

# Paul Kirtley's Blog

Wilderness Bushcraft • Survival Skills • Outdoor Life

Paul Kirtley: This is the Paul Kirtley Podcast, episode three.

Male: The Paul Kirtley Podcast. Wilderness bushcraft, survival skills and outdoor life.

Paul Kirtley: Right. That's enough of that. I have had a good amount of feedback from podcast one and podcast two that people, or at least the people who have contacted me, don't like the intro music. Also, they don't like some of the other audio bits and pieces that I have been using.

So, I do listen. This is an iterative process. This is a new podcast. I want to make this the best listening experience for my listeners.

So the consensus that I have received is, cut out the intro music. Cut out the other aspects, which are a little bit like commercial radio.

So voiceover lady has been sacked. The band have been told to leave and the I am keeping enthusiastic man, as somebody described him, because I do need somebody at the beginning of my podcast to describe what the podcast is about.

It's about wilderness bushcraft, survival skills and outdoor life. I could say that myself.

But I think it's good to have a bit of contrast.

Anyway. Onto my guest for episode three.

He's well known in the outdoor community in Canada. He's less well known in Europe and the U.K., but he is somebody you should know. He is somebody that is worth listening to, and even if you think you do know him and his material, he's a little bit of a dark horse. There's more to this guest than meets the eye, as I found out in the conversation that you're about to hear.

My guest this week is Kevin Callen, and I'm honored to have him on my podcast.

Kevin is a Canadian canoe enthusiast. He's somewhat of a media personality in Canada and is the author of around 15 books, including the best selling Happy Camper.

Kevin has written many guidebooks to various areas, paddling areas in Ontario and he is very well known in terms of getting people out into the wilderness in Canada. He has a lot of interesting things to say and he's also always charming and amusing to listen to.

Anyone who has seen his YouTube channel will know how entertaining he is. Kevin is a frequent guest on Canadian radio and television. He has written for many publications, including Explore magazine, Canadian Geographic and Canoe Roots magazine. He also blogs on the websites of some of those publications.

He has won writing awards for his magazine articles. He has also won four film awards, including Best Of in the prestigious Waterwalker Film Festival. I first met Kevin when I was in Peterborough for a visit to the Canadian Canoe Museum, and later, when Kevin came over to the Welsh Canoe Symposium we reconnected there and we've also corresponded over the years.

I first knew of Kevin from picking up his guidebooks when I was looking to paddle certain areas in Canada. I picked these books up. I thought they were very good. I read them. That's where our conversation started.

[audio changeover]

Kevin, thank you very much for joining me and agreeing to talk to me on my podcast. It's very kind of you to take the time out of your day. Can I ask you first... I mean, I've known about you for awhile. I've known who you are. But it was primarily because I picked up your guidebooks in Canada when I was there. Guidebooks to come of the areas I was looking to visit.

I guess if you've not done that... Like me, I've not seen your books over here. So maybe people in the U.K. and Europe don't know you so well.

Did you start off writing guidebooks? Was that the first type of book that you wrote? You've written a lot of books now.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. Great question, Paul.

First of all, it's an honor to be on your show. This is really cool. This is fantastic.

Paul Kirtley: Thank you.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. The first book was a book on Killarney for Richard Park, which is in Ontario in Canada. It was just a coffee table history book.

At the very last minute the editor said, "Hey, you should write some trips that people can do in the park," wrote this in a couple of days and they went in the back of the book.

Then, after that, that became, like, "Hmm. That's more interesting. How about we combine the history with the guidebooks." Then, 15 books later... The main reason I started writing guidebooks, per se, than all the other type of books, is a famous canoeist from the Canoe Museum here in Canada, Kurt Wipper, came out to me one day and he said, "Boy, you're one hyper guy. You're doing everything. You're trying to do all these things. You're going to burn out soon."

He goes, "Choose thing you're really good at."

I said, "Well, what is that?"

He says, "Your job is really good at getting people out there and telling people where to go."

If they go, then they'll see what they should save and then they will protect the wilderness. So that's why I started writing guidebooks.

Paul Kirtley: So did you find it gave you more opportunity to go out and do your own trips as well, or did you find it, actually, that you then had to really think ahead about the trips you were going to do so that you could turn it into a guidebook afterwards? Did you find it a liberating experience, or did you find it something that became a big constraining in that sense?

Kevin Callen: Really good question. Actually, I have never been asked that before.

But really liberating, actually. The guidebooks are basically my own true character. The route are the ones I choose to do. The guidebooks became a reason for me to go out.

My wife always laughs. I go, "Oh, I gotta go out and do another trip to write it for a guidebook."

She goes, "No, you don't have to."

But, yeah.

(laughter)

So, yeah. In fact, even the boo I wrote on lost routes, that was the whole idea. I wanted to look for routes that weren't used that much that I wanted to be protected. Then, once they were used a lot, the routes weren't lost anymore.

But, yeah. That was just self interest. I just wanted to go on these routes that weren't there anymore.

Paul Kirtley: And have you had feedback from readers? Have they gone and replicated those routes? Have they followed those lost routes?

I have to say, I own that book, but I don't think I have done those routes myself yet. Are people saying they have gone and done those trails and those old portage trails that were overgrown and those routes that are not well traveled anymore?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. It has happened both ways. Some routes were never found because of lack of government maintenance or because, basically, people just didn't want to go there because they were too far north.

Others have become so busy that people curse me. My nickname in my hometown is the wilderness pornographer.

Paul Kirtley: Really?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. There's that negative quality, right? You tell people where to go because no one is there, and then everybody is there and they're going to curse the person that started it.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: I'm okay with that. I've dealt with that. People... Bot very many people, but there are people that hate me for it. Bill Mason told me years and years ago, "Well, you better tell them where to go to those places. They wont' be protected if you don't."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. It's a balance, isn't it? I mean, it's a hard balance, I guess, in some cases. If people don't go there at all then there's nobody there to go after it. The interest of the wilderness is not served, but equally, if there's tons and tons and tons of people there it starts to get degraded, maybe, a little bit, if people don't take care when they're there.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. There's a local park just north of where I live in Peterborough called the Kawartha Highlands. Actually, that's really what started the guidebooks. That was a really interesting story.

I moved up from the city to this smaller town. I started following this canoe roots in cottage country in Ontario. I went to the government said, "Well, these are great canoe routes."

Well, they don't exist anymore.

I said, "Hmm. I think they should be. If you don't have them as canoe routes, what else are you going to do with them?"

So I convinced a publisher to publish the routes and today that area is a park. Now, I'm not saying I created that as a park. But I was one reason for it, because all these people came up from [sp] Chamberlain to go canoeing in this area. Then the government sort of said, "Okay. I guess we better do something."

Then they followed my guidebook and they made a park out of it.

I will go in that area, and the locals... There's a great story, Paul. I was on this one trip where a young couple was following my book. These local guys were burning my book in a fire.

Paul Kirtley: Really?

Kevin Callen: They joined the book burning party. "We're going to kill that sun of a gun."

I kept walking, pretending I wasn't Kevin Callan.

(laughter)

But at the end of the day it was, like, "Well, I'd rather it be a park than just a place for you guys."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. I guess people get quite protective of their own special places, don't they?

I think, at the end of the day, the more people that value these things the better, really. I've been to Algonquin. That's a very popular park, isn't it? I mean, I know there are some very remote parts of it. But the central part of the park is very popular and well used, and yet it's not damaged.

I mean, the campsites are a little bit light on firewood, clearly. But are you seeing an increase in damage, do you think? Or is it still in good shape?

So I think you mentioned that you had found a bunch of rubbish, a bunch of trash somewhere.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. You find that in a lot of places.

Algonquin, I gotta say, they do a pretty good job at keeping it maintained. So I don't want to knock that park. I think they do a good job. But everybody knows there are those people out there that just will leave the garbage.

Last year in Algonquin park they closed this area up because of a bear problem. A bear was getting into people's garbage.

Well, sure enough, it's because someone left all their leftover food on the portage just because they didn't want to carry it any further.

Paul Kirtley: Wow.

Kevin Callen: The bear found that, and of course the bear was shot because of it. That's just ridiculous.

But I found other parks at Quetico, they're now changing their attitudes. If a bear becomes a problem they will close that area for canoeing until the bear is no longer a problem, because we've created that problem.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. It's not very fair on the bear, is it, if we leave a bunch of food there and then it becomes habituated to seeing humans as a source of food, and then the bear gets shot as a result of it. It's a pretty hard deal for the bears.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. You must have that. Well, I think that happens everywhere in the world. There are some wild areas where just some lazy people, some unethical people, unknowledgeable people go out there and just decide, "Well, I'll never do this again. I'm just going to leave my garbage here."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. I think that's the case. I think people are just ignorant. I don't think it's necessarily malicious. In a lot of cases, people just don't know any better. Particularly if you get people who have largely been brought up in an urban environment. They are used to people carting their trash away for them. They leave it, and there are lots of places where they leave the trash. It's gone. It doesn't stay there forever.

I think people take that attitude out to wilder places sometimes as well.

I don't think most people do it because they want to damage the environment. They do it because they don't know any better, and I think it's a case of educating people so that they know the issues that it causes if they do leave things.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. The case study with that is when my wife and I were on this Chapleau River up in northern Ontario. A group ahead of us were leaving their garbage, they were pooping in the water...

Paul Kirtley: Eww. Right.

Kevin Callen: ...They did everything wrong. Everything.

We just didn't want to meet them because I just hated them. I thought they were the devil. Sure enough, we caught up to them because of a storm. They were actually okay people. They just went to do a wilderness thing to say they did it once, tick it off, and then it got out of their hands. Over their skill set. They thought, "Well, nobody else will go here."

Yes, we are.

Yeah. They weren't the devil. It's becoming more and more that, though. Even this summer, in Killarney park, someone left a whole bunch of cans of food under a rock. I had to carry them out.

It's, like, "Who would do this?"

But when you meet them, they're not what you think they are.

Paul Kirtley: No.

Kevin Callen: It's happening more and more because, like you said, people are just used to being given everything.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. I mean, that's a little bit more considered, isn't it? You're actually hiding it under rocks. But still, yeah. I think it's just people don't know what else to do, do they, in some cases?

As I say, I think it's just ignorance, really.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. If you make it that it's the norm not to do it... I interviewed this one gentleman last year in Algonquin. He admitted right on camera that he would leave garbage and stuff behind. Then he finally got a fine. The park caught him. But the fine was only \$150 dollars and he was somewhere from the city of Toronto that had a lot of money and sort of said, "Well, that's nothing. So it was well worth leaving the garbage."

That man is evil.

(laughs)

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. That's not nice. That's not nice.

Kevin Callen: It has to be \$1000 dollars or go to jail.

Paul Kirtley: Or just ban them. Although, maybe they don't care if they're only doing a one trip thing and that's it. Maybe they don't care about being banned.

Kevin Callen: Well, there is that story I've been told a lot of native elders. The best way to change their attitude is to grab them by the ear and take them into the wilderness for a month. They will change.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. Okay. Well, that might work. That might work.

You mentioned doing trips with your family. I've noticed you certainly do paddling trips as a family. I've seen reference to it in your books. I've seen reference to it in your YouTube videos. You take your daughter, Kyla. How old was she when you first took her on a paddling trip?

Kevin Callen: She was six weeks.

Paul Kirtley: Wow.

Kevin Callen: I know. It wasn't my idea. It was my wife's.

A lot of people told us that our life would change dramatically once we had a child and that we wouldn't do all of the canoe trips we once did. That's true, but it's also not. I mean, my life really began when I had a child.

I was going on trips from A to B, writing guidebooks and stuff like that. It was my daughter that slowed me down and made me remember why I was doing it. She would look at a pinecone for an hour, an ant hill and enjoy nature.

Yeah. My wife really pushed to have her out early. We did a two week trip when she was two years old. Now she's so comfortable out there.

Some people will wait until their child is 14 or 15. That's a huge mistake. When you're 14 or 15 you do not want to go on a canoe trip with your parents.

Paul Kirtley: No. Certainly not.

Kevin Callen: No. It's not cool, right?

But taking her when she was really young, one of the magical times was when she couldn't walk. Well, she can't escape anywhere.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: You hear people say, "Well, it's not safe."

Well, life isn't safe. The only time we ever got into danger was when she choked on a gummy bear and I had to put her upside down to get the thing out.

People will say, "Well, that's dangerous."

I go, "Well, she could have done that in the kitchen in the house."

Paul Kirtley: Very true, and I know you know Cliff Jacobson. I was watching an interview with him awhile ago. One of the things that he pointed out, and other people have pointed out as well, is one of the most dangerous things you do on a wilderness trip is driving to the trail head or driving to the park. Then you get a new canoe and you go off.

People think that's the dangerous part. In fact, you've actually done, statistically, the most dangerous part of your trip in driving there and back.

Kevin Callen: It's true. I calculated all of my moments where I needed first aid or there was an incident on the trip. Of all the times, 99.9% of the time was human based error, meaning that someone did something nasty with someone on a trip. A bear wasn't an instance. We had someone just take all our tires off our vehicle.

Paul Kirtley: Take the actual tires off the wheels?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. They didn't like us in that area, so they took the tires off. It was a fly in trip. We came to our vehicle and there's our vehicle with no tires.

Everybody goes, "Well, that's a disaster."

Well, that has nothing to do with wilderness. That has something to do with some idiot that didn't like people.

Or food poisoning on a trip. That has nothing to do with wilderness. It had to do with, well, we got food poisoning.

So I would say that it's a terrible story, but it's a good one. I was going to give a presentation once at a library, and on the way, on their highway, there was a major accident. I went to administer first aid. The man died. It wasn't pleasant.

I went to give the presentation, and during that time a woman in the back said, "Isn't this wilderness travel dangerous?"

Absolutely not. Traveling on the highway is dangerous.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. It is. It is, and we lose a lot of people on the roads every year even though we all know it's dangerous. Yeah. Got to keep things in perspective.

So you have been tripping as a family for a long time. What advice would you give to families that are looking to get their kids involved in canoe camping trips?

Kevin Callen: Well, younger the better, but also make sure it's part of their lifestyle. Also be a parent when you're out there with them, but also be a camp counselor. Have fun. Make them part of the trip. Don't carry all the stuff for them. Make sure they are carrying their own pack, they are putting the tent up. They may whine a bit at first, but after awhile they will be part of the team and they will feel really good about themselves.

A magical moment this year was when my daughter turned 10, and for her birthday... Her friend turned 10. I said, "What do you want for your birthday?"

She said, "I want my friend and I to go on a canoe trip with you."

I went, "Great. Has your friend gone on a trip before?"

"No."

Well, my daughter is a little bit smaller for her age compared to all of her friends. The confidence that girl had on that trip, and I knew she was doing it to sort of say, "Well, hey." She might have been teased a little bit at school about her being small. She was sort of showing how, yes, I'm small, but look at what I can do.

I have done this since I was six weeks old.

Kevin Callen: Yeah.

They all followed her. She had this great confidence.

Then we met these macho guys. The ones with the fake military outfit, the big knives and big tilley hats. You know those guys?

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: They're out surviving. They couldn't believe these two little girls out there. They are just giggling, saying, "What's your problem?"

Paul Kirtley: That's fantastic. It's fantastic.

So many people, as I say, as we already talked about, know you through your books. I think you have also reached a significant audience on YouTube as well. I've certainly enjoyed your videos, particularly this last year, your once around Algonquin trip. You've got some crazy characters that come on those trips with you.

I note in particular, speedo man seems to be a particularly crazy individual. We'll talk about him a little bit more in a minute because I think she's British, isn't he?

Kevin Callen: Yes. The poor bugger.

Paul Kirtley: But I really enjoyed that trip that you guys did. Is Andy the guy you did that trip with?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. Andy, my neighbor. All my canoe mates are my neighbors. We all gather round and we go canoeing together.

But Andy, not speedo man, but Andy went on that trip with me. He's been going on numerous trips with me. That trip was insane. If you imagine going all around Algonquin park and doing 96 portages. It added up to, I think, 68 kilometers you're walking with a canoe on your head.

The reason why we did it is because we're both turning 50. This route called the menu link was designed by Algonquin outfitters. It connects to all the stores around the park, all the access points. They did it as a challenge. So the record is eight days.

So what him and I did is, I always have a reason to do something even though it's subconscious.

But I did this to show that you should not do it in eight days. Hats off to you if you did it in eight days. I'm not knocking those people.

But why are we going out there to do it as quick as possible when we spend all of this time wishing we were out there?

Paul Kirtley: That's a good point. Yeah.

Kevin Callen: I just don't get it. So we ended up spending... Well, 20 days had turned into 16 days because of an incident. But we spent our time going around the park and enjoying and immersing ourselves in that wilderness.

Paul Kirtley: Did you even spending 16 days over it, was it a tough trip still?

Kevin Callen: It was an insane trip. Don't ever do that trip, Paul.

I don't know why we did it. Now I'm 51, so all that's over. I'll get a sports car or something.

Paul Kirtley: All right.

Kevin Callen: Why it was so difficult was, the first four days you go up river. I don't know if you've ever traveled up river, but it's not easy. I don't know how they did it in the old days. We're just totally different people now. We're too soft.

But my buddy didn't look at any of the information I sent him. He just showed up the day we left. Then, by day two, he looked at me and went, "What are we doing?"

I showed him the route and he's, like, [inaudible 00:21:14]

Paul Kirtley: Well, I guess that's what happens when people trust you, isn't it?

Kevin Callen: Well, I don't know if it's trust or not. But the most comical part was, there was some individuals that were doing it as a race. They try to get ahead of us.

We weren't in any race. They didn't make it. It was kind of funny. This one gentleman, he took his son and they tried to do the loop. The son left him. He tried it with his other son the next year and his second son left him. Then we met him with his third son, and the third son broke his foot and had to get lifted out.

Paul Kirtley: Ow.

Kevin Callen: We're, like, "Why are you in a rush? We're fine."

What's really comical is that, on the trip, I was on a CBC radio and also online. I had lots of followers. I didn't know. I could send signal out, but not receive it.

I found out there were some people that didn't like us doing this untraditionally. You're supposed to use a cedar canvas canoe. I used a really light weight canoe because I'm smart. We also found out that Andy, he couldn't complete the whole trip. He only had 16 days. So I said, "Well, I'd rather finish the trip with you and break a few rules."

So we broke a few rules. But it wasn't cheating. I was telling everybody on radio and online that I was cheating. That's not really cheating.

I have a weird sense of humor. I was having fun with it.

What happened was, someone that really didn't like that idea got to our food drop on day 12, which had my food and my whiskey supply, and they took the whiskey out.

Paul Kirtley: Really?

Kevin Callen: Now, that's evil.

Paul Kirtley: That's just nasty.

Kevin Callen: That's nasty. They thought it was funny. But it's funny if you steal some whiskey and then give it back. But here's the magical part, Paul.

The people out there that are actually connected to the wilderness and like canoeing and backpacking and stuff, we're all a really neat community. That's what I like.

So I went on the radio saying, "Hey, my whiskey is gone. Please help me."

I had an endless number of people piling into the park delivering whiskey to me.

Paul Kirtley: Awesome. That's fantastic.

Kevin Callen: Over 70 bottles of it.

Paul Kirtley: 70?

Kevin Callen: 70! There were notes left on a portage saying, "Way to go Kevin and Andy! Keep going!" There was a basket of whiskey below.

Paul Kirtley: That's fantastic.

Kevin Callen: It was. I didn't drink it all. It just shows you that there's a community out there, right?

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. It's great. It shows that you had all those people rooting for you and following you. That must have only been a small proportion of the people that felt like they'd like to do something. The people who actually take action are always a relatively small proportion, aren't they?

So that must have been great to know you had that number of people behind what you were doing.

Kevin Callen: Well, that's true.

There were four people disliking me and 11,000 people going against them.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: And I get those guys' point. But the thing is, I wasn't going out... There was a moment on the trip where we almost bailed. We almost pulled the pin. We were probably day 10 of 16. Maybe day eight. The bugs were really bad. The mosquitos were really bad the last year.

We were looking at the map saying, "Okay. Forget this. This is not worth it. How are we going to get out of the park?"

Then we saw this snapping turtle move up along this embankment. It took him 27 minutes to get to the top. When he got to the top he fell down and rolled back to the river.

Paul Kirtley: Wow.

Kevin Callen: We thought, "Well, at least we're not the snapping turtle."

Paul Kirtley: That's almost like an Aesop's Fables or something.

Kevin Callen: It was. We decided to continue on and then we ended up getting some whiskey delivered. So we were good.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. Sounds fantastic.

That sounds like it was quite a tough trip, even though it had a good outcome. When I watched the videos, I mean, some of that did some across. There was a lot of laughter there as well. There was a lot of humor. How do you keep humor going when it's tough and you know you've got people against you and you've got people stealing your whiskey supply.

How do you keep the laughs coming? How do you keep the humor up?

Kevin Callen: Because that is the only thing that will keep you going.

Knowledge base, to make sure that you're doing it safe. We know we're doing it safe. We've been out there a lot and we actually really think about what we're doing.

But my buddy Andy has a really good rule. We don't complain because it's our choice to be out there. So we have fun with it. We had fun with the bugs. We had fun with the nasty portages. We laugh about it and we enjoy ourselves, because we know we'll go back to just our job and that will be boring. Right?

Yeah. I know a lot more people think the other way. They go out to challenge themselves. Well, I challenge myself too. But if you go out to try to challenge nature, nature will always win. If you go out there for other reasons, that's good. But I go out there to enjoy myself.

I got interviewed the other day by a radio show in New York.

You're a bushcraft person. You know those survival type people that try to survive?

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: I've got nothing against that at all. Just, that's not me.

They tried to ask me some questions, like, "How do you do a one match fire?"

I said, "Well, I don't. I bring a lighter."

They said, "What kind of insects do you eat when you're out there?"

I go, "I don't. I make really good meals."

Then they ask me, "What about winter? How do you survive the winter?"

I said, "Well, I bring a [inaudible 00:26:32] tent with a wood stove and I really enjoy it."

I'm the happy camper. That's my whole thing. I'm thinking, "Gosh, guys. You spend weeks and weeks planning to get out there. Might as well enjoy it."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. Well, it's the same with me. I mean, people seem to get confused about what bushcraft is as well. I get the whole, "Ah, do you sleep under a hedge? Do you eat worms?" sort of questions when you go down to the pub and meet people and they find out what you do. It seems to be one of those misconceptions that, if you want to go out and interact with nature, you somehow need to make yourself uncomfortable.

It's a bit of a weird perspective. But, yeah, there's a lot of misconceptions out there.

Again, you were talking about people perceiving you to be teaching. I get that as well. People... "Oh, didn't you rub sticks together to get your campfire going? Oh, that's cheating."

I said, "Well, no. It's a choice you make, isn't it?"

Like you say, you choose to be there. You choose what methods and techniques you use when you're there. We all take [sp] kit. That's the thing. It's not like we're going out there with our... Maybe with the exception of speedo man, we're not going out there just in our underpants. We're all choosing to take clothing and equipment with us.

So it's all a conscious decision at the end of the day, isn't it, what we do?

Kevin Callen: Well, I learned a valuable lesson this year too. In the fall I took some students from a college that were just about to graduate as guides. I was teaching them advanced wilderness skills.

I'm 51. They're in their early 20s. People kind of know me, so they're like, "Well, let's see if we can beat Kevin."

I went, "Sure enough. Go ahead."

But what was beautiful about it was, the first couple of days they were doing fine. But then the comfort level of being out there... And I do know my bush skills. Yes, I'll bring a lighter, but if I really had to I could make a fire another way.

I've done it, right? So what happened on this trip was the weather was brutal. It rained, snowed all day for seven days straight. The only ones that really did well were the ones that got it. They looked at me and they said, "Why are you so comfortable? It's miserable out."

I go, "Because I've done this before. I am comfortable. I love being out here, and as long as you have the proper clothing and proper attitude, it's not bad weather. It's just an experience."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

So that was part of a college program you teach on, is it?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. I usually don't teach the sort of stuff I write about. I have been teaching for 26 years in a college. I teach forestry, fish and wildlife. Environmental issues, environmental debate. I teach the blasting guys how to actually look at endangered species and how to make sure that they don't blow them up.

Paul Kirtley: Right.

Kevin Callen: All these different courses. But I don't teach canoeing or camping unless it's some part of a workshop, whatever.

I've always wondered why I did that. But my background is in forestry, fish and wildlife.

I used to work in forestry and all those jobs and then on the weekends worked in outdoor education. So I think what I have done in my life now is combined those two and had somewhat of a career with it.

But I think the interesting thing is, if you like something, don't teach it. So I never teach canoeing because I want to go on canoe trips. If you teach canoeing you'll never go on a canoe trip. You're too busy teaching canoeing.

Paul Kirtley: It's difficult to go on canoe trips. That's true.

I mean, you know Ray Goodwin, don't you? He just about manages to balance that, but he does spend a lot of time out teaching people canoeing as well.

But he just lives it. He just loves being out, whatever the weather.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. He has a great philosophy, though. He really still wants to be out.

If you even look at canoe builders, which are fantastic people... But it's really rare to see a canoe builder go on a canoe trip.

Paul Kirtley: It's true. Yeah.

I was at the English canoe symposium recently and I was speaking to a few people who are involved in wholesaling and retailing canoes. I was talking to them. I said, "When was the last canoe trip you did?"

They were, like, "Uh." Then they were, like, "Yeah. We're too busy selling them to get out."

It's interesting. But they love the canoes, though.

In terms of teaching kids, that's something that you're still involved with?

I guess that's an area that not so many people are familiar with. People know you because of the guidebooks. People know you because of the canoe tripping. People know you because of what you show in your YouTube channel.

Is that something that you wish you could include more?

I'm trying to flip the question on the head, really, that you said you don't teach the things that you enjoy. But do you wish you could include some of the more environmental stuff in the YouTube, in the guidebooks?

When I met you in person I was interested to learn that you had such a background in environmental education and forestry and wildlife. That didn't necessarily come across from, say, watching a YouTube channel apart from the fact you love being out there. Is that something you wish you could get into your mainstream educational products, if you like, a little bit more?

Kevin Callen: Well, that's a really good question. I'm always toying around.

See, what I do is education, but nobody really knows it. That, to me, is true education.

See, I teach students at risk. The last six years. Because I'm part time, I get all of the students that nobody wants. I end up liking these students because they are very unique individuals. But they are not easy to teach.

But I've trained myself how to really grab someone's attention. When you're teaching students at risk, you've got two minutes and that's it, right?

So what I've done is, I've used entertainment education, combined those, and it works. If they don't know I'm teaching the, then I have done my job.

But at the end of the day I want to die knowing that I tried to make a change in the world and tried to protect nature and stuff.

Here's a good example. The canoe museum once asked me to help them out. Promote their national Canoe Day. James [sp] Rapin said, "Can you help us out?"

I said, "I'm a little different. I'm not very traditional."

He goes, "Yeah. Go ahead."

So I got this canoe made at Nova Craft. It was a Canadian flag canoe that looked like something Evel Knievel could paddle.

Paul Kirtley: I've seen that in the canoeing DVD. Is that right?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. This Is Canoeing film.

Paul Kirtley: Yes.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. Well, when I showed up at the museum, a lot of the traditional canoeists said, "Well, that's not a canoe. What the heck is that?"

I said, "Well, it's mine."

In one day I'll be on more radio and TV shows than you will ever be on with what you have. I go, "I'm not knocking you, but I know how the media works."

Sure enough, I was on 12 morning shows. They loved that canoe and loved how whacky I was.

Or, for example, in one sense you should never talk about bears. Well, the media is always going to talk about bears and how they could kill you. Well, you get their attention by doing that. Then you make sure you slip in the educational part.

But going back to the idea is, like, should I just do that all the time? Well, I kind of am. It's just a delicate question for me. The main reason I don't do any of the things I do outside of where I work is because what I've done outside the work, the Happy Camper and the books and the videos, I've all done on my own and I'm very proud of creating that mold.

When you're out in an educational place they have a tendency to want to steal that theme.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: So I want to teach at the college because I'm good at teaching forestry and fish and wildlife. Around Christmastime my students will say, "Wait a minute. You're the happy camper."

I go, "Yeah, but that has nothing to do with what we're teaching today."

Paul Kirtley: Right. Yeah.

Kevin Callen: So I want to be known there as a good teacher, not because I'm... Oh, that's the guy that's on video.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah, that you're not there just because you're a kind of celebrity and you've got your YouTube channel and you've written a bunch of guidebooks. You're there because you know your stuff and you can teach it.

Kevin Callen: Yeah, and the students know that. I just love. I'm getting to the age where... The students can smell fear a mile away, right? I teach some of the roughest individuals. I mean, I teach guys that blow things up, right?

But they're my friends. The other day someone was getting upset with me. All my [inaudible 00:34:57] students came to my rescue.

Paul Kirtley: Oh really?

Kevin Callen: [inaudible 00:35:02]

I'm trying to teach my daughter that. You don't judge a book by its cover.

My dad was a professional boxer. That's what he did for a living. He taught me that. You never judge a person by the color of his trunks.

Paul Kirtley: Was he Irish? Am I right?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. He was a lightweight boxer. The Fighting Shamrock. Yeah. He fought in [inaudible 00:35:26] Gardens and everything.

Paul Kirtley: Wow. Not to be messed with, then.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. If you look at me? No way.

I got all my background from my Scottish cousins. My father would roll in his grave if I said this, but yeah, my mom's Scottish and I visited Scotland a few years back and met them all. That's where I got it all from. My background from Scotland is writing and storytelling. I do not look like a boxer.

Paul Kirtley: No, no. And enjoying good single malt as well.

Kevin Callen: Oh yeah. I [inaudible 00:36:00] Irish whiskey as well, but...

Paul Kirtley: Fair enough. There are some good ones.

Have you tried any Japanese whiskeys?

Kevin Callen: I did the other day. I also tried... Canada has its Cape Breton single malt.

Paul Kirtley: Okay. I've not tried that one.

Kevin Callen: It's all debatable whether it's a whiskey or not. But it was quite good. I enjoyed it.

Paul Kirtley: I'll have to try that next time I'm over.

What would you say, then, is your perfect canoe trip? You clearly keep it for you, for yourself. It's not something that you necessarily let bleed over into your teaching career or your formal teaching career, if you like.

So how would you describe your perfect canoe trip, or even a perfect day on a canoe trip?

Kevin Callen: Well, I get the question a lot of what's your favorite place to go canoeing. My favorite place is [sp] Sappi, but it's the next place I'm going to. It doesn't matter where it is. I love the planning of it. I love the mystery of it. I love the new things.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. I get that. I can understand that.

Kevin Callen: Well, you went on the Bloodvein in Canada this year, right?

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. That's right.

Kevin Callen: So what was the purpose behind that? Why did you choose the Bloodvein?

Paul Kirtley: Well, Ray had been there before. I was doing it with... Ray and I were leading it together. That was is years ago. He had really enjoyed it.

But just the fact that it was such an untamed, unspoiled wilderness area and that we were going to be in [inaudible 00:37:24]. That's an adventure in itself.

Then it was just paddle out through its amazing boreal forest. It was just not knowing what you were going to expect. Clearly you've got Hap Wilson's guidebook and you can try and work out which way the water is flowing from some of his weird diagrams.

You've got some idea of what's coming, but that doesn't really give you any idea of what you're actually going to see with your eyes. Yeah. It's just that. Going into the wilderness, that unknown, finding your way through it, making decisions... One of the things was, even though Ray had been before, very different water levels and pretty much a completely different river from that respect.

So, yeah. It's always an adventure, and going somewhere for the first time is just fantastic.

You're right. The planning is much apart of it. When you actually get there you feel like it has all come to fruition, whereas, if you don't plan it properly, you feel like you're at sixes and sevens the whole way through.

Yeah. It's a great thing to do right from start to finish, as far as I'm concerned.

Kevin Callen: It goes back to why my daughter feels good about herself. It actually challenges you. It doesn't challenge you against nature. It challenges you to make you feel confident about yourself and try other things.

Now, the big question is, who is a better cooker? Ray or you?

Paul Kirtley: Well, yeah. It's a good question. We've both got our own individual styles, it has to be said.

Ray is very much a, let's get as many different ingredients in one pot as we can. Sometimes it works really well and sometimes it doesn't work quite so well.

But your belly is always full with Ray's cooking. That's for sure.

So, yeah. He came up with some interesting concoctions with what the outfitter had given us. Not necessarily what was supposed to be the combination that we were supposed to be using, but nonetheless we ate well. So it was good.

Kevin Callen: If you think back to that trip and you think back to the question we're on, what was your favorite smell on the trip? Was it the spruce? Was it the canvas packs? Was it the smoke on your clothing? Was it the freshwater? The river?

Paul Kirtley: The water, yeah. Certainly some spots. It was strange. It almost smelt a little bit like sea in places, even though we're a long way away from the sea. I don't really know why.

There was a real fresh smell to the air. The pine and the spruce, again, as well. Some of the camp sites. And juniper, even, in some places. There was a real nice fragrance where we were.

So, yeah. All of those things together. Absolutely. It's amazing how, when you smell one of those components, again, it takes you back to a particular moment.

Kevin Callen: I always think of a perfect canoe trip. You look at the beautiful scenic vistas and things like that, and you always remember those. You also have video and photos to replenish those memories.

But I always find that, at the end of the day, what were your favorite tastes, touches, smells, that sort of thing? Those are the things that photos or videos don't give you, but will last forever.

Fresh [inaudible 00:40:35] with butter that you didn't know you had in the pack, or blueberry scones. Even Labrador tea or something. Those are the memories that you really entice.

The reason why I think it's really important to have those senses is you've now reconnected to nature. You're part of it. You're not trying to survive out there and going from A to B and then getting home. You don't want to go home because you know you're already at home.

Paul Kirtley: Absolutely. Yeah. There was one portage one day. We stopped on the end of the portage trail for lunch. Just towards the end of the portage trail there was a pin cherry bush. The little pin cherries that you get. There's not much flesh on them, but they're really tart and really nice. I went back and got a handful of them and ate them before I had my main lunch.

I can still taste that tartness in my mouth. It's those things that you really do remember. Yeah.

Kevin Callen: You see, that's bushcraft. You're eating the edibles because you want to. Not because you had to because you were forced to survive out there.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. Absolutely.

There's a reasonable amount out there you could eat. You would struggle over long term.

Yeah. That time of year there's some fruit around. There are a few things you can browse on. Banic butter and pancakes and all those things are great, but after awhile they do get a little bit samey. So even just a handful of fresh wild fruit, whether it's some blueberries earlier in the year or some cherries or something, it's absolutely fantastic.

It's almost like you struck gold. You found something really valuable.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. Your body really thanks you for that. I remember in Quetico I was going for a 26 day canoe trip. On day five I wasn't feeling that great. Very lazy and lethargic. My gut was killing me. I'm thinking, "Well, I'm eating banic or dehydrated foods."

I'm thinking, "Man, I can't keep this up for 26 days."

So I stopped and I spent two days on one lake, and I fished. I [sp] swished blueberries. I started eating fresh stuff that's around me. It made a huge difference to the point, by day 15, I didn't even know it was day 15.

Paul Kirtley: Really? Yeah.

Kevin Callen: Those magical moments where you don't look at the time, you don't look at the calendar. You just go, right?

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. There's that sweet spot in the middle of a trip, isn't there? You're into the rhythm of the trip, but you're not so close to the end that you're thinking, "I need to make my pickup or my plane or my ferry," or whatever it is that you need to do at the end of the trip. You're enjoying the moment as you go through. You're not thinking about what has come before it. You're not thinking about what's coming after it.

It's really nice to enjoy those moments.

Kevin Callen: I think that's what's changing now in canoe tripping, or even wilderness tripping. Back in the, oh gosh, the '30s, the average trip was a month or tow. In the '70s it was 10 days. If you look at all the guidebooks in the '70s, they're all 10 day routes. If you look at the '90s they're five days. Now it's two nights. In fact, sometimes I think it's only one night.

I found that that has to change. I don't know how it's going to change, but it has to. There's no way you can connect and be comfortable with your surroundings in one night. You're still afraid that a bear is going to kill you because you're not used to that.

It's not until day five or six where you just switch. Your whole body becomes comfortable.

The good example of that was that program I told you, where I took the students out. I agreed to teach it only if I took them for... I asked for 10 days. They gave me seven. Last year, when they asked me to teach it for the first time, it was two nights.

I said, "Guys, they can't have advanced wilderness skills in two nights."

Paul Kirtley: No.

Kevin Callen: If you go to the Happy Camper channel and watch those series of videos, the first one, you're looking at these students. You're, like, "My God. How do they ever survive?"

Then [inaudible 00:44:24] Lord, they were a nightmare. But by the end of it, the ones that made it through, they were completely different people. It was a magical transformation, and it was because they had gone through that time.

When I asked them all, "Would you like to do it again?"

None of them wanted to go home. But five of them on day two I had to haul out because they couldn't deal with it. In one sense they could. They just didn't want to.

Paul Kirtley: Was that the weather or the pace? What was it they didn't like?

Kevin Callen: It was everything. I had people that were injured and did have emotional problems on the trip and continued. The ones that left... The weather was bad, I've got to say. It was really cold and nasty.

Paul Kirtley: It looked like what I would call proper hypothermia weather. It was that bit in between being properly cold and when it's just snow and ice. It's that kind of wet, cold, sleety, snowy bit in the middle that's really nasty.

Kevin Callen: It was, but the one thing I kept telling him, the partner I was with, the guy I worked with... I said, "Look, we won't let you get hypothermia. So don't worry about that. We have backup stuff. We're fine. You're fine."

But two days into it, the ones that panicked, they said, "Well, I'm injured. I have to go back."

So what I did... It was a really interesting case study. We had a split up. We made it their choice of what to do because it was a leadership program. It was the students' choice to split the group up. So the ones that wanted to continue went with the other instructor, and I headed back with the one injured that had an injured knee.

I went back with seven others. The closer we got to the parking lot, there was only three of them left that wanted to continue because they all said, "Well, I'm injured." They might have been injured. But it was that bail out plan. Like, "Well, there was the parking lot. I'm out of here."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: The others, they had no bail out plan. Now what's happening... It's a sad thing, too, because it's human nature.

After the trip they were back in class. The ones that bailed are really getting teased by the ones that made it.

Paul Kirtley: Really?

Kevin Callen: It's a touchy situation. In the one sense you want to say, "Yeah, but you didn't do it. The others did."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. It's an interesting one, isn't it? It's an interesting one.

Would it be okay if I link some of those videos in the show notes when this is on my blog? I can let other people see what we're talking about, if that's all right with you.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. There's seven videos of that backpacking trip. But when you start watching it, get a single malt beside you. Actually, probably take two or three drams to get through it.

But make sure to watch it until the end. The first couple you're, like, "How did Kevin ever survive with these kids and not strangle them?"

Good lord, the skill set was brutal. Five of them didn't even bring a flashlight for a seven day trip in the fall. They're supposed to be guides at the end of it. Then the

food they brought was just horrendous. Can this, can that. Their packs weighed, minimum, 65 pounds. Minimum.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. There was one guy... Like you say, it was just all tinned. He didn't even realize that it was heavy.

Kevin Callen: No. Well, that's youthful enthusiasm, right? It's, like, "We can do it. I don't care how heavy it is."

Then by day three, "Oh, this is terrible!"

My pack was 40 pounds. I wanted it to be 35, but it was 40 because I had all of this [sp] Mersey stuff in. Everything was fine.

We have bears here, so you have to hang your food so the bears don't get at it. So I showed them how to do it. Well, instead of getting angry... So there's a certain point where the Irish temper come south, right? It's, like, "You guys are all..!"

I got up the first morning and I realized they didn't hang their food pack properly at all. They were hanging right to the tree.

So instead of getting mad and telling them what they did wrong, I started doing the humor thing and letting nature teach them. So I actually hid all their food in the forest. They woke up. I turned the camera on. They're, like, "Where's our food?"

Maybe a bear got it.

"What are we going to do?"

I said, "Well, I don't know. Maybe you should have thought about it."

The one guy, he kept on complaining about how his pack was heavier than the others, but it really was the lightest. So I put rocks in it every morning. Then at night he would open it up... "Who put these rocks in here?"

I don't know. I don't know.

Paul Kirtley: Fantastic. I have a friend who has a tendency to put rocks in people's day packs and rucksacks. Yeah. You've got to watch yourself when you're around him. Yeah.

Kevin Callen: That's not Ray Goodwin, is it? I can see him...

Paul Kirtley: No. It is the sort of thing he would do, but it's not him. No. I won't mention his name. He will stay anonymous.

So you were taking how, back in the day, people did longer trips. We're still talking leisure trips here, aren't we? We're not talking about people prospecting and trading and what have you. But people, for leisure, took longer trips.

Awhile ago you posted a nice old film from 1950s called Wilderness Day that was filmed in Quetico superior wilderness area. That, again, it was a really interesting insight into how things were back in the day. But, also, it seemed like they were giving advice in terms of tidying up after you and not using spruce [inaudible 00:49:52] to sleep on. Using an inflatable mattress.

So even back then there must have been starting to be some issues with more use of wilderness areas and maybe needing to change practices so that they weren't overly damaged.

So apart from the length of trip coming down, have you noticed any other changes over the years in terms of the way people trip, or how they trip, or just canoe camping in general?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. I really find that whole film interesting too. What's happening now is exactly what happened then.

There was a time where this huge amount of people wanted to go and try this wilderness experience, whether because it was immigration, new Canadians, or because of population or because it was after a war and people wanted to get away from violence. Whatever it was.

There was always this influx of people trying it. Then there's a lack of ethic because a lack of knowledge. That film in the '50s was done for that. It was put together because there were too many people doing wrong things and someone had to show them how not to do it.

Well, this year a whole bunch of people drowned or got lost or got injured in Canada. The media was saying, "Well, why?"

I said, "Well, there's a bunch of reasons." Some people die out there because they're very experienced, but just bad luck. One day nature wins and nothing could be done. The other reason why people get injured or die out there is because they are novices. They are learning along the way, learning from misadventure, and just, again, terrible bad luck.

But the majority of the time is this usually male bravado, but it's basically, "I can go out there without a life jacket even though it's hypothermic weather because I'm fine. I need this." Then an accident happens.

What's happening is, there's a lot more people wanting to go out there. But they don't want to spend the time learning the skills.

Again, going back to those students, they didn't want to spend the time learning the skills. They wanted everything given to them. They wanted a job as a guide, but they didn't want to stay in the bush to learn the experiences.

So that's what's happening now, I think. There's a lot more people going out there, but there's less skill set and a lot more injuries.

Technology, too, might have something to do with it. A SPOT is a great piece of technology. You can push the SPOT global system where it will tell everybody where you are. If you're injured you can press 911 or SOS.

But some people are just pushing it when they're not really injured. They just want to go home.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. I have some friends involved with mountain rescue. They have had those experiences where people are on the side of a mountain somewhere in the Lake district or Scotland, and they call for mountain rescue because they're tired. They want, literally, a taxi service to come and get them off the hill. It's incredible.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. I don't know what you're doing over there, but Canada is thinking of just finding them.

In Killarney Park this year there was a trail that was 100 kilometers long. It's a really difficult hiking trail. It takes probably six to 10 days depending on your skill set to do it.

Well, people are trying to do it in a day. It's a contest now. The park, they've had enough. Legally, they have to give the permit. But they're telling everybody, "We're telling you not to do it. If you do it, you're paying for that helicopter."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. This isn't an organized event like an adventure race or anything. This is just people going out and trying it on their own, is it?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. Again, it's this male bravado thing. It's, like, "Yeah. We should be able to do that."

Again, hats off to those people if they can do it. But the people that are trying this haven't even gone camping before.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: I meet these people. I'm thinking... So the one we rescued this year, I helped with the rescue. He thought he got bit by a rattlesnake even though there were no rattlesnakes there. It was actually a wasp that stung him.

He didn't drink water for a day and a half. He didn't have a first aid kit with him.

It's, like, "What were you thinking?"

But I think what I'm trying to get at is, we all go through that stage where we don't know what we're doing and we try to learn and we have some misadventures along the way.

Paul Kirtley: Absolutely.

Kevin Callen: I have some. But what we really need is more bush time.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah, and I think there's a difference between just going camping locally, isn't there, and actually making a journey. I mean, I certainly feel that way.

It's something to do with the commitment, where you're committed to being there for seven days or 12 days or 14 days or whatever it is that you're doing. You're in there and you're coming out the other end 14 days later.

Kevin Callen: You're a totally different person.

For good reason, people can't do it because of work. That's a problem in society. We're working too much. We're connected too much to technology.

But, yeah. I feel bad for people that only have the weekends. Probably hearing me say all these things, they're, like, "Well, that's nice for you to say, Kevin. But I don't have a month to go off in some wilderness trip."

I hope they do someday have a month. But I think, as a whole, we really got to get away from just doing one-nighters.

Paul Kirtley: Sure. So for somebody starting out now that was new to going out canoe camping, what advice would you give them to get started so that they do stay relatively safe, but they can progress onto bigger things.

Kevin Callen: Well, take it easy at first. Don't really try to overdo it. Don't go as somebody that wants to overdo it.

I see so many people that have a buddy that wants to take them on this amazing adventure, and of course they have never even gone camping once in their life. Then they come back hating it. That's the worst thing. You don't want them to hate it.

Paul Kirtley: Right.

Kevin Callen: Also, don't worry too much about gear at first. There's really a lot of emphasis on what's the best gear. We think too much of it, especially with me. My VISA card, my wife is going to grab it off my one day.

The greatest thing that happened to me years ago was I was robbed of my canoe gear just after a trip. Then two days later I was supposed to go do this big huge trip with my wife. I canceled it. I said, "Well, we can't go with just the gear we have."

She goes, "We used to."

The old gear up in the attic, that canvas, [sp] tantric canvas pack or whatever, we used to camp with. Why don't we go back in time? It's just your mindset. Make sure we're safe. Be logical about it, and we were fine.

It was a great trip. We didn't need that fancy stuff. It's nice to have the fancy stuff, but you don't really need it.

Paul Kirtley: That's true.

I guess as an extension of that, people who are in Canada, they could maybe go and find somewhere locally and do a weekend trip and build up to going on longer trips. For those of us that are further afield, a lot of British paddlers, a lot of European paddlers, are interested in doing a trip in Canada.

For some reason it's one of those bucket list things to do.

I always think that when people put things up on a pedestal like that, it's the same as... In Scotland, for example, you get more English hillwalkers going in trouble in the mountains in Scotland than Scottish hillwalkers.

For the Scottish guys, if it's bad weather they go to the pub or they go next weekend, whereas the English guys, they have driven 12 hours to get up there. They have taken that time off work. They have taken that time away from family or whatever.

They are committed. They were already committed regardless of whatever the weather is doing. It's always the same. When you're coming from further afield, you've got to do what you've decided to do at that point in time.

Is there any advice you would give people that were traveling to Canada, if you like, that are maybe going to do a bigger trip? Anything you could add to what you've already said there?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. If you're coming to Canada, one thing I learned going to the U.K. ... I was in Wales and also in Scotland. Scotland is amazing. Wales is amazing. But I also learned that a lot of people were jealous of where I was from because we have so much vast wilderness.

I mean, we don't. We have major issues, environmental issues here. But there are lots of wild areas. It's overwhelming.

If you were never in Canada before and you wanted to go on a canoe trip or a hiking trip, where do you go?

There are so many places. There's the typical places, like Algonquin, Temagami, Killarney, Quetico. There's even the far northern places like [inaudible 00:58:20] Caribou and [inaudible 00:58:21]

Out west there's the Milk River out in Alberta and stuff.

That's, I think, the problem. There's too much to choose from.

So I would actually go online and get connected to people that are in chat forums and stuff like that. They're not outfitters and guides trying to sell... There's nothing wrong with that, but they're trying to sell you their [inaudible 00:58:41], right?

We're complete strangers.

We're not complete strangers. We're all sort of a community here.

Sort of say, "Look, I'm coming from afar. I'm going to fly here. Where should I go?"

They will probably give you some of those lost canoe routes. There's a place up in Sudbury in northern Ontario that's south of Temagami called the Chiniguchi. It's one of the best canoe routes I can ever imagine.

You go up this one river called the Chiniguchi and come down the Sturgeon River, which is a beautiful river. It's a 10 day loop. You'll probably see one or two other people. It's not that far north. If anything ever happened, you could get out of trouble really quickly.

Paul Kirtley: Right, right.

Kevin Callen: Then I'm going to keep labeling all of these places, right?

I would say, if you're coming to Canada, don't go to the main areas where everybody goes.

Paul Kirtley: Is the route you just mentioned there, near [inaudible 00:59:41], is that one of the ones that's in your lost canoe routes book?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. Part of it is. The whole route is in the top 50 Canoe Routes book that I did a couple of years ago.

Paul Kirtley: Okay. Right.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. There's a bunch of other places around that area too.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: I went to go canoeing in Scotland sort of the switch it. I had no knowledge of Scotland whatsoever. I contacted a bunch of people up there. Then I said, "Well, where's the best place in Scotland."

It was the northwest. I forget the exact blocks we went through. But I think we went to the best place in all of Scotland.

Paul Kirtley: Right.

Where was that?

Kevin Callen: It was near Sugarloaf Mountain.

Paul Kirtley: Okay. I know what you mean. I think I saw some pictures from where you were. I think you had good weather as well, didn't you?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. We did. We were so naive. I love going to Scotland because I didn't have a clue what I was doing.

The idea of dragging your canoe through the grass and portaging it... I was portaging. People were laughing at me. Why are you doing that? You just drag it.

Paul Kirtley: Through the [inaudible 01:00:48]. Yeah.

Kevin Callen: And midges. You poor buggers. Those are crazy. We have black flies, mosquitos, horse flies, deer flies. I thought I could handle midges. No. Midges are brutal.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. They are. Particularly on the west. The west of Scotland, it's worse. It's warmer and wetter there than the east. Yeah. It can be brutal in the summer. Yeah. Absolutely.

Kevin Callen: I'm just glad I didn't wear a kilt.

Paul Kirtley: You do wonder, don't you? Where the Scotsman are laughing at non Scottish people trying to wear kilts. It's just some big national joke that we don't know about.

Kevin Callen: Well, it's like maple syrup here, right?

We might have maple syrup. But it's not every morning.

Paul Kirtley: No.

Kevin Callen: We do drink a lot of beer though, I think. Aye?

Paul Kirtley: Oh man.

So, just to finish off, I know relatively recently, compared to your canoeing career, if you'd like, your canoeing pads... You have gotten really into winter camping and snowshoeing and tobogganing, or at least it seems that way.

It's a relatively recent interest, but you seem to really, really love it. What is it that's got you into it? Why do you love it so?

Kevin Callen: I absolutely love winter because I'm really sick and tired of people complaining about winter. There's so much around here, I tell you. Especially in the city. As soon as winter happens they start complaining.

"Oh, I hate the weather. I hate winter. I wish winter was over."

If you look how long winter is here, you better enjoy it or you're going to go insane. Right? So I rejoice winter. I used to cold camp. What we call cold camping is you use a four season tent with no heat source. Yeah, there were some mornings where I woke up and this is ridiculous. I'm not doing this. It's minus 30 degrees.

Then I thought, "Okay. Well, I'm going to use a [sp] prosprator tent and a wood stove."

Then I realized, "This is fun."

It's like a moveable log cain. You can take it wherever you want.

So for a good... I don't know. I have been doing it for four or five years.

I'm quite addicted to it. Now, the way my job is at the college, I'm part time. In January I don't have students at risk. So that gives me about a month, month and a half where I don't have employment.

So my wife says, "Well, you just go out camping."

Paul Kirtley: Get out of the house. Yeah.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. I think winter camping like that is similar to kayaking and canoeing or backpacking. Imagine yourself pulling a freight toboggan across the lake with your buddies. They have their own freight toboggan. You're chitchatting, and then now and then you spread out and have your own solitude.

Then, at night, you get around the campfire and have a chitchat and a single malt. It's the same thing, except it's cold. But I find, in winter camping, if you use skill set you're not cold. You're never cold. You can get wet and damp because you're sweating all day pulling that freight toboggan, but you're used to your element.

Then you come back and you watch all of these people in the city dressed in these huge puffy jackets freezing to death. It's because they're not part of their surroundings.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. They're trying to fight it, rather than work with it.

Kevin Callen: Yes.

Paul Kirtley: I absolutely love winter camping. Hot camp winter camping is absolutely fantastic.

You're right. In some ways it's more simple than summer camping. There are certain things you need to do. The days are quite short. You've got nice, relatively long, relaxed evenings as long as you've got firewood for your tent.

I think it's a fantastic way to be out in the woods in the winter. It's just brilliant. I love it.

Kevin Callen: I was on TV the other day showing winter camping. They said, "It gets dark soon. What do you do?"

I said, "I don't do anything. That's why I like it."

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: Imagine that. You sit in a tent with a candle and a wood stove going and you read a book. Imagine that. You don't have to actually check your email to make sure what you have to do for work the next day.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. It's brilliant.

I actually get the sleep I need as well on those trips, whereas often, like you say, with emails... Particularly in this line of work that we have, you're checking emails before you're going out during the day or you're doing things late at night before you get in, or you're trying to integrate the technology with trips that you're doing so that you can... You were talking about sending your radio broadcasts earlier on your Algonquin trip.

All of that just adds an extra stress, doesn't it? So just to be able to go and sit in your tent and read, or talk with friends and then have a good night sleep... It's absolutely fantastic.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. It's also a good time to make really great meals.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. Definitely.

You've got the excuse as well because you're burning the calories during the day, so it's good.

Kevin Callen: That's right.

I never go on a diet when I'm out winter camping.

Paul Kirtley: That's fantastic. That's good.

So have you got some canoeing camping trips planned for this winter, Kevin?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. In fact, I leave tomorrow with some students. I volunteered to take some students at risk out for a few days in Algonquin. That's going to be fun. But also, I have quite a few planned for January. There's one trip that's really kind of intriguing.

There was a story of Grey Owl when he was Archie Belaney. He went to Algonquin park and he didn't like the idea of the park saying you can't trap. This is when he used to be a trapper and didn't switch over to the Grey Owl thing.

He bet the park wardens that he could go through Algonquin and they couldn't catch him. Well, they chased him, and then he fell through the ice and they saved him.

So it's a really neat story. I want to do that same route and hopefully not go through the ice and not get chased by the park wardens. But I want to do the same route.

I think the whole Grey Owl story is pretty cool.

Paul Kirtley: It is. He was an interesting character, and yeah, from Hastings as well, which isn't that far down the road from where we run some of our bushcraft courses. So a nice little local connection there as well.

Kevin Callen: I think that's where speedo man was from.

Speedo man, by the way, he's my neighbor. He came over from England probably six or seven years ago. I remember him coming over that day. He said, "Oh, hey, I want to try this Canadian canoe thing. Will you take me out?"

I went, "Sure."

My wife said, "You don't even know him."

I said, "Well, I'll know him by the end of the trip."

The first night on the French River... Well, you got on the French River. You know that route.

I go swimming. I have no clothes on. It's not a big deal. That's when you do when you're camping.

He was quite offended. He goes, "This is what we do in Canada? You swim around naked?"

I said, "Well, you can do whatever you want."

So he wears his bathing suit, which is a black speedo with no backend. It's a G-string, right?

I go, "What the-"

He goes, "Well, this is what we wear in England."

I go, "I don't think so."

Paul Kirtley: No.

Kevin Callen: I don't think anybody in England wears this. So the whole five days he's wearing this thing.

I even said to him, I go, "If women see me naked swimming they will giggle for sure, but if they see you they will be disgusted. There's a difference."

The last night of the trip I jump into the water and I didn't know there was a rock there. I hit a rock with my foot and I broke my foot in three places. It was nasty. I said, "Can you help me?"

He goes, "Well, no. You're naked. I'm not touching you."

So I had to convince this man with a black speedo to pull my naked body out of the water, and right then these canoes come around the corner filled with women. One woman yells out, "There's two naked men!"

He drops me. "I'm not naked! I have a bathing suit on!"

I go home. My wife said, "I told you so. I told you so."

I wrote this story called Northern Exposure. I won a writer's award for \$2000 dollars.

Paul Kirtley: Really? Fantastic.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. It was great. So I was never going to go canoe tripping with him again. But my publicist said, "Well, you said, because you get some good stories out of that."

He's still my neighbor. We still go out. We even go winter camping together.

Paul Kirtley: Fantastic. Does he wear more than speedos in the winter, though?

Kevin Callen: He's obsessed with his speedos. Now he wears one with the... I can't believe I can't remember the name.

Paul Kirtley: Union Jack, do you mean?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. He wears one. But it looks like a diaper on him. Someone made it for him.

His friend in England made this. I think he knitted them. I don't know.

If anybody is listening, get Paul to give you my address and mail me any speedo with a Scottish flag and a proper Jack...

Paul Kirtley: Union Jack. Yeah.

Kevin Callen: ...Or the Irish flag.

Paul Kirtley: And a Saint George's cross as well, and a Welsh dragon.

I'm just going to get loads and loads of pairs of pants in the post now. I can see what's going to happen here.

Kevin Callen: That will be an exciting time for you then, won't it, Paul?

Paul Kirtley: Possible.

Kevin Callen: If you get those mailed to me, I guarantee that he will wear one or two of them, or even three or four different designs, and run across the snow. I will videotape that and put it on my site.

Paul Kirtley: Okay. Well, let's do that then.

I'll put an address that people can send them to below this on my blog. People can send those pants for speedo man. Ill package them up and forward them to Kevin. We'll get a YouTube video up of speedo man streaking across the snow in his various different national speedo pants.

Notice that he hasn't signed up for this at all. But that doesn't matter.

Kevin Callen: Oh, no. Believe me, I know him really well. He will do it. He thinks he looks good in speedos.

Paul Kirtley: That's all right, then. Very delusional, obviously. Nobody looks good in speedos, unless they're on an Olympic team.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. That's true.

Paul Kirtley: Cool. So you got some cool winter stuff coming up. Anything else? What does 2015 hold for you that you can tell us about at the moment?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. Every year around this time of year I sort of go, "Okay. What am I going to do next year?"

I don't say I'm going to do this trip, that trip. These things all come together. But what's my purpose?

My purpose next year is to really try to help the idea of getting better ethics out there, better knowledge base. A lot of the new Canadians coming into Canada, I want them to get out camping and I want them to be safe. I want to make sure whatever I'm doing is helping that.

Last year or this year, now, my product was to get more families out. That's why I did that once around Killarney trip with the family and put it on film.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. That was nice.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. It was a fun trip. It was a really good trip.

Next year is all about safety, but safety is a boring word. It's more to do with what to do proper out there.

He's an example. Some people don't even know what portage etiquette is. The idea of actually going along a portage, who gets the right away? The one with the heavy canoe and the one with the light pack?

What's happening now is people just don't move for you. It's becoming like a city street out there.

Or even better, people don't even say hello to you out there.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. It's incredible, isn't it?

Kevin Callen: Yeah. I mean, I had these guys that didn't say hello to us. I just said hello to them and they just watched me. Wouldn't even pay attention.

Then I had to rescue them that day. They flipped over in a snowstorm and I had to pull them to shore, got them around the fire, and actually speedo man was with me. He said, "Well let them die."

Paul Kirtley: Good British attitude.

Kevin Callen: But they're sitting around the fire and yeah, speedo man finally said, "Hey, do you want to say hello to us now?"

Paul Kirtley: Were they seasoned trippers? Were they new?

Kevin Callen: They were the type of people that thought they were seasoned. But they had no clue what they were doing. That's the danger up there.

In fact, to finish this all off, I'll tell you a really good story I wrote up for Canoeroots magazine you'll see in a couple of weeks. Probably one of the best adventures. Because I'm Irish and Scottish I'll exaggerate the truth, but this exactly happened to me.

I did a workshop in Algonquin park to teach people how to go canoeing because a lot of people were getting in trouble.

So the night before that, though, I did a book signing the park. This guy that I called the Yuk Yuk Man, he came up to me. I call him Yuk Yuk Man because he just kept on going, "Yuck, yuck, yuck, yuck."

He would say really bad jokes about his wife, about sex and everything. He was just rude, right?

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: Then I thought, "I'm going to get out of here. I can't stand this man."

I escaped. Well, I went to the campground. There's a series of campgrounds in the park. I got my site. I pulled up. He's my neighbor. He's camped right beside me.

I'm thinking, "Oh, for the love of God, why would this man be my neighbor?"

So I disguised so when I came out of the vehicle he wouldn't know it was me. That didn't work. So he came over with really cheap beer and kept on telling me how great was. Then I said, "Well, are you taking my course tomorrow?"

He said, "Oh, no. I don't need to take that course. I know what I'm doing."

That's a sign that they don't. Anybody that says they know what they are doing in the bush, they don't have a clue. You should always be willing to learn something.

Paul Kirtley: And you always are learning. That's the thing.

Kevin Callen: Oh, all the time.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: This is classic. This is a great story. It gets better.

So the next day I gave my course. I felt, "Oh, it's a nice day. Lovely people. But really, they're not in danger. They really are thinking logically. Great to have them out for the day, but I'm not sure if I saved anybody." Then I left and the road was closed. Emergency services were there. They were pulling a man out of the water. He's alive, but he almost drowned through hypothermia because eh didn't have his life jacket on.

It's Yuck Yuck man.

Paul Kirtley: Seriously?

Kevin Callen: It's the guy.

Paul Kirtley: Wow.

Kevin Callen: Life is phenomenal to have that happen.

It taught me that lesson. It's Yuck Yuck man that's dying out there 95% of the time because he's not listening to reason. He's being that fool that thinks he knows what he's doing and not wearing a life jacket when it's really cold out.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. I think there's a false psychological trick that people play on themselves. You see it in other outdoor pursuits as well. You see it with seat belts as well.

People say, "Well, I've never worn a seatbelt and I'm still fine."

It's kind of a weird perverse reverse logic, because you've done it for a long time and by chance nothing has happened to you. Therefore, that's what you do. It's fine. It's not a problem.

If you actually just look at it objectively, it's just stupid.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. I remember being in northern Quebec running this northern river. It was a class two rapid before a waterfall. A gentleman on the trip with me, actually... He was with his son too. He went to run it. I didn't. He called me a sissy pants.

I was, like, "Sissy pants? Whoever uses that term anymore?"

I go, "Why am I a sissy pants?"

He goes, "Well, you can run a class two, Kevin."

I went, "Yeah, but if I don't and I go over that waterfall, I'm dead and we're in the middle of nowhere."

He goes, "Yeah, but that's silly."

He ran it. He survived. He ran the run perfectly.

I went up to him. I said, "I'll never go canoe tripping with you ever again."

The only way you survive out here is to be logical about what you're doing. You don't run a class two above a waterfall when you're in the far north near James Bay.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. Absolutely. That's something that Ray Goodwin and I had a chat about quite extensively on the Bloodvein, and in fact that's in episode two, the episode before this, where we talk exactly through that sort of stuff.

As British paddlers, we often come up against that sort of attitude. We'll show photos or video or what have you of trips that we do. We're lining some rapids, maybe, and people are going, "That's a class you. You can run that."

It's, like, "Yeah, but what if?"

In this case, below it are some rocks. IF we don't get it right we pin the boat, or somebody swims into that, they're going to be in a mess. Whereas, in other cases, we'll run a class three but it's just out into a pool.

If you swim you're in deep water still. You're out into a pool. You gather your kit up. It's fine. So it's all about context and the consequences of what's going to happen if you get it wrong. Not about whether or not, under most circumstances, you will get it right.

Kevin Callen: It is. I learned that too when I was at Whales at the symposium.

I've got to say, there are amazing paddlers in the U.K. Amazing paddlers. What I say is that you don't have a lot of vast wilderness. You have specific places everybody goes to. That's just because the country is a lot older than Canada, right?

Paul Kirtley: And it's small, and we have a big population. Yeah. Absolutely. The terrain is different.

Kevin Callen: It is, and it's beautiful. I mean, Whales was beautiful. But you're practicing all day in the same hole. So you're getting more proficient, where the majority of us just want to go canoeing somewhere.

There are those certain people, the [sp] play boaters, that practice in the same hole all day. But the majority of us just go on a trip.

So it's different paddling techniques. On the way home from Whales I thought, "Wouldn't it be a great project to do a documentary or even a book or whatever, a film, on wilderness culture, and show how all these different people around the world go into their wild area and how they do it."

They all do it differently, but they all think of it the same.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. The mentality that people use to approach it.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. So that's what we'll do, Paul. We'll quit our jobs. Ray Goodwin will joint us.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. We should do it.

Kevin Callen: [inaudible 01:17:56]

We'll travel the world and we will have, what, Japanese single malt you said? What was that? The Japanese now have their own single malt?

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. The namesake. It's good. You should try it.

Kevin Callen: Yeah. We'll get a whiskey sponsor to sponsor us and we'll go to Japan. We'll go to Canada. We'll go get some bourbon down in the southern states.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah.

Kevin Callen: Then we'll go down the Spey River in Scotland. Ah, it's amazing!

Paul Kirtley: That would be fantastic. That would be awesome.

Kevin Callen: In fact, forget my whole plan of doing safety stuff next year. I'm canceling all that and this is my plan now. I'm going to go drinking around the world and [inaudible 01:18:39]

Paul Kirtley: Once around the world in a whiskey glass, we could call it.

(laughter)

Well, if anybody is listening that can help us with that, we're certainly up for it. I'm sure [inaudible 01:18:50] would be up for it as well.

Kevin Callen: That sounds good. I think everybody wants that job.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah, yeah. Excellent. Good.

Well, thank you very, very much for joining me, Kevin. It has been an absolute pleasure to talk to you. We've talked a long time, which is great. It doesn't feel like we've been talking more than 10 minutes, really.

It has been fantastic having you on my podcast. Thank you so much for joining me. I'm sure the listeners will enjoy having heard from you. I'll put links below this on

my blog to a lot of the things that we talked about, videos and books and what have you.

We'll look forward to that video of speedo man skating across the ice in his Four Nations underpants before too long, I'm sure.

Kevin Callen: That sounds good.

[inaudible 01:19:38]

I really appreciate you spending the time to do the interview with me. Actually, yeah. Love the stuff you do. Love the video channels. Love your blogs, actually. Really good detail.

Yeah. Next time we'll have a chat around the campfire.

Paul Kirtley: Yeah. I look forward to that. Whether it's in Scotland or whether it's in Canada, we'll do that soon. I look forward to it.

Kevin Callen: Sounds good.

Paul Kirtley: All right. Take care, mate. Cheers. Bye-bye.

Kevin Callen: Thanks, Paul.

Paul Kirtley: Wow. We talked for over an hour there without even realizing it. Certainly, for me, it went by very quickly.

Kevin is such an easy guy to talk to. He's such a positive force in the outdoors world. It's great to have him on the show. Thanks again, Kevin.

Anyway. I hope you all enjoyed that. I hope you enjoyed this third podcast.

Please let me know your thoughts. Let me know on my blog or let me know by tweeting me @pkirt. That's P-K-I-R-T. Pappa, Kilo, India, Romeo, Tango.

Also, this podcast is getting listed on Stitcher, on iTunes. Please go to your podcast index, your podcast listing... If you use iTunes, if you use Stitcher, there are a few others coming online as well... Please go to your directory of choice and please leave me a review. It will help me massively in terms of getting this podcast in front of other people that don't know about the podcast.

If we can get it a little bit further up the rankings on iTunes and Stitcher and various other places, then more people will be able to listen to it. So if you've enjoyed this podcast, please leave me an honest review on one of those and that will help massively. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

Anyway. A head's up for episode four. I will be speaking to Tristan Gooley, The Natural Navigator. I'm sure that will be a fascinating discussion. I'm certainly looking forward to that, and I hope you are too.

So thanks for listening to this, episode three. I appreciate you listening all the way through. I appreciate your feedback. Keep it coming. Let me know what you think about this podcast and I look forward to speaking to you on the next podcast.

In the meantime, I've got some bands to audition. The first one has turned up.

Take it away, lads.

[music]

Mm. Yeah. I'll give you a call. I'll let you know. Interesting.

[end transcript]