

The Time We Crashed The Car

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Bass Fishing

I hope that I can always remember the feeling of being 18 years old. When I was 18, I had a whole lot of energy, I was pretty convincing, and I didn't have many failures under my belt. I was sure that I could do just about anything. I really hope that the acquisition of wisdom never fully drowns this feeling out.

In the summer of 1998, [Nick](#) and I decided to embark on an epic adventure: a week-long trip into the depths of Algonquin Park to camp on the shores of our favorite bass-fishing lake. This lake is like something out of a fairy tale... once you get there. The drive itself is bad enough— the middle of nowhere is where you lose the paved road and the put in isn't until the back of beyond. From there, it's a long, tortuous expedition with lots of long portages and paddles across big lakes, culminating in one massive portage through a swamp full of mosquitoes.

The reward is more than worth it— a gorgeous campsite that people care enough about to maintain, on just about the best bass-fishing lake you'll ever see. To say that the lake is teeming with bass is an egregious understatement. When you paddle on this lake in the sun, the shadow of your canoe shifts with the movement of the bass. When you dip a toe in the water, odds are you'll come up with a fourteen-incher attached to it. While you're reeling in a bass, you can watch several others attempting to bite the lure out of its mouth. I once decided to bring a fly rod to the lake and I caught a bass when I accidentally dipped the fly in the water while putting the rod together.

The plan was to take a week off from our respective summer jobs and to hoof it up to the lake for a week of relaxation and serious bass thumb. We were to be joined by [Dave M](#), [Dave C](#) and [Clint](#). There were, of course, a couple of complications.

First of all, the matter of getting time off work. As seasonal workers at this point in our lives, we didn't have the luxury of full control of our schedules. Nick, Dave M and I cajoled our respective employers and got the whole duration. Clint and Dave C weren't so lucky, or perhaps weren't so persistent. Regardless, they each only got half the time, on opposite ends of the week from each other. Nick came up with the ideal solution. We would drive up with Dave C who could enjoy the glory of the lake for the first three days. At that point, Nick, Dave C, and I would take one canoe and head back to town. We would meet Clint there, driven by his mother all the way from Ottawa, and exchange Dave C for him. While there, we would re-supply, before making the two-hour drive back, and canoe trip in with Clint. Dave M, in the meantime, would lounge at the lake and enjoy himself while awaiting our return.

There were two potential issues with this plan. First, Dave M had never been wilderness camping before in his life. No big deal, he's got three days to learn, right? Second, the trip in to this lake from the put in took eight hours at our fastest speed to date, not including the portage at the end. But, we would leave early with a canoe waiting at the end of the first portage and would be travelling with three people and barely any gear. So, no big deal; six hours out, five hours round trip for supplies, six hours back. If we left at dawn we'd be back by 10 pm.

The second issue surrounded obtaining gear for the trip. As young campers whose parents were not wilderness trippers, we did not have everything we needed for a week-long expedition. . We had only one canoe and Nick's Oldsmobile was too small for a four-person trip. Dave C saved the day on the canoe front. He scoured around and found a Scout Master of his who was willing to loan him a high-end whitewater canoe. It would make for a bit of a heavy portage, but it was better than nothing. After much pleading, my parents agreed to loan us their Toyota Previa van– that grey jellybean on wheels. I'd borrowed it in the past, but never for a trip of this distance. This decision would end up seriously straining their trust in me.

Challenges circumvented, we were ready to roll! The trip started somewhat inauspiciously. We all had late nights the night before and didn't have the chance to pack properly. To save time, we removed the middle seat in the van so that Dave and Nick could pack while we drove. We gingerly loaded both Dave's whitewater and Nick's SportsPal canoes on the roof of the van, the SportsPal gingerly balanced on the side of the whitewater, and headed west. The drive out went well – the weather held and there were no major mishaps. The omens foreshadowing the disaster to come didn't start until we got to the end of the gravel road and prepared to put in.

We unloaded the van and took the canoes off the roof. As we were unloading, another canoeist motioned over to the van. "Hey, did you guys see that you have a flat tire?" Sure enough, the rear driver's-side tire had succumbed to the long drive on gravel. Game-day decision time. We were coming back to switch team members in a few days and were already later in arriving at the put in than we had hoped. We would change the tire when we swapped our companions.

With that, we hurriedly packed up the canoes and headed out across the first, very large lake. It wasn't until 2 km into that paddle that I realized that I had left my brand new Tilly hat back on the dock– never to be seen again.

The rest of the trip in was uneventful if arduous. The weather was nice– mostly sunny, warm and without too much wind. It wasn't until we got to the take out for the last very long portage into our lake that we were hit with our next setback.

The lake we love is also loved by a few other people– but not very many because it's so remote, and not on any major canoe route. To travel there is to portage in to a virtual dead-end. We had been a few times already and had never seen another person there. As is the case with many lakes in the area, there were two campsites on the small lake. The first is a large, beautiful campsite where everyone stays; a windswept site with full afternoon sun, a bed of dry pine needles, and few bugs. The second is smaller- rocky, grassy, and covered in exposed tree roots, where hardly anyone has ever pitched a tent. Because the great campsite is right at the end of the long portage trail, our typical approach was to leave our canoes at the start of the portage, head in, camp, and then go back the next day to pick them up.

Imagine our trepidation when we landed at the start of the put in trail to see a groove in the sand from someone pulling up a canoe. Was it recent or a mark from earlier in the season? We brought our canoes up on shore, and our fears were soon confirmed; two canoes were stashed in the woods just out of sight of the put in. We cached our own canoes as usual, shouldered our packs and started the hike, hoping against hope that the campers were merely exploring the lake on a day trip.

Arriving at the other end of the trail, our hopes were dashed by the sight of another group in the process of setting up camp. They had arrived at the campsite of campsites a mere 5 minutes before us. There were two immediate issues with this. First, our canoes were at the other end of the portage trail and, second, we had to get to the other side of the lake to start setting up our own camp. We approached the other group and asked them nicely if they would mind lending us the canoe they had portaged to the site to start shuttling gear across while a couple of members of our team went back for ours. They were gracious enough to agree, so we quickly sprung into action. Dave M and I began shuttling the gear over, to leave me on the other side to set up tents while Dave M went back to meet up with the other two. It was at this point that whichever higher power wanted us to turn back and head home before disaster struck started being a little less subtle.

I started loading the gear into the borrowed canoe while Dave M grabbed another pack. I'm a pretty decent canoeist and by this point I had been leading trips for a couple of years. What happened next was a combination of overconfidence, fatigue and an unfamiliar canoe. I grabbed my pack and stepped into the canoe, intending to put it in front of the back seat. Instead, I ended up dumping the pack, the canoe and myself into the water. No harm, no foul, despite a bit of dampness and some serious embarrassment. We've been on enough trips to know to waterproof everything. Dave M and I righted the canoe and reloaded it. We then grabbed Nick's paddles and headed out.

I need to pause at this point and explain about Nick's paddles. And to do that, I need to explain about Nick's canoe. Nick had recently purchased a [SportsPal](#) canoe from one of his uncles, who had

purchased it from one of his great-uncles, who bought it second-hand (that story has its share of adventures and will be posted soon). The [SportsPal](#), for those unfamiliar with this piece of Canadian engineering, is a canoe made of lightweight aluminum, lined with foam and then reinforced with slightly sturdier aluminum ribs. The design of the canoe is intended primarily for fishermen and hunters and not so much for canoe tripping, portaging or going particularly quickly. It is stable as hell, but handles like an ox. From the [manufacturer's website](#), "Sportspal canoes are hand crafted from light gauge marine aluminum which withstands the normal use and abuse by Sportsmen but is still easy for Grandpa to load onto his vehicle. With a 38" beam and a 13" depth the 12' Pointed weighing in at 34 lbs. is a great canoe for fishing, hunting or cruising the shoreline of your favourite lake or stream." The downside to this design is that it's difficult to accommodate real bench-style canoe seats. The "light-gauge marine aluminum" would likely bend under the load of a person. Instead, they provide quite comfortable foam seats that rest on the bottom of the boat. Comfort aside, the seats mean that your sitting position is such that your nipples are basically level with the gunnels of the boat.



The Sportspal foam seat

With any regular-sized paddle, covering any distance in Nick's canoe would be an exercise in pain as you attempted to continually raise the paddle over your head to get it out of the water. Even worse, the paddles that came with the canoe were somehow longer, not shorter than normal. So Nick had come up with a solution. He had taken the paddles to his other uncle's workshop, where they cut a section out of the shaft to shorten it. To re-connect the handle with the shaft and reinforce the paddle, they drilled vertical holes in and around the outside of the remaining shaft pieces and inserted doweling. Finally, they glued the paddles back together. The resulting paddles were beautiful – the dowels excellently fitted into the modified shaft, the varnish perfect around the join. They had served us well all day on their inaugural trip.



The SportsPal - complete with Shark Teeth and Flames

The weather to this point had been beautiful, but as soon as Dave M and I set off from shore to shuttle gear across to the “short straw” campsite, it completely changed. Clouds moved in quickly and obscured the sky, and a driving rain set in. Worst of all, a heavy wind came out of nowhere – seemingly blowing from the campsite we were headed towards and directly in our faces. We were only a little ways off shore and I was already regretting that I had put Dave M, who was on his first canoe trip ever, in the stern with the comment “it’s only a couple of hundred meters”.

I shouted back at Dave, “Let’s go!” and started pulling hard on my paddle. Not more than 30 seconds later Dave yelled and I turned back to see him holding two halves of one of Nick’s beautifully modified paddles. He quickly tossed the handle part into the boat and gamely paddled with the remaining stub of the shaft and the blade. Thirty more seconds of hard paddling into the wind and my paddle snapped in exactly the same way with a sickening crunch. We battled our way to the campsite, weaving as I attempted to help Dave M steer, and eventually arrived exhausted and soaked, just as the light started to fade from the sky.

Dave M dropped me off with the packs and headed back to join up with Dave C and Nick. My first order of business was set up a tent to give us some shelter from the weather. I was anxious to get started to take my mind off being alone in the dark, in a place I’d never been before, in the middle of the woods with wind and rain howling around me. I unloaded my pack to get the tent out and pulled it out of its stuff sack. Then I looked through my pack to find the poles. No poles. No problem– they had probably been packed into Dave’s pack. No poles there either. This wasn’t particularly out of the ordinary (we usually split the poles from the tent in order to level out the load between the packs) but it meant that the poles were in another pack... on the other side of the lake.

Being stuck in the woods in the dark, on your own, with nothing to do is not a very pleasant thing. At first I was pissed. “How could we forget to bring the poles across if the whole point was for me to set up the tent?”, I thought. Then I started to get nervous. “I’m in the dark, by myself, with no means of

escape, if anything happened, what would I do?”. The longer I waited for the other guys to show up, the slower time seemed to pass. “Where are those guys?”, my mind was racing, “did Dave M capsize on the way back over? They can’t still be portaging the canoe, can they? Why aren’t they here yet?”. After what seemed like two hours but was probably more like 20 minutes, I started yelling. “Guys?! Can you hear me?! Where are you?!”. My yelling turned to pleading until I finally heard the faint splash of paddles coming across the lake. I was so relieved when the canoe finally came into sight that I think I may have actually kissed the first person that stepped out of it. The rest of the crew did not seem to understand the extent of the state that I had gotten myself into.

The rest of the night was soggy but enjoyable as we got the tents up, made a roaring fire and cooked up our traditional first-night dinner of steak, fire-baked potatoes and foil-wrapped veggies. We recapped the day, lamented our bad luck and went to bed exhausted but happy to have arrived.

The next couple of days were idyllic- hot, sunny and filled with bass. They passed in a flash and it was soon time to make the fateful trip out and exchange Dave C for Clint. By a stroke of good luck (at last), the party on the good campsite was scheduled to leave on the day we planned to trek out and back. We revised the plan so that Nick, Dave C and I would leave early in the morning, taking only some lunch and Dave C’s pack. We would paddle the loaned whitewater canoe out, even though it was heavier, as it cut through the water faster than the ox-like SportsPal. Dave M would remain at the site and spend the day tearing down the existing site and moving us across to the good campsite. In retrospect, leaving the only guy who had never stayed in the wilderness before to shuttle gear back and forth across an isolated lake, by himself, with two broken paddles probably wasn’t the best idea. But we had a time crunch to hit with the exchange and we needed the best paddlers to take the trip out and back. So we gave Dave M all the advice we could think of, told him to be careful and said not to worry- we’d be back by 10 pm. The trip out was a hard and fast one – with Dave C being the champ and lugging the heavy whitewater canoe across just about every portage. The highlight of the trip was when we spotted a few moose in the water about 20 meters away. We arrived at the put-in in under four hours, putting us well ahead of schedule, and swapped the flat tire for the donut. We quickly loaded Dave C’s borrowed canoe and headed into town for supplies.

When we got to town, we picked up Clint and bid adieu to Dave C. I called my dad, and the conversation from my end went something like “Hey Dad... yeah, everything’s fine, we just got a flat on the van... oh... I already drove on the spare a lot further than that... ok, I’ll go straight to Canadian Tire”. I dropped Nick and Clint off at the grocery store, went to Canadian Tire and bought a brand new tire. After getting it installed and heading back to pick up the guys, the time gained on our speedy canoe trip out was lost and we were severely behind schedule.

We headed out of town at around four pm. That gave us about six hours to get back to the site, including the two-hour drive, before darkness would be complete and Dave M would start freaking out. At 18, nothing is impossible. Especially if you think you have cat-like reflexes and have not yet learned the reason for speed limits. We set off for the put in again, fast.

I drove, way above the speed limit, passing everything I feasibly could without a second thought. I remember the next set of events vividly.

Nick was sitting in the passenger seat, attempting to fix his baseball cap with some duct tape. It wasn't going very well. Clint asleep in the back of the van, stretched out across the bench with his seatbelt off. I pulled out across the dashed yellow lines to pass a slow-moving 18-wheeler. Seeing that the lane was clear, I felt confident and floored it, pushing 140 kph. I got about halfway alongside the transport when a pickup truck "appeared" out of a dip in the road ahead of me, and I said "Oh shit".

Nick looked up, and assessing the situation believed I had enough time to finish passing the truck. He would have preferred that I slow down and abort the pass. I was too panicked to think. All I could think of was to stop, to get out of the situation and to not be in a position to have a truck barreling towards me with no evident escape. I attempted to slow down and pull off on the left-hand, gravel shoulder.

Clint awoke as the tires hit gravel and, seeing nothing but knowing an accident was forthcoming, went limp. The van careened back on to the road in an uncontrolled slide, and slid once back to the left before reversing course again and slamming into the side of the transport truck. We bounced off and hit the oncoming pickup truck, with the front drivers' side corner of the van smashing into the front drivers' side corner of the pickup. The van spun around 180 degrees and came to rest leaning up on the pickup and facing the way we had come.

The van started to fill with smoke, which later turned out to have been powder from the airbag going off. There was only one airbag - to this day Nick proclaims that I got an airbag in the face whereas he got an 18-wheeler. Not knowing the source of the smoke, Nick kept his wits about him and got us out of the van well away from it in case of fire. Clint took a bit longer- when the dust settled, there was glass all around but when he stood up to get out, the windows in the back half of the van were intact. Going limp had saved him from the muscle soreness often associated with bracing oneself in anticipation of an accident, but he had taken an awful buffeting from the newly filled cooler. In his shell-shocked state, he could not understand why the windows were in place when there was so much broken glass around. So he simply sat down to wait. It took several minutes for us to realize he was still in there, and Nick said, "Clint! Get out of the van!". "OK" was his response, and out he came.

From then on until I arrived back in town, everything is a little hazy for me. I was entirely hopped up on adrenaline and totally mortified at what my stupid recklessness had wrought. I remember the OPP officer saying that he arrived at the scene expecting to find corpses and that he was shocked that no one was even injured in the accident. I had a couple of scrapes and one of the occupants of the pickup truck was treated for shock. I am told, but do not remember, that as Nick and I stood well away from the 'smoking' vehicle, the driver of the pickup truck came over to have words with us. He was seething, and apparently punched me in the face before Nick told him to back off. He spent the next hour kicking dirt on the van and later, once the van had been towed into town, relieved himself on it. I do remember my internal shame as I did everything in my power to not admit guilt to the OPP officer as he grilled me on the accident and told me how much worse it could have been. I truly believed at the time that if I admitted my guilt, I would be tossed into jail. Even with that disincentive, I wanted nothing more than to admit it and seek forgiveness from the only authority figure around.

What I've managed to reconstruct from the accident scene based on what people have told me was that the folks in the pickup were driving down to Ottawa to hop on a flight to Disney World. Incredibly, despite the fact that we had just completely ruined their vacation, Clint was almost been successful in getting their daughter's phone number once he rallied from his initial slowness. They had loaded up five people in the three seats in the front of the pickup for the trip. It was no small miracle that no one was hurt. It was also no small miracle that our borrowed, high-end whitewater canoe was largely undamaged. It suffered a broken bow plate but remained completely seaworthy.

After cataloging the scene and clearing the roadway, the OPP let the tow trucks do their work and we were taken back to town with the wreckage of my parents' Previa in tow. To give credit to Toyota, the only sign of damage on the interior of the van was the broken glass, and a moderate dent in the back-right corner. That giant metallic jellybean certainly protected us from far more serious consequences. The tow truck brought us back to their home base, which, as is relatively common in small towns, was a combination gas station, garage and motel. Once there, we were faced with two challenges. The most daunting, in my opinion, was calling my parents. The second was that it was now getting on for 10 pm and we were nowhere near getting back to see Dave M- stuck and alone in the woods, without food.

I dialed my parents' number and my mother picked up. "Can I talk to Dad please", I asked somewhat shakily. She must have sensed that things weren't good because she didn't question me and just put Dad on the line. I had practiced the line over and over, "Dad, everyone's ok, don't worry," (that was the most important part), "but we had an accident.". My father, who, it occurred to me later, was probably 18 and reckless himself at one point in time, took it all in stride and promised to make arrangements to be out to pick us up the next day.

Next we had to deal with getting Dave M safely out of the woods. This was not something that could wait until the morning. Nick hit the phones and called every possible number for Ontario Parks and Algonquin. We were finally connected to the Park Gate. No, they would absolutely not send a ranger in to get Dave. That was completely out of the question- especially at this late hour and given no direct threats to his health and safety. After some convincing regarding his lack of experience and food, they agreed to allow us, this time only, to use a forest-access road that would take us to within a reasonable paddle and the long portage in to Dave. With the help of the motel owners, who had by this point taken an interest in our predicament, we located a guy with a pickup truck who would drive Nick and Clint with the canoe and our food down this road and drop them off. My parents would then rent a van and come to pick me up at the motel, deal with the matter of the Previa, and then continue on to pick up the rest of the gang at the end of the forest access road the next day.

I remember that I didn't sleep that night after wishing Nick and Clint good luck. I felt completely sick to my stomach and the scrapes on my arm, though not major, were quite painful. I spent the majority of the time sitting in the gas station/motel's convenience store talking to the night clerk and getting an education on where in the area you could pick up cocaine. Not my cup of tea, but an interesting chat none the less. When my parents came to pick me up the next day, I was quite relieved. True to form, they had filled the rental van with fresh fruit and snacks, water and thermoses of tea before they left and it was extremely comforting to see them and get into the back of the van for the drive back out.

We arrived at the designated point on the forest access road and parked and waited. And waited. And waited. Two hours after they were supposed to arrive, we saw a canoe in the distance, moving slowly across the lake. Finally it came into view, with Clint walking in the waist-deep water and pulling the other two and the gear in the two canoes, which were tied together, all in high spirits. When they arrived at the shore, they gave us the full story.

Nick picks up the story

We set off from town at about 11 pm, and headed up the access road. I spotted about five moose on that road alone, but Clint missed most of them from the back seat. Our 'taxi' driver dropped us off at the edge of a river and drove away in the dark around midnight. We were left to load up the canoe with the cooler and paddle across the River. We knew there was a large set of rapids immediately downstream of the bridge, and could not tell how strong the current was as we ferried across the river in the dark; not an auspicious start to our midnight journey. We made it across the river unscathed, but were met with an unexpected challenge. The massive lake that we had to cross happened to be exceedingly shallow. Our paddles hit the bottom on every stroke for the first hour, and we were never sure if we would run aground completely. We were already on edge, and the v-shaped waves of large fish scurrying from our approach did little to calm us down. We resorted to singing off-key Pink Floyd songs to keep our minds off the journey as we crossed the lake- likely to the chagrin of the many campers seeking peace in the wilderness of Algonquin. Arriving at the portage, we had no interest in bringing the canoe, but did have three days' worth of food in the cooler. We were both very stiff from the accident, me from a whole-body form of whiplash, and Clint from his mid-air encounter with the cooler, but we managed to help each other get the cooler into camp.

As we approached camp, we pictured Dave huddled by the fire, jumping at every sound and becoming increasingly distraught at our late arrival. To make sure that he did not mistake the sounds of our approach for a marauding bear, we began to call out from several hundred meters away that it was us. We needn't have bothered- Dave was fast asleep in the tent and had been since sunset, exhausted from having completed his task of moving camp. We woke him up and re-lit the fire while giving him the complete run-down of events. I was sore and exhausted, and very much ready for bed. Clint, fresh into the park and knowing that he had only a few hours before we were due to pack out, was intent on making fajitas and doing a bit of fishing in the little time he had. Dave rallied and agreed to help make food, while I fell into a sound sleep.

The next morning, we packed the gear and canoe out, making an extra trip for Mike's gear. We loaded up the canoes, but quickly realized that we had only two good paddles, and that the SportsPal was no fun to solo. Making matters worse, the wind was against us across the big, shallow lake. Still very stiff from the accident, Clint and I agreed to paddle the whitewater canoe, and tied a rope to drag the SportsPal behind. Dave stayed in the SportsPal and used the half-paddle as a rudder, keeping the canoe straight to reduce drag. The whole process took much longer than expected, and we arrived at the makeshift take out a bit late.

Epilogue

Suffice to say that I lost my driving privileges when we got home, but not for nearly as long as you would think. To this day, I still dislike passing across dashed yellow lines for any reason. My parents received write-off value for the van which almost covered the cost of a well-used Subaru Legacy Wagon. I paid the, as I recall, very small amount needed to repair the borrowed canoe.

Something good did come out of the whole ordeal. My parents wrote to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation and informed them of the “dip” in the road. The ministry, within the month had investigated and painted the dashed lines solid to prevent passing in the zone where what they termed an “optical illusion” occurred and a car could be lost from sight. If you drive in the area now, you’ll find the highway massively expanded, with passing lanes added in both directions right at the site of my accident.



Nick says, dripping with sarcasm, "Sure Mike, it was all the Ministry's fault..."

Nobody died, but:

- It's generally a bad idea to pass a transport truck on a downhill - the truck accelerates and can make passing unsafe.
- We were crazy lucky - wear your seatbelt, don't overload your car with people and drive defensively
- Cutting your canoe paddles and gluing them back together is seldom a good idea - no matter how much you reinforce them

