

Trip Log/Diary

Participants

Neil Miller millerne5@yahoo.com

Brian Prodin

Trip dates

September 19, 2013 through September 25, 2013 (on the water)

Total trip including driving was September 18, 2013 through September 26, 2013

Day One (Thursday, September 19, 2013) – 8.72 km

We had the continental breakfast at the motel and I should add that the bagels were like spongy white bread as though they had been delivered from someplace else frozen and then thawed. After breakfast, we filled up the gas tank and drove the 35 miles to the turn-off for the put-in at Santoy Lake. There is no sign at the well-maintained gravel road the exits Highway 17 to the right (northeast) but if you go down a long grade and come to Jackfish Lake on your left (there is no name of this lake on the highway), you have overshot the road to Santoy by about 2 miles. The morning was heavily overcast with fog-like moisture of an occluded front. The upside of this was that the lake was dead calm so putting-in at 9:45 AM we made good time to the portage, arriving at the take-out to the Diablo Portage at 11:20 AM (UTM 506945E, 5413757N).

The Diablo Portage trail is 1673 meters from Santoy Lake to Diablo Lake. This portage was poorly marked with a strip of faded surveyor's ribbon, but we found it from our GPS waypoint. From the shore of Santoy, the first 300 feet in vertical elevation is accomplished in a horizontal distance of only 400 meters (about 1,300 feet.) This averages out to a 13-degree slope, with some parts steeper than others, and makes for a very steep climb up from the lake's edge.

We double-carried and mostly dragged our canoes up this very steep initial section to stage them near the top for the rest of the carry. Then we went back down and loading on our packs, set out to make the first trip to Diablo Lake.

Once you reach the top of the steep trail up from Santoy, the entire canyon trail to Diablo Lake is nothing more than boulders and scree from centuries of avalanches where vegetation got a toe-hold and grew into a dense forest which dropped its leaves and needles every fall until it created a soil-like substance. As a result, this trail has many holes, which could swallow an entire foot up to mid-calf. It is very treacherous and requires constant vigilance and because of its poorly maintained state, it had a lot of undergrowth hiding many of these traps.

The heavy mist of the occluded front gave way to intermittent rain showers and some were even heavy at times. This continued throughout the day and into the night.

The part of the trail known as the "Devil's Den" (someone had actually posted a sign on the trail at this point ten years before but it was gone now) is about 200 meters in length and roughly 400 meters from the end of the portage. In this part of the trail, the vegetation never got a hold so you have to climb up, down, over and around boulders ranging in size from 3 feet in diameter to the size of a compact car. By the time I got here on my second trip with the boat, I was physically exhausted and my calves were cramping up. I had suffered this same condition 10 years before; however, I was far more exhausted than I was on the previous trip. Brian actually came back down the trail and carried my canoe the last few hundred meters. The important thing to note was that there was no "easy" section of this portage. It was a tough slog from start to finish.

One final note on this portage trail. It was more over-grown than it had been 10 years before. Our feeling, which was continuously reinforced over the entire trip, was that very few people were paddling this route. We also began to believe that the folks from Geraldton that maintained this route each year were no longer engaged in this activity. We could be wrong but that was the condition of the route from our perspective.

We reached the end of this "grand" portage after our second trip at 4:30 PM and although there was a brief discussion of pushing on, I was physically spent so we paddled the 400 meters to the island straight out from the put-in where we had camped in 2003 (UTM 506837E, 5414562N). We managed to get our tent up and eat our FD meals between rain showers. We drank our first bottle of wine, which was a Solombra Malbec and it was disappointingly fruity. We had decanted four bottles of wine into Platypus plastic roll-up wine containers so as not to take glass into the wilderness.

This entire portage, for us, was two trips and 5 hours. I believe if I could've kept up a faster pace, it would have taken about 4 hours but I was moving snail-slow on my second trip with the canoe. In my opinion, I don't believe this portage could be done faster than 3½ hours if you were making two trips. *(PLEASE NOTE: In July of 2004, two 35 year-old men did the Diablo Portage in a single carry in 81 minutes, just to give a best case perspective)*

During the night it rained off and on right up until morning and at times it was quite heavy. We were both fairly exhausted from the difficulty of this portage but before falling off to sleep we talked about this portage and how it seemed so much more difficult than 10 years before. The trail was definitely more overgrown but the basic topography hadn't changed in millenniums so maybe it was just us, 10 years later. Brian was in better shape than I was and I found that I had to stop a lot and gather my strength. He got his pack and boat over to Diablo Lake and then helped me with my boat. I had gotten through the "Devil's Den" but I was taking a break when he came back and carried my boat the final 250 meters to the lake. I was not happy about this but I was in no position to argue, either.

Friday (September 20, 2013) 20 Km

We made our French Roast coffee and ate Pop-Tarts and Clif bars forgoing our oatmeal in favor of time management. Departing our island camp at 9:50AM, we covered the two remaining kilometers of Diablo Lake and found the portage which was marked with a faded surveyor ribbon. In any event, we had our GPS coordinates from the trip 10 years before.

The first portage was 755 meters and very tough. It had swampy sections and rocky sections and three up-hill sections, one of which was quite rocky. The swampy sections were especially mucky with all the rain that had been falling. This trail was also very over-grown and we began to believe that this would be a recurring theme. These trails were not being maintained and it also seemed that traffic on this route was minimal. Once again, given the difficulty, I was moving quite slow and had to take more breaks than usual. I was a little surprised to realize that my strength and stamina were so low. I could only hope that I would get stronger as the trip progressed but I had really struggled on the Diablo Portage the day before and I was struggling now.

The first portage led into a small Beaver pond and crossing it we found the second portage at the end but on the right side. This trail was not marked in any way but it was obvious once we got within 10 meters of it. This portage was also wet, rough and very overgrown and I caught the ends of the canoe a number of times but it was only 262 meters in length. This trail led into a second Beaver pond and we also felt that the distance of this trail was accurate.

The third and final portage trail from the second Beaver pond into Cairngorm Lake was only 189 meters in length and it was similar to the others and we now knew the simple truth was that this was going to be the personality of this route.

It had taken us three hours to cover this relatively short distance of 2.3 miles but most of that distance had been by portage and we had to do each one twice. This was considerably better time than we covered the same distance 10 years before so even though I was struggling with the difficulty of the portages, we were both happy with our progress.

As we started up Cairngorm Lake, it was still overcast with occasional light rain and there were some gusts but we heard them more than we felt them. We passed the dome-like rock, at the bottom of the

lake, which we had camped on 10 years before and continued up the lake. Cairngorm is fairly protected with both open areas and narrows until you reach the head of the lake where it really opens up. We paddled 85% of the distance up the lake but at about 7:00 pm and with only a half hour left of daylight we landed on a small island that had just enough room on the exposed rock outcropping for the tent (UTM 505234E, 5431323N). There was only minimal soil for the tent stakes so some of the corners were just tied to brush and driftwood. Brian had to use his saw to cut back the downed trees and brush so that we could bring up the canoes which we had to stack on top of each other. This was the size of our campsite.

Our fire was dangerously close to the tent but there weren't any other options other than not to have one. From time to time we could hear the wind but for some reason it was not hitting our little island campsite so we took the chance on a fire. At Camp Two we chose to drink our second of three Malbecs called Alamos and it was a little drier than the Solombra from the night before. We enjoyed it more with our FD meals.

In the night we continued to hear the wind but the little island was well protected by the mainland's high rock bluffs so it had little effect on our camp. We did get a sleet storm at one point, however. We briefly discussed that we had made decent progress up Cairngorm so we might make it up half of Steel Lake the next day. For a couple of different reasons, unknown to us that night, this was not going to happen.

Saturday (September 21, 2013) 10.47 Km

We departed Camp 2 at 9:35AM, and the sky was overcast but it wasn't raining or sleeting. Once again we decided to only make coffee and forgo the oatmeal. This became our daily pattern and I carried all the oatmeal throughout the entire trip.

The sky was gray and the outcroppings were fairly bald from old forest fires and the visual impression was hostile – more like you would expect to find as you're approaching the barrens of Nunavut. As we entered the head of Cairngorm Lake the wind was blowing about 15 mph out of the north-northwest. Fortunately there are several islands that we could use as wind-breaks as we worked our way over to the north-trending eastern bay that would lead us up to the portage at its head. We had to work really hard with the canoes to cover the open spot between the last island and this bay. This was about 350 to 400 meters of open water unprotected from the wind.

At the head of this narrow bay we paddled back and forth looking for the take-out. The sedge grasses that had grown up along the top of this bay completely hid the trail but we eventually found it.

In keeping with the personality of these portages, the first part of this trail was wet and mucky and very overgrown and the second part was more open and on higher ground but due to lack of usage, it was difficult to follow an actual trail. Brian did some scouting and eventually found the trail (or at least a trail) and marked it by breaking twigs along the route. Once we had the trail marked, this turned out to be one of the easier portages of the whole trip.

We put in and paddled the twisty narrow little stream, which was the start of the Steel River, being forced to step out of the boats onto trees that had fallen criss-crossing the stream and precariously dragging the boats heavily laden with gear over these semi-dynamic obstacles. We've estimated this stream distance to Esker Lake at approximately 650 to 700 meters.

Entering Esker Lake (This is unnamed on topo map) we turned west and once again had to fight the wind up to the exit where we picked up the twisty creek again. There wasn't much protection on either shore from the wind and we just had to slog into it. Working northwest up the lake, the left (southwest) shore was flatter and more marshy but the right (northeast) shore was slightly more protected by the esker that gives the lake its name. About a kilometer down the creek from its source at Esker Lake there is a falling rapid with a lot of tree debris and this is the marked take-out for the 167-meter portage. It should be noted that it was marked with an old decaying life vest hanging from a tree branch. This goes up a short steep hill then gradually downhill to end at a fire-road which the MNR built in 2004. The fire road had a long earthen approach abutment which then crossed the creek on an overbuilt bridge. The problem was

the obvious portage trail ended at the base of this earthen abutment and it was a very steep climb of about 40 feet up to the road.

However, the real problem was we could not find the trail on the other side. We spent a couple hours scouting and eventually we put in our own trail. Once again we marked our trail with broken twigs and it wandered all over as we tried to avoid the heavy thickets and deadfall. Brian has a real skill for scouting and he took the lead on this trail-blazing endeavor. The old portage was 167 meters but it went through where the bridge now stood. I would estimate that this second portage was closer to 400 meters as it wound its way up, down and around all the undergrowth we couldn't get through. We ended our portage at a small pool and the last part was a trail of sorts but it looked more like a game trail than a portage trail.

The put-in was dicey because of a large floating log and we had to make an over-the-stern entry into the canoes. This type of entrance is always risky and Brian almost rolled into the pond but he managed to balance his boat back to the center of gravity. We've estimated the final stretch of stream into Steel Lake to be approximately 2 kilometers. At the point where the stream enters the lake, there is a rock garden creating a rapid. There is a 118-meter portage around this and it was in very poor shape but at least it wasn't very long. Ten years before, we waded/lined/lifted through this rock garden to get the boats to the lake but it was in August, back then, and the water levels were low.

It was about 4:00 PM when we paddled out onto Steel Lake. The wind was still blowing strong out of the north so we struggled over to the eastern shore at the north end of a narrow bay and took-out at an unmarked campsite where we had seen two guys in a red Winona canoe camping ten years before (UTM 507959E, 5436866N). The time was about 4:30 PM. This was a comfortable, protected campsite with a semi-constructed fire-pit on top of an outcropping.

We followed our usual pattern of putting up the tent, stowing our personal gear inside, collecting firewood and then dinner. On this night we drank our South African dry, multi-varietal red blend, "Goats do Roam" and it was quite decent.

We were subjected to a beautiful sunset as the twilight skies began to clear. We knew that we would have clear weather on Sunday and we only hoped that this north wind would discontinue. We had an 18 mile paddle due north up Steel Lake the next day. We didn't talk much about it but we were both concerned that we could spend another day at this camp wind-bound.

The tent was in a low spot below a large outcropping and that night from the perspective of inside the tent, there was no wind or precipitation. Only once did we cautiously mention that we might get a break the next day.

Sunday (September 22, 2013) 31 Km

After following our usual morning routine, we departed at 9:20 for the paddle north up Steel Lake. The sky was clear and the wind was non-existent. This would be the best day of our paddle and it couldn't have happened in a better place. If there had been a strong north wind we would have been wind-bound.

In the lower part of the lake, within the first two miles, we passed four beach areas, all on the eastern shore, that would all have made good protected campsites. We had stayed on one of these beaches on our previous trip. These were only in the lower part of Steel Lake and once passed we saw nowhere else where we would even be able to land, let alone take-out.

Trees and vegetation were once again taking a firm hold in the old burn areas and the topography did not have the same lunar landscape appearance as on our previous trip.

We saw no wildlife in our paddle up the lake with the exception of some predatory birds in the sky.

We stopped for lunch on the very rocky shore of an island (UTM 5454100N) at around 2:00 and this was the same place we had stopped for lunch ten years before. If nothing else, this is an indication of the lack of places to take-out on this long lake.

As we paddled through a narrows into the pond-like northeastern enclosure of Steel Lake, we passed a very roomy and comfortable looking beach on the north shore. Passing this we went the final 600 meters to the take-out and arrived at 5:30 PM.

There is a pretty campsite right at the beginning for the portage trail but the take-out is up a steep rock face which presented its own difficulties (UTM 519914E, 5463644N).

That night at dinner we drank our fourth and final bottle of wine. This was another Malbec called "Layer Cake" and it was the right mixture of fruity and dry with "oakey" overtones and we agreed that it was the best of the four we had brought with us. We thought we had two more days to go but we were going to be proven wrong on our timing. So far, our timing and location was a mirror of our timing from our prior trip.

Monday (September 23, 2013) 22.48 Km

The camp was west facing so it was still dark when we made our hasty breakfast of coffee and pop-tarts and the temperature was in the 40s F. We still thought we might be able to finish this route in two more days so we packed up first in the dark; then, in the shadows as the rising sun was blocked from our heavily forested location.

We departed this camp at 8:30 AM hauling our gear to the end of the portage trail. This was a short trail downhill that ended at a very rocky put-in with some current in the lower part of the stream. Caution had to be taken not to stage the canoe too far out or the current would grab it but it had to be far enough out not to get caught up on the rocks. Just another dicey put-in on this route. We paddled into a pool whose end was choked with boulders and trees and the take-out for the next portage was obvious on the right side and about 320 meters from our previous put-in.

There was a narrow flat gravel bench just big enough for the front ends of two canoes and then the trail went up a clay and gravel rise that was nearly vertical. This vertical section was about 25 feet and then the trail angle eased up but only slightly. Because of previous forest fires and the deadfall they created, this trail just went up higher and higher as it wound its way around all the obstacles. Brian was out of sight ahead of me and I came to a washout area that was very steep. I was making my first trip with the (very heavy) pack and it looked like the trail went down the washout and into the trees closer to the shore of the stream. I should have dumped my pack to find the route but I kept it on and went to the bottom of this steep washout, a distance of about 50 vertical feet. It turned out to be just wishful thinking on my part and to my dismay, what had appeared to be a trail just went into a jumble of brush and deadfall and I had to re-trace my steps back up the very steep washout. I backtracked a ways thinking I had missed a turn; then, turned around, came back to the washout and went up toward a large boulder and hidden behind the branches of a small tree was the trail. It was still going up the slope. Eventually, the trail began its steep downhill run for about 200 meters and ended at a put-in that was covered in large exposed roots and deadfall. Then I had to go back to get my boat. Paddlers have said this trail was 500 or 600 meters but we still believe it was every bit of 800 meters in length.

On my second trip, coming through with my canoe on my shoulders and before I got to the washout, I suffered a catastrophic gear failure. My demountable yoke shattered in three places. It was made of oak and it must have just contorted enough on the irregular trail that it first started to loudly creak and then a few seconds later it shattered on my shoulders. Brian had already made his second trip and I hustled down to the put-in and luckily caught him as he was just getting ready to shove off. Instead of loaning me his yoke, he came back up the trail and attached it and carried my boat down to the put-in. As it turned out, his yoke was a little shorter than mine (even though we have the same boats) but luckily it was still usable.

We crossed a small pond and put in at the third and final portage into the main branch of the Steel River. This trail was only about 140 meters and went around a rock garden but it had the customary tough take-out and put-in that we had come to expect on this trip. As soon as we put in, we passed a large campsite right at the junction with the main branch of the Steel River.

We made the right turn, to the south, and started down the main branch of the Steel River that would end at the head of Santoy Lake.

The first eight kilometers of the Steel River has a swift personality with only three ponds where the water flattens out. It was immediately obvious to us that the river was flowing faster with a greater volume of water than our previous experience. The swifts were approaching Class I and the Class I's we remembered from 2003 were now Class II's. The other factor was there was enough volume of water flowing through these narrows that we never touched bottom. We did however scrape or glance off of the occasional rock (pillow) just barely under the surface.

After the upper eight kilometers of the river, the Steel opened up into a series of narrow, flat-water lakes connected by short, narrow stream sections. Each of these narrows had a rapid that was at least Class I but some were Class II. It is important to note that the Class I's and II's were for volume of water but not necessarily for obstacles. Most of the rapids were straight from pond to pond and we had to strain to look for "pillows" and quickly maneuver around them. This was primarily the pattern and it did require some advanced paddling skills in terms of draws, cross-draws and pries to miss these submerged obstacles.

We stopped for lunch at a designated campsite that was quite dark and shaded and would have been very buggy in the summer. It did have a "teepee" sign however and a small sand beach. In the very next lake we passed the fly-in camp which had been our Camp Five, 10 years before. The time was approaching 1:00 pm and the faster current and our earlier departure time had put us a few hours ahead of our previous trip schedule. We were feeling pretty good about our progress on the river.

Later in the afternoon, at around 4:30 pm, we approached an obvious Class II rapid that made a sharp turn to the right. I sat at the top while Brian maneuvered around the turn and disappeared behind the shore. Brian's on-side (his favored paddling side) is the right side of the canoe and from my vantage point sitting at the top of the rapid, he made that right turn with no issues. He used a bow-draw to pull the boat to the right and he was through.

My on-side is the left side of the boat and with my paddle on the left I entered the rapid aligning myself in the center and then I came to the right turn. The water picked up speed faster than I had anticipated and at the very least I needed to put in a bow sweep but my paddle was behind the beam so I put in a stern sweep to try and drag the stern to the left forcing the bow to the right. It was totally the wrong maneuver at the wrong time and just before my bow drove into the rocks, I knew that what I really had to do was snap in a cross-draw. But then I hit and an instant later I was swimming while the boat "turtled". The moment I surfaced, I saw my pack alongside of me and instinct told me to grab it. This became my second mistake and by holding the pack I was unable to turn around to go down the rapid feet-first and my butt slammed into a rock. After I hit the rock, I could hear Brian yelling to let go of the pack and I did.

My PFD worked perfectly and even though I was wearing layers of clothes and my NEOS trekkers were full of water, I was still able to dog-paddle over to the rocky left shore. I was about 20 meters from the shore when I ended up in calm water. Brian asked if I could make it to shore on my own and I told him that I could and then he started collecting my stuff in the water. I found a spot that was an area of large, rough igneous cobbles and Brian came ashore with my pack and built a twig fire; then, while I changed out of everything wet and into dry clothes, he went out to retrieve the rest of my gear. I should note that both of our packs are water-proof so everything inside mine was dry.

The most difficulty Brian had was retrieving my boat because I did not have a painter attached to it. This was a big mistake on my part and a real problem for Brian and it took him a solid 20 minutes or so to get something attached to my upside down canoe so that he could tow it ashore. Towing the flooded canoe with his solo boat was not easy either.

When it was all over and I had changed, putting my wet things into a garbage bag, we took stock of the damage. The wooden bow plate had broken into two pieces but the integrity of the canoe's bow structure was un-compromised. Brian collected this piece and we will see if it can be glued back into place. The important thing was the hull was undamaged. My primary bass-wood paddle had gotten stuck in an eddy and was hammered against a rock before it was spit out and it was full of dimples but still intact. My back-up paddle was a Sawyer plastic paddle and it was untouched. My water bottle, map case and waterproof fanny pack were also still attached to the canoe's thwart but the map case was open and all my maps were wet goo. *(I always had trouble sealing this map case in the field and I took it back to REI and they gave me \$32.00 for it even though I bought it 8 years before. I should also add that in 2016, I delivered my canoe to the Swift factory for the repairs to be done professionally.)*

All of this drama took a little more than an hour and a half and we were underway again. At the end of the lake that we were in, there was another Class II rapid and this one had a portage trail around it. Brian scouted the entire rapid and came back saying that the portage was real rough and that the rapid would be easier. I was still a little "gun-shy" about running another rapid so soon after my recovery from the previous run but I took Brian's word for it. It was a straight rapid and although we both "kissed" the same rock just off the center of the channel we successfully passed through it. The time was now about 7:20 and the sun had nearly set, so we turned at the bottom of this rapid and went ashore at the lower end of the portage trail and made camp right there (UTM 521755E, 5446164N). There wasn't going to be anyone else coming down this river.

When the sun went down, this camp became infested by some sort of moth. They were tan colored with golden eyes when you shined them with a light. They were everywhere and some of them even got inside the tent. We still built a fire and had dinner in the dark but unfortunately we were out of wine. We made an early night of it and turned in; killing all the moths we could find that had made it inside.

Tuesday (August 24, 2013) 32.36 Km

We were up around 6:00 in the dark and made our earliest departure yet at 7:45 AM. Right up to shoving off, we were killing moths. The weather was calm and the temperature was in the lower 50s F. A light wind came in as the morning progressed and; as always seemed to be the case, it was right on our nose. This did increase our paddling effort out of necessity.

The first five kilometers of the river was much like the afternoon the day before, a series of narrow flat-water lakes connected by short, swift stream sections. Each of these short streams required close attention because of the volume of water. I was now paying real close attention to every single bend and obstacle.

Following the five kilometers of narrow lakes, there was a two-kilometer section of swift stream, then the river jogged to the southwest.

From here, most of the way to the falls, the river reverts back to its personality of narrow, flat-water lakes connected by short rapids and a final swift section leading up to the Rainbow Falls take-out.

It's impossible to miss the start of the falls because there is a natural dam of bedrock and boulders. The take-out was unmarked on this trip but what was now considered atypical; there was a steep take-out up a clay embankment. The other typical (or atypical) thing was there was only a shelf less than one foot wide to catch the boat. Even exiting the canoe was difficult but pulling out the heavy packs and trying to get them up the 15 foot vertical embankment was really difficult. We had to do one boat at a time tying it into whatever branch or root we could reach so it wouldn't take off when it was exited.

The Rainbow Falls portage trail goes up a steep but short hill then it's a gradual downhill all the way to the single, large, well-groomed MNR campsite. Beyond this the trail goes steeply down to a tributary creek bed and out onto a gravel bar at the river's edge. The Rainbow Falls portage is about 400 meters and is

quite possibly the easiest trail of the route. Not necessarily the take-out, but the trail was in good shape although it was very narrow with a steep drop off to the side.

The campsite was unoccupied and we launched immediately from the broad gravel bench at the river's edge. The campsite was large and could accommodate quite a few tents.

The run down the first five kilometers below the falls was to be some of the best on this river. It was very fast with a swift to Class I personality and there wasn't much in the way of those hidden "pillows".

For the next seven kilometers, the river began to slow down and meander but it still had a current that it hadn't had on our previous trip. About twelve kilometers below the put-in at Rainbow Falls there was a heavily built logging road bridge (UTM 5431900N). This was not on the topo map nor was the well-graded road that crossed it. (*According to well-known canoeing author and consultant, Cliff Jacobson, this bridge is named Dead Horse Bridge.*)

Approximately 2.6 kilometers below the bridge we came to some small deadfall across the river between the right (west) shore and a large gravel bar (UTM 5430900N). It was about Noon and we stopped here for lunch. After about 30 minutes, we dragged our boats and our gear over the gravel bar and set out downriver again. The river starts to seriously meander after this short lift-over but even so, there was still a small current that we had not enjoyed on our previous trip.

Approximately 3.5 kilometers below the lift-over there was an island where the river bisected but it was no problem in the high water. This had been a problem for us on our previous passage (UTM 5428500N).

Through this stretch some of the ancient granite cliffs along the eastern shore towered 400 to 450 feet above the river. This was a very spectacular sight.

The river really had a pattern of very tight meanders to such a degree that the GPS kept getting confused and would flip back and forth between the former and the next waypoints. At one point a large fish jumped out of the stream but I didn't get a good look at what type of fish it was and; in any event, I wouldn't know one fish from another. Approximately six kilometers below the small island we encountered the first logjam (UTM 5426300N). The logs were haphazardly piled on each other as far as the eye could see until it rounded a right bend. We couldn't see any markings of a trail and the banks on both sides were 15 to 20 feet high but we had been through here before and we knew that the trail was on river-right. With some degree of struggle up the steep bank Brian went up and made a cursory scout stating that he had found a trail but then it just vaporized into the thick underbrush. He came back to the embankment's edge and said all he could find were short game trails and the underbrush was very thick and nearly impassable.

I climbed up the bank and we decided to split up but remain in ear-shot and no matter which way we went we ran into brush too thick to pass through. Our trip-log from 10 years before said the portage was on river-right and in fact we both remembered it that way. Finally the brush became so dense that it was decided that I would take a seat on a log while Brian made a 360° search for a portage trail. The day had warmed up into the 60's and we were both immediately bombarded by black-flies and mosquitoes. We had completely covered our bodies including head-nets but it just leant to our frustration and aggravation. We walked back to the giant logjam and even made a feeble attempt to work our way through it but this was impossible.

Finally, Brian said he would check out the left shore and no sooner had he climbed the bank, than he yelled over to me that he had found the portage trail. We were very perplexed and frustrated. We had wasted nearly two hours trying to find a path through the dense underbrush on the other shore.

Once we put back into the river we didn't have to go very far before we came to the next logjam. This ended the mystery as we scaled the steep embankment on river right and then realized that this was our first logjam of 10 years before. There was now a new first logjam and this was the second. These take-outs were up very steep clay with just enough sand mixed in that our footing wanted to let go with our

weight. Dragging packs and canoes up these 20 foot cliffs was extremely difficult and time-consuming. We estimated this trail to be about 600 meters in length and the put-in was just as steep and dicey as the take-out.

It was twilight, about 6:50 PM, and the sun had disappeared behind the trees when we stopped at a steep little beach on an inside bend to make camp (UTM 510625E, 5428072N). Using our paddles, we had to grade the sand to as near horizontal as we could in order to put up the tent. Even then, the tent was literally right on the edge of the river. We were able to find enough small stuff to build a twig fire but that was about it. We cooked and ate our food in the dark sitting on the gunnels of our canoes. By 8:00 PM we were in the tent. It had been a long difficult day. One short note - virtually every inside bend in the lower meanders had a beach although many of them were not suitable to accommodate a tent.

Wednesday (September 25, 2013) 35.06 Km

As crazy as this sounds, we both had business meetings on Thursday morning that we had to make. We rolled out of the tent at 6:00 AM into pitch darkness hurriedly going about the process of eating and breaking camp. Now we had a new problem – we were out of coffee. No wine at night and no coffee in the morning. We were really roughing it. We departed camp at 7:20 AM and paddled into the darkness. This was to be our earliest departure of the whole trip. It was dark enough that once Brian got 30 meters ahead of me, I couldn't see him. Just as it was becoming gray with the approaching sun, we encountered the third major logjam (UTM 5425600N).

We found the portage trail on river-left and it turned out to be only about 150 meters and cut off the meandering curve.

This part of the river was very tightly meandering but again unlike our previous trip there continued to be a small current.

At one point we were escorted by a pair of Great Horned Owls who stayed ahead of us for about a kilometer. I don't know much about these birds but I thought they were only nocturnal. The sun was fully up by now and it was a bright cloudless day.

We came upon the fourth major logjam about 9.3 kilometers downstream from the third one (UTM 5420550N). There was a portage sign (the first we had seen) on river left. We pulled up to the embankment and Brian went ashore to scout. There was a good trail that ended at a jumbled log jam and he couldn't see anything going around it. This was a little perplexing so he asked me to paddle up to the log jam and see if I could figure it out from the water. I tried to go left around the logs but they filled up a bay surrounded by forest. From my vantage point it looked like the river actually went to the right at this point. Brian got back into his canoe and we paddled another 150 meters until we came to a real logjam blocking the river. There was no portage on either shore (obvious or otherwise) and we finally pushed through up against the river right shore going under and over logs with a fair amount of difficulty. We struggled through this task for about 50 meters and then we were through. In hindsight it looked like the logjam up-stream had a partial break-away and these logs got caught up a few hundred meters downstream.

We covered the next 4 miles in about an hour-and-a-half. When we were less than a mile from the mouth of the river, we rounded a left bend and there was the final major logjam (number five). The portage trail was on river-right and although it had the (now usual) steep, difficult take-out, the trail was in the best shape of all of the logjam trails. It was about 140 meters long and cut off the meander putting in at a small beach. It was also the most recognizable from our trip of 10 years before. The rowboat and other things that had been cached by a trapper were still here just as they had been on our previous trip.

We arrived at the head of Santoy Lake at 1:30 PM. This was the same time we had arrived on the previous trip and just like our trip 10 years before, there was a south wind coming straight up the lake. We decided not to take any time to eat lunch in case the wind was freshening. We estimated it to be about 12 to 15 mph with occasional gusts hitting 18 mph. The sky was completely clear and we paddled

over the breakers at the mouth of the river and into the lake. These breakers were created by the southwind chop hitting the outflow current of the river. We decided to head for the western shore and to stay close to that side of the lake for whatever protection it might give us.

Given the direction of the wind, there really wasn't much protection but the good news was that it also wasn't increasing in velocity.

This was one of the hardest paddles we have ever made because neither one of us could let up for even a moment. As soon as we slacked off, the wind would push the solo canoe around and we were heading back up the lake in the wrong direction. It was 2 ½ hours of continuous hard paddling. In spite of this we managed to maintain an average speed over the bottom of 2.8 mph.

When I pulled into the gravel beach at the take-out, I was so spent that I just collapsed over the thwart. The time was 4:15 PM. With all the chop out on the lake, I kneeled the whole way without a break because I feared if I tried to uncurl my legs from under the seat, I might very possibly roll the boat. It was a slow and agonizing process just getting out of the canoe at the take-out and then getting the circulation back into my legs.

We changed into more street-like clothes at the truck and got everything stowed and then we drove back to Marathon to the A&W and had dinner. Of course we wanted to take a motel in Wawa and have a real dinner with cocktails but this was not to be.

We left the A&W and began the long drive home.

Some final details:

When we ran this loop in 2003 the water level was low. As a result, we got hung up in a lot of rock gardens and had to walk the canoes through. In 2013 the water level was medium high from all the rain. In the river portions this gave the run a whole different personality and we never bottomed out once.

The log jams look like they've been there unmoved for centuries but in fact they are quite dynamic. There was a new "first" logjam and the "fourth" logjam had been partially broken up only to re-build its barricade 150 meters further downstream.