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Packing Food Bags

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

By Beth Jackson and Eli Walker

Day 45: It's hard to fathom that 13 kilometers to the east lays our destination. One more short paddle and our expedition will be over. As I lay awake in my sleeping bag underneath our bug shelter, I can see lights from the town of Kangirsuk in the distance. On this morning, the last morning, we leave camp early to weave in and out of boulders in the falling tide as the sun rises. The water is glassy, flat and calm- very different from the big winds we have experienced the previous days. We are quiet. We have never talked excessively as we paddle. Deep breaths. Paddle stroke after paddle stroke. The brightly colored houses grow bigger. And then it is over. Our feet touch the ground in Kangirsuk. Hugs all around. We excitedly send our last InReach message, notifying friends and family that we have made it. We take the obligatory group photo and ravenously eat the last of our food: three biscuits, two Snickers bars, two packets of Justin's chocolate hazelnut butter, and one package of Tang to share among the 4 of us.

Packing the Barrels

Sage Chopping Nine Pounds of Onions

Day Dreaming; An Expedition is Born

Two years ago, Beth Jackson decided she was going to plan the biggest, most challenging canoeing adventure she could afford and was going to drag her best friends with her. The requirements: a love of upstream travel and portaging, a willingness to pack no single-use plastics, and a commitment to keep going regardless of the circumstances. Only three made the cut: two friends from work, Steve Melamed and Eli Walker, and Eli's fiancé, Sage Waring. The route was adventurous and at least a little bit intimidating. When the friends agreed to join, she asked twice to ensure they had all looked at the lines she'd drawn sneaking through endless lakes, ponds, and streams between the Leaf River and the Payne River watersheds. She wasn't worried about the route, never doubted we would reach our destination… at some point. Instead she wondered if the upriver sections would take far longer than planned, if we would run out of food, if we would encounter a polar bear, and how exactly we would get our flammable items to our starting location. Mostly, though, she worried that partway through, somewhere halfway across the peninsula, we would open our homemade fabric food bags to find our food turned green and slimy.

Our expedition goals were to seek out big adventure, traverse the Ungava Peninsula, and use zero single-use plastics. The well-known phrase "pack it in, pack it out" was born out of the Leave No Trace movement. We strove to pack in less, so that we could ultimately pack out less. A few days into most expeditions a crucial piece of gear is born: the bag of bags. It's where all empty food bags go to die, hoping that if they are lucky they may come in handy at a crucial moment to double-bag something that has burst a hole. We traditionally bag or vacuum-seal our food in plastic, line our packs with old contractor bags with a few too many duct taped holes, and use those trusty Ziplocs to keep books, headlamp batteries and everything else safe and dry. We use plastic bags to waterproof and to organize. At the end of the expedition, that old bag of bags gets packed out. Maybe some will get reused, but most will likely get buried in a landfill to outlive all of us, our grandchildren

included. Perhaps we didn't leave a trace on our expedition, packed out everything we packed in, but now we return home only to deposit a bag of bags into the trash. On Canoe Ungava we hoped to eliminate this ritual upon our return home.

Food Preparation & The Richard River

In July of 2018 we embarked on the adventure of a lifetime. Over 46 days, we travelled 930 kilometers through the remote wilderness of the Ungava Peninsula in Nunavik, Quebec. Sometimes our PakBoats were balanced upon our shoulders and other times we fought to get upriver, far less gracefully than the running salmon. The real journey began years earlier, staring at the tiny rivers and streams that connect Lac Minto to Hudson Bay. On July 3rd we left our vehicles and families behind and boarded a plane to Umiuaq. From there we paddled north along Hudson Bay, past the foreboding Nastapoka Falls and on to a smaller watershed, the Richard, which we quickly nicknamed something too inappropriate for these pages. Hard-fought portaging, lining, and paddling earned us Lac Minto and finally our first downriver stretch on the Leaf. After a few short days on the Leaf, we turned north again to head up the Vizien. Following what felt like weeks of portaging, more lining, and lots of fishing, we gained our final height of land and began the rapid descent to Payne Lake and on to Kangirsuk and Ungava Bay. We did this with no single-use plastics. No Ziplocs, no ice bags, no vacuum-sealed food, no trash bags, and no contractor bags. No single-use plastics.

In addition to eliminating plastic bags from our food system on expedition, we also hoped to eliminate landfill waste from our entire food purchasing, prepping, and packing. At first this proved to be eye opening; later it proved impossible. Food prep generated 9 ounces of plastic waste, including stickers from fruits and vegetables. All other waste was recyclable (plastic containers, glass jars, cardboard, paperboard, cans, etc.), compostable (banana peels, pepper stems, onion peels, and more), or repurposed (kale stems in soup, mushroom scraps in omelets, etc.). Our final food pack generated an additional 13.2 ounces of plastic waste.

Storing Food in Canning Jars

When we realized we couldn't completely eliminate plastic from our pre-expedition food preparations, we decided to be conscious consumers and create as little waste as possible, given our time and financial constraints. We became strategic purchasers, curious consumers, and all the while stuck to our lofty dreams of a nearly gourmet menu. We didn't just want to eat food on our expedition. We wanted to eat good food.

All in all, during expedition prep most waste comes from shipping materials. We bought everything we could in bulk, chose recyclable packaging, piled fruits and vegetables into reusable shopping bags, and bought loose produce. But we could not control the packaging on the food and gear we ordered and had shipped to us. Most of these items were shrink-wrapped or bagged in plastic and nearly every cardboard box was over-

Beth and Steve Lining, Vizien River

Curried Apricot bread

sized and crammed with air-filled plastic pillow packs to take up space. Trying to pack plastic-free opened our eyes to how much plastic we consume, often without as much as a second thought. Despite our vigilance and intention to go plastic-free, we ultimately threw away 22.2 ounces of plastic during our pre-expedition preparations.

Day 4: The Richard River lies 4 kilometers north of Nastapoka Falls and marks the end of our journey on Hudson Bay. It greets us mightily with cold, misty wind.

Eli (and Steve), Pond-hopping across mountains

We wake up at 3 a.m. to big winds, rain, and lightning. Once the storm clears, we can see the Richard climbing into the mountains, its flooded waters pouring over waterfalls and sending spring ice melt into the bay. Our journey east begins on foot. The following 5 days are spent mostly portaging, with some lining and paddling. Our backs hurt, our legs are tired, and slowly we watch Hudson Bay disappear as we climb higher among the cuestas. We collapse at the end of each day too tired to continue portaging. Once we near the top of the watershed, we are able to paddle more, sneaking through the winding river beneath mountain peaks that continuously give us the illusion we are about to paddle off the edge of the world.

Menu Planning and Lac Minto

As wilderness guides at Outward Bound, each of us spends somewhere between one and two hundred days eating camp food every year. Sometimes we get to prepare it for ourselves, but we have all eaten our fair sure of burnt or undercooked foods prepared lovingly for us by our students. To be fair, we have also had some amazing foods prepared by our students. Because of this, there are some things we just won't eat anymore. Beth dislikes pasta; Steve has no appreciation for cumin; Eli despises cinnamon; and Sage... well, Sage will eat just about anything except instant oatmeal. We started our menu planning with some non-negotiables (for example, NO instant oatmeal) and designed an artful and delightful menu. Sure, any food is tasty after 12 hours of portaging, but this was different. We didn't crave fruits and vegetables and home-cooked meals the way that we all had on shorter expeditions.

Eli and Sage spent the spring planning our menu, carefully balancing dried weight vs. cost vs. bulk vs. nutritional value. Our food budget of $8.00/day per person as well as our concerns about fitting our food and gear in our boats necessitated doing just about everything ourselves. With only minimal experience dehydrating food, and knowing that they didn't have time to test any of the foods they were drying, they jumped in head-first. They made countless batches of granola, made and dehydrated tomato sauce, hummus, lentil spread, black

beans, black bean spread, fruit leather, jerky, scrambled eggs, and more. They chopped 9 pounds of onions with goggles on before opting out of that special type of torture and bought frozen prechopped onions. Unfortunately, these came in plastic bags. They capitalized on sales and bought in bulk so we could afford fresh fruits and vegetables with as much diversity as dried apples, blueberries, melons, bananas, broccoli, green beans, eggplant, squash, sweet potato, peppers, peas, kale, spinach, corn, and tomatoes.

Feeling the restrictions on weight and space, we capped our rations at 1.7 pounds of food per person per day. Within these constraints, food quality was the next priority. We wor ked off a menu of six breakfasts, six lunches, and eight dinners. These included everything from sprouts and homemade dehydrated hummus on fresh bread to pancakes with homemade dehydrated fruit sauce and maple syrup to kitchire, a traditional Ayurvedic dish made with mung beans. We ate well.

On expedition, the most coveted camp job was "Baker." We brought 168 energy bars, nine pounds of dehydrated fruits and vegetables, ten pounds of granola, twelve pounds of various bean spreads, but forty pounds of flour. We baked almost every night: yeast breads when it was sunny and warm, biscuits when it was not, and the occasional chapatti or pancake. We had an excessive spice kit (packed by Steve's wife and overflowing with love) and a set amount of miscellaneous baking ingredients set aside for each pack out. There is just something to be said for fresh-baked bread every day! Perhaps one of the harder parts of the expedition was not eating the bread after supper, when it was still warm.

Throughout our packing system, minimizing food bulk was both important and a challenge. This was ultimately why we decided to bake our bread products. You can imagine how the one pound of flour needed for one of our lunches was far more compact than 1 meal of crackers, Pilot biscuits, or Bickies. Additionally, we planned for 8 fish dinners to cut down on food bulk. Fish dinners were our favorite. There were no set amounts and no cup or ounce measure-

Fish!

Food Bags

Last Height of Land Portage, All Downhill from Here!

ments, just the need to catch as many fish as we would eat. Fishing became part of our daily routine. When we encountered lake trout fins rising below rapids, we stopped. Often fishing coincided with lunch, which meant that we had an unintentional learning progression in how to deal with multiple pounds of fish during our travel day. Sage took on the role of official fish pot portager, an important job for the sure-footed.

To round out the menu, we added molasses, maple syrup, chocolate chips, Nutella, M&Ms, and other tasty treats to satisfy each of our sweet-tooths… somewhat. The amounts we had were really only enough to tempt and taunt. The occasional desert of 3 chocolate chips per person was somewhat satisfactory. If we were to do it again, we would definitely pack more chocolate, and more fat, and probably just more food in general.

Day 14: We have gained Lac Minto! The prevailing westerlies stay strong as we sail our way eastward, stopping to inspect caribou antlers and sleep in tiny protected coves. After two weeks we give up on ever seeing sunshine, yet the following day we wake up to misty rain that gives way to warm sun and glassy water. We catch our first fish, three lake trout weighing in at eight pounds, as Lac Minto falls away into the Leaf River. The Leaf is swollen with spring run-off and provides us with entertainment in the form of invigorating big-water paddling. We complete a ferry that would have earned us bragging rights… if anyone were around to see it.

A Full-Time Job & The Vizien

We ran into a puzzle trying to figure out how to keep our food from perishing before we set out on our expedition. Historically we have vacuum-sealed or tied tightly in plastic bags. We were able to borrow hundreds of canning jars from Eli's family, and luckily for us (unluckily for them), their enormous chest freezer had been accidentally unplugged and its contents were discovered in a soggy rotten mess. We promise we had nothing to do with this unfortunate event, even though we greatly benefited from it. After cleaning out and deodorizing the freezer, we had the privilege of having the entire space at our disposal. The dried food was weighed, labeled, and stored in canning jars in the freezer until our final food pack.

In an act of desperation, Eli quit his job two weeks early in order to finish dehydrating our food. During this two-week time period, food prep and plan-

Sage (and Beth), Tassialouc

ning became his full-time gig. He spent hours each day re-examining the menu and eventually developed a strategic food-packing scheme that cut in half our total amount of food bags. Our meals were organized into four twelve-day pack outs. Packouts One and Three worked off of a similar menu, and Two and Four were similar. Each packout included three or four options for each meal, to be eaten three or four times each. This system allowed us to minimize the number of bags we used. For example, four meals of grits were packed into one food bag. Each time we opened the bag on expedition, we would measure out the amount needed for one meal. This system meant it was easy to choose a meal at the end of a long day (fewer options in each packout) but that we still had tremendous diversity, since the menu changed every other packout. Precise measurements and no guessing were the key to success after a month on expedition when no amount of calories seemed to quite satisfy our bodies.

Spice Kit packed in Squishlocs

Day 18: We leave the Leaf and begin our second up-river adventure on the Vizien, marking the point where we cease our eastward progress and head upriver north and northwest for 60 kilometers. The Vizien is beautiful—amazing rapids and blue-green, crystal-clear water. The hydraulics shine emerald green in the bright sun. The brook trout fishing is un-

Steve portaging

Trout, Mashed Potatoes, Veggies, and Cranberries

matched. Here we perfect our lunch fishing, filleting, and fish-portaging techniques. We line, line, line, and portage, and paddle upriver.

Too Many Questions, Not Enough Time

Together, the four of us have 33 years of experience leading wilderness expeditions, with an estimated 4,000 professional days in the field. This does not include personal expeditions or the days (really years, that some of us have spent living out of our vehicles). Each of us is a certified Wilderness First Responder, and three of us are certified whitewater canoe or kayak instructors. We are paddlers, gardeners, climbers, artists, musicians, sailors, bakers, tea drinkers, and more. We all work for Outward Bound, which means that we have been exposed to the same systems. When we were planning the Ungava expedition, we knew that there are many people (perhaps yourself included) who have far more experience than all of us combined, especially when it comes to arctic and sub-arctic canoe trips.

We spent the months leading up to the trip trying to answer questions. Yes, some of them may have been kind of dumb. Where is tree line? What do we do if we see a polar bear? Are these blue barrels actually waterproof? What do we need to pack for PakBoat repairs? Do we need dry suits? What kinds of shoes should we bring? How cold will it be? Will we be wind-bound for days? The list seemed endless at times, and we realized most of the questions would only be answered by the expedition itself, at which point it would be too late to do anything about it. Once we got up there, we learned that Steve's revered Hudson Bay axe proved to be nearly useless. We saw no polar bears but lugged around a workhorse of a shotgun just in case. I'm sure anybody watching Beth teach the rest of us how to use it would have laughed hysterically. Lesson #1 was "Don't be afraid of the gun." If you're looking for a good laugh, just look up the video of Eli learning how to shoot a gun on our Canoe Ungava Facebook page. We tested the barrels in a bathtub, debated over shoes, and compared personal packing lists. Despite oodles of research, we still felt like we had only a vague idea of what we were walking into. None of us had ever paddled in Nunavik.

We were certain that there was only one way to find out. We had to go do it. With time, we would learn how cold and wet it can be on the Ungava Peninsula. We would learn what it feels like to withstand 90 kmh winds when there is nothing to hide behind. We would learn what it is like to navigate on dried-up lakes that we thought would be filled with water. We trusted our ability to problem-solve and endure, and we trusted our food bags.

Unchartered Territory – Reusable Food Bags & Lakerivers

Prior to Canoe Ungava, every trip we had been on had packed food into single-use plastic, which was thrown away at the end of the trip. There had to be a better solution. Beth dreamed up the idea of doing an expedition with no one-time-use plastics and spearheaded the initiative. She looked for hours, over the course of days and months, for a product that would meet her expectations and survive the harsh expedition environment. She never found what she was looking for. Like any savvy wilderness traveler, she decided to solve her own problem and make her own food bags. Aside from the route, this was one of the biggest risks we took. Beth thought that if we could complete a big expedition, in a remote corner of the earth, with zero single-use plastics, other adventurers might strive to do the same.

Her research led her to a waterproof and food-safe fabric. It was important that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved all materials, so that the bags could be used by larger organizations like Outward Bound. The first 5 bags were tested on an expedition in Brazil prior to the Ungava crossing. They performed well and held up throughout 50 days of expedition travel.

Day 29: As the Vizien ends we enter the land of lakes, rivers, rock gardens, and subarctic barren lands. At times we question whether we're paddling on a lake or river and find ourselves paddling and lining through many shallow rock gardens. We cross our final height of land on a beautiful blustery portage, taking turns steadying each other's bows against the wind. We enter the water of Lac Bisson, marking our entrance into the Payne River watershed. We spend the next days linking together small lakes and streams that carry us to Lac Tassialouc. We stopped mid-day on Lac Tassialouc to fillet our catch, later realizing 18 lbs. of live fish means fish for dinner and lunch. Lac Tassialouc gives way to the Tassialouc River. This river offers us some of our most exciting days of paddling. The whitewater is incredible, genuinely fun, technical class III, and we have no knowledge of the river. A surprise awaits us around each bend. The flat and barren landscape transforms into rolling hills as the river feeds us into Lac Payne.

A Massive Sewing Project & Lac Payne

Two hundred pennies isn't a lot when you count them. Two hundred M&Ms could easily be eaten over the course of a day. But holy moly, two hundred food bags require A LOT of sewing. Beth thought two people could easily sew two hundred bags in two days. Our friend, Meganne, who volunteered to help, spent four hours on her knees, expertly cutting twenty-seven yards of fabric into 200 pieces. The following day, Beth spent seven hours troubleshooting broken sewing machines while Meganne sewed like a machine. On the second day, Beth sewed on all the ties and finished the bags, and Eli's mom helped by sewing forty bags. After three days of food bag production, everyone's butt was tired from sitting and had eaten way too much takeout.

While Eli and Sage finished up their work commitments, Beth set to work carefully weighing and packing ingredients into the brand new food bags. She packed each ingredient from our menu into a food bag, packed the food bags into a dry bag, and packed the dry bag

Steve and Eli, Tassialouc

Beth at The Hammer of Thor

into a barrel. As she piled in bag after bag, Beth just hoped that when we opened the bags two months later the oats would still look and taste like oats.

When Sage accidentally dropped his snack ration in the river on a scouting mission, the food bag was not waterproof enough to keep his peanuts from getting soggy. Unfortunately we did not have a Ziploc or other plastic bag to test out and compare to. We also found the bags challenging to open and close on the days when neither thick neoprene gloves nor winter mittens could keep our hands warm, simply because our manual dexterity had diminished. During our expedition cleanup, we discovered that the pumpkin seeds (but not the tomatoes or blueberries!) stained the fabric.

Overall, the bags performed excellently. Forty-six days on expedition, and none of the food spilled or spoiled. The bags proved to be far more durable than plastic. We had no spaghetti holes and no ripped bags from shoving them too aggressively down the sides of barrels. Despite the seemingly endless days of cold and wet weather, our food stayed dry and fresh. We each used a small food bag for our daily snack ration, and these bags took a greater beating than the rest. The granola stayed crunchy, dehydrated fruits and vegetables with no preservatives stayed mold-free, and our flour stayed powdery. After weeks of preliminary research, and a rigorous expedition to test her product, Beth had pulled it off. She created a plastic-free way to organize and waterproof food.

Beth, Day 37: After eight days of slogging north we bear east again toward Ungava Bay. We stop to explore ruins of past settlements—tent circles, pit houses, and food caches dot the shorelines of Baie Aarialakallak, where the Payne River leaves the lake. The Riviere Payne begins with a fury, a long treacherous class V rapid. The portage is made easier by our well-developed caribou trail tracking skills, their trails always leading us through the path of least resistance, through thick willows, dwarf birch, around rock piles and marshes. This portage, our last portage, also highlights our ability to navigate these trails half blind- with sunglasses on, bug shirt zippers closed over faces, sweaty sunscreen dripping in our eyes, a thick cloud of black flies swarming, and boats on our heads. We camp above the boisterous rapids in a cloud of blackflies. They are in our barrels, in the flour bag, in our pants' pockets, our belly buttons, and our dry bags. We learn what mashed dead blackflies smell like.

Post-Expedition Waste & The Payne

We put in the financial investment at the beginning of our trip to get high-quality gear that would last. Of course each of us has brands and gear that we love (and probably some that we don't), but we were especially impressed by the new Squishloc containers we used for spices,

honey, molasses, and oil. Without going into the nitty gritty of our entire gear list, some items we found to be especially able to withstand the rigors of 46 days on expedition, and others we didn't. After years of using large plastic bags to line our expedition packs and smaller Ziplocs to organize our gear, we each purchased an Ostrom pack liner and other assorted waterproof stuff sacks and dry bags. These will help us reduce our environmental impact not just on Canoe Ungava but on future expeditions as well.

By the end of the expedition, we had a barrel of re-useable bags (instead of a bag of plastic bags) and a modest amount of trash. Once home, we flipped the bags inside out, rinsed them, and put them in the washing machine. They came out good as new and ready for the next adventure. We had learned through trial and error a few tips and tricks for washing and drying the bags that helped us streamline the process post-expedition. In comparison, Beth and Eli were up until the wee hours of the morning untangling a mess of 200 food bags the night before Beth needed to pack food into them.

Our other post-expedition landfill contributions included a set of makeshift foam knee pads that fell apart, a handful of zip ties used in boat repairs, vinyl corners cut off of boat-patching material, a few odds and ends from broken gear, scraps from sewing and fishing projects, and one repurposed plastic bag that became the trash bag. After 46 days, we had created a bag of trash no bigger than a soccer ball. We flew back to the states with all of our recyclable and non-recyclable waste to avoid adding to the Kangirsuk burn pile. Recyclables included four 24-ounce plastic peanut butter containers (two of which were stuffed full of energy bar wrappers we were able to recycle), five 1-gallon aluminum fuel cans, seven 2-pound blocks worth of Cabot cheese wax that was melted into a beautiful smelling candle for a friend of ours.

Day 42: As we continue down the Payne River we find big rolling green mountains. Spring ice melt is long gone and the flow normal. The rapids are easy to navigate and enjoyable. The kilometers melt away as we enter a magical caribou land. Caribou line the shores and swim across the river all around our campsite. We stop for our first rest day in six weeks. The following days the caribou lessen, the rapids grow less frequent, and the river widens. Cabins appear on the shoreline, signaling that we are nearing the end of our journey. Sixty kilometers west of Kangirsuk, we paddled our last rapid and watched in awe as it changed with the rising tide. Forty-foot tides are far larger than anything any of us has ever experienced. As we continue east the river's shores are lined with rocky cliffs and shoals that extend far into the river at low tide before getting swallowed up at high tide. High winds, river current and following seas create enormous waves that send us into the shoal-protected cliffs with our tails between our legs. Kangirsuk will not come so easily.

Finishing the Traverse

There are a lot of ways to reduce our environmental impact as we continue to live out both our front country and our expedition lives. Steve is back home in Vermont with his wife and cat, Beth is living in an off-the-grid cabin in western Maine, and Sage and Eli recently got married and are working on teaching their new puppy to love adventures as much as they do. We haven't quit our jobs to save the world, nor have we completely eliminated single-use plastics from our lives. Our goal is to be curious purchasers and minimize our landfill contributions.

Plastics are in our oceans and our rivers. It's not hard to find a recent news piece about some large quantity of landfill waste that was recently found somewhere it shouldn't be. Just a few days ago, there was a piece on the radio about thousands and thousands of golf balls that have been discovered on the ocean floor off the coast of California. Going plastic-free is not something that most people are accustomed to thinking about when they expedition. Leave No Trace teaches "pack it in, pack it out." On Canoe Ungava, we took a hard look at what we were packing in. We committed to buying gear that would last and chose to support companies that use recyclable packaging. We created a waterproof bag to organize and store our food when we discovered that no such products existed.

We dreamed of big challenge, big adventure, and no single-use plastics. The long days of upriver travel, swarms of biting bugs, set rations, and our own personalities tested us in new and special ways: One of us panicked when black flies filled their head net; two of us yelled at each other after weeks of misunderstandings and miscommunications; and the last person found the daily calorie deficit debilitating. All of us cried.

The food we arrived in Kangirsuk with?????

Kangirsuk Group Photo

Every day was an adventure, another paddle stroke or step into the unknown. We aimed to use no single-use plastics on our expedition, and succeeded. We crossed from Hudson Bay to Ungava Bay. Our expedition is complete, our goals accomplished, yet only time will tell how well we have inspired others to minimize their environmental impact in their own way.

Can you find a trip closer to home to lessen your carbon footprint? Can you replace your pack liners and smaller plastic bags with something more durable or reusable? Can you purchase products that are packaged with recyclable materials? Can you do a few repairs and keep using that old piece of gear or clothing? Perhaps you could collect your trash at home for a week to get a better idea of where it is coming from. When you find a company that doesn't ship their items in plastic, thank them. When you are discouraged by your options, speak up. When you find alternatives that work, share them, and when you discover ones that don't, let people know as well.

Day 46: Returning from expedition presents its own set of challenges. On August 19th, 2018 we land on the beach in Kangirsuk. You could see it all in our eyes: smiles, tiredness, relief, excitement, hunger, bittersweetness. We have sun and wind-burnt faces, bags under our eyes, unkempt beards, mustaches growing past upper lips, and worn hands. Upon closer inspection you can see layers of dirt caked on once brightly-colored dry suits, matted hair hidden under layers of hats, patches on boats, and dead mosquitos and black flies caked in every nook and cranny. In this moment, if you were to ask, "How was it?" your question would be met with a blank stare, or wide eyes and a smile. "How was it?" is not an easily answered question. We were on expedition for 46 days; that is 1,104 hours. We slept around 315 hours. This leaves 789 hours of adventure on lakes, rivers, and oceans; with rocks, musk ox, black bears, mud, moss, fish, rain, rainbows, sun, wind, waves, sunsets, sunrises, full moons, rapids, tides, geese, eagles, ducks, caribou, willow, dwarf birch, and cranberries. To Inuit culture past and present, and to the kindness of the people of the North – we experienced a world-class adventure, a true expedition in every sense of the word.

Canoe Song

Sandy Richardson

Robert Thompson and Dr. Seaborn making the recordings. (From Voices of Chief's Point exhibit.)

How do people from an oral culture, without written maps, remember and pass on information about various significant travel routes? One important way was through songs that describe landmarks that act as signposts to the route. Sadly, many of these songs have sadly been lost over time.

A recording of one of these, a canoe song, was recently discovered at Museum London and has now been preserved and digitized. It is part of an exhibit at the Bruce County Museum in Southampton, Ontario: *Voices of Chief's Point.*

Chief's Point is a small reserve on Lake Huron at the mouth of the Sauble River, south of the Fishing Islands. It was carved out by Treaty 72 in 1854 and kept by the Saugeen people as one of their communities. No members of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation live there today, but it remains an important piece of land to the people.

Robert Thompson, moved to Chief's Point as a 10-year-old with his family from Manitoulin Island in 1886. As time passed, some family members moved away, but Robert and his family stayed. Robert refused to register under the Indian Act, determined to live as an Anishinaabeg; Chief's Point, with no Indian Agent, was an ideal place to do this.

Thompson's refusal to register created some difficulties for him and his family, as they had to depend on themselves with no services or support. It also freed him from the bans that would have prohibited him from practising his traditional songs and dances and wearing traditional clothes. As well, it spared him from having to attend Residential School and losing his language and heritage.

By 1920 Robert and his second wife, Elizabeth, were the only people living at Chief's Point. (His first wife and two children died of Yellow Fever in the early 1900s.) In the 1920's he became good friends with Dr. Edwin Seaborn, a surgeon from London, Ontario and a professor at the University of Western Ontario, who had a cottage at Sauble Beach, across the river from Chief's Point. Dr. Seaborn had a keen interest in cultural studies and recorded Robert's stories and songs on wax cylinders and aluminum discs in 1938. These recordings were donated to Museum London in 1975, where they had been in storage and largely forgotten, until recently.

In 2017, Bimadoska Pucan, a member of Saugeen First Nation and a PhD candidate at Western University, found the recordings and with Museum London

Wax cylinders, Dictaphone and aluminum disc. (From Voices of Chief's Point exhibit.)

arranged to digitize the recordings using non-contact optical scanning technology. The recordings, the oldest known from the Saugeen Peninsula, were brought back to life.

Following consultations with Robert Thompson's relatives and Elders at Saugeen First Nation, some of these recordings and other artifacts were put together to create the *Voices of Chief's Point* exhibit at Museum London in the summer of 2018. The exhibit is now at the Bruce County Museum, next door to Saugeen First Nation.

Robert Thompson's Canoe Song, in this exhibit, describes the canoe route from Chief's Point – which lies at the Lake Huron end of the ancient portage route across the Saugeen (Bruce) Peninsula from Lake Huron to Georgian Bay – across the Saugeen Peninsula, through Georgian Bay, or "Wassau-gummauh," and the French, Mattawa and Ottawa rivers to Montreal.

In the recording, Robert sings the song and Elizabeth translates it into English for Dr. Seaborn. She explains that the Anishiinaabeg used to travel this route to trade furs with the French – a journey that likely took one to three weeks, depending on direction and weather. She mentions among other details a campground, like a clearing, where they would stop to perform ceremonies and to rest.

As explained in the exhibit, directional songs, such as this Canoe Song, are ideal for remembering and passing on information about routes. They can be shared with many people and are easily remembered because of their catchy tunes. (They are also more durable than maps or GPS units which don't do well if they fall in the water.) Complex details are built into the Anishinaabemowin language that result in specific and intricate information necessary for survival being contained in seemingly short songs.

Thanks to Bimadoska Pucan, this song and others of Robert Thompson's many stories and songs have returned home to Saugeen. Through *Voices of Chief's Point,* they are being shared with the larger community.

The Voices of Chief's Point exhibit is at the Bruce County Museum from September 15 through December 14, 2019.

Bruce Peninsula Portage Historic Marker. (S. R.)

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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.

Remarkable Mail Delivery on Snowshoes

I would like to make a comment for inclusion in your journal regarding Dave and Kielyn Marrone's excellent article on their snowshoe trip down the Missinaibi published in Nastawgan Winter 2013 Vol. 40 No.4. It brought me to remember a 1905 article by Duncan Campbell Scott that I read 30 years ago. Scott was one of three commissioners appointed to visit native groups to negotiate Treaty #9. A Metis named Jimmy Swain was the expedition's head guide for the Albany River portion. At age 67, Jimmy was still portaging heavy loads while in bare feet. He must have been immune to rocks and black flies! Apparently when younger, he carried a 600 pound load across a portage that was nearly one quarter mile long without putting the load down and resting anywhere along the trail.

What intrigued me most about Scott's article was Jimmy Swain's remarkable mail delivery on snowshoes. Jimmy supposedly snowshoed solo from Moose Factory on James Bay to Fort Michipicoten on Lake Superior via the Missinaibi River in six days! Since Scott reported this route to be 500 miles, Jimmy must have been averaging over 80 miles (128 km) per day! Apparently besides the mail, he took only one blanket, some hardtack and a handful of tea. If this report is accurate, Jimmy accomplished one of the most amazing feats in human history. Back then, the Missinaibi River was extremely remote. Without the benefit of modern maps, it must have taken considerable courage to even attempt a solo trip like this. Consider that the Marrones on their Missinaibi trip found it extremely challenging to even snowshoe 10 kilometers a day.

It is interesting to speculate how Jimmy's feat was accomplished. He must have been in amazing physical condition. Both the weather and snow conditions for winter travel probably must have been the best in his lifetime. Also the bon-kanah (winter trails) to avoid open water and weak ice such as the one described by the Marrones at Cedar Rapids must have been in much better condition. Certainly the key to easier and safer winter travel on the Missinaibi River today would be to research the location of these historic trails and to re-open them. There would not be that many additional trails but it would make a huge difference.

Jimmy Swain's feat is so fantastic that it begs verification. If somebody has the inclination, the H.B.C. records for Moose Factory, Brunswick House and Fort Michipicoten should be checked for a mention of his winter trip. The period that should be checked is from 1850 to possibly 1880.
Craig Macdonald

I'm very excited to introduce you to the latest initiative led by The Canadian Canoe Museum and the Luste family to honour George. The Luste family is making yet another significant contribution to the Museum following the incredible donation of more than 14,000 books from George's personal collection in 2015.

As you are likely aware, The Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough, Ontario, is planning and fundraising for a new museum for the world's largest collection of canoes, kayaks and paddled watercraft. Right now, this collection of national scope and significance is housed in 1960s-era factory buildings. The new museum will be built at the water's edge – next to the Peterborough Lift Lock. (More information at canoemuseum.ca.)

This latest donation would ensure that the new museum's Archives Storage Room* and potentially the Library and Research Room*, both of which are located in the Research and Knowledge Centre, are named to honour George Luste.

If you ordered WCS tickets in the past three years, you can expect to receive a letter from the Museum outlining specific details about the opportunity for you to contribute to the George Luste Memorial Fund. The amount required for both rooms to be named after George is $300,000, of which we are hoping to raise $80,000 in contributions to support the naming.

I know that many of you will find a way to contribute toward this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to further honour our late friend and mentor, George Luste. In anticipation of receiving the letter from The Canadian Canoe Museum, please take a few moments to consider how you can best participate. *Aleks Gusev*

***Archives Storage Room**
Adjacent to the Centre's Library & Research Room, the Category A curatorial space will safely store and make accessible parts of the museum's one-of-a-kind collection, including its rare books and archival collection. The archive will unlock an important part of the collection and open new doors to learning.

***Library & Research Room**
The Library & Research Room, also located within the Centre, features a dedicated work space for researchers and the general public to explore the museum's significant archival collection. This Category A curatorial space houses a reference book collection and appropriate work stations. It will simultaneously allow for both research and preservation of the collection.

A Tale of Two Rivers: The Wind/Peel Rivers in Flood

Story and photos by Bob Henderson

The Wind/Peel River combo from McClusky Lake at the Wind River headwaters to Taco Bar at the big bend where the Peel turns north toward the Arctic Coast beyond the Mackenzie Delta is a fine class 2 "pushy" river trip. Twelve days on the Wind River and two to three days on the Peel River afford ample time for hiking and perhaps camping in the dynamic Peel Canyon. In 2014, friends and I paddled this combo in medium-low water. There are hazards to be sure, particularly in narrow river braids of the upper river, but all things considered, a delightful trip with steady current and crystal-clear waters in a mountain river corridor with superior hiking.

But! Well, there is always another river. This will be a tale of that other river; the other rivers, that is.

In 2016, friends and I enjoyed eleven glorious days on the Wind River to Mt. Deception on the lower Wind River with a full day's paddle onto the Peel River ahead. From the mouth of the Wind, it is about 80 kms to the Taco Bar takeout on the Peel River. It is another four days paddle to Fort McPherson if one is so inclined.

For 2016, we had medium-high water levels. My friends were not veteran whitewater paddlers. So those early days in tight river braids with a pushy current were an important time for learning eddies and river paddle strokes, mostly bracing in converging currents. But, if being a veteran paddler implies experiencing ALL kinds of water, then there would be no veterans on this trip.

Enter day 12 at Mt. Deception camp. It had rained for 22 hours straight from arriving at camp to a late push off early in the afternoon the next day. The river had risen significantly. The day was grey. The river was now brown, and we were a bit blue having waited out the morning rain only to set out in rain anyway. Worse though, the river was rising quickly. Perhaps up two feet through the night and morning. At noon, the river rise didn't seem that significant. We were careful to avoid hazards and outer bends in the "advancing" water levels and strengthening current. Slowly the river's growing aggressiveness caught up to us. "Let's camp now." "Right, too much of everything." There suddenly seemed to be too much current, too much dark water, too much dark sky, too much misty drizzle, too much of a roaring sound from the water and now with gravel bars disappearing along with shorelines – too few places to camp. "There's one!, what luck." "Good: Eddy out – NOW!" Everything was happening quickly. This wasn't the river I had known, and it wasn't the river we could ever imagine. But! There is always that other river. The river in flood.

Lower Wind River vista in low water (2014). In flood conditions, water is from shore to shore!

Lower Wind River in flood just before red cliffs

Wind River braid paddling (2014)

Once we'd camped, we placed a large rock at the shoreline. By the time we'd gone to sleep we had added over ten such rocks all placed in linear ascending-on-the-bank fashion. We were forced to move our tarp kitchen area AND we watched significant – steady – flowing river debris float by with an ever-increasing current speed. We wondered, "Is this a full-on flood or just the possibility of rising waters we had heard about?"

The navigation to the mouth of the Wind River should be very fast in the main current but slow and steady for us as we stopped often (not easy) to scout our next course. Everything was too fast for us to read on the go. In 2014, this final run to the Peel River had been a simple hour from Basin Creek, our last camp. In 2016 it was closer to a half day with lots of scouting and opting for slower water braids while avoiding newly formed braids which were more likely to contain sweepers. The final pinch into the Peel River was straightforward. No bends. No hazards. No waves.

One kilometre from the mouth of Wind River at Peel River Junction (2014)

Then the Peel. We had planned to exit on river-right on a cobblestone beach to walk up to a cliff face with coal deposits: No beach, only more black water with ample floating debris! Water was rolling like a continuous wave into the river-right shoreline. Can't go there? So we opted for the middle into black waters that were hard to read. Right! Now we are in five-foot rolling waves, the kind that make canoes crash downward and spray water at the bow while the stern paddlers brace for dear life. I looked around and determined that there was no obvious place or way to conduct a canoe rescue if one of us were to dump. The others followed, wondering if we in the lead were concerned.

We stopped as soon as we could to catch our breaths, had lunch and consid-

ered the Peel; a much bigger river than the Wind but also a much broader river valley that I had thought would absorb high water without consequence. Wrong. Perhaps the Peel River is in full flood. We tried the braids of the many islands on river left but the river speed combined with the hazards and river debris and tighter moves made the main current more appealing. Nothing is appealing on the Peel this day. Still on river left we looked to camp. We tried but couldn't find a spot and eddying in and out of new high shorelines with fast water everywhere is hardly comforting. We tried our luck on river-right. Shocked at the distance we had travelled since lunch, we crossed the river dodging weird converging former braids and islands and debris. [Read: Full Sized Trees, Really!] It was a bit like those bumper car rides at Exhibitions where you are trying desperately to not get hit (in this case, by weird currents, sweepers and moving debris), while new sensory danger input is coming at you from all sides. With the crossing done, the main current was better. The mouth of the Bonnet Plume River with a flat river delta appeared before us and no canoe was swept off course. Good fortune shone on us again (as it had in finding a campsite at Basin Creek). We camped, landing between many shoreline

Peel River Canyon in low water (2014)

Up stream on Wind River. Glorious days before extreme high water flooding

Peel River in flood at Bonnet Plume, notice floating debris

hazards that must normally be … the forest.

Once camp was set up, I noticed the water table must be rising. Low-lying ground among our seemingly level campsite ground became puddles. The sky cleared. We were safely camped and could think about the Peel River Canyon and the final, more constricted river onto Taco Bar tomorrow. Talk about looming issues ahead. That night, my wife, Margot Peck and I talked over the options. It went something like this.

There is no easy rescue: the islands are mostly gone and there is little to no accessible shoreline? If a canoe dumps, it's a long cold ride. Check. The Peel River Canyon ahead in 2014 was a "conscious" float. You had to stay low in the canoes given the unpredictability of boilers. In high water we knew the class 1-2 rapids become class 3. What of flood waters? We can presume class 4 or more. Check. Then, is Black Sheep Aviation even flying with these conditions? We can find out. Check. So, with the information that Black Sheep is indeed NOT flying into Taco Bar and news from there that the river was rising two inches every half hour yesterday, and the group stuck there was clinging to what land remained of the island, and the canyon they did paddle two days before while the water was still rising necessitated spray skirts and quote "freaked them out," all pointed towards two choices: wait it out or explore helicopter evacuation options.

Peel River in flood

On a sunny morning with water levels crested but not receding we opted to seek the helicopter option and accept the financial consequences. All the above is one big "hats off" to the satellite phone.

Darcy Drinnan at Black Sheep Aviation arranged a helicopter evacuation with Norm of Fireweed Helicopters out of Mayo. We would travel by chopper to the nearest lake (Margaret Lake in the Bonnet Plume River watershed) and then resume our earlier scheduled float plane trip out to Mayo where ground transport began. Who knows how long we might have waited for water levels to drop to safe levels? The first advice from the heli-expert was, "consider burning the canoes". If many trips were required to ferry gear and people the 70 kms upriver on the Bonnet Plume, the price might exceed any reasonable reason to worry about canoes. This was unsettling. But Norm, the chopper pilot, was able to move all of us, our gear and canoes in two trips. We enjoyed the spectacular flight to Margaret Lake (why not enjoy it – we paid for it) and a cheaper float plane trip back to the Mayo Black Sheep base. It was a shorter distance than to Taco Bar. In total, the cost was roughly $5,500.00.

That is our story of that other river; that full-in-flood, once in-a-long-while-flood-event river. The following are a few other stories shared later in phone conversations with other paddlers out at the same time. Who doesn't want to talk about such moments?

Bruce Hawkins was camped at Canyon Creek West, upriver from the Wind River, on the Peel River having paddled the Hart River. With three days of rain he and his companions were waiting for a floatplane pickup in rising waters. They were forced to scramble up to higher ground on their campsite. He

talked about observing a river surge. For Bruce that meant, one moment the river had "in-the-river" debris of the usual kind and seemingly very quickly and surprisingly, the debris began to include new forest leafy debris. In other words, the river flow now included forest floor growth not just river floor and shoreline growth as debris. His party noticed the transition.

Tom Alexander was guiding a group for Sea to Sky Expeditions a few days behind us. He noticed the flooding when at the Little Wind River junction with the Wind. That makes sense. This junction is an easy day's paddle upstream from Mt. Deception. He, like us, found the decision- making among the Wind River braiding to be exhausting at high speed. Once on the Peel he described it feeling like a moving lake was before him with his group doing major ferries looking for the safest water. They camped on a gravel bar and waited for two days for the water to drop. They had learned of our decision made that day downstream. It was a hot, sunny day (the first in four days) and the water levels were beginning to drop. Tom watched four trees on an outside river braid bend of an island break away from the forest shore. He heard the roots "pop" as they were torn from the shore (really the first level of the forest).

After two days they had observed the water levels drop perhaps three feet - hard to say - the water was still roaring but the weather was good. "Time to move" thought Tom who likened the Peel Canyon to "putting a finger on the garden hose." With another group who had largely missed the flooding on the Wind they carefully approached and paddled the Canyon stopping on the emerging gravel shoreline after each pinch to scout their next moves with binoculars. They mostly ran the big wave trains. Crazy, violent eddy lines and recirculating eddies were the greatest hazard. He suggested the Canyon waters were worthy of a topographic map with depressions and surges of elevation gain. At Taco Bar, the river had dropped about seven feet and river debris was now intermittent and the pilot was able to land on the back channel of the Taco Bar Island.

The Sea to Sky group was behind us. Their first day on the Peel was our decision day. It was sunny and the river was beginning to drop. For example, in our drizzly Peel paddle we saw zero gravel bars. Also there was nothing but water and canyon walls in the canyon. We only knew that because our sympathetic helipilot gave us a quick tour of the canyon to commence our evacuation which confirmed our decision not to press on … at least in these high-water days. From Tom, we learned that we were in the highest of the waters just before the canyon. We also learned that the waters dropped quickly. We reckon our wait time would have been five to six days based on Tom's experience.

Mouth of Bonnet Plume from helicopter

Bryan Allemang and three friends were two days ahead of us on the Peel. We had enjoyed their company at a shared campsite on the Wind. They had spray skirts and dry suits. I'd thought it was overkill for the Wind/Peel but I'm certain in the end, they were glad they had them. Bryan remembers a river bank on river right at the mouth of the Wind. They had lunch in the Peel Canyon at a cobblestone shore on river right. I had stopped there too in 2014. Both these shoreline banks were submerged just two days later. In steady drizzle Bryan remembers having to grab their canoes twice during lunch in the canyon as the water was rising. They soon paddled onto Taco Bar just in advance of the flood. Debris started to float by when they were in the Canyon. In high water the Canyon was a bit "unnerving" then. He estimated that in the days they were on the Peel (he flew out August 12), the river had risen seven feet. Most of this happened as they waited at Taco Bar. They experienced high water but not flooded waters. We flew out August 13.

Two other groups well upriver in the Peel watershed were lining up the Ogilvie River to paddle the Blackstone River at the headwaters of the Peel. The rivers here flow less between high banks and more in seepage areas of low shorelines. One group was forced to tie their canoes off to well established trees and to float for a day and night in the current. The waters had exceeded the river banks. Another group in the same area attempted to walk out to the Dempster Highway (which we learned was closed due to flooding). Both groups used their SPOT device to call for aid. The latter group was in waist-deep water in the forest when they used the SPOT. The helicopter on arrival dropped a saw on a rope for them to cut out enough trees for the hovering helicopter to descend for a person-by-person pick up. I was told they cut out more than twenty-five trees. Where they were there was no high ground.

Yet another group, a family group, also couldn't find high ground to camp so called out for help. In fact, a helicopter was helping this family group when the "walk to the Dempster" group hit the

Peel Canyon in flood, narrows at the top of image was unrunnable as judged from the air

SPOT. They were shocked at the speed of their rescue. In a final assessment of these groups, it appears to have been a better choice to stay with your canoes. A Yukon outfitter I talked with said this was a record-breaking flood from their ten-year experience. But they have now seen enough high water to consider giving the Peel watershed a pass. Parting words were, "it is getting too unpredictable for novice paddlers. If it is pouring somewhere, it is pouring hard! Global warming and melting permafrost might have something to do with it."

What is one to make of all this?

Jill Pangman of Sila Sojourns, a canoe guide of thirty years in the Yukon, and I discussed the question of exceptionality or regularity of such flooding in the Peel watershed. This 2016 flood may be exceptional. Flooding of a more modest variety can be expected every five years or so. The watershed catchment is extremely large. For those canoe parties well downriver (like the Wind as it relates to the entire Peel watershed) it is difficult to know what is happening a hundred kilometers upstream. Water levels rise fast (which we observed) but tend to recede quickly as well (which we didn't stick around to observe). We guessed at minimum it would be four days of dropping levels before we would head into the Peel Canyon. The weather had to hold though.

Jill remembers one late June when the Taco Bar campsite Island disappeared under rising water levels. She has a story of having to cut out a new pickup site for the float plane at the mouth of the Snake River. The Peel crossing – a mere two kilometers – to Taco Bar was too ominous. Bob Jickling, another veteran Peel watershed paddler, told me how extremely challenging ferrying across the Peel from the mouth of the Snake was. He remembers a narrow margin of error for that crossing. Darcy of Black Sheep remembers a time when river debris at Taco Bar filled the river. Derek, also of Black Sheep, said of the 2016 flood, that he'd not seen the water that high or violent in thirty years. All this makes an assessment from a non-local such as myself as to the exceptionality of the August 11-15, 2016 waters as unclear as the water itself. As a flip side to all this high-water discussion, Al Pace of Canoe North Adventures across the Mackenzie Mountains on the Keele River in late August 2016 (a short distance as the crow flies) had the unusually low water on the Keele. Perhaps we can begin to expect pendulum swings in these northern mountain river watersheds.

So, was this flood of August 11-15, 2016, a regular occurrence every five years or is it an example of "global weather weirding" which will have no discernible pattern? I guess this remains to be determined. I, for one, will be watching with interest and will be committed to carrying that Satellite phone or SPOT device and perhaps carrying an extra pack with spray decks and neoprene suits stored away just in case.

On my flight home from the west, I read the following quote by Chris Czajkowski in an airplane magazine: "Like many people, he had been in love with the romance of wilderness rather than the wilderness itself." She was telling a bear story gone bad. I am telling a river story gone … unfun. Had these river flood waters dampened my love of "wilderness" river canoeing or did I accept this event as all part of the ups and downs of the wilds of backcountry travel? Do I love a romance of wilderness (where all goes well all the time for my leisure holiday experiences) or do I love the wilderness itself (where one dwells within the wilds of all that is possible as a life – not holiday – experience)? Where does calling in a helicopter fit into the above? This is a question we all need to consider in time of danger on the river.

I believe we handled our particular situation firmly within a "love of wilderness" ethos, but with modern inroads that one doesn't read much of in historical accounts. Only twenty years ago, all groups would have simply waited out the flood - a long wait with limited food. Still I cannot seem to shake a strange feeling. It is a loss-of-innocence feeling; not romance lost, but succumbing to a modern life force. It was clear to us in the thick of the moment that lives were at stake, not timeframes and paddlers' pride. We had the time to sit but for how long (about six days I reckoned from my inquiries) and we had the technology to act to change the wilderness storylines; to use this life force of modern technologies. We left the Peel River from the Bonnet Plume, a day's paddle before our planned finish at a mostly submerged Taco Bar. Somehow wilderness river canoe trips will feel different now. The wilderness doesn't change, I think, but the river canoeing does as the possibility of that "other" river will be omnipresent in my mind. Strange, the experience of that August 2016 flood is both a bit comforting and a bit distressing for the same reason. Comforting in that one can call out for help but at the same time distressing. We were glad we made the call to get off the river.

The Veterans and the Professionals

Story by Tom Elliott
Photos by Sue Sedgwick & Stef McArdle

Beautiful Natla River

It was a coincidence that veteran canoeist Sue Sedgwick and I booked the same Black Feather trip. We just happened to run into each other in the Edmonton Airport, both going to Norman Wells to meet our group. Neither of us knew the other was on the trip. I got to know Sue and her late husband Bill on the Snake and Fond du Lac Rivers and hadn't seen her since 2009. I couldn't think of a better person to trip with.

One might ask, why would veteran canoeists with a history of numerous do-it-yourself, self-guided trips go with an outfitter? Is there really a time and place for everything? This would be Sue's second trip with Black Feather (BF). Her first was the Mountain River.

In Sue's case, some years have not gone well since I saw her last and canoeing is a part of making a new life.

In my case, my last remote trip was 6 years ago. My interest in tripping has since faded, been there, done that. The time and effort required for the planning and preparation of self-guided trips is onerous. At my age and with poor balance, I also questioned my capability. Perhaps I should be well supervised with guides and a responsible outfitter. My wife especially liked that idea. I also had an urge to see the Arctic one more time as easily as possible.

For both Sue and I, having lost canoe contacts for the kind of trip we wished to do, we needed people to trip with. When comparing this trip to self-guided trips, of interest to me were the many aspects and experiences which were different from and unique to any canoeing I had ever done.

Our chosen trip was the Natla-Keele Rivers in the NWT, July, 2018. Our guides Stef and Ken met us in the airport at Norman Wells. Sue and I hugged each other, and Ken and Stef announced their engagement which had taken place the day before. It was a joyous occasion!

But, what about the other paddlers? There were none! Just Sue and I and two guides to do the first 7 days on the Natla. A 1:1 guide/client ratio, not at all typical of BF trips. Truly fantastic, 2 canoes, 4 paddlers. Ken paddled with me and Stef with Sue.

I assumed our guides would have run these rivers many times and knew every

Ken in the stern and Tom in the bow

rock and rapid. Not so. It was all new and very exciting for them. I think they enjoyed the trip more than the clients. Each year Ken is assigned a new river to guide and the Natla-Keele was it.

I knew nothing of the Natla except for the BF description – https://black-feather.com/canoe/natla-keele-river. Sue did some research and was worried about the difficulty of the rapids. With a rapid drop in elevation there was always a fast current. On the other hand, I had no worries. BF has a fine reputation and I assumed their guides would be super skilled white-water canoeists. That turned out to be exactly how it was. I had never been so relaxed running rapids. We dubbed our guides the "professionals" and Sue and I the "veterans."

Veteran and Professional

A twin otter delivered us to O'Grady Lake and there began 7 magnificent days on the Natla River. Day 2 began with warming up exercises followed by river morphology and paddling instruction, normally requiring 3 hours. With us "veterans," the instruction took about a half hour. In the instruction we learned that the BF approach to dumping is quite casual. No big deal, not to worry, happens all the time, we'll have you out of the water in less than 3 minutes. On a previous Natla trip, all 3 canoes in the group dumped. That was declared to be a triple crown. Before running some Class 3s, Sue warned that this is a "triple crown" rapid.

Our small group travelled fast and efficiently. From the stern, Ken called the route and strokes. I had little responsibility except to follow orders. He was quite

rigid about this strategy, not the usual 50:50 thing. Watching Sue and Stef run rapids, I could see that Sue, like me, was relaxed, having fun and just going along for the ride. The professionals were in control. There were no mishaps.

Out of force of habit, I had an impulse at the first few camps to pitch in and work. No, no, the guides do the food and most of the camping chores. Ken and Stef worked very hard and asked very little of us and were most appreciative of whatever we did. The clients were expected to help portage kitchen gear and canoes between the river and camp site and gather firewood. We also washed dishes and did a little food preparation. I felt guilty retiring to my tent with time to relax each day. Sue and Stef did a few hikes. Such luxury! Sue was good at finding things to do to be helpful.

Given that BF assumes a lot of responsibility, I thought perhaps clients' methods of tripping might be quite restricted, well controlled, do everything the BF way. Not so except for some environmental, sanitary, paddling and safety protocols. All quite reasonable. Helmets and dry or wet suits were mandatory on the Natla. Sue and I used our own tents and she and Ken noted that I had my own methods of doing things which they respected. I was asked to use a BF PFD (life vest). My faded, cumbersome vest dated from 1980. My baseball helmet from 1980 was acceptable.

The group considered my lightweight, high-quality hiking boots (with neoprene socks) to be "old school" for wet feet use when canoeing, wading and portaging. They said I should use sport sandals, river shoes, or running shoes as suggested on the BF clothing list. The "old school" type boots are intended to protect feet and ankles, provide traction and ankle support. So to me, it was strange to see the others wear flimsy shoes all day travelling, and then put on substantial footwear when we camped and not needed. Like, what's wrong with this picture. It wasn't a weekend trip in southern ON where foot injury and evacuation could be readily dealt with.

Further to my methods, one of my favourites is at the end of each day I like to wash, followed by a dunk in the river, nude. The water was very cold, I was in and out in 5 seconds or less. I did it at the end of our only cold rainy day. That blew Ken's mind! He couldn't believe it, talked about it 3 times. Once I did a dip near Sue's tent. The following day she said, "I saw your skinny white ass."

Sue enjoying the moment

For travel-light freaks like me, the bulk and weight of our outfit was horrifying! 100 lb canoes (empty), barrels of weighty fresh food, massive amount of cookware, firebox, large tarp. Canoes were piled high. Fortunately, there were no portages. All those provisions made for fine food, quite gourmet and plentiful. Fresh fruits and veggies were the main difference as compared to most canoe food. Well preserved in the cool climate. Red and white wine and Grand Marnier lasted almost the whole trip. We were often fed fresh-baked goods. Ken was a meticulous chef. I asked, why so elaborate? Answer – BF is in competition with other outfitters. That's what clients expect.

To minimize my personal gear, I never bring a camp chair on trips, even though they are lightweight. Ken insisted that I sit and be comfortable at all meals. I was asked to sit on a box until a chair, just for me, was flown in later when we were resupplied. More luxury!

Plenty of red flags went up with my application to do this trip. Ken said when BF reviews applicants with a lot of experience, a red flag goes up because such a person may not adapt well to new and different ways of tripping. That's no surprise, we know what canoeists are like! When looking at my application, this is what BF saw:

Since 1980, an extensive list of canoe trips and snowshoe camping, the "cold type." Current activities – running (slow 10km), gym, underwater rugby, freediving, recent static apnea 5:40. Excellent health, fitness above average, swimming ability excellent, capable of doing this trip.

Sounds good, but here is the rest:

Height 6 ft, weight 138 lbs, not strong in comparison to most canoeists, poor balance, age 82. Lots of red flags.

Ken said I was accepted because there was more than ample guide supervision. Stef loaned me a walking stick for our two steep-slope hikes. Ken's assistance was mainly making some common-sense cautions and helpful hints for safer travel. For example, use a paddle for balance when scouting rapids; or once when looking over a cliff, Ken said "Tom, please take one step back." Sue was relieved that he said that as I am a bit tottery. He assisted me getting in and out of the canoe. That was difficult due to

Breaking bread after a hard day at the office (from L or R: Tom, Ken and Stef)

kneeling in the bow which had very small leg room, coupled with a low seat and the obstruction of spray skirt with water deflector. It was painful to straighten my legs after an hour of paddling. I had never been in a canoe like that. I think this prompted the discussion of my "old school" footwear. It would have been much easier with what the others were wearing.

Ken was pleased to see that while the canoe bounced around, my hips rocked, and upper body was stable. He also said that I was the only paddler he ever allowed to use the pry stroke. That's a no-no in canoe world. I have always used it as an efficient option in lieu of a cross bow stroke. Around day 4 he said, "Tom, I'm really glad you came on this trip."

7 days on the Natla was a unique experience. So quiet, so beautiful and such a congenial small group. Ken gives the Natla a 5-star rating for its spectacular mountain scenery, great class 2 and 3 rapids, remoteness, and rare use (only one other group on it last summer). The weather was good and there were very few bugs.

On day 8 we reached the Keele River, where flights brought in supplies and two couples to join us for the next 10 days. We then had a 4-canoe, 8-paddler group including our 2 guides. At the same time, another BF group arrived to do 10 days on the Keele. We shared a camp site with them on 4 occasions. That made for more socializing as we got to know some of their 14-member group including 2 guides. That group was mainly younger while our group were about retirement age, guides and I excluded.

Our new canoeists were fit and well qualified to do the fast current and standing waves of the Keele. Bob and Marg were long distance runners and Karen did aerobics and other exercise. Peter is an avid cyclist. The fun and compatibility continued to thrive. Once again, little instruction was needed for the new people.

The Keele makes a variable change in geography and lovely transition from mountains to lower land where it ended at the MacKenzie River. We did two one-day hikes to high points, a great leg and cardio workout which I really welcomed. Ken said I was a strong hiker. I said a climb to high elevations won't make underwater rugby players out of breath.

Epilogue:

In retrospect, for me the trip was a success. Like all wilderness trips, it was beneficial for my mind and physical well-being and I did get to see the Arctic one more time. And my physical qualifications, which I wasn't sure about, turned out to be satisfactory.

Did I experience a feeling of personal achievement like the other trips in my past? No. Missing was the usual post-trip high of a do-it-all-yourself effort. I think the credit goes to BF and our magnificent guides who did most of the work. Ken disagreed. He said my role was essential. He also thinks I might be the oldest person to have done the Natla. For all that fine service, I only had to pay the fee.

The fee, the cost ……. Yikes! Sue estimated that a self-guided trip like this would cost about half of what it cost us. I felt the fee paid to BF was reasonable. However, the cost increased drastically with tax, airfare and hotel to and from Norman Wells, travel insurance (optional), and tips for the guides which were of course optional and well deserved.

Ken has done about 50 trips for BF. There was only one other which had a 1:1 guide/client ratio. He figured that at best, BF would have broken even.

Watching professionals work was fascinating. I quizzed Ken a lot about being a professional and wondered what the difference is between them and the many expert trippers I have known. I think it's mainly people skills, leadership and teaching ability. They also assume more responsibility for the other trippers (clients), and work harder than anyone else. Ken and Stef do it year round, they love it and it's their whole life. They have a business called S and K Expeditions guiding backcountry skiing and whitewater canoe trips in BC and beyond. sandexpeditions.com

Client applicants are carefully screened. Ken said that they are usually fit, experienced and competent. The most common complaint from clients is that they wish they had gotten in better shape before the trip.

As opposed to my previous trips, my wife Paula was most comforted and pleased that I was being well cared for. She has heard of some wild stories from my past trips.

And then there is Sue. I know she kept an eye on me, making sure I was updated on what was going on, making sure I tried this or that food item, and I often asked her where the good tent sites were. One evening she and I stood staring at a spectacular dinner just served. Sue said, "Dig in Tom, you paid for this."

Behind the Scene at Paddle the Don

By: Carol Kim and Geri James

For the past 26 years, residents of Toronto have been treated to the colourful sight of hundreds of canoes paddling down the Don River on a single day in May. On the other 364 days of the year, the Don River doesn't have enough water to safely navigate. But on this one special day, the day of "Paddle the Don," a reservoir upstream is opened and over the next five hours enough water fills the Don River to make it possible for canoes and kayaks to navigate the 10 km route from midtown Toronto to Lake Ontario.

The WCA has been intimately involved in Paddle the Don since its formal inception in 1993, when then City Councilor and WCA member Joan King encouraged the Toronto Region and Conservation Authority (TRCA) to organize a paddling event on the Don River. Since then, many WCA members have volunteered as "weir watchers" to help event participants cross three portages. Paddle the Don provides the WCA with a unique opportunity to promote paddling and to showcase the best of the WCA in action.

While the paddle takes most participants about two hours to complete, the event itself is a huge undertaking involving months of preparation and the collaborative efforts of many individuals – many of whom have been involved in the event for years. This article is a "behind-the-scenes" look at the roles of just a few of these dedicated individuals.

Craig Mitchell
Senior Manager, Flood Infrastructure and Hydrometrics, TRCA

Can you describe your role in Paddle the Don?
I am the dam operator for G. Ross Lord Dam located on the West Don River near Dufferin and Finch West. Because the flows in the Don River can be too low for paddling a canoe, I open the gates at the dam to add enough water to ensure the canoes can navigate the Don River.

How many years have you been involved with Paddle the Don?
I have been involved with Paddle the Don for about 14 years.

What's the desired water level for Paddle the Don?
TRCA doesn't use water level to determine the best conditions for Paddle the Don. We use flow, which is measured in cubic metres per second. After talking with participants over the years, TRCA has determined that the best flow is approximately 9 cubic metres per second. TRCA has a stream gauge at Pottery Road on the Don River that provides real-time flow data. By looking at the stream gauge, we know how much to open the gates at the dam to bring the flow up to 9 cubic metres per second. For example, if the flow is 4 cubic metres per second at Pottery Road, I know I need to open the dam gates enough to add 5 cubic metres per second.

What time do you need to open the dam?
I typically open the dam around 2 a.m. on the day of Paddle the Don. It takes approximately 4.5 hours for the flow from the dam to reach the launch site for the canoes.

What are some factors you must consider before opening the dam?
I look at the flow at Pottery Road to determine how much to open the dam gates. I also need to know if there is forecasted rain. This could increase the flow at the Don River. It is sometimes necessary to reduce the dam gate opening so that flows aren't too high for the event. This can be dangerous for the participants.

Are there things you need to watch for leading up to the event?
Weather plays a big factor in our decision-making process. In 2018, Paddle the Don was cancelled because of high-flow conditions. TRCA had a flood warning message out and it was determined that the river would be unsafe for canoes.

What effect does this sudden increase in water flow play on the river and the local organisms in and around the river?
The increased flow for Paddle the Don has minimal effect on the other inhabitants of the river. Nine cubic metres a second is a small amount of flow in relation to the size of the river channel. Rain can increase the flow in the river many times larger than the Paddle the Don. TRCA has measured flows in the Don River as high as 100 cubic metres a second.

Dennis Kovacsi
Supervisor, Ravines and Watercourses
Parks, Forestry & Recreation, City of Toronto

Can you describe your role in Paddle the Don?
I am Supervisor for Parks, Forestry & Recreation, Ravines and Watercourses. We look after all ravines and watercourses throughout the city. I manage the staff that remediate the obstacles in the river and along the trails so that participants can paddle safely along the Don.
How many years have you been involved with Paddle the Don?
About eight years, I think.
What are some of the obstacles in the Don River that need to be removed before the event?
Most of the work is removing woody debris. We also remove shopping carts, picnic tables, and anything else that has been dumped or fallen in that would be a hazard for the event.
Can you walk me through the process of what a site visit involves?
Prior to the event, Ravines staff and TRCA staff will do a walk along the shore from start to finish – E.T. Seaton Park at Eglinton down to Lake Ontario. All concerns are logged and discussed for priority. Sites are GIS tracked so once staff start working, they can find the sites easily and TRCA is able to track the work being done.
How are obstacles removed?
Ravines and Watercourses try to make the least amount of impact to the surrounding area. If access to the site is near a path that we can get a truck into, then we have small cranes that can aid in the work. If it is a walk-in site, the work is done utilizing winches, ropes, and/or blocking debris up to remove. Debris is removed to a safe location so that it will not re-enter the waterway. Garbage is removed, and when possible, materials are recycled.
What are some of the factors affecting the number of hazards/obstacles in the water?
Workload is affected by numerous issues.
● Weather: An increase in rain events has caused more debris to move faster and create more piles.
● Urbanization: More development and more open ground getting covered has added to the water load entering our streams.
● Living river: A reminder that rivers are living entities and will move within the valley. There should be no expectation that they will remain the same. Rivers during high flows will carry loose materials and deposit them in different areas of the river. This causes changes in the river flow. Aging trees also cause more loose debris, as well as the full collapse of trees into the river.

Gary and Geri James
Wilderness Canoe Association

Can you describe your role (and the role of the Wilderness Canoe Association) in Paddle the Don?
The WCA has been involved in Paddle the Don since its inception in 1993. In the early days, WCA members performed many roles, including weir watchers, volunteer organizers, safety personnel and overall paddling ambassadors. We also helped put up signs and perform river inspections. Over the years the TRCA introduced more specialist volunteer roles and the WCA has now taken on more of a weir oversight role, although we're still very involved with TRCA staff in some of the planning because of our knowledge of paddling and the river. We also provide direction for the volunteers from Scout Canada, who perform the heavy lifting of the canoes out and in the water. WCA members are also points of communication in the event of an emergency.
How many years have you been involved with Paddle the Don?
We have been involved with Paddle the Don for at least 24 years.
How did you first get involved in Paddle the Don?
Joan King was our City Councilor and lives in our neighbourhood. Joan and her husband Bill are avid paddlers and introduced us to the WCA. They were the WCA Paddle the Don organizers before us.
How has Paddle the Don changed since the first one you were involved in?
One of the things that keeps bringing us back is that the event changes every year. Certainly, the event has grown and improved over the years. But the river is also different every year due to weather, erosion, downed trees, and water flow. It al-

most appears to be a real wilderness river in some places. Over the years, TRCA and City of Toronto have really cleaned up the garbage, removing picnic tables, shopping carts, tires, pipes, and identified hazards to avoid. The river looks better and healthier every year.

For people taking part in their first Paddle the Don, is there anything they may be surprised about or not expecting?

- The view of the city and river that runs through it is amazing. We have seen deer, beaver and many different birds, too.
- A few sections of the paddle could be considered true "whitewater." Most people who see the wide, slow-moving Don from their cars on the Don Valley Parkway would be surprised at the swift-moving, winding river with class 1 and 2 rapids.
- Portages. Some areas of the river have rapids that must be portaged. Although they may also be surprised that the rapid at the last year are often runnable.

What's your favourite part of Paddle the Don?

The moving water and bends in the river. The recent erosion that created the S-turn adds some excitement. Before weir two, the remoteness and the cliffs of the area make it feel like wilderness.

Debbie Webster
Coordinator, Events, TRCA (Retired 2018)

What was your past role in Paddle the Don?

Since 2007, which was the first year that a landing party was added to this annual event, I assisted in the coordination of all aspects at the take-out site, including dignitary invitations and responses, arrangements for food and refreshments, music and rentals, public health permit, waste management details, and arrangements for shuttle buses at the take-out to transport participants back to their vehicles at the launch site.

How many years were you involved with Paddle the Don?

I was involved in the first Paddle the Don, which was part of TRCA's Watershed Week in 1993. Then I volunteered at the launch site for another few years prior to my extensive involvement over the past 12 years at the take-out site (2007 to 2018).

How has Paddle the Don changed since the first one you were involved in?

The overall scope of Paddle the Don has grown immensely since the first year, especially with the addition of the landing party in 2007. Although the number of paddlers has remained consistent over the years, the number of resources required to carry out the event has continually grown and TRCA is truly thankful for all of the sponsors, partners, staff, and volunteers that make the first Sunday in May a very special day for all of the participants. The popularity of the event and the utmost importance of everyone's safety during the event are two things that have not changed over the years!

What's a memorable Paddle the Don moment for you?

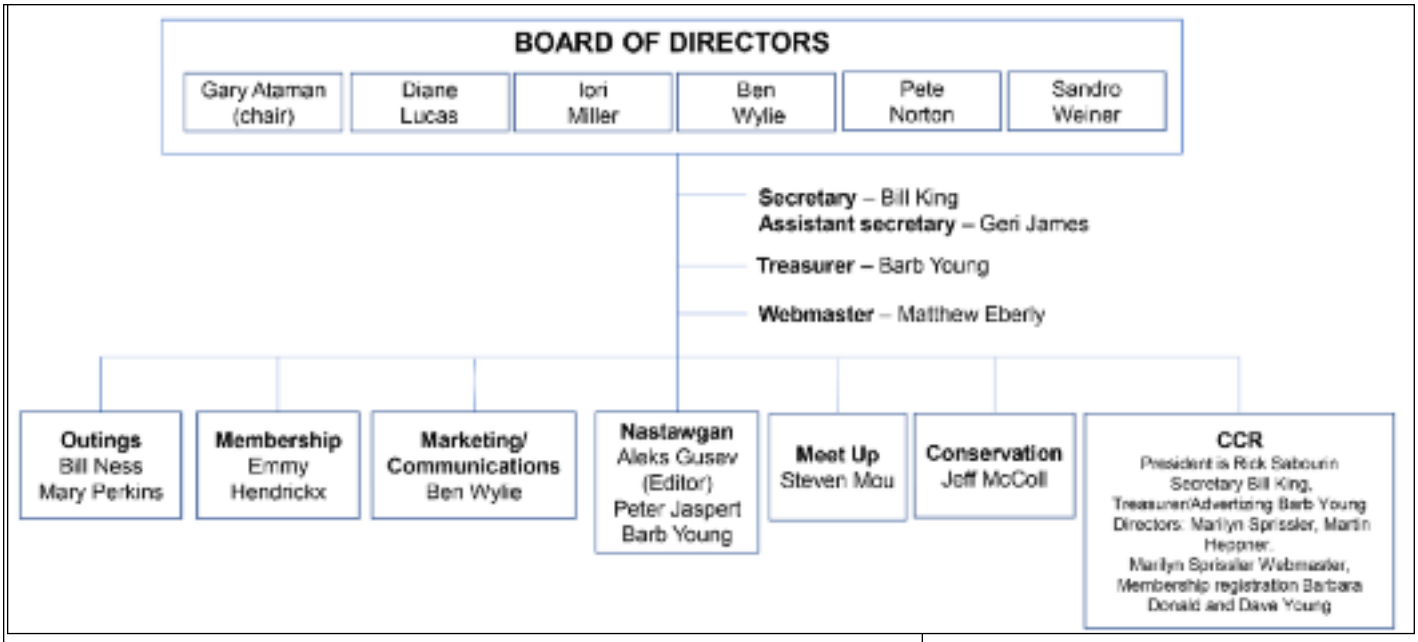
When the take-out was located on Villiers Street from 2007 to 2017, I enjoyed watching up the river as the canoes approached the Keating Channel and arrived for the landing party. It was quite a sight and an amazing experience in such an urban setting with the Gardiner Expressway and the CN Tower in view.

What's your favourite part of Paddle the Don?

My favourite part of the event is the sigh of relief that comes at the conclusion of every successful year, knowing that all of the hard work, dedication, and total commitment of everyone involved in the planning and safety aspects, from the top to the bottom, has provided an invaluable and exciting experience for all of the participants.

What advice do you have for people participating in their first Paddle the Don?

Enjoy every minute of this unique and amazing experience that only happens once a year! There have been various weather conditions over the years, so dress appropriately and make sure that you have read all the safety tips and requirements on our website to ensure that you have the most enjoyable paddle possible. Also, don't miss all the fun at the landing party!



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