

Hard Lessons on Hudson Bay

Hudson to Ungava

Hard lessons learned

By Michael Peake

As many readers of CHE-MUN are aware, planning and researching for a northern canoe trip are a matter of pride to experienced trippers. We all believe that we've learned from past mistakes and can circumvent potential problems.

The realities, however, often differ from planned expectations.

Our group, the Hide-Away Canoe Club, had spent several months working on the details of a trip from Hudson Bay to Ungava Bay. Costs, as usual, were the prime factor in determining the types of transportation chosen. We were proud of saving hundred of dollars each by driving up the James Bay Road (see CHE 45) and flying to Great Whale from LG-2 rather than Val d'Or.

We not only saved on airfare but we were able to put our canoes right on top of the empty seats next to the eight passengers on the Air Creebec 748 flight. (After, of course, being told there was no room for the canoes.)

Our starting point was 80 miles north of Great Whale at Richmond Gulf. Another cost cutting - and interesting - manoeuvre was to hire an Inuit boat to take us those 80 miles. That's where problems started.

Despite arranging with the Inuit Mayor of the town our two guides were not there when we arrived. He had informed us that there was still a lot of ice along the coast but that it should be OK to travel. We were also informed that the \$150 guide price didn't include gas (we forgot about that!) and that we would have to purchase 90 gallons of gas - at \$4.50 per gallon!

Three hours into our journey up the inside passage the lower unit of their 140 hp. outboard seized up because the oil seal had broken. Our first paddling was to a nearby island. Despite assurances their friends would be following with an extra motor we ended up waiting there four days before finally getting a ride BACK to Great Whale.

Because we had lost so much time and we'd heard the ice was still heavy we now had to fly in. We had abandoned the idea of travelling up the Clearwater River and decided to fly into Clearwater Lake, a distance of 130-miles from Great Whale. But first another problem. The only charter plane with floats had just left that morning to return to southern Quebec because of lack of work. There were no float planes available in Great Whale, the only chance was hiring one from LG-2.

Propair came to our expensive rescue. The only plane they had was an Otter that could - by law - carry only one canoe on the pontoons at a time. It seems there are no Twin Otter's on floats in Northern Quebec something we weren't planning to rely on but had assumed when we were forced to. This meant two, virtually empty, flights up to Clearwater in a plane chartered from 120 miles away. The total bill for our 75-minute flight was \$3000.

But our trip came very close to ending right there. Like most charter companies they wanted cash. If the president of Propair, Jean Pronovost, hadn't agreed to bill us through the company I work for, the trip was over right there! Merci beaucoup, Jean.

Sitting in the back of the Otter while flying up to Clearwater I felt certain that

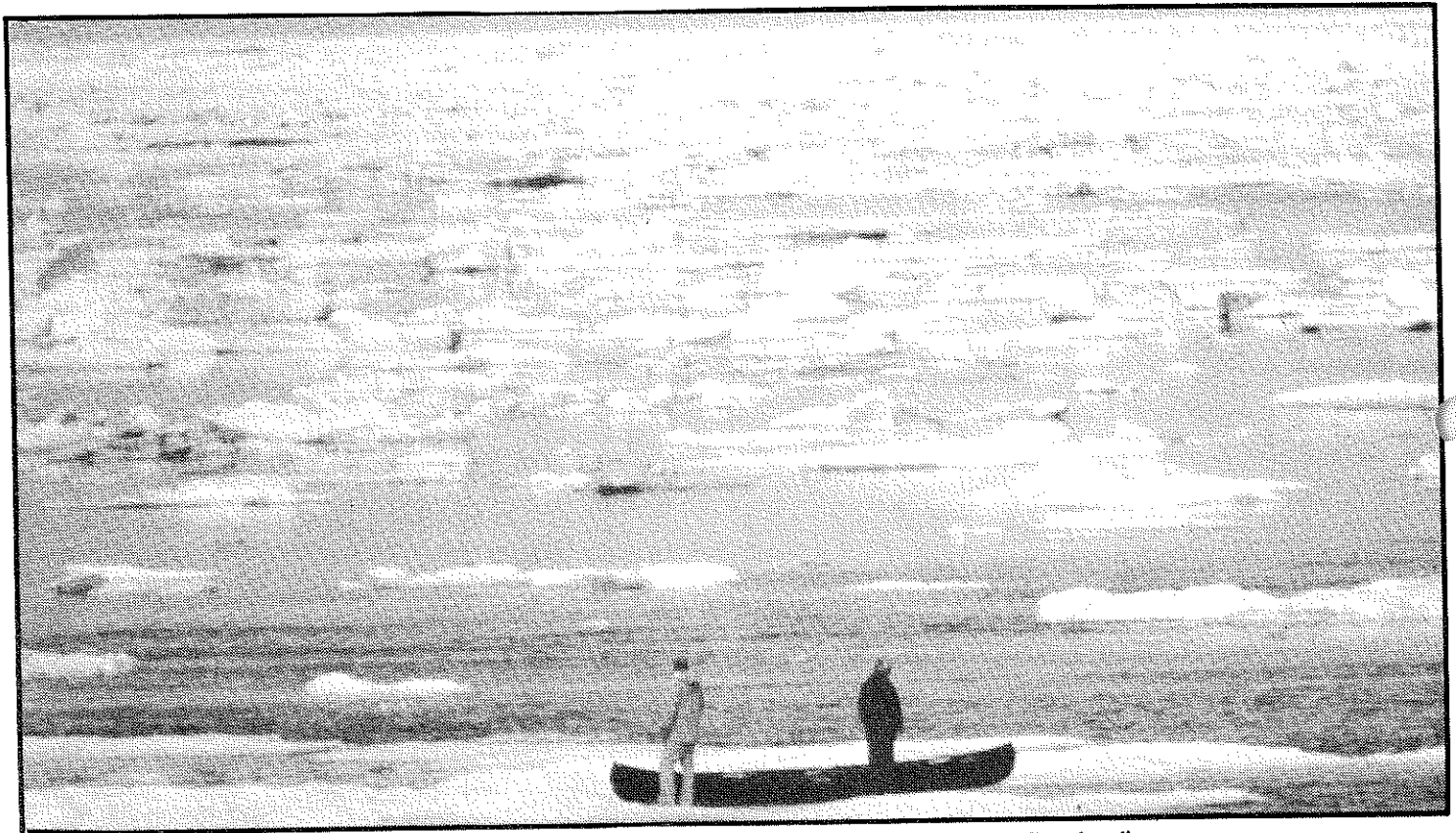
with a little judicious loading we could get our Old Town Tripper's into the cabin.

After returning to Great Whale our native guides asked for \$150 EACH plus they would keep the rest of the unused gas - about 70 gallons. Fortunately the Mayor who was part of the original negotiation didn't agree. We paid them a total of \$150 and some gas while the Inuit government bought most of the remaining gas for their local hunter support program and said they'd send us a cheque for the amount (at this writing, still waiting).

All of which goes to show anything is possible. And the further north you go the more possible everything gets. Be prepared, be flexible, be rich.

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From Bay to Bay Hudson to Ungava -Almost!



Geoff Peake and Kate Schnaidt gather fresh water on a Hudson Bay ice floe.

By
Michael Peake
Editor, CHE-MUN

Artic Quebec remains one of the least travelled and most alluring destinations for wilderness canoeists.

Quebec's Ungava Peninsula stretches north into the Barrenlands despite being at a much lower latitude than the N.W.T. The dominating forces of Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay make the area colder and more barren than the geographic position would indicate. The Hide-Away Canoe Club set its sights on crossing the entire peninsula, Hudson to Ungava, 400 miles from Bay to Bay.

This was an ambitious goal for a 25-day trip. We had planned to start at Richmond Gulf and proceed up the Clearwater River and then through numerous lakes and rivers to Minto Lake which is drained by the Leaf River (Rivieres aux Feuilles).

We ran into travel problems right at the beginning (see page 3) and were forced to start on July 12, a week later than planned, at Clearwater Lake - a beautiful crater-formed lake about 50 miles east of the Bay. Our crew consisted of Michael and Geoffrey Peake, Peter Scott and a first for our group, a woman, Kate Schnaidt, Geoff's girlfriend.

The weather was very calm and sunny during our first week. We glided across Clearwater L. with no problems and started into our upstream work. We were just about at the treeline. The terrain is

similar to the Barrens of the N.W.T. A rolling topography abundant in mosses and lichens, studded with larch and spruce trees.

We headed up the stream that drains into the northeast corner of Clearwater, heading for the Seal Lakes. The small rivers were fairly shallow and the water warm which helped greatly in the tracking, sliding and wading that was necessary. Numerous eskers snaked through the country providing great campsites.

July 15 dawned as had previous days, sunny and hot. Good weather for wading! The sun rises, about 4 a.m. in this part of the north since it is so much further east. We had a lazy paddle up Upper Seal L. with a light breeze.

This is the area outlined by Twomey in his book *Needle to the North* which tells of

a 1938 winter expedition in this area to find the elusive freshwater seal, or kasa-gea, that supposedly lived in the lakes of the Ungava Peninsula. We were on the lookout for this seal but held out little hope, for it took Twomey and his band of guides several weeks to get one specimen. We scanned Lower Seal Lake carefully for any signs of its namesake. Nothing. This is the lake that eventually drains into the Larch River which flows to Kuujjaq.

We headed west on the Nastapoka River, which drains back into the Bay, the first river north of the Clearwater. We were to follow it down a few miles and then start overland through many small waterways to Minto. The Nastapoka is a fair sized river with fast rapids that offered a welcome, though brief, downhill run.

Camped one evening between two rapids, a mile apart, the last thing we expected to see was a seal. But there he was. Cruising in the twilight-tinted gold waters of the Nastapoka, a freshwater seal about the size of a harbour seal, made several passes across the front of our campsite 40 yards from shore, slowly diving and resurfacing. In a few minutes he was gone. It was an exciting moment and an unusual one for freshwater paddlers not used to seeing such beasts in their midst.

Leaving the Nastapoka the next morning, we pushed north though portage trails already well-worn, in some places, by the thousands of caribou who thrive on the lichen-rich terrain. The portages were generally easy for that is the joy of the Terrains. The walking here was much better than the areas we had experienced last summer in the Territories. The ground here is firm with a great deal of reindeer moss and the like.

We also saw only one caribou as the great George River herd was well to the north at this point in the summer. A few miles north of the Nastapoka we approached one short stream, a small blue squiggle on the map, and from the air it surely was. But the squiggle was flowing very quickly and though only 20 feet wide, with a solid line of willows lining the banks, it was a turbulent little run. We

waded down gingerly. Kate was almost swept away a few times as the water was waist-level for her. It was tricky going but we had the perfect weather to do it in - and the water was warm.

We were heading through a mish-mash of country to Bourdel Lake. There was a great deal of dragging, portaging and lining - though never in great amounts at any one time. A caribou-pounded trail led us to the shore of Bourdel. We knew we were running behind schedule but we were doing 10-12 hour days and making 12-20 miles per. Naturally the bugs were heavy. It was almost entirely mosquitos, in N.W.T.-style numbers.

The weather continued beautiful through Bourdel and the lake held another surprise. Several freshwater seals took a look at us as we headed north in the calm waters. There were at least four, probably two pairs, who circled the canoes at about 50 yards, popping up occasionally to get a good look at the strange intruders.

A few miles south of Minto we decided to take two longer portages to avoid possibly six shorter ones. It was the right decision. The second portage was about 2 kilometers long and rose up along the side of a big hill. It was the perfect day for such a carry. The air was crystal clear, the sun shining and the panorama of northern Quebec's beauty was breathtaking. Walking was easy and the wilderness index off the top of the scale.

That exotic high ended abruptly the next morning when more typical Ungava weather prevailed. Fortunately the stiff wind and clouds were at our backs (unheard of) as we continued our slow march to Minto. The weather was ending its week-long lull and it would play a dominating factor in our lives for the next week.

A vicious thunderstorm broke that afternoon. The big windblast (50+ mph) hit shortly after we'd pulled in to escape it. The sun came out a little while later and we thought all the rain had passed. The wind remained very strong but had switched to the west from the south. We pulled in from the gale as we reached an open lake and set up tent in the brilliant, blowing conditions.

But our sunshine was short-lived. It was only the centre of the low pressure and ominous clouds soon rolled in and the wind continued unabated. Things soon deteriorated. A driving rain coupled with the 40+ m.p.h. wind made things miserable.

Geoff and Kate resided in a North Face Pole Sleeve Oval - the nylon rock - my Eureka Mushroom was humiliated. The strong wind simply buckled the corner of the tent, exposing the fly and making things pretty wet inside. We tied it down well and rode out the storm. The tent looked like a circus fun-house from the inside with its dripping, mishapen walls.

Next morning, July 20, we got underway despite wind and rain. We had no time to spare and had to push on. Things cleared up a bit as we worked our way down rapids towards Minto. Despite a three-hour slog into the wind we made the final drop into Minto, a beautiful 40-foot falls, at 9 p.m. and promptly celebrated the final portage of the trip with pate, oysters and brandy.

Though we still had over 200 miles to go we knew there were no major carries. Our big problem could be Minto Lake, an octopus of water with arms stretching a 100 miles wide.

We were lucky on our first day, the lake was calm and we mangaged 20-plus miles to the center of the lake where we turn east towards the Leaf River which drains Minto. The freshening evening breeze that night told us there was trouble ahead.

There was. Next morning was raining and blowing hard although in our direction. Shortly after we headed off the rain stopped and four-foot waves propelled us down the lake. We passed the small unmanned weather station which reports by satellite. The wind seemed to be getting stronger and when we stopped for lunch and looked back up the lake we found it hard to believe we just paddled down it.

It was a gale now and yet we decided to push on as we were running with the waves, close to shore - with spray covers. Peter Scott and I rode atop one monster wave bigger than anything I'd encountered on Lake Superior, just before we turned off.

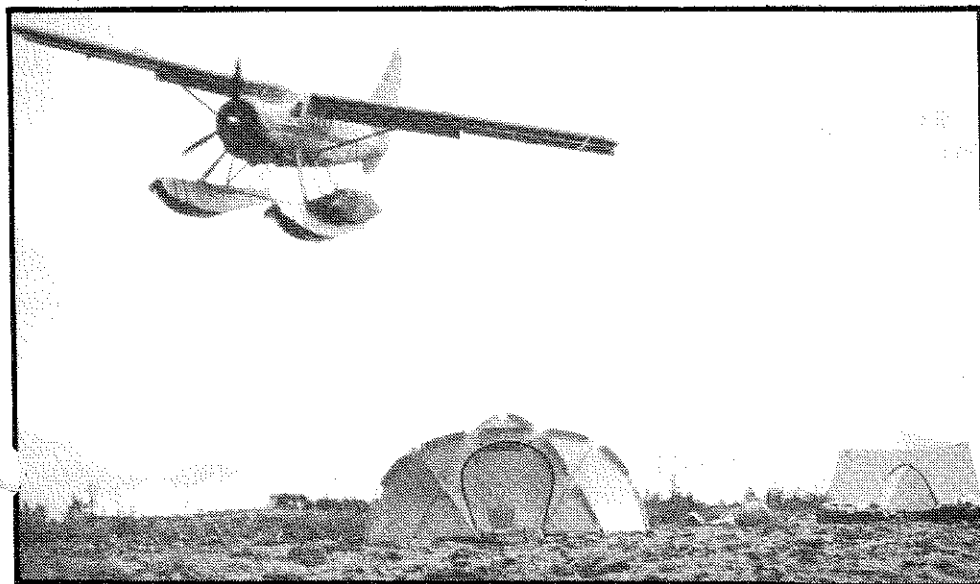
We camped about 4 pm, hoping for a weather change. We decided to allow ourselves a treat - popcorn. Made in the pressure cooker - NOT under pressure - with olive oil, popcorn is one of the most delicious and fun meals to make.

We do it right in the tent in crummy weather. The difference is when it's popped no butter is added - just spices like Worcestershire sauce, garlic, Spike and enjevita yeast - a tasty nutritional yeast that's sprinkled on top. We eat it in layers flavouring each one a little differently. Great food!

Geoffrey's announcement, following popping time, was enough to bring on indigestion. We knew we were tight for time and Geoff had just discovered he'd underestimated the total distance of the trip by 30-40 miles. We still had 220 miles to go and only 8 days to catch our plane. Great.

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Hudson to Ungava: across Arctic Quebec

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The system was still blowing the next morning but the wind was down, though still in our favour. Minto Lake, by this point, is a long narrow channel that eventually turns into the Leaf. We did 24 wind-assisted miles to a small narrows where the channel turns north before heading sharply east again.

Next morning was a beautiful awakening - quiet. No sound of the wind. However, shortly after departing we discovered why. We were camped on the west side of a large hill. As we rounded the point to head east we met our old enemy - the north-east wind.

We slogged a few miles and packed it in before a large expansion. All that air was apparently sucking into a huge low pressure behind us. We declared ourselves windbound and broke out the cards. That evening the rain started - and continued for 33 straight hours. It was a miserable time.

We have always considered the true sign of experienced and adept northern trippers is not their ability at running rapids or carrying great loads but, rather, making themselves comfortable in disgusting weather. We tried but my tent was a mess. I wrote in my journal "I shall not return to the Barrens without a North Face geodesic dome tent". That says it all.

It was classic hypothermia situation. We all bundled into Geoff's tent for cards, popcorn and psycho-analysis. All three were rewarding and needed. The next day was interesting. The wind had died as I drifted off to sleep at 2:30 a.m. - with dreams of calm paddling in my head.

Upon awakening, it was still raining and blowing just as hard, only now from the Northwest. We set off anyway and got in 18 cold, hard miles. We decided that evening to go into a 'push mode', weather permitting, to try and make Tasiujaq by July 30. It was four days and 180 miles away.

The Leaf River is seldom travelled and, in my opinion, is one of the great secrets of the north. And I would like it to remain that way. It is a suitable river for novice and expert alike. We paddled 175 miles without a portage and only a couple of spots of lining. The water is clear and the rapids long and runnable. If we'd had time to fish - that would have been great too. For large lakereels were rising on the surface throughout our few days on it.

We estimate there have been only about a half dozen trips down the Leaf though Hydro Quebec has a monitoring station on the river. The upper Leaf has fairly flat surrounding land. The river drops 580 feet from Minto L. to Ungava and there are several flatwater sections in the upper stretch.

Just before Mountain Bend, about half-way down the scenery really changes. A deep river valley develops. Steep barren hills line the blue waters. Sunny weather enhanced the long stretches of beautiful, shallow rapids.

I was expecting the Leaf to be similar to the George, but it is smaller in flow and more scenic. And there are no fishing camps on this river. Naturally the Leaf gets more barren as you approach Ungava.

The final drop is the roughest one on the river, a very rocky affair, that is tidally influenced. We lost our tide tables and we were not able to estimate the arrival of the world's largest river tides - up to 48 feet. After lining the top part of the final drop we filled a garbage bag with some fresh water. Shortly thereafter, we discovered the tide was just starting to go out (good luck!) and the fresh water disappeared about a mile later as the Leaf dissolved into the Arctic Ocean.

We followed the receding tide out into Leaf Bay. The weather calmed by evening and we crossed Red Bay on flat water. Great numbers of ducks crowded the estuary. We decided to push on for Tasiujaq even though it was getting dark. But we were paddling in slack tide with calm weather and only light would be a problem.

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About 10:30 pm two sets of Northern Lights appeared; Tasiujaq's and Aurora Borealis'. A shimmering salmon-coloured band slid across the southern sky over Tasiujaq - a unique display, one we'll never forget. Nor will we forget our arrival in town at 11 p.m. Or more accurately - our arrival at the end of the tidal flats - at 11.

We were about a mile from town at the boundary of the slipperiest rocks in exis-

tence and in total darkness. Geoffrey tried to track up the river which runs rapid though the flats but even he gave up. So we simply relaxed in our boats and waited until the next tide - about two hours later did the job for us. We slowly rose as the rocks around us sank.

By 3:30 a.m. we were at the high water mark of the sleeping town. Escorted by 23 dogs of the village, we took refuge in the small Anglican Church for a few hours sleep. CHE-MUN reader Hugh Glassco,

Tasiujaq Town Manager, was away but Isabelle Ste. Martin, who was filling in for Hugh, came to the rescue with her Honda ATC to help us get our stuff to the airport next morning.

Actually the 'airport' is a very bumpy landing strip where the Air Inuit Twin Otter sits for a few minutes between take-off and landing. A short flight to Chimo - Kuujuaq - and we caught a Nordair flight to Montreal, then home, where the planning would start again.