

Opasquia Provincial Park... Off the Beaten Path

Jim Carrier

Robert Frost concludes his famous poem, The Road Not Taken, as follows:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Similar sentiment prompted Dr. Wayne Spence, Lawrence Donley and I to scour maps of Ontario's vast and virtually untouched far northwest for paddling adventure... something off the beaten path. Our attention settled upon an unfamiliar splotch of green, labeled "Opasquia", adjacent to the Manitoba border. The name itself was so unfamiliar we were unsure how to pronounce it.

Opasquia Provincial Park (pronounced, as we learned, "O*pas*q*way) is remote. Drive as far north as you can. Board a Cessna Caravan and cruise above endless forest, spruce bogs, and lakes to the Sandy Lake Airport landing strip. Cram in gear and food for two weeks (100 lbs/person limit) into a much smaller Cessna 206, floating on the sand-colored water that gives the big lake its name. You pray it achieves lift-off and hold on tight. You're headed for Big Hook Wilderness Camps on Central Lake... your starting point.

At nearly 1.5 million acres of virtually unspoiled wilderness, Opasquia is similar, size-wise, to the BWCA, Quetico, Wabakimi, and Woodland Caribou. It differs from the others in that it is an "unimproved park" and "fly-in only." Portages, where they do exist, are not maintained by park crews. Campsites are mostly what can be scratched out of the wilderness. Administered by Woodland Caribou Provincial Park officials over two hundred miles away in Red Lake, the park is rarely visited... even by them! We knew of only two other canoeists and one park official who had ever paddled there. One of those two canoeists was Martin Kehoe, who made an excellent YouTube video of his adventure there the previous year (see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNPWk_5uaEw).

Canoe traffic in this vast park is limited to the three vessels owned by Steve, Evie, and Nathan Hartle, our hosts at Big Hook Wilderness Camps. We found transporting our own canoes to be cost-prohibitive. Canoe rentals represent a minor sideline business for the Hartles, who operate six cabins in this vast, trackless western boreal forest. Steve Hartle expressed his desire to remain very respectful of the interests of First Nation people in nearby Manitoba. He told me they have been good neighbors for many years. He is disinclined to start sending "fleets of paddlers" into waters on the western edge of the park where they occasionally fish, although "two or three canoes at a time was just fine."

Steve would appear to have very little to worry about on that score. Aside from us, we know of only one other paddler who visited the park all season long!

Our \$50/day canoe rental also included fuel for our camp stoves (you are not allowed to fly it in) and a tent (we elected to use our own). When you consider flights there and back to Red Lake were only \$500/fare, "expense" would not seem to be the big factor keeping park usage so low. Rather, until portages are serviced and campsites established, paddling in Opasquia Park will likely remain an adventure for only the very ambitious!

In addition to earning "bragging rights" amongst the membership of our paddling community at the

QuietJourney.com website, Wayne, Lawrence and I hoped to contribute findings concerning canoe routes, camps, portages, and fishing holes to the scant body of knowledge available for this park.

Oh, fishing this alleged walleye paradise figured into our game plan, too!

We were a well-seasoned crew. About to turn age 60, I was the spry youngster and the only non-retired member in our party. Though this adventure figured to involve hard work, we were determined to prove ourselves worthy.

Upon arriving we unloaded the Cessna, signed a few papers, and hustled over to examine canoes that had just been hauled out of winter storage. Sadly, the lighter, smaller fifteen-foot Dagger canoe, preferred by our solo paddler Lawrence, had developed a crack during their bitter cold winter. It proved unseaworthy. We tested their remaining two vessels - identical seventeen-foot Novacraft Prospectors - found them satisfactory, and loaded up.

By mid-morning we were waving goodbye to our host, Evie Hartle... the last human we would see for two weeks.

We would paddle nearly forty miles west/northwest on long, narrow lakes, very close to the border with Manitoba (see map on page ____). There, we hoped to establish a "big circle route" through the park by locating a portage allegedly used by First Nation parties between Joint and Mossberry lakes. If it existed, we could avoid redundant travel on our return leg. If not, well, we would just have to cross that portage when the time came... or not.

Mother Nature greeted us with sunny blue skies and a rising east wind that mid-June morning as we stroked north along Central Lake's eastern shoreline. Morning sweat trickled down my back and felt pleasantly cool in the refreshing breeze. Despite our 3:30am wake-up call and the early morning flights, there was a definite pep in our paddling! Wayne and I had been concerned about Lawrence handling the larger, heavier Prospector as a solo paddler, but he was doing just fine. At age 67, Lawrence is a savvy voyageur who improvises and adjusts to whatever the wilderness throws at him.

We planned only two or three portages and maybe ten miles worth of work this first day. As we eyeballed mile after mile of jack pine, black spruce and thick brush spread along the water's edge, it became apparent we needed to conserve energy for "creating a campsite." It promised to be no easy task!

After an hour or so we veered west off of the main body of Central Lake, putting the stiffening breeze at our backs. We blew through a narrow spruce-rimmed channel and exited into a large wind-whipped bay. A small squadron of ducks zipped downwind, racing with legions of puffy white clouds sailing past overhead.

When I considered how these clouds had likely originate in Hudson Bay about the time we got out of bed in Red Lake, a very real sense of our true "remoteness" began to envelop me. This park was truly "out there." The mental baggage, work stress and worries I brought in with me began to dissipate in the exhilaration of that moment. They had no relevance here. Wilderness was already claiming me and offering a benediction that boded well for the adventure ahead!

According to the map, much of our route to Joint Lake would occur on what is referred to as "East Lake." This is a bit misleading. East Lake is actually comprised of several bodies of water separated by numerous unimproved portages. "Unimproved" we soon learned is euphemistic park service nomenclature for: "nasty." The sheer number of deadfalls lying across trails - mostly waist-high, of

course – suggests that visits from First Nation neighbors in Manitoba – or from anybody else, for that matter - are indeed rare events.

We crossed the windy bay and found shelter in a narrow channel where the first of three such unimproved portages awaited us. Nearly 60 rods in length, the buggy path paralleled the rapids. Thankfully, it was only moderately obstructed by deadfalls. An eagle patrolled overhead, curious about the unusual “human” activity below. It’s likely he heard us moaning about full food packs or the 80 pound behemoth canoes on our shoulders. Before this trip was over we would sorely miss our 40 pound Kevlar vessels back home!

The narrow channel wound its way west/northwest. We scooted through a swift-moving chute en route to our second portage, a 68 rod affair on river-right. At every turn we stirred up small flocks of ducks. The park has a plentiful population, far more than I’ve seen elsewhere; eagles, too. On the other hand, geese and loons were fewer than we typically observe further south.

We rested and munched jerky and string potatoes at the back end of the second portage under one of the largest, thickest poplars I have ever seen. [On our return leg, we would find this massive tree lying on its side, blocking the portage, victimized by one of the ferocious wind storms we would encounter.]

Though we were sorely tempted to test the walleye appetites in the swift current beside us, we knew we should keep moving... and we did. Progress would now slow considerably as all shorelines needed to be examined carefully for viable campsites.

A third, shorter portage by-passed a set of Class 2 rapids. Beyond it, the channel gradually widened, featuring a few swampy, buggy-looking islands... poor prospects for camp. As we approached the main body of East Lake, a strange apparition appeared on the horizon, hovering above the water. Closer inspection revealed it to be a rusted-out old snowmobile wrapped in tattered plastic. This broken-down token from the mechanized world somehow felt intrusive, perched as it was on a rock in the middle of this pristine lake. However, I soon got over my indignation, remembering that Reality sometimes dictates that wilderness be shared to serve many purposes.

Our early start, full packs, heavy canoes and deadfall-laden portages were taking their toll. We were fatigued. Though we looked everywhere, the only potential campsite was under that big old poplar, miles back, where we took lunch.

Wayne, our main researcher and cartographer, indicated a possible campsite might lie on the west shore ahead. Sadly, we saw little but scorched hills layered with burnt toppled timber ahead. “Fire events” are very much a part of the natural ecosystem here in northern Ontario. Opasquia proved to be no exception.

We opted to paddle on and discovered the prospective campsite had indeed been consumed by fire. Charred timber lay strewn willy-nilly everywhere, like so many matchsticks dumped from a box. Exhausted, we looked around us and shook our heads. Someone said, “Aw, the heck with it! At least it’s mostly flat!” With that pronouncement, we began tossing blackened logs out of the way. We pitched camp on the ugliest, roughest site I’ve ever settled for.

Just when it seemed our miseries couldn’t worsen, they did. It rained, smearing blackened soot over everybody and everything. Despite adversity, our master chef, Wayne, persevered and fixed a gourmet meal of salad, steak and potatoes. Three very tired, hungry, human beings wearing charcoal face paint ate and slept well that night!

The next morning my garment of choice was The Original Bug Shirt. Though the folks at Big Hook had warned us of their worst mosquito season ever, my mind was not prepared for an experience worse than anything I had ever seen. By the end of our trip, Lawrence was able to fill a cereal bowl with the dried dead carcasses of mosquitoes emptied from inside his hammock tent!

Wayne fixed eggs, bacon and coffee in the morning drizzle. We slapped parasites and contemplated the trip's biggest issue: locating worthy places to camp. The decision to move out of this charred, bug-infested hell was unanimous!

Paddling slowly west under sunny skies, we left the burn area behind. We deliberately checked every point, island and inlet for possible campsites in this vicinity of East Lake for use on our return leg. Prospects appeared poor. When we spotted a promising promontory on the north shore, we investigated. It flattened at its crest but a lot of downed timber needed to be removed to make it habitable when the time came.

We decided that time was now.

Though it was still morning, the allure of fishing, an early lunch, and a strong desire to wash off the charcoal decided the matter. We gobbled beef jerky and potato sticks for lunch, relaxed, and enjoyed a gentle breeze on a beautiful sunny afternoon. We were on vacation, comfortable, and had no real need to push on. In two hours the site was cleared of debris and our assorted shelters were pitched.

The moment had finally arrived for cleansing soot-covered bodies and clothing!

Later, just as the urge to grab our fishing rods became overwhelming, the sky clouded up and ominous peels of thunder began to rumble. We retreated to our shelters. The storms persisted. We cast lures from shore whenever the lightning subsided, catching and releasing a few pike and walleyes. However, we enjoyed Wayne's canoe country pizza that evening and lightened our food pack. The storms waned in the late evening and the southerly breezes became quite tame. We hoped for a full day of angling during tomorrow's layover.

Unfortunately, "tomorrow" showed up with a bad attitude!

At precisely midnight, a sudden monster blast of cold air out of the northeast rocked our world. My lean-to shelter, now facing windward, instantly billowed out like a sail, straining fabric and lashings. A second gust ripped paracord from logs and rocks. My protective lean-to went airborne! My little one-man screen tent (minus rain fly), now completely exposed to the elements, seemed unlikely to blow away... as long as I remained in it to anchor it down.

Whether it was my cussing or the racket from the mighty wind that woke the guys, I don't know. Two headlamps soon appeared beside me. Together we managed to yank my lean-to shelter from high tree branches which had prevented it from sailing to Manitoba. We draped it directly atop my little screen tent, anchored it with some heavy rocks and called it a night.

Morning arrived overcast with wind gusts and temperature both in the low 40's. Drizzle and wind-whipped spray from the lake felt awfully raw, so fleece-under-raincoats was the uniform of the day. After moving my entire set-up further into the woods we decided it was a great morning for a nap!

That afternoon, we awoke to sparkling rays of sunshine filtering through the tattered clouds jetting by in streams overhead. Encouraged, we grabbed our rods, jumped into our canoes, and braved the

afternoon breezes in the safety of our protected inlet. Walleyes were everywhere! Chef Wayne prepared sizzling filets in blackened redfish seasoning that chilly evening.

What a difference a day makes... especially up north! Despite the morning chill, our spirits were buoyed by the promise of sunshine. We enjoyed a quick breakfast of cereal and coffee while pouring over maps. The 7-8 mile trek today included only a single one-hundred rod portage.

Proceeding southwest down a narrowing East Lake, we scanned both shorelines for signs of wildlife. Wayne had spotted a fisher the day before. No such luck today; just long stretches of barren rocky hills with occasional stands of fire-scarred pine and toppled blackened birch. Wispy ribbons of Cirrus cloud streaked an otherwise powder-blue sky providing stark contrast to the desolation below.

We exited the fire zone as we approached the portage out of East Lake and back into – you guessed it - East Lake. Finding it was no easy matter. We “brush-crashed” the general vicinity of the alleged portage and, eventually, stumbled onto it. It was flat but there were numerous deadfalls to negotiate.

Hip-high downed timber really takes the steam out of you; you can't easily get under or over it. Ultimately, we were rewarded for our labors by a beautiful cascade spilling into the lake just beyond the portage. We considered how few human eyes had ever enjoyed this spectacle and took delight in our good fortune.

Wayne's intelligence regarding the next camp, our third, turned out to be spot-on. As we were eager for quality fishing time, we pitched our shelters quickly. This time, I put my set-up way back in the woods atop a thick bed of caribou moss. After a lunch of hummus and crackers, Lawrence and I each grabbed a canoe and went fishing while Wayne napped. Walleye fishing was fabulous and, inside of five minutes, we caught more than we could possibly have eaten. However, that night we would enjoy Wayne's beef and bean burritos with cheese.

Supper was followed, hours later, by an impromptu pyrotechnics show, courtesy of the Aurora Borealis.

The next morning, Wayne and I decided to explore a narrow channel south of camp. It led to a spectacular double-set of waterfalls. Wayne had a photographer's heyday! Lawrence's adventures took him over a series of beaver dams through a narrow channel to the north. We experienced fantastic fishing all around this area. During the warm afternoon we cleaned fish, bathed, and wrote in our journals. Lawrence, our resident engineer, assisted Wayne in devising a solution for a problem with his bow seat which tilted too far backward, rendering his paddle strokes less effective.

For me, it doesn't get any better than traveling with woodsmen like these two guys. One is a great cook, the other can fix anything, and both are entertaining... a great formula for a successful trip. We feasted on walleye filets that evening!

After a quick breakfast of oatmeal and coffee, we managed a 7:00am start on our planned eighteen-mile journey to Joint Lake, the far western end of our journey. A narrow spot we had hoped to shoot, line, or wade proved too risky, necessitating an unplanned 25 rod “bushwhack.” Opasquia portages are little better than bushwhacks, themselves. High-stepping the downed timber on four such marches made for a tiring day by the time we reached Joint Lake.

Once again Mother Nature provided ample reward for our labor. Two gushing waterfalls separated by a small island appeared in the channel to the south side where the waters from Cocos Lake spilled

in. Just across from these falls, to our north, we spotted a huge eagle's nest. Its inhabitants flitted nervously about. Perhaps they were guarding young from the intruders... us. They certainly had a wonderful vantage point for spotting fish in the shallows below those beautiful waterfalls.

We discovered Joint Lake to be in an early stage of fire recovery. It featured mostly scrubby brush and a few spotty tracks of green standing timber. We were dead tired and eager to get off the water, out of the rising wind. We set up camp on a fine flat rock shelf on the lee side of a small island in the north half of the lake. Stiff breezes kept bug issues to a minimum as we enjoyed Wayne's Navy Bean Soup. That night, we slept on a thick mattress of caribou moss as Mother Nature's lullaby of whistling wind and lapping waves ensured we slept soundly.

The next morning we woke up with different agendas. Wayne and Lawrence wanted to explore. Specifically, they sought the alleged portage to Mossberry Lake that would cinch down the circle route we hoped to use on the return leg of our adventure. Me? I wanted to fish. So, Wayne hopped into Lawrence's canoe and off they paddled into the rising sun towards Mossberry Lake.

My tally was approximately one hundred pesky hammer handles and only seven walleyes when the boys returned around Noon. They returned with a bang... literally. Did I mention these guys have an evil streak? I was happily lost in blissful meditation and piscatorial pleasure, when they stealthily glided in and tossed a firecracker into my canoe. This effectively ended my silent reveries... and very nearly ruined a decent pair of pants.

I begrudgingly cleaned the walleyes those guys would eat for supper that night!

Wayne and Lawrence reported they had, indeed, located the portage to Mossberry Lake... well, the first half of it, anyway. They followed a trail for about a half-mile, finding the remnants of old boats and the logs they had been rolled on along the way. Then, the bug-infested path morphed into a swamp. It may or may not have resumed on the other side. They never found out. It was decided our heavy canoes and gear would simply be too much to haul across such formidable terrain.

The next morning I awoke to the strangest bird song I've ever heard before. "Song" may be a bit of a misnomer as it was more of an electronic clucking or honking sound. I'll likely invest a couple hours this winter listening to recorded bird songs to identify what it was. For now, it remains a mystery.

We downed another "travel day" meal of oatmeal and coffee under a breezy overcast sky. We elected to head south to Cocos Lake and spend a couple days there before venturing east on a more southerly route back to East Lake and, eventually, Central Lake.

We backtracked to the big eagle's nest and turned south towards Cocos Lake. The double waterfalls were still heavy with spring flood. There was no portage evident so we carefully approached swirling currents, climbed the island rock shelf hand-over-hand, and then bushwhacked across. Launching our canoes on the far side without being drawn into the current and plunging down the waterfalls – backwards - was our next challenge. We waded out, towing our vessels as far as possible, hopped in, paddled like hell, and gained a safe distance from those tricky waterfalls.

Each day in Opasquia, save one, the wind distinctly came out of the east... sometimes violently so. Today, just when we had to cross a large expanse of Cocos heading due south, we were greeted by a headwind! Wayne and I secured our hats and took it straight on, powering across. Lawrence, however, paddling solo, was challenged to use all of his considerable skills to achieve a safe

passage. At the southern end we turned east into a narrows and were further tasked with paddling upstream against stiff current. At the far end of these narrows was an impressive set of cascades. The 12 rod portage around them, a couple hundred yards to the north, was a veritable garden of ankle-breaking rocks. Though we were exhausted from paddling, we tread carefully and reached the next large section of Cocos Lake safely.

One of the nicer campsites we would enjoy in the park was on the other side, just above those cascades. The site was small – lots of “togetherness” - but quite flat and mostly free of debris. It sat at the confluence of multiple large channels, bays, and promising fish habitat. Despite fickle weather conditions over the next couple days, we took full advantage of its comfort and the plentiful walleye population that called this flowage home!

At one time or another, the whimsical wind would blow us out of every one of those channels and bays. Ultimately, we did our best walleye fishing walking along the shoreline of the small canyon through which the rapids flowed. All the while, heavy dark clouds scudded across the sky with dramatic intermittent outbreaks of sunshine, often generating gorgeous rainbows. Though skies threatened continuously, it never did rain on us while we stayed at Cocos Lake.

The wind eventually settled back into its normal easterly pattern. We figured to be bucking a headwind on the long trek back towards Central Lake. Therefore, an early start was warranted to put us ahead of the worst of it. Our route wound its way past richly forested green hills, game trails, scenic cliffs and unique rock formations. As usual, ducks fluttered about on every turn. We surprised a large family of otters as we quietly glided around a narrow bend in the channel. It had the hallmarks of great angling, too, but we never succumbed to the temptation, being anxious about the afternoon winds.

I did spot one rarity - a wonderful location for a campsite - on the north shore of another lovely bend of the channel at the far eastern end of Cocos Lake. Unfortunately, it was far too early to stop. I made a mental note of this location, however, as this lush stretch of peace and tranquility offered just about everything I look for in a park. When I head back to Opasquia, this is where I will go. Ultimately it may prove buggy-as-hell with nary a walleye to fool but, until then, in my mind's eye, it remains the picture of paradise that will compel my return.

Portaging back into East Lake, we didn't think twice about returning to where we had pitched our third camp. Good campsites were simply too hard to come by in this wilderness and, besides, this one was a real walleye hotspot!

As it turned out, we had to batten down the hatches for the next couple days as cold weather and a major storm rolled in with gusts well over 50 mph. We were a hardy and resourceful bunch, however, and managed to coax a warm fire as we huddled together under those adverse conditions. Eventually the sun came out and we enjoyed our walleyes, our explorations, our camaraderie, and our solitude for several more days as we retraced our steps back to Central Lake and the Cessna that would take us away.

A venture into Opasquia Provincial Park is not for everybody. It takes considerable time and effort to get there. Once you arrive, things you take for granted in other parks require a great deal of additional labor. Plan to paddle extra miles to locate viable campsites. Campsites will require considerable work to make them suitable for habitation. I ate far better than I have on any previous camping trip (thanks to Wayne!), yet lost fourteen pounds in as many days. Prepare for bugs – sometimes in Biblical proportions - if you travel in June or July. While campsite selection is often your

best defense against them, those choices are quite limited. Have patience with burn areas... eventually they end.

We heard very little air traffic overhead and saw no motorized vehicles save that rusted-out snowmobile adorning the rock on East Lake. Be advised, too, there is no organized response to fire in this park. During our last few days we spotted a couple of active fires and feared we might have to re-route to reach Central Lake.

You will occasionally see signs that people have passed through. We saw evidence of First Nation fishermen on Joint Lake. However, chances of actually encountering homo sapiens are about on a par with spotting woodland caribou or wolverines (we saw none of the above). We did spot a fisher and several moose and we were serenaded by wolves – very close at hand - on multiple evenings. As noted, waterfowl are plentiful.

Fishermen, you will catch more walleye and pike than you can imagine.

Lovers of peace and wilderness solitude... you will fare even better.

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