

## FROM BARK TO BOAT

### **From Bark to Boat: The Odyssey of a Birch Bark Canoe Built in the Bush**

John Zinser is a twenty-year-old student living in Olympia, Washington. He is a junior enrolled in the Evergreen State College studying history and English. John has been with Wabun since joining us as a camper in 2001 and has been a member of our staff for the past three years. He enjoys canoeing in his daily life, paddling in the Puget Sound where he commutes to school.

Adam Wicks is also a junior at the Evergreen State College where he studies upper division science. Adam joined Wabun in 2000 and has lent his considerable talents to us as both camper and staff. This past spring Adam earned an apprenticeship with John Lindman, building birch-bark canoes in Spokane. He spent three months learning the art and history of this ancient craft and building a twenty-eight foot birch bark canoe. Birch bark canoes are now his passion and he plans on building many more, in the bush and in the shop.

Adam and John share a reverence for canoe tripping. They have paddled thousands of miles in Wabun canoes as both campers and staff, have been a part of preparing those canoes and the sections that paddle them on trip, and have an intimate knowledge of the satisfactions and joys to be derived from traveling with the grace and elegance canoes afford. They have taken this satisfaction to a new height this past fall by moving into the Temagami forest for a month and

building a birch bark canoe from scratch. The following is their account.

#### **Adam Wicks' Personal Account**

Building a birch bark canoe in the bush was the most amazing challenge either of us had ever experienced. On August 12th, 2008 John Zinser and I entered the Canadian Wilderness with the intention of building a birch bark canoe in the woods using only the materials we could gather and the hand tools we could carry (see picture 1).

On August 10th John, my dog Churo and I arrived at Wabun with the camp nearly empty and no clue of where we were headed. Frightened by the fact that we had no idea of where we would be spending the next four weeks, Pete Gwyn suggested Ferrim Lake, a small lake just west of Kokoko Lake where he had established a hunting camp many years ago. He thought there might be some large birches in the area.

With a firm destination in mind, we called and told our loved ones where we wanted to go but warned them that if we were unable to find the necessary materials at Ferrim Lake we would continue north until we found a suitable site. Our plan was to stay in the bush until we either ran out of food or finished a birch bark canoe. We brought enough food with us for four and a half weeks. This sense of uncertainty was thrilling, as neither John nor I had ever traveled in the bush without an itinerary. We only had a



goal: to build a birch bark canoe in the bush.

Building a birch bark canoe in the woods differs greatly from doing so at home or in a shop. In the shop, one could order all the wood and bark necessary for the canoe and begin building at once. In the bush it's a whole different story. The process of constructing a canoe in the woods involves three fundamental steps. The first and most important step is gathering the materials. It took us a full week to simply find enough birch bark, a cedar tree free of knots, and enough spruce root to sew up the canoe. Once the materials are gathered one must then prepare the materials for construction. This step also took us a full week. It was two weeks into the trip and we hadn't even started building. Finally, once all the ribs and sheathing are prepared, the construction phase begins. This stage took us about a week and half and was without a doubt the most stressful yet exhilarating time of our lives.



Gathering all the materials was definitely the most spiritual aspect of our trip. John and I completely depended on Mother Nature to provide us with what we needed. We searched for days and tested hundreds of birch bark trees but only found five trees that we could use (2). The birch bark must pass a test of flexibility (3). Carefully, we removed the birch bark from the tree using our hands and a bark peeler spud, which Glen Toogood gratefully gifted us before our departure (4). We used the cedar for the gunnels, ribs, and sheathing. Our canoe required us to cut down two cedar trees, which were straight and couldn't have any knots. We then split the trees in half and quartered them by hand (5 & 6). For this we used a froe: a foot long steel blade which is pounded into the log to split it



## FROM BARK TO BOAT



along the grain (7). We were able to split the logs down to quarter inch ribs and 1/8th inch thick sheathing (8 & 9). We also had to gather spruce root and tap spruce trees for pitch (10). Spruce root essentially holds the canoe together because it is used to sew sheets of bark together and to lash the gunnels to the bark. The roots are dug up in lengths of up to 15 feet.

Just over a week into our trip we began the material preparation stage. First, we split out our gunnels. In our canoe we employed four gunnel members, two inwales and two outwales. The outer and inner gunnels sandwich the birch bark and are lashed together in groups by spruce root. With the ribs and sheathing split down to



the desired thickness, we carved them smooth and straight with the crooked knife. This took several days but we were amazed by the quality and near perfection of our ribs and sheathing. One factor of the preparation stage that I underestimated was processing the spruce root into a product that could be sewn. After the spruce root was dug up from the ground, we coiled and soaked it in near-boiling water for two hours. Once the root had been heated sufficiently, we peeled off the skin or bark. Then we split the root in half, carefully controlling the split, not unlike how we split the cedar. The split root is then trimmed down so the entire length is of equal width and thickness. Each strand of root took about an hour to make it flexible enough for sewing.

Finally, two weeks into the trip, we finished gathering and preparing our materials. We hadn't started building the canoe yet, but at the beginning I had truly doubted we would get even this far. For weeks before we left for

## FROM BARK TO BOAT

the trip, I was filled with doubt and thoughts of failure. What if we weren't able to do it? What if we couldn't find any suitable birch bark? What would I do if Churo, my four-month-old labradoodle puppy, got sick out in the bush? As thoughts like those filled my head, I told myself, "How could we not be successful?" Mother Nature did her job and supplied us with the materi-



als we needed. The pressure was now on us. It was our time to perform.

On day twelve we unrolled the bark and weighted it down with rocks (11 & 12). The bark was then folded up around the weighted building frame (13). Side panels of bark were then inserted where needed and the sewing began. In this step, we sewed the side panels to the hull with a stitch that ran the entire length of the canoe on both sides (14). It was during this stage



that we could truly begin to actually envision the canoe we were building. With each stitch, the canoe began to show her lines and looked more and more like a canoe (15). Sewing with spruce



root is an extremely tedious task that took us three full days to complete. Next we inserted the gunnels and began lashing the gunnels to the side panels of bark. Lashing the canoe was mentally very similar to sewing. For four days straight we did nothing but lashings. I'll say that again, for four days in the bush we lashed or prepared root for our canoe, for over 10 hours each day.

Then it happened. I was carving the bow-carrying thwart and as I rocked my 5-inch buck knife on top of the tennon with the intention of splitting off a 1-inch sliver, the piece

## FROM BARK TO BOAT

popped out but my knife continued downward into the top of my wrist. I filleted a 1 ½ inch chunk along my wrist, but luckily it didn't cut my skin completely off. I was just left with a huge flapper. Miraculously the cut didn't bleed a drop or hurt the slightest bit. Calm and collected, John and I treated the wound but quickly realized for a wound of such severity we wouldn't have had nearly enough medical supplies to tend the wound for the duration of the trip. We decided to return to Garden Island and seek medical supplies. John had to solo paddle us to Garden Island, and we returned to our site in less than twenty-four hours. John also soloed us eleven kilometers back to Ferrim Lake.

With all the lashing and sewing complete, we bent and inserted the stem pieces. The stem pieces are what give the bow and stern their



shape. The stem piece is a one inch square, two foot long piece of wood that is laminated or split five to six times to the middle (16 & 17). This technique allows a thick piece of wood to bend with relative ease (18). By day 22, with all the ribs carved smooth and straight, we were ready to bend ribs. We soaked pairs of ribs in near-boiling water (18) and then bent the ribs on our knees (20). Bending ribs was a wonderful culmination of all our efforts (21). Having spent so much time and energy on each rib, we felt a connection to the wood and bent each rib with such care



20



22



21



23



24

that not one was broken in the entire process (22).

On day 24 we finished the canoe by pounding the ribs and sheathing in tight (23 & 24), and fashioned and added birch thwarts (25, 26 & 27). We also pegged a gunnel cap to the top of the gunnels. With all the ribs and sheathing pounded tight in the canoe, John, Churo and I celebrated. With cries of joy we immediately pushed off on the canoe's maiden voyage. We shot for it and John won so I had the absolute pleasure of watching our canoe be paddled into

## FROM BARK TO BOAT



After 25 days in the bush we returned to Garden Island in triumph. As the canoe could not be paddled for long distances, we carefully balanced it atop all of our gear. Imagine the sight, two grizzly guys and a dog paddling a fully loaded canoe with another canoe, a birch bark canoe, resting atop their gear.

The process of building a birch bark canoe in the bush was simply the union of John and me working with the perfection of what Mother Nature has to offer. If we showed her our respect through our actions she wouldn't let us fail. After three and a half weeks of working everyday from sunrise to sunset we finished our birch bark canoe with an unparalleled sense of achievement.



the wilderness, the same wilderness from which it was created. Even though we could only paddle it for about ten minutes each because it would quickly take on water due to the lack of pitch. I still felt an intense sense of joy and accomplishment. A birch bark canoe built in a traditional manner is the ultimate means of travel in the bush. Pushing off on our canoe's maiden voyage filled my soul with an emotional euphoria. In essence when you paddle a birch bark canoe you are truly paddling in a piece of that Canadian wilderness we all inherently love.

