

# CANOEING THE CHURCHILL

A Practical Guide to the  
Historic Voyageur Highway



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Historic Voyageur Highway

**Greg Marchildon and Sid Robinson**



**University of Regina Press**

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To Julian Marchildon, Haley Robinson, and Ragnar Robinson,  
a new generation of voyageurs



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# FOREWORD (2015)

I have now spent more than forty years paddling on, dreaming of paddling on, and telling others about paddling on the Churchill River in northern Saskatchewan. It's certainly not the only place I've paddled, but it is still one of my favourite places to be. There is something about the serenity of an island-filled lake together with the adrenalin-inducing ride down a wild rapid that makes the Churchill River special. Then, when you mix this with the knowledge of all those who have gone before—the First Nations people and then the voyageurs and now a century of recreational paddlers—there is a feeling to this place that is like none other. And you can add to this the cry of the loon as you are sitting beside your evening campfire, the bald eagles soaring overhead, the pelicans fishing below a rapid, or even the hum of mosquitoes outside your tent door. In midsummer, the smell and sound of a refreshing rain as it comes across the lake to your canoe is intoxicating. On those same hot midsummer days, there is nothing better than to plunge into the warm, refreshing water of the Churchill River. Later in the season, there are those mornings where the sun is trying to shine through the mist coming off the water. The Churchill River is a special place. It is where I feel at home. It is where my heart is.

The Churchill River is unique. If you look at a detailed map showing Canada's Precambrian Shield, you will see that nearly every river flows along the grain of the Shield. In northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba, that is generally northeast or southwest. The Churchill doesn't fit that mould. It flows west, *across* the grain of the Shield. Imagine: many thousands of years ago, the glaciers are melting, the water is piling up against an ancient mountain range. A lake, which we now call Sandfly Lake, is forming. Finally, the water spills through several gaps in the mountain range, forming what we now call Needle Rapids and Needle Falls. The water that spills over Needle Falls runs up against another ancient mountain range to form a lake we now call Kinosaskaw Lake. The water eventually finds its way through the mountain range at what we now call Silent Rapids. Again, the water runs into yet another ancient mountain range to form a huge island-filled lake we call Black Bear Island Lake. And again, the water eventually finds a way through at Birch Rapids. This pattern continues over and over again all the way across Saskatchewan, as this new river encounters ancient mountain range after ancient mountain range. You can see it plainly when you look at 1/250,000 or even 1/50,000 scale maps of the Churchill River. Across the Precambrian Shield in Canada and the northern United States, there is no river that does this to the extent that the Churchill does. In Manitoba, the Nelson and Hayes Rivers do this for a very short distance. In Western Ontario, the Rainy and English Rivers, and the beginning of the Winnipeg River, do this for short distances. The Ottawa River, too, does this for a short distance upstream from Ottawa. But nowhere else does this phenomenon occur – a river flowing *across* rather than *along* the grain of the Shield – to the extent that it occurs on the Churchill River in Saskatchewan. This makes the Churchill River unique among rivers.

So what does that mean? What difference does that make? It means you have a river on which you can travel upstream almost as easily as downstream. The only difference is that you are either portaging uphill around a waterfall or downhill around it. So the Churchill River has

served as a two-way highway, first for the First Nations people, then for the voyageurs, and now for its recreational paddlers. The ancient peoples were no different than we are today. They chose to live along the transportation routes. Since the Churchill River was a two-way highway across this land, they chose to live along the Churchill River. When the voyageurs began travelling this far west, they loved the Churchill River because it was easy to go in both directions. They set up many trading posts along the river. Today, recreational paddlers use the Churchill River extensively in both directions. It is still the two-way highway of this part of the world. A river unique among rivers.

That's where this book comes in. Greg and Sid have done an incredible job of covering all three eras of the Churchill River's use. They have stories from First Nations people from all the way up and down the river. The book includes the First Nations names for various lakes and rapids—names like Diarrhea Lake. There are many long-ago observations from the voyageurs who travelled up and down the river, as well as quotations from the writings of traders, trappers, and missionaries from that era. And for the recreational paddlers of the modern era, the book includes detailed information about portage trails, rapids, and good places to camp. When reading *Canoeing the Churchill*, one really does get the impression of a two-way water highway that has been used by many peoples for thousands of years.

Greg Marchildon and Sid Robinson's *Canoeing the Churchill* is a labour of love and devotion to a river that has obviously had a huge impact on both of them. The book is filled with the most interesting stories and incredible detail. It is a book that is equally enjoyable reading in one's living room beside the fireplace as it is beside the campfire while on a canoe trip on the Churchill River. It is a "must read" for anyone paddling the Churchill, and it is a "must have" for anyone doing research into the history of the fur trade or that of the native peoples of Canada. My copy of this book is tattered and torn from being read and reread. It is wrinkled from getting wet with Churchill River water. It smells of smoke from being read in the light of an evening campfire. I would consider it the best Saskatchewan book ever written. (I am only a little biased.) Thank you, Greg and Sid!

Ric Driediger  
Churchill River Canoe Outfitters  
Missinipe, Saskatchewan  
May 2014

## FOREWORD (2002)

We are very fortunate to have *Canoeing the Churchill: A Practical Guide to the Historic Voyageur Highway* as the third title in the “Discover Saskatchewan” series. The two authors, Greg Marchildon and Sid Robinson, have, through their extensive research and experiences on the river, provided a significant contribution to the literature for canoeists and outdoor recreation enthusiasts. Of equal importance, their book contributes to the historical and ethnographic understanding of lives lived along this northern Saskatchewan waterway.

On a personal level, each year I look forward to spending the long daylight hours of the northern Saskatchewan summer on wilderness waterways. The beauty of this lonely land draws me back year after year. I hope that through this book people from Saskatchewan and beyond will take the opportunity to understand more about this magnificent river and the people who, over the centuries, have relied on it for trade, transportation, and food.

While the Churchill is a relatively isolated river in an isolated land, it still needs to be understood in an historical as well as a current context. The authors of *Canoeing the Churchill* provide these contexts, and it is to be hoped that readers will be convinced to treat the river with respect, in order to ensure not only that the Churchill River continues to serve its fundamental and critical role in the northern ecosystems of Saskatchewan, but also that future generations can continue to enjoy and appreciate its beauty.

Publication of *Canoeing the Churchill* was assisted by a generous grant from the Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation. Special thanks go to the staff of the Canadian Plains Research Center, in particular Donna Achtzehner for her invaluable work in bringing this project to fruition.

Ralph Nilson  
Series Editor  
December 2001  
Regina, Saskatchewan

# PREFACE

In the summer of 1985, we rented cabins on opposite sides of Lac la Ronge's Nut Point peninsula. By overland trail, we were only two kilometres apart, so we sometimes met on weekends to drink tea and discuss topics of interest. One August evening, the talk turned to canoeing and the possibility of a fall canoe trip. After sorting out the mechanics of the J stroke (our paddling skills were limited) and who had what gear, we determined we were in fact ready for a modest excursion. We then went on to discuss possible trip routes. A section of the Churchill River, just an hour's drive north of La Ronge, was our unanimous choice.

We were captured by the Churchill's rich history as part of the old trans-Canada voyageur highway. We looked forward to camping on the same rocks and portaging the same trails as the early traders and their voyageurs. At the same time, it occurred to us that we might benefit from a guide or handbook describing our intended route's history. As far as we knew, though, no such guide existed. We were familiar with the canoe trip booklets—originally written by canoeist Peter Gregg—that the provincial government offered free of charge to canoeists. However, while these booklets were (and still are) excellent navigational aids, their slim format left little room for history.

Sitting at the kitchen table under a kerosene lamp, we continued our trip planning into the night. But even as we concentrated on maps, food, and gear, we kept coming back to how handy a history guide would be. And gradually, as the lamp wick burned shorter, the idea for this book was born. We decided—without yet knowing a low brace from a knee brace—that we ourselves could canoe the length of Saskatchewan's voyageur highway and write up a paddler's guide to its history. The idea seemed so sensible, we wanted to get on the water right away. However, as it was clearly too late in the year to begin an extended canoe trip, we reluctantly agreed to postpone our adventure until the following spring. Although disappointing, the delay would give us a chance to read more about the fur trade, learn the rudiments of photography, and find the equipment needed for a summer-long trip.

In late May, 1986, we finally set out on our enlarged expedition. We hauled an aluminum Grumman Eagle to the Clearwater River and, from there, headed south and east on a seventy-day voyage to Cumberland House. We could not have wished for a better summer. We paddled and portaged, fished and swam, and talked to people we met along our way. We were always dead tired by nightfall, but each day taught us something new.

While our 1986 canoe trip was long, the actual writing of this book has been a far longer journey. The original plan was to have our research written up into a usable guide soon after our canoe trip. We started our writing fast enough, but within weeks, we seemed to have more questions than answers about our route. The next summer, despite our best efforts, we were still a long way from completion. By 1990, we had made enough progress to interest a publisher in our work. But three years later, we had not yet turned in a completed manuscript, and the publisher had moved on to other endeavours. As more years passed, we also moved on to other things and farther away from a wrap-up. While we continued to revisit our route and gather information about it, we were never able to put our collected information and photos into usable form.

In 1997, our project was resurrected from the dead by the Canadian Plains Research Center. That year, we were asked by Dr. Ralph Nilson, the Dean of Physical Activity Studies at the

University of Regina, to finish the book up so that it could be included in his new “Discover Saskatchewan” series. Dr. Nilson’s hope was that the book would appear by no later than 1998. Again, we were to fail to meet expectations. We did devote any spare time we had to finishing up our work. However, it seemed our time too often went into more research rather than writing final drafts. We thus caused more delays and, in doing so, surely tested the patience of our publisher and editor.

Now finally, with the help of CPRC and encouragement from family and friends, we have managed to put our collected material together. The finished product—with its maps, photos, and text—is thicker than we originally intended. Nonetheless, while it may be heavy to portage, we hope it finds its way into many canoe packs.

Greg Marchildon, Sid Robinson, January 2002

## PREFACE TO THE FOURTH PRINTING

In this fourth printing, *Canoeing the Churchill* remains essentially the same as it was when first published. There have been two significant changes to the text and some small, but important, additions of note.

The first change, made in the second printing, concerns the way measurements are set out in the text. To assist visiting American paddlers and others who may not be familiar with the metric system, metric measurements are now followed by their American equivalents in parentheses.

The second change, also made in the second printing, is with respect to the spelling of Cree terms and place names in our guide. In the first printing, Cree words were spelt using “Colin’s Modified Roman Orthography,” developed by the Lac la Ronge Indian Band. The Band has since adopted the use of “Standard Roman Orthography” (SRO). As SRO is now standard throughout most of Saskatchewan, our original spellings have been converted to their SRO equivalents. We extend our thanks to Arok Wolvengrey – assisted by Solomon Ratt, Jean Okimâsis, and Bill Barry – for making the conversions. Readers can refer to Appendix C (page 408) for a pronunciation guide to both Cree and Dene words.

In this fourth printing, the colour insert contains most of the images from the original publication, along with added photos from the 2005 Saskatchewan Centennial Canoe Quest. In the Quest, 30 teams raced “North” canoe replicas down the guide route from Lac la Loche to Sturgeon Landing, traveling 966 kilometres (600 miles) in 15 days. (A 16th day to Cumberland House was cancelled when flood waters forced that village to evacuate.) The race was an epic adventure and is now part of the route’s history. Another addition is Appendix D, which provides information about a new series of maps for Saskatchewan canoeists and kayakers.

Now published by University of Regina Press (formerly Canadian Plains Research Center), this fourth printing has a new cover and includes a new foreword by Ric Driediger of Missinipe, the Churchill’s canoeing outfitter extraordinaire, whose intimate knowledge of the guide route is nothing short of legendary.

Greg Marchildon, Sid Robinson, October 2014

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this guide would have been impossible without the help of the dozens of people who have, over the past sixteen years, given us practical support and provided us with information. To the extent possible, we here wish to acknowledge and thank those persons. We will undoubtedly miss naming some who have helped us along the way, and we apologize for this oversight. The help of all contributors, named or unnamed, has been appreciated.

Thanks first to Gene Josephson and Wendy Stueck who accompanied us down the Clearwater River from Warner Rapids to Methy Portage at the start of our 1986 trip. In those first days, Gene—an old canoe hand by our standards—gave us much needed advice on when to run rapids and when to walk around them. Both Gene and Wendy did more than their share of camp chores while we examined and photographed rapids and portages.

Thanks, too, to Patsi Walton, now of Montreal, who was with us for the last third of our 1986 trip—the distance from Otter Rapids to Cumberland House. Patsi shared her knowledge of northern Saskatchewan's plants and showed us the ones we could safely add to our menu. Patsi also used her guitar, voice, and good humour to enliven our journey.

In the years since 1986, several canoeists have supported us on forays to revisit the route. Without exception, they have been endlessly patient during detours made to check and recheck information. They have also freely done more than their share of portaging and camp chores to allow us to pursue small explorations. These canoeists include Laurel Archer, Ryan Burdon, Joanne Epp, Noreen Gobeille, Judy Halyk, Bill Hilderman, Bill Jeffery, Hilary Johnstone, Vanessa Johnstone, Dorothy Josephson, Gene Josephson (again), Brad Koop, Leslie Mennie, Alain Michelet, and several Robinsons, namely, Faye, Gaye, Haley, Ragnar, Randy, Shelley, and Sherry.

In 1986 and in subsequent years, we also received a great deal of help from people on dry land. Sometimes, this help was of a practical nature as in the case of vehicle shuttles or proofreading written text. Most often, it was in the form of information—a commodity most vital to us. The help we received had a tangible value, but it also encouraged us to move forward with our project.

We are particularly indebted to the assistance we have received from Dale Russell of Saskatoon. In sharing his knowledge of Cree and Dene history, Dale reminded us that the human history of the Churchill and Sturgeon-weir goes back thousands of years and that the period from European contact to the present is only a small part of it. While the route's early history remains largely unknown to us, Dale has at least given us a sense of how rich it must be. Tim Jones, too, with his understanding of aboriginal pictographs, has helped us appreciate the great span of pre-contact history.

In researching the fur trade, we have had research assistance from the National Archives of Canada, the Saskatchewan Archives Board, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) and the Pahkisimon Nuye-ah Library in La Ronge. We owe a significant debt to the HBCA in Winnipeg. Much of our research at the HBCA was done by mail, and archives staff often went

an extra mile to answer our written queries. HBCA staff who assisted us include David Arthurs, Judith Beattie and Scott Reid. Special thanks go to Anne Morton, present Head of Research and Reference at HBCA, who faithfully answered long lists of questions.

Provincial civil servants often assisted us with answers to questions. These include Andrew Gracie and Pam Schwann of Energy and Mines, Dalvin Euteneier of Sask Water, Daryl Kraft of Information Services (SaskGeomatics Division), Peter Niven of SaskPower, John Boyd of Sask Housing, and Dennis Belliveau of Saskatchewan Highways and Transportation (who went to considerable length to give us the history of northern Saskatchewan's first provincial roads). Several Saskatchewan Environment staff, some of whom are listed below, also assisted us both while on duty and while on their free time.

We also benefited from the help of the Historic Trails Canoe Club of Regina, originally established in 1956 to explore the Churchill River. The members of this club have always had a keen interest in the history of the Churchill and have played a significant role in reviewing and updating the provincial canoe trip booklets for the river. We would like to thank members Jean Miketinac, Dave Christopherson, and Peter Whitehead for their comments on portions of our manuscript. Special thanks go to Marcel de Laforest (like Peter Whitehead, a charter member of the club) who read most of the manuscript and was most patient and helpful in the last stages of revision.

Others who gave us practical support or general information include Dave Armstrong, Cindy Barker, Lee Barker, Bill Barry, Marvin Bather, Father Beaudet, Thomas Billette, Mervin Bilquist, Verna Bilquist, the late Simeon Bloomfield, the late Louis Bouvier, Vi Bouvier, Bill Chanin, Scott Charles, Bev Cheechoo, Jeff Chiarenzelli, Doug Chisholm, Roly Chretien, Marie Jeanne ("MJ") Chuey, Ron Clancy, the late Jonas Clarke, Robert H. Cockburn, Karen Cojocar, Ron Cojocar, Ken Cornett, Mike Current, Lois Dalby, the late Fred Darbyshire, Nora Darbyshire, Jeff Davies, Howard DeLong, Irene Desjarlais, Ovide Desjarlais, Ric Driediger, Leighton Dunn, the late Father Durand, Beatrice Fecke, Charlie Fosseneuve, Dorothea Funk, Lyle Galloway, Louis George, Rick Glass, Joe Goodeyon, Bev Goulet, Gill Gracie, Walter Hainault, John Hansen, Carmen Harry, Norm Henderson (who went far beyond the call of duty in commenting on the first three chapters of the manuscript at one particularly difficult stage), Jack Hillson, Lynda Holland, Dr. Meinrad Hoffman, Norm Hoknes, Casey Howey, Gwyneth Hoyle, Anita Jackson, Bruce Joa, Leo Jacobsen, Sherry Jacobsen, J. Keith Johnstone, Harold Kirtzinger, Eugene Klein, Margaret Klein, Fritz Laliberte, George Laliberte, Mary Laliberte, Joyce Laprise, Mike Lariviere, Charles Lauterer, Jean (Jerry) Lavoie, Bill Layman, Harvey Legary, Carl Lentowicz, Grant Lohrenz, Audrey Mark, Dale McAuley, Father Jean Mégrét, David Meyer, Dave McIlmoyle, Yvonne McIntyre, Isaac McKenzie, Father Bertrand Mathieu, Roy Morin, Vital Morin, the late Gisli Norman, Lilje Norman, Clarisse Petit, John Piper, Elaine Poulin, Roger Poulin, Allan Quandt, Alvin Reimer, Nancy Reimer, Alex Robertson, Scott Robertson, the late Fred Robinson, Ivor Robinson, Roland Robinson, Don Ryback, Virginia Scanlon, Wayne Schick, Ray Sernes, Angus Sewap, John Sheard, Jon Sigtema, Don Skopyk, Kelly Stevenson, Larry Stevenson, Dean Tait, Fred Thompson, Gary Thompson, Ron Thompson, George Thurlow, Eddie Tihonen, Jacqueline Toupin, Tim Trottier, Gord Wallace, Ron Ward, Don Watson, Randy Wells, and Charlie Willetts.

Photographs make up an important part of our work. If not otherwise indicated, the photos shown are our own—most being taken as either black-and-white prints or colour slides on our

1986 trip. However, in addition to our own photos and those obtained from archival sources, others have made significant photo contributions. Pilot Doug Chisholm of La Ronge took all of our aerial photos (excepting the archival shot of Buffalo Narrows on page 133). Dave Armstrong of Regina took many of the photographs shown in Chapter 8. Marg Beament of La Ronge provided us with the photo of her parents, John and Mary Ann McKay at Black Bear Island Lake. Lois Dalby and Lynda Holland, both of La Ronge, provided us with the photo of Solomon Merasty and P.G. Downes shown on page 331. Graham Guest, also of La Ronge, gave us his photos of Angelique and Bill Merasty shown on pages 359 and 360. (Graham has further given us a good deal of practical support.) John and Mary Morin of Prince Albert provided us with photos of the Sturgeon Landing residential school shown on page 383. Finally, Hilary Johnstone of La Ronge has contributed several photos and has also done the sketches of the food box on page 13, the voyageur on page 39, and the pack and paddle on page 404.

Many Dene have their home territories on western sections of the route. We have set out some local Dene history and have tried to give Dene names for places along the route. This would not have been possible without the help of Dene who live, or have lived, between the Clearwater River and Knee Lake. For information and names regarding the Clearwater River and La Loche regions, we relied heavily on advice from Greg Hatch (assisted by Celina Janvier and the late Pierre Lemaigre), Alphonse Janvier, Steven Lemaigre and Annette Montgrand. For names and information about the Peter Pond Lake area, we relied upon help from Hazel MacDonald and Monique Sylvestre. Paul Sylvestre provided us with names and information for the Churchill Lake area. Joe Black and Philip Wolverine proved to be invaluable resources with respect to English River Dene Nation territory. Mayor Margaret Aubichon provided us with information about her home community of Patuanak. Finally, Ben Garr, a Dene linguist originally from Patuanak, spent several hours reviewing our Dene names and helping us transcribe them into our rudimentary English phonetics.

Many, many people helped us with information about Cree territory and the Cree language. Without exception, they were ever patient as we asked to have stories and Cree words repeated time and again. Those informants that come especially to mind include Mike Durocher of Île-à-la-Crosse, the late Albert Hansen of Pinehouse, Martin Smith of Pinehouse, Bill Nelson of Trout Lake, the late John McKay of Black Bear Island Lake, Johnny S. McKenzie of Grandmother's Bay, Blake Charles of Stanley Mission, Big Jim McKenzie of Stanley Mission/Nistowiak Falls, John Charles of Stanley Mission/Keg Lake, Daniel Linklater of Pelican Narrows, the late Frank Linklater of Pelican Narrows, Martin Michel of Pelican Narrows, and the late Bill Merasty of Denare Beach. A very special thanks goes to John and Mary Morin, now of Prince Albert, who gave us information about Cree life on the Sturgeon-weir River and at Cumberland House. John was born on the West Weir and was intimately familiar with the Sturgeon-weir. Mary was born and raised at Cumberland House. We went back to John and Mary for information so often, John was once heard to ask, "How many books are those guys writing?" Our other Cree informants include Victoria Ballantyne, Allan Charles, Pat Chartier, Jim Churchill, Sarah Cook, Susan Cook, Louis Custer, Dick Hansen, John Halcrow, Maggie Halcrow, Adam Highway, Eli Highway, the late Louis Jobb, Vie Laffrenere, the late Arthur McCallum, Judy McCallum, Richard McKay, Becky McKenzie, Sam McKenzie, Ron Merasty, the late Solomon Merasty, Gerald M. Morin, James (Magic) Ratt, the late Joseph Ratt, Maggie Ross, the late Elizabeth Sewap, the late James Sewap, Ray Smith and Doreen Vancoughnett.

Nicole O’Byrne first made us aware of the possibility of publishing our book in the Canadian Plains Research Center’s “Discover Saskatchewan” series. We want to thank the series editor, Dr. Ralph Nilson, Dean of Physical Activity Studies at the University of Regina, for immediately understanding what we were trying to accomplish and committing his support. We also wish to thank CPRC publisher Brian Mlazgar for his willingness to take on the risk of printing our work. And our warmest thanks go to our editor at CPRC, Donna Achtzehner, who put in countless hours of skilled labour to transform our original manuscript drafts into book form. She was always cheerful in the face of our delays and demands, and we ever appreciated her patience and understanding. We also owe special thanks to CPRC map-maker Diane Perrick for her many hours of painstaking work on the route maps.

Lastly, we wish to acknowledge the contribution of our respective families. From the very beginning, we have had ongoing encouragement from our parents—Anna, Joe, Violet, and Ivor. We have also had loyal backing from our immediate family members—Giovanna, Julian, Hilary, Haley, and Ragnar. Over the past years, they have encouraged our “canoe book” project even when it has taken time away from them. We are most grateful for that support.

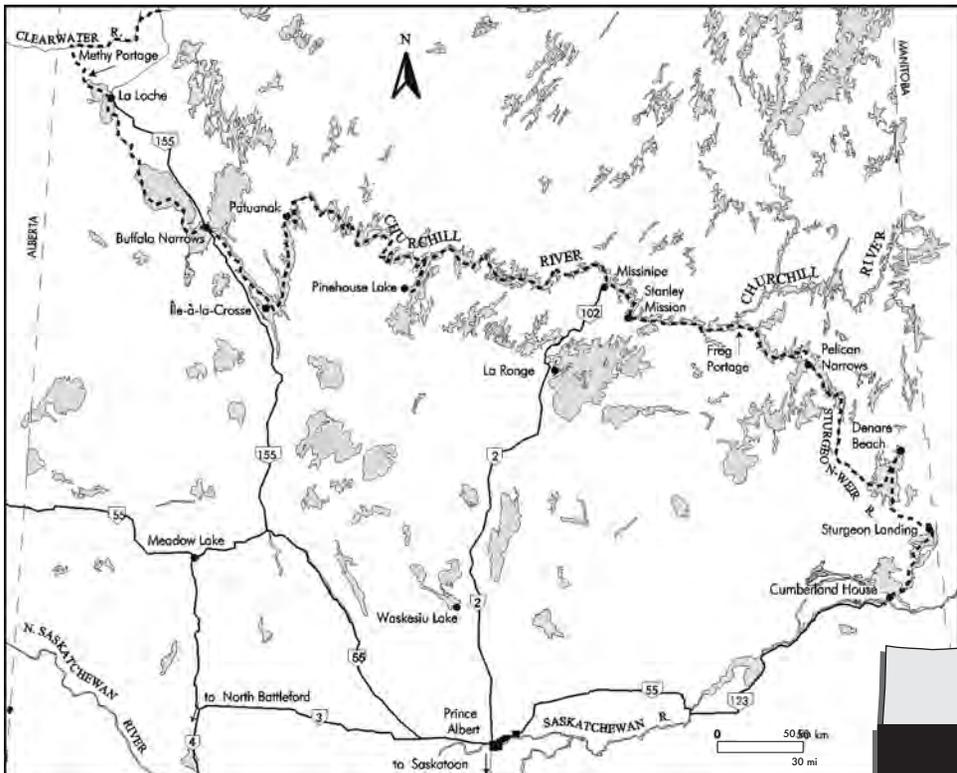
Greg Marchildon, Sid Robinson (2002)

# -1-

## INTRODUCTION

*There is magic in the feel of a paddle and the movement of a canoe, a magic compounded of distance, adventure, solitude and peace. The way of the canoe is the way of wilderness and of a freedom almost forgotten, the open door to waterways of ages past and a way of life with profound and abiding satisfactions.*

Sigurd Olson, *The Lonely Land*<sup>1</sup>



*Saskatchewan's Voyageur Highway: From Methy Portage to Cumberland House*

This book is a paddler's guide to a historic canoe route—a 1,000-kilometre (625-mile) chain of lakes and rivers stretching across northern Saskatchewan from Methy Portage in the west to Cumberland House in the east. The route was once part of the great voyageur highway which, at the height of the fur trade in North America, reached from the Atlantic all the way to the Pacific. As such, it was the very track followed by fur traders and explorers like Alexander Mackenzie, David Thompson, and George Simpson when they first came into Canada's North-West. We intend this guide to help you trace the path of these famous travellers and—just as they did—learn about the route as you proceed.

Our guide is meant for a varied audience. First, we hope it assists the ordinary canoeist who perhaps gets out in a canoe only once a summer. We also hope it is of some value to more experienced trippers, especially group leaders and school chaperons who need to know as much as they can about their route. Finally, we hope it offers something to students of aboriginal and fur trade history who, whether they paddle or not, have an interest in the voyageur highway.

We should be clear as to what this book is not. It is not a guide on how to camp or canoe. On these subjects, there are already many excellent books (some of which we have listed in Appendix A). Nor is this book meant to be a travel narrative. Back in 1986, while doing our initial research for this guide, we did paddle the length of the route in a seventy-day trip. We will sometimes refer to that trip (and to later trips), especially to mention people we have met, but our intended focus is the route itself and not our own paddling experiences.

## THE GUIDE ROUTE

The route begins at the western edge of Saskatchewan on the continental divide separating the Arctic and Hudson Bay drainage basins. It then moves eastward towards Manitoba, following the natural downstream flow of its lakes and rivers. The early fur traders necessarily first paddled the route in an opposite, upstream direction to enter the North-West. However, since most present-day canoeists prefer to travel with the current, the route is best described in a west to east, downstream direction.

At its upstream end, the route begins with an 80-kilometre (50-mile) section of the Clearwater River that provides access to the north end of historic Methy Portage. It then follows the voyageur trail south over the portage (which crosses the Arctic-Hudson Bay divide) to Lac la Loche, one of the headwaters of the Churchill River. From Lac la Loche, it goes down the La Loche River, through Peter Pond Lake, and into Churchill Lake. Now recognized as the Churchill River, it continues on to Lac Île-à-la-Crosse and then follows a chain of east-flowing lakes and rapids to Frog Portage. Here, it leaves the Churchill basin via Frog Portage and heads southeast along waterways making up the Sturgeon-weir River. Finally, it ends where the Sturgeon-weir joins the Saskatchewan River at Cumberland House.

Two main features give the route a wild and rugged wilderness character. First, the route lies entirely within Canada's boreal forest—the "north woods." Secondly, much of it—that between the communities of Patuanak and Denare Beach—lies within the Canadian Shield. Here, where the glaciers of the last ice age scoured away much of the soil, there are bare outcrops of ancient, Precambrian rock. These outcrops produce picturesque shorelines as well as many good campsites.

Alexander Henry was one of the first white traders to reach the upper Churchill River. His description of the region, based on what he first saw in 1776, captures the physical essence of the route even if he exaggerates the ruggedness of the local geography:

As we advanced, we found the river frequently widening into lakes, thirty miles long, and so broad, as well as so crowded with islands, that we were unable to distinguish the main land on either side. Above them, we found a strait, in which the channel was shallow, rocky and broken, with the attendant features of rapids and carrying-places. The country was mountainous, and thinly wooded; and the banks of the river were continued rocks. Higher up, lofty mountains discovered themselves, destitute even of moss; and it was only at intervals, that we saw afar off a few stunted pine-trees.<sup>2</sup>

If you were to paddle the entire route, including the initial Clearwater River portion, your trip would actually be 1,100 kilometres (684 miles) long. Since this may be more paddling than you want, we have divided the route into sections and have given each section its own chapter. With the exception of the initial Clearwater section, each section begins at a northern community accessible by road and ends at a similar community downstream. You can therefore use one or more chapters to fashion a trip that best fits your own circumstances.

The route offers some of the best wilderness paddling to be found anywhere in North America. Its relative isolation translates into a pristine canoeing and camping experience, far removed from the concrete and confusion of urban life. It is a place where natural vegetation still grows and where wildlife still finds the habitat it needs to survive. With the exception of areas immediately downstream of communities, you can still drink straight from the side of your canoe without fear of human pollution.

Unlike so many places in the world, the route is still open to use by all responsible travellers. You are free to paddle your canoe and pitch your tent where you wish without permit, licence, or fee. Such freedom is a rare thing these days, and it goes a long way toward making the route a special place.

### ***Climate and Weather***

The route lies entirely within the subarctic climatic region. This means that the route's waterways are typically sealed shut by ice in winter for as long as they are open in summer. Typically, spring breakup is not over until early May or later. The first fall frosts usually begin in early September. Actual freeze-up of small lakes and quiet bays begins in October and is well advanced everywhere except on large lakes by early November. In short, the regular canoeing season runs from about June 1 to October 1.

Paddling the route, you may encounter some days that are wet, cold, and miserable. But as a rule, you can expect good weather and at least a few days that are gloriously warm and sunny. Though the route is less arid than southern Saskatchewan, its rainfall is actually quite light with an average summer having a total of about 30 centimetres (12 inches).<sup>3</sup> At one point during our 1986 trip, it rained for four days straight, but this is uncommon. Usually, a day or two of cloud and rain will be followed by clear, sunny skies.

The temperature and precipitation statistics in Table 1.1 approximate summer weather conditions on the route.

**Table 1.1 Three-year Average Temperature and Precipitation at Missinipe (1994-96)**

Month	Average High	Average Low	Average Temperature	Precipitation
May	14.5°C (58.1°F)	0.1°C (32.2°F)	7.3°C (45.1°F)	44 mm (1.7 in)
June	23.2°C (73.8°F)	8.1°C (46.6°F)	15.6°C (60.1°F)	63 mm (2.5 in)
July	23.3°C (73.9°F)	10.4°C (50.7°F)	16.8°C (62.2°F)	72 mm (2.8 in)
August	21.1°C (70.0°F)	8.8°C (47.8°F)	14.7°C (58.5°F)	91 mm (3.6 in)
September	16.6°C (61.9°F)	4.7°C (40.5°F)	10.7°C (51.3°F)	48 mm (1.9 in)
October*	6.9°C (44.4°F)	-1.8°C (28.8°F)	2.5°C (36.5°F)	40 mm (1.6 in)

Data collected by Ric Driediger of Horizons Unlimited in Missinipe for Environment Canada.

\*Note: October data is for the years 1993, 1994, and 1995. October data does not include snowfall.

Wind is always of special interest to canoeists since any wind strong enough to create white-caps is apt to keep a canoe on shore. In northern Saskatchewan, the prevailing summer wind is from the west with average wind velocity being between 12 and 14 kilometres per hour (7 and 9 miles per hour)—notably less than in southern parts of the province. In the fall, the wind comes more out of the north and increases in velocity.<sup>4</sup>

Although wind conditions can vary dramatically from day to day, the wind often follows a 24-hour cycle driven by the sun's energy. On clear days, the wind is typically very light at sunrise. The sun then begins to heat up the forest which in turn causes the air above it to warm and rise. As more and more air rises and cooler air comes in to take its place, the wind builds. This wind generally blows strong through the afternoon. Then, as the sun sets, the wind ordinarily diminishes to an evening calm. When the cycle is in effect, you can sometimes escape being windbound by embarking in the evening or early morning. At times, of course, the wind may blow strong both day and night and force you to stay put for a day or so. Here, the value of patience cannot be overstated. The wind *will* eventually drop and let you proceed safely.

The route is all but free from hurricanes and tornadoes. (A freak tornado did touch down on the Churchill in early July 2000.) Occasionally, though, during either day or night, severe thunderstorms and strong winds can hit like a freight train. These are rare, but you will want to keep them in mind. During the day, a weather watch will let you know if it is time to leave the water to seek refuge on land. In the evenings, pitching your tent in a place that is sheltered yet away from ready-to-crash trees will allow you to sleep safely.

### ***Daylight***

Because the route lies between 54° and 57° north latitude, it has long summer days. It is not quite the land of the midnight sun, but it should provide as much daylight as you need through most of the paddling season. At the summer solstice in late June, the Buffalo Narrows area has a sunrise time of 4:26 a.m. and a sunset time of 10:04 p.m.<sup>5</sup> Allowing for pre-dawn light and twilight, you can expect to have usable daylight by 4:00 a.m. and as late as 11:00 p.m. Into the fall, the days shorten rapidly, but even into October, you will have twelve hours of usable light.

### ***Vegetation***

The route lies entirely within Canada's boreal forest belt. Its main trees are aspen poplar (*Populus tremuloides*), black spruce (*Picea mariana*), and jack pine (*Pinus banksiana*). The

aspens—favourite food of the beaver—proliferate along the route, most noticeably in the west before the route enters the Shield. Black spruce dominate low-lying areas, where they form a dense “rabbit bush,” but they also grow extensively on the Shield’s rock outcrops. Jack pines form thick stands on sandy soil and also survive well on Shield rock. Less common species include balsam poplar, white spruce, balsam fir, white birch, and tamarack. In the Cumberland House area, you will also find cottonwood, Manitoba maple, American elm, and green ash. Sometimes, an area will have only one tree species, but often several species grow together to form a mixed wood. For example, a hillside might have 60 percent aspen and balsam poplar, 30 percent black and white spruce, and 10 percent randomly spaced birch and jack pine.

The route’s forest ordinarily has an understory of shrubs. Near the water and in wet spots, you will find river alder, dwarf birch, red-osier dogwood (oddly, related to the little bunchberry), willows (whose species are hard to sort out), and sweet gale. Away from the water, at least in aspens and mixed woods, the green alder creates tangled thickets and encroaches on many portage trails. The alder offers no fruit, but several other shrubs sharing its territory have edible berries—saskatoons, gooseberries, raspberries, pincherries, and low bush-cranberries. In very dry situations, where little else will grow, creeping juniper (its small blue berries are actually cones) sometimes finds enough moisture to form thick green mats.

Below the shrubs, the forest floor is green with enough small plants to keep any amateur botanist busy. In low areas, shrub-like Labrador tea (whose leaves make a mild tea) are everywhere. Blueberry (producing fine fruit) can be found on several different terrains. Other species easy to identify include fireweed (common in burnt areas), twinflower, bearberry, bog and dry ground cranberry, bunchberry, cloudberry, dewberry, strawberry, coltsfoot, and sarsaparilla. Immediately at ground level, there are also mosses and lichens (the pale green reindeer moss found on dry ground is really a lichen).

Not all the route’s vegetation is on dry land. Many plants grow in or right next to the water. With the aid of a plant guide, you can learn to identify much of what you see from your canoe. Plants common to the route’s shallow water and shore margins include cattail, horsetail, great bulrush,

giant bur-reed, water smartweed, yellow pond lily, sedges, and wild mint.



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*Horsetails in water.  
Photo taken June 28,  
1986, downstream  
from the old Knee Lake  
settlement site.*

## Animals

The mammals you are most likely to see while canoeing and camping along the route are beaver, muskrat, otter, woodchuck, snowshoe hare, and red squirrel. (You can also count on being startled by beaver tails slapping the water on quiet nights.) Other fur bearers—lynx, coyote, fox, mink, ermine, fisher, marten, and wolverine—are secretive and rarely seen. The larger mammals—moose, woodland caribou, white-tailed deer, and black bear—also tend to stay hidden from view, but you may chance upon them around river bends and on portages. As for the legendary timber wolf, while you are not apt to see one, you might hear its stirring howl at nightfall.

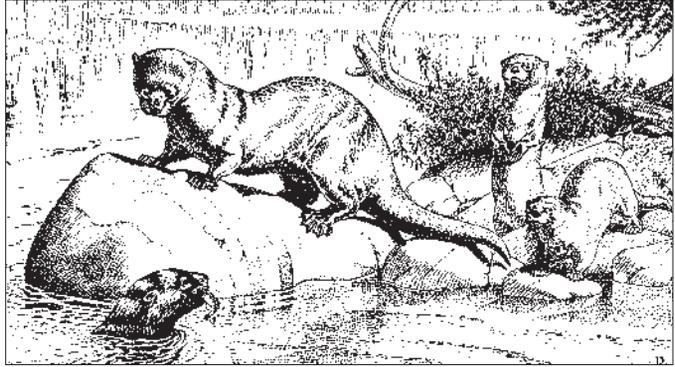
Over the centuries, these animals have all been hunted and trapped by people living on the route. However, with their habitat largely intact, most populations are at safe levels. Only two mammals living along the route—the wolverine and the woodland caribou—are considered vulnerable. These species require large tracts of wilderness to survive and are intolerant of habitat change caused by human intervention. In 1998, both species were listed as being at risk by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada.<sup>6</sup>

The route is rather short on amphibians and reptiles. The only amphibians resident on the route are the boreal chorus frog, the northern leopard frog, the wood frog, and the Canadian toad. The sole reptile is the red-sided garter snake which, happily, is harmless to humans.<sup>7</sup>

## Birds

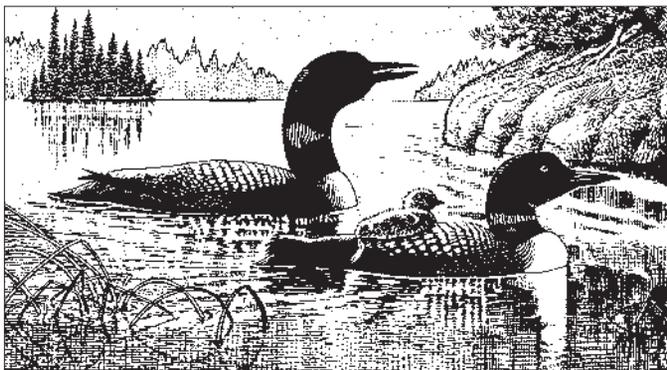
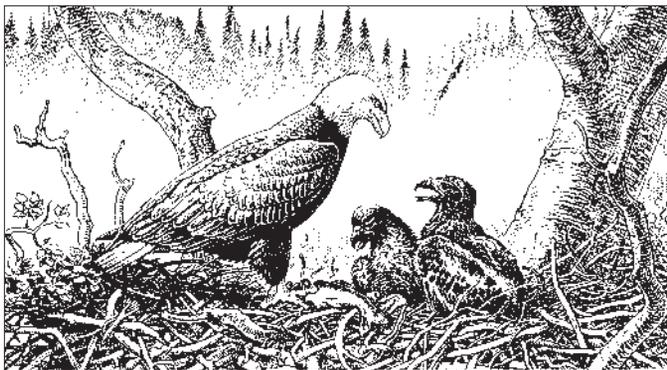
The route's birds are much more visible than its animals. Even if you are not a birdwatcher, you will easily identify several species. Most notable of these are the bald eagle, common loon, white pelican, raven, and grey jay (this dapper-looking bird is also known as the "Canada jay," "whiskey jack," and "camp robber").

The bald eagle is of special interest to many canoeists. The route—particularly its Shield section—has some of the best bald eagle breeding habitat in North America. A 1996 study showed



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*Otters (above) and woodland caribou (below).*



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*Bald eagle with eaglets on nest (above) and loons (below).*

that between Otter Rapids and Trade Lake the route had a total of fifty-six nests with twenty-nine of these active (a breeding pair may change nests from year to year).<sup>8</sup> Bald eagles, both male and female, develop their white head and tail plumage by four or five years of age and apparently begin breeding about two years later.<sup>9</sup> On the route, when you see a white-headed eagle, you can keep an eye out for a nest—typically a huge platform of sticks built well above the ground in a large aspen. If the nest is active, you may see young eaglets (usually two) poking their heads up over the edge of the nest as they wait for their parents to bring more fish dinner.

Most canoeists will instantly recognize the common loon by its wild, haunting call. Loon pairs use the entire

guide route as a summer home and breeding ground, hatching two chicks on a low mound of mud and plant material built alongshore. Fish-eating birds, loons are superb underwater swimmers. When one vanishes near your canoe, it is a challenge guessing how far away it will resurface.

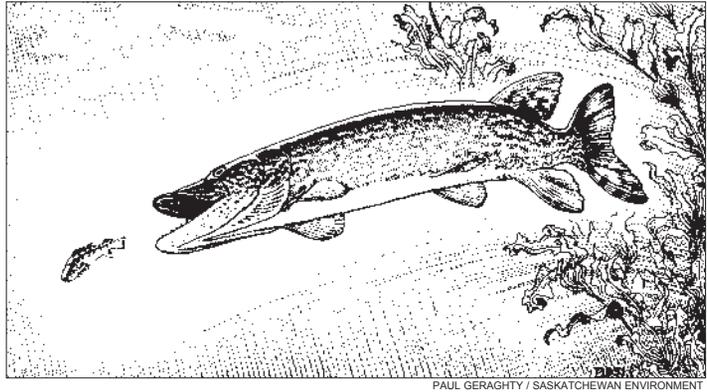
Other individual bird species to watch for include the double-crested cormorant (often called the “crow duck”), belted kingfisher, common nighthawk, sandhill crane, and golden eagle (confusingly similar to an immature bald eagle). You are also likely to see various species of gulls, terns, ducks, geese, grebes, blackbirds, hawks, owls, woodpeckers, chickadees, grouse, and assorted shore birds. You will definitely hear many of the small songbirds who nest in the route’s marshes and shore thickets, but hidden as they are, you will not easily catch more than a fleeting glimpse of them.

### ***Fish and Fishing***

Northern pike (*Esox lucius*), commonly known as “jack” or “jackfish,” and walleye (*Stizostedion vitreum*), often referred to as “pickerel,” are the main game fish you will encounter. Both are excellent eating fish. It is generally quite easy to catch walleye and a related species called sauger by casting a jig into the foot of rapids along the route. Pike can be caught almost anywhere, especially along the edges of shallow, reedy areas. They are voracious feeders and will

strike just about any type of lure.

Other fish include the pretty Arctic grayling (found only on the Clearwater River section of the route) which can be caught on a wet or dry fly. The rather ugly burbot (also known as maria or ling cod) also counts as a game fish, but it is not often caught by summer anglers. Yellow perch are numerous, but they are very small along



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*Northern pike.*

the route and seldom fished for. Although lake trout are found in the deeper lakes adjacent to the guide route, they usually only occur on the route as accidental migrants. As for whitefish, while they are a mainstay of the route's commercial fishery, they only rarely take an angler's hook. Goldeye are said to occur in the Pelican Narrows area and at Cumberland Lake. Lake sturgeon, once common from the Sturgeon-weir River to Cumberland Lake, are now very rare, and sport fishing for this prehistoric-looking monster is currently banned.

If you plan to fish along the route, you must purchase a provincial fishing licence, available at local Saskatchewan Environment offices (see Appendix B) and at many gas stations and retail stores in northern Saskatchewan. When you purchase your licence, you can ask for a copy of Saskatchewan's anglers' guide which sets out the daily limits and regulations for the current fishing season.

## TRIP PLANNING

This guide is not a "how to plan your trip" book. We assume that you or your partner(s) already have experience in planning a canoe expedition. If you do not, we recommend that you read one or more of the good canoe tripping books on the market. In what follows below, we restrict our planning advice to a few topics pertinent to the route.

### *Skill Levels*

Whatever your canoeing experience, it is fair to ask, "What skills do I need for this route?" The answer to this question depends on what section or sections of the route you wish to paddle. As a general comment, we can say that the route is well-suited to the ordinary canoeist. It is definitely challenging, but it does not have to be a white-knuckle adventure.

Since not all sections of the route are the same, this guide suggests the skill level required for each particular section—whether modest, advanced, or expert. These levels take into account factors such as the nature of any rapids and portages, available wind protection, and the section's remoteness. While the levels have no official status, we give them the following common sense definitions:

- Modest:** Good basic skills beyond the novice level, i.e., an ability to paddle flatwater in a straight line in fair weather and run Class 1 rapids.
- Advanced:** An ability to paddle flatwater in some wind, run Class 2 rapids, and negotiate moderate rapids by wading, lining, or tracking.
- Expert:** An ability to paddle flatwater in winds producing whitecaps, run Class 3 rapids, and negotiate difficult rapids by wading, lining, tracking, or poling.

The suggested skill level for a particular trip should be taken only as an approximate measure of what a trip may demand. Factors such as water levels, the time of year, and weather conditions can have a dramatic effect on a trip’s level of difficulty. It should also be noted that a particular trip is often more difficult in an upstream direction. While upstream travel avoids the risks associated with running rapids, going up strong currents often calls for special skills and extra endurance. The skill levels required for the route sections are summarized in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2 Trip Planning Information**

Chapter	Route Section	Skills Required for Downstream Travel	Skills Required for Upstream Travel	Distance km (mi)	Days Paddling	Portages
3	Clearwater River to La Loche	Advanced	Expert*	119 (74)	5-7	7-8
4	La Loche to Buffalo Narrows	Advanced	Advanced	127 (79)	5-8	0
5	Buffalo Narrows to Île-à-la-Crosse	Modest	Modest	64 (40)	2	0
6	Île-à-la-Crosse to Patuanak	Modest	Modest	63 (39)	2-3	1
7	Patuanak to Pinehouse	Advanced	Expert*	175 (109)	6-9	3-8
8	Pinehouse to Otter Rapids	Modest	Advanced	170 (106)	6-8	9-15
9	Otter Rapids to Stanley Mission	Modest	Modest	34 (21)	2	2
10	Stanley Mission to Pelican Narrows	Advanced	Advanced	125 (78)	5-6	9-11
11	Pelican Narrows to Denare Beach	Advanced	Advanced	127 (79)	5-7	5-8
12	Denare Beach to Sturgeon Landing	Advanced	Expert*	65 (40)	3-4	0-1
13	Sturgeon Landing to Cumberland House	Modest	Modest	52 (32)	2-3	0
Total				1,100 (684)	43-59	36-54

\*Not recommended for ordinary canoeists.

### ***Choosing your Party***

We suggest that in choosing your party for a trip on the route you pay some heed to the above-recommended skill levels. Although this guide was prepared with the ordinary canoeist in mind, the term “ordinary” should not be equated with “inexperienced.” We recommend against a group of novice canoeists attempting the route on their own. Novices can paddle and enjoy the route, but they should do so with a veteran partner who can compensate for their own inexperience. Even the most naturally able beginner can benefit from the company of an experienced mentor.

In planning a group trip, you should also take into consideration factors beyond the paddling and camping skills of your group. Are you extroverts or introverts? Are you all in good physical condition? How do you each handle psychological adversity or physical hardship? Being alone with people for days or weeks on end in the wilderness can be a trying experience (more trying than the wilderness itself), and you should do what you can to bring together people who can get along under difficult circumstances. You should also know in advance what each person's objectives for the trip are. Is it to paddle through every available hour of daylight? To run as many dangerous whitewater rapids as possible? To go fishing? To enjoy the quiet splendour of nature? To escape from family or work? To catch up on sleep? To talk and carouse with old friends? The answer to such questions will help determine the compatibility of your group.

What is the right size of group? You should try to keep to eight or fewer paddlers. Big groups make it hard to find campsites of sufficient size. They are also harder to organize in camp and on the water. And, the more people, the less likely that you will get to enjoy the solitude of your surroundings or to see wildlife. Of course, if you are leading a school or youth group, your party may be quite large indeed. If so, you will need to plan around your numbers, paying special attention to campsite selection.

To completely avoid group dynamics, you might decide to go solo. Keep in mind, however, that going it alone on the sparsely populated route means there may not be anyone around to help you in the event of difficulty or injury. That said, there is no law prohibiting solo paddling. Moreover, being alone in the wilderness can be a profound experience. How, then, can you reduce the risks of a solo trip on the voyageur highway? First, make sure that you have advanced canoe tripping skills. Second, make sure that you are not only in good physical condition but also psychologically prepared for being alone. Third, avoid long lake traverses and run only Class 1 and Class 2 rapids. Fourth, be extra careful around camp. Finally, have a friend back home who knows your trip route, schedule, and emergency rescue plan.

If you cannot find a suitable party to paddle with and you are not quite ready to go solo, you may wish to look to a professional canoeing outfitter for help. An outfitter can arrange for some preliminary training, the right equipment, and an experienced guide. You may wish to request a trip of your own design or else join an expedition already planned by the outfitter. Either way, an outfitted trip is an excellent option in many situations. Contact names for canoe outfitters serving the route can be found in Appendix B.

### ***Trip Length***

We have divided the route into sections or "trips" of varying lengths. Table 1.2 above sets out the required skill level, distance, estimated paddling time, and the number of portages for each. The estimated times in the table assume an average travelling speed of 25 kilometres (16 miles) per day, but they also allow for the risk of being windbound on big lakes and/or the extra time needed for bad rapids and tough portages. You can use Table 1.2, and the more detailed information contained in the route chapters, to tailor a trip that matches your particular situation.

### ***When to Go***

As already mentioned, the route's paddling season runs from about June 1 to October 1. You may plan your trip for any time within this window. However, if your trip includes the Clearwater River, the La Loche River, or the southern part of the Sturgeon-weir River, you should be aware