

OUTDOORS



NEWS AND NOTES BY DALE BOWMAN



Someday, will the sounds from XM Satellite Radio drifting across the Boundary Waters break the serenity of a sunrise? Wilderness purists shudder to think that it could happen. —DALE BOWMAN/FOR THE SUN-TIMES

Getting away from it all becomes harder as technology marches on

My cell phone would die. About as soon as the plume of dust started behind the car when I turned back on the gravel of 5900 North road, cell service would be out the window.

There were many reasons I loved Gov. Ryan's purchase of the Mazonia South Unit in 1999. Not the least of which was that my cell didn't work there.

It was flat-out refreshing to disappear in a wilderness area an hour southwest of Chicago. And I mean really disappear. As in, ring me up? Nope, the phone doesn't ring here.

That's getting harder and harder to do.

Not only has carrying a cell phone become ingrained, a bad habit, but the technology is improving rapidly. The last time I visited Mazonia South, much to my dismay, my signal pretty much held the whole time.

Argh. Instead of being chased by a bear in the woods, I feel like technology is nipping at my heels.

Along comes the Cell Antenna 4-Way Whip. It improves cell-phone service in those hard places such as Mazonia South. There are four interchangeable antennas, from tiny for the city to a 2-foot whip for the wide-open spaces. There's a magnetic base that attaches to the car.

It's a wonderful addition to modern technology.

And part of me can't stop wanting to touch and play with the new technology. It's neat. And as somebody with a family and kids, I find it reassuring to have phone service in some of the wilder places we go.

But part of me wants to run and hide. Or, more quizzically, rage against the machine.

Yet there it comes. Technology marches forward like the clones in the cartoons my kids watch.

Last week, I tested the Thermal Scout, a thermal-imaging device for hunters to use in scouting and game recovery. It's not for me, but I'll readily admit I could have spent an entire day playing with it.

Sometimes, technology feels like dirty pictures.

Go to a campground and what is most noticeable, for those of us who still notice, is the blue flickering of televisions as night drops in.

One of the draws of the Boundary Waters on the edge of Minnesota and Canada is the loon calls of its utter isolation.

Not so utter anymore. XM Satellite Radio proudly has introduced units that will work even there. Just what I need to be wafting across the water as the embers die in the fire and the sun sets, the Dodgers and Giants as part of somebody's complete Major League Baseball package.

Staying connected keeps getting easier and easier; disconnecting is harder and harder.

Wireless connections are already into some campgrounds.

Now Intel lets us know: "The growing number of outdoor wireless locations such as the Casey KOA Campground, the Waukegan Marina and the Double J RV Park in Chatham, combined with cool new ruggedized mobile devices, are enabling Illinoisans to increasingly take advantage of mobile technology to enhance their active lifestyles."

I read that and just want to uncoolly scream my head off.

Part of an active lifestyle is more than working the body; it's giving the brain some room to rethink. Reboot?

Yet part of me knows within the next year or two I almost certainly will file an outdoors story from one of those outdoor wireless locations. I hope I at least feel a little dirty.

Our wild areas keep being encroached upon, not just by actual sprawl, but by technology. Wilderness is more than a place; it's a state of mind. It grows smaller and smaller.

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