

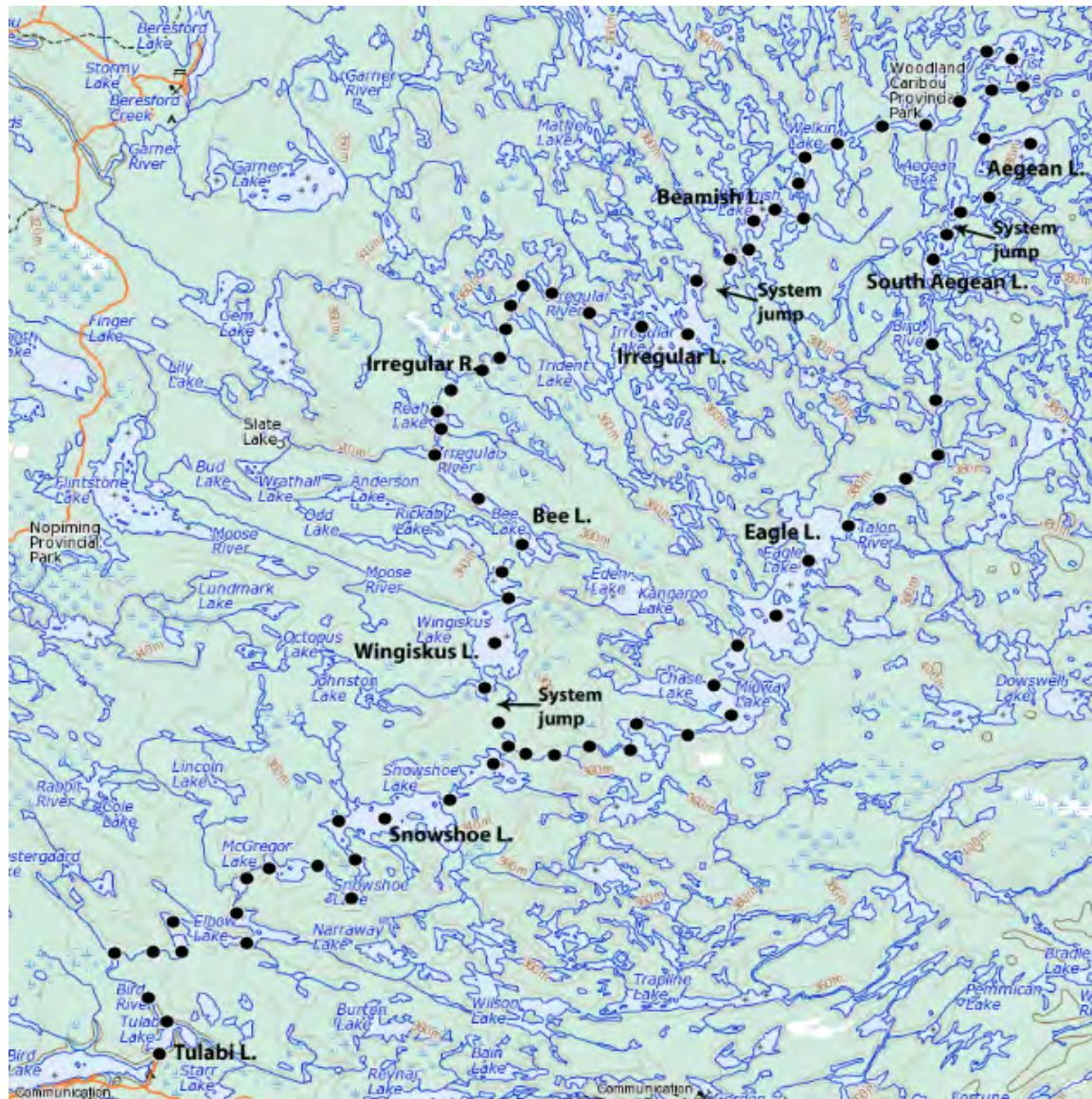
A long ago Irregular Lake trip

The year was 1971. My canoeing partners and I had been exploring the Bird River system as far north as Eagle Lake prior to 1971. In those days, the Bird system was as much a wilderness zone as were more remote and exotic places such as the Churchill River of northern Manitoba. In our explorations up the Bird we found established portage trails, some faint trails that we improved, and cut basic trails where none had existed. It was all part of the adventure of travelling into the unknown. For the summer of 71, we had decided it was time to explore some of the area north of Eagle Lake. [*Today, this area is part of Woodland Caribou Park (WCP).*]

All we had available for planning a trip was a 1:125 000 topographical map. That scale does not provide much detail. For the now-known-as WCP part of the trip, we were mostly “crossing our paddles” about finding trails, or at least, hoping to encounter country that was hospitable for cutting trails.

I had a new canoe, a lightweight Grumman, that weighed all of 65 pounds, including a radical invention – a well-designed padded yoke. [*The Grumman is the canoe that was used in the movie ‘Deliverance’.*] My new canoe was a joy compared to the 80-pound fiberglass canoe I had been using. [*I now mostly use a 16-foot Prospector kevlar canoe for tandem and solo canoeing. It was a gift from my wife because she thought my fantasy age was starting to catch up to my actual age. I love the Prospector when portaging and when gliding over smooth waters. However, I still prefer the Grumman when waters get stormy, when rocks lie in wait below the surface of shallow waters, and when landing at unfriendly shores.*]

In those days we travelled in a minimalist manner. One tent held all four of us. Sleeping was a bit crowded but no one dared to snore. No water filter. We drank the water right out of the lake. [*I still do not carry a filter. I boil water only if it is suspect and do not drink water straight out of the lake in cottage country. I have never had the “dash into the bushes bug” in over 40 years of canoeing.*] No cooking stove. We always made elaborate cooking stoves from the local rocks. The stoves were capable of heating two pots at a time, had warming areas, and were located on exposed bedrock away from burnable materials. The rock stoves were left intact for the next traveler. This practice marked campsites for others and hopefully meant less human disturbance to the land overall. [*I still don’t carry a stove unless forest fire or weather conditions warrant it. My preference is to live as basic as possible when canoeing.*] Pasta, nuts, and breakfast oats were mainstays for energy. Meat and vegetables were a problem. [*Dehydration was mostly thought of then as a person not having enough water in the body.*] We carried some canned meat and fresh eggs but relied on what we caught fishing for our protein needs. Some dried fruit (raisins and prunes mostly) was available but we also carried fresh grapefruit. Our only serious issue was with sleeping pads. Air mattresses were too heavy and bulky to carry. What was available was inadequate for taking care of those troublesome bumps that somehow appear under the floor of the tent when you settle in for the night. When therma-rest pads came on the market, we were in heaven.



Our plan was to go up the Bird to Eagle (a familiar journey), then head north on the Bird to where we might be able to jump systems (at Aegean Lake) into a creek system that led west (the Beamish). We hoped to jump systems again at Irregular Lake, travel down the Irregular River system to Bee Lake. From there we wanted to portage to Wingiskus Lake and then hoped to portage back into the Bird River (a system jump) just upstream from Snowshoe Lake. Once in the Bird, it was a well-known path back to Tulabi Lake, our starting point. The trip was about 230 kilometres in length with 8 days to do it. *[We weren't flying entirely blind about the Wingiskus portage. We had noticed in our travels on the Bird upstream from Snowshoe that there seemed to be a portage leading north to a pond lake named Alga. The trail started on the east bank of the tiny creek that drained Alga. Our guess was that the trail was part of the portage to Wingiskus Lake because there would be no reason for a portage just to Alga.]*

Our minimalist approach to what we carried had a large benefit when portaging – we normally one-time walked portages. The approach also made 4-man carrying much easier. Four-man carrying involves two people at the front and two people at the rear of the canoe, with one person on each side. Usually one packsack is taken out of the canoe and placed on someone's back. We used this technique when portaging over short trails and when having to lift a canoe while water walking in a rapid/fall/rock garden. A Grumman canoe - with its three thwarts, internal ribs, and external reinforced keel - is well made for this mode of portaging. A canoe made out of today's modern materials and construction techniques would not last long when not supported from underneath as is the case when doing a 4-man carry.

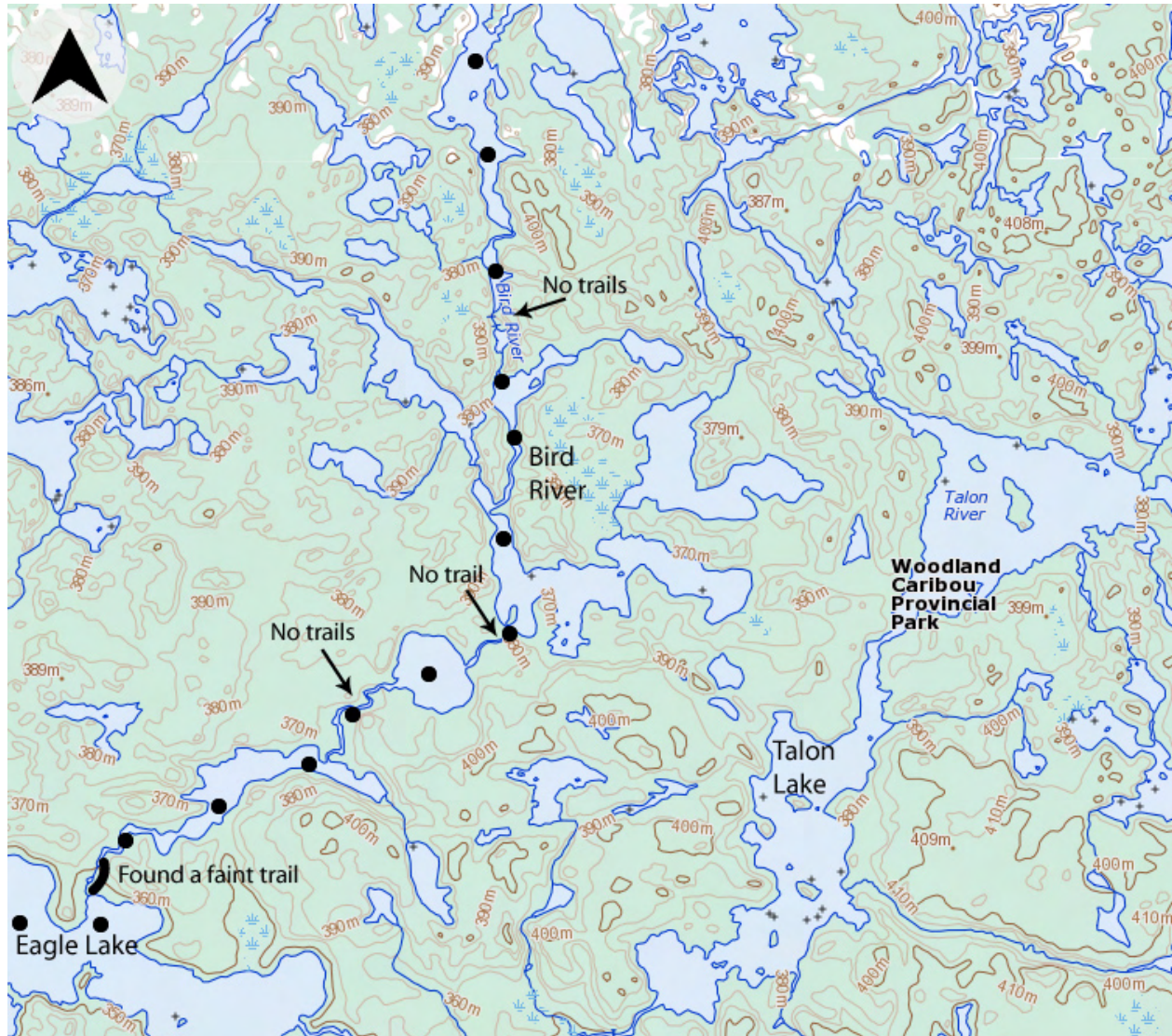
One-time walking over portages and 4-man carrying allowed us to travel fairly rapidly past canoeing obstacles. We did slow down when looking for a portage and when cutting one. When we encountered water obstacles such as rapids/falls we first looked for a portage. If none was found we assessed the length and severity of the rapids/falls. If too long and/or difficult, we cut a basic trail (by doing minimal clearing and blazing prominent trees as needed). Otherwise, we water walked/lined/pulled/4-man through the rapids/falls. Our relatively fast travel time past obstacles and our 10-hour days (normally from 8 AM to 6 PM) meant that we typically travelled from 30 to 40 kilometres per day.

Setting up camp was handled with efficiency. Two of us were responsible for making a tent spot, setting up the tent, and getting our gear organized inside. The other two were responsible for making the rock stove (usually a necessary task), getting the firewood, and cooking the meal. Within an hour or so of stopping for the night, we were eating. After the dishes were cleaned, it was relax time. The morning routine was similar.

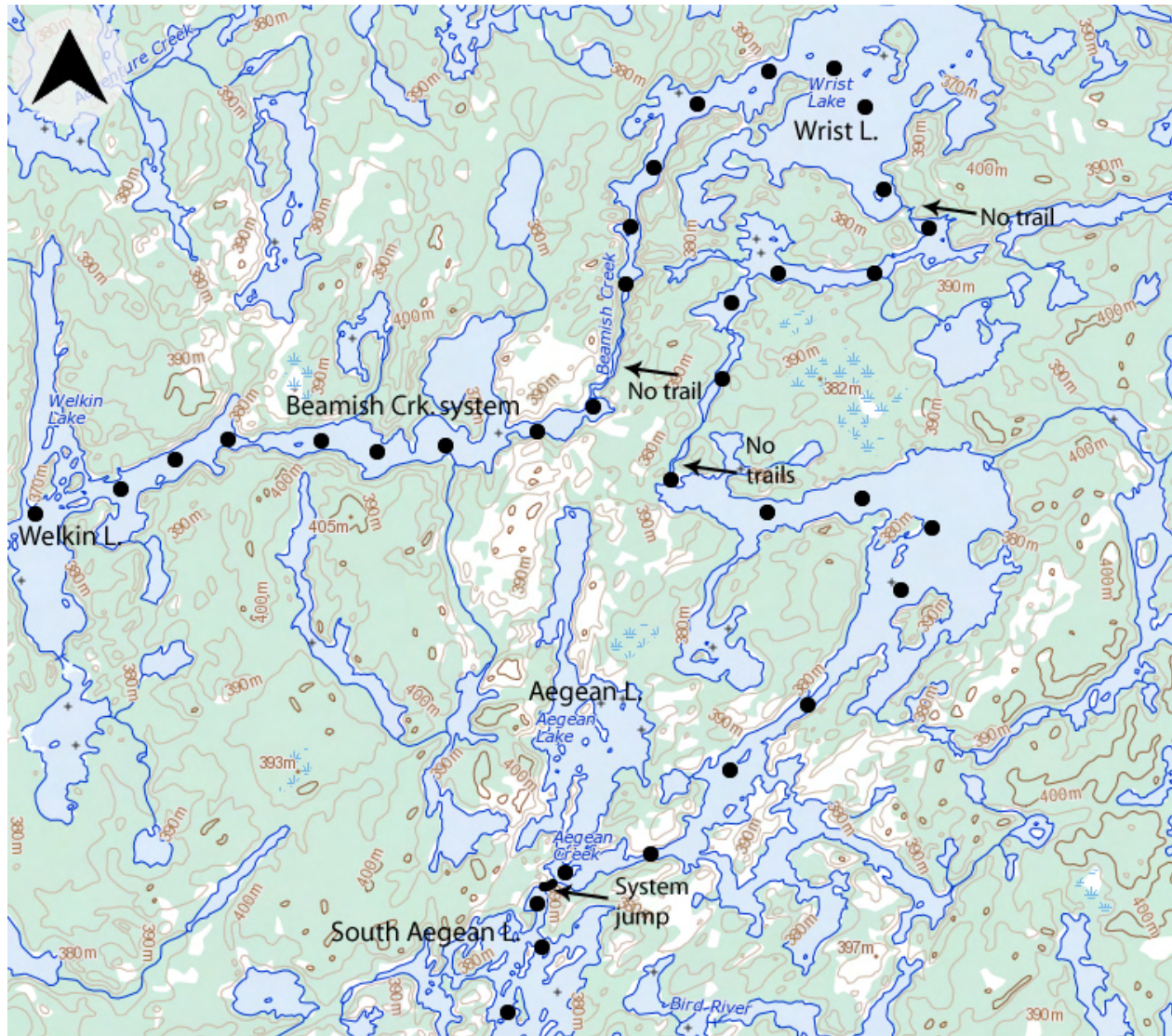
Our adventure of 1971 began in Tulabi Lake. We stopped briefly at the far end of Snowshoe Lake, close to the mouth of the Bird, to leave a cache of food (a supper and a breakfast). There is no point in carrying food back and forth if you are passing by the same spot on your return journey.

We reached the north end of Eagle Lake, a distance of 70 km with 12 portages/water obstacles, in two days. The only suitable campsite we could find was at an abandoned fishing outpost cabin a short distance from where the Bird enters Eagle. We set up our tent (excluding the fly) inside the cabin. Although its roof, walls, and floor were still intact, the cabin was in the early stages of falling apart. It would not have won an award as a place to live. *[Nowadays, you cannot easily tell that a cabin had once been there.]* That night we had critters visiting us. It seems mice were the owners of the cabin. They let us know what they thought of our intrusion. *[Speaking of mice, I have no pictures from my pre-1979 trips into WCP country. I lived in Ontario for a while (1979-81). While there, I stored all my canoeing and other slides in a secure container in a barn. Mice figured out how to get in. They nibbled and performed bodily functions on the slides. It was so bad that I had to burn them.]*

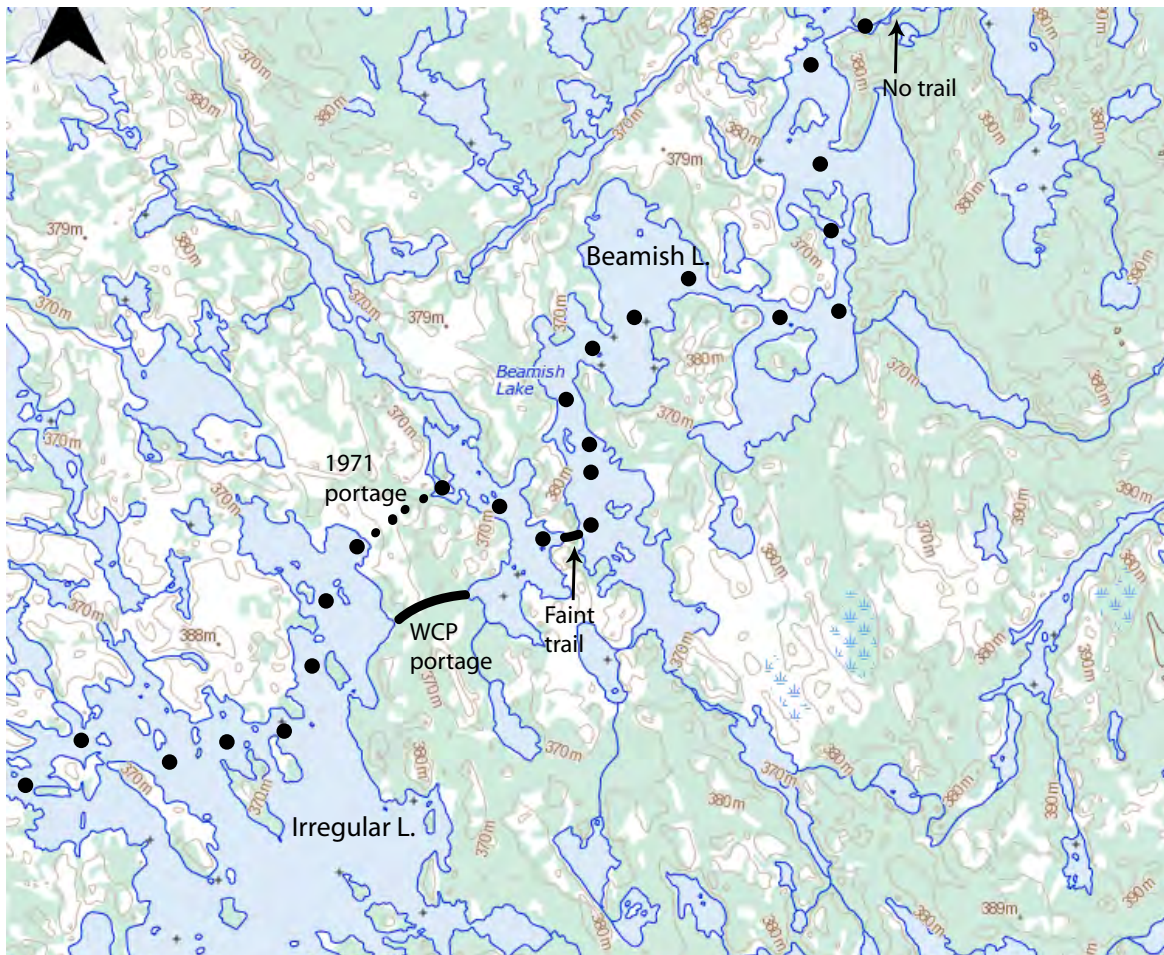
We left for the Bird in the morning. It enters Eagle at a waterfall/rapids. We found a trail that someone had walked. Matters looked promising. *[In retrospect, the trail was likely made by someone staying at the fishing outpost cabin.]* Alas, there were no more trails at the remaining rapid sections of the Bird before South Aegean Lake. We portaged by bush whacking, water walking, lining/pulling, and using the 4-man carry. The weather was hot. Any opportunity to get wet was appreciated.



When we got to the north end of South Aegean Lake, fortune smiled on us. There was a faint trail at the system jump from the Bird (a south-flowing system ending in the Winnipeg River) to the Beamish (a west and then north-flowing system ending in Haggart Lake). From this point to the system jump from Beamish to Irregular Lake we were unable to find any trails. It was bush whack, water walk, line/pull, and 4-man carry at each creek obstacle.



When we got to Beamish Lake we found a faint trail leading to the lake separating Beamish from Irregular. The trail was in the same place as the current WCP portage. The portage out of the separating lake (the top end of the Haggart River system) was in a different place than the current WCP portage. When we were planning our route, we thought that a likely place for a portage would be on the shoreline west of the big island in the separating lake. Our hunch was correct. Once again, when we came to a system jump, we had found a trail. This one led to Irregular Lake (its waters flow into the Manigotagan River).



The Irregular River awaited us. *[I caution the reader here. I would not rely on what follows too faithfully. My memories of this part are somewhat shaky. The general nature of what I describe is accurate but the exact locale may be in error.]* We found no portages. Here and there, we came across minor difficulties (short stretches of rapids/falls). These had become routine for us. We water walked, lined/pulled, and used the 4-man carry to bypass them. South of Trident Lake, we were out of what is now WCP. The river became wider as it flowed through a swampy area. Past that, the fun began.

It was rock garden after rock garden in the section before Reahil Lake. The shoreline was crowded with dense growth – forget bush whacking. We struggled

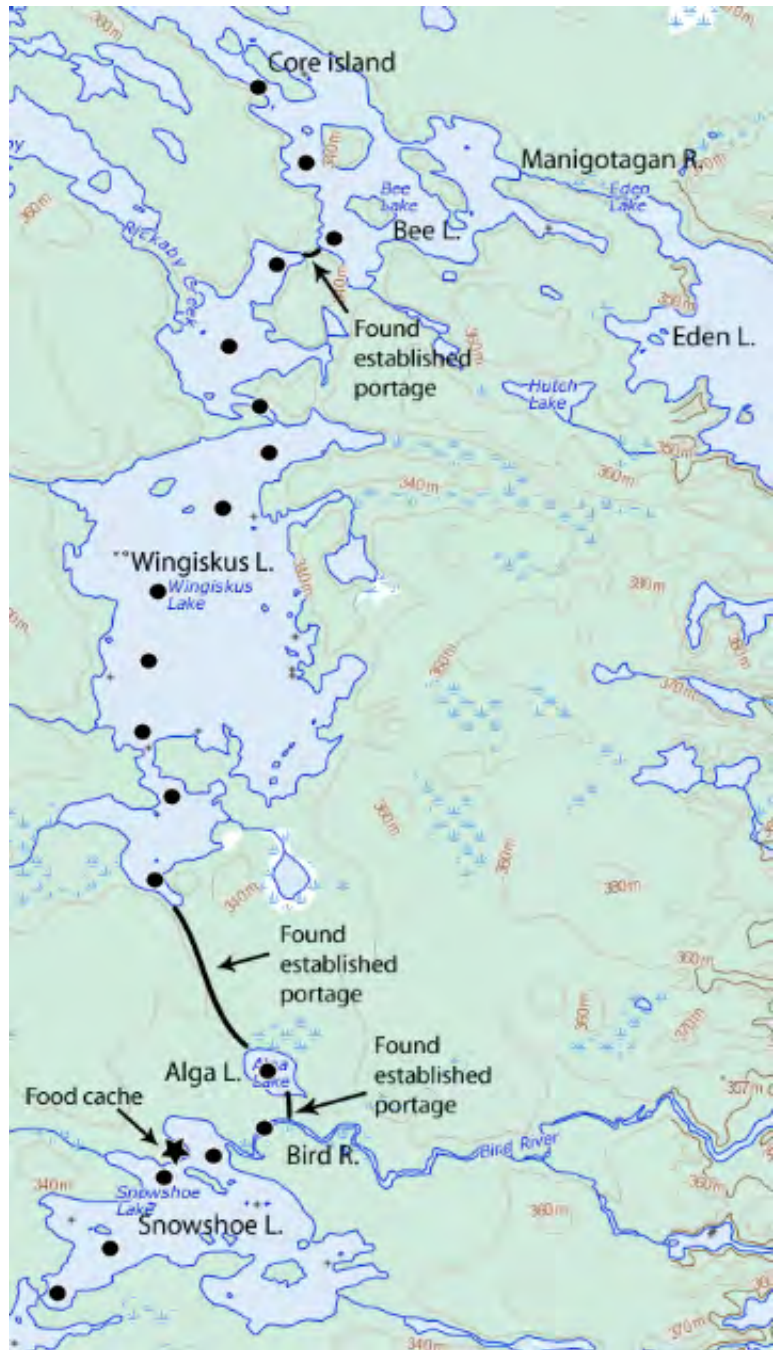
through the shallow rock-filled water. My canoe was punctured when someone slipped and had to let go of it. It seems even a Grumman is not indestructible when it suddenly meets a sharp rock. *[The hole was temporarily fixed with some banging to flatten the rupture area, applying aluminum tape on the inside and outside of the hole, and then covering the tape with pine sap.]* We were overcome with joy when the waters of Reahil lapped against our canoes.

We stopped for the night at Bee Lake. It is part of the Manigotagan River system. The lower end of the Manigotagan is a favourite white-water canoeing place for Manitobans in the spring. Where we were, the river is only a nervous trickle coming out of Eden Lake (the lake is aptly named, well worth a visit). Our campsite was sprinkled with mining core samples (small cylinders of smooth rock) but there was no mining activity in the area. I suppose there was no gold in them thar hills.



Next morning we found an established portage from Bee to Wingiskus (a minor system jump from the main run of the Manigotagan drainage to a feeder part). I doubt that a prospector had made the portage. Heavy drilling equipment is best transported with a floatplane. We seemed to be in fur trapping country. The Moose River, which drains Wingiskus, looks like good muskrat and beaver habitat. My guess is that a trapper had made the portage (and the portages from Wingiskus Lake to the Bird River).

Wingiskus is a pleasant but shallow lake. We paddled to its southernmost bay and found what we thought would be there – a portage. The 1.5 km trail was in reasonable condition and looked like it was used more than just once a year. It was an easy walk to Alga Lake. The only difficult part was a swampy stretch close to Alga. The landing there was a flat rock at the edge of swamp. The portage out of Alga started just east of the tiny creek that connects the lake to the Bird River. The trailhead was troublesome to reach because of the swampy shoreline.



We paddled down the Bird to Snowshoe and picked up our food cache. We stopped for the night at the west end of Snowshoe. Next day we paddled back to Tulabi, glad to be on our way home, but also sad that another adventure into unknown country was over. Because we liked the country north of Eagle, as we drove home into the setting sun, we decided that next year we would go eastward and explore the Talon system and beyond. *[We did a 1972 trip from Tulabi back to Tulabi via the Talon, Sturgeon, and English river systems.]*