



David & Matthew's Wonderful Adventure – Kingscote – Scorch – High Falls

5 days - June 29 – July 3, 2006

This was the first trip Matthew and I did together. In 2001 Nancy and I took the kids on a backcountry camping trip. This was after a few years of car camping in places like Silent Lake, Algonquin and Bon Echo. Nancy had never experienced back country camping and I had not done it for years since moving to Toronto from Ottawa in 1982. We took our son Matthew (then 8) and our daughter Rebecca (then 11) to Kingscote Lake in South Algonquin. The reason we chose Kingscote is that we wanted to experience Algonquin with hopefully not too many people such as I am sure we would have seen going in off Highway 60.

All we did on that trip was paddle up Kingscote Lake found a nice site with the ability to swim off a nice rock outcrop and camped for 4 nights. The only portaging we did was a day trip into Big Rock Lake where we discovered the Kingscote/Big Rock Lake portage was quite a challenge. Being the July weekend the bugs were relentless. It was also cold and windy that weekend at times and on July 1 the temperature dipped to 5C overnight. We all huddled around the fire singing campfire songs at the top of our lungs. The kids had a very inventive take on the Mama's & Papa's California Dreaming which became Algonquin Wiping.

We also had a wind day as the next day the whitecaps were very visible on Kingscote Lake. Indeed the wind on Kingscote always proved to be a challenge and one day Matthew and I were unceremoniously dunked in a bay when we were unable to get out of the bay because of the wind. Matthew being only 8 and small didn't have the strength to do the heavy duty paddling against the wind. We eventually got out but not until we were dunked near the shore. A good experience. Matthew never panicked even though the water was almost lapping at his mouth. He followed the instructions to a T and we eventually got the canoe drained and turned back over and climbed back in. Eventually we got out of the bay with me furiously paddling in the centre and Matthew doing his best up front.

Nonetheless it was a great experience for all and we even won over our reluctant daughter Rebecca who thought going on a weekend back country trip was something that no self respecting tween would be caught dead doing.

Our next trip was in 2004 when Matthew and I went with Brent and Spencer friends of ours from cubs/scouts on a five day trip from Magnetawan Lake to Misty Lake and back. It was a great experience as well but this was the first trip Matthew and I took together. A great opportunity for father/son bonding.

Day 1 – June 29 Kingscote Lake

We left as soon as we could that morning for the drive up to South Algonquin. We drove into Pine Grove Lodge around noon. We were also getting our canoes there and they were a bit busy and didn't have anyone immediately to take us up to Kingscote Lake. Finally our bags and our canoe were put on a truck and climbed into the cab with the fellow from Pine Lodge and Matthew sat on the packs in back. We finally got underway about 2pm or so that afternoon. Our plan was only to stay on Kingscote the first night because we weren't sure how the winds might treat us. We remembered from our earlier trip that the winds can come howling down Kingscote and if it was windy it was going to take us awhile to paddle up the lake near the top. While Matthew was now 13 he was still a lightweight not even weighing 100lbs. Nonetheless as the picture below attests it was a gorgeous day.



Heading out onto Kingscote Lake – June 29, 2006

We made it up to our site with no problem. Our site is a smaller one south of the portage and the same site we stayed on in 2001. It had a great rock for swimming from. And we knew from our previous experience while it was a tight site for our three small tents in 2001 putting only one up was going to be easy. We got settled had a great swim and settled down and cooked our steaks on the grill. They were delicious of course and of course I brought some wine with me (in a Nangene bottle of course – oops can't use those any more) to wash down the meal. Nothing like fine wine on a camping trip.

After supper I decided to head out in the canoe to go over to marshes and reeds across the Lake. Well I never made it. The front of the canoe was on a rock and when I got into the canoe it suddenly started rocking. Very quickly I was dunked into Kingscote Lake. How embarrassing. Worse I had my hiking boots on and not water shoes. The boots were soaked of course. So we set about building up the fire and to put them by the fire to hopefully dry them out a little as we definitely needed them the next day for the Kingscote/Big Rock Lake portage.



Drying out the boots – June 29, 2006

Day 2 – June 30, 2006 Scorch Lake

That night we had a huge thunderstorm. Doesn't it always rain in Algonquin? We thought the heavens were going to come down upon us and especially you worry about being hit by lightning. Nevertheless our little tent, that barely holds the two of us (It says it is a two man tent but only if you wish to be cozy and intimate. We slept with our heads at opposite ends) held out very well and we wakened the next day to gorgeous sunlight and weather.

Indeed the gods blessed us with a beautiful rainbow which of course we couldn't help snapping for posterity.



A Beautiful Rainbow Kingscote Lake – June 30, 2006

After a hearty breakfast of pancakes and bacon we packed up and headed for the Kingscote Lake/Big Rock Lake portage. The portage is 1300 metres and we remembered from our trip in 2001 that there was a swampy area that could prove to be a bit problematic. Being the July 1 weekend we knew the bugs would be bad. Skitters and black flies. Matthew had a bug net but I don't like them and instead slapped on the citronella. Smells better than deet.

We got the food bag on Matthew and I sent him on his way. I told him to keep to the right as we don't want to go up to Lower Minnow Lake. Finally I got the canoe up over me and took off after him. After a bit of walking I suddenly came upon Matthew almost lying face down in the mud of the swamp. The swamp and of course the rain the night before had completely covered the trail. You could see the trail on the other side. Swarms of skitters were surrounding him. Good thing he had on the bug net. What happened? Well he wandered into the swampy part of the trail and before he got too far he was up to the top of his boots in mud. He then more or less fell down into the mud as the pack leaned him over. He was afraid if he pulled too hard he would lose his boot(s) in the mud.

Realizing the last thing I wanted to do was go in after him I told him to hang on until I got around the swampy part. So with the canoe on top of me I turned to the left heading into the bush looking for dry land to get myself around the swamp. Of course any of you that have charged off into the bush surrounded by skitters carrying a canoe bashing into trees and fighting your way through underbrush which did nothing but send more swarms of skitters up know how difficult it is. Nonetheless I finally got through with only minimal scratches to my face from the brush and put down the canoe.

I was able to work my way across my side of the swamp to a dry spot roughly in the middle. From there I was able to reach out to Matthew and he managed to get the pack off and handed it over to me. We then carefully pulled him out of the mud and managed to do it without losing his boot. Matthew was pretty muddy. But at least he was smiling. We then traced our way across the other side of the swamp to the trail got our back packs on again and finished the trip to the take out at Big Rock Lake. After securing the canoe and putting the food under the boat (some think we should tie it up in a tree again) we took off back to our get our other packs. No we didn't plan this to do in one haul.

We finally finished the Kingscote/Big Rock Lake portage. It probably took us at least an hour and half or more to get it done. The trip across Big Rock Lake was pretty quick and we reached the Big Rock Lake/Byers Lake portage. This one was only 660 metres but it proved to have its own little trick. The trick was a rather steep hill to go down (thank god down and not up LOL). I picked my way down the hill with the canoe on top without mishap. Finally we reached Byers Lake.

We were now hungry and decided to find a spot on Byers Lake to have lunch. We knew there was a campsite just south of us so we worked our way down to the campsite and fortunately it was empty as we were not finding too many other landing spots for a meal. The take out on Byers was not over appetizing being very bushy and no real spot to sit. The site proved to be quite large big enough for a large group. We enjoyed our lunch of Russian bread, salami and lots of trail mix washed down with lemonade.

We then headed out on our trip up the York River. The York River was nice. Even after leaving Byers Lake you felt like the river was really just a small lake. Lots of marshes we passed by and we finally lucked out on one of our turns and a cow Moose was grazing in the grasses. She wasn't overly cooperative for a picture though and by the time we got close enough she took off through the marsh into the bush.

The distance up to Branch Lake proved to be longer than we thought. Took us a big chunk of the afternoon of paddling. But then again we were kind of lazy about our paddling soaking in the river and its life even though other than birds and a hawk or two circling above we didn't really see a lot of wildlife except the cow moose. We finally made it to the Branch Lake/Scorch Lake portage. There is actually a campsite at the portage (marked on the map) but this has to be one of the most pitiful sites we have ever seen. It isn't much of site. A fire pit opening right onto Branch Lake, exposed completely to the elements, marshy so no swimming and really room for only one tent if you are lucky. Good thing we weren't staying there.

We headed out on the Branch Lake/Scorch Lake portage. This one is 900 metres and was supposed to be quite flat. It was although there was the odd log across the portage to climb over and even a large tree which we had to go under. Nonetheless this one went pretty good and after an hour or so and our usual two trips we made it to Scorch Lake.

Scorch Lake was quite beautiful. A real gem in Algonquin. Much of the shoreline looks like the picture below. We worked our way up the lake. We passed one site but it didn't look to appetizing. Since we were the only ones on the Lake we knew we would have the pick of the four sites.



Scorch Lake Shoreline – June 30, 2006

We checked out a couple of others and finally decided on one of the sites. Boy it was bare. The other we saw was small and also not overly appealing. We actually never found the fourth one. Well this one had a wide open space a fire pit and that was it. Well it had this small table sort of thing made with a piece of plywood on a log but it was pretty pitiful. But the lake was so beautiful as we looked out on Scorch Lake mountain I guess we didn't care. It was a good thing we decided to bring our stools so at least we had something to sit on. There was definitely nothing else. I had imagined this is what unmaintained sites looked like. I am sure we are not too far off. So if you are looking for nice wide campsites, well cleared with a big fire pit and benches well dream again. You are not going to find it at Scorch Lake. And this was in our opinion the best site we saw. LOL.

Anyway I was so pooped after our long day on the portages and paddling I crawled into the tent late in the afternoon and slept for at least an hour. Matthew pattered or read and sketched.



The pitiful table at our Spartan campsite – Scorch Lake June 30, 2006

We had a great meal again (can't remember what now as I am writing this a few years later LOL). We made a fire and sat around and swapped stories and swigged whisky.

Day 3 – July 1 Scorch Lake

We got up and it was quite chilly. Remembering how cold it was on July 1 a few years back on Kingscote Lake we began to think that July 1, cold and Algonquin were synonymous. Being good boy scouts we got out our Canadian Flag hung it from a tree and Matthew provided an unfurling. It was also a gorgeous morning with a lovely mist rising from Scorch Lake. Couldn't resist the proverbial mist in the morning shot. And with Scorch Lake Mountain in the background. Couldn't be better.



Unfurling the flag – Scorch Lake – July 1, 2006



Mist in the morning on Scorch Lake. Scorch Mountain in the background – July 1, 2006

We were pretty lazy that morning taking our time with our pancakes and bacon for breakfast. We tried to decide between seeing Bruton Farm or climb Scorch Mountain. We decided to see Bruton Farm. We made the paddle across the Scorch Lake and found the put in for the trail to Bruton Farm (and also to Scorch Mountain). It is not a particularly long hike. It goes through some pretty forest where we saw signs of life (moose scat, deer scat) but no wildlife. We finally came to an old stone fence and followed that along for awhile. It took us out on to a forestry road. We wondered where the rest of the farm was our map indicated there was buildings etc.

Well our senses were pretty bad. And the map was as good as useless. It turns out that there was a continuation of the trail on the other side of the forestry road that took us into Bruton Farm. Unfortunately we never found it. We probably wandered in the wrong direction or something. So instead we enjoyed our lunch on the old stone fence and Matthew did some sketching. We then did the walk back to Scorch Lake.

Regretfully we didn't do the climb to the top of Scorch Mountain. Okay that was a mistake as I have since seen some pictures and it looks like a great view. Instead we went back to our camp where we puttered and read and took it easy.

Later in the afternoon we finally saw our first people since we left two days ago. A couple of young guys came in. We talked to them for awhile and then they went looking for a campsite. They went over to look at the one at the north end of the lake but left and went back the other way. Meanwhile a couple came in a beautiful cedar canoe. We didn't talk to them but they also checked out the north end campsite then left as well. Later the two young guys came back and they did take the north end camp site.



Sketching on the stone fence – Bruton Farm trail – July 1, 2006

Day 4 – July 2 Byers Lake

We got up the next morning and it was another gorgeous day on Scorch Lake. Had our usual good breakfast then packed up and began our trip back. Our last night was to be spent on Byers Lake so really all we had to do was to traverse the Branch Lake/Scorch Lake portage again and go down the York River.

Well the wind on Scorch Lake was awful. No white caps but it was real nasty and we were struggling to go up the lake to the portage. The wind blew us from shore to shore. At the rate we were going it was going to take us all morning or longer to get out of there. In one of our blow across we landed at the campsite that the couple in the cedar canoe had taken. We had a lovely chat.

Their campsite was not very appealing. Not as nice as ours and ours was almost at best equivalent to an unmaintained campsite. Turns out they were in the 70's and had come over the Kingscote Lake/Big Rock Lake portage as well. The cedar canoe (a Kevlar as well) was gorgeous and had been a gift. After a great chat with them we decided to head out and finish the paddle up to the portage. As we got further up the lake the wind eased as we were now more protected.

We finally made it to the portage and as we were going across to Branch Lake a group of 6, 3 guys and 3 gals were coming in three canoes. They were camped at the big campsite on Byers Lake and were just up here for a day trip. We knew immediately we couldn't have that site and there was now only one left which was further down the lake near the entrance to the York River. Had a good chat with them. They had paddled up the York River and were going back the same way the same day we would be travelling down the York River.

The wind had been horrible for them paddling from Byers Lake to Branch Lake. They thought they would never make it. Actually from our viewpoint it was great as it meant we would have the wind behind us going to Byers Lake. Well we certainly did. It was great. The only time we put our paddles in was to straighten ourselves out and keep us on course otherwise we were blown back to Byers Lake. Here is a picture going down the York River. Saw a few beaver dams but no beavers. The area is pretty open with marshes on the side of the river. And as we noted before it is pretty wide.



York River Algonquin between Branch Lake and Byers Lake - July 2, 2006

We arrived at our Byers Lake campsite and it wasn't bad. After the Scorch Lake campsite this was luxury. Nice big fire pit although no benches. Flat and cleared as well. After supper I went for while down the York River and very quickly discovered that our first obstacle of the next day was a pretty big beaver dam to go over. Had to make note of that.

That evening we were rewarded with a spectacular sunset and of course I couldn't resist taking more than a few pictures. Afterwards we had a great campfire.



Sunset on Byers Lake – July 2, 2006

Day 5 – July 3, 2006 Benoir Lake Pine Grove Lodge and to home

Got up the next morning and there was a gorgeous mist on Byers Lake. Couldn't resist the proverbial shot. We lingered a great deal over breakfast realizing of course that this was our last day and we had to go down the York River to our take out at Benoir Lake and Pine Grove Lodge. Looking at the map and the distance I figured we should easily do it in a few hours. Boy was I wrong.



Mist on Byers Lake – July 3, 2006

The York River from Byers Lake to High Falls is quite beautiful but it is littered with beaver dams and some just horrible put-ins and take-outs at the portages. Our map of course indicated only 5 portages the longest being the double one at High Falls of 445 metres and 280 metres. So on the surface that seemed quite easy.

Well we made over our first beaver dam then seemed to barely get through that one when we hit another one. Then our first portage. Well it was only 190 except the put in was so rocky you were forced to unload at least 4 or 5 metres from the shoreline then wend your way over the rocks and try not to slip. The take out was equally bad. The portage short 190 metres.

Back on the York River we kept running into beaver dams. We saw so many of them that even decided to do one of them twice. At the next portage I foolishly thought instead of going into the put in which looked as horrible as the last time out that we would see if we could wend our way around the portage. So we climbed down a beaver dam and proceeded on our way. Of course we got to the short but nasty rapids through a narrowing and realized we couldn't go through there. So we had to go back.

Well this time in getting into the beaver dam we got out and prepared to haul the canoe over the beaver dam. Except I stepped back the wrong way and suddenly found myself over my head in the water with my hat floating away. Ah the beauty of traversing beaver dams.



Another beaver dam dead ahead York River – July 3, 2006

Back on the river and through another portage we hit more beaver dams. How many does this river have? We began to think that if we saw another beaver dam we would blow it up. Of course we had nothing to blow it up with. LOL.

We finally got to the gut rapids portage and as usual the put in and take out was just horrible. It was only 320 metres but again we hauled the equipment through the mud to get it to shore then had to put on our hiking boots to do the portage. The portage seemed to be straight up. Of course it leveled out but then going back down it was littered with boulders and logs to crawl over. Thought I would kill myself if I tripped carrying the canoe. Nonetheless we went back up to Gut Rapids and it is quite beautiful. We lingered there for awhile and took pictures of course.



Gut Rapids – York River – July 3, 2006

We finally continued our trip down the York River and began to realize that what we thought was a few hours trip down the river was turning into a much longer day. More beaver dams on the way to High Falls and one in particular was quite high. Matthew showed his disgust of yet another beaver dam. Damn critters. Now we know why the Voyageurs wanted to capture them all and turn them into hats. LOL. To get rid of all the beaver dams.



Not another beaver dam – York River – July 3, 2006

We finally made it to the High Falls portages. This is quite an interesting one. This is a double one with a small 30 meter crossing of the York River to get to the other side to complete the double. Of course now being at High Falls we had to stay and see the falls. After putting our bags and canoe to the side of the portage we walked back to the falls. Now people can reach the falls from South Algonquin via a 1900 meter trail. And invariably we ran into those who just hiked up to the falls complete with their flip flops on. Flip flops? Boy how Algonquin. After 5 days we are tanned and skitter bit and have our hiking boots on.

Well realizing what time it was we knew (unfortunately we had better not stay there too long). It was already well into the afternoon and we had to finish the trip down to Benoit Lake. So we just went back to the falls took a few pictures and went on our way. When we were at Kingscote in 2001 we hiked into High Falls and enjoyed a great swim at that time. And these are really nice falls to sit in.



High Falls South Algonquin – July 3, 2006

We put into the York River once again and now at least we knew there were no portages. But we figured there would be more beaver dams. Well there wasn't anymore. Indeed the nature of the river changed and instead of the marshes we were used to there were good banks and areas of deadfalls in the water. The river was a bit winding but finally it took us down towards civilization. When we first saw a bottle tied to a deadhead, then we could see telephone poles and finally a bridge our hearts began to sink as we knew our journey was really over. We were back in civilization.

After a number of other twists and turns we could start to see Benoir Lake. But before we got out we were rudely interrupted by a real reminder of civilization. A guy on a seadoo came into the mouth of the York River and made a few loud noisy turns. When he saw us maybe a tinge of guilt of destroying our thoughts came upon him and he circled back around us and took off back into Benoir Lake. Now we really knew the trip was over.



End of the line – Bridge at South Algonquin, York River – July 3, 2006

There was a bit of wind crossing Benoir Lake but we put our heads down and finally pulled into Pine Grove Lodge. The group of six guys and gals whose paths we had crossed at Scorch Lake that morning and again at High Falls that afternoon came in just behind us. It was late in the afternoon and instead of the few hours I thought it would take us it was almost 5:30pm.

We tried to phone Nancy back in Toronto but the cell phone wouldn't work there. So we figure lets go down to Harcourt and get some supper and phone from there. Well the phone still wouldn't connect. But we had a great meal in Harcourt and the beer of course was cold. We finally got out on the highway to drive home and we were finally able to connect with Nancy. She was worried sick that something had happened to us. Well it did. We had just completed a great weekend in South Algonquin and had a great weekend of father/son bonding.

Can't wait until the next trip.

David Chapman

Matthew Chapman

Toronto, Ontario

david@davidchapman.com