

RETRACING CANADA'S HISTORY

A solo canoe journey following the Voyageur water route from Waterfowl Lake along the Quetico - Boundary Waters Canoe Route to Fort Frances (August 30th – September 19th, 2012) Jan Soukup

„Oweeee!!!!“ – A scream pierced the silent darkness of a late evening. Its gravity got legitimized by muscle tissue-muffled thuds of a human body collapsing into the kitchen floor tiles. Sitting in front of a computer in the ground floor office, I had no idea that Milena was returning from the upstairs bedrooms to join me. Allegedly, she wanted to help me check, which items on a pre-determined list still remained to be added to an already packed gear for our very challenging canoe expedition. We had planned it for over a year and were to depart for it in two days. It turned out that after an evening bath and application of complexion creams, Milena was descending in her nightgown and raised heel slippers down the carpeted stairs - in darkness! The fate struck on the second last step, when her instep slipped sideways in her slipper and got violently twisted into a position, in which it wasn't meant to function in any other way, than to drop the rest of the body as an undercut tree. The first was an instinct reaction - a response to the sharp pain - with attempts to assess the level of injury. But soon followed the reaction of a cool reason, as to what impact could this unfortunate accident have on our plans. Unwilling to accept the thought of cancelling our ambitious project, Milena bravely stood up and tested, if she could put weight on the effected leg. She hoped that this would turn out to be just a severe sprain, something that might, perhaps, postpone our expedition a bit, but not cancel it. Yet, the X-rays at the Emergency the next morning, painted a different picture. It showed that Milena fractured the navicular bone in her foot – a diagnosis that eliminated any possibility of her tackling the forty difficult portages that the route of our planned travel through the lake country wilderness involved. Don't they shoot race horses when they suffer this kind of injury? Milena's leg went into a cast and her spirit sank into a deep depression. She feared that I had to be disappointed, and although I assured her that everything was O. K. that this was simply fate, that things happened for a reason and you could not do anything about it, my mood was low from the inability to resolve anything.

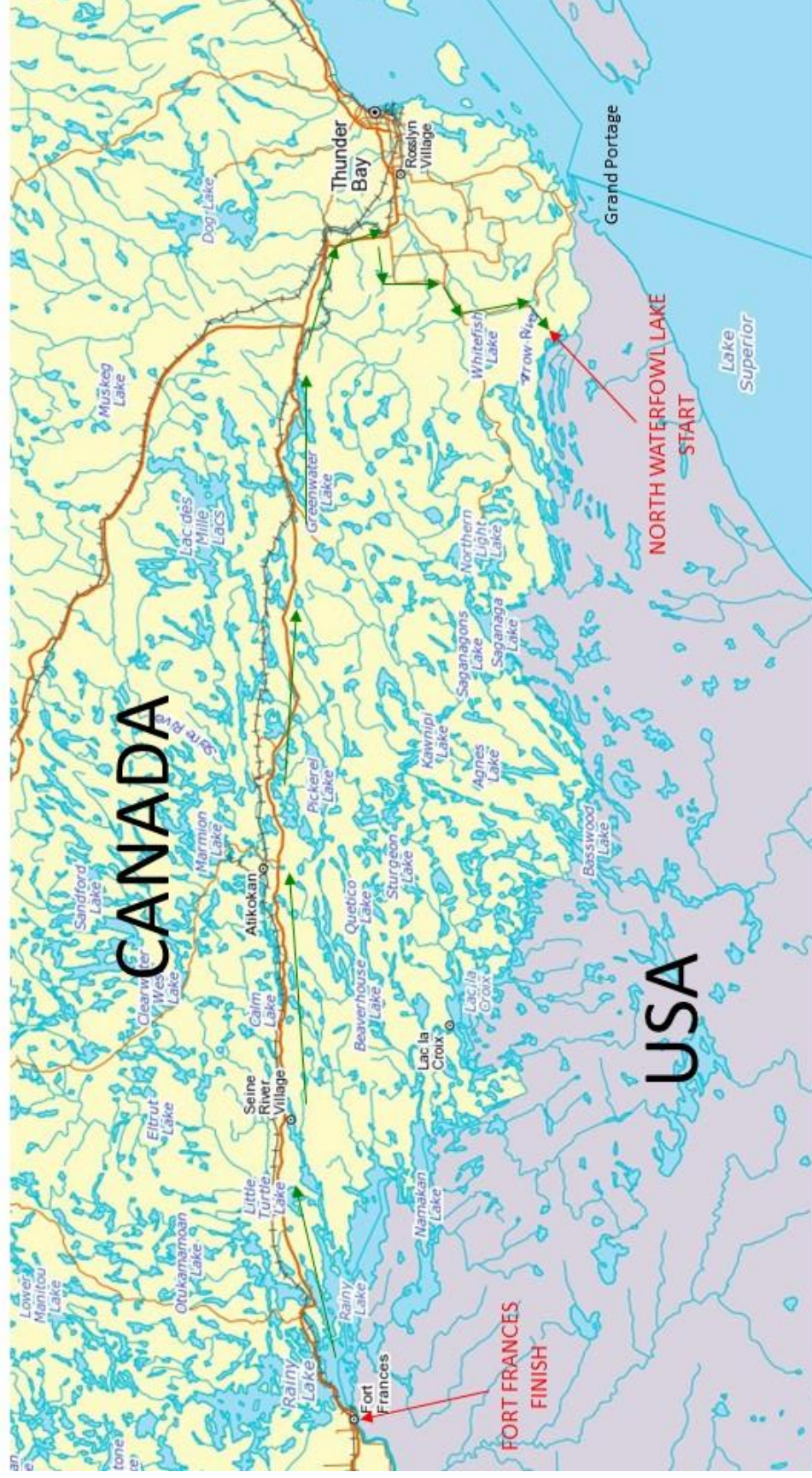
When I aborted my canoe voyage across Canada along the water route of the Voyageurs at Waterfowl Lake in June, 2013, I determined then that to continue on, among other factors without a partner, was too dangerous. But when, during the whole next year, I had not found any, it was just Milena again, who voluntarily stepped by my side, offering to accompany me as a partner. I valued that gesture strongly, but I worried that the present kind of undertaking could be somewhat over her head. Yet at the same time, I fully realized that I would have a hard time finding a better partnership. I had known Milena well and I knew that in critical situations, she would be able to mobilize all the abilities that she had to her disposal and focus them towards a positive outcome. I knew that she would never panic. Didn't we successfully complete a trek with a canoe over the mountains of the Continental Divide to the Nahanni River in Northwest Territories together in '97? Haven't we together descended the rivers Tsichu, Keele and Mackenzie in the Northwest Territories completely alone and trekked back to our vehicle in

Yukon along the Canol Heritage Trail in '99? Following my initial doubts, it was quite clear to me that Milena didn't view her offer as some heroic sacrifice, or an attempt to somehow prove her faith and love. It was obvious that she was genuinely looking forward to the adventure. The preparations thus started already a year in advance. Sometimes during November, I discovered a new tandem canoe for us in the Edmonton Mountain Equipment Coop store. It was hanging on the wall, smiling at me with its slender shining yellow hips right from the moment, when my eye roved over it. It was a love at first sight. The canoe had a classical "Prospector" shape and it was made by the same manufacturer, who produced my thoroughly test-proven solo canoe. It was made from a yet lighter Kevlar and thus, although a whole seventeen feet long, it weighed even less – 20.5 kg. It was again adorned with a splendid ash woodwork, including an artfully sculpted center yoke for its most comfortable carrying behind the neck on the shoulders. Its original price was no less than \$3300, which posed a high enough barrier for me to forget about it. But as I continued to visit the store during the winter, I noticed with a surprise that after Christmas, the price started to drop. The store was to receive a new shipment of boats in the spring and it needed to make room for them. I entered into a kind of a poker game with the store, by cautiously postponing the purchase. When, at last, the price dropped to \$2200, I was ready to close a deal. Only, as the last minute prank, I proposed a very improbable offer of \$1800 and to my shocked surprise, the sales person accepted it. After its transportation home, a lot of work still remained around the new canoe. A new spray cover had to be designed and sewn for it – already our fifth. This meant to source out waterproof Life Jacket Nylon, to drill a row of small holes on each side of the canoe and pass through them nylon cord loops glued from the inside for the lacing on of the spray cover. We managed to overcome all the related snags and pitfalls and complete the task less than a week before the planned departure. And now, this!

Milena was given a sick leave from her employer and I was racking my brains trying to come up with some idea of how we could use her time off together. It would have been nice, if we could spend the Indian summer at the log house on Kootenay Lake in B.C.. Alas, the conditions of the sick leave stipulated that Milena was not to leave Edmonton. Even if I wanted to, I alone could not leave her for a few days either, because, as long as she had a leg cast, she could not drive. Ergo, I had to be constantly on hand, to drive her to checkups and for unforeseen incidentals. Only after the cast had been removed and the doctor suggested that Milena should start cautiously walking on her leg and drive, I made a spur of a moment overnight decision. I would head east and continue in the Voyageur route alone again – solo. Everything had been ready for two weeks. What only remained, was to replace the tent and the canoe with the solo kind. Small repairs that my solo canoe required took me only one day. By now, it was the end of August. The time for the realization of the trip was quickly passing away.

My flash decision filled me with fear. Am I not contemplating to return to where I considered my situation lethal two years ago? Moreover, I did not even know, if I would succeed in getting my gear and myself to Waterfowl Lake, the location from where I turned around to go back at the time. While pouring over the terrain around Waterfowl Lake in Google Earth, I finally discovered a spot on its Canadian shore, where in the maximum zoom-in, four wheel drive trucks and all-terrain vehicles appeared parked in the shade of the trees, together with motor boats and boat trailers. They hinted to me that there must have existed a way to get to the lake from the Canadian side, which would allow this kind of vehicles an access. Indeed, I was then able to trace a mud, or gravel track on the screen that was disappearing and reappearing from under a

MAP OF THE BOUNDARY CANOE ROUTE OF THE FUR TRADE FROM LAKE SUPERIOR TO FORT FRANCES



The water route stretches along Canada/USA border (the interface between areas of the yellow and lilac colors). The green arrows show the route taken with the Jeep from Fort Frances to Waterfowl Lake.



forest canopy, having peeled off a small paved road. “There is my only hope!” I concluded. On it, I should be reliably able to get to the lake in my Jeep Wrangler with the canoe on its roof. But to leave the Jeep unattended in the middle of nowhere for maybe even a month? And how am I supposed to get back to it from Fort Frances, after I finish my canoe voyage there? I was prepared to pay generously to my Good Samaritan Aaron, who provided me with the transport to Lake Superior and stored my vehicle in Thunder Bay two years ago. But he was now finishing his master’s degree at the university and couldn’t free himself for the service. In spite of keeping several „irons in the fire“ represented by promises from friends to find something for me through their acquaintances in Fort Frances, nothing materialized in the end. Finally, I again turned to the electronic friend – the World Wide Web. I managed to find two taxi companies in Fort Frances, who were both willing to take me to Waterfowl Lake, even though they had never heard of it and didn’t in fact know, what they were getting into. The problem was, though, that the price for the service was on the level of taxi fares and for the several hundreds of kilometers, this was really high. The first company had a standard price of \$500 for the trip from Fort Frances to Thunder Bay. My lake was situated another 150 kilometers further south on the border and consequently, I should have expected a total sum of some \$700 to be brought to it. Besides that, I was to pay another about \$100 for safekeeping of my Jeep in Fort Frances. When I mentioned to the second cab company, which had been in a constant competition with the first one, that I had another option, its owner immediately offered that they would take me to my destination for a flat fee of \$500. Without much hesitation, I accepted the offer on the phone. We were to meet early the



A stop in Sioux Narrows on the way to Fort Frances

next morning at the parking lot of the Gold Star Taxi. During the night in the motel, however, I hardly slept. The stress from the uncertainty of the success of the operations would not let me sleep, nor eat. Through the whole night, I was thinking. The Gold Star were planning to use just a regular Chrysler minivan with a front wheel drive. It had no roof rack and thus we would spend a lot of time in untying my canoe from my Jeep and tying it in an improvised way onto the rooftop of the minivan. Besides that, I wasn't even sure, if we would find the way to the lake at all.

In the morning, I turned up in the taxi company's parking lot almost still in darkness before six o'clock. Its owner, Doug, already waited there prepared with a Dodge Caravan. We introduced ourselves to each other, shook hands and I revealed a bold plan, which emerged from my sleepless meditations: "Doug, look, this Jeep would have no problem making it to the lake. The canoe is already reliably affixed to its roof. The gear is inside, the tank is now full of gas. If we drive in it together to the lake and you then return with it to Fort Frances, I will pay you \$200. If you park it at your house and guard it there until I reappear in town by canoe, I will pay you yet another \$60. What do you say?" "There was no problem. Doug immediately agreed. It was likely that he had been in fact worried about his vehicle. Without delay, we jumped into the Jeep and started out. I was driving and maintained a conversation for the long hours of traveling along the highway in the direction of Thunder Bay. Doug didn't do much talking. He was of roughly my age, a slender cowboy type, apparently a heavy smoker. In Kakabeka Falls, we turned south and

followed now already secondary paved roads in the direction of the border. The settlements along the way gradually petered out until we finally drove through vast forests on a pavement that seemed to be only wide enough for one vehicle. I correctly turned off onto a gravel road at the right moment and, after crossing a small river, I followed an arc of the road, which was curving in the right direction. These roads no longer showed on the map and the electronic navigator on the screen of my Jeep displayed only the arrow of my position that was hovering in empty space. I knew that we should arrive to a fork in the road, where we were to choose its left branch. A turn-off from it to the right should then appear after some distance and this was already supposed to lead to the lake. The fork in the road indeed soon appeared. Its left branch seemed to be well traveled and that we now followed. After some while, a right turn-off really appeared and, even though somewhat faint, we turned onto it. The new track turned very rough, going through rugged terrain. The Dodge Caravan would have hardly coped with it. The turn-off, however, curved into a wrong direction after a while, it started steeply climbing and in the end it petered out. We were forced to turn back. I tried to determine our position using an app in my iPhone, but it for an unknown reason failed. Every time I opened the app, the cell phone crashed. What now? I despaired. We had already lost over an hour in fruitless wandering around, the tank contained enough gas for only 100 kilometers. The nearest gas station happened to be 80 kilometers away. I was already dreading that we would be uselessly returning, me wasting the transportation money for nothing and in the end, I would reappear back in Edmonton in a few days humiliated. I had a nagging feeling that we had turned off too soon at the wrong fork. The arrow in the navigator seemed to be hovering too close to the asphalt road. Furthermore, I remembered that in Google Earth, the correct right turn-off to the lake had been situated past the ridge of the rocky escarpment that we now saw in front of us. I was freaking out. Fortunately, Doug remained admirably cool and let me make decisions without any comments. When we returned to the fork, I decided on a daring last ditch attempt. Instead of toward the asphalt road, I turned to the left and followed the right branch of the fork. God had listened. After a few hundred meters, he sent a local old-timer in a pickup to meet us in the opposite direction. I immediately jumped out of my Jeep and flailing my arms wildly above my head, I flagged him down. „Sir, I hope that you can help me. Do you know it around here? We are looking for a way to North Fowl Lake!“ The man raked his hand through his gray beard and replied: „Well, you are on the right track. After about 300 meters, you will arrive at a fork. Take the left branch. You will round a long corner to the left and a turn-off will appear to the right. That one will bring you to the lake.“ Praise to the lord!“ I immediately jumped back behind the wheel and after some while, we were already sloshing through axel-deep liquid mud to an opening panorama of the lake shore. In spite of his stoic nature, not even Doug could hide his utter delight that in the end, our efforts were not in vain. After we untied the canoe and unloaded the equipment from the Jeep, he wanted to help me get ready for sailing off, but I thanked him and sent him back. I knew that the logistics of my preparations would demand at least a couple of hours. In it, I like to think alone. Doug had now only 80 kilometers worth of gas left in the tank to the nearest pump that was 80 kilometers away, but it did not seem to have un-phased him in the least, as he was disappearing through the deep mud into the shadow of the forest.

All of a sudden, I was alone again in the middle of the wilderness. Among the trees on both sides of the road ending, were silently snoozing 4x4 pickups, Jeeps and boat trailers. It seemed as if



Finally at the lake. Doug with the Jeep.

they were waiting like some Sci-Fi robots, to be activated for the final Armageddon – exactly as I had seen it at the maximum zoom-in in Google Earth. But otherwise, nary a living soul stirred anywhere. I sorted out my gear and found that it included several pieces of clothing and other small items that were meant to stay in the Jeep. Now, I would have to transport them in the canoe and on the portages all the way to Fort Frances. I felt fear. My self-confidence was depressed to a minimum. I was hardly fifty percent convinced that I would successfully make it to Fort Frances. Yet, once my Jeep was gone, I was committed. Bailing out anywhere along the route before Fort Frances was next to impossible. Was my risky adventuring perhaps finally embarking onto that tragedy scenario? Will my aging body be able to cope with the hardships of forty portages and daily paddling marathons? Not even the hardy adventurers at the peak of their strengths, who represented the paddling crew of the first European, who in 1731 had the courage to penetrate up to these parts and explore the territory beyond Lake Superior, were willing to risk their lives. They mutinied against continuing on this way. It was the expedition of the Frenchman, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye (1685 – 1749), who had resolved to find a way across the continent to the western sea and to the riches of the Orient. Discouraged by the dreadful toil of the Grand Portage and scared by the horror stories related to this journey, which were maliciously spread by the envious enemies of La Verendrye still before he left Montreal, the group then split. A mere half of the bravest continued on up to the outflowing river, the Rainy (or rivier La Plui for the voyageurs), from the lake of the same name. On a land point there, they built the westernmost base of the emerging young Canadian civilization - Fort St.

Pierre. The mentioned place – today’s Fort Frances – was also the final destination of my present voyage. They traveled through here during roughly the same month as I did now. The second half of the outfit including La Verendrye himself then returned to overwinter at the mouth of the Kaministiquia river (location of the later Fort William and today’s Thunder Bay).

There was a small wooden board pier here, where I finally loaded the canoe and stretched on its spray cover. Then at last I pushed off into a narrow channel through the band of reeds that lined the lake’s shores. When we had arrived, the lake surface was as smooth as a mirror. But by now, a strong south wind had risen and its side waves challenged my progress towards the portage out of the west extremity of the lake. Behind me to the left rear, I could see through narrows the island, on which I camped two years ago and from



which I returned back to Thunder Bay. Like Verendrye, I thus got to know the way to Waterfowl Lake from Thunder Bay by wayfaring upon Lake Superior to Fort Grand Portage in the USA, by carrying all gear repeatedly up the Grand Portage trail to the Pigeon river and up the river to it, all in both directions, up and down. Now I was at last aiming for the far tip of the lake, covered in a thick growth of wild rice. After a while of searching, I finally discovered the approach to the start of the portage. That led to the next lake on the boundary water route, the Moose Lake. The access was



extremely muddy. I poled the boat up the goo with the paddle like a sled as far as I could, before I carefully disembarked, stepping on bent bunches of marsh grass. I then dragged the canoe upon the mud still higher, before I could at last gain access to remove the spray cover and start unloading. The portage was rough in comparison to those that I had hitherto experienced. With three repeat loads and the return trips in between, I had to walk its length five times. Exhausted from the lack of sleep, long hours of the last three days



behind the wheel of the Jeep and the loss of appetite, I luckily and gratefully found a relatively nice campsite on the Canadian side of the Moose Lake shore, right near the end of the portage. I quickly erected the tent, unfurled in it the bedroll and right at five in the evening, I curled up to sleep. My sleep was restless, yet thanks to its length, further extended by a morning rain, I felt relatively refreshed. I neither ate the supper, nor the breakfast. I had no appetite for food. This condition would last for the next almost three days, before I gradually rediscovered my lost instinct to eat. I packed all and I loaded it into the canoe. The fly sheet of the tent was still wet and I placed it separately on the top, so it could dry, while it would not get other things wet. This time, I still stretched the spray cover on the canoe, because I was not quite sure, that it wouldn't rain again during the day.

The Moose Lake was higher than Fowl Lake and it also already possessed a somewhat different character. There were less of the reeds, rushes and other signs of muddy marshes here that had appeared on the previous one. There, they likely attracted the aquatic fowl, which gave the lake its name – Waterfowl, or Fowl. The Voyageurs had a French name Lac Aux Outardes for it, ergo it used to be also called Goose Lake. As I had learned later, so was also named the long portage to it from the Pigeon river, which back in the summer of 2013, I found and used merely by luck – the “Goose Portage“. Moose Lake was already surrounded by hilly landscape covered mostly with coniferous forest. I crossed its length in a relatively relaxed pace well before noon and I reached a ruggedly rocky portage at its end. It led to the next, another degree higher Mountain Lake. The rather long portage to it was broken into



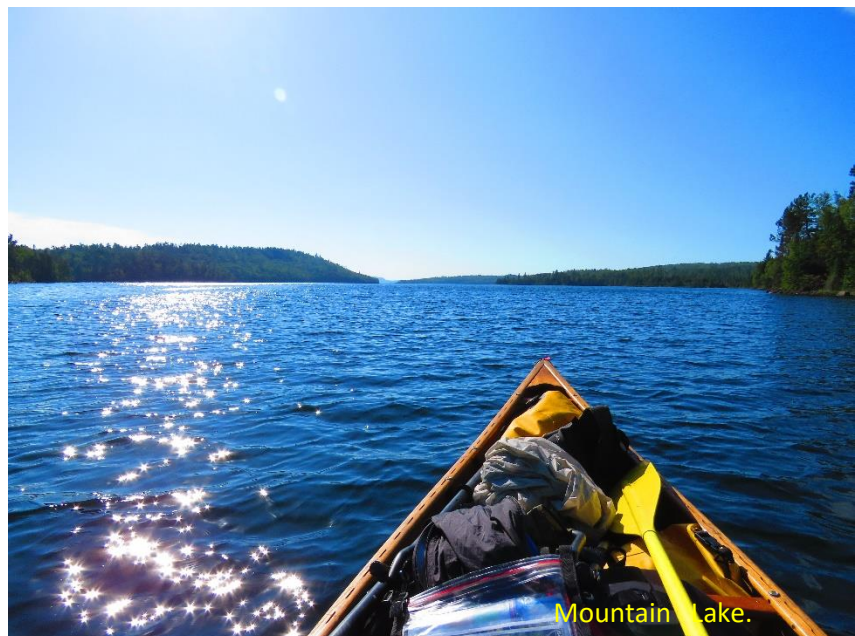
three by two small lakes, which had to be paddled across in the boat. I thus delivered the whole outfit to the first lake, reloaded the canoe without disassembling the packs for the back, re-embarked it and paddled the kilometer plus of the lake's length through reeds and lily pads to the start of the next segment of the portage. All was repeated to the second little pond and having overcome a deeply muddy beginning of the third leg of the portage beyond it, I finally reached the shore of the long Mountain Lake. I had, of course, absolved the length of each portage five times, hence I did not start paddling on



Lake Vaseux on the triple portage from Moose Lake to Mountain Lake

the lake until after three o'clock. I resolved to paddle as far as possible towards the end of the lake and stop when I would see a possible camping spot on the Canadian side. On it, it is allowed to camp "wild" (back country), wherever it is suitable, while on the American side, camping is only allowed in designated and marked camp sites. The latter however, are equipped with cast iron forestry fireplaces, leveled spots for two to three tents

and even with a plastic roofless forestry commode as a toilet deeper along a path in the woods. It is important to note that the historic water route of the fur trade, which my expedition followed, wound constantly along the border between Canada and the United States. In fact, this was the other way around. The boundary between the two countries in this region was actually defined by this route and it was officially established at the beginning of the nineteenth century. When I was getting ready for this stretch in 2013 and researched what kind of a permit I would have to acquire for the crossing of the border from Canada to the USA on Lake Superior when on the way to Grand Portage, I had to have a so called Back Country Border Crossing Permit from the American authorities. But to my unexplained surprise, I also had to get one from the Canadian ones. For both, I had to pay fat fees. This time, I decided to ignore these requirements and had no permits. My logistics was the following: In the first place, this time, I did not venture anywhere deep into the territory of the United States, but I launched from the Canadian side and I strived to keep to it during my travel. From the beginning, I therefore always looked for camping on the Canadian side. In any case, I prefer the free „wild“ camping anyway. I did anticipate that the border could be guarded and I had a logical explanation prepared for a possible border control. According to the Webster – Ashburton Treaty from 1842, the spirit of the act of



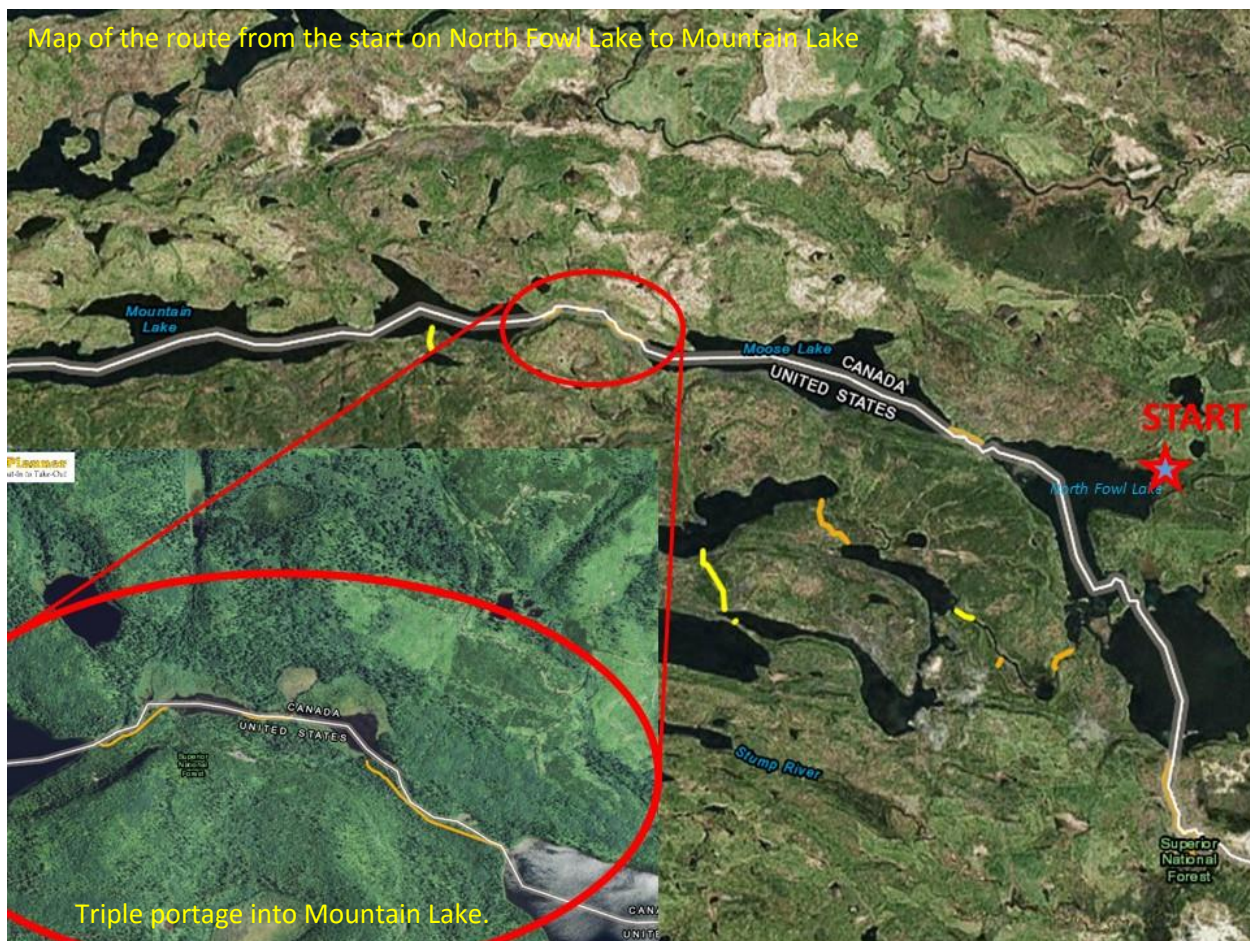
Mountain Lake.

establishing the border on the fur trade route was to make the travel along it readily accessible from both sides. And this not only exactly along the border line, but with access to all the elements facilitating the travel on it. This means free access to portages for a Canadian, if they happen to be on the US side, and vice versa for the American on the Canadian side, as well as to a distant American shore of a lake and vice versa, if it is necessary to move along its shelter for a safe travel due to wind and waves. I felt self-confidence that I could successfully refer to it, if I ended up in a legal situation. It remains an interesting fact that during the entire voyage from Fowl Lake to Fort Frances, I never met with any border patrol, while I moved freely, sometimes as far as five kilometers in the US territory. During all this time, I displayed decals of the Canadian and the Czech flags on the stern of my canoe. I must admit that this situation had brought up another level of adventure for me. I constantly felt like a fugitive to some degree and I analyzed every motor boat that was racing from a distance towards me from the aspect of a border patrol. This certainly had a reinforcing influence on my otherwise anyway always followed credo never to leave any trace of my passing through the wilderness and to maintain a minimalistic profile.

Before I reached the end of Mountain Lake in the canoe, it was already past five o'clock and the sun had considerably lowered itself toward the western horizon. I paddled directly against it and, to top it off, also its reflection on the waves was blinding me. In spite of their shading by the brim of my hat, my eyes could see nothing on the passing coastline, but a deep shadow.

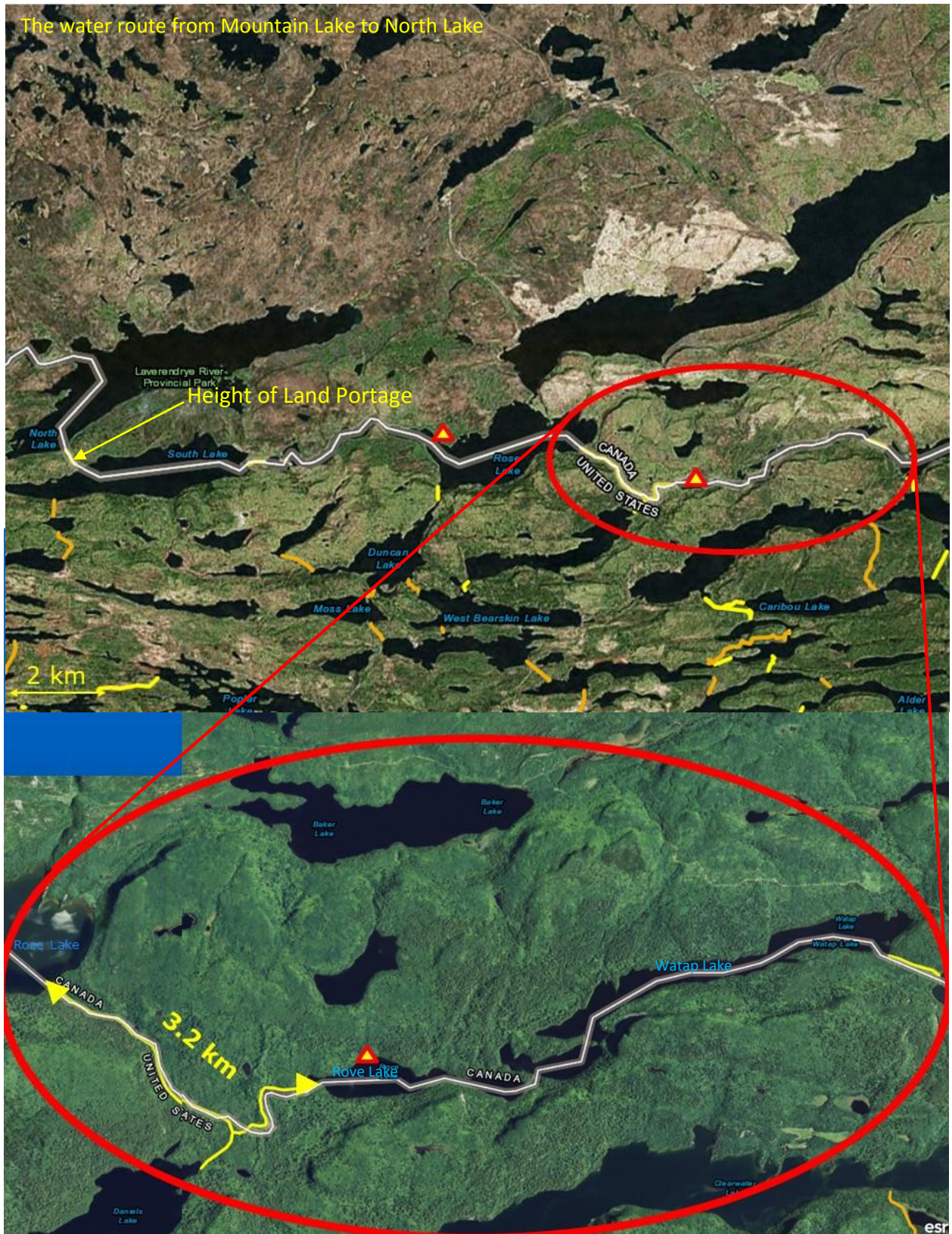


My wild camp on the Canadian side of Mountain Lake

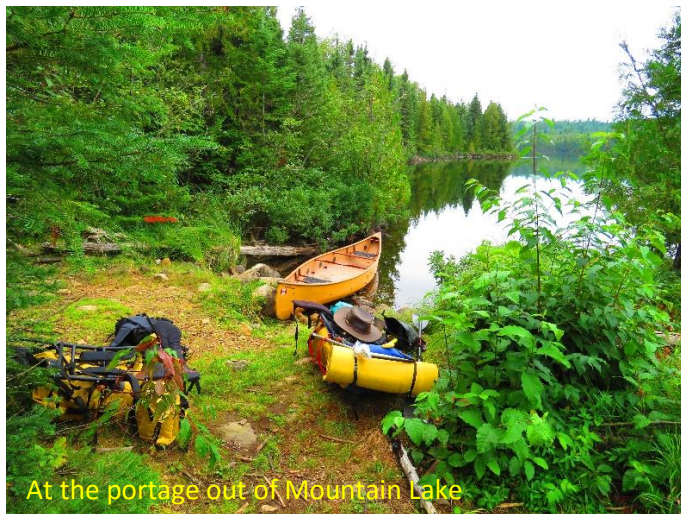


This strongly hindered my ability to find a camp site. The sites for the back country camping are rare as it is, because the shores of the lakes are mostly lined with shattered granite and dense forest growth right down to the water's edge. Hence, one usually has to look for a flat rock platform that juts out from the shore into the water. It seemed to me that I was passing a small black beach, but I rejected it as likely muddy. Only when my hope for a possible campsite on a point with a tall pine up ahead turned false, I turned around for a second look at the black beach. I now had the sun behind me and could see right away that what I had taken for a beach, was in fact a granite slab gently sloping into the water. The unobstructed part of it was not very wide – I could hardly place a tent on it – but the weather was clear and calm. After a moment of walking from one of its ends to the other, I unloaded onto it the canoe. First, I pitched the tent, as usually and prepared the bed in it. In the next phase, I attended to the kitchen. That is when I discovered that somebody had used the site before me, since it already had a good fire pit built from stones. When the water was heating in the kettles to boil four liters of tea for tomorrow and for a supper from a food packet, I jumped naked into the lake and had a swim to relax the arm muscles from paddling, the leg muscles from stumbling along the rocky portages and those of the back from toting the heavy loads. The water in these smaller lakes, after the exceptionally warm summer, was pleasantly warm. No threat of hypothermia in the case of a canoe upset existed here this year. In the twilight of the evening, the place quickly turned into a cozy home. My stress from the uncertainty started to dissolve.

The water route from Mountain Lake to North Lake



In the morning, I set out relatively early. I did not cook any breakfast, the kitchen outfit had been stashed in its nylon stuff sack and that in turn packed in the dry bag with “hardware“, since last



At the portage out of Mountain Lake

night. My breakfast consisted of a protein bar washed down with cold tea and it got postponed until the time, when after a short paddle, I reached the portage at the end of the lake. Everything around here reeked of a fishy odour. It was apparent that a bold eagle had chosen a flat granite rock outcrop here as his countertop for gutting and pecking of his catch. Remains of fish heads, fins and tails in varied stages of rot that laid scattered around testified as its evidence. There was also a border marker here, in the form of a concrete pedestal with a shiny metallic

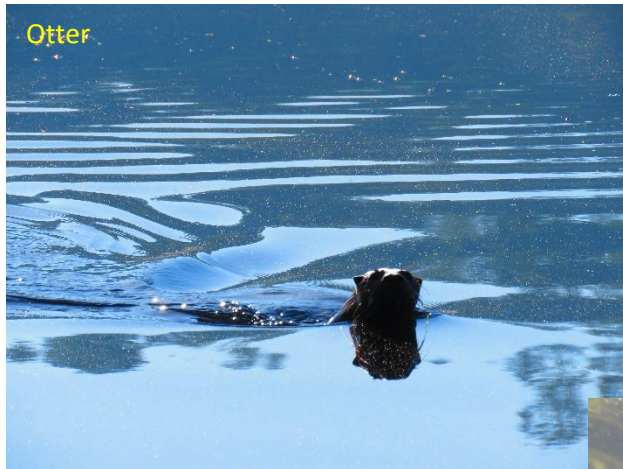
cone jutting vertically up from it. The boundary was further made visible here by a recently cleared wide cutline, which laid across a low ridge separating Mountain Lake from a long and narrow Watap Lake. The latter followed as the next link in the chain of the boundary route. The roughly a kilometer-long portage at first wound through the cutline, then slipped into woods on the American side and then returned back into the border cutline near its end on the shore of the next lake. Near the shore, there was another border marker. Watap Lake snaked among



Boletus mushroom harvest from the portage

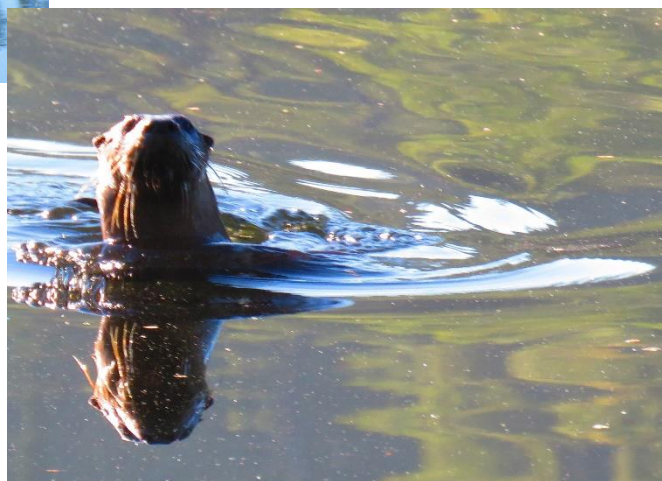
densely forested shores as a motionless wider river. When Milena and I printed out a series of satellite maps covering the boundary route, I did not consider any need to print out further close-up details here. At the time, the topography of this section appeared simple to me. My negligence now cost me almost an hour of lost time, when after a while, I arrived at a false end of the lake and could not find the portage there. Only after I had fruitlessly explored every

beaver slide into the water, I turned to analyze the shoreline somewhat back, from where I came. To my great surprise, I found that before, I had missed the continuation of the lake. It peeled off in an inconspicuous and against-the-noon-sun-shadow-shrouded little bay that I had not seen the first time. Now I paddled into it through a shallow narrows, where the bottom of my canoe rubbed against a rock. The Voyageurs likely had to lighten the load off their birch bark “canot du nord” („*décharge*“) here, to safely pass through. The new part of the lake bore a new name – Rove Lake. At the scale, in which I had printed out the satellite view of lakes Watap and Rove, their narrow width was in many places covered over by a relatively thick band displaying the border. Only with the benefit of the lesson, provided by the previous lapse of attention, I noticed a second extension of the lake through an obscured narrows, which finally brought me to its real end and the beginning of an over three kilometers long portage to Rose Lake. It was only two o’clock in the afternoon. Yet, I knew that I would have to walk out some sixteen kilometers on this portage, of which nine and a half would be with heavy loads. For that I would need a greater part of a day. There was not enough time remaining now and I could not count on camping somewhere along an unfinished portage. I had to postpone it till tomorrow morning. I therefore looked for some wild camping around the Canadian side of the end of Rove Lake. Several kilometers back, I had seen a pretty spot on a point with mature pines, but I would not want to lose time in the morning by repeating the paddling gain that I had already once achieved. In the end, I thus chose a true emergency type of camping on a narrow strip of a spongy, moss and low



bushes-covered shore between the water’s edge and thick young spruce growth. I had to use my machete to chop out a sufficient room in the spruce branches for my tent. It wasn’t cozy here, yet I took advantage of the still warm sunny day afternoon for a rewarding swim in the lukewarm water of the lake. Soon after, I retired to an early rest in the tent upon a bed of deep moss. I planned to get up the next day with the crack of dawn.

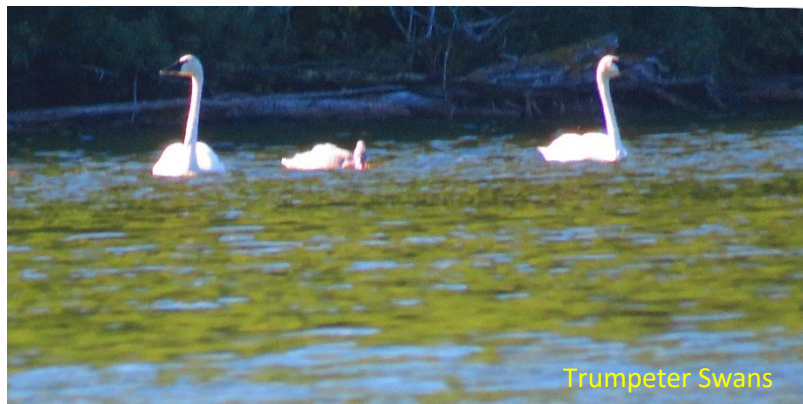
The lake and my camp were shrouded in a low heavy fog. But, as the sharp rays of the rising sun started penetrating it, my loneliness was broken curtesy of a show from an otter. With a noisy splish-splashing he weaved through the lake surface and snaked with his flexible shiny body to the left and right. Every once in a while, he thrust its head and neck out of the water and sent at my person an angry look, accompanied with ratchetty snorts. I had likely settled too close to his nest, or perhaps, I had simply just trespassed on his sovereign territory. What must have brought him satisfaction, was the fact that I tossed my livelihood roughly into the boat and set out toward the portage. It had its beginning only a little over some hundred meters away from my camp. Only once there, I carefully sorted everything out and



assembled it into loads for the back. The first one was represented by my waterproof frame pack that contained the sleeping bag, all the clothing, the tent and a Bio-Lite stove. The stove was rather heavy – even heavier than my minimalistic tent – but unlike other typical models, it didn't use liquid fuels, but pieces of wood, pine cones and other natural fuel. It generated its own thermal electricity, which powered a fan and this blew the flame into the mightiness of a propane torch. The excess electrical energy was then made available through a USB outlet on the stove for the charging of camera batteries, cell phones, etc. It was meant to be my backup mode of charging besides solar chargers in the case of a lack of sunny weather. I must admit, though, that I hardly ever used this stove and a next time, I would leave it at home for the situations, where there is need to minimize weight. For a portage, I would add to the pack a waterproof map case, a small dry bag with electronics and one two-liter bottle of tea. To the top of the frame, I would still strap a rolled up sleeping mat. The second load for the portage was assembled on the hunting pack frame. It was welded from light aluminum tubes. On its bottom shelf, I horizontally strapped a dry bag with food. At the start of the expedition, this item represented the heaviest object to be transported. I would then strap on vertically atop of it a second dry bag with the "hardware". If the tent fly was still wet at the time of packing for the portage, it went into the top of this bag. The third load for the portage was the canoe. With it, I also carried a large lumbar fanny pack, which had a shoulder strap besides a waist strap. In it I carried rubber sandals, fingerless leather paddling gloves and a second bottle of tea. I also slipped the lifejacket on the shoulders, but it would not be zippered up.

I started the portage with the waterproof backpack. With it, I also carried a waterproof fanny pack that contained items of the day needs and food for the lunch and snacks. This I carried turned forward onto my stomach. In my hands, I carried a camera and the spare (kayak) paddle as a walking cane. The path was very rough, bristling with large pointy rocks that jutted out in all angles. The rocky stretches alternated with muddy sections, where one was forced to balance on the edge line between the limbs of the trail-lining tree growth and deep liquid mud in the path itself, like a rope walker. It wound and climbed through young deciduous woods, as well as through tall conifers. The trail occasionally provided a hurdle in the form of a large cross-wise laying log, to stimulate a wakeup from the beast of burden lethargy. The fresh morning sun made the greenery glow in vivid yellow-red hues of the autumn-turning foliage, creating a merry carnival atmosphere. In about a third of the distance, the path had a junction with a turn-off to Daniel Lake in the States. From here in the direction of Rose Lake, the trail had a long stretch of relatively smooth promenade-like walking up to a region of marshes, where beaver mega-projects flooded a short spread of the passage, submerging it under water. This called for a great deal of acrobatics on slippery fallen tree trunks, bent bushes and skirting of the deluge through thick growth. Especially, when passing through here with the canoe, there was no threat of boredom. Right here, in a tight wiggle of the path through tall marsh reeds, I almost collided with a trio of Americans, who travelled in the opposite direction with one canoe. While I still faced two more returns for the next loads ahead of me, they only had to walk once on each portage. It was an inverse proportion formula that one would readily deduce once on the way: Three paddlers in one canoe = one trip on the portages; Two paddlers per canoe = two trips; a solo paddler = three trips on all portages. The last third of the trail continued straight to the lake under a canopy of a coniferous forest, but again over rough rocks scattered throughout the trail in a chaos. At long last, the shore itself of Rose Lake revealed a welcoming scenic beach of coarse sand under tall mature pines. The deep blue surface of the lake glittered in the pre-noon sun with thousands of starlets of its reflections on fine rippling waves from a westerly breeze. Before I

had finally slaved my way up to it also with the canoe on shoulders, I had to circumvent the beaver flood zone, while bending two-and-a-half-meter birch trees under my crotch like a bulldozer. By then, the sun had long swung past its zenith and late afternoon had set in. Sweat was pouring down my face and my weary skeleton screamed with pain. I saw not a living soul anywhere around. Hence, without a long hesitation, I stripped all and gleefully plopped myself into the welcoming arms of the crystal clear waters of the lake. For a while, I frolicked in it like a happy amphibian and weaved through its surface in dolphin-like leaps, not unlike my morning otter visitor. Once I had a satisfactory swim and relaxed my abused muscles at least a little bit, I dressed up again, loaded the canoe and pushed off into the lake. By then, it was already around four o'clock, the evening was approaching. Like practically all the lakes on the boundary route, also this narrow lake was stretching from west to east and for me, a headwind prevailed. But now, toward the evening, it had already somewhat abated. In this part of the canoe route, where it rises through its highest altitude on the divide between the watersheds of the Saint Lawrence and that, which drains down into Hudson's Bay, I was encountering a relatively populous traffic of canoes from the U.S. side. It is because Minnesota, as a lake country state, abounds with many bases of outfitters, who rent out canoes and gear to water tourists together with detailed descriptions of several-day canoeing loops. There the clients are dispatched, sometimes even with paid guides. The loops encompass various lake chains, of which many partly overlap the boundary canoe route. Interestingly, practically everyone that I had met on this route, moved from west to east and so took advantage of the prevailing westerly winds. Only a masochist like myself, resolves to face the winds and waves in travelling from east to west. But this is exactly the way, in which Canada used to be discovered and this is how I want to discover it for myself. After a while, I met a pair of canoes with American tourists, who had despaired that all the campsites on the American shoreline were already taken. They were asking, if it was possible to camp at the end of the lake, whence I came. When I had assured them of it positively, they in turn expressed concern, where I was going to camp. I replied that I would be looking for a wild camp site on the Canadian side. This reaped me a smile of silent admiration with a "V" of two raised fingers as a sign of wishing me victory. Not in the least though, was I sure that I would really discover any campsite on the Canadian side. Not until past the half-length of the lake, when I had already become uneasy from the lengthening of the evening shadows, did I suddenly notice, what looked like very inconspicuous descending steps from the shore to the water, with seemingly worn and newly regrown grass cover. Rather skeptically I halted here, stood up in the canoe to look and "Voila!" – A beautiful little meadow shaded by a grove of young birch trees, whose snow-white trunks encircled it. There were signs of its prior usage, which included a rock fire pit. The whole area was overgrown with tall, wild oats-like grass and thus perhaps yet unused this year. But in a flash, my tent stood here, flames licked the bottoms of the kettles and I was enjoying another refreshing swim, before the water would start boiling. It had once again become my home and an oasis of the chances to regenerate my



strength and the hope for the success of my continuing journey.

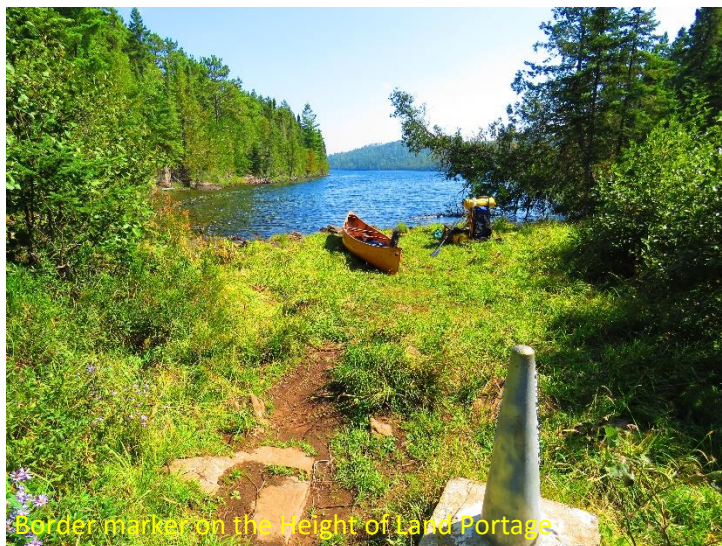


To the west of my camp, Rose Lake markedly narrowed down and wound in between woody shores shallow, with a muddy bottom. Already Alex Mackenzie, the prominent explorer for the



Northwest Company and the first man, whose team reached the Pacific coast by canoe across the continent in 1792, notes in his journal that the shallow end part of Rose Lake had a strange effect on their canoes. It allegedly imposed drag on the canoe movement, as if the shallow muddy bottom sucked on them. I do not know, if I experienced something similar, but the fact of the matter is that the next morning, my water craft did not develop any racing speed here in spite of my vigorous paddling. This was partly due to the fact that every once in a while, I poked the paddle into the soft bottom and could not perform a proper stroke. I was passing here the iconic Canadian loons, whose haunting wails, or hysteric laugh periodically pierced the silence of the misty morning ambiance above the surface of the lake. Yet my interest was piqued mainly by a family of pure white large trumpeter swans – two adults and an adolescent youngster – who aristocratically arched their slender long necks in menuet-like bows.

Before its very end, the route was leaving the lake in a short portage – perhaps only three, or four canoe lengths long – over a small rocky ridge into a short Rat Lake. Soon after I reached the next portage at the end of this lake, a party of young Americans in three rented canoes also arrived. While carrying on the portage trail, I mingled with them. During the ensuing small talk, I was pleasantly surprised that one of the young fellows recognized the Czech flag in the decal on the stern of my canoe. He must have been an educated university student. We instantly became friends. As to the canoeing experience and the optimized physical style in paddling, they were badly lacking and I was thus way ahead of them on the next lake, right after leaving the end of the portage. The next lake was South Lake. This lake was long and it was the last one in the chain of the Boundary Route, which still drained into the watershed of the Saint Lawrence. The portage out of it, sometimes called „The Height of Land Portage“, into the next lake was already surmounting the ridge of the divide into the watershed of Hudson’s Bay. Its start was situated on the north shore of South Lake, roughly in two thirds of its length. The next lake on the Hudson’s Bay side was North Lake. The crossing of the divide used to possess a great significance. By crossing it, the „pays d’en haut“ – the upper country - was officially reached and the new recruits of the Northwest Company underwent a ritual similar to the christening by Neptune on the occasions of crossing the equator at the sea. The newbies were patted with wet cedar boughs, which officially installed them into becoming the „Homes du Nord“ (Men of the North) and, of course, yet another reason availed itself to crack open a keg of the “high wine”. I arrived at the Height of Land Portage on a rather choppy surface of South Lake shortly after noon. On the



Border marker on the Height of Land Portage

portage, I met an interesting trio of Californians from San Diego – two young men and a very athletic young woman – who traveled in the opposite direction and this on stand up surfboards. At the time of our encounter, they had been facing a rare to their direction of travel headwind, while I for change enjoyed a wind in my back. I could not believe that they also transported large rubber packs on their surfboards, but they insisted that this had not been a problem. In my opinion, though, especially the standing position on the board



represented major unsuitability of this mode of travel for this lake wilderness with high incidence of headwind and waves.

By the time I pushed off from the portage into North Lake, it was already past four o'clock. I first sought a possibility of camping on the Canadian coastline. But a narrow sandy beach, which only looked promising, turned up abused in the past by untidy fishermen, who left the bush behind it disgustingly littered with scattered garbage. I therefore focussed my attention across the lake, to its American side, where in about a kilometer distance, I suspected signs of a campsite that was marked on the map. Nowhere on the lake, could I see anybody. The lake landscape appeared to be dreamily deserted. As I neared the intended spot, a vividly green stripe on the small length of a bare beach under it gave me a worry that I was looking at a green canoe pulled up on shore and that the site would hence be occupied. But with the further approach, the stripe turned out to be just lusciously green strip of tall grass. The campsite was free, waiting just for me. This was the first time, when I used a campsite on the American side of the border. I enjoyed the comfort of a leveled spot for the tent here, a log seating configured into a square around a cast iron grid fire pit and I admired the plastic commode of a toilet deeper in the woods. Thanks to the lasting warm weather of the Indian summer, I again enjoyed a nice swim in the small sheltered bay of the camp's landing. The only disadvantage of the site was its lack of firewood. Everything in the near vicinity had its dry wood supplies thoroughly picked over. In a serene



My camp on North Lake

moment, while I savoured gulps of delicious Drambuie from a light flask on the palate to celebrate my crossing of the divide and sat on a log by the fire, a family of Ruffed Grouse – a cock with four hens - all of a sudden emerged from under the surrounding growth. Just like domestic chickens, they started peacefully pecking the ground right around me, making almost inaudible clucking murmur. Then they slowly shifted off to have a drink from the lake. It is possible that some of the visitors of the site before me might have fed them here.

As I had reached the start of about a fifty-meter portage by paddling to the end on the deserted lake the next morning, the water, flowing out of it through a narrow winding channel reminded me that from North Lake on, I will be descending in my traveling along the Boundary route chain –downhill. I had not expected a portage, hence only with contempt, I went to survey its path. In the morning, before the launch, a dramatic sky in the east seemingly threatened with heavy rain-laden clouds and I therefore stretched the



Ruffed Grouse



spray cover on the canoe. Now I was reluctant to remove it again after such a short while for the sake of such a short portage. The inconvenience from this point of view on one hand outweighed the danger of a risky operation on the other. That is, I had started to study the narrow channel of the outflow from the lake. The truth is that this was only about a meter and a half wide and it snaked in three serpentine among large rocks, yet..."Shall I try it?"... I planted myself firmly in the canoe, I

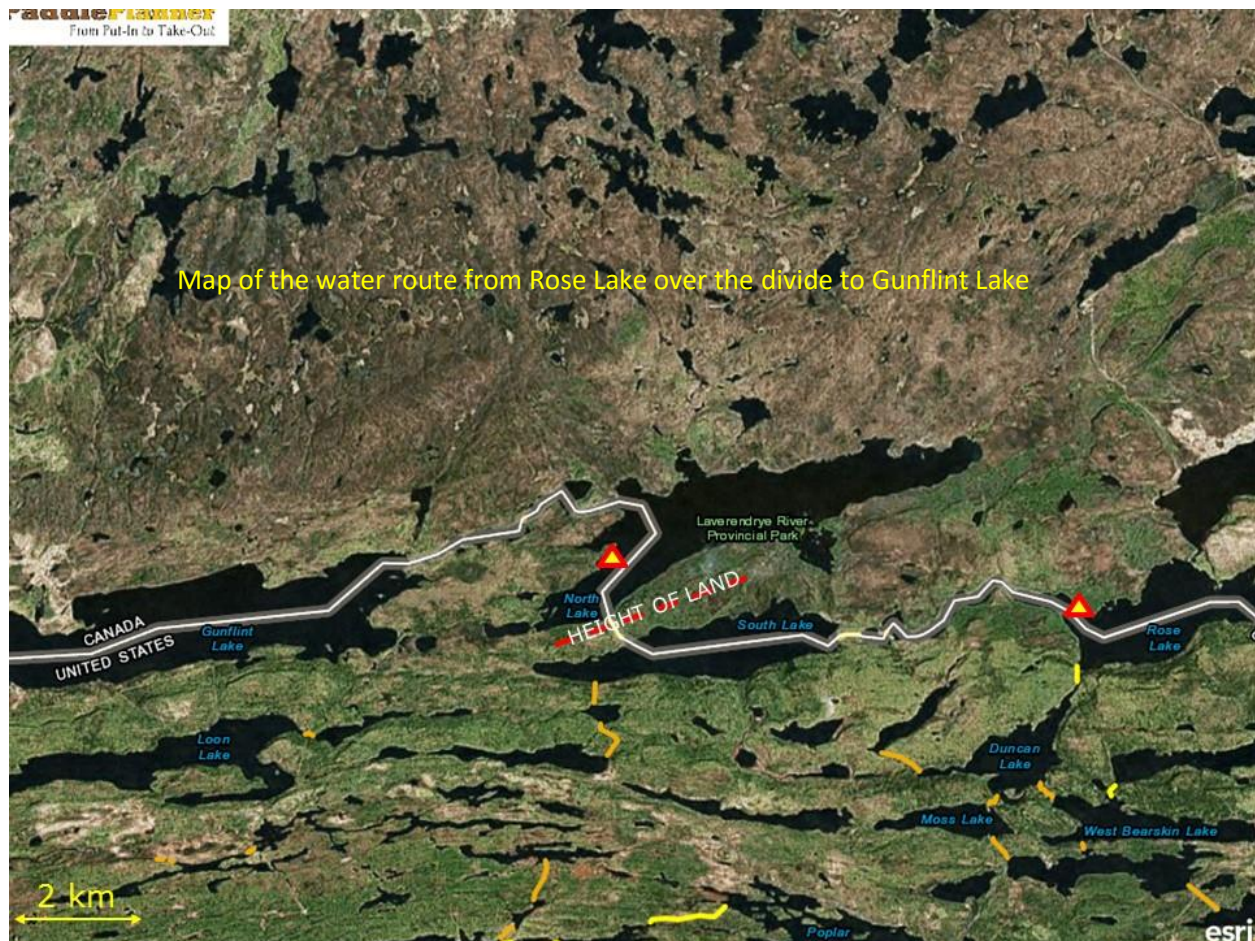
wrapped my hands around the paddle with a wise-like grip and I slowly moseyed towards the sucking maw of the lake outflow, while constantly analysing the structure of the current in front of me. I was deciding what maneuver would be required where. The current set the speed, I just tilted the blade of the paddle in flash movements and I stabbed with it left and right as needed with a lightning speed. In a few seconds, my canoe shot into the wide calm water of the lower lake. I had not merely even



Outflow from North Lake

touched any rock with the hull. A great pride from the significant saving of time and from eliminating the need to portage spread over my shoulders.

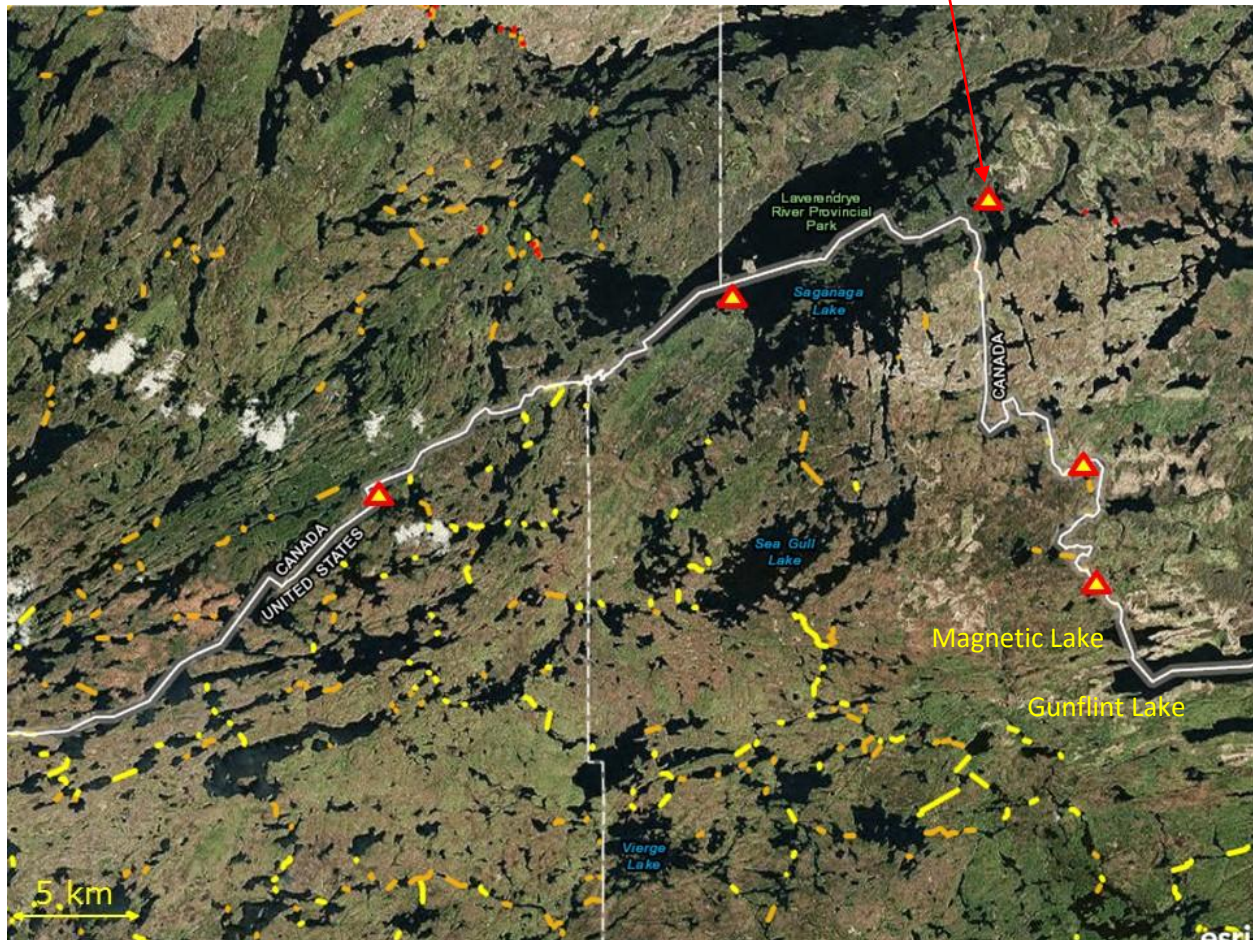
I now moved on a narrower water body – almost as on a wide river – between low shores, lined with areas of reeds. A low ridge was rising on the north side, which was covered with a coniferous tree forest consisting of many pines, both the majestic Eastern White Pines, as well as by the red pines. The left bank contained a low green growth with thinly scattered bare masts of tall trees burnt by a forest fire. This was Little Gunflint Lake. After some distance, the lake narrowed further and paddling through thin reeds and water lilies, I slipped twice with the canoe down an overflow of beaver dams, the only spots, where there was a discernible current. When it already seemed as if I had reached a dead end, where the lake ended, a narrow right-angle turn around a sharp point of red sand appeared. I ascribed it in an elegant move, tilting the canoe and I emerged into a vast open surface of the large, long Gunflint Lake. On the right, a long beach of red sand stretched out. The setting appeared to be an ideal site for a camp, but it wasn't even ten



in the morning. Towards the west, about an eleven-kilometer length stretched out in front of me of a lake, the end of which was hard to see in a misty distance. It was over three kilometers wide. The lake had a road access from both sides, the American, and the Canadian. As a result, motor boats appeared here and even cottages. At first, I moved along its right – Canadian side, aiming in a straight line to a place on the right hand shore near the end of the lake, where an inconspicuous narrow channel was supposed to usher me into the lake of the route's continuation. This lake was called Magnetic Lake. As the day progressed, a steadily strengthening wind blew, which



The camp of the incident with a bear



The water route from Gunflint Lake to Birch Lake

gradually shifted from the south-east to the south-west. Firstly, the wind was sending its component of a



headwind
against my
face and
secondly, it
was
whipping
waves that
grew in size
across the
lake's width.
At the north
shore, there
was already
surf, like at a
sea. This
forced me to
traverse
across the
width of the
lake to its
left –



American – shore and then paddle in its lee all the way to the lake’s end. Only then, I again had to cut across it to the sought narrows of its outflow. Magnetic Lake was surrounded with cottages, hence it did not offer any chance of camping. I hurried to paddle across it and enter its narrow outflow in the form of the Pine River. Here I ran into a waterfall Little Rock Falls. It was preceded by a short chute through a rock ledge, which I shot with a pounding heart and a white-knuckle grip on the paddle – again without a touch. I shortened the portage in this way, but I had to carry around the waterfall itself. It was already rather late and I was by then thoroughly exhausted from the paddling against the wind on Gunflint Lake. I was pondering, if I should not set up an emergency camp somewhere before the portage, but there was only rough and uneven rocky surface. In the end, I opted for a portage and looking for a wild camp somewhere beyond it. The carrying around the waterfall was really rough. It was bordering on rock climbing, as it traversed a steep side wall of the falls’ canyon. A real challenge came mainly when I was carrying the canoe, as its length would not yield to the sharp wiggles between the rock wall and trees. In several spots, I had no choice, but to hold the canoe on shoulders with only one hand, while I had to hang around tree trunks with the other. The continuing river Pine wound crookedly between granite rock banks, varying in its width from some twenty meters to seventy. In its character, it was really a lake that was filling a long fissure in the granite crust, where there was no discernible current. Its shores were covered with low young growth, above which loomed bare skeletons of sparse tall trees burnt by a vast forest fire of 2007. Several islands appeared in the river. One of them, picturesque with its silhouette of unburnt mature pines on top of its granite platform of , perhaps, a mere ten meters in diameter, I finally approved for my camp of the evening. According to the map, the island was situated on the Canadian side of the border. It



My wild island camp on the Pine River

was nice here. At one side, it was possible to dock at the rock edge with the canoe and under the canopy of pine branches, a shallow rock saddle, lined with a bedding of moss, offered a cozy spot for my tent. Soon, flames of a fire of pine cones and dry sticks blazed under the kettles, while once again, I slipped from a granite edge into deep water and had a swim, already in the dusk.

The Pine River zig-zagged through the granite crust, occasionally dropping by a fall, or a wildly cascading rock staircase. Twice, I had stuck out my neck to the fate, when I shot through an initial chute of a rock threshold and by that I shortened the portage around the rest of the obstacle. Several times, the earth crack had opened wider and the water had filled it into smaller lakes. Only upon them, the wind mattered a bit, while otherwise, the incised narrowness of the river, yielded a reasonable wind shelter. I absolved four portages that day, which, at the time, represented my utmost accomplishment for one day. The evening had caught up with me before yet another portage. Neither time, nor energy in me remained for it. I was finding myself on one of the smaller lakes, this one called Granite Bay. I was forced to look for a wild camp on the Canadian side. A hilly terrain, surrounding the lake, was falling off steeply to the water and to a very uneven, marsh grass and bushes-covered shore line. The sad deserted landscape was littered with burnt black trunks laying among the fresh greenery of new growth. Above it, jugged up blackened skeletons of trees that still stood and like raised fingers, they threatened with a revenge for the crime that was committed on this corner of the wild nature. Following a while of break-neck climbing uphill and over black chaos of deadfall, I erected the tent on the crest of a



hill, among sparse broken mast-like stumps. Then I quickly fulfilled the chore of cooking, leaving all the rest of the outfit down on shore at the boat.



My wild camp on Granite Bay Lake

I left the spongy shore of an unkempt tangle of blackened dead sticks and bleached branches, which was continuing even into the water, under an azure sky of a sunny morning. The start of the next portage happened to be only some two hundred meters from my harbor. But first, I wanted to have a look at the outflow from the lake, which was only a little bit farther. As I neared it, I could hear a violent rumble of the water. I prudently floated closer, to see the whole length of the channel. It seemed that I could paddle through the first part of the

narrow passage in the boat, then stop, disembark and lead the canoe through the rest of the channel while walking in the water. For that I needed to change from my socks and hiking boots into rubber sandals. Yet, when after stopping in the mid channel, I was vainly looking for the sandals, I realized that I had forgotten them on shore at my last camp. They had been drying there since yesterday. The price of my attention slip was to drag the canoe back up the current, stepping carefully among the sharp-edged rocks on the bottom in bare feet and then paddle back to pick the sandals up. But when I returned to the outflow again, already changed into the sandals, a sudden surge of bravery allowed me to shoot the whole length of the channel without stopping and disembarking the canoe. And this again, without a single touching of the bottom of the canoe on a rock. With the boosted self-confidence, I would then descend down several more drops of the river during the day. It now changed the name according to the map to the Granite River. One portage then brought me to Gneiss Lake, which was followed by Devil's Elbow Lake. The route around the "Devil's Elbow" offered a shortcut here by way of a portage over a narrow neck of land. For my case though, however long a loop of paddling on flat water while sitting in the canoe, is shorter both, time-wise and hardship-wise, than a quintuply-walked portage. The river that had narrowed again, led straight north now and over two more drops. I portaged here around boisterous "Horse Tail



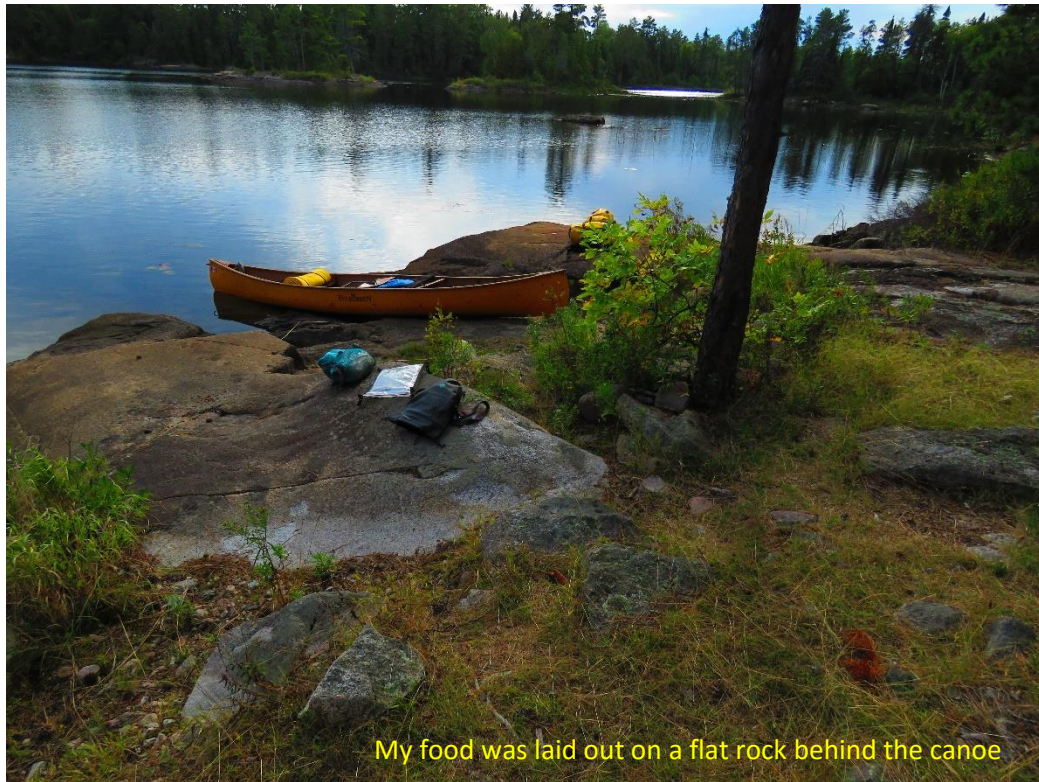
Saganaga Falls

Rapids“. And then, “Saaaganaaaga!!!!”- my victory yell resounded with an echo of a happy “Yee-haw!!” from the people-less wooded horizons, as I had finished carrying around Saganaga Falls and dipped the paddle in again, to finally enter into the vast Lake Saganaga. Its native name means “a lake of many islands”. From the map, I was aware of an American campsite on an island immediately past the mouth of the Granite River into the lake. Yet, as I approached it, a green canoe, pulled up on shore, betrayed quickly that the site had been already taken. I had no choice, but to continue along the route, which now wound among the lake islands and look for a wild camping on the Canadian side. It was high time. The lengthening shadows signaled arrival of the evening.

Not before I had paddled about two additional kilometers around a large island with unsuitable shoreline, did I spot a site, about half a kilometer across the water on the next shore, which carried promising signs. It was a point with a flat rock platform under thin grouping of tall pines. As I headed to it, my speculation proved true. There was a campsite here, likely relatively frequently used, if apparently by untidy fishermen. A rock fire pit was here with a square configuration of logs for comfortable sitting around it. Built near it, there was even some sort of a kitchen counter. Yet the counter was partially burnt and tossed around were several soot-blackened grills from frying of fish. Behind my tent, I later discovered a shallow pit, where they were disposing of spent frying oil. A thought flashed through my head that this campsite must have been known to a local bear. Yet, I was happy that I had found a place to lay my head down just before darkness and anyway, I had never had any problem with bears during my entire canoe



This was the bear's view, when he emerged from the thicket into my camp on Saganaga Lake



My food was laid out on a flat rock behind the canoe

wayfaring all along the voyageur route from Montreal. After setting up the tent, I quickly readied myself to cook supper. For that I had to remove things from the dry bag with food, to make an inventory of food items, of which I had known that they had been

put in, but I had not seen them so far. I laid out the whole contents of the bag on a rock platform, to have a good view of everything. I gratefully found a baggie of dehydrated tropical fruit, which I tore open right away and rewarded my neglected taste buds with a sizeable plug to chew. The dried fruit smelled heavenly, similarly to the smell of the chocolaty protein bars. Mixing with it were the aromas of spices, garlic and jerky. I could smell all those goodies from three meters away. I chose a package of a rice meal with mushrooms, quickly unpacked the kitchen, collected firewood and started cooking. In the meantime, I was running from the canoe to the tent and back to place items in their proper places and to finish unloading the boat.

Somebody else must have smelled my goodies from up to five kilometers away. After some while, I could occasionally overhear a suspicious sound from behind a young spruce thicket, which surrounded my campsite from behind. This sometimes sounded like a step, another time like rubbing through the branches. Yet, when I raised my head from work to listen, there was always silence. "I heard the similar sounds around my campsite yesterday and still, nothing came out of it", I comforted myself. I ate my supper with a healthy appetite and saved half of the mushroom risotto for tomorrow's cold lunch. When I returned to the canoe looking for an empty zip lock bag, the moment of revelation arrived. I sensed as if somebody just stepped out of the spruce thicket and perhaps even said something. I looked up in the direction of the sound and ... I froze. The evening was darkening and I was not wearing glasses, but I could clearly see that in front of the thicket stood a big black bear, daringly looking straight at me with its head lowered between his shoulders. "This is just what I needed!" In my head, I feverishly started developing strategies. There was no way that I could back out of the place somehow. "It is going to be dark in a few minutes and I would never be able to find another campsite." The bear stood with his rear still just inside the thicket, some ten to fifteen meters from me. "I will surely scare him away!" I declared hopefully. I started shouting at him, as one would at a nosy stray dog, while I

swung my arms in shooing away motions. Yet, the bear advanced a step closer to me. I grabbed the paddle and started to amplify my yelling with noises of slamming it against the trunk of the nearest pine tree. The bear advanced another step with a stiff ruffled nape, his muzzle of a reddish tan aiming straight at me. Now, he reinforced his threat with a rapid clicking of his teeth. “This expresses an aggressive challenge in them”, I recalled from some Nat Geo TV program. Just yesterday, I pondered over the usefulness of my belt with the attached items of protection against bears. “I have been carrying that bear spray, bear bangers and flares with me on the various expeditions in the wilderness for some twenty years now and never in my life have I had to use them. The next time, at least for trips where weight matters, I will leave them at home!” Now, I quickly leaped to the belt, which happened to be still at the canoe, extricated a bear banger from its belt pouch and tried to screw it onto a pen-shaped launcher. The bear banger had a fine thread in plastic though, and this was steadfastly cross-threading as I struggled in vain to attach it. “Finally!” The bear banger rested on the tip of the launcher. But now in turn, the trigger wouldn’t work! I repeatedly pulled the spring of the trigger down and let go, but nothing was happening. “Could the bear banger be stale – too old?” After about the fourth attempt, the strike of the hammer finally hit home and fired off the banger. It made a big bang, but I had not known how it in fact worked. With the bang a bright crimson flare was also launched. It described a steep ballistic arch and, as I held the launcher in a random aiming, it fell into the spruce thicket, about twenty meters away from me and about thirty degrees to the right of the direction to the bear. The landed flare immediately ignited dry undergrowth. The threat of causing a forest fire rose greater fear in me than the bear. Without a second of hesitation, I sprinted to the fire and, barely in time, managed to stomp it out. When I returned to my layout of food on the rock platform, the bear was yet another two steps closer to it, steadily clicking his teeth. I did not need an explanation. I knew exactly, what was the matter of issue to the animal. He had an irresistible desire for my laid out food and was challenging me to a duel for it. Yet, he was hoping that I would give up without a fight and run away. “Had he not spend long enough time verifying that I was just alone?” But, I had no choice. “I must stand my ground!” I extricated another bear banger and screwed it onto the launcher. This I now carefully aimed. Not directly at the animal, I did not want to cause him injury. I felt self-confidence that this would work without violence. The banger exploded and the burning flare landed five meters to the right of the bear and a little in front of him. It again ignited the surrounding parched growth. Terrified, I again sprinted to the fire and I feverishly stomped it out. I was happy that I had succeeded. Only then, my attention returned to the bear. But he was now suddenly gone. He must have got finally scared either by the flare, or, possibly, by the fact that I daringly darted practically directly against him, when I hurried to put out the fire. He must have come to a conclusion that I wouldn’t be easily intimidated.

“The first battle has been victorious” I patted myself in a self-praise. “But when it gets dark and everything is quiet, the bear will undoubtedly be back!” I feared. “Yet, I have nowhere to go! What choice is there remaining for me, but to wait the night out in the camp?” I immediately collected and stowed away all the food items from the rock back into the vinyl dry bag, and I hermetically sealed it by rolling its top and snapping the corners together. Then I detached the rope from the bow of the canoe and tied a rock to its end. With it, I tried to throw the rope over a high branch on a leaning pine tree. I finally succeeded on about the tenth attempt. I attached the food bag to the end carabiner of the rope and tried to hoist it by pulling on the rope over the branch. It did not work. The friction of the rope on the branch was too high. Only after I lifted

and pushed the bag up with my right arm as high as I could reach standing on my tippy toes, while simultaneously pulling down on the other end of the rope with my left arm, the bag ended about two and a half meters above the ground. Thanks to the tilt of the tree, it also hanged almost two meters from its trunk.



My food bag hangs on a pine tree

Allowing that the result might not have been ideal, I did not think that I could do any better. “It will have to do, even if bears are known to perform surprisingly acrobatic feats sometimes.” I then decided that I should better eat the saved rest of the supper and I packed the kitchen into the dry bag with “hardware”. Having brushed my teeth and packed away the items of personal hygiene in it, I carried the bag away from the camp – to the very tip of the rocky shoreline point, some twenty meters away. Then I returned to the tent. I marked my territory around it by multiple peeing on its perimeter – the language that the wilderness understood. I then lied down to sleep, my head sandwiched with a bear pepper spray on one side and the machete and a hunting knife on the other. For a long time, I would not sleep, but listened. I was waiting for when the cracking of bear’s footsteps on dry twigs would betray his return. If I had fallen asleep several times during the night, it could not have added up to even a third of its length.

The bear, however, had not returned. Or at least, if he had, I did not know about it. In any case, he had not succeeded in taking over my food supplies and so gain an easy way of developing sufficient fat reserves to survive another winter. Nothing in my camp had been disturbed. This, thus far, had been the only camp, since my leaving Montreal, where I would have to hang my food supplies on a tree. Otherwise, the food bag had always rested near the shore under the overturned canoe. Besides this time, I had never experienced any bear problem during my entire voyage.

In spite of sleeping little, I got up shortly after four. I had a long way ahead of me on a large lake, on which I was to move against the prevailing winds. I could not have afforded not to take advantage of the early hours of the calm before ten, around which time the wind usually started rising. When I was taking down the tent, there was still dark twilight, but, by the time I loaded the canoe and finally took off from the bear encounter battlefield at 5:30, there was already daylight. Lake Saganaga with its multitude of islands confused the orientation. Even Voyageurs frequently used the help of native guides here to lead them through. The boundary line, which



followed the historical route of the birch bark canoes, and which one clearly saw on the map, quite obviously was not also painted on the water of the lake surface. I had thought that I knew, where my camp was located, yet, when after morning start, I arrived at a dead end of the channel that I had followed, I had to admit that I got lost. I returned to the camp and tried a different water channel, still deeper into the Canadian side, but it dead-ended too. By then, I had been already losing an hour. In the end, I returned all the way to the island with the yesterday's occupied campsite on the American side and from here, I at last followed channels that I assumed to be right. Still, I needed some kind of a proof that I had recaptured the true sense of orientation. On my right, I was passing an island with cottages, which, if I was correct, should have been on the Canadian side of the border. Some cottages along the way used to fly a flag and I now wished that I would see somewhere just that Canadian one, as the confirmation of my correct assumption. At last, around a corner, a flag emerged above the tree tops with the red maple leaf. I rejoiced. Spotting a Canadian flag in the middle of the border wilderness had always affected me as a touch of a friendly arm around my shoulders. What was my surprise then, when after completing the bend, it turned out that the flag flew over a building of the Canadian Border Inspection. A billboard announced it on shore, of which I guessed that it requested from Canadian citizens, who crossed the border, returning from the U.S., to possess a permit CANPASS.... I was moving immediately underneath it. I turned my eyes away, to have a clear conscience that I had seen no announcement. Now, I paddled at a fast clip in extended strokes, to disappear as fast as possible from the view of the building beyond the nearest rocky

point. Nobody stopped me, however. It was still only seven o'clock in the morning and the work shift in the office likely hadn't started yet. I escaped the law. Now, as a fugitive, I weaved with the canoe among the islands towards the west-south-west along the edge of a large area of open water. This I followed for easier orientation. On the other hand, on the more open water, I was now paddling almost directly against a rising headwind. Around ten, I finally arrived at the end of the islands. A vast bay opened up ahead of me, which in my direction of travel, I had to cut across. Its water surface was now menacingly black, as it was chopped up in high waves from a strong south-west wind. There was no other choice, but to take it on. The waves tossed with the bow of the canoe and bucked it up, like in a rodeo ride on a wild bronco. I moved at a small angle to the right from the straight against the wind direction. The wind maintained a constant attempt to turn the bow of the canoe to the right, but at the mentioned aiming angle, only to the point, where I managed to resist it with mighty paddle strokes along the right side of the boat with no need to correct the strokes by steering. When the bow wandered off to a bit larger angle, the canoe was immediately turning broadside and it took a superhuman effort to return it back to its correct aim. I could not skip a single stroke. The battle lasted for forty-five minutes, while the headwind and the waves grew steadily in strength and size. I was forced to maintain a racing pace of paddling on the right side during the whole time. When my right arm was already dying of exhaustion, I at last reached the lee of the opposite side of the bay in front of me. I then moved in its relative shelter, closely hugging the coastline to a point on its end, marked on the map as "Rocky Point". This, I was to round to continue on my way. As soon as I poked the nose of the canoe out past the rocky point, however, it became instantly obvious that to try continuing would



Early start on Lake Saganaga

be a nonsense. Luckily, there was a marked campsite on the rocky point, which happened to be situated on the American side. I landed at the lee side of its rocky shore and unloaded the canoe. It was only around noon, but I put up the tent. I was “wind bound” – “*dégradé*” in the language of the Voyageurs. They used to make offerings of tobacco to “La Vieille” – the Old Lady of the Wind, so she would ease on her blow. Yet, there was nothing in this situation to be sorry about. My body was exhausted to death anyway, my back and my arms screamed for a horizontal rest in the tent.

I used the lost time due to being wind bound in an early sleep. The idea was, to wake up early the next morning. I could not allow again, to be caught up with by a newly arisen headwind on the remaining length of the lake. The sky was still dark, just a narrow band of orange glow was spreading above the eastern horizon, when I pushed off the canoe and rounded the rocky point in the direction of the west-south-west. Lake Saganaga tapered down that way into a long spear, the narrow point of which eventually snaked through a wiggly narrows into a chain of smaller lakes strung together by portages. This commenced with Cedar Swamp Lake and followed with Plume Lake, Ottertrack Lake, Knife Lake, Seed Lake, Carp Lake and Birch Lake. The fresh morning had just started awakening, when I arrived at the portage leading from Plume Lake into Ottertrack Lake. Divine serenity hung over the small lake. Just a short while ago, I escaped the wind, as it just started rising, when I neared the end of the long tip of Lake Saganaga. The water surface before the portage was thickly dappled with green plates of the leaves and ivory white crowns of water lily blossoms, while birds sang in the crowns of the surrounding birch trees. The end of the lake was shallow, with deep black mud making its bottom. To make it possible to dock with the boat and disembark, there was a long board pier here, jutting from shore into the lake. Something similar must have existed here already during the era of the fur trade. When my carry with the waterproof backpack had swung past the crest of the lakes-separating ridge, and I was descending to the shore of Ottertrack Lake, I ran into another lone wolf, who had been traveling solo, but in the opposite direction. He was stumbling on the rough rocky path in knee-



Launching into Ottertrack Lake

high rubber boots under the weight of a hybrid between a canoe and a kayak. He was an American, who had allegedly grown up in this Minnesota environment of hundreds of lakes. Although now living in Colorado, he still returned here for his vacations. Perhaps ten years younger than me, he was also up in years. He complained that his



A family of mergansers

lower back had ached from the extended kayak sitting to the point that he was actually looking forward to portages. His soft, friendly and politely aristocratic demeanor with a somewhat neglected physical shape of his tall figure was betraying somebody of a position of importance and influence in his professional carrier somewhere. Dean was quite obviously an adorer of nature and a lover of the lake wilderness, with which he had grown up in his backyard. We struck an instant friendship in the mutual admiration and in understanding each other. Traveling along only a part of the boundary route, he admired that I planned to complete the whole thing. He only warned me with an expression of deep concern that big problems inevitably ought to await me in my planned attempt to paddle the length of the enormous Rainy Lake from east to west.

I now paddled on a very long, yet narrow Lake Ottertrack. Though I had been looking forward to not encountering the need to carry for a long time thanks to its length, I soon found that for me, the lake stretched almost directly against a now already strong headwind. I tried hiding behind the mild bends of the lake's course, but the mostly cedar forested shores acted as a guiding trough for the air current and aimed it against me, whether the lake angled



A turtle

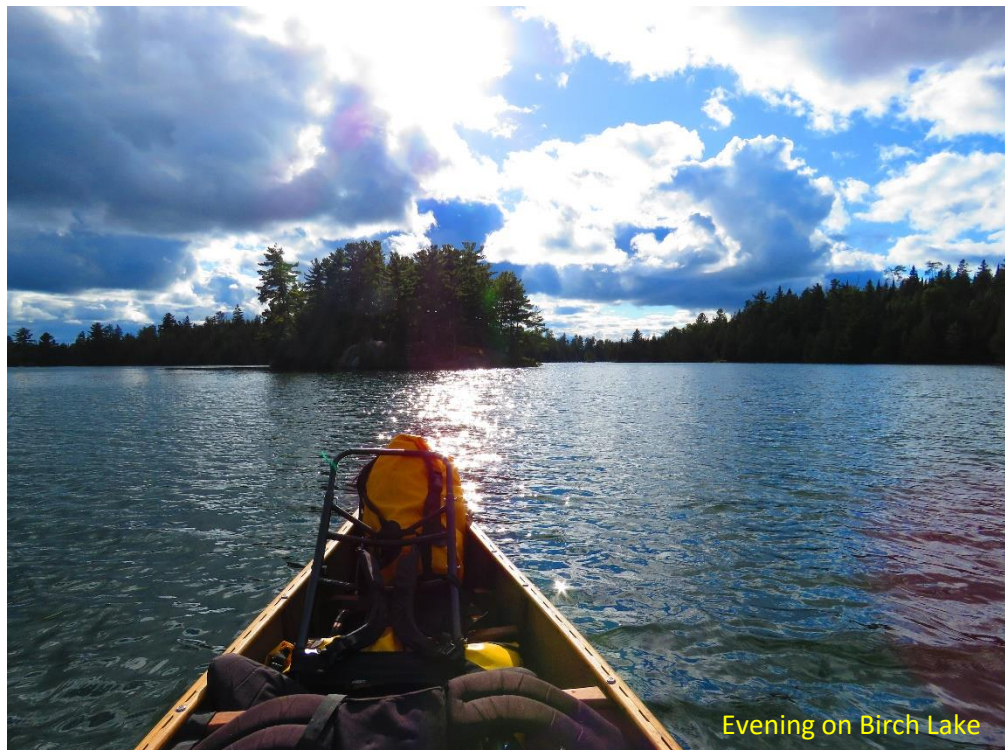
one way, or another. For most of the time, the progress along the surface of Ottertrack Lake was a strength-sapping clenched-teeth battle, fought with the paddle against the nature's mockery. Only at its end, I temporarily breathed a sigh of relief in a momentary refuge of wind shelter. But as soon as I summited the top of a short portage and descended down to the shore of the next lake – Knife Lake – again oriented straight against the wind, it was immediately obvious that I would not be able to continue. Not until the wind would abate. It was still only shortly after noon. I rested a while eating lunch and I pondered, whether I should wait out the afternoon here. Yet, there was no indication that the wind would have any tendency to stop, if at all before evening. I knew from the map that just around the corner, merely some fifty meters from the end of the portage, an American campsite should be located. In the end, I loaded the canoe in a difficult surf upon the shoreline of knife-sharp rocks that gave the lake its name and I set out to rodeo-ride the reflected waves along a high rocky cliff in the direction of the campsite. I succeeded in locating it after a while, but the landing at it in the persisting surf proved to be a hard job to accomplish. I managed to abut the canoe to a meter-high edge of a smooth granite outcrop and, after several attempts, I successfully grasped a rock crevice and scrambled up from the boat atop the shore. I immediately reached back for the bow of the canoe and tried to pull it up fully loaded onto the rock platform. When the canoe's center of gravity already rested on the rock edge, yet it was still leaning towards the water, the spare kayak paddle suddenly slipped out of it into the lake. I sprung to rescue it and, holding lightly onto the stern of the canoe, I leaned out to the paddle as far as I could. At the very moment, when I touched the floating paddle, my imperceptible pressure onto the canoe tipped its balance and the whole works slipped back into the water, myself included. Luckily, the canoe neither tipped, nor took on water. Now, I swam fully dressed, up to my neck in the water around the canoe and the paddle. The lake was really deep here. In spite of the crystal clear water, the bottom could not be seen at all. I threw the paddle out as far as I could onto the shore. Then I climbed again atop the slippery rock like a flooded-out mouse and this time, I brutally hauled the whole boat so far onto the shore that it could not slide back. The campsite atop the high craggy shore was nice and cozy. It was quite fortunately baking in the afternoon sun, which made it really warm. Hence, I could blithely free myself from the wet cladding and spread the dripping clothing on the surrounding bushes and rocks to dry. The spot was simultaneously exposed to a strong southwest wind and the clothing was thus quickly drying, while I was putting up the tent and started a fire for the cooking. There was a pleasing setting here for serving out yet another wind-bondage sentence.

It must be quite understandable that after the recent experiences with the headwind, I again arose right after the walls of the tent started to grow barely perceptibly pale. This was somewhat after four. Still in the tent, I first changed from the long thermal underwear, in which I slept, into clothing for travel on the water. It consisted of a black silk T-shirt, a blue thermal long sleeved shirt with a zip-T collar, nylon swim trunks, black, silk long johns and of long nylon pants with zippers along the sides all the way up to the hips. With it, I wore woolly hiking socks, and early in the morning also a compact insulated windbreaker on top. Dumping of the clothing from the sleeping bag stuff sack, which had served stuffed as a pillow followed, and the sleeping bag was then tucked in to replace it. Already in hiking boots outside, I placed the packed sleeping bag in the bottom of the waterproof backpack, added all the dumped clothing into it and tightly rolled up the closed cell mat. The latter I carried to the canoe, which I turned upright, and I strapped the rolled mat to the top of its seat. Taking down the tent and packing it in the waterproof backpack was next, all actions so far practically still in the darkness. The sealed waterproof backpack was

now moved to the boat, together with the items like the machete, the belt with bear security, the map case, the hat, the camera and the Gore-Tex windbreaker, which had occupied the rear vestibule of the tent. By the time I floated the canoe and loaded it – no more stretching the spray cover on it, because after the very first morning, it would never rain again during the day – the day would start sufficiently dawning. Now, I changed into rubber sandals barefoot, embarked the boat and pushed into the long dark shadows along the smooth water surface, immersed in the silence of the awakening early morning. All was still sleeping, only the echoes of an occasional knock of the paddle against the gunwale of the canoe reflected from the granite walls and dark forest giants, which lined the shores. Low fog slowly folded over the water and ghost-like tatters of vapors stood just above the surface in grimly dark coves, as the cool temperature of the morning air condensed the evaporation from a still relatively warm water of the lake. The tips of the tall fir trees and pines in the higher positions on the west escarpments commenced to turn gold from the sun rays that fought their way over the edge of the jet-black horizon in the east. The lake surface glistened with blinding glare in that direction. Of the eastern coastline and islands, only their black silhouettes like theater props interrupted the liquid shine. Sometimes, a long wail of a loon pierced the morning stillness and in my soul, it sounded equally as if he called “Caaaanadaaaa!” My canoe glided smoothly upon a quiet mirror surface. I had a feeling that I would be trespassing against rules if I disturbed the temple-like silence with even a single splash of the paddle.

By the time I reached the end of the seventeen-kilometer long, narrow Knife Lake, I was again wrestling with the headwind. In that situation, I even welcomed the change in the form of a series of portages on smaller lakes, of which there were no less than five. The wind was not a dominating issue here. At the end of one of the portages, I ran across a forgotten, brand new, splendid-looking US Army canteen. It was of rectangular shape with round corners, made of light, yet robust durable plastic in, of course, the khaki color. On the outside, it was protected by a shoulder bag-like canvas sheath in the shade of “desert sand” with large black letters “US Army”.

I was musing about, how somebody would grieve its loss, when he would discover that he had left this interesting and likely well deserved possession somewhere. But, at that moment, a canoe emerged from behind a point with two frantically paddling men. They were from a party of three



Evening on Birch Lake

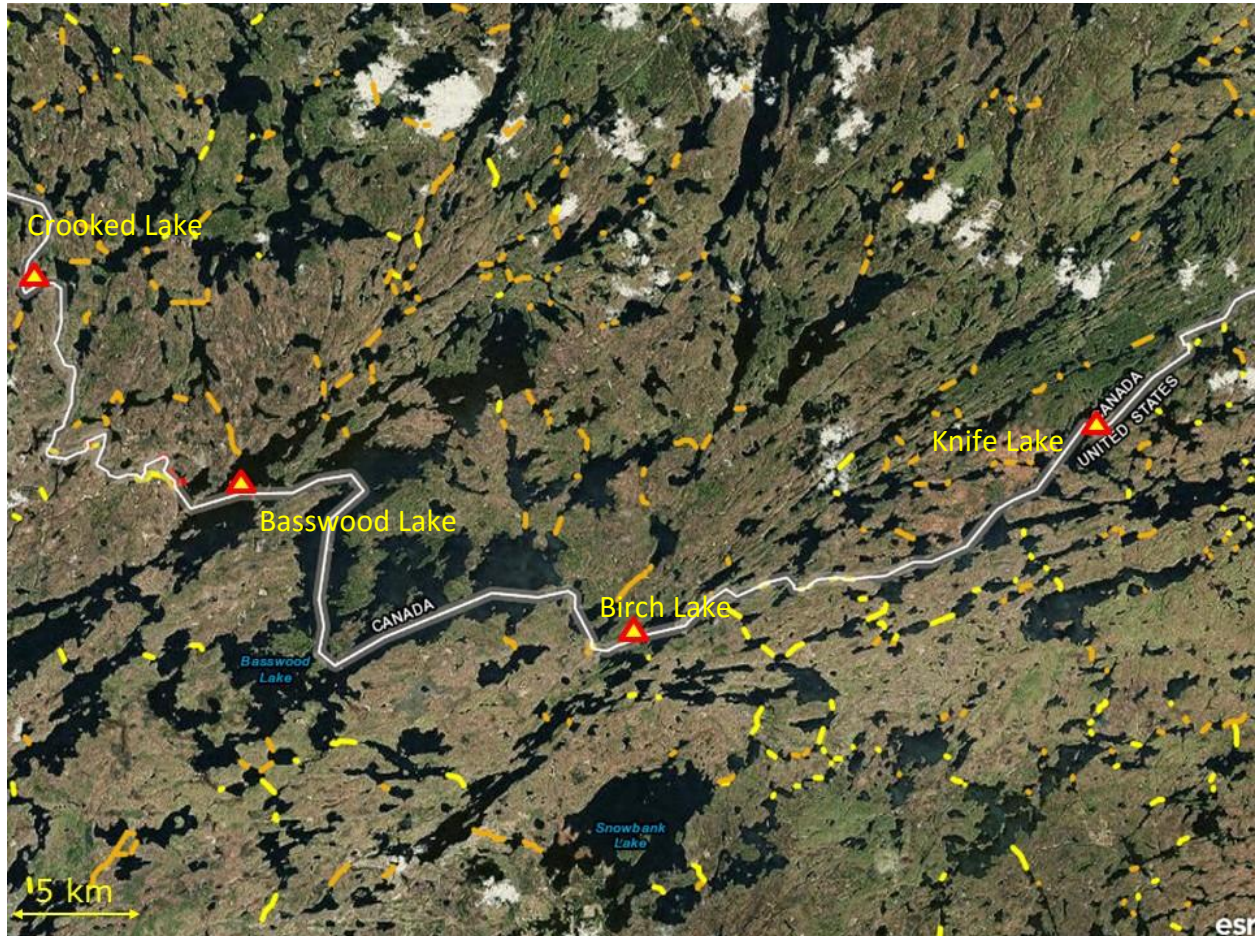
canoes of middle-aged military-looking paddlers that were led by a man with an aura of authority. They addressed him as “colonel”. The group overtook me on one of the past portages. With loud hollering they let me know that the canteen belonged to one of them. They had not hesitated to return for it from as far away as the next portage.

It wasn't until after four o'clock and the sun already headed for the horizon, when I restarted paddling into its blinding glare upon the surface of a now again larger Birch Lake. Here, I had to look for a camp site. I had hoped that I would find it no sooner than around the end of the lake, so that I would get as near as possible to a vast Basswood Lake, on which I was to travel tomorrow. Indeed, I did find a campsite on a low, level point of a forested island on the Canadian side, which was really nice and cozy. Also here, the wild fauna came to greet me in the form of a tame rabbit, who hopped blithely right around me, while I was cooking. I was now skirting the southern edge of the Canadian „Quetico Provincial Park” and the map marked in it also Canadian campsites, the majority of which were utterly gorgeous.

Getting up just after four, practically still in the dark, had by now become „de rigueur“ for each new day of my water voyaging. The inhumane slavery of a fight with a headwind, or risking an upset of the canoe in whipped up huge waves by a side-wind, had forced me to extend the productive part of the day before ten o'clock in this way, the time when the winds awakened. Early morning hours yielded the lion's share of the distance traveled during every day. The Voyageurs waited out the middle part of the day on land, whilst after the winds died down towards the evening, they resumed paddling until dark. They, however, already knew the places,



My camp on a Canadian island of Birch Lake



The water route from Knife Lake to Crooked Lake

where they were to camp every evening and the collective work sharing in the camps made a quick process of completing all the necessary chores before sleeping. I had to find a campsite between four and five. Still, it would take me until dark to complete all the required chores and duties, before laying my exhausted skeletal frame onto the sleeping bag in the tent. This was typically sometimes around nine in the evening. The combination of eleven-hour paddling marathons, interlaced with stumbling under heavy burdens on the portages, as well as the constant bending down to lift miscellaneous, often heavy objects – all from the ground level – in the evening camp, turned the moment of the final reaching of the horizontal position in the tent a true feeling of being liberated from slavery. The idea of an evening paddling sounded absolutely unreal to me.

I reached the portage into Basswood Lake really early, practically still in darkness and in a fog. Just then, fast motor boats of outfitters from the USA were converging to it, as they were bringing their clients, mostly for fishing. Their headlights beamed through the fog, some of them carried up to four upside down canoes on an overhead pipe rack. They were in contact with the clients by radio and in this way, they could pick them up and “rescue” them from situations, where they had requested it due to a headwind, or a bad weather. The one time waterfall into the lake was now replaced with a small concrete dam. On the Canadian side of it, was a foot portage for canoeists, while the American side had a road for a truck, which loaded motorboats with a winch and transported them between the lakes. The truck’s headlights had been visible from a distance. The entrance beach of Basswood Lake was covered with tatters of dirty foam from a surf that had been whipping it since the wee hours. It did not serve as an encouraging sign. Gone were the cigar shapes of the lakes’ outlines, elongated from east to west, which I had passed before the crossing of the divide. The large lake Basswood spills into a torn up, complicated shape and the water route weaves through it in several giant zig-zags. Depending on their direction, a strong, west-south-west wind thus asserted itself in them either as a strong side-wind, or a merciless headwind. When moving northward, I had trouble stabilizing the canoe in large side waves, moving westward, I was bronc-riding big waves straight against the wind. Should I ignore the hard, as well as risky



Lunch break on Basswood Lake

labor of fighting with the headwind, Basswood Lake and its surroundings were very scenic and romantic. The adjacent ridges were treed predominantly with tall pines that spilled their rich greenery over granite crags all the way to the water of the lake. From the lake surface up the gullies and ravines of inflowing creeks and streamlets, yellow-gold of the birch, aspen and alder foliage, starting to turn autumn colors, dissolved into the

green. Here and there, a lonely maple screamed with a splash of fiery red. A few times, a “V” of migration-ready geese carried across the blue sky above a distant horizon, its point aiming south. The motor boats and the canoes of the outfitters, dispatched onto the lake with their clients, in time dissolved into its vastness and I paddled alone, forsaken in a deserted wilderness. Around ten, the sun started blazing in the clear sky. Sweating from the searing heat, as during most days up to now, I stripped shirtless and paddled like an aboriginal water nomad. The wind cooled the sweaty muscles and it was bringing the aroma of coniferous resin to the nostrils. Around two o’clock, I rounded a sharp point of a wooded shore on the inside of a giant bend of the lake into its next segment that was aiming westward and directly into the wind. There, I suddenly felt that any further battle with the wind was pointless. Seeing an empty campsite on a granite cliff of the American side, I traversed the width of the lake and landed there to inspect it. The site turned nice, but I was reluctant to unload the canoe yet. I felt sorry that I would be losing a significant part of the day in an early stop of paddling. Reclining on a sun-warmed patch of grass high on the crag, I enjoyed a nice view of the lake ahead of me. In the distance, I glimpsed a reflection of the sun on a wet paddle. Focussing on it a bit sharper, I discerned a trio of canoes, engaged in a battle against the wind, seeking advantage of the coastline protrusions and of little islands. This prodded me to an instant decision to continue a little further. After a few kilometers of a slow progress against the waves and the wind, I at last arrived into the vicinity of a group of islands, topped with a growth of tall pines. One of them, according to the map, was to have a campsite on the Canadian side. As I was rounding the high granite edges of its shoreline, nowhere could I

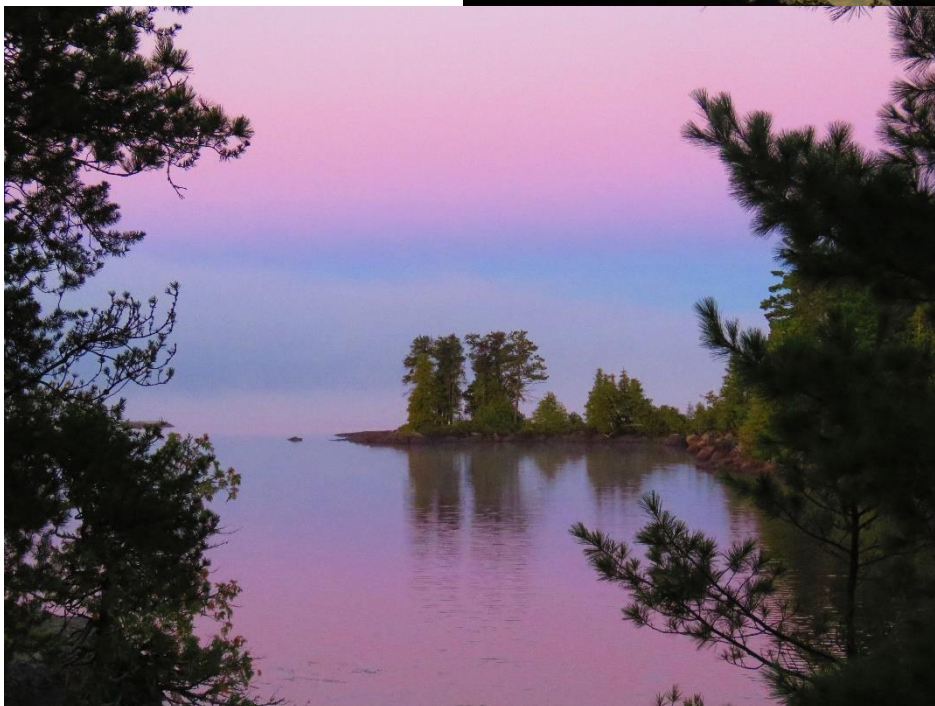
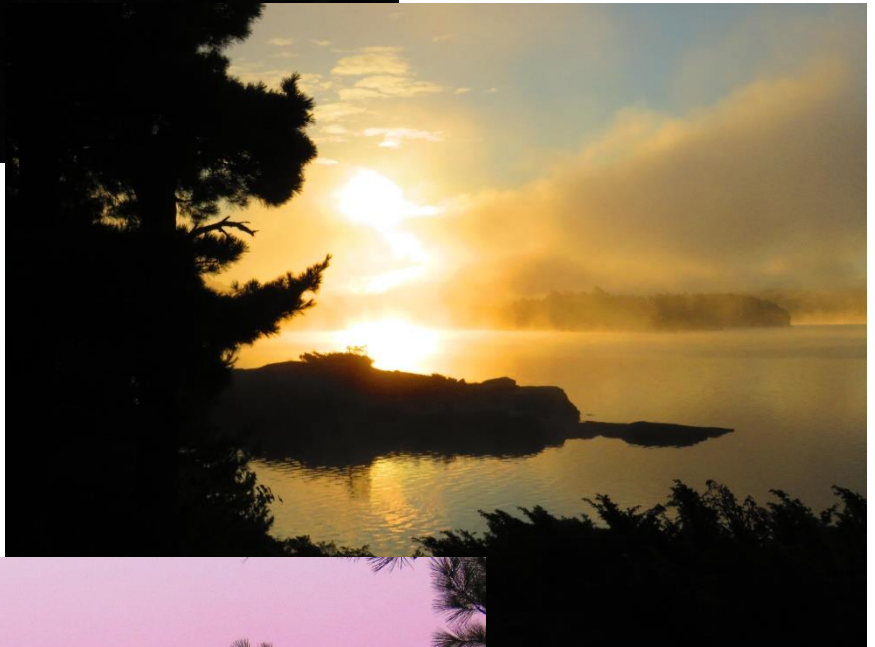


Island camp on Basswood Lake



see any campsite. It was not until I had touched at a high bank, scrambled upon top of it and surveyed the island's crest. There was a gorgeous site here on a high grassy plateau among sparse tall pines. A rock fire pit certified its official status as a campsite. Only from here, I could see an access along a slanting granite ramp from a

small notch in the rock shore on the opposite side of the island. Right away, I returned into the canoe and, after rounding the island, I disembarked again in the newly discovered harbor. It was one of the "Pine Islands" on Basswood Lake, which already the Voyageurs used to relish and which were particularly praised



by the explorer of the Northwest Company, David Thompson. The evening sitting by the fire on the platform of the high island camp could not have had a more relaxing atmosphere. The sceneries in a beautiful panoramic view of the lake with its multiple silhouettes of islands and shorelines, each spiky with the tips of the coniferous trees,



receding one behind another into the back drop of long shadows and colorful reflections of the evening light on the mirror of the water surface, were as if competing with the reddish-pink hues of a blushing lace-work of clouds, above the western horizon. This was not to be the last reward for me from Lake Basswood. All this would be upscaled by the performance of the awakening morning lights from the very hint of dawn up to the rising of the low sun diffused in a dense fog over the shiny lake surface. By then, I had already paddled for some while towards the portage around the outflow of the lake in the form of scenic Basswood Falls. Etheric outlines of islands and points of the shoreline kept emerging like ghosts, suspended in a milky, seemingly weightless space in front of the canoe. One after another they were film-fading into view at the last moment, as I quietly paddled along the coastline. The fog first thickened and I moved through it practically by memory, in which I held the shape of the shoreline, orienting myself by the spot of the lightest concentration in the diffused light up behind my head, which signaled the position of the morning sun. Only when the sun had moved higher above the horizon, and its reinforced rays started to burn through the fog from a higher angle, it commenced to thin up and reveal lines of the landscape surrounding the lake. It was still only around six, when I was passing by an American campsite with many small water craft lined up on shore. I faded in from the fog like an apparition to a man, who had just sleepily stumbled out of one of the tents and clad in long underwear with a woolly toque on his head started to look around. It was apparent that he spooked, when he noticed a soundless phantom of a mist-shrouded figure in a hat, with an aura of a sun glow penetrating through the fog, as it was just moving by in a smoothly gliding canoe. The group was moving in the opposite direction and his colleagues were still sleeping,



when on my question, he confirmed that the start of the portage was to be found just beyond the nearest point. The first, higher drop of the Basswood Falls was followed by a series of smaller drops and rapids,



which curved in a long arc to the left between banks of granite outcrops overflowing with forest growth. The portage around this natural obstacle was significantly long. Its name is “Horse Portage“, which may indicate that during the time of the busiest traffic along the water highway,



horses might have been used to help with the carrying. The Portage is over two kilometers long, but after two thirds of its

length from upstream, it has a short detour to the water. Those, who travel upstream, obviously absolve the whole length of the portage. But the



Lower Basswood Falls



On the portage around Lower Basswood Falls

more courageous of those, who travel downstream, can shorten the walking Calvary by some seven hundred meters if they launch the canoe at the detour and shoot the remaining length of the river rapids in it. With shaking knees and a vise-like grip on the paddle, also

I did this. A person in my situation, who is forced to absolve the length of each portage five times, naturally profits from this kind of a risky enterprise the most. All went well though, and with a new injection of pride, I continued on the voyage. The Basswood River then led me to its magnificent end in Lower Basswood Falls. The portage trail offers a nice vista over the roiling rush of the hurtling waters, where I took time, to strap my camera onto a trunk of a young spruce





The camp on the Canadian point into Crooked Lake

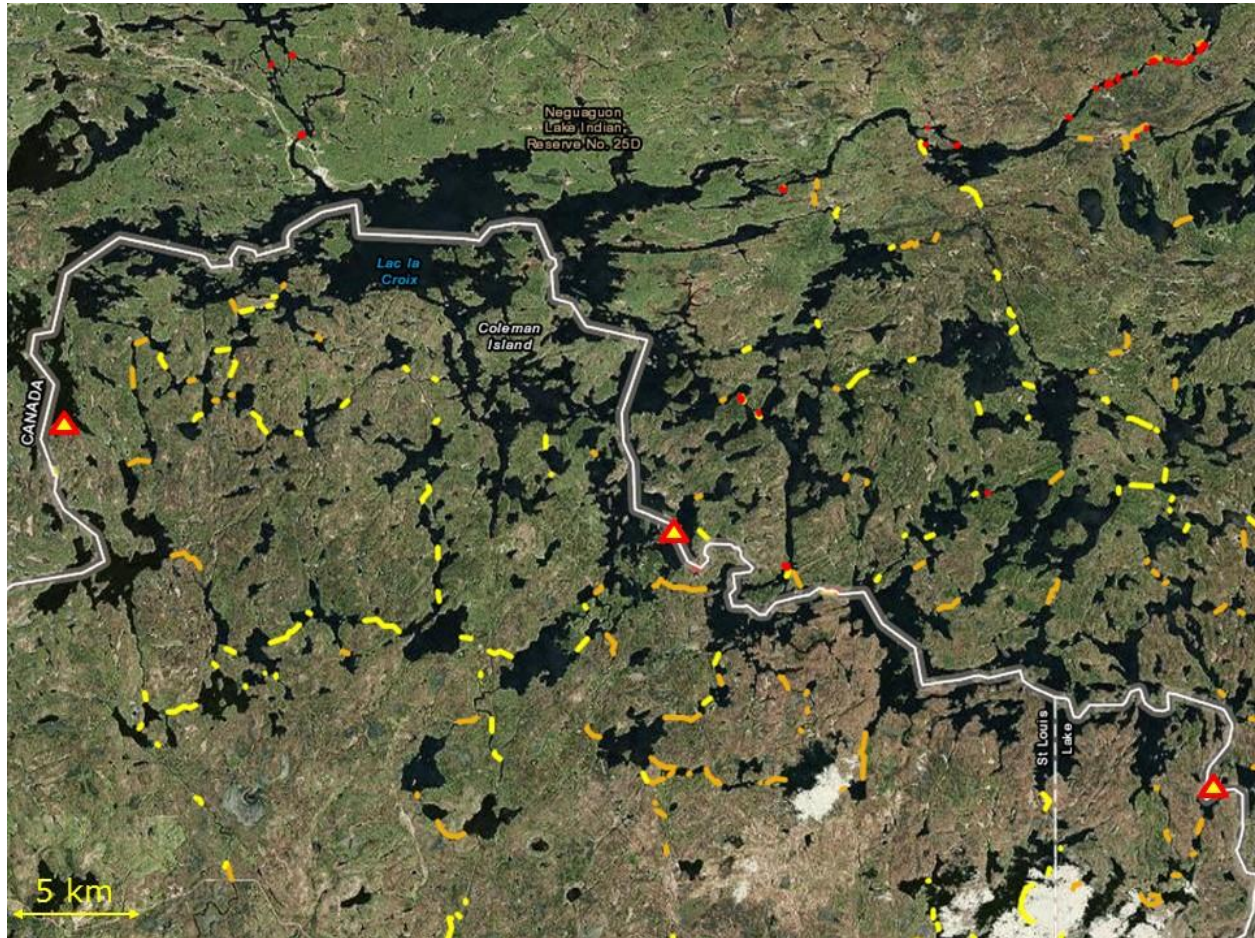
and took a self-timer selfie. I hoped that it would enliven my future slide presentations. I even took a short video footage of me carrying the canoe here.

Crooked Lake, which followed and first appeared more like a river due to its narrow width, revealed another interesting curiosity. Not too far below Lower Basswood Falls, vertical rock walls, lining the narrow stretch, displayed native pictographs from the pre-historic past.



The eagle feather

Red paintings in vermilion exhibit here wild animals like moose, pelicans and human figures. For a long time, also colorful feathered ends of arrow shafts jutted out of a horizontal crevice



The water route from Crooked Lake to Lac La Croix



Curtain Falls

high up on a rock cliff overhang that were shot in by members of a marauding Sioux war party at one point. They were to serve as an intimidating proof to their foes of their deadly prowess in the use of bows and arrows as weapons. By now, though, the bottom rock part of the crevice had fallen off and with it also the relics of the arrows. At least this kind of danger no longer looms over the

intrepid canoe passer-by of today. The Canadian side offers here another splendid campsite on top of a sharp high rocky point, around which the lake breaks its shape to enter into narrows toward the north. The grassy platform of the site with a thin growth of mature pine trees spreads on the flat crest of the point's ridge, on a level of some ten meters above the surface of the lake. The



late sun-drenched little meadow, to which I had climbed along an incline of granite from the canoe, kept a surprise for me here. As if prepared just for me, right in its middle rested a large single eagle feather. I accepted it as a

reward from Mother Nature, who surely must have appreciated my resilience and endurance in the dreadful toil of the tests, to which she had subjected me. To me, it was a coup of a special achievement by her “redskin” worshiper. I treasured this symbol of my Boundary Waters adventure and guarded it as the eye in the head. It traveled with me all the way home to Edmonton.

Crooked Lake possesses a truly crooked, complicated shape. It zig-zags in turns to the north and the west, aiming in average toward north-west. From my camp with the eagle feather, I still had its main length ahead of me. Admittedly, the strong southwest wind, which was blowing after noon, while I paddled on its last segment leading me to the north-north-west, did not act against me, but it tried very hard, to overturn my canoe with sinister side waves. I had bravely resisted its vile intentions for quite some while, before I finally rounded the last point and reached the sheltered refuge of a bit of smooth water just before the rim of Curtain Falls. Another portage had its start here to bypass this obstacle. I chased the prow of the canoe up onto the coarse sand of a small notch in the granite right next to the edge of the waterfall and I stepped out from the boat onto shore. Welcoming me here was a beautiful scenic setting. The lake water was throwing itself smooth over the granite lip, before it shattered on a ripped up rugged rock incline into a thundering white lace-work, spreading like the bottom of a richly ruffled crinoline. All this was framed in healthy forest greenery of pine limbs, combing through moisture-filled scents of a sunny day with azure sky. The fine long tufts of the white pine needles, as well as the rough resinous tassels of the needles of red pine saturated the ambient atmosphere of the warm autumn day with an intoxicating aroma of resin. Right when I stepped closer to the Nature’s wonder, to absorb in its beauty, a young man approached me, also traveling solo, who had rested here before the portage, sipping tea from a metal cup. “How are you? Nice seeing you again!” He claimed that we had met on some of the previous portages, which I did not remember, but we warmly shook hands. Brad had a very light, short canoe and with it also very light baggage for a shorter expedition. He was able to carry his canoe together with a backpack and consequently, he went only once on each portage. His canoe was too narrow, however, and Brad thus suffered stability problems in side waves. I could tell from his wide open shaking eyes that he had just experienced long moments of terror in the side wind on the last stretch of Crooked Lake before the falls. Below the end of the portage, it was still necessary to run a short series of mild rapids. Also here, I could see that Brad prudently hesitated for a long time, kneeling in the canoe, deciding how to pass through the first chute of the rapids. I hollered encouragement to him, before I had to return for my next load, but the rumble of the water drowned my acoustically dispatched injection of bravery into nothing.

The sun of the ripe afternoon saw me wrestling with waves and headwind in a battle for meter-after-meter in the south-westerly direction on Iron Lake. Following my passage through a rocky narrows into a small Bottle Lake, this was already a gaze of the late sun that watched me start the portage toward a mighty big lake Lac La Croix. The portage on the Canadian side had several stretches of deep liquid mud here, which together with rough chaotic rocks elsewhere made the life of this lonesome exhausted voyageur dreadfully hard. The sun had already sat by the time I at last pushed off again and paddled into the lake and wind. A campsite on an American island, which I had hoped to use, alas, proved to be occupied. I could see that already from a distance by two canoes drawn up onto shore. Fortunately however, not too far from the main route around there, was situated another island campsite, which was empty. Having found it already in half-darkness, I only disembarked, erected the tent and supped on a couple of protein bars. For cooking that evening, there was no time left.



Early morning at the beginning of Lac La Croix

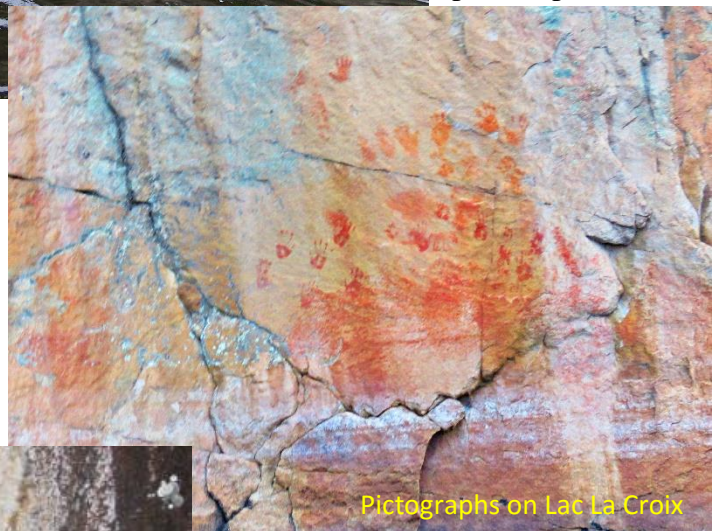
A strip of orange glow had just started forming behind the black stage set of the eastern horizon, when I slipped the loaded canoe from the granite slab into the dark water of Lac La Croix. I stepped into it with my right leg and pushed it off with the left. I seated myself on the soft rolled mat and started to paddle towards the north pushed in part by the south-south-west

wind. It had blown through the whole night and it ruffled the surface of the lake into black waves. As I was passing the campsite with the two drawn out canoes, it was dead there. All was still sleeping. Most likely, they traveled toward the east and did not have to worry about starting the day early. Lac La Croix is really vast. The name originates for one from the fact that missionaries erected here a giant wooden cross on one of the islands a long time ago. But secondly, the lake also represented a cross road of two fur trade water routes. It's because the later trade route of the Northwest Company, which was leaving Lake Superior up the current of the Kaministiquia, joined the boundary route from Grande Portage here. My way through the lake followed the line of the border. This wound through the enormous water area, strewn with islands, in a giant horse shoe with both its ends in the south and the highest point of its bend in the north. While I traveled from the southeast end of the horse shoe to the north, I had another chance to admire more native pictographs on high granite walls dropping vertically into the lake. Yet the waves tossed with the boat and made it hard to photograph the graphics. Moreover, the sky had a gloomy overcast, which created a somber twilight, suppressing all shadows. The coastlines of the shores and islands around the widespread lake surface thus merged into one black mass that made it impossible to recognize their shape. It so happened then that after infinite hours of paddling, when I already expected my arrival at the end portage out of the lake, but the geographical elements would still not quite agree with those on the map, I ran into a fly-in base of float planes, above which a Canadian flag flew. I landed here to go and ask where I could find the portage. Right away, a chap in a baseball cap came forth to meet me, who, as it turned out, was the pilot of a plane that I had seen landing over my canoe a short while back. He willingly escorted me along the floating pier to his plane, took a pilot's map from the door pocket of the aircraft and spread it on the deck. Radially spreading pencil lines on it converged into one point, which was supposed to be the spot, where we were just finding ourselves. I couldn't believe my eyes and at first, I totally rejected the pilot's claim. It is because I had been



totally disoriented. The base was situated in the center of the bend of the horse shoe, on its very highest point. I therefore had a whole half-length of the horse shoe to the end of the lake still ahead of me and I had no idea, where I had been wandering off till the time that I arrived at my present position.

But now, knowing already where I was and where the north was, all that remained to be done, was to accordingly reprogram my brain. Then I set a hard racing pace, resolved to catch up with the lost time and reach the end of the lake La Croix before dark. The headwind, which I was now facing in my southward movement, was



Pictographs on Lac La Croix



fortunately abating a bit with the advent of evening. I knew from the map that almost at the end of the lake on a point of the left shore, an American campsite should be situated. I only prayed that it be free.

The campsite was to be found on a point that was rather a small island joined with the main shore by a short narrow isthmus. The spot that I had taken for it from a distance, as I was

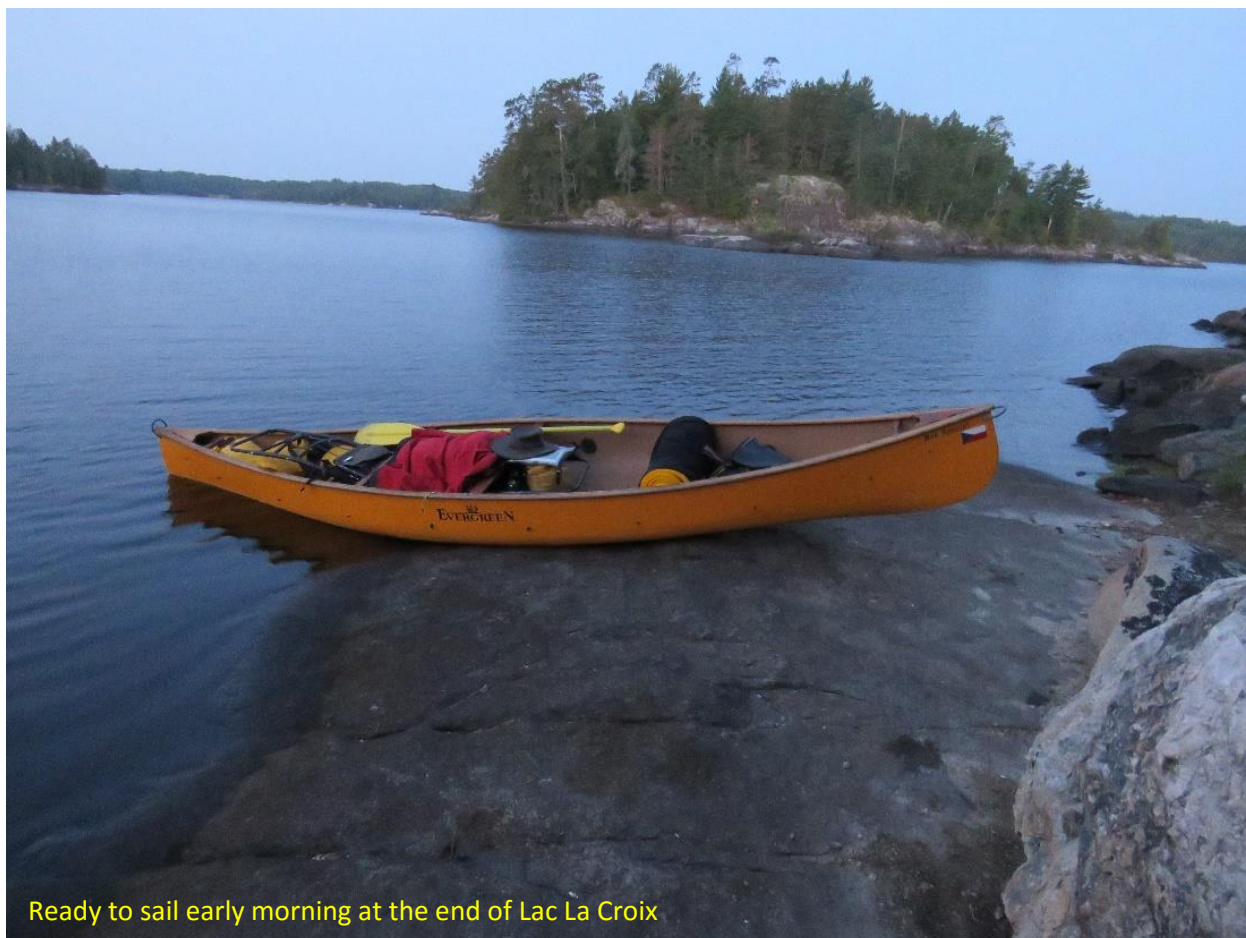
approaching it with my eyes glued onto the greyish rock slab satisfied that it looked empty, did not in fact turn up to be the campsite from up close. I already despaired and readied myself for the need of emergency camping. Yet, only after rounding the peninsula to its southern side, where it formed a sheltered little cove with the main shore, the right signs emerged. Here was a



Canadian fly-in base on Lac La Croix

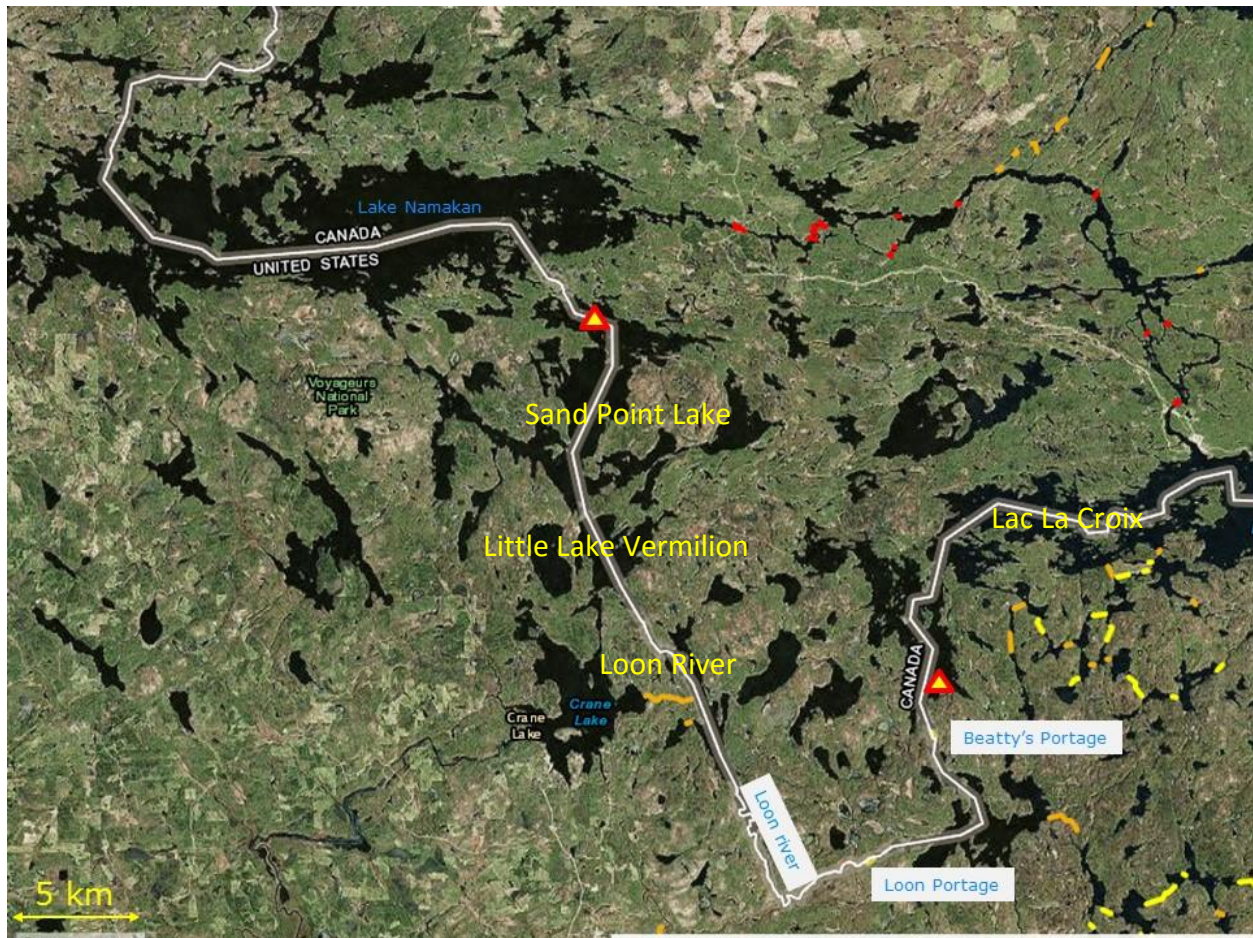
harbor of a granite platform and higher up in the back on a grassy clearing under tall trees, there was a fire pit with comfortable log seating and a scenic view of the bay. There was not much time remaining, but all the necessary chores had by now become a well-entrenched routine. The tent stood in a blink of an eye and when the fire was already licking the kettle bottoms, I

managed to even jump into now serene water of the bay and wash my hair with a shampoo after



Ready to sail early morning at the end of Lac La Croix

two weeks. This was taking place already in dim light. I then finished drying myself in the warm radiating heat at the fire, while I finished supper, the tea and ate.



The water route from Lac La Croix to Lake Namakan

I launched the canoe already at five next morning. The lake was quiet, but the light fog above its surface was this early now already freezing. I paddled in a light insulated jacket with its zipper drawn up to the throat. Even the hat, jammed up to my ears, filled its function in holding the body heat. At the end of the lake, where I had expected a portage, a small rural stucco house, likely several generations old with various additional structures as in a small village settlement emerged from the misty twilight. There was mowed grass here and a pier with moored boats. I took it for a private property and searched farther beyond it, but there was already the end of the lake and no sign of a portage trail. It was only twenty past five and I knew that I could not wake the owner of the property up, to ask. Yet at that moment, his voice thundered from somewhere around the door of the house, where I could not see anybody: "The portage is to the left of the pier!" What? Isn't there just a lawn of a private lot? I could not understand. Again the voice bellowed, this time separating individual words with a short pause for the instruction to sound more comprehensibly. "The-portage-is-on-the-left-of-the-landing-pier!" I already detected a hint of ire in the undertone and hence I obediently turned my canoe around right away and headed to the ordered spot. Only now, I could see that over the lawn led rails to the water for transporting motor boats. Also only now, I noticed a greyish figure in high rubber boots and a ball cap, standing on the entrance porch of the house. From it must have come forth that angry voice from heavens? As I would soon find out, it was Mr. Beatty and the whole settlement in fact served to the portaging of fishing motor boats between the two lakes. It made a living from the corresponding fees for the service. On the front of a shed here, a sign hung burnt into a wooden board: "Beatty's Portage" The Beatty family apparently had acted on the scene here for several generations. My quintuple non-motorized trek through the morning dew across the property to the water of the next lake naturally was not subject to the price list of the fees for powerboats that were conspicuously posted here and I therefore quickly disappeared from the annoyed Mr. Beatty's eyes. Who knows, maybe he had had a bad dream.

Now, I was moving to the south, against a south wind. My route today was to describe a big square „U“ and I couldn't wait to have its first leg, aiming south and against the wind behind me. After that, I was to move more or less toward west-south-west, where the wind should be coming from the left side. Some distance beyond the next portage on the Loon River, the route should even bend to the north and thus down the wind. Up to the first corner of the "U" and for a great part beyond it, the route stretches through smaller lakes. Before I rounded the corner, the wind had already changed to south-south-west and I consequently had a bit of a headwind with the strong side waves. But as soon as I entered into the narrow Loon River, which aimed more or less directly to the west, the wind was only seldom channeled by the trough of the forested banks against me. Soon I arrived at the second portage, which, as it turned out, also had a set of rails over a small hill for transferring motor boats. It bore the name „Loon Portage“. The trail for the canoes had a small landing here in a cove full of reeds and mud. When I located an extension of the path from the shore into the water in a paving strip of flat rocks, I polled the canoe along its side up the mud with the paddle all the way to a mowed lawn, to be able to step out of the boat with dry feet in hiking boots. It was right at that moment that to the stone strip came a man with a canoe on his shoulders and a huge rubber pack on his back from the other side of the portage. I greeted him and apologizing, I asked him to wait a second, so that I could pull the whole canoe out of the water and make room for his launching. Yet, he assured me that there was no problem

On the Loon River



that he was O. K. and that he would pass by me. What a shock awaited me, when, having pulled the full canoe onto the mowed lawn, I turned toward the water and saw the man standing up to his waist in the black muck, a brimmed hat on his head, the pack on his back and his chest at the level of the gunwales of his canoe, launched next to him. Horrified, I rushed to help him, but again, he claimed that he was O. K., that he did not need any help. Ergo, I delivered my first load to the other end of the portage. I had thought that the man traveled alone, like I was, but soon his wife appeared on the scene with another big rubber pack. They were both around fifty five, dressed by the latest outdoor fashion in perfect synthetic tops, him in blazing red, her in turquoise, in brand new fast-drying cargo pants with many pockets, excellent mountaineering boots and in glowingly new waterproof hats of the „Outdoor Research“ brand. He, however, after my return for the second load stood on the shore wet from the navel down and black from the mud. Yet, he insisted that everything was O. K. When I had run into his wife on the portage, and warned her that right at the water's edge was deep mud, into which her husband sunk up to his middle, she noted leisurely that “This is typical for him. He did the same thing last year!” It was obvious that they loved the nature, but they must have belonged to a city elite without a great deal of wilderness experience and without much physical fitness. On my third return for the canoe, I already saw them paddling in the direction, from which I had come. It did not seem that the man had bothered to change. All was probably O. K.

The Loon was narrow, like a small river. It wound through a land of mixed forest, along occasional meadows of waist-high grass and weeds, with lonesome old oaks – trees, which in

Alberta, where I live, one does not see. On the inside of the curves, shallow sand bars formed. Not once, I had to avoid an into-the-water-fallen tree. There were signs of beaver here, every once in a while a pair of ducks appeared. At one time a trio of kingfishers held a step with my canoe, flicking their bluish wings in a swinging flight from one river bank tree branch to another further and further down the current. When I at last rounded a ninety-degree turn to the right and to the north, I finally had the wind in my back. It was an unusual luxury, which I had to really appreciate. I paddled in long strokes on some fifteen meters wide river, passing white trunks of birch trees leaning above the water, shore line rushes and an occasional granite outcropping. As a typical feature of the “rivers” of the boundary water route, neither here one could discern any current, except in a few narrows. I again paddled stripped to my waist like a redskin under the blue cupola of the sunny Indian summer day. Just then, a roar of a strong motor in the back announced to me that soon a motor boat would show up. I squeezed into the sparse reeds by the right bank and I paddled on. In a moment, a large boat of outfitters from Minnesota emerged, in which about eight men with serious looks of seasoned outdoor professionals sat ranging in age from some thirty to sixty five. It was evident that surprised, they all admired my appearance of a seventy-one-year-old, paddling by mighty strokes with a bare, sun-bronzed back with no life jacket, but a hat on, in a solo canoe. As they advanced closely along my canoe at a reduced speed not to make overly large waves for me, one of the younger men lifted a plastic window flap of the boat’s transparent canopy and with one raised finger on an outstretched hand expressed a query by his questioning grimace: “Are you traveling alone?” I understood. When I positively nodded, all in the boat stretched the corners of their lips down with the pushed out chins in an appreciative nodding, some of them with a “V” of raised fingers as a recognition. It was the most effective booster injection to my self-confidence - a shot of courage into the continuation of my lonesome rough coexistence with the wilderness.

And of that courage I indeed needed more than a few bunches in the not too distant continuation of my movement to the north. That’s because the river widened up after a while, first into a large lake Little Lake Vermillion and later into an even bigger Sand Point Lake. This was already afternoon and the wind by that time had already gained the maximum strength. It now blew from the southwest. In the narrow sections of the river aiming north, it got expressed as a tail wind, but on the open water of the lakes, it sent strong waves from the rear left. Two motor boats, which I met in the middle of Little Lake Vermillion moving in the opposite direction, were forced to reduce their speed to a minimum, because the waves and the wind threatened to throw their bow over the stern. They looked surprised seeing a lone canoeist fighting the waves in the middle of the vast spread of the water like a rodeo cowboy in a bull ride. They too signaled with the “V” of raised fingers, wishing me victory. Yet, however crazy seemed the continuation of paddling on the lake, I could not afford not to take advantage of the natural force that was driving me forward for free. Who knows, how long the wind would continue blowing from the back in this part of the route? I was prepared to persist in paddling for as long as it would be possible, perhaps even till dusk. Between four and five, when I normally started looking for a campsite, the waves were overwhelming. But the near shore, which was the Canadian one, was still not offering any suitable spot. I had passed the whole coastline of a large island, where I had hoped to camp, in a vain searching. The lake was now opening a broad bay to the northeast, where I did not see its end. My route called for a diagonal crossing of the lake to the northwest, to a point on the American side, distant about five kilometers across the open water. For a long while I hesitated, pondering whether to risk, but at a momentary weakening of the wind, I

suddenly gathered courage and took off for a hard race across the water. I knew that I had to reduce the time to be spent in the middle of the lake area, kilometers from the nearest shore, to a minimum. I suspected that the wind and waves could only worsen with passing time. I truly paddled as in a race, with my eyes burning a spot in the red-black rock point on the horizon. Yet it seemed to be remaining at the same distance. When at last it seemed that, perhaps, only half a kilometer remained to reach it, the wind grew mad in an obsessed effort to prevent my possible victory. Every once in a while, an even much bigger foaming wave came from the left side, which threw the front of the canoe high above the water and at the same time, it tried to capsize the craft to the right. As I was forced by the wind to paddle on that side, my body weight also happened to rest more on the right. Only with heavy support from the paddle, as I stroked mightily against the water, I managed to resist this tendency. Perhaps even the rock cliff of the point itself was compressing the streaming of the wind along its wall, so that in the moment, when I neared the point to within ten meters, and considered the battle almost won, its climax was yet to come. Moreover, the waves, reflected from the wall, made sure that the boat moved toward the point forward and backward in an infinite snail pace of a see-saw struggle.

Oh, what a relief, when finally, I rounded the point and found myself temporarily in its lee from the wind and waves. This was, however, already around six - a high time to immediately look for a campsite. I was passing a low, narrow, extended sliver of a granite island, which, in an absolute emergency could allow a sleep over, yet I wanted to explore better possibilities a little further. I wished to as much as possible approach a hidden narrows, which was to reveal tomorrow's access into the next lake, which was a vast Lake Namakan. I hid from the wind by moving through narrow gaps between islands, when to my disbelief, in a small cove of a small island to my left, I discerned through the evening half-light a brown sign on a post, which seemed to be depicting a symbol of a tee-pee. Is this to indicate a campsite? I almost passed the site, but now I returned to it. Indeed, there was no doubt that the sign was marking a campsite. This one even had a name: „Norway Island“. On sandy soil here under the crowns of tall pine trees, were two pic-nick tables, a metal fire pit, four leveled base platforms for tents, a shelter-less plastic commode toilette and even sheet metal cabinets for safe storage of food from bears. A noted curiosity of the island was, that everywhere I looked, a bounty of king bolete mushrooms grew – the most prized by European mushroom picking savants. Thanks to their island isolation, they all evidently shared the same mutated gene that gave their heads a very light beige color tone. The whole island was void of people, it was only waiting to soothingly cradle my aching body and help renew its strength and energy for the battles of the near future. I had a pleasant evening here. For the usual swim, there was neither time, nor mood this time. The strong wind was especially now already too chilling. One important thing distinguished my current water voyage from the previous ones: This time, I carried a small electronic device of the pocket watch size, which allowed me to send an e-mail message via satellite each evening to a list of recipients that I had myself determined. I was able to broadcast an information, if I was O. K., or if I needed help. The gadget of a “SPOT” brand had besides buttons for sending out the messages: “I am O. K.” and “I need help” also an “SOS”, button that was protected by a snap cover that had to be flipped open before its pressing. This would activate a full-fledged rescue mission from the appropriate international authorities. One could be responsible for the financial cost of such an operation, should he/she have light-heartedly abused it. He, or she thus has to think twice before pressing the “SOS” and make sure that the request for a rescue action is really the last resort for his/her survival. In any case, Milena had a message from me every evening that “I am O. K.” Besides this text, (which, again, I could compose myself, but only before the trip), the e-mail

message also contained an interactive Google map with a pin head indicating my exact position with the GPS bearings and the date and time of the broadcast.



The „SPOT“ device

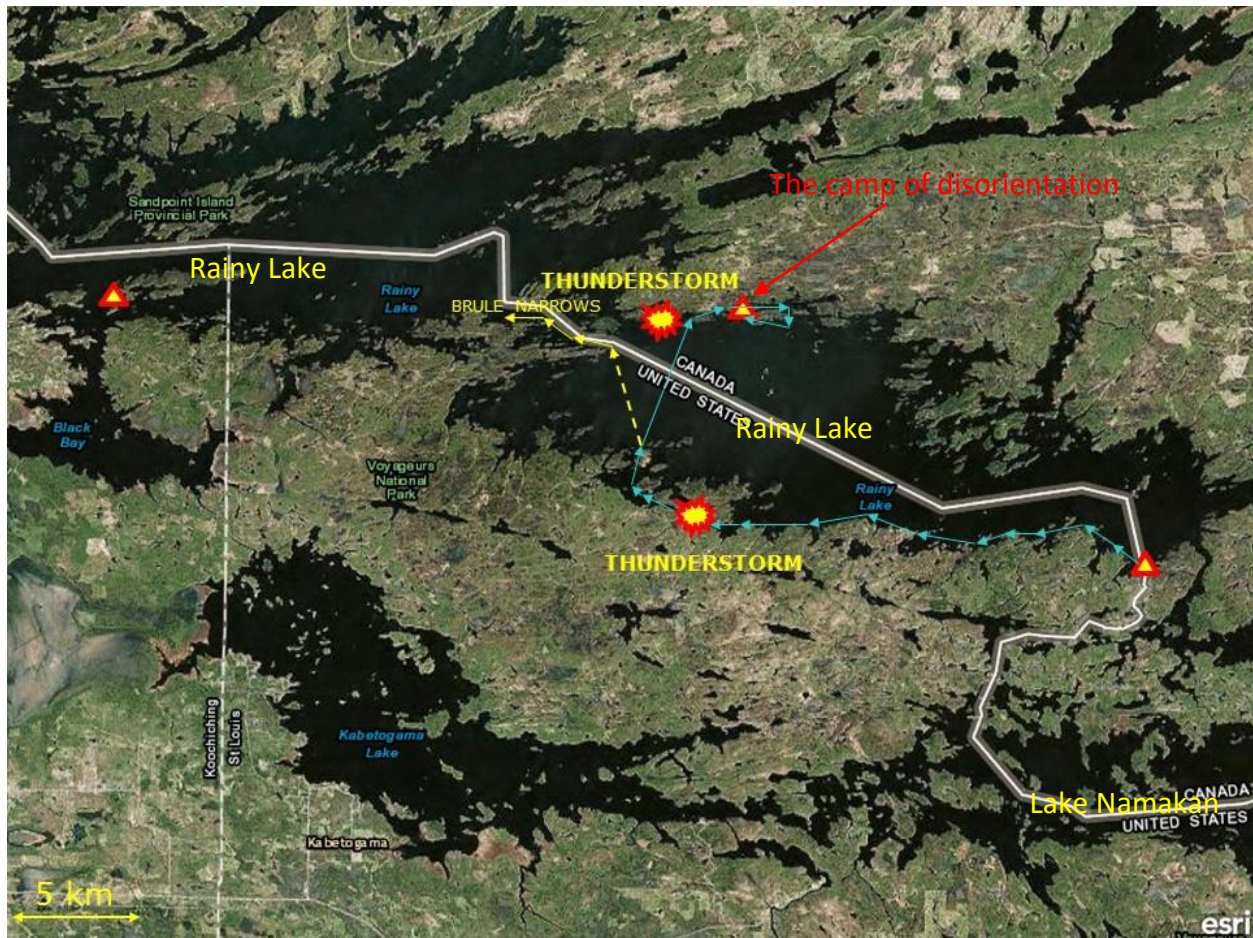
The blazing light of the planet Venus in the role of the Morning Star in the east and the cold constellation of Orion above the southeast horizon were welcoming me, when, still in the dark, I left the comfort of the tent and started packing. It was necessary, to find a very inconspicuous narrow canal in among the wooded shores and islands of a large lake into an even much bigger one. Once on Lake Namakan, I was to move for a large distance directly to the west. I studied the shape of the coastline leading to the narrows in the last light already yesterday evening, after I had walked across the island from my camp to its west side. Now I moved through the dawn twilight on the lake's surface very vigilantly, so that I wouldn't miss the passage. All was successful, though, and I entered Lake Namakan victorious. It was still relatively early in the morning. The wind had not calmed down completely overnight and it still blew with a reduced strength from the southwest. I thus paddled closely along the south – American – side of the lake, where the waves were smaller. Only once at the end of the lake, I started to curve the course to the right, north, where I was to enter another narrow passage of an inverted “S” shape.

This was supposed to finally lead me to the largest and final lake of the route, Rainy Lake. The wind rose to its full strength on Lake Namakan at the time, when I was already aiming northwest to the passage through the narrows. I thus fought again a life and death battle with



A happy discovery of the narrow entry channel into Lake Namakan

the side waves from the left and with a howling wind. Only with an utmost exertion and with a sizeable dose of luck, I at last reached the calm water in the passage and now, I paddled for a longer



The water route from Lake Namakan into Rainy Lake



period in a relative wind shelter to a site called Kettle Falls. Its name hinted that it was to represent waterfalls, even if my map no longer showed any further need for a portage on my route. I first heard the name from Dean, the lone water traveler in the opposite direction, with



My wild camp on the Canadian side of Rainy Lake

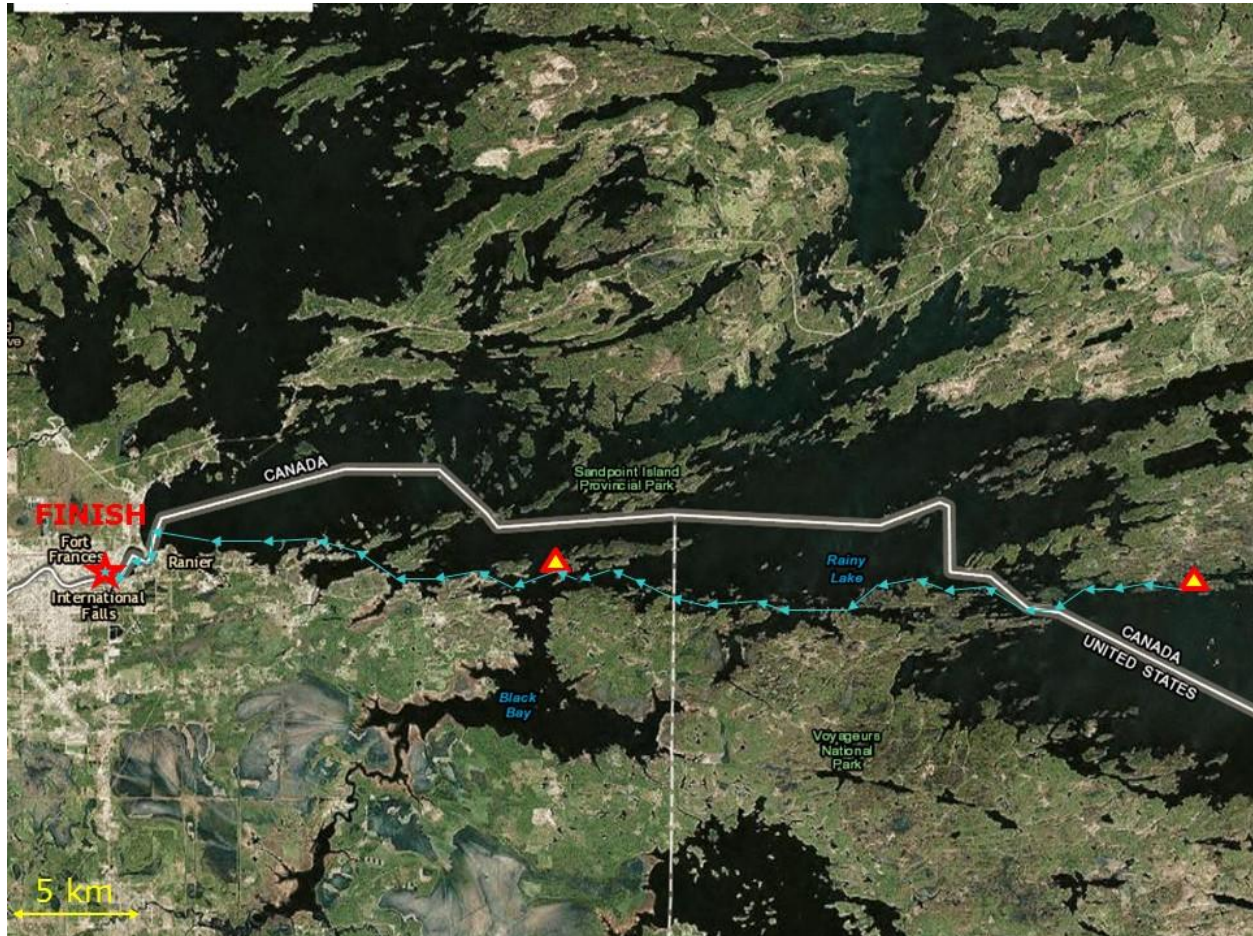
whom I had met on the portage to Ottertrack Lake. He was curious at the time, about how I was intending to overcome Kettle Falls. But I followed my time-proven philosophy, which I had adopted on my water voyage, not to worry about possible problems, until I actually faced them. And so, I continued paddling along the border, until warning signs forbade my further progress because of a dam ahead. I did not see any posted instructions on how to circumvent the dam and I thus started guessing, where most likely the portage around it could be. I backtracked from the arm of the dam and entered an adjacent bay on the American side, where I had seen motor boats disappearing before. Soon I viewed a grouping of small buildings with a number of water craft tied at several harbor piers. I did not see any rails here, but I guessed right that a smooth dirt road disappearing over a crest represented the portage for powerboats. Those were transported here for change on a trailer behind a truck. Accordingly, I had repeatedly transferred my livelihood on foot under the dam and floated out. After a period of a lost wandering due to a brief disorientation of the correct direction, I did find the right channel and at last, floated into the lake of an enormous spread - Rainy Lake. The name comes from the name of the outflow river – the Rainy River, (or Rivier La Plui as the Voyageurs called it), because a short distance below the lake, it had a big waterfall with water spray that precipitated all around as a never-ending rain. Today, the site is obscured by a hydro dam. But now, I had a long way to that end of the lake and all this straight to the west. The sun was low now and the only prospect of a campsite, which remained for me, was a wild campsite on the Canadian side of the boundary. I thus searched on the right, hugging with the canoe the right shore. After some period of scrutinizing, I indeed found a gorgeous spot, which did not bear any evidence of being previously used. It had all the right attributes: a low flat granite platform for landing and disembarking and higher up, a short distance away a granite terrace with a carpet of soft moss and caribou lichen for the tent.

There was abundance of dry wood everywhere around for fire, which I placed in a rock cavity so it would be sheltered from wind and conserve its heat by reflections from the walls. The tent was soon up next to a “whale skeleton” of a fallen old pine with bleached stubs of its branches as ribs. The wind quieted down with the evening and the late sun rays reflected from the smooth water surface into the camp. In it, it was pleasantly warm. The edge of the harbor slab was falling off to a considerable depth and so there was a natural access for my traditional swim. Yet, in spite of the seeming closeness to the finish of my journey, I still seriously worried about what obstacles the giant vastness of the water body that I was to traverse to reach Fort Frances would plant ahead of me. The above was the town of the destination of my voyage and it was situated at the outflow end of the lake. In all honesty, at that time, I was still not sure, if this lake would not stop me.

The morning was gloomy. The tent fly was dry unlike on other mornings, when it would be wet from the morning condensation of humidity. Black clouds rolling in from the southwest thickened the pre-morning darkness. The air smelled of rain. It was the first time in a long while that I decided to stretch the spray cover onto the canoe. I was hurriedly loading and just as I was frantically unfurling the rolled up cover from the bow to the stern, a downpour started. It managed to form a few small puddles in the bottom of the canoe, before I finished covering it securely. But the rain definitely managed to drench me, before I found time to don my Gore-Tex jacket and my hat. I will have to dry by body heat while paddling. I again hugged the south - American coastline of the lake, to avoid big waves that were being whipped up farther on the open water. I could imagine, what kind of a sea surf must have been pounding the distant Canadian shore that was visible only as a thin black line in a misty distance. The first rain

shower passed after some while, yet the clouds only grew and new showers were coming one after another for the whole morning. From the map, I had worked out a strategy, which was to take advantage of a narrow passage between the American coastline and the adjacent islands up to a place, where it was necessary to turn northwest and aim across the open water toward narrows, which separated Rainy Lake into an eastern and western parts. The dividing constriction had a name - Brule Narrows. The passage between the coastline and the islands was supposed to protect me from wind and waves. When I reached its beginning, the sun had merrily blazed for some while, as if by some miracle, it found an opening in the wallowing clouds. Here was a quiet lee of the coastline and I thus stopped for a quick snack in the boat. For the cases, where I hadn't had the time to make tea in the evening, I had a filtering straw as a backup. This is a plastic tube with a sucking mouthpiece, inside of which a smaller coaxial ceramic tube acts as a filter. With this device, I could draw water to have a drink directly from the lake without worry about contracting bacteria, giardia, etc.. Before I could finish my refreshment, though, the water surface around me started getting dappled with little rings from rain drops. At first, the sun was still out and it seemed that this was only a passing whim of an errand tatter of a cloud, but as the rings grew steadily denser, I packed away my food in a hurry, put on the Gore-Tex jacket and closed the skirt of the spray cover up to my armpits. I pulled down the bottom edge of my jacket over the spray skirt just when it started pouring. Now, the sunshine was already replaced by gloomy half-darkness. When I looked up to the sky, with horror, I saw above the black spruce tips on the left bank of the passage a menacing black wall of rapidly rolling storm clouds. From their violent interfolding were shooting crooked lightning bolts and above my head exploded thunder claps. Right away, I knew that this would not be something that one could somehow escape. In the blink of an eye, the storm was above my head. The rain turned into a waterfall. Together with a wild wind, it flogged my back and drove my boat down the channel like a broom in violent gusts, which chased along the surface of water waves of white frying boil. I merely squeezed to the right shore under the protection of the trees in lieu of lightning rods. I was not going to represent the highest point on the open water, even if I had noticed that the lightning bolts were being mutually exchanged only between the clouds and not between them and the ground. The wind and rain pushed me in my direction without paddling. I held the paddle crosswise in my lap and leaning slightly forward, I tried to roof over the waterproof map case with my body. Yet, it immediately rested in a rain puddle on the spray cover anyway. An idea of leaving the canoe and seeking some refuge on shore was totally out of the question. The rain water accumulated in puddles on the spray cover and poured from my hat down my back at the same rate as if somebody poured one bucket on it after another. I couldn't keep up in lifting the spray cover in front of me and behind the seat, to dump the accumulated water in it over the gunwales and it was again sagging under the load of litres of new water. When I already thought that there had been enough and that, perhaps, the end should be coming, a yet more berserk fit of the Nature's insanity would arrive. When at long last the worst wrath of heavens had passed, I again started paddling. With the help of the still driving wind in my back, I soon reached the end of the narrow passage. Here I turned to the north along the shores of the islands that I had earlier predetermined as my navigational guides. The storm had moved over the main area of the lake in the north-easterly direction. The scene of the lake landscape possessed a funeral atmosphere. Under the leaden sky, all the shores looked black and islands merged with the mainland into one black mass surrounding the open water. No shape of the surrounding coastlines was distinguishable. Yet, after the passing of the storm, the surface of the lake miraculously calmed

down and sat quietly, like the eye of a hurricane. In the southwest, I could see a portent of another wrath of



The water route from the east part of Rainy Lake to Fort Frances

heavens. I now had to cut across about four kilometers of open water to a narrow channel leading to the next part of the lake and I knew that I only had a short window of time to accomplish it. Should I get caught out there in something similar to what I had survived in the passage, it might likely sink me. Naturally, under the present circumstances, I discerned no narrows in the black line of shore on the distant horizon ahead of me. I just set a crude azimuth of the desired course to it from the map and from the north on my watch and I commenced the race. I glued my eyes to a lighter spot of some rock outcrop on the distant coastline, but as I progressed along the water surface, I more and more tweaked my course to the right in an effort to rather possibly miss the narrows toward the Canadian side and return along its shore left to it. Just when I at last approached the coastline in front of me to perhaps three hundred meters, the gale of another storm roared in from my left. In the ensuing waltz of the devils, furiously paddling, I reached some protection in a gap between the coastline and a near island. Driven by the wind through the gap to the right, I was looking for another gap on the left, through which I could somehow return to the sought after narrows. It seemed that several were available here. I was cruising through their network for quite a while. Yet, the topography that I could see, did not agree with the one on the map. I determined the north from my watch and to my utter disbelief, it was exactly on the opposite side than where I had assumed it to be. I fished out a busola from the bottom of the electronics dry bag and it confirmed the testimony of my watch. I was yet again disoriented, this time thoroughly. I had a very hard time trying to reprogram my brain to comprehend the present position. When I finally emerged onto open water, and assumed that due to a sheer luck, I had passed through the narrows into the next part of the lake, from under the edge of the cloud cover on one side peeked out the sun. That by now had to be in the west, where I was supposed to aim. Against my instinct, I thus turned to the right, in its direction. Yet, on the left, where I had planned to follow the American coastline, there was no shore. Everywhere on the left, as far as the eye could see, only a vast lake was spreading. I paddled uncertain for another half an hour against a strong headwind. After a while, when I had already known that something was seriously out of order and I could not continue, a small island appeared in front of me with a small cove of a harbor on the shady, lee side. A Canadian flag flew there above a cottage in pines. I headed directly to it in hope that I would ask its owners, where in fact my position was on the map. But the place was deserted. I was exhausted, chilled to the bone from the cold wind and from the wet clothing that never had a chance to dry on me from the rains and the drenching of the previous and the recent storms. I based an emergency camp on the grassy flat at the harbor. Even into my waterproof map case, water somehow found its way and the maps in it were a soggy mess. I peeled them carefully apart and spread them to dry. In the meantime, I tried to use all possible means that I had to my disposal, to determine my position. I pulled out the GPS unit and I determined my bearings. These I transferred onto my very non-detailed 1:250,000 topographic map, which was wet, but was the only one that had the degrees and minutes marked along its edges. Yet it did not have a corresponding set of grid lines inside and I therefore only estimated the cross-section of the transferred coordinates by eye. This gave me a nonsensical result, according to which, I should have been finding myself on the Canadian shore, still somewhere in the part of the lake before the narrows. I refused to take this revelation seriously. I charged the iPhone, and tried to open an App, which was supposed to show me my position on a map in it. The App, however, always crashed my cellphone in all repeated attempts. But then, I

suddenly noticed that I had one bar of a telephone signal. I attempted to call Milena and ... a miracle! ... her voice answered. Wisely, she suggested that I sent her my SPOT signal and she would call me back with a description of where I was. I was a little skeptical about Milena's sense of orientation, who in her orientational handicap could normally take "east" and "west" for baking ingredients. Yet, as usually in critical situations, Milena outdid herself. She confirmed to me that I was indeed finding myself at the Canadian coastline still in the part of the lake before the narrows, thus to the east of it. She informed me that she clearly saw in the satellite view on the map my island with the cove of the harbor and the cottage. She even had the guts to joke that she could see me there. To my amazement, she even described, how I should move to get to the Brule Narrows. I had her repeat everything several times and in the end, I believed her. Everything now meshed. It would cost me an extra day, but now, I started feeling confidence that with prudent vigilance and self-discipline, I had to reach the finish of my voyage successfully. The lion's share in it belonged to Milena's encouraging words.

The next morning, I took off again at the first signs of daylight. Yet, I still fought against a merciless southwest wind. A low sun, clearing the eastern horizon, finally illuminated the entry into the narrows. The progress through the passage to the west was once more a Sisyphus struggle. When at last the more western part of the lake opened up in front of me, I closely followed its American coastline, seeking protection behind every projecting point and a near-shore island in a prolonged battle with the headwind. I constantly, scrupulously studied and verified my current position on the map, so that I would not again lose my orientation. In some



places, I advanced meter by meter against half-meter waves. Towards the end of the day, I strayed into a dead end channel and had to backtrack, but in the end, already in the dusk, I set up an emergency camp on top of a rocky point of an American island. My tent stood under a huge cross of some religious organization that must have owned the otherwise empty property. I was satisfied that I had accomplished a significant advance toward the final destiny of my journey that day. Venus and Orion once again welcomed me in the morning, as I was folding the tent and carried gear from the top of the point down to the canoe. I paddled through the morning twilight vigilantly, because I was to pass through another narrows of the lake, leading to its final western spread. I was on a keen look out for the direction of the movement of occasional powerboat traffic through the channels and gaps between islands. I was following some kind of marine signs, which seemed to delineate a shipping channel and appeared roughly about every kilometer in critical locations. The shores were getting more densely populated with cottages and in the background, one could start hearing industrial noise. Dense fog rolled in before six, but by around seven, the sun and blue skies had triumphed. Suddenly, I sailed into wide-spreading open water. I could not believe that I had had the narrow passage behind me, but this would turn out to be true. Now I just paddled in stretched out, mighty strokes with my eyes focussed onto the hazy line of the most distant coastline, where tiny light squares of building walls started getting distinguishable. It was Fort Frances. Once again, I raced to reach it before the wind would awaken. It did wake up, when I neared the coast. The battle especially intensified, when I had to enter the outflow river, the Rainy, and continue paddling on it up to the municipal marina. Had I started paddling an hour later in the morning, I would have never reached Fort Frances that day.

I grasped the edge of the wooden pier from the canoe, as I pulled parallel with it, and I called the taxi driver, Doug, on my iPhone. His hoarse voice, which responded, betrayed that I probably just woke him up. After all, it was only eleven thirty in the morning and it was a Saturday. He might have likely had hectic business the previous night and drove clients till the wee hours of the morning. “Hi Doug, this is Jan, How are you?” “Hi Jan, where are you?” “I am here, in Fort Frances at the marina pier.” “You must be kidding! Already in Fort Frances? I am there in a couple of minutes!” Doug did not appear in two minutes, but he arrived in mere fifteen minutes with my Jeep. What a relief that everything ended well! He wanted to help me with disembarking and loading into the Jeep, but I thanked him. “Doug, thank you, but I am going to work slowly and methodically. I have to savor the feeling that I have all the hard exertion behind me.” I offered to give him a ride home, but he lived only a block and a half away. I thanked him again, we shook hands and Doug strode off in his jeans and cowboy boots. Seating myself in the Jeep and setting the course to the west, came as the sweetest reward for me. It brought me both, a mental and physical relief. I had a long road ahead of me, yet. “So what? The whole way, I will be only sitting and I won’t have to paddle at all.”

P.S. Only while I browsed in an outdoor store back in Edmonton sometime after my return home, did I discover that what I had always taken for a bear banger (the shorter cartridge), was actually a flare and a bear banger was the longer one. Milena and I verified it by firing both at midnight on the New Year’s Eve 2016 at our log house in Kaslo. So, those were flares that I used to scare the bear on the Saganaga and not bear bangers!



My arrival in Fort Frances