

The Bear and the Rat

by Svante Björck

Mid-August 1981, NW Ontario, 200 km northwest of Thunder Bay

It was a beautiful evening at a lake shore, where we had put up our tents and made a camp fire. I had done all the shopping for food, after advice from colleagues, and had brought a mix of vegetables and meat for the evenings. I was hungry after the day's field work, and took it for granted that Herb also was, so I put some nice steaks and large vegetables, including potatoes, on the fire. For the potatoes I had brought aluminum foil to wrap them in to avoid burning the potatoes. Very soon Herb made it clear that he did not want any steak and he also thought the foil should be used for wrapping sediment cores, not potatoes; "Roasted potatoes are delicacies and we should not waste the foil! You never know how many cores we retrieve."

So there we sat in the sunset, surrounded by a cloud of mosquitoes, one guy filling himself up with two large steaks (and a few potatoes) and the other enjoying black roasted potatoes and onions. After a couple of beers we began talking about science and our lives: the fun of combining lake sediments with glacial geology, paleoclimate and vegetation history, our common experiences from Iran, and when I asked about his career Herb began, after a while, talking about his WWII missions and some less pleasant memories. It was clear that it was not a light topic.

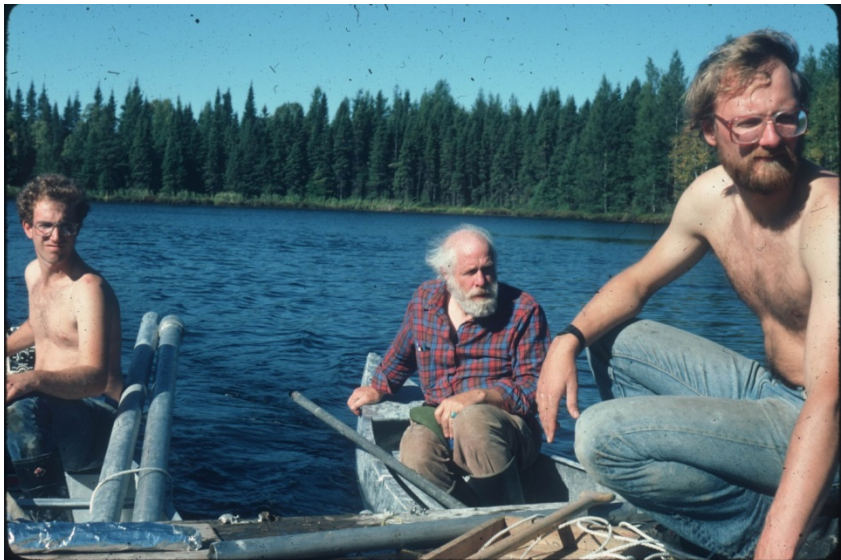
Finally it was time to go to bed in our two tents and finish the day's work by killing as many mosquitoes as possible. It took me a pretty long time and when I finally had got rid of them and was falling asleep I heard someone moving quickly through our camp. I thought it was Herb going to the toilet or something, so I asked "Herb, is that you?" A calm answer came from his tent 5 m away "No Svante, it was just a bear!" That was it! I was slightly shocked that we had bears walking through our camp, possibly looking for left-over food, but after a while I fell asleep again and did not worry any more about night-wanderers.

A few hours later I woke up by the insight that I had something moving down at my toes in my sleeping bag. I soon realized that it must be a rat, so I tried to keep calm, laid myself gently on my back, slowly opened up the sleeping bag and began to shake my legs. A rat suddenly ran over my belly and face and I felt the long tail on my cheek before it left the tent. It took me some time to recover and fall asleep so when I woke up in the morning Herb was already at the camp fire boiling tea water. When I told him about the night-rat he laughed in the typical warm Herb-way and with a typical Herb comment "You always experience interesting things in the field. Did it find anything to eat in your sleeping bag?"

A typical Herb camp site in BWCA,
northern Minnesota, 1984.
Photo: Svante Björck



Herb with Geoff Seltzer and
George King during field work
with double canoes in BWCA,
northern Minnesota, 1984.
Photo: Svante Björck



Herb curiously examining a
sediment core from Cristal Lake
in NW Ontario, 1981.
Photo: Svante Björck

