

## OUTDOORS

Epic adventure born in Minnesota takes six paddlers north into the Arctic



Photo Gallery - Epic adventure born in Minnesota takes six paddlers north into the Arctic

By [DENNIS ANDERSON](#) , STAR TRIBUNE  
September 30, 2023 - 3:10 PM



In the end, after 45 days in the Canadian bush and 1,100 miles of paddling, the six men climbed back into their canoes, wanting to finish what they had started, and do it properly.

The scene was otherworldly.

Afloat on Hudson Bay, whose tidal currents rise and fall 10 feet, the adventurers, five of whom first met 40 or so years earlier at an International Falls wilderness camp, were achieving a goal three years in the planning, and decades in the dreaming.

Approaching the tiny Canadian village of Chesterfield Inlet, with many of its menfolk gone to hunting camps and its harbor swimming with beluga whales, the paddlers' exhaustion morphed gradually, then overwhelmingly, to joy — and relief.

"The day before, we had struggled mightily against a strong wind, covering 30 miles we thought would be only 15, and we had come ashore three miles from Chesterfield Inlet," said Peter Tester, 60, of Minneapolis, deputy commissioner of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. "Some townspeople were waiting for us, and they worried about polar bears if we camped there. So they brought us to town, where we slept that night between pews of the Catholic church."

Awakening the next morning without their canoes for the first time in more than a month, they hiked back to where they had beached the double-ended craft and paddled around the northern tip of Chesterfield Inlet.

Washing over them as they did were stark images of their journey that were indelible then and, they say, will be forever: Of caribou staring curiously from riverbanks as the six men paddled the wild Kazan River; of skeins of migrating geese honking overhead as the men bivouacked on barren lands; and of the Kazan's many clattering rapids, some of which tempted the men to ride out the white water, while others demanded they portage, their shoulders straining beneath their hefty packs — 15 in all — and 85-pound canoes.

"To be in a setting like that, which is so vast and so overwhelming, yet so fragile, is life-changing," said Hugh Haller, 65, of Cincinnati, president of the Camping & Education Foundation, which oversees Camp Kooch-i-ching, a century-old youth outpost headquartered on a Rainy Lake island.

A summer skills camp for boys, and a place from which older attendees depart for monthlong Canadian paddling adventures, Kooch-i-ching is as much a melting pot of aspirations, and inspirations, as it is a summer getaway. Tales of paddling trips on far northern rivers — the Back, the Dene and the Coppermine, among others — are swapped in the camp's tents and cabins, and around its campfires; the stories sprinkled with denouements of challenge, danger and, most importantly, achievement.

"Kooch-i-ching is one of the last American camps that has a tripping program," Haller said. "As the boys progress through the years, by the time they are seniors in high school they're paddling the Seal River and other Canadian rivers, pretty much running the trips themselves."

As teenage campers at Kooch-i-ching, Tester and Haller refined their wilderness skills, as did Steve Shook, 59, of West Lafayette, Ind.; Steve Luebke, 59, of Northport, Mich.; and Dave Siebert, 60, of Madison, Wis.

Those five, along with Ken Alt, 52, of Winnetka, Ill., whose two daughters attended Ogichi Daa Kwe — Kooch-i-ching's companion camp for girls — departed Wollaston Lake, Saskatchewan on Aug. 8 and paddled into Chesterfield Inlet on Sept. 21.

The trip's initial 350 miles traversed Canada's boreal forests, and many times required the men to bushwhack portages from one lake, or river, to the next.

The early going was complicated by a drought plaguing Canada's interior, which in some cases has lowered lakes and rivers by 5 feet.

One particularly brutal land crossing extended for 2 miles and took nine hours — one of 55 portages required in the journey's first two weeks.

"I think we each lost 15 pounds during that time," Tester said.

Added Alt: "If that portage had been near the end of our trip, I don't know if we could have made it. Coming at the beginning as it did, we had no choice. We had to move forward."

Poring over old journals and maps, and at times using Google Earth to envision how the trip could be accomplished, the men also consulted a Canadian, Ric Driediger of Churchill River Outfitters in Missinipe, Saskatchewan, about the adventure's possibilities and pitfalls.

Ultimately, 13 waterproof maps were developed, each measuring about 3 feet across, for the route's various segments. Daily, and sometimes many times each day, one or more of the maps was spread out and a compass laid atop it to plot a path forward.

In addition to personal gear, including waterproof boots and extra clothing, the men's packs toted three tents, dry suits, a first aid kit, a satellite communication device and other gear, as well as cooking equipment and food precisely measured to allot each paddler about 3,500 calories per day, a goal achieved with healthy dollops of bacon fat, olive oil, honey, jelly and peanut butter.

"Our suppers were mostly one-pot meals cooked over single-burner stoves," Haller said. "They varied between chile, rice and beans, lentil stew, lentil curry, pesto pasta, mushroom stroganoff and macaroni and cheese. Whenever we could, we supplemented these with fish, which Ken [Alt] caught."

Said Alt, "I fished from shore and cast a Dardevle. During the first part of the trip I caught northern pike, then mostly lake trout, with the biggest about 17 pounds."

The adventurers' canoes were Canadian made, by Nova Craft, and were chosen for their durability and ample freeboard. In the journey's first weeks, the canoes were often dragged over

rocks due to low water, and their seaworthiness was particularly useful during eight major lake crossings, one of which was 60 miles long.

Unlike some expeditions, the men chose no leader, or Bourgeois, as the Ely, Minn., author and ecologist Sigurd Olson was called during a 1950s trip down 500 miles of Canada's Churchill River, an expedition Olson recounted in his book, "The Lonely Land."

Instead, the Kazan bunch made decisions collaboratively.

"We're all Type A individuals, and moderately stubborn to say the least," Haller said. "People told us, 'You need a leader.' Instead, we divided responsibilities, one of us in charge of communications, another the food, another emergency medicine, and so forth. We trusted each other."

On some days, the wind blew too hard to paddle, requiring the men to clamber into their canoes at sunset, when the wind laid down, and travel through the night.

During those darkened forays, northern lights often pulsated chromatically, and sometimes the dips and strokes of the men's paddles sparked watery explosions of green — lime green, evergreen, fern green, emerald green — resulting from bioluminescence, a firefly-like phenomenon.

"The wildlife we saw was incredible," Tester said. "Muskox, arctic foxes, arctic hares and moose, as well as massive migrations of snow and blue geese, and also canvasbacks and scoters and other sea ducks."

Why undertake a month-and-a-half-long wilderness trip when you're 60 years old, or approaching it?

For some, the siren song of the far north, while varying over time in pitch and timbre, never quite stills itself.

For others, the unknown is a temptress whose allure is irresistible.

Still others fall into line with T.S. Eliot, the poet, who said, "Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go."

"The trip was hard, but we wanted it to be hard," Tester said. "Immersing ourselves in the land, we could hear its voices and feel its rhythms. Relying on ourselves amid such beauty gave us time to reflect on life's larger questions."

Said Haller: "At our advanced age, we had doubters. But we finished the trip and finished it well. We didn't stumble across the finish line. The goal now is to be true to the experience and hang onto it, realizing by contrast that so much of what we go through in our daily lives just doesn't matter."