

# 'Alone' on the Allagash

*A journey of mind, body, and spirit  
on a classic American waterway*

DOUG LELAND

Forward by GIL GILPATRICK

EDITING, LAYOUT & DESIGN BY MATT MCGOVERN, [WWW.700ACRES.COM](http://WWW.700ACRES.COM)

Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland. All rights reserved.

*'Alone' on the Allagash: A journey of mind, body, and spirit on a classic American waterway* makes a great gift for friends, family, employees, or members of your group or organization. For information contact the author and publisher by email at [Doug@DougLeland.com](mailto:Doug@DougLeland.com); by mail at 420 C Avenue, Coronado, CA 92118; or visit his Web site at [www.DougLeland.com](http://www.DougLeland.com).

The information contained herein is designed for informational purposes only and is sold and/or otherwise made available with the understanding that the publisher and author is not engaged in rendering professional or personal advice or counseling.

---

**Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland.**

**All rights reserved.**

**Printed in the United States of America.**

**ISBN-10: 0-9725293-2-2**

**ISBN-13: 978-0-9725293-2-7**

---

This publication may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in whole or part in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written consent of the author: Doug Leland, 420 C Avenue, Coronado, CA 92118.

## ≈ **Forward**

As I read Doug Leland's manuscript for *'Alone' on the Allagash*, I was reminded of a solo trip I planned many years ago, but one that never happened. In the early days of my guiding career there were frequent gaps of time between paying customers, so I planned a trip alone during one of those lulls. But a week before I was scheduled to get underway I picked up a guiding job and the solo trip was "postponed," permanently as it turned out. As the guiding jobs became more frequent, the idea of paddling the Waterway without being paid grew less attractive.

That's the trouble with turning your passion into your business—you enjoy the work, but you are no longer consumed with the need to paddle at every opportunity. I do continue to enjoy trips on the Allagash, but now they are made with family and friends and I can relax, enjoy the company, and give orders when something needs doing around camp.

A special treat for me on these friendly trips is having someone else do the hard work of firewood gathering and preparation. As a guide this was my job, and while my guests frequently helped, I couldn't depend on it. I was fussy about my firewood because I depended on it for part of my meal preparation. Rain or shine I needed good firewood.

## ‘Alone’ on the Allagash

As you’ll discover when you read *‘Alone,’* adhering to a schedule was frequently on Doug’s mind. I can readily relate to this, and especially the problems he encountered with the wind on Chamberlain Lake. My guided Allagash trips were usually for seven days, and my guests expected a full seven days for their money. Finishing early was not an option. On the other hand, they also expected to be back to work at a certain date and so it was imperative that I finish the trip on time. I did always have an understanding that it was possible—due to weather usually—that we could finish later than scheduled. However, for me this possibility was definitely to be avoided.

I remember one trip that started at Chamberlain Thoroughfare Bridge. It was pouring rain and the wind was blowing at least 30 miles per hour when we arrived. There was no way we could paddle up the lake in that weather. We camped in the thoroughfare for two nights! A two-day layover would be bad enough sometime in the middle of a trip, but to have to spend two days and nights ashore before anyone had hardly wet a paddle was frustrating for them and for me. Fortunately, we were able to see the huge waves on Chamberlain so no one was tempted to suggest we give it a try. We did manage to finish the trip on time. In fact, I never had a trip come in late in more than 30 years! I somehow managed this in spite of every imaginable kind of weather, including three hurricanes. The winds on Chamberlain gave me so much trouble trip after trip that I finally gave up on it as a put-in and used Indian Stream into Eagle Lake instead.

It was fun for me to follow Doug’s journey in my mind’s eye. With more than 100 trips through the Waterway, I had no trouble following along and was frequently reminded of problems and concerns I may have had at any given point on the trip. At first, his “Wrong Turn” had me a bit confused, but once I dug out a map his need to turn

‘Forward’ by Gil Gilpatrick

Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland. All rights reserved.

*Doug Leland*

around and backtrack became clear to me. Without benefit of his map, which was tucked away in his gear, he knew he had to hang to the left shore. However, he apparently mistook the inlet of a small stream for the narrows that lead into the main part of Eagle Lake. He paddled up the inlet until he could go no further and it was apparent that no lake loomed ahead. His mistake answered a question I had frequently asked myself through the years as I paddled on toward the narrows. I often saw people deep in the same cove that Doug had entered. I wondered why they did that. “Must have seen a moose or something,” I thought to myself. Now I know. They too made a “Wrong Turn.”

At one point in *‘Alone,’* Doug asks his “inner voice” the question, “Do I run Chase Rapids or not?” This reminded me of how many people through the years asked me (instead of their own inner voice) if they should run the rapids. I’m not talking about my guests, who I always trained to make the run through the rapids, but about strangers who, seeing that I was a guide, wanted me to make the decision for them. Of course I was not about to give advice on something like that to complete strangers, but to withhold my opinion without offending them required some diplomacy. One couple, who had a toddler in diapers, actually asked me if they should go through with the youngster. In this one case I did render an opinion. “NO!”

Although I never got to make my trip through the Allagash alone, I have spent countless days alone in the Maine woods. So I knew, as Doug would find out, time often weighs heavily. Without anything to do, you find yourself reverting to the one or two things you know you can do. In Doug’s case it was to travel—to keep paddling downriver.

‘Forward’ by Gil Gilpatrick

Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland. All rights reserved.

## 'Alone' on the Allagash

In *'Alone,'* Doug mentions that he never built a fire. Like most outdoor Mainers this concept is almost unthinkable to me, though Doug had his own considerations, constraints, and perspective.

Most on the Waterway look forward to an evening fire for outer warmth, inner warmth, or a warm meal. And if ever lost in the Maine woods you are advised to stay put and build and maintain a fire. The wisdom of this advice is twofold. First, the fire will lead air rescue to your location and, secondly, the maintenance of the fire keeps the lost person's mind occupied, thus reducing the danger of panic. For Doug, a fire could have offered some comfort and cheer as he watched the sky darken with the coming of night.

One of the things I always wondered about as I looked at maps of the Allagash River is why some rapids rated a name and others, often as difficult, or even more difficult, were anonymous. This isn't a problem for a seasoned Allagash paddler, but for the first-timer the unnamed rapids come up as a complete surprise. Doug rightly pointed out that the unnamed rapids leading into Round Pond are as difficult as the ones called "Round Pond Rips," which are encountered immediately upon leaving the pond ("rips" is a Maine term for easy, usually Class II rapids). The only reasonable explanation that I have been able to come up with dates back to the river-driving days. Rivers were the only means of getting logs to market and the river drivers put in long, cold, and wet days during the spring runoff. The places that now have names must have been the ones that gave the drivers difficulty by causing logjams and other problems. Since they had to have a way to talk about those places, they were named often for something or someone associated with that part of the river.

'Forward' by Gil Gilpatrick

Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland. All rights reserved.

*Doug Leland*

An example of a place named for a river driver is McGargle Rocks, located about a half mile below the Big Brook campsites. Here, a man named McGargle was killed while trying to clear a logjam. Another place is Ghost Landing Bar, located just above Twin Brook Rapids. Here, as the story goes, the ghost of a logger who was killed felling a big pine tree sits and beseeches everyone who passes to roll the log into the water. The tree that killed him turned out to have a rotten core and so was abandoned on the shore.

Doug made some wise choices as he prepared for and proceeded through his Allagash trip. I see and hear about so many people who go off on trips such as this unprepared physically and mentally. He had safety on his mind, and once he decided on what to do, he stuck with it. He rightly worried about Chase Rapids and the decision to run or portage was on his mind right up to his arrival there. I always told my guests that the river was built backwards. If Chase Rapids came near the end, after they had successfully paddled the lesser rapids along the way, hardly anyone would hesitate about making the run.

There continues to be a conflict between residents of northern Maine, environmentalists, and others over access to the Waterway. The locals want more and easier access to the Waterway and its campsites, while the others want more restrictions on access and a movement toward enhancing the wilderness experience. You will see that Doug got a hint of this discord when he paddled past Ramsey Ledges campsite where some folks from northern Maine were camped. Yet, in spite of these differences, the average Waterway paddler is mostly unaware of any such problems and simply enjoys the clean water, abundant wildlife, and all the other benefits of a wilderness area. I have to remind myself of these happy paddlers whenever I get depressed over all of the barbs that seem to get thrown back and forth between the opposing groups.

'Forward' by Gil Gilpatrick

Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland. All rights reserved.

## 'Alone' on the Allagash

Being from middle Maine, and with friends in both camps, I hope to someday see a logical and common sense compromise that satisfies everyone concerned and puts an end to this conflict.

In the meantime, I know that hundreds of folks will continue to enjoy the Allagash Wilderness Waterway each year as much as I did in more than 30 years of paddling its waters. I think Doug thoroughly enjoyed his solo trip as well, and I hope you enjoy reading about it as much as I did.

Gil Gilpatrick

Master Maine Guide

*July 2007*

'Forward' by Gil Gilpatrick

Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland. All rights reserved.

*Doug Leland*

## ≈ Introduction

*I know not the source of the siren song . . . only her location.*

---

Two years ago I sat in a kayak for the first time.

Two months later I purchase a high end fiberglass boat, figuring I'd rather grow into an expensive performance kayak than outgrow a not-so-inexpensive starter (I still have a lot of growing to do).

For the next two years I shuttle *Trinity* between Atlantic and Pacific, able to walk her to salt water in either location. It's hard to imagine a more ideal situation for a sea kayaker.

One would think that even small incremental increases in confidence, skill, experience, and expertise would quickly escalate into activities designed and influenced by tidal pulls and the seduction of endless and ever-changing possibilities for ocean adventures. Yet the serenade of my siren song is not coming from the sea . . . its location is a dark green strip on the map of northern Maine—she's calling from the Allagash Wilderness Waterway.

Introduction

Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland. All rights reserved.

## ‘Alone’ on the Allagash

I have no explanation for the allure of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway, a remote 100-mile aquatic trail of linked lakes, streams, and its namesake northerly flowing river. As far as I know, I have never even met anyone who completed the Allagash; nor is my attraction born of a childhood dream or an adventure discussed by family or friends. Unless a long ago *National Geographic* article planted a seed deep in my subconscious, I have no explanation for my fascination with her.

As the Allagash increasingly captures my attention, I refrain from sharing with any but those closest to me her strengthening grip. A year in advance of my eventual departure, I purchase a waterproof topographic map of the waterway depicting in detail each of her lakes, streams, portages, campsites, rapids, trails, and landmarks. I place it on the back of my office door . . . out of sight to all but me. I study it, knowing I’m going to do it, and not having a clue as to why.

I consider taking this trip with others—I am advised to take this trip with others—but these are not the lyrics of my siren song. This journey, my first on the Allagash, is to be solo . . . it needs to be solo.

Before departing I wonder if the Allagash is drawing me toward a transformative experience—a journey offering life altering shifts in perspective. How would I recognize transformation? Does it surface in an instant or are life’s lessons strewn around more like a vein of gold releasing its wealth one nugget at a time into the fast moving currents of adjacent rivers and streams?

For me, most often, if there are life shaping messages and nuggets of wisdom to glean, finding them requires digging and panning. This river odyssey is no different. Like the much anticipated, yet still surprising appearance of precious metal glinting from amongst

*Doug Leland*

gravel, sand, and swirling water; sluicing and sifting is necessary to unearth and grasp the Allagash's teachings, often times hidden within the subtleties of each setting, segment, event, and bend in the river.

I enter the "Thoroughfare" at Chamberlain-Telos Bridge at 1 p.m. on June 22.

---

With passage now complete . . . I sluice and I sift.

Introduction

Copyright ©2007 by Doug Leland. All rights reserved.

# 1 ≈ Schedules

One of the many beauties of the nearly 100-mile long protected Allagash Wilderness Waterway and one of her many challenges, is her inaccessibility. No matter how you approach the southern most put-in at Chamberlain Lake, adjacent to Baxter State Park and in view of the terminus of the Appalachian Trail on Mount Katahdin, you cannot avoid the last 50 miles of rugged and often rutted, dirt logging roads.

Some access roads are more remote than others. Each is frequented by heavily laden logging trucks commanding the right of way—if not by sheer size and speed, then certainly by virtue of this network of hastily blazed and as quickly overgrown roads being privately owned by a handful of paper companies.

With freshly cut timber stacked on either side of the road for miles, and the need to occasionally stop for stubborn and seemingly arrogant moose unwilling to relinquish claim to territory in the middle of this narrow man-made clearing, it quickly becomes clear that logging trucks and cars with kayaks are equally unwelcome, and that civilization as I know it can be left behind in a hurry.

My wife, Sally, does not care for the Greenville Road or the Golden Road, each slashing their way into the North Woods. They are remote and lonely and leave one feeling vulnerable—yet certainly not

## 'Alone' on the Allagash

as desolate as most other areas in this vast wilderness representing about 50 percent of Maine's total landmass.

We drive the route considered fastest, but still it takes close to six hours to reach the put-in—longer than expected—and already I am behind schedule.

The truth is I will never be on schedule at any point during this journey, despite ample (if not exhaustive) thought given to creating a carefully conceived and conservative trip plan. There is much to consider in determining an itinerary for the Allagash. Some you can plan for—much you cannot. Either way, getting it right can be important, especially if traveling alone.

Most who travel the Allagash to the “unofficial” endpoint in Allagash Village, six miles downriver from the remote, “official” endpoint, use an automobile portaging service. Fashioned specifically to satisfy the unique demands of this one-way journey, paid drivers drop people, canoes, and gear at the put-in, then shuttle each paddler's vehicle to the takeout, several hours north near the Canadian border. In this scenario, no matter how off-schedule one becomes, once you reach the end, whenever that may be, transportation home awaits.

This is not my scenario.

Having chosen several years ago to simplify one aspect of our lives by downsizing to one vehicle, Sally and I find ourselves facing more complex options regarding transportation. Not wanting Sally to go stir crazy for lack of access to a car, we decide she will drop me off at the put-in and retrieve me at a designated time and place one week later.

*Doug Leland*

It is a rather simple plan to articulate: “I’ll meet you on the west side of the Allagash River, adjacent and south of the Route 161 Bridge at 3:00 p.m. on June 29.” We both realize the importance of a date-and-time-certain rendezvous. We both understand the potential meaning and ramifications of a late arrival by either of us. Knowing there are no good scenarios for not showing up on time, we only consider her contingency plans in a most cursory way.

Once on the Allagash, there is no means for communication: cell phones and VHF radios are just extra baggage. If you get into trouble, you will need a little luck getting out of it. It’s not that there aren’t other people on the Allagash, and in the busy months of July and August you could encounter quite a few, it’s just they may not be nearby when you need them most. Rangers are also sprinkled throughout the Waterway, but you can easily complete the Allagash without speaking to any.

If traveling alone and facing an emergency, you will probably be OK if you can afford to wait several hours to spot other paddlers and have flares, a whistle, mirror, or some other signaling device to attract their attention. In true emergencies, and once aware of the situation, rangers can use their shortwave radios to herald necessary assistance, to include sea planes and helicopters for extraction. If your communication needs are anything but emergency in nature, however—such as “I’m a day behind schedule”—there is no means for communication.

Other than the prospect of personal injury, the greatest nemesis to a well-conceived schedule is the unpredictability of weather—most notably, winds announcing a frontal system. The Allagash Wilderness Waterway runs almost true north. With a strong northerly wind, the first 10 miles on Chamberlain Lake are more akin to sea conditions

## ‘Alone’ on the Allagash

than those of lakes. When such a wind blows, it’s not uncommon for paddlers to get pinned at the start, sometimes for a couple of days.

---

I enter the protected waters of the Chamberlain-Telos Bridge Thoroughfare two hours behind schedule, knowing I will soon face a 15-knot northeast wind blowing straight down the lake—just the conditions I do not want to encounter on my first day. Rounding the bend into the open lake I am buffeted as anticipated and face heavily white-capped waters boasting one to three foot seas and the more troublesome type of waves sporting short and variable periods. The conditions are not unlike the ocean. Fortunately I have a boat designed for just such a sea state. Nevertheless, conservative decision-making and everything read in preparation suggests it’s most prudent for me to set up camp at the southern end of the lake and await the usually calmer waters of early morning.

The thought of unpacking my kayak and setting up camp just 20 minutes after meticulously placing every dry bag and piece of gear in its precise and practiced location within one of the three cargo holds or strapped to the deck is more than I can take. Hugging the western shore, I decide to push on and get a few miles under my belt, feeling a need to truly declare this voyage underway and to keep from falling too far behind schedule.

Not yet used to the campsite markers, I miss the two sites for which I’m looking. Moments later I find the once close-at-hand western shore giving way to a headland and dumping me into the

exact middle of the lake with lots of water between me and any possible campsite for the night.

For those not familiar with paddling, there is no opportunity to rest when bucking a 15-knot wind. If your paddle is not constantly making an effort to move you forward, the wind and seas will most surely shove you backwards.

Reaching the far shore after paddling for a couple of hours, I am both worn out and relieved. Had I capsized in the middle of the lake, no one would've known. To my surprise and delight, and within minutes of my crossing, I spot a campsite marker—one of about 80 sprinkled along the Allagash Waterway.

Shady Campsite is not one experienced guides talk about as a favorite, but at this moment it looks pretty good to me. Shady is home for my first night.

Surprisingly, given the conditions, I cover eight miles in my first three hours and feel positioned to get back on schedule the next day. Little did I know (and would not know until the next morning) I am to pay a price for taking on Chamberlain's angry demeanor.

---

With each passing landmark along the Waterway, I recalculate my progress and refine my daily destination. I gain on my initial schedule, recapture it, surpass it, and keep pushing forward. It's important to note that I am never truly on schedule at any point during my Allagash journey, and I never actually stay at a campsite circled on my map as either a primary or secondary location.

## 'Alone' on the Allagash

It would be easy to attribute my quickening pace to the unexpected or not fully appreciated benefits of a brisk southwest wind offering an assist after the first day, or the high water of late June, but that would be incomplete and deceptive. Underlying all practical and obvious considerations as I routinely reassess my schedule are three nagging thoughts, each suppressed but never completely submerged: "I cannot afford to be late, so get ahead of schedule and stay ahead of schedule; It is lonely out here and the only solution to that issue lies 100 miles to the north; and I have some unknowns ahead, such as rapids, that will gnaw at me until they are behind me."

Reflecting on my newly discovered and now articulated motivators, I conclude that "schedules" of any sort are primarily fueled by fear and desire . . . and perhaps they are one and the same.

How often do I push to get ahead for fear of falling behind? How often do I seek companionship out of fear of loneliness? How often do fears of the unknown interfere with experiences and opportunities presently before me? Probably much more than I'm aware or want to admit.

Schedules are necessary. They have their place. Schedules suggest goals and objectives and a time frame for achieving them. They provide a means for accountability and a mechanism for measuring progress. Schedules can highlight variances, which can lead to learning, whether on-schedule or off. Schedules are beneficial, yet they can also serve as blinders and barriers to learning life's lessons. Forcing adherence to timetables for no other reason than achieving arbitrary objectives can cause one to miss the journey between the checkpoints.

How would my trip change if I did not need to be in Allagash Village by a certain date and time? How much more would I observe

*Doug Leland*

and appreciate if a companion were along to cut the loneliness? What would change if I'd gained confidence with rapids before starting this trek?

Certainly, my experience would be different—not necessarily better—but different. What is clear, however, is that schedules, of any sort, must be considered thoughtfully . . . if not with a little suspicion.

Consider the schedules that run our day-to-day lives. What keeps them fueled? How much is driven by fear or desire? Are desires merely masking fears? Do schedules promote gain or loss?



I settle into Shady for the night and zip my sleeping bag before the sun dips down. Already, I am behind schedule . . . *whatever that means.*