

Fishing with Charlie

By Jim Carrier

Correction: “Chuck.” Right off the bat my newfound bow paddler - who had just turned sixteen - informed me of this preference. Despite knowing him as “Charlie” since moving into the neighborhood twelve years ago, I was only too happy to accord him complete parity with respect to naming conventions. I had worked too hard to “land” him so I wasn’t about to disrespect his metamorphosis out of “juvenile” status. Nevertheless, I considered myself fortunate he hadn’t nicknamed himself “Snake” or “Mad Dog.”

So it was that Mr. Carrier became “Jim” and Charlie became “Chuck”... though I still have trouble not thinking of him as Charlie.

I “targeted” Chuck as a potential paddling partner shortly after my oldest son had bowed out of my original tripping plans and his mother loomed as the most likely replacement. Alas, after *many* years of absence, I had only “reintroduced” Nancy to canoe-camping last September. A multi-portage July fishing trip is a far cry from a bug-free, storm-free, and almost portage-free venture with blessed cool evenings around a crackling fire in September. This was decidedly NOT a “Nancy-type” trip. Clearly a different recruit was needed!

Enter Charlie... excuse me, “Chuck.”

I figured Chuck was “ripe for the picking” for several reasons. First, year-after-year, he watched me pack and unpack camping gear for canoe trips – *especially fishing poles* - with evident curiosity. Second, his Dad often told me that – other than his studies (Chuck is an outstanding student) – fishing up at their cabin is his passion in life. With this in mind, I should observe that I wholeheartedly agree with Stu Osthoff’s comments about sport fishing in the 2012 Spring Issue of the BWJ. He maintained it can help your canoe-camping trip become a “transcending” experience. Being “hooked on fishing” *might* just be enough to sustain a kid – um, young man – who had never ever camped before through inevitable trials and tribulations of the newbie experience on the wilderness trail. Third, I knew Chuck to be both highly respectful and inquisitive. That sealed it for me; he was a prime prospect!

He didn’t see it coming. I laid for him and pounced one fine sunny weekend afternoon while shooting hoops in the cul de sac. The topic of “fishing” somehow popped up in our conversation. Gee, imagine that! So, when Chuck whistled at my fish tales (as opposed to my

older friends who typically laugh at my fish tales) I nonchalantly floated this bait, “You wouldn’t be interested in doing a wilderness canoe trip, if ever I was seeking a partner, would you?”

His eyes went saucer-like with incredulity and, seizing the moment, I set the hook, “Well, it just so happens that, this year....”

The rest of the deal was all about persuading parents... and grandparents.

I confess to harboring a measure of trepidation regarding the fact that Chuck’s Dad is an attorney. Fortunately, however, he worked with a die-hard BWJ subscriber who was familiar my contributions to this magazine. I hereby thank my unknown benefactor for vouching as to my credentials for running off into the wilderness with his colleague’s son!

Chuck’s Mom was still not entirely convinced, however. That’s when I launched extraordinary measures to seal the deal. I purchased a SPOT Messenger (sends “OK” e-mail messages and location information to loved ones back home via satellite) *and* a fancy Katadyn Base Camp Water Filter (kept me from poisoning her kid), items I had *never* used in the past.

When Mom was won over I thought I was home free. Alas, it was not so. During a holiday visit, a concerned set of *grandparents* ambushed me while I was out mowing the lawn. Chuck’s grandfather froze me with his steely-eyed gaze and admonished, “You WILL take good care of my grandson... right!?”

It was more a declaration than a question. I gulped and nodded vigorously.

So I was duly and fully apprised of my responsibilities when “Darren”, towboat operator for Anderson’s Outfitters of Crane Lake, ran us up to Customs at Sand Point en route to Lac La Croix. The two friendly ladies serving as Canadian Customs officials reviewed the signed and notarized letter I had secured from Chuck’s parents as well as our passports. The process went smoothly.

Based upon sound advice from my friends “Snow-Dog” and “Old Salt” on the website Quietjourney.com, I planned a less- aggressive-than-usual route. Having indoctrinated many youthful paddlers into park travel, they were emphatic I should optimize “fishing time” versus paddling time. Despite introducing my own two young sons to Quetico, I had almost lost sight of this wisdom. Therefore, Chuck and I would enter the park at Bottle Portage, proceed across Iron Lake and up through the Rolands to Argo, Darky, the Darky River, Minn Lake, and cross McAree Lake to exit via Black Robe... an arc of barely twenty-seven miles in length. This promised leisurely travel when spread out over more than a week.

Chuck found the mechanical portage at Loon Falls fascinating. We jumped out of the towboat and walked alongside as it was pulled up and over the hump of land via a rail line and deposited in the water on the far side. Underway again, Darren pointed out cabins owned by various celebrities and regaled us with tales about Coach Bobby Knight and other luminaries he had shuttled into the park over the years. After stopping at the park office to pick up our permit, we cruised past the Lac La Croix pictographs and Warrior Hill while Darren recounted ancient Ojibwe legends associated with those landmarks.

Chuck ate it up. Nevertheless, I could tell he was anxious to get started fishing!

We said our goodbyes to Darren at Bottle Portage around mid-morning and proceeded up a blessedly dry trail to Iron Lake. I had carefully prepared two "Chuck-sized" packs to make our portaging more efficient. At 6'2", Chuck is every bit as tall as me but must weigh eighty pounds less. I hoped to stay close enough together on portages to ensure he exercised proper care. However, with his long legs and youthful energy, he got way ahead... and survived just fine.

We quickly loaded my Souris River seventeen-footer and pushed off into Iron Lake. I wanted to put a healthy distance between us and a rather raucous family of frustrated, inexperienced paddlers, struggling with loading their vessels back at the put-in. They were expressing their displeasure with one another in no uncertain terms. Such discord was soon drowned in the rush of rising breezes which greeted us as we stroked towards Rebecca Falls. This was my first-time ever in a canoe with Chuck. I was pleasantly surprised with his strength and ability in the bow but acknowledge I got lucky on this score. I strongly recommend a trial run or two makes better sense whenever paddling with a new and inexperienced partner.

Though it was mid-July, the water level was high from substantial late spring rains. Both sets of cascades were roaring as we beached our canoe and crossed the island to do some casting on the backside of Rebecca Falls. Chuck was rewarded with his first smallies of the trip!

As we ate a quick snack back at our canoe we watched the approach of that hapless family of paddlers we had left behind earlier. The father attempted a premature exit from his vessel and flipped his canoe... drenching himself, his packs, and one teenage daughter. Despite obvious struggles, I applaud efforts of folks like this trying to make the wilderness part of their family heritage. You learn by doing and - if you stick with it -you'll do better next time. Some of us even remember such initial mishaps with fondness. Believe me, I know.

Chuck and I shoved off to give this family much-needed space and privacy as they "processed" (rather vociferously) what appeared to be their inaugural canoe-camping experience.

Knowing the approach to Curtain Falls was tricky, it did not surprise me to witness yet another canoe flip in the crosscurrent as we approached. Lots of action on Iron Lake this day! As they dried off, Chuck and I powered by and safely disembarked. By the time I made my last haul up the trail to Crooked Lake, Chuck was landing yet another smallmouth just above the falls. I fixed a lunch of cheese and sausage crackers atop my food barrel, allowing Chuck to continue doing what he loves most. Soon, we put the crowds behind us for good, paddling into a stiffening breeze toward the portage leading to the Roland Chain.

Pushing up Little Roland, we made the short crossing into Middle Roland and decided that was enough for one day. We grabbed the campsite on the north shore, just west of the pretty little waterfalls near the portage to Roland Lake. Dutifully, I sent our very first SPOT Message signal to Chuck's parents and to others back home. It provided them with our precise location on a Google Map and indicated "all is well." I showed Chuck how the unit worked, including how to broadcast the "Send Help!" message in the unlikely event I became incapacitated and we found ourselves in trouble.

My plan to give Chuck his own accommodations – a small two person tent – and the responsibility for setting it up himself worked wonderfully. He laid out a Tyvek ground sheet inside the tent, inflated my brand new Exped DownMat, and he put his sleeping bag atop that. There was plenty of room for his pack and belongings and, most importantly, a watertight private space he could call his own. Later, he adorned the entrance to his abode with an eagle feather found in camp. Meanwhile, I positioned my Clark Jungle Hammock a good thirty yards away to establish some "breathing room" until we got better acquainted. And, hey, I was just being courteous; I've been known to snore pretty loudly in that hammock!

I had been forewarned Chuck was a bit of a "picky eater" and he didn't eat *much* grub... period. First night steaks, onions, and potatoes presented no issues, though; we both gobbled them down. Clearly, however, he was anxious to finish that delicious meal so we could do some fishing.

So we hustled through meal clean-up, prepped the canoe for serious angling, and began working the shoreline during the hour or two before dark. Chuck was thrilled to nail a few more smallmouths. I was even *more* excited to recover the GPS unit I had discovered missing and which I dropped into the water when flipping the canoe at the last portage hours earlier. Miraculously, it still functioned!

Later that evening we buttoned-up camp. As we did so, Chuck was further indoctrinated into the ways of the wilderness. I had urged him to hustle but to little avail. Now, as he brushed his teeth and cleaned up, I watched the evening's "feature show" from safe behind the ample netting of my hammock tent.

In my experience, Canadian skeeters don't really "drift in" one-by-one. Rather, they show up all at once and about the same time every night... almost down to the very minute. So, when that first savage onslaught of killer swarms of mosquitoes swamped the camp, the lad got real lively... arms flying, hands slapping, legs driving him towards his shelter. My yelling, "Make danged sure you don't jam that zipper!" probably didn't do all that much to allay his panic, either. Fortunately, Chuck is very bright, learns quickly, and would not be caught out in the open like that again during the "bewitching hour."

Informed by his dad that Chuck would likely "sleep in" most mornings unless roused, I was astonished to arise at 5:30am and discover him up, dressed, and ready to go fishing! He downed a couple breakfast bars and waited patiently while I drank coffee and knocked off powdered eggs of dubious vintage, leftovers from previous trips.

I assured him the walleyes weren't going anywhere.

We caught a couple nice 'eyes right away as well as some good-sized northerns and several more smallmouth. Yet, as the morning wore on, however, Chuck's fishing appetite was not satiated. He was fixated on achieving a Grand Slam right off the bat during his very first "fishing" morning in the park!

Middle Roland is not a deep lake and, while it allegedly holds trout, I thought we'd do better on nearby, deeper Roland Lake. Chuck had never fished lake trout before and was really pumped about doing so. Three minutes after attaching the silver/blue Reef Runner lure and letting out one hundred feet of line, Chuck's line bent over.

"What do you think it is?" he queried, barely containing his excitement and holding on.

"Supper... I hope." I replied.

Chuck reeled in his first ever lake trout. Now he was really hooked!

We cleaned the walleyes and, of course, the trout, put them into a plastic bag and inserted that into a water-soaked canvas bag. We hung the bag from a tree limb in the cool shade back at camp. Darrell Brauer, frequent BWJ contributor, taught me that evaporative cooling is nearly as good as a refrigerator. Thanks for that trick, buddy!

Watching Chuck's eyes as *his* trout fried-up with potatoes and onions was almost as rewarding as witnessing him landing that fish. There was no sign of a picky-eater *this* night! We enjoyed our meal besides a smoky fire pit as rain droplets played a soft tune upon the overhead tarp.

Roland Lake was mirror-like and peaceful as we crossed it the next morning. We planned to grab one of the great mid-lake campsites on Argo Lake... only a short distance away. After a short portage, we meandered lazily along both shorelines of the beautiful Siobhan River with Chuck casting happily in hopes of landing one of its reputed trophy smallmouth bass. While he didn't land any trophies that morning he certainly saw plenty of action in that exceptional fishery.

After securing a fabulous, centrally-located island campsite, we munched on bean and rice tortillas for lunch. Chuck picked out and tossed the beans, treating the numerous red squirrels to a virtual feast. Shortly afterward, inspired by plentiful sunshine and gentle breezes, we washed clothes and bathed. As *any* hiatus from fishing was *too* much for my angling fiend and bow paddler, we were soon back on the water. Chuck picked up where he left off a few hours earlier, boating numerous smallmouth. He also resumed his winning ways with trout, though supper that night was mac, cheese and sausage... another winner!

I spent that evening in my well-screened hammock re-reading a tattered copy (loose pages kept in a plastic baggie; book binding is shot) of Hugh Fosburgh's canoeing adventure story, The Sound of White Water, for perhaps the twentieth time. I noted Chuck was safely tucked away in his tent, all chores completed, well before the thrumming din of mosquito swarms enveloped our camp.

Heavy-duty thunderstorms blew in around 4:00am and were still going strong when I arose at 5:30am. I hustled around tightening tarp lines and securing camp. Convinced we were watertight, I fixed scones for breakfast but Chuck wanted no part of them. It had been a really good idea allowing him to bring along a healthy personal supply of breakfast items and treats his parents *knew* he would eat.

Strong, hot southwest breezes buffeted our island and kept our fishing pinned to the lee side until late morning. We caught a few smallmouth bass. Chuck was eager to have yet another go at trout fishing, however. I evaluated the situation and, when the wind subsided a bit, relented. So we forsake our shelter, braved the elements, and nearly got blown to the north end of the lake! We fought our way back to camp and grabbed an early lunch. More tortillas; more beans for the squirrels. That afternoon the wind died and the day became exceedingly hot. We decided to troll around Birch Island. Action was slow but Chuck picked up yet another trout which was all I needed to fix some delicious Cache Lake Fish Chowder for our supper. While the chowder simmered, a big thunderhead built in the west, resulting in a brief deluge which we welcomed as the cooler air mass made sleeping conditions much more bearable.

The next morning we broke camp. A friendly canoe party of four from Tennessee came up from behind us while portaging the big hill that separates Argo and Darky lakes. We exchanged pleasantries and fishing tips. They paddled over to see the pictographs while we pushed off for

our targeted island campsite on the northwest corner of the lake. We would return to enjoy the landmarks and magnificent cliffs of “Spirit Lake” in another day or so.

It proved to be another hot day. After setting up camp, we failed to fool lake trout and switched to bass and walleye fishing. We found success making several passes of a windy promontory on the east side near the corridor leading to Josie and Brent lakes. While I cleaned our walleyes, Chuck enjoyed light action casting to smaller fish in the wind-driven current flowing through the narrow gap separating our island from the north shore. Our discussion beside our campfire that evening concerned the all-important “fishing plan” for the next day. That conversation froze instantly and our heads jerked upward as the first howl from a nearby wolf pack commanded our full attention!

The eerie serenade lasted a full fifteen minutes, obliterating all other thought and action. Few sounds in the wild will grab you quite like that one.

My pancakes the next morning were pretty-much a disaster, so I didn’t fault Chuck for sticking with his breakfast bars. We discovered that the Cheese-Whiz canister exploded in my food barrel (for the second year in a row!) creating quite a mess and resulting in a delayed start to our planned day of walleye fishing over on Ballard Lake. Chuck clearly found the delay painful as he demonstrated his restlessness by pacing back and forth as I wiped the barrel down. He was far too polite to try to hurry me along with words. Nevertheless, his anxious behavior brought to light (for me) differences in “sense of time” as experienced by seniors and youth. The teenager was eager to get-on with what he saw as the main point of this trip... fishing. The senior – yours truly – saw plenty of time for fishing. I wanted to knock out work and *then* play. Chuck’s energy and focus needed an outlet while I puttered around dealing with camp chores and messes. I would do a better job assigning “chores” for the balance of the trip and Chuck would handle them quite well. Meanwhile, for now, I suggested he invest the “wait time” in fishing the channel on the north side of camp.

Later, while we collected firewood, a huge snapping turtle nearly swam off with the stringer of Ballard walleyes we brought home for cleaning. Fortunately, I spotted the villain, won the tug-of-war, and we ate well. We found a bright-colored Frisbee in camp. It turned out to be same one that a cyber-buddy of mine from Texas had found and left on this very same island during his spring trip. We flung it around a few times and then retired for the evening... a little disappointed not to hear wolves again. A few minutes later, Chuck called over to me, asking if I had a pen that I could spare. Why? Well, he wanted to mark up the park map I had given him back home for his personal use during this trip.

I was elated. That was the moment I knew I had a new convert to wilderness paddling!

Darky Lake presents lots of adventure options. The next morning Chuck landed a beauty of a lake trout and I nailed a walleye of equal size while trolling en route to viewing the pictographs at the south end of the lake. Later, we enjoyed a blue sky and breezy afternoon of incredible bass fishing on beautiful, island-studded Wicksteed Lake.

It was time to move, again, and the Darky River en route to Minn Lake provided Chuck with a rich park experience decidedly different than the lake travel we had enjoyed thus far. Every twist and turn of that quiet wilderness waterway teases you with the expectation of encountering a moose or a bear or, perhaps, a family of otters. We were not to be disappointed, either. We paddled gently towards the confluence with Andrews Creek and were nearly mesmerized by soaring eagles above and bright green “Angel Hair” grasses undulating in the current, below. A very dark moose cow broke the hypnotic spell by splashing across to the stream’s west shore just a few meters ahead!

Chuck was certainly getting his money’s worth on this, his first-ever camping trip!

We claimed a well-worn island campsite on Minn Lake and called it home.

Our last few days were spent walleye fishing on Minn Lake, trout fishing on McAree Lake and rapidly crossing the very short, flat, but absolutely mosquito-infested portage that lies between the two. Our rhythms and routines were well-honed and smooth. We lived on “wilderness time” and had little need for wristwatches. We fished in the mornings. In the afternoons we washed clothes and swam. Warm breezes dried everything quickly and kept biting flies at bay while we relaxed, read, or wrote in our journals. Afternoon thunderstorms made summer evenings more bearable. In the evenings we watched loon couples dive and, on faraway rock faces, patterns of reflected light shimmered and shifted as the orange sunset flamed-out over rippling waters. The serenade of loons, whitethroats, ravens, herring gulls and geese was constant as was the sigh of the ever-present wind. The effect of it – sunburn, windburn, hot days, cool nights, bird song, and especially the wind - comprised a soothing and much-welcomed tonic that put traffic noises and city cares – and upcoming school days - well-out-of-mind.

That’s not to say that we didn’t miss family and friends. Rather, the wilderness experience wakens and consumes one with rich subtleties of Nature so often missed in a world dominated by I-pods, tight schedules, narrow focus and countless more “civilized” and complicated pursuits. I realize Chuck was out there *mostly* for the fishing... just as I used to be. Over time, however, *my* canoe retreats/adventures have grown to encompass the totality of the experience. I embrace each opportunity to cleanse myself and, perhaps, *lose myself* in fundamental human engagement with “wilderness.” Don’t get me wrong, I still enjoy fishing... but now I very much enjoy not-fishing, too. When I reach the point during my trip when hands

and shoulders have adjusted to paddles and pack straps *and* when wind, water and sunshine have leached away the last vestiges of worries brought into the wilderness with me, I have indeed found my happy place. Great fishing is merely a bonus.

Chuck is a very gifted young man who, when we started, didn't like getting his feet wet, had never camped even once before, had never fished for lake trout, was picky about his food (much to the delight of the local vole, mole and squirrel populations), and had certainly never encountered moose or wolves except, maybe, in a zoo. Routines and camp chores were all new, too; collecting firewood, tending fires, cleaning dishes, setting up and breaking down tents and tarps, loading canoes, portaging, and navigating using a map. He even learned how to successfully revive some *very* large fish (yes, he caught a leviathan or two) dredged up from cold depths on hot summer days. I won't disclose precisely where Chuck's heavy duty rod doubled-over (which it did, sadly, more than mine!) but I will dare say he had the "transcending experience" Stu Osthoff claims sport fishing can produce in a canoe trip.

We did a lot of fishing. Chuck earned his Grand Slam early on and caught a few trophies, too. As a result, I suspect we may have hooked another youthful convert on wilderness paddling. This became abundantly evident on our long towboat ride home out of Black Robe portage when I coaxed him into showing his fish pics to the other passengers.

As the eyes of veteran anglers started bugging out, Chuck's face erupted into a large, infectious and incurable smile.