



# nastawgan

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*Start at Whitefish Lake*

## **From Whitefish Lake to Great Slave Lake: Tundra, Trees and Cliffs**

**Story and photos by John McInnes**

Having spent several summers in the 1990s exploring some of the small rivers falling into the East Arm of Great Slave Lake (McLeod Bay) from the north, I was curious if it were possible to canoe into the East Arm (Christie Bay) from the south. Geology was an obstacle here since the steep north-facing cliffs of the McDonald Fault, which runs along the south shore of the lake here, mean that the height of land is only a few kilometres inland, and most of

the drainages entering the lake from the south are no more than tiny creeks. The only river of any size entering Christie Bay is the Snowdrift. Rising in the Barrens at Sandy Lake, it flows southwest parallel to the axis of the East Arm until finally plunging through the McDonald Fault to Great Slave.

This final plunge was the problem. The surveyor Guy Blanchet had followed the Snowdrift in 1925. Missing the



**Route map**

portage the natives had warned him to take, he followed the river northwest from Austin Lake, where they had described it as “falling down the mountain”. Blanchet’s party took three days to descend six miles here, where the river dropped five hundred feet. On reaching Great Slave, Blanchet met an old native who had travelled with him on an earlier expedition. When Blanchet told him that they had followed the river all the way to the lake,

the old fellow thought for a bit, and then replied “I think maybe no.”<sup>1</sup>

John Blunt and Peter Browning – whose excellent book *“The Last Wilderness”* had aroused my interest in the Snowdrift River area – also followed the Snowdrift down to Great Slave, at the end of their trip from Black Lake to the community of Snowdrift (now Lutselk’e) in 1964. Avoiding Blanchet’s river route, they elected to portage down the mountain.



**Drainage of Timberhill Lake – turn upstream**

Browning estimated the portage, which took several days, to be at least thirteen miles – “enough portaging to last us forever.”<sup>2</sup>

Perusing maps of the area, I wondered if it might be possible to bypass this last difficult section of the Snowdrift. My attention was drawn to a possible portage route, leaving the Snowdrift further upstream, and following a chain of lakes – Robert, Dion, and Daisy – to what appeared to be a gap in the steep contours of the McDonald Fault and a possible descent to Meridian Lake and Charlton Bay, at the far east end of Great Slave. I mentioned this possibility to Herb Pohl when I visited him in Burlington after a WCA Symposium one year. Herb thought for a minute, then left the room. He returned a few minutes later with a copy of the Winter 1991 *Nastawgan*. It included an article by an English adventurer, Steve Read, who had followed this exact route at the end of his 1990 trip from Fort McMurray, Alberta to Reliance.

Read had in fact found a trail at the north end of Daisy heading downward to Meridian Lake. It was not an easy portage – he wrote that “this portage to a small lake just before Meridian Lake turned out to be the toughest of the trip, despite losing about 120 metres in altitude.”<sup>3</sup> But it wasn’t thirteen miles long. I decided it would do and set out to finalize a route through this area. I elected to start in Whitefish Lake, in the Thelon headwaters, and descend that river for a few kilometers to Lynx Lake. From there I would go south, through Timberhill Lake and across a low height of land to Sled Lake in the Mackenzie watershed. From Sled Lake, Sled Creek would take me to Eileen Lake, from where the Eileen River would carry me to the Snowdrift, which I would follow to Read’s portage route. Once I reached Great Slave, I would paddle across Charlton Bay to the landing for Pike’s Portage, where I would end the trip.

I set out to put this plan into action on July 3rd, 2007, flying 245 miles east from Yellowknife in an Air Tindi Cessna 185 to a sandy beach on the east shore of Laroque Bay, at the south

end of Whitefish Lake. It was cool here – 10C – but the mosquitoes were numerous. There was some ice in the north end of Whitefish, but my route to the south was clear. On the flight I had spotted a couple of forest fires burning just northeast of the Eileen – Snowdrift junction: I hoped they wouldn't prove to be a problem later in the trip.

The first morning of the trip was easy: a paddle across Laroque Bay and a couple of current-assisted kilometers down the Thelon to Lynx Lake. An attractive esker complex is found where the Thelon enters Lynx Lake. Then I paddled east along the south shore and stopped for lunch, after an easy 20 kilometres, where the stream flows in from Timberhill Lake to the south. Travel now slowed down a bit. That afternoon I spent on four portages, linking three small ponds, which took me up to Timberhill. Sighting a herd of muskoxen on the third portage was the highlight of the day.

After camping on Timberhill, I spent the next two days pond-hopping my way south to Sled Lake. Portaging was fairly straightforward, the country being mostly barren here, but bog and boulders were occasional obstacles. The weather had turned warmer, bringing out the blackflies to join the mosquitoes, as if they needed any help. I made a total of 14 portages between Timberhill and Sled lakes and was hoping for some easier downstream travel when I launched the canoe onto the (relatively) expansive waters of Sled Lake.

For once my hopes were realized, and Sled Creek's stream and lake expansions treated me kindly. After portaging the outlet rapid below Sled Lake, I only had to portage one more time in 37 kilometres of travel before the creek delivered me to Bigstone Bay, the eastern extremity of Eileen Lake, named by Guy Blanchet for his wife. All the other rapids and constrictions in the creek had been passed by wading, lining, "bumping", or paddling. The map indicated a 5-metre drop at the last narrows into Eileen, and I had been sure a portage would be required, but that was not the case. It was just a shallow, rocky rapid, easily



*Esker Lynx Lake*

negotiated after picking my way through the boulders at the top.

From where I entered Eileen Lake to the junction with the Snowdrift River would be about 80 kilometres. This stretch of the Eileen River would be more challenging than Sled Creek. The Eileen runs generally northwest

towards the Snowdrift, across the "grain" of the country, a series of rocky ridges running southwest – northeast, parallel to the Snowdrift valley and the McDonald fault. Where the river breaks through the ridges, serious rapids result. In all, I would portage nine times on the Eileen, and



*Pond hop to Sled*



*Pond hop to Sled*

probably should have portaged once more. The float bags were very helpful in one situation that required extensive bailing.

One interesting spot along this stretch occurs about 14 kilometres below the outlet of Tent Lake. Here, the Eileen River simply disappears from the 1:250,000 topographical map

“75K Fort Reliance” for about a kilometre before resuming its course. On the earlier “Preliminary” edition of this map (printed in 1938) this stretch of river is shown only as a dotted line – which is incorrectly located. This mapping error caused Browning and Blunt some difficulties on their 1964 trip. Unable to find the river where it

was indicated, they resorted to a lengthy portage over a high rocky ridge to reach the next expansion of the river. Fortunately for the modern traveller, this piece of the Eileen River does exist, and is correctly located on the 1:50,000 topographical map. The only real obstacle in this stretch is a small boulder rapid, easily run.

The final rapids on the Eileen are quite dramatic, as the river boils down through a rocky canyon to join the sandy and peaceful Snowdrift. The portage here was quite beautiful. In Browning’s words, it ran “through beautiful open park country across a great sand plain overlooking the foaming Eileen and its confluence with the Snowdrift.”<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this beautiful area, and some other sections of the Eileen near Tent Lake, were swept by fire in the summer of 2014.

The seventy-odd kilometres of the Snowdrift River from the Eileen confluence to the start of the portage to Robert Lake were undoubtedly the easiest of the whole trip. In this stretch, the Snowdrift winds its way down a wide, rock-walled valley filled with sand. The current was light, but helpful, and there was only one rapid of any consequence, which was easily run. A wolf sighting was the highlight of this stretch. It was a good chance to rest up for the strenuous portaging which lay ahead.

As I paddled the last few kilometres on the Snowdrift towards the start of the portage route to Robert Lake, I realized that the country north of the Snowdrift had all burned fairly recently, and I started to worry a bit about portaging conditions. Then I spotted something that didn’t look quite natural near where the portage should start. As I got closer, I realized it was a yellow plastic barrel hanging in a tall spruce that had survived the fire. My spirits rose: surely anyone with the energy to shinny up a tree with a barrel would have had the ambition to do some trail marking as well? Apparently not. I landed, walked in to the tree and searched all around, but found no trace of trail or blazing.

So I headed out on a scouting mission to find the best portage route. After a lot of false starts and whacking



*Cascades, Eileen River*

around in thick deadfall, I finally reached Robert Lake. Then I started working my way back, marking a trail with surveyor's flagging tape. This went pretty well until I ran out of tape. Since I was running low on fluids as well – it was oppressively hot, windless, and buggy in the bush now – I trekked back to the canoe and paddled across the river to a beach for lunch. This site would also provide a camp for the night. Fortified by lunch and several litres of fluids, I crossed the river again with a new roll of flagging tape and returned to the trail marking business. I finally finished marking the whole trail at 7:00 pm. Dinner and a refreshing bath were highlights of the evening.

The next morning, I set out for Robert Lake. Steve Read had written that “the portage to Robert Lake took me five hours and was uphill all the way.”<sup>5</sup> With the trail marked, it was about a forty minute walk one way, and I had my two loads across in just over two hours. I would have felt good about my comparatively speedy progress, if I didn't count the eight hours spent marking the route yesterday. When Read reached Robert Lake, he found he “had missed a well-cut trail which appeared to follow a ridge of high ground from a point upriver,”<sup>6</sup> of where he had started his portage. I saw no sign of such a trail, and assumed it had vanished in the burn.

I continued on from Robert through a couple of small lakes, followed by another lengthy carry requiring scouting and flagging to Dion Lake. From Dion, a short portage took me to Daisy Lake, and I paddled to its north end, hoping that the trail Read had found there was still in existence. Not far from my campsite in Daisy were the remnants of an old winter camp – tent poles, bough floors and cut wood – which I hoped was a sign that the winter trail down to Meridian was still in use and might be marked in some fashion.

Steve Read had described himself – with, I think, typical English understatement – as “pleased” to find a trail at the north end of Daisy heading towards Meridian. My spirits rose greatly when I located it. Most of the



*Falls, Eileen River*

trail's recent users had been moose, but there were signs of chopping in places, and it was too direct and well defined to be just a game trail. I followed it to the “first cliff” which it descended steeply but passably. After flagging a few of the less obvious sections, I portaged the gear and canoe to the bottom of the cliff, about a 25-minute walk one-way from Daisy.

At the bottom of the cliff, things got a little more confusing. The old trail continued west, along the south side of

a boggy valley, rather than heading more directly for Meridian Lake. It soon became clear that the trail was headed to a narrow lake in this valley, and presumably would continue on from there. It might have been the best winter snowmobile route, but it struck me as a fair bit of extra walking for a summer canoe carrier. So I elected to cross the valley and see if I could find a feasible and more direct route to the small lake adjacent to Meridian.

Initially, things didn't look promis-



*Sand-plain portage*



*Camp on Snowdrift River*



*Snowdrift River*



*Pike's Portage landing, Great Slave Lake*

ing. But then, from a high ridge, I spotted what looked like a feasible route just west of where the creek flowed down through a narrow rocky gorge. Exploration confirmed the route was possible -- through open woods, across the narrow rocky creek, up a bedrock ridge, and then down a steep game trail to the flats where the creek emerged from the gorge. After a short detour around a willow thicket, I followed sections of moose trail through thinly-wooded muskeg to where the creek entered the small lake. I had a portage route. Then I marked the route back to the canoe below the first cliff, and stopped for a late (5:00 pm) lunch.

I didn't think I could finish the portage, so I took the canoe and gear forward across the creek to a good out-crop campsite just beyond, with the creek providing a water source. It seemed curious to be camping on a canoe trip with no water in sight, but I guess there's a first time for everything. After setting up camp and eating dinner, I relaxed. It had been a statistically easy day -- 2.5 kilometres of straight-line travel, and about 2/3 of a portage -- but quite a tiring one in any event.

The next morning, the portage to the small lake went well. Unfortunately, a lot of smoke from distant fires had drifted in overnight -- I had hoped for some good photos from up on the ridge. In all, I think my portage route from Daisy to this small lake was about a 65-minute walk, one way. Strange how it took 24 hours to complete!

I paddled through a narrow creek into Meridian Lake, and after a short stop to investigate an old trapping cabin, continued northeast towards the portage to Great Slave. While stopped for lunch along the shore, I was surprised to hear a rhythmic splashing approaching. Soon, another canoe paddled into view. In it was a young couple from Ft. Smith, who were in the midst of a great circle route from their home town. They had arrived here via the Slave River and Great Slave Lake and were now bound UP! the cliffs to the Snowdrift and Taltson Rivers on their way back home. Impressive. We



Old grave near Pike's Portage



Great Slave Lake shrouded in smoke

chatted about the route to the Snowdrift, and they confirmed my impression about the traditional winter route, which had been described to them by people in Lutselk'e. Then we said farewell, and they paddled on. I didn't envy them their next couple of days.

From Meridian, a good portage trail took me down to Charlton Bay of Great Slave Lake, and only a few kilometres of flat water paddling remained. The next day, as I approached the landing for Pike's Portage where my trip would end, I had another "human" encounter. I met Roger Catling, the wolf hunter from Reliance, and his family, who were out for a boat ride. He remembered Steve Read – Roger still has his canoe – and we talked about my route, which he was familiar with from his winter travels. Then he returned to Reliance, and I paddled on to set up my last camp on the beach at Pike's Portage. Here I was delayed a day while high winds interfered with my charter pickup, and spent some time chatting with another young couple, from Alaska. They had paddled here from Yellowknife, and were on route to Baker Lake. A lot of ambitious youth in this area!

Finally, my ride arrived and I was on my way to Yellowknife. It had been a good trip – 19 days, 330 kilometres,

and 35 portages. Now it was time to start thinking about next year.

#### References:

1. Asfeldt, Morten, and Henderson, Bob, eds., *"Pike's Portage: Stories of a Distinguished Place"*, Natural Heritage Books, Toronto, 2010. Contains an interesting chapter on Roger Catling of Reliance.
2. Browning, Peter, *"The Last Wilderness"*, Great West Books, Lafayette, California 1989. A classic of northern travel.
3. Hoyle, Gwyneth, *"The Northern Horizons of Guy Blanchet: Intrepid Surveyor, 1884-1966"*, Natural Heritage Books, Toronto, 2007.
4. Olesen, Dave, *"Kinds of Winter"*, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo, 2014. Includes an interesting description of a winter dog team trip from Great Slave up to the Snowdrift and beyond, along the Meridian – Daisy – Dion – Robert route.
5. Read, Steve, *"Towards the Barrens"*, in *Nastawgan*, Wilderness Canoe Association, Toronto, Winter 1991. [http://www.mycr.com/sites/default/files/storage/CCR%20pdf/Nastawgan/winter\\_91.pdf](http://www.mycr.com/sites/default/files/storage/CCR%20pdf/Nastawgan/winter_91.pdf)
6. Wolf, Frank *"Mammalian: a barren lands odyssey"*, Gravywolf Films, 2010. [www.mammalian-movie.com](http://www.mammalian-movie.com). Wolf and his partner canoe the route described in this article in reverse, from Great Slave to Lynx Lake. Some "artistic license" is taken with the order of events.

#### Footnotes:

1. Hoyle, Gwyneth, *"The Northern Horizons of Guy Blanchet: Intrepid Surveyor, 1884-1966"*, Natural Heritage Books, Toronto, 2007, p. 90.
2. Browning, Peter, *"The Last Wilderness"*, Great West Books, Lafayette, California 1989, p.153.
3. Read, Steve, *"Towards the Barrens"*, in *Nastawgan*, Wilderness Canoe Association, Toronto, Winter 1991, p. 22.
4. Browning, op.cit., p.134.
5. Read, op. cit., p.22.
- 6 Ibid., p.22.



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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.

## Articles Wanted

Consider submitting your story – they are all worth sharing, no matter how “big” or “small” your trip was. Glad to help, if help is needed. Reach out to Aleks Gusev, Editor, for encouragement, tips & tricks!

## 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

## Contributors’ Guidelines

If you are planning to submit any material for possible publication in *Nastawgan*, you would do the editors and certainly yourself a great favour by first consulting the *WCA Guidelines for Contributors to Nastawgan*. These guidelines should be followed as much as possible by all contributors, so that the editorial team can more effectively edit your contribution to make it fit the *Nastawgan* style. The latest draft of the guidelines is available on the WCA website.

## Events Calendar

**31th Annual Wilderness and Canoe Symposium** will take place on 19th-20th February 2016 at Monarch Park Collegiate (1 Hanson Street, Toronto).

**AGM** will take place on 05 March 2016 at Toronto area location. Please visit WCA website for details and to register.

# 2016 Wilderness & Canoe Symposium Program

*“The Maps of Peter Pond”* – David Chapin, Rye, NH

*“Ukkusiksalik – The People’s Story: The Power of Inuit Oral History”* – David Pelly, Ottawa, ON

*“Future Arctic, Field Notes From a World On the Edge”* – Ed Struzik, Edmonton, AB

*“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone – A Walk to the South Pole”* – Ian Evans, Elora, ON

*“Perspective on canoes in the northern First Nations lifestyle”* – Ron Chambers, Haines Junction, YT

*“1,000 Miles, 41 days, in a canoe across North West Territories Canada”* – Ruby Zitzer, Bozeman, MN

*“Arctic Challenge – An all-women’s ski expedition across Auyuittuq”* – Wendy Grater, Seguin, ON

*“Last of the Wild Rivers - Present and Future of Rivière du Moine”* – Wally Schaber, Chelsea, QC

*“Paddling with Tom Thomson”* – Sue and Jim Waddington, Hamilton, ON

*“The Big Lonely – William’s Story”* – Rodney Brown, Thunder Bay, ON

*“Connecting rather than conquering nature with digital filmmaking”* – Scott Ellis, White River Junction, VT

*“Solo and Simply, Paddling Northern Quebec Rivers”* – Sylvain Tremblay, Quebec City, QC

*“Lessons Learned in Northern Quebec”* – Amelia Ingersoll & Kera Zegar

*“Finding partners for Arctic canoeing journeys”* – Iva Kinclova, Toronto, ON

*“Abandoned Landing: Paul Kane and the Lost Leg of the French Portage”* – Martin Cooper & Ken Lister, Toronto, ON

*“Winisk Me Away”* – Sara Gartlan, Toronto, ON

*“Book Building for Paddlers”* – Dave Brown, Craftsbury Common, VT

“To be Updated.....” – Dave Hadfield, Barrie, ON

“To be Updated.....” – Roy MacGregor, Ottawa, ON

“To be Updated.....” – Blair Doyle, Halifax, NS

# Rivers take you Places

By Greg Went

At the put-in. This year's trip is starting where a road meets the river that we are going to canoe. It is the last road access to the river from here all the way to James Bay. A long way to go by canoe.

Can't back the car up close to the river because there's a steep drop-off from the edge of the road to the edge of the river. It looks like the first portage on this year's trip will be getting canoes and gear from the car to the riverbank.

All the gear is not yet packed into duffel bags so there are a lot of trips up and down from the car to carry everything to the shore. Each trip down with gear gives me another chance to take a look at the river. No rapids in sight looking upstream or downstream. Can't see any signs of man's handiwork. From river level I can't even see the scar made by the road on the approach to the river. Starting to feel like I am already deep into the wilderness.

The river is moving quickly here. It's in a hurry to get away from the road. There's a lot of wild country up ahead. The river must know that too. It wants to go downstream and see the wild country. I'm guessing that the river has probably had enough of what contact with man has brought to it. Pollution, lumbering, road building. The river wants to go back to what it knew before man came to know it.

I think the river doesn't mind wilderness canoeists though. Travelers who appreciate its beauty, who try not to make any mark on the land, and like all good visitors, leave after joyful meetings so that the river can pursue its destiny.

I'm just hoping that the river is OK with taking us along as it continues on its journey to James Bay. We're trying hard to be good guests.



# Food for Paddlers

Gerri and Gary James enjoyed a guided trip on the Horton River in 2014 with Canoe North Adventures operated by WCA members Al Pace and Lin Ward. Gary and Gerri are very active WCA members, Gerri being a board member and Gary coordinating the WCA's Paddle the Don volunteers. The Canoe North Adventures has a tradition that guests bring appetizers and desserts. Gary has forwarded a number of recipes. This is the third recipe made by Gary from the Mother Nature Network Website. It was also Gary's birthday and retirement cake.

## Camp Tiramisu

Serves 2-3

### Ingredients

- 2 & 1/3 cup water (as needed)
- 2 teaspoons instant espresso powder
- 2 tablespoons Kahlua
- 2 x 32 g (1.13 oz) packet instant white chocolate pudding
- 2/3 cup powdered milk
- 12 ladyfingers broken into bite size pieces
- 1 dark chocolate bar (use Lindt Chili chocolate for a little zing)

### Preparation

**At home:** pack all ingredients separately in small bags or reusable containers.

Bag 1: espresso powder

Bag 2: pudding with instructions and powdered milk

Hard food container: lady fingers and chocolate bar

Nalgene bottle with Kahlua

**In camp:** heat 1/3 cup of water to a boil and then mix in espresso and Kahlua. Make pudding in separate bowl according to package directions using powdered milk and 2 cups of water. Place half the ladyfingers in the bottom of a pot or bowl, drizzle half of the espresso mixture over them and then spread half of the pudding on top. Place the rest of the ladyfingers on top and then repeat espresso mixture and pudding to create a second layer. Use a pocketknife to shave thin strips of chocolate from candy bar, and sprinkle these over the tiramisu.

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).



Dave Young, WCA Chair, introduces Frank Wolf, the fourth annual Mike Wevrick speaker, to the packed house of WCA members eager to hear about Frank's latest adventures.

Photo by Aleks Gusev

# Mistassibi River

Story and photos by George Cates

The Mistassibi River is located in south-central Quebec and flows in a southerly direction towards Lac Saint-Jean, where it connects with the Mistassini River. The start of our paddling trip was about 155 km north of the town of Dolbeau-Mistassini, on the shores of Lac Saint-Jean. There are two branches of the Mistassibi River,

simply referred to as the North-West (NW) and North-East (NE) branches. Our trip was on the North-West branch.

Access to the river was by well-maintained logging roads that head north from Dolbeau-Mistassini. The NW branch of the river started with gentle paddling mainly on flat water.

The trip began at a large narrow lake with beautiful high cliffs called Lac au Foin at the start of the trip. After the lake, a good mix of mostly Class I and Class II rapids, but with a few Class III rapids between, required scouting. Campsites were plentiful except in the region of Lac au Foin, where only a few sites were available due to the high cliffs abutting the river. The NW branch of the river did not have any other paddlers during our trip in late August, which made it true wilderness paddling. Logging activity in the area was minimal, and we did not hear any logging work, except on the first and the last day of the trip.

Our trip was organized by Wanapitei Canoe and guided by Matt Thompson and Brian Wright from Toronto and Ottawa, respectively. The participants from the Toronto area included George, Suree, David, Peter and Cathy. They have paddled together for several years. Also on the trip were Jeremy and Sasha from Maine and Paul from New York. Overall, the trip took eight days, including the initial half-day drive to the put-in. The total paddling distance was about 135 km. The flow rate of the river during our trip was about 200 m<sup>3</sup>/s, measured at station #062114 by Quebec Hydro. This was the normal flow rate of the river for late August.

## Day 0 – Sunday, August 16

Everyone arrived late in the day at the Motel Chutes des Pères, located in the town of Dolbeau-Mistassini. The motel overlooked the magnificent rapids and falls of the Mistassini River. We all gathered in the motel lobby and sensed the excitement of the forthcoming trip that we had all been thinking about for months. We agreed to meet again the next morning to load the trucks and to set off. The dinner in the motel was excellent and was finished off with a



*Jeremy and Sasha try fishing near a waterfall cascading from the high cliffs*





*The early morning sunshine gets everyone warmed up*

**Day 2 – Tuesday, August 18**

We were greeted in the morning with a light mist on the river and the smell of fresh coffee. Breakfast was French toast, potatoes and sausage – so far so good.

We paddled down the river with

nice scenery all around. The forest changed from barren burned forest into nice boreal spruce and fir. We passed several small streams pouring into the river. Several entered quite dramatically, including one which had a 30–40 metre waterfall. When we

started the trip there was nothing but sand and gravel, but this day, we started to see a few rocks and ledges.

For lunch, we stopped on a sandy beach. In the sand we saw three sets of bear tracks, which were probably only one or two days old. Two of the tracks



*A beautiful white sand beach makes for easy camping*

were together and looked like they were from a sow and a cub. The other track was slightly bigger and was probably from a male. One could see in the river bed sediment where the bears had crossed from the mainland onto the island.

We started to see steep cliffs in the distance to the south – shimmering in the bright sun. On river left we encountered a large waterfall cascading from a cliff about 100 metres high. Since this was a picturesque site and also looked promising for fishing, we decided to camp on the nearby island. The campsite had beautiful white sand that made it look like it was a southern resort site – just without the palm trees.

Brian and Jeremy set out to try their luck fishing beneath the falls. They tried for about an hour, but did not have any luck. Matt tried a little later and got one pike that he released.

### **Day 3 – Wednesday, August 19**

We started the morning with a beautiful blue sky, but the wind was coming



*A relaxing time around the camp while the sun sets*

against us from the south. We anticipated some hard paddling to come on the lake. Again, we encountered bear tracks on a sandy beach. This time they were very fresh and very large so we quickly headed off. As we approached the start of Lac au Foin, we stopped for lunch and a refreshing swim.

After a nice tuna-melt lunch, we started the long slog down the lake. The view of the lake was spectacular with its large, sometimes barren ledges and cliffs on both sides of the lake. The cliffs came right down to the edge of the water, making it difficult to stop. George kept stopping to take



*Brian is chased by the clouds on Lac au Foin*



*A beautiful view of the surrounding cliffs on our second night*

photos which put him and Suree behind the others, but he was rewarded with great photos of the overlapping cliffs in the distance to the south.

Finally, after paddling for about 28 km we found a good campsite on the lake with a small sandy beach. The camp had a couple of sites in the woods, but also sufficient room on the beach for a tight squeeze of the tents. We were all very tired and slow at setting up camp, but the scenery around us made up for the sore muscles.

#### **Day 4 – Thursday, August 20**

The morning was overcast but still warm. We continued paddling down the lake, slowly passing each of the many cliffs protruding into the lake. It seemed to us we would never reach the foggy ridge that had been looming at the end of the lake for the last two days, but finally we got there. Once onto the river the current picked up and we ran many swifts (EV on the map – a French abbreviation for “Eau Vivre” or lively water). We joked that the abbreviation stood for “extra violent,” but in reality they were pretty easy. A few Class I and Class II rapids gave everyone a chance to practice their eddy turns and leans.

The character of the river had changed drastically from above the lake. It changed from a very broad, sandy one to a somewhat more constricted river with less dramatic land-

forms on the banks. There were a few signs of a bit more logging in the area, probably due to the accessibility of the terrain.

We came upon a small stream on river left with a large piece of Canadian Shield – a bedrock outcrop on the bank of the river – that we chose for our campsite. The woods provided a few small campsites but the

rest of the sites were on the rocks. Cathy and Peter went rock collecting near the stream in order to have something to hold down their tents from the wind, which was a good thing since we were to encounter heavy rain and wind all night.

It was a beautiful site just to relax and enjoy the summer evening, swimming and talking. We talked of politics



*Fresh bear prints on a beach tell us that black bears are nearby*

(both US and Canadian), gun control, and the benefits of camp chairs versus pads – all the talk lubricated with lots of red wine. George managed to take a “less-than-graceful” slide down the rocks into the river, leaving a green, slimy stain on his fresh, clean shirt, which delighted Cathy into poking fun at his misfortune.

#### **Day 5 – Friday, August 21**

Any good paddling trip always includes a little rain, but the previous night was more than heavy! Some of us were not fortunate enough to keep the rain out. Jeremy and Sasha were flooded on the rocks due to a small stream that started running under their tent. We were hoping for some sun and wind during the day to dry things out.

We packed up quickly since the rain started to let up. We soon were ready to set off down the river. The river was really getting to be exciting! We managed to run a couple of Class III rapids with no major issues. Keeping far to river right gave us a good line to run. After a few Class I rapids, the river took a sharp turn, leading into a Class IV rapid. We got out to scout the rapid and decided to line the boats on river right. The area had some very interesting rock formations, so we considered camping there, but in the end we decided that the “bush-whacking” was not for us and we moved on. Matt decided to hold back a little longer and showed us his skill in rolling a solo boat in the rapids – quite impressive!

After paddling about 23 km for the day, we got to a great campsite with lots of room amongst the trees. Soon the place was like a spider web of clotheslines with everything hanging up to dry. A ledge in the river provided a little surf hole. Sasha enjoyed sliding down the small tongue and playing in the water like a seal. Jeremy was play-boating in the large solo boat and tried to surf in the standing wave.

#### **Day 6 – Saturday, August 22**

We awoke to heavy fog on the river,



*George and Suree negotiate a set of rapids*

but soon the sun burned off the fog and gave us a wonderful, blue sky. We had enjoyed a cool, clear night with no rain so we felt good enough to just relax a bit in the morning.

We got off late, but we still ran many rapids during the day. Some

were a bit technical and required tight manoeuvring around the shallow rocks. We stopped late for lunch before a set of Class II/III rapids. The area was like a small rain forest with thick, lush moss growing between the trees. After scouting the rapids, we



*Cathy was elected official "water pumper"*



*Brian makes it look easy, but it takes a lot of skill to maintain a good line*

worked our way down river right using a “sneak-line” beside the Class III rapids. The line through the main current looked tough to make, horrible to swim, and a rescue nightmare. We made the correct choice sneaking down the right side.

Below the Class III was a string of less technical rapids which was “read and run.” Everyone made it down without any problems. It was a good area to practice a few hot eddy turns. Downriver, we were soon back into sand and gravel territory. We passed by

where the NE branch joins the NW branch, so we were reminded that the trip would soon come to an end. It was hard not to feel somewhat sad. It was peaceful and quiet here and as Jeremy said, “It would be nice to just paddle up a nearby feeder stream, portage into



*Mirror smooth water on a perfect summer evening*



*An early morning mist slowly lifts from the river*

the next drainage and keep going!”

We found a nice sandy beach site to camp on, adjacent to a small creek on river left. The night was clear and cool. Just after sunset, a jet flew high overhead, leaving a bright contrail across the sky – another reminder that civilization was approaching.

#### **Day 7 – Sunday, August 23**

The morning was misty again. A small ring-necked plover was running quickly along the shoreline looking for small bugs.

The paddling was brief and rather uneventful. There were no rapids and the scenery was average (still better than most places, but not like the upper section of the river). Jeremy pointed out some spruce budworm damage where the spruce and fir trees were dead or dying. We passed by where Rivière Brule-Neige entered on river left and then the river split around a large island.

We camped early on another sandy beach and had plenty of time to swim, play and relax. George practiced paddling Matt’s tippy solo boat and managed to stay upright – just barely! Peter was lounging in

the shallow water with his camp chair and chatting with Cathy about the complexities of life. We heard the whooping call of some Sandhill Cranes and then spotted three of them flying over the river. Most of us had not heard or seen these birds before, so it was a nice experience.

#### **Day 8 – Monday, August 24**

It was a quiet morning. Brian spotted a moose swimming across the river just before everyone got up.

The paddle was only 8 km until the take-out, so we took our time getting on the water. The river started out calm with many large islands. Only two rapids remained for us to traverse. The first one was a Class II with a set of “glassy” standing waves on river left and another, “less-wet” line on river right. Jeremy and Sasha, as well as David and Paul, chose the wet line through the waves. Clearly, they were the biggest waves during the trip, but everyone made it through ok – lots of fun!

The second set of rapids came up soon afterwards and they also split on both sides of the river. Brian and

Matt ran their solo boats down river right, but clearly it was not easy. Some of us were foolish enough to try spotting a line, but after Peter said “no way,” we all decided just to portage over the small island rather than take a risky run on the last day.

We soon spotted the bridge over the river, signalling the take-out point. Everyone was quiet, knowing that the trip was coming to an end.

Jeremy remarked that, “This trip has been the most spectacular thing we have done so far.” The scenery was absolutely stunning and the river was fun, but not stressful. The campsites were great. We did not see another person or group the whole time. We only heard trucks on the first and the last day and they were far off in the distance. You could tell the river was not traveled very often. The beaches were untrampled, the trails were not well-used, and everything was pristine.

Our guides, Brian and Matt, were very nice, well-grounded and, most importantly, great cooks. Soon we were back at the motel in Dolbeau-Mistassini and “reconnected” to the world – for better or worse.

# Fear, Zen and Affirmation: Shooting the Mattawa River in Crazy High Water

Story by Gary Storr

Can a river change a person? Can a canoe trip become a life-altering experience? Or does the event simply reveal us for who we are? Four years had passed since my neighbour Graham Bryan and I tossed back a few cold ones on a sunny Sunday afternoon. We'd met for beers occasionally, but that afternoon was notable for one reason — I had made Graham an offer.

The proposition was simply this: to return with Graham to the Mattawa River in Ontario, specifically to Pimisi Bay, to reshoot the rapids of the 10-kilometre-long Pimisi Run and assert dominance over his nemesis — a boulder at the base of a rapid bypassed by the

*Portage des Roches*. This canoe-eater had bettered him on two prior outings. As a youth on a school sojourn, he and a chaperone had smashed into the beast full tilt and banana-peeled their aluminum canoe. Then, some 30 years later, with Dan Bell and me along for support, he had soloed the rapid twice more and struck the rock both times. I, too, had been humbled by this brute on my first trip down the Mattawa River but with Dan's able assistance on this, our subsequent bid for redemption, I had triumphed, and narrowly escaped its slaving maw.

Now we were going back.

This time we weren't out solely to

conquer our fears or to prove ourselves — the river was running high and we wanted photographs. The flash melt of 2013 had been accompanied by heavy rains; floodwaters prevailed; towns and roadways were awash. We postponed the photoshoot, then two weeks later cancelled a Petawawa River trip. An acquaintance, a former Petawawa guide, warned us that even if we succeeded in shooting rapids that were now raging torrents, we would be pinned against canyon walls and would swamp in the icy tumult. We always enjoyed an edge to our outings but we weren't suicidal. The decision to cancel was made for us when I received a phone call from an



*Devising a plan*

Algonquin Park warden informing me that the Lake Travers Road was washed out and wouldn't be repaired in time for our arrival.

Not to be outdone, we turned our attention back to the Mattawa. Logan Montreuil, owner of Algonquin North Outfitter, responded promptly to our inquiry. "The water is high...but not crazy high," he explained. It was all we needed to hear. Graham, Dan and I prepared for the shoot. Our photographer, Paul Bryan, cleared his calendar.

It was on.

It was a bright Saturday morning when Logan met us at the Canadian Ecology Centre (CEC) located in – but not part of – Samuel de Champlain Provincial Park. The venue was ideal for our needs as the park wouldn't open until the May 24th weekend. Bill Steer, General Manager of the National GPS Certification Program, and Joyce Beam, Facilities Manager, had been obliging. Bill had warned us off two weeks earlier when there was still a metre of ice on Pimisi Bay. Joyce had booked us a cabin, cancelled, and re-booked. The CEC is a short walk from the take-out at the foot of the Champion Rapids and Joyce allowed us to leave our vehicles at the facility until our return.

We shook hands with Logan and climbed into the truck. It had been four years since he had shuttled us to Pimisi Bay and five since he had transported my wife Debby and me to our ill-fated run. He caught us up on the local buzz, then pulled off the highway in front of the gate blocking the boat launch. Logan had long entertained the notion of cutting the chains at Sam Champlain Park – the late opening date hampered his business, but the boat launch was under authority of the Ontario Ministry of Transportation and he wasn't looking for trouble with the MTO. He helped carry our canoes around the gate to the water, offered some tips and wished us luck. The bay lapped conspicuously at the high-water mark.

Paddling across Pimisi Bay we heard the first set of rapids. The river had awakened, shaking off the last vestiges of winter. This time we knew we weren't

listening to wind rustling in the treetops – we were approaching a full-throated cascade. We lugged our gear over the *Portage des Perches*, then waited for Paul to stumble into the thigh-high meltwater with his camera. The rapid was a Class 1 – less technical in high water – and we ran it easily, fatuous grins plastered across our faces.

The significance of the waterway to the fur trade was clearly evident: the historical plaques; the dilapidated signposts marking the portages; indeed, the very essence of the voyageurs in their deft naming of carries. It seemed as though we might hear their spirited song cloaked in the mist of the cascades:

*Il y a longtemps que je t'aime,  
Jamais je ne t'oublierai.*

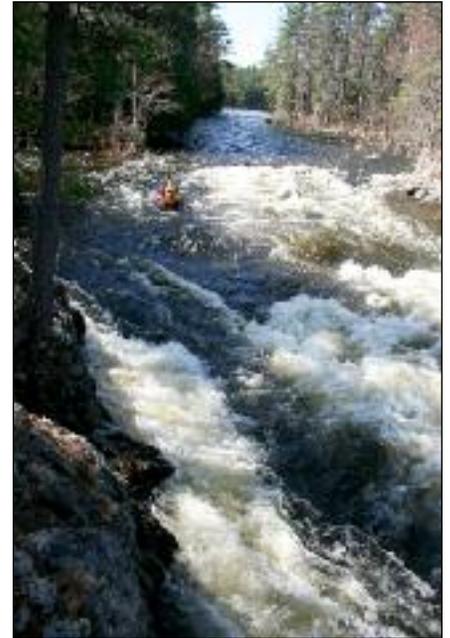
(Long have I loved you,  
Never will I forget you.)

Chorus: *À la claire fontaine*

A large rock to the left of centre marked the entry to the next stretch of whitewater. We debated whether to enter river left or right. Choosing to go with a bit of elbow room, we opted for the right side entrance. The longest stretch of whitewater along the Pimisi Run was also one of the wettest rides. Culminating in a series of rolling waves, the river bucked the canoes like a bronco shaking an unwanted rider; it flung them up and splashed them back down. We took the sprays full in the face, hooting like cowboys.

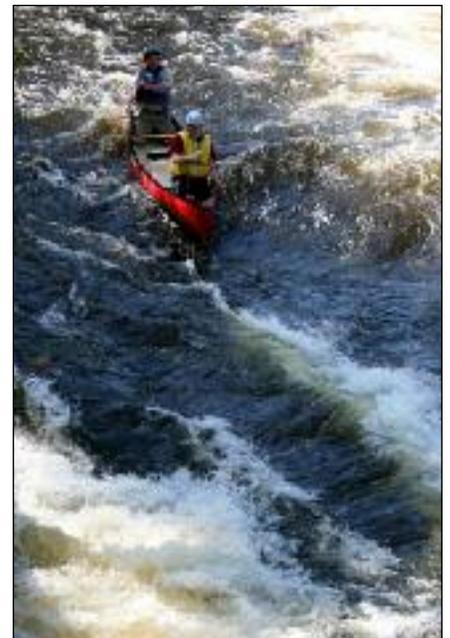
I was reminded of the words of Helga Stitt, an unbridled paddling enthusiast with whom I've canoed on several occasions: "After an exciting run through rapids, what flashes through my mind is, 'Yeah, baby, that was fun! Man, am I soaked. Let's do that again!' knowing the rush we crave is what keeps us coming back." Save for the missing fear element, her statement perfectly echoed my sentiments.

The next rapid was unrecognizable in contrast to its low-water version. Where there had once been a tiny double drop followed sharply by a hairpin turn, the river now swelled near the take-out leaving much of the *Portage de la Cave* un-



**Gary Storr (bow) and Dan Bell attempting to ride the trough, Petit Paresseux Falls**

derwater. The ledges were gone and we couldn't locate them. We scouted the river with concern for a cliff that intercepted the rapid along its base. Here, the edifice forced a violent left turn. Graham ran it first and enjoyed a wild, unfettered ride. He descended toward the wall at the mercy of the river but the current carried him around the bend



**Gary Storr (bow) and Dan Bell plunging into the trough, Petit Paresseux Falls**



**Gary Storr and Dan Bell (stern) hitting the wall, Petit Paresseux Falls**

without consequence and spat him out unscathed at the bottom. The rest of us followed. After playing here for awhile, Dan and I departed apprehensively for the *Portage de la Prairie*.

Ahead, the river flattened into a smooth, brown slick that coursed downhill into a bay above the next portage. Thinking that Paul might want photos of the waterslide, I swung us into a one-eighty but I was too late. Already in the

grip of the slide we began to flow downhill ass-backwards. We restored ourselves directionally but the manoeuvre had shaken Dan's confidence.

We pulled ashore at the head of the portage and walked its length. Below us, the river crashed through the Petit Paresseux Falls in full fury. Contrary to Logan's report, the water here was crazy high. It ran powerful and deep, flexing its muscle. We sat at the base of the

*Portage de la Prairie* and sagely pointed at the cascade, attempting to stoke our resolve, but this was Class 3 whitewater and the mojo was fading fast. After a half an hour of uncertainty, Dan spoke. "I'm sitting this one out, guys," he said. My heart sank. I wanted pictures of this rapid but I wouldn't push the trip beyond anyone's comfort level.

While meditating around a past campfire, Graham had waxed philosophically about the effect on him of shooting rapids. "Once I'm on the tongue of a downstream V, it becomes a Zen thing. Nothing exists outside the moment – no family, no friends, no job. It's just me and the rapid," he had said.

Now, sensing a mass bail, Graham jumped to his feet. "If I don't do it now," he declared, "I never will." He marched up the path to where we'd left the canoes. Waves of both relief and anxiety swept over me. I knew that another decision had been made for me: I was going to run it too.

Paul inched into the freezing flow, fighting the current that tried to flush him downriver. Expensive camera equipment hung in the balance. Dan and I held our breath until Paul found a foothold and settled in, ready.

Soon Graham appeared at the top of the rapid. He had chosen a line to the right of centre. The old rules were quickly discarded. The ledge we'd run years earlier was far beneath the surface, no longer a factor; the boulder that had terrorized us was still prominent, but completely awash. I stared into the turbulence – it sounded like thunder and flowed like stink. Standing waves thrust upward paddle-height. A deep trough angled from river right, its sides higher than our boats. Catching air, Graham flew into the trough, rode up the far wall, and nearly capsized. We could see by the shape of his mouth that he was shouting but his adrenalin-fueled maledictions were inaudible. Bringing the bow around he slid back in and endured a brief pummeling through the haystacks. Surviving that, he eddied out around a small spit to the end of the portage where he floated silently in a mild state of shock. A deep pool of

water sloshed at his knees.

It was late in the afternoon so we elected to stay put – there was a spacious campsite at the top of the portage. Long ago, writer Alphonse Karr observed, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” With each outing our group grew increasingly proficient in shooting whitewater but, for Dan especially, one aspect of the sport remained constant. “Whenever I hear the sound of rapids ahead,” he said, “I feel fear.”

In the morning we wandered along the trail, coffee mugs in hand, and sat mesmerized at the base of the cascade. After a while, Dan looked up. “I’m ready now,” he said. I nodded. We returned to our canoe at the head of the portage and pushed out into the swirling, black water. We lined up right of centre and allowed the river to draw us in.

Squinting ahead I wondered where Paul had gone. He’d had sufficient time to find a perch from which to photograph our descent. Afterward, he explained, “I was blinded by the glare of the sun so I jumped in the canoe and paddled like hell upstream to cross the river. Then I ran up the rocks and found a spot just as you were coming down. I almost slid off the cliff!” I turned my attention back to the matter at hand. Rather than flying into the trough, Dan and I had decided to enter it from the open end and ride it through the middle.

We had vastly underestimated the power of the current. Our draws and pries were useless. We were going wherever the river took us. We tilted over the side of the trough and slammed into the wall of water on the opposite side. Then, like Graham, we rode up the wall and fell back in. Drenched, I hollered at the river gods as they fed us to the haystacks and then, as suddenly as it began, it was over.

At the bottom of the portage Dan and I dumped the water from our boat and high-fived. Then we quietly collected ourselves and pushed on down the river.

The drifting haze was as thick as if we were standing on the deck of Niagara’s *Maid of the Mist*. No features of the waterfall were visible – only a foaming pillow of water that masked

even the rocky outcrop normally seen at the centre of the falls.

We paddled languidly up the riverbank to the base of Paresseux Falls, then let the outflow carry us back. We moved like this in a lazy, circular fashion while Paul took photos from above. My mind was clear; I gazed at the spectre before me with bovine tranquility.

Afterward, we explored the *Porte de l’Enfer*, or Gates of Hell, an ochre mine found high in the north embankment a short paddle from the falls. Voyageurs believed the cave to be the home of a man-eating demon.

Then, nearing the end of the Pimisi Run, we rounded the bend exiting Bouillon Lake to view the chaos of water and rock that was home to Graham’s nemesis. We fleet-footed over

the smooth, round boulders that comprised the *Portage des Roches* and stared upriver at the rapid. Our rock was submerged. The only sign of it was a tiny curl in the middle of the river. Where I had once gasped for breath trying to pry my canoe from its grasp, the rock itself appeared to be drowning. I felt cheated – the river was mocking us, denying us our glory.

Years earlier I had described this rapid as being short and unremarkable. Ironically, now that the river was hell-bent and overflowing its banks, the rapid was less impressive. No technical skill was needed; just aim the canoe straight and ride it through. Graham went first, followed by Dan and me, then Paul. With false gusto, we loaded our gear into the boats and set off down the final



*Exploring the Porte de l'enfer or Gates of Hell*



*Enjoying the ride*

stretch of the Pimisi Run to its terminus at the base of the Champion Rapids.

In July of 2008, my wife Debby and I paddled the Mattawa River for the first time. The water was low, creating technical but, for the most part, gentle rapids. We had run them all except for the stretch skirted by the *Portage de la Prairie*. Intimidated, we had opted to walk after encountering three snorkellers attempting to retrieve gear dumped in a disastrous bid to avoid a mammoth boulder. A short time later, Debby and I also snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

An instant of indecision was all it took, a do-we-go-right-or-left moment that cost us the run. We were shooting the rapid churning past the *Portage des Roches* when a flash of mental paralysis



*Paresseux Falls*

caused us to ride up the rock. The river hurled us upon it with such force that our canoe broached like a ship side-on to a gale. It twisted and settled back into the river on its side, firmly pinned against the bank. Three quarters submerged, our craft succumbed, folding at the centre thwart – a perfect wrap.

For two hours Debby and I struggled, first to drag the waterlogged packs ashore, then to rescue our beleaguered boat. Unable to budge the canoe, we contemplated filling a daypack with a few essentials and hiking out to the highway.

Then came an epiphany: Thinking Man roused in me and threw off his torpor. Gulping for air, I fastened one end of the throw-line to the yoke near the lower, submerged gunwale. Then I tossed the rope over the upper gunwale to Debby who was standing downstream in waist-deep water. I positioned myself at the centre of the canoe and, with both hands, reached into the froth. Gripping the lower gunwale, I began to strain upward in a rhythmic, rocking motion. Debby coordinated her efforts on the line to match mine, using the rock as a fulcrum against itself.

Suddenly I heard Debby's voice carry over the river. "It moved!" she yelled.

It was an electrifying moment. Redoubling our efforts, Thinking Man morphed into Primal Beast. Inch by inch we scraped our injured craft up the boulder until it quietly washed over the top. Floating the canoe to the riverbank, we examined it thoroughly. Its gunwales and thwarts were intact, a testament to the manufacturer. The hull, however, resembled a failed origami. I climbed in and, performing my best Stompin' Tom Connors impression, trampled the canoe back into shape.

Afterward, as we recovered on the riverbank, Debby expressed her take on the situation. "You were wonderful," she said. Surprised, I reached over and took her hand. It was an affirmation that buoyed my spirit and I basked in the glow.

Did the river change us? Like Orr, in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, we repeated



*Graham Bryan dropping into the trough*

our actions, returning to the river to dissect its components and drive our canoes through. Orr crash-landed his crippled plane into the sea after bombing missions, then awaited rescue with his men in an inflatable life raft. To the crew's amusement, he examined and made use of the survival gear he found on board, paddling the raft with a tiny Dixie-cup spoon. Orr had a plan – he persevered and paddled out of the war in a rubber raft all the way from the

Mediterranean Sea to Sweden.

Each year our group returned to the places of our setbacks to try again. Unlike Orr, we had no plan, but I knew the river was shaping us, testing us, preparing us for some grandiose undertaking I couldn't yet imagine.

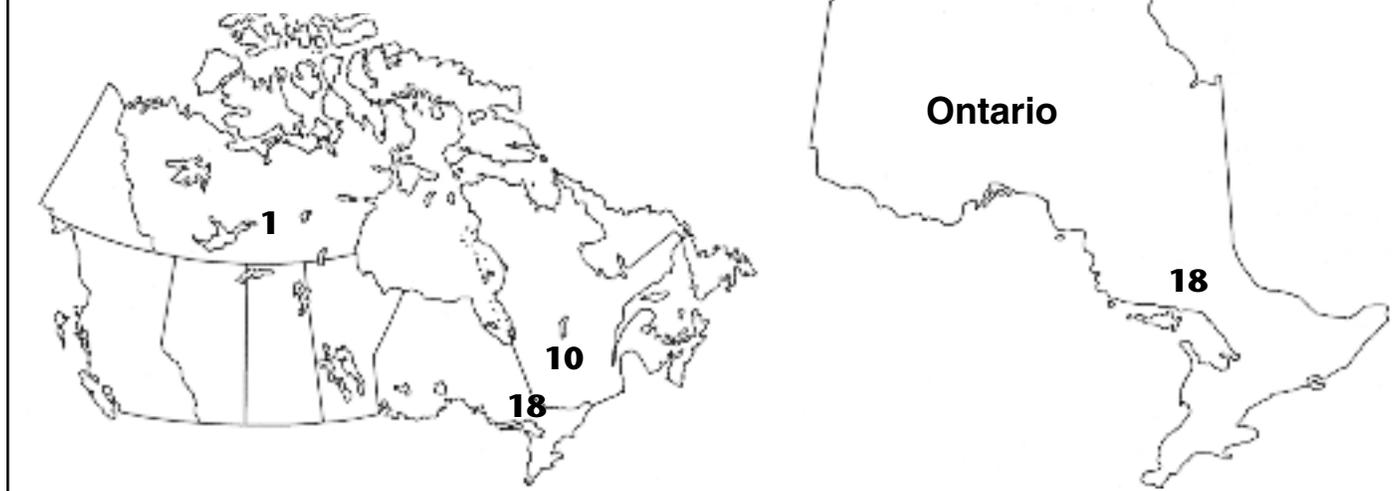
I no longer feel the need to return to the Mattawa River. To paraphrase Dan's words, I think we're ready.

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*Graham Bryan skidding through haystacks, Petit Paresseux Falls*

## Where it is...



## ...in this issue

1 From Whitefish Lake to Great Slave Lake: Tundra, Trees, and Cliffs  
 8 Editorial  
 9 Food for Paddlers  
 9 Went: River Takes you Places

9 Wine & Cheese Event  
 10 Mistassibi River  
 18 Fear, Zen and Affirmation: Shooting the Mattawa River in Crazy High Water  
 24 Where it is...

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