

## FalconGuides Interviews Cliff Jacobson

*FalconGuides author Cliff Jacobson is one of North America's most respected outdoor writers and wilderness canoe guides. He is the author of more than a dozen books on camping and canoeing and has been inducted into the American Canoe Association Hall of Fame. Here, FalconGuides discusses Cliff's memorable "firsts" in a career highlighted by bestsellers and awards:*



Cliff: Tha-anne River, Manitoba, Canada

**How did you first get into canoeing? What was it that drew you in and kept you coming back to it time and again?**

It began in 1952 at the age of 11 at a rustic Boy Scout camp set deep in the Michigan woods. The canoes were wood and canvas—and magical! Those who've paddled wooden canoes will understand. The canoe was a ticket to the wild in wilderness. Yes, one could hike to remote places, but it was faster and easier by canoe. You can carry more gear than a backpacker and thus live more comfortably. On a long backpacking trip you'll travel super light and "rough it," but a canoe will "smooth" the way.

I read every book on canoeing and camping I could find. I doted on the adventures of the northern explorers. Names like Hudson Bay, Coppermine, Churchill, and the Northwest Territories called my name. If there's a "wilderness gene" I have it.

The canoe has a beauty and grace that is unmatched by other watercraft. The same canoe that can carry you on a picnic down a placid river can float you to the Arctic Ocean. Some highlights of trips that keep me coming back for more? Paddling among thousands of caribou, stroking their backs with my paddle; talking quietly to bears, telling them we are no threat; watching seals, which are nearly as long as my canoe, skitter by; paddling among beluga whales; being chased downriver by a polar bear; catching huge lake trout, the size of which anglers dream.



Cliff: Latiseino River, Norway. 14-foot Pakboat®

**Tell me a little bit about your first multi-day expedition? What did you learn and take away from that first trip?**

It was a 21-day trip from Folyet, Ontario, to James Bay (300 miles), via the Groundhog, Mattagami, and Moose Rivers in Ontario. It rained every day for 17 days; the river was flooded; the bugs were horrendous; the rapids were frightening and the topography wasn't all that pretty. We didn't see a soul the entire trip. Of all the northern routes I've done, this is my least favorite, and one I would never do again. But it was very adventurous; it tested my skills and it encouraged me to keep learning. I learned that there are few second chances on these tough northern rivers. Doing things sloppy or merely "good enough" is not GOOD ENOUGH! Some of my readers have accused me of being opinionated in my methods. In reality, successful explorers follow much the same pattern of planning and executing a canoe trip. Yes, they may use different style packs or paddles or foods, but they follow strict procedures on waterproofing their gear, scouting and running rapids, portaging, storm-proofing their camp, etc. It takes years to develop the proper respect for a wilderness river; you can't rush it. Those that try usually don't survive very long.

**When planning out a new canoeing trip, what is it that first draws you to that trip?**

I love remote rivers, especially those in northern Canada and Alaska. On some rivers it's the challenge of the rapids; on others it's the wildlife—caribou, musk ox, wolves, dall sheep, and grizzlies. Still others are noted for their intense beauty or magnificent campsites. Recently, I've turned my attention to American desert rivers like the Green, Missouri, and Rio Grande (it's awesome!). Last year, I canoed two remote whitewater rivers along the border of Norway and Finland. What a rush! Every place has its unique challenges and beauty.

**Is there a particularly memorable trip that always pops up first when reaching back into the memory bank? What was so memorable about that trip?**



The wedding day: Wilberforce Falls, Hood River, August 12, 1992



Wilberforce Falls

Yes, the Hood River (Province of Nunavut, Canada), north of the Arctic Circle. I've done it twice: On the first trip (1984), we encountered nearly 100,000 caribou, some so close you could touch them with your canoe paddle. We also saw over 300 muskoxen and two grizzlies. On the second trip (1992), Sue Harings and I were married at Wilberforce Falls on the Hood River. It is the only recorded wedding at this spot. Wilberforce, by the way, drops 160 feet through a 3-mile canyon; the U.S. Niagara Falls, by comparison, drops 167 feet. The Hood has one of the most spectacular waterfalls on the continent. There are just two ways to get there—by canoe or by pricey chartered bush plane that's outfitted with tubby tundra tires.

**How did it feel to be inducted in the American Canoe Association hall of fame?**

It was quite an honor, naturally. I remain surprised though because, frankly, I don't consider myself an expert canoeist. I'm decent but not in the league with today's top paddlers. Good judgment, more than paddle skill, keeps me out of trouble.





Cliff: Boundary Waters Canoe Area

**I know you're an avid outdoorsman with many pursuits. If you could impart one piece of advice to the next generation of avid outdoorsmen (and women) looking to make this their lifestyle and work, what would that advice be?**

My best advice is to always remember that "skills are more important than things." You can get by with mediocre gear if you know what you're doing. If you don't, you're in serious trouble, even if you have the best gear. Learn first, buy second!

Knowledge makes the difference. Read every canoeing and camping book you can find, even those that are long out-of-print and belong to the last century. There are things you can learn from the old-timers; don't dismiss old knowledge as bad knowledge. New isn't always better; it just sells well. Case in point: In the early part of this century, Horace Kephart, in his book "Woodcraft and Camping," wrote that insect headnets should be colored black so you can see through them. Today, most tent screens and bug nets are in colors other than black. These colors reflect light into your eyes and reduce visibility. For the same reason, automobile steering wheels and dashboards should also be black. Manufacturers would be wise to reflect on proven ways.



Cliff: North Knife River, Manitoba

To learn more about Cliff Jacobson and his many books, check him out [here](#) or on his website, [cliff-jacobson.com](http://cliff-jacobson.com).