

**T**hey said in Minnesota there were mosquitoes big enough to carry a man away, that the Minnesota state bird was really a member of the terrible Culicidae family. Never mind the bears and wolves, they said, "it's the 'skeeters that'll kill ya." We believed them, too. Many times as boys, while trying to tempt wily trout out from under rooty overhangs we felt as if the flock of them, whining and attacking around us, would pick us up and drop us in the stream, spooking all of the fish. While canoeing less remote waters, we often thought that the sheer energy produced by all those millions of flapping wings would push us off course and send us into the "bad water." Our boyhood fears of mosquitoes were thankfully never realized, but we might have underestimated the bears.

I rang my long-time adventure companion to sell him on yet another expedition I had dreamed up. And I was sure he would go for it. You see, we have been doing this since the first time we collaborated on a panty and shaving cream raid on the girls' dormitory at summer camp, when we were twelve or thirteen years old. It never mattered who initiated the idea, the other was almost always game.

I gave my buddy a call one Monday morning. He instinctively knew by my opening that I had something in the proverbial crock-pot.

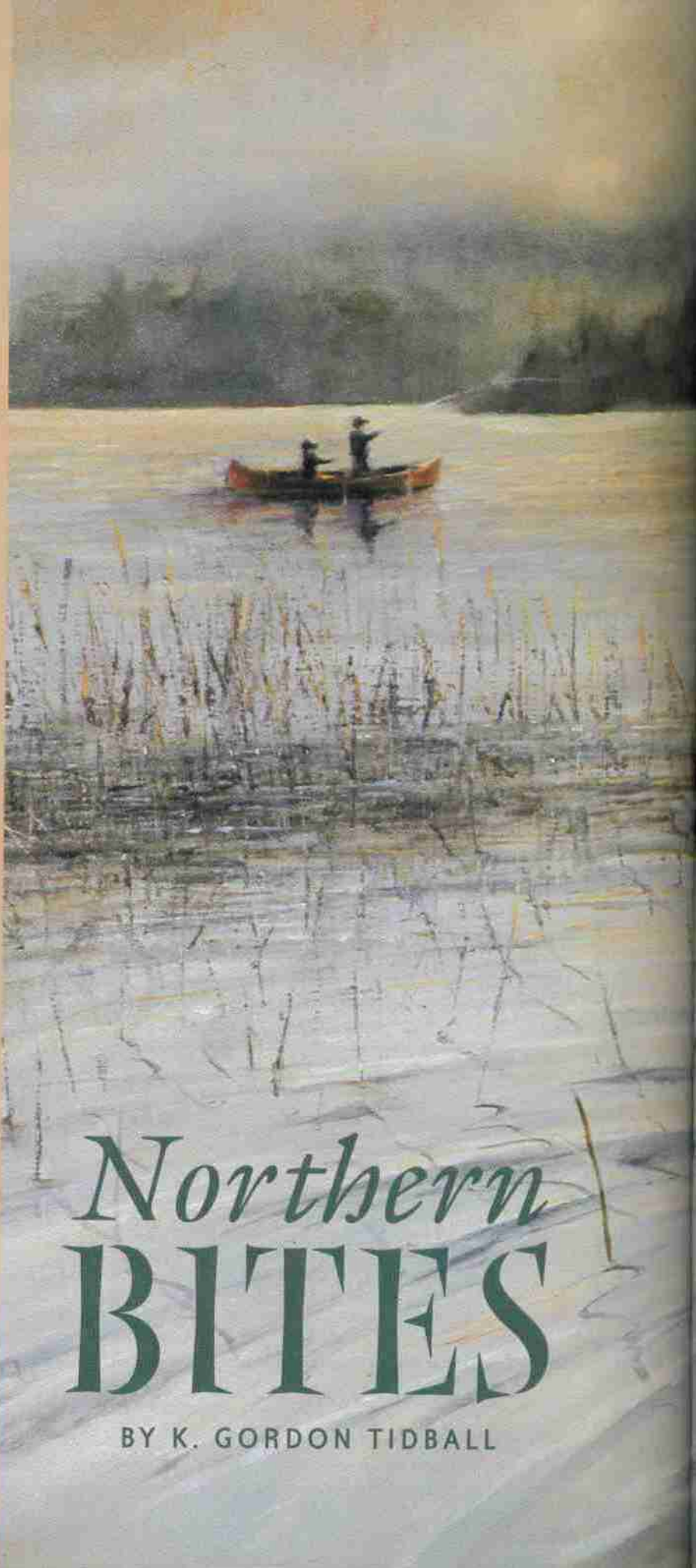
"I've got an idea."

"Figured you did. Where and when?"

"Minnesota. Boundary Waters. Canoeing in pristine wilderness, wolf and moose filled forests, and Loch-Ness-monster sized pike, and they keep it pure and primitive."

"Fly-fishing?" he asked skeptically.

My reply was sheepish. "Nah. I thought we'd just bombard the placid



# Northern BITES

BY K. GORDON TIDBALL

waters with good ole' red and white Daredevils, you know, spoons man, like when we were kids..."

"Hmm...for how long?"

"Four days in August, after the mosquitoes die down."

"Good thinking," my compatriot said. "I'm in."

"Good, I'll call you in a week or two with details. We'll be there before we know it!"

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, in northeastern Minnesota's Superior National Forest, is part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. As its name implies, this more than a million acre woods extends nearly 150 miles along the Canadian border, adjacent to the Quetico Provincial Park. The Boundary Waters wilderness contains several thousand portage-linked lakes and streams, interspersed with islands, forests, and crags. Of course, as part of the Wilderness Preservation System, the area is strictly regulated to ensure preservation of the wilderness feel. Reservations and permits are required to control the amount of visitor use and impacts, and there are rules and regulations that are enforced to ensure the preservation of the area's primitive characteristics. This means no prepared shelters, no piped water, and no signs to point the way. And no bottles or cans either, which makes it tough on a guy who likes a libation or two after a hard day afield or on lake or stream.

We arrived at Sawbill Lake Outfitters, also the site of a National Forest campground, a rag tag duo with what could be accurately described as "no-earthly-idea" about Boundary Waters canoeing; these long-haul, portage filled, self-contained and self-sufficient tests of wilderness savvy. One look at us and the wizened guardian of this particular portal into God's country immediately conjured up a "more realistic" first expedition into the Boundary Waters. "What's wrong with canvas?" we protested. We, the old-school sporting types cum back-country neophytes, lacked featherweight tents and sleeping bags and space age stoves that burn humidity and all the other supposedly prerequisite gadgetry. Also, we lacked appropriate funds to rent said items. But the kick-

er was that we couldn't bring a cooler on the canoe full of Hamm's beer, or any beer for that matter, unless it was in recyclable milk cartons.

So making a base camp at the National Forest campground started to make sense. We could live in relatively greater comfort than we could "out there" and still make long day trips by canoe into the millions of acres of pike filled waters. Now, lest you get the idea that some tender-footed pansy-ness was at work here, we were still roughing it. The outfitter's little shop, where one could buy beer and bait and junk food, was 600 yards away, and it closed at 7:00 PM. Other than that, it

was an hour to the next civilization. We weren't as remote as we had originally fantasized, but we were definitely off the beaten track, and we were deep enough for bears.

For three full days, the mosquitoes were practically nonexistent and the pike fishing was spectacular. It was as if these toothy beasts from the primordial waters were waiting for hun-

dreds of years to lash out at modernity, at plastics and machine-stamped metal things. The spoons worked well. The soft, rubbery offerings worked pretty well, too. But to really agitate these atavists, a Mister Twister, one of the grape ones, attached to a spinner, was the perfect combination of soft and hard, of dark and bright, of injection mold plastic and fabricated metal. It was the epitome of the "Technological Now," spinning and gurgling and gyrating right through their lairs, provoking the meanest of visceral, bone-jarring strikes.

Typically, we would canoe to the end of Sawbill Lake, not in any big hurry, but purposefully. This was to get away from the few people enjoying the lake from the campground, and to get to weedier water. We'd take in the scenery, becoming enthralled with the song of a White-throated Sparrow, or the methodical grazing of the moose. Then, a short portage over a beaver dam got us into pike country, and the hunt was on. We'd slowly drift through the shallows, right along the weed beds, looking for drop-offs and other inviting looking places, places we would hang out if we were pike. We got pret-

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ty good at this, and more times than not, our anthropomorphic treatments of these water wolves proved right. A brief conversation would occur, something like "That looks good" answered by, "Yep," or "Here we go..." followed by "Uh-huh" in reply. These were weighty conversations, distilled into concise phrases by the necessity of the concentration required when in pursuit of game.

We went slow, methodically moving the bails of our spinning reels, making deliberate casts, pausing a moment or two, and then beginning our retrieves. This had more to do with savoring the anticipation and exhilaration than with some sort of practiced proficiency. We were spell-bound by the possibility, and then the reality, of being struck by lightning, of being hit by a freight train, of feeling the force and impact of the wilderness when it decided to give you a wallop.

There was the sound of the lure splashing, maybe a loon in the background somewhere, and then the whirring sound of the reel; of the out-of-place man-made Machine in the wilderness, orchestrating the invasion of the pike's domain. And then, "WHAM!" Sure, you might be expecting it, but it still scares the daylight out of you, the same on the first time as on the fiftieth. The lightning strikes at the end of your line, travels up the monofilament, through the graphite rod, and right into the flesh and blood of your Homo Sapiens city-dwelling fingers, hands, arms, and guts. Welcome to the wilderness, and boy does it feel good.

The fights are even, sometimes the pike winning, sometimes the person. When we won, we were amazed at the teeth, at the anger in the eyes, at the torpedo shaped angularity of the body, and the commando coloring. We gingerly unhooked them, using pliers and sometimes gloves, and let most of them return to their lairs. A few came with us for supper, the medium sized ones. But in a way, they all came with us. After a dinner of beer-batter fried fish, try as we might, the unique smell of a Northern Pike that lives in a weedy slough stays on the hands. And the sense and memory of lightning-strike stays in the heart. After such a dinner, one stares into the fire for a few minutes and begins to tell stories of the day, of the way these pike make war, of their ferocity and mettle.

These stories become epic after a few beers, as they did this particular night, the last night of our trip. We spoke of the noble pike and his warrior cousin, the Muskellunge. We spoke of other noble beasts of the boreal forests, the Wolverines, the Badgers, the Wolves

and Bears. We spoke too of noble men, some we knew and some we would never meet. And we spoke of our families, of hearth and home, closing the circle, bringing meaning back to the ancient art of the pursuit of game. These were the same weighty conversations held earlier, but unconstrained by concentration and liberated by hops, water and grain. At least we thought they were weighty. But the weightiness of the conversations, at last, could not out-weigh the weight of our eyelids, and it was time to retire one last night to our canvass tent. We sat and listened for a final few moments to the loons laughing out on Sawbill Lake before turning in. Never a sleep so sound.

Most anyone who has spent much time at all at tail-gate parties, fraternity parties, on bass boats, or in ice-fishing shacks is intimately familiar with the distinct sound of a hand in a cooler stirring the ice and cans around looking for the coldest or the right brand of beverage. This sound is much like the bell in Pavlov's dog experiments. It means something powerful, and triggers reactions, most of which have to do with quenching thirst.

At about 3:15 AM I heard this ice-hands-and-cans-in-the-cooler noise, somewhere off in the distance of my sleeping bliss. Twice I heard it, the second time more vigorously. I was a bit reluctant to leave such perfect slumber, and was in that delightful stupor of "sleeping out" and smelling damp earth and woody air, but the proverbial bell was ringing, and at the wrong hour at that. Suddenly I was brought sharply to immediate wakefulness. I heard "The Sound," an aural signal much stronger than the ice and can stirring cooler sound. This was the sound of a can being opened, that crisp release of pressurized air mixed with just a bit of moisture. "The Sound." I sat straight up in my sleeping bag, eyes wide open, ears primed to hear the faintest noise. After a few moments I whispered "Hear that?"

"Yep," my buddy replied. Awake as I was. The noise we created caused a stirring out at the picnic table where we stupidly left the cooler, where the intruder was opening our remaining beer.

A hundred thoughts were coursing through my brain. "How many beers were left?" "Is it that Harley-riding couple a few campsites down?" "Should I just be cool and let them go, or should I be a good American and stand up for my rights?" And then again, "che-cunk," "The Sound." "That's two..." my buddy said in a low surly whisper. I said nothing, and kept listening. I heard gulping and slurping distinctly now. "This guy is

just guzzling our beers! Talk about a raid..." I thought. I heard an empty can, discarded, rattle a bit in the grass and sticks on the ground. And a third time, "*The Sound*." "That's it!" I said out-loud. I could take no more of this insult, this breach of sporting ethics and campground common-law. This reproachful act of spite and thievery was about to be addressed. I grabbed my flashlight and noticed my buddy move to prop himself up on one arm, rubbing sleep out of his eye with his other hand. I crawled out of my bag, unzipping it as I went, and then positioned myself in front of the tent door. I hesitated, clearing my throat. Surely I had made enough noise to warn the perpetrator outside of my coming. I mean, beer is important, but not worth getting sluggish over necessarily.

Theatrically, I unzipped the tent flap and heard my buddy guffaw a little, but I valiantly pressed on and stepped out of the tent. I said, "Hey, you over there..."

as I turned the lens on my flashlight towards the dark, bent-over shape to illuminate the scoundrel. At first, he seemed to not notice me, and then he turned towards me. I froze. He froze. The beer can fell to the ground. I said, "Oh crap!" in a higher than normal, urgent whisper.

My buddy queried from inside the tent "Is he big?" "Oh yeah." I replied.

"What's he look like?" my buddy inquired, mentally sizing up our foe. I could hear him getting out of his bag. I was still frozen in place, staring the thief in the face.

"Uh...he's big and black." I heard my buddy at the tent door.

"That's strange. Really?" he said.

"Yep. See him?" I said, still shining the light.

"No...Oh...yeah...Oh crap!!" he said loudly.

"That's what I said."

This was about enough commotion for the marauder. He rose up, propping up against the picnic table. And then we hear another sound. Beyond surround-sound. In all the years of listening to and watching bear footage and hearing their primeval grunts and bellows recorded and digitally replayed, we had certainly never heard this before. He roared. At us. Loudly. From the cavernous cavity behind his waggling uvula we could feel the air heaving toward us.

At this, we both ducked back into the tent, muttering various vulgarities under our breath. My buddy grabbed me by the shirt and said excitedly "Why didn't you tell me it was a bear?"

"I was gettin' to it," I explained.

"A freakin' huge black bear drinking our beer. Now what?"

"Hell if I know. All I know is that we only had six or seven beers left for tomorrow."

"Well, the way I see it, we've got three options. One, we let him drink our beer. Two, we see if we can join him. And three, you try to scare him away."

"Me? What about you?"

"Both of us, I mean."

"Right. Well, I don't like option one and two."



"Me neither."

As this conversation was finishing, the bear opened yet another beer. This made our decision even easier and more obvious. It was time to shoo away that big ole' bear. We screwed up our courage, and looked at each other wide-eyed like two Airborne Rangers about to jump out of a plane at 20,000 feet to almost certain death. "Ready?" I said.

"Ready."

"We'll just go out together and scream and yell at him."

"Great plan. Let's go."

We slowly pulled the tent flap back, and could see the bear, facing away from us. He had the most recently opened can of beer long-ways in his mouth, his teeth embedded in the aluminum, head tilted back, tongue working inside of his mouth against the can, lapping the beer that drizzled out from the puncture holes. He looked awfully silly and not too mean, but he was certainly huge.

In unison, we stood and made the most fierce growling-roaring-yelling-screaming racket we could muster, running at the bear with our hands over our heads to make us taller. The bear whirled around with lightening quickness and jumped up onto the picnic table with startling agility. Now he looked positively enormous.

The angered bear opened his massive jaws, beer can still stuck on a tooth, dangling. He snarled and roared loudly back at us, repeatedly, with significantly more vigor and authenticity than our recent attempt. We froze in our tracks, dumb-founded and terrified for a second, arms still above our heads, but feeling useless, and our wide open mouths letting out a different sound now.

"Agghhhhhhh!" we shrieked in unison, a far cry less intimidating than our previous vocal utterances, and characterized mostly by fear and panic. We "turned tail" and made a hasty retreat for the tent. Stopping at the entrance, we turned back to see the bruin. He was looking right at us, and he didn't look at all happy. The bear roared and growled at us again, and we joined the cacophony with our chorus of "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" The three of us, we later learned, livened up the entire lake's pre-dawn wilderness experience considerably.

In a flash, the beer bruin jumped down off of the table and ran straight for us, his shoulders hunching, charging at us rapidly. We stood stalk still as he rushed

us, closer and closer, and I can remember thinking that he had amazing closing speed and would make a good middle line-backer. I also remember thinking I was going to die in a matter of seconds over a few cans of beer. At the last possible moment he veered off, passing close enough by us to touch and smell him. Off he went crashing into the woods, loudly at first, and then all was quiet.

We both stood there for a few moments, still stunned and trying to process our near-death experience. We looked at each other blankly, and then surveyed the battlefield. Punctured aluminum cans lay strewn about, fellow comrades, mowed down mercilessly by the bruin, who would be sorely missed. My buddy shrugged his shoulders and walked over to the cooler, on its side on the ground now, a few beers visible among the ice cubes. He reached down and grabbed two cans, leaving the cooler where it lay. He tossed one of the beers at me. I caught it, barely. He sat down on the picnic table bench and popped the top of his beer. "*The Sound*" broke the tension and the silence and we burst out laughing and exclaiming and swearing and thanking our lucky stars. Dawn was coming, and beer never tasted so good.

From the cavernous cavity behind his waggling uvula, we could feel the air heaving toward us.

K. Gordon Tidball works internationally in sustainable agriculture and natural resources management, which gives him ample opportunity to "acquire writing material." He calls anyplace with cold lakes and streams and a healthy birch and hemlock population home. This is his first *Sporting Tales* contribution. He resides in Washington, DC and writes on occasion for *The Oak*, *The Hazmat Review*, and the *Chaunticleer Convivium*. "I though mostly poetry." He also has published a great deal in the fields of agriculture, natural resources conservation, international affairs, and anthropology.

ACCOMPANYING ARTWORK:

*Bear—Anglers* (pg. 56) oil on canvas, by Bee Booth. This piece is available as original and print. To learn more of this handsome work and others by Bee contact her at 908-285-2690, or log-on to [www.beebooth.com](http://www.beebooth.com), or email [beebooth@yahoo.com](mailto:beebooth@yahoo.com). *Sitting a Spell* (pg. 60) oil on board, by Ken Carlson. For more information on this and others by Ken Carlson please contact Collector's Covey of Dallas, Texas, by phone at 1-800-521-2403, or by logging on to their site at [www.collectorscovey.com](http://www.collectorscovey.com).

# Sporting Tales

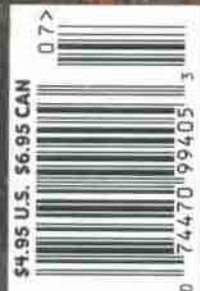
A Celebration of the Sporting Life  
JULY/AUGUST 2009



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COVER: Ridges, watercolor, by Rod Crossman. Available as original 11"x15", and may see printing. Our thanks to Rod for sharing this provocative piece. Learn more about this and other works by calling Rod Crossman Studios, 765-674-6314, or log-on to his web site [www.rod-crossman.com](http://www.rod-crossman.com).

BACK COVER: Night Watch, by Jack Cowin; a hand colored etching. We appreciate artist Jack Cowin and also Collectors Covey of Dallas Texas for making this striking piece available. Learn more of this and other of John's vivid works by calling the Gallery at 800-521-2403, or go online to [www.collectorscovey.com](http://www.collectorscovey.com).

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