



William on coffee detail

The Great Lug Nut Caper or Surviving The Mistassibi Nord-Est

**Dedicated to William Sleeth
Story and photos by Dave Young**

The Lac St. Jean area of Quebec has some great canoeing rivers, and in 2012 we explored two of them. The names of the rivers are somewhat confusing or hard to spell or both. There is the Mistassibi Nord-Ouest, the Mistassibi Nord-Est, the Mistassini and the Ashuapmushuan. To complicate

matters more, the Mistassibi and the Mistassini come together at the town of Dolbeau-Mistassini, before emptying into Lac St. Jean. We canoed the Ash in July and then returned in August to do the Mistassibi Nord-Est. We had met a group on the Ash that had recommended the Mistassibi

NE and had enjoyed the Ash so much that we decided to return.

You might ask why not do both rivers when you are in the area instead of travelling there twice and that would be a good question. If I were to do it again, that is exactly what I would do. However we had planned to do the Lievre River in August, but had to change our plans because of low water levels. Hence, back to Lac St. Jean. That night we slept in the motel right beside a falls that was part of the Mistassini River.

Early the next morning (8:00 a.m.) we met Simon (our shuttle driver) at the Domtar Road. This gravel logging road gives paddlers access to the river, so that flights are no longer necessary.

We drove all the vehicles into a logging camp. Here we transferred our

gear and boats to the van/trailer that Simon had brought with him for the shuttle, parked our cars in the logging camp compound and headed up the road another couple of hours. Around noon, we were dispatched on the side of the road beside the river. All of the logistics were easy with no problems except for a flung stone (from a logging truck) that cracked Dave Robinson's windshield. As we readied the boats to begin our trip there was lots of anticipation as the first rapids were just around the corner. The water levels seemed high and the river was moving at a good clip. The first set of rapids was uneventful, but livelier than we had anticipated.

As often happens (to us anyway), we found ourselves following Dave and Dawne down the next rapid without

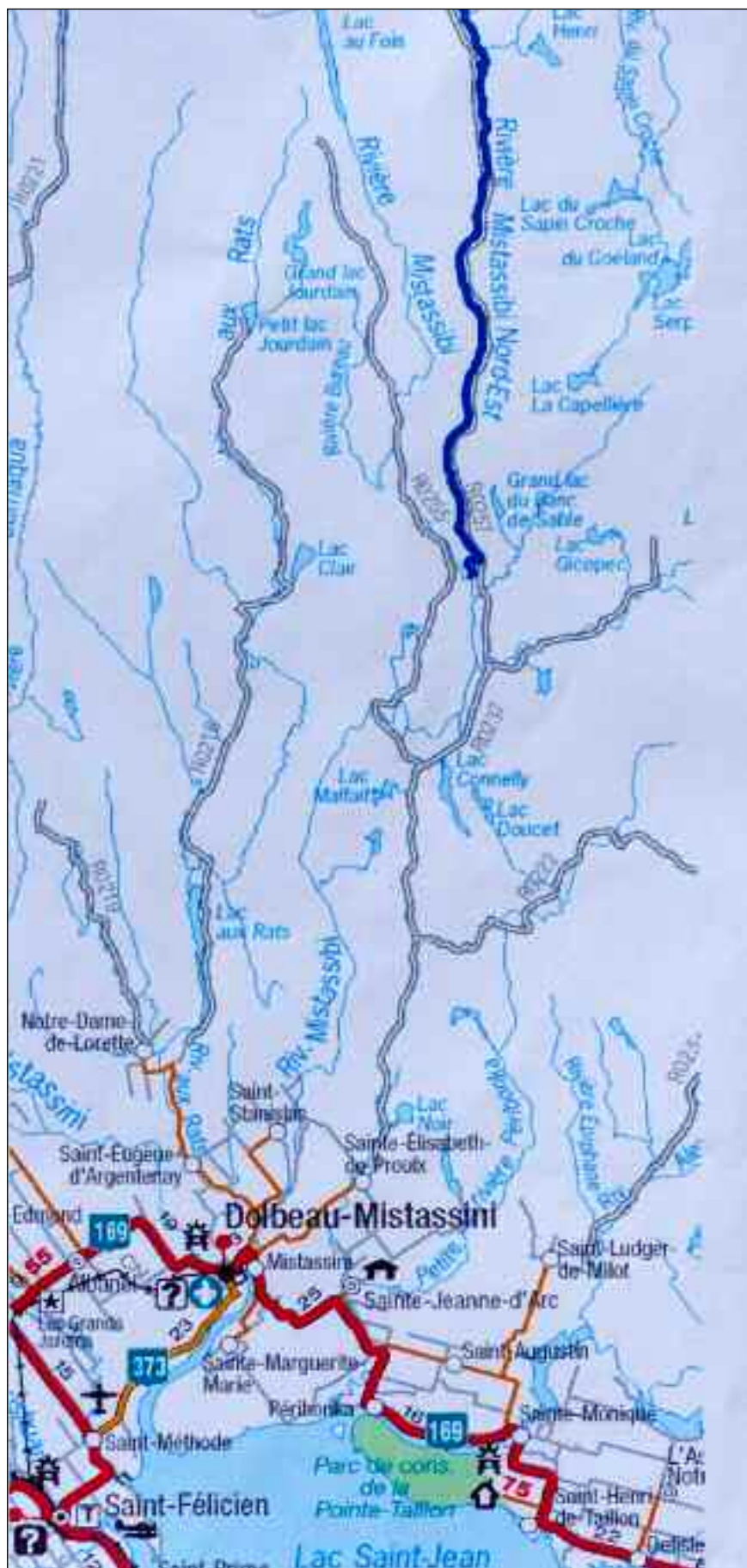
any clear plan for how we were going to run it. Somehow, we have communication problems at the beginning. It was a class 3 rapid and should have been approached with some caution. As Dave and Dawne approached the rapid, William and Andy pulled off to the side (a smart move), but Barb and I followed Dave and Dawne. They disappeared around a small island and backed into what we thought was an eddy. As we tried the same maneuver, they were already leaving because the eddy that we thought was there was not an eddy at all. They headed for river right, where they hoped to find an eddy and we had no choice but to follow. There really wasn't an eddy there either, just a few bushes to try and hang onto, but alas we couldn't keep our boats from heading downstream. We



Andy, Simon and William going over proper pronunciation of the river name

were in their way, but we both started the downstream run with a peel out. However, they had to paddle farther upstream because of our blocking their boat. Unfortunately, they ended up dumping on a ledge above us while we were taken by the current down the rapid. After careening off two or three large rocks, but remaining upright somehow, we managed to find an eddy. As we looked upstream, we saw Dave and the canoe floating down towards us and Dawne stranded way back up the river. Dave tossed his throw bag towards us, but as we tried to retrieve it, we got caught in current again and had to abandon the rescue as once again we were careening down the rest of the rapid. We finally made it to a small lake/pool at the bottom of the rapid and started to collect items that had made their way down ... paddles, a small barrel, and whatever else had gotten dumped.

We then began to walk back up the rapid to see how the others were doing. Dave had managed to self rescue himself and the boat, but Dawne who had gotten tangled up in her boat and barely extricated herself, was forced to jump back in the water and swim down the rapid until we could get a throw bag to her. I walked back up a little farther and saw a missing paddle just barely bobbing above the surface in a small hole. I helped lower William by rope down to the eddy where the paddle bobbed. He was able to rescue it and as a result we had successfully found all of the gear except for one of Dawne's paddling shoes. Dave and Dawne had both been banged up and bruised in this rapid, mostly because of our following them with no clear plan and getting caught up in the fast current. Dawne, as usual, was a real trooper and got back in the boat with Dave and ran the rest of the rapid. After that we were much more careful about how we approached and ran rapids. More class 2 and class 2-3 rapids followed until we arrived at a potential campsite. It was large enough and would have worked, but was not very appealing. It was kind of boggy





The put-in

looking and only 2:30 p.m., so we decided to press on and see if we could get to the GB (G-large, B-quality of) campsite marked on our map.

It turned out to be a long way to this potential campsite and it was approaching 7:00 p.m. by the time we ar-

rived. A paddler's worst fear when arriving at a campsite quite late in the day is that someone else is already camping there. We had seen no other boats on the river, but sure enough as we rounded the bend there were four or five boats there ahead of us. We had

little choice but to ask the campers if they would share their site with us. Thankfully, they were quite accommodating and although we had pretty uneven and damp areas to pitch our tents, it was much better than having to create our own site somewhere else. It helped that we had found a full fishing tackle box they had lost on the last rapid, that belonged to their friends and had handed it over to them. They were part of a canoeing club from Quebec City and could speak much better English than we could speak French, so we were able to communicate.

After setting up our tents and rushing a supper, we finally had a chance to chat with the other canoeists. We/they were worried that we would be heading to the same campsites as we made our way down the river. They had been having a few drinks and were a little happier than we were. One of the ladies said to me that she had not heard me say "one word of French" so I replied "un mot", but alas my attempt at humour was lost in translation. Perhaps it was my lack of suitable pronunciation.

The next morning we were on the river just before the Quebec group and were aware that we were both heading for the same campsite. They had run this river several times before, and soon passed us as we took time to scout class 2 which were more like class 3 rapids. The rapids were quite challenging ... even the lower rated ones and ledges had to be avoided or carefully run. On the rapid where they went ahead of us, they headed down the left side over two sets of ledges that had fairly big drops. We eventually followed using the same line. William lost his maps when he and Andy hit a rock while entering an eddy and the maps were swept away as the gunwale dipped below the water. Barb and I had a moment when we zigged when we should have zagged and ended up pinned on a rock. After a few choice words and some adrenaline-enhanced heaving, the canoe came off the rock and we were able to get under way again, but not without sustaining a crease in our rela-



River beauty



Not bad campsite if no trucks



View downriver from roadside camp



Friendly Quebec group

tively pristine Starburst ... (a character building moment if I ever had one).

When we got to the campsite beside the S5 ledge it was occupied by the Quebec group. They had been there for some time since all of their tents had been erected and there was no room for us. They helped us lift all of our boats over the ledge area, which was nice of them (or did they just want to get rid of us as fast as possible?), but there was no chance of sharing the site. Just downriver from this site was a place where the logging road crossed the river. We knew that there was a widened section (parking area) of the road just before it crossed the bridge and decided that we could make do with that as our camp for the evening. This was nice and flat for camping, albeit dusty and noisy from time to time as logging trucks and pickups occasionally went whizzing by. By 10 p.m., the traffic virtually ceased and the camp was okay.

Vroom, vroom woke us up pretty early the next day as daylight brought the logging trucks back. We had breakfast, packed up and were on the river around 10:00 a.m. We paddled through a beautiful canyon section today...very enjoyable and scenic. We stopped for lunch at the 4B "beau site" marked on our map. Just as we were finishing our lunch, the Quebec crew pulled up for a chat. They were again heading for the same campsite that we were and realized that the lunch campsite was a possible alternative. They were not doing as much of the river as we were and decided that they could tarry at this campsite and let us use the next one. We were grateful, because we were tired of being bumped from our planned sites all the way down the river. That afternoon we had a quiet paddle down to the 5B campsite on river left. While setting up camp we had some rain, but luckily it didn't amount to much.

The next morning William (coffee man) had lots of hot coffee going, needed to fend off the shroud of fog and mist. Meanwhile Andy had paddled upstream to a small lagoon to fish while we had breakfast. He returned to



Andy fishing in the mist

report “no luck”. As we hit the water, we knew we were in for another “white water” day as we were approaching the “tres belle section”. The river began with swifts building to class 1 and class 2 and then the amazing class 1-2-3, which I renamed as class 1+, 2+, and 3+ because of the size of the waves. The rapid was long and built in intensity as waves and holes got bigger and more obstacles were thrown in for good measure. Once you had committed to it, you had little choice but to “ride it out”. We followed Dave and Dawne who began to back paddle to slow the boat and keep the water from swamping it. We did the same and had to really work hard to slow the boat enough so that we weren’t running into them. However, it worked. At the end of the class 3+ part of the rapid, the waves were huge and the boat was wallowing, but we made it. Dave and Dawne, who were the most skilled at back paddling, managed to only have about one-third of a canoe-full, Barb and I were at least half full and Andy and William were completely full of water (yes, to the gunnels). It was this rapid that finally convinced them that it might be a good idea to back paddle in certain situations. Despite all of the water in the boats, all of us made it to shore without dumping.

We continued down the class 2-3 and class 3 rapid, which ended in class 4 rapid (in high water). We managed to paddle to the brink of the class 4 rapid and then bushwhack (portage) our way around the class 4 ledge on the right. Once around the ledge we continued down the rest of the rapid. After stopping for lunch, we enjoyed a long stretch of class 1 rapids all the way to the GB “tres beau” camp. The campsite was excellent, however the noise from logging trucks was evident. Before we departed in the morning, we left our Quebec friends a thank you note and a couple of beers for their kindness over the past two days. All in all, it had been a very exciting and fun day!

At this point the heaviest of the white water was behind us, but the rapids were by no means finished. The next morning’s paddle began quietly



Rapid approaching

through burned out areas and we also noticed some areas where logging had occurred right to the river’s edge. There was still quite a bit of current in the river, and after lunch we ran through many class 1 and class 2 rapids as well as braided, narrow swifts. It was necessary to watch out for and avoid sweep-

ers in this section. In lower water levels, we concluded that it would be trickier to navigate through this stretch. We noticed lots of cedar waxwings through this section. Later in the afternoon, we pulled into a good GB campsite. Skies looked threatening, so tents were erected with some urgency. Very



Dave, Dawne and Andy preparing to portage Class 4 ledge



Curious black bear

shortly after we set up camp, it poured down – great timing we thought. Having successfully dodged the rain, we enjoyed the pulled pork and veggie dinner even more.

Day 6 began as usual. The river had slowed a tad and there were only swifts to worry about as we headed for the

take-out near the logging camp where we had parked our cars. Once we arrived at the take-out, the cars were driven from the logging camp down close to the river, so we could more easily load the gear and canoes. We took time to eat Andy's pizza bannock that he had prepared the night before. All



Andy's pizza bannock

seemed great. The trip had been great, the food had been great, the company had been great, and the logistics had worked out. What more could one ask for? We eventually headed down the Domtar road (gravel for at least an hour). I had trouble keeping up with Dave, as my car seemed to be “loose” as they say in racing circles. It just didn't feel normal. I drove more slowly and it was okay. Eventually we made it back to the paved road at Dolbeau-Misstassini and headed to Roberval to spend the night. In the morning, Barb took a turn driving as we headed down the road to Trois-Rivieres. I think she was noticing some “shimmy” as we went, but the speeds were not too great and things were proceeding more or less as expected. However, shortly after we turned onto highway #40 and speeds picked up, she had to pull over and stop. She said the car felt like it was skidding on ice and wasn't controllable. I got out and inspected the car, expecting a flat tire, but found nothing. It was a very busy highway and I decided we needed to get off the highway and give the car a closer inspection. We slowly made our way to the closest ramp and left the highway. After we had parked the car in a safe place, I once again inspected it. It took some time, but I finally noticed that we were missing 3 lug nuts from the back wheel on the driver's side. We were extremely lucky that we had not lost the wheel!

We slowly pieced together what must have happened. We checked the wheels on Dave and Dawne's car and found the same wheel had been “tampered with”. Someone had loosened all of the lug nuts except the one that was locked. We could only guess at what the motivation might have been. It could have been our Ontario license plates or perhaps this individual just had a grudge against canoeists for some reason. I'm thinking he/she was not one of the sharpest tacks in the box if you know what I mean. This action could have resulted in a serious accident for us with injuries to others as well.

After removing our wheel, we deter-

mined that two of the studs had sheared off. We were left with two good studs and one, which was about two-thirds of a stud. Luckily they were positioned so that they were on opposite sides of the wheel. We “borrowed” nuts from two of our other tires and tightened the wheel back on. We then gingerly set out on the highway with one tire intact (5 nuts), two tires okay (4 nuts) and the fourth tire with only 3 nuts. As luck would have it, this all happened on a Sunday. Finding a service station open proved impossible, even though a tourist info-centre attendant helped us. She called any service station that she thought might be open, but with no luck. While we were there, we called the Quebec Provincial Police to report what had happened.

After travelling slowly for some time, we felt confident enough to head out on the 4-lane highway again and headed for Montreal. Driving through Montreal was nerve racking as there was no shoulder to pull over on (due to construction), if we had had a problem. At the Ontario/Quebec border we pulled into the service centre to take a break and check the tire again. All was well, so we continued driving all the way back to Brampton. Fortunately, the tire stood up to the long drive with only 3 lug nuts holding it. After all of the big rapids we had run, it was kind of ironic that the most danger we encountered was not on the river.

Sharing a trip with fellow canoeists is always rewarding. Sharing this kind of incident brought all of us a little closer. We had enjoyed our trip, and had really gotten to know William and Andy. We were looking forward to tripping with William and his wife Claudia on the Snake River the next year. Unfortunately William was diagnosed with cancer, only a short time before we were about to leave. He was forced to abort the trip and begin treatment. William was very courageous and continued to live his life to the fullest, but this was the one and only canoe trip we were able to have with him. We will remember him fondly.



Quebec group scampers ahead of us



Loading up after cabin exploration



The Daves with QPP officer



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Nastawgan is an Anishinabi word meaning "the way or route"

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

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

WCS Program

(visit www.wcsymposium.com for latest program updates)

Iva Kinclova: "Finding partners for Arctic canoeing journeys"

Rebecca Ataman: "My Journey to the North: The Firth River"

Michelle Tari Davies: "Seeking the Sites: an Archaeological Guide to Labrador"

David Greene: "Route Blanche: Quebec's Lower North Shore"

Jeff Wright: "How to Make Love in a Canoe"

Jon Turk: "Crocodiles and Ice: A Journey into Deep Wild"

Kim Sedore: "Together, To-gather, To-Get-There: Wilderness therapy from an unclinical perspective"

Laura Rietveld: "The Making of Okpik's Dream"

Nicole Howe: "The Power of Photography in Northern Quebec"

Robert Dale: "Back Door to the Hood River"

Katherine Wheatley: "Water Moves Me (Song Inspired Nature)"

Torie Gervais: "Valuing Wilderness: New Canadian Future Leaders in Quetico Provincial Park"

Jeremy Ward: TBA

Sara Gartlan: "Winisk Me Away"

Robin Potts: "The story of Teme-Augama Anishnabai's N'Daki-Menon Birch Bark Canoe Build Project"

WCA AGM

Please join us for our 2017 Annual General Meeting on Saturday March 4, 2017 in the Community Room at the new MEC store in Toronto (784 Sheppard Ave. E., North York, ON M2K 1C3).

Activities include: AGM, ravine hike, paddling gear presentation, lunch.

For more information and to register, please go to the WCA website.

WCA and WCS What's the difference?

If you're not sure, you're in good company.

Wilderness Canoe Association is a non-profit organization born in the early 70's, made up of individuals interested in the outdoor pursuits and in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe, kayak, backpacking, and by skis and snowshoes. WCA's value proposition to its members include organized outings, where members with no experience or little experience can team up with more seasoned members on daily or weekend trips, as well as quarterly journal you're holding in your hands, *Nastawgan*. WCA also owns and operates My CCR website, renowned for it's forums and resources.

Wilderness and Canoe Symposium is a brainchild of George Luste, originally started in 1986 as a small gathering of friends who came together to exchange stories and slides in Luste's living room. Today, the Wilderness and Canoe Symposium draws over 500 participants from across Canada and US.

WCA is an active supporter and sponsor of WCS, supplying volunteers and promoting the event. WCS provides an excellent venue for WCA to establish its physical presence at a time of the year when paddling is not possible or practical for most members. WCS attendees can renew their WCA membership and purchase back issues of *Nastawgan* during the Symposium. Current or past WCA members make up a majority of WCS audience.

While WCA and WCS share the same

goals, they remain two separate entities. Each organization maintains its own website and has a unique database of members, which are not shared for privacy reasons. To become a WCA member, and/or to remain a member in good standing, one has to be an approved WCA Registered User and pay the annual membership fee (\$35 single, \$45 family). WCA website User Login and password will not allow you to register for the Symposium on WCS website. You must have WCS website User Login and password to accomplish that. As many of us login on WCS website only once a year to register for the Symposium, User Login and/or password are often forgotten. "Request new password" link will generate new, temporary password, and allow you to reset it and purchase the ticket. If you're still unable to login, send a note to reg2016@wcsymposium.com along with your contact information.

Events Calendar

32th Annual Wilderness and Canoe Symposium will take place on 24th-25th February 2017 at Monarch Park Collegiate (1 Hanson Street, Toronto).

WCA AGM will be held on Saturday March 4, 2017 in the Community Room at the new MEC store in Toronto (784 Sheppard Ave. E., North York, ON M2K 1C3).

25th Paddlers Gathering will be held on 10th-12th March, 2017 at the Hulbert Outdoor Centre in Fairlee, Vermont.

WCA Fall Turkey Trip

By Cindy Atsma-Powell

Each year near summer's end, the Wilderness Canoe Association organizes a canoe trip for its members to a group campsite. The objective is to roast a turkey, wilderness camp style and share each other's favorite gourmet camp cooking specialties. It's a time to 'talk turkey', exchanging canoe adventure tales, camping expertise, extol over the latest camp



gear discoveries and just enjoy the camaradery of fellow wilderness canoe enthusiasts. It is a social gathering, all about the food with a little canoeing on the side.

This year they picked the September long weekend for the wilderness turkey



trip. What better time to "labour" over camp chores, cooking and canoeing with friends. Sherborne Lake, located in the center of the Ontario Haliburton watershed, was chosen by the WCA committee as the site of the planned event. An old logging access road branches off Highway 35 N. just south of the Dorset

Ministry of Natural Resources College in Ontario. The speed limit is posted at 50 km/h, which is laughable, because you dare not go over 40 km/h in order to avoid the ruts and rock outcrops. The road twists through the rocky wooded Ontario escarpments and marshes.

Nine vehicles, laden down with canoes and kayaks and some very special gear and food supplies not typical to most wilderness camping trips, carefully traversed the 12 km long winding, gutted, gravel road, to the put-in point on a northern bay on Sherborne Lake. The Haliburton watershed and is riddled with numerous lakes and protected wetlands. Motor boats are restricted and the ministry maintains the campsites scattered far apart along the bays of the lakes. The campsites have a fire pit and a thunder box. The standard rule of "what you pack in, you pack out" is applied. At the end of the road on a wide sandy beach, we unloaded gear and packed it into canoes and kayaks for the short 1.3 km paddle to reserved campsite 18 on a point of land directly across the bay.

It was a beautiful late summer morning with the mature forest foliage brilliantly mirrored off the glassy surface of the lake. Only a few occasional hardwoods were just beginning to display the crimson shades of approaching fall. The warm morning air gave no hint of the previous cold snap, which had thankfully eradicated all the flying insects just in time for the trip. Loons glided across the surface of the lake, ignoring the intrusion of the unloading trekkers, intent on fishing.

WCA member Margaret Harper had paddled out to the rendezvous campsite early and gathered and cut a large stack of cut firewood in readiness for her fellow campers.

"I am amazed watching people set-up for this luxury camp," the trip organizer observed as everyone organized his or her tent areas. "The chairs and tables came out. Bernadette Farley, who looks forward to this event each fall, brought an inflatable couch that looked really comfortable." The tubular lounge is one of the newest lightweight camp accessories to

hit the Canadian market.

Another couple that arrived early, Daniela Kosch and Doug Bell, set out in the morning to scout out a couple of portage points and bring back more wood. The peaceful foraging expedition was not without incident. Some of that wood did not want to come easily and put up a fight. Daniela Kosch was breaking up some wood and it unexpectedly



snapped back and whacked her sharply in the face. She returned to camp with a large bump and bruise on her face.

Fortunately back at camp, fellow association members, Andrea Fulton and Gilbert Chalifoux had set up a bar with real glass martini glasses, an ice bucket



filled with ice, cocktail shaker and olives to make the perfect martini. The left-over ice was quickly reutilized for first aid on

Daniela's face and a cocktail provided to ease the pain.

Doug exclaimed, "Arriving at the paddle-in campsite to see WCA trippers sipping martinis from real martini glasses, with ice cubes plucked from an ice bucket with silver tongs was quite surreal."

For dinner, individual meals were prepared and after all had settled in, the first



evening passed congenially around the fire, getting acquainted over the cocktails.

Saturday morning brought a beaver swimming lazily across the misty bay and a flock of brown mergansers skimming in V formation over the still waters. Steven Creaser, a professional pastry chef, emerged from a hammock suspended between two trees on an elevated rocky slope on the north side of the peninsula. He refers to this hammock tent as his "bear burrito".

The hammock was part of a kick start program. It is a game-changing, lightweight, water-resistant hammock designed for any terrain. It comes with a



slip-over dragonfly bug net and a glider rain tarp made of weather-resistant amphibiskin. It has a very unique functional design. The diamond weave tarp easily sheds the rain which flows down to attached rain gutters and funnels into water bottles in the corner tie downs. It can be purchased in a single or double size. Steve's is the double hammock. "I got it because it is wider, longer, and more comfortable." Steve had a busy day planned, preparing for the weekend's highlight – the gourmet turkey wilderness feast.

Along with his canoe partner Chef Anne-Marie Grave, the two professional chefs set up a well-organized kitchen near the shore. Steven also brought a home-made water heater that went into the fire and heated dish water for the whole company of campers.

Steve explained, "The water heater was a prototype I was trying, I found it on YouTube when I was searching for a campfire water heater. It worked pretty well but takes a long time to get the water heated up."

A gourmet menu featuring what everyone was contributing was officially posted on a tree near the makeshift kitchen. After an early-morning swim in the clear waters of the lake, still warm from summer, everyone set out in groups to scout out the lake's portage points. We were all told to return to camp early to begin the preparation of our special gourmet contributions to the pot-luck wilderness dinner. Steve and the turkey crew got busy setting up a trash can oven assembly.

Tin foil was layered on an area of level ground in a 3-foot square. A base of four foil-wrapped bricks was placed in the center to hold a raised grill. A turkey v-rack was placed on the grill to hold the turkey in place, and a foil tray of beer was placed under the grill to keep the turkey moist, tender and add that extra gourmet touch.

Coals were set to burning in three foil-pans on the perimeter of the foil area in preparation of heating the trash can oven. The turkey was seasoned and placed on the V-rack and then covered with the metal trash can. We then shovelled prepared hot coals all around the entire base of the trash can and also heaped on the upturned bottom (the top).

Early afternoon saw food barrels come down from the trees, where they had been hung out of the reach of raccoons and

bears. A flurry of camp cooking gear assembled around the fire pit hearth as the smell of roasting turkey wafted up from the coal-covered trash can oven and everyone set to preparing their speciality addition for the anticipated feast.

Our camp forager, Daniela, brought back a collection of edible mushrooms from her morning paddle and set them out to dry on her upturned canoe.

Daniela said, "The mushrooms, mostly boletus edulis, are delicious when sautéed in butter or even better dried. This year



was the most phenomenal mushroom year, at least up here in Muskoka. In over 50 years of mushroom hunting, I have never seen such abundant or large sized mushrooms. Global warming, increased CO₂ Bring it on!" Daniela cautions, "Please remember that eating wild mushrooms can be a deadly hobby if you have incomplete knowledge!"

A Prospector canoe was turned and mounted on two food barrels, its wide beam providing a buffet table on which there was ample room to serve up everyone's contribution in true camp style. "Oohs" and "aahs" were voiced in appreciation from the lineup of diners as plates



were laden with a delectable varied fare of food entrees. We all settled around the fire pit to enjoy our meals and exchange recipes. After dinner, platters of delectable canapes, deserts and cocktails were shared until long after the stars came out. Doug summed up the meal, "While we thoroughly enjoyed all aspects of the weekend, the seriously gourmet nature of this get together was the highlight... Having two professional chefs, one of



them even a pastry chef, led to amazing treats, like individual pumpkin pies topped with fresh whipped cream and served on a Mohawk whitewater paddle, or the compressed watermelon salad steeped in elderberry cordial with feta



cheese. Remarkable."

Sherborne Lake is an ideal hub for canoe portage excursions into the interior lakes of the highlands. On Sunday morning, the group gathered around Margaret's detailed topo map, showing the numerous portage routes to surrounding lakes, and planned their excursions. The lake has two fair-sized islands in the center, and five finger bays reaching out in all directions of the compass. Daypacks were packed with lunches and canoes and

kayaks loaded up for a day paddle. One group set out for the portage to St Norde Lake on which the Frost Centre is located and another set out south-east to explore a dam. The Norde Lake portage trail starts at a small dam and passes over a boardwalk through a wet land marsh. The day was spent paddling the glistening, rippled lake in the warm sunshine, exploring and the bays and viewing the landscape so magnificently carved out by the glaciers centuries ago. The scenery is well worth photographing. Steve cast his rod out into the reedy shallows around base camp to catch one of the small mouth bass or trout populating the lake.

Late in the afternoon, Chef and new WCA member Anne-Marie Gravel welcomed the returning paddlers. It was Anne-Marie's first excursion with the WCA. Anne-Marie had artfully prepared a 'charcuterie platte' for the returning canoers. She presented the tasty platter of various sliced meats, sausages, pate, cheeses, dips and bread biscuits as an appetizer to the re-sharing of the previous night's turkey feast. Leftovers were never this good. "It was a perfect weekend in so many ways." She said, "I met wonderful people who shared a love for paddling and the outdoors, the weather couldn't have been any better, the food was amazing and the vibe was relaxed and laid back."

By the end of day three, smart phones and electrical devices, although used sparingly, were not getting any "vibes" at all and needed recharging. Randy Powell, boat builder and all-round lover of wooden boats, demonstrated his biolite cook stove with power adapter to charge devices and simultaneously make some robust camp coffee. Randy enthusiastically recommends the device. "It is fueled by forest litter, small twigs and pine cones. It is only about the size of a coffee can and it sure works great." Devices were repowered and GPS turned on, in preparation for the next day's departure.

After breakfast everyone began the teardown and the camp was packed and cleared by noon. Farewells echoed across the lake as seasoned WCA members efficiently loaded canoes and kayaks and departed to return to their busy lives. The relaxed rhythmic dipping of paddles closed a weekend hiatus celebrating season's end with a superb Gourmet Wilderness Turkey feast on a pristine lake

in the Haliburton Highlands.

WCA is considering doing it again next year. They would welcome suggestions for other canoe destinations to explore and other ideas for camp trash can cooking.



All WCA members are encouraged to sign up on the website for the group social canoe trips planned on the Grand



River, Lower Madawaska River and next years Turkey trip.

Sherborne Lake, 12 km south of Dorset, 45 degrees 10.41 N and 78 degree 47.06 W

Haliburton Highlands Water Trails Information, 20130 Hwy #35 North

Phone 705 766 9033 Fax 705 766 2402

<http://www.algonquinhighlands.ca/water-trails.php>

Email: trail@algonquinhighlands.ca

Our Maps

By Robert Perkins

November is for wood, cut and stacked outside in the spring and these last days moved onto the covered porch, within easy reach of the kitchen's Jotul. The weather in New Hampshire is not cold-cold yet, but it's coming. A few leaves cling on and the pile of books by the bed might get read in the coming months. Then there are the maps. I have put away my canoe maps until next season.

People don't go on expeditions without maps. I go on mine with old maps, cut to a bare minimum, sandwiched between clear plastic shelf-paper to keep them dry. Cutting them down saves bulk. I use 1:250,000 for traveling, four miles to the inch, nothing more detailed, with one overview sheet of the whole Great Fish River tucked away. In case I lose everything,

I have a map. People feel safer with a map, tangible or intangible. How many times on the river have I argued with my map, believing I was right and the map wrong? How many times *in my life* have I tried to enter new territory with an outdated internal map, only to find myself unchanged and justifying my lack of growth by saying, see....nothing changes.

If I cared to, I could fold and carry the whole river in one pocket. Writing that line reminds me of Emily Dickinson's poem with its line:

"you can not fold a flood." (**foot note 1*). I found the scrap of paper with that line at Father Buliard's cabin on Garry Lake, as a remnant, one among many, of the library begun at the cabin ten years earlier. Having gotten tired of reading, re-reading, and re-re-reading books, I attached a shelf to the mud-room wall of Buliard's abandoned cabin, left several books, and asked only, "If you take one, leave one."

For a few years, there was a lively exchange. John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" remained the one book never taken. Eventually, the ground squirrels and a bear shredded

and tossed the library outside. Rain and wind and snow did the rest. I liked the little tattered poem I found about a flood. Poems are an economical way of teasing the mind away from personal, obsessive thought patterns that never resolve anything.

A second tiny thing I value from Father Buliard's island I keep on my desk. Way on the island's backside, among the esker dunes, I discovered an empty, tiny glass bottle, the size of my baby finger, with a screw-off brass cap in the shape of a tiny cross. Father Buliard disappeared in the 1950s, after spending four years establishing his mission among the scattered Inuit camps around the lake. What I held in my hand was an intimate item of his. The bottle was empty; it had a hole. I thought I'd keep the cap. I had a shock when I unscrewed the bottle's top. The strong smell of rose water enveloped me, for a few seconds, before the wind carried away the sweet smell.

This was rose water trapped in the cap's screw grooves for four decades.

Everyone takes comfort inside their story, their "map." Father Buliard's was his missionary Catholic faith. Maps.

With our phones, computers and other electronics we begin to believe we're approaching a perfect correspondence: us equals the world. We aspire to create

a scale of 1 to 1. (**foot note 2*).

Thankfully, the tundra remains blissfully unaware of this.

Footnotes:

1. Emily Dickinson poem: CXXXIII
YOU cannot put a fire out;
A thing that can ignite
Can go, itself, without a fan
Upon the slowest night.

You cannot fold a flood
And put it in a drawer,
Because the winds would find it out,
And tell your cedar floor.

2. from Lewis Carrol, Sylvie and Bruno Concluded, Chapter XI, London, 1895

"What a useful thing a pocket-map is!" I remarked.

"That's another thing we've learned from your Nation," said Mein Herr, "map-making. But we've carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?"

"About six inches to the mile."

"Only six inches!" exclaimed Mein Herr. "We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!"

"Have you used it much?" I enquired.

"It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr: "the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."



That Summer on the Nahanni 1928

by Fenley Hunter

When he ventured down the South Nahanni River in 1971, veteran canoe tripper and wood-canvas canoe builder Hugh Stewart wondered about backstory of Virginia Falls, the iconic waterway's centrepiece. On the map, most Nahanni place names reflect a punishing, merciless country: Headless Range, Deadman's Valley and Hell's Gate. "It was curious that amidst these romantic names was the rather benign and cultivated sounding name for the most prominent and rugged feature on the river," observes Stewart.

Decades later, Stewart discovered the falls were named after the daughter of New York businessman Fenley Hunter, a fellow of the prestigious British Royal Geographical Society. In a 1928 expedition, Hunter and two companions set off from northern Alberta and travelled by motorized canoe into the Northwest Territories. The summerlong journey included a five-week side trip up the Liard and South Nahanni rivers, with the purpose of measuring the Nahanni's towering cascade and naming it after his 16-year-old daughter. Dig deeper, however, and it's clear that Hunter's objectives were more influenced by his passion for the wilderness. "Let me confess I love the sub-arctic forest better than I understand it," he would later write in correspondence.

Hunter's curiosity contributed to his detailed diaries and maps. In 1923, he followed the Yukon trails of his hero, George Dawson of the Geological Survey of Canada, ostensibly in search of Dall sheep. Only 50 copies of Hunter's

Yukon journal were printed; a few years later, a similar number of reproductions of his Nahanni notes were made. However obscure, copious Hunter-related correspondence, journals, photographs and sketch maps passed through the hands of the late George Luste of the Wilderness Canoe Association. Fortunately, Hunter's 1923 and 1928 journals also landed in the files of Patrick McGahern, an Ottawa-based book collector and publisher.

McGahern teamed up with Stewart to publish an updated version of P.G. Downes' enchanting northern travelogue, *Sleeping Island*, in 2011. The McGahern Stewart Forgotten Northern Classics series also includes a two-volume collection of Downes' journals and arctic explorer W.H.B. Hoare's 1928-29 Thelon River journal. *That Summer on the Nahanni 1928*, a compilation including Hunter's Yukon and Nahanni journals, was a logical addition to the series.

Today, the South Nahanni River tops the bucket list of many canoeists. In Hunter's time, the river's deep canyons were thought to contain lodes of gold. In 1908, the headless corpses of prospectors Willie and Frank McLeod were found on the river's banks, inspiring stories of lost mines. Hardscrabble prospector Albert Faille was but one captivated by the region's mystique; British ex-pat R.M. Patterson, the author of the classic book, *Dangerous River*, was another. Patterson and Hunter met one another on parallel Nahanni explorations in the summer of 1928.

Hunter's notes are just as readable

and entertaining as Patterson's 1954 travelogue, and effectively capture the day-to-day hardships and rewards of life on the trail. Like Downes, Hunter's observations capture the end of an era: Airplanes would soon reduce the magnitude of exploration in Canada's north. Yet despite the uncertainties of venturing into unknown country and the race to beat freeze up, Hunter was clearly enthralled by adventure. He writes, "There is one great luxury in this country and that is when one does get to a camp and stretches out on frozen ground in his sleeping robe, he has something that but few ever experience and no civilized luxury could possibly compare with it."

Stewart, who served as the editor of the new edition and contributed an insightful introduction, notes that Hunter's journal has "the ingredients of a classic wilderness tale. There is a quest. There is much arduous travel. In time, there is impatience to get out of the country..."

"Nearly a century later," adds Stewart, "we can count ourselves fortunate that Hunter was so able a traveller, so conscientious a diarist, and so adept at capturing the social texture and human colour of a long-vanished era."

That Summer on the Nahanni 1928 deserves to sit beside Patterson's *Dangerous River* on bookshelves. Better yet, it ought to be read around campfires by modern-day canoeists. Then and now, as Hunter concludes while camped at Virginia Falls, "A great adventure is worth more than gold any day."

— Conor Mihell



The Wild Lands of the DePas and George River

Story by Leah Titcomb

With the glow of the computer screen reflecting off my face I read the email and my heart pounded in my ears. I could feel the blood pulsing in my fingertips as I scrolled up and read it again. My friend and mentor was putting together a two-boat expedition on the DePas and George River. 'Did I want to come?' The answer was yes, but the real question was, 'Could I go?' I had just used all of my vacation time to leave for four weeks the previous month. There was no way I was going to have enough vacation time by late July to leave again for a month. But how could I not jump at this chance? My head spun a little and I blinked closing the computer. I had been hearing about the allure of these remote and rugged rivers for years.

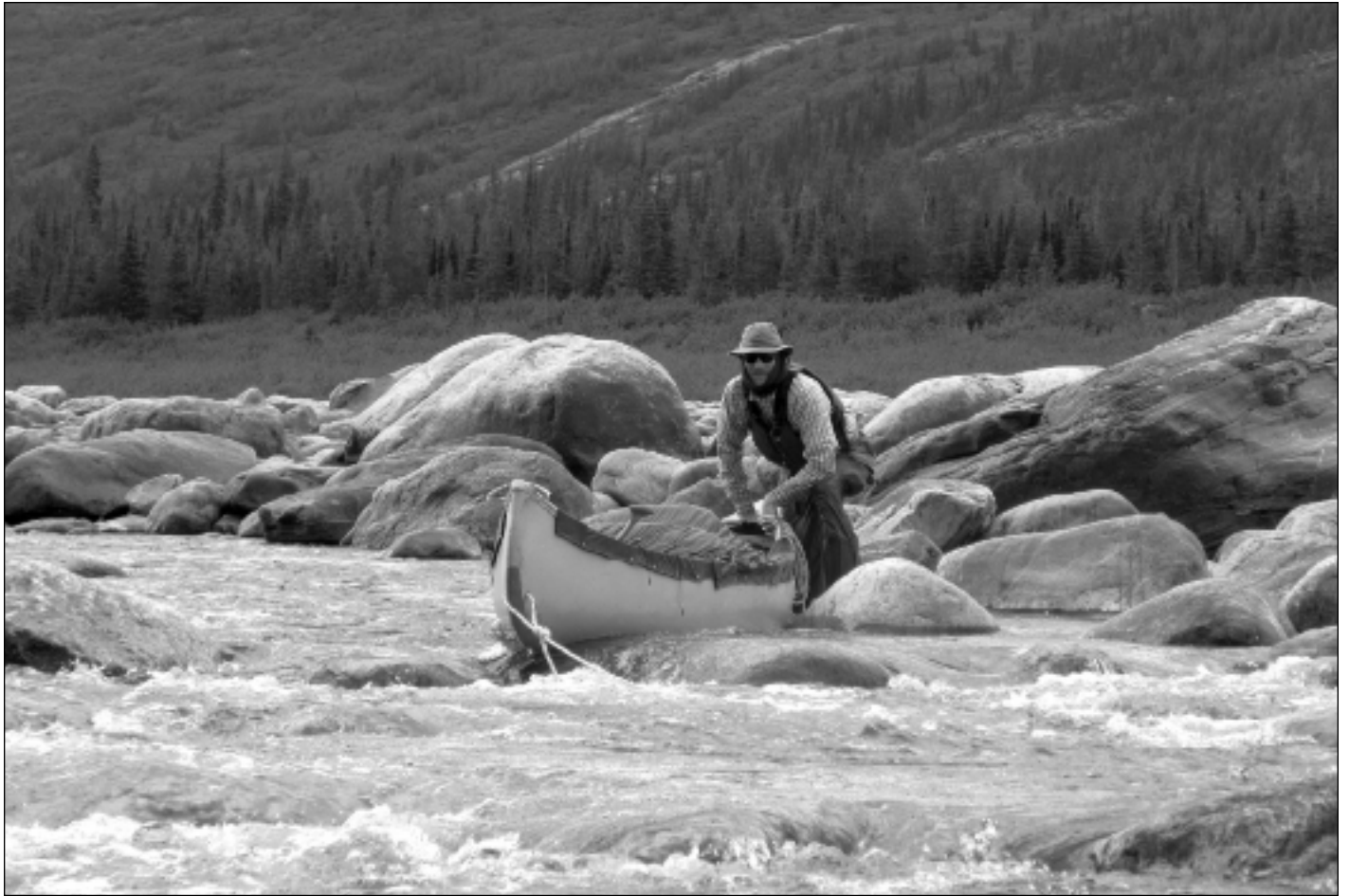
Veiled in a cloak of mystery the few people I knew who had paddled these rivers would immediately glaze over with a far-off look when I asked about them. When pressed they would describe mounds of swirling whitewater and a passing caribou or two. I hadn't thought I would get a chance to go. It's a serious expedition and I didn't have friends who could both take the time off and be trusted on a trip like this. For this type of expedition one needs to truly trust one's boat partner and the companions because they were the people who would save or endanger your life. David was someone I would go with on such a river trip.

With a knotted stomach I approached my boss cautiously explaining that it would be a good opportunity for me to

do professional research on alpine flora and fauna. I was teaching natural history in the alpine zones of the White Mountains after all. I presented the reasons it would be beneficial for everyone if I went on the expedition but she repeatedly declined me the time to leave. Over the next few weeks I couldn't sleep. I thought of all the reasons I should or shouldn't go, but what I heard whispering around me day and night was a simple and important mantra that my parents had raised me by. "Go light, go cheap, but most importantly go NOW." There is always a reason not to do something, there will always be a job or circumstance that will seem like a reason that you can't do the thing you want to, so you must go now or you will never go.



Team (from L to R): Leah, David, Dan and Elijah



Dan Dubie Lining Through Shallow Rapids, Photo by Leah Titcomb

The reasons to wait and not go on an adventure are illusions we have created. So I eliminated the problem. I quit my job and packed my dry bag.

David, Dan, Elijah and I had never paddled as a group before, and I only knew David, who would be my boat partner, but I trusted his judgment about our other expedition mates. We met as a group to discuss what we wanted our group culture to be. We were all naturalists and that became one of our focuses. We discussed which field guides to bring. We discussed how we wanted to travel and check in with each other. We divided up the tasks of acquiring group gear and discussed food. We decided to each bring our own breakfasts and lunches and to cook as a group for dinner. We each had one dinner meal we would cook and rotate nightly through who was cooking their meal for the group. We planned to be on the river for 21 days and had a contingency plan of 4 extra days of food. (Actually, David and I had a contingency plan of 4 extra days of

food; the other boat was a little less experienced and decided to risk it. That to me is like not taking your raincoat with you, it pretty much guarantees it will rain no matter what the weather report is.)

Four exhausting travel days later we were standing on the shores of Attikamagen Lake at the Iron Arm put-in next to our loaded boats, ready to embark into the northern region of Quebec and



Leaving the DePas and Entering the George River. We Were Hailed by an Evening Rainbow, Photo by Leah Titcomb



My View of Indian House Lake from the Stern, Photo by Leah Titcomb

follow the George River watershed from source to sea along the border of Labrador and Quebec to the Ungava Bay. We made our way through the smaller rivers and lakes leading to the DePas river and found ourselves at the head of the DePas on day four, having paddled an easy 15 miles in 5.25 hrs. that day! Delighted, we stopped on a sandy beach

and spent a blissful hour in the warm sun protected from the bugs by a steady breeze. Elijah was a little nervous about the upcoming rapids and didn't want an anxious night of anticipating them so we decided to push on and paddle the first five miles of the DePas to the next potential camping spot. We loaded the canoes and left our little paradise.



Yoga on Indian House Lake, Photo by David Gilligan

Instantly and without warning we were in water that was fast and big with significant drops and rocks. It was a taste of what the rest of the trip would be like. We scouted, canoed, lined, and portaged for five hours and five miles. We paddled three miles of continuous class 2-3 whitewater establishing a system we would use for the next 18 days. We scouted as far as we could see along the shore to the miniscule eddy just big enough for our two boats. We would run the rapid, hop into the eddy, scout the next section, determine the route to run, or line, or portage, then paddle again. We were in and out of our boats constantly assessing water. It was exhausting and time consuming, but we weren't about to run blind into the wilderness and get ourselves into trouble.

As we entered one of the last rapids I took my headnet off thinking I would be able to see more clearly without the black netting. I was immediately covered in crawling blackflies swarming my nostrils, eyes, and neck. I spent the whole rapid choking on bugs and trying to swipe them off my bare skin while steering the boat. It was torture!

Once on land, we set up our tents and immediately dove into them to escape the blackflies. I had heard horror stories about the bugs but I couldn't actually imagine what they were like until I was covered in them. There was no way to truly understand their sheer numbers until I had experienced it. They came in clouds so thick that when I sucked in air they clogged my mouth and nose. It looked like I was wearing black pants, but they were in fact tan and swarmed with blackflies. We dove into our tents laughing because it was the only thing we could do.

I dragged my hand across my face and body smearing hundreds of bloody blackflies with one swipe. The inside of my tent crawled with them. We were all stunned by the thick cloud of them and laughed talking to each other from our own little tent-bubbles of protection. I killed thousands of blackflies in my tent and made a little death pile of them at the foot of my sleepingbag, a pile as big as a large grapefruit. It became my nightly routine to sweep their little carcasses into the corner of my tent. We laughed in amazement at the bloodstains on our



Our Trusty Fleet, Photo by Leah Titcomb

clothes and where the blackflies had managed to crawl. We were astounded by the flies and their impact on us. David shouted “We’re really living the dream!” and we burst into another course of astonished laughter and merriment. This was what kept the region remote and unpopulated. We laughed at how ridiculously long the last five miles had taken us and how unprepared we had been for the whitewater and bugs. We had been lulled by the long lakes and small tributaries and thought we had already experienced the ‘terrible’ blackflies we had been warned about. We had no idea. We hadn’t even begun to experience the clouds that were coating every surface now. My face was puffy and covered in itchy bites, my eyes were nearly swollen shut from their bites and we looked like we’d been in a terrible fight! Very few people would actually think of this as

anywhere close to “living the dream.” But despite how miserable we all were in that moment, we knew we were in fact living the dream — it just came at a price.

Threatening dark clouds etched against a lighter sky forced us off the water for the night and I trembled at the low rumbles and the dark centers of the clouds. I poked around looking for a relatively flat and boulder-free piece of ground for my tent. Within minutes of landing on the undulating hills of bedrock and lichen an osprey dove into the river in front of me and emerged with a twisting silver fish dangling from its talons and flew to the other side of the river. Not a minute after I watched osprey retreat with its catch, a massive bull caribou with an expansive rack came loping over the tundra hills next to our camp, plunged into the river,

and swam across. Its rack bounced above the water, its breath steamed from its nostrils. It emerged from the water, shook its dark fur free of water droplets and then disappeared into the black spruce forest on the other side. I stood spellbound by what I had just witnessed. I didn’t even attempt to pull out my camera. I simply stood in rapture at the raw power of the place I was in and the truly wild land around me.

I have never been anywhere so wild and remote. I didn’t think such places still existed. I thought they were a thing of the past, something I could read about but wouldn’t ever be able to actually experience. I have traveled in the mountains and glaciers of Patagonia, sought out the jungles of Laos, paddled and trekked through mountains ranges and rivers of the United States, and felt wildness, felt remote and alone, but not like this. This



Evening Reflection by the Fire, Photo by Leah Titcomb

was what I sought and hadn't believed I could still find. We didn't see another human for 340 miles and 17 consecutive days. The animals were curious about what and who we were and slightly cautious as if they had never seen humans before, because they very likely hadn't. Eagles soared in front of our boat as we paddled through rapids and they seemed more majestic, more wild than any eagle I had seen before. My heart lifted with them in their natural habitat. They crossed our path high above us and dove for fish next to our paddles. Otter swam curiously up to our lunch spots, their friendly faces alighting on our new forms, whiskers twitching as I inched closer. Bear sniffed the wind as we approached on the river as if trying to determine what we were and if we were a friend or foe. They often turned and huffed and disappeared into the alder along the river, their shiny black

coats rippling as they melted into the landscape.

We pushed off early in the morning, everyone quiet in the cold morning mist. The light green of the tamarack trees glowed softly through the thick dew and contrasted with the dark trunks of the mingling black spruce. I felt as though I were in a children's book about the polar express, heading into a mystical and magical land. We were quiet all morning soaking in the scenery and paddling along a calm section of the river corridor.

One of the thrilling things about the DePas and George River is that it doesn't stay the same for long. Be it calm or turbulent, its constantly changing nature forced me to be totally present and aware of my surroundings. The river was filled with tricky maneuvers, big waves with rocky consequences, and tight small eddies that were essential to our survival.

One time, as David and I sat in an eddy watching Dan and Elijah come down the section we had just run, we watched in helpless horror as they came into the eddy too fast, bumped a rock and immediately bounced out of the eddy and were pulled down the rapid. Dan's voice was pure panic as he yelled "go!" to Elijah who was looking back at him stunned and also terrified. Images of a wrapped boat and hours of pulling on a Z-drag, bobbing bags of food disappearing into the wilderness, broken wrists, arms and legs, and the struggle to make it out to a place where we could potentially meet a helicopter or even get satellite phone service, played before my eyes as their heavy boat lunged and rocked sideways down the river. They rotated the boat and pointed straight just as the bow hit a narrow chute of water pulling them down a ledge. They plummeted over and imme-

diately caught the next eddy hooting and hollering, happy to be upright and alive! My head pounded with the sound of my blood rapidly thumping from my heart and my voice trembled as I hooted in relief. They were lucky that there wasn't a hidden rock midway or a second bigger drop. David and I paused letting the adrenaline leave our shaking hands before we also paddled over the ledge and joined them in celebration.

The river widened as we neared larger lakes and the wind howled down the river corridor. We hugged the shoreline, ducking our heads and digging our paddles into the waves to force our way forward. The wind barreled down upon us and I plunged my paddle forcefully into the waves to propel us forward. As we rounded a corner I heard a faint shout from Dan before the wind carried his voice away. I looked up and saw him pointing frantically to the shore. I glanced over and saw a white wolf, her dark nose poking out from under the shrubs where she slept, maybe ten feet from us. She slowly belly-crawled her muscular body out onto the sand before stretching into a graceful arc and casually glanced over at us. Without a seeming care in the world she sauntered off gracefully across tundra in a short effortless minute. She stood atop one of the undulating bare hills and glanced back at us where we had stopped paddling and we stared with our jaws on our spray decks. No-one reached for a camera, no-one moved. We watched the wolf so at home in her northern land in total veneration. Then she disappeared over the top of the hill and was gone.

In these precious instances it is better to pause in humility and be in the moment than search for a camera to capture it. And the truth is there is no way to capture it on film. It isn't just the sight of the wolf, but also the wind whipping our faces and the smell of wet lichen and the feel of water spraying our bare skin. It's our cold, wet hands gripping the paddle, the straining muscles of our shoulders, arms, and torso, our eyes straining, our mouths open and tasting the air, as she stared back at us, her thick white fur ruffled in the wind, her casual deliberate manner and calm sharp eyes. It's the footprints left in the sand and a caribou carcass found near-by. It's wondering



Elija's Prize Trout, Delicious! Photo by Leah Titcomb

where her den is as I walk alone behind the alder brush to dig a cat-hole. It's the feeling of reverence that reverberated through my body and in the air around me as we sat sipping tea under the tarp waiting for the storm to pass. It's pure gratitude at being in a place and able to witness such beauty and wildness, at the chance to sneak up on wolf because the

wind was in our faces. It's the hot tea sliding down my throat, past my heart and lungs and into my belly, warming me as we all look at each other and speculate at what her life was like up here in the tundra and how many humans she'd seen before.

This is what I had come for. The chance to be in the wild, the chance to be



Leah Decides To Go For It On A George River Rapid, Photo by Dan Dubie



Leah Decides To Go For It On A George River Rapid, Photo by Dan Dubie



Pyramid Peaks on the George River, Photo by Leah Titcomb

tested by whitewater and wind and waves, to soak in the sun and drink tea in the tundra and laugh with a small group of friends who also appreciated the wonders of the natural world. Who also wanted to sit around the cook stove or fire in the evenings and pull out the flora and fauna books, and the bird book and identify the plants and animals we had seen that day. Old Inuit fishing camps were abandoned along the river corridor and ancient tent rings were barely visible on the high flat camping places along the river. Others had been here, others would venture here, but they were few and far between and their impact was little. There was plenty of space and plenty of wildness left to explore.

Leah is a registered Maine Guide who educates adults and youth about the natural world around them. She is often found canoeing on the waterways of Maine or adventuring in the mountains.



The Danger Venture Canoe Waiting for our Return, Photo by Leah Titcomb

The Mountain River Canyons: The Indigenous Experience

Bob Henderson and Al Pace

Every once in a while, you read a passage that blows you away. A moment for pause and reflection, one might say. These are usually good moments, important moments, but more on that later. I (Bob) had one such moment following a canoe trip down the Mountain River in the Mackenzie Mountains flowing into the Mackenzie River just south of Fort Good Hope.

The Mountain River has six canyons. Depending on where you start you might paddle all six. Each one is distinctive in some way or other. You likely will not be taking pictures in any but canyon six (the last one) so it is best to take a good mental image as you enter and have a

good look back up river at the end. My two favourites were canyon one about two days downriver from a fly in start at Norseman or Dusty lakes and canyon two where the Cache Creek comes in. The former is notable for the tight [read: important to follow] lines and right angle bends; the latter for the grand entrance. The six canyons provide a variety of grade three entrances, holes, quick rapids in succession and significant wave trains as well as calm water stretches to regroup and catch your breath.

Several times at the canyon entrances, I thought of Wally Schaber, Bill Mason and friends heading down the canyons blind as to what would follow.¹ Sure they

had maps so they knew there were no waterfalls. But ledges are another matter. Certainly they knew indigenous peoples, the Sahtu Dene, had descended the river in large (up to 40 foot) moosehide boats for perhaps thousands of years but unquestionably since the fur trade came to the Mackenzie Mountains in the early 1800s. I had the benefit of a fellow guide, Taylor Pace, who had been down the river many times. Wally and Bill had no trip reports. Franklin and company did the same (no trip reports) on the Coppermine River at Rocky Defile. Man, the feeling of entering canyon paddles blind, as it were, is a provocative thought. But there were trip reports! All were keenly aware of the indigenous



Beginning of the First canyon



Downstream end of the First canyon (from Norseman Lake start)

presence on these and all travel routes. Here is one passage that caught my attention about the Fa? Fa Niline (Mountain) River, “the most important traditional trail” used by Mountain Dene from Fort Good Hope for hunting and trapping.

At the head of the canyons, the boats would stop to let the women and children out to walk over on the portage trail. Only the men would lead the boats through.²

What, portage the canyons?

Like Wally and Bill, but with less maneuverable boats (I assume, I’ve never paddled/rowed a moosehide 40 ft. boat) these guys annually ran the canyons. With a number of years they would have experienced a wide array of water levels each with its own character and list of positives and negatives such that experience taught them to be prepared for anything and don’t talk too much about “last

year’s run” through here. It could look very different this year. It is amazing to think of the big boats with large rudders navigating the canyons – and perhaps more amazing to think – the women portaging the gear. Where were these portage trails and with an ever-changing river, how to get to the portage trail head in a given year with major river changes year to year? There appears to be no evidence of portage trails today, but then again who is looking anyway?

The whole event is mind boggling but they weren’t on a trip – two weeks and back home to the city – they were living an annual cycle of life. If it took longer – big deal. It really is a lifestyle issue. I, for one, go on episodic ventures north to lakes and rivers for the grandeur and peace in the terrain but it ain’t home. Extra time dealing with a canyon is a delay to a trip, but it is life on the river for the Dene who were negotiating the

Mackenzie River canyons on their annual life cycle of hiking inland to mountains heights to hunt and trip and run the river out back to the Mackenzie River to Fort Good Hope. I (Al) often think of the Dene of Deline and Tulita engaged in the same annual upriver hunting trip, then downriver run on the Keele River, but the Mountain River demands an advanced skill for river travel for the Fort Good Hope peoples. I had rarely considered that skill required until that portage passage came to light.

We can’t help but think it is good to ponder such things as modern fly in / fly out visitors. In doing so, we and the people who still live here keep the knowledge of the way of the land strong. Wow! What a portage those women would have done. What a wild river run some year at Canyon Four. What a wild river run some years at Canyon Four. It is important to think of such things.



Second canyon with Cache Creek coming in on the river right

We might want to take a pause in one of the six Mountain River canyons. Look up – way up, think how long you have been in the canyon and how long that portage would be. Then consider the perspective from above of those looking down and wondering, “Will the boat be there when we get to the down-river end of the trail”. And this causes another pause, for the philosophically minded, concerning wider culture questions. From British author Jay Griffiths:

“Children [and adults] need the wisdom of the past, the wisdom of the ancients, say all cultures, but today’s children [and adult] are subject to a pervasive prejudice of our age; the disdain of the past”.³ The Sahta Dene on these life cycle river runs likely were not swimmers, certainly didn’t have helmets, wet suits / dry suits and ... personal floatation devices and understood the ‘quest’ pattern of a “wild” life and the mysticism of the past. Nothing but admiration

for these moosehide boat paddlers and portagers should engulf the modern plastic boat paddler as the paddling itself in these canyons engulfs the paddler then and now in the awe – infused river-scape.

Leon Medeste a Sahta from Deline (once called Fort Franklin – established in 1799 as a fur trade post ten years after Mackenzie followed native guides down the Deh Cho-Big River) once said, “We are Dene Wá (the people) have to survive by righteous rules and are courageous in helping one another. We should be content with our lives. For we are Dene Wá and we survived by helping one another. So in general the Dene feel content.”

I can think of Leon and his ancestors and Wally and Bill and celebrate the thrill of running these canyons. We can all ponder the indigenous experience then and now on travel ways. I can only marvel at what those portage trails around those canyons would have been like. This is another journey, but a journey certainly; one of the imagination not one of “disdain for the past” but one of respect and attention to the past. As paddlers we have so much to gain by the journeys: the river and those canyons, the men running the rapids, those women Sahta portagers; all content in surviving by helping each other. That seems a big journey for us paddlers today but one we should feel comfortable in. We should be keeping the journey of the wisdom of the ancients alive on the land and in our hearts and we should be celebrating them as a part of our physical journey on the trail. Let’s face it; no one really knows exactly what it was like on these rivers hundreds of years ago. That is a good thing. One needs to get what knowledge you can, then let your imagination run free like the river and with the river.

¹ *Canoeing Into The Unknown*, Bruce Hodgins / Gwendolyn Hoyle (Natural Heritage; Toronto, year ????)

² *The Sahtu Atlas; Maps and Stories from the Sahtu Settlement area in Canada’s Northwest Territories*. Edited by James



Upstream look through the mouth of the Second Canyon

Auld and Robert Kershaw. (Friesens book: 20005).

³Kith: *The Riddle of the Childscape*, Jay Griffiths (Penguin Books: London, 2013).

Bob Henderson is defined by his passion for music, story-telling and outdoor adventure. The author of *Every Trail has a Story* and *Pike's Portage*, and accomplished guitar player, Bob has been guiding winter and summer trips forever! Bob developed a dynamic Outdoor Education Program at McMaster University which inspired a legion of students through unique experiential programs. Bob's passion and legacy for guiding trips has recently taken him to Iceland and Norway summer and winter with Laurentian and Edinburgh Universities respectively. Bob's the author of *Every Trail has a Story* and co-editor of *Pike's Portage and Nature First*.

Al Pace was born into a canoe-tripping family frequenting the lakes and rivers of Algonquin Park, Killarney, French River, Kawartha Lakes and Missinaibi Provincial Park. Al graduated from Lakefield College School in June, 1977 and was fortunate to join a three-week canoe expedition on the Coppermine River following his graduation. Al's wilderness journeys span thousands of river miles on over twenty different northern waterways. He is one of Canada's most accomplished River Guides having lead over 100 successful canoe and hiking expeditions. Al teaches respect for the rugged northern landscape and takes great pride in Canoe North's impeccable safety record. In the off-season, Al is a studio-potter creating original stoneware vessels, both functional and decorative with a distinctly Canadian flavour. Al's pottery designs reflect the textures and rhythms of the mysterious northern landscape. Al is the recipient of 2016 Mike Stilwell Lifetime Achievement Award for providing longstanding and exceptional service to NWT tourism industry, and for his demonstrated leadership and integrity.



In the Fourth canyon



Illustration of the Fifth canyon (Donna Griffin-Smith, 2011); Note: Mountain river and its canyon constantly change; they may not look as depicted in this drawing

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