

A photograph of a moose swimming in a river. The moose is in the middle ground, facing right, with its head and antlers above water. In the foreground, a fishing rod is visible, angled upwards from the right. The river is calm with some ripples. The background is a dense forest of evergreen trees under a cloudy sky. The text "Life off the Radar" is overlaid in the lower right quadrant.

Life off the Radar

Dry flies, boxed wine,
and Moose on Maine's
Allagash River.

By Damon Bungard

“Did you just slap me with a salmon...?”

I proceeded to wipe the fish slime from my cheek. “Pick it up and *get up there!*” I demanded. To Brian’s credit, running up a wet, rocky, stream bank with a fresh Sockeye in hand, just to get *closer* than we already were to a large brown bear that was quickly closing in on us and our catch, might have been a little much to ask of somebody who had never even seen a wild Alaskan bear. He *said* he wanted to see one—just maybe not that close. I don’t think he intentionally tripped, throwing the salmon into my face as I knelt with my camera on the side of the trail. But part of me wonders. The photo, and our camp dinner, turned out great, though.

Flash-forward a year. It’s mid-August again. My beard no longer stinks of fish. Trade salmon for brook trout, and bear for moose. I’ve tempted Brian to join me on another river trip, this time in the far Northeast. The high level “plan” was pretty simple: load up the Jeep with camping and fly fishing gear, strap a couple of Jackson Kayak Coosa fishing kayaks up top, and head north from Vermont to explore the North Maine Woods. We’d catch more fish. He shouldn’t need to slap me with any.

The North Maine Woods (NMW) should be a top destination on any North American overlander’s to-do list. The region, which borders Quebec and New Brunswick, is a unique conglomerate of over 3.5 million acres in Northwest Maine. Over 3,000 miles of maintained logging roads and thousands more of unmaintained, off-pavement trails, provide access to countless clean, clear, trout streams, including the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, a premier National Wild and Scenic River. The NMW provides the perfect opportunity for a multi-sport overlanding trip, combining kayaking, fly fishing, camping, hiking, and general life off the radar.

This is big logging country, with minimal facilities or resources. Wildlife, in the form of moose, loons, eagles, and black bear, is plentiful. People aren’t. Bottom line is this: If you want solitude, there’s plenty to be found.

Loading up my 2008 Jeep JK Rubicon with a week’s worth of gear, we headed north, crossing the border into Quebec. Pitching our tent in a public campground north of Quebec City, we found ourselves among throngs of Québécois trailers out for the weekend of “camping.” Our early morning departure for Saint-Pamphile, a small border crossing (from Quebec back to Maine), couldn’t come soon enough. The map indicated this route would offer the quickest transition from pavement to dirt.

Passing acres upon acres of the region’s primary export, stacked timber, we came to a halt at a seemingly abandoned border crossing. All was quiet on this western front. The silence was broken when a border agent walked out from behind the office, two ladies in tow, tucking his shirt into his pants, with a somewhat bedraggled look to his face. He greeted us with a “What are *you* doing here?” We were wondering the same about him. He informed us that this was a “logging crossing,” not usually staffed by border agents on weekends. (I guess we should have looked into border crossings, and hours of operation, a little more in our “plan.”) After a lengthy chat, followed by a vehicle inspection to ensure that our tires and rig were up to the long gravel roads ahead, we were back in the U.S. and on our way into the NMW.

Our initial destination would be the town of Allagash, at the confluence of the Saint John and Allagash rivers; it is also the take-out for a typical float trip on the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. We’d need to cross the Black River, the Saint John River, a number of anonymous streams, and navigate a day’s worth of dusty gravel tracks. It was quickly apparent that the primary logging roads, though gravel, are well maintained and relatively easy to follow in the *Maine Gazetteer* map book. Bridge crossings, which are typically single lane and constructed of wood, provided tempting views of the rivers and gave us an idea of what to expect on the Allagash.

Anxious to wet a fly line and check water temperatures, we stopped at the first bridge over the Black River. Temps were a little warm for trout, reinforcing what we expected—that trout would be more concentrated in cold tributaries than they would in the main river systems. Our theory was confirmed later in the afternoon when we pulled over for a break at West Twin Brook, near where it flowed into the Allagash. Clear and cold, it was full of trout eager to take a dry fly.



Single lane wood bridge
over the Black River.





Brook trout and dry fly on West Twin Brook.

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Probing a few side trails off of the main track, most of which were more fit for a moose than my Jeep, it was quickly apparent that the trail options were too numerous to count. Moose populations in this region are significant, and a leisurely stroll could quickly put you face-to-face with a 10-foot bull. If we were going to make Allagash this night, those trails would have to wait for another time.

Allagash

A key part of our “plan,” one that we had actually done some homework on before heading off on our little adventure, was how to manage the logistics of getting to the put-in and take-out spots with just one vehicle. It’s not easily done when the two are separated by days of river travel. Enter Norm, who runs Pelletier’s Campground in the town of St. Francis, near Allagash. Norm also runs a shuttle service: Leave your vehicle at the take-out in Allagash Village; Norm’s vans bring you and your gear to the put-in. Sitting on the banks of the Saint John River, Pelletier’s is a good place to spend the night prior to getting on the water. Arriving at Pelletier’s and meeting Norm, we proceeded to unload gear from the Rubicon onto a nice, grassy bluff along the river. Up went the tarp and bug walls, down came the kayaks. Laying out our gear in a nice organized fashion, we shifted from road mode into river mode. Brian started to prep dinner in a gazebo and pulled out some cold beers. Anticipation levels were high for both the river journey about to begin and the marinated apple and boar tenderloins (based on an Overland Gourmet recipe) that my wife had pre-packed.

It turned out electricity was also in the air. Just before dinner, the skies darkened and proceeded to unleash a fury of wind, lightning, and torrential rain. We spent five minutes frantically throwing all of our gear back into the Jeep in any fashion we could. Battling powerful wind gusts, we secured the tarp, all the while trying (failing) to keep the rain out of our dinner plates. The only casualty was a camera battery, which in the melee was flung into the black hole behind the Rubicon’s dashboard. Soaking wet, we dined on cold boar in the front seats. Re-organizing and prepacking wet gear in the dark would be our destiny this night.

Norm arrived at sunrise to pick us up. Kayaks loaded, we headed back into the NMW toward Churchill Dam, the start of the main river portion of the Allagash. We picked up a detailed map of the river from the NMW gatekeeper and paid our projected daily access and camping fees. The Rubicon was 65 miles downriver, safe in the front yard of the oldest resident of Allagash, who proudly protects the ‘nice travelers’ vehicles with her cane.



Brian and moose locked in a stare down.
Opposite, clockwise from top left: Mushroom, onion and garlic stuffed brook trout for dinner. The Allagash Falls, which are near the take-out, required portaging. A bull moose hoofprint in the river gravel dwarfs my boots. River camp along the Allagash.



There's a certain purity that comes with shoving off the bank and embarking on a river trip.



On the Water

The initial few miles of river downstream from Churchill Dam is considered low-grade whitewater. Since this would be Brian's first experience in a fishing kayak, we opted to drop our gear downstream so he could get broken in without the added weight, or possible consequence of our gear taking a swim. Aside from Brian's soggy waders, we breezed through and were back to our gear cache in time for lunch—and the next round of thunderstorms—before finally loading up. We were officially in 'river mode' now: nothing left to do but float, fish, and enjoy the sights and sounds of the river.

I'm not sure how to best explain it. There's a certain purity that comes with shoving off the bank and embarking on a river trip. Maybe it's the committal factor: Water flows downhill and there's no going back. Maybe it's the simplicity of carrying everything you need, or passing through the same point in time as every other drop in the river. Maybe it's the exploration factor, what lies around the next bend, flowing into the unknown. Whatever it is, it keeps me going back for more.

Within a couple of bends of the river we had what would be the first of numerous waterborne encounters with Maine's famed four-legged trademark, the moose. It seems as though in Maine, if there's a puddle of water, there's a moose standing in it. I often describe the state as more of a large lichen sponge than an actual landmass; hence, there are a lot of puddles and lots of moose. Aside from logging trucks, the primary hazard while driving is moose. Their large, dark bodies blend incredibly well with the landscape. They stand so tall, your headlights shine under them. Collisions with thousand-pound objects don't end well for anybody, and driving remote regions in Maine at night is nothing to be taken lightly.

Brian asked how moose react to kayaks. In general, they don't. Moose are usually rather placid and seemingly oblivious to their surroundings. Exceptions are bulls in rut, or cows with calves, which are better given their space if you don't want to risk being charged, or worse. Reputations aside, moose attack and injure more people than bears. They are easy to see coming on the river; it's the braking that can be a problem. If they're standing where the river is taking you, it's

up to you to maneuver around them, or pull into an eddy and wait for them to pass.

It wasn't 15 minutes after hitting the water that we had our first encounter: a cow and her calf making their way across the river in front of us during yet another thunderstorm. Other moose stood by, posing for the camera, munching on river grass, likely wondering what

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those big floating things were as we drifted by. Our first day ended with sunset over spruce, a grassy bench for the tent, a break in the rain, a hot meal, and a fresh box of wine. We enjoyed the company of a large cow moose in the eddy directly below us. River life is good.

During the following week we settled into a nice routine of packing up camp, floating a few miles, finding a cold side stream to hike, and casting dry flies to wild brookies. Once explored, we'd move along downstream. The river would transition in and out of the various lakes that are interspersed along the waterway. When the sun headed for the horizon, we'd find a new campsite to call home for a night. Rain would come and go, as would the wind, bugs, denning garter snakes, eagles, loons, beaver, and of course, more moose.

There's a common thread that runs between backpacking, overlanding, and multi-day kayaking, or any other self-supported activity. That link is simplicity and self-containment. Shed all the unnecessary burdens of the world, load up the bare essentials in whatever platform you choose, and get back to the lost art of experiencing your surroundings and smelling the proverbial roses.

Our final night was spent portaging around and camping near the roaring waters of Allagash Falls. We reflected by the fire with the last of our whiskey, as sparks from the campfire battled the falling rain.

By the next evening, we'd be back in the JK Rubicon, seeking the next trail, the next stream, the next bite, and planning our next adventure in the North Maine Woods. 🌐



North Maine Woods Resource Guide

Getting There, Maps, and GPS

NMW is accessed through Quebec, New Brunswick, or route I-95, Southern Maine. The *Maine Gazetteer* is a must for navigation. *National Geographic/Trails Illustrated*, *Allagash Wilderness Waterway*, is an excellent guide. Some logging roads are on GPS navigation systems, *some are not*. Information and maps are available on the North Maine Woods website: northmainewoods.org

Border Crossings, Fees, and Permits

The primary border crossing from Canada is into Fort Kent, Maine. Crossings such as the one near Saint-Pamphile, Quebec, may or may not be staffed on the weekends. NMW fees of \$14/\$20 (resident/non-resident) per day are paid at entry checkpoints. A valid State of Maine fishing license is required. maine.gov/ifw

Vehicle and Gear

Most logging roads are not difficult and our Jeep JK was more than sufficient. Tracks can be narrow and crossbar-style roof racks can snag trees. We used a streamlined Gobi unit. Sit-on-top kayaks, such as our Jackson Coosa, tend to be more stable than conventional kayaks and work better for float fishing.

As for camping gear, tents, sleeping bags, pads, and stoves are sufficient for the regular season. Quality bug repellent (such as Repel Sportsmen Max) and a tarp is a must (head nets can be handy for the mosquitos). Distances can be extensive. Fuel is available in perimeter towns but not in the NMW, so plan accordingly.

On the Water

To maintain the region's classic canoeing heritage, Allagash watercraft regulations prohibit the use of rafts or other inflatables. The width of a kayak or canoe must not exceed 25 percent of the length. state.me.us/doc/parks/programs/awwcanoe

Seasons, Shuttles, and Provisions

The official season is May 1 through September 30. Peak travel is June through early August. There are several river shuttle companies (check online). We used and can recommend Norman at Pelletier's Campground: mainerec.com/pellcamp.shtml

Wet wading up a clear, cold Allagash tributary.