

Eastward 45 years later



July 2012
Woodland Caribou trip
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About 45 years ago I was canoeing with three buddies in what is now known as Woodland Caribou Park. Back then, the area was not a park. It was wide open to fishing lodges and those wanting to buy a piece of Canada's wilderness. The cabins on Donald Lake are a remnant of those times. Some lodge owners resented canoeists spoiling the "wilderness experience" of their guests. One particularly notorious owner operated a lodge in Carroll Lake. He would intercept canoeists, tell them that canoeing was illegal on the lake, and sometimes tried to scare them away with his motorboat.

We were traveling north from Mexican Hat, on the way to Wallace Lake. As we paddled towards the west end of Glen Lake we could see a channel to the east. One of us commented that we could probably get to Red Lake if we went that way. We never tried. The logistics of car shuttling from Winnipeg and insufficient holiday time made it difficult to pursue that dream until July 2012. With a recent canoeing partner, Les, we made a 14-day plan. It involved starting at Leano, and going to Jake, Paull, Aegean, Wrist, Adventure, Roustol, Hansen, Glen, Optic, Telescope, Onnie and ending at Johnson.

But twas the season of forest fires. A large fire near Adventure forced WCP staff to close access to the area. There also was a fire just south of channel from Leano to Bunny. For a while it seemed we would have to abandon our plan. Luckily the Leano fire was small and extinguished with the help of light rain. The only modification we had to make was that Wrist became the furthest point west before heading north to the Gammon system. Some sections of the plan were new to me: the Bunny-Lunch way to Jake, the portages from Wrist to Hansen, and of course the entire way from Glen to Johnson.

A pleasant afternoon in late July found us bouncing along in a big 4WD truck getting a taxi ride to Leano from Johnson where I had left my car. The new system of dealing with water crossings of the road should intrigue environmentalists. It sort of involves returning the land to its natural state. Logging has stopped in the area. As part of vacating the area, the logging company removed the culverts and replaced them with rock-filled dips over which water can flow across the road. These "natural" depressions are hazardous. A vehicle needs high ground clearance if it wants to enter and emerge from a dip without hanging up or tearing out its bottom on the nicely pointed rocks.

The taxi left us with our pile of gear at the head of the 300 m access trail to Leano. Before leaving, the driver remarked whether we had enough food for two weeks. He had noticed our rather small food pack. We explained the miracle of dehydrators and the like. Each home-prepared supper meal was about a fistful in volume. It consisted of dehydrated hamburger meat, dehydrated vegetables, and rice or lentils or pasta. Each supper was pre-spiced with curry, or masala, or Italian spice and garlic. The same approach was used for breakfast which consisted of oats, dried fruit, and powdered skim milk with cinnamon or Splenda sugar as an enhancer. Lunch was a personal choice and typically consisted of dark chocolate, trail mix, cheese, rye crisp, granola bars, and dried fruit. Our entire food supply weighed about 13 kilograms and did not take up much space. We assured the taxi driver that us old fogeys would not starve.

We camped on the much-used island site in Leano for the evening. It is a cozy spot - well sheltered and large enough for a bit of wandering around. Next day we headed to Jake, following the creek that eventually spills into Mexican Hat down a steep waterfall. It is a picturesque route and much used, judging by the well-worn portage trails.



We camped in Jake at the south end of the narrows that are just north of the 40 metre portage into the lake. The spot resembles a popular picnic ground. Because our trip was shortened due to the fire at Adventure, we had time to dally. We stayed at Jake for 2 nights. Les fished and I roamed and meditated. Les broke his fishing rod on a cast (alas, not on a big fish). It went sailing into the lake. No big loss because his fishing success was minimal at best. He did manage to retrieve most of the line, the reel, and the rod part.

On day 4 we headed to Paull Lake and the headwaters of the Bird River, one of my favourite rivers that I have paddled many times over the last 45 years. In my younger days, it was one of three pathways into what is now Ontario's Woodland Caribou Park and Manitoba's Atikaki Provincial Wilderness Park. The Woodland & Atikaki region offers a myriad of canoeing options. To reach it, we would begin our journey at Tulabi Lake (lower end of the Bird River system) or at Wallace Lake (near the start of Wanipigow system). The Bird River pathway had minimal options until Eagle Lake, from where you could portage west to the Manigatogan River system or head north into the

Woodland country. The Manigatogan was not a sensible choice because its upper reaches were shallow and choked with deadfall and windfall - not a pleasant place to canoe. The issue with using the Bird to reach the Woodland area is that it took at least 2 days of travel to get to what is now the southern boundary of WCP. It took 2 days back as well. Because of limited holiday time, this left only about 4 to 5 days to explore the area. Eventually, Wallace Lake became the preferred entry point into the Woodland & Atikaki region. It took only one day of travel to reach it. We used either the Wanipigow River to get to Crystal and beyond or the infamous "3 mothers" Obukowin portage to get to Carroll Lake and beyond.

Returning to the present, the 425 m portage from the extreme south end of Jake into the Bird system is tricky to find. It begins on raised sloping rock shelf and is marked by a small rock cairn. It is not obvious to spot unless you are almost on top of it. After portaging over a bulging height of land, the start of the Bird awaits. The start is likely the small trickle of water at the 60 m portage into Paull - a somewhat unimpressive beginning for a marvelous little river.

Paull Lake, the headwater lake of the Bird system, is a junction point between the Sturgeon River system, a northeast branch of the English River, and the Gammon River system, a major branch of the Bloodvein. The waters of the Sturgeon are a short portage distance from Paull while the Gammon system is a day's journey away. If you canoe the Bird downstream to its end, it would take you about 6 days to reach the Winnipeg River. Paull would have been at least a minor destination when Aboriginal peoples were the sole human visitors in the area. I am aware of stories of an ancient Aboriginal campsite near where the Bird enters Eagle Lake. I have looked for the site only briefly and, not surprisingly, did not find it.

As we paddled close to our camp spot on Paull (the island with a peninsula point at its west end), we passed near a gull nesting islet. The gulls did not appreciate our presence. They dive bombed us relentlessly, sometimes zooming close enough to give us a wind haircut. Les waved his paddle around in the air to try to thwart their bombing runs while I paddled with vigour to get us away from them. Not only did they try to give us unwanted haircuts, they also released sloppy white splatter bombs at us from their rear bomb bays. Luckily they were not good at vector physics.

We camped at the west end of Paull for 2 nights. Again I roamed and meditated while Les tried to fish with fishing equipment that did not have a handle. As you might guess, his efforts went unrewarded.

We left for Aegean on day 6. We saw our first clear sign of the presence of large mammals at the start of the 300 m portage downstream from Paull. There were fresh wolf tracks in the mud - so fresh that water was still seeping into the depression. My guess is that a wolf had been there perhaps 5 minutes earlier. When it heard or smelled us coming, it melted into the forest. Further along the trail there were more tracks and recent scat. I suspect animals appreciate portage trails as much as canoeists do.

I suppose that many of the trails along and between waterways were originally made by animals. I imagine they prefer easier walking as much as we do. Aboriginal peoples would have found and improved the trails. When I first canoed in the Woodland & Atikaki region years ago a few of the portages looked like animal trails. In later years, I found improved versions of them that had to be the work of canoeists and others. Animals can't afford axes and saws.



When we got to South Aegean, I became momentarily disoriented. I missed the channel between the large island and the northern peninsula. Instead of heading west through the channel, I had headed southerly. It didn't take long before I realized that reality and the map did not correspond. We decided to stop for lunch on a shady rock shelf and sort the matter out. I am of the old school - no GPS to light the way. I navigate by map and sun, occasionally using a compass when making a heading decision across a large open expanse of water. I have never been confused to the point of being lost using these basic navigation tools. Momentary confusion rarely happened on a trip, but, I must confess that now it happens a bit more as I get older.

The confusion was sorted out, and after lunch, we paddled around the bottom of the big island and then headed north. The last time I was here was about 40 years ago. We had come up the Bird to explore the country north of Eagle Lake. The land has changed. Back then, there was an old growth forest embracing the rocky outcrops and shorelines of South Aegean. Now there was new growth forest reclaiming the land. The massive cliff on the southwest end of the large island was still there though eroding and depositing substantial chunks of granite at its base. Glad I had become momentarily disoriented or I would have missed revisiting that grand and memorable sight.

I restored my partner's faith in my navigation skills as I wiggled our way through the tangle of small islands guarding the north end of South Aegean and the portage to Aegean. There used to be an enormous tree growing close to the start of the trail. It was now in its death throes. The top had snapped off and was cluttering the trail area. The trunk was decaying. One should not mourn such losses. Rather one should marvel at and enjoy what is there and understand that it cannot last for eternity. The natural state of the universe is to change what is - a viewpoint that our species seems to have a difficult time adjusting to and appreciating.

We camped at a rarely used spot at the southern tip of the large island lying at the northwest end of Aegean. We stayed 2 nights. Again I roamed and meditated. My roaming included a large blueberry field that was on high ground above our campsite. We did look for signs of bear because bears and blueberries go together like paddles and canoes. No signs except for quite old scat. Les decided that it was time to do handicraft work. He found a suitable branch and whittled a reasonable facsimile of a fishing rod handle. He attached the reel and remainder of the rod to it using parachute cord. The result was superb field-crafted fishing equipment that worked. He was back in the fish business and with success, catching a couple of small northens from shore.



On day 8, we left for Wrist Lake, only about 4 hours travel away. We found a glorious camp spot on a small island close to the northeast shore. It had a "beach" of very flat smooth granite shelving on three sides with easy entry into the lake. The only issue was wasps. The island had an unusual number of them investigating us as they searched for suitable food. We stayed 2 nights, the last time we double stayed at a camp spot.

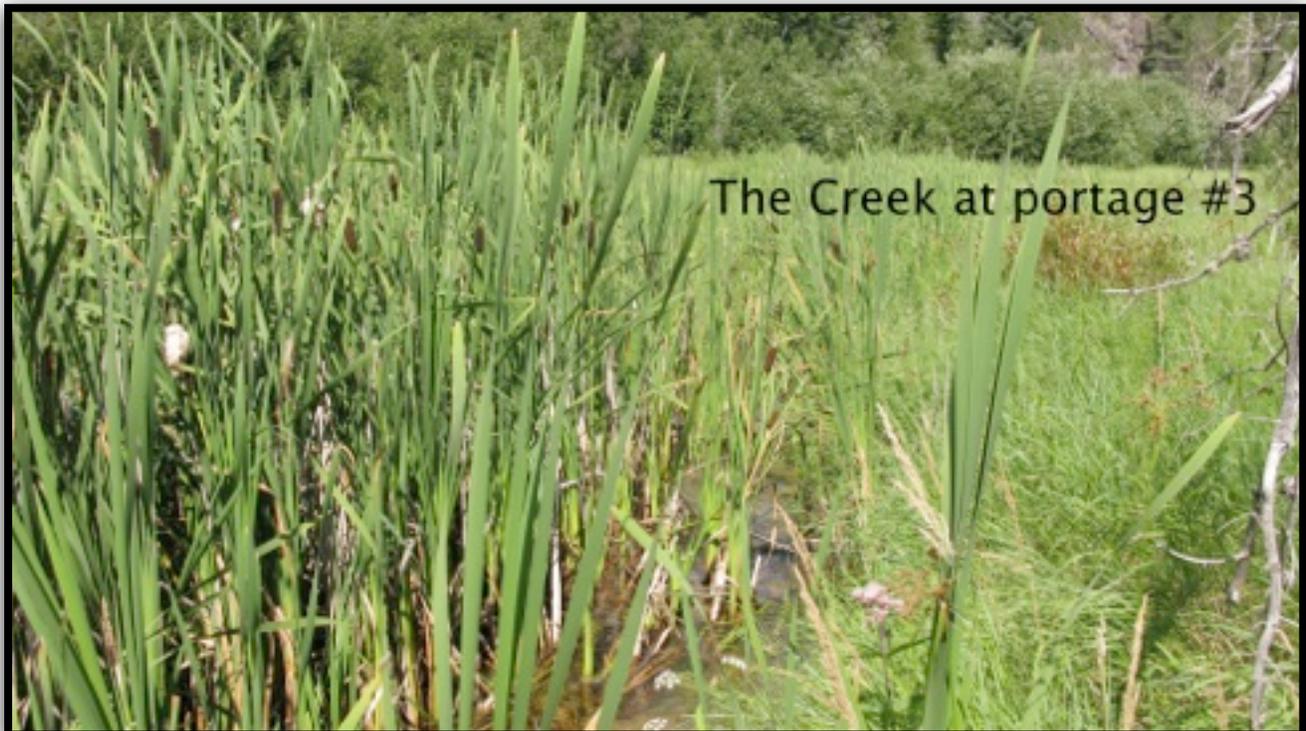
Our stay this time could have had serious consequences. I typically craft a special stick to use for hauling the food pack up a tree. I was doing that in the approved safety manner when my knife slipped down the stick. That should not have been trouble, but as the blade moved away from me, it bumped into a large knot on the stick. The knife flipped over and rebounded upwards, slicing my middle knuckle. With a typical knife, the slice would not have been bad. However my knife is sharp as a surgical blade. The bleeding took 15 minutes to stop. We constructed a finger splint out of a plastic drink tablet tube. For the remainder of the trip I gave the middle finger salute to keep my finger straight to prevent the cut from reopening. Fortunately the bleeding stopped except for occasional seepage and the wound did not become infected.

On day 10 we left for Hansen and the path east to Johnson and my car. There are 4 portages from Wrist to Hansen. The 625 m portage out of Wrist is mostly flat through an enchanting forest. It ends at a steep sandy drop into a wonderful little lake. The fun began at portage # 2 - the 90 m one. I am seriously and extremely allergic to poison ivy. If I contact it, large bubbles form a day later that itch "like crazy" and that often become infected. I can tell you every place I have canoed where poison ivy exists (it makes an occasional appearance in Shield country). The portages from Wrist to Hansen were new to me. I was careless and did not notice poison ivy growing alongside the trail until it was too late - contact with my pants and boots had been made. At the end of the trail, I carefully took off my pants and boots and threw them in the lake after rinsing off my legs and leaving them in the water away from where I washed my pants and boots. After repeated washings of my pants, I wrung out as much water as I could and drained my boots. I glanced at my legs. They were covered with hundreds of tiny leaches. I was bathing in a leach nursery. I was still scrapping off the critters when we reached the other side of the pond where the third portage was supposed to be.

After I putting on my moist pants and boots, we searched for the portage. No sign of it. A wee creek drained the pond we were in. We carried our canoe and gear a short distance along a marshy shoreline to reach hopefully deep enough creek water. It was barely adequate. A 70 metre push and paddle journey ended at an old abandoned beaver dam and a cliff. There we found the missing trail although its beginning was still a mystery. The trail went across the dam and down a big drop in the terrain and then stopped abruptly.



At this point the tiny creek continued through a marsh. The creek was about 50 cm wide and 20 cm deep with rocks scattered here and there below the surface. It was push and pull the canoe while wading in the marsh. All we could see horizontally was reeds and a sliver of a watery path. Eventually the creek was deep enough for us to get into the canoe and pole our way out to open water. Any one traveling from Hansen to Wrist would wonder how to continue when arriving at the creek's exit. The way seems closed because the shoreline is swampy, consisting of a thick bed of reeds broken only by a very narrow opening where the creek flows into the open water.



We wondered about the fourth portage after experiencing portage #3. The WCP map indicates that the creek can be poled when water levels are high enough. Otherwise you do the 500 m portage. We decided to gamble and headed for the creek. After all, it could not be worse than the section we had already traversed. The dice rolled in our favour; the creek was better than before. We did not have to wade in water. We could pole and paddle, only having to get out at a couple of low beaver dams on which we could stand as we pulled the loaded canoe across and then scrambled back on board.

It had taken much longer than anticipated to get from Wrist to Hansen. It was time to search for a camp spot. We found a reasonable one on a small island that was across from a fly-in fishing cabin. The night brought serious weather. A powerful thunderstorm parade began in the late evening and lasted into the morning. Wave after wave of storms hit us, lighting the sky with arcs of static electricity while depositing bathtubs of water. The intense drenching weather lasted 14 hours. A good thing our tents were in sheltered spots and waterproof. After a thankfully dry breakfast, We headed east late in the morning of day 11.



The evening and night of day 12 was eventful. We were camped on a peninsula on Optic Lake. Our two small tents were separated by an open area. We should have suspected interesting times because of the well-trodden path that led into the interior and the moose visitor that came ashore after supper not far from us. I slept through the entire spectacular show. Les did not. He awoke at midnight to the sounds of the moose stomp. A big male was nervously stomping his feet in the vacant area between our tents. The dance lasted several minutes. Needless to say, Les wondered if he would become its dance partner. The male then bulldozed his way to the lake and swam away. An hour later, the stomp repeated but this time with a female moose. Les again experienced the joy of wondering if he would become a dance partner. Luckily neither moose wanted him on its dance card. In the morning we examined our location in Sherlock Holmes fashion, and concluded that we were camped at a convenient animal lake crossing point.



On day 13 we headed towards Telescope Lake. The plan was to camp there or at Onnie if no campsite was found at Telescope. The winds were blowing hard from the west as we left the western end of Telescope. So hard that as we paddled eastward, we were mostly surfing. We could not stray from our eastward path because of the wind. Canoeing in the troughs would surely have led to an undesirable dip in the lake. No campsite located; we ended up at the east end of Telescope. It took us an hour to travel the 9 km length of the lake; not sure if this is a world record.

We could not find a vacant (unoccupied and suitable) campsite on Onnie Lake so we kept on going to Johnson and the car. That day we paddled 30 km and did 10 portages. Not bad for a pair of old fogeys. Red Lake and a motel were welcome that evening.



Next day we stopped at the Park office and chatted with Claire. It was the first time we had met each other although we had been communicating for years via email and phone. Then it was home to Winnipeg - a 6 to 7 hour drive. In retrospect, the eastward path from Glen to the Red Lake area was interesting, enjoyable, and satisfying. It fulfilled an old dream; something to be thankful for.

A note worthy of mention and of possible interest to canoeists.

On past long trips, I usually cooked on a rock stove bringing only a grate with me. This requires either finding an adequately constructed rock stove or building one. My constructions are elaborate - capable of heating two pots at a time and with warming areas. I leave the stove intact for the next traveler, partly to signal a camp site and partly out of courtesy. Howard Holtman and I are of similar mind on this matter. Lately I have been finding rock stoves wrecked or turned into fire rings, a rather pointless arrangement for cooking purposes. I am getting tired of rebuilding or building from scratch rock stoves. It takes much effort that seems less appealing as I gracefully age.

I tried out a new stove and cooking gear for the trip. I had already used it for a short trip and was quite pleased with its performance. It is Swedish in origin, going by the brand name 'Trangia'. The gear consists of a small alcohol burner, two non-stick pots, and a non-stick fry pan that doubles as a lid. Everything nests together into a pot-size bundle and weighs just under a kilogram (2+ lbs for American viewers). The picture below shows the cooking set up. Notice how stable it is and the vent holes in the bottom section. They allow air to enter to the burner which is located where the top and bottom sections join. The burner uses methyl hydrate (wood alcohol) and is wind proof. It requires about 1/2 litre of wood alcohol per person per week, a bit more if an abundance of coffee and tea is on the menu. The downside is that it takes longer to boil water (perhaps 20% longer) but why the hurry when canoeing. The burner does not make a sound (unlike the roar of jet engine stoves). If you ever had a fondue meal, you have a good idea of what the burner is like.

