

What *ELSE* can I do in the Wilderness?

Scott Earl Smith

A few years ago I began diversifying my outdoor interests. The reasons were twofold: one, to kind of turn off the 24/7 fishing and hunting channel within my little brain; and two, to meet the practical needs of writing an outdoor column for Airlines magazine, the in-flight publication of West Jet airlines. The column had to be more on the eco-friendly end of the spectrum with a wide appeal to air-commuters.

So I found myself doing crazy things like ice-climbing, rock-climbing, bird-banding, hiking, mountain-biking, whitewater- and sea-kayaking, sailing, snorkeling, etc. I drew the line just shy of sky-diving because, well, as I've written before, our lives are in God's hands – but even He won't get in the way of sheer stupidity. No offence to skydivers and the like, but I do believe in the mantra, "Play with the bull – you'll eventually get the horn."

In any event, I found that every one of these outdoor pastimes could be done within a few miles of my front door. Northern Ontario is that kind of place. You can pretty much dabble in any kind of outdoor adventure here.

Case in point is a day in June a few years ago when me and two of my three children ended up on a rock-climbing and rappelling excursion to assist a local scientist in banding some peregrine falcon chicks. It all started when I bumped into a friend from the local chapter of the Alpine Club of Canada while having breakfast at the Hoito restaurant in Thunder Bay. (The Hoito is well worth a visit if you have any time to spend in Thunder Bay – ask for the Finnish pancakes; you won't regret it.) That was quite the day.

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My ice-climbing experience, however, was short-lived. I found myself feeling like an ant on an icicle, 50-feet up an ice-formation on a local cliff, and not really having fun.

Others relish in the idea.

But not all outdoor adventures have to defy death in order for them to be enjoyable. My wife, Antonietta and I spend a lot of time beachcombing. Either on foot, or with the use of a boat or canoe, we visit secluded beaches and explore. My wife's garden is full of rocks, driftwood and other artifacts from our beachcombing adventures.

Finding out about area history, geography and culture is also something I make a point of doing. Who settled the area first? In Northern Ontario you can ask, "Is this Cree or Ojibwa territory?" And other things like that.

As a former fly fishing guide I found that I was constantly being asked about the local flora, fauna and rock formations along the banks of the river or lake I was fishing. So finally I made a point of learning a little more about those things so I could answer those questions with some authority.

In turn, now that I am more often being the one that is guided, I make a point of asking my guides these same questions. And I am always intrigued by their answers.

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I've learned through my many sojourns in Northern Canada that First Nations guides are generally not very talkative. Don't take it personal – it's just a cultural attribute. My late friend, Emmanuel Jacob, who operated a guide service on the mighty Winisk River in Northern Ontario, taught me a lot about the Cree culture because I took a genuine interest in learning about his family and culture. I learned very quickly to ask open-ended questions – not those that simply required a “yes” or “no” answer.

Yes, there is a lot more to the outdoors than fishing. Next time you make a trip to the north, try spending less time worrying about just how many fish you catch per day, and on what bait, but what lies beneath.

What lies beneath and beyond the end of your fishing pole, boat, or campsite? How do those pesky mosquitoes survive the winter? Who painted the sky blue? And why do trees smell so good in the breeze?

Take along a camera – and **MAKE** the time to take pictures – explore some beaches and shorelines; maybe bring along a book that covers the trees, plants, and animals that live in the area. You may not get to photograph a moose, but what about photographing it's footprint in the sand! That would be cool too wouldn't it?

You may not get to photograph a fly squirrel either – but did you know they inhabit the boreal forests of Northern Ontario? Last summer on my trip to Striker's Point I was surprised one evening to find a flying squirrel peeking through the screen of the fish-

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cleaning house. I scrambled to get my camera and flash ready (it was dark) in time to get the photograph but the squirrel climbed up an adjacent tree and flew – yes flew! – from one tree to another completely over top of the fish-cleaning house! That was a first for even me; a Northerner who spends a lot of time (possible too much time depending who you ask) in the wilderness for one reason or another.

These little experiences, as innocuous and serendipitous as they seem, are the things that make your trip all the more memorable.

After all, yours should be a vacation from all things that are even remotely reminiscent of work; things like quotas, competition (except for the purposes of a good laugh), and cost-benefit ratio should be saved for another time and place.



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Wilderness North

Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

Phone toll free: 888-465-3474

www.wildernessnorth.com