

It Takes a River

A mom and her teenage daughter encounter the unexpected along the Northern Forest Canoe Trail

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMIE STRINGFELLOW

Is all of Vermont this boring?" my daughter, Hallie, asked while we stood on the edge of the Clyde River. It was Day Two of our paddling adventure along the Northern Forest Canoe Trail. I could see why a 14-year-old might wonder: From where we stood, we could see no lights or stores, few roads, and no houses, except for the vacation rental we'd stayed in the night before. Oh, and there was no Internet.

The Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT) is 740 miles of lakes, rivers, and streams, along with overland portage segments. The trail winds from Maine through New Hampshire, Vermont, and Quebec—tracing routes once used by American Indians and French fur-traders—through forests, meadows, and towns, to its end point in New York's Adirondacks.

The nonprofit NFCT has preserved and mapped the route to help connect and revitalize communities along the trail. Noah Pollock, an NFCT representative, had invited us to help him scout a segment he hoped to promote as a self-guided, town-to-town canoeing trip.

DAY ONE: **Staying Afloat** Island Pond to East Charleston, Vermont

By late morning, we shoved off from Island Pond Lake, in the aptly named town of Island Pond, in our 16-foot canoe, paddling underneath Main Street to the banks of the infant Clyde—the wee origin of the river that would eventually deliver us to Pensioner Pond, near Charleston, Vermont, at the end of Day Two.

Noah, leading the way in a little kayak, showed us how to work as a team: how Hallie, in front, could push her paddle backward to help turn the canoe, for example. Paddling lessons seemed a lot like parenting lessons: steering without rocking the boat amid unpredictable currents; feeling like you're heading upstream much of the time; figuring out how to enjoy yourself while your teenager rolls her eyes and makes fun of a river that, honestly, had the volume and velocity of the runoff from a car wash.

The Clyde meandered to one side then the other, our boat barely clearing corners (and the river bottom) before the next switchback. We paddled past birches and poplars under darkening clouds, the river gradually widening, the current picking up just enough until it felt like a real river.

Hallie and I weren't a very good team. From above, you'd

have seen sloppy zigzagging as we each overcompensated for the other's paddling.

We came to a small beach and I took half of a roast beef sandwich for each of us from our dry bag. Spring had been rainy, Noah said, the river swollen with melting snowpack. But now, after a month of dry summer, the water level was 2 feet below normal for late July.

Which explained the boulders and tree trunks littering the water as we got underway after our snack.

"That portage trail should be up here," said Noah. He pulled his kayak up and went off into the forest to scout. We pulled up and waited.

You know that arched strut in the middle of a canoe? That's so you (or in our case, Noah) can carry the canoe on your shoulders on the portage trail until you are beyond river obstructions. Or, in our case, as we search for

the trail that appears quite clearly on the map but has overgrown so badly on the land that it is invisible and virtually un-navigable (especially while lugging a 16-foot canoe). About that time, it started raining. As if we were in the Amazon.

"Good thing we're scouting this route—looks like the trail needs grooming!" Noah said cheerily. Somehow we heaved and toddled to beyond the boulder field, and slid our boats back into the water.




River Lore

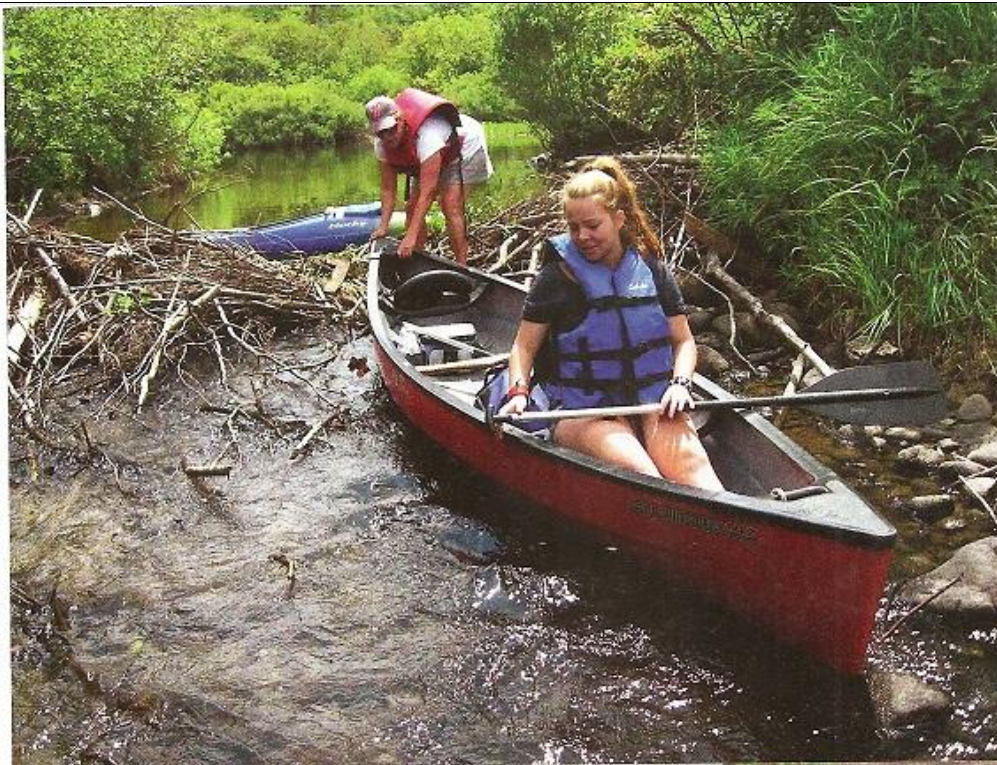
The Northern Forest Canoe Trail (NFCT) offers myriad self-guided itineraries in Vermont, Quebec, New Hampshire, and Maine, as well as self-guided packages that include lodging and equipment rental. The two-night Explore the Townships trip, for example, visiting the headwaters of the Missisquoi River, starts at \$216 for two adults. (802) 496-2285; northernforestcanoetrail.org.

Guided options include **Inn on the Connecticut River**, with trips that encompass three nights' lodging, two days of guided paddling, meals, gear, and shuttle services (rates start at \$870 for two people). (603) 528-0136; outdoorescapesnewhampshire.com.

Clyde River Recreation can help you get your own rental boat at your starting point, and your car at your end point. Rental prices range from \$6 per hour for a small kayak to \$150 a week for a tandem canoe. The writer's canoe was \$80 for two days; prices include paddles and lifejackets. Clyde River Recreation also offers paddling trips that include meals and stays in local inns. Their Pedal and Paddle package builds in some biking; prices range from \$375 to \$513 for two. (802) 895-4333; clyderiverrecreation.com.



Noah Pollock (opposite page) leads the author (in back of the canoe, above) and her daughter, Hallie, on a paddling adventure along the Clyde River, part of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail.



(Clockwise from left) The mother-and-daughter team learns to navigate obstacles on their trip from Island Pond to their first night's lodging.



Hallie laughed and held her paddle high. "We did it!" she cried. We had bellies full of roast beef, 7 miles of river ahead, and no more portaging planned. The afternoon looked golden. Then we came to a huge fallen oak spanning the river. We might be able to duck under, at the perfect angle—tough in these swirling currents. Before I could consult Hallie about strategy, she hopped out into the water, then hoisted herself up onto the fallen tree.

"Mom. Duck." She pulled me through, pulled the boat alongside the trunk, and calmly stepped back in.

I was in awe.

I found that, taxing as the constant twists and turns were, I liked not knowing what was around the next bend. I liked the challenge of trying to steer our little two-girl-powered boat around a corner, without crashing into a riverbank or capsizing.

But by 5 o'clock—after five hours in the canoe, I was ready for a hot shower, a cold glass of wine, and a soft seat.

We turned a final bend and saw the rooftop of Bill Manning's Clyde River House—the only structure around for miles. We hauled the boat out of the water and flipped it like a couple of pros. Noah, who'd parked his car here earlier, glided up in his kayak. He headed home, his mission finished. The trail from here would be along a wider river, with no foreseeable need for him to update the NFCT's maps.



Hallie and I let ourselves into the three-bedroom rental house, threw our wet stuff in the laundry, padded around in our socks, and fixed a dinner of SpaghettiOs and some greens Bill had left (he sells them at his nearby farm stand). Then we settled in to watch a VHS of *Dirty Dancing*.

Miles: 11. Hours paddling: 5.

Go With the Flow

LODGING: Bill Manning's three-bedroom **Clyde River House** in East Charleston, Vermont, has stunning river views and shoreline access. House rental is \$95 a night. (802) 723-4534 or (609) 865-3627; vermontleadershippartnerships.com.

Lake Salem Inn has amazing food and friendly hosts in the border (with Canada) town of Derby, Vermont. Rates start at \$125, including breakfast. (802) 766-5560; lakesaleminn.com.

DAY TWO: Dip, Dip, and Swing East Charleston to Derby, Vermont

Could the river have changed direction? I wondered as we pulled away from shore on the morning of Day Two. Why the sudden resistance from the current? Could a 7-mph wind really make it seem like we were paddling upstream?

On we went, checking the map for landmarks to anticipate: bridges carrying country roads over us, little intersections with churches, a town hall, shops. A duck exploded out of the water, as if shot from a circus cannon, and ran on the surface of the water ahead of us, around and around.

"You know how they do that?" Hallie asked. "Water molecules are sticky. They become a surface you can push off against."

We saw a beaver duck into a little hole in the bank. We saw lily pads under shady trees. "You think frogs really balance on those lily pads?" Hallie asked. "Maybe they're like us on boogie boards," she said, which made us giggle.

After our lunch stop, moving off from a little cove where we'd enjoyed classic Vermont views of white steeples, rolling hills, and cows, we rounded a corner, and suddenly, I realized, we were moving as one. Without being aware of when it started, we'd become a team.

Paddling well creates a momentum that rowers call "swing." We had swing—adjusting to the current, the shape of the river, and each other without even thinking about it. Our cadence was one, as we pirouetted our paddles in, out, and around obstacles, beyond bends, and down the river together, our momentum bigger than the sum of our parts.

We are both, I realized, inclined toward frequent breaks. Hallie, whose attention span I (and her teachers) worry about, liked to stop often and look around; or float while I paddled, trailing her fingers in the water.

Was that so bad? I liked it, too. Of all places, shouldn't I surrender to that rhythm now, on our vacation? So I stopped, too, and let the river



PACKING: Include some foul weather gear, polar fleece (no matter the season), shirts you can layer (tank, tees, longsleeves) for temperature variations, extra food and water, sunblock, hats, and a cell phone.

take me. Then Hallie turned around, and said, "Mom! Get paddling!"

We passed the halfway mark, and what seemed like a half hour later, I was astonished to see we had less than a mile to row before the Clyde emptied into Pensioner Pond.

The river had become a twisting, turning serpent. The accelerating current challenged our new skills, and we paddled into the pond. I could guess at the name: little cabins huddled on the shore, the dreams of retirees, spending their pensions on a fish-filled pond. Somewhere, on the other side, the Clyde continued. We'd have a short paddle then to our car, which folks at Clyde River Recreation had shuttled to our end point the day before.

But in the pond, we found ourselves pitted against the open-water wind. Digging, pulling, and brute effort replaced our rhythmic teamwork. It started to rain. We paddled harder. No talking, no laughing. Not soon enough, we paddled into the Clyde River, and onward to where we pulled up the boat. Some colorfully clad kayakers, new to the sport it seemed, pulled toward the shore in front of us, clearly uneasy about how to get out of a kayak. Hallie hopped out in the knee-deep water; I held back. "I'll hold this for you," she said to the kayakers, and they eased themselves out. My daughter, the river guide.

Within minutes, we were on our way down the road to Lake Salem Inn. Owners Joe and Maureen "Mo" Profera grow most of the ingredients for their dinners and breakfasts in their garden. Venison came from a farm up the street; my minestrone soup was so good I asked to save my leftovers for breakfast.

Miles: 11. Hours paddling: 6.

Now, months later, when Hallie tells our paddling story, she says Lake Salem Inn served "the best meals we ever had, right, Mom?" A dinner so impressive, it had accomplished the impossible: making Vermont less boring to a 14-year-old. But what she won't say to the general public is just how good food can taste, and how great a bed can feel, when you've rowed yourself the whole way there. 🍷

Jamie Stringfellow coedits the website weekendwalk.com.



SHOES: Flipflops are the wrong footwear. So are sneakers. Use shoes, such as Tevas or Keens, that have good tread for walking on sticks (or rocky river bottoms), are open on the sides so they don't retain river water (thus acting as weights), and can fasten tightly around the ankle so you don't lose one in the mud.