

Going analog  
on a canoeing  
adventure is a  
surefire way to  
escape real life  
for a while.



# SWAP YOUR GAS PEDAL FOR A PADDLE

*Looking for an escape from 24/7 screen time and the never-ending news cycle, Heidi Siefkas parked her car lakeside, near Grand Marais, Minnesota, and chose another escape vehicle—this one powered by paddle.*

**N**eeding to recharge my batteries and disconnect from the reality of pandemic life, I returned to the Midwest (the place of my childhood) and also to Mother Nature. After driving from the Twin Cities through Duluth and along Lake Superior on Route 61, an “All-American Road” scenic byway, I left my road-trip rental car lakeside to spend five days immersed in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW), exchanging my gas pedal for a canoe paddle.

## **Liquid road trip—Boundary Waters**

Located in northern Minnesota and just miles from the Canadian border, the BWCAW is more than one million acres of wilderness dotted with countless pristine lakes. I, along with my PIC (Paddler in Crime), rented a canoe and set off on a liquid road trip, leaving civilization behind. With our cell phones

on airplane mode and safely packed away in one of our many dry sacks, we began our canoe-camping adventure. There would be no Siri directing us—just a waterproof map and compass.

With a rough game plan to paddle a loop and change campsites each night, we listened to our bodies and the weather to dictate our adventure. There were no hard timelines. Unlike a road trip where there are road signs, there were no signs waterside stating, ‘You are here,’ so, I took the role as navigator.

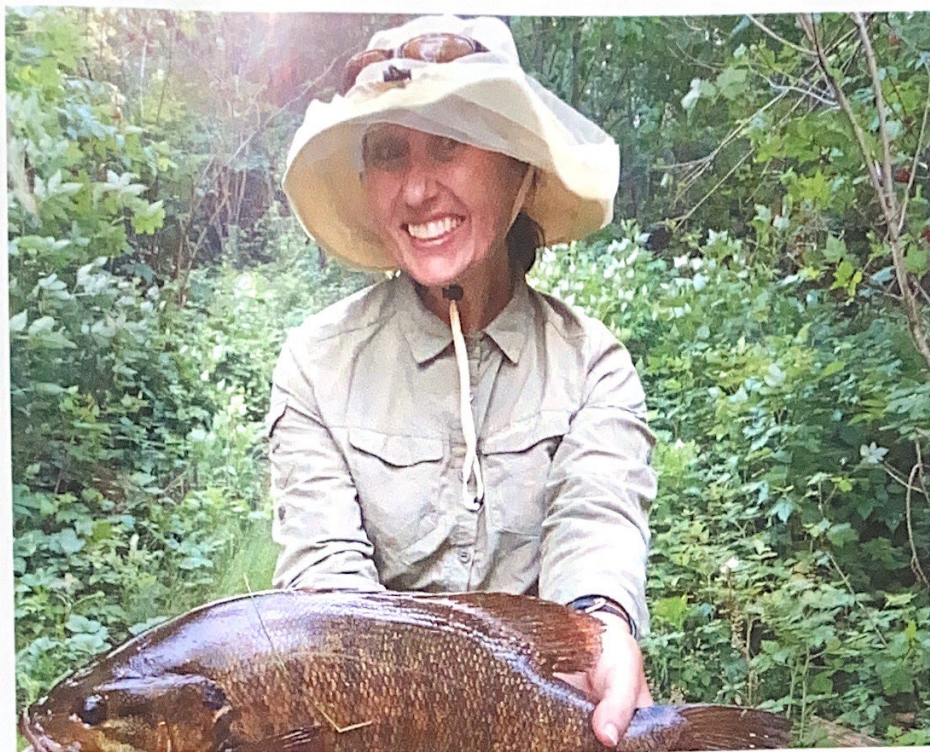
## **Lessons from the BWCAW**

Within a half hour of paddling, I spotted our first of countless portages (places where it’s necessary to carry the boat and gear overland). Although our canoe was Kevlar and considered lightweight, we soon learned the first lesson of a liquid road trip through the BWCAW: happy campers pack light. I have to admit that we packed more than what we needed: too much food and too many clothes. As my PIC took

care of the 40-pound canoe, I was the Sherpa with the supplies. Both roles were subject to mosquito assaults, slick rocks, and mud. The only bonus about being a Sherpa was that each day my load would get lighter.

The second lesson of the BWCAW is that couples that portage together don’t always stay together. We had our moments and thankfully we are still together, but I personally know couples that have not made it because of a portage!

Although canoe-camping in the BWCAW is not always easy, the benefits of being enveloped in untapped Mother Nature were exactly what the doctor ordered. The granite shoreline fringed with pine and cedar forests was a playground for us, but also for Northwoods wildlife: moose, bears, beavers, and many birds. Just as we had exchanged a gas pedal for a canoe paddle, on this voyage we switched our playlist from Pandora to the songs of loons. The third lesson? Nature deserves a Grammy.



### Five-star campsite and camp fine dining

After a full first day with four successful portages and not another paddler in sight, we decided not to do more than four portages in any of the days to come. Plenty tired and wanting to set up camp before sunset (mosquitoes' prime feasting hour), we found a five-star campsite to call home. Not only did it have ample trees for shade and wind protection, but it was an island. That's right—our very own private island. After pitching our tent and gathering firewood, we had a choice: shore dinner or ramen noodles. Although we spotted storm clouds and rain to our west, we opted for fishing. My PIC cast several times from the shore, catching not fish, but tree trunks and grass. Thinking positively, I lit the campfire in hopes of a bass dinner. The dancing flames and smoke of the fire were certainly better than nightly Netflix entertainment at home. Just prior to sundown and an impending rainstorm, my PIC snagged a hefty largemouth bass. We hurriedly grilled and scarfed down the tasty fish before the rain began; then,

seeking shelter inside the two-man tent, we rubbed our bellies and fell into a shore-dinner coma.

The next morning, we awoke with the typical aches and pains that arise when sleeping in a tent. Wanting to assess our morning, I sat up into a lotus position, spun myself around towards the tent's door, opened the awkward zipper screen, put on my wet sandals, and non-gracefully exited the drenched tent. The five-star campsite was a muddy mess. All of the firewood was soaked. It would take hours in the sun to dry out the tent and gear. After two strong instant coffees (aka attitude adjustments) from our handy gas stove, my PIC and I decided that we would carry on, hoping to find our next campsite by early afternoon in order to dry our tent and gear there. After four long portages and a rain shower, we found a campsite located on a peninsula with a natural swimming ledge, plenty of dry firewood, and airflow to dry out our stuff. That evening, we didn't eat fresh fish. We actually didn't get lucky fishing again on the trip. But we were dry. Our better fortune at this site prompted us to rethink moving campsites

each night. We both needed rest, and mutually agreed to give ourselves a break by staying put for two nights. We celebrated our wise decision with camp fine dining: noodles, wine, and campfire light.

### Life doesn't get much better

The next several days were filled with majestic eagle sightings, impromptu hikes to secret waterfalls, the most vibrant Milky Way night sky, and postcard-worthy sunrises and sunsets. The upside of disconnecting from routine to reconnect with nature far outweighed the nuisances: pesky bugs, wet gear, rainstorms, and the dreaded portages. Life doesn't get much better than a soundtrack of loons, catching your own shore dinner or lunch, and campfire entertainment.

I left the BWCAW recharged and wanting to return. Next time, my PIC and I will pack lighter and go for longer. I encourage everyone to exchange your gas pedals for canoe paddles once in a while—and maybe even take a break from your devices! Heading for an adventure where there is no Wi-Fi connectivity, like the BWCAW, will leave you more connected to Mother Nature, yourself, and perhaps your portage partner. **R**

Heidi Siefkas is the author of three books, a TEDx speaker, and an adventurer. Originally from small-town Wisconsin, Heidi now calls Maui, Hawaii, home. Learn more about Heidi, her books, and her adventures at [www.heidisiefkas.com](http://www.heidisiefkas.com), Facebook @HeidiNSiefkas, and Instagram @HeidiSiefkas.

Above: Ask Mother Nature for dinner, and you shall receive.

Opposite top: Finding a campsite by paddling ensures solitude and peace.