

Keys to Planning a BWCA/BWCAW Boundary/Boundary Waters Canoe Route By BWCA Canoe Outfitter Sue Prom

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You've heard people talk about the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. You've seen BWCA photos of big fish caught in the wilderness of Minnesota's canoe country and you've been shown Boundary Waters maps. You want to take a wilderness canoe camping trip but you want it to be a good experience. How will you know the right route to travel when there are so many options? Consider each of the following 5 points when determining your BWCAW route and you will have a fun and successful Boundary Waters canoe trip.

Before you bring out the Boundary Waters maps determine who will be traveling the wilderness waters with you. A canoe trip that involves young children will most likely be much different than one with a group of Boy Scouts who are attempting to earn their 50 mile canoe patch in the BWCA. Young children do well with shorter periods of paddling and portaging and most aren't very helpful at portages. Setting up camp and taking it down again requires patience and time. Does who you want to paddle with have these qualities and will they be fun to be around? Who you plan to paddle with largely determines where you will enter into the BWCA.

"What is the purpose of the trip?" If you want to relax and hang out at one Boundary Waters's campsite then choose a lake that is easy to get to. This may be a Boundary Waters entry point lake or a lake that is just one portage from the entry point lake. Limiting the amount of portaging you will do allows you to bring along gear that will make you more comfortable at your campsite. Some folks like camp chairs, screen tents and coolers at their campsite but hauling all of that gear is not a good idea if you want to travel through many lakes and across numerous portages.

Are your paddling partners up for the wilderness challenge of portages? A Boundary Waters portage isn't like a sidewalk in a city park. It's a path that has been worn down to dirt that can have boulders in the middle of it, trees toppled over it or mud the entire length of it. Even though a portage is measured in rods (16.5 feet/rod) and most aren't real long (1/4 of a mile or less) they can be quite challenging. Aluminum canoes weigh upwards of 60 pounds with some older canoes topping out around 100 pounds. Duluth Packs filled with gear can weigh 50 pounds or more so make sure you aren't the only one capable of carrying it. One portage may be too much for your group depending upon the shape your participants are in. You will want to consider how much portaging your group can handle and then determine if you should travel and camp at different lakes each day or take day trips from one centrally located campsite.

Many BWCA routes include large bodies of water. Are your canoe trip participants able to paddle and navigate across open bodies of water? Wind and waves are normal in the canoe country and bigger lakes can pose problems when paddlers take unnecessary risks to cross them or when they do not use their common sense. If you have planned your trip properly and allowed yourself an extra day or two then you can avoid dangerous situations by not paddling in inclement weather. Knowing yours and everyone else's comfort level and skills as related to paddling big water will be important information to consider when planning your Boundary Waters canoe route.

The main reason some people take Boundary Waters Canoe trips is because they want to fish. Knowing how important fishing is to your group is vital information needed to determine the right BWCA canoe route. Some lakes only contain certain fish species that bite better during specific times of the summer. This information is critical to a successful Boundary Waters fishing trip. And remember, if fishing is the focus of your canoe trip then don't plan to travel great distances each day. If you do then you'll spend all of your time setting up and taking down your campsite only to find yourself too tired to fish when you're finally done.

A wilderness canoe camping trip in the Boundary Waters is a memorable experience. Whether or not the memories are good or bad will depend largely on the canoe route you choose. Spend time thinking about these five issues and you'll have a better chance at having a successful and fun BWCA canoe trip.

Find Boundary Waters maps and routes on my website...

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