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Adirondacks paddle at summer's end is full of delights

Owls, coyotes, and loons, plus waterfalls and portages, keep things interesting in the ADKs

By Ralph Heimlich

My annual trip to the Adirondacks (ADK) this year was the last week in September, later than usual. Greg Welker reminded us that winter comes early to the ADK by sending a photo of a hammock camper caught in a mid-August snow flurry. Accordingly, I packed a down sleeping bag and cold-weather clothing. We enjoyed warm, sunny, nearly windless days in the 80s, nights in the 60s, and low humidity for nearly the whole week, even swimming in the coolish waters most days, until the penultimate night when temps plunged to the high 30s and we then pulled out the cold weather gear.

The ADK has a wide variety of waters, from large lakes best suited to long sea kayaks (Tupper, Cranberry, the Saranacs), to smaller lakes and ponds suited to a variety of craft (the Saint Regis Canoe Area, Little Tupper, the Fish Ponds), to a series of shortish flatwater rivers connecting them (parts of the Raquette and Saranac rivers). For this trip, we opted for canoes to paddle some rivers and small lakes. Dave Isbell had his solo Wenonah Wilderness; Greg, his Vernon Kruger Sea Wind sea canoe; and I, my 12 foot Old Town Pack Canoe.

Our rendezvous was the Fish Ponds Campground off Rt 30 just west of Upper Saranac Lake. Because of the long drive, over 500 miles and 8.5 hours, we reserved a campsite for that night. Early our first morning, we launched at the ominously named "Crusher" landing on the eastern branch of the Raquette River, which flows from its source at Long Lake over the upper and lower Raquette Falls, to a junction with Simon Pond, Raquette Pond and Tupper Lake at the town of Tupper Lake. Crusher is just off the road about half way between the falls and the town. We loaded and paddled vigorously upstream as the cool air



Photo/Dave Isbell

and warm sun pulled mini-tornados of steam from the warm water.

We passed several campsites before selecting #14, typical in having a small sandy beach, a steep bank with gnarled roots as steps up which to haul gear, a few almost-flat places among the towering white pines to pitch tents, and an exposed "thunder box" of a privy up the hill screened only by the dense

undergrowth. After lunch, we

paddled empty boats against the current, aiming for the falls. We looped around numerous bends and cut-off ox bows through low, swampy areas past Axton Landing, once the site of a lumber camp called Axe Town, and past the mouth of Stony Creek on our left. A curious little cable car strung across the river serves to ferry the private landowners over to the south bank.

According to Jamieson, this section of the Raquette has returned to something like what it was before loggers built Setting Pole Dam to drown Setting Pole Rapids and flood Raquette Pond and 28 miles of the river up to the falls. The dam was lowered in 1885 which returned the river level to something akin to what Ralph Waldo Emerson described in his poem "Adirondacks" as:

"...a small tortuous pass
Winding through grassy shallows in and out,
Two creeping miles of rushes, pads and sponge."

After several hours beating against an increasingly strong current, we heard the gentle buzz of the lower falls. Rounding a bend, we were brought up short by white water cascading over a gentle slope of large rocks, so we paddled left to a sandy landing beach. Dave opted to stay with the boats while Greg and I took the portage trail, up

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nearly a mile to the take out above the upper falls. I suppose in the higher water of spring runs, or in the long-ago days of wooden boats and iron men, some brave pathfinders ran the nearly one-mile rapids that constitute Raquette Falls, but the remains of a busted-up canoe hanging on the warning sign were mute evidence that potential disaster awaits those foolhardy enough to eschew the portage trail.

After a brief look around, we hiked back, skirting the cliff edge to glimpse the white water far below. Back to Dave and our boats, we enjoyed a much faster passage WITH the current to our campsite. The onset of darkness brought out the well-mannered mosquitoes of the ADK, present only briefly at dusk and dawn. Later in the night, owls called across the swamp and a pack of coyotes howled in the distance to the crescent moon. Though close to the highway, we couldn't hear road noise at all.

Next morning, we retraced our route on the Raquette past Axton Landing but then turned into Stony Creek heading to the Stony Creek Ponds. The first few miles were all sand bank meandering through swampy ground with nary a stone. We then debouched onto lower Stony Creek Ponds and the summer colony of Coreys. While developed on the western shore, much of the east side and northern shoreline of the ponds is wild.

Of particular interest on Stony Ponds is Indian Carry on the upper pond. A low divide of glacial drift separates by a mile the north-flowing Raquette drainage from the east-flowing Saranac drainage and may have captured Upper Saranac Lake from the Raquette drainage at the end of the ice age. Indian Carry has been a "Times Square" of the woods for a thousand years. Jamieson says:

"Jesse Corey, the first white settler, who ran Rustic Lodge at the N end of the carry, reputedly gathered a large collection of arrowheads and Indian pottery in this vicinity. For white trappers and later tourists, Indian Carry was still the hub of travel."

With a 1.1 mile woodland path crossing at Rt 3 to continue to the south end of Upper Saranac Lake, it is still a hub; instead, we retraced our route to camp 14.

Next a moving day, so back to Crusher. It was hot and humid as we landed, loaded the gear and drove to Little Tupper Lake. We reorganized there, sorting clean from dirty clothes, packing food for the next few days, eating lunch and filling water containers. We had thought that we might be the only paddlers mid-week in late September, but the parking lot was full with boats coming and going. We gawked at different boats and carts and wondered at the mounds of gear these paddlers were hauling into the wilderness. A 4-burner

stove and camp kitchen in one pair's gear made my food barrel and portage pack look positively light weight.

We paddled west on Little Tupper past a section of private land excluded from the transfer of the 31,000-acre William C. Whitney-Round Lake Wilderness in 1997 when most of the land was given to NY State, and settled for campsite #2 on the north shore. After another quiet night, the cool air created a foggy enchantment that made it feel as if our little corner of the ADK had drifted off the planet on a cloud, along with a trio of loons seeking a fish breakfast. When the sun burned off the mist, we ventured out toward Rock Pond. We passed early morning paddlers out fishing who hadn't consulted the resident experts. Half a dozen loons were clustered at the west end of the lake where they had cornered all the best fish.

We turned into the inlet from Rock Pond, a narrow, swampy channel choked by lily pads and water weed with little current (a portent). After paddling a few miles, we came to the first beaver dam. Our procedure was to have one of us ram the dam near one side, jump out onto the dam, then

haul the other boats up and over before reembarking on the upstream side. After three or four of these damn dams, we got pretty good at it. Eventually we came to a portage around what had been a dirt road bridge where some past flood had demolished the bridge and dislodged the two large iron culverts conducting the stream underneath. From the high vantage point of the bridge, we could see at least a half-dozen more beaver dams ahead. We decided Rock Pond held its solitude too dear for us and turned back. Returning to Little Tupper, we crossed to Short Island and climbed the steep trail to the campsite at its center for lunch.

Next day, we paddled east on the south shore to reach Round Lake. We passed another in-holding at Eagle Point and the small dam that enlarges Little Tupper Lake to the channel running into Round Lake. There are nice campsites on Round Lake, so we paddled to one on the northern corner, adjacent to where the lake spills out as a branch of the Bog River. After one night, we broke camp, paddled out and drove to our next destination, the Fish Creek Ponds. We launched onto Follensby Clear Pond, part of a complex of ponds (Green, Polliwog, Horseshoe, Copperas, Little Square, Floodwater, and Rollins) that make up the Fish Creek Ponds. Our camp was at the narrows between the two parts of Follensby Clear Pond. After a leisurely day and night, we stopped one more time at Lake Eaton Public Campground for showers and a meal on the town. With the wintery turn for our last day, we appreciated the hot showers. Perfect timing to depart from mountains turning crimson and gold, we bid adieu to the ADK for another year. ♣



At the Falls. Photo/Ralph Heimlich