

A Walk in the Woods – August 2010

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Life in the woods has changed for me quite a bit in the last year now that Jewel, my aging four legged walking partner, has pretty much retired from long walks. At the age of 13 ½, the old girl is pretty content to take short, methodical walks, sleep in her bed and chase rabbits in her sleep. However age has not dulled her sense of adventure and our latest walks in the woods have been via canoe, where her distance traveled is unlimited as she gets paddled around local ponds.



Tonight my canoe paddle dips into the wind swept waters of Long Pond, a beautiful forest pond rimed with balsam fir and spruce which cling to a craggy shoreline of rock and swamp. As the sun sets, the wind calms down and the air is colored with a dull orange glow highlighted with a rim of green around the lake. Ripples in the water glint with the waning sun and sparkle silvery orange in the black empty water. Jewel sits with her nose pointing in the air, smelling smells and smiling inside. She is as content as an old dog can be.

I close my eyes and inhale, trying to imagine what she smells in the air that I cannot. In comparison to her nose, mine is pretty much a human decoration with little use. Instead I quietly imagine a time when the canoe under me was an essential tool of survival.

At one time in our history the canoe was a major source of transportation. Native Americans of the northeast had canoe routes that followed water courses and portages from Northern Maine across New Hampshire and Vermont to New York State and into Canada. These canoe routes served Native Americans as transportation and trade routes.

Early settlers and trappers adopted these canoe routes and used them for trapping and trading furs of beaver, mink, otter and muskrat. Trapping settlements were built on these canoe routes, and these settlements eventually became villages and then towns. Little by little early European trappers carved a life out of the wilderness and eventually built this country. Much of this country's history would have been quite different were it not for a simple wooden device known as the canoe.

When walking in the woods, the noisy sound of my feet frightens wildlife and limits my viewing opportunities. In a canoe it is much different; it isn't hard to become a silent, graceful intruder and viewing wildlife becomes much more intimate and interesting. From a canoe on a forested pond, wildlife watching opportunities are unlimited, and my wife and I have had many close encounters including watching deer swim and moose feed lazily in deep water. This evening's show does not let us down. Loons, ducks, kingfisher, and dozens of other species of boreal forest and wetland birds treat us to the concert of the wilderness.

The highlight of the evening was watching a beaver feed methodically on a 20 foot mountain ash sapling. We watched in silence from a short distance as the chubby rodent used all his body weight to drag the sapling from the woods into the water where he proceeded to devour every leaf and branch. After his meal he slipped silently under the black water and disappeared.

We paddled in watery silence through the last of the daylight and arrived back at shore in the dark. Jewel, our captain, slept soundly this evening, and so did I.