

Brule Lake

An essay by Christopher Turek, Age 38

After a day of on-and-off drizzling rain, we were finally grinding out our last portage. Water squished out of the eyelets of our boots as we thumped the granite gear packs into the belly of our red canoes. We sighed happily as we paddled into the afternoon wind on Brule Lake, knowing all we needed to do was find a campsite.

We had pushed hard that day to earn a layover day on Brule, hoping the outfitter didn't lie when his dirty fingernail had settled on the map, "Great fishing here. I've always slayed 'em there."

It's a larger lake and we were happy the rain and storms had now ceased, giving us a chance to safely paddle across the wide water. The island campsite sat open, a wide brown bed of pine needles covering the open space leading from the fire pit down to the shore. As the canoes drew closer the four pine logs lining the fire pit came into view, with the tent pad clearly behind it, and we all chuckled that even though it was unseen, the thunder box undeniably loomed. The wind was at the other side of the island, creating a calm pool of water as we stepped into the shallows and dragged up the canoes.

After scouring the island for firewood and failing we decided to cook on our stoves and pick at the Brule shoreline for wood tomorrow during our fishing. With dry clothes on we devoured rice, summer sausage, and Gunflint cookies, feeling warm as the clouds were burned away by the setting sun. The weather had blown out and the clear sky told us a chilly north woods night was coming. Our food pack was hung, sleeping bags were spread out in the tent, and we made random chatter while picking at lures and leaders for tomorrow's fishing.

The sun had fully set and the empty, wet fire pit had no magnetic qualities to pull the evening together. We glanced at the lake quietly and each thought about heading to bed, but it was impossible not to notice that the chilly northern sky was now exploding with stars.

"I've got an idea!" A bungee cord was threaded through a flashlight base and then hung from a tree close to the shore. It swung like a pendulum, shining a single beam down at the damp pine needles.

We quietly slid our canoes onto the pitch black lake. The lake was like glass and a few j-strokes had us cruising smoothly in a forward line. As we drifted into the blackness at the center of the lake the more nervous ones checked back to see the now still beam of light. The island was otherwise undetectable in the night.

We slowly slid into the belly of our canoes and rested flat on our backs. The sky was a dazzling array of stars, more than our Chicago eyes had ever seen. As our eyes adjusted, the stars knocked away the darkness.

The chill of the night added crispness to the points above us. We took turns finding the satellites, sad when they sometimes turned out to be planes. Shooting stars were too quick to show to your buddy, so we all concentrated on a specific piece of sky, finally erupting in cheers when we watched a quick blaze of light snap across.

We noticed that chill was growing just as the flashlight was dimming, so we quickly sliced the canoes back across the lake, only to watch the batteries die as the canoes were dragged towards camp.

We quickly flipped the canoes, loaded our packs underneath, and headed to bed. Our aching shoulders would appreciate the rest.

In the morning there would be a fire, pancakes on the griddle, and a warm sun drawing us onto the lake in search of walleye. For now, we dozed off thinking of a sky so clear, quiet, and perfect that words about it just couldn't find our lips.