

A Good Day in the BWCA

By Owen Secoy

The first day of a recent BWCA wilderness canoe trip started quite ominously with heavy pattering of rain on the outfitter's bunkhouse roof, the wind whistling through the pines, frequent flashes of lightning and loud claps of thunder. We were well prepared for our yearly trip to the Boundary Waters, psyched up and ready to put our paddles in the water. But a cold front complete with rain, wind and lightning was not how we had envisioned starting our first day.

As the group leader, I tried my best to be positive and to encourage each member of our group. Hey, we are thirty miles from our entry point, it probably isn't even raining up there, I tried to be as persuasive as I could. So we downed a hasty continental breakfast, piled into the outfitter's van and headed north to our entry point. Hoping all the way that around the next bend we would drive out of the unpleasant weather.

Well, we had good news and bad news. The good news was that it did quit lightning. The bad news was that it was still raining and the north wind, though not excessive at the moment, was still blowing. And of course, the wind would be blowing in our faces all day as we made our way north.

We unloaded the van, assembled our gear, took a few pictures, shouldered the canoes and headed down the path to the river. The first carry was mostly downhill and sheltered somewhat from the blowing rain so it was easily dispatched. We carefully loaded the canoes and were soon paddling north on the river. Finally being on the water was a good moral booster; rain, wind, it didn't matter - we were where we wanted to be, doing what we wanted to do and enjoying every minute doing it.

The river provided us with some protection from the wind-driven rain for the first few miles and that helped us to keep a positive attitude. We did the first

river portage as if it was a cakewalk. It was wet and muddy, but the group worked well, got it done and we continued on. When we came to the first lake and open water, we were forced to stop and consider our route. There were two different portages that we could take to the next lake. One was a simple 'lift over', while the other was a carry of about forty rods. Neither one would have gotten much thought normally, but on this day the paddle into the brisk headwind gave cause for more consideration.

I opted for the longer portage since it offered the least paddle distance into the north breeze. We had barely gotten the canoes unloaded at the portage and I was already wishing that I had chosen the other route. Water was pouring down the portage trail. Up one side of the carry and down the other, it was like wading in a mountain stream. Where the water wasn't rushing, there was boot top deep mud. There were no complaints from the group, they took it all in stride, got the task done and we pushed on.

We worked our way across the next large lake into a heavier north breeze and harder rain. I figured that even though the up coming portage was going to be much longer and more difficult, it would be a welcomed break from the hard paddle. Well, the next portage was called a lot of things that day, but 'welcomed' wasn't one of the words used. The portage was longer, steeper, muddier and had more water cascading down it than the previous portage. The weather had succeeded in making a moderately hard carry into a very difficult one. We had planned to take a lunch break at this portage, but conditions had gotten so bad that we decided to skip lunch and pushed on.

Several miles of river paddle carried us to the next large lake. It was our intended first day's destination so we paddled down the southeast shore of the lake for another mile or so and stopped at the first available campsite. We were wet, cold, muddy, tired and hungry; it was time to stop. As soon as the canoes were unloaded and the gear carried up to the camp, we erected a rain tarp and got a fire started. The tarp sheltering us from the rain and the fire warming our cold, wet bodies was a welcome relief from the elements.

We pitched our tents, prepared and devoured the first night's steak and potatoes and soon had the kitchen cleaned and put away. We were ready to crawl into our warm, dry sleeping bags.

Our first day had been filled with apprehension, the threat of lightning, a cold hard rain, an over abundance of mud, a constant north wind in our faces and portages made more difficult by the cascading water. We were soaked, cold and had missed lunch. It was an unusually hard day for trippers in the BWCA, but what a marvelous day it had been! The experiences we had that day cannot be shared adequately in simple word pictures. Only by being there and doing it can one experience the joy of our day. We lived it and we enjoyed each and every moment. It was great to be in the Boundary Waters again, appreciating the opportunity to marvel at all that it has to offer. From our perspective it had been another good day in the Boundary Waters.

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