

Paddling in the wake of Aldo Leopold – the Flambeau

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[[This essay is intended for publication in the “Leopold Atlas” feature of *Leopold Outlook* magazine, published by the Aldo Leopold Foundation. As such, it assumes a reader familiar with Aldo Leopold and his significance. If that doesn’t describe you, then let me tell you that Leopold was in many ways the founder of wildlife ecology and of wilderness preservation. A thoughtful, lucid, and lyrical prose stylist, his *Sand County Almanac* is one of my four favorite books.]]

On Thursday, 26 July 2018, I was driving west toward the headquarters of Flambeau River State Forest in northern Wisconsin. Ten miles away from headquarters I spotted three Sandhill Crane, and it brought to mind Aldo Leopold’s essay “Marshland Elegy”. Eight miles from headquarters I spotted a fawn, and it brought to mind “Everywhere are deer, perhaps too many” from Leopold’s “Flambeau”. Five miles from headquarters I spotted a turkey, and it brought to mind Leopold’s “Turkey Hunt in the Datil National Forest”. Why did everything remind me of Leopold? Because I was off to re-create Leopold’s 1942 canoe trip on the “legendary stream” of the Flambeau River.

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My first reading of *Sand County Almanac* came in the spring of 1971. (I can date this precisely because, in a successful attempt to irritate my high school physics teacher, I wrote on his blackboard “Man always kills the thing he loves, and so we the pioneers have killed our wilderness.” And I took high school physics in the spring of 1971.) But I encountered snippets from Leopold’s writing before then in Sierra Club and US Forest Service publications. The very first snippet I ever encountered was, if memory serves correctly, from his essay “Flambeau”: “People who have never canoed a wild river, or who have done so only with a guide in the stern, are apt to assume that novelty, plus healthful exercise, account for the value of the trip. I thought so too, until I met two college boys on the Flambeau. . . . The elemental simplicities of wilderness travel were thrills not only because of their novelty, but because they represented complete freedom to make mistakes. . . . Perhaps every youth needs an occasional wilderness trip, in order to learn the meaning of this particular freedom.”

Much later, when I turned sixty years old in 2015, I took the opportunity to reevaluate the direction of my life. I had been backpacking, with great pleasure and great reward, since 1969. But nearly all my backpacking had been in mountains. What about seashores, lakelands, deserts, swamps, plains, farms? I resolved to widen my wilderness travel experiences and, concretely, to backpack in every state of the union. When I thought about where to backpack in Wisconsin, the Flambeau River came immediately to mind. Could I re-create Leopold’s journey?

Leopold’s essay “Flambeau” is high on thoughtful, evocative prose, but low on specifics. To re-create his journey I would need to answer questions like: Where and when did Leopold put his canoe into the river? Where and when did he take out? Did he paddle the North Fork or the South Fork of the Flambeau River?

Progress toward answering these questions came from Curt Meine's biography of Leopold, and from the digitized Leopold papers at the University of Wisconsin library. From these sources I found that the canoe trip occurred in the summer of 1942 and that Leopold was accompanied by Ernest Swift, acting director of the Wisconsin Conservation Department, and four others. I found that the essay "Flambeau" in *Sand County Almanac* (1949) had progenitors in two earlier essays: "Flambeau: The Story of a Wild River" (1943) and a portion of "The Ecological Conscience" (1947). But I didn't find exactly where the canoe trip started or ended.

So, I began my trip on the Flambeau at an unusual location: two hundred miles south of the river at the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives in Madison. I combed the Swift papers searching for a letter like "Dear Aldo: Please meet me at 8:00 am on 2 September 1942 at the bridge carrying Wisconsin Route 70 over the North Fork of the Flambeau River ... take out will be at noon the next day at the ford in Cedar Rapids Township. – Ernie" It was thrilling to touch the very same paper that Swift and Leopold had touched, but in fact I found no such unambiguous document. I have good reason to think that Leopold's journey took place on the North Fork – he mentions the "block of virgin hardwood" lying on the North Fork – but that remains surmise, not established fact.

With this paper search out of the way, I laid my plans. I would park my car at Flambeau River State Forest Headquarters, then hike north carrying on my back a lightweight inflatable "packraft" – and all the rest of my gear and food. I would walk the Flambeau Hills ski/bike/hike trail north to Wisconsin Route 70, then walk the shoulder of that highway east to Nine Mile Landing, where the Flambeau River enters the State Forest. There I would inflate my packraft and float south down the Flambeau to Beaver Dam Landing, the last take-out point within the State Forest, where I would deflate the packraft, return it to my backpack, and then walk north on West Lane back to my car. The State Forest today is larger than it was in 1942, so my journey would likely encompass Leopold's.

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And that is how I came to be driving toward the Forest Headquarters thinking about Leopold essays on 16 July. At headquarters I parked, registered, put on mosquito repellent and long pants and long-sleeved shirt, and started walking.

As expected, there were a lot of mosquitos. But there was also Paper Birch, Yellow Birch, Sugar Maple, Northern White Cedar, Hemlock, White Pine, and Balsam Fir. And Ferns: Interrupted, Bracken, New York, Oak, Lady, Rattlesnake, Ostrich, Maidenhair, Narrow Beech, Sensitive, and Spinulose Woodfern! To the left, I occasionally spotted the broad, swift, and stately Flambeau River. There was no sense of wilderness on the 9-foot-wide mowed ski/bike trail, but there was no possibility of snagging my paddles on a low tree limb either.

I set up camp just a bit north of Snuss Boulevard. In the seconds it took me to enter my tent's mosquito netting, dozens of mosquitos invited themselves in as well. I ate a cold meal inside. Then it started to rain! I sleep poorly and was generally discouraged.

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On the morning of Friday, 27 July, I doused myself with mosquito repellent then ventured outside my tent. I continued walking north and east on the ski/bike trail and then on the shoulder of Wisconsin Route 70. When I reached Nine Mile Landing I spread out my tent to dry in the sun, then inflated my packraft.



Packraft on the edge of Flambeau River, just before setting out from Nine Mile Landing.

I gritted my teeth and worried. This would be my first substantial journey on a packraft and I was uncertain of my skills. Was I pushing my “complete freedom to make mistakes” too far into “mistake” territory? I got in, pushed off, and placed myself in the hands of fate.

It was so easy! The craft was remarkably responsive. Off to the right a hawk wheeled. After a quarter hour of smooth river I reached the first riffle, where I bounced through with a few deft paddle strokes. As I emerged from the riffle a huge bird took off from a tree and flew ahead of me downstream: a bald eagle.

There were no mosquitoes and few biting flies on the river. A bald eagle escorted me out of the second riffle, as well. I passed two fishermen in an aluminum rowboat. One of them called out to me “A beautiful day” and I could only reply “They don’t come more beautiful.” What a contrast from my mood the previous night!

And so my journey continued. The occasional rapid was fun or thrilling rather than terrifying, even for a novice like myself. Dragonflies and damselflies landed on my craft and on me. I noted fewer plants than I would have in a corresponding time walking, but more wildlife: five bald eagle, eight deer (Leopold saw 52), a muskrat, a raccoon. A trip high point came when I noticed movement on the opposite bank. Paddling toward the movement I found three playful river otter – my first sighting of this species. My approach didn’t frighten them; instead they jumped into the river and swam *toward* me to investigate.

In 1942, Leopold was distressed by intrusive, incompatible riverside cabins. Some of these remain. Did I find a “rustic pergola for afternoon bridge”? No, it was instead a gazebo. But I also encountered harmonious riverside cabins that seemed almost to grow out of the woods and the river.



Campsite on Friday, 27 July 2018.

For two splendid days, and for the morning of a third, I didn't walk in Leopold's footsteps – instead I paddled in his wake. I enjoyed the fauna, the flora, and the people. Sometimes I could smell the big pine trees even when I was out in the middle of the river. I reveled in my ignorance: most of my nature study has been on land, and the river provided a close view of underwater plants and water surface insects totally unfamiliar to me. Here was a whole new world to explore!

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On the morning of Sunday, 29 July, I paddled my brave little craft to Beaver Dam Landing, hauled it out of the water, deflated it, and rolled it back into my pack.

I walked north a short distance on West Lane, but the first passing vehicle picked me up. (I could have walked the 15 dusty miles, but it was a lot nicer to ride.) It was a pickup truck driven by a bear hunter returning from training his Plott Hounds, who were in the back. In a wide-ranging conversation, he told me that his main objective in hunting was not to “harvest bear” but to explore the forest, to find calm in a harried world. Very Leopoldian.

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Many of Leopold's essays end on a sad note, and "Flambeau" is no exception. He concludes that it "seems likely that the remaining canoe-water on the Flambeau, as well as every other stretch of wild river in the state, will ultimately be harnessed for power. Perhaps our grandsons, having never seen a wild river, will never miss the chance to set a canoe in singing waters."

Well, I *am* of the generation of Aldo Leopold's grandsons and granddaughters, and I am fortunate to have gotten this chance. But each of us must remember that this chance exists only through the dogged effort of conservationists before us. No conservation victory is permanent. The three Sandhill Crane that I spotted ten miles from the Flambeau River State Forest Headquarters were there only because they and their forbearers had been protected through the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. And even as I was making my way down the Flambeau, a proposal to weaken the related Endangered Species Act was making its way through the halls of Congress.