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## Catching a Fish: Girls Find Food and Water

Leah Titcomb

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# Catching a Fish

*Girls find food and water*

**Leah Titcomb**



I STOOD ON THE SHORE IN A CLOUD OF NO-SEE-UMS, TINY BUGS THAT made me swell and burn until I got away from them and managed to stop itching. As long as I stood on the shore, it wasn't getting any better. I hustled to get my girls to tie down their stuff in the canoes and push off into the moving stream away from the bugs. When we finally launched our boats, I was able to stop scratching my bites and focus more intentionally on instructing my students. Some were more frustrated than others.

I dipped my paddle into the Penobscot River and pushed my canoe forward. It silently arced through the current, propelling me into the interconnecting waterways of Maine. The teenage girl in my bow looked intently at her paddle as if she could will it to make us go the direction she wanted. It was the first time she had ever canoed, despite having grown up in Maine, where the waterways run endlessly between Canada and the coast.

The other Old Town canoes wove around us, each girl with a determined and slightly strained look as she dipped her paddle in the water and tried to steer her canoe. After a few minutes of concentrated silence, the girls started giggling and bumping into each other and the riverbank. Their voices rang out in shrills, shouting directions at the bow- or stern-woman on how to make the canoe move the way they wanted it to.

Chelsea was in my bow, and she watched her paddle move through the water, experimenting with different strokes. Pry. Draw. Pry. Our canoe wobbled with each of her strokes, and I kept correcting it.

We paddled noisily away from Lobster Trip Boat Launch, our last sign of civilization for the next 170 miles. The trees on the riverbank engulfed us, and the girls' voices reverberated through the tall pines, chasing away every moose, rabbit, and chipmunk within miles of us. Fish slipped beneath rocks at our approach.

Canoe Expeditions for Maine Girls was a three-week trip designed to give these girls a chance to connect with a wild and scenic part of their state. They had applied, gotten accepted, and now I was guiding them on a scholarship-funded paddling expedition. I could tell they were all wondering what they had gotten themselves into as they apprehensively left civilization behind and let the river pull them into the wilderness. They kept looking back over their shoulders and then at each other with wide eyes, joking about the horror films that started this way.

*Teenage girls canoe on the Penobscot River for the first time.* LEAH TITCOMB

WE MADE CAMP OUR FIRST NIGHT AT THE SAME PRIMITIVE CAMPSITE where Henry David Thoreau had slept in the mid-1800s, and where my grandparents had stayed in 1941 on their north woods canoe trip. This was familiar territory for me. I held the ax handle, smooth and cool in my hands, and demonstrated how to split wood for our evening fire. The swarm of blackflies and mosquitoes would die down with the smoke, and the girls assigned to fire building quickly took charge. Just like Thoreau and his companions, each person is essential to running a smooth camp. Once the girls had learned their tasks, the only sound was the high-pitched whirr of the Coleman stove, the squeak of the water pump, the snapping of twigs, and the thump of the ax against logs. I didn't need to nag anyone to do her chores because it was immediately and readily apparent that we depended on one another for warmth, food, and safety. The girls wanted to be comfortable, and for that to be possible, they all had to pitch in. I could tell that the girls took pride in their work; they obviously felt valued and useful as they learned the basic skills it took to live. They couldn't open the refrigerator here, close the door on the mosquitoes, or run the tap water. They were starting to understand what it really meant to eat, drink, and be warm.

Delia hovered over the green camp stove, holding the metal spatula uncertainly as the onions sizzled in the pan. She looked at me. She opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again, as if to say something.

"What is it, Delia?"

"I've never sautéed onions before."

I smiled. "Now you have. Keep moving them around so they don't burn."

The next morning I awoke early and sat at the river's edge with my grandfather's small leather-bound journal in my lap and my fly rod next to me. I opened the creased binding, its pliable leather softly flopping open. He and Granny had stayed here, loaded with provisions for the journey. The tall dark pines that he wrote about were now emerging from the mist in front of me. I sat on the river's edge sipping my tea.

Everything was still and silent, except for the rush of the water. This was one of my favorite times of day. It was my time with the land. I waded out into the shallow water with my rod and cast a few loops.

This is a secret part of the Northeast, rarely talked about or ravaged by hordes of tourists because it is too remote for most people. It is solitary and isolated; the trees stand undisturbed by loggers. I reeled in my line and called the girls to join me by the riverside and appreciate the free-flowing water.

They gathered around me, sleepy-eyed and groggy. When their eyes started to focus more, I had them visualize the river, not as it was now, but packed with rolling logs, tumbling over the rocks from bank to bank, like a box of cigars. The river was part of their heritage and mine.

Once, the water was full of floating logs being driven to sawmills on the coast, and before that, the rivers were highways for trappers and American Indians. Loggers' voices and the sound of their saws cutting pine trees used to fill the woods. The loggers drove the pine logs through rapids and over waterfalls, living in makeshift camps from here to Canada.

To get the trees to the mills, loggers would roll the trees into the rivers, and the trees would float, packed tightly and bumping against the banks and rocks. The loggers would run across the logs, standing on the rolling mass as it moved through the water, breaking up logjams and herding the logs, trying not to catch a foot or roll under the logs.

Now this waterway is a quiet floating road into deeper wilderness. It leads to the Allagash River, the only river in Maine that is a designated wilderness, and is almost "free flowing," meaning it has only two old dams blocking the flow and the fish passage. In most places, it looks the same as when Thoreau canoed it, and the French-Canadian trappers before him, and the American Indians before them.

The waterway is still set in a working forest, but logs don't travel to market on the river anymore. Fortunately, the sounds of trucks and chainsaws, in the few areas being "worked," don't penetrate the silence too often. The land around the corridor is mostly untouched for miles, and the only thing floating down the river are fish and sporadic canoes.

The farther we canoed into the Allagash River from the Penobscot River, the more sunken logs we floated over, their bark eerily preserved in the cold water. The girls started shouting out when they found more, trapped between rocks or half buried in mud.

Some logs had thick spikes still driven into their sides, with dark rust sliding off and tainting the girls' hands as they reached in to touch a piece of the past. The logs and spikes weren't a problem in the slower-moving water, but, in the rapids, I had to keep my eyes peeled for them as I wove my canoe through mounds of whitewater.

I concentrated on the maps spread out before me on the smooth ledges of Gero Island and drew our watery course through rivers and ponds with my pencil. In some places, we were going to have to go short distances upstream to reach the next body of water. Some of the girls crowded around me,

their faces close to mine, strands of stringy hair dangling down like tendrils. We squatted around the maps, pointing to different sections, rapids, and historical places. They were very concerned about going upriver for eight miles. I grinned and told them to imagine that they were fish fighting their way up the river from the ocean.

SOME OF THEM GLANCED AT MY FISHING ROD LEANING AGAINST THE dark green hull of my canoe, and one tentatively pointed out that I hadn't caught anything yet. "That's because we haven't gotten to the good spots yet." This waterway has been the traditional route of countless salmon, trout, river herring, and alewives. Their numbers have decreased with the increase of dams clogging Maine's waterways, but the Allagash has fish ladders on its dams, increasing the chance of the fishes' survival.

Fish ladders are a series of steps with water flowing over them to allow the fish to jump from pool to pool, and around or over the dam, as if it were a waterfall. They have been partially successful in helping to restore fish populations. For some fish, it has been a huge victory, but it hasn't helped others. Each species can jump a certain distance and height, so making a ladder that accommodates all species is very difficult.

The abundance of dams on Maine rivers, particularly the Penobscot and the Kennebec, prevent fish and eel populations from traveling downstream and upstream between feeding and spawning areas. The few fish that miraculously make it over the 24- to 100-foot walls of concrete often get caught and killed in the thrashing blades of the turbines on their swim back downriver. The alewives, river herring, and Atlantic salmon populations, to name a few, have steadily decreased in Maine with the increase of dams.

The Atlantic Salmon Commission counts the number of fish that return to the rivers of Maine to spawn each year. The commission has estimated that in the early 1800s, hundreds of thousands of salmon spawned in the northeast rivers of Maine. In 2010, fewer than 2,000 returned to Maine.

There have been thousands of dams in Maine history. Most of the early ones provided electricity for sawmills, then for textile mills. The river drivers sometimes used dams to stop or divert the flow of logs along the waterways. Dams also trapped water to power paper and pulp mills. Now the water flowing over most of them generates electricity. We produce so much electricity in Maine that we actually sell the excess to Massachusetts and Connecticut.

The dams littering the Maine waterways are not all in use. Some are abandoned hydroelectric dams; others have been abandoned for decades, and their purpose is unknown. For the most part, the abandoned dams remain in the rivers, blocking the passage of fish into their spawning grounds.

I STOOD ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER ALONE THE NEXT MORNING and cast my line, watching my forward loop unfurl over the current. The fly skimmed the river surface before delicately landing. The free-flowing water moved it too quickly, and I cast again, hitting the eddy line to slow it down, so the fish could get a good look at it. I let it sit on the surface of the water and float slowly along the eddy line, waiting for a fish to bite.

Several casts later, I reeled in my line and tucked my rod into the canoe and paddled out to a new spot along the river. I knew there were fish farther out, but I wasn't sure what kind or how many. As the river narrowed, I floated up to some odd muck sticking out of the current. As I got closer, I realized it was a pile of old logs and concrete blocks with shreds of canvas stretching the span of the river. It was an old canvas dam, and the shreds of cloth bobbed eerily just under the surface. I carefully picked my way through the mess, trying not to get caught in it, wondering if there were very many fish beyond the dam.

Rivers and fish can recover if they are given the chance. There has been a recent movement to remove dams along the major rivers and add fish passages to the remaining dams. The destruction of dams is controversial as the need for "clean" power increases.

Hydroelectricity is clean; it doesn't burn fossil fuels to create electricity. But if a hydroelectric dam doesn't have a fish ladder, it causes other equally devastating environmental and economical problems.

I gripped my rod and cast my line, hoping the fish up here had had time to make a comeback—hoping to catch a glimpse of one on the end of my line. I sent my line out in careful and swift loops, making the fly dance through the air. The rod became an extension of my forearm, and I moved it back and forth in slow motion, making sure the line didn't tangle as the fly made low figure-eights over the river. Fly-fishing is meditative time with the river. I brought my rod on the trip, not necessarily to provide food, but to practice an art and get to know the river more intimately.



MY CONNECTION WITH THE LAND IS THROUGH THE WATER, THROUGH my family's history in northern Maine and along the coast. I was passionate about showing one of my favorite rivers to this group of Maine girls. Instead of texting or Facebooking, they stood around me, knee deep in the cold current, learning to cast a fly rod, recognize where a fish would be, and mimic a bug landing on the water.

I handed the rod to Judy and stood next to her holding her arm, helping her to get the feel of casting. She smiled and concentrated on the motion and the water. The other girls stood to the side of me and watched Judy try it out. I pointed to where the water was flowing fast, and where it slowed down, and explained how, just as we used the river currents to our advantage in the canoes, the fish also used them. I explained how the fish take a break in the eddies and don't want to use more energy than they have to. If the fly is in a place where the fish would have to expend more energy to catch it than it would gain by eating it, the fish will watch it float by. Judy cast on her own, laughing when the line tangled, and then trying again to get the fly to where I was pointing.

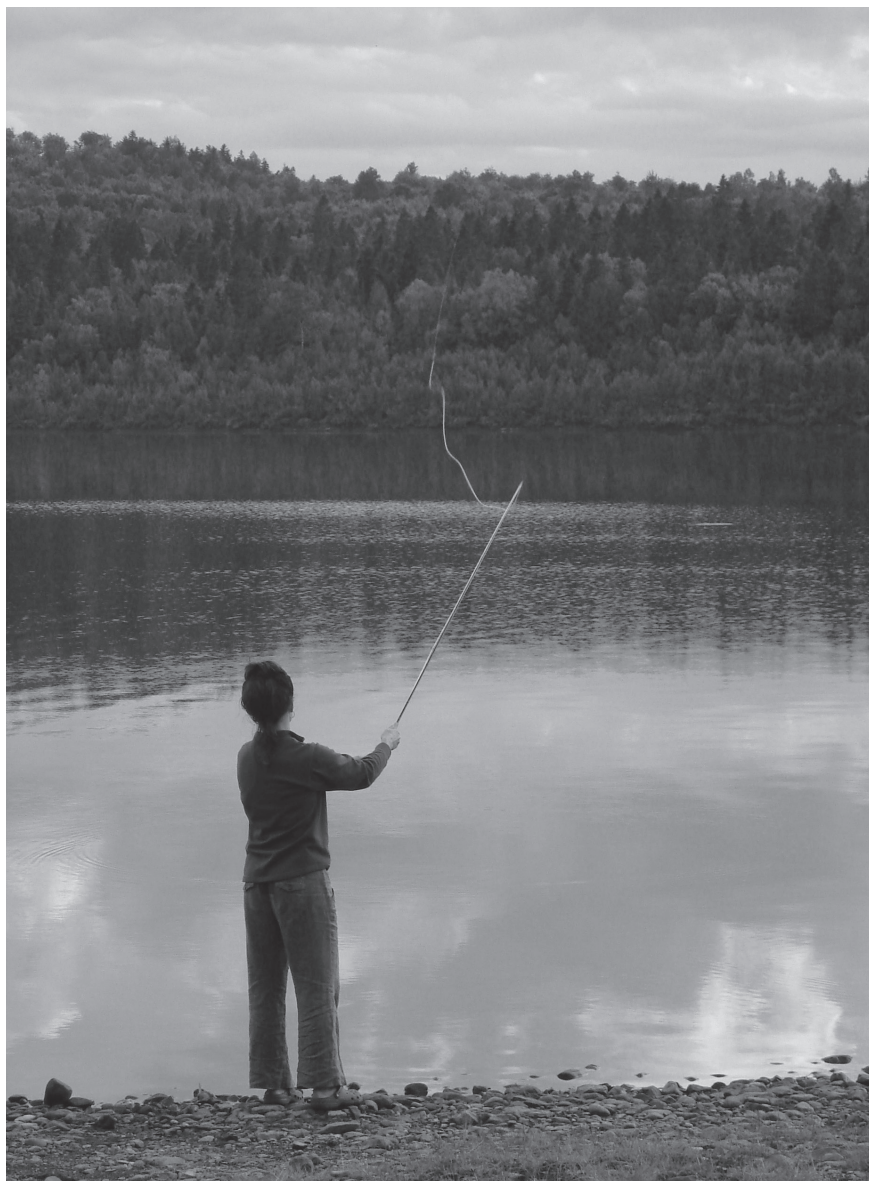
Next, Jocelyn wanted to try it out. She had been fishing with her uncle but hadn't been able to cast; he had done most of the casting while she had hung out. I let her hold the rod and gripped her forearm, just as I had with Judy. Jocelyn's face squished up in concentration as she threw the fly-line out toward the eddy, and I let go of her arm and let her cast on her own.

As Jocelyn was casting, I turned to the other girls and made sure they understood the importance of using the current to our advantage when fishing and canoeing. Using the current was symbolic of the way we traveled in the wilderness, "going with the flow" and adapting to changing weather and situations. We literally floated in the currents and used them to help us move our boats without overexerting ourselves.

We depend on the river to carry us, to teach us how to maneuver with the current instead of fight it, and how to work with it instead of against it. The girls watched the fly move along the current, and they learned how the fish use the current. They were discovering the history of their state and taking pride in it.

The remnants of their ancestors lay sunken below the canoes—the spikes and logs of logging days. The waters carried our canoes over the same rocks and past the same banks as those of the American Indians and fur traders. These waterways were ancient; the grueling portages keep the waterway private and gave the girls a sense of pride in their passage to the wilderness. They learned





*Learning to cast.* LEAH TITCOMB

their strength as women, mentally and physically, by paddling more than 170 miles and solo portaging their 80-pound canoes for two-mile stretches. In an age where teenage girls are bombarded with messages about how they should look and act, these girls were getting the chance to redefine themselves

without outside pressures. They were being challenged to be physically and mentally strong, and they had female role models to help them realize their own strengths. Jocelyn was getting a chance to see a woman fish competently, which was helping her to feel that she also could learn to fish competently. She tried casting, instead of passively watching.

I believe that these girls' connection to the land strengthened as they learned more about its history, how to fish the water, and how to guide canoes through the rapids. They were learning to fish in the same waters that Thoreau and my grandfather (and his father before him) fished. The girls were excited by casting and trying to predict where the fish would be. Each girl took a turn with the rod, experientially learning how to cast a fly rod. The others cheered the caster on and pointed to where they thought the most fish would be hiding.

We stayed at the same primitive campsites that Thoreau so eloquently wrote about, and we talked about the fact that now women, too, explore the wilderness. These girls were getting to experience the Allagash wilderness as it was more than 100 years ago and as it will be for the next 100 years—that is, if young people like them will stand for the stipulations of the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. Their daughters might also get to learn their own strengths and experience the independence of traveling, if these girls help to keep it wild.

The Allagash River is the last wild river in the east. The other rivers of Maine, like the Penobscot and Kennebec, have more volume and mass, but they are developed. Hydroelectric dams trap the fish and clutter the waterways. Highways run next to them, and bridges span their width.

The Allagash originally had two access points, but as pressures increase from special interest lobbyists, the number has been increasing. We had accessed the Allagash the traditional way, via the chain of rivers and lakes stemming from the Penobscot River. If so many dams didn't interrupt the Penobscot River, we could canoe the entire length of Maine. Instead, I had to drive to a point where the river was free flowing, and we could float unencumbered to the Allagash.

Standing in the current of the Allagash, the girls felt the power of the water push against their legs. They joked about how strong their legs were now, and how their paddling arms could defeat any obstacle. It was heartwarming to hear them talk so confidently about their bodies and their abilities after also hearing their doubts about their strengths earlier in the trip. It made me smile to hear them talk passionately about the fish in the water and ask questions

about the waterway rights and politics. Delia handed the rod back to me after her turn, and I made sure everyone had had her fill of casting before I took the rod and looked out over the river.

The glistening side of a fish flickered for a split second beneath the water. I zinged the fly on the end of my line out to where I had seen the flash. The tops of trout are dark, with vermicular patterns that blend in with the dark river bottom. The undersides are silvery, to blend in with the lighter sky. Holding my breath, shoulders tense and ready, I let the fly float, and I tugged it a few times to mimic a struggling fly on the water. The end of my rod dipped slightly, and with a small flick of my wrist, I set the hook into the fish's lips. I reeled in against the strain of the struggling fish. After the fish wore itself out, I dipped my net into the water and brought it briefly ashore. The fish gasped, moving its thick-lipped mouth as if it was trying to speak to us. The silvery scales on its sides reflected like mirrors back at the marveling girls. When everyone had had a chance to see it, and before it ran out of oxygen, I put it back into the water, holding it gently until it regained enough oxygen and strength to slide out of my cupped hands, and dash away with the flick of its dark tail. We stood in the water.

Silently. Smiling. Listening to the sound of free-flowing water.

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LEAH TITCOMB is a registered Maine Guide who teaches young people about the natural world. She is often found canoeing on the waterways of Maine or adventuring in the mountains.

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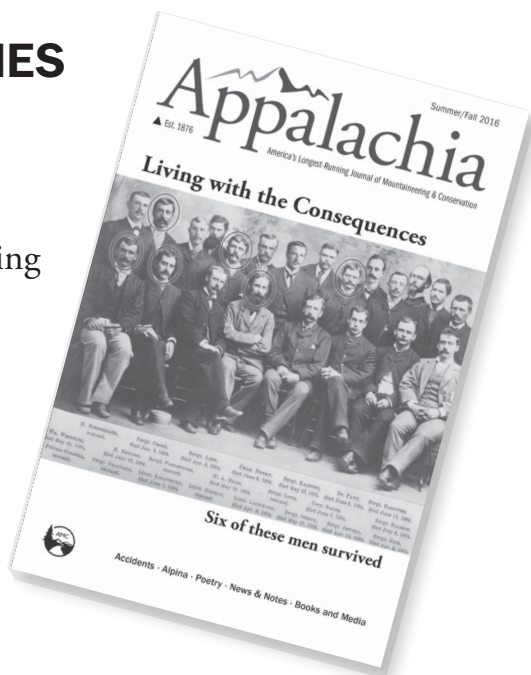
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