

Pine Barrens Canoe Adventure

Mullica River, Wharton State Forest, NJ

April 15-17, 2011

“It was a dark and stormy night...” might be an apt description for this memorable trek, but it would omit a myriad of supporting details which made this troopwide canoe outing simply unforgettable. Set against the Jersey Devil legend in the unique Atlantic coastal Pine Barrens ecoregion of southeast NJ, this campout represented the first overnight canoe/kayak trip most of our scouts had ever attempted. Indeed, many of our 22 boys would become men on this ‘not for the faint of heart’ adventure.

Extra preparations for this higher difficulty trip comprised special gear and menu planning and a regular Troop meeting shakedown check. A group menu prepared on backpack stoves would ensure everyone got a good, hot, cost effective meal in any contingency. Extra waterproof bags and trashbags were employed to ensure a swamped canoe didn’t result in a soggy, sleepless night. We learned “there’s a storm coming” from meteorologists the week of the trip, but being Troop 76 scouts (and waterproof) the show must go on. Unlike in life when we often don’t have

adequate warning to prepare, here the scout motto rang true: Be Prepared. Special thanks to Mr. Schaffer and our outfitter Adam’s Canoe Rental for having plans A through D ready for all contingencies.

Departing the church lot Friday night in clear weather, our monster truck convoy looked more like a steer stampede with all the canoes and kayaks on roofs. Our Scouts exhibited unmistakable ‘adrenaline filled anticipation’ signs, the promise of healthy outdoor adventure piquing both Scout and Adult imaginations alike. Indeed we had all been looking forward to this unique trip since last Fall’s planning meetings. The romanticism was interrupted only briefly (@2.5 hours) by bumper to bumper Friday night Parkway traffic. However, the adventure continued unabated in the spooky Wharton State forest area after dark on unmarked two lane back roads reminiscent of a B-rated horror movie. We had arrived within the Jersey Devil’s lair.

Sandy soil supported a unique pine



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forest and featured a floor of dropped pine needles, a characteristic pleasant aroma, and the eery sound of unseen running water. Indeed, a clandestined sand pit required four wheel drive to recover adequate traction as we pulled into a first night group camping area. Luckily the rain would not touch us Friday night. In the enchanted clearing, a campsite magically appeared with fires, chairs, and marshmallows in about 25 minutes. We did notice a frequent, watchful scout glance towards the stream around the campfire as ghost stories were just a tad more believable here.

Morning light fortunately revealed a full compliment of hungry campers. Waking scouts had to run three specific gauntlets this pleasant morning. After properly tearing down tents and packing gear in waterproof fashion for canoes, food called. The breakfast line consisted of classic Taylor egg ham and cheese doled out by two unshaven old guy patrol members who's eyebrows had barely survived the hasty Pam spray can over the open fire griddle. One could only hope they had washed their hands. The lunch line was established off the backs of trucks where Green Bar members doled out dried lunch foods, gorp, granola bars and the like. Each scout ended up with enough food in a large zip-lock bag to sustain them for the next 30 hours. The SPL then gave the signal and the whole contingent departed in trucks for the canoe outfitter.



Checking in with the outfitter, the weather prognosis revealed strong rain starting after 3 pm. This allowed for plan B, an overnight bivouac, and both canoe and gear assignments were finalized. Thirty minutes later we found ourselves effortlessly transported to the river bank with scouts and adults loaded and ready to launch. The canoes were staged two by two, and this seemed appropriate for what would ultimately constitute a modern recreation of Noah's flood.

The Mullica River greeted us with a truly unique watershed with pine trees, good visibility, and a modest 25 foot wide waterway that would wind and twist its way through the next 10 moorish miles. The water of our Pirates of the Carribbean attraction was a bit higher than normal in mid-Spring, but currents were manageable and presented a very interesting canoe manouvering course. Because the water was high, Mr. Brush served as point leader where he wielded a quite formidable saw with razor sharp teeth to clear low hanging obstacles. His swashbuckling was impressive enough to earn the nickname

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Obi-Brush-Kenobi because our Jedi master made that saw cut through trees faster than any light saber.

The rest of the attack squadron deployed from two launch bays at will. Our flotilla of over 15 vessels consisted of solo and duo canoes as well as kayaks and was careful to disperse adults amongst scouts for safety. I understand it took Mr. Cruz a humbling three attempts to launch his kayak without capsizing, but due to \$300 worth of wetsuit gear including footwear remained dry (and looked good). He looked almost as good as our Emeritus Scoutmaster, Mr. Breheney, on his maiden kayak voyage with the boat show price tag still dragging in the water. I had the responsibility to run the B52 bomber vessel filled with the balance of the trek food payload, and I had plenty of assistance at a half dozen minor portages from nimble kayak fighter pilots who had vested interests in my successful arrival at the drop zone.

Now with the game afoot, water obstacles lurking, and new canoe teams learning to maneuver through tight channels together, it should not be a surprise that about a mile into the trip we



passed a group of wet scouts off to one side changing into a fresh set of clothes. I heard the soft, scoutish lilt of only uplifting and encouraging words wafting across the peaceful moorish meadow as I approached. “I said zig, not zag.” “Oh, I thought you meant zigzag”, I could hear them saying. There’s your mulligan on the Mullica, I quipped. “Nothing that a reinflated ego and a hot cup of cocoa won’t cure”, I heard Mr. Schaffer call as he gave aid. I believe it was Mr. Cruz who later served the cocoa....

We made excellent time through the first paddle day, aided by the pleasant current and urged forward by a foreboding sense of what nature might unleash. Arriving at the campsite about 1:30, campers wasted no time establishing a campsite and getting tents set on high ground. I should have known something was amiss when Mr. Cruz hung his hammock and said he wanted to stay off the ground tonight. Suddenly my 2 inch thick self inflating mat felt about as useful as a postage stamp in an alligator infested moat and I wasn’t sure it was going to float.

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With clouds now a constant grey curtain, an occasional light rain betrayed only a hint of what was to come. After hanging two patrol flies, gathering wood, and pulling canoes well away from the water, it was time to try our luck at fishing in the calm before the storm.

Unfortunately, our luck at fishing was just about as good as our luck would be with the weather.

It started to rain just as we began to prepare our backpack dinners. It is amazing how many people can cram under a 12x14' tarp when they need to, being careful not to upset numerous backpack stoves. Tortellini with red sauce, Raman noodles, garlic toast, and mixed veggies with plenty of warm drinks was on tap for a memorable dinner session under that tarp. We made sure everyone had plenty to eat, seeing as how this might be their last meal. Plenty of activity, story telling, and scout fellowship occurred in that setting. Dishes were washed in nature's rinse cycle. It couldn't have been later than 8 pm when the signal to abandon ship was given. Or in this case, board the arks. Under a heavy deluge, scouts dove into tents two by two and battened the hatches for the duration.

The adults on the other hand retreated to their

Brush fire which indeed thwarted the rain for another hour in the microclimate environment created by all the heat. We had all 7 adults under an 8x10 tarp when we see the state

forest ranger pull up in the four wheel drive with all the search lights on. Undeterred by the torrential rain on his shirt and capless face he approached us in haste up the muddy embankment. "Where's the fire, Ranger?" I heard

Mr. Hahn say with a good natured grin. In a very appreciated act of concern, the canoe outfitter Adam's Canoe had asked his Ranger friend to check on our merry band of scouts given all the rain. What a classy act of concern which we were sure echoed that of many Ringwood parents in what would be called the next day the "worst storm in 37 years".

It also continued the Troop 76 tradition of generally positive interactions with various local and state law enforcement agencies. "Situation under control Ranger, all kids present and accounted for," Mr.

Leo called out. We're not so sure about all the adults.

Shortly after this incident, many of us decided to call it an early night. Those who didn't



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participated in an olympic swim team tryout later in the evening on the way back to tents. I have never spent such a restless night sleeping in such a pounding rainstorm. Not even on the exposed ridge of the Appalachian Trail in the Kittitiny Mountains described in another memorable Trail Tail. The rain just kept coming. Periodic thunder and lightning punctuated the



relentless rainstorm in ways that reminded us who was really in charge. Frequent tent checks revealed no major drips, but a glance outside at the ground showed the moat forming and two salivating alligators sharpening their front teeth with iron files. I made sure again I was squarely on my inflatable

postage stamp oasis. Another careful check of internal tent seams revealed my first water leak which was luckily positioned in the outside vestibule. Too late for extra waterproofing now, one just



had to shut their eyes against the water monsters and pretend they didn't exist. I could now hear Mr. Cruz snoring right outside my tent, proving once again he can fall asleep anywhere, anytime in exactly 12 minutes. It's

a gift, Mr. Schaffer would say. Tonight it was a comforting sound that somehow brought order to the universe. It was certainly quieter than the pounding rain or the snapping jaws of

alligators and eventually I felt myself dozing off. But you know it's a bad night in the outdoors when Mr. Cruz' snoring is the pleasant, comforting sound.

Morning light presented itself brightly on my yellow tent fly. I awoke and

instinctively reached to see if I was alive first, and dry second. Affirmative on both counts. Snoring continued outside, so we knew at least some wildlife was good. If I had had a white dove to release from the tent I am certain it would have returned with an olive branch in its mouth. Emerging from my tent, I

was greeted with beautiful blue sunshine and fresh morning air. A quick check of scout tents revealed they were moored safely on high ground and canoes were still in place. We had made it, we were alive. "Hot dog!", I said.

"No, coffee and oatmeal" said Mr. Brush over at the breakfast fire.

Our scouts emerged from tents like hobbits following winter naps. Reports of leaks and

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other various overnight issues revealed nothing unusual given the dramatic deluge. Now I wouldn't want to intimate everybody was totally dry, but smiling faces revealed true scout cheerfulness in the face of adversity and these guys all deserved a gold star for weathering the storm. Welcome sunshine radiating through pine trees on faces, fires now active, oatmeal flowing, the day was off to a great start. All those extra plastic bags paid off and everyone had a dry set of clothes.

An hour later with the camp packed up, we set off on the Mullica water roadway which had now become an expressway. The water level was certainly



up, but still in a manageable fashion. Today's paddle by design was on a broader river section, so the extra water was not as noticeable as it would have been in the previous section. Following some quick instructions and lots of pictures, our floating armada set off again. I don't really recall paddling very much on day two, but I do recall an awful lot of welcome blue sky, pleasant temperatures, gorgeous green scenery, and healthy scout fellowship.

Lunch was at one of two bridge portages that day where we had PB&J's and GORP on a sunny crossway. We got to play the under the bridge limbo game to see 'how low can you go' with your canoe so you didn't have to

portage around. There was certainly some interesting techniques employed. An hour later we finally arrived at our take out point just past the second bridge and of course Noah's water adventure had come to an end. The canoe trip was over too.

A short time later we had miraculously reunited with the trucks and were completing a closing circle heading for home. Our guys were tired, but happy. It was indeed a bit of a long ride home, but one that was worth the

extra effort required for such a memorable event. There was not a patch associated with this camp out,

but there certainly was a badge of accomplishment awarded for our whole crew. Particularly for scouts who ended up in water of one kind or another, this was a big time camping accomplishment. Great job guys, you should be proud of how you handled camping adversity. Our brief apologies to Ringwood School attendance monitors for Monday late arrivals, but we can assure you these guys were getting an invaluable education of a different ilk.

■ *Tom Bedard is an Assistant Scoutmaster for Troop 76 in Ringwood, NJ where he resides with his wife and three children. His son, Gabe, also participated on the adventure.*