

The Miramichi Naturalist

Observing Wildlife from Your Canoe by Leonel Richard – published in the Miramichi Leader, Wednesday May 18th, 2011.

Many of us who have a fondness for the canoe were initiated to it by an invitation to a long weekend on the river with friends. For others, it was more about the canoe and its connection with the natural world. Thanks to the canoe, I learned that the best way to approach wildlife is from the water. With my little canoe, I can float quietly down the stream and see much more wildlife than if I were walking through the woods. I believe it is not only that the canoe moves quietly but also the fact that most of the animals and birds have evolved to fear danger from the land more so than from the water.

The same applies in our backyard when songbirds are happily eating or singing and a falcon or a hawk flies by. Every bird turns quiet and still for a few minutes. If on the other hand a raven or a gull is overhead, the backyard birds don't pay it the slightest bit of attention. Now birds don't assess the potential danger consciously through reasoning but react impulsively based on their own particular evolution.

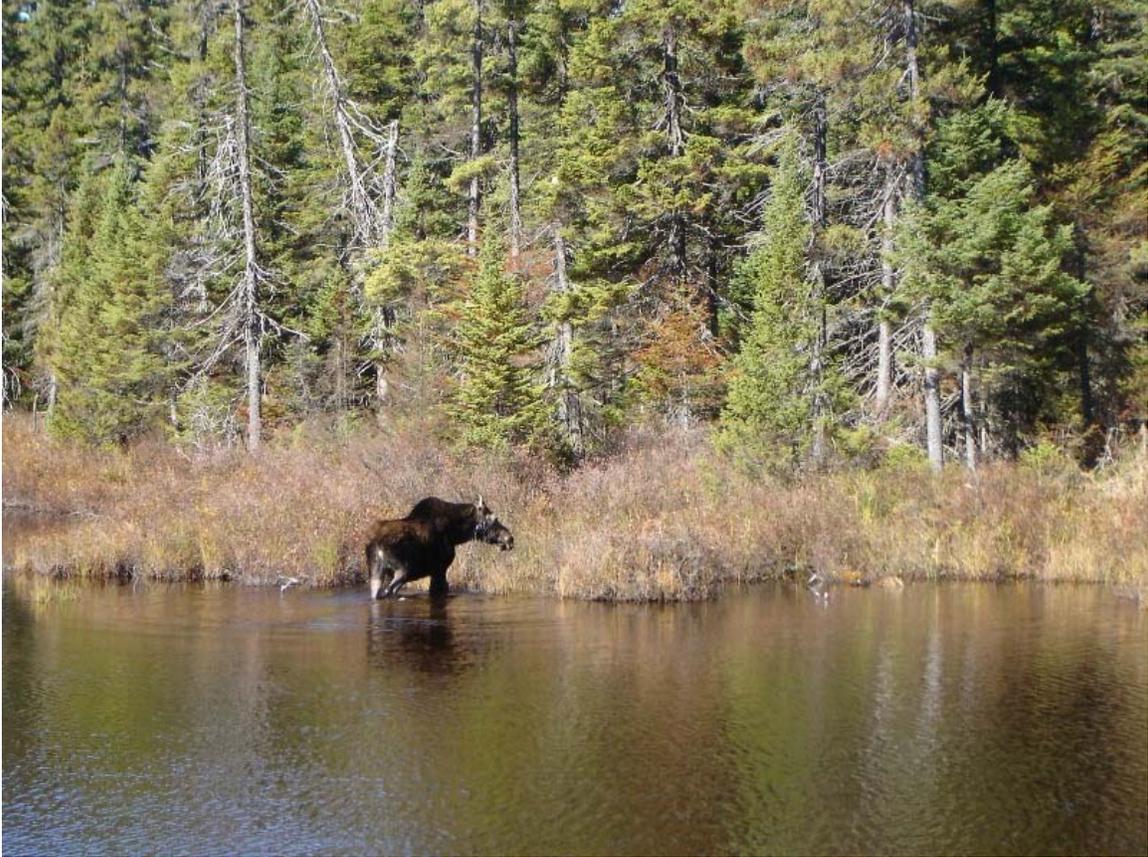
That little theory came to me one summer in my youth when working up in the hay loft and our old horse Dolly was standing at the fence gate just below. I called her and she looked all around for me but never looked upward to where I was. She was able to pinpoint the direction of the sound on the horizon and maybe even sense the distance of the sound but her senses were not equipped to locate its source on a vertical plane. It made sense being an animal of the plains; the horse in its natural habitat would have no concern about what was up above but would surely keep an eye out for predators on the horizon.

Many years ago some friends and I were paddling the upper stretch of the Dungarvon River when I spotted a small anomaly on the water's surface in the distance in front of me. I then realized that a small animal was swimming across the river which at that place was a good seventy metres wide. My friends in the other canoe saw it and their line of travel coincided with that of the little swimmer. One of them gently stretched out his paddle on top of the water and a Red Squirrel climbed up and ran up his paddle, then up his arm and then jumped in the canoe. It stayed there and rested for a minute and then jumped back in the river on the opposite side and continued on its way.

The squirrel saw the canoe as an island or just something floating down the river and not as a potential predator.

So sit or kneel in your canoe and paddle using the Canadian Stroke which is almost silent. Here is how it's done. The first step is the same as a regular forward stroke but at the end leave your paddle in the water and slice it forward with the power face of the paddle away from you. Once at the front make the paddle do one half turn in your hands and you are beginning another stroke without having lifted the paddle from the water.

During May and early June the forest is a busy place and most animals and birds are active all day long. On top of that the trees haven't yet fully leafed out and the ground vegetation is still low which means added visibility. Coincidentally this time is also prime time to go paddling as the rivers are at high levels. As you float quietly around a bend in the stream, keep a lookout for the browsing mother moose and yearling calf or the Great Horned Owl high up in a pine tree.



So if you want to see before you are seen, there is no better way to travel in the forest than paddling in a canoe.