Working Together to Protect Wilderness

A collaborative effort is transferring Gaul Island from private land to public stewardship.

Page 12

INSIDE:

Meet the Wolf Lake Citizen’s Monitoring Group
Page 4

Read What’s going on in Washington D.C.
Page 8

Camp Warren Turns 85
Page 10

The Quetico Superior Foundation, established in 1946, encourages and supports the protection of the wilderness, cultural and historical resources of the Quetico-Superior canoe country and region.

www.wildernessnews.org
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Last Spring, Wilderness News launched a new magazine-style format so we could bring you more in-depth stories about the Quetico-Superior region. We want our coverage to explore the history and culture of northern Minnesota and examine the ways it is a dynamic and changing region today.

In this issue, we examine some of the forces that continue to shape northeastern Minnesota. Landowners, government agencies, environmental groups and even politicians continue to jockey over how the region is managed, and their discourse doesn’t always get the attention reserved for hot button issues like mining. We take a look at collaborative efforts led by the Trust for Public Land to protect Gaul Island, just outside the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and across from Sigurd Olson’s Listening Point. We learn about an unlikely partnership between former adversaries—the Forest Service and landowners—to monitor a roadless area. We also examine proposed legislation that seeks to change wilderness protections.

We hope you’ll find the stories engaging and thought-provoking.

As always, we welcome your feedback and appreciate your continued support for our efforts. Readers responded to the new format with 83 donations that totaled over $4,000. That support does more than help sustain continued coverage—it confirms the value of Wilderness News content, and helps us expand our granting efforts. For that, we thank you.

Sincerely,
Jim Wyman
Board President, Quetico Superior Foundation

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Thank You

On the Cover:
Aerial view of Burntside Lake looking northwest from Tamarack Bay. Burntside Island Scientific and Natural Area, and Gaul Island are at the top of the photo below the word News. Photo by and courtesy of Bruce Wilk.

Tell us what you think and keep up with canoe country issues: http://www.facebook.com/WildernessNews
Keep it Wild, Keep it Free
How fortunate we are in North America to have wild public lands where we can camp, travel and be part of wild nature. We might imagine that these areas are wild because they were set aside in a pristine condition for future generations to enjoy. Restored and rescued is closer to the truth—and usually not without a fight. As demand for resources and land increases, continued political vigilance will be necessary to maintain the special protections these areas enjoy. But we need something else. Preservation of the wilderness depends on knowledge and experience. You’ve got to know it and you’ve got to live it! The more you can learn about the natural and human history of these wild places the better, and the more you can pass this knowledge on to the younger generation the more likely it will be continued to be valued and cherished. More important than knowledge is experience. It is the juice, the energy, that will guarantee these lands stay preserved forever. After experiencing the freedom, the wonder and the magic of the land beyond the road, it becomes an inseparable part of you. So get out there. Put the paddle in the water and bring the kids along. —Rob Kesselring

Women in Wilderness
For me, last summer’s canoe trip acquired an intergenerational feel because of sharing a canoe with my paddling partner and daughter Emily, as well as discovering during a trip to Norway in June of 2011 that my great grandmother Maren Bunnæs Larson grew up in an area of Norway that mirrors the BWCA to a tee. Walking along the shoreline of her birthplace, I found myself wondering if my love for the Boundary Waters was planted well over a century ago by my ancestral soul sister Maren? —Norma Christianson

A Survivor of the 70s
My deceased husband, Jon, was involved in all the problems in Ely in the 70s—testified on behalf of the wilderness, had a building burned, car overturned at our home, I & my son were threatened, our store (Canadian Waters) was blocked & they threatened to storm it, my husband & his brother were armed. Finally, he was hung in effigy in front of our store. Sig Olson was a good friend, as is Lynn Rogers, our ‘bear’ man. What we left 10 yrs. ago, was a town that had finally achieved a tourism status with w/trees, flowers, flags, old lighting; on the edge of the wilderness. What is left now is a shrinking tourism base & a town waiting for mining to mistakenly ‘save’ it again. It’s a hard place to live, everything is a fight. The future mining has a strong potential to destroy everything, I’m glad it will not be our fight now. We were left the only scapegoats to attack in town. Our employees had guns pointed at them as well. The 70s were far worse living there than most people realize. Living in a quiet, peaceful forest now, working to support clean-up, restoration & re-introduction efforts in the hills/Karst of S. Ind., which is being successful. Supporting your efforts, because Ely was home. —Joyce K. Waters

Send your anecdote, stories or pictures about the Quetico-Superior Region to editor@queticosuperior.org
A New Model for Partnership

By Alissa Johnson

Meet the Wolf Lake Citizen’s Monitoring Group. Together with the Forest Service, they’re proving that private landowners and the government can work together to care for land.
The relationship between the Wolf Lake Citizen’s Monitoring Group and the U.S. Forest Service started in an all too familiar way: in court. In 1997, the Forest Service issued a permit to build a four and half mile road into a stretch of forest on the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness without conducting an Environmental Assessment or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Area landowners gathered more than 100 signatures in protest, beginning a decade of challenges that ended up in court on more than one occasion. And it might have continued that way if a new district ranger hadn’t suggested an alternative in 2007.

The Wolf Lake citizen’s group had just contested the latest EIS for the Echo Trail. According to Doug Wallace, who spearheads the monitoring group with his wife Peggy, the EIS gave four reasons that the inventoried roadless area did not qualify for elevated protection: it was regularly used by snowmobilers; it had recently been logged; there was high potential for future development by other ownership; and people used it to reach private lands. Based on research the homeowners had conducted themselves, they knew each claim to be false. But district ranger Nancy Larsen did something unusual: she asked them to withdraw their contention, and in exchange, promised the Forest Service would reexamine the record. The group agreed, and in the end the Forest Service amended the EIS and the Forest’s management plan to side with the landowners. Then Larsen had another idea. “She said, ‘You know more about this area than our staff, so why don’t you consider the possibility of doing a demonstration project of what a citizen’s monitoring group could do?’” says Wallace. The group gave Larsen’s suggestion a shot, and in the nearly five years since the landowners have taken on an ever-expanding role in monitoring the Wolf Lake roadless area, adjacent to the Trout Lake area of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW).

A group of about 18 families monitor plant and animal species as well as human use of the area. They provide the Forest Service with an annual report, allowing the agency to form a clearer picture of what’s happening across the forest. The group’s monitoring has already confirmed the presence of invasive earth worms, which eat through the duff on the forest floor, and they have confirmed the presence of about 13 bird species that are “species of special need.” Among them is the Canada Warbler, which is listed as a bird of concern by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

“The outcomes are improved data for the Superior National Forest, but this effort also provides a good two-way communication between the Forest Service and landowners,” says Bruce Anderson, Superior Forest Monitoring Coordinator. He works with the group to select annual training and monitoring projects.

The Forest Service has provided the group with training on surveying techniques, forest classification, and identification of basic plant, aquatic and terrestrial species. Recently, the monitoring group also joined a climate change study, working with the lead scientist to collect data on a plot in the Wolf Lake roadless area. The group recorded dead and down timber, the size of remaining timber, plant life, regeneration of the forest floor and a variety of other data that will, over time, form a picture of how the forest is changing over time. Looking ahead to next summer, Anderson says, the Forest Service and the monitoring group are considering a partnership with a rare bird expert. But as the group’s role continues to evolve every year, it’s no longer limited to simply monitoring.
“They are also looking at helping us create more recreational opportunities for the public,” says Tim Sexton, Larsen’s successor. “One of the projects we’re working on now, in infancy stage, is a birding trail…. They have offered to do most of the work associated with creating and maintaining the trail as well as develop the informational media that would support it.”

The idea for the trail—proposed at the end of the portage into Wolf Lake—came from birders, Alan and Karen Orr. They got involved with the monitoring group after Wallace noticed them walking around with binoculars. He asked them to help with bird monitoring, and initially, they performed line transect surveys. By walking an established line and recording bird sightings by sight and sound, they established a formal record of the species present in the area.

“We’re in the process now of establishing point count observations, which go into a specific locale on a frequency two or three times a year over a period of years,” says Allen Orr. “We simply stay in that area for a specified time and record what we see and hear, and that has more value for the Forest Service, and it also has value in terms of being able to apply statistical analysis.”

Their data has confirmed the region as one of rich avian diversity, and the Orrs suggested a nature trail as a way to draw people to the region. Orr believes recreational birding could have some economic impact on the area.

“There are indications that birding might have some economic impact on the state of Minnesota, but it needs to be pushed up the hill. Of course, that’s not my goal. We’re involved with the group because we enjoy birding,” says Orr. It’s that passion, he believes, that drives involvement in groups like the Wolf Lake Citizen’s Monitoring Group.

“It stems from a long history of citizen involvement, citizen conservationists who have an interest in nature and who want to assist agencies, government or private, in terms of helping preserve environmental conditions in a particular locale.”

But what Orr sees as tradition, others see as unique. Anderson has seen partnerships between the agency and environmental organizations, and collaborative groups that include several entities. But the direct relationship between landowners and the agency is something else altogether.

“It’s a two-way street right now, there is information going both ways, what we contribute is training labor and what the Wolf Lake group contributes is labor to do inventory and monitoring,” Anderson says. Both he and Sexton see a great deal of value in the partnership.

“It’s a great idea to involve members of the public to help get monitoring work done, it is a tremendous job and the Forest Service never has enough resources to get the job done as well as these folks get the job done,” Sexton says, “The relationship started somewhat adversarial and to their credit and my predecessor’s credit… they came to an agreement that if you’ve got this much interest in the land here, why don’t you help us monitor it. They agreed and do a wonderful job monitoring things of interest to them and us.”
Meet Andrew Steiner

Please tell us what your involvement with the Quetico Superior Foundation means to you: The region holds many of my fondest memories. I find serenity in the isolation, beauty, and physical exertion associated with my visits to the Boundary Waters. It is my favorite place. My father first took me on a trip when I was eight years old. He was going on a trip with some friends and I asked if I could go too. Without hesitation he said yes. It was the first of many adventures with friends and family. Today I have two very young girls, and I can’t wait to introduce them to this treasured place soon. The Foundation works hard through Wilderness News to bring the news, history, and culture of the region to our readers. Through Foundation grants we also work to protect the region and introduce it to other young explorers. It’s an honor to help protect this beautiful region.

What other ways have you been active in the Quetico-Superior Region? Our family business has been active on both sides of the border for decades. AmeriPride Services and Canadian Linen and Uniform Service have been successfully providing linen, uniforms, floor care and restroom services to customers for nearly 125 years. In this region we operate out of the Bemidji, Hibbing, Duluth, Winnipeg, Manitoba and Kenora, Ontario markets. We are pleased to service thousands of businesses and employ hundreds in these cities. We are the only North American textile rental provider to still operate our laundry facilities in these local markets, and we are proud of it!

What is the most pressing issue you see in the region today? Clearly sulfide mining. As a medium-sized business owner I completely sympathize with the desire to create additional employment in the region. However I have to think about the long-term responsibility that we have to protect our wilderness areas. Until we can be absolutely certain that mining will do no harm to the region, I’m dead set against the short term economic benefits that are certain to bring long-term or permanent environmental damage.

What is one of your favorite memories from the Quetico-Superior Region? In high school for a “senior year project” four friends and I spent the winter building two Kevlar canoes, guided and assisted by my uncle. In May we launched on a nineteen-day, 150+ mile tour of the BWCA and Quetico Park. We followed ice-out north, hacked and sawed our way through portages wrecked by downed trees, beat the Canadian rangers across the border (we left an envelope with our entry fee), and ate our way through over 300 pounds of food. Along the way we dumped a canoe or two, caught exactly zero fish, and solidified life-long friendships. What an amazing adventure for a group of seventeen year-olds!

What’s your favorite way to spend time in the Quetico-Superior Region? I tend to remember my entry points more than where I’ve been once I’m into the woods. I especially recommend the adventure of entering from the Outward Bound School near Ely, Minnesota on the Kawishiwi River. Paddling upstream through a variety of actual and makeshift short portages gets you into the challenge right away. I much prefer entering with a paddle rather than a long portage, and this is a great way to head into the woods.

Any last tidbit you want Wilderness News Readers to know? My wife Cassidy is a dynamo in the bow of our canoe! I can’t wait to get back to the Boundary Waters with my girls.
Proposed Legislation Could Undermine the Wilderness Act and the Protection of Wilderness

By Alissa Johnson

On the surface, two proposed pieces of legislation appear unrelated to wilderness protection. The Sportsmen’s Heritage Act seeks “to protect and enhance opportunities for recreational hunting, fishing and shooting.” The National Security and Federal Lands Protection Act was designed to provide “operational control” for border security on federal public and tribal lands within 100 miles of the Canadian and Mexican borders. But wilderness activists say both bills would undermine the heart of wilderness protection in the United States. Places like the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Voyageurs National Park could be opened to development and habitat destruction without environmental review. And what’s more, both bills passed the House of Representatives with minimal protest.

So far, the fate of the bills in the Senate and their eventual passage into law is unclear. Kevin Proescholdt is Conservation Director for Wilderness Watch, an advocacy group based out of Montana. He has a long history with the Friends of the Boundary Waters and understands the implications of both bills well. Proescholdt visited Washington D.C. at the end of June to make U.S. Senators aware of the bills’ hidden implications, and rising opposition to their passage. He says the Senate appears reluctant to address the bills individually, “but the more likely scenario is that they get attached to another bill.” He and other wilderness activists are working hard to keep that from happening.

The Sportsmen’s Heritage Act (HR 4089)
In April, six out of eight Minnesota representatives to the House voted for the Sportsmen’s Heritage Act; only Betty McCollum and Keith Ellison voted against it. Proescholdt thinks that in some cases the support may have resulted from an eagerness to support sportsmen and a failure to recognize the bill’s hidden implications. Without specifically referencing the Wilderness Act of 1964 by name, language in the Sportsmen’s Heritage Act appears to redefine certain aspects of land management in wilderness areas.

The 1964 Act, which set the precedent for wilderness protections in the United States, prohibits uses like permanent roads except “as necessary to meet the minimum requirements” of the area as a wilderness. In the Boundary Waters, that includes things like portage trails and camp sites. The Act also states that there shall be no temporary roads, no motorized vehicles or motorboats, no landing of aircraft or other mechanical transportation. Legislative compromises specific to the Boundary Waters do allow for some motorized use, but under the Sportsmen’s Heritage Act that could significantly expand. Wording in the Act appears to directly contradict the Wilderness Act:

The provision of opportunities for hunting, fishing and recreational shooting, and the conservation of fish and wildlife to provide sustainable use recreational opportunities on designated wilderness areas on federal public lands shall constitute measures necessary to meet the minimum requirements for the administration of the wilderness area.

The memo went on to explain that additional language in the bill appears to “obviate” the purpose of the Wilderness Act by saying that wilderness values would apply “only to the extent that they did not conflict with other land management statuses, including wildlife conservation.” And while wildlife conservation might sound like a good thing, Proescholdt explained that would give Federal and State wildlife conservation managers the ability to make on-the-ground changes without environmental review.

The National Security and Federal Lands Protection Act (HR 1505)
The National Security and Federal Lands Protection Act was introduced to the House of Representatives by Representative Rob Bishop [R-UT] “To prohibit the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture from taking action on public lands which impede border security on such lands, and for other purposes.” In short, within 100 miles of the border it exempts Border Control from 16 environmental, public health and safety laws on Federal public and tribal lands—including the Wilderness Act.

“The Department of Homeland security could do pretty much anything they wanted within 100 miles of the
border, including the BWCAW and Voyageurs National Park,” Proescholdt said. That could include things like roads, walls, and surveillance towers, and they could do it without environmental review because they would be exempt from the National Environmental Policy Act as well.

Opponents to the bill argue that it is unnecessary to ensure homeland security. In April 2011, Border Patrol Deputy Chief Ronald Vitello even testified that Border Patrol doesn’t want or need the bill to do its job.

**Likelihood of Passing**

Both bills are so outlandish, it has been hard for some northern Minnesotans to see them as a real threat—even those who could be most affected by them. BWCAW outfitter Bill Hansen, of Sawbill Canoe Outfitters, believes they’re symptomatic of the way Congress has been operating in recent years. “Both of these bills are spurious political ploys with no real chance of acceptance by the American people,” he says. “Politicians are making ridiculous political points rather than solving real problems, and the scary thing is that sometimes they get through if they get attached to another bill.”

Proescholdt agrees that such a scenario is the only likely way either bill would pass the Senate. “It doesn’t appear from the visits we made [in Washington D.C.] a couple weeks ago that the Senate is eager to consider the bills,” he says. But a recent skirmish over the Farm Bill does raise concerns that Senate Republicans could try to attach it to other legislation. When the Sportsmen’s Heritage Act was introduced as an amendment to the Farm Bill without the language undermining the Wilderness Act, a competing amendment was introduced that did. The amendments weren’t allowed to stand due to their dueling nature but it did demonstrate that some members of the Senate are actively seeking ways to pass the bill.

“You can expect more of that kind of skirmishing and looking for other legislative vehicles,” Proescholdt said. So he and other wilderness advocates like the Wilderness Society won’t rest easy until the legislative session is over and the next Congress comes in. “It almost seems like a fantasy how bad these bills are, it seems almost beyond belief, but I’m afraid it’s true. So we’re trying to get the word out to as many Senate offices as we can and let them know there is a lot of the opposition to these bills. Hopefully they will die and never get attached to another bill.”

To help raise awareness about the Sportsmen’s Heritage Act and the National Security and Federal Lands Protection Act, contact your State Senators.

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**U.S. Public Lands Covered by H.R.1505, as Amended**

Map courtesy of PEW Environmental Group.
Girls attend camp during the first half of the summer and boys attend camp during the second half. It’s that single-gender environment that allows campers to let down their guards and form stronger, deeper friendships. The lakeside setting, with towering white pines and ancient cedar trees, provides the perfect backdrop for kids to participate in progressive skills-based activities. With no outside influences, strong community lies at the heart of the Warren experience.

Camp Warren’s core programming includes two-week sessions (shorter and longer options are available), during which most campers focus on four activities reminiscent of traditional summer camps: everything from pottery and archery to canoeing, kayaking and sailing—even horseback riding. More adventurous campers can go on canoe trips in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. But what makes Warren unique is the way campers are encouraged to build on their skills over time and taught the importance of service. Every other day, campers pitch in sweeping the dining hall, performing trail maintenance, or helping in the barn or garden.

Giving back has become part of the culture and what campers call the Warren Spirit. Staff like to say that at Warren, the camp self is the true self. Campers can be themselves and embraced for who they are. Warren has a history as a place of acceptance and a refuge for kids where they reconnect with friends and healthy lifestyles, and learn to take risks. It’s kept them coming back for 85 years, so that some families have attended for three generations.

This summer, Camp Warren celebrates its 85th Anniversary. Old and new campers alike will reconnect with camp. Yesterday’s campers will get to see what camp is like today, and today’s campers will view pictures and videos of Warren dating back to the 1930s. Most of all, they will see that the Warren Spirit is alive and well, uniting the generations. To learn more about Camp Warren visit www.ymcatwincities.org/camps/camp_warren.
Memories of Camp Warren

I often tell people that I think I should write a book called "I Learned Everything I Need to Know About Life at Camp." I mean, I'm psyched that I know how to shoot a bow and arrow and sail a sailboat, but it's the life lesson stuff, that I didn't even know I was learning, that I rely on again and again as I navigate the professional and personal tides of my time.

At Camp Warren, in every moment, in every little log cabin built for nine, I learned, from the age of eight, how to live and work with people different from myself. Now, after 26 summers at camp, I know this much is true:

There is always a clear blue lake at the end of a grueling canoe portage, no matter how long it seems or how many mosquitoes you have to battle to get there. Anything can be fixed with duct tape or kind words. Nature provides all the games and toys and food and wonder that you need. Life is better when you find people to be on Your Team, and keep them around forever. If something doesn't exist yet, you can create it from tin foil or dancing bodies or birch bark or ideas. Do the dishes. Listen to music. Laugh.

– Emilie Hitch, Camp Warren Camper, 1980s

Camp Warren has been a special place for my family. Three generations of Scotts have special memories of camp...individually and as a group. I was a camp counselor at Warren for three years back in the mid 60s, and I have been on the Camp Warren Board of Management for over 25 years. My sons John and Mark have been campers, and my daughter Kathy was the camp office manager. Now five of their eight children have been Warren campers, and three of those campers have become Warren staff members.

Each Labor Day since 1970 our family has attended Family Camp at Camp Warren. Last year, with friends, we had 18 at camp .... more than enough to do our annual family skit. Fishing has always been a big part of that weekend. When my youngest son was 14 he caught a 6 pound largemouth bass, and that is still the Family Camp record bass.

I always say that Camp Warren is an experience that lasts a lifetime, and it has been for my family. My kids have taken the teachings of the YMCA principals... "Respect, Honesty, Caring and Responsibility" to heart. Those core principals have helped shape their lives, and those of their children, as well. At Camp Warren, individual development is what we strive for, with each child getting the attention and encouragement needed to grow in body, mind and spirit.

– Jeff Scott, Camp Warren Counselor, 1960
In the summer of 2010, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) received an inquiry from the Listening Point Foundation. The owners of a 15-acre island across from Listening Point had notified the Foundation that they intended to sell their property.

Gaul Island sits in the heart of Burntside Lake’s western arm, a gateway to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) and home to a series of permanently protected islands, including 43-acre Long Island acquired by TPL in 2004 and now a part of the Superior National Forest. Add to that its proximity to Listening Point, now on the National Register of Historic Places, and the fact that zoning would allow four building sites, and development had the potential to dramatically change the area.

Discussions and negotiations with the landowners proceeded, and by November it became clear that an appraisal of the island needed to be conducted in order to meet the year-end deadline set by the landowners. Shaun Hamilton, TPL director of the Northwoods Initiative, remembers that posed a problem. The boats had already been taken out of Burntside Lake, and if
they didn’t meet the deadline the island would be put on the market. He made a few calls to see if he could secure a boat. As luck would have it, Sigurd Olson’s very own canoe was available.

On a cold, blustery day Hamilton launched the canoe from Listening Point in 20-mile-an-hour winds. Waves rocked the canoe, and the appraiser looked a little green. But it was worth it to brave the weather. Protecting the island would create a bridge between Long Island and two Minnesota Scientific and Natural Areas used for research, Pine and Snellman Islands. It would add to critical shoreline and wildlife habitat and protect future recreational opportunities. Like Long Island, it might fill a need for recreation outside of the BWCAW.

“Part of the need is for near wilderness recreational experiences. Not everyone can go into the Boundary Waters and spend a week, and that has been one of the priorities for the Superior National Forest to provide those opportunities,” Hamilton said.

Or, it could fill research needs like Pine and Snellman islands. However the land could be preserved, TPL’s mission and structure allowed it to act faster to acquire land than the Forest Service or other federal and state agencies. While partners like the Forest Service, the State and Listening Point all see the value in protecting the island, they wouldn’t have been able to act within the required timeline. So TPL filled in, acting as the catalyst to eventually transfer Gaul Island to public ownership and permanent public steward. TPL used funds from its Northwoods Land Protection Fund to purchase the island by December of 2010.

“The Northwoods Land Protection Fund is a revolving land protection fund that allows us to acquire at-risk properties and get them taken off the market and hold them until public funding can be acquired,” he said. Additional expenses related to acquisition and holding will be covered by donations from organizations like the Quetico Superior Foundation until the island can be transferred to public ownership.

When that will happen and what public ownership will look like is yet to be determined, but Hamilton said there is interest among state and federal conservation partners and TPL is working on facilitating conversations to explore options. Ideally, he said, Gaul Island would be added to the Superior National Forest or the Burntside Islands State Natural Area. But he’s comfortable with the fact that it might take some time to get there.

“Originally, when looking at the island we knew there would be no assurances, but we decided to acquire the land knowing it could be a number of years before public money is available for acquisition,” Hamilton said, adding, “We knew this may be the opportunity to converge and bring these groups together and get everyone looking at a larger picture.”

It would be an innovative approach to land preservation, but one that Hamilton has seen work in western states. It’s also one worth pursuing for an island located in a pristine lake with the cultural and historical significance of Burntside. And already, the collaboration between the landowners, the Listening Point Foundation and TPL is praiseworthy. Hamilton hopes to build on that foundation by weaving “together a larger partnership of public, private, and nonprofit conservation efforts in a pretty unique landscape and island ecosystem.”

Find out more at:
www.tpl.org
www.listeningpointfoundation.org

What Are Minnesota Scientific and Natural Areas?
The Scientific & Natural Areas (SNA) program preserves natural features and rare resources of exceptional scientific and educational value. SNAs are open to the public for nature observation and education, but are not meant for intensive recreational activities. Find out more: at www.dnr.state.mn.us
Bound for the Barrens
By Ernest Oberholtzer
Edited by Jean Sandford Replinger
Mallard Island Books 2012 $19.95


This remarkable journey at the end of the classic era of land-based travel in the north was not published until 2001 when the lavish Toward Magnetic North book appeared. Subsequently veteran Arctic hand David Pelly wrote The Old Way North in 2008 which looked at this trip in detail.

Well those books were the finished and decorated cakes of that great trip—and now we have a book of the ingredients. Bound for the Barrens is a full transcription of the wonderful field notes and journals of Oberholtzer’s six month trip from Cumberland House to the bottom of Lake Winnipeg via the Reindeer, Cochrane and Thlewiaza rivers plus Hudson Bay and the Hayes River in an 18-foot Chestnut prospector which is another of the stars of this story.

And despite the fact I knew this tale fairly well from enjoying the other two books, I found these journals absolutely fascinating. It will appeal to Che-Mun readers especially as I think they would have a better understanding of reading someone’s immediate impressions noted during a trip.

Perhaps the most interesting parts are Ober’s wonderful observations and insights into the people he met along the way in that summer of 1912 when the near north was a busy and bustling place. Oberholtzer, who was just 24 when he did the trip, has a great eye for detail and his adventures among the northern world of 1912 are quite revealing. I found it very compelling to be guided through the machinations and planning for the trip they were about to undertake and their fruitless search for a guide to take them into an unknown area. Ober and Magee, a native from northern Ontario, had often travelled the waters of Quetico but neither had been to the far north.

It was interesting to read how much study the young Ober put into the Tyrrell trips, spending time at the British Museum reading his reports and wishing to emulate the Tyrrells. He wanted to follow their route and was taken on his own unique one.

The chance meeting with the tremendously able Inuk named Bite and his family near the mouth of the Thlewiaza provides the most interesting part of the book. As David Pelly pointed out, Bite opened Ober’s eyes to a new type of survival on the ocean. With his young family traveling with them, Bite showed the pair how to live on and navigate the particularly treacherous
West Hudson Bay coastline—one of the most dangerous places on the planet to paddle a canoe.

Ober had great observations on almost everyone they met—and they met quite a few people—everyone except his stalwart travelling companion Billy. There are not many photos of Billy and he is often treated as the servant he sort of was—but not without respect. The pair, separated by 25 years, had a lifelong bond in a way that we find somewhat difficult to understand today. Things were different then. People were described differently. That’s just the way it was.

It is very surprising that Oberholtzer did not publish any of this trip in his lifetime. He went on to a very distinguished career of environmental stewardship. This trip was clearly the cornerstone of that. However, he was clearly aware that his trip had some newsworthiness when he ends up speaking with a newspaperman at the end of the trip and says he purposely did not tell him much at all—presumably to keep it for his own effort.

The book concludes with a fine summary by retired University of New Brunswick professor Bob Cockburn, to whom this book is dedicated and an eminent P. G. Downes expert who also worked on this. His insight is valued as he knows the areas of northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba from a historical travel perspective better than almost anyone.

The journal contains all the usual things any good northern trip journal would. This includes a full listing of supplies purchased and all the other info gathered along the way. One particular small but interesting addition is under Miscellaneous at the end of the journal. Dozens of lines and snippets are included—things which wouldn’t have meaning to an attentive reader—lines like “Little bells to keep away the wolves in winter. Joins the circus” and “Huskie wakes you at 3 o’clock in the morning to ask if you are cold. Very solicitous.” Little chinks in the logs of a major wilderness trip that many of us would write.

The fact that this pair made this remarkable journey unguided under difficult conditions makes it all the more appealing. The book features numerous photos and maps and is fully footnoted. A most wonderful read for canoe trippers of all eras.

Swinging his double paddle slowly from side to side and with two little red flannel streamers from each end of his boat, he came up beside us, and extending his paddle for me to take hold of, shook hands.” – September 12th, Ernest Oberholtzer

Editor’s note: you may follow along this summer with Ober and Billy’s journey online at: www.canoeing.com/nature/feature/oberholtzer.htm

Where to find it: http://eober.org/Store/Books.shtml
ONLINE UPDATES

Check out Wilderness News Online for ongoing news coverage of the Quetico-Superior region, including updates to stories you’ve read here.

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Little Rock Falls on the Pine River, BWCAW and La Verendrye Provincial Park boundary. Photo by Tim Eaton.