

“Springtime” in Canada

As I stood on the rickety dock, watching my traveling companions putter away into the distance, quickly disappearing amid the thickly falling snow, I thought to myself, “I am going to die out here.”

Nearby in the wilderness, a sleepy bear shook itself awake. It had been enjoying a lengthy nap, as spring had been slow to materialize this year. It opened its eyes and yawned, exposing an impressive mouth full of sharp teeth. It stood up on all fours and stretched weary muscles that had stiffened from being in one position for so long. The bear shuffled forth from its den into the falling snow, and began sniffing the air. Something had changed recently. FOOD! Its belly rumbled with hunger, so the bear began heading into the woods, gliding silently between the tightly packed trees in search of victuals.

A mere 48 hours ago, I had been in Hartford, Michigan, about 30 miles west of Kalamazoo. It was a gorgeous spring day in early May. I had traveled to Michigan from Rolla to join my sister’s then-husband (they are now divorced) and his brother on a fishing trip up into the wilds of Canada. My sister and her in-laws had been to Canada on a similar trip a couple of years earlier and had a blast. They fished and swam in a remote lake in the Canadian wilderness of north-central Ontario. Now it was going to be my turn. Neil and Clark had both been as well, so they knew the ropes. They were also both highly experienced outdoorsmen--which I am not--so I felt I was going to be in good hands.

Neil and I spent the night with Clark and his family near Grand Rapids. We then set forth on a 14-hour drive that would show us amazing and wondrous natural settings that northern Michigan and then Ontario had to offer. Our first true adventure occurred at Mackinac Bridge, one of the longest suspension bridges in the world and quite a magnificent sight. The span of the bridge disappeared into the early morning gloom. Only the nearest tower could be seen, gleaming white in the surrounding darkness, red lights flickering at the top, warning air traffic away from the danger. We just happened to arrive at the bridge right as a terrific thunderstorm swept across the region. High, gale-force winds, stupendous blasts of thunder and lightning, all

of these made crossing the bridge in our heavily-laden vehicle a bit nerve-wracking. By this point, we were also more than halfway to the North Pole. Even in early May, we could start to detect a change in the weather.

Once we crossed the Mackinac Bridge, we drove across the Upper Peninsula ("U.P.") of Michigan and then proceeded to the border crossing with Canada at Sault Ste. Marie, a quaint Canadian city. The weather was noticeably cooler this far north, despite the fact it was late spring. Our drive continued northwest along Lake Superior, then turned north and finally back to the east. It was easy to tell that we were in woods that only lightly tolerated the touch of man. Trees were quite a bit shorter than those in southern Michigan and were so densely packed that not a single beam of sunlight touched the forest floor. Only the road on which we traveled gave any sign that mankind had passed through the region. After our long drive we reached our destination for the night--the outfitter base camp through which we booked our fishing trip. "Base camp" consisted of a small lodge for the outfitter and his wife and several trailers for camping. We stayed the night in one of the trailers. It was primitive and rustic, but quite cozy and comfortable.

Early the next day, we ate breakfast with the outfitter and his wife in the main building. They shared quite a few stories of life in the Canadian wilderness. We then bid farewell to this lonely outpost of civilization for the next week or so. We packed up our supplies and traveled with the outfitter by truck along dusty logging paths. This was bear country, so we'd see the occasional black bear lumbering down or across the roads. Black bears were actually a bit smaller than I expected them to be, but still weighed in at a few hundred pounds--more than a match for our fragile human bodies. Sometimes they had a cub or two along with them. We were fairly safe in our truck, but make no mistake--bears could easily kill any or all of us out in the open.

After a couple of hours in the truck, we stopped at a wide spot in the road, where an eight-wheeled ATV was waiting for us. I had never seen such a vehicle, but it was absolutely necessary. Any other vehicle would have gotten stuck in the swampy marshland we had to drive

through. We arrived at a small dock where a couple of rowboats outfitted with outboard engines took us the rest of the way up a river and across a lake to our cabin. We spent that night in the cabin. We only had two rooms--a living area in front and a bunk room in the back with enough beds for six people. Our toilet, such as it was, was a portajohn covering a pit. Naturally, if we had to use it at night, we had to light our way with a flashlight and risk an encounter with the local wildlife. However, we did have running water in the kitchenette, solar panels for electricity, propane for cooking--all the comforts of home, more or less. We even had a shower with warm water!

We spent the rest of that bright, sunny day fishing, and easily caught our daily limit. Just three guys having the time of our lives in the great outdoors, at least a hundred miles from our nearest neighbors. The lake was so full of fish--northern pike and walleye--they practically jumped into our boat. Our first official catch of the trip was a freshwater clam. We both saw and heard numerous beavers, their rough-hewn lodges scattered around the lake like little leafy domes. They loved slapping their tails on the water as we trolled by in our boat. I learned from our guide that beaver dams are so strong that they can only be removed through judicious use of high explosives.

At the end of the day, we returned to our little cabin by the lake to process our catch for dinner. I learned a lot about scaling and filleting fish. It's a messy, slimy, disgusting business. We tossed the fish guts into a 5-gallon bucket. To protect ourselves from the bears, we kept it off the ground. Before our guide left us, he told us where we can dump out our food scraps for the bears so that they would not bother us at the cabin. That was an interesting experience. I was the lightest, youngest, and most agile, so I was somehow volunteered to be the person who dumped out the scraps at a bear-bait site. We trolled along the river to selected spots among the trees. I'd scout the riverbank from the boat for any signs of bears. Assuming there were none around, I'd then have to haul a heavy bucket of fish guts and other assorted food scraps a few yards inland, where I'd dump it on the ground. I could see nothing in the forest around me, but I always had a sense the bears were nearby, just waiting to pounce when my back was

turned. I did not linger after dumping out the scraps but hastened back to the boat as fast I could. I know the bears were there, however, as all of the food was gone the next day when we went back with another full bucket.

When we woke up for our first full day on the lake, we noted the temperature had dropped around 50 or 60 degrees from the day before. We gathered in the small living area of the cabin, rubbing our hands and breathing out plumes of frosty air. Outside, big, wet flakes of snow were falling gently, yet thickly onto the ground. We easily had several inches of snow outside--in mid-May. Due to the weather, fishing was not an option, but there was another problem we had to deal with--fresh water. We had a couple of gallons in large plastic containers, along with some bottled water, which would last us a day or so, but that was it. We needed more. Without fresh water, we would not survive the week. The cabin had running water to the sink, but it was lake water that was heavily treated with chlorine, so it was undrinkable. There was a freshwater spring a few miles away by boat, but with the blizzard conditions, we really had to make a tough choice--stay close to the cabin and hope the snow thawed out, or risk going out into the blizzard in search of fresh water.

Neil and Clark decided to stick to our original plan, which was to go get fresh water. So they dressed up in their cold-weather gear (we came prepared for any weather). It was decided that I would stay with the cabin and keep an eye on it.

So now here I am, watching them go forth in search of fresh water, even though it was falling all around us. As their boat disappears into the mist and snow, I must confront the very real possibility that they will not return. The spring is several miles away; they could easily get lost, or could become injured. They could also capsize from a lake swell and drown, despite their life jackets.

The bear watched its potential prey from within the shadowed eaves of the forest. Its belly continued to rumble, despite the bounty it had found the day before on the shore of the river. Somehow, a pile of fish leavings had been piled up on the riverbank. The bear found this arrangement very convenient and didn't question it too much. From time to time throughout the

year, it would often find such offerings and would simply accept them as its rightful due. Now, however, it had spied one of the more mysterious creatures of the forest, which only appeared on very rare occasions. It stood up on its hind legs and seemed to have no trouble walking around on them. The bear only stood up on hind legs to intimidate its prey or when it felt threatened. The creature seemed to spend most of its time in the strange den that these creatures liked to build. The bear kept a watchful eye on the creature because it knew how troublesome and tricky they could be. They liked to surround the den with sharp pointy sticks that hurt the bear's paws. Sighing, the bear settled down to wait and see what happened with the creature, even as the snow continued to fall down all around it.

Now there is nothing for me to do but wait for their return, so I make sure to keep the fire in the old wood stove going. Fortunately, firewood is definitely NOT in short supply around here, as we are surrounded by dense trees, have a nice stack already cut for us, and we certainly have the tools to create more firewood. As long as I can keep the fire going, I can easily last the week or so. I can use the stove to melt snow, and I have more than enough food to feed three of us for a week, as well as a lake full of fish. My goal, should the worst happen, is to simply hunker down and survive until our guide comes to pick us up as scheduled at the end of the trip.

I briefly give into a moment of panic as I remember that I am in the midst of bear country. They are just now waking up from their long hibernation and will no doubt be hungry. I look around me and see that the trees are so thick around our little cabin, that there is no way I can squeeze through them. This gives me a sense of security, but it's a false sense--bears can easily move through the trees like a ghost, leaving little trace of their passing. It's remarkable just how invisible bears are when they want to be. Should a bear decide to make a snack out of me, there is little to nothing I can do about it. We didn't bring guns because it was not that kind of trip, and it's difficult to bring guns across the Canadian border through customs. The only real protection from bears I have is sheets of plywood in which large screws have been drilled through. These sheets are strategically placed around the windows and doors of the cabin to prevent bears from entering--the screws are very long, very sharp, and will certainly cause

painful wounds to any bear foolish enough to step on one. But then I'll have a hungry, enraged bear attempting to eat my face instead of just a hungry bear. My moment of panic is only temporary, however, and gets the old adrenaline flowing again, heightening my senses and awareness of my surroundings.

After watching the creature's den for several hours, the bear eventually heard strange noises coming from the lake. It only heard these noises when the odd creatures were around. It knew from experience that it was best to avoid such creatures when they were in packs, so the bear decided it would be better off searching for some berries or maybe a fish or two instead of trying to take on these strange creatures as a group. As bears go, it was not very big. The bear let out a muffled grunt of disappointment and ambled back into the forest.

I breathe out a huge sigh of relief when I hear Neil and Clark returning, the puttering of their outboard motor oddly muffled in the air, but still audible. I can also hear their voices, so even if it snows the rest of the week, at least I won't have to survive out here alone. I've been in some life-and-death situations before, but on this vacation, I think I truly came face-to-face with my mortality for the first time. Fortunately for me, it blinked first.