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nastawgan

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View of Pulpit Rock from the top of the Gate.

The South Nahanni River By Canoe: Into The Land Of Dreams

Story and photos by Erik Thomsen

Prologue

Few wilderness canoe destinations the world over have been documented and celebrated to the extent of the fabled South Nahanni River in Canada's Northwest Territories. The river valley and its surrounding wildlands – the rugged Mackenzie Mountains – are famous for their immense natural beauty. This is a land of towering 3,000 foot canyons; cathedrals of limestone, castles of sandstone; of Virginia Falls – one of the largest waterfalls in the world. This is a land of spectacular karst terrain, cave systems, hot springs and gemstone lakes; northern lights, wild rapids, roaming grizzly bears and wood bison. This is a place with a river that flows through a greater diversity of landforms than virtually anywhere else on the planet.

The Nahanni Valley is a place of great human history and legends. This is the land of the Dene – comprising the Deh Cho First Nations – who have called the Nahanni and the Mackenzie River home for some 10,000 years.

The wonders of the Nahanni are so great that they earned the site the world's first UNESCO world heritage designation in 1978. This designation reflects the fact that the Nahanni River is, to cite the selection committee, "one of the most spectacular wild rivers in North America."

In August 2022, I left my home in southern Ontario to chase an old dream, along with five friends, to finally paddle the South

Flying over the MacKenzie Mountains en route to Virginia Falls.

Nahanni. For me, this was a dream that had been sown many years prior through an old national parks documentary that left images of the breathtaking canyons of the Nahanni seared in my memory. The dream was stoked in more recent times through the writings and stories of the old Nahanni Valley explorers, prospectors and trappers such as Dick Turner, Albert Faille and Raymond Patterson.

Our plan was to complete a self-guided voyage down the 216 kilometer stretch of the river from Virginia Falls to Nahanni Butte over 10 days. With the river generally flowing at well over 10 kilometers per hour, our itinerary would afford us ample time to take in a number of the park's spectacular hikes and savour the landscape.

On August 6th, our group of six – Emily, Kevin, Lachlan, PJ, Zach, and myself – arrived at Yellowknife airport from Toronto via Calgary. Here we picked up our rental car and some last minute supplies and hit the road for Fort Simpson – the gateway to the Nahanni.

Day 1 – Flying to Virginia Falls

The morning of our departure from Simpson was cool and damp, with a gentle northwest breeze and scattered clouds. Our departure was delayed until early afternoon due to a low mist in the river valley that prevented float planes from landing safely at the Virginia Falls aerodrome.

Weather conditions can change quickly in the Nahanni Valley and impact air access. Peter Jowett's book, *Nahanni: the River Guide*, provides a startling illustration of potential impact of weather and wind conditions on small aircraft in the Mackenzie Mountains: "I vividly recall flying over Yohin Ridge on one occasion and encountering a wind shear which pulled us into a free fall from 3,500 feet to 1,500 in a matter of seconds…have faith in your pilot!"

By 1:00 pm the first plane, carrying four members of our group, was off into the sky above the confluence of the Liard and Mackenzie rivers. Within moments we were soaring over rolling expanses of boreal forest and muskeg, interspersed with multicoloured, serpentine rivers, streams and ponds; the silhouettes of the rugged Mackenzie Mountains loomed ahead.

The mountains themselves suddenly

Watching Virgina Falls at the brink.

emerge up out of the earth like enormous sand ripples on a wind-blasted beach. The mountains are rocky, dusty, tan and grey, with sparse vegetation and form every shape imaginable and are incredible in size and scale.

Late in the hour-and-a-half flight, I found myself straining to glimpse the river I knew was ahead. Suddenly, below us, in the distance, a wide chasm appeared to cut through the mountains. At its base lay a murky, sparkling river – my first sighting of the Nahanni. Moments later, the spectacular frothing pinnacle of the Virginia Falls itself came into view.

Our plane descended, minuscule against the hulking mass of Sunblood Mountain to our northeast. Our pilot banked the plane and feathered it onto

View of Virginia Falls and Sunblood Mountain at dusk.

View of the Nahanni River from the summit of Sunblood Mountain.

the river so adeptly I had not realized we had landed. While we awaited the arrival of the second plane, we set up camp and hiked down to Virginia Falls to marvel, up close, at this miracle of nature.

Virginia Falls or Na'ili Cho (Dene for "big falling water") is one of the world's great waterfalls. Here three billion cubic feet of water careen over the edge of a sheer drop of 316 feet – twice the height of Niagara Falls – into the Nahanni's Fourth Canyon. The waterfall is divided by an immense limestone spire known as Mason's Rock, so named for Bill Mason, one of Canada's most celebrated canoeists.

Campsite at night, Virginia Falls.

Above the falls, the relatively placid waters of the Nahanni rapidly transition into a series of Class V rapids as the river winds slightly to the east and then to the south before reaching the brink. Here, Mason's Rock defiantly divides the river in two, deflecting turbulent spray 40 or 50 feet into the air. When standing at the brink, the raw unfettered power of Virginia Falls – of the Nahanni itself –can be felt in your bones.

Day 2 - Sunblood Mountain

After breakfast, we ferried across the river from the campsite to the Sunblood Mountain trailhead. The hike, which involves 1,000 meters of elevation gain and requires about eight hours to complete, is regarded as one of the best on the Nahanni.

From the trailhead, we hiked through a tangled web of paths, cutting through spruce trees, along the valley floor to the foot of the mountain. At this point, the trail rises precipitously toward the northeast over treacherous scree, holding a scenic view of the top of the falls, before veering north along the mountain's prominent eastern ridge.

Spruce grouse and fluttering whiskey jacks greeted us as we pushed further through the forest, up the dramatic incline. Eventually we passed into the alpine, which exposed us fully to the blistering summer sun. We then met a final rock face and clambered up to the summit after about four hours of hiking.

The view from the top is nothing short of stirring. From the distant northwestern horizon the Nahanni River winds its way through the mountain valley, past the camps along the western shoreline, over the brink of Virginia Falls and into the massive palisades of rock that characterize Fourth Canyon. To the southwest, Marengo Creek shimmers as it lazily dances through the mountains to meet the Nahanni. To the southeast, a substantive, dominant ridgeline can be seen stretching across the landscape, some 30 kilometers away; this represents the location of the Flat River – the largest tributary to the Nahanni and a storied waterway in its own right.

The summit of Sunblood yields the South Nahanni Valley in all its otherworldly spendlor. Around us the fresh wind pulsed in chilly gusts, arctic ground squirrels frolicked about amongst wildflowers; below us emerald coloured lakes freckled the valley; oxbows, cliffs, crevasses, hoodoos, and other incredible features lay before us in the crisp summer light.

Of times like these, Henry David Thoreau wrote: "...when the wild river valley and the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked the dead…There needs no stronger proof of immortality…O Death, where was thy sting? O Grave, where was thy victory then?"

With reluctance we began the trip down the mountain and soon returned to camp. Here, as the sun set, parks staff treated us to bannock and Labrador tea, and told us of Dene traditions and games, showing us various artifacts made of bone, hide, and spruce root. We learned as well of the Dene's historical methods of subsistence in this land relying heavily on large moose skin boats used to tra-

View from the base of Virginia Falls.

verse the river to sustainably hunt and harvest food. We learned that the falls is sacred to the people, and that travelers have historically seen figures of powerful animals, such as eagles, dramatically emerging from its mists.

Day 3 – Virginia Falls to the Flat River

With our gear packed up in the morning, we loaded our boats at the Virginia Falls dock and made a brief paddle along the shoreline to the portage trailhead near top of falls.

Here we began the lengthy task of hauling all of our gear to the base of Virginia Falls via the 1.3 kilometer portage trail on the southwest side of the river. About seventy percent of the trail is a well maintained wooden boardwalk,

Paddling big water through Fourth Canyon, Nahanni River.

Paddling the Nahanni, beyond the Flat River.

Paddling the Third Canyon, Nahanni River.

with the final section of trail winding down a series of dirt switchbacks. The end of the trail gives way to a long rocky beach, which at river level, provides the iconic, rainbow-adorned vantage of Virginia Falls commonly seen in photographs.

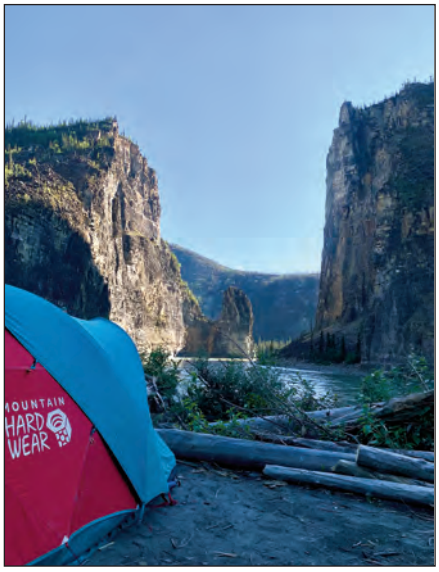
With a cool breeze at our back and under the gentle mist of the falls, we set off into the Fourth Canyon in the early afternoon. The route around the first bend in the canyon seemed straightforward. However, as soon as we rounded the corner we were confronted by immense standing waves that launched the bows of our boats high into the air and downward, deep into each trough. Repeatedly, with each cresting wave, our boats were swallowed in a foaming maelstrom.

An incredible canyon surrounded us, though we struggled to savour it amongst the chaos of the rapids. Sheer crags of limestone glowed almost orange in the afternoon sun as we crashed through the waves.

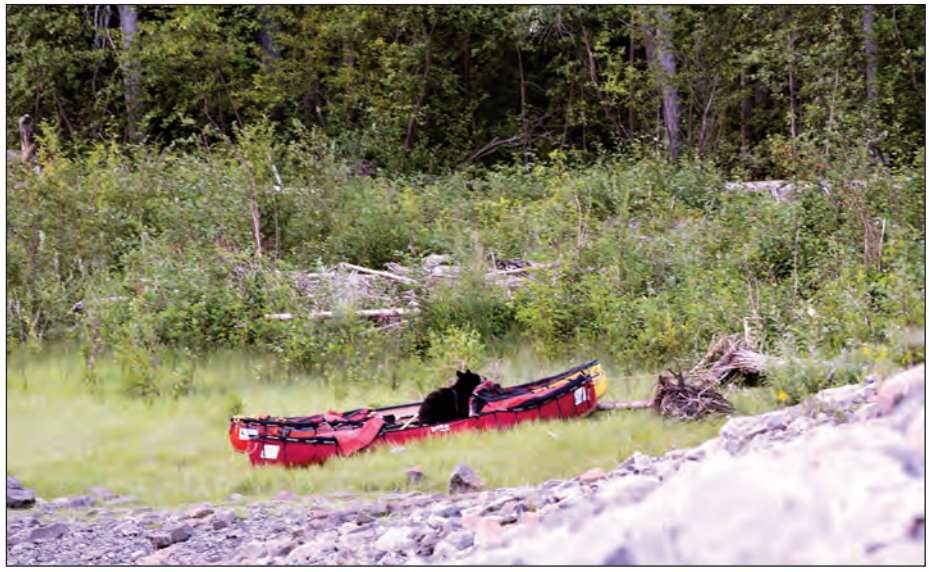
As we passed through the canyon, we arrived at the confluence of Marengo Creek and stopped here to bail out our boats. Fourth Canyon proved to be one of the most thrilling sections of white water I had ever paddled.

Onward past the blue, gurgling waters of Clearwater Creek, we soon arrived at Figure 8 Rapid, so named for the churning whirlpools here that form something that resembles the number "8". Historically this rapid has had the nastiest reputation of any on the South Nahanni. In Raymond Patterson's book *"The Dangerous River"* he describes the rapid as follows: "It was an amazing sight, though by no means designed to make the voyageur burst into any hymn of thanksgiving: it was Figure-of-Eight Rapid, the most dangerous bit of water on the lower river – now known as Hell's Gate". In recent years, however, high waters have entirely altered the rapid and washed out its most challenging features. Fortunately, we were able to pass through Figure 8 with little effort.

We soon reached the Nahanni's confluence with the Flat River and pulled our boats up onto a beach at the point where the two rivers meet. On the shore we noticed scores of black bear prints which we followed for about two hundred meters upstream along the beach of



Campsite facing the Gate and Pulpit Rock.



Habituated black bear in canoe at the Gate.

the Flat. The prints led us to a good campsite along the treeline, where we decided to stop for the night.

By now, the blue skies we had enjoyed for the better part of the day had been replaced by an ever darkening gloom. As we set up a fire, rain began to fall and we decided to turn in for the evening.

Before the day was out, however, PJ had noted that a beautiful misty sunset and full rainbow had emerged across the mountain ridge adjacent to our site. I roused from my tent to take in the view.

Day 4 – Flat River to the Gate

In the morning, we pushed off the edge of the Flat River and approached its junction with the Nahanni. It was fascinating to see the difference in the clarity between the two rivers and to watch the waters blend; the Flat appears relatively clear while the Nahanni is opaque and extremely silty – so much so that it is possible to hear the silt hissing off the hull of the canoe as the boat glides through the water.

We paddled casually past Vera Creek and into Third Canyon, which runs approximately 40 kilometers through the heart of Nahanni's Funeral Range. Third Canyon is a sight to behold. Tall, sheer peaks tower endlessly over large sections of scree and loose sediment with the snaking river winding a course below. The canyons here have a special and unique character. Unlike the pure, sheer limestone canyons elsewhere on the river, the rock composition in Third Canyon is comprised of limestone, shale and sandstone – somewhat reminiscent of sandstone canyons of the American southwest.

The river is pushy through the canyon, and we tackled several minor sets before arriving at the Gate, where we unloaded our boats to set up camp.

The Gate is one of the many truly remarkable features of the Nahanni. It is here that the river completes an abrupt hairpin turn through a 460-meter, precipitous and narrow passageway in the river. Through the Gate lies Pulpit Rock – an iconic pillar of rock that rises vertically out of the river. The campsite at the Gate provides an excellent vantage of the area and affords access to the summit of the Gate's eastern wall via a short, but vertical hiking trail. Given the picturesque nature of the campsite at the Gate we resolved to use one of our rest days here.

Members of our group in the Deadmen Valley Paddle Cabin. Left to Right – Zach Dayboll, PJ Justason, Lachlan McVie, Emily Lebeck, Erik Thomsen, Kevin Groombridge.

Day 5 – The Gate to Big Bend

I woke up in my tent just before 8:00 am to the hollow thud of one of our canoes striking a rock. I ignored the sound at first, believing it to be my imagination, but when I heard the sound repeat I knew something was awry.

I emerged from my tent and peered down at the shore about 50 meters away to find a juvenile black bear sitting inside one of our canoes. Concerned for our spray skirts and other latent gear I started yelling at the bear, which in turn looked up and walked five or six steps toward me before stopping and gazing in my direction. I walked closer to the bear,

Paddling Second Canyon.

Deadmen Valley at Dusk.

Approaching George's Riffle, First Canyon.

shouting louder – by now everyone else had awoken and joined me wide-eyed at the shore, not knowing what to expect. Lachlan discharged a bear banger which hardly phased the creature. However, with some effort, our shouting caused the bear to back off to the edge of the forest, where it continued to observe us. We approached the canoes and found that the bear had caused a seven inch tear in one of the spray skirts.

Thinking we had scared the animal away, we returned to camp, but almost instantly noticed that it had returned to the proximity of the boats – this time pulling one of our drysuits to the edge of the forest. Again, with great difficulty we managed to usher the bear back into the woods. The cycle repeated itself on five occasions before the bear left the site, seemingly for good.

Dall sheep at the entrance to First Canyon.

Paddling George's Riffle.

Paddling First Canyon.

Late in the afternoon at camp, Lafferty's Creek.

In discussing the situation, to avoid further damage/loss of gear, we collectively decided to leave the site and inform the Duty Warden via emergency communications device. The bear, though small in stature, was clearly habituated and had no fear of humans.

After returning home from the Nahanni and discussing the incident with park staff, I learned that a two-week closure at the Gate, which had occurred earlier in the summer, was the result of an incident in which a bear had torn open the side of a tent at night with campers sleeping inside.

Moving on from the incident, we paddled on through the Gate, bound for the Big Bend. Passing through the Gate is a surreal paddling experience. The immense scale of the narrow canyon walls, which absolutely dwarfs canoeists, im-

Having a soak at Kraus Hotsprings. Left to Right - Emily Lebeck, PJ Justason, Zach Dayboll, Lachlan McVie, Kevin Groombridge, Erik Thomsen.

posed a hush over our group as each of us ceased paddling to look up and admire the towering temples of rock above us.

Emerging from Third Canyon, the country opens up again into a large valley that rounds a large corner in the river called Big Bend. Ultimately, we found a good sheltered spot for our camp at the top of a silty beach, situated along a dense patch of trees.

The spot provided a wide, mountainous panorama that yielded a beautiful orange sunset. The sunset was followed by the slow emergence of a broad carpet of stars, and incredible northern lights that stretched from horizon to horizon.

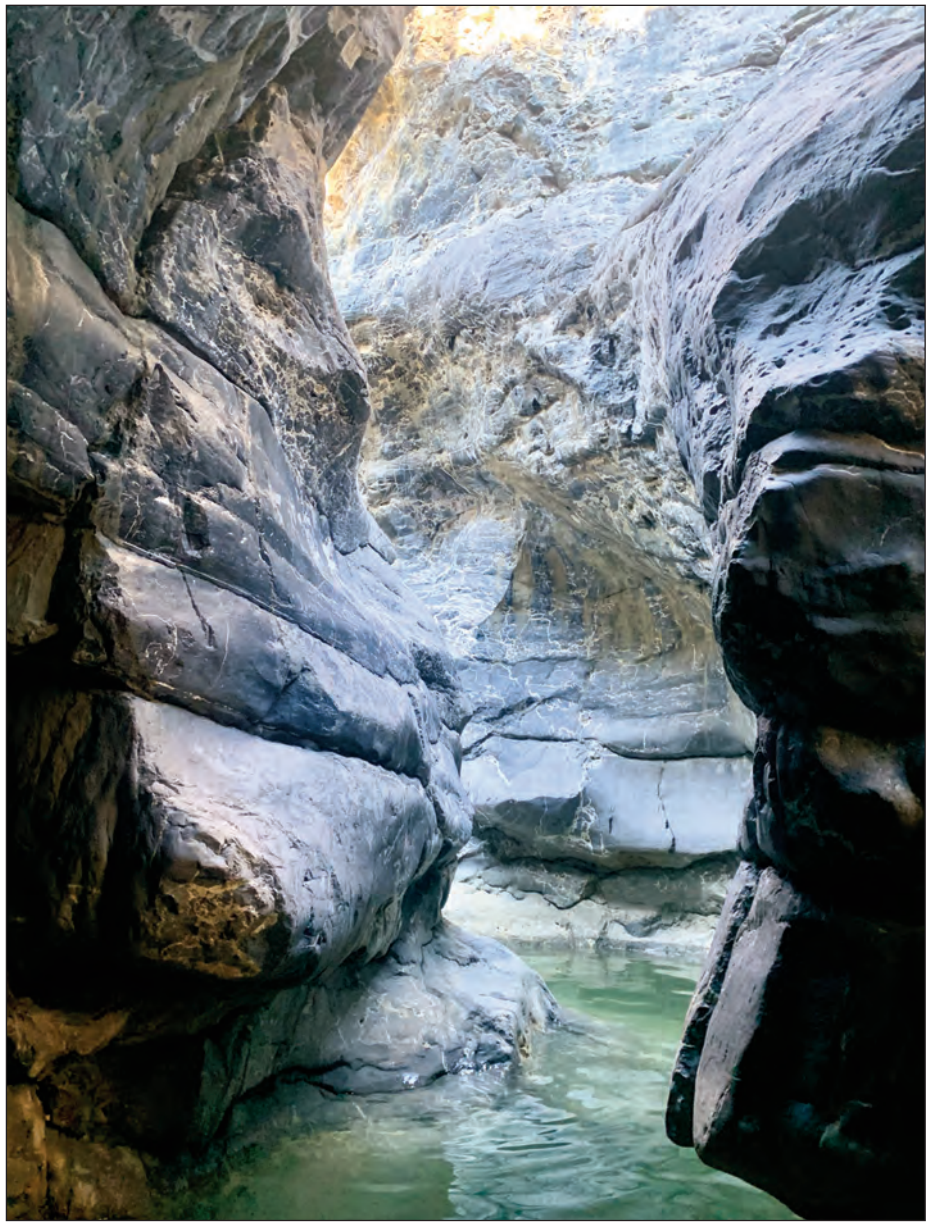
Day 6 – Big Bend to Deadmen Valley

The day began with a quick stop to hike the shallow creek at Painted Rocks Canyon. This place takes its name from the red pigments lining the walls and coating the rocks scattered on the canyon's floor.

The next major landmark on the river is Second Canyon, where an enormous mountain towers 1,300 meters above the river past Scow Creek. Eventually, the river through Second Canyon emerges in a spectacle of magnificence into the broad expanse of Deadmen Valley. The scenery of the valley is starkly different from that of the canyons prior, with rolling flat-topped mountains – the Headless Range – looming prominently over distant horizons.

Deadmen Valley, the Headless Range and the Funeral Range all derive their title from the story of the Lost McLeod Mine. It is understood that in 1906, brothers Willie and Frank McLeod departed upriver to attempt to access the Klondike via the Nahanni mountains. Two years later, their bodies were discovered, headless and tied to a tree, by a search party led by their brother. Rumors had spread in the region that, before their demise, the men had been successful in finding a bountiful gold mine in the valley. Speculation has led to dozens of expeditions to discover the mine, resulting in at least twenty deaths and disappearances.

Beyond the McLeod brothers, the early 1900s brought many intrepid travelers to this perilous region in search of fortune. Numerous, mysterious tales of death and disappearance in the mountains in the early 1900s gave the Nahanni a reputation as a "cursed" river. In 1917, for instance, the decapitated corpse of a prospector named Martin Jorgenson was found alongside his burned cabin near the Flat River. In 1945, the headless body of another prospector, Ernest Savard, was found in the valley. The causes of the innumerable fatalities and disappearances in the Nahanni during this era generally remain a mystery.



View from inside Slot Canyon, Lafferty's Creek.

Dene oral tradition provides fascinating insight into the history of this valley pre-European contact as well. It is said that the mountain dwelling Naha tribe lived in Deadmen Valley. This hostile tribe was known to periodically invade lowland Dene settlements. In conflict with the Naha, Dene warriors had mounted an attack on their settlement near Prairie Creek only to find it completely abandoned, with the Naha never to be seen again. Some speculation persists that the Navajo people of the southwest United States are descendants of the Naha, given similarities in Navajo and Dene dialects and stories of a large tribe from the north suddenly appearing into the desert lands.

Toward the end of our paddle through Deadmen Valley we encountered the Deadmen Valley warden cabin and

Paddling the Nahanni River's braids, the Splits.

check-in station and decided to pitch our tents here. After dinner we rambled down a kilometer long trail at the northwest end of the site and came across an old forestry cabin best known as the Nahanni's famous paddle cabin.

Over the decades, hundreds of canoeists have carved small wooden paddles and left them here to dangle, like little floating spirits, in commemoration of their passage through the mountains. Within the cabin, the slightest movement or gust of air causes the paddles to clatter together in a hollow, ghostly toll. Each paddle tells a unique story of the river; together they are a fascinating and humbling monument to the Nahanni.

Day 7 – Deadmen Valley to Lafferty's Creek

From the Warden's Cabin, it is a short paddle to the entrance to First Canyon.

Paddling by a large bull wood bison, the Splits.

Here we were greeted by a lone Dall sheep scrambling effortlessly along the steep shoreline. After admiring the strange animal, we pulled our boats up onto a long cobble island to scout a notoriously tricky rapid known as George's Riffle. The rapid is characterized by large and irregular waves at centre right and can largely be bypassed by paddling the left shore of the river. We opted to run as much of the rapid as possible through the centre and repeatedly crashed through the massive crests and into the air before smashing back down into furious flow.

First Canyon boasts the highest vertical walls of any canyon in the park and is commonly regarded as one of the most spectacular places on the river. We duly took our time slowly floating along the river and did little paddling to prolong and savour our experience here.

After some time, we arrived at Lafferty's Creek – where we planned to take a rest day – and staked our tents on a silty beach. Here we could sporadically catch the scent of sulphur travelling up river from Kraus Hotsprings, two to three kilometers to the south.

The large cliffs that overlook the mouth of Lafferty's Creek from the north contain "Grotte Valerie" the largest cave system in the park with over 200 caves and two kilometers of tunnels and passageways. These caves are a feature of

the karst lands of the Nahanni plateau. Over eons, water pooled atop the plateau and drained through the porous limestone to carve out the cave system that exists today. These caves, restricted to visitors of the park, hold an array of natural treasures such as 350,000 year-old stalactites and stalagmites, the skeletons of sheep that died within the cave system over 2,000 years ago and a passageway called the 'crystal passage' for the feathery ice crystals that coat its walls.

As sundown set in that evening, a stout wind picked up from the north, thrashing our campfire violently and lifting up large clouds of silt from the dried bed of Lafferty's Creek. We each clambered to reinforce tents with rocks and guylines before heading to bed and hoped the sandstorm would soon abate.

Day 8 – Lafferty's Creek

To our collective dismay, the windstorm had intensified in the night, with gusts of wind likely reaching over 80 or 90 kilometers per hour – strong enough to repeatedly flatten some of our tents. The storm had particularly caused Lachlan, Zach and Kevin to have little rest. The interior of their dwellings had been blasted by large quantities of sand which entered underneath their tent flies and vestibules and through their screens.

After breakfast we decided to hike up the dry, bouldery bed of Lafferty's Creek toward the top of the plateau. As we walked, we noted various cave openings speckling the surrounding canyon walls.

The riverbed climbed high through the valley, eventually leading to a smooth, narrow slot canyon, flooded with ice-cold meltwater. We followed the chasm and waded through the water but ultimately came to a dead end. After retreating to the front of the canyon we were able to find a way up and over the obstruction and emerged into a valley closer to the plateau. It appeared as

Black bear print in the mud, near Nahanni Butte.

Paddling by a black bear near Nahanni Butte.

Northern lights at Sambaa Deh Falls Territorial Park.

though it would have been possible to eventually climb to the plateau, but we decided to head back to camp.

Day 9 – Lafferty's Creek to the Splits

The first task of the following morning's paddle was to complete Lafferty's Riffle, the last major rapid of the trip, which each of our three boats did in thrilling fashion by hitting the main waves in the centre of the river.

A brief paddle past Lafferty's took us to Kraus Hotsprings, where we beached our boats on a gravel bar and stepped out into warm, ankle-deep water. The submerged rocks at our feet were covered in a spectrum of whites, greens and yellows – a result of bacteria flourishing in the hospitable conditions of the hot spring where it met the river.

Over the bank of the river is a small rotting cabin, a remnant of the homestead of Mary and Gus Kraus who lived here intermittently for over 30 years beginning in 1940.

In the centre of a large gravel bar at the site, the hot springs trickle into a sizable crystal pool. The water here sits at a temperature of about 35 degrees celsius and is perfect for a relaxing soak, despite the persistent smell of rotting eggs.

Kraus Hotsprings marks the end of First Canyon and its transition into a region known as "The Splits". The Splits are an immense valley that contain dozens of confusing channels, called braids, over a distance of more than 60 kilometers. Despite the navigational challenges imposed by The Splits, this place has an incredibly wild and unique feel and for most of its duration, the river maintains a healthy flow. In the distance, large mountains, such as Jackfish and Twisted Mountain, loom prominently.

After spotting a cow moose and her calf, not far from Jackfish River's confluence with the Nahanni, we came upon a sign marking the southern edge of the park's boundary. Now less than 40 kilometers to Nahanni Butte, we pulled over to make camp. The first location we chose was a sandy beach covered in hundreds of bison and bear tracks. Thinking it prudent to relocate, we ferried across the river and found a flat, sheltered spit of grassy land that served perfectly as a campsite (though we were periodically serenaded by buffalo calls over the course of the evening from the wooded area behind our tents).

Day 10 – Splits to Nahanni Butte

We were now entering the final phase of our journey on the South Nahanni. We paddled past the mouth of the Jackfish River and almost immediately encountered several herds of wood bison, with an occasional lone bull along the river banks. It was an amazing sight to behold these creatures – the largest land mammal in North America – in such abundance in their native setting. This privilege was compounded by the fact that these creatures, as other bison species, were on the verge of extinction little more than a hundred years ago due to over-exploitation.

Eventually the Nahanni calms to a

virtual flatwater paddle and slowly meanders toward Nahanni Butte – an omnipresent landmark in the distance on this leg of the trip. Our journey toward the Butte brought us past a large group of trumpeter swans and three black bears.

Before long, we had rounded a corner in the river and spotted a long row of fishing boats tied to the muddy river bank. We had arrived at the small, 100-person Dene community of Nahanni Butte and were soon unloading our gear to camp at a small clearing in the middle of the community.

The Road Home

In the morning we deregistered at the park office in town and prepared for a boat shuttle that we had previously arranged through Nahanni River Adventures.

In summer months, the community is only accessible by boat or plane. Our shuttle, accordingly, involved a boat ride to a seasonal access road upstream on the Liard River where we would meet a vehicle shuttle to take us back to Fort Simpson. In Simpson, we would transfer our gear to our rental cars and drive back to Yellowknife.

Despite some engine trouble on the boat ride, we made it to the access road and began the drive back to Simpson as ash fell from the sky from nearby forest fires.

By nightfall, we had arrived at Sambaa Deh Falls Territorial Park, where we would spend our last night in our tents before driving off to Yellowknife.

At around 1:30 am, in an effort to catch one final viewing of the aurora, we hiked down to a place on the river bank in Sambaa Deh called Coral Falls. As if the Northwest Territories had not astonished us sufficiently, the skies were set ablaze with the most intense display of northern lights I had ever witnessed.

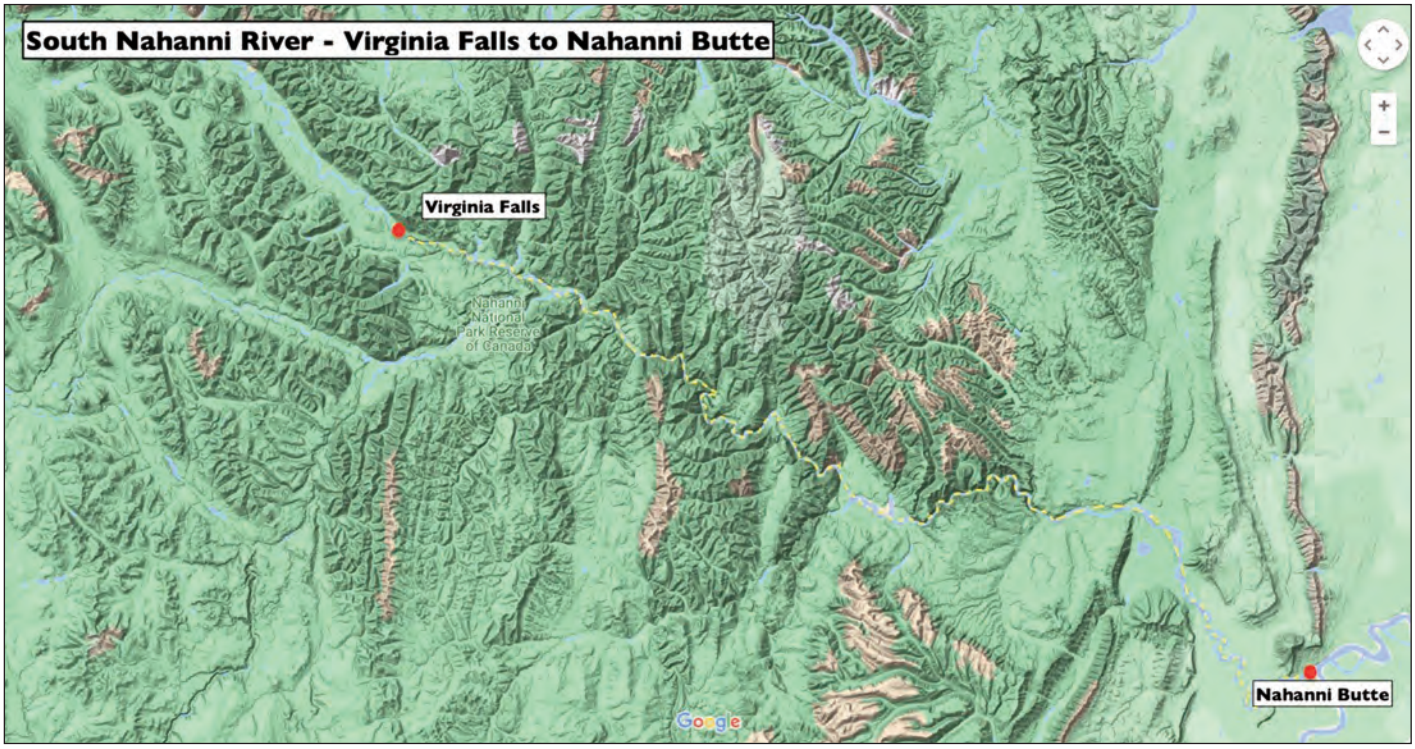
In the foreword to the 1966 Canadian Edition of his famous work, *The Dangerous River*, Raymond Patterson wrote:

"The Dangerous River tells of trips made in the North just before the aeroplane made all places accessible to any kind of man Those of us who had the good fortune to be on the South Nahanni in those last days of the old North may, in times of hunger or hardship, have cursed the day we ever heard the name of that fabled river. Yet a treasure was ours in the end: memories of a carefree time and an utter and absolute freedom which the years cannot dim nor the present age provide…we were kings, lords of all we surveyed."

As wilderness canoeists we endeavour to explore wild places for many reasons: physical and mental well-being, to challenge ourselves, to build relationships, to hunt and fish, to heal ourselves and find reprieve, to experience deep sensations of freedom, distance and solitude, to pursue the innate human desire for exploration and knowledge, to see and feel things for the first time, to build bonds with our planet, bridges to our past and to find meaning.

It is true that the reasons we paddle change over time, but for each of us, I would suppose, that there was something in the land or perhaps in the feel of the paddle, at the beginning of our first forays into the wild, that struck us and formed an impression to change us forever.

For those who love exploring nature and have done so for many years, to paddle the Nahanni River is to paddle a canoe in the wilderness again for the first time; with child-like wonderment, you will rediscover all the things that first kindled your love for the great out-of-doors.



Nahanni Park Map.

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

The WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION is a non-profit organization made up of individuals interested in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe and kayak, but also including backpacking and winter trips on both skis and snowshoes. The club publishes a journal, *Nastawgan*, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas of interest to wilderness travellers, organizes an extensive program of trips for members, runs a few basic workshops, and is involved in environmental issues relevant to wilderness canoeing.

2023 Wilderness and Canoe Symposium

The 38th Wilderness and Canoe Symposium will take place online, for the third year in a row, between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. on 15th February 2023. Registration is open and required to attend. Details at www.wcsymposium.com.

Two dramatic spikes have informed our decision to continue online. First, Toronto is seeing a concerning spike in hospitalizations due to COVID, despite our access to 4th vaccinations. While we cannot predict the future since our crystal ball is backordered (darn you, supply-chain challenges), we can surmise from past years that February will see the second cyclical spike of cases. Second, we are on the uncomfortable edge of a spike in the cost of gas, flights, accommodation, rental spaces, coffee, and batteries for the slide changer. Until both stabilize, our Zoom Auditorium offers us safer and more affordable space to gather and share our stories.

This year's online event continues to feature:

- Free admission;
- Scintillating and diverse paddling stories from across North - America and around the world;
- The usual comforts of your favourite chair, stock-piled snacks and beverages tailored to your own tastes, and no lineups in the bathroom; and
- Low-emissions travel to the Symposium, and increased access to those who would not be able to join due to the inconvenient location of massive oceans, unrelenting work loads, and the dynamics of life.

At this juncture, we are looking at creating a 'long runway' to explore the possibility of returning to in-person event in 2024 or possibly launching our second hybrid event (the first being the phenomenal presentation in 2019 from Lesley Johnson (ON) and Kristen Tanche (NWT): *"I hold Dehcho in My Heart"*.) An online survey was launched to solicit the input from over 1,500 past WCS participants to gain more insights into the audience's appetite for in-person gathering. You can read more details on www.wcsymposium.com.

On the program side, the filmmaker **Chris Forde** will introduce us to his new documentary film *"Paddle to the Amazon"* a story of a father and son's incredible 12,181-mile canoe trip from Winnipeg to the mouth of the Amazon River. **Michael Peake** will talk about the final book in his Hide-Away-Canoe-Club trilogy *"The Coppermine and Beyond"*. Program updates will be posted on WCS website.

Peter Jaspert

1942 – 2022

The WCA has lost a valued member of its team of volunteers. Peter Jaspert began doing layout for the Nastawgan many years ago under the direction of then editor Toni Harting. Peter came to the job with an abundance of experience in typesetting and transformed the newsletter into the professional looking journal it is now. I met Peter in 2014 when I volunteered to be the backup person. We spent many pleasant hours together as he showed me the ropes.

Peter was an avid canoeist, who soon after arriving in Canada in 1960 from Germany, began paddling in Algonquin Park with his Sears canoe. A few years later he took up whitewater paddling and the Madawaska River became his home away from home as he honed his whitewater skills. Peter paddled many rivers throughout Canada, the Nahanni being his favourite.

Peter developed melanoma two years ago and despite many surgeries and treatments succumbed on Friday, Oct 28th. His loving wife Finny and two daughters Claudia and Nadja were vigilant during his last days and ensured he was comfortable to the end.

On behalf of the WCA, I want to acknowledge Peter for his many years of hard work and dedication.

I will always remember him as my very patient teacher and friend.

Barb Young

Jimmy Kash River May 2022

By Stew Taylor

The North Shore of Lake Superior between Wawa and Marathon is one of the most beautiful regions in all of Ontario. This stretch of coastline is almost completely unspoilt and for a few weeks every spring, the rivers that flow into Lake Superior are a whitewater paddler's paradise. These rivers include the Pukaskwa and its tributary the East Pukaskwa which end in the National Park, the Dog River as well as the rarely travelled Cascade River. Dennison Falls two km from the mouth of Lake Superior on the Dog River is familiar to many sea kayakers as there is a trail from the coast to its base. The vertical drop of these rivers is about 240 m and the length from the start to Lake Superior ranges from 35 km on the Dog River to 70 km on the Pukaskwa.

Canoeists who have paddled the Dog River may be familiar with the Jimmy Kash River. According to Ruth Fletcher, the author of *The Puckasaw* (sic) *Diaries*, it is named after a trapper that lived in the area. It is the largest tributary of the Dog and enters from the east about 5 km above Denison Falls. I suspect most paddlers when reaching the confluence have looked upriver and wondered if it could be run. We certainly did on our first trip in 1990, but it was only in 2022 that we investigated further.

Finding any information proved to be challenging. There was a 10-year-old post on the Canadian Canoe Route's website looking for information with no responses. I thought if anyone knew about it, it would be David Wells from Naturally Superior Adventures, however he had no recollection of it being paddled. In many ways this made the river more compelling. Most of our previous trips had been on well documented rivers, so this uncertainty provided an additional level of excitement tempered by the concerns that we could be dragging our boats for a few days.

After scouring all the available online maps and satellite imagery with my paddling partner Mike Janiec, we concluded that it probably could be run with the right water level. The main issue was access. The Dog, Pukaskwa and East Pukaskwa river put-ins are all within about 10 km of each other and easily accessible by road. This was not possible on the Jimmy Kash River. When our friend and former paddling partner John Robart from Marathon, Ontario heard of our plans, he went to work with his local connections to see what he could find

Looking for the Jimmy Kash River. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

Start of the river. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

Jimmy Kash River Route Map

out. After a couple of months of conflicting reports regarding access roads we decided on a plan. Ironically a week before our departure my partner Mike was speaking to a tent supplier in Minnesota who knew paddlers who had run the Jimmy Kash in kayaks years earlier. We didn't get much information, except that it was "hard with several runnable class II-IV rapids." At least this confirmed it was possible.

The length of our trip was 52 km, 32 km on the river and 20 km on Lake Superior. We hoped to complete it in four nights, two on the river and two on the lake. In most years, when completing the Dog River to eliminate the chance of being windbound on Lake Superior, we utilized a boat shuttle from Anderson Fisheries to get us back to Michipicoten Harbour and our vehicles. However, this year we decided to paddle back as we couldn't commit to being at the lake by a certain date.

The next major consideration was water levels. Because of the topography these rivers can rise very quickly, and 15 years earlier we experienced a 24-hr rain storm which resulted in the Dog River rising three feet overnight. This led to a series of events including a canoe breaking in half and a 12 km bushwhack to Lake Superior. On subsequent trips down the Dog we have found pieces of Mike's broken canoe randomly scattered on the river as if to remind us who is actually in control. We settled on a level of 4.2 on the Pukaskwa River gauge which we use as a standard for this area. This provides for reasonable flow so that most rapids can be run and long swifts have enough water to float solo canoes.

On a bright sunny day in late May we made our move. Naturally Superior provided a driver using our vehicle. He was surprised at the drop off point, a logging slash with no sign of water anywhere. We thought the two to three km hike through the bush would be challenging but really didn't know what to expect. It looked simple on the satellite images.

Arriving at our first campsite. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

We never said we were smart. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

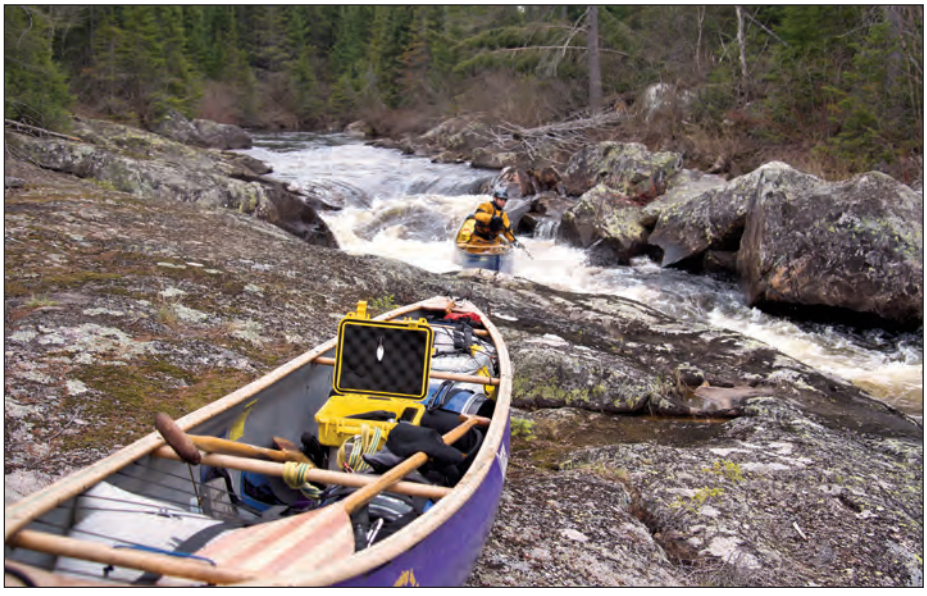
Not having a GPS or exact coordinates we set off using Mike's phone. Our portaging technique was to pick a point 30-40 m away using a compass and then drag our boats to the spot, return for the second load and repeat. Knowing that we had this hike as well as the portage at Denison Falls, we had reduced our gear to the bare minimum. Items previously considered essential such as the Mantis bug shelter, extra clothes, boat unpinning rope, etc. were left at home. A far cry from earlier years where we could have been accused of having 1,000 lb of the lightest gear. Often the bush and alders were so thick it was impossible to see back to where the remaining equipment was. I can confirm that dragging an Esquif Pocket Canyon is a nightmare compared to a Dagger Rival, the difference in width and length continued to plague me throughout the trip. Mike's Rival slid effortlessly while my boat seemed to delight in getting hung up at

Mike having a much needed time-out. Photo credit: Stew Taylor

Mike finishing a steep portage after lowering the canoes. Photo credit: Stew Taylor

every turn. Fortunately, the bugs weren't out and after 3 1/2 hours of pulling, dragging, and cursing we finally got into about 3 inches of water in a small bog. Three hours of paddling into a strong headwind through a chain of lakes led us to the start of the Jimmy Kash River. It was a very good feeling to finally be at this spot after studying it for so many hours on the computer. We changed into our dry suits and then headed downstream. In retrospect, we should have camped on one of these lakes as they were beautiful.

The start to the river was as pleasant as one could hope. Enough water to float our boats and a gentle current. It was approaching 5 p.m. and we agreed to paddle for a couple of hours or until we saw a nice spot. We had hoped to reach a set of power lines about seven km downstream but that seemed unlikely. Two hours later – after paddling through slow sections, swifts, class I rapids and a couple of pull overs – we found a great site on river left. A large open rock above a small narrowing of the river bounded on either side by the high rocky hills that make this area so special.



Nice easy rapid. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

The following morning was warm and sunny and more importantly bug-free. We were on the river by 9 a.m. The next two hours were a great start to the day. Runnable rapids, long swifts and unspoilt scenery. We were behind our self-imposed schedule and needed to make up time so we paddled past two sets of power lines without stopping to investigate. At the power lines we looked in amazement at a new bridge crossing the river. It was not on any maps or satellite photos and we realized it had been installed to complete the recent construction of the new power line. It presented a conundrum as it provided alternate access to the river which would eliminate all the dragging and portaging. However we both agreed our route was the preferred option as it gave us a sense of accomplishment and allowed us to experience the river from its headwaters. Our understanding is that the bridge will be removed in the future.

This river was flowing at an ideal volume. Mistakes could be made by picking the wrong line and missing an eddy or getting hung up on rocks without a critical outcome. Mike and I paddle in solo boats and never set up someone in a rescue position. It's each man for himself, deciding what he is comfortable running. Usually one of us will go on shore in larger rapids, not with a throw rope but with a camera. Our throw ropes are now exclusively used for lining and on this river for lowering the boats on long drops. Not long after the bridge we came to our first significant drop. Over 50 feet with no easy re-entry place at the base of the falls.

Over the years of paddling these rivers we have adapted our strategies as we have gotten older, smarter (this would be disputed by many) and weaker. Portaging in this area is very tough, so we find ourselves lining in some very dicey situations to avoid getting off the river. We often joke that the reason for wearing helmets is not for paddling, but for portaging. Canoes are rarely carried, they are almost always dragged. Purple and blue shavings of ABS are the only

traces of our passage through the wilderness. To this point we had been able to line some larger rapids on the exposed shoreline. However this drop was much too significant for anything but a portage. It took a couple of hours to go the 250 m and ended with Mike at the river and I above him lowering the boats using a small tree as an anchor. Tough work but very rewarding. The river continued dropping steadily as the day became more overcast. By 4 p.m. we reached another large drop which also required a couple of hours to get around. The put-in was reached by a steep drop with Mike in his usual spot at the bottom and I at the top lowering the boats. Leather gloves proved to be indispensable for both dragging and lowering. Even with the gloves my hands took a couple of weeks to heal. It was now starting to rain and for once we made the right decision to call it a day, instead of pushing on to greener pastures. We hacked out a small site beside a large pool. I still have nightmares about this spot. I was using an axe to clear the bush but wearing gloves which were wet because of the rain. The axe slipped in mid swing and went full speed between my legs. An inch either way would have created a major problem. I thought of the Baird Brothers and their ill-fated trip down the East Pukaskwa a couple of years ago which ended after two days because of an axe injury. This would have been a much worse place to get out from. The rain increased steadily, and we called it an early night after Mike cooked in his vestibule for us. I had been looking forward to a drink and cigar but it was not to be.

We awoke to rain and overcast skies. I had put a marker in the river the night before and it showed the water level up considerably. Later we confirmed that the Pukaskwa gauge had risen from 4.1 to 4.6. The change in the river was obvious. It was much pushier and more menacing. Long swifts were now big class I-II stretches with large standing waves. Not knowing the river and what was ahead caused us to cautiously eddy hop close to corners where we could get a clear view downstream. The morning went quickly as we had two large obstacles that each took a couple of hours to get around. Both required the lowering of boats the full length of our throw ropes. It was on one of these portages that we saw the only trace of previous paddlers, a small stump of a spruce cut by saw. After completing the second we had a quick lunch on shore then headed off hoping we would see the Dog River soon. We were not disappointed and the last km on the Jimmy Kash was a thrilling downstream ride.

Not having been on the Dog River since 2016 we had forgotten how big it could be in high water. It was pounding along and in less than an hour we had reached the take-out to Denison Falls. This stretch of the Dog brings back unpleasant memories of our 20-hour walk many years ago, and we identified the

Cleared out campsite. Photo credit: Stew Taylor

Stew lining and dragging. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

Bottom 2/3s of Denison Falls on the Dog River. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

One of the many great rapids to run. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

spot where I was ferried across the river with my paddling partner by Mike to continue walking to Superior as he floated down the river with his partner in my canoe. This walk was highlighted by waist-high snow and a long swim in a swamp pushing our Pelican cases with our chins.

We approached Denison Falls with some trepidation as these conditions would change the last portion of the portage considerably. At the best of times it is hard and we have usually split it into two sections by sleeping at the top. This year we thought we would try and push on to Superior. The portage starts with an uphill climb followed by a long, relatively flat section to the campsite. From the campsite it is a 40 m drop down a very steep path which is not so bad as you can lower the boats by rope most of the way. The final section is a slippery walk over exposed rock beside the base of the enormous eddy pool at the bottom of the falls, then another climb to the spot where you lower your boats into the river. It was this final section that was the problem. As we had experienced in the past this was not possible because of the depth and current created by the normally small stream that dumps in beside the put-in. This forced us to continue through the bush for another two hours to find a suitable spot to cross the stream. Six hours from the start we finished and were finally able to paddle the 2 km down to the coast. It was 9 p.m. when we arrived at Lake Superior and after 13 hours we were too tired to do more than put up the tents and have a quick dinner before calling it a night.

Perfect Superior paddling conditions. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

Camping on Lake Superior is always a highlight of these rivers as the trip isn't quite over but the hard technical challenges are. Under the right conditions it is a spectacular location to relax and take in the surroundings. Clear cold water as far as the eye can see. We woke to bright sun and no wind which allowed us to spend the morning drying out our gear and fishing. The mouth of the Dog River is a hard place to leave. It is a remarkable

location with a large sandy beach and excellent camping. It holds special significance for me as reaching it has marked the milestones in my paddling life. My first trip was completed with no skill and the brute strength of youth. Now I have the technical skills but the strength is fading fast. We headed out at noon in perfect paddling conditions. I am not a big fan of lake paddling and I was not looking forward to this part of the trip. Between carpal tunnel and boredom it was going to be a slog. While I bitched and moaned, Mike revelled in it. He has paddled most of the Superior shoreline in a canoe on many trips and would happily do it every year whereas I can't wait for the paddling to end. The torture only lasted a few hours until we reached another beautiful spot at the Makwa River. Our final night was spent in front of a fire with a clear sky, Lake Superior in front and the river running swiftly beside us. The favourable weather continued the next day and after a few hours we were met at Michipicoten beach with our vehicle by Naturally Superior Adventures.

Finishing any canoe trip always brings mixed feelings which can range from "thank God that's over" to "I can't wait to do that again." For me this was a bittersweet ending as I thought it might be the last time I would paddle a river like this. I had enjoyed the paddling and the challenge of completing the trip but dragging and portaging the canoe was so tough I wasn't sure if I could or wanted to do it again. At the base of Denison Falls I had taken an extra long look and made the comment that I would probably never be back. Funny how time changes things, now months later safe and warm in the confines of home, the challenges of the trip seem less daunting. I am not sure what the spring will bring as I have a new knee in my future but maybe I will see Dennison Falls again.

Statistics:

3 km portage/drag to the headwaters
22 km to confluence of Dog River
5 km to Denison Falls
2 km to Lake Superior
10 km to Makwa River
10 km to Michipicoten Reserve
The trip was 4 nights. An extra day would have been better as one of our days was 13 hours long.

Lake Superior. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

1 x Dagger Rival
1 x Esquif Pocket Canyon with one seat and full flotation

We have paddled these north shore rivers in a combination of tandem and solo canoes. I would strongly recommend solo boats due to the number and difficulty of the rapids. Tandem boaters will be portaging and lining much more frequently. Drysuits are highly recommended in May as are helmets, lining ropes, and the ability to unpin a boat. Water levels can rise extremely rapidly which can change your trip from fun to challenging. Boat shuttles can be arranged in Marathon for the Pukaskwa from Lake Superior Adventures. Anderson Fisheries may provide shuttles from the Dog or Pukaskwa Rivers back to Michipicoten Harbour.

Michipicoten Beach Finish. Photo credit: Mike Janiec

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WCA Governance Structure

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gary Ataman (Chair)	Pete Norton	Luigi Salerno	Thomas Connell	Christopher Mayberry	Sandro Weiner

- **Outings –** Bill Ness, Mary Perkins
- **Conservation** – Thomas Connell
- **Membership** – Emmy Hendrickx
- **Communications** – Luigi Salerno
- **YouTube –** Matt Eberly
- **Instagram –** Sandro Weiner
- **eNastawgan** – B. Wylie, Sue Wi-Afedzi, Dave Robinson
- **Facebook**
- **MeetUp**

- **Secretary** – Pete Norton
- **Treasurer –** Barb Young
- **Webmaster –** Jeff Haymer
- **Map Library –** Gary James
- **Nastawgan –** Aleks Gusev

CCR – President Rick Sabourin, Treasurer/Advertising Barb Young, Directors: Matt Eberly, Martin Heppner. Webmaster Matt Eberly, Membership Dave Young

WCA Postal Address
12 Erindale Crescent
Brampton, ON, Canada
L6W 1B5

http://www.wildernesscanoe.ca