

“WHAT IF?”

Story 13 from “River Stories” by Rob Kesselring

A version of this story was originally published
in the spring 2004 *Boundary Waters Journal*
all rights reserved

At the BWCAW entry point parking lot as I pull the canoe down off the roof rack I always figure the most dangerous part of the trip is over. Sure in the days ahead I might be disemboweled by a bear or have my throat slit by a terrorist sneaking across the Canadian border. But those eventualities are so much rarer than an unlikely car crash on the roadtrip to get to the BWCAW they should be dismissed by all but the most neurotic.

Bear “attacks” seem to top most people’s list of canoe country fears. Bears are powerful and must be treated with respect but after many generations of being relentlessly pursued by human hunters they have become timid beasts. In remote arctic regions where bears have never encountered people and have not learned to fear them, bears can be dangerously aggressive. My best friend was killed by the unprovoked charge of bear on the shores of Nonacho Lake in the Northwest Territories of Canada (see Story 16 for an account of that tragic attack). But the likelihood of being mauled by a bear in the BWCAW is less than one in a million. Northern Minnesota residents who live in areas where bears frequent backyards similar to the ways raccoons prowl the suburbs have learned the black bear’s reputation as a man killer is exaggerated. On one canoe trip many years ago, shortly before camping time we saw a small bear on the side of the river. My paddling companion implored me to paddle on for hours so as to “lose the bear”. She then insisted we camp on the opposite bank. I neglected to tell her a black bear could swim across that puny river as easily as she could walk across a street. After a less than romantic campfire and her incessant complaining about mosquitoes, I left her at the door of her tent and was tempted to tell her just how well bears, especially hungry bears, could swim. I resisted that temptation, refusing to perpetuate irrational fears about bears. In fact, if we wonder why some of our friends are reluctant to accompany us into the wilderness, it may have something to do with the canoeist’s habit of sharing rare encounters with carnivores in blood curdling detail and with every retelling, closer, bigger and more ferocious outcomes. Keep a clean camp and you will

be lucky to see a bear.

But there are a few real ways to get hurt in the BWCAW. I am not thinking of blisters, nicks, burns and bug bites. Those are red badges of courage to display at the trips conclusion with pride, like snapshots. I am thinking of the things out there that can kill you.

You can be struck by lightning. Precautions reduce the already rare possibility of being zapped. The best being to get off the water with the first rumble of thunder. A friend was going through a tough divorce a few years back and as storm clouds darkened I watched him launch his aluminum canoe on Big Moose Lake. He fished for walleyes throughout one of the longest and most electric storms I can recall. I witnessed it with macabre fascination expecting a fully cooked surf and turf dinner at any moment. Although he never did get the jolt he was looking for, his folly does not mean paddling in an electrical storm is safe. Quite the contrary, lightning seeks the highest point and no matter how sleek your canoe, you're it. There are no guarantees with lightening but if you stay off the lake and back from open points and avoid leaning against the tallest tree in the forest you are at miniscule risk - a lot more golfers are struck by lightning than canoe campers.

My proofreader admonished me for the previous paragraph informing me that I imply that aluminum canoes are more dangerous than other hull materials. Apparently experts claim lightning does not care what your canoe is made of and although aluminum may feel scarier you are in just as much peril paddling around in Royalex or birchbark. Although the latter case does conjure up an image en flambé. I was also informed that getting off the water after you hear the rumble of thunder is too late and you should get off before you hear the thunder. This begs a question but let's move on. Thunderstorms can build quickly in the BWCAW - putting you in a dilemma of pushing on through an evening storm or bivouacking at an illegal, impromptu campsite. Burger King used to have a slogan, "Sometimes you gotta break the rules". This is one of those times. Be safe, stop, camp if necessary, but get off the water. It happened to me once with a large group on Lac la Croix. We left our illegal campsite at dawn with minimum impact.

Anyone that has camped extensively has at least one story about thunderstorm-interrupted sleep. It does get your hair up on end when you awaken to the crash of thunder and a rainfly billowing like the spinnaker of a sailboat. After a flash of lightning nothing in

this world seems dimmer than the beam of your flashlight. If you were a careful camper you don't care because you tied down your canoe and battened down the camp gear before retiring and now you can just rest back and admire the cracks and booms. Big downdrafts however, can get the most seasoned camper a little unglued. The swishing, creaking and cracking of trees suggests the possibility that one could drop. Even a little two-ton tree would pop your tent like a grape under a shoe. This is a highly unlikely event. On July 4, 1999, 25 million BWCAW trees blew over in a catastrophic storm. There were thousands of campers in the BWCA that day and not a single person was killed by a falling tree. Don't choose tentpads beneath dead, leaning pines, but don't lose sleep over it either.

The best wilderness travelers always are asking themselves, *What if?* It may be calm and clear when you turn in but *What if* the wind comes up during the night? Is that featherlight canoe tied down? Is there plastic over the woodpile? *What if* uninvited late night dinner guests arrive? Are the foodstuffs secure?"

Not surprisingly in canoe country the biggest accident waiting to happen involves water. It is also the most preventable. Water can get you in two ways: drowning, and chilling your core to such a degree that you die of hypothermia. Both are rare occurrences but three factors combine to make the spring season a time for particular care. Cold water, windy weather and paddlers rusty from a winter of other pursuits make mistakes more likely and potentially lethal. Wind and big lake crossings are always a time to ask yourself, *What if?* and to plan accordingly.

Veteran paddlers may dismiss concerns of a capsizing but I listened twice this winter to harrowing personal stories by competent and respected canoeists. Henry Wang is one of my favorite paddling companions and a careful, skilled paddler. For several years he worked as a camp counselor at YMCA's Camp Menogyn off the Gunflint Trail. He led many groups of teens on their first canoe country trips. Henry followed those experiences by working for the Forest Service two summers as a BWCA ranger. A paddle was in his hands daily. Astonishingly, last August on a pleasure trip, he spent two and a half hours floundering in Seagull Lake. Eager to meet a scheduled shuttle pick-up appointment he had ventured across the lake in high winds and after capsizing could do little more than shepherd his gear and swamped canoe for an interminable downwind drift to shore. It was a cool day but the late

summer lake water was temperate. Even so, Henry admitted to me that at the time he wondered if he was going to make it. Both Henry and his partner were severely chilled when they finally reached shore and a warm cabin. He had underestimated the wind and failed to take precautions. His gear including his PFD had been loose in the canoe. Clearly Henry had not asked himself, *What if?* as he began his lake crossing. Unlike bear stories that are retold with relish and embellishment, canoeists are frequently embarrassed admitting to dunks and these cautionary tales are less discussed and often minimized. This is a mistake. All canoeists should study the mishaps of others. Curiosity kills cats, overconfidence kills canoeists and even the most skilled and careful canoeist someday may find themselves wrong side up.

Take the example of Mike Youngren. Mike is the athletic director for Wausau East High School in Wisconsin. He is a fit, skilled paddler and an experienced wilderness traveler. For a decade Mike and his buddy Bill Vickroy, athletic director for Wisconsin Rapids High School, have been taking two-week Quetico canoe trips in early June to revitalize after the challenges of the frenetic school year. It was June 18, 2002 when their canoe country vacation became a struggle for survival. They had established a base camp on Pickerel Lake and were spending a day fishing. Despite being only few days shy of solstice it was a brisk spring day. Three days of steady but warm rain was being pushed out by a sharp cold front, the temperature had been dropping all day and the wind was freshening out of the northwest. Despite paddling a big seaworthy Royalex boat the increasing wind and a squall line on the horizon meant it was time to head to camp for a walleye dinner. At 5:30 the boys (both were nearly 50 but still embraced an adolescent zest for life) started working back toward the portage and basecamp. It happened as they trolled passed the west end of a large island. The wind, as they passed the island's point, perhaps channeled by the landscape, roared from an unexpected heading. Mike described the wave pattern as "a ruckus of whitecaps and swells". The canoe rolled. Everything that was once in the canoe was now in the water. It was a drastic change. Mike claims the rain of the preceding days had warmed the water and it did not seem cold that June afternoon, not initially. The rods, reels, camera and much of the tackle and gear sunk immediately. Mike and Bill used precious energy pulling on their PFDs while treading water and gathering paddles. Although

the canoe had capsized close to the island, by the time they began to work the boat toward shore, land was seventy yards away and they soon concluded that they could not gain against the wind. There was no choice but to set a course toward the downwind shore a quarter mile distant. Mike was at the bow protected from the wind by the boat's hull and dressed in snug fitting wool. Bill was at the stern, dressed in bulky fleece his back exposed to the wind. During the one-hour swim to land they exchanged words of encouragement. At one point they debated attempting to right the canoe and paddle it, swamped, to shore. They wisely dismissed this plan. Climbing in and paddling a swamped canoe was a rescue method popularized in the days when aluminum canoes with big bow and aft floatation chambers were the norm. I have never met a pair of canoeists that can paddle a swamped Royalex canoe even in calm conditions.

One hundred yards from shore, Bill got the shivers. The shivering became more and more violent as they pushed the drifting canoe closer and closer to shore. Bill was in trouble and Mike was as scared as he has ever been in his life. When his feet finally touched bottom Mike pulled the canoe to a rock ledge. Waves were slapping the shore and pounding the canoe. Here is the most ironic and providential part of the story. They were now shipwrecked on the same shore where they had eaten lunch six hours earlier. Just 50 yards away was a traditional Quetico rock fire ring, the site of their picnic and here's the clincher. When they were eating lunch Bill had discovered a book of matches in a zip lock bag under a rock, he had left it where he found it. Those matches would now save their lives. Mike sent Bill to gather wood for a fire while he dumped out the canoe and waded it along shore to a protected beach by the lunch site. Although dizzy and shivering, Mike was still able to function but when he looked ashore, Bill was crawling on all fours, unable to stand, his arms numb, his fingers unable to open the zip lock bag of matches. Bill was rapidly slipping away. In the lee of a pair of cedars Mike made fire. Bill is a large and powerful man but the water and wind had sapped his strength and now he had to dig deep to find a reserve of energy just to peel off his wet clothes and throw dead tree limbs on the fire. Their wayside was on an isthmus and the wind howled, pushing the fire horizontal. Fortunately, both men were shielded by that pair of ancient cedars and able to respond to the heat of the fire recovering their wits and their strength. For almost five hours they stoked the fire, dried their

clothing and shared their experience. The fleece dried quickly but the wool, which had stubbornly held some of Mike's body heat in the water, was now stubborn to dry.

The wind finally subsided and in the milky darkness of a June night the men got back in their canoe, paddled to the portage and eventually to their tent. Both men have never had a happier moment, when dog tired they crawled into their tent and slid into their sleeping bags. That happy moment was possible because the men kept their focus, supported each other and of course - those providential matches. The character of these men is revealed in what happened next. After a day and a night of recuperation in camp they returned to the site of their struggles and retrieved floating lures and other objects that had washed ashore. But this time they were wearing their PFDs and had a waterproof bag of survival gear tied into the boat. Although both men remember the ordeal as a defining moment in their life, it did not diminish their enthusiasm for canoe country. Quite the contrary they came out of the experience stronger, wiser and with a deeper appreciation for the forces of nature. Next June they returned and they camped on that same isthmus.

Mike and Bill will be the first to admit they should have been wearing their PFDs that June day. But a louder and louder commandment in canoeing literature to, "Always, wear your life jacket" is a little annoying. On a dog day, August afternoon paddling across a little lake or casting for smallmouths you won't see a life jacket on me. I would be as likely to wear a parachute on a commercial airliner and it would be just about as silly. But there are times when it is just plain foolish not to wear a life jacket. I have seen so many poor examples of people not wearing life jackets when they should; it makes me understand where the chorus of do-gooders gets their motivation. I guess the reasoning must be if people always wear their life jackets they won't have to decide whether or not it is necessary. But that kind of argument makes experienced canoeists sigh. Why should we be made to feel guilty by not wearing a life jacket when conditions do not warrant it?

Last spring on fishing opener weekend, long trains of parallel bubbles and foam streaked the surface of BWCAW lakes indicating a steady wind speed in excess of 10 knots with gusts likely twice that. I watched a father and son zoom down Clove Lake sitting in a top heavy, small, aft weighted, canoe. Had they rolled or swamped it could well have been their last father son trip. Neither were wearing PFDs and even if they were it would have

been false security. It was too dangerous to be out in the middle of that lake. In the case of a downwind run on a cold lake that dad should have asked himself, “*What if* I start shipping water? Is my bailer handy? If I need to start bailing will I still be able to keep control of the boat, knowing my young son will not be able to do much in the bow? If I swamp will I be able to hold onto the boat and work myself to shore? Do I have a change of clothes in a waterproofed bag? Do I have the means and skill to build a big fire even if I am chilled to the bone?” Instead he was likely oblivious to all of this and just focused on getting to some point on the map they had decided on weeks ago. This father son duo was taking a terrible risk and even as I watched them I was preparing myself for a dangerous rescue mission. If they knew anything about canoeing they would have been camped or at least been hugging the shoreline and wearing their life jackets. They made it and I could relax but one characteristic of a competent canoe country camper is avoiding unnecessary risk. I once rocketed down Quetico’s Agnes Lake in similar winds but here's the difference. It was late July and the water was temperate. I had everything stowed below the gunwales and lashed tight to the bottom of the hull and I had an experienced bow paddler and we both were wearing snug, quality PFDs. We ran close and parallel to the shoreline. It was a roller coaster, surfer’s ride and a wonderful memory and not a risk.

When should you wear a PFD? First off, if you feel more comfortable wearing a PFD at all times, wear it. For some paddlers it is like a seatbelt. They just don’t feel right if that PFD is not on. There are advantages to this approach. If it’s on, there is no danger of leaving the PFD behind at camp or having it swing from a thwart and obstruct your view on a portage. Some life jackets also have padded shoulders, which make portaging more comfortable, and all have a certain amount of insulating value that can keep you comfortable on a chilly day. If you always wear a PFD skip the next paragraphs because you never have to decide whether or not to put one on. But if you are like me or even more importantly, if you are one of those paddlers I see not wearing a PFD when even Aquaman would have one on, read my guidelines carefully.

Wear a PFD if you are a non-swimmer. I hate the expression “no-brainer” but this is one.

Wear a PFD if there is a non-swimmer in the boat. Non-swimmers can be calm while

sitting in a canoe but one nano second upside down and they can emotionally unravel even when they are wearing a life jacket. It is a heck of a lot easier to deal with them when you don't have to concentrate on swimming.

Always wear a life jacket in the BWCA before June 10 and after September 20 or whenever the combined temperature of the water and air is less than 110 degrees. You may have heard the song lyric, "take my breath away" - this happens when you fall in love and when you fall in cold water. In both cases you are in extreme danger. In cold conditions a life jacket helps insulate your torso like a bad wet suit and most importantly allows you to focus on getting your boat and gear to shore. Without a PFD you may not drown but you may get to shore too chilled to recover. Incidentally, if you are going to wear a life jacket, wear it. Having your arms jauntily speared through the holes is not enough. The jacket should be zipped up, cinched up and snug and should be the proper size. Struggling to tighten a loose jacket in the water wastes valuable energy and time and is sometimes almost impossible.

Whenever you are in rapids wear a PFD. There are a few runnable stretches of whitewater in canoe country. Before attempting to paddle these, scout from shore, tie in your load, put on your PFD and get on your knees. Things happen in rapids and the chance of an capsize geometrically increases. Not only will a PFD keep you afloat it will also give you a little padding if you "swim". Also don't let the thrill of whitewater lure you into trying something beyond your ability. Roadside rivers are far better places to practice your whitewater skills than the BWCA. Unless you have a convincing answer to, "*What if?*" take the portage trail.

Who among us has not underestimated the speed of which a thunderstorm can descend in canoe country? When that sky gets green you want to be putting the ash to her (paddling hard) not monkeying around with your PFD. Put on your jacket whenever you suspect stormy weather.

There are storms and then there are blows. Shakespeare once wrote, "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May". Novice canoeists (and experienced paddlers who should know better) often underestimate the power of wind. I have taken eight canoe trips in the Far North of Canada where wind and huge lakes combine to create mountainous seas and multi-

day layovers and I have been accused of getting antsy at the first quiver of a poplar leaf, but I know wind. Beginning BWCA paddlers succumb to the illusion when they are camped in a lee that somehow, despite the swaying of 200-year-old pine trunks, the lake will be just as calm around yonder point as it is in the calm lee shore. It won't be. When you choose to paddle on a windy day, you don't want to be out in those waves struggling to put on your life jacket. You will look like a cowboy on a bucking bronco - bad form and dangerous.

You can fish and even travel on a windy day if you take precautions and plan your route. Obviously the longer the stretch of water the larger the waves. By sticking to lee shores and small lakes and rivers, travel, although challenging, is not dangerous. Sometimes it will be necessary to make short crossings or downwind runs. Tie your waterproofed load in low, if you have D-rings on the canoe floor, cinch down to those. Remember unless you are carrying rocks, your waterproofed load is a lot lighter than that equal volume of water would be and in the event of swamping, your load will act as floatation. The strap of a Duluth pack looped around a thwart is clearly not enough. Put on your life jacket. Kneel. Put your bailer between your legs. If you are making a downwind run in high winds remember after a short distance there will be no turning back. It is an exciting ride and the waves will build faster than you imagine. Should you start to ship water keep your heading while bailing - this gives multitasking a whole new meaning. Modern canoes are as likely to ship water amidships as over the bow so be prepared. Because anyone can make one for free with a penknife and an old bleach bottle, bailers don't get much mention in gear catalogs. But bailers are the most underrated piece of essential gear. Americans are sometimes puzzled why Canadian law insists that a bailer be carried in every canoe. This is not some grudge left over from the French and Indian Wars. Canadians know canoes. Every time water goes into the boat the boat gets a little heavier and rides a little lower which makes it easier for the next wave to go over. Bailing, sometimes frantic bailing, preserves precious freeboard. Don't leave the parking lot without a bailer especially on a blustery day.

Because I prefer canoeing the BWCA in its fringe seasons you will usually see me wearing my PFD. I also like to help canoeists and campers that are facing adversity. My mood is usually better though when canoeists floundering as they might be, have taken some precautions and are wearing their PFDs. Rescues themselves are dangerous. Scouts and Y

camps often practice with unloaded canoes on bluebird July days. Real rescues can be cold, noisy, whitecap rodeos. The canoe over canoe rescue in rough water is beyond the capability of most canoeists. Unless you are confident of a happy outcome don't waste your energy or risk tipping yourself by attempting one. The best self-rescue is get behind your boat pull up on to it as much as possible and work (kick) downwind toward shore. If the downwind shore is two miles away you didn't do that, "*What if?*" mental exercise did you?

If you are in a group and one canoe goes over, use extreme caution. Tipping is contagious. Two shivering campers and four dry campers with dry gear on a shoreline is an inconvenience. Six shivering, wet campers, with wet gear is an emergency. Command swimmers to hold the gunwales on opposite side of your canoe as you paddle downwind to shore. If it's easy, retrieve the paddles, but for the time being forget about their boat, it will follow you on its own. If your "hitchhikers" are wearing their PFD's not only will they be warmer but also they will act like human sponsons and it will be all good.

If you are camping and see a boat flip over in a big wind as it is zipping by your campsite resist the urge to pretend this is a rerun of Baywatch. Don't just charge out there. Plan what you are going to do. The odds are you were sitting around your campsite because you deemed the lake too rough for paddling. That is still true and the best course of action may be to put on your life jacket, take a rope and work down the bank encouraging the swimmers to work their boat to shore. If you choose to paddle after them make sure to ask yourself, "*What if?*" For example if you are camped on an island it may be impossible to get back to it! So take what you need in a waterproof bag. Approach swimmers with caution. You will be in a light boat with lots of freeboard, which is good and also "tippy". If you are not already on your knees, get down. If the swimmers are "freaking out" don't let them grab the rails of your boat or you will be "freaking out" with them. Every situation is different but be safe, take it slow, do not escalate the mishap into a crisis. Hypothermia, especially in spring, is a danger, but contrary to all the hype, it is not an immediate threat.

Whenever I paddle any distance from camp I always carry a waterproof pack that contains waterproof matches (waterproof redundancy is always good with matches), a firestarter, a raincoat, a fleece top, a small tarp, and an axe strapped to the outside. I have only needed it once, but many times when I asked myself, "*What if?*" The pack gave me the

confidence to make a safe choice.

Whether you are a novice or a seasoned veteran canoe country is a wonderful and safe place to pursue adventures, relax or just soak up the splendor. And the power of nature needs to be respected, especially wind. Be careful out there and happy paddling.