



*A beautiful view downriver from our campsite in Stelfox Canyon.*

## **Natla and Keele Rivers**

**Story by George Cates**  
**Photos by George Cates and Peter Wilson**

### **DAY 1 – SUNDAY, JULY 4**

The Natla and Keele Rivers start high in the Mackenzie Mountains in the Northwest Territories. They flow in a north-easterly direction, with the Natla joining the Keele and then the Keele joining the Mackenzie River south of Tulita. Our paddling trip was organized by Black Feather (BF). It was run in two sections: the first on the Natla with a smaller group of eight paddlers (George Cates, Suree Narindrasorasak, Peter Jaspert, Cathy Skinner, Peter Wilson, Walter Silecky, and BF guides Steve Ruskay and Jason Carrey) and the second group (Geri James, Gary James, Terry Johnson, Cliff Johnson, Chris Johnson and BF guide Molly Prendergast) on the Keele. The second part of our paddling team joined at the confluence of the Natla and Keele

Rivers, arriving by float plane.

Our trip started in Norman Wells. From there we flew to Norman Wells to O'Grady Lake (headwaters of the Natla) by float-plane. The entire canoe trip from O'Grady Lake to the Mackenzie River was about 240 km and took three weeks with plenty of time for relaxation and hiking along the way. Once we arrived at the Mackenzie River we were to be picked up by a motor boat to travel back to Norman Wells to complete the trip.

We arrived at the Norman Wells airport just before lunch, travelling by Canadian North airlines. There were a lot of familiar faces. We met Cathy, Peter J, and Walter, whom we knew from our Noire River trip in Quebec last year. New to us was Peter W, although the rest had paddled with him in

the past. This was the group that would start the adventure beginning with the Natla River section. Suree and I were obviously the “newbies” to northern paddling. The others quickly were talking about their previous trips. This would be a topic for many camp discussions in the coming days.

We met Jason and Steve, our two Black Feather guides, at the Norman Wells airport. Everyone was very excited and was talking to each other about the forthcoming trip. When we got to the base, we hauled the gear under the tarp near the lake and started to put the things we needed into the canoe packs and barrels. The sun came out and it was easy to get things together. Steve and Jason had already spent the morning assembling and checking all the main gear which made this all ready to go.

We soon had the gear assembled and after a quick lunch, we started to load the two planes – one was a Twin Otter and the second, a smaller, single engine, Pilatus Porter. Three canoes were stacked in the Otter, leaving a set of six

seats on the left side for us. By the time we had everything loaded it was a tight fit for everyone. Walter and Peter W chose to go in the smaller plane, so we had me, Suree, Cathy, Peter J, Steve, and Jason in the Twin Otter.

The Otter was the first to leave for our trip into the mountains. The float-plane base was located on a small lake just east of Norman Wells. Once in the air we had a grand view of the Mackenzie River. It was not long before we were cruising over mountain tops. The Mackenzie Mountains were quite varied in ruggedness. Some were smooth and rounded, whereas others had the jagged appearance of the Rockies further south. We were thrilled to see many spectacular rivers carving their way through the mountain valleys.

The flight to O’Grady Lake took about 90 minutes. The descent was quick and we had a smooth landing on the high alpine lake. The Otter was skillfully backed onto the sandy shore where we were able to unload the canoes and gear. The wind was brisk and the day was

overcast. We felt the chilly air and knew we were high in the mountains. Since the temperature was only about 10°C everyone put on warm clothes and toques to keep warm. The Otter took off, but it wasn’t long before Walter and Peter W arrived in the single engine Pilatus Porter.

The mountain scenery was amazing. The elevation was about 1,300 metres and there were no trees, just low scrub bushes and lots of caribou moss. The moss was so thick in places that walking on it was tricky since we sank into it several inches with each step. We set up our tents and quickly figured out the unfamiliar pole fittings. It did not take long for the camp to be set up with Jason and Steve looking after the communal tarp. Hot tea was soon ready. We were still coming to grips with how fantastic the next few weeks were going to be. Dinner was grilled salmon and Portobello mushrooms. It was a joy to eat in the outdoors looking over the lake with the mountains in the distance.



*Early morning near a mountain tributary campsite on the Natla.*





*Lunch breaks are always important, but sometimes a little wet.*

We soon realized how tired we were and because of that we headed to bed early with the sun still overhead. Over the many days to come we would have the pleasure of sunlight till after midnight. In fact, there was no real night – only a dusky time from about 1-5 a.m.

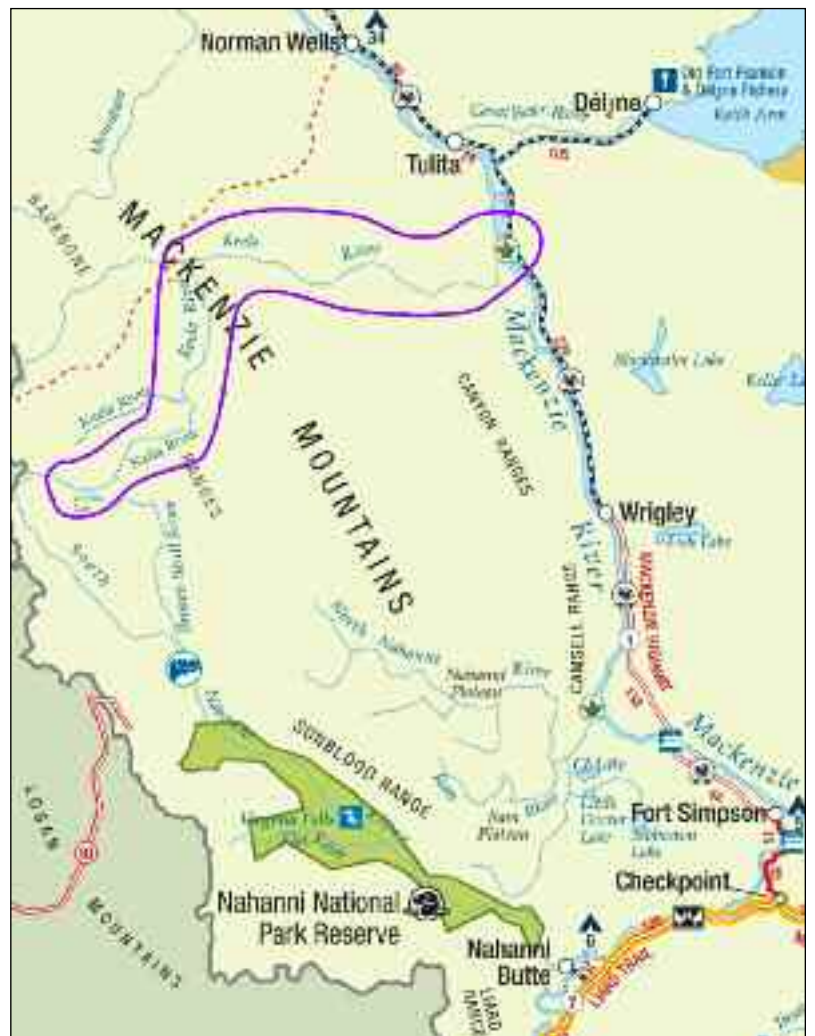
Campsite Position: 62.986002, -129.029954

### **DAY 2 – MONDAY, JULY 5**

The sun was shining and spirits were high. After a leisurely breakfast, we headed onto O’Grady Lake to warm up and practice our paddling strokes. I think Jason and Steve wanted to check us out before we hit the river. We headed back to our campsite for lunch and then put the spray skirts on the canoes.

Steve decided to split up Suree and me. Suree went with Jason and I went with Steve. This was a good idea since the upper sections of the Natla proved to be quite technical and we were the least experienced of the paddlers.

We paddled about 8 km down the “water slide,” as Steve referred to this section of the Natla. The river had continuous class I/II/III rapids that required lots of back-ferry maneuvers to find the best line. It was a great experience paddling with Steve. I was with him in the lead boat, and because of that I had the best view of the upcoming river. It was a non-stop whitewater exhilaration! We found a nice campsite on a river bend that met with Steve’s high standards and then settled in for our first night on the Natla River.





*Beautiful striations can be seen in some of the Mackenzie Mountains.*

Campsite Position: 62.998655, -128.860862

### **DAY 3 – TUESDAY, JULY 6**

The scenery continued to amaze us. The absence of trees made it easy to capture the full vista of the mountains. We felt so small as we headed downriver!

We stopped at a tricky section to scout it. There was a large rock near river-left where most of the water was flowing. Steve gave the “thumbs up” for us to run this section, one canoe at a time. Steve and I headed out first and Steve decided to take a line to the left of the rock. We quickly realized the current was stronger than we expected and we got bounced hard off the rock, but continued the line to the eddy lower down.

Cathy started the run with Jason in the stern, but they were not as lucky as we were and quickly flipped, after hitting the rock. Jason swam to shore, but Cathy parked herself on a rock mid-stream. Jason and Peter W tossed a throw bag to Cathy and she was able to get back to shore on river right.

We regrouped, and decided that the better line was to the right of the troublesome rock. Steve took this line with Walter in the bow and they made it through. Finally, Steve went again, but

this time with Jason – success again. The two Peters and Suree decided to walk this one.

The day continued with some fabulous runs. Steve and I did a “big rock hug,” but managed to squeeze through. Walter and Peter W barely made it, but Cathy and Peter J took a swim. We managed to get everyone out of the water without too much difficulty. We camped on a spot with a view towards a dramatic 2,000 metre high mountain to the east. We were just east of “Broken Skull” valley.

Campsite Position: 63.040179, -128.684418

### **DAY 4 – WEDNESDAY, JULY 7**

This day was less difficult than the previous day, but there were still many good sections of fast water with tricky back-ferries to stay on line. At least everyone stayed dry! Our confidence was building as we regained our paddling skills from being rusty over the winter.

By now it started to rain and we broke off for lunch and ate under the tarp. There was a crystal clear stream here, which was reason enough to fill up the water bottles with fantastic mountain water.

We ended the day at a beautiful

campsite with a raised gravel bar next to a large stream with many good flat spots for the tents. The river had continued to drop quickly in elevation and we were now at 1,100 metres.

Campsite Position: 63.172089, -128.577848

### **DAY 5 – THURSDAY, JULY 8**

The river was now easier to paddle, but the current was still strong at about 10-12 km/hr. We were able to relax paddling which allowed us more time to take in the scenery. We pushed on looking for a good campsite, but the trees were now much more abundant along the shore. We stopped on a gravel bar to take in the view of a mountain in the east that had remarkable coloured striations in the form of chevrons. Cathy called it “Chevron Mountain,” but I liked “Rainbow Mountain” better.

We continued longer than we expected that day, but were rewarded with the most spectacular campsite we would have for the whole trip. It was clear as we rounded the bend in the river that “this was it.” Everyone exclaimed when they saw the site. It sat adjacent to a very large tributary that was pushing emerald green water into the main river. Where the waters met, the water was absolutely clear and sparkled in the sun-





*Hiking in the Mackenzie Mountains is rewarding.*

shine. The valley opened up here and we had a view of rugged mountains to the east. “Rainbow Mountain” overlooked the site, and the sun highlighted its colourful bands of rock. We had lots of room, which allowed us to spread out and to take in the glorious view. We couldn’t stop talking about how lucky we were to experience such a beautiful country.

It was quite hot and some of us decided to cool off in the river. The water was so clear and very inviting, but it was also very, very cold. It was not possible to stay more than a few seconds in the frigid water, but it was still very refreshing, especially with the warm sun to dry us off.

That night was “Lasagna Night.” Steve and Jason made absolutely delicious lasagna in the Dutch oven, and everyone filled up and relaxed in the beauty of the mountains and the river. There were no bugs to worry about, which was a great relief. After being serenaded by Steve’s guitar, we drifted off to our tents with the sun still blazing overhead.

Campsite Position: 63.310353, -128.183626

#### **DAY 6 – FRIDAY, JULY 9**

We awoke to heavy fog over the camp-

site, but as soon as the sun came over the horizon the fog broke up. The patches of fog created a surreal atmosphere with the mountains suddenly appearing when the fog lifted. We decided the day would



*A clear view of the Natla River valley to the north.*



*A crystal clear stream feeds the river and offers a spectacular view.*

be a “layover” day since we were making good progress and we wanted to do some hiking at this terrific spot.

The canyon coming in from the north led to Divide Lake. We decided to hike south-east up the canyon and then head north to the top of a small mountain. The plan was to get there by lunchtime so we could get the best view of “Rainbow Mountain” and the valley where we were camped. It took us about two hours to hike to the top. The route turned out to be more difficult than anticipated since we had to drop down into a few deep gullies and then climb back out on the other side. In the end we made it to the summit and basked in the view. We could see for many miles and it was easy to see the Natla River valley off to the west.

We had a great lunch with some very tasty salami and then headed back along the north-west side of the mountain. This turned out to be a good choice, but when we got back we were all tired and hot. The cold water of the river refreshed us once again.

Campsite Position: 63.310353, -128.183626

#### **DAY 7 – SATURDAY, JULY 10**

The current continued to be very fast – about 10-12 km/hr. The water was quite clear so we could see the rocks on the river bottom flash past. There were no major rapids, but lots of swifts and the skies were clear, so everyone relaxed and enjoyed the scenery.

The temperature started to rise and it quickly got hot. The heat brought on early afternoon thunder clouds which approached from the west. We decided to camp early to avoid the rain, but in the end the rain moved more to the north and it missed our campsite.

Our camp was on a pebble beach on the west side of the river, just south of Stelfox Creek. We had a great view of Stelfox Mountain which towered over us at 2,300 metres. There was lots of red colouring in the rock in this area; thus the name of the area to the east – Redstone Plateau.

We had lots of time to chat and share stories about our other trips. We got to hear about “The Mountain,” “The Nahanni” and “The Coppermine.” I was beginning to think these rivers have some pretty big rapids, based on the stories!

Campsite Position: 63.472823, -127.914505

#### **DAY 8 – SUNDAY, JULY 11**

We got an early start and soon went past Stelfox Creek and hit some big waves. The run was not hard, but the big water was exhilarating. Sitting in the bow, I took some water in my face and quickly got reminded about how cold the water was. It was great fun, but we were all glad that we had decided to put on our drysuits.

As we headed into Stelfox Canyon, we enjoyed many big wave sets. There were no upsets here since we were starting to get more confident. We scouted a major set of rapids with a large class III/IV wave ending the set. We spent a lot of time going over the line since a mistake here could mean a very rough swim. Steve described the line – tight on river-right to sneak past some difficult spots, then a very hard back-ferry to river-left to set up for the line through the final big waves. It sounded okay, but everyone was nervous about this run.

Steve and Jason made the first run to check the line and set up a safety boat



at the bottom. They ran the line perfectly and had a great ride through the rapids at the bottom. It was decided that Steve would do the run with the other three boats. It meant lots of running back up the shore for Steve, but he seemed to relish it like a mountain sheep. Suree, Peter J and Cathy decided not to run this set.

Peter W, then Walter did their runs with Steve – all with great lines. Walter took some major water in the face, but held on well and cleared the entire set with skill. The final run was with Steve and me. What a ride! I got some great video on my helmet cam. The rush was exhilarating.

We continued through some easier sets of rapids and then hit one with a large standing wave on river right. Three boats skimmed the wave, but made it through. Jason and Suree were not so lucky and were tossed by the wave and flipped. There were lots of tense moments as Jason swam downstream, valiantly holding onto Suree, who is not a strong swimmer. Steve and I tried to catch the canoe. Steve grabbed the boat's painter, but was eventually forced to release it in order to help Jason and Suree make it to shore safely.

Suree was winded and tired, but made it to shore after a long swim. Once everyone was safe, Jason and Steve sprinted down the shoreline like a couple of mountain sheep hoping they could catch the canoe. I could see them way downstream and then I lost sight of them when they turned the corner.

We all waited anxiously for Steve and Jason to come back. Eventually they returned, but they reported that they had lost sight of the canoe. Steve took time to get everyone regrouped and calmed down. There was not much we could do so we decided to eat lunch and plan our next steps. We decided that with one canoe gone, Suree and I would hike along the portage trail on river-left while the rest of the group continued downriver in the remaining canoes. We were hoping that the errant canoe had washed up on a gravel bar further downstream.

The trail was just a game trail that followed the river. Suree and I continued to talk loudly to make sure any bears heard us coming. Steve came back to tell us that the group had spotted the canoe downstream. We met up briefly with the three boats, and then continued our hike down the shore; our spirits

boosted by the safe recovery of the lost canoe.

The canoe got bailed out, but we were in an awkward spot. Eventually we got clear and set off with vigour through some more class II/III rapids. I was impressed that Suree was still confident and not put off by her earlier spill.

We entered a narrow canyon area where the water was being pushed hard into a rock wall on river left followed by a sharp bend to the left. Cathy and Peter J missed the line and flipped in the waves here. Fortunately, there was a pool where a recovery was possible.

The day had been very tiring, but at the same time very exciting. We made camp here rather than push on to our planned rendezvous point with the Keele group. Steve and Jason discovered a nice campsite just opposite the large waves where Cathy and Peter J flipped. It was clear that other canoeists had camped there before, but it was easy to miss while coming downstream. The site was on river right and we had to ferry over through the strong current and took time to relax a few minutes to take in the view before setting up our tents.

The sky was a beautiful blue and we



*Clear views and magnificent scenery abound on the Natla.*



*The Mackenzie Mountains are sprinkled with alpine lakes and rivers.*

had a great view of the rapids and mountains to the east. The rocks on the beach had a wonderful range of colours – blues, pinks and magentas.

After a spaghetti dinner, Steve and Jason then headed out on the portage trail to check out the rapids in the remainder of the canyon. One of the great things about the long days is you can easily be hiking a trail or doing camp

chores at 10 p.m. with plenty of light.

Campsite Position: 63.527918, -128.043497

#### **DAY 9 – MONDAY, JULY 12**

We finished the Natla River and were somewhat sad to put it behind us as we drifted into the Keele River. The Keele was still a fast moving river, but there were no really difficult rapids expected.

Most of the rapids were class I/II. They tended to be standing wave trains on the river bends and were easy to avoid because of the widening nature of the river.

We stopped early at the rendezvous point on the Keele. Here the river was quite wide and straight, which made it possible for a plane to land on the river. There was a cluster of cabins on river-



*O'Grady Lake was the starting point of the trip.*



right, but no one was around. The Twin Otter arrived around 4 p.m. and circled the area for the pilot to check out the river and make sure there were no obstructions in the water.

The newcomers were Geri and Gary James, who paddled with us last year on the Noire River. There were three men as well from Colorado (three generations: grandfather, son, and grandson), Terry, Cliff, and Chris Johnson – in order of age. Terry was 75 and had done many rivers in the north in the past. Cliff and Chris had never paddled before so it was to be a fantastic trip for them. Finally, one new guide from Black Feather, Molly Prendergast, also joined the group, making us a team of fourteen (seven canoes) for the next two weeks.

Campsite Position: 63.593824, -128.073532

#### **DAY 10 – TUESDAY, JULY 13**

Now that the new group had formed, Suree and I joined up to paddle together. Gary and Geri were also together. Terry, Cliff, and Chris joined up with Jason, Molly and Steve respectively. The pad-

dling was easy, and with the fast current we covered about 20 km and were off the water by 2 p.m. The easy and wide river meant that we could jockey back and forth and chat with each other along the way. There were many possible routes between the numerous gravel bars. Steve looked for where the water flow was the best and we followed his lead. Jason and Terry fell back to act as sweep. This was okay because Terry liked to take a lot of video shots as he went along.

We stopped on a large alluvial fan where there was a huge expanse of Dryas flowers, which is the official flower of the Northwest Territories. When it is dry it looks like a huge field of cotton balls. This area had some salt licks, but we didn't spot any wildlife.

The day was hot and the only shade was under the tarps. We kept chasing the shade to keep out of the sun. We spent the afternoon chatting and exploring the surrounding area. It was quite hot and even though the water was slightly warmer than on the Natla, the shrieking and squealing of the swimmers was a good indication that the

water was still quite chilly.

The Johnson gang tried their luck at fly fishing. Chris caught a small grayling and decided to keep it just to taste it. He cleaned it and wrapped it in foil to be cooked with the rest of the dinner. We headed off to the tents early to escape the heat, but it was still hot until the sun dropped behind the mountains.

Campsite Position: 63.717435, -127.892429

#### **DAY 11 – WEDNESDAY, JULY 14**

The day started out cold but soon warmed up by the time we were on the river. The paddling was calm and relaxed with a lot of meandering between the gravel bars. Just after dinner, the rain started and all headed to their tents. The rain continued off and on for most of the night, but stopped in the early morning.

Campsite Position: 64.088843, -128.140428

#### **DAY 12 – THURSDAY, JULY 15**

The day started out overcast which made it necessary to put on our rain



*Steve and Jason scout a tricky section of the Natla.*



*Steve and Walter negotiate Stelfox canyon.*

gear for the paddle. The rapids were easy to manage and the river had started to widen, but still had a very good current. The Twityn River joined the Keele from the west. The Twityn had a lot of silt so the river started to become brownish with the silt in this area. The silty water tended to come and go on the Keele, but in this area the silt soon disappeared and the beautiful blue returned to the river.

Campsite Position: 64.226917, -127.643643

#### **DAY 13 – FRIDAY, JULY 16**

The river widened a lot in spots. There were no rocks, but because of the current there were many spots where the water got choppy and boils appeared. It was easy to get pulled across the eddy line in places and lose the current. We tried to cruise around the bends and pointed the bow to the inside to allow the current to do the work.

Our lunch stop was on a large alluvial fan. We looked to see if there was possible camping, but the smallest rocks were the size of bowling balls. It would

have been rough tenting, so we moved on. The lead canoes spotted a grizzly bear on the far bank. They claimed it stood on its hind legs to get a good smell of the intruders and then disappeared into the bush. It was reportedly quite large (around 300 lbs.), but then everyone who saw it seemed to be outdoing each other to exaggerate the encounter!

The weather was quite peculiar; there was a strong wind from the east, but the prevailing winds from the west continued to drive the clouds westward higher up. The local mountains probably created swirling winds. Again, rain came in after dinner and continued lightly all night.

Campsite Position: 64.222770, -127.202069

#### **DAY 14 – SATURDAY, JULY 17**

There was fog in the morning after the rain all night, but this blew off during breakfast. It continued to rain lightly on and off. Fortunately it was not cold and we did not find it to be a problem. The river got silty again and turned brown.

Steve expected the river to slow down but the GPS indicated our speed was over 10 km/hr. It was easy to make progress without too much work.

We stopped at about 1 p.m. for lunch and decided to camp at the same site. It had been a nice afternoon, but large rain clouds kept threatening. The clouds seemed to split here and most of the rain went away from us. The rain finally came just before dinner, and we all huddled under the tarp until it stopped. We were rewarded with a magnificent double rainbow that lit up the south mountain slope.

Campsite Position: 64.155476, -126.936574

#### **DAY 15 – SUNDAY, JULY 18**

The day started cool and overcast. Some put on drysuits to feel warm and comfortable. The river was quite wide in spots with some large volume waves. These were not difficult, but it was necessary to pay attention in order to avoid getting turned sideways. Progress was still very good.

The campsite was very open with



plenty of flat gravel sites for everyone. Terry, Cliff, and Chris tried more fly fishing, but without any luck. I got a lesson from Cliff on the basics of fly fishing.

Steve played guitar and we relaxed after dinner. A rock piling contest ensued. Chris took on the challenge and won easily with a pile higher than him.

This was the last day in the mountains since the next day the river would move onto a plain before joining the Mackenzie River.

Campsite Position: 64.190576, -126.571862

#### **DAY 16 – MONDAY, JULY 19**

We officially cleared the Mackenzie Mountains, although far to the east, on the other side of the Mackenzie River, we could see a high mountain (Mount Clark; 1,400 metres) in the Franklin Range. We kept expecting the current in the river to slow down due to the reduced gradient, but to our surprise we kept a steady 10-12 km/h. This meant our paddling was lazy. We continued looking for the deepest water channels

and had no problems. It was important not to go down one of the side channels since the water got shallow and one's canoe would quickly become grounded.

Our campsite was just off the main channel with lots of sandy spots for the tents. There was a nice set of pools where the water had warmed from the sun. The pools got fed from water that percolated upward from the main river so the water was clear. It was a great spot for taking a dip and getting some warm water for washing.

Campsite Position: 64.240623, -125.968318

#### **DAY 17 – TUESDAY, JULY 20**

We made very good progress on this day. We only paddled for about four hours and made approximately 50 km. The current remained strong; it was just a matter of picking the best channels. Steve had no problems in this regard, which gave the rest of us time to relax and “follow the leader.”

We camped again on sand. Unfortunately, when the wind picked up the sand went everywhere. The sand

made for gritty eating if one was not watchful. Dark storm clouds approached, and we quickly ate dinner and headed for shelter. We had heavy rain until about midnight when it eased off.

Campsite Position: 64.256371, -125.174413

#### **DAY 18 – WEDNESDAY, JULY 21**

The morning was overcast, but at least the rain had stopped. It was clear that the river had risen a few inches because of the rain. The water was much muddier as well, due to the silt from the runoff.

We paddled through rain showers. The current was a little slower, but we still made easy progress. We passed a very high cliff on river-left made of clay and shale. As we passed by, a small rock slide tumbled rocks into the water, reminding us not to get too close. Looking back we could see Jason and Terry dwarfed by the immensity of the cliff which made them appear insignificant.

We selected a campsite early since we anticipated it would be harder to find a good site closer to the Mackenzie



*The end of Stelfox Canyon.*

River. The site we chose was elevated, but had a lot of small rocks that needed to be cleared for each tent site.

We all knew this was our last campsite on the Keele. Tomorrow we would cross the Mackenzie River. Everyone seemed more subdued as they thought about the great trip that was about to end.

Campsite Position: 64.365708, -124.915085

#### **DAY 19 – THURSDAY, JULY 22**

Since this was our last day on the Keele, we took our time breaking camp. We knew that the paddle this day would be short, so we wanted to savour the last bit of time we had on the Keele. The delta area was large and flat with lots of mud. We stopped to gaze at the Mackenzie River and to take a group photo. We were lucky that the weather was clear and there was no wind. The Mackenzie River was calm so it was relatively easy to paddle eastward across the river to the other side. We had been anxious the day before thinking we might have a tough paddle if there were large waves on the Mackenzie. In the end we were fortunate.

We spotted our pickup point a little further downstream. There was a work crew nearby using helicopters to ferry

mining gear inland. We learned later that the mining site was about 50 km away and they were preparing for the winter season. They continued to shuttle heavy equipment, with a helicopter arriving every thirty minutes.

We set up camp a little north of the helicopter shuttle site, adjacent to a nice stream. The stream was very clear and relatively warm. It was handy to have clear water nearby for drinking and swimming.

This was our last night on the river so everyone gathered under the tarp to relax. Steve, Jason, and Molly surprised us with a song they had written. Terry recorded the song on video as we listened and sang along. The words were a wonderful reminder of our trip.

We reluctantly headed to bed, although I spotted Chris sitting up to enjoy the beautiful sunset which lasted for hours. At about 11:30 p.m. we were awakened by a motor boat coming upstream and stopping just south of our campsite. This was our transport boat to take us back to Norman Wells in the morning.

Campsite Position: 64.430625, -124.773693

#### **DAY 20 – FRIDAY, JULY 23**

We started to break camp after breakfast

and got to meet Rick, the captain from Norman Wells. His powerboat was well equipped to transport the canoes and all the gear and people back to civilization. The canoes were strapped to the top of the cabin and also to two custom outrigger platforms.

Once all the gear was loaded, we headed downstream to Norman Wells. Rick slowed down to point out the natural coal deposits along the river that had continued to burn for hundreds of years. We also slowed as we passed the town of Tulita and saw the old Hudson's Bay post. The adjacent mountain (Bear Rock) here had three rock "patches," which according to local folklore, represented beaver pelts laid on the mountain to dry. The weather was clear and sunny so we all enjoyed the smooth ride back to Norman Wells.

We docked at Norman Wells and unloaded the gear and canoes. We got shuttled to the "hotel." The rooms were pretty basic, but we were all happy to have a hot shower and clean clothes.

We celebrated later by having dinner at the Mackenzie Inn. It seemed strange to eat Chinese food in Norman Wells, but the company of our friends was more important. It had been a great adventure that none of us would forget!



*Cathy decided to send the canoe down ahead of her.*





*It is no problem finding great campsites on the Natla.*



*Suree Narindrasorasak, Peter Jaspert, Walter Silecky, Cathy Skinner, Peter Wilson, Geri James, Chris Johnson, Cliff Johnson, George Cates, Molly Prendergast, Terry Johnson, Steve Ruskay, Jason Carrey, Gary James.*



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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.

## Passing the Torch

The paddling community lost several notable members since the last edition of *Nastawgan* went to print. John Lentz, Ria Harting, Elizabeth Sinclair, William Sleeth, Bill Lawson and George Luste all departed within the past few months. We are thankful for their contributions to WCA and will always remember them with fondness.

The recent passing of George Luste ignited a heartfelt outpouring of profound gratitude, respect and reminiscence from many that knew him. Although George would probably not approve of all this "fuss", I'd like to share several passages from your letters. If you have a memory of George you'd like to share, please send it to [wcsymposium@gmail.com](mailto:wcsymposium@gmail.com)

Aleks Gusev, *Editor*

George, you were the voice of the symposium.  
You are gone, but somewhere your spirit is paddling, paddling,  
paddling ... across northern lakes and along northern rivers.  
May your portages be short.  
May the bugs be few.  
May your firewood be dry.  
And may winter never come.  
You are sorely missed.  
Douglas McIntosh, Fairbanks

When running a long set of rapids, George was inclined to sit very high up on the stern of the canoe to improve his view of the water. Worried about stability, a fellow tripper asked George: "Don't you ever kneel in the canoe?", to which George replied, "Only when I am afraid..."

When George was asked to paddle a fine northern river for the second time, he declined: "So many rivers, too little time" he said. Once, when George was paddling a long solo trip up north, a friend asked Linda if she worried about George's safety. "I don't worry", she said, "because I know that George will never hesitate to put his feet in the water...(and step out of the boat)."  
Ric Symmes, Toronto

I first met George when he called me in the autumn of 1989. He wanted to know if I would come to Toronto to give a presentation at a symposium on wilderness canoeing. I was surprised. How did he get my name? Somehow George seemed to know everything about everybody. After attending and giving a lecture, I saw a labor of love unfold. As I told him many times, he was "performing a service for humanity." We are all better for his time on earth.  
Jonathan Berger, Philadelphia

My memories of George are few in number, yet full of respect and joy for the initiatives he was so passionate about. I feel

deeply satisfied to have been a part of the symposium this year and to have witnessed the urgency George felt about passing on the torch with the younger generations. What courage it takes to stand up for one's beliefs, and how brave it was for him to stand tall despite his illness. These feelings have stayed strong within me since then, and I feel as though George re-lit that flame of inspiration for sharing our stories and getting more and more people involved. I am honoured to have been present at the brunch to get to interact with George more personally, despite the difficulty he was having with remembering. I remember looking directly into his eyes and staying present and honouring him and his desires as we shared moments of conversation. I am grateful for this.

Emma Brandy, Toronto

I will have spent the best northern trips in my life with George and his family. My condolences to all of them and I thank them all for putting up with me. George may be no more, but he is not dead for his memories will live on in all of us. One who leaves you with good memories never dies. Thank you, George. Good night.

Bill Pollock, Ste-Agathe-des-Monts

I am saddened to learn of George's passing. George invited me to speak at the WCS many years ago. As part of the invitation, I was welcomed into his home for the waffle brunch on Sunday. I returned to the WCS as well as to George's home for brunch several times. I was amazed by his vast library and his ability to suggest just the right book no matter how obscure the topic, as long as it was remotely connected to the north. The passion in his eyes and his energy were especially apparent when he showed me his wall map of northern waterways. His wife and family were also so welcoming and engaging. Surely he will be missed, but he has inspired so many of us with his *joie de vivre* that I cannot help but smile when I think of him.

Annie Aggens, Wilmette



# George Juris Luste

## 1940-2015

George Luste, a pillar of the Wilderness Canoe Association and a founder of the Wilderness & Canoe Symposium died at his home in Toronto on Saturday, March 21st.

George was born August 6, 1940 in the village of Valmiera, Latvia. His family escaped the conditions of World War II and arrived in Wawa, Ontario in December 1948, where his education began in a two-room schoolhouse. Within a few years they moved to Montreal, where he graduated from West Hill high school in 1957.

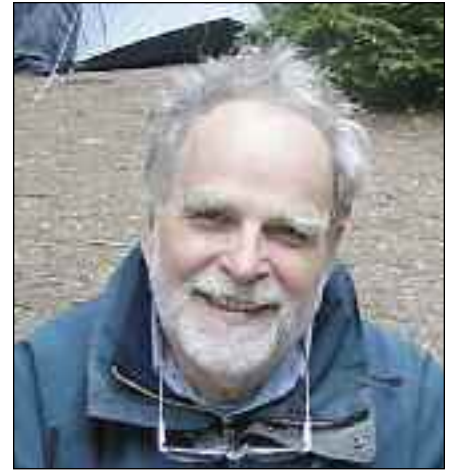
He went to Mount Allison and graduated in 1961 with a BA, honours in mathematics and physics. He went to Johns Hopkins in the fall of 1961, and during the summers took jobs at AECL at Chalk River. His PhD research and thesis at Hopkins was in experimental high-energy physics. After completion in 1968, he was offered a post-doctoral position at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Centre, and in 1971 was offered a tenure stream faculty position at the University of Toronto in the physics department. While there, he was also Associate Dean in the School of Graduate Studies. For ten years prior to retirement he was the President of the University Faculty Association, where he advocated strongly for pension management reform.

George was always very involved in his community in Toronto. For a number of years he served on the Board and as President of the Royal Canadian Institute. He was a key organizer of the “Stop the Spadina Expressway”, and advocated for protection of the Cedarvale - Nordheimer Ravine. While a member of the Board of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority in the early 1970s, he started the Don River Day paddle. Further afield, he advocated for conservation and protection of the Nahanni River, the Missinaibi River, and other natural areas across Canada.

He canoed much of Canada’s barren lands and northern coasts, and started an annual canoeing symposium to share trip stories and learn about the North and wilderness. He also collected over 8,000 books on the north. In his later years his hobby was investing and reading about investing.

George is predeceased by his mother Mirdza, his father Leonids, and his favourite uncle Nikolajs. He will be missed by Linda, his wife of 49 years, his children Tija, Tait, and Debbie, his six grandchildren Zoe, Eli, Ramona, Izak, Benjamin, and Kali, as well as his sister Marg, and cousin Inta, and their families.

George actively participated in the



30th Annual Symposium, only four short weeks prior to his passing. During those 30 years, George touched many of us in special ways. His considerable legacy will continue to live on these pages, as well as in the future Symposiums and in our hearts. We encourage you to make a donation to the Luste Lecture Fund. This fund was created by the WCA and the Canadian Canoe Museum in recognition of George’s immense contribution to wilderness canoeing. Donations can be made online in support of this lecture series through The Canadian Canoe Museum at <https://www.canadahelps.org/dn/13607> or by calling the Museum at 1-866- 342-2663.

May he rest in peace and live on in our memories.

## Canoe Touring 101

By O. Ross McIntyre

Above all, George was a teacher. I wish I had taken a physics course with him, but instead experienced Canoe Touring 101 at his hands. It was a wonderful course.

Like most experienced teachers, he began by showing us photos of an early trip, aluminum canoes, crude low-budget equipment, unrealistic goals for the day, infectious enthusiasm for what he was doing. And then, trip by trip, our understanding of what he was about grew, as did our view of his landscape as it expanded from that first narrow valley to one that eventually encompassed the total horizon of the northern world.

We were with him as he sorted the food packs out on the ice when his travel companion dropped out with a

bleeding ulcer. We were with him as he arrived at the sea. We worried with him about the bears on snowy hillsides in mist and snow and rejoiced with him in the full measure of a sun-filled day in the Arctic. Our comfort in our canoe-touring course derived from George’s imperturbability – his level-headed approach to the unexpected, his optimism that things would be O.K. And when the course was finished, it was not because of some inopportune or rash decision on his part. He made no fatal mistake in setting his course amongst the high water and rock, but rather it was a powerful and random particle launched out of the universe that resulted in that unlucky hit on his DNA. It could have

happened to any of us.

It is reasonable for us to wish that we had been smart enough to go with him on one of his trips. That cannot happen now, but let’s imagine it. We are sitting together quietly in the long arctic evening on an esker that offers a view to the east over the lake. There is a decent breeze and the bugs are quiet. Behind us lies the patterned ground, the hexagons that we have crossed on our way to climb up here. George is speaking of some travelers who have been to this place before. He knows the book of their journey as well as he knows the land forms around us. He has been telling us about it. Our education continues.

# WCA AGM 2015

Story by Geri James

Photo by Larry Hicks



On Saturday, March 7, 2015 WCA members met at the Toronto Public Library, Riverdale Branch, on the banks of the Don River for our Annual General Meeting. The business part of the meeting included a message from our chair Dave Young as well as reports from the treasurer (Barb Young) and from members of the outings and membership committees (Bill Ness and Emmy Hendrickx).

For the election of the Board of Directors, all incumbent directors whose terms were expiring were willing to stand for reelection, and since there were no new nominations the members voted to reappoint directors for another term. As a result, the board for 2015 is comprised of Dave Young (chair), Gary Ataman, Dave Cunningham, Bernadette Farley, Geri James and Diane Lucas. Items the membership asked the board to review in 2015 include website functionality, new member strat-

egy, advertising, social media, and enhancing the value of membership. Other business included a review of upcoming club activities in 2015, which include Paddle the Don on Sunday May 3, the Fall Meeting on the weekend of September 18-20 and the Wine & Cheese on Saturday, November 14. Please see the WCA website for more details about these events.

After we concluded the business part of the meeting, we enjoyed a fascinating photo presentation on the Agawa Canyon region by Jeff McColl. We then dressed warmly and headed outside for a hike on the Don Trail, including a visit to Riverdale Farm. The hike ended at a local restaurant where we socialized over lunch. Thank you to all who attended this successful AGM and to the board members and all the dedicated volunteers who keep the club running.

## Elizabeth Jane Sinclair

1949-2015

By Fred Oliff

Elizabeth passed away on February 21st after a long battle with cancer, kidney failure and then shingles. She had a tough last few years, even surviving a kidney transplant in 2011, but always maintained a cheerful outlook on life, especially when sharing memories of the many canoe trips we took together. Starting before 1991, when we got an antique Old Town, we did many flatwater trips, and started paddling whitewater on local southern Ontario rivers, with a few forays into Quebec to paddle the three rivers of the Ottawa Valley, the Dumoine, Coulonge and Noire. We also did two trips on the Ashuapmushuan and one on the Batiscan with friends from the WCA and the Crash Test Dummies from Lindsay. She loved to scout rapids and, with encouragement, run the big wave train of Cody Rapids on the Magnetawan River one Easter weekend with the WCA. Canoe camping was something we both loved to share, and she will be greatly missed by me, especially, and her son, Matthew, who frequently joined us in his kayak.

Elizabeth was editor of *Nastawgan* for a few years and was also quite active in the Waterloo-Wellington Canoe Club. Recently, she had a grandson, and unfortunately did not live to see him start paddling.





# 2015 Wilderness & Canoe Symposium

This year marked the 30th anniversary of the Symposium. Sadly, it was also George Luste's last. He actively participated in the program planning and spoke briefly several times during the weekend, and urged the audience to continue to support this unique event. George particularly emphasized the opportunity, and the need, for younger members to play a more prominent role.

Overall, the 2015 program met and, according to some, exceeded the expectations. Excellent facilitators kept the pace and made for interesting introductions. Joel Britz wrote this summary: "I have only attended about five or six times and, for me, it was certainly the best. There have been some amazing presentations in the past but I think, like good wine, this year's program was all about balance ... gender balance, age balance, presentation balance, etc. I love to see great photos – and there were lots of those; but Paul Watson's presentation had no photos and it was riveting. I can't wait to read his book! I was impressed by the two young gals (Anna and Devon) who were so enthusiastic about what they had learned from their experiences at camp. Jason White was hilarious as he cleverly drew us all into his on-line efforts to find paddling partners. Some presentations were practical (Rick Stronks), others were informative (Jeremy Ward) and some were esoteric (Emma Brandy)."

Louise Abbott – QC "*Nunaaluk: A Forgotten Story*"

Saqamaw Mi'sel Joe – NL "*An Aboriginal Chief's Journey*"

James Raffan – ON "*Circling the Midnight Sun*"

Nancy Scott – ON "*Lake Nipigon: Where the Great Lakes Begin*"

Brian Johnston – MB "*Messages From the Subarctic: Publishing Notes From Tyrrell's Cairn*"

Lester Kovac & Lynette Chubb – ON "*Ungava Crossing 2014*"

Jeremy Ward – ON "*Freighter Canoes: an Illustrated Exploration of the Iconic Northern Workboat*"

Jack Goering – ON "*Retracing Franklin's Route From Yellowknife to Coppermine*"

Paul Watson – BC "*Finding Erebus: The True Story Behind the Discovery of Sir John Franklin's Flagship*"

Rick Stronks – ON "*Camping in Black Bear Country*"

Devon Ide & Anna McClean – MA "*Our Summer in the Woods: Growing Up With Canoe Tripping*"

Jason White: "*Finding Canoe Partners in Hard Times*"

Kevin Redmond – NL "*Newfoundland and Labrador: Abandonment & Place-based Journeys*"

Emma Brandy – ON "*Filling the Gap: A Journey Through Autoethnography*"

Conor Mihell & Virginia Marshall – ON "*L'Eau Vive: Canoeing the Great Whale River in Northern Quebec*"

Chris Leopard – ON "*South Nahanni River, NWT – River of Dreams*"

Barbara Burton – ON "*Orchids, Pits and Pictographs – Exploring Northwestern Ontario's Lake Superior and Quetico Paddling Routes*"

Kate Weekes - ON "*Banks of the Snake: Northern Songs*"



"On Leaped the Canoe like a Runway Horse", 1924. Frank E. Schoonover

# Smoothwater Trifecta

Story by Gary Storr

Photos by Gary Storr and Dan Rokitnicki-Wojcik

I squinted to the northeast trying to discern the fire tower on Che-bay-jing (Maple Mountain) but with no binoculars I couldn't make it out. I knew the tower was there, standing sentinel among the spirits of the Anishinabai dead: I had hiked up the mountain with my wife a few years earlier. Now, standing with Deb at the base of Ellis Tower on Ishpatina Ridge, we recognized our island campsite on Scarecrow Lake. To its north were Mihell and McCulloch lakes and further still, to the northeast, were rolling waves of ridges as far as the eye could see.

Then my eyes settled on a feature much closer. Immediately to our north lay a giant chasm. A wall of rock rose from the base of the far side and, from that, another peak seemingly as high as the one on which we stood. We were looking across a canyon from Ontario's high point to its third highest, Ishpatina's North Peak. I didn't know then what I was gazing at but the image burned itself into my memory.

The next day Deb and I set up housekeeping on a long, sandy beach spanning a shallow bight on the east side of Smoothwater Lake. Our carefree

neighbours, we soon learned, were Buzz and Beth. Buzz pulled on a pair of shorts and strode over to greet us with an outstretched hand and a grin that revealed a row of uppers too perfect for a man of his vintage. He was lean, long-haired and well into his sixth decade. And he had yarns to spin. After sunset, while tossing back shots of Jose Cuervo, Buzz regaled me with history and homily punctuated by outrageous claims of derring-do. Among other things, I learned how to placate a bear. Then I was taught how to kill a bear. Later, I found out that a plaque spiked



*The Canoeing Legends (L to R): Graham Bryan, Dan Rokitnicki-Wojcik, Gary Storr, Drew Goodman, Brent Goodwill, Dan Bell.*





*Spirits were high travelling between portages on our way to McCulloch Lake on our first trip in 2013.*

to a red pine at the southernmost campsite was not just a memorial to an old friend of Buzz – it was a grave.

“His ashes are buried there, right at the foot of that tree,” said Buzz. “I was shocked – I didn’t even know he was dead.” Buzz shook his head regretfully. “He made one hell of a spaghetti sauce.”

I was impressed. It was as succinct and honest a eulogy as I’d ever heard. Beth lay under a blanket on the sand picking disinterestedly at a bowl of fruit.

Then Buzz told me another story, one that piqued my interest: “I was sitting on the beach looking through my binoculars one afternoon when I spotted a cave on the other side of the lake. I jumped in my canoe and paddled across and climbed up to the cave. It was about the size of a half-ton – wasn’t nothing in it but some bats. It was getting late so I slept there and paddled back the next day.”

I thanked Buzz for his hospitality

and tramped back across the sand to where Deb had kindled a warming fire – I had stories to share. I wondered if Buzz knew the cave in which he’d slept was, in all likelihood, the cave from which sprang the aboriginal story of Creation :

Nenebuc had just crossed the Snake Portage into Smoothwater Lake when he noticed some lions (mishipeshu) playing on the beach. He made a screen from birchbark and hid inside. He made a hole in the bark through which he could shoot arrows if the lions came too close.

When the lions noticed the strange object on the beach they came closer to investigate. Nenebuc shot an arrow and wounded a lioness – their queen. She limped back to her cave on the other side of the lake.

Nenebuc dressed in toadskins and introduced himself at the cave as a medicine woman, promising to make the lioness well. When the lions ushered him in, he pushed the arrow fur-

ther into the wound and killed the lioness. Immediately a great torrent of water issued forth from the cave and began to flood the earth.

Nenebuc built a raft and took on animals as the water began to rise. After a time he sent the beaver down to see if there was land below them. The beaver returned without reaching bottom. More time passed and he sent the muskrat down. The muskrat reached bottom but drowned on the way back up.

Nenebuc noticed that there was earth in the muskrat’s claws so he flung the dirt away from the raft and formed the ridges of Temagami.

A few years later, while perusing websites to do with Temagami wilderness, I happened upon a photograph of Ishpatina Canyon; the chasm I remembered suddenly gained a name. The photo was taken by Andy Stevens from a helicopter flying over Ishpatina Ridge. His higher point-of-view revealed something more than my mem-



*A cold wet mist enshrouded us as we embarked on our first attempt at making it to the canyon.*

ory held – it exposed a small lake at the base of the rock wall. Intrigued, I began to gather information about the canyon but there was precious little to be had. At 200 metres, it was one of Ontario’s deepest canyons, twice the depth of Ouimet Canyon northeast of Thunder Bay. A handful of individuals had bushwhacked through Ishpatina Canyon to the tower ridge or the North Peak but

no one claimed to have stayed there. It hadn’t yet become a destination. Okay, I mused. Our paddling group, the Canoeing Legends, could change that. So in September 2013, Dan Bell, Graham Bryan, Dan Rokitnicki-Wojcik (Dan RW) and I climbed into our canoes and began paddling up the Montreal River on our quest to find Ishpatina Canyon...and a cave.

It should be mentioned that Dan Bell and I are comfortable without electronics on backcountry trips, Dan, because he is a self-professed Luddite, and I, because nothing pulls me out of my reverie faster than a partner scrambling up a pile of rocks waving his phone for a signal. Why the desire for instruction to pick up milk on the way home from the forest? That said, one of us usually



*The fall colours were spectacular on our second trip.*





*The addition of two young guns, Brent and Drew would surely make the difference the second time around.*

has a cellphone at the bottom of his pack for emergency use...but it is never seen. And using GPS feels like cheating.

We weren't concerned with failure because we had a ringer in the group. One of Graham's young colleagues at Environment Canada had agreed to join us. Dan RW possessed a unique skill: he was a first-rate orienteer. With him leading the charge, we were unstoppable.

Earlier that day, after chewing up endless kilometres of highway, we had turned south onto a dusty logging road between Gowganda and Elk Lake. Bouncing along the right fork, we reached the put-in on the Montreal River. It was late afternoon. We lily-dipped contentedly upriver and then southeast through Lady Dufferin Lake. Beaching their canoe for a rest stop, Graham and Dan RW had a fortuitous encounter: catching up to us afterward, Dan displayed a photograph of a lynx

on his camera. As we glided toward Smoothwater Lake, the sun sank below the horizon cloaking us under a balmy, starlit sky. Spellbound, we slipped silently through the darkness until we approached an islet that marked our arrival at the beach. Digging in, we drove for the south campsite and a late supper next to a grave and a tiny, effervescent lagoon fed by a creek tumbling from Marina Lake.

In the morning we took up our paddles and, putting our backs into it, slammed our canoes across whitecaps into a pounding south wind. Eventually we landed at the Apex Lake portage, the lake so named because its waters flow from a height of land into both the Montreal and Sturgeon River watersheds. According to legend, when Nenebuc journeyed to Smoothwater Lake he encountered a great snake. He shot it with an arrow, and the snake became a rocky ridge traversed by a long, rolling footpath – the Snake Portage.

Apex Lake is enchanting. Nenebuc's ridge forms the north shore and flatlands of mixed forest lie to the south. The portage out of Apex Lake passes over level ground and, save for the distance, is an easy carry. There are muddy sections near the north end and a jumble of steep, jagged boulders at the south. Halfway along the trail sits a sizable quartzite block. It is white, chalky and soft to the touch. Efflorescence occurs when mineral-rich water rises to the surface of the rock and evaporates. The bloom has the texture and appearance of an overcooked dumpling.

Three short carries later we launched our canoes into McCulloch Lake. We pitched our tents on a spacious site at the south end of the lake within striking distance of the canyon. In the morning the crew broke camp and made the short paddle to an esker that forms the west shore of the lake. We cached our canoes on the embankment and hoisted



*Lunch break on Smoothwater Lake.*

our packs. For this trip the Legends had brought internal frame backpacks rather than canoe packs – they were smaller, lighter and enabled us to elbow through the prickly conifers in an upright posture. We crashed southward along the spine between the lake and a pond on

our right until we reached the pond's discharge. There we stopped to revisit our plan.

Beforehand we had agreed on one point: we would walk in a westerly direction until we picked up a creek that coursed from the lake at the base of the

canyon. From there we would follow the cascade to our objective. The plan was foolproof, elegant in its simplicity.

Shortly after setting out, someone suggested to Dan RW that instead of hiking over the hills, we skirt them. The rest of us shrugged in agreement. This strategy, we discovered, was flawed. As we trudged further afield to avoid hills, we found it increasingly difficult to maintain our bearings. And because we were hiking up to the canyon, we'd have been better off to climb the hills we faced. To our relief, we found the creek. It didn't flow with the zest we expected but it spilled from the northwest. Energized, our loads lightened and we strode uphill with renewed confidence.

As the creek meandered, so did we. After a while we noticed it had altered its course and was now trickling from the north. Perplexed, we pushed on, hoping that the aberration was nothing more than a blip on the radar, and that we would be heading northwest again soon. As we ascended the ravine the creek petered out and gave way to an expansive, walled, sphagnum bog spiked with spruce and tamarack. The luminous green sphagnum was spongy underfoot but held under the weight of our packs. We tentatively crossed the mat. The walls on either side weren't nearly 200 metres high and the only lake lay beneath the moss. We were taken with the vibrant otherworldliness of the bog but clearly this wasn't the



*A long day of paddling means making dinner in the dark.*



canyon we were looking for. We turned and retraced our steps.

We followed the creek down to where we had met it, then stumbled through the forest in search of the pink flags Graham and Dan RW had affixed to tree branches along the way. Returning to a location from where we thought we could access the canyon, we began again. Sputtering through a black spruce thicket we found ourselves circumnavigating a swamp. Lulled into believing we were following the shore in a straight path, we were slow to recognize the deception. Now we were bearing south. And still no creek. Backtracking, we collected our blazes and then, checking our watches, made a decision. Pinky swearing that ‘no one must know,’ we returned to the canoes.

Dan RW had become enamoured of Ishpatina’s grandeur and wanted to climb the ridge. He proposed a biathlon of sorts in which he would rise early, paddle and portage to Scarecrow Lake, sprint up the trail and back down, and return to camp in time to paddle back to Smoothwater Lake. We didn’t doubt his ability to medal in this event but convinced him that time was not on his side. In the back of my mind, however, a seed was planted. Perhaps I could use the ridge as enticement for a return trip.

On the next to last day we travelled to Smoothwater Lake and from the water, scoured the cliffs for the cave. Reluctant to leave our canoes we packed it in and returned to the beach. We were untroubled, though, because we understood that familiarity breeds triumph. We also knew it was time to go home; we had some reconnoitering to do.

In September 2014, the crew once again gathered on the bank of the Montreal River. This time we included an extra day for a hike up Ishpatina Ridge. We were joined by fellow Legends Drew Goodman and his buddy, Brent Goodwill. My nephew Drew, born with a smile, and Brent, good-natured and industrious, were a solid fit. The combination of youth and experience strengthened the dynamic – the pups would keep the old dogs moving.

We pushed out onto the river in three canoes destined for McCulloch Lake.



*Head west young man. We start the hike towards the canyon.*

The morning sun warmed our spirits but it was necessary to keep moving. Along the way we took lunch on the beach at Smoothwater Lake. Here, Drew and Brent admired the plush digs we would enjoy on the way out. Later that afternoon, paddling from the portage at the north end of McCulloch Lake, we noticed a motorized canoe trolling to the south. A tent was pitched on the campsite beyond it. The occupants of the canoe slowed when they saw us, trailing their lines. They invited us to set up camp in the woods behind them. I was quietly pleased; the rough bivouac would ready us for our stay in the canyon.

The next day we loaded the canoes and paddled to a break in the esker. The aim was to lift over into a pond beyond the gap and paddle and portage south to a second, larger pond. The fishermen watched from their canoe as we disappeared through the esker. I smiled, imagining their confusion. Near the outflow of the second pond we cached the canoes, reorganized our packs and fortified ourselves with a snack. Then we shouldered our gear and started walking.

Employing the one-kilometre-per-hour rule of thumb when bushwhacking, we headed west for the first hour. It was a rugged, uphill slog. We traipsed over deadfall and hummocks, around

sinkholes and bogs. The route took us higher and higher but we knew the terrain would level when we reached the creek. Enjoyment of downhill progress was tempered by the awareness that any altitude forfeited would have to be regained. Drew commented how odd it seemed to enter a canyon from below.

Brent, Drew and Dan RW broke trail followed by Dan Bell and I. Graham lagged behind having assumed the onerous task of flagging the route. We snapped twigs and scuffed moss-covered rocks, occasionally hallooing ahead for the younger ones to hold up. Taking a breather at the edge of a steep valley Dan RW held up his hand. A hush fell over the group. Then we heard it. A tiny trickle, waking our senses. Muffled voices chattered over smooth stones in an unseen stream of glistening quicksilver; a resounding shower echoed from below, rising through sparkling sunlight, captivating us. At that moment we knew we would soon enter the canyon. Success smelled sublime in the fresh, moist air.

We trekked along the valleyside knowing the creek would source at our elevation. When it did, Graham kindly cleared the ‘path’ to allow me the first glimpse of the canyon. We assembled at the base of a beaver pond and through a small opening above the dam, saw the lake. To the right was the quartzite wall.



*Canyon panorama facing northwest. Clear skies and mild temperatures were not indicative of what was to come.*

Backtracking, we crossed the creek and leaped over tributaries until we found a location that showed promise. Flat ground didn't exist. Potential tent sites were rife with growth and dead-fall. We dropped our gear and continued exploring the south side of the canyon. Steep and strewn with dolerite, it was hazardous work. After a while we turned back, aware that we'd left our packs at the only viable option. A kitchen area was cleared near a shoreline fen. Cedar boughs were laid over wet ground to create a floor. Tent sites were carved from the wilderness and logs were arranged around an impromptu fire ring. Nearby a hammock was strung up. When we were done we admired our handiwork.

Suddenly the sky began to darken. A gray mass raced over the North Peak and across the canyon. Graham sat up in the hammock. "Get the tarp!" he yelled. Then seeing we were transfixed by the imminent inclemency he barked, "Now!"

At the same instant the tarp went up, the rain came down...and it rained for two nights and the day between.

That night our only casualty was Dan Bell who pitched his tent after a fruitless search for firewood. Left with a sharp incline on which to sleep, he neglected to close the fly over the door of his tent. During the night he slid into a pool of water. Not being one to complain, the rest of us didn't hear about

his mishap until later.

After breakfast we donned our rain suits, filled our daypacks, and studied the map. The consensus was to walk up the ridge employing the same strategy we had used to reach the canyon. Shying away from high concentrations of contour lines on the map, we proposed to travel in one direction for a set period of time, then alter our course and repeat. I handed the map and compass to Drew – he would be at the front of the pack. In deference to the young crew and in light of the previous year's outcome, electronics had not been banned. On the way up the ridge Dan RW sneaked a peek at his GPS. Showing me the device we nodded – Drew was tracking a flawless course.

Soon we stood on the ridge. A raw wind pummelled us from the north. Soaked by a day of steady rain we were chilled by the blast of cold air. There was no visibility beyond a fringe of treetops at our feet – we were inside a cloud. We didn't care; we had devised a plan, stuck to it and hiked up the east side of the ridge by way of the canyon.

After fleeing the tower peak for the shelter of lower ground the crew fanned out, competing for clues. We surveyed the forest for blazes, bent branches and bald rocks from which we had earlier kicked moss. The steady drizzle rendered Graham hypothermic

– it was urgent that we pick up the pace. Back at camp everyone but Brent crawled into their sleeping bags for a late afternoon nap. Our respite was short-lived: we were awakened by the groan of a tree splintering and breaking. Moments later a birch crashed between the tents. Brent's startled observation from the kitchen capped the alarm.

The next day we departed the canyon, a place we would remember as being inhospitable...but nonetheless home. The woodland was diverse; the ridge hosted a variety of species: white pine, yellow birch, and white spruce. Here, the natural order progressed undisturbed: trees died of old age and toppled due to wind or ice load.

It became apparent during the descent that the crew was of one mind: to luxuriate in the embrace of Smoothwater. There, the sand would caress their feet and beer would soothe their souls. I, however, wasn't finished. During lunch I approached Dan RW. "Interested in finding a cave?" I inquired.

"Going for the trifecta?" he grinned. I had found my compatriot.

Departing the Snake Portage, Dan RW and I paddled north along the west side of the lake. The others slowly shrank from view as they headed toward the beach. Drifting along the base of a cliff, Dan and I found a smudge pot – a rusty tomato juice can



hanging from a tree at eye level. It held a thin layer of dried cedar fronds. Agreeing that the smudge might mark a trailhead, Dan leapt from the bow onto the rocks. Lean and fit, Dan counted rock climbing among his many talents. So as I bobbed in the canoe along the base of the cliff, Dan clambered up the boulders and disappeared. After a while he called down that he was returning to the smudge. Settling into the canoe he marvelled at the views to the north and south – but he had found no cave.

With fading hopes we tried again. Paddling toward shore Dan selected a reference point, a lone pine that towered above the rest. Pulling ashore, we plunged into the forest and soon we found it – a narrow trench at the base of a rock. And just as Buzz had said, it was about the size of a half-ton. We had completed the trifecta: a canyon, a ridge and a cave.

We climbed the ridge. On the other side of the lake a colourful array of

tents and clotheslines stretched across the sand; tiny specks moved among them. Dan and I called it a day – a cold beer beckoned.

In terms of pay off, was the glass half full or half empty? For the Canoeing Legends this conundrum was about a process: was the glass being filled or was it being emptied? If we were to intentionally drain the glass it would be half empty...but that was rarely the case. Our group always strived to maximize the experience, to top up the glass. So even if a project ended in abject failure we never returned home with an empty vessel – it was merely not yet full.

The crew paddled the Montreal River in high spirits, heading for home. With each pull of the blade, cool water lapped at our hull. My bow partner Dan Bell and I closely trailed Drew and Brent. Suddenly inspired, I took aim, and with three hard paddle strokes nudged the stem of their canoe. It was a perfect shot. Their boat piv-

oted slightly and glided off into the lily pads. They smiled askance in our direction as Dan and I smugly paddled by. This time the glass brimmed.

**Sidebar:**

In 2013, during the Legends' first attempt to bushwhack into Ishpatina Canyon, our dinner menu consisted solely of couscous – it was lightweight and compact – easy backpacking fare. So back at the campsite on McCulloch Lake we dined on couscous. As Graham ladled the gelatinous goo into my bowl, he whipped a candle from his pocket, planted it in my supper and lit it. Then they sang. I had completely forgotten. Best birthday ever.

Summary of the Teme-Augama Anishinabai story of Creation as told by second chief Aleck Paul to anthropologist Frank Speck in 1915. <http://temagami.nativeweb.org/tale-nenebuc-f.html>



*Making camp on Smoothwater Lake on our trip out.*

# Red River Canoe Trip

Story by Neil Luckhurst

I don't really consider myself to be a paddler, even if I have done a half dozen or more canoe trips in my time. There is one interesting and offbeat little trip that I like remembering though. Dave and I put a canoe in the Assiniboine River right across the street from his house in Winnipeg and paddled to where it emptied into the Red River. There we turned left and followed the Red northbound to Lake Winnipeg and Winnipeg Beach. We were on our way there to take part in celebrations and feasting for Canadian Thanksgiving.

I grew up in Winnipeg where the street layout is largely dictated by the city's two meandering rivers. But I had been so warned off from going near these supposed death traps that I had ignored them both, and they never really entered into my consciousness. So it was a special treat to be paddling right through the bowels of downtown Winnipeg, passing under bridges and observing the city from such an unaccustomed vantage point. We left late in the afternoon after Friday classes at the University and the October darkness came early. We were barely past the city limits when we decided it was time to set up camp. We were fully equipped with a tent and sleeping bags and had a gas cook stove. One problem we hadn't considered was that the riverbank was occupied by private homes, even outside of the city. We had no choice but to stealth-camp in a clump of trees just beyond someone's manicured lawn and handsome dwelling.

We ate supper and set up our tent.

Sleep came easily. I awoke while it was still totally dark and lay there wondering what time it might be. Neither of us had brought a watch, but I was wide awake, as if I had had a good night's sleep. I lay there for a few minutes and decided to wake Dave up and suggest that we get going right away, just in case it was already early morning and to prevent sleeping in too late.

Dave was in agreement, so we quietly broke camp, packed up the canoe, slipped it into the river and began paddling. It was pitch dark. I studied the sky for signs of false dawn but didn't see any and we paddled for a long, long time and it was still pitch dark.

It was a calm and clear night and I felt like Huckleberry Finn as we glided northwards. We were closing in on the town of Selkirk when we began to discern houses and church steeples silhouetted against the sky. A rooster crowed. We paddled onwards. We realized that it must have been about 2 a.m. when we had left the campsite.

Once past Selkirk, the river became wilder and we passed the communities of Peguis and Breezy Point. Our topographic map indicated that we were close to Netley Lake, which is part of the vast 24,000 hectare Red River delta wetland known as Netley Marsh. At this point, the now sluggish river was separated from Netley Lake and the surrounding marshes by a thin strip of land. We found a flat area with plenty of room to put up the tent and found enough dry wood for a fire. There we were, on the west bank of

the Red River, surrounded by miles and miles of marshland and nothing else. It was a truly amazing and wild place to be. It was a clear, early October evening and we had plenty of time to enjoy the sunset over the marsh before turning in. I loved it.

There was snow on the ground the next morning and it was chilly. After breakfast we got back into our canoe and continued paddling, bucking a strong north wind, which made me wonder what the swells on Lake Winnipeg would be like. We finally made it to the mouth of the Red River, which was a place from the mythology of my youth. I spent my earliest summers at my grandmother's cottage on the shores of Lake Winnipeg and the "mouth of the Red" was a place that for some reason was only spoken of in hushed tones.

When we passed through the verge and entered Lake Winnipeg, we found that the swells were not too bad, about two feet high and well separated. They came at us from the northeast and we were headed northwest. So our little red canoe rolled harmlessly in the surf. We aimed our craft at Winnipeg Beach's fire tower and paddled hard and earnestly for an hour or two. We arrived at our final destination, a landmark known as Stephenson's Point, to the wild applause of Dave's cousin Derek who, with several of our friends and relatives, had been watching the lake for our appearance. We had made it and I felt great. Next on our agenda was Thanksgiving dinner.



Photo by Dan Rokitnicki-Wojcik "Sunset on Smoothwater Lake"



# Food for Paddlers

Geri and Gary James enjoyed a guided trip on the Horton River this past summer with Canoe North Adventures operated by WCA members Al Pace and Lin Ward. Gary and Geri are very active WCA members, Geri being a board member and Gary coordinating the WCA's Paddle the Don volunteers. The Canoe North Adventures tradition is for guests to bring along appetizers and desserts. Gary has forwarded a number of recipes. The first is from Geri who adapted the recipe below from <http://www.foodnetwork.ca/recipe/black-magic-figs/9268/>

## Geri's Drunken Figs

16 dried figs  
2 cups port wine  
8 sheets of thinly sliced Italian Prosciutto

Cut the stems off the bottom of the figs.  
Marinate the figs in port for several hours until completely rehydrated.

After soaking, reserve the port for drinking later.

Rip the Prosciutto in half lengthwise and wrap one piece tightly around each fig, stretching it as you wrap. This will allow the Prosciutto to stick to the fig and eliminate the need for toothpicks.

Lightly oil a pan and fry the wrapped figs on medium heat for a few minutes on each side to warm and crisp the Prosciutto.

Serve with the cups of fig-infused port.

*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](mailto:youngj david@rogers.com).*



## The Knowledge

By Greg Went

### Three stages of knowledge about wilderness canoe travel

The first stage is knowing how to travel and survive in the wilderness. How to read a map, how to paddle, how to camp, how to stay dry. These are basic skills that have to be learned to travel in the wilderness with any degree of safety. It seems that most writing about wilderness canoe travel begins and ends here. The writers want to give you the skills, the knowledge of wilderness travel.

The second stage is understanding that in the wilderness, true wilderness, your safety is up to you alone. The river exists in all its wild fury and beauty. It does not care whether you live or die. You're there and that's great. Not many have worked so hard to see it so close. But any difficulties are yours alone. You are in an area where men have not marked up the land, and rules are different here. Others may not be able to save you. Only you can save you.

The third stage of knowledge is understanding your place in the timeline of humanity. In the beginning the land was clean and men were a scattered few. Rarely crossing paths with some other few. It was all like this in the beginning. You now are experiencing it. That is why it is so long ago familiar and why once you have experienced it you must go back. You have to go back. It is a direct link to the beginnings of mankind. It is the link to the very heart of the being that is man. You were here before. Many times.

It felt good then too.



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### WCA Postal Address

P.O. Box 91068  
2901 Bayview Ave.  
Toronto, ON M2K 2Y6

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Dave Young  
(Chair)  
chair@wildernesscanoe.ca  
416-457-7937

Gary Ataman  
Gary.Ataman@  
safranmbd.com  
905-683-3100 ext.1286

Geri James  
Geri.james@blackrock.com  
416-512-6690

Diane Lucas  
lucasde@yahoo.com  
905-826-0875

Dave Cunningham  
DBCunningham-Appraisals  
@rogers.com  
905-863-2865

Bernadette Farley  
mbernadette.farley  
@gmail.com  
416-762-8073

### WCA Contacts <http://www.wildernesscanoe.ca>

**Secretary**  
Bill King  
45 Hi Mount Drive  
Toronto, ON M2K 1X3  
416-223-4646  
lyonrex@rogers.com

**WCA Outings**  
Bill Ness  
194 Placentia Blvd.  
Toronto, ON M1S 4H4  
416-321-3005  
bness@look.ca

**Editor**  
Aleksandar Gusev  
8 Valiant Road  
Etobicoke, ON M8X 1P4  
416-236-7079  
aleks.gusev@gmail.com

**Treasurer**  
Barb Young  
youngjdavid@rogers.com

**Webmaster**  
Jeff Haymer  
Toronto, ON  
416-635-5801  
webmaster@wildernesscanoe.ca

**Membership and  
Computer Records**  
Emmy Hendrickx  
emmy.hendrickx@bell.net

**Conservation**  
Jeff McColl  
mccolls@sympatico.ca

### Editorial Team:

Aleks Gusev: Editor-in-Chief  
Pegi Dover: Text Editor  
James Fitton: Text Editor  
Jan Bignell: Text Editor  
Barb Young: Food Editor  
Bob Henderson: Resource Editor  
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