nastawgan

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A flat summit photo. Turnaround point on the trip north, at the headwaters of the Back River above Aylmer Lake.

Kinds of Winter: Compass Points, Over the Boulders, Eager…

Story and photos by Dave Olesen

As the sun went down in late afternoon on the 28th of February 2003, I raised my voice above the roar of wind, calling out gently to the team of huskies stretched ahead of me: "Who-o-oa there now, who-o-oa." The low tone of my command was muffled by the ice-encrusted hood surrounding my face and it did not carry far. The dogs heard me but they hardly slowed at the sound. "What? Surely he's not thinking of making camp here?" I stood heavily on the sled's steel brake claws, forcing them deeper into the wind-packed snow. Our momentum fell off and ten frosty dog faces turned back, baffled, to see what I was going to do next. "Whoa," I said again, and dropped the snow hook. I kicked it down with my thick mukluk. "That'll do. Home sweet home."

It was time to camp, and the blank white sweep of tundra offered no shelter. The northwest gale had dominated our day, howling at us head- on, shifting slightly, probing for weakness like a tireless sparring partner, hour after hour. The rush of air had dropped perceptibly at day's end, but it still packed a wallop. With the temperature near 40 below zero, the wind was still eager to freeze any skin I might carelessly expose to it. I moved forward up the team and unhooked the toggle at the back of each dog's harness. Now my intentions were clear to them all and as they felt the toggles come free they each pissed, shook, circled, and curled up on the snow—tail over nose, furry shoulder turned toward the brunt of the wind. Work done, day over . . . call us when supper's ready, boss.

The dogs and I were about halfway between the upper Thelon River and the east end of Great Slave Lake. We were westbound for home, with about a hundred miles to go. It was time to stop the day's marching, dig in, pitch the tent, cook food for us all, and rest for the night. We would find no oasis of spruce trees, no cozy hut on these rolling plains. One barren hillside was as good as the next and darkness was coming on.

I started the chores. The dogs would sleep in harness that night, stretched out in pairs across a smooth blank slope, so I only had to secure the forward end of their gangline to one of the stout aluminum pickets I carried in the sled. I walked to the head of the team again, poked the 30-inch stake into the packed snow, and made the gangline off to it. That done, I set up and lit the two-burner camp stove, heaped big chunks of snow into a square cooker kettle, then sheltered the cooker and stove with a sheet-metal windscreen. Over the next half-hour or so that snow would grudgingly become hot water. With that hot water I could melt big blocks of frozen fat, then pour the water-fat soup over the dogs' dense kibble. I moved up and down the team, putting a bright blue windbreaker on each dog and taking off the cloth booties that they often wear on long runs in deep cold. Next I staked out and raised my red tent alongside the sled, only a few feet away from Jasmine and Schooner, the two wheel dogs at the very back of the team. Every time I set something down I secured it somehow or threw something heavy on top of it, and by doing so managed to make camp that night without losing any bits of my gear to the wind.

Through the two hours of dusk and deepening twilight I worked steadily. Finally, with everything done outside and the dogs all fed, I could retreat to the tent to cook and eat my own supper—a steaming kettle of caribou meat, rice, and butter, seasoned to simple perfection with salt and pepper. An hour later I could begin to get ready for sleep. This is a laugh- ably laborious half-hour project when tent camping in winter: change clothes, arrange bedding, prepare the stove for quick lighting in the morn- ing; wriggle into double mummy bags with their confounding tangle of drawstrings, cord locks, snaps, and zippers. At last I rolled sideways in my cocoon of goose down and synthetic fluff, and blew out the candle.

Pure blackness. The incessant wind

Krummholz camp, final camp of the east trip, at dawn.

still battered the fabric of the tent. Almost at my elbow Jasmine shifted in her snow bed, and sighed as she settled again. I marvelled, as I teetered on the brink of consciousness, at how utterly alone a man and ten dogs are in such a place on such a night. A warm glow of deep rest crept up and down my limbs, then deep, dreamless sleep.

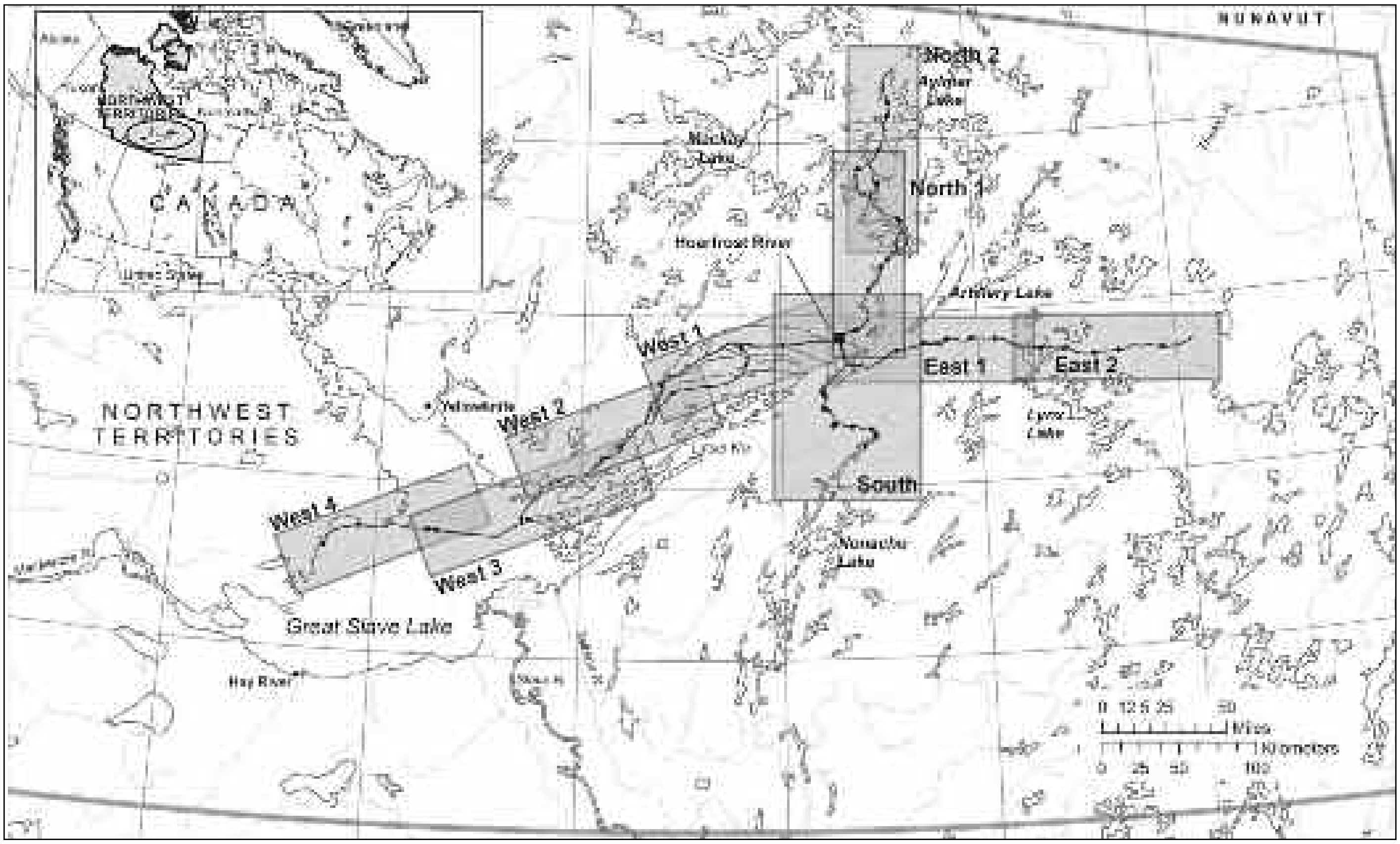
And suddenly dawn—the first morning of March. Daylight tinged orange by the red-and-yellow fabric of my tent. And—could it be? — silence! For the first time in four days the wind had calmed.

During a pause to careen the sled and remove the aluminum rails.

Once I had the stove burning full bore I made a brief foray out from the warm tent. Tundra and sky all around, shaded pink to the east- southeast where the sun would soon rise. Forty-one below zero, according to the little thermometer slung from the handlebar of the sled. Dogs all drifted in, some completely invisible beneath the snow, and not one of them even stirring at the sound of my footsteps. After a couple of minutes outside in that ever-astonishing cold, I dove back into my little nylon haven and the comforting hiss of the camp stove. Just as I sat down and began to fuss with making coffee, one of the dogs barked, and another: short barks of alarm which told me something was amiss, something was moving or approaching our little camp. Reluctant to leave the warm tent again, I poked my head through the door flap.

Eighty yards or so beyond the lead dogs stood a truly enormous white wolf, thick with frost on his mane and pelt, staring at the camp and the dogs as if transfixed. A second wolf, tawny grey, stood just behind the white one. All the dogs were on their feet now, some with clumps of snow still clinging to the sides of their heads, shanks, and nylon jackets, giving them a dishevelled just-woke-up look. No one moved or made a sound. A third wolf, white and slightly smaller than the others, probably a female, trotted in from the northeast.

By then the tips of my frost-battered ears were going numb, and I pulled back into the tent to fetch my hat. When I stuck my head out again the two smaller


NUNAVUT
North 2
Aylmer Lake
MacKay Lake
North 1
CANADA
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
United States
Hoarfrost River
Artillery Lake
West 1
East 1
East 2
Lynx Lake
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
Yellowknife
West 2
South
West 4
West 3
Nonacho Lake
Great Slave Lake
Hay River
0 12.5 25 50 Miles
0 25 50 100 Kilometers

The home hearth of the Hilleberg tent on one of the "radio nights." HF radio warming atop the Coleman stove, for my weekly scheduled call to Kristen.

wolves were ambling away, but the big white fellow still stood and stared. Finally he turned, stepped away, paused once more to study us, and slowly followed his comrades out of sight over the rise. I crawled back into the tent as the dogs settled into their beds again.

It seems necessary to begin every piece of writing about Canada's Northwest Territories with a refresher in North American geography— even for many Canadians. Because my family and I live in a little-known corner of these remote territories, we spend a lot of our conversations when we are "down south" in exchanges like this: "No, not the Yukon. No, not Nunavut. Not Alaska ..." Puzzled look, scratching of head. "What's next, going east . . . Greenland? What the heck is straight north from Alberta and Saskatchewan, or straight north of Montana? Pass me that atlas, please."

That blank in popular geography is part of the wonder, and at times the frustration, of living in this place so far on the fringes of modern North America. It is an enormous stretch of land and waters over a thousand miles across, yet its entire human population could easily take seats to watch a ballgame in a metropolitan stadium. In 1999, when Canada officially established the territory of Nunavut to the north and east of us, the diminished yet still enormous Northwest Territories faded even further from the southern consciousness—perhaps not such a bad thing, considering the implications of the alternative.

The far cache grove with wall tent and sled at 42 below zero.

The journeys I describe in this book took me out from and back to my home at Hoarfrost River, at the northeastern tip of McLeod Bay on Great Slave Lake. Once a year for four consecutive winters I hooked up a team of dogs and set out on long trips away from our homestead, travelling toward one of the cardinal points of the compass: south in 2002, east in 2003, north in 2005, and finally west in 2005. Having gone out, I turned home again. It was as simple as that. My narrative will make many digressions, but the days and nights and miles of those four trips are the main trail wending through the pages ahead.

As I look back on these journeys a steady stream of images comes to mind: that bare-bones camp on the tundra; the stunning cold morning after the wind died; those wolves. Other camps and fleeting moments are fixed permanently in my memory as all the little details begin to fall away: The headwaters of the Back River on a bright, amazingly mild day in late February 2004. I knelt to chip some ice with my knife, since I had boasted to my two little daughters that we would raise a toast to my return with lemon-ade poured over Back River ice chips. A moment on the first trip, south, on the divide between the Snowdrift and Taltson watersheds, standing alone on snowshoes miles from my camp and dogs, on a day so clear and frigid that the air was like some new solid, some surreal essence of cold. And a sunny pastel afternoon on the final trip, moving west across the enormous expanse of Great Slave Lake, mile after mile, slow hours passing, until the far western shore, a land of wood bison and sinkholes and poplar, rose into sight like a new continent in the distance.

When a person lives in a place for many years, it becomes a centre point. Moving outward in any direction from that physical centre, the geo- graphical place, one will eventually and certainly

Walking with my snowshoes on my shoulder atop the esker above the far cache, East trip.

encounter change— or else all places would be the same. For my journeys and motives the four cardinal compass points provided suitable direct headings – I would hook up a team of dogs, and with them hold a heading until something changed. Vegetation, terrain, weather, animals, light, depth, distance – the specific parameters didn't matter. And then, having moved out to that perceptibly new place, the dogs and I would turn for home. Of course anyone, from anywhere, could undertake such a series of outings, and many people have probably taken such journeys in their minds. But it was important to me to actually set out and do it, to make it a part of my life—a life so firmly rooted to a place called Hoarfrost River.

The compass rose and its cardinal points provided a simple and appealing framework for my routes, year by year. Our little cluster of cabins and outbuildings, which we call our homestead for lack of a better word, sits just west of the mouth of the Hoarfrost, where that small river flows into the long arc of McLeod Bay. Here my wife Kristen and I have lived since 1987, raised our two children, and made a life and a living for ourselves. To journey out to each of the four directions, one winter after the next, rounding the compass and always returning to home, appealed to me. It was a simple plan, and that bare-bones simplicity was one of my goals. Over my years in the wilderness, I have often drawn wisdom from a snippet by climber and skier Dick Dorworth, writing in Mountain Gazette many years ago,

Mid-day rest stop on the northwest arm of Whitefish Lake, eastbound toward the Thelon.

Lead dog Foxtail enjoying some indoor time at the stopover hunting shack on Whitefish Lake, westbound for home on the 2003 trip.

Resupply cache camp at Laverty Lake. Wind-polished ice shows black in the background.

something like: "If you can't plan the thing on the back of an old envelope, it threatens to become an Expedition, and should be seriously reconsidered."1 Of course my planning for these trips did entail more notes than I could fit on a scrap of paper, but that advice has always served me well, and over the years I have tried to remain true to it.

I was out for about sixteen days on each trip. Using my methods a lone musher with a sled and a team of dogs cannot travel more than about nine days (somewhere between 100 and 200 miles) without some resupply. Thus I needed to set out one or two resupply caches for myself prior to each journey. Being a bush pilot in my working life, I was able to set out these caches for myself, by ski plane, a week or two before each year's start.

I timed the first three journeys for the second half of February, and because of work pressures I made the final trip west in the middle of March. Given complete freedom to time the trips I might have taken them all in March, but that would have conflicted with my work as a pilot and guide. I intended these to be purely winter trips, not winter- edging-into-spring trips. The second half of February is the very heart of winter, analogous on the flip side of the calendar year to the second half of August. By February at 63° north the length of daylight does not impinge on a solid day of travel, and the equinoctial winds of March have not kicked in. So February it was, three times out of four.

Wild country rewards those who approach it without fanfare. I did not want corporate sponsors, online interactive education, or any of the other trappings of the modern Information Age expedition. And, to be honest, they didn't want me—the journeys I made were not intended to be dramatic or extreme. In Madison Avenue parlance, these trips just weren't very sexy. On the most prosaic level, I only wanted to take the time and make the effort to go out and immerse myself in some of the vastness that surrounds our home, and thus to fill in some of the blanks in my own mental geography. On another level, I sought a return to the original motivations of my long career as a dog musher. From 1985 to 2000, I had been intensely focused on long-distance sled-dog racing. Eight times I ran teams to Nome, Alaska, in the Iditarod, and I competed in many other races like it. Finally, coming home after the finish of the 2000 Yukon Quest, I sensed that I had scratched that itch, and I made the decision to turn away from competitive dog mushing. It was time to steer my dogteam and myself toward less tangible prizes, or risk finding that all of us— canine and human—had grown too old and soft to make the effort.

Early on in my ruminations about the four trips I decided to travel alone. Although the ideal companion would certainly have enriched these journeys in some ways, I never second-guessed my decision to go solo. For most of the sixty days and nights I spent on the trail I found that solitude could be, as Henry David Thoreau claimed, a pleasant and thought- provoking companion. It allowed me to sustain themes of thought over many hours without interruption, to linger over my journal writing on some mornings in the tent, and on other days to pack up and head out without any mandatory pause for introspection. I wanted time to think, to write, and to ask myself some questions; to mull things over all by my lonesome. Of course on a dogteam trip one is never completely alone. I could talk to my dogs, and with them I could savour—and at times simply endure—the ups and downs of our life on the trail.

Setting out in winter, I travelled by the only method that I, a veteran dog musher, could imagine setting out. Had I made these journeys without the dogs—travelling by ski and pulk, or snowshoe and toboggan— both the philosophy and the nuts and bolts of the trips would have been changed utterly. I would have sacrificed a huge amount of distance covered, and would have subtracted a measure of comfort from my already spartan camps.

And what if I had gone to the other end of the tundra-travel spectrum and set out by snowmobile—what then? I could have covered vastly more distance, hauled more gear along with me, and enjoyed the comforts of cozier camping night after night. And . . . at that vast distance, alone and unsupported, the machine might have broken down and demanded repair work far exceeding my paltry skills as a mechanic. What then?

Kaltag (left) and Ernie (right) screamed their impatience as I paused to snap their portrait in The Gap.

March sunrise from the north end of the Hearne Channel, Great Slave Lake.

The dogs at rest on ice in the wind.

An ignominious rescue, a return home, a salvage, and a bill . . . failure and project over. The only thing I can say with certainty about the snowmobile option is that I never considered it even for a moment, because with every noisy, stinking mile I would have run that rubber track right over the essence of everything I treasure about winter and the wilderness. Harsh words, but true.

Sled dogs have been such a huge force in my life that I do sometimes take them for granted. I suspect that my time with huskies has shaped me more than I will ever know. I am a dog musher, and good mushers take pride in viewing dogs honestly, in trying to plumb the deep magic embedded in our unvarnished partnership with our dogs. “Critters are critters,” as a friend of mine, a sort of horse whisperer in his own right, said one night as we sat and looked out at his pasture and herd. And in that simple statement lies a lifelong mystery.

The team on the last full day of the final trip, approaching Gibraltar Point on McLeod Bay.

Poet Augustus Merrill, once an English professor of mine, remarked after reading a draft of this book that he found himself interested not so much in what I did as in why I did it. Fair enough—setting out alone in mid-winter, for no apparent practical purpose, into some of the most desolate and unpopulated parts of the planet, is not, I admit, an entirely rational act. Yet to me and to my friends and family it never seemed completely irrational either, given my background and my lifelong fascination with the North. I tried to put it this way: for a man to make a home and live out his life at a place like Hoarfrost River, with a team of huskies and the savvy to drive them, and never to venture forth on such trips, would be like living on a seacoast, with a capable boat moored in the harbour, and never to set sail.

Some people, told of my plans, simply nodded politely. Their bewilderment was obvious, though—it was as if I had announced “Over the next four winters I’m going to take a series of long swims in ice-cold water, just to see how it feels.” For these puzzled people I can trot out

Left to right: Annika, Kaltag, Ernie, Dave, and Liv. Final day, final trip, home sweet home.

reasons like those I have listed: the desire to explore my home territory; the chance to run the dogs without the pressure of racing; the urge to ponder, question, and write. Stacked up against the brute reality of a 40-below night alone on the tundra, huddled next to a camp stove in a flimsy nylon tent, words and reasons can all sound stilted and contrived.

It has taken years for me to complete this book, to work my scrawled- pencil notebooks into some coherent forms and chapters. As those years have passed my journeys have receded from the sharp clarity of recent memory into the slippery haze of the past. The essences of them, concentrated or distilled like maple syrup or good whisky, have taken on a purity not apparent in the mundane details of days and nights, camps and weather and resupplies, routes and mileage. Those days and nights, that red tent on the tundra, those teams of dogs and miles of wind, have melded and become layers of my soul.

It is a primeval act, this setting out and leaving home—especially for a man alone, from such a remote home as ours, into the teeth of winter. Some lines from Gary Snyder's poem "Tasting the Snow" catch it perfectly:

Out the door:
Icy and clear in the dark.
once I had thought,
laughing and kissing,
how cosy to be tuckt in bed —
let them sleep;
Now I can turn to the hunt.
Blade sharp and hair on end
over the boulders
eager
tasting the snow.

"Kinds of Winter: Compass Points, Over the Boulders, Eager..." is an excerpt from *Kinds of Winter: Four Solo Journeys by Dogteam in Canada's Northwest Territories*, by Dave Olesen. It is reproduced here with the permission of the publisher, Wilfrid Laurier University Press (www.wlupress.wlu.ca).

Dave Olesen grew up in small-town Illinois. He has a B.A. in Humanities and Northern Studies. A veteran dog musher, he finished the daunting Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race eight times. Olesen immigrated to Canada in 1987. He lives on Great Slave Lake with his wife, Kristen, their two daughters, forty-three huskies, and a ninety-year-old Danish sailboat. He works as a bush pilot and guide.

Dave Olesen

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Nastawgan is an Anishinabi word meaning "the way or route"

The WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION is a non-profit organization made up of individuals interested in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe and kayak, but also including backpacking and winter trips on both skis and snowshoes. The club publishes a quarterly journal, *Nastawgan*, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas of interest to wilderness travellers, organizes an extensive program of trips for members, runs a few basic workshops, and is involved in environmental issues relevant to wilderness canoeing.

Articles Wanted

Consider submitting your story – they are all worth sharing, no matter how "big" or "small" your trip was. Glad to help, if help is needed. Reach out to Aleks Gusev, Editor, for encouragement, tips & tricks!

Events Calendar

Wine & Cheese WCA Party will take place on Saturday evening, 14th November 2015 at Toronto Sailing and Canoe Club (1391 Lake Shore Blvd West, Toronto).

31th Annual Wilderness and Canoe Symposium will take place on 19th-20th February 2016 at Monarch Park Collegiate (1 Hanson Street, Toronto).

Contributors' Guidelines

If you are planning to submit any material for possible publication in *Nastawgan*, you would do the editors and certainly yourself a great favour by first consulting the *WCA Guidelines for Contributors to Nastawgan*. These guidelines should be followed as much as possible by all contributors, so that the editorial team can more effectively edit your contribution to make it fit the Nastawgan style. The latest draft of the guidelines is available on the WCA website.

Kinds of Winter

Dave Olesen temporarily halted the building project at his homestead at McLeod Bay on the East Arm of Great Slave Lake, and flew south for few book readings and presentations. Most notable – for us – was his talk at the 3rd Annual Luste Lecture delivered at the Canadian Canoe Museum few weeks ago. Dave doesn't get down from Hoarfrost River often and we're thankful to his publisher, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, for giving us permission to reproduce an excerpt from his new book. We're also indebted to Bob Henderson, our ever-so-resourceful Resource Editor, for planting the seeds of the idea to bring Dave as the speaker at the Luste Lecture. Kudos also to Carolyn Hyslop, Museum's Director of Operations, for putting together a rich content around Dave's talk.

Lively Q&A provided insightful dialogues and opportunity for Dave to challenge some of our ideas about life in the North. This may have been Dave's first trip to Ottawa in all those years, but thirty years spent in the North as professional dog musher, bush pilot, husband and a father makes him very qualified to dispatch thoughtful reflections about a life well loved and well lived.

If you enjoyed reading Dave's story in this issue, check out his blog post – bushedpilotblog.wordpress.com. I sure did.

Symposium Update

Date and location are now confirmed – WCS will take place on 19th-20th February at Monarch Park Collegiate in Toronto. Onwards with programming efforts now! Please send your speaker suggestions to wcsymposium@gmail.com. Pass on the word to your friends and communities. Reminder that '15 WCS content is available at www.wcsymposium.com. Visit there or WCS Facebook page for more updates.

WCA Activities

Want to view all club activities, learn more about our extensive outings program for members, or organize and post a trip? It's easy! Visit the Outings section of the WCA website:
www.wildernesscanoe.ca

2015 Wine and Cheese

Will take place on Saturday Nov. 14 at 7:00 p.m. at the Toronto Sailing and Canoe Club, featuring Frank Wolf as the Mike Wevrick Memorial speaker.

Frank is a Canadian adventurer and movie-maker. His self-propelled trips include canoeing in every province and territory of Canada with distances from 620 km to 8000 km over the past 20 years. He has also biked the Yukon River from Dawson City to Nome Alaska in winter and rowed 1850 km in the Arctic Ocean.

Fall Meeting Dispatch

Notes and photos by Daniel Aufgang

I headed out Friday after work to Cedar Ridge Camp in Madawaska Highlands. I was welcomed by Diane Lucas, event organizer, and 34 other WCA members at a large campfire near the lake and saw many familiar faces, who quickly introduced me to anyone I did not know. I checked into my room in the winter lodge – an eight-bunk room to myself. Other people were spread out throughout the other nine rooms and the many cabins spread out through the camp. Next morning at 7:30 am I went to the dining hall and prepared my lunch for the day – options of tuna salad, chicken salad, ham and veggies. Very impressive breakfast buffet was served; bacon, eggs, cereal and more. Sunny morning, but it did get a little rainy and windy later in the day. Options for the day: white-water paddling along the Lower Madawaska River (organized by Jon McPhee and Beth Jones), flatwater on nearby Mayo and Gin Lakes (organized by Andrew Craig), hiking, or attend a solo paddling workshop (organized by Jeff Haymer). I enjoyed both the company and landscape of the flatwater trip. Our group included Wolfgang from Austria, who was in town to purchase 37 Swift canoes to take back home. In the late afternoon many people gathered near the magnificent fireplace in the winter lodge for happy hour before dinner. Dinner was an impressive spread of chicken, potatoes, beans and salad, with some vegetarian options. After dinner we were treated to two trip presentations on the Nahanni River (Terry Brayman and Matt Walker from New York) and the Pigeon River (Dave Robinson), which were very inspiring and gave me ideas for future trips. We were served another great breakfast on Sunday morning. Sunday options included hiking, flatwater or a whitewater clinic at Palmer Rapids. There were a few places on the way home I wanted to explore and photograph, so I enjoyed a leisurely drive home with many stops. This was a weekend well spent, and am already looking forward to next year.

The Duet

Story by Greg Went

The wind bloweth where it listeth. Where it comes and where it goes no man knoweth. (John 3:8)

Some basic advice for wilderness lakes – be alert for the wind. It could spell trouble. And what can you say about the wind? It can vary from the howling breath-stealing monster of the barren lands to a friend sending gentle puffs that take sweat and heat away from your body as you paddle.

It's tough enough paddling against the wind on river stretches where to rest a second or to miss a stroke costs you hard won meters by being blown back by the wind. But it is very dangerous on lakes. You should cast a piercing eye at what's ahead of you when there is a lake to paddle the length of or to paddle across. Winds blowing head-on at you are most dangerous when you are at the start of the lake and have to travel the entire length. The biggest waves are at the start when you paddle out from your sheltered spot. Right away you face waves that have had the whole length of the lake to build up.

Winds blowing directly from behind you are most dangerous when you are at the end of the paddle down the length of the lake. Swells that boosted you along as you traveled can approach dangerous size and breaking potential once you have most of the lake behind you. You've been coasting and have had it easy and now, when the lake paddle is almost over, you realize that the swells are gathering steam. Normal lake dynamics. Easy to explain in a classroom, hard to deal with on the water.

Scared of lakes even after many years of traveling on them. Too little a boat for too much water. Canoeing lakes can be done, but never let time problems push you out onto a lake. Wait for calm water, wait till evening and hope the winds die down, wait till early morning before the winds pick up. The wind, too, shall pass.

Winds and lakes play a dangerous duet. Wilderness canoeists should make sure that they are not caught in the middle.

Floating into Insignificance

Story by Patrick Call

Photos by Kieran, Leslie and Nathan Enzian & Ben Harding

Berglets, kayaker Randy Welch, and the rafts feeling small on Alsek Lake.

Mention an Alaskan rafting trip and it may conjure up images of spellbinding Northern Lights, the haunting howl of a wolf in the distance, forever twilight evenings, glaciers decorating the skyline. Or…of being mauled by a brown bear, rain or sleet driven horizontally by an up river wind, and clouds of bugs. Most trips include some items from list A and some from list B. My wife Ellen and I did a magical trip 24 years ago down the Tatshenshini and then the Alsek River starting in the Yukon and ending at the Pacific in SE Alaska. We have recounted this trip over the years to our boys, Baxter and Fletcher, and they decided they wanted to see if for themselves. Thus our summer vacation was born.

Much had changed in the intervening years: the entire course of the rivers is now part of Canadian and US National Parks with the attendant escalation in bureaucracy. A guidebook had been produced which, as is always the case with guidebooks, brought general clarity and specific confusion to a thoroughly wild and untamed place – repeated book references to "nice eddies" became the running joke for the trip as we failed to find many (any?). We brought others from Vashon (Nathan, Leslie, Rhea and Kieran Enzian, Richard Parr and Cindy Young) and Colorado (Ben Harding and Randy Welch) into the plan with assurances that "we don't remember it as all that tough so it can't be". We remembered the initial canyon – several miles of quite continuous and attention grabbing whitewater – and then a float to the coast of about 140 miles through some of the most impressive mountains on the planet.

Our party with its four rafts and two kayaks was greeted by a sign at the remote put-in: "Welcome. You are now entering the food chain." Gulp. Which dry box was that bear spray in? Launching the next morning thrust us into the canyon where one of our catarafts had a tough day spending an extended period lodged on a rock and then, after having cleared the most daunting challenge (M&M Falls), flipping on the next wall necessitating a major rescue operation and dispatching all of the trip's beer and wine to the river gods. On day two we entered a braided, twisty section decorated by

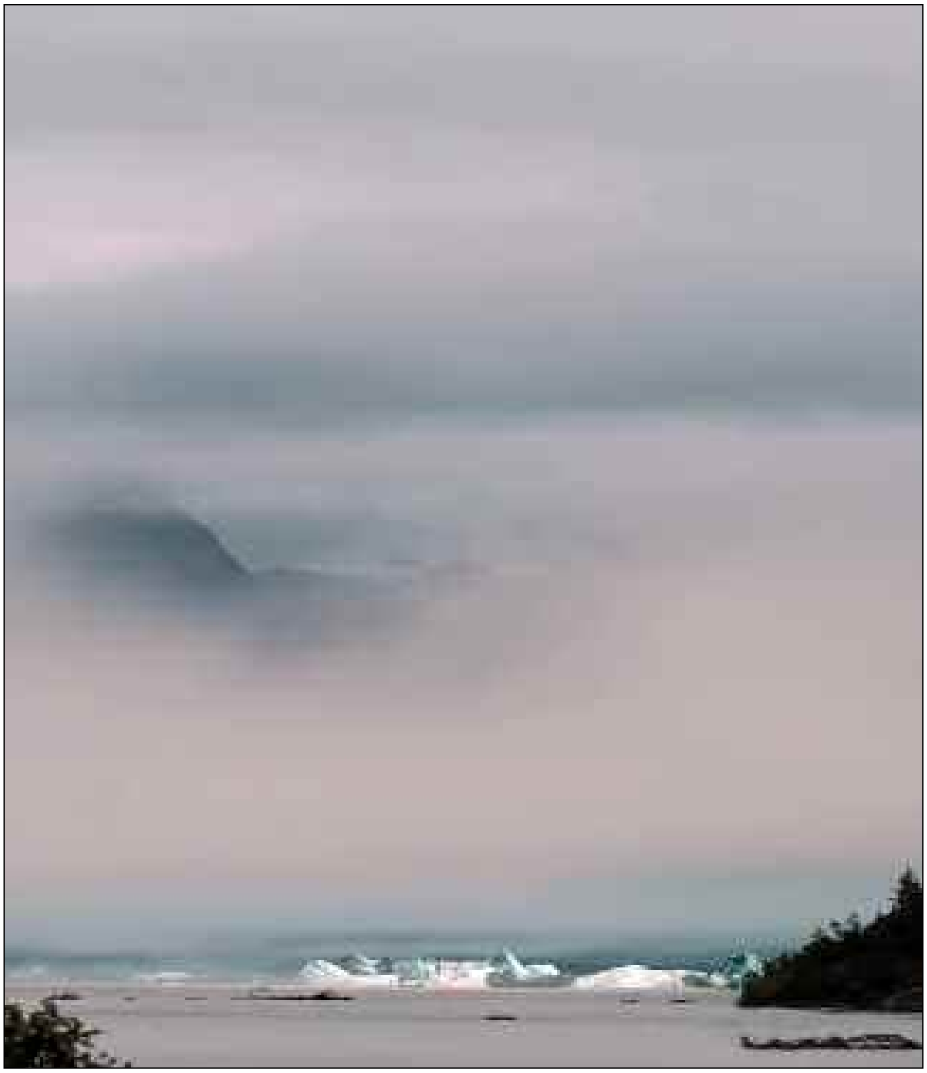
View from Hike, looking down on the confluence of Sediments Creek and the Tatshenshini.

thousands of uprooted trees that again proved difficult for our biggest craft (hanging up in trees and requiring a rope tow assist to escape). Day three was met with improving weather and a relatively easy float down to Sediments Creek leaving time for a stroll up onto the side of the canyon to take in the views.

On day four the river exploded in size with the entry of many tributaries of roughly equal volume to our original river. It was hard to keep the group together, hard to find a place to pull off to rest and hard to resist the feeling that we were being flushed down the toilet. We went sailing past our intended campsite with no place to stop and in the end traveled almost 30 miles

Calm Water on the Tatshenshini.

Fast Water, typical non-eddy.



Looking Through Door #2 into Alsek Lake.

Alsek River

before finally coming to rest for the night. On most rivers you scout the rapids; on this one we scouted the landings. Having travelled two days worth of river we decided to treat ourselves to a layover day and the next day took a walk up Towagh Creek where the group learned first hand why cobbles are round. As we ascended the creek and it steepened you could hear the boulders rolling (saltating) in the streambed, a truly ominous and fundamentally disturbing sound.

On day six our objective was Melt Creek which is within sight of where the Tatshenshini joins the mighty Alsek. The scale in this scene however had become otherworldly as even the smaller Tatshenshini is over a mile wide. At this point in its existence the Tat is an evil-looking brown amalgam of water, glacial till and ground up vegetation. Melt Creek is a silvery sluice shooting directly from an iceberg-choked lake. The guidebook makes reference to the tributary roughly doubling the size of the main river but strangely makes no reference to the spooky hydraulics at this intersection: Melt Creek totally stops the main river throwing it back upstream into a gigantic whirlpool. Our lead raft made 5 thrill-packed circuits before passing downstream. One of the kayakers said he hadn't seen anything like it in almost 50 years of paddling.

Day six was the transition from "forever twilight" to "horizontally driven rain" as we descended the Alsek to Walker Glacier. Twenty-four years ago the glacier ended right at the river. Now it sits about a mile back with an intervening lake. This camp was another chance for a layover day but much of the time was spent in our tents trying to keep the rain from penetrating. In the night a gigantic roar punctuated with the sound of rolling boulders led to a fitful night's sleep. We arose to see that a waterfall downstream of the glacier had grown tenfold and was the source of the din, and to find that the main river had risen

Alsek River near Dry Bay, flowing at over 200,000 cubic feet per second after the rains.

five feet. Again the guidebook provided some horror stories from earlier trips to feed our already active imaginations. We were off to Alsek Lake; a gigantic kidney-shaped eddy in the river five miles across and featuring many miles of active glacier front that calved gigantic icebergs, some gleaming white, others brooding and dark grey.

Our objective was to skirt the lake on its right side, sneaking in behind a large protuberance called Gateway Knob. Following the right hand shore of the river meant that we would not have been able to see over to the left hand side had it been clear but under the day's conditions (see Item #2 on List B, above) we floated as specks in the ocean (or as gnats, but we get ahead of ourselves). Just above the knob and safely in the right hand channel a large scree slope to our right chose this moment to disgorge a few refrigerator-sized boulders which hurtled downwards toward our rafts. We sat for a few seconds frozen in ignorance of how far out into the river they might tumble, but with great relief and a huge splash they fell close to shore and didn't cause a problem.

Arriving at the end of the day thoroughly exhausted and chilled we made the best of a fairly low-lying piece of real estate for camp. That evening, too exhausted even to cook dinner, we were in for some more bigger-than-life experiences. The river/lake continued rising – another three feet at the crest but that was not our only problem. The rising lake water had breathed life into the sleeping icebergs and they began to

Playing Euchre on the Banks of Sediments Creek.

Walker Glacier, receded almost a mile in the last 25 years. Replenished the ice chests.

Flying from Dry Bay to Haines over 50 miles of living ice.

Alsek Glacier with Icebergs in the Forefront. We watched them roll over and calve sending tsunamis into camp.

Feeling small; Alsek Glacier behind Alsek Lake.

roll and break up. Some of these structures were over 100 feet high and their antics resulted in a series of tsunamis crossing the now-higher lake into our gravel bar. So all night we would hear what sounded like a cannon fusillade followed by a roaring wall of water rolling toward our camp. We came out of our tents to see if the latest one would sweep over us. In the end none did but several came very, very close.

In the morning we awoke to clearing weather with moody clouds swirling around the peaks thus providing our first sight of Mt. Fairweather which at about 30 miles distant and fifteen thousand feet high sits improbably high off the horizon. In exchange for the improving weather we received our "cloud of bugs" – in the form of "white sox" – flies whose bite while initially unfelt developed into a powerful itch.

The final day (number 11) on the river dawned brilliant and clear. The lake spilled its icy contents into the current adding a new dimension to running the remaining rapids. It was no longer enough to miss the biggest hydraulics but necessary to space your run so that you didn't collide with, nor get run over by, a gleaming ice sculpture that might weigh several tons. It was like running a martini stirred by a current in excess of ten knots.

All Alsek River trips end with an airplane shuttle off a gravel landing strip. The pilots who perform this task are true aeronautical magicians and the trip back to civilization traversed more than 50 miles of continuous ice fields, glaciers and mountain peaks reinforcing our utter insignificance. We also learned that the river had almost tripled in volume to a summer level only rarely reached. In reflection the trip was about ten times harder than we had remembered. Was it failing memory, deteriorating physical stamina (sixty five may not be the new forty after all) or vastly different conditions? Probably.

But now we need a vacation to recover from our vacation.

Crossing Cultures: Winter Camping in Lakeland Provincial Park

Story by Peiren Chen and Eric Steele

Photos by Morten Asfeldt and Takako Takano

The Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta recently teamed up with Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan to create a unique outdoor education course. This course brought together eight students from Waseda University and eight students from Augustana for a 14-day experience that included a six-day snowshoe and wall tent expedition in Lakeland Provincial Park, 25 kilometers east of Lac La Biche, Alberta. The course was co-taught by Dr. Takako Takano from Waseda and Morten Asfeldt from Augustana. The goal of the course was to examine and experience international perspectives on outdoor skills, leadership, human-nature relationships and place.

The concept for the course originated in July of 2010 when Morten and Takako attended a wilderness educational expeditions conference where 14 international attendees from 6 countries paddled the Mara/Burnside Rivers in the Canadian Arctic. "I remember one day that Takako and I were hiking together" reflects Morten, "we began talking about how we could bring our students together on some sort of cross-cultural wilderness educational expedition." In 2012, Morten and Takako brought together a group of Japanese and Canadian students for a 14-day course in August, which included a canoe trip and hiking trip in the Canadian Rockies. The course was a great success and they were inspired to create a similar course that would bring the students together for a Canadian winter experience.

Wall tents on Shaw Lake.

In this article, we offer insights into our Canadian winter experience from the perspective of both a Waseda and an Augustana student.

Peiren: At first, I was attracted by the phrase "field work" in the course title. Hiking and doing outdoor sports is what interested me. There are not many opportunities for students to do outdoor trips in China or even in Japan. Besides, learning while doing some outdoor activities is always my expectation for the study process, which is not that normal in our curriculum. By taking this course, I hoped that I could have a better comprehension of the human-nature relationship, develop the ability to think critically, and communicate with others more positively.

Eric: I was interested in experiencing winter camping again and was looking forward to learning about perspectives on leadership and the environment from another culture's viewpoint. In addition, I was interested in new outlooks on human-nature relationships and a sense of place to enrich my Canadian point of view.

Peiren: Preparations for the trip began in September 2014 at Waseda University. The Waseda group comprised of eight members, including four females and four males (five Japanese and three visiting Chinese students). We all came from different university departments and different years, yet we got to know each other through a semester of preparing and learning about Canada under the tutelage of professor Takako. We learnt about human-nature relationship, sustainability, and outdoor education practices during the classes. Aside from that, we spent some time learning about Canada by reading materials and preparing our gear that we would need during the trip. The reality of the trip hit us when we went to the gear store, to purchase equipment. I was inexperienced in the outdoor trips and was wondering if I would ever use this gear after returning from Canada.

When our semester came to an end, we gathered and prepared for a presentation about Japan for the Canadian students. During the discussion, we found that there were so many things to talk about. This was the first moment for us to seriously think about the differences we would encounter in Canada.

Eric: For the Canadian students, the preparations for the trip and the Waseda student's arrival started at the beginning of January. The first challenge was equipment. This was the first time a snowshoe trip of this scale was being organized by Augustana. As a result, essential equipment such as toboggans and wannigans had to be acquired. Using Do-It-Yourself kits from the equipment and adventure company Lure of the North, we assembled a fleet of eight trail toboggans made out of ultra high molecular weight polyethylene to carry our stoves, tents and duffle bags. Using drills screws and wood glue, we built eight wooden

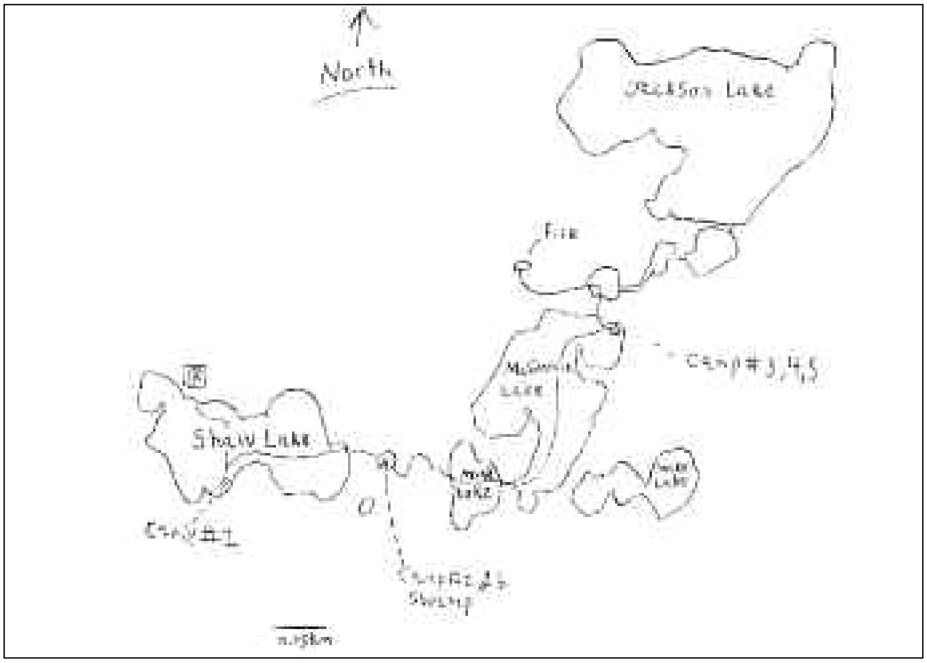
Shigeru cutting wood at the swamp.

Morten, Ally, & Emily on a cold but clear morning on Shaw Lake.

wannigans to carry our food and kitchen supplies while on the trail. Finally, we opened cans of varnish and busied ourselves applying new coats of varnish to two dozen pairs of snowshoes; some that had first been used at Augustana in the 1970's.

The next task was preparing food. Preparing meals for a winter camping trip requires two things to be considered. First, the number of calories required for every meal. In a winter environment, the human body can burn up to 5000 calories per day to stay warm and fueled. In addition, all our meals had to be durable enough to survive constant freezing, yet easily thawed on our stoves. As a result, most of our food was pre-cooked and kept frozen until we departed for the trail.

On February 11, the group from Waseda arrived in Edmonton and then boarded two vans for the one-hour drive



Steele Map – Hand-drawn section of Lakeland Provincial Park Map.

Sunrise at the Swamp.

to Camrose. When the vehicles pulled into Augustana Campus, the Canadian students opened up their homes and dormitories to the new arrivals.

The first few days in Camrose went by quickly as the students from both universities spent time together completing the practical preparations for the trip as well as learning about leadership and group dynamics. There were presentations introducing each other to the countries of Japan and Canada, which included sharing culture, geography, traditions and fun facts. Evenings included classic Canadian cultural events such as a hockey game.

The first day on the trail was defined by a series of setbacks. Our planned departure from the university was pushed back due to the disappearance of a sleeping bag that necessitated a search. While on the road, poor road conditions slowed our travel, and an unplowed parking lot at Shaw Lake postponed our departure. We engaged in an authentic Canadian experience as we shoveled, pushed, and pulled the vehicles in order to unload and park.

By the time we loaded up the toboggans and started moving on to Shaw Lake, it was already 4:30pm. It was getting dark and we only walked for 45 minutes before we had to stop and start setting up camp on the south side of the lake.

Setting up a wall tent is a lengthy and difficult process when done for the first time. Our experience was made even more challenging with the rapidly enveloping darkness that forced us to bring out our headlamps. It was an unexpected challenge, yet a trip in the wilderness is

Nature Walk and Presentation.

Gathering inside the wall tent.

often filled with those sorts of experiences and everyone set up their wall tents without any problems. For the Waseda students and many of the Canadian students as well, it was their first night of winter camping.

The next day dawned clear and crisp. Packing up the wall tents would be just as lengthy as the set up. By the time the tents were put away and the toboggans lashed, it was nearly noon. The first full day of pulling the toboggans was the most challenging. They dragged in the snow, weighed down with wall tents, stoves, duffle bags, and food. They were an ounce less than being unmanageable and everyone started sweating from the exertion.

We traveled to the eastern reach of Shaw Lake and started following a creek to the next lake. The trail narrowed through dense willow and alder forest, necessitating that we shorten our running lines, but even then navigating through the brush was a trial. Two people were required to navigate a toboggan effectively: one to pull from the front and one at the back to swing the tail of the toboggan around tight corners. The going was slow, as every branch and twig seemed to smack and scrap our faces. Adding to the challenge, we soon discovered that the smallest of stumps or branches sticking out of the snow would bring the toboggan to a grinding halt.

After an hour of grunting, sliding, and

Wall tent on McGuffin Lake.

Inspecting a beaver lodge.

Julia sharing a story.

hauling we climbed a small hill to arrive at a snow-covered swamp in between Shaw and Mud Lake. Though it was only the middle of the afternoon, we decided to start making camp, as the swamp was a gold mine of firewood and we didn't want to set up in the dark again. Hundreds of tall dead trees populated the swamp, rising high out of the snow and ice to form a small forest of black monoliths.

When the sun descended below the horizon, we gathered inside the leadership wall tent (the largest of the four) for the evening's discussion. Each night during the trip we would gather inside this tent for two activities: First, to listen to the telling of a classic winter story such as the 1931-32 story of the Mad Trapper of Rat River. The purpose of the stories was to share a glimpse into Canadian culture, history, and the experience of winter. The second purpose was to discuss an aspect of Japanese and Canadian culture. These discussions ranged from leadership styles to human-nature relationships and the purpose was to learn not just about each other's culture, but also to understand the uniqueness of our own.

We were in awe of the almost superhuman endurance of Albert Johnson as he evaded the RCMP in the Yukon during the winter of 1931. This story created a hunger for more tales that would captivate us. We were humbled by the story of Grey Owl, as he imparted words of wisdom onto the people of his time and the account of Robert Service's "The Cremation of Sam McGee" made us all ponder. Finally, we were terrified by accounts of the cannibalistic Windigo spirit that haunts the Canadian North.

Peiren: When I left the leadership tent, in the swamp on the second night, the sky turned dark. It was like a canvas poured with buckets of black painting oil. Maybe it was because the night sky I usually see is in the city, where the lights of buildings can easily block off my eyesight to the sky, or maybe it's because the stars in the sky were setting foil to the darkness. The sky was just amazing; it was easy for me to imagine it as a robe of a princess or prince in the sky. It was a robe of the purest black in the world, decorated with shiny stars in different shapes. The decorations of the stars were even moving. Shooting stars and northern lights danced across the sky. Maybe the princess that owned this robe was staying behind it secretly, seeing how her beautiful robe was appreciated and mesmerized by the people of the earth. I could not help but go out of the tent with my teammates. We wandered around the swamp, and looked up at the sky for a long time. I enjoyed the quietness and peacefulness created by this night, while at the same time strongly missing my family. The night sky reminded me of a traditional festival in China called mid-autumn festival. On that night the moon in the sky is fully round, and it means reunion in Chinese. We would gather with our family and admire the moon that night.

Eric: At the beginning of the third day we put the swamp and its forest of dead trees behind us as we continued east through the provincial park. We had just begun breaking trail through a series of trees, when we stumbled upon a summer portage trail. To our delight, it lead all the way to the west side of Mud Lake. The sky was overcast and the wind began to pick up as we made our way across Mud Lake and through another portage to McGuffin Lake. It was 4:00pm when the train of toboggans came to a halt at the north end of McGuffin Lake and everyone began unpacking their loads.

That night we met as a group inside the leadership tent again. The night began with Wenting and Isao, students from Waseda, who described the movie Princess Mononoke . The film follows the adventure of a young warrior Ashitaka's involvement in a war between forest gods and the humans, who consume those resources. Central to the films theme is the environment. Nature is seen as a sentient being which fights back against human's attempts to consume resources without restraint. In addition, the film represents the struggles of a small group of people who try to create peace between those who consume the environment and those who want to protect it. The role of San, a human girl raised by wolves, represents the Japanese perspective that human culture is connected with, and inherently dependent on, the environment.

Growing up in a western society, I have noticed that we tend to have an opposite view where the environment is something that is subject to our actions and choices. This is reflected in Aldo Leopold's chapter "Thinking like a mountain" where hunters kill off the wolves in hopes of providing better deer hunting only to have the deer over-populate, resulting in over-consumption of the local food source followed by a decrease in deer population. Dominant western viewpoint on the environment sees human society apart from nature as opposed to a part of nature as the Japanese do. Ironically, principles such as Leave No Trace, have the potential to perpetuate this view.

In the wall tent that night, we discovered that the Canadians use terms such as

Pushing cars out of the snow.

Erin & Kate building toboggans.

Crossing Shaw Lake.

"outdoors" or "wilderness" to describe the environment while the Waseda students almost exclusively use the term "nature". The term "nature" reflects a softer and more spiritual connection to the natural world, one that is inherent in Japanese culture and tradition. This is apparent when they use statements such as "I belong to the nature."

Our fourth day began in a much more relaxed manner. There were fewer chores to do as we would layover at McGuffin Lake for a day before continuing on. The challenge of packing up and being on time for departure was gone and we took our time cooking breakfast and organizing our belongings for the day ahead. Given our goal of sharing Canadian culture with the Waseda students, breakfast consisted of pancakes and bacon and, of course, pure maple syrup.

We met at the leadership tent for the morning's session of story and discussion. After listening to the story of Grey Owl, a conversation about family history and ancestry began. The ancestry of the Canadians varied considerably with people tracing family roots back to England, Germany, France, Norway, Denmark, Scotland, Ukraine, and Netherlands. The Waseda student's ancestry, however, was rooted strictly in China and Japan. As the conversation continued, it was revealed that the Waseda students could trace their heritage back several generations. Takako, in particular, could trace her family back ten generations. Conversely, the Canadian students couldn't reveal any ancestry older than their great-grandparents.

Peiren: Discussing ancestry and family history made me think about the question of identifying people. Talking about nationality is like trying to identify ourselves. For example, I am Chinese because I was born and spend most of my time in China, have a Chinese passport and my family is in China. That made me different from other Japanese or Canadian students. Figuring out the roles we play in family society can be a way to identify ourselves. Then, it occurred to me that it seems like people tend to classify themselves. Why do people need to identify themselves?

Eric: After lunch, we were given free time and a fever of excitement spread through the group. We trampled about on McGuffin Lake, creating pictures and symbols on the vast blanket of snow. A snowball whizzed by someone's head and soon the air was filled with volleys of the frozen projectiles. Someone pitched the possibility of climbing the island hill in the middle of the lake and the idea caught on like a wildfire.

Climbing the hill was no easy task, and through my frustration I began to see it as a fortified castle that was determined to stop my ascent. There were steep slopes on all sides, sending our group sliding down as we attempted to ascend. Branches and shrubs tangled our arms and legs while pillows of snow barraged us from the trees above. The hill was warding off our attempts to get at its peak, yet we were not so easily dissuaded. After 20 minutes of climbing, pushing, pulling, and sometimes crawling, we reached its top victorious in our efforts.

As I stood above my defeated opponent, the joy of the moment vanished as I realized the futility of my actions. I was treating nature as an opponent that must be conquered. The reality is that the hill is indifferent to my assaults. It has stood the test of time and has endured eons of change. This hill has lived with the dinosaurs and has felt the cold of the Ice age, it has existed alongside humans and will continue to stand long after we are gone. I realized that this hill is immortal, and immortality is living in quiet peace with your surroundings.

We enjoyed a relaxed start the next morning, as we decided to spend another layover day at McGuffin Lake. As a group, we headed out with just a few toboggans in tow with a gear for the day. Morten lead us on a walk through the woods to the north. He pointed out different plants and animal tracks, all the while giving snippets of information about their uses and ecology as we meandered our way through the brush. We entered the south side of Jackson Lake, and saw a white tailed deer prancing away towards the west. Following it, we left the lake and arrived at a frozen pond and the nearby beaver dam that created it. One by one, we took turns climbing on top of a large beaver lodge, to inspect it while the others gathered wood for a lunchtime campfire. From the top of the beaver lodge, we could see the hoarfrost gathered around the breathing hole, a tell tale sign that the beaver lodge was active. Eating our lunch around the heat of the flames we listened to the story of Robert Service and his poem, “The Cremation of Sam McGee.”

We made our way back to our tents and later that evening gathered as usual in the leadership tent. Mahya and Shigeru from Waseda presented a model of leadership titled “Hunter vs. Farmer.” The hunter is a leader because he is the biggest and strongest of the group. Wherever he goes the group follows; whatever he says, the group does, as no one in the group is as big or as strong as the hunter. Whenever a kill is made, the hunter receives the credit. The farmer, on the other hand, consults with the other farmers before he makes a decision. They make their decisions carefully as they know that others are relying on their work. If there were a single leader of the farmers, it would likely be the oldest, as he has more knowledge about the world.

Traditionally, Japanese people prefer the farmer method of leadership, which personifies what is often called servant leadership in North America. Historically Japanese culture is one that is focused on leading by example and on helping the community. Leaders are less heavy-handed and hierarchal than in the western society. Japanese business leaders focus their attention on making workers happy, as a worker may stay in the same position with one company their whole career. A common idea in Japanese leadership is to “show your back.” The term embodies leadership by example and comes from the act of children watching their father’s back as they work, and wanting to copy them.

Peiren: After the discussion was over, the small groups trickled back to their individual tents where the conversations

Wall tent at night.

continued even after everyone settled down for the night. In my tent, the discussion started with Yoshi's question of what is a leader. I was not sure if this only applied to me or if it applies to most Chinese, but whenever I think about leadership, the first thing that comes into my mind is the Chinese officials. Leadership meant power and influential quality to me and there were different kinds of leaders in my mind. First, there are leaders who have power, like the officials in the world. Second, there are leaders who lead people because they can influence how other think, like Mahatma Gandhi.

Kate then told us a story. There was a village of people. One day, a man suddenly started to dance on a mountain, and he just kept dancing, which had never happened before in this village. Before long, another man started to dance with the first man. Soon more and more people joined in the dancing. Kate asked who, in this story, was the leader? It was the second man, not because he was the first one to dance, but the first one to follow. Leaders may not be the creator of an idea or action, but they lead others by helping people do the same thing as them. In this story, the "thing" is not dancing, but following the dance. That's why the second man is the leader.

Eric: The sun dawned on our third and final morning at McGuffin Lake as we began to take down our tents and pack the toboggans, preparing for the return journey back to the vehicles. Inside the wall tents the lay a sloppy mess of snow, after being used as a floor for the past three nights. The only thing that held the lake back was a carpet of spruce boughs.

Our group met each morning to discuss a "thought of the day" before we started our activities. Takako shared a thought about a simple life this morning. A misconception held by many people is that a life in the outdoors, though not easy, is a simpler one. There are no bills to pay in the woods, no commuting to work, no deadlines to adhere to. Instead, there is solitude away from the hustle and bustle of civilization. However, this idea is a mirage. A person living in the wilderness is merely trading complexities. There is no business to manage in the wild but there is the business of staying warm and fed. There are the challenges of proper navigation and the complexity of choosing a good campsite. A life in the wilderness is not a simple one, only a direct one. Instead of having a regular job that pays the bills and keeps a house warm, a person in the wilderness has to gather wood and attend the fire that will keep him warm.

After the morning discussion we started making our way south along the path that had brought us north earlier. The morning sun disappeared behind dark clouds and a wind rose to whip our exposed skin. Despite the weather, we quickly made our way south and over the portage west to Mud Lake. Our lighter toboggans combined with our accumulated experience from the days before, resulted in a quick transition from Mud Lake to the summer portage trail that lead us to the swamp. Soon our toboggans slid back into view of the dead trees that called the swamp their home. Because the swamp was an excellent winter campsite, we decided to stop here again for the night.

Newly constructed toboggans.

As the day progressed, the wall tents were erected for the last time and the Coleman stoves were fired up to cook our last dinner. Six days ago when the tents were being put up for the first time, everyone was a beginner and struggling to work together to make camp. Now, we were an experienced team and worked smoothly to complete task after task. Nine days ago we were two groups of strangers from different cultures, now we were a group of friends cherishing the warmth of the stove, and the joy of good food but also the warmth and joy of new relationships as people shared stories and laughed at each other's jokes.

Soon darkness filled the air and everyone made the nightly migration to the leadership tent. That evening we were mesmerized by the tale of the Windigo spirit preying on a group of unsuspecting moose hunters and then the wall tent was filled with singing and laughter as games and songs lasted throughout the evening. The tempo of the evening slowed as the each one of us shared our favorite moments from the trip and lessons learned.

Peiren: Takano's reflection that evening impressed me. As one of the organizers of this expedition, she said that she didn't know how many more times would she lead such expeditions again. However, she found that people like us might continue in her footsteps. She said she saw hope. I was moved by her thought, and I suddenly realized the permanence of nature compared to human beings, or conversely, how short our lives are. I started to treasure this trip more. For it gave me the chance to notice that being with nature is what I like. It triggered my interest in environmental issues. It would be a great loss for me if I did not notice these things.

Eric: When the final thought had been shared and the last song sung, we drifted back to our tents, crawled into our sleeping bags, and went to sleep for the final night on the trail.

The next morning was a brisk -29C. The chores of camp had become so second nature that before we knew it, we were packed and heading out of the swamp towards Shaw Lake. Visions of struggling through the brush with heavy toboggans seemed like a distant memory as we traversed the same stretch with ease. The reality of our situation began to dawn on us when we circled up on Shaw Lake for the final thought for the day.

With so much that had happened in the last few days what would each of us remember? What image would we take with us when we left this lake and this park? I did not take an image back with me, but a memory. It's a memory of my small group and myself, walking through the woods. At one point, we stopped in a grove of trees and had a moment of silence. As soon as we stood still I could feel the silence connect me with the surrounding woods. I could feel vibrations that seemed to permeate with everything around me, from the falling snow to the beating hearts of my companions. I felt peaceful and at home in this place surrounded by the now familiar forest and people.

That memory stuck with me as we moved out across Shaw Lake on the final leg of our journey and stayed with me as we arrived at the parking lot and loaded up the vehicles. It stayed with me when we arrived in Camrose and took blissfully long showers, when we met over the next few days to make presentations about our trip, and finally when I was waving goodbye to the Waseda students as they drove away for the airport.

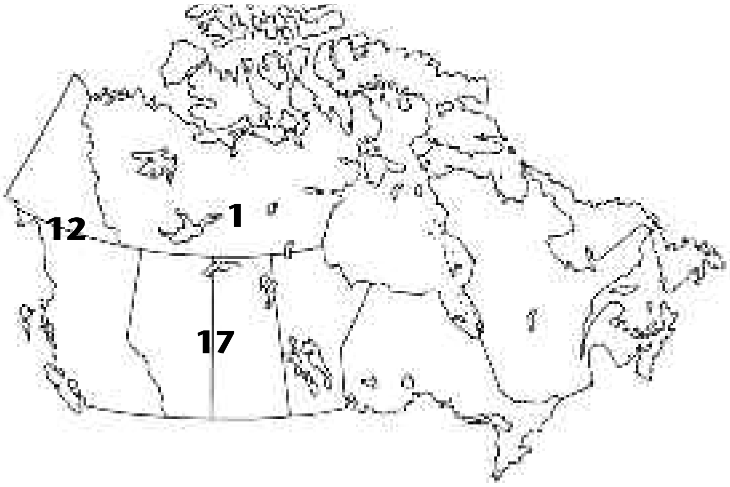
Peiren: Upon my return from Canada, the first thing that I noticed was that I was having a different view of my normal routine. The place I lived in Tokyo, Waseda University, the buildings that I am used to walking through, the people in the street of Tokyo…. I noticed these things because… maybe it was because I had a different view about myself. My emotions were changing. Feelings of regret, paleness, disinterest, exhaustion, loneliness, all these pessimistic emotions seemed to be covered by a layer of happiness. Not an extreme kind of happiness, rather satisfaction and optimism about everyday life in my heart. I thought this might all come from the feeling of broadness. I was talking to one of my classmates, Mahya, about the trip and she found her mind was narrow before the trip. People are easily trapped in their own tiny world because they tend to believe only the things they have seen, which are always limited. That is why people read and travel, to explore and to be curious. I treasure this trip very much.

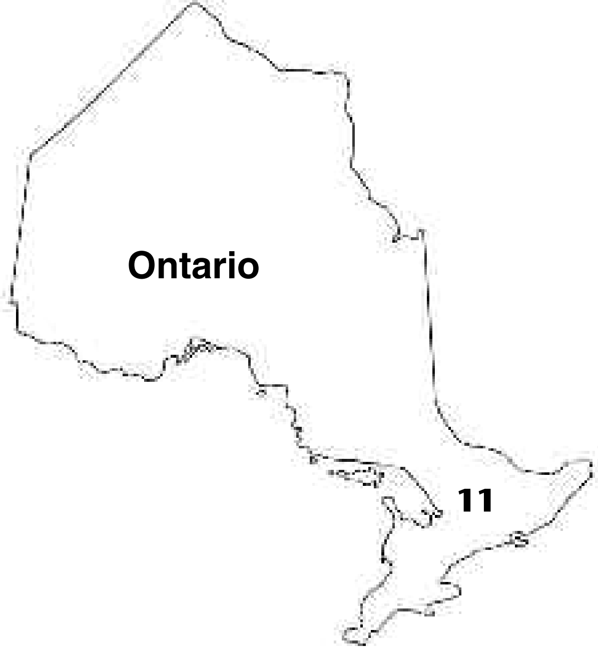
Eric: This was a unique experiential education course that brought students from two different cultures together. Different styles of leadership were shared, new winter living skills were learned, new cultural perspectives were discussed and sense of place was developed. No syllabus could predict the impact this trip would have on each student.

We didn't just learn about winter camping; we experienced it. We didn't just read about different cultures; we lived with people from different cultures. We didn't just study leadership, we lead, and were lead. We didn't just walk through Lakeland Provincial Park, we travelled through a wilderness that connected us with each other, as well as with the place. These experiences, bundled together in one course, made for a rich and unique learning.

Takako making breakfast in the morning.

Where it is…





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