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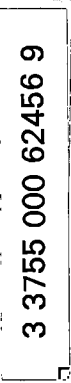
ON March 2, 1968, m. Thayer

Thayer, Averills

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D R A F T

CANOEING ON THE SHEENJEK RIVER

If you have an interest in wild and untracked country, and in canoeing on streams unmarked by man, and in seeing wild animals that have not a morbid fear of man, then open your atlas to the map of Alaska and find, roughly in the center of the State, the city of Fairbanks. From Fairbanks look north to the place where the Yukon River flows north across the Arctic Circle. Here, on most maps, is marked the village of Fort Yukon. From Fort Yukon look north again and this time bear 17° east of north for a measured 147 miles, and there make a mark on your map.

Note, the mark you have made is a long way north! But don't assume because of this that you have marked an area of perpetual ice and snow. Instead the mark you have made locates the rich, warm, and lake-filled valley of the Upper Sheenjek River in the Arctic National Wildlife Range. In 1966 I canoed over a 120-mile portion of this river.

I went to Fort Yukon, arranged for a float plane, threw in my baggage and canoe and headed for the Sheenjek.

From Fort Yukon the pilot flew northeast and we were quickly over the Porcupine River, proceeding upstream until we turned north at the mouth of the Sheenjek River. Looking ahead we saw in the foreground placid convolute bends of luminous green water with gracefully curved sandbars in their concavity, and on the

opposite side of the river, black oxbow sloughs with green marshy shores. Beyond, the river was less convolute but still meandering, swinging rhythmically in a bed of boulders and gravel through the vast forested plain of the Yukon Basin. One after the other these bend proceeded, the shining course of the river drawing our gaze until, far to the north, where the river was but a glistening thread, it disappeared into the pel^omonts of the Brooks Range. The river possessed a hypnotic beckoning, a beckoning to continue following its course and go with it into these mountains.

The pilot lowered the plane and we started upstream, flying low over the river. After thirty minutes, the land began emerging from the plain of the Yukon Basin. Low ridges and hills appeared, became more numerous then finally joined to make a valley for the river.

The valley is one to three miles wide with rounded green hills on the east and on the west, closely joined hills and ridges with often steep banks facing the river broken by narrow valleys and clear tributary streams. Along the valley bottom are lakes and groves of cottonwood and spruce.

Later the river was, for a short time, in an open area of many small lakes. Ahead the river disappeared into the mountains of the Brooks Range. As we followed it the peaks and ridges of the Brooks Range rose far above us, and we flew low over the nearly level valley floor of the upper river. Three hundred lakes in a green background framed the river's once again convoluted path.

Abresvajuun Lake is the last lake, as you proceed up the Sheenjek River, that is suitable for float plane landing. The day we landed there it was calm. The spruces scattered along the shore were reflected in the lake; grayling surfacing for insects rippled the images. Around the lake the land is rolling tundra; to the east and west it is guarded by looming colorful mountain bastions faced and topped with limestone battlements; altogether a place that invites delay.

It took but a few moments to deposit my canoe and baggage on the shore then, as the airplane and its clatter disappeared to the south, the first of many pleasant experiences in the Sheenjek Valley occurred. This one was silence; simple, absolute, ear-ringing silence. In a world battered by unwanted sound, silence is a tangible and pleasant phenomenon.

In my newly acquired silence I gathered a load of equipment and wandered slowly toward the river. The sun made hot going and portaging, as everyone knows, is not to be taken industriously. While so engaged a Greater Yellow Legs discovered me and was my companion each way, diving and soaring on narrow wings, and perching precariously on the topmost spire of trees along my route until I overtook him. Then swooping down with a penetrating cry he was up again, bobbing and soaring ahead to another spruce, to teeter and watch my progress. The cry of a Greater Yellow Legs is shrill and it is loud---but it isn't noise!

When my baggage was piled on the river bank, I displayed in the sun the many slivers of varnished wood that according to the manufacturers instructions, composed the canoe's skeleton. As the keel, frame and chines, gunwales, thwarts, and coamings

were identified and assembled, the canoe skeleton appeared. Then the gray rubbery covering, appearing as though it may have been removed from a young Beluga whale, was stretched over the skeleton and a canoe appeared. When launched this twiggy craft moved easily, and a solitary voyage was begun.

As the boat drifted around each bend, it sometimes was carried along the light-colored sand and gravel bars in the concavity of the bend, occasionally touching bottom and ~~swinging~~^{swinging} about providing a variety of views. Other times, it was carried near the cutbank where avoidance of occasional overhangs required some use of the otherwise idle paddle.

Exposed at these cutbanks were the horizons of two feet of the dark, fertile-looking soil supporting this promethean valley. Where the banks are undercut, the fibrous vegetative carpet supported by this soil hangs into the water where yellow marsh marigold and other colorful flowers can be seen waving in the current---a pretty sight! Behind these curtains of flowers, the small streams trickling into the river echo hollowly.

Late in the afternoon I started up a small stream that according to the map was connected to a good-sized lake. Soon a number of grayling were running ahead of me as the stream was not a great deal wider than the canoe. When the possibility of being in the wrong stream became worth considering, a deep and blue lake appeared. In some places the lake shore was as steep as 45° , although composed of soft earth. In other places it had a gravel beach, spire-like white spruce

grew among the low hills around the lake. Several flocks of Old Squaw and Scoter ducks moved from the path of the canoe. A campsite with a view was easily found.

While on the subject of camping, I will give my unsolicited views on camping in wilderness areas. Camping in the wilderness is a fine thing but insuring that it will be just as fine for the next camper requires planning and constant care.

A few rules to observe are:

1. Do not camp near a soft, steep bank where your coming and going from the boat will make an unnatural trail or break the vegetative mat and start soil erosion.
2. Move the camp often to preclude wearing out the vegetation near it--arctic vegetation is very fragile.
3. Build the fire on gravel or sand, so the earth is not scorched. When camping on promontories and away from streams, it may be necessary to carry gravel or sand to the fire site. Scatter the sand or gravel when leaving.
4. Cut no trees, live or dead. Axe marks left on the stump or trunk means the area is a less perfect wilderness. I burned stumps and broken branches exclusively and burned all of each one used, leaving no burned end. The dead coals from the fire were scattered in the bushes so that little trace of the fire or camp remained.

Needless to say, no debris must be left about the camp. Non-burnables were carried back to Fort Yukon for disposal.

After erecting the tent, a short hike along the lake shore soon revealed grayling feeding in a shallow bay. Four of these readily took a fly and were boiled for

inner.

The next day I explored around the lake and left about noon to continue downstream. After rounding a few bends of the river a small bluff appeared. I found on its top a number of splintered bones and other evidence that wolves apparently were spending a good deal of time there. While examining the photographic possibilities from this vantage point, a yellow-white wolf emerged from the willows 70 yards away and crossed a small meadow very intent on the other side. The wolf was in view for not more than a few minutes and as I had no telephoto lens, I made no attempt to photograph it. I was pleased to have seen it. A cow moose ^Cstaring from across the river disappeared into the brush when I pushed off again in the canoe.

While in the canoe, I took the unnecessary precaution of carrying my camera in a waterproof bag. This bag, a product of war surplus, was an intricate affair with flaps, folds, and straps not quickly unfastened. With the camera secured from water, and use, the canoe rounded an open gravel bar that was broken only by a dark mound that I took to be a lump of flood borne muskeg but proved to be a black wolf. It rose to its feet and walked toward the water, limping slightly on the left front leg. as the river carried me swiftly within ten yards of this curious animal and downstream past it. After swinging the canoe about and paddling back within ten yards of the wolf, I began frantically unfolding the many fastenings of the camera bag, but while so engaged the canoe swung around and I was in danger of drifting broadside into a rock. This required my immediate attention with the paddle. While absorbed in avoiding the rocks, the canoe was again carried downstream, necessitating another brief period of frantic paddling

to regain my former position near the wolf. The camera still secure within the many folds of the war surplus waterproof bag.

My alternate fumbling with the waterproof bag and frantic paddling excited the wolf's curiosity beyond the limits of its natural timidity. It approached the very edge of the water to stare without alarm at the strange proceedings. Finally, after it turned and was walking away in disbelief, the rubber bag relinquished the camera permitting my making two rapid exposures--both underexposed. From willows a short distance away, a white wolf timidly watched the foregoing and disappeared in company with the curious, limping subject of my photographic efforts. I missed getting the closeup photo but very much appreciated having seen an unalarmed wolf so close, and became very optimistic about future photographic opportunities. Had I known that later this same wolf would expose himself even closer to my camera without being photographed, I might have been less optimistic, but it is such surprises and new situations that flavor an outing.

At 6:00 p.m. I camped on a broad sandbar, untracked except for the wolf and caribou prints.

Early the next morning, I continued downstream, this time prepared for any photographic opportunity--the camera out of the bag and adjusted for the light conditions. Soon I climbed a small hill and made some scenic photographs; then proceeded past a few more bends of the river and abruptly came upon a grizzly bear splashing about in a small stream on a sandbar, possibly attempting to catch grayling. As I moved the canoe closer to the sandbar, the bear must certainly have seen me but it instead chose to ignore me and presented only a

sternal view to the camera. I called to him several times but rather than getting his attention, received instead the attention of two wolves rising from low grass near the stream. Thinking quickly, I adjusted the shutter to 1/250 second from the 1/25 recently used for the scenic shots, and caught all three animals in one frame. Moments later I noted that I had not adjusted the "F" stop; and the picture was underexposed. This depressing discovery was interrupted by the grounding of my canoe on the bottom a dozen feet offshore. At this occurrence, the bear approached the river. Frantically I adjusted the "F" stop lever and quickly snapped his picture then, as I did not wish to interfere with him, I backed into the current of the river and drifted downstream. The bear swam across the river and disappeared into the willows, although good concealment was much closer on the sandbar. The wolves had retreated to willows on the river bank and peered from shaded, partial concealment there.

After proceeding downstream one-half mile, I made camp on a hilltop where I could view the valley and sandbar where the wolves and bear were seen. This hilltop was evidently popular with certain wildlife in the area as a well-defined trail led over it.

From the hilltop I could see the wolves wandering in a meadow and the bear doing similarly across the river from them. These three animals appeared to be hunting small mammals, but not seriously applying themselves.

Later the air became still and oppressively hot; the bear wandered into the willows and the wolves also disappeared into the cooler shade after lying on the sandbar for awhile. Nothing in the valley stirred; not an animal was in

sight, no birds called, the foliage hung without movement, the lakes were mirrors with motionless waterfowl resting, each on its inverted image. The silence was so real you could see it.

Following the example set by the wildlife I retired to my tent and slept until about 8:00 p.m. when a sniffing and snuffing sound awakened me. I lay motionless a few moments listening, and quickly concluded that a bear and I were ear-to-nose, fortunately with a mosquito net between us. When I moved my head slightly for a look, I startled the poor beast and he abruptly made off and went pounding down the hill.

Having had some sleep and being curious about the bear's possible return, I remained awake for an hour, then slept until 1:00 a.m. when I awakened to the sound of birds ^{ing} called; one by one the species joined together in greeting the morning, testing the volume of their song until the valley fairly shook. At last the cranes entered the contest, tearing the morning air into great chunks with their hoarse cries, silencing all other species and officially beginning another day in the Sheenjok Valley.

From my hilltop camp, I could see several moose feeding, a grizzly bear crossing the meadow intent on his unseen objective, and two adult wolves energetically hunting mice or whatever in their meadow and making frequent trips to a low brushy hill, where I assume they had a den. Two young wolves aimlessly wandered about the sandbar.

I launched the canoe and paddled upstream past the young wolves, then climbed a hill one-quarter mile upstream where I could observe them. They seemed to have nothing to do: they lay on the sand first on one side, then on the other, they rolled and wiggled their legs in the air, and paced about aimlessly occasionally disappearing into the willows at the end of the bar. They seemed disinterested in the gulls around them and generally appeared to let time weigh heavily on them.

When I thought they had forgotten me, I drifted down past the young wolves with the camera ready, and took several pictures while the two adults watched from shadows in the willow. After this minor photographic triumph, I returned to my hilltop camp for a few hours, then noted two adult wolves resting on the sandbar. A long circuitous approach by land brought me within the willow concealment on the shore side of the bar. The earth within the willows was a mass of trails and beds of bears and wolves; my silent approach through this resting area concerned me a little as the air was warm and bears might be resting there-- apparently none were.

Quietly, I emerged from the protection of the willows onto the sandbar and observed the two adult wolves sleeping there. At the first crash of the camera shutter, they both leaped up, stared, then slowly walked into the willows, an animal passing on each side of me; both animals appeared chagrined at having been caught asleep. After they disappeared into the brush they apparently hurriedly met because when I emerged at the place where I judged they would emerge, I saw them together, fleeing wildly across the meadow.

After this major triumph and, what I thought was the last laugh on the wolves, I returned to camp and celebrated with a brief swim in the river. After the swim a caribou, still shedding and in very unkept^M condition, appeared on the shore of a nearby lake; I approached him and was successful in getting a good snapshot. Back at my camp grayling feeding along the rivers edge reminded me of food; my 9-foot fly rod dropped the mosquito dry fly in the waters of the Sheenjek for thirty minutes, long enough to catch three for a boiled dinner.

This had been a pretty good day! I decided to move on down the river while I was one up on the wolves so I left my hilltop camp at 11:45 p.m. In the twilight the river was placid and the cool, the moist midsummer night air was appreciated as much by the wildlife as by me for caribou, a bear, moose and several large porcupines were visible. I did not see the wolves though--they were doubtless on some errand.

The river was a little swifter here and I moved quickly along. Later the confluence of Old Woman Creek appeared. These clear waters pushed a transparent cavity into the blue-green water of the Sheenjek and it appeared the canoe must surely fall to the stony bottom but did miraculously glide across the gap and continue. A number of large grayling acknowledged the overhead passing of the canoe with brief, frantic swimming.

I stopped for breakfast about 3:00 a.m. in a sharp part of the valley where the water was swift and white among variously colored large smooth boulders and the sun was coming over the rim into the water.

calmly as the canoe glided toward him but he had some minimum distance he felt I could safely approach and as I slowly attempted to reduce the distance he slowly waded away through the belly-deep water. I made several snapshots then decided to rush him. At my swift approach he fled in a spectacular shower of water and soggy vegetation.

The river from this place continued swiftly. The exposed banks were composed of coarse gravel and often boulders. The river bed became a series of quick waters connected by deep placid pools. High banks and forested bluffs often rose from the river bends.

That night was spent on a pebbly river bar near the east fork of the Sheenjok. My objective for the next day was Eskimo Creek and a short hike upstream there. I was a mile downstream from Eskimo Creek when an examination of the map proved it was time to haul out the canoe. While I was walking back upstream to Eskimo Creek, a cow moose stood firmly on the shore beneath a bluff insisting, in a moose's inimical way that I detour around that part of the shore. Consequently, I climbed the bluff and part way up a sizable hill where I found traveling on the vegetative carpet a little spring, but the improved view and cool breeze well-worth the extra effort.

Eskimo Creek was mainly dry with clear pools separated by gravel bars through which the water flowed. It provided pleasant walking and I did not trouble to walk on the shore around the pools but splashed through them. The forest of excellent white spruce near the Creek was open, the trunks were clear of limbs

for a dozen feet above the ground, and the forest floor was composed of a clean layer of needles. Within the forest, the ruins of cabins, caches and doghouses, and a faint sled trail mutely testified that a trapping program involving several families and dog teams had once existed there. The main commodity there is now silence.

I walked back down the river and past the place where the moose had stood her ground, folded my canoe, and boarded the plane that had come for me.

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