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NASTAWGAN

The Quarterly Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association

SPRING 2011

WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION

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3. Click on “Membership Online Form”.

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Spring 2011 Vol. 38 No. 1 Quarterly Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association

Campsite at Upper Eskakwa Falls

The Albany River

July 5–12, 2010

Text: Beth Bellaire Photos: Bruce Bellaire

Part of the fun of tripping is deciding which river will be next. After last year's Harricana River adventure (see *Nastawgan*, Summer 2010), we decided that there was one priority for our next trip – more tailwind! Realizing that the westerlies are considered predominant for a reason, we looked for rivers flowing west to east. Combining this criterion with a shorter-than-usual timeframe for our summer holiday, our choices were narrowed considerably. After some research, the Albany seemed the best fit.

At 982 kilometres, the Albany is tied (with the Severn) for the honour of being the longest river in Ontario. However, we were only doing a small midsection of the river between Osnaburgh and Miminiska lakes, planning on paddling about 25 kilometres per day. We would miss the headwaters coming

At the put-in

out of Cat Lake and the tidal channels leading into James Bay, but we would at least get a taste of this historical fur trade route.

The spring of 2010 was particularly dry. Many of the southern Ontario rivers that we paddle to hone our whitewater skills had dried up much earlier than usual, and we were concerned that there might not be enough water in the Albany to ease us over those Cambrian Shield rocks. However, when we finally booked our shuttle, we were reassured that the Albany always had enough!

This year, our usual foursome of Beth and Bruce Bellaire and Barb and Dave Young was joined by Diane Lucas and Rick Sabourin. They brought their unmarked mango-yellow Evergreen Starburst, which nicely balanced our very battered red-and-green Swift Dumoines.

Bruce and I, as usual, spent the night at Barb and Dave's in Brampton, doing the last sorting of gear and packing of food. Saturday morning, July 3, saw us up early and on the road for our rendezvous with Rick and Diane at a pit stop on Highway 400. Near Parry Sound, we saw the first wildlife of the trip – two deer in the median between cars racing north and south. Unfortunately, one tried to break free and was hit by a car. We were too far past to see what happened to the other but we can hope for a better end to its story. We also sighted a moose and a bear plus several turkey vultures, osprey, and a kestrel diving beside the road: a good practice run for wildlife sightings from the boats.

A full day's drive with sun, wind, and then rain brought us to our first night's layover – the Red Dog Inn in Terrace Bay.

Sunday, July 4

It rained off and on through the night, but the morning, although overcast, was drying out. After a full breakfast, we set out again for our second full day of driving. It was clear sailing until Nipigon. We had just stopped for a quick break but found this extended considerably when Rick and Diane returned to their vehicle to find a flat tire. Lacking the necessary key to unlock the wheel and so having to resort to a tow from CAA, they urged us to go on, saying they would catch up. (As it turned out, the tire had two small pinholes which were easily fixed by the local Canadian Tire in Thunder Bay. The "high" light of this side trip for Rick and Diane was the ride in their car on a flatbed truck – they enjoyed waving to passersby from this lofty perch!)

By 8:20 p.m., we were all back together at Winston's Motel in Pickle Lake, a town just shy of 500 inhabitants located at the end of the road. Highway 599 ends here at Ontario's most northerly community accessible by year-round roads: communities further north are served only by winter roads. Since almost nothing was open on a Sunday night, we made a passable dinner from leftovers and a few cold drinks and snackfood that we purchased at the convenience store.

Barb and I had already scouted the town on an early evening walk while waiting for Rick and Diane. We easily located Pete Johnson's Pickle Lake Outpost: he was to provide our shuttle-in and our fly-out. Pickle Lake appeared to be a major centre for fire fighting. There was a hangar with two large fire

Rocks at the put-in

On the river

trucks plus a barracks for the firefighters. We also noted a motel operated by PC Gold where I guess they billet their mining staff. (Pickle Lake was actually founded after gold was discovered nearby in 1928 and 1929. It enjoyed a few years of quick growth and good times until the gold dried up and most of the mines shut down in the mid 1960s. PC stands for Pickle Crow, one of the two main gold mining companies in the area and the name of a nearby ghost town that was once a bustling mining town). Other than that, there were some fairly well-kept family homes, an apartment complex, and a prosperous looking native employment project called Wasaya Airways.

Monday, July 5: 20 kilometres

Winston's dining room opened at 7 a.m. for breakfast, so we enjoyed a leisurely morning. After a short shuttle, we were loaded, on the water, and waving goodbye to our porters by 10:20 a.m. The day was warm and sunny with a little breeze, coming, as planned, from the west!

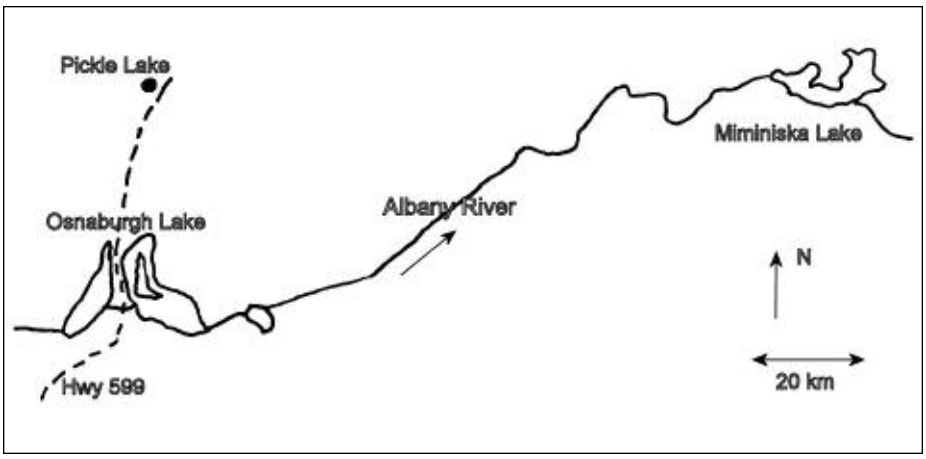
As is often the case, the first day was mostly lake paddling. Osnaburgh Lake, or OZ as the locals call it, is quite large with many islands and bays, so navigating was tricky at times, but the GPS combined with maps that we'd downloaded from the Atlas of Canada website served us well. We spied our first bald eagle of the trip, perched regally in a tall spruce on the right hand shore shortly after our launch. We also saw several loons and a lesser yellow-legged sandpiper. A healthy looking leech swam in the shallows, waiting for its meal at a beautiful beach where we had stopped for lunch. We also were surprised by fish leaping clear out of the water – perhaps bass or something larger (sturgeon?). The only trouble we had was at the end of the day, finding our way through four channels into the river proper. We tried the first channel we came to but it ended in a dry rock bed. This was likely a passable route in other summers perhaps, but not an option with our low water levels. Then we somehow paddled past the next two channels and entered the last one, but it, too, was impassable, blocked by a beaver dam. So we backtracked to the third channel where we found our first rapid, an easy C1 – and here, at 4:30 p.m., we made camp on river left, on a wide open stretch of rock, saving the run for the morning.

All enjoyed a refreshing pre-dinner swim and a post-dinner sip of chilled Chardonnay. We were pleasantly surprised that we could sit outside well past sundown and be bothered by very few bugs. In fact, it was a very warm night, but the breeze came up occasionally to cool us down. In the early night, the moon was full and beautiful, but by 4 a.m., it had clouded over and started to rain lightly.

Tuesday, July 6: 18 kilometres

We were all up by 6 a.m. Since there was still a light rain falling, we made coffee under the tarp and ate a quick breakfast of granola and oranges. Rick had taken the dishes down to rinse when he called to us to come quickly. What had he seen? There, floating by just under his nose, was the apple we had offered to the river gods the previous day.What an amazing coincidence! Taking this as a good omen, we watched the route it chose as it manoeuvred through the rapid, and we hoped its blessing would continue to show us the clear path.

We were packed and on the river by 9 a.m. This proved to be our pattern for the trip, breaking camp around nine



most days. This day was promising more good weather. The morning rain had dissipated and we now had sunny skies and a pleasant breeze – from the west! Our morning paddle was again on a lake – Lake Atikokiwam. We stopped on an island for a snack, and just as we left it, Bruce and I spotted another bald eagle in a tree, guarding its nearby nest. We quietly drifted over and were able to line up a good close-up shot.

The rest of the lake passed fairly quickly, with an agreeable tailwind helping us along. We stopped for our lunch on a large open hill – again, there were no bugs! Soon after this, we arrived at the first marked rapid, which turned out to be so shallow we had to step out and walk the loaded canoes through. The next stretch of river had much bird life. We saw a brood of mergansers, a heron, and had a tremendous viewing of a pair of sandhill cranes that flew over our heads as they trumpeted their warning call. Following fairly closely, we came to the second rapid. This one too was not runnable, but for the opposite reason. It was a very significant drop, so we portaged 600 metres on the left around the whole canyon, along a good path with only a couple of boggy spots.

At portage end, we were treated to an otter playing in the run-out. When it heard us, it stopped to study us briefly and then disappeared in the froth. We next worked our way through three small drops; the last looked a bit larger, but was just a fun run after all. We stopped below this at a beautiful site on river right. The fire pit had a fire laid out ready to be lit, with a huge pile of firewood waiting. Thank you to the kind and generous campers who had gone before. Our apple luck was holding well! It was 4 p.m. - time for beer and jerky!

Across the river, there was a lovely stand of tamarack, also known as the American larch. They are such delicate feathery beings – so out of place, it seems, for the harsh northern clime.

Wednesday, July 7: 35 kilometres

I was up for a quiet swim at 5 a.m.; the rest of the folks rose by 6. It was a lovely morning with a bit of breeze to keep the bugs at bay. We paddled for a bit to the first rapid of the day which four of us lined on river left. Rick and Diane, feeling a bit more daring, paddled through a channel on river right but still ended up lining at the end.

Further on, we came to Kagami Falls. We paddled through some small rapids leading up to the portage trail on river right. The path was 700-800 metres long and fairly good except for one spot where several large trees blocked the way, and we had to remove our packs to crawl under. It was 11:30 a.m. by the time we finished this portage, so we had a snack break to fortify us before we tackled the rock-dodging runout.

Old baldy

Soon after this, we came to a narrow chute that looked almost doable, but we decided there was just a bit too much aerated water. Bruce and I lined a bit on the right and then did a 120 metre portage. The others paddled back upstream and took a similar trail on the left bank. Reunited, we continued on through a long rapid with lots of rock-dodging fun.

Finally, the river opened up and we were able to make some distance. We stopped for a late lunch on river right. Hoping to put the ever-present tailwind to use, we tried our hand at sailing, but the wind decided it was time for it to take a break, so we gave up and went back to the reliable people power instead.

At this point, the river really opened up. We found ourselves in a wide area full of grassland islands and sandbars with lots of little channels to choose from. This led us into Achapi Lake itself which was very shallow. We had to paddle a wide arc around the shoreline to find our way back into the river proper again.

With no sites presenting themselves

Shoreline with canoe

in this stretch, we continued paddling until we hit the 75 kilometres (from Oz) mark. We stopped around 6 p.m, at a reasonably flat spot on river right. However, our bugless trip was finished! With no trees in reach, we rigged up our netted tarp using four logs for corner posts. Rick had brought along a telescoping centre pole – hurray! That gear barrel of his was great! The netting did its magic – except for the no-see-ums. So since most folks were pretty beat, we made a quick spaghetti dinner and retreated to our tents where our battle with the bugs continued, but at least from a more comfortable position.

Over the course of the day, our animal sightings had continued. We saw a family of otters, several beaver lodges, and the usual culprits: bald eagles, ducks, and sandpipers. Along the muddy shoreline of our camp site, there were footprints of a bear and its cub, and of a moose. We left many of our own footprints for them to study too!

Peaceful

Thursday, July 8: 30 kilometres

Our treeless tarp, albeit a bit a-kilter after the night, worked to keep most of the bugs at bay for a quick breakfast. To brighten our spirits, we found our first spring of the trip just somewhat north of our campsite. It was a bit of a wade through the mud and alders, but

Barb and Diane in conference

Kegami Falls

well worth it.

The day began with a couple of hours of flatwater paddling. Bruce, Diane, and I, being dragon boaters as well as canoeists, made the best of these bits to keep our sprinting muscles in shape, but I think the others were tiring of these stretches. At least the weather didn't slow us down. There were short rain showers that helped to cool us, and a thundercloud threatened our way. But in the end, just led us to the next sets of rapids.

We weren't sure what to expect of this section of whitewater. It looked potentially hazardous, but in the end our very low water levels created mostly zigzag runs to find enough water to keep moving. Only one or two sections offered any challenge. At one drop, we paddled to the brink and then did a six-person lift-over to lower the canoe to the bottom. We took turns leading, to share the fun, but the routes were pretty obvious and no mishaps were experienced at all.

There were lots of ducks in this section – mergansers and maybe a raft of buffleheads. Several shorebirds, some Bonaparte gulls darting about, and a golden eagle joined the ubiquitous bald eagle in this section. At lunch break, we saw both a beaver and a marten trailing the opposite shoreline.

At the end of these rapids, the river

MEC tents in the grass

again opened out into a small lake; we'd already fit in our requisite 25 kilometres, so we decided to start looking for a site. Sites in this section proved to be few and far between. What looked promising from afar inevitably turned out to be just another narrow exposed flat grassy/stony area along the shoreline. It had been a very windy day, so we tried for a more protected landing and settled on one of the larger of these grassy spots on the southwest shore. We were soon wishing for more of that breeze, however, for as the day waned, the wind abated and the bugs arrived in force. Still, we enjoyed a relaxing evening, watching the storm clouds skiff by and being entertained by some small birds chasing a broad-tailed hawk while Rick prepared dinner over the open fire.

Rocks - water - trees - sky

Friday, July 9: 30 kilometres

Although 6 a.m. was the agreed upon time for arising, someone forgot to mention this to the pileated woodpecker who was having an early morning feed. We listened to his hammering while watching a beautiful pink sunrise.

However, the sky soon turned less promising, so we decided to change our routine and pack up tents – still dry – before a breakfast of blueberry pancakes. The whole day, the weather was erratic. In the afternoon, we heard thunderclaps and saw rain falling but the storm blew right by us without releasing even a drop on our heads. We did have wind but, as planned, it was mostly a tailwind. The west-to-east flowing criterion was proving very worthwhile!

This was another fairly long day of mostly flatwater paddling. We were on the water shortly after 9 a.m. and not off until 6:30 p.m. Only a few swifts and a single C1 broke up the monotony. (These came after what was one of the few times we had to battle a heavy headwind. It was on the first south stretch of the river that twisted and turned consid-

Scouting

Rick and Diane

erably in this section.) The swifts were fun, once again challenging us to find a clear path through the shallows. There were also the regular bird friends to look for along the way. We saw another broad-tailed hawk, an eagle's nest, and a small merlin guarding a corner.

By mid-afternoon, we had covered the 30 kilometres to reach Upper Eskawkwa Falls, so we thought we were in for another relaxing afternoon. However, the toughest part of the day lay ahead – finding the portage! The write-up we had downloaded from the internet noted that there were two trails but they had followed the right-hand one. The co-ordinates for this had been penciled in on our maps, but seemed to be far too high up the river from the falls, so we decided to check out the left-hand option first. However, there seemed to be no trail at all on the left shore. Bruce and I backtracked along the shore for a while, and even tried to follow a moose into the woods, thinking she might have come down a trail. But all we found were hordes of black flies left behind.

Moose

Then we decided to try the right-hand side again, paddling back upriver to the coordinates we had marked down. Again, nothing there but bog and brush and bugs. After an hour of bushwhacking this shore, we decided to follow our instincts instead of the write-ups and paddled down to where we thought we would be if we were a trail and, sure enough, there was one on the right-hand side but much closer to the falls than where we had been looking. When Rick went to check this out, he discovered a huge wasp nest smack in the middle of the trail. He noted there was a low-water take-out just around the corner, so we all lined down to this second take-out and after a short 150 metre portage found ourselves at a picturesque cedar-circled site overlooking the falls.

Saturday, July 10: 10 kilometres

Since the planned distance to travel this day to Lower Eskawkwa Falls was very short, we decided to linger this morning and enjoy the beauty around us. I went for my usual morning swim while Bruce used a camera to capture the mists rising from the river. The other two couples lazed in their tents for a bit and we all enjoyed an opportunity to read the books we'd been carrying along. Still, we were on the water by 10 a.m.

The first challenge was the run out from the falls. As usual, there were lots of pillows to miss. Bruce and I had moved our canoe and gear further down, so we had an easy route, while the other two couples decided to challenge themselves with a higher entry. Although it was a near dump for one, in the end, all canoes made it through unscathed.

The river zigzagged again between the two falls, with lots of C1s and swifts, none of which were challenging at these water levels. Soon, we saw the beginnings of the Lower Falls. The infamous write-up said that the portage was on the right, but we looked, bushwhacked, and looked some more to no avail. (We did

find a spring that made the searching at least worthwhile – it is such a treat to have fresh, cold water again.) By this point, we had all surmised that the account had confused the lead-ups to the two falls: the description for the lower falls was really that of the upper.

Sure enough, we found the portage on the left – a short 150-metre path with a poor campsite (one or two tent pads at the most) part-way along. We were really happy that we hadn't pushed on yesterday to find the really "beautiful site" at the end of the Lower!

We had lunch and a swim in the large eddy at the end of the portage and then moved on to Snake Falls, misnamed in these conditions, since it turned out to be an easy centre run with no obstacles and even an eddy or two on the way down. Bruce and I caught one just below a cave on the left wall. The campsite at the end was on the left hand side, up at the top of a steep rock bank. It was tight for our three sleeping tents plus our bug tent.

Upper Eskakwa Falls in the morning

There were a few patches of poison ivy and a wasps' nest under a piece of plywood, but it was a great location otherwise. There was a natural swimming pool in an eddy at the bottom of the rapid with a few leeches, but lovely just the same. A second spring was discovered just down the shore from us, so we decided to splurge and use our endless supply of good water to make chilled drinks to accompany our appetizers that night.

Stopping early had allowed us plenty of time to explore the rocky shoreline along Snake Falls. There were some very red pools of water indicating high iron content in some of the rocks. Across on the right-hand side was a huge pile of

Lower Eskakwa Falls

Dave and Barb running Snake Falls

weather-whitened logs – evidence of the power of this river in conditions different than ours. There were also signs of fishermen coming up from Lake Miminiska, now only about 15 or 20 kilometres away. Our trip was winding down.

Sunday, July 11: 20 kilometres

There had been a thunderstorm during the evening, but it was only a minor inconvenience since we had already set up camp and our bug tarp again proved its worth. We stayed up a little later than usual, playing up and down the river – a fitting card game for a river trip. Bruce came very close to a perfect game, only missing his bid once.

Our final morning was another lazy one. Rick upped the excitement ante after slipping on the wet rocks at the top of the hill, he did a recovery run ending in a headlong dive into the river. He rated his entry as a 0.5. Unfortunately, this was not captured on camera, so it will live on only in memory.

Diane and I paddled down river to the

Red pool at Snake Falls

Food for Paddlers

The following recipe comes from a good friend, Diane Lucas. Rick Sabourin and Diane Lucas joined Bruce & Beth Bellaire and Dave & I on the Albany River for our 2010 summer adventure. Diane prepared the goulash while Rick slaved over the scalloped potatoes. The rest of us cheered them on while sipping our favourite whisky-sour aperitif.

Hungarian Goulash: 3 to 4 servings

3 tbsp. vegetable oil
1 lb stew beef
1 small onion, chopped
2/3 of a medium green pepper, chopped
1¼ cups tomato juice
½ tsp. salt
¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
2 tsp. paprika
¼ to 1/3 cup flour
¼ to 1/3 cup water

At home: Remove all visible fat from the beef and then cut it into ½ inch pieces. Pour the vegetable oil into a large pot and heat over medium heat, and then add the meat. Brown the meat and add the chopped onion and green pepper. Cook until the onions are soft. Then add the tomato juice, salt, pepper, and the paprika. Cover and simmer for 1½ hours. Stir occasionally, checking to make sure there is enough liquid to prevent the meat from sticking to the pot.

Scoop out the meat and vegetables and set them aside. Bring the sauce to a boil. While that's simmering, pour equal amounts of flour and water into a jar with a lid. Secure the lid shut and shake well. This flour mixture is known as slurry. Stir the sauce constantly while you pour a little slurry into the pot. Continue to stir. Allow it to cook for a few minutes while still stirring constantly. When the sauce has reached a gravy-like thickness, remove the pot from the heat.

Measure the goulash, and write this measurement down on a sticky note (meat, veggies, and sauce). Place meat and vegetables on a drying tray and the sauce on a separate drying tray. Dehydrate the meat for 7 to 10 hours or until it looks like large gravel, and dehydrate the sauce 6 to 8 hours or until dried thoroughly.

At camp: Add enough boiling water to the meat, veggies and sauce to equal the measurement on your sticky note. Be sure to account for and add your dried ingredients to the rehydration container prior to adding the water.

This meat goes really well with scalloped potatoes (dried scalloped potatoes are available in most supermarkets and can be made with dried skim milk powder). I have also added peas to the meat and veggies before drying. Now you have a balanced meal.

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

spring and filled up on fresh water. Then we all settled down to read, write, explore, or just relax and soak up the sun. Yes, it was another bright sunny day with an occasional breeze to give a break from the black flies. After lunch, we set out for the last leg of the trip to our previously arranged pick-up point just past the mouth of the river as it entered Miminiska Lake.

The wind whipped across the open space created as the river flattened out into the reedy lake. It was a tricky paddle over to a flat-rock "beach" on the north shore, where we arrived around 3 p.m. Since we had not yet been able to reach Pete on the satellite phone, we weren't sure we were at the right place. But with rain beginning to threaten, we decided to look for an area to set up tents. Barb found a good spot at the eastern tip of the long stretch of stone we were on. There was lots of room for our tents and tarp and only a small pile of garbage and cans nearby.

The rain came as we were putting up the tents, but it was just a sun shower, and soon everything had dried out again. Pete was turning out to be a difficult man to reach. First, the line was busy; then there was no answer. Luckily, we still had 400 minutes left that we'd pre-paid.

Monday, July 12: Fly out

During the night, there had been distant thunder and lightning, and a persistent beaver had slapped his tail over and over, warning us of something – perhaps a bad night's sleep? However, the day broke bright and breezy again. What wonderful weather we'd had this trip! The prescribed morning dip helped to wash away the night's cobwebs, and the morning coffee finished the job.

Everyone took turns calling the outfitters as we went about the morning chores. Finally, we reached someone – Pete's daughter, as it turned out. She said we were in line for an 8 a.m. pick-up, so we took down camp and were all ready in plenty of time, sitting on the beach rock and watching the skies. A bald eagle perched in a nearby spruce had kept us company all morning. He seemed to be waiting too.

Eight a.m. came and went, but Pete did not arrive.

Islands near the take-out

At 9:30 a.m, we called again, only to find out that he'd decided to do a drop off first. We were next in line, but there was only one plane, so we would have to decide who would be left to wait for the second run. Rick and Diane graciously offered.

Books were unpacked, and we settled back to wait some more. At 10 a.m., the unmistakable sound of an Otter was heard. A quick repack and short paddle out to the plane, and the first four were up and on their way out. First news of the outside world: Spain had won the FIFA Cup!

It was a 45-minute flight back to Pickle Lake – always fun to try and see if we could recognize anything as we flew over the terrain we had seen from such a different angle over the past eight days. At 11:30, we were unloading on the dock. Rick and Diane would join us in a couple of hours – plenty of time for a second cup of coffee and a freshly cooked lunch.

Flying back

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Published by the Wilderness Canoe Association
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.

Editorial

– Colour, at long last, colour! After years of dreaming and talking about it, and many months of dedicated actions (thanks, Aleks Gusev and hardworking team) you now hold in your hands the first issue of our beloved journal *Nastawgan* printed in colour. For several months we have been able to enjoy our journal in full colour as presented digitally in our website, but finally we can actually hold and feel the real colour magazine. Enjoy!

– Our search for one editor or a small team of editors to replace the present Editor-in-Chief has been successful. We have added Pegi Dover to our team as Text Editor and she has already shown her enthusiasm and craftswomenship by assisting most ably in the editing of two major articles in this issue. Pegi, you're very welcome to the team and we're looking forward to much excellent editorial work from you.

– The need to find a replacement for the Editor-in-Chief has suddenly turned urgent. In the last week of February I was hit by a heart attack that forced me to have a stent inserted to help my heart function more or less properly again. I have now returned home and am still very weak, but I have fortunately been able to finish this issue of *Nastawgan*. Plans to replace me are in hand and *Nastawgan*'s future is assured. It has been an unbelievably life-enriching experience for me and I'm convinced that my successor will find equal joy in having the opportunity to help create the truly unique journal that is our *Nastawgan*.

Deadlines

The deadline dates for submitting material for the four issues we publish each year are: the first days of February, May, August, and November. If you have questions, please contact the editor; addresses on the last page.

Palmer River Festival

Do yourself a great favour and participate in the Palmer River Festival that will be held on May 21 and 22 at the Paddler Co-op Boathouse on the Madawaska River in Palmer Rapids, organized together with the WCA. All information is presented on the colour poster published on the inside back cover (wrap) of this issue.

WCA Activities

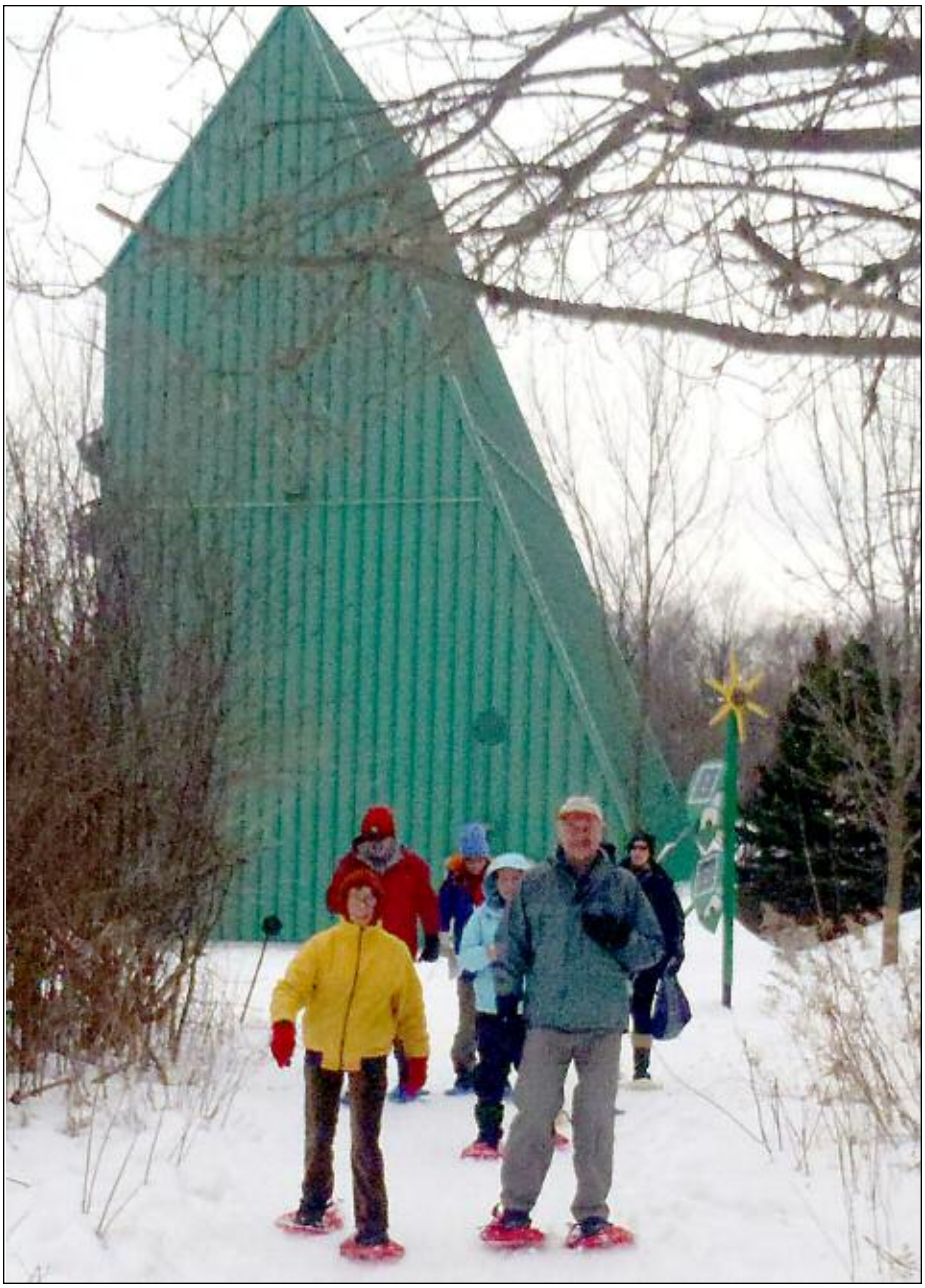
Want to view all club activities, learn more about our extensive outings program for members, or organize and post a trip? It's easy! Visit the Outings section of the WCA website: www.wildernesscanoe.ca

2011 WCA AGM

Kortright Centre for Conservation
Sunday, February 13, 2011

Perhaps many members were off on romantic Valentine weekends? We only saw 26 people register for this year's AGM, despite a fun and informative afternoon in a lovely outdoor setting after the morning business and a nice hot lunch.

WCA chair Aleks Gusev set the mood during our meet-and-greet with some movie peeks of his George River raft trip. In his Chairman's report, he highlighted the launch of the new website in April, the preparation for colour *Nastawgan* in Spring 2011 and the outsourcing of its distribution, a great fall meeting, and a sellout Wine and Cheese. Members can now renew memberships on line, submit outings on line, register and pay for events on line, and participate in Forums. Ongoing goals include more outings from more organizers, digitizing *Nastawgan* back issues and making them available online, and exploring partnerships with organizations with similar core values. For example, WCA will be joining with



Paddler Co-op to present the Palmer River Festival on the May long weekend.

Next came the report of the Auditor (we are in good shape) and committee reports. In his Outings report, Bill Ness focused attention on the new MOT legislation requiring all trip leaders to have their boats registered, amongst other requirements. Jeff McColl, in his Conservation Report, stressed how staggering the number of issues are, and the need to form alliances to fight them is our goal to protect and preserve paddle routes.

The new WCA board sees Michel Lafrance and Barbara Burton stepping down, to be replaced by Geri James and Rick Sabourin. Aleks Gusev, Martin Heppner, Mary Perkins, and Allan Jacobs will continue on the board.

After lunch, the afternoon activity impressed on us what a beautiful, large piece of property the Kortright Centre has. Half of the group started with an introduction to Geocaching, which in this form was much like orienteering using a GPS instead of a compass. We passed by the Raptor Centre hosted here, which takes on imprinted birds, who for example may have "worked" at the airport. We saw a peregrine, gyrfalcon, bald eagle, and two lovely types of owls. The other group started at the Archetype Sustainable House, the result of a design competition. These two joined dwellings display amazing innovations in energy conservation, and are the centre of continuous experimentation.

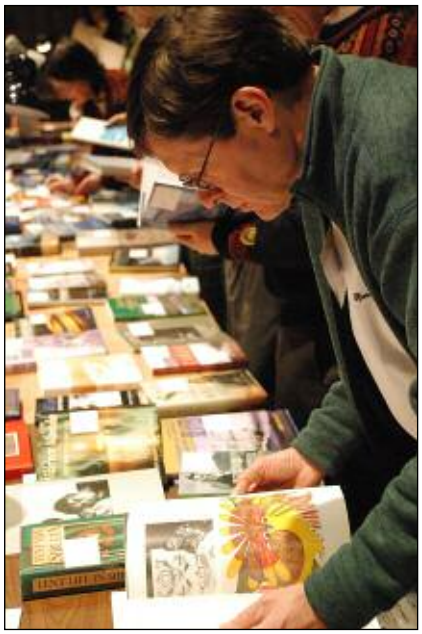
With the low turnout this year, perhaps it is time to return to the idea of combining the AGM with the Outdoor Adventure Show, and have our business meeting in one of their rooms before the show opens? Or maybe go back to the ever-popular Canoe Museum in Peterborough? Let us know what you would like to see next year; please email your thoughts to me: burtonbaj@sympatico.ca

Barbara Burton

26th Annual Wilderness & Canoeing Symposium

Hundreds of paddlers and other lovers of the outdoors thoroughly enjoyed the 18 presentations made at this wildly popular symposium, organized by George Luste and sponsored by the Wilderness Canoe Association, held in Toronto on February 18 and 19, 2011. The following presentations were made:

– Serge Ashini Goupil and Jean-Philippe Messier: *The Northern Aboriginal Seminars at Mushuau-nipi*
– Elizabeth Ashini: *My Youth on the Moisi, and the Nomad Innu Culture*
– David Bain: *Towards a Personal Canoeing Philosophy*
– Jim and Ted Baird: *The Pukaskwa Experience*
– Ed Bartram: *Georgian Bay Landscapes*
– Dot Bonnenfant and Lynn Gillespie: *Mista-Shipu / The Grand (Churchill River, Labrador)*
– John and Katherine Clement, Doug Heym, Ted Gallagher: *Bloodvein River Canoe Adventures*
– Larry Coady: *The Lost Canoe – Hesketh Pritchard in Labrador*
– Tija Luste Dirks: *Paddling the Western River with my not-so-young Parents*
– Jack Gregg: *A Long Time in One Place – The Upper French River*
– Carol Hodgins: *Fifty Years of Northern Canoe Travel*
– Geoff Jones: *In Search of Wilderness – 1968 Churchill River, SK*
– Phil Lange: *Kayak Research on Baffin Island*
– Ross McIntyre: *Why we Paddle*
– Aaron Orkin: *The Little North Canoe Expedition*
– Al Pace: *Legacy Wild – 30 Year Arctic Wilderness Journey*
– Philip Schubert: *Retracing the Hubbard and Wallace Saga*
– John and Christine Yip: *Thomsen River Adventures, Banks Island.*



Mattawa River at High Water

Dennis and Pamela had paddled with me in the early spring, so they had experienced canoeing with high water levels before. But they wanted to get more experience with running rapids.

When they asked to paddle with me on the Mattawa River in early spring (April 1995), I was comfortable with the idea. The Mattawa River starts at Trout Lake near North Bay and travels to the Ottawa River at Mattawa. (See map on page 3 of the Fall 2010 issue of *Nastawgan*.)

We started at the dock just above Talon Dam, portaged down to the canyon, and paddled through it to Lake Pimisi. Then ran the swifts at high water down to the chutes and the swift beside the smaller campsite on river right, well above Petit Paresseux Falls. I asked Dennis to wait until I landed my canoe some distance above the normal portage trailhead, and then to land well above me, since I knew the drag on the canoe was very strong.

As I landed and was pulling my canoe up on shore, their canoe drifted past me. At the trailhead Dennis tried to stop but then his paddle wouldn't hit bottom, so he grabbed frantically for the bush on the riverbank and he just caught hold in time. Branches were breaking off in his hand as I ran toward the canoe. I was just able to grab a gunwale as the last branches snapped right off.

With both canoes on shore, we three walked to the rock ledge on the portage trail, left to the hidden group campsite, then right along a faint trail that took us to the higher ground at the end of the portage, just inland from the Petit Paresseux Falls. Neither Dennis nor Pamela said very much.

As we walked along, the roar of the water rose to a terrible tearing sound. Standing close to the river, we saw the water blasting over the first ledge, then over the second ledge with the rock on river left completely submerged. I was shaking like a leaf. Dennis and Pamela were speechless. We realised that they would probably have been killed if their canoe had entered the boiling water in front of us.

After I walked back to the canoes, I paddled one canoe and towed the other through the trees along the flooded portage trail to the end of this trail, which is below Petit Paresseux Falls. Dennis and Pamela stayed at the end of the portage trail. There is a rocky outcrop that was above the water level where they could stand. They were still in shock. With water surging around us as we boarded the canoes, we ventured out below Petit Paresseux Falls and paddled on downstream to the trailhead of the portage trail around Paresseux Falls.

Below these falls, we paddled down to the cave on river left, and then to Elm Point campsite where we spent the night. By then I had calmed down, but to this day I still have nightmares about what happened and what might have happened.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. I ran the rapids with both canoes after we carried our packs across the portage trails. The last run was down Champlain Rapids and that took us to our cars. It was nice to get out of the cold weather under overcast skies that weekend.

Every time my wife and I paddle the Mattawa River, I remember that trip, and I break out in a cold sweat. Thinking about it, the falls were far enough away that Dennis thought he could go right to the usual takeout place. Once the increasing pull of the water began, it was too late for him to backpaddle. On previous trips I had drifted slowly down the bank until I felt the pull of the water, then backpaddled to shore, far above the place where Dennis tried to land.

He made one mistake that nearly cost them their lives. And I learned my lesson about taking friends canoeing in the spring. Their lack of experience and ignoring my request took them to a near disaster. I was reminded that whenever the spring waters run high, fast, and cold, there is little forgiveness.

Arnold Hartford

Picturing Paddling Kids

Photo 1

Photo 2

Parents (and grandparents!) know that nothing beats the power and impact pictures of young children can have. Everybody simply loves to see children enjoying themselves and there are countless opportunities for making such prized photographs, certainly in canoe country. All you have to do is follow children around, look at what they are doing, recognize the picture in the scene, point the camera, and push the button.

The story of this little boy in the big canoe (Photo 1) is obvious: he is on his first outing in a real canoe. Holding on to his dad gives him the necessary support to help overcome this frightening encounter with the fantastic world of paddling that is going to unfold on the lake he is looking at so timidly. The picture is defined by the little guy's hand touching his father's back and finding much reassurance there. Without that arm establishing contact between them, this would be nothing but a snapshot of two people in a boat. With it, there is a lovely story of a little boy on a big adventure. This is a great addition to the family album.

The photo of the little person in Photo 2 tells a different story, one of confidence and trust in the knowledge that the oversized lifejacket will keep him afloat, no matter what. In such a tightly composed portrait, avoid cutting off part of the head and bands of the person you photograph. Keep the background free of clutter and see to it t hat there are no trees or other things growing out of the kid's head. Remember, try to shoot at the child's eye level; do not point the camera down from where you are standing.

Children grow up so fast that every picture you make of them is a unique record of a moment in their lives. Their unpredictability and profound curiosity

lead them into situations that create numerous occasions for fine pictures, so photograph them before it is too late. This little guy in Photo 3 obviously loves to canoe. He appears to be training hard for his first solo and does not mind showing the photographer the finer points of paddle control. Here, both canoe and paddle are on diagonal lines, together forming an interesting cross shape. Even though the shadows created by the sunlight are rather harsh, it really is unimportant, provided the printing of this snapshot is not too dark.

The "pooped" person in the much-softer-lighted Photo 4 is far away in slumber land, after what must have been a tough day portaging and paddling against the wind. Or maybe he also did not get enough rest last night because he and his tripping buddies were raising hell at the time. Who knows? All he wants to do now is sleep.

The combination of travel and photography can be a great experience for the whole family. Give the young ones their own cameras with which to experiment and, later at home, discuss the results with them so they (and you!) can learn from their successes and mistakes. Teach children the fascinating art of seeing and recording photographs, and they will soon start making their own visual memories of the family canoe trips. Never too young to learn!

Excerpt from Shooting Paddlers by Toni Harting, Natural Heritage Books, © 2000.

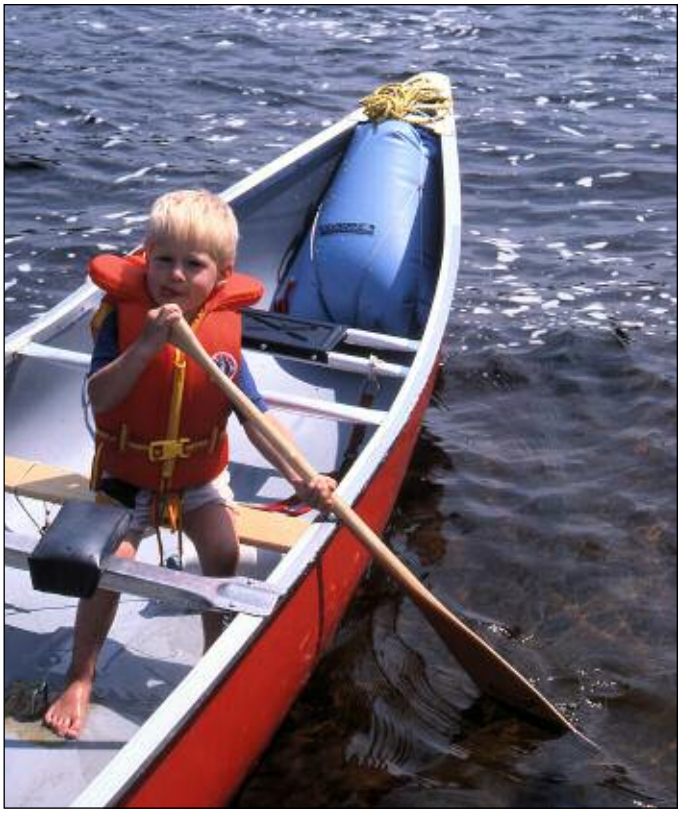


Photo 3

Photo 4

Lessons of the Land

Experiencing Labrador's Woodlands in Winter

Text: Scott McCormack Photos: Colin O'Connor

This is the story of a research journey and the applied practice of returning to the sensory experience of place in the Northeastern Woodlands of the Canadian Shield. It is also the story of my reflections on my own ecological identity in relationship with the Northeastern Woodlands.

Colin O'Connor and I had been preparing to do a traditional winter toboggan-hauling trip in interior Labrador for over a year. We had both done many trips before – in all seasons – but nothing to this degree in winter. We were looking to challenge ourselves, but more importantly, we wanted to really experience winter out on the land: to put knowledge, skills, technologies, tools, and techniques together to carefully interact with the land. It takes a lot of work and rushing around to get ready for a trip like this and it always takes at least a few days in the bush to even begin to get into the rhythm of the landscape. We were really looking forward, and felt privileged, to have an opportunity to be in the bush a whole month.

We had heard exciting stories about Labrador from long-time snow-walkers, such as Algonquin Park warden Craig MacDonald and McMaster University professor Bob Henderson. We burned through some classics of traditional winter camping in Labrador, including Elliot Merrick's *True North* and Garrett and Alexandra Conover's *A Snow Walker's Companion*. We became fixated on the lure of Labrador, the far reaches of the Northeastern Woodlands.

A few months in advance, we checked with the Innu/Montagnais First Nation and the Naskapi band offices to ask permission to snow-walk on their traditional territory for a month. The folks at both offices were excited at the prospect and encouraged us to come. One gentleman was urging us to come back for the goose hunt in the spring, for which we will have to make a return trip some day.

I wanted to deeply experience the Northeastern Woodlands winter landscape without the distractions of modern technology and timesaving devices – automobiles, telephones, internet or even a gas stove. For reasons of both form and function, we used some traditional technologies and techniques of winter travel that have been used in this region over many generations. These included *babiche* (woven raw-hide) and wooden snowshoes, an Egyptian canvas wall tent, a tin wood stove, smoked moose hide mukluks and mittens, lamp wick bindings, two toboggans, a crooked knife, forest axe, and an ice chisel of a 200 year-old Hudson Bay Company design. I wanted to explore how the use of traditional technologies would affect our experience. Would such an approach to winter living significantly change my perception of the winter landscape? And if so, how?

As the sun rose on Monday, March 2nd, 2009, we squeezed the last of the gear into and on top of my small Subaru and hit the road from my neighbourhood of little Portugal in Toronto's west end. I hadn't yet heard from the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University regarding the acceptance of my research proposal and risk assessment for the trip. I was nervous. We drove up to York where I began tracking the hallways and offices in search of a sign that we could go ahead with the research trip. Usually, when you need to find somebody at York you can be assured that they won't be there and that day I needed to see three people. I felt that the odds were against me. But somehow, everybody was there and I received the go-ahead from each of them! I was ecstatic. I said my goodbyes and we headed east on Highway 401.

En route, we picked up a Russian-made Baikal shotgun at a hunting shop north of Belleville, with the idea that we would be able to add some small game to our diet during the trip. Driving along the North Shore of the St. Lawrence River we stayed at the travellers' hostel in Tadoussac, Quebec, a base-camp for many outdoor adventurers. An inquisitive traveller emerged from the small group of Quebecois at the bar and checked out our topographic maps now covering the hardwood floor of the common room. In a thick Quebecois accent, he inquired,

"And where do you go?"

"Interior Labrador."

"Labrador? So you guys do the opposite of the Florida thing?"

"We hadn't thought about it that way, but yeah, you could say that."

"Hmm, Labrador. It is not a place where people go, only a place that people try to get out of."

We checked into an overpriced roadside motel and began packing our provisions into toboggan bags. We used cardboard boxes to store the food as they fit well on the toboggans and could be burned once we ate through the food. The next morning we caught the Quebec North Shore & Labrador (QNS&L) Railway Line train heading north to Labrador.

On the journey north, many folks were getting on and off the train at hunting camps. We were far away from Toronto, but I felt calm and welcome. The people we talked to were friendly and happy to share stories about being out on the land. It was not strange to them that we were going out onto the land for three weeks. The only strange part for some folks was that we didn't have a skidoo. A few people asked, "What kind of 'sleds' do you have?" When we responded, "two 12-foot toboggans," everyone laughed.

At eight o'clock in the evening, we arrived at the Menihek Dam. It was dark and -35 degrees Celsius. A kind gentleman who works at the dam and whom we had contacted in advance offered us a room for the night at the dam barracks. He showed us around and had us over to his place to look online to see, by way of satellite locator devices, where the Caribou were travelling. There were none in the territory where we were heading. He also informed us about how the Quebec government was putting a lot of money into the hydro dam and that within a few years the dam will have 15 people at a time working there. Presently there are only two or three.

We set out from the dam with our 275-pound, provision-loaded toboggans

in tow, and headed out towards the west across Lake Menihek. It was a crisp, sunny day at about -30 degrees Celsius. The pulling was harder than we had anticipated. That day we only travelled three kilometres to the nearest island about halfway across the lake. We successfully made our first camp, cooked and ate a huge beef stew, and slept like two bears in hibernation.

For the next five days, everything went well. We started to settle into the place and began to feel more at home. One afternoon when we were base-camped, I took the time to craft a crude pair of snowshoes with my axe and crooked knife, using materials that I could find at hand. What I made didn't turn out to be aesthetically pleasing, but I wanted to see if I could make something that would work, that could get me out of there if I were to lose or break one or both of my snowshoes.

On day six we hauled ourselves and our toboggans through a narrows, skirting around its open, moving water to reach Howell Lake. Looking through our iced-up goggles was much like squinting at a frosted freezer wall. Removing the goggles, however, was no better; the blowing snow impaired our vision, froze our eyelashes together, and slapped our faces with frostbite. It was minus 40 Celsius. When we reached Howell Lake, the 100-kilometre-per-hour dry, stinging wind blew down from the snowcapped hills, relentlessly whipping our meagre, urbanized bodies and finding its way through every microscopic hole in layers of wool, fur, leather, and canvas. I felt like an alien on my own planet, superimposed onto an infinite canvas of snow.

Through multiple thermal layers, I heard Colin muffle, "Are we sure we should be out here today?"

I thought about Colin's question and wondered whether we should push on or turn back to set up camp all over again. From what we could see, there was not ample tree cover on Howell Lake to set up a camp in these gale winds. On the other hand, to set up a traditional winter camp took the two of us about three hours of hard labour. For starters, the basic routine chores include assembling and supporting the canvas tent and wood stove, digging down into the snow for a kitchen, chiseling a water and fishing hole through five feet of solid ice, cutting and bucking up standing dead wood for fuel, harvesting saplings for supports, and cutting spruce boughs for the floor. Then there is cooking dinner, re-

pairing any equipment, and sharpening tools among other things. Taking down camp in the morning is also labour intensive, not to mention mentally challenging. We would get up early in the morning and disassemble a warm wood stove and heated tent only to freeze our fingers by lashing gear onto toboggans in minus 40 temperatures. The thought of setting up a camp that we had just spent two hours taking down was exquisitely frustrating. Bearing all this in mind, it seemed defeatist to turn back to the previous night's campsite. We decided to push on.

The wind got stronger as we trudged further out onto Howell Lake. The snowdrifts were hard-packed and unpredictably spaced. Combined with our impaired visibility, the drifts caused us to stumble and fall while pulling our loaded toboggans. In a feeble attempt of the blind leading the blind, we would take turns breaking the trail, feeling our way, foot-by-foot, across the lake. My left leg started to seize up as the toes on that foot lost circulation and sensation, practically giving me a clubfoot upon which I could barely keep my balance. I was beginning to feel like a lame pack mule who had strayed too far from the farm. Behind me Colin had been yelling "retreat!" but I hadn't heard him over the wind. When I looked back I was relieved to discover that he was pointing to a snowdrift behind a few scrubby black spruce trees and willow brushes where we could rest and re-evaluate our plan.

We made it to the other side of the

lake, where we were able to regroup and make a plan. It was empowering to be able to navigate in these conditions by engaging our senses with our surroundings, without having to rely on modern technology. It was reassuring to have the map, GPS, and compass with us in case we needed them, but on the other hand, it was also reassuring to know that if these more modern technologies were to break down, there are other, older techniques of way-finding.

Somewhat sheltered behind the snowdrift, we pulled out a few pieces of beef jerky and some dried berries, our modern bastardization of pemmican. We gnawed away in silence while I got the circulation going in my foot by shaking it, stretching, and doing a little jig on the wind-packed snow. We then looked at each other and shook our heads in disbelief, "What are we doing here?" and "Why are we doing this?" The gusts toppled over and curled around the drift, blowing snow on our faces. Half chuckling, Colin remarked, "You know, if anyone could see us right now they would think that we were completely crazy." I was beginning to think that we were.

Most Canadians, myself included, complain about winter. Who likes the polluted slush pit of Toronto, the incessant rain in Vancouver, or weather in Halifax so unpredictable that one can never decide whether to don a sou'wester or a snowsuit? A forty-hour workweek combined with dwindling daylight seems to be the perfect formula for a case of Seasonal Affective Disorder. It can be challenging to embrace the winter season in the 'Great White North.' But beyond being really uncomfortable and inconvenient, is there a deeper reason why winter is perceived as such a problem?

Snow and ice have a seemingly paralytic effect on the progress-oriented lifestyles of modern civilization, at least for the ever-growing majority of us who live in urbanized areas. Snow causes institutions to close and inhibits our ability to move faster in an automobile, transit system, and even by foot. We're late for work because we're scraping the windshield. We miss important meetings because we are trapped in a snow bank. Time is money, and *snow eats time* – we must get rid of snow, or at least complain about it.

One of the most common remarks from others after our trip north was, "There really was nothing out there. Just wilderness, eh?" Apart from a few airplanes overhead and skidoo tracks on Lake Menihek, we didn't see a sign of human life. This made it easy to perceive the Menihek Hills as barren, empty and void of life. At times, we felt completely alone in the wilderness. Within a Western concept of linear time and in a human-centered sense, yes, we were out there all alone. But somehow this seems too easy, anthropocentric, and narrow minded. I can't help but wonder if this is just more of a perception or frame of mind. For thousands of years, people have been successfully travelling and living in the Northeastern Woodlands of North America, in the very landscape where we were contemplating our sanity. In many places we could sense the presence of others who had come before us; the waterways on which we were travelling felt like age-old arteries of travel, transport, and trade. Travelling through the landscape at the speed our own bodies could carry us allowed us to engage with, and notice the subtleties of, the place in a way that we would not have

had we been travelling under power of a modern combustion engine. The layers of history under our snowshoes reminded us that others have crossed Howell Lake and maybe, at times, their toes were as numb as mine.

Once the warm blood crept back to my foot, we looked at the map, collected ourselves, and headed toward what we desperately hoped would be a sheltered and forested cove. It was a crapshoot. Upon arrival, we found the cove to be sparsely covered with trees. There was a small lump of a hill that we could barely tuck behind to get out of the wind. With the wind gusting and the blowing snow swirling, we dug deep down to minimize the chances of the tent turning into a giant canvas kite. Cursing the wind, we did all of the routine chores, fired up the stove, and cooked a hot meal. It was peaceful, warm and cozy inside the tent. That night the weather cleared and the wind died. Outside, the stars blanketed the night sky.

The next day was sunny and calm – nothing like the tantrum of the day before. We took a day of rest, hunted ptarmigan, and followed animal tracks. We ate baked brie on bannock, bacon-wrapped figs and chèvre, and a fresh ptarmigan stew.

After dinner I sat back with a hot chocolate in the tent and reflected on my existence in Toronto. Maybe what we were doing wasn't crazy when compared with some of my routine activities in Canada's mega city. I thought about sitting in a chair and staring at a computer screen all day; text messaging, emailing, and Facebooking with some of my best friends who live in the same city but whom I never see. I recalled barreling down a highway in rush hour at 110 kilometres an hour in a hunk of metal with nothing but a white line separating me from another hunk of metal travelling the same speed in the opposite direction. What about inhaling exhaust fumes and wafts of sewage, dodging trucks and road-rageing SUV's while cycling up Keele Street – with no shoulder, I might add – to get to class at York University? Yeah right, I forgot, none of this is crazy at all. Relatively speaking, lost in the drifts in the Menihek Hills is safer than cycling down Bloor Street to get some food.

The longer we spent in the Menihek Hills, the more comfortable we became. We slowed down, started picking up on the subtleties of the landscape, and operated within the limits of the place. The occasional visit from an elusive boreal owl and a slick frolicking marten reminded us that we were not alone. White ptarmigans filled our bellies. We spied a hairy woodpecker pecking away at a dead tamarack and noted the fluttering

whiskey jacks, dancing rabbits' tracks, and fresh wolf scat. The aurora borealis pulsated emerald green. At night, the black spruce trees popped and snapped in the cold and the ever-changing snowdrifts revealed weather patterns. The land, the forest, and the life it sustains were telling us a story. These stories would not be the same if experienced as a passive observer from a car window or on a computer or TV screen. As participants, we were listening and were living close to the place. Our digital devices began to seem pointless; nature was doing its thing whether we ran out of batteries or not.

Life seemed to get easier as the time passed. As the days turned into weeks, we gained strength and skill and perfected our techniques. As we ate through the food, pound by pound, our toboggans became lighter. After being out there for three weeks, I felt that I could have stayed for another three. While hauling my toboggan, I found myself scheming about how I could live there for a whole winter.

Towards the end of the second week, we made our way to a "T" intersection at the southern tip of Zoloski Lake where it intersects with a long and narrow finger lake that runs west about 20 kilometres to the height of land that is the Quebec / Labrador border. This place, a logical crossroads of wind-packed waterways that make for ideal snow travel, felt especially imbued with the spirits of previous travellers. We made our way west along this finger lake to a location near the border that personified all of the elements of a great base camp: multiple possibilities for day treks with hill-top vistas, good dry wood, adequate forest cover for shelter. The willow brushes were also a good sign for hunting ptarmigan, and rabbit tracks gave us hope of snaring a dinner. We hunkered down for four days, and engaged in all of these activities. We were unlucky with the rabbit snaring and fishing, but we feasted on more ptarmigan. On a sunny and clear day, we made our way up to the top of a hill where we could see for miles in all directions: the plateau of Quebec's Ungava Peninsula to the west, the Menihek Hills where we came from to the northeast, and due east we had a clear view down the valley that would guide us through the hills and back to Menihek Lake to the dam.

During the last week we doubled back on the narrow finger lake, passed the crossroads at Zoloski Lake, gradually descended through the valley and skirted moving water to get to Pointer Lake. Descending out of the hills, we popped out on Lake Menihek where we camped for our final evening. From our tent we could hear the distant hum of the dam. Crossing the lake on our last day of

travel, the weather warmed up and hovered around zero degrees centigrade. The snow turning wet, sticky, and heavy was a sign that it was a good time to finish. Returning to where we had started, the Menihek Dam, we closed the circle of the trip. The dam keeper and his wife had prepared a traditional jig's dinner with roasted caribou. We showered, feasted, and revelled in the luxury of fine company, food, and hydroelectric power.

I have only begun to understand the intelligence and wisdom of Labrador's woodlands. While I enjoy the amenities and cultural diversity of urbanity, I have been reminded that I can slow down. I can turn off my phone and be on the land for a month, a week, or just an afternoon in a garden or park. I can go with people I love, or go alone. Perhaps, most importantly, I can continue to learn from these experiences and places. My appetite for consumption and cravings for distraction can wait. When I die, I don't want to have known this earth as a mere acquaintance. The Northeastern Woodland winter landscape is alive and it is our common home. In all of its humble beauty, it reminds me that if snow slows me down, it is not a bad thing at all.

Scott McCormack is a writer and an Environmental Studies masters student at York University. Colin O'Connor is a freelance photographer based in Toronto. His work has appeared in Maclean's Magazine, Outpost Magazine, The Globe and Mail, Maisonneuve, The Toronto Star, and The National Post.

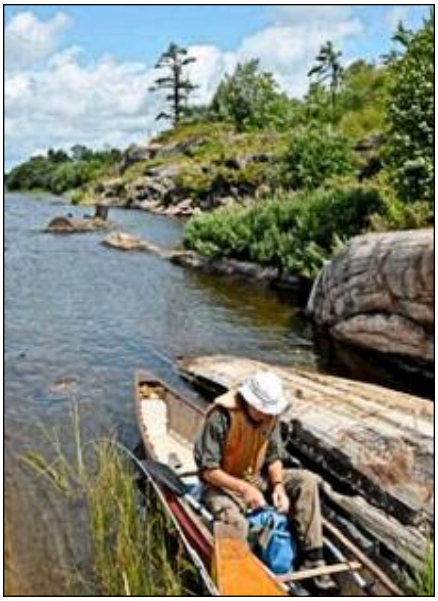
Alligators in the French River

Rob Butler

This was July 2010 and I had been warned that water levels were 5 to 8 ft below normal.

Wanting to visit the lower part of the French River, the Delta, and therefore putting in at the Hartley Bay Marina, I was told by the very helpful and friendly people there: Yes, water levels were at a record low due to little winter melt, and no rain since, so that the Chaudière dams in the upper river were holding back virtually all water to bring up the level in Lake Nipissing. No, you would have no trouble canoeing, but it might take longer. No, don't use the dry Old Voyageur Channel nor the dry Pickerel River Outlet.

Our suspicion of new portages and newly exposed rock gardens proved unjustified, testimony to the deep waters of the French River Delta. However, what wasn't mentioned were the extraordinary revelations of 'the good old days'. On the new, lower shoreline of our campsite just a kilometre east of Dalles Rapids, we found the fully exposed rusted hulk of an "alligator" from the early lumbering days on the lower French River more than 100 years ago, a specialized tug to transport rafts of cut trees over the water. Wow, how tough those men must have been to manoeuvre such a heavy, awkward hulk. Wow, how did it travel so far to this log rafting-up area? Wow, why hadn't this been hauled up the embankment for historical preservation? Wow, imagine a canoe or motor boat hitting this submerged rock of Gibraltar. Wow, fancy swimming into all that rusty iron. Ouch, why aren't there float-markers to warn travellers of the danger? (More about these non-lethal alligators in:



http://www.pastforward.ca/perspectives/Mar_22001.htm)

So, paddling on down the Main Outlet within close proximity to the Dalles Rapids, which drop into Georgian Bay, we came to more silt-laden alligators, even one close to the eastern end of the portage, and another two just south of the western end. In all, we saw at least five relics/alligators close-up and more from a distance. I wished I had photographed them all. No doubt, had a research team looked, they would have found many more.

And I wonder, has any organization taken the opportunity to catalogue, preserve, and make safe these temporarily exposed man-made treasures from the past?

High Water

Water levels seem about average to us as we are paddling down the river. However, everywhere we look we can see that there must have been high water with the spring runoff this year. Lots of evidence to prove this theory. Brush that normally clogs the shore right down to the water is almost completely gone. Even now the first green shoots from bushes trying to re-colonize the shore do not begin until three or four metres back from the current water level. It's almost as if the green, after being hurt so badly this past runoff period, is afraid to take back what once it owned.

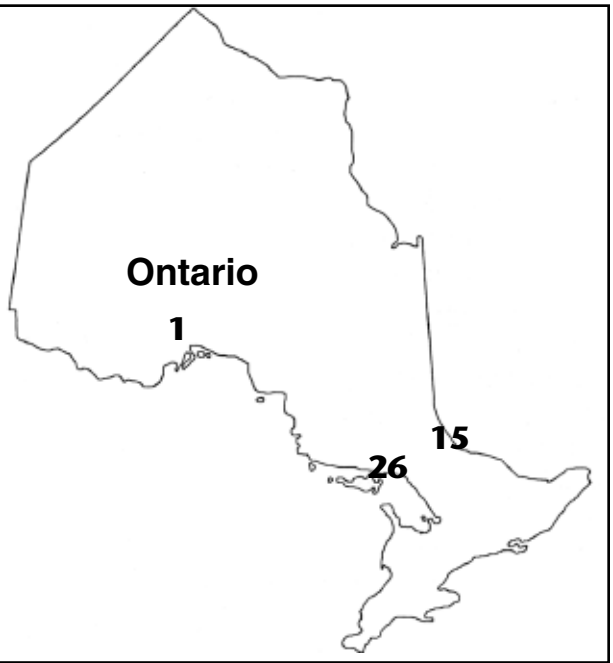
On clay embankments, big boulders are pounded into the clay as with a hammer. Ice coming down the river must have pushed into the clay. Hard. Any rocks that were carried by the ice must have pushed hard too.

The water scoured the shores as it roared down the river, taking even huge trees with it. There are uprooted trees stacked in every eddy. As we paddle by we can see that some of these uprooted trees are sprouting green leaves. The trees hope for life where there is no hope. This clear shore makes stretch breaks or lunch stops very enjoyable. The whole shore is available for these respites from paddling. On past trips, finding a place to stop often had to be rigorously searched for since green bushes crowded the shore. For kilometre after kilometre. Those bushes were telling us that the shore was already owned. They were saying that they had fought for their space along the shore and if we want to stay here too it will be a very hard contest for the space. Mostly we conceded defeat and kept looking to land the canoes somewhere else where the struggle would not be so hard.

On the whole, this year's trip witnessed an awesome display of the elemental forces of nature. All the green struggling to grow during the time when warmth and light permitted. Opposed by water tearing, ripping, and washing away. Wilderness canoeists are observers of this titanic struggle. They are visitors who watch in amazement at the energy both sides bring to the contest. Wilderness canoeists are also visitors who hope to take a small portion of this energy and bring it back home to the city with them. After all, there are titanic struggles going on there too.

Greg Went

Where it is…



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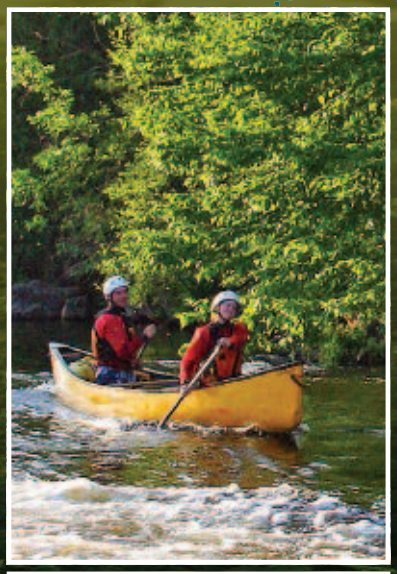

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