

## **Alumni Canoe Tripping**

by Zach Arem

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Canoe Tripping defines the Pathfinder spirit better than any other expression. When Pathfinder family gather -- young, old, alumni, family, friends -- conversations ultimately turn to the one thing we love and remember the most: canoe trips. There is no greater feeling than being out in the wilderness of Ontario and Quebec with good friends, camper or staff. Over the past 98 years we have turned canoe tripping into not just an activity to partake in, but an art form allowing us to bear the title of the greatest canoe tripping camp in North America.

But what happens after life at Pathfinder? The real world begins.

Just about all of us have had to come to the conclusion that Pathfinder is only a temporary part of our lives. It's one of the toughest decisions we all have to make. When is it time to move on? Some of us come to the realization earlier than others, but in the end just about all of us figure it out. We need to finish school, get a job, earn money, experience other parts of the world, and finally get married and have a family. We get back to the island for a weekend during the summer, the GLM, reunions, but the dream of being at Pathfinder for an entire summer, and especially canoe tripping, is over. But does it have to be? Well, for some Pathfinder alumni the answer to that question is no.

While many Pathfinder alumni trips have gone out in the past, a number of more recent alums have taken it to the extreme. With a little effort, planning, and teamwork Max Brown, Brent Hurley, Barrett Wadsworth, Tim Lamont, Will Hopkins, Alex Hurley, Ryan Arthurs, Adrian Kelly, Mike Floyd, Karl Doench, Zach Arem, and non-alumni Garret Hart have been able to experience some of the most pristine wilderness areas and rivers in Ontario, Quebec, and Labrador.

The list includes the Kesagami River in 2009, the Moisie River in 2010 and 2011, the Missinaibi River in 2011, and an upcoming descent of the George River in 2012.

### **Kesagami River: Summer 2009 (Barrett, Brent, Garret, Max, Tim, Zach)**

We started our trip by getting dropped off by Johnny Baits, a Cochrane local, at Upper Kesagami Lake, ON. The first five days were spent on small streams and lakes, but we eventually made our way to the massive Kesagami Lake. This 40-kilometer lake is the source of the Kesagami River and also has some of the best fishing in all of Ontario. At Kesagami Lake

Lodge, clients are flown in for thousands of dollars a day in an attempt to catch four-foot walleye and six-foot pike. Needless to say, swimming was a bit nerve-wracking.

The Kesagami follows the same path as many other northern Ontario rivers, falling off the Canadian Shield on its way through the Hudson Bay Lowlands, eventually ending in Hannah Bay at the southern tip of James Bay. The Kesagami is unique among typical Bay rivers, however. While many Bay rivers are wide and shallow with minimal to moderate whitewater, the Kesagami is narrow and deep with over 90 sets of whitewater in just under 100 kilometers of river.

Within a few kilometers of getting on the river the whitewater began. We spent the next eight days having the time of our lives. While the river was technical and challenging with many must-make moves, it also offered dozens of runnable and playable whitewater sets, none greater than Sharrock Rapids near the end of the river.

We eventually made our way to the mouth of the river and paddled a few kilometers up the Harricana River to the Hannah Bay Goose Camp. (By 2009 it was still under construction, dating back to our first camp visit in 2002). Though we were at Goose Camp a day longer than expected, we made the most of our time, and eventually our freighter canoes from Moosonee showed up and gave us a breathtaking ride across James Bay as the sun was setting.

### **Moisie River: Summer 2010 (Alex, Barrett, Brent, Tim, Will, Zach)**

After everyone showed up in Lakefield, ON we started our 18-hour truck trip to the town of Sept-Île, Quebec, located on the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Though long, the drive was trouble free, offering incredible views and scenery. The following morning we loaded our gear and boarded the Quebec North Shore and Labrador Railroad for our seven-hour train ride north to Oreway, a mining stop on the eastern shore of massive Ashuanipi Lake.

Due to fact that the Moisie flows from north to south, and ends just 30 minutes east of Sept-Île, within minutes of boarding the train, we were all in anticipation of viewing the Moisie from the Trestle Rapids train crossing. It is extremely rare to see the end of your river before even starting, but the Moisie is one of those anomalies. We eventually made it to our put-in on Ashuanipi, and started paddling west toward the headwaters of the Moisie. It was an incredible feeling to know that we were paddling in the province of Labrador, and indirectly representing Pathfinder while doing so.

After paddling for a day and a half across Ashuanipi, we finally made it to our most difficult obstacle of the entire trip, a three-kilometre bush through wet bog and dense boreal forest. The plan was to follow the portage route of James West Davidson and John Rugge who in the late 1970s wrote a detailed book called *The Complete Wilderness Paddler* about their journey down the Moisie. As suspected though, little to nothing remained from their trip or any other trip since then. The bush took us six hours, but due to our flagging system and teamwork, we made it through without any major problems. Once past the bush, it was all down river from there, literally. The next day we reached the headwaters of the Moisie and it did not take long for us to get thrown into the whitewater.

The Moisie is unique from any other river in the world. It is known as the “Grand Canyon of the East” and Mish-Te-Shipu (Great River) to the Innu native communities. It is also known as one of the best Atlantic salmon fishing rivers in world. As with the Kesagami, clients pay thousands of dollars to fly into one of the Moisie’s many fishing lodges just to have an opportunity to land their prize.

The Moisie flows directly south off of the Labrador Plateau, and after millions of years has carved a meandering path leaving canyon walls rising over 1000 feet as a result. Over the course of the river’s 500-kilometer descent to the ocean, it drops a staggering 600 meters in height. This in turn leaves a plethora of whitewater including massive waterfalls, such as Five Finger Falls, just north of the Pekans River junction, and Fish Ladder Falls, where a diverted path allows salmon to make their way around the massive obstruction.

After hundreds of kilometers of whitewater (runnable, playable, and scenic), cascading waterfalls formed by tributaries flowing off the canyon walls, pristine wilderness, challenging obstacles, and navigating Trestle Rapids, the trip of a lifetime had come to a successful end.

### **Moisie River: Summer 2011 (Adrian, Barrett, Karl, Mike, Ryan, Tim)**

By: Barrett Wadsworth

The Moisie was so incredible, that we decided to do it again in 2011. Tim Lamont and I were the 2 remaining members of the previous trip, which made trip preparations and outfitting much easier. Coming along to teach us some new tricks were Mike Floyd, Ryan Arthurs, Karl Doench, and Adrian Kelly.

While we’re all Pathfinder Alums, and therefore very stuck in our ways, alumni trips are very different from Pathfinder trips. First of all, there’s no Headman. Decisions need to be made communally, or by boat. There were several times when one boat would choose not to run a particular rapid while the others did. All in all, I think that moving to Alumni trips is a little like the switch from camper to staff. I loved being both, so it’s hard to say that one is better or more fun than the other. But once you’ve made the transition, there’s no going back.

It’s difficult to describe the Moisie. I think Alex Hurley said it best when he said it’s “the river to ruin all other rivers” by comparison. Starting by hopping off a mining train in the middle of nowhere on the Labrador plateau is an interesting experience in itself. Labrador is vast. I’m sure there are other adjectives that work, but I think “vast” works best. The lakes dwarf even Temagami, the shoreline is an unchanging combination of alder bushes and spruce trees, and the terrain is flatter than AK’s abs.

The major upside to Labrador: apparently nobody has ever fished these lakes before, because almost every cast seemed to yield a 3-foot pike. The major downside to Labrador: in order to leave it, you have to bush your way out. The 3.5K bush from Labrador into Quebec remains the toughest thing I’ve ever done (twice). There were a couple low moments – the kind where you make eye contact with your boat partner, and nothing more needs to be said – but it was also the type of experience that brought us together early in the trip.

Finally, we made it to the Moisie, where we got to spend 2 weeks descending 1700 feet over the course of 500 kilometers through a 1000-1500 ft canyon. It’s a very high volume river,

which means big whitewater, but also relatively safe whitewater. We were able to shoot a number of Class 3 rapids, and even two Class 4 rapids – which is the first time I’ve ever had to wonder what happens if my canoe slides back down a wave because it’s too big!

Finally I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention the current. We had days when we were able to rudder ourselves 40K down river without taking a forward stroke. There’s nothing like napping/tanning in a canoe as you meander through a giant canyon, just waiting for the next rapid to appear around the corner.

The Moisie certainly deserves its reputation. It’s spectacularly beautiful, very remote, and incredibly powerful, and the fact that we were able to traverse a river of this magnitude is a testament to the skills and the spirit instilled in all of us during our years at Pathfinder.

### **Missinaibi River: Summer 2011 (Brent and Zach)**

Of all the Bay rivers we know at Pathfinder, the Missinaibi takes the cake. We have paddled the river over 10 times, and the first one in 1986 was the trip that really propelled us to expand our boundaries beyond Algonquin and the Ottawa Valley. It has become a staple in the Pathfinder tripping regimen, and just like Algonquin, it never gets old. Every trip that has paddled the Missinaibi comes back with stories and experiences that will stand the test of time.

The Missinaibi is one of the most historic rivers in all of Canada. It was used for centuries by Cree natives, and later fur trade Voyageurs, as a main trading route between James Bay and Lake Superior, providing a link between the Arctic Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. Today the river is a protected provincial park and even part of the Canadian Heritage River System.

The Missinaibi flows 500 kilometers due north from its headwaters at Missinaibi Lake until it junctions with the Matagami River, and here the Moose River is formed. From that point, it is another 100 kilometers to the villages of Moosonee and Moose Factory at the southern tip of James Bay. Like the Kesagami, which parallels it to the east, the Missinaibi also carves its way through the Canadian Shield, then fizzles and widens towards its end where it enters the Hudson Bay lowlands. Over the course of its 300-meter drop from start to finish, the Missinaibi is littered with whitewater ranging from swifts to deadly waterfalls, none greater than Thunderhouse Falls.

Our trip started with our old friend Johnny Baits, who trucked us from Cochrane to our put in at the north Ontario town of Mattice. Due to challenging experiences with Mattice locals on previous trips, we quickly loaded our gear into the canoe, said goodbye to Johnny, and headed north with the fast flowing current and high water.

This experience was unique not only because it was a two-man trip, but because it was a two-man trip down a major whitewater river. Caution and safety was at the top of our priority list, especially when we approached Thunderhouse. Reading about the casualties at Thunderhouse over the years put us a little on edge, but we were sure to stick to the far left shore and keep our eyes peeled for the portage.

Thunderhouse is an experience beyond explanation. With three massive waterfalls, all having the power to shred a cedar strip canoe in a matter of seconds, standing beside them allows you to have a true appreciation for the force of nature and how little control we as humans have. After exploring the area, spending the night, and paddling up to the spirited Conjuring House Rock just below the falls, we pushed on to the Moose River.

As the whitewater fades after Hell's Gate, another massive rapid, the river turns to fast current and steep cliff walls for dozens of kilometers until it reaches its junction with the Matagami River at Portage Island, creating the Moose River.

The Moose has been plagued with shallow waters for decades due to damming projects that have infiltrated its tributaries, including the Matagami and Abitibi Rivers. The river is awe inspiring nonetheless.

After 12 lazy days, we made it to the Cree village of Moosonee, where we got some good food, and eventually made our way back to Cochrane on the Polar Bear Express.

### **George River: Summer 2012 (Brian, Brent, Charlie, Henry, Ryan, and Zach)**

As I write, preparations are underway for a 25-day canoe trip down the George River in Labrador and northern Quebec. Our plan is to drive 25 hours to the put in on the Smallwood Reservoir in Labrador, and then spend the next 20 days descending the ultimate dream river. Upon arriving in Kangiqsualujjuaq (the Village of George River), we will fly back to Labrador City and make our way home. At this writing we have purchased our canoes, which will be donated to the George River villagers at trip's end, being too expensive to fly back out.

The George, named after King George the III, is a massive river that flows northwesterly for about 600 kilometers from its headwaters near the mining town of Schefferville. After passing through big lakes such as Indian House, and big whitewater such as Helen Falls, the George eventually empties into the sea at Ungava Bay, a bowl shaped segment of the Arctic Ocean at the northern tip of the Ungava Peninsula. The George is best known for its treeless tundra shorelines, its annual Caribou migrations, and its exploration history.

Back in the early 1900s, Labrador was one of the last unmapped areas in the world. One man by the name of Leonidas Hubbard decided it was his destiny to explore the area. So in the spring of 1903 he set out with two other men, Dillon Wallace and a native guide from Moose Factory, George Elson, from the town of Northwest River on the eastern shore of Labrador. The plan was to paddle up the Naskaupi River, cross the height of land at Lake Michikamau (now the Smallwood Reservoir where we are starting our trip), and head north down the George. In theory, the trip sounded straight forward, but with no maps of the area the expedition was doomed from the start.

After entering what they thought was the mouth of the Naskaupi River (actually the Susan Brook), the men worked for months against the current not even making it to Michikamau before early winter set in. Finally deciding to head back to Northwest River, the men fought off starvation and freezing temperatures before separating in order to find help for Hubbard, who

remained behind due to his rapidly deteriorating health. Ultimately, Hubbard met his demise just 30 miles away from civilization. Wallace and Elson were lucky enough to make it out alive.

Two years later, two competing expeditions, one led by Wallace, and the other led by Hubbard's widow Mina with Elson as guide, made their way back to Northwest River for a second attempt. Both expeditions were out to vindicate the name of Leonidas Hubbard and finish the trip that he dreamed of completing himself. In the end, both expeditions were successful, with Mina arriving at Kangiqsualujuaq weeks ahead of Wallace.

All three expeditions are abundantly documented in a number of books written by Wallace, Mina Hubbard, and many researchers. If you ever have the time, I urge you to read any of the following: *The Lure of the Labrador Wild*, *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador*, *The Long Labrador Trail*, *Great Heart*, or *The Woman Who Mapped Labrador*.

Beyond the relative ease of access, as well as the river itself and what it has to offer, this is the main reason we have decided on the George. The intriguing history of this river is comparable to none other, and having the ability to retrace the steps of the Hubbards, Wallace, and Elson is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Our departure date for the George is Thursday, July 12<sup>th</sup>. We greatly look forward to this opportunity, and know that we will not only represent ourselves, but the Pathfinder family as we embark on our biggest adventure yet.

### **The Lure of Labrador: Our KickStarter Project**

Of course, with high aspirations also come high prices. After plane tickets, gas, food, and gear, we are looking at an estimated cost of \$12,000 (\$2,000 a person). Ryan Arthurs suggested an exciting alternative method to cover our expenses while promoting his photography project in the region. We are using KickStarter, an online threshold pledge system that helps aspiring entrepreneurs and artists achieve funding for creative projects.

Ryan is proposing a photography project that retraces the footsteps of the three Hubbard expeditions, resulting in a self-published book. From his proposal: "I am fascinated with the Hubbards' story. I find it to be one of the great true adventure stories of our century and yet at the heart of it, it is also a love story. The idea of following the footsteps of someone you love to be closer to them I find beautiful and haunting."

Beyond the crowd-sourced micro-funding, one of the benefits of KickStarter is the ability to create a sense of shared ownership for projects. By supporting our project not only would you help us achieve our goal of paddling the George River, but you would also support Ryan in publishing his photography book. Donations are matched with various rewards as a thank you to backers. Examples include: receiving GPS SPOT page updates allowing you to follow our progress on the river in real time; limited edition photographic artworks; and receiving a copy of Ryan's photography book which will be published in the fall of 2012.

Our project will go live on the KickStarter website on Sunday, April 1. Once live, we will have about three weeks to promote our project and pursue funding. The catch is that if we don't reach our goal of \$12,000 after the three weeks, we don't get any of the Kickstarter

pledges. It is our hope that with the support of friends, family, Pathfinder alumni, and other interest generated on the web, we will be able meet our goal. So keep an eye out on the Pathfinder website for more updates and please help us meet our goal! Also, please follow our progress by clicking on the link to our blog. Many thanks go out in advance!

### **Tying It All Back To Pathfinder**

One thing is certain: none of the above mentioned trips would have been possible without the acquisition of whitewater skills through Pathfinder. During the past decade of Pathfinder tripping, the knowledge of the Staff has been taken to new heights. Staff need to know not only the basic skills of canoe trip leadership and working with campers, but many others as well. A greater emphasis has been placed on developing skills such as lifeguarding, wilderness medical, canoemanship and repair, as well as trip planning, whitewater paddling and especially the risk management and judgment that go with it.

Due to this, the tripping program has been able to grow and expand to new horizons. Rivers such as the Harricana, Rupert, Attawapiskat, Bloodvein, and Broadback were once but a dream. Now they are a practical reality. These big trips offer a once in a lifetime experience, and they are one of the main reasons campers and staff keep coming back for more. Don't get me wrong, this is not what defines us at Pathfinder, and I do not believe that bigger is always better. But, I do believe in expanding our horizons. Algonquin is incredible, and it will always be our bread and butter. Today Pathfinder Otts fill in their Algonquin maps before venturing beyond. But if the proper training, planning, and precautions are taken, the rivers mentioned and others are all well within reason for Pathfinder tripping.

Of course, let's not look past what canoe tripping is all about. In the end it doesn't matter where you go or how long you go for. It's all about who you go with. While the alumni trips we've gone on were down some of the best rivers in Canada, they would not have been the same without each and every member. Having the opportunity to trip with incredible Pathfinder friends was what it was all about. We all have new Pathfinder memories that will last us a lifetime.

In the end, I urge each and every one of you reading this article to stay at Pathfinder, or stay on the trail as long as you can. It doesn't matter if you are 15 or 55. If you attended Pathfinder, canoe tripping is part of your soul. It doesn't have to be for 25 days, but get out there. We are all busy and have obligations, but don't let the real world tie you down in all aspects of life. If you really want it to happen it can happen. Call an old Pathfinder friend and start planning today. If you don't know where to begin feel free to contact me. I have a passion for planning canoe trips and would be more than happy to help you out.

Thank you for reading this article. I truly hope that it has inspired you to get back on the trail in some capacity. I think just about all of us would agree that Pathfinder is and was one of the greatest experiences of our lives. No matter where our journey in life takes us, we will always remember our time at Pathfinder, and as one of my good friends Adam Mollenburg once said, *"When we've paddled and portaged and the day is done, we sit by the fire and watch the*

*setting sun, and as we lay down our heads on our soft balsam beds, we thank the great spirit that our blood runs Pathfinder red.”*

Noonway,  
Zach Arem