The Boundary Waters and the Far North

Similar but Different Paddling Challenges

Winter 2024 Boundary Waters Journal

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On a summer trip in the BWCAW, I minimize human encounters by paddling at first light and avoiding heavily trafficked routes. On canoe expeditions in the far north of Canada and Alaska, I rarely bump into other canoeists, but when I do, I always welcome the encounters. Who knows? Maybe they have some surplus candy bars. But the salient point of this article is their answer to my question "Where are you from?" At least half the time, it is Germany or the upper midwest of America. The Germans always have great chocolate, and the midwesterners consistently wax affectionately about the Boundary Waters.

There is an inexorable connection, almost a symbiotic relationship, between Boundary Waters lovers and far north paddling. In over a half-century, Bob O'Hara, who has paddled more far northern rivers than anyone, also has never missed at least one annual Boundary Water trip. Nobody loved the Boundary Waters more than Sig Olson, yet he was also drawn to the far north and wrote two books about his adventures there.

Decades ago, it was a hike around BWCAW's Emerald Lake that truly inspired my love for the Boundary Waters. The sight of the granite outcrops, the scent of black spruce, and the presence of caribou lichen stirred such profound memories in me that tears welled up in my eyes. These were not just sights and smells, they were flashbacks of experiences which spliced the Boundary Waters with my love of the far north.

Around a Quetico campfire, I have shared the Klondike poetry of Robert Service and journal entries of explorer Samuel Hearne. The historic Voyageur canoe route that passes through the Boundary Waters

and continues to the far north is a testament to the shared history and the environmental connection.

There is an appeal to the remoteness of the far north, but what is the difference between an arduous portage-laden Quetico trip when you are ten miles from the nearest road and a tundra river 200 miles from the nearest road? Wilderness is wilderness, but there is a difference.

Experienced Boundary Waters paddlers sometimes wonder if they have the right stuff for a far north trip. The challenge of a trip has more to do with how hard you want to push it than how far you are from civilization. Some of my trips in the BWCAW have been more challenging than my runs down the Kelly or Kugurok Rivers in Arctic Alaska, where we zipped downstream without a single portage. The skill set, necessary gear, and the obstacles nature presents are similar in both places. When experienced Boundary Waters paddlers ask me what clothing to bring on a summer far north trip, I reply, unless it is a far, far, north trip, "Pack what you would bring on an end-of-September BWCAW trip and then throw in a bug shirt and pull out the headlamp." The experience of a Boundary Waters canoe trip is similar but different from the far north; it is not better or worse, but it is different.

The lure of the far north is powerful even for paddlers who are most passionate and content with the Boundary Waters. When Dan Cooke returned from his first far north trip, a run down Nunavut's Kazan River, he was not enthralled with the far north and shared that he would stick with the BWCAW. And yet, in the following several years, he found himself making three more far north paddling trips. Similar but different is a strong and persistent draw.

While it's a thrill to surprise a whitetail buck on a familiar BWCAW portage trail, imagine the exhilaration of hearing the low reverberating gurgle of a bull Muskox so close that your own lungs vibrate. Completing an arduous loop of lakes in the BWCAW is satisfying, yet the allure of following a far north river 400 miles from its source to the sea is undeniable. Outsmarting a Walleye in a tannin-stained Quetico lake is exciting, but who wouldn't be captivated by the idea of catching a Lake Trout on every other cast in a gin clear far north river? Following directions in a guidebook to pictographs on a Boundary

Waters lake is exciting, but the astonishment of discovering tent rings and stone meat caches of pre-Columbian far northerners is unparalleled.

The simple truth is that most ardent Boundary Waters paddlers yearn for a far north expedition. Unfortunately for many, that “trip of a lifetime” never happens. I have talked with enough canoeists to know why.

Years ago, I had to forgo a Siberian canoe trip due to political reasons, and my knowledge of the far north of eastern Canada is limited. However, I've personally undertaken 39 canoe journeys in the northern reaches of Alaska, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, giving me a wealth of first-hand experience.

An epic canoe trip in the far north requires three things. You need to have time, money, and muscle. Unfortunately, during our life span, for many of us, those three things don’t occur at the same stage of life.

In our younger years, we have the muscle, vim and vigor; our career paths are not yet chiseled in stone, so we can quit our jobs, leave our belongings in Mom and Dad’s basement, and hit the road with unlimited time. What most of us lack at that age is money. Sure, we could buy an old aluminum canoe and hit the road. Unfortunately, easy road access to far north trips limits paddlers to the muddy old Mackenzie and Yukon Rivers. Technically, these are far north rivers, but these are also shipping arteries and towny routes with lots of motor boats, garbage, and a paucity of wildlife. A good adventure can be had on those routes, but it hardly meets the definition of a far north expedition in pristine wilderness. The game has changed a bit in the last half-century. In 2025, with muscle and a GPS, adventurers can get into the promised land without much money but with much hard work. These trips are called “by fair means.” No float plane charters, at least not to your jump-off point, and are possible with a modest budget. Yellowknife is the most common starting point for a fair means trip, but you must be prepared to paddle on the Great Slave Ocean (I mean lake, but believe me, it will feel like an ocean). You might also need to paddle upstream and struggle over some arduous portages. It is easy to bite off more than you can chew. When planning, fair means paddlers are often misled by the small scale of far north maps. You might make a little squiggle on your map between watersheds. But that little squiggle is an unmarked seven-mile

portage over muskeg that you must plod five times. “No blood, no sweat, no fun,” maybe, and it can be great. But rookie fair means trips with patched together gear are often disappointing and drastically curtailed when challenges become insurmountable. Maybe worse, you push the In-Reach hot button and feel like a weenie.

On most far north canoe trips, the biggest expense, and it is big, is the bush plane charter both to the put-in and, in most cases, the pick-up point. Later in life, you may have money to burn, but squeezing in a 3-week canoe trip may not go over well with the boss or your spouse, and there are always soccer games, weeding your organic garden, and painting the house. Lots of priorities are squeezed into those short summers. This is the time of life when you dream and even plan a far north expedition but then say, “Next year.” When next year comes, you again say, “Next year.”

Finally, the house is paid off, the kids are grown and on their own, and a pension is pouring in. You have the time, you have the cash, but how about the muscle? Lumbago, the beer belly, tennis elbow, you question if you can even do it and wonder if the opportunity to do a far north canoe trip has passed you by.

I’ve been a rule breaker and accomplished far north trips in all those stages of life. Among others, a 1600-mile trip down the Mackenzie drainage to Tuktoyaktuk when I was 21. In my fifties, a 760-mile pan-arctic expedition in my fifties, and last summer, at 72, eight portage-free days on the Nonacho-Taltson River watershed. No regrets, but it required more sacrifice than many people would tolerate.

I want to share a bit about last summer’s Nonacho trip, especially for those readers who have always dreamed of a far north trip but have maybe reconciled that it will never happen, for those and for others of any age who want to experience some of the best of the far north in a canoe and in eight days. I invite you to realize that dream this coming June.

In the last several years, I have returned to a lake in the far north that has special significance to me. I built a log cabin on Nonacho Lake in 1975 and used it as a base for a dozen canoe trips since. Part of the Taltson River, the Nonacho Lake watershed is 200 miles from the nearest road, far from mines that dot the northern landscape, and in an

area seldom traveled, almost forgotten. There are also so-called "pristine" canoe routes in northern Alaska, where you will likely encounter more trash and low-level flyovers than on a typical Boundary Waters trip. But if you know when and where to go, you can still find pristine water in the far north. The Nonacho Watershed is one of those few remaining places.

Nonacho Lake is a 300-square-mile spidery-shaped body of water. Nonacho is attached to other lakes without rapids or portages, bringing its surface area close to 500 square miles. It has a depth of over 300 feet. With hundreds of miles of shoreline, there is only one small fishing lodge and it is open for only a few months each year. There are no roads that connect to the lake. All the building materials and supplies for the lodge are flown in two hundred miles by float or ski-equipped bush planes. Legendary pilot Merlyn Carter built the lodge and was killed at Nonacho by an unprovoked charge of a bear in 2005. I wrote a biography, "Merlyn Carter Bush Pilot," available from booklocker.com, which includes more information about the Nonacho watershed. Merlyn's son Myles now owns the lodge and, in 2023, flew four Esquif hard shell canoes into the camp. He has a camp launch that can transport canoes 75 miles from the lodge. Myles Carter has invited me for the last three years to spend half the summer on the lake as a guest on canoe trips and to talk about the environment and history of the area with guests at the lodge.

The paddle trips in June of 2025 will begin about sixty miles from the lodge, upstream on the Taltson River. On similar 8-day trips last June, I witnessed 80 Musk Ox, two Wolverines, eight Moose, Mink, Otters, Porcupines, and one wild pre-Columbian bear. I caught a 20-pound Lake trout casting from shore. And in three weeks, there was not a single random flyover, not a single axe-cut stump, and beaches devoid of human footprints. For me, that is a big attraction in this part of the Far North. The strongest reason I paddle north now is this thrill of discovery. I accompanied Greg Pitchford and paddled up a small unnamed tributary of the Taltson River last summer. We passed through four unnamed lakes to a waterfall that had only been witnessed by three others in the previous 75 years. No one has ever paddled above that waterfall, but that opportunity awaits you.

These are not grueling trips not like my 450-mile Noatak River expeditions or my six-week 760-mile pan arctic trip. I am proud of those epic adventures and have shared the accomplishments on the pages of the Boundary Waters Journal and from the podium at paddlesport shows. I don't mean to discourage you from making long, arduous expeditions. But these Nonacho trips are comfortable canoe camping adventures in one of the world's wildest corners. Twenty years ago I might have scoffed at an 8-day 60-mile canoe trip. I am the guy who thrived on a 13-month canoe trip on the Nonacho watershed long ago. That year, I stopped, built a log cabin, and wintered over without even a radio. At my current stage of life, that type of travel lacks appeal. I enjoy immersing myself in the land, having time to study the flora and fauna, and soaking up the spirit of untouched nature that is so rare in our twenty-first century world.

This summer's Nonacho Canoe Adventure trips are comfortable canoe camping adventures set in pristine wilderness. An 8-day canoe trip with some of camping luxuries that enhance no-portage trips. Any Boundary Waters recreational paddler could handle these trips. Last summer, we explored an ancient winter camping place close to a caribou crossing that likely has been used by First Nation Aboriginals for thousands of years. I spent an afternoon just sitting in that old camping site and absorbing thousands of years of human history. Who knows what I will discover this summer? Nonacho Canoe Adventure trips are for canoe campers who want to immerse themselves in the far north and still want time for exploration, discovery, relaxing, and fishing.

Myles has invited me to be a guest again this summer. There will be two 8-day self-guided canoe trips, and I plan to tag along on both. The fee includes round-trip float-equipped bush plane flights from Yellowknife Northwest Territories, great canoes, top-end tents, chairs, a screen house, and Yeti coolers for fresh food. For safety, canoeists will have daily satellite radio contact with the lodge. I welcome you to contact Myles Carter at info@nonacho.com for information on how you can make
a far north paddling dream still come true. Suppose you are interested in a more strenuous trip. In that case, you can use the equipment and self-

guide a journey later in the summer into the virtually unexplored and untouched wilderness of the Nonacho watershed.

One of the most unique aspects of the far north is its wildlife. The mammals here are unfamiliar, and while they may be timid, they are not afraid of human encounters. In fact, they are more likely to be curious than skittish. Last summer, on the first of July, a big bull Muskox wandered right through our camp, just a few feet from our tents. Such encounters are not uncommon in the far north, making it a truly unique and unforgettable experience.

So, there is much praise for both the Boundary Waters and the Far North. Similar in many ways but different enough that as much as most readers of this magazine cherish the Boundary Waters, it does not stop them from yearning for an arctic expedition. I promise it will be an adventure that will fuel Boundary Waters's campfire stories for years to come.