

# CANOE TRIP



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ALONE IN THE MAINE WILDERNESS

DAVID CURRAN



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ASHLAND, OREGON

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FOR KEVIN AND MARIAH

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I HAVE BEEN, THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, THE GRATEFUL RECIPIENT OF A great deal of good luck, an essential element in any sort of undertaking. The reader will doubtless note many examples of it in the pages to follow. Good fortune has certainly played a role in the publication of this book. I was fortunate to have my manuscript land on the desk of an editor, Judith Schnell, who happens to be from Maine and whose grandfather happens to have been a river man, a log driver no less. I was lucky to have crossed paths with Walter Bickford who got my mind right about the ideal of wilderness travel and steered me to Maine. I was lucky to have known two readers, Kevin Rose and Amanda Waldron, who took the time to go over the manuscript and give me their honest opinion of its faults and merits. Finally, I have been lucky to be married to Pat, who has not only been excited to see me leave but quite pleased to have me return.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS BOOK IS PRIMARILY AN ACCOUNT OF A TRIP DOWN THE ALLAGASH River in northern Maine from June 23–25, 2000. However, several other wilderness canoe trips in Maine are referred to in this work, and it may help the reader to see a list of the significant trips in chronological order.

Moose River—July 31–August 2, 1997

Seboeis River—April 20–21, 1998

Seboeis River (The Return)—May 22–23, 1998

Allagash River—July 1–3, 1999







# I

IT IS JUNE 14; ONE WEEK BEFORE THE TRIP AND THE DREAD IS SETTING in. My appetite has lessened. I am not enjoying much of anything. I am preoccupied and have trouble being interested in things. A vague but steady nausea floats in my stomach. I feel terribly homesick and haven't even left. I am a psychologist and have been finding talk of my trip intruding into my clients' sessions. This feeling will deepen and broaden in the days to come. I'll watch the weather every chance I get. I will get on the Internet weather sites and look at forecasts for northern Maine. I will be secretly looking for good and honorable reasons to cancel. The dread has been getting worse with each anticipated trip.

The dread was an acquired feeling. I had been raised to ignore and suppress it. You grow up with five brothers in a family like mine and you begin real young to shut it out. A kind of natural selection causes it to weaken in the consciousness and die in the expression. A lifetime of recklessness and good fortune seemed to kill it off altogether. A safe and peaceful adulthood slowly wraps itself around you. Naturally, you come to believe you are safe and that you carry that safety with you. It is a belief deeper than thought, so you don't even notice when you have taken it where it does not belong and it has no power. You develop other mistaken thoughts. People with bad luck think they are cursed. People who've been lucky think they're entitled or that they must be doing

something right and that if they've flipped a coin nine times and it's been heads nine times in a row, that it's bound to be heads on the tenth, when in fact the odds are steadily silently growing that it won't.

My friend Kevin is a high school English teacher. Three years ago I told him of a canoe trip I planned to take, alone, in April, down the remote Sebobeis River in north central Maine. I had been very excited. I had planned it for months. All winter long I had thought of it in a hundred versions, contingencies and conditions. Every night I brought it to sleep with me like some dream of pirates' treasure. Many nights I got out of bed to write down an idea on how to cope with a newly imagined and adventurous danger, a new piece of equipment, a better way to pack or stow my gear. I had planned to go in late April, during the school vacation, because the ice would be gone, because the flies would not have risen and because I just couldn't wait. Kevin is an ex-Marine, a former football and hockey player. He's been a fisherman and a sailor. He, his wife, and another couple sailed to Australia a few years back. He's a big and burly white-haired, white-bearded pug, who doesn't scare easily. You could say that he is a tough guy and a brave one too. But what I had in mind bothered him and one day he told his class about it, adding that I was an "idiot" for doing this sort of thing alone and that he was angry at me for taking that kind of risk. At the time it made me smile. I was proud to have Kevin view me as so audacious (though he hadn't said "audacious," he'd said "idiot"), skimming right past the fact that he thought me a fool.

There is a lot to be afraid of on a solo wilderness canoe trip. But I had to learn that, piece by piece. For instance, I had believed that I was not afraid of bears. Ignorance and the influence of deep-seated childhood images barred me from the truth. As a child I'd had a full Davy Crockett outfit: a leather fringed jacket, powder horn, canteen, flintlock and coonskin hat. Davy and I not only had the same first name, I often pointed out, but the same initials, D.C. Davy could just "grin" a bear into cuddly submission. I'd seen him do it plenty of times on Walt Disney. That was pretty much the level of my thinking as I considered my trip and the possible dangers I might face. Kevin could see that and it made him wince.

As for bears, I still like to think that I want to see one. If I see one up close, I expect I'll wish I hadn't. I've read and heard accounts of the power and unpredictability of black bears. I know they can outswim and outrun, outclimb and outfight any human if they feel like it. And now and then they feel like it. A male black bear can weigh 650 pounds, or twice as much as the most fearsome steroid-pumped pro wrestler. While black bears are not in the same class as grizzlies in size, power or aggressiveness, they do occasionally attack and kill humans. This past July a female Canadian biathlete training in Quebec was killed by a black bear. The bear was a nursing sow and it is believed the woman may have come between the bear and her cub. Bears in remote areas with little or no experience with humans are considered most dangerous. Still, only about 40 people are known to have been killed by black bears in North America in the past century, and bear advocates and aficionados are eager to point out that we have a much greater chance of being killed by a bee sting, dog, or lightning than by a bear. But the imaginations of humans, judging from the popularity of state lotteries, are uninhibited by long odds. What about the three teenagers attacked and partially eaten by a single black bear in Ontario in 1978?

One night I camped on a grassy bluff, upriver of Attean Falls, on the Moose River near Jackman, Maine. I had pulled over right before nightfall, just before a heavy rain, lucky to find what was probably the only campable space for a couple of miles in either direction on either bank. I set up and got quickly into my tent without supper, seconds before the rain. A thin muddy animal trail of some sort passed close by my tent through the high damp grass and down the steep slope to the river. I had been excited by its presence. It was my first trip to Maine and I wanted to get as close as possible to anything wild. I woke up the next morning to the sound of something snuffling softly outside very close. I lay still, listening. It may have been only four or five feet away from my tent opening. I badly wanted to know what it was but I thought the sound and movement of unzipping my tent would scare it away before I could see what it was. Also, I discovered, I didn't really want it to know I was there. I was thinking, what if it's a bear?

But the dread is not really about bears. It's not particularly about animals of any kind, though they have made their contributions. A female moose charged me once across shallow water. I had been coasting toward her, camera in hand, on a lonely narrow stretch of that same Moose River in western Maine. It was early evening. I had just passed by the last established campsites I would see for many miles. There would be no others before nightfall. But I had felt too good to stop for the day just yet. I intended to continue another hour or so and find my own spot to camp. I came around a corner and there she was, the first up-close moose I'd ever seen. I felt rewarded for having pushed on past the campsites at Spencer Rips. All I could think of were the pictures and this big old moose being in my frame. It never occurred to me that I was drifting into her house.

As I came abreast of her, no more than fifty feet away, she charged. The water was only a couple of feet deep and with those long legs she could move with ease. Three long crashing splashing steps covered half the distance, then she stopped. I had been staring, but when she came at me I put my head down and paddled as hard as I could. It would have been to no avail had she decided to continue. I kept my eyes averted until I was at a safe distance. It might have helped. My daughter later told me that it was probably a good thing to have done because if moose are anything like horses, they may perceive direct eye contact (I'd been staring and taking pictures, grinning like a madman) as a challenge. A safe thirty yards downstream I looked back. She might have had calves nearby, I thought. I felt simultaneously exhilarated and intimidated. She stared a baleful good riddance.

I don't worry about injury or illness, though I have made myself think carefully about it. I've read books on wilderness first aid. Never having been a Boy Scout, fireman, soldier, or otherwise resourceful person, I am a complete novice to first aid of any kind. So I read with much grimacing and fascination the diagnoses and treatments for shock and the acute stress reaction, hemorrhages and hypothermia, fractures and flail chest. I can't say, though, that I have actually learned anything. One never knows if something's been learned until it can suddenly be recalled later on in an unexpected moment.

But there is value in mental rehearsal so I've imagined myself taking a tumble into rocky rapids and making my way to shore to find that I am injured. How about, let's see, a dislocated shoulder. Yes, that could happen. OK. The book says, if alone, to lie on a flat ledge of some sort and let the injured arm hang straight down. Oh, first tape (duct tape, of course) ten to fifteen pounds of weight to the end of the arm. With fatigue, the arm will relax and the shoulder will slip back into place. Should only take about an hour. Broken lower leg? Apply traction by placing the foot into the cleft of a tree or rock and pull back firmly until the bones have slipped back into place. While proceeding, bite on nearby tree to keep from frightening nearby animals with disturbing screams.

I capsized once going over a low ledge I hadn't bothered to scout and banged my hip on a submerged boulder. I barely felt it at the time, but it raised a baseball-size lump and left me with the nastiest bruise, by far, I've ever had and unable to lie on that side for a month. I know the soft-looking water can be very hard. Still, the possibility of serious injury seems more hypothetical than real to me. I bring lots of medicine. I could get sick, but I never think about it.

Once I thought I might be lost and it was a terrible thing. I lay in my tent that night thinking, how much would I pay just to know where I am? I plan for the possibility. The *Maine Gazetteer* is an excellent series of finely detailed topographical maps, which include most logging roads and trails at a scale of 1:125,000, or 1 inch equals 2 miles. I make two copies of the area I need, laminate them both and keep one in my survival pouch. If I think I need something better I order topos at a scale of 1:24,000 (1 inch equals about  $\frac{1}{3}$  mile) from the U.S. Geological Survey. By comparison my AAA Maine road map is 1:679,000, or 1 inch equals 11 miles. As good as the maps are, none of them can tell the real truth about travel across that terrain.

The land that the maps describe looks open, smooth, clean, and neat across a soothing green expanse. Contour lines indicate the prominent changes in elevation, and symbols show the significant wetlands, but nowhere does the map show the mosquitoes and black flies, that bane which Thoreau called "more formidable than wolves." Nor does it show a forest so thick with pine, fir, and spruce of every size that you need

your hands and arms as well as your feet and legs to wrestle your way through. It cannot describe the visibility so limited that, without a compass, you'd be lost for sure in the time it takes to say your prayers. You cannot see the fallen trees strewn thickly like pick-up sticks everywhere and every which way at every angle so you can't take three steps in any direction without having to step over, climb over, tightrope down, crouch or crawl beneath some felled giant whose remaining spike-like branches maintain a screen which must be broken through. It cannot fully describe the ground itself; the broken, rock-strewn land, the mini swamps and alder-encased streams with the ever-present boot and clothes soaking damp. For the sun can only weakly reach these dark depths, and near the rivers, ponds, and lakes the morning mist soaks it fresh each day.

Two years ago, on only my second wilderness trip, I was forced to abandon my canoe and walk out of the Seboeis River wilderness region. It took me parts of two days to cover one mile. It was a full body battle nearly every step of the way. The Maine woods, I have learned, are nothing like the forests of home. Thoreau wrote that his woods, the Massachusetts woods, have lost their "wild, damp and shaggy look." I have spent all my life playing in and hiking through the woods of Massachusetts. I have never needed a trail to make my way. Beneath the oaks, white pines, maples, poplars, and birches there is virtually open ground with few serious obstructions. You can almost keep a straight line. It is easy maneuvering around and through the brush, which dots the former pastureland beneath the trees. Most of the north Maine woods has never been pastureland, never smoothed, domesticated, or even inhabited. The forest is ferocious, tenaciously in your face, pressing on you, pushing on you until you want to scream "Back off. Get off of me." But it won't and it is endless.

In the forests of home visibility is good, several hundred feet much of the time. No black flies tunneling into your hair. No dense clouds of mosquitoes that fill your mouth every time you take a breath or crowd onto every exposed inch of flesh.

But there is no sauntering off to see the country, and  
10 or 15 rods seems a great way from your companions,

and you come back with the air of a much traveled man, as from a long journey, with adventures to relate, though you may have heard the crackling of the fire all the while,—and at a hundred rods you might be lost past recovery, and have to camp out. It is all mossy and moosey. In some of those dense fir and spruce woods there's hardly room for the smoke to go up. The trees are a standing night, and every fir and spruce which you fell is a plume plucked from night's raven wing.

Henry David Thoreau, *In the Maine Woods*

Bill Bryson wrote of the Maine woods in his account of his journey along the Appalachian Trail, describing them as having a “more ominous, and brooding feel.” He continues,

They were unquestionably different from the woods further south—darker, more shadowy, and inclining more to black than green. There were differences in the trees too—more conifers at low levels and many more birches—and scattered through the undergrowth were larger rounded black boulders like sleeping animals, which lent these still recesses a certain eeriness. When Walt Disney made a motion picture of Bambi, his artists based their images on the Great North Woods of Maine, but this was palpably not a Disney forest of roomy glades and cuddlesome creatures. This brought to mind the woods in the Wizard of Oz, where the trees have ugly faces and malign intent and every step seems a gamble. This was a woods for looming bears, dangling snakes, wolves with laser red eyes, strange noises, sudden terrors—a place of “standing night” as Thoreau neatly and nervously put it.

Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods*

I would say that my two-day trek in the Seboeis River area east of Baxter State Park was the worst experience of my life, except that in my

winter reveries I find myself thinking back on it wistfully, fantasizing secretly, despite myself, of having to do it again. From the safety of my bed before falling asleep, from the safe distance of the off-season, I pose problems for myself and then try to solve them.

For instance, what if I capsized in fast rapids and became separated from my canoe and all my supplies which had been tied in so securely; my pack, my water, all my gear, everything lost, sent zipping away from me downriver as I crawl to shore?

Following the river along its bank is rarely possible for long. Alders, steep banks, boulders or dense forests to the waterline usually prevent any travel along the river shore. Swamps, the river's twisting path and other impediments will probably wear out any attempt to follow the river from higher ground. If the river is deep enough and not too cluttered with rocks, a raft might be made and poled downstream in search of the lost canoe. I have a book called *How to Stay Alive in the Woods*, by an old-timer named Bradford Angier, which shows how it can be done. I like that idea a lot. But I might just have to set off overland in the direction of the closest logging road marked on my map. In any case I'll have nothing to rely on but what I'm wearing, the contents of my fisherman's vest and my waist survival pouch. The contents of the survival pouch fall roughly into five categories: warmth, shelter, water, physical care and travel. "Dry" comes under the headings of warmth and shelter.

To stay warm and dry I have, first of all, lots of matches. In a waterproof, screw-top, rubber-gasketed little tube I have wooden friction matches. The plastic tube is in a waterproof plastic box. It's a small one, about the size of my hand. I've checked it, though, weighted down in a sink full of water, and found it leaks a bit. The tube doesn't. In a plastic bag, the "one-zip" Hefty brand—the best because it has that little white sliding clasp that seals up easily even in the dark or with shaky hands—I keep waterproof and regular matches. These are stuffed into the box as well. Both types have their limitations. The waterproof ones have tiny sulfur heads that break off and don't light that easily, and if their strike plate gets wet they won't light at all. Regular paper matches light great but of course are useless wet. I figure that with the three types I can get a fire lit. Just in case there are no birch trees around, I carry bark in the

pouch. The final item in the waterproof box is a tiny flashlight into which I must remember to put a fresh AA battery.

The hatchet on my belt can help prepare firewood (or make that raft) and help in building a shelter. All that is needed is readily available. Trees give you the material for a lean-to. I pack a 4 X 8-foot piece of heavy plastic for a waterproof roof that can be covered with the branches of whatever evergreen is most lush and most available. I keep a small roll of nylon string for tying things down and together, though I've read that arborvitae or hemlock bark in strips makes excellent string. With a fire and a shelter you can start getting dry and warm if you are wet and cold. I pack a space blanket to wrap around myself as well. It folds up to the size of a hot dog bun, weighs nothing and will wrap around your body, preserving any heat your body can produce, or so I hear; I've never had to use one. A small bottle of insect spray is included so that I'm not sucked dry as a raisin while sitting in my lean-to. There are reliable accounts of deer and moose being killed by blood loss due to the mosquitoes and flies. Humans are simply driven mad. I wonder what the Indians did for protection? The Indian guide with Thoreau used nothing and suffered for it.

The Indian would not use our wash to protect his face and hands, for fear that it would hurt his skin, nor had he any veil; he, therefore, suffered from insects now, and throughout this journey, more than either of us I think.

Thoreau, *In the Maine Woods*

The survival pouch is where I keep my water purification tablets. I have my canteen on my belt and a light plastic water container folded up in my pouch. Even apparently pristine wilderness streams cannot be entirely trusted to be free of diarrhea-causing microbes.

In case I get hurt I include a small first-aid kit with bandages, gauze, antiseptic ointment, medicine in a waterproof plastic screw-top container, an Ace bandage and a nylon knee brace for my vulnerable, football-loosened knees.

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I have a Leatherman combination knife, a type of Swiss Army knife containing a toolbox full of devices you could build a schooner with and still have puzzling instruments left unused. I have yet to have a need for it, but it's small and was a Christmas gift and comes in a nice leather holder and in an emergency might have just the thing I need, buried somewhere in its midst.

The pouch is where I keep my car keys, cash, and credit cards, all thoroughly bagged. After all, presuming I make my way to civilization or to wherever it is my truck has been left for me, I'll need these things. If my truck has been, instead, merrily appropriated by impoverished unscrupulous shuttlers who considered my rusted, dented, never-been-to-a-car wash-or-in-any-other-way-properly-washed, handmade-by-my-hands-wooden-canoe-rack-bearing, 1990 Ford F-150 (with air-conditioning and power locks and windows) two-wheel-drive (what was I thinking?) beast to be such a major improvement over their own vehicles that they just couldn't help themselves and were willing to throw away their reputations as honorable shuttlers in order to have it, then I'll really need the money and credit cards.

I have my compass and laminated map. Now if I truly *were* to find myself without or unable to use my canoe, the safe and smart thing would be to stay by the river and wait for someone to eventually come by. Even in the wilderness, rivers are roads and people travel them a lot more than they travel deep uninhabited trackless forests. In addition you will be where you told your family you would be, along the river, so searchers will know where to look if you're late returning home. But it could be that the waiting is unendurable or undesirable for some reason or that the wait could amount to days and a dirt road leading to a ranger station or a frequently used canoe put-in point may pass nearby, with a vehicle now and then passing along it. Some logging roads see a good deal of use. On the other hand there are usually more trails and old roads in the woods than are marked on the maps, and getting lost in the maze they can create is a very real danger. It's usually best to stay put.

Finally and least important according to all the guidebooks is food. Nonetheless, I will be sure to enclose a few energy bars of some sort this time. Though it is said that a person can go many days without food they

rarely wish to, and so I will include some food because one can only be so content living on mouthfuls of mosquitoes.

I will be wearing a hat and prescription sunglasses, if I haven't lost them. For the first time, on the upcoming trip, I will have a pair in reserve in my survival pouch. I will probably have a nylon quick-drying T-shirt, Gore-Tex shorts and a pair of sneakers. I will have a skin diver's knife (3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-inch blade) strapped to my calf. I love my knife. I've never owned a gun or any sort of weapon in my life. While it's a very useful tool, I know I wear it mainly because it looks so cool. On my belt I will have a one-liter canteen along with the hatchet. While I have packed and repacked the contents of the waist pouch many times, I have never had to open it on a trip. I have imagined the use of each of its precious items in great detail.

The greatest danger to any person in a wilderness survival situation is cold. Cold scares me. Hypothermia can break down or kill a person faster than anything short of traumatic injury or poisoning. Much faster than heat, thirst, or hunger. It is my greatest fear. It is one source of the dread. Whenever I imagine myself in a miserable wilderness condition I see myself cold and wet. Cold and wet is just what I would be if I lost my canoe and had to walk out. Even in summer the water in Maine can be cold, the woods damp and shady, the nights very cool. Cold water dissipates heat faster than any other commonly encountered substance, faster than wind, 240 times faster than still air.

I had a taste of the early stages of hypothermia a couple of years ago. I had returned with a friend to the Seboeis River in late May to retrieve the canoe I had been forced to abandon there the month before. That ill-advised (idiotic) April trip had culminated in the horrific two-day hike out.

It was a bit warmer in May, but not much. The snow was gone from the woods. The river level had dropped considerably from its April flood stage. It was drizzly, barely in the 50s. The forest was filled with mist and the low clouds seemed to grow up out of it. Everything, the water, the sky, the trees, was washed in shades of gray and black. Dismal.

Paul is my age. We met on our high-school football team and have been friends ever since. He has only slightly more woodsman experience

than I, but he's strong, tough, and about as indefatigable as a person can be. He has slowed his exuberant recklessness a little, over time, but still sneers at danger and enjoys what we used to call "good torture," which loosely translated means something like "pleasure in hardship in the service of a good cause and/or good story." A good cause is nearly anything that yields a good story.

The retrieval of the canoe seemed to offer excellent opportunities for "good torture." Though we hadn't spoken for several months he had agreed in an instant to accompany me. Agreement, for Paul, did not automatically evolve into preparation, though when I picked him up at 4:00 A.M. and he threw his hockey duffel bag into the back of my truck, he looked well supplied to me. So I was surprised when, just past Bangor, he told me to get off at the next exit. "I have to get a couple of things." We found a Wal-Mart and we rushed in and picked up a box of plastic trash bags. "These will be my raincoat if I need it." Outside it was raining lightly. "Probably rig up a bunch of them for my tent, too." He wanted some hiking boots but didn't like their prices.

"Jeez, Paul, do you need anything else? No *tent*? I told you I only had a one-man tent? What *did* you bring?"

"Oh I'm fine. Don't worry about it. I got everything. Hmm, mosquito repellent. I could use that."

It is a shame to go to the Maine woods and not see a moose. I nearly hit two on a desolate road as it neared the river. Paul had just said to me, "You know, you should probably slow down some. There could be moose in the road anywhere." I looked at him to see if he was joking. Caution and foresight had never been particular qualities of his. But he was right. So I slowed down and there they were around the next curve, a cow and her calf. They quickly glanced at us, then loped into the woods without a sound, snaked between the trees, and were gone. Seeing them and missing them seemed to be good omens. Unfortunately the incident also encouraged Paul's belief that he is psychic.

I had left my canoe on the west bank, pulled up ten feet from the high waterline. Our task was to hike down a trail along the east side a mile or so and locate the canoe on the opposite side. Unbeknownst to me a month ago, there was an abandoned old logging road running parallel to the river about a quarter mile above the water on the west side.

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We spotted the canoe, now a good 30 feet from the water, took the truck down the bumpy dirt track, branches scraping roughly along both sides, to its end, which was at a point below which we estimated the canoe would lie.

Blankets of mosquitoes draped themselves over us the moment we left the truck. I counted eight of them on just one of Paul's fingers. What do they do all day without people to suck on? Torment the deer and moose, I guess.

He laughed, "Good thing I got this stuff, huh?" as we quickly doused ourselves with the DEET.

The woods presented a solid mass into which we plunged hands first like tunnelers. I put my head nearly into Paul's back and followed him in. How hard could it be? Go straight. Head downhill as soon as the ground began to slope to the river. Our ears alone should be able to guide us. Within five minutes or fifty yards we'd each fallen down at least once and the forest had turned us in so many directions we no longer had any idea which way was north, south, east, or west or where to point for the river or the road. It hadn't seemed necessary to take a compass reading to walk 400 yards to a river. But, this being the Maine woods, we were immediately engulfed and disoriented. The compass set us right and following it carefully we soon made out flickers of the white-capped lead gray river between the trees. A few minutes more and there was the canoe right in front of us, exactly as I had left it in the snowy woods of April a month before.