



KPIK

FROM ZERO TO SEVENTY DEGREES



Crew H5122710D arrives at Northern Tier via Kevin and Gosha Collins of Ely Cab Ground Transportation.

From zero to seventy degrees on New Year's Day, that was the temperature swing as commercial flights transported our crew from the frigid Boundary Waters back to the sunny, warm Low Country. The Scouts of Troop 888 began planning for this bone-chilling adventure early last year, intent on visiting Northern Tier, one of the BSA's three National High Adventure Bases. Yet since their Summer 2010 School break was being used for a trek at Philmont Scout Ranch, the plan was to go over the Christmas break - besides there would be far fewer mosquitoes then.

The Northern Tier National High Adventure Program in located 22 miles northeast of Ely (pronounced e-lee) Minnesota and this is the site of the Boy Scouts of America's National Cold Weather Camping Development Center

Iditarod Race Trail in Alaska. Gaining an appreciation for what would lay ahead, we press on from this gateway town into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness - a 1.09 million acre wilderness area within the Superior National Forest.

As we offload our gear into the snow-covered parking lot at Northern Tier's base camp, a jovial, warm-hearted Drew Augustyne greets us in the darkness; he will be our OKPIK Interpreter for the remainder of the journey. After processing paperwork and a final



Crew Advisor Bruce Mount has just pulled his sled into our protected cove with all his gear for the journey.

review of our health and medical forms, we settle into our cabins for the first night and a snowball fight, then gather at the historic lodge for our Holiday Stay orientation with a record breaking 17 crews who, like us, decided this was a good way to spend their winter vacation. For the record this



Quinzhee construction underway on Snowbank Lake.

the folks at Northern Tier were able to outfit us with nearly everything we needed for our stay in their below freezing environment, from heavy fleece pants and shirts, to skis, snowshoes, and yes, even mukluks. Back home, our transportation on the trail usually entails hiking boots and hauling our gear in backpacks. This time, we would travel over snowy trails pulling our gear in sleds. Easier said than done! With so much winter gear to carry, each crewmember got a workout slogging up and down the portage trails from frozen lake to frozen lake with a sled that had a mind of its own. Sometimes the going was easy, like on the level ice. Other times, like when you go downhill, you had to keep a close eye on your sled unless you wanted to have a free ride down the hill on your gear.

As it turns out, our itinerary had us camping several miles away from base camp on the appropriately named Snowbank Lake. So,

By: Gregory Duckworth, Scoutmaster
mounds to functional structures. The snow kitchen is a pretty straight forward process: counter tops for preparing and cooking your meals on gas stoves, carve out an area for your feet, a wind break to make things more hospitable, cup and utensil holders, a bench to seat three or four, and a fridge. Yes, the small snow fridge was used to insulate the water and keep it from freezing!



Awakening refreshed in the newly converted windbreak include Crew Advisor Christie Gallagher, Luke Mount, and Jeffrey Dew.

Water was used in all of its forms and temperatures. Accessed from below the lake ice with an auger, we would boil it for safe cooking and drinking water. At night, we'd throw a Nalgene bottle full of hot water into our sleeping bags to keep us warm and so we'd be certain to have drinking water. You couldn't just leave your Nalgene water bottle lying around camp and expect to drink from



OKPIK orientation taking place in the historic Lodge, first structure built on the base in the winter of 1941 by craftsmen of Finnish descent.

called OKPIK. The word OKPIK (ook'-pic), which means Snowy Owl in the Inuit language, identifies their Winter Camping program at the Charles L. Sommers High Adventure Base and it appropriately defines the place where we spent our holiday - camping on frozen lakes.



Pulling sleds across Flash Lake are crewmembers Trevor Duckworth, Mason Joyner, and Luke Mount.

For many of our Scouts, this was their first foray into the icy grip of a Northern Winter and before the final push to our destination; we poked our noses into the frosty air at Ely for a pizza dinner, snowball fight, and an impromptu tour of the quaint town's mukluk store - Steger Mukluk Co. A few asked what is a mukluk anyway? Is that an animal, some type of food, or maybe a fictional creature out of a Harry Potter book? A mukluk is a type of footwear for serious cold weather adventure and the boots made in this small town have been worn by numerous expeditions from the North Pole to the South Pole, and on the



Arriving on Snowbank Lake, to be our frozen home for the next three days.

was, indeed, a GREAT way to pass the time with friends, family, and a friendly, highly organized, knowledgeable staff. Those who were lucky enough to be there know this is a special place and the rest of our time on the snowy trails proved why the BSA chose this magical slice of wilderness as a National High Adventure Base.



Our OKPIK Interpreter, a skilled Drew Augustyne at the helm of the snow kitchen.

We then headed over to the dining hall for the late night cracker barrel snack and a meeting to determine our itinerary. As several childdogs later and fate would have it, we were one of the final crews to make it over to the sign-up board, so most of the camping locations nearby base camp were already reserved. Not that it really mattered, we wanted to get out there and have some wintry adventure and our Interpreter, Drew, would have had it no other way as he was clearly happy to oblige our crew's wishes!

Bright and early the next morning, after a snowball fight, and a hearty breakfast in the dining hall, we finished gearing-up for our adventure. One of the nice things about being from the South Carolina coast and heading into the Great White North is that



Admiring their handiwork inside the Quinzhee are Drew Augustyne, Luke Mount, Jeffrey Dew, and Sean Gallagher.

off we went up the trail from our cabins, down and over Flash Lake and then over another portage trail and onto the frozen Snowbank Lake. Soon we came upon our first campsite located in a small, sheltered cove, just in time to build a snow kitchen for lunch where we were introduced to Hudson Bay Bread, a Northern Tier tradition. As Drew demonstrated, by slathering it with massive quantities of peanut butter and jelly, Bay Bread is a most excellent lunchtime meal when you're burning thousands of calories each day.

Building a snow kitchen and snow shelter are done in much the same way. Both start with lots of shoveling and when you've piled the snow six to eight feet high, you're left with an area large enough for an ice rink. After letting them set up for about an hour or so, both are ready to be transformed from snow



The very same Quinzhee just moments after the roof collapsed. Here you can see DJ Joyner pulling Luke Mount out of the snow!

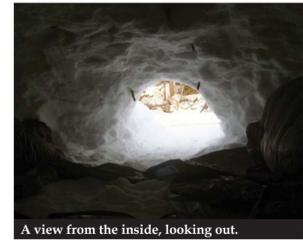
it later, so each crewmember was issued a special water bottle pouch that you would keep hung around your neck inside your many layers of clothes to avoid freezing your water. And of course, we enjoyed soaking in and frolicking in the frozen forms of water



The other Quinzhee made a warm, comfortable shelter for the night.

that were all around us in this picture perfect, postcard world which we were now calling home.

Before building our snow shelters, also called Quinzhees, we poked sticks about eight inches deep into the perimeter of the snow mounds. That way we knew when we were getting close to the outer walls as we carved from within. It took us the balance of the day to finish setting up our snow camp and as



A view from the inside, looking out.

several of us admired the space inside one of our snow shelters, the roof collapsed leaving some of us trapped under the avalanche for a few tense moments! Not all was lost though, as some of our crew set up camp inside the



remnants, using the walls as a windbreak. Still others slept in the remaining Quinzhee.

Were we cold? Only when you stood there doing nothing, which was really never and our bodies seemed to adapt to the situation by turning up the thermostat on our internal furnace. At night before we retired, we hiked to a distant, rocky outcrop to assure our furnaces were on high and climbed into our sleeping bags - a two-layer sleeping system because of the extreme cold - then we ate a



Our morning transportation arrives.

high-calorie snack to keep our internal fires stoked. The sun set early and would rise late, and the stars that night were so clear and bright that you could see the Milky Way Galaxy with ease.

In the morning, we awoke to sunny skies and teams of dog sleds gliding past our little cove on the lake. After a hot breakfast including cream of wheat and bacon, we met up with the dog sleds for a ride of a lifetime. Those dogs just love to run and you could see it in



Crew Advisor Greg Duckworth on a dogsled ride.

their every move. If they weren't running, they were howling to run with their muscles straining to pull their sleds as soon as they could go. The six-dog teams consist of the lead dogs, which are the smartest; the fastest are in the middle to challenge the lead dogs; and the strongest, wheel dogs are at the back to help pull the sled through the turns. And pull they would, it was effortless for the



The crew enjoys the wonder of it all on one of their many cross-country ski outings.

sled dogs to haul us through the snow and ice. If we ever have the opportunity to visit the Northern Tier again, I look forward to spending time in the Musher Camp or on a Dog Sled Expedition!

After our dog sledding encounter we broke camp and set out for our next destination - the backside of a remote island further north on Snowbank Lake, a mere four miles from the Canadian Border! Here we made our home for the next day and night and it's where we



Pulling our sleds on the way to a remote camp in the middle of Snowbank Lake. Looking back, the protected cove on the right is where we made camp our first day out.



Crewmember Brandon Duckworth catches air on their makeshift downhill ski run.

set out on our first journey with cross-country skis to enjoy more pristine winter wilderness. In no time, the Scouts had discovered a hill and quickly established a downhill ski run - never mind they were not on downhill skis! They built a snow jump and spent the rest of the afternoon mastering their techniques. As we settled into our winter camping routine, we were constantly amazed by the majesty of our surroundings and the spiritually uplifting serenity of it all. A hot dinner that night really hit the spot and a rousing game of kickball with another crew from across the frozen lake warmed out hearts for another



Crew Advisor Crissy Duckworth takes in the beauty of fresh powder while snowshoeing.

Up North is a certain way the wind feels on your face and the way an old wool shirt feels on your back. It's the peace that comes over you when you sit down to read one of your old trip journals, or the anticipation that bubbles inside when you start sorting through your tackle box early in the spring.

Up North is the smell of the Duluth pack hanging in your basement and the sound of pots clinking across the lake. It's a raindrop clinging to a pine needle and the dancing light of a campfire on the faces of friends.

Up North is a lone set of cross-country ski tracks across a wilderness lake and wood smoke rising from a cabin chimney. It's bunchberries in June, blueberries in July and wild rice in September.

Each of us has an Up North. It's a time and place far from the here and now. It's a map on the wall, a dream in the making, a tugging at one's soul. For those who feel the tug, who make the dream happen, who put the map in the pack and go, the world is never quite the same again.

We have been Up North. And part of us always will be.

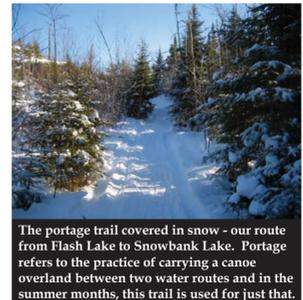
"Up North," from the book *Up North* by Sam Cook.

night's sleep - the late night snack capped off another perfect day.

The next morning's weather brought a mix of freezing rain and snow. Since this was our

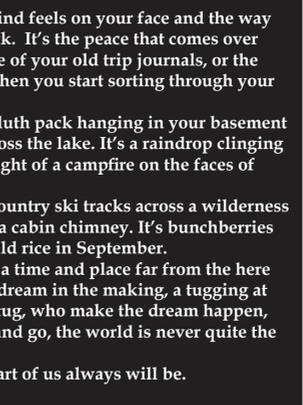


The boys are exhausted after a full day on skis and a game of kickball on the lake ice. This is the windbreak where they were sleeping for the night.



The portage trail covered in snow - our route from Flash Lake to Snowbank Lake. Portage refers to the practice of carrying a canoe overland between two water routes and in the summer months, this trail is used for just that.

most remote camp, we'd chosen to construct windbreaks out of snow to sleep under the stars and most of us had issues with moisture in our sleep systems and our other protective gear. After another delicious hot breakfast, we loaded up the sleds and made our way back towards base. With weather forecasts showing near zero for the upcoming night, it was imperative that we made it back to dry out before we had an emergency situation on our hands - it turns out our Interpreter made the right decision in more ways than one. After a warm bowl of delicious tomato soup for lunch and an epic snowball fight, we were back on the portage trails, skiing for the balance of the day. That night, many crews did the same and returned to base camp and what a fun time was had by all at a traditional Rendezvous gathering in the lodge - think of it as a rousing campfire hoedown, with tall tales, skits, jokes, and outstanding music, complete with banjo and mandolin accompaniment. Returning to base was worth it that evening, as nearly a foot of fresh powder piled up outside, the fellowship in the rustic lodge warmed us all as much as the tomato soup.



View from the Dining Hall porch, looking across frozen Moose Lake.

to say, we had all mastered the art of the downhill on our cross-country skis. On the way back in, we dropped our ski gear at the Baypost and that night, during the awards



Crewmember Mason Joyner threads his way through the backwoods on his cross-country skis.

ceremony, we reflected on our journey's end as the base director read aloud the poem, "Up North." We later stopped in the Trading Post and then played some cards awaiting the clock to strike midnight - it was a new year and our transportation to the airport was just an hour away. The snow was pouring down as we carefully made our way out of winter's wonderland. The temperature was below zero as we boarded the plane and I'm pretty sure most of us were longing to stay up north awhile longer.



View from the Dining Hall porch, looking across frozen Moose Lake.

As I write this, we're readying the Troop Bus for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to do some more cold weather camping and a bit of hiking on the Appalachian Trail. Being a part of the adventures our Scouts conjure up has been a privilege - I can hardly wait for what's around the next bend in the trail.

Troop 888 is a boy-led Troop that meets on Thursday evenings, from 5:30 to 7:00 PM at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church in North Myrtle Beach. We are advocates of the traditional Scout pioneering and outdoor skill methods. The Troop is very active, not only in membership but also in activities. We go on monthly camping trips and other high adventure outings, participate in a weeklong summer camp, spring and fall Camporees, as well as community service projects. The Scouts plan the places and activities in advance. For more information, please visit our website at: www.troop888nmb.org



Entertainment in the Lodge at the Rendezvous gathering was exceptional.