



*Dave and Barb in Class 2-3*

## The Harricana River July 4-17, 2009

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If you've done a lot of wilderness canoe tripping, you're probably familiar with those trips where the logistics work out perfectly, the weather cooperates, the campsites are all spectacular, the water levels are perfect, and of course there are no bugs. This was not one of those trips.

We had finished our Kattawagami trip at the Goose Camp seven years previously (see *Nastawgan*, Summer 2004) and

were curious to see if any progress had been made on the Eco Lodge project that the Cree had started there. The present trip on the Harricana (locals seem to use this spelling, without the w) would not only bring us to the same location, but would be cutting across the same topography. Since our trip on the Katt had been pretty much as described in the paragraph above, there was some anticipation that a similar trip might be in the works.





*Looking back at Le Petit canyon*

### **Logistics**

I was in charge of arranging the logistics for the trip and I thought this would be an easy task, since I could just follow the same template as our previous trip. As you may have guessed, this was not the case. Rick Chartier, who we had used seven years previously for the canoe shuttle, was no longer in Cochrane. With some internet research, I was able to locate Terry O'Neal (a.k.a. Johnny Baits of Johnny Baits Canoe Expedition Shuttles) and arrange a shuttle to the put-in using our own vehicle. It then took many phone calls and some persistence to arrange the freighter canoe shuttle from the Goose Camp/ Eco Lodge back to Moosonee with Clarence Trapper in Moose Factory. Even the train trip from Moosonee to Cochrane had changed since 2002.

Back then, you could only access the canoe car on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday on the Little Bear. Now, there is one train that runs every day except Saturday. However, it arrives in Cochrane at 11:30 p.m., not the best time to begin an eight-hour drive back to Toronto.

We arrived in Cochrane on Friday, July 3. We first drove to Lillabelle Lake Lodge, where we were staying for the night. No one was around but there was a note directing us to our rooms. Ah, the trusting and hospitable north! At 11 degrees and raining, it felt so cold that Barb insisted we shop for toques in town. I was skeptical about being able to find such an item in July but I guess they are never out of season in Cochrane. Bruce and I both came away with bright orange (hunter's) toques

from the local Canadian Tire. They were warm, if not fashionable.

### **The Trip**

#### **Day 1**

After an early-morning breakfast at the lodge, we (Dave and Barb Young, and Bruce and Beth Bellaire) completed a five-hour drive to the put-in with Terry along for the ride. This meant some careful packing in order to accommodate the extra passenger. The drive took us south, then east into Quebec, through the town of Amos and then north to the abandoned mining town of Joutel. This put-in is about 225 km from James Bay. There is another put-in at the 180 km mark if you want to shorten the trip.

The day had started out cold and clear in Cochrane, but by the time we had driven into Quebec, the rain had

started and kept up for most of the drive. We arrived at the boat launch in Joutel shortly after noon. We ate lunch in the van. By the time we finished eating, the rain had stopped and we launched the boats in calm weather conditions. At this point, the river is a chocolate colour. Perhaps that is not being honest. It is an effluent colour. You would not want to rely on it for your drinking water. The other feature that makes the Harricana stand out is the width of the river. We have not been fortunate enough to paddle the really big rivers of the north yet, so for us this was by far the widest river we had ever paddled on. At the put-in it is about half a kilometre wide and gets wider from there on.

Within minutes of Terry disappearing over the horizon with our van, the skies opened up, accompanied by wind. Was it a headwind or a tailwind you might ask? Headwind! We struggled against the wind, hugging the right-hand shore for several hours. We were hoping to find a hunter's cabin we had read about in one of the trip reports. It was supposed to be about 11 miles (luckily we are old enough to know what those are) down river. Bruce had his GPS so he could monitor our progress, but all of his reports indicated we were moving agonizingly slow. With the wind in our face and seemingly very little current, our fully-laden canoes seemed more like barges. It was starting to get fairly late in the day, but we were only 11 kilometers (according to Bruce) away from where we had started, when we spotted a cabin on river left. As it turns out, the GPS had reset its units of measure when Bruce replaced the batteries and we had actually covered the necessary 11 miles.

After being rained on all afternoon, we found the cabin to be a wonderfully warm, dry place. We built a fire in the stove and had a very comfortable evening.

## Day 2

During the wee hours of the morning, I was up for a fluid level adjustment and was surprised to see a perfectly calm river brightly lit by a full moon. We were up early and packed by 8:30 a.m., a little anxious to take advantage of the

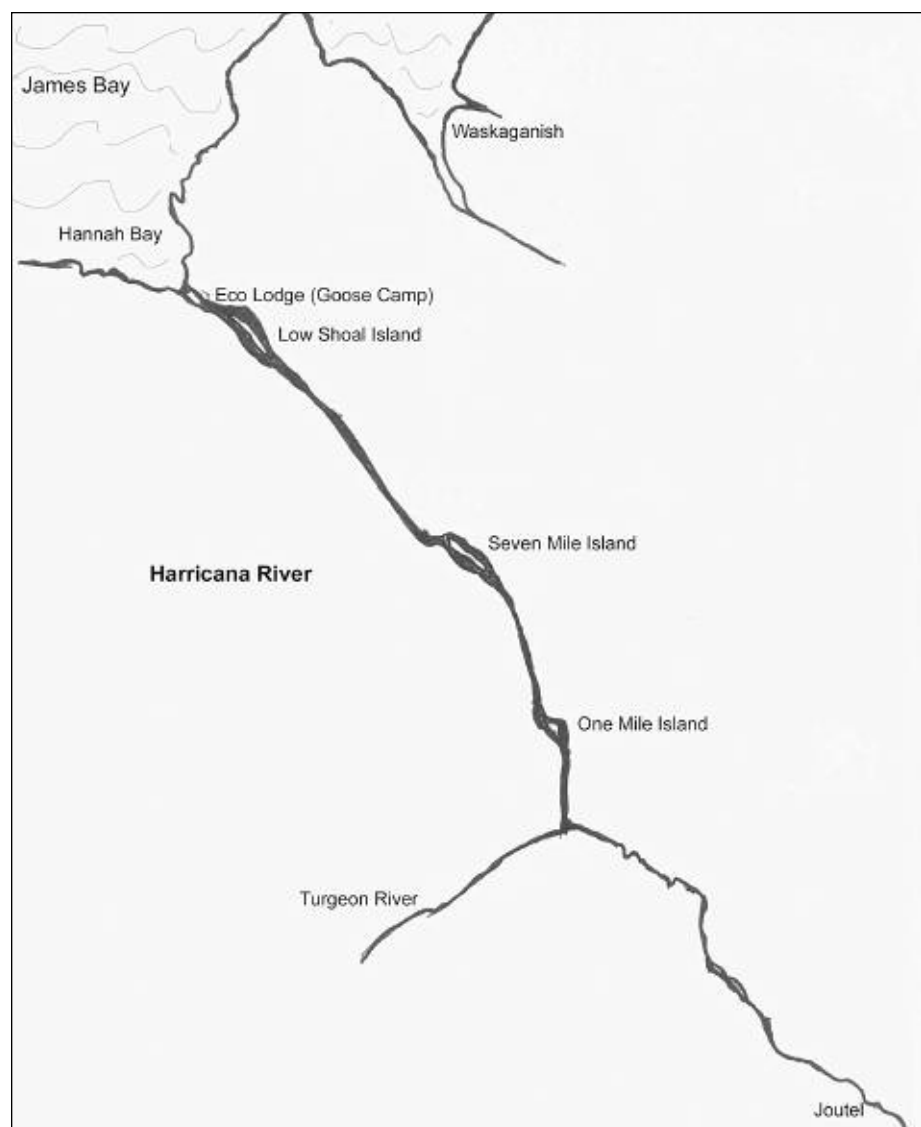
lack of wind. However, we had a minor delay. The small black plastic cover for the air hole at the back of the water jug was missing, and despite an in-depth search of the environs, we were unable to find it (more on this amazing piece of plastic later). Duct tape provided a temporary solution.

We paddled in great conditions (with some wind at our back!) until we arrived at the first rapid around noon. We were on an island close to the left side of the river. A giant ledge seemed to stretch across the entire river, and though some of it could be portaged over the island, there still seemed to be a major drop remaining. Our descriptions weren't very helpful. We weren't sure, but it was starting to appear like the water levels were quite high.

We decided to line/run down a sneak

channel on the left, which was fairly shallow and rocky. After lining for a while, we came to a stretch that looked runnable in a bump-and-grind kind of way, and so we hopped in the boats to pick our way down. We ended up going a little farther and a little faster than we had first planned, including a small drop, but made it with only a minimal number of scrapes. This was only the first section of the rapid.

We continued from an eddy to ferry into the main stream of a nice Class 2 beneath the drop, but realized that we had better scout the next part, which is the last drop of the rapid. We managed to ferry to an island in the middle of the river and scout from there. There is a channel on the downstream side of the island, but it looked like big waves and high volume. Once again, the left side







*Lining around a minor falls*

looked good as far as we could see, but with a tricky left-hand turn at the bottom to try to negotiate a ledge. Both canoes had trouble making the turn and ended up going over the ledge somewhat sideways, resulting in facing upstream in an eddy (just like we had planned it!).

From here we continued downstream to have a look at the Petit Canyon. Despite the name and quite a narrowing

of the river, it turned out to be a gentle run through some waves and current to the campsite at the bottom of the canyon. This was the campsite where we had decided to stay. It was about 3:00 p.m. With the canoes partially on shore we began to unpack the gear. As I was emptying the canoe, I peered down beside it at an object that didn't seem to fit with the normal rocks and debris. I reached down to

pick it up and lo and behold, it was exactly the piece we had lost for the water jug! How had it gotten here? We finally realized that it must have been stuck to the bottom of the plastic water jug just by tension, and had managed to stay there while the jug was being moved until it fell off at our new campsite. Amazing!

This site had tent pads in the open near the take-out and more pads back in the woods. With clear weather and lots of time, we enjoyed supper and a campfire and looked over the notes for the next day.

### **Day 3**

After leaving camp about 9:30 a.m., we ran a C1 followed by a portage on river left around a serious drop. The next rapid is very large, extending across the whole river. There is a nice but narrow channel on the left with a couple of drops that looked navigable and a nice pool at the bottom. We both ran this section with no problems and then lifted over the next drop. This day was sunny and warm with a long paddle on flat water. We actually got to use sun block, a rare occurrence on this trip.

Finally, hydro wires crossing the river signaled that the upcoming falls were not far away. Our goal was to make camp at the bottom of the falls, as had the group whose notes we were following. We were able to get quite close to the falls by landing on an island at the top. The view from there is spectacular, with water cascading everywhere and the bottom of the falls looking very far away. The total drop looked to be in excess of 20 m.

We now had to look for a portage trail. Our notes did not mention which side it was on and the exploration for the trail took longer than we had hoped. Finally, after close to an hour of careful paddling above the falls, we found the portage trail on the right-hand side. Hoping that the campsite was at the bottom of the portage, we were very disappointed to find it not to be the case. The trail was blocked in places by blow-downs and the end of the trail was covered with drift-wood debris, necessitating slippery clambering over logs and mud to the put-in. Did I mention that a thunderstorm appeared out of nowhere just as we were about to begin the



*Bruce getting clean water from a spring*





*Bug tarp setup using log as centre pole*

portage? It didn't last long, but got things just wet enough to make footing slippery (another common feature of this trip).

After Bruce sawed some of the branches that were obstructing our way, we were able to complete the portage and paddle out to the base of the falls. Though buggy, we eventually found a suitable camping area on the right-hand side at the bottom of the falls. With the aid of a nice tall pole I found nearby, we put up our tarp. The screened walls made the bugs bearable and supper edible.

I had been experiencing some cramps in my legs during the paddle and they came back with a vengeance as I tried to lie down in my sleeping bag. I must have been dehydrated from the warm day and the work on the portage. Never underestimate how much water you must drink to keep yourself hydrated. Speaking of

water, we mentioned before that the water of the river was not something you would want to drink. We were fortunate to find many springs along the sides of the river that afforded us cold, clear drinking water. In fact, we didn't pump any water at all during the trip. Nice.

#### **Day 4**

We awoke to a cool morning with lots of mist. You could hardly see the falls. As the put-in was a little steep and the water deep, we delayed putting on the spray covers. As we approached a bridge (this is the second place where you can access the river to make for a shorter trip), we decided to put on the covers for two reasons. There is a rapid right after the bridge and it had started to rain. The rapid after the bridge is short and looks like a drop over a small ledge. Since we

had just been out of the canoes, I decided not to scout. The rapid turned out to be a little more serious than I had thought and our line wasn't the best. We got pretty wet, especially Barb, and the canoe needed bailing, but otherwise we were okay. Barb was a little upset that I had not stopped to scout, and she was right. Bruce and Beth found a better line farther right and had a clean run.

We paddled on for some time through rain. Around 1 p.m., we spotted a hunt cabin on the left and visited it for lunch. The cabin was not in the best of shapes and featured bear mats (boards full of nails pointing upwards) on the porch/deck, but it afforded us shelter from the elements. Since we were cold and wet, we tried to start a fire in the stove but couldn't get it going well enough to provide any heat. Knowing we





*Beth sighting up the river*

were moving on soon, we gave up trying.

After lunch, we headed back to the canoes and were greeted by clearing skies and the appearance of Mr. Sun. At Rapide Tegatagama, we lined on the left, though it looked like you could run on the far right. We just decided it would be faster to do a little lining than to paddle back up-river and over to the other side. Immediately after this small rapid is a canyon with very large haystacks in the middle of the run. We tried to stay as far left of the middle as possible, but we still had to negotiate some huge waves. Both canoes made it through with spray covers, but still needed to bail out a lot of water.

The next rapid marked on the map turned out to be just a swift, which was followed by a flatwater paddle to the confluence of the Turgeon River. We had trip reports suggesting that people had camped here before. Try as we might, we were unable to find any signs of a campsite. We were tired as we had already travelled 31 km, and finally settled on a small rock island towards the right side of the river. The tent areas were not all that flat and there was no way to put up a tarp. We were hungry and had a snack of beef jerky and a can of beer after we decided to stay.

We hurried to set up camp and start supper, because there were some very ominous-looking clouds building to the west and north of us, and we could hear distant thunder. We just finished eating our grilled cheese sandwich and soup when the rain began. With no tarp, we headed for our tents to weather-out the storm. Though it seemed to be all around us, we never got the storm that we had expected, just some light rain.

There had been little wildlife sighted so far. Eagles, terns, and a swan were seen today, but no moose or bear, although we had seen signs of them.

#### **Day 5**

Today we would head for One Mile Island, one of the places where significant drops and rapids had to be negotiated. After the morning mist burned off, the day proved to be the hottest of the trip. According to our topo map there is a patch of “rough water” before the island. The last “rough water” had necessitated a portage, so we wondered what we would find. We approached OMI with some trepidation, knowing we were to take the right channel. We ferried back and forth and stopped to scout a bit, but the rough water just turned out to be Class 1 and current.

We put ashore at the top of OMI for lunch and to scout. After lunch we began our run down the right-hand side of OMI. We ran the first rapid eddying out on the left just above a ledge. We thought we might be able to line through a break in the ledge, but decided the water was too turbulent for safe lining and instead portaged the canoes and packs over some large rocks/boulders along shore. After bumping down a smaller ledge on the left, we decided to front-ferry across the whole river to the right-hand side where the next drop looked easier to get around. We were able to line about half of the drop, but were once again forced to portage stuff about 150 m over nasty, slippery boulders. Long grass and bushes hid holes that could swallow legs, while the rocks were slanted and slippery.

At one point, I slipped up to my thigh as my foot found a hole. Later as I was loading the canoe I took a somersault down a slanted rock but somehow saved myself from serious harm. The heat of the afternoon had brought out some nasty horseflies that didn't seem to realize they were unwelcome. In fact, they seemed to take a real liking to us, though we had made it clear many times that we didn't like them.

Looking downstream, all we could

see was fast current and then the beginning of waves around a large outcrop of rock on the left shore. So, we front-ferried our way across to the other side to explore the rock as a possible campsite. It turned out to be unsuitable and the next rapid looked runnable, but with some very large waves. Spray skirts were attached and the 800-m-long rapid was successfully negotiated. We were elated to have made it without dumping in the haystacks. Despite some rocky terrain we decided to camp at the bottom of these rapids. There turned out to be a wonderful cold-water spring there and we drank copious amounts. We were all very warm from the portaging efforts and the very hot weather, so everyone had a swim. Unfortunately, as Beth was exiting the water she cut her hand badly on a sharp rock. Barb helped her patch up the cut

with our first-aid kit. It probably would have required stitches if normal medical aid had been available.

We managed to get up our tarp (once again using a centre pole) and get out of the bugs to enjoy a whisky-sour cocktail before making supper. We left the supper prep until late in the evening when it had cooled off a bit. We had a very clear night with a brilliant moon.

#### **Day 6**

We thought we were close to the end of One Mile Island and that proved to be the case. We had a more leisurely morning, partly due to my watch malfunctioning, thus causing a later-than-usual emergence from the tent. The morning was again hot with lots of deer flies, black flies, and horse flies. One last rapid blocked our exit from OMI but it turned

out to be an easy run.

The rest of the day was beautiful with almost continuous C1 and C2 rapids. The rapids are so long that the end couldn't be seen. Other times, you could see right to the end of the rapid, but the final vee looked extremely far away, and it was not possible to tell how large the waves were. After a flat-water paddle of about an hour, the C1/C2 rapids began again. On one of the C2's, we decided to stop and have a closer look as the waves had started to build, but mostly to take a break and have lunch. As we scouted we saw a substantial ledge on the left and large haystacks in the middle. We needed a good front-ferry to take us to the right and then down through a nice vee to avoid most of the trouble. Barb and I were to go first while Bruce



*Beth having a little fun*





*Carrying across the rocks*

took some pictures. We had planned to stop and wait after the first bit, but the ferry worked so well, we just continued down the long, wide rapid. We finally reached the bottom of the rapid and turned around to try and spot Bruce and Beth. The river is so wide and the rapid so long, that they had practically done the rapid before we spotted them.

A beautiful flat rock with some shade showed up on the left. We stopped to look and found it to be so nice that it became our campsite for the night. This proved to be an excellent spot for a swim, some clothes washing, and some relaxation. It had been an easy day and the first time that it felt like vacation. Inside our tarp/kitchen, the bugs were bearable and the x-ped chairs were extremely comfortable, so appetizers and cocktails were in order. This was our lull before the storm (so to speak), because the next three or four days would prove to be very trying.

As we read over trip descriptions that night, we knew we were in for some difficult sections. We were now about seven or eight km from Seven Mile Island (SMI), a section of the river which is filled with a maze of islands and channels that are very difficult to navigate.

From the topo maps, we could see that there would be a lot of drop in the next 15 km or so.

#### **Day 7**

We had spread our sleeping bags out on the rocks to air out, but they must have picked up some no-see-ums, because both Barb and I got bites on our legs during the night. Thinking about the challenges of the next days, along with those pesky no-see-ums, had made our sleep a restless one. We had tented up close to or

slightly in the bush and the bugs were so plentiful between our fly and the tent, that it sounded like rain.

We got going quickly this day, with the weather still warm but changing. After paddling for a while we came to a C2/C3 which we cautiously paddled/lined. Next up was a C4/C5 with very heavy haystacks at the bottom. We were able to line and carry over on the left, taking our time and being very careful. The weather had turned to rain and wind and it had cooled off a lot.

According to our descriptions, there are a couple of falls before we would get to SMI. The next stretch of river is very wide and decisions to move from one side to the other had to be made quickly in order to front-ferry the entire width. We decided to get all the way to the right and found some small eddies along the right shore above the falls. After scouting, we found an excellent flat rock landing area from which we could portage. The portage on the right turned out to be fairly short, though the footing was slippery because of the heavy rain that had begun. Later, a look back at this spot showed a vast panorama of ledges/falls/islands that stretch across almost a kilometre of width, with a drop of five to seven metres.

Now, each move we made required patience and discussion. We wanted to avoid any errors in judgment that would put us in a bad situation. We paddled over to an island with a small eddy. Currents from this point head in both di-



*Campsite in the woods*



rections, with heavy sets of rapids on either side. We were able to portage across the island and continued to slowly work our way down river-right, lining where necessary. We headed for an eddy behind an outcrop of rock along the shore. The rain and wind had made everyone cold and miserable and it was time for lunch.

The skies looked like they might clear, so we decided not to press on yet. We wanted the wind to die down, so that our approach to SMI would not be affected. The sun did come out after awhile, but the wind seemed to be picking up. After waiting for some time and scouting as far down the shore as we could, we decided to camp here and hope for better weather the next day. This was a very short day distance-wise, as we still were a kilometre or so from the approach to SMI. We were all feeling a little apprehensive about what lay ahead; we were also feeling like we had wimped-out a bit by not continuing down to SMI. (Considering the difficulty we had setting up the tents in the strong wind, I don't regret at all the decision to stop; and we had thunderstorms overnight. - Bruce -)

### Day 8

The approach to SMI is guarded by four relatively large islands strung out across the river. Between each of the islands are channels of falls/rapids, which drop about five metres to flatwater on the other side of the islands. Our notes suggested we portage over the island that is second from the left. Our goal today (at least for the beginning) was to get past these islands.

The wind had died down from yesterday, but as we left camp, it began to rain again. We were able to run down through current and waves to the island which is third from the left, and then scout a route to the island which is second from the left. The portage over the island turned out to be quite easy except for the slippery footing. In front of us was flatwater and islands wherever we looked. We knew it was imperative to stay to the right of SMI but there seemed to be no open water on the right. One description had mentioned a blue barrel, marking the portage, but it was nowhere to be seen. For no particular reason except false hope (in hindsight) we believed we



*Rocks around Seven Mile Island*

were already on the right side of the island. I thought that the small left channel that was shown on the map had already branched off and that we had just missed it because we couldn't see it, due to the width of the river and the view being blocked off by the islands.

We paddled along cautiously, looking for signs of a portage to the right. Straight ahead and left seemed a more likely route and kept beckoning us. I guess we were lulled by the path of least resistance. We eventually came to where the fastwater began and stopped at an island to scout. On the right side of the island is a canyon with big fastwater flowing through. Portaging over the rocks on this side was possible, but as we continued around the rest of the island, a better portage was evident on the left. They both got us to the same place, and there was evidence that people/canoes had come this way, so we presumed that we were heading in the right direction.

After the portage, we devised a plan to head to the right and looked to go in that direction. However, Bruce and Beth went to a channel that was not as far right as I thought they were going. Barb and I headed farther right to explore. Splitting up like this was perhaps a bad idea. We should have been

closer in order to talk things over and check the maps carefully again (lessons to be learned!). Barb and I were looking at a large box canyon with water rushing down and turning to the right. The canyon has steep rocky walls. The drop is substantial with no portage route apparent. Bruce and Beth were looking to the left where we would have to front-ferry and run through some rapids to an eddy. As I mentioned before, we were still under the false impression that we were already on the right side of SMI, so taking a left channel would be okay. Later, going over the maps, we realized that the point of land directly in front of us at this point is the beginning of SMI. This was where we took the wrong channel.

As we worked our way down the left channel, we had to run two C3 rapids with bailing after each run due to large waves. Then the next rapid ends in a drop of about three metres. There was a good eddy on the right and it looked like we could line down that way. We both managed to paddle down to and into the eddy. After scouting, the lining possibilities seemed not so good so we decided to go to the left side. From where we were this would mean a



*The Vortex from the height of the portage trail*

quick front-ferry across the current only 15 or 20 m above the main drop.

We were very grateful for our many spring day-trips where we had practised ferrying, because we really needed a confident ferry here. We both made it to the small eddy on the other side and were able to do a liftover/line down to below the drop. The only casualties were a couple of spray cover snaps. Below this we were able to paddle to some slower-moving current and spotted fresh water tumbling into the river from the left shore. Here we filled our water container and began to think we were on the wrong side of the island. After a short careful paddle in some current we came to yet another serious drop through a rocky canyon. We snuck down to an eddy on the left and scouted. There seemed to be no trail to portage down without having to negotiate a cliff that is about 10 to 13 m high, and the rock along the canyon is far too steep to line.

We were more and more starting to think we were not where we should be, so we decided to paddle back up to a rocky outcrop about 500 m back upstream. With some difficult paddling against the current, we reached the spot and stopped for something to eat. We also wanted to explore some water on the right, even though it looked like current from it was coming our way. Bruce realized he had left his PFD back where we were scouting and had to go and re-

trieve it. Barb and I said we would go and explore the bay on the right and then paddle down the right-hand side to the canyon again if the exploration proved useless.

The water on the right just turned out to be a back bay that was a dead end. We carefully headed back to where the canyon begins. There wasn't much in the way of eddies on the right so we proceeded very slowly. Bruce and Beth joined us after finding Bruce's life jacket. Beth volunteered to go and explore the right-hand side of the canyon for portage possibilities. After some time she returned with no good news. If anything, the right side was worse than the left.

It was getting late in the afternoon and we didn't want to start trying to portage over this extremely rough terrain, so we once again forced our way against the current to the rock outcrop. We managed to find places for our tents and decided to camp for the night. We pored over the maps and read descriptions to see if we could determine where we were. We all came to the conclusion that we were on the wrong side of the island. At this point we had thoughts of calling someone and discovered that our satellite phone had low batteries (my fault — I must have left it on after calling my daughter).

#### **Day 9**

We all had a restless sleep, thinking about what we could do. Carrying on

down the left channel seemed possible, but it would be very, very tough and the contours on the map show steep sides for quite a distance. Trying to fight the current and rapids back up to the start of the island seemed equally futile. I asked myself "What would Herb Pohl do?" Herb probably wouldn't have ended up in this predicament, but if he had, he would just portage to where he wanted to be. In the morning, Bruce and I had come to the same conclusion. We decided to try to scout a route over the island to the right channel.

With a GPS, duct tape, and a small axe, we all set out to mark a trail to the other side of the island, and do it without getting lost on the way. We were not too sure about the compass feature of the GPS and had a few technical difficulties (such as me leading the group in a complete circle!), but eventually we found our way to the other side. By 11 a.m. we had returned to our campsite, had lunch, and packed up all of our gear. It took us until about 6 p.m. that evening to move everything over our rough trail. The trail featured slippery rocks, springy moss, tight narrow spaces, a three-metre cliff (dubbed the Hilary Step), bog with thigh-high holes, and domed rock outcroppings. Did I mention the bugs and the rain? All in all it could have been much worse.

That night, we camped at the top of the edge of the island not far from the river, which was at least 30 m down. We were all exhausted, wet from the inside as much as wet from the outside rain. We managed to change to dry clothes and have some supper. Bruce volunteered to get water from the river to wash dishes in. It was a climb down followed by a steep climb up through wet bushes. Indeed heroic! Since we were in the bush, the bugs were numerous, to say the least. Again our tarp with mesh made it bearable. After entering the tents that night, there was quite a session of bug extermination before heads found pillows.

#### **Day 10**

At this point, we felt that we had taken about two days more than planned. We were starting to worry whether we would have enough food for the rest of the trip,



even with the extra we had packed. I also had to call the Cree Shuttle people to let them know we would be a couple of days late arriving at the Goose Camp. However, our spirits were still much higher than they had been for the last two days. We were now on the right side of the island and headed in the right direction.

As we began lowering our packs and canoes down to the water's edge, we spotted canoes gliding down the river right in front of us. We called them over to chat. They were a group of young paddlers from a camp in Temagami. The leaders were able to give us valuable information on the rest of the rapids. They also confirmed that the river levels were very high. Apparently, the left side of the island is the channel of choice when water levels are low, but clearly not a good choice when levels are high. For the next three or four hours, our paths kept the two groups together. Almost the whole day consisted of portaging over slippery rocks and rough terrain. Didn't we just finish doing a whole day of this?

The group had names for all the rapids that had to be portaged, like The Vortex. It is quite a spectacular rapid, but the beauty of it was somewhat lost on me as I carried the canoe over an-

other kilometre portage. Eventually we got ahead of their group (which had about eight canoes), but saw them later in the day as they continued past where we were camped. As we set up camp it was raining harder than ever and not at all comfortable. We had only travelled a few kilometres and still had quite a bit of SMI to do. Tomorrow would prove to be almost as challenging as the last two days, but for now, sleep came easily.

### Day 11

After having a quick granola breakfast and packing up in the rain, we headed for the left side of the river where we had seen the canoes pass the night before. Bruce and I scouted the rapid from the left shore and concluded that the right shore looked better. However, Barb and Beth, who were waiting for us, had figured out a route around the first drop and suggested we do that. With a little portaging and a little paddling, we worked our way down the left-hand side. We couldn't see the end of the rapid, but Bruce and Beth decided to paddle down farther. We thought they were going to follow the left shore and stop further down, but as we watched they began to ferry across the river heading for an eddy on the far right shore. They were forced

to adjust their ferry by a large rock and ended up too low to make the eddy. It was a choice between crashing into rocks on shore while in current, or turning and going down the rapid. From our vantage point, we could see them turn and go, but I knew that had not been their original plan and I was worried that they were heading into trouble.

Having seen their route, Barb and I chose to ferry across earlier and were upstream of the rock and made it to the eddy fairly easily. However, my worst fears were realized as soon as I hopped out of the canoe and peered downstream. Their canoe was floating upside down and so far away it was not possible to make out if they were okay or not. The rapid itself was huge, with lots of exposed rocks to get around. Though gradual, the difference in elevation from our eddy to the bottom of the rapid was easily 10 m. It took Barb and I at least half an hour to line/portage/paddle to where our friends were.

As we went, we were glad to see two people up on a rock recovering their canoe and later paddling it over to shore. As we approached them, still concerned that someone had been hurt, a 1.7-m fish jumped clear out of the water, likely a sturgeon. We were very relieved when Bruce and Beth greeted



*Who says you need two trees for a clothesline!*



*The Ecolodge at the Hannah Bay Goose Camp*

us with “What kept you?” They had made it through a monster hole in the biggest drop, filled up with water, and dumped in the next set of waves, resulting in a long swim through several more drops. Though still a little cold and damp, they had changed clothes and were ready to carry on.

Not much further on we encountered more rapids with ledges. We worked our way down the right-hand channel where the current was less strong. The final drop required a short portage over flat rock. At the end of the portage we ate lunch with the canoes tipped over to block a chilly wind. As we began again, there was a long C2 that ended in a ledge, which seemed to stretch right across the river. We picked a spot and went for it, keeping the canoe pointing straight down. Despite a lapful of water, we stayed upright and turned to look for Bruce and Beth. They had got hung up on a rock and were not even visible as we looked up-river. Finally, we spotted them and watched them come down and over the ledge on river left. They also got a lapful, but looked like they had picked a better route than we had.

After one more set of swifts/C1’s and more ledges we finally made it past SMI. We saw the other channel coming in to rejoin the river and large limestone cliffs on the right. (Note: the guides we spoke with earlier had described all of these rapids as swifts. At our water levels they

were more like C1’s and C2’s with ledges. - Bruce -)

Meanwhile, the rain had stopped and sunshine had made an appearance but we were paddling into a headwind. We were much relieved to be done with SMI and knew that no significant rapids were left as we made our way through the James Bay lowlands. We paddled on for a couple of hours wanting to make up for lost time, eventually passing the Temagami group. Finally, at about 6:30 p.m., we stopped and set up camp on the right-hand shore. The land slopes gently down to the shore and is covered with small rocks, but we were able to groom the area enough to set up our tents. The sun was out and we dried as many articles as we could before nightfall. As nighttime approached, a heavy dew began to fall and it got very cold. Fleeces were the jammies of choice!

#### **Day 12**

By our calculations, we still had about 65 km to go to reach our destination, the Goose Camp at Hannah Bay. Even making good time, we would need two days – we thought. We decided to get an early start, avoid the wind if possible, and see how far we could get. It was still very cold as we loaded our canoes and departed, but the sun was out and the wind was at our backs. With the aid of the wind and many swifts and shallow rapids we made excellent time. When we

stopped around 10 a.m. for a break, Bruce reported that we had already covered over 20 km.

By lunchtime, we had covered over half the distance to the Goose Camp. We began to think it might just be possible to reach it in one day. By 2 p.m. we had reached Low Shoal Island where we took the right channel. The sky began to darken and we thought that it might rain as we passed the end of the island. Now we were on a river that was easily one kilometre wide. Off in the distance we spotted an orange glow, which turned out to be at the Goose Camp, where they were burning scrap wood and other rubbish. By 4:15 p.m. we were at the camp. We had covered a remarkable 63 km in a little over eight hours of relatively easy paddling.

The Goose Camp itself was a swarm of activity. There were about 24 people working there, including a crew of Junior Forest Rangers from Cochrane. They carried our packs and helped us take our canoes up above the tide line. The Cree workers were very hospitable, giving us a newly finished (though unfurnished) room to sleep in, and inviting us to dine on spaghetti with them. It was a wonderful way to finish a perfect day of paddling. At supper, we found out that our shuttle boats had already left Moose Factory to come take us back to Moosonee. We would spend the night and leave in the morning.

We got caught up on the work being





*Across the bay in a freighter canoe*

done on the Eco Lodge. It had sat for about six years with nothing more being done to it. Then, about a year ago, they had begun to work on it again. It was now fairly close to being complete, but about twice as big as they had originally planned. It had solar panels for electricity and many generators as well. There was television in the dining area and a cook made meals for all the workers and guests. There was still lots to do, like hook up the plumbing for the toilets, but their goal was to finish it that summer. The ultimate plan was to attract bird watchers and other tourists to the lodge.

When the crew from Moose Factory arrived, I went to talk to the person in charge. It turned out to be Daryl, one of the Cree guides who had shuttled us on our last trip, seven years earlier. He

seemed unclear as to what time we would leave in the morning (tide charts don't seem to be part of their lexicon) so I asked him just to let us know, so that we would be packed and ready to leave.

### **Day 13**

At about 5:30 a.m., there was a knock on our door. Barb finally went to the door to answer it. It was Daryl telling us we could sleep longer, since we wouldn't be leaving for another three hours at least. Nice of him to let us know! Bruce was so sure that Daryl was going to tell us to get packed that he had let air out of his X-ped and spent the next couple of hours on a rather hard bed.

After a great breakfast of pancakes, sausage, and beans supplied by Hubert the cook, we packed up our gear and canoes in the two freighter canoes and left

for Moosonee. It was an easy crossing and by 11:30 a.m., we were at the town. We took our gear to the station by taxi, ate some lunch in a local restaurant, and by 11:30 p.m. we were back in Cochrane, where Terry met us with our car. We stayed at Lillabelle Lake Lodge again that night and were back home the next day.

All in all, we were pretty happy with the trip. It was definitely a little tougher than we had thought it would be, but we were proud of the way we had handled adversity. At the same time, we were humbled by the mighty Harricana, the weather, and most of all by those 17-year-olds that trotted passed us on the portages carrying twice as much! We hope that in turn they were somewhat impressed by us oldsters whose average age was almost 60.



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**Published by the Wilderness Canoe Association**  
**Nastawgan is an Anishinabi word meaning "the way or route"**

The WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION is a non-profit organization made up of individuals interested in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe and kayak, but also including backpacking and winter trips on both skis and snowshoes. The club publishes a quarterly journal,

Nastawgan, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas of interest to wilderness travellers, organizes an extensive program of trips for members, runs a few basic workshops, and is involved in environmental issues relevant to wilderness canoeing.

## Editorial

Another milestone in the varied history of our WCA: we have a new, modern, easily accessible website that makes it much simpler to quickly get up-to-date information to the membership (see next page). The Outings Committee has therefore decided not to present the complete list of outings in each printed issue, but make all the information available only on the website (see page 27). Faster, cheaper, simpler, less work! Registration for events such as the coming WCA Fall Meeting (see next page) will also be available only on the website and is no

longer printed on the brown paper wrap.

You will surely notice that this issue has fewer articles than normal; only two very long articles give us anything to enjoy about actual canoe tripping. This is not a healthy situation for a world-class publication such as our very own *Nastawgan*. You, the members of this fine association, will have to do something about it! Put your paddles and kneepads aside for a while and take the time to write an article of any length about something you saw or experienced in your paddling world, anything that

## Deadlines

The deadline dates for submitting material for the two remaining issues in 2010 are: the first day of August and November. If you have questions, please contact the editor; addresses on the last page.

would be of interest to the members of this outdoors-oriented group of paddlers and walkers. And do it quickly, please! We're running very low on good material! If you have ideas but don't know how to go about it, contact the editor, who is eager to help.

## WCA Photo Contest

Members of the WCA visit many incredible places on this planet, both near and far. However, we don't often get a chance to share our stories and images with other members. But now there is such an opportunity, because all members are invited to participate in the search for the best photographs made by WCA members.

Select three of your favourite canoe/kayak/wilderness trip photographs (flat water, whitewater, camping, portaging, swimming, anything you encounter on wilderness canoe trips and related activities) and enter them in this competition.

Photographs can be made in traditional analog format (35 mm, medium, negative, slide, colour, black-and-white,

etc.) and digital format. But all submissions must be in the form of digital files, so you need to digitize the analog originals before submitting them. The files should be in JPEG at 300 dpi at 4 x 6 inch or larger. Please include a brief description of each image and the full name of the photographer, as well as some basic technical information on the photographs.

Send your selection to Toni Harting, *Nastawgan* editor, at: [journal@wildernesscanoe.ca](mailto:journal@wildernesscanoe.ca). Toni will be the main judge, assisted by several photo-savvy people who are not members of the WCA. The closing date for submission of your entries is 1 October 2010.

Winners will be announced at the Wine & Cheese Party in November 2010. The top ten photographs will be enlarged and laminated to be a part of the WCA booth at public events. In addition, winners will be published in the Winter 2010 issue of *Nastawgan*. The top winners will also receive an autographed copy of Toni Harting's book *Shooting Paddlers, Photographic Adventures with Canoeists, Kayakers and Rafters*.

We're hoping that this invitation may provide a spark for future similar initiatives – perhaps making this a fun, annual event! So, grab your camera and go shooting...!

The Board



# WCA FALL MEETING, 1-3 October 2010

## Madawaska Kanu Centre

Mark your calendars and join us for yet another unforgettable WCA Fall Meeting!

We will, once again, enjoy the MKC hospitality and diverse paddling options in the area. Come paddle, hike, bike, read, meet old friends and make new ones, and get the latest on the best canoe routes the Madawaska valley has to offer. Members, non-members, and children are all welcome. You won't be disappointed! We'll have a fantastic time.

The area is rich in beautiful flatwater paddling options, such as:

Paddle Bark Lake in touring kayaks with Aleks. Canoes welcome.

Paddle the North arm of Kamaniskeg Lake from Hinterland Beach to Barry's Bay

Conroy Marsh  
Madawaska River  
Bonnechere River

Of course, some of Ontario's finest whitewater is located in the immediate vicinity.

Remember to bring your used equipment for the GEAR SWAP.

"MINI-SYMPOSIUM" evening presentations by our members will be shortened to allow more time to socialize. Please contact Diane Lucas [lucasde@yahoo.com](mailto:lucasde@yahoo.com) or Aleks Gusev [aleks@gusev.ca](mailto:aleks@gusev.ca) if you'd like to present your favorite trip.

To register and/or to obtain more details, visit the Events Page at [www.wildernesscanoe.ca](http://www.wildernesscanoe.ca)

## We Have a New Website!

On the 22nd of April, the new and vastly improved WCA website was launched. This project is the result of close collaboration between several volunteers led by Marilyn Sprissler and Aleks Gusev. Excellent development work was provided by the CERAI Team, an Information and Technology consulting firm. Funding for this project was secured from the Ontario Trillium Grant.

The new website features a contemporary design, offers a lot of interactivity, and is driven by a powerful back-end open-source platform allowing for future expansion. Here are several highlights:

- Interactive Outings section – you can sign up for trips online; you can also submit a trip of your own to the Outings Committee online.

- Automated email notification – as a Registered User, you can indicate the types of outings for which you wish to receive email notification when a new event is posted.

- Bulletin Board – you can submit new BB posts online. The administrator will need to approve the posts before

they are published.

- New Member Registration and Renewal – It's never been easier to join the WCA.

- Online Payment – using a secure online payment module we can now pay our membership fee and for Special Events such as the Fall Meeting and the Wine & Cheese Party.

- Secure site – yes, it's another password! But, on the plus side, here's what it allows us to do online:

- Receive email notifications for new outings

- Process membership renewals

- Register and pay for Special Events online

- Register for the outings, etc.

Each WCA member who provided an email address in the membership application/renewal form has received a personal login and temporary password prior to the new website launch. For those of us who are Family members, only one login will be created – for the main contact on the membership form. If you haven't received the User Name

and password, it means one of two things – either your membership is lapsed, or we don't have your email address on file. In both cases, you can register on the website by clicking on "Create New Account" link below LOGIN prompt. Don't forget to pay your membership fee online, as it is required in order to gain access to the many website "members-only" features.

Please refer to the Help section of the new website for instructions on how to effectively use its many features.

Our website is a "work-in-progress", as are all things internet-related, and will be subject to continued change and development. As new features are implemented, you can expect even more flexibility and ease of use.

We'd love to hear from you. For that purpose, we created a new email address [feedback@wildernesscanoe.ca](mailto:feedback@wildernesscanoe.ca) that will direct your comments to the Board members.

We hope you'll enjoy the new website.

WCA Board

# A Steel River Story

Neil Miller



## *Day one on Santoy Lake*

### **Prologue**

In many ways, southwestern Ontario's Steel River Loop is the perfect paddling experience. In fact, it is almost "theme park" perfect. If you are approaching from Wawa or Thunder Bay, the put-in is only a couple of kilometres off the main highway, the route ends where it starts, half of the route is lake and half is river, the portage trails are marked and groomed by local paddlers, there are sufficient campsites along its entire course, and you can complete it comfortably in a week. Of course, it is not a theme park so there are natural issues such as large burn-over areas, shallow water in late summer, the legendary logjams, and the Diablo Lake Portage Trail.

We believe that we have now made tougher portages than the Diablo Portage, but it still ranks up there with "the best." Every experience continues

our education and the Diablo was no exception. My initial scout of this portage, which seemed thorough enough at the time, was totally inadequate and for this I take complete responsibility. I had been jaded by an old trip report I had read and even though I criticized it highly, certain "facts" stuck with me. They had written about a steep climb out of Santoy Lake and I just assumed that they were not on a trail because they never mentioned one. This simple mistake was going to cost me and my team dearly in both time and energy. Our team was composed of Brian and Keith Prodin, brothers in their thirties paddling a Swift Yukon, and Neil and Mike Miller, father (early fifties) and (teenage) son paddling a Novacraft Prospector.

This portage caused one of our team to "hit the wall" and another, me, to be nearly immobilized with leg cramps.

Throughout the first night of the trip I awoke three times in the middle of excruciating cramping and had to rub my calves for 15 minutes each time to cause the cramps to subside. All-in-all, it was a fairly ominous beginning to a trip that was going to call up our endurance repeatedly over the course of a week.

Now that it is years behind us, we look back at this portage and, to some degree, we all wear it like a medal on our chest. This would be the last trip my son would make with me and I don't know how much this portage played into his decision or how much of it was his age of 15. One of the two brothers of our team also dropped off and our paddling foursome became a duo. As for myself and the other brother, he and I continue to paddle as partners, and we have both been in more challenging situations since that week of 9 – 15 August 2003 on the



Steel River Loop. However, the portage trail between Santoy and Diablo lakes continues to hold a special place in our collective paddling portfolio, and for us this portage and the logjams still define the Steel River Canoe Route.

### Flashback

In front of us the shore had a pale-yellow, sickly glow but behind us, the sky was a deep slate-gray, almost black. As the cold front roared down on us, the lake became dead calm and took on the same leaden gray as the sky.

We were in the seventh and final day of our canoe trip and this monster thunderstorm just seemed to fit perfectly with all the other surprises and challenges that had presented themselves to us throughout this route. Foolishly thinking we could outrace this storm, I looked to shore and saw the Diablo Canyon where our wilderness experience had really begun a week prior. It seemed like an eternity ago and my thoughts drifted back to that first day and the portage ...

### Off-route

Just below the surface of our consciousness, we all knew we had gotten too late a start. We didn't talk about it but it was there, worrisome, threatening. It was 2:30 in the afternoon and we were paddling slowly along the shore at the base of the steep canyon that hid the portage trail to Diablo Lake.

The only information we had to go by was a 13-year-old trip report copied off a canoeing website. This report was both understated and overstated at the same time. The author talked about climbing a 125-metre cliff right out of the lake with no mention of a trail; therefore, as we paddled along the shore, we saw a good place to take out at the base of a large boulder-filled avalanche slope. Only later did we find out that we had landed the canoes about 60 m south of the actual portage trailhead, at the location of a giant rock scree slope, which had been caused by centuries of rock falling off the rock face of the south canyon wall.

I went ashore and climbed up about 10 m above the lake's surface, then traversed from the south wall of the canyon to the north. I reasoned that if there were

an actual portage trail, I would intersect with it. The canyon was 90 m in width and was just more of this jumble of rocks and boulders with a deep, narrow gully filled with deadfall under the north wall. Returning back to the water's edge from my scout, I reported the lack of an obvious trail. With resignation, we loaded up for our first trip up the steep boulder field.

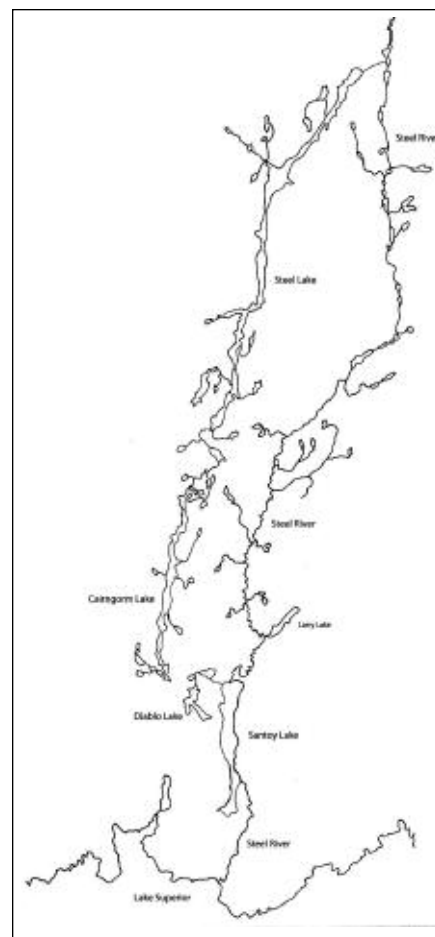
### Canoe mountaineering

We were only about an hour and a half into our seven-day trip on the Steel River Loop and we had not yet left our shore identities behind. It would be another day or so before we started to clearly think with the identity of wilderness paddlers. Brian set out in the lead and we carefully began the process of gaining elevation through this jumble of fallen rock. Aside from the steepness, there was added treachery in that some of the individual rocks were loose and would teeter and slide when we stepped on them.

We were slightly perplexed at the lack of canoe paint on the rock surfaces and this should have told us that something was amiss. As steep and rugged as this (lack of) route was, there should have been "canoe scrapings" everywhere but there weren't. Although we openly discussed this fact, we were more focused on the time of day and the difficulty we were encountering as we slowly gained altitude up this boulder field. The temperature was in the mid-twenties centigrade, and we were all sweating like the tenderfoots we were. To come all this way sitting in a car, paddle about an hour, and then carry 27-kilo packs up a steep avalanche chute, put us at about the limit of what we could handle. We would physically and mentally mature over the next couple of days but recognition of that knowledge eluded us at this point in time.

### We once were lost but now we're found

We had reached an area above the boulder field that was about 25 m in width between the canyon walls. The forestation had increased to the point that the personality of the gap changed from rocky canyon to overgrown gully. The floor of this narrow gulch was still com-



posed of boulders and bedrock, but enough organic matter had fallen over the centuries to create what deceptively could be called soil. We took a breather and stared up this gully looking for a way through the increasingly dense undergrowth and a gnawing hopeless feeling began to settle in. We had climbed through the steepest portion but still we could not see a clear path through the tangle of trees and brush.

I looked over toward the north side of the gully and saw a patch of bare earth illuminated in the afternoon sunlight. My son was closest to the north wall so I asked him to strip off his gear and check out this discovery. He yelled back over to us that it was definitely a trail. At 4 p.m. we had found the Diablo Portage Trail, the hard way.

### The Devil's Den

This discovery proved to be bittersweet because, although we uttered a collective sigh of relief, we still had over 600 m of trail to Diablo Lake. To the four of us it



*Struggling up the scree slope*

felt as though we had been at this portage all day and yet we still hadn't completed our first trip. The trail was certainly easier than what we had just come through, but it held its own hidden treachery.

The Diablo Canyon Portage Trail is a thin layer of organic matter underlain by rocks and boulders creating a very treacherous pathway with numerous holes that can swallow an entire foot over the ankle. We were already pretty spent from doing our "variation" up the scree slope, and we still had two more loads to carry. The food pack was so heavy that I

didn't think my 15-year-old son's skeletal frame was strong enough to carry it, so we were looking at two more round trips, which included the canoe.

With about 400 m to go to Diablo Lake, we passed a hand-carved sign nailed to a tree announcing the Devil's Den. This turned out to be about 200 m of perpetual darkness filled with a jumble of multi-sized boulders. There were so many rocks that the vegetation had never gotten a toehold and so we had to climb up, down, over, and around these obstacles. Threading through this maze



*On the boulder field*

of boulders was very difficult and I kept thinking about coming through here with our 35-kilo canoe on my shoulders. It was about 5 p.m. when we dumped our packs at the edge of Diablo Lake and went back for our second load.

### **Let's get physical**

The Diablo Trail is 1000 m in length and the elevation difference between Santoy Lake and Diablo Lake is about 100 m. Following the trail back to Santoy Lake we came to an extremely steep downhill, which ends at the lake's edge. We were all thinking the same thing: we were going to have to turn around and climb this steep trail with the rest of our gear including canoes. The trail goes from the edge of Santoy Lake to an elevation of 90 m in a horizontal distance of only 200 m. Portions are so steep that for some of the climb we were crawling on all fours, pulling ourselves up with the aid of roots and trees along the trailside.

At least the mystery of finding no trail on my initial scout was solved. When I was standing at the north side of the canyon, the trail was already 30 m above my position, hidden in the trees.

On our second trip I carried the very heavy food pack while Mike carried all the loose stuff from the boat (paddles, lifejackets, rope, etc.). As we passed through the Devil's Den I could feel my calves beginning to cramp up and I had to stop and rub them a couple of times. The 30-kilogram dinner pack was a poorly suspended waterproof bag that put all the weight squarely on my shoulders.

We made our third and final trip with the canoe. As I single-carried our boat, Mike was behind me, carrying what loose stuff he had missed on his second trip, and acting as my cheerleader. But we were tired and I was moving very slowly; his words of motivation and inspiration seemed to be more of the nagging, impatient variety than encouragement.

By the time we arrived at the Devil's Den, I could barely lift my legs, and now Mike was continuously reminding me that the sun was nearly set and we needed to keep moving. I didn't really



need the reminder because I was doing the absolute best that I could. As I was working my way over a large boulder, my right calf completely cramped, causing my toes to curl up inside my shoes. The canoe made a sharp report bouncing of the boulder as I collapsed to the ground in pain.

### **My summer vacation**

I was splayed out on the rocks in the Devil's Den, groaning with the painful cramp; my son didn't know why I had collapsed. With rising panic in his voice he was asking what was happening to me. I lay there for a moment looking up at the deep concern and shock on his face and I asked in mock seriousness, "So Mike ... How's your vacation going so far?" The sun had set below the horizon. Night had arrived. I was sprawled out on the trail trying to uncurl my cramped toes, and Mike's laughter neurons failed to fire. He had run completely out of humor. From this point on, we double-carried the Royalex canoe and we weren't very gentle about it. It was dark and we were hungry, thirsty, and completely burned out.

We arrived at Diablo Lake at 9:30 p.m. and all that was left of daylight was a faint gray line along the treetops. We paddled 400 m to the nearest island in Diablo Lake where we knew a campsite existed, set up the tent, and boiled water for our freeze-dried dinners. We ate at 11 p.m. and were in our tent by 11:30 p.m. Keith and I both suffered from leg cramps throughout the night and would wake up periodically in a spasm of pain.

For us, this entire portage took three trips and seven hours; we figure the scree slope variation cost us an hour-and-a-half. I believe if you start at the right place and make the portage in two trips it would take between three and four hours, probably closer to four.

### **Two days for one**

A series of beaver ponds connects Diablo Lake to Cairngorm Lake. Cairngorm is the first of two long, narrow lakes that are representative of the geology of this region. It seemed that our jinx of the day before was still with us because it took



*Still off-route*

us five hours to travel through the terrain created by those pesky beavers.

As we cleared the final narrows and paddled out onto long, narrow Cairngorm Lake, we were immediately battling a stiff northern headwind. We were only able to make another three kilometres in distance before the increasing wind forced us to shore. We put into a rock bluff that had a fire ring and although the take-out was very dif-

ficult, our second campsite was comfortable and scenic. This bluff is the normal first-day stopping point for paddlers who started earlier and made the Diablo Portage in three to four hours. We had to tie our free-standing tent to rocks and trees to keep it from getting blown off the bluff, but we still had some much-needed relaxation time.

That night, we slept so soundly that if





*Cairngorm Lake*

we hadn't filled the southern part of the lake with the guttural explosiveness of our snoring, you would have thought we were four dead men.

#### **Into the burn**

As we started down Cairngorm the next day, the northern high blew itself out leaving clear blue skies and no wind. Halfway up the lake we paddled into a large burn-over area. The fire had roared through here the year before

and all the trees were lying in a massive jumble as though they had been pushed over by some mighty giant. Wildflowers and young sprouting foliage were trying to push their way up through the downed forest, but there was no visible wildlife. There were no predatory birds because there were no perches, and the small mammals and rodents could travel in relative safety under the fallen trees. As we passed through this "dead zone," the only

other living things we saw were some loons.

#### **The shrine of the little waterfall**

The top of Cairngorm Lake is a series of bays, with the Steel River connecting Cairngorm to narrow and even longer Steel Lake. The river turns out to be a weed-and-log-choked creek that is non-navigable; so with some exploration we found the take-out at the head of the northeastern-most bay of the lake. The trail starts out as black muck, then goes to higher ground where it is so thoroughly burned over that when I dragged my life jacket over a burned-out stump, it left a charcoal stain that I have not been able to remove to this day.

But there are always anomalies, and as we approached the put-in at the end of this burned-out trail, we found a pristine little waterfall where the creek becomes a wider stream. This topographic feature had been completely missed by the fire, which had burned everything else around it. The idyllic little waterfall surrounded by green foliage and wildflowers had the appearance of a shrine to life enveloped in destruction. Working our way through a few more ponds and portages, we entered 30-km-long Steel Lake.

#### **The red boat**

About 500 m up on the eastern shore at the north end of a narrow bay we saw a camp with a single, shiny, red canoe. We assumed this was a marked campsite, though we never went close enough for verification. The camp was in a heavily burned-out area and did not look very inviting. About two kilometres up the lake, where it begins to narrow, the burn no longer existed. We could see a light-colored strip at the water's edge, which we knew would be a beach and it was here we put ashore and set up camp three.

The next morning, I rolled out of the tent just after sun-up, followed by Brian. Ten minutes later the red canoe, a Wenonah Sundowner, slid by in the heavy morning mist with its two male occupants. We nodded in their direction and they nodded in ours and that was the



*Father and son*



sum total of our contact with them. If they were trying to get the jump on us, they won, but perhaps they were just early starters. However, without question, if there was an especially nice campsite at the end of Steel Lake, it would be theirs.

### **The professionals**

We were in the wilderness tripping groove, now. We were thinking and operating like the self-contained paddlers we were. Between the four of us we had organized setting up and breaking down camp like a well-oiled machine. Our portages had been perfected to the modicum of efficiency, and we had finally left our shore identities—well, on the shore.

There's an old paddling riddle that asks how many pairs of underpants do you need for a four-day paddle? The answer is one. You wear them the right way the first day, backwards the second day, inside-out frontwards on the third day, and inside-out backwards on the fourth. Well, this wasn't to be our story. We had washed our underwear and socks and they were laying on top of our gear drying in the sun as we paddled down Steel Lake.

But enough degeneration into self-absorbed smugness. We had unknown challenges ahead of us and we would handle some with expert proficiency and some with amateur ineptness.

### **The red boat, redux**

Our fifth day started with the same perfect weather that we had enjoyed every day so far. We had now reached the very north end of Steel Lake where the main branch of the Steel River flows out of the lake. Taking one easy portage, one that was difficult, and a wade through a rock garden, we followed the Steel River until it joins the Little Steel River, which comes from the north, at Aster Lake. At the point where the Steel River flows into Aster Lake there is a large, flat, shady campsite and it was here we met the red Wenonah again. The two paddlers had set up a comfortable camp and were lying around in full relaxation mode. It looked as though they were taking this day as a layover day and, as with our first en-



*Burned portage to Steel Lake*

counter, we nodded to them and they nodded back and no words were exchanged.

### **Small lakes and boney swifts**

The 31 km of the Steel River below Aster Lake are an easy and pleasant paddle through small narrow lakes connected by short swifts. Although we did a lot of “tail-dragging” in the “boney” swifts,

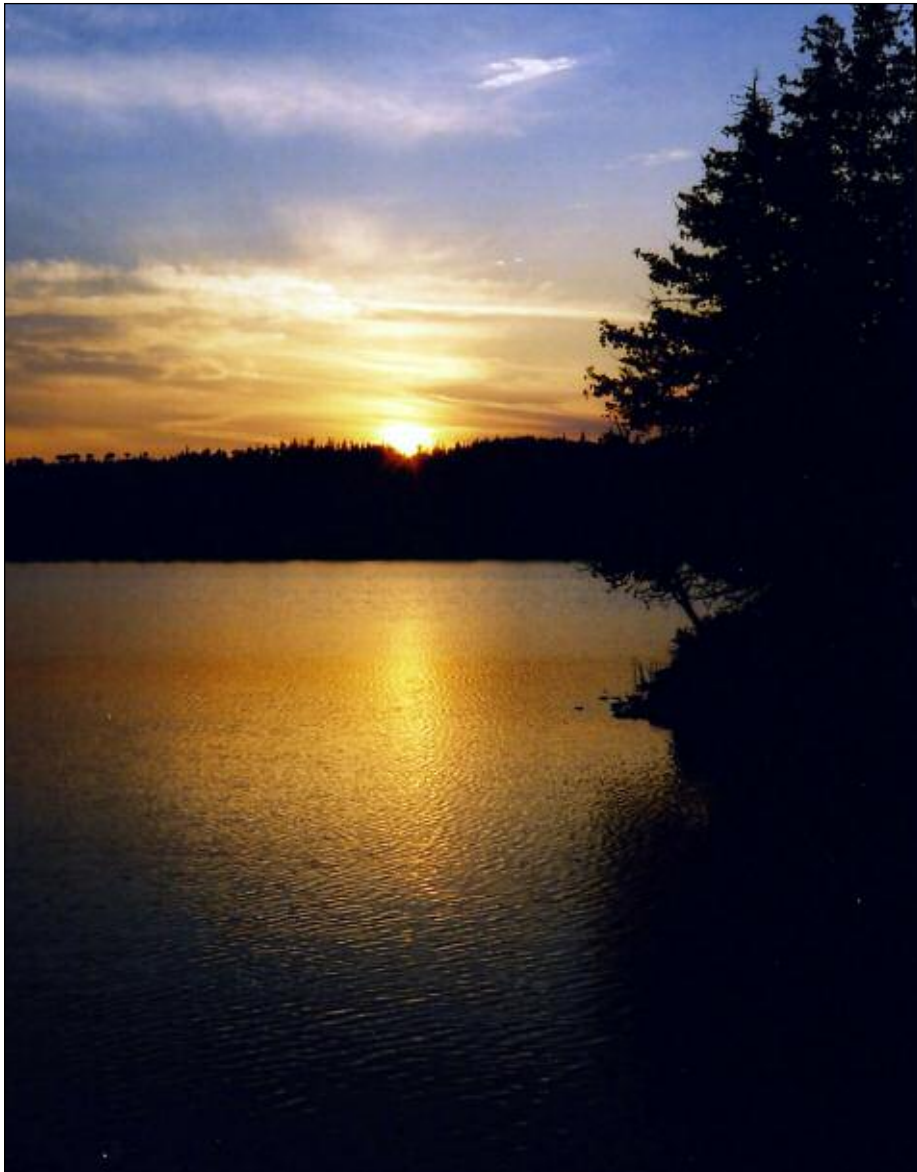
there is only one portage and that is around the picturesque Rainbow Falls. There is one large, flat campsite at the falls and on this day it was occupied by a single tent as we passed through. The six kilometres below the falls are mostly all swifts and offer some of the best paddling on the route.

There was no burn-over along the entire course of the Steel. We did make a





*Steel Lake morning mist*



*Sunset at head of Steel Lake*

rare sighting of a Lynx in a tree branch that overhung the river. We also startled a juvenile black bear at the river's edge. As it went crashing up through the brush, our heart rates increased a little as we worried that the young bear might still be under the protection of its mother. Fortunately, no angry mother bear appeared and we were pleased to see that life had returned to the Steel River Canoe Route.

### **Split personality**

With 36 km of river remaining before the entrance to Santoy Lake, a new personality of the Steel emerges. The river begins to slow down and meander and we encountered a couple of small logjams that we had to circumvent. They weren't much to deal with, causing us to muster up a false bravado regarding the stories we had heard of giant logjams. We convinced each other that the stories had been much exaggerated.

But the meanders became tighter and tighter. We would actually be going 270° of a circle in each bend and then it would turn in the other direction and the process would repeat itself. This had a "Bermuda Triangle" affect on our GPS as the little instrument tried to figure out if we were heading for the next waypoint or the one behind us. The reliability of this instrument became suspect and, though we left it switched on, we stopped relying on it.

### **The river's gone!**

Toward the end of our sixth day, we rounded a tight meandering bend and there, as far as the eye could see, was the "mother of all logjams." Disappearing around the distant bend was this massive jumble of thousands of trees. Initially, a defeated "Oh-my-God!" feeling set in as our imaginations ran away with us. We still had over 20 km of river travel to complete, and in total negativity we thought there was no more river.

With some difficulty we muscled the boats and gear up the six-metre embankment. There was a web of multiple game trails but we decided to scout without gear and followed the trail along the riverbank. As it turned out, the trail was about 550 m long and then the river was





*Lunch on Steel River gravel bar*

open again. There were no more jokes about overstated logjams. We took the very next patch of sandy beach on an inside bend in the river for our final camp.

### **The day the world fell dark**

We had a small battery-operated short-wave radio and every night we would bring it into the tent and turn it on. We would listen to the BBC, Radio Havana, Radio Taiwan, and Thunder Bay. On this night, for no apparent reason, we left it in the pack. As a result, we didn't know that the entire eastern part of North America had been cast into darkness because of a vast electrical chain reaction that started at a minor Ohio generating station on Lake Erie.

Being self-contained as we were, this would have only been a curiosity - something to talk about - but it threw millions of people into a panic. Fresh food perished and even the water supply was untreated and dangerous to drink. Our water supply was the river, pumped through a filter, and we had those commercial freeze-dried meals. In fact, on

that night I had dined on Chicken Teriyaki. The one thing we did notice before sunset was the accumulation of altocumulus clouds. We all knew this was a solid indicator of an approaching low-pressure system.

### **Three, Four – We don't care no more**

Our final day began hazy and humid. We had barely been on the river five minutes when we hit the next logjam. Nine kilometers later, we made the take-out for major logjam number three and the 150-m portage was just business as usual. Seven kilometres after that, less than two kilometres from the river's mouth at Santoy Lake, we came up against the fourth and final logjam. By now, they had totally lost their shock value and each one was just another portage around an obstacle. At midday we reached the end of the river with the big lake in front of us.

There was a strong wind blowing up from the south, so we put in to the very expansive and quite beautiful beach that wraps around the head of the lake. We

ate a quick lunch and discussed our crossing. Santoy Lake is about 10 km long by two kilometres wide and the wind was going to be right on the nose.

### **Return of the Mackerel Sky**

As we shoved off into the wind and whitecaps, the altocumulus clouds suddenly reappeared moving from west to east. In passing, I mentioned to my son that a storm was coming but I thought we had hours before that would occur. Once out on the lake I looked up again and the entire sky was covered with these fish-scale-like clouds. The solid "mackerel sky" should have told me something but I didn't quite "connect the dots."

We became very engaged with keeping the canoe going in the right direction with the gusty headwind, and I never gave the weather another thought.

### **One flew east and one flew west ...**

Both canoes were so focused on dealing with the wind and whitecaps that it went unnoticed that my son and I headed for



*First major logjam*

the protection of the western shore of the lake while the brothers headed for the opposite shore. It wasn't until I looked around searching for them that I saw the very last thing a paddler wants to see in an open canoe in the middle of a rough lake. The sky behind us was filling in the color of dark slate. We had no place to run and no place to hide. For sure, we were in for it.

The lake had gone dead calm and turned the color of cobalt. I snapped out

of my daydream of how the trip began and focused on the very serious business of out-racing the storm. I have never paddled a tandem canoe with any partner harder or faster than we did on that day.

#### **The hypothermic finish**

Of course, we lost that race as the storm front in all its violence swallowed us up from the rear. We paddled the last 1500 m in cold, hard, gusty rain – the rain that can only come from that great inland sea

that never warms up. The brothers had hitched a ride with a couple of fishermen who were also racing for the protection of the shore. They had hastily lashed their canoe alongside the small power boat.

None of us had put on our raingear and so we finished the Steel River Canoe Route stumbling, shivering, and talking in slurred speech as we affixed the boats on the roof of our truck. This trip had begun with a challenging and difficult first day and so it ended with the same synergy.

Once loaded, we drove away from the take-out with the truck's heater turned on full blast. We drove at least 20 km before our uncontrollable shivering finally ceased.

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Note: the author makes available an extensive trip report in bullet point format with GPS UTM coordinates for every feature, obstacle, and portage along with gear checklist and time & distance chart. Ask the *Nastawgan* editor (see the back-page) for the author's email address.

Note: a report on a 1991 Steel River trip is presented in the Autumn 1992 issue of *Nastawgan*.



*Rough water on Santoy Lake*



## Food for Paddlers

The following recipe and description comes from a long-time friend and paddling partner, Beth Bellaire. On our recent trip down the Harricana River (see the trip report on page 1), we had been slowed down by high waters and were reaching the bottom of the barrel for dinner options. Necessity being the mother of invention -- and dinner being a pressing necessity -- the cook found some leftover dried veggies (mixed peppers and mushrooms), a battered clove or two of garlic, an onion, an extra can of flakes of ham, a last package of cheddar cheese, and some tortilla wraps. The resultant creation was first referred to as "campers' quesadillas" but an internet check more properly identified these ham & cheese rounds as *sincronizadas*.

We enjoyed these so much that they may become a standard meal for our trips. Next time, I would add some dried chilies or jalapeño peppers and experiment with dried salsa, but it could be that they will never taste quite as good as they did on that eleventh night on the Harricana.

### **Harricana Sincronizadas**

dried veggies  
1-2 cloves of garlic  
1 onion  
1 can flakes of ham  
1 package cheddar cheese 250 g  
tortilla wraps  
olive oil

Rehydrate veggies. Sauté onions and garlic in olive oil until onions are soft. Add drained veggies (the warmed broth from these can be enjoyed while cooking the *sincronizadas*) and ham. In a lightly oiled frying pan, place a wrap. Cover lightly with slices of cheese and add a few spoonfuls of the veggie/ham mixture. Place a second wrap on top. Brown both sides, remove from heat, and cut into quarters.

*If you would like to share your favourite tripping recipes, please contact Barb Young, 12 Erindale Crescent, Brampton, Ont. L6W 1B5; [youngjdavid@rogers.com](mailto:youngjdavid@rogers.com).*

## Sand Beaches

They can appear anywhere. You can be paddling down a river, constantly pressed in by a shoreline cloaked in green, round a bend, and one appears--a sand beach. Often they are a part of an esker that comes down to river level, but not always. Maybe a sand beach is just a place where the glacier stalled for a period of time, dropping its load of sand for us to inspect as we travelled down the river years later. Maybe the glacier just wanted to leave us a sign, and by depositing the sand it was letting us know that it had once thrived and moved over the land and stopped here for a little while.

Sand beaches are really noticeable when you are canoeing big lakes. They start as just a faint brown line in the distance as you are paddling along the lake. Slowly the line becomes more distinct and then it becomes clear that it is a sand beach. A break from the usual shore of trees and rock.

I don't know why we naturally gravitate towards sand beaches. It must be a

combination of factors. Room to spread the gear out, places to walk after dinner is over and everything is put away for the night, multiple flat spots for the tents. It might also be the very distinct change from a green-choked shoreline, the fight to push canoes through brush on portage trails, the closed-in feeling that other shore breaks bring. I just know that when I see a sand beach I almost always have to stop. Even if it has only been a short time since our last break.

There is a cost to camping on sand though. Grittier meals, sand in every container, sand in the sleeping bag, sand in the tent. You camp on sand and for the next week you pay for the night's rest.

Still though, we tend to pick sand beaches when we stop for the night. Maybe by doing so we are telling the glacier that we too thrived and moved over the land and are stopping here for a little while.

Greg Went



**Wilderness Canoe Tripping** by Bill Hosford, published by Ecopress, Lakeville, Minnesota, [www.ecopress.com](http://www.ecopress.com), 2009, softcover, 178 pages, US\$17.95.  
Review by Toni Harting.

The author of this charming book is a long-time WCA member with many years and more than 10,000 km of wilderness canoe tripping to his credit. All those years of intimate contact with the outdoors have given him a keen appreciation and understanding of the many aspects of tripping that make this activity so attractive to us. Now that the end of his canoeing career is coming closer, Bill has gathered a great many of the tricks of the tripping trade he has collected over the years and put them in this fine book, making it a handy guide to newcomers and old hands alike. It's amazing how much fascinating information is presented here in a methodical and systematic manner. No wonder, as the author is a retired professor of Materials Science at the University of Michigan, used to writing technical publications.

The book contains eleven chapters: trip planning, gear, food, making camp, lake paddling, portaging, river paddling, fishing and leisure, weather, canoes and paddles, reflections. Even more information is presented in eleven appendices: interpreting maps, magnetic declination, knots, wilderness medical care, subset, insects, waves, mechanics of canoe propulsion, animals, glossary of canoeing terms, references. Everything is illustrated with many excellent pen-and-ink drawings, sketches, and graphs. The lack of traditional photographs is amply compensated by the author's many attractive watercolor paintings, showing scenes encountered during his numerous trips in Canada and the northern USA.



*One of Bill Hosford's watercolors*

**Pike's Portage, Stories of a Distinguished Place** edited by Morten Asfeldt and Bob Henderson, published by Natural Heritage Books, Toronto, [www.dundurn.com](http://www.dundurn.com), 2010, softcover, 325 pages, \$29.99.

Review by Toni Harting.

In 1890, an eccentric Englishman named Warburton Pike descended a forty-kilometre-long portage trail linking a chain of eight small lakes, that formed an ancient connection between the eastern end of Great Slave Lake and Artillery Lake to the east, bypassing the unrunnable Lockhart River to the north. Pike wrote a book about his adventures, calling the portage "by far the prettiest part of the country that I saw in the north ... a perfect northern fairyland." In 1900, J.W. Tyrrell was the first one to call this trail "Pike's Portage." The trail had of course been used by the local native population for many centuries, and they were the first people to guide the early white explorers eager to visit the marvels of the Barren Lands. Over the years, many more visitors followed, and stories about their exploits and also stories about the lives of natives and settlers in the area came to be told and written down.

Fortunately for us, many of these stories have survived the years and several are now collected in this intriguing book that offers the reader rare and valuable insight into the human history of the Canadian Far North. Numerous notes, a selected bibliography, and an extensive index make this book an important addition to the works available for serious study of the Barrens. This also is a wonderful book for reading at home on cold winter nights, a desirable book for all trippers, especially those planning to go to the North.

For all its excellent quality, it is a bit disturbing for those readers who don't already know about Pike's Portage, that it takes a while before an actual description of the portage is given in the book. In fact, only on page 136 in Chapter 8 is an extensive, and possible the best available, description of Pike's Portage presented. This information should have been included at the beginning of the book.



# WCA ACTIVITIES – TRIPS – MEETINGS SOCIAL EVENTS – EDUCATIONAL CLINICS

*The Wilderness Canoe Association offers a great selection of canoe trips and other activities throughout the year. Our members organize and participate in whitewater & flatwater canoe trips that range in length from a day or a weekend, to a week or more. The trips that are offered vary depending on the interests of our member volunteers, so you'll also find a number of other outings such as hiking and ski trips. The trips range in skill level from novice to advanced. These trips are an excellent way to meet new people and are at the heart of our club.*

*Our ability to offer an interesting and diversified activities program depends on our trip organizers' generous donation of their time and enthusiasm. The next time you are out on a club trip, take a moment to thank the organizer for making such paddling opportunities possible. If you are an active paddler, please help us. Become an outings organizer.*

*WCA outings and other activities may have an element of danger of serious personal injury. You are responsible for determining if your equipment, skill, and experience are adequate to participate safely in a club activity. Participants are ultimately responsible for their own safety and well-being when participating in club events.*

*The complete set of our current outings are advertised on our website: [www.wildernesscanoe.ca](http://www.wildernesscanoe.ca) For questions, suggestions, proposals to organize trips, or anything else related to the WCA Outings, contact the Outings Committee: Bill Ness (Chair), [bness@look.ca](mailto:bness@look.ca), 416-321-3005; Mary Perkins, [mary.perkins@sympatico.ca](mailto:mary.perkins@sympatico.ca), 905-725-2874; and Jon McPhee, [jon.mcphee@rogers.com](mailto:jon.mcphee@rogers.com), 905-640-8819*

Over the decades since the WCA was founded, the ways by which we communicate information about our outings and other club activities to our members has continued to evolve. Back in the early days, we relied on our quarterly newsletter to get the word out to our members about what outings and other events were scheduled for the coming season. Around mailing time, especially in the spring, our really active paddlers would get impatient and phone Outings Committee members to see if they could persuade them to dictate the listings over the phone so they could write them down. The Outings Committee would spend endless hours on the phone trying to connect with prospective trip organizers, and ringing up big long-distance bills. After the trip schedule came out, the prospective participants went on to play telephone tag with the organizers, leaving messages with their kids and spouses, hoping to connect with the organizer eventually. Of course, a few of us high-tech types had the newest marvel of personal communications: a telephone answering machine!

The advent of the Internet and email in the 1990s changed all that. Increasingly the telephone got pushed aside as we plugged our modems into our phone lines and started to reach out to each other via email. Email gradually became the method of choice for the Outings Committee to solicit trips, and to collaborate in the production of our outings program. Similarly, organizers and participants alike found its convenience and low cost compared to long-distance phone to be compelling reasons to make it the standard form of communications for outings.

Ultimately, the WCA joined the electronic age by establishing its own website. Club outings were now available for members to read long before they made it into print, and members could post new trips at any time, WCAers more and more came to use the website as their primary source for up-to-the-minute information about club outings and other activities.

This spring we launched an exciting new club website that offers considerably more interactive functionality. The

Outings section has many new features to facilitate members' posting, signing up for, and managing their club activities. The new website also represents a recognition that electronic communications have become the near-universal method for our membership.

As part of this exciting transformation, the time has also come to acknowledge that continuing to post in *Nastawgan* an outings program that is outdated before you see it and that increasingly fewer people are using, is not the best use of valuable space in our journal. We think you will agree with us that in order to go forward our new website should be the focal point for our entire club's outings and activities information. So, from now on, the Outings information will no longer be part of our printed journal, but can be found only at our website: [www.wildernesscanoe.ca](http://www.wildernesscanoe.ca)

Outings Committee:  
Bill Ness (Chair),  
Mary Perkins,  
Jon McPhee

## Where it is...



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