

GOOSE HUNT, JAMES BAY, 1986

Prologue: In September of 1986 my husband Ken and I took a goose hunting trip to Kashechewan. The following is the write-up I did of that trip when I returned home:

We first drove north to Timmins, Ontario. At the airport there we flew on an old, chartered British two engine. The airplane was full of forty (39 male, 1 female [me]) hunters and a collection of Black Labradors which were lying in the aisles. These hunters were from Florida, Ohio, South Carolina, and Southern Ontario. We flew north to the native reserve and village of Kashechewan, which is at the mouth of the Albany River in James Bay – about mid-way between Moosonee and Hudson's Bay.

Kashechewan is a native village, with modern 3 bedroom bungalows built by the Federal Government. The bungalows are mixed in with tepees. The airport has no tarmac just large gravel. In the village the streets were all gravel as well. There were no roads or way out of the village except by plane. Everything has to be flown in and there are no jobs for the people to earn money at. The native schools open in mid-August and close for the hunting season as the whole family leaves to work in the hunt camps and also just their own general hunting. The schools open again in November.

Kashechewan has no trees available for lumber to use for fuel. The Federal Government built the natives houses out of wood and other materials. Having no fuel to keep warm by a few families moved into one home and then burnt the rest of the new homes for fuel. In their infinite wisdom the Federal Government decided that henceforth they would only build new homes for the natives out of steel and concrete. (I wonder why it didn't occur to the Federal Government to provide them with fuel!!!).

There are many children and babies running all over. There is only one school and no industries. The only store visible was a Hudson's Bay Post. The Cree are totally cut off (no roads only the airport for access) and depend on hunting and fishing for their livelihood. It is a dry (no alcohol) town. At the airport the police lock the gates each time when a plane lands and the OPP check all hand luggage and regular luggage, for alcohol. If any is found it is confiscated. The exception to this is the hunters plane as that group as allowed to go straight through the village to the boat launch.

At the boat launch we were met by loads of children waiting (very politely and quietly) for handouts of apples or candy. They enjoy the apples at this time as they are unable to buy any fruit as none is flown up to them.

The Cree tents are very clean with carpets spread out over the ground, the beds are always made neatly, the dishes always washed and the laundry done. They are very clean people but both the adults and the children are in great need of more clothing – hats, gloves, boots, warm pants, jeans, coats and sweaters.

The male children group together and take off all day with their homemade slingshots (Y-shaped wood and loads of joined broad elastic bands knotted together). They are excellent shots and can easily bring down a sea-gull in flight and loads of snipe. (Snipe are a long-billed bird and look like sand-terns. They are excellent eating and taste like partridge. We fried one up and ate it.) This manner of youthful hunting is how the male children learn their hunting skills. The female children help pluck the geese and ducks and generally hang around outside the tents and help with chores and the looking after of younger children. I saw how, without freezer

etc., they preserve their game for winter. They erect a short wooden tepee for smoking game. After the game is smoked the meat looked all shrunken up and the Cree woman told me they then boil it up for stews. Their tents are lined with smoked geese for the winter. A few of the women and men can speak English but all prefer talking Cree.

About the native guides. We had one guide for each two hunters per boat. They carry all of the decoys and take, by water in large freighter canoes, the hunters to a different hunt spot twice a day. Our guide was named Albert Lazarus and was very silent and just sort of grunted instead of speaking. When offered a drink then he spoke excellent English. The rest of the time though, he just grunted.

After landing at the airport we were taken by open pickup truck, along with our gear, (one had to keep ones eye on the guns as it seems that the guns somehow, mysteriously disappear!). The Americans amongst us brought tons of cartons of beer. We were driven directly to the boat launch. There was no dock or anything. The boats are called freighter canoes and were 20 feet long. The Cree only know two speeds: Off and Full Throttle. There were no lifejackets in any of the canoes. We were then taken by boat for a half-hour ride to the hunt camp. At our camp there were 16 men (actually 15 men and myself) and at the other camp further up James Bay, the other men went by water plane. At our camp there were three large and two small cabins, office, and cookhouse. Each large cabin has 2 rooms (4 bunks each) and 1 adjoining and shared bathroom with shower. They are very clean rooms. We had a sleeping bag with fresh sheet liner, wood stove, table and two chairs. Further up the island were the native tents and tepees. Each of their tents had a wood stove. The food cooked in the cookhouse was excellent and there was lots of it.

Daily routine: Each morning at 4:30 a Cree would come in, light the woodstove and lantern. You had to get right up, dress in all your hunting clothes and speedily head down to the cookhouse for breakfast, eat quickly, and then meet the guide at the boat launch. It was still dark at this time.

The guide took us by boat to a site covered in water, mud and swamp grass. We would walk (average one mile each way, times 4 times a day. This added up to a lot of hard, tough slogging through sucky mud and water). It was very tough going to say the least. The guide erected a blind from saplings he carries in with him. Before sun-up we all sat and waited. The guide starts to call in the geese (without an artificial caller) and flocks of geese start rising up around you. (In the blind we say in water – hipwaders are a necessity!). After the shooting, around 10am, and all soaking wet, we returned to the base camp. We'd light the wood stove, strip off all clothing and hope that our clothing dried in time for the afternoon hunt. The afternoon hunt was all the same hard, rough routine as in the morning. Walking in muddy, sucky swamp grass while all geared up and carrying guns is hard work. When the geese are shot the guide walks to them, and picks them up. (At one point I winged a goose and went chasing it across the mud flats. I fell down and water ran into my hipwaders. This was in nearly 0° temperatures. I had to sit and walk in those web frozen clothes for hours!!) (But I got the goose – that was most important). On the walk out the guide carries all of the game, takes it to his tent for the family to clean and pluck. Back to base camp around 7:30 for supper, and in bed by 8:00pm, exhausted.

After three days of this most of the hunters had had enough. On the last morning, before fly-out, the guide comes to the cabin with all of the shot geese and plastic bags each bird. He puts them all in a special cardboard box, on dry ice, with ones name on the front for the fly-out, and for identification at the Timmins airport. (One of the wings is left on the geese for identification if the Ministry of Natural Resources checks you out).

Each hunter is allowed 10 geese apiece and if more are shot then the Cree keep them. At this point the guide is tipped, usually \$20 by each hunter. His wages are paid by the camp. It was a rough boat trip back from the base to the village of Kashechewan, then the fly-out to Timmins.

We spent one night at an outpost camp. It was very rough compared to our cabins. We left the day of a hurricane and the water had very high waves. We had to wait for the tides to flow in before we could leave camp.

At the Outpost there was only one tent with 4 bunkbeds, (for a total of 8 people), a long table and a wood cook-stove/heater. The guides slept in another really rough tent. There was no out-house just low bushes, and soft sucky mud everywhere. It was very interesting for me – 1 woman and 7 men all soaked through and everyone down to long-johns! Laundry hung everywhere trying to dry inside the tent. A tent in a hurricane – think about it! On that evening hunt one could not stand up in the high winds – we got blown over. For supper the native cook made stew. Enough about that meal!! If you watched him making it you would not eat it but were we ever hungry. With the winds so high the stove pipes (no screws used to keep the pipes pieces together) – they looked like they'd fall apart. And then the tent nearly blew in. Some men braced up the front of the tent with wood supports. We let the stove burn out so that there would be no threat of fire during the night.

We were all in our beds by 8:00pm – bushed. All the men snored and what a noise. Thank goodness the hurricane drowned out some of the noise. The tent flapped and snapped against my face as I was in the upper bunk. (Ken was in the bunk below me, [guarding me?] but no tent was flapping on his face!) I was scared stiff of the hurricane and didn't sleep all night. At 4:00am one man got up to commune with nature and as he was at the tent door flap he yelled, "You black bas____, get the h____ oughta here". A bear was at our door getting at the garbage. I had to pee as well so I crawled down from my bunk. I figured that by 4:30am the cook would be coming and he'd scare the bear away. So I stood silently there inside the door flap in the cold and dark for ½ hour. No cook came (we found out later that the cook had just gotten married and so he stayed in bed with his new wife.) By the time we got out to the blind for our hunt the sun was already up and it was too late to hunt as the geese were already flying. All that work for a missed hunt!

Overall I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge and adventure. On my next trip up there I'll make sure I bring along apples, rubber bands for the kids slingshots, lifejacket, and cartons of warm clothes for the natives.

Written by Valerie Boal
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Addendum: We did take another goose hunt trip to Kashechewan a couple of years later. And I did take cartons of clothes for all ages to distribute – along with rubber bands. It was another good but hard hunt.

Sadly, these trips are no longer available as they were then. Now the natives control the trips and the flights out of Timmins are no long organized. So now, nearly 20 years later I feel that I was able to experience something of native life in times past. – Valerie Boal, October 2004