

Exploring the swamps east of Clark Lake

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I took off just after light, and figured it being the middle of the week, and also early in the morning, I could walk the snowmobile trail partway, saving my efforts for later in the day. The trail is pounded down hard from traffic and is nice walking. The only problem was that it was so cold that the snow was so loudly squeaky that I really had to pay sharp attention to hear snowmobiles coming. As loud as they are, the racket of the squeaky snow was about deafening. I guessed the temp to be maybe around zero. It was cold, but I was OK moving along easily. I was later told, upon returning, that people around town recorded a low that morning of anywhere from -18 to -26, probably depending on both the time and location. In retrospect, I should have known this from the way the snow sounded, which was nearly as impressive as a few years ago when it would get 30 below every night for a couple weeks. Loud squeaky snow rocks :-)

I packed somewhat over a liter and a half to drink, in three containers, but knowing how cold it was, I heated them up in a microwave to almost uncomfortably warm, and then stuffed two of them inside a pair of spare gloves, and packaged them inside my backpack up against my back. Two water, and the third was Mountain Dew. Yeah, yeah, "no caffeinated stuff", but if you are already walking home and massively tired, the hit of sugar is useful and rejuvenating, and also, expecting this to be the last one I drank, the sugar retards freezing by a few more degrees and a half an hour. I even heated that one up too. The hot water was making a warm spot in between my shoulders for the first hour or so of the day.

One lone snowmobile came up behind me a half mile down the trail. I heard it coming a quarter mile away, and stood off the trail as it passed. Not ten minutes later, I found a grouse laying in the trail that that snowmobiler had apparently hit. The body itself was still warm, but due to the extreme cold, the legs, wings, and neck were already half frozen. Despite evidence of being struck, it was in better shape than some I've killed with a shotgun before (I've since gone to shooting the heads with a .22 for that reason). Seemed a shame to let it go to waste on a coyote, and they are tasty, so I stuffed it in my backpack. Hey, if I get lost today, I can cook it over a fire while I hole up somewhere waiting for dawn!

In another 20 or 30 minutes I noticed, as I stopped to get in my pack for something else, the bird was frozen like a stone, which I expected, thus knowing it'd more than keep until I got home. Some I shot during the season last year were frozen by the time I walked home. Figuring they couldn't do more than stay frozen, I left them in the windowsill of the cabin. Two days later I started a fire, thawed them out to clean them, and they were perfectly delicious despite this treatment.

4 or 5 miles out of town, now around 10am, I left the snowmobile trail and took off down the short stretch of abandoned logging road that marked the start of my route. This area was clearcut a few years ago, and is currently full of 10 foot high saplings as thick as hair, and this area is thick with hares, judging by the dense scatterings of bunny tracks. Not much moving. Besides that one heavy area of rabbit tracks, tracks were sparse. Then again, a lot of the areas I covered are not likely to be inhabited by much animal life. I saw some bobcat tracks around the edge of the rabbit patch. One set of ?fox? tracks that were partly snowed over, a couple more scattered rabbit tracks during the day, a few random red squirrel tracks, and one or two teensy rodent tracks of some sort. Voles or mice...?

At the end of the bit of road, there was a small waterway halfway between running creek and just an almost-connected chain of very wet spots. This was what I had found impossible to cross in early January. There was more snow now, and I also had brought my 7 1/2 foot pole with me. I poked it through the snow, finding several feet of good stiff snow, and then ice down underneath that was at least strong enough that I couldn't pound the stick through it. What with the snow on top, it was good. Probably has grass down there half holding the ice up, too.

This little stub of road only goes for not quite a mile due west. Overall in net or absolute distance, I needed to go a bit over a mile to the south, and over 4 miles west from this point. Taking some cues of the land layout from the pattern of small streams on the map within a few miles, I could make a rough guess at elevations, and then in turn a slightly rougher guess as to what kind of brush and forest I might expect to impede me. Because of this, I opted to go a bit over a mile as close to southwest as I could, then to try a few degrees south of west after that. I was only wildly guessing at when I had done a mile or so. In the end, I must have done pretty good. I was hoping this path would keep me in mostly open bog, and it did at first, but

almost two miles later I was running out of open areas to keep to, and into increasingly thick areas. I wandered quite a bit off course in here, seeking an easier, brush-free, if longer, route, always heading westward, but sometimes almost due north or south, though I tried in my head to keep the offsets balanced against each other to approximate due west. This also must have worked quite well. It usually does if I don't overdo it.

After a half hour or so of what was getting too close to all out brush-busting, I saw a stand of tall trees on the horizon somewhat to the south...but I had been angling a bit north for a while anyway as I followed a stray open line of bog. I decided to risk the detour, and headed to the trees, and found a nice 20-30 foot high ridge, not over a hundred feet wide for the most part, and it was even heading damn near due west. These kinds of swamp ridges are nice. They have no brush, usually being populated with tall red pine and maybe some white and jack pines, but all open underneath between the widely spaced trunks.

This went for most of a mile, I think. I thought I was set. This was great! But it petered out after that into a REALLY desolate stretch of wide open bog. I stood on the last hill of the ridge looking for some evidence in the distant treelines that it reemerged again, but it didn't seem to. I saw nothing much besides sparse, stunted spruce bog varying from almost-thick to almost treeless in patches in all forward directions. This area was also incredibly wet, with deep pits in the snow where tiny spots wet enough to almost be surface water had nearly melted the snow above it. Zero problem or worry now, but I'm guessing crossing this in the summer on foot would be nearly a physical impossibility in places. This is what I love about snowshoeing! Here I am walking somewhat easily over some of the nastiest hiking terrain possible in the area. I stopped to rest a moment now and again throughout the day, and also to stop and look around. All was ear-ringing silence and lots and lots of pretty much empty space. Peat bogs are desolate places in the winter, but also, partly for that, beautiful.

The brush and trees gradually thickened again. The rest of the walk started turning into lots of bits of open bog, then a ridge running north and south, then more bog, then another ridge, and so on. Since these ones were all running north-south, it meant going up and down hills over and over. Eventually, the ridges got closer together and higher and until I wasn't in swamp anymore. I know this is going to sound silly, since I have never been in this spot before and woods is woods, but I could tell that I'd been

nearby it by the kind of terrain and trees. Reflecting on the distance and direction I thought, at best guess by dead reckoning, I had gone, this seemed about right. By the feel of where I thought I had walked, and by the look of the woods, I was probably a half mile east of Clark lake, more or less, give or take a half mile north or south. I hadn't been to this exact spot, but the land looked like where I had been maybe as close as quarter mile nearby somewhere. Despite the potentially disastrous allure of "hey, I recognize this-I know where I am!" I have found I can sometimes carefully trust it, and it works amazingly often.

Nevertheless, the sun was starting to slide faster west now. Uhoh. I was supposed to be at my grandparents' house for a dinner party for my Mom tonight.... It's that late already? My watch said 3pm. Oops. Sadly, they are kinda used to me saying I'll be back, and I don't make it. Me is a Bad Son. :-) These kinds of explorations always take longer than one imagines, even after you take into account that it'll take longer than you imagine. I'd only covered maybe five miles of distance, but by the time I wander slightly back and forth in favor of terrain, I wouldn't be surprised if it ends up closer to 7 or 8.

I keep thinking it would all go so much faster if I could keep trading off trailbreaking duty. This deep powder is like walking up stairs forever. This comes now, because I'm trying to decide whether to follow my trail back or forge on. I hate backtracking, but on the other hand, it would be fun to seemingly fly easily over the already broken trail. Also, I'm so close.... I undecidedly keep on west, but start veering south a bit, thus kinda hedging my route between my intended destination, and bailing back out to the highway somewhere to the south. I guess I've decided that for expediency's sake, as boring as it's going to be, I'm going to walk M-123 back to Paradise. Shouldn't take over 2 hours if I push a bit.

The sun slips another 5 degrees or so west, and I stop and decide it's going to have to be close enough. I might almost make it back in time if I go. I walk a big huge circle in the snow to mark the abrupt change of route in case it is useful in the future. I don't expect to be back through before the tracks snow over, but you never know. I head south from my direction change mark in the snow....and a short bit later run into the road that runs off from the Lower Tahquamenon falls, northwest to Clark lake. I'm guessing I ran into slightly over halfway between the lake and M-123 and the falls. For this to have happened, I had to have been mere minutes from

reaching my destination anyway. All in all, I am happy, This was really what I wanted anyway; to intersect this road, though ideally I wanted to hit it just at the south shore of the lake, for the purposes of this trip, that would have just meant more walking for the sake of having reached some official ceremonial endpoint. The practical purpose of the trip was successful though.

After reaching the highway, I cross it and can't resist going to look at the falls quick. Besides, I can justify this, kinda. *GRIN* There's a payphone in the park someplace, so I can call and tell 'em I'm coming, if late. Er....yeah, so I could probably make it almost on time if I didn't detour to use the phone (and see the falls)... :-). The foot trail to the falls I expected to be well tramped down. It was mostly, but no new tracks in the last 4 days, I was guessing. I'd think it would be busier.

There is a very vicious looking and interesting exactly circular pit (vicious circle?) of rapidly swirling, grinding ice and water at main drop of the near side of the lower falls. Something about the way the ice has formed here redirects the flow of water to create this. For some reason, there appeared to be a 1-foot diameter or so red rubber ball going around in there too. Another chunk of ice had what I could only guess to be a dead beaver frozen into it. I tried to make myself think that was silly, and it was probably a chunk of wood or roots or something else brown. After all, you'd think beavers would know how not to drown in the river, but it sure looked like a beaver. I wonder if they can get sucked by the current under the ice and not be able to get back up for air? The river is probably frozen full over except for breaks at the upper and lower falls. The whirling ice pit almost looked like something a bad guy would have in a movie, though. You know.... drop people in it and watch them get bashed, bloodied, and hypothermic for a few moments before getting sucked under the ice, unless their friend hands over the documents, or whatever. "Natasha, tell moose, squirrel go swimming!"

Hope cameras work in the cold. Took LOTS of pics through the day. The snow in the trees is gorgeous, and there was full sun for the first few hours of the morning. I also took a pic of the swirling ice hole, though I doubt it's going to be impressive when not in motion.

I discovered that I didn't have my phone card, so the payphone option was out. Well, phone cards are not generally much use in the woods, and I tend

to forget it half the time. Oh well. I sure as hell have the essential stuff though. Someone asked the other day (and I can't find the message now, so I don't know who) if I had ever falling into a "spruce trap" when snowshoeing. Yes. Once! It was no big deal to get out of, but it was annoying for a moment. If I had needed to stay out overnight, I'd have simply found a huge spruce in a deep thick swamp, and built a tiny fire underneath. Such fires as I am wont to build are not going to melt the snow out of the tree on me. If suitable dry fuel permits (wet wood needs bigger fires) I'll make little ones and sometimes even sit with a leg on each side of it, slowly feed it sticks, and occasionally pushing it back together. With the temps near zero, despite the snow, any hanging dead branches are very dry and a small hot fire would be effortless to make. I could have grabbed a few balsam boughs to sit on off the snow, and cooked up my bird and simply been sleepless by morning is all.

Another option-- I also have a waterproof flashlight with cold weather batteries, and at least 40 hours of light left in it, and an LED bulb that doesn't burn out, so I could have also followed my backtrail in the dark with not much inconvenience. Failing that light, I have another around my neck at all times which would also work if it had to.

I apparently had no idea how cold it was. Upon my return, I found out that it had not been over -4 all day. This may explain why almost no one stopped me. I am used to getting bothered by constant offers of rides while walking the road in the winter. Possibly, a snow-covered guy with 1" icicles in his beard, carrying a 7 foot stick, with huge snowshoes slung across his back, several miles from the nearest building looks like he knows what he's doing. Maybe.... or maybe he's crazy to be out in this weather, and noone wants to give a crazy guy a ride. Twice some tourist snowmobilers did stop, but only to ask me curiously what I was doing. The second one stopped while I had stopped to finish off my Mountain Dew, which was now finally starting to freeze at almost 5pm. They for some reason asked, "are you a trapper?"

A local did pick me up 2 miles outside of town though, and for the sake of time, I accepted. During the few minutes' ride, I was asked if I had a Bic lighter to start a fire. I do carry one, but didn't tell them that I really don't expect it to probably work in such weather. The butane is probably too chilled to do anything. I found this kind of amusing though, because hell yeah, I carry multiple overlapping ways of getting a fire. I need more than

"A Bic lighter" to feel like I am on top of things in that department. Anyway, come to find out, I need only have been home by 7pm anyway. I would have been fine walking the whole way. I should have thought to ask about that before.

Wearing: My much-abused felt Australian-style hat, a light summer shirt, tan cargo-pocket hiking pants, and a raincoat, and plain uninsulated leather gloves. The raincoat is not as such insulated, though it is, being waterproof, totally windproof, and closes up tight around my neck right up to my ears if I want it to. If I am careful not to get too hot and sweaty, the rain jacket breathes enough to keep me mostly dry. If I slack off the pace for about 30 minutes before stopping, I'll dry out before I stop moving, which keeps me warm when I do stop. When I start getting hot, I can lose a lot of heat just my taking off gloves or opening the throat and chest area of the coat up. I'm constantly taking the gloves on and off, running the coat zipper up or down as little as an inch or two to regulate heat loss to maintain a comfortable level. At a few points, I could actually have gone without even the jacket.

I know this doesn't sound like much, and in fact minus the jacket and boots, it's actually identical to what I wear in the summer. However, I was uncomfortably close to being too hot most of the day, which leads to sweating, then you get cold. If I were to stop for a while, I'd need a fire, but then I'd be fine. I've tried wearing more, but then I get sweaty carrying all the crap that I can't wear without overheating myself to drenching.

Water is also a huge issue in such cold. I carry some, but in case I ended out unexpectedly longer, I had a soup can which fits perfectly around the aforementioned flashlight. With this, I could melt snow to drink. One time, it dawned on me that it's hard to melt snow if you don't have some sort of fireproof container. I've played with this, and found it's not too bad to make some sort of handle for it out of a random handy stick.

Somehow, the hat, despite not covering my ears, keeps them warm. The brim seems to direct the windflow around my head from them, or something. If I have to, if it gets well below zero, or the wind is evil, I will cover my ears, but I rarely need to, and even more rarely want to. I always carry something for the purpose, but it drives me nuts to have my hearing impeded. *shrug* I definitely recommend such a type of hat for going through brush in the winter, too. The brim also keeps snow from going

down your neck and collar when going through trees, which in itself does an amazing amount to keep you warmer.

In addition to carrying some water or something, I personally recommend some kinda energy snack(s) highly. I kinda favor gummi worms for some reason, or those gummi "peach slices". I haven't found any cheap in a while, but in-the-shell walnuts are fun to stuff your pockets full of. You can crack them in your hands easy enough, and the shells are not going to hurt the woods any, especially in areas that are not probably going to see another person for a few years, so that also takes care of issues with littering wrappers to try not to lose.

I never did run into any brush that would be much of a hassle to pull a sled through. I don't know how well I could recreate the route. Sometimes, finding a route hinges on the chance of catching the exact right fork in a ridge or something, and you can never find it twice from one direction or the other. There was some neat country out in the middle of there, though. Maybe if the new snow slacks off a bit, my tracks will remain and I can run out relatively quickly on the established track in a few days and look at some surrounding area.