



# VANISHING POINT

DANIEL TRASK LEFT SUBURBAN ROUTINE  
FOR THE NORTHERN ONTARIAN  
WILDERNESS. LITTLE MORE REMAINS OF  
HIM THAN A CAR, A CAMERA AND  
UNANSWERED QUESTIONS.

BY CONOR MIHELL  
FROM EXPLORE



**A**t first, Jeff Geiler didn't think much about the gold Chevy Impala in the parking lot at Camp Wana-

pitei, the northern Ontario summer camp where he works as a year-round caretaker. It was early November—a little late in the year for visitors—but Geiler recognized the car as Daniel Trask's. Over the previous seven months, Trask, a 28-year-old from Waterloo, Ont., had become a regular presence in the Lake Temagami area, often setting up his tent nearby and dropping in at Geiler's log cabin to shoot the breeze and poach some time on the Internet. Geiler walked to one of Trask's usual campsites, expecting to find his friend. There was no sign of him. "I just assumed that he was out and about," says Geiler.

But when Trask still had not appeared after several days, Geiler got worried and contacted Trask's parents, Don and Maureen, who alerted the Ontario Provincial Police. It was November 13. Sometime before sunrise on the morning of November 3, they said, Trask had left the family home unannounced, packing lime-green snow pants, a blue-and-white Columbia Sportswear jacket and, as far as they could tell, not much else.

Don and Maureen were initially somewhat relieved to hear that their son's sedan had turned up at Camp Wanapitei, and assumed that he had ventured back to his favourite place one last time before winter. But despite a weeks-long ground and aerial effort by search-and-rescue professionals, Trask remained missing through the winter.

**Almost half a year earlier, on the first** day of summer in 2011, Dmitri Poukhlov awoke to the sound of footsteps on his deck in the Temagami wilderness. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, glanced out the window and saw the silhouette of a man skulking into the forest. At his door was a watermelon and a freshly filleted fish.

It wasn't until evening that Poukhlov found the strange gift giver camped on a beach adjacent to Camp Wanapitei, taking advantage of the excellent bass fishing at the mouth of the Red Squirrel River. Poukhlov and Daniel Trask became fast friends as they shared stories over a bottomless pot of tea through the shortest night of the year. "Dan said he wanted to get away from all the noise of the city and to be alone, to have the freedom to do whatever he wanted to do, whenever he wanted to do it," says Poukhlov, a Belarusian immigrant who left his computer

programming job in Toronto a decade ago. "I know that feeling."

Trask had begun his first major trip into Temagami on May 27, 2011, offering little explanation to his parents and friends for his sudden change of lifestyle. Trask had been a girl magnet and partier since his teenage years. He pinballed between bartending and construction jobs, rebelled against authority and ignored his parents' suggestion that he develop his natural artistic talents through post-secondary education. The only written clue to his new intentions was a journal entry with the words,

rate Scout, developed his love of the outdoors and was first exposed to First Nations culture, attending powwows at the Ojibwa reserve on Bear Island. But when he returned to the region on his own in 2011, it



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In fact, his choice of Temagami was far from random. As a boy and teenager, Trask had spent a couple of weeks each year at a cottage the family rented on the region's namesake lake, and it was there, say Don and Maureen, that their son, a first-

was not for cottage-country R&R.

"His intention was to brave the elements and have the sort of experience that broke him or made him different," says Poukhlov. "He wanted to bring some justification to his life."

Trask didn't return to Waterloo until July 29. He'd spent ten weeks

criss-crossing the backcountry, finding solace amid the nastawgan, the ancient network of water routes that radiate through stands of old-growth pine across the rooftop of Ontario. Along the way, he befriended Ojibwa elders and local characters like Geiler and Poukhlov, and made a pilgrimage to Maple Mountain, a remote, 650-metre peak that is known as Chee-bay-jing—

“the place where the spirits go”—by local First Nations, for whom it is an ancient burial site. He survived the notoriously rough portages of the Lady Evelyn River, and ultimately chucked his cellphone into a waterfall in a ritual of disconnection from society. He was thrilled, he confessed to Poukhlov, to divorce himself from a “civilization that makes you a worker bee.”

Don and Maureen say their son was a new man when he returned



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COURTESY OF TRASK FAMILY

from Temagami that summer: more reserved and inward, more skeptical about modern life. “The North changed him, and not in a bad way. He was gentler, he was kinder,” says Don. Trask told his father that his city life was a “waste of time” and that he couldn’t wait to get back to where he felt he belonged. After restocking his bank account with a month’s wages as a roofer, he returned north in September for another three weeks of canoeing. “Everything about Daniel,” Maureen says, “was intense.”

### **I was fascinated by the case of Daniel**

Trask from the moment Maureen posted an alert about his disappearance on a regional outdoors web forum in November 2011. I interpreted Trask’s summer in Temagami as an apprenticeship of sorts. He’d taken the time to forge friendships, gain a better understanding of the area’s cultural history and learn the skills of wilderness survival. In many ways, he’d done the groundwork to adopt the region as his home.

Canoe trippers on [Otertooth.com](http://Otertooth.com) sent in a flurry of messages about their encounters with Trask, describing him as “amazing,” “great” and “a Daniel Boone-type guy.” One, named Marina, remembered his resourcefulness: he carried a selection of the latest camping and survival

gear, but also stone arrowheads fitted onto dowel-like shafts, both of which he patiently made by hand. “I don’t believe for a minute this seasoned, smart, adventurous guy went out there with nothing,” concluded Marina. “He’s fully stocked, making arrowheads, hunting, etc., and looking up at the sky daily with the thought, *Wonder what the helicopters are looking for?*”

My own correspondence with Maureen began in January 2012, when I gathered the nerve to contact her about writing a profile of her son. She politely declined, explaining that the family wasn’t ready for a story. I followed up several times as the months passed, offering to help with the search, but she remained reluctant. Then, in May, I received a surprising email. “I was wondering if you were still on for a Maple Mountain long-weekend canoe/search and if you could lead it,” wrote Maureen. That was all I needed to start gearing up for a seven-day trip.

Maureen wasn’t naive enough to see the expedition as anything more than a body-recovery mission, but after six months on an emotional roller coaster, she needed closure. Maple Mountain seemed like an improbable destination for someone trekking overland with minimal food and gear—the peak is about 40

kilometres as the crow flies from Trask's abandoned car—but Maureen knew her son had made a special effort to reach the summit in the summer, and believed such an ambitious journey fit with his character. She also had some clues to go on. Poukhlov had gone to Belarus for the winter on October 25, but when he returned to Temagami in late March, he noticed he was missing about a week's worth of firewood and a knife. Perhaps Trask had gathered his wits at his friend's place before heading off.

Simon Donato, a Calgary-based adventure athlete who has revolutionized search and rescue over the past five years, agreed that Maureen was on the right track. Donato cuts against the grain of, as he puts it, "typical search and rescue where everyone holds hands and walks through the forest." He's convinced that cases involving adept back-country travellers like Trask require an approach different from the usual grid-search methodology that focuses on a missing person's last known position.

"I'd search what hasn't been searched," Donato suggested. "Going back and redoing something is a waste of time." Still, he underlined the fact that the chances of finding the young man were slim. "With somebody missing in Temag-

ami, there's so much water, extremely dense bush and a healthy wildlife population," he said. "Remember, you're looking for something about six foot tall that's hiding in that huge area."

**Don and Maureen Trask have trusted** me to assemble my own canoe party for the expedition on the May long weekend. My wife, Kim, is an easy recruit, and I find a second boat in Adam Wicks-Arshack, John Zinser and Dan Cassell, three Americans who are volunteering on a summer-long canoeing and canoe-building project on Bear Island for First Nations youth.

Travelling light, Kim and I have no problem with the two portages separating Wakimika and Diamond lakes. Lugging the Americans' birchbark canoe is a different story. They ask me to help carry the 115-kilogram beast over the second portage, a 500-metre tap dance through refrigerator-size rocks. Zinser gladly accepts nearly half of the canoe's weight and incredibly cranks out a set of push-ups when we stop to rest at the halfway point. Wicks-Arshack raves about how this is probably the first birchbark canoe to pass here in a century, but I'm more acutely aware that one slip could result in a broken leg and shattered boat. Thanks to luck and



## A TINGE OF FADED GREEN ATOP THE SHORE CATCHES MY EYE. WE STOP FOR A CLOSER LOOK.



Zinser, a beast of burden who clearly defines himself by the hardship he can endure on the trail, we make it to Diamond Lake unscathed.

The birchbark canoe flies across Diamond's big water, while Kim and I struggle to keep up in our five-metre tandem. The lake is a short portage from Lake Temagami and is part of a popular canoe route, so I assume it's been examined in previous searches. Our paddles flash and we charge absent-mindedly in pursuit of our friends towards Lady

Evelyn Lake and the gateway to Maple Mountain.

Hoping to maximize our exposure to a tailwind, I steer for the east shore of Diamond Lake's north inlet. Later, we'll estimate that nine out of ten canoe parties would hug the west shore, where a slab of granite acts as a canvas for native pictographs—the blood-red, centuries-old images of people, canoes and birds are among

the most vibrant in Temagami. Now, along the infrequently paddled east side, a tinge of faded green atop the sloping shore catches my eye. It looks inconspicuous, like a discarded shopping bag. But Kim is adamant that we stop for a closer look. We come about, fight the wind and sideslip

Soon afterwards, Wicks-Arshack waves us over. He's found a blue Columbia Sportswear jacket on mossy ground just inland from the lake. Gathering around the jacket, we agree to leave the site as uncontaminated as possible for search-and-rescue professionals—a noble guise for

## WE SPEND HOURS PONDERING WHAT COULD HAVE GONE WRONG.

ashore. Above the water and almost directly across the channel from the pictographs, I unroll an inside-out pair of lime-green snow pants.

Men's large.

Trask's.

There isn't time to ponder the discovery. Kim and I hop back in the canoe and paddle like hell, hoping to catch up with our trip partners before they complete the carry-over to Lady Evelyn. Fuelled by adrenalin, we make it just in time, and the five of us turn back to set up camp just up the shore from where I found the snow pants. Then we fan out into the bush.



what really amounts to a profound fear of what we might discover next.

**When I call Don and Maureen from Camp Wanapitei the day after we make our find on Diamond Lake, they're dumbfounded. *Is this for real or a dream?* thinks Maureen,**



who, though emotional, is totally relieved.

A few days later, the couple welcome me to their split-level home in Waterloo. Insect repellent, GPS units and assorted camping gear clutter the living room, and maps cover the kitchen table. Don and Maureen have recently returned from nearly a month of searching out of Camp Wanapitei, and their friendly smiles and chattiness belie the harsh reality of lives on hold. Don, a retired firefighter, quickly explains that he'd be prepared to spend the entire summer camping out, if that's what it would take to find his son's body.

We spend hours pondering what could have gone wrong. I describe the dozen or so cut or partially cut standing trees we found in the vicinity of Trask's clothing. It seems likely the deadwood would have been used to build a shelter or fires. Yet subsequent ground searches by police officers and a cadaver dog within an 800-metre radius of the site revealed no evidence of lean-tos or campfires. They did turn up a sleeping bag, toiletries and a pair of underwear and socks—confusingly, the sleeping bag was in an advanced state of decay that suggested it might have predated Trask's visit. In June, divers and police in side-scanner-equipped boats searched the waters

of Diamond Lake and found no sign of Trask's body.

Before I leave, Don shows me a sequence of photographs taken by Trask with a disposable camera later found in his car. To me, the prints spread out on the table represent the classic snapshots of a Temagami canoe trip. Don insists there's something more. "It was the little things we didn't notice right away," he says. Four images are particularly compelling: a self-portrait of Trask making a fist and flexing his biceps; a shot of his bare legs resting on packs in the canoe, his hand flashing a peace sign in front of the lens; a picture of Trask's shadow framing a smiling face of rocks; and the image of a directional arrow made of stones on the ground. "We think he's saying, 'I am strong, I go in peace, and I'm happy and I know where I'm going,'" says Don. Through tears, he gazes penetratingly into my eyes and points to two more prints, the first depicting a portage trail, the second a sun-splashed lake. His voice falters. "Into the woods, into the light." ●

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*The Trask family requests the public's assistance in solving the mystery of Daniel Trask's disappearance. For more information or to report a discovery, call the Ontario Provincial Police at 888-310-1122.*