

Paddling the Dubawnt River
A General Guide to the River
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This brief document is in no way meant to be a definitive guide to this wild and remote sub-arctic river. All it should be used for is to give a general overview of the "How to Get There" and "Some of the Rapids". Water levels vary radically from year to year and one person's comfort level on a remote river like this may be far over the head of another person. A few years ago I wrote a story for www.GORP.com about the Kazan River and had occasion to exchange phone calls and emails with two men who wanted to paddle the river. Post trip one of these paddlers commented, "I wish you had told us about all the rapids from the bottom of Kazan Falls to Baker Lake!" It was obvious that he was mad and felt that my story had not given him the information he needed. I explained that when Lynda and I had done this section it was pouring rain - in fact almost snowing - and that we were so cold we were near hypothermic. Because we were trying to generate body heat, we ran everything without getting out of the boat to scout once. "Besides, truth be known, we found it all pretty easy." I told him. The real problem with this pair was simply that we had no rivers in common with them and we could not gauge each other's respective skill level. They simply made the assumption that if Lynda and I had done it at age 50 they shouldn't have any trouble. In contrast, I also spoke to a lady from the US of A recently. She wanted to do the Dubawnt this summer and needed information. Because we had both paddled a few of the same barrens rivers we could easily cross-reference each other's skill level and make comparisons about rapids we both knew. Based on what she told me about her experience on the Kazan River she will do fine and can use these notes as a general "Heads Up" guide.

So when you read this be sure to remember that the Dubawnt River is a very remote river, you can expect no help if you get in trouble, and you best be a darn good paddler well versed in sub-arctic barrens travel. In short, the Dubawnt River shouldn't be the first "north of tree-line river" you decide to paddle.

MAPS

You will need the following 1: 250,000 scale maps for this trip:

Stony Rapids 74P Wholdaia Lake 75A Snowbird Lake 65D
Boyd Lake 65E Carey Lake 65L Kamilukuak Lake 65K
Dubawnt Lake 65N Tebesjuak Lake 650 Aberdeen Lake 66B
Beverly Lake 66C Schultz Lake 66A

As an aside, you can buy your maps from Horizon's Unlimited. Just don't get talking to Ric Drediger about where you're going as you'll never get him off the phone!

I also took a series of 1:50,000 scale maps for areas that I thought would be tricky to navigate, or where I thought I wanted a better pre-trip look at the rapids. As well, at age 52, my eyes suck big-time and I now have to wear reading glasses so I often need the detail of a 1:50 to see what's going on. Take as many, or as few as you want, but my advice is to get those for the area from Wharton to Marjorie Lakes as this is a real tricky area to sort out. I have listed the 1:50 maps that I took under their respective sections of the river below.

GENERAL NOTES ON THE RAPIDS

Hinde Lake to Boyd Lake

You won't find any rapids at all until the exit from Hinde Lake. The first rapid is at 5795E / 67885N and is just plain ole' fun. We only stopped to look at it so I could take some pictures of the esker running along the north shore of the river.

Keep your head up at 5950E / 68490E. This is a longish section of mid-big water with some gentle turns. We did it starting river right and then back ferrying side to side to keep out of any of the slightly bigger stuff that would get us wet. This was a real fun stretch and we camped at the bottom of the last curve and caught grayling like crazy! And they stayed for supper with us!

There are several other rapids in this section but the only one of these to give a second glance to is the last one above Boyd Lake where. Located at 5965E / 68575N it's nothing real tricky but for what it's worth, we ran it river left punching through a nice little "almost-ledge" wave. But it was a sunny day and the river seemed real friendly! Funny how a river always looks better on a hot sunny day!

1:50,000 scale maps

Hinde Lake 65E/4

Arnot Lake 65E/6

Barlow Lake to Carey Lake

Located at 6105E / 6886N at the exit from Barlow Lake, this is the first rapid on the river you should watch out for. It's big and could get you in trouble but there aren't any boulders or holes that I saw. We didn't scout it from shore choosing to slide down river left to an eddy where we could see the rest of the run (this is a straight through rapid but from the top it is hard to see the tail end). From here we did an aggressive front ferry to river right and then slid down the right shore to the bottom.

There are more marked rapids on this section but they are real easy and don't require any great degree of maneuvering. We did a lot of front and back ferries through this entire section just for practice and 'cause I love to feel my Novacraft 17 foot prospector dance her magic. If you're having trouble in these rapids my advise is to call Tukto Lodge and get their Single Otter to pull you out now. It gets lots WORSE from here kids.

1:50,000 scale maps

Nicol Lake 65E/11

"No Name" 65E/14

"No Name" 65L/2

Carey Lake to Markham Lake

The first rapid at the exit from Carey Lake is full of potential for trouble. Located at 6055E / 6909N, you will find the choice of going left or right around an island. We chose the left channel

and from the upstream view of the right channel at the bottom of the island I'd say it is the sane choice.

The first rapid is on an east to west run of the river and drops into a calm bay. We scouted it from the left shore and ran it easily river left. From here the river turns tight right and you find a second rapid that is real nasty. No doubt doable any number of ways, we opted for the left side. I lined about 100 meters to get past some gnarly stuff (if I had been with a second canoe I probably would have run it) and then we ran river left doing a lot of back paddling and some easy back ferry rock avoidance. The trouble with this rapid is that although the right side and the middle look good, it is long enough that you can't really see what you are getting into until you get into it. I don't like this kind of planning and opt to only go as far as the next safe eddy that I can see and know I can get into.

There are other rapids marked right after these ones, but they are nothing but fast water with little riffles and you could float them with an open beer in hand and it would all work out just fine.

1:50,000 scale maps

"No Name" 65L/7

Nicholson Lake to Dubawnt Lake

The first rapid at the exit from Nicholson Lake is fast and could get you in trouble if you don't keep your head up. You will see two islands marked on the map and we chose the right channel. Not shown on the map, we scouted the first rapid from the canoe and did a full front ferry from river right to river left. What you will notice here is that the volume is much larger and that the river is really haulin' ass! From here we worked back to the right to set up for the second rapid which is the one, I think, shown on the map at 6195E / 69593N. Looking a lot worse than it really is, we scouted it from shore and paddled it river right and then easily backferried to the center and ran it out.

Then it really gets crazy! The next rapid at 6205E / 69610E is an S turn that has the first turn heading to river left. We started it on the right side but since this meant that I couldn't see what was coming around the point jutting out from the right shore, we backferried to the center, and then to the far left margin. From an eddy on the left side, I could see that if we got back to the right we could probably get down the right margin (so when you do it, skip the front ferry to the left side and just slip down the right side!) We did a full front ferry to river right and let me tell you the river here is really moving big time. It reminded me of some of the ferries we did on the Coppermine River at Sandstone and Escape Rapids. We got to a good eddy on the right shore where we could scout from a high bank. From here we snuck the right shore to the beginning of the next turn. From this turn we back ferried toward river center and finished to the left margin of the river. But I gotta' tell you that the front ferry we did momentarily gave me that "tight gut puckered you know what" feeling for a few seconds. THIS IS FAST WATER! A swim here will see you in the river for miles ... and it's damn cold!

There are two more rapids at 6470E / 6978N just before Dubawnt and we did them river left and river right respectively. There are any number of ways to do these rapids as they are real straight ahead and short. We scouted them both from the canoe but if it's near lunch this would be a great place to stop! And I bet the fishing would be unreal!

1:50,000 scale maps

"No Name" 65L/15

"No Name" 65L/16

Dubawnt Lake to Grant Lake

The first rapid at the exit from Dubawnt Lake is at 4155E / 70500N. We ran it river right and camped mid-way down the rapid where I could see that the left run would also work just fine.

The next rapid is located at 4170E / 70515N. This is a long rapid that turns gently to the left. You can't really see the bottom with any degree of confidence so it's worth scouting it to get a line you can live with. We ran it river right to about the 1/3 mark and then scouted from a high bank above a big eddy we floated into. I found a line tight river right to about the 2/3 mark where we started to back ferry toward river center and finally to the left margin near the bottom. You'll find lots of rocks to avoid but no holes of any consequence.

The third rapid located at 4175E / 70562N is a short deep run where the river makes a gentle right hand turn. We ran it easily on river left without scouting.

A short distance from this rapid you get to the humble beginnings of the canyon. You can run this section for a considerable distance along the right shore until you are just not comfortable any longer. It is your call when to pull out and seek the safety of the portage past the Dubawnt Canyon. We got a long way down after I lined a particularly bad corner where a little point juts out. At the top of this corner there is a pile of rocks clearly marking the start of the portage. Take a look from here and you can see that if you can get past this corner you can shave off lots of carrying. It isn't a real fun place to line and I essentially swam the canoe around the corner hanging onto the stern line. This sounds a lot more dangerous than it really is. There's lots of slow moving shallow water below the corner so it's real easy to get back to shore. This section past this point is runnable, but you would have to be out in the main current about 15 meters from the point, and a swim here would almost certainly see you into the Canyon proper ... and this would be a certain death. Your call and don't say I didn't warn you!

At the tail end of the portage you'll be on a long raised gravel esker that's ideal for camping. If you camp beside the small tundra pond on the right of the esker you can bathe in luke-warm water! My advice is to stay for a night and walk the canyon in the light of evening ... believe me it's well worth it!

In the morning you can hunt out the small rock pile along the river's edge where you can safely get back into the river. There's any number of ways to finish the bottom stretch. We did it all along the right side, lining once, and maneuvering through the rubble rock fields at the bottom.

1:50,000 scale maps

"No Name" 65N/10

Grant Lake to Wharton Lake

The first rapid is at 4300E / 70690N. It's big and fast but there's no holes or boulders. We ran it river right and slipped the canoe around into a full front ferry and piled into the eddy on river left at the bottom. There was absolutely no reason to do this ferry other than for fun and practice.

The next rapid at 4324E / 70760N starts as a turn to the right and then back to the left. There is nothing here to worry about and it is not big or pushy. You will need to do a lot of easy manoeuvring toward the bottom where the rapid is real shallow and your biggest chore will be to avoid rocks and look for a channel.

The map shows a rapid about 5 kilometers further on, and another 6 kilometers past it, but they are nothing to worry about.

The last rapid before Wharton Lake at 4510E / 70805N (Uksuriajuag Rapids) should be run on the right side. You will note a tiny island at the head of this rapid. Stay on the right of the island and shortly after you will find a point jutting out into the river with an eddy at the top. Scout this rapid as it has a real bad ledge at the bottom. We made a short carry across the point as the ledge was way out of control the day we saw it. Others I have talked to have lined it in lower water. The bottom is a long, very safe, gravel rapid where you will spend all your time trying to find the channel with the most water.

1:50,000 scale maps

"No Name" 65N/16

Uksuriajuak Rapids 650/13

Wharton Lake to Marjorie Lake

This is a tricky section of the river to navigate and you will find yourself off and on maps 650 (Tebesjuak Lake) and 66B (Aberdeen Lake) all day. As I said before, this is a great place to have a few 1:50,000 scale maps.

There is only one rapid worth noting here located at 4689E / 7100N. It runs around a corner to the right and we did it all along the right side. At the bottom it gets big and fast and we did a lot of hard back paddling just to slow down and stay dry as we floated through big waves.

There are two main routes from Wharton Lake to Marjorie Lake that are best described as the north (or west) route and the south (or east) route. We opted for the north route turning into it at 4742E / 70967N. This is a gorgeous little side channel that only has one rapid of any consequence located near the entrance to Marjorie Lake. We ran it down the center and punched through a mid-sized hole.

If you are even near ready to camp for the day stay in this side channel, as once you run the last rapid the camping is real marginal until you are off of Marjorie Lake.

1:50,000 scale maps

Uksuriajuak Rapids 650/13

"No Name" 66B/4

Marjorie Lake 66B/3

Marjorie Lake to Beverly Lake

The first rapid out of Marjorie Lake at 4765E / 71232N is long and nasty. We started down river left as it looked best. Part way down I could see the river got real bad toward the bottom where a long point juts out into the river. We had to do a full front ferry across to river right where we easily lined about 25 meters past a nasty bit and ran the rest. It looked to me like the best line would have been river right all the way.

There is another rapid at 4615E / 71371N but it is real easy. We ran it river right.

The Dubawnt Gates is pretty wild. Located at 4515E / 71485N scouting is mandatory. I think the best plan here is to portage about 50 meters across the point that extends out into a big ledge. Did I do that? Not a chance! Like an idiot I took us through the ledge and got far too close to the 6 foot holes on our left. There is lots of volume here and we got stuck in the boiling water between the edge of the holes and the huge eddy on our right. When we slid into the slot and I saw one of the huge left side waves about 3 feet over my head that broke over the deck, I knew we were real close to eating it. And if you've been in this spot before in your life you know that the hole is really trying to suck your canoe in for a close-up and personal look at you! We fought like crazy to get out of the squirrely water and into the huge eddy that we could have portaged into in about ten minutes if I had used my brain. All Lynda said, as I bailed out about 5 gallons of water, was, "That's the biggest *7^%\$! water I've ever been in my life!"

I was rattled enough that I decided to carry along the right side up onto the 150 foot high sheer cliffs past the nasty stuff. This was no fun but I just had that feeling that it was time to carry again to get my ego back on the ground for awhile. You see, up to here, we had only had one carry excepting the short one prior to Wharton Lake and the mandatory Dubawnt Canyon carry and I knew I was secretly trying to run the whole river.

I think that the run from the eddy would have been easy had I not got rattled. I would paddle out of the eddy to the edge of the holes we almost got sucked into. From there an aggressive straight ahead paddle angled as hard as possible to the left of the river to miss the holes below the eddy would work. If the canoe started to slip too quickly downstream toward the holes I would turn the boat into a full front ferry and work across to the left. From there to the bottom it is, as they say, "a piece of cake!"

Beverly Lake to Baker Lake

There is nothing at all to talk about until you leave Schultz Lake and are on the final 50 miles of the Thelon River into Baker Lake. The first rapid from Schultz is very easy and can be scouted from the canoe. There's a lot of current but you would be hard pressed to get yourself into any trouble.

Ateksektok rapids located at 6020E / 71835N should be scouted and run along the right side. There is a little island (really a rock pile) that you will keep to your left as you enter the rapid. After you enter the rapid you should slowly back ferry toward the left to avoid some large waves along the right side. After you get past these waves work your way back to the right and slide slowly down the shore. Where the river turns to the right you can stop and scout from the river bank. There are really no eddies here so you will have to leave someone with the canoe to be safe. From the top you will see two things. A cross that tells you that there was a drowning here and a hole that could eat a house near the right side just below where you are standing. A short bit of lining will get you past this hole or alternately, if you are high enough above the hole, you can get out into the main current and miss the hole by paddling past it keeping it to your right. I've done it both ways and all you want to remember if you choose the paddle-past option is the cross and why it's there.

LOGISTICS

Rent or buy a Personal Locator Beacon to save the rest of the world a lot of headaches. To get a sense of what they are all about and where to get them, see my article in KANAWA magazine (Summer 2002). As I note in that article, please do the tax payers of Canada a favour and save us a bundle of cash by not taking an EPIRB (for ocean ships only!) or and ELT (for airplanes only!) Some day they are going to arrest people and fine them for using these devices! -- and that day won't come soon enough for me!

Please file your trip with the Stony Rapids RCMP and the Baker Lake RCMP and, of course, remember to tell the RCMP that you are done when you get to Baker Lake.

You can stay overnight at the Whitewater Inn in Stony Rapids (recommended) pre-trip and at the Baker Lake Lodge (highly recommended) at trip's end. If you are cash strapped, there is a campground at Baker Lake but you are on your own at Stony Rapids. Boris Kotelewetz at Baker Lake Lodge has his finger on the pulse of Baker and can store your canoe and shepherd it onto the NTCL barge for a nominal charge. Plan to stay in Baker for at least a day and tour around town. David Ford's art gallery is a must see and the local interpretive center is beyond belief. As well, you can visit the old re-furbished HBC trading post. Baker is a great community and the people are used to paddlers and are all real friendly. And after 40 days on the river tell me you won't want some Kentucky Fried Chicken and a coke at the North Mart!

You can get back to Churchill – where you can catch the famous Muskeg Express train to Winnipeg - from Baker with several airlines, and they all have a far better ticket price if you are paying with cash. There is no way to get cash in Baker with your VISA so take a handful of hundreds for a trip on the Dubawnt. For all your pre-trip and post-trip planning for getting home from Baker Lake phone Uniglobe Travel in Churchill – they can tell you more than you ever would want to know about travel in Nunavut.

You can drive into Stony Rapids but the road is really only a winter road from Points North Landing. Count on 8 hours to do this 220 kilometer stretch and you should have a 4 X 4. You can store your vehicle at Northern Dene Airways fenced in compound for a modest fee and if you are flying out with them they will probably let you park there for free. We chose to start our trip at the south end of Selwyn Lake thus avoiding the long and miserable Chipman Portage from Black Lake. Norcanair can get you up to Stony Rapids and Northern Dene Airways can charter you out with their Beaver or Single Otter.

Our trip was 720 miles and took us 38 days. Add another 4 to 5 days if you insist on doing the Chipman portage. If you choose this option, you will have to start at Black Lake. Phone Boniface Robillard or Billy Joe Mercredi for a taxi from Stony. Say hi for me and Lynda Holland if you do! These guys are real neat!

You can rent covered canoes from Ric Drediger at Horizon's Unlimited at Otter Lake, or Horn's Sports in Prince Albert. (Did you note I said covered? Don't even think about doing this river without a cover!) If you are driving up to Stony you have to go right through Prince Albert and Otter Lake. If you are planning on flying into Stony with Norcanair's scheduled flight you are going to have to arrange for lots of lead time to get your canoe up there. Phone Dave Webster at Norcanair (he also owns Northern Dene Airways) and he can arrange to get your canoe up with his trucking operation. Truth is he has been thinking of buying some canoes to keep in Stony so you

could probably rent one from him. Dave is a great guy to work with and treats canoe people real well! Say hi for me!

If you are time limited and want to get flown out from Beverly Lake phone Bob Huitikka at Tukto Lodge (Wilderness Air). Bob has a Single Otter and a Beaver at his camp on Mosquitoe Lake and he can get you back to Kasba Lake where you can fly out from their strip on their weekly scheduled plane to Winnipeg. Obviously you can do a shorter canoe trip by flying into Kasba Lake (rather than Stony Rapids) and renting a canoe from Kasba Lake Lodge or from Tukto Lodge.

PHONE NUMBERS

Northern Dene Airways 306-439-4990 or 306-439-2020 (Stony Rapids)

Dave Webster 306-764-0550 (Prince Albert)

Stony Rapids RCMP 306-439-2185

Baker Lake RCMP 867-793-1111

Whitewater Inn 306-439-2188

Baker Lake Lodge 867-793-2905

Norcanair 306-765-3500

Billy Joe Mercredi 306-439-2048

Boniface Robillard 306-284-2087

Horizons Unlimited 306-635-4420 (780-471-1273)

Horn's Sports Inc 306-922-1500

Tukto Lodge (Wilderness Air) 807-227-5473

Uniglobe Travel 204-675-2811 (800-267-5128)