Thread: Galloway: Second Time Around

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11th-June-2015, 07:31 AM

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It is a sad moment when one of the team retires. After several years of paddling together, you settle into your particular roles out on a trip, you all know what each other will do, and can rely completely on one another. After so many adventures together, the bond becomes a strong one.
We were faced with finding a new member for our Spring trip. It would not be easy. We had put the word out for a new recruit, the CV information was in and the selection process begun. What swung it for Pat (apart from being the only applicant) was his answer to the question:

Q. What do you want to get out of canoe tripping?

A. “Hardship!”

Now, we all know that Bill Mason decreed that the purpose of canoe technique is to avoid adversity. If you encounter hard times, he said, you have failed. But there is another view; if you don’t encounter adversity, you haven’t tried hard enough!

Pat, from the Wicklow Mountains, felt a strong attraction to traditional canoe travel, and was building a canoe, but had almost no paddling experience. The best outing we could think of that would give him a feel for what canoe tripping is all about was the Grand Tour (see here) in Galloway Forest Park. This canoe route has all the necessary elements: river and loch paddling, portaging, route finding and campsite hunting, in good measure. The route links seven lochs by a series of portages and streams, looping round in a big circle leading you back to your starting place. It is a varied and exciting trip in the traditional vein. With miles-long portages, it is not for the faint hearted, but is good for opening your eyes to the possibilities that lie “beyond the trolley”. Andrew and Graham had done the route before (link). For variety, we opted to take the alternative portage from Loch Riecawr to Loch Macaterick, reported previously by MattT and Davy 90, instead of our Loch Gower-Loch Fannie route of last year.
A canoe trip is not merely a line on a map. The whole entity is almost a living thing, a mix of the route, the personalities and the weather, inseparably blended. That’s what makes each one unique. The weather on this trip was of particular concern because the forecast seemed certain that a storm was coming. Fifty-miles-per-hour winds were expected in the North. We started paddling on Wednesday afternoon and the storm was predicted for Saturday, mid day, so we really wanted to get beyond Loch Macaterick and start down the last leg of Black Garpel before the storm hit, and this thought was ever present throughout the trip.

We have had long campfire discussions about whether to publicize route information or not. Do you keep quiet and try to protect a place from damaging traffic, or do you reveal it? We did a beautiful wild trip from Loch Assynt to the sea and now find that it has been adopted by a canoe rental business as a trade route. Why does the thought of it as a “rental route” give us a sense of disquiet? But publicity can be good; with use can come recognition of value by the powers-that-be, and allocation of resources for conservation and improved access. It might also help to integrate paddlers with other land users, as we were to see.

We think the Galloway Grand Tour can only benefit from publicity. It is in an already well used area, especially by week-end campers; the litter and thoughtless camp fires testify to that. The route is sufficiently challenging that it will deter those casual campers who seem to do most of the damage. Rather than cause further degradation, canoe traffic will probably help — we brought some other people’s
litter out, as would most canoe trippers. We decided to produce a route guide which is downloadable from here.

--- Extracts from the Journal ---

We started around mid afternoon at the car park south of the Balloch Castle, paddled the four miles up Loch Doon then portaged up to Loch Finlas. This has to be the prettiest of places with its blue water and spruce-clad ridges, with a hint of wilder land beyond. Our canoes smoothed torpedo-like paths across the wind-ruffled surface. Last year, we camped here well into the trees for shelter; tonight we chose a sunlit little headland, a beautiful spot, but unfortunately a little too obvious, so it had attracted the attention of bottle-and-can campers.
It was around 9pm and already going dim by the time we had tied off the canoes, set up camp and put the dinner on. The last of the sunshine was lighting up the trunks of the pines as we settled down to eat, and watch the sun sink over the water.
Beyond the eastern end of Loch Finlas, the character of the route changes abruptly as you emerge from the trees. The wind rose steadily next morning, and we felt it all the more because we were now out of the shelter of the forest. We were quite relieved to reach the far end of the loch and escape the big waves. The short carry took us across to Derclach Loch which was still breezy but too small to throw up much water. The main problem here is submerged rocks; a constant lookout is needed.
From Derclach Loch, the Waterworks Portage follows a wall across the shoulder of the hill, down to a road, which then leads you up to Loch Braden, and a convenient lunch stop by the dam. This is another handsome loch (as are they all on this trip) especially as the clouds were now melting away and the water had changed from the steel grey of Derclach to deep blue.
On the far side of Loch Braden a fine hard track takes you up to the road, where you need to dodge the occasional vehicle, reminders that this is a working forest. With a canoe over your head, you can’t see them coming, but somehow you can sense that now would be a really good time to step to one side.
It is downhill from here to an insignificant-looking stream on the right. It looks like you should ignore it, but take it anyway because after 100 yards or so it is clear enough to carry you down to a reedy bay where the water opens out into Loch Riecawr. Last time we were here, three heavy-looking gentlemen appeared out of the trees to check us out. When it was clear that we were just as keen as them to keep the place pristine, they showed a friendly interest in our trip and left us in peace. Today, as we crossed the portage for the second time with the canoes, we saw that some guys had found our cached packs in the trees. Alarm. When we got close, we found it was the same team, The Protectors, and they recognised us from last year, and seemed pleased to see us again.
Packing your gear so that everything is in its place, and nothing gets left behind is quite an art. Ticklists work pretty well, but there is a hidden danger point just waiting to get you; changing vehicles en route. Sooner or later it will happen, and on this trip it did. Graham’s daybag got left behind in a transfer. The most significant item now conspicuous by its absence was the roll of duct tape for canoe repair. This might not seem such a big deal, but if you have a canvas-covered canoe and are heading for rocky streams where a nick is likely, it certainly gives you food for thought. As if sensing our vulnerability, a rock lunged for the Peterborough in the stream coming down to Loch Riecawr, water started coming in, we had a leak. With no duct tape to mend the hole, we needed an alternative. A hunt through the spruces around our camp revealed what Graham was looking for — a tree that had a pronounced bend, where it had half fallen in a storm, but then changed direction to grow straight up. At the bend, abnormal stresses had split the trunk, and the tree had repaired itself with resin. The tree was also to repair the canoe. Graham prised some of the resin out of the split, melted it in a tin with some charcoal from our fire, and daubed it on the gash. Once set, it was sanded smooth with a mildly abrasive stone. Job done.
We had given Pat a gear list prior to the trip and he had, amazingly, acquired the lot in 48hrs, even picking up items on his journey through to Scotland. We gave him the guide weight of 17kg for his pack. Amusingly, he had interpreted this as 17kg of gear and had seemingly brought an equal weight of food. We had never seen anything quite like his rucksack full of onions, potatoes, carrots, parsnips, apples and slabs of bacon. We ate well. There were so many vegetables left over that the best idea seemed to be to plant them at our Riecawr camp to provide a harvest on our next trip!
Now we moved into unfamiliar territory. We headed for the lowest point on the horizon at the south-west end of Loch Riecawr which seemed the best place to find the stream coming down from Loch Slochy. The portage route was clear and straightforward, and very interesting, first up the stream, then along its side where it rocked out.
Loch Slochy is a secretive sort of place, but looked a bit thirsty today. A stream led
out of the far side, which took the canoe for a while, then it was along a clear firebreak to meet up with a stream running into Loch Macaterick. What a classic portage!

The moss hereabouts is strange. When stepped on it springs back only slowly. This gave a very interesting effect when carrying a canoe overhead tandem. Being at the back, looking down, you could see the vegetation recoiling from the steps of the front person some time after they had moved on. It was like sharing the carry with the Invisible Man.

The forest had again been protecting us from the rising wind. It was Friday evening and the predicted storm was now only hours away. Emerging from shelter, it was wild out on Loch Macaterick forcing us to make a rather hurried landing and head into the trees to find a storm-proof camp. Andrew found just the spot, which after a bit of clearing of eye-pokers shaped up rather nicely. It started to rain and really blow, and the weather concerned us. Conditions outside the forest turned foul. Urgent fragments of text came through the static of a very intermittent phone signal.
“Get started by 6am tomorrow............... get off the water by 8.........”

Checking down by the water later on, we were confronted by a Green Man seemingly rising up out of the lake, like something out of an Arthurian legend. Then another. Just when we started to doubt our sanity, the pair introduced themselves: Donald and Doogie, wilderness fly fishermen, wading the fringes of the lochs at dusk looking for sport, clearly not at all put off by the gale and slanting rain. On seeing our canoes, they piped up “ Oh yes, this is a canoe route now isn’t it. We saw details on Song of the Paddle!” They seemed genuinely excited to see us and have a chat about the boats and our trip. We, in turn, were fascinated by their adventurous approach to their sport. This warm fisherman/canoeist concord left a lasting impression on us — the way things ought always to be. We can’t help thinking that prior publicity of the route has helped here, maybe “legitimising” our presence in their eyes. We were on an adventure of our own, not simply trolling around getting in their way.
We did get up at 6am and got packed and off straight away. The Loch now had its angry face on. We used the shelter of islands to get safely across to the start of Black Garpel, non too soon, and the route back down to Loch Doon and the car. The first part of the river is very exposed, with nothing to protect us from the hail squalls that swept across from time to time. These were good times to have the canoe over your head. We reached the edge of the forest by 10am and ducked inside for a sheltered breakfast.
Various discussions kept us entertained during the portages down to Loch Doon, and made the distance pass quickly. Whilst talking about free style canoeing, or canoe ballet, we saw no reason why the concept shouldn’t be extended to portaging. There is no need just to slog along; why not carry your gear with style and grace; could the carry be developed into an artform? You could do high stepping, a bit of prancing, the odd twirl, and we thought of other variations that are perhaps best left to the imagination. There are strong parallels with the equine world — with dressage. In fact, regarding the term “portage”, we propose that the English/American pronunciation "port-idge" be used for the basic process of carrying boats and gear, while the French-Canadian pronunciation "port-arge", echoing dressage, be used to denote this more stylised and personal expression of self.
We happened across a smooth spot near the end of the route overlooking Loch Doon, which was too good to pass and provided the perfect spot for a final camp, tucked in a corner behind a sheltering wall of trees.

We had again thoroughly enjoyed this great canoe route. Pat had really taken to it and seemed equally at home balanced on tussocks under a canoe, or up to his waist in a stream (or paddling, for that matter). For Andrew and Graham, the route had a completely different feel from the first time we had done it. Then we were finding our way, around every bend was an adventure. This time we knew the portage points, campsites, where to head for, what to avoid. The sense of familiarity was charming, we could relax and just enjoy the surroundings.

We missed the lure of the unknown of course.

Andrew (Borgwitha)
Graham (Moosehead)
Pat
Moosehead Canoes and Paddles

www.scottishcanoeroutes.info

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11th-June-2015,  08:43 AM

Mal Grey  
Way beyond established member

Great stuff, as always.
The tree resin canoe repair bit was brilliant.
I love these trips, and the map and guide are really impressive.

Covering as many malmiles as possible before being distracted by the pub! 🍺

Paddle Points - where to paddle

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11th-June-2015,  08:47 AM

Biff  
More posts than a more established member

Another great Moosehead Adventure - adventurous as always. You'll have to write a book!
Great read, great photo's.
You always seem to get the weather - sometimes all in the same day!

Thanks for sharing,
Biff

'I can gather all the news I need on the weather report...'
Great blog and very well written, though the trip does sound like hard work!

This was my favourite bit:

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Brilliant. 🤙

Dressage with boats.

Can we have a video please, of some early performance of this new art form?
Your trips and blogs always deliver - super stuff! Must get back up there.

No clothes peg innovations on this one but a bit of old school canoe repair and the idea of port-age prancing, perhaps to song and even synchronised in teams, what with Magikelly's recent paddle twirling, I can see a certain flamboyance creeping into the SOTP community 😝

my canoe movies

Nice One Guys
Another fabulous read just like 100 paddle designs which I am thoroughly enjoying (Thanks Graham)
Cheers😊
Alick

Awesome nice read!😊
I do really enjoy these blogs, so much that we have decided to do it next year, hopefully when the weather is on our side. Keep the blogs coming 😊

😊 😊 *If in doubt, hit it with a hammer!! 😊 😊*

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I recognise loads of that...amazing where exploring Galloway by bike for four years takes you...

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A Beautifully written account of this great trip.
A particular "well done" is due to the novice tripper, Pat, who seems to have fitted right in to the rhythms of this type of journey. I bet he got loads of knowledge and enjoyment from it.

Top stuff by all concerned.

MarkL
and I am here ... 
and you are there ... 
and a thousand miles between.

Just excellent.... And your map is stunning. Inspiring. Thanks.

"Thus we lead a life of pleasure
Thus we while the hours away"

from Thoreau, Voyager's Song