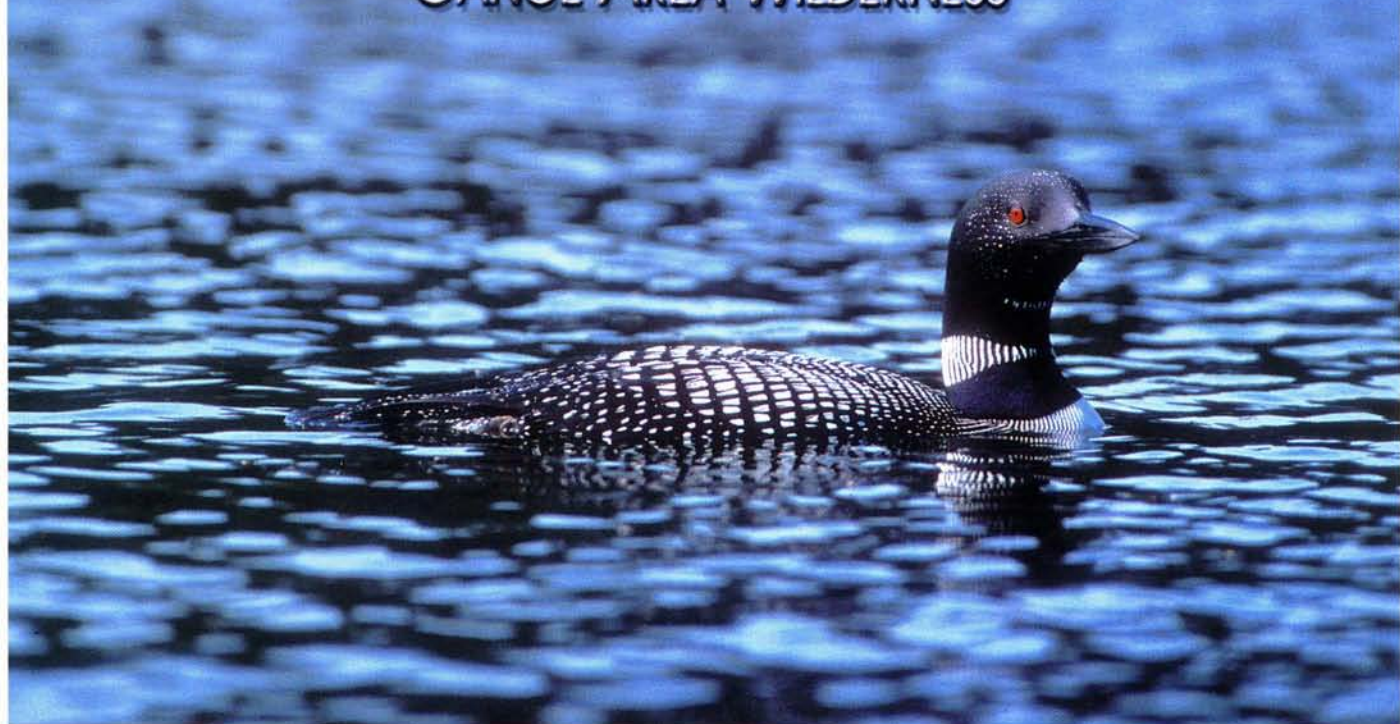


# IN THE LAND OF THE CHIPPEWA

## PHOTOGRAPHING IN THE QUETICO-BOUNDARY WATERS

### CANOE AREA WILDERNESS



Common loon, Quetico-Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, by Terry Nathan. Nikon F100, Nikkor 80-400mm VR zoom lens, Fujichrome Provia 400F, handheld in canoe.

Article and Photography by Terry Nathan

Field Contributor

**A**t the break of dawn the haunting call of a solitary loon echoes from a distant, mist-shrouded lake. Timber wolves roam unseen amidst the shadows of the surrounding boreal forest. The fragrance of fresh pine fills the cool morning air as my canoe drifts quietly along the riverbank. Such are the memories from my recent photo canoe adventure to the largest international wilderness recreation area in the world — Canada's Quetico Provincial Park and Northern Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW).

The Quetico-BWCAW embraces over two million acres, a vast region where the canoe has been the mode of travel since prehistoric times; it is rich in history, wildlife and scenic beauty. The region has been home to the Chippewa people for centuries as well as one of the major routes for European fur traders. The glacially formed landscape is a mosaic of lakes, rivers and bogs whose tree and rock-lined shores provide prime wildlife habitat. Photographic opportunities abound in this pristine wilderness, though not without some planning and effort.

Three friends and I began planning the trip in late spring. We sought solitude and time to explore the marshes and bogs that line the rivers and lakes. I also wanted to create a photographic diary of our trip and to capture on film the spirit and many moods of the region.

#### PLANNING THE TRIP

We accessed the Web site <http://www.Canoecountry.com>, which provided a wealth of information about the Quetico-BWCAW, including a listing of canoe outfitters who can tailor a trip to one's individual needs. Wilderness permits were required. We needed advice on a canoe route, seaplane transportation in the Quetico and two lightweight Kevlar canoes. Because I was the sole member of the group with an interest in photography, there would be some compromises as to where and when stops would be made for me to make images. I opted for a solo canoe, which allowed maximum flexibility to seek out opportunities while also providing a more stable and predictable canoe-based photographic platform.

The unparalleled scenic beauty of the Quetico-BWCAW provides numerous photographic opportunities as well as considerable challenges and hazards. The portage trails, though relatively short, are often muddy and strewn with slippery rocks and tree roots. And there is the ever-present danger of a canoe capsizing, either from an errant wave or from a rock lurking just below the water's surface.

To protect my equipment, I used a hard plastic, watertight Pelican 1500 case, whose dimensions are well within the limits set by most major airlines for carry-on luggage. The Pelican case easily fit my two Nikon F100 bodies and three Nikkor lenses: 17-35mm F2.8D AF-S zoom lens, 35-70mm F2.8 zoom lens, and 80-400mm F4-5.6D AF VR zoom lens. My tripod was simply inserted into a plastic bag and carried separately. My film choice was Fujichrome Velvia and Provia 100F, which were used mostly for the land-based scenic photos. I mainly used Provia 400F for the canoe-based photos. I placed the film in a hard plastic container and stored it within my plastic lined backpack.

We rendezvoused at Ely, Minnesota, a veritable mecca for canoeists, and the main jumping-off point for trips into the Quetico-BWCAW. The outfitter provided overnight accommodations, where we organized our gear in final preparation for our early morning start. I would be carrying four separate items in my forty-pound canoe: a large backpack containing my camping equipment, including sleeping bag, tent, clothing and film (fifty-five pounds); a medium backpack with my food (fifteen pounds); the Pelican case for my photographic gear (twenty-one pounds); and my Bogen 3001 tripod with Giotto TH-20 ball head (five pounds). These four items would be tied to the canoe at all times.

#### AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE CANOE WILDERNESS

After an early breakfast, the outfitter transported us to the seaplane base in Ely. The bush pilot tied our canoes to the seaplane's pontoons and then quickly stowed our gear. Within minutes the propellers were whining as we bounced along waves, our excitement growing as the plane lifted off, providing us with a grand vista of the wilderness that would be our home for the next nine days. Our forty-mile flight would take us from Ely to the Canadian seaplane base on Lac La Croix, ten miles west of the Quetico Provincial Park boundary.

To capture candid photos within the confines of the plane as well as aerial shots of the Quetico-BWCAW, I used my fast 17-35mm F2.8 zoom lens. Because aerial views of the landscape often lack sharp, defining boundaries, auto focus lenses have some difficulty focusing. Thus I set the lens on manual focus. To minimize the effects of the plane's vibrations and the image degradation asso-

ciated with shooting through Plexiglas windows, I photographed with the fine grain and moderately fast Provia 100F. I set the camera on matrix metering and aperture priority, with the aperture set two stops down from wide open in order to obtain some additional sharpness while maintaining shutter speeds in the 1/500 second range.

After about a forty-minute flight and numerous photos, we landed at the seaplane base on Lac La Croix. We were transferred to a powerboat that transported us to Bottle Portage on Quetico's western boundary, where we quickly off-loaded our canoes and gear. As the din of the powerboat faded in the distance, we were left to the soothing sound of the waves gently lapping against the lake's rock-lined shore.

#### PHOTOGRAPHING IN THE CANOE WILDERNESS

The Quetico-BWCAW is dotted with widely separated island and shoreline campsites. These primitive campsites consist of a small clearing and a fire pit. In order to be well positioned for sunset or sunrise photos, we used our maps and compass to choose campsites that had western or eastern views of the horizon. I searched for locations near the camp having interesting foreground, such as boulders or trees, while also providing a broad view of the water and sky.

When photographing sunsets I use manual exposure mode, manually focus, spot meter the sky away from the sun, open up one stop, and then recompose. I bracket the photos to provide different tonal qualities to the sky and landscape. Although I was unable to capture that once-in-a-lifetime sunset photo, you know, the one where a bull moose is silhouetted against a crimson sky as an eagle soars majestically near the sun, I nonetheless savored being outdoors during that quiet, golden hour.

Photographing wildlife, aquatic plants and shoreline scenery from a canoe was the norm throughout our journey. Because the canoe was always in motion, either from wave action or wind, image sharpness was constantly a problem.



Aerial view, Quetico Provincial Park, Canada, by Terry Nathan. Nikon F100, Nikkor 17-35mm zoom lens, Fujichrome Provia 100F, handheld.



Moose calves, Darkey River, Quetico Provincial Park, Canada, by Terry Nathan. Nikon F100, Nikkor 80-400mm VR zoom lens, Fujichrome Provia 400F, handheld in canoe.

Telephoto lenses exacerbated this situation. Fortunately, with the fast Provia 400F slide film and the vibration reduction technology of Nikon's 80-400mm D VR lens, I was able to produce acceptably sharp wildlife photos of several animals, including beaver, moose and loons.

Photographing the common loon was challenging and fun. This feathered icon of the Quetico-BWCAW has striking black and white plumage and distinctive red eyes. Except for going to shore to mate and incubate its eggs, the loon spends most of its time on the water. To photograph a loon (or any other animal), I would maneuver the canoe so that the loon was front-lit. When I was within photo range, I would quietly place my paddle in the canoe, open the Pelican case and remove my camera with the 80-400mm VR lens, and then quickly close the case to protect the remaining gear. Admittedly, in the excitement of the moment I sometimes forgot to close the case. The camera was preset on aperture priority, auto focus and center-weighted metering. Because a fast shutter speed is paramount when photographing from a canoe, the lens aperture was initially set wide open, thus sacrificing some depth of field. Although a shallow depth of field generally isn't a problem for wildlife photos, it posed some compositional challenges for the fragrant water lily photos that I took while leaning precariously over the canoe's gunwale.

As I slowly drifted towards the loon, it would often dive for a couple of minutes only to resurface elsewhere, typically behind me or much farther away. I would maneuver the canoe into position as the loon again dove beneath the surface. This cat-and-mouse game might continue for quite a while before I either obtained a photo or simply moved on for another opportunity.

The last day of our journey took us down Basswood River. This river straddles the United States-Canadian border. Along the United States side of the river, in the BWCAW, are vertical rock walls upon which you can see Native American pictographs. These ancient cultures used red ochre pigment

to make pictographs. For centuries the red ochre pigment survives in spite of rain, sunlight and wind; a startling contrast to the pigments that are used in modern photographic processes. The lifetimes and abilities of today's pigments to endure the elements pale in comparison. Sitting in our canoes and gazing at the rock canvases that the Chippewa people used for their artistic impressions of their world and environment underscored our sense that the feelings evoked by nature transcend time and culture.



Beaver, Quetico Provincial Park, Canada, by Terry Nathan. Nikon F100, Nikkor 80-400mm VR zoom lens, Fujichrome Provia 400F, handheld in canoe.

### JOURNEY'S END

During our seventy-mile, nine-day canoe adventure through the Quetico-BWCAW we experienced the solitude of placid, moonlit lakes, paddled against stiff winds over white-capped waters and endured the occasional mosquito-infested camp. My careful planning allowed me to safely capture on film these and many other trip experiences.

My three film choices, two camera bodies and three lenses provided great versatility. I was able to successfully produce land-based and canoe-based images ranging in scale from the microcosm to the grand scenic. After reviewing my photographs, my memories flow easily, beckoning me to return to this grand wilderness.

As the late writer-philosopher and renowned conservationist Sigurd Olsen stated, "The lake country of the Quetico-Superior [BWCAW] is without question one of the most delightful areas of its kind in the world."