

A Family Adventure from Mexican Hat to Tulabi

My family has gone canoeing with me from early on. Before I married my darling wife, I took her on an 8-day trip into Woodland Caribou Park along with another couple. A few years later, I confessed that I was “checking out” her reactions to canoeing life. She promptly informed me that she had been checking to see if I was a “jerk”. Fortunately, we both passed the test. A few months after each of my children were born, they were already experiencing life in a canoe on day trips. As they grew older the day trips became week trips. But none of the trips had involved a bush plane. Mid-August of 2005 provided that thrilling experience.

The grand canoeing adventure from Mexican Hat to Tulabi Lake took months to prepare for. My dehydrator was busy shrinking weight and volume of potatoes and vegetables. Our gear was kept to a minimum as well. I had a beloved 17-foot Grumman lite-weight canoe that had bumped and glided over a few thousand kilometers in its lifetime. I had to rent another Grumman for the trip that, while advertised as lite-weight, must have been made of “heavy” aluminum where the nucleus of the atom has an extra neutron.

We drove to the Lac du Bonnet floatplane airport (on the Winnipeg River just north of the town of Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba) with our gear and with two canoes on the roof of the heavily laden van. We unloaded the gear and canoes. My wife and daughter remained at the airport while I, with my son for company, drove the van to Tulabi Lake (in Nopiming Park). A friend followed me in his car. Tulabi Lake was where we would end our canoeing adventure. I parked the van and returned with my friend to the airport. The car shuttling took about 2 ½ hours to complete.

We were delayed for over an hour because of a fishing group that had arrived late for its flight. Finally, we loaded our gear and supplies into an Adventure Air Otter. The pilot tied a canoe to each pontoon with, what seemed like, not enough rope. I didn't question the pilot's work. It turned out he knew what he was doing.



The plane taxied out into the river. Both my children were nervous but my 14-year old son was brave enough to sit upfront beside the pilot. My 17-year old daughter looked somewhat greenish as the plane lifted off the water. My heart jumped a bit when the pilot asked me where exactly was Mexican Hat Lake. I tried a variety of explanations. The one that worked was when I told him it was about 6 kilometres due east of Wrist Lake. Apparently he knew where Wrist Lake was. Off we went, with no map anywhere in sight, following Manitoba's provincial road #314 north. Then the road was no more. Only the Shield Country slipped by below. It was interesting to see, from above, waters that I had canoed. Elbow, Snowshoe,

and Eagle lakes on the Bird River system seemed like duck ponds from the air when the reality was that they were bad places to be in a canoe when the wind blew.

After an hour of flying, Mexican Hat Lake beckoned ahead. I told the pilot to put us down in the northern part of the lake (the peak of the hat). The creek that drains the lake has its origin there. I knew that there was a good campsite on the west shore of the bay near the creek entrance. I had first come across the site in 1972 when exploring the area (before it became Woodland Caribou Park) with my three canoeing buddies. At that time we reached Mexican Hat from the south by land hopping and swamp trudging along a tiny creek that flows into the eastern end of Nutria Lake. Nowadays, there is a 600 m portage at the western end of Nutria.

The plane taxied into a small bay that was slightly out of the wind. Because the pilot was nervous about the pontoons getting snagged in the rocky deadwood-strewn water along the shore, we unloaded without touching terra firma. The pilot untied the canoes and passed them to us. We held onto them while standing on the pontoons and loaded our gear as the pilot passed it to us. Loading gear into a bucking canoe while standing on a pontoon that is swaying in the waves can be interesting. With the gear loaded, we scrambled into the canoes and let the wind push us away from the plane.

Each of us had a moment of doubt as the plane soared into the air on its way back to Lac du



Bonnet. We were in the proverbial middle of nowhere with no one around in case we got into trouble. The moment passed as we paddled towards the campsite. The pleasure of gliding through the water, the beauty of Mexican Hat, the challenge of canoeing to Tulabi, and the novelty of the situation captured our imaginations and lifted our spirits.

After setting up camp and eating supper, we celebrated my wife's 54th birthday. We had brought along a cake for the occasion – carrot cake in the wilderness has a special appeal.

The next day we explored the eastern end of the lake. I have been to Mexican Hat three times before but had only canoed the western end: the Nutria Lake-Mexican Hat creek-Gammon system pathway.

We found a marvelous waterfall near the east end of the lake. The fall has several cascading steps to it. This is typically where canoeists enter Mexican Hat when launching from Leano Lake. I have canoed the southern end of the Leano route but had never been to its exit at Mexican Hat.



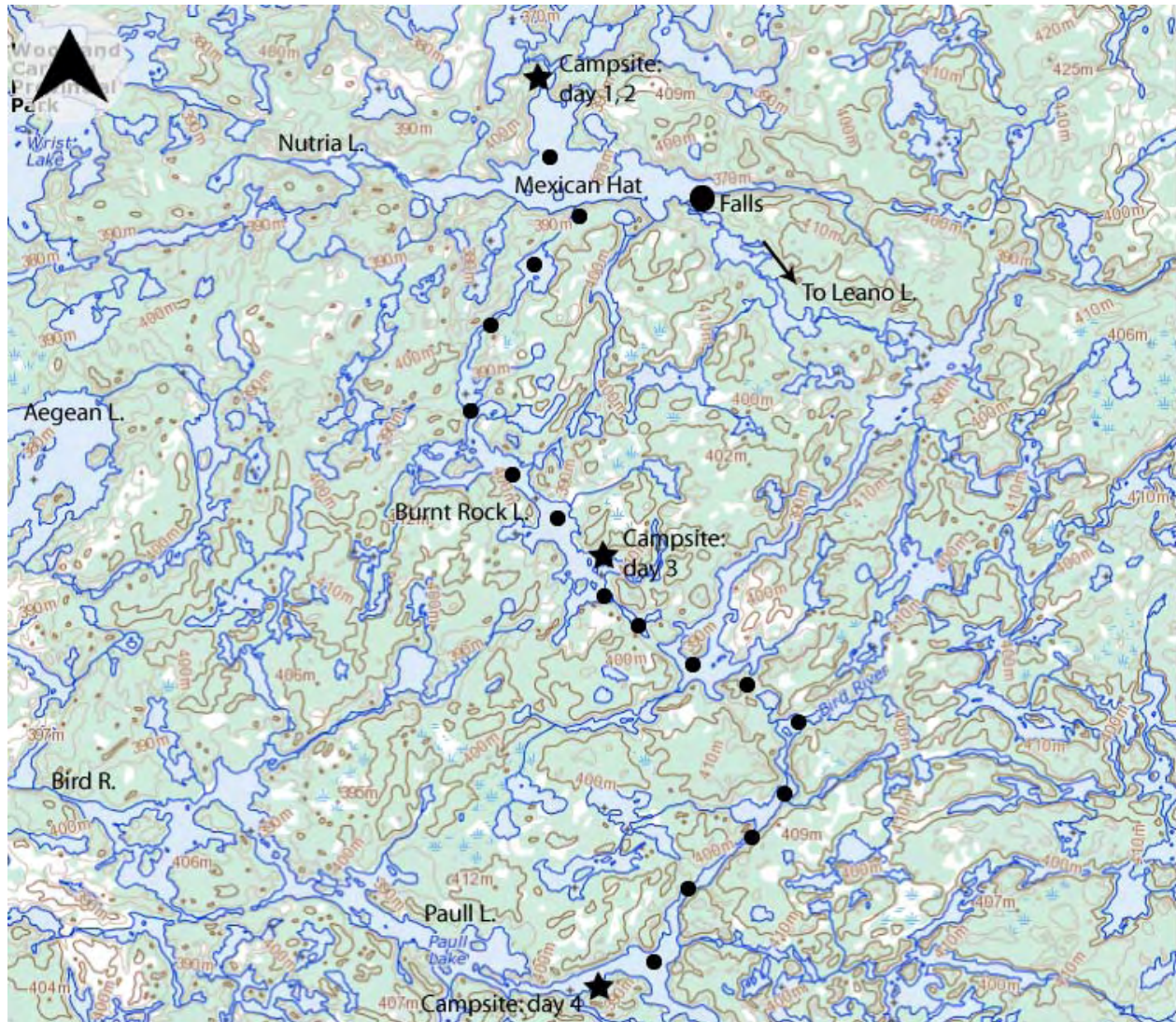
After playing in waterfall and exploring the portage and small lake above it, we returned to our camp and spent the afternoon at the “beach” (right by our campsite where the outlet flow has built up a sandbar). It is not Grand Beach (a fantastic beach on Lake Winnipeg) but it sure felt like it.



Next morning we said goodbye to Mexican Hat. We travelled south using the 800 m portage into the Burnt Rock system. The portage looked seldom used but it was in good shape and a scenic walk. The only difficult part was where the trail crossed the creek. The high water level made the crossing too deep to wade. We constructed a bridge out of rocks and deadfall and gingerly stepped across the gap. Later in the day it began to rain lightly. We stopped for the night at the south end of Burnt Rock Lake at a point on the edge of a small bay.



Our first day of travel was only about 10 km with two portages. We were sorting out canoeing partners and portaging routines. Thankfully, we had packed wisely. We only had to double-carry on portages. The best approach was for me to portage the canoes plus a small pack with each trip. The others carried the heavier packs and any loose gear.



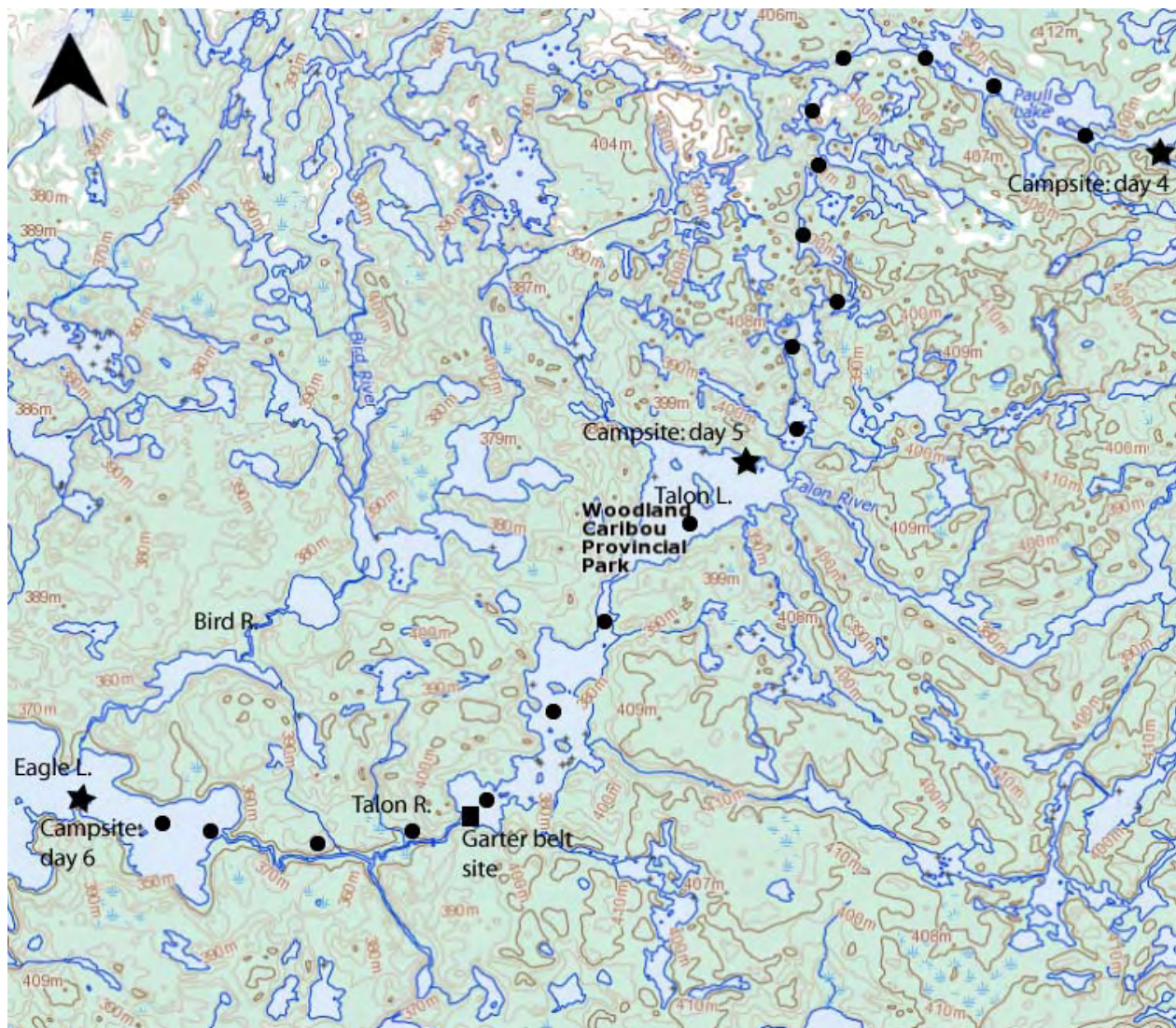
We broke camp around 9:30 AM the next day and headed for the Bird River system. It is one of two atypical river systems in WCP because it drains southwest, eventually releasing its waters into the Winnipeg River. The second exception is the Haggart River; it flows south to north. The other rivers in WCP flow from east to west. The Bloodvein River is the major collector, spilling most of the waters of WCP into Lake Winnipeg.

Five portages later, we reached Paull Lake in the late afternoon. Paull is the headwater lake of the Bird River system. Its eastern end is narrow and canyon-like, creating a wind tunnel effect. The wind was from the west, the direction we were headed. My wife and children were getting tired and cranky. Their arm and upper body muscles were not yet used to the seemingly endless paddling rhythm of reach, pull, and lift. It was time to look for a campsite but the shoreline did not look camp friendly. Because I had never been to Paull Lake in all

my years of wandering through WCP, I had no idea of what lay ahead. We had no choice but to keep battling the wind, hoping that the shoreline would change. As we canoed through a narrows, we saw salvation in a spot tucked into a small cove in the southern shoreline.

While the parents cooked supper, the children played in the water with the canoe – tipping and refloating it. It was a good way to relax after a strenuous day.

It was the morning of day 5. We wanted to get to Talon Lake but that involved 8 portages. We decided that we were ready for the challenge.



The route going south to Talon from the west end of Paull is a scenic small creek journey. We encountered some bush “perfume” along the way. The fourth portage south of Paull bypasses a tiny creek. As we approached it, our nostrils were bombarded with an aroma. We soon discovered the source - otters playing in the water. They were using the portage as their latrine. I wonder how many generations of otters have selected that particular land spot for their bodily functions. My guess is a lot of generations.

Most of the portages on the route from Paull to Talon were enjoyable walks but one was especially not. Swamp walking on the third portage south of Paull seriously interfered with our joy. At least some anxious humour occurred. I temporarily lost my son in one of those ogre holes that seem to inhabit



swampy portages. The last portage (350 m) into Talon concerned me. It was in a fairly recent fire zone. Would we have to do the high hurdles with our loads as we picked our way through a maze of fallen tree trunks? To my relief, the trail looked like a small bulldozer had come through. It was wide and clear, and easy to follow in the diminishing light.

We reached Talon Lake around 7:30 PM. The wonderful beach camping area that was there during my first visit (pre-WCP creation) to the lake was no more. The rejuvenating, but also destructive, forest fire had turned the area into dense jack pine growth that covered a helter-skelter zone of charred windfall. We found a campsite on a small island just west of the portage. We accomplished the less enjoyable part of canoeing (setting up the tent, cooking the meal, and cleaning up) with weary minds and hands. Then we settled into the tent to appreciate its restful comforts.

Day 6 was our last day in WCP. We broke camp by 9 AM and headed south on Talon Lake to the first portage. The lake ends with a big splash in a spectacular fall. We had left my wife's garter belt there hanging from a branch on a 10-day canoe trip into WCP that we did a couple of weeks after we were married (in 1987). The belt was gone. Perhaps some squirrel was now using it to provide sparkle to its nest.



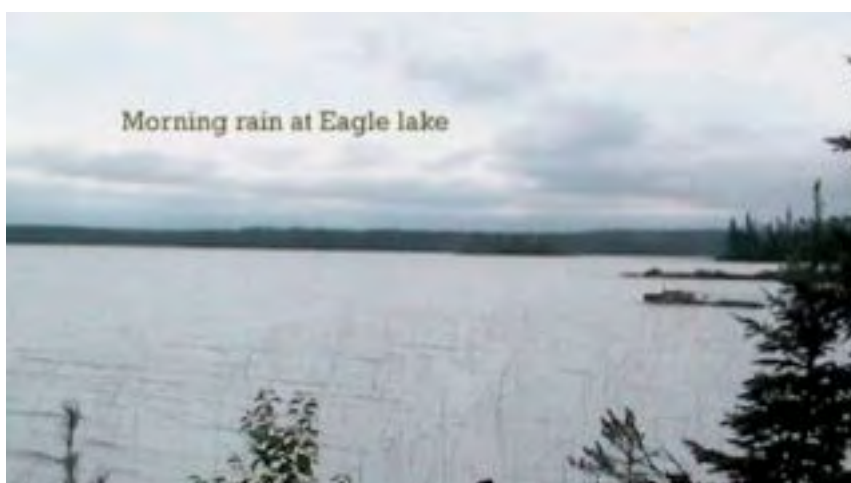
The portage trail is fairly steep and emerges close to the bottom of the falls. The view reminds you of the kind of places where you could stay a long while. The Talon River, below the falls, is a narrow fast-flowing stream with a sandy bottom for about a kilometer. Then it widens and deepens.



The last two portages before Eagle Lake were a mess of tangled tree trunks. Sometime in the recent past, a powerful windstorm had toppled the trees as if they were mere matchsticks and deposited them any which way over each other. The third portage was not passable. We would have had to do major climbing over layers of fallen trees, a task that was too dangerous when carrying gear. Running the rapids was the only sensible option because the fallen trees also made it impossible to track the canoes. So, after a quick survey of the tricky path of rocks and current, my son and I ran the rapids, one canoe at a time. The only mishap was on the second run – a temporary hang-up on a rock, something that tends to happen when an aluminum canoe says hello to a chunk of granite.

We reached the mouth of the river and left WCP in mid-afternoon. We were now in Eagle Lake, a lake to be wary of when the wind blows. As luck would have it, we found ourselves heading west and the wind was from the west. Thankfully the waves were not at the white cap stage. I knew of a good campsite about two kilometres ahead of us. The site is on a peninsular-like point directly south of where the Bird River flows into Eagle. With only minor difficulty we arrived at the site and set up camp.

Next morning we were greeted with on and off light drizzle.



We lingered and had a leisurely breakfast of pancakes. Hurrying was not in my plans.

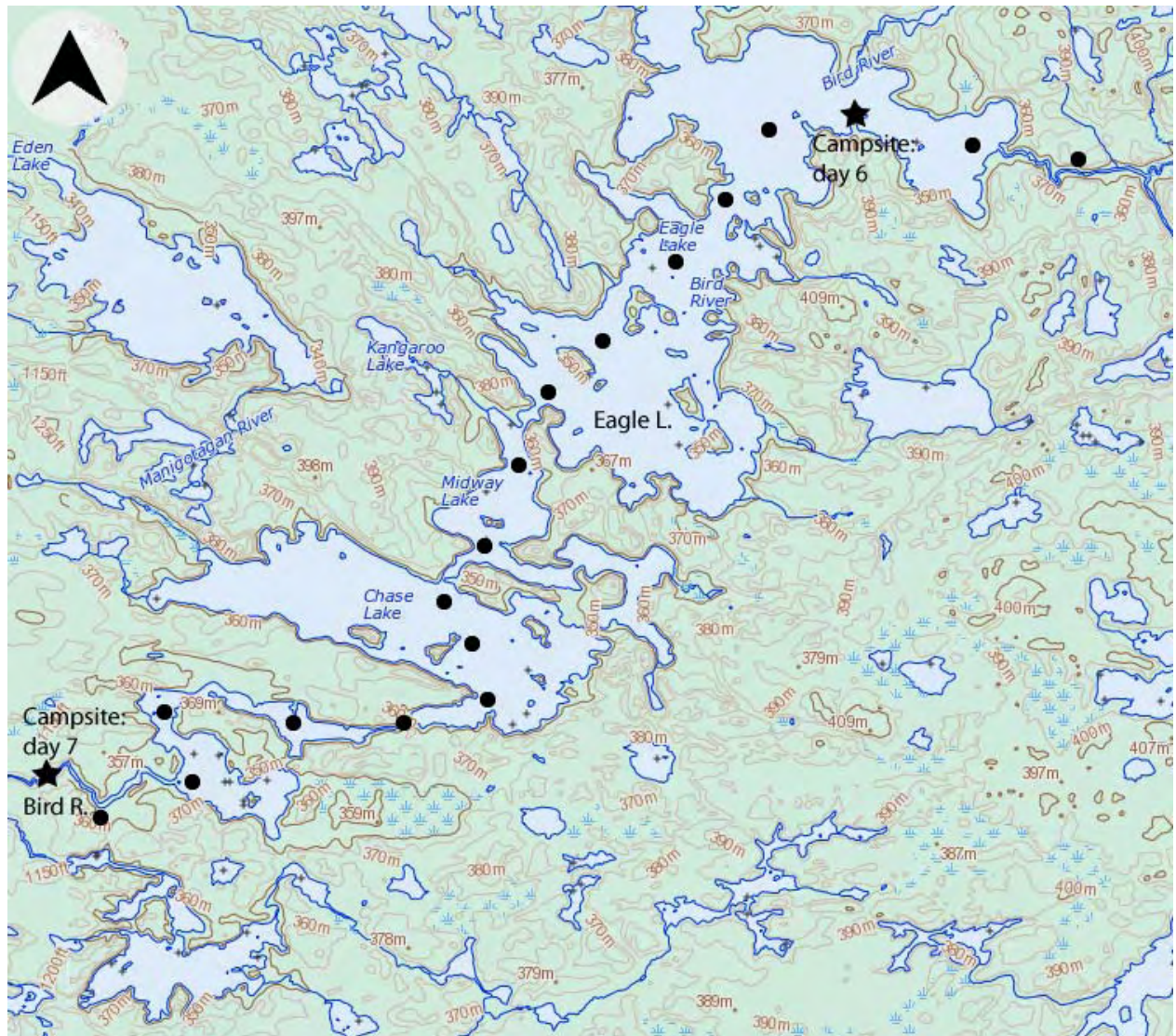
Our next destination was somewhere upstream of what I refer to as the “deliverance run” of the Bird River. The section of the river between Chase Lake and Snowshoe Lake has numerous rapids and small falls, with a canyon stretch as well. Water levels were high and therefore portage landings were possibly going to be at least difficult if not dangerous. I did not want to find us tired from paddling for hours and then trying to make it through the deliverance section as evening approached. It was better to tackle the section after a good night’s sleep.



We broke camp around 11 AM and headed south on Eagle Lake. The wind was light and at our stern. After more than two hours of paddling we reached the narrows at the southern end of Eagle Lake. Midway and Chase lakes were ahead. Midway is prime pike country. Its bays have monsters lurking there. Chase has two high-end outpost camps. I have never stopped to fish in it but I suspect walleye abound in the lake.



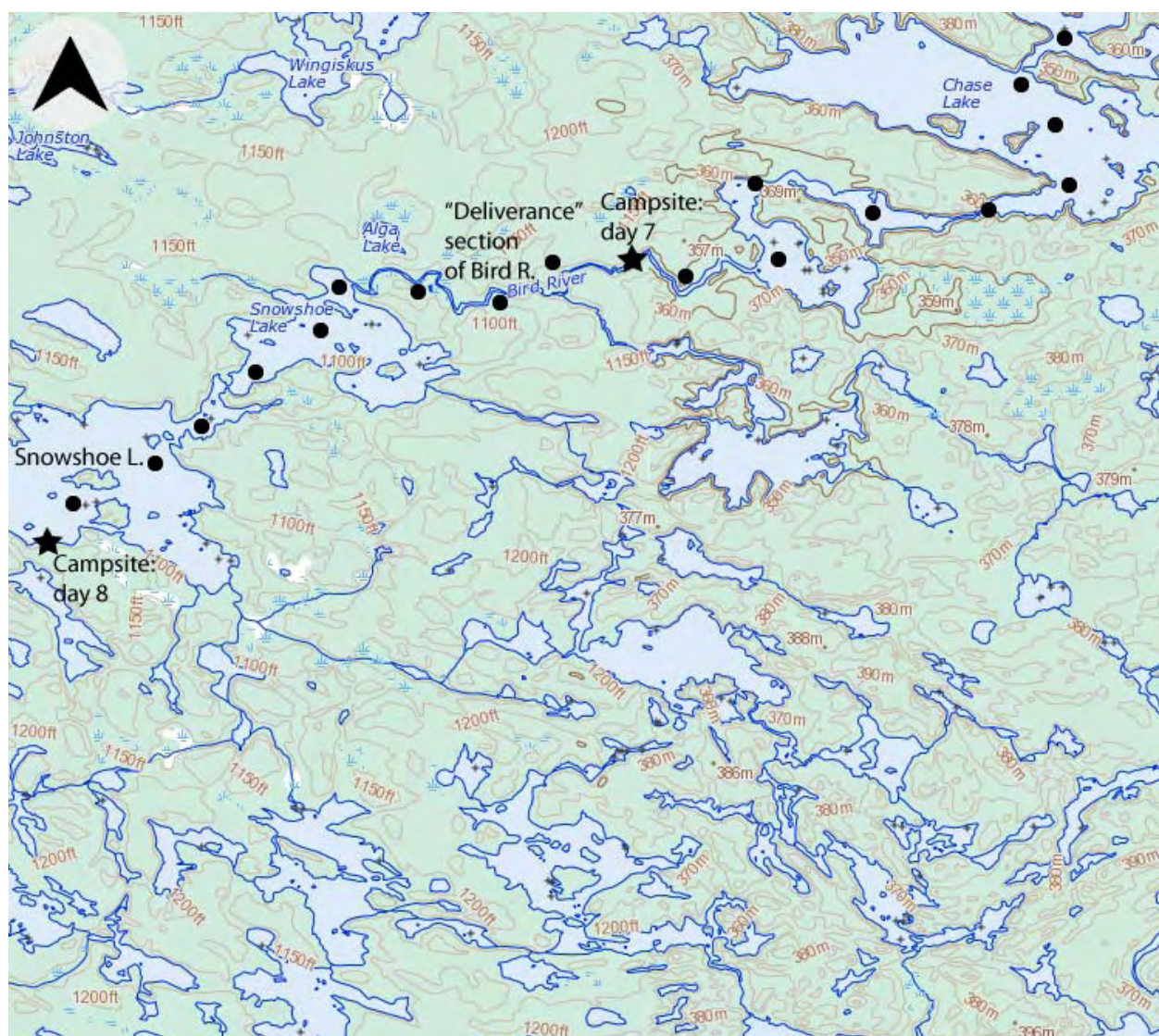
About 1 1/2 hours later we stopped for lunch on the portage at the south end of Chase Lake. This is not what I consider the official start of the deliverance run. Before you get to “THE PLACE”, there still is a small zig-zag lake and a kilometer or so of river to paddle



We reached 'THE PLACE' in the early evening. It is an island in the Bird River. The portage trail is down the middle of the island. The upstream end of the island has a small waterfall on the south side and a step rapid on the north side. It is another of those magical places where one can easily be tempted to linger. We set up camp for the night near the top of the trail.



Next morning we were off to tackle the deliverance run of the Bird. Matters were going well until we reached the portage at the S-shaped rapid. I have lined this rapid in low water but the water in the river was about a metre above normal summer levels. Lining was not possible in the frothing current. To reach the start of the portage you have to paddle through a chute and then across the top of the rapid at the point where the river makes a sharp turn to the left. The distance from the top of the rapid to the shoreline that is parallel to the top is about 8 metres. When the water level is low, this is a fairly simple task. But now it was a scary task. *[Lining is not feasible because of the swampy nature of the shoreline that is parallel to the top of the rapid.]* I knew my son and I could make the crossing but my daughter and wife were not used to paddling in such places. One solution was to paddle across in my canoe, land it, and then walk back along the shore to do the same with the other canoe. That is what we did. My wife and daughter were quite content to walk along the shore to the landing.



The canyon stretch was next. The portage starts fairly close to the top of a small fall but at least you come at it without having to paddle across the flow. The start of the portage was submerged and the riverbank was steep. I had to stand in the water holding each canoe as it was unloaded in bucket brigade fashion.



The second last obstacle was actually runnable because of the high water. It is a narrow channel between a boulder field and a rock face through which the river spills over a step shelf. In low water, you usually end up smashing the stern of the canoe down on the lower step. The high water



conditions eliminated the smash part. My son and I ran it without incident. My wife and daughter were determined to do the same even though neither of them had run a rapid before except when I was in the stern. With tense faces they headed for the V. Three seconds later the run was over. The pure joy on their faces heralded how they felt about their accomplishment.

The last obstacle in the deliverance run is a boulder field rapid that has a rather large boulder protruding out of the water in the middle just before the end. The rapid is not runnable and tracking is not advisable. At one time there was a canoe wrapped around the big boulder. Someone had tried to run the rapid



apparently without much success. The portage that I knew about started in the current alongside a low rock face. The landing was not easy in the high water but we managed thanks to a tree that had fallen into the river. *[There is a new portage at this rapid across from the old one. It avoids the potentially dangerous upstream landing.]*

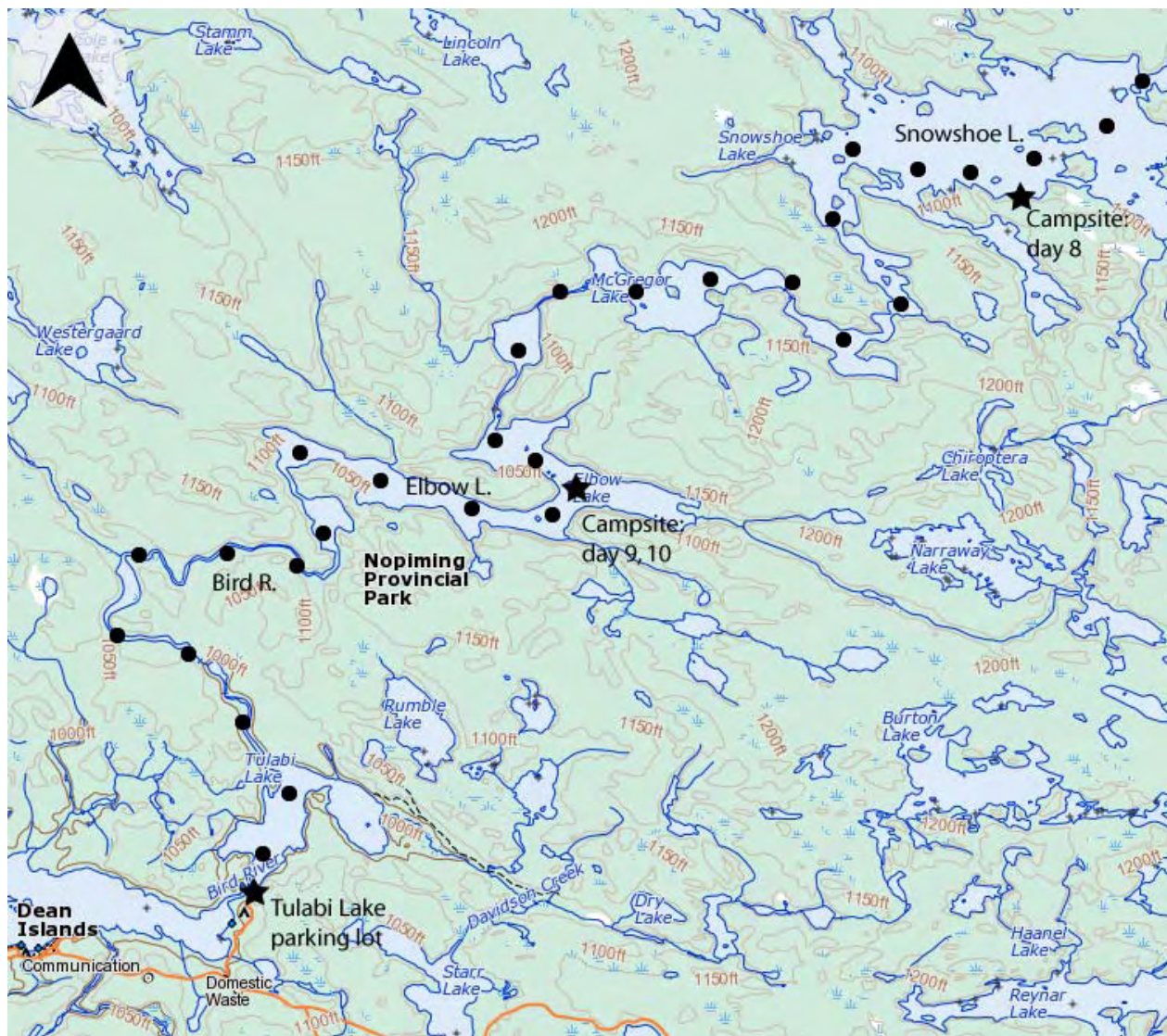
Downstream from the deliverance run, the river meanders as it makes its way to Little Snowshoe Lake. As we emerged from the reeds at the mouth we were greeted with a strong headwind. My goal was a very nice campsite in the western narrows of Snowshoe. I decided to lash the canoes together for safety and paddling efficiency reasons. We found two long beaver-chewed poplar poles about 12 cm in diameter. We tied one across the front thwart of each canoe and one across the back thwarts. The gap between the canoes was less than desirable but the length of the poles was the limiting factor.

With our canoes sort of outriggered, we paddled across Little Snowshoe without too much difficulty. As we came through the narrows into the main part of Snowshoe, reality struck. Whitecaps bombarded the canoes; water splashed in as it swelled up occasionally in the gap between them. My goal had to be abandoned. The closest place to camp was along the south shore. We had no choice but to grin-and-bear it as we struggled our way southwestward towards a campsite in a small bay. The islands provided little relief because the wind was coming from the northwest. We finally reached calm waters in a protected bay. The campsite itself was exposed to the wind but you accept what nature has to offer you when you are in the wilderness.



It was the morning of day 9. The wind had slowed significantly but we kept the canoes lashed together. Travelling this way enhanced the family feeling. Also, we were able to travel faster. Previously, I had to wait about every half-hour so that my wife and daughter could catch up. They could not keep up with my son and I. Because of this our actual rate of paddling was about 3 km per hour. Paddling with lashed canoes increased the rate to about 4 km per hour.

Our travel destination for the day was an island at the crook of the elbow of Elbow Lake. There, we would be in “picnic” country and in Manitoba. The province has created wilderness campsites along the route from Tulabi to McGregor Lake. Most sites have a picnic table and all have an official firebox. Open fires are allowed in Manitoba’s wilderness only in those boxes. The Tulabi to McGregor route is a very popular weekend canoeing route. I timed our arrival so that we would not be there on a weekend. Otherwise, it might have been impossible to find a “legal” campsite.



We enjoyed the paddle through the remaining part of Snowshoe. It is an interesting lake with pretty views. The portage at the falls awaited us. These are the most spectacular falls on the Bird system. The portage itself is an easy walk except for a short wet swampy section near the top end. We removed the lashing poles and, with ceremony, cast them into the water at the inlet to the falls. One of the poles decided that it was not a good idea to travel any further.



McGregor Lake was next. It is much smaller than Snowshoe. McGregor also ends with falls. They spill over a wide granite shelf at the bottom. In low water years, teenagers are sometimes seen jumping off the ledge into the water. Doing so in this high water year would be suicide.



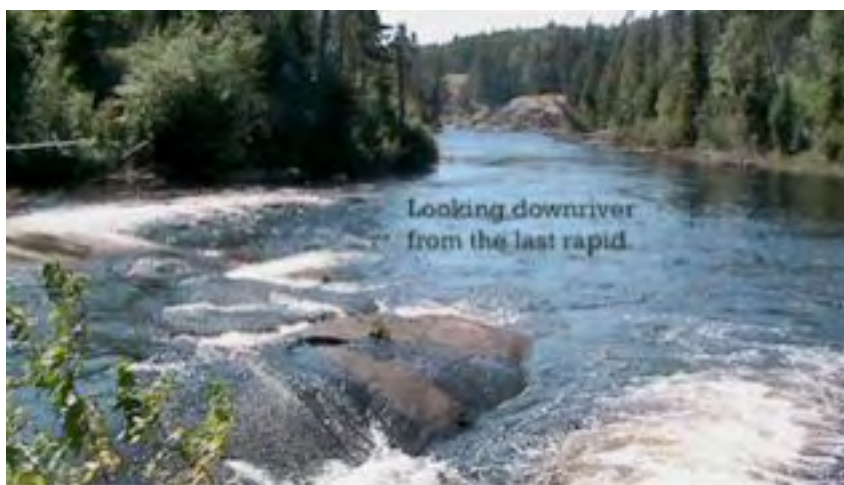
The portage begins near the top of the falls. In normal water-level years this not a problem because there is a tiny inset bordered by a rock shelf that prevents a canoe from being swept down the falls. This year the rock shelf was half a metre under the water. We managed to land by hugging the shore. I stood on the submerged rock shelf and held the canoes as they were unloaded.



A short channel of fast water was next, followed by a short portage around an obstacle consisting of a low waterfall on one side of the river with a rapid on the other side. I have run the rapid in low water. It was tempting to run it again but sanity prevailed.



The portage was almost completely underwater, with its downstream end turned into a tiny waterfall. Fortunately, the landing is a wedge between a rock shelf and a steep shoreline. Each canoe took its turn in the wedge. Unloading and loading was a wet boot experience.



The remaining 3 kilometres to the island campsite went by quickly. The river has a canyon feel to it in the last kilometre before Elbow Lake. There is a short chute section where the river enters the lake. Paddling upstream through it would have been a challenging task.

The island campsite was unoccupied. We stayed there 2 nights, enjoying Elbow Lake with its granite hills and scenic vistas. We also enjoyed the sunny warm weather as we cavorted in the water. The only blight on our last days in Shield country was a noisy group camped in the bay south of the island. Their boom box radio blasted songs well into the night.



We left the campsite the morning of the 11th day. We lashed the canoes together with a longer set of poles. Now the separation between the canoes was just right. There was no wind. It was one of those days when the surface of the lake becomes a mirror that turns earth and sky into confusing twin images. We headed for Tulabi Lake and our van.



Three portages lay ahead. The first one was a simple 10 m walk past a narrow rock-shelf dip in the river. We unloaded the gear and portaged the canoes still lashed together, one person at each corner. We sadly had to unlash at the second portage. It was too long and involved some steep climbing.

We caught up with the noisy campers at the start of the third portage. They were somewhat out of shape 20 to 30-year old guys with beer coolers as part of their essential gear. I watched (chuckling silently) as two of them struggled to get a canoe up on their shoulders so that one person would be under the bow and the other under the stern. I enjoyed their chagrin as a 61-year old man (me), with a small pack on his back, deftly, from the side, swung his canoe up to his shoulders, and marched off down the trail with the load. Payback for noise can take many forms.

Our last portage was over. We bid farewell to land and water and headed towards the beach landing and our van. The last 3 km was mostly paddled in silence, each of us absorbed in our thoughts.



We landed at the small beach that is just to the east of the top of Tulabi Falls and lugged our stuff up the hill to the van. It was time to go back to city life.

The adventure had lasted 11 days, with 9 of them travel days. During that time, we paddled about 150 kilometres and carried our gear and canoes over 30 portages, the longest being 800 metres. The wonderful time we had spent together served to strengthen family bonds and more deeply instilled our appreciation of Canada's Shield Country.

