

## Canoeing in the Wilderness

What do you do if you are attacked by a bear? That was the main topic of conversation before our canoeing trip in Algonquin Provincial Park. We agreed that there were two “don’ts”. Don’t run. Bears can run faster than we can. Don’t try to swim away. Bears can swim. The choice seemed to be between lying down and playing dead or standing and fighting. The Provincial Park advice is clear – “confront the animal ... all members of the party should be out of the tents, standing up, yelling, making noise, and throwing sticks and rocks.”

Bears can be a problem in Algonquin. Two Canadian psychiatrists we met canoeing in the park told us that, on previous trips, they had twice lost all their food to bears. For that reason, all campers are exhorted to tie a bag containing their food and cooking utensils to a tree branch, at least four metres above the ground, some way away from their tents. Finding “the bear tree” and hauling the food ruck-sack up over a branch became part of the regular evening routine. But, the problem can be exaggerated. In the last thirty years, only five people have been killed by bears in Algonquin. In North America, about forty people have been killed by bears in the last century. More have died from bee stings.

We did not see a bear. We saw fresh wolf prints in mud on a portage track, but did not see a wolf. We saw beaver dams across rivers, and pine trunks gnawed into pencil shaped points by beavers, but we did not see any beavers. We did though see moose. The closest sighting was as we paddled silently across Lake Wright, among the water thimbles thrown up by a thunderstorm. In the corner of the lake, we saw a rock, but then it moved. Was it a bear? No, the head and antlers, which were all that we could see above the water, were clearly a moose. Slowly, the young male stood up and looked at both canoes. Then, majestically, he limbered out of the water, onto the bank and disappeared into the forest.

The rain, the lake, the forest, the moose and our two canoes. We felt the stillness, the isolation, literally the *wilderness* of Algonquin. The Provincial Park is only four hours drive north of Toronto, but it is on the edge of the Canadian Northland, the vast glacial shield which stretches up to Hudson Bay. During our five day canoe trip, we saw no man-made buildings and no motorised transport. Each morning, we loaded our tents, food and equipment into the canoes and paddled across lakes, along meandering rivers and up winding creeks filled with lush green reeds. In the shallows, water boatmen rushed about and, beneath the water, there were fresh-water mussels. Out in the middle of the lakes, loons sat, singly or in pairs. These large divers are Ontario’s provincial bird and are depicted on the Canadian dollar coin. Their eerie, haunting, yodelling cry pierced the silence from dawn till late at night.

As we paddled along creeks, frogs lazed on water lily leaves, among white and yellow flowers. We disturbed grey herons and saw solitary sea gulls, resting on rocks and dead branches. Beyond the banks, there was always the thick, impenetrable forest – a darker green with tall pines and firs and shorter deciduous trees - birch, yew, maple and alder.

The canoeing was broken up by portages – narrow paths round rapids or from one lake system to another. Then, we hitched our ruck-sacks onto our backs and threw our canoes over our heads, balancing the yokes on our shoulders, and trekked up into the forest, easy prey to the deer flies and mosquitoes. Some portages were short, no more than a hundred metres, but between Dickson Lake and Bonfield, there was a brute of a portage, almost five and a half kilometres, which we completed during a violent thunderstorm, with hail stones bouncing off the Kevlar of the upturned canoes.

Each evening we hauled our canoes out of the water and camped – often in small clearings, on promontories, with views through the pine trees, across the lake. We foraged for fire wood, among moss and brightly coloured fungus. We lit a fire each evening, but cooked our monotonous rations of freeze dried food on a small camping gas stove. We slept on beds of pine needles, not far from our fire. Some nights were wet and thunderous. Others were still, dry and starry. But every dawn, the rising sun was reflected with white clouds in the still lake water. Sometimes mist lingered on the far side of the lake. As the sun rose, it sparkled on the water, like diamonds fresh from an impressionist's palette. By the shore, in the sunlight, the water was amber coloured, due to the tannin from the vegetation. Under cloud, the depths became black.

As days passed without a bear sighting, Algonquin felt less like the setting of a Jack London short story, and more like the backdrop for a trans-Atlantic Arthur Ransome adventure. Yes, we were in the wilderness, miles from anywhere, completely self-dependent, but far from being hostile and dangerous, the lakes and rivers, the rocks and forests, were becoming familiar. We were overgrown, aging, Swallows and Amazons, not nineteenth century prospectors crossing the frozen Northland in winter. But Longfellow described these lakes and forests best.

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,  
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.  
Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,  
Rose the firs with cones upon them;  
Bright before it beat the water,  
Beat the clear and sunny water,  
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.

Substitute our tent for Nokomis's wigwam, and you can see our campsites.

Nic Madge