

* The Allagash *

Day 35, July 12

13 miles, Pillsbury Island Campsite

The four days that I've been off the river have seemed interminable, a tangled headache of logistics. At times I despaired of ever finding a way to get myself to the Allagash (since I am here without a car or phone, and must depend entirely on favors and ingenuity). But at the eleventh hour a ride finally manifested! Thanks to all who are making this northernmost leg of the trip possible: friends who hosted me and shared their computer + phone, Noah for lending me his Kevlar solo canoe and double-bladed paddle, my aunt and uncle for deciding to shuttle me up to Chamberlain Lake out of the goodness of their hearts, and all who've made me feel loved, welcomed, and encouraged by letter, email, phonecall, and in-person. This journey would be impossible without my community!

I have decided to canoe the last 110 miles of the Northern Forest Canoe trail solo. My shoulder feels improbably strong, I'm borrowing a lovely solo canoe, and after two 5-day trips with loving friends to heal from the disappointment

of the collapse of my thrupaddle team, I'm ⁽²⁾ now finally experiencing the call to commune with this river one-on-one. The Allagash is the crown jewel of this canoe trail, famous all over the world, and this is my first time paddling it. I'm ready to lay aside the distraction of interpersonal dynamics and give my full attention to the spirit of the river. She has been calling me!

Reaching Fort Kent won't be the end of the trail for me, since I have friends lined up to help me fill in various gaps in my journey. By the time I leave Maine I hope to only have a few small gaps left unpaddled (which I hope to finish next year!) and I will canoe the New Hampshire rivers as a part of my trip home. More unpaddled sections await me in Vermont and Quebec, but that is close to home and I can chip away at those miles over time.

The rainy day cleared up in time for sunny skies as I launched around 1:30 pm from Chamberlain bridge, waving goodbye to my aunt and uncle. When I made it out to the open lake I made some offerings and said my greetings to this water, this land, the ancestors of this place, and the beings who live here. I sang songs to the lake as I paddled.

A rain squall crawled closer from the northern horizon, eventually reached me, ⁽³⁾ turned the lake into a flurry of concentric circles competing to out-shimmer and out-ripple each other, and then blew past me. The act of paddling out here feels like home. The loons and mergansers feel like neighbors whose habits I know well, and whom I trust. The meditation of the paddle took me into a timeless state, where solitude scoured me out from the inside and left me buzzing with energy and excitement.

Hello Aragash.

I'm here.

Let's play!

Day 36, July 13

15 miles, High Bank Campsite

Yesterday I was so excited to be here that I paddled until 7:30 pm and then went instantly to sleep! This morning I got a rare chance to practice my favorite morning routine (which was my norm on my AT thruhike, but no travel companions ever seem to find it appealing):

5:30am. Around 7am I ate a cold ④
breakfast of yesterday's rice while sitting in
my canoe, and around 9am I made a pit
stop at a beautiful campsite on Farn
Island. It was already hot out and
there was absolutely nobody on the Lake,
so this quickly became a skinny dipping
and sun-basking stop as well. The water
is so warm in these lakes, at least compared
to my icy mountain stream back home! The
rest of the day unfolded in a relaxed
rhythm of spontaneous breaks to eat, nap,
pee, or drift as needed. Around lunchtime I
met a gregarious game warden named Mark
who exclaimed with great excitement that
I was the only person paddling the Allagash
solo that he's met all season. This surprised
me - I would think lots of folks would do this.
A friend in Unity told me that she'd recently seen
a big presentation by a woman who paddled the
Allagash solo, and I was surprised by that too - the idea
that just ~~doing~~ the Allagash solo is rare or impressive.
I feel extremely safe and comfortable out here,
with no real concerns about hazards or dangers

conditions, since - barring a freak accident in the rapids - I know how to deal with the things that might happen to me in the woods. I've been living out in the woods for most of my adult life. I'm home out here.

I got into camp at 2:30pm. Usually I wouldn't stop so early, but the dam release at Churchill dam only flows from 8am-12pm, so I'll camp here and tomorrow I'll have to decide whether to run Chase Rapids or to take the Ranger-operated shuttle around the Class II water. Since I am borrowing Noah's canoe, I want to be sure not to damage it, so I was planning to shuttle... but it handled so well on the little stream below lock dam yesterday that now I'm tempted to try the rapids! While it isn't a whitewater canoe and does not turn quickly, with just me and some light gear in it, it draws almost no water and bobs lightly over logs and around rocks, almost floating. Today I tried different places to sit and kneel in the canoe, and

practiced turns with both the double- ⑥
bladed paddle and my trusty green canoe
paddle. I still haven't made up my mind.

I really love this canoe! It's a
Wenonah Solo Plus, which can be paddled
both solo and tandem. The double-bladed
paddle is fun and easy, and my shoulder
likes it a lot better than paddling on one
side. It does work slightly different
muscles, so I get tired more often than
with a canoe paddle, and take short breaks.
It handles well even in the wind - on lake
crossings with a strong side-wind I find
I can wind-ferry by quartering into the
wind and paddling only on the leeward side
with the canoe paddle. It's fun to geek
out and see what this boat can do.

In the afternoon, Mark the Warden stopped by
my camp and asked me to tell him some stories
of my NFCT journey. His wife is an avid
fishwoman and recently started hunting, and he
thinks she'd like to meet me. They live at
Clayton Lake, a tiny hamlet nearby, and are
the only year-round residents! Amazing.

He gave me some flies and told me how ^{to} use them on my non-fly-fishing rod. He has his Maine guide's license for hunting, fishing, and recreation. I've been thinking of taking the recreation guide exam next year so I can guide canoe trips here in the future, and he was encouraging.

Wildlife seen today:

- loons
- grebes
- Bald Eagles
- an osprey
- a dark duck with 4 ducklings
- a deer feeding on the shore
- Kingfishers
- warblers
- gulls
- a tern with a minnow in its beak
- a bull moose!

I was planning to fish the boggy cove behind my campsite in the evening, but just when I was headed down there I heard the telltale splashy stomp of a moose. I snuck down to the shore and watched a very nice bull wade into the water, his antlers still growing and covered in summer velvet. He repeatedly dove to the bottom and came up munching pond weed. I watched him for half an hour,

only 40 yards away, and then gave up on 8
fishing, left the cove to him, and snuck
back to camp to eat my dinner. I can still
hear him snorting and coughing in the water
as I write this!

Today I reflected a great deal on how grateful
I am to all my friends in + around Unity, Maine,
who have made this trip possible by lending cars,
phones, computers, and giving me my pick of three
different loaner canoes! And who made my
waiting days much more fun with good conversation,
loaned books to read, and an exceptionally hilarious
D+D session. Thank you, dear ones!

Day 37, July 14

20 miles, Last Popple Campsite

Today I was up at 6, on the Lobe at 7, and
at the Churchill Dam ~~before~~ 8 am. A
friendly young assistant ranger named Alyssa
greeted me: "Are you the woman paddling the
NFCT alone that we heard about?" I'm famous!
After consulting with Alyssa I decided to have
my gear portaged 5 miles down the river by
the ranger truck, and carry Noah's canoe
past the most severe rapid, putting in 1.5 miles
below the dam so I could still paddle the
other rapids on this section with an empty canoe.

⑨

To my surprise, Alyssa offered to help me portage my canoe! I accepted, and spent a little time in the Churchill Depot history exhibit while she drove my gear downstream. They had some beautiful replicas of indigenous stone tools that had been found in the area - an arrowhead, spearhead, axe, and gouge - and I learned that in this area hunters didn't switch from atlatl to bow and arrow until 2,000 years ago. The logging-era history displays were less interesting to me.

Alyssa and I cheerfully portaged Noah's 40-pound canoe the 1.5 miles to the big eddy below Chase Rapids. It's always a pleasure to chat with another badass woodswoman. Then I was on my way, into the class I-II rapids and continuous rips. What fun! Kneeling in the empty canoe, I floated down the river like a leaf, the rocks ahead demanding my steady attention. The rapid and I danced a very old dance, and just like a complicated waltz, the dance was completely engrossing, but not stressful. The ease I felt on these rapids made me half-wish I hadn't portaged around the big one, but I know it's wise to be extra-protective of this

borrowed canoe.

I picked up my gear at Bizonelle Bridge, and cruised down one more rapid before I reached Umsaskis Lake. I probably have less than 60 pounds of gear with me (I packed very light), ~~but~~ so it didn't bog me down, but the magical feeling of running the upper rapids empty was definitely worth it.

A brisk wind greeted me on the lake, and I had to put my heavy food bucket in the bow to keep from getting blown around. It was a workout! I pulled over near the ranger station to wait for some thunder to pass and eat my lunch. This ~~lake~~ waterway is so thoroughly patrolled - I've encountered either a park ranger or a game warden every day, all very nice, but sheesh! The designated campsites are very nice too, but it makes me a little sad that I can't just camp anywhere. It makes me want to go somewhere remote enough that there aren't any rules.

The wind on Long Lake was stiff, whipping up whitecaps! I stayed close to shore and paddled until my shoulders burned! But I did appreciate the wide-open sky scapes, watching

cumulous clouds rise up into potential ⁽¹¹⁾ thunderheads and tiny squalls of lavender rain falling from purple cloud-bottoms in the distance. At the channel into Harvey Pond, the strongest wind yet hit me, along with slashing rain. Each paddle stroke only moved me one or two feet forward, but still I crawled along. Finally, the campsite I'd been shooting for came into view!

Moose count today: 6

Best wildlife moment: In the rain squall, I paddled parallel to a muskrat, only 4 feet away. Then it dove and resurfaced on the other side of my boat. So cute!

Most "American" moment: A bald eagle flew ten feet in front of me at eye level in the middle of a rapid.

Day 33, July 15

31 miles, Allagash Falls Campsite

Up and out of camp by 5:45am. Why do I love paddling early? the joy of it! I get out there before the wind kicks up, when the water is glassy and still, and the low-angle light of the dawn sun turns everything gold. You see a lot more animals at this time - I

12
saw 2 moose before breakfast! Each night on this trip I've been in bed before 8pm, exhausted and grateful. Each morning I'm awake by 4:45am, listening to the birds' dawn chorus. These are the hours that feel right in the woods.

Why do I paddle so many miles in a day? Why not linger longer and "enjoy it"? Because the thing I enjoy most is the act of journeying, of seeing what is around the corner and finding a way to navigate everything gracefully. What's so enjoyable about sitting in camp, getting eaten by bugs? I want to feel the joy of my muscles working, to be in conversation with the river.

As I realize I am on track to finish 2-3 days before my earliest prediction, so many people's voices clamour in my head - some whining, some accusatory, some judgemental - telling me to slow down. But none of these voices is my own. I'm happy to go slow when I'm teaching, or when someone needs me to. But it's just me now. I get to choose my own joy.

Where is the shoulder injury that has plagued me most of this year? I have no idea, and am shocked by its absence. I - it couldn't keep up!

Around 1:30 pm I stopped, letting the headwinds blow on without me, and took a 2-hour nap at a lovely campsite near Five Finger Brook. Then I cooked my dinner over a fire... actually, I cook all three meals at once in one pot. This trip the menu has been:

- Day 1 - wild rice with venison + Italian spices
- Day 2 - wild rice + venison with wild atlantic wakame harvested by a friend.
- Day 3 - wild rice with acorus, apples, plums, cinnamon, and brown sugar.
- Day 4 - Chili! Wild rice, venison, apples, plums, chili spices, and brown sugar.

Thanks to the spice kit, I have a completely different menu every day!

Once dinner was cooked, I loaded the canoe back up and re-launched. It was 5:30 pm, the wind was dying down, the sun's heat was cooling, and the light was turning golden. I felt wonderfully well-rested and fresh, filled with delight at what a beautiful time of day this is to be on the water. I got into Allagash Falls just at sunset, portaged the canoe, and slept.

Day 39, July 16

(19)

40 miles, Fort Keat/Eastern Terminus

Whew! Today I paddled the longest day I've ever paddled - with downstream current and a tailwind to help me along! I paddled from 5:45am to 5pm with only short breaks. It felt a bit like the "four state challenge" on the Appalachian Trail, when I hiked 43 miles in 21 hours... except not quite that exhausting!

A dreamy misty morning greeted me when I carried my gear down to the river. Every last inch of this river is a stunning jewel of northwoods beauty. The last few rapids were fun! I paddled through Allagash around 9am, bypassing the famous diner because my stomach was already full of delicious wild rice chili, and how could they possibly ~~be~~ top that? Once I got onto the St. John, the rapids got much more exciting,

with those big-river waves that this (15)
river is famous for. I sat farther back
in the canoe today so I could have better
steering control, and this worked very well.
So far!

Before I knew it I had reached my goal
campsite, 27 miles from my starting point,
but it wasn't even noon yet! I calculated
that the current on the St. John River
was giving me a 5mph pace. Why stop now?
I could reach Fort Kent in just a few
more hours!

I began to tire in the hot sun, my
shoulders begging for a rest. Then a
tailwind kicked up and started blowing
me along. In a moment of inspiration,
I stood up, letting my body become a sail
that pushed the canoe along and using the
long kayak paddle to make occasional
steering strokes while standing. What a
wonderful rest for my shoulders, what

a charming new perspective on the (16)
river, and what an interesting metaphor:
to have my own resting body become the
sail that powers me along.

I have pandered many things on this
journey: the skill of leadership and the
skill of followership, whether or not the
binary concept of "wilderness" versus
"working landscape" is a healthy or
productive one, the difference between
transactionalism and reciprocity, all the
subtle forms colonialism takes as it
creeps into our interpersonal relationships,
whether or not a birchbark canoe would
stand up to these rapids without needing
patching... and, repeatedly, the difference
between operating ~~with~~ ^{from} urgency versus
operating from ambitious joy. The objective
results can look the same - for example,
paddling 110 miles in 4.5 days, which I have
just done. Urgency says "I only have 5

days off work, I have to finish this fast! ⁽¹⁷⁾
It is based in scarcity. Ambitious Joy says,
"Well, I have 11 days worth of food with
me, so there is no rush at all. But wouldn't
it be so fun to paddle further today?"

I wonder what will happen if I push
on? How far will I get?" It is
based in abundance and playful excitement.
Throughout today, I checked in with my
"joy meter" to ~~be~~ sure I was still having
fun. About 5 miles before Ft. Keat,
continuing to paddle became less than fun.
At that point I already had a friend en
route to pick me up, so I pushed on - but
still was glad I was making the decision.

Ambitious joy is much harder to practice
in groups - people's skill, endurance, and
values usually need to be well-matched for
it to work. But when you can let your
ambitious joy take the reins on your own,

without creating urgency for anyone else - the world turns to magic. (18)

So here I am in Fort Kent. The trail register shows that ten people have thru-paddled this year - 2 names I recognize from the Adirondacks, 4 people I met in person, and 2 pairs of names that are new to me. Some names I've seen haven't made it here (or haven't made it here yet). I signed the register, although this is not the end for me. I've paddled 402 NFCT miles as of today, plus 72 off-trail miles on trips with friends. I have 307 miles to fill in... and three trips arranged in the next few weeks to chip away at that goal. Will I finish all those miles this season? It seems a bit doubtful, as my busy teaching season is only a month away. But my goal has never been the purity of a complete thru-paddle, but to make my

way along these waterways with joy. ⑩
While I've grieved the breakup of my original team, I can see that my level of joy and presence and gratitude has vastly increased since we stopped trying to make a broken thing work through sheer force of will. It has demanded that I find the courage to ask my community to help me achieve my vision, and allowed me to invite so many others into the experience. This journey is powered by community!

Here is Jackie now, in her truck, arriving to take me back to unity. We'll share stories of the river on the drive! More Maine canoeing adventures lie ahead, filling in the bits and pieces of the trail that I've missed...