

Lake Levels and Level Headed Safety

By Gord Ellis

For Wilderness North

There are a two common questions anglers located south of the border often ask those of us who call Canada home.

The questions are:

- 1) how's the winter been?
- 2) how are the water levels?

So let's deal with those two subjects first.

In Northern Ontario, the winter of 2007/2008 has been pretty close to an "old-fashioned" one. Many areas far north of Thunder Bay have seen a lot of snow, and the cold has been a familiar visitor. Thunder Bay has seen a touch less snow, but you don't have to go far north to get into big depths. This is a good thing, as the northern eco-system relies on a cold winter with a lot of snow to keep the lake levels up. With that in mind, water levels should be good this spring, certainly close to average and what you'd expect and hope for.

Lake Superior, which reached a record low last fall, has even crept up a bit, although it's still nearly a foot from where it should be. All in all, the conditions bode well for good spring fishing. So with that out of the way, let's talk about a subject that should be important to anyone who is heading north this year, particularly to an outpost camp.

That subject is Level Headed Safety:

In the past 20 years. I've visited 100 or more different remote outpost camps all across Canada. Some have been short stays, others long. Being dropped off in a remote place, with no one around but a few friends or loved ones, is one of my favourite things to do. However, the possibility of having trouble is very real.

My wife and I became acutely aware of this when our first son was born. Devin was a pink cheeked tot, but seemed to get weird rashes whenever I picked him up after a fishing trip. When our 2 year old ate a piece of fish and had a bad reaction, we had him tested. Turned out our boy was allergic to fish. An ironic twist for a father who has spent much of his life fishing, but a hard reality.

Our second son had no allergies and could eat anything handed to him. So when our family planned our very first fly in fishing trip some years ago, we had a lot of things to consider. Was it worth risking Devin's safety just to enjoy a family trip? Could we handle a potential emergency if left alone for days? After much consideration, we decided to do the trip. Both Cheryl and I are trained in CPR. We had medication and an Epi-pen that could be used if Devin had a bad reaction. Most importantly, we told the outfitter the situation and they checked in with us regularly during our fly in. I'm pleased to say that we've done about a dozen family fly in trips since that first one, and have never had a major problem outside skinned knees and sunburn. But we weighed the risks and were prepared.

Fly in trips are not a place for surprises. Many years ago, I went on an excursion with a group of people I knew pretty well. However, one of them had a serious medical condition none of us knew about. When this person got very sick on day one, we were unprepared and helpless. It was especially frightening as we'd not asked for a check in and had no radio. It was a long four days. Everything turned out ok, but it could have ended horribly. Since that situation, everybody makes a full medical disclosure before I step in a float plane heading to a remote camp. I've done fly in trips with people that suffered from sleep apnea, heart disease and asthma. Because we were prepared there have been no problems. Anyone with a medical condition needs to have plenty of medication, and a back up supply if the stay gets extended. Several fly in trips over the years have had days added to them because of bad storms, low cloud cover and fog.

For those of you who are healthy as a horse, there are still things to consider. Bad sunburns and sun stroke are a common problem on fly in trips. People get out in the wilderness and expose pasty white flesh to the summer sun for hours on end. A bad sunburn can ruin a fishing trip. Bring plenty of sunscreen and wear it. Unless you have hair like Robert Plant, you should have a sun hat or ball cap. Make sure you

douse your ears with sunscreen. Sunglasses are a must as well. I always bring a well stocked First Aid kit , although most outpost camps have one on the site.

There are time when even being prepared and ready is not enough. Last summer, Thunder Bay based writer Scott Smith and I were fly fishing near Miminiska Falls. When we were getting ready to head back to the lodge, I noticed that Scott was coming towards the boat with a limp. He said he'd slipped and had a bad fall, but was otherwise ok. Back at the lodge, Scott peeled off his waders. A gnarly mix of blood and water gushed out onto the deck. Scott had split his leg wide open. Luckily, my colleague has a high pain tolerance. Scott was fixed up by the capable staff at Miminiska Lodge and got on a plane quickly. A few hours later he received stitches at the hospital in Thunder Bay. We were both glad to have been in the care of a top shelf operation like Wilderness North.

Don't let these stories scare you. Most of the time, trips up north are care free and without incident. As a veteran of fly ins, I'm quite confident that the safety of my family in a remote Canadian cabin is a whole lot better than it is on any city street or highway in urban North America. It's just good to make sure you're ready if the unthinkable actually occurs.