

2019 Canoe Mosaic

①

The West Branch of the Penobscot River

Day 30, July 1

0 miles, Roll Dam Campsite

Today I was swooped up by four magical humans from Vermont + Maryland. Two I know well and two I've barely met. We are off to a cheerful start, pooling our minds and resources to navigate the confusing private logging roads that wind through Maine's Northwoods to the West Branch of the Penobscot River. We camped at the put-in, and I knew I was with an excellent crew when the first thing we did was decide how to make proposals in a way that all voices and concerns could be clearly heard. After a delicious meal of campfire tacos, we skored what we are bringing, what we're leaving behind, and how the group can support us. I set three intentions for this 5-day journey:

1. Embrace the unexpected
2. Be present with the hearts of the people I'm with.
3. Greet the other-than-human beings that we journey past on our way

Day 31, July 2 - 10 miles, Ogden North Campsite ②

It rained last night, but today dawned sunny. I made a wild Rice breakfast with dried apples, plum leather, and apple leather from Minnesota, plus a little cinnamon and brown sugar. This is a completely normal breakfast for me this summer, but rather remarkable for my new companions!

We packed up the canoes and stood ankle-deep in the river to make some offerings and speak some words of respect and acknowledgment for the Penobscot people who have called this river home for at least 10,000 years.

The river had a few rocks and riffles for us to steer around at first, then deepened and quieted. A distant thunderstorm rumbled to the north, but left our sunny skies undisturbed.

At Midday we came to the confluence with the Lobster Stream, and had our lunch on the boat launch there. Then we peddled up Lobster Stream to Lobster Lake, a side trip off of the NFCT. Lobster Lake feels so remote and untouched, with Lobster Mountain rising steeply

from its shores, Big Spencer Mountain ⁽³⁾
(which I climbed as a teen) just behind it,
and a tall proud mountain that we've concluded
must be Katahdin off to the east. A stiff
tailwind swept us along to our campsite,
where we unloaded our boats and then
jumped in the water like a family of
Merfolk. A sandy beach, a breeze to
keep the bugs away, and sun to kiss our
skins... it's moments like these when I realize
that maybe all the twists and turns that
brought me here were just right, because
these people, this place, and this moment
all feel like such a blessing.

Later in the afternoon somebody brought out
a bow drill kit and it was a team effort to gather
and prep tinder, start a new hole in the fireboard,
carve a new notch, and have a try at creating an
ember. We were successful, and I sang a fire
song to the rising flames:

"Fire spirits come to us, we will kindle your fire..."

An incredible dinner of chili, roast yams, kale
salad, and homemade cilantro pesto filled our bellies—
this leg of the trip is not strictly limited to wild

food, and each person is taking joy in ④
expressing their creativity through food. In the
evening we were graced with an incredible purple
and magenta sunset over the lake.

Day 32, July 3

26 miles, Gero Island Campsite #1

Beautiful sunshine blessed us again today. We
saw a moose from a distance near the outlet
of Lobster Lake, as well as a loon sitting on its
nest. When we rejoined the West Branch (and NFCT)
we made very good time due to the strong
downstream current. We were able to take snack
breaks and rest breaks while still drifting
down the river! Midday I took a turn in the
middle-of-the-canoes seat to give my shoulder
a rest and was lulled into a short ~~rest~~ nap by
the heat of the sun. After lunch I paddled for the
rest of the day without any shoulder pain, making
this the longest-mileage day of my summer
so far! We settled into a beautiful island
campsite with very few bugs, and enjoyed another
evening of excellent food, refreshing swims, and a
lovely sunset. I'm really appreciating the strong
sense of safety and trust in this lovely group.
Oh, and we had another moose sighting in the afternoon,
very close! We could see antler nubbas sprouting on his head.

Day 33, July 4

(5)

13 miles, Mouser Island Campsite

This morning the air was a little cooler, and the lake was as smooth as glass. While we ate breakfast I saw a few fish jumping, so once I'd packed up my tent I got out my fishing pole. The first cast was uneventful, the second cast I got my line snagged in a pine tree overhead, and on the third cast I got a bite! I reeled in a beautiful silver 7-inch Chub, called to my friends to build up the breakfast fire, and dispatched and cleaned the fish while singing it the death songs that I sing when I harvest a deer - songs of gratitude, returning to the earth, and sending the spirit to the stars. I cooked it over the open flames and shared bites of the flakey white flesh. Eating the fish felt like eating the lake, eating this place, becoming one with the sunshine and water and trees and rocks.

The smooth water stayed with us until lunch, and the gentle afternoon wind after that helped dispel the oppressive heat and sun a bit. Katahdin looms ahead of us, it's peak hazy in the eastern

sky. The sun made us sleepy in the afternoon, and we stopped at a stoney beach to nap, skip rocks, swim, and snack. We arrived at our island campsite with plenty of time to set up and cook dinner without rush. The miles we paddled today take us off the NFCT, but I'm happy to be seeing more of this lake and spending time with these travelling companions. My shoulder has been feeling strong! Which gives me hope for my Allagash dreams... (6)

Day 34, July 5

4 miles, Ripogenus Lake take-out

Today we reluctantly took our leave of Chesuncook Lake, marvelling at how few people we've seen out here and how private and apart our journey has felt. Now we must re-enter a world of fellow human beings of all stripes, cars, money... so many complications. Tonight we will camp in Baxter State Park, tomorrow we hope to climb Katahdin, and then we drive south... where I will dive right back into logistics and planning for the next leg of this canoe journey.