

living on the edge



Grand Slam— Summer 2013

□ by Stuart Osthoff

The past year has been a classic example of the balancing act Mother Nature likes to perform. “Normal” ice out on Blueberry Lake near our place just south of Ely is April 20. In 2012, the ice went out on March 25, the earliest in my 30-plus years here and 25 days ahead of the historical average. Spring 2012 was super early and super dry with bad fire danger and low water levels. June brought monsoon-like rains and water levels shot back up. Then July, August, and September went dry as a bone. My October BWCAW trip found very low water levels again. The drought was back.

Winter 2012-13 started with a whimper. Daughter Taryn and her fellow cross country skiers on the Ely team barely had enough snow to ski on through mid-February. Then winter kicked in for real as March and April brought several big dumps, right when everyone wanted spring to show up.

On May 2, Michele and I headed down to the MN/IA border to hunt turkey during the traditional spring green-up. I had not hunted turkey for four years and was really looking forward to running down a gobbler. But the winter that just wouldn't quit belted us with another 17" of heavy, wet snow. We couldn't even get around on the country roads and our “hunt” was a total bust. (I am desperately looking for help from *BWJ* readers who have good turkey hunting land in Minnesota. I would love to have access to a property with a couple hundred acres of forests and fields. Maybe I could trade turkey hunting privileges for a fully guided/outfitted canoe/fishing trip in the BW-

CAW/Quetico. If interested, please contact me at 218-365-5168.)

Saturday May 11, the MN walleye opener, found most of the Ely area lakes still frozen. The ice went out May 9 on Blueberry Lake. I spent the opener splitting wood in snow squalls. Burntside and Vermilion went out May 15. I was getting nervous about my first Quetico trip so I called Kathy Zup, and she said they had just gotten into their lodge on Lac La Croix on May 16. So the bigger lakes went out a full three weeks later than normal and an amazing 45 days later than 2012. No doubt about it, 2013 was payback for the beautiful early spring of 2012.

TRIP # 1 (May 25–June 1) 4 people

5/25 Caught the tow with Zups into Black Robe Portage. It had rained hard all the previous week and Mark Zup said La Croix was still coming up 5" each day. There is no shortage of water in canoe country this spring. Between the late snow melt and recent rains, every swamp is full and the waterfalls are booming.

This first trip was planned to get a crew of Alabama bass anglers into some great topwater smallmouth action, but the late spring has me scrambling to make something happen. Any guide can get clients on fish when conditions are favorable; the best guides produce when things conspire against you. Smallmouth spawning temps (60 degrees) are still a good week away, so I decide to stash our packs on the portage into

Pulling/Dahlin and day trip in there to take the smallmouths' “temperature.” If they are still inactive in these smaller lakes, we are probably in trouble this week.

The four of us catch 16 smallmouth in three hours. All nice fish, mostly 16-inchers with one 18", one 19" and one 20". I use a Mimic Minnow Spin (orange), which runs about 3–4 feet deep. David is in my bow and he nets three good smallies on a yellow Lazy Ike. Now there is a lure from my childhood. In the other canoe, Mike and Dave catch a few on spinner baits and tube jigs. We don't move a lot of fish, but those we do are surprisingly aggressive and fight hard, which is encouraging. Clearly we are dealing with pre-spawn smallmouth mode even on the smaller/warmer lakes. This trip might morph into more of a walleye/lake trout affair than we planned. That's the beauty of having the canoe country Grand Slam at our disposal.

We paddle on down McAree Lake and camp on the 5-star site below Rebecca Falls. She is really roaring with lots of debris washing down. After a fajita supper, we spend the final hour of daylight fishing from shore and collectively land nine walleyes with 1/8 oz. yellow jigs and yellow Gulp Alive minnows. They are all 16" males, still in the current and just finishing up the spawn. Two other guys are camped nearby and they kindly fill us in on how things are going. They have caught lots of walleyes nearby and are



*My clients caught/released
43 smallmouth over 20 inches
this season, including this 21"
Lost Bay bronzeback.*

leaving in the morning so I decide to work the currents over tomorrow for the makings of a walleye fry.

5/26 We sleep in until 9:00 and I really needed it. The past two weeks have been peak stress level getting the Summer BWJ ready, finishing outdoor projects delayed by the late spring and prepping for the non-stop 10 week summer guiding season. Today is a bluebird special, seventy degrees and no wind.

David and I troll up 8 walleyes, putting four on the stringer. Dave and Mike, fishing mostly from shore just west of the western chute of Rebecca, take 18–16 inch walleyes, keeping another four for supper. Some of these male walleyes are still leaking milt so we can't be too far removed from the spawn.

On the way back to camp a canoe comes through; they are paddling from north of Atikokan to Ely. Last year they canoed from Winnipeg to York Factory on Hudson Bay. They had that quiet confidence that told me they really know what they are doing.

The guys really enjoy their first ever walleye fry. Canoe country walleyes know how to make a good first impression. It's always great to get that first walleye fry of the season under my belt. After supper, we all go out for a couple more hours of walleye fishing and collectively catch and release another 30—nothing big.

5/27 We move from Rebecca across Crooked Lake and on up into Elk Lake. We see zero people all day. Crooked is high and murky, so I don't think twice about passing over water that is usually primo topwater action in late-May. It will be a while before the bass get cranking on top here. We work into an east wind all the way up through Gardner Bay and find someone camped at my preferred spot

on Elk. We settle into a marginal site to the south, grill up some brats, and hit the hay.

5/28 I have seen enough of these guys to know they are up for an "aggressive day trip," so after filling them with eggs, sausage, and blueberry streusel, we are off through Hurn, Ted, and Milt to Newt Lake. Newt is the smallest lake I know of in this general area and will be the warmest water for early bass activity.

Dave and I make a beeline to the shallowest bays on Newt and catch 10 smallmouth including 6-16s, an 18, a 19 and 2-20s. The two 20s are a true double, as I land both with one scoop of the net. David hooks his on a small Dardevle spoon, and mine whacks a yellow spinner bait. Both are obvious females, heavy with eggs.

We all gather for lunch back over on Milt and then work it over pretty good. We find no fish up in the classic, woody cover, and for the second year in a row move a lot of fish but the largest goes just 16 inches. So I have yet to confirm big smallmouth in Milt although there is every reason to believe they are there. Trolling a Rapala on the way back across Ted, Mike nets a 25-inch lake trout, his first ever, so that is cool.

Back at camp I grill chicken, wild rice, and corn over the campfire. It is a perfect, starry night with the loons calling and no bugs. Tomorrow we will hit Elk hard for trout and bass.

5/29 I decide to let the sun work on the shallows while we troll for trout. David, in my bow catches, two 25-inchers in short order on a green Dardevle and I pick up a third trout with my Dr. Spoon (#285 in fish scale). The other canoe goes trout-less. David and I head up into the shallowest/warmest water we can find and immediately start seeing big bass in the clear water. One takes a swipe at my crank bait near

the surface, so I figure what the heck and tie on a Z-Pop 2. First cast, a chunky 16-incher blasts it off the top and the action is soon fast and furious. David hooks 19 smallmouth, all on a Mepps #3 brass spinner run right along the 5–10 foot break line, casting parallel to shore. Another half-dozen 30-inch pike attack the Mepps. David's biggest bass trio go 20, 20 1/2, and 21 1/2. Meanwhile, the big bass are just savaging my Z-Pop on every cast. I land 13 brutes, including 2-20s, a 21, and a 22. This 22 is the largest smallmouth I have ever taken on a topwater bait, so this is a real highlight for sure. There are no nests around yet. These are all heavy, pre-spawn fish. Some jump and tear up the water—they are not sluggish. Of our 32 bass in less than an hour, 7 trophies go over 20 inches. WOW! Across the lake, Mike and Dave net another 38 bass with three 20-inch trophies in the mix. We all meet at camp, scarf down a spaghetti feast, and head back out to bass fish until dark.

David and I get into the big bass again—17 fish including two more 20s and a 21 1/2. That 21 1/2 got me good. I net him and he wraps the front treble of the Z-Pop in the mesh. I am holding his lower jaw with my left hand, trying to extract the hook from the net with a forceps in my right hand, when he flops and drives one of the trebles into the underside of my right pointer finger. The netting has the hook pinned down tight into my flesh, and we have to land so Dave can come back to the stern and rescue me. Once he gets the netting out of the way, the barbless hook easily backs out and I am back into the big ol bass ASAP. Dave loses his hot Mepps to a pike, so I gave him a Vibrax #3 and he just continues to rack up the big fish. So I put on a Vibrax #4 brass color and the first cast get a 21-inch hog.

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On the second cast, I throw the Vibrax as far out as I can. *Wham!* An absolute monster of a smallmouth blasts it and does the old leap and headshake routine. I manage to keep her on through four more series of jumps and am bringing her alongside the net when the hook pops out and off she goes. I will never know for sure, but I have seen thousands of canoe country smallmouth, and I am certain I have never seen one that long and wide in the girth. An absolute behemoth of a bronzeback that will swim through my daydreams until I return next May.

Back at camp we learn Mike and Dave have gotten into more big bass as well. Our Elk Lake tally of smallmouth for the day is 96, 15 of these going over 20". Five went over 21, and then I had the one 22-incher. Throw in the two 20s from our Newt Lake combo and that makes 17 smallmouth over 20 inches in just our first

couple days of bass fishing. I have never done this before, so I am starting to warm up to this whole idea of pre-spawn smallmouth fishing. We have proven today that the bass do not have to be on the nests to get great shallow water action—including some topwater hits during the heat of the day. You better believe I will be trying to book a trip the week before Memorial Day next year to tap into this newfound trophy smallmouth pattern. And I thought I knew everything about canoe country smallmouth. Think again.

5/30 We pack up wet tents and portage through Cone and Argo in a light rain. The half-miler into "Dad's Lake" is still a butt-kicker, with three loads for me. Nobody is on Argo and the rain quits as I show them the Darky Lake pictographs. We set up on my regular east shore 4-star site, down some Zup's polish, and hustle over into Ballard Lake. We boat 8 walleyes on 1/8 oz. yellow jigs

with Impulse Sunrise Grub Tails. The largest goes 25" and I fillet some of the others for a walleye, bacon, and egg brunch in the morning. Being able to put fillets on ice until we want a fish fry is just another of the many things I love about the *BWJ* Insulated Food Pack System. We enjoy a hot chocolate on this frosty night and notice a campfire up on the north end. This is our first sign of people since the one camp on Elk.

5/31 After our walleye brunch we portage on over into Josey Lake for some more smallmouth fishing. On the way we catch 10 bass in the Darky River rapids, a 19" being the biggest. Josey is sub-par, as we only catch 25 smallies and all are under 16 inches. David and I go down into the Darky River a ways and I am into steady action on 16-inch bass with the Z-Pop before thunderstorms chase us into the woods and then back to camp. In the morning, it is over Goat Hill to

Black Robe portage and the tow back to Crane Lake.

I can't say enough about what a great group this was to guide. All were experienced anglers and hunters, but none had a lot of canoeing experience. It just proves the point once again that canoe-tripping experience is overrated. I will take guys who are willing to paddle, portage, and fish hard over those who think they know it all anytime. They trusted me to push them hard when needed so we could maximize our precious time on prime water. Not once did they second-guess my decisions or whine about the effort required to carry out the game plan. The payoff was the best big smallmouth action I have ever had in Quetico. I have caught a lot more 18-inch fish on many a canoe trip but never so many top-end smallmouth trophies. If only every group was this easy and fun to guide...

TRIP #2 (June 5–12) 4 People

This trip was originally booked by a husband/wife from New York who had done my Hunters Island trip in 2010. That was mostly a travel-everyday type trip, but we squeezed in enough fishing for me to see they have a real passion for the game. We set up a Grand Slam trip up to Kawnipi, and then in March he was diagnosed with cancer. The prognosis for effective treatment was encouraging, but our Quetico trip would have to be postponed. So I was left scrambling to fill this hole in my schedule and was fortunate to find Dave and Bob from Illinois, who have limited canoe trip experience, and Bob W from Kentucky, who had done 10 trips with the highly-regarded guiding duo of Harry and Mary Lambirth. I got to hear a lot about how they operated and he got to see that I like to portage a lot more than other guides.

6/5 It's a cool and drizzly day

as we paddle up to Prairie Portage, check through, and move on through Burke and North Bay into what I call Dahlberg Lake (the lake within Kings Point between Ranger Bay and White Island of Basswood Lake). This is a 5-star camp on a great little bass lake. We fish a couple hours in the evening and take 25 bass, but the largest is 18 inches. Tacos for dinner.

6/6 Still cool and overcast today but not raining. We day trip up and over the five trails (maps only show 3) into McNaught Lake. Our group catches 85 bass, of which 55 are 14–16-inch largemouth. The 30 smallies are all under 15", and we see no bass beds in the shallows yet. The Mimic Minnow Spin is the hot bait for the day. All in all, lots of action on medium-sized bass.

Back out on Basswood, we fish our way down to Kings Point picking up a few fish here and there. We stop to check out the old ranger cabins, which are still in good condition. It is always interesting to imagine what life must have been like living out here in the Quetico. We pick up a few trout and walleyes across from U.S. Point and Bob W gets a 19 1/2" smallmouth on a jig and plastic in 20 feet of water. Basswood is still running high and cold with few fish in the shallows. They are staging on the main break line, and you need to go down after them to get serious action. I do pick up a few 18s on the Z-Pop 2, but we are talking a lot of empty casts between strikes.

Just after sunset we see a helicopter come in from the north, then hear it hovering off over the Basswood River for about 15 minutes. Helicopters in canoe country are never a good thing. Pretty soon we see it lift off and head east towards Prairie Portage with the basket hanging down. It appears to be carrying a body, and we

learn the next day from paddlers coming in that there was a drowning fatality. It was a sobering reminder that the water is still running high and cold, and dumping is a serious matter in the early season.

It's beaver wood bratwurst for dinner, and we are able to enjoy a rare show of northern lights around the campfire. The northern lights are great, but I am more excited about the sky finally clearing and getting some sun to heat up the shallows tomorrow.

6/7 All three of these guys are "retirement age" and they let me know that the day trip into McNaught Lake was not something they want to do every day. So I start contemplating my options—where I can get them into fish without a lot of portaging. We all agree to move up to Shade Lake and base out of there for the next three days or so. This would give Basswood more time to warm up, and we could finish our trip back down there when more bass would be in the shallow zone.

We camp on the mid-lake peninsula 5-star site on Shade. There are a couple other groups on the lake, but they don't seem to be out fishing. Bob W and I work the south shore of Shade and Bob boats 16 smallmouth, mostly sight-fishing nests, then dropping a jig and plastic Chomper crayfish in there. His scorecard includes 2-18 1/2s, 1-19, 1-20, and a beautiful 21. I get squat on the topwater stuff. Dave catches a 20" on a Skitter Pop (#5).

6/8 Dave and I decide to day trip up to Sultry and paddle Shade, Noon and Summer in short order. We work hard for only 20 smallies, one goes 20. We drop back to Noon Lake where we pick up 50 more fish. I get the biggest—a wide-body 21" on a Pop R. We see some nests, but not like one would expect for early June. "The



*This 34" laker gave Dave a great battle and a memory he will cherish forever.
(North Bay, Basswood Lake)*

Bobs" caught 50 bass on Shade Lake today, giving the group 125 on the day with three more trophies over 20". For the trip that makes 270 smallmouth, with 6 over 20" and 10 more over 19".

6/9 We all head over to fish West Lake, but it is a very windy proposition today. Bob Y and I fish the eastern half and net only 5 smallmouth and 5 largemouth, nothing big. The others catch 15 smallmouth on the western third and many are nice 16–19 inch fish. So this lake has potential on the right day. It is raining at 5:00 back at camp, so we do spaghetti and call it a day.

6/10 We pack it up and move back down to the top end of North Bay. We find a great 5-star site open even though there are plenty of other people around. This is more company than what I typically see when I portage into my backcountry haunts, but this is what these guys want. Bob W and I head out into Lost Bay, and by 6:00 we are lighting it up on the surface. Bob is making 40–50 yard super casts with a big, heavy Zara Spook. He calls one particular green Zara Spook "Freddy" and another white one "Lucille." Then he starts telling me if I want to catch as many bass as he is that I need to give my lure a name. Twice I have pike break my X-Rap Pop off and miraculously it floats back up, I tie it back on and continue fishing. I say something like "That lure is living a charmed life" so he takes to calling it "Charmin." On the next cast I blast a 21-inch bronzeback and am forced to concede that maybe there is something to being on a first name basis with your lures. I get 16 nice fish, including 2 over 20", and Bob lands another 18 nice smallmouth with one over 20". Meanwhile, Dave and Bob Y catch 22 bass with one over 20". We eat our Zup's polish and baked beans, which means

we have no dinner entrees left for tomorrow. It's fish for our last supper or go hungry.

6/11 Dave and I start out by trolling for lakers, and he has the touch from the get-go. Trolling the main deep basin out on North Bay, he nails trout on the first three passes, all on a blue Walleye Diver with no extra weight. The thing can't be getting down over 30 feet. The second laker is a 34-inch beauty so we take pictures and then head west behind Neil Island and switch to smallmouth mode. Lots of canoes out and about today, but we do our own thing and nobody really gets in our way. Dave catches a couple walleyes (which we dearly need for dinner) and some pike along with 20 smallmouth (several go 19"), so this gives him his canoe country Grand Slam for the day and he is a happy camper. I get on a nice little topwater run around 8:30 along the shoreline north of Cigar Island. As the sun sets we switch back to walleye mode and Dave comes through with a couple more 22" walleyes at the eleventh hour to complete our walleye meal.

Back at camp the others have no walleyes, so it is a good thing we had Dave along to provide for us all today. A pack of wolves makes a big racket off to the south as we dig in and enjoy another bug-free, cool night around the campfire. We are homeward bound in the morning.

We finish the trip with 403 smallmouth, 40 pike and a few trout and walleyes. Eleven of the bass are over 20", so that makes 28 trophy bass taped and accurately measured at over 20 inches on these first two trips. Not bad for a record late spring that I thought would completely mess up the smallmouth fishing routine. Despite being limited to well short of my normal range, these guys caught a lot of nice fish and were fun and easy to be with.

Two Quetico trips down, three to go.

TRIP #3 (June 17–25) 4 people

Loyal *BWJ* readers already know that Sturgeon Lake is my favorite base of operations for smallmouth fishing. Other lakes like Crooked, Basswood, Pickerel, and Saganagons produce a lot of big bass, but they attract a lot more people. That's because they are pretty easy to get to. I prefer to fish the more remote waters of canoe country—the fishing is usually outstanding and the overall wilderness experience is always better than on the well-traveled routes. Going beyond the average canoe trip angler usually means portaging and then portaging some more. In the case of Sturgeon, we usually take the tow to Twin Falls and then there are only six relatively short portages on the Maligne River to reach the big lake. While the \$200/person round-trip tow discourages some (I think this is well worth the cost) it is really paddling up the current of the Maligne that steers most paddlers to other routes.

My best guess is that I have been up/down the Maligne about 20 times in the past 20 years, so not many know its idiosyncrasies better than I. If each canoe has a stern paddler that actually knows how to J-stroke (as opposed to ruddering to steer), it is not that difficult to reach a camp mid-way down Sturgeon the first night out. The maps show 5 portages between Twin Falls and Sturgeon, but there are 2 or 3 more rapids that, depending on water levels, are too much for most people to paddle up through or line, so I make improvised portages around these tricky spots. If I was running the Quetico, I would send crews with chain saws into these spots and add a couple more "real portage" trails along the Maligne River and extend the portages that are already there. This would



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take a lot of the angst out of getting up to the actual portage landings without fighting the current. But it is what it is, so if you want to go to Sturgeon via the United States, you learn to deal with whatever the Maligne throws at you. There have been times when I detoured all the way around through Brent, Conmee, the Death March Portages into Delahey, then up through Camel and Fred to Sturgeon. This eats up half your fishing time, so I have learned to not plan trips up the Maligne until mid-June or later. Another part of the Maligne River navigation equation is that most of the stronger current is above Tanner Lake, so I get to assess the paddling skills of my group before this junction, and if they are lacking on the lower Maligne they will struggle on the upper section. When this is the case, I usually detour off into Pooh Bah,

which is an outstanding base camp fishing lake too.

This particular group is Bill, his son Josh, and nephew Kyle. Josh and Kyle are in their 30s, so I figure since Bill claims to be an experienced wilderness paddler all the boys have to do is sit in the bow and power up. We share the towboat ride with 6 guys from Minnesota who are *BWJ* subscribers, so I tell them all I know about Pooh Bah and wish them luck (I later heard from them, and they had great fishing for 5 species on Pooh Bah this week). Kyle and I are able to get up through all the current areas except one. Bill and Josh need to portage a couple other spots, but all in all we make it halfway down Sturgeon to the big beach 5-star site by dark and are in position to fish hard in all directions for the rest of the trip. We enjoy a fajita dinner by moonlight at the campfire—and only one

stray mosquito.

6/18 The day breaks sunny and calm. I soon learn that Kyle is allergic to nuts, so deleting cereal, granola bars, gorp, cookies etc. from his menu starts to make his meal plan look pretty sad. It would have been nice to know this little detail ahead of time. We head out to fish with Kyle, and I picking up 30 smallmouth in the big northernmost bay. I take 16 fish on the Z-Pop, including a 19 and 4-18s. We see a few males on nests, but it is hard to see in the high, murky water. I conclude the spawn is now largely over. There are not a lot of big fish in the shallow water zone, but we move decent numbers of medium size bass and they hit pretty aggressively. In the evening, we switch to walleye rigs and catch 15 up at the “walleye straits.” Eight of these went back to camp and onto the ice for tomorrow



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night. Our day one total reads 45 smallmouth, 15 walleye, and 10 pike. Not a bad start. Still clear and calm tonight.

6/19 I send Kyle and Josh out to fish the proven north side of the lake and take Bill to explore new shoreline along the southern side of Sturgeon. We pick up 20 bass and a half-dozen pike. The biggest smallie went an even 20" and hit my yellow X-Rap Pop. The other guys got a few bass (one 20-incher) and five walleyes on plastics.

We enjoy a midday walleye feast and make plans to bushwhack into Moxness this evening, but the weather appears too stormy. I don't want to haul these guys all the way in there when the weather is threatening to blow us off the water. So we all get baths and then elect to head back over to the "walleye straits." I boat nine on a gold Reef Runner-Little Ripper by casting up into the current and working it downstream along the bottom. Pretty cool to get walleyes by casting rather than the usual trolling. Distant lightning passes by before dark but no rain.

6/20 Today we are off to fish what I call the Lonely Ponds. Maybe 12 miles round-trip with four short portages and a dash of bushwhacking. Not an especially tough day, but I later find out the crew thought otherwise. On the way over, Kyle decides to carry the second canoe before I get back

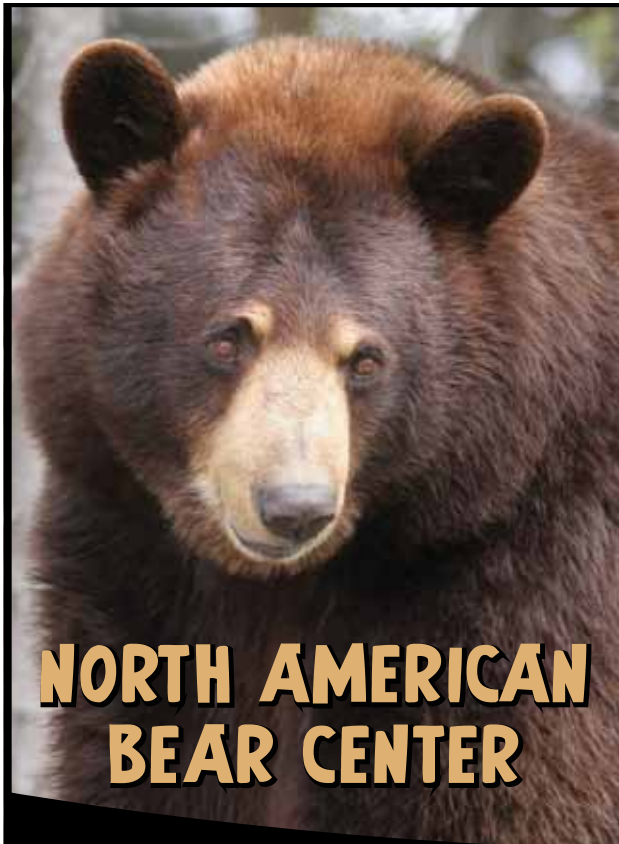
from portaging the other canoe over. I meet him on a wet, sloping rock and tell him to walk the far left edge, so he can get purchase along the edge of dirt. He ignores my warning, steps exactly in the slick spot, goes down and puts a big crack in the Wenonah Champlain. These canoes are lightweight because they are very thin-walled and are not made to be dropped on rocks. Later he shears both stainless steel bolts off the bow seat in my Bell Northwoods—they all insisted on using those aluminum frame seat/backrest things, and they proved to be brutal on all the canoe seats. I despise canoe seat backrests for a couple reasons. Number one, if you are leaning back to where you are actually using the back support then, by definition you can't be paddling. Not with any decent level of thrust anyway. Second, the backrests throw off the balance of the canoe when flipping it, because no way in hell am I ever going to have one on my stern seat. These guys are like half my age; they don't need a lousy back rest. But they think they do, so I try to tolerate the bloody things for the rest of the trip but vow, "Never again."

We have always smoked the smallmouth in these two little lakes off Lonely, and today lives up to expectations. I paddle Josh around the entire perimeter of the second lake, and we net 54 and 42 small-

mouth respectively. I take most of mine on a #4 Vibrax running 3–5 feet deep and Josh sticks with a jig and Impulse Grub tail. We have clearly missed the spawn as most of the fish are 12–15 inches with a few going 16–17. Despite hitting the post-spawn funk and thunderstorms all around, ninety-something bass is pretty good. This lake has a lot of primo spawning gravel, and I know it holds big fish from other years. I have a few hogs on, but they get off before coming into the net. One burps up a 5-inch cisco, so this tells me they have a very good food source in here.

Bill and Kyle don't move too many fish on the other lake, but they do land an 18, a 19, and a 20-inch smallmouth. I figure we can bass cast the upper section of Sturgeon on our way back to camp but they all vote for calling it a day. I can't resist paddling through the always reliable "walleye straits" and quickly catch and release four 22-inchers on the Reef Runner. Even this doesn't change their mindset, which is all about laying around camp.

6/21 I make a big breakfast of pancakes, eggs, sausage, bacon, and blueberry streusel, hoping to maybe elevate the fishing fever amongst this crew. They seem perpetually tired with no get up and go. The weather is windy and threatening rain again. Around 5:00, Kyle and I start working along the northern shoreline of the big lake



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and finally break through with the topwater baits. We net 20 smallmouth, all very nice fish, including 3-19s and 3-20s. We lose another 10 fish that are in this class as well. For some reason the bigger bass came into the classic shoreline cover tonight and hit topwater like they really wanted it. Maybe they are finally getting their appetites back after the late spawn and we will have consistent bites, at least in the evenings. Tonight was the kind of big bass action we came here for. Right before dark, a big bronzeback busts my Z-Pop and shakes the hook in a spectacular leap and shake. Another big bass pounces on the plug, I don't get a good hook set, and he gets off too. The plug is laying there next to the canoe and a 2-foot pike grabs it and breaks my line, but the Z-POP that has caught so many trophy bass for me this past month miraculously floats back to the surface. I reach my hand out to

pick it up but that damn pike engulfs it again, and this time it's a goner.

6/22 It's raining in the morning, so we cook another big breakfast under the tarp and plan for a run into Moxness when the weather brightens. By late afternoon we are bush-whacking in there, and all goes well. I make two trips on everything with the two canoes and they just carry the fishing gear and paddles. It's breezy on Moxness but we take 30 smallmouth including a 17, 18, 19, and a 20. We move into Little Moxness and find it all stirred up with pollen and/or runoff of some kind; usually this is a clear gem of a little lake. It rains hard on us, and we manage to catch 50 smallies, but the size is not up to the usual standards in here. It seems the bigger fish are laying low today. Josh does get one 20-incher.

We make it back to camp at dark, and I cook steaks on the campfire with mashed potatoes

and green bean casserole. I am not hearing any complaints about the food, but I do get an earful about how hard the day was. And we didn't even get out of camp until 2:00. Go figure?

On my June trips I feel it is important to keep my clients out fishing right until dark, as that last hour is often the best action of the whole day. This means I routinely cook dinner at 10:30 and don't get the dishes cleaned and everything put away until pushing midnight. This is the nature of the game so I just accept the fact that I can "sleep when I'm dead." On the other hand, it makes my typical workday eighteen hours all summer long, so it is always nice when my clients appreciate this extra effort. I get a kick out of guides who pull up to the resort dock with their boat and motor at 8:00 and have their anglers back by 5:00 for a hot shower and dinner served up in the lodge. That is like

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a day off for me. Apparently these anglers are clueless that they are missing the best parts of the day.

Tonight I brave the hungry mosquitoes and take a midnight bath on the beach. I can feel the grime and stress of this trip wash away and am looking forward to heading for home tomorrow. The fishing totals have been solid on this trip: 305 smallmouth with 8 over 20", 50 walleye and 55 pike. But the trip has taken a real toll on my gear and disposition: broken seats in both canoes, big crack/leak in the one canoe, broken coffee press, puncture hole in the water filter bag, badly bent tent poles, and for a week I have watched these guys fling \$150 Bending Branches paddles up onto the rocks every portage. I wouldn't do that with a \$25 discount store plastic paddle. I couldn't afford to guide trips if I had to

replace equipment at this rate of attrition. No doubt about it, I see the world through a completely different lens than these guys.

6/23 Turns out we are not "out of the woods" yet. Kyle is really lily dipping up in my bow all the way down Sturgeon so, knowing I might need something more before the day is over, I encourage him to put some muscle into his stroke. He says he has a sore shoulder. I also notice Bill is letting his canoe get broadside to the wind and warn him that this can be a problem in waves and current. He says he is trying. I didn't reply that the Maligne doesn't care about "trying." You simply gotta execute without mistakes, or the river will make you pay.

So we make the first portage out of Sturgeon, paddle across the small bay to the second portage, hike that trail, and

then they realize they have left their two rod cases back on the other side. So Bill goes back to get them and returns without them. Turns out they must have left them back on the first portage. I ask who wants to paddle with me to go make the half-hour retrieve and Bill says to just leave them. Say what? They just left a thousand dollars of new St. Croix rods lying back there rather than expend a little effort to go get them. No wonder they treated my gear with so little respect.

So off we go in the pouring rain towards the third portage going down the Maligne. Some of you will recognize this portage as the one with the nice campsite. Kyle and I float the Bell through the current before the portage without incident, and I hold up to await the other canoe. All you need to do is have the stern guy rudder his way down through the eddy

and you're home free. But Bill comes through the current with his paddle held up chest high. When the current spins him a bit he can't counter the momentum quickly enough, and they roll the Wenonah over. I have been harping at them all week to wear and zip their lifejackets, but they haven't listened. They have them on now, but they are not zipped, so they are flopping around as they grope for the canoe. The potential problem here is the next portage is around a waterfall and it is less than a hundred yards away. I am concerned the current will push them on down there so I tell Kyle to quickly pull ashore, and I unload our packs as fast as possible. When we get back out to the swamped canoe, I am relieved to see the whole mess is being held in a swirling pocket of water rather than heading downstream. So I have Bill grab our gunwale and we tow him to shore. I have made them lash the packs in today, so now we toss our bow line to Josh and try to backpaddle the whole works to shore. We are not making much progress, so I yell at Kyle to put something into his paddle for a change and he snaps back at me. Under the circumstances, I was shocked at what a feeble effort he was able to muster. We finally get the whole outfit ashore and sort things out. The tent pack now weighs about 150 lbs. So my record of never having one of my clients dump in the current or wind is over, but the water is warm and nobody is hurt.

The rest of the way down to Tanner Lake we portage all the current areas, even those without real trails. We have lunch on Tanner in the rain, then go down to my usual four-star site on the west end. Thankfully the sun comes out, and we are able to dry the tents out. Things are looking up. I

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assume we are going to give the Tanner smallmouth a go after supper, but I have no takers. Too bad, I'm sure it would have been good. I am already looking forward to the next trip—starting in just three days.

TRIP #4 (June 29–July 6) 6 people

Like a ball team that has taken a drubbing the game before, I am determined to make this a bounce-back trip. A professional must quickly turn the page and start anew, and these guys make it easy. I have Jim and his three adult sons plus a family friend. All have canoe trip experience except Andy, the youngest. I realize from the get-go that Jason and Chris are going to give their little brother, the rookie, a lot of razzing. But I aim to make sure Andy paddles and fishes with me so we can more than hold our own.

Zups tow us into Bottle Portage in the rain, and it is the

usual muddy, buggy hell hole. We run into a former client of mine, Alan Mize, on Iron Lake. Alan specializes in working scented plastic lizards along the rocks for smallmouth, and his old standby method has produced well over the past week. He reports the topwater action has not been as good as usual with the late spring and all. Then we run into Tim Maas and his family having lunch at Curtain Falls. They have been up in Conmee and caught 30 big walleyes over the course of three evenings. That sounds good, because that is where we are heading.

We settle on the four-star island site in the northeast corner of Sunday Bay and rig up the bass rods. I put Jason in my bow, as he is anxious to try out his trout stream fly-fishing skills on canoe country smallmouth. I order him to tie on one of the Dahlberg Divers that

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he purchased from GreatLakes-flys.com, and we start along the bay leading to the Argo portage. Jason misses the first few strikes, but once he begins strip-setting the hook he starts sticking them pretty good. He boats 15 real nice bass, including a heavy 19 and a more slender 20. I hook another half-dozen good fish on the Z-POP, so we are off to an encouraging start with the topwater approach.

6/29 We day trip all the way down and around Friday Bay and enjoy very good topwater bass action. My hunch that Crooked smallies would finally get cranking this week after the cold, flood stage conditions for most of June is panning out nicely. Jason loves the fly rod action, and he boats another couple of 19s and a pair of 20 inch beauties. Mike gets his own pair of 20-inch trophies on an X-Rap Pop and Chris breaks

into the 20-inch club, throwing a Pop R. I lose a couple dandy bass alongside the canoe while reaching for the net. All told, we have an 85 fish day with 5 trophies over 20 inches. We paddle back into a gorgeous orange sunset to a beaver wood bratwurst dinner. The threat of rain is gone and won't return for the rest of the trip. It is cool tonight; I didn't bring a sleeping bag, so it might be a bit chilly. I will take that over hot anytime.

6/30 It's moving day—eight hours of hot, buggy triple portaging from Crooked up into Brent. We stop for lunch on Argo, and there is nobody around. Nobody on Cone or Brent either. We take the four-star site on the peninsula on the west end. After a spaghetti feast, Jim takes Jason out with his fly rod behind camp, and Jason nails two more 18s and a 20 on the Dahlberg Diver. Dad

had fun watching his son fly-fish for the first time.

7/1 We cook up a big breakfast and head out to troll for trout late morning. It is sunny and 80 degrees as I coach Andy how to troll a Dr. Spoon for lakers. The only fishing he has ever done is pan fish with a worm. In less than an hour he brings in two 26 inchers. I add a third trout of the same size and Jim and Mike get a couple of trout too. Andy lets his brothers hear about his catch when he learns that they came up empty on the trout. They did catch 20 more bass, including our seventh trophy over 20 inches for the trip.

I grill chicken on cedar coals with wild rice and corn, and we head out for walleye until dark. It proves to be a tough night. Six guys, but only 8 walleyes are scooped into the nets. Four were too big to, eat so I fillet the others and put on

ice until we have enough for a meal. The cool thing today was that Andy had never caught anything but a bluegill, and here on Brent he caught six fish: 2 lake trout, 2 pike, 1 walleye and 1 bass—the Grand Slam on just six fish!

7/2 We move up to Conmee on a hot, dead calm sunny day. Nobody around here either. We have not seen a single canoe since Crooked. My regular mid-lake campsite is tight for 3 tents, and the landing is bad for 3 canoes, so I take the camp on the island in the far east narrows. It has better tent sites and landings, but the shade is marginal. I grill rib eyes on beaver wood with mashed potatoes and beans. There are no leftovers with these 3 boys around. By the way, as a trail snack they brought along 8 pounds of gummy worms. I thought those of you out there that recoil in horror at the weight of my real food menu would get a kick out of this. Naturally, I helped them polish off the bag over the course of the week. A cow and calf moose swim across the channel in front of us while we are sitting down to dinner. They are dunking their heads to shake some of the flies.

Tim Maas and his family left me a note by the campfire. Turns out 11 year old Ben had the hot hand this trip. He wrote: “Dear Stu, All of the walleyes I caught in the honey hole were bigger than any I have ever caught before. I caught 4 of our 5 biggest fish including a 29" and another 29" (well technically it was 28 1/2" but a real fisherman always rounds up). All together my walleyes were 29, 29, 28, 28, 26, 26, 26, 25, 23. All were bigger than my Insula Lake record. When I bend my arm there is pain. Good luck, Ben Maas.” Tim and I first discovered this tremendous trophy walleye fishery back in 2004 and have since watched our partners



STUART OSTHOFF

Most of my anglers focus on smallmouth, but when we did break out the walleye rigs this year, we had very good action. (Conmee Lake)

catch and release hundreds of big walleyes here. It is great to see that his son Ben is now a member of this exclusive club.

We are up at the honey hole by 7:30 and find the bite steady for good fish. The group tallies 16 walleyes with 10 of these between 24 and 28 inches. The six others are 20–23 so I keep

the four smallest to fill out our walleye dinner. We also lose a couple bruisers next to the gunwale; it's hard not to get too excited when you see these big fish below the boat. Yellow jigs with 3" Impulse Minnows work the best. I get 2-24s and a 26" casting my gold metallic Reef Runner right after dark. I like

this method a lot more than dragging a jig around in the rocks. All in all a good night for big fish with four of us getting a walleye over 26". Chris is top gun with a 25, 26, 2-27s and 2-28s.

7/3 We down a bacon and cheese omelet and I tour the bay with Jason and his fly rod. We find very few decent bass in the shoreline zone. Too hot and sunny. I do get one 18 1/2 on a Baby Torpedo, but that's about it. We go back to camp, take baths and hang out in the shade.

We have an early walleye supper and hustle down to the honey hole. We catch 10 walleyes total, but most go only 20 inches. There is one 24 and one 26, but they don't seem real active tonight. Jointed Shad Raps (#7) work the best, and the Reef Runners produce again too.

7/4 During breakfast a medium-sized bull moose swims across in the same place as the cow and calf did yesterday. We break camp and head west. We stop for lunch on the 5-star site on William- wish we had time to stay and fish here. Nobody around. Takes 7 hours from east end of Conmee to the 4-star site on the east shore of Darky. Very hot portaging and the deer flies really get their licks in today. We all take a badly needed swim, and I thank God I didn't have my last crew on this trip. We might still be there. This group is just plain good people, and Jim has really enjoyed watching Jason catch all those big bass on his fly rod, Chris rack up all those big walleyes, and Andy step up and paddle and portage like a veteran canoe-tripper. Tomorrow it's over Goat Hill and the tow back to Crane Lake. Four down and one Quetico trip to go.

TRIP #5 (July 10-18) Ely to Atikokan - 6 people

7/10 My intent with my last Quetico trip of the season is usually to offer a move-every-

day paddle and travel type trip. The last couple years I have done the Hunters Island route in 9-10 days, and those were good trips, but they left little time and energy for the folks to fish. So I decided to shorten the route to go from Ely to Beaverhouse Lake, more like paddling across Quetico than trying to circumnavigate the whole park. Turns out most of the guys on this trip do want to do some serious fishing, so I make a plan designed to lay over on a couple proven hotspots.

We paddle through a one-foot chop up to Prairie Portage. This grows to two foot swells on North Bay, where I relocate the weakest paddler into my bow, and we go the rest of the trip just fine. This is another bunch of really great guys who really help me renew the faith and put the Sturgeon Lake trip further behind me. I have 3 retirees in their mid-60s, one guy my age, and Jason is only 40. He proves to be an outstanding portager and really makes my job much easier than normal. We make the 4-star site on Shade, have our fajita dinner, and hang out around the campfire getting to know each other.

7/11 Shade to McNeice Lake today. The 125 rodder into Gray's Lake still has the confusing intersection of trail options and despite my warning to bear to the east, three of the guys veer off and it takes a bit to get everything back together where I have dropped the canoes. Somebody put logs over the worst mud hole so those with decent balance can now stay pretty clean here. We take the 4-star site on McNeice, and despite reports of fires since I was last here, the view down the length of the lake is still pretty as ever.

We all wash the day's portaging grime off with a cool swim and head out fishing. Jason catches a couple small lake trout, but the rest of us come up empty. After a bratwurst

dinner I take Cal out for smallmouth. We only find small fish in tight to the shore. There are a lot of trees fallen into the lake from the 2006 and 2011 fires, so this lake would probably be good in June for bass. I finally get the Z POP into a 21" beauty off a rocky point—that makes my day. The fires were patchy here, and there are still plenty of mature white pines standing. There is something about this lake, just a feeling or mood I always sense that says, "Now this is what a wilderness lake should be."

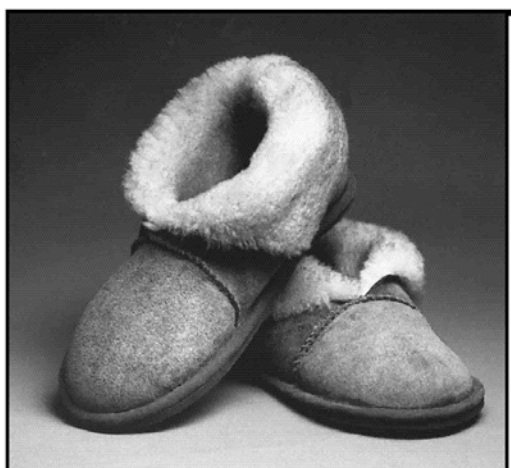
7/12 We down a big hot breakfast and tackle the big portage into Kahshahpiwi. The trail has been mostly reclaimed from the fires, but it is still a workout on this hot and humid day. We catch a nice tailwind up Kahshahpiwi and Keefer and pull into my 5-star favorite site on Sark with time to fish—after a supper of Jack Daniels shredded beef and mashed potatoes. I paddle Vince around with his fly rod until dark, but it is pretty windy, and we only move small bass in the shallow shoreline zone. Vince is a retired fisheries biologist, so I tap this resource for all I can. One interesting thing I learned from him is that even though lake trout spawn in the fall, the fry do not actually hatch until early spring. This saves them having to survive through a long, lean winter and gives them a head start on all the other baitfish hatching later in the spring.

7/13 It is hot, muggy, and destined to be a gut-check day. Plan is to cover Sark, Cairn, Heronshaw, Shelley, Keats, Chatterton, and Russell. We can't find the portage out of the northeast corner of Heronshaw, but I know it is there because I took it coming the other way a couple years ago. The map shows two options; the northerly one is definitely not there, so we take the southerly trail through a swamp

and then still have to run a small rapids into Kawnipi. Cal and I slide through in the Bell Northwoods, but the Wenonah Champlain behind us takes a hit, and a rock puts another puncture through it. This canoe has been snakebit for me; I am getting good at applying epoxy patches to it. I will never buy another Kevlar canoe without a gel-coat covering. The thin skin boats are lighter, but not nearly tough enough for my style of wilderness canoe tripping. We duct tape the leak, and this will suffice until I get home for real repairs.

We see one canoe heading south on Cairn and another at Snake Falls. Then we run into Andy Hill and Chuck Wick from Ely at Split Rock Falls. They are basically doing our route in reverse. They sure look hot in their knee-high rubber "Ely" boots, and ironically question our leather Gore-Tex dry boot approach—I just bite my tongue. It is too late to teach these old dogs a far better new trick. We get the camp below Chatterton Falls, enjoy a long refreshing swim, and have a spaghetti feast. The ankle biters come out with a vengeance for the first time this season and are nasty until almost dark.

7/14 More overcast today, so a bit cooler as we take the hike up along the scenic series of Chatterton Falls. We pick a few handfuls of blueberries, but the late spring means I will miss the main crop this year. We have to portage the current between Russell and Sturgeon Narrows, as there is really good water flow for July. I suppose I am gun shy after watching the Maligne River fiasco. I have been talking up the 5-Star big beach peninsula site I plan to stay at on Sturgeon, but as we approach I spot a bunch of tents there. Darn. It would have been nice to swim and fish out of here for our layover day. I think this is the first time I have found it full when I really



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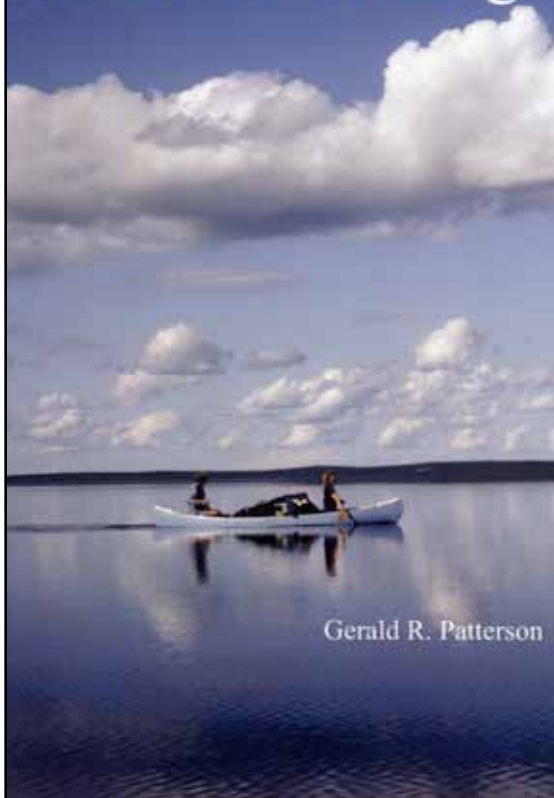
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wanted to stay there. So on we paddle to a nice 4-star site on the northwest shore of Sturgeon. It is raining so we get the tarp up, but the mosquitos are so bad we retreat to the tents until supper. I find enough driftwood to grill the chicken, and the bugs chase us back into the tents for good tonight.

7/15 We find three portages and two beaver dam pullovers on Jean Creek. Nobody is around on Burntside Lake, so we take the 5-star site on the east shore and settle in for a couple days. It is breezy with a walleye chop, so I figure it is worth a shot during midday. The two canoes combine for 11 walleyes, I catch 5 on yellow 1/8 oz. jig with yellow Impulse Grub Tails down around "Taryn's Reef." So we have our walleye fry, and it is a hit. Three eagles and a couple gulls entertain us with who gets the carcasses.

7/16 After a bacon and cheese omelet, four of us head over to Jean Lake to troll for lake trout. Jason and I each get a small trout on Dr. Spoons, but it is super windy and hard to fish. Cal manages to land a 36-inch northern, which he says is his biggest ever so he is happy about that. Back to camp for our rib eye steak dinner. Everyone is feeling full and lazy after supper, but Charlie, our one non-angler in the bunch, kindly offers to paddle me back over to Rogue Lake so I can try topwater bass fishing for a few hours before dark. It is windy on the way over and a storm front just misses us, making for slow action the first hour. But after the weather clears and the sun sets, the bass turn on and start whacking every touch-down of my X-Rap Pop. I move 25+ fish that last hour, including a 17, 18, and 19 that I actually land. I didn't bring a net on this trip, and I am reminded why that is so important because several bass in that 20-inch category thrashed off at

the gunwale while I was trying to lip them. It is such a rare treat for me to actually sit in the bow and cast to the primo topwater bass cover, if only for an hour. What a wonderful way for me to end the 2013 Quetico fishing season. This has been the best big bass season I have ever had.

Tomorrow it is out to Eden Island on Quetico Lake for our last camp and then on to Beaverhouse, where Michele will meet us with the truck. This group has been a pleasure to guide, as they have been so helpful with the camp chores and very considerate of each other the entire trip across Quetico. This route has made for a much more enjoyable pace than hurrying around Hunters Island, so I plan to repeat it next July. If your canoe trips seem to always turn into paddling, portaging, and camping—and not enough fishing—consider joining me for a true Quetico fishing adventure. We will customize a trip to target your specific fishing goals, and you will spend a lot more time fishing and actually catching fish. See my Grand Slam Guide Service ad on page 99 for 2014 openings.

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Since 2008 I have led 8 guys on a 10-day canoe trip down the Sutton River for big brook trout every August. The fishing is always so unbelievable that the demand has outpaced my one trip/year offering, so I decided to do two back-to-back ten-day trips in 2013. Getting the food supplies ready to feed 8 people for 20 days (that's 480 "real food" servings) is a bit daunting, but our air charter service has enough freezer space for round #2, so it all worked out. My co-guide, Len, realized he left his passport home in Florida, so the morning we left we faxed a copy to my house, and that got us through the border at Grand

Portage. Except the couple-hour delay put us right behind a bad accident near Nipigon. All traffic accidents with fatalities in Canada mean a thorough investigation, and long story longer we sat there on the highway for 8 hours—nobody moved either direction. We ate our Sutton River first day lunch for dinner that night in the truck. We made it into Hearst with no sleep and no time to spare to organize all the gear and board the floatplane.

The six guys on this trip all know each other from work, so they pair off amongst themselves and prefer to stick with the same partners for the whole trip. All six are primarily spin fishing—they brought one fly rod to share. This is different from our norm as most clients on this trip are hardcore fly fishermen. So off we go with seven of us pounding the water with #5 Vibrax Spinners. Only Len is using a fly rod.

The river is pretty low this year so the fish are more concentrated; there appears to be less "fishable" water to the first-time visitor, but Len and I know better as we have fished the Sutton under all conditions. We know it pays to slow down and carefully work every darker-looking vein of the crystal clear water. But after a couple days it is becoming obvious to me that the others are moving too fast and passing up water that we should be fishing more thoroughly. So my pleas to slow down evolve from "pretty please" to direct orders by day four. It works, and we catch and release a trip high this day of 368 fish. We get a frost with the northern lights this night and see no rain until day seven. Everyone gets plenty of big trout action and the weather and bugs cooperate beautifully for the most part all week.

On the seventh afternoon I beach the canoe and wade out into one of my favorite holes



I caught/released over 2,000 Sutton River brook trout before finally landing that elusive two-footer. This fish measured 24" on the button and 18" in girth. A lifetime angling highlight for sure.

You guys grab the packs, I've got the canoes! - Zoe



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where I have caught many big brookies in the past. On my very first trip for these Hudson Bay brook trout my goal was to catch just one 20" brook trout, so I had a graphite mount done of the 21 1/2 incher I took on that trip. After that, I vowed I would not mount another until I caught a two-foot brook trout. Well here I stand, six years later, with my personal Sutton River brook trout total at 2123—including a good 75 fish between 23 and 23 3/4 inches—but no 24's. So for about the 12,000th time, my #5 yellow Vibrax spinner lands far out in the churning Sutton River channel. I pick up the retrieve for a couple cranks and feel a solid hit. I know from the power this is a good fish, but lots of these fish fight like holy hell and then you discover they are "only" 21 inches. We have become desensitized to the prospects of an exceptional fish. As fate would have it, I have decided to experiment

with new line today (Spiderwire Ultracast Invisibraid 6 lb.) as I have been forced to re-tie my 6 lb. Stren mono every 10 fish or so. This makes for annoying downtime, plus too many big fish are breaking me off. The stronger line, together with the lucky break that this fish elects to run downstream in my direction, allows me to get him into the net relatively quickly. And then I realize I have a very special fish. The girth on this big boy easily eclipses any Sutton brookie I have ever seen, and I have seen a pile of them. I call my partner over for assistance and as an eye witness for some quick photos and official tape-measuring. He measures 24 inches on the button with a girth of 18". So there it is: his likeness is going up on the wall. He is my one in 2000+ Sutton River trophy brook trout.

We finish the trip up with 1674 total trout. This is somewhat below our average, but we

have never been this early and the guys fished way too fast on several days, passing over a lot of fish. The low water might be delaying the run of some of the fish up out of the ocean too. But all in all, most of the guys catch close to 200 big brookies, are happy with the fishing, and will never forget the power and beauty of these incredible fish.

SUTTON RIVER TRIP #2

It rained the last two days of our first trip and the two days we were in town reloading, so as we start on down again we notice right away that the river has come up considerably. This is a lot more "coachable" group, and by following my advice we are into way more trout from the get-go than the week before. All seven of the others are committed to fly-fishing, so I have to uphold the "heavy metal" tradition and rack up big numbers on the Vibrax. We average over 300 big brook trout each day from day two through day seven. Every day seems to bring brighter spawning colors in these fish, and we are into a lot more big fish than most other trips. The only downside is that it has been cool, drizzly, and wet continuously for the first seven days. The Cabelas Gazebo screenhouse with optional nylon fly is a Godsend on this trip. I have not been out of my Patagonia silkweight long johns except for one quick bath on day four. None of the others has braved the 55-degree water for a true bath. The cool, rainy days have kept the bugs at bay so that has been nice.

Day 8 turns into a very special day on the Sutton. We catch and release 492 brook trout, and since we have only ever topped 500 in a day once, this is truly a banner day. Six out of the eight of us have our best day, and everybody catches over a dozen whoppers. I finally quit at 106 because I didn't dare put supper off any longer. I could

have kept casting and catching if I wanted.

We finish with 2469 trout, 800+ more than last week and everyone is still in that shell shocked stage as we paddle to the pickup point down by the Bay. Each of these anglers has experienced the "Sutton River Magic," and is now a part of all this river will ever know.

My goal on these Sutton River brook trout adventures is to capture the absolute pinnacle of stream trout fishing for my clients. I want the sheer numbers of big, bold, beautiful brook trout to just blow them away. We are talking complete shock and awe here—for nine straight days. Sadly, for this last group, the incredible fishing action we enjoyed will not be their most powerful indelible memory—that will go to the big polar bear that terrorized our camp that last, dark rainy night down by the Bay.

The Sutton River originates from two twenty-mile long lakes (Sutton and Hawley Lakes) before tumbling 80 miles down through the Hudson Bay Lowlands to the coast. (The Sutton spills into the ocean at Cape Henrietta Maria—right where James Bay meets Hudson Bay on the west side). Although the Cree natives we work with up there have seen polar bears all the way up to Hawley Lake, the vast majority hang out down close to the coast. We routinely spot 4 or 5 white bears combing the beach as we take off and head for home. It's actually fun to see them from the safety of the plane. Even from high above, their speed and power are impressive. Make that extremely impressive.

In seven trips down the Sutton now we have only encountered two polar bears, both in 2011. The first popped up mid-stream about 75 yards in front of my lead canoe. When I hollered back to the others he spooked and ran off full



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tilt into the spruce. We got the drop on the second bear and were able to maneuver around the far side of a mid-river island and continue on downstream without that big boy ever knowing we were there.

There is really only one feasible pickup point on the entire Sutton River where the big Turbo Otter can get in/out with a big load of 8 people and all our gear. That spot is about 2 miles up from the coast and we have camped here the last night of the previous six trips without even seeing a polar bear. Not so this time around...

We pull into "The Bay Camp" on this ninth and final evening of our trip and our well-rehearsed crew quickly gets the four tents and big Cabela's Gazebo up while I tend to our last supper of Zup's polish and baked beans. As always, I continuously scan for white objects all up and down the river banks. I keep my Browning 12

gauge pump turkey gun loaded with 5 rounds lying beside me in the screen house. I have not become complacent. I am as diligent as ever on the bear watch, but once again darkness falls and all is quiet except for the flocks of geese honking out over the tundra.

We bake a chocolate cake to celebrate Jerry's birthday, and by the time I get all the dishes cleaned up and put away it is 11:00 p.m. Because all six of the other guys on this trip are chronic snorers, I have taken to sleeping alone in the screen house most nights. (I am often asked, "What is the hardest part about being a wilderness canoeing, fishing and hunting guide?" Without a doubt, it is sleeping. For me, a good night's sleep between May and November is nothing but a pipe dream).

Since most of the bears hang out down on the tidal beach, I have always figured if we saw

one at this camp it would come from that direction. So I put my tent the furthest downstream (Tom is now alone in there). Next, I stack the six mostly empty food packs near the canoes with the screen house (and me) just up from there. Clustered upstream 20 yards are the other three tents, each with two occupants. Between the 20-mile paddle today, a summer of sleep deprivation from snoring clients, and the emotional comedown that another great fantasy fishing trip is “in the books,” I soon fall fast asleep.

Soon the rain, drizzle, and fog that has plagued us for the past nine days rolls in once again, making for a night as black as can be. Around 12:30, Jerry, who is in the tent furthest upstream, is awoken by a heavy object pushing against his head through the tent wall. Thinking it to be a fellow camper tripping over a tent rope while out taking a leak, Jerry hollers out, “Hey! Who’s out there?” The only reply is the loud ripping of nylon off the other end of his tent. Now Len is awake beside Jerry and reaching for his bear spray.

Meanwhile, the bear moves on to Patty and Whit’s tent. Patty also feels a heavy object knock into her through the nylon tent wall followed by more tearing of nylon and loud heavy breathing. Whit unzips their tent door and not 10 feet away stands a large polar bear. This gets them both to yelling as loud as they can, a response they were taught while fishing/camping in brown bear country up in Alaska.

At this point all the disturbance has roused me over in the screen house. My first thought is that somebody is just having a bad dream. There is a fine line between preparing everyone for the remote possibility of a bear attack and overhyping the actual danger level. So it would not be surprising

that someone could have a nightmare involving bears at this very spot. But then Patty screams out, “He is going to kill us! He is going to kill us!” I know from her tone that this is no false alarm—this is the real deal.

Before I crawl into my sleeping bag every night, without fail no matter where I am, I wrap my Petzel XP2 headlight around my baseball cap and place it beside my pillow for instant access. In this instance, when I hear Patty scream, I grab too quickly and knock the light off the hat. I curse and scramble to recover it, but nearly ten precious seconds elapse before I find the light, get it affixed to my hat, turn it on and get unzipped from my sleeping bag. Figure another five seconds to dash across the 15-foot screen house, grab the shotgun, and unzip the 7-foot tall door.

As I step out under the awning covering the gazebo doorway, my light sweeps towards the river and there he is: a large adult polar bear, 10 yards, broadside on all fours, and facing left to right. He is looking right at me. He is acting relaxed, unafraid. He has now passed the upper trio of tents and the gazebo and is pointed towards Tom’s tent about 20 yards downstream. At this moment in time, I do not know if he has actually hurt any of my crew or not. What I do know is that human scent and yelling has done nothing to scare him off. It appears something more will be necessary.

On one of our early trips down the Sutton, I was fortunate to share a camp one night with Cree guide Sam Hunter. We spent hours talking about his ancestors settling on the Sutton to fish, hunt, and trap. Nobody has more experience with polar bear encounters, so I listened carefully to his advice that night. My main takeaway was

that in *most* cases a warning shot will scare off the polar bears around this locale.

So fast forward now. I have a second or two to make a decision. Do I shoot to scare him off, or shoot to kill? I make the judgment call that I do have enough time and space to fire a warning shot, because if that fails I should still be able to get at least one slug into him even if he charges. The 12 gauge explodes into the night and the bear simultaneously explodes off the river bank and swims off out into my beloved Sutton.

Still in my Patagonia long johns and stocking feet, I run forward to the river’s edge to track the bear’s intentions. My light picks up his eyeballs reflecting back at me, from about 50 yards away. It’s as if he has stopped to look back and see if whatever made that noise is chasing after him. Then he moves off, out of range of my light into the rain and fog and unknown. I breathe a bit easier.

A quick check with the others finds some frightened souls but all healthy bodies. This bear has dodged a bullet and we all know exactly how that feels.

Upon checking around camp, we find a 3-foot tear in the fly of Jerry and Len’s tent, a small tear and chewed-through stake out shock cord in the corner of Patty and Whit’s tent, plus a tarp and dry bag of gear have fresh holes chewed in them. Near as we can figure, the bear was alone, came from upstream, and blundered right into Jerry’s tent. The wind is blowing downriver so he would not have smelled us from afar if this scenario is accurate.

Len and I get dressed back into our fleece and Gore-Tex and ready ourselves for an all-night vigil. Tom moves his sleeping gear into the gazebo with me and the others go back into their tents. I want to know where everyone is so I know which directions are safe to shoot. Any hint of daylight (5:00 on this day) can’t come soon enough.

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Meanwhile, we have plenty of time on our hands to ponder what might have been.

It doesn't take a polar bear expert to conclude that if this bear had been in full predatory mode he could have inflicted serious damage upon our crew. We will never know for sure what his next move would have been, but my decision not to drill him in the chest with a magnum slug on that first shot at least gives him the opportunity to learn a lesson and steer clear of people in the future. Most sobering of all to me was just how fast he reacted to the blast of the shotgun. Had he elected to come after me, I would have had time for only one more shot to stop him. That would have been the ultimate high-pressure test of both my composure and marksmanship. Even now as I write this up a week after the fact, I can't help wondering how I would have performed on that little

test.

I learned four lessons from this whole episode. First and foremost, we are all done camping down at the pickup spot by the Bay. From now on, we will camp ten miles upstream on our final night and paddle the last few hours to the plane in the daylight. No more "sleeping" in polar bear alley. Second, every tent/canoe will have a canister of bear spray, know how to use it, and keep it ready. Third, I will pack a super-bright high-powered light so I can scan the surrounding area if I ever need to again. Normal headlights don't cut it beyond close range. Finally, if you play this wilderness tripping game as much as I do, sooner or later, stuff is going to happen. But as the saying goes, "A ship is safe in the harbor, but that is not what ships are built for." I already have two groups booked for a return to the Sutton in 2014.

The Sutton is home to the world's best brook trout fishing. I figure we can enjoy the first 70 miles of spectacular sport-fishing and leave the last 10 miles to the polar bears. After all, this is their home too. Now, after 7 trips down the Sutton, I too feel a part of all this river will ever know.

One final note. As we are boarding the plane to leave that last morning, an absolute giant of a polar bear crosses the river a quarter of a mile below camp. Even at that distance he is a sight to behold. After taking off we circle around the area a couple times and spot only a mother and cub. Our midnight visitor is nowhere to be found.

I have just one opening for my first Sutton River trip in 2014 remaining, and the second trip is full. I am booking people for 2015. See my Grand Slam Guide Service ad on page 99 for more details. □