

Camp Auntie Brenda beats the rain odds

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." Here is Part two...

By Brenda Missen
Special to This Week

The forecast for the last week of July is dismal, as it has been all month. The forecasters are so dejected they don't say "Sunny, with a chance of showers in the afternoon." They say, "Increasing cloudiness in the morning." To get any glimpse of sun at all, you have to read between the lines. Here at Camp Auntie Brenda we've been reading between the lines all week.

My home on the Madawaska River is the perfect setting for camp. It has a large dock extending into a deep swimming bay, a perfect point for pitching a tent, and high surrounding hilltops linked by hiking trails. It's also within easy canoeing distance of both McPhee Bay, whose pine-sheltered spit boasts beaches and walking trail, and Conroy's Marsh, a natural gem.

I have two campers in session this week – my 10-month-old puppy, Maddy, and my ten-year-old nephew, Gavin, on his first solo visit. Like his sister, he's a good walker and swimmer and has experience in the canoe.

Monday is our first full day. We make the most of it, running outside whenever we see the sun, and baking cookies and watching movies

when the showers come. By evening, there's an actual sunset, which of course requires a sunset paddle. Almost every night (when there are no storms), we sleep out in my tent. Gavin graciously shares his space with Maddy, the Therm-a-rest hog.

The sun rises and even shines Tuesday morning, but the forecast is for afternoon thunderstorms. Clearly this is the day for a camp excursion to Algonquin Park: we can hike a couple of the 14 trails along the Highway 60 corridor and, if it rains, take refuge in the big (dry) Visitors' Centre.

The threat of afternoon storms has Counsellor Brenda swinging into unusually high early-morning action, and she has the daypack and campers (and rain jackets) loaded onto the camp bus by 9:15.

First stop is Centennial Ridges, a 15- to 20-minute drive from the East Gate. The trail is 10 kilometres long, but the ridges that are the star attraction are near the end and can be arrived at much sooner by taking the trail "backwards." Our steady uphill climb ends on an extensive ridge of Shield overlooking one of the most stunning vistas in the park. The smooth rock makes an excellent snack and photo shoot site. The sun is even shining!

The one thing Counsellor Brenda forgot was water, essential on such a surprisingly sunny warm day. So the camp bus heads to the Visitor Centre in search of beverages.

The Visitors' Centre, with its large cafe, book store, art gallery and museum exhibits, is a wonderful place to spend a rainy day. Since it is, by some miracle, not (yet) raining, Gavin and I don't linger inside. We have the Spruce Bog Trail to hike.

All of the trails along the Highway 60



Brenda Missen's nephew Gavin lines up a camera shot while on the Centennial Ridges trail in Algonquin Park.

corridor provide trail-guide booklets that can be kept or returned at the end of the hike. At each designated marker, Gavin and I pause to speed-read about the park's natural and cultural history – absorbing just enough to learn a little something without getting bogged down along the 1.5-kilometre trail.

Last stop is the Logging Museum, just inside the East Gate. I'm not a museum person. But the Logging Museum is interactive and mostly outdoors. A 10-minute video presentation takes us back to the incredible days of the log drive and then leads us, in a surprising way, outside to the life-size exhibits along the 1.3-kilometre forest trail. The bonus is that Maddy can come along. The three of us spend a fun and fascinating hour exploring, among other things, a recreated logging camp and an ingenious amphibious steam-powered tug called an "alligator."

I know our Algonquin day has been a success. As we leave the now rumbling skies behind, Gavin declares, "This has been a great week so far, and it's only Tuesday!"

Wednesday is wet. Camp takes a break from outdoor activities to read, watch movies and have lunch in town.

But after rain comes sun. We're rewarded with the perfect day to go on a mini canoe trip into Conroy's Marsh. Gavin has already demonstrated a strong bow stroke. Now it's

time to test his portaging skills. We make a detour down to McPhee Bay to do a "practice portage" from the beach at one end to the landing at the other; it's a 10-minute walk, perhaps 700 metres long. Gavin excels at portaging: he carries the day pack, life jackets and other extraneous gear without a break.

We launch the canoe and head across the Madawaska and down the channel into the marsh, my favourite place in the world. "Marsh" used to make me think of humid, stagnant places, but Conroy's Marsh involves the York River snaking through an extensive wetland surrounded by majestic forested hills. At the bottom of one of those hills is one of the few solid places to land a boat, a rocky point where Gavin, Maddy and I have a leisurely picnic, take photos, and read our books.

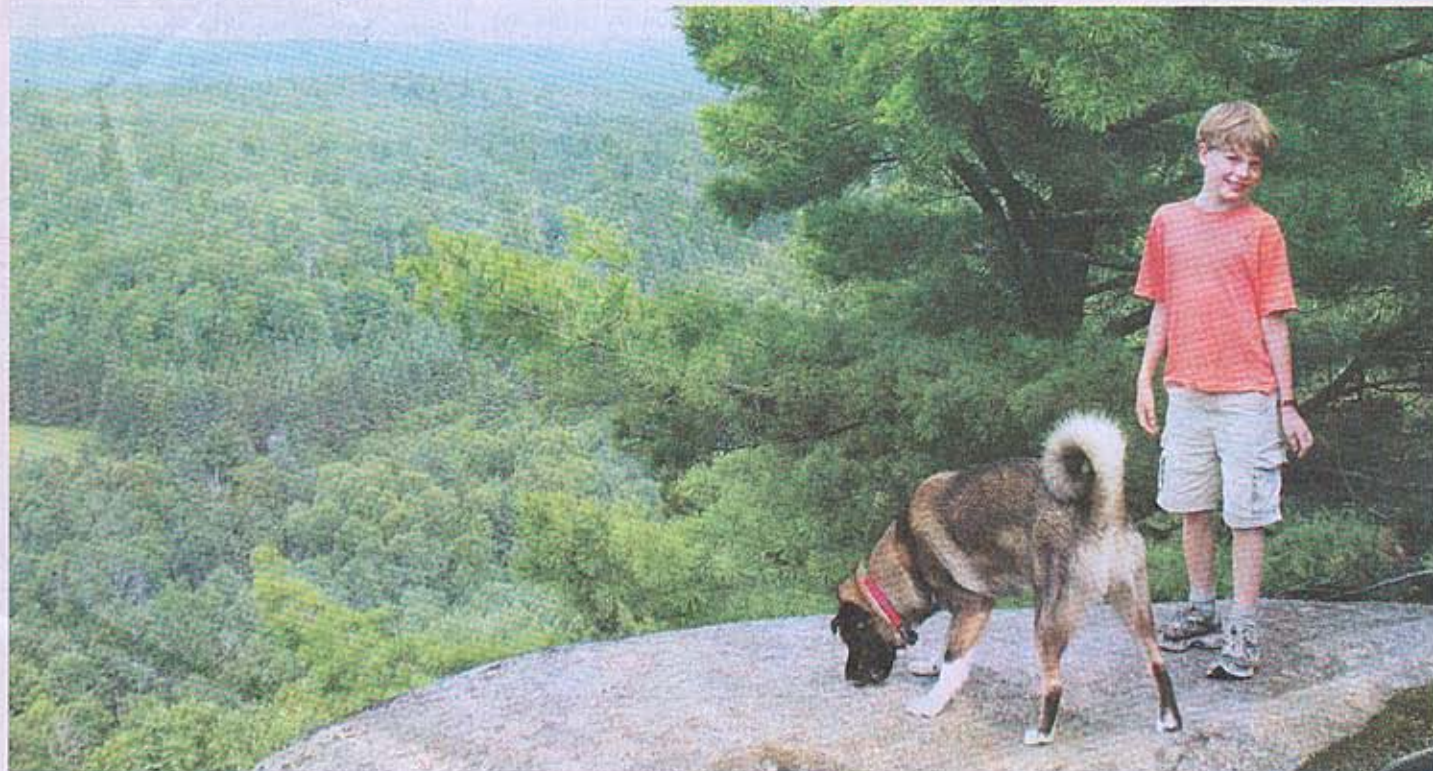
It takes over an hour to make our way back up the channel and upriver in a headwind to a neighbour's beach. I'm impressed by Gavin's endurance in the bow. It may be because we're getting closer to the moment he's been waiting for all week: canoe tipping!

I introduced this camp activity to his sister, Julia, last summer because she confessed she was afraid of falling out of the canoe. "So let's go fall out of the canoe," I said and took her over to shallow waters near a beach to show her how to right an overturned canoe and get back in should she ever, heaven forbid, fall out.

Now Gavin and I are doing the same. On the count of three, rocking the boat a little harder on each count, we launch ourselves into the water as the canoe flips upside down, then stand up underneath with our heads in the air pocket. We push up on the gunwales and turn the boat back over. Then we haul ourselves inelegantly back in and do it all over again (many times...). Maddy chooses not to participate in this particular giggle-filled activity.

On the paddle home, Maddy, who thus far has been happy to sit either in front, under, or behind Gavin in the bow seat, suddenly decides it's her turn on the seat. Maybe she wants to soak up the record amount of sunshine. In any case, she nudges the bowsman off and takes her pride of place. Gavin good-naturedly continues paddling on his knees in front of her. A true canoeist!

Next year: Camp Auntie Brenda takes Gavin on an Algonquin canoe trip, and Maddy learns the bow stroke...



Left, Maddy and Gavin enjoy the view from Centennial Ridge.