

Trip Report: November 11, 2002
May 22, 2003
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Posted GreatLakesHikes YahooGroups.Com Message Board

I've meant to adapt this over for here for a long time. Well, obviously! What has decided me finally is that I intend to follow this up with a March TR and one from a few days ago, and thought the contrast might be nice.

I was considering somehow glomming onto Siler's successful and popular "3 years ago today" theme ala sad pathetic attention whore, like maybe with "six months ago today", but went for simplicity in the title instead...for now. Well, that and it hasn't been exactly six months. How inconvenient. :-)

Seasonally out of work until winter, I decided to go to the cabin and get some hunting in the last few days of grouse season before deer season starts and grouse season ends. I started walking after sunset (7pm I think I started), but not yet full dark. I walked a two-track a ways out of town, then followed the edge of the quiet highway for a short bit ,then back off and followed a skidder track through a logging operation, walking past the smell of cut wood, hydraulic oil, and the bulk if silent machines with the settling hydraulics creaking in the dark. There was half a moon up for like 3 hours after dark, and that helped a bit to see. Here and there in the cups of the fall leaves, a light trace of snow catches moonlight. It was kind of cold, but that was good. If it's below freezing, it can't rain on me. Snow is not good, but easily tolerable. Rain, on the other hand is very bad, unless it is warm out, but this is late November, so it's not warm. Actually, most of the problem is I'm still soft from baking all summer. I'd be more able to handle the weather if I were just coming off from staving off frostbite all winter.

I don't have much for a pack. Just some food, drink, gloves, etc. Minor things. It's just a daypack, really. I've opted to go light and forgo the heavy packing. I still have the means to stay warm if I have to. I won't be comfortable if I have to camp, but I'll certainly live.

There is a clear sky with lots of sparkling stars out, though the moon was blotting most of them out on the south. Walking at night after the leaves are gone is nice, because you can watch the stars and keep a rather exquisite reckoning of your sense of direction. You can't get lost on snowshoes in the woods on a clear night in the winter. You just can't. The whole sky is a huge compass that you don't even have to pay attention to, because you can't NOT see it. The moon set, and I walked on in the dark, now turning off the northbound road and picking up the long westward-running East Tower/Betsy River Road that is always the longest and most tedious part of this journey. A quarter of the way along, heading west, there is the Betsy River, which is more or less the

halfway point for the overall walk between Paradise and the cabin, so I sort of like to see it. The bridge has been officially "out" for years. No matter. I've looked it over, and have been driving over it anyway, deeming it good enough for a car if not for a log truck (which is what broke it like 5 years ago). Last year the county ripped half the bridge's decking up, but there was still enough to drive an ATV over, which was more than enough to walk over. However, I get there in the dark and see only a big gap of black water. (!!!)

Hmm...sometime in the last couple of weeks they took the rest of the bridge out. Nice. I've spent like 5 hours of walking to find this out, and as I review the surrounding area in my head, I can't think of a way around this that won't take me at LEAST 5 hours just to get to the other side of the river. Well, the river is only maybe 30 feet across at most (probably less), and 8 feet deep at worst, but I should mention that it's now midnight and 20 degrees out, probably. I kick around getting wet and seeing if walking will keep me warm until I get to the cabin, but this is stupid, and I discard it. If nothing else, it's too cold to walk without shoes, and if I walk with wet shoes, I'll have agonizing bleeding feet way before I even get where I'm going. I hate being stopped by something so stupid. Water doesn't seem like it has to be such a huge obstacle, does it? It's just water. You can drink it. It won't hurt you to touch it, etc. Strange.

There are two lone boards still sticking out across the rotten pierwork that I might walk across. 2x10's on edge that served some unknown purpose in the overall design of the bridge. Um...surre. If I was a highwire artist I could maybe walk them. Maybe if I just concentrate, I can balance good enough for that short distance? Sometimes, you can actually get your mind in the right frame and achieve such results. Maybe? Nah. I'm already a bit tired and staggering from the walking so far. Nothing bad for just walking. You wouldn't be able to TELL that I'm "staggering" but I'm used to my legs and how far I can push them and so on, and I can tell they are not at peak. I'm too tired now for such delicate coordination. That's the first thing to go, always. Falling in isn't an option. I'll live somehow or other, but it would be a huge hassle. I don't feel like it. I don't think I can reliably walk across those boards. Right off the bat, as you work any muscle group, you lose the fine coordination as they tire, long before they actually tire seriously. Anyway, the boards are rather thin for their span, and the farther one has a disturbing curve in it that would seem to rock it off its mountings if I put my weight on it.

I actually sit down in the road and fume. The mud of the road has frozen now, so it's not wet. I have to decide soon, because I am only dressed enough to be totally comfortable moving. I need to be walking, inside somewhere, or next to a fire. Not sitting on my ass on a frozen road in the dark.

It's absolutely still and dead quiet. I can literally hear single leaves

falling far out in the trees. I can hear water running somewhere....
Downstream. That means something is in the water, which MIGHT mean.....??
Maybe....So I bust off into the brush after the noise, and finally find
what looks to be a very substantial beaver dam. Oh wow. Kickass! Joy.
Happy. Wunderbar. I prod at it with my staff, and it's solid. I walk out on
it, and find it's got a 6 foot or so gap in it most of the way across. Bah.
Figures. See, that's what I get for having hope. Another impasse as I stand
thinking, and I ponder taking my shoes off and wading. I *probably* can manage
not to frostbite my toes doing that. Nah, that's just the "I can walk soaking
wet the rest of the way" thought coming back in another guise, I think. I poke
a stick in the gap in the dam, and find out the water is deep there. Over my
head at least. Okay, scratch wading, then. Well, dammit, this figures. I
mean, the rest of the dam is solid. The bit on the other side looks good to
walk on too. Hmm...well, anything a golf-ball-sized brained, bucktoothed, 40
pound rodent can do I can do, right? Damn straight. I also have a saw and an
axe, both of which work better than beaver teeth. Over the next somewhat under
two hours by flashlight, I hauled, cut, dragged and threw enough dead trees,
logs, brush and stumps and anything else loose and dead I could get hold of
until I can manage to walk across without getting my feet wet. It works. All
that follows is working my way back around to the road on the far side of the
river bank. Due to the curve of the river at this point, while it is a couple
minutes off the road to the beaver dam on the side I started, on this side, it
takes me maybe ten minutes to fight through the tag alders in the dark to get
back to the other side of the missing bridge.

About this time, it clouded back up. Goodbye pretty stars. On the other hand,
with cloud cover, it's probably not going to get any colder now. It's not as if
there's nothing to look at. There is no such thing as full dark. Even if it's
cloudy, and raining, and there is no moon, and even here, where no city lights
put a glow in the sky, the stars always give enough light to see something by
once your eyes adjust.

At around 4am the clouds break up and it mostly clears off, so the stars are
back. Shortly after 6 am, I probably only have 3 hours to go, but the soles of
my feet are getting sore to the point that they seem to burn. Not totally
unusual. I've probably gone nearly 30 miles so far, and somewhere around or
past 20 I usually hit a limit of not exactly physical endurance but blisters and
other such bothers. I stop and build a tiny fire off in the woods for four
hours, and drink and eat a snack out of my small backpack. I might have slept
a bit, but not substantially. In certain states it is nearly impossible to tell
if you've slept or just zoned out. It's cold. A fire just keeps you from
actually freezing--it doesn't actually make you comfortably warm, like to be
able to sleep. On the other hand, don't take this to mean I was like shivering
the whole time. I wasn't. I just wasn't toasty is all.

Shortly before noon, I'm on my way again, and after I stop to pick up a couple

handfuls of beech nuts, I'm there. Well, all told, this was like 20 hours, wasn't it? Then again, I had not intended on having to stop to repair beaver dams. Also, something in my right foot hurts like hell when I walk. This, like the footsoreness, is not unusual in general. Minor things seem to come and go during long walks, don't they? Though, whatever the pain is, it's not anything I've had before. It annoys me because I don't know what it is, I think. On all-day walks, such things come and go. They slow you down a bit, maybe. I guess the 4 hour rest was not strictly called for either. I could have gone without it, but what the hell. It's not like this was a death march, or like I had any strict itinerary.

I'm pretty beat when I hit the cabin. I have a tent there, and had intended on taking it out and setting up somewhere else. Hmm...I've been awake well over 24 hours now, walking most of it, and nothing sounds as nice as a sleep right NOW. So I do. I don't wake up until like 4am, and there's not much to do in the dark in the woods, so I go back to sleep, and don't wake up again until 10 am. It's 29 degrees in the cabin. That's interesting, and if not precisely comfortable, it's certainly tolerable. Also I remind myself that it wouldn't hurt to sort of push the comfort level a bit toward the lower end of the thermometer. It'll make winter easier in the long run. The temperature is actually a minor issue when I first stand up. The bigger concern is: DAMN are my feet stiff! at least for the first minute or two. Oh well. Best thing to work that out is go for a walk and see if I can't scare up a grouse. I hobble around (ever try to limp with both feet at the same time? :-), eat something, and eventually decide to take the .22 rifle instead of the shotgun. The shotgun is the conventional bird gun, but something about spraying a small shower of lead bugs me. Inelegant. Loud. Rounds are expensive compared to .22 shells. Maybe I can shoot birds in the head with that. What the hell, a grouse's head is not quite the size of a nickel, and that's almost as big as a squirrel's head, which is maybe like a quarter, which I can hit reliably while freestanding at 50 yards. As far as I know, this is starting to push a bit at the inherent accuracy of most .22 rifles and ammo. Maybe out west in Montana or something you need to make 300 yard shots, but everything here is swamp and thick pines and brush. I have the .22 sighted for 50 yards, but I don't think I've shot anything any farther away than 30 yards. 90 feet. Not far, really. Most shots are more like 50 feet away. The simple fact of the matter is that if it is farther away than that, you probably can't see it to shoot it, because it's behind brush. While this sounds close, keep in mind I'm going for clean headshots on rat-sized squirrels. I have half a dozen different kinds of ammo for it. 150 rounds of really good (but expensive) stuff. I opt for a box of the stuff I have the most of. The standard .22 bullet is 40 grains. These are 36 grains(2.33grams). Lighter. Faster. Shoot flatter. Less impact energy, due to being lighter, but as I'm just shooting birds and overgrown rats with them, it's still overkill.

Later in the day, I have two more squirrels in my backpack, but that's not a lot to eat. I'm admittedly not being serious enough about the whole thing

though. Mostly, I like to just walk around, and sometimes get too wrapped up in watching the wind move the trees or something to remember to keep my senses tuned for game. On top of that, sometimes I see an animal and it just seems more interesting to watch it than to make dinner out of it :-)

Weather is calm, but there is a low shifty wind, and it's cold, and it's not good for hunting stuff. The shifty wind makes things nervous. I don't see much. Oh, I know where the birds at least are hiding, but I can't hope to go in the thick areas after them without scaring them out far ahead of me. Nevertheless, I do see one bird and get a perfect medium range headshot off on it. First bird via the rifle. I like it! Zero spoiled meat, instant clean kill. I may never bother with a shotgun again. So far today, not altogether bad. Two nasty squirrels and one tasty birdie to eat. Then again, it's good I'm not doing this for a living, as I probably burned off more energy walking around after these things than I would get back from eating them.

Well, tomorrow. I get back after dark and go to sleep, so I decide to procrastinate and cook them the next day. Being as it's a few degrees below freezing out, I stick the dead bird between the outside and inside door of the cabin, and there it would keep beautifully for days on end, no doubt.

The next day, my damn foot is killing me again, but it again feels better after some walking, and again, also feels somehow worse after a lot of walking. I could stop walking entirely but...well, that would be boring, and also, past experience with this kind of thing indicates that walking on it enough to keep it irritated but not outright aggravated will make it get better faster. This plan is working, as usual, but slowly, as is also usual.

Oh well. Today is nice weather. Colder, and somehow boding of nastiness to come. There is a pensiveness to it. Hah! The grouse will be holing up in a swamp somewhere. It is on days like this that I hear people say "man, the birds are just gone this year". They don't know where to look. I do. On the other hand, the place(s) I know to look can't be driven to. Have to walk all day to get out in a swamp. I time it right to hit the roosting area just before sunset, and find most of a dozen of them in one spot. The weather has them shifty and nervous, and I only get two more, but all things considered, I think this is quite good. I'm not starving, so I pass up a lot of questionable shots. Some people think it the worst of unsportsmanlike behavior to shoot a roosting or standing bird, but personally, I'm not comfortable with throwing in more uncertainty and chance of wounding with a moving target. Also, what the hell, I've inherently given the birds a better chance anyway, what with trying to nail their tiny, spastically jerking heads dead center with what is basically a glorified pellet rifle. I could have gotten maybe another 2 with the shotgun, but with the .22, zero meat is ruined. I like it. I also missed another one due to the bullet self destructing on a twig (see pine needles and sticks and cones shower everywhere, which looks impressive, but nothing actually much

happens), and outright missed another. One ethical bonus for using a .22 on birds' heads. There is no "wounding shot". Their head is so small, it's either a hit or a complete miss. Oh...and it doesn't make my ears ring everytime I pull the trigger. I see way more birds than I really go after. I just want a meal for now, really, and also the fact that I was able to track them down and know where they'd be is most of the victory.

On the way home, I pick up another squirrel when I stop to collect more beech nuts, and he apparently takes offense that I'm stealing them from him, and comes out to cuss me out.

I don't get back to the cabin until almost 1am. There are tracks along the road. Someone has been through, and, I'm guessing, is probably in the cabins up the road. It's snowing a bit, and the temp is going down fast. I think I should clean the birds, but I note they have half-frozen in my backpack. Eh...I guess if the guts are frozen in, they aren't going to hurt anything to stay in, frozen, until tomorrow. (translation: screw it, I've been walking all day, and I'm tired again :-)) I throw them in the doorway too with the one from yesterday.

The next morning, I have to start a fire just to thaw the birds and squirrels out enough to be able to dress them, and anyway, the water I have in the cabin is freezing.

As I'm returning from the river with a bucket of water to rinse dead birds in, my uncles (in the cabin up the road that came in last night while I was out) ask me to eat with them later. Eh, what the hell. Free food. I dress out all the critters and eat the squirrels and one bird for lunch on a fire. Leaving them sit around frozen and undressed hasn't hurt the taste in the least.

Considering their size, partridge have very large hearts. I guess they fly somewhat, so this makes sense. Need lots of energy and stuff. Whatever. I just find this makes them handy to toast on a stick in the fire. :-)

Later, supper is lasagna. Well, it's better than rodents (squirrels), but it lacks...I dunno...spirit, or authenticity, or character, or something. There are even...um....napkin rings, though these accompany paper plates, and such, so it's tolerable. I get asked once, apparently sincerely, something along the lines of if the food is good enough, the chair is OK, etc. Usual trivial, borderline-annoying niceties. I'm amused, though. After all, I am usually pretty happy to be sitting on the ground next to a fire, gnawing a carcass and throwing the bones back in the fire, listening to the wind in the trees around me. :-)

Later, the remaining birds go back home with me, and it has approached zero overnight a few times, so they are frozen solid, and remain perfectly preserved

with no loss in flavor. I basically retreat out of the woods because the deer hunters have taken over. Some are certainly OK, and more a woodsman than I am or ever will be, but....Heh. Something just bugs me about people so scared of the woods that they have to tie a trail of plastic orange ribbons 10 feet apart through the brush so they can walk 200 feet from their truck to a deer blind. Partly I'm just being bitter, too. What has seemed up until now to be totally my own private silent domain is suddenly filled with other people. Because I tend to resent this, I'm doubtless pasting the persona of the 2 idiots who buzz out 8 times a day on their four-wheeler to go look at the deer blind onto other people who don't really deserve the "citiot" label.

Though, I do wonder, if it seems like the woods has exploded into activity literally overnight from MY point of view, what must the deer think of this? Still, I had a few quiet days of windy, crisp cool days with gray skies with occasional breaks of blue, filled with the sweet tangy smell and rustle of newly fallen leaves, over the somewhat fungus-y, moldy, damp, yet fresh smell of the fall woods..