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Setting off on a beautiful morning, Windy Lake.

Thlewiaza 2017: Exploring Sleeping Island and No-Man's River

Part I

Story by Chris Rush

Photos by Chris Rush and Jenny Johnson

Since stalwarts Laco Kovac & Lynette Chubb from Ottawa were not canoe tripping in 2017, and neither were any of my Montreal buddies, I was wondering if I would get a northern vacation in that summer. So early in the new year I started asking around, and got a positive reply from Lee Sessions in Oregon – he had been looking at some rivers in Nunavut but hadn't nailed a crew down yet. The Thlewiaza River was suggested to Lee as a good option by some paddling friends. It drains huge Nueltin Lake, the lower half of which straddles the Manitoba/Nunavut border, exits the northeastern end of the lake, continues through Seal Hole Lake, then turns south, and finally makes its way roughly east to Hudson Bay between the settlements of Arviat and Churchill. The part of Nunavut that this section of the river flows through was previously known as the Keewatin District of the Northwest Territories.

Nueltin Lake and the Thlewiaza are at the border of the bar-

Photograph of expedition members hauling a canoe through shallow rapids on the Thlewiaza River, in the area south of Kasba Lake, Nunavut. The photograph was taken by J.B. Tyrrell on the 1894 CGS expedition to the barren lands.

rens – weaving in and out of the treeline, the traditional line demarcating Inuit from First Nation (Indian) lands. Small stands of mostly stunted trees are often abundant, but there are no large forests, so it is known as the "land of the little sticks." The topography is predominantly tundra, peat bog, or rocky. Many lakes of all sizes dot the landscape, long eskers snake through the land, and there are even raised beaches, relics of old sea floors. In the south lived the Idthen Eldeli (Chipewyan Dene), and in the north, the Ihalmuit (Caribou Inuit). Both relied heavily on caribou for survival, for both food and clothing, hunted as the giant herds migrated south in the fall and north in the spring. These two indigenous groups led an isolated existence well into the 20th century, essentially unknown to most of the rest of Canada.

In 1912, Ernest Oberholtzer, of Minnesota, hired the Ontario Ojibwa guide Titapeshwewitan (aka Billy Magee) and set off on a remarkable journey, intending to retrace the 1894 Kazan River route of J.B.Tyrrell, of the Canadian Geographic Survey. Instead they turned east sooner and canoed the entire length of Nueltin Lake and then the Thlewezia River to the Bay, went down the coast to Churchill, on to York Factory and then up the Hayes River to Lake Winnipeg, mapping as they went. Two thousand miles in four and a half months. Two tough dudes!

The history of trading posts in the region is well documented by the Canadian writer, Farley Mowat, who spent two summers at Windy Post in 1947-48, canoeing the Thlewiaza with Charles Schweder, in 1947. His time there spawned several controversial books, culminating with "No Man's River," published in 2004.

According to the book "Canoeing North into the Unknown" (Bruce Hodgins and Gwyneth Hoyle, 1994), between 1947 and 1974 there were six known descents of the Thlewiaza by canoe. Since then the river has been traveled dozens of times by various canoe trippers. To our knowledge, we were the only people to attempt the river in 2017.

Since we had 3 weeks for our trip, and the Thlewiaza from Seal Hole Lake to the Bay could be easily run in 2 weeks, we decided to fly into the Nueltin area so that we could explore the history of the region. One of Lee's friends who had paddled this region years ago noted that the portage from Nueltin into Sandy Beach Lake was "not pleasant," so we decided to fly directly into Sandy Beach. The best fly-in option was Wings over Kississing, who have a turbo Otter at their float-plane base in Thompson, northern Manitoba.

The trip crew now consisted of Lee, myself, Jenny Johnson from Washington state, and a friend of Lee's, Dave, from Minnesota. Unexpectedly, Dave had to pull out in March, so we put out calls to try to find a fourth paddler. A month later, things were looking grim as we had no takers. Suddenly, almost miraculously, Curt Gellerman from New Jersey arrived on the scene. He had all the req-

uisites, and more. Apart from being a very, very experienced northern tripper he owned a folding canoe, and had access to a shotgun – a necessity due to the possibility of hungry polar bears not only near Hudson Bay, but even inland where they now often roam after losing much of their coastal habitat thanks to global warming.

Saturday, July 1st, 2017
Airport rendezvous

Perhaps ironically, the group adventure started on Canada Day, the national holiday celebrating Canada becoming a nation, this year considered special as it was Canada's 150th "birthday" year. Of course this "birthday" refers only to the new nation of European immigrants who stole the land from the indigenous peoples outright or via what we now recognize as shameless treaties.

I awoke that morning in a fleabag motel in Nipigon on the north shore of Lake Superior having driven from Montreal the day before. I was a little early getting into Winnipeg, just before 4 p.m., as I had a 5 p.m. rendezvous at the airport with Curt, who was driving in from New Jersey. We were headed to the airport to meet Lee and Jenny who were flying from Portland.

I pulled into the airport arrivals area on time, to find a lonely Subaru wagon with New Jersey plates waiting at the passenger pickup area. I figured it must be Curt, who I'd never met in person, snuck up to the car window and told him that Jersey Subarus weren't allowed to park at the airport. He laughed and I immediately knew he was going to make a fine traveling companion. I then went into the terminal to find our other accomplices, after which there were hugs and smiles all around. It's hard to explain the excitement and anticipation immediately before these trips to those who haven't had the chance to experience them.

Sunday, July 2nd, 2017
To the north, at last

After reaching Thompson around noon, I found the dirt road that led to the Wings of Kississing float plane base. We went over the maps with the pilot, Wayne. Remembering Bill Mason's quote, "anyone who says they like portaging is either a liar or crazy," I suggested that we not land on Sandy Beach Lake but head directly to Windy Lake, which would save a series of portages.

The lonely route North.

We flew low over Sandy Beach Lake, wondering where all the beaches were. A hot, wet spring after a big snowpack winter had triggered historically high water levels in the region – eight feet higher in the lakes.

We headed even further north on Windy Lake, slowly circling, until Wayne spotted a small cabin; usually, up north, where there is a cabin there must be a decent landing area. Lo and behold, the cabin was well placed – on a small bay with an exposed little beach. We landed and taxied right to the beach.

I was elated because we had skipped the potentially nasty full-load portage that would have ensued had we landed on Sandy Beach Lake, and we weren't missing much as far a scenery goes since the pretty beaches on that lake were "submerged." Indeed, we were already ahead of schedule, probably by two days! I was thinking that this was going to be an easy trip, something one should never do this early. But enough daydreaming, it was time to get to work. We

Climbing to a cruising altitude after take-off.

had to assemble the canoes, organize our gear for "canoe mode" rather than transportation mode, and set up camp. I hate assembling folding canoes, aside from always being worried that I've forgotten or lost a vital piece.

I have done it many times, but always forget the minutiae, especially how to assemble the seats. And there are always broken fingernails. Thankfully, this time it went quite smoothly, except for a broken rear seat we worked together to fix.

I gingerly lowered my butt onto the "new" seat, and…success! In fact, it was much more stable than the flimsy old design. I was elated, we had successfully made it to the lake, we hadn't forgotten any important gear, had fixed the canoe seat, skipped the first portage, the sun was shining, it was warm, the bugs were not bad…what else could we hope for? Well, how about a glass of wine? It was dinner time, and time for a fire. We quickly gathered firewood, went up to the sandy area by the cabin to catch the breeze, started a fire and cooked dinner.

After dinner we went for a walk on the esker ridge. Sunset was glorious, a riot of red and orange framing the few clouds that had blown in. To bed at midnight.

Monday, July 3rd, 2017
Windy Lake and River reveal their history

Back on the lake I was ruing not having paddled much in preparation for this trip. My paddling muscles were already sore, and my left elbow hurt when I paddled on the right side. Uh oh. We had a lot of lake paddling before getting to the big river where the current would help propel us to the Bay. Late in the afternoon we finally reached the end of Windy Lake, where on even the large-scale maps only a single line marks the start of Windy River. But this was a real river, not a little bumpy creek like those single squiggles often denote. It was clearly running high, the banks submerged up to the bushes on the sides, and there was slow but definite current.

Almost straight after the Windy River starts, it splits into two around a large triangular island.

We wanted to visit the old Red River HBC post that was at the junction of the left branch of Windy River and the Red River, so we should have gone down the left branch. But the lead boat with Lee and Curt zipped by this channel in the current. That meant we had to turn west and go upstream on the Red River when we reached the end of the island. This mistake cost us a good hour slog up a shallow stream with a fairly strong current. Luckily we knew the approximate location of this ruin, and the others in the Windy River region, thanks to an old hand-drawn map made by Francis Harper and published in his paper, "The Barren Ground Caribou of Keewatin," one of his treatises based on research performed at Windy Bay Post in 1947. Harper was the American zoologist who had originally hired Farley Mowat to accompany him on his scientific mission to study the Keewatin caribou and the people who lived off them.

Finally, as we rounded yet another bend in the river, we spotted some very grey, rotting timbers poking up from the underbrush about seventy five feet from the riverbank on a small slope. Here was

the first site mired in historical legend that I had read about and had been anxiously waiting to explore! The roof beams had collapsed onto the main structure, but the walls were still recognizable, the logs stacked as high as the door at the front of the building, which was surprisingly still functional. Between the bushes, small spruce trees were sprouting up. We had to be careful of the nails that were dangerously exposed everywhere, especially on the timbers rotting on the ground.

There was a second, smaller cabin structure about thirty feet to the left of the main building, completely in shambles.

Making our way up to the top of the knoll behind the cabin, we discovered an old stone cairn. Stands of mature spruce trees stretched north obscuring the horizon.

From the old photographs it was clear this area had been mostly clear of trees and brush when the post was in use. Nevertheless, surveying the scene below me, I imagined the hustle and bustle as the Inuit came down the Red River to trade with the white men who ran the post, at first for Revillon Freres, then for the HBC.

Tuesday, July 4th, 2017
More cabins, both old and new

Well, we just had Canada Day, and now it was the fourth of July, apparently some important holiday for my American companions. Even the weather ended up cooperating later in the day, substituting thunderous lightning strikes all around us for the usual holiday fireworks.

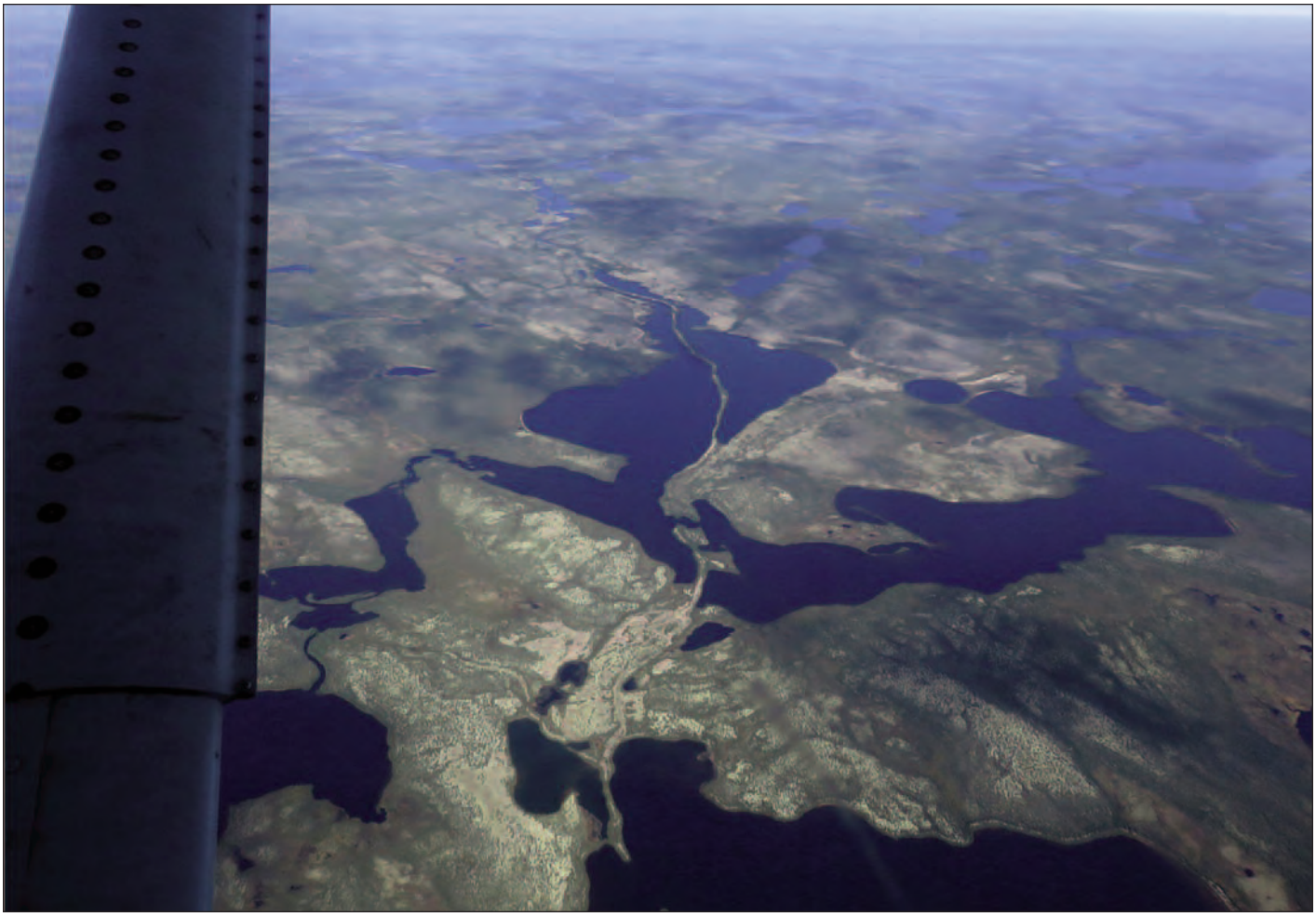
When Lee roused us out of the tent in the morning it was to clouds, a slight breeze and a lot of bugs. We quickly ate breakfast and started paddling Simon's Lake, a small lake – up to 500 meters across and five kilometers long, lined by low hills.

The lake quickly narrowed, turned east and continued as Windy River, now a serious river with swifts and a few tricky rapids. The banks were very bushy, with no rocks showing, indicating a river still bulging with spring runoff water. It was raining gently now, cool and grey. We hit a few sets of class 2 rapids, a fun run, thinking that maybe that would be it for technical stuff, but after passing through a small lake, we hit Mink Rapid, which posed much more of a challenge. There were big, white waves down the middle that would swamp open canoes, and with the spray decks packed deep in our gear bags because we weren't expecting any serious rapids until the Thlewiaza, this could be a problem. There was a cheat route on the right but at the end, you had to dodge a big rock splitting the current – to the right, safety, to the left, trash, and the water was pushing forcefully left. Curt and Lee ran it, spinning safely into the eddy at the bottom. I chickened out and asked Jenny if we could line it. I just didn't feel like running it with a canoe that was not set up properly – even our gear bags were stacked haphazardly and high in the canoe. It took all of five minutes to line the short rapid, and off we went down the remainder of the river, dry and safe.

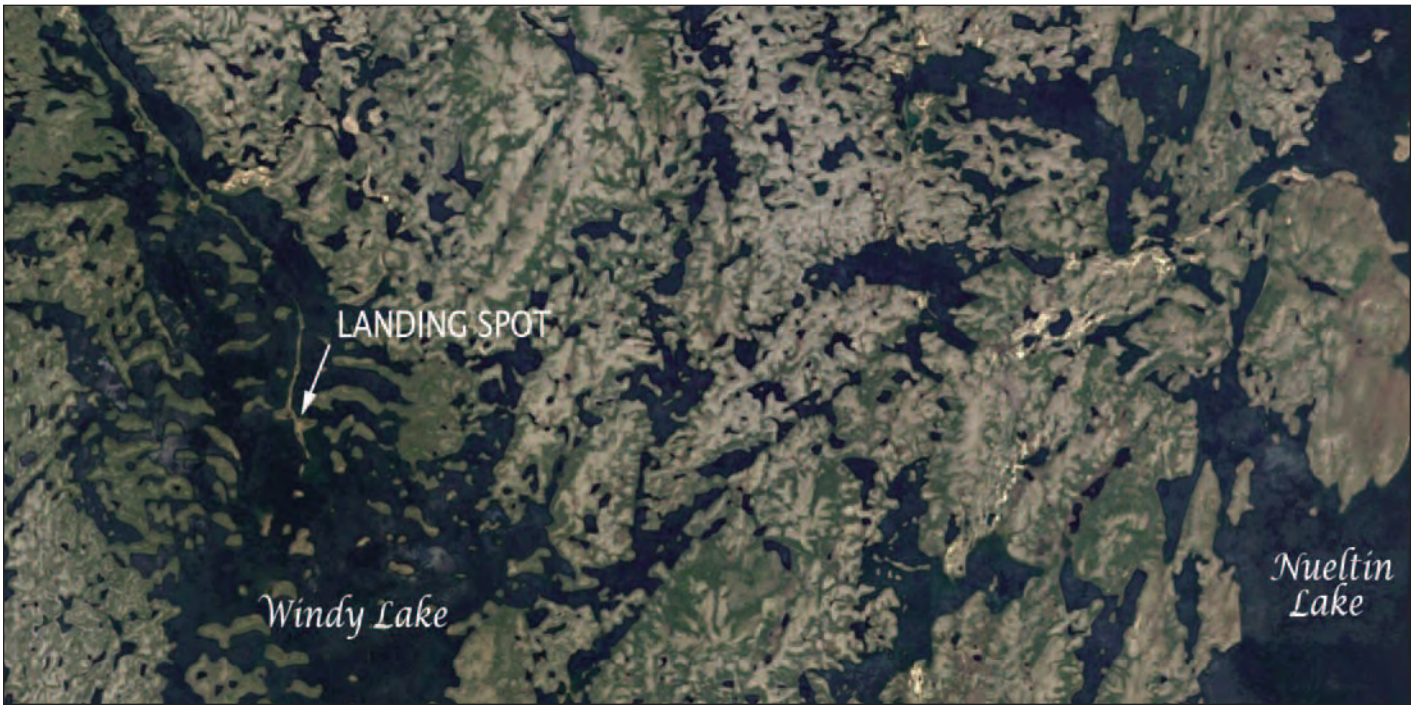
Excitement built as we reached the cabin of German immigrant and fur trader Fred Schweder, a former HBC manager who in 1945 moved an abandoned HBC post here from Simons Lake. It was almost a complete ruin. Similar to the previous cabins, the area around it was quite grown over and bushy, making it difficult to poke around. The main structure still had quite a few logs in place. At the rear was a big old cast iron wood stove, the kind you cook on. Seventy years ago the Schweder boys, Farley Mowat and Francis Harper would indeed have been cooking on it.

A tea kettle lay in the bushes. A bucket, old tin cans, a rake head, and a remarkably well-preserved, unusual pump "sprayer" were also scattered about. Jenny wondered if the sprayer was the same kind used to mist bug repellent, as relayed in P.G. Downes' book "Sleeping Island." As he travelled up Reindeer Lake on the Lac du Brochet freighter, Downes recounts, "When night came, we turned in en masse below the deck, each seeking for himself the most comfortable couch he could find on the rock-like sacks of flour and boxes of ammunition. Every cranny was chinked and the hatch closed to keep out the mosquitoes, and the already thick atmosphere was heavily sprayed with Fly-Tox….it wasn't long before I left my uneasy berth…" I can imagine the occupants of the cramped, dank Windy Bay post also

The drop-off area. Lots of water.



As the terrain changes, an esker snakes through lakes.



Landing spot.

Sawing an old plywood board to fit the top of the canoe seat.

desperately spraying the interior of their cabin with this same stuff. I wonder exactly what was in that "toxic" mixture.

I also thought of the photographs that Harper took of the youngest Schweder, Mike, and the Inuit children Anoteelik and Rose, butchering a caribou, then transporting it back to this very cabin. These were mere kids – how different their lives would be today!

I went up the ridge behind the cabins hoping for a good view inland, but it was

Dinner fire on the esker in the early evening sun.

Sparse remains of a cabin, Windy Lake.

too bushy and treed to see much.

I thought about trying to convince the others to explore further, to try to find the so-called "pile-o-rocks" marked on the maps a few kilometers north, probably an ancient cairn. Or go check out Little River, which also emptied into Windy Bay. The Schweders canoed up this river to get to the Inuit camps to the north. But it was raining hard now, cold and quite miserable. Curt and Lee were eyeing a surprising sight – a few kilometers across the bay was a modern cabin that promised a dry lunch. So we left the history behind and I, reluctantly, paddled over to the 21st century with the others. I don't like these modern intrusions into what should be pristine wilderness. It was a fairly large fishing lodge, complete with a dock. Several aluminum skiffs were overturned on shore. A shack at the dock, door hanging open, was stuffed with fuel tanks, life jackets and an outboard motor. Up the bank, an abandoned ATV sat outside a gear shed, which was full of tools. The main cabin door was also open despite the sheet of plywood with nails that had been placed on the deck in front of it. We carefully sidestepped the nails and entered. What a disaster zone! A bear, probably a grizzly, had outsmarted the nail defense and trashed the place. A huge chest freezer was overturned, kitchen stuff scattered everywhere.

Harper's map of Windy River, 1947.

In the main room random things from huge fishing lures to first aid kits to sheaves of topographic maps were left behind. It looked like everyone left at the end of fishing season, expecting to return the next spring. Except no one came back. In a ledger, the last entry was dated 2010. What a waste.

We had a decision to make. In the middle of Windy Bay was a long, skinny island, called "Flat Island" on Harper's map. To the south was "Falcon Cliffs,"

which may have falcon nests. To the north was "Wolf Esker," a large sandy hill that harboured wolf dens. These were undoubtedly the dens that Farley Mowat studied in 1948, the result being the famous book, "Never Cry Wolf," although some critics question how much of what he wrote was actually true (see John Goddard's Saturday Night magazine article, "A Real Whopper," May 1996, link: http://tarekfatah.com/john-goddard-on-marley-fowat/.)

I managed to convince the crew to check out the wolf esker, about five kilometers away, but a powerful thunderstorm forced us to seek shelter on an island a few km short of Wolf Esker.

Following dinner, we drank boxed pinot noir and told stories. After a nice sunset, to bed at 11 p.m.

Wednesday, July 5th, 2017
A Shift in Topography

We didn't hit the water until 10:30 a.m. I still wanted to check out the wolf esker, as did Jenny, but Lee didn't sound too interested and Curt didn't say much. I think they just wanted to paddle, anxious to get some miles in on the big lake while it was calm. "Priorities," as Lee put it. As we paddled close to the esker on the north shore, it became apparent that a hike up to it may be difficult, it was quite bushy in areas and there were some large stands of trees. Hiking through waist deep (or higher) alders and dwarf birch can be quite exasperating, so this probably also weighed on the decision to skip exploring the esker. It would undoubtedly have taken a couple of hours to get up there, explore, and get back to the boats.

We had a nice, easy, sunny paddle for about two hours, finally leaving the west-east Windy Bay and turning south in the larger Smith Bay. Nasty black clouds materialized behind us from out of nowhere, catching us on the water. Sheets of driving, heavy rain followed, chasing us to shore to regroup and don our rain gear.

A strange meteorological sight materialized from one of the large storm clouds. Two inverted spires of misty rain tumbled down from the cloud towards the water – mini tornadoes perhaps? As we progressed south on Smith Bay, the topography was changing drastically. Goodbye to the relatively continuous thick bush and large stands of trees, indeed mini-forests, of the Windy Lake/Windy River system, hello to the barren, bouldery hills of Nueltin Lake.

Later, we decided it was futile to paddle into the headwind on this new, unnamed bay, so we set up our tents and made an early camp. I estimate the wind was blowing about fifty km/hour. Since it was early in the afternoon, we went exploring. As we wandered south of camp, we all realized that no one had brought any bear defense. Oops. Barrenlands

The ruins of the Red River HBC Post, at the confluence of the west branch of Windy River and the Red River.

Knock knock…the front door is still functional!

The "haunted" Simon's House, Simon's Lake in the background.

Francis Harper, Rose, Fred Jr, Mike and Anoteelik in front of Windy Bay Post, 1947 (Francis Harper photograph).

Setting up the shelter before the storm hits. Lower Slate Falls.

Red-tipped lousewort among various other marsh-loving plants and lichens.

Setting off from Flat Island. Note the high water levels on the lake, the rocky shore is completely submerged.

Lee and Curt paddling Windy Bay while looking for "the cache."

grizzlies are big and can be cantankerous if you surprise them!

Thursday, July 6th, 2017
Onto the big lake

We were on the water at 9:30 to a blue-bird sky. For most of the day, we battled a straight headwind or one at a 45-degree angle – but still in our faces – managing only 1-3 km/hour. The wind-whipped waves wobbled the canoe, some crashing over the gunwales. We again had lazily packed the canoe, dumping the gear in a high, haphazard pile, which caught the wind and made it hard to track in a

On the edge of the barrens — Rocks, rocks and more rocks.

Map of Windy Bay, Smith Bay and part of Nueltin Lake.

straight line. And I was regretting it.

The bay was full of islands and had a complex shoreline, with the connection to the main part of the lake just a narrow little channel between some low hills, easy to miss without maps. Three bald eagles were hanging out on a big rock near the bay exit, flying off as we came near. The shoreline was now barren but very pretty - all bare hills with low shrubs and no bushes. Real tundra!

We continued to battle the wind, scouring our faces until we stopped for lunch on a pretty beach with some protection. Then it was back to torture, with sore muscles powering flailing paddles. It is at points like this where one wonders which is worse – paddling into a strong headwind or portaging? In the end, it is just different challenges, with different muscles taking a beating. But wind does have one positive: it is nice to paddle without a cloud of mosquitoes around your head!

A possible hunting blind that Jenny explored.

I was getting fed up of paddling, my muscles were now really fatigued and I had had enough of battling the wind for the day. After the narrows we had to cross more open water in a wide bay, after which we finally spotted the beach nestled behind a point. Unfortunately, immediately behind the sloped beach stood a dense stand of small spruce trees, with boggy ground behind. We figured that if the wind dropped, this would become bug heaven and camper hell. No thanks!

Luckily, a few hundred meters north was a knoll, dry and breezy, so we set up camp there. Late in the evening, a few clouds rolled in, making for an interesting sunset.

To bed at 11 p.m., with a definite resolution to get up early the next day to check the wind. In bed, I started reading Oberholtzer's journal ("Bound for the Barrens") now that we were on his route up Nueltin Lake. He used to get up quite early, often around 3 a.m., and do much of his paddling early in the day, fueled by two breakfasts, several hours apart. Maybe that's what we should be doing instead of going to bed late and being on the water during peak wind hours. Then again, getting up at 3 a.m. serially would be cruel punishment.

Friday, July 7th, 2017
Windbound

The plan was to get up early and go before the wind picked up. There was a big bay ahead of us to cross, which would be brutal in strong winds. Well, sometimes the best plans end up for naught – at 5 a.m. we awoke to a howling gale and fiercely flapping tents. Oh well, nothing to do but to go back to sleep, never a bad option. Perhaps we should have packed up the previous evening when the wind had died down and made a break for it then! The next wake-up call was Lee at 8 a.m. saying that the wind was now coming from the west, and that we should wait an hour to see if it dropped and then decide if we were going or not. In the meantime it started to intermittently rain and when Lee did not return at said hour, I figured it was a no-go today. Windbound!

Saturday, July 8th, 2017
A brutally long day

Late evening clouds.

When faced with no alternative, I have no problem getting up early in the morning. This was one of those mornings. We were going to pull an "Oberholtzer" and get on the water early – 6 a.m. It was magical to be on the water with the sun so low on the horizon.

The second big bay crossing was tougher as the headwind stiffened. Moving up the lake, our bearing steadily changed to the northeast, so it slowly became a 45-degree crosswind, still in our faces. The last big bay crossing was the most brutal. Every muscle strained as we tried to keep forward progress. I have to

Wind whipping the tundra, and Jenny.

By 7 p.m. the wind was still whipping the shelter and tents, but the whitecaps had dissipated.

play mind games to motivate myself on crossings like this, daydreaming of just about anything other than the tortuous stroke, stroke, stroke.

But we did slowly, painfully, inch forward towards the hilly shore on the far side of the bay. The lake was now quite wide, about ten kilometers, and full of islands. We used the occasional western islands to our advantage, hopping between them, then shielding ourselves in their lee.

As we reached the north end of Nueltin, we finally turned slightly southeast, the wind now predominantly at our backs. Surfing the surge, big rollers moving faster than us would lift the stern, the water almost reaching the gunnels, then the boat would slide uneasily down into the trough, only to be lifted by the next wave.

On the maps, there are three possible exits from Nueltin Lake. The traditional outlet is the most southern, the one that Oberholtzer and Mowat/Schweder took. Both almost met with disaster. Well, after reading of their ordeals and having the luxury of an intricate topo map, as well as looking at satellite images while preparing for the trip, we had decided to take the most northern outlet. Reaching the large island that splits the two uppermost outlet channels, we made camp.

"Rectangular Rock," offering a good view of the lake.

After setting up camp, we eagerly walked downriver to scout the upcoming rapids before the river hit Seal Hole Lake. I think Curt was excited as he "smelled" whitewater. We walked about two kilometers, surveying two sets of rapids that looked like they would be fun to run. We could see a third set in the distance that looked slightly more menacing.

We strolled together back to Lee's turkey dinner with stuffing, indeed piggishly stuffing ourselves. Interestingly, when I got back home and re-read Mowat's book, at the same point on his voyage, he and Charles Schweder "made gluttons of ourselves, perhaps stimulated by the instinct that impels soldiers to eat, drink and make merry to excess the night before going into battle," as they too wondered how they would fare in the upcoming rapids.

To bed at 10 p.m., exhausted.

Sunday, July 9th, 2017
Finally on the Thlewiaza!

We skipped breakfast as we were eager to run the upcoming rapids. Out came the spray decks for the first time. To me, lacing a spray deck on a canoe for the first time on a trip has an almost warrior feel – as if we are donning armour, anticipating an impending battle.

This feeling is usually mixed in with the trepidation of the unknown – yes, we are about to engage in a battle with upcoming rapids, unknown entities, their strength and force only to be guessed. So, both a warrior feeling and a knot in the stomach, a rather strange combination! I felt much relief knowing that we had Curt in the lead canoe, comforted by his experience and calm. And, as usual, I had my very competent partner in the bow, always promising to lead me to no harm.

After two rapids that were simple and fun, the third set was much trickier. Some big water flowed through a tight

Big moon rising over Nueltin Lake as the sun sets.

right bend, Curt and Lee hitting it without scouting, so we bravely followed. We paddled furiously to miss the pileup of whitewater on the left, slipping the boat sideways to the right, although I had trouble hearing Jenny's instructions in the tumult. Heart pounding, I asked her to shout louder, with her curtly replying that I should "know" what to do… Hmm. Maybe one day I will finally figure this whitewater stuff out. No matter, it was a pretty heart-in-the-mouth moment, but we made it through unscathed, feeling a mixture of elation and terror.

A few easier rapids followed, after which the river opened into Seal Hole Lake. The wind was quite brisk and coming from the northeast, into our faces once more. More whitecaps, more tough paddling. Mowat and Schweder had explored the high ridge lining the eastern edge of this lake, there experiencing "La Foule," the migration of thousands of caribou.

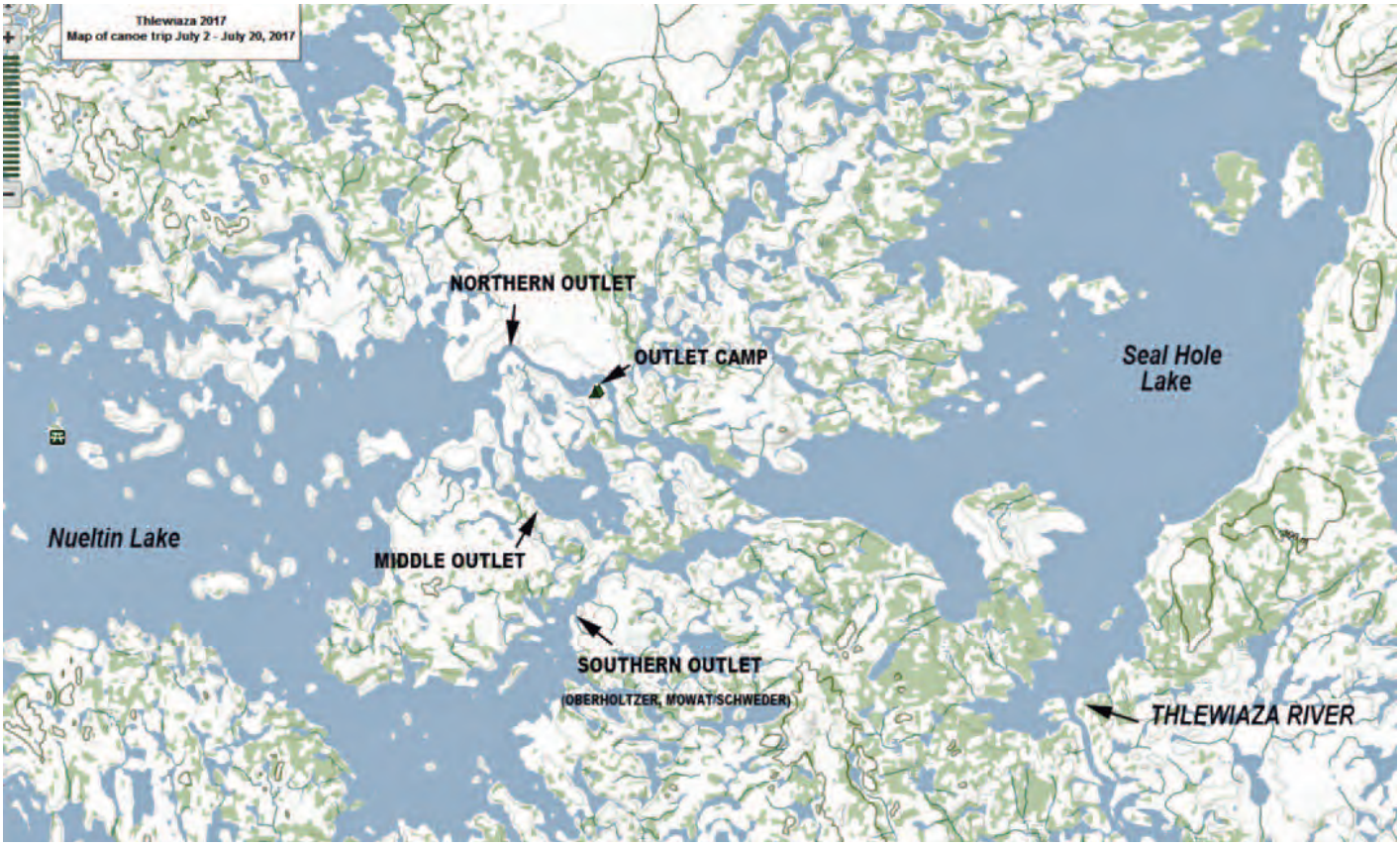
The Thlewiaza exits Seal Hole Lake from a southwestern bay. We finally reached the river, and I was amazed at how small it looked. Despite its narrowness, a big volume of water was coursing through it. This is how Farley Mowat described the start of the river: "We went ashore, climbed a hill, and there was Big River– a mighty cataract spewing over a shattered landscape with the kind of chaotic violence that might follow the collapse of a major power dam. I found it an appalling spectacle."

Right on cue, just as we left the lake, the weather broke and the sun came out. Landing on the right shore, we scouted the outlet rapids. The first section looked easy, then some really big water went right through the middle of the river, so the route was to the right, but not too much as big waves bounced off the right bank. Then it was to the far right at the bottom to miss more big stuff. But nothing as dire as the hyperbole that Mowat terrifies people with!

Back in the boats, we executed our plan to perfection. Of course, it always helps to have Curt and Lee's boat to follow. We flew quickly through the first ten kilometers of river, the water flowing fast, up to 10 kph at points. Not unlike our predecessors, who both wondered how long the river would take them south, we too felt as if we were heading back into the boreal forest rather than to the barrens! We finally stopped for a well-earned lunch on the shores of one of the little lake-like expansions.

Well fed and back on the river, we encountered a variety of runnable, boat-scoutable rapids, swift current, lazy boils, and some small lakes. An altogether pleasant paddle, especially as the weather was cooperating with a bright, clear sky replacing the murkiness of the morning.

We finally stopped to camp at a small peninsula sticking into the river before a big rapid. Curt was anxious to scout the whitewater, as was Jenny, so off they went. Lee was more interested in fishing, catching five arctic grayling which ended



Outlet Map.

Donning our "armour" – the spray decks. The riverbanks are overflowing.

up as a nice fish fry. Finally!

Before dinner, we pulled out the shotgun to practice – just in case we encountered a polar bear, which often come inland in their desperate search for food now that the ice patterns have changed on Hudson Bay, often resulting in starvation.

Monday July 10th, 2017
Seals and siksiks

After breakfast we debated how to run the difficult-looking rapid. The first part was easy enough, hugging the right shore looked safe, out of the big water in the middle. This route, though, led to a ledge, followed by some nasty canoe-trashing waves spilling around a small point. After careful consideration, Curt felt confident that we could drop over the ledge close to shore, punch the following waves, spin the canoe, front ferry into the middle of the rapid, then turn downstream and shoot the easier waves in the middle to the end of the rapid. I admitted to Jenny that I didn't feel the same confidence that Curt did. Incredulously (to me!) Curt volunteered to run our boat solo. The hooker was that he only wanted a few packs in the boat to lighten it, but this was still a better deal than a full portage, so we readily took him up on the offer. Now this should be fun to watch! He ran his boat solo first while the rest of us portaged packs to the end of the rapid. After dropping the ledge, his canoe took on a fair bit of water punching the waves, so he modified his plan on the fly and managed to get to shore right away.

After bailing, Lee joined him for the front ferry and the two did a splendid job getting to the bottom of the rapid. Then Curt went back and ran our boat solo the whole way.

I didn't feel bad at all missing out on the white water, and I think Curt really enjoyed the extra run – he deserved some fun after all the lake slogging he had just endured.

We cruised along the next 8 kilometers of river, boat scouting many runnable rapids. This led to a small lake, about 5 km long, paddling into a fair headwind, but thank God nothing like Nueltin or Seal Hole Lakes.

We spotted a few seals today, one was very curious, following us for about half an hour, constantly checking us out. After 5 p.m., we set up camp right beside the rapid. Wandering about I heard the distinctive call of siksiks. I spotted a pair on the ridge behind camp, chirping away. Siksik is the apt Inuit name for the arctic ground squirrel, the only arctic mammal that deeply hibernates in the winter – they become fully torpid, unlike bears that only become dormant. They were such cute little creatures, curiously chirping away, but quickly dove into their burrow when I approached.

Editor's Note: Part 2 of the story will be published in the next issue of *Nastawgan*.

Peninsula camp.

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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.

COVID-19 Update: Continuing Suspension of WCA In-Person Activities

The WCA has currently suspended all paddling outings scheduled for this year. This step was originally taken in light of government guidance aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19. More recently, we are encouraged by positive progress made in Ontario and across Canada; Ontario is entering "Stage 3" of its framework to restart activities across the province, with further easing of restrictions supporting public health goals. Despite this positive progress, the WCA Board continues to suspend all in-person outings, taking into account evolving public guidance on risks of COVID transmission between individuals from different households. In addition, the insurance coverage maintained by the WCA for the benefit of members and the organization overall now excludes claims relating to COVID-19 infection. For the time being, it is impossible to quantify the potential exposure of WCA members to COVID-related claims, even if the likelihood of such claims may seem remote. In addressing this issue, the WCA Board continues to consider practices of other clubs focused on canoeing and comparable activities, and has engaged in ongoing discussions with the Ontario Recreational Canoeing and Kayaking Association (ORCKA) which has a lead role with respect to the umbrella insurance policy that is available to ORCKA member-clubs such as the WCA.

The WCA Board has created a committee that will continue to work on issues relating to COVID-19 risks and practices. This committee consists of Gary Ataman, Tom Connell, Bill Ness, and Ross Pope. The committee members welcome contacts from WCA members with questions, comments, and suggestions. Anticipating the eventual resumption of WCA in-person activities (although timing is presently unknown), the WCA committee is working on an updated risk waiver, a declaration that will be required from outing participants to reduce the likelihood that any trip participants will be exposed to COVID-19, and a set of practices to further reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission among outing participants.

In the meantime, WCA members are making the best of the situation. We have had a number of very successful on-line virtual events covering canoe trip routes and skills such as trip preparation, wilderness navigations, and ultralight camping. Please let us know if there is a topic you would like addressed in one of these sessions, or if you would like to present a particular topic.

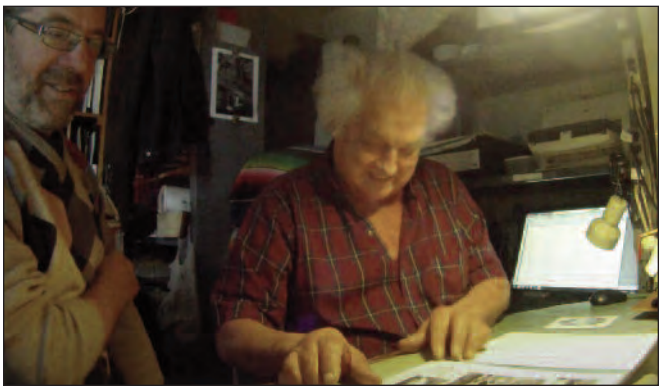
In addition, WCA members are still venturing out on the water, but with more of an emphasis on groups of family members or close acquaintances. We hope that WCA members will share any effective practices they identify to uphold physical distancing guidelines in the course of a paddling outing.

On behalf of the WCA, we wish continuing good health to all members, and look forward to getting together on the water whenever that may be.

WCA Board

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!



Toni Harting, famous and best-ever *Nastawgan* Editor trying to impart words of editorial wisdom to Aleks Gusev. I often feel that Toni's having quite a few laughs at my expense! Photo was taken in November 2011.

Paddling in the Algonquin Provincial Park in November

Story and photos by Neil E. Miller and Brian Prodin

We saw the cobalt grey wall approaching but we weren't sure what it was. Our assumption was rain but we'd left the shore wearing full rain gear so we weren't unduly anxious. Canoe Lake had been very calm until we approached the small cluster of islands that made up Camp Wapomeo, a summer camp for girls. The wall caught us fast and within seconds a snow squall of pelting wet snow and winds gusting to 20 knots engulfed us. We paddled as hard as we could in our solo boats, angling our bows to quarter into the squall line. Visibility was no more than 3 meters beyond the front of the canoe. After 15 minutes of furious paddling it passed, the sky cleared, the wind dropped to a pleasantly light breeze and we were through it. It didn't last: the next squall overpowered us and drove us to the western shore. We were close to the Tom Thomson Memorial Cairn when it overran us.

Like the first squall, it lasted only 15 minutes and then the sky cleared and the sun came out. This was all within the first hour-and-a-half of our trip to Littledoe Lake in November of 2019. We referred to this weather as hypothermia weather. Chilled to the core, temperatures hovering around 0° C, and frequent wet snow and driving rain would make this one of the more challenging trips in our annual custom of November paddles in Algonquin Provincial Park.

The year before, we started even later in November and drove into the Rain Lake Access planning to complete a three-day loop through Cranebill and Islet Lakes. Unfortunately, with the exception of a narrow channel running down the center of the lake, Rain Lake was frozen shore to shore. Preparation being the key to success in managing the variable November weather in Northern Ontario, we always brought backpacks and related hiking gear (including snow shoes), because we just never knew what would be in store for us that late in the season. We needed to have options. This canoe trip turned into a winter backpack trip on the Western Uplands Trail which runs along the southeastern shore of Rain Lake, with the trailhead at Rain Lake Access. Planning for alternatives, and being prepared with the essentials for those alternatives, makes it possible to take advantage of the quiet solitude that the lack of people provides in the late season.

This solitude is the key factor regarding a November paddle in the park. We had been making these November paddles since 2003 with the occasional hiatus when we paddled some other Northern Ontario area or during the 3 years of what has been called "The Great Recession." The central point is that if a paddler wanted to go into a place that is completely remote (no people – none), challenging in terms of skill and ability and, for many, close to home, then the provincial park sits there huge and empty in November. As an outfitter once whispered to us as we were putting into a tributary in the Moose River basin, "There's nobody in front of you and nobody coming in behind you. Go easy in there." This is the mantra of a November paddle within the big park.

Of the nine November trips we made since 2003, the average high was 6°C and the average low was -3.5°C. On one day in 2005, the temperature hit 16°C and in 2003 the night before we nearly got caught in ice-up, the temperature dropped to -11°C and we struggled to get out of the park, nearly getting caught in ice-up.

In the 2003 paddle as we crossed Daisy Lake just before we took out for the night, we noticed that the lake was full of swirling ice crystals. Every sign on that trip was trying to tell us something that we just didn't want to see. The drive into Access #3 alone involved two blowdowns and one flooded road.

This was our first November paddle and so we pressed on. At the campfire that night after dinner as we finished our wine, we held a discussion of how ice forms. We were thinking about all those swirling crystals in the lake. The next morning Neil was up first and was prepping the stove to make the coffee when he happened to glance down at the lake. "Brian," he called out. "The lake is frozen." We destroyed a perfectly good otter-tail paddle cutting a path through the 3 cm of ice over to the portage to Ralph Bice Lake and fortunately Bice was deep enough and windy enough that it hadn't frozen in the plummeting overnight temperatures.

Four out of the nine trips saw daytime temperatures that ranged between 8°C to 16°C. These were April-in-November days, with partly sunny skies, relatively dry portage trails, and no black flies. The night-time temperatures still fell to around or even below freezing, but paddling and portaging on these temperate days was awesome and the big park was all ours.

On our third day in 2011 the wind was calm, the sun was out and the temperature rose to 8°C by mid-day. We still

Cutting the channel.

Waiting out the squall.

wore gloves while paddling but there were no cold hands or feet. We were actually concerned that we were going to get sunburned on our faces because one of the items we both left behind was sunscreen.

In 2015 we were making a loop trip out of Magnetawan Lake to Little Misty and returning through Little Trout Lake. The daytime temperatures went as high as 8°C but the afternoon was punctuated by intermittent showers. On the morning of our last day we experienced similar temperatures with light wind out of the west-southwest. In early afternoon the temperature began to drop, the rain returned, and the wind began to veer to the northwest. The rapidly falling temperature indicated that the rain would be short lived to be replaced by freezing to subfreezing weather.

On Little Misty Lake in 2006, clearing morning clouds gave way to bright clear skies warming the afternoon high temperature to 13°C. The mammals in the park must have known that it was going to be a perfect fall day. As we entered the Petawawa River, an entire family of river otters set up a cacophony of chatter in our direction. It sounded like they were angry at us for disturbing their morning. Once we departed the river for the 805-meter portage to Moccasin Lake we encountered well-defined bear footprints that were fresh that morning. It looked as though the bear had followed the trail for about a hundred meters and then went off to the left of the trail, breaking a few saplings as it made its way through the underbrush. We never met the prints' owner, but relished the knowledge that the bear had been close by.

The November 2019 paddle was shaping up to be one of our more challenging winter canoe trips. We had started out for the familiar lakes out of Access #3 but the snow-covered road to Magnetawan had no tire tracks. The snow was deep enough that Neil's car was bottoming out. Concerned that we would get trapped on the wrong side of an unmaintained road, 35 kilometers from the nearest civilization, we made a snap call to change our plans. We decided on Access #5, Canoe Lake, because the parking lot was right off of Highway 60 and would be maintained.

The temperatures had been holding between 1°C and 2°C and though we expected these temps to rise, they never did. We passed through two more snow squalls before we took a campsite on the northwest shore of Little Joe Lake. The temperature never changed but there was no precipitation in any form and we built a roaring fire and passed a most pleasant evening. Over the years we had many of these remarkable nights. Some were colder and some were warmer but they were all memorable.

On this night, however, the weather wasn't to hold. At 10 p.m. the rains came in the form of a cold drizzle at first; then, they fell steadier and heavier. We suited into our raingear but as the rainfall grew in intensity, we retired into the tent. All night, the precipitation continued sometimes as rain and other times as sleet. We could hear the difference as it fell against the tent's rainfly.

We both woke up early – it was still dark and it was still raining. Temperatures continued to hover around freezing and everything inside the tent was damp. We began the process of stowing gear, deflating mattresses and stuffing sleeping bags. Around 9:15 we got a break from the weather as it lightened to only drizzle and mist. We took advantage of this to make coffee while, maybe a little too slowly, stowing gear into our dry bags. What we should have done is to quickly drop and stow the tent, because we were still stowing our gear when the rain came back, much heavier than before.

Throughout these late fall and early winter trips we have learned that if you had to have precipitation, the best form was frozen: snow. You shake the tent and all the snow falls off. The same is true for other gear left out in the night. But when it's rain, everything gets wet and stays wet. Nothing dries when the relative humidity is near 100% and the temperatures are hovering just above freezing. Admittedly, this is the most dangerous weather requiring proper gear, proper attitudes, and the skill and experience to make sound decisions about the true nature of the situation. You can't have one without the other. It is a true symbiotic relationship requiring an application of all of these interrelated factors.

We had to put our gear away damp and our tent away wet. We had cut-down construction bags for that purpose but it all added weight to our gear with the longest portage coming up. This was the 1,140-meter portage over to Littledoe Lake. Throughout these fall trips we have had every conceivable portage experience from perfectly dry, to covered in snow, frozen with ice or morphed into a stream course from the rain.

The portage between Baby Joe and Littledoe Lakes was snow-covered on the planks that crossed the marshes and was a muddy quagmire in the depressions. The trails up and down from the high spots were wet or icy with water flowing in the pathway. Because of the persistent rain we kept our cameras under wraps. By the time we had made two trips with gear and canoe, night was falling. We paddled out to the first campsite on the lake but it was too exposed so we chose the next site. By now it was dark and still raining. There was no fire on this night and for that matter no dinner. We ate our snack foods and trail mix inside the tent and made the relatively easy decision to end the trip on the morrow. Not taking time for dinner and a glass of wine or bourbon is a very unusual occurrence for us. In our more than 20 years of paddling this was only the second occurrence. Even 14-hour paddling days in the bright days of summer doesn't find us too exhausted to enjoy a drink and conversation at the end of the day.

This would become only the second trip in November that we would abort because of rain, snow, and the persistent deep-body chill that makes one fear that hypothermia is near. In 2015, the rain and (occasional) sleet was continuous. They were showers when we shoved off into Magnetawan Lake but they only grew worse. On our camp in Little Misty Lake we stood around in our raingear as the full force of a front rolled through. Our tent wasn't up yet. The next morning we decided we had to shorten the trip and head in; although, we still followed our planned loop trip through Little Trout and Ralph Bice Lakes. We just moved a lot faster even though in the morning the temperature climbed and the rain held off. The temperatures were predicted to fall and with everything wet, this would set up real danger. As we approached the lonely island in the east end of Little Trout Lake, the rain had diminished to a misty drizzle. This was not to last, however. As we were crossing Bice, heavy rain returned, the temperature was dropping and we were totally saturated.

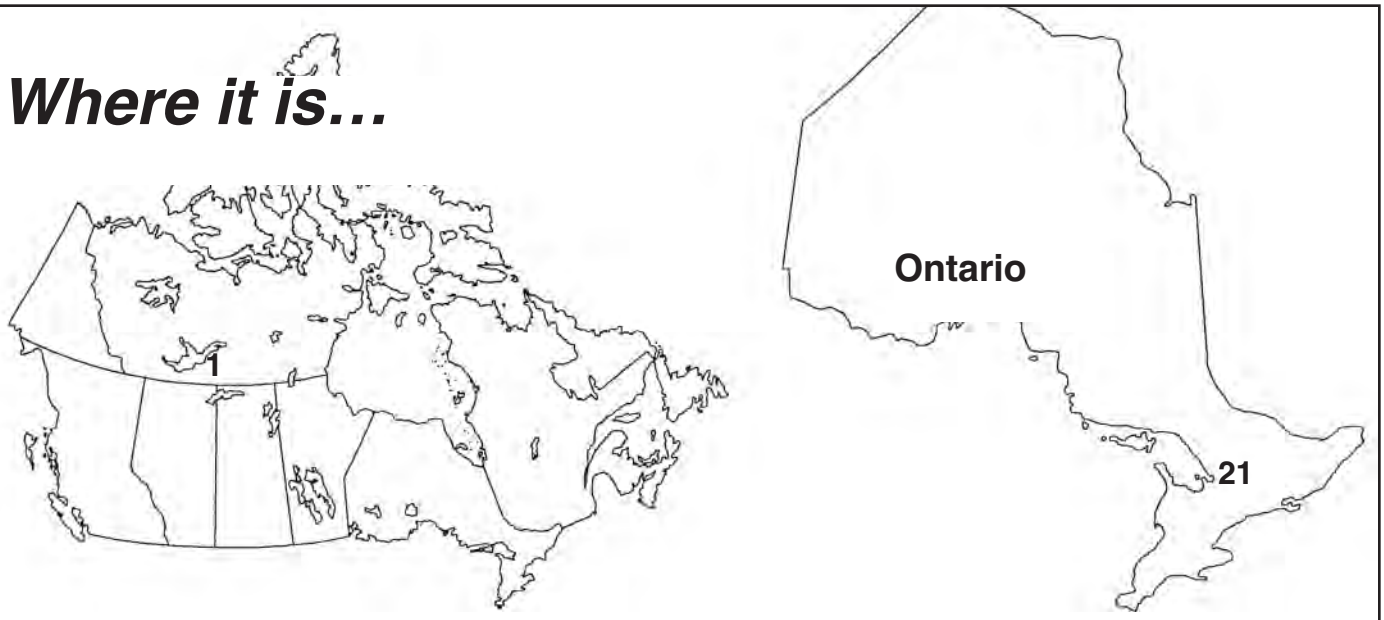
November paddling causes a lot of clothing changes in terms of shedding or adding clothing. Our outer barrier is generally rain jacket and rain pants. Under that we have layers of fleece, synthetic insulation or down. The precipitation of November 2015 caused a complete failure of Neil's 8-year-old raingear. When he returned home, he put it out with the trash. His newer raingear stood up admirably in 2019 and given the temperature never wavering much from freezing, he was fortunate that it did.

Forgot the sunscreen.

There should be no question that to enjoy the true romance of the big park in November, the paddler must be prepared for all weather eventualities. We have encountered almost everything nature could present us with and aside from being prepared in terms of gear, we have always had a clear head about where we were. The advantage of selecting the Canoe Lake loop in November 2019 was that we would never be more than five hours away from the take-out. Developing alternatives, being prepared with the appropriate equipment, and having the knowledge and experience to use each in conjunction with the other was a crucial part of the change in our tripping plans. Staying flexible allowed us to enjoy one more November trip into the big park. Go easy in there – but go. We will certainly be back.

The comfort of a roaring campfire.

Where it is…



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