

Going north to WCP to get south to Big Whiteshell Lake

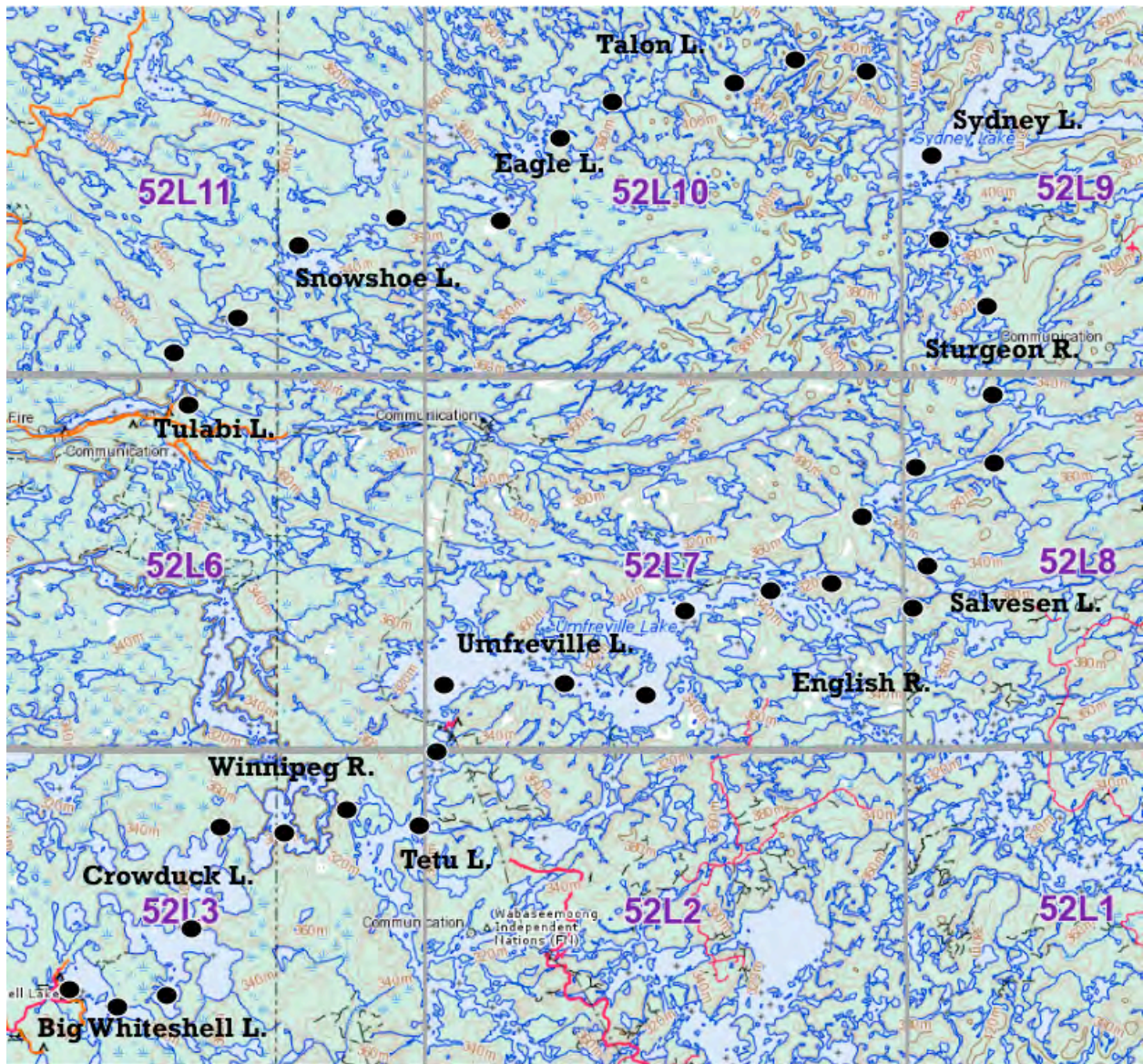
On most summer weekends the parking lot at Tulabi Lake Falls is jammed with deserted vehicles. The owners have abandoned them temporarily for a weekend of canoeing on the Tulabi to McGregor Lake canoe route. This four to six hour journey up the Bird River has become a popular weekend event for those seeking a pleasant - although often crowded - time in the Shield country of Manitoba. The small beach that lies at the bottom of a fairly steep path close to Tulabi Falls can also be a launching point to more distant destinations. The Bloodvein River and the Manigotagan River are some that come to mind. This is the story of a 1989 trip to one of those far destinations - Big Whiteshell Lake in Whiteshell Provincial Park. It is also the story of a trip that went north to get to a place well south of that small beach on Tulabi Lake.

This story is also a dedication to Don, a canoeing partner of mine for 15 years. He was the kind of partner you could trust with your life. I miss his energy and humour. He died a few years ago as a result of a heart attack.



[If the reader is wondering why avid canoeists would use a motor, the answer lies in time available. A few times we didn't have enough holiday days to travel as far as we wanted to go. When that was the case, we used a motor to take us from Tulabi to the far end of Snowshoe Lake (involves 6 portages with 3 of them quite short). We could easily do so in a day, saving us travel time. We stashed the motor and some food at the far end and continued our travels up the Bird to WCP country or other places.]

Don and I spent hours hunched over topographical maps in search of a way to reach Big Whiteshell Lake from Tulabi Lake. We could have planned to go south downstream on the Bird River to the Winnipeg River and then upstream on it to Crowduck Creek but that would have meant cottages, motorboats, and power dams for most of the trip. We wanted a wilderness adventure, not photo opportunities for the magazine, *'Better Boats and Cottages'*. The end result of our planning was an 8-day trip that would be about 280 kilometres long and that promised to have more portages than the number of digits on our feet and hands.



We packed all of our stuff, including a pile of laminated map sections, into two bulging packsacks. With only two packsacks, we were able to one-time walk the portages.

Ready at last, we left the small beach behind one glorious morning in early July of 1989. The first part of the trip (from Tulabi Lake to Eagle Lake) followed the Bird River upstream.

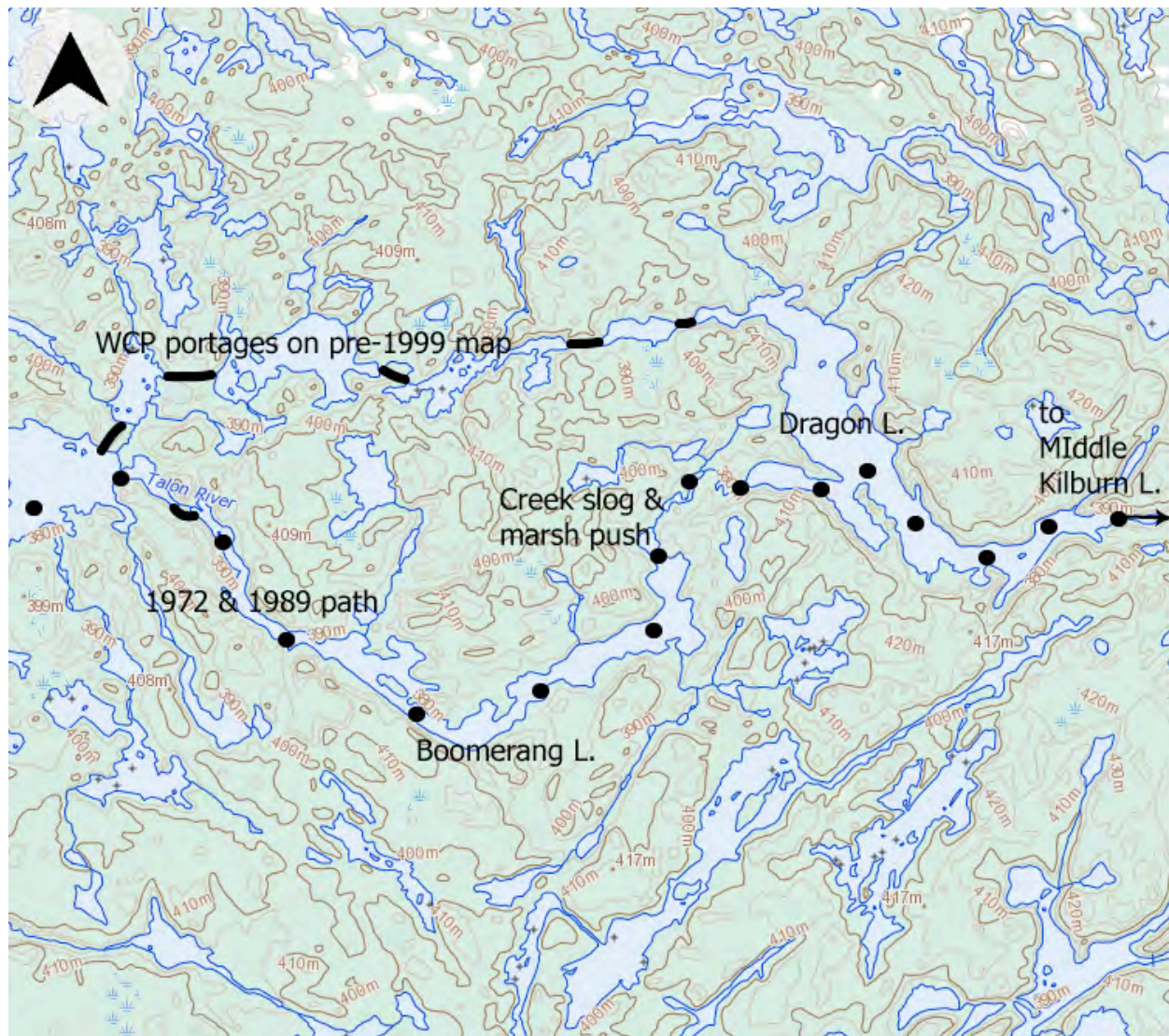


We had canoed this stretch a good number of times already but always found it interesting and refreshing. The Bird is a small picturesque river that sometimes meanders through swampy regions but more often it flows kind of "straight" through areas bordered by forest and rock outcrops. There are 12 portages/obstacles between Tulabi and Eagle with the longest one being 300 metres. A few of the rapids can be lined but that depends on water levels. The portages between Tulabi and McGregor were easy to locate and well trodden. After McGregor, portages were far less travelled. A special portage is the second one before Chase Lake. This portage crosses a small island in the Bird River and is a delightful place to linger and enjoy the ambience of speckled light and rushing water.

Thankfully, luck was with us on Elbow and Snowshoe lakes. The wind was a light breeze at our backs. These lakes can be trouble when there is a strong blowing in your face. It took us two days to reach Eagle Lake, a distance of about 70 km. We camped at the end of a long narrow peninsula across the bay from where the Bird River flowed into the lake. We also happened to be across from the southern boundary of WCP. [*As the reader can tell, we were moving along with good tempo, and this would increase as the days literally flew by. 280 km in 8 days means an average of 35 km per day (about 22 miles per day for American viewers).*]

We left early the third day a bit apprehensive about the section from Eagle to Kilburn Lake. I had canoed from Eagle to Kilburn in 1972 by way of the Talon River system. A forest fire had been through the area around Talon Lake in the early 80's. This made past portages and remembered ways suspect [*In 1972, portages were a rare find.*]. In retrospect, it was fortunate that we did not

have the pre-1999 WCP canoeing map to guide us. We only had topographical maps. The reason I say fortunate is because the pre-1999 WCP map shows a more difficult way to get from Talon to Kilburn Lake. The way I went in 1972 was not shown on the pre-1999 WCP map. Not having that map relieved us of the joy of becoming confused.



The Talon River is misnamed. It might better be called a creek but it does have character. As you get close to Talon Lake, from downstream, the river becomes sandy-bottomed and gives you the feeling that you can pan for gold in its clear shallow waters. The elevation difference between Eagle Lake and Talon Lake is about 25 metres, with most of this difference becoming evident on the steep 300-metre portage from the river up to Talon Lake. In 1989, the trail was rarely used and needed work. At the top of the portage we searched for my wife's wedding garter belt. My wife and I had canoed from Tulabi to Talon Lake and back in 1987. On a romantic whim, we had left her garter belt dangling from the branch of a young jack pine that was growing close to the portage trail. The belt was nowhere to be found in 1989. Something or someone with a similar sense of romance must have appreciated the belt as much as I did.

At the northern end of Talon Lake we headed upstream on the Talon River. One portage later we were in Boomerang Lake, a long narrow lake that looks like a boomerang. The Talon River from Boomerang to Dragon Lake required serious pushing and pulling. I did not find a portage in 1972 and did not find one this time. We slogged through the connecting creek and marsh. Alas, Don broke one of my cherished T-handled wide-bladed Clement paddles while pushing the loaded canoe through a swampy section. We left the handle sticking in the muck as a marker of our passage. We found a faint 600-metre (and then the 325-metre) portage out of Dragon Lake to Middle Kilburn Lake where it was supposed to be according to my 1972 memories. [*They looked more like animal trails in 1972.*] It's nice when this kind of thing happens in remote places. By early evening we were setting up our tent on an island in main Kilburn Lake.

A light rain and fog greeted us on the fourth morning. Because Don was not feeling well, we decided to stay in Kilburn an extra night. While he slept and rested, I spent the day exploring and fishing in the murky mist. The walleye seemed to appreciate the gloomy weather and came willingly to my lure. We had two fine fish for supper that evening.

Next morning the sunny weather returned. It was a good thing that Don was feeling much better because we had to make up for lost time. It was not long before we left Woodland Caribou Park and reached the wide expanse of Sydney Lake. Fortunately, there was little wind. I dread the thought of having to cross that lake on a day when an energetic wind is blowing. Somewhere near the middle of the four-kilometre crossing we almost bumped into a submerged rock. It was the same rock I had bumped into in 1972. [*Who would think that a rock could lurk just below the surface in the middle of such a large lake? We took a picture of one of us standing in the middle of the crossing of Sydney Lake in 1972 with no canoe around. It was a weird sight to see someone standing alone in the middle of a wide expanse of water. Unfortunately the picture was lost to mice in a barn.*]

The Sturgeon River drains Sydney Lake. It is similar to the Bird River in water volume but more tumultuous in nature. There are about a dozen waterfalls/rapids between the river's start at Sydney Lake and its end at Umfreville Lake. Only a few of these can be run. There is actually not a lot of river in the Sturgeon River system. Much of it consists of lakes with fairly short stretches of river between them. In 1972 and in 1989, we found a reasonable portage trail at each river obstacle. I suspect the proximity of the Sturgeon to the English River is the explanation. The Sturgeon offers an avenue into a lot of good fishing and canoeing country when coming from the south.

We made good time in the lengthy paddles between portages. Even so, it was a long tiring day before we stopped for the night in Salvesen Lake on a skinny island close to where the Sturgeon River flowed out of the lake. We had canoed almost two topographical maps worth of north to south distance that day. We had travelled about 50 km in doing so.

The sixth morning was an interesting adventure in fly avoidance. Sometime during the night or early morning, a swarm of flies had hatched. These were not houseflies but "ankle" flies - the kind of fly that stays with you in the canoe and bites any exposed flesh around the ankles. [*I think the proper name for this fly is stable fly. Apparently it breeds in decaying matter.*] We ate breakfast covered in flies. It was a good thing that they weren't hungry yet. They just sort of settled all over us. We didn't wait for them to develop an appetite and quickly bid a hasty farewell to what was otherwise a good campsite.

An hour and a half later, we reached Umfreville Lake and the English River system. The lake used to be three lakes before the hydro dam at Caribou Falls backed up the water and flooded the area. Now the lake is one vast body of water that covers an entire east to west span of a 1:50 000 topographical map. We had to travel the length of Umfreville to reach the English River below the dam. Had there been a west wind, we would have had at least a two-day adventure crossing the lake. Instead of canoeing through waves, we canoed across the surface of huge mirror. The day was sweltering hot and there was no cloud cover. Hyperthermia, not hypothermia, was the issue. We had to jump in the water about every half-hour to cool down. It took all day to cross Umfreville. We stopped for the night on an island that was close to a road-access campground. After supper, we couldn't resist the urge to mingle with the tourists and mooch a cold beer or two. It seemed rather fair to trade stories for beer. After all, the tourists were quite curious about the two frazzled sun-burnt unshaven voyageurs that paddled towards them.

[In my 1972 trip, we went north from Umfreville to Werner Lake instead of going south down the English River. There was a mine at Werner (now closed). To get to the mine you could travel the Bird Lake road to the Ontario border and then continue to Werner (nowadays, it is forbidden to travel the Ontario part of the road). From Werner, we travelled west to Tulabi Lake by hitching a ride on a mining truck that happened to be going our way. Without that ride we would had a interesting gruesome journey along a tiny creek system to reach Tulabi.]

The next morning we portaged around the dam on the west side. Portaging was fairly simple but great care had to be taken launching the canoe into the powerful and treacherous current below the dam. We were now in big river country. Paddling was relaxing - it was downhill to where the English River met the Winnipeg River and then downhill some more on it. We camped on an island in the Winnipeg River, setting up our tent well away from the shoreline. We had heard stories about sudden changes in water levels on that river.

We were blessed with more fine weather the next day - our last day of the trip. Canoeing this part of the Winnipeg River was relatively easy. South Boundary Falls lay ahead but when we got there the falls turned out to be an easy rapid that we ran. By early afternoon, we reached Crowduck Creek. It is navigable with one portage at the falls just before Crowduck Lake. We soon came to the unscientific conclusion that this creek had to be the deerfly capital of Manitoba. We were dive bombed by hordes of these pesky flies until we reached Crowduck Lake.

Crossing Crowduck can be tricky when the wind is blowing. Again, luck was with us - hardly a breeze stirred the air. A few hours later, we reached the last and longest portage of the trip - the 800-metre portage to Big Whiteshell Lake in Whiteshell Provincial Park. This portage is one of those rare Shield country places that I dread. There is an abundance of poison ivy along the trail and I am severely allergic to it.

Culture shock awaited us on the other side of the trail. Boats and more boats churned the waters of Big Whiteshell. We crossed the lake to the provincial campground and found the car that had been left for us by our wives. After a quick phone call to confirm our safe arrival, we were on our way down the road to find supper and then home. It had been a marvelous trip - one that I would gladly do again but next time in ten days instead of eight. *[We actually had only 7 days of travel time. This meant that we canoed an average of 40 kilometres per day.]*