

CATHY WURZER: You know, Minnesota has some pretty incredible places where you can hike, fish, simply soak up the beauty around you. Leah Lemm is a citizen of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and spent most of her life in cities, first the Twin Cities suburbs, and then Boston where she went to college. But recently, she's been venturing outdoors to the wilder places. And this summer, she headed out on a two-week hike along the North Shore all alone. Why did she do that. Well, we're going to ask her. Welcome back to the show, Leah. How are you?

LEAH LEMM: I'm well. Thank you, Cathy.

CATHY WURZER: You hiked the North Shore by yourself? Why did you want to do this?

LEAH LEMM: Yeah. It's a totally fair question. So I started at Caribou lake, and then hiked down kind of close to split rock. And I mean, I have so many reasons. I love getting off the grid, feeling closer to nature. And I'm also turning 40 here soon, and I wanted to celebrate, in my own way, with a chance to have this two weeks of contemplation and this quiet joy, which was amazing. And then also, frankly, I needed time to think. So what better way to do it than alone.

CATHY WURZER: That makes complete sense to me, and I really applaud you for doing this, because not many people would.

LEAH LEMM: But I tell you what, it was really nice to be able to make my own decisions. Because oftentimes, we get swept away with others' needs, others desires for us, like you have a job, or like family. But I also wanted to see what happened while being able to make pure decisions for myself, especially in of a dangerous situation.

CATHY WURZER: Mm-hmm.

LEAH LEMM: I mean, it's safe and dangerous. It can be dangerous.

CATHY WURZER: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly. Would you describe yourself, Leah, as kind of outdoorsy?

LEAH LEMM: OK. I would describe myself as medium or mild outdoorsy. I like to garden and get out in the woods. But other days, I like to wear my nails, and my eyelashes, and my heels.

[LAUGHTER]

CATHY WURZER: Now I want to have you take us back to the first day on the trail. And you took a little video. So I'm going to play some of the sound.

[NERVOUS LAUGHTER]

I know. We're going to play some audio from that video. So here we go.

LEAH LEMM: Hello. Day 1. I've made my way to Mystery Mountain.

[BIRDS CHIRPING]

And there is a woodpecker out there. And I can hear the Poplar River. I've planned my route for tomorrow. Keep going Southwest. And purified my water, bear packs up. I don't know what else to do. It's 6 PM.

CATHY So you're camping obviously.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: Mm-hmm.

CATHY Was it boring? To be honest now, is it boring?

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: I tell you what, yes. But I don't think boring is a bad thing.

CATHY Right.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: Oftentimes I really just wish I could be bored because often times were just too busy. So yeah, many days I would be done by 5:00 or 6:00, and then I just lay in the tent and then go to sleep. And then wake up and do it again.

CATHY Did you run into any four legged residents of the woods that would be a little scary, say a bear perhaps?

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: Yeah. I ran into a bear. I was in this part of the trail that was very thick, very woodsy. You can't see far beyond your shoulders even. I heard a baby bear out in the woods somewhere. And I couldn't tell precisely where it was, so I started making more noise.

I found that I like singing Britney Spears on the trail for some reason. I don't know why Britney Spears just came to mind. And I also have a bear bell that's constantly ringing. And I'm also not very light on my feet. So I'm always making noises. I rounded a bit of a corner and there they were, just eating. And then it saw me, and luckily, just turned around and ran away very fast. I must punctuate that they are very fast, bears.

CATHY That's the one thing keeping me from camping, is running into bears.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: Mm-hmm.

CATHY I have this fear.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: Yeah. You have to be very bear aware. We don't leave trash around. You've got to make sure that you're packing everything up in bear canisters, or bear bags, and putting it high and far away from camp, high up in the trees.

CATHY Any other run-ins with residents in the woods?

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: Yes. And I actually had to use my bear spray. I was attacked by a grouse.

CATHY Get out.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: And let me tell you--

CATHY Come on.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: --they are scary. I think the pouf way up--

CATHY Oh.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: --and run at you with their arms, or their wings, like spread way out. I called it a Velociraptor, because it was just running after me squawking. Sounds kind of like a guinea pig. And I didn't want either of us to get hurt so I gave it the absolute, and I stress, the absolute lightest touch of bear spray to keep it back. And then it stopped and then sort of circled around behind me. But yeah, this grouse was not letting up on protecting whatever it was trying to protect.

CATHY Wow. I did not know that they could get themselves a little unsprung. There you go. I learnt something new.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: Oh yeah.

CATHY Say, I'm wondering too, this was for you, a big trip, and I'm wondering too when you were on the trail, did you

WURZER: think of your ancestors who also walked those paths for generations? Was the hike culturally significant for you?

LEAH LEMM: Yeah. I think a lot of it had to do with the plants, our plant relatives, and our animal relatives out there. So I made sure that I brought my medicines. I had tobacco and sage with me, and then foraged a tiny bit of cedar while I was out there. And it was nice to just kind of give thanks every day. I felt even more safe, I think, just making sure that I gave Thanks, connected with the land and the water and the animals and the plants in that respect.

And then it really kind of sparked a curiosity in me too to be able to identify more of the plants and animals out there. Remember, mild to medium outdoorsy. And so now that kind of sparked that curiosity to be able to identify the plants and their uses that have been around for millennia. I didn't really go out seeking it so much as it just sort of popped up.

CATHY That's interesting.

WURZER:

LEAH LEMM: Yeah.

CATHY You know, what did you learn about yourself? You were out there two full weeks by yourself, which is, for many

WURZER: people, an amazing adventure. So what did you think you came away with in the end? What lessons did nature teach you about yourself?

LEAH LEMM: Yeah. There are the obvious lessons like I can do it, I'm capable, and I'm quick on my feet, and I can innovate and use my equipment in new ways that helps me be more comfortable and effective out in the woods. But I think being mentally stronger is a takeaway, because--

So I do have obsessive compulsive disorder. That's been a part of my life since I was nine years old. And I've struggled with anxiety and these sorts of mental hurdles that have just been a part of my life. And I think taking the quiet, the calm, and really just knowing that I can work through these challenges.

You know, like I fell quite a few times, and shed some tears over it because my knees were just absolutely trashed because of the falls. And just knowing that I can kind of still end up on the other side with a smile on my face, happily eating a hamburger in Silver Bay, like that's the joy right there.

CATHY I am glad you did the trip. I really am. And it makes me think maybe for other listeners too, can I do the same
WURZER: thing? You know? So thanks for sharing. I appreciate it.

LEAH LEMM: Yeah. Thank you, Cathy.

CATHY Leah Lemm lives in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. She's a member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. You can see
WURZER: photos from her hiking trip, including those skinned knees, on our website, mprnews.org. To learn more about how to safely hike and camp along the superior hiking trail along the North Shore, go online to superiorhiking.org