

Trip Report: The Albany Effort

**39 Days from Hearst, Ontario to Mammamattawa via the Fox and Kabinakagami Rivers.
February and March 2010.**



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The Albany Effort

In January of this year my girlfriend, Kielyn, and I began planning a 45-day trek from Hearst, ON to Fort Albany, ON. While we didn't make it down to James Bay due to poor ice conditions (or rather, poor route selection), we did have an incredibly diverse, challenging and rewarding trip. It was an experience we will always cherish. And even though the winter, well, wasn't very 'wintery', we enjoyed every moment of it out on our trip rather than lamenting the poor weather like I might have done at home.

An overview of the route plan: We would begin in Hearst, ON at Pivabiska L. Twenty kilometres on Pivabiska and neighbouring Wolverine L. would take us to a winter road, and shortly thereafter to our first river: the Fox. From the Fox R. we would travel downstream to the Kabinakagami R., Kenogami R., and finally the Albany R., which would take us to Fort Albany and the Arctic Ocean at James Bay. The Fox River was the greatest unknown on this trip, shown on the map as just a thin, wavy blue line travelling through about 70 kilometres of muskeg before emptying into the much larger Kabinakagami River. Kielyn and I both knew that the Fox would most likely be the 'make or break' portion of our trip, and talked ahead of time about skipping it entirely by starting directly on the Kab. R., about 30 kilometres to the west. However, for a few reasons, we stuck with the original plan of starting on the Fox:

1. It offered easier logistics, allowing us to park our car and depart directly from the Hearst airport;
2. I liked the idea of starting at the headwaters of a small creek, and following the waterway all the way to the ocean at the mouth of one of Ontario's largest rivers;
3. I like exploratory, 'connect the dots'-style trips – I walked a well documented river last winter (lower Missinaibi), and the idea of just going up there this time and seeing what the land and waterway looked like, without a lot of advance knowledge, really appealed to me.

So on February 7th, under clear skies, we set out early to drive the 10 hours north to Hearst. In the vehicle were two toboggans – 11' and 8' long respectively – 130 kg (280 lb) of food, a wood stove, a pile of tools: axe, saws, ice chisel, shovel, etc., a canvas tent, duffel bags full of wool, canvas and fur, and of course all other requisite camping supplies such as first aid and repair kits, pots and sleeping bags, and extraneous gear such as cameras, books and even a boardgame or two. This gear we dumped at the shores of Pivabiska Lake in the early afternoon, and I drove off to drop the vehicle, while Kielyn began pulling across a small bay to find a spot for our first night's camp. By the time I dropped off the vehicle and got back to the lake, Kielyn had a warm fire in the tent, and supper almost ready.



*Photo 1: Just a portion of our gear.
Note: not our dog.*

Day two, and the early portion of day three went extremely well as we crossed Pivabiska and Wolverine Lakes and then travelled on the winter road until it crossed the Fox River, approximately 2 kilometres shy of the river's head. Despite many stops for early trip adjustments and refinements to our snowshoe bindings and hauling systems, we were making great time. The loads were the heaviest I've ever hauled, but on the light snow of the lakes and road they pulled surprisingly easily and my confidence soared.



Photo 2: Winter road connecting Wolverine Lake to Fox R.

When we reached the Fox it was much the size I had expected it to be and the ice below the road was solid. However within less than 30 metres we were running into increasingly heavier slush and thinner ice, which finally forced us into our first portage. We dragged, heaved and pushed the 'boggans through a 30m tangle of alders. Our first of many gear breakdowns occurred here when we snapped the headboard and top 2" off the curve of our shorter toboggan. This was only a precursor of things to come with our gear, as the Fox River would rapidly grind down both us and our equipment. After the alders we encountered a series of about four or five small beaver dams which we navigated slowly but easily. After the last dam we got onto probably the easiest and perhaps most enjoyable portion of the Fox that we would encounter all trip. The river widened and wound its way through flat, open, bog country, with only a few beautiful standing dead woods to obscure our view. The only damper on the fun was that Kielyn realized she had dropped the camera battery, likely some kilometres back. She backtracked and found it, while I pulled both toboggans into a suitable campsite. We stopped near the end of this section, just as the river began to show signs of opening up into Bannerman Lake.



Photo 3: Our first encounter with the Fox River



Photo 4: Soft ice on the Fox River.



Photo 5: Collecting firewood near Bannerman Lake

Day three, as it turned out, marked the end of our good fortunes and easy travel for quite some time. Day four started out well enough, with an easy, albeit windy and cold, crossing of the shallow, weedy, Bannerman Lake. At the end of the lake, the river was shallow and open, and we elected to use a snowmobile trail to skirt an approximately 3km long section of the river. Another gear mishap here: dropping back down the bank from the trail to the river required a short, steep descent, during which a stick caught one of my food boxes and tore the side clean off. Not knowing how valuable cardboard was to become for us further on in the trip, we stuffed the food into any available orifice, burnt the box and moved on. Very quickly it was apparent that we would have our work cut out for us on our little river. Sections of poor or non-existent ice slowed progress to a crawl. The river was very narrow in sections (sometimes less than two metres!), and the banks frequently steep and covered in alders. A succession of beaver dams wore us down as we hauled over them while dodging sections of open water. We stopped for the night after a particularly frustrating portage when we found a small opening in the bush suitable for a camp. Ice conditions outside camp were very strange and are worth mentioning here: the river here was very narrow: 2m, and had obviously sagged and melted in the centre (evidenced by newer ice here, with no snow on top). Though sags are usually avoided as being good indicators of weaker and/ or slushy ice, in the case, the sag was the only section of decent ice. Along both margins of the river, the ice was essentially non-existent, but this fact was hidden by snow bridging. You could (and I did) stand in the middle of the river, and simply pat a mittened hand against the snow on either side of you to open big holes in the ice. Do it for a while and you are left standing on a 1m wide vein of ice, bordered on each side by running water. Adding to that, occasionally those veins of ice were broken by a bookend of heavier snow and poor ice which had to be crossed. Though they could often support the passage of our toboggans, they would either require a leap or run around by Kielyn and I to stay dry.

Though it was much earlier than we had planned for one, after a rocky start and lots of overland sections, we decided to rest on day five. We discussed the possibility of turning back and heading overland (on a series of gravel and winter roads) to reach the larger Kab. River. The Fox had been hard on us thus far, but it had a way of drawing you inexorably further into its depths. I took a walk that evening, and found the river too captivating, I knew we couldn't give up on it just yet. Difficult sections were broken up by sections of great travel, and signs of wildlife were everywhere. Beaver dams and lodges abounded, and the effect they were having on the river was fascinating to behold. Tracks criss-crossed our path, trees hung in our faces, and of course, the shelter from the wind was hard to give up. I imagined that this was the type of difficult waterway trappers would have often endured, and this step back in time is part of what I love so much about winter camping in Ontario.

On Day six we set out to travel further down the Fox, but after four hours, and only 1500m of progress we came to an impasse: about 100 metres of slushy ice surrounded by thick brush. Necessity, as they say, is the mother of invention, and Kielyn and I had already come up with numerous techniques to skirt poor ice in a timely manner (we were to hone many more later in the trip!). I promptly grabbed the shovel and began building a snow road on the slush from the heavier snow on at the river's edge. As before, the ice here was so thin that the simple act of lifting snow would often break large holes in the ice. The slushy ice in the centre of the river where I was building the road was only marginally better. When we rounded a corner with our road and found continued poor conditions we decided we had seen enough of the Fox. We returned to our same little hollow in the woods that we had used the previous two nights. Now it was devoid of obvious firewood and becoming a bit of a slick slide into the open river, and would mark for me, a low point in the trip. When I returned to camp with a fair-sized log, I reached the slick hard-pack in front our tent and threw the log awkwardly from my shoulder. It landed on the tail of my shoe with a disheartening crunch. I was almost afraid to look, and when I did the news was not good. The crack was about four inches long, and an ugly mess of splinters

poking out the bottom of my shoe.



Photo 6: My twisted, buckled shoe – after repairs.

I repaired the shoe that night using my entire supply of sinew (intended for moccasin, mitten and other repairs), which helped straighten out the crack very satisfactorily. I finished up with a wrap of rawhide and decided a splint was unnecessary. The photo doesn't quite do justice to just how warped the shoe was by the end of the trip, and in hindsight a splint should probably have been added to keep things aligned a little better. Also in this photo, can be seen leather lace which was wrapped over the raw hide and sinew to protect it from the abrasive spring conditions we encountered later in the trip.

Day seven: We returned to the winter road and began a hilly 25 kms to the Kab. R. En route we saw a mink chasing a hare. Both ran right up the road to ~ 3 m distance from me. The hare had nary a moment to spare, ran right past, onto my float and continued straight towards Kielyn. The mink paused, thought about it for a moment, and then decided it wasn't worth the risk or maybe effort and bolted into the bush.

Day eight: We woke to our first and only snowstorm of the trip. This continued pretty consistently for the next 48 hours, piled fresh snow to over a foot deep, and slowed our progress to a crawl. The combination of fresh snow, and hauling our still heavy loads up hills and across gullies wore us down considerably, and for quite a while after the snow quit falling. On many hills Kielyn would go ahead and pack a float, then would return and help push my toboggan. Then she would return for her toboggan while I continued trying to break trail. Breaking at this point, despite my fair-sized snowshoes (14 x 48 for 175lbs) was extremely difficult. By the afternoon we would often have to break without our toboggans and then double back for them to keep any type of momentum. We stopped by a beautiful cedar swamp with lots of standing deadwood. In the afternoon Kielyn got the opportunity to watch a vole popping in and out of the snow, and later an ermine running around outside camp.

Day nine: With the storm full in still swing and so much enticing wood nearby we took an extremely relaxing rest day and enjoyed watching mother nature at work.

Days ten and eleven: We continued slowly along the road. Though the map showed the road dead ending a kilometre short of the river, we were hopeful that it would continue in one form or another right to the river, and were in luck. With some scouting, Kie found the road narrowed to a trail, and continued to a wonderful, open grove overlooking the Kab. The river was a spectacular sight after the torment that had been the Fox. As I walked down to the river that night, it felt so good to be out on open, windswept terrain, and though I could see a hint of open water further downstream, the river was wide enough (I hoped) to allow easy passage around any open leads. Although it was now day eleven,

and we were barely 20kms north of where we had started, there was still plenty of time, and I was hopeful that we would make up the lost week in the days to come.



Photo 7: The trail to the Kabinakagami River. Boy were we glad to find it!



Photo 8: And equally glad to find this site at its end!

Day 12: The first day on the Kab. R. was much easier than we had experienced on the roads. The snow from the storm was already consolidated and fairly wind-packed, and we reached our 10km goal for the first time in quite a while. As we were travelling down the 5km section known as “Limestone Rapids” there were many open leads, but all were easily navigated without need to leave the river.



Photo 9: Limestone Rapids.

Downstream of the rapids, where we hoped for more straight-forward travel, we encountered a huge jumbled mess of ice upheavals. This matches, but far surpassed in severity, what I encountered last year on the Missinaibi River, where downstream of Thunderhouse/ Hell's Gate we ran into a long stretch of convoluted ice. The uneven terrain was bad enough, but the worst part was how blown snow settled and collected in this section of the river.



Photo 10: Convoluted river ice.



Photo 11: Tough going on the Kabinakagami

Day 13: The upheavals continued for many more kilometres and continued to wear us down. At one point there was a sag in the river ice so large, that it formed a trench over 2m deep. Again, we knew that the sag was more likely to be thin and/ or slushy, but its smooth surface with little snow cover sure was enticing given the alternative of walking out on top amidst the crazy ice jumbles and snow pockets. We entered the trench, and were able to travel in it for over a kilometre before being forced out by soft ice. The photos really don't do this feature justice. Its high walls obscured our view of shorelines and our surroundings so much that we actually passed a series of six small islands without even seeing them!



Photo 12: The walls of the trench.



Photo 13: Kielyn about to enter "the trench"

By day 14, after ten solid days of tough going, my 'snow-crusher' muscles were killing me, and Kie's 'hauling' muscles were killing her... so between the two of us, neither one felt strong enough to both break trail and pull their toboggan at the same time. This was when we hit upon a fantastic solution which offered many advantages: we tied the toboggans together with a short length of rope so that they ran one after the other, and then we both pulled the lead toboggan together. Advantages included:

1. Both of us passed over the deep snow and packed a really nice float before either toboggan had to pass;
2. With Kie's still-strong 'snow-crushers' and my still-strong 'haulers' we had one good set of legs between us;
3. The front person used a long (10m) lead, giving them the low-angle pulling power we desired, while the second person used a shorter (3 - 4m) lead that allowed us to keep control of the train;
4. Kie's rapper name was "Kie-Diesel" because she starts slowly in cold weather, my rapper name was "D-Fizzle" because I fade – together we had all-day consistency;
5. Like tandem canoeists we could now hold a conversation while travelling.



Photo 14: Toboggan Train!

This was really a vast improvement in ease of pulling, and rekindled my hopes that we might still make it down to the bay (despite how far behind we were falling, and how weak we were both feeling). In fact we enjoyed this method so much we used it for much of the remainder of the trip.

Day 15: Eager to make up time we awoke at 4am and were moving by 7am. We quit for the day at 8:30am. Though I still felt we could make it to Fort Albany, and I think we were both eager to complete our goal for a wide variety of reasons (feeling of accomplishment, higher likelihood of seeing northern lights, seeing the bay in the winter, etc), the cost just seemed too high. The combination of tough travel on the Fox R., travelling over the undulating roads amidst deep new snow, and finally the massive upheavals downstream of Limestone Rapids had really taken a toll on us, physically and mentally, and had done a number on our equipment as well, with our repair to-do list starting to get away on us. We felt that to finish the trip as planned would require most days be as early as 4am and be very full travel days. I had a similar experience on the Missinaibi, covering the 245km in 17 days, and was really eager this year to have more time to enjoy and interact with everything around us. If we kept going we felt we were unlikely to have much opportunity to do much other than walk. Now in hindsight, knowing that the snowstorm in early February was the last one we were going to have all winter, we feel like we could have easily made the 14km / day we now required, but of course, there was no way to know that then... So with the decision made, we decided we would set our camp, and would not move again until we were feeling better. The new plan was to continue downstream until we reached the Kab's confluence with the Kenogami R., at the site of the abandoned HBC fort of Mammamattawa. From there we would head upstream on the Kenogami R. ~ 2km until reaching the mouth of the Nagagami R., which would be followed back South to Hwy 11, thus (with a short hitch-hike) completing our loop.



Photo 15: Sunset on the Kabinakagami River.



Photo 16: Sunset.

Days 16 & 17: We rested and repaired (ourselves and our gear). For my part, I had a large list of minor repairs:

- Mittens and socks had to be darned;
- Canvas moccasin gaiter had a hole - torn while bushwhacking on the Fox (canvas patch);
- Threads on moccasins were very close to snapping due to abrasion from lamp wick binding and were replaced before any holes developed;
- Palms and thumbs of my leather mitts had many small holes (just closed these without a patch);
- Wool pants had worn through at both knees and crotch (duffel wool patches);
- Long underwear had worn through at crotch (duffel wool patch);
- Briefs had worn through at crotch (sheesh!);
- I had also sewn my glasses back together earlier in the trip when I lost the screw holding the frame and lenses together. They continue to hold well.

Kielyn also had some minor repairs, including, I believe, socks, mittens wool pants and moccasins, but more importantly she had her snowshoes to deal with. The rawhide on them had suffered a few wettings on the Fox R., and warm afternoons the past few days has served to soften them again. As a result they were sagging terribly and a few strands had already snapped. She had already been treating her shoes very kindly, drying them in the tent whenever they got wet, but from here on out, they needed almost constant nursing to keep going. Kie tied off the broken strands with rawhide we had brought along and wove in some extra supporting strands to boot. She then tried re-waterproofing the weave with bacon grease, which we were both hopeful would end the problem, but wore away far too quickly. In addition to the bacon grease, beeswax and vegetable oil were both tried later in the trip with similar disappointing results. We wondered a few times if fir resin would be a better sealant, but never got around to testing this, but for now, the snowshoes were still holding strong.



Photo 17: Fixed mitts!



Photo 18: Kie splitting wood for our layover days.

The other major gear meltdown we were facing was that of our food boxes. They too had taken a beating through frequent wettings, and had been torn up on our diversions through the bush. When we finally took the time to take the boxes off the toboggans and inspect them, we realized just how bad they had become. From here on, they were a constant source of concern for us. The boxes were repaired through liberal application of duct tape, and binding with webbing, plus our stove bag really came to the rescue too. This year I decided to sew up a pack for the stove because I was tired of having it gauge toboggans and wear through running lines. While the stove didn't get to spend much time in the case it was invaluable for keeping our boxes going. The box in the worst shape would be labelled 'never touch' and shoved into the stove bag for safe keeping. Once another box was emptied through consumption, we would reshuffle everything and crown a new 'never touch'. The previous king's tour of duty was not over yet however: it would be dismantled and the pieces used to reinforce all other boxes. This system helped slow, but not stop, the steady deterioration of our boxes until we came up with a better solution later in the trip.

Days 18 & 19: The river calmed and flattened out. We both felt rejuvenated, and pulled easily, joking that perhaps we should in fact continue to the bay...

Day 20: Early on this cold and windy morning we passed the mouth of the Fox R. We had planned to give it a quick look on passing and pay homage to the river that had drawn us in, chewed us up and spit us back out. The mouth looked fantastic: 10 – 15m wide and frozen solidly. We left our toboggans and took a short walk up the mouth of the river to get a bit of a feel for its lower stretch. What we noticed immediately was just how much warmer it was after only one curve. The shelter of the Fox stood in stark contrast to the wind howling down the Kab. only minutes earlier. We took a seat to enjoy a snack and drink in comfort and noticed a woodpecker working away only a few metres from us. After a while it flew right over our heads while passing to the far bank. Again we were struck by just how much closer at hand wildlife felt on the Fox. Again we could feel the lure of the river drawing us back into its depths. Now that we were no longer heading for Fort Albany, we reasoned, we would have all the time we needed to explore the river fully, and we felt it would almost certainly be more interesting than the Nagagami. Plus, it would take us back to our vehicle without hitchhiking, and finally, it would answer our curiosity: would the Fox have gotten better if we'd have just stuck it out a few kilometres further? Our ever-changing plans morphed again. We would still continue north to the Kenogami River and the site of Mammamattawa, but would then return to our vehicle via the Kabinakagami and Fox Rivers. This also provided the added benefit that we would not have to haul all our food to Mamm. and could store much of it right where we were. So, despite the early hour, we set camp and began preparing a cache. With 44kms to Mamm. and the desire to spend a day exploring it, we reasoned nine days of food would be adequate. We also dropped some of our extra clothing, like changes of socks, duffel liners, underwear, etc., and a few books and other extraneous items. Nothing was removed from potentially important pieces of kit, like the first aid or repair kits. After the paring was done, we found that all the gear for both of us and ten days of food comfortably fit on one toboggan. So that is a nice realization for us. On all future trips of ten days duration or less, I believe we should be able to make do with a single toboggan! The cache was laid up on wood, covered with our tarp and boughs, and buried in snow in an effort to keep it dry and protected.



Photo 19: A nice campsite early in the trip.

Days 21 – 23: The eight day, 88km round trip from the mouth of the Fox River to Mammamattawa and back was the easiest portion of our trip. We had hit our stride now, the load was light and we hadn't had any fresh snow since early in the trip. We would sleep in, have a leisurely breakfast and not be moving until after nine, but would still be finished by early afternoon. Because we were planning to use the same campsites on the way back we cut extra wood each night, and laid this up, along with stove supports, stove pipe poles and boughs for our future use. The weather really began to turn at this point as well. While the start of our trip seemed to be predominantly overcast, we started to get our first consistent sunshine, and we revelled in the 'balmy' daytime highs of -6° , not having any ideas what was in store for us in the weeks to come.

Day 24: Nearly two weeks behind schedule, on a gloriously sunny, calm day, we pulled onto the Kenogami River at the former site of the HBC post of Mammamattawa (Cree word for “where the rivers meet”). A brief glance at a map makes obvious why the site was selected: within about a 2 km stretch of river, the Nagagami, Kabinakagami, Ridge and Squirrel Rivers all join the mighty Kenogami. A ground level view of the topography also helps explain the decision. The site, up a steep rise from the river, enjoys a commanding view and would have been easily defended. I believe it was inhabited until the early 1950s, but not much remained visible above the snow other than a couple of collapsed buildings and a cross. We explored the grounds a bit that afternoon, but by this time the snow had become very wet and heavy, pushing us back down to the river. We camped in a small bay on the east side of the Kenogami, and prepared to enjoy another day of rest.



Photo 20: Looking downstream on the Kenogami River towards the former site of Mammamattawa.



Photo 21: Looking upstream from the site of Mammamattawa.

Day 25: Laundry, haircuts, baths and light flurries!



Photo 22: Our camp on the Kenogami River.

Days 26 – 28: Returning to the Fox R. on our now well-sintered trail after a day of rest was a breeze. We didn't need to wear our snowshoes and covered the 44km in one moderate (22km) and two very short (12km and 10km) days. The weather turned sunny again after our light flurries and stayed that way for practically the remainder of the trip. Though day time high temperatures were starting to get quite warm (approaching freezing), nighttime lows were still quite low (-26° on both March 4 and March 5). We simply enjoyed the nice weather, with no idea that it represented the last we would see of winter.

We had a funny encounter on Day 27: while packing camp a helicopter buzzed low over the trees behind us, travelled downriver, and then started to land only 100m away. The helicopter then picked back up, flew even closer, and touched down just across the river. My first reaction was that it was someone from MNR coming to check on us, but the chopper was labelled “Expeditions”, and for a brief moment, I believe Kielyn and I both thought it might be someone from Hollywood here to swoop us away. Instead a single surveyor jumped out and the helicopter lifted off. The surveyor didn't say a word to us, in fact didn't even look our way. When we called out to him and asked what he was doing he simply said “I'm working!”. And with that we moved on.

When we returned to the Fox on day 28, we found our cache as we had left it, reorganized, tried to dry out our mushy boxes, played a game of catch on the river and enjoyed the opportunity to watch a Ruffed Grouse feeding high in a birch tree above our camp. We also setup our toboggans so that we would be pulling alone for the first time since we began our toboggan-train at the end of the second week.



Photo 23: Food cache on the Fox River.



Photo 24: Clothesline on the Fox River.

Day 29: After a promising early start, we ran into poor ice very quickly. I scouted ahead and saw a lot more poor ice.

“I guess that's it for the Fox” I said to Kie.

“No way, I'm having too much fun!” she responded. Kielyn is usually the more sensible one of the two

of us, so if she was willing to push deeper, so be it, I too was having a great time on the river. The concentration of animal signs was perhaps heavier than I have ever seen.

As the river usually ran only ankle-deep (though occasionally waist- or shoulder-deep), the consequences of a break-through were very low and this gave us the confidence to get very creative with our various thin ice techniques. We had the “tripod technique” which involved planting a ski pole through weak ice down to the river bed to facilitate jumping over holes, the ubiquitous “road building” technique, which involved filling holes with snow faster than the river could sweep it away to provide a path for toboggans, the “end run” (person runs around weak spots so as to leave them intact for the quick passage of toboggans), and the ever-popular “leap of faith”. Navigating most obstacles actually required a combination of many of these and any other technique that we could adapt for the situation. And when I say we were travelling on thin ice, I really mean it. Our standards of what was 'good' ice dropped very low, very quickly on this section of the river. Whereas a hollow sound when tapping with a pole is usually considered a sign of poor ice, for us a hollow sound was considered exceptional, because at least the ice was making some sound and not simply breaking! Further, if a tap with the pole did break the ice, we would try a series of lighter taps around the break. If the ice could consistently hold a light tap, it could hold us with our shoes on. And even when the ice in a large arc could not support a light tap of a ski pole, it was still not yet time to turn back – instead we would just reach forward and begin tapping beyond the weakness, probing for the possibility of using the “tripod technique” or “leap of faith” to get past.

In one particularly exciting situation, we ran into a five or six metre long section of thin (< ½ cm), chandelier ice. This was the type of fall skim that sometimes freezes overnight and is a joy to plough through with a canoe. The water was open on both sides of this thin vein of ice, the left shore was inaccessible from our position and the right shore was blocked by a huge downed tree and a steep bank. The portage was going to be time consuming, and we were eager to avoid it. Adding to our conundrum, the ice was not a straight-forward crossing, but instead ran in a zigzag pattern around the open water. Nonetheless, we lined up the lighter toboggan first with an extended haul line added. I moved it right to the very edge of the 'good' ice and threw the haul line to Kielyn, who had scrambled over the tree, and was also standing on 'good' ice on the far side of the hole. The plan was that I would point the toboggan away from Kielyn, straight out towards the middle of the (open) river, and give it a big shove onto the thin ice (the 'zig'). Kielyn would wait until it was time for the toboggan to 'zag' and then would start hauling, hopefully spinning the toboggan 90° and getting it up onto solid ice before it sank. As soon as I pushed the toboggan out onto the ice, it depressed and began flooding the surface, causing some cracks in the process, but Kielyn hauled it perfectly to safety. Our already poor crossing now looked terrible, with the ice flooded, cracked and very precarious. But we thought it had enough left in it for one more passage, so lined up the larger toboggan for the same manoeuvre. With Kielyn situated I gave the toboggan one mighty shove and then watched with bated breath as the ice started breaking underneath it. It still had its momentum however and Kielyn was hauling fiercely, with the front half of the toboggan still high and dry, but smashing the ice as it went. As Kielyn breached the front of the toboggan onto 'good' ice, the toboggan continued breaking through the ice, forcing Kielyn to run backwards as she pulled, eventually getting the toboggan onto a solid surface. The shards of ice we had just been crossing broke apart and drifted downstream, leaving only open water where our gear had just been.

We were forced to camp just after noon due to sloppy snow conditions. When I unintentionally broke a large water hole in the ice that evening and found it to be waist-deep, we enlarged it and went for our first dip of the season.



Photo 25: Pulling the toboggans over snow and mud to get around a section of poor ice.

Days 30 & 31: We enacted “freezing-temp savings time” and set our clocks ahead one hour to encourage us to get up early and start moving by sunrise in anticipation of an early, slushy stop. Morning progress was occasionally quite good on top a nice crust of snow, and with our familiarity with the Fox's features allowing us to anticipate poor ice, we began cruising past mostly-open sections of the river. However good our progress was though, we always faced the prospect of a single, difficult 100 or 200 m section robbing us of an hour or more of travel time. One section we pushed our luck as much as we could, probing out on to very thin, saggy ice which would begin flooding as soon as we stood upon it, before deciding it was non-navigable and resorting to bridge building. We cut two poles from the forest and used them to span the open leads. We carried those poles with us through that section and required them for three different bridges. Kielyn had her rubber boots on (I was still trying to wear the moccasins as late in the morning as I could because I couldn't stand the calf sweat of the boots), so she would wade in the shallow water and help guide the 'boggans over the bridges.

The weather was consistently very sunny, calm and warm as it had been for the previous week. We would frequently be topless or in a tank top (respectively) while working around camp in the afternoon, and had to begin facing the prospect that this didn't seem like a short warm spell that would be ending any time soon.

Our soggy box, and Kielyn's soggy shoes, problems continued and we were left scratching our heads

about both, having tried almost everything we'd brought with us, when we hit upon using birch bark to reinforce our boxes. We gathered some large, full-thickness (ie. right to the wood) sheets as would have traditionally been used for canoes, baskets, etc, and after soaking, coaxed them into taking 90° bends to fit inside the boxes. These worked exceptionally well, and with one move all our anxiety over our failing boxes dissipated. We collected 4 or 5 extra sheets while we were at it and carried these along hereafter for emergency use. Kielyn's shoes were still an issue, especially with the abrasive snow we were now moving over, but we were hopeful they would last out the trip. I wrapped my sinew/rawhide repair with a leather thong as it was also getting badly abraded on the crusty snow.

Day 32: We awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of rain, and we both knew our time on the Fox R. was quickly coming to an end. We had moved a paltry 12km in the past three days. This would have been just enough to complete the full length of the Fox in our given time frame, but not with the weather we'd been having. About 15 kilometres on there was a trail indicated on the map connecting the Fox back to the larger Kabinakagami, so this was our new goal. We packed quickly, covered our gear with 'birch-brella' sheets to protect it from the rain and set out at first light. Five full hours of work and only 800 metres later we were in the middle of a long section of the river which was almost completely open. We had done a number of overland portages already, and were clearing another one, when Kielyn suggested we call it quits on the Fox and simply cut our own trail, 3km overland, back to the Kab. It really seemed like the only remaining option at this time. Spring-like temperatures were continuing in full (we consistently recorded temperatures of 15 – 22° in full sunlight), the small river was deteriorating very rapidly, and now that the banks were almost free of snow, heat absorption and melting were only going to accelerate further. So we dug in, knowing that we would be using the same site for at least a few days, and prepared for the trail building ahead. I estimated we would take three days to cut the trail, Kie was more optimistic, and in the end it took us two days to cut and one day to move our gear over it.

Day 33 & 34: Trail Building! A great, very comfortable couple of days. We would have a leisurely breakfast and then head out on the trail to work, returning in the late afternoon to our beautiful site in the sun and our pile of firewood. The trail building itself was however fairly strenuous. We were of course, settling for a very rough trail, but at the same time wanted something we could get the toboggans over reasonably easily. We moved fast, with the person in front looking for a straight path of least resistance and carrying a small saw for pruning. The second person followed up with the axe for limbing and breaking up rotten stumps and logs, and a larger saw for felling trees and straightening the trail. After a steep rise from the river we encountered a typical Black Spruce/ White Cedar forest. The snow was receding quickly revealing patches of moss, Bog Laurel and Labrador Tea. The harsh terrain continued to take its toll on Kie's snowshoes, and by the end of the first day they were finally spent. The rawhide was in terrible shape, with numerous snapped pieces, and no longer had the strength to support Kielyn. Back at camp she managed a passable repair with a variety of materials: nylon climbing webbing was woven throughout the rawhide, more rawhide was added, and the whole lot was tied off with whatever was available, including strips of leather, extra pieces of cord and even, while on the move, some flagging tape.



Photo 26: Kielyn's snowshoe after much TLC.

Back at camp, now that we were no longer worried about being stranded on the Fox we enjoyed some really fun afternoons in the sun. With the river breaking up very rapidly, I became obsessed with the idea of breaking loose a large ice floe, and riding it down the river. Our firewood for our three night stay had been a large cedar deadwood, the lowest five feet of which was too large for the depth of our saw. I split the log into quarters using cedar wedges, and then took one of the planks out into the river to use as a pry bar. After a lot of straining, prying, cutting and lowered expectations, I finally worked one small piece free, which promptly sank when I hopped on board. These and later afternoons were so warm we could hop in and out of the water and simply rewarm standing in sun light.

With the snow being now almost constantly wet, our pieces of birch bark really came in handy for a variety of purposes. In addition to their intended use reinforcing boxes, and their use as 'birch-brellas' when it rained, they also made great waterproof mats around camp. We would use them to hold and carry the kindling, to place our duffels upon, and even to kneel upon.

Day 35: We bid our beautiful gravel bar adieu and set out early to haul our load back to the Kabinakagami River. To get up the initial steep hill, we used a 3:1 pulley system. Last year I had brought along a dedicated haul bag, including carabiners, pulleys, prussiks, etc., but found they weren't worth the weight. This year we just used what we had on hand, and were able to set up a great low-friction system in very little time. We had lots of extra rope to use as our haul line now that we had both shortened our lead lines for travel through the bush, lots of little pieces to use as prussiks, some

extra climbing webbing served as anchors, and in place of 'biners and pulleys, we used one metal ring from my belt, plus one ring from our load lashing systems. We laughed about this because both of our belts were now being used for unusual purposes. Kielyn's simple leather thong was now lashed onto her snowshoe, and my belt was being incorporated both into pulley systems (ascending) and Munter hitches (descending).

Our hard work of the previous two days paid off, and we had an easy time crossing the spruce forest. When we reached the steep slope back down to the Kab. we had two surprises awaiting us – one happy, the other disheartening. The happy surprise was that our tracks from the previous day were now covered in wolf prints. We had made a few different floats trying to find the best path down the hill, and from the looks of things, the wolves had really scoped out every route we had taken. This was actually my second occurrence of this happening this winter. On a trip in January in Temagami, while camping on a small point at the end of (incidentally) Wolf Lake, I looked up to see four wolves out on the lake sniffing around in our tracks. Very neat.

The disheartening surprise was that the river had changed very dramatically since we had seen it last. When we spotted it while trail building the previous day, the river looked slushy on the far shore, but was otherwise totally snow covered and still looked in fantastic shape. Now when we peered down at it only 24 hours later, the amount of visible slush had probably tripled. The near shore had a huge vein of slush matching that of the far shore, and even the snow in the centre, had a very dark, wet look to it. Looking up and downstream did nothing to buoy our confidence that the river would be much better further along.

We lowered the toboggans down a steep clay slope. I was down first and went out to check the ice conditions. Though the ice was solid, it was covered by a layer of water 4 – 6” deep all the way across. There would be no crossing the river, or moving at all, for today. Instead, we were caught at the base of our steep hill, or as I put it in my log, we were “stuck on a little pile of mud at the base of a mud hill”. The broken shelf ice along our shore ran right through the tent. Luckily a group of four or five trees at the base of the hill had managed to hold on to enough soil to create a small landing on which we camped. We splashed around in the water a bit in the afternoon, and I realized that the bushwhack had put a hole in my rubber boot, just as they were becoming one of my most crucial pieces of equipment. A Thermarest patch and some seam seal did the job there. We were both hopeful for a solid freeze overnight, which would allow us a relatively easy escape from our position, but we hadn't had below freezing temperatures for four nights in a row, and weren't willing to sit around waiting. We discussed the possibility of simply having to pull our toboggans through the giant pool of water, and did our best to waterproof and/ or stack crucial items high that night. The current plan had been to walk 34 kilometres upstream on the Kab., across the winter roads and back to Wolverine/ Pivabiska Lakes at Hearst. However, with the river changing so quickly, we decided the sooner we could get off the better, and opted to take out at the end of the Constance Lake First Nations road only 12km away. We both went to sleep that night dreaming of a deep freeze.

Day 36: Negative two would have to do. When we awoke and found the temperature just below freezing, we were not hopeful that a solid enough crust would have formed atop yesterday's melt water. We packed up, and then plunged down the broken shelf ice and into the water. After quickly wading through the near-shore slush we were surprised to find we could actually stand atop the crust which had formed in the middle of the river. Even when our boots punched through the ice, there was still enough strength to support the toboggans, which had been our biggest concern. We began racing upriver at first light. What happened next was probably the most surreal experience of the entire trip. (Unfortunately we captured no photos as we were unwilling to lose any time in our race against the sun

and warming temperatures). After a bit of slow going and post-holing near our camp, we reached a few kilometre long section of the river that was solid glare ice. We jogged up the river with our toboggans skittering effortlessly behind us. I dropped back for a time, and the experience of watching Kielyn run on this huge expanse of ice straight towards the rising sun was absolutely incredible. We both mentioned feeling as if we were in the high arctic. Once we had made some ground and gained some confidence we began to have some fun. We took turns jumping on the back of the other's toboggan – one person could easily haul both toboggans plus rider under such conditions.

The river looked naked without its usual covering of snow, and seeing its features revealed was a real treat. The upheavals that had been snow covered mounds in February could now be seen in detail as sections of smashed ice where the river had settled onto boulders. As Kielyn described them, they looked like tiny volcanoes made of ice. We also saw lots of 'inverted' or raised tracks, primarily wolf, plus our own. Our float ran the entire length of the river as a ridge of hardened snow that had resisted melting, but particularly neat were the areas where we or the wolves had encountered slush. At these spots we were left with perfect raised sculptures of our snowshoes (or their paws) in ice.



Photo 27: Open leads and flooding ice.

We didn't start encountering any major difficulties until we were within about two kilometres of the road, and by then, we knew nothing could stop us. We took to shore for a few short sections, crossed some thin ice, and then were forced away from shore and into the middle of the river by a large open lead on the west side of the river. We walked the good ice along this lead for two kilometres until

reaching the end of the road – which was unfortunately on the far side of the 5 metres of open, waist-high water. Now seasoned winter engineers, we dropped a couple of leaning birch into the river to build a bridge, and had a passable bridge built by noon. We were both in the water once or twice in the process of laying the bridge and crossing the toboggans, but another warm, sunny day made this a non-issue. We were on solid land, and best of all, the road was still well covered in snow, and looked like it would allow us easy passage the final 37km to the town of Constance Lake.

Day 37: We took a well deserved break and indulged ourselves.



Photo 28: Kielyn on rest day. (I fell obliged to admit I staged this photo while she was sleeping...)

At mid-day our bridge proved itself useful in more than one capacity. I was wandering around on the road when Kielyn called me down to the river.

“Hurry!” she yelled.

I raced down a little bit reluctantly, but was overjoyed at what Kie had found: the bridge had acted as a dam and caught a couple of ice floes that had apparently come down the night before. Kielyn had already released one large floe, and it was heading downstream. I raced across the bridge onto the solid ice and down to a point where I could hop onto the passing floe. My obsession with riding an 'iceberg' was finally realized! I rode it for a hundred metres or so before getting concerned about my return trip and hopping off. Later that evening I found another floe dammed up against our bridge and had a second, further ride, but I was disappointed not to have found any floes large enough to support both Kielyn and I.



Photo 29: Riding an ice floe down the Kabinakagami River.

We had been watching cirrus clouds overhead for the past 48 hours, so weren't surprised, then, when a front rolled in that evening. These were unmistakably rain clouds (nimbostratus), so we battened down the hatches and decided to stay another day.



Photo 30: Our final campsite of the trip.

Day 38: We awoke to the expected rain, though luckily it didn't last long, and the skies were clear by mid-afternoon. Kie spent much of the day wandering around and exploring the river bank, while I took to a craft project. I was tired of drying and dealing with our spent boxes, and decided to make something more substantial of our remaining birch bark. So after being used to reinforce boxes, as umbrellas, as kneeling and carrying pads, and being smashed up on the bushwhack, the sheets were now going to be transformed into a basket to hold much of our remaining food. I had never done this before, but wasn't looking for anything particularly artistic. I used the thread we had along, a leather needle, and a piece of bark to help push the needle through, and while the result wasn't particularly pretty, it did the job and held our food, allowing us at last to burn our waterlogged boxes.



Photo 31: Our new food box.



Photo 32: Birch basket from above.



Photo 33: Kielyn exploring the river bank.

And finally, that evening, my greatest moment. Having ridden the floes which caught up on our bridge was all well and good, but I really wanted to free the floe myself, and I wanted one big enough for both Kielyn and I to ride. So as supper cooked I grabbed a strong fir pole we had around camp and set out onto the ice looking for a likely candidate.

After probing a couple of large cracks without success I finally found the perfect piece. A huge floe that was entirely detached, but was being pinned against the solid ice by the force of the river's current. With Kielyn watching I pried at that floe for nearly ten minutes, trying to nose it out into the main downstream current. Every time I got a little headway, the current would take back over and slam the ice back home, nearly snapping the pry bar in the process. I eventually gave up and turned to leave, and just as I did, my weight lifting off the ice caused the currents to shift and get in behind the floe, forcing it free in the process! I whooped and hollered and hopped on board, yelling for Kie to join me. She ran across the bridge to the far shore, trying to anticipate where the next opportunity would come. Once she was aboard, we lifted our drawbridge and were off on a romantic evening ride for two. The floe was a battleship, nearly the entire width of the lead, completely unfazed by our weight, and crunching anything in its path. The only thing stronger was the river itself, and when the floe got caught up on some logs and tilted, the current caught one corner and almost upended the entire thing. We jumped onto solid ice before that happened, and said our final goodbyes to the Kabinakagami.

Day 39: We set out walking, without our snowshoes, on a nice early morning crust, with the intention of making 12 – 13 kilometres each day, and reaching Constance Lake in three days. However we very quickly ran into large, open gravel patches on the road, and found ourselves taking to the banks to find some snow to pull on. When things began worsening, we reasoned that it had been the northern aspect of the road as it dipped to the river that had kept so much snow on it near camp, and that things were unlikely to be better further on. After about five kilometres, we cached our toboggans and set out with just the essentials, planning to walk the entire 37 km in a single day. Rain gear, warm clothing, food, water, a knife and matches were packed into a small duffel and our lunch bag, and we began the walk. Because my shoulders don't fit into the duffel straps I lucked out, and Kie was stuck with the more cumbersome duffel. We rigged shoulder straps onto our lunch bag, and I wore it as a backpack. After about 20km I got tired of the backpack setup and tied the lunch bag to the end of a stick to be carried 'hobo-style'. Though I reported that it wasn't particularly comfortable, Kie got jealous and also grabbed a stick for her duffel. The duffel we strapped to the centre of the stick, 'pig-on-a-spit' style and carried on our shoulders between us. I found this image hilarious, and was hopeful someone would drive by just to see us carrying a blue duffel bag like a couple of tribal hunters. We also eventually tied both packages to opposite ends of a stick so they could be carried 'balance-beam' style by one person. None of the methods were great, but at least with the variety, the awkward packs could be made a little more bearable. After ~ 25km we were passed by a couple of pickup trucks who didn't stop, and at 30km, around 2pm, we were picked up by a friendly man from Hearst who had been out ice-fishing. He dropped us off right at our vehicle at the airport, we drove back to grab our cached gear, spent the night, and drove back to Sudbury the following day.

Though we hadn't reached our goal, we had a fantastic time together. The decision to not continue to James Bay had been the right one for us on this year, despite the near-perfect travel conditions which developed later in the season. We had a varied trip, learned tons about travelling over a very wide range of ice conditions, and were able to witness the advance of the seasons in one area. We had a lot of time to play, explore, learn and laugh together, and will likely be back to complete this trip some other time.

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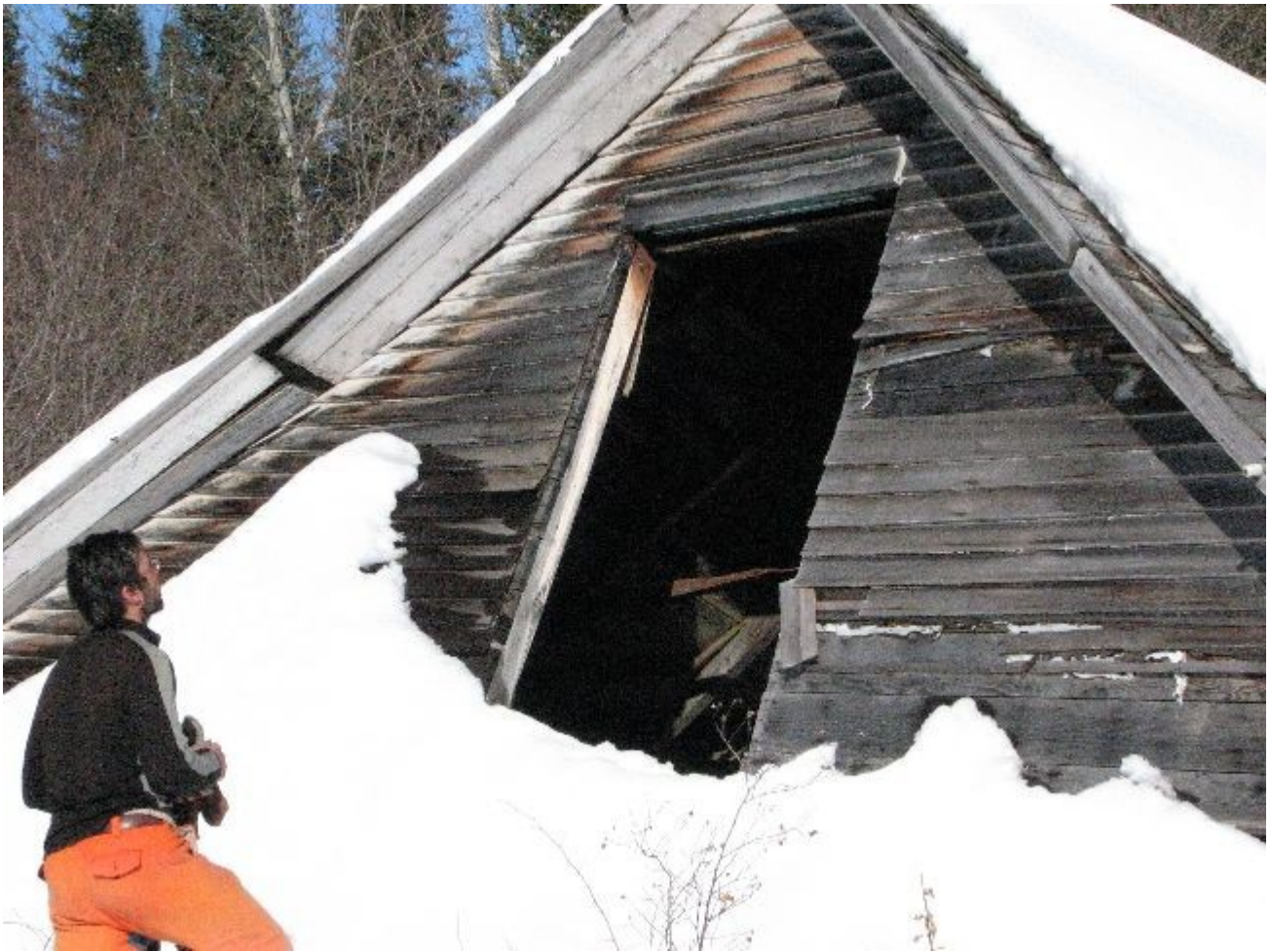


Photo 34: Collapsed building at Mammamattawa, Kenogami River.

About Us

Kie and Dave are an adventurous Sudbury, ON couple who have graduated from Laurentian University's Outdoor Adventure Leadership degree program. We work as outdoor educators and guides and love just about any activity that gets us outside. We occasionally offer privately guided trips and hold snowshoe moccasin-making workshops, and hope to expand this to include a wider variety of winter trekking clothing, equipment and activities. Feel free to contact us at any time to discuss winter camping, traditional travel or the outdoors in general.

