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Finding an Unforeseen Labrador

From the St. Lawrence to Ungava

David K. Leff



YOUNG AND LUSTING FOR WILDERNESS, I DREAMED OF LABRADOR. Like most dreams, reality proved different. It was “the land God gave to Cain,” French explorer Jacques Cartier remarked with foreboding in 1534. Intoxicated by its wild reputation, Henry David Thoreau maintained, “There is a singular health” in the word *Labrador*, “which no desponding creed recognizes.” In 1988, the year I first journeyed there, canoeists and Labrador adventure historians James West Davidson and John Rugge called it “a vast wilderness of mosquito-infested bogs, windswept barrens and lakes without names.” Here was an irresistible challenge.

True to its reputation, the country along the De Pas and George Rivers to Ungava Bay was a rugged, unforgiving landscape of stark, haunting beauty where weather, rapids, vast space, and bugs challenged my physical stamina and spirit. Nevertheless, what most intrigued me were not my encounters with nature, however awe-inspiring, but my unexpected contacts with loose fragments of civilization that penetrated the region like city flotsam awash on distant shores or telltale evidence of industrialization locked in Antarctic ice and snow.

Deep into the backcountry, my then-wife, Alice, and I were not alone. We traveled among First Nations people, hunters, fishers, guides and lodge managers, bush pilots, wildlife biologists, and residents of such far places as France and the Netherlands. At the very edge of nowhere, I found myself starting my adventure in a derelict mining town. Three weeks later, I ended at an Inuit village served by massive freighters and small planes. Along the way I saw canoes tethered beside floatplanes and weather stations collecting data near rock circles where generations of natives had pitched tents. Place names were often rendered in three languages—that of Aboriginal peoples, French and English—indicating complex and often contradictory histories.

I returned home with a surprisingly fresh sense that nature and culture are inextricably entwined. My notions of wilderness and humans’ relation to the outdoors were never the same.

Heading downriver. JEFF BOND



The author took a 359-mile train ride along the St. Lawrence River to Schefferville. From there, he and his companion paddled for many days along the De Pas and George Rivers.

LARRY GARLAND/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

The Train

Lurch, rattle, screech, and rumble, the train crept along clickety-clack tracks. In 1988, the principal way into the interior was a 359-mile train ride to Schefferville from Sept-Îles, Quebec, on the St. Lawrence River via the decrepit North Shore and Labrador Railroad. A hunter asked the florid-faced conductor when we'd reach our destination. "You should know better than to ask *that*," the conductor said in his French accent. To anyone accustomed to commuter trains bound for Grand Central, timetables on this line seemed an approximation, a piddling detail. I'd discovered this the night before when trying to load my canoe in a boxcar, and in the morning when we'd bought our tickets. The station irregularly closed early, opened late, and no one seemed particularly upset. "We're aboard a third-world country," a sunburned guide in a checked shirt grinned wryly.

Beyond grimy windows, a country of rushing rivers and low rugged hills with bare rock glistened in sunlight. Spruce, birch, and poplar along irregular wind-rippled lakes reached into expansive skies of swift-moving clouds. The topography flattened as we headed north into light green bogs among clusters of dark spruce.

The cars were crowded with Naskapi and some Montagnais, but the conductors guided us to the only car of mostly whites and told us where to sit. Most were rough-looking men in heavy boots and wool shirts, many carrying firearms or fishing rods in aluminum tubes. There were a few other paddlers, both men and women. The passengers smoked, gambled, ate, and read motorcycle and hunting magazines.

Windows didn't open, and the rusty, battered cabin became warm, stuffy, and smoke-filled. Occasionally, I'd catch some wind on the noisy platform between cars like a dog sticking its head out of a moving vehicle.

As we gained latitude, the spruce stood shorter. They were straight as posts with downward-canted branches clinging close to the trunk like closed umbrellas. Dead tree skeletons stood in desolate, bleached groves among patches of loose rock and gravel. For miles the monster metal transmission towers of Hydro Quebec paralleled the tracks, sending power from remote backcountry reservoirs to cities far to the south.

Stretching my legs, I walked through adjoining cars a couple times. The First Nations people relaxed with friends and family, conversing animatedly



Schefferville as it looked in 2007. PIERRE BOUCHARD/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

in at least three languages. The seats and aisles were crowded with duffels, cases of soda and beer, musical instruments, cartons, packs, coolers, and every type of container imaginable bound with rope, tape, and string. Cigarette smoke lay thick like coastal fog. The floor was slick with spilled water as well as trash. Children ran screaming, laughing, and playing games, which included clogging toilets with paper.

As a conveyance to the gates of wilderness, the train was a mind-bending experience. I was an outsider among people heading home. I sought adventure where their ancestors once lived. Could the wilderness that I sought to experience, I worried, have contributed to their displacement?

Schefferville

It lacked roads connected to the outside and stood at the cusp of the 55th parallel, only a couple days' paddle from the arctic zone, but Schefferville was not the busy, rough-and-ready frontier town I'd imagined. Rather, it was a

community rapidly decomposing. Many buildings were vacant. Streets and other infrastructure were falling apart.

We arrived at the station well after dark to a chaos of bodies and vehicles. Having been told we'd easily find a pickup for hire, we sought someone to haul our gear to the put-in. But speaking only English was a handicap, negotiating a price was complicated in the swarm of activity, and the train crew disappeared instantly, leaving the canoe and gear locked in a boxcar, apparently until sometime in the morning. Just before the place was abandoned for the night, we hired Claude and his rust-bitten truck. He took us to a small lakeside cottage, promising to retrieve us in the morning. "Blowin' in the Wind" played softly in French on his cassette deck. It started raining.

Morning revealed a gritty community with boarded-up houses and abandoned shops. The closed Roxy Theater stood lonely, just one of many businesses that had given up. Whole neighborhoods had been demolished, leaving a ghostly suburban grid of streets and sidewalks without houses. On the town's edge were brown, flat-topped hills. Schefferville was established in the mid-1950s for iron mining and was once a boomtown of about 5,000. The mines closed in the early 1980s, and the population plummeted toward the hundreds.

Bumming a ride to the mines, we found a vast moonscape in southwestern reds and oranges. Mesas of oxidized rock and machine-cut open cliffs stood near deep craters. Some depressions were dry, others contained emerald or brown water. Scattered throughout were rusted buildings with torn sides and broken windows, decrepit derricks, and rock crushers. Roads paved with mine tailings went nowhere and were strewn with wire, metal pieces, springs, pipe, machine parts, and chunks of wood.

Lunch was sandwiches at the dark motel bar in the center of town. Decorated in a Spanish motif, it featured stucco, rounded arches, and Don Quixote images. A television blared French, people around us spoke several languages, and American country music played in the background. The clash of cultures was somewhere between painful and hysterical. I had traveled into the bush farther than the distance from Hartford, Connecticut, to Washington, D.C., only to find a place despoiled and used up, a disposable landscape abandoned by its corporate creators when mining grew unprofitable.

Language Barrier

By the second day of paddling from lake to lake, we'd developed a love-hate relationship with wind. Fickle gusts played havoc with navigation, and unrelenting cold blasts wore us down with sore arms and backs. But on a few occasions when it quieted, a thick fog of biting blackflies would dart into our eyes, making us crazy with buzzing. Once in a while we'd take a break atop a beaver lodge. From the conical pile of peeled sticks, we'd watch flotillas of ducks or the aerial acrobatics of osprey diving into the water and flying off, grasping fish in their talons.

Coming ashore to camp, Alice and I found a tall, dark-haired man with a scraggly beard beside a roaring campfire. He wore a bright orange multipurpose garment that made him look part monk, part Disney character. It was a coat and pants, tent, poncho, or jacket depending on how it was buttoned. But stranger still was how he held two shoes on sticks over the fire like he was roasting hot dogs.

Monfreid was a Parisian, one of three Francophones with whom we spent time paddling a series of ledge-rimmed, spruce-bound lakes on our first few days. He was with another countryman and a Quebecer, the trip leader. Although neither Frenchman had much outdoor experience, they sang while paddling, recalling the voyageurs of fur trade days.

"I like Quebec," Monfreid said, "because it's like America, only in French." But a common language could cause serious problems, as he proved while drying his espadrilles over the flames, shoes that in France and the United States were fabricated with canvas, cardboard, and rope soles. The Quebecer had favored both companions with a detailed gear list, including two pair of espadrilles, which in Canadian French means sneakers or running shoes. What Monfreid held over the flames was destined to disintegrate when wet. "A savage country," he kept repeating in thickly accented English.

Language was a force, even deep in the bush where nature was supposedly a universal lexicon. We had to be careful even in describing our destination, an Inuit village on Ungava Bay at the tundra's edge. Called George River, Port Nouveau, or Kangiqsualujjuaq depending on the speaker's background, each name carried significant political freight—the use of which could make you a friend or pariah.

Science in the Wild

The De Pas and George rivers were lined with low barren hills brindled with golden-green moss, bare gray ledge, and scree in irregular patterns. Boulders sat enigmatically on many ridges where small groups of caribou might appear. Low scraggy trees worked their way into sheltered folds. Often the slopes were dotted with skeletal trees, parched and bleached, tormented by the wind into gnarly shapes glowing silver in sunlight. The hills seemed desolate and moody, their aspect changing as the light changed. With little in the way of soil or trees, it seemed we saw the very muscle and sinew of the planet.

At night the sky was thickly starred with pinpricks of white, magnesium-like fire. Deep into the darkness, the aurora played across the sky in dancing streamers of gauzy yellow-green light. It was an ephemeral incandescence softer than starlight, brighter than the moon, and reflected in the water where nighttime's phosphorescent, arcing rainbows wavered like heat rising off pavement.

After ten days of paddling and portaging, we found ourselves well along the George River among low, elongated hills. The sky seemed endless, a grand theater of massive ever-morphing clouds that teased the imagination with everything from faces to animal shapes. Trees here were smaller and more weather-beaten, barely grasping life in a thin curtain along the river or sheltered in deeply cleft valleys or at the base of hills. Though it was only midafternoon, we were exhausted from fighting brutal winds and whitecaps and stopped at a cluster of buildings on a rise near Pointe Wedge. We spotted several derelict structures and one large, serviceable building. It seemed abandoned, with some siding yanked off for firewood.

Opening the door to the big cabin, I jumped suddenly back. From within the dimness came a booming, "Hello!" But it wasn't the ghost of some long-lost hunter. Rather, for several days the place had been the bivouac of Lo and Anne-Marie, two young and cheerful Dutch biologists collecting caribou data for a university professor. They invited us in for tea. Conversation flowed easily, as if we were old friends. We talked about the weather, our homes, the barren landscape, and characters we'd met along the way. Most of all, we talked about caribou.

They'd been months on the tundra observing the "activity budgets" of the animals, with an emphasis on the influence of insect harassment on behavior. They'd seen 100,000 caribou from a plane and spent several weeks among

a herd of 10,000. The animals constantly ate lichen, were very curious, and would snuffle up to their tent at night.

Lo and Anne-Marie invited us fishing on their inflatable Zodiac boat. On our way to the water we passed several shallow circular trenches and rock rings where for generations Naskapi people had camped. The ancient tentsites connected me to yet another dimension in the landscape, leaving me feeling like just another in a series of nomadic travelers.

We caught a few arctic char and a trout and had a fine fried dinner with shared snacks. Anne-Marie and Lo wanted to live in North America permanently, closer to the wild places they loved. Good English was a necessity, they said, because Dutch is limited to the Netherlands and a few other places. "There is no wilderness in the Netherlands," Lo complained. There are lush and parklike places, but nature is tame and contrived. Since the unknown and unpredictable are significant elements of wilderness, I asked if the probing eyes of science might be diminishing the very thing he sought. Interesting question, he agreed.

Luxury Accommodations

"Have you seen any caribou?" As we made our way down the De Pas and the George, such was the typical greeting from sportsmen and guides, like so many inquiring Ahabs seeking their whale. It might not be quite like hiking inn to inn in Vermont, but a paddler on these remote rivers could often stay under the roof of fishing and hunting camps where well-to-do "sports" come for salmon and lake trout, bear, ptarmigan, and especially caribou.

Isolated as they were, each camp was its own world with a distinct culture. Some of the differences reflected operators' origins in French- or English-speaking Canada, First Nations, or the United States. But beyond an owner's ethnicity, each camp simply had its own timeworn way of doing things. A few places were put off by ragtag canoeists, afraid that they might annoy guests who had paid thousands for a week of hunting and fishing. But others were welcoming, interested in swapping stories, and offering a coffee or bite to eat. At one lodge we were graciously given some cooking oil, which had run low after frying lots of fish.

The camps were typically clusters of buildings. They could be homey with lines of bright wash drying, or more like rustic hotels with maybe a tiny

airstrip and vehicles brought in on winter's ice. Wanting to keep faith with our notions of wilderness, Alice and I didn't often stop.

Just before noon, three days' paddle from the Dutch biologists, we climbed a bluff to Pyramid Mountain Camp, a small collection of neat log buildings with a view dominated by Pic Pyramide (also called Pyramid Mountain), an arid-looking, forbidding peak with a forlorn grandeur and a shape true to its name. With the guides out hunting and fishing with their sports, the place was eerily quiet. But we soon met Derek, a handsome, bronze-complected boy of about 10 who called for his grandfather. Bob May greeted us warmly and sent us to the main building for coffee while he finished some chores. Derek returned to feeding raw caribou to two pet kestrels perching on his arm.

We entered through a doorway crowned with caribou antlers, a locally common ornament. Derek's grandmother smiled and served us strong coffee, cookies, and homemade bread with butter before wrapping some brownies and nut cakes to go. Antlers, a caribou pelt, maps, and fish posters adorned the walls. On the table was a book titled *Eskimo-English Dictionary*.

Bob soon returned and with an old-time tavern keeper's charm delighted us with stories. A big, hearty, Manitoban, he'd first come to Pyramid Mountain in 1956 after a stint as a factor (mercantile agent) with the Hudson's Bay Company. Salmon fishing was good and caribou hunting would pick up in a couple weeks, he thought. He grumbled about the government granting special hunting and fishing rights to "the Indians" and insisted on flying only the maple leaf on his flagpole, although it offended the Quebecois. Solo canoeists were crazy, he said, and could cause big headaches for search-and-rescue crews. His opinions were as strong as his coffee, both commonplaces in this part of the world.

Fish and game were the objects of sporting camps, but the lodges were also cauldrons of cultural stew where pride and historical and personal enmities often seethed beneath the surface. You could paddle to the end of the earth, but politics remained wherever there was humanity.

Ungava Metropolis

I was hardly foolish enough to have imagined igloos on the shore of an empty sea, but the Inuit village of Kangiqsualujjuaq seemed positively cosmopolitan

after more than two weeks in the backcountry. The place looked fairly conventional, but people seemed to operate on an alternative vibe. It was a little Kafkaesque to an outsider from the south like me. I was used to reserved New Englanders and typical government and corporate bureaucracies, but I found friendly and helpful people after setting aside my customary expectations.

The village housed about 400 souls in wood and aluminum houses situated at a bulge in the river near Ungava Bay. The town hall and the school both looked new. The church was a Quonset hut with a steeple. A co-op sold everything from groceries to hardware and native crafts. On the outskirts were a dirt airstrip, a utilitarian power plant, and a dump that burned continuously during our visit. A large freighter anchored outside the harbor. Without substantial trees, the town looked as stark as its surroundings.

We headed to the town manager's office, hoping for help getting a flight home and shipping our canoe. People smiled at us. They wanted to know where we were from and how we had gotten there. After a short walk, an older Inuit man gave us a ride up the hill in a battered pickup. I thought I'd heard him wrong when he said the town manager's name was "Fred and sometimes Jim."

The desk nameplate read "Jim Stewart," but the pale man in a leather jacket and Presley haircut asked us to call him Fred. He was friendly and accommodating but seemed a bit distracted, as if all our questions were novel. We couldn't make a collect or credit card call to the outside because operators weren't available. It was a problem, he observed nonchalantly, that had been going on for months. Something to do with a strike, but he wasn't sure. He directed us to the Air Inuit office, told us that the freighter would arrive on the next tide, said that we could camp on a rise by the satellite dish, and cautioned us about roaming dog packs who could tear apart our gear.

Air Inuit was headquartered in a modest house, and we sat at the agent's kitchen table with his wife as he informed us that there might be a flight the next day, but he wasn't sure. If there was a flight, he was uncertain if there was room aboard. He advised us to come back tomorrow.

We were awakened late at night by a crane and forklift operating on the beach in glaring white floodlights. Half the town turned out as workmen unloaded the freighter's barge. In the dark and confusion, it took a while to find the right person, but I arranged for the canoe to be shipped to Montreal for \$300, and I helped load it onto the barge.

The next morning, I was back at Air Inuit. A twin-engine Otter would arrive at a time uncertain and it wasn't full. Nevertheless, we could not get on. After some confusing back-and-forth over a half-hour, I discovered the problem. The agent was out of tickets—that is, the pieces of paper. He could not sell us something he did not have. Though he was reluctant, I finally convinced him to call the hub in Kuujjuaq. After his protracted phone conversation with headquarters in a language I did not understand, he said that we could pay now and get our tickets on landing, even though it was highly unusual.

The plane arrived the next day much earlier than expected. We finished packing in haste and rushed breathlessly to the landing strip. From the air, the village seemed faded among the vastness of rocky barrens dotted with lakes. The tide was out, revealing a huge field of mud and boulders. Suddenly I was overtaken with regret at leaving so soon. I had so much to learn in this place where life was not so rushed or linear.

Land of Perpetual Quest

In Labrador I discovered a lot more to wilderness than the wild, and my most lasting impressions and deepest education was as much about people as about bears, caribou, barrens, and bogs. Sure, *Labrador* still has a magical ring to it, and there remain wilder places there than I experienced. It endures as a land of perpetual quest for intrepid souls seeking to challenge body and spirit. But my pure notion of wilderness as a trackless expanse home only to plants and wild animals evaporated. Wilderness seemed more an idea than a place. Ultimately, my Labrador journey taught me to appreciate and protect pockets of wildness close to home because I learned that the mere presence of humanity did not necessarily destroy their value. Liberated and energized by this revelation, it led to a lifetime of quiet, joyful, unexpected adventure in places nearer to home.

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