

great slave lake to baker lake

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In 1899 David T. Hanbury made the first recorded trip from Chesterfield Inlet in the northwest corner of Hudson Bay via Baker Lake to the eastern end of Great Slave Lake. A report with a map may be found in The Geographical Journal (London), vol. XVI (1900), 63-77. He reached Artillery Lake without much trouble, but lost his equipment in the turbulent section of the Lockhart River between Artillery Lake and Great Slave Lake. This for all practical purposes non-navigable stretch can be avoided by taking Pikes Portage Route.

My partner Robert Schaefer of Washington, D.C., and I flew on 6 July 1970 from Yellowknife to Ft. Reliance at the eastern end of Great Slave Lake. The starting date appears rather late, since the ice at Ft. Reliance breaks up about two weeks earlier. However, at the other end of the route we had to cross Beverly, Aberdeen, and Schultz Lakes, which are often ice blocked till the end of July, and this determined the starting date.

The trading post as well as the RCMP post at Ft. Reliance had been abandoned. Only a weather station, a fly-in fish camp, and a few Indian families living in the general area were left. The ruins of historic Ft. Reliance built in 1833 during Captain George Back's expedition are 15 km northeast at the mouth of the Lockhart River.

The following morning we paddled the 8 km across the lake to the mouth of Glacier Creek (12VXE0253). (Locations are given with the military grid reference shown on the topographic maps 1:250,000). The name of this creek is due to the accumulation of ice produced by its overflows during winter, which provides a conspicuous landmark for the canoeist. The mouth of Glacier Creek is the start of Pikes Portage Route to Artillery Lake. The name Pikes Portage Route is still shown on the map 1:506,880, Artillery Lake, 1951 edition, but not on the newer topographic map 1:250,000, Ft. Reliance, 1964 edition. However, the portages are shown by black dashed lines on the newer map.

Pikes Portage Route starts out with a 6 km long portage, ascending somewhat more than 100 m. It is well beaten at its beginning, but becomes occasionally quite unrecognizable in swampy areas. For some distance we had to walk on a snow field that, of course, showed no marks whatsoever. The heat generated by the heavy portaging made it impossible to wear a mosquito net, and the insect repellent was quickly rinsed off by sweat. We did not enjoy the portage, but the mosquitos did. Twenty-two hours after leaving Ft. Reliance we had all our gear at the south end of Harry Lake, where one finds a good campsite.

The following day we paddled to the north end of Harry Lake, made the short portage to French Lake and from there to Acres Lake. The creek between Acres and Kipling Lakes could be paddled.

On 8 July we reached the portage at the north end of Kipling Lake to Burr Lake. It is about 2 km long. Another, equally long portage leads from the north end of Burr Lake to Toura Lake. At the north end of Toura Lake a portage of about 1 km leads to an unnamed lake (12VXE2571), which provides an excellent jump-off point for a day hike to Parry Falls, only 8 km away as the crow flies, but somewhat farther as man walks due to the many lakes and ponds. Parry Falls is one of the sights of northern Canada, tumbling 40 m over a ledge (Fig. 1). The last stretch of the route follows the Lockhart River above the falls, where powerful rapids are a sight in their own right.

The portage between this unnamed lake and the southern end of Artillery Lake is hard to find. A well-beaten trail at the north end of the lake turns east and seems to peter out in a narrow gorge. One must squeeze through between the boulders in this gorge to find the trail again, which leads to a small pond and then on to Artillery Lake. The distance is about 2 km. If one does not force ones way through this gorge, one must take a much longer and steeper route over the mountain to the north of the gorge. Artillery Lake is 203 m above Great Slave Lake according to the topographic map.

We paddled about 15 km north on Artillery Lake and pitched camp on the east shore across from Timber Bay. The time taken from Ft. Reliance to here was four days, plus one day for the visit to Parry Falls.

On the following day we paddled about 50 km north on Artillery Lake in perfect weather. The trees come to an end around Crystal Island. Two log cabins could be seen on the island. Many sandy beaches along the shores of Artillery Lake provide excellent camping.

On 12 July we reached the mouth of the upper Lockhart River. It turned out that we could paddle upstream without much trouble. Only in the evening when approaching the first rapid (13VCA7543) did we have to resort to wading. This rapid drops about 3 m. The map 1:506,880 of 1951 shows a drop of 5 metres for this rapid and 3 metres for the following one, but this is too much since the altitude difference between Artillery Lake and Ptarmigan Lake above the rapids is only 6.4 m according to the topographic map 1:250,000 of 1965.



Fig.1. Parry Falls on the lower Lockhart River.



Fig.2. The cairn at Hanbury Portage.

The following day we portaged this rapid as well as a second one with a drop of some 2 m (13VCA7546), and camped at the end of the peninsula sticking into Ptarmigan Lake from the south. Three hours paddle bring one to a narrow spot of the lake (13VCA8765), and two more hours to the eastern end of the lake (13VCA9464). The topographic map shows a rapid here, but actually this is a boulder-strewn bed of a stream without water in it. A short portage leads to an unnamed lake, and about 1 km paddling along its north shore brings one to the height of land at Hanbury Portage (13VCA9563). A small cairn marks the spot (Fig. 2). The ascent from Great Slave Lake to here is about 215 m, the descent to Baker Lake about 365 m.

A portage straight east of about 500 m brings one to an unnamed lake in the Hudson Bay drainage. At its south end is again a boulder-filled stream bed shown as a rapid on the topographic map, and one portages into Deville Lake. A short distance further on we camped on 14 July.

The rapid at the outlet of Deville Lake (13VDA0556) required a portage, but this seems to depend very much on the water level. We had now reached the Hanbury River. A strong headwind impeded progress and we only made it to the southeast end of Sifton Lake in the evening, ten days out of Ft. Reliance. Sifton Lake is the usual starting place for parties going down the Hanbury River, requiring a flight of 450 km from Yellowknife.

A heavy wind made progress slow on the following day, and we barely got past Muskox Hill. From here on one enjoys a good stretch of peaceful paddling until a rapid (13VDA5458) is reached that requires a short portage on the left. At the entrance of Lac du Bois comes the next rapid (13VDA6058) with a short portage on the right. We combined the portage with our camp on 17 July.

Grove Rapids at the outlet of Lac du Bois requires a portage of about 2.5 km on the right. A short paddle across Hanbury Lake brings one to Caribou Rapids and another 2.5 km portage, this one on the left. True to its name, thousands of caribou were in the process of crossing the river here. The next portage is mercifully short (13VDA7548), and is followed by a rapid about 13 km further on that actually can be run (13VDA8752). We pitched camp below this rapid on 18 July.

The rapids above Hoare Lake (13VDA9352) can be run. Below Hoare Lake is sometimes fast water not shown as rapids on the map. Strong winds made us camp below the mouth of the Darell River.

Next morning we awoke to strange noises. Looking out of the tent we saw ourselves in the middle of a caribou herd that slowly moved through our camp. The caribou were quite curious about us and showed no fear, but they did not permit us to touch them.



Fig.3. Lower part of Dickson Canyon looking downriver.

A few hours of paddling in fast water brought us to McDonald Falls, which drop about 15 m. A portage of 500 m on the right gets one around. Some 2 km further on comes the high point of the Hanbury River, Dickson Canyon (Fig. 3). This is a spectacular canyon, every bit as good as the great gorge of the Dubawnt River above Grant Lake. A pretty bad portage of upwards of 4 km on the right is required. A very small caribou did not approve of our portaging and defended the narrow trail, rising on its rear legs and beating its little front hoofs against us. We had to use a paddle to shoe it off the trail, there was no other way of convincing it that we did not want to throw it into the pot. We camped at the end of the portage on 20 July.

Only an insignificant stretch of canoeable water separates Ford Falls from Dickson Canyon. The falls are about 18 m high, and require a portage of more than 1 km on the right. A stretch of fast water follows to Helen Falls (18 m high, Fig. 4) and Fischer Falls (3 m high). The portage on the left goes around both falls and is somewhat less than 2 km. We camped on the flat rock shelf above Fischer Falls, which seems to be a favorite spot for everyone coming down the Hanbury River. This is the place to celebrate, there is no more scouting or portaging until the rapid on the Thelon River Below Schultz Lake, some 12 days away.

The next morning, 21 July, we entered the Thelon River. A large herd of caribou was swimming across here. We clearly got more than our share of caribou on this trip.



Fig.4. Helen Falls on the Hanbury River.

After all the portaging of the previous 16 days we were looking forward to a peaceful and easy run at least as far as Beverly Lake, but nature decided otherwise. The following ten days we battled wind and rain almost continuously. It was the worst stretch of bad weather I experienced in 30 years of canoeing in northern Canada and Alaska. Progress was slow. The Thelon is quite featureless between the mouth of the Hanbury River and Beverly Lake,

except for the famous growth of trees along its banks that is separated from the region of forests further south. There are some trees already between Dickson Canyon and the mouth of the Hanbury River, but they start in earnest some 20 km below the Hanbury River and go on to about the mouth of the Tamarvi River. A noteworthy place here is Hornby Point (13WEB5501) with the ruins of a cabin and three graves (Fig. 5). John Hornby, Harold Adlard, and Edgar Christian starved here to death in the spring of 1927. The story is told in George Whalley's book *"The Legend of John Hornby"* (1962).



Fig.5. The graves of Hornby, Adlard, and Christian on the Thelon River.

Near Lookout Point (13WFB1917) we came across three muskoxen grazing on the left bank. The Thelon River seems to be about the southern limit of their range, many more can be seen along the Back River.

Beverly Lake was reached on 28 July. Enormous piles of driftwood are found here. This is the last place on the Thelon River to stock up on firewood. J.W. Tyrrell in his book *"Across the Sub-Arctic of Canada"* (1908) states that there are piles of driftwood at the mouth of the Dubawnt River at the east end of Beverly Lake, but this is clearly a mix-up between the two places. One will not find so much as a stick at the Dubawnt River, since there are no trees below Dubawnt Lake and no tree trunk could make it across the permanent ice of that lake. Wind and rain made the 20 km across Beverly Lake a whole day effort. The following morning we passed the mouth of the Dubawnt River, which can be identified from the map only; there is absolutely no distinguishing feature. In the evening we reached Aberdeen Lake.

In 1970 the University of Saskatchewan maintained an arctic hut at the left bank of the Thelon River where it enters Aberdeen Lake. A scientist studying arctic foxes was stationed there, supported by an Inuit family from Baker Lake. There was hardly anything dry left in our equipment and we greatly appreciated the luxury of sleeping in a hut rather than in a soaked tent. This hut had disappeared when we passed the place again in 1983.

The route from the west end of Aberdeen Lake to Baker Lake settlement has been described repeatedly in Nastawgan. In good weather one needs two days to reach the east end of Aberdeen Lake, a third day from there to Schultz Lake, a fourth day to the rapids below Schultz Lake (14WPG0283), which are the only ones requiring scouting or portaging, and a fifth day to Baker Lake.

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