

French Family Adventures

August 31 – September 3, 2010

Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, Canada

Written by: David French (September 9, 2010)

Route: Access Point 17 (Shall Lake) – Farm Lake – Kitty Lake – Booth Lake

We (Keira, 5; Andrew 9; Suzi, 30'ish; and myself, close to 40) started our adventure, leaving from my wife's family cottage on May's Bay (Big / Little Bald Lakes), a few kilometres north of Buckhorn, Ontario at about 8:00 am on August 31st. After a slight 20 minute detour to the Bobcaygeon dump to drop off a bag of garbage, we were officially en-route to Access Point No. 17 (Shall Lake) in Ontario's Algonquin Park.

I like to think I have a very good sense of direction and above average map reading skills, but I must admit that the advent of the dash-mounted GPS, complete with a sexy voice (we named her Phyllis...I know, not exactly a sexy name) telling us when and where to turn, has made our travels much "easier". Although Phyllis has made our routing easier, there has been the odd occasion where the route has been a little "queasier" – such as this day.

Allow me to digress for a moment. The roads in our home area, Chatham-Kent, generally run in very straight lines (often extending from one side of the municipality to the other without necessitating any movement in the steering wheel), with the only elevation changes occurring when crossing one of the many Highway 401 overpasses. As a result of this landscape, our children are not accustomed to winding roads – consequently neither is their stomachs.

As you can no doubt guess by my digression, the route which Phyllis plotted wasn't exactly straight (although it was straightforward), nor was it level. As such, not too long into the trip our five-year old daughter (on her first trip to Algonquin) was looking a little "green", and very shortly thereafter felt the need to show us just how upset her little tummy was...another first. I don't think I need to explain further. Needless to say after a quick clean-up she felt much better and was raring to go.

At about 10:30 am we pulled in to the Mad Musher Restaurant in Whitney for a bite to eat before we continued the last half-hour to the access point. Granted, it is hard to screw up a breakfast, but the food and service was quite good, even the Algonquin décor and pictures got all of us yearning to get back on the road and into our boats. Although I have only eaten at the Mad Musher once, I can say I have never had a bad meal there and therefore can only give a rave review.

Around 11:30 am we were sitting on the steps of the Access Point No. 17 Permit Office, waiting for the attendant to be "back in 5 minutes". It turns out one of the attendants responsibilities include cleaning the potties by the parking lot. He returned shortly. Once I exchanged my credit card information for our permit, we set off to organize the gear and load the boats. Please note that when I state that we loaded the "boats" I say that somewhat in jest. Our boats consisted of one Nova Craft Prospector 16 Kevlar canoe and one eight-foot, plastic yellow Walden (puddle jumper) kayak, which by virtue of its recreational design, can hold exactly one Ziploc sandwich bag full of something – and my wife. No worries though, the Prospector design canoe is a trusted load hauler.

At this point I would like to highlight the fact this is the first time that we have done this type of trip as a family; the first time my wife has slept in a tent more than 20 feet from a car and her first time to Algonquin; the first time Keira has been to Algonquin; the third time Andrew has been interior camping in Algonquin with me; and my ninth interior trip into the Park. I would also like to highlight the fact that Andrew passed his Level 1 Flat Water (ORCKA) this past summer, and Keira spent an hour every morning in a canoe working on basic skills. I am very proud of you both.

At 12:30 pm we were loaded and in the water, all of us paddling into the “wilds” of the Park. No looking back...except to double check that I didn't leave my fishing rod case on the shore (like I did last year). Thankfully all was clear.

The following pictures and captions tell of our next four days in the Park.....



Kudos and many thanks to Jeff for creating such a wonderful resource!

DAY 1



Access Point No. 17, looking up towards Farm Lake. Andrew, Keira, and the rest of our gear.



Loaded and ready to go.



Suzi and the kids smiling for a little family photo op.



We're off! (I think I needed a little bit more ballast in the bow. Suzi told me I needed a little less ballast in my "rear".)



Andrew loves canoeing...and Algonquin too!



Keira loves sitting in the middle and looking cute.



Suzi loves having her feet up.



I love this view.



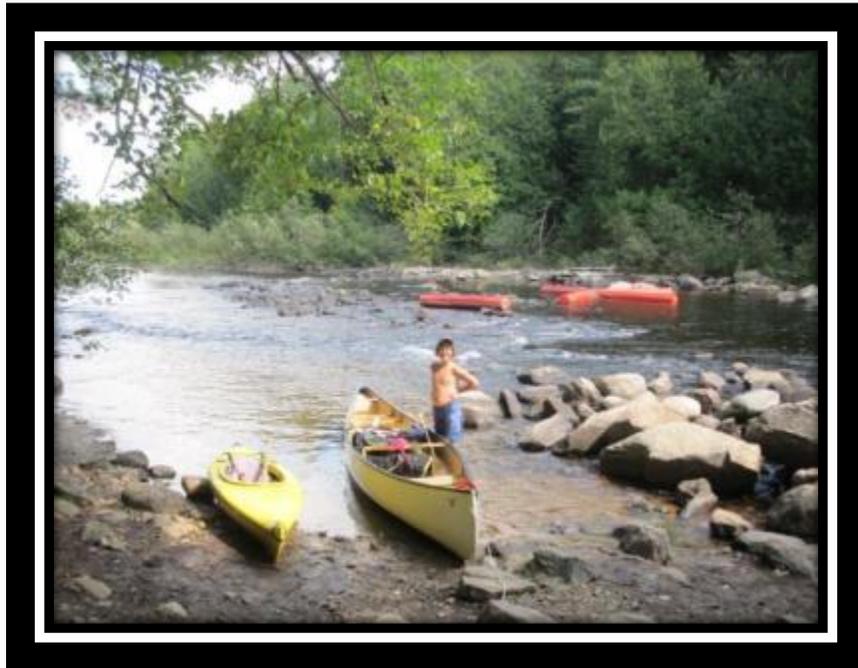
If mamma ain't happy, then ain't no one goin' to be happy. Thankfully mamma is happy.



The first portage along the route (90 metres). We, like the group of people ahead of us, chose to walk the boats up the little swift.



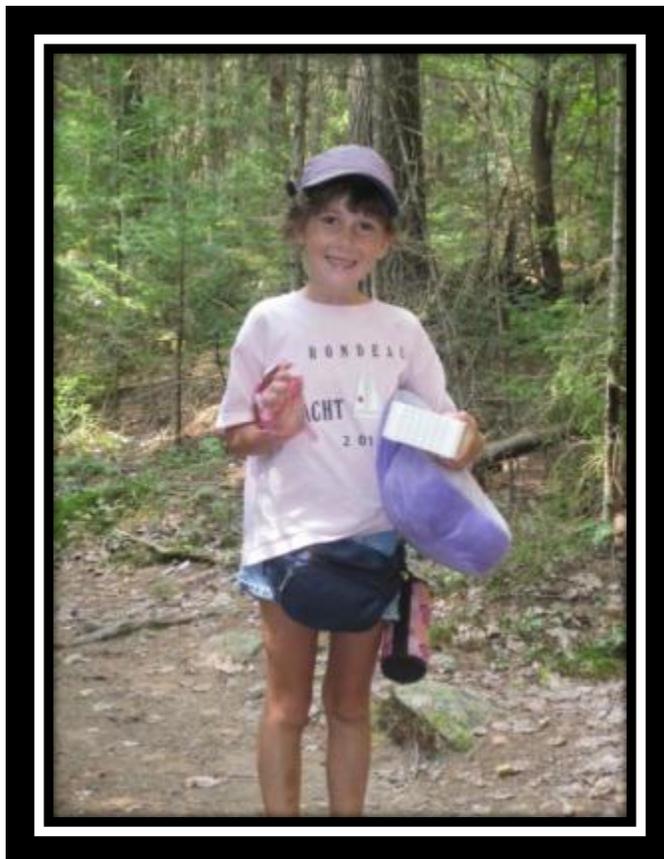
Out of the swift and looking through Kitty Lake.



The next portage didn't give the option of walking the boats through the water. A series of small rapids and a dam make sure of this (along with the big red floats).



Along the 550 metre portage. The path was quite good although you had to watch out for mossy, ankle-twisting roots. Being the family Sherpa, this was a three carry portage for me. Below – Keira carrying her pillow and again looking cute.





One of the bigger “ups” along the portage.



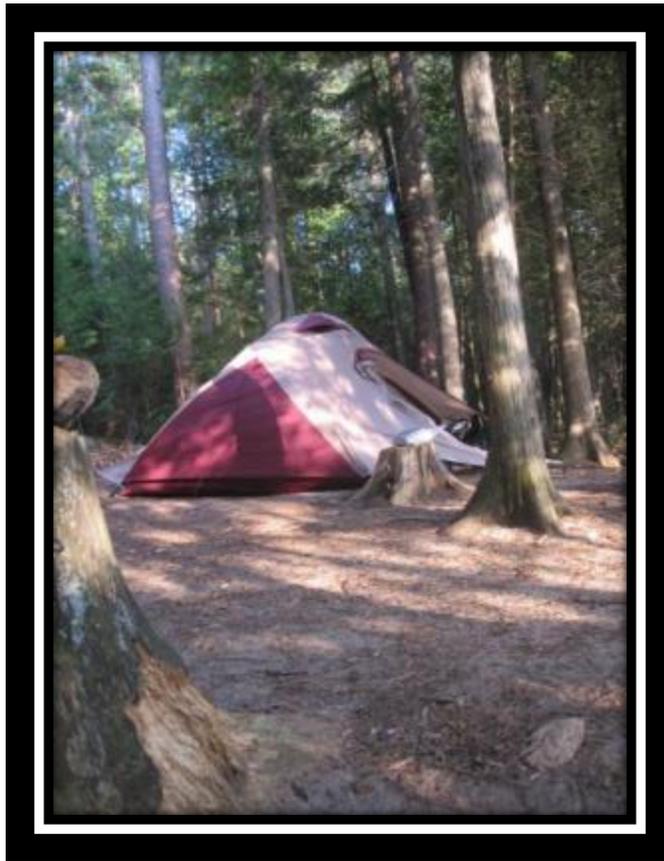
Through the portage and paddling on Booth.



It doesn't look like it, but there were whitecaps and a gusty, 20 knot head wind on Booth. Two strokes forward, one stroke back.



At the campsite and enjoying a glass of white wine on her two-legged Butterfly chair (she loves this chair – highly recommended!).



Our digs for our stay.



This was a GREAT campsite with a GREAT sandy beach and GREAT rocks along the shoreline for the kids to conquer!

DAY 2



Waking up in paradise.



I get to cook breakfast, the kids hunt for frogs. Just the way life is supposed to be.



Suzi's mid-morning stress reduction session. She loved the hammock too!



Two peas in a pod?



Andrew and I doing a little casting.



Suzi and Keira going for a dip. Clear water, sandy bottom. Again, it is hard to tell by this photo, but the wind kept us on shore this day.



Better than a big screen HDTV!



Huckleberry Finn?



“Prince Eddie” – he is one BIG frog...about an eight inch body! OK, maybe a six inch body (it’s a guy thing).



Mirror, Mirror on the wall.....



A forecasted threat of rain led me to put up the tarp...just in case.

DAY 3



It rained off and on through the night. The morning brought low hanging clouds draped over the hills across the lake...and more rain.



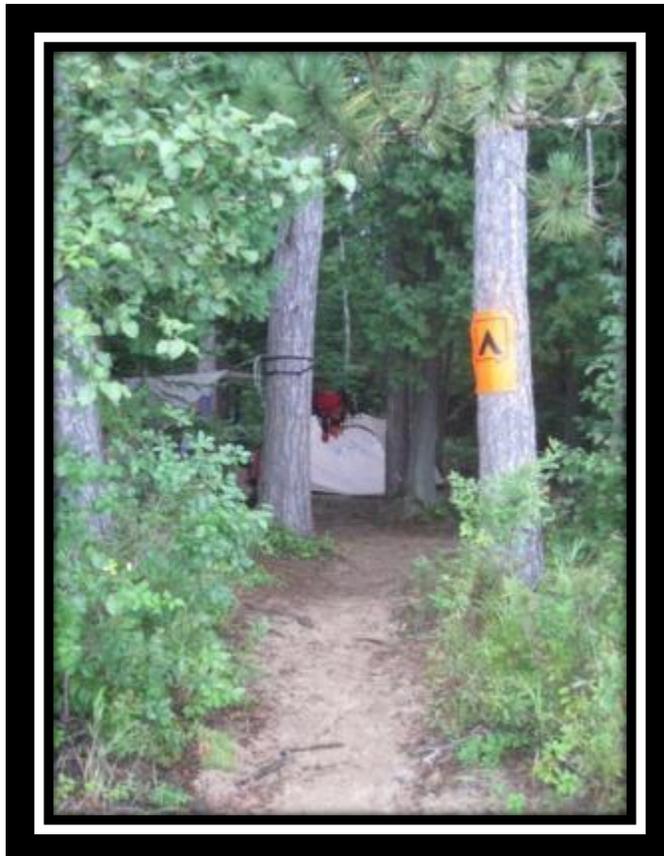
I love morning mist!



The rock garden at the southern end of our beach.



Overcast doesn't mean anything to the kids, except raincoats.



A look up the path from the beach to the tenting area.



Getting ready for breakfast.



Making breakfast. Notice the sunlight starting to peak through the clouds.



Keira loves her bacon...and my bacon too.



Where did the sun go? Thank goodness for tarps.



The rain didn't last long, but boy, did it ever rain!



A river runs through it, or at least under it.



Clearing up, but still raining. All that rain made me have to pee. Thank goodness for umbrellas.



A little post-rain campfire always helps to warm up your spirits. So does S'mores.



Do I really need to explain?

DAY 4



A glorious morning – blue skies and a nice following breeze for our paddle out.



Magic? Not really...just a shutter timer and a well-placed rock. Loaded up and ready for the paddle home.



Almost to the portage from Booth to Kitty. Note the dam visible in the mid-ground.



Coming upon the dam.



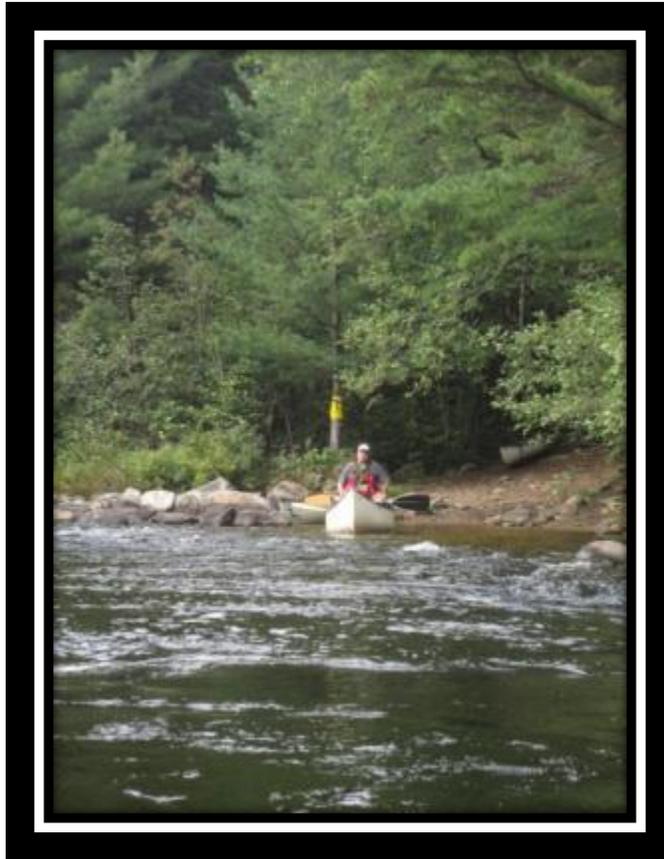
Unloading for the 550 metre portage.



Most of the gear through the portage. Only a two carry trip this time around.



Loading up.



Swifts sure are easier to go down than up. Much more fun too.



I never once got bored of this view. Note the clouds building.



A tired little girl and a little “plumber butt”.



Mamma’s still happy. Thank God.



Suzi ran this little swift in her kayak. The kids wanted nothing to do with this one so I lined the boat instead of carrying.



Slippery rocks with a few hidden holes beneath them. I only fell once.



The Kitty Lake Rangers Cabin.

About a quarter of the way into Farm Lake, and about 20 minutes from our van, the sky went black, claps of thunder and lightning filled the sky, and the winds started to pick up. (Sorry – no pictures) The middle of the lake was not where we wanted to be. We made a bee-line for the nearest shore which also happened to contain an occupied campsite. I called to shore and asked if they minded if we shared their beach until the storm was passed. The site was occupied by a lone fellow from Ohio who was on his 43rd (?) annual summer pilgrimage to Algonquin. He was a gracious host and a true gentleman who allowed us to share his tarp during the ensuing deluge of rain. I am sorry, but I forget his name. Thank you very much!

After about half-an-hour on shore sitting out the storm, the skies appeared to clear up a bit so we mopped out our boats and headed back out onto Farm Lake. There was a helpful following breeze at our backs and we were making good time. All of a sudden the sky went dark grey this time, a single clap of thunder was heard, and the sound of a freight train was heard behind us. Obviously there wasn't really a train, but there was a very intense squall speeding through the pine trees (I love that sound by the way). I looked back and a wall of rain was quickly approaching. I instructed the kids to put their rain hoods up, keep low in the boat, and not to look back. Suzi and I did the same.

Then, it hit us. The wind gusts were well over 30 knots, driving the rain horizontally past us from behind. We kept paddling through this and the wind was 100-percent to our advantage all the way to the car. Thankfully, as the wind came so quickly, the waves did not have time to build to a point of being a concern. However, if we had to paddle heading into this weather, it would have been impossible and dangerous.

Surprisingly, we all took this weather in stride and had as much fun paddling back to the van as we could. More surprisingly, mamma was still happy, which meant so was I. It wasn't until we landed at the access point that Keira became cold and upset, but hey, she is only five.



Keira trying to stay dry while we unload the canoe at the access point.



Once again, looking up towards Farm Lake from the access point, just as we did four days earlier. Except, today, it was raining...hard.

PROLOGUE

I truly am blessed and proud to have a family that is willing to try new things and share in the passions and places that I love. One of the things that excited me most about this trip was the simple fact that they all had fun and want to do it again. We will likely venture into Booth again on our next trip because there is so much more to that lake than we were able to see this time around due to the wind / rain bound days. As well, neither Andrew nor I caught a single fish. But, people say the fish are there.

On our way home, we stopped once again in Whitney for a bite to eat; this time at the little gas station / diner (can't remember its name) across from the Mad Musher. Another fine meal and again, highly recommended. And yes, it was still raining.

Following our mid-afternoon lunch we headed west along Highway 60 through the park corridor and stopped at the Visitors' Centre for a self-guided walk through the ecology and history of Algonquin. I never get bored looking at the exhibits. We dropped a few dollars on books and souvenirs for the kids in the Friends' Bookstore, and I picked up a couple Friends' raffle tickets for their November 28th draw. (I sure would love a new [lighter weight] canoe!)

After the Visitors' Centre we continued west along Highway 60 and made my usual stop at the Algonquin Outfitters / Swift Canoe store just west of the West Gate. I love wandering around that store looking at this and looking at that; picking up this and picking up that; and wishing I had this and wishing I had that. They say apples don't fall far from the tree – my kids too wandered around the store and looked at this and looked at that; they picked up this and they picked up that; and wished they had this and wished they had that. Yes, just as life is supposed to be.

It was now getting late in the day so we thought we better actually head home, or at least back to the cottage, where we started our trip. We made good time on our way back, heading in the opposite direction of the mass exodus of Toronto dwellers heading to their northern retreats for the long Labour Day weekend, and were sitting down at the table for supper (which Suzi's parents had waiting for us) at about 7:30 pm.

And yes, in case you were wondering, the roads were much straighter on the way home. Thank you Phyllis.