

Life in remote wilderness cabin was fit for a king

So, is living in a remote wilderness cabin in the dead of winter all that bad? Nah, not at all.

In fact, when you think about it, it is far better living than that afforded most of the 6.7 billion people on Planet Earth.

Dan's Cabin, named in honor of the late Dan Urbanski, a well-known local photographer and lover of the Porcupine Mountains, was lovingly, carefully, solidly built: Modern triple-glazed windows, thick insulation-board sandwiched between interior and exterior walls, insulated roof and floor; a dandy old cast-iron stove for heat, propane kitchen stove for cooking and even baking, propane lamp for at least some light.

In winter, a simple camping cooler was all that was needed for refrigeration.

Just remember to move it inside or outside to keep foodstuffs cold without freezing what should not be frozen.

In respect of the wilderness setting, all attempts here are made to leave as light a footprint as possible.

I stored ashes from the stove in a lidded bucket, to be carried out and disposed of appropriately, but elsewhere. Gray-water from cooking and washing went into a daily slop-bucket, any particles separated out by pouring through a strainer.

Debris went into the daily trash bag. The slop bucket and overnight pee-jug were emptied carefully, daily, in random spots in deep snows well away from the cabin and nearby Little Union River. Kitchen and cleansing soap was biodegradable.

An outhouse employs a composting toilet which did not work in winter's deep freeze, so I used an "indoor outhouse," a plastic three-legged stool with double plastic bagging, known as a PETT Wag Bag. Worked fine. Hauled out the biodegradable bags in the trash.

Obtaining drinking and cooking water at the cabin was solved simply by hauling in plastic gallon jugs on my sled, and refilling them at the Ranger Station, a four to five-mile round trip on foot or by snowshoe, every few days.

The nearby stream was running, down deep under snow and ice, and it fairly obviously could have been very dangerous, alone in below-zero, to try to draw water.

One slip or misstep and no amount of yelling and screaming for help would do. Besides, even

this wilderness is posted with boil/filter water advisories. Bugs.

For washing and dishes, I melted a bucket of snow atop the wood stove, topping off the snowmelt throughout the day with additional pots of snow. I used about 1 to 1.2 gallons of drinking/cooking water a day, and three-quarters of a bucket of snowmelt for cleaning/washing.

As you might guess, such things take a bit more time than merely flipping a switch, turning on an electric pump, or flipping a flush handle.

Typically it consumed about two hours each morning, including sweeping the floor and hauling in another day's worth of wood for the stove.

But this is not a problem after you tune into the wilderness lifestyle. It is perfectly healthy. I was as fit the day I mused out as when I mused in.

Cooking was a snap on the propane stove, easy as using a natural gas stove at home. Canned goods [meat and vegetables], instant dry milk and mashed potatoes, dried fruit, candy bars, dry soup mixes, cooked hot whole-grain cereals, honey, sugar, spices that ran the gamut from dill and minced onions to crushed red pepper, Parmesan cheese, and cinnamon and nutmeg - I was well satisfied with my daily diet. My only bread was bannock, or Indian frybread, a frypan full of which I would make every other day. Uh, add raisins and cinnamon unless your tastebuds are really dulled.

I relished my own cooking and menus. Maybe six to seven hours a day of vigorous hiking and snowshoeing just sharpened my appetite. But I actually took time to dine, savor my food, see it, smell it, taste it, celebrate the gift. A simple, forgotten pleasure.

All in all, it was a comfortable, relaxed lifestyle, frankly leaving nothing to want. I imagine that a vast majority of the 6.7 billion people on earth would have seen me living like a king. I certainly felt that way.

Nighttime sounds stir adrenaline, old fears



Kerosene lanterns light the way at dusk to a bonfire for skiers and snowshoers along Lake Superior. Afterward, warming temperatures that melted snow made for a hard trek back to shelter.

WHITE PINE, Mich. - So, who's afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?

I kept asking that childhood question, reminding myself that I do not believe in the BBW, Bigfoot, the Boogie Man, aliens, or other spooky things that go bump or yowl in the night.

But what I could not believe was the hair raising from my neck, stiff as the quills on a porcupine's back. Nor could I stop the skin underneath from crawling just a mite. Yes, sounds silly - grown man, rugged outdoorsman and all. But there it was, that little niggling uncertainty

Maybe it had something to do with the "whatever" that crackled loudly in the brush 50 feet off-trail to

my right. The sudden noise had burst through the funereal moaning of a big-muscled wind that was bowing the treetops. Not to mention 10 minutes later, when a tree close by snapped in two with a crack as loud and sharp as a high-power rifle shot.

Maybe it had something to do, too, with the fact that these events transpired well after dark in a snow-shrouded wilderness forest, with safe haven still two miles away via steady slogging on snowshoes. Uphill. Maybe the hairs on my neck had a right to stand out.

I was man-hauling a little ice fisherman's sled of filled water jugs and some gear to a wilderness cabin deep in the Porcupine Mountains of upper Michigan. The windstorm was turning serious, headed as it was toward 62 mph worth of roaring, tree-crack-ing nasty. It would end up swaying mighty hemlocks like they were play toys and leaving the woods and trails afterward littered with heavy, skull-cracking limbs and snapped timber.

In such a case it is fascinating how your subconscious mind plays games with your rational mind. Some part of it, no matter what you tell yourself out loud, still believes in the Boogie Man.

Goodness knows, I myself must have been a sight - a 6-foot bipedal bulk with one red eye (the night vision-preserving lens of my headlamp), clopping along on oversized "feet" (snowshoes) and dragging along a "carcass" (my sled.) I probably was driving the

forest's nightlife into headlong, panicky flight.



A kerosene lantern offers a comforting trail marker for skiers as dusk settles over the forest in an area where an individual venturing from a safe cabin has to remain vigilant.

Earlier I had hiked and Jeeped down to a Saturday night bonfire for skiers and snowshoers. It was a mile from the end of plowed road, hard by the deep-frozen Lake Superior shore. It had been a jovial event on a classic northern winter evening - still, crystal clear, with Venus and a waxing sliver of moon suspended brilliantly in the afterglow behind the Porcupine Mountains. Then about 7:30 p.m., the wind suddenly kicked up and the temperature started to climb.

Not good. The weather here can turn on a dime, and the dime had dropped. By 8 p.m. I became steadily less engaged in the cheerful fireside camaraderie and more focused on the building weather. Shreds of cloud began scudding across the tops of the forested ridges just to the southwest. I was thinking about how I would have a nearly three-mile slog with a laden sled in the dark. Time to go.

Well, I made it back OK. But I was actually glad, really glad, to bolt the cabin door and stoke the wood stove. I had hauled back to the cabin in just 38 minutes, seven or so minutes faster than usual.

Nothing like the boost of an adrenaline rush to improve your pace.

I was soaking wet with sweat. The thermometer outside the door read 38 degrees at 9 p.m., surprising after a day in the 20s and a prior week in which the mercury had plunged to as low as minus 17. I had not been dressed for 38, but for more like 8, and the smartly stepped stroll back to the cabin was not without exertion. Given the quick rise in temperance, it is no wonder I had not liked the softening feel of the snow underfoot. It made for tougher going.

Afterward I sat wondering, relaxed in the cabin's comfy old oak rocker, some classical music playing softly on the public radio station from over east at Houghton, two fingers of bourbon poured over a glassful of fresh snow: What is it about us humans and the dark? Was it bred into our genes millennia ago, back when our very ancient ancestors huddled in caves after dark in fear of big hairy things bristling with tooth and claw and growling with appetites for fresh meat?

Or maybe it had to do with some of the bedtime stories Dad told in my childhood - great colorful tales of Black Forest wolves with eyes glowing in lantern light and of mighty hunters who saved peasant mountain villages from ravening packs. As an adult you know such were fairy tales, and you know Dad meant well, not intending to frighten the bejabbers out of us. But you know you shuddered under the covers when the lights went out, and you know that no matter how many rational bandages you put on them, those wolves still howl occasionally somewhere in the dark forest of your mind.

Such is the stuff of a night in the wilderness, though not all. Rest assured, it usually is more, a lot more, than the mere revisiting spooky stories of childhood bedtime.

On more than one evening I would step outside the cabin for yet another look at the awe-inspiring spectacle of the universe unfurled overhead. The Milky Way, so distant from city lights, actually looked like a trace of milk spilled across the heavens. Constellations of stars shined so brightly and seemed so near that you could reach out and touch them, corny and overused as that sounds. Somehow the stars were looking back right at you, and smiling in a way you could only call jolly. Imagine something joyful, mirthful Out There. Wouldn't it be nice? It made me smile, feel good, there, alone in the dark.

A jetliner, perhaps a regular night-flight, passed west to east high overhead some nights. Its passenger and crew doubtless were oblivious to a grizzled, gray-bearded man in a mountain cabin below. The jet's muffled roar was the only sound to break the stillness. Till, that is, a barred owl began its nightly calling down in the frozen swamps to the east of the cabin. "Who, who, who-whooo "

A waxing moon grew on successive clear nights from a mere crescent to a brilliant three-quarter disc that lit up the white-draped forest so brightly that shadows were crisp and sharp and took on a bluish-hue tint, rather than pure black. One night the moon caught the snow crystals just right and the reflecting landscape exploded with a thousand million sparkling diamond pinpoints. "Moonsparkles," my daughter Sarah called them on a starwalk long ago along a winter creek far away.

Such nights were so crisp that you could clearly see on the snow the shadows of the smoke curling lazily from the chimney. Inside the well-seasoned splits of yellow birch and hemlock logs were roasting away in the old cast-iron stove inside, warming me and my cabin.

The sweet smell of that wood smoke was a great comfort on those nights alone. It made me feel, like, it was good to be home.

Ready for worst, expecting the best

BY STEVE POLLICK

BLADE OUTDOOR EDITOR

First of three parts

Blade Outdoors Editor Steve Pollick recently completed an artist-in-residence fellowship awarded by the Friends of the Porkies, the volunteer organization that supports Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park along Lake Superior in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He was the program's first winter resident, spending two weeks in a wilderness cabin and hiking and snowshoeing across more than 85 miles of back country. His series reflects on his experiences there.

SILVER CITY, Mich. - Call it a minor predicament, an unexpected eventuality, a little fix that you just know you will get yourself out of. Probably.

That is how I felt, almost flat on my face, my snowshoes nosedived into deep, powdery snow.

I was surrounded by tall, pristine eastern hemlocks, miles from anyone, the world all golden afternoon sunshine, a crisp five below zero. I was snared in my own snowshoe trap.

I had been on one of my daylong treks from a cozy cabin tucked into the drifts along the Little Union River, deep in the back country of the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. It was early on in my two-week stay as the first winter artist-in-residence in the "Porkies," wherein I had proposed to explore the parallel ideas of both winter and wilderness solitude.

The tumble - I had misstepped and caught the tail of a snowshoe - came while "bushwhacking" off-trail to a scenic spot called Union Spring. The spring was supposed to be one of the few places in the nearly 90,000-acre park, Michigan's largest, where I might find open-surface water in the deep-freeze of the northern winter. Maybe I could catch sight of one of the northern weasels - a fisher or a marten.



Union Spring still has open-surface water in the deep-freeze of the northern Michigan

So there I was, listing slightly downhill to starboard, my right arm buried to the armpit. A three-foot trekking pole extended down from my snowbound right hand. I probed around a bit and could not find a compacted bottom. Hmmm. Deep, really, swimmingly, deep.

Such is the solo life in the winter wilderness. You get stuck, you get yourself out. No Big Hand is going to magically reach down and pull you upright. No 911. No calling for Mom. It was the deal I had asked for. So.

After a few minutes of rocking and heaving and twisting - employing a gymnastics routine I did not think I was flexible enough to execute - I was back up on both snowshoes and brushing myself off. It was just a minor thing, I told myself. "Let it be a lesson to you." I said it aloud, obviously to no one in particular save self.

The lesson: Going it alone in the wilderness leaves little room for error and certainly none for foolishness.

But if you go prepared for the worst and expect the best, as I did, the experience is deeply, soulfully rewarding. Not to mention invigorating. Teddy Roosevelt would have loved it - "Bully!" as he said so famously.

I had been met three days earlier in nearby Silver City, jumping-off point for the Porkies, by Sherrie McCabe, coordinator of the artist-in-residence program for the park's hard-working, enthusiastic support group, Friends of the Porkies.



Snowshoes and trekking poles help hikers traverse the woods in the Porkies.

Sherrie, on cross-country skis, showed me, on snowshoes, the way to Dan's Cabin. It was named in memory of Dan Urbanski, an award-winning Silver City photographer and devoted explorer of the Porkies who died several years ago.

The artist-in-residence program had been Dan's dream, and his Friends made it happen, complete with a beautifully crafted post-and-beam cabin made mostly of timber salvaged from the vast, wild park and fashioned by hundreds of hours of loving, sweating, back-straining labor. They used a mule named Willie to haul in the heaviest beams and such.

Carol Huntoon, another Friend, had snowshoed into the cabin on the prior day, completing a healthy 45-minute upgrade hike from the park's ranger station.

Carol's chore had been to warm the cabin for my arrival. "It was 6 degrees in here," she said about the interior on her arrival.

Carol and Sherrie had wrestled until almost 10 p.m. with a balky chimney. The initial fire in the stove had filled the cabin with smoke.

But the resourceful women engineered away the problem. Sherrie had skied back out of the park in the dark, using a headlamp to light the trail, and Carol fed the stove overnight. The cabin was a toasty 75 when I arrived.

The ancient Charm No. 23 cast-iron stove, donated by a passing if generous stranger who admired the Friends' cabin-building, came from an old cabin some miles down the Lake Superior shore.

The ornate old chunk of iron easily could overheat the snug cabin to 85 degrees, as I found out en route to learning its capabilities.

Sherrie and Carol gave me a few minutes to settle my gear, wished me well, and bade me good-bye. I was alone.

The abiding, soul-permeating silence of a wilderness locked in the depths of winter smacks you in the face. You hear - nothing.

Maybe a tick from the wood stove, a periodic creak of a wooden cabin-joint, the latter the wages of the war between heat inside and below-zero cold outside.

Or you hear your own breathing. Or the occasional "thud!" of a clump of snow from the overlaid branches of a big hemlock. That's it.

In the middle of the night during the first few pitch-dark sleeps, the thudding of these "snow-bombs" and the ticks and creaks of the cabin's soul are magnified, sleep-startling. But you get used to it; it's like moving into a new house.

"A lot of [summer] artists have commented on how quiet it is at that place," said Bob Wild, the park naturalist, during a visit to the Ranger Station. To them, he added, "it's almost disturbing. They're not used to the quiet."

Only when you venture to the periphery of the wilds, down by the unplowed boundary roads where the hordes of snowmobiles can play, do you hear the see-saw whine and scream of the engines - "like a swarm of angry bees," as Mike Rafferty, one of the rangers, put it.

Much of the wildlife is asleep, denned up by day or hibernating; many of the birds have flown south. I've experience alone in wild places and knew what to expect.

But those first few hours of solitude, coming on the heels of the mindlessly, incessantly noisy world "outside," always give pause.

"Things are pretty hunkered down here because of the cold weather," said the naturalist.

Tuning in to the deep cycling of natural life, reawakening dormant and jaded senses, occurs gradually. Finally the synchronization with the rise and fall of day and night, the ever-changing light, the ever-changing weather occurs. The occasional outbursts of a few chickadees, the hammering of a pileated woodpecker sound clearly. The rhythm of life becomes the natural one, which is slow.

It is an amazing transition, one that many people are afraid to allow themselves. But thus began two weeks of reflections on the solo wilderness experience.

Mind you, it is not as though I saw no one the whole time. My intent was not to become a hermit. I periodically crossed trails with cross-country skiers, met several winter campers man-hauling sleds on snowshoes as I was doing, and of course communed with the kindly staff at the ranger station, where I replenished my water supply and was able to take a couple of showers during my stay. (Frankly, daily bathing is a modern obsession, not a necessity.)

One day I hiked out and drove my sturdy old Jeep Cherokee into Ontonagon, 17 miles east down the lake, to make a presentation at the high school. But it was not unusual to go three, four days without seeing anyone. Plenty of time to ponder wildly.

Nor was I here to play a cable-TV survivalist who by satellite phone is within ready rescue by helicopter if things head too far south. You cannot think deeply about wilderness and nature and our place in it when you are in danger of freezing or starving.

Indeed, our predecessors did all they could to consume and destroy wilderness; it was threat to them, not a treasure as it is to us who have too little of it left. Some of us, anyway, realize at this 11th hour that wilderness has untold intangible values, including deeply spiritual ones that many native cultures past have implicitly understood. We have lost much.

So this experience was about absorbing the lessons of solitude in a winter wilderness, in reasonable comfort and safety, if without power or plumbing. It was about living "off the grid," as they say, "Thoreau light" perhaps.

No cell phone, no e-mail, a minimum 45-minute hike to civilization no matter what.

A small battery-powered radio for weather and a little music for sanity's sake.

It seemed a reasonable plan, relatively benign. As long as I kept myself upright on my snowshoes and didn't try anything stupid.

Wilderness experience sensational and sublime



Steve Pollick absorbs the view of the Lake Superior shoreline and forested lowlands from a 1,350-foot ridge in the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

ATOP WEST VISTA, Mich. - You could say that it is a peak experience to stand on a 1,450-foot wilderness ridge here in the Porcupines, with the northwest gusts off Lake Superior whipping the wind-chill to 35 below and a furious snow-shower threatening to obscure the view. Or not.

But it is something you never forget. You look back at a photographic self-portrait, made at arm's length, and remember the thick coating of ice that had formed on your beard and mustache. You recall the stinging frostiness of your exposed cheeks, and your gnawing hunger at having delayed a packed lunch to photograph what you could of the wild panorama before visibility was gone altogether.

It was not an ideal day to take in the scenery from on high, but you take what you get from the winter wilderness box of chocolates, Forrest Gump.

If such an experience makes your blood boil, fuels your desire to be there, then you are a lover of wild country.

Thank God some of it is still here.

For me, it was worth nearly five miles of uphill trekking on snowshoes, climbing more than 700 vertical feet en route.

What a place, I told myself again and again, reflecting on the sprawling, rugged backcountry of Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. It is a place apart, out on the end of the stick, so far across the western upper peninsula that Detroit is just a rumor and the Central Time Zone is a stone's throw to the west.