Wilderness Canoe Association
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Harris Lake

The Waterfall

A Story from the Little Abitibi River

Neil Miller

Prologue

Our emotional content was different on our second trip, in 2007, into this remote wilderness. We knew what to expect and we knew where the dangers were and yet this river still held a few surprises for us. A week of rain prior to our departure had raised water levels to such a degree that the entire class of river travel was increased by one solid level. This completely changed the personality of the route and out of necessity we were forced to utilize every paddling skill we had ever learned. Compounding the water volume issue, we had made the decision of taking light-weight Kevlar boats instead of heavier but more durable Royalex, and the probability of destruction of our canoes became a very real possibility.

"The expedition went into the patient wilderness, that closed upon it as the sea closes over a diver." On our first trip down the Little Abitibi, in 2001, we sat in our boats with the open and calm Harris Lake to our rear and the noisy, long rapids that introduced the source of the river at our front, and this line from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* sprang into my consciousness. Perhaps this simile was just a little overly dramatic but as the boreal forest closed in around us on the narrow, winding river, we were entering a wilderness which was unknown to us and, once begun, the only way out was to follow it to the end.

On that first trip; every rapid, every portage, and every obstacle was a new experience for us. We didn't know how much distance we would be able to cover in a day, and in truth we had no concept of how much time the overall trip would take. Around each bend of the river was another mystery – another challenge.

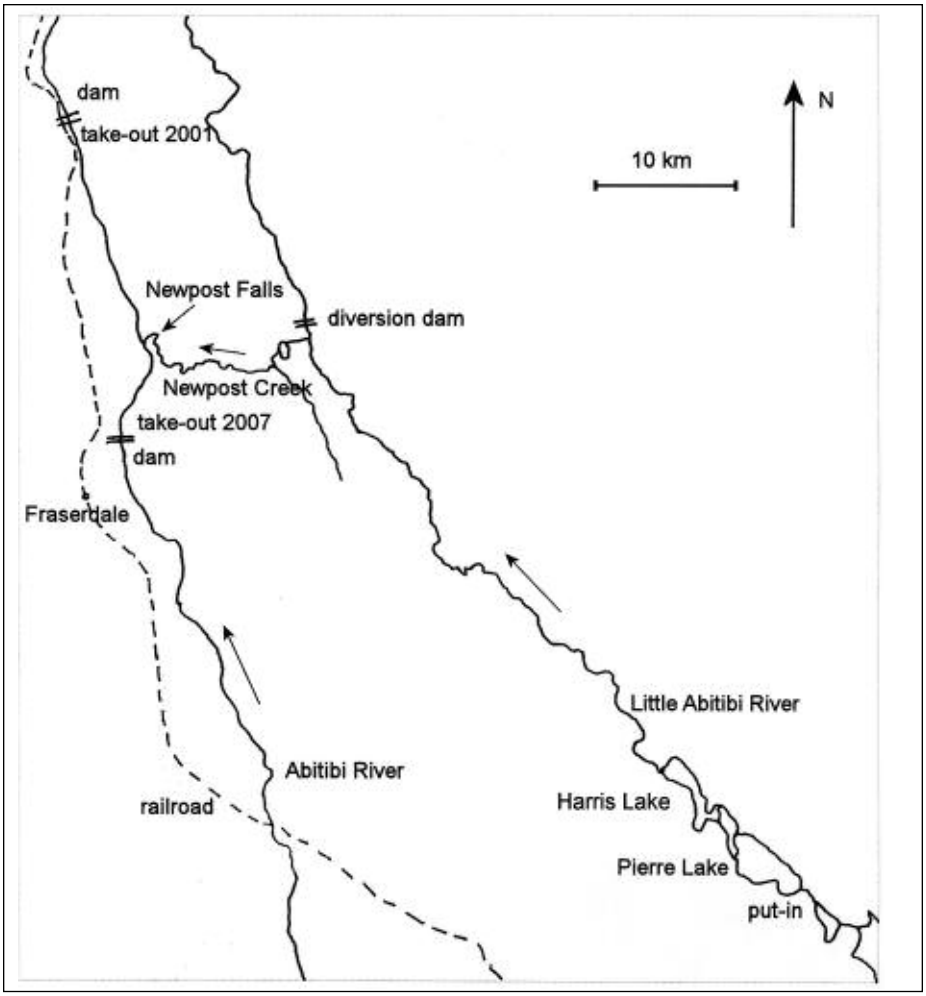
With the first trip completed and as we strained to hear the sound of the train with our boats and gear staged at trackside, we were able to reflect on the personality of the Little Abitibi Canoe Route. We thought we understood it better now and though it still felt remote and uninhabited, at trip's end we didn't feel that same *Heart of Darkness* foreboding that we had felt at the beginning. And so six years later we set out to, once again, paddle this obscure and remote river that we now thought we knew a little better.

Camping on a gravel bar on day 3

Weather changes everything and the factors of greatest effect for those of us who prefer to travel in open boats are wind and rain. Wind is the greater factor in open water but rain changes the temperament of the river. Rain can increase the volume of water and this in turn increases the water's mass and velocity. We were going to be "spanked" by both wind and rain on our second trip down the Little Abitibi Canoe Route.

In order to reach Cochrane by midday, we started our 2007 adventure by driving from Dexter, Michigan, for sixteen hours straight through the night. Somewhere outside of the Chapleau Preserve we drove into the rain. At times the rain was light and at times very heavy but it never let up. On the way out to the Pierre Lake put-in, our shuttle driver told us the rain had been falling steadily for a week and, as though to emphasize the point, when he dropped us off we stood in our raingear in a steady, heavy downpour and watched him disappear in our vehicle back down the potholed road.

When we departed the following day, the rain let up but the wind roared in and we thought we would be windbound before we even got started. The next few days brought more rain and on the final one of the trip we were dealt double indemnity with both wind and rain. On this final day the wind was so strong out of the north that we were forced to alter our plans and paddle upriver to the Abitibi Canyon dam instead of downriver to the Otter Rapids dam, as had happened on our first trip. (At either location the southbound Ontario Northland Railway train coming from Moosoonee can be flagged down for transportation back to Cochran.) Metaphorically, our trip was like a country song with multiple verses and the refrain was wind and rain.



The segments of rapids along the Little Abitibi were stronger and faster, and places that we lined six years before had to be carried or our lightweight boats would've been beaten mercilessly on the rocks. On the fast little Newpost Creek, the entire run seemed like one solid rapid. Most of the time it was just Class 1 but constant vigilance was absolutely necessary along its length.

For this reason, we took longer than on our prior trip to scout the more serious segments of Newpost Creek, and as a result arrived at the head of Newpost Falls with merely an hour-and-a-half of twilight left in the day.

We slowed our pace within a kilometre of the falls in the hopes of finding a place to make camp, but the higher water levels had submerged all the sandbars that we remembered from our first trip. Fading light or not, we were going to have to make the portage around the falls, because the only place to set up our tent was at the bottom.

Joseph Conrad's main character, Marlowe, emerged from his experience up the Congo River basin with an understanding of both the essence of who he really was and of the human condition in general. He rolled through every possible emotion from gripping fear to complete elation and through these continual challenges he learned who he was, for

Early morning of day 4

better or for worse. I wouldn't begin to compare myself to the character of Marlowe or the Little Abitibi Canoe Route to the *Heart of Darkness*; however, in a way there were similarities.

In any wilderness paddling trip, we quickly find our physical limits; but more significantly, we discover what really defines us. It's the core of our essence that reasons out challenges and overcomes our fears, and if we never put ourselves into these confrontational situations we will never know what our limits really are. And knowing who we are is critical to whether we have success or failure interacting within the human environment.

Deceptively passive

Three hundred metres ahead, the water was calm and there was a series of flat rocks stretched across from river right to river left; beyond that there was a definite water's edge as the river disappeared. Dense trees and brush overhung the shore on both sides, and in my mind I envisioned a tire hanging from a rope and laughing children as though it was a Rockwell painting of the family picnic at Aunt Edna's. There was no wind and with the sun glimmering off the surface it created the illusion of a very lazy, late afternoon at the old swimming hole; but we knew different. We had been through here some years before and we also had the take-out programmed into the GPS and the small electronic device told us we were running out of river.

As we approached nearer to the take-out on river left, we could hear the sound of rapids but the noise it made was little different from rapids that we had been running for the last four days. In a fluke of audible trickery, a combination of a dog-legged left bend and thick forested shores successfully muted the sound of the crashing cataracts, which led without break to the thirty-metre vertical precipice, Newpost Falls, that channels the falling river down through a narrow black rock canyon that never receives sunlight.

Neither our memories nor our GPS failed us and we knew we had to land the canoes before we got entangled within the flat rocks. There was only one very small patch of gravelly clay about four metres along the shore and only one metre in depth. This was just enough, however, and we put ashore to search out a portage route around the falls.

What would Frodo do?

Though it was only about 6:30 in the afternoon, the sun was below the tree tops and the forest immediately became deep woods with only twilight visibility at best. We had chosen mid-September for this trip for a variety of reasons, which meant at these northern latitudes that total sunset was complete by 8:00 p.m. This didn't give us a lot of time to find the best

way through and complete the portage. And, the woods were thick and dark … scary dark. As soon as we worked our way eight metres in from the river, the denseness seemed to swallow us up like the enchanted forest in *Lord of the Rings*.

We bushwhacked our way through the overgrowth and undergrowth, always mindful to keep the river somewhat visible through the patchwork of solid forest. We had left all gear and canoes at the take-out and were performing a scout to try and find anything that might resemble a path or a route through this nearly impossible terrain. I could feel my heart rate increase as a small amount of anxiety swept over me, because there wasn't a bare patch of ground anywhere and I knew our only possible campsite selections were at the bottom of this portage.

We finally slashed our way through to another small gravelly clay beach just in front of the first cataract and there was a single piece of green iridescent surveyor tape hanging from a tree branch. This was obviously the intended take-out and we looked around and to our surprise and joy, we saw another piece of the same tape hanging from a tree branch about 20 metres inland. There was no obvious pathway but that was simply because this canoe route sees very little traffic in a paddling season. Working our way up to the second piece of surveyor tape and after a little bit of straining to focus our vision through the dense woods, we saw a third piece of tape. A wave of relief flooded over us because we knew we had found the portage route through this dark place.

No way out

After we had worked our way through the thick growth back to our boats, we had two options to move them down the shore to the proper take-out. The quickest was to paddle out toward the center of the channel, then pass through a narrow passage with a Class 1 rapid and pull hard for the left shore because the first cataract was only three metres ahead at that point. We both studied this and discussed it and the decision was to take the slower but safer route.

The route we chose required a lift-over of gear and boats on some of the flat rock slabs near the shore. Although we were certain we had the skill to make the quicker route, it was that three metres to the first drop that really had us worried. There was no question that once you got caught

The 1000-metre-long man-made diversion channel

Rough water in Newpost Creek

in the current and went over that first ledge, there would be no escape. Hypothetically, even if the paddler bailed out of the canoe, the chance of making it to some safe position was almost non-existent. And after the first cataract there were three more in quick succession, followed immediately by the waterfall dropping into the dark, sunless gorge. Without overstating the situation, certain death would surely ensue. So, we chose the safer, though more time-consuming, route.

Into the woods

The four-metre bank consisted of near vertical, semi-moist clay making the task of getting gear and boats up into the forest a difficult and frustrating chore. As though this was not enough of a challenge, in the four days we had been on this route, this was the first time the temperature got above 15°C and mosquitoes had mysteriously appeared. And not just one or two of the little vampires, but enough to force us both to throw on our hooded bug shirts with the zip-off face nets.

Bug shirts become a second skin when you canoe in remote northern Canada so, for me, the mosquitoes were not the problem. My problem was with the sun sinking to the horizon and the naturally dark forest; the net across my face just impeded my vision that much more.

Strapped-up with all my gear, I set out to follow the portage route, surveyor ribbon by surveyor ribbon. There was no obvious worn trail, just the green iridescent ribbons. I had made the decision to leave the canoe until the next morning, so I had every bit of gear attached to me in some way. And straining my eyesight into the tangle of trees and bushes, this triple canopy jungle of the North, it took me a moment to spot the next piece of tape in order to set out.

Darkness, darkness

Following the surveyor tape was like a life-size, connect-the-dot puzzle, zigging and zagging through the forest avoiding the almost impassable deadfalls and ravines. The deeper in we went, the darker it became. My paddling partner had set out five minutes before me and was now completely out of sight and sound. An unusual feeling began to creep into my consciousness and it took me a few moments before I realized it was fear.

I could no longer see any part of the river or any patches of sunlight, so I would stop and listen and I could hear the waterfall off in the distance. I was just a little surprised at how much that comforted me, maintaining my connection as it did to a topographic point I could actually find on the map.

At one point, I walked past one of the green tapes and soon found myself on a steep, downward slope full of thick brambles, and staring into a debris-filled ravine. I was definitely off-route. I unzipped and raised my bug net so that I could see better but I couldn't see surveyor tape anywhere or in any direction. Immediately, I began to feel that deep churning in my bowels as anxiety tinged with a little panic started to overtake me. A subliminal voice in my head kept reminding me that this was how people got lost in the woods, which certainly didn't do anything to blunt the fear factor.

Reason quickly prevailed, however, and I carefully backtracked exactly the way I had come and returned to the last piece of the iridescent tape that I had passed. I had to dump my gear on the ground and really strain into the dense woods, slowly scanning right to left and back again before I saw the next piece of tape, not straight ahead but acutely off to my right. By now the mosquitoes had discovered my uncovered face so I zipped the net back up, put all the gear back on, and continued to the next waypoint, the next piece of tape.

The "breadcrumb" trail

There were several more occa-

Going down the Newpost Falls portage (photo from 2001 trip)

Cataracts before the main Newpost Falls (photo from 2001 trip)

sions when I had to stop and listen for the sound of falling water, and each time it brought great comfort to my isolated situation as I felt I was being consumed by the ever-darker and deeper woods. On one more occasion, I had to drop the gear and unzip the bug net to peer into the tangled forest to spot the next piece of tape. Like Hansel and Gretel following the breadcrumbs to their cottage, I followed the pieces of green tape, knowing that at the end of my quest, there would be a place to put a tent and eat dinner.

The portage route followed no logic as it wound through the forest skirting impassible ravines and giant deadfalls, but it eventually ended at a real path, which led sharply down to the outflow area at the bottom of the falls. This path held its own treachery in that it was perpetually wet from the steady rain of the waterfall's mist. I thought of when I was a child at Niagara Falls with my parents, wearing the yellow raincoat and burlap overshoes they gave us and standing "under" the falls. The mist at Newpost Falls wasn't as thick as Niagara but the sensation was similar.

Actors and trolls

There are two turn-outs that lead from the path to the edge of the chasm where the creek crashes downward on its way to joining the main branch of the Abitibi River.

The upper overlook is right at the edge of the drop for the main falls and you can look back upstream and clearly see the four cataracts. Even though I needed no confirmation, it was a little chilling to see how quickly a paddler could go from calm stream to end-of-life simply by not paying close-enough attention. I found myself playing mind games and trying to envision if, caught in the current, I could leap free of the boat and pull myself up on one of the rocks in the cataracts. The current was very strong and I concluded that only if I were the star of a Hollywood action film, could I grab a rock and hang on. In reality, my physical strength (or lack thereof) could never overcome the power of the falling water.

The second overlook is further down the trail and is at a very dark

place looking right into the black narrow canyon itself. The rock is very solid, dark basalt, and standing right at the edge, I felt myself get a little dizzy trying to peer into the depths of this tortured couloir. It had all the appearance of a place of mythological lore and I would not have been surprised if a troll-like creature walked up and tapped me on the shoulder. Well, actually I'm sure I would have jumped out of my shoes if that were to happen but this was my perception of this ethereal place.

The slippery slope

The trail was very steep and heavily eroded with much bare bedrock that was as slippery as though it were ice. Loaded down as I was with gear, I had to carefully place each foot as I worked my way down the path. And as careful as I tried to be, at one spot, I did lose my footing and go sliding down about two metres on the back of my pack. It was solid bedrock, that same black basalt that made up the canyon of the falls, and as gingerly as I tried to place my feet, they went out from under me and down I slid.

The steepness of the trail never abated until I reached the very bottom and then the path changed from slippery clay to crushed gravel and leveled off. Bushes and trees still overhung the trail until it suddenly popped out at the alluvial outflow pond at the bottom of the falls. There was a gravelly beach and this is where I connected, once again, with my paddling partner.

He had gotten there only a few minutes before my arrival and was unhitching his gear as I walked in. The joint decision was to put up the tent and then he was going back up to bring down his canoe. I was planning to stick to my earlier decision and wait until the next morning to make my second round trip to the top.

Wild animal attack

We put up the tent, which only took about ten minutes, and I started dragging out our food and cookware while my buddy went back up the trail to the top to retrieve his boat. Out of the corner

Edge of the main Newpost Falls (photo from 2001 trip)

Main drop of Newpost Falls (photo from 2001 trip)

of my vision I saw a very aggressive animal emerge from the thick undergrowth and instantly assault my waterproof fanny-pack, which was sitting by the tent's entrance. There was a bag of a gorp-like mixture of nuts, raisins, and M&M's inside the pack and I immediately plunged headlong into the defense of my snack-mix.

Making much noise and waving my arms wildly I drove off the attacker and grabbed my fanny pack out of harm's way. This only lasted for a moment, however, as the animal charged back into the clearing; this time assaulting our main packs where our primary meals were stored. Once again, I drove it off with my own aggressive defense but again, the animal charged back into the clearing.

Massive retaliation

Desperate situations call for desperate measures, so I opened my main pack and drew out my sheathed, 60-centimetre, end-weighted, Chinese-made machete. Now, I met the assault anew and I'm sure I was a fearsome sight as I drew the slightly rust-pitted but nonetheless fearsome edged weapon from its cheap, olive-drab canvas sheath.

Full of renewed confidence, knowing that I now had the creature "out-gunned," I immediately set to work building defensive works to protect the camp. In the end, I knew that I had won as I stared admiringly at all our gear securely suspended one metre off the ground with no weeds or other avenues for the deer mouse to use in order to continue his assault on our food stocks.

My partner had returned with his canoe toward the end of the pitched battle and his admiration for what was really our mutually shared victory over the rodent, was difficult for him to contain. Of course, I was bursting with pride as I had demonstrated why "man" deserves his place at the pinnacle of the food chain. I had driven back multiple, clever assaults by the 10-centimetre mouse and our triumph was assured.

Retreat with honor

The next morning, the weather was rainy with gusting winds as I went back up to the head of the falls to retrieve my canoe. The trip down was uneventful with the exception of, once again and this time with a 23-kilo canoe on my shoulders, I lost my footing and slid down at the same spot where I had slipped the day before.

As we finished breakfast and packed up all the wet gear in the rain, we never saw the mouse again but we knew he was out there silently watching us from the dark shadows of some bush. In honor of this brave opponent that had fought with such valor the day before, we left behind some crumbs from a granola bar as a salute to his dauntless courage. Of course, this act would only encourage him to assault the next party of through-trippers, but we figured his patterns and habits had been well established long before our arrival.

Ten minutes later we paddled out onto the main branch of the Abitibi River amid the whitecaps, wind, and rain.

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Editor's Note

The author made two trips down these rivers. The first one was a five-day trip with three friends in two open canoes in August 2001, and the second one, where the above story took place around Newpost Falls, was a five-day, 153-km trip with one partner in two solo boats in September 2007. Several of the photographs in this article were taken on the first trip. Extensive reports on both trips can be obtained from the author; ask the editor for the contact address. The first trip is also reported in the files of Canadian Canoe Routes.

The Newpost Creek Diversion was constructed about 50 years ago by Ontario Hydro to divert water from the Little Abitibi River to the main branch of the Abitibi River to provide additional flow for the generating station at Otter Rapids. A rock-filled crib dam was built across the Little Abitibi and a channel was cut west from the river to Newpost Creek, creating 30 km of fast water as the water level drops 90 m from the Little Abitibi to the Abitibi. Much of this drop comes at the western end, just before Newpost Creek enters the Abitibi, and forms 30-metres-high Newpost Falls, one of the most spectacular waterfalls in northern Ontario. After a short, steep rapid, the river drops vertically into a deep, narrow canyon, then races 300 m through the canyon to a quiet pool (a total drop of about 55 metres) before entering the Abitibi.

(Information adapted from: "Bird Atlassing on the Little Abitibi," *Nastawgan* Spring 1986.)

Flagging down the ONR train at Fraserdale

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Nastawgan is an Anishinabi word meaning "the way or route"

The WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION is a non-profit organization made up of individuals interested in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe and kayak, but also including backpacking and winter trips on both skis and snowshoes. The club publishes a quarterly journal, Nastawgan, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas of interest to wilderness travellers, organizes an extensive program of trips for members, runs a few basic workshops, and is involved in environmental issues relevant to wilderness canoeing.

WCA FALL MEETING, October 2-4, 2009

Madawaska Kanu Centre

Mark your calendars and join us for our annual WCA Fall Meeting!

Come paddle, meet old friends and make new ones, and get the latest on the best canoe routes while enjoying the beautiful Madawaska Kanu Centre. Yes, we're back at MKC for the third year in a row – by popular demand! Members, non-members, and children are all welcome. We'll have a chockfull program and the event is shaping up to offer a fantastic time.

No, this is NOT the "whitewater-only" weekend as some may have told you. There are many incredibly beautiful flatwater paddling options, such as:

Paddle Bark Lake in touring kayaks with Aleks. Rentals available for $35/day, space limited. Canoes welcome.

North arm of Kamaniskeg Lake from Hinterland Beach to Barry's Bay.

Conroy Marsh.

Madawaska River.

Of course, there is some of Ontario's finest whitewater in the immediate vicinity.

Remember to bring your used equipment for the GEAR SWAP.

Last year's "mini-symposium" evening presentations by our members were such a HUGE success that we'll do it again this year. Please contact Aleks Gusev aleks@gusev.ca if you'd like to present your favorite trip.

To register and/or to obtain more details, visit us at Events Page at www.wildernesscanoe.ca The registration form is also available on the inside back cover page of this issue.

Food for Paddlers

During a visit to New Zealand last year, we met the Harding family. These friendly Kiwis served a yummy breakfast of home-made granola, yogurt, and coffee. Chris was kind enough to share her recipe for granola. This will be part of our tripping menu this summer.

Harding Granola from NZ

Take a large roasting pan and put in about 10 or more cups of rolled oats, half wholegrain if you like. Add 1 cup of: powdered milk or soy flour, brown sugar (or less), wheat germ, bran flakes, coconut. Add 1/2 cup of: sesame, pumpkin, and sunflower seeds, and some nuts if you like. Stir it all around.

In microwave, melt together 1 cup honey and 1 cup oil. Pour over granola and mix through with your fingers. Bake in oven 150 degrees for about an hour. Remember to stir every15 to 20 minutes, otherwise it will burn!

If you would like to share your favourite tripping recipes, please contact Barb Young, 12 Erindale Crescent, Brampton, Ont. L6W 1B5; youngj-david@rogers.com.

Hello from Australia

Here is a suggestion for the outings committee. Try paddling on the quiet northern Australian Daintree River during your winter. It is warmer, no problems with ice so no wetsuits, it is a tidal river so there is current and the wildlife is very interested in you so you should have some interactions. The river is never crowded because paddlers are eaten if they are too slow. It should make for a thrilling adventure. Crocodiles eat plastic, carbon fibre, canoes, kayaks or humans. They are very inclusive in their diet. No need to worry about leaving a mess behind.

My wife and I visited this area in mid October and thoroughly enjoyed it. The wet tropical rainforest is typical jungle with lush vegetation and a high canopy. We visited during the dry season and only had a couple of rainy days. The trip on the Daintree River was part of a commercial day outing. The 3 metre python was in a tree near the shore while the +4 metre croc, or estuarine crocodile also known as a "salty" was swimming upstream towards a females nesting site. We gave it plenty of room as the breeding season was just starting.

We also did a trip to the Great Barrier Reef where we snorkelled amongst fish, coral, a ray and giant clams.

There are white water river trips here but most of them are far away and run by raft operators. It is rare to see a white water kayak and OC1 and OC2 canoes don't exist. They do not use floatation bags because they have never heard of them. They call everything a canoe and what is a canoe is called a Canadian canoe that turns out to be a plastic moulded canoe that they paddle with kayak paddles. It makes for interesting sights on the water.

Last year I rented a moulded plastic kayak and paddled a section of the Kangaroo River south of Sydney. A spray skirt was not available to rent so it meant that I stayed in the tame stuff. My folding kayak is designed for flat water and was unsuitable. The next day we drove upstream and saw real kayakers with fully equipped private kayaks running rapids.

Enjoy your winter. The lowest morning temperature that I recall from last winter here was +6 C. It was a bit chilly running in shorts but no frost to slip on.

Regards, Stephen Catlin

Annual General Meeting

February 28, 2009

photo Aleks Gusev

Canadian Canoe Museum

Change comes to Kitsissuarsuit

David F. Pelly

In Kitsissuarsuit, an isolated island community halfway up the west coast of Greenland, it is rare for a hunter to bring home a polar bear. When Ole Nielsen and his son Tuuma each caught one on the same trip, it was an extraordinary event, unprecedented in living memory. There was only one other man alive on the island who had ever killed a polar bear. So it was natural that for Tuuma's 25th birthday, the family would serve meat from his bear and invite the entire village, all 120 people on the island. Lucky for me, I was visiting exactly that week

Kitsissuarsuit is a tiny island, roughly a kilometre across, off the coast of Greenland. It lies 20 kilometres offshore, alone at sea in vast Disko Bay. Its only companions out there are the icebergs, lots of them – for centuries, they were the major freshwater delivery system used by the island's Inuit inhabitants. At latitude 69° North, it is directly across Davis Strait from Nunavut's Clyde River near the northern tip of Baffin Island.

At some point during that memorable, sunny summer afternoon, everyone in the community trekked over to the Nielsen house to join the party. A few brought small gifts. All shook Tuuma's hand. One pretty young woman only half resisted his shy attempt to plant a kiss on her cheek. Everyone shared in the boiled polar bear meat, the *maktak* (whale blubber) chowder, the strong Danish coffee, and bread-cakes, just as each member of the tiny community shared in the special bond that ties them together and binds them to their island. The gathering celebrated more than a birthday, more even than a polar bear hunt; it celebrated a way of life.

The hills on this picturesque green island rise to 43 metres above sea level. Its shoreline includes several coves and one well-protected natural harbour. Surrounding the harbour is a quiet village, its brightly coloured houses scattered up the hillsides, looking out to sea. Although the houses seem to have been built at random, each is positioned to take maximum advantage of its view. This is a community of hunters, who constantly watch the sea. The Inuit who live here depend on the sea for their food, chiefly in the form of seal and

The island community of Kitsissuarsuit ("located far out to sea") off the west coast of Greenland, near the mouth of Disko Bay, which produces the world's largest concentration of icebergs. Life in Kitsissuarsuit has changed radically in recent years for the small number of Inuit hunters who live in these colourful houses surrounding the natural harbor, which originally attracted their ancestors to this remote island.

whale meat, augmented by occasional treats of caribou from hunts on the mainland, or by infrequent trips to the stores in the closest mainland town, Aasiat, 20 kilometres away, where the grocery store shelves are well stocked with European goods.

"I was born here, I've lived here all my life, and I hope I'll stay here till the end," Johannes Jeremiassen told me, reflecting his community's sense of stability and permanence. (Greenlandic Inuit often have Danish names, the result of 400 years or more of contact with the European settlers.)

I visited Kitsissuarsuit in 1998 while researching my book *Sacred Hunt*, about the special relationship between Inuit and seals. It was an unforgettable week on that little island paradise, embraced by people living much as their ancestors had for centuries. "Without seals, this place could not have survived," said Martin Angubesen. "We stayed here because of the seals and the narwhals."

Indeed. The people of Kitsissuarsuit have harvested their food from the sea for generations. For most of the year, that meant travelling across the sea ice, from the island, to open water at the floe edge, far out to sea in Davis Strait, where they waited, motionless, sometimes for hours, until a whale or a seal appeared. Concerned about disturbing the animals, over the decades before my visit they imposed a ban on the use of snowmobiles for that winter trip on the ice. All hunters travelled by dog-team. The population of dogs on the island outnumbered the people by two-to-one.

Last summer, 2008, ten years later, I returned to the island for a brief visit. It looked the same. But appearances can be misleading. Upon enquiring, I quickly learned that the winter hunt, dependent upon travel on the sea ice, had become too dangerous. The ice is not safe, I was told. It freezes much later, and sometimes there is open water nearby, between the island and the mainland, even in mid-winter. Travel by dog-team is no longer possible. A centuries-old way of life has disappeared, a direct result of climate change. The community's survival is hanging by a thread.

Tuuma Nielsen's mother proudly raises the flag of Greenland above her house, to signal that the party begins, a community feast to celebrate Tuuma's birthday, his recent polar bear hunt, and a way of life among the people of Kitsissuarsuit. On the table are two polar bear skulls and one muskox skull – all the meat is consumed by local people.

Though I have seen many signs of climate change in the Arctic, none are more personal nor more dramatic than the plight of hunters on Kitsissuarsuit. This is not what Jeremiassen meant when he said he hoped he'd be here "till the end."

* * *

WCA member David Pelly has written eight books and scores of magazine articles on the North, the land, its people, their culture and history. www.davidpelly.com

Living the Dream

A few hours on the Oxtongue River

Peter Wilson

After thirty-five years as a banker and thousands of daily commutes into Toronto on the Go Train, I finally decided to take early retirement and move to paradise (aka Muskoka). Mind you, had I only known that my departure from the financial world would unleash the great crash of 2008, I might have had second thoughts! Ah well, no longer restricted by corporate vacation policies, I looked forward to expanding my paddling beyond the week or so once a year that had been my lot. Now I have the endless lakes and rivers in and around Algonquin Park, less than half an hour from my front door.

But, where to start? Lakes are nice, but I've always preferred going with the flow (as long as the portages are few and far between), so I looked around for some nice river trips. As my wife and I were building a new home, it was a busy summer and time was at a premium (wait a minute, I thought retirement was supposed to be relaxing and stress free!). I was looking for routes that could be done in a few hours but which also offered the potential for longer and more challenging trips in the future.

After a bit of research (thanks to books by Kevin Callan and Hap Wilson), I found exactly what I was looking for, the Oxtongue River. The Oxtongue flows west out of Algonquin Park and offers a great variety of rapids, falls, calm stretches, and beautiful scenery. It is easily accessible from Highway 60, the main road through Algonquin, and has the potential for short and multiday trips. This time I just planned a few hours on the water.

One day in early September (by this time I had at least put some new

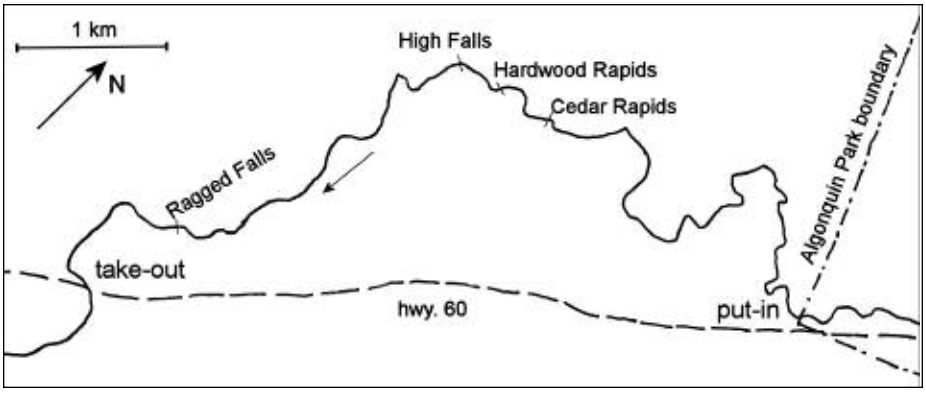
Peaceful Oxtongue

Cedar Rapids

grass seed around our home and most of the boxes from our move had been unpacked), I put my canoe into the Oxtongue River on the north side of Highway 60 just opposite Park Lake. Here a short stream takes you to the Oxtongue River proper. I was very glad with my Oxtongue River Chrismar map at this point. Although this stretch of the Oxtongue is predominantly calm, meandering through mixed forest climbing into impressive bluffs, a few kilometres downstream are a couple of named rapids (Cedar and Hardwood) followed by the four-metre drop of High Falls.

In spite of my map I couldn't find Johnny Rowan's disused trapper's cabin on River Right (maybe lost in the bush), but the hunting camp and site of an old cable bridge on River Left were unmistakable and provided a handy spot. From then with eyes carefully following the map I paddled down to what turned out to be a well-marked portage and easy take-out for Cedar Rapid on River Left. This short rapid is straightforward at low water and I ran it centre-left. A couple of swifts further on Hardwood Rapid duly announced its presence proving to be another good run with a couple of rocks to slip between.

The swifts below Hardwood are fun but just around the corner is the take-out for High Falls. At midsummer water levels the approach to the falls was blocked by fallen trees and the take-out on River Right not a problem. High Falls itself is the gem of this section of the river. Only a couple of kilometers downstream is Ragged Falls, a well-frequented provincial park on Highway 60, with a beautiful fall down to a large rock garden. High Falls is inaccessible except by canoe and you're likely to



High Falls

have it all to yourself. While the total drop is not as large as Ragged Falls, the whole river cuts through a narrow cleft into a spectacular pool below and is well worth a visit.

My map showed three portage options, depending on water level and ability. The low-water option is the longest at 800 metres but the route is mostly well-marked and maintained, not too steep and gives great views of the falls from a sloping rock. This is where you could launch in high water for an instant burst of adrenalin! I just took photos and continued past a good campsite to the final put-in at a wide pool where the river calms down after the rapids. From here to Ragged Falls is about a half-hour paddle with a few more swifts and pleasant woodland scenery. One of the best features of the whole run is that while I was never that far from Highway 60, there was no noise of traffic at any time. If you've hiked any of the Algonquin trails you'll know what I mean.

The powers that be have decided that they should discourage you from running Ragged Falls. Just as the river makes a 90-degree right handed turn, they have erected a large sign advising you to take out on River Left. This is about 500 metres above the falls themselves but means that you will also avoid the quickening current and rapids round the turn which looked tricky even in mid-August. I took their advice. The irony is that the only people likely to need or even see this sign are those who have paddled down from above High Falls. High Falls is not marked this way and running it would prove equally detrimental to your well-being!

I portaged round Ragged Falls dodging the day trippers with whom I shared the trail and put in again at the bottom to enjoy the view back up the falls and play in the very modest outwash. Another short paddle round a few bends took me back to the parking lot at the picnic area below the Highway 60 bridge. Here my wife had left my car and I was home in plenty of time to get on with the yard work.

Ragged Falls portage take-out

Book Review

Late Nights on Air by Elizabeth Hay, published by McClelland & Stewart, 2007, soft-cover, 364 pages, Cdn $22.00.
Review by Ria Harting

In this book, that received the Scotiabank Giller Prize, Elizabeth Hay describes a group of people who, for the most part, have moved to Yellowknife to escape something in their past. Characters have been formed into believable entities, tied together mainly because of a shared workplace in this remote setting. It is a human story of opportunities, skill, and burn-out from other work/life situations. It provides an insightful glimpse into how circumstances have formed the characters and why they have travelled to Yellowknife. In addition, there is surprisingly detailed information on some characters' cultural backgrounds, skillfully described. I liked the way Yellowknife is used as the background for this story. Although I have never been in Yellowknife, the description of life in such a remote place comes across as experienced by someone who had indeed lived there and who also possesses good language skills to let this fact simmer through.

Why review this book for *Nastawgan*? Mainly because four of the main characters decide to canoe the Thelon River and visit the cabin where John Hornby and his party starved to death in 1927. I was delighted to read the canoeing-related chapters; their descriptions ring very true, from preparation to execution and thinking back on the canoe trip. One senses that the writer has indeed experienced canoeing on wilderness rivers. The internal life of the paddler surfaces, there is recognition of situations I have found myself in on other, less-remote rivers. The tension-filled encounters with violence in nature are well dealt with, although I must admit these form my least-favourite parts of the story. The book is small enough to be packed on a canoe trip where it would make good bed-time reading.

Erosion

The geologic term. Mountains and plains washing away. All heading to the ocean. We saw the end result of this long process when we canoed the North Knife River in northern Manitoba. The river ended in a delta that was kilometres wide and kilometres long. The delta was made up of huge mud flats – the final deposit of the mountains and plains brought down from far upriver. Only shrubs and grass for plant growth. No trees lived there because either the flats were covered by high tides or salt water incursion prevented deep-rooted trees from prospering.

The North Knife River delta still posed a significant impediment to route-finding, though, because the channels spread out in all directions. Water went into narrower and narrower rivulets until at last some channels became too shallow to even float canoes. On the final few kilometres of our journey to the sea, we had to walk the canoes down. The mud was hard packed so the footing was relatively good, but many places required dragging the canoes to a deeper channel, all the while looking at Hudson Bay, now staring back at us in its looming immensity.

Canoeing allows one to experience this power of moving water to erode. One night we camped on a rock shelf that showed exfoliation. Uplifted layers of rock were peeled apart like an onion. Water caused it. Going into the rock, freezing solid in winter, and breaking up the surface layer when the ice melts in summer.

To tell the truth, you see erosion everywhere on the river. Clay banks collapsing into the water, sand bluffs pushing up into creeks that join the river, fallen trees first turning into sweepers before the river carries them away, waterfalls and rapids slowly wearing down even granite. It's almost as if water is unhappy at its confinement within rivers and lakes and can find no rest until at last it meets the ocean. Its angry nature tearing at everything it contacts: rocks, trees, soil.

Sitting around the fire tonight thinking about erosion and how the term affects us as wilderness canoeists. Each year another year older. Each year more complications of work, family, and time keeping us from wilderness canoeing. Each year presenting us with a body that has less strength, less endurance, less energy, less everything. Soon to be swept away too. Hoping to find the peace we search so desperately for as we head at last to our own looming ocean.

Greg Went

A Portage to More Understanding

Toni Harting

"Go to hell!" he hissed. "I don't want to listen to you, got my own problems. Get lost." I could hardly understand what he was yelling in his jumbled mixture of Quebec French and broken English. But his intentions were clear. He didn't want to talk to me. Nice, helpful guy.

I was travelling in western Quebec on the Dumoine River, which flows into the Ottawa River northeast of Algonquin Park, and had landed my canoe on a small, sandy beach. A wood-canvas canoe with some tripping gear indicated that another paddler was already there and I wanted to talk to that person. I hoped to find someone who could give me inside information on the river, interesting tidbits not mentioned on maps and in trip reports; maybe a local fisherman or a trapper who knew all the secret spots that make these places such a delight to explore.

But the young man I encountered on that beach was in a truly foul mood, refusing to listen to me, raving and ranting about that stupid outsider bothering him here in his very own country on his very own river. I tried to explain in my best French that all I wanted was a bit of advice.

Suddenly he stopped yelling, looked at me intensely, and said: "So you're not English then?" Apparently he had heard from my Dutch accent that I was not one of those damned born-and-bred English Canadians whose cursed ancestors, almost 250 years ago, had conquered his beloved Quebec on the Plains of Abraham, forever changing the lives of his people.

"No," I said, "not English; I come from Holland. But I'm Canadian, yes, just like you." I obviously shouldn't have said that. He started yelling again.

"I am not one of your rotten Canadians! I am a proud Quebecois and I don't want to be insulted by anybody who has no idea at all about what it is to be oppressed in your own country." Obviously something was bothering him.

After awhile he calmed down a bit and glumly explained that his temperamental outburst was triggered by my approaching him in that hated English instead of French, the official language of his province. Besides, he was in no mood right now to be nice to anybody because he had just found out that the video camera he was using to record some river locations for a documentary had been badly damaged by humidity. His camera case had leaked and water had destroyed the delicate instrument beyond immediate repair.

There we were. One fervent Quebec separatist who wanted to kick all Canadians out of his land, and one import Canadian-by-choice who truly valued his new country. One with a busted camera and one in need of information. There obviously were some problems. It didn't look good.

But maybe because there were only the two of us on that beach made the sky clear up somehow. He

apologized for his outburst, I apologized for speaking English to him. After shaking hands we decided to help each other. He would give me as much information as he could on the river he knew so well, and I would lend him one of my still cameras and some slide film that I had brought along to photograph this exceptional river. At least he would then have some reference pictures of what he might want to film on another trip.

It worked out fine. We travelled as a team for about a week, paddling, portaging, running rapids, swatting black flies, camping, swimming, photographing. And talking! Talking about ourselves, our backgrounds, dreams, love of canoeing, nature, photography, filming, travel, people.

We talked about the Canadian Shield, rivers, lakes, fur trade, voyageurs, cultural diversity, and many other things that make Canada special.

And we talked at length about the huge problems facing this country: the economic domination by the USA, the consequences of a Quebec separation, the rights of our Native population, our quickly diminishing natural resources. We fully agreed there are no easy answers here; the problems are too deep to be solved by easy answers. There will always be differences.

But at least we sat down together, communicated, developed a dialogue, talked, exchanged ideas, tried to understand conflicting points of view, even started to trust each other.

We laughed and yelled and cried and cursed, learning to recognize each other's diverse demands and aspirations, getting a lot closer to appreciating what makes us tick. In the end my tripping partner still passionately thought separation could work although I tried to convince him it might mean the end of both Canada and Quebec.

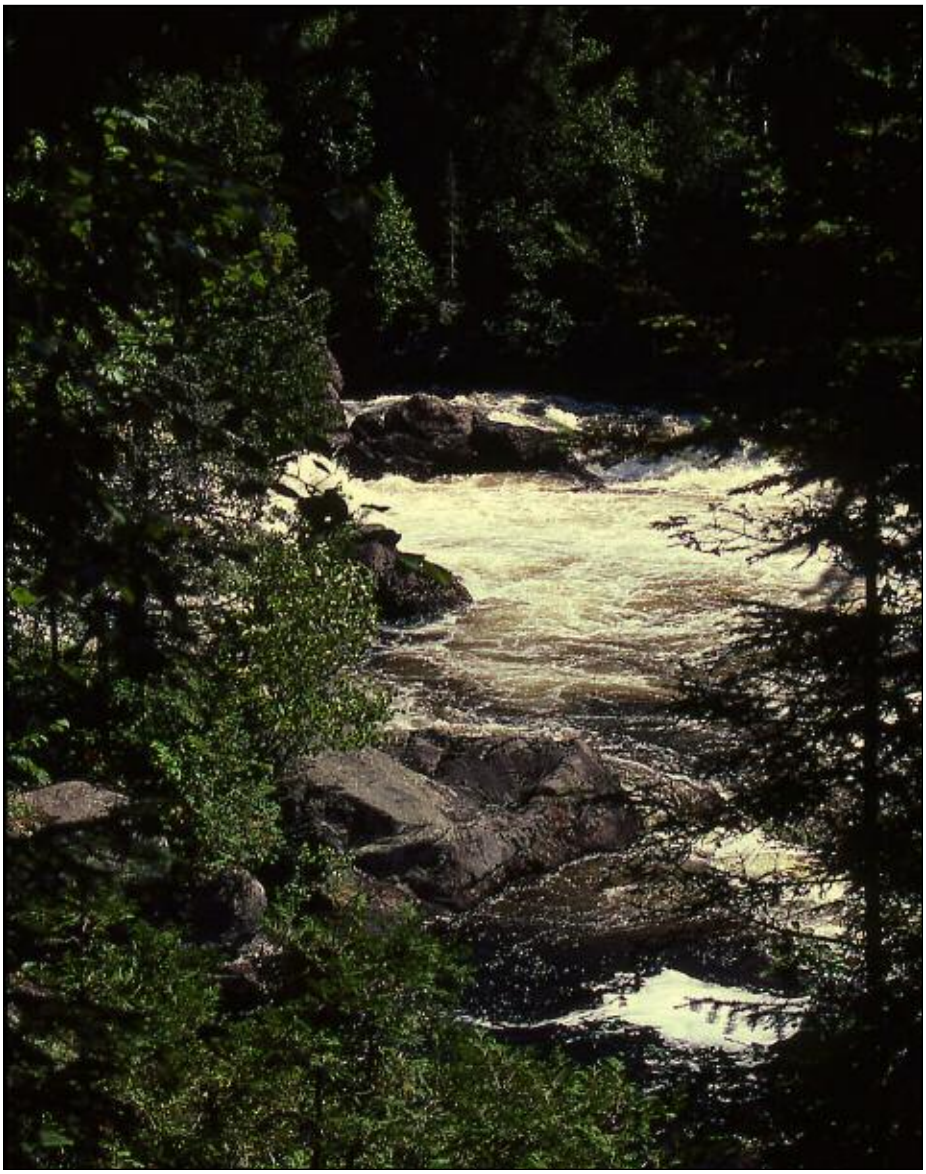
However, there was one thing we wholeheartedly agreed upon: those politicians in Quebec City and Ottawa should all go on a canoe trip together and solve their problems on the water. They might even develop some mutual respect and a better understanding!

When we finally reached the Ottawa River, each went his own way. He turned east to go back home, and I went west upriver to continue my hunt for canoeing photographs. We looked at each other with a new appreciation of our dreams.

"Good luck," I said. "Good luck, my Quebec friend."

"Bonne chance," he grinned. "Bonne chance, mon ami canadien."

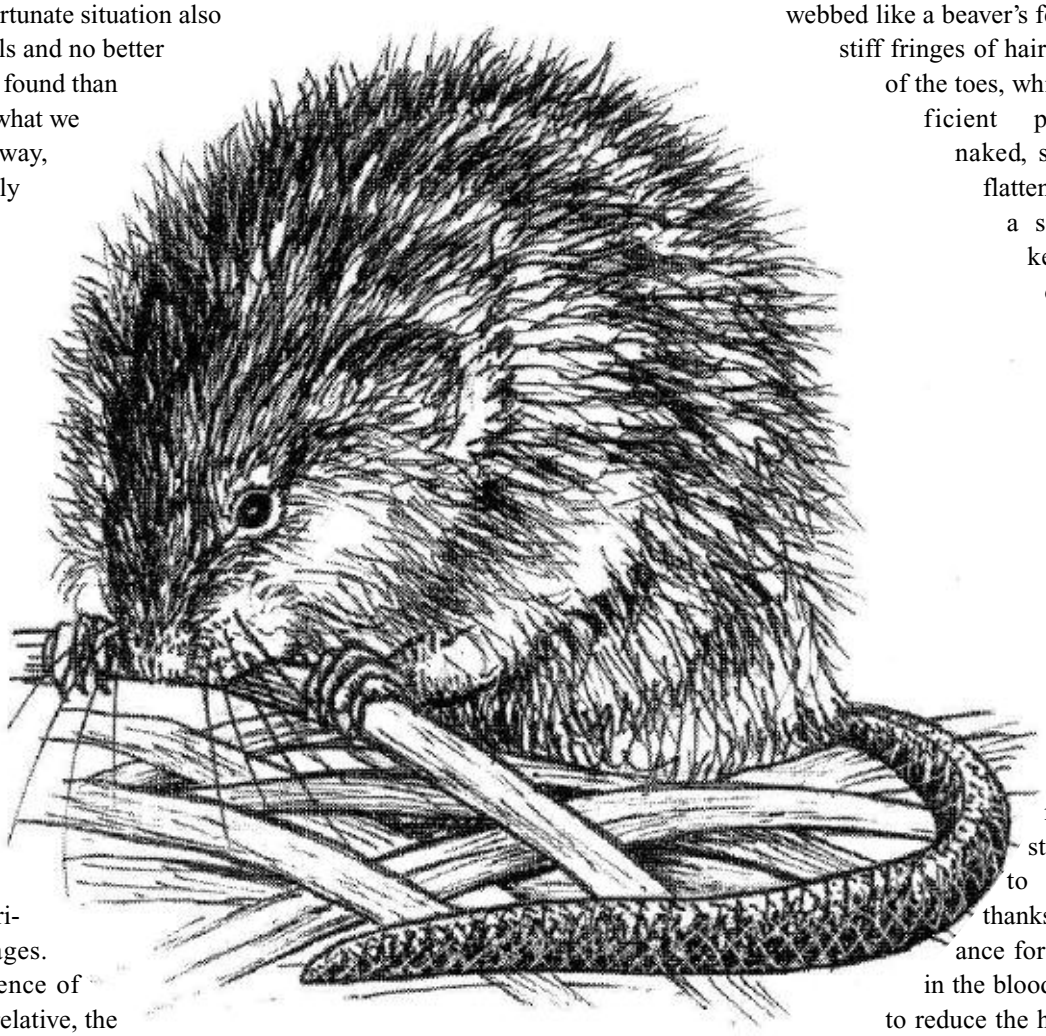
Previously published in: *The Globe and Mail* (28 August 2001) and *Canews* (November 2001)



The Mouse that does Pushups

Some individuals just don't get the recognition they deserve. In spite of their considerable accomplishments they are condemned to living on the fringes of public esteem. Other people treat them with plain indifference or even (oh, the injustice of it all!) barely concealed condescension.

The same unfortunate situation also exists with animals and no better example could be found than the muskrat. See what we mean? Right away, you are probably thinking to yourself that the muskrat is a less than inspiring subject for contemplation but, please, do not fall into this error. Hear us out instead. You see, the poor old muskrat suffers from at least two very serious disadvantages. First is the existence of its rather distant relative, the beaver. Although the two animals have many similarities in abilities and lifestyles, the beaver is bigger, has a few more attention-grabbing gimmicks (like dam building), and ends up getting all the glory – leaving the muskrat to appear as some sort of insignificant second-rater (quite unfair really). The muskrat's second problem is its very name. No matter how you slice it, the first part of the name makes you think of "smelly" and as for the second part, let's face it, a rat is a rat. We could try using the Latin name, Ondatra zibethica, but somehow we don't think it would catch on. Of course, it isn't the muskrat's fault that it has grandstanding relatives or that English-speaking humans persist in calling it a "smelly rat," so the least we can do is make amends by considering this animal's special qualities.



To begin with, we should get it straight that the muskrat is not really a rat but a mouse. To be sure, it's a very large one, weighing between one and two kilograms, but technically that's what it is. It also departs from other mice in its adaptations for life in the water. Except for the tail and feet, the whole body is covered with a thick, buoyant coat of waterproof guard hairs and below that a dense underfur, the two combining to keep the muskrat's body warm and dry even in freezing cold water. A muskrat swims with alternate strokes of its hind feet. They are not webbed like a beaver's feet but there are stiff fringes of hair along the sides of the toes, which make for efficient paddling. The naked, scaly, vertically flattened tail serves as a sort of keel to keep the animal on a straight course when it is swimming on the surface. But underwater, the tail is actively sculled back and forth providing significant propulsive power. A muskrat can stay under for up to 15 minutes thanks to a high tolerance for carbon dioxide in the blood and the ability to reduce the heart rate and to relax the muscles during a dive. This capacity is very important in permitting the muskrat to escape from predators and to swim long distances under the ice in winter.

During the summer we usually see muskrats in the evening, swimming across some boggy pond or creek. At a distance, it is sometimes hard to tell a swimming muskrat from a beaver but if you look closely you will see that with a beaver it is usually just the top of the

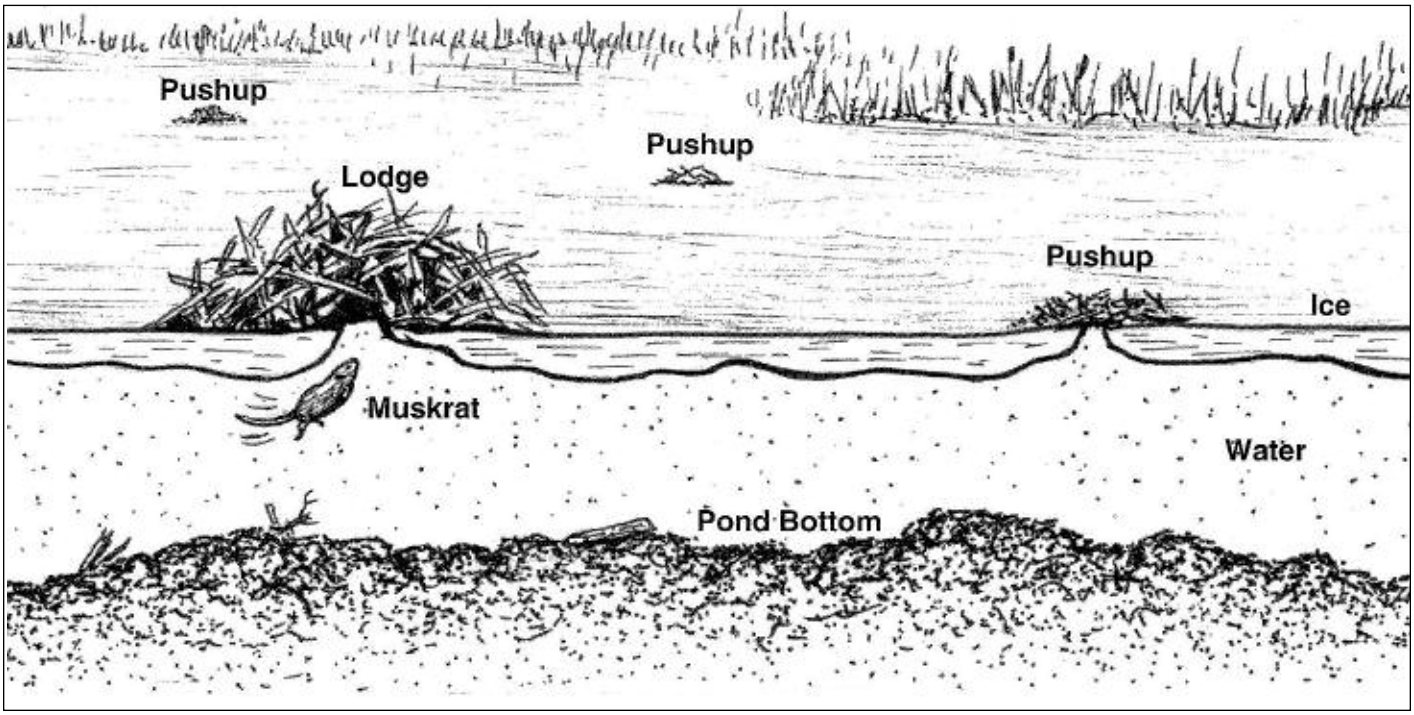
head that is visible above the water, whereas with the muskrat both the head and back can be seen. Of course, if you see the tail when the animal dives, there won't be any more doubt about the animal's identity. A common sign of muskrats in Algonquin is a pile of clam shells in shallow water (they apparently pry open the shells with their teeth, somehow) but most of the diet consists of water plants of which cattails are by far the most important. In fact, because cattails are not particularly common in the Park, our local muskrat populations are nowhere near as large as in other areas, south of here for example, where there are large cattail marshes.

Apart from their relatively low numbers, there is another reason why the presence of muskrats is not all that obvious in Algonquin. Most of them tend to make burrows from under the water's surface up into pond or streamside banks. The classic muskrat lodge of heaped up mud and cat-tail stalks is a relatively unusual sight in the Park. They are built away out in large marshes where there are no other possible havens from predators and bad weather. Also, since lodges are built mostly of plant materials, they can– up to a point - serve as a handy food supply. If a muskrat can't leave its lodge for some reason, it can stave off hunger simply by eating part of the bedroom wall. Of course, this is only an emergency measure and most food must be sought outside the lodge.

In the summer, this is a relatively easy matter and muskrats build scattered feeding platforms, and sometimes floating rafts to which they can retire and eat food obtained nearby. In winter, however, there is a serious obstacle posed by the ice. Muskrats do not store food close to their lodges the way beavers do and, even if they can stay underwater a long time, it would seem each animal would sooner or later use up all the naturally occurring supply of aquatic plants near its lodge and thus face starvation. In fact, this does not happen because soon after the ice freezes muskrats chew holes in the ice at various locations around their lodges. They then bring mud and vegetation to make mound-like roofs (which quickly freeze) over the holes. The little structures, just big enough to hold one muskrat, are called "push-ups" and they are of fundamental importance to their builders because, as satellite feeding, resting, and breathing stations, they vastly increase the area each muskrat can exploit during the winter. This behaviour is even more remarkable when you realize that each muskrat is apparently capable, in the total darkness which exists in the frigid water beneath the ice and snow covering the winter marsh, of routinely finding food and then the nearest push-up, and eventually going back to the lodge or burrow. They seem to know something about navigation that we don't.

There we have a condensed account of an animal, which obviously deserves more recognition than it normally gets. We think everybody should turn over a new leaf and let the muskrat share a little of the limelight we normally reserve for the beaver. And, if you have trouble getting enthusiastic about a "rat," just forget that dumb name and think of it as a "talented mouse that does pushups." It's closer to the mark and certainly sounds a lot better.

Reprinted from the July 14, 1994 issue of Algonquin Park's *The Raven*, courtesy of the Ministry of Natural Resources.



WCA ACTIVITIES
SUMMER 2009

WANT TO ORGANIZE A TRIP AND HAVE IT PRESENTED IN THE AUTUMN ISSUE?

Contact the Outings Committee before August 1

For questions, suggestions, proposals to organize trips, or anything else related to the WCA Outings, contact the Outings Committee: Bill Ness, 416-321-3005, bness@look.ca; Gisela Curwen, 416-484-1471, gisela.curwen@gmail.com; Scott Card, 905-665-7302, scottcard@sympatico.ca; Mary Perkins, mary.perkins@sympatico.ca, 905-725-2874

Our ability to offer an interesting and diversified activities program depends on our trip organizers' generous donation of their time and enthusiasm. We appreciate the important contribution these members make to our club. If you are an active paddler, please help us. Become an outings organizer.

WCA outings and other activities may have an element of danger of serious personal injury. You are responsible for determining if your equipment, skill, and experience are adequate to participate safely in a club activity. Participants are ultimately responsible for their own safety and well-being when participating in club events.

All moving-water trips rated intermediate level or higher require participants to have fully outfitted whitewater canoes (thigh straps, air bags filling the boat, throw bag, secured spare paddle), and to be wearing helmets and weather-appropriate clothing (wetsuits or drysuits for winter, spring, fall trips).

Below is a summary schedule of our upcoming club outings and activities.
Full details and descriptions can be found in the outings section of our website.

All Season **HALIBURTON COUNTY CANOE ROUTES**
Ray Laughlen, 705-754-9479, rlaughlen@gmail.com ----- There are many canoe routes in Haliburton County that offer superb lake tripping. As I live in Haliburton and have a flexible work schedule, I visit these areas frequently, especially during the week. If you would like to paddle with me, give me a call. Outings are suitable for novices.
J

June 13-14 **MATTAWA RIVER & LA VASE PORTAGE**
Gillian Mason & Derek Lancaster, 416-752-9596, wakima@pathcom.com, book by May 22 ----- A weekend on historic fur trade canoe routes. Saturday paddle the Mattawa from Pimisi Bay to the Campion Rapids. Sunday we will travel over the "newly uncovered" La Vase Portage from Trout Lake to Lake Nipissing. Camp at Samuel de Champlain Provincial Park. (your responsibility to book a site). Suitable for novices comfortable in moving water.

June 19-21 **GEORGIAN BAY, KILLARNEY AREA**
Bob Fisher, 416-487-2950, info@upthebay.com ----- Book as soon as possible. June is a great time to paddle the open Bay, with long evenings, open rock campsites, long vistas, and fewer bugs. We will start at 10:00 am Friday morning, and be back by mid-afternoon on Sunday. Limit of four members (singles or tandems) comfortable paddling on open water with the possibility of wind. There may be a park fee if we camp in the park. We will have two group dinners, which will require a $10 per person contribution to the kitty. Plus there will be a parking fee.

June 20-28 **ASHUAPMUSHUAN RIVER**
Jay Neilson & Frank Knaapen, 613-687-6037, jneilson@nrtco.net , book by May 24 ----- The Ashuapmushuan River is located north of Lac St Jean in Quebec. This is a challenging Class 2-3 river that requires confident ferrying and eddying skill in big water. Fully outfitted whitewater boats, including spray decks, are mandatory.

June 26-28 **OTTAWA RIVER**
John & Sharon Hackert, 416-438-7672, jhackert@sympatico.ca, book before June 20 ----- Three days on the Ottawa for big water fans. Must be at least strong intermediate whitewater paddler. Limit six boats.

June 29- July 3 **WOLF LAKE AREA**
Cheryl Stoltz & David Atkins, 905-830-0720, canoetrippers@rogers.com -----This is a family trip--kids very welcome--through an area of old-growth pine forest and landscaped similar to the LaCloche Mountains. It's a very beautiful area. Plus there are lots of historical sites for us to visit. The trip is exploratory as we have not been to this location before. We may loop back on a poorly maintained route. Route is easy, and we're hoping to have a day to kick back and relax. Trip length approximately 90 km. Longest portage is 1200 m. Suitable for flatwater paddlers with tipping experience who like kids.

July 4-5 **INTRODUCTION TO WHITEWATER**
Jon McPhee, 905-640-8819, jon.mcphee@rogers.com ; and Bill Ness, 416-321-3005, bness@look.ca, book as soon as possible ----- A two-day workshop at Palmer Rapids on the Madawaska River for flatwater paddlers who want to develop basic moving-water skills. Limit of five boats. Please see full description & prerequisites on website before registering.

July 25-26 **INTRODUCTION TO THE MINDEN WILDWATER PRESERVE**
Jon McPhee, 905-640-8819, jon.mcphee@rogers.com ; and Bill Ness, 416-321-3005, bness@look.ca, book as soon as possible ----- A whitewater skill building weekend for solid intermediate tandem or solo canoeists. Limit of five boats. Please see full description & prerequisites on website before registering.

August 1-3 **OTTAWA RIVER**
John & Sharon Hackert, 416-438-7672, jhackert@sympatico.ca, book before July 25 ----- Three days on the Ottawa for big water fans. Must be at least strong intermediate whitewater paddler. Limit six boats.

Aug 22-23 **LOWER MADAWASKA RIVER**
Aleks Gusev 416 433 8413, aleks@gusev.ca, book by August 7 ----- Suitable for novice & intermediate paddlers. Whitewater instructions & stroke tune-up will be provided, if desired. Run Snake Rapids section on Saturday & paddle Palmer Rapids on Sunday. Rentals available from Paddler Co-Op. Maximum of six boats, with priority given to new WCA members.

Sept. 5-8 **OTTAWA RIVER**
John & Sharon Hackert, 416-438-7672, jhackert@sympatico.ca, book before August 28 ----- Three days on the Ottawa for big water fans. Must be at least strong intermediate whitewater paddler. Limit six boats.

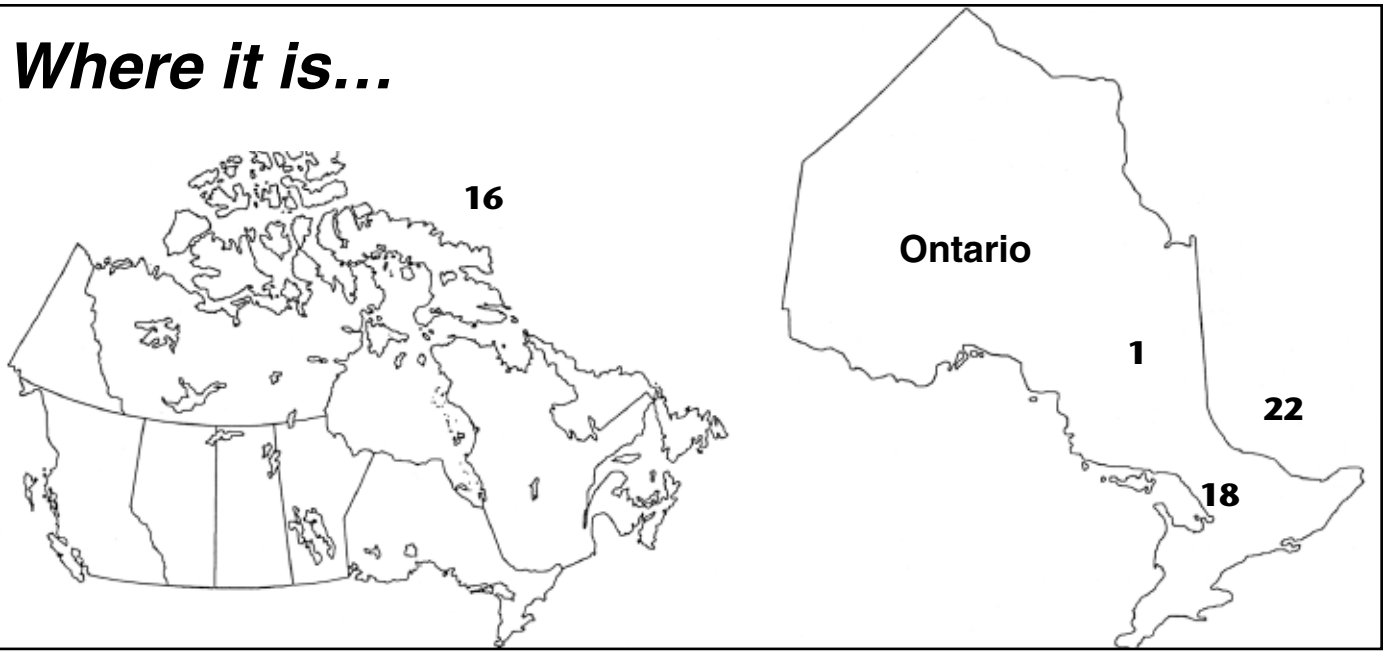
ADDITIONAL TRIPS

Check our website at www.wildernesscanoe.ca/trips.htm for additional trips. Members may submit additional trips to the Outings Committee anytime at bness@look.ca. If you miss the Nastawgan deadline, your trip will still be listed on the website. Also, check the bulletin board at www.wildernesscanoe.ca/bulletin.htm for private, non-WCA trips or partner requests.

NEED A PARTNER?

If you're a tandem canoeist in need of a paddling partner, whether for a single trip or on a more regular basis, our website provides a valuable resource to help you connect with other members who want to get on the water. If you need a partner, please submit a message for posting to our website giving details.

Where it is…



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