



# Greenland Paddler Qajaq Camp: Minnesota 2015

By Christopher Crowhurst

**Like the Renaissance of the twelfth century, this year's Qajaq Camp was about cultural and attitudinal change towards the role of the qajaq. Minnesota and the surrounding states are home to many passionate people willing to share their enthusiasm for traditional paddling. By coordinating their energy into a focused weekend, we have been able to bring together many diverse practices. We carefully structured the program to gently introduce people to the multi-dimensional aspect of the Inuit Qajaq Culture and allow them to become immersed within it.**

## Acknowledgements first

But before I delve into the activities of the weekend, it is worth touching briefly upon the logistics to acknowledge the fine efforts of several people. Qajaq Camp does not happen without planning and forethought. The initial concept was a collaboration between Mike and Lynette Woida and myself, and we quickly expanded the cohort to include Renee, Pete and Cindy. Mike and Lynette located the venue and secured access through the park services. Lynette then coordinated the food for the weekend, ably assisted by Carla and Joan. We decided the event should be catered as we have experienced the alternative and find the benefits of providing food outweigh the efforts of preparing it. Keeping the event accessible was a key concern so we adopted the philosophy that no one would be compensated for their efforts; it truly is a volunteer effort. The evening activities and on-the-water programs are organized by myself in coordination with Renee, Pete and Cindy. We recruited many other mentors to assist, this year including Don Jay, Tony Schmitz, Pete Strand and Tim Manning.

## Friday

Friday afternoon saw us visited by the only rain of the weekend; this failed to deter a hardy group of paddlers from taking to the water and exploring Lake Independence.

After a hearty meal our evening activities were kicked off on Friday with a viewing of Paddler's Pilgrimage, a film that chronicles two young Canadian's preparations and the journey to Greenland to take part in the celebration that is known as the Greenland Kayaking Championship. The film really seemed to open people's eyes to the idea that the qajaq was a lot more than simply a vessel to paddle, and was at the heart of a subsistence culture. The film highlighted the importance of children and educating them in the traditions to ensure their survival. One of the mentors had brought their grandson with them, so we had our own enthusiastic example of youth learning alongside us all weekend. After the movie Tony led a conversation about his passion, the construction and use of

traditionally built qajaq and bardaika. The remainder of the evening was spent introducing people to Greenlandic strength games.

## Saturday

The morning found us afloat with a large group of paddlers learning to roll, a group learning forward strokes and extended paddle turns and another learning how to throw the harpoon. The weather was perfect; a stiff breeze kept the intense heat of the sun at bay. Lunch was served in a pavilion by the water, allowing a brief respite prior to jumping back into the qajaq and continuing our training.

Competition is used in Greenland to motivate paddlers and to measure their progress. Dubsid, a well-known US paddler passionate about Greenland, has worked with Qaannat Kattuffiat and established a method of scoring rolls on an individual basis to allow people to measure their development. I spent a couple of hours putting people through their paces; it was impressive to see how well people did. We have a fine group of rollers in Minnesota.

After we finished on the water we returned to camp. Tony was bending ribs for a qajaq and Don was carving deck beads from antlers. We set up ropes and helped people learn a few of the basic rope gymnastics moves, a crucial teaching element used in Greenland with the children prior to them learning to roll their qajaq. Saturday evening was a potluck dinner with a tremendous variety of delicious dishes; suffice to say that no one went hungry. The evening was kicked off with Don Jay talking with us about the relationship between the subsistence hunter-gatherer and their environment. This connected the dots for many of us about how important the qajaq was culturally; it truly was the difference between life and death. As the sun fell we lit the fire and were entertained with banjo, fiddle and song as the evening drew to a close.

## Sunday

Sunday morning was divided into shorter sessions to allow weary muscles a greater chance to experience a diverse set of activities. It was great to see over half the campers all trying the harpoon, inspired, I believe, by Don's words the previous evening. After getting their fill of throwing, rolling, paddling, turning and lunch, camp broke and everyone headed back to their respective homes.

Feedback has been great and we intend to run camp again next year. We set up a website for Qajaq Camp (<http://qajaq.mn>) where we posted pictures and will keep people informed about next year's schedule.

## Personal notes

This year's camp was especially important to me; my personal therapy for the past six months has been the construction of the Shrike-Skin, a skin-on-frame replica qajaq. Qajaq camp was the Shrike-Skin's first event, a showing if you like. While not perfect, the qajaq is a shining (she really does shine, by the way) beacon of hope and triumph for me. I developed the qajaq to be a facsimile of the Shrike-R (a rolling kayak). Given the differing construction methods, I was able to modify the Shrike-Skin to be an even higher performing rolling machine. The double mask that I built provides exceptional contact and control. The flexible deck allowed me to decrease the height of the rear coaming considerably.

The resulting effect is a terrific qajaq. I spent 30 minutes afloat working alongside Colin, our youngest camper. I showed Colin each of the layback rolls in the scoring sequence and then decided I was having such a good experience I would try an elbow roll, a roll that has eluded me for three years, I was successful on the first attempt. To say it was an emotionally moving experience is an understatement and many hugs were given and received when I went ashore victorious. That feeling of joy remained with me throughout the event as I saw many people opening their hearts and expanding their minds to the spirit and wealth of knowledge being shared by everyone at Qajaq Camp. I can't wait to see everyone again next year. ☺

## About the author

Christopher Crowhurst, an ex-pat Brit now living in Minnesota, USA is slightly obsessed with Greenland rolling. In 2010 he founded Qajaq Rolls, a philanthropic business that promotes the passing on of the traditional of Greenland style kayak (qajaq) rolling. Christopher has developed video, diagrams and written instruction to help paddlers learn the traditional Greenland rolls. During 2010 he self-published Rolling with Sticks, a waterproof guide book of 25 Greenland-style rolls, and followed this up with a companion DVD. In 2011 he used the business to establish and fund a program of free rolling clinics, providing hands-on training for paddlers looking to develop their Greenland-style kayak rolls. You can contact Christopher through his website: <http://qajaqrolls.com>