

the right stuff



A Style All Your Own

□ by Stuart Osthoff & Rob Kesselring

Most of us have spent years developing our own personal canoe tripping style. My own approach, the result of 30+ years guiding hundreds of trips into canoe country, is still constantly evolving. Every trip involves different people with different interests which means planning a specific route that will satisfy those interests. Our goal at *BWJ* is helping all of you develop your own wilderness canoe tripping style. We can accelerate this process by learning what really works for other folks.

In this article I invited “Far North” veteran paddler, Rob

Kesselring, to share his lessons learned from a lifetime on the canoe trails. Rob has led dozens of BWCAW/Quetico trips plus his experience on “far north” rivers reads like a fantasy list: the Thelon, Hood, Mountain, Snow-drift, Nahanni, Taltson, to name a few.

Rob started his family of five girls in a cabin off Great Slave Lake. He still has the cabin and the local connections from which he launches new paddling adventures. Suffice to say, very few have paddled more wilderness water or scrutinized more carefully the techniques and gear that really

work out there.

What follows is Rob and I doing a little one-on-one, challenging each other’s canoe tripping approach and outfit. We hope the upshot produces fresh perspective to consider for fine tuning your own distinct canoe tripping style.

WHY WE GO?

A couple of passages from Rob’s latest book *River Stories* (See ad page 56.) reveal his motivation for wilderness canoe tripping. “A big part of the far north canoe trip is being apart from civilization, traveling independently and tasting a purity of spirit that can bring clarity to life.” And then he



STUART OSTHOFF

For a one-week canoe/fishing trip for two, I like a big capacity 18 1/2’ Kevlar boat, three full-size packs including one with fresh food on ice, two smaller guide packs for “on the trail” essentials, rod case and net. All the amenities we want in a double portage, compact load. (Crooked Lake)



Ninety-nine percent of canoe country portages can be executed with a dry-foot landing. There is absolutely no reason to be wet and miserable out there. (Lonely Lake)



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adds, “Beyond the multitudes of caribou and uncluttered vistas, more than the amazing fishing and pure water, it is the spirit of discovery that distinguishes a far north canoe trip.”

Clearly Rob craves escaping the modern urban existence, paddling for the pure sake of paddling away from the hectic everyday routine. Rob enjoys paddling from point A to point B just to go somewhere—anywhere through wild country will do. A sense of discovery is vital, so the more remote and untraveled, the greater the appeal. Rob likes to test his whitewater skills and embrace the challenge of paddling through big wind, big waves and hordes of bugs to complete a long distance goal.

With such a “see the country” mind set, it’s not surprising Rob likes to travel light and fast. If that’s your style, Rob’s approach to canoe camping and his chosen gear will sound very appealing.

On the other hand, I don’t go to the woods to escape anything. My entire “living on the edge” lifestyle is a deliberate attempt to defy the economic realities of a “normal” urban life. Living in a log cabin five minutes from the BWCAW and guiding twelve weeks of wilderness trips each year, I take pine-scented air, clean water, pristine scenery and solitude for granted. This doesn’t mean these wilderness values are any less important to me. It simply means something else compels me to pick up a paddle and go. The pursuit of fish and game in a wilderness setting is that enduring source of motivation for me and millions of other Americans. I have no doubt my body will give out long before my passion for the wilderness fishing/hunting experience.

Actually, I really enjoy the act of paddling a canoe. It has always come easy for me, and under most conditions, paddling becomes a mindless form of relaxation. Rarely, however, is canoeing the purpose of my canoe trips. The bottom line for me is that I get my fill of paddling heading in and out of my favorite canoe country fishing holes. Canoeing is a mode of transportation to me. A means to an end. Canoes provide unlimited access to the wilderness backcountry. **The** place where I’ve always found true spiritual fulfillment. I’ve never understood those who go out and paddle around in circles, testing how far they can lean this way or that without dumping. Like canoeing is some form of artistic expression.

Most *BWJ* readers know I have never been constrained by the backpacker mentality on the canoe trails. I don’t buy the conventional wisdom that lighter gear plus a faster pace = better canoe trips. Could it be the masses are unable to shake their high-tech, rush-rush everyday existence even when paddling into the wild?

Too many folks want to “see it all” on a given one-week canoe trip. Even those of us who make our living out there haven’t “seen it all” in our lifetimes. I concede there are days when I dig in and hustle, but I would encourage you to slow down and pack what is needed to really enjoy a given slice of canoe country once you get there. Many who boast of enduring considerable self-deprivation on wilderness canoe trips consider themselves “seasoned veterans.” I just think they should know better.

Rob and I have talked about doing a far north river

trip together. But I don't know? I have next to zero whitewater skills. If Rob didn't drown me by accident running some Class V cascade, he would probably kill me with his trusty full-size axe for stopping to fish every good looking hole.

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

Rob: I hold Stu Osthoff in high esteem. He has far more experience in the BWCAW and Quetico than I do. I read about the numbers of fish he catches and the weight of his packs with awe. But occasionally I read something he has written and scratch my head. So with the canoe country covered in a thick blanket of snow and my wood stove glowing red, I welcome this opportunity to spar with him a bit about the choices we make for summer canoe camping in the heart of the continent. Like, hey Stu, what's up with those blue jeans?

A decade ago, halfway down a 300-rod portage under the yoke of an 80-pound canoe, a little argument was going on in my head—nostalgia vs. reality. When I had to hump back up the trail for a second load, reality won. I love wood-canvas canoes, cotton tents and bacon and eggs for breakfast, but when I am in the BWCAW I love traveling even more.

Modern technology has given us the capacity to travel in summer without having to double-back on portages for a second load and without having to strain under heavy burdens. It may mean giving up a few creature comforts, but the gain is more freedom and an unbridled spirit of discovery.

In summer most of the wood, the leather, the canvas, the frozen meat, the fresh potatoes, the fishing tackle and the gadgets stay home. I reach for the graphite, the nylon, the GoreTex and the freeze dried—a smaller pile, a lighter load and the insight that less can be more. Traveling light is not for everyone, and sometimes I even haul in a big load and base camp. But the summer trips I remember most fondly? Light and fast, baby, light and fast.

My days of taking groups of teens and strangers into the BWCAW are just about over or at least on hold. I did enjoy the group dynamics involved with coordinating those trips, and I believe all of us who love the wilderness have a responsibility to share our passion with those who have not had the opportunity. But for the last several summers I have led arctic canoe trips; the little summertime I have left, I reserve for BWCAW trips with my daughters or best friends. These trips rarely consist of more than two canoes.

Stu: My M.O. is leading groups of four to six guys, often people I don't even know. Unlike Rob's trips, where just getting back out unscathed can be a noteworthy achievement, my challenges are more social.

Bringing a mix of personalities/interests together for a real adventure that transcends expectations is a fascinating goal with a tremendous upside. Leading trips where camp camaraderie really clicks is a very special feeling. Knowing you personally contributed to helping others enjoy a rewarding wilderness experience is as good as it gets for me.

I have had canoe trips blow up in my face, but very few. All in all, I'll take sharing the delights and dilemmas of canoe country over solo tripping anytime. Soloing beats not going. But it's a last resort

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for me.

I don't find it particularly challenging or exciting to simply paddle/portage/camp my way from point A to point B. Some trails will have more mud, bugs and headwinds than others, but it's a foregone conclusion I'm going to get where I want to go. Like Rob, I too crave that sense of risk, discovery and connection with nature. Only fishing brings this and so much more to my wilderness canoe trips.

This emphasis on angling makes my approach to canoe tripping, food and gear very different from Robs. Think of it as the canoe angler vs. the pure paddler. Let's take a closer look at what gear works best for these two different styles.

CANOES

Rob: An ultralight canoe is crucial to single portage summer canoeing. Mike Cichanowski literally turned the canoe world upside down when, as founder of Wenonah Canoe, he popularized Kevlar skin-coat canoes. You no longer had to be a gorilla to wear a pack on your back and throw a canoe on your shoulders. The 42-pound wonder called the Wenonah MN II will go down in history as the canoe that changed how people think about canoeing. It's sleek, tough and, most importantly, it carries like a parrot on your shoulders. I owned one for ten years and loved her. That straight keeled design and narrow beam will test a novice, but don't blame the canoe for that. Wenonah has also developed some new designs with more space and stability. I have not yet had the opportunity to paddle all of them, but I am confident we all have many excellent BWCAW ultralight choices.

Currently I paddle an 18.5 foot Savage River Susquahana carbon/graphite boat that weighs only 35 pounds and carries three people and gear with stability you wouldn't expect from its race inspired design. My second boat is a Savage River Deep Creek 16.5 foot weighing 29 pounds. For two, this is the ultimate BWCAW canoe. After years of paddling a longer boat, I really marvel at how easy the Deep Creek handles at landings and when weaving down a corkscrew Quetico portage trail.

People sometimes say to me, "What's the big deal about shaving off another fifteen pounds? Is there really any difference between a 44-pound canoe and a 29-pound canoe?" That question reminds me of people that say, "Once it gets below zero who cares if its 10 below or 40 below?" I care. A 29-pound canoe is so easy to put up on your shoulders that you don't even think twice, and on the water it floats like a willow leaf. Incredible.

I've never paddled them but some Souris River boats seem like rugged yet ultralight canoes. Bell canoes are well designed and come closest to a wood-canvas canoe in grace. Their fit and finish is without peer, but their weight is starting to creep up to that threshold: the threshold where the average person can no longer carry both a big pack and lift the canoe to their shoulders.

In the arctic it's a whole different story. Double, even triple portaging is the norm and Royalex is king.

Stu: I want maximum-load carrying capacity without sacrificing too much paddling speed and portaging comfort. This means an 18 1/2 foot Kevlar canoe. The Bell Northwoods 18 1/2 is perhaps the perfect

canoe country fishing canoe. My gel-coat-wood trim models go over 50 pounds, but I can still handle this with a light pack on most portages.

The Bell Northwoods is ideal for two anglers and four big packs for a week to ten days. I have also packed it to the gunwales with Mom, Dad, the two kids, six packs and the family dog. It has seen me through thick and thin. A very stable canoe with a big load or while out fishing in a big wind.

The Northwoods has just enough rocker/tumblehome to produce very good maneuverability in small creeks, approaching a tricky portage or turning around for a snag in a two-foot chop. Yes, it's a bit heavier and slower than my 18 1/2 foot Wenonah MN II, but I use it on a lot more of my canoe trips. This probably also explains why I drive pickup trucks and not sports cars.

The Souris River 18 1/2 foot Quetico model would be my second choice for all-around canoe country fishing trips. I paddled one on a trip last year and found it falls between the Bell Northwoods and Wenonah MN II in handling all of the big four: load capacity, stability, speed and carrying comfort.

The Wenonah MN II is probably the #1 most popular canoe model on the streets of Ely each summer. I guess this speaks to the purchasing power of the growing travel-light crowd. I usually give my MN II to the two slowest paddlers in our group and spread part of their pack load into the other boats. The Wenonah MN II is notably faster/lighter than the Bell or Souris River 18 1/2 footers.

PADDLES

Rob: I agree with Stu on paddles but for different reasons. I went through a bent-shaft carbon-fiber phase, and they are faster and lighter than straight shafts. But most canoe country lakes are not so big that an extra mph is really significant. What's the big rush? Also I think the increased efficiency of bent-shaft paddles is mostly for sitters, I kneel 90% of the time. Kneeling is more stable, more powerful and once you become accustomed to it, more comfortable.

My favorite paddle is a 58-inch Bending Branches straight shaft Expedition model. I stripped the shaft of varnish, gave it an oil finish and painted the blade red. It is ugly but almost indestructible, has a wide enough blade for a solid brace and a T-grip for precise control.

The red blade? North of treeline, even with a spare lashed to the canoe I have nightmares about losing my paddle. The red blade makes lost paddles easier to find, stuck in a pack they are a helpful beacon when returning for a second load and from a distance the flash of red on a paddle helps me keep an eye on all the boats.

Every time I take a lighter paddle, I regret it as soon as I find myself pushing off from boulders or chopping onions. Best of all on those July nights when the sun sets over a mirror-smooth lake, there is no greater joy than solo paddling an empty canoe, leaning it up on the gunwales and executing a sequence of freestyle maneuvers which create a graceful water ballet. You need a long, straight shaft, big paddle for that.

Stu: I have three beautiful bent-shaft wood paddles in my equipment shed, and they all collect dust until I borrow them out. I haven't been able to change my

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I use a 62-inch straight shaft Bending Branches Expedition Model T-grip, with laminated hardwood 8-inch blade, reinforced with fiberglass cloth and protected by a Wrap Around “Rockgard Tip.” I absolutely love this paddle. It grabs a lot of water and withstands a ton of wear and tear in the rocky canoe country. Mine are still going strong after VERY heavy use. I probably put more paddling hours on mine in a year than most folks do in ten years. So I quickly see any weaknesses. The Bending Branches Expedition model has no weaknesses. It’s the only paddle I use, and I strongly recommend it. (See VTP p. 88.)

PORTAGE YOKE

Rob: The lighter the boat, the less important the yoke. Last summer with the 35-pound Savage River, I just tucked the paddles under webbing on the thwarts and rested the paddle blades on my shoulders. Big pads are overkill on a lightweight boat, adding a

couple of needless pounds and interfering with loading. On my MN II I was very happy with Chosen Valley Canoe Accessories’ sling style yoke pads. CVCA is a Minnesota company, and the pads are light, comfortable and small.

Stu: I consider an ultra-cushy portage yoke one of the most important pieces of canoe-camping gear. It alone can make up for a lot of that extra 10 pounds of canoe I carry to achieve my desired load capacity/stability. Many scoff at my double portaging approach, but I never stop while on one—even those over a mile. Combine that with a quick stride, and I can portage two times almost as fast as many people portage one time. Especially after we put in a dozen of them on a given day.

The super comfortable *BWJ* yoke pads make high rpm, non-stop long portages not only possible but routine. (See VTP p. 87.) I put them on all my canoes, and whenever I portage a canoe with something else, I quickly realize why mine are the best.

They simply get me from lake to lake with less pain.

CANOE PACKS

Rob: Over the past few years, a typical summer BWCAW trip consists of a couple of daughters, one canoe, three packs and myself; single portaging all the way.

I use a 60-liter barrel for the food pack. It is airtight, making waterproof liners unnecessary and greatly reducing any interest from bears or rodents. The newest suspension systems make barrels as easy to carry as soft-sided packs. Also, because the barrel is rigid, it provides excellent protection, is easy to dig around in and you can stand on it—which will help you hang the tarp up a bit higher. This barrel starts off as a heavy pack at 40-55 pounds but not nearly so heavy as Stu’s food pack. I am able to carry the barrel and my 34-pound canoe. If I tried to carry Stu’s “ice chest” pack and his 50-pound canoe, I would herniate myself. Lunch is packed at the top of this barrel.

The second pack is a big soft



Portaging 75 lbs of "Real Food" on ice is worth every ounce. The BWJ Insulated Food Pack System makes it easy with a padded back panel and hip belt. Be sure to wear 8" leather/GoreTex boots for good traction and ankle support. A paddle in one hand is OK to brace yourself in a stumble, but keep your chest and other hand free of gear. (Cap Lake to Boulder Lake)

Duluth style. Nylon is better than canvas because it is lighter, especially on a rainy day. The BWJ Standard #4 (VTP p. 86) is as good as any and better than most. For the girls I like just simple shoulder straps. This pack is bulky but not heavy. It carries the sleeping bags, tent, clothes and pads. Regardless of manufacturer claims about water resistance, I line this pack with a heavy poly bag (not a thin garbage bag). The sleeping bags should also be stored in special watertight stuff sacks, not the ones that came with the bags. I like waterproof Outdoor Research stuff sacks with roll down Velcro closures. When it's time to break camp, this big pack is stuffed, sealed and will remain unopened until arrival at a new camp. I also put an extra set of maps in the bottom of this pack. I can still get bewildered on some of those island-studded lakes, and having reserve maps gives me peace of mind should one set get lost. Plus,

inevitably, at night you want to look at maps and this set will be in the tent.

The gear pack is an old Cooke Custom Sewing model with an inner semi-rigid foam zippered box. I line this with a 6-mil poly bag between the inner box and the outer pack-cloth box. Similar to the barrel, its open shape makes sorting easy. Now that my daughters are older, they like the privacy of their own tent so I carry a small solo shelter in this pack, plus all the odds and ends: first aid kit, multitool, duct tape, filter pump, one leather glove, Nalgene bottles, tp, GoreTex rain jackets, camera, telescoping fishing pole and a few hooks. I also throw in the game bag with cards, maybe journals and a book so I am prepared for long lunches or afternoon stops on sultry days.

Down the sides between the inner and outer packs, I slide the maps in front, the permit in back, the axe on one side and the saw

on the other. Early in the trip I might also need to put the cook kit in this bag, but I move it over into the food barrel as soon as space permits. This pack carries best with a tumpline, but my daughters hate tumplines so just simple shoulder straps work fine. Rain-proof and bilge-water-proof but not tip-over proof, this pack is perfect for 99% of canoe country paddling. On a whitewater river trip you need a different system.

Limiting the outfit to three packs, three paddles, 3 PFDs simplifies the carries and minimizes the real possibility of otherwise leaving something behind. The duffer sits on the soft pack and paddles. It is a sleek, light and fast system; we have never been passed. I've tried carrying a fourth small pack for the lunch and raingear, but with three people there is enough room in the gear pack. When given the choice, I always keep things simple.

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With two people it is always tough to single portage, but with two canoes and four people it gets easier, and five people with two canoes is even easier yet. No matter how many people are traveling you only need one axe, one saw, one tarp so the weight per person drops off. In fact, with nine paddlers and three canoes you can start packing watermelons. However, I have learned on Far North trips that there is a paradox. You would think with more people and the ability to delegate tasks everything would be speeded up. Wrong. Big groups move slowly.

Stu: For a party of three for seven days I would have:

One *BWJ* Double Insulated Food Pack which would hold most of the fresh and dried food plus the saw, axe, tarp, rope and fry pan between the poly box and the sides of the nylon canoe pack. About 75 pounds.

One *BWJ* Extra-wide Ultimate Pack with 3 sleeping bags, 3 full-length Thermarests, 3 camp pillows, clothes, camp shoes, tackle boxes, first aid kit, towels,

etc. About 60 pounds.

One *BWJ* Regular Ultimate Pack with tent (4 man Eureka Timberline), cook kit, propane stove and 2 tanks of fuel plus overflow misc. dry food consumed after 2 days. About 50 pounds.

Remember, with my *BWJ* packs, I have critical portage performance features Rob ignores. I have a fully-padded foam back, padded contoured shoulder straps, a padded hip belt that transfers some of the load to hips and a sternum strap to stabilize/balance the load.

One *BWJ* Guide Pack with personal water filter bottles, 3 one-quart Nalgene bottles, rain jackets and pants, camera, 3 headlights, bug dope, sunscreen and emergency kit. About 25 pounds. (*BWJ* Packs see VTP p. 84-86.)

On the portages I would carry the Guide pack with the canoe while the other two guys take the food pack, personal pack, 3 life jackets, 3 paddles, fishing net and rod cases. One of the three would have to make a second trip for the equipment pack, but only going into our target destination. While

there for 4-5 days we would consume most of the food so heading back home we are basically down to 3 packs and doing the portages in one pass. With only two people, we would both double portage coming and going. However, we also have amenities Rob doesn't, and we eat a whole lot better all week long. By the way, no hernias yet—only wilderness fishing paradise.

TENTS

Rob: The tent is one of the heaviest items in your outfit, and unlike the foodpack, tents do not get lighter as your trip progresses. However, the small difference in weight doesn't justify choosing a claustrophobia inducing two-person tent over a spacious four-person model. For three adults I actually prefer a six-person tent.

Because I also use my tents in the arctic, low-slung dome tents with high quality aluminum poles and a tent fly that stays put in a gale make the most sense. A perfect *BWCAW* tent would be light but spacious, have excellent ventilation and keep you dry in a downpour or steady rain. I like Minnesota-made Cooke Custom Sewing's new line of shelters. They have those attributes plus a close-to-nature experience that is very pleasing. Kids, however, prefer tents that can be sealed up tight. It gives them a sense of security. If you are traveling with little ones and can't zipper in, be prepared for snake questions well into the night.

A ground cloth is a waste of money and weight. In the life span of a tent (which is a lot less than a dog) zippers and rainflies fail before the floor. An inner thin oversized poly sheet makes some sense on top of your tent floor if the coating and seam sealing in your tent floor is starting to leak. When my tents start leaking, I donate them to the Boy Scouts and buy new ones. I broke this rule once with a terrific Walrus tent only to have the zipper on the door go on the fritz half-way through an arctic expedition. We had to duct tape the door shut, cut the netting out of a window and enter/exit through the window the remainder of the trip. I can get emotionally attached to tents, but you have to know when it's time

to let go.

Stu: I take a four-man Eureka Timberline tent for a group of two or three. With four people I take a six-person tent. Ventilation is huge for me; the more netting the better.

SLEEPING BAGS, ETC.

Stu: I use an L.L. Bean goose down bag (rated to +20° F) in canoe country from late May to mid-September. It's a rectangular bag. Mummy bags save a few ounces but cost me dearly in lost sleep. I can't move in these straight-jacket things. I've given all my mummy bags to the rest of the family. My bag and camp pillow in a *BWJ* Compression Sack (See VTP p. 87.) pack down almost to the size of a football.

I know goose down is "worthless" when wet. That's why I double waterproof my sleeping bag. In 35 years of camping I've never had a wet goose down sleeping bag. I pack Patagonia silk-weight Capilene long underwear—top/bottom and goose down booties for early and late season trips. They add a good 10-15° comfort and warmth to the sleeping bag performance.

I pack full-length Thermarest sleeping pads for everyone. Get one with non-slip fabric. I have Thermarests of varying thicknesses (1 to 2 1/2 inches thick) and take the thickest one I can fit in the pack for a given trip. They make sleeping on the ground comfortable enough to actually sleep.

Rob: I sleep like a baby in my mummy bag. In fact, when my wife is out of town, I will sometimes choose to sleep in a mummy bag at home, and an ultra-light 3/4 pad is all you need in the summer. Full-size pads and rectangular bags, although not much heavier, are bulky and inefficient. Pillows? Use your rolled up fleece or wool top. Three-season sleeping bags are overkill in the summer. My current summer down bag only weighs a couple of pounds and stuffs impossibly small.

There are a half-dozen mountaineering companies that sell super-quality sleeping bags. This winter I bought the lightest model of the brand that was on sale. It replaced a down liner bag that I had used for almost thirty years of



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summer camping. I keep a set of Patagonia Capilene underwear and thin socks in the bottom of the bag for those rare frosty summer nights. Down sleeping bags are best but not for kids, they cannot seem to keep stuff dry.

No chairs. Not even clever ultralight chairs. Ask yourself, "Is this little comfort really worth tripling my portaging distance?" It's always those add-ons that push you over the single portage threshold. PFDs make good seats and can also be used to extend the length of your sleeping pad.

TARP

Rob: I like the Cooke Custom Sewing 10 x 16 foot nylon tarp for a rain shelter over the fire.

Stu: I use our *BWJ* 10 x 12 foot ultralight nylon tarps over the cooking area for rain protection and shade on hot days and to cover packs overnight. If you're still using the bulky blue plastic discount store junk you can do a lot better. (See VTP p. 87.)

FOOD SUPPLIES

Rob: No one can starve in one week. Eating well on the trail if it

means lots of pans and messing with many ingredients is just not a high priority for me. I keep it simple and organize the food pack by breakfast, lunch/snacks and dinners. Real oatmeal with raisins is the perfect food for every breakfast. Easy to cook, it sticks to your ribs and keeps you regular. I don't buy the instant packets, the regular Quaker Quick Oats are almost as fast and taste a lot better. On arctic trips we do oatmeal in bulk, but in the BWCAW, I pre-package group servings in plastic bags. For large males double the suggested serving amount. Use a little less water than is suggested on the package as drier oatmeal is more palatable than loose porridge. If this sounds too monotonous you can vary the texture of the meal by sometimes boiling the raisins before you add the oatmeal. This makes them soft and swollen as opposed to chewy, which is what happens when you toss the raisins in after the oatmeal is cooked. If you want to get really wild, every third day you can dust the oatmeal with cinnamon, an

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ounce of cinnamon goes a long way. You don't need milk but always liberally sprinkle the cooked oatmeal with dark brown sugar; when the sugar runs out, the joy goes out of breakfast.

I hate bringing coffee but to not do so when a regular coffee drinker is in the group can be perilous. Cowboy coffee is fun. Throw grounds into a boiling pot of water, brew and then using your arm like a giant windmill, spin the grounds to the bottom. The last step, stopping the windmill is the trickiest. I prefer tea.

Early rising is good for summer canoeing as you will have the lakes and portages to yourself, see more wildlife, generally have calm water and you will avoid the mad-dog sun of high noon. An early start will result, even after hearty oatmeal, with a desire for a mid-morning snack. Cliff and Luna bars are perfect. They come in many flavors and are nutritionally sound. Smaller companies make similar bars which are equally good. Do not confuse these with cheap grocery store granola bars

that are mostly sugar and not satisfying.

Lunch in the BWCAW is always some combination of grocery store bagels, peanut butter, jam, cheese, nuts and a piece of dark chocolate. The problem with GORP is kids tend to "high grade," fishing out the bits they like and thereby altering and degrading the remaining blend. As a result I have lost my fascination with this old canoeing favorite. Bannock is the staple of the far north. A quick break of lard, flour, baking powder and salt baked adjacent the fire in a cast iron skillet or over heat as fry bread. I have taken several long trips where the only food we brought was bannock ingredients, tea and dry-meat; our meals were always satisfying and never boring. Bannock works equally well in the BWCAW and will be especially welcomed after the bagels and pitas are a few days old. The only trouble is you want a no-cook lunch and that means making the bannock the night before and fresh bannock has a way of disappearing.

Supper the first night is fresh. If kids are part of the trip, hot dogs on a stick with buns you treated with care in the pack. Just enough mustard and ketchup in sandwich bags are all the condiments you need. Pringles on the side and a few marshmallows (you've already cut the sticks for the hot dogs) finish the meal. The first day invariably involves a late start because of the drive to the BWCAW, so a quick clean-up meal is especially appreciated. With adults, substitute real steaks for the tube steaks and compliment them with one of the many dried potato dishes available on supermarket shelves. Finish the meal with a piece of chocolate or a couple ounces of Bailey's under the stars, perfect. In the arctic the first meal and each supper that follows is almost always fish, maybe with rice, noodles, stove top stuffing, dried potatoes or bannock.

Second night in the BWCAW is spaghetti. The problem with spaghetti is two fold. You really need a fork and I prefer to travel

forkless, and it requires two pots. But spaghetti is always popular, so I have softened to it in the last few years. In preparation for the trip, transfer the contents from a glass jar of meatless sauce into a boil-in-the-bag container. This greatly speeds clean up. Parmesan cheese in a sandwich bag adds fillip to this dish.

Bean burritos are the perfect meal for the third night as long as you have enough time to cook the dried beans. Tortillas keep well flat on the bottom of the barrel and cheddar cheese starts looking goofy in the heat but tastes fine well into the week. Fourth night is grocery store Mac and Cheese, substitute lard for the butter and skip the milk; hopefully, you can jazz up this night with a fish.

The last couple of night's dinners are freeze dried. Stu disparages freeze-dried, and he has a point, but when I come out I want to truly savor that restaurant meal in Ely or Grand Marais. A couple of nights of freeze-dried will whet the appetite. Freeze-dried has improved since the 80s. The best is Mountain House Pro-Paks. These are 4-ounce individual entrees. Kids enjoy picking from a wide variety of choices, even if they do all taste similar, so take extras. Expensive but very lightweight, if you have some left over you can save it for the next trip; freeze-dried keeps for a decade.

Ice? I agree with Stu that it's nice to have ice when you are camping. If I was just paddling a lake on the periphery of the BWCAW I might bring along ice, but there is no way I am ever packing frozen water down a portage trail. It reminds me of my Boy Scout days. If one kid in our group was being annoying on a backpacking trip, we would sneak a few big rocks into his pack. When he would stagger into camp at dusk and discover he had been carrying rocks, to thirteen-year-olds, it was very funny. If I stagger down the portage trail because my pack is loaded down with ice, it wouldn't be funny. Ice in the rum is one of the perks of an arctic trip, but that is because natural ice is frequently at hand. I'll stick to lukewarm in the BWCAW.

Stu: Depending on group size

and forecasted high temperatures, I carry 5-12 lbs of ice. But I only actually carry it for 1 1/2 days of a 7-day trip. In the meantime, our meals go from expensive freeze dried fare low on taste, portion size and calories to delicious outdoor feasts. I despise all alcohol so I'm not packing ice for cocktails. I pack ice to enjoy the pleasure of real food in a wilderness setting. It's a special treat, worth every ounce on the portages. The last day I pour Tang into the ice jugs and relish this ice-cold thirst quencher all the way to the truck.

I place a one-gallon frozen plastic water jug in the bottom of the *BWJ* double insulated poly food box/canoe pack the morning I head into the woods. I tightly pack frozen steaks, chicken breasts, a ham, brats, hamburger, deli meats and bacon around the ice. I pack a one-gallon plastic jug of milk used only for breakfast cereal. (The milk is six pounds but start adding up eggs, bacon, pancake mix, syrup, etc. and quick, tasty, filling cereal makes a lot of sense over cooking breakfast. I cook two breakfasts a week but cereal and milk is my staple. Oatmeal with powdered milk is not a palatable option to me.) Then I place cheese, lettuce, fresh veggies/fruit etc. on the frozen meat with dry foods filling up the top of the pack. Managed properly, this will keep things cool for five days when the temps are in the 70s.

With four or more people we would go with one cold pack of fresh food and one poly food box pack of dried food. In the three person scenario, you're in between so we squeeze the overflow dry food into the other packs. After two day's consumption, all will fit in the cooler pack.

I haven't eaten a freeze-dried meal in canoe country since the mid 1980s. Freeze dried foods are for backpacking. This is canoeing. With our *BWJ* Insulated Food Pack System, real food is easy and a real pleasure to enjoy in the wilderness. (See articles in *BWJ* Spring 2002, "Real Food For The Soul" and Spring 2004, "A Fresh New Approach To Food Packing" for complete story on converting to a real food system for your canoe trips.)

Rob claims it's too hot in canoe country to carry fresh food on ice. Hundreds of *BWJ* readers have proven otherwise with the *BWJ* Insulated Food Pack System. Rob also claims leftovers are more of a problem with fresh food. But I've found people actually LIKE to eat up all the fresh food on my canoe trips. Freeze dried food is where you get unpalatable leftovers nobody wants. Burning a few leftovers in a hot campfire does not "attract bears" in canoe country as Rob claims in his book. I carry pepper spray just in case, but I've never had a bear in camp where I've had to use it.

The bottom line on food supplies for BWCAW/Quetico trips is you can live on rice, oatmeal and granola bars for a week. But why would you want to? Real food is worth every ounce on the portages.

CLOTHING

Rob: Even in the summer I think cotton is bad form. It is heavy. It is cold and uncomfortable when wet and very slow to dry. I might sneak a couple of threadbare cotton T-shirts on a trip but synthetics are the way to go. I have an old pair of Ely-made Wintergreen guide pants with elastic cuffs that are wind proof and dry off almost as fast as the sun comes out, but they are usually in the pack as I prefer short pants nine summer days out of ten. A wool shirt or a fleece pullover, a GoreTex rain jacket and a white Tilley hat is all I need, unless the daughters are around; then I need a swimsuit.

Footwear is perhaps my biggest schism with Stu. Last summer in 90-degree heat, I cannot imagine what it would have been like to be Stu wearing GoreTex boots. On my feet, high-quality sport sandals were a delight. I prefer Chacos, partly because they are some of the last footwear still to be made in America, but more because they provide a very stable footbed and non-slip sole. I routinely waded up to my hips before dropping the canoe.

Treated likewise, boots become heavy, soggy blister machines, as do modern sneakers. Some people are afraid sport sandals do not provide enough support for the ankles and protection for the toes,

but how can you argue with a billion people, many of whom wear sandals 365 days a year? Paired with neoprene socks I'll even wear sport sandals late into September. Boots are for mountain climbing and backpacking. Twisting booted feet underneath the seat so you can kneel to paddle requires yoga control I have not yet mastered. Free your feet Stu, lose the boots. At the very least your tent will smell better, and you'll learn why "hand" lotion is important.

Stu: During June, July and August trips I wear blue jeans, T-shirt, baseball cap and 8-inch leather GoreTex boots. My GoreTex rain gear is always within easy reach to keep my blue jeans dry. In my *BWJ* Guide Pack I have a WindPro fleece jacket, GoreTex rain jacket and pants. In a watertight dry bag inside my *BWJ* Ultimate personal canoe pack (which has another waterproof liner as well) I pack the Patagonia Capilene underwear, a long-sleeve fleece shirt, 2 short-sleeve shirts, 2 pairs of socks and underwear, supplex swim shorts, 1 pair blue jeans and a towel. My clothes dry bag also compresses down to not much bigger than the sleeping bag.

I absolutely forbid anyone on the trips I guide to portage in sandals or watershoes. From what I've seen, they are the #1 cause of portaging injuries. Portaging in sandals is a reckless disregard for the hard-earned vacation of the rest of the party.

On a serious note; I'm reluctant to even publish anything advocating the use of sandals for portaging for fear somebody will be foolish enough to try it. They are bad, bad, bad news period. Also, with Rob wading into the drink after every portage in his sandals then climbing aboard dragging two gallons of water with him, no wonder he needs a bailer.

I fish in running shoes. I travel in leather GoreTex boots that give maximum traction on slippery rocks. I never wade into the water while loading/unloading. I stay dry and comfortable, which also lets me walk faster with sure footing. I "live" in these same GoreTex leather boots for a month straight while guiding elk hunters at 12,000 feet every year. I've

never gotten a blister, and my feet don't get hot in them as Rob implies. I sit in my canoe seat, so the kneeling position in boots is irrelevant. You can be cold, wet, hungry and miserable if you want. Some say it builds character. I say, have at it.

I often get ripped in internet chat rooms for packing "heavy," eating real food, double portaging, etc. Rob claims his travel light/fast single portage style lets him cover 12 portage trails and 25 miles per day. We often do that with our "heavy outfit" the first day. With dry, good boots and a 75-pound load I can portage a lot faster than most folks, slip sliding and squishing along in their sandals and "ultralight" load.

I just laugh at all the double portaging criticism. When the kids were young I did every portage four or five times. I consider two trips over each portage an absolute treat. After enjoying real food for a week we often cover 20+ portages and 40 miles busting out to the truck that last day. Who's traveling light and fast now?

MISCELLANEOUS ADVICE

Rob: I pack two sets of maps per group just in case one gets lost. Take a single leather glove for cutting wood and cooking. Pack duct tape for repairs. Hand lotion for dry hands and feet.

Gadgets: Back to the theme of less is more; this certainly holds true with technology. You don't need a GPS, cell phones, depth finders, walkie talkies, ipods, binoculars, radios, gameboys or lanterns. In fact these gadgets diminish rather than enhance your wilderness experience. I will concede to a headlamp, although in June and July you will need it only to identify strange night noises, or I guess if you are a fanatic fisherman.

If photography is your passion a good camera is nice but photography is the least gratifying of pursuits. Pictures will never match your memories or your hopes. It is a better idea to leave the camera home and enjoy the wilderness unfettered by a lens.

Water Filters: I like the sound of Stu's Katadyn Exstream. I am going to buy one! Now if Stu will only give sandals a try.
(Editor's note: That will be a cold

day in)

In the past I have insisted my daughters pump the water or add those tiny pills, but I usually sneak a drink with the bailer out on the lakes.

The Axe: A good full-sized single bit axe is a thing of beauty and the most important piece of gear in the canoe. You cannot do much better than an old single-bit Snow and Neally 3.5-pound axehead and a 32-inch hickory handle. Stu, like almost everyone else, carries a little hatchet. He also carries a camp stove, so fire is not nearly so important to him. I cook all my meals on an open fire. While Stu might be out fishing in the evening, I relish time spent around a campfire. Splitting wood with a hatchet is frustrating and time consuming; splitting wood with a three-quarter axe is dangerous.

One of the joys of a canoe trip is cutting, splitting and stacking wood. With a large bow saw I can cut unsightly stumps flush with the ground and, when combined with the big axe, get into that dry heartwood. Beneath a big colorful Cooke Custom Sewing tarp I can get a roaring and cheery blaze going on the rainiest of days. I leave my campsites neater, safer and usually with a nice stack of wood for the next camper.

I use a 30-inch hardware store Swede saw. The frame is rigid and tough. I am careful purchasing blades. The best blades are made in Scandinavian countries. I sheath the blade in a piece of cardboard covered with plastic tape and secure it with a bungee.

Oiling the axe handle, filing and honing the head are an important part of preparing for a canoe trip. It is a ritual during trip preparation that brings me much joy. In my twenties I built an entire log cabin with this same outfit, and the cabin still stands 30 years later. The axe and saw are long, heavy and worth it. Fire bans? Well then, you are stuck bringing a stove. I have never met a white gas stove I liked, and propane/butane stoves are simple but wasteful and lack oomph.

The Bailer: Stu might be right about the bailing in the BWCAW, but a bailer saved my life on Rennie Lake in the Northwest

Territories, and that sticks with a person. For a bailer I actually prefer a round top half-gallon juice pitcher because it has multiple other uses even if I never need it to bail. I consider a bailer like a PFD. You might never actually need it, but when you do, you do. Plus, Canadian law requires you carry a bailer. Canada is famous for good looking women and canoeing wisdom. I pay attention to both.

My final point would be to make your next canoe country trip a lightweight whirl, adventure guaranteed! And remember, in moments of hunger, chills, spills and gear failure, if you didn't pack it—you don't need it.

Stu: I don't pack two complete sets of maps for my Quetico trips. I have the one set of McKenzie/Fisher maps then I take the one-sheet overall Quetico map for backup. It's a smaller scale but adequate for finding portages and the way out in a pinch.

I strongly recommend the Katadyn Exstream 34 ounce personal water filter. Just dip it in the lake, squeeze and drink. No digging in the pack and assembling parts, hoses and then pumping away. The Exstream is instantly ready. I have everyone carry a one-quart Nalgene bottle as well. Then you each have two quarts of liquid available and can add Tang/KoolAid to the Nalgene bottle.

I drank right out of canoe country lakes for 20 years without getting giardia by taking water out deep away from shores, streams or rapids. But the Exstream makes drinking filtered water so fast and easy, it makes no sense to risk getting sick. I did get giardia drinking out of Colorado mountain streams while sheep hunting; it's bad news. The good news is you probably won't be laid low until after the trip.

I love my Browning one watt single LED headlamps. I've retired all my Petzel headlamps which are not nearly as rugged, dependable or bright. When hiking back to elk camp in the Colorado mountains, my hunters always ask, "What kind of headlight is that? It's shining 2 to 3 times further down the trail than mine." The secret is the two lithium

batteries (available at most discount stores). They are expensive (\$10 a pair) but very powerful. When we stay out on the walleyes well past dark, it's comforting to know I can always find our way back to camp by scanning the shoreline with my headlamp. A bright headlight makes the occasional after-hours portage safe and feasible.

Rob takes one leather glove; I take a pair for sawing/splitting firewood, cooking, pulling on food pack ropes and early/late season cold weather paddling.

My repair kit consists of a multitool pliers. Bolts on canoe seats/yokes can loosen up out there, so I have a screwdriver and pliers to tighten them up. I religiously check, maintain, replace all my equipment and rarely have any failures. Unlike Rob, I don't pack duct tape, of course as you'll recall, I don't wear sandals in canoe country so I don't need duct tape.

I do pack a tiny bottle of hand lotion. It helps relieve the pain of fish hands, all the cuts, slices and poke holes from fish spines, teeth and gill rakers.

I carry the *BWJ* Turbo Cut Camp Saw, it has a nasty 7-inch blade that quickly cuts through 3 to 4-inch diameter camp wood for cooking fires. No assembly or parts and only 6 ounces. (See VTP p. 87.) For spring/fall/winter BWCAW trips where fires for heat/warming are important, I pack a Wyoming saw. It's the only "put together saw" I've ever used that won't rattle, wobble or fall apart.

The *BWJ* Lexan Sport Axe is all I need to split the campfire wood I need on canoe trips. It's light, tough and performs great. Rob's full-size bow saw and 3-foot axe are complete overkill for BWCAW summer trips. Ever try to split a 2-inch thick log with a 3-foot axe? I suppose a big saw/axe would be handy if you wanted to clear portages of big deadfalls. I should send Rob on up ahead on all my trips.

As for a canoe bailer, I've never had any need for one. My Bell Northwoods canoes have enough rocker/tumblehome for competent paddlers to pound into two and three foot waves without taking on

"bailable" volumes of water. Any rare day windier than this, I'll wait it out. A sponge under the rear seat to mop up water from dunking the leech locker in/out of the lake is handy, although this won't be a problem any longer in Quetico with the new total ban on bait.

Other essentials for me: a life jacket that is designed for paddling and comfortable to fish in. So I wear it. One spare paddle for the group. I've never broken a Bending Branches paddle, but it is possible to lose one in a rapids or step on one and crack it. Lots of rope for hanging packs, tarps, clothes lines, canoe anchors, lining canoes, etc. A one-burner propane stove and fuel, even when most meals are done on the fire, for times when fires are too wet, time consuming or banned.

And last but certainly not least, my rod case, reels, nets and plenty of fishing tackle. Because there must be some reason I'm willing to double portage that "extra" gear. A reason all canoe country anglers fully understand.

FISHING

Rob: Stu says I don't fish. Actually I do fish, I just don't catch. At least I don't catch much, and that's the way I like it. Fishing is an excuse to paddle around and explore a lake's shoreline, and if a walleye happens onto my hook? A couple of fresh fillets for dinner are always appreciated.

We approach fishing very differently. Stu fishes for sport and practices "catch and release." Having never released a legal walleye in the BWCAW, I have more of a hunger based "kill and grill" approach. But I am hardly a glutton. I seldom eat more than one fish dinner on a BWCAW trip, and I never pack fish out of the BWCAW nor would I permit anyone in my group to do so. I have caught fewer walleye in the last twenty years than Stu catches and releases in one spring day. Although our philosophies on fishing are quite different, our impact on the resource is about the same, negligible.

Once after returning home from a glorious but fishless week on a Malberg Lake loop, I telephoned Stu for a little walleye catching advice. He told me, "Go fishing

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after dinner. That's when the big walleyes like to feed." There was a long pause from me. The reason I go fishing is FOR dinner, why would I go out after I had already eaten?

There are other problems with fishing. I have spent less on a necklace for my wife than the price of some of those fancy spinners, and a related problem is those little knots you have to tie. Tying those knots reminds me of pulling a sliver out of a 3-year-old's finger. You can barely see it, and you never really know if you have it in hand; in the case of the knot, if you didn't get it right, well there goes that expensive necklace down to the lake bottom. Then there are poles that break, reels that snarl, bait escapes, and if you are "lucky" fish slime, fish guts and a greasy pan to wash.

Plus there is the competitive aspect. What if the guy in the bow catches a lot more fish than you do? You start to loathe him. I go canoeing to avoid the rat race. Why would I want to start keeping track of who caught what

and how long it was?

Don't even get me started on leeches. I am always afraid those slimy things will somehow get inside me. I always hate it when someone brings live bait on a canoe trip. I am glad it was banned in Quetico. On about half my trips to the BWCAW I bring fishing gear, and it is a pleasant enough pastime and a reason to get out on the water with maybe a nice edible reward, but fishing is just one small part of my wilderness experience.

In the Far North typically we paddle long distances every day, and we count on fish as an important part of our diet. When it's finally time to stop and camp, someone walks down to a rapids to catch a couple of lake trout while the rest of us set up camp and build a fire (or on the tundra try to get the stove to work). Even in places where fish have never seen hooks and the water is alive with fins, I don't linger to "catch and release" fish. I agree with the Dene, the aboriginal people of Canada's Northwest Territories. If a fish presents himself to you by impaling his mouth on your hook, you insult him by throwing him back. By doing so you risk some bad medicine down river, like headwinds or a grizzly bear charge.

Editor's note: Of course in the Quetico/BWCAW with thousands of anglers, we can't afford the Dene philosophy. The powerful "catch and release" ethics of canoe country anglers is huge in sustaining this high quality wilderness fishery. Catch and kill is the norm on most public waters. That's precisely why the fishing in canoe country transcends the norm.

Rob's Last Word: I hope someday to go on a canoe trip with Stu. He's my hero, and I really mean that. He has managed to carve a niche and live a life on the edge of one of the continent's largest wilderness areas. I spend a lot more time stuck in traffic than with a paddle in my hands and admire him for finding a way to do just the opposite. The Boundary Waters Journal has become a valuable resource for beginners and expert canoeists alike. More importantly, it has given those of us that don't live on the edge a

chance to relax on the couch four times a year and dream.

Stu's speed down the portage trails scares me a little. I'm not sure I could keep up with him. I might have to sneak some extra ice into his pack to slow him down. But I think we'd get along fine, no axe fights, no tipovers. The wilderness would work its magic, and we would agree to disagree but mostly just have fun. I don't think Stu will ever wear sandals on a portage, but I think I could learn to put up with all his fresh food.

*Editor's note: Get Rob Kesselring's new book **River Stories** for lots more on his lifetime of wilderness paddling adventures. The common theme running through this fun collection of 17 stories is a craving for that sense of adventure from paddling into the unknown. Rob bares his soul to share with us all the delights and dilemmas of the wilderness experience. Paddling with Rob means facing roaring stretches of white water, rollers sloshing over the spray deck on large lakes and tough 50-mile days, pitching your tent where only the Dene have ever camped. Most of us can only dream of following Rob to such remote places, but at least this book confirms such wild places are still out there.*

Despite a "Far North" flavor, the book includes a good dose of BWCAW storytelling too. Some of which have run in BWJ. The real message of **River Stories** is for each of us to pursue our love of the wild wherever we can. Wilderness canoe trips take us away from "making a living" to those precious days of "really living." Rob reminds us in a most compelling way that those days spent paddling wilderness waterways are priceless, too few and forever lasting.

We are lucky to have a book like **River Stories** to inspire us to go where only the canoe trails lead. I love Rob's brutal honesty, sense of humor and appreciation for "it's the journey not the destination." You won't put this book down until you hit the back cover. □