

Silence and Solitude

By Lee James

I am alone. The drone of the floatplane has faded, leaving me and sixty days of supplies near the headwaters of the Back River in Nunavut, Canada. Silence and solitude. And the charged presence of this great open land, sky and water. I hike the low hills above my lakeside camp and recognize old friends: Lapland Rosebay, Mountain Avens, Alpine Azalea and Labrador Tea, all blooming simultaneously in the compressed arctic summer. I breathe in the distinctive aromatic air of tundra. Silence and solitude. And this powerful river I hope will carry me to the sea, more than 600 miles across the Barrenlands of the Canadian arctic.

I am comfortable here, alone in this place. I'll wish for many things over the next 60 days: less wind, younger tendons, more current, or less, better rain gear certainly, but not once will I long for someone to talk to. I've come to relish the freedom from conversation and compromise. And there's an elevated intensity and commitment in spending weeks alone in this environment, so alive with potential for wonder and surprise – gifts opened by the simple focused prayer of our attention.

The sky darkens as a powerful squall sweeps across the lake, long linear clouds driven hard by the wind. In its wake a rainbow arcs across the water, brilliant against the dark clouds, a benediction for the journey ahead. And I do feel blessed: to be here, to be wired for solitude, to be willing to place myself in this position of vulnerability where I am absolutely compelled to pay attention.

I assemble my “canoe in a bag”, a modern version of ancient skin on frame design. The frail looking craft is surprisingly nimble and durable – as long as the paddler keeps it off the rocks. I anticipate plenty of opportunities to do just that. There are reports of as many as 83 significant rapids and George Back, leading the first descent of the river in 1834 claimed: “there is no end to them”.

Back was commissioned to lead an expedition from the interior to an unexplored region of the arctic coast in hopes of finding clues to the fate of the Ross expedition which had sailed into the arctic three years previously. He proposed a descent of what was then known as the Great Fish River. Since no one had traveled its entire distance, he could only hope it would carry him to the northern coast. It was a prospect his native friends discouraged, certain he wouldn't survive it. When the missing expedition was rescued in Lancaster Sound after surviving a fourth arctic winter, the allure of the blank spot on the map was sufficient for Back and the Admiralty which sponsored him. Thirty-one days after setting out Back

and his ten man crew reached Chantrey Inlet – an amazing feat of navigation and leadership. Then they retraced their journey, dragging their heavy wooden boat back upstream! With all the advantages of modern maps and GPS technology it will take me more than fifty days to reach the coast.

Wind dominates my days. Blowing sand is pelting the tent walls and large white capped swells march relentlessly upstream. Everything is covered in fine silt and there's grit between my teeth. A flock of geese, beating against the wind, stalls, their formation falling apart as they're driven to shelter in the lee of rocky outcrops on the far shore. I've been pinned down for days in what I've come to call "Satan's Sandbox" and I'm feeling completely overmatched. With more than four hundred miles of lake and river still ahead and the wind showing no sign of letting up, I'm not optimistic. What was I thinking?

This: I'm paddling through an endless vault of blue, still water a perfect reflection of clear skies above. The low evening sun leaves only a dark line of rolling hills on the horizon. I follow a loon's call through twilight. The setting sun transforms the water's surface, now pure liquid gold, every ripple dark in contrast. A loon in silhouette dives, spreading circles across the burnished surface, and dives again. The river narrows and the world goes cool blue, currents black in fading light. I'm carried through miles of sweeping bends until rapids and dim light force a halt. Three hours of sleep and I'm at it again, on through the rare still day and out into great oceanic lakes.

There's not a day that isn't touched by wonder:

A pure white wolf appears on the hillside above the river, granting a moment of mutual regard, howls electrifying the air, distance falling away...

Caribou beyond counting gather on the far shore before crossing the river. As far as I can see they are streaming across the open tundra, a herd so large it takes an entire day to pass...

Arctic Terns hover above me, breath-taking white against deep blue sky, their vocalizations lending support to the notion that birds descended from dinosaurs...

Sun through broken clouds bathes the tundra in variegated light. Rainbows form and dissolve repeatedly and curtains of silvery mist hang shimmering in the morning air...

Grace-notes without end.

As I walk the high ground above the rapids I often find ancient Inuit tent rings and standing stones. There's comfort in sensing the long history of human interaction with this land. And again and again I'll find an eagle soaring above the wild water below. I'm realizing solitude is an illusion. I've never been more keenly aware of my connection to a larger community – human and not. Even at this distance I feel caring and support and I have no intention of authoring a tragedy here.

One by one I navigate the drops down through Escape Rapids where I catch up to the only other people I've seen, a Norwegian team that had passed me weeks ago. They're as surprised as I am. Over coffee they tell me they've spent a day repairing a canoe pinned in the last drop! We part ways at the confluence with the Meadowbank River, where they head upstream.

I wake to a hard freeze and snowflakes swirling in a cold north wind. It's as though a switch has been flipped. Caribou that were drifting slowly across the tundra yesterday are grouping up and moving with purpose, herds coursing up the sunlit valley opening south. And for the first time geese are leaving the rich green wetlands along the river, V-formations carving through wintry air. Evening sun lights the hills across the river and it's clear summer has passed, the greens of the tundra gone to red and gold. In my short time here I've experienced three seasons and the fourth feels imminent. The animals seem to have taken this turn in the weather as a signal to leave the country. I'm thinking I should follow their lead.

I run the last rapid on the Back River and I experience a flood of relief and regret. The sense of nearing the end of this journey is almost unbearably sad. I still have many flatwater miles ahead and the challenge of paddling a canoe out on the arctic coast looms large, but this feels like a distinct turning point. I allow myself a rest day at an abandoned fishing lodge and hike back upstream to a rocky outcrop overlooking the last rapid. It's one of the more straightforward runs of the entire trip, yet as I look down on it I'm stuck by the incredible power of this river. There's a humbling sense of having been in the grip of something much greater than myself and the improbability of safe passage is suddenly clear. I'm overwhelmed with gratitude.

A run of calm days allows good progress and I reach river's end where I begin to encounter Inuit families out from the village of Gjoa Haven. It's only relatively recently that the people have left the interior and I meet several elders who were born out in the Back River country. They bring their grandchildren, increasingly immersed in technology linking them to the outside world, out to experience the land, hunting and fishing, hoping they'll remember.

My first day on Chantrey Inlet is completely still, with glassy conditions letting me make a long crossing to the eastern shore and a camp by a waterfall. It's the

last calm weather I'll see. Over the next ten days I sneak a day and a half of paddling in between a series of storms blasting the arctic coast. Even the natives in their powerboats are shut down. Open water crossings in a canoe seem less and less likely. I make it as far as King Island, fighting a fierce headwind through rain and fog, where I make the satphone call for a pick-up. I'll wait four days before a boat from Gjoa Haven can make the crossing.

Saul, a 60 year old native of the village, materializes out of the fog in his small open boat, taking advantage of a brief window of calm. I'm in for the ride of a lifetime. He doesn't want to get caught out so he's gunning hard for home. The boat is slamming the wave faces and the unpadded seat leaves me feeling battered and bruised. Rising wind is driving spray over the bow and I don plastic compactor bags in a futile attempt to stay dry. I want to kiss the ground when we land but I'm too numb to bend over. I literally stumble into the gracious hospitality of Charlie Cahill, the Gjoa Haven contact who arranged my pick-up. After 60 days of relative deprivation it is simply amazing how exquisite a hot shower and a home cooked meal can be. I slowly dissolve into the luxury of warm shelter and dry clothes.

Two months out and I'm still processing this experience. The intensity of those days on the river and the many gifts offered cannot be reserved for remote arctic environments. Given the focused attention they're surely worth, I believe any moment of any day can unfold in wonder. That's the adventure of a lifetime.

Lee James
Adventure Education Faculty
Prescott College, Arizona, U.S.A.
ljames@prescott.edu