

living on the edge



by Stuart Osthoff

Grand Slam Spring/Summer 2022

Winter hung on around Ely right through April again this year, putting four out of the last five into the severe category. Drove me nuts not being able to get the dogs off the groomed trails and out into the hinterlands. The deep snow also prevented me from waging my spring assault on the alder brush with my brush saw on our trails and wildlife openings. Will have to try to make up for this come fall. By April 20, my cabin fever was far worse than any COVID fears, so Michele and I got out of Dodge and went turkey hunting near Delano, Minnesota on her horse show friends' properties. We both rolled big gobblers. Then she went back home to work and take care of Sage and Jack while I headed west to finish my Gobbler Trifecta with a long-lost friend in South Dakota and Nebraska.

I met Duffy Brungardt in our Little League days growing up in Madison, Wisconsin. We started out at the same high school, but then his family moved to Arizona, so we didn't see each other till we were reunited at UW-Madison. Duffy's dad owned a 400-acre investment property west of town out in the Driftless Area—a perfect blend of corn and alfalfa fields on the ridgetops and valley bottoms with thick hardwood forests cloaking the hillsides. It was a deer and ruffed grouse hunting paradise, and it didn't take long for a half-dozen of us to render an old shack there tolerable as headquarters for weekend escapes from the college grind. We carried piles of books and homework out to the shack from 1974 to 78, but not a lot got done during

the hunting seasons. Suffice to say, our gang had a unique and priceless opportunity to connect with nature here. We all look back fondly on those years now with deep appreciation for just how fortunate we were to have that place in our lives at that time. I can't speak for the others, but I know my years on the Brungardt place did more to influence my career and life than seven years of college ever did.

Duffy ended up teaching high school biology in Idaho, and of course I settled in Ely, and we didn't see each other for over thirty years. Then a mutual friend sent me his email, and I reached out to him from the blue last fall. We decided a reunion trip was in order and made plans for a South Dakota and Nebraska spring turkey hunt. I have always wanted to try turkey hunting in the Black Hills, so we headed there first for a DIY public land hunt followed by an outfitted hunt in the Sand Hills of south-central Nebraska where I have enjoyed great gobbler action the past three years.

A late April blizzard buried the northern half of the Black Hills shortly before our arrival, so we headed to the southern section, hitting pay dirt thanks to intel from a GS2 Quetico client who lives in Rapid City. For me, a big part of the appeal of spring turkey hunting is escaping winter mode up in Ely to witness spring green-up in the hardwood forests and prairies to the south. You can have your spring break to the crowded

tropical beaches. I'll take going one-on-one with a wary gobbler in the farmlands every April. On one magical spring-like day, I solo hunted eight miles up and back a small river glassing up twenty-five whitetail deer, fifteen mule deer, fourteen elk, five antelope, one sharp-tail grouse, countless ducks and geese, and seventy-seven turkeys. How many places can you do that? It is a wildlife paradise. I shot my gobbler by spotting him a mile away and stalking into range across very scant cover. No calling, no decoys, no pop-up blinds, just pure stealth and raw hunting drama. The next day, I took Duffy back in there and helped him bag his first ever turkey. Our reunion revealed different life styles and politics, but that shared passion for the thrill of the hunt is still as strong as ever. We both fell in love with this place and plan to return in April of 2023. It looks like the South Dakota regulations allow us two gobblers each in here with a second archery tag, so we plan to bring a canoe, camp on the river, and give that a shot. We both shot gobblers in Nebraska as well, so overall it was a great hunt and hopefully the start of a spring tradition.

So, I left Ely on 4/25 with two-feet of snow in the woods and the lakes still locked up tight. When I got home ten days later, the snow was gone and the ice out on Blueberry Lake near our place. The meltdown was so sudden the ground was still frozen, so all that water just flowed into the low areas.

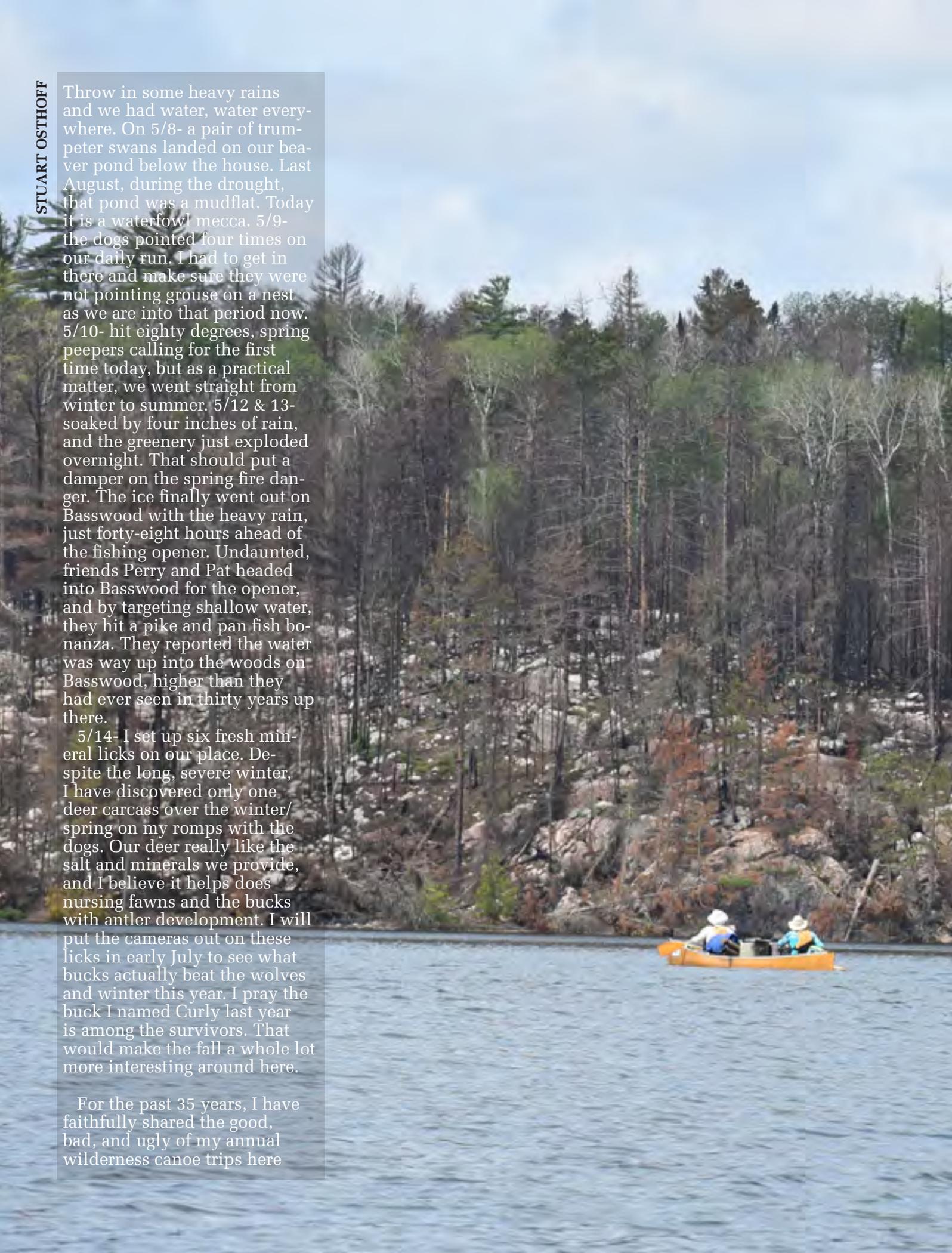


I led six more Grand Slam Guide Service trips this summer. The highlight of that first trip was netting this absolute beast of a laker for client, Jerrit Francis. (37" length, 23" girth). (Argo Lake)

Throw in some heavy rains and we had water, water everywhere. On 5/8- a pair of trumpeter swans landed on our beaver pond below the house. Last August, during the drought, that pond was a mudflat. Today it is a waterfowl mecca. 5/9- the dogs pointed four times on our daily run. I had to get in there and make sure they were not pointing grouse on a nest as we are into that period now. 5/10- hit eighty degrees, spring peepers calling for the first time today, but as a practical matter, we went straight from winter to summer. 5/12 & 13- soaked by four inches of rain, and the greenery just exploded overnight. That should put a damper on the spring fire danger. The ice finally went out on Basswood with the heavy rain, just forty-eight hours ahead of the fishing opener. Undaunted, friends Perry and Pat headed into Basswood for the opener, and by targeting shallow water, they hit a pike and pan fish bonanza. They reported the water was way up into the woods on Basswood, higher than they had ever seen in thirty years up there.

5/14- I set up six fresh mineral licks on our place. Despite the long, severe winter, I have discovered only one deer carcass over the winter/spring on my romps with the dogs. Our deer really like the salt and minerals we provide, and I believe it helps does nursing fawns and the bucks with antler development. I will put the cameras out on these licks in early July to see what bucks actually beat the wolves and winter this year. I pray the buck I named Curly last year is among the survivors. That would make the fall a whole lot more interesting around here.

For the past 35 years, I have faithfully shared the good, bad, and ugly of my annual wilderness canoe trips here





The biggest change that post-pandemic paddlers found in Quetico was the aftermath of the 140,000 acres of 2021 wildfires. This shot on Argo Lake shows how the fires burned with variable intensity, low to moderate in some areas and white-hot crown fires, right down to the rock in others.



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in the Fall issue of Boundary Waters Journal. I have never been content to just write about this game—I gotta be out there playing it at the highest level, trip after trip, year after year, decade after decade. The casual reader may wonder what hasn't already been said after such a long run? Turns out, plenty. Every trip is different. There are always new paddling partners, new challenges and new rewards. Perhaps therein rests the true value of what I call "canoe country magic." When you truly love something, it never gets old, you never get tired of it, you're always thirsting for more. Trust me, it is not mere hyperbole to characterize my 2022 season in Quetico as **UNLIKE ANY OTHER—EVER.** The perfect storm of circumstances came together in Quetico this season to deliver a once in a lifetime gift of priceless spiritual fulfillment. I am proud of what my Grand Slam Guide Service (GS2) clients and I accomplished this season, but this story is not really about us. It is about documenting what is possible out there for those who genuinely love this game. It is about inspiring you to invest whatever it takes to achieve your own Quetico dreams. Maybe next year will be your dream season.

*TRIP #1 – MAY 20-28.
 TRUCK TO FORT FRANCES,
 MOTEL OVERNIGHT, DRIVE 2
 ½ HOURS ON FIRST NATION
 ROAD INTO LAC LA CROIX.
 TOW TO BLACK ROBE-MCA-
 REE, GRATTON, WICKSTEED,
 DARKY, ARGO, CROOKED,
 LAC LA CROIX*

After two loooong agonizing years of no Quetico trips, you would think I would be ready to roll. Think again. While it was clear that Americans would be able to access Quetico from the Atikokan area entry points this season, uncertainty still ruled over the status of the Crane Lake/Namakan Canadian

Immigration station. It is no secret that a tow from Crane Lake through the trolley car portages and into La Croix is my preferred access to Quetico, so once again that is where I planned to go for most of my 2022 trips. Canada went ahead and authorized the reopening of its water-based Immigration offices nationwide in mid-May, but the record flooding this spring along the entire Canada/ U.S. border left the Namakan office cabin submerged. The national news featured dramatic efforts to sandbag homes and businesses all across the Rainy Lake watershed. Basically everything from Saganaga to Knife, Basswood, Crooked, Lac La Croix, Rainy, and Lake of the Woods is six feet under. After being shuttered for COVID for two years, the Namakan Customs Station would have opened were it not for a hundred-year flood. You can't even make it up.

So here I am on the eve of my first trip, headed to the Fort Frances Immigration office with canoes, gear, and clients in tow, still needing to actually pick up my two Ontario work permits to guide trips in Quetico and up on Hudson Bay and Sutton River. For the last fifteen years, I have been one of the privileged few Americans granted such permits, so I am always stressing about it until it is a done deal. With the COVID era, absolutely nothing seems to be what it was before. The benefit this magazine brings directly to Quetico and the Ontario tourism industry is the reason I am allowed to guide trips up here. Without the support of all our loyal subscribers, there would be no Quetico summers for me—so thank you all very much. I have been corresponding by email with Immigration staff, and they do indeed have all my paperwork in order and ready to go. Finally, I am back in

business, and we are Quetico bound.

With no RABC system renewed, there was no Quetico access through Gunflint/Cache Bay or Ely/Prairie Portage as of July 2022. Plus, with the flood closing off access through Crane Lake, that left driving up through Fort Frances and then another 2 ½ hour drive, half on dusty gravel, on down to Lac La Croix. Yes it took more time, expense, and angst to do this five straight trips this summer, but it was all definitely worth it. The bottom line is besides entering Quetico up near the Atikokan entry points, Zups, the Canadian Lodge on Lac La Croix, was the only other legal or practical option for accessing Quetico this summer.

Kathy Zup met us at a boat landing on La Croix, provided parking for our vehicles, wrote out our Quetico permit, which we had pre-paid for over the phone (the Lac La Croix Ranger Station did not get up and running till July), and then had her staff tow us off to Black Robe Portage to begin our trip. Kathy did this for us against all odds. After not being able to operate her lodge during the two years of COVID, she finally arrived to open up this spring only to find their place badly flooded. Somehow, someway, she refused to quit and cobbled together enough of the operation to help parties like ours experience the one and only Quetico again.

Our group of eight portages into McAree where the plan is to head down to my favorite five-star camp below Rebecca Falls and have at the walleyes in the current. We have finally overcome COVID, immigration requirements, online permits and licenses, passports, Arrive-CAN, hundred-year flooding, and a huge logistical nightmare to be paddling down this sparkling lake today. So it should be clear sailing from

MARK FRITTSCH



The huge burn combined with two years of COVID/limited access, put my groups among the very first to encounter massive blowdown on many portages in the southwestern quadrant of Quetico. My anglers often morphed into portage trail crew, cutting six hours on Goat Hill (Gratton to Wicksteed) and four hours (Darky to Argo) with our BWJ Boreal 21 camp saws. By the end of the summer, we felt like we had given something back to the Park and our fellow paddlers. (Little Pine to Snow Lake)

here on out—except there is one more thing. The summer of 2021 was the worst fire season in Quetico history, and we are now paddling into the thick of

its 140,000-acre burn zone.

Before long, I notice the ridgetops between McAree and Crooked are torched, and my worst fears come to pass,

as the big five-star site below Rebecca is scorched as well. This camp has special significance to me, not only for all the great walleye fishing over the years, but it is the last place I ever camped with my dad. You want that memory to live on in your mind forever, but it was not to be. We squeezed in four tents between the blackened blowdown, but the original fireplace and the beautiful shady white pines are no more. This was one of my top ten campsites in all of Quetico, so it is sad to see.

Of course, the fish don't care about the burned forests, and from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., four of us boat twenty-eight walleyes, including six over twenty-two inches. I fillet ten in that seventeen to nineteen-inch range and put them on ice in the *BWJ* Insulated Food Pack System. All are taken on jigs, soft plastics, and Gulp. Tonight is Mexican night—a big chicken taco feast with real lettuce, tomato, and cheese. We all huddle around a blazing campfire as evening temps slide into the thirties. The fire feels great, and it's wonderful to be back in Quetico.

5/22- After breakfast, Dave and I paddle over to scout out Curtain Falls. Nobody could tell me coming in if that route was even passable given the record flooding. It's a bit dicey getting around the Rebecca Falls torrent, but by extending the established portage, we make our way over into Iron and the BWCAW portage to Curtain Falls. I need to know if we can come out this way to Bottle Portage towards the end of our trip. Curtain is roaring like I have never seen before, but only one fifty-yard section of the trail is flooded. As a dry-foot canoeist, we will simply reload the canoes and paddle this versus wading through the waist-deep timber.

Back at camp, most of the

guys just hang out for the day while John and I catch another dozen walleyes below the Falls, adding six more to the cooler for a walleye feast later in the trip. Overnight I have nightmares about the portages tomorrow into Wicksteed/Darky. Turns out, the reality is worse than the nightmares.

5/23- Up at six, paddling by eight, and cruising across the top of McAree by 9:15. The creek alongside the portage into Pond is deep enough to paddle, so we stroke up to the Goat Hill Portage at 9:30 a.m. Long story short, we will not rid ourselves of this curse till 3:30 p.m. That's six hours of hard cutting with two *BWJ* Boreal 21 camp saws to hack a tunnel through the blowdown sufficient to carry canoes through. Dave and I cut while two others move debris off the trail and the other four shuttle gear and boats up to the line of progress. Thank God it is cool—in the fifties and no real bugs. We drain all our water on the trail, and dehydration becomes an issue. We're charred and cut up, but we slay the dragon and repeat the assault for another hour and a half between Gratton and Wicksteed.

What we have here is pine, spruce, aspen, birch, and alder with very shallow root systems due to the Canadian Shield bedrock all around. When fire sweeps through, if it is hot enough at the ground level, these shallow roots completely dislodge the entire tree from the soil, where it hangs precariously until the first good wind blows it over. Hundreds of trees from two inches in diameter to two-feet are blown across the Goat Hill 220-rod trail. The ends of the route are especially bad as the wind picks up steam blowing across the open waters of Pond and Gratton Lakes. Consider this: I have conservatively made a hundred different canoe trips

over Goat Hill with an average of three passes per trip. I needed every one of those 300+ laps to help me locate where this portage used to be. In places, the blowdown tangle was so gnarly that even I didn't recognize where the trail went. It was just gone. No tread way, no sawed logs, no nothing. When there was no visible sign of which way to continue, I looped out ahead a hundred yards or so, relocated the pathway, and then backtracked to the last cleared location via the least bad route.

Three things soon become obvious. One, nobody has gone through this portage since the 2021 fires. It is impossible to bushwhack a canoe through here on anything remotely close to the direct line of the established portage route. We don't have to worry about our preferred campsites being occupied. NOBODY is ahead of us. Two, no portage crews are likely to come along soon, so that leaves short-term trail clearing to us. We cut everything off the trail that is six inches thick or less and de-limb the big stuff enough to get over or under it. And number three, my guys are gassed by the time we make it to Wicksteed, so I pull into the mid-lake five-star island camp, which thankfully dodged the burn, and we call it a day. My clients paid good money to me today for the privilege of partaking in this trail clearing exercise. Nonetheless, I feel like I earned my pay today and hope to get them on fish the rest of the way.

It is hard to accept the fact that much of the western Quetico I have come to know and love over the past forty-five years will never look the same in my lifetime. On the other hand, fire is a natural force in the grand scheme of things up here, and Quetico

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Park Officials don't see it as all negative. They view it as a natural regeneration of older forest to young growth that is actually beneficial to many plants and animals in this complex ecosystem. As for me, I have the sensation of flashing back 500 years, before any European impact on the land, surrounded by pure, raw wilderness. Something about forests ravaged by fire seems primeval to me.

It's nice to be tenting in the pine duff again, and the guys wolf down several rounds of Sloppy Joes before hitting the sack. We have several guys over seventy in the group, so today was a tough workout for them. Most likely, we are going to have to do more trail clearing to complete our route through Darky and Argo and back to Crooked. But that can wait. Job one for tomorrow is finding some warmer water where the bass are doing some-

thing.

5/24- I prepare a big egg, sausage, and bagel breakfast while giving the sun time to warm up the shallows. Two canoes will stay on Wicksteed; the other two head to the Darky Portage. We discover the Wicksteed end of this portage is completely gone. I can't see how it can be reclaimed even with chain-saws. We saw for a good hour, just enough to clear a rough landing spot. Jerritt and Tim head to the Darky River outlet while Jeff and I check out the Darky River inlet coming from Brent Lake. We net eight heavy pre-spawn bronzebacks, all eighteen to nineteen inches. I call the unnamed lake between Darky and Brent "Wales Lake" because the unnamed lake just to the south is known as "Josey Lake." We move no fish on Wales, so we portage on over into Josey.

On our steady tour around

Josey, Jeff and I team up to boat fifty-one smallmouth. Most go fifteen to sixteen inches, with a dozen running eighteen—nothing bigger. Pretty typical of Josey, solid action on good fish, but no monsters. We definitely hit more fish in the shallow warmer bays and boulder flats than plugging the shoreline. Back at camp, the others report tough fishing, although Dave does pick up the season's first twenty-inch trophy smallmouth on Wicksteed. We treat ourselves to that all you can eat walleye fish fry, and it is past eleven by the time dishes are done and camp buttoned down.

5/25- Off to Argo today. Having cleared it yesterday, the portage into Darky is now a walk in the park, and soon we are heading south to the pictographs. The high water is almost up to the lower Serpent and canoe paintings, but what

I consider the best pictograph site in Quetico remains unmarred by the surrounding fires. The portage trail from Darky to Argo is another matter.

Both ends of this portage are badly buried under big trees, but up along the ridgetop the going is not as bad. All told, it is four hours of hard labor. We lunch on the Argo side and paddle out through a two-foot chop to the mid-lake five-star island site. The mainland to the west and south is all torched, but both this camp and my favorite on Birch Island escaped the burn. We pound down Michele's Chicken Alfredo on egg noodles and turn in early. All in all, we have lost a day and a half of fishing to trail clearing, but the only alternative is to backtrack over what we have already cut. The fishing prospects back there are poor, so pushing on ahead seems like our best bet.

5/26- It is cool and breezy, but the rain holds off as Jerrit and I work the new *BWJ* Klos Boys lipless crankbaits (LCBs) through "big trout alley" off Birch Island. I feel bad for Jerrit, as he was slated to take this trip in 2020, then 2021, and now the park finally opens and we have spent more time sawing than fishing. But you know what they say, "Good things come to those who wait".

Around ten a.m., I get the first hit and land a little twenty-inch laker, my first ever on the Klos. No sooner do I dump him out of the net than Jerrit is into his first ever lake trout. I had told him there are big trout here, and they can be deceiving coming in. Typically, they will not fight too hard until they sense the boat, then those big ones power down deep and the battle is on. That is what happens here. Jerrit is fishing with a basic walleye outfit, but he does a good job of letting this fish work the drag and gradual-

ly tire itself. At the ten-minute mark, the trout surfaces along the left gunwale, and we see what we have. WOW! I don't like the angle I have with the too small net, so I pull back, and the trout powers back down to the forty-foot bottom. Another ten minutes of cranking and drag-sizzling runs, and he is back alongside the canoe. On my knees, I wiggle forward from my stern seat and scoop his head section into the net. The aluminum handle bends but does not break, and I swing the whole works aboard. What a fish. He is long for sure, but his girth is the most striking feature. I tape him at thirty-seven inches with a twenty-three-inch girth. Absolutely stunning. A true trophy lake trout on light tackle from a canoe in shallow water. A once in a lifetime Quetico lake trout for most guys. I caught a forty-incher in this same spot in 2000, but this fish has an even more impressive girth that runs the full length of its body.

I paddle ashore while Jerrit keeps the fish and net in the water. We do a quick photo session there on the rocks, then Jerrit holds him upright in the shallows until he pulls away and swims back out into the depths. The water is only forty-five degrees, and he hit in thirty-five feet of water, so this is a pretty stress-free catch and release. This is the second biggest laker I have ever handled. This fish is forty years old—easy. You can go a lot of fishless hours, even days without a good trout in the canoe. But just like that, canoe country magic can strike, and you have a priceless indelible encounter. All that downtime cutting our way in here means nothing now. I would do it all again ten times over for this fish. What a thrill.

Over the next hour, we catch a total of eight more lakers on the Klos LCBs. I would paddle

to the upwind side and let the breeze blow us back over the known trout hole. The Klos LCBs are easy to use. Forget about trolling. They don't troll well. Just cast out or lower it overboard and let it sink to the bottom. Noting how much line plays out gives a rough idea of how deep it is under the canoe. Slowly lift it up off the bottom maybe a foot or two, then let it fall back down again. Drifting with the wind like this, you're basically vertical jigging but still moving horizontally across the sweet spot of structure. My biggest trout today is twenty-four inches, but it is still fun action. The other canoes netted eight other trout as well, all on the Klos LCBs. I never trolled a lick, and I may never troll a spoon for trout again. Drifting and jigging like this is a lot easier for me—I actually get to hold onto my rod and work the lure versus wrapping my leg around the rod and being the "trolling motor" all day.

By mid-afternoon, Jerrit and I switch to bass mode up in the Siobhan River area. He throws a Moon Eye White Bucktail Jig, and I stick with the #5 gold Vibrax. We each catch fifteen smallmouth with ten over eighteen inches, two nineteens, and Jerrit takes top honors with a pre-spawn heavyweight twenty-one-and-a-half-incher. Not bad for a cold, cloudy day in fifty-degree water. We are a tad early for most of the bass. It is usually good in here by Memorial Day, but we are a good week or two behind the normal progression of the smallmouth spawn. It is burned up in the Siobhan, but not hot enough to kill all the big pine in most places. The portage into Roland looks like an impassable mess.

Paddling back to camp at suppertime, we meet two canoes outfitted by Zups on

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their way up to Darky. They say the portage from Crooked to Argo is not too bad, and we tell them we cleared the trail into Darky. They will be the only canoes we see all week. It's beaverwood burgers on the campfire for dinner, and Jerrit gets to share his big fish story—a story he will tell for the rest of his life.

5/27- We move from Argo to Lac La Croix, warmer today with the black flies making an unwelcomed appearance. We only have to do one hour of trail work on the Argo and Crooked portage, and we lunch after our three laps across the Curtain Falls Portage. We take Bottle Portage—it's the usual muddy mess—and camp out on La Croix where Zups will pick us up at noon tomorrow. We enjoy a big meal of Michele's homemade spaghetti and relax for the evening. I take Dave into Bass Lake for a couple hours that last morning, and he lands a nice nineteen on the Vibrax, but things are quiet in here overall. Too early. The whole trip is a cool, cloudy one. After eight days, the one-gallon ice jug in the *BWJ* Insulated Food Pack is still 85% frozen. Fine by me, I will take cool days and giant lake trout over summer any day.

TRIP #2 – 6/3-12. TRUCK TO FORT FRANCES, MOTEL OVERNIGHT. DRIVE TO BEAVERHOUSE LAKE ENTRY-BEAVERHOUSE, QUETICO, JEAN, BURNTSIDE, STURGEON, OLIFAUNT, ANTOINE, RAM, LONELY, STU'S, AND BACKTRACK TO BEAVERHOUSE.

6/3- Locked and loaded with eight people, four canoes, a mountain of gear, and ten days of real food. All seven are repeat GS2 clients selected for their proven "fish till you drop" passion. We battle the infamous crosswind on Beaverhouse, check in with the ranger, and catch a strong

tailwind most of the way down Quetico Lake. Despite the wind assist, the group is really flogging the water by 4:00, and we have a long ways to go. I split up Mike Thomas and his wife, Anna, putting her in my bow and implore the rest to dig deeper. We pick up the pace through the Conk Lake portages and break out onto Jean Lake at sunset. The big 5-star site on the right is occupied, so I take Plan B across the lake on the beach. It is a decent camp with enough room for the big Clam screen house and four tents. The temps fall into the forties, so a hot meal of chicken tacos warms our bellies and primes us for a deep sleep.

6/4- Time to fan out and see what the bass are doing this week. Mike K. and Ron head to Little Jean, where they only boat twenty bass, but Mike tapes three beauties: a 20 ½, a 21 ½ and a wide-bodied 22 ½, all on the River2Sea Bubble Pop. Mike T. and Anna work up and back the main lake shorelines, taking twenty smallmouth (but no twenties) plus three lakers on the Vibrax. John M. and John H. fish the far east end of Jean proper, tallying thirty bass with two twenty-inch trophies. Dave and I Vibrax the water west of camp where a mile-long sandbar is usually prime spawning habitat. I see no beds today, but good numbers of pre-spawn fish are staging just off in the deeper water all along this shore. We combine for forty fish, which isn't a lot for this spot in early June, but thirty are stocky, hard-fighting eighteen to nineteeners, plus five go over the twenty-inch mark. I pick up three lake trout in only an hour of jigging the Klos LCB, the best a twenty-eight-inch beauty. The guys report a few camps on the east end, but no real fishing pressure out on the lake. There are twenty-some vehicles in the Beaverhouse

parking lot, so there must be canoes out here somewhere. I decide Jean is a bit too cold to warrant a second day, so we'll move to Sturgeon tomorrow. The daily group total of 106 smallmouth, fifteen pike and six lake trout sounds mediocre, but sixty of those smallmouth were over eighteen inches, with ten over twenty, two over twenty-one, and one over twenty-two. I will take quality like this over quantity any day.

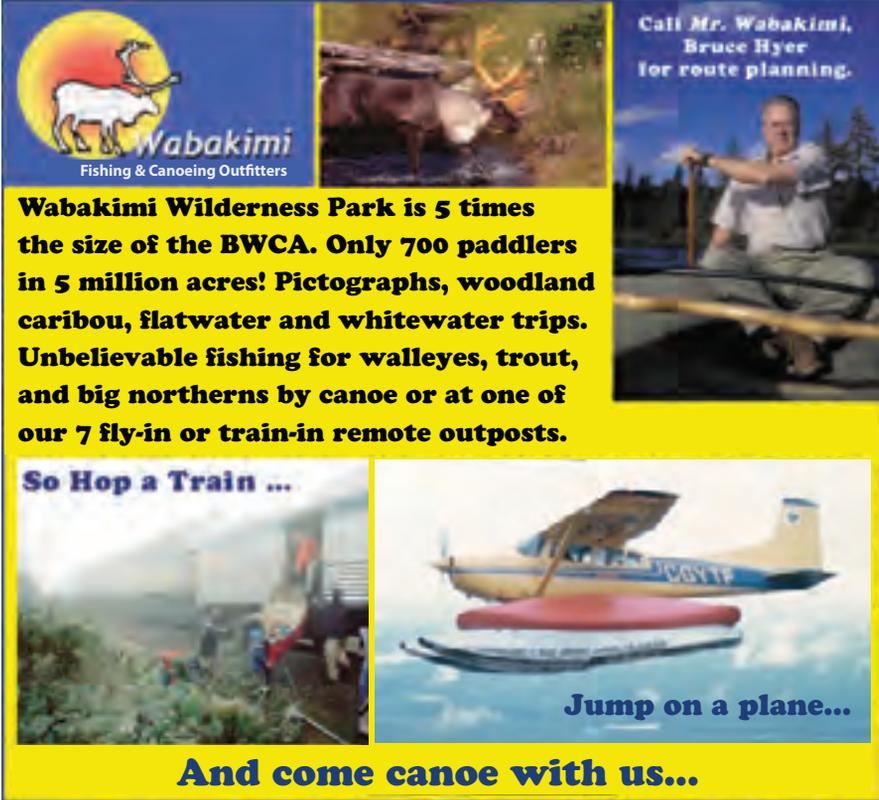
6/5- Paddling by 8:00 with our sights set on the big beach site on Sturgeon or the High Overlook site north of Scripture Island. The high water in Jean Creek helps our pace, and we stroke on down Sturgeon, more nervous by the minute as blackened forest stretches towards the beach peninsula. As we draw near, I breathe a sigh of relief upon confirming that fire surrounded Quetico's best campsite but miraculously spared it from destruction. But upon landing, my relief flips to despair. The record flooding on Sturgeon has swept the peninsula clean of all pine duff. A wake of mud puddles dots the entire site. There is usually room for fifty tents here. Today there is room for zero. Just looking at the muddy mess, I conclude it will take a few years for this special camp to rejuvenate itself. Plan B is the site by the Walleye Straits, but we soon see that is flooded as well, so we aim for the high overlook site, which is high and dry but decorated with tents. Ugh. It has already been a long day, but we have no choice but to paddle on to upper-Sturgeon in hopes of finding a big five-star camp. I had planned to camp up there later in the trip anyway, so we will just go there now, fish Olifaunt, Antoine, and Ram first and then work our way back after that. *BWJ*

contributing writer and photographer, Darryl Blazino, had told me about a nice campsite just west of the Olifaunt portage, and turns out it is open, big, beautiful, and exactly what we need right now. I dish up a hot supper in the screen house as it starts to rain, and my tired crew crashes soon thereafter.

6/6- The sun comes out with a light breeze as Mike K., Dave, John H., and I portage over into Olifaunt. I have never been in here, so fun to add a new piece of water to my database. My intel is that Olifaunt is a four species lake, and our boat makes short work of catching the Grand Slam. We only net a dozen smallmouth with nothing noteworthy. Either the smallmouth are not in the shallow zone yet or you can scratch this one off the primo bass list. We drift over by the Pickerel River outlet, still throwing our Vibrax spinners, and I quickly hook a nice pair of twenty-five-inch lake trout. Meanwhile, John runs off four walleyes, all nice twenty-one to twenty-three-inch specimens, which have the misfortune of going back to camp with us. Pretty cool to Vibrax the Grand Slam like that in only a few hours.

As we are leaving, a canoe with a pair of Quetico rangers pulls up and checks out our permit. The woman in the bow does all the talking. Her partner in the stern says little. They are working on the portage trails in the area—in fact we would see them clearing deadfalls from the Ram and Antoine portages the next day. I can't resist telling them about my previous "trail clearing trip" down by Wicksteed, Darky, and Argo.

Perhaps it has something to do with the late spring and/or the drought last year, but the aspen trees seem to be making up for lost time with a seed boom for the ages. The aspen cotton is so thick on the water it is hopeless to cast a lure in



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huge sections of Sturgeon Lake. Huge rafts of the annoying stuff floats wherever the wind slacks. It takes regular plucking with fingers and teeth to clear your lure of the clingy cotton. I have seen this before during Memorial Day week, but never this heavy and widespread.

Ron found a good size fresh moose shed that we tie up to a tree in camp. I like to decorate my favorite camps with deer and moose sheds or skulls, so if you see these, it is probably one of my regular stops.

6/7- Ron and Dave go check out the fast water where the Pickerel River dumps into Sturgeon while the other three canoes daytrip over to Ram and Antoine. Mike and Anna Whopper Plop twenty good bass on Antoine, but the highlight of their day is a close wolf encounter on the portage. Mike K. and John H. boat another fifteen smallies, with one over twenty, plus they stringer an-

other five walleyes for dinner. John M. and I tour Ram Lake where the going is tough. We tally thirty-three smallmouth, including John's 21 7/8ths on the fly rod and Dahlberg Diver, and I Vibrax a twenty-one plus a couple more shallow cruising twenty-six-inch lakers. John and I watch a cow moose feeding on water lilies, and Mike K. bumps into another cow and calf while portaging back to camp. Great seeing more moose this year. The gang raves about our all you can eat walleye fry as the moon rises up over Sturgeon Lake.

6/8- We pull out of Upper Sturgeon camp, headed for the high overlook site above Scripture Island that was taken on our way in. I want to camp here and fish Lonely, Draper, and Stu's Lake, but dang it, the tents are still there. So we push on through spotty rain squalls all the way up Jean Creek again and into Burntside. We run

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into *BWJ* contributor, Brent Notbohm, and his group on Burntside. They have been camped on Little Jean all week and doing well with their fly rods, including catching the Grand Slam and good topwater smallmouth action. No fishing for us today—we are happy to lay claim to the sprawling five-star camp on the east side of Burntside, where I grill cheeseburgers and fry potatoes to feed the crew that has worked up an appetite with another honest day. My GS2 trips focus on fishing, but most still come with plenty of paddling and portaging, more than I had planned these first few trips.

6/9- Two canoes will fish Burntside today while Mike and Anna hit Rogue Lake for smallmouth. Foiled coming and going down Sturgeon, Mike K. and I are headed to “Stu’s Lake” today, come hell or high water. Turns out, we hit both. We are paddling by 6:00 a.m. across Burntside, Jean, Little Jean, Yeh, Lonely, Lonely Pond #1, and Stu’s Lake. The Yeh to Lonely portage is wrong on the map, more to the south, but we make good time on the first two thirds of the trail. On that last third into Lonely, we hit VERY BAD burn and blowdown—worse than anything on the first trip this year. There is no time for sawing today, so Mike carries both our daypacks plus rod case and paddles while I wage hand to hand combat blasting through the tangle with the Northwoods

18’9”, not the handiest of bushwhacking canoes. I am blackened and battered by the time I dump the boat into Lonely Lake, but we have no time to linger. We zip down Lonely, and as we pull into the portage, we meet *BWJ* subscriber, Chris, from Arkansas. Seems he picked today of all days to try and get into Stu’s Lake as well.

After an awkward conversation about our plans, Chris graciously decides to head north. I feel bad about the situation because I really don’t mind others fishing Stu’s Lake as long as they release everything and go anytime but the two days I’m there each season. It is too small for more than one canoe per day. This is a good place to ask all *BWJ* readers to please respect my Grand Slam Guiding schedule when planning your own trips. I publish my GS2 trip schedule every fall and winter issue, so it is easy to avoid fishing particular lakes when I am in there.

Generally, it doesn’t even matter if we are both fishing Jean, Sturgeon, Kawnipi, or Crooked at the same time. It only becomes an issue on small lakes or very specific spots like the Conmee Lake trophy walleye hole. So the deal is I will continue sharing everything I know about fishing Quetico with you, including where I specifically catch the most big fish, but the caveat has to be that we coordinate our arrivals at such spots so we don’t infringe on each other’s action. This is very doable, just email me if you have any doubts about our trips overlapping at key spots and we can work it out. My GS2 schedule is very tight—I don’t even have time to eat and sleep between trips. You have more flexibility than I do. This is my livelihood, so please coordinate your trips as much as possible so we both enjoy the best possible fishing and trips.

The creek through the beaver meadow into Lonely Pond #1 is high enough we are able to paddle most of this stretch. I brought the *BWJ* Boreal 21 saw along today, so we take the time to hack out a small tunnel through the alders into Stu’s Lake. Still, by the time we string the rods, it is high noon, exactly six hours since we left camp. I load up with a Vibrax gold #5 and Mike the River2Sea Bubble Pop.

We have a slower than normal start with more small fish than I ever recall, but after a couple hours, we get rolling and move plenty of big smallmouth. In five hours of fishing, Mike lands fifty-eight, and I net sixty-four. Mike gets five over twenty inches (1-20, 2-21s, 1-22, and 1-22 ½). This is precisely why I dragged his butt all the way into here today. I have never fished with anyone who can boat big smallmouth like Mike. Case in point, today he had taken two twenty-ones on the popper, but down the backside, he switches to a Z-MAN spinnerbait to take both his twenty-twos. Most guys would

Mike Kleeman partnered with me through the worst of the worst burn/blowdown on our daytrip into Stu's Lake. Eleven hours of paddling and portaging for five hours of fishing but Mike made the bass pay with four over 21 inches including this 22½" brute. (Stu's Lake)



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have stuck with what was working, Mike found something even better. I get three over twenty, including a heavy 22 ½ of my own. But that was not the takeaway of the day.

In *BWJ* Spring 2022, I wrote a story called "Dream Trip" where I cast from the bow for a month straight while my partner paddles me around the best twenty-five smallmouth lakes in Quetico. The story is fiction of course, but it scripts out how my own Quetico dream smallmouth trip would go down. The story concludes with what I believe to be my lifetime best smallmouth escaping at the gunwale when my partner botches the netting job. The setting for that dream bass was Stu's Lake. What is not fiction is this bronzeback gem holds top end fish, and every trip in here we tape twenty-two-inch fish, and often, like today, a couple of 22½'s. But NEVER in here or anywhere else have I measured a legitimate twenty-three-inch smallmouth. Today, I had a monster bass right up close to the net when the Vibrax popped out. I see lots of big bass every year. This one looked like a twenty-three, but we will never know. That quest marches on.

We had almost completed our circuit around Stu's Lake when I mention to Mike that lots of Quetico lakes have good smallmouth habitat and forage, but few produce so many truly big bass. My theory is that Stu's has very few pike

(less predation), as evidenced by the fact we haven't seen one of the slimy devils all day. Wham! Right on cue, a heavy three-footer slams my Vibrax, and I battle her into the net. She is actually an impressive fish, so I unhook her, keeping her in the net while Mike readies his camera. I have a habit of allowing my lure to hang about two-feet off the end of the rod tip. There is actually a reason for this, as it allows me to put down my paddle, grab my rod with the lure ready to go, and fire a quick cast. That two-feet of line allows me to load the rod, enabling much further casts. Cranking the lure up to the rod tip necessitates pulling line out through the drag or flipping the bail to measure out that two-feet, an extra time-consuming step. After forty-five years, I have perfected the art of command & control of the canoe while still getting my share of trophy fish. Meanwhile, a breeze is blowing us around near shore, and right when I have the fish raised for the photo, I notice my lure has snagged on something under the canoe, and we're blowing over the top of it. My new St. Croix rod is bent to the max, so I fling the damn pike overboard and reach for my rod. Snap. Too late. More rod carnage courtesy of canoe country pike.

We pull out of Stu's Lake at 5:00 p.m. sharp, which means we gotta shave an hour off this morning's travel time to make camp by dark. Back in the gnarly burn of the Lonely to Yeh portage, I pause for a breather amidst the scorched rubble and notice something white and round at my feet. Turns out to be a porcelain insulator from a telephone wire. A hundred years ago, Quetico rangers were able to communicate between cabins through a crude telephone system strung through the woods. The 2021 fire uncovered it here for me to find. I use my Leatherman to cut the still solid wire from the insulator and bring it home as a souvenir. We pull into our Burntside Lake camp at 10:00 where Anna has supper hot and waiting for us. Mike is pretty whipped, and I will have no problem sleeping either. Just another day in paradise, make that Stu's Lake.

6/10- The gang did decent on Burntside and Rogue yesterday, but they vote to move on. My goal is to camp half-way down Quetico Lake, and we do just that, finding a new awesome five-star site on the north side. For years I have looked longingly at those three smaller lakes running across the top of central Quetico Lake, and at Canoecopia in March, someone said they had great smallmouth fishing in the most westerly of the three. It is too late today, but we pound down a spaghetti feast and ready our gear for tomorrow.

6/11- It is Ron's turn to fish with me today,

so after a bacon and cheese omelet, we paddle the four miles west and begin our day trip loop through “virgin water”. On the reputed “small-mouth lake,” we combine to Whopper Plop forty-two bass, except they are 100% largemouth. All chunky fifteen to eighteen-inch specimens, but yet another example of why I never completely trust fishing intel unless the source is rock solid. As for internet chatter, no thanks. In the central lake, we switch to the Vibrax and move good numbers of smallmouth, walleye, and pike. Three of the bass are nineteen and one goes twenty inches. The walleyes are perfect twenty-inch eaters, but we are not dragging them around all day. The third lake along our daily loop is a repeat of smallmouth, walleye, and pike on the Vibrax. We catch over a hundred fish that day (forty-two largemouth, thirty pike, twenty smallmouth, fifteen walleye). The portages between these lakes are a bit overgrown but not burned or difficult to follow. There are only a few smaller camps along the way, and it is an aggressive day trip, but I am glad I finally swung through here. Solid fishing, and very few people get in here.

Mike and Mike bring in another dozen walleyes and turn them into walleye fry number two of the trip. I’m not thrilled about killing a second batch of fish, but they have things well underway before I get back, so I just bite my tongue and chow down. It doesn’t kill me. John and John spot moose number five of the trip today. Cool.

Tomorrow we paddle out to the truck at Beaverhouse. It has been a good group, good weather, and good fishing. The topwater conditions have been subpar with too much wind and the aspen cotton boom, but we finish the trip with: 478 smallmouth, 42 largemouth, 110 pike, 56 walleye and 10 lake trout. The bottom line is we tape twenty-four trophy smallmouth over twenty inches, including four over twenty-two. And at the end of the day, that is why we came here.

TRIP #3 - 6/17-24. TRUCK TO INTERNATIONAL FALLS, MOTEL OVERNIGHT, DRIVE 2 ½ HOURS ON FIRST NATION ROAD TO LAC LA CROIX, TOW WITH ZUP’S TO BOTTLE PORTAGE.

This trip with eight older guys was supposed to be an easy paddle out of Prairie Portage to Basswood’s North Bay area, but with that access still a no-go, I figure I can still get them a minimal portage trip into Crooked, Gardner Bay, Newts, Bart, Robinson, Elk, etc. With Crooked still very high water levels, I don’t count on good fishing there, but the others should be good action. The wild card will once again be the fire blowdown on the portages north of Crooked. We make it to Stu’s Island in Friday Bay by 7:00 and get the four tents and screen house all set up. As I am preparing supper, I tell the guys about the eagle

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we have always had hanging around this camp, waiting for fish remains. I figure he is long gone since nobody has been here for the two COVID years. But low and behold, there he is, sitting atop the very same white pine, listening to me talk about him. Paul quickly catches a dinky smallie from shore and flips it out onto the ledgerock. Our eagle swoops down and grabs it, giving us all a show. At least one thing is the same as it has always been out here. Great sleeping as overnight temps drop into the forties.

6/18- Even though water levels remain very high on Crooked, I decide to give it a shot today, so our four canoes fan out, plugging miles of shoreline. The group totals 103 smallmouth, with four going over twenty inches. Not bad, but not enough to stay here tomorrow.

6/19- We move on down to the camp in Wednesday Bay, not far from the portage up into Gardner Bay. The shoreline is badly burned, but I stop to check out the portage, and it is fine. A heavy downpour forces us to pull over, and we get pummeled waiting for it to pass. The camp is tight for four tents and the screen house, but we make it work by putting my tent well back into the woods. Before supper, Josh and I hit that north bay paralleling Bart Lake and pick up fifteen mid-sized smallmouth, a heavy thirty-six-



inch pike, and two twenty-four-inch walleyes, all on the Vibrax. A few bass show some interest in the Whopper Plopper at sundown, but we land nothing special. It is hot and muggy, feels like a storm coming. A wicked thunderstorm slams us around 1:00 a.m. It is all John and I can do to hold our Big Agnes tent down and help support the poles that are whipping like a fishing rod. I had tied two of the Northstar canoes to a lone pine out on the point and the storm blew one of them—still tied up—into the water. My tent was so far back in the woods, I didn't hear the canoe banging against the rocks all night. Apparently, the guys in the three tents nearby didn't hear it either. The gunwale got pretty twisted behind the stern seat, and the wooden yoke was broken, but I was able to repair it pretty well once I got home. (I got another new Northstar 18'9" in August, so the bent one will be my back-up boat now.)

6/20- Brothers Mike and Tom spend the day bassin on Gardner Bay and do well, sixty-four smallmouth, including five over twenty inches and two twenty-ones. They have done thirty-something canoe trips and know how to catch fish. Gardner Bay is part of Crooked Lake, but it is isolated from the border route flowage, so it was not as high and stirred up as the rest of the lake. Peter and son-in-law, Josh, fish Bart Lake along with John and Don. Their two canoes total

90 bass with about a fifty-fifty split of small-mouth and largemouth. Josh takes top honors with a heavy twenty-inch largemouth.

Paul and I leave Mike and Tom on Gardner, paddling on to Little Newt and Newt for the day. Going in mid-morning, we get close to a pair of trumpeter swans with one chick. When we come back out late afternoon, there are two chicks in tow. Both portages into the Newts have bad burns and blowdown, adding an hour and a half of travel time to our day. We combine for twenty-one largemouth on Little Newt, all on the Whopper Plopper. Most go fifteen inches, but even these are hard-fighting bulldogs. Over on Newt, the wind picks up, and I am largely reduced to boat control, so our numbers nosedive, but it is still worth the trip. Paul nets a twenty-one-inch beauty of a smallmouth, and I Vibrax a wide-bodied twenty-two-inch largemouth, my biggest bucket mouth ever. For some reason, most canoe country largemouth seem to top out at eighteen inches, while true twenties are rare. I think we have caught more twenty-inch largemouth in Newt than any other lake in canoe country. If you go there, please handle these trophies with extreme care so they can thrill future anglers.

The winds have calmed somewhat when we get back out on Gardner Bay, and despite having left my walleye tackle in camp, we pull into a proven walleye reef, and I throw out a tube jig. Wham, a golden twenty-five-inch walleye. Then Paul jigs up an identical beauty plus a twenty-three-incher and two small enough to ride home destined for the cooler. We pick up ten more nice smallmouth on the way down Gardner, giving us forty-eight bass on the day with ten pike and the five walleyes. Not a huge day, but some really good fish. Sadly, the best four-star camp in Gardner got destroyed by the 2021 fires. Not far from there, I spot a lone black wolf prowling the shoreline, but Paul talks too loud, spooking him before I can get into photo range.

6/21- Tom and Mike want to hit Gardner again, and Josh and Peter join them. Don and Paul return to Bart. All told, they tally 140 bass, with two over twenty inches, and they add four walleyes to the cooler. We can keep three more to reach our possession limit tomorrow. John and I battle the wind down Crooked past Table Rock. The portage into Robinson is not burned, so it's pretty smooth sailing, except John detours around one blowdown and loses track of the trail. When he doesn't show on the Robinson end, I hike back and reel him in. I have to keep an eye out for John on these trips, but at seventy-five, he still loves it and is still having fun. I hope I can say the same ten years from now. I see beds on the sandbars near the Tuck River, but there are no longer any fish on them. I want to fish



On my third trip, we sawed our way through burn/blowdown into Newt Lake – primo largemouth water. This bucket-mouth smacked my #5 Vibrax and taped 22", the longest canoe country largemouth I have ever handled. (Newt Lake)

Little Robinson today, but it is already 4:00, and going in there now would not get us home by dark. So we portage on over into Craig Lake where I have not been since my first year of GS2 in 2008. I remember seeing a lot of sandy bay spawning habitat in Craig, but today I only move a dozen smallies, all around fourteen inches. John nets the highlight of the day, a twenty-one-inch bronzeback beauty. We portage on through Bart and pound west across Wednesday Bay into three-footers back to camp. Michele's Chicken Alfredo is a hit, and we all share canoe country tales in the comfortable confines of the big screen house long into the night.

6/22- Paul, Josh, Don, and I set sail for Elk Lake today, and as expected, we hit bad burns and blowdown on all three portages. The landings are especially gnarly, but we carve out a pathway and rig up our bass rods. Elk Lake has produced a lot of really big smallmouth for my guys over the years, but the past two or three times in here have been disappointing. Today that trend continues. We move mostly small fish with only a couple of good nineteen-inchers. I can't put my finger on why, but Elk, Wicksteed, and Sturgeon have gone cold for me of late. Maybe it is a timing issue—too early or too late—or maybe they just don't have the big fish they used to. I find the latter hard to believe, so I keep returning, but I am definitely starting to wonder what is going on.

The best camp on Elk dodged the fire, but the other camp is gone, and much of the surrounding forest is burned right down to the ledge rock. Too bad. It was such a pretty lake—one of my favorites. After lunch we switch to trout mode with the Klos LCBs, and Don is quickly into a solid twenty-seven-incher, his first ever

canoe country laker. I pick up a smaller trout, but the other canoe gets blanked, maybe because they don't have any Klos lures?

As we are exiting Elk to the south, a cow and calf moose emerge along the shore. Then when we pop over the first portage, a small bull is feeding in the lily pads of this beaver pond. Once again, Paul spooks him before we can get close enough for photos. If you want to see wildlife in canoe country, you gotta see these animals before they see, hear, or smell you. So keep scanning way up ahead, talk softly, and no banging of paddles on the canoe. On this same beaver pond, I watch an osprey dive headlong at full speed into the water and emerge with an eight-inch fish. What a cool bird.

Don collects a gallon Ziplock of morels in the burn on the portage. He swears he is a hundred percent sure of his identification, so we pack them back to camp and fry in butter alongside our huge walleye feast, potatoes, and onions. I have never had morels before, and they are really sweet.

6/23- A hot and windy one as we move back to Sunday Bay, taking the site up on the hillside of the channel leading to the Argo Portage. We see a few canoes pass by camp along the border on Crooked, but we see zero canoes in Quetico this trip. The wind subsides some by 7:00 p.m., so Josh and I hit the shoreline from Curtain Falls on around to the Roland Lake portages. This area is all badly burned, but once again, we are not here to admire the scenery. The first half-hour we move nothing of note, but then on three consecutive tosses of the #5 gold Vibrax, I catch sixty inches of smallmouth, an 18 ½, a 21 and a 20 ½. How cool is that? It's a great way to wrap up the trip. Trip totals: 754 bass (seventeen over twenty inches

and six over twenty-one), 165 pike, twenty-nine walleye, and two lake trout.

TRIP #4- 6/29- 7/8. OVERNIGHT IN FORT FRANCES, TRUCK ON DOWN TO LAC LA CROIX WHERE ZUP'S TOWS US TO BLACK ROBE PORTAGE. McAREE, GRATTON, WICKSTEED, DARKY, BRENT, CONMEE, SUZANNETTE, BACK TO DARKY, ARGO, CROOKED, LA CROIX

Those of you responsible for planning, outfitting, and leading canoe trips with family and friends know how much fun that can be. But try doing it for six straight trips all eight to ten days long with six to eight people per trip. I generally have three or four days between trips, and it is always a mad scramble to deal with magazine work, mowing and weed whipping our huge yard, packing up all the food, plus whatever gear maintenance issues need tending to. This year I had the added stress of wondering if we should get motel rooms in Crane Lake or International Falls. I often couldn't tell clients the answer until the day before, which left us scrambling to find rooms up there. Then of course, there was the burn and blowdown and record flooding, which impacted the portages, campsites, and fishing. So 2022 had a lot of unknowns and new challenges, but one thing is for certain: Quetico still offers world class Grand Slam fishing for dirt cheap to anyone ready, willing, and able to invest the sweat equity into planning and executing a backcountry trip. This makes a Quetico wilderness fishing trip priceless—and well-worth all the extra angst of making it all happen.

It's nice to have only six of us on this trip after eight on the previous three trips. Still, we have six personal packs,



On my fourth trip, a fortuitous meeting with the Quetico Ranger team of Michael and Trion, led to an expediting of their chain-sawing bad blowdown on the portages from Darky to Brent. This allowed us to make it into Conmee Lake for another trophy walleye trip. I figured the least I could do is feed them a home-cooked dinner in our screen house. (Wicksteed Lake)

six day packs, three food packs, the eighty-pound Yeti cooler on a pack frame, the fifty-pound Clam screen house, tent pack, kitchen pack, and rod cases, nets, paddles, and lifejackets. With the three canoes, that's sixteen loads or three laps per person on every portage. We don't break any travel speed records, but we work hard as a team and still get where we want to go—the best backcountry fishing water in the park. And of course, when we do get there, we are set up to eat well, be comfortable in camp, and have everything we need to maximize fishing success. Fishing success on my trips is not just scratching up enough for a meal. We need lots of action on big fish to deem the trip a good one. Yes, this puts a lot of pressure on me to produce week in

and week out, but you know, that is precisely the number one appeal for me on these trips: getting my guys into big fish like they never have before. You have to be very driven to succeed in this game, and that competitive drive has always been my strength. Like a pro athlete in any other sport, you gotta produce, even when hurt, tired, or other conditions conspire against you. The season is a long grind, but the thing is, the client cares only about the here and now, not what I did last week or will do next week. So I try to take it all one day at a time, making the most out of fishing each lake.

It starts to rain as we hit Goat Hill Portage. Never fun portaging in hot rain gear, but hey, at least we already cut the sucker out last month. We make our

three to four laps per person in 3 ½ hours, but it still taps our energy levels enough that I decide to camp on Wicksteed. Besides, I want another crack at the smallmouth there. On the Gratton Lake side of Goat Hill, I run into a pair of Quetico rangers. Turns out, Michael is the guy who was paddling stern when I met him and his partner (his girlfriend) up on Olifaunt Lake in early May. Trion is from the First Nation Village on Lac La Croix, and he has been working portage crew for six years. I can tell by the way he handles a chain saw that he has cleared his share of blowdown. They are trying to reclaim the original trail here on Goat Hill as well as the other burned and buried portages, but I notice they veer off and include some of the new detours I cleared

back in May. As just a small token of our appreciation, I invite them to have dinner with us tonight on Wicksteed. They have been out busting butt on freeze-dried rations for a week, and real food sounds too good to refuse.

We settle into the five-star Wicksteed island site with the big fireplace boulder, and our dinner guests soon arrive. We all enjoy a chicken taco feast and learning more about Quetico Park Ranger work. They are one of only three- two-man Quetico Ranger crews working in the park. I think of the thousands of portage trails they have to keep open, especially in the new burns, and wonder how they will ever catch up. But they seem undaunted and just go out every day, work hard, and do as much as they can. They saw thirty-five moose on their last eight-day trip. How cool is that? As they ready to head back to their own camp across the lake before dark, I ask what they are up to tomorrow? Their plan is to cut out the burnt blowdown in the Darky and Argo area over the next couple days. So I ask if they wouldn't mind clearing the 191-rodder along the Darky River into Brent sooner than later. Michael says they will work on that one tomorrow while we fish Wicksteed, so it will be clear for us the next day. Wow! Now that is some kind of service.

6/30- Dave and I fish the southern bays of Wicksteed, but the wind does us no favors. I boat twenty-five bass, half on the Whopper Plopper and half on Vibrax, but they all run small, not a sixteen-incher in the lot. Same for Dave and the other two canoes. The majority of the surrounding forest is burned clear down to the rock. We hang out in camp from three to five, hoping the wind lets up. After supper of beaver-wood brats, we give it another

go, but the results are the same, another thirty smallies, but nothing big. I know there are big smallmouth in here, but Wicksteed humbles me again.

7/1- Our ranger crew does indeed open our route to Brent. That last stretch of trail from the small pond to Brent is the worst. They must have chain-sawed fifty big trees on that 150-yard section of trail. That would have been a beast without their efforts. My four-star peninsula site is still unburned, so we set up there and hang out, hoping the seemingly relentless twenty mile per hour wind will subside. It never does, and we never wet a line in Brent.

7/2- We paddle east down Brent, and the news is not good on the fire front. Most of the camps are destroyed, including the five-star island site, widely regarded as the best on Brent. It is becoming clear to me that Quetico has to do something about reclaiming and creating more campsites, especially for bigger groups. Parties with one or two little tents can squeeze into some of these marginal sites, but with four tents, you need a more spacious camp, and these have become few and far between. This is going to be a problem when Quetico access gets up and running full steam again. Hard to believe, but many good-sized Quetico lakes have at most one decent campsite. I would like to see more so groups who paddle and portage hard into the backcountry are not so disappointed to find no place to camp. I would start by chain-sawing the blowdown off the established sites and go from there.

After waiting two long years for another crack at the trophy walleyes in Conmee, looks like we will have to wait a bit longer. Both the portages from Brent into Conmee are burned and blocked by down trees. But we are a well-oiled logging ma-

chine by now, and within two hours, we are floating on wall-eye nirvana. I sure hope the walleyes cooperate, because the scenery here is bleak. Most of the lake is completely ravaged by the 2021 fires. Trees of every size are stacked helter-skelter, and every camp I know of on the lake, save one, is destroyed. My four-star mid-lake high point camp is thankfully unburned, so we land and squeeze in our three tents and greenhouse. The landing here is poor, but the fireplace, breeze, and view are all stellar. Plus, we are now strategically positioned to do some real damage with the walleye rods.

Dave and I paddle across to a little island for a much-needed bath. It feels good to rinse off the grime and black soot. Hard as it may be for you swimmers out there to believe, this is my thirtieth day in Quetico this season and first time in the water. What can I say, I hate swimming.

There is a bit of a wall-eye chop as our three-canoe brigade makes its way down to the walleye honey hole by 6:00 p.m. I have Ted in my bow, who on a scale of one to ten is maybe a three as an angler, but he still manages to drag two beautiful walleyes into the net, a twenty-four and a twenty-eight incher, his lifetime best in over twenty Quetico trips. Casting the Rapala BX Swimmer, I get a 26½ and lose a bigger one right at the boat. I despise jig fishing, so I avoid it at all costs. Dave is "guiding" Ted's wife, Jeanne, but he still nets his own twenty-nine-inch trophy. Jeanne gets blanked by the big walleyes tonight. Mark F. and Mark H. are excellent walleye anglers, and they combine for eight nice walleyes on the night, including a twenty-seven, twenty-nine, and one they claim was bigger but never put



In two nights down at the ol' Conmee Honey Hole, we caught 28 walleyes with 20 over 24", 14 over 27" and 7 over 29". It was great to reconnect with these special fish. (Conmee Lake)

a tape to. I can't accept a thirty-inch trophy walleye without an official measurement, so that one goes in the books as a twenty-nine as well. So we boat a total of thirteen wall-eyes, including three twenty-fours, a 26½, a twenty-seven, a twenty-eight, three twenty-nines, and four heading back to camp to go on ice.

The mosquitos slaughter me as I fillet the fish, so it is heavenly to duck into the screen house and fix a leisurely supper without getting killed. It's sloppy joes with green beans, bacon, onion, brown sugar, then another midnight dish detail, but it has been a good day. We have confirmed that the big Conmee walleyes have not missed a beat in our absence, and that is all that matters here tonight.

7/3- I cook up a hot breakfast of eggs, sausage, and blueberry bagels. Then I have to pack a lunch for everyone, as we are headed over to Suzanette for the day. We take the most westerly portage in there, happy to find it unburned and easy going. Ted is with me again, as he has never caught a canoe country lake trout in those twenty-something previous trips. Let's just say this will be the true test for the Klos LCB. I let the breeze blow us across known trout waters of sixty feet deep or so and we jig and drift our Klos baits near the bottom. Not five minutes into this effort, Ted starts cranking away and hauls in a twenty-eight-inch beauty. He has his first ever lake trout. That wasn't so hard. I get a twenty-five-incher right after that, and an hour later, I net a heavy twenty-eight-inch trout of my own. These Suzanette lake trout are all stocky brutes. Must be a good cisco forage base in here. Mark F. nets a twenty-six and twenty-eight-inch trout on the Klos too. Jeanne Klos's up a twenty-eight-inch beauty

too. Mark H. and Dave have no Klos baits and catch no lake trout. Are you starting to see a pattern here? The beauty of the Klos LCB is it is so easy to use. Just drop it to the bottom, slowly lift, and let it fall back down. We rarely get the Klos hung up vertically jigging, unlike the snagfest of trolling deep-running spoons. Six trout in under two hours, including four husky twenty-eights. Definitely worth the trip over here.

After lunch, Ted and I Whopper Plop the bay running to the east end of Suzanette. I boat a dozen smallmouth, including three eighteen inchers and a twenty. I wish we had more time to keep circling the lake because I sense good numbers of bigger bass are in the shallow water zone right now. The burn has dumped a lot of new woody cover along the shorelines. Suzanette has always been a good smallmouth lake, but it should be even better in the years to come. It would be fun to topwater here tonight, but we gotta head back to camp and get ready for round two in the Honey Hole.

I am happy to have a skilled angler in Mark F. in my bow tonight, and I'm eager to see what he can do. We start fishing at 6:30, and Mark wastes no time in nailing his lifetime best walleye. I stretch the tape on her three different times, and try as I may, can only get 29½ inches out of this beautiful fish. Mark is thrilled nonetheless. This one hit his jig and Berkley Power Bait four-inch paddle-tail minnow. Things quiet down till 8:00 when Mark H. runs off a streak of three straight twenty-eight-inch hogs further back in the channel. There is shade back in here, and we speculate this has attracted these fish before the sun sets. Pretty soon, my bowman sticks four more good fish, a twenty-five, twenty-six, a twenty-nine, and a twenty for

the cooler. It is actually hard to catch eating-size walleyes from this spot. We have to stretch that twenty max a bit or we can't put a meal together despite releasing hundreds of pounds of walleyes. I hook a 25½ casting the BX Swimmer off the point, and then wonder of wonders, catch a 27½-inch golden beauty on a jig and paddletail minnow. My third walleye of the night hits a yellow jointed-Shad Rap. He goes twenty-two, and I reluctantly put him on the stringer. A very chunky thirty-two-inch pike smacks my BX Swimmer too, giving me my Grand Slam for the day. Dave, Ted, and Jeanne get blanked tonight. As good as this spot is, and I would take it over any other walleye hole in Quetico or anywhere else, it's no longer an automatic slugfest like in the live bait era. With artificials and barbless, you gotta fish hard and hope the walleye gods bless you. Walleyes have a reputation for being slugs in the fighting department. Not these walleyes. These twenty-eight to thirty-inch beasts will power down and leave a lasting impression for sure.

7/4- We get rain on our Fourth of July parade, but Mark H. and I pull on the raingear and tour the east end of Conmee anyway. I want to see if the camp I always stayed at with the family and friends is still okay. As I paddle through the channel leading to the old campsite, I look and look, but no camp. I wonder if I am confused somehow and maybe missed it. Nope. This is the spot—you just can't see it from the water anymore. It is just a pile of scorched rubble. I land and climb up through the tangle. The fire ring and tent sites are buried. Memories of great trips with Michele, Alec, Andy, friend Tim Maas, and so many others come flooding back. The home base for those

incredible walleye trips is now lost to the ages. Reminder 1001 of just how fleeting life is and that we damn well better make the most of it.

I am not even sure why I have a Vibrax tied to my line on this walleye lake, but I solemnly walk down to the beached canoe, pick up the rod, and cast out as far as I can. It can't be 8 feet deep out there, but like it was meant to be, a heavyweight twenty-nine-inch walleye blasts the spinner and battles me all the way to my feet. Are you kidding me! I camped here fifty to sixty nights, and I don't think we ever even fished from shore. Maybe it was a message from the powers-that-be, that despite drought, fires, floods, and pandemics in the past two years, the true spirit of Conmee Lake is alive and well. I thank this amazing fish for gifting me this special moment, and I flip it out of the net.

Mark and I forge on around the most southerly bay of Conmee, picking up a few more walleyes and even some decent smallmouth. Right before stopping for lunch on a chunk of ledge rock, a pike breaks off my #5 gold Vibrax. Damn pike. As we pack up our things to leave, I notice a fish rolling on the surface. We paddle over and I net a two-foot pike. You guessed it: He has my Vibrax in his throat. I back it out with my forceps and he swims off. For a change, I get the best of a canoe country pike.

Mark H. adds a couple more walleyes to the stringer, and I Vibrax another twenty-nine-inch trophy walleye. Back near camp, Mark F. picks up another twenty-eight-inch trophy in a spot I told him to try. Cool. The rain continues into the evening and all night. I have no takers for leaving the dry, cozy screen house on this miserable night, so that's it. We gotta pull out tomorrow. In two days on Conmee, we catch twenty-eight walleyes. Eight are eaters under twenty-two inches. The other twenty all go over twenty-four inches, with fifteen over twenty-six, fourteen over twenty-seven, twelve over twenty-eight, and seven at twenty-nine or more. Four of my clients get their lifetime best walleye and lake trout, and I know they appreciate what went into making that happen. My goal on every trip is to deliver a wilderness fishing experience they could not achieve on their own. Mission accomplished.

7/5- The rain lets up as we move back on down to Darky. I move Jeanne into my canoe and put Ted in the bow of Dave's canoe. Dave has been my bowman on six trips now, and he is a good one. Today I discover he is solid in the stern too. That will come in handy down the line. We make good time down the length of Brent and over the Darky River portages. It is 5:00 when we hit Darky, so we camp on the five-star island site on the north side, the most



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spacious on the lake. The burn hit this camp, but not hot enough to kill all the larger pine, so there is still decent shade and plenty of space for four tents and the big clam. Mark H. and I paddle out to collect beaverwood to grill our cheeseburgers. It's a beautiful, calm evening for a change. I wish I was out topwater bass fishing, but my Sherpas are all down for the count. We spot a canoe across the lake to the south, the first we have seen in eight days, not counting the rangers. There will never be another year that we have the western Quetico all to ourselves like 2022.

7/6- Seems those big walleyes on Conmee sunk their teeth pretty deep into Mark F., and he is craving more. No problem, I will take him over into Ballard Lake today. I cook up eggs, bacon, and English muffins and coach the other two canoes on what to do where on Darky. Turns out Michael and Trion cleared the Ballard Portage last week, so we are in there trolling in no time. Actually, Mark prefers to cast his jig versus trolling it. He feels like he can get it down better that way and maintain contact with the bottom. I can't argue with his results, as he takes six nice walleyes on our four-hour tour around the lake, a 25 ½, a 26 ½ golden beauty, and two twenties for the stringer. I pick up five walleyes as well, trolling my trusty jointed Shad Rap, putting a couple on the stringer for a change. This makes a



STUART OSTHOFF

I generally only allow one fish meal per trip so when fish night does roll around, it's "all you can eat". The recipe for my popular fish fry's is lots of dry beaverwood, the BWJ Cast Aluminum Fry Pan, Chef Roberts Breeding Mix, REAL LARD and a dozen 15-20" boneless walleyes— never bass, trout or pike. With the BWJ Insulated Food Packs and ice, I can collect said walleye fillets over several days if necessary. (Darky Lake)

everywhere on the Ballard side, and it also looked bad when I paddled past the Wicksteed end earlier in the trip. It may not be as burned as it appears, but if I was going into Ballard in 2023, I would use the Darky Lake portage access. That one is good to go thanks to our ranger buddies. We have fun with a dozen decent large-mouth on Ballard too. One goes eighteen inches.

Meanwhile, back on Darky, Ted and Jeanne apply their new-found Klos Boys lake trout tactics to smoke six more lakers on the south end of the lake down by the pictographs—just drifting and jigging like we did on Suzanette. They claim the biggest went thirty inches, but without a ruler and with a phone camera whose battery went dead, they have no real documentation. Note to all future GS2 clients: Keep a flexible measuring tape in your lifejacket pocket and use the thing on all bigger fish. I put a lot of blood, sweat, and tears into these trips, and I need accurate fish counts and measurements, not guesswork. I borrowed Mark H. a Klos LCB this morning, and he racks up three nice lake trout off the mid-lake reef. Only Dave, who was shut out on lake trout, did not get his Grand Slam on this trip.

Dave gets the beaverwood and cedar fire going and fries up the potatoes while I bread up the walleyes. We all gorge ourselves to the gills, and still the gulls get a few fillets. The gang offers to clean up the dinner mess while I take Ted out for a quick spin in a longshot attempt to add his lifetime best smallmouth to the personal best walleye and lake trout he has already landed on this trip. I head up the Darky River channel to the north. It is pretty breezy, but I pick my spots as Ted is throwing the Whopper Plopper. I pick up a dozen good fish on the Vibrax,

dozen in the cooler, and our ice will be gone tomorrow, so we gotta have our big walleye fry tonight.

Ballard is half-burned, including the island that had the

only small camp on the lake. I circle way up into the woods where I have portaged from Ballard to Wicksteed several times in the past, but I can't pick up the trail. It looks gnarly

including one twenty-incher, and lose a couple more at the gunwale that look even bigger. Ugh! I feel like a hack losing two big bass just off the net like that. Speaking of hacks, against all odds, a big bronzeback plasters Ted's Plopper, and he drags it through a tangle of cabbage weeds and into the net. Twenty-one inches on the button—his best bass ever. Time to quit while we are ahead. I wish we had another day to fish bass here, as the big ones seem primed to turn on. I would love to go back over to Wicksteed and hit that again. Maybe the third time this season would be the charm. But I want to show them Argo and some new water tomorrow, and our tow is picking us up at Bottle Portage the next day. See, even when you are out here all summer, there is still never enough time. These bass will be here bigger and badder next year.

7/7- We get going early and beat the heat in and out of Argo, claiming the island site in Sunday Bay. This was a great five-star camp till a lightning strike hit it in 2017. Then it got hit again in 2021. But we just need a place with shade and a breeze to spend our last night of the trip. We all enjoy a refreshing swim and bath and a mac & cheese with chunks of ham dinner. It is breezy, but I throw out the invite for one last fling at the smallmouth. No takers—the gang just wants to relax in camp this final evening. I'm okay with it. We came, we went, and we slayed the trophy walleye dragon on Conmee. We didn't even know going in if we could get to Conmee through the burn and blowdown, and if we did have to cut our own way all the way, would we even have any time or energy left to fish? All six of us are between the ages of sixty-five and sixty-nine, so all in all, it was a real accomplishment. Everyone pitched

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in and worked as a team to get the job done. I especially want to thank Jeanne for all she brought to the trip. She portaged like a pro, not just for a woman, I'm talking rock-solid, period. Well done girl, well done.

TRIP #5- 7/13-22. WE DRIVE STRAIGHT THROUGH FROM ELY TO BEAVERHOUSE ENTRY POINT THEN QUETICO, JEAN, BURNTSIDE, STURGEON, LONELY, STU'S, RAM, ANTOINE, BENTPINE, BADWATER, QUETICO, BEAVERHOUSE.

There are only ten cars in the parking lot as we portage on down to Beaverhouse Lake, only half what were here in early June. We paddle across to the ranger station, get our permit, and have lunch on their picnic table. It's a beauti-

ful summer day, not too hot, not too humid. The little rapids below the portage with the old car leading to Quetico Lake is much lower than a month ago. Our first two canoes pole up through, but Kelly and Dennis roll over, and the two dry food packs go bobbing back out into the lake. Kind of an inauspicious start, but no real damage done. We paddle on down Quetico for ten miles and pull into the stellar five-star site I discovered in June. We pound down the chicken tacos and dry out the contents of the food packs. All the cold stuff is still fine in the Yeti cooler for this ten-day mid-summer trip. No fishing tonight. We will push on hard to Burntside tomorrow.

7/14- We get going by 8:00 and pass two occupied camps on Quetico. We lunch on the

Jean five-star site and push on to Burntside, arriving at the five-star I like best at 3:00. It hurts to not fish bass and trout on Jean, but adding the Bentpine Lake leg to this trip means we gotta pass over some good water. I take Josh over to Rogue, and we combine to Whopper Plop twenty-five nice smallmouth. I get six eighteens, and Josh lands a nineteen-incher. All are stocky, hard-fighting specimens, but we boat no trophies. Back on Burntside, Fred trolls up three twenty-inch walleyes with a Shad Rap, which gets us started collecting our walleye meal in the cooler.

7/15- It's about four hours from Burntside to the Big Beach site on Sturgeon. Jean Creek has dropped three feet since early June, but there is no burn in here, so the portages are good to go. I pull ashore on the beach and am really surprised to see how good it looks compared to a month ago. The place looks more like its old self, one of the very best camps in all of Quetico. We get all set up, have lunch in the shade, then out on the sandy beach for a bath. Hot today, and the water is warm in the shallows. I take John up into the bays north of camp, good bass area and calm conditions for a change, but we take only fifteen fish on the Whopper Plopper. Only a couple go sixteen inches. Not sure what to make of this, but it is disappointing. The big lake has come way down from the flood stage of June, but the bigger bass are just not active in the shallow water zone right now. The other two canoes catch fifteen nice walleyes over in the Walleye Straits, keeping ten to complete our possession limit in the cooler. Most are caught on crankbaits. The bugs are bad while cleaning fish back at camp, so the screen house is a godsend for cooking and eating dinner. Another midnight affair, but come July,

you gotta fish till dark, so that is just the way it is.

7/16- Fred and I hustle off to Stu's Lake, three hours up through Lonely Lake and then the two bushwhack "portages" into this smallmouth gem. I spot a cow and calf moose in the weedy bay leading into Draper Lake, so we detour over there for a closer look. This will be a true test for Stu's Lake, as I have only fished it in June until today. I end up with fifty fish, but forty of them are small. Fred nets thirty-five, his biggest going eighteen inches. We both throw the Vibrax for the most part. So recall the fictional story I wrote in the Spring *BWJ*, "Dream Trip," and losing what looked to be my best ever smallmouth at the gunwale with the botched netting maneuver. The setting for that story was Stu's Lake. Then Mike and I came in here June 9 and once again boated some monster smallmouth with eight trophies over twenty inches, including two 22 ½'s. Plus, I had the hook pop out of a huge bass just a couple feet from the net: that one looked like she may have gone twenty-three. Fast forward to today. Despite boating eighty-five smallmouth, only one fish goes over twenty inches. And that one is worth telling you about.

So we are two-thirds of the way around Stu's Lake today, moving one twelve-inch smallmouth after another. Pretty typical for mid-day, mid-July canoe country bass fishing. The bigger bass don't move into the shallows to feed until evening hours. But there is no way for us to fish the evening prime time in here. It would leave us portaging and paddling for hours in the dark. This has never hurt us in June when the water is cooler and the fish are shallow, but clearly, it is hurting us today. Anyway, I am more or less on autopilot, sweeping my paddle to keep

the canoe the proper casting distance from shore, then laying the paddle down atop the yoke, grabbing my rod, and firing the #5 gold Vibrax spinner into the rocky shoreline pockets. Basically, I am fishing like I do in June, even though here in July it is proving to be unproductive. The last thing I am thinking about is catching a twenty-three-inch smallmouth. Right now, I would settle for our first twenty-incher of the day. But you know, fishing is a strange game. You can play all the percentages just right, exploiting the probable over and over. But there is still no predicting the possible. Low odds are not zero odds. If you keep throwing that lure out there, you have a chance at something big. After six trips in here and eye-popping hauls of big smallmouth every time, our leanest spin around Stu's Lake goes from bust to epic in a single cast.

My Vibrax plunks down about three feet off the end of a big white pine log followed by an instantaneous vicious swirl. As soon as I feel a good fish, I reef it clear of the log and out into open water. She leaps high, suspending there, showing off that classic big bass pose. Holy cow: That's a huge smallmouth—long body and full-length heavy girth. She jumps three more times, violently shaking her head, using that airborne leverage to try to shake free. But seems I stuck her pretty good, and unlike in the "Dream Trip" story, Fred cleanly scoops her into the net. Wow, what a fish! I can tell when I reach inside a bass's mouth if it is trophy class. Big smallmouth have big maws, almost largemouth bass-like. This one is big. I get the Vibrax out of the corner of her mouth, put her back in the net in the water, and fish my measuring tape out of my lifejacket pocket.



In 45 years of targeting canoe country smallmouth, and tens of thousands of bass caught/released, this is the first one to break that elusive 23-inch barrier. Sometimes dreams actually come true. (Stu's Lake)

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Among the 12 chapters of the book there is a history of the Charles L. Sommers Canoe Base on Moose Lake where the author began his six-year guiding career in the Quetico and the BWCA along with a detailed review of some of the more interesting canoe trips which the author guided while working at the canoe Base from 1957 to 1963

Reviewed and Recommended by Stuart Osthoff, editor of the BWJ

With Fred as my witness, I tape her twice vertically held aloft and twice horizontal, lying on my paddle blade. The tape reads twenty-three, twenty-three, twenty-three, twenty-three. I wrap it around her midsection—15½” girth. She is the biggest smallmouth I have ever handled. Fred takes a half-dozen quick photos with his camera. I take one last look at her and splash, she is gone. I am a bit shocked to have this happen today, a day when we struggle mightily to move good bass. I always figured any breakthrough twenty-three would come on a banner big bass day.

I know some of you are probably thinking what is the big deal between a 22½” smallmouth and a twenty-three-inch smallmouth? It’s a lousy half-inch. I’ll tell you what the difference is: Forty-five years of scheming and dreaming, 250 week-long BWCAW/Quetico trips, thousands of miles of portaging, millions of paddle strokes, and tens of thousands of smallmouth caught and released. That half-inch has been like attempting to climb Mount Everest a hundred times before reaching the summit. My clients and I have been soooo close so many times for soooo long but never measured a true twenty-three-inch smallmouth till now. It seems only fitting to have it go down on the Vibrax on Stu’s Lake. Turns out the sequel to my Dream Trip story is better than the original because it is true. The big one did not get away

this time.

Fred and I stop at the Walleye Straits on the way back to camp, and in less than an hour we rack up four big smallmouth. Fred nets a nineteen and two twenty-inch heavyweights, and I add a twenty-incher to the days tally as well. Kelly and Dennis elect to hang out in camp, swim, read, relax while John and Josh find some good bass action on the far east end by Moxness Bay, including four nineteen-inchers. I grill burgers on the campfire as rain threatens but misses us.

7/17- It’s a three-hour paddle under a hot sun to the upper end of Sturgeon Lake. The Blazino five-star site I liked so much in June is taken, so we set up on Plan B just to the west. It is a squeeze for four tents and the screenhouse, but there is good shade, a good landing, and swimming rocks. Kelly and I bass fish the big bay to the south parallel to Olifaunt Lake. I lose three or four good bass on the Vibrax and finally land two eighteens on the Whopper Plopper. Kelly boats a nice nineteen-inch, and we combine for five twenty-inch walleyes over by Blueberry Island as the sun goes down. We get out to stretch on a sand beach on the east side of this basin and discover it must have been a former ranger cabin site. There are still old rock foundations, old boards, and obvious human alterations of the ground. The Habels try up where the Pickerel River dumps in, which was a hot spot this spring, but nothing doing tonight. The bugs are bad tonight, so we eat our Chicken Alfredo in the screen house. With a Thermancell going in there, it is virtually bug free. We notice a small brass plaque on a tree near the fire pit that reads: “Jerry Baines 1950–96 — Memories of a special brother and friend.”

7/18- It is so hot I gamble, leaving the tent fly off when we go to bed. Our tent is on pure ledge rock, so it is impossible to stake down in the normal fashion anyway. Such is life when you always get the last pick of tent sites. Well, a wicked thunderstorm rolls through after midnight as Fred and I scramble out to rig the fly in a gale. We get some wet gear in the tent, but morning breaks warm and sunny, and we have everything dry in short order. All three canoes are off to Antoine and Ram today.

Fred’s goal is to catch his first ever Canoe Country lake trout today, so I put him in my bow and we drop our Klos LCBs into the upper basin of Antoine. I have caught nice trout trolling Dr. Spoons through here many times, so I know the fish are here. After a dozen Quetico trips under his belt and no trout, it takes Fred a whole five minutes to reel in a twenty-eight-inch beauty on the Klos. That was easy. The others are still portaging the three nets bungee-

dealee-bobbed together, so I kneel down and hand-land the thrashing trout. Soon John pulls alongside and hands us a net, and good thing, because my Klos no sooner hits the bottom and I am into a big trout. This fish fights long and hard on my little six-foot bass rod. I never get tired of the power of these bigger trout when they want to drive down to the bottom. He tapes 30 1/2" and is just a blocky brute overall. I pick up one more twenty-four-inch trout on the Klos, and Fred is now a believer. I'm telling you folks, this thing is a game changer. If you're serious about catching lake trout in the BWCAW or Quetico, buy a Klos Boys Lake Trout Tackle Kit from the *BWJ* Voyageur Trading Post (p.89). They are easy to fish on a basic walleye rod and reel, and they flat out catch lake trout.

After lunch we switch to bass mode and find active fish off the edge of several cabbage weed patches. I land four seventeens and two eighteens on a #5 Vibrax with a white bucktail, and Fred cranks in several nice bass up front. Here is where that tough to break habit of leaving my Vibrax hanging overboard really bites me. I am paddling on the left when a bass grabs the Vibrax dangling in mid-air, and my whole rig is overboard in a flash. All I can do is curse and watch my \$400 St. Croix rod and Shimano Stradic reel swim down into the depths. I've had bass grab my suspended lure like this before but always managed to grab it as it was going overboard. Not this time. Last month I had three new such bass outfits, and I am now down to one. I won't have time to order any from St. Croix before my Sutton River trip, so I can only hope to find a decent two-piece spinning rod in Duluth to tide me over.

We decide to portage back over to Ram and give that a try. Ram is big bass water for a small lake, but we move little on the Whopper Plopper. Fred cranks up a twenty-inch smallie from deeper water, and I boat another four fish in the seventeen-inch class. So we do okay for decent fish, but the really big bass are missing in action today.

The guys enjoy our all you can eat walleye fry tonight as the bugs and thunder chase us into the screen house. It has been a pain portaging this awkward seven-foot-long, fifty-pound shelter over my shoulder all summer, but on nights like this, it is a sweet luxury indeed. All those single-portaging, ultra-light minimalists have no clue what they are missing.

7/19- We set sail early morning bound for Bentpine, and it seems to take forever to get to the far west end of Sturgeon. The guys are just not paddling like they can or should. I get after them, and they pick up the pace on the four portages up Bentpine Creek. There is no real

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burn here, but the landings are all gnarly, so we can only load or unload one boat at a time. The rain soaks us all before we can get our raingear on. so everyone is happy to pull into the five-star mid-lake camp. We spot a small bull moose feeding on Bentpine Creek and find a moose shed on one of the portages, which we rig up in camp—my calling card. A hot spaghetti dinner in the screen house while the bugs hum outside makes us all feel better. The sky clears out by midnight, promising a good day for fishing tomorrow.

7/20- My own kids literally learned how to fish on Bentpine Lake as we took 10+ family trips in here in the 1990s and early 2000s. This was the live bait era when I could put a hook, splitshot, and leech on their lines and let them troll, drift, or bobber fish. Whatever they did with it, they had a chance to catch a walleye, and they caught plenty in Bentpine. Every trip. We never caught top end walleyes in here like on Conmee, but we caught tons of twenty to twenty-four-inch fish, with an occasional twenty-five or twenty-six incher. I will never forget the evening we fished off shore and I spent all night baiting hooks while the kids skidded one nice walleye after another up onto the smooth ledge rock. We probably didn't catch a hundred that night, but we had to of come close. We named it Alec's Island,

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but I have not had it in me to return without the family, so I think my last time in here was 2004.

It's a windy one today, but I am anxious to hit the old proven spots with Fred, who is a better than average walleye angler. On our morning tour, we boat five walleyes each, mine on a jig and white twister tail and Fred on a Rapala that was not a Shad Rap—something I didn't recognize. All are in that twenty-one to twenty-three range. We also hit plenty of smallmouth, which we never saw on Bentpine eighteen years ago. It is tempting to go to the Vibrax and fish these chunky bass, but we stay with walleye baits and still pick up an eighteen, nineteen, and a twenty-inch smallmouth. I pull into our old camp on the north end of the lake to stretch, and the wonderful memories come flooding back. I am glad I finally made my return to Bentpine. It doesn't look like I will ever get the kids back here again, but I for one will be back, as the walleye fishing is still outstanding, and now it has that bonus smallmouth as well.

We return to camp to find Kelly all excited about catching eight nice walleyes right off the camp shore. We eat an early Zup's polish and baked beans dinner. then Fred and I head west to close out the trip. We boat another eight walleyes, Fred taking big fish honors with a twenty-

four and a twenty-seven on the Rapala BX Swimmer. Despite the wind, it is a twenty-eight walleye day on Bentpine. And so the sun sets on my Quetico fishing season. It's been a good one—make that a great one.

7/21- Our rods are cased for the duration of the trip, but we are not out of the woods yet. Exiting Bentpine back into March Lake, the portage to Trail Lake is okay. All those trips I made through here, we always paddled the length of Trail Creek. It never had a lot of water, but it was always canoeable. Not today. Some combination of the 2021 drought, the burn that swept through here, and beaver activity completely dried up the entire bog. The good news is it is dry and solid enough to just portage through here for about 300 yards to open water on the next unnamed pond. The portage from this pond to Snow Lake is burnt to a crisp, so we have to cut blowdown trees to get the canoes through. We get lucky though, as most are only three or four inches thick, quick work for the *BWJ* Boreal 21 camp saws.

The long portage out of Snow Lake to the north is unburned, and I only have to cut away a couple of blowdowns to pass through here. We paddle on down Your Lake, and I am happy to see the five-star island site is still intact. The beavers have rearranged things again on the portage into Fair Lake. Just paddle up the creek then paddle the pond out onto the lake. The two short portages into Badwater Lake are brushy from lack of use but passable without sawing. We call it a day at the high rock overlook site on Badwater and fix our last supper. It has cooled off, so good sleeping weather tonight.

7/22- The notorious Badwater one-mile portage is long as ever but not too muddy this time. We all make our three passes and push out into the cool breeze on Quetico Lake. We jump across the sand spit portage, and when we turn west, the wind really blasts us. We power on down to the old car portage, but the scene out on Beaverhouse is a definite no-go. Huge three-foot whitecaps roll in multiple directions out on the main lake, and we are windbound—not much more than an hour from the truck. We have guys with planes to catch in Minneapolis, so we really need to get out tonight and back to Ely. Finally, about 6:30, the wind throttles back to foot-and-a-half waves, something we can handle. We make our final portage to the truck and pull into my driveway at 2:00 a.m. I am tired, but it is a good tired. I have three days to rest up before heading up to the Sutton River on Hudson Bay.

TRIP #6- JULY 27- AUGUST 4- DRIVE 10 HOURS FROM ELY TO HEARST, ONTARIO, WHERE WE MEET THE REST OF THE GROUP



We saw a dozen total moose on my five Quetico trips this season, definitely an encouraging increase over the last ten years. (Bentpine Creek)

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AND PREPARE FOR THREE-HOUR FLOAT PLANE FLIGHT INTO HAWLEY LAKE, THE HEADWATERS OF THE SUTTON RIVER.

This will be my fourteenth trip down the Sutton River, widely regarded as the world's best brook trout river. Gary Hamilton from Idaho is along, I guided Gary on the Sutton way back in 2009 and then on a Quetico trip in 2019 with son, George, and cousin, Don. After that Sturgeon Lake trip, a plan was hatched to do the Sutton. COVID subsequently cancelled everything for two years, but finally here we are. The Hamiltons drive to Ely, and we take my truck and all the gear up to Hearst, which is about five hours northeast of Thunder Bay. Roy and Joe meet us there after driving over from Connecticut.

In all those previous trips in and out of the Sutton, I never lost more than a half-day waiting on the weather to fly. Maybe I used up all my good luck because after waiting two long years through the pandemic, we get stuck in our Hearst motel for two more boring days waiting to fly out. Such is the nature of float plane fishing, but it doesn't pay to take any chances. I used to allow ten days for floating and fishing the Sutton, but in 2018 I cut this back to an eight-day trip. Now after losing two days before we even start, it would be nice to have that ten-day schedule back. As it is, our six days of fishing is now down to four, so

this will be a new challenge in making the most of every cast at this thirty-three percent faster pace.

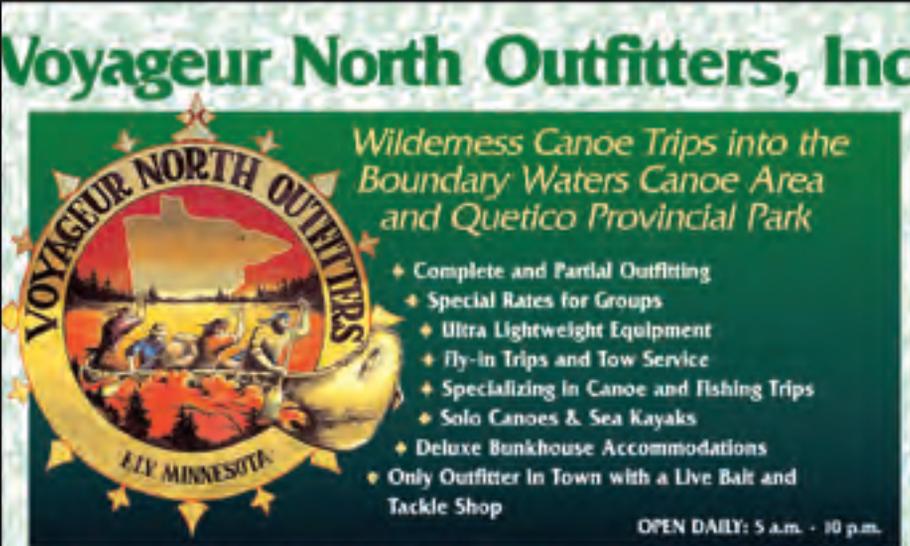
7/30- We finally fly in under sunny skies in Hearst Air's Turbo Beaver and Piston Beaver. Our maximum load allowed was a combined 1200 pounds of people and 600 pounds of gear, and we use every bit of space loading it all into the three seventeen-foot Royalex canoes. The Sutton is mostly shallow with pea gravel and sand bars on nearly every bend. In low water years, we are forced to get out and pull the loaded canoes over these barriers in our chest waders, so Kevlar canoes are not the answer here. Dragging over said gravel bars is as close to portaging as it gets on the Sutton. This can slow down the pace considerably, but I quickly note that will not be a problem this year. The water is high, just like down in Quetico. This is an easy trip physically, and I regularly take clients into their seventies who do just fine.

Hearst Air works with Albert, a Cree who operates a camp on Hawley Lake. This allows for fuel and canoe storage, helping to control the cost of far north flying, which is very expensive. Albert strings our three canoes together single file and tows us with his little motor boat for an hour down to the first set of good rapids. From here, we all rig up our #5 Vibrax spinners and start on down. We find trout immediately, and these fish make an instant impression.

Most stream trout anglers grow up fishing the headwaters of tiny creeks where an eight-inch brook trout is a good fish. I did this as a kid in southwestern Wisconsin and dreamed of someday, somehow, catching just one massive twenty-inch brook trout. This represented the ultimate trophy in my fantasy fishing dreams. Here on the Sutton, where these sea-run brook trout exploit the bait fish forage base out in the bay, six to eight-year-old fish easily tape over twenty inches, and they return every July for their fall spawning run. Catching twenty-five brookies over twenty inches a day per guy is routine on the Sutton, twenty-one-inchers are common, and most net a dozen twenty-twos each trip plus a handful of twenty-threes. Going into this trip, my clients had collectively caught and released 21,628 Sutton River brook trout, and we had taped less than ten legitimate two-footers. So a twenty-four-inch Sutton brookie is the best you can hope for. I have seen nothing bigger. Obviously, brook trout do get bigger. The Quebec side of Hudson Bay produces brookies up to eight-pounds, but these are lake-based fish, and daily catches rarely exceed a dozen fish. I have personally had many a one-hundred fish day on the Sutton. All big, beautiful, bold brookies. That is why we call it "shock and awe."

In low water conditions, it is fairly easy to target where the trout will be holding. On sunny days with polarized glasses, we often see pods of twenty fish making their way upstream. They will stage in the deeper runs and holes, and it is a simple matter of working your fly or spinner through these darker, deeper veins of water. But we won't be able to sight fish on this trip—too much water. We will have to earn our fish by covering a lot more water. The limestone geology here keeps the pH right at seven, and the tannin-stained, tea-colored water of the Canadian Shield is rendered crystal clear here on most days. Only once, in 2013, did a hellacious week of torrential rains muddy the Sutton up to where it became unfishable. We were forced to lay-up in a single camp for four days while the river settled down. Even on that trip, the Sutton cleared itself, and we caught 1,500 brookies on the second half of the river.

Today we are forced to fling our Vibrax spinners largely from the moving canoes. The upper river is fairly straight with no sweeping bends to land, wade, and fish. Historically, this upper-stretch holds a fish here and there, and our group will typically catch fifty fish total before our first camp. Usually just enough action to get everyone tuned-up for what is to come. Today though, there are more fish than usual, and Don and I catch and release thirty-two and thirty-six fish respectively from our boat. It is actually kind of frustrating because the high-water current is pushing us along too fast. When we both hook a good fish, by the time we battle them into the net, release them, and cast again, we have been swept seventy-five yards downstream from the hot spot. All you can do is what we call “whack and stack,” crank them in, net em ,



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use your forceps to remove the barbless hook, get them back in the water, and fire another cast. On the afternoon, the group tallies 104 trout, with George taking top honors with a twenty-three-inch brute.

We all make it down to the river-right grassy bank I have in mind for our first camp with an hour of daylight to spare. Our camp routine on the Sutton becomes a well-rehearsed operation after a few days. The Sutton is about ninety miles long from Hawley Lake to the coast, but the fish are not equally distributed along that entire length. The top and bottom portions hold the fewest fish, so the trick is to budget your time wisely on that more twisty, turny, and fishy fifty-mile midsection. I let the fishing action dictate where we end up camping each night, but sometimes when we are ready to call it a day, we have to push on to find a suitable campsite, especially on the upper third of the river.

So our routine is to unload all the gear onto the riverbank and pull the three canoes up well away from the shore. Losing one to the wind and current

overnight would be a major retrieval problem, as once the search canoe located the runaway, it would be a brutal upstream pull back to camp. The three canoes are loaded to the max as is, so there would be no way to get six guys and all the gear into the remaining two canoes. The first order of business is always to designate an official rod tree so we don't have expensive rods scattered all over in the willows, waiting to be stepped on. Then we put up a four-person tent for each pair of guys and the big Clam popup screen house. I like to tell people contemplating taking this trip that the bugs and bears are a pain, but the fishing is to die for. The screen house lets us cook, eat, socialize, and share the fish tales of the day without getting killed by mosquitos and black flies. We hang a Thermacell in the fifteen-by-fifteen screen house, and it is virtually bug free inside while outside there is an ominous humming.

The typical day on the Sutton is cool, overcast, and with some on and off drizzle. With waders on, you don't need rain pants, and we typically wear



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a fleece jacket under our Gore-Tex rain coats. Many days we wear fingerless fleece or neoprene gloves, as it is cold on the hands. I hate hot weather, which is a big reason why I quit guiding in Quetico in August and head up here to the Sutton. But I still long for those sunny seventy-degree days on the Sutton because clear days turns the fish on like crazy. It also brings out the bugs.

Inside the screen house, I put my two-burner Coleman propane stove atop an aluminum roll-up table and cook and serve Michele's homemade pre-cooked and frozen dinner entrees. Chicken tacos, chicken alfredo, sloppy joes, spaghetti, beef and broccoli, and then brats and burgers on the campfire. We usually have one all you can eat trout fry as well. I pack the frozen meat and dinners in a Yeti 50 cooler, which keeps ice for eight or more days and is also bear proof.

The dry foods go into the *BWJ* food packs we use in Quetico, but we put our personal gear in roll-top dry bags or duffels as they sit in three to four inches of bilge water all day, every day, constantly drug aboard by our waders. We sit on the Helinox rollup camp chairs in the screen house, as the ground is typically damp along the river. Even on clear days, there is usually a lot of dew each morning, forcing us to pack up wet tents and let them dry when we make the next camp.

7/31- We sleep in till eight, enjoy a leisurely breakfast, pack up, and loosen up our casting arms. The way we do it is the lead canoe paddles until they see a good-looking spot to pull over, wade out, and fish. Meanwhile, if another of our canoes catches up to them, they move on down to the next fishy spot, pull in, and fish that. The trailing canoes always leapfrog to the front of our fishing partners. This way, everyone is continuously fishing fresh water all the way down the river. The trick for me is to rein that lead canoe in often enough so that they are not blowing by good water and setting too fast of a pace. With our two lost days, I give everyone more slack than usual to press on ahead. The reality is the high water and current is already pushing us faster than I want to go.

I know from past experience we should be positioned for a big numbers day today. Before long, the sun breaks through, and Don and I get it going in our canoe. Don caught a bruiser of a 22 ½-inch smallmouth from my bow on Antione Lake and had it mounted alongside a huge largemouth he caught back home in North Carolina. His goal on this trip is a twenty-three-inch brook trout to add to that collection. He boats sixty-eight trout on the day, including lots of twenties and

twenty-ones, but nothing bigger. I get the twenty-three he wants so badly and catch and release eighty-five big brookies on the day. Five of these came on the Whopper Plopper, as the trout were rising to take big caddis flies during the sunny afternoon. The trout really knocked the Whopper around, but with one treble removed (required by law on Sutton River) I was only able to hook about one in five strikes. Still, it was a lot of fun laying into big brookies on topwater, and I will be looking to expand this approach in the future. We are able to pull over to wade and fish in strategic spots, which helps to slow down and more thoroughly work the sweet spots. The group totals 299 trout on the day, not record breaking, but a very good day, and we are into "The Sutton River Magic" now. We grill beaver-wood brats along the river bank, and everyone shares the big fish highlights of their day.

8/1- We need a huge day today for any chance of reaching 1000 trout on this trip. I take Gary with me today, as he has served as stern man and guide for George the past two days. He uses his little bait casting outfit to net fifty-one on the day, including many twenty and twenty-one-inch beauties. Don, George, Roy, and I all have our best days of the trip with sixty-eight, sixty-eight, twenty-seven, and ninety-four caught and released respectively. Don nets that coveted twenty-three inches for the wall, but George does him two better with three twenty-three-inch trophies of his own. We have a friendly competition going of course, so it is fun to best them both with the only twenty-four-incher of the trip. This is only my fifth two-foot Sutton River brookie in fourteen trips down this river. By week's end, my lifetime catch

My clients and I have collectively caught/ released thousands of 20-23" Sutton River trophies. My personal tally now stands at 4856. I have only caught/taped five legitimate two-footers so this special fish is literally one in a thousand.

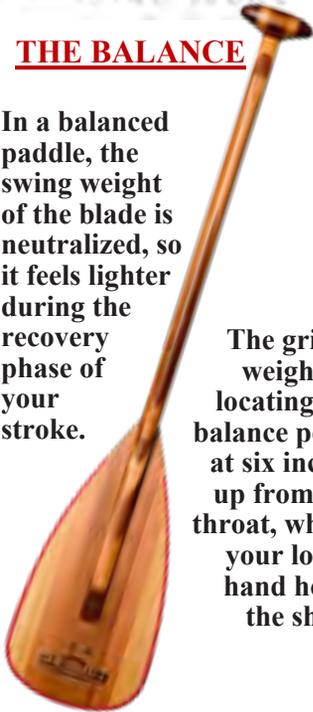




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total on the Sutton will reach 4,856, so it is fair to say, these twenty-four-inchers are one in a thousand.

The group tallies 337 on the day, far short of the daily record of 567 set in 2011. On that special day, four of us hit upon a mother lode you simply had to witness to believe. We had two fly-rodders on one bank and two of us throwing Vibrax's from the opposite bank. We were basically all casting to the same school of big brook trout in the middle of the channel. Over the course of three hours, three of us caught a hundred each and the fourth guy seventy-five. Do the math, one of us caught a trophy brook trout every thirty seconds for three straight hours without ever moving our feet. We christened that spot the "375 Hole,"

and the amazing thing was, I had the lunch in my canoe, and we were two hours late meeting the rest of the group downstream to eat. I finally had to say, "we gotta go," but you know, those fish were still hitting fast and furious when we pulled out. I must add we have not seen the likes of that spectacular afternoon since, but I share it here just to show what is possible on the world's best brook trout river.

8/2- With our late start, day four is our last real day of fishing, so I implore the gang to make the very most of it. We total a respectable 217 trout today, but I was hoping for more. We finish with a grand total of 973 in the four days of fishing. This trip confirms that an eight-day trip is about right—if the weather blesses you with the expected six full days of fishing. This was not a good trip for the fly rodders. Joe, Gary, and George played around with it, but the high water and cold wind and rain (except day two) made for tough sledding on the surface. There have been trips when half our 2000 take was caught on top with Dahlberg Divers and mouse patterns, so fly fishing can be incredible on the Sutton. But on thirteen of the fourteen trips down this amazing trout stream, despite always having to command and control the canoe and deferring to my clients at the best spots, I have led all anglers on the scoresheet, and I throw the Vibrax almost exclusively. That is why they call me the "Vibrax King."

If you are serious about doing the Sutton River trip, there are a few other things you should know. You can do a DIY trip here and catch plenty of big brookies, but you will finish the run down the river and lament, "If only I had known a week ago what I know now." Problem is, this is a one and done bucket list trip for most,

so by going with me, you're paying for all that experience up front and can apply it each and every day. Hearst Air is the only operator flying into the Sutton. Albert is the only camp up there, and I am the only non-native permitted to guide there as far as I know. Hearst Air spaces their parties out, so rarely will you encounter others on the river. It is a short season on the Sutton because the trout don't return in big numbers till late July, and by early September it is too cold and nasty to fish up there. This means less than ten groups canoe on down and fish the whole river each season—less than fifty anglers a year. If those who do fish the Sutton spare no effort to release these fish with minimal stress, it will remain as it should, unspoiled, unbelievable, and unsurpassed as a stream trout fishing experience.

We typically see a handful of caribou, a moose or two, lots of eagles, waterfowl, shorebirds, otters, and a few white bears. I am allowed to carry a twelve-gauge shotgun with slugs for bear protection, and each canoe/tent has bear spray. Part of the Sutton River flows through Polar Bear Provincial Park, so obviously, this is their home, and we must make every effort to avoid bear conflicts. I have had two close calls with polar bears in camp, and they were sobering encounters. You simply cannot appreciate the speed and power of these 1500-pound killing machines until you witness it up close. I was fortunate in both cases when I fired a warning shot and the bears ran off. But all bears are unpredictable, and as a very experienced big game hunter and guide, I am constantly looking out for my brood on these trips. Most of the polar bears we have

encountered I have spotted far enough away to easily give them time and space to move safely past us. The polar bears definitely add an element of intrigue to the trip, but to date, Hearst Air has never had anyone injured by one on the Sutton.

Besides the bears, the other negatives to this trip are the bugs and cost. A head net and a screen house are essential equipment on the Sutton. Throw in a spray can of DEEP WOODS OFF and you will board the plane at week's end bit up but still alive. For 2023, I will be charging my clients \$2,500 USD per person for the eight-day trip. What you are getting from me is outfitting with all the very best camp gear, fresh food supplies, and guide service. I do the cooking, set up the camps, and direct the trip as far as how much time we fish where. It is my job to get everyone into the fish. Lots of fish. If anyone is struggling, I put them in my bow and coach them until they get up to speed. I have guided over a hundred clients down the Sutton and can only recall a couple who just couldn't get it done, but they were total hacks. I take care of every single detail from start to finish to make sure this is the best fishing trip of your life. I always say, beautiful scenery, wildlife, canoeing, camping, camaraderie, adventure—all are a part of this trip, but when all is said and done, it is those indelible encounters with big fish that we will take to our graves. Hearst Air charges \$5,450 CAD for the canoes and round-trip flight. With current exchange rates, this runs about \$4,500 USD, so bottom line, you're looking at \$7,000 USD per person for this trip. Yes, it is expensive. But I know this for sure, these fish, their beauty, their wildness, their savage attacks cast

STUART OSTHOFF



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Each night we set up camp along the Sutton’s grassy banks, eat dinner in the screen house and share the big fish tales of the day. On that last night it hits home, you are now a part of all this incredible river will ever know.



after cast, their drag-sizzling power in the current, this is a priceless angling thrill. What is the personal satisfaction worth to you of being one of the very few to experience the very best there is in trout fishing?

I am full for my Sutton River trip for 2023, and the two years of COVID downtime has created a bit of a waiting list. If you're serious about doing this trip, contact me and get on the list. You can always turn it down when your turn actually comes around and it's time to fully commit. (stu@boundary-watersjournal.com) (Hearst Air-705-463-5700)

It was great being home for most of August, reunited with my best friends, bird dogs Sage and Jack. They love me too because I take them out running through the woods first thing every morning. It has been cool and wet enough most days for them to run hard for an hour or so. We stick largely to our brushed trails, but once a week we veer off deeper into the woods to swap SD cards in the seven trail cameras I have out over mineral licks. We have pointed/flushed what I would guess to be four or five different ruffed grouse coveys in the past three weeks. This may not sound like a lot, but considering we haven't gone off the beaten path much yet, I'll take it. Heck, one ¾ grown covey had ten or twelve birds. I shot

a total of twelve grouse all last year on our place, so all in all, I am excited for October when we can roam all over and hunt for real. Sage is still finding the bulk of the birds, but two-year-old Jack is beautifully honoring all his points, and I am working on Whoa-ing Jack when we have to relocate birds that have moved off from the spot where Sage first detected their scent. Sage is a rare talent at handling wild-ass ruffed grouse, so Jack has the perfect teacher if he can just take advantage of it. Jack handles running rooster pheasants well, so I'm confident he will eventually figure out how to move in gently on grouse as well.

So, I told you about the buck I named "Curly" on our place last year and how I was praying he had beaten the wolves and winter. I am thrilled to report Curly is alive and well up on our jack pine ridge behind the house. He is still in velvet as I write this and may grow a bit more, but on the August 11 video, he looks like he will be a typical ten-pointer with long G2s and extra trash coming off both bases. Overall, he is very similar to last year for total inches of horn, probably due to the long tough winter. But at least he survived to give me a target buck for the upcoming archery season. He has to be 5 ½ by now. A buck that old in farm country with crop

nutrition, easy winters, and no wolves would easily be pushing 170 inches or more. As it is, I would peg him at 155 this season. Who knows, we got twenty-something video appearances from Curly in 2021, and only one was in the daylight. He is a super-savvy nocturnal Northwoods buck that completely vanished during the entire gun hunt, only to reappear on camera the day after the season. It is very possible that despite my plan to go all out for him with my bow, he could survive another year and grow even bigger next year. I would be good with that. There are another ten or so different bucks on our cameras, no other shooters for me, but enough to keep family and friends happy and in venison this season.

I am busy working on this Fall issue of *BWJ* and then after Labor Day will head out to Colorado to chase elk. In 2020, I decided to try muzzleloader for elk after twenty-one years of strictly bowhunting, but massive fires cancelled the entire hunting season, and the hunt was re-scheduled for 2022. Except I was unsuccessful drawing a muzzleloader license for this year's hunt. I was able to obtain an archery elk tag, so I will be bowhunting again while my two partners in camp hunt with their muzzleloaders. Who knows, maybe this was meant to be and this will be the year I finally arrow that dream bull. After that, I guide my BWCAW Fall Color Trip in early October. Then it's bird and buck hunting till I drop through January. After that, it will be time to start thinking about spring turkey hunting and another summer in Quetico. What would I do without my outdoor passions? Shriveled up and turn to dust. So, bring on the fall. 🍂

GRAND SLAM GUIDE SERVICE (GS2)

Wilderness canoeing/fishing adventures — personally guided by BWJ publisher, Stu Osthoff



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2023 GS2 TRIP SCHEDULE

TRIP #1 — SHALLOW LAKE TROUT/PRE-SPAWN BASS (8-Days- \$1200/person)

May 20-27 (Lac La Croix/McAree/Crooked/Argo/Darky/Josey/Ballard/Wicksteed)

Moderate portaging/Solitude/Cool temps/Primo big trout/4 camps... 5 OPENINGS

TRIP #2 — PEAK TOPWATER SMALLMOUTH (10-Days- \$1500/person)

June 2-11 (Lac Croix/Beaverhouse/Jean/Sturgeon/Stu's/Antoine/Maligne)

Moderate portaging/aggressive day trips/Primo big bass/4-5 camps... 5 OPENINGS

TRIP #3 — QUETICO GRAND SLAM (8-Days- \$1200/person)

June 16-23 (Lac La Croix/Crooked/Bart/Newts/Gardner Bay/Elk/Robinson)

Easy portaging/Best bass-pike combo trip/3 camps... 5 OPENINGS

TRIP #4 — TROPHY WALLEYE (10-Days- \$1500/person)

June 28- July 7 (Lac La Croix/Wicksteed/Darky/Brent/Connee/Suzannete)

Serious Portaging/Primo big walleyes/Big bass and trout, too/5 camps... 5 OPENINGS

TRIP #5 — KAWNIPI "WALLEYE FACTORY" (10-Days- \$1500/person)

July 12-21 (Moose Chain/Agnes/Kawniipi & back)

Moderate portaging/Lots 18-24" walleyes plus big bass & pike/4 camps... 5 OPENINGS

TRIP #6 — SUTTON RIVER TROPHY BROOK TROUT (8-Days- \$7000/person)

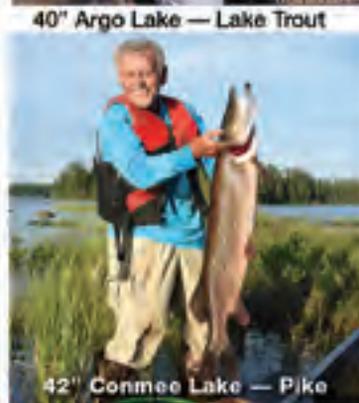
July 27-Aug. 3, 2023 (FULL)

Fly-in and canoe/camp for 90 miles down "World's Best Brook Trout River". Spectacular action for big, bold, beautiful brookies in Polar Bear Provincial Park. Most clients catch over 200 20-24" brook trout on fly rod or spin gear. As good as it gets for stream trout action on big fish. No portaging/easy trip physically. I have guided 15 groups/trips down the Sutton, nobody knows how to capture the "Sutton River Magic" like I do. True World Class Sportfishing... **BOOKING FOR 2024**

TRIP #7 — BWCAW FALL COLOR TRIP (7-Days- \$1200/person)

October 1-7 This is **NOT** a fishing trip

Combines paddling/camping/hiking/photography and walleye fishing/grouse hunting if interested. Peak colors, no bugs, cool days, rutting moose, howling wolves and true solitude. Route varies each year, usually 4 different camps... 5 OPENINGS



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