

Saltwater Canoe Expedition

By Nyssa Wilkinson

“These bags weigh more than me!” our class complained, as they tried to haul them to Hoyts waterfront.

“At least you don’t have to push the carts!” exclaimed a few kids as they tried to push their carts overloaded with gear, down the hill. The carts skidded across the wood chip path, the wheels threatening to break loose. I was beginning to wonder if doing this overnight was actually a good idea. When we got to the waterfront, where we were going to load the canoes, I was ready to take a nap. I did not realize that carrying group gear, personal gear, and pushing carts was going to be so energy consuming, and we still had to paddle to Ideal Point.

This year the 7th and 8th grade class went on a four- day saltwater canoeing leadership expedition. It took a lot of work to finally get out on the water, but once we did, there we enjoyed every minute of it. We only had to go 1 mile on the first day; it went by very quickly. We had no idea how hard the next days 3.5 miles were going to be.

When we got to Ideal Point on Chewonki Neck, (where we were going to spend the night) we unloaded the canoes and carried them up the shore, trying to not slip on the seaweed. We set up camp and got the crews together, all the while laughing and giggling. I got the fire going so we could cook the burgers for that night's dinner. We made brownies for dessert, which took a while, but in the end came out really good. I was really nervous about sleeping in the tents, because there was a possibility of a thunderstorm that night. As we fell asleep, Hunter serenaded us with “Billy Jean.”

The next morning we woke up to dreary skies and misty rain. A light fog was hiding the land and water like a blanket, keeping the land from the warmth of the sun. Not the best wake up call, but at least it wasn't stormy. Sleeping in a tent was not so bad after all. I started the fire for breakfast. At one point the fire got too big and caught the butter in one of the pans on fire. We had a nice hearty breakfast of French toast and sausages. Then took down our tents and loaded the canoes. Before we left, we circled up around the map and Hannah showed us where we were going. It looked fairly short to me, and I thought we could probably make it there in two and a half hours at the most (I was very wrong). We pushed our canoes into the water and were off.

The minute I started paddling, I knew something was different. We were moving a lot slower with each stroke than we had been yesterday. Something *was* different- we had left an hour later than planned, due to how long the French toast took to make. Since we left so late, the tide had changed and become a flood tide, meaning the tide was coming in. As we paddled to the far shore of Oak Island, the wind began to pick up. We went slower and slower with each stroke, as the wind relentlessly pushed us back. By the time we had made it to Oak Island, we were all very ready for a rest. We stayed along the shore of Oak Island for the next 3 miles, so we could be a bit protected from the howling wind.

The worst possible thing that could happen was if the wind caught the wrong side of the boat, it would spin us around sideways and pull us backwards, and out into the middle of the channel. I would have no control over where the boat went. I had to watch every gust of wind as it cartwheeled across the water towards our tiny canoe. I felt like I was on a neverending rollercoaster of wind waves, our canoe was just another desolate image on the enraged sea. My

arms hurt more and more with every stroke, and on top of that I had chosen to take two of the four, 7-gallon water jugs, I had to summon all the perseverance and grit I had to keep our boat moving forward.

We finally stopped for lunch at 3 pm. We had already been on the water for 4 hours, and had only about a half mile to go to get to Castle Island, where we were planning to stay the night. To get there, though, we had to make a crossing from the mainland to the island. This was going to be the hardest part. We began to paddle away from the safety of the mainland into the recklessness of the wind and the current. We watched the shore to see how much progress we were making. We weren't making any progress, and in fact, we were going backwards. The water lashed mercilessly at the side of the canoe, occasionally making it into the boat, until there was a puddle by my feet. Hannah gave us the challenge of trying to make it to the red channel marker in 7 minutes. We all paddled with a newfound strength towards the buoy, which was not much faster than we were already going. Our only goal was the red channel marker. We couldn't quite make it in 7 minutes, but we did make it in 10. From then on we would choose a buoy, and only try to make it there, and then once we got to that point we would choose another buoy. The wind lashed at our hair and clothing, but we did not give up.

By the time we made it to Castle Island, we were cooked. The trip had taken 6 hours, and the crossing had taken us one and a half hours. We could have gone to sleep right there in our canoes, if it weren't for the hundreds of thousands of mosquitoes that were buzzing all around us, biting whenever the swatting hand would allow.

When we had finally unloaded our canoes and were setting up our tents, the mosquitoes were so bad that we threw on all our layers, even though we were hot. We had just started making dinner when we heard the thunder. I was really frightened, but I was not going to show it. Instead I pretended that I did not have a care in the world. When the storm got too close for us to be outside, we all got in our tents and waited out the storm while Hannah and Anna cooked dinner from their tent platform.

We had so much fun in our tent during the storm that I almost forgot that there was a raging storm right outside our small tent. Inside that tent it was full of laughter, snorting, and hair styling. Outside, wind effortlessly whipped through the forest, thrashing branches together, while rain relentlessly pelleted against the land, not letting a single creature escape dry. Thunder shook the ground and the lightning illuminated it all, pulsing fear into us, but we managed to stay safe and dry in our warm and cozy hidey-hole.

The storm ended and we all came out. That night I stood out on a big, long rock that stuck out into the water. I watched the clouds slowly part to let the moon show its head. It let a

warm glow shine on the island. Silently, but peacefully, tucking the world into bed. The water was silent, not a ripple in sight, so very different from earlier this morning. The wind had died to only a slight breeze that whispered across my face. A horn sounded in the distance and the world fell into a happy sleep.

The next morning we woke up at 6 am and there wasn't a single thought of wind. We had our canoes loaded and on the water by 8:45. The tide was going with us, so we all felt like we were flying. As we made our way through the Back Door, the tide got so strong that we only had to steer. I felt like I was on top of the world as we sailed by trees hanging over the water, waving "good morning". It was like the world was making up for its tantrums yesterday. We stopped for a quick snack at Beal Island, then started off again.

Our canoes cut through the water, as we gaily made our way past Robinhood Marina. I was oddly mesmerized by the tall, sturdy beauty of the sailboats. They were elegant in their own way. We went through Goose Rock Passage, where a big ferry let us ride her wake. As we made the last big crossing to Spectacle Island, which was where we planned to stay the night, a seal popped up next to one of the canoes. The seal curiously followed us all the way to the island, as we sang Christmas carols and laughed. By the time we reached the island, the skies were blue and there wasn't a cloud in sight. It took us only 2 hours to go the 5 miles to Spectacle.

After lunch we had some sit spot time, and then an hour of free time. I found a lobster buoy that had washed up with the high tide. Then I went and stood on a rock where I could see all the land and water around the islands. I watched a gorgeous old wooden sail boat move around the tip of the island, and then turn and head toward the mainland. The sky was a perfect blue. The land had a soft glow to it as the sun generously gave us all of her last summer warmth. It was really enthralling looking at the world from up on that rock, and it made me think of how much nature can change in a few hours - how it can go from cloudy and gray, to blue skies and beauty. I was completely enthralled and almost ready to cry, as I thought about what people are doing to this dazzling color, but then I remembered that I was here and it was now, and the magnificents was not going to leave me.

We had a really good dinner that night of burrito bowls, followed by tasty S'mores. That evening we stood on the rocks and watched the sunset. It was absolutely stunning. The sun seemed as if she was waving as she disappeared below the horizon. We then picked out a quote and shared how it reminded us of the trip. That night was a full moon, it was so bright it almost felt like day again. I fell asleep to the cheerful glowing of the moon and the soft lapping of water against the shore.

The next morning we were in our canoes by 8:30, and were off on our last leg of the journey, only 1 mile to the takeout. We watched a seal jumping out of the water to catch fish. The seal then followed us all the way to the bridge before the take-out. Along the way we passed a giant private yacht with a swimming pool on top.

We got to the take-out and loaded the canoes onto the rack behind the van, and then drove back to Chewonki. I had so many mixed feelings about this trip beforehand and during it, but after watching the sun come out at Spectacle, I was as happy and filled with love as ever before.

At times this was a very hard and discouraging trip; there were a lot of challenges and it took a lot of perseverance and effort. Overall it was a very rewarding experience, and I definitely learned to appreciate the natural world more. I can't wait to do something like this again.