

The Annual Class IV Hardcore Expedition

Late Fall Trip to the Sauna Islands

Brock Hunter, Rob Tull, Bill Newman and Patrick Maun

What better way to celebrate the end of the kayaking season than with a short trip in potentially risky conditions to remote areas. This was to be the third annual Class IV Hardcore trip and we had grown complacent from fine weather in years past. We choose to ignore forecasts and head for the Sauna Islands of Ontario. Our initial group of seven is whittled down to a hardy four including the much-missed Iowan Rob. The excuses of others have been noted and will be considered when the invites go out next year.

Brock and Rob headed up early Wednesday and paddled out to Flatland Island. Bill and I were traveling on what I like to call Newman Time, so we managed to hit the road by 6:00PM. After what we'll refer to as the "gas incident" we roll into Sturgeon Bay by 2:30AM and set up camp in the highly official parking lot campground. Temps dropped into the 20's and made for some cozy sleeping.

Getting on the water by the crack of noon the following morning, we make quick time out to Flatland that I promptly rename Trashland Island. Not only is the island covered in trash, they've managed to burn the sauna down. Way to go.

Lucky for us, we have our heated tipi to make it through the cold weather and the rest of the day is spent in traditional SKOAC fashion - mocking Newman. Once the temps drop, we retire for an evening in the tipi disposing of wine and Bailey's. Tull decides that sleeping in the tipi might be a good idea due to the cold, but years of sleeping in hammocks has rendered him soft and even a stack of three Thermarests isn't enough for his frail body. We worry for his health.

The following morning we head for Pie Island. After a lovely paddle we land and check out the carnage that is Pie Island. I am fairly certain that Pie is a recycling center for Labatt's. How else can one explain the hundreds of bottles of Blue spread about everywhere? That and mattresses. The trail down to Perch Lake is a fine walk and reveals that there has been some sort of competition to see who can sink the most boat hulls into the lake. There are at least half-a-dozen trash-filled hulls filling the lake. Very scenic.

We head on over to Thompson Island, also known as Malibu of the North. OK, I made that up but it may as well be called that. The site is immaculate and one of the plushiest on the lake. The sauna is big, well designed and much less burned down than the others in the island group. We promptly get the sauna fired up and get a serious soak in.

We awoke Saturday morning to rough weather. The forecast was not looking good with "strong" winds set to get "stronger" according to the helpful Canadian forecast. The bay at Thompson Island is very protected from all directions except the northeast. Of course the wind was blowing from the northeast. Some things you can count on. Obviously it was time to take a sauna and mull over our options.

Sea kayaking is a risky sport. Rough conditions necessitate sound judgment gained from experience. By using this judgment one can avoid potentially dangerous situations and paddle another day. Often the wise course of action is to weather out the conditions. And what a wonderful place to be wind bound!

Of course, we had none of this judgment stuff.

Lake Superior weather generally follows a pattern of calm mornings with winds rising in the afternoon. Knowing this, Bill figured a 3:00PM launch would be prudent to increase our time in the sauna and guarantee we paddle in the dark. While normally we follow Bill's suggestions, as he is the true father-hunter, we decide to leave as early as possible. So by the crack of 1:00PM we were on the water.

And what water! Outside of the bay, we paddled into 4-6 foot seas, though if you ask any of us there were some 8 footers mixed in just for the fun of it. If you've never paddled into a wall of water, I highly recommend it. We tucked into the other side of Thompson after about a mile where we are treated to some nice calm water - for about 10 minutes. This is promptly replaced by 2-4 foot following seas. Big sets would roll through and provide enough vroom to make this 11-mile paddle one of the quickest in memory.

Did I mention the driving wind and rain?

We had that too. Cold wind. Cold rain. And yet we paddled on. As we headed over to a small group of islands I noticed an odd sloshing sound in my boat. There's no way my cockpit could be filling with water, I thought, what are the chances of that. A bit later that sloshing was becoming a little too much to ignore. A brief inspection revealed that a wave had knocked off the back of my spray skirt allowing my cockpit to fill up to my knees. Now everyone knows how much fun it is to paddle in a swamped kayak. Now toss some waves into the mix. My thoughts turn to Brewster's new electric bilge pump. Boy, that'd be sweet right about now. After some precarious paddling we reach the shelter of the small islands. Did I say "shelter"; I meant utter lack of shelter. If anything it was windier in the lee of the islands. Smaller waves gave me a chance to pump out the cockpit.

After a refreshing snack we make the final jump over to Sturgeon Bay.

This time we get to enjoy broaching seas. Things were running 3-4 with the occasional fives. Great fun with the rain finding its way into eyes and ears and waves exploding against the boats. We make it into the shelter of the bay in time to see Brock engulfed in a reflected wave. He stays upright and laughs in the face of Misshepezhieu, oh the arrogance!

We head into the protected waters of Sturgeon Bay and are met with a mean headwind, but make it otherwise unscathed to the cars. We decide we are far too hardcore to camp in this foul weather and instead head to Grand Marais for dinner at the Angry Trout and the long ride home.