

Next Lake to Baker Lake along the Dubawnt and Thelon

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From Prince Albert in Saskatchewan the road runs north via La Ronge to the south end of Wollaston Lake. From here we wanted to canoe to Baker Lake at the end of Chesterfield Inlet on Hudson Bay. Since we are already 47 and 55 years old, we broke the trip into three parts: one summer from Wollaston Lake to Stony Rapids at the east end of Lake Athabasca via the Fond du Lac River; the second summer from there via the Chipman River to the height of land between Selwyn Lake and Flett Lake in the Northwest Territories and back to Stony Rapids; the third summer from Flett Lake to Baker Lake. We used a Coleman canoe made of polyethylene. Although the softness of polyethylene is a drawback on the hard rock of the Canadian Shield and on the ice of Dubawnt Lake, the canoe comes at half the price of the better white water canoes and it travels well on the lakes. The problem of softness was readily solved by gluing a few strips of fibreglass to the keel of the canoe.

On 29 June 1983 we flew from Stony Rapids to the south end of Flett Lake. Stony Rapids was under heavy attack by black flies, but the season was still too early for them at Flett Lake, and we could load our canoe in peace. The heavily wooded shores of Flett Lake do not offer many good campsites. We had to pitch our tent for the first night on one of the "moss glaciers" described by J.W. Tyrrell in his book *Across the Sub-Arctics of Canada*, which is the first written account about the route from Stony Rapids to Baker Lake. The next morning brought us to the portage to Wholdaia Lake. Although only wilderness canoeists use this portage now, it is well marked by parts lost from snowmobiles. Apparently, there is a good deal of motorized traffic between Stony Rapids and Wholdaia Lake in winter. The portage is swampy; it is difficult to find dry spots for the baggage at either end of it, but camping is good in the middle.

Two calm days permitted good progress and we came close to the outlet of Wholdaia Lake, where we reached the protection of islands against a wind that sprang up on 2 July. The islands combined with what seems to be a magnetic anomaly made it somewhat difficult to find the outlet. There is a cabin at 13VET7555. (We use the military grid reference to locate a point; this grid is shown on the 1:250,000 topographic maps.) The following day brought us to Hinde Lake. The wind kept increasing. The shore was most inhospitable for camping. A very small rock island appeared just in time. When we landed, a goose took off in terror. There was a lovely nest with two goslings out of the eggs, one just struggling out, and one still to go. We had no choice but to share the island with the goslings, pitching the tent as far from their nest as possible, which was about five metres. During the night the mother goose flew over the nest to ascertain that her babies were still alive, but she did not dare to land. The next morning a fourth gosling had appeared. With no mother goose in sight, we were adopted as parents. Since the wind kept blowing, we could not move on. The goslings tried very hard to get into our tent, but we did not want to spoil them and they had to settle in front of it. By noon the four little fellows were in the water, very disappointed that we did not join them. In late afternoon it dawned on them that something was wrong with their parents. Mother goose was sitting out on the windswept lake and called them. One by one they left the island and braved the waves. The youngest fellow had the hardest time; since we were the first moving things it saw, we should be its mother. However, the call of mother goose had a stronger imprint in its little brain, and eventually it decided to follow her call.

The north shore of Hinde Lake features a beautiful esker with wonderful campsites. There is also a cabin (13VET7185). We lined the first rapid at the outlet of Hinde Lake, which is over a ledge. Several other rapids since leaving Wholdaia Lake and many more to come were of the bolder-and-gravel type that can be run with care.

There was sometimes a problem with too little water toward the foot of the rapid. On 5 July we camped on a very long and impressive esker just south of Boyd Lake. A well-beaten path of bear tracks on the top of the esker showed that we were not the only ones who preferred eskers.

Getting across Boyd Lake was the most difficult navigational part of the trip. The lake is filled with islands, and the topographic map repeatedly shows passages between them that do not exist. At the outlet of Boyd Lake is a cairn high on the left bank. The trees peter out along the lake but small groves of trees or some bushes can be found as far north as Dubawnt Lake. The rapids between Boyd and Barlow Lake could all be run.



Dubawnt River Gorge above Grant Lake

On 8 July we entered Barlow Lake. Soon a white ice blink appeared in the north. The northern part of the lake - about north of 62° - was still filled with ice. We had learned in Stony Rapids that the ice break-up was about one week late, Canada's share of the El Nino weather pattern of 1983. When we could go no further we pitched camp on an island.

The next morning a strong wind had opened a lead along the west and north shore of the lake - between the shore and the islands located along shore in this part of the lake - and we pushed our way through without too much trouble from the ice but plenty of trouble from the wind. The rapid shown on the topographic map between Barlow Lake and Carey Lake can probably be run in calm weather, but the high wind gave us too little control over the canoe and we lined. At the entrance of Carey Lake is a long "debris" rapid that is readily run.

On 10 July we fought the wind across the southern part of Carey Lake and had to pull out after 3 hours. However, the wind had the redeeming effect of blowing the ice to the east side of the lake. Hence, we could reach the outlet of the lake on the following day, drifting with the ice through the easy exit rapid. Access to Tyrrell's cairn on the east shore of Carey Lake was blocked by the ice.

Soon after, we reached the section of rapids shown on the topographic map below Carey Lake. We lined two rapids and portaged a third. Rain showers drenched from above what was not soaked from below. Once through this section of rapids the scenery makes up for the hardship. There are high rocky shores and some current. On two occasions schools of otters came to inspect us, showing their tricks and apparently laughing. We passed another cabin (13VET71619), built of incredibly thick logs, even though only occasional groves of trees could be seen now.

Flett Lake. There was no ice. The following day we fought our way across Nicholson Lake against a stiff wind. Again there was no ice.

The first rapid below Nicholson Lake was run, the second portaged. We set up camp at the end of the portage. Rain and wind kept us at this place for two nights. We were on the right bank. Across the river were one cabin and a frame for a tent cabin (13VFV1960). On the third day we launched the canoe in a heavy wind but soon had to pull out since the wind made it impossible to run the rapids. We spent three more days only a short distance below the previous camp. To make use of the time we portaged our equipment about 1.5 km, although this stretch could have been run in calm weather.

On 18 July we could move again. We covered 40 km and reached the last rapids above Dubawnt Lake. Besides wind and rain we had to face fog caused by the cooling of the northwind as it blew across the ice of Dubawnt Lake only a short distance away. The next day the sun broke through the fog by 5:00 and we were ready to go by 6:30. But a heavy fog set in again and we had no choice but to pitch the tent once more to keep dry and warm. By 9:00 the fog lifted and we were gone in an instant. We ran the first rapid shown on the map (13VFV4678), and tried to pull out to scout the second one. Having become careless because of the many rapids run without trouble during the previous two weeks, we did not pull out in time and were sucked into the rapid. Some heavy paddling got us through. The fog closed in again and we entered Dubawnt Lake under conditions best described as continuous transition between fog, water, and ice, on the twenty-first day from the height of land at Flett Lake.

After we had groped around in the fog for some time the sun broke through. We found an open channel close to shore that soon widened and we were paddling across open water. Camp was pitched a few hours later at Teall Point. This is a point of land sticking out some 10 km from the west shore of the lake. The ice was packed solidly against this point. Tyrrell mentions that they had the same problem and got around it by a portage across a narrow neck of land (13VFV5097). We did the same on the following day. Paddling north we were protected from the ice by a chain of islands, one of which is denoted Snow Island on the map. Northeast of Snow Island the protective barrier of the islands comes to an end, and we were stopped by ice piling up on the shore (13VLF5513). For three days we enjoyed absolutely calm, sunny weather. Anywhere else this would have been a gift from heaven but here we needed the north wind to drive the ice away from shore. We noted that there was always a very light breeze towards shore. First we thought this was bad luck but eventually we realized that the direction of the breeze changed from east to southeast to south as we worked our way along the shore of Dubawnt Lake. The explanation is probably that the lake is so large that the ice creates a local high pressure in the middle of the lake that causes a slight breeze toward shore everywhere around the lake. The result is, of course, that the ice is pushed to shore everywhere during very calm weather conditions.

After three days of waiting the ice thinned out somewhat and we started again on 23 July. The following ten kilometres required constant pushing through ice floes, running the canoe up on the ice to break it up, or dragging the canoe over the ice for short distances to the next open water. Eventually we got some protection from several small islands, sneaked through a narrow passage (14VLF6019), and faced another section of the shore unprotected by islands and thus blocked by ice. For four days we waited here for the ice to break. The weather was perfect. Except for the light breeze from the lake - which came here straight from the south - there was no wind and the sky was as clear and blue as in a tourist brochure. We used the time to glue a few more strips of fibreglass to the keel of the canoe, since the ice had worn the old layer thin.

The waiting became too much of a strain by 27 July, and we decided to push right through and over the ice. Of course, sun and blue sky vanish the moment one hits a large field of ice since the ice produces its own layer of fog. It is only a few metres high, but this is all the canoeist needs to feel cold, wet, and blinded. Groping our way through fog and ice we started hearing voices. Not having seen anyone else for 28 days we thought first of an hallucination. But, sure enough, soon three canoes came out of the fog. The group consisted of five boys from a summer camp in Minnesota and their camp counsellor. United we pushed on for a few

protecting islands and faced the large expanse of open lake to Outlet Bay. The water was covered with ice floes but the passage appeared possible (14VLF8327).

By morning a southerly wind sprang up and soon the lake to the east was solidly packed with ice. We all settled down for a long wait, but luck was with us. After a few hours the wind shifted to the north and began to blow furiously. Within an hour all the ice had been pushed south and our passage was clear. This was the first north wind we had had since entering Dubawnt Lake nine days earlier.

In early afternoon of 28 July the wind calmed down enough for us to make the long open crossing to Outlet Bay. There was no ice in Outlet Bay. The north wind kept blowing for three days, which slowed our progress since we had to paddle straight into the wind. On 30 July we reached the first rapid at the outlet of Dubawnt Lake. We were again travelling alone, the group from the boy's camp having decided to visit Mooberg's Fish Camp in Outlet Bay (14VMF1536), which required a detour.

The first rapid was run without any difficulty. A chain of more rapids followed (14VMF1752). We were on the left bank and had to make a portage of about 1.5 km across rocky and swampy land. It appeared that this could have been avoided by keeping to the right bank. A stretch of smooth river followed. The next rapid (14VMF1856) required a very short portage on the right. The following sequence of rapids was readily runnable except for a short distance requiring lining. By noon of 31 July we reached the head of the great Dubawnt Gorge.

Climbing up the right bank we could see Grant Lake. The portage is some 4 to 5 km long; its lower end is not well defined since there is turbulent water for some distance that one may or may not want to run. We built a cairn at the head of the portage, since we had spent quite some time deciding how far we should stay with the river and would have appreciated some marker indicating the beginning of the portage. The portage itself is as good as any portage of this length can be on the tundra. It is completely dry at the beginning, then follows an esker that looks like a superhighway. At the end it gets rocky if one stays close to the river and swampy if one keeps further inland. Small bushes are growing here again.

The Dubawnt River Gorge is one of the major sights of Northern Canada, in the same class as Parry Falls on the Lockhart River, Dickson Canyon on the Hanbury River, or Bloody Falls on the Coppermine River.

Grant Lake had some ice floes, but they were of no significance. On 1 August we camped above a 2 km long rapid (14VMF3276). It cannot be lined, and a portage would be arduous. We ran it even though it required much maneuvering, and an upset in the upper part of such a long rapid is very risky for a party with only one canoe. Some 15 kilometres of quiet paddling followed, then came first a ledge rapid that we portaged on the right, and a very long rapid at the entrance to Wharton Lake. This rapid was less risky since its challenge was the avoidance of shallow spots rather than the rock dodging in fast water of the previous long rapid. On 2 August, 35 days since Flett Lake, we pitched our tent on an island in Wharton Lake.



Exit Gates of the Dubawnt River

avoid the lake's open northern part we went through a narrow passage that the topographic map shows as open water but which required some dragging of the canoe over the rocks in very shallow water (14VMF6497). Going out of Wharton Lake there is a powerful rapid not marked on the map (14VMG6900). No white water is visible from the head of the rapid but the fast water creates high waves that do not break. One starts down along the right bank and crosses over to the left in the middle of the rapid to avoid the highest waves. Shortly after, the river divides into two branches that again come together in Marjorie Lake. Most of the water is in the eastern branch which we followed. The previously mentioned party of three canoes followed the western branch, as we were told later on. We were also told that there are no rapids in the western branch. We found a dismal campsite just above the first rapid on the east branch and had to stay there three nights in a driving rain.

Of the five rapids shown on the map in this area (14VMF8094) we ran four and made a short portage around the fifth. At the entrance to Marjorie Lake is a vicious ledge rapid not shown on the map that we portaged on the left.

At the outlet of Marjorie Lake we found a camp of geologists prospecting for uranium. We enjoyed their hospitality for one night. Particularly, the first hot shower in 39 days was welcome. There we met again the party of three canoes, and were told about their easy passage down the west branch of the Dubawnt River above Marjorie Lake.

Just below the camp is the rapid where A. Moffatt died in 1955, as far as we know (14WMG7623). We made a portage of about 100 metres on the right. The rapid can be run without too much trouble, but thinking of Moffatt and having only one canoe, we passed up the opportunity. Below the rapid come some 25 kilometres of an unnamed lake. The Twin Mountains of Tyrrell's book are conspicuous on the north side of this lake.

Going out of the lake there is a long rapid that can readily be run by first keeping to the right and then crossing over to the left. This stretch of the Dubawnt River is the only one that has a fast, helpful current for any distance.

Almost exactly at 100 western longitude one hits the exist gates of the Dubawnt River (14WMG5248). This rapid is not shown on the map and Tyrrell does not mention it, even though it is the most conspicuous feature of the Dubawnt River except for the gorge above Grant Lake. We were on the right bank and made a short portage; the descent to the river was very steep and there was hardly any space for loading. The left bank looked much better for portaging, even though it calls for a steep ascent at the beginning, but the current was too fast to cross over.

River is most inconspicuous. The only visible sign is a slight change of the colour of the sandy islands from reddish to more yellow. The description in Tyrrell's book is quite incorrect. There is no driftwood here, as Tyrrell states; the big piles of driftwood are on the west end of Beverly Lake where the Thelon River enters.

Soon after reaching the Thelon River we met a party with two canoes from the Kingston area. In the evening, 8 August and 41 days from Flett Lake, we reached Aberdeen Lake. Two days of hard paddling brought us to its east end. Schultz Lake was reached in one more day. The rapid shown on the map at the entrance to Schultz Lake (14WNG5577) was barely noticeable. We met another party of two canoes from Minnesota here.

On 12 August we woke up in a driving rain. It got worse during the day, and the following night the water was sloshing around in the tent. The great convenience of a waterproof tent floor had turned into its opposite. There does not seem to be anything else one can do to keep dry in a hard driving rain storm on the tundra but NOT to use a floor in order to permit the water to drain. The next day was even worse than the previous one. During the night of 13 August the wind got so severe that our canoe was flipped over even though it was tied down to large rocks at both ends. We had no choice but to get out of the tent, line the canoe up with the wind, and tie it down once more. We used the sponge intended for bailing out the canoe to bail out the tent at two-hourly intervals.

On 14 August the rain stopped but the wind kept blowing. Finally, on 15 August the wind decreased enough that we could risk crossing the large bay at the west end of Schultz Lake. Since the wind blew from the north and we tried to follow the shorter route along the south shore of the lake, we were fighting waves that were getting too high. We decided to go to the south of the large island (14WNG6877) and the long peninsula in the southeast corner of the lake. The temperature dropped dismally, and we barely stopped for lunch since only hard paddling kept us warm. This route required three short portages (14WNG671) but was worth it. We camped in the middle of the fourth portage that was perhaps 200 metres long and offered excellent camping.

On 16 August we left Schultz Lake. The rapid at the outlet presented no problem. The big rapid farther down was evaded by paddling into a bay to the south and portaging 1.5 km due east back to the Thelon River below the rapid (14WPG0480). We camped at the end of the portage, knowing that one more day would bring us to Baker Lake. The following day, 17 August and 50 days from Flett Lake, we ran down the 80 odd kilometres to Baker Lake. This stretch of the river was quite populated with tents and motorboats from Baker Lake. There is occasionally turbulent water right down to the lake and many sandbars clog the outlet to the lake. We pitched camp close to the airport, where one enjoys more privacy than on the bustling beach of Baker Lake settlement.

WCA ANNUAL MEETING

The 1984 AGM will take place on Saturday, March 3, 1984 on the premises of St. James-Bond United Church in Toronto. St. James-Bond is located two blocks north of Eglinton Avenue on the corner of Avenue Road and Millbank Avenue, and thus within easy reach of the majority of WCA members.

It is hoped that the convenient location will induce a record number of people to participate in this enterprise. The AGM is the only forum which gives members the opportunity to meet with the executive of the Association at a time when an account of the past year is presented and the direction for the coming year can be influenced. It is an opportunity to voice concerns, initiate changes, offer help and express appreciation.

The day's activities are planned so as to allow for a great deal of contact time. The morning is given over to reports from the Chairman and the various committees, and the election of three members to the Board to succeed the three individuals whose terms expire at this time.

In the afternoon, Dr. Ron Sonstegard will discuss aspects of environmental health: "The Effects of Water Pollution". Ron Sonstegard has studied at South Dakota

State, Guelph, Harvard and M.I.T. He is an internationally recognized authority on comparative ecology and an expert on fish health. Perhaps more importantly, he is an enthusiastic outdoorsman and genuinely concerned about environmental issues.

Our evening speaker will be Eric Morse whose topic will be "Changes During the Past 75 Years in Canadian Wilderness Canoeing". Eric Morse really needs no introduction to a canoeing audience. He has been spending his vacations making wilderness canoe trips throughout Canada since 1918; he is author of Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada: Then and Now. He has an M.A. and LL.D from Queens, is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and a member of the Order of Canada. We know you would not want to miss his address.

A detailed schedule of events and additional information about the meeting will be mailed to members at the end of January. The names and resumes of individuals who have declared their candidacy for election to the Board of Directors appear in this issue of the newsletter. Other members interested in contesting a seat on the Board should send resumes to H. Pohl (address on the back page) so that this information can be included as part of the January mailing.