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*Drop at Elliot Lake*

## Sideways In The Yukon

By Chris and John Lepard

In the summer of 2023 John and I would be celebrating 30 years of canoeing – more than 45 trips with more than half north of 60. We had paddled almost 23,000 km together. To mark the occasion, we decided on a return trip to the Hart River in the northern Yukon. We had paddled the Hart in 2016 and it had been a great trip. The Hart is part of the Peel River system. Most

groups fly into Elliot Lake and navigate down Elliot Creek for about 24 kilometers where it joins the Hart. From here it is a 290 kilometer trip to the confluence with the Peel. Take out is another 10 km down the Peel. We planned on a month-long leisurely trip, with lots of time to explore, hike, and just soak in the grandeur of the wilderness.



**Camp Elliot Lake**

Summer of 2023 was also the year of massive wildfires across Canada. It was, therefore, with some trepidation that, in mid-July, I checked the Yukon Fire Status website (<https://wildfires.service.yukon.ca>) and also the smoke forecast map, (<https://firesmoke.ca/forecasts/current>). I was very relieved to see that although there were fires burning in the southern Yukon, there were none in

the vicinity of the Hart River or Peel watershed. And miraculously this area was also one of the very few smoke-free regions in Canada. This meant the trip was a go. It was time to ship our gear and pakboat to the Alkan Air float plane base in Mayo, Yukon, from where we would be flown to Elliot Lake. We have been using Manitoulin Transport to ship our gear and boat north for over 15 years.



**Starting down Elliot Creek**

Manitoulin is one of the few companies that will transport personal items (not insured), and they have depots in most northern cities. This is a very economical and stress-free way to get our gear, pakboat, clothes and some food, north. For this trip we shipped 350 lb. in four large rubber tubs from Sudbury, Ontario to Mayo, Yukon – and return – for under \$1,000.

At the end of July, just a few days before we were to leave for Whitehorse (our shipment had already arrived in Mayo) I checked the fire status again and was very dismayed to see that there were 13 new fires burning in the Yukon. One fire was just outside of Mayo and there were several in the northern region. The smoke forecast map showed lots of smoke blanketing the entire north including the Peel watershed. With some unease we decided not to cancel the trip. Our gear was already in Mayo, our flights had been paid for, and the dog sitters would be arriving shortly to stay at our cottage and look after our two standard poodles. We decided to go, stay positive, and make the best of the trip. A lot could change over a month.

We arrived in Whitehorse on August 4th. There was smoke but it didn't seem too bad. Visibility was good. We had rented a vehicle for the month. We would drive it to Mayo, park it at the float plane base, and drive it back to Whitehorse at the end of our trip. This was actually cheaper than a shuttle and gave us lots of flexibility. After arriving we did some last-minute shopping in Whitehorse and spent the night at the Yukon Inn. It was threadbare but clean.

The next day, August 5th, was a beautiful sunny day and the smoke was light. It was a leisurely 5-hour drive to Mayo. As we got closer to the town the smoke became denser. As soon as we arrived at the Alkan Air float plane base an employee immediately came out of the office and told us our float plane was ready to go . . . and, oh, by the way, Mayo was on evacuation alert. A recent lightning strike had started a fire just south of Mayo, across the Stewart River. Southerly winds were fanning the fire towards Mayo. Glenn, a very helpful Alkan employee, suggested we park our vehicle where there was lots of green grass and nowhere near the brush pile . . . just in



case the fire crossed the river! Our thoughts were – OMG, what if our rental vehicle burns up while we are on the river!

Glenn also told us that there had been no appreciable rain for over 3 weeks. The Stewart River was at historically low levels. Yikes! What would the water levels be like on Elliot Creek? On our prior trip it took us 4 days to navigate down the creek but it was fun. There was plenty of water to float our pakboat. We did considerable walking, but we were also able to paddle many sections. I had my fingers crossed that we would not be walking the entire 24 kilometers down the creek this time!

We were worried, nevertheless we loaded our gear and pakboat into the Beaver (#56) and flew out as scheduled at 4 pm. Normally the flight into the mountains is spectacular with ever-changing, eye-popping vistas. Our flight this time was shrouded in smoke which became denser as we approached our destination. When we landed at Elliot Lake, even the pilot was taken aback by the amount of smoke. He dropped us off at an unoccupied hunt camp. The mountain directly behind the camp was visible, however Castle Mountain across the lake was almost completely hidden by smoke.

By the time we set up camp and assembled the pakboat it was 9 p.m. and getting dark. We were too tired to cook a meal and just had cheese, crackers and chips. A mug of wine helped relax us after what had turned out to be quite a stressful day.

August 6th. The next morning dawned a beautiful sunny day. Unfortunately, a brisk south wind blew in lots of smoke. The mountains and landscape across the lake were barely visible. We debated canceling the trip and calling for a pick-up. I used the inReach to text Alkan Air and get an update on the fire situation. It was a relief to find out that there were no fires burning in our immediate area. Yukon Wildfire was committed to saving the float plane base plus they expected the southerly wind fanning the fire would change direction in a few days. This information plus the water level of Elliot Lake (which seemed about the same as on our last trip) gave us the confidence



**First Camp Elliot Creek**

to proceed.

It took us a while to organize our gear and load the boat. We started across the lake around 12:30 p.m. and entered the creek soon after. The water level of the creek was very low – much lower than in 2016 – and very soon we were walking and dragging the heavily loaded boat.

The 17' pakboat with our gear and food for a month weighed about 450 lb.

The pakboat is great in moving water, but with the rubber hull has absolutely no glide. Plus, although the hull is fairly rigid supported by an aluminum frame, there is a certain amount of “bath tubbing”, i.e. the bottom of the boat has a certain amount of sag when it is heavily loaded. Although we tried to stay positive, it was hard work moving the boat down the creek. By 5 p.m. we were tired



**Smoky morning start**





**Day 3 down the Creek**

and ready to quit for the day. Unfortunately, we could find no workable campsites. The creek was surrounded by swamp grass and huge hummocky vegetation. Finally, at 7:30 we found a flat mud-grass area to accommodate our two tents.

For the last few years we have been traveling with two tents. Our sleeping

tent is a Eureka El Capitan and the second tent is a cheap, light-weight Canadian Tire tent which we use as a rain/bug shelter and also to store our packs and gear. This cheap tent is a great alternative to a tarp. It goes up in 10 minutes, and provides excellent protection from the weather and bugs.

It was very hard work today dragging

and walking the canoe over countless mini rapids that were too shallow to float the boat. Occasionally we even moved rocks to clear a path downstream. We only covered 5 km today and at least 1 ½ km of that was on Elliot Lake. We were grateful for the good weather although it continued to be very smoky. We laid out our boots and dry suit pants to dry when we arrived and within the hour, they, as well as our tents, were covered in ash.

By the time we were set up it was 9:30 p.m. We were both exhausted. It was cheese, crackers and wine once again for supper.

August 7th It was a cold night and a cold morning when we crawled out of the tent at 7 a.m. The land was shrouded in mist and smoke. The creek beside our camp was no more than a babbling brook. I knew we would be starting the day by dragging the canoe, but hoped there would be some opportunities to actually paddle. Unfortunately, it was another very challenging day. The creek did widen, however there were lots of boulder rapids – all too shallow to run.

Our goal was Km 10, a site where we had camped on our previous trip. However, by 8 p.m. we were only at Km 9. It was going to be dark soon and we were exhausted and demoralized. It appeared there was no end in sight to the dragging, and the mountains were barely visible through the thick veil of smoke. Very luckily, when we just could not go any further there was a flat, meadow-like area up on the bank. It took us another hour to hoist our heavy packs and the boat up the 5' bank and inland to the meadow. The sun set just as we finished setting up camp. Again, we were too tired to cook and had another meal of cheese, crackers and wine.

August 8th. It was another beautiful, sunny (but smoky) morning. Last night we decided to stop and make camp by 5 p.m. no matter how much distance we had covered. The gruelling physical effort plus no decent meals was not sustainable. We had a month and we would just take however long was necessary to get down Elliot Creek without hurting ourselves. Unfortunately, we are no longer young people. And although my 95-year-old uncle insists age is just a number, there is no avoiding the loss of strength and impairment to joints, when



**Twilight end of Day 3**



you get to be our age.

We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of camp coffee and instant oatmeal with re-constituted strawberries before humping our packs and boat back down to the creek. It was an awkward put-in because of the high bank but there was no worry the canoe would float away as one heavy pack anchored it to the creek bottom. Although the creek widened and it should have been a fun run, the water was very low. It took 2 hours to travel ½ km. I felt like crying! However, when faced with the inevitable there is only one thing to do – put your head down and go forward. I walked in front of the canoe looking for the best route and cleared rocks as we went. I cleared and dragged and John pushed.

After a lunch break, we entered a very



*More dragging Day 4*



*Finally a hot meal*





**Day 5 walking the creek**

narrow section of the creek with deep, fast water. Finally, we were able to paddle – but only for a few hundred metres. True to our commitment, we started looking for a campsite at 5 p.m. After an hour of checking out possible spots we came upon a dried stream bed that would accommodate our 2 tents. We should be safe unless the creek rose a couple of feet – which was highly unlikely. Distance

covered today was only 3 km.

We spread out our wet clothes and gear to dry and proceeded to set up camp. We were enjoying the more relaxing pace when I noticed a huge black cloud coming our way. We barely had time to throw our loose gear into the supply tent before the storm bore down on us, bringing high wind, driving rain and fierce lightning. We hunkered down in

the supply tent, read our books and hoped the storm would pass quickly and we wouldn't be hit by lightning. An hour later the calm returned and we fired up our stove and cooked a delicious KD dinner with canned salmon. Our first hot meal in 4 days.

August 9th. When I crawled out of the tent this morning, I could see the mountains. It was a beautiful, sunny morning and a lot of the smoke had cleared. Water levels were a bit higher and we were able to walk the canoe for long stretches without dragging. Made steady progress until we became hung up on a wide ridge of rocks that spanned the entire creek. It took almost an hour to clear the rocks (some more like boulders) and drag the canoe to deeper water. After this section we encountered a stretch of deeper, faster water and were actually able to paddle some longer runs.

It was a very hot day and we were roasting in our dry suit pants, but they were an essential part of our walking-in-the-water attire. Past experience had taught us that wearing water sandals or water shoes to walk in ice cold water was extremely unpleasant. In recent years we have worn dry suit pants with feet and neoprene boots. Inside the pants we wear double socks. This combination keeps our feet warm and dry, plus the dry suit pants allow for walking in deeper water.

We were making good progress when we heard thunder and saw a bank of dark storm clouds coming over the mountains. Although it was 4 p.m. and we had only covered 3 km, we decided to set up camp ASAP and once again, luck was with us and we came upon a great spot almost immediately. I do not want to paddle in a thunderstorm. Lightning scares me silly!

The take-out was straightforward and we were able to set up camp quickly. Once again, a fierce storm assaulted our tents – high wind, driving rain and lots of lightning. I recalled how most of the forest fires in the Yukon had been started by lightning. It stormed until 10 p.m. and again we had cheese, crackers and wine in the supply tent. Thankfully the supply tent is a completely waterproof shelter. We sat in our chairs and read our kindles.

Before the storm began, I tied a bag of wine at the water's edge. When I retrieved the bag at 10 p.m. the water level



**Obstacles on Elliot Creek**





### ***Approaching storm***

had risen by two feet. This was great news. Perhaps we would actually be able to escape Elliot Creek!

August 10th. A nice morning with heavy mist and sadly lots of smoke. The creek now narrowed and the water was deeper. We were able to paddle many sections but also had to frequently walk the canoe past tree obstacles in the water. We stopped for lunch at 2 p.m. but once again saw dark clouds heading our way. Thunder warned us of an impending storm.

Our goal for the day was Km 19 – a large gravel bar site we had used on our previous trip. It was 1 ½ km from our current location. We decided to make a run for it and arrived just before the storm descended on us. We had time to set up the supply tent but then unloaded the canoe in hard rain, stashing all our gear safely in the tent.

The storm was very intense and there was an inordinate amount of lightning.

One brilliant strike was so close we heard it sizzle, then POP. John said “That’s interesting,” but I nearly peed my pants. Never in all our northern paddling experiences (all later in the season) have there been so many fierce thunderstorms. We fervently hoped all this lightning would not cause another forest fire!

Around 6 p.m. the storm finally moved upriver. We set up camp and made a hot meal of chicken. It had been a good day but we were exhausted from the physical work and stress of all the storms. We retired to the tent by 9 p.m. and soon heard another storm approaching. Soon our tent was battered once again by high winds and driving rain. I lay awake for a couple of hours hoping we would survive the lightning.

August 11th. This is our 7th day on Elliot Creek and we are only 5 km from the Hart River. It is taking a long time but we are getting there. It was a pleasant, sunny day. Slow going down the

creek but we made steady progress. Mostly we walked and lined the canoe as there were many tree obstacles in the water.

Shortly after 5 p.m., we decided to stop at an expansive gravel bar with a great view and lots of wood. We were planning to have a relaxing evening and make a pizza over a wood fire. I had been thinking about pizza all day and was looking forward to a delicious hot meal. We set up camp under sunny skies, gathered and cut wood. As I started assembling the pizza it started to thunder. Looking south over the mountains – sure enough there were the black clouds heading our way. John stashed our wood under the canoe and we once again hunkered down in the supply tent.

The fierce storm with torrential rain, high winds and almost constant lightning lasted until 9:30 p.m. After waiting another 30 minutes to make sure another storm was not coming our way, we made





**Breaking camp Day 6**

a fire and cooked the pizza.... Chicken pizza with Swiss cheese, mushrooms and homemade crust. It was delicious and we sure needed the calories.

August 12th It was a beautiful clear day. Blue skies and no smoke. The creek twisted and turned and was filled with many hazards. We paddled some but mostly lined and walked the canoe. In one particularly dangerous spot the creek

narrowed to flow through a wood-choked channel. Luckily the shallow water allowed John to line this section. It seemed to take forever to cover the final, short 1-2 km distance to the Hart. It felt like we were in the Twilight Zone! Would we never get off Elliot Creek?

Lining and walking in the water around obstacles became trickier as the stream bottom stones were covered in

slippery algae. In one turbulent spot John tried to maneuver the canoe around a sweeper and slipped into the water becoming totally soaked – even under his dry suit pants. Since we were now less than half a kilometer from the Hart he opted to keep going.

After another hour we finally, finally reached the Hart. After 8 days of very hard work, we made it and it felt great. John took the opportunity to change into dry clothes and we had a late lunch. We planned to paddle about 5 km to a great campsite we had used in 2016. However, we weren't on the river very long when I spotted a huge black cloud in the distance. Well #@!#%\$!! John was not wearing his rain pants and his dry suit pants were soaked. We needed to find a campsite ASAP and get the supply tent set up.

Soon we spotted a large gravel bar which was perfect. We landed and it was a scramble to get the tent set up and the boat unloaded. High winds threatened to blow away the supply tent until we weighed it down with our still very heavy packs. John donned his rain pants and nothing was soaked including John. We just had time to set up our main tent before it started to rain. After a 30-minute blustery rain storm we had a short reprieve and then it rained all evening. However, we did get a fire going to cook our cheesy broccoli soup with buns. The soup took forever to boil but nevertheless it was delicious and our stomachs groaned from too much food. We were very thankful to finally be on the river and enjoy an evening without pyrotechnical lightning, even though we had constant rain.

August 13th. It was a cold morning with variable clouds and a brief light sprinkle. We had a leisurely breakfast enjoying the decent weather and good conversation. We didn't get on the water until 12:30 p.m. Yikes!

The first couple of hours was a relaxed paddle on the slow, emerald green water. Many gorgeous mountain vistas were reflected in the almost flat water. There were countless photo ops. To save time we ate our lunch as we floated downstream. Around Km 40 the river began to steadily increase in speed. It was now important to stay alert and navigate to the deep water channel, other-



**Walking down the creek**



wise there was a danger of grounding out. The river was definitely much lower than on our 2016 trip.

It was a fun, fast paddle of mostly Class II water. However, unfortunately it was raining, sometimes so hard that it made reading the river more challenging. However, we experienced no difficulties and it was just such a huge relief to be paddling.

We arrived at our destination – Km 60 – at 5:30 p.m. This was a large gravel bar at the base of a mountain which we had hiked on our previous trip. This was a relatively easy hike and we planned to scale the mountain again the next day.

Of course, we had our routine nightly shower as we were setting up, however the double rainbow arching over the river made it worthwhile. During a dry spell we cooked a gigantic spaghetti dinner

over a blazing fire and ate in the dark. We barely finished the dishes when we were chased into the tent by yet another torrential rain storm. We are camped fairly close to the river and I hoped the water would not rise dramatically during the night.

August 14th. It was a nice morning with variable clouds and some sun. Since it was a “rest day” we took our time enjoying breakfast and didn’t start hiking until 11 a.m. The first part of the ascent was through sparse spruce forest with deep moss and other low vegetation and bushes. It was tough, slow walking as our feet would sink deep into the moss. After about an hour of upward slog it started to rain! Of course! Why not? We hiked steadily upwards in the rain, however when the wind started to blow it became very cold and we hid behind some

trees until the showers moved up river.

Around 2 p.m. we finally cleared the trees and the worst of the bushes. We followed a good bear trail (complete with bear poop) up the gentle mountain slope until we reached a bench-like rock outcrop. Here we stopped for lunch with a great expansive view up and down the river. Naturally we had to experience a brief rain shower as we ate our trail mix and jerky.

After lunch we continued upwards on the bear/caribou trail. It was easy hiking and new vistas continued to be revealed. Late afternoon at elevation 4,040 ft. we decided it was time to head home. Just as we headed down it started to rain once again. However, this time the sun was shining, creating a magnificent arching rainbow up and down the river. The colours were brilliant. Many photos were taken.



**More obstacles on the creek**





### ***Finally: Hart River!***

Although we made the hike down in 1 ½ hours it seemed to take forever, particularly as it rained constantly once we reached the trees. The vegetation was soaked and walking on the moss was like walking in deep, wet snow. We were wearing our rain gear, however we soon discovered that our waterproof hiking boots were not. By the time we reached camp the water was sloshing in the boots

and our socks were so wet they had to be rung out. Luckily it stopped raining by the time we arrived at camp.

We laid out our wet boots and socks to dry and donned our neoprene boots with a plastic bag as a liner. Hopefully the hiking boots would dry out by the time we needed them again.

John decided the best way to rejuvenate after the strenuous hike was to take

a nap. I should have joined him but decided it would be a good night for pizza. The homemade pizza only takes about 15 minutes to bake over the fire however it is a lot of work to put it together. The yeast dough must be mixed, kneaded and finally rolled into shape. Mushrooms and tomato sauce have to be reconstituted. Sausage and cheese sliced. It all took over an hour to assemble the pizza. By then I wished I had called for take-out! Nevertheless, we did enjoy a pleasant evening by the fire eating the delicious pizza.

August 15th. Our goal today was Km 90 but we fell short by 10 km. We didn't get on the water until 12:30 p.m. The first 5 km of the paddle was fun Class II water with many bouncy waves. Then we hit the boulder garden. Despite all the rain, the water levels were still very low. In 2016 the rocks through this section were barely visible and we skimmed over most. However, now it was necessary to zig and zag around the boulders to avoid contact.

Over the next 15 km the fast current flowed through a braided landscape dropping off countless exposed gravel bars and wending its way through forested banks. The inside bends were particularly dangerous as downed trees were hanging far into the river. Occasionally the bend was very tight and narrow, and it was impossible to avoid the hazards as the current forced us into the bank. We were nearly decapitated a few times but managed to duck under the trees by lying flat on the boat. In a few instances we grounded out and had to drag the canoe to deeper water.

Low water levels made the Hart a very different river from our previous "float." Although we wanted to make some miles, at 4:30 p.m. we saw dark storm clouds approaching from the south and decided to find a campsite before the rain arrived. Plus, we needed a break from the continuously dangerous and stressful paddling situations. Low water, very tight corners and lots of overhanging trees have made for a scary paddle. When we came across a great gravel bar with lots of wood we stopped immediately.

The storm passed us by and the sun shone. It was a lovely clear evening and we relaxed by the fire with a hot meal.



### ***The Hart River***



We reviewed the schedule and noted that we were 45 km behind the original schedule, which, considering we spent 8 days on Elliot Creek, was not too bad. It would be necessary to spend some longer days on the river or forego some of our planned hikes. However, there were still many days left in the trip and there would be lots of opportunities to catch up the lost miles.

August 16th. The morning dawned overcast and cold. Mindful that we wanted to make some miles, we hurried ourselves along and had our gear and boat at the river's edge by 11 a.m. It was freezing. We decided to dig out our long underwear before launching. John donned his long-sleeved polypropylene jersey and I put on my silk/poly blend, top and bottom.

Challenges were immediate in the low water – fast current, narrow river with tight corners and lots of overhanging trees. It was necessary to be constantly alert and stay away from the dangerous outside bend. But in some cases it was impossible as the exposed gravel bars forced the current into a very narrow channel. We had to duck a few times to avoid injury. We were making good time. In one long straightaway stretch we spotted a pair of eagles soaring high above the mountains. I wondered “Good omen or warning?”

After about 2 hours paddling, we suddenly found ourselves in a very narrow side channel. How did that happen? The forceful current was taking us deeper into the channel and as we came around a bend we encountered a tree bobbing almost across the entire channel. We managed to ground the canoe on a small gravel bar on river left. From there it appeared that we could walk the boat to river right and then scout along the burnt-out shoreline. It would be nice to see what was ahead before the current can take us barrelling down the channel.

The water was nearly to our crotch. We are both hanging onto the canoe as we shuffle across the current. As we move across, the rocks beneath my feet shift and I'm in the water. The current is pulling me downstream. I'm hanging onto the boat for dear life. John is hanging onto the rear of the canoe, trying to stay upright as the current is pushing us all downriver. John manages to hold his

ground holding the canoe with one hand, and hauls me upright by my life jacket with the other, and we safely reach the right bank. After calming down we walk along the burnt-out bank to scout downstream. Thankfully there are no more obstacles ahead in the channel that we can see and we continue down the side channel without any further difficulties and soon rejoin the main current.

(As an aside, Jim Baird canoed the Hart in July, just a few weeks before us. He was also swept unknowingly into this very same side channel. You can watch his videos on YouTube.)

Our joy at rejoining the main river is short-lived as we are immediately navigating narrow channels and sharp bends filled with lots of trees in the water and overhanging the bank. We are constantly

alert, doing a good job of avoiding the hazards and still making decent time. We decide to forgo a lunch break and just make some miles.

### John's Words

The main river and its various split channels have many uprooted trees from earlier flood conditions, with some swept downstream to eventually clog the river or be swept onto gravel bars, as additional hazards to maneuver around. Many trees are overhanging the banks at various angles, some out of reach, some just high enough to canoe under without difficulty and a few lying horizontal on the river. Now that the flood waters have receded and time has passed, the river is much lower than on our previous trip. We are now canoeing in a much narrower



*Cooking soup in the rain*





*The Upper Hart*



*Preparing for a day of hiking*

channel with less room to avoid hazards, and even more so when the river splits. We have already had two narrow calls with trees almost level to the river, less than a foot higher than the top of our canoe. There was no room to back paddle or draw out of the way. The trees were upon us almost immediately as we entered the curve. To avoid disaster, we had to quickly lay forward, level to the boat. There was just enough space that the trees only grazed the back of our heads as we passed under.

As we are coming down a long straightaway the river widens to at least 75 ft. and then splits into two channels. Decision time. At the “Y” channel split the river drives toward a large marooned tree. If we choose the right channel, we





### ***Hiking up the mountain***

must move fast or risk being forced against the tree. It is also not possible to see what lies down this right channel. Chris calls for the right channel and I immediately concur. As we rush towards the channel, I start to fear we won't make the turn and will be pinned against the tree. I call out to go straight. Forget about trying for the right channel. We rush down the straightaway and quickly ground out on a huge gravel bar just past the tree on river right. Chris calls for lining the boat around the corner but I don't think it is necessary and so we push off the gravel bar and head into the bend.

#### **Chris's Words**

The river is very wide. However, at the bottom of the straightaway there is a massive gravel bar on the right squeezing the river to the left and narrowing to

a channel of less than 15 ft. The current has us and I know immediately we are in trouble. There is no avoiding what will happen within the next few seconds. Trees hanging low over the water span the entire channel. The current is fierce and there is no room to maneuver. We are able to duck under the first two but the third group is right at water level. We smash into the trees. The canoe flips to the right and I am ejected out of my spray skirt. It must have been very deep as I made no contact with the bottom. My big bulky life jacket forces me to the surface within seconds but the current has grabbed me and is taking me down river. Ironically, immediately after the tight bend, the river has now widened again to at least 75 ft. or more.

I try to swim to shore but am making little headway against the current. The

current is quickly taking me downstream. I tell myself "Pretend you are at the cottage." This helps calm me. I get on my back and start kicking to the right shore. This finally works. Now I see John has the back of the boat and he is thankfully OK. I make it to shore. John tries to land the canoe on river right just below me but there is a forceful side stream coming into the river. It pushes him and the boat out into the main current and over to river left. I watch as he disappears around the bend.

#### **John's Words**

As the river turns right, we are immediately into a deep channel only 10 to 15 feet wide where it is impossible to maneuver. There are at least five overhanging trees which we cannot avoid. I duck under the first two, however the next





***Fabulous rainbow***

bunch .... It's irrelevant. We are on them instantly. I pray Chris ducks in time, she's in front! I duck under the first two – no problem, I'm past. I look up in time to see the third group of trees, just as the boat comes sideways to the obstacles. Now the upriver gunnel is rolling under and then the canoe is upside down. I'm in the water. I hold my breath and kick out of my seat and cockpit cover. It seems to take a bit of time, but with some kicks and the life jacket providing upward direction my head comes up and I see the back of the boat with the rope securing the canoe cover. I latch on with both hands. While I'm hacking to clear my throat of water, I look around to assess my situation and see Chris wearing her black and white toque lying in the water safe at the gravel bar shore. She turns to look at me and our eyes meet.

The river current takes me to river right just below Chris. I need to push the boat into shore. However, the water is too deep to stand and a strong side cur-

rent forces the canoe and me back out into the river. Quickly I'm taken downstream to river left. The only thing I can see is the red pakboat in front of me. I constantly try to touch bottom for a chance to bring the canoe to shore as soon as possible and occasionally I feel loose gravel with the tips of my feet, but it isn't enough to gain any traction to stop. At some point the boat gets turned by the current so that the stern (my end) is now leading the way. When that happens, I move hand over hand to the trailing end, to let the boat lead the way. That is the natural position to line the boat from shore, and the only way I'll be able to control the canoe when I finally gain the traction I need to stop it. Eventually, about a kilometer downstream my feet touch rocks. I gain my footing, stand and see that I've reached a gravel bar. Finally, I can stop. The boat is upside down and full of water. I look around – Chris is nowhere to be seen.

I've reached a very rough gravel bar,

but it's dry and big enough - and then some – for a camp. I'm not in shock or hurt in any way, other than being wet and cold. I have no idea where Chris is, so decide to get dry and rescue the boat and our gear.

First, I remove my life jacket and hang it on a large rootball facing the opposite river bank for Chris to see. I do the same with my shirt, leaving me with my quick-drying polypropylene under-shirt. My feet are very heavy and I realize my dry-suit pants and boots are filled with water. I take them off and pour out an abundance of water. I lay out my pants to dry and put the boots back on.

Next is the boat. My first attempt to lift the offshore gunnel to tip the boat doesn't quite do it, so I put more effort into it and the boat comes upright, still with the camera case and chairs bungeed to the cover. I take them off and unstring the cover and remove it. The boat is filled with about 8 inches of water and I see that all the contents seem to be present,





**Mountain vistas**

including items we had stored under our seats. With the boat empty, I pull it onto land and turn it over on one of the marooned logs to allow it to drain. I tie it down to ensure it doesn't escape. Occasionally I check for a sign of Chris as I work.

### **Chris's Words**

With some dismay I watch as John is swept to river left and around the bend. I rest on the shore for a few minutes to calm myself. Once sure I'm not going to have a heart attack, I take off all my clothes (other than my underwear) and ring them out. I empty my boots and dry-suit pants and then re-dress, including my raincoat, dry suit pants and life jacket. A weak sun is shining and it doesn't feel too bad.

Where is John? He has disappeared from view. I need to get further downstream to look for him but it will mean crossing the side channel which is at least 20 ft. across where it enters the

main river. The current is very forceful. I reckon if the water is up to my knees, I will likely make it walking across, however if the water is deeper, there is a good chance I will be swept out into the main current. I didn't feel the cold when we capsized but I know the water is just above freezing.

I decide to look for a good stick to help me make the crossing and also check further up the side channel if there is a better place to cross. As I walk up the shoreline I realize I am on a big gravel island. I'm not afraid but it feels very strange to be without John. He is with the canoe and I hope he is safe. The side channel only gets wider the further up it I walk. There is no place to cross and I head back down to the main river.

I have my stick and am trying to analyze the crossing at the mouth of the side channel. Should I take a chance? Perhaps I should wait to see if John shows up. He might be able to throw me a rope. Then I hear thunder! What the heck!! I look up

to see a huge black cloud coming over the mountains. I recall the fierce storms we had on Elliot Creek. Forget about crossing! I need a shelter ASAP.

I scout around in my immediate location and spot a big tree lying on its side with a large denuded rootball which is about 5 feet high. This would make a good base for a teepee-like structure. I use the rootball as the back of the structure and start laying long pieces of driftwood up against the top to form a frame. Then I fill in with bigger pieces of wood. For the top I use a large clump of mud with a tuft of grasses. I just have the rudimentary structure complete when it starts to rain. I crawl into the shelter. It is cramped but it does – surprisingly – keep me dry. However, I do notice that there is a breeze coming into the shelter. If I am going to spend the night here, it will need to be beefed up.

Thankfully it is only a light shower with no lightning and after 20-30 minutes the skies clear. I decide to keep





### Tricky water

working on the shelter. This seems like the safest bet since I have no idea where John is. He could be miles downriver. I add more driftwood to the sides and back. Then I rip off live, leafy twigs from the surrounding bushes and use these to fill in holes between the driftwood pieces.

After about 2 hours I spot John. He is at least a kilometer down river and sadly on the left side of the river. I start yelling and wave my paddle (which I managed to keep hold of during the upset). Eventually he spots me and waves for me to come over. To reach John I would have to swim across two sections – the very strong side current and then also the main current. It feels very unsafe to swim. It is also getting late in the day and I have a reasonable shelter for the night. If I waded or swam I might make it to the next gravel bar but then I would not have a shelter and there might not be any wood to create a new one. Or in the worst case I might be swept into the main channel and onward down river past John.

I yelled and yelled at John to help me cross, and when that failed to register, that he should use the SOS on the inReach. I had no idea whether or not he heard me. Turns out I didn't hear him and he didn't hear me. The river was eating our words. We were both hoarse for a

couple of days after.

### John's Words

I lay out the soaked gear to dry and with that done, I'm hoping Chris will show up eventually, and would appreciate a camp to come to, so I at least need to set up the supply tent. There is no smooth level spot, so I go ahead and set up beside the supplies. The gear is still wet but maybe drying a bit, so it might as well go inside before any inclement weather makes it worse. Done. Canoe bags are in the corners of the supply tent and everything else is along the sides out of the way as usual. Still no sign of Chris.

I pace the shoreline in front of the tent watching the other side constantly. Time passes and I'm still hopeful but increasingly worried. It's still good daylight. At some point I hear a high-pitched shouting, and after scanning across the river, in the distance notice a small red colour, either standing still or moving closer. She's too far away for me to recognize, but I know it has to be Chris. I'm excited and relieved! She's ok! I can hardly wait for her to get closer! But somehow, she doesn't. Over the next two or three hours I'm calling her name and urging her to come, and she's calling to me but I can't make out any words, and apparently, she can't hear me. What the heck's the problem? Why can't she come? Just walk

down to me on her side of the river. (I don't know at this point that Chris would have to cross the side channel in order to walk down river.) One or two times she moves laterally upstream from the one position, and it looks farther away, but then ends up back at the original position, sort of close to and beside a large pine, but otherwise in what appears to be an open bushy area. I get tired of standing with no change in our circumstances, so I bring a chair to sit and watch for her. I refuse to stay in the tent while Chris is out in the open, suffering.

I'm still urging her to come when I realize she could be caught out there overnight, and I have no idea how she could make it in her cold wet condition. I'm more and more agitated on the shore line, and shaking with fear for her safety. I finally see no alternative but to call for rescue. We should have the "Inreach" somewhere with its SOS feature, and we have rescue insurance. I have no idea what she would think of me ending the trip by calling, but my concern for her well-being wins out. I locate the device in the tent in the orange pelican case, bring it back to the chair, and sit, studying it. I have never used it before. I press the red lettered SOS on its right side, and nothing happens. It looks like a protruding button that should depress when pushed. No such luck. There must be a way! At the bottom at the back there is some small lettering. When all else fails, read the instructions! It's spelled out clearly. Lift the tab, then press the red button inside. I do, and immediately a screen lights up showing a bold border on top saying "SOS in progress". In regular text below it, a message reads "what is the nature of your emergency?" 15 or 20 minutes pass while I try to learn how to communicate with this thing. Meanwhile they're waiting for a response. They've sent the same question three times before I discover how to reply. Halfway through our texting I realize night has fallen, and I can no longer see the other side of the river, or Chris. With no hope of Chris coming now, I move back into the tent with my chair and continue texting, at one point urging them to send a copter with lights. When their final message was "can't fly at night, trying to line up a copter, and will reply when they do," I stop texting, but



keep it on, for their next text. I stay in the chair, but try to surround myself with a sleeping bag for warmth, and keep my eye on the door. I don't recall dozing off.

### **Chris's Words**

John did activate the inReach SOS, however, I was unaware of this. As it became twilight I knew I would be spending the night on the gravel bar.

I worked to beef up my shelter and also tore off some longer twigs that I could use to weave a "door." Night was falling and it was getting colder. Before I crawled into my shelter I realized the feet of my dry-suit pants were full of water. I took off the pants and rung out my socks and then redressed.

It was a very cold night (3-4 C) but I knew I was going to survive. I talked to myself, and to my deceased loved ones. I had read many stories of people surviving the night in the wilderness. I would, too. (Of course, some of those were fiction!) My cousin had told me she was going to Portugal in the fall. I joked with myself – how nice to be lying on those warm beaches, visiting vineyards. I tried to visualize it! However, in my heart I was a wilderness traveler and I knew I would never go to Portugal. I resolved to swim the channels in the morning if John had not activated the SOS.

Occasionally I thought I heard an animal walking around on the gravel bar and blew my whistle. I wasn't afraid and felt quite safe in the shelter. The only animal that visited me was a mouse.

Earlier I had berated myself for not having the means to start a fire, but the shelter was a much better alternative for surviving the night. I would not want to be sitting out exposed, by a fire. I was very grateful that we had put on our long underwear in the morning and that we never wore cotton. All the layers I was wearing were going to help me survive the night.

I kept the hood of the rain coat over my head, and my legs tucked up against my chest. I thought this would help preserve my core temperature. And besides, there was no room in the shelter for me to stretch out. My upper body was not too uncomfortable, however my arms and legs were freezing. And by the end of the night my neck and body were killing me from maintaining such a

cramped position for so long.

Eventually I sensed that it was getting lighter. I needed to stretch my legs and have a pee. When I crawled out of the shelter, I was immediately struck by how cold it was "outside." The shelter had definitely helped me survive the night without becoming hypothermic. Before returning to the shelter, I tore off a big pile of leafy twigs and threw them inside. I used them as a cushion and also threw some over my legs. I should have done this last night as it was much more comfortable and warmer. I stretched out my legs and fell asleep.

### **John's Words**

At first light I'm back outside with the Inreach, still waiting. Soon, instead of a text, I hear the faint thrumming of a helicopter. I am overjoyed! As the sound gets closer, I see it coming in low, and it passes slowly over me to the other side as I wave to it, then it turns upriver. It's out of sight for a few minutes before it reappears to settle on the other side where hopefully Chris is. I wait anxiously for the few minutes it takes to rise again, fly across, and settle on my gravel bar 50 feet away. It takes the two in the cockpit long minutes to shut down,

before one man exits and starts to approach me. Halfway there, Chris climbs out of the backseat and starts to quickly approach. Until that moment, I had no idea what shape she was in, dead or alive. She rushed to me, and as we embraced in a "thank god" moment we had tears of joy that we survived.

### **Chris's Words**

It was likely around 9-10 a.m. when the distant sound of a helicopter woke me. I crawled out of my shelter just as it came into view. I was relieved but also sad. I knew the trip was over. The helicopter landed on my gravel bar and soon Sgt. Dave Wallace, with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, came to greet me with a thermos of hot tea. I think he was surprised I was in such good shape. We were quickly airborne and made the short hop over to John. After an emotional greeting we got to work breaking camp, dismantling the pakboat and loading the helicopter. Thankfully, our pilot Shawn agreed to take all our gear and the boat. It was decided that we would dump the food to reduce the weight of the load. As I helped Sgt. Wallace empty all the ziplock bags with the dried food I had spent months preparing, I felt a terrible



**Burn area on the Hart River**





**Helicopter rescue**

wave of sadness.

Our rental vehicle was in Mayo, however the Bell helicopter from Fireweed was stationed out of Dawson City. We had search and rescue insurance but it would not cover the flight to Mayo, which would have been exorbitant. Sgt. Wallace suggested it would be much less costly to charter a plane from Dawson City to Mayo and he would put us in touch with a contact at Nahoni Air.

The flight to Dawson City was about an hour. When we arrived at the Fireweed/RCMP base I was finally able to change into some dry clothes. Sgt. Wallace had a young officer drive us into town to find a room for the night. I got to sit in the back which was made, deliberately, very uncomfortable for criminals! It was Discovery Days in Dawson and the officer drove us to three different hotels before we were able to find a vacant room. As we were checking

in, we were told the entire town of Dawson would be without power from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m.

Once in our room I made contact with Nahoni Air and booked our flight to Mayo for the next morning. They would be notifying Alkan Air of our pending arrival.

After a thorough and heavenly shower we went out for a huge fish and chip dinner, followed by ice cream cones. We were still a bit giddy from our experience and the rescue. However, once in our hotel room we were fast asleep well before the power went out.

### **Epilogue**

On August 18th, our 38th anniversary, Mr. Fink (a very interesting man with fascinating northern experiences) of Nahoni Air, flew us to Mayo where we were very relieved to find that our rental vehicle did not burn up. We repacked our

gear and boat in the big rubber tubs, and Glenn from Alkan Air promised to deliver them to the Big Way Store, a Manitoulin side depot. We spent the night in Mayo eating a weird, but very appetizing supper of frozen foods purchased at the Big Way store and nuked in the room. Unfortunately, they had no utensils in stock so we purchased wooden and measuring spoons to eat our meals.

We still had the rental vehicle for 3 weeks but opted to stay only another week. We took this time to drive back to Whitehorse and then explore the Haines Junction area and also Summit Lake. We made the best of our time but the Yukon is busy in August. There were people everywhere. Although it was all interesting, sadly it was not the experience we craved.

Returning home there was of course a lot of shoulda, coulda, woulda. However,





***Farewell to the Hart River***

ultimately, what was most important was that our general canoeing practices kept us and our gear safe. We were rescued unharmed, and live to canoe another day.

Key elements that helped us survive the upset:

We always paddle with our life jackets on. Since we generally paddle in colder weather, we have big, bulky life jackets that are very buoyant, and help to keep us warm.

We always canoe with the spray deck on – no matter where we are paddling. The cover keeps us warm and dry plus it also keeps our gear safe. We are prepared for almost any circumstance.

All items on the spray deck are bungeed down. The only items lost in the upset was my hat and a few old bungees which had been stored loose under the chairs. And John did lose his paddle. However, he did save the boat which is much more important!

We never wear cotton (well, maybe our underwear). We always dress in layers. Sgt. Wallace and Shawn, our helicopter pilot, both concurred that this was very important to my survival. “Cotton kills” is no joke.

In recent years we always carry our inReach and also have Search and Rescue Insurance which is actually very cheap. For many years we carried a Sat phone however it would not have helped us in this situation. All wilderness travelers should have an inReach. It could save your life.

On the gravel bar I berated myself for not having a means to start a fire and Sgt. Wallace also emphasized to us the importance of having fire-starting capability on our person. We did this for many years in the past but became complacent. And I agree, we should be carrying fire-starting capability in our pocket. However, for me, the shelter was the

most important factor in why I survived the cold night without becoming hypothermic. In a similar situation, building a shelter would be my first action.

Finally, many people were very kind to us after our rescue. Alkan Air refunded the cost of our pick-up on the Peel immediately without hassle and their employees at the Mayo base went out of their way to be helpful – particularly Glenn.

When we rebooked our flight home with Air North they charged us an additional \$960. Ouch!! However, when we returned home I emailed them an abbreviated version of our experience on the river and surprisingly, they refunded \$660 of the additional charge. Definitely not like any other airline we’ve flown!

It was all a remarkable experience but we hope it never happens again, and we are looking forward to a new adventure in 2024.





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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.

## Ontario's Paddler Co-op Looks to the Future, With WCA Support

It's a reasonably good guess that most whitewater paddlers in Ontario have at some point sharpened their skills at Palmer Rapids on the Madawaska River. Palmer (as it's known) is a near-ideal whitewater site for an introduction to whitewater, or for refining a paddler's skills at any level. The Paddler Co-op has been a fixture in this area since 1997, providing access to the river for paddlers, along with a range of services including instructional clinics, camping, transportation, and equipment rental. Organized by the Co-op, biannual Palmerfests have become fixtures on the paddling calendar. Paddler Co-op is organized as a non-profit, and for its first twenty-plus years operated at its current site as a tenant. Faced with the possible sale of the site by its long-term owner, in 2024 the Co-op has launched a fund-raising campaign to allow it to buy the property and secure its long-term future at Palmer Rapids.

The Wilderness Canoe Association has now joined the long list of Paddler Co-op supporters through entering a sponsorship agreement with the Co-op. The WCA board had an opportunity

to hear about the Co-ops plans first-hand, including through a presentation by Paddler Co-op executive Director Ryan O'Connor (a recorded YouTube video can be found by searching for Paddler Co-op on the WCA YouTube channel). The WCA board decided to contribute to the paddler Co-op's fund-raising goals for three main reasons:

- the value to paddlers of ensuring continuing access and support for paddlers at Palmer Rapids, as a tremendous asset for whitewater paddlers in Ontario;
- an opportunity to raise the WCA's profile among Co-op members looking to expand their circle of paddling friends and to benefit from WCA resources and outing arrangements; and,
- building on WCA's sponsorship to take full advantage of the Co-ops offering for WCA members, including as a site for the WCA's fall gathering in 2024, with discounts on Co-op camping and other charges flowing to WCA members.

The WCA contribution used a combination of WCA reserves and a portion of funds contributed in memory of Mike Wevrick, with agreement from the Wevrick family, representing an enduring component of Mike's paddling legacy. The WCA encourages its members to plan a visit to Palmer this year, and see what's going on at the Co-op. WCA members considering a personal contribution to the Paddler Co-op fund-raising campaign can check out the fund-raising campaign web site at <https://sweet-home-paddler-co-op.raisely.com/>.





# Canadian Canoe Museum

## New Home on Little Lake, Peterborough

Before I tell you about the Canadian Canoe Museum's (CMM) new home, I think it is important to understand the museum's history.

In the late 1950s, Kirk Wipper (the museum's founder) amassed a large collection of canoes.

Through the 1960s and 70s, the story shifted to "building a home for the collection," a log structure on property at Camp Kanadore near Minden, Ontario, which became the Kanawa International Canoe Museum.

In the 1980s, Wipper sold Camp Kanadore, and began looking for a new home for what was now a unique and very significant collection of canoes, kayaks and self-propelled watercraft.

The 1980s story was "collection outgrows collectors ability to look after it". A group convince Wipper, to move the collection, to an office and factory of the Outboard Marine Corporation on Monaghan Road Peterborough.

In October 2003, the CCM board of directors opted to close the museum until May 2004, engaging an accounting firm to consolidate its strained financial position and restructure the organization. The museum was quietly reopened in May 2004, but remained dogged by the story of the closure.

By 2010, however, after significant

staff turnover and years of conservative budgets, careful management, and concerted communication efforts, the "closure" story has slowly been eclipsed, through Herculean work by everyone involved. It has now been replaced by a much more hopeful narrative about a "national treasure" proudly housed in Peterborough, Ontario – the natural home of canoe manufacturing in North America.

In 2015, a \$65 million contemporary design was envisioned to display the collection beside the world's highest hydraulic lift lock on the Trent-Severn Waterway. In May 2020, an independent investigation by the museum determined the site, owned by Parks Canada, contained the chemical compound trichloroethylene (TCE), along with a variety of other chemicals. Carolyn Hyslop, the museum's executive director, states, "We had a beautiful, award-winning design that was perfectly suited for the Lift Lock location that is regrettably utterly non-transferable to another location," and "We are in the process of identifying and selecting a new site for what will be a revised museum design that will complement the waterfront site selection."

In the 2020 annual report, it was stated "we are pleased to share that in less than a year we have reimaged our new mu-

seum project and identified a preferred new site at Johnson Property on the Little Lake waterfront".

In January 2021, it was announced that the new design and construction process was started on the Little Lake site. By September, the CMM officially owned the Little Lake property. In July 2021, the Covid-19 restrictions were lifted and the CMM reopened its doors.

2022 marked the 25th year at Monaghan Road, Peterborough, and start of the "Big Lift" portage to the new site on the water's edge on Little Lake.

The Official Opening of the CCM, in its new home on the shores of Little Lake, Peterborough, Ontario, took place on May 11, 2024. The opening presentation was simulcast on YouTube at <https://youtube/ZmsT6gG2hyc>.

The museum's two-storey, 65,000-square-foot building is a purpose-built facility on its five-acre lakefront campus. The facility houses the artifacts and provides workshops/activities, helping to preserve history through the display, restoration, and appreciation of the canoe. The project's fully funded cost was \$45M.

The WCA executive encourages members to make a visit to the new Canadian Canoe Museum and experience the new facility first hand.

*Story by Gary Ataman, WCA Chairman*





# All The Right Places

By John Newton



Back in the day canoe tripping was youthfully simple. Barry would call, I would grab a grocery bag with a blanket, fish line, sardines, matches, knife in pocket. Let's go. Prep time- 3 minutes. The results were always a mash up and always inspiring. Without searching I was confronted by a group of random events. Water lapping, rinsing the sloping granite of my perch, moon lit arcs on the black water ripples, glistening stars, pine silhouettes...they entered my heart as a gentle tsunami. Unbeknownst, I started a relationship with the River. Peace waves, harmony, communion, hints of clarity. What is this? A seed planted in a not too bright teenager.

Warm under the tarp in the rain, dark, our kids finally sleeping. Wore them out quite well. My 10-year-old son Peter had his first chance to pack his own gear for this canoe trip. Brought a pack full of board games. His kids and his sister Val's kids are now with us on a canoe trip, swimming with killer Jimmy, a large black water snake. Laughing with delight.

Sitting on the wanagan, with the fall lads. End of a wonderful day. Eagle perched on top of a dead pine tree, star-

ing at us with piercing glare through the dense fog. This is his neighbourhood, we are visitors. Excuse us.

The act of searching implies a journey. To journey without prejudice can be done paddling a river. Blind corners allow no inference, no contrivance. The unfolding of the unknown. The exhilaration of discovery that the mind has no part of. The river needs no one. It is unto itself. It carries on with or without but is more than willing to share. That's a good friend, a soulmate....I get to share this all with dear Pamela. Fancy that! We are in a great rhythm, we are in sync. I hear music.

Focus in rapid running is all encompassing. Concentrating on the next rough patch I did not notice paddling between a cow and her baby moose that were crossing the river. Pam said she could have slapped momma on the butt. We got through the next rapid just fine. One does not defeat rapids. All the rapids, right now, at this moment are raging with noise, fury, with shapes and flow, molded movement, quite content with their own company. We look to create a relationship with the current. Ignore the fury, the chaos, the strewn canoe-busting

boulders, the angled wave curls, the hydraulics, the dark deep centre of the whirlpool. Attend to the accomplice – the current – a teammate, a brother, a friend. Full focus on the safe route, working with the river in tandem.

Pamela leans way out of the bow on the Bloodvein, hauling water to steal our way around a nasty pillow, mid rapid. Each run has its own subtle personality. What we see is the river not as a separate entity. We are one, in motion. The water can crush you or run through your fingers like the caress of a sweetheart.

The river is a constant amidst constant change. Or is it? By immersing in as opposed to just watching, I see each river has its own heartbeat. Lying on a rock prominence at Thunderhouse Falls, the river splits, running on either side of me – stereo. Listening to the underwater rocks rocking and rattling. An orchestra. Listening carefully the music had rhythm, the current changes alter the rock notes. What song is this, no matter. Standing in the shallows of a French River rapids the high water has a lot of turbulence. Water thrashes my legs with a great variety of push, pull, caress, pummeling. The river apparently constant but not – alive unto itself, its own nature, its own rhythms. The relief of the mini chute at a campsite on the Dumoine. With a rope to hold I can position lying down in the brook, head first, feet first, naked. Intense full body massage. Muscles pulled and wriggled, skin puckered and stretched. Brook current turned flesh into waves travelling along my bones. Pamela I am sure could find a way to enjoy this massage of nature's champagne.

Being part of the portage pilgrimage. Sweat dropping on the worn, granite stepping ledges. Head bowed under the load. This is shared with all the travelers of days gone by. The family of patrons, labourers, seekers of the unknown, survivors in the wilderness, our indigenous brothers making their way as they have always done along this same path.

Such camaraderie. What is it out



there? Simplicity amongst complexity? Purity of form? Clarity of function? An arm on the shoulder never felt so good. The smell of the water rinsing my face. The first whiff is the tell all. The conglomerate of tree shapes on yonder shore. A mosaic of greenish shapes, seeking light and propagation. As dusk creeps in, the shore loses its distinctive textures. It blends to uniform while tree tops, backlit by the fading light reveal their endless individuality.

Horse flies, no see ums, mosquitoes, black flies, bear scat, giardia, moose prints, otter slides, pitcher plants, snakes, bass, leeches, snails, ravens, whiskey jacks, loons, turtles, ants, balsam gum, pine needles, rock, rock and more rock. There are flags on trees, inukshuk, chipping stations, eskers, hypothermia, hummocks, pingos, caches, cairns, tent rings, tin cans, grills, deer, my old friend – head wind, tears, shivers, triumphs, failures. What a gathering this is!

On a lake above the Coulonge, heading to the river, we were on shore camped. A couple of native guys pulled up in a boat. They had a fish net on board with a few fish in it. Guns at hand. They wondered if we had seen any moose. We asked if it was not out of season. They had a family group camp nearby. One of the lads looked around and asked if we had seen a grocery store nearby. When I can appreciate that these lands have had 8,000 years of habitation, with all that life experience and ancient knowledge of nature maybe then I will belong to the land, our land Canada.

Chanced upon an ancient Indigenous burial site. Sapling burial platforms now fallen to the ground. Rings of rock laid out. Thick with spirit. Whisper only. That night a dream of a wolf charging in darkness, being interrupted on his trail by my tent.

I am tempted to join the wolf conversation across the river, in the dark, full moon being enhanced by passing clouds. My call makes no sense, speaking a language I don't know or if I make sense – what am I saying/preaching/dictating to the speakers. "Wolves who don't play by the rules" Willie Thrasher reminds me.

The few campsites on the Hayes have all been used by all the travelers. The ladies in their high collars and long



skirts, York boats, settlers full of hope, Indigenous peoples hunting, travelling have all been here at this spot. Sitting at water's edge I find a chunk of lead that would have been made into bullets. This same place, only difference is a slight time shift.

The animal trails wearing down the eskers, creating a web of migration. Repeating ancient journey routes from food to food to birthing to wintering. Pulsing motion over the still land. The trail makers pausing for a drink. The drip, drip, the drops gather. Little puddles overflow into rivulets and downhill to babbling brooks, to meandering creeks, gathering brethren along the way. Suspending nutrients and bubbles as they gather into the arteries of the land – rivers, descending to drop food onto fields before they cascade into the sea. Immersed, diluted and anonymous.

Late day, the north star lending its

direction, we find an ancient fire pit. The rocks confining the heat and flame to warm, cook and provide fire dance to mesmerize. Up to mid-calf in sand on the inside of a river bend. Fire crackling. A bourbon mixed with river water in hand. Pam in tent with her favourite ambiance – the spirits singing through the pine boughs, and me – floating. One's eyes can be overfilled. Thoughts of Siddhartha creep in. Nastawgan. Ahhh, nature's bottomless fountain.

Not certain how to access the creator but I am sure I am looking in all the right places.

In the early morning, tiptoe time of the day, standing in ankle-deep water, hands on gunnels, about to push off to an uncharted day with great peace that wafts over during gentle reflection. A delicacy to absorb with heartfelt grin. No words can spill out. Other than – Darlin' lets go!



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## WCA Governance Structure

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