

# Clearwater River, Saskatchewan

*Two weeks of wilderness canoeing from Lloyd Lake, Sask to Fort MacMurray Alberta, Canada.*



**Pictograph located below Lloyd Lake on the Clearwater River, Saskatchewan**

Though the water color was not as clear as the name implies, the Clearwater River winds its way tumbling and cascading from its beginnings above Lloyd Lake Saskatchewan, across the Precambrian Shield to its confluence with the Athabasca River. Beaver lodges larger than any I had seen previous, towered over our canoes as we drifted by. Geologically, the Precambrian Shield contains some of the oldest rock on earth, which presents obstacles for the river and canoeist alike. There were a number of waterfalls and rapids with mandatory portages while others were optional. Our panoramic vistas consisted of a never ending boreal forest interconnected by expansive marshes, broken only by a glimpse or two of the Precambrian Shield as it bared itself from the foliage below. Large pillowy clouds drifted endlessly amidst a deep blue sky created by a brilliant sun. Almost daily they would build to the heavens, inevitably bursting into thunder, lightning and heavy rain forcing us under cover. Like a natural filter, we could feel the tingle electricity as the freshness settled around us.

It was not long before we began a complimentary relationship with the local dragon fly's. We would attract the biting insects, they would remove them from around us, even plucking them off our bodies... How cool is that! Local wildlife consisted of bear, moose, pelicans, pesky squirrels, osprey, eagles and red-tailed hawks. Although there was plenty of wolf scat, we were never graced by their presence.

The Clearwater River has historical significance, which is one of the reasons we decided to explore its length. Discovery of this passage by Peter Pond and then later explored by Alexander Mackenzie through the Methye portage, it became part of the Trans-Canada fur trading route connecting eastern Canada to the West, eventually to the Arctic Ocean down the Mackenzie River. The Methye portage joined the Clearwater River just before it tumbled off the last of the Precambrian Shield. Of significance to me, was the fact one of my long ago relatives worked the fur trade, eventually taking a wife here and moving back to his home in Scotland. One of the lucky ones who survived a very harsh and dangerous life in the Canadian North!

This would be our first wilderness trip paddling a loaded canoe while learning effective communication skills. Our paddling companions were Darryl, Lori, Keith, and Jane from Revelstoke BC.

## HEADING NORTH



**Top:** Rafting on the Blaeberry River  
**Bottom:** Red Deer River.

Carol and I had been paddling for a few years, but we had never paddled a canoe packed with gear and enough grub for extended trips. This was my first thought when we were approached to paddle the Clearwater River in Northern Saskatchewan. In fact...we were still struggling with that communication issue between bow and stern, and learning left from right! I still said yes! Perhaps I should have taken more time to think this through?

“OK... Between now and the trip, we will work on these issues — hopefully seasoning on time.”

By the way...You should have a spray deck!?? I could tell we had a few more details to work out!

Not long after this initial invitation, a list of trip essentials showed up. We have never been involved in planning a trip let

alone participating in one, so we had a steep learning curve to be prepared on time.

Once all the details had been worked out by our friends from Revy, we made a plan to spend the first two weeks of July, day tripping rivers between Chilliwack and Fort MacMurray. Sort of like a skills development program. We learned we need better communication skills and not to exert ourselves so hard before an extended wilderness adventure!

We concluded our pre-trip in Edmonton visiting family, a chiropractor, and a doctor for newly developed tendinitis?! Age may be a contributing factor! Readjusted with a months supply of assorted pills, we unload non-essential gear and head to Fort Mac.

## KAMIKAZE TRIP TO FORT MAC!

Normally I wouldn't include a drive to the put-in, but this one deserved attention! If not for the excitement... at least to give fair warning to those who dare this drive!

Ron, my brother, had explained to me about the potential for life threatening issues while driving up to Fort Mac during a crew change. I shrugged it off like all big brothers do... Geez! I think I can handle it! Obliging him, he told us not to drive on a crew change day.

Leaving Edmonton was as normal as could be expected for a large city. Driving north through the farms and small towns was enjoyable and quite relaxing. We were about one hundred kilometers from Fort Mac when it all started! It was a hot, sunny day, my eyes were straining from a bright dash and thought I was seeing things. As we entered a long sweeping corner, I reached for my sunglasses, it was then we realized the mirage was real. It was THREE LANES of traffic coming at us on a two

lane highway!! Two pickups passing on either side of a bus! Holy !?/o#@%! We had just enough time to pull onto the shoulder to avoid that malay. Even though we were in plain view, they did not budge! OK, I should have listened! Realizing we were smack in the middle of crew change, we began negotiating corners on the shoulder. That worked until they started coming around corners FOUR abreast! What have we gotten ourselves into? I was thankful they had the foresight to build a very wide two lane highway because we shared the shoulder with the odd pickup! We were also glad our travel trailer was small.

I cannot remember what day crew change is on, but I would recommend including that data in your trip planning. Eventually, we made it safely to the campsite where we hooked up with our fellow adventurers. Thirty-five dollars a night to camp unless you paid cash? Boom town mentality was in full swing here.

BACKWOODS TRAVEL

Preparing gear for our 5 am flight into Lloyd Lake Sask., we begin the process of removing items to meet the weight restrictions of the small airplane. There are six of us on this trip which worked out to three trips with the cessna airplane.

It was tough deciding between rum, beer or food. This was Carol and my first wilderness trip which we learned on the fly. We chose the first flight into Lloyd Lake to avoid bumpy conditions. After circling the lake we put down and unload into our canoe paddling to shore. That was a first... We paddled to a rock outcrop where the river began. It took most of the day for everyone to arrive, by then we had established a comfortable camp.

This was it then.. Our first wilderness excursion! Not knowing how we would make out or even if we could paddle a loaded boat off the Precambrian Shield.

We took an extra day to fish and explore our surroundings. I had not caught pike or mackerel since I was a child in Northern Ontario, forgetting how mean they looked. There were pelicans

swimming in the lake and beaver lodges the size of motels!

Under cloudy conditions we huddled around the maps planning our trip down the Clearwater River. We had twelve days to hit Fort Mac! Unbeknownst to me, this would have a profound influence on all my future trips.



TILL DEATH DUE US PART!

Off we went into an adventure that would teach us about



wilderness tripping, how not to communicate at times of extreme danger, and how divorcing makes no sense so far from civilization. In fact... Because we are captive to the canoe and each other, it forces one to face the issues head-on, eventually to find a working solution. Although a bit more expensive, it could be classed as an

extreme form of marriage counseling. That being said... one can always walk out!

From our perspective, not knowing our abilities, it would be honest in saying Carol and I were apprehensive about this adventure. Although we were excited, it would take us time to figure it out and become comfortable with our surroundings. Traveling with experienced friends helped soften our anxiety, eventually teaching us how to deal with the situation. There are no secrets in group paddling!

Slipping behind the trip leaders, Darryl and Lori, we embarked on our first ever canoe trip. Following the Clearwater River, our journey will take us across the Precambrian Shield paddling through marshes, down rapids, and portaging around waterfalls to our vehicles at Fort Mac.

As a child, I lived in Uranium City so there was almost a sense of home coming. Perhaps a little pride that I was about to rediscover this land of the North that was once my playground.



BEAVER ACCOMMODATIONS

This image was typical of the beaver lodges along the Clearwater River. It is understandable that the fur trade would reach this far into the Canadian north. How big are the beavers here??

THE TRIP BEGINS



**Top:** Drifting behind

**Bottom:** Typical drop between pools at the beginning.

Heading in a South Easterly direction from Lloyd Lake, we will eventually make our way to Virgin River. Most of the paddling at the beginning of the trip were short rapids and wave trains connecting pools. Not the continuous type we are use to paddling in BC. This just meant that when you came across a rapid, it was steep! The real steep ones are called waterfalls! Alas... The Precambrian Shield!

Initially traveling without spraydecks was interesting. Exiting one particular rapid, I hollered we should head straight for shore. Carol insisted we go by the book and eddie out, I suggested that she turn around for a look! Although she was sitting high and dry, I was up to my armpits in river and we were not

about to catch an eddie. OK... perhaps I didn't say it quite like that, but you get the picture... Communication is work in progress.

This may sound strange but I was relieved when we began portaging around rapids based on past trip reports. Kind of took away the stress of the unknown. I can tell you this though... by the end of the trip we had a new paddling phrase added to our vocabulary! "RUN & GUN"

A few years after, Carol and I befriended Laurel Archer and Brad Koop. This was before Laurel published her first book. It was then we learned we could have paddled more rapids than the trip reports we reviewed let on. Oh well, live and learn.

APPROPRIATE DRESS FOR SHORE LEAVE IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN.

Hand position for squishing biting insects!

Open areas!  
Your survival depends on camping in open areas with lots of air flow!

Shorts are invaluable in the extreme northern heat!



Hood... Although difficult to feed through, keep closed at all times!

Bug Jacket:  
Consisting of 98% air, they are damn hot??  
Designed to keep the smallest vicious bugs out!

Sandals are worn only by the bravest of paddlers! Or those who use bug repellent with 90% deet! Pick your evil!

Ducking behind whatever cover was available we tried to avoid the headwinds that hit us daily. Picking campsites that were exposed to the wind was a given to maintain sanity from the constant barrage of insects. Swimming in the warm water was another ploy to avoid blood loss until we discovered leaches! Dammed no matter what eh! Welcome to Northern Saskatchewan! Just be careful of the gators. Keep everything tucked in and covered! I wonder why we haven't seen any wildlife yet?

Research showed that there were pictographs somewhere near here. We eventually found them along side the river on exposed rocks walls. Wow! I cannot help wondering what they were saying? Was it a self portrait as he hunted a Moose? The fact is, whatever they used to draw has lasted through the ages. Incredible!

Pressing on, we continue ducking behind reeds and grass banks looking for relief from the wind. We saw another eagles nest. Not wanting to endure the bugs until camp, we take pipe breaks in our canoes. Because of our limited time frame, we paddled many hours each day. Evenings were enjoyed watching the sunsets by the river as we fed increasing numbers of mosquito's. Dragon flies became allies as they began feeding around us attempting to reduce their numbers.

Day four we saw our first bear and experienced our first portage. More of the same headwind but we had more continuous rapids which by now we are looking forward too! The day ended with a swim and another gorgeous sunset!

Day five we arrived at the Virgin River, we were looking forward to a rest day and fishing for grayling. There must be good fishing, on the way here we saw another large eagles nest high on a cliffs face. Spreading out our maps, we realize the need for speed to meet Darryl's grad reunion commitment. We needed to paddle longer days in-order to get back on schedule. Carol left her glasses on a log here! Oops! Interestingly enough, she actually needed them to see... Period.?



## EXHAUSTED

**Need for Speed!**

That was it then! Without further delay, we had to put as much milage in as possible each day. Most of the portages were still ahead of us so our trip soon turned into a paddle/portage marathon. Not so good for a first time but it taught us a valuable lesson on scheduling trips. Even though I had good intentions of doing so, I never took notes. The rapids and portages Became a blur after a while. Our record was three portages in one day! We managed to skirt a few portages and almost miss a few. Paddling into a setting sun made it quite interesting. Anyone who has padded this river knows how the rock and water blend in color. For the "Alert Paddler", this should be no problem except when the sun is about to set! Yeah... we hit a few rocks. Especially into Werner Rapids!

Camping at the road to Uranium City brought back memories of my childhood spent around Athabasca Lake. My father worked at the mine and we built a ski hill in our backyard that sloped down to the Athabasca Lake road. I started school there.. At least they tried to get me to go. I remember getting into trouble about as much as a young lad can, particularly when my Uncle was the RCMP!

Local people were having a barbecue as we set up camp for the night. Thunder, Lightning and heavy rain hit us through the night. When it started raining inside the tent, Carol suggested I get the tarp! I suggested she get the tarp but she pulled the "I can't see without my glasses" excuse. Our Taymor tent was enjoying it's last adventure!

Still apprehensive about tripping, I managed to talk Carol into the canoe and paddle down the wave train under the bridge. It was lots of fun even though this was the wettest day of the trip. Our goal for the remaining portion of the trip was to get to the Methye Portage. We wanted to spend a rare extra day hiking to the point of view where Alexander Mackenzie saw the Clearwater River for the first time. Disappointment set in when we saw the garbage dump at the Methye! We were not impressed by the debris nor the masses of mosquito's that welcomed us.

I must admit, all these long days were hard work! Adding more stress to an already shaky

canoeing relationship did not help our communication. It was on our last portage that Darryl tossed his canoe saying -- From now on it is RUN & GUN!

Following Darryl and Lori, (to close!) we paddled the last rapid off the shield. When they started back paddling, we were struck with panic. We had a long way to get to a good line, and no time. Powering as hard as possible, we dropped over the ledge sideways filling with water but managed to stay upright. Keith and Jane were far enough back watching the action, slipping through unscathed. Setting our sights for the provincial campsite, we hit the trail.

Signs of civilization began to emerge as we started to see cabins along our way. River boats were also seen and heard off in the distance. We saw a brave squirrel swimming across a river full of pike. With the last of the Canadian Shield behind us, not wanting to camp in the swamp as we did at the Methye Portage, Carol and I pressed on to the Provincial campsite. Sixteen exhausting hours later, we find it. Our last campsite on the river was spent fending off a mentally disturbed squirrel. I get why they would swim in this river... It is the pike that should be concerned! To survive in this wilderness you have to be tough!

Day twelve, our last day of paddling was the toughest. During eighteen hours of paddling, we met with an old-timer who was on his way across Canada by way of the fur trade route. Starting at Athabasca Lake, he was hooking up with his son at the east end of the Methye Portage. It kind of put our plight into perspective.. No more complaining! We passed fishermen and riverboats, almost hiring one to get us to Fort Mac. Persevering into the headwinds and oxbows, we pass a military tank perched on shore? Pipe breaks consisted of standing exercises, paddling backwards and laying on the deck. We pulled into Fort MacMurray to the blazing sounds of skidoos and motorboats. Were Back!!

- River Life -

[Image Gallery](#)