



WREAF 2011 Expedition Report

“HEART OF THE BOREAL FOREST”

Prepared by Rob Mullen

For the Canadian Boreal Initiative (CBI) September 4, 2011



“Red 124” – a Force 5 wildfire heading straight for the WREAF expedition crew August 2

A summary of a month long canoe expedition in the Boreal Forest of north-western Ontario and an explanation of why the original plan to continue into Manitoba to Lake Winnipeg on the Bloodvein River had to be abandoned in favor of remaining within the southern section of Woodland Caribou Provincial Park

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Expedition Dates: August 2 – August 29, 2011

Route: a circuit of lakes within Woodland Caribou Provincial Park, including: Leano – Bunny – Hansen – Mexican Hat – Wrist – Aegean – Elephant Head and finally back to Bunny and Leano Lakes (see map in attachments)

(Originally the “Bloodvein River Expedition – Heart of the Boreal”)

Crew:

- **Dawn Banning**, ON
- **Julia Hargreaves**, BC
- **Gary, Joanie and Sila McGuffin**, ON
- **Rob Mullen**, VT/QC
- **Luna**, ON (the McGuffin’s malamute)

Financial support from the *Canadian Boreal Initiative* (CBI)

Additional financial, logistical and publicity support from:

1. *Goldseekers Canoe Outfitters*,
2. *Woodland Caribou Provincial Park*,
3. *Chimo Air Service*,
4. *Sabourin Lake Lodge*,
5. *CPAWS*



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Special Preface

Fire is a critical regenerative force in the Boreal Forest. I have been well aware of this, but not focused on it until USGS Research Ecologist James Vogelmann underscored the issue at our conference in Washington DC this past April. Consequently (and ironically) we were hoping to record some evidence of fire and forest succession stages on this expedition. Due to the drying influence of the prairies to the west, this region of the Boreal Forest has a higher incidence of natural fire than any other part of the ecosystem. As Joanie and I spent part of the afternoon of August 1 with Woodland Caribou Provincial Park Superintendent, Doug Gilmore going over maps for the park among other advice, he mentioned a small fire south of our route, but assured us that it was not a worry.

Our plan was to put in at Lund Lake August 2 with a week's worth of food and paddle to Sabourin Lake Lodge where Albert Rogalinski of Goldseekers Outfitters had arranged for Chimo Air to drop the balance of our month's supplies and the lodge owners had invited us to stay for a night. From there, we would continue to Artery Lake with its remarkable pictographs and then to continue on the Bloodvein River to the village of Bloodvein on Lake Winnipeg where we would be hosted to a feast August 29, organized by the Bloodvein First Nation and CPAWS. With the excitement of starting out and the work of portaging, I don't recall how smoky Lund Lake was, but there was no forgetting the "Dantesque" sci-fi atmosphere on the second lake. We paddled on, optimistically making camp despite the stubbornly contrary evidence of warm ash and burnt spruce needles that fell from the foreboding amber sky.

The black helicopter arrived in the morning. We were told to turn back immediately and rendezvous with Park personnel who would take us back to Red Lake. The small fire to the south of our route that Superintendent Gilmore had mentioned had "exploded" through 15,000 acres the day before and was raging into one of the largest fires in decades (now designated "Red 124"). It was blocking our route to the Bloodvein and its south face was racing directly toward us. Forest fires are rated on a force scale of 1 – 5; "Red 124" was a Force 5.

Back in Red Lake, we conferred with Superintendent Gilmore, Albert and the Park's biologist about our options. We could still access the Bloodvein via the Gammon River from the south, but that would reduce our painting time by nearly a week. Moreover, the consensus was that there was a high probability that Manitoba would instate a back country travel ban in which case we would face a logistical nightmare. Speaking of logistics, our food drop had already been delivered to Sabourin Lake, complicating all scenarios and threatening to swamp our budget.

However, Park personnel (from Superintendent Gilmore on down), Albert and Kelly of Goldseekers Outfitters and the owners of Sabourin Lake Lodge and Chimo Air all worked to not only preserve the goals of the expedition, but did it at no additional cost. Our food was returned, a new route worked out, new maps and fire updates provided, cultural sites identified and transport arranged so that we missed only one day, putting back in on Leano Lake on August 5.

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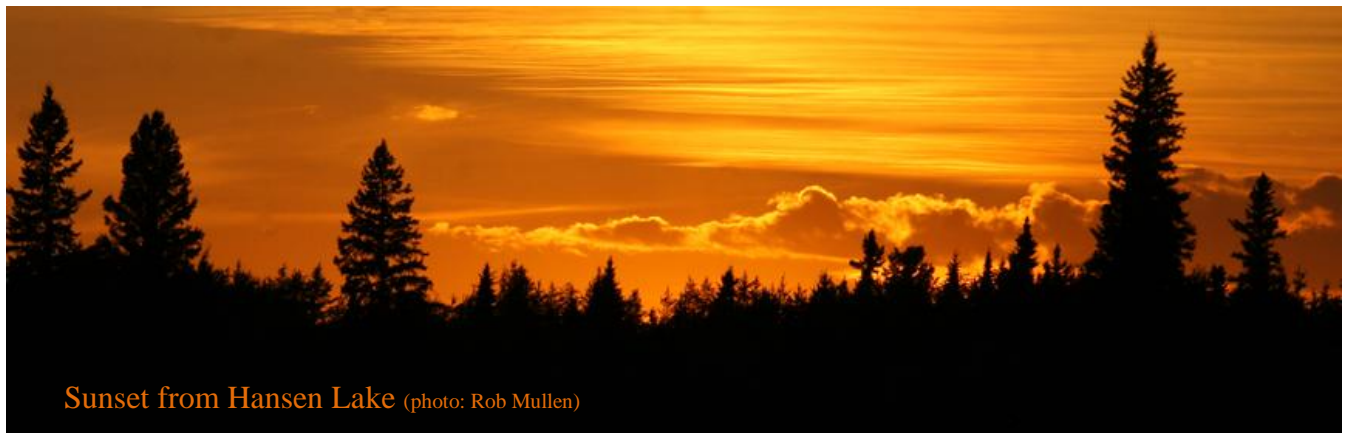


Background

In January 2011, CBI Executive Director Larry Innes asked me if WREAF could put together a crew of artists for an August expedition to help publicize the proposed **Pimachiowin Aki** UNESCO World Heritage Site east of Lake Winnipeg. **Pimachiowin Aki** (“The Land the Gives Life”) is an initiative of five Anishinabe First Nations to gain protection for their cultural heartland; a region about the size of Denmark that is totally within the largest block of intact forest left on Earth. This region not only offers sustenance and cultural revival for the Anishinabe, but is of universal cultural, ecological and spiritual value (hence the UNESCO effort); it also arguably forms the “Heart” of the Boreal Forest.

WREAF is working with the **Smithsonian Institution’s** National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) on a tripartite exhibition of Boreal Forest science, art and aboriginal perspectives and such an expedition would fit wonderfully with it. Accordingly, I started discussing route and crew options within the Pimachiowin Aki project area with one of WREAF’s Canadian canoeing experts, Gary McGuffin. We settled on the Bloodvein River as a means of targeting both publicity goals for Pimachiowin Aki and our exhibition objectives.

The Bloodvein is already a *Canadian Heritage River*, rich in aboriginal history and a highly regarded wilderness whitewater river among the paddling community and so seemed a good candidate to build awareness of where **Pimachiowin Aki** is, what it has been and what it can be. For WREAF’s NMNH exhibition goals, in addition to expanding the geographic scope of WREAF’s expeditions to a purely Boreal Forest river (most of our other expeditions have included ecological transition zones) and the artwork that would come of an expedition anywhere in the region, the Bloodvein in particular offered a specific benefit in the opportunity to film some exciting whitewater sequences to use in possible immersive visual exhibition displays.



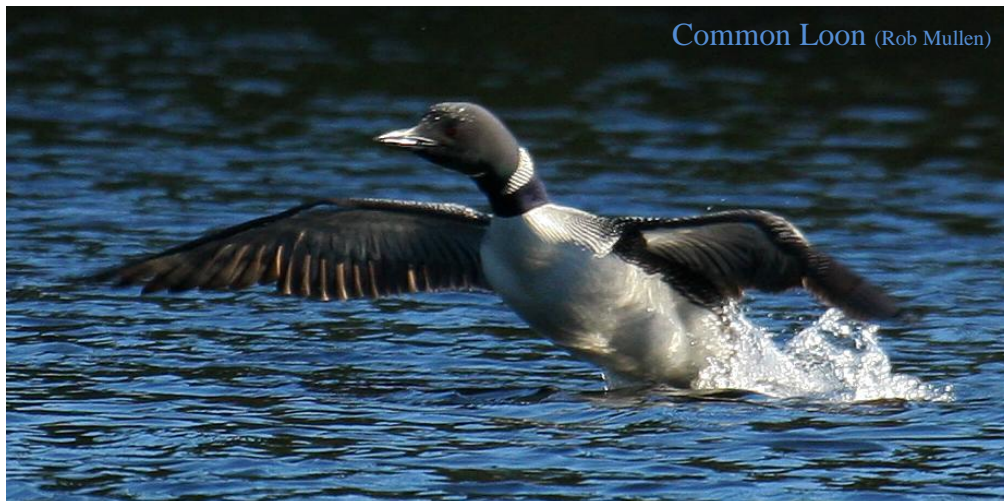
Sunset from Hansen Lake (photo: Rob Mullen)

Goals

1. Generate publicity for Pimachiowin Aki UNESCO World Heritage Site proposal
2. Produce artwork for NMNH Boreal Forest exhibition
3. Expand geographic coverage of WREAF expeditions in support of NMNH Boreal Forest exhibition to include a river completely within the Boreal Forest
4. Record Anishinabe cultural artefacts and pictographs
5. Film forest succession stages relating to fire and whitewater action sequences for possible immersive NMNH exhibition displays

Methods

1. Recruit diverse crew of artists, including Anishinabe painters, carvers or photographers
2. Travel a newsworthy route within the Pimachiowin Aki project area.
3. Coordinate with NGO's, government, corporations and First Nations on publicity
 - a. CPAWS had arranged for a welcoming feast/media event at Bloodvein First Nation upon the completion of the journey on August 29



Outcomes

1. *Publicity*

- a. Prior to the expedition, I wrote CBI and every individual member of the Board of Directors for the Pimachiowin Aki project requesting suggestions on publicity coordination. To date I have had no responses to any of those inquiries, but hope that with the completion of the expedition, some will be forthcoming
- b. Immediately prior to the expedition, I wrote press releases which were forwarded to CBI and CPAWS and the crew gave interviews to the local paper in Red Lake, ON. I followed up with a new press release following our evacuation by the Park Service. I do not know what was done with those press releases and so have no information on press coverage of the expedition in Winnipeg or elsewhere apart from the local coverage we participated in directly. “The Northern Sun News” of Wednesday August 10, ran an article on the expedition’s evacuation and second outset and goals and we are following up with the reporter on the aftermath of the trip
- c. The two new artists on the crew (Dawn Banning and Julia Hargreaves) will coordinate with press outreach in their areas (southern ON and BC)
- d. Several of our other expeditions have been covered by national media (magazines, newspapers and CBC radio) and “Red 124” may help generate similar coverage. Joanie McGuffin is writing an account, as I will and we will seek to have them published as widely as possible. We can also provide art, photography and firsthand accounts for other writers should media sources prefer.
- e. Our evacuation on August 3 precluded being able to do the Bloodvein and therefore unfortunately forced us to cancel the Bloodvein feast event. However, our revised itinerary was still totally within the Pimachiowin Aki project area and the fire and subsequent evacuation provide their own dramatic storylines and tie into an important ecological factor in the Boreal Forest that we have meant to focus on more – and now have firsthand experience of. Woodland Caribou Provincial Park personnel are cooperating with us to provide images of the fire itself (which we were not allowed to approach any nearer than we already had been)



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2. Artwork

- a. The scenery and weather along our second route was superb. Photographer Gary McGuffin said this one month journey surpassed three seasons of photography in Quetico Provincial Park he and Joanie spent for their latest book. The three painters on the crew (including me) have already produced a large body of plein air field work and are starting on studio pieces. From an artistic standpoint, the change from the Bloodvein River had no negative effect at all; in fact it may have been a benefit.
- b. Despite months of effort, we were unable to recruit an aboriginal artist for the crew. We will continue to try to do so for subsequent expeditions, especially any into this area since we have an excellent painter in mind

3. Heart of the Boreal

- a. As noted above, despite the complete reworking of our route, we were still totally within the Pimachiowin Aki project area and also totally within the Boreal Forest. While we did not proceed west into Manitoba, we did accomplish the goal of an expedition that remained totally within the forest without straying into transition zones.
- b. In fact, the highland plateau we were on, with its intricate pattern of intimate lakes and streams from which several rivers arise, felt very much the heart and core of the region

(photo below by Rob Mullen)



4. *Anishinabe cultural resources*

- a. One main attraction of the Bloodvein River was that it has the highest concentration of aboriginal pictographs in Canada, including the fabulous sites on Artery Lake. The fires forced us to miss those, however, Park Superintendent Doug Gilmore sat down with us and identified many other sites within the Park that we could (and did) access
- b. In addition to pictograph sites, using our collective field experience (artistically focused as it is) we kept watch for other potential cultural sites. We identified several possible tool working sites and camp areas which we reported to Park authorities
- c. We postulated an alternative use for what had been pointed out to us as a possible “fish trap” on Hansen Lake. The semicircular arc of boulders, open to the lake and tapering toward the shore (highest facing the forest), seemed more likely a blind meant to hide hunters’ silhouettes from swimming caribou. Sitting in it making a sketch, I had a panoramic view of the narrows and there were caribou tracks on the beach nearby that had come from the lake (obviously having swum across)
- d. We found numerous tool working flakes, two tools (a probable scraper and another scraper or projectile point blank) and a shard of pottery. The notable pieces were photographed, locations carefully noted on maps and/or GPS and left where found

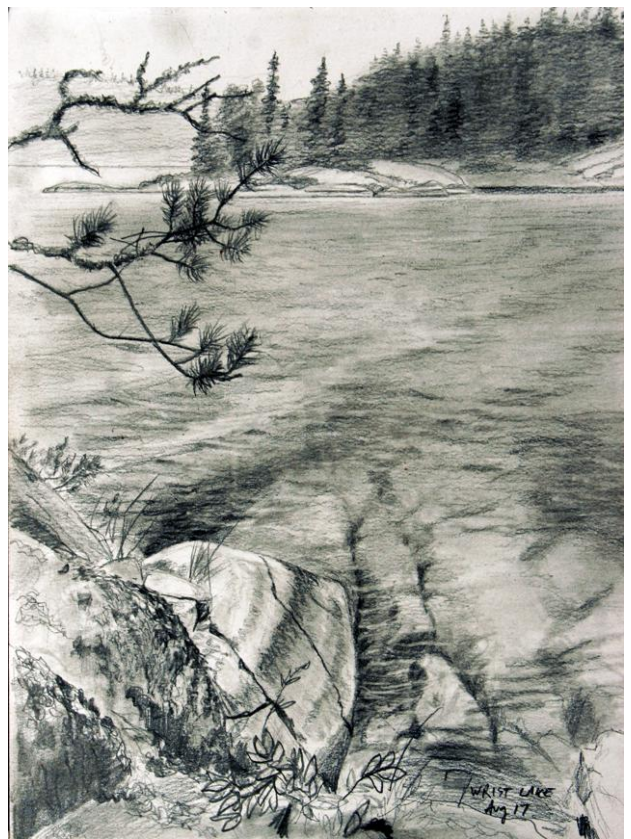
5. *Filming forest regeneration stages and*

whitewater run – Forest regeneration images were easy to obtain and correlate with the fire maps provided by the Park. The whitewater filming will have to wait. Software difficulties with the camera rendered it not such an issue and there will be ample opportunities to shoot what we want; on a return to the Bloodvein or on another river

Pencil field study that lead to exhibition idea for

“Journeys in the Boreal Forest” Travel, Transformations and Transitions in the North American Wilderness

Wrist Lake, August 17, 2011 (by Rob Mullen)



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Conclusions

The “Heart of the Boreal Forest Expedition” met or exceeded four and a half of our five main goals despite the complete disruption caused by “Red 124”. This was largely due to the enormous generosity of Goldseekers Outfitting, Woodland Caribou Provincial Park personnel, Chimo Air and others. This is the second expedition in a row to face enormous difficulties once underway and yet be successfully completed and so also, once again, underscores the skills, experience, resourcefulness, tenacity, flexibility, respect and contacts that WREAF crews bring into the wilderness.

The one goal that was not met – the whitewater footage – was the least essential and can be accomplished at a later date. Of the four goals that were met:

1. The artwork (plein air art, photography and reference for studio work) possibly surpassed what we could likely have done on the Bloodvein because of the slower pace and lack of technical paddling. The new artist members of WREAF, Dawn Banning and Julia Hargreaves were superb additions to the crew, producing plein air work and already at the easels; I am anticipating a lot of good work from them both
2. It is premature to assess publicity since most of it will be generated in the coming weeks and months and is dependant to some degree on cooperation of other interested parties whom we are waiting to hear from. However, it is reasonable to hope that the national news of the highly active fire season in general and our dramatic encounter with “Red 124” in particular, will more than make up for having to (temporarily) cancel our welcoming feast with the Bloodvein First Nation.
3. The geographic goal of the expedition was not affected in any meaningful way apart from not reaching Manitoba. We did learn that the region is one of the finest paddling destinations any of us have ever seen. A river journey here would be sublime.
4. The goal of seeing and gaining a sense of the scope and history of Anishinabe presence was no doubt affected to some degree. We were unable to meet with the Anishinabe in Bloodvein and missed the most famous cultural sites at Artery Lake. However, we succeeded in other ways as referred to earlier in this report and through serendipitous meetings with other Anishinabe residents, we now have permission (required) from Pauingassi First Nation elder Joe Owen to paddle the Berens River in the northern reaches of the Pimachiowin Aki region.

The success of this expedition notwithstanding, given the extensive examples of Boreal ecology and culture in the region, I believe that **it would be very useful to return to paddle the Bloodvein, Poplar and/or the Berens Rivers**. We would be able to fill in the few gaps from this trip and build on our experience and the contacts we have made in order to solidify and expand on the original goals of this expedition.