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NASTAWGAN

The Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association

SUMMER 2022

wilderness canoe association

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End of a Portage at the Maze Rapids

The Kattawagami River – A Best Kept Secret Shared

Story by Iori Miller

"Why I went there no longer matters; what I found there is the subject of this..." (Edward Abbey)

I'm not the most terrific storyteller. Yet, I feel compelled to share what happened on my paddle of the Kattawagami River that July before Covid. I had heard of this great whitewater river that spills off the Canadian Shield into James Bay, and so when the trip was posted on the WCA website I asked to join it. I will attempt to describe the details of the journey and maybe some of what I lost there. Was it some innocence? Was it my naivité? I will try to wrestle a bit of a tale for you, the reader, the earnest wilderness paddler, but I forewarn there's another voice at play than mine.

I know I should list the cast of characters in this play, so I'll give you that. But no more. I won't apologize for this, as this story isn't about the who but more about the where. It's about the stage upon which the story is set. This is as far as I'll go: Chad (Washington DC) was paddling solo in a sea kayak (yes I know, in

Day 1: The author, and the Kiwi Canoe

whitewater, go figure), Yiu Yin (PHD Psych student, Windsor U.) and me in one really old yellow Mad River canoe, Robin and Hermione (married Kiwis) in a newish red Swift canoe, and lastly two friends named Emily and May (Deep River, Ottawa Valley) in a much older red canoe. An interesting paddling collective; opportunity often creates connections.

It was a helter skelter spring; a long relationship had recently gone aground for me. I needed a backcountry trip to clear my mind of all the noise so I could better hear myself again. As Thoreau said, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." But honestly, I just needed to paddle some awesome rapids and sleep under the stars, or rain, or whatever.

The story begins at the Northern Adventure Inn near Cochrane, Ontario where I found myself negotiating with six people over what gear to bring. Why does organizing a trip feel stupidly last minute sometimes? It was late in June. Hopefully the bugs won't be bad!? The black flies in the black spruce forests can sometimes carry you away, drop by drop, at this time of year. Everyone sounds pretty confident and fairly experienced with white water, but I have my doubts about that sea kayak. I've heard this river has some serious drops! One of our paddlers says she paddled pretty much everything on this river many years ago. Hmmmm? Doubt it. That doesn't sound like the river I've read about. Canoes and serious drops? While my thoughts consider that, I begin to hear a voice in my head saying, ***Wait until you see how many boats I've taken from the tourists.*** Normally I just say to myself, "go with the flow, dodge the rocks", but I've heard this river takes no prisoners.

Day 1

After a 2-hour shuttle north on the Detour Mine Road we put in on Kattawagami Lake, the river's headwaters, at about noon. Once on the river, the current appears non-existent and the water is warm, as most of it begins in shallow lakes and ponds from the upper reaches of this river. As we paddle, we are expecting mostly C1s and a few C2s today. Yet already some of those C2s look seriously challenging! I am watching the kayak as it makes big turns to avoid rocks, and I anticipate some adventures with it in the more difficult rapids to come. Again, in my head, first a chuckle, and then, ***I've humbled many before you. Don't get too comfortable.*** At the end of the day, I am sad to see our first campsite is just a push in the bush. No soil to build a fire upon. And yes, the black flies here are heavy already. Fun!

Day 2

After a quick breakfast we are on the river just after 9 a.m. Today we paddle a long 38 km stretch of mostly C1s, nothing too challenging, and we feel the current slowly building. Where is all the wildlife? I've heard it said before, that when the diversity of flora drops, as it does in a black spruce forest, the diversity of fauna follows similarly. But that doesn't account for the low numbers, and we are seeing nothing!? A few birds, but little else. I came to escape the noise in my life, but the silence here is thick and unexpected.

In the late afternoon we get to the north beaches of Bayly Lake and there are a few surprises waiting for us. While paddling up to the beach we saw a small hunt cabin signed with, "No Trespassing – Property of Moose Cree First Nation."The First Peoples use this land (by flying in), everyone else is a tourist here. There also are a plethora of footprints everywhere on the beach. Bear footprints. Big ones and little ones. Mama has been taking her toddlers out in the breeze to escape the bugs. The voice again chuckles in my ear, ***What I don't take, maybe the walking spirits will. You wanted wilderness, and the wilderness wants you.*** I decide to get a fire going to cook dinner. Maybe I'll make a dessert with the reflector oven? Maybe the fire will discourage the makers of the footprints?

Day 3

We are on the water by half past 9 a.m. As we paddle out of Bayly Lake the river feels bigger now, and there is a steady recognizable current. Here I see our first wildlife sightings: a moose and an occupied osprey nest right outside of the lake. When planning for this river I learned there are three basic geographic regions we will traverse. The first is a fairly flat region with shallow lakes and ponds atop the Canadian Shield. The middle section, about 45 km, is where the river 'rapidly' drops off the shield. This is what lured me here: set after set of serious CII and

CIII+ rapids. The third section is also fairly flat, where the river spreads wide and braids as it crosses the muddy Hudson Bay Lowlands to the sea (James Bay).

Some might ask, why paddle days on end in isolated northern places far from help? I have always appreciated the simplicity of the day on a wilderness river: you wake up, eat and pack up, you spend the day gazing at scenery only a few canoes pass a year, you make camp again, then eat and sleep again. Repeat. For each of us there is also something personal about such a trip; something just between you and the river and the land it empties.

Once you've paddled a northern river you want to return again and again, like an addict to a needle, to reconnect with something personal and wild inside. It's a connection, a voice, easily forgotten, drowned out by the noise of the civilized world. It's only in the wilderness that the noise inside your head stops and you can actually hear your thoughts.

In the early afternoon I am staring down the first rapid that gives me pause on this river: Pineapple Rapid. Yiu Yin and I decide to avoid it and cautiously line the smaller channel to the left and so does the Kiwi canoe. Yet to my surprise, the Ottawa valley canoe lines up and takes it straight on! The next drop is bigger still, Eddy Hop Rapids, and again my partner and I avoid running the main flow by lining our boat. It's obvious we have now begun our descent from the Canadian Shield. A few kilometers farther on, at day's end, we camp on a rocky peninsula sticking out into the river. Today we paddled 10 km less than yesterday and all are still dry. No spills yet. That little voice chides, Hey tourist, you came to conquer the river … your plastic boat is made for this … show me your moves! As you said, 'go with the flow and dodge the rocks!' I realize it is right. My partner and I have begun the river overly cautious.

Day 4

I know we are in the thick of the Kattawagami's charm now. With the plateau behind us, the river has begun to tumble off the Canadian Shield. At 8:30 a.m. we begin to take a succession of rapids, all with interesting names: Little Spruce, Big Spruce, The Snout, and Adrienne Falls. With more bravado we run most of the early stuff, but when coming up on The Snout I can see the river takes a hard left in front of a pile of boulders. Spring floods have knocked away all the soil, leaving these boulders piled high like a purposefully constructed wall. No one suggests running the irregular convulsion of waves squeezing through the tight narrowing of the river right after the bend. The 'Snout' is plain to see. Knowing we are portaging this, I grab my canoe first and start to move boulder to boulder, carefully picking my way over to the calmer waters

A beautiful day to begin a paddle on the Canadian Shield

Camp One – a 'Push in the Bush'

The Ottawa boat in a CII – Day 3

below as I leave the group behind me.

Suddenly a whistle! Dropping the boat and running back, I see someone alone in the water and floating towards the bend of the Snout. Unprepared, I don't have a throw rope! Fortunately, just at the last minute, she recovers and pulls herself out onto one of the boulders. My heart is pounding in my chest. Again, that voice, ***Are you sure you're prepared for this? Slow down. Why always the rush?*** I acknowledge to myself, a wilderness white water river is not forgiving. Generally I think of rivers as benign elements, nurturing, as something I should protect like family. Yet they will take a life in a second. Another smirking chuckle. ***Now you're thinking. I am not your friend.*** Note to myself: I need to stop rushing and stick with the group on a portage.

After finishing 22 km we carefully pulled out on river-left, at the top of Adrienne Falls. I see it's a succession of irregular drops into small pools, each drop unforgiving for a canoe. What beauty though! It's a kayaker's wet dream. No place has been more scenic up to this point! While there is enough flat space to camp right by the falls, there's a few more bugs than expected. Checking the sky we hustle to get our tents up … it's day 4 and now our first rain shower!

Day 5

A reasonably early start; 8:30 a.m. on the water. The Kattawagami began with some long stretches of Cls and Clls while we were atop the Shield, and that was a lot of fun, and now we're running some of the bigger stuff. Yet I have this feeling that other than the spill at The Snout, everything has been too easy. You know that feeling? Like something is imminent. Yet when you snap a quick look behind, it's just a monotonous wall of black spruce. I stop to listen intently, still feeling we aren't alone, but all I hear is a slight wind and the rush of the water.

Without much warning in the early morning light, the Ottawa boat suddenly slips sideways hard against a rock in a simple CII and its paddlers forget to lean down river. All its contents are immediately spilled into the flow, including someone's PFD. My boat races ahead of the flotsam and finds a convenient place, about a half km down river, where the flow funnels and we can retrieve most everything. When done, we wait patiently for over an hour before the other boats come around the bend above us.

The top of The Maze Rapids – Notice the Burn!

The Ottawa boat looks no worse for wear but now holds two humbled passengers and only one PFD. The not-so-friendly voice muttered, ***I thought I had 'em. Look at that one without her life jacket! Easy pickings! Too confident! Aw there's still time yet…*** As they pulled up beside our boat, we handed back all their stuff: personal packs, a food barrel, water bottles, their extra paddle, a map set, and a few articles of clothing that had been loose in the boat. So much for having everything tied in eh? It's easy to lose stuff when you spill. ***All that small stuff just gets lost and adds to the plastic crap you tourists always think is somebody else's fault.***

I can't deny some of the truth in this, but I answer, "Do only a few canoeists really do much harm? What about the miners, fishermen, loggers, and even the indigenous peoples that leave the landscape strewn with wastes?!" ***Yes, first it was only you white folk, but now the ones before you have adopted your ways too. All the balance is gone. It's time for someone to pay.***

By lunchtime, we are at Maze Rapids. Wow, confusing! Islands abound and the river's main channel is lost amongst them. Everywhere are signs of a fire that burned through here not so long ago. It feels a bit surreal, and desolate. Here is the dangerous reality of the boreal forest cycles. ***The creator giveth with one hand and taketh with the other. Stay outta the way and you'll be fine.*** We finish our lunch and depart after a longish portage down the open slope of a big island.

As we exit the Maze we notice a smoke plume close and to the southwest. Fortunately, the wind favours the safety of our northerly direction; we see the smoke but never smell it. An hour later it was behind and gone as if it never was.

In the afternoon, first Terrace Falls, then Chad breaks a kayak paddle at Driftwood Rapids, and after, we reach Quimby Rapids. In order to get through the mess that is Quimby, we are often in and out of the boat, half lining, half walking. Gaining in confidence we take a clear fast run around a big boulder at what I thought was the end of the rapid. We screamed into a small pool that flows over a rocky drop with no room to slip through! There's no time to reconsider our speed, and for the first time Yiu Yin and I dunk; our egos are injured but soothed with laughter. This time the Ottawa Valley boat gathers us back together. With all our little stuff clipped in,

The river shows off its bounty

The top of Arrow Chute

only our few packs scattered and so in no time we were all back in our boat no worse for wear. The rest of the afternoon went well but for a small capsize of the Ottawa Valley folk at the end of the day. Today was undeniably our most interesting, and humbling, so far. We camped at Raindrop Falls at 6:30 p.m. – only 13.5 km downriver from this morning!

Day 6

A later start today. Swift Finger, The Box, The Slide, Jackpine Falls, Peace Falls … we are moving faster now. We move efficiently and steadily forward, sometimes lining, sometimes running the more difficult rapids. The Kattawagami is a steady succession of drops at this point. While scouting the rapid you're on you can see the last one just a km behind, and also the next one a km ahead. This river is a classic, and great fun! We see no other paddlers but find a few battered

hulls abandoned along the way. At one point today, we find two Camp Wanapitei canoes pulled up on the west bank beside a long CII. They are damaged beyond use and abandoned long ago. What happened to this group?

Generally, there are very few portages cut as you can line or carry over the rocks beside each rapid. It's slow going at this point, but gloriously beautiful with blue skies and white puffy clouds almost every day. Tonight we find our campsite high on a rocky promontory just below The Needle, a point where the river tightly narrows for a stretch. Later, while settling in to make dinner, I notice a beautiful red sky to the west and one could look directly into the sun. Somewhere there's a forest afire, and it's creating a filter for our view of the sun's intense rays. With no radio to inform, we interpret what we see as best we can.

Camping high above The Needle

Day 7

Leaving before 9 a.m., we approached the island maze on river-left that is Arrow Rapids. About 15 years ago, Doug Weekes, an American, paddled the river solo and narrowly escaped death here. He flipped in these rapids and floated down river, and a half km later was flushed mightily through Arrow Chutes. Climbing intact and somewhat alive onto the west shore, he espied his canoe floating right side up with all his gear in an eddy above the chutes. On the east side! Alone and with no canoe, Weekes had to signal for a helicopter rescue (expensive!), as that was as far as the Kattawagami let him go. Again, I heard that raspy chuckle in my head as I looked carefully for a safe route around the west side of Arrow Rapids. I found myself marveling at the almost scarlet hues in the syenitic rocks here. Hard, sharp clefts in the broken rock allow the water's passage yet threaten to eat even a royalex canoe. ***Then best you portage like all the gentler folk who lived here first. Tourist, pay attention to past wisdoms learned and maybe YOU won't need to be rescued!*** In the days when only native peoples passed these waters no one paddled white-water. Today's technology allows paddlers to attempt some rapids (Royalex beats Birch Bark any day), but often the river still triumphs and takes a boat. I found myself listening more respectfully to that voice in my ear. After this, Lover's Leap, Lost Wannigan Falls, The Autobahn (a long straight, but safe, fun run!), and then we made camp at Frog Song Falls. A whole 5.6 km today!? Frog Song is to be our home for two nights; it's a beautiful set of rapids wrapping around an island, and a welcome respite from the river's now continuous white-water.

On the second night at Frog Song, while making dinner, a solitary Canada goose gosling appeared and ran circles around us while plaintively bleating about its loneliness. Strange. So little wildlife, and now this poor hungry bird

Where did all the water go? Paddling becomes Hiking

Our paddling is over. Last day on the river; getting a shuttle to Moose Factory in freighter canoes

with no adult to feed it! We put a few small piles of cornmeal out for it away from the campfire. Finally, some wildlife, but this left me with a real twinge of sadness. Its parents gone; would wolves get it?

Day 9

Today we are going to finish the last of the drop off the shield rocks before entering the Hudson Bay Lowlands. First The Devil (not as bad as its reputation), and then we ran Bill and Jane easily (although I had to shove hard off a rock using my paddle like a spear to avoid having our bow smashed flat like a nail head). Here the Kiwis showed that they too could invert, and they with the group's only spray deck. There was a short but scary moment when one of the Kiwis almost floated into the next rapid!

I had begun to be quite impressed with Chad's ability to keep his kayak afloat through serious drops. Our last serious rapids on the Kattawagami came just before lunch. We all scouted, from our boats, the beginning of a fun 200 m CII, aware that our trip notes indicated it terminates with The Finale, a CIII technical wave that will be the last challenging element on our descent of the river. The first part went well. But where was that Finale? ***I'll have you now, just one slip! Show me why you came here Shaganash!*** At this point on the river, full of confidence, the voice was faint in the background.

At the final corner of the CII we saw it, and Yiu Yin and I jumped ashore to scout it. In this midsummer water level, we saw it's a sharp hook left with a strong pushy wave against the far rocky riverbank. Definitely not for an open boat. Again, that shrill whistle from upriver! Turning around I see Chad in the kayak still in the CII, but he is caught in the main current coming up fast upon the CIII, with no room to manoeuvre. People immediately pull out throw bags, and I jumped into the water up to my knees at the river's edge. Chad, realizing the imminent peril ahead, smartly throws himself sideways into a wet exit. His first on the Kattawagami. Fortunately, he was able to get to the shore with the help of a throw rope in one hand, and his kayak's bow handle in the other. For a sea kayak, a hard turn in a fast current is near impossible. This was worthy of a wet exit! The chuckle in my head was a soundtrack for a movie clip: I saw the arm of a slot machine being pulled … and it was all lemons coming up. ***No harm or lost boats this time round Shaganash. Skill? Luck? Overconfidence will bite you in the ass if you take me for granted, tourist.*** Maybe we should have scouted this from the shore?

After our escape at The Finale I noticed the whole look of the river changed. Gone were the rocky riverbanks. They became sandier and more cut by spring floods. At only 11.5 km from Frog Song rapids we decided as a group to camp on the pebbly beach of an island midriver. The damn mosquitoes rose to meet us from its grasses, but at least the ground was firm and flat. I already felt nostalgic expecting ahead two days of flat paddling to the sea.

Day 10

Shallow swifts, river braids; we are now on the Hudson Bay Lowlands. Just before noon a lonely woodland caribou trotted towards us on the west bank of the river and didn't even give us a second look. I lamented it was the only one of his kind we saw on the whole trip. ***You think as soon as you leave your highways that the wildlife will be thick about you? Stupid tourist! Stay a winter or two here and really know the north. Those before you often starved as the wildlife is smart and wary! Still, there was more before you came with your gold mining and chainsaws.*** After our near miss at the Finale, the voice was loud and ever present again – a narrative to the movie my mind was making of the Kattawagami.

To finish the trip, all we now need to do is paddle to the confluence of the Kattawagami with the Kesagami, and then follow the remainder of that river to where it meets the Harricana River — just before the latter empties into James Bay. Then we'll paddle an hour or so up that river to the native owned Washow Eco-Lodge to meet our shuttle connection. However, for the second time today we were lucky; we hit the tide's cycle at the absolute right time, and after a 54 km day we caught it as it turned and rode it up to the lodge by 7 p.m. A day early! Tomorrow, then, is easy, we will be ferried by large freighter boats to Moose Factory, where we will catch the Polar Bear Express

train … our connection back to our cars in Cochrane. In the end I felt sad that the Kattawagami paddle is over.

More than a year has passed and as I finally transcribe my reverie ….
Yes, I paddle wild rivers to live a few days deliberately, as Thoreau would say. I prefer those in the north because I want to experience nature and wilderness in its raw and unadulterated form. Yet, I had to talk myself into sharing my story here. ***What's up Shaganash? You having second thoughts? You want to tell everyone about my Kattawagami, one of the best white-water rivers and best kept secrets in the north? You will just bring more to spoil further a river hardly heard of!***

That voice which again invades my thoughts tells me I'm no better than any of you reading this, because you too will now want to go where, truthfully, we are not welcome, or pampered, by the wild nature that struggles to survive despite us. I was greeted by a solo osprey, a single moose, a single woodland caribou and a lonely gosling with no mother. Mostly a lot of empty space with very little to fill it. Some people in the resource industries go there and see nothing but bugs and spruce trees, and don't see any value in keeping things as they've always been. From the ancient accounts of fur traders, it barely resembles what it was before Europeans arrived. For comparison, a summer canoe trip in Algonquin requires the patience of rush hour driving as you queue up for the portages. For a canoeist, the far north is like a black hole, its silence pulling us ever into it. It's still the best remaining wilderness, and I don't want to tarnish it further.

I find myself arguing with myself here; "We record the stories of our canoe trips to celebrate and share the experience with others. We respect these waters, and only a few will come because of what I write here." ***Tell that to the disappearing caribou, and all that used to live in balance here. Maybe, Shaganash, you should just shut up and leave my river out of your stories? The less who know the better.*** Once again, I don't get the last word.

"There is something of the sublime in feeling trivial in the realm of great landscapes. It is truly the only place you can actually sense your consignment in the greater portrait of life." (Hap Wilson)

The Paddle Crew at the put-in at Kattawagami Lake

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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 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.

Rivers of the Upper Ottawa Valley by Hap Wilson

Review by Matthew Eberly

The following review specifically concerns the Dumoine River guide section of Rivers of the Upper Ottawa Valley by Hap Wilson. Publisher: Boston Mills Press; Revised edition (May 6, 2004)

According to Hap Wilson's website, *Rivers of the Upper Ottawa Valley* was first published as a single river guide for the Dumoine River in 1986. The contents of the current book suggest that for the most part, the original material was largely unmodified and simply reformatted for the new layout. In addition to the sprinkling of topical history, a linear story line to describe the trip experience, useful logistical, technical, and practical details, the description of the Dumoine itself remains a useful working guide for the river. From Bridge Rapids to Bowman's Portage over 64 kilometres, 31 rapids are numbered and labelled, most with meaningful names. Twenty illustrations describe those which can be run by canoe, and otherwise, many swifts and falls are provided only with locations and suitable warning. The overview maps probably benefited from the availability of government survey information or overflight photos. However, it is clear that Hap originally drew his rapid illustrations in the field, during an era still reliant on typewriters, from the perspective of someone travelling downriver by canoe. Characterizing the flow of water down an irregular hill is challenging in concept, yet the illustrations are functional and reliable. Scales vary widely, as two boxes of roughly the same size on the page describe rapids that are 100 metres and also ten times as long. This is suitable because the complexity of the drawings are in keeping with the scale, such that Red Pine Rapids is given almost an entire page for its highly detailed description in five parts. The art is well thought out, with simplifications appropriate to the application. Individual rocks, larger examples, and gravel bars are marked in one of two sizes of asterisk. Larger boulders and sculptured formations are drawn in identifiable shapes. Ledge lines, tongues, and wave trains are drawn in an illustrator's style. Obvious and suggested deep water routes are marked with red arrows. The effect is consistently useful, regardless of water levels. Features significant to the paddler experienced at river reading are readily identifiable without being impractically specific. At Big Steel the guide can tell you to follow the waves along river right, but it cannot tell you exactly where the hole is. Actual scouting remains necessary. It is also apparent that some of the drawings have been made at specific water levels. When the river is flowing at other conditions, some features are more difficult to find. For example, at Double Choice only one of these two rocks are visible, and though the graphic suggests the current will carry a tandem to the left, paddling directly down the right side is no problem even in low water. Still, large features are clear and easy to identify. The sculptured rocks at Tight 'round the Bend make it obvious which rapid this is. Ultimately that is the point of the guide. On the occasion of encountering a rapid of at least Class two, the reader will know which one it is, and be able to find themselves on the map.

Hap Wilson graciously provided several clarifications:

1. First single river guide published in 1987.
2. Updated "rivers" guidebook published in 1993 and again in 2004 to expand available routes to take pressure off the Dumoine River. There were 500 flights a year being flown by Bradley and the Dumoine was showing overuse. Remember, my guides were published first and foremost for environmental purposes.
3. I didn't use government maps, information or overflights (typically all inaccurate as base material). It was all done during several in-field trips to gauge AVERAGE water levels only, and to indicate the importance of low and high water portage locations. The water level information in the book clearly points out the differences my diagrams are during extreme high or low water levels.
4. There is no hole at Big Steel Rapids and the diagram illustrates a sideslip or downstream ferry left to avoid a boulder ledge (near top of rapids before it straightens out into a long CI) that is more defined during low water.

WCA Fall Gathering 2022

We are pleased to announce that our traditional Fall Gathering will resume this September after a 2 year forced hiatus due to the pandemic. As our most recent 2019 Gathering at the Minden Whitewater Reserve outside of Haliburton was a huge success, we felt it would be fitting to return there again this year.The area provides, in addition to challenging whitewater canoeing on-site, great local opportunities for easy river and lake paddling as well as hiking.We have booked the facilities for the weekend of **September 23-25**. So, circle that weekend on your calendar. Program details will follow.

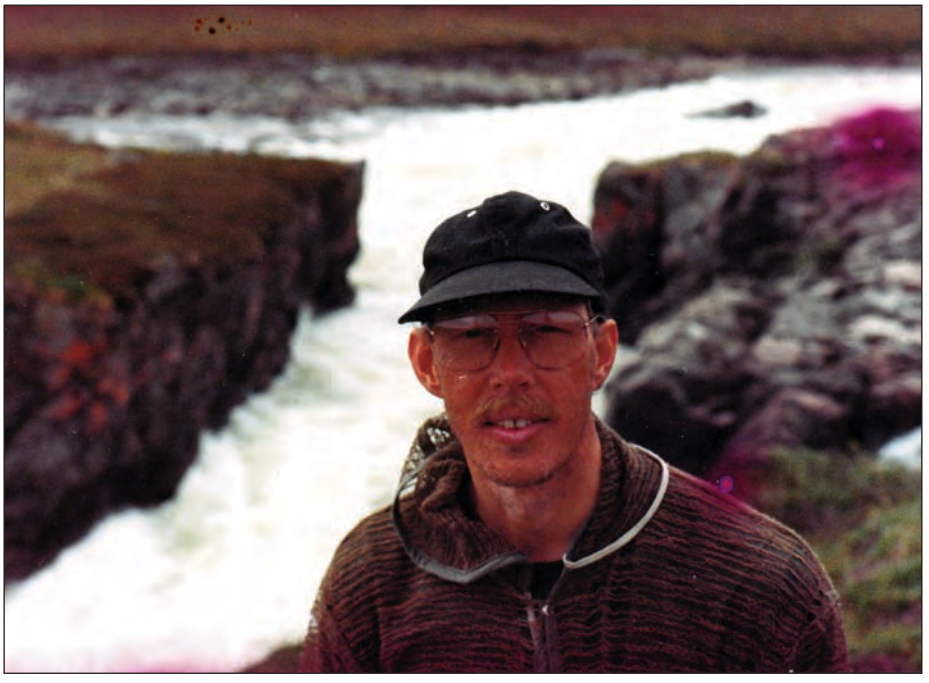
My Favourite Photographs

By Reg McGuire

I've been a WCA member for about 50 years, have always loved the organization and have had a half dozen or so articles published in the Journal. In the Winter 2021 *Nastawgan* you asked for favourite pictures of our trips to be sent to you and I've picked a couple of my favourites based on stories in the latest *Nastawgan*. The first came to mind when reading A Winter Ski Crossing of Algonquin Park. The first picture I'm sending is from 1978 and was taken on Smoke Lake in Algonquin Park. My brother Dan, friend Henry Pasila and I camped in the winter in the park on several occasions in the 1970s and 1980s. However, we had easier traveling than the ski trip authors because for the first few trips we made in the park we used the motive power of a dog team. Dan owned Chimo, a large Siberian Husky who was well trained and was our lead dog, and we borrowed Arco, Benny, Sandy and another dog whose name I can't now remember in exchange for pictures we gave the owners of their dogs in harness in the bush. The first few hours of these trips were always an adventure of tangled harness until the team got organized and sorted out. Later we manually hauled toboggans in the park and certainly missed having the help, and companionship, of the dogs.

Smoke Lake, Algonquin Park

The other two pictures relate to the article "More on Kazan Falls Cairn", also in the Winter 2021 *Nastawgan*, and were taken on the Kazan River in 1981. One shows Henry Pasila standing at Kazan Falls. Our article on this trip was published in the WCA's *Wilderness Canoeist*



Kazan Falls

Typical Load

Cessna 185 in Yathkyed Lake

in the Fall 1981 edition. The picture is blurry because the private plane that came to pick us up turned upside down on Yathkyed Lake with our canoe party of three and the pilot in it. The pictures were under water for a week before the plane was salvaged. I've attached a picture of the Cessna 185 upside down on Yathkyed Lake. The picture was taken by the Canadian Air Force Search and Rescue team that parachuted from their Hercules aircraft to help us out by setting up a tent and providing sleeping bags and food for us after we had spent the night on the Barrens without any of the above! The team that later salvaged the Cessna sent us a 35mm film container that had leaked water into it; almost all the pictures from that trip have water marks on them.

In the article we mention that Sandy Richardson had noted on his trip in 1977 that there was a peregrine falcon nest at the falls. We knew of Sandy's trip and had contacted him when planning our own and were delighted to find the nest still there and active in 1981. WCA members have always been wonderful resources when planning wilderness trips. The other picture shows Dan, Henry and me on Ennadai Lake on the Kazan River and displays this immense land in its glory around 11:00 p.m. at the end of a long, tiring, wonderful day in the Barrens.

You might be interested to know that we travelled the 1981 trip with three of us in an 18-ft. cedar-strip canoe with a full spray cover. As I noted in the article in the WCA Journal about the Kazan trip, we found the big canoe with spray cover warmer in the wind, dryer in the rain and safer in the rapids. I've also included a picture of our canoe loaded with gear and food for a month for three men.

Near midnight on Ennadai Lake

One Picture and a 1,000 Words

By Joel Britz

On the fourth morning of a canoe trip in mid-August 2018, the nasty headwinds suggested we hike up onto the tundra and wait for less painful paddling conditions. In this photo, you are overlooking the "treeline", actually a broad "transition zone" between the boreal forest and the tundra, a zone that follows the Horton River for over half its journey to the Arctic Ocean.

For hundreds of kilometers in every direction there are no villages, no roads, no dams or mines – just vast wilderness. For two weeks we saw no one; or even a trace of anyone. We never saw fire pits and our guides even reminded us to scatter rocks we had used to help guy down our tents. It's easy to find wilderness in Canada; but, on the Horton, the most northerly river on Canada's mainland, the remoteness is palpable! Our take-out at Whaleman River was slightly north of where Erebus sank, 400 kilometers to the east.

Even on this overcast day, the crisp, uncontaminated air – whisked clean by the wind – made it feel as if you could see forever. Below, our campsite sits comfortably next to the steady flow of the purest water anywhere!

If you pivoted right, to the east, you would be looking out over the tundra. There was a scattering of twisted, stunted spruce that are probably hundreds of years old. Beyond that, all the vegetation was underfoot as the tundra stretched to infinity. Your eyes are drawn to the horizon; but, when you look down, you begin to appreciate that, between the ancient rocks, you are in danger of trampling on the canopy of a miniature forest.

The tundra should be experienced by everyone!

On that morning and every day of the trip, individual or small numbers of caribou stared at us as if we were strangers from outer space. Or they passed by as if on autopilot. Birds of every variety were always in sight. Three-meter-high eagles' nests, built up over scores of years, clung to lofty cliffs. We passed a herd of muskox who simply ignored us. Likewise, a grizzly and her cubs were more focused on the profusion of berries.

When the river braided, our guides chose the easiest way through. The water level was lowering, and they set the right line as we ran a surprising number of delightfully easy rapids. Each campsite they picked surpassed the previous as muted fall colours took over the landscape. Al, Pate and Kia kept us safe, well-fed and on-task.

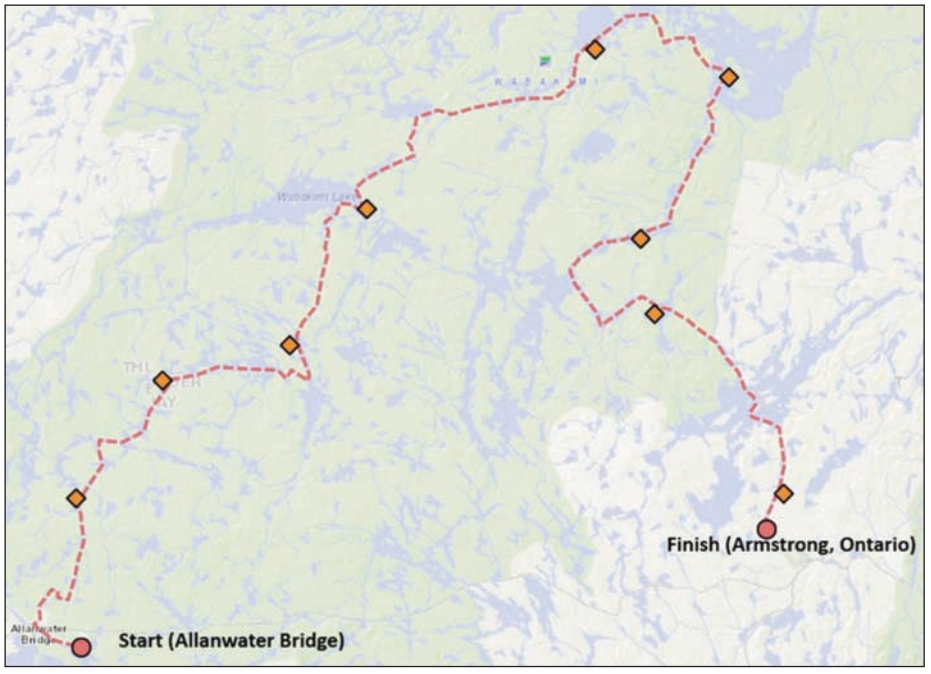
But, with rare exception, "less painful paddling conditions" didn't materialize. We paddled early, we paddled late. We lost two scheduled layover days. The wind, rain, sleet and snow turned exposed skin rosy. We layered up with all the clothes we had brought. Despite a decent current, we often faced whitecaps and spindrift blowing … upstream! On most days we paddled until we were exhausted and each evening, we gathered cheerfully under a tarp anchored to a canoe filled with rocks.

It was a great trip!

Has anyone ever studied the strange correlation between adversity and memorable canoe trips?

White Waters and Grey Ghosts – A Journey Through the Heart of Wabakimi Provincial Park

Story and photos by Erik Thomsen



Wabakimi Map

Prologue

Grey vapours loomed above us as we stood on the edge of Mattice Lake in Armstrong, Ontario. The cool, early morning air held a faint scent of smoke; a manifestation of record-breaking wildfires raging just to our west that would claim some 800,000 hectares of boreal forest by the end of summer, 2021. Under the hazy, overcast sky, a slight breeze tickled the surface of the lake. The water was cold and dark and the forest was dark too. The scene held a magnetic gloominess that stoked my sense of anticipation. We were about to begin an adventure through the heart of Wabakimi Provincial Park – a land of some 10,000 lakes and 2,000 kilometres of canoe routes.

Prepping to Fly – Mattice Lake, Armstrong, Ontario – preparing to fly.

Our group – Jono Kuketz, Kevin Groombridge, Lachlan McVie and myself – had just finished pulling the last of our gear onto the dock alongside our two 16-foot prospector canoes. We were equipped to spend two weeks in the backcountry and now eagerly awaited the arrival of the floatplane that would be our vessel to the interior.

In 2017, we had paddled Wabakimi's Kopka River system – a trip that I remember with great fondness for its solitude, its broad expanses of rugged and unblemished taiga, its impeccable weather, its thrilling rapids and mighty waterfalls. We now sought to rediscover a measure of the challenge, exhilaration and wonder of that unforgettable journey in this new Wabakimi experience.

In consultation with Bruce Hyer, operator of Wabakimi Outfitters and wilderness advocate whose efforts were pivotal to the park's creation in 1983, we settled on a 250 kilometre, three-stage route through the park. First, we would take a floatplane to the northeast end of McEwen Lake (just south of Allanwater Bridge[1]) and travel north on the Allanwater River to Wabakimi Lake via Brennan Lake and Granite Lake. Next, we would continue to follow the Allanwater north to Whitewater Lake via Kenoji Lake and the western end of the Ogoki River. Finally, after paddling the entire breadth of Whitewater Lake from west to east, we would travel south and exit at Little Caribou Lake via Lonebreast Bay, the Caribou River and Caribou Lake.

In this land, fire-driven swaths of scraggly black spruce and jack pine

tower over thick carpets of sphagnum moss and provide shelter for a diverse range of creatures. Glacial activity and the retreat of Lake Agassiz some 10,000 years ago have provided for a sprawling array of vast lakes, tumbling rivers and waterfalls. Indeed, the word "Wabakimi" itself derives from the Ojibway term for "white water" – a probable reference to the scores of rapids and falls and windswept lakes that characterize the region. Scenic rockscapes, also formed by glacial activity, account for a quarter of the park's total surface area. These barren stretches of lichen-covered rock not only provide excellent opportunities for canoe camping but are also prime habitat for the provincially threatened woodland caribou. With only 300 inhabiting the park and 5,000 remaining in the province, we could only hope to spot one of these magnificent creatures.

The route is also distinguished by a fascinating human heritage. Archaeological records, particularly north of the park along the Albany River, suggest that Indigenous peoples have populated the area for some 7,000 years. The original inhabitants lived semi-nomadic lifestyle, shifting habitation according to availability of seasonal food sources. Innumerable, well-preserved Indigenous pictograph sites remain to this day, as do portage trails and campsites, which themselves are relics of a bygone age.

The abandoned hermitage of Wendell Beckwith is another major point of interest along the route. A legendary figure in the area, Beckwith escaped from civilization in 1961 to the seclusion of an encampment on Best Island on Whitewater Lake. Here he lived until his death in 1980, conducting what he described as "pure research" of the natural world, unencumbered by the distractions of modern society. Beckwith's story and the site of the cabins still hold a strong allure to travelers of the region to this day.

Part I – Allanwater Bridge to Wabakimi Lake (Days 1-4)

As we waited on the dock, from somewhere beyond a bend in the shoreline, we heard the steady rumble of the engine of the 1958 de Havilland Otter that would provide us access to the park. The sound became louder as the craft slowly taxied toward us and finally came into view, revealing a slick navy blue and white fuselage.

Flying In – Soaring over Wabakimi Provincial Park en route to McEwen Lake.

With the plane moored, gear loaded and boats strapped to the craft's massive pontoons, we climbed into the plane ourselves. The engine roared to life. The dock drifted off behind us as we proceeded toward the centre of the lake for take off. Once in place, the pilot slowly pushed the thrust lever forward and the engine responded in kind, sending us forward with rapidly escalating speed. By the time we passed the dock again we were 100 metres in the sky and well on our way to the interior.

From the air, a lush green carpet of lake-spangled forest stretched into infinity. In an instant, we had been plucked from a world of certainty, comfort and security and hurled into one where chance, mystery and peril are the elements that hold sway. A wide wilderness lay before us in immense scale and awesome grandeur. We would be traversing it – to the horizon and beyond. We would endure its toil, confront its hardships and

Allanwater River – Paddling the Allanwater River near Allanwater Bridge.

Allanwater Rapids – Rapids on the Allanwater River before Brennan Lake.

learn through dogged endeavour of its steep ways. We knew in the end, as always, that we would find a way to reconcile with this place, however stark and uncompromising.

The sprawling greenery below us was, for a few brief moments, interrupted by large brown patches of disturbed earth – evidence of logging activity before the eastern edge of the park's boundary. We also soon spotted a straight dark line cutting through the trees to the north as well. This, of course, was the Canadian National rail line that passes through the southern extremity of the park. Following the path of the line over bogland, lakes and through vast stretches of forest, we were ultimately able to locate the spot along the tracks just north of Beagle Lake that we had used to access the Kopka system by train in 2017.

Pictographs – A pictograph on the Allanwater that appears to show a caribou being hunted.

Eventually, the plane entered low hanging clouds and the pilot began to descend. Through the mist, from the shape of the lake, I could tell that we had arrived at our destination. Suddenly, our pilot executed a thrilling, sharp bank, encircling the lake before decelerating and crisply landing on the near still waters below. The pilot anchored the plane just off a golden beach on the north side of McEwen. Before letting us away he wished us luck and provided the ominous advice that any rescue required us to be on water that was at least two kilometres in width, noting too that he had extracted no fewer than six ill-fated parties in the prior season.

The plane was soon back in the air and grew ever smaller in the sky until it disappeared over the trees to the south. We were alone now, surrounded by the dark forests of northern Ontario. A cool, shadowy atmosphere hung around us as we stood on the sand. Everything but our red and green canoes and the vibrant tan beach below our feet seemed to be coloured in a tone of grey. What a strange, isolating feeling it is to be dropped off into the remote bush by plane.

We silently pushed off from our beach and made the first paddle strokes of our journey back. Within three or four kilometres, we had paddled under Allanwater Bridge and almost instantly entered a charred landscape ravaged by fires only six years prior. Here, large dead trunks towered over dense green shrubs on either side of the narrowing river as we approached our first rapids of the trip. A large bald eagle, the first of at least 20 we would see on the trip, soared above us as the sun burned off the morning mist. Over the following 10 or 15 kilometres we tackled several class I and II rapids, with the river flowing well despite relatively low water levels.

In the afternoon we came upon a dilapidated trapper's log cabin that we briefly explored. The front side of the building was the only part that remained

intact. Its facade leaned aggressively backwards and away from the river, propped up by its decaying side walls. A collection of old rusted artifacts – cooking pots, pans, a bed spring – remained inside. Soon this site would be fully reclaimed by nature – akin to the seemingly inevitable fate of the Beckwith cabins we would encounter later in our journey.

Further along, we portaged across a sizeable island in the middle of the river. Both channels around the island were entirely un-runnable with the south end characterized by a large, voluminous and likely deadly waterfall. We had now traveled 27 kilometres on the day and thought our progress sufficient to pitch camp, which we did on a spit of flat granite on the river's west shore, in earshot of the fall's murmur.

The following day, a long paddle north on the Allanwater under sunny, but hazy skies, brought us to the base of a high-volume rapids. Here we jumped out of the boats for a quick swim while Lachlan cast a line, bagging five pike and walleye in what seemed to be less than ten casts. The fishing here was incredible.

En route to Brennan Lake, we stopped at two pictograph sites. The first, a rock face near Stump Lake, included a series of caribou footprints, signifying the importance of the once bountiful caribou to the Indigenous populations of the area. We found the second site along the eastern edge of a rocky, dome-shaped island at the southwest end of Brennan Lake, amongst a landscape devastated by fires in 2015. This site, adorned with bright purple fireweed that clung to the face of the island's granite wall, held pictographs of a caribou being hunted and various human figures of good quality.

As we departed the second pictograph site, dark clouds swept up above, and we decided it would be prudent to establish camp. We had just finished staking our tents on an outcrop amongst a stand of scorched spruce, when a violent weather system swirled in and pelted our encampment with heavy rain. Calm conditions prevailed soon thereafter, and we were treated to a surreal sunset of pastel blues and oranges.

Our seven-kilometre journey across the east end of Brennan Lake the following morning was hampered by strong, cold headwinds that forced us into a routine of feverish paddling in high waves, interspersed by periods of momentary reprieve as we found shelter behind Brennan's plentiful islands and peninsulas.

By lunch time, we had made it to the base of Brennan Falls – a spectacular and treacherous chute that connects Brennan with Granite Lake. Bruce had warned us that he had once thrown a log into the maw of this violent torrent and found it circulating two days later.

At the north end of Granite Lake we began searching for a place to stop for the night as thunder had begun to rattle ever more intensely in the distance. Ultimately we found a beautiful, flat campsite that held a massive carpet of feather moss and a supreme northerly vantage. For a second consecutive day, we had pitched our tents just in time to

Brennan Night – Night time on Brennan Lake.

Brennan Falls – Downstream view of Brennan Falls.

gain shelter from a late afternoon storm.

As the crashing thunder subsided, I emerged from my tent to find the most glorious blue skies above – a significant and welcome departure from the smoky haze that had floated above us to this point. This, in turn, would yield an exceptionally vivid, tapestry of stars that evening, which were complemented by the nearby calling of loons.

The remainder of our time at the site was not without incident. We had each turned in to our respective tents around midnight, when Kevin, whose tent was pitched on the edge of dense forest about 30 metres from the rest of the group, began violently gargling and heaving. Believing he was in medical distress or being confronted by some wild animal, I emerged from my tent on high alert to render aid. As it turns out, the four-day old corned beef he had consumed for dinner that evening did not agree with him.

Granite Lake – Camping at the north end of Granite Lake.

The following day, we woke to heavy rain and bided our time, both to let the weather pass and to allow Kevin time to recuperate. After 11 a.m., we set off and completed the final expanse of Granite Lake before following the Allanwater further north. Our goal for the day was to complete the notorious 1,600-metre crossing of Wabakimi Lake, which we knew would be perilous due to wind.

At the base of Osprey Falls, we stopped to fish and had good luck again, catching both walleye and pike. Further down river we portaged around Black Beaver Rapids, paddled most of Little Sturgeon Rapids, and took the mandatory portage around Sturgeon Falls, where we found a well-preserved, sun-bleached beaver maxilla.

On approach to Wabakimi Lake the river broadened dramatically. Massive swells, which gave way to cresting three-foot waves welcomed us to the lake. Serious white caps hammered our canoes in a chaotic flurry, and we struggled to make any progress in the maelstrom. We recognized that we stood absolutely no chance of completing the crossing and opted to hug the southeastern shore of the lake to find a location to camp.

In the end, we found respite at the far southeastern shoreline of the lake at a jack pine-shrouded campsite that appeared to have been derelict for decades. Amongst strong, whirring winds and a late evening drizzle, we nervously wondered what the next day would bring.

Part II – Wabakimi Lake to Whitewater Lake (Days 5-7)

I awoke in the predawn to the unceasing and uneasy hush of wind in the pines. I had not looked at the lake but thought then that our prospects of crossing might be compromised.

The rest of the group soon roused and we developed a game plan to traverse the lake which involved sheltering in the lee of the sporadic islands that separated our location and the northern coast. Jono had rightfully expressed concerns about the

magnitude of the waves and our ability to cross, but the rest of us thought it would be manageable. As a compromise, we decided to attempt a crossing to the first island (perhaps three hundred metres to our northeast). There we would determine whether the larger portions of the crossing could be completed. This island, according to our map, held a campsite that we could use if the larger crossing were unattainable. Ultimately, we would have been best served to stay put, as it became clear early on in our attempt, that the waves would be too powerful.

Once in the lee of the island we anchored our canoes and began to cut through the island's thick brush in search of a site. Alas, the best we could find was a shrubby, root-laden, partially exposed clearing, not fit for tents. Here, we set to work, with trees flailing above, to build a wind and rain break with our tarps, recognizing we would likely be marooned for many hours. We would later learn that the winds had reached almost 90 km/h that day.

The general dreariness of our situation was compounded by the fact that we knew we were losing an opportunity to make headway in our journey. Worse was the fear of being stranded here for multiple days in the event that the winds failed to let up. We buoyed our spirits with whiskey and tales of old times on the river.

In spite of our situation, I felt a great sense of gratitude to be here. On this day, this wild, windswept lake, with its scores of islands and endless coastline, was our home. Wind, crashing waves and shrubby, uneven ground notwithstanding, we had everything we needed.

Amongst the sheer wind and spray off the water, I decided to scramble up the exposed western shore of the island to an elevated area we had not yet explored to gain a better vantage of the awesome tumult occurring over the big water. As I crested a rocky ledge, an old fire pit appeared before me and, above it, a large clearing. Unwittingly, I had stumbled across the campsite marked on our map. We would be in good stead for the evening – a small measure of redemption that meant a great deal.

We awoke at 5:30 a.m. the next morning in an effort to beat the wind, though we could already hear the waves crashing against the shore. Through the dim, predawn light, I could see that the water was turbulent, but not insurmountable, but we had to act quickly. We gathered our gear and cast off shortly after 6 a.m. with no breakfast.

Approaching Wabakimi – Approaching the southern opening to Wabakimi Lake on the Allanwater River.

The crossing was about 1,500 metres in distance and was buffered by an occasional island. The high wind and large cresting waves, however, presented a treacherous situation. I had written in my journal at the time that this was "likely amongst the most challenging crossings I had ever completed" given the size, strength and unpredictability of the

Whitewater Beach – Beach campsite at sundown, Whitewater Lake.

Bog Slog – A bog slog en route to the Beckwith Cabins on Whitewater Lake.

waves. Elation and humility awaited us upon completion, in the mouth of River Bay, north of Wabakimi Lake, where the strong headwinds eased into pushy tailwinds.

Invigorated by our success, we conquered each of the several rapids between Wabakimi Lake and Kenoji Lake, and we were even greeted by a large black bear along the way, which ambled down the shoreline before bolting into the woods.

Past Kenoji, we paddled an additional series of rapids without issue, until a minor mishap occurred when Kevin and Lachlan's canoe tipped on the exit of a tricky set. Wet, but not demoralized (though the skies were gloomy and the air cold), we continued on, completed a 400-metre portage through a burn, and soon officially entered the Ogoki River system.

It was late in the day when we arrived at Whitewater Lake. We found a long, sheltered cove on the south shore of the lake's western segment and pitched our tents on the sand. The sky was clear with a splendid sunset in the west, which I watched solo from my canoe. We had traveled 45 kilometres from our island site on Wabakimi Lake and were now positioned to make it to the Beckwith site within a day.

The following morning was sunny and calm – a major relief considering the vastness of Whitewater Lake – the largest body of water in Wabakimi. Eventually, we ducked into a channel and found our way past the old Ogoki Lodge, another fascinating relic of Wabakimi's earlier days.

The Ogoki Lodge site, initially developed in the mid-1970s, was funded by the provincial government and operated by local Anishinabe as a remote tourism outpost. At the time of our visit, the complex contained 15 or more rustic buildings, including a large, architecturally-unique main lodge designed in the shape of a teepee. Unfortunately, the cost of upkeep, coupled with the site's remoteness, meant that the Ogoki Lodge operation would have been difficult to financially sustain. Several years of disuse and neglect had exacted a serious, and perhaps irreversible impact on many of the buildings.

South from Ogoki Lodge we traversed two short portage trails before attempting a "short cut" to bypass the main lake, which included a taxing 400-metre slog through knee-deep mud, a 100-metre bushwhack through dense bulrushes and a severely overgrown 300-metre portage trail inhibited by several large blowdowns. By the end of this section of travel, it was clear that we should have remained on the main lake.

Beckwith's cabins, situated on Best Island, were now less than two kilometres away, but as it happened, this was not the primary reward we received for our toil. On approaching the island, Jono spotted something swimming off the shore ahead of us. As we drew closer, we

saw that it was a woodland caribou.

The woodland caribou is known as the grey ghost of the boreal forest for its scarcity and elusiveness – a moniker that may provide an unfortunate presage to the fate of this magnificent creature. Once bountiful, the remaining caribou are threatened by habitat degradation and fragmentation due to development.

Grey-brown, with matted fur and stunted antlers – this young caribou was the most incredible creature I have ever seen in the wild. We watched it silently and in awe as it emerged from the water, shook itself dry, and slowly, regally, trotted along the shoreline, surprisingly indifferent to our presence. It loomed for a while and then, as quickly as it had entered into our view, it vanished into the woods without a trace. With its departure, this mysterious creature of the north left behind enduring feelings of wonder, enchantment, sadness and hope that stir within me to this day. There before us was the embodiment of all the magic and mystique of the wilderness – long may it live.

Caribou – Young woodland caribou trotting along the shores of Best Island, Whitewater Lake.

Part III – Whitewater Lake to Little Caribou Lake (Days 8-11)

Approximately, 200 metres from where we had seen the caribou was a small, sheltered beach that marked the landing to the Wendell Beckwith site.

As noted, Beckwith, a design engineer and inventor by trade (though he held limited formal education), came to Best Island in 1961 to conduct research on the natural world including issues related to gravitation and radiation. Bankrolled by a wealthy businessman named Harry Wirth, and with periodic assistance from a nearby Indigenous community, Beckwith lived as a hermit on the site conducting research, experiments and devising inventions until his death in 1980.

Beckwith's hermitage contains five log structures (three cabins, a shed and an outhouse), all of which we found to be in varying stages of decay. The main cabin, the first built in the early 1960s and Beckwith's initial refuge, had in recent years collapsed entirely in on itself. The guest cabin, and second one to be built (in the late 1960s), remained in the best condition with little structural damage. The cabin was mostly used by Rose Chaltry, who lived on the site and assisted Beckwith periodically over several years in the 1970s. Though the contents of the building, which included a mattress, old mugs, cookware, lanterns, books and faded National Geographic magazines, were scattered in disarray, they helped to provide a real conception of how life would have been here 50 years ago.

The most interesting and unique structure on the island is the cabin that was Beckwith's principal dwelling, which he termed the "Snail" for its circular, shell-like appearance. The cabin, designed by Beckwith himself, included sleeping area, a workbench, storage cabinets, a centrally located stove and rotating heat shield that would allow Beckwith to optimize heat distribution during Wabakimi's brutally cold winters. Unfortunately, the Snail is quickly being reclaimed by nature and, at the time of our visit, had a large hole in the ceiling

Snail – Wendell Beckwith's primary cabin, known as "The Snail", on Whitewater Lake.

Best Island – Sitting by the fire, Best Island, Whitewater Lake.

which will undoubtedly contribute to its rapid deterioration.

That afternoon we set up our tents at a campsite directly abutting the cabins and often found ourselves drawn back into the forest to marvel at the structures and contemplate this fascinating part of Wabakimi's story.

In the morning we were on the water before 8 a.m. to avoid facing high winds across the remaining portion of Whitewater Lake. We had traveled 164 kilometres and were now less than 90 kilometres from the end of our route. We were anxious to make progress since we expected strong headwinds in the long section that lay ahead through McKinley Lake and Lonebreast Bay.

Portage – Scenic portage trail en route to McKinley Lake.

Our concerns were justified as this day would be among the toughest of the trip. Though the weather was warm and sunny, we would tackle at least six portages of varying length and complete three major lake crossings into relentless whitecaps. By the late afternoon we had traveled over 28 kilometres and, completely exhausted, decided to pull into an island site on Lonebreast Bay. As we pulled up to the site we noticed it was occupied by a lone black bear, which dashed off and swam away as we approached.

That evening the thick haze in the air present at the onset of our trip had once again returned. As the sun dropped lower in the sky it became increasingly enveloped by the haze from the western fires and projected an unnatural, eerie orange-red hue.

In the morning we paddled out of Lonebreast and along the shore of Smoothrock Lake in dicey conditions and risked being thrashed against a minefield of hidden boulders that lay just below the surface of the water. In Caribou Bay, we were fortunate to catch a tailwind that brought us to an excellent campsite near Funger Lake. Here we spent the remainder of the day catching fish and celebrated the imminent completion of our trip with a fish fry as the sun set again.

The following morning we woke up to a thicker haze than any day prior. The smell of wildfire smoke was omnipresent now, and we imagined that the fires must be relatively nearby. Despite the haze, this would be our third cloudless day in succession.

We made quick progress heading upstream on the Caribou River and emerged onto Caribou Lake, a vast and stunningly beautiful lake containing hundreds of small islands, surrounded by large rugged hills and ridges. The north shore of Caribou Lake also marks the edge of the park's official boundary. The final 15 or 20 kilometres of our trip south would now be through general use Crown land.

We had been concerned about the difficulty of crossing this large body of water due to its potential for high waves, but on approaching the mouth of the

Caribou River we appeared to be in luck as we met an easy southwest wind. After weaving our way through islands over approximately six kilometres, we came to the Little Caribou Lake portage – the last of the trip. We were now on the home stretch of our adventure.

We paddled Caribou Lake slowly, enjoying the final leg and found an old overgrown campsite, perched atop a rocky slope that we would revitalize for our final evening of our Wabakmi adventure. The site was carpeted with thousands of blueberries which we picked away at as we set up our tents. We were less than five kilometres from our takeout point, a distance we would cover in less than an hour under glass-like conditions the following morning. There we would find our shuttle back to Armstrong.

Epilogue

Our journey through Wabakimi Provincial Park covered 252 kilometres over 11 days. Over our time here we experienced the fickle nature and full spectrum of the boreal's mid-summer temperaments – blistering heat, bone-chilling rain, gale force winds, furious thunderstorms, serene glassy waters, bluebird skies, smoky sundowns.

Wabakimi, with its sweeping fairy tale forests of spruce and feather moss, represents all that is extraordinary about the Canadian wilderness: the thrill of a dash down the challenging torrents of the Allanwater; the surreal fire-ravaged rockscapes of Brennan Lake and earth shaking power of Brennan Falls; the ancient rock art; the chill in the western gales on Wabakimi Lake; the blast of the summer headwinds on Lonebreast Bay; the fading cabins of Best Island; the grey ghosts of the boreal forest.

Back at Mattice Lake, we bid farewell to our gracious hosts at Wabakimi Outfitters, packed up our cars and turned south on Highway 527. The long road home now lay ahead. Suddenly, as a final reminder of the still wild and magical world we were leaving behind, a lone grey wolf dashed across road and vanished in the scrub. I glanced back in my rearview mirror and was affected by a feeling of wistful fulfilment, as though I was leaving a part of myself behind in this storied land.

Caribou River – Hazy sunset on the Caribou River.

[1] Note: a more conventional means of initiating a trip beginning at Allanwater Bridge is by train from Armstrong or beyond. In our case, we opted to access the area by floatplane to save ourselves time as the COVID-19 pandemic had severely limited passenger service along the rail line in the summer of 2021.

Acknowledgment: Planning and execution of this adventure relied heavily on the advice and expertise of Bruce Hyer of Wabakimi Outfitters. We also relied on information provided through the community, including incredibly detailed trip information available at <https://albinger.me>.

Group Shot – Members of our crew after crossing Wabakimi Lake. Left to Right – Erik, Jono, Lachlan, Kevin

…in this issue

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Hilding the World's Longest Esker

Story and photos by Dwayne Wohlgemuth

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

Part II

Story by Chris Rush

Photos by Chris Rush and Jenny Johnson

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

Part I

Story by Chris Rush

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Cat River Canoe Trip

Story and Sketches by Jon Berger

Canoe Ungava: Crossing the Ungava Peninsula with No Single-Use Plastics

By Beth Jackson and Eli Walker

Flat River

Story by Dwayne Wohlgemuth

Photos by Dwayne Wohlgemuth and Rory McIntosh

Where the Rivers are Wild: A Journey Down the Lower Missinaibi and Moose Rivers

Story and photos by Erik Thomsen

My Memory of the Lake Superior 1967 Centennial Canoe Voyage

By Craig Macdonald

Photos by Dr. Bob Janvry

Mountain River

Story by Nicola Ross

Photos by Brendan Spafford and Aleks Gauer

From Labrador to Chisasibi on James Bay

By Herman Perry

Back Door to the Hood River

Story by Rob Dale

Photos by Greg Konighatsni, Sara Gartlan, Rosemary Warren, Rob Dale

Lockhart River – Pike's Portage Canoe Trip

Journal Excerpts: July 15-August 8, 2015

Story by Carmine Minutillo

Photos by Carmine Minutillo, Colin Phillips and Tom Glassco

Up the Grandin River and down the Johnny Hoe River

Story and photos by Dwayne Wohlgemuth

Palmer Rapids – a home away from home

Aleks Gauer

Artillery Lake Ice Walk

Story by Morten Asfeldt and Glen Hvenegaard

Photos by Morten Asfeldt

Chapleau River 2013

by Richard Griffith