

ISHPATINA DREAMS

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It was my first *real* winter expedition. In fact it was the first winter expedition for any of us. Our goal, although modest compared to some expeditions, was definitely not a walk in the park. That goal was to summit the highest point in Ontario: Ishpatina Ridge. Deep in the heart of the Temagami wilderness, we planned to reach it in a 6-day, 80-km sledging trip. I had planned to attempt the ridge from the south the previous winter, however that trip was modified and the ridge attempt aborted, when I realized none of the secondary roads marked on my map would be driveable in the winter. In 2006 I was determined to reach my first provincial high point and thus spent a bit more time in preparation and planning. I found a route from the north, travelling south on Beauty Lake Road (off highway 560) to reach the Montreal River. From there we would access Lady Dufferin and Smoothwater Lakes and make our summit attempt from the base of the ridge at the southern end of Smoothwater. I called ahead to check road conditions, assembled a 'crack' team of three enthusiastic friends and picked up the plastic sleds we planned to haul. Everything was in place for our departure February 17th; except, of course, the weather. We woke that morning to 25cm of new snow with more falling, and an expected daytime low of -28°C. Everyone slept in. Despite the foul conditions no one wanted to put the trip off and we left Sudbury with nothing worse than a few hours delay. Upon reaching Beauty Lake Road, we discovered that if it does indeed get ploughed, it certainly hadn't been lately. Snow was piled on the road deeper than the bumper of our Impreza; incredibly the little car ploughed its own path for the 12 kilometres to the trailhead with little problem.



Not getting started until 4pm, we made it only 3km that first day before stopping to make camp. It was decided we would build a quinzee that night, reasoning that it would be worth the effort for the extra insulation from the expected -30° weather we were facing - plus I just thought it would be really cool to build our own shelter. Although everyone got right to work when we reached camp (piling snow for the shelter, sawing and splitting wood, cooking supper and boiling water), we were still outside with an uncompleted quinzee by 10pm. At this point one of the group members became extremely cold to the point of lethargy. This same member had expressed some initial concerns about their ability to withstand the cold, and seemed now to be succumbing to it as they buried themselves deep within their clothing and crouched by the fire. For 30 minutes the fate of the trip looked bleak as they shrunk further into their clothing and responded little to the stimulus of the group. To make matters worse for this member, the heat of the fire melted holes in both a mitten and a boot. Finally, however the cold seemed to lose its grip and as one we all began to stir as we readied ourselves for bed. Fully recovered for the night everyone crawled into the shelter and the inviting warmth of their sleeping bags.

The road we travelled on Saturday morning was well used by snowmobiles; hard packed to the point of making snowshoes unnecessary. We made good time, reaching the Montreal River by early afternoon. Travel upriver was decidedly more difficult with deep drifts across the river impeding our progress and sections of open water around many bends forcing us into the deep snow along shore. This first section of river took the remainder of our daylight (and energy) and we pulled into a campsite at the opening to Lady Dufferin Lake around 5:30pm. We again decided to make a quinzee, but with a slightly more cramped, wooded site snow was more difficult to come by. We were up past midnight to finish digging out this shelter and boiling the next day's water. Nonetheless, we all agreed the 8+ uninterrupted hours of warm sleep that resulted was well worth the effort and we rose Sunday morning ready and eager to make it to the base of the ridge.



Despite our best intentions, our morning departure turned into an afternoon one when we had trouble getting a good fire going and spent much longer than we had hoped preparing breakfast and packing our gear. At around 1pm Chris and myself left camp to get started breaking trail, with Matt and Vicki expected to be ready and following in 5 minutes. I started in the lead and broke trail in the deep snow on shore. As the lake widened out and we distanced ourselves from the mouth of the Montreal river I grew more confident of the ice quality and ventured out onto the wind-blown Lady Dufferin Lake. Travel on the lake was much faster and easier and it felt great to finally get started for the day. Suddenly I heard, or perhaps felt, a crack in the ice. I looked down just in time to see the white ice beneath me turn to inky blackness as it and my feet disappeared into the lake. Luckily I dropped only to my waist in the water before catching the ice around me. (I'm still unsure if I escaped full submersion because I had touched the bottom of the lake; was held up by my sled harness; or simply because I caught the ice.) Instinctively I shoved upwards against the ice behind me, but felt it too give way. Now an instant of fear flashed into my thoughts as I dropped back into the water. Quickly I tried again to shove up and managed this time to get myself seated on the ice. "Get back to shore!" I yelled to Chris, who seemed unaware of what had just happened. I then followed my own advice and scrambled backward away from the hole and my sled. At a safe distance I pulled out my camera to take a picture. "One I won't be sending to my mother," I joked to Chris as I took it. Realizing I was alright, Chris retorted that I should have filled up our water bottles as I was in there. When Vicki and Matt arrived moments later the cold started to sink in. A sled was pulled up for me to sit on, and everyone at once went to work on me. Despite the obvious effort everyone was putting in trying to make me comfortable I couldn't help but notice that while only one person dug for new socks, two immediately went to work clearing the ice off my snowshoes. "Funny" I thought, "they must really be *really* anxious to get moving again." I peeled off my socks, exposing my wet feet to the numbing bite of the wind and moments later was pulling dry socks onto wooden feet that no longer felt the cold. Feeling that my core temperature had not dropped significantly however, I decided to

leave my wet pants on and take advantage of the heat I'd produce hauling to dry them off. With that we were back on our way south, although now we once again found ourselves hauling in the deep snow on land.

I suspect it was a result of coming down off the adrenaline spike of earlier that day, or perhaps I was simply having a low-energy day, but I crashed hard that evening. We reached Smoothwater Lake with Matt ranging far ahead and myself in the rear. We pulled under the glow of an incredible sun setting behind the hills to our right.

A setting that, despite my fatigue, I couldn't help but gaze at in appreciation.

Our goal for the day had been to reach the southern tip of Smoothwater Lake and the base of Ishpatina Ridge, but we



were still more than an hour away with little sun remaining. Out of shouting distance, I silently urged Matt to force us on, knowing I'd gladly stop the moment I was given the opportunity. Unfortunately (but wisely) Matt pulled up short, stopping about 3km from our intended camp location. With an overcast sky and the likelihood of a warm night we saved the effort of a quinzee and erected the tent. Tomorrow we would leave it standing and leave our sleds behind while we made our day trip attempt to reach the summit of Ontario.

We left camp (late again) at 11am, and set out for the ridge. As soon as we got near and I took a closer look at the lay of the ridge, I realized my mistake. When planning the route I had closely examined how best to reach the ridge, but not how best to climb it. I had viewed the ridge, all 7+ kilometres of it, as one continuous unit that we would reach and tackle from the north. But the goal was not simply to climb the ridge, *but to climb the highest point on the ridge*, and therein lay my error. The highest point is on the southern half of this elevated region and separated from the north by a drop (and subsequent climb) of over 1000'. There was no way we were going to climb the ridge from the north and cross this rift to make it to the southern peak – we would have to walk around. Thus, we followed a snowmobile trail through a string of small lakes including Apex, Whitemud and finally McCulloch. From the southern end of McCulloch Lake our goal lay exactly west of us about 3.5km. The time was 2pm. Suspecting we'd missed our opportunity, but still wanting to make the best of it, we started into the woods and up the climb.

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Later we all walked back across Smoothwater Lake in silence; enveloped in the darkness. The hill had beaten us, but not by much. After three hours of scrambling, digging and crawling our way up and down hills through some of the deepest snow I'd ever experienced we were only a single kilometre from the top. Distances on the map can be deceiving though, and at the pace we'd been keeping that kilometre was set to take more than an hour of difficult climbing. Exhausted already, and with no easy route out behind us we decided not to push our luck and forced ourselves to turn back. Now at 9pm, still

heading back to camp, the hike began to feel as a forced march rather than the celebratory return we'd anticipated. The previous night's firewood and our open, welcoming sleeping bags were a much appreciated luxury for us all that night.

Day 5 was uneventful. We retraced our steps to Lady Dufferin Lake, and stopped at our second night's campsite with its awaiting quinzee. We managed an early night of 10pm, knowing our longest day awaited us for the walk out. The next morning Matt and I drew Vicki and Chris outside with the lure of a 'surprise'. The surprise had been built our first time at the site when the two of us had cut down a dead hardwood that proved to be too heavy to carry back to camp. Rather than risk injury carrying back the huge piece of wood, we decided instead to risk injury by setting it up on its stump as a precariously balanced see-saw. We took Vicki and Chris to our hidden playground and immediately



jumped aboard, expecting them to share our obvious excitement. Vicki, the group's self-proclaimed 'voice-of-reason', declined to try out our surprise. She was proven most sensible, and worthy of her title, when the log shortly afterwards rolled off its perch and onto Matt's thigh. No serious injuries were incurred, but our childish fun was definitely ruined for the morning. With that we all set out to finish the trip and reach the car; a walk surely made

more difficult for Matt by the developing bruise in his thigh.

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As we sat in a truck stop on the drive back to Sudbury we discussed the trip. The group agreed that although we hadn't reached our goal the trip was anything but a failure. For a first winter expedition we had kept ourselves surprisingly comfortable and we all learned firsthand about the special considerations of winter camping. I learned that I love camping in the winter almost as much as during other seasons. I love the rhythm of the days and evenings, the forced solitude of in-line hauling, the beauty, quiet and accessibility of the terrain, and of course the immense satisfaction of crawling into my sleeping bag at night with a hot water bottle (or two) at my toes. Although I might head elsewhere in the winter of 2007 I know I won't be able to leave Ishpatina Ridge much longer than that. If not next year, I will definitely be back hiking through the snow and enormous pines of the Temagami old-growth forests by 2008, and next time I will view it all from atop the highest point in Ontario.

From left to right: Chris Hocking, Victoria Logan, Matt Hardy and Dave Marrone are all Human Kinetics (Adventure Leadership and Health Promotions) students at Laurentian University.

