

this week
OUTDOORS

LOST CAUSE

Darkness, bugs, rain turn trip into excellent mis-adventure

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NEAR NOELVILLE, Ontario?

Four months of planning, a 16-hour car ride and here we were: spending our first night of vacation shivering on the ground, swarmed by mosquitoes.

Almost 24 hours before, Jay and I were greeted by a bad omen: a batch of thunderstorms and dense fog on I-95 south of Fredericksburg. Things already weren't going as planned on our trip to the French River region of Ontario.

We pulled up at Judge Lake around 7 p.m. in a steady rain with temperatures in the 50s, normal for the area in late May. Still, we wanted to meet Jason and Todd that evening at Offtrail Lake, where they'd been camped for a night. We aimed to paddle the length of the narrow 2½-mile glacier-carved lake, carry the canoe across a rugged half-mile trail (a portage) and paddle another half mile to the campsite.

Outfitted in rain gear, we loaded the canoe with everything we needed for four or five days of fishing in the bush, the term locals use to describe the backcountry of the Canadian Shield.

Determined, we paddled Judge Lake in record time. I located the portage — a boulder-strewn game trail — with little difficulty (it was my fifth trip there). Leaving the canoe, we strapped on our packs and charged down the trail. We reached Offtrail Lake by 8 and dropped our gear. We hurried back to Judge Lake to grab the canoe. Daylight was waning,

but we hoped to be sitting next to a crackling fire in an hour.

We reached the canoe and dumped the rainwater that had accumulated. We trudged back up the initial incline of the portage, lugging the 75-pound boat. Ten minutes later, we had lost the trail.

"Bob, find Offtrail," Jay ordered with urgency. After all, I supposedly was familiar with this area. This was his first trip to Canada.

Looking for a landmark, I dashed in a random direction, careful to keep within range of Jay's voice. I returned and bolted another way and repeated the process, failing to recognize anything amid the birches and pines of the boreal forest. I finally spotted a lake from atop a hillock. This couldn't be Offtrail Lake, though, we hadn't gone far enough. It was Carrie Lake, which also was accessible from the portage. My topographic maps were neatly stowed in my pack — with the rest of our gear — about a half mile away. The compass on my watch was useless.

Bewildered
 Bob Dolgan and Jay Burkhardt spent the night of May 26 on the trail, cold, damp and surrounded by mosquitoes. Here's how that came about:

1. The start of the portage. After paddling Judge Lake, the canoe was left here around 7:45 p.m., and the gear was taken to Offtrail Lake (Site 2).
2. The end of the portage. The gear was left here around 8, and a return trip was made to Site 1 to retrieve the canoe.
3. Upon retrieving the canoe, the trail was presumed lost around here. With daylight waning, the canoe was left here.
4. After relocating the portage, the night was spent here, the halfway point between Judge Lake and Offtrail Lake.
5. Jason Rich and Todd Stuckey were camped here.

*Just after daybreak, the canoe was relocated at Site 3. It was brought to Site 2 and loaded and launched. The final paddle was made to Site 5.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY BOB DOLGAN

Clockwise from top left: canoe at Offtrail Lake; Bob Dolgan with largemouth bass; a view of Judge Lake.

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We decided we had to find the portage — and our gear — without the canoe. We left the canoe and guessed at the direction we had come. It was after 9 now. It still was raining.

Somehow we wound up back on the portage and strode to Judge Lake to reorient ourselves. We marched down the trail toward Offtrail Lake. This time, we made it to the halfway point of the portage — a dome of mossy rock where the trail splinters. I recognized a cairn I'd piled there two years ago that pointed toward Offtrail Lake, but I couldn't relocate the trail. Dive-bombed by mosquitoes, Jay didn't take it so well when I suggested we spend the next 6½ hours (until sunrise) at that spot.

By the way, this is the heart of black bear and gray wolf country.

We were soaked and exhausted. Except for our rain gear, we were clad in cotton clothes, a major backcountry gaffe. Our quick-drying Capilene shirts

were packed about a quarter mile away in the darkness. Horror stories of hypothermia brought on by a breeze, 50-degree temperatures and a damp T-shirt popped into my head. Still, the low was supposed to be in the upper 40s that night, and it wasn't windy.

The rain tapered, and we found a mossy depression in which to sleep. With mosquitoes hounding us, we concealed as much skin as possible and attempted to get comfortable.

I checked my watch only once — at 11. Cold and wet, I fitfully dozed, and at 4 a tiny glimmer of gray light appeared. Mosquitoes had buzzed in our ears all night, and our faces were swollen with bites. It had stopped raining.

We got up but were unable to discern the trail. I jumped in place to get warm. As it brightened, we found the trail and located our gear. Whew.

Next, we had to find the canoe — our transportation in and out of the bush. We had a

decent idea of where we got off the trail. We made circular surveys a couple of hundred yards into the woods. On one lengthy foray, I spotted a splash of red in the distance. The canoe.

We met our companions before 7, and the rest of the trip went according to plan. We consistently caught fish. We emerged from the bush and went to the French Canadian hamlet of Noelville, where we ate heaps of poutine (fries with gravy and cheese) and drank cold beverages.

We even saw a bear on the road into town. We told a server at Sam's Tavern that he had been camped in the bush for a week and had seen a bear. She said bears had been ornery lately and that all the foxes in the area were rabid.

"You're not camped in tents, I hope," she said with a concerned smile. For one night, we hadn't even had that luxury.

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