routes through canoe
country
Snowbank to Lake One - A Family Adventure

Going four-in-a-boat is the hallmark of our canoeing style. We take turns paddling. And on this trip, Jerome and Doug (ages 15 and 11) are big enough that we will cross portages in a single trip.

We put in at Snowbank Lake, 23 miles east of Ely, at 6:45 a.m., our earliest start ever. We fit snugly, though comfortably, in our 18 1/2 foot canoe, which rides well up in the water.

A 40-minute paddle brings us to a wide, fairly level portage into Disappointment Lake. We head east to the foot of Disappointment Mountain, where our route turns north. The wind is now at our backs, and we are soon portaging into Asub.

Jerome and Doug paddle us across Asub. Its clear grey water blends with the subtle greys and dark greens along the shoreline. How different this is, Marilyn and I realize, from our earliest family trips when we did nearly all the paddling.

After several more small lakes and short portages we reach Jordan Lake. We stop early for lunch, on a rock point opposite the last portage. The remainder of the paddle through Jordan is due east down a slender arm with steep ledges on both sides. At the 5-rod uphill portage into Ima Lake, we unload Doug’s pack and start him across the trail. Jerome’s pack and handgear is next, and then Marilyn’s. As I hoist the canoe overhead, I notice Doug already atop a 20-foot boulder at the other end of the portage.

Ima, a mile-wide dish-shaped lake, is crowded with people. Surprisingly, the first campsite just around the point to the south is empty. It is cold and windy as we set up camp, and we welcome the opportunity for an afternoon nap. While we’re preparing dinner, Doug wanders off to “visit” a neighboring campsite. We hear all about it during dinner. Afterwards Jerome and Doug explore the nearby shoreline. I hang the food pack, an operation we call “putting up the bear pack” and Marilyn watches the aquatic antics of a beaver. By 8 p.m. we are in bed, expecting rain and cold.

Day 2
No rain during the night, and we break camp at 8:30 a.m. We fish as I paddle us slowly across Ima. A steep ascent begins the 50-rod portage into Hatchet Lake. Three short portages lie along the stream leading into Thomas Lake. We paddle out into the large bay at the entrance to Thomas, then pause to rest, take photos of the loons, and set up our lines to fish during the paddle across to the east end of Thomas. A narrow V-shaped inlet leads out into the long stretch of Fraser Lake. A sparsely wooded expanse from a forest fire is visible far across the lake along the hillside rising from the northeast shore. A stiff cross-windbuffets the canoe as we make our way toward the ranger cabin midway down the lake. We pull ashore for a closer look at the vacant cabin, and, during lunch, speculate about its use. The remaining paddle on Fraser leads to the 65-rod portage into Sagus Lake.

Sagus is shaped like a backwards “L” with a large bay on the south and a long narrow arm extending to the north. We head south from the portage. The first campsite is occupied. We choose the nicer of the two remaining campsites, up on a ledge overlooking the entire bay. After an early dinner, we head out to fish and explore the lake.

Half way up the north arm of the lake, we spot a young bull moose swimming across the channel ahead. When things start happening they happen fast. Doug and I have just reached full paddling speed and Marilyn is rushing to get the camera ready, when a fish strikes my line. Doug is still paddling. Suddenly, as I am about to net a nice walleye, Doug cries out, “Rock ahead!” Reverse paddling full strength, we barely miss a huge boulder less than an inch under the water. Fish netted, we come up on the moose as it is climbing out of the water. The woods along the shoreline were burned over in the same fire whose signs we had noted that morning. We have a good view of the moose as it ambles up over the crest of a gentle rise. We then locate the portage we will take the next morning. Walking back along the trail, we discover a thick growth of juicy raspberries. On the paddle back, after gorging ourselves on berries, Jerome catches another walleye.

Day 3
I get up at 6 a.m., before the others as usual. I use a strip of

SPRING 1989/ 5
This boy will remember this fish for the rest of his life. The Boundary Waters is a great place for kids to grow up a little bit.
birch bark to start the fire. Within 5 minutes I am sipping the first cup of coffee. The next cups are prepared more leisurely, and by then Marilyn is up; Doug, who is next up, drinks hot chocolate. Jerome is still not up and Marilyn calls him. No answer. Finally, just as the walleye fillets finish cooking, he is out of the tent. Later in the trip Jerome tells Marilyn that he prefers to lie in the tent for an hour after waking up.

By 8:30 we are paddling north toward the portage into Roe Lake. The fishing isn’t good—not a strike on four lines in over 45 minutes. So we pull into the portage and head across, pausing frequently for raspberries. Paddling across Roe, a shallow, narrow lake, takes half an hour. A grassy stream leads to a moderately difficult portage into Cap Lake, a small egg-shaped lake about a third of a mile long.

We sometimes stop to look at campsites even when we don’t intend to stay there. It is interesting to know what each one is like. The one campsite on Cap is excellent. It is easy to rationalize staying here. Already 11:30, it is a clear, warm day. There is a smooth flat rock area to lie on. Small lakes should be warmer for swimming, and since the entire shoreline is visible, this is a perfect place to let Jerome and Doug take the canoe out alone. That evening we try the fishing without any success.

Day 4

At 8 a.m. we begin the longest portage of the trip. After a short uphill stretch, the trail winds down into a marshy area and runs for a third of a mile along the base of the hill to the north. We then cross the shallow stream and begin a long ascent over the ridge to the southeast. The descent to Boulder Lake is steeper but seems just as long as the uphill stretch. Canoe rests, each more welcome than the one before, are at strategic points along the two-thirds of a mile haul that this portage covers. (On some maps the portage is ambiguously marked. You save time by carrying the entire length of the marshy area, instead of putting into the barely passable stream.)

We enter Boulder Lake through a bay at the northermmost part of the lake. Once out in the main body of water, we head for the island campsite in the middle of the lake, but not without pausing for some casts into the white tail that grows plentifully here. Our efforts are soon rewarded with two four-pound northerns. A short paddle brings us to the best campsite on the lake. Again it is a warm, clear day. We spend the afternoon fishing. First around the islands, then in the deep water for lake trout, and finally near the outlet on the south shore. We locate the portage and photograph water lilies in the quiet bay.

Dinner is a feast. Northern pike is our favorite meal in the woods. Nowhere is it more delicious than here in the deepest, most remote part of the BWCAW.

Our evening venture is to Jug Lake, a narrow mile-long stretch of shallow water, reached by a short pull-over from the south shore of Boulder. With the sun at our backs, we cast into shore while I slowly paddle the length of Jug. The last rays of sunlight now touch only the easternmost part of the lake, creating the “Ross Light” phenomenon (described in Sigurd Olson’s Runes of the North.) Tonight the Ross light effect is accentuated as the sun illuminates objects on the shore both directly and by reflection off the rippling water from below. We watch silently as the shadow cast by our canoe hovers along a wall of spruce and aspen.

We start the paddle back. We are, fortunately, still trolling several lines. Action! Two northerns hit our lines simultaneously. Within a few minutes we catch nearly a dozen. We keep just one for breakfast. Loons accompany our excited small talk on the after-dark paddle back to camp.

Day 5

The weather looks threatening. We move quickly to get the fish cooked and our gear packed up. By 9 a.m. we are leaving Boulder Lake, over a 25-rod portage that ends in a large mudhole. Loading the canoe is impossible without wading knee-deep in the mud. The mudhole soon turns into a mud stream, running for half a mile. In places we have to step out, sometimes onto rocks or a beaver dam, other times into the mud, in order to inch the canoe forward. Eventually the stream opens out into Adams Lake. By now storm clouds are forming. We hear the thunder distinctly. Our immediate goal is therefore to reach the next portage a mile and a quarter to the south. We pull into the portage as the first raindrops fall.

One challenging task for Marilyn and me is to distribute the gear in such a way that Jerome and Doug each carry loads which, though manageable, are heavy enough that they do not merely run across the portage and then have “time to kill” on the other side. This morning we have been lax in our attention to this detail. By the time we get across the portage, which ends beneath a cliff, Jerome and Doug are high overhead. Climbing on the moist surface obviously is dangerous in that we are a full two days’ paddle from the nearest entry point. Jerome and
Doug “catch hell” for being so careless. Being in the woods, particularly with children, entails a level of risk. Each year that we have gone out as a family, some new “adventure” has engaged Jerome’s or Doug’s interest.

The first part of Beaver Lake (also called Elbow Lake) is a mile-long arm to the west. We are now headed into a heavy wind, the rain is coming at us in sheets. With three paddles going, we finally reach the main part of the lake. As we round the point and see the beautiful large campsite where we had a “day camp” the year before, we feel relieved. The rest of the day we’ll be paddling south. Two more portages, each short, and we reach the Kawishiwi River.

The Kawishiwi is indeed a river, a labyrinth connecting numerous lakes in the southern part of the BWCAW. Half an hour’s paddle brings us to one of the main lake-like portions of the Kawishiwi. We stop for lunch at a campsite on the north end of a large island. We eat granola bars, trail mix, and chocolate under the dripping pines. Back on the water after lunch, the rain pause.

Before long the waterway narrows. This stretch of the Kawishiwi we call the “River” because here on a warm, sunny afternoon the previous year, we saw four canoes boldly paddled by young women naked from the waist up. Further south, we portage around the rapids, but not until we have sampled the blueberries.

Four campsites are on the south arm of the Kawishiwi, the lower part of which is called Fishdance Lake. The first campsite is diagonally across from the Indian pictographs, although a steep climb is required to reach it. We decide not to stretch our luck trying to find a better site. We spend the next two hours on a long paddle, fishing as we go, down into the main part of Fishdance Lake. Two of the campsites are “primitive” with barely room to pitch a tent. The third is no better than the one we have already claimed. Surprisingly, we have seen no other parties since passing the pictographs. This part of Fishdance has a shadowy, still ambience, the north bank is scarred from a fire burn. Marilyn’s comment, “This place is spooky,” is right on target. It is time to get back to our campsite. When we are but a quarter mile away, the rain hits in torrents. We quickly pitch the tent, trying to keep as much of our gear dry as we can. Since the rain shows no sign of letting up, we eat sausage and cheese sandwiches in the tent and bed down for what turns out to be a long, wet night.

Day 6

The morning ahead is for travel. We first paddle across for a close look at the pictographs. At the first portage, our route turns west. After a second, shorter portage, the river empties out into the southern part of Alice Lake, where we encounter a stiff headwind. Next is a two-mile narrow stretch of the Kawishiwi followed by another short portage, Jerome carries the canoe across this one. We are now in the northeast arm of Lake Insula. Paddling hard against the wind, we eventually pull through the channel into the gigantic main part of Insula to the south. The map shows a campsite just to the west.

The campsite has a sand beach in a tiny bay, from which we climb up onto an immense grassy plateau. How surprising to find such a large and comfortable campsite unoccupied! It is starting to rain. We throw up the tarp portion of the tent, eat lunch under it, and rest for the next hour or so. We watch several distant canoes, tiny specks which, though they seem to be barely moving toward us, we know are being heroically paddled in the face of the wind. After nearly an hour one canoe pulls into the southeast shore, another gives up at the first island, a third canoe finally comes the whole distance. Just as the canoe is about to pass out of view into the protected waters to the north, Doug, who will do anything for a laugh, bounds out of the tent and scrambles across the plateau waving both hands overhead. The two canoeists stop as they see him and, thinking something is wrong, paddle over and put in on the sandy beach. Somewhat embarrassed, Marilyn and I go down to greet them. Our guests for the next 20 minutes are two veteran female canoeists from the Twin Cities.

At mid-afternoon the sun appears briefly. Doug and I paddle around the point to fish the northeast arm of the lake. I land a two-pound walleye. Doug hauls a nice northern out of the choppy water as we round the point on our way back to camp. We definitely will eat fish for dinner if only we can get enough fire going to cook them. The rain now is the steady soaking variety. Getting dinner ready under such conditions takes well over an hour. We’ve roasted marshmallows every night we’ve had a fire so far, but tonight Jerome and Doug finish off our remaining supply right out of the bag. The wind has continued, and now it is getting very cold. As we hurry to hoist the food pack up on a limb, Jerome observes that we have put up a “bear pinata.”

Day 7

It is still wet, and very cold.
We dispense with a fire and eat dried fruit and granola bars for a quick breakfast. By 7 a.m. we are on the water. I troll one of the diving Rapalas we had used so successfully on an earlier trip in the Quetico. Before long I have netted several walleyes. Paddling the length of Insula takes about two hours; the moderately demanding portage into Hudson Lake, another half hour. By comparison, the five remaining portages are all quite easy. On Lakes Four and Three a bracing west wind slows our progress. When we finally reach Lake Two we are ready for lunch, but this close-in portion of the BWCAW is so heavily used that we cannot find a vacant campsit to cook our last meal of fish. We eat sandwiches instead on a little island. On the final portages we encounter a steady stream of groups who entered the BWCAW that morning. Doug takes the stern and I sit in the bow for the final paddle to the Lake One Landing, where we had arranged to have our car dropped off, a short distance from our point of departure. We arrive at 2:30, having traveled twice as far in one day as we did on our entire trip six years earlier when we made our first venture into the Boundary Waters as a family.