

# Wilderness News

FROM THE QUETICO SUPERIOR FOUNDATION FALL/WINTER 2004



The Quetico Superior Foundation, established in 1946, encourages and supports the protection of the ecological, cultural and historical resources of the Quetico Superior region.

*“The blue in the dome of the sky deepens to the color of cobalt. The line of trees across the water loses not only its color but also its shape. The distinction between earth and heaven blurs, then disappears. The first star appears, then another, and another.”*

*I sit on a rock at the edge of the water in the gathering darkness, staring into the depths of the lake and thinking of something Thoreau said, when he was perhaps in a similar mood, about Walden Pond: “A lake,” he said, “is the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature.”*

— Paul Gruchow *Boundary Waters, The Grace of the Wild*



## Wilderness News

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July 21st...the fire burns across an island on Shoepack Lake. Photo courtesy Voyageurs National Park

## Natural Fire Management in Voyageurs National Park

by Diane Rose, Wilderness News Contributor

**Federal parks and forest officials had a perfect opportunity last summer to advance two of their goals for Voyageurs National Park: restoring fire as part of the natural ecosystem and regenerating white pine forests. The last large fire in the area had occurred in 1936 and the park was established in 1971.**

On July 8, an Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources detection aircraft discovered a fire burning between Loiten and Shoepack lakes on the Kabetogama Peninsula. An alert went out to the Voyageurs Park. Using their “Decision Criteria for Wildland Fire Use” park staff made the decision to let the fire to burn

naturally. The eligibility criteria for making the go-ahead decision included: immediate and potential threats to life, property and resources; acceptable fire effects on natural and cultural resources; current and forecasted fire danger and expected fire behavior; and availability of fire management team resources.



Map courtesy Voyageurs National Park

The fire burned for the next two and a half months and became known as the Section 33 Fire. The fire naturally consumed 1,435 of the park’s 170,000 acres of land, or less than 1%, before gradually dying out in late August.

If 2004 had been a typical summer, the wildfire that was sparked by a lightning strike during a July 5 thunderstorm would have been put out immediately with water, said Barbara West, the park’s superintendent. But the weather was cool and wet and the

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Photo courtesy University of Minnesota College of Natural Resources

## Minnesota: A History of the Land

Premiering on Minnesota Public Television (tpt) on February 21st and 22nd 2005, at 8:00 pm.

*Minnesota: A History of the Land* is an epic four hour video series that chronicles the vast changes in Minnesota's ecosystems from the last ice age to the impacts of urban sprawl. Produced by the College of Natural Resources at the University of Minnesota and Twin Cities Public Television, this series explores the ways in which human populations and nature have interacted over time to shape Minnesota as we know it today.

The series provides powerful context for understanding the State's current environmental dilemmas including:

- the role the land has played in shaping Minnesota's economies and its communities over the centuries
- awareness of the human impact on the landscapes, water, plants and wildlife
- the current health, use and long term sustainability of the landscape

Episode I illustrates the forces of nature that shaped Minnesota before humans, and tracks rapid change from Native American habitation through early European settlement. Episode II covers the spread of settlers, farming and economic growth, and examines how the land is affected. In Episode III, Minnesota becomes a battleground for conservation efforts, and the Boundary Waters region is saved from destruction. Episode IV depicts the post-WWII landscape, the issues that Minnesota is facing today, and raises questions about the future.

An educational curriculum and a Viewer's Guide developed by the College of Natural Resources and the Minnesota Historical Society will be available in February.

As this series explores crucial matters of conservation and natural resource management, Minnesotans, as well as everyone of concern, will develop a greater appreciation for their roles as environmental stewards of our landscapes.

For more information, go to the *Minnesota: A History of the Land* web site: [www.historyoftheland.org](http://www.historyoftheland.org)

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fire started in the center of the Kabetogama Peninsula, where it wouldn't threaten life or property no matter which direction it moved.

The day-by-day progress of the fire is described by Dave Soleim, the park's Fire Management Officer, in the 2004 annual report of federal and state fire agencies in Minnesota, the Minnesota Incident Command System (MINICS):

"Two days after the fire was detected, a south wind event pushed the fire along a pine covered ridge to 55 acres before two to three inches of rain was received that night. The fire was monitored daily with only limited smoke visibility until July 21 when the fire crossed a drainage. Driven by strong west winds the fire pushed towards Shoepack Lake, spotting across the lake. Over the next couple days the fire continued to spread and again spotted to the north shore of Shoepack Lake where it became well established on the north side of the lake. Weather and fire behavior forecasts indicated that the fire had potential to move to the shore of Rainy Lake within one to two burning periods. Twenty private and use and occupancy cabins dotted the islands in the projected fire growth path. Protection measures were employed to protect these structures, with all cabins and outbuildings having sprinkler systems deployed. On July 27...the forecasted wind event...came with cloud cover and high humidity and fire growth was minimal. After August 5th, rain and high humidity, little wind and cold quelled the fire, and it grew very little. Over the next several weeks isolated hotspots were observed but there was little growth. The 1,435-acre Section 33 Fire still burned less than 1% of the park's 170,000 acres of land."

West showed spectacular photos and described the planning and progress of the 2004 blaze at the Voyageurs National Park Association board of directors meeting in Minneapolis on Nov. 30.

One dramatic image in her presentation showed sections of an island in Shoepack Lake that were burned on July 21, when strong westerly winds drove what had been a smoldering fire around and over the lake, incinerating trees that contained an eagle nest. The fire grew from 60 to 176 acres that day and "ran over the island as if there was no water in between," West said. The adult eagles were spotted soon afterward in another tree on the island, but it was feared the eaglet had died until it was spotted days later, she said.

West described how the fire would "munch" slowly along for days through the fir-balsam understory and birch-aspen overstory, until strong winds would come. "Then the fire would start running like an inferno, with short crown fire runs, and then it would start to rain and slow it down again," she said.

Each day, West had to run through a checklist of factors and conditions, and she was responsible for the daily decision to let the burning continue. "By the time it was over, I had a great deal of

admiration for the guys who make this their lives," West said.

Officials shut down campsites, houseboat sites and trails, she recalled, and as time went on the houseboat companies "got testy." Concerns included whether the fire would reach cabins, Kempton Channels or Rainy Lake, but none of these happened. The fire stayed within the maximum manageable area defined by the fire management plan.

**"The 1,435-acre Section 33 Fire still burned less than 1% of the park's 170,000 acres of land."** – Dave Soleim

At one point, 58 people were working to manage the fire and prepare for contingencies, including local crews and equipment from the Interagency Fire Center in Grand Rapids and crews from Montana, Arizona and New Mexico. These included the Southwest Fire Use Management Team. The national teams specialize in managing Wildland Fire Use events. The total cost of monitoring and managing the fire was approximately \$450,000, West said.



New growth was beginning to appear by early September. Photo courtesy Voyageurs National Park

**"Wildland fire is as fundamental to Park ecosystems as rain, snow and wind...(the) Section 33 Fire brought back a much-missed element of the natural community."** – Dave Soleim

By the end of August, new ferns and other plants were already sprouting in areas that had been burned. The fire burned so hot that it's difficult to know whether white pines will regenerate naturally, West said. Monitoring plots will be studied in the spring, and she said it may be a challenge to keep deer away from new pine seedlings.

West noted that a major natural event happens in the area approximately once every 100 years, causing the ecosystem to be renewed.

"The management of wildland fire for resource benefits is among the highest risk and highest consequence programs administered by federal wildland fire management agencies," Soleim wrote in the MINICS report. "Wildland fire is as fundamental to Park ecosystems as rain, snow and wind...(the) Section 33 Fire brought back a much-missed element of the natural community." □

*“I think the BWCA wilderness will always be a work in progress” – Don Fraser*



BWCA circa 1994. Photo courtesy Tom Fraser

## Don Fraser – Still Standing Up for Wilderness

by Diane Rose, Wilderness News Contributor

After 16 years in the U.S. House of Representatives, Minneapolis native Don Fraser was poised in 1978 to move on to the Senate. Politics were taking a conservative turn nationwide, and it promised to be a hard-fought election. The going got even tougher for Fraser after he was asked to sponsor the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) Wilderness Act – which called for strict limits on motorboats, phased out snowmobiling and prohibited logging and mining in the BWCA.

“Normally, someone would go to the district affected by the legislation but (U.S. Rep. James) Oberstar was not supportive,” Fraser recalls. “I felt that bills of this consequence needed to get in front of the House committees, so I agreed to sponsor it.”

The move stirred up tension between Oberstar and Fraser and substantial opposition from residents of Oberstar’s heavily DFL Eighth Congressional District in northeast Minnesota. However, Fraser said he believes his support for wilderness protection was just one of several reasons for his defeat in the 1978 election.

After three ballots at the DFL convention, Fraser won the party endorsement. He was opposed by northern Minnesota State Rep. Doug Johnson, who was against additional restrictions in the BWCA. Fraser lost the primary election to Bob Short, a DFLer who ran without the party’s endorsement and also opposed the BWCA legislation. Among DFLers, the November 1978 general election came to be known as the “Minnesota Massacre.” Short was defeated by Dave Durenberger, U.S. Sen. Wendell Anderson lost to Rudy Boschwitz and Al Quie unseated Rudy Perpich as governor.

Simultaneously, however, the BWCA Wilderness Act was approved by Congress and signed into law in October 1978 by President Jimmy Carter. Fraser is modest, giving much of the credit for work on the bill to Rip Rapson, who was his staff member at that time. Rapson co-authored the book *Troubled Waters: The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness*.

“The only reason the bill got through was that the local people’s influence didn’t reach very far outside the area,” Fraser said. “We had good success mobilizing people in the House. It was a tough fight, but I wasn’t really in the center of it. The chair of a key subcommittee, Phil Burton, was a good friend who was very helpful. And (the late U.S. Rep.) Bruce Vento played a very important role.”

Today, at age 80, Fraser doesn’t regret tackling the wilderness protection measure. What if the BWCA Wilderness Act hadn’t passed? Fraser said fewer people would have experienced the peace and quiet of the wilderness over the years, and the area under protection might be smaller.

Fraser went on from the defeat of 1978 to serve as mayor of Minneapolis from 1980 through 1993. Today, he remains politically active, focusing primarily on early childhood development issues and human rights. “That’s one of the challenges – there are so many things I’d like to follow,” he said. “One of the impressions I do have about the Boundary Waters is that there is stress around the issues of development and the threat of mining.”

The fall of 2003 was the 25th anniversary of the BWCA Wilderness Act, and Fraser marked the occasion by writing an October 19 piece for the Star Tribune. The article pointed out that attempts to undermine the law have been beaten back, yet “...the wilderness remains threatened. More people seek to live near the splendor of the Boundary Waters full or part time. Increased construction of homes and roads places a tremendous burden on the region’s ecosystem. Wildlife is displaced, and runoff from yards, roads and driveways pollutes the otherwise pristine lakes....While the Boundary Waters elicits deep passion, it is my hope that future debates about the area remain calm and civil.”

Calm civility is often in short supply in today’s political debates. Fraser, however, continues to set an example. He speaks gently and eloquently, and smiles often. He doesn’t seem to regret many things in his long political career, or his life. □



## Conservationists Appeal the U.S. Forest Service’s Management Plan

### Superior National Forest

The new management plan for Superior National Forest has been challenged by conservation groups asking the U.S. Forest Service to do a better job of protecting wildlife and wild lands in Superior National Forest. The new management plan released in August increases logging in areas near the Boundary Waters, and threaten 90,000 acres of remaining wild lands.

Under the plan, some of Minnesota’s last remaining wild lands will be opened to logging and road building. These special places in the Superior National Forest include roadless areas near Seven Beaver Lake and Hog Lake. Seven Beaver is the headwaters for the St. Louis River and the area near Hog Lake comprises 200 acres of the few remaining cathedral white and red pine trees more than 100 years old.

Conservationists say the plan suffers from a ‘reality gap’ because it sets goals for more old, natural forests and protecting wildlife like the Canada lynx and songbirds, but in reality it moves backward on these goals.

“Wildlife like the Canada lynx and gray wolf have a place in Minnesota’s northern forests and this gift to the logging industry doesn’t protect them,” said Clyde Hanson, conservation chair of the Sierra Club North Star Chapter.

Groups joining the appeal include the Sierra Club North Star Chapter, Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, American Lands Alliance, and Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness.

To learn more about the appeal, visit [www.northstar.sierraclub.org](http://www.northstar.sierraclub.org) and to view a map of the 90,000 areas recommended by the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness for wilderness protection, visit [www.friends-bwca.org](http://www.friends-bwca.org)

**More than 26,000 Minnesotans submitted comments to the Forest Service urging the agency to protect the remaining wild forest lands in Minnesota and across the country. This outpouring of support built upon the more than 2,500 comments Minnesotans submitted to Superior National Forest last year in support of more wilderness designation.**

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View of Long Island from Listening Point. Photo courtesy Minnesota Land Trust

**“Long Island has remained a sentinel signifying the edge of the wilderness and its permanent protection ensures that others will know the same wilderness that inspired Sigurd Olson.”**

– Quetico Superior Foundation

## In View of Long Island

The Quetico Superior Foundation was excited to participate in the Trust for Public Land’s purchase of Long Island on Burntside Lake located northwest of Ely, Minnesota. According to the foundation, Burntside Lake has a special place in the American and Minnesota conservation history. It was from its shores – in view of Long Island – more than half a century ago that famed conservationist and author Sigurd Olson wrote of the value of wilderness to the human soul.

Learning from the U.S. Forest Service of the island’s imminent development, the Trust for Public Land acted quickly with its Northwoods Land Protection Fund, securing the island to ensure the public opportunity would not be lost. Because it can take the Forest Service years to acquire money from Congress for such purchases, and because the land was about to be subdivided for expensive summer homes, trust officials quickly agreed to step in. “The south half of the island already had been surveyed to be split up into lots and was initially listed with a real estate

agent last fall. It was that close to being developed,” said Shaun Hamilton, director of the trust’s Northwoods Initiative.

For landowners Jeff and Sharon Rome, the decision to sell their 43-acre Long Island in the middle of Burntside Lake came down to protecting something they loved. Their choice will allow future generations to visit the island’s natural sandy beach and listen to one of the lake’s many nesting loons. “It’s such an extraordinary piece of property, where it is on the lake and the view around there, that we thought it should stay that way,” Jeff Rome said from his cabin on the mainland of Burntside Lake. Rome, a Rochester physician, and his wife Sharon owned the northern half of the island, and his sister owned the southern half. His sister began exploring development options prompting Jeff and Sharon to suggest selling for conservation.

Public acquisition of the Long Island property will ensure that the attributes of the Northwoods region so treasured by its many visitors – the solitary sound of the common loon, the serenity of an evening paddle, the call of the wild – will be protected in perpetuity. □

## BWCAW Prescribed Burns Fall Short of the 2004 Goal

In April 2004 the Forest Service planned 31 prescribed burns for the Gunflint and Tofte Districts of the BWCA totaling more than 30,893 acres— a very ambitious plan representing 41% of the 75,000 prescribed acres resulting from the 1999 blowdown. However, spring 2004 again proved too wet to carry out burns. Then, in early September conditions improved and over a four day period 6,256 acres were burned which included Lark Lake (3,182 acres), Loon Lake (234 acres), Mayhew Ridge (48 acres), Round Lake (60 acres), and Tuscarora (2,587 acres). However, on October 8th, when all burn plans were ceased for the year only 6,256 acres or roughly 20% of the 2004 goal had been achieved.

The master plan outlined in the Environment Impact Statement by the Forest Service and signed into effect in September 2001 called for the 75,000 acres to be completed in a 5-7 year time-frame with acreage goals spiking in year four.

Now, after three years, with only 13% or 9,543 of the 75,000 acres burned we wonder if the plan is on track and what to expect in 2005.

The Forest Service tells us the priority areas for spring of 2005 include Meeds, Saucer Rum/Shed and Bower Trout Lakes in the Gunflint area and Sommers, Horseshoe Island, Wood and Snowbank Lakes near Ely.

Until more of the critical and high priority areas can be reduced by prescribed burning the potential still exists for an extreme wildfire event. According to Jim Sanders at the Forest Service,

**“The danger of a big fire is still there; that won’t be gone for 10 to 15 years until we’ve completed the burns and everything has decomposed.”**