

Fresh Fish, Frozen Angler



Tom Thulen for The New York Times

Inside a canvas tent pitched about 15 miles from the nearest road in Quetico Provincial Park in northwest Ontario.

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THE sun slipped below a jagged horizon of red pines, and another long winter's night began in the north woods. I sat on a cot in my long johns, a few feet from a wood stove

blasting heat like a furnace, inside a canvas tent pitched here about 15 miles from the nearest road in southern Ontario.

On the blue tin plate in my lap lay a lake-trout filet that was all I had to show from six hours of [fishing](#) through a hole cut in two feet of ice. The temperature outside was zero, our warmest night yet by a good 10 degrees.

This was a hard-earned meal.

Winter camping in the Quetico is not the easiest way to get a fish dinner. Though 22,000 people visit the park on the Ontario-Minnesota border each year, fewer than 50 souls endure harsh northern winter nights in the backcountry, where temperatures routinely plummet into negative double digits. The Quetico's restrictive fishing rules (no live bait, barbless hooks) stiffen the challenge of ice angling. Our expedition was part extreme outdoor adventure, part purist fishing trip.

We had set out two days before — Tom Thulen, a photographer; Mike Prom of Voyageur Canoe Outfitters, from whom we rented our winter camping gear; and me — on a sunny late-January morning when the thermometer read 13 below, and winds gusted to 20 miles per hour. The first leg of our trip was on snowmobile, from Minnesota into [Canada](#) and 12 miles west on vast Saganaga Lake. At Hook Island we parked the snowmobiles at the doorstep of the Quetico, a wilderness in which motorized vehicles are banned. Then we unloaded our pulks, the specialized freight-hauling toboggans we'd use to pull our gear to Cache Bay. Mr. Prom was keen to return there, where he had previously pulled a 16-pound lake trout through the ice.

The wind whipped up mini-tornadoes of snow that danced across the frozen lake as we strapped on snowshoes and buckled ourselves into harnesses like sled dogs for the pull into Cache Bay. A foot of snow had fallen a few days earlier, and it hadn't set up hard yet, so the pulks sank instead of glided, and the pulling was tough. After 90 minutes we had traveled only two miles. We decided to lay up in a small wooded inlet just outside the lip of Cache Bay. Mr. Prom immediately dug an energy bar out of the food pack, but it was a frozen rock, so he gnawed at it like a dog on a rawhide.

Our campsite was sheltered by a pure conifer shoreline of pines and spruces. In minutes we erected the A-frame canvas tent and assembled the small wood stove,

about the size of a footstool. Now we needed wood to burn, so we spent the final two hours of daylight gathering and splitting downed timber.

Sundown brought merciless cold. A thermometer placed outside read 20 below. But our stove fired the tent up to 50 degrees, then 70. My cheeks tingled and fingers stung as they thawed out. Mr. Prom set a pot of frozen chili atop the stove for dinner. We changed into dry clothes. The temperature inside the tent kept rising, and when we snuffed out the lantern to go to sleep, I left a leg hanging out of my sleeping bag.

By morning I was huddled up inside my bag, the face hole cinched tight like a peephole. A debilitating chill had set in overnight after the stove burned out. But Mr. Prom bravely threw on his parka and lighted a bundle of birch bark to start a fire. After I smelled wood smoke, I emerged to start the morning chores. It was noon before we had made coffee and oatmeal for breakfast, cleaned our dishes, put up another stack of firewood and were ready to fish.

We stayed close to camp, since the sun would set in a few hours. Mr. Prom and I drilled holes with an ice auger, a giant man-powered corkscrew. Then he grabbed a couple of silvery lures called spoons, pinched down the barbs on the hooks with pliers, rigged them to our ice-fishing rods and sent the spoons down the black holes in 30 to 50 feet of water until they hit bottom, at which point we reeled up a bit and flicked the fishing-rod tip like an orchestra conductor, a technique called jigging.

“Fishing the Quetico is definitely more of a challenge,” Mr. Prom said. “No live bait really makes it tougher to lure lake trout. They’ve got to be biting. And the barbless hooks increase the possibility of a fish getting off.”

The afternoon brought more wind and biting cold but only one bite from a fish. Mr. Prom just missed setting the hook on that one. We trudged back into camp. The outdoor thermometer read 15 below.

“It’s going to be another cold one,” Mr. Prom said grimly. “Better put up more wood.”

Disappointment quickly melted away inside the tent though, as we warmed up homemade beef stroganoff on the wood stove. The next day we snowshoed a mile west to enter Cache Bay, crossing a fresh set of moose tracks along the way.

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“She must have walked by while we were in our tent eating breakfast,” Mr. Prom said.

We drilled two holes at the rocky point where the bay begins. I tied on a Swedish Pimple, then settled into the trance of jigging and staring into a dark seven-inch-wide opening in the lake. At last, for the first time in thousands of jigging motions over the past two days, tension on the upward pull. I set the hook, reeled for 30 seconds, and it was all over. A laker, dark evergreen with a speckled side and a snow-white belly, flipped and flopped on the ice. It was two feet long, about three pounds.

“Not big, but a good eater for sure,” a giddy Mr. Prom said.

We had two fish back in camp that night. Mr. Prom built a fire in the snow to grill the trout, basted with butter and drizzled with maple syrup. As he prepared dinner I went for a quick walk along our snowshoe trail back down to Cache Bay, sort of a way of saying thanks. When I reached the hole where I’d pulled out the fish, a black form trotted onto the ice across the lake. I peered through binoculars at a timber wolf, head held low, broad shoulders bobbing, loping with confidence. The smoke-gray wolf paused, sat and regarded me. Then he continued on his jaunt, aware of my presence but unconcerned.

Dinner in the warm tent that night was three-star quality and joyous as a wedding feast. Mr. Prom raised a mug of beer and toasted, “Here’s hoping the snowmobiles start tomorrow.”

By morning light we pulled up camp, hauled the somewhat-less-heavier pulks out and left behind a bare patch of shoreline where the snow had melted away beneath a stove

that burned for three nights. The exposed rocks and grass would soon be blown over with snow, not to see the sun again until spring.

If You Go

LICENSES AND PERMITS

If you plan to cross into [Ontario](#) in the wilderness, you should have a United States passport for crossing back. You must also have a Remote Area Border Crossing Permit: 30 Canadian dollars (about \$28.60); cbsa.gc.ca; (807) 624-2162.

Overnight permit fees in **Quetico Provincial Park** are 20 Canadian dollars per night. In order to fish you must have an Ontario outdoor card (9 Canadian dollars) and an eight-day [fishing](#) license: 25.75 Canadian dollars, conservation; \$44.50 Canadian dollars, sport; ontarioparks.com; (888) 668-7275.

OUTFITTER AND GUIDE

Voyageur Canoe Outfitters in northern Minnesota rents gear for winter camping trips. A package consisting of a tent, stove, pulk and winter sleeping bag costs \$250 the first night and \$105 each additional night; canoeit.com; (888) 226-6348.