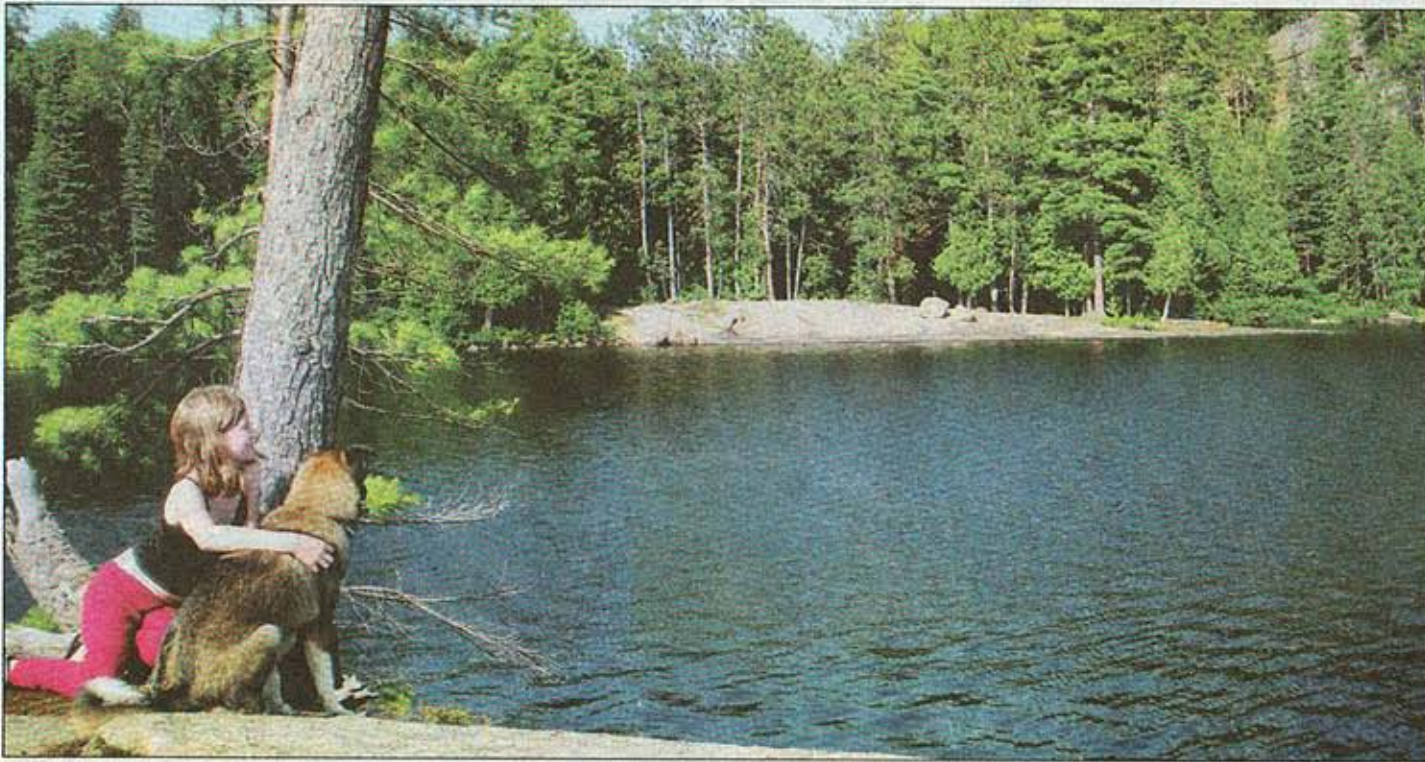


Camp Auntie Brenda goes tripping in Algonquin Park

No camping ^{experience} expedition is complete without a canoe trip, author says



Story and Photos by Brenda Missen

In July, Brenda Missen's young niece and nephew each came on their own to visit for the better part of a week. Brenda was pleased to have the one-on-one time but just a little worried because she's not used to having kids around and wasn't sure she could keep them each entertained. Thankfully, she lives in an area that makes the perfect setting for "Camp Auntie Brenda." What follows is part one of her two-part story.

The winds are stiff and coming out of the south. This means we're going to have a hard paddle down to Pen Lake – and sooner or later we're going to get rain. But these things don't matter, because the campers at Camp Auntie Brenda are "too excited for words": they're embarking on their first-ever canoe trip in Algonquin Park!

The campers are my niece Julia, nearly 12, and my puppy, Maddy, 10 months old.

Camp Auntie Brenda got instituted last summer when Julia was telling a friend's mom everything we were going to do when she came up from Toronto for a week-long



Top, Campers Julia and Maddy look across the cove to our Rock Lake camp site. Above, Julia and Maddy in the canoe's bow on Clydegale Lake.

solo visit.

Overhearing only the list of fun outdoor activities, her friend asked, "What camp are you going to?"

The mom laughed. "Camp Auntie Brenda!"

My home, on a wide part of the Madawaska River, does make the perfect camp setting. Maddy wasn't born yet, but Julia and I did every camp activity we could think of, from swimming and hiking to canoeing lessons and sleepouts in my tent, pitched on the point.

But no camp experience would be complete without a canoe trip. So here we are, a year later, on Rock Lake, south of Highway 60, making happy headway – thanks to my strong bowgirl – to the first portage on our three-night, three-lake trip.

Algonquin Park is a treasure for those of us who live in the Madawaska Valley. The hiking trails and campgrounds along the Highway 60 corridor are wonderful enough, but "my" Algonquin is the vast backcountry. For 20 years I've canoed a good portion of the 2,000-plus kilometres of lakes and rivers that are linked by well-maintained portage trails and dotted with canoe-in campsites.

Our portage into Pen Lake, at the south end of Rock Lake, is an easy 375-metre trail that skirts tumbling rapids. For this trip, I've divided the gear that I usually carry in one heavy pack into two packs, one light enough for Julia. She impresses me by taking on the food pack as well, on our second relay.

Maddy is transporting her own food in specially designed saddle bags, into which I've also secretly stashed some of our smaller gear. She shows no objection to pulling her weight (and some of ours).

Pen Lake is an aptly named long, narrow body of water. We hug the east shore, scouting for the orange signs indicating a campsite. Every site we pass is occupied. In Algonquin, you reserve the lake but the campsites are first-come, first-served.

Finally, near the south end (close to tomorrow's portage), we find a beautiful site with a rocky shoreline and a magical hemlock interior. The interior is backed by high, moss-covered rocks crisscrossed with trails, which Julia and Maddy immediately go off to explore while I set up the tent.

See next page 3

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Left, With her camera at hand, Julia is joined by Maddy on the Breakfast Rock at Clydegale Lake.

Right, Julia and Maddy are ready to head out on a portage.



from page 2

Maddy has designated herself Julia's shadow, so I know they're taking good care of each other.

Julia cheerfully does whatever I ask. After a shared firewood-gathering mission, we cook up a freeze-dried Indian curry dish, and dine serenaded by a loon. When the sun goes to bed, so do we.

I brought a thermal pad and mat for Maddy, but it doesn't take her long to discover the superior comfort of a self-inflating camping mattress.... In the morning I find two curled-up balls beside me - Julia on the top half of her mattress, Maddy at the bottom.

The dark morning sky clearly communicates its intentions in the rain department but holds off until we're packed up and paddling to the portage. Julia and I don our rain jackets, while Maddy takes refuge under the tarp. Thankfully, we have a very short travel day - just a hop over to the next lake, Clydegale, on a 275-metre trail.

After an obliging but brief break in the rain while I set up the tent at our Clydegale site, we crawl inside: it's 11 o'clock in the morning....

Julia and I entertain each other with a book we're reading aloud to each other and a deck of cards I thought to bring. Maddy alternately sleeps and explores outside. But if the rain is going to last all day and night, confinement to the tent is going to make us raving mad. I did bring an old tarp, but my engineering skills are weak and reluctant.

However, after a couple of hours, I put my wet outer layers back on. Fifteen minutes later I'm outside the tent proudly announcing: "I've performed a miracle, Julia. You can come out and have lunch under the tarp."

I perform a second miracle by coaxing a fire from soggy wood, and we have a hot meal to warm our insides under the not so very badly leaking tarp.

We get a lot of reading done that day....

And sleep surprisingly well. I don't usually sleep well on canoe trips. When I'm on my own I lie awake, listening for creaturely intruders such as bears.... On this trip, when a fellow portager asks me if I feel safer with a dog, I tell her I actually worry more, because Maddy might have a run-in with an animal. "But," I laugh, "I do feel safer with Julia."

It's meant as a joke but I realize it's true. Not only does

Julia take my mind off things I would rather not be thinking about, but we make a jolly, noisy party that keeps away those things I would rather not be thinking about. I spare not a thought for bears the whole wonderful trip - except, of course, to take the usual precautions of keeping a clean campsite and hanging our foodpack in a tree.

Friday is our longest paddling day. We're heading back to Rock Lake for our last night, which means two portages and three lakes. We take our time, and by noon the skies have cleared. By mid-afternoon, arriving at the perfect campsite in its own private cove, we have bright, hot sunshine and waste no time getting on with our preferred canoe-camping activities: swimming, sunning, exploring, and sitting on warm rocks absorbing the kind of inner stillness only a campsite in the backcountry can provide - not to mention watching the sun actually set....

It has taken Julia no time to "get" the essential reason for going into the Algonquin backcountry. On our very first day, from the bow of the boat, she pronounced: "This is one of those times it's good to be alive."

Slightly perturbed, I replied, "Is there a time you feel it's not good to be alive?"

Julia paused, then revised her pronouncement. "This is one of those times when you're aware it's good to be alive."

Camp Auntie Brenda has clearly achieved its goal.

Next week: Camp Auntie Brenda Beats the Rain Odds

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