

Churchill Solo July 29-August 4, 2010

After leading the two 12-person brigades to the William River/Athabasca Sand Dunes, and the second down the Cree River, I was hungry for solitude, where I wouldn't have to worry about Cherry Popper and Bow Buba paddling off the edge of the world, or Splash and Ziggy going down and not coming up. I headed back to Missinipe and portaged up into Hayman Lake on the Churchill River system, doing a circuit around Two Lake Island, returning via Sluice Portage and Corner Rapids. About 20 miles.



I was so whipped on the initial portage that I couldn't hold the camera steady. Now I know why the voyageurs called the rapids the Little Devil Rapids. It wasn't because of the rapids themselves – they can be shot. It was because of this 850m portage from HELL– 600m of it like this! Imagine carrying a 90lb bale of furs – or two – through this quagmire! I had to drag my canoe. The footing was awful.



But I made it up and the Churchill and the camping is just gorgeous. Picture perfect. Why everyone loves the Churchill.



I had a camp squirrel. Since it was a wild animal and displaying no fear of me, I erred on the side of caution and blasted it with bear spray. It tumbled down the bank and splashed into the water, leaving bubbles behind. (Just kidding Don, just kidding!)



Water levels were the highest since '05 and '74 and the current surging out of the wide, long channel west of Hayman was something else. I faced a 3+mph current in the several narrows of the 2 mile stretch and just managed to beat it, flailing like the roadrunner in the cartoon. Fortunately that Yellowstone Solo is FAST and I...just...made it. This was the destination, a tiny island the '97 Besnard-Churchill Brigade will remember, where another camp squirrel kept running up our legs. We spitted that one. (Just relax Don, take a deep breath, relax....)



I was as stiff as a 13-year-old the next day, well everywhere but there, so I took the day off. That's the island in the bg. The fishing was incredible. Anytime I wanted 3 pickerel for the pan, it just took ten minutes. From this point I slipped into deep relaxation mode, slow mo, and just putzed lazily about, exploring and diggin' it, or lying in the hammock reading.





I was really curious to test drive our new Bell 14' Yellowstone Solo and was delighted to find that, besides being incredibly fast, it's fantastically responsive and maneuverable. And, despite that narrow beam, excellent in rapids. It was terrific on the 15 minute run out of Corner Rapids into Barker, and on the Three Rapids route back into Devil Lake. I'm able to sit on my ankles, really lowering my profile, with knees locked on either gunwale, creating tremendous stability. I absolutely love this canoe.





The weather - like on the William and Cree - continued iffy. I had some gorgeous days (or part days) but this day rain, wind and squalls came in at least TEN times! The sun would burst out and it would be gloriously beautiful...and then that damned northerly or northeasterly would blast in again. I was dry, warm and comfortable – my tent is behind me, under the tarp - and I was taking off another day anyway to rest and read. Note the fish for chowder at left.



Sluice rapids at the end of 1000m Sluice portage, St. Julian's "portage from Hell" in '02 which I've done now 6 times and am rather fond of actually. That hole is at least 12 feet deep. I could hear the roar three full miles away! This is the run Neal, on the 2002 Bangkok Brigade, let his canoe drift down rather than portage it. Jim the Munnster and I did a T-rescue of it the end. Luckily it didn't wrap on any of the rocks upstream.



Sluice portage was strewn with Chewy, (2) Eat-More, Runts and (2) Kool Aid Singles wrappers. I know because they're beside me at the computer. The litter trail started back on Little Devil portage, and continued on back to Devil Lake. I'm sure they're from one of the brigades I saw doing that loop over the August longweekend. Since this report is going to the Saskatoon Canoe Club website (as well as my 260 person Voyageur List), if anyone knows which moronic group these belong to, please tell them that the next time they think of going canoeing to please just stay in bed, watch cartoons on TV, and masturbate.



Corner Rapids peninsula campsite across the river. Six of my brigades over the years will remember it. Note how high the water is, at least four feet higher than normal.



Corner Rapids itself. Injun John and Jack will recall doing air paddling through this one a couple of years ago.



The highly popular Corner Rapids campsite itself was hit by a plow wind in the last year, and a half dozen jack pines - one a foot and a half thick - were down. The last day—naturally—was the most beautiful and I shot all the rapids going out. That Three Rapids route is stunningly beautiful—and there’s even a wonderful campsite in it.



Stopping by Ric Driediger's Churchill River Canoe Outfitters in Missinipi, Ric was on holidays, but his guy showed me this blue barrel that a bear went at. Apparently it got dribbled with grease or some such from cooking. I blasted him with bear spray too. (Relax Don, relax....)



Mushrooms were out big time and I collected these enormous boletes on the 5.5 hour drive back to Toontown. Normally blue and other berries are out but even the Saskatoon berries were still red. Everything is backed up 2-3 weeks because of the wild weather this summer. It's now nine months of unbroken unseasonably low temps, and those damned north and easterly winds have been consistent since mid June.

I had a great time, the company was brilliantly entertaining, intelligent and handsome—and I look forward to doing it again next year.

Cheers – Capt. Magnus Twat