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Journey with Jim: A river runs through it



By Jim Moodie, The Sudbury Star
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We can hear the rapids before we see them, a sibilant rumble that sounds almost like the name of the place we're visiting.

Wabagishik, the word for both the whitewater ahead and the wind-ruffled lake behind us, turns out, however, to be only accidentally onomatopoeic. According to Linda Heron of the Ontario Rivers Alliance, who consulted a First Nations teacher for the definition, it's the Ojibwe term for white cedar.

There are definitely some examples of that fragrant species on the shores of this big, ridge-rimmed lake near Nairn Centre, although at this time of year, the hardwoods are making the biggest impression. It's Thanksgiving weekend, and the maples and oaks and birches are painting the slopes in red, rust and gold.

Such beauty was not lost on Franklin Carmichael, who captured a scene here in his 1928 painting Lake Wabagishik. That work appears to have been done on a moody day in spring, but is far from drab; the massive hill at its centre is a swirl of blues and greens and browns.

I have to credit my friend MK for drawing both the painting and the lake to my attention. I'd never heard of either, even though, like many of us, I suspect, I had zoomed right past the turnoff to Wabagishik on countless occasions.

You don't see the lake from the highway, but you also don't have to travel too far off the beaten tarmac to reach the public launch. From Sudbury, it's just a 40-minute drive, door to shore.

Once here, however, you feel like you've travelled a much greater distance. There's no marina or resort. There isn't even a dock.

When I arrive at this site with MK and another friend, whom I might as well call CR for the purposes of this story, there are quite a few vehicles, most belonging to walleye fishermen, and two kids flicking rods from the shore, but for a balmy holiday Saturday in peak colour season, it still feels pretty quiet overall.

The canoe and our random collection of gear and food -- we're going to spend one night camping, but don't have to portage, so it's one of those grab-what-you've-got-and-let's-go sort of trips -- get unloaded in a flash and stuffed, along with us, in the boat. And away we paddle.

At this point, we are on the Vermillion River, just upstream of Wabagishik. The banks are less than 100 metres apart and directly across from where we've put in, you can see an old road disappearing into the woods, giving the impression a bridge once spanned this gulf.

Not so. According to the book *Beaver Lake II: Sisu, Stumps and Sugar Lumps*, application was made in 1923 for a bridge to access the Finnish homesteads on the south shore of Wabagishik, but it was never approved. Instead, a scow was employed to ferry settlers and their vehicles back and forth, sometimes with comically disastrous results, judging by the photo of a half-submerged truck that appears in the book.

While Wabagishik was the first part of this Finnish enclave to get settled, its isolated farms were also the first to be vacated. "Now the properties have almost all been sold to city folk for use as summer camps," note the authors of *Beaver Lake II*.

As we paddle down the seven-kilometre lake, cleaving closest to the south shore, it's hard to see any evidence of the hardscrabble farming era, while the summer camps are mostly concentrated at the east end of Wabagishik, near the launch. We pass a few fishing boats at the narrows -- encountered a third of the way in -- but none thereafter.

Having never canoed the lake, let alone camped on it, I've been a bit worried about finding a site for a tent, but am confident we'll come across something. Prior to setting out, I called Bob Florean, who used to work for the MNR out of Espanola, and was assured much of the shore is Crown land.

Much of it is also way too rugged to camp on, however, so we just keep cruising west, enjoying the scenery as we go. MK is a crack photographer, so I've encouraged her to snap away from her spot amidships. Every now and then she exchanges her shutter button for a paddle grip, though, and suddenly we're shooting forward a lot faster; scrambling with my own paddle to keep the canoe in line, I sometimes splash her in the back of the head. CR, in the bow, sometimes forgets to paddle altogether, but makes up for the lulls in propulsion with entertaining anecdotes.

And in this herky-jerky, yet oddly harmonious fashion, we make our way to Wabagishik's remotest corner, even passing up one rather tempting campsite along the way. As CR sums up its attributes in one word: "Chairs!"

"We can always double back," I say. I want to get closer to the rapids at the lake's outlet, because it's supposed to rain the next day and could get windier, and I don't want to miss this feature before we turn back.

A kilometre-long spill of Class II whitewater, the Wabagishik Rapids might not be there much longer. The site has been pegged for a hydroelectric project, and the proponent has already received tentative approval under the Feed-in Tariff (FIT) program. A comment period is due to wrap up at the end of this month, after which the province will deliver a ruling.

Heron, who lives on the Vermillion River and has been heading up the fight against the development, says the six-metre-high dam proposed for this site will be "really hard on the river's ecosystem."

Sediment studies have shown the lake has high levels of nickel, zinc and copper, she says. Holding water back and then releasing it to power the turbines will be "like turning a fire hose onto those sediments."

The artificial conditions imposed on the lake and its outlet could also exacerbate milfoil and algae issues that already plague the Vermillion system, Heron warns, not to mention iron out a run of frothy water that is pretty to the eye and tempting to paddlers of average whitewater ability.

I'm not sure we're practised enough as a team to take on these rapids ourselves, particularly at this time of year, but it's definitely a spot I want to see, so I'm pretty thrilled when we discover a campsite within earshot of the turbulence that even comes complete with a single, wobbly chair. We take turns sitting in this gift from the Wabagishik gods as we poke our fire and watch the stars crystallize overhead.

Morning brings sun and a light breeze, contrary to the Enviro Canada fear-mongering, which also strikes me as a gift, and within no time we're at the head of the rapids, parking the canoe on safe ground and tying it up for good measure.

Some places are letdowns, particularly when you've spent a lot of time imagining them in advance, but I'm more moved by the flow of water out of Wabagishik than I expected.

It's not Niagara Falls, or even Onaping Falls, but the magnitude of the outpour isn't really the point. It's a special spot, bordered by Killarney-esque rock and reached only by boat or quad, or snowmobile in the winter months -- the D110 Trail crosses these rapids, via a green bridge that's like the one over the French River, in miniature. We hike to that arch, following the bouldery shore, and stand at its apex, watching the water gallop below. We're about 25 feet in the air, and there are names of other pilgrims etched in the paint of the rails.

One of us picks up a pointy piece of quartzite and writes: "CR wuz here." So wuz MK, I think. And so wuz I.

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GETTING THERE

Driving distance:

53 kilometres from Sudbury

Paddling distance:

7 kilometres from launch to rapids

- - -

Sudbury Star's Jim Moodie likes to explore areas of natural beauty and cultural interest in his spare time. Journey with Jim will appear twice a month and feature trips that can be done in a day in the Sudbury area. If you have suggestions for future excursions, email him at jim.moodie@sunmedia.ca.

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Deborah Wilson • 3 years ago

Lovely photo and story! I could feel the mist on my face as you described the white waters. Another trip for my bucket list :)

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Guest • 3 years ago

Is it just me, or do these treks get hairier and hairier? Beginning to fear for your well being, but appreciating every step you share along the way.

Thank you Jim Moodie et al.

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