

Bearberry Point

August, 2003

“Should you be doing this? Is this trip a good idea?”

“Don’t ask.”

“This trip” was two weeks’ canoeing in northern Canada, coming up in a few weeks. While I was doing nothing very strenuous, a disk named L4-L5 tried to escape from my spine and took a bite out of my sciatic nerve. Agony until two wonderful shots of Demerol and a miraculous infusion of cortisone brought about a truce. I dutifully went to the PT sessions and did all the exercises, all the while trying not to dwell on mortality and whether I had a time bomb in my back set to go off in the middle of a portage. The doctor thought not, as long as I was careful, and A-, the guide, forewarned, was willing.

I’d been on two trips with him before, great trips in the Barren Lands in Nunavut, west of Hudson Bay. Wonderful stark scenery, wolves, caribou, musk oxen, birds, even a wolverine riding (involuntarily) down a long stretch of rapids. In mid-summer, the sun set but never quite finished the job; and there were always several thousand, no, million mosquitoes on hand (we’d always managed to avoid the short black-fly season). I was particularly looking forward to this trip because it was the last of the season, the end of August into September, so it promised no bugs (well, not the summer clouds) and dark nights with stars and maybe northern lights. On the other hand, it was all lake paddling – no current to do most of the work, inevitable headwinds, and “a few” portages, mostly short.

Getting there ain’t half the fun, what with air travel losing out to buses for comfort and style: Boston to Edmonton in a cramped seat next to an enormous sweaty fellow afraid on his first flight and no sleep in the hotel from four o’clock on when two nudniks in the

next room began to pack and re-pack their gear for an early hunting trip. I found J- at the airport, also waiting. She'd been on eight or ten trips with A- before, including my two. And N-, from Australia, another repeat client but one I hadn't met. (It's easy to tell the tourists from the locals in the airport waiting room) The other four clients presumably flew up earlier, which suddenly seemed a very smart thing, as the plane to Fort Smith turned out to be broken (they never explain) and it wasn't clear whether we'd get to Fort Smith that day at all. "Arctic Time" is pretty casual, but this could certainly screw up the canoe trip. Fortunately they found a spare plane somewhere and we took off only four hours late.

The next day, canoe paddles apportioned and everything re-packed in Duluth sacks, we took off in two bush planes for the three-hour flight northeast to the lake where the canoes had been stashed (on the return from the previous trip) for the start of our trip. All this sitting around, cramped in big planes and small, wasn't making me feel any more sure of my back, but so far, so good. Not so good was the weather. Low clouds and off-and-on light rain, never quite enough to stop the planes, but close. We landed on S. Lake, at the edge of the Barrens, in an intermittent drizzle.

A- gave The Lecture: how to set up the tents, safety, how the days would be laid out for mealtimes, paddling, setting up camp, and so on. Some might consider him a bit "controlling" but if he's set in his ways, it must be said that his ways do work.

Me: "Can I help with that?"

A-: "No, thanks, you'll do it wrong." (pause for two beats, then a smile) "Well, not wrong, but not my way."

J- and I smiled as A-, as he spoke of protecting nature, absent-mindedly stomped on a clump of dwarf birch.

No canoeing that day, but we took a walk to a nearby wolf den. Lots of wolf tracks but no wolves. Musk ox tracks too, but the only wildlife were the few Whiskey Jacks screeching around camp.

The next day brought somewhat better weather, patches of sun breaking through, but still the occasional shower, and everything was still soaked, so we went for another walk while waiting to see if it would all dry out. More wolf tracks and scat, including some puppy-sized paw prints. All quite fresh, so A- went into “tracking mode”, trying to keep all of us quiet and moving carefully. Me too, but I always figure the animals are way ahead of us and well aware of us “stalking” them. After about forty minutes following the tracks, losing them on the rocks and in the marshy spots, but picking them up again in the sandy areas, we went slowly up a small hill and surprised ourselves and the family of wolves lolling about on the top. Two black and three gray adults and a gray pup, all of whom bolted at the sight of us, taking off in two groups in opposite directions. They stopped and kept an eye on us from a hundred yards off, howling from one group to another, though it was hard to hear them in the wind. They were too far off for good pictures, but the cameras kept up a steady clicking.

The successful “hunt” made up for the weather, but more rain that evening was leading to cabin fever. As Mark Twain (should have) said, “Everybody talks about the weather and I wish they’d stop.” Discussions of what the barometer was doing or whether the wind was shifting and what it all might portend approached religious fervor, inevitable in the face of the uncontrollable and unpredictable. Never mind that the barometer is not particularly predictive this far north. I certainly prefer sun to a soaking, but “it is what it is and what it will be”, so why not just wait for the future? Which attitude surprised me, since I do really hate it when it rains.

The future came in the morning with more of the same. After lunch, it seemed that cabin fever had gotten to even to A-, who decided we would, finally, move on, at least for a few hours paddling. The tent flies were still wet, but “pack them as they are” – enough was enough. Fine with me, especially as it meant the first portage would be put off for a day. So far, so good, my back, with

all the lifting and carrying while unloading the planes, setting up canoes, etc., but the portages were the real test.

A- and N- were in one canoe, J- and I in another. The other four were two couples who came together, E- and J- having introduced B- and O- to canoeing just in the past year. We had a nasty wind on our starboard stern quarter that wanted us to broach, but was manageable with effort. E- was a bit of a bloviator, but behaved himself, and in fact made sure that B- and O- weren't left lagging behind alone.

It was still overcast, but the rain held off. The lake shores were lovely rocky ledges, covered in black and gray lichen. Between the scattered clumps of raggedy black spruce were carpets of crispy pale yellow reindeer moss and occasional patches of red bearberry and cranberry and a very sweet small blackberry. Skeins of geese caught an almost free ride on the north wind. A pair of Whiskey Jacks flew about, looking for scraps. Loons calling insanely during the night capped off a good day, finally on the move. And so to bed.

The next day – Tuesday? – brought the first serious test of my back: after a ten minute paddle came a hard portage, about two-thirds of a mile long. I didn't shirk, but was very, very careful – no tossing the canoe onto my shoulders. I made a couple of trips carrying some heavy boxes, but that was less risky, as the pack frame acted like a brace. So far no problems, knock wood. From there we had an easy paddle through a narrow stretch of river, black stone ledges close on either side. The weather had cleared completely, and the river spread out in a long lake.

We camped on a small rise above a sand beach. We spread out the wet clothes which of course brought a (short) sprinkle. After the tents were up, a home, I was in the river for a wash – “Another addition to the list of memorable bathes”¹. A gorgeous sunset, red-

¹ So wrote frequently H.W. Tilman, British writer, mountain climber, and (in later life) sailor.

orange flames reflected in the lake, and the loons again called insanely all evening.



During the night came occasional rain, even a drizzle sounding like a torrent inside the tent, but by morning it was clear for the day's work – portages, not long ones, but difficult. Not so bad on caribou tracks or open smooth stone, but it had its share of boulder fields and boggy patches, often with a copse of bent and stunted spruce trees, shaggy at the base in a tangle of dried out twigs. During the last portage a bald eagle circled above us.

I felt good, touch wood, after a lot of work: two canoes (not by myself), some boxes and bags, all with no trouble – may it continue so!

We found a very pretty campsite next to a babbling rapids. Too tired to look hard, we picked a somewhat lumpy site for the tent, but we had no trouble sleeping.

The next day brought its own bit of foolishness – the end of one portage was too narrow for more than one canoe at a time, so I held tight to the end of the painter on A-'s canoe and pushed it out into the lake. It's good that I held tight to my end of the painter, but the other end wasn't tied to the canoe. "Bon voyage!"

Fortunately the canoe stopped not far from shore, and J- waded in, brought it back, and made sure to tie the painter.

Out of the tent in the middle of the night (when the bladder insists, ...), I saw what I thought might be northern lights, no color, but silver-white, like moonlight. It moved only a bit, but not like a cloud. Maybe.

In the morning, another portage, and a lovely day paddling, with a cool breeze under a blue sky. Going through one rapids B- and I were to go last, as sweep – a responsibility and an honor, but we pulled it off, thank goodness.

Another fine campsite, white spruce and carpets of reindeer moss everywhere. And the resident loons. I decided to get up in the middle of the night (bladder or not), to see if the northern lights were about; the others asked me to wake them if there was something to see. And so it came to pass – around midnight I went out and saw a bright white broad stripe across the sky, the ends waving. Very pretty. I woke the others and at that moment was created a new religion, idolizing the northern lights.

Morning brought a fine day (after the inevitable brief sprinkle). No portages, but a strong headwind made for heavy paddling, with waves big enough to make paddling interesting. With time, everyone got across the lake.

We camped on a broad rise, 15' above the beach, with black spruce, scraggly, with naked branches, only here and there clumps of green needles, and bigger white spruce (taking A-'s word for the specifics). The ground around was dry and covered with crisp reindeer moss. The sky was clear and at 12:30 came another performance of northern lights.

Morning brought some dirty weather, grey, with sprinkles, but it let up by the time we'd finish breakfast (always the same: as many packets of oatmeal one wants, with raisins, sugar, and the like). We set off at 9:30, out of the small sheltered cove and an easy paddle to the other side of I- Lake, the beginning of a hard,

painful, but the last portage. Just a half-mile, but a third of it was through a swamp, like walking on sponges. And a few dozen black flies. Though the going was hard, that was all there was, the world, one thought only of where to step, where to point the canoe. It was pleasant, such “living in the present.”

B- caught a fish, a big grayling, maybe three pounds. A- mixed it into the soup – very tasty.

More northern lights at 1:30. In the morning, the river was completely covered in fog, very pretty, with the rush of the rapids to the south. Above it was clear blue sky, the fog just hugged the water.

We paddled only until one in the afternoon, set up camp, and though tired, went off looking for wildlife, mostly musk oxen. The going was easy, on a big esker that snaked around to a high point with a view back to the river, and I got a clearer match between “these” on the map with “those” on the earth. It’s a land full of water – rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, all in great confusion.



On a sand-spit that almost cut the lake in two, maybe a mile from camp, stood a musk ox, and four more on the left bank, which

started to swim toward the one, but changed their minds en route. Three finally did swim across, the fourth wandered away from the river. Maybe we'll meet again.

Labor Day brought a lot of work – as soon as we left the shelter of the cove, we met a strong wind and two to three foot waves. It took more than a half hour to cover the mile to the opposite shore – like being on a roller coaster. The shore provided shelter from the wind but going from point to point across open bays had us back in the wind and the waves.

Finally we came into a long, narrow lake, through a very strange passage: the end of the lake was very shallow, clumsy paddling, except for a narrow channel, deep and blue through the yellow sand shallows on both sides. Maybe thirty feet long and probably recut every spring by the high water from snow-melt.

The last camp, where we would wait a day or three for the planes. I began the waiting by taking a bath, the first in a few days². I was feeling good, though J- was a bit taken aback as she walked by along the beach.

At 1:30, more northern lights (still not “oh, yeah”), and Mars was so bright its reflection was clear in the lake.

In the morning we set off early – a lovely day, sunny, maybe 60° – looking for animals. After an hour, across a stream, a real one with a stony bed, not the usual soaked ground, and along eskers when we could, after an hour, we saw about a mile off a lone musk ox, by a pond. Like Nimrod, we crept closer, quietly, quietly. He pawed at the sandy ground and wallowed in some loose sand. After his bath, he lay down for a nap.

We stalked the great brown lump to within fifty yards, when he raised his head, pricked up his ears (I assume). We froze for three or four minutes, until he lay down again, then snuck to within ten or 12 yards and started snapping picture after picture until the

² I think I've gone 10 or 11 days without washing more than my face, which makes me feel still somewhat human. There have been days with mosquitoes so thick that washing seemed an affectation.

noise from all the cameras woke him. He got up but didn't run, just posed for his portrait, first the right profile, then the left.



Finally he wandered slowly in the direction of camp, so we followed him for a while, until he came up on a small rise. He stopped and smashed his head against the trunk of a dead spruce tree, turned, and looked at us – we were about 12 yards off – stamped on the ground, snorted and rumbled. After a minute's staring ("You talkin' to me?"), he turned and ran. The whole adventure left us a four hour walk back to camp, maybe seven or eight miles.

The next morning, another walk, but no animals save for four spruce grouse on a rocky rise and a common flicker on a small tree. We were back in camp in time for the usual gluttonous lunch, and then dispersed on our several ways. The planes should be here tomorrow.

I walked along the sandy beach about a hundred yards to the small rise on the point west of camp. My place. A couple of tattered spruce trees between the stones, which were all covered with red bearberry bushes. The wind had strengthened, blowing

maybe ten-twelve knots, which raised a bit of a surf against the beach and whitecaps on the lake. At the top of the rise was a low ridge of stone, covered with lichens, a sort of seat, a rare and pleasant thing here at the edge of the Barrens. The autumn colors were late this year, said A-, and the hills around the lake still had a lot of green (apart from the evergreens) among the yellow dwarf birch and the bright red berry bushes and ground cover. I sat myself down and watched the waves. My back had behaved itself the whole time, and it was indeed a lovely trip – I was feeling good.

I'm not dead yet.



The view from Bearberry Point

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