

Thanks...

For Making it Happen

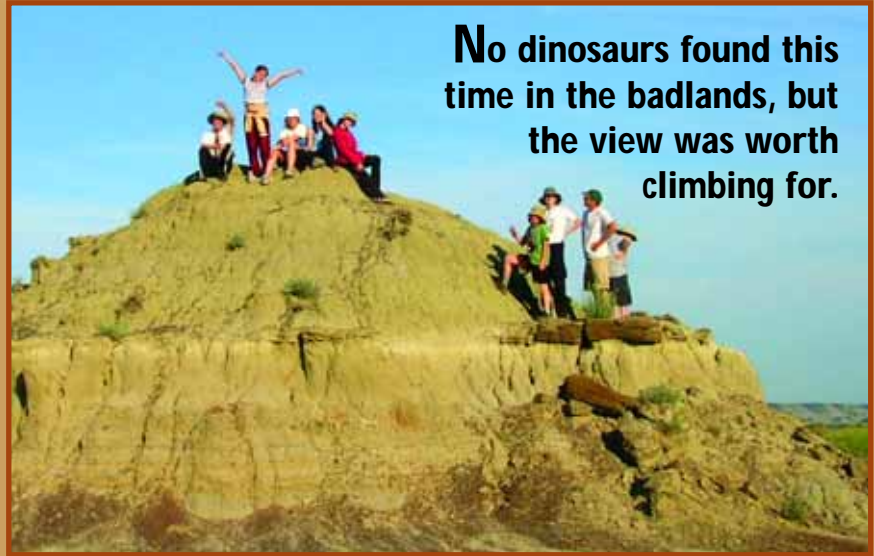
by Steven Methot

My canoe lies
on the water,
Evening holds
the bones of day.
The sun,
like gold dust,
slips away.

One by one,
antique stars
Herald the
arrival of
Their pale
protectress
moon.

Far and silent
lightning
Stirs the
cauldron of
the sky.
I turn my bow
towards the
shore.

— Bruce Cockburn



Photos: Bernie May

Across the river from us the badlands rise from the water's edge, their heights painted in shades of grey and indigo. A pack of coyotes are yipping somewhere out there across the river, their calls echoing eerily down one of the gullies. I stir the fire and sparks fly up, joining the stars that seem to be strewn carelessly across the sky. We've been lucky. We missed the thunderstorms that had been forecast, but to the south there are occasional flashes of lightning.

The kids are all heading for their tents and I know that it's past time that I head for sleep too, but I want to stay for just a bit longer. We've planned this trip all year, a three-day paddle down a section of the Red Deer River, eight canoes, ten kids, and eight leaders/parents. For six of these kids it is their last event as Scouts, and my last as one of their leaders. I've known some of them since they were five years old (not including my sons!) and have watched them grow, take on challenges and gain some leadership skills. Some of them have been talking about this trip for three years, and now, like kids on Christmas Eve the day has arrived and they're a bit over the top with excitement. We're here. Let the fun begin.

No dinosaurs found this time in the badlands, but the view was worth climbing for.

Saturday dawns and we become acquainted with the essentials of our environment for the next three days: the river, the badlands, the incandescent blue sky, and of course the sun. In the heat of the sun all of these elements are melted together. The forecast calls for clear weather for all three days, clear and hot with temperatures in the high 20s and low 30s Celsius, upper 80s Fahrenheit. In the river valley and the badlands it will be warmer, much warmer.

We paddle around on the river by our campsite, getting acquainted with the eddies, practicing some of our river skills, and then we head off for Dry Island Buffalo Jump, 15 km upstream.

The River Dance

If you've never seen the badlands you can't quite appreciate the schizophrenic nature of the terrain. A sign says "Road impassable when wet". It's hardly passable when dry! There are layers of rock and dirt and clay and sand and fossils, here and there some sage and cactus, hoodoos hiding under their cap of sandstone. We've left the wolves behind; this is "Wile E. Coyote" territory.

Then we begin the river dance, unload, pack up, and cast off. For the first part of the journey we're nestled

between cliffs, but over the course of the 50 km that we paddle the badlands will recede and return. At times the river valley is broad and we're paddling in cottonwood and poplar groves with willow bushes lining the bank; at other times the badlands loom right at the water's edge and the bones of the earth and of dinosaurs are visible and almost within reach. It's quiet out here, wilderness really, no sign of humanity, precious few other travellers.

We take our time on the river, singing, occasionally rafting up and sharing snacks, racing ahead or paddling in long lines. But it's the quiet times that speak to me. You can hear the breeze in the willows, you can hear the killdeer and the meadowlark, and yes, the occasional hawk. We're surprised by the pelicans; great big white monsters that skim the water ahead of our canoes. Iridescent dragonflies skim the water and light on our canoes. From time to time a fish will leap out of the water to catch one.

The river is shallow, more like a slowly moving lake, and if we'd wanted to we could have just drifted, but paddling seems so natural. It's an amazing first day and while we are entranced by the journey we welcome the sight of our tents on the river's edge.

That night: another campfire, another long lingering sunset. Some other camper has brought fireworks to celebrate Canada Day and we're entertained by them, our own private show. The kids call them "firework" because whoever is setting them off can only work one at a time. It somehow seems fitting. Happy birthday Canada!

Balance on the River

Sunday we worked for our supper: twenty-four km of river. We stopped from time to time to explore and to play. At one spot there was what seemed to be a dry creek bed emerging from the badlands. One of the kids attempted to climb and sank into quicksand up to his knees. That started the Great Mud Battle. Well, the river cleans a lot more than mud; it cleans away petty worries and pre-occupations too.

I'm ashamed to admit that I really didn't know much about canoeing before we started our training. It's something that everyone in North America should know how to do, Canajuns especially. But Sunday saw



Rafting up for lunch while floating down river. What a great way to spend Canada Day!



me steering a canoe for the first time, and doing most of the paddling too. I had a young Scout up front waving his paddle at the water from time to time and someone in the middle who couldn't reach the water with her paddle. It could have made for a very long day, but somehow I found it cathartic. We were getting somewhere, and while it was difficult slogging at times the trip was worth it.

From time to time I'd stop paddling and let us just drift for a while, trying to drink in what I could of the quiet, the smell of sage and sand, the light, the heat. At one point one of the kids up front asked me what I was thinking about and I responded that I was wondering if perhaps it wasn't the river flowing but the world passing us by. I heard a "Whoa!" from up front in my canoe. "That's doing strange things to my head!" And

above a hawk wheeled on a thermal and the river flowed on.

Sunday evening we camped at a provincial recreation area, and after supper I went off in search of a clean biffy. On the way I noticed that the

sunset was painting the badlands in shades of crimson and I saw that someone had climbed half way up onto the side of one of the canyons. I heard someone calling to me and realized that the person on the hillside was a fellow leader. I scrambled up to meet him and came face to face with a rattlesnake. A small one. Funny, but I never thought about it until then, snakes have to come in all sizes. I side-stepped it and kept on, but with a more wary eye.

The view from the canyon side was breathtaking; we could see a whole sweep of the river valley and a truly amazing sunset. We didn't speak much, just stood for a bit and watched and pondered. The snake was nowhere to be seen on the way down.

Campfire and songs and skits and snacks. How can you not have a campfire, even when you're beat and dirty and layered in sunscreen and bug spray?

And then, just as we had found our rhythm it had to end. Monday we faced a stiff breeze in our faces as we worked the last ten km to our last landing by a cable ferry across the river. The river was a tad shallower in places, and I often stood like a gondolier to spy the best course. If we got stuck, over the side one of us would go, pushing the canoe back into the proper channel.

It was a challenging but strangely peaceful weekend. Being a gondolier, if only for a moment, taught me that there's this balance on the river. You can't take out of the wilderness what you didn't already bring. You find there what you need, but you brought it with you in the first place.

I'm coming back, soon. X

— Scouter Steven Methot captured the wilderness feeling perfectly in this account of a canoe journey. We hope you agree.