

## **21 Days in Woodland Caribou Provincial Park**



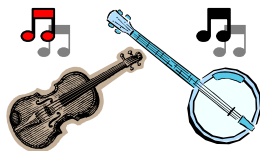
### **Trip Journal w/ New Canoe Route Description: Dunstan to Carroll Lake via Walking Stick !**

Tyler Rudolph & Jacynthe Guimond  
a.k.a. "Team Guidolph"!

Dec. 25<sup>th</sup> 2008

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**Figure 1.1 :** Our trip in a Nutshell. Left map is of Nopiming Provincial Park in Manitoba, with Woodland Caribou Provincial Park on the right.

## INTRODUCTION

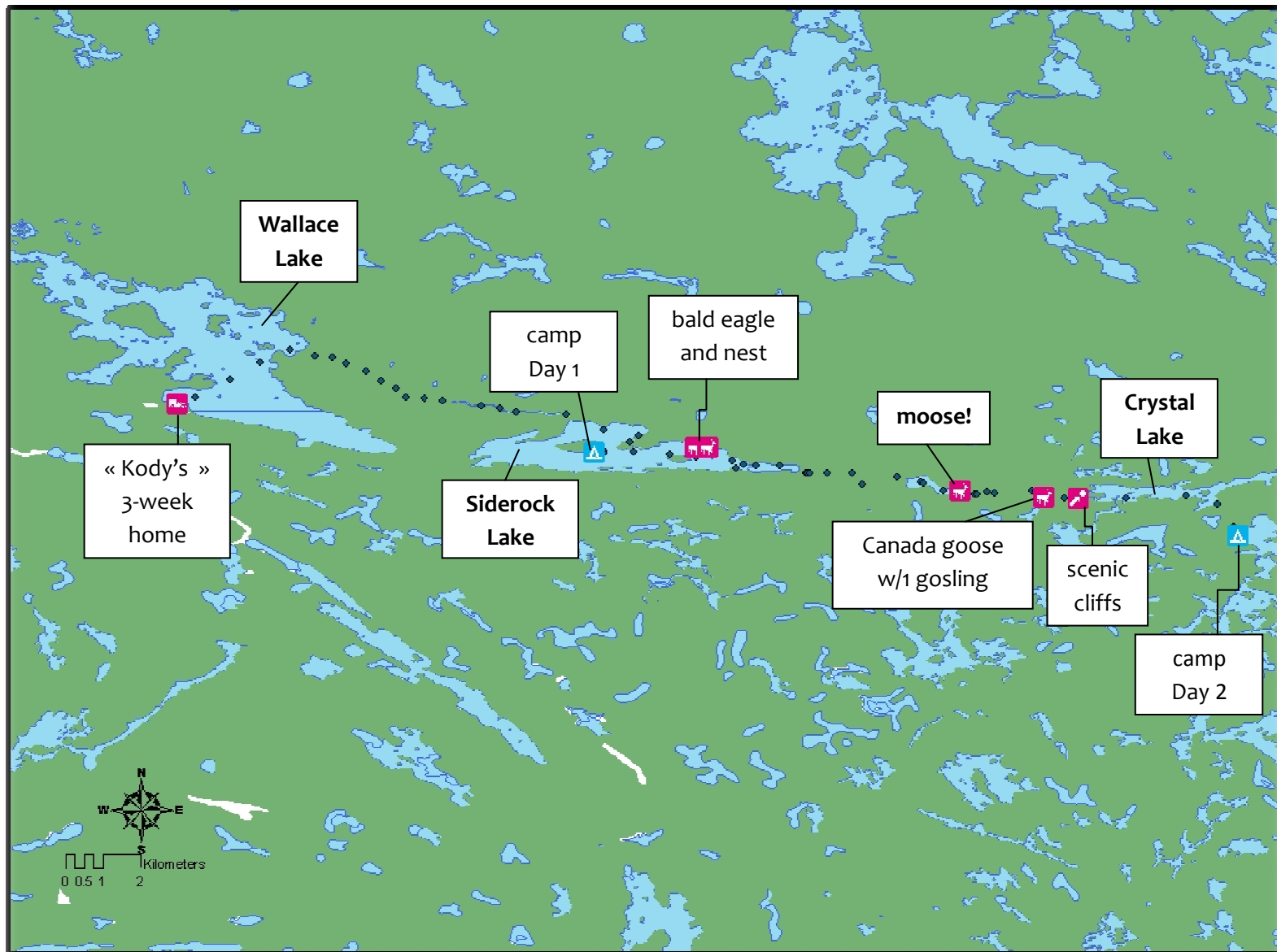
This report documents a 21-day canoe trip into Woodland Caribou Provincial Park from the Wallace Lake access point in Manitoba undertaken by Tyler Rudolph and Jacynthe Guimond in July of 2008. Emphasis is placed on a previously undocumented canoe route from North Dunstan Lake to Carroll Lake via Walking Stick Lake. It consists of a 21-day trip journal containing reference maps throughout, followed by detailed portage and campsite descriptions within the heretofore undocumented area of interest. Along with wildlife sightings and other observations made throughout the trip, the report offers new information on recreation features and opportunities along the proposed new route.

### Itinerary & Route Description

Day	Date	Location
1	Jul-08	Siderock
2	Jul-09	S. of Crystal
3	Jul-10	E. of Haggart
4	Jul-11	S. of Welkin
5	Jul-12	Aegean
6	Jul-13	Jigsaw
7	Jul-14	Adventure
8	Jul-15	Bulging
9	Jul-16	Haggart River
10	Jul-17	N. of Carroll
11	Jul-18	Wanda
12	<b>Jul-19</b>	<b>Dunstan</b>
13	<b>Jul-20</b>	<b>Dinosaur Rock</b>
14	<b>Jul-21</b>	<b>Dinosaur Rock</b>
15	<b>Jul-22</b>	<b>UN W. of Dinosaur Rock</b>
16	<b>Jul-23</b>	<b>Walking Stick (N "handle")</b>
17	<b>Jul-24</b>	<b>Walking Stick (S "handle")</b>
18	<b>Jul-25</b>	<b>Carroll</b>
19	Jul-26	Carroll
20	Jul-27	Siderock
21	Jul-28	Winnipeg

Our route consisted of a loop which began and ended at the Wallace Lake Provincial Recreation Park, located between Nopiming and Atikaki Provincial Parks off Highway 304 East of Bissett, Manitoba. We entered the park via the Wanipigow River into Crystal Lake and exited via Carroll and the 5 km of portages which connect Obukowin to Siderock Lakes. Our first 10 days were spent exploring the southern part of the park, after which we crossed Carroll Lake via the Haggart River and paddled up into the central zone at Dunstan Lake, at which point we scouted and marked a previously undocumented route to Walking Stick Lake, descending the Walking Stick River into Carroll Lake and our ultimate point of egress.

Figure 1.2 : Days 1 & 2



## 1.0 TRIP JOURNAL

### Day One: Winnipeg to Siderock

Our 3.5-hour drive up from Winnipeg blessed with sightings of deer, a young black bear and a very long-legged wolf, we stop into Blue Water Aviation on Highway 11 to purchase our Ontario fishing licenses. We continue up Highway 304 through intermittent downpours to reach the Wallace Lake Provincial Recreation Park by mid-afternoon, unloading the truck and making last-minute packing decisions. We discover one of the thwarts is coming loose and we take the opportunity to tighten all the screws holding the wooden gunwales to the Royalex hull of my 16' Nova Craft Prospector canoe, fondly known as "The Velociraptor". After leaving a note with the campground hosts and saying goodbye to my trustworthy pick-up Kody, we cross the waters of Wallace Lake to grey skies, light rain and cool winds. This being a high-water year, we have no problem paddling up the Wanipigow River. After a short spell of rain to wake us into shape, the skies open and it is relatively mild for a spell as we enter Siderock Lake, our final destination for the day. After some scouting we settle on an island site with a great view, though we fail to finish dinner in time to avoid the swarms of blood-sucking mosquitoes. We find out later it has been a record year for bugs in Ontario and to this we can certainly attest! In our attempt to ration oil we end up with one very burnt frying pan and two slightly undercooked mushroom-swiss burgers that leave a bad feeling in our bellies. Yeeuck!

### Day 2: Siderock to S.E. Crystal

Having woken to thundering rains and skies as dark as the night, we pack up between showers and head toward the river's inlet around 10am, spotting a bald eagle not far from its nest along the north shore of Siderock. We continue up the Wanipigow and have an intimate encounter with a cow moose at the east end of the small lake leading upriver into Ontario. The clouds make room for the sun as we approach the border of Woodland Caribou Park, which to me is a sight for sore eyes! The park has made considerable efforts to erect heavy-duty boundary markers throughout its border waters, and I think back with pride on the one I helped build on Artery Lake in 2004 with former Ontario Park Warden Daniel Bartol. I am impressed with the beauty of this river, which is frequently lined with cliff walls and seems to abound with wildlife. We cross paths with a garter snake along a portage and Jacynthe spots two muskrats in the shallows. Around another corner we surprise a "wild" Canada Goose with two young, who are quick to fly ahead of us and thereafter keep their distance. We tolerate deer flies in

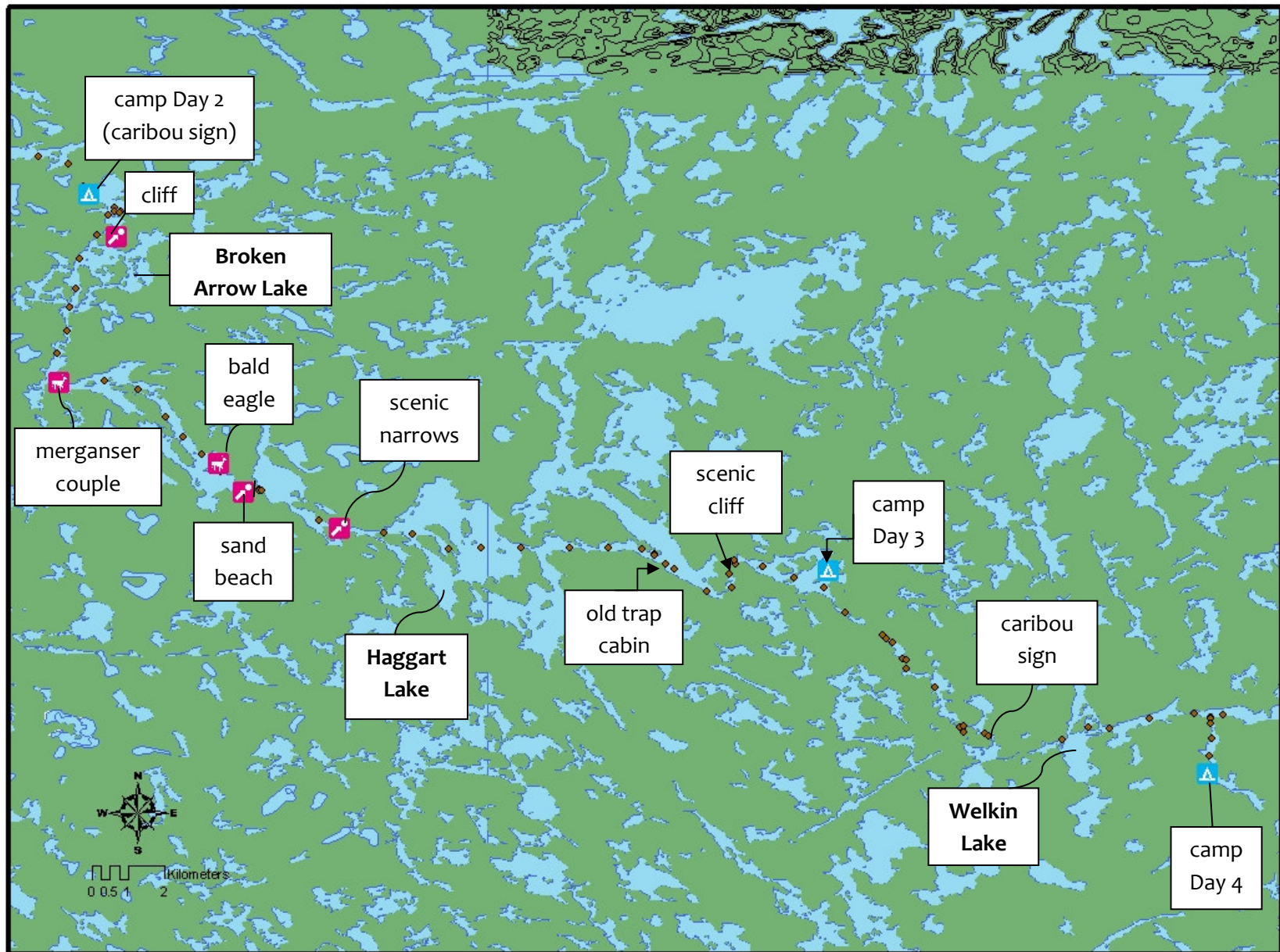


modest swarms and in marshy country we delight in the solace of numerous blue-green dragonflies with black tips on their wings. The weather continually plays tricks on us with heavy showers one minute and sunny skies the next, although high water levels allow us to tramp or line through several of the smaller portages. Our last 300-metre portage into Crystal is particularly impressive as it lines a small canyon of smooth sloping rock and ends with a postcard-perfect lunch spot. I can see we are entering caribou country as the wetlands of the Wanipigow make room for dry, rocky uplands peppered with outcrops of ground lichens so loved by these threatened animals, our “friends of the forest”. Crystal is charming in the light of late day but as we were forced to delay our original departure date we decide to forge on over the 925m portage south which leads to Broken Arrow. Though we are fully loaded with 3 weeks of food, we have energy to spare and the trail is dry and clear. Across from our put-in at the other side we locate an attractive location to set up camp. It is a rocky point with a great landing that is well-configured for a tent, a tarp/kitchen area and a pleasant view. While exploring we note caribou “pellets” in the vicinity, confirming their presence in the area. With no mosquitoes in sight, we strip down for our first dip in the park’s pristine waters. We feel rejuvenated and bask in the warm glow of sunset as we sip a cup of tea, our bellies full and our minds enchanted by the serenity of nature after a long year in the big city.

**Day 3: S.E. Crystal to E. Haggart**

We awake to the promise of a gorgeous summer’s day as we dry our wet items in the already hot sun, applying sunscreen for the first time on the trip. Jacynthe is drawn to the water for another refreshing swim but finds herself trapped on a small rock of an island surrounded by leeches. She bides her time, charts her re-entry and bravely jumps back in, bee lining it safely to dry land without incident. After savoring our tea along with tasty omelettes on cheese buns, we paddle south to our first portage, which is short (40m), flat and very well-travelled. Jacynthe takes advantage of the opportunity to try portaging a canoe for the very first time and, being the firecracker that she is, succeeds with flying colours. The next portage to the south (20m) we are able to easily avoid by simultaneously lining and pulling up the short swift in tandem. We spot two mergansers at the middle narrows of Broken Arrow and delight in the joy and convenience of paddling along a relatively sheltered lake with no immediate portages. The area strikes me as being high-quality caribou habitat and I lament the lack of time as I would like to scour the shorelines for evidence. We are welcomed by a bald eagle as we enter the final bay and our 300m portage into Haggart Lake. Rather than

Figure 1.3 : Days 3 & 4



lunch at the adjacent sand beach we choose to push through to the opposite side across a nice portage over the height-of-land and through a forest of tall green ferns. There is one large tree down over the trail but it is not too much trouble for a skilled canoe handler. We reach our chosen lunch spot, which is a small sunny point in an intimate narrows along Haggart that is surrounded by rock cliffs and inviting clear water. After lunch we doze off for an unplanned nap, then slowly regain momentum as we reload the canoe, round the bend and cross the biggest part of Haggart we will see on our trip in the face of a mild head wind. Nearing the eastern end of the lake and our access into the Beamish system, we scour the shore of the prominent peninsula to the north for a sandy campsite I once shared with Claire, the park's Assistant Superintendent. We abandon the search for lack of time but are drawn by intrigue to an old trap cabin on the south shore; we stop in for a closer look, take some pictures and marvel at the resilience of nature in a green plant growing out of the cabin floor. We make our way to the first 50m portage, which involves climbing onto a ledge several feet above the water and passing uncomfortably close to the edge as we carry around a short rapid to face a spectacular giant cliff wall that surprises us with its grandiosity. We paddle away with it fresh in our mind to our final portage of the day, a 225m carry up and over a rocky ridge lining a narrow gorge containing some fairly impressive rapids. The trail has a fairly steep incline on either end and I note a pile of wolf scat that likely contains caribou hair. There is abundant otter sign here as well and the smell of rotting fish and crayfish remnants linger in the fresh humid air. It is now getting on evening and we make haste for a campsite, eventually finding an established one that is very spacious and generally quite flat on a small island near the inlet to the southeast. There is evidence of a recent fire on one of the two main islands, parts of which can be seen along the shore as well. While unloading the canoe we discover a giant leech that had hitched a ride with us at some point along the way. We are tempted to conduct a salt bath experiment but we decide not to tempt fate and we let it find its way back to water peacefully. We settle in for our first dinner of homemade beef stew with veggies and mashed potatoes – delicious! – and retreat to the tent when the bugs start getting bad. Tiger Balm is applied liberally to our sore muscles after a long day of paddling and portaging. We consult our maps for tomorrow's course of action and then it all fades into a dream.

**Day 4: E. Haggart to S. Welkin**

We rise to grey skies and a morning of Irish Breakfast tea and delicious homemade granola. It began raining overnight and we are pleased to make use of the shelter

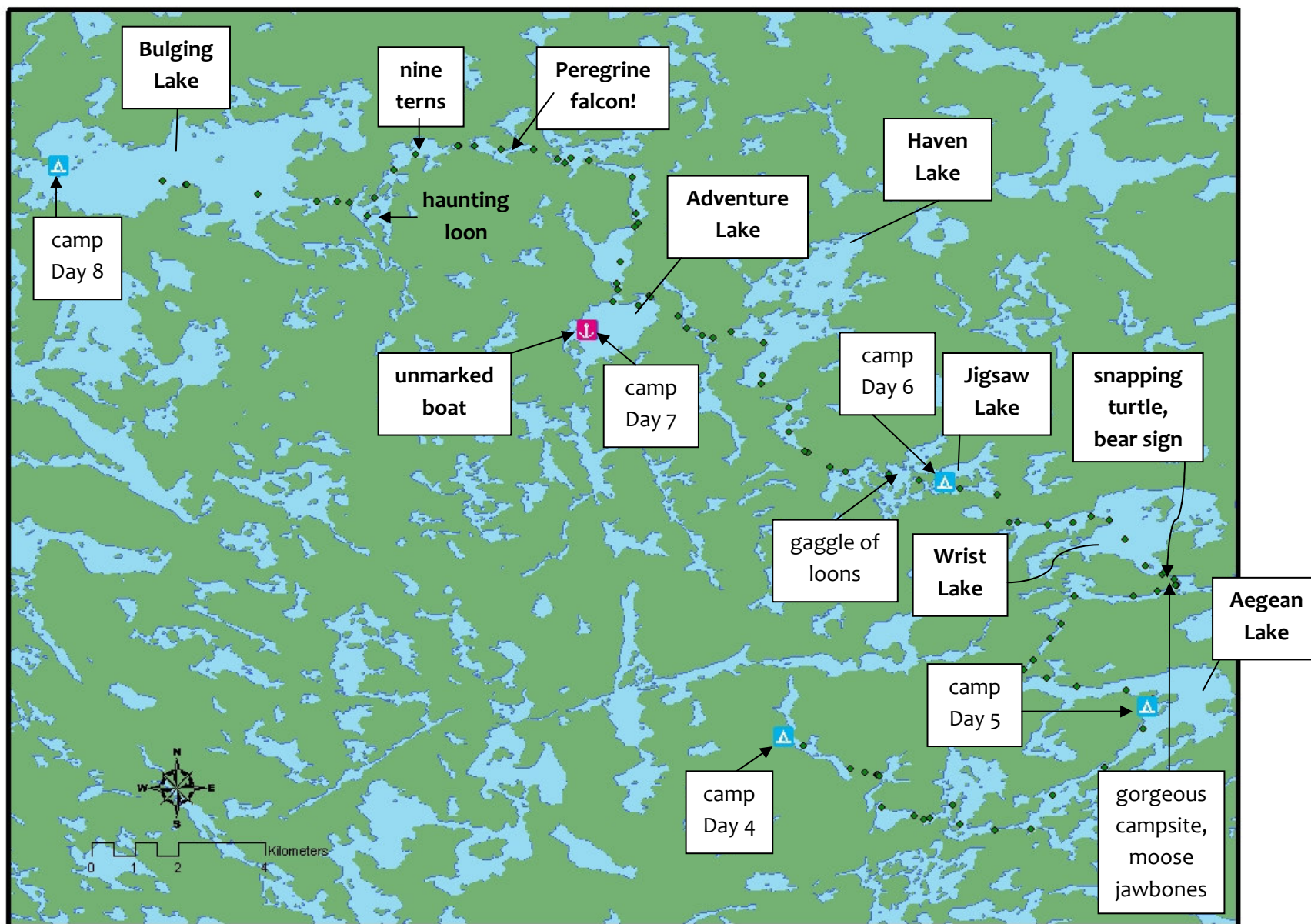
of our tarp. We quickly pack up camp and head south under mild rain. Today will be a key if we are to make up for our delayed start so we head up the creek with determination and begin our first of many portages. They are occasionally difficult to find but in the process we are honing our sight and learning to trust our instincts. While appreciating the quaint intimacy of an island narrows we forge a set of swifts and end up further than we had intended, missing our third 90m portage and facing the set of rapids that lead upriver to Beamish Lake. I wonder if it is passable further ahead as I can see by red paint on the rocks that others have been this way, though with no obvious portage around the cascade before us we must backtrack and go lake-hopping instead. We admire some purple orchids at the next 100m portage and find more caribou sign near the trail's end. I am starting to get hungry but the weather isn't great so we snack a bit and push on to Welkin. As it opens up before us we are met with powerful cross-winds and a treacherous downpour which fills our canoe with rain. With rhythmic intensity we plunge our paddles, our jaws clenched, time and again, as we slowly gain the leeward shelter of islands ahead. We take cover behind one of the first small islands, which is connected to a larger one by a mat of aquatic vegetation that forms an enclosed bay. A loon lingers nearby and we are pleasantly surprised to note the rain has stopped, though we are soaking wet and do not realize this until we have landed our lunch supplies and gotten over the initial shock. We take comfort in tortillas with hummus and cheese and homemade beef jerky but our appetites are not great as of late. We had hoped to make Aegean by this evening but the weather isn't great and we hear thunder in the distance while we contemplate our next move. We decide to camp in the long thin lake to the east and south, but we must first locate our portage in a denuded burn where every tree is scarred and indiscernible from the rest. Fortunately it is a short 100m and after briefly scouting around we find the trail where we suspected it would be. It is obvious enough, though we are forced to negotiate a very wet section near the end. The char and soot turn our gear to black and it is something of a dreadful scene as we cower next to the gloomy dead forest and wait out a round of thunder and sheet lightning. We are stuck between a rock and a hard place and the rain shows no sign of abating. We set our sights for a rocky point ahead and wait for our window of opportunity. There we find a fire ring but no obvious place for a tent and after scouting around the small bay we choose a flat spot high on a rock with a sheltered place by the water to hang our tarp. We find a tent peg next to where we are camped, confirming our assertion that it is a site worth its salt. We are pleased with our find and we settle in with great satisfaction, though the wind at times is fierce. It blows our tarp up like a balloon and then smothers our

heads with it, chilling us to the bone with intermittent gusts of crisp damp air. We are concerned about our exposed tent but once inside we are happy to be warm and dry. Our bellies are content with hand-picked mint tea and tasty Mulligan Stew. We decide that contrary to our naïve intentions, this falls considerably short of a vacation and it is a good thing we didn't have family members along for they would certainly be miserable right now.

**Day 5: S. Welkin to Aegean**

It rains all night and continues to rain all day. In our own self-interest we decide to cut the southern portion of our journey short, effectively gaining a day on our planned itinerary by circumventing Paul, Burnt Rock and Mexican Hat and heading north to Jigsaw directly from Aegean. This gives us some relief as we face the coming day, slipping once again into our wet clothes and kicking it off with crunchy sweet granola and strong mocha to boot. We are perfecting the art of setting up and taking down the tent without exposing it to the elements and we seem to have a good packing and weight distribution system together now. Thus under foreboding grey skies we paddle to our first portage, which is a 550m trail through more burned country, with numerous slippery descents on exposed bedrock and about 100m of swamp at the end. The park has certainly done some damage control since the fire but there are numerous fallen trees along the way, which is something there is only going to be more of as time goes by. We continue down the next skinny lake and eventually find the portage where there seemed to be almost no trace of one. It is high and dry with a majestic entry to Aegean, though a mighty steep and slippery one under the circumstances. I am thrilled to be on this lake as it has intrigued me for many years and it surely would not disappoint. Lined with gorgeous cliffs and boasting such unique geometry, it is the first shoreline we have seen in a while that has not been razed by fire and we delight in the sight of a living forest. We are treated with spectacular tailwinds as we enter the southern passage and it powers us up the northeast arm. We had wanted to see the infamous shore cave but in the face of ever more rain we do not care to spoil this key opportunity. By the time we reach the islands we are soaking wet, chilled to the bone, and famished. We manage to locate a campsite on the southwestern tip of the larger one and given the circumstances we make an executive decision to stay put. A stellar site on any other day, today it is exposed to the wind and rain, yet we manage to set up the tarp in a somewhat sheltered area that is further back and surrounded by trees. We make a quick lunch of boil-in-a-bag Indian on couscous. Once the tent is up we rally under the tarp and hover like zombies for an extended period of time, dripping wet from head to foot and

Figure 1.4 : Days 5 - 8



shivering in the cold and wind. The thought of removing our sopping garments is difficult to fathom and it seems doubtful there could be a more uncomfortable fate. We replay in our minds time and again the sequence of events that must take place in order to attain the warm and dry. We feel nonsensically attached to our wet clothes and struggle with the thought of leaving them in a festering pile where they will surely be colder and wetter in the morning. We humour the thought that we are not so cold after all. We are beginning to show the signs of mild hypothermia. GO! Leaving all else in our wake we shed our sodden skins and leap into our tent refuge, crossing that sacred yet imaginary barrier between all that is wet and all that must never be. We frantically covet the few dry items that remain, that they too should fall victim to the humidity, to some careless act that would dampen them indefinitely, such a slippery slope.... We surrender to fits of cathartic laughter that almost bring us to tears. By rights it is only afternoon but we collapse in our pile of “untouchables” and fall into a very deep sleep. We wake later on but the thought of going back outside is ominous and we decide we are not hungry for dinner. A small pond begins to collect under the tent near our feet and I use our wet shoes and sandals to prop the groundsheet up off the ground where the water is entering. It begins to feel like a partial waterbed where we lie. We don’t know how long this low-pressure system will last and in fear that one, or heaven forbid two, more days like this should break us, we are left with little choice but to pray. Fortunately I have sage and sweet grass for just such an eventuality and in a sincere and solemn address to the Creator we are earnest and pleading that the rain be stopped. We go over our new route in the fleeting comfort of this floating island of solace, anxious yet exhausted.

**Day 6: Aegean to Jigsaw**

It continues to pour rain throughout the night with periodic reprieves. Upon waking we find the bottom of Jacynthe’s sleeping bag wet, a moral blow which hereafter compromises the integrity of our sacred “untouchables”. Though we are averse to excessive hopefulness, there seems to less and less pitter-patter on the roof of our tent and more and more wind blowing high in the trees. When we exit the tent we are tentative but soon realize it has stopped raining, at least for the moment. The wind becomes our friend and as we eat breakfast we hang select items out to dry. A miracle occurs when the clouds separate and a beam of warm sunlight pierces the air for the first time in what seems like a vaguely distant memory. I open my chest and raise my face to the sky, eyes closed and arms out to my side, and feel the sensation of heat on my forehead. We are filled with new hope. We linger while the wind does its work and when we put our wet clothes

back on they are much drier than before. We leave the island to cloudy skies and moderate winds and as we round the point towards Aegean Creek the sky is blue and the sun is prominent. We spread more wet gear over the canoe and dare to apply sunscreen. What a trip! We are charmed by the small passage leading north into Streak Lake and admire the shallow caves and cliffs along the shores. Before the portage into Wrist Lake we stop for lunch at a gorgeous rocky point with a lone tree where we discover a set of moose jawbones. The sun is bright and the wind still strong as a bald eagle soars in the stratosphere overhead. It feels like Christmas as we delight in “decorating” the tree with our damp clothes, taking advantage of every precious moment of sunlight. We venture inland along an established trail and discover a beautiful campsite on a plateau overlooking the water. We would love to stay but we must get moving after a tasty lunch of hummus and jerky on tortillas with homemade trail mix. At our first portage we are met with the biggest snapping turtle I think I have ever seen, sunning itself in the mud next to the landing. We are thrilled and amazed to be blessed with such an encounter and we try to be respectful and appear unthreatening as we admire and photograph it. The falls next to the portage are spectacular. While trying to decide what we will do about the turtle blocking our entry it works a slow 180 and is quickly swimming underneath our canoe. It looks strangely prehistoric and blends amazingly well with its underwater environment. We are upbeat and thankful as we carry on our way, noting bear scat along the trail into Wrist. In the face of a strong head wind we hide behind the island to the south until we are forced to expose ourselves and face the brunt of the oncoming gales. We are sore and spent by the time we reach the tip of the peninsula. We stop for a snack and now when we turn the corner the water is mostly calm. A nearby island intrigues us; we know we are heading back into burned country and we are tempted to stay, but in the end we stay the course. Our last portage is 850m and ends on a bug-ridden floating bog on the shores of Jigsaw Lake. It marks our return into the fire-scorched landscape and is easy to follow except for a section of blown-down trees near the beginning. We make haste from the pestering blackflies and soon we have found our campsite. It is a mostly bare bedrock point on an island that has obviously been used in the past and with good reason – it is lined with a shallow bay on one side and a long, rocky ledge on the other that is perfect for both swimming and fishing and comes replete with a fire pit and of course plenty of dead wood to burn. Though everything is dead, under blue skies and sun and the radiant pink of fireweed it seems refreshing and inviting. We jump into the lake and wash ourselves for the first time in almost a week. We dry off in the sun then set to fishing, catching numerous pike and a nice walleye that we cook over



the fire and eat for dinner. After a gorgeous sunset the stars come out along the makings of a full moon. We feel blessed to have had our prayers answered, and with spiced rum in hand we bask in the warm glow of happiness, that which can only come from an appreciation for the simple things in life.

#### **Day 7: Jigsaw to Adventure**

It is hot when we awake and we are anxious to get out of the tent for a breath of cool air. Feeling lucky from last night's exploits we try our hand at fishing for a spell before settling into our comfortable camp chairs for a morning of breakfast burritos and a hit of espresso to start the day right. Paddling through the myriad islands of Jigsaw Lake we are taunted by thick billowing thunderclouds overhead yet never receive more than a single shower. We are thoroughly enchanted by this lake and can only marvel at how attractive it must have been before the recent fire. A gaggle of loons appear to be provoking their young into flying while at the same time making a formidable racket that is nevertheless appreciated. Our first portage, a 525m into Gulch Lake, is difficult with numerous downed logs, but from here on in the day goes smoothly. We are blessed with a light wind and partially sunny conditions ideal for outdoor travel. The 275m portage into Adventure Lake is a pretty one and we arrive on a high note to take on another significant head wind leading to our preselected island campsite. We note an unmarked boat cached nearby. Our site is splendid; we love it here and feel at last again like we are on vacation. The water is clear and cool and we settle into a sheltered depression in the bedrock. We eat like kings for dinner with creamy tuna pasta, no-bake macaroons and a side of rum and we admire the glory of the soon-to-be full moon. While brushing my teeth around 10:30 I notice an abundance of well-camouflaged toads hopping about the island's lichen-encrusted bedrock contours and I begin to speculate on the role of toads in island ecosystems. We make a short video for friends and family to commemorate our one-week anniversary before retiring to the comfort of our nylon quarters and calling it a night.

#### **Day 8: Adventure to Bulging**

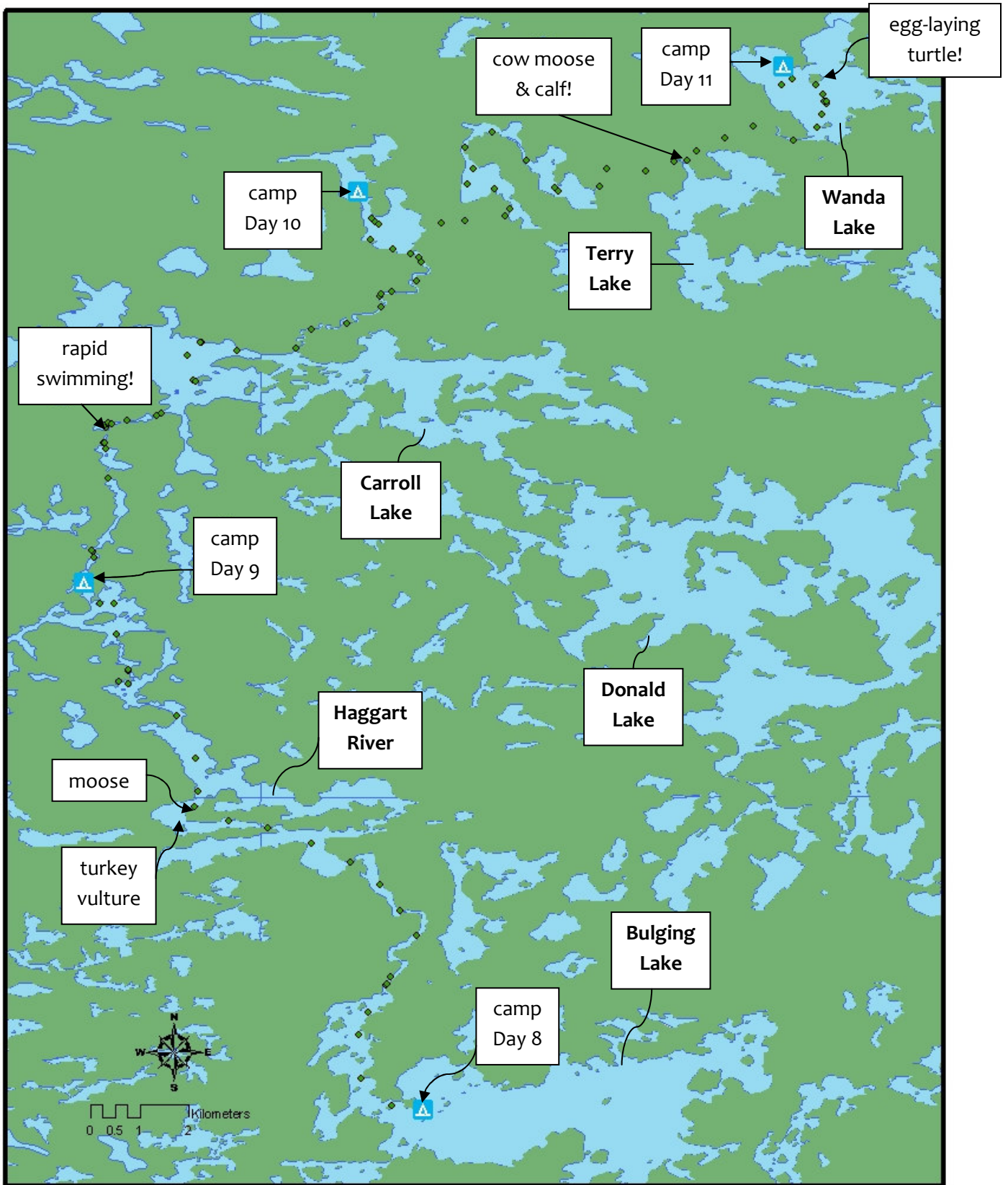
It is a gorgeous day with plenty of radiant sunlight and we take it in stride. After breakfast we discover a giant man-eating leech under the canoe with orange spots down its back and we decide not to go swimming after all. Jacynthe portages the canoe several times and we discuss the finer points of the classic paddling strokes. We get a very good look at a peregrine falcon, which appears to be keeping the local fish population in check as I had no luck while angling in the vicinity. We count nine terns and are later hypnotized by the echoing cries of a loon as we

descend the final lake before the 200m portage into Bulging. This is the deepest lake in the park and surely the largest we will be exposed to on our trip. As fate would have it, it is clear as glass upon our arrival and we make haste to cross it. As the wind picks up we reach an exposed point and revel in the thought of eating our lunch without a single annoying bug getting in the way. We sense that we are in a powerful and exceptional place. Miraculously, when we are done eating the wind dies down again, offering us safe transit to a dreamy campsite high on the bluffs of a rocky island. Here we settle in gracefully, failing to unearth any sign of fish in the surrounding waters but pleased nonetheless to partake in such leisure. Jacynthe has accidentally left our roll of toilet paper on the last portage, but we still have one left and maybe the other will come in handy for someone in an emergency. We cook up a veggie and meat stew with shitake mushrooms and are treated to a spectacular sunset, featuring the crackling of the campfire, the cry of resident loons, and the rising once more of an almost full moon. When it is dark the bugs are atrocious and we hide.

#### **Day 9: Bulging to Haggart River**

It is another beautiful sunny morning. We kick the day off right with Chai tea and fresh pancakes with home-dried berries and apples. As we pack up camp it rains mildly but not for very long. There is no sign of wind and we launch the boat into a dead calm, the only sign of life being the sound of our paddle strokes in the warm, glassy water. The pancakes seem to weigh us down and we move like molasses up the western arm on our way to the Haggart River inlet. The sky is cloudier than before and penetrated by occasional soft rains. We reach our first portage and we are impressed by the power of the rapids at the inlet. We try our hand fishing at trail's end for a spell, but with no sufficient results. The River is as beautiful as anything else we've seen, with some intimate narrows and interesting cliffs. Around the giant island we catch a glimpse of what we conclude was a moose and note a turkey vulture flying overhead. Jacynthe is intrigued by some barren rocks but the gulls are territorial and we leave them to their peace. Midway up we get disoriented in a fog and amidst islands it feels like we're lost in a dream. Unhappy with the potential campsites we've seen we continue until late day and settle on a shoreline grove across from some cliffs in a bay. While scouting the alders behind the campsite for signs of life I disturb an ant's nest and end up improvising a funky manic anti-ant dance. We try fishing for awhile, then get water and make dinner next to the fire until the mosquitoes and black flies get too bad. We are now on the Gammon River system and it is nice to be going with the current for a change.

Figure 1.5 : Days 9 - 11



## **Day 10: Haggart River to E-Shaped Lake North of Carroll**

Today we have the pleasure of discovering the picturesque canyons and precipitous gorges of the lower Haggart River! Granola and espresso get us going in the morning and we leave our buggy site with excitement and anticipation. The numerous short carries are oftentimes surprisingly perilous, climbing sheer slopes next to raging chutes and slipping between trees and rock faces that should otherwise be removed if it wasn't for the threat of erosion. By necessity I introduce a new technique to my canoe-toting repertoire, my left hand grappling a tree as I lean the canoe to the right to get by it, all the while simultaneously "smearing" my right foot against an awkwardly placed boulder and "shuffling" between the two. An exhilarating workout! For fun and perspective we paddle in and surf on waves at the bottom of a rapid and in the heart of the scenic passage we find a sweet swimming spot in the roiling lee of another, jumping into the fray fully equipped with shoes and life jacket and being swept off in the torrent feet first, to frolic in the eddies and eventually regain our trusty steed which had been moored 30 yards further downstream. Before long we have reached Carroll Lake and I feel like I am back in familiar country again, having spent a week or so in the area in 2002 conducting caribou calving surveys. We try to find a sand beach that supposedly exists but the water is so high this year we have seen very few and soon abandon our cause, settling on a nice shore lunch with a view of the lake to the south. We witness the first motorboat we have seen since our trip began, which I gather contains visitors from Donald Lake or Carroll Lake Lodge. Not wanting to spoil our advance and selfishly coveting our own little piece of wild space we carry on up the river towards Terry and Wanda. It is grassy and meandering and we marvel at the diversity of the many water systems we have had the pleasure of seeing in this canoeist's paradise. The organic mat of vegetation that gives the river its prairie-like appeal constitutes in a way the lungs of these headwaters of the Gammon River. By the time we reach the E-shaped lake north of Carroll it is coming on evening and I regret not taking better notes because we have done twice as many portages as what is marked on the park map, all of which were short but necessary regardless of water levels. There is a known campsite close to the mouth of the lake but it is shallow here, buggy and stagnant so we carry on along the shore in hopes we can make something else work. It doesn't appear promising at first but about halfway up the west shore of the peninsula we discover a very acceptable site on a point with several possible tent sites. The lake is shallow to the south but appears to be deeper here and it is much prettier. It is probably less travelled because it is out of the way, yet there are nice rock faces lining the shores which we are tempted to explore further.

Instead we set to dinner as it is getting late and the bugs are bad and it has started to rain. By now we are getting pretty decent at gauging when it is time to retire to the warm dry bug-free comfort of our tent, and at this point we do so with speed and efficiency.

#### **Day 11: E-Shaped Lake to Wanda**

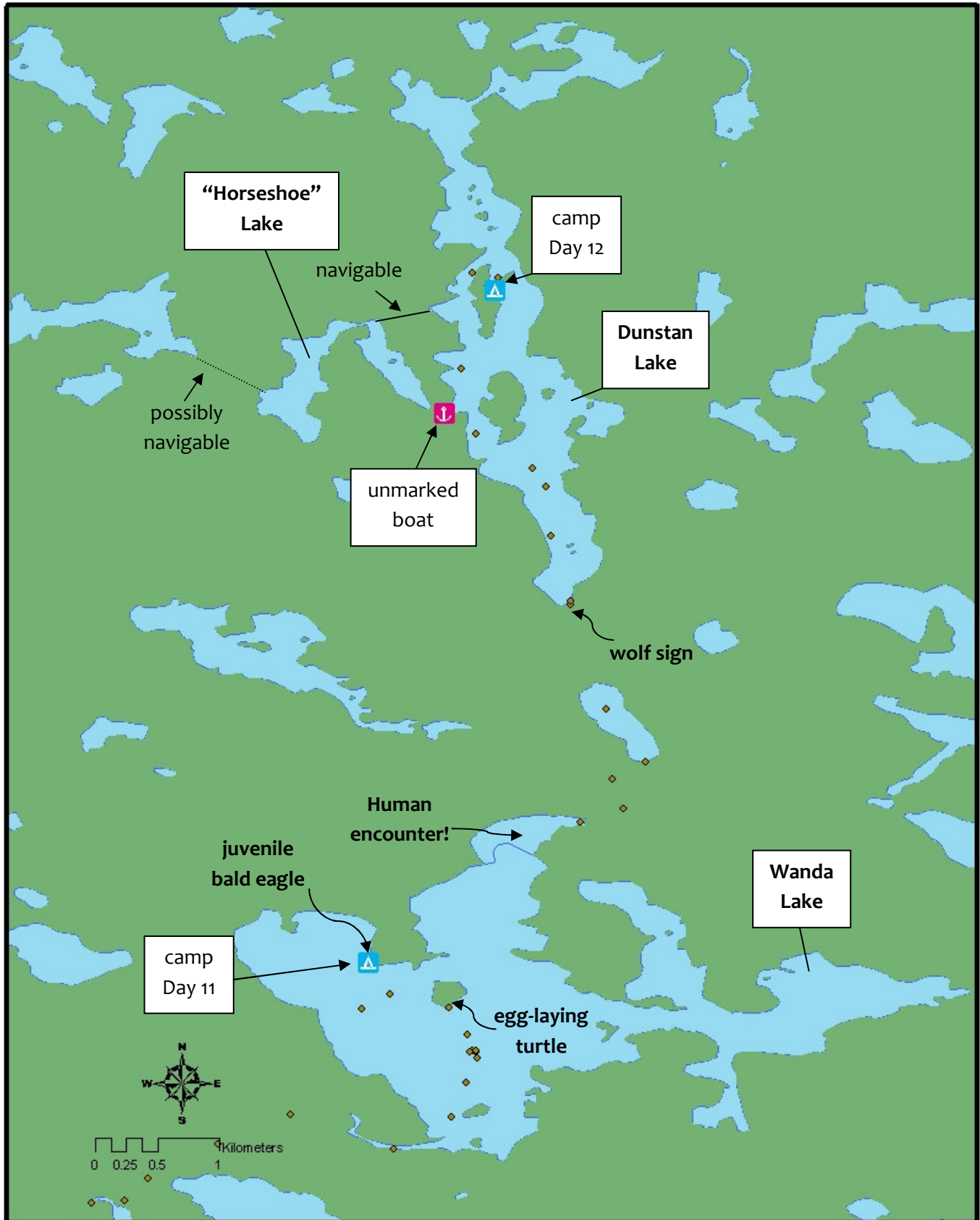
It continues to rain steadily throughout the night and we are woken by thunder in the early hours. We sleep in and cuddle for a while and when we finally bid good morning to the outside world it is sunny and we can't believe our luck. We spread out the tent and wet items to dry while we make hearty breakfast burritos with eggs, bacon, hummus, cheese, and sundried tomatoes. By the time we cast off we are stuffed and feeling lethargic so we jump into the lake for a refreshing reveil. We are wary of leeches after seeing one so big and disgusting on Adventure so it is here we put into practice the new technique of water access by canoe rather than leech-infested shoreline. It is hot and sunny when we rejoin the grassy river and continue against the current up the meandering stream. Jacynthe tries flipping the canoe onto her shoulders without assistance but it is quite heavy at probably 80 lbs. with life jackets, fishing rods and waterlogged gunwales. The Velociraptor is an indelible Work Horse but I would trade it in a second for a Kevlar canoe on flatwater trips. We make good time up the river and see numerous birds, ducks and beaver lodges. At the confluence of Terry Lake we startle a cow moose and her calf feeding neck deep in the reedy shallows. The mother displaces an incredible amount of water as she plunges onto land, cracking what sounds like numerous large branches as she breaks into the forest while her young, more curious and tentative, follows in her footsteps not far behind. We continue upriver and soon reach Wanda, which strikes us as a somewhat magical place with its clear water and inviting shores. We try for walleye off and around the barren island in the middle of the lake but get nothing but a few snags in the rocks offshore. While scouting for a campsite we see a painted turtle with its bum partially buried in the soil between two bedrock slabs. It seems surprising that it should be laying eggs in July but after doing some reading it has apparently been known to happen. And so we leave it to its devices and continue on our quest for the perfect campsite, finding just that on the southwestern tip of the lake's western peninsula. The site has clearly been well-used, presumably by a fly-in fishing outfit, as the forest floor is bare of wood and there is a large stone firepit with a stack of wood and a grill next to it. There are a couple of frame-like structures and even a "honey bucket" setup in the woods. We understand the park is not keen on this kind of thing but at least we are pleased to see they clean up after themselves and a little piece of

civilization seems to add something novel to the site. We decide to split up the duties and make the best of the day so after setting up the tent together I head out with the fishing gear while Jacynthe tends to dinner preparations. I don't want to go too far so after trying a few potential walleye holes I decide to go in closer to shore and, worst case scenario, catch us a "jack" (heaven forbid!). I see something jump near the reeds but after a few unfruitful casts I decide to size down my gear and switch to a Mepps #2 spinner. I feel like I've snagged a log for a second before I've begun reeling in, then a slight tug and WOMP! I set the hook and bring in a healthy looking fighter of a pike. It feels good to "bring home the bacon" so to speak, and when I arrive Jacynthe has a fire ready. We make instant rice with cheese and broccoli and when the coals are going good we lay the cleaned fish on the grill and cook it just like my grandfather used to do. It is tasty and very filling and we wash it down with a glass of "Long Island" iced tea. The now full moon is a glowing orange ball which rises between the clouds and enchants us. We admire it for as long as we can muster the bugs, lingering for a time after we've brushed our teeth until it is hidden by a cloud and then, happy but sleepy, we head for shelter.

#### **Day 12: Wanda to Dunstan**

We wake to what sounds like a floatplane taxiing up to shore, but when we dress and step out of the tent it is nowhere to be seen. There is a soft breeze that keeps the bugs away and we lounge in our camp chairs by the shore eating a mixture of instant oatmeal and homemade granola with dried fruit. Our suspicions are confirmed when we see a boat in the distance and we observe the two fishermen with curiosity through our binoculars. A juvenile bald eagle circles very low overhead, giving us a perfect view of its still maturing plumage. We apply Tiger Balm to our respectively aching areas and start the working day a little less stiff than before. While en route for the river we meet up with Bob Alexander of Smith Camps (Kenora, ON), who has flown in with an inflatable Zodiac and guest Guillermo of Guadalajara. Bob is friendly and offers to fly out the surprisingly little bit of garbage we've accumulated so far, to which we humbly accept. We chat it up for a while and after ample attention to the subject of fishing he gives us three of his favourite lures, red oblong jig-heads with white power grubs and a tiny spinner on-the-side. We are very thankful and excited to have seen and talked with the first real live people we've seen in 12 days. We are proud to have come all this way through our own power alone and it is with pleasure and confidence that we bid them adieu and make tracks for Dunstan. The river is much narrower and we have to fight the current in places while negotiating several beaver dams.

Figure 1.6 : Days 11 & 12



Going on instinct I decide to veer left at what turns out to be the prime opportunity as I'm sure many have failed to pay attention here and ended up in the chain of long lakes to the east. We get to the portage without incident, though the landing is quite wet and we have to pull the canoe through spongy grass to get our gear to shore. The 750m portage into Dunstan Lake is as remarkable as they say. From the Gammon system over the height-of-land into the Bloodvein watershed, it is a magical journey through an enchanted pine forest with an open understory dominated by terrestrial lichens and mushrooms of all shapes and sizes. The trail is dry and well-established and there is only one fallen tree along the way. We are thrilled upon our arrival at Dunstan and after all that portaging the first thing we do is jump in the lake and take a few deep breaths. We have arrived, and here the second leg of our journey begins, which is to be as much about investigation as it is about appreciation, for we are here to document a new canoe route for the park. Following the western shore we first search for signs of a portage into the horseshoe-shaped lake west of here. It would be a short and straight-forward carry to the other side but we find nothing obvious, only a game trail and a cached aluminum boat on the Dunstan side. Rounding the second island we are thoroughly smitten with this lake and conclude it to be a worthwhile destination in itself. We chance upon a 5-star camping destination consisting of two wide, flat stone ledges with an elevated view of the lake and several tent sites to choose from. There is a fire pit on both levels and we set up on the lower one for our usual lunch with the addition of beer salami and mustard. After a dessert of hot chocolate and a bit of fishing, we round back to the south to scout the cliff-lined channel connecting Dunstan to the Horseshoe Lake. It is thick with cattails, at times requiring us to grab the reeds ahead of us and pull ourselves through. There is one beaver dam but it is definitely navigable and in ten minutes we are through to the other side. We don't have a lot of sunlight left and there are looming thunderclouds ahead so we make directly for the west shore and scout for signs of a trail to the next lake over. We scour the shoreline then get out and scout inland but find no sign of a passage. Next we head to the creek, which is narrow yet adequately deep and overall fairly open, with the odd tamarack and a few shrubs on either side. We paddle in a ways and it seems passable as far as we can see, but in the end we must turn back for lack of time. Of the options we considered this was one of the prime candidates for a route to Walking Stick and I would be keen to return and explore it further sometime. On our way back we fish until twilight but the new lures Bob gave us bear no fruit and we return to our site empty-handed.

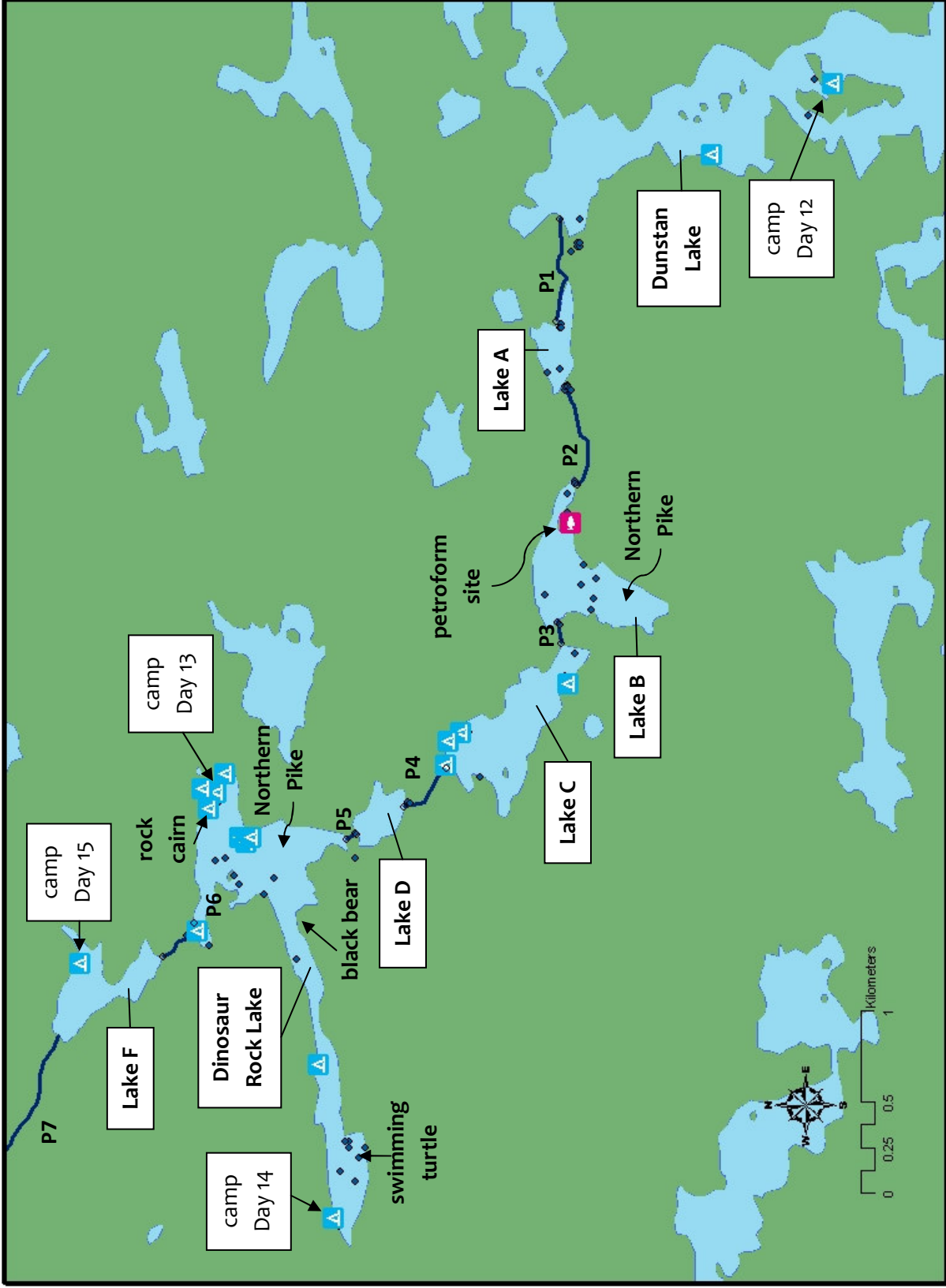


### **Day 13: Dunstan to Dinosaur Rock (a.k.a. Lake “E”)**

Today is a big day as we are heading into uncharted country on our way to Walking Stick. Unfortunately it is raining, which needless to say for reasons of the past brings us some anxiety. To give us strength and courage we pack in a trucker’s breakfast of omelettes and mashed potatoes and treat ourselves with a tasty sweet mocha for dessert, a mixture of powdered hot chocolate and instant espresso with a bit of milk (powdered, of course!). Before leaving the site we round up a plate of offerings consisting of a quartzite stone, a Canadian dime, a flower, fresh berries and a fern, and proceed to burn sage and sweet grass while praying to the Great Spirit for guidance and safe passage. The rain has stopped for the moment and we reach our first portage heading out the north end of Dunstan into a chain of unnamed lakes to the immediate west. This is to be the first of five portages we scout, mark and carry over today, and before long we have a system down (*Note: see Chapter 2 for detailed portage descriptions*). First and foremost we determine if, in fact, a portage is even necessary by pushing as far as we can via water and scouting along draws from one lake to the next. When it is clear a portage is necessary we use 1:50,000 topo maps to estimate the driest, flattest and/or most direct route, then identify the nearest and best landing available. From this point we walk the most accessible and canoe-worthy route we see fit while attempting to stick to the most direct route possible between the first lake and the next using map & compass, splitting up where appropriate to gauge options. This tends to be fairly intuitive and on our return trip to the canoe and gear we place discrete flagging markers as a guide along the way while removing dead branches and trees with an axe where necessary to make way for the canoe. Our second trip we do loaded with packs and paddles, at which time we identify changes and make adjustments where necessary. On the way back we GPS the route. By this time we have a fairly clear sense of the best path available, we have eliminated inferior options along the way, and we are ready to portage the canoe and the heaviest pack. Thus we carry out our day from dawn until dusk, arriving at our final destination (Lake “E”) in the silence of twilight. The first portage goes fairly well but the bugs are horrific and by the time we’ve finished scouting out the second one it has begun raining again. We decide to break for lunch in the relative shelter of trees before heading back out to “seal the deal”. The trail is fairly wet in places but it’s the best we can do under the circumstances without a major detour to the south. Upon entering Lake “B” we investigate a potential campsite to our immediate left on a high bluff overlooking a small bay. From this impressive vantage point we notice several large cobbles that appear to be oriented in a circle, which indicate this may be a petroform (see photos APPENDIX A). The east

shore of Lake B is lined with gorgeous cliffs and, excited by our discovery, we paddle slowly alongside in hopes of spotting a pictograph... but to no avail. While Jacynthe is filtering water I try my hand at angling, catching a decent northern pike that I am quick to release. We are thrilled to confirm there is life in this lake and we jump in for a dip in the heat of the sun. While drying off we check a potential campsite but the two we eventually consider are much too small to support recreational use, though we do find the lake very appealing. After eliminating the short creek as a viable option we lay out a short portage through blowdown into the next lake over (Lake "C"). Here we are treated to a glorious rainbow before the skies open and pour down upon us for a few short minutes. We identify four potential campsites on Lake "C" before what we hope will be our last portage of the day. There is a well-used game trail which virtually leads us directly to Lake "D" without incident, though the end is fairly wet and we regrettably load the boat too early and are forced to drag the loaded canoe through spongy wet sphagnum puddles for about 15 meters. Lake D is tiny but boasts a few pretty rock outcrops and offers us another stellar rainbow amidst the vibrant hues of sunset. We are disappointed to find the very short distance between us and Lake "E" blocked by an impressive beaver dam, hence necessitating our fifth and final portage of the day, which turns out to be a very short carry along a well-used beaver trail not very far to the east. We put in at an inundated sand beach and slip onto the lake with little time to spare before darkness falls. The resident beaver swims indignantly nearby without making a sound and we see signs of its ongoing attempts to fall jack pines all along the shoreline. In fact we have noted extensive beaver damage to shoreline trees since we began exploring the lakes west of Dunstan. I think I am seeing a black bear lumbering in the timbers to my left but when I blink and refocus it is gone. We make a rapid assessment of campsite potential, identifying a couple of make-do sites before spotting the site we will settle on for the night. It draws us in like a magnet, a majestically sprawling bedrock throne with numerous tablets and a sweet landing. We find an elevated tent site overlooking the water and make a quick dinner of Mediterranean stew (courtesy of a good friend) while equipped with bug nets, the slits of which we open ever-so-slightly to make way for our spoons in hopes of evading the pestering mosquitoes. We are happy to have made it here and we decide we might stay for a little while.

Figure 1.7 : Days 12 - 15



## Day 14: Dinosaur Rock

Our morning begins with bannock and Irish Breakfast tea. It is a beautiful day which we are happy to spend exploring this remarkable lake, which has all the makings of a 5-star canoeing destination except for one thing: after about 8 angling hours we fail to catch a single walleye, which makes us doubt their presence this far up from the aptly-named Pickerel Lake. We do, however, catch a few modest pike and this manages to keep our spirits going. Behind our glorious campsite can be heard the rapids which lead downstream in the direction of Pickerel. We are curious to see how long it continues to be navigable but must abandon such hopes with so much else to do. In the centre of the small channel leading to the outlet is a giant rounded stone smattered with black pelt lichen which looks like the back of a prehistoric armadillo sleeping in the water. We are delighted with the otherworldly quality of our environment and hereafter it is dubbed “Dinosaur Rock” Lake, the bluffs and cliffs of which are tremendous and seemingly inexhaustible, with high jack pine ridges all around and plenty of reindeer lichen on the forest floor. While in the process of investigating and documenting numerous campsites along the shore’s rocky outcrops we discover a suspicious pile of rocks which we are bound by curiosity to investigate. With so much randomly deposited glacial material in the park one can never be too sure, yet we soon conclude this to be out-of-the-ordinary as we remove rocks from the surface to find numerous small quartzite stones lying within. Fearing we may have gone too far, we carefully replace the stones as it was when we found it and as we part we are amazed to think we may have found a cairn containing some symbolic, precious or magical item once buried there by past inhabitants. We move on to the long western arm of the lake, having a swim before dropping our lines and allowing ourselves to be carried by the wind down the lake. The water here tickles us with tiny prickly sensations and we wonder later if what we were feeling was loose lichen particles floating in the current. We take a hike up to a high ridge and later on while exploring the shore I spot a turtle in the water swimming under the canoe. The sky lingers with large dark grey storm clouds but the rain never falls directly upon us. On our way back past the tip of the arm we are startled to see a black bear foraging along a rocky outcrop, turning over rocks and nuzzling into rotting logs with a kind of concentrated haste that tells us it is struggling to sate its hunger. Momentarily darkened skies paint a desolate scene as the wind whips up tufts of its black coat as it tinkers along the precipice, sending sizeable cobbles tumbling into the water below. We feel like spectators and even when the wind blows us closer in it shows no sign of noticing us. We are somewhat taken aback as we head for the northwest corner of the lake. This is surely not the most

productive country for a demanding omnivore! Between our encounter with the bear, the prehistoric dinosaur rock and the discovery of the mysterious cairn, the lake begins to take on elements of the fantastic. We pole up the creek leading into Lake “F” but when it seems more trouble than it’s worth we scout the right side for a reasonable trail we can portage in the morning. We make a few last attempts at fishing then head back to camp for dinner around 8:30pm. As I begin to prepare the food I turn my head in surprise to see an unwelcome visitor – that same black bear has come halfway around the lake to sniff us out! Having surely gotten a whiff of our scent as we parted earlier it is now a mere 25 feet before me on a point next to the gully that separates our campsite from the adjacent forest. It is not particularly afraid and as I yell and throw rocks it hesitates for several seconds, finally turns back slowly and shuffles off into the forest. I climb onto the ridge overlooking the gully and, still yelling, toss the largest cobble I can lift down into the chasm where I last heard it move. From this point on we hear no further sound and can only guess it is lingering nearby, wondering what to do next. In the meantime, Jacynthe has rounded up the few emergency items we have for such an eventuality – our hatchet, bear banger, and SPOT, our satellite messenger. We have very little time until the sun goes down, at which point we fall mercy to the mosquitoes and the uncertainty of darkness. We strike an emergency meeting, weigh our options, and move to relocate. Within minutes our camp is down, in the canoe, and we are silently paddling across the lake in the perfect stillness of twilight. The wind is completely absent as we move in stride to the far end of the western arm, the blades of our paddles dipping in quiet, rhythmic unison. Here we enact our plan precisely as discussed: we pitch our tent on a bedrock plateau next to a cliff high above the water, taking great care to place all food and anything that smells in our 115 liter dry bag, which we then place in the centre of the canoe. When we have secured the canoe to a tree by a rope we carefully push it away from the shore, and it stops as it slides over a dead tree lying shallow in the water. Having taken all necessary precautions, we are in the tent before the menacing hour and with our heads on our sleeping bags we ponder our fate. We are pleased with our decision to relocate. It would have been risky to stay, and we likely would not have slept very well. This being the case, we can’t help but wonder if our incident with the bear had something to do with the cairn we unwittingly disturbed earlier in the day. Perhaps the bear was also a messenger, or some form of spirit guardian watching over the lake who had come to teach us a lesson of sorts. If this was the case we are now certainly the wiser, and we agree to honour this fact.

## Day 15 Dinosaur Rock to Lake “F”

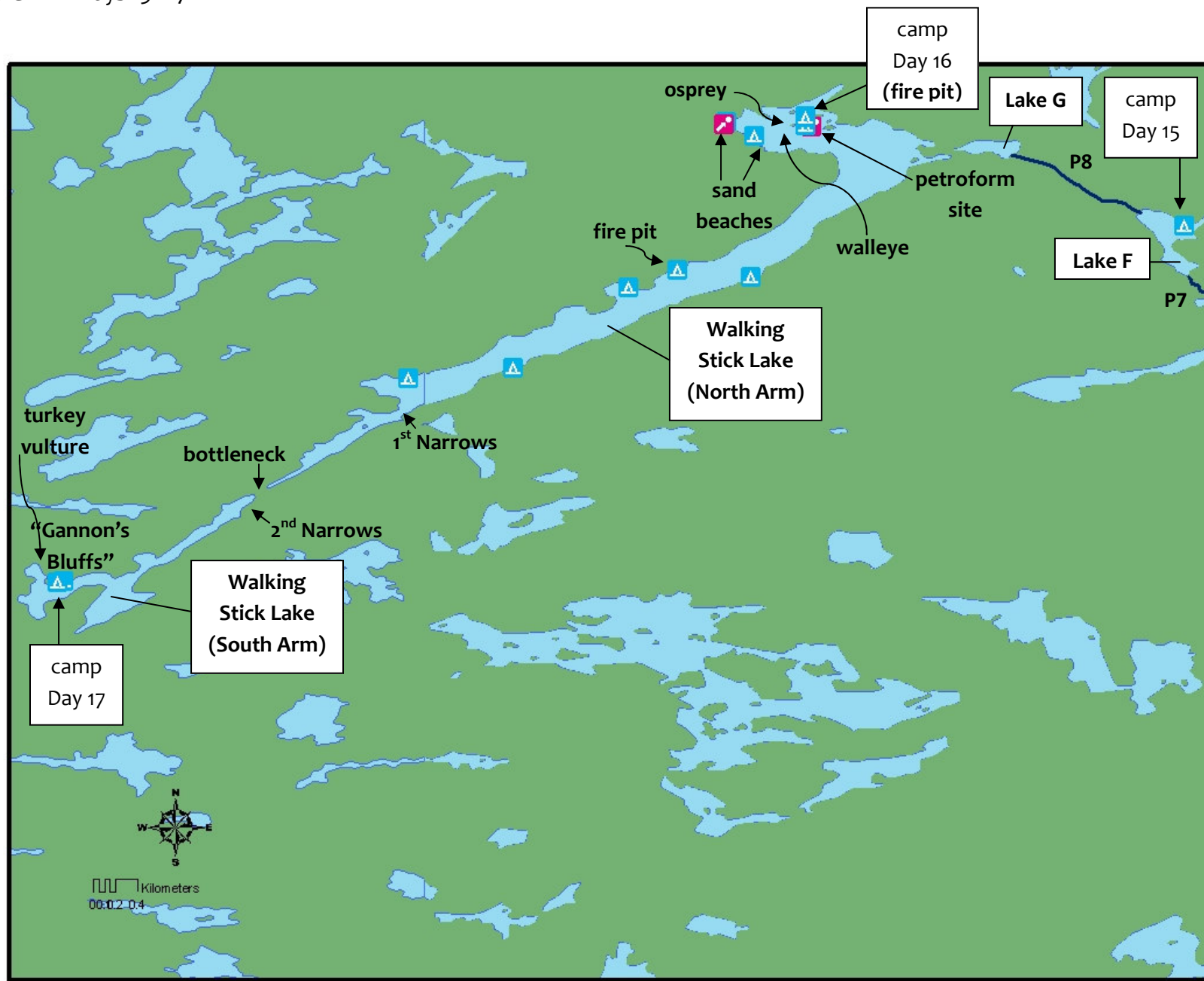
We can't imagine why but we have both slept like angels. The sun is welcoming and warm and we feel surprisingly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, both optimistic about the day ahead of us, which we hope will lead to the elusive Walking Stick. We have a quick breakfast by the water and once we've loaded and launched the canoe we stop for a quick swim, a refreshing way to kick off the day. We are pensive as we retrace our path back to our original camping site, where we proceed to make an offering and a prayer to the guardian spirits of the lake. We don't remain long, stopping by the creek behind the island for a photo and paying our respects to the sleeping Dinosaur Rock as we pass solemnly by the site of the cairn on our way to the next portage. Though we had originally cased out a route east of the creek, my intuition tells me there is a better way and indeed we find the west side to be drier, more scenic and much simpler overall. We are now at the final lake before our largest portage of all, which will take us back over the height-of-land into the headwaters of the Gammon River system via Walking Stick and Carroll. It is a small lake but quaint enough and we locate one campsite which eventually will serve us for the night. Our goal for the time being is to determine the best possible way to get to Walking Stick, so with this in mind we pack a small day bag and with compass in hand we mount the rocky terrain into high country, bound for the fork in the river that leads to small lake east of our Promised Land. The going is easy and soon we are overlooking the deep, narrow river valley below. We skirt it from above for a while but are offered no glimpse of the water below so we descend into the valley bottom and soon we are negotiating sheer cliffs on one side and swampy alder thickets on the other. The air is very humid here and smells of rotten logs and spore-infused earth. It is clear from where we're standing that this deep, north-facing gorge receives little, if any, sunlight throughout the year. The stream is narrow and clogged with vegetation, mostly alders that have grown so tall the understory is clear, but in places the channel gets wider and swampier due to beaver activity. As we follow it to the opening of the lake we see no way out of the craggy gulch and for a spell we feel stuck between a rock and a hard place. We negotiate the shore of the lake and soon find the best and only landing we are bound to find here, one which allows us reasonable passage to higher country via a relatively short climb that is somewhat steep but within reason. We spend the better part of the day with map, compass, axe, flagging tape, and GPS in hand laying out the best route possible along the bluffs back to our canoe. When we finally return we are spent but very satisfied. By some miracle the trail leads us to the exact point we had imagined for a landing on Lake F. It being past 6 o'clock by this time, we decide to leave the big portage

for the morning when we've fully rested, instead opting for a refreshing swim, a good meal and an early night. This being the start of our third and final week, we celebrate with the last of the spiced rum and an amateur home video for the friends and family.

## **Day 16 Lake "F" to Walking Stick**

We set our alarms early this morning to make the most of the day and we tackle the portage well-rested and in good spirits. Along our first trip we reroute several sections for the better and thrill in the scenic bluffs as we breathe deeply in the pine-scented air of the high country. It's about a kilometer in total but seems to go by in no time and in the end we are very proud of our accomplishment. We make final touch-ups on the way back then gather our energy for our last trip with the heavy pack and the canoe. There are a few awkward sections with the canoe that could be smoothed out by removing a few small trees but we succeed with little issue and will leave such matters to the park authorities. When our gear is safely in the canoe on the lake which leads to Walking Stick we are thrilled to no end to have arrived and before paddling on to the inlet we take a moment to reflect on all we have experienced up until now. As Jerry Garcia once said so well, "what a long, strange trip it's been"! At last we have reached the opening and we see the lake ahead. There is a wide beaver dam but we remove a few sticks and easily slide the loaded canoe over the lip. The streambed is sandy and there are perch here even in the shallows, which we easily negotiate. We are finally on Walking Stick and we revel in the moment, taking a home video for good measure. There is a sizeable wind coming up the long arm of the lake and after briefly circling the archipelago of charming islands in the north "handle" we settle on a windswept rock with a view for a tasty bug-free lunch. We then proceed to evaluate the campsite potential of the numerous islands, discovering what again looks to be a petroform at the first site we explore. Like a lot of what we've seen since we branched off from Dunstan, this northern part of the lake has a kind of magical charm and we are at once enchanted by the lake's clear water and rocky windswept shores. We eventually decide to relax for a bit and settle down on a smooth sloping rock with a great water entry that we use for swimming and frolicking in the hot sun. While Jacynthe is swimming the wind picks up suddenly and an osprey flies in low and circles overhead, unsure if it is prepared to take on its potential prey. I try fishing for a bit and as the afternoon fades we move to pitch camp across from the petroform on our favourite of the sites we have seen so far. We then return to a small, barren island that is sure to bear tidings of tasty joy. Here we set up our rods and put in a good hour and a half of fishing, bringing

Figure 1.8 : Days 15 - 17





in a couple perch, a decent pike and a nice walleye that we keep and take home for dinner. Jacynthe prepares the kitchen while I filet the beautiful fish and as I paddle back to camp I can see a seagull is thrilled to be feasting on the remnants. We cook it up right in batter with plenty of oil and it tastes delicious with pasta and a sunset view... until the rain starts to fall and we clamour to clean the gritty pan in the dark amidst a haze of ravenous mosquitoes that turn our poor legs into mincemeat before we are back in the shelter of our tent refuge and fall to sleep peacefully once again.

## **Day 17 Walking Stick**

It has rained all night and when we rise it is black and grisly outside. There is a slight chill in the air as we huddle under the tarp with our mochas eating pancakes with dried fruit, almond butter and jam. We enter the long arm of Walking Stick in a fine mist that occasionally turns to rain, giving the fjord-like waterway a certain gothic appeal. We admire the imposing cliffs that border its shores, fishing as we go while criss-crossing from one side to the other in search of worthy campsites. We discover a fire pit on the west side and I wonder if the party who once surveyed the lake stayed here. Behind the site is a very flat open area that could easily have contained a building of some kind at some point in time. We try in vain to locate foundations or old timbers while gleefully reaping the abundance of the many berries we are met with along the way. By now we are seeing plump trailing raspberries, sizeable bunches of juicy sweet red currants and even ripe blueberries are turning up in places for us. At the first narrows we climb an otter trail next to a gorge to get a view of the small lake to the east. It is pretty high country here and the bluffs along the lake are impressive. We wonder if the outlet to the next lake over is navigable but from where we are looking I would suspect not, though it is hard to say. As we descend, Walking Stick grows gradually narrower and soon we reach the bottleneck where it becomes something of a grassy stream for 100 meters or so. We are required to step out of the canoe on occasion but the riverbed is sandy so it is no big deal. This could be slightly more problematic in lower water but by no means a major setback. Immediately following and to the west we spend a good half hour scouting for signs of a possible trail into the series of lakes that would lead to Craven from here. There are reasonable options on both sides of the draw, which we follow perhaps halfway to the next lake, but in the end we find no evidence of an existing trail and continue along our way. We are surrounded on both sides by rock walls, some of which are impressively high, as we attempt yet again to catch fish for tonight's dinner. Jacynthe catches a pine tree and is forced to put her rock climbing skills into effect to get her jig back. We

stop for lunch at a point with a view of the last narrows before the south opening of the lake. Here we cook macaroni & cheese with tuna and extra cheese. We are excited to see what the Walking Stick River will look like. If, God help us, it is not passable, we will have about 3 kilometres of slogging to do through who knows what kind of terrain. We contain our excitement for the moment and concentrate on exploring the southwest arm, the north shore of which is a veritable playland of rocky bluffs and we are giddy as schoolchildren as we hop along them in search of potential tent sites. The sun has come out to join us and a turkey vulture circles overhead as we explore a fascinating rockslide with intriguing potholes in the northern bay. It is an easy choice and we decide to pitch camp along what are now fondly known as “Gannon’s Bluffs”, in honour of my mother who recently celebrated her 61<sup>st</sup> birthday. It rains on us while setting up the tarp and we are teased with another short downpour when we get to the mouth of the Walking Stick River, which appears reasonably passable at least for a short while. We scramble up a rock face to our right and scurry along the ridge for our first view of the river valley: it is a wide, grassy plain and an open channel weaves through it like a ribbon for as far as the eye can see. We can barely contain our excitement knowing how much less slogging we have in store and the lion’s share of our apprehension is quelled by the beautiful sight before us. It is hard to believe this is not a known canoe route and that we could be the first of our time to document it first-hand.

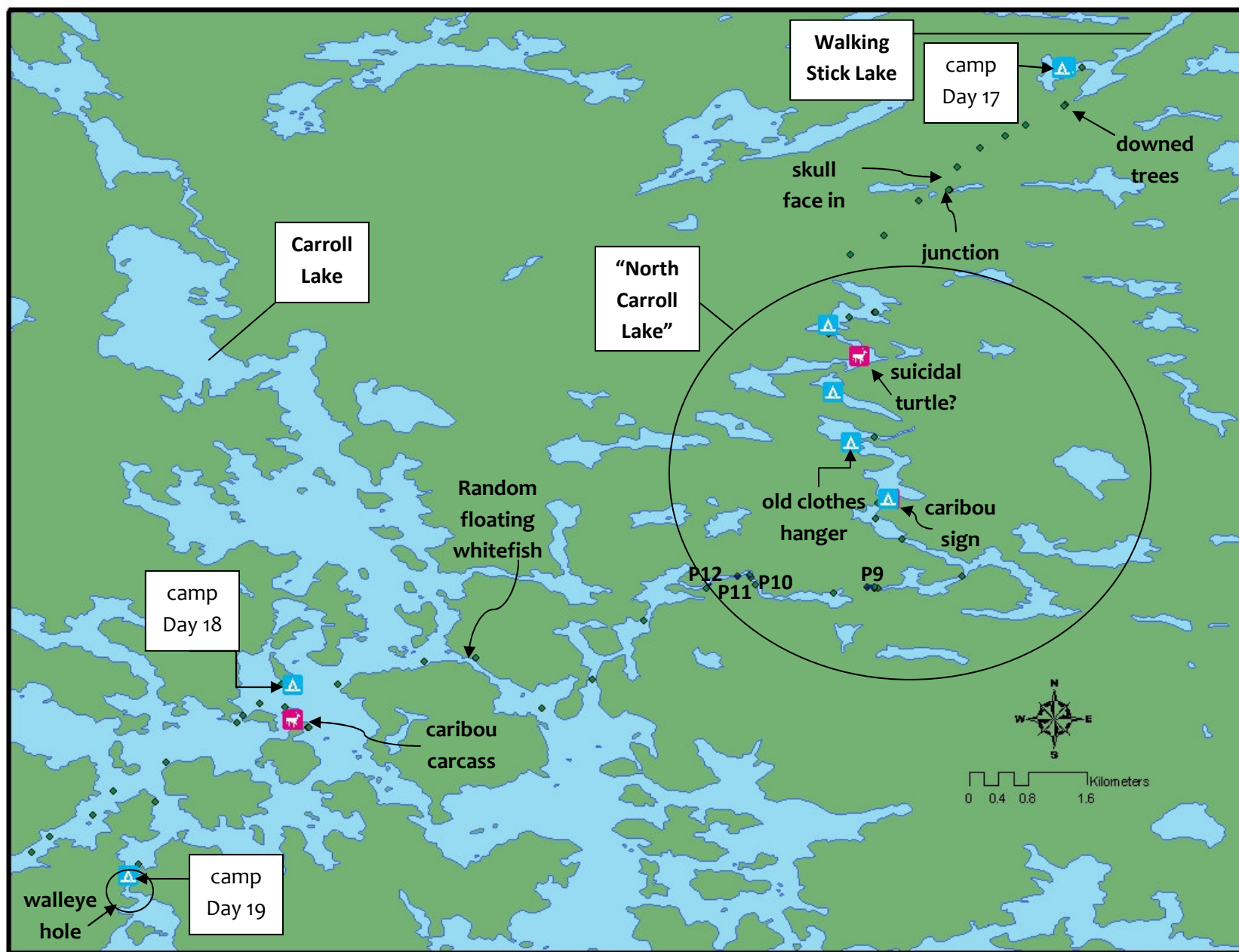
On our way back to camp we investigate the northeast bay for any sign of a portage to a lake to the east. It is swampy and surrounded by abrupt terrain and we quickly eliminate the few options available, having seen no sign of a blaze or a trail marker since we left Dunstan. Back at camp we celebrate our incredibly good luck with mint tea and chewy chocolate-coconut cookies. Since the soggy first leg of our journey we have come a long way without major incident; we are in good physical condition and we have enjoyed surprisingly good weather. We feel extremely blessed for all that we have experienced and in a way we are sad to know that we will soon be leaving it behind. Nevertheless we have a big day ahead of us so we pack it in early and dream of waterways paved with gold.

#### **Day 18: Walking Stick to Carroll**

Though we set the alarm for 6 o’clock we don’t actually wake up until eight, but this we take in stride as we have most things. We start the day with strong Irish Breakfast tea and granola and then proceed to wash our soiled bodies in the lake. When we reach the mouth of the river we are refreshed and we pull over our first obstruction, a partial beaver dam, with little hesitation. About 100 meters in we

meet up with numerous fallen trees and proceed to de-limb them to make space for a short carry-over to the left. After portaging the gear I realize there is a deeper channel along the left shore so we reorient the empty canoe and pull it around, removing a couple more trees along the way and lining down to where the packs are waiting to be loaded. From here on in the channel gets deeper and it is a sweet day for paddling on this meandering grassy river with a sandy bottom. It is fairly narrow in places but we have no problem finding the channel and before long we have reached the tamarack sentry at the first noticeable bend in the river (~700m from the inlet as the crow flies). We continue along with great delight to find more of the same in the next stretch, the second bend marked by a forested outcrop on the left and a lone boulder to the right mid-river. Rounding the bend we are met with what looks like a dam, and we scratch our heads for a moment before eyeing a narrow passage in the tall grassy mats to the right which we slide through with relative ease. Bluffs become more frequent on either side of the river and as the channel takes us directly alongside the right shore we notice in the rock face a familiar shape that looks...distinctly...human! More likely than not a geological anomaly, it looks unmistakably like a face, a tribal mask, and were it not for the good weather we might take this as a bad omen, but instead we marvel at its presence and leave more fascinated than we ever thought we could be by this spectacular and diverse body of water. The channel slips over to the left now and runs along the shadow of another rock wall. Within moments we reach the approximate halfway point, a junction in the river where a system of multiple lakes to the east feeds the Walking Stick River. There is a small set of rocky rapids here but nothing preventing one from accessing the first lake with a short and simple carry. We climb high up onto a butte to the north and get a good clear view of the country around us. The weather is gorgeous and the view is spectacular. On both sides of the lake are impressive cliffs and from here we can make out the small river valley connecting us to the next lake over. The junction gives us a sound marker to judge progress by and we are happy to see that we are making good time. When we return to our boat and we have paddled a short ways we can already notice the increase in water volume since passing the junction. Not much further, what appears to be a small lake on the map appears to us nothing more than a vegetated opening, and only when we are significantly beyond it do we realize it has passed us by unnoticed. The channel is deeper and wider from this point on and there is a noticeable current in places which we joy in descending. A warm wind blows and the grass makes a soothing rustle as we inspire and revel in the sweet smell of sun-kissed flowers and water and humid earth. This is quite possibly the most beautiful river we have seen and we are so ecstatic to be here it

Figure 1.9 : Days 18 & 19



almost seems surreal. We round a bend through encroaching conifers and emerge into a vast plain of golden green grass, a freshwater marsh of grand proportions. To the east enters a second, though smaller, river and we cross the plain only slightly sentimental knowing we will soon reach the end of the Walking Stick River. In the final narrows we course between handsome pine-laden bluffs which open up subsequently, the channel widening before us as we get our first view of north Carroll Lake. It has not been more than two hours since we left and from here the whole thing seems like a dream. We allow ourselves to drift for awhile and absorb all that has happened. The river was one of the highlights of our trip, exceeding all expectations, yet it seemed to go by in the blink of an eye. We know there is still country to discover, but the high adventure is mostly over and we are more-or-less bound for civilization. We still can't believe our luck as we pull up to a rocky point where we decide to settle down for lunch. As if to wake us from our reverie, we are met with gale force winds that drive into us head-on. The place is rampant with old white beaver scat that seems hazardous under such conditions – after all, it's true we've been in the bush for almost 3 weeks but we still have a sense of proper hygiene, especially around food! We gingerly finish lunch and head back out, fighting the wind every step of the way to the next campsite we find. We round the next corner in time for Jacynthe to see a giant snapping turtle, surely in surprise and desperation, tumble from its high dry perch down a sheer cliff face and fall several meters into the water. Suicidal tendencies or calculated self-rescue? You be the judge! The westerlies are incredibly strong today but they are mostly on our side, allowing us to drift with considerable momentum along certain parts of the system. Each new bend seems to turn up something different and as we amble through the many lakes and passages of North Carroll we immerse ourselves in the diverse beauty of the landscape around us. We have seen so many impressive rock formations by now that it almost seems redundant, yet we continue to gasp in awe and say things like “Whoa! Check out that cliff!” and “Wow! Isn't that gorgeous?!” We locate a campsite on a rocky point next to a swift narrows and here find our first sign of human occupation since Walking “Stick”. It is an old beige clothes hanger that looks like it came from an early 1960's Simpson Sear's catalogue. They would have had a number of portages do to in order to get here and it makes me wonder how many others have been this way. We pass into another lake that is absolutely rife with water lilies and here we identify another potential campsite. Jacynthe harnesses the power of the wind with the help of our guide tarp but the wind is inconsistent and our automated cruise is short-lived. We find another site with camping potential and here find evidence of caribou activity, which is known to be fairly prevalent in the Carroll

Lake area. We sail down the final stretch before we veer west with the main channel and soon arrive at a rapids (P9). The park has imparted us some information about the area north of Carroll based on one man's account so I am not surprised to find this section impassable, though we entertain the thought of lining it first. This seems more trouble than it's worth but it is a difficult carry with steep rock on either side. We eventually find a trail over the bluff on the north side; it is fairly obvious, leading straight down to the water's edge past the rapids, but it peters out near the upstream side and we fail to find an obvious landing. Not wishing to negotiate the steep slippery rock with our 80-pound canoe, we choose a forested landing just prior for a much evened climb. Not much more than a kilometer away we reach a sizeable falls where the water jags sideways before tumbling down a chute into a grassy bay (P10). Mid-portage we disturb two frolicking otters, which reluctantly tread down to the water and swim out for a safer view. We choose the obvious carry over the southwest side, which is short and natural but the final descent to water is long, smooth and mossy in places with little to grip on. It likely only appears well-used because of extensive otter activity and may not be the best choice, especially on a wet day or when approaching from downstream. This being said, we don't scout the northeast side for other possibilities and that is an option that should be considered. Not far around the bend we are met with another rocky cascade that we have no choice but to portage, a very simple, flat and dry carry to the south (P11). At this point based on my understanding we are through the obstructions, so when we are faced with a fourth set of rapids I begin to wonder if we took a wrong turn somewhere. The sun is going down now; it's already been a big day and we have further to go yet. This final obstruction is part beaver dam and part rapid consisting of a relatively short chute with unavoidable rocks (P12). We consider scouting through the reeds on the right for an alternate passage but as time is drawing thin we opt for a very short carry through the woods to the left. Soon we are entering the final stretch before Carroll Lake proper and as we near our first major opening to the south we are startled by the crackling of branches offshore to our right. We struggle to catch a glimpse of the animal but we are disappointed; it may or may not have been a caribou but I suppose it could have just as easily been a moose. We decide to paddle north around the big island where Carroll Lake Lodge is located. Our arms are now very sore but it is sundown and we forge onward as we still need to find a campsite before dark. On our way through the north passage we cross a bloated but intact whitefish of a decent size; it seems very random as it floats toward us but Jacynthe's luck at fishing hasn't been great thus far so we decide to stage a photo – she hooks its lip with the jig attached to her fishing rod and holds

it up as though she caught it herself. We laugh heartily until we cry, all the while attempting to paddle as fast as we can before it is too dark to see. While scouting for a campsite we discover what appears to be a partially submerged caribou carcass on an island at a well-used shore lunch spot. This is not the most welcoming site, so we decide to move on. After several botched attempts we finally locate a rocky point with a fire ring and proceed to set up camp and cook with the speed of Olympians. When the mosquitoes reach epic proportions we are forced to move indoors for the remainder of our meal, but it soon becomes clear that something unwelcome has entered our safe haven. It is a lingering odor strongly resembling that of human feces, and though we try to remove all trace of it, it continues to plague us throughout the night.

### **Day 19: Carroll Lake**

After a huge day of high adventure we are ready for some serious relaxation, and though we are bound for Obukowin, we are in no mood to hurry ourselves today. We take the morning in stride with bannock and chai tea, catching up on reading while the sun warms our rocky point. When we are nice and hot we dive into the soothing cool water and bask in the glory of freedom and nature. When we finally pack up and leave it is 2:30 and we are met with a strong northwesterly that we must struggle against to cross the bottom half of Carroll Lake. In a moment of absent-mindedness I lead us down the western side of the peninsula into a dead-end inlet and we must retrace our steps back around the point. There is an island at the narrows to the south of here which intrigues us into fishing for a bit. This turns out to be a fruitful decision as we spend the better part of the afternoon here catching walleye (or “pickereel”, as we call ‘em in Manitoba). Most of them are small, but Jacynthe hooks a whopper that steals both her hook and line. I am determined to catch it now, and after twenty minutes of experimenting I manage to set the hook on this monster-of-a-fish. I am so excited to have it within my grasp that I give little thought to how I am going to land it, opting for a spontaneous extraction into junipers along the shore. To my horror it spits the hook free as it bounces off the vegetation and without further reflection I am down on all fours trying to contain it. The terrain is quite steep here, and while I somehow manage to refrain from falling backwards into the water, gravity unfortunately is against me and I must concede defeat. It is only when the fish has fled that I realize I have been double-duped, for my fishing rod is now in two pieces and by most accounts irreparable. D’OH! After considerable discussion, at the expense of another late arrival and dinner in the dark we decide not to go any further today. While attempting to recapture the giant walleye for dinner,

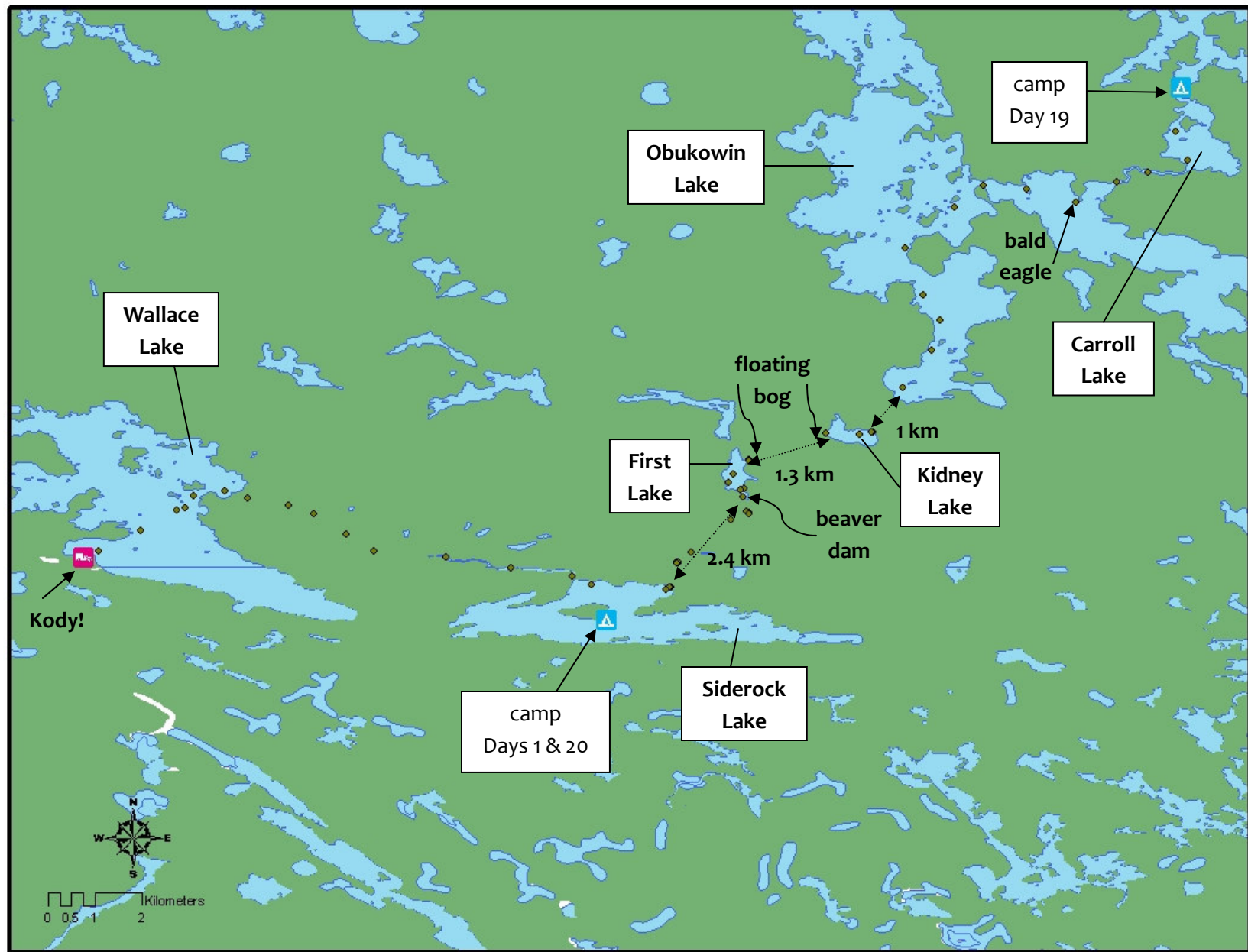
Jacynthe captures her biggest pike ever (a close second)! Soon she is pitching camp while I collect firewood and when this is done we head out on an exploratory paddle. It is late day and a loon lingers close by as we filter water for dinner. On our way back we catch numerous walleye, taking turns while the other paddles. Despite the sun there is a thin grey haze in the air and it smells conclusively like a forest fire. The setting sun is bright orange behind the smog, which makes for a unique scene to the naked eye. We settle in for a relaxing dinner overlooking Carroll Lake and reflect on the eventful trip we have had. We are proud of our accomplishments and more than anything charmed by all we have experienced in this beautiful place of natural wonder. We bask in the warm solitude of the fire in the last fleeting moments of dusk, giving thanks for all we have seen and learned here in Woodland Caribou Park. Tomorrow we head back to the 'Toba.

#### **Day 20: Carroll to Siderock**

Once again we can't believe our luck as it is gorgeous and sunny with no wind whatsoever. We have a BIG day in store so we kick things off with a breakfast of champions: eggs and mashed potatoes with Gouda cheese and espresso! We leave the site the way we found it with extra firewood to boot and begin our long trek south, stopping for a photo at the park boundary and reluctantly waving goodbye to this land of high adventure "where nature still rules". We are welcomed into Obukowin Lake by a majestic bald eagle perched on a tall dead tree near the mouth of the bay. It takes about 3 hours to reach our first big portage and we stop for a dip to cool off prior to our arrival. The first 1 km portage is quite wet, crossing calf-deep water for a stretch near the beginning, and the bugs are atrocious. At one point prior to reaching rocky ground it traverses a blown-over swamp, requiring some very fancy footwork. It is actually easier to float the canoe through this part and hang on for balance the second time through, a technique we learn to employ in other circumstances on this day. The latter half of the portage is high and dry and it is scorching hot when we reach Kidney Lake. We drink water, apply sunscreen and push along to the second 1.3 km portage, the first and last 200 meters of which is floating bog, plain and simple. There are some hairy sections along the trail but these are negotiated with little incident. We are exceedingly thankful to have made it this far without injury of any kind. We reach the celebrated "Stone Man" marker for a photo session at the entry to First Lake. This being a fairly high water year, the bedrock ends abruptly at a pond of sorts and we dawdle along the edge for several minutes, not at all sure how we will reach the floating bog without swimming. Nor are our



Figure 1.10 : Days 20 & 21



paddles long enough to reach solid ground so we must tempt fate as we pussyfoot tenuously from one submerged footing to the next. Of course it is easier the second time around with the canoe for flotation, though nowhere near as challenging. The sphagnum mat absorbs every ounce of momentum and by the time we have slogged all our gear to the edge of open water we are ready for a nice cool swim. As fate would have it the lake is quite shallow and the water somewhere between cool and lukewarm, though we make the most of it and retreat to the canoe as soon as we can to avoid unwelcome “hitchers”. We find a high spot on bedrock for lunch and while feeding I discover a wood tick crawling on the food pack. Having ample experience with said parasite, I am quick to free up my pocket knife and swiftly proceed to cut its blood-sucking head clean off, summary execution style. My grandfather would be proud! After confirming we are free of other imposters, we head south down the grassy meanders leading up to a giant beaver dam and the beginning of our last 2.4 km portage. We are particularly grateful for Martin Kehoe’s detailed coverage of these portages ([www.canoestories.com](http://www.canoestories.com)), for without his waypoints we would never be truly sure if we were on the right path, and indeed we were. It took some scouting to locate the best entry point, but as in Martin’s account we were able to paddle literally right up to the trail and unload next to the beaver dam at the far right. The trail is somewhat submerged but sandy and firm for about 10 meters before it branches off into the woods and up onto the rock escarpments to the right. The portage is remarkably diverse, with rocky panoramic uplands, open pine woodlands over deep sands, dense muddy mixed forest, swampy country, and a wide grassy field reminiscent of the prairies. It intrigues us throughout but it is lengthy and a challenge with the 80 lb. Velociraptor on my back, which we return to collect about  $\frac{3}{4}$  through. After about 20 km of paddling and 15 km of cumulative portaging, we are completely worn out and could not be happier to see the cool, soothing water of Siderock Lake. We celebrate the end of our last portage with a picture, launching through the reeds onto the lake and towards our first and final campsite. Anglers in a motorboat remind us how close we are to civilization, but that does not prevent us from stripping down and jumping into the lake with whoops of satisfaction and relief. We set up shop for the last time and dine on macaroni and cheese with tasty packaged tuna while the resident rabbits curiously inspect the premises for signs of leftover food. We have eaten like kings throughout this trip, largely thanks to all of Jacynthe’s hard work dehydrating and preparing meals. Thoroughly pleased with our great fortune, we hit the hay early and sleep like babies.

## Day 21: Siderock to Winnipeg

Throughout our trip we have consistently slept through the alarm, but this morning we wake up raring to go at 7. It took us this long to perfect the technique of hanging the watch directly over our heads, but at least now we know for next time. Glory be, it is another gorgeous day and we are blessed creatures on this Earth. We take in the view of the lake and its bordering cliffs from the comfort of a high rock where we sip our tea and eat our breakfast. We are in very good spirits when we head off and we tackle the numerous meanders of the Wanipigow River with swiftness and efficiency, crossing paths with an aboriginal family heading to Siderock for a day of fishing. We reach Wallace Lake in a mere 1.5 hours but before leaving the river we collect a bouquet of flowers for my mother back home. Although it is a bit cloudier and there is a light wind, nothing can keep us from one last swim in the healing waters of the Canadian Shield and in this we are accompanied by a pair of doting loons who swim and frolic along nearby. We bring out the binoculars and confirm our next bearing – it is my faithful pick-up Kody, the sight of which causes our battle-hardened Prospector to soar with delight, cresting the waves with great ease and within moments we have reached our final take-out, the boat launch at Wallace Lake. We are in no immediate hurry so we savour the fruit of our labour with a tailgate party overlooking the lake, concocting a stew of just about every last dehydrated item left while listening to canned music for the first time in 3 weeks, the Celtic & old-timey sounds of Tim O'Brien (by special request):

“Born in the mountains, many years ago,  
I've climbed these hills and valleys through the rain and snow,  
I've seen the lightning flashin', I've heard the thunder roll,  
I've endured, I've endured, how long must one endure.”

As all our senses delight we revel in the satisfaction of what we have accomplished. Excitement is in the air as we load up the truck and when we fire up the engine it is clear that Kody has been eager to roll with us once again. Before leaving we pay a visit to Lem the campground host and thank him for harbouring our steed for such a time. The sky is clear and blue and we couldn't have picked a better day to travel. On our way through Bissett we pick up a cold drink and proceed to munch on the stash of chocolate bars we had left behind for just such an emergency. En route for Pegtown we decide to spoil ourselves even more. Water levels being what they were on our trip, we missed out on a vital part of the outdoor experience, which we now make up for with a slight detour to Grand Beach, what I understand to be the largest freshwater sand beach in North

America and the summertime pride of Manitobans everywhere. Here we live it up large, the gorgeous fine sand a pleasing massage for our battle-hardened tootsies. This will be the fourth time we have swam today, yet here is uniquely novel to us, as are the crowds of people we are so unused to seeing. We ring it all in with tasty burgers and fries and finish things off with the most spectacular ice cream cone we have ever tasted. From here things become fairly predictable, but in our hearts and minds we retain and cherish the many adventures we have had the pleasure of sharing during our 3-week escapade in Woodland Caribou Provincial Park. As we cross the longitudinal center of Canada and enter the city limits of Winnipeg, we are already planning next year's adventure, the details of which we are best to leave for another place and time....