

# canoe country challenges



□ by Jim Carrier

## Rendezvous In The Bush

In 1912 the following newspaper advertisement was placed, calling for a few good men: “Men Wanted for Hazardous Journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success.” *Ernest Shackleton.*

In February 2003, a similar but less-daunting internet call was placed on Quetico-related websites, calculated to appeal to online park enthusiasts like myself. A shadowy but clearly wilderness-savvy cyberspace character named Stumpy proposed to convene a “Bushwhackers Jamboree.” Attendees would earn charter membership in his unique club called B.U.G.B.I.T. (Better Understand Going Bushwhacking Is Torture). Ground rules for participation in Stumpy’s proposed modern day Rendezvous were as follows:

**Who...** Whoever can get a permit & get to the location to be named later.

**What...** An informal meeting of tough & hardy travelers.

**When...** Mid-June, when bugs are bad & so are the voyageurs.

**Where...** On a no-name lake near the middle of Quetico. No portage trails lead to it.

**Why...** I want to meet other bushwhackers & shake the hand of anyone that gets there.

On December 7, 2004, Bushwhacker Jamboree’s day of infamy, Stumpy posted map coordinates for his proposed Rendezvous. The destination was revealed as a small, nameless lake between Cairn and Kawnipi Lakes. Internet characters with curious and sometimes colorful Ids such as Intrepid Camper, Woods Walker, Magic Paddler, Pittsburgh Portager, Quetico Passage, Kawishiway, Rangeline, Hexnymph and many others soon applied for June entry permits with the purpose of accepting

Stumpy’s challenge. By way of contrast, my own web ID Jimbo felt a little lame.

I was gut hooked on this proposed adventure. Accompanying me would be my son Ben, a freshman at the University of Minnesota. His fervor for the challenge was a real blessing, returned. I had watched my two boys “grow up” during trips to canoe country, hoping they would come to share my love of the park. Both boys were eager, but Ben’s schedule permitted participation.

In a few short months, it was time to swap out the Palm Pilot and cell phone on my belt for a Leatherman tool and my brand new GPS unit, purchased with bushwhacking in mind.

We hired Doug Chapman, of Canadian Quetico Outfitters, to truck us over to Stanton Bay late on a very overcast Friday morning in mid-June. When Doug discovered Ben was a member of the U of M’s rowing team, he shared “crew” tales from his own rowing experiences at the Henley Championships.

An hour later, Doug waved us an enthusiastic good-bye as we hauled our packs down the well-corduroyed portage, passing some bedraggled-looking folks coming out.

Anxiously we asked each, “How was your trip?”

In response we heard, “lots of wind and rain,” “fishing is so-so,” “coming off early,” and “hope your luck is better than ours.”

Buoyed by our quest, Ben and I were not dismayed by these comments.

We shoved off into the drizzle and gray-green dreariness on Pickerel Lake, bound southwest for Pine Portage Bay. Ben noted the early-growth stage of forest recovery along Pickerel’s fire-damaged northern shoreline. He


vividly recalled a charred and barren version of that same shoreline from a trip during his early teens. This trip would take us down to Sturgeon narrows and wind us around to Heron Bay, Fred Lake and Cutty Creek. We planned to camp two days on remote Camel Lake, then work our way east, enjoying Cutty Creek and several smaller interior lakes en route to our proposed bushwhack staging area on Cairn Lake.

We slipped our raincoats on as the early afternoon rain became steady while crossing Pine Portage Bay. Steady rain grew into a real “frog-strangler” by the time we reached Dore Lake. Ben and I beat it for the shelter of a small campsite on the far side, near the portage to Twin Lakes. There, we gulped down our much-anticipated crackers, cheese and sausage. Fresh air and paddling surely invigorates the appetite!

Three friendly fellows in an Alumacraft, thoroughly soaked in their makeshift plastic-bag rainwear, paddled past us. We wave and exchange pleasantries. Loose gear and small packs lay strewn about their canoe, so we were not at all surprised to learn this was their first trip. As they moved on, Ben and I finished lunch and considered the bathtub-like quality our canoe had taken on in the drenching. We untied its painter and hopped in. It was only a short way over to the portage. We could flip and empty her there. We caught up with the rookies at the hump of bald Canadian Shield rock, the portage entrance.

What happened next was the unfortunate highlight of Day One.

I allowed our Souris River seventeen-footer to drift a little too close to the landing area. The three rookies, each wearing a small pack, reached down and

A photograph of a person in a green canoe on a riverbank. The person is crouching on a large pile of sticks and branches, possibly a beaver dam or a natural landing. The river is dark and calm, surrounded by a dense forest of tall pine trees. The scene is set in a backcountry area, likely between Mudro and Fourtown.

*Beaver activity can be both a blessing and a curse while bushwhacking into the backcountry. Those tricky pullovers are offset by flooded stretches of easier paddling. (Between Mudro/Fourtown)*



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jerked their canoe upward, apparently intending to perform a triple-turtleback portaging maneuver. Something I had never seen before.

Sadly, the rear set of this odd turtle's legs crumpled and then stumbled backward under the unexpected weight of the canoe and accumulated rainwater. As the Alumacraft lifted, a sudden rush of bilge surged to their rear end, nearest the lake... right where we were. Thus, as the vessel flipped, a waterfall of lures, loose bait and what-have-you gushed out the rear, emptying directly over Ben's head.

Profuse apologies followed. The struggling portage party, still clad in now deteriorating plastic bags, then became fully turtleback. Spacing themselves evenly underneath their shell, they marched toward Twin Lake.

Ben and I beached our canoe, dried off and watched. A lively stringer of several smallmouth bass dangled at their collective knees from their overturned thwart bar. Hand-carried rods and paddles poked out willy-nilly in all directions. The odd sight

jingled, jangled and stumbled its way down the path. "Tangle rods" snagged bushes, tree branches and their legs.

Ten minutes later, we caught up with them, gasping for air while lying on the portage path beside their canoe. It lay crossways fully blocking our progress with our own canoe and heavy bags. After about a minute, one of them asked, "Do you want to get by us?" We simply nodded our assent and moved on.

The rain abated somewhat later that evening. We enjoyed first-night steaks on a fog-laden, skeeter-infested, island campsite in Sturgeon Narrows. We chuckled over our encounter with the park rookies. Ben humbled me, however, reminding me of my own misadventures from "way back when," which wasn't all that far back. We soon agreed it was better, indeed, to make mistakes as a park rookie and learn than to never venture into the bush in the first place.

Campfire conversation drifted to speculation about the would-be bushwhackers. How many others had launched their quests to

rendezvous with the mysterious Stumpy at his Jamboree? How did Stumpy get his name? Was he short and stocky? Did he once work for a logging operation? What's so magic about Magic Paddler? Half the fun of this adventure would be in meeting these various internet personalities!

Campfire conversation turned philosophical. We discussed how existence in this wilderness world was so *inverted* from day-to-day reality back home. Out here, especially on days like today, we were no longer protected behind glass, passively observing a world that lay beyond a windshield or a television screen. Out here, we did not push buttons and watch the consequences from a distance. Out here, like it or not, we were actively engaged in stiff winds, blowing rain, gnawing cold, smothering heat, burning sunshine or confounding fogs... such as the one all around us right now. Out here in the wilderness, the world is always in our face, demanding complete attention and respect as its price for admission.

This *wilderness transaction* was

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our only certainty. If we were lucky, the wilderness *might* yield glimpses of its grace and beauty in return. On the other hand, there was no guarantee we would get so lucky while tripping and bush-whacking.

The most we could ever hope to do was to be prepared for the worst and to accept anything better with a thankful spirit.

Overcast sky and plenty of mosquitoes greeted us as we broke camp in the morning mists. At around 7:30 a.m. we pushed our canoe into the mild, swirling current and headed south toward Camel Lake. Bug nets adorned our heads as we waved at a canoe party heading north, gliding past us in the Narrows, the last people we would see for a few days.

The bug nets came off as we cruised down Heron Bay and Fred Lake in a light, following breeze. My new GPS revealed we were moving along nearly at a 5 mph clip, helping me fully appreciate Ben's strength and stamina in the bow! Soon we found ourselves at the fern-covered entrance to Cutty Creek.

Not surprisingly, Ben prefers

bug-free breezy lakes where he can paddle aggressively in his customary competitive rowing manner. Personally, despite the mosquitoes and flies, the older I get the more I prefer languid, lazy creeks and streams where nature envelopes us and offers countless possibilities around each twist and turn. Would we surprise a deer, bear or moose? Would we finally get a glimpse of a wolf? In my excitement, I started to tell Ben about several such wildlife encounters on a similar stream years ago near Cache Lake. Ben silently hushed me, finger to lips, as if to say, "If we *must* endure all these bugs, let's at least be quiet and maybe we *will* have a chance to see some wildlife!"

En route to Camel Lake, we encountered one extra portage, unmarked on the Fisher Map, as well as a major *false* portage. It was fairly tough going. The bush was clearly reclaiming these lightly-traveled portages. We celebrated reaching Camel Lake, very close to the geographic center of Quetico Park, by snacking on peanut butter and jelly tortillas.

Heading west, we paddled

through the narrow channel separating the cliffs at the entrance of Camel's western-most bay. Beaver activity appeared bent upon closing this channel but had not yet succeeded. Arriving at Camel's west bay, we searched for a campsite recommended by one of our internet friends. Throughout this trip, we would make use of valuable information shared by trusted cyberspace personages such as Mad Mat, Quetico Passage and Tripper. As we glided closer to the eastern shore, however, we began to second-guess this particular recommendation.

"Yikes!" I exclaimed. Fire had evidently swept through a few years back. Vegetation was sparse. The thin, remaining soil of the campsite sat on huge square blocks of Canadian bedrock, about the size of freight cars. These were separated by foot-wide fissures with crevasses up to eight feet deep. Clearly, we would need to watch our step on any midnight runs into the woods! After careful deliberation, we finally decided that this site was suitable, barely, for our purposes.

We set up camp and soon found

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the place was infested by no-see-ums and ticks. As bug juice offered minimal relief, we spent most of our stay on the water! On the upside, abundant walleyes near camp offered ample compensation for our discomfort. Soon we dined in true canoe country style on walleye chowder, using table-sized stone blocks as our kitchen.

After dinner, sunset breezes scattered thick clouds and most of the pesky no-see-ums. A golden-orange glow in the western sky hinted fine promise for the following day. A loon serenaded us, echoing a faint call from somewhere beyond the narrow channel to our north. We watched an eagle swoop down to grab our discarded fish carcasses, placed on the distant shoreline. The sense of remoteness and solitude on this deep interior lake was absolutely overwhelming. It brought to mind some memorable advice from John Muir, who once said: "Break clear away, once in awhile, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean."

The following morning, Ben and I washed our spirits clean around

wonderfully remote Camel Lake. We discussed making an impromptu bushwhack over to nearby Hoare Lake. Hoare's reputed olive jar message cache and rumor of its lake trout were tantalizing. However, in light of productive bass and walleye fishing on Camel, we opted to conserve our energies for Bushwhackers Jamboree, now only three days away.

One highlight from our two days on Camel Lake was our close inspection of a nearby beaver lodge, curiously laced with well-placed, head-sized rocks. How did the rocks get there? Also, this beaver family proved to be particularly garrulous. We heard a racket of grunts, chuffs and throaty noises emanating from within every time we passed within fifty yards!

On Day Four we broke camp at 8 a.m. and paddled east with a brisk breeze at our backs. Once again, the price to be paid for paddling beautiful Cutty Creek was the donning of bug nets. We made our way over to peaceful, jewel-like Egan and Cub Lakes rather unevent-

fully. Like Camel these picturesque lakes seldom see much canoe traffic.

Tempted though we were to set up an early camp and try our hand at fishing their pristine waters, we elected to move on. My internet pal Tripper had riveted my attention upon Baird Lake, which he characterized as spooky and maybe haunted. We were anxious to discover what qualities could possibly make a lake feel that way. We intended to camp on Baird, spooks or no spooks!

The portage into Baird from Cutty Creek was short but tough. It was slick with mud and almost vertical. We gritted our teeth, hoisted and heaved, and gained the top. There, the presence of a beaver dam complicated our put in. Clouds thickened behind us, so we pushed on to a recommended island campsite at the center of Baird Lake. It sat atop a ledge, and its approach was from the rear of the island.

Once set up, we paused to admire the great view and the bowl-like features of this high-rimmed lake. Sounds of the

wilderness seemed to echo from all directions. Perhaps this was the eerie aspect of the neat little lake? Or could the haunting come in the form of a monster of the deep such as the 40+ inch northern that chased, but never seized, Ben's white-skirted buzzbait that evening?

Torrential rains broke soon afterward, and we beat it back to camp, empty handed. Booming thunder reverberated endlessly off of the high cliffs that night, suggesting yet another way this lake might freak you out.

Cold, heavy rain persisted and greeted us in the morning. Emerging from our tent was a slow process. Fortunately, our *BWJ* Ultralight Dry Fly Shelter (see VTP page 89) made it possible to prepare much needed coffee and breakfast in relative comfort. While we didn't fancy the idea of breaking camp in this mess, we thought it better to travel than lie about idly hoping conditions might clear. We steeled ourselves to the day's challenge and donned the heavy rain gear.

The portage out of Baird into No Name Lake was just as muddy and steep as the portage in! We exercised care, crossed No Name and hoofed it along a real ankle-breaker portage into Metacrust Lake. Pushing east on Metacrust was quite a challenge. A stiff easterly wind blew sheets of rain directly into our faces.

The morning seemed to grow colder as it wore on. Stumpy's great rendezvous in the bush was supposed to be the following day. My plan had been to get a good head start on bushwhacking *today*. Prospects seemed dim, however, as we crossed Heronshaw Lake and approached Cairn Lake, where we intended to launch our trek to the target interior pond.

Those dim prospects turned bleak when, around midday, we eyeballed the tall vertical cliff faces of the eastern shore of Cairn Lake for the first time. Their tops were lost in the blowing mists and rain. Their high shoulders shed rivulets of rainwater which gathered and gushed as cascades down into the lake, splashing right beside us.

We were cold, wet and weary. Bushwhacking a couple miles into



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the interior from *this* spot was unthinkable. Accordingly, Ben and I silently opted to paddle south where we hoped to find shelter and, perhaps, a better approach to the big X on our map marking Stumpy's Bushwhackers Jamboree.

What an incredibly raw and miserable late spring day! We later learned a veteran solo hiker in the BWCAW had disappeared that very week. Reports said he had likely perished from hypothermia. Authorities never found his body... just his scattered clothes.

As we paddled south, we knew other folks were also on the move towards Bushwhackers Jamboree. Anyone not prepared for these challenging conditions was at serious risk. We pushed ahead in hopes of finding a place to set up our shelter. We ached to get off the water and get warm!

We spied an island midway down the lake and hustled down there to check it out. We rejoiced at finding numerous suitable tent

pads. Our first thought was to set up the *BWJ* shelter for the purpose of staging gear in a relatively dry spot and especially for fixing something warm to eat and drink—away from the downpour. We set it up and started to relax a little with hot chocolate in hand. Ben reminded me that others might be desperately hunting for shelter in these terrible conditions. We started to feel a little guilty about our good fortune. It was about then we had our *great idea*.

It is not everyday a canoe camper carries a large Granite Gear pack crammed full of a dozen standard-sized, garden-variety, pink flamingos into Quetico Park. In a story too long and bizarre to relate here, Ben and I had done just that. A dozen of these classic lawn ornaments, hauled through the mud and the bush, dumped out of the bag onto this lonely island in the middle of Cairn Lake.

I had taken considerable ribbing on the internet about being a

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started swapping tripping tales. "Where have you been, so far?" "How was it?" "How did you come to be at this particular spot?" We also discussed options and approaches for bushwhacking the next morning. This discussion had not gone on very long when a pleading thin voice was barely heard above the howling wind, rain and flapping tents. It came from the water, well below us.

"Hello up there! Hey! Can you make room for a couple of cold, wet paddlers?" We jumped up instantly and hustled over to see who the pink flamingos had fetched. Through chattering teeth, Magic Paddler introduced himself. He was about my age, in his fifties. He traveled with his older brother, age 73! We gladly welcomed this waterlogged, weary, nearly hypothermic but clearly indomitable pair. They had begun their trek a few days earlier in the rugged Mack Lake region, heading this way—intent upon bushwhacking and meeting Stumpy. Warm drink was issued, their tent erected quickly and their bags rolled out. They were dangerously cold and wet.

The tales and our camaraderie resumed. QP and Woods Walker told us about climbing a fire tower. They displayed well-marked maps of Quetico containing references to message caches, pictographs, fishing holes, campsites, little-known portages and more.

Intrepid Camper impressed us with her wilderness savvy and her extraordinary lean-camping skills. We learned she lives on an island just outside the BWCAW and makes several solo trips into the park each year. Magic Paddler wandered over after ensuring his brother was safe and warm in his bag. Their day had been particularly gruesome and soggy. They had been especially glad to see the pink beacons of our camp. To my further embarrassment, he ceremoniously presented me with an inflatable pink flamingo!

I winced again. My notoriety as a collector of useless lawn ornaments had clearly approached mythic status!

Everyone began to relax. The group got chummy. Much to my red-faced son's embarrassment, I

major collector of lawn ornaments. How this silly fiction really got started doesn't matter. My intention had been to give them away as mementos from Bushwhackers Jamboree.

We now thought of a *much* better use for our pink flamingos. Thus, I directed Ben to, "Deploy the birds! Stick them both high and low at the front and back ends of the island."

So it was that little pink lighthouses encircled our island, hopefully welcoming cold, wet and maybe even desperate strangers to our campsite. The tactic worked like a charm! Within half an hour, Woods Walker and Quetico Passage arrived from the south, cutting clear across the lake upon sighting the strange pink phenomena. We introduced ourselves and welcomed them to Flamingo Island.

Woods Walker said, "We *knew* that *had* to be you, Jimbo!"

I winced. My lawn ornament fancier status was apparently more legendary than I had feared. While

they set up their tarp, Ben tried to coax a measly smoky fire to life.

Forty-five minutes later, a pair of kayakers emerged from the mists, Intrepid Camper and Kawishiway. We waved them in. Again, we all introduced ourselves, shook hands and huddled together under the protection of the tarps.

"Anything that pink and preposterous out in the woods simply *had* to get checked out!" said Kawishiway. "It's not exactly an everyday sort of wildlife encounter."

Kawishiway's fire paste nourished our erratic blaze into fuller life. Quetico Passage, who preferred to be called QP, heated up more warm beverages for all. Shortly after warming up, Intrepid Camper jumped back into her kayak and scoured the island's shoreline, retrieving plenty of burnable wood and resin-rich cedar bush, highly combustible even in these conditions.

Upon her return, we all crowded together under our shelter and

was coaxed into rendering impromptu verse from an art form I liberally call Bushwhacker Balladeering. My ballads are not likely to rate Top Forty radio time in the foreseeable future. That I was actually *encouraged* to recite more than one ballad was a first for me and showed me how kind these folks truly were! We went on to exchange canoeing stories, camping tips, addresses and other personal information. It was an awful lot of fun just putting faces on well-known but previously unseen internet friends! All the while, Mother Nature spewed her blasts just an arm's length away.

We wondered how others "out there" were faring. Were they approaching the interior from the Kawnipi side? Is that where bushwhackers like Stumpy or Hexnymph or Pittsburgh Portager were right now? Would they, or others, yet miraculously appear out of the gloom—drawn to flamingo island—before the evening light was gone?

Later as we lay in our bags that long, wet night, Ben and I likened the impromptu Cairn Lake happening to the fabled voyageurs' Rendezvous of old. We had shared a cheery, lively campfire with a colorful company of like-minded souls. All these folks shared a common thirst for adventure and a passion for the Quetico wilderness. We drifted off to sleep. Sometime in the night the pounding rain stopped.

The radiant sunshine of dawn transformed Cairn Lake into a place of beauty. We were finally experiencing a payoff from our patient transaction with the wilderness. After enduring a few days of harsh conditions, Mother Nature was finally showing us her grace. She also gave us a lot to think about.

It was still awfully wet up in those hills and possibly even dangerous. I got to thinking about all the things that could go wrong and about what I truly valued in the overall experience. As I slipped out of my bag, I asked Ben, "So, would you think your Dad too much of a wimp if he suggested backing off this bushwhacking thing?"

I never doubted his support. Intrepid Camper and I were the

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early risers, enjoying sunshine and coffee, piping hot from my French press. I disclosed our "vision for the day" no longer included Stumpy's Bushwhackers Jamboree. Rather, Ben and I would engage the wilderness in a much less risky transaction over on McDougall Lake.

I carried a copy of Tim Mead's story "Return to McDougall Lake" (see *BWJ*, Spring 1998) in my back pocket and was itching to check it out. Today I would scratch that itch! Moreover, we had *already* found much of what we sought in meeting so many of our internet friends. In spite of the horrible conditions, and perhaps *because* of them, our rendezvous the day before had been a wonderfully sweet experience. Today we thought it prudent to paddle off, while the wilderness equation still worked in our favor.

Yes, our newfound friends were somewhat disappointed to learn of our decision. All but Magic Paddler's older brother made an attempt at bushwhacking that day. As it turned out, all parties starting from Cairn Lake were unsuccess-

ful. We later learned even Stumpy himself was unsuccessful. When a party member was injured en route, Stumpy wisely turned back. Another group, including Hexnymph, Pittsburgh Portager, and Penn Paddler assailed the targeted interior lake from northern Kawnipi. Theirs was the *only* party to succeed in the Bushwhackers Jamboree challenge. They alone earned a measure of the "honor and recognition in the case of success" Ernest Shackleton had once described. The tale of Bushwhackers Jamboree is theirs to tell.

The tale of our rendezvous on Cairn Lake concluded with a smile on my face. All canoes and kayaks departing Flamingo Island that fine sunny June day sported unusual pink hood ornaments, prominently and proudly displayed on their bows. □

the BOUNDARY WATERS JOURNAL **Route Finder**

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