



## Knoydart Voyageurs September 05 The Expedition Report

On 12 September 2005 Jed Yarnold of Truenorth and David Goodworth of Wildlife launched an expedition to Knoydart, the second in a series of canoe ventures into the wilds with a canoe travel and wilderness living theme. The group for this trip came from a variety of backgrounds and a broad spectrum of knowledge and skill levels and experience. They were:

Jed Yarnold – Exped leader  
David Goodworth – Joint leader  
Charlie Dennis  
Cathi Llewellyn-Jones  
Alex (Feathers) Travers  
Brett Halfpenny  
Justin Halfpenny  
Dan Hawkes  
Noam Bamburger  
Benjamin

The destination chosen was the Knoydart peninsula in NW Scotland. What follows is a story of the journey, some observations on various facets of the expedition, lessons confirmed and some thoughts for others venturing forth.

### Aim

The Aim of Expedition KNOYDART VOYAGEURS SEPT 05 was to explore the Knoydart wilderness, apply campcraft skills where it mattered, enjoy the wild flora and fauna of this mountainous and maritime environment and catch some fish. The team also stressed a need for unwinding from the treadmill and the relentless pressures of work. All the above was achieved in what was a most challenging expedition, with regard to weather conditions.

### The Expedition Area – Knoydart

The Knoydart Peninsula is one of the last great wilderness areas left in Europe. It is located east and north of Mallaig. The expedition area included Loch Morar, Loch Nevis, the steep pass between both lochs and the tidal foreshore. It is an area of outstanding natural beauty; with silvery beaches, crystal clear sea and a wide variety of wildlife including red deer, seals, sea otters, porpoises and golden eagles, all except the eagle were seen on the expedition. Once in this area, all travel must be achieved by canoe or on foot.

Loch Morar is the deepest freshwater loch in Scotland and is the home of the legendary “Morag” (The same sort of chap as Nessie, only carnivorous!). The western end is dotted with picturesque pine-clad islands with miniature sandy

beaches. Loch Nevis is a seawater loch and has strong tidal flows, especially in the infamous narrows of Kylesknoydart. On this trip we found the narrows in friendly mood and helpful tide.

The area is sparsely populated with no roads east of Mallaig except a short stretch from Inverie to Airoir on the West Coast. There are several pack horse tracks, ghillie’s paths and only a handful of dwellings. The post boat travels between Mallaig, Inverie and Tarbet on a Mon, Wed and Fri.

The climate in the region is very variable and is reputed to have the worst weather and midge conditions in Scotland, although coastal areas benefit from the warming effect of the gulfstream. We experienced the very extremes of this weather as the tail end of Hurricane Maria spent itself with force 11 winds and lashing rain against the West Coast on the first 2 days. After a sunny interlude the wind gathered itself for a final onslaught with sunshine and winds on the Friday with the full fury unleashed on the Saturday morning. The dreaded midge let us off pretty lightly with only an occasional foray to let us know he wasn’t extinct.

### Getting there

David and I travelled up as an advance party on Sunday transporting the canoes, provisions and heavy kit. Cathi, Charlie and Feathers travelled in convoy in the second car. We then swapped about quite frequently which made the trip north go quickly. We stopped overnight at the Forestry Commission campsite at Arochar. On Monday we finished the journey and met the rest of the team who had travelled north by car under their own arrangements, Dan, Justin and Brett having already had 2 days in the hills. We then enjoyed a well-organised kit fuff sorting gear into canoe loads and lashing it down on the foreshore against the impending storm. After a fish and chips supper, overnight camp and breakfast we assembled at 10 on the banks of Loch Morar to form a plan of action. The first taste of a journey into uncertainty that would test us over the coming days!

### Day 1

#### Glen Finnan and the Morar Lochans.

Howling winds and lashing rain were the order of the day and we swiftly decided to split into 2 groups; 5 to go on a medium level hill walk, the decision driven by Brett who definitely needed to get straight out into the wilds – at all costs! And 5 to drive to the visitor centre at Glenfinnan. The hill walk was reasonably uneventful with heavy showers and a cloud base skimming the high crags, we also discussed some useful pointers to high level navigation en route to the lochans: a beautiful area and no less so for the appalling weather. The Glenfinnan team had a rather more exciting time as within minutes of arriving (after a fairly hectic journey, as the sykes burst out of the hill across the roads and swamped the dykes) the Finnan broke its banks and flooded the car park. David raised the alarm with minutes to spare and having assisted others to safety the team escaped to a safe haven – the hotel with roaring fire and fresh victuals- very wise! That evening as the weather deteriorated and after moving all the tents off the ridgeline we took refuge in the lavvu (a Finnish hunter’s tepee) and enjoyed hot brews and an occasional dram as all hell broke loose outside. We also had a useful warm up session with guitar and flute for the ceilidh to follow!

### Lessons

- When due to weather the conditions are beyond paddling, change your plan. Do not press on whatever the pressure to do so.
- If wind bound, and the group can take off for pastures new by other means then the solution is simple. However when in the middle of nowhere each individual needs to have a book/ drawing pad/or something to occupy the long hours.
- Group leaders need to have some other activities up their sleeve for just such an eventuality. Which we did chaps – by the way!
- The lavvu makes a first rate storm shelter for the group especially when tree cover is non-existent.
- Pitch tents to catch the breeze when there are midges. Bite the bullet and move them if the weather goes downhill. Our tents would have been destroyed had we not done so.

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## Day 2 Sailing East down Morar, “The Portage from Hades” and the Ceilidh

We awoke to patches of blue sky yet the wind had veered away to the north. Had these conditions remained, then we would find ourselves wind-bound for a second day – a bit of a morale crusher. Yet over breakfast it started to back round to the west and at last we had one really workable option and window of opportunity which we grabbed! After a brief paddling interlude to get the feel of the laden boats we set forth into the strengthening wind and as we rounded the point of Bun an loin we rafted together in a 3/2 configuration and set sail for South Tarbet. This manoeuvre worked extremely well as the group followed instructions precisely! The 10 km trip averaged out at a speed of 5.5 miles per hour with bursts of up to about 9! As we rounded S.Tarbet peninsula into the sheltered bay we broke up the raft and paddled in to the miniature beach. David (now skilled at the helm of a 5 boat raft under sail) and I breathed a sigh of relief. Now ravenous, the team devoured a prodigious belated lunch before the impending overland crossing to Loch Nevis.

For most of the team this was their first proper portage. There really should be a diploma for this one; yes it's a beauty, a steep, stony, 400-foot climb and 3/4 of a mile long. So after a quick “how to portage with boldness and cunning” brief from Jed, we set off and cracked it in about 2 1/2 hours and 2 to 3 trips across each. With 2 portage trolleys taking 2 trips over and back and Justin and Jed practising a racing 2 man “yoke” portage the whole operation went very smoothly. Having remustered at North Tarbet at 1610 hrs, a decision had to be made – press on or go firm in the N. Tarbet bothy. After a short discussion, a recce of the old kirk, and a discussion with “young” Frank (87) we decided to stay. While sorting the gear we learned of a rift between “old” Donald (93) and Frank:

Frank: “Have ye heard what's happened to Old Donald?”

Jed: “No, nothing serious I hope?”

Frank with bristling grey beard and fierce eye: “Serious?! The ald buggers' gat married!! ... There's a wurd fer that, Obscene!”

Jed: “ Not “lucky” then?”

Frank: “No man, she's just a wee lassie of 65 fer God's sake!!!”

We moved in. After dinner we decided to make the most of the fairly calm conditions and set off for a night paddle while Brett and Dan went off fishing from the rocks. With a faint

glow of moonlight seeping through the heavily overcast skies we slid silently out of the calm of the little bay into the body of Loch Nevis. Here the great muscular heart of the incoming tide was a powerful surge with a steady, rise and fall of great grey waves. Once we had experienced the strong pull towards the dark narrows of Kyles Knoydart, a place not to be at the dead of night, we stole quietly back past the fishermen to the haven of North Tarbet bay and the welcoming glow of the little kirk.

Young Frank appeared with “the last 4 bottles of French rose’ ” for the group and: “I'll be back with the accordion later – I can play anything in the key of C!” And thus began one of the most memorable impromptu ceilidhs I have ever experienced. Benjamin not only played his guitar but also the pedal church organ. Justin an accomplished keyboard man himself also played the melodica, Noam the guitar, Cathi the flute, fantastic! Jed the harmonica (likewise, anything in the key of C) and Norman a local estate worker having finished with his fishing boat for the day brought along a second accordion and his tin whistles. At some stage young Frank appeared with a second armful of bottles “The last 4 bottles of French rose’” At the look of stunned déjà vu he announced “This is a different last 4 bottles of French rose’ – and 4 bottles of Whyte and McKay blended Scotch. At one stage young Frank, with a cunning look in his eye, produced what can best be described as a narrow necked, fretless, 3 string Siberian banjalele and challenged anyone to play it. Benjamin our maestro was thrust forward. After tuning and 2 faltering bars he briefly mastered the dreaded instrument before a vital string snapped. Honour satisfied on both sides, we went back to the music.

I'm sure we all have a picture locked in the memory banks for our old age – the wood burner blazing, with boots and socks hung to dry, the great thick candles in their cast iron candelabra over the refectory table. The jokes and laughter and the vision of young Frank on the battered old sofa, blissfully lost in the music of the lochs and glens.

### Lessons

- Sailing is something that often only appears as a passing thought during the serious business of stroke-work on the BCU syllabus. Practise sailing the canoes. In squally conditions where you might not wish to risk paddling as separate boats, and the attendant risk of getting split up, sailing may prove to be a valuable option.
- Portage is a black art that needs rehearsing to make it efficient, with nothing and nobody lost,

left behind or broken at the end. Ideally, if at all possible, it should be taught prior to the trip. With 5 boats and a 2-trip crossing, 3 trolleys would have been ideal.

- Proper portage harness straps attached to food barrels made the crossing easier and more comfortable.
- H & S considerations put many of us off teaching the “yoke portage”. However it remains a valuable technique and the best option in the event of a crash portage through underbrush and over broken ground.
- Rain or shine winter or summer be off the water by 4.30 to make camp, cook dinner etc. One can always take an evening paddle later. On this trip we were tempted, given the slow start, to press on out into the wilder areas which would have made for a late finish. We made a wise choice to go firm at the Bothy – and hey, what an evening!

## Day 3 Loch Nevis and Sourlies Bothy

We continued our journey after breakfast, a little weary after our 3.30 finish to the evening on an incoming tide through the Kyles Knoydart and hugged the northern shore till we found a suitable spot for lunch and a brew. We gathered mussels from the rocks and the girls also took the opportunity to get a shower in the stream. As we were getting set to go we spotted a sea otter swimming by and pausing to fish as he went. Though he kept his distance he seemed generally unconcerned with the strange and colourful colony observing from the rocks.

As we journeyed on, time was invested scavenging for firewood and then with the rain beginning to settle in we arrived on a high tide at Sourlies bothie at the eastern end of the Loch. After a brief check on this ancient dwelling Noam and Benjamin decided to give it a try and moved in, whilst the rest of the party decided to camp on the wonderfully flat, well-drained meadow. Noam and Benjamin also enjoyed the company of 2 fit young kayakers who had retreated to these more sheltered waters from Skye where they had been wind bound for 2 days. The evening high point was a prodigious evening meal with moules marinieres as a starter which was viewed with some trepidation by Noam, despite the fact he had generously helped to scrape them. Ultimately his adventurous spirit got away from him and he decided to give them a try. This is probably something he will not be doing again as he spent a fairly lively night darting out of the bothy at regular intervals.... Enough said!

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## Lessons

- Plan a flexible non-travelling day into the programme and take it when it's fine if possible. On this trip we were obliged to take it right at the beginning, but this still allowed us to complete the planned itinerary.
- Generally, in foul but workable weather you may just as well travel as hang around in a gloomy bunch.
- Take time to muddle when the weather breaks to wander the foreshore and just "be".
- Often in Scotland firewood is scarce, make a conscious effort to collect it on the way in to the evening campsite.

## Day 4

### Loch Nevis and Inverie

With the tide on the ebb and a light breeze it was important to make an early getaway and we made it as far as the lee of Rubha Dubh before our first break and a handful of gorp. It was clear at this point that the friendly wind was freshening up and backing to the west again. It was also clear that the group was beginning to feel the strain of the previous days' challenge and would need a break soon. So with a determined effort we pushed on to Reidh a Ghuail. On this stage of the journey it became apparent that we were level with the retreating tide and Feathers managed to land yet more fish! We also spotted the occasional Atlantic grey sea and a pod of porpoises. I have never seen these elusive creatures so far into the loch, but like our sea kayaking chums they were obviously retreating from the weather.

In Scotland they do say that if you don't like the weather, wait 10 minutes. As we pulled up on shore in gloom, rain and a strengthening wind we rigged the tarp over a cleft in the rock shelf and got a brew on. Then just as suddenly the sun broke out and we took the chance to escape the refuge and stretch our legs. Ben and Noam got into deep conversation in the bristly grass of a headland, Cathy drifted off to check out the flora and Dave, Feathers and I explored a well concealed otterholt. Charlie and the 3 lads just chilled and spent some time spying on the steel structure of Jim "Moby" McClean's extraordinary whale shaped- ship project, across the loch at Ardentigh.

The last leg of the day's journey to Inverie was in bright cold sunshine with the wind gaining strength by the minute. Despite hugging the shelter of the shore, at one point we found it impossible to make headway and were pinned to the beach as a heavy squall blew itself out along the coast. At last we gathered our strength for the final push and hauled ashore at Inverie.

The voyageurs were more than ready to enjoy a pint and a meal in The Old Forge the most isolated pub in Britain. So we set off at a brisk pace and weather that was getting more balmy by the minute. The pub was packed, beer brilliant and food magnificent the pub more than deserving its excellent reputation for steaks and seafood. Then, as the first guitar strains hit the air, things really kicked off.

A neighbouring group sang their heads off for the first 4 melodies, then the maestro moved in on our group with a proffered guitar. Benjamin looking a tad daunted was thrust forward to accept it. He muttered something about "Back me up here guys" and then struck up, and away we went on a tour with the Beatles, the Beachboys and others to huge applause for our hero. The guitar then passed to a "folky" group and round and round again: a really splendid finale to the days paddling ... but not to the adventure! With still air and moonlit mirror-flat sea on the walk home all boded well for the morrow. What could possibly go wrong.

## Day 5

### The last day and the voyage to Mallaig

From the comfy depths of our sleeping bags we were wakened to the ragging of tent flaps in a howling, full-on westerly at about force 8. The rain was torrential and the opposite shore a scant 1800 metres away invisible. Nobody was paddling to Mallaig today. So Jed and Dave headed into the village to seek a solution. Again more uncertainty challenged our problem solving: a boat was available, then it was on the venison run, but could possibly be back by 12. Then we heard that the "impeller" on one engine was dodgy, then it was workable and finally with 25 minutes of workable tide we made a dash for the dock 3/4 of a mile away. As the 40-foot pilot cutter surged up and down in the turbulent water we loaded all gear on to the deck where Ben and Noam stashed it below the deck. We finally shot down to the beach to paddle the empty boats through the surf and with not a little trepidation clambered aboard and loaded them on the back deck.

All soaking wet and safely aboard, and the props churning the remains of the tide we headed away on the final leg to Mallaig. As the swell in long corrugations advanced out of the Irish Sea and swept under the hull, I'm sure we all contemplated what would befall a paddler intrepid enough to attempt this journey by canoe. The truth is he would never have made it.

Pulling into the sanctuary of Mallaig harbour, we loaded the trailer in torrential rain, lashed in the gear and headed off for a beer and a final meal

together in the alien environment of a cosy pub. We decided the key words for our journey were "challenge", "uncertainty" and achievement. What a team! Farewell and adieu to the intrepid Knoydart Voyageurs!

## Lessons

- Flexibility in the face of uncertainty!

## Catering

Provisioning and cooking was, by agreement, tackled as a group. All rations were then divided by meal and day bagged, labelled and stowed in heavy-duty waterproof dye barrels for protection and easy stowage in the canoes. A PE Prospector can carry an all up cargo of 1000 lbs., so using the canoes to freight in our supplies meant we could eat well. Breakfasts fell into 2 categories, one that can be prepared with boiling water (tea porridge cereals and the much-maligned Chinese breakfast of noodles and tuna, etc), or the more exotic fry up of bacon, pancakes, beans etc. Lunch was a cold snack and tea (ham, corned beef, cheese, chocolate, gorp, biscuits etc). Dinner was the high point of the culinary day and everyone chipped in and cooked or washed up. With the shortage of good cooking wood in the area we carried a double burner plus gas canisters and a robust cookset. The kettle was heated over a Peak stove that was ideal for brews inside the Lavvu and for lunch stops. The group approach to catering worked well. It became a social focus; it bonded the team, it allowed concurrent activity and saved tremendously on time faffing about and endless duplication of effort and equipment carried. Ensuring that everyone's dietary needs are met however is a perennial problem and one can see how many expedition leaders resort to allowing members to self-cater.

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## Wilderness living and survival issues

For most of the team wilderness living held few mysteries and we very quickly sorted out the priorities and became adept at making and breaking camp. Tentage thankfully was well chosen and up to the task and the lavvu a godsend. In an area with no shops, cooking, sleeping, or drying facilities, that precludes the use of support vehicles for daily resupply or transport in the event of an injury, ones choices are thrown into sharp focus. Kit has to be right or you suffer. It has to be man portable, reduced to a minimum and has to be highly practical. If it gets wet it has to be worn wet or dried. It also has to be robust, if it gets damaged it has to be repaired.

From a Bushcraft foraging perspective it was clear that the sea would provide far and away the most bounty and that fishhooks, cordage and line would be amongst one's most valuable survival tools. Firewood was not at all plentiful but could be far more readily found and collected by canoe along the shoreline. Get away from the coast and life would indeed be very hard to win from the land.

Here are some pointers for others planning to go into the area, in no particular order:

Correct clothing is the prime consideration. Hypothermia at any time of year in the North West is a very real possibility.

Keep your dry gear dry! So: if you have jobs to do and you're warm but wet – crack on. If you are cold and wet get sorted ASAP and then stay dry. If there are essential tasks to be done out in the wet once you have got sorted and had a hot brew and scoff, then it's back into the dank gear, I'm afraid and crack on. Morag the Loch Morar monster will chasten those that start the next day in their only dry gear with a nasty stash of soaking kit in the boat, and that's the law!

Loose fitting low-tech foulies work well. Though any impermeable or supposedly selectively permeable membrane will build up moisture – which is ok compared with the penetration of fresh cold rain! As Chris said on the last trip "You're never so wet as when you're wet in a boat!" Some of the high tech wonder materials are a snare and a delusion, anything that will effectively keep out moisture will produce condensation. How we manage that moisture is a whole different ball game.

Thick spongy fabric boots and trainers get wet, stay wet and eventually smell terrible. There are 5 workable solutions

- River sandals and bare feet
- Fell-running shoes and bare feet. Add sox in the evening
- Wellies if it's cooler. Changes of sox,
- Leather boots are great if you look after them. Changes of sox
- MVP sox with any of the above work very well

A bombproof 100% success rate on fire making in all conditions is a major key to success. Your firebag needs to be big and full. Be disciplined and once the fire is going, dry your next kindling. That's also the law!

A well-rigged tarp turns a situation from pretty grim to incredibly comfortable. Get good at tarps.

When conditions are outrageous a lavvu with its 20 steel pegs and 10 guy lines is fantastic

Develop a scavenger's mentality: firewood, birch bark, random cordage, polythene sheeting: Spot it, assess it, and collect it.

Awareness, that's it really. Squalls, rain, wind, fog, midges. , Be aware. React!

## Wildlife

NorthWest Scotland is renowned for the diversity of wildlife, but we have to realise several important factors. First of all the animals and birds are not habituated to man's presence and are therefore shy and elusive. Secondly a living in this mountainous region is hard won so there are not vast numbers of animals to be seen anyway. Thirdly the combination of pure air, long views and a minimum of sound pollution means that the observer is often detected far out and avoided, usually blissfully unaware of the wildlife drifting into cover well ahead. For these reasons wild creatures are not seen in large numbers loafing about to have their photographs taken as in the Yellowstone Park context. This can sometimes lead to disappointment in the wildlife enthusiast.

It is a credit to this group that so much wildlife was seen and generally at close quarters, on this trip. This success was due to a cohesive team, not spread out all over the loch, stealthy paddling, quiet voices and mainly being in the right place at the right time with bins and camera at the ready.

## Notable Mammals

Red deer – stags, hinds  
Sea Otter  
Atlantic grey seal  
Porpoise

## Notable Birds

Arctic Tern  
Cormorant  
Lapwing  
Eider duck  
Goosander  
Hooded crow  
Sandpiper  
Great black backed gull  
Black guillemot  
Raven

## Sea life

Crab  
Giant sea snail  
Mussels yes lots of these chaps  
Cockles  
Razor shells

## Conclusion

This turned out to be a very challenging trip, full of uncertainty. We did experience how hostile this environment could be and this will serve to focus all group members on the safety issues of wilderness travel and confirm our choice of equipment for the future. The fact that even in these extreme conditions we managed to accomplish our journey was directly attributable to the team's flexibility, determination and massive sense of humour. A special mention must also be made here of Charlie's highly professional management of the wannigan in any and all circumstances. Well done buddy!

The highlights that remain foremost in our memory will probably be sailing down Loch Morar, the night paddle, the gift of sunny interludes, the marvellous impromptu ceilidh at North Tarbet Bothy and the Old Forge. The voyage to Mallaig into the teeth of the wind and lashing rain, the brutal portage and soaking kit will drift from memory except in tall tales and I believe the whole team are looking forward to the next adventure".

## Jed Yarnold