

## North Forest Canoe Trail Errol to Groveton, New Hampshire

By Erik Eckilson

It was a long, dark drive up to Errol, New Hampshire. Chuck Horbert, Mike Bussel and Bill "Wet Willie" Luther had left earlier in the day so they could scout out the river. I had to work, and didn't leave Waltham, Massachusetts until after 6:00 PM – right in the middle of rush hour traffic.

It was already dark when I got through the Franconia Notch. I followed Route 3 north toward Groveton, and then I took Route 110 along the Upper Ammonoosuc River toward Errol. It was getting late, and I was anxious to get to the hotel. For several miles, I was stuck behind a van going very slowly, even for this remote area. When we finally hit a straight section of road, I sped past – big mistake.

I wasn't more than a quarter-mile down the road when something big ran out in front of me. I slammed on the brakes and laid on the horn. Fortunately, I stopped in time. In the middle of the road in front of me stood a large female moose. After a few seconds she lost interest and trotted off into the woods. Now I know why that van was moving so slowly.



For the past couple of years, Chuck, Mike and Bill have been paddling their way through sections of the North Forest Canoe Trail. Covering 740 miles, the North Forest Canoe Trail links rivers and lakes across northern New York and New England from Old Forge, New York to Fort Kent, Maine. I had been invited to join their trips several times in the past, but always had a conflict. When they told me that their next trip would be the Androscoggin and

the Upper Ammonoosuc in New Hampshire, I decided that I had to go. The Androscoggin was the first whitewater river that I ran with my dad in 1990.

My first day started early – breakfast with Bill at 7:00 AM. After breakfast, Jim Cole and Tommy Taylor met us at the hotel. We got on our gear and headed off to the river. We would be paddling 16 miles down the Androscoggin River. The Androscoggin starts in Errol and runs 178 miles across New Hampshire and Maine until it empties into the Kennebec River. The section we would be paddling includes the Thirteen Mile Woods - one of the prettiest sections of the river.



We shuttled our cars and put-in below the dam in Errol around 9:30 AM. The river starts off with some class II rapids, and then alternates between flatwater, quickwater and easy whitewater down to the Pontook Dam. For much of the morning it was pouring rain – I mean POURING - but that didn't dampen our spirits. The rain came and went, and we had a great time. Along the way we saw lots of wildlife including osprey, loons, heron, and even a bald eagle. I must admit, on such a cold rainy day, it was nice to go back to the hotel for a hot shower after the paddle. That's what I call roughing it.

The second day of our trip was a 9-mile run on the Upper Ammonoosuc. We shuttled our cars down to the take-out in the Village of Stark. Stark sits at the base of a steep granite cliff called The Pulpit. With its picturesque covered bridge over the Upper Ammonoosuc, it is one of the prettiest New England villages that I have seen.



The Upper Ammonoosuc is much smaller than the Androscoggin. It twists and turns through cow fields and woodlands across the top of NH until it ultimately empties into the Connecticut River. The previous day's rain had brought the level up nicely. The river was mostly quickwater with lots of maneuvering needed to get through the twists and turns. The day ended with a couple of class II rapids as we entered the Village of Stark. We had a good time playing in the rapids, and only had to pull our boats on shore to be home for the night at the Stark Inn Bed & Breakfast.

Unfortunately, this would be the end of my trip. I needed to leave early to be home for Saturday. As luck would have it, Chuck, Mike

and Jim had to leave the next morning as well, leaving only Bill and Tommy to finish the trip.

By the time Bill and Tommy put-in on Saturday morning, the river had dropped a foot from the previous day's level, but there was still plenty of water. From Stark to Groveton, the river was a mix of quickwater and class I rapids with two dams – one they ran, one they portaged. The day ended at another picturesque covered bridge in Groveton.

What's next on the schedule? There's talk of something in Vermont – lots of uncharted territory up there. The guys have 530 miles to go. I hope I'll be able to make a few more of their trips.

