

We searched diligently - first for a road, than for signs of what might once have been a road and finally just for a way back out to the river. Nearly two hours later we re-emerged perhaps half a kilometre upstream and I at least, noticeably wearier. For quite awhile thereafter we were content to follow the meanderings of the stream. Now and again we'd pause to look for signs of the elusive road which should have crossed the river here, or run along the banks some distance farther on. Our progress became more tentative as open water here and there forced us into the matted alders on the shore. Numerous beaver dams complicated the situation and despite our best efforts to take a safe course, wet feet prevailed.

By mid afternoon we passed Croy Lake and when John managed to break through the crust once more we decided to beat a short retreat and set up camp. The place was a veritable jungle of dead balsam fir, some vertical, some horizontal, all nice and dry. Without ever venturing further than ten metres we had enough fuel for a comforting fire which John nurtured for hours, all in the name of necessity of course.

Once the initial flurry of activity of setting up camp was over my partner decided it was time to attend to his personal comfort. I watched with considerable interest as he proceeded to take off his boots, remove the wool liners, then in stages three socks from the left and four from the right foot (perhaps it was the other way around), all equally wet but wonderfully varied in texture and colour. Obviously John is not your average snappy dresser. There in another thing about him - he is determined; from 5:30 p.m. EST to approximately 9:46 p.m. he patiently moved articles of clothing to and fro in an intricate pattern. My last impression before I drifted off to sleep under our lean-to was that of a shadowy figure with hands encased in boot-liners and arms stretched out toward the flame as if in a pagan ritual.

Snowflakes carried by the shifting breeze under our shelter landed on our faces and woke us disagreeably the next morning. Because of the freshly fallen snow and mild temperatures we were concerned that the ice cover for our homeward journey would be even more treacherous; but except for a few near-misses we managed to stay dry. Since we had lots of time on our hands we decided to leave our toboggans at the junction of the North Madawaska and Fern Creek and follow the latter for some distance upstream. The whole region is wild overgrown scrub-forest, full of dead falls and obviously still has not recovered from the after effects of logging operations some fifty years earlier. On our return we noticed ski tracks join our route for the rest of the way back to the car and there an unmistakable clue: a little bag of coffee tied to the car door handle - we were not the only WCA members in these parts.

Our trip had been useful in that it convinced us that it would be unwise to pursue this route with a larger number of participants. Nevertheless I wasn't satisfied - how could a logging road disappear so completely? A comparison of the Park map with the topographic map showed several inconsistencies and when I dug out a 1947 map of Algonquin it disagreed with both; in particular it showed a logging road farther east. There was the answer to the puzzle no doubt and an excuse to spend another weekend in the region.

With John tied up at a director's meeting, here was a chance for real solitude as well. All week it had been cold; Saturday began with glorious sunshine and a decided nip in the air - minus thirty the man at the research station said. In the intervening two weeks the region had experienced a heavy rainfall which froze into a solid crust on the lakes. No need for snowshoes I decided as I followed our old tracks. I could hear the faint gurgling of water below me as I started upriver from Sasajewun Lake. An instant later the sound was more noticeable, so was a cold sensation in my left foot. The water wasn't deep and I didn't linger to marvel at the large hollow beneath the thin crust I had travelled on, I just decided to be more careful from now on. A half hour later, just as I was about to leave the old route behind and turn up Red Fox Creek I happened to turn around and there, pumping hard, approached a solitary skier. It was the dispenser of the bag of coffee - Karl Schimick. I could detect a slight air of condescension as he glanced at my outfit (not fast enough?) and after a brief exchange we went our separate ways.

For most of its short existence Red Fox Creek runs in a narrow steep-walled valley. Open channels make travel through the alder-clogged shoreline a frequent necessity. I was trying to negotiate another beaver dam when I experienced once more a sudden loss of altitude.

I was not pleased!

Standing knee-deep in slush I gradually (i.e. step by step) enlarged the area of open water in my efforts to get the hell out of there. What makes this process even more annoying is that your feet don't get soaked all at once, as experts in the field know, rather the moisture advances gradually from the top of the tightly laced mukluks downward as a cold front so that the full effect is not realized until several minutes after the event.

Of course I had a change of footwear with me for just such an occasion, but with the way my luck was running I thought it best to leave things as they were in spite of the cold. Progress for some time thereafter, was more hesitant. Once again the elusive road which should have crossed the creek in this area failed to materialize. Resigned to failure I continued upstream, now content to make an early camp at a suitable spot and from there explore the countryside. It wasn't long before I found myself trapped on the wrong side of the creek. The ice was too thin to venture across and here I was stuck between a rockface on one side and Red Fox Creek on the other, precariously advancing on a little shiver of shoreline and behind me an eight-foot toboggan which kept sliding sideways onto the ice which would promptly give way. For the next fifty metres I left a trail of open water (and four-letter words) behind me without coming to serious grief but the cover of ice on the toboggan didn't help the glide. It was early in the afternoon when I came upon a nice sheltered spot on Banjee Lake. Once again, as two weeks earlier, there was a profusion of dry firewood - this was going to be a comfortable camp.

There was plenty of daylight left, so I set out with map and compass to do a little circle route. It was a glorious day and the scenery had a fairy-land quality about it. The icy coating on the vegetation sparkled with the sun's reflected rays and every breeze brought forth a wave of tinkling sounds. When I reached Amyoa Lake I climbed the rocky promontory which dominated the scene and remained there for awhile, in part to look at the scenery. The other reason was that down by the lakeshore a moose was noisily snorting about and I couldn't tell whether it was angry or just suffering from a bad cold.

By the time I returned to the toboggan it was dusk and I got down to the business of setting up camp. It was then that I made an interesting discovery - my waterproof duffel bag wasn't all that waterproof and consequently my spare clothing had been transformed into a frozen lump. The rest of the evening was reminiscent of two weeks earlier, only the temperature was much lower this time around.

Intermittently throughout the night the silence was broken by loud reports from the lake as the ice cracked with the increasing cold. I wasted no time getting a fire started in the morning and lingered near the flame until my boots were pliable once more. Another beautiful day was in the offing.

On the way back I carefully steered clear of all trouble spots. New ice had formed on sections of previously open water which seemed to attract a number of Cross Bills; in fact there seemed to be an unusual number and variety of songbirds about which filled the morning air with cheerful tunes. I tried to capture the flavour of the scene on film to serve as a reminder of the feeling of happiness engendered. And long before I finished I vowed to return again.

As a post script it may be appropriate to inform travellers contemplating a visit to the area that the writer is convinced that gremlins inhabit the region. Besides the tribulations mentioned above the final proof came when the author opened the camera to send a roll of exquisite pictures to be developed and found it - empty. But that's not all - exactly the same thing happened to Paula Schimeck two weeks earlier. Coincidence you say? We'll see!