

VENTURING MAGAZINE

Okpik Holiday Adventure by Melinda Buck

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Crew 506 enjoyed our summer trip so much, that Crew D began almost immediately to plan our trip back in December for the Okpik Holiday Adventure. It takes place in December each year, but the same lakes that we canoed on a few months earlier are frozen solid. We were amazed to be walking across them and pulling our gear behind us on sleds, as pictured to the right.



Upon our arrival, we registered, carried our gear to our cabins, and got ready for orientation. The staff at Northern Tier is exceptional, and led us through "shakedown" to determine that the gear we brought from home was sufficient for the extreme temperatures. We then gathered our food from the commissary, and checked out additional gear from the Baypost with the help of our interpreter for this trip, Sam Stone. After dinner, and a good night's sleep we were up and ready to pack our gear onto our sleds.

Upon arrival at our chosen campsite, crew members began to set up camp before dark. We decided to "sleep under the stars" directly on the frozen lake. The first step was to shovel approximately a 2 foot windbreak around the area in which we would be sleeping. We then set up our sleeping system which consists of putting down a tarp. We then placed two closed-cell foam pads on top of the tarp. Our own 0-30 degree sleeping bags were placed inside a -20 degree sleeping bag that had been provided by Northern Tier. The remainder of the tarp was to be pulled over everything after you got inside. The tarp provided additional protection from the wind and the snow which collected on top overnight.



Our interpreter gave us another helpful hint. Before bedtime, we filled our Nalgene bottles with boiling water and put them into the bottom of our inner sleeping bags a few minutes before retiring and they stayed warm most of the night. How was sleeping on the lake? Initially, we found it to be a little distressing to hear the lake gurgling and cracking beneath you while you slept. Our interpreter assured us, however, that this was normal and a good sign that the lake was continuing to freeze. Apparently a "quiet lake is a dangerous lake"... and Moose Lake was not quiet!



Our Kitchen

We also had to get our kitchen ready to be used. In order to do this, it is necessary to shovel a huge pile of snow, and spaces are burrowed out in it for your kettle pack (which contains most of your necessary cooking gear) as well as your stove. The stove is placed on a piece of wood in one of the areas that you have prepared. Please see the photo below. Negative temperatures have interesting effects on your snacks. We

found it necessary to put breakfast bars, Twizzlers, jerky, and cheese inside our jackets for a while to thaw it before eating. All of your warm meals are boiled and so the temperatures had little effect on the dehydrated food, but we did find it interesting that it took approximately 2 hours to bring the water to a boil, so we always tried to remember to start the water in plenty of time for meals preparation.

Water is obtained for drinking and cooking by using an auger to drill through the ice into the lake below. It is then boiled for purification. The picture to the right shows crew member Andrew performing this task.



An evening fire is very nice in negative temperatures. The crew spent some time each afternoon gathering downed branches from the shore for our evening fires. The process of building a fire on a frozen lake is much different than what we are used to in our home state of Tennessee. You must first make a pile of snow. A few branches of wood are then placed on top of that pile, and underneath a metal garbage can lid that is part of the gear provided by Northern Tier. You then place your firewood on top of the garbage can lid and light as usual. Andrew Patchen was up for this task, as he is well known in our crew for being able to start a fire anytime, anywhere, with any materials available. This process prevents the heat of the fire from melting the ice. Of course, in practicing "Leave No Trace" all firewood and ashes were cleaned and removed from the surface of the lake before we broke camp. Our female youth leader, Anna Patchen, made sure we observed Leave No Trace requirements. Ashes from fires left by crews who visit Northern Tier during the winter months could cause a problem with the pH of the lake and be harmful to the ecosystem of the lake during summer months.

Another option for sleeping, is to build a "Quinzee". Snow is shoveled into a pile, then hollowed out in the middle for its occupants. Sticks are used to support the top. They provide excellent protection from the elements at Northern Tier. Our crew is pictured beside a Quinzee (left to right): Melinda, Anna, Christina, Allan, Andrew.



Our days were filled with cross-country skiing trips to explore adjacent lakes. The advantage to the winter trip, in our case, was that we made a base camp on Moose Lake for the 3 day trip and were able to leave our gear at camp while we explored. On our prior summer trip, of course, all gear (including canoes) was carried with us on these portage trails because we would not be returning to the same camp. We felt as if we were traveling very light comparatively. Oh, and I shouldn't leave out the other advantage. It is that there are no mosquitoes in the winter. This made us all very happy.

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We also enjoyed dog-sledding while on this adventure, and those interested were given the opportunity to help harness the dogs to the sled. Our adventurous female crew members (Christina, and Anna) chose to ride on the back of the sled along with the "mushers," while the rest of us preferred the safety and warmth of riding inside the sled. They were also given the chance to feed and water the

dogs once we returned to base. We must say that Northern Tier staff ROCKS! I think that all of the youth members of our crew hope to spend at least one summer or holiday working as staff at Northern Tier once they graduate from high school.

The coldest night that our crew spent on the lake had a nighttime low of -7 degrees and it was -18 degrees by morning as we made our trek back across Moose Lake and into base.

We learned a great deal on this trip about wilderness survival in extreme temperatures, and YES, we'd go back again.



Our crew and our interpreter (left to right): Allan, Anna, Melinda, Christina, Andrew, and Sam.