Expedition Report: Again River Waterfall Expedition, 2013

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Exploration objective

The objective of the expedition was to canoe the Again River, and in the process, photograph, measure, and document the longitude and latitude of each of the river’s waterfalls.

Description of River

The Again is a shallow, rock-strewn 107-kilometre long tributary of the Harricanaw River, which drains into James Bay. As such, it is not surprising that the Again has attracted little attention among modern-day wilderness canoeists: it is too small and marginal to hold much interest to most wilderness canoeists, particularly since the Hudson and James Bay watershed contains many dozens of larger, more navigable waterways.

The Again is located in the southern reaches of the Hudson Bay lowlands, North America’s largest wetland and the third largest on earth. The lowlands have always been a difficult place to survive. They reputedly have the highest concentration of blood-sucking insects in the entire world.

In terms of political geography, the Again River snakes across the Ontario-Quebec provincial boundary, with a total of approximately 63 kilometres of the river within Ontario and 44 within Quebec.

Beginning of the expeditions

I first ventured to the Again River watershed in 2008, and once more in 2009. On these occasions, I created new trails connecting various wilderness lakes in preparation for future trips.

In 2012, I returned to the area once more with the objective of canoeing the river in its entirety, from swampy headwaters down to where it drained into the Harricanaw. I blogged about that adventure for Canadian Geographic. On that expedition, I saw several waterfalls, numbering between five and nine, depending upon how one chooses to classify a waterfall. (There are no universally agreed criteria.) The number varies depending on

- Whether one counts “split falls” around rocks or islands as one or two waterfalls;
- Whether upper and lower drops should be counted separately;
- If “step falls,” a sort of cascade, should be counted as a waterfall; and
- Whether an exceptionally fierce, steep rapid, with a considerable drop, is considered a waterfall or just a big rapid.

However, being conservative, at least five distinct waterfalls exist on the river. None of these are marked on the existing 1:50,000 scale topographic maps covering the Again, although this fact in itself is not surprising.
On July 31, 2013, I departed for the expedition. Once more, it would be a solo journey. Unlike in 2012, which had been a dry summer, 2013 was wetter in the summer, resulting in water levels on the Again being approximately a metre to a metre and a half higher than in 2012. This made some of the rapids much more challenging.

The first day of the expedition, I set off into the wilderness approximately 150 kilometres northeast of Cochrane, Ont., on Kattawagami Lake. Exhausted as I was from a week of too much work and little sleep, I paddled only a short distance across Kattawagami Lake and down the Kattawagami River, making camp on its banks and getting a good night’s rest.

The next day, feeling rejuvenated, I paddled downriver, reaching a shallow lake, known as Bayly Lake, which the Kattawagami flows through. By the time I reached the lake, it was late evening. It was raining hard, and was windy and cold. With my teeth chattering, I decided to camp on an island. I had covered approximately 50 kilometres that day.

The next morning, I finished my paddle across the lake and continued down the Kattawagami. Eventually, I reached a small tributary creek. I first explored this nameless creek in 2008, and used it as part of the route I created to get overland out of the Kattawagami watershed and into the Again River watershed. It was easier with the higher water levels than it had been the prior summer, but the creek was still shallow and rocky in various places, where I had to wade and drag my canoe up small rapids. I followed the creek for 8.5 kilometres, until I reached a large lake. I camped on this lake that night.

On the fourth day, I started a gruelling portage from the lake I camped on to another lake. The distance between the two is approximately 1.6 kilometres, though the portage I had to make was more, since I could not travel in a straight line due to swampy ground. It was much easier this time around, as I was able to follow my old blaze marks in the straggly spruce and tamarack trees, which I had first made in 2009. Back then, I did not even own a GPS, and did all my navigating the old-fashioned way, relying on the sun, stars and a compass.

Of course, it was not possible to carry my canoe and all of my gear in a single trip across the uneven, occasionally swampy, often thickly forested ground. On the first trip across, I carried my backpack. On the second, I carried my watertight plastic barrel, and on the third, my old 13-foot canoe, which weighs about 55 pounds. Thus, in total, this portage required over 8 kilometres of travel.

Once that portage was finished, I had many blackfly and mosquito bites, and had burned a lot of calories. But I like to push myself hard. So I ate some beef jerky, drank from the next lake, paddled across it, and commenced yet another lengthy portage. This time, I had to get across a tangled alder swamp, then through forest to a tiny lake on the other side. The distance between these lakes is approximately 600 metres, though the portage was again longer because of my meandering route and multiple trips across. Once this was completed, I paddled across the little lake and commenced yet another portage. This one was mercifully short, only about 160 metres one way; however, it was over a steep hill and through thick brush. With that accomplished, I paddled across the next small lake, then finally made camp for the night.
The next day I was confronted with yet another gruelling portage. It was approximately 1.5 kilometres, though it was more like 8 kilometres with the multiple trips across and meandering around obstacles like fallen trees, swamp holes, and impenetrable brush. During this portage, I was startled by a loud crash. Though I thought it might be a tree that toppled over or a bear, nothing appeared and I resumed by portage until I reached the Again watershed.

It was a miserable day – raining and cool. I dragged my canoe across some muskeg and then paddled across a shallow, weedy lake, in order to reach the start of the Again River. The name “river” for this upper stretch is misleading; it is really no more than a creek. I paddled along it, passing through several more lakes. At various points, the Again was too shallow to paddle, even with the higher water, and I had no choice but to wade through and drag my canoe. In one stretch, the river was completely covered in rocks, with no open water whatsoever, forcing me to actually portage over the rocks. I also encountered several beaver dams across the river.

But I pushed on, finally arriving at the last lake before the Again comes into its own and flows almost due north. At this last lake, I made camp on an island.

The following day, I had to battle a stiff wind blowing against me and large waves to reach the end of the lake. That done, I continued downriver. Despite the higher water levels, the river was still shallow and rocky, forcing me to occasionally wade, and scraping the bottom of my canoe frequently over the rocks. Each time my canoe scraped over a rock, I wondered if it would be the last straw for my three-decade old canoe—but somehow it managed to hold up. However, in one rapid, my canoe struck a large rock in the river, getting crushed against it, and flooding with water. I leapt into the river, which was only about waste-deep, and hauled my canoe off the rock before it could suffer any serious damage.

I quickly repaired the canoe on shore, kicking it back into shape and repacking it. I then resumed paddling downriver, encountering many rapids and rocks.

**Waterfalls**

I eventually reached the first of the waterfalls. This time, I was extra cautious, and edged slowly along the banks, before climbing out and getting all my gear on shore. Last year, this first unexpected waterfall had caught me by surprise, and I had gone straight over it in my canoe.

This waterfall has two distinct drops: a smaller, upper drop of just over a metre, followed by a second, larger drop of about four metres, for a total drop of about five metres. (The exact height of the waterfall will vary somewhat depending on water levels.)

The next morning, while being attacked by hordes of blackflies, I photographed, filmed, measured, and recorded the coordinates of the waterfall. I then portaged around it.

On day seven, I encountered many rapids. A few times, I had to go to shore and empty the accumulated water from my canoe that splashed over from running successive rapids. I also spotted a moose on shore, before arriving at the second waterfall. This waterfall is the highest on the river, and measured approximately six metres in height. I portaged around it through thick
forest. I then ran more rapids, some quite large. My small canoe is very shallow, with a depth only half that of most white water canoes. (This makes it vulnerable in big waves or large rapids, but makes things much easier when I am portaging long distances through dense forest, where the trees grow close together and squeezing the canoe between them while dragging it over the moss-cloaked ground is a necessity.)

In one large rapid that I paddled through, my canoe swamped with water. I kept the vessel upright, but even with my floatation inside it, the canoe sunk. Forced to swim, I grabbed onto the flooded canoe with my right arm, while with my left I struggled to get a hold of my plastic food barrel, backpack, and paddles, which were being swept downriver. Kicking with my feet, I managed to swim over to an exposed boulder in the river, beach my canoe on it, and make several trips to shore, securing my gear. Fortunately, I only lost a few small items and a bag of dried apples. I soon emptied the canoe and paddled, on my way once more.

That night, I camped on a sandy riverbank in an area burnt out by a past forest fire. The next morning, when I crawled out of my tent and wandered into some alder bushes to search for firewood, I was startled by the backside of a large wolf. It was gone in a flash, disappearing into the brush. Evidently, it had been sitting only about three or four metres behind my tent, watching, and only fled when I had startled it.

Over the next few days, I finished canoeing the river. I mapped, photographed, measured, and filmed the remaining waterfalls, which came in several varieties: there was a miniature horseshoe fall with a vertical drop measuring just over four metres; a cascade fall of about three metres; and a wild cascade waterfall around a rocky island.

When I reached James Bay, I spent another three days, photographing wildlife and enjoying my solitude before I met up with a couple of people from Moose Cree First Nation. Together, we crossed the Bay to the Moose River. I visited some of my friends in Moose Factory, and then boarded the Polar Bear Express train across the river in Moosonee to head back to Cochrane. The expedition was a great success, with all of my objectives accomplished well ahead of schedule. My old canoe, however, I think I will have to retire.