

A Special Trip Up The Beartrap River

By Owen Secoy

Through the years the groups that I have taken canoe camping in Canada and/or the Boundary Waters have always been groups of four or more. Matthew, my grandson, began going with me three years ago at the age of twelve. The 2007 trip was to be his fourth trip and maybe his last.

Over the past year his parents had made a big decision to move the family to New Zealand. Facing a possible last trip with Matthew called for something special, some special lasting memories. A trip, just the two of us, up through the Sundial Primitive Management Area of the Boundary Waters on the Beartrap River was selected.

We left Texas early Sunday morning, June 10 and drove to Ames, IA and spent the night. We rose early the next morning and continued north with a brief stop for a bit of shopping at the Cabela's store in southern Minnesota. We arrived in Babbitt, MN about 2:00 PM and stopped at the local gas station/bait shop for our fishing licenses. Then on to Duane's Canoe Outfitting to check in, do the paper work and gather our gear. We bunked at the outfitters that night.

There were several groups heading out from the outfitters, on Tuesday morning so to ease getting everyone one out in an expeditious manner we volunteered to get up extra early and get out of the way. We were up at 4:30 am, had a cup of coffee and sweet role and we were off to entry point. We arrived at EP#23 (Mudro Lake) about 6:00 am and unloaded the gear. It was sad to see the old Chainsaw Sisters Saloon sitting there abandoned waiting to be demolished. After a few pictures and a wave to our driver, we were ready to hit the water.

It looked like there was plenty of water to put-in on Picket Creek at the drop-off area but we opted to carry the canoe and gear down the short 30 rod trail to the normal put-in. The nice little trail follows along the creek and allows the sense of joy of once again entering the BW to sink in.

The paddle across Mudro Lake was easy. No breeze to speak of, it was smooth as glass. It was good to put the paddle in the water and to put the helter-skelter behind us and to look forward to what the week had in store for us.

The first of the three portages into Fourtown Lake is an easy, relatively flat 30 rod portage around a small rapid. It is a good portage to get the feel of the trail. A short paddle up the creek carried us to the second of the three portages. This portage is a 140 rod carry. The take-out was tricky since we had to unload in the middle of the fast moving rapid that dropped over an old beaver dam. The trail had a couple of pretty good climbs and then dropped down to a rocky put-in area.

The third of the portages into Fourtown is a short portage around a small rapid. The map shows it to be 10 rods but is probably closer to 15. The rocky trail leads to a testy put-in area. It has a shear rock face about 15 feet high that you have to get your canoe and gear down. We were fortunate to be greeted by a group of scouts from Arizona that gave us a hand getting our gear and canoe down to the water. Their help was greatly appreciated.

We made it to Fourtown Lake glad that the three portage bottleneck was behind us. The paddle across Fourtown was enjoyable with a slight breeze at our backs. We got to the 35 rod portage heading to Boot Lake and ran in to a crowd. One group was going north and one going south. The portage itself was easy, pretty flat and in good shape.

We made Boot Lake by 10:30 am and picked up a pretty strong south breeze at our backs. We had decided to stop on Boot for the evening and selected a campsite on a point halfway up the lake. Not a bad site, it would serve our purpose just fine. We set up camp, pumped some water and settled in for the rest of the day. The strong wind kept us off the lake so we did some bank fishing after dinner with no success. All in all, a good first day!

We awoke at about 5:30 am on day 2, got dressed, had a "quick start" breakfast, broke camp and were on the water by 6:45 am. The morning was bright and clear and Boot was calm. The paddle to the 15 rod portage to Fairy Lake passed quickly. The short trail rises a little and then levels off to the lake. The paddle across Fairy

was uneventful other than the fact that we were now experiencing a slight north breeze that felt good.

We arrived at the location of the portage to Gun and found it on the left side of the drain rather than on the right as indicated on our map. The path rose quickly as we started up the trail and it resembled a bubbling brook with water cascading down the hill. There was no way to avoid wet feet on that one.

The breeze on Gun had swung back around to the south making the paddle across more enjoyable. Gun is an attractive lake and might warrant a return trip someday. We arrived at a rocky take-out area for the 40 rod portage to Mudhole Lake. The trail was very easy and nondescript and the put-in area was shallow and muddy. I couldn't figure how Mudhole Lake got its name, it certainly wasn't muddy. It is a nice little pond that provides a little break between the two portages into Thunder Lake.

You start the 60 rod portage from Mudhole to Thunder with a deadfall that has to be crawled over. After that you are faced with a pretty good climb that levels out after a ways then drops down to the lake. The last 20 rods are very muddy.

Thunder Lake is a pretty, medium size lake. We stopped for the night at the campsite close to the portage to Beartrap Lake. The site is well above the water and has a couple of really nice tent pads. To the left of that campsite is a high shear cliff that is easy to scale and offers good vistas for a photo op.

Matthew caught some northerns fishing from the bank but most of the afternoon was spent getting the camp set up, writing in the trip log and just taking it easy. We went out fishing after dinner and caught a few "axe handle" northerns. Bed time came early with our hardest travel day facing us on the morrow.

We anticipated that the third day would be a real tester for us. We were headed into the Sundial Primitive Management Area with its long unmaintained portages, numerous beaver dams and the long paddle up the Beartrap River. I didn't secure a PMA Camping Permit so once we left Beartrap Lake there would be no campsites available until we got to Iron Lake.

We crawled out of our cozy bedrolls about 5:00 am, broke camp, had a quick start breakfast and were on the water by 6:00 am. It was only a five minute paddle to the 5 rod portage into Beartrap Lake. The trail was flat and the undergrowth wide enough to allow us to hand-carry the partially unloaded canoe across the portage.

Beartrap Lake is a pretty lake about one mile long. It has one campsite that was unoccupied when we went through. It was an enjoyable paddle. The 200 rod portage out of the lake, though, is not so enjoyable. This portage throws a bit of everything at you. It has length, lots of blow downs (some you crawl over, others you have to crawl under), boot-sucking mud, lots of roots and rocks, ups and downs, etc. Needless to say, it was challenging. The portage also seemed much longer than the posted 200 rod length. We double-portaged this one and it took us about an hour and a half to get the job done. The put-in on the river was shallow and muddy but we were glad to use it and be back on the water.

The paddle down the upper stretch of the Beartrap River was very pleasant with a slight breeze at our backs. We saw numerous deer along this stretch. We had several beaver dams of varying sizes to lift over or try to pole around and we had one blow down that we had to do a balancing act on in order to slide the canoe over.

The first portage on the Beartrap River is a 160 rod trail that follows the path of the river but is not flat. It has its ups and downs, has a number of blow downs, and is muddy in places, rocky and rooty in places and heavily overgrown. Other than being a little shorter, this portage is every bit as difficult as the one exiting Beartrap Lake. It was good to get back on the water but we had spent a lot of energy on the two long portages and we were pretty tired.

The next stretch of the Beartrap River meanders all over the place making it hard to get in a good paddling rhythm. We also had to negotiate several more old beaver dams but they didn't offer much delay. We arrived at Sunday Lake about 11:00 am. I chastised myself for not getting that PMA Camping Permit, we were tired and Sunday would have been a good place to stop. I have to admit, though, that the half mile paddle across the lake was a nice break from the meandering course of the river. The portage out of the lake was a little hard to spot. It is a short 17 rod up and down trail over a small rise. A piece of cake after what we had experienced earlier.

The Beartrap River north of Sunday Lake is completely different from that to the south. This stretch of river more resembles a lake than a river. We got to the first portage in this stretch (a short 10 rod) and found it to be not much more than a lift-over. Being hot and tired made it seem more than what it was.

The next portage shown on the map is a 35 rod portage about half way to Parley Lake. We paddled right through the area it is shown in and never saw a hint of a rapid or a portage. We didn't complain. We continued on to the last portage on the river, a 110 rod that circumvents a combination beaver dam and rapid. The portage was hard to spot but, once found offered a nice take out area. The portage trail climbs a little bit and then drops quickly to the lake and an awkward put-in. The portage was relatively easy but, was heavily overgrown and infested with lots of ticks.

We made the Peterson Bay of Iron Lake by 11:00 am and headed for the island campsite that faces the bay. We took one wrong turn that cost us a few minutes of paddle time but, we finally made our way to the campsite and found it to be vacant. Thank goodness! We were tired and didn't want to face the prospect of more paddling in search of a vacant campsite.

We were very pleased with the site. The campsite has lots of tall pines for good shade, good tent pads to choose from and a nice open breeze. We set up camp and took a siesta. It had been a long warm day with a bit of difficulty ^ it felt good. It had been a good day.

We slept in till 7:00 am on day 4 then got up and had our first hot breakfast of the trip. A strong south wind kept us off the lake much of the morning so I busied myself with my trip log and Matthew entertained himself with some pretty good bank fishing.

In the afternoon we had a good game of Gin going when a little shower blew in and forced us to scramble to tie things down and/or cover them up. The high wind and rain continued for a couple of hours although we were able to get in a little fishing between the showers.

Fishing got a lot better after the rain moved out of the area. It also cooled off, considerably. We caught numerous smallies and northernns working our way around a few of the islands. We decided to move on to Lake Agnes the next day so we packed what we could and hit the sack about 8:30 PM. It had been another great day in the BW.

We got up about 5:00 am on day 5 to our now accustomed travel-day routine and were on the water by 6:00 am. We had a long paddle across Iron Lake into a strong northwest wind (wouldn't you know it) and 8 to 10 inch rollers but we still reached Bottle Portage by 8:00 am. The infamous Bottle Portage was actually not in too bad of shape. It was dry enough to allow us to work our way around most of the muddy areas. The put-in area was shallow but not muddy.

The long paddle across Lac La Croix was aided by the northwest wind so we slipped through the islands and made our way to the 65 rod portage in Boulder Bay. The portage was in good shape and was just an up and over a rise of land. The put-in side was very rocky. We continued on to the 24 rod portage into Lake Agnes. We ran into three coed groups around this portage. Other than the traffic, this was a very easy carry.

We made Agnes by 10:00 am and paddled down the lake into a wind that was now in our faces. We paddled past five campsites on the west bank that were not very inviting and finally stopped at the sixth. We liked this site very much. It sits high above the water and catches every breeze. It was a real nice campsite and we were ready to stop for the day.

Our timing was great. About 1:00 PM the southern wind got very strong and was pushing whitecaps down the lake. We, on the other hand, were in camp taking it easy and enjoying the cool wind and the bug deterrent it offered.

The wind let up after dinner to let us do some fishing. We caught some nice smallies and some small northernns. One of Matthew,s smallies was a real nice four-pounder. We built a small fire that evening and roasted some marshmallows. Bed time came about 9:00 PM... life is good.

We got up a little later on day 6 and took a leisurely approach to the morning. With all the weather (and wind) coming out of the south we decided to go ahead and move on to Nina Moose Lake to make our last day that

much easier. So we had a hot breakfast, struck camp and headed south at about 8:00 am.

We had a nice paddle across the south end of Agnes and on up the Moose River to the 90 rod portage. This is an easy portage that follows along the river and was quickly dispatched. Soon after getting back on the river it began to rain and things got pretty wet by the time we got to the 70 rod second portage.

We ran into a youth group on the second river portage and it nearly broke my heart to see a group of youngsters heading into the BWCA in the manner they were going. Their obvious poor preparation, haphazard attire and lack of portaging skills were a sad sight. They already resembled drowned rats and they were just getting started.

We completed the 70 rod portage and continued on to Nina Moose Lake. The wind was really blowing hard by then and the rain continued. We located an empty campsite on the west bank. The kitchen area was full of water but it had a good tent pad so we decided not to look any further.

We put up a rain tarp and got all of the packs and gear out of the rain. We then pitched the tent so we could get into some dry clothes. Happiness is a dry change of clothes after a long paddle in the rain. It continued to rain all day. We must have stayed in the tent from "9 to 5." We ate lunch in the tent and killed the afternoon playing Gin. The rain stopped about 5:00 PM so I put up a clothes line and hung up much of the wet stuff. After dinner we tried some bank fishing but didn't have any luck. The wind and rain cooled the evening substantially so we had to add a layer to stay warm. This had not been one of the better days in the BW but we enjoyed every moment.

It was our last morning and we had lots to do. The sun was shining so I got up at 6:00 am and pulled out all of the wet gear and spread it around on the flat rocks to dry. I then pumped some water and fixed us a hot breakfast.

After eating and cleaning up, we broke camp and headed for the exit. We were on the water by 9:00 am. We were again paddling into a strong south breeze that was to accompany us all the way to the exit portage at EP #16 (Moose River North). There was also a lot of water coming down the river increasing the flow against us. But all in all, it was still a pretty easy paddle.

We made it through the two short river portages (25 and 20 rods) without missing a beat but when we paddled into view of the landing for the exit portage we were disheartened, to say the least. There was a huge gaggle of canoes, people and gear everywhere. Every nook and cranny had something or someone setting in it. It was the same as far up the trail as the trees would give us view.

We patiently waited while a dreadfully slow group of six teenagers in two canoes from a local camp got their gear and themselves loaded and pushed out into the current. The next group was horribly disorganized so while they hesitated, we moved in, unloaded quickly and made our way through the horde and off up the trail. From what I gathered as we moved through the mass of people they were all from the same group. There must have been 20 to 24 men and youth and 7 or 8 canoes ^ poorly organized and poorly prepared. It was not a pretty sight.

The exit portage is shown on the maps to be 160 rods. The Forestry info says that it is 176 rods. I lean to the latter. The trail is in good shape but is basically up hill all the way from the river. It is not a difficult carry but it will have you breathing heavy by the time you get to the parking lot. Our timing was perfect. Right after we finished the carry it started to rain and rain hard it did. We covered our gear with a tarp and took refuge under the small bulletin board structure to await our pickup.

Our ride arrived at the appointed time and we were soon on our way back to the outfitter,s facility in Babbitt. Hot showers, shave and clean clothes waited. We were then off to the Ely Steak House for our traditional "end of trip celebration." Normally we would go back and spend the night in the outfitter,s bunkhouse but since we had arranged to have such an easy last day we decided to eat and hit the road back Texas.

MUSINGS OF A GRANDFATHER I have mixed emotions about this trip. It had been all the things I had hoped it would be. We had enjoyed another great week in the BWCA and it was great to share it with my grandson. We enjoyed small lakes, big lakes, rivers, creeks, long and short portages, some maintained and others not, some good fishing, lots of solitude, lots of wildlife, good campsites, etc. It was a good week full of lasting memories.

On the downside, it also singled the possibility that it would be the last time that I would be sharing such experiences with Matthew. He has become a great campmate, bowman and fishing buddy. It is with sadness that I ponder that we might not be doing it again. Whatever the future holds though, we can look back favorably on this trip and note that it had been a special trip up the Beartrap River for both of us.

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