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The Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association

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WINTER 2023

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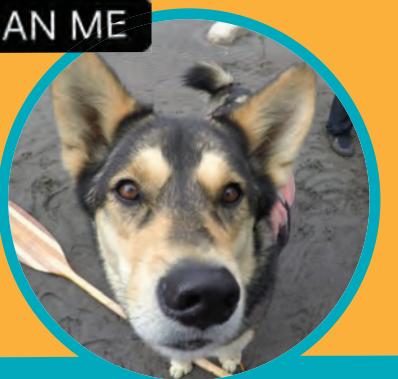

Steps: Watch the video and find Ranger sightings at **https://bit.ly/find-ranger** To enter the contest scan the QR Code or google **www.canoenorthadventures.com**. Those identifying the correct number of Ranger sightings will be entered in the contest. Contest runs from January 10 to February 28, 2024.

Contest Rules: Prize package includes canoe trip for one from July 2 through July 13, 2024, leaving from Norman Wells NT. Does not include commercial air to Norman Wells. Open to Canadian residents of legal age, not including those living in Quebec. Become eligible for the contest when you submit an online entry via our website prior to content close on February 28, 2024. Trip must be taken on the specified date. No cash value. Alternatively, enter by sending your name, address and Ranger sightings by envelope marked Find Ranger Contest to: Canoe North Adventures, 307114 Hockley Road, Mono ON L9W 6N6 519-941-6654. Entries must be received prior to content close.

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Swallowed by the Falls

by Dawne Robinson

This is the story of a near disaster at Swallow Falls in the Northwest Territories, an accident that occurred near the beginning of a 23-day trip down the Broken Skull and South Nahanni Rivers in early July 2023.

Full disclosure – we deliberated for some time about writing this article. The feeling within our group was initially one of embarrassment and a desire to keep the incident to ourselves. That emotion was tempered with gratitude that no one was injured, and pride that we managed to rescue everyone, recover nearly all our equipment, repair our badly damaged canoes, and complete our journey. We ultimately concluded that if such an accident could happen to an experienced group like ours, it could happen to oth-

ers. We hope that sharing our story might help other groups prepare for such risks.

We were a group of 10 very experienced paddlers in five tandem teams: my husband Dave and I, Katie and Roland Paris, Cathy and Rod Rogers, Erwin Ellen and Suzanne Gates, Sara Gartlan and Robert James. Between us we've paddled most of the wilderness river classics – the Hood, Horton, Mountain, Nahanni, Snake, Wind, Bonnet Plume, Hart, Thelon, Hayes, Fond du Lac, Clearwater, Churchill, Missinaibi, Moisie, Mouchalagane, Bonaventure, Romaine and Ashuapmushuan Rivers, all without incident. I only mention these rivers because it makes what happened at Swallow Falls even more astonishing. In 2021, while Covid was still rampaging across the country, most of our group paddled the Yukon's Snake River. Near the end of the trip, we began discussing where we would paddle next. Immediately the conversation centred on the Broken Skull River, a river we had heard was just pure fun. Full of bouncy white-

water and epic scenery, its continuous whitewater generally ranges from class 1 to 2+, with nothing really scary to worry about. It usually takes about 10 days to paddle the 150 km from Divide Lake to Rabbitkettle Lake just off the South Nahanni River where you can fly back out. As most people in our group had not yet paddled the South Nahanni, we decided to extend the trip from Rabbitkettle to Virginia Falls and then through the canyons of the Nahanni ending at Blackstone Territorial Park, 525 km from Divide Lake. From there, we would shuttle back to Whitehorse.

The cheapest way to get into the Broken Skull was to rent canoes in Whitehorse from Up North Adventures and use their shuttle service to get us to Kluane Airways' float base on Finlayson Lake, about 7 hours northeast of Whitehorse. We would take three 17' Esquif Prospector canoes and two 16 ½' Canyons that could be nested. It is a short flight from Finlayson Lake over the mountainous Yukon - Northwest Territories border into Divide Lake, located inside Nááts'įhch'oh National Park Reserve. The reserve covers an area of 4,850 square kilometres and encompasses parts of the South Nahanni River watershed in the Northwest Territories.

We planned to spend some time hiking through the valleys and ridges surrounding Divide Lake after which we would exit the lake via Cold Feet Creek. About two kilometres downstream, Cold Feet Creek joins Divide Creek and their combined waters then plunge over Swallow Falls. We would portage around Swallow Falls and continue through the canyons of Divide Creek until they converge with the Broken Skull River, roughly a day's paddle. After 10 days of descending the Broken Skull, we would then enter the Nahanni for the second leg of the journey. As much has been written of the South Nahanni River and the joys of paddling the Broken Skull, I will confine this story to the rather intense experience of our first four days.

Before the trip had even begun, we ran into complications. In Whitehorse on July 2, the day before we were to fly into Divide Lake, I received a call from Parks Canada informing us that both the Nááts'įhch'oh and the South Nahanni

National Parks were officially closed due to a record-setting, 4-day rain event. Water levels climbed to spring-runoff levels, doubling the flow over Virginia Falls. People already on the Nahanni were told to stay put. In the end, we decided to begin our scheduled shuttle to Finlayson Lake early the next morning in the hope that the park would reopen by the time we got there. If fate did not allow us to fly in, we would camp at the float base. Our pilots, Warren and Shawn LaFave of Kluane Airways, were optimistic, and later the same afternoon, we received notice that the park was reopening. We were ecstatic and after a short and very scenic flight, we arrived at Divide Lake late on July 3.

When we landed at Divide Lake, we immediately noted that its stunningly beautiful landscape was swollen with water. The lake was spilling over its banks and numerous creeks were tumbling down the surrounding mountains. We were certainly not expecting to see anyone upon our arrival but to our surprise, we were welcomed by a small group of Parks Canada employees who had arrived earlier in the week and been stranded by the extreme weather. They included four young people from communities in the Sahtu region of the Northwest Territories hired to develop an interpretive program for the new park which resides within the traditional lands of the Mountain Dene. Before flying out a day later, our hosts invited us to gather at their campfire where they treated us to freshly-caught fish, Labrador tea and an evening of storytelling and drumming. On our behalf, they made a traditional offering of burned tea leaves and other local foliage in hopes of good weather

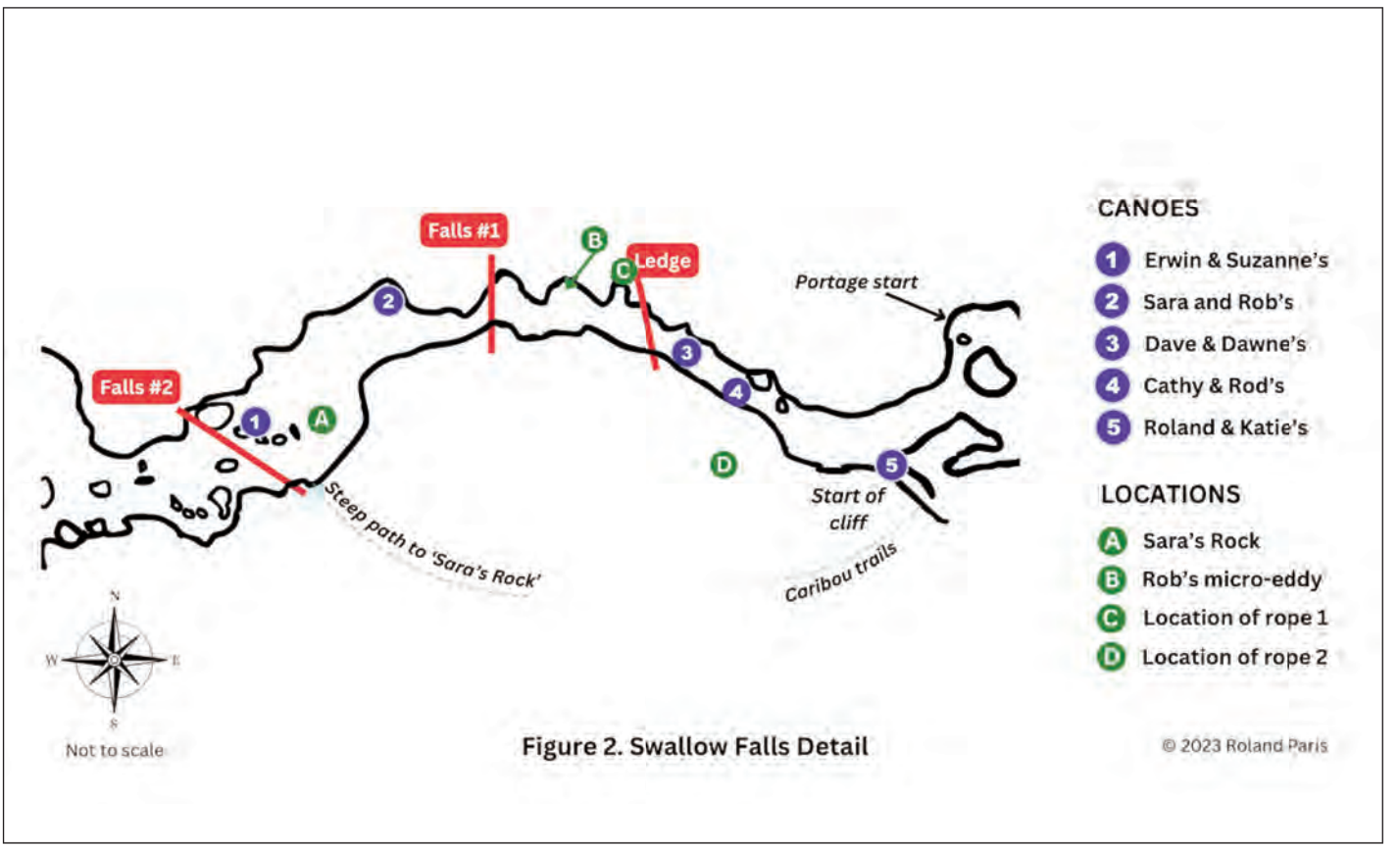


Figure 2. Swallow Falls Detail

Swallowed: Illustration by Roland Paris

and safe passage for our upcoming journey. It was a magical time, and I believe that their prayers may have saved us from serious harm in the coming days.

We spent one day hiking around the area, and from high on the surrounding mountain ridges we could see Cold Feet Creek, the outlet of the lake. The multitude of braids in the creek, not normally present in July, rang no alarm bells. There was only a palpable sense of anticipation that we would soon be making our way to the river. This excitement carried over into the next morning as we crossed the lake towards the creek. It was soon obvious that the creek was still very much in flood. Beginning as a grassy-banked stream, it quickly split into numerous braids. We were pleasantly surprised that we could paddle what is usually a stint of dragging and lining. Soon the current became quite swift and we delighted in finding the fastest channel through the braids. We became more spread-out than our usual pattern of paddling "ducky-style" and lost sight of each other at times. We believed – falsely, as it turned out – that it would take some time to arrive at the confluence with Divide Creek, which would indicate that the portage and falls were imminent. In fact we had already arrived at the junction with Divide Creek and did not recognize it among the many braids in Cold Feet Creek. The 2-km distance from Divide Lake, which might take 2 hours to cover in low water, had taken us only half-an-hour. Still joyously dodging and weaving in the now very swift current, we were oblivious to the nearness of the falls.

Allow me to paint a picture of the setting. Swallow Falls is an absolutely gorgeous waterfall, named for the swallow colonies that nest within its steep canyon walls. The falls cannot be seen from upstream because the creek makes a sharp right turn before heading into the canyon. We also could not hear the falls due to the noise of flood water. Unfortunately, the planning guide does not mention this bend and as we discovered, once you turn that corner, you're in trouble! Just before the turn is the portage around the falls. The park's trip planner describes the 150 metre portage (we think it is longer) as being on river right, at the confluence with another small creek (Divide creek) on river left. Because of the high water levels we were experiencing however, none of the five boats noticed this confluence. The landscape was one of a drowned land that did not match our maps at all. Creeks were flowing everywhere and the start of the portage route, little more than a caribou trail, was under water and therefore invisible. The official route description had apparently been written for lower water conditions.

The canyon leading down to the falls begins around the turn in the creek. All told, the canyon is about 40 metres long, with sheer cliff walls about 15 metres high on river left, and a wall on river right that starts low but gradually gains altitude and climbs into an overhanging cliff at the brink of the falls. Once in the canyon, class 1 rapids quickly become

class 3-4, with many rocks and ledges. About 15 metres ahead, there is a large, slanted ledge, then a miniscule eddy on river right (which would play an important part in our story), immediately followed by the first of two falls. These falls drop about 3.5 metres through a narrow slot straight down into an aerated pool. A short stretch of turbulent water with a big rock in the middle of the current (another key player in our story) leads immediately to the second falls: a gnarly bone-breaking mess of rocks. Below this is the end of the portage trail and a flattish area on river right where it is possible to camp in a pinch. The fast current continues through the canyon and beyond.

Winding through the braids, Sara and Rob had ended up at the front of the group. Before getting into the canoe, she

and Rob had consulted the map and agreed "Ok, so portage and waterfall in 2 km". Sara recalls thinking at one point that they should pull over to wait for everyone else but the excitement of being on the river prevailed. Picking their way down a braid on river left, she and Rob passed the portage entrance on river right, perhaps because there were several braids between them and the right shore. Once all the channels began coming together, they quickly realized their mistake, but it was too late. It was a mistake we would all make.

Rob later recounted "We were paddling through the braids when we noticed the water had gotten a bit deeper. We exuberantly started to paddle harder, reveling in the first bit of water that would accept more than a quarter of our paddle blades. A glance to the side showed a second canoe keeping up on a parallel braid. We continued to paddle and didn't see them again. The speed of the water picked up and I thought 'This is a bad idea. We should stop and wait.' I don't remember whether I vocalized this or not. A second later, we came to the first rock and worked our way around it. At this point I said 'We need to stop. Now!' As I looked around for a suitable eddy, I saw cliff walls starting to rise around us. The current picked up again and we came onto the next few rocks. I thought 'Oh sh*t. We're committed'. We worked around the rocks looking and hoping for a suitable place to stop."

Sara did hear Rob yell but could not see anywhere to pull over. They were at the point of no return. She still didn't realize they were approaching the falls. Sweeping around the rocks, Sara and Rob were jostled around a bit but stayed upright. They went over the large ledge above the first falls, got hit with a wave from the left and capsized. Rob was thrown into the water towards the right. Sara hollered to see if he was okay and saw him surface just as she was sucked under water herself. Rob was reaching for the canoe to pull it to the side when he heard her yell. He thought she was telling him to swim to shore, so he let go and swam for the nearest bank on river right where he ended up in the micro-eddy above the first falls. That was the last he saw of Sara or their canoe for what felt to him like 2 hours. As Sara plunged through the slot over the lip of the falls, she had the presence of mind to take a deep breath in case she was pushed under again. She felt bubbles all around her and then was pushed upwards to the surface. She took another deep breath but was not dragged under again. Instead, a rock appeared in front of her – the one big rock in mid-current between the first and second falls – and she climbed onto it. That was when the miracles started.

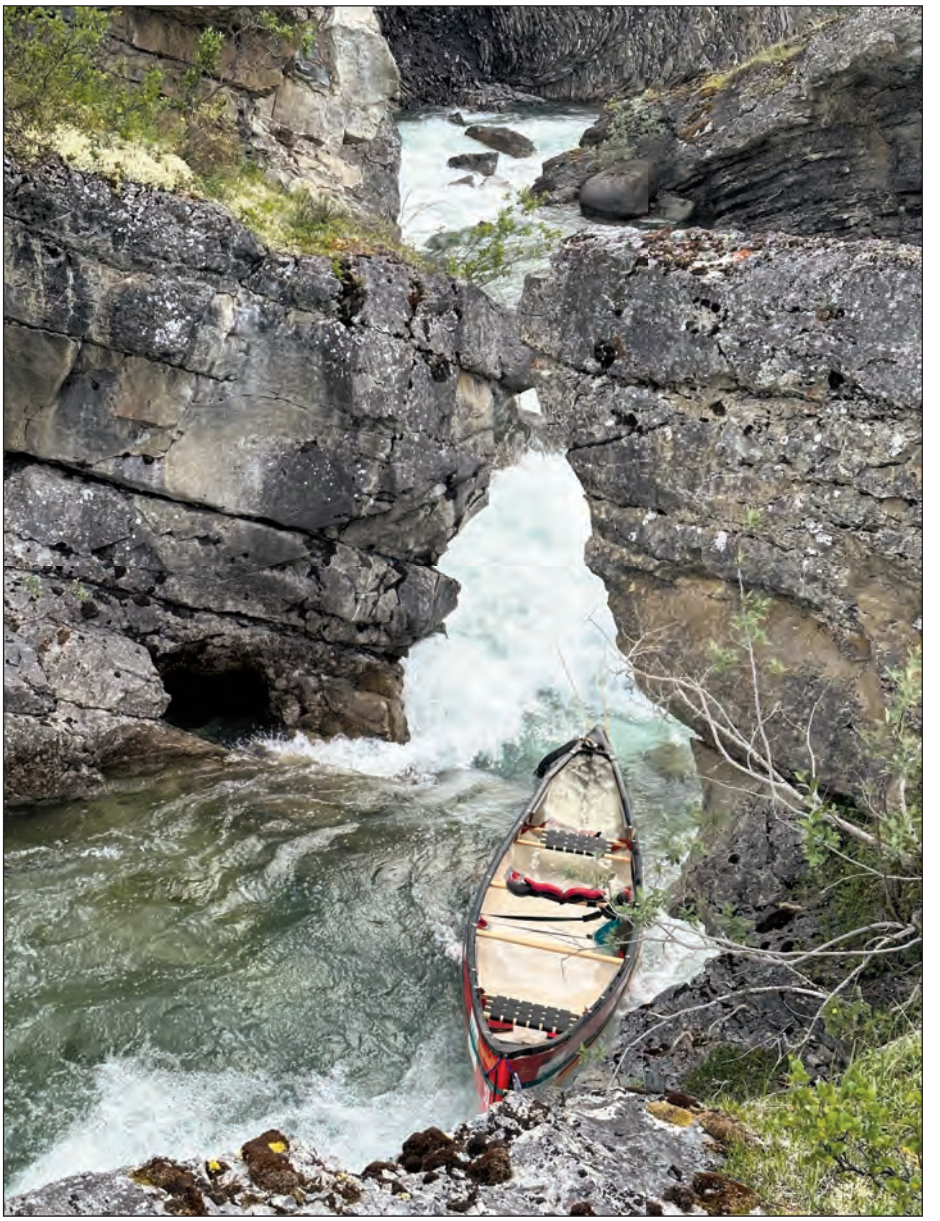
Although Rob managed to stop himself from going over by holding onto the rock face, he was literally stuck at the brink of the falls. It was another miracle. He discovered a thigh-deep ledge underwater that he could step up onto. Beside

him, the water cut under an overhanging rock that was tilted away downstream at about a 45 degree angle. The current sweeping under it was very strong. If he slipped off of his perch he would likely get swept under it with the serious possibility of entrapment. This provided motivation to secure himself to the cliff as best he could.

Now back to Dave and me. We didn't know Sara and Rob had missed the portage; we saw them round the corner above the canyon and go out of view, and we followed them. Once around the bend, the current became exponentially stronger – too strong to fight. We caught a glimpse of the first boat disappearing over the horizon line a short distance away and Dave bellowed: "Sh*t, we're in the canyon!". We were unable to reverse our course at that point. Thankfully we were able to ground our canoe on a flattish rock not too far from the shorter canyon wall on the river right. As we considered what to do, I saw the third canoe carrying Suzanne and Erwin round the bend. Cries of "Stop, don't come in here!" came too late. Like us, they were unable to stop in the strong current and before we knew it, they rammed our canoe. The impact dislodged our boat and it spun around behind the rock. We briefly entertained visions of going backwards over the falls but by some miracle, the canoe stayed there – at least for the moment.

Erwin and Suzanne's canoe flipped instantly when it hit us and both paddlers spilled into the current between our rock and river right. Fortunately, both surfaced close to the right shore and Erwin immediately spotted a small gap in the wall. He pushed Suzanne into it and desperately climbed in after her. Being of small build (though incredibly strong and fit), Erwin and Suzanne were probably the only people on the trip who would have fit in the gap. Hanging on by their fingers, both managed to climb out to safety. This was yet another miracle. Their canoe continued over the falls by itself.

As this was happening, the fourth boat carrying Cathy and Rod came into view. In Cathy's words "Suddenly a strong current was pulling us downstream. In a flash we realized that we were already at Swallow Canyon – we had missed the pull-out for the portage! Oh CRAP! Rod quickly donned his helmet and lifejacket and we both began paddling full steam. Using the momentum of the current, we hoped to cut across to the river left and ground the canoe on a gravelly patch just upstream of the rock wall. Alas the current was too strong and we couldn't land. As we rapidly slid downstream, we grabbed at the rocks and sparse vegetation along the wall. This slowed us a little but the shale rocks crumbled in our hands and the vegetation came off. We rounded the corner to see steep rock walls arising on both sides, funneling the water down the canyon. We were aghast to see Dave and Dawne in their canoe ahead of us – pinned broadside on rocks. With rapids and current growing all around us and precious little room ahead, all I could think was 'Don't hit them! Don't hit them! Don't make this worse!!!'. Although we slid further downstream, our efforts had at least taken us close to the left wall of the canyon and we were no longer moving full tilt. We abruptly arrived at a ledge about three feet high. As the canoe hit the ledge, I was catapulted out of the boat. Rod had the presence of mind to step out into shallow water at the brink of the ledge and snag the end of the canoe's stern painter. This allowed us to anchor our canoe and later



simplified our rescue. Remarkably, I landed in a micro-eddy, a tiny, perfectly placed eddy, tucked snug against the left wall of the canyon. With the rock wall towering above me, I clasped the side of the canoe and my feet found a ridge of rock about a metre underwater, protruding from the wall just wide enough (maybe 1/2") to edge my toes on. Although it kept crumbling, together with the canoe, I had enough support to keep most of my torso above the frigid water." Cathy continued, "I took in the scene: our canoe was anchored by Rod but laden with water. Some items (our bailer, Rod's daypack) had already been swept away. Dave and Dawne were in their canoe, wedged broadside midstream, in rushing water. Rob was floating in an eddy below a vertical rock wall on the right side of the canyon and Sarah was nowhere to be seen. Erwin, Suzanne and their boat were gone. I was filled with dread."

Cathy and Rod's situation played out just across from where Dave and I had ended up. It appeared to us that they were temporarily safe but in a very precarious position above the falls. Katie and Roland's canoe came into view next. As they turned the corner, they saw Dave frantically waving and holding his paddle in the air. Seeing all the commotion below, Roland's universe became very focused on stopping their boat. They drove their canoe onto the left shore just above where the canyon began in earnest. Once grounded, they hopped out and tied up the boat.

Meanwhile, I stepped out of our boat onto the rock and threw Erwin one of our throw bags. He then tossed the rope back to me; I clipped into it and jumped into the water and he and Suzanne pulled me to shore. It is very counterintuitive to deliberately jump into the river above a waterfall! Dave threw us a second throw bag and Suzanne and I quickly tied the canoe off to a boulder slightly downstream on the river right. The throw bag that had hauled me in was then dispatched to Dave. He tied on to it but as he got out of the canoe, the boat shifted slightly downstream and became wedged between the far wall and some rocks. Retrieving the canoe from its new position became a major logistical challenge later in the day.

With Dave on shore, we went into triage mode. Six people were on shore now and two were safe for the moment on the river left almost waist-deep in water. Our immediate concern was for the first two paddlers who had disappeared. After beaching their canoe above the canyon, Roland grabbed a throw bag and ran downstream to help. The only possible route was set back about 10 metres on a caribou trail that climbed up the slope on a river left parallel to the cliff. He cut back to the edge and looked down to see Dave still in the canoe and Erwin, Suzanne and me safely on shore. In his words, "There was a part of me that was looking at me looking at the scene and saying: this is exactly like a simulation in a whitewater rescue course – stop, observe, plan, act!" Roland saw Rob standing in the water across from him but realized that Sarah and one boat were missing. Leaning out from the cliff, he saw a serious waterfall and his heart sank. Sarah wasn't visible anywhere. He knew in that moment that she'd definitely gone over. Roland made his way further downstream, turning the corner that had obscured his view. Again, in his words: "As I ran along the caribou trail, scenes of what I might find flashed through my head. It was a strange sensation: part of my brain felt strangely unemotional and clinical and ready to act, while the other part was full of dread — a sinking anticipation about what I might see when I turned the corner. But there she was, sitting on a rock below the falls, waving – and seemingly unhurt! A miracle!"

As Roland raced along the top of the river left canyon wall to assess the situation, those of us on the right shore scrambled up and along the top of the right canyon wall. We also saw Sara perched on a midstream rock just above the second – and worse – falls. Dave slapped the top of his helmet and she responded with the time-honoured "I'm OK" signal. I thought our hearts would burst with the relief we felt in that moment! Sara was safe for now but still in a dangerous spot above a very nasty looking expanse of rocks. We would worry about that later.

Next up – get Rob! On his little shelf in the miniscule eddy, he was literally at the brink of the falls. I will never forget the vision of him smiling up at us with a big grin on his face. He was holding the shoe that Dave had lost upstream while

being towed into shore. This certainly broke the tension for us! He also had four paddles. He later recounted seeing a steady stream of gear for a few minutes. Inexplicably the paddles didn't enter the main current but took a right turn towards him. The fourth one was a Werner and Rob had momentary thoughts of an upgrade to his own collection. "I realized my feet were starting to go numb in the cold water so I was looking for a way to climb out before my own situation got worse," he later said. "The cliff face was crumbly – not solid enough to support my weight for a handhold. Below my waist, the rock was slightly undercut – no help to get a foothold. I was leery of trying any dynamic moves to improve my position – the current was strong and the hazard of that undercut downstream rock was close and personal. When Roland announced that Sara was ok and unharmed, I breathed a sigh of relief. Everything immediately slowed down and I felt a weight come off of my shoulders." It took two ropes to get Rob up the slope, one with a loop tied into it, so he could push off with one foot while pulling with his arms on the main line – effectively creating a ladder.

With one more person safe, we could turn our attention to Cathy and Rod's predicament. Cathy was still on a shelf waist deep in the frigid water holding the bow of the canoe. Rod was standing on the ledge holding the stern with all his strength. By this time, Cathy had discovered a second bailer in their canoe, one designated as garbage because it was nearly unusable. She covered the holes with her palm and began bailing to lighten the canoe. Dave and Erwin repeatedly threw her a line with a carabiner, which Cathy clipped to heavy packs and barrels in her boat. One at a time, they were pulled across the water to dry land. Once the canoe was empty, Cathy and Rod began hauling their canoe back up upstream over the ledge. The canoe tilted slightly and quickly refilled with water. With the boat heavy again, they began to lose their footing and grasp. When the ropes were on the verge of slipping from their fingers, Dave appeared beside them in time to help pull the canoe back to a safer position. He had crossed the river upstream in the shallower braids and after tying on to a safety rope, had waded towards them in the shallow water along the cliff face. Phew!

So, what about Sara? The stress of not knowing what was going on above must have been excruciating. She had initially believed that she and Rob were the only ones to miss the take-out. She then began seeing bags come over the falls, then a few barrels and finally Erwin and Suzanne's canoe. As it floated past, its painter drifted within arm's reach, and she had the presence of mind to grab it. For a moment, she thought she was preventing the canoe from going further downstream but quickly realized that it was pinned on some rocks just above the second falls. Roland and Katie scrambled down a less steep part of the cliff to throw her a rope which she attached to the canoe painter in her hand. Roland was then able to anchor the canoe to shore.

Although Roland and Katie searched upstream for a place where it might be possible to throw Sara a line and pendu-

lum her to shore, it became obvious that this was not possible. There was only a steep, crumbly slope that had 'accident' written all over it. After some discussion it was determined that the best approach would be to throw her a line from a slightly downstream position. Doing so would require more hands to pull her in quickly – drifting into the ragged rocks downstream would have been bad news. Others soon arrived and with some reluctance, Sara re-entered the water holding the rope and was carried smoothly to shore and into our waiting arms. Amazingly, she was unharmed – not even a scratch. No doubt the increased volume of water had created a smooth ride into the pool below the first falls and landed her almost directly in front of that large smooth rock. To this day, we think of it as "Sara's Rock".

With everyone on dry land, we could turn our attention to retrieving the canoes and gear. Two boats had gone over the falls and one was still stuck in the canyon. Erwin and Suzanne's boat was still pinned downstream from Sara's Rock at the top of the second falls. Although the stern end was secured to shore with a rope on river left, the footing was treacherous so several ropes were daisy-chained together to enable us to pull from a safer vantage point further up the slope. Efforts to dislodge the boat from the rock beneath its bow on river right failed so Dave climbed down to the water's edge to attach a line to the bow. Pulling straight up allowed the canoe to break free. The bow swung out into the current but those on the river left were unable to hold the canoe. Fortunately it was flushed down to where it could be more easily retrieved. This boat sustained some damage to the skid plate and had a small tear under the gunwale.

Rob and Sara's boat was discovered circulating in an eddy on the river right at the base of the waterfall. Some of the gear was still tied in and this had to be removed before we could haul the empty canoe up the cliff. The yoke was broken (the gear that had been attached to it had all gone downstream) and the bow was badly dented but the damage was substantially lighter than expected.

Dave's and my canoe was still stuck in the upper canyon, pinned against the left cliff and some rocks in the middle of the channel. We could see it twisting against the force of the water and a small tear developing. It was still tied to shore on river right (rope 1), but the rock at the stern of the canoe was preventing the canoe from moving. We needed to lift the boat up over it to allow the z-drag to function. The puzzle became how to get a rope to the canoe from the river left when that end of the canoe was totally inaccessible. The solution was for Rob to cross over to the river left with a throw bag, and then throw his rope (rope 2) to Dave, which he then attached with a carabiner to rope 1. Dave tossed the throw bag back and by reeling in rope 2 from river left, Rob was able to wriggle

the carabiner down rope 1 all the way to the canoe. Now we had two ropes to work with!

A lot of people were needed on the river left to pull on this rope in the hope of releasing the canoe – there were no anchors for a z-drag: no trees, no boulders, and only crumbly rock. A first attempt was made to pull the boat up and rope #2 broke in the process, allowing the canoe to drift downriver. This was a lesson that good quality rope is important – not all of our rental throw bags were up to the task. The angle of the remaining rope was readjusted and with Dave now positioned precariously close to the cliff edge to keep the rope off sharp rocks, the stern of the canoe finally lifted off the rock.

Roland and Katie had stayed on river right and attached a z-drag to rope 1, so that they could pull in the canoe if the lifting on river left succeeded in releasing the boat. Amazingly, it worked. As the canoe raced down towards the falls, Katie and Roland reeled in frantically. The line became taut with the weight of the swamped boat, now held by a prusik brake. It was teetering at a 45-degree angle literally on the brink of the falls! This allowed much of the water to spill out (gear had already been flushed) thus lightening it.

To retrieve it from this position, Roland scrambled down the rock wall (with Rod holding a safety line attached to his rescue PFD), clipped another rope onto the canoe's grab loop, and set up yet another z-drag. As the boat was pulled straight back to shore with the z-drag, one of the ropes moved beneath an undercut section of rock that projected from the nearby cliff. Even if the rope didn't fray and sever as we heaved on it, the canoe was unlikely to pass under this undercut. After some discussion, it was decided that pulling the canoe straight up the approximately 7-metre high cliff would be our best option. Hidden behind the undercut rock, a section of canyon wall dipped downwards toward the water with a stepped series of ledges. At the bottom of this natural 'staircase', Dave was put on a rope so that he could lean over to attach another rope (rope #3) to the grab loop on the canoe's stern end. The third z-drag was then installed parallel to the boat and above the cliff this time. The selected anchor point was a half-buried erratic rock so a trench was dug around it to prevent the rope from slipping off. We initially had success in hoisting the canoe partway up the cliff by pulling on rope #3. It could be raised no further however. Rope #1, still attached to the stern of the canoe, was interfering but by releasing tension on it, we were finally able to pull the canoe up the remaining distance to solid ground. There was much celebration but the small tear behind the stern seat was now a gaping slice from the gunwale almost to the keel line. We later wondered if the boat would have been less damaged had it gone over the falls.

After the canoes had been retrieved, we carried the remaining gear down the portage to a landing area below the falls. This would be where we'd camp for two nights. Suzanne and I had been searching below the falls for barrels and gear which had flushed out during the rescues. Most of it was found circulating in the large swirling eddy below the falls. We would wait for a barrel to swing around towards us and then we would reach out to grab it. At one point Suzanne held me as I stretched a bit fur-

ther to grab those just out of my reach. She later toiled for what seemed like hours, hauling the heavy barrels up the crumbling near vertical slope a foot or two at a time. This was a herculean effort as the barrels would have weighed well over half her body weight.

Erwin joined us to help. Several barrels, two pelican cases and a boundary bag had continued a short distance downstream, fairly close to where we would camp. Rod's daypack had been swept downstream but was found when he stepped on it where it lay submerged and hidden among the rocks near the campsite. After a short scouting mission that involved clambering down the shale scree slopes and wading in Divide Creek, we discovered two more food barrels and another boundary bag floating in an eddy below a cliff some 300 metres downstream. We pulled them onto a nearby gravel bar on the river left to recover later when we proceeded down the river. They were too heavy to haul up the somewhat treacherous slope.

That night was probably the most difficult night any of us have ever spent on a trip. We were exhausted, bruised and dejected that our trip might be over before it had really started. So much work goes into planning and preparing for an extended canoe trip that we were reluctant to consider the possibility that it might be over. After setting up the tents, we suggested that Sara begin supper preparations. Our hope was that it would distract her from thoughts of her ordeal and give her time to process it. As she worked away, three Black Feather guides appeared. They had noticed the carnage of our canoes stuck in the canyon while they were flying over earlier in the day. After landing on Divide Lake, they fed their clients and then hiked overland to check on us. Their concern was appreciated but there was little they could do. It was probably 11 at night by this time but still light. As we sat down to eat, the adrenaline finally started to wear off. Dinner that night was a surreal mix of sombre reflection and jubilation. Discussions about how the incident happened and morbid reflections of what else *could* have happened were mixed with incredulity that we had managed to rescue everyone safely, retrieve our boats and locate most of the gear. There would be some degree of alcohol consumption. Maybe it was that, but it really struck me how calm everyone was. We were just extremely grateful to be there eating that meal. We savoured every bite.

As the sun rose over the edge of the

cliffs the next morning, we drank our morning coffee and discussed plans for repairing boats and retrieving the rest of the gear. The repairs would certainly be a challenge but here again, our experience would pay off. Over the years, we've put together quite a complete repair kit. A spool of brass wire that we've been carrying for a long time would finally be put to use. The tear in our canoe stretched from the gunwale almost to the keel and needed to be 'sewn' together. Roland had brought a nail which proved to be very useful. Sara heated it up in a make-shift forge that she created using twigs and small pieces of wood. Taking a plastic support tube from a spray skirt, she blew through it to fan the flame. Once the nail was hot, Dave poked a series of holes through the T-Formex material on either side of the rip. The material melted easily and created clean and sturdy holes for the wire to thread through. He laced it through five times, tightening it each time with a multi-tool. Each round brought the seams closer and closer together until they were tight. The holes were then sealed with Starbrite epoxy putty which comes in a stick and bonds with just about any material, even when wet. It sets in 5 minutes. Over this, he placed two GP-36 Gator Guard Patches. These peel and stick patches are easily molded around curved areas, joints and dents. They are also watertight and impenetrable and cure upon exposure to air and light in under an hour. Red duct tape was placed over the patches simply for aesthetics. The repair was so good that the canoe got us safely down the river to Blackstone Landing without a single leak.

The yoke of Sara and Rob's canoe had been broken and the bow skid plate was a bit bashed in but the damage was lighter than expected. Rob used epoxy to fill the cracks in the bow. Meanwhile, Sara put her talented knife skills to work and whittled a piece of wood to perfectly match the shape of the crack in the yolk. She then epoxied the wood in place and created notches where wire was run to add extra support to the joint. This was a work of art that lasted the remainder of the trip. Erwin also used the epoxy stick to repair a small tear in the hull of his canoe. A bit of duct tape finished the job.

While some worked on boat repair, others mounted an expedition to retrieve the remaining gear. Two barrels, including one of mine, were still missing and would remain so until the expedition parties hiked the ridges and eventually lo-

cated them. Searchers traveled down both sides of Divide Creek below the canyon, using Inreach satellite communication devices to maintain contact. The last piece of gear – Erwin's food barrel – was spotted at the confluence of Divide Creek and the Broken Skull River, using Rob's drone to confirm. Fortunately the flood waters had already started to recede by that point stranding it on a gravel bar. Had it entered the current of the Broken Skull, we may never have found it. A few more pieces of gear, scattered over the 3 km distance from the canyon to the Broken Skull, were spotted by the drone and marked on GPS devices. I cannot begin to express the gratitude I felt at the sight of Cathy and Rod appearing at the rim of the cliff opposite our camp with my barrel in tow and huge smiles on their faces. It contained clothes, sleeping bags and my medication. Although I'd borrowed extra clothes from Cathy and a sleeping bag from Katie and Roland that Dave and I shared, it had been a cold night for all concerned. My main concern was the medication. Without that, my trip was in jeopardy. Regrettably, I had not followed my own advice to Erwin to split up medications between two boats. It was one of those tasks that got forgotten in the rush of setting off on our journey. The joyous reunion with my barrel confirmed that the trip was still on for me and Dave!

As it turned out, we were fortunate to lose very little gear – an empty net bag, Suzanne's small backpack and one of Erwin's chairs that he'd strapped to the outside of a barrel. Rob's Go Pro had unfortunately come off of its mount when he ended up in the river and, sadly, we lost our firebox. Inexplicably we found and retrieved the fuel can that had been stored inside it. It should be noted that although we normally tie all of our gear into the canoes using straps, we had not done so that fateful day due to the proximity of the portage. This was a happy circumstance as it turned out – any hope of rescuing fully loaded boats would have been futile.

Now that we had boats, most of our gear and the location of the remaining barrels, our journey could continue. We set out the next morning just as the Black Feather group appeared over the portage. Divide Creek was beautiful in the sun

and the swallows were very happy to send us on our way. The creek proved tricky in spots but everyone made it through with finesse and only a small degree of lining. The smiles on our faces reflected renewed confidence. We reached the Broken Skull River by afternoon and celebrated that we could finally begin our trip in earnest.

The Broken Skull proved to be an absolute delight to paddle. As advertised, its clear waters and continuous rapids were just sheer fun. The mountain scenery was stunning but the landscape was often so saturated with smoke that nearby mountains blurred completely out of sight. On some days, we even needed to wear masks. Upon reaching Virginia Falls on the Nahanni, we hiked down to the lip of the falls and experienced the overwhelming magnificence of that place. The climb up Sunblood Mountain proved to be a little disappointing though. What is normally a spectacular view of the falls was almost completely obliterated by smoke. On the upside, the typically busy campground was very quiet. No planes had been able to fly in because of the smoke. We had the river almost completely to ourselves until we reached the end of the trip.

Dave and I had paddled the Nahanni before from the Moose Ponds but had forgotten how awesome a river it really is. We were all mesmerized by the beauty of the place; our necks became stiff from constantly looking up the canyon walls in wonder. The view from the top of "the Gate" was breathtaking. Several days before the end of our journey, we made a special pilgrimage to the 'Cabin of a Thousand Paddles' in Deadman Valley. Tradition has it that each group passing through hangs a paddle listing names of its participants. Once again Sara deployed her artistic skills and carved an exquisite paddle. She and Katie then decorated it with a scene commemorating our struggle at Swallow Falls. The cracked gunwales of two of the rental canoes had led to the refrain 'Sorry about the gunwales!". The phrase would become an anthem for us and was faithfully inscribed onto the paddle. It almost seemed a shame to leave it behind.

So…. back to our story of Swallow Falls. In Cathy's words, our situation changed rapidly (pun intended) and dramatically from the serenity of Divide Lake to the danger and carnage at Swallow Canyon. It amounted to: 2 minutes of inattention when the portage pullout was overlooked, 5 minutes of carnage, 10 hours of rescue, and 24 - 48 hours of gear repair and recovery. How did this happen, especially to such an "'experienced'" group? We talked about it a lot in the days that followed.

I was later contacted by the park safety officer after we returned home. He wanted to know if there was anything that park staff could do to prevent another accident at Swallow Falls. I noted the shortcomings of the official Nááts'įhch'oh National Park Guide at the water levels we experienced. A reference to the bend in the creek just above the falls would be extremely helpful. Likewise, a description of the portage location in high water would be invaluable. Nevertheless, despite our rather traumatic experience, we feel that a sign indicating its presence would not be welcome. It's best to leave this spectacular setting as natural as possible.

All of this said, we still take full responsibility for the incident. Perhaps it was hubris and overconfidence that led us astray. The excitement and adrenaline at finally starting the trip probably contributed as well. Looking at the aerial photos we took after the fact, we won-

dered how on earth we could have missed the point where Divide Creek joined in with Cold Feet Creek. The overwhelming feeling of the group was, and still is, one of embarrassment. In fact, the very experience level of the group may have played a role: We didn't have a leader. Everyone assumed that everyone else was navigating. We all followed the boat in front of us without questioning. These turned out to be humbling errors. The safety officer confirmed our theory by noting that in his view, such a mistake is perhaps most likely to happen among a relaxed, experienced group of paddlers on a self-guided trip. It had in fact happened to him.

We have (re-)learned many important lessons: Start every trip and every day by reviewing the route. Treat even the most "benign" moving water with the seriousness it deserves. Don't be complacent about doing up dry suits and PFDs and put helmets on even if you're only going to paddle 2 km to a portage. Take high water seriously. Keep whitewater technical rescue skills up to date. Carry the makings of a de-pinning kit (biners, pulleys, prusiks) in your lifejacket, along with your satellite device, because in an accident, your canoe might be unreachable. Buy a rescue PDF with a quick-release belt – we had two on our trip and they were both essential. When there is potential danger ahead, the most experienced team should go first. Review paddle signals before setting off. Always be aware of where you are – we were having too much fun racing around in the braids and didn't realize we were so close to the falls. Load all waypoints, landmarks and danger spots into your GPS — and check it! Restock your repair kit – you never know when you'll need it.

While we averted a worse disaster, our mistakes were still costly – literally. Even though the repairs were solid, we ended up having to pay Up North Adventures for the replacement of two canoes and further repair of a third. This came to the tune of just under $8000. Yet looking back, there were so many positives to come out of the incident at Swallow Falls. In Cathy's words "During the chaos, I never imagined it would be possible to salvage our trip from that degree of danger and carnage… for everyone to get through unharmed, to recover all essential medication, food and gear, and repair each of our boats! We took care of people first, and then stuff. It is remarkable that we never had to send an

SOS on our Garmins. First and foremost, I am profoundly grateful for the extraordinary good luck that protected each of us from harm and that underpinned many aspects of our recovery. While fully appreciating the crucial role of good fortune, I'm also extremely grateful to and proud of our group. Every one of us contributed in crucial ways. I never heard an angry word or saw fingers pointed in blame. We just came together to identify what needed to happen, brainstorm how best to do so, and then got to it. By collaborating and using all of our rescue gear, knowhow, training, and experience – not to mention a prolonged ration of strength, determination, courage, and adrenaline – we managed to keep putting one foot in front of the other."

We did indeed learn a lot about ourselves and the collective power of working together in a wilderness setting where it was totally up to us to get ourselves out of trouble. There is great pride in the fact that we accomplished this. In the end, there were no recriminations, just appreciation for the role that each person played in our recovery. No one panicked. Oddly enough, most of us did not even recall being afraid in the moment. I truly believe that our experience and training kicked in when a less experienced group in rescue and repair techniques might have called for an evacuation.

We're bonded now in a way that can only be accomplished through facing adversity together. We talked frequently about the little miracles that happened and Erwin's refrain of "Never say never!" has become a bit of a mantra for him. Albert Einstein once said that adversity introduces us to ourselves. That's when you find out who you really are. There's much truth in that. What we are is a group of individuals who managed to control our fear, work together as a team and get out of an extremely dangerous situation, admittedly of our own making. What we are is a group of friends who supported each other during a difficult time and were able to set the incident aside to enjoy the rest of a truly remarkable trip down two of the most breathtakingly magnificent rivers in Canada.

A number of people in our group contributed to the writing of this story by sending me their recollections and photographs. They were Roland Paris, Robert James, Cathy Rogers, Erwin Ellen, Dave Robinson and Sara Gartland. Thank you all!

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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.

39th Wilderness and Canoe Symposium

The last in-person Symposium took place in 2020, on a cold February day before most of us knew or understood the meaning of the word "Covid". What we do know, today, is how much we missed the incidental chats in the line-up for coffee and muffins, the deep silence of 500 people listening to riveting stories, the wild-goose-honk of George Luste's time signal horn, the sense of community, connection, joy, and passion for our people and the adventures we have shared.

So it is with full hearts and winds at our back that we are thrilled to announce that WCS is back on in-person!

The event will take place on 24th February between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. at York University in Toronto. Program will feature ten speakers and will include live music performance by Jerry Vandiver and Caitlin Evanson.

Speaker's Podium will be shared by Cat (Mark) Criger, Dave Greene, David & Dawne Robinson, David Pelly, Dan Wong, Jim and Charlie Boon, Pat Lewtas, Lee Sessions, Carolyn Hyslop and Jeremy Ward, Matthew Boyd.

Visit WCS website www.wcsymposium.com or WCS FB page for more details, or contact Aleks Gusev at aleks.gusev@gmail.com

Time To Renew Your Membership

Our members are from all over the world, concentrated mostly in North America.

If you search for "YouTube-How to renew your WCA membership", you'll find the video that will walk you through the online process. Cost is $45 for a single membership and $60 for a family membership, valid for one year. Multiple year option is also available.

Single membership includes:

- Regular email communications about club activities to one email address
- Access to members-only section of the WCA website
- Ability to organize and/or participate in club outings, events and social activities

- Preference for access to outings that are full (members have preference over non/members & guests)
- Nastawgan journal
- Ability to access and post in forum discussions
- Access to WCA map library (ability to sign out maps)
- Ability to bring one guest on up-to-2 outings per year
- Partner match (ability to find partners for club outings)
- One vote at AGM
- Insurance coverage for trip organizers (under club liability insurance)

Family membership includes:

Everything included in a Single Membership plus

- Ability to bring your spouse and children who are age 21 and younger (who are living with you at the same residence) to any club outings and events in which you are participating. Contact membership@wildernesscanoe.ca to obtain a "family member" profile for your partner.
- Ability to add up to 10 family names and emails that you want to receive WCA announcements
- One vote per family member at AGM

No, I don't smoke or The wrongest possible answer

by Carsten Iwers

In preparation for a trip down the Elk and Thelon Rivers in 2013, Ellen, a Cree elder and recent acquaintance offered to help me with my last-minute errands. As lunchtime drew closer, we settled down at the Crusty Bun in Winnipeg, and when Ellen spotted Winston, another Cree elder, we were soon all chatting casually while enjoying our meal. In the course of the conversation, Winston asked me if I took any tobacco along on my trip, but my terse reply "No, I don't smoke" wasn't really what he had in mind. No wonder the subject was dropped after my brainless answer. Some time later, the washroom called for a visit and upon my return I found a pack of tobacco next to my plate on the table. Winston then introduced me to the First Nations' tradition of tobacco offerings, and our lunch ended with my promise to make good use of it. We parted, I got the rest of my supplies, and the next day saw me flying to Kasba Lake Lodge and onwards, out to Damant Lake.

At first I felt a little helpless with that pack of tobacco in my kit. Not having been brought up overly religious or superstitious, I wasn't sure how to keep the promise given. However, after a few days of mulling it over, and since there are not many people to talk to on a solo trip, I started talking to the elements – the water, the wind, the sun and the land. I asked to be spared by the rapids, asked for benevolent winds, for less – and at times – for more sun, for a good campsite, always offering each of the four "addressees" a pinch of tobacco. Most of the time my offerings were accepted and I was given ample opportunity to express my gratitude the next day. This became a daily routine before setting sail for the rest of the trip – and for every other trip thereafter. After a week of this practice I started noticing a difference within myself, a change of mindset. This recurring ritual seemed to fortify my mindfulness and reminded me constantly that my safe passage, out there, was dependent on forces beyond my control, dependent on the grace of the elements. I noticed that I became more prudent, more aware, more attentive. And it may be of no surprise that from then on I reached my destinations unscathed, usually well ahead of schedule, dodging major mishaps and without ever having to rush. I have kept this ritual and will always be grateful to Winston for his guidance – to a rite to jog my memory, as well as to create opportunities for thankfulness. Years later, I came across a noteworthy 400-year-old quote by Sir Francis Bacon to capture the importance of the latter: "It is not happy people who are thankful. It is thankful people who are happy."

WCA YouTube Channel

We thought it would be appropriate to remind members to check out the club's YouTube channel. You can easily find it when you google "Wilderness Canoe Association YouTube channel" and/or navigate to this link: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_dgYg7NV2FIkOdKG2ru6pw/videos

Several weeks ago the WCA YouTube channel fulfilled the requirements to be monetized, and will start to pay the club depending on how much traffic we generate. It would be awesome if you can help by watching posted content, and get others to watch them. If you like what you see, we ask that you engage by selecting the "Like", "Subscribe" and "Alert" buttons. Feel free to share our video links on your Facebook page and other social media accounts.

We are also always looking for club members' content. If you would like to add your content contact us at info@wildernesscanoe.ca

The Thelon and the Man

A Friend Remembers Alex Hall

by David F. Pelly

The early years on the Thelon

The very word "Thelon" stirs an awakening in the heart and soul, down to the very boots, of almost every Canadian wilderness traveller, most especially canoeists. If they have not been there, they have dreamed of it.

So, too, in different ways, it has long been an alluring place for the Indigenous peoples whose territories lie to either side. For the Cree to the south, it was the far-off land inhabited by the *Otchipiweons*. For the Chipewyan, the *Ethen-Eldili-Dene*, the "caribou-eaters," it was the place for summer hunting and, as cited in Jim Raffan's thesis, "the place where God began." For the Inuit beyond the trees, close to where the mighty river spills its 150,000-square-kilometre drainage into Hudson Bay, the upper Thelon was largely beyond the reach of their collective knowledge, but nonetheless known to be a source of wood and food.

At the heart of all this is the Thelon Sanctuary, created in 1927, one of the oldest and largest protected parcels of true wilderness in the world. When you are in the very centre of that sanctuary, you are nearly 500 km from the closest modern community in any direction. You are much farther from the closest road than it is possible to be anywhere else in continental North America. (In the lower 48 of the US, the maximum achievable distance from a road is 20 km.)

In our lifetime, the one man who

Alex and David, old friends, walking the esker, Sept 2018

Alex with his sons and a small group of friends, departing for his last trip in 2018

knew this place better than anyone else alive, who felt connected to it from his very core, was Alex Hall. His first trip there was in 1971, when he paddled the full length of the Hanbury-Thelon to Baker Lake. In 1974, he paddled the full length of the Thelon itself, from Lynx Lake to Baker Lake. He'd fallen totally in love, and soon quit his office job down south, to become the North's first licensed canoe trip guide. Canoe Arctic Inc. was his sole livelihood from 1977 until his death in 2019. Every single one of those years, he spent most of his summer in the Thelon country. In his book, *Discovering Eden*, he wrote: "The Barren Lands have become my religion, my church; they're sacred ground. I worship them. My soul is there."

Compared with Alex, I was a Johnny-come-lately. My first trip on the Hanbury-Thelon was in 1984. Like Alex, I was smitten, and returned many times. Occasionally, he and I would arrange to meet "out there" at some place along the river, for a visit. For several years, that was the only way we saw each other. I had known him for some years, before ever visiting him at home in Fort Smith, NWT. (Although one could easily argue that he was more "at home" in the Thelon country.) Over the winter, for many years, until two days before he died, we spoke often on the phone. During the summers, habitually, between trips Alex would phone to report on what he'd seen during the previous trip. (He kept detailed notes of his observations.) And during his off-season months, Alex loved to write long, rambling letters. It was a friendship like no other I have known. For a few years in the 1990s, we fought together to save the Thelon wilderness, a battle which – with support from many quarters, most significantly the people of Lutsel K'e and Qamani'tuaq – ended in success for the Sanctuary, and brought us even closer as friends. Alex was a man like no other I have known.

Clarke River

On every flight in or out of the barrenlands, to start or end one of his guided canoe trips, always at low level, Alex studied the land below intensely, always on the lookout for new routes or appealing eskers or potential wolf dens. On one of those flights, back in the '80s, Alex examined a fairly short but significant tributary to the Thelon which he had seen on the map, but which, so far as he knew, no one had ever paddled. Thereafter, Alex considered it his secret "discovery," as a canoeist. He soon took clients to the Clarke River, but did not advertise it by name, and swore his guests to secrecy. Of course, in time, that covenant was broken; Alex never forgave the culprit.

One of the remarkable features of the Clarke is its bedrock geology, comprising what is known by geologists as the classic Thelon Basin, but nonetheless unique. That was part of its appeal for Alex; he put a photo of it on the cover of his book *Discovering Eden*, although, of course, the book does not reveal *where* the photo was taken. The Thelon Basin is one of several large quartz-dominated continental sedimentary basins developed on top of Paleoproterozoic and Archean (4.0 to 1.6-billion-year-old) rocks of the Canadian Shield. (Geologists wax eloquently about this place, but in case detrital zircons are not your thing, I will spare you the details.) Suffice to say, the rocks are old, and the cliff formations sometimes breathtaking.

There are also eskers aplenty, unbelievable eskers, remarkably beautiful eskers. On one of those eskers, which snakes across the tundra between the

Clarke River

Clarke and the Elk Rivers, at the very heart of Alex Hall's favourite parcel of wilderness, his favourite place in the world, there is a tiny cairn to mark the spot where the remains of this great man now lie. Just months before he died, together with a few close friends and his two sons, we flew there from Fort Smith so Alex could visit the spot and show us where he wanted to be in the end, "so my body and spirit will remain part of the Barren Lands forever." (To see Alex enjoying his last walk on the esker, and pointing out the very spot, watch the film "Discovering Eden," link below.)

Dene tradition refers to the rock as "Grandfather" – a mark of respect and reverence for the eons of knowledge and experience it is believed the rocks store within. They have seen so much over the course of their "lifetimes." Perhaps one could interpret this notion as a deference born of geological time, as the power of geological forces, and of the very land in which every contour is the result of that power. None more so than the eskers, those long, beguiling, sinuous rivers of glacial till and sand. There is surely a sense of wonder and wisdom underlying that. No one in Alex' lifetime knew this place better, or felt its wonder in the same way, or embodied such wisdom in the ways of Nature on this land. How fitting then that he will lie for eternity among the rocks out there in the Thelon country. For my generation of barrenlands canoeists, he is the grandfather.

All of this to say, again, that Alex Hall had an affinity, even a passionate love, for the Clarke (and a couple of other rivers) that went way beyond anything I've ever seen from anyone else. He was a part of that land. Over the course of a lifetime, he came to know it better than anyone else alive.

I remember well, in one of the many telephone chats we had during the months we both knew were his last, he was bursting with excitement to tell me he had found his successor, someone to take over Canoe Arctic. He had just met Dan Wong, a young Yellowknife-raised man with a passion for the outdoors and for canoeing in particular. Alex knew within minutes that he could "trust" his cherished places to Dan. He decided on the spot to hand over two summers' worth of booked clients, his maps and detailed notes, plus all his NWT licenses, including the Clarke and his other two favourites, the Elk and the Baillie. Thus, Jackpine Paddle blossomed overnight, with an inherited responsibility to sustain a legacy. Dan Wong takes this seriously.

Early in 2022, Dan called to say he was organizing a trip on the Clarke River as a tribute to Alex. There'd be a filmmaker, he said, to record some of Alex' special places along the river, and the memories from those of us who knew him and his river well. I could not say No, of course. So, in the summer of 2022, Laurie and I and a scattering of Canoe Arctic ex-clients joined Jackpine Paddle's "invitational" Clarke River trip: 12 days to cover a stretch of river that, when I last paddled it, took me 26 days. (I've long preferred to travel in a leisurely manner, with multiple days "off" for hiking.)

It was a treat to return, at this stage of life, to a place that I love. It is still the purist wilderness you will ever see, "as big and wild and remote as you can get"

the way Alex saw it … and "the most exciting place left on this Earth." The wildlife population has diminished: the muskox have largely moved out of the sanctuary; the barren ground caribou population has been decimated; there are relatively few wolves. But the land, and the Grandfathers, are essentially undisturbed, preserved as ever, able to nurture the soul of a passing traveller who lingers long enough to tap into the eons of knowledge.

For me, it was the first time in 45 years of barrenlands paddling that I was not the trip leader, or that I travelled with a guide and outfitter who attended to the details of a purely recreational canoe trip. It was not difficult to adjust to the lack of responsibility and the relatively light work load. Nor was it a challenge to enjoy the remarkably good meals that Dan and his partner Caitlyn served on a daily basis (trip food may be the one element of Alex' legacy not worth preserving). For the record, they also provided a well-organized trip, safely guided a group which included novice paddlers, and did everything in their power to make sure the group "clicked" comfortably as a team. We all, quite simply, had fun. All that was good, and I would recommend Jackpine Paddle to anyone looking to join an outfitted canoe trip in the Thelon country. But most memorable for me was the real admiration for and loyalty to Alex which someone four decades younger could display, along with a palpable respect for his legacy. It was genuine, to be sure, and will no doubt serve Dan well for many years to come. He is paddling in the wake of a giant.

As well known as the Thelon is, and as much as we canoeists may dream of a trip there, "grandfather" Alex Hall's connection to the land and the rivers of the Thelon country is beyond comparison in our lifetime. Nor will it ever be matched, I predict. His own words, to his family and to me, just before he died, say it well: "I am the most fortunate person in the world. I had the best job in the world, in the best place in the world. I loved almost every single minute of it!"

David Pelly literally "wrote the book" on the Thelon, as they say. His *Thelon: A River Sanctuary* was published in 1996, and still sells steadily, although it will soon go out of print. Alex Hall called it "a classic!" It remains a must-read for those planning (or dreaming of) a canoe trip in Thelon country. Most of the remaining inventory of books is at either Dundurn Press or the Yellowknife Book Cellar. David's most recent book is *The Ancestors Are Happy*, a collection of stories rooted in the Arctic landscape, a contemplation on the old tales and wisdom of the "grandfathers." For a recent long-form interview, on his northern career, visit: *Into the Arctic:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27mQq93_vSA
www.DavidPelly.com

Alex, looking out across the barrenlands one last time

Other Resources

A recent documentary about Alex Hall is a must-see for all canoeists. It is now available online on YouTube. Search for "Discovering Eden" or go to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vRje7h0rnQ

To listen again to Monte Hummel's stirring tribute to Alex Hall at the 2019 Wilderness & Canoe Symposium, go to: Tribute to Alex Hall – YouTube

For CBC coverage re Alex Hall, go to: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/alex-hall-thelon-tours-continue-1.5208977

You can read or download Alex' book, *Discovering Eden*, for free, at: https://jackpinepaddle.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Discovering-Eden-1-1.pdf

For information about Jackpine Paddle: https://jackpinepaddle.com/

For a short 4-minute preview of the Clarke-Thelon River, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLl0NmHTqkA

Dan Wong 2022

…in this issue

WCA Governance Structure

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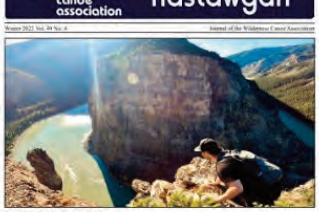

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