

Exploring the Garner River System of Ontario's Woodland Caribou Provincial Park

By Jerry Ameis July, 2010

Entering Woodland Caribou Park (WCP) from car-access points in Manitoba involves at least one day of canoeing. There are three major access points. You can start at Tulabi or Davidson Lake and canoe up the Bird River system to the north shore of Eagle Lake. The north shore is the southern boundary of WCP. It takes two to three days to reach WCP this way. You can start at Wallace Lake and go upstream on the Wanipigow River. It takes one day to reach WCP. You can start at Wallace Lake and use the infamous "Three Mothers" portage to Obukowin Lake (in Manitoba's Atikai Wilderness Park) to enter WCP. This takes two days. Or, you can start at Beresford Lake (in Nopiming Park) and go upstream on the Garner River to Garner Lake to enter WCP. This takes one day.

In July 2010, six Nature Manitoba canoeists entered WCP by starting at Beresford Lake. The Garner River downstream from Garner Lake meanders through marshy country until you get close to the lake. There are no portages. Motorboat traffic from Beresford Lake discourages beavers from building dams. The journey is relaxing if you like to paddle back-and-forth in a wandering stream. In high water years (like 2010), the current is quite fast.

When we reached Garner Lake, the strong wind was blowing from the west and we were heading east. We wind surfed eastward along the north shore of the lake to a point where we had to go southeast to reach our campsite at the southeast corner of Garner Lake. The site is a beach just into Ontario and WCP. We had to island hop at an angle to the waves to reach the beach. As we island-hopped, occasional waves broke over the stern of our canoes. The good news about this is that water provides ballast. The bad news is that the ballast shifts as the canoe sways in the waves. Squall rains added to the ballast.

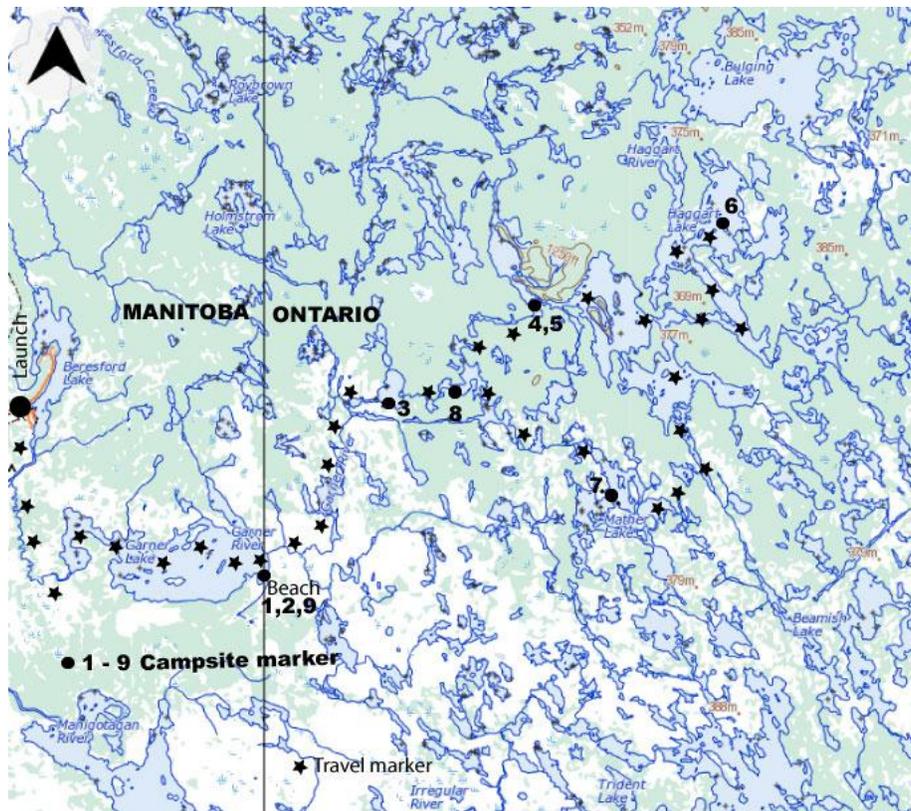
Somewhat wet, we flew onto the beach, glad to get away from the waves. The area inland from the beach has room for many tents. It is flat ground with a small number of trees interrupting the open spaces here and there. The place is a favourite spot for weekend camping and fishing by motorboat folks. Some of them respect the wilderness; some do not. This means that a clean up of such things as broken beer bottles is sometimes needed. It can also mean sharing the place with boisterous "party animals". Luckily, we were the only ones there.



The next day the wind was still roaring from the west. The entrance to WCP is at a 300-metre portage where the Garner River flows into the lake. To reach the portage, we would have had to paddle about one kilometre north from our campsite. Paddling north meant running in the troughs of the waves, not a wise thing to do. So we stayed for another night at the beach. There is a high ridge behind the beach dense with luxurious trees and undergrowth. It is a good place to explore when wind bound, and explore some of us did. If you are wondering why the three explorers in the picture are covered from head to toe, the answer lies in the number of black flies looking for nourishment. My suspicion is that all of the black flies west of the beach had been blown to the beach area by the strong west wind.



The next day we left for WCP and our exploration of the Garner system (see map) that would last ten days. Three of us were over the tender age of 60. One of us (my son) was still full of the vigour of youth. The other two were around 50 (kind of getting on in years). Many portages, and hopefully interesting adventures and sights, awaited us.



We hung a cache near the portage. The cache contained food and fuel for when we returned to the beach on our way back to Beresford. It makes good sense not to carry supplies there and back again, when back is where they are needed.

The Garner River upstream from the lake is a small marvelous river with very little meandering. There are numerous picturesque rapids and falls. Water levels were very high, greatly increasing the speed of the current and the paddling energy needed to counter it. Nine portages later, the longest being 825 m, we stopped for the night at a north-facing point in a pond lake.



Our first adventure happened the next day. Two paddlers had rented a canoe. The only one available was rather long. Eighteen feet of canoe do not always cooperate in a narrow stream. A short distance upstream from a 100-metre portage, the canoe became stuck at a bend in the river, wedged between rocks and held in place by the current. As luck would have it, no one in the other canoes could reach a camera to take a picture of our waist deep water-walking, cursing voyageurs as they struggled to extract themselves from their predicament.

Five portages later, we reached Haggart Lake, a deep large and multi-branched lake. We stayed two nights at a campsite on a point guarding the entrance to a small bay that ended at the portage from which we had emerged when leaving the Garner system. The campsite is at a crossroads. It is two days journey from Wallace Lake where I usually start my trips into WCP. As I paddled my way deeper into WCP, I have passed by the site many times, but never stopped for the night.

We explored the southwest corner of the lake, looking for interesting features. We found a magical granite rock face splashed with a mosaic of lichen and moss colours. The wildlife stayed out of sight but a moose (or perhaps a sasquatch) visited us during our last night.

Breaking camp, we paddled three hours to the northeast corner of Haggart and stopped on an unusual island in the large bay there. The island is best understood as two islands joined by an isthmus of tree-dotted sand about 70 metres long and 10 to 30 metres wide. There is a beach on either side of the isthmus, with the water depth increasing dramatically not far from the edge of the isthmus. The island had a well-travelled animal trail from its north tip to its south tip. The tips are fairly close to the



mainland. The island maybe a convenient crossing place for animals wanting to stay almost dry as they wander from the northern to the southern part of the large bay.

The campsite is “luxurious” with room for a number of tents. It would have been even nicer except that most of the beach area was underwater because the water level in the lake was about one metre higher than normal, . We spotted loons, eagles, and squirrels and lots of droppings but not their former owners.

The morning of our sixth night in WCP, we began our return journey. We retraced our now-vanished paddle swirls to a point in the large middle bay and then headed south towards a small lake the Haggart River system. We were looking for the 300 m portage that would take us out of the Haggart into the Garner system. The portage was tricky to locate because it goes sharply uphill alongside a tiny creek. The unusually high water in the creek spilled over onto the trail in many places, hiding signs of it.

Three portages later, we were in Mather Lake, the headwater lake of the Garner system. Mather can be confusing to navigate. It has many islands separated by narrow channels. We had difficulty finding a campsite because a forest fire had swept the area perhaps 15 years ago. The new tree growth is dense and covers likely campsites. We finally found a sloping rocky point that, with some work, was barely adequate.



The beginning of the Garner River was waiting for us the next day. It starts as a narrow rock-filled channel with no portage. Water walking was needed. Gradually the river widened. The swift current propelled our canoes happily downstream.



We stopped for the night on an island in a narrow channel of a small lake. The site seemed to be a popular place to stop for lunch or the night. It was roomy, low to the water, full of blueberries, and had many tent sites.

A snapping turtle visited us during a rainy spell to gawk at the strange beings roaming the shore.

The next day we did a major push to reach the beach campsite. Portages are always easier going downhill. The river had dropped about half a metre since the time we had travelled upstream. Some of the portage landings were now friendlier. We were also able to water walk through one of the rapids, saving us the trouble of unloading and loading the canoes. The level of Garner Lake has also dropped, exposing more beach. The chili con carne supper and the pancake breakfast in the cache were untouched by animal or human mouths. We enjoyed the setting sun and the garter snake that slithered along the beach edge.



Next morning the wind was kind to us as we headed towards Beresford and our cars. We met two boatloads of party-minded people coming upriver as we paddled downstream. The beach was likely going to be a noisy beer-splashed place that evening.

What wildlife did we see? No moose, no caribou, no wolves, no bears but eagles, loons, owls, unknown birds, turtles, and garter snakes. Three canoes moving through the wilderness are just too noisy for any self-respecting large mammal. It wants away from there. We did come across bear and wolf scat, and moose and caribou droppings at campsites and on portage trails. The companionship and laughter of the paddlers, and the beauty of Woodland Caribou Park more than made up for what we didn't see.