

## Churchill 7/19-7/28/2022

Camp 1: Next to Cowpack Island – 17K/11mi      Camp 2: Entrance to Sandfly – 14K/8mi/mile 20  
Camp 3: Kinosaskaw Lk – 20K/12mi/mile 32      Camp 4: Black Bear Island Lk – 25k/15 mi/mile 47  
Camp 5: BBI Lk – 22k/13mi/mile 60      Camp 6: Trout Lake – 18k/11mi/mile 71  
Camp 7: Rock Trout Portage 20k/12mi/mile83      Camp 8: Boyle Island – 16k/10mi/mile 93  
Camp 9: Great Devil Portage 14k/8.5mi/mile 103      Finish: 7k/4.5 mi/mile 106.5

Mileages are rough estimates

We left Missinipe around 9 and arrived at Pinehouse Lake at a fishing lodge below Snake Rapids at 2 or so, packed and put in at 2:20. Wind on Pinehouse was stiff, so we hugged the west shore northward, then cut across about 3 kilometers of open whitecaps toward Cowpack Island.

Quite the wind lesson: Quarter into and away from the whitecaps, sort of tacking like a sailboat, timing the paddle plants with crests. A heavy stroke with a crest amidships means a sudden turn. Wind wants to whip you sideways hard, so stern is constantly drawing and prying to correct. Surrender to the will of the wind, and you'll rock back and forth in the troughs. Scary. You also adjust your stroke to counter the wind, maybe starting wide then pulling 45 degrees to the boat. As stern paddler, sometimes my rhythm was two hard strokes, then a correction. Pete's steady rhythm in the front was easy to match. This whitecap paddling would be dangerous for someone without solid pries and draws.

After a 10-mile day of wind, we camped about 7 p.m. at a finger island just off Cowpack, in an old Native fishing camp, and found pieces of monofilament gill nets and a piece of plywood, probably a table for cleaning fish. Their toilets were bottomless buckets half-buried in the soil. Nice camp, a bit dark in the trees. Sound sleep but breezy dawn at 4 a.m. or so—not as wavy as day one.

### Day Two: On to Sandfly Lake

Passed several remote, nice cabins near Belanger, then turned south down a narrow bay. Oops—not our bay. Two miles in, past a huge eagle nest with two eagles, we realized our error and returned into the correct channel. So only about seven miles on route today, and 4 extra miles of a free tour. We camped at a wonderful spot marked on the map along a flowage just before Sandfly Lake.

Marked camps are generally larger, but strangely they may have scarce tent sites. With wood cut, water filtered, and tents pitched, we had time to relax. We sat to chat, when 25 feet away a bear strolled out from the jack pines! I did my "strict teacher" voice: "Hey, we don't want you here!" He bolted back into the timber. Unbelievable! I felt mean, though.

We fished then, and using a spinner, I hooked a 16" walleye on my fourth cast. Good fight, hooray, and a farewell release. Couple more casts, then another, same size. Then an 18" pike. When a walleye and a pike inhaled the treble hook too deeply, and I had to kill and fillet them. Into the pan, and oh, so good!

I fixed jambalaya with andouille sausage, with added vacuum-packed chicken, and stretched it to four people with some instant mashed potatoes. With some Malbec from a box, it went down well.

Ron and Peter were earlier to bed, leaving Pete and I to sip Pete's bourbon and watch the fire burn to embers. Then came the onslaught: clouds of mosquitos attacked. Quick, douse the fire and dive for the tent! A dozen mosquitos came in with us. Time to swat our whining tentmates, some smearing blood on the tent. Out like a light. Camp 2 at mile 20.

### Day Three: Sandfly Winds

Sandfly Lake is very pretty...they say. But the wind! Again we hugged the lee of the west shore, paddling south, then hugged some islands; but we had to turn east and cross open water, about 2 kilometers. Rough wind put us into steadily rising whitecaps, a constant struggle to hold quarter, to synch with the waves, stroking in the crests, all the while watching how close the waves came to the gunnels. We looked only at the waves and the aiming point so far ahead and slow to approach. Oblivious to our peril, terns and gulls cavorted overhead, just as they do in Stephen Crane's story, "Shipwreck," while men cling to lifeboats and prepare to die" Hmm...think instead of how beautiful Sandfly Lake could be.

Then a southward turn toward Needle Rapid welcomed us, and soon we heard Needle's roar. Yes, we had progressed; yes, we had moved on from the arduous battle with the wind. We saw the rooster tails leap over the horizon line. The portage was just left of the rapid, and hard to find, but very short, about 50 yards.

A two-minute paddle brought us to Lower Needle Rapid, class 2, which we lined 60 yards along the left bank of an island, then easily ran a wave train. Two kilometers below was Needle Falls, with a 66-yard portage on the right, sliding canoes on birch logs laid end-to-end longways. We ate lunch at the edge of the falls, impressed by the entrance tongue speeding like liquid glass into strong keeper hydraulics, with a class 4 “sneak” on river right. Onward to camp, another kilometer, on a small point as our course swung left, northeast, into Kenosaskaw Lake.

Our camp neighbors were flocks of pelicans and Arctic terns, whose aerobic flights darted over us, their rasping voice more a snarl than a song. This was another Native fish camp, with plywood and fire ring. “Kenosaskaw” is Cree for “There are many fish,” says Marchildon. I never had a chance to verify. Oh, so comfortable, and we slept soundly. Camp 3 at mile 32

#### Day 4: Silent Rapid!

In the morning our tents were covered with mayflies, large yellow-green drakes, and covered also were trees and brush, and the water’s surface, where the mayflies lay spent. Happy deaths, one hopes, after ecstatic aerial tangos and exuberant coupling. Females fly into clouds of dancing males, where they mate. The females drop to the water to lay the fertilized eggs and the males fly off to die on shore vegetation. I watched for a while as two touched antennae, tenderly, it seemed. The masses of ephemeral joy and death carpet the water, to be strewn along a downwind shore. A day’s sun has them decomposing, the rotting smell noticeable 20 yards from shore. Mats form mid-lake, and Pete calls them mayfly gyres. Though decaying, or perhaps because of it, much better than our gyres of never-dead plastic.

Through the dead gyres we departed, northeast up a narrow strait. “There’s a bear swimming ahead,” Ron called, and we watched the bear’s head complete the 50-yard crossing. Behind a rock bear number two slipped out and into the forest. What next?

Next was a meander, east and south, toward Silent Rapid, quietly waiting, especially for Pete and me. Olsen gives it an almost fearful reverence in *The Lonely Land*. It is like people I’ve known who, quiet and seemingly unassertive, possess at their core an indomitable force that demands respect. Silent Rapid is

indeed quiet, a whisper as 5,000 cfs wrenches through a channel maybe 40 yards wide. After the center vee, fast and glassy, the core of the chute boils free in coiling whirlpools. The largest collision of these whirlpools was along what seemed a foot-high eddy fence. We chose a center run, planning to turn before the fence into the eddies on the right. Marchildon and Robinson write:

The Cree name for Silent Rapids is manitow pawisticos, which translates as “spirit rapids.... There are old Cree stories that associate the powerful whirlpools...with an underwater spirit or animal.... some referring to a water woman or mermaid.

We were to meet the mermaid! On our line we arced into the chute, veering right almost in time. The wall calmed before us, but just as we were to pass into the eddies, a wave rose on our left, oddly a pearly silver gray, about eight inches tall. A powerful side current zipped beneath the silver wave—a grinning maw that slipped us in. Instant window-shade, catching the canoe amidships. Pete looked up, perplexed a moment as the bow rose maybe two feet, then we were flipped quickly as a playing card in a game of blackjack.

My first impression was that the water was warm, and second, that I was being pulled down, life vest and all, into the whirlpool. I’m used to surfacing in one or two strokes, but no such luck: I couldn’t re-surface! I seemed to be swimming upwards but later realized that the water was rushing down around, and with, me. I was getting fearful when the water brightened and I broke, gasping, onto the surface. Pete yelled, “Eric are you okay?” and I sputtered that I was.

Ron and Peter had missed the maelstrom and paddled to us, Ron grabbing our painter and beginning the tow. Pete clung to the rear of our boat, and I used my paddle to begin the 60-yard swim to shore. “Easy,” I thought, but it wasn’t: We were being pulled in a wide, strong eddy back toward the wave train, 100 yards away. I grabbed our rescuers’ stern and hiked my legs up over their gunnels to cut my drag in the water. Ron said later that they were losing ground in the tow. But rescuers prevailed, and we slipped into quiet water. I swam free, and soon kicked rocks with my feet, then staggered to shore.

“Now this water’s feeling cold,” Pete said. I was beginning to shiver. A drizzle had begun. Pete and I stripped from wet clothes to don somewhat damp ones. I was glad I’d decided to run the rapid without my warm wool shirt, now somewhat dry.

My rain gear was wearable soon after a vigorous shaking. Some quick, rich food from Ron and Pete warmed us more. We thanked Ron and Peter repeatedly.

We were warmed, too, by paddling on into Black Bear Island Lake and on to camp 4, another 4 miles to make a 12-mile day. Black Bear Island Lake is enormous, forming 25 miles of our route. The camp was hard to find: no camp where the map indicated, and we searched two more nearby points. Paddling another kilometer, we found a nice camp on a small peninsula shaped like Italy. We set up camp quickly, and Peter cooked a quick meal of freeze-dried Pad Thai.

A loon swam in close to camp and sang out in its tremulous voice. Soon another circled in, landing in clumsy loon fashion, skimming the surface until the legs caught, then face-planting comically to a halt. Then a duo chorus, followed by a whistling yodel from 2-3 others flying overhead. More splashdowns, and then a quartet paddled before us, darkening in the dusk as they entertained. Every day and every camp was graced with loons. On several nights their howling, lonesome calls sweetened our waking moments.

After Silent Rapid, the warm sleeping bag felt especially good.

Camp 4: Black Bear Island Lk – 25k/15 mi/mile 47

Day 5: The Swimming stone

We paddled east, with a southward bend at Swimming Stone, an erratic moss-covered boulder shaped like a twelve-foot-long flattened potato. It's a traditional Cree landmark. We turned too early for a brief interlude in the wrong channel, then corrected our course with help from Pete's Garmin. Soon came Swimming Stone Rapids, a class 1 glide before a 14-kilometer course in a narrow channel. We passed through High Rock Narrows, stopping to eat lunch and visit three pictographs done in red ochre. We continued through a 4-5-kilometer open stretch of Black Bear Island Lake, just breezy and nice, under our usual gray clouds. As we were entering the next channel, Ron (again) announced, "There's a bear in the water!" And 500 yards away a brown dot waded in front of a granite slab as we paddled silently in. As we approached to 300 yards, he climbed out to amble the shore, then disappeared. Good eyes, Ron!

Into the channel, passing through a huge 2015 burn. Every day found us passing old, massive forest fires, regular events in the Northwoods, almost always

lightning-caused and rain-extinguished after burning thousands of acres. Our maps showed what years they had raged, and each had its level of revegetation: burned trees still standing over new brush; trees down in tangled jams among new birches and poplars; and scars older yet welcoming new spruces and firs.

Two kilometers to camp 5 for spaghetti night—Chef Ron—with red wine! The 3-liter box of Malbec lasted through day 7. Then the routine night life: Fire glowed as we talked, the Bockhauses retired, the mosquito cloud blew from the forest, 20 attacking each of us at once. Finish the whiskey glass, douse the fire, head for bed. Zip quickly, then kill the dozen or more suckers who came in with us. Set the pee bucket/bailer inside the door. We had learned to use it inside, maybe dumping it out past the zipper. Do not leave the tent! Camp 5: BBI Lk – 22k/13mi/mile 60

#### Day 6: On to Birch Rapids

We expected to be there by noon. Northeast around an island, then 90 degrees to aim SE, past Pine Island and its resort, one of at least three fly-in fishing resorts near our course. Wind again, but we headed south into narrowing passages channeling into Birch Rapids. We heard the North Birch Rapids roar before we got there and saw the horizon line—yes, that was it—then the white plumes kicking up. As usual, an island separated two rapid channels. We portaged right, for 380 yards. I carried a canoe over a rocky dry trail after Ron showed me his trick for hiking a canoe onto one's shoulder: Person at bow of upright canoe raises it to his waist. Person at stern grips the boat on the ground. On a count of three, Bow flips boat upside down as Stern flips the rear without raising it. Now, while Bow raises the bow high overhead, Stern leaves the stern on the ground and walks under the carrying thwart and takes over as Bow walks free.

Portages are times of contemplation, and mine pondered the physics of walking: As a physical therapist said, older folks fail to engage their glutes and upper-leg muscles. I emphasized these, and it was more solid.

We ran Lower Birch Rapid, class 2, easily and beached in a marked camp on a small island in Trout Lake. We had hoped for an early camp and succeeded, arriving about three. I also wanted walleye again, and after only a few casts

caught two 16-inch walleyes to eat, and one poor 18" pike that over-inhaled the lure. Praise for the ¼ oz. Double-Vee Jig, perch finish, the champ lure so far. I filleted the walleye and pike a bit ineptly, fearing the bones I might have missed. "Let's chunk the fish," Ron suggested. A shake in the corn meal bag with Old Bay Seasoning and a dash of pepper, then into the sizzling olive oil in Ron's fry pan—a nice 12" square pan of cast aluminum with a separate handle. Three pans full of nuggets to brown at a time—delicious finger-food, and no bones. Complementing the walleye was Pete's Japanese Curry with dehydrated veggies and some coconut powder. So very good. Camp 6: 18k/11mi/mile 71

#### Day 7: Trout Lake to Trout Lake Falls

Another northeast channel day, 12k (7miles) to Trout Rapids and Falls. We left about 9:30 and hit the falls about noon. We portaged the falls, then sat by them for lunch. They start with an impressive jet-like tongue, slamming into four-foot-high hydraulic boils. The tongue looked fun; the reversals looked insurmountable. Rain and pea-sized hail stalled us a bit, then we loaded boats for a 200-yard pool to our 95-yard portage around Moose/Rooster Tail Rapid. Then came a 1K paddle across Stack Lake, where the rumbling of an impending storm made us nervous. Next we began a portage around Rock Trout Rapid, 380 yards. Again, Bearman Ron spoke out: "There's a bear!" A small, very black bear, number four, maybe 200 pounds, bounded away when I said a loud hello.

We camped halfway across the portage, first pitching the tarp, which sheltered us through some drizzles. Another night's routine, and a very nice sleep. I heard the sweet sound of rain on the tent in a drowsy moment, then drifted away. Camp 7: Rock Trout Portage 20k/12mi/mile83

#### Day 8: Mountney Lake into Nipew Lake

Another day, at least starting clear, though with a deceitful brown haze. We finished Rock Trout Portage then paddled Little Rock Trout Rapid, class 1+, into Mountney Lake, where we swung south to Fine Cloth, or Chief, Rapids, all easy, into Nipew Lake, which comes on the map with a wind caution for good reason. Back to hugging lees of islands—seven of them. A fast-approaching thunderstorm had us sheltering on one. Another threatened as we sprinted across two

kilometers of open water toward the twin islands, Boyes and Boyle, which has a 100-yard sand beach. Not to be spared, we endured a 10-minute heavy shower. The landing and cook-space were ideal, but only one good level tent site. We set up the tarp and tents, after Pete chopped out a root for ours, and shoved our chopped firewood under the upturned-canoe table, then sat out a brief rain.

Then I went fishing. We wanted two more medium walleyes. After a few casts came a soft hit, and I set the hook; a tug or two, so I set the hook again hard for a bony mouth, then the rod arched and line buzzed off the drag. Wow! A good struggle, the fish running with line twice. Finally here came a large walleye, 20 inches and 4 pounds, and I unhooked him and tossed him into the blueberry bushes. Just as I did so, the jig just fell off the line! The fish had bent the little cheap snap-swivel apart. Amazing! "Fellas," I called, "looks like it's only one fish tonight!"

I took the walleye to the beach and filleted him immediately. Time to try walleye chowder! Here's how:

1. Dice a medium potato and some red bell pepper and set them to boil.
2. Add a 6-oz. can of minced clams and juice and a teaspoon of onion powder and 3 tablespoons of bacon bits.
3. Brown and almost fry walleye.
4. When the potatoes are almost done, add walleye and about  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of condensed milk from a squeeze tube.
5. Simmer awhile, adjust seasoning, and thicken with some instant mashed potatoes. Voila!

It went well, feeding all of us. Time for bed, meaning the fire-whiskey-mosquito slaughter...you know.

Camp 8: Boyle Island – 16k/10mi/mile 93

Day 9: Go to the Devil and Portage

A reasonable 9:30 departure from Boyle Island, then we visited the nearby collection of cabins, Devil Rapids Camp—about 8 buildings, empty and tidy, three



with bunk beds, and four outhouses. The main lodge building had a large kitchen, again very tidy and vacant—with, as Pete hoped, a red-and-white-checkered tablecloth. Marchildon, when he visited in 1986, found it vacant as well. On to Devil Rapids.

We rounded a point and began to hear Great Devil Rapid. Left of its horizon began our longest portage of 1.3 kilometers. Ron and Peter carried the canoes and a load of gear; Pete and I, some packs and the grab-clutter that comes last. No bear this time, but tracks and fresh scat full of red berries. On return trips along the portage trail, I sampled blueberries, raspberries, strawberries and sugar plums (=pin cherries, I think). We finished the day then, paddling around an island to its large, comfortable camp—our last. Next day, the last portage, then three kilometers to the pick-up spot.

Dinner of Ron's rice n' bean burritos and my mac n' cheese. Dessert of Peter's Chocolate Mudslide pudding (REI) and Pete's ginger snaps. Yum! Camp 9: Great Devil Portage 14k/8.5mi/mile 103

#### Day 10: The Finish

Morning brought a keen blue sky and the usual breakfast, although Peter could not swallow any more of Ron's Bushwacker Oats, and so had tortillas and peanut butter. It was a pond-paddle to Little Devil Rapid, a series of three rapids ending in a 3+. We chose the 1100-foot portage instead. This one started nice and dry, with some knee-high cross logs, then into some drying mud, then into some shin-high muck that side-slipped our feet two inches or so. I developed my portage theory further: I did a first carry with a barrel to rehearse, testing the footholds and detours, looking for limbs and forks to provide canoe rests. Then I carried the canoe, raised with Ron's method. Being old and teetering, I walked carefully. Usually people walk just off-balance: We step forward before we're fully balanced on the previous step, catching our balance as we step again, again not fully engaging our upper leg muscles and glutes. Not allowed for an older, balance-challenged guy. I get fully balanced after each step and cannot allow a teeter to begin. Secure under the canoe, I enjoy positive thoughts—how beautiful is the ground cover, where are the berries, what paw prints are here. And I sing--slightly to alert bears, but mainly because I love to sing! Any negative thoughts and little

pains are cushioned by song and the enjoyment of the plants and ground. It's slow and noisy—sorry partners!

Lastly we put into Devil's Lake, the end, but with more drama. There had been a small forest fire the day or two before, and smoke puffed out of the trees where the fire came to an end near the lake. Investigating, we found flames leaping from tree roots and moss. Carrying bail buckets and an emptied dry bag, we doused the flames. Good karma for our next trip. A landing, a phone call and a shuttle brought us back to the cold beer at Missinipe.