

## The river man

Arctic explorer Bob O'Hara has paddled the equivalent of the earth's circumference, all in frigid far-north waters. And he prays for many more miles to go.

BY CHRIS NISKANEN

ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS

Bob O'Hara's home is a modern museum of Arctic life and travel.

On the walls hang dozens of photos of O'Hara and his friends paddling among ice floes. A replica Inuit kayak rests on a windowsill. A Duluth pack sits in a corner, containing a pair of sealskin mukluks, a gift from an Inuit craftswoman. A musk-ox skull sits on the coffee table.

Then there's the indoor temperature: 58 degrees on a chilly March afternoon.

"Sorry about that," apologized O'Hara, 64, a retired biology teacher. "I actually cranked up the thermostat when I knew you were coming. I breathe better in a cold environment."

When he's not chilling in his St. Louis Park, Minn., home, O'Hara's secondary residence is a tent on the tundra among the ancient caribou trails of northern Canada.

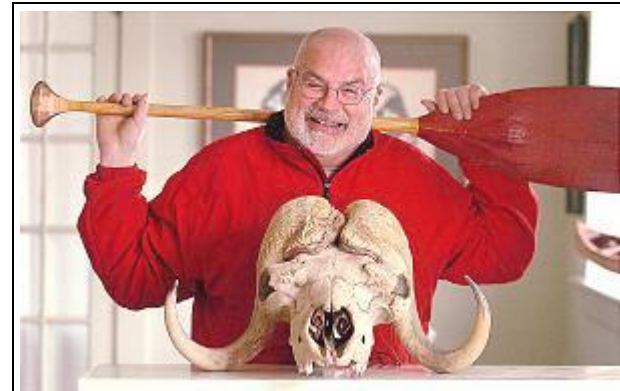
He's probably Minnesota's least known Arctic adventurer, but one of the nation's most respected authorities on canoeing travel in the most remote regions of northern Canada.

Since 1967, O'Hara has spent every summer paddling the great rivers of the far north, logging between 15,000 and 25,000 miles from the Yukon to Hudson Bay and a few points farther north. He's paddled 37 rivers to date, and this summer his group hopes to pioneer a canoe route down a nearly inaccessible river in the province of Nunavut. (He's not saying which river until the trip is completed.)

O'Hara has accomplished these feats on a high school teacher's salary, never offering himself up for corporate sponsorships, book deals or the seminar circuit. Among canoeists, he is a fountain of free information, often opening his home and voluminous map library to strangers and youth groups heading north.

"He's a living resource and incredibly generous with information," said Jim Murphy, a long-distance canoeist from Fargo, N.D., who first met O'Hara in 1987 while researching a trip to the Thelon River. "There might be a few who have paddled more miles, but not many, and maybe some with more experience with whitewater, but for a willingness to share information and to be a friend to other canoeists, you won't find a better person than Bob."

For canoeists seeking challenges beyond the Boundary Waters, the rivers of Canada's northern provinces are the ultimate destination. Many flow hundreds of miles through the treeless tundra, emptying into Hudson Bay or the Arctic Ocean, offering breathtaking views of caribou



Joe Rossi/St. Paul Pioneer Press

Bob O'Hara of St. Louis Park, MN is considered the guru of Arctic canoe tripping. Starting in 1969, O'Hara has spent every summer in the Arctic, canoing 37 different rivers and traveling more than 15,000 miles across the tundra.

herds, musk ox, polar bears and other Arctic wildlife. Part of the challenge is simply getting there --floatplanes are the primary mode of delivering people and gear to the tundra -- and the reward can be weeks of travel without seeing another human being.

## **A LIFE OF ADVENTURE**

O'Hara caught the far-north adventure bug in 1967 when he and a few friends decided to canoe from Manitoba's Lake Winnipeg to Hudson Bay. He fell in love with the tundra and Arctic life and discovered that being a teacher, with summers off, would be the perfect occupation for someone spending not weeks, but sometimes months, on canoe trips.

He's never been married, perhaps because he's rarely at home in the summer.

"I was engaged once, but I wasn't when I came back from a trip," he said. "I guess she couldn't understand why I was gone for eight weeks."

His first big Arctic river trip occurred in 1969 on the Thelon River. In the 1960s, few people were attracted to such trips because the region is inhospitable (lakes are ice-free in July and August and in some years, they remain frozen through the summer) and air travel was expensive. O'Hara also blames a 1955 article in Sports Illustrated that detailed the disastrous canoe trip headed by Art Moffat, whose death on the tundra made national news.

"After the big spread on Moffat in Sports Illustrated, nobody went up there for over a decade," he said. "It was so inhospitable, nobody wanted to go."

O'Hara's trip down the Thelon nearly met with disaster. His group became stranded on Aberdeen Lake, which was bound in ice, and they ran out of food. They ran into a Canadian wildlife biologist who was studying Arctic foxes and was being guided by a young Inuit hunter named Barnabas Piroyur. The biologist was in similar straits: He had run out of food and his research was fruitless because he couldn't find any foxes.

O'Hara's party had a gun (back when Canadian authorities allowed travelers to carry firearms) and the Inuit hunter helped them and the biologist kill three caribou. The canoeists eventually were flown back to civilization, but not until a memorable moment was burned into O'Hara's memory.

"The biologist has 10 gallons of grain alcohol for preserving specimens, but he had no specimens," he said. "I had a little Tang left over, so we mixed it and had Tang cocktails and cooked caribou steaks over the fire. Those caribou steaks were really sweet."

In nearly four decades of northern travel, O'Hara and his traveling partners have never suffered a serious accident or injury, but there are other moments of hardship and hair-raising encounters. He's been icebound on lakes, swamped by rapids in frigid waters and was once missed for a pick-up by a pilot who failed to see them on the tundra (which is one reason why O'Hara's jackets and canoes are almost always red.)

One trip, his group had nine polar bears wandering their camp on Hudson Bay.

"We were there for 24 hours, waiting for a pickup and these bears were feeding on seals," he recalled. "At night, we hear an awful roar and there are two bears standing on their hind feet, pawing at each other. One was a female with a cub and the other was a male who wanted to eat the cub."

## **DIGGING OUT OLD DOCUMENTS**

One of his early lessons, said O'Hara, is that Arctic travel is unforgiving, unpredictable and requires a lot of research and preparation.

In the 1960s, few maps or descriptions of northern rivers were available, so O'Hara drove to Winnipeg to visit the Hudson Bay Company headquarters there to pore over old diaries and travelogues.

"A lot of these guys back then (with the Hudson Bay Company) had been to these old settlements and I would go to their desks and meet them and gather my own research," he said. "Of course, there was no Internet, so I would buy old books like crazy. In two days in Winnipeg, I could get tons of information."

Because of the difficulty of getting to some rivers, many of O'Hara's trips are months or years in the planning. Airplane drop-off and pick-up has to be coordinated, maps researched and secured and canoes transported northward. At the end of one logistically difficult trip, O'Hara never caught up to his gear until a year later, after it was shipped by barge to Montreal.

One of the jumping-off points for O'Hara's northern adventures is Baker Lake, an extremely remote Inuit settlement in the province of Nunavut. O'Hara keeps a cache of canoes there and maintains friendships with about 40 townspeople.

Among them is Barnabas Piroyur, now in a retirement home, "but still one of my best Inuit friends," he said.

## **FEW IN THE WORLD CAN MATCH HIM**

O'Hara doesn't travel alone. He organizes a crew for each annual trip, charging a nominal fee for equipment rental. "I don't guide and legally I can't (because he's not a Canadian citizen)," he says. "We all share equally in the chores and while I could go solo, it would be really difficult. Besides, I'm too gregarious."

B.J. Kohlstedt and her husband, John, live in Finland, Minn., and have been on three trips with O'Hara starting in 1988. "He appears to be gruff and autocratic," she said, "but that's all just a cover for his extreme caring and competence. He's brilliant with his research. I don't know if he has a photographic memory, but he's amazing in his knowledge of plants, animals, Inuit people and natural history."

Lee Sessions, a long-distance canoeist who lives in Portland, Ore., has known O'Hara since 1986 and paddled numerous Arctic rivers with him. He's also part of the crew heading north this summer.

Sessions said O'Hara's technical knowledge of Arctic canoeing is rare.

"Over the years, I have seen Bob employ numerous 'unconventional' tactics to move canoes from point A to point B, including lining (using ropes to guide a canoe around rapids), portaging, carrying and dragging," Sessions said. "There is a real art to lining and Bob is a master."

Murphy said he once believed he might be able to match the number of rivers O'Hara has paddled, but realized it was an impossible goal.

"I'm 49 and I used to think I'd catch up with him, that some day I'd paddle as many rivers as he as, but it's gotten worse," Murphy said with a laugh. "He just keeps going. He's like the Energizer Bunny."

Mel Baughman of St. Paul organizes the Twin Cities' Far North Symposium, a daylong program about northern canoeing, where O'Hara is a popular speaker.

"He's known in Canada as the American who's done as much canoeing up there as anyone," Baughman said. "There aren't too many Americans who get invited to Toronto to talk about canoeing, but he has."

### **AIMING FOR CENTENARY**

O'Hara retired from teaching biology at Cooper High School four years ago. During his teaching career, he was well-known in high school track and nordic skiing coaching, and continues to coach skiing at Benilde High School and officiate track and skiing events.

An asthmatic, O'Hara said he retired from teaching because of physical exhaustion, only to learn he had suffered for years with sleep apnea. His sleep is enhanced with a special machine now, but he leaves it at home each summer because the cold Arctic air helps his breathing.

His grandmother lived to be 109 and O'Hara doesn't plan to stop canoeing anytime soon. "I pray every day that I have her genes," he said.

If all goes well, O'Hara said, this summer's river trip -- which is a decade in the planning -- would be a major accomplishment. "We've not found any records of anyone canoeing this river, perhaps because it drops 30 meters in a one- to two-mile stretch," he said. "We could end up doing a lot of walking or dragging the canoes or we could have a helluva a lot of whitewater."

There's one minor problem -- O'Hara has a kidney stone that doctors say might have been with him for years. He'll bring a satellite phone, but only for such a dire emergency. If he were to perish under a blue Arctic sky, that would be fine with him.

"I'd rather die on the tundra, doing what I love, than in some hospice," he said. "I don't think (the kidney stone) will ever come down. I'm praying it won't."

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