

living on the edge



Grand Slam Spring/Summer 2019

□ by Stuart Osthoff

Ely and the Boundary Waters Area saw its third straight long winter with later than usual ice-outs and another slow warm up. Blueberry Lake near our place went out April 25, about one week later than the historical average. Custer, Sage, and I felt like we got out of jail when the snow finally melted enough to get off my packed snowmobile trail and ramble cross country through the woods. They pointed a few grouse, but the overall population here looks low. I can only hope for a good spring hatch, but it is obvious I have to get off my place this fall to shoot many grouse. With Sage going on two years old, I now have the control and confidence to take him out into the remote corners of the Superior National Forest.

In mid-April, I went back down to Nebraska with friend Tom, where we each shot a nice gobbler. The guides said that judging from the 1 5/8-inch spurs on my Rio Grande bird, he had to be four or five years old. So, I got my trophy gobbler, but I was not able to spot/stalk and run/gun like I did down there in 2018. The week before the hunt, I was helping my friend and neighbor, Don Beland, split some birch firewood and I hurt my wrist. I didn't even notice anything until the next day, but then I couldn't bend or use it for two weeks. I had to shoot my bird from a blind with decoys using a Primo's shooting stick—not my preference, but it was still fun to see these big gobblers come strutting in. A week later, my wrist much better, I hunted GS2 client Randy Hoffarth's place down by Rochester, MN and chased several gobblers to a "close, but no cigar" outcome. I had more fun running and gunning after those wily birds that gave me the slip than shooting that Nebraska gobbler. I hope to return next year to close the deal.

April was also the time that I met with Canada Immigration up

in Fort Frances to renew my work permits to guide in both Quetico and the Sutton River. Very few Americans are licensed to guide canoe trips into Quetico, but they recognize that BWJ and Grand Slam Guide Service make a very significant and unique contribution to the Ontario tourism economy. All went well with them, and I was all set for five Quetico trips, the Sutton River trip, and my BWCAW Fall Color Trip. This makes another forty people that are trusting me to deliver the best wilderness fishing trip of their lives. This is also my twelfth year of running Grand Slam Guide Service, and I have now personally guided over five-hundred clients to the kind of fishing action they dream about. I am very proud of how I have been able to share what I know and love about canoe country with tens of thousands of BWJ readers over the past thirty-three years. The BWJ TRIPS Program where I mark-up maps for subscribers is very rewarding for me as well. But there is nothing like being out on the canoe trails and sharing my passion for wilderness angling, one-on-one, with all these great people. Most of my clients learn a lot, appreciate all I put into these trips, and come together as a team to paddle and portage to big fish. My goal is always the same: to give these guys a wilderness fishing trip that they would not and could not achieve on their own. Not every client catches a lot of big fish but most do.

Trip #1 (May 19-26) Five clients from NV, IL, FL: a husband/wife, father/son and a single: lakes covered: McAree/Iron/Crooked/Argo/Darky/Josey/Wales/Wickstead/McAree

5/19 The Loon River is too low for tow boats, so Zup's has to boat us up north from Crane Lake to Namakan River and then truck us

into Lac La Croix near the reservation. We run into BWJ contributor, Bill Colgate, and his crew at the Ranger Station. They're headed into the Brent Lake area for two weeks. Bill is an expert canoe country lake trout angler—I would love to fish with and learn from him someday, but for now, I am on my own with the Argo trout.

All five in this group have some Boundary Waters experience, and Mike is a surgeon, plus Kelly is in medical school, so we got the healthcare covered on this one. We paddle with a strong breeze to our backs down McAree and pull into the five-star site below Rebecca Falls. There is nobody around this year. We set up my new ALPS Mountaineering Taurus Outfitter 4-man tents. These tents have two doors, two vestibules, and heavy-duty floors and zippers. They look like a great canoeing tent with strong poles to withstand the treeless Sutton River winds. (These tents passed my demanding test this summer, so I bought another for the Sutton River trip).

We spend the late afternoon trolling the current below Rebecca and land a dozen fourteen to nineteen-inch walleyes on Gulp and Power Bait minnows. We stringer eight of them, and I pick up a couple thirty-inch pike and a few bass on the jigs. Later while I am cooking up our fajita feast, Bill picks up four more walleyes off camp, which brings us to our group possession limit of twelve walleyes. I fillet and put them on ice in the BWJ Insulated Food Pack. It's a nice, clear, cool night with a three-quarters moon, but the black flies force us to don our head nets until the sun sets.

5/20 We are packed up and on the move by ten a.m., soon meeting two groups at Curtain Falls. Both have maps I marked up through the BWJ TRIPS Program.



This 29 1/2" Argo laker hit Bill's Rapala Tail Dancer 30, cast up into the shallows on our late-May trip.

It is always fun to meet the people who are such big BWJ fans. It is hot in the woods on the half-miler up and over into Argo. It's four trips for me as Tom and Kelly look pretty cooked after two laps. Mike is a strong portager, knocking off four heavy loads as well. Nobody is around, so we claim the mid-lake island five-star site and settle in for a couple days of trout fishing. Our slow pace today has left no time to fish, but I grill brats for supper while we ready our rods for tomorrow. Another clear night with less black flies here now that we're away from the rapids. We enjoy the first loon music of the season and call it a day.

5/21 After a big egg, sausage, and strudel breakfast, Bill and I troll our Dr. Spoons all around "Big Trout Alley" off Birch Island. Bill finally nails a twenty-nine-and-a-half-inch, thick-bodied beauty casting a Rapala Taildancer 30. I hope I got some good, sunny photos. We also tried casting the Rapala Rippin Rap lipless crank-bait but drew a blank. Others have urged me to try these for trout, but I have come up empty every time. Apparently, they know something about how to work them that I am missing.

Mike and Anna get five strikes, landing three trout while staying shallower than my boat. One of them is a nice twenty-six-inch fish. We add a couple small trout to the walleyes in the cooler, and then Mike and I zip up to the Siobahn River to check on the bass. It doesn't take long to confirm we are too early for the smallies—just too cold. I get five hits, three on Tuff Tubes and two on the Vibrax spinner. The largest goes eighteen inches, but I have a huge pot-bellied pre-spawn female right up to the gunwale, reaching for the net, when she flops free. Dang it! My first (but not the last) trophy lost at the boat this season. She easily went twenty-one inches, maybe more. We usually hit many big pre-spawn smallmouths in here this week, but not this year. We are running late on the bass bite for sure. Our walleye and trout feast goes over big as most have never had fresh wild walleye. Fish just doesn't get any better.

5/22 Windy, rainy with temps in low forties, this ain't gonna help

on the bass fishing front. It sucks to be stuck in camp in miserable weather like this, but it is all part of the game in May up here. I do find some good dry cedar to grill our steaks and potatoes, which is definitely a hit. Still forty-two degrees at dinner time, so we pass around the hot chocolate and tell stories well past dark. No fishing today, but the day is not a total loss. When I crawl in the tent to get the weather report for tomorrow, I pick up the Minnesota Twins game. They are out on the west coast, so they are on till one a.m. Quetico time. The Twins win in dramatic fashion in extra innings and have the best record in baseball with largely a new cast of players. It has been such fun to follow them this spring, and I hope I can get down to a game in August. Meanwhile—GO TWINS! (See, I do maintain some contact with the "real world" while in the woods all summer).

5/23 We break camp in a light drizzle, and the crew does much better portaging today. We make it into Darky in three passes versus four, stop to ponder the photographs, and settle into my four-star east shore site by noon. The rain quits by two p.m., so we head out to fish. I leave Bill and Kelly on Wales and take Tom in my canoe, Mike and Anna follow us into Josey. It's windy and forty-five degrees. This cold front and low pressure have clearly knocked the bass off the shore and out deeper, as we move very few fish in on the rocks. Tom nets five smallmouth on a jig and Gulp minnow—one goes eighteen inches, and he nets a nice twenty-two-inch Josey walleye. I get five pike all around two feet on the #4 Vibrax, and I hook two bass on the X-Rap jerk bait. One is a hefty nineteen-inch female. I lost another bigger bass while reaching with the net. Mike and Anna catch six bass too, the largest goes eighteen inches. This is my slowest action for any tour ever made around Josey. I wish I could be here a couple weeks from now, but then, when the bass really explode on top, I always wish I could be about fifty different places in Quetico at the same time. Such are the delights and dilemmas of Quetico smallmouth fishing. Oh well. At least we got

out fishing today and caught a few quality fish. So far, the crew is toughing out the lousy conditions and staying after it. A hot, heaping helping of Michele's chicken alfredo pasta hits the spot on another cold night, and it feels cozy-ohzy to crawl into the goose down tonight.

5/24 The rain has quit but it is still a chilly forty-five degrees, so I cook up a bacon and cheese omelet to warm up the crew. On my eight-day trips, I cook two big breakfasts. It takes too long to prepare and clean up these meals to do them every day. Normally, we have real cereal and real milk or oatmeal. These meals are fast, filling, and get us out fishing earlier in the day. I have a bad vibe about day-tripping over to Wicksteed for bass today, but what else are we going to do? I put Anna in my bow and Mike and Bill portage on over to this smallmouth gem with us. Tom and Kelly go into Ballard to see if the walleyes are doing anything.

The wind and rain pick up in earnest by mid-afternoon. I throw a Vibrax, X-Rap, Shad Rap—and catch nothing, not even a lousy pike. There are almost no fish in the shallow water zone. The late spring and this cold front have conspired to humble us, big time. This is by far the worst I have ever done on Siobahn, Josey, Wales, and now Wicksteed. Anna hangs tough and picks up two medium bass on a #5 Vibrax. It is pouring hard and blowing harder as we bust back across Darky to camp. The others report no noteworthy catches, just cold, cold hands and relentless rotten conditions for smallmouth fishing.

5/25 It's a long hard day into a gale on Wicksteed and then taking four trips over Goat Hill. The crew has been very understanding with no complaining. I probably should have remained on Argo longer, cut my losses, and stayed on the lake trout. Twenty-twenty in hindsight. There is no sugarcoating the bottom line on this trip. Both the total fish and big fish numbers are the worst in my twelve years of GS2. But soon after this trip, Mike books my Sturgeon Lake ten-day trip with four buddies for 2020. This mid-June trip has been my best big bass action for

CRANE LAKE

MINNESOTA

Adventures start here.

Voyageurs National Park,
BWCA, Canada/Quetico

*Where roadways end,
and water routes of the
Voyageurs begin...*



Free Travel Guide 1-800-362-7405 VisitCraneLake.com

the past three years, so hopefully the fishing gods will make things up for him next year. My three new Northstar canoes do great in the rough waters with our heavy loads, and the new tents perform well in the brutal rain and wind. So, it looks like I am all set there for the season. All we need now is for spring to show up so the bass will turn on.

Trip #2 (June 2-9) Five clients from Missouri including another husband and wife duo and a father and sixteen-year-old son duo; lakes covered: Crooked/Bart/Robinson/Gardner Bay/Newt & Little Newt/Elk

It was nice to have five days at home to get the Summer issue off to the printer, mow and weed whack, run the dogs, and reload for trip number two.

6/2 It's twenty-eight degrees with a heavy frost covering the lawn as I load the truck to head up to Crane Lake for round two. The forecast is for nice, summer-like weather all week, so that bodes well for bass activity. Zup's tows us to Bottle Portage. We

lunch at Curtain Falls and then paddle three hours on down to my Wednesday Bay camp. We get squared away and out to fish the last three hours of the day. This crew is above average portaging but only average paddlers. But it soon becomes clear they are exceptional anglers, and that is why we are here. I take out sixteen-year-old Isaac, who is on his high school bass fishing team and passed up competing in the state finals bass tournament to go on this trip. The water here on the Crooked Lake flowage is still high and cold, but this camp is strategically located to access a lot of smaller, warmer water that should have good bass action by now. I head up northeast of the portage into Gardner Bay, and we only boat six smallies, nine pike, and two walleyes, but Isaac slams a chunky twenty-incher on a Tuff Tube, our first trophy bass of 2019—finally! I catch four sixteens on the #5 Vibrax. I do get one on the Whopper Plopper, but clearly not much is happening on the surface here yet.

This early in the season, the bass hit in the middle of the day (when water is the warmest) better than morning and evening, so my preferred approach is to run and gun on long day trips to smaller waters that are further along than Crooked in the warm up and spawning cycle. Nearby Bart Lake is the bass target for tomorrow. We relish Michele's homemade beef fajitas on a cool, clear, bugless night. Not many mosquito free evenings left now.

6/3 I lead all three canoes into Bart, and then we fan out to blast the bass. I immediately notice how much warmer the water is than out on Crooked. Chris and I net eighty-two bass between eleven a.m. and two p.m. Most of my fifty are on the Vibrax, with two-thirds being largemouth. So we have very good action, but almost all are fourteen-inch or sixteen-inch fish. We spot and lose a few bigger fish, but for the most part, the trophies are missing in action. Most of the day is cloudy and cool, which may have knocked the big fish a bit deeper. The skies

try to clear after lunch, and my yellow Whopper Plopper 90 sticks twenty-something mid-size bass.

Isaac hammers sixty-five bass (same two-thirds largemouth ratio) on a Tuff Tube with a dozen in the eighteen-inch and even nineteen-inch range, which just goes to show the bigger fish are holding deeper and want a slower presentation than the Vibrax or Whopper Plopper. Tim and Mindy land ninety-one in their boat, with Mindy's twenty-inch largemouth (tube jig) the only trophy of our collective 258 bass today. At least everybody caught lots of decent bass (and thirty-something pike). We will try to improve upon the trophy quality in the coming days.

6/4 Just when the weather is finally heating up the bass action, the forecast is for thunderstorms, wind, lightning, and rain. So I cook a big breakfast and see what develops. I decide that despite Crooked still being in the cold, pre-spawn stage, we should fish close to camp today. We all head through the Big Current, picking up six walleyes for the stringer on the way to Thursday Bay. Mindy and I bass fish the east and west bays south of the Guide's Portage, figuring it will be more sheltered from the wind. I hook six nice seventeen to eighteen-inch smallies on the #5 Vibrax, and Mindy hooks a few of her own on the Whopper Plopper. She was a Division I college athlete, and it shows, as she can really handle a paddle and a fishing rod. Tim and Mindy have fished a lot, including Alaska and South America. By trip's end, it's obvious she can out-fish most of the guys I bring out here. But it turns out she can't out-fish the whiz kid Isaac, who continues to rack up the highest daily totals, this time on the east side of Thursday Bay. Chris picks up a twenty-inch smallie on a tube north of Mindy and I: our third trophy of the trip. But by two thirty, the predicted thunderstorms arrive and chase us all back to camp. Storms pummel us in the tents till six, when we all head back out. I move zero with the Vibrax and Whopper Plopper, but Todd has a huge pike hit his jig and soft plastic setup right at the boat. I see its head rise up from the depths and just hang

there for maybe ten seconds off the gunwale. It's obvious we can't land this gator with our little bass net, so I tell Todd we will try to beach him up on shore, and I start paddling. This pivots the canoe, so Todd has to try to swing the line and rod around the stern to the lakeside. But my spare rod is running out the back, and his line snags on my Whopper Plopper, causing Todd to let off the pressure, and then the beast breaks off his leaderless jig. DAMN! That was more my fault than Todd's. I should have just left him on the shore side and taken our chances. When a big pike is hooked without a steel leader, I think you're better off landing and netting them sooner than later. We will never know the length or weight of this creature, but I know one thing for sure. I have never seen a pike with that big of a head in my forty years of canoe country fishing. This was some kind of pike—I'm talking extreme top end here, elite trophy caliber. Absolutely, positively, the pike of a lifetime. No doubt about it. I would have loved to get a photo of that thing.

The others add four more walleyes to the cooler pack on their evening outing, which brings us to nine total. We can keep three more for our possession limit. Crooked is clearly too cold to produce what it will a couple of weeks from now, so I put the crew on notice that they will have to paddle harder over the next three days so we can range out and day trip bass water that is warmer and producing good action. It's chicken alfredo on noodles tonight; the real thing, not freeze-dried crap. The gang appreciates the difference and is beginning to understand why those heavy packs with ice and frozen food are worth the extra effort.

6/5 It's foggy, misty, and cool as our trio of canoes strokes down Crooked past Table Rock to the portage into Robinson Lake. Only one downed tree forces us to dismount the canoes, but the trail is muddy as ever. It's two hours on the button from camp to get in there. Chris and I spot some beds before the Tuck River and each nab eighteen-inchers on our first cast. But then nearly all the other beds we see are void of fish. I can't

believe the bass spawn is completely over in this deep, cold lake trout lake—the cold front must have knocked the fish deeper. Chris and I struggle mightily to move many bass, so I portage on over into Dart and Cecil Lakes. But we move only a few fish here as well, nothing big. So we go back to Robinson and try trolling for trout. Chris loses a trout right at the gunwale, and I get no strikes. We find Todd and Isaac, and they report much the same. I have sent Tim and Mindy into Little Robinson, and they catch forty-five bass, mostly sixteen-inchers with a few eighteens. They also nail two twenty-six-inch trout back out on Robinson on the way home. Todd and Isaac pick up three walleyes back on Crooked to round out our possession limit in the cooler.

6/6 Tim and I head up through Gardner Bay in a fog and drizzle to hit Little Newt and Newt. In the hour and a half it takes to get in there, the sun finally comes out, and it is calm. We net forty-six largemouth on Little Newt, Tim on the soft plastics and I on the Vibrax. Most are stout, hard-fighting fifteen to seventeen-inch fish and a lot of fun. There is nothing second class about these largemouth. They run, jump, and battle every bit as hard or harder than the smallmouth.

Over into Newt we go, which usually has a fifty-fifty split of largemouth and smallmouth with some bigger fish. Tim breaks out his fly rod and a nineteen-and-a-half-inch bronzeback smokes his Dahlberg Diver on the first touch-down. Shortly thereafter, Tim does a notch better, a twenty-incher on the Dahlberg. Then he adds two more twenty-inch trophies on soft plastics, both of which have impressive, heavy girths. Meanwhile, I struggle mightily with the Whopper Plopper, just can't seem to get in synch with these fish. Then, as we are hitting the last offshore reef before leaving, a brute of a largemouth jumps all over my WP. She jumps, shakes, and rips all over as I ease her towards the net. But once again, I lose a trophy just a couple feet from the net. Ugh! I have lost so many nets over the years because guys drop them overboard and they sink to the bottom. These Promar nets float,



Yet another late ice-out/spring had the smallmouth spawn running late for my second trip, so Isaac went down after them with a vengeance with soft plastics/tube jigs.

Insul-Go-Spout®

but they only have a sixteen-inch handle, which is nice for portaging, but it is costing me trophies. (After my third trip, I learned that Tackle Warehouse has these same Promar floating nets with a thirty-inch handle for forty dollars, so I got three before my last two trips—they worked great. I definitely reached out and scooped up some big fish I would not have gotten with the shorter handle).

Todd and Isaac went back into Bart today and caught fifty bass with two of the smallmouths going twenty inches. Chris and Mindy followed them in there but then pushed into Craig Lake. It has been over ten years since I was in here, and I recall nasty portages both in and out of Craig. But they find the portage from Bart to Craig to be well cut out, and they catch thirty smallmouth with one over twenty inches. They also see several other big smallies cruising around but can't get them to bite. Nonetheless, it seems Craig is worth sending a canoe into next year. All in all, the group boats six trophy smallmouth over twenty inches today, no thanks to me. We enjoy a big walleye and trout fry under a half-moon and notice the first mosquitos of the season.

6/7 Sunny, breezy, and headed for over eighty degrees today—our first hot summer day. Our fleet of three Northstars heads north to Elk Lake. We get up there and fishing by ten thirty a.m., and all seems primed for a big day on the bass, but it is not to be. Mindy and I work our way up the west shore, spotting a few beds, but most are empty. She lands one nice nineteen-inch fish on a tube, but we only catch twenty total fish, and most are small. Chris and Todd only move small fish up the east side. This is the third year in a row that my timing has been off here. I have had many great big bass days here, but I am on a hard luck run of late. More proof that you better cash in when the fruit is ripe for the picking, because you never know how long it will be until the conditions break your way again.

The Elk Lake trout give us a break and take the sting out of the bass bust. I actually catch a twenty-six-inch laker on the Whopper Plopper—that's right, the WP. But

do you think I can catch a decent bass on the thing? I get another twenty-sixer on the Dr. Spoon and help Isaac catch his first ever lake trout too. The group nets seven lakers and has another five on that get off at the boat. We pull out of Elk early, as I want to have enough time to fish Gardner Bay for bass on the way back to camp. Gardner is largely cut off from the main flowage of water going down the border on Crooked, so it warms up earlier and should have bass in the shoreline zone.

Isaac is with me now, and he catches a twenty-one-and-a-half-inch walleye before we leave the portage landing on Gardner. I prowl on down the east shore where two-thirds of the good-looking cover is too windy to fish. But where there are calmer patches, we spot twenty-something beds, mostly in six or eight feet of water and occupied by good fish. Generally, bass beds are hard to spot in Crooked, so Isaac takes full advantage of this good fortune with his jig and Elaztech fluke. He smokes twenty really nice bass with only one over twenty inches, but lots of eighteens and nineteens. I add fifteen to our total on the Vibrax—just too windy for Whopper Plopper, or so I thought.

Turns out Tim and Mindy come along behind us, and Mindy catches ten good bass, all on the Whopper Plopper 110. Tim measures one of these brutes at twenty-two-inches with a thirteen-and-a-half-inch girth. Right after measuring up Mindy's best bass of the trip, she catches a two-foot pike. While he's trying to release it for her, Tim gets two fingers impaled on one of the WP trebles. So there he is, trying to control the canoe in the wind, with hooks in two fingers and a lousy pike flopping all around. He finally cuts off the hooks with a Leatherman, and despite the pain, he tells Mindy that it's okay. The agony was worth the thrill of watching her catch that twenty-two-inch bass: Now that is a devoted husband. Tale number 1001 of why I hate pike. But it also shows the value of my grinding all the barbs off my lures with a Dremel tool before they ever go into my tackle boxes. Pinching the barbs down satisfies the legal requirement for barbless

and helps reduce stress to the fish, but it does not completely remove the barb, as Tim found out the hard way here.

6/8 Continues to be hot, sunny, and breezy as we move camp from Wednesday Bay back to "Stu's Island" in Friday Bay. The island camp's resident eagle is there to greet us, but the jack pine he normally perches in has blown down onto the canoe landing. Later, I take the saw to the tree and clear things somewhat. It is very windy, so I take Isaac out behind Australia Island. I do get nine smallmouth, all fourteen to sixteen inches, on the WP. Meanwhile, Isaac boats nineteen bass on the Fluke. He just takes the Elaztech four-inch white minnow/fluke and runs it onto a quarter-ounce minnow jighead. This rig was very productive for Isaac and a lot easier to rig and work than messing around with threading special worm hooks through the fluke that rip out every couple fish.

Tim and Mindy work up into Argo Bay and over to the Guides Portage where Mindy Whopper Plops ten eighteen to nineteen-inch smallies and Tim does the same with Isaac's jig and fluke rig. They even catch ten walleyes on the fluke while bass fishing. I grill ribeyes and potatoes for our last supper and open up "Stu's Lemonade Stand" with the melted ice water jug. I really enjoyed this group because they were great people and outstanding anglers. No doubt about it, their angling skills made a big difference in our catch totals on this windy trip that had the bass spawn running late on Crooked, Robinson, and Elk. Totals for trip: 680 bass with eleven greater than twenty inches, with one twenty-two-inch bass, thirty-five walleyes, nine lake trout, and 150 pike. A solid trip, but I am still looking to breakthrough with that peak topwater action on the next trip.

Trip #3 (June 13- 22) Five clients from Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Minnesota. Four of these guys have been on GS2 trips with me before: lakes covered: Beaverhouse/Quetico/Jean/Burntside/Albert/Sturgeon/Lonely/Antoine/Ram/Maligne River

6/13 We get towed by Zup's into Lac La Croix then trucked on up

Best Kept Secret...

Western Quetico Park & Northern BWCAW

- Paddle, fish and explore the least utilized entries of the Park system.
- Tow service from Crane Lake, MN to: Bottle, McAre, Maligne River, Three Mile & Beaver House Entry
- BWCAW drops near Snow Bay, Takumich, Lady Boot Bay and at Bottle Portage
- Partial Outfitting
- Complete Outfitting
- Overnight accommodations on Lac La Croix (meals optional)
- New fleet of Wenonah canoes



1-888-602-BASS (2277)

www.zupsresort.com

info@zupsresort.com

www.facebook.com/zupsresort

to Beaverhouse Lake. This is my ten-day Ultimate Grand Slam trip, and I think I have the right crew to make the most of it. Will and son, Ben, are the strongest portagers I have had in the past twelve years, and Bob and Mike are elite anglers, so I aim to get in position to work these bass and then close the deal with skilled casting and playing of big fish. I just hope our timing is right for these waters.

We keep the hammer down on Quetico Lake, and aided by a tailwind, portage over into Jean and claim the five-star site on the first peninsula by seven thirty p.m. Not bad at all considering we didn't get to start paddling till one p.m. after all the boating and trucking. We devour Michele's opening night fajita feast and ready the rods for tomorrow.

6/14 It's breezy with a little rain, so we take our time heading out. Dave and I start just west of the double beach campsite on the south side. From here, we head southwest where a huge sand bar runs well out from shore nearly a mile. We spot forty to fifty small-

mouth beds along this stretch, and most of them hold good fish. With the breeze and glare, it can be hard to spot these nests before the canoe blows over them and spooks the fish out deeper. This kind of "spot, stalk, and cast" fishing is new to Dave, and it takes an hour or so for him to locate the beds from a distance, cast, and hook up before we spook these fish off. The winds graciously subside from eleven thirty to one thirty, and we go on a memorable big bass tear. I boat twenty smallmouths on the Whopper Plopper 90, and every single fish is eighteen to twenty plus inches. Clearly, we have hit the spawning males guarding the nests. Jean is a super clear trout lake, so once the wind lets up, this is classic sight fishing for big smallmouth. I net four smallmouths over twenty inches and lose several more (I wish I'd had that longer handled net on this trip). Dave proves to be a quick learner, and by the end of the afternoon, he has boated thirteen smallies over eighteen inches, and six of these are nineteen and a half

on the button. We keep thinking we've got one, but these bass never quite hit the twenty-inch mark. Still, Dave is happy with the outing and lets everyone know that this was the best smallmouth action he has ever experienced. Thirty-five combined bass caught and released, and not even one under eighteen inches. This is the quality topwater bass action I have been looking for.

Will and Ben troll up five lake trout (twenty-two to twenty-five inches) with their spoons out on the main basin of Jean. Bob and Mike work hard for sixteen bass and thirteen pike (one three-footer) down along the northern shoreline. I grill up beaverwood brats early enough to get back out fishing, but the wind never lets up. Topwater is hopeless, so nobody goes out.

6/15 We pull camp and catch up to a group of sixteen girls from Atikokan High School. They have monster Clipper canoes that hold five or six paddlers and their gear, and these canoes are fitted with two yokes, as they run 130

pounds. I am impressed with how they are doing as I pass them coming and going on the portage into Burntside Lake. Turns out they have trained hard for this trip and it shows. They are bound for Sturgeon Lake today and a two-week Quetico adventure. For the first time in at least ten trips, my preferred five-star camp on the east shore is occupied, so we settle into the mid-lake island site. Conventional wisdom has it that this is the best site on the lake, but I beg to differ. Still, it is a good site for a couple nights.

I had planned to go into Rogue to fish, as it is a consistent big bass producer, but we watch our neighbors head that way, and it is too small for more than one canoe. So Kentucky Bob and I work the east shoreline, picking up twenty-six smallies with nineteen inches being the biggest for both of us. Mike lands a bass twenty and a half inches long on his Whopper Plopper, and Dave lands a twenty-seven-inch lake trout on a jig. Will and Ben stock our cooler with three eighteen-inch walleyes for our upcoming fish dinner. It's beef and broccoli on rice tonight.

6/16 Over the winter, I received some reliable intel on Albert Lake for lake trout and pike, so today is our day to go in there and check it out. The portages into Ceph Lake are well cut out, and we get in there without incident. It is windy as Mike and I troll big crankbaits for trout. It is not a big lake, so the three canoes cover it pretty well. Only Will and Ben move any trout. They net three that go between twenty-five and twenty-eight inches on the Dr. Spoons. I do get four heavy thirty-two-inch pike on a #6 Vibrax, so that is good fun. I don't mind decent pike—it's the two-footers that wreak so much havoc. Bob picks up a twenty-and-a-half-inch smallie before we break to have lunch and consider our options.

I don't have good vibes about Albert today, and I am not too keen on fishing Burntside again, so I look at the map and figure that Little Jean Bay should be pretty protected from the wind. I have not fished it since the mid-90s while guiding my brother in here with his fly rod. We did well in here back then. Looks like today

is the day to get an updated status report. So, truth be told, I elect to fish Little Jean as a last resort more than anything, yet it is also safe to say that my forty years of small-mouth fishing experience steers me to good fishing more often than not. Maybe all that experience was trying to tell me something today.

From two thirty to seven thirty, Mike and I go clockwise around the three sub-bays that comprise Little Jean Lake. We run out of time before we hit it all, but we cover about two-thirds of it. We don't see much for beds on our tour, but nearly every bassy looking lair holds a good fish. Mike lights it up with the Whopper Plopper 110. You would never know he had never used it till yesterday. All I know is that he has the touch tonight and smokes a tremendous run of big bass. I net and measure up all twenty of his fish—all are over eighteen inches, with four over twenty, including two measuring twenty-one and a monster twenty-two-inch smallmouth with a broad girth that runs the full length. I consider an accurately measured twenty-inch smallmouth a trophy (nineteen and a half inches is NOT a twenty). Lots of smallies are eighteen or nineteen inches, but only one or two percent of the bass we catch go over twenty inches. A twenty-one-incher is a rare trophy, and a twenty-two is probably a lifetime best in canoe country. I have taped a dozen twenty-two and a halves, but never a true twenty-three. Between controlling the canoe and netting and measuring Mike's hogs, I get my own WP90 going and add a dozen more big bass to our evenings total, including a twenty and a half, a twenty-one, and my own twenty-two-inch beauty. All of these fish are heavy, broad specimens with big tails. The forage in Jean Lake must be outstanding, because of the over one hundred bass we have landed here in two half-days of fishing, twelve are over twenty inches and five are over twenty-one inches, including two measuring in at twenty-two. Even all the eighteen-inchers are very solid fish.

Next year, I plan to stay two nights on the west end of Jean and two nights down on the east end so we can hit this again and

include all the water we didn't cover.

6/17 Moving day today. Four hours triple-portaging in the rain from Burntside to the big beach site halfway down Sturgeon Lake. The guys are happy to setup at this spectacular campsite and head out fishing. Bob and I work the bays north of the "Walleye Straits" but only catch five bass apiece, the largest going eighteen inches. Most of the WP hits are tentative, and we get lots of misses. Soon we know why, as a heavy downpour sends us for cover into the woods. When the rain lets up, we are cold and wet, so we elect to head back to camp. Mike and Dave fare much better down at the Walleye Straits, catching eighteen walleyes on a jig and soft plastics. They keep five eighteen-inchers for our fish fry, bringing us to eight total in the cooler. We can keep four more to reach our possession limit. It's chicken alfredo tonight, and it's starting to clear just enough to reveal a beautiful full moon.

6/18 I cook up a big breakfast, then Will and I stroke north through Lonely Lake and bush-whack into what I call the "Lonely Ponds." We get in without getting wet or injured, but it is plenty daunting enough to keep out the uncommitted. Not Will, he is a true gamer, eating it all up. It would help to bring a saw in here next year to reestablish the fading route I have been using. So it's four hours up and another four hours back, which leaves us five hours to fish. We skip the first Lonely Pond—I have now passed it up five times, but it looks like it could be bassy too. The second Lonely Pond is one of those hidden bass gems I dream about on cold winter nights—it is a medium sized, clearwater lake with lots of shoreline wood and rock structure and big boulder flats running out into deeper water. It must have a good forage base, because these are not skinny bass—most have "shoulders" and fight like crazy. Chances are, we will throw the only lures they see all summer, so these fish are super aggressive. We circle the entire lake and finish with a hundred smallmouth on the button, a perfect fifty-fifty split between my WP90 and Will's #5 Vibrax. I land two twenties on



By my third trip in mid-June, the top-water smallmouth bite turned red hot and Mike went on a phenomenal big bass run one evening on Jean Lake. (22" on Whopper Plopper 110)

the north side, and Will boats a twenty-two-and-a-half-inch brute with a thirteen-and-a-half-inch girth on the south side. I lost another couple of trophies by the gunwale, making me all the more determined to find some longer handled nets.

Bob and Ben Whopper Plop thirty smallmouth in the northern-most bay on Sturgeon. Dave and Mike rack up another twenty-three walleyes in the Walleye Straits and bring those last four home, where I promptly bread and deep fry the works in real lard. Fresh walleye under a full moon on the best campsite in all Quetico? Well, it doesn't get any better than that.

6/19 I know the guys would love to stay longer on this unique beach site but visions of the incredible fishing we had on Antoine Lake in 2018 compel me to pack up and head north. In the uppermost part of Sturgeon near Blueberry Island, we see the first loons of the season with a pair of babies. Water levels are still high on the big flowage lake of Sturgeon. We spot the first two canoes we have seen since the ones on Burntside. Both the portages into Antione through Ram are hot, muggy, buggy, and very, very muddy. The four-star site on the north side of Antoine is open, and we settle in. There is a nest of eagles nearby with two babies screeching as we approach. There are two big bass on beds right off the canoe landing in camp, so Ben drops a jig in on one and hooks a twenty-one-inch dandy. He remains on guard over his nest for the rest of our stay, but he is safe from our lures now.

Bob and I head down to the south end of the lake and get off to a great start, each taking a twenty-and-a-half-inch smallmouth on a WP90. We work up the southwest shoreline, Bob boating twenty smallies and me seventeen. About a dozen are in that seventeen to nineteen-inch slot, all nice, heavy fish. There doesn't seem to be a lot of big bass along here like we found last June. So I switch rods to the #5 Vibrax and tie into a hard-fighting twenty-six-inch walleye. Antoine is a very good Grand Slam lake—you can easily catch all four in a single hour of fishing.

6/20 I rustle us up some bacon

and eggs, then Ben and I hustle over to Ram Lake. Ben misses one big bass after another with the WP 110 before I realize his drag is set way too light. With that problem fixed, Ben turns into the second coming of Larry Dahlberg with his Whopper Plopper. He hauls in twenty-one fish, four are nineteen and a halves, and the highlight of his trip—a twenty-and-a-half-inch behemoth with a fourteen-inch girth. Just a tremendous fish that the photos don't do justice. Trust me, this fish was very impressive. I have my fun too with big bass absolutely pounding my WP90. Of my twenty fish, five go over twenty inches (four twenty and a halves and one twenty-one-inch with a thirteen-and-a-half-inch girth). This big girth twenty-one-incher rose on his own to slurp a bug, tipping me off as to his whereabouts. So I flipped the WP over there and WHAM! Big bass on. So of our forty bass on Ram, six are over twenty inches, plus we missed a bunch getting our act together. I know Ben will remember this run of big bass on Ram Lake, and to be honest, I can't recall too many better afternoons of smallmouth fishing myself.

Bob and Will bass fish around Little Antoine and get it going on quality bass. They boat thirty, with most going seventeen to nineteen inches. Mike and Dave get three walleyes over twenty inches and a twenty-eight-inch lake trout out in the main lake. For dinner, we each have a personal walleye and a big helping of Zup's polish sausage. After dinner, Mike and I head out for bass, and Mike takes fifteen bass on the WP90, including four nineteen and a halves and several eighteens along the north side of the long skinny island. Tomorrow it's on down the mighty Maligne River, which will be running high for sure.

6/21 We say goodbye to Antoine on a calm morning that promises to get hot. We elect to avoid the mud in and out of Ram and take the one long portage out the south end of Antoine leading directly to the Sturgeon Narrows. I have been on this one twice before, both times coming the other way. Trust me, you'll notice the uphill climb going south. Both Will and Ben load up with two big packs

each and bust over the 200-rodger. We are forced to dump our loads at a knee-deep mudhole near the far side and shuttle things over in the canoes. All I can say is this is a really tough portage, and thanks to Will and Ben, we put it behind us in record time. They can portage my packs anywhere, anytime. Thanks guys, you are awesome Sherpas, and not bad fishermen either.

We come across two trumpeter swans with five babies in tow down by the entrance to Fred Lake. So that makes loons, mergansers, geese, eagles, and swans all seen on this trip with young of the year. Mike and I saw a cow moose that day on Little Jean, and we saw several beaver, mink, and otter on this trip too.

All goes well on the four portages around the current, and the guys keep the bow pointed downstream for the most part. The key is to let the current sweep you to the left side going down then come back over to the right to land at the hidden third portage (not shown on Fisher or McKenzie maps). It is always more stressful here than lake paddling, but man, the fishing up in this part of Quetico is second to none, so it is what it is. We lunch on the fourth portage and cruise on into my regular four-star on Tanner Lake. We've done over ten hours of traveling today, and the guys are bushed.

I have no eager takers to go out bass fishing, so I plead with Will who can't refuse. In just an hour and a half, we each Whopper Plopper ten bass, including six eighteens and I get one last twenty. Don't tell anyone, but those short-handled nets cost me a couple more trophies. The guys have Michele's awesome spaghetti dinner ready for us on our return. What a treat for our ninth night in canoe country. It has not been just a good trip. It has been a great trip. The numbers don't lie. For the third straight year, the Sturgeon Lake trip has been as good as it gets. We caught more bass on the previous trip to the Crooked Lake area, but this trip blows it away for big fish.

Smallmouth: 470 (26 over 20 inches), (8 over 21 inches), (3 over 22 inches), (largest 22 ½ inches)



Ben's dad, Will, manned up for the bushwhack into Lonely Ponds earlier in the trip and was rewarded with a monster smallmouth on the #5 Vibrax, that I taped at 22 ½" with a 13 ½" girth. But on our last day of fishing, Ben did the old man one better, Whopper Plopping this Ram Lake 21 incher with an eye-popping 14" girth.



On June 25, Jennifer Zup and Logan Hayes exchanged wedding vows at Curtain Falls where her Grandfather, Bill Zup, operated a resort in pre-BWCAW days.

Pike: 75

Walleye: 52

Lake Trout: 9

Trip #4 (June 27-July 4) Five clients from Minnesota, Virginia, and Arkansas: Grandfather, Frank, is my oldest ever GS2 client at seventy-eight. He's joined by sixteen-year-old grandson and three older singles. Lakes covered: Iron/Crooked/Elk/Brent/Conmee/Darky/Wicksteed/McAree

6/27 Many Americans visit the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone once and figure, been there done that. But the BWCAW and Quetico area has an amazing power to hook people and bring them back again and again.

Those of you reading this who have made ten, twenty, even fifty or more trips to canoe country know exactly what I am talking about. This staying power was the underlying premise of my starting Boundary Waters Journal back in 1987 and the basis for why I believed we could build a viable subscriber base.

Every trip to canoe country is different. Every route is unique, and every trip back to familiar waters brings new adventure. Take this trip: this is my third time through Curtain Falls into Crooked Lake in the past five weeks. While Curtain Falls never fails to inspire me, even after several hundred visits, for me it is just the gateway to real adventure and wilderness fishing. For Jennifer Zup, from Zup's Resort and Outfitters on Lac La Croix, Curtain Falls has a more profound significance than any of us will ever know. Just last week, she was married here, complete with formal wedding gown, photographer, and minister. Jennifer's grandfather, Bill Zup, built and ran his resort here at Curtain Falls for many years until the 1964 Wilderness Act forced him to relocate to the Canadian side of Lac La Croix. The "Old General" Billy Zup is surely smiling down with pride about his granddaughter's decision to have her wedding at his beloved Curtain Falls.

We lunch at Curtain and end up with leftover meat, cheese, and crackers, so I offer it to a group of seven college girls who pass by, clearly living on ultralight rations. They attack the offering like a starved northern pike, so I throw in a dozen cookies for good measure. To say they were grateful is the understatement of the day. As for me right now, I am more interested in the smallmouth bass that Billy Zup introduced to Crooked Lake some seventy-five years ago. I have managed to miss the peak topwater action on Crooked for the past three years with these late breaking springs. I feel like I am due to hit payday.

This crew is below average on paddling and portaging, so it takes longer than usual to get down to "Stu's Island" in Friday Bay. For the evening, Mike and I boat twenty-five smallies, all on Whopper Ploppers, most fourteens to sixteens with a few seventeens in the mix. Will reports catching two over twenty inches, but he has no

measuring tape, so ????. Ralph and John catch a dozen, no twenties.

6/28 As we are breaking camp in the morning, that same group of girls stops by for directions down the confusing waterways of Crooked Lake and then they are off. They seem to be enjoying themselves. It takes us three hours to go from Stu's Island up into Gardner Bay, over the three short portages, and into Elk Lake. We claim the four-star on the north-east side and rig up for lakers. It is hot and calm, and we come up empty. In the evening, we try for smallmouth, but that is largely a bust too. Ralph takes an eighteen and a half and a nineteen on the WP 110, but the rest of us are humbled. I hope to have some of my ashes spread here on Elk Lake someday, so that tells you what I think of this special place. But lately, it has been the death of me on big bass. Just can't get in synch with the monsters that swim here.

6/29 It's a long, hot eight hours through Cone and Brent to Conmee (quadruple portaging for Ralph and I). Nobody is around on Elk, Cone, Brent, or Conmee. With the hot forecast, I select the mid-lake high point camp rather than the more spacious but sunnier site on the east end. This camp is tight for three tents, and the landing sucks, but the shade here trumps everything else in July.

Our trio of canoes works the Conmee Honey Hole till dark and boats a grand total of four walleyes: a twenty-four and a half, a twenty-five and a half, a twenty-seven and a half, and a twenty-eight. All are nice, heavy fish. The two biggest hit on Rapala Jointed Shad Raps right before dark. The highlight of the night has nothing to do with walleyes. John came on this Conmee trip in 2018 to try for his lifetime best walleye—and did so with a heavy twenty-six-and-a-half-inch fish. He is back this year looking for that thirty-incher, but tonight will be remembered for his big pike. I have John in my bow as I drift deeper down into the channel than usual when trolling for walleye. For several minutes, I assume he is fast into that thirty-inch walleye on his jig and Powerbait. But eventually, the forty-two-inch pike surfaces, and I know I will have my hands full

Voyageur North Outfitters, Inc.



Wilderness Canoe Trips into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area and Quetico Provincial Park

- ◆ Complete and Partial Outfitting
- ◆ Special Rates for Groups
- ◆ Ultra Lightweight Equipment
- ◆ Fly-In Trips and Tow Service
- ◆ Specializing in Canoe and Fishing Trips
- ◆ Solo Canoes & Sea Kayaks
- ◆ Deluxe Bunkhouse Accommodations
- ◆ Only Outfitter in Town with a Live Bait and Tackle Shop

OPEN DAILY: 5 a.m. - 10 p.m.

CALL TOLL FREE 1-800-848-5530 or 218-365-3251
John & Lynn O'Kane • 1829 E. Sheridan St. • Ely, MN 55731
Website: <http://www.VNorth.com>

landing the brute in my small bass net. Despite all odds, we team up to get the beast into the canoe and get a batch of photos. This fish has an over twenty-inch girth, and it holds that beefy girth the entire length of its body. Just holding it, I would say it easily goes twenty-five pounds. All I know is it is heavier than any pike I have handled in many years. John is super excited about his big pike, and we are all really happy for him. Most fish get lost in the shuffle, but true trophies like this pike, these are special memories that anglers take to the grave.

It's a hot night back at camp as we enjoy our beef and broccoli on rice amidst a horde of mosquitos.

6/30 I whip up a big egg, sausage, and toast breakfast, and Ralph and I portage on over to William for the day. It is hot, and we boat no big fish but enjoy sharing hunting stories. Today I get my first Quetico bath of the season, a refreshing dip on another hot day. We are all back down to the Honey Hole by seven p.m. with a repeat performance, only four walleyes caught. I take another twenty-seven on the Jointed Shad Rap, and Frank lands the trip best twenty-eight-and-a-half-inch walleye on a jig and four-inch Power Bait paddle-tail minnow.

7/1 We move from Conmee to Darky via the Darky River. We

see our first two canoes on Brent since Crooked Lake. It takes seven hours with triple portaging. We hit a couple open patches on the long trail along the river, and it feels like a blast furnace out in the sun. We set up on the east side four-star site, and John and I head up to the north end to try the bass. The Whopper Plopper has some takers as I move a dozen good fish, losing a couple at the gunwale that look to go over twenty. These are quality, hard fighting smallmouth. I wish we had another night to spend here. Ralph and Frank hit the shoreline south of camp towards the pictographs and net ten bass in the seventeen to eighteen class. The highlight is Frank's big twenty-two-and-a-quarter-inch smallmouth on a WP 110. Supper is burgers grilled over beaverwood with fried potatoes. It's midnight before I finish the dishes and crawl into the tent. But it's a good tired with another good trip winding down.

7/2 Today is an easy day as we just move over to Wicksteed. Nobody else is on the lake, so we set up on the five-star island site with the big, scorched fireplace rock. We all enjoy a swim and head out to fish on this pleasant seventy-degree evening. Will and I are into bass all night, taking over a hundred on the WP 90 and Vibrax #5, but most are only ten to twelve

inches. Five go over eighteen, and one is nineteen and a half. There are very few big fish in shallow—just too hot.

Ralph and Mike go over into Ballard and catch twelve wall-eyes, keeping six that go eighteen to twenty-one inches, so with the ones we put in the cooler on Conmee, we have our last night's wall-eye entrée secured. Tonight, it is a big spaghetti feed hastily pounded down in a swarm of skeeters.

7/3 We get going early to beat the heat on our three laps over Goat Hill into McAree, then set up on the island site next to a Montana crew. They mention they caught a twenty-four-inch smallmouth in Pond Lake yesterday. I have put the tape to thousands of canoe country smallmouth, including many twenty-twos and precious few twenty-two and a halves, but never an honest to goodness two-foot smallmouth. I believe it is possible, and Pond has some big bass, but I am skeptical of secondhand reports and measuring techniques. I fry up the walleyes on the two-burner Coleman, as it is just too bloody hot to cook on a campfire. I head out with Mike for a couple hours of Whopper Plopping. We take fifteen fish, the largest going sixteen inches. We dodge a few thunderstorms and return to camp. Ralph, Will, and John all catch eighteen to nineteen-inch smallies to put a nice wrap on the trip's Whopper Plopping; all are believers now. I listen to the Twins beat Oakland in twelve innings on the weather radio until one a.m. This is their year.

7/4 We get a brief shower in the morning, but it soon clears as we paddle to Black Robe for our pick up. I have had my rain jacket on just one time in the last eighteen days out here. I am not complaining, but the woods are getting dry. We really do need some rain.

Editor's Note: I thought BWJ readers would be interested in reading this note from Frank who went on the Conmee Lake trip this year. At seventy-eight, Frank is the elder statesman for the twelve years of my Grand Slam Guide Service. He downplays his contribution to the trip here, but I can tell you that for seventy-eight, he was outstanding both portaging

and paddling—he was rock solid for any age. This should give us all hope to be out there canoe tripping at that age:

“Dear Stu, I can't thank you enough for allowing my grandson, Will, and I to join your trip to the Quetico. The food, company, fishing, scenery, and just everything will be remembered forever. Please extend my thanks to Michele for the wonderful meals. You are a professional and excel in every phase. It must be very rewarding to have a job one really loves. I appreciate you helping Will as much as you did, and the note you wrote on his map meant very much to him. I ordered a BWJ subscription for him to keep the fire burning. I also thank you for helping me land the twenty-eight-and-a-half-inch walleye on Conmee and all the other knowledge you passed on. I apologize for making you, Ralph, Mike, and Will tote all the heaviest packs. I did the best I could, but it did not ease y'all's burdens. I would appreciate if you could forward me a photo of the walleye. Thanks again, and may the wind always be at your back.”
—Frank Wait, Pangburn, AR

Over the past winter, I corresponded at length with Tim King from Lakeville, Minnesota. Tim grew up in Orr, Minnesota on the edge of the BWCAW. He went on many canoe trips with his Dad and family, and that passion for fishing the BWCAW and Quetico only grew stronger throughout his adult life. It didn't take many emails from Tim for me to conclude that this guy was the real deal as far as canoe country anglers go. But there are lots of good fishermen out there. What impressed me most about Tim is the way he downplayed his own successes and focused more on helping others enjoy canoe country fishing. Pretty much out of the blue, Tim sends me a detailed map of Kawnipi Lake with personal notes about where to catch walleyes and bass. He said it was payback for all he had learned and enjoyed from reading BWJ over the years. Turns out, I had already been thinking about taking my fifth GS2 trip up to Kawnipi in 2019, so this unexpected super valuable intel sealed the deal. Tim had literally decorated my Kawnipi map with

a lifetime of hard-earned fishing experience. I am usually the one sharing my canoe country fishing knowledge with others, so this was a real switch. One thing led to another, and I urged Tim to consider writing an article for BWJ. That resulted in Tim producing two BWJ stories: “The Doofus Awards” in the Spring 2019 issue, and “Tubing Canoe Country Wall-eyes” in the Summer 2019 issue. In this editor's opinion, they were exactly the kind of articles our readers want and expect, so I was looking forward to coaxing more such material out of Tim in the future.

Shortly before leaving for my first Quetico trip on May 19, Tim and I emailed back and forth about my going to Kawnipi to fish his hotspots. My main concern was not interfering with his own plans to be up there, but he assured me he would be going in late July after my trip. I got home from Quetico on May 26, so on May 27, I was at my desk putting the finishing touches on the Summer Issue, including Tim's “Tubing Walleyes” story. Sadly, tragically, unbelievably, Tim took his own life on this day, and I spent all summer out in Quetico trying to make sense of it all. I failed. I am still unable to shake the haunting question, “How can this happen to someone like Tim who seemingly had such a wonderful life?” By the time my Kawnipi trip finally came around, I almost felt guilty about going up there to fish Tim's honey holes. Had this been a personal trip, I probably would have bailed on it. But I had six clients counting on me to guide them on this trip, and besides, I knew Tim would have wanted me to go up there as planned. So I decided to dedicate this trip to Tim King. Kawnipi was Tim's favorite lake in all of canoe country. Nobody knew it better, and nobody loved it more. I wish I could have had the chance to fish Kawnipi with Tim, but alas, his spirit will have to guide me on all my future trips to this special place. Thanks for your kindness, Tim. This one is for you.

Trip #5 (July 12-19) Six clients from Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, and Virginia. Two sets of brothers, including Dave and Jim, whose father ran a summer camp



John paddled and portaged into Connee Lake for the trophy walleyes but will remember this trip for his big pike- 42" length, 22" girth and estimated 25 lbs. Congratulations John, you earned this one.



TIM KING

BWJ subscriber and contributor, Tim King, shown here with a typical walleye from his beloved Kawnipi Lake. Tim was kind enough to share his lifetime of fishing intel on Kawnipi with me for this trip. Sadly, he passed away before I got to thank him for the 260 walleyes we caught, exactly where he told us to fish. So I dedicate this trip report to Tim.

where they guided many trips into Algonquin Park (they turned out to be de facto assistant guides on this trip—what a treat for me, thanks guys). Lakes covered: Moose Chain, Basswood, Burke, Sunday, Meadows, Agnes, Keewatin, Kawnipi, Anubis, Bird, and then back down Agnes.

7/12 It promises to be a hot one as we paddle up the Moose Lake Chain in under two hours. Looks like we will be able to make good time with this crew. I have my twenty-one-foot, three-seater Bell with “Big Conmee Pike John” in the middle to accommodate our crew of seven. I have tried going up to Kawnipi via the S-Chain in the past but found the constant loading and unloading on the dozen shorter portages was actually slower than just bucking up and taking the two long ones into the bottom of Agnes. We lunch at “Big Agony” while several other groups come and go. One thing I definitely noticed out there this season is a big increase in the number of Northstar (Bell) canoes. Apparently, lots of other folks are discovering what I have been saying for twenty years now: the Northstar 18 is the ideal canoe country tandem canoe. They have great capacity for heavy loads, are super stable, both with that big load and empty while out fishing. They’re very seaworthy in big waves, and

they are very maneuverable in tight streams or tricky portage approaches. My Northstars are still plenty fast to paddle and light to carry on the portages. Both the outfitters and the general public are realizing there is a lot more to a great BWCAW or Quetico canoe than speed and weight.

On my first trip over with the big canoe, I hear a pounding noise and come onto a Quetico portage crew. Turns out, they are crushing larger rocks into smaller pieces with sledgehammers, loading five-gallon buckets with this gravel, and filling in some of the worst mud holes on the portage trail. What a hot, muggy, buggy, miserable job. I am hot enough just walking over the portage. Hats off to these guys—these portages don’t maintain themselves.

Triple portaging the five trails today taps the crew, so I have to “crack the whip” and implore them to dig deep to reach my goal of the four-star site just north-east of the Silence Lake portage by dark. (It is eight hours of triple portaging from Sunday Lake to here). This site is tight for three tents, but it’s tolerable for one night. Agnes has very few large campsites for a big lake, so we really have no choice but to put in a longer day than ideal for the first day out. Pushing hard today will gain us an extra day of fishing, so the guys will eventually see the wisdom in this decision. Right now, they are just plain beat. Michele’s fajita feast helps perk them up as a three quarters moon rises on a clear, calm night. I leave the fly off my Big Agnes Copper Spur tent, which is like sleeping in a screen house—awesome on hot summer nights like this one.

7/13 It’s another six hours through Keewatin Lake etc. to our camp on the south tip of Rose Island. The portages through this Keewatin route are much more gnarly than I recall, lots of rock gardens with hazardous footing. We will go out Anubis and Bird, as I know they are better trails. There is no way to fish all of Tim’s top walleye spots from a single camp, so my plan is to spend two or three nights in each of the two camps. This first camp on Rose Island will allow us to cover the west end of Kawnipi plus Murdoch Lake. Then we will move up into the top of Mckenzie Bay to hit fresh reefs up there. Kawa Bay and the eastern third of Kawnipi will have to wait for another trip.

We all hustle out to fish the evening prime time. I take John and Steve up to Tim’s “Gull Rock” spot east of Rose Island. We boat a total of sixteen walleyes right where Tim pinpointed them, most going eighteen inches with a few up to twenty-two. I get mine hooking a Gitzit tube to a standard walleye ball jig, (no specialized tube jig) just as Tim wrote about in his story in the last issue of BWJ. I also land a heavy nineteen-inch smallmouth and have a heavy, pike over forty inches up to the gunwale where John whiffs on it with the net and he breaks me off. Perhaps John is afraid this pike will dethrone his Conmee beast as the best pike of the season. I don’t think it was quite the size of John’s Conmee pike, but it was a big gator for sure. The gulls have three babies up on the little island we are fishing and are not happy about our proximity until we catch, kill, and throw a little pike up there for them to eat. Then they decide we are okay to have around. Tom and Dan pick up seven walleyes of their own nearby, and Dave and Jim boat fourteen

walleyes closer to camp, bringing our first night total to thirty-seven walleyes with a few good bass and pike for a bonus. Not the kind of numbers that Tim typically racks up here, but a decent start for our crew. I grill brats and beans in the dark; bad skeeters, but still clear and cooling off some.

7/14 It is super windy today, so I lead the three canoes on down into Murdoch, hoping it will be more sheltered than the main lake but it still tosses us around in there. This is one of Tim's favorite spots, but we do not do it justice today. We come out of there with fifty walleyes for the group, but it's a constant battle with the gusty wind. We have to scratch and claw for what we get, and it feels like we leave a lot of fish on the table in here. I get most of my walleyes on the special jighead I got at L&M Fleet Farm. It is a 360 Gear quarter-ounce minnow jighead with a special shape that seems to snag a lot less than the standard ball jig. I put the Berkley four-inch Power Bait Shad Paddletail on it and get good action. John does well with the same rig. These jigs really hold the larger soft plastics on well, and the walleyes seem to like them. We land on the portage out the south end of Murdoch for lunch. There is a crude campsite here and a decently sized stream spilling in. We catch six nice walleyes at this inlet and two twenty-inch trophy smallmouth on the Whopper Plopper. But what I will remember most about this ill-fated stop is losing no less than four new Whopper Ploppers to pike—that's like fifty bucks gone in five minutes. Ugh! See why I pack in twenty-five pounds of tackle?

On the way back to camp, Steve goes on a nice little Whopper Plopper run in Lemay Bay, netting three nineteen-and-a-half-inch smallmouth on the 110. But as has always been my experience on my last dozen trips to Kawnipi, the smallmouth seem spread out in thin numbers, and tonight just reinforces that take. We enjoy a chicken alfredo pasta dinner as a threatening storm dupes me into putting the fly over our tent. But it never rains, and it is a long, hot, sticky night.

7/14 There are not many places in Quetico that I have not been, but one spot that has been on my radar for a long time is paddling up Lemay Creek to Lemay Lake. Sam Campbell wrote a story years ago about "Sanctuary Lake," which to him was the idyllic canoe country wilderness escape with fish to boot. He left clues as to its whereabouts, and conventional wisdom has it pegged as being Lemay Lake. So, always up for a wilderness adventure, especially if they include bass, I talk Steve into day-tripping up into Lemay. We find three short, brushy portage trails, but it only takes an hour to reach the lake going up the narrow, shallow creek. The lake itself does not impress me, lots of shallow, muddy, weedy bays—not great looking rocky smallmouth habitat. Nonetheless, despite a hard downpour with lots of lightning, Steve picks up eight smallmouth on the WP 110, all are heavy, healthy, eighteen to nineteen-and-a-half-inch fish. I manage just two nice eighteens, three walleyes, and ten pike. We stop for lunch at the mid-lake campsite—a three-star, at best. At the site, we find a message jar started in 2017. Curiously, they mention "largemouth bass" here in Lemay, but Steve and I fail to move a single largemouth in our tour around most of the lake. This would not be the first time I have run into those who

EXPERIENCE QUETICO

VOYAGEUR WILDERNESS PROGRAMME

QUETICO PARK'S PREMIER ECO-ADVENTURE CANOE OUTFITTER SINCE 1960

INDIGENOUS
TOURISM ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

WWPCOM

Eco-Adventure Packages / Outfitting & Rentals / Schools & Groups / Eco-Field Trips / Voyageur Island / Amenities & Accommodations

REMACKEL TRAILERS
FOREST LAKE, MN

NEW URBAN PADDLER!

Urban Paddler Hauls 2 Canoes/Kayaks Breaks down for easy storage

651-464-2889
SALES@REMACKELTRAILERS.COM
WWW.REMACKELTRAILERS.COM

don't know the difference between a smallmouth and largemouth.

The others enjoy good action back on main Kawnipi Lake, boating forty-five walleyes, putting fourteen on ice for a dinner, and bumping our trip total up to 135 walleyes.

7/15 We move on up to the top of Mckenzie Bay today. We still have not seen a soul around on this massive Hunter's Island route lake. We stop and check out the alleged "Six-Star" campsite at the bottom of Mckenzie Bay. It has some nice features, but without a doubt, I regularly stay at much better camps on Jean, Burntside, Sturgeon, Argo, Wicksteed, and many other lakes in the region. Agnes and Kawnipi have a dearth of good large campsites for big water. We settle for a small island Tim recommended just past the tight narrows into the final northeast section of Mckenzie Bay before the portage into Mckenzie Lake. It is tight for three tents but has good shade and nice breeze through it.

Dan and I are out trolling walleyes by three p.m. through some more of Tim's spots. All produce at least a half-dozen walleyes, mostly on jigs, and mostly on Dan's jigs. Did I ever mention that I detest the jig style of fishing? Probably because I suck at it, something to do with being born with no patience and having even less now. I just don't have the jig touch and am consistently out fished by jigs right next to mine: more on this later. For now, Dan nets fifteen to my five, and the other boats total fifty more, all eighteen to twenty-one-inch carbon copies. That's over 200 walleyes for the trip now without a single one over twenty-two inches. People ask why I repeatedly return to Conmee for walleyes when I can fish places like Sturgeon, Bentpine, and Kawnipi and catch and release ten times more walleyes. The simple answer is that size matters. I would rather catch a dozen big walleyes than a hundred little ones. Conmee has big walleyes like no other lake in Quetico or anywhere else that I know of. But it is work to get there, and they are not easy to find. That is why they get big. We enjoy our walleye fry under a full

moon, but the mosquitos make it an eating through our head nets affair.

7/16 We need days seven and eight of this trip to travel back to Moose Lake, so today is my last day of fishing in Quetico for 2019. Thanks to Tim King, it is a memorable one. Jim and I paddle on down to the central part of Mckenzie Bay to a narrows where Tim reports the walleyes usually run twenty-three to twenty-six inches. This sounds appealing right about now, since we have yet to see a twenty-three-incher all week. It is cooler, overcast, with some light off and on rain. Jim immediately goes to work racking up ten quick walleyes on an eighth-ounce jig and yellow twister tail. He is really, really good with that thing. He knows where to throw it, how to get it to the bottom, how to work it along the bottom, how to feel the bite, how to hook the fish, and how to play him up to the net. He is a high-level walleye jigger. I study his every move like a hawk, mimic it, and catch two lousy walleyes. My competitive nature being what it is and my stomach for jiggng completely shot for now, I pull out a brand-new lure that I borrowed from John earlier in the trip. It is called a Rapala BX Swimmer12 and is a jointed cisco looking bait that sinks and has a small plastic lip. I cast it out and let it go down about fifteen feet, then I pump and reel it back to the boat. In the next hour, I catch thirteen nice walleyes on this new-found bait, most go twenty-three to twenty-four inches. I didn't catch up to Jim—he finished with twenty out of this hole—but I really had fun casting this lure for my walleyes instead of jiggng for them. We land twenty-something pike and ten bass for good measure. While landing one twenty-two-inch walleye, a huge pike floats in and warily eyes the struggling fish. I get a really good look at this monster, and she easily goes forty-five inches with an enormous head, about like the one we lost on Crooked on my second trip this year. Just a huge fish. If only we could see what is swimming around down there in some of these Quetico lakes. I have never seen the BX Swimmer in a store, but you can bet I will find

it somewhere and stock up with more for 2020. All indications are that it could be awesome on the big Conmee walleyes. Here is hoping I can catch lots of walleyes in the years to come without ever tying on another jig.

I serve the gang a real treat tonight: dinner in the daylight, our first of the trip. It's burgers on the grill with lightning and thunder all around, but it never rains till we are in the sack.

I learned a lot about Kawnipi on this trip: where to camp and how to best work Tim's walleye spots. I will be back in 2020 because where else am I going to go where we can catch 260 walleyes, 100 pike, and 100 big smallmouth in the middle of July?

7/17 It is another long twelve-hour day as we push on down Agnes and camp on Meadows Lake just before dark. We pound down Michele's homemade spaghetti dinner and call it a night. It's been another great trip thanks to Tim King. It's out to Moose Lake tomorrow, and then my Quetico summer is over. So many great people, wilderness water, and big fish. There are worse ways to make a living than guiding Quetico anglers. A lot worse.

7/23-27 Michele and five of her horse show friends go into Fourtown Lake for a few days. I load the canoes on the trucks, drive them up there, help with the first portage, and head back home to hold down the fort. Feels strange to not be going back out there, but I have lots of magazine work to catch up on and someone has to take care of the dogs and horses. They catch enough for a walleye fry one night and have a good time out there. Michele and I have not been on a canoe trip together since I started GS2 in 2008. One of these days...

Trip #6 (Aug 4-12) Seven clients from Minnesota and Iowa—ninety-mile float trip to fish from Hawley Lake down the Sutton River to Hudson Bay

After ten straight years of guiding at least one trip down the Sutton River for trophy brook trout, I missed going in 2018, but this spring I was able to figure out the new system and once again secure approval with Canadian Immigration, and eight of us fly in here for

another go at these big, beautiful, bold brookies. As I paddle down “The World’s Greatest Brook Trout River” for the thirteenth time, you would think I would have seen about everything it can throw at me. Think again. The water level for our 2019 trip is far and away the highest I have ever seen, and Albert, who runs the camp that we base out of and has been on the river for over sixty years, confirms this is indeed record-breaking flow. In 2015 when I took Michele up there, our group had to hole up for four days in one camp as heavy rains turned the river chocolatey and the fish simply could not see our lures from two feet away. The river did settle down on that trip, and we scrambled to catch our 1343 brook trout on the lower half. This year, the banks are flooded, and there is no chance it will recede to normal by the end of our nine-day trip. While the water clarity isn’t the normal gin clear, at least it is clear enough for the trout to see and home in on our Vibrax spinners from typical range.

For the first half of the trip, we are forced to fish largely out of the canoes. We are all wearing waders, but places to pull over, secure the canoe, and then wade in are few and far between. Luckily, I have nobody using a fly rod this trip, as it would be very tough to fly fish from our speeding canoes. The current is probably pushing us five to six miles per hour without even paddling. These guys have all done many trips to Quetico and Woodland Caribou Parks, so they are well versed in fishing out of a canoe. The current is pushing us faster than I prefer to go, but the guys do a good job of thoroughly fishing all the slower water. Normally, Sutton brookies are highly concentrated in the primo moving water and deeper holes, runs, and tailouts. It takes me a couple days to forsake these traditional honey holes and focus my fishing efforts in the stretches of what until now we have considered dead water. It all just goes to show that you never have Mother Nature all figured out. The fishing gods can throw you a curveball on any trip; that is when you find out just how well you can apply all your collective experience, adjust your approach, and still catch a lot of fish.

The weather is the usual cold and drizzle, but we only get a couple of hours of heavy rain during the week. We do see the sun for parts of some days, which of course turns on both the trout and the black flies. All the flooded banks with hundreds of streams and rivulets dumping in make for a record black fly scourge. Black flies breed in moving water, and we are on nothing but. At sundown, the black flies let off and the mosquitos come out in force. Think of your worst Boundary Waters bugs times ten—then you will have a good idea of what we faced. This is why I bring a Cabela’s fifteen-foot screenhouse where we can socialize and eat in peace. Once again, the screen house was unanimously voted the most valuable piece of equipment on the trip. When not in the screen house, it was pretty much wearing your head net or getting killed.

The bottom line is that the group tallies 1259 brook trout for the trip, with everyone catching dozens of trophy twenty to twenty-one-inch brookies plus a handful of top end twenty-twos and twenty-threes. From 2008 to 2014, my groups averaged over 2000 big brook trout per trip down the Sutton. I call it “shock and awe,” because many days these fish will just pum-



Fletcher Canoes
For those who want the Best... Naturally

Custom-built cedar canvas canoes.
 Call or write for a free brochure:
Fletcher Canoes
 Box 1321, Atikokan, ON
 Canada P0T 1C0
 807-597-6801

www.fletchercanoes.com

Builders of the Bill Mason 'Heavy Duty' Special and the Fletcher's Fancy

Hands-free portaging has never been easier.

The **Bungee Dealee Bob** is an innovative shock cord gear-fastening system to quickly and securely attach paddles, fishing rods and other loose items to your canoe. Bungee Dealee Bob – a reusable zip-tie.



Innovative Solutions for Outdoor Enthusiasts
www.OldScoutOutdoorProducts.com

Now, you can have fresh baked goods on all your wilderness adventures.

The **Old Scout Campfire Reflector Oven** is a traditional styled campfire reflector oven that uses an innovative tab and slot design to slip together quickly and securely. The aluminum construction is light-weight and maintenance-free.





Just another ordinary 22" brookie on the "World's Greatest Brook Trout River". I never get tired of the power, beauty and wildness of these incredible fish.

mel you in that strong current. Personal catches of seventy-five to a hundred big fish a day were commonplace and we probably got a little spoiled. For whatever reasons, from 2015 to 2019, this per trip average has dropped to around 1200. We have caught big numbers of Sutton brookies in all types of weather and water levels, so I remain puzzled about why we caught nearly double on our earlier trips. Who can say what factors are at play out in the Bay as far as food sources, predation, etc. All I can do is make the very most of the hand that nature and fate deals on any given trip. Still, all in all, the guys got to experience the best stream trout fishing of their lives and are now among the few anglers to know the “Sutton River Magic.”

We see a few caribou and have one polar bear sighting on the river. I am in the lead (with the only gun) that last day when I spot a mid-sized bear about 400 yards up ahead, prowling towards us on the east (right) shoreline. I immediately gather three of the canoes over on the west side (left shoreline), but our fourth canoe is lollygagging way back behind us. I have done my best to impress upon the group why it is so important to stick close to me this last day. I know from past experience with these Sutton River polar bears that one can't possibly appreciate their incredible speed and power until you see it up close and personal. So it is a lot of extra stress for me trying to “herd cats” in the hot bear zone down by the Bay. Anyway, while I wait for the bear to reveal his intentions, that fourth canoe comes drifting down the right shoreline, unaware they are heading right towards the bear. We signal them over to our side as the bear closes to about 200 yards on the opposite shore. But, wouldn't you know, he then decides to enter the river and start swimming over to our side. I don't think he knew we were there, just an ill-timed random maneuver. So I slap my paddle hard on the water four times, like a giant beaver tail, which gets his attention. Then we all wave our paddles to give the impression of a large gathering. He spots this,



turns around, and swims back to the east bank. He hits the shoreline at a dead run, and that is the last we see of him. This was the ideal polar bear sighting scenario because we had the time and space to respond as needed and give the bear maximum time and space to avoid us. Of course, the big fear will always be rounding a bend and having a bear emerge from the alder brush right in our laps. Not good.

It was great to get back up to the Sutton after a one-year hiatus in 2018 and feel the power of those fish again. They are still there; still amazing as ever. My only real disappointment was that the high-water levels made throwing the Whopper Plopper difficult in the fast current. I did manage to land two nice twenty-one-inchers on it with just the one barbless treble on the rear, and I missed a dozen other strikes. Oh well, I will try again next year.

As this issue goes to press, my Grand Slam Guide Service trips are filling up fast. If you are interested in joining me in 2020 for a wilderness canoeing and fishing adventure, see my ad on Page 65 and contact me as soon as possible.

8/18-25 I am keeping busy working on the fall issue, shooting my bow every evening, and prepping all our gear for the Colorado elk hunting season. I will be archery hunting my old stomping grounds in the Comanche Wilderness after hunting down in the Wemenuchie Wilderness last year. I am especially excited about Michele coming out to hunt elk as a muzzleloader this year.

I will guide her and continue to bow hunt as well if still chasing my own bull. This is my absolute most favorite trip of the year, and it promises to be a special one.

I am running the dogs early in the cool mornings, and they are pointing a few young-of-the-year grouse on our place, so I am hopeful for some good hunting here when I get back from Colorado. I am checking my trail cameras and having fun seeing all the wildlife we have in our woods. Bears, wolves, moose, and about a dozen different bucks in velvet have shown up so far. I have been able to distinguish four different eight-pointers that are decent bucks, probably three-and-a-half-year-olds. They all need at least one more year of seasoning. There are no images of “Gnarly” yet, the buck I got so much video of last year, but I am hoping he is still out there, as he would likely be five and a half and would make for a fun fall of bow and rifle hunting. Even if I get no photos of him this summer, if out there, he definitely knows where our does hang out, and hopefully we will meet during the rut in November when it counts.

It is really quiet around here this week. The boys have their own lives in Minneapolis and Florida. Michele is down in Kentucky at a horse show. And Taryn went back to school at Saint Ben's in southern Minnesota. I have zero time to myself all summer, every summer, so it is great to be home, but I still prefer having family around. It is just me and the dogs for now, biding our time till summer is gone and the Hunter's Moon arrives. 