

East Branch of the Penobscot River – Canoeing and Kayaking Challenging and Spectacular Rapids

By
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Introduction

It was an unseasonably warm September day in northern Maine as we drove to the unorganized territory of Township 6 Range 8 West of the Easterly Line of the State (T6R8 WELS) to the East Branch of the Penobscot River. We unloaded three 17' white water canoes with nine food coolers, three tents, sleeping gear and one white water kayak. Our group was guided by a thirty year seasoned Master Maine Guide, Linwood "The Loon", his assistant and wife Betty; my long time friend, Dundee, Dundee's adult son Paul, and my two adult sons Tim and Shaun.

This was Tim's and my fifth canoe trip with The Loon. We previously had done the Allagash Wilderness Waterway twice, the Moose River Bow trip, and the Saint Croix Rivers in the four preceding years. With each trip Linwood kept enhancing and challenging our white water canoeing skills, and the East Branch was the most challenging whitewater we have faced to date.

A word about T6R8 WELS. I had expected to start our trip in a rural northern Maine town, and this was certainly an odd way to identify a geographical location. Northern Maine has at least 1,100 unorganized minor civil divisions. This is unorganized territory because there are no incorporated towns with local governments to represent the territory, and so the State simply identifies the location by a grid system with townships running south to north, and ranges run east to west, incrementing numerically each six miles. This is essentially a wilderness area.

The East Branch of the Penobscot River drains the region north and northeast of Maine's highest peak, majestic, mile high, "Mount Katahdin". The East Branch has also been a recipient of part of the Allagash drainage since the construction of Telos Dam in 1841.

The trip covered a total distance of 48 miles from the outlet of Grand Lake Matagamon. Webster Stream empties into Grand Lake Matagamon, an Indian name meaning "the old, exhausted lake". Hawks bred on the ledges of nearby Horse Mountain in such numbers that they depleted the population of partridges and ducks. Consequently the Indians found little or no food on their hunts here (hence the name).

The 26 mile section from Grand Lake Matagamon to Whetstone Falls demands skill and strength, but it offers incomparable scenery particularly as the river descends along the bases of Horse, Bald, Billfish, North Traveler, The Traveler, Lunksoos, and Daisey Mountains (some soaring to over 3,000 feet in elevation) as it enters the cataracts of the "Grand Falls" region. The unnavigable waterfalls and rough pitches must be carried, and the whitewater between them requires proficiency in technical maneuvering as well as swift decision-making. Moreover, the four portages become burdensome not so much

because of their length as for their proximity to one another. This is a fairly difficult but splendid river. It is one of Maine's truly classic trips.

After leaving Grand Lake Matagamon, the river follows a sinuous course through "the Oxbow" and into "Stair Falls", a succession of shallow ledge drops, ranging in height from 8 inches to 2 feet and resembling a low flight of stairs. The rapids beyond Stair Falls deliver you into "Haskell Deadwater", a final breather before the river really tests your skills. Haskell Rock Pitch is the first of the four portages and the first of the four "Grand falls of the East Branch", full of strong eddies, steep pitches, river sculpturing, and fossils.

After running the rapids below Haskell we reached the second of the "Grand falls", the 10 foot drop of Pond Pitch and another portage (the shortest), we then paddled on to the third and most spectacular of the Grand falls of the East Branch, "Grand Pitch". Grand Pitch itself is one of Maine's rare "Horseshoe" falls, some 30 feet in height. Because of the awesome spectacle of this natural wonder, (and having portaged three times), we camped at this spiritual site. I use the word "spiritual" because of an incident Linwood experienced while he camped here many years ago.

As Linwood tells it, "I awoke about 5 a.m. as dawn was just breaking. After getting the early morning fire going I walked down to the quiet, mist shrouded pool at the base of Grand Pitch to fetch water for the breakfast coffee. After filling my pot, and not hearing a sound, I stood up and there, in the morning mist, standing in the middle of this quiet pool at the base of the falls, sat an Indian, bareback, astride his silver and gray colored horse. We stared at each other for a moment. I waved a sign. Not speaking a word, he nodded, raised his hand in return, whirled his mount, and walked out of the pool, up over the bank, and into one of the most cherished memories I have had in all of the my years spent guiding on the wilderness rivers of Maine."

Shortly after wetting the paddle the next day, we reached the fourth portage, the "Grand fall" of the East Branch. A place called "The Hulling Machine", so named in log driving days because it removed bark from the logs being driven down the river. It's easy to see how it might have ripped the bark from a log. What's hard to imagine is that there was anything left of a log after it was tossed like a matchstick through this frothing, violent falls. This is the last and also the longest portage of the four Grand falls of the East Branch. A portage effort broken up by a cool refreshing swim and our lunch stop for the day.

The next class III drop, "Bowline Falls", did not overwhelm us since we had successfully negotiated the rapids upstream in the preceding days. (There is a remote sporting lodge here and is probably where the Indian came from that Linwood saw in the mist of the early morning). The next 15 miles is mostly quickwater and smooth water with the chance to spot moose, eagles, beaver, and other wildlife.

Then came "Whetstone Falls", which consists of two sets of rapids separated by fastwater. The upper section, class III, can be run by experienced canoeists. The second half is easier. Even if you get wet here, it was our campsite for the night, affording an opportunity to get dry and comfy again.

The next day, a 14-mile paddle, our last day on the East Branch, ended at a spot called "Grindstone Falls", so called because of their sharp rock ledges. We ended the trip here because of the unusually low water conditions. Linwood had previously looked at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) web site for Maine river water flows, and found the water flow was 380 cubic feet per second (cfs), which is about half what Linwood recommended to run the Grindstone Falls gorge.

Solo in a 17' canoe

At our third night's campsite I had the opportunity to solo in a 17' canoe through class III rapids – and did it twice. On my first attempt I misread the water flow, and got hung up on rocks. I teetered on what appeared to be a huge rock underneath me. White water was spraying, foaming and churning all around me, and there I sat not moving in the middle of the river. It took me a few moments to figure out how to extricate myself from what appeared an unmovable position. I hesitantly exited the canoe by balancing myself with both hands on the gunnels, gingerly reaching one foot outside the canoe searching for solid rock whence my canoe was sitting, and slowly shifting my weight outside the canoe. Once assured of outside footing, I pushed the canoe forward till I felt it was ready to release.

I jumped back into the canoe, did one "hump" stroke and off the rocks I slid. Later, Linwood said, "You should have moved to the front of the canoe thereby relieving the weight from the back and you would have tipped forward and been released from the rocks." I replied, "my concern with that would have been what would happen once I released. With rocks ahead of me I was concerned with not being able to guide my canoe correctly and then straighten it out before I hit the "vee" of the next drop, which was only 10 or so feet to my immediate right." My solution worked, and I was able to maneuver the canoe properly, and then straighten it out before hitting the downstream "vee". However, you can bet that next time I am in that situation I will remember Linwood's words, "change positions and you change where the point of balance is."

Dundee grabbed a canoe, and he soloed ahead of me. Dundee is an experienced canoeist, and he was having a grand old time playing with the water and eddying out behind rocks. Once I was free of the rocks, I relaxed and tried imitating Dundee entering an eddy turn behind a rock. I missed it the first time, and paddled backwards upstream to once again get in front of the rock. This time I was able to eddy behind the rock. Relaxing and practicing these canoe whitewater skills was indeed a fun time.

I needed to try the rapids again to confirm I could read the water. Tim, Dundee and Linwood, all gave me their opinions on how to do my second attempt. Remarkably, I integrated all their advice and this time missed the rocks with a smooth traverse through the foaming rapids. I even stopped to do an eddy, and it was a great "mental high."

Tim decided to try it and show us his skill level. He very adroitly soloed through the rapids. His river reading skills were confirmed.

Kayaking Through A Class III Gorge

Prior to this Penobscot experience, my kayaking experience was limited to taking a two-hour winter course in kayak rescue techniques offered in an indoor swimming pool at the Goffstown, NH YMCA. As I would joke with my friends, “I can save myself if my kayak dumps, but I do not know how to paddle.”

Dundee had brought his whitewater kayak on the trip, and on the morning of our second day he asked, “Who would like to use the kayak today?” I quickly volunteered. My perception with kayaking was that it was more difficult than canoeing, and the only way to learn and compare was to try it.

I put on the life vest and kayak skirt, and Dundee assisted me in getting into the kayak. So far so good. The skirt was carefully wrapped around the kayak entrance, and I was positioned to go. My first real kayak adventure was now beginning.

Dundee’s kayak was designed for whitewater, meaning its bottom was rockered shape and had no tracking keel, and it was about 10 feet in length. Its weight was about 20 pounds. I pushed off and paddled happily after my fellow three canoe adventurers.

My first lesson in kayaking came when I had difficulty keeping up with my friends’ canoes. I would stroke one side, and quickly turn more than I wanted, often ending up sideways to the direction I wanted to go. I needed to learn how to feather the stroke for this type of kayak. I promptly learned this kayak was made for quick turns, as is required in rapid white water. In flat water a power paddle can spin you around, as I initially proved.

Certainly kayaks are designed for different environments. A keel responds to a power stroke straight ahead and speeds up the kayak. This keel-less kayak reacted immediately to the side with either my power stroke or any breeze that came up. Thankfully Dundee and Linwood kept slowing to give me instruction and challenge me to “eddy out” to adjust to the feel of the kayak. The “eddy out” is used in this sense to mean I pass by a boulder in the river, and then quickly turn back upstream essentially hiding behind the boulder, as the boulder deflects the current and creates a small refuge of still water. The current passing by the boulder essentially keeps my kayak in place with minimal paddling. My confidence was quickly building.

The morning paddle went smoothly. I had class I and II rapids available and I was beginning to get a feel for how to turn, stop, eddy out, and even go backwards.

My real kayak challenge was approaching. As canoeists, Linwood rated us class III experienced and ready for our toughest class III challenge to date at the Hulling Machine gorge. First however, these rapids needed to be taken without the weight of our camping gear and we needed to portage our gear around the rapids, about a half-mile trip over rough terrain to the end of the Hulling Machine. It took four trips for each of us to get our gear to the end of the rapids.

I asked Linwood if he thought my kayaking skills were such that I might try the Hulling Machine. He said, “absolutely.” I questioned him again, because as much as I enjoy trying new challenges, I certainly did not want to put myself in physical danger. Linwood assured me that between my canoe skill level, and my morning “four hour course” in kayaking, I was ready to try Hulling Machine. My confidence was still shaky, but the adrenalin started pumping in anticipation of a new conquest.

We had a large 15-foot waterfall in front of us, so we portaged the canoes and kayak to a spot immediately below the falls. This portage included carrying the canoes and kayak down a 20-foot rock ledge and into the gorge to a spot where we could slide our transportation quickly over ledge and gain entrance to the rapids. We would run the rapids one boat at a time, with Linwood and Betty going first. They would wait at the end of the gorge with a throw rope in case one of us got into trouble.

We needed to scout the half-mile gorge of roaring class III+ rapids to determine which route we would take. The group lumbered to an overlook of the gorge. Much discussion ensued with Linwood providing guidance and instruction on how to read the rapids. Needless to say, there were many questions by all.

Linwood and Betty went through first. We all watched from the overlook as they very calmly and slowly weaved themselves through the rapids. They seemed to go so slowly and deliberately through the rapids. Their canoe expertise was a thing of beauty and they obviously were “in charge” of the river.

Next was my turn. Dundee had quite a bit of whitewater experience, and I looked to him for additional advice as to how to “conquer” these rapids. “Steve, no matter what happens, always point the kayak downstream if you get in trouble.” He repeated this a dozen times and I absorbed it in my mind. I repeated it back. I was now ready.

I entered the kayak, and quickly headed my kayak downstream while trying to maintain my river left position, which we spotted earlier from the overlook. I wanted to “hit” the vees while I continually repeated Dundee’s words, “keep the kayak straight.” My morning lessons taught me the kayak was more forgiving than a canoe when in rapids, and if I hit a rock or ledge I wanted it to be head-on, rather than sideways. In that manner the kayak hopefully would slide to the side of least resistance and continue straight down river with me in an “upright” position!

I wish I could give you more insights to my feelings, but I was concentrating so much on “keep the kayak straight”, that time essentially stopped for me as I concentrated on maintaining a straight “river left” channel, and I was quickly through the half mile churning rapids and eddying safely at the end of the gorge. What a thrill!

I quickly went to shore and hurried back upstream to see my sons work their canoeing skills through the Hulling Machine. Indeed they “conquered the “Hulling Machine”. Dundee and Paul went last. Linwood’s confidence in us paid off as Dundee and Paul, Shaun and Tim, very efficiently showed their skills with uneventful runs.



Steve's Kayak Starts Through Hulling Machine Gorgeⁱ



Shaun and Tim conquering the Hulling Machine gorge rapidsⁱⁱ

Swimming Downstream In Rapids

On one of our earlier Allagash trips we swam in the rapids. We now had an opportunity to do it again on the Penobscot. After our Hulling Machine experience we took a rest break at the end of the falls. We wanted to swim in its rapids. We counseled each other about swimming downstream in the rapids with sandals, and with feet and legs forward to detect and fend off hidden rocks. This technique proved itself, as at the end of our hundred yards or so “swim”, it appeared there was only a fast flowing current. Upon arrival there were many unseen rocks just below the surface. I got stuck on the first one as it was like a tabletop rock, and wide. I cleared the table rock, and immediately detected another rock with my feet

I was trying to see if I could touch bottom, but it was to no avail, as the rocks were too plentiful, and the current too swift. I had visions of getting my feet stuck between two rocks. I was passing by the eddy out landing. The swift current would not allow me to swim, and so I gently did a side paddle to the left of the stream to get out of the fast flowing river. There was another set of obvious rapids a hundred feet or so ahead, and I did not want to take them swimming. Finally I began to make progress, and I eased my way left until I was close to shore and able to walk back upstream to where my other companions had made their way out of swift current.



L-R: Paul, Shaun, Steve, Tim and Dundee enjoying a rapid swimⁱⁱⁱ

Four Portages In One Day

The group's physical conditioning was challenged the first two days as we had to do two portages the first day, and two portages the second day. The day one portages were particularly difficult because one portage was over ½ mile, and it took at least 3 trips each to transport all the gear and the canoes and kayak. Ten minutes of paddling, and then another portage of a ¼ mile followed this equivalent "2 mile portage". Whew!

Primitive Camping

Our usual sanitary camping facilities were a wooden outhouse or a seat in the middle of the woods. This was always sufficient and expected. However, our first night of camping required us to dig a "cat hole" for our pleasure. This reminded me of my Boy Scout camping experiences many years ago.

No'se'ems.

One night of camping was particularly warm. I awoke in the middle of the night scratching all over. I could not see what was causing the itching, but no'se'ems surely were there, and not welcome. Sleeping was difficult that night.

Bow Stroke

In my earlier canoe trips I had rarely been in the bow. Last year on the St Croix, Dundee was in the bow and he did some marvelous easy strokes that moved the bow of the canoe very quick and efficiently. I knew the bow draw stroke, but wanted to learn the "bow rudder" stroke.

Betty was using the kayak, so Linwood and I partnered. Here was an opportunity for me to ask Linwood to teach me the bow rudder stroke. Essentially I reached forward and formed a wedge with the canoe and with my paddle facing front. When on the left of the bow the canoe quickly turned left. When on the right it quickly turned right. After a few mistrials, I got it to work! It amazingly slows the canoe down while quickly turning the bow. I was very pleased with this stroke. In comparing it with the bow draw stroke, I found the bow rudder stroke slowed the canoe a bit while making the fairly quick turn. The draw stroke was quick, but required strength and did not slow the canoe down.

My son Tim likes to power through the rapids, whereas my observation of Linwood and Betty going through rapids was that they picked their way in a very deliberate and slow manner. They were essentially in control of their canoe – rather than the river controlling them.

Learning The Hard Way To Secure A Dry Bag

We had one over-turned canoe – and my camera got wet. The incident was not the fault of those who flipped (and hence will go nameless), but because I had put the camera in the dry bag myself, when it got wet, I was the only person to blame. Guess I need to practice my dry bag routine a bit more. Having said that, this has happened before, and I sense no matter how well I fold the dry bag, I suspect it will still leak. The repeated experience of getting my belongings wet just goes to show the importance of using

ziplock bags, if possible, for delicate items. My clothes were in zip locked bags, and remained dry, whereas my poor camera was simply laid in the bag. Sorry about that.

Swollen Ankles and Sore Knees

On my first canoe trip to the Allagash Wilderness Waterway I had gotten swollen ankles. I firmly believe this was from deet in the bug repellent that I used on my ankles. We took three more trips, and I did not need any repellent, and my ankles were all normal size. This trip was a bit different and puzzling. The bugs were out, so in the evening I would apply a non-deet bug repellent. On the fourth and final morning I noticed my ankles were a bit swollen. Not as bad as the Allagash trip, but they were still swollen. It took four days after the trip for my ankles to return to normal size. What caused this phenomenon is still a mystery to me.

Another Rewarding Canoe And Camping Trek

Being able to share the outdoors with family and friends is indeed a “high”. The East Branch of the Penobscot River was more of a challenge than our previous canoe treks. The country we passed through was equally as beautiful, and yet different than our earlier Maine expeditions.

The East Branch of the Penobscot River is one of Maine's most scenic waterways. It offers semi-wilderness travel with intermittent rapids up to class III, ledges, waterfalls, and portages - all in a region that has much less use than the Allagash and which is more accessible than the Saint John.

For next year we are planning a seventy-seven mile canoe and kayak trip from Fifth Machias Lake to the Atlantic Ocean on Maine’s Machias River.



A successful trip on the East Branch of the Penobscot River. L-R: Loon, Dundee, Paul, Tim, Betty and Shaun. Photo by Steve^{iv}

This is an excerpt from Steve's forthcoming book, **Short Stories of an Outdoor Enthusiast: Never Say, "I Wish I Had"**. A copy of the full manuscript can be found at www.professorsteve.com or by emailing Steve at steve@professorsteve.com.

ⁱ Steve's kayak starts through Hulling Machine Gorge

ⁱⁱ Shaun and Tim conquering the Hulling Machine gorge rapids

ⁱⁱⁱ L-R: Paul, Shaun, Steve, Tim and Dundee enjoying a rapid swim

^{iv} The happy crew of the East Branch of the Penobscot River Expedition

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