

Into the wild blue yonder

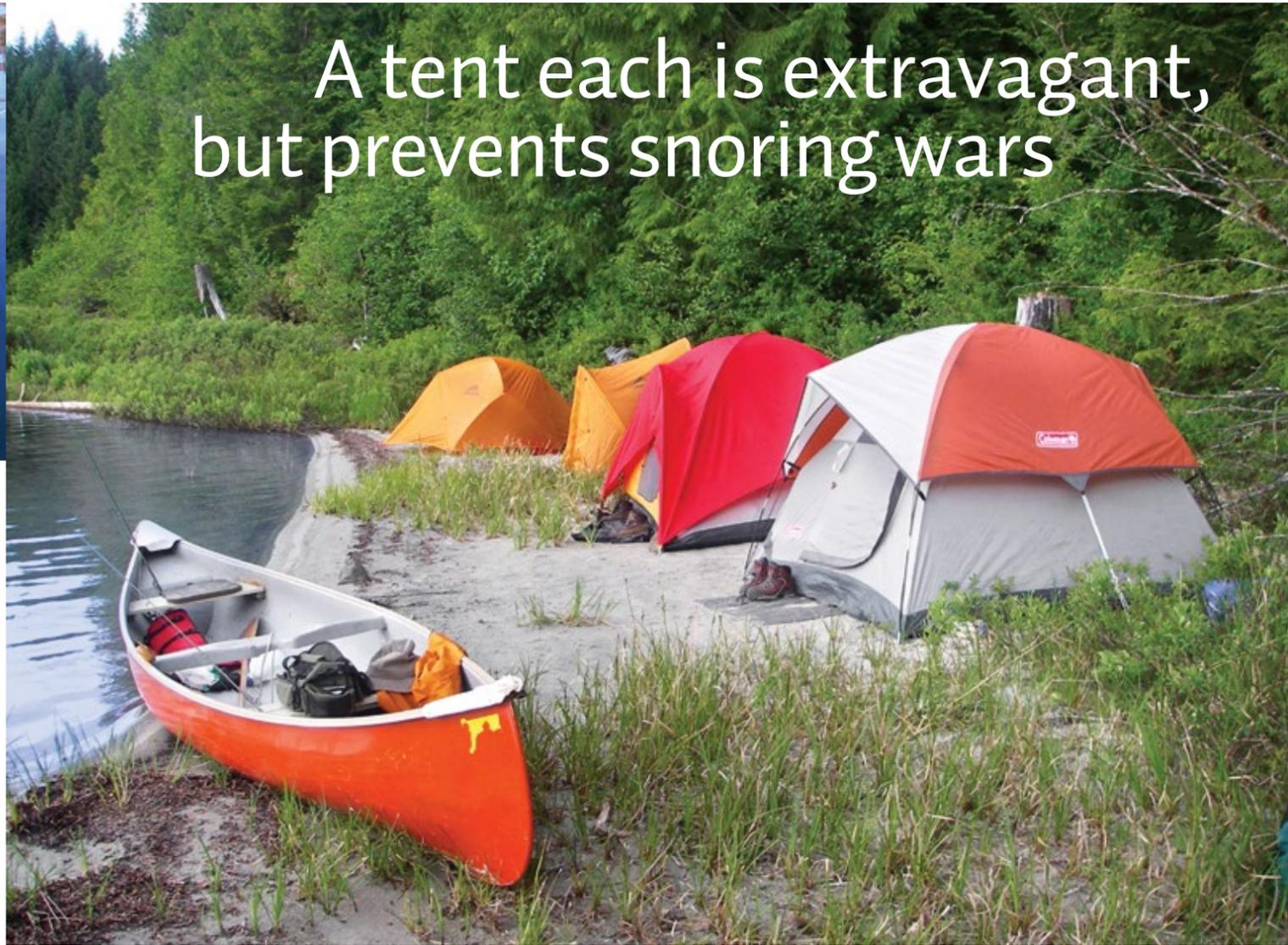
What happens when a bunch of old guys with a couple of canoes paddle off into the wilderness?

Overhanging willow branches painfully scratch our arms and faces; our paddles are tangled and useless as the racing current sweeps our canoe down the narrow channel. I can see it. Any second now, our bow is going to jam into the brush or the bank and twist us sideways. The canoe will flip, and it will all be over.

For years, my old 18-foot *Frontiersman* was relegated to the fringes of our cabin property. There it sat, upside down, covered by decaying leaves and spotted with moss and mildew. We used it only once or twice a season—ever since a 10-foot tin boat with a 5 hp outboard took its place. I felt guilty about it.

Then, last spring, a group of guys I've known since my teens brought up the idea of paddling the 50 km Sayward Forest Canoe Route on Vancouver Island. I figured it would be an exciting adventure—and what better way to honour my forlorn canoe?

The eight of us have done fly-in and drive-in fishing trips together in the past but, by early June, our group had shrunk to four. It may have had something to do with the fact that we're now all closer to 60 than 50. Portaging laden canoes? Not for the faint of heart—or geezers like us. We all grew up around canoes and the water, but none of us had ever tackled a serious canoe route. »



A tent each is extravagant, but prevents snoring wars



The Sayward Forest Canoe Route is a circular chain of more than a dozen lakes connected by eight kilometres of portages in a relatively remote area northwest of Campbell River. Though surrounded by mountains and heavily forested, its gentle topography makes it an ideal route. What seals the deal are canoe carts. We have rented a couple of these two-wheeled contraptions to save us having to carry the canoes—my 40 kg fibre-glass and a borrowed 35 kg Grumman aluminum—plus our gear on our backs during the portages.

The four of us—Jim McBride, Glenn Gilmour, Peter Baillie, and I—stand on a grassy patch of level ground on the shore of Mohun Lake, gazing out over the clear water and the forested shoreline. Our two canoes are loaded with food, fishing gear, lifejackets, clothing, tents, sleeping bags, and other assorted “necessities.” The canoe carts are lashed awkwardly on top.

As we push off from shore, we begin what will become our standard paddling routine: Jim and Glenn in the Grumman; Peter and I in the Frontiersman. After climbing aboard, we adjust our seat cushions—sleeping pads folded into nylon seat

Trout treats were a highlight of the trip. We trolled lures and caught and dined on tasty rainbow trout and cutthroat every day. The wheeled canoe carts made easy work along most of the portages. Above, Glenn and Jim paddle their borrowed and slightly worse-for-wear aluminum canoe.

slings. They will be priceless butt and back supports and, of course, when unfolded, the inflated pads make for comfy sleeping. We arrange our gear around us: water bottles, snacks, tackle boxes, extra clothing, and fishing rods. Finally, we paddle off and, when we get up to speed, we let out our fishing gear.

Initially, we are a little concerned about the stability of the laden canoes, so we proceed cautiously, but they prove to be remarkably stable when full of gear, presumably due to their lower centre of gravity. Still, I eye the freeboard on Jim and Glenn’s canoe. The gunwales seem perilously close to the water.

It’s a good thing that most of our gear is sealed in dry bags and roped into the canoes. Were we to capsize, we’d be in

trouble with all that heavy, bulky stuff dangling under the overturned boat. Fortunately, the lakes are quite shallow and reasonably warm.

We paddle north under clear blue skies. The air is warm and the lake flat calm. Like most lakes along the route, the muddy bottom is often visible below us while lily pads dot the surface.

At a point where the lake narrows to only a few hundred feet, we pass through the rotted pilings of an old railroad logging bridge, the first of several we will encounter. We imagine the harsh conditions faced by pioneer engineers who graded the hilly terrain and built rail lines and trestles through untouched forest. And we marvel that their legacy endures almost a century later. It seems

Four tents mean more gear to lug, but they avoid any issues around snoring tent-mates. This night, to bear-proof our food, we loaded it into the Grumman and anchored it to an off-shore snag. Normally we hung our food between tall trees. We had no issues with bears though.

so unlikely that the economics of the day would allow a railway network to be established in the bush, but that is exactly what happened.

Then, nearing the north end of the lake, we find our first portage marker—a small yellow diamond nailed to a tree.

“Would you like a spot of tea?” As we pull up on shore, a voice calls out from the wilderness. We look at each other in confusion. We thought we were in the middle of nowhere.

It turns out that our gracious host, a grizzled, elderly fellow, has been camping nearby for several weeks. He says he is a commercial mushroom picker, scoping out areas to pick in the fall harvest season. As politely as we can, we decline his kind offer of tea, fearing that whatever is in it might make us forsake civilization and join him in the woods forever.

The pullout for the portage is rocky and steep, but we manage to get the carts under the canoes while they are still in the water, and the four of us wrestle each one up to a level spot. We’re happy this works because it saves us from having to unload the canoes. >>

PETER ROBSON, EXCEPT TOP LEFT AND RIGHT, GLENN GILMOUR. PREVIOUS PAGES: JIM MCBRIDE



8 Things we learned

Gear: keeping dry

- Carry all your gear in dry bags. Larger models often have backpack-like straps and room for lots of stuff—great for portaging.
- Make sure dry bags are sealed properly with the specified number of folds. If not, they will leak.
- Tie everything into the boat. If you capsize, you don't want your gear sinking or floating away.

Canoe/kayak Carts

- Check that the cart tires are inflated. A flat tire can ruin the adventure.
- The canoe needs to be carefully balanced on the cart—or one of you will be doing a lot more work.
- Cinch straps need to be tight, however, if overtightened, the canoe will bend or crack.
- Push from the side. Otherwise, if the cart hits a rock or root and comes to a sudden stop, you could injure your chest—or your groin.
- It is usually easier to haul the canoe with short bow and stern lines instead of hanging on to the bow and stern. Gloves help reduce rope chafe.

It doesn't get much better than this. The canoeing is easy, the lake is calm, the fish hungry, and the scenery magnificent. In 1938, this area was devastated by a 300 sq. km fire that started in logging slash and burned everything in its path. The forest has since recovered and portions are being harvested once again.

The first 1.6 km portage feels more like 10. Peter and I lean our shoulders against our cart, pushing it up the steep, narrow, winding patches. Suddenly, the cart slams to a halt, knocking us flat. We grab the canoe as it slides sideways, and Peter walks around to see what we've hit. A tree root meandering across the path has stopped our cart in its tracks. Heaving the wheels over the barrier, we press on. Three portages and another kilometre of root-and-rock-strewn goat trail later, we're exhausted. But we're making progress.

When a marshy area bogs down the carts, it seems like a good time to stop for lunch and rest. Jim lays out the fixings for pork tenderloin sandwiches. Afterwards, we develop a system that we'll use for the rest of the trip. On the level sections, two people handle each canoe. One person pulls from the bow and one pushes (and steers) from the stern. In steep sections, it takes all four of us to move each laden cart.

Between our second and third portages, in Twin Lake, we make our only wrong turn when we follow the larger of two divergent channels, presuming that it is the main route.



PHOTOS: JIM MCBRIDE, EXCEPT TOP RIGHT, PETER ROBSON; ILLUSTRATION: SÉBASTIEN THIBAUT

Instead, it leads north to upper Twin Lake. After searching in vain for the elusive portage markers, we resort to a modern convenience—our GPS—which shows that we have to double back and take the lesser channel. An embarrassing moment for sure, but justification for the GPS.

After three portages totalling 2.7 km (the longest series of portages on the trip), we enter Amor Lake, one of the four large lakes of the circuit. Two guys pass us in kayaks. They plan to complete the full route in three days. It seems a shame to rush through this scenic part of the province, but perhaps a quick trip is better than no trip at all.

In Amor, we catch our several 12-inch cutthroat trout—our first fish—which

(Top right) We ready ourselves and the canoes after another portage. Pictured, left to right, are Glenn, Jim, and Peter. Bottom left, I guide my canoe into deep water before boarding. Above, an illustrated version of the BC Parks official route map.



lifts our spirits. We have heard that there is a scenic island campsite on the lake, but that it is only big enough for one group of campers. We seek it out, hoping to be first and, happily, find it deserted. The island is indeed very small, about 20 by 20 metres, but we have it to ourselves. The campsite, which a carved wooden sign says is maintained by the Comox Valley Paddlers Club, one of the volunteer groups that look after the boat-access campsites along the route, has a firepit and just enough room for our tents. The rain is settling in, so we set up some tarps to allow us to cook and have partial cover while we tend the fire. Dinner is smokies in buns, cooked over the campfire, with fresh trout as an appetizer. Delicious! Our chair slings prove to be a godsend for our sore backs.

Two days later, we pack up our gear and head off down the lake in glorious sunshine. We had decided to take the previous day off to explore this beautiful lake, to fish, and to sit around the campfire. After breakfast, we had heard the haunting calls of loons across the water, and Peter {Continued on page 95}

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amazed us by imitating their calls. To our surprise, the loons called back and swam right up to our island. Peter explained that when he was a kid at his grandparents' cottage in Bracebridge, Ont., he and his friends spent hours making sounds by blowing on grass strands, and they eventually learned to imitate loons. Cool cottage trick!

The first portage is a short one of 300 metres into Surprise Lake. Unfortunately, while short, it is the most rocky, narrow, and winding of them all. Our only choice is to unload the canoes and carry them individually to the put-in spot. From here, we paddle to the start of the longest single portage of the trip, 2.3 km.

I have been dreading this one, especially as the previous portage proved so difficult. If we have to unload the canoes and carry our gear by hand, it would take three round trips—a total of 12 km. What if my back isn't up to it?

So I am delighted to find a wide trail over gentle terrain, likely old railroad grades. We make excellent time to large Brewster Lake. Once again, we fish along the way and have success with rainbow and cutthroat trout. They aren't huge, averaging about 12 inches apiece, but it's always a thrill to catch fish, and especially to know that they'll turn up on the dinner menu.

We'd hoped to camp on an island in the lake but, when we arrive, it's already occupied, as is a second campsite on the opposite shore. This is a surprise as, until now, we've only seen the two kayakers. Instead, we find a narrow strip of beach and set up our tents, a cooking area, and a firepit. It is very cool to see all four tents in a row on the only totally sandy section of beach and only a few feet away from the edge of the lake. (A tent each adds to our gear, but avoids issues about who is the worst snorer.)

Our trout reappear as appies in a number of styles (lemon and butter, Cajun, habanero). Jim then cooks up a gourmet meal of stir-fried Thai noodles with peanut sauce. We stay up late, enjoying a peaceful evening with a roaring fire, until we feel raindrops. It takes all of about 10 seconds for us to scurry into the dry confines of our tents. >>

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Today we are facing two sets of rapids, the only fast water of the trip. I have been anxious about this day, as we have no idea whether to expect roaring tumults or an easy paddle. Fortunately, there are marked portage routes around both sets.

Just before the first set, we pull into shore to scout it out. The water is flowing swiftly, but it doesn't look dangerous. Our main concern is the extremely shallow, rock-studded bottom. For the sake of the canoes, we decide to portage. At the bottom end, we relaunch and bounce along the still-shallow stream. I cringe every time my weathered Frontiersman bottoms out. Occasionally, we have to jump out and manoeuvre the canoe into deeper water.

When we get to the second set of rapids, we go ashore again and watch as four canoes ahead of us dash through the whitewater, more or less in control. We decide to risk our canoes and go for it.

As expected, the beginning section is rocky and shallow. Almost immediately, Jim and Glenn's boat runs hard aground and twists broadside to the swift current. Jim jumps in the water and tries to turn the canoe downstream. Glenn jams his paddle against the rocks in an effort to stop the canoe from capsizing. Peter and I see this going on ahead and somehow manage to dodge around them. This is looking very bad. We are now in the lead and quickly lose sight of our friends. Ahead, the stream deepens into a very narrow channel about two metres deep and not much wider than the canoe. Our path is almost completely blocked by overhanging brush. The current is running too fast for us to stop and, helpless, we are swept along. We know that we must paddle faster than the current to be in control, but the brush is like a solid wall. It scratches at our faces and spears our bodies. My baseball hat snags on a branch and rips from my head. The tangle is such that we can't even use our paddles. It is all Peter and I can do to keep the canoe balanced. We stab at the bank in an effort to keep ourselves parallel to the racing water. We both know that should we tip, the canoe will turn sideways to the current and possibly break in half. A few minutes later,

we shoot out into a wide marsh at the bottom and regain control.

Our immediate concern is for Jim and Glenn. The minutes tick by, then suddenly they come shooting out the passage, their canoe draped with branches. It's over, and we've made it. We high-five and shout with adrenalin-fuelled joy.

By comparison, the next series of lakes—Fry and Lower Campbell—are tranquil. Dotted with dead standing trees, they are part of a reservoir and dam system built in the late 1950s to provide electricity to nearby Campbell River. It is creepy paddling among the jutting and submerged forest of ancient trees, but it is better than the rapids. Late in the afternoon, we find a picturesque sandy beach fronting an almost-empty campground. For some reason, only one other campsite is being used. Our trip is winding down and we are using our dehydrated meals. Peter cooks up pepper steak and rice.

The next morning, Jim discovers why the campground was empty. The lone campers have placed a sign at the entrance: Steve's Stag Party This Way—Honk Three Times When Strippers Arrive. They confess that there was no stag party; they put up the sign so that they and their friends would have the place to themselves.

Our second-last day brings another tough one-kilometre portage. It takes all four of us to push and pull one loaded canoe at a time. The payoff on our last night is a picture-perfect spot with a lush cover of trees. We have the five-acre island to ourselves and spend the afternoon relaxing, swimming, and fishing off the rocks.

Next day, with our bellies full of pancakes (and most of a coveted bottle of maple syrup Peter carried the entire way), we pack up for the last three kilometres. As we paddle up the lake, torrential rain—the worst rain of the trip—soaks us but, fortunately, it no longer matters.

We make our way around the last bend and our starting point comes into view. Too soon the voyage is over. We've done what we set out to do—spent time in nature with good friends.

Next year, we plan to take on another canoe route and, once again, I will put my cottage canoe to good use. Maybe we'll even tackle a few more rapids. 🐾