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## St. John's native teaches arctic survival skills

Byline: Karen Griffin

Two weeks ago, St. John's native Shawn Stratton found himself in a canoe at the edge of the Arctic Circle.

He had led a group of about a dozen students through the Alaskan wilderness and down the Yukon River, the fifth largest in North America.

The experience might have been awe-inspiring for most people, but for Stratton it was another day at the office. He's a wilderness instructor for a non-profit organization called the National Outdoor Leadership School. His expeditions can involve spending from four weeks to three months eating dried rations, wearing the same shirt, and teaching leadership, survival and navigation tips to students from around the world.

Stratton says Scouts nurtured his love of backpacking and wilderness life.

"I knew it wasn't cool to get the badges, but it was the

only way I could go backpacking," he said.

## CHANGED COURSE

Stratton started out studying business and physical education at Memorial University, but then he found out about a degree program at Dalhousie University in Halifax that truly appealed to him: experiential studies.

"I met a great professor there and found out he worked for a group called Outward Bound, working with people in personal growth development, and I thought to myself, 'Wow! There's a career in this.' "

After graduation, Stratton began working at summer camps -- in Alberta, San Francisco and North Carolina. But he says his great love is the North.

"I love the remoteness and the weather. I like the harshness of it. It reminds me of home," he says with a laugh, adding that he has been on a 35-day course where it rained for 28 days.

His most recent trip began like many of the others he's taken during four of the last five summers.

He and his students were within 30 kilometres of the Arctic Circle, or two days' journey by canoe, when Stratton and his co-instructor decided to leave the students on their own for a few days, and meet up with them later -- as the instructors often do near the

end of the course.

It turned out that the trip home would be an adventure in itself.

Stratton says four hours after they left the students, both groups were hit by a fierce gale of wind that persisted for days. The instructors managed to get off the water and were thankful to learn their students had done the same. But Stratton and his co-instructor were stuck in a tiny native village 70 kilometres from the students, and Stratton had to use a satellite phone to call in two bushplanes to rescue them.

## TIME CONSTRAINTS

And as if being stuck wasn't enough, Stratton and his students were on a deadline. They had to catch planes back home. Stratton was supposed to be the best man at his best friend's wedding in St. John's in a matter of days.

"For those couple of days it was a big joke. (The students) were saying, 'we have to get Sean to the church on time.' "

Stratton eventually made it home, arriving the day before the wedding and moments before the rehearsal dinner.

Stratton says his students range from college

students to financial analysts to university professors, and many say the course is an experience of a lifetime.

## LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

"I don't think of myself so much a teacher as a facilitator," Stratton says. "The students learn by doing. One day we teach them a course on conflict resolution and the next day they find they need those skills. The education is immediate,"

Though he loves his job and has more stories to tell than most of his twentysomething friends, Stratton doesn't see himself doing it forever.

"I've been very fortunate, but at the same time I think I'll want to stop in the next two or three years," he said.

But not before next spring, when he plans to climb Canada's highest mountain, the Yukon's Mount Logan.