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**BY RICHARD HARPAM
PHOTOS: ASHLEY KENLOCK AND
RICHARD HARPAM**

I AM NOT SURE AT WHAT AGE I DEVELOPED A LOVE OF EXPLORING AND IN PARTICULAR MAPS, CERTAINLY IT HAS BEEN THERE SINCE CHILDHOOD. THE ECLECTIC MIX OF SYMBOLS, COLOURS AND LANDSCAPE PRESENTED IN A 'FLAT PACK' FORMAT PROVIDE A FUEL FOR WANDERLUST, TRAVEL AND JOURNEYS. SO YOU CAN IMAGINE OUR EXCITEMENT WHEN OUR CANADIAN PADDLING FRIENDS HAP AND ANDREA WILSON INVITED US TO JOIN THEM ON A TRIP OF A LIFETIME TO NORTHERN MANITOBA, TO MAP THE NORTH SEAL RIVER. THE GOAL WAS TO OPEN UP THIS MAJESTIC LANDSCAPE TO OTHERS BY CREATING DETAILED NOTES AND GUIDANCE FOR CANOE TRIPS, WILD CAMPING AND BREAKING TRAIL.

Richard Harpham bio

Richard Harpham is a human powered adventurer and inspirational speaker who has completed over 10,000 miles of expeditions by kayak, canoe, bike and on foot including

exploring the Yukon, cycling the Sahara and Canada's Inside Passage. At home he runs www.canoetrail.co.uk, a watersports and adventure business with his wife Ashley in Bedfordshire providing qualifications, canoe camping, coaching and paddling trips to some of the UK's and world's best locations. He is the former editor of Bushcraft and Survival Magazine and writes for Outdoor Adventure Guide, MoD's Resettlement magazine and the Paddler magazine. His adventures are supported by: Flint Group, Paramo Clothing, Olympus Cameras, Valley Sea Kayaks, Silverbirch Canoes, Bamboo Clothing, MSR, Canadian



Affair, Osprey Rucksacks, Extreme Adventure Foods, Air North, Reed Chillcheater and Exposure Lights. You can follow his adventures through social media & @ www.richadventure.com

Hap Wilson bio

Hap Wilson is a prolific writer, wilderness explorer and canoe guide. Hap and his wife Andrea run Cabin Falls Eco-Lodge in Ontario. He is as an environmental activist and had written many guide books sharing his knowledge of wilderness paddling by canoe, on foot and snow shoe. Hap is a self-taught writer, photographer and artist and is one of North America's best known wilderness guides and received the Bill Mason Award for services to conservation. Hap is supported by Swift Canoes. You can follow Hap and Andrea at www.hapwilson.com

MAPPING THE NORTH SEAL RIVER

To our knowledge, the North Seal River had been paddled once in 2006 by a small group, from Egenolf Lake down to join the Seal River on Shethanei Lake (a 100 miles of wilderness paddling). This area is home to some of the best fishing in the world at Gangler's Lodge as well as plenty of wildlife with the Caribou migration, moose, bear and wolves. There was also the promise of extraordinary geographical features left from the last ice age with glaciers forming huge elevated sand bars called eskers, as

well as giant rocks called erratics. We were hooked and could not wait to catch up with our travel buddies!

Our destination was 250 miles from the nearest road and definitely a wilderness picture postcard scene. Located just below the Arctic tundra, Northern Manitoba is within striking distance of Churchill and the polar bear viewing experiences. Gangler's Fishing Lodges are recognized as one of the top 10 fishing locations in the world for huge cold water species such as Pike and Trout with over 5,000,000 acres of adventure playground to explore. Gangers have been stewards of this area for decades and are transforming their 'bucket list' destination into an adventure tour operator. They have added canoes, kayaks, Salsa fat bikes and ecological tours to their programme. As an experienced wilderness outfitter they have a network of lodges and float planes and boats to travel the huge expanse of lakes and river systems.

ASSEMBLING THE PAKBOATS

Taking off from Winnipeg we were buzzing with excitement to break trail and explore the river. We landed on a dirt runway with a jolt, literally the strip had been carved out of the boreal forest. Ken Gangler met us with a friendly smile and we were off to the lodge to get orientated to our new temporary home. Gangler's main lodge is nestled on the shore of the lake with the Robertson Esker running adjacent (one of the world's longest eskers at 300km long). We had a couple of days to sort kit and assemble the Pakboats, a skin on frame canoe. The Pakboats were made of a robust rubberized material with tough aluminium tubing but retained a lightweight and robust stature. We took the opportunity to get out on the fat bikes which proved perfect for the sandy/gravel terrain. Having previously cycled the Sahara on a fatbike it was great to be reacquainted with my old friend.

Time passed quickly checking kit, stores and our route and after another fat bike sojourn to the erratics we were ready to hit the trail. Ken's guides took us to the North Seal head waters as it escaped from Egenolf Lake, named after a missionary priest who had arrived their many moons ago. The water was clear and cold and already thickening as the 'fall' temperatures prepared to relinquish these vast lands to the grip of another Canadian winter. Jamie and Sangadore, the local first nation guides, expertly navigated the lake and connecting creeks to a beach to abandon us for our 12-day expedition.

The air was crisp and we admired our smokey breath in the morning sunlight. Frost blanketed our Pakboats adding to the authenticity of our endeavours. This was the real deal, navigating by Canadian topographic maps, which did little to tell us of the river features and conditions. Hap had diligently studied Google Earth to try and determine river channels and flows and had studious notes on each section. Essentially it was a 'scout it' or 'read and run' option on each rapid. This of course is how original map makers, adventurers and explorers would have approached such journeys. Game on!

The local guides departed and an echoing silence remained, our omnipresent companion for the next two weeks. We loaded our Pakboats observing a mountain of kit, food, tents, bags, shot gun, cameras and more besides. Fully laden we left the beach to head 4km down the lake and onto to moving water. Or so we thought. Unusually low rainfall meant no flow and we were left with a rock garden as far as the eye could see.

BACK BREAKING WORK

We rolled up our proverbial sleeves and got to work 'man and women hauling' the heavy Pakboats through the boulders and rock gardens. The morning sun added to the warmth from back breaking work. We managed the additional complication of extremely slippery and treacherous rocks with the risk of broken ankles and ending the trip on day one.

Black flies and mosquitoes seemed overly interested in our bare skin and fresh blood. Every so often hope emerged of a clear channel and a chance to paddle rather than carry, portage and drag our canoes. Each of us ended up on our knees and backsides on numerous occasions. We cleared some channels by literally moving rocks to create flow – It was back breaking work, almost leading to sense of humour failure. Periodically we found open traces of water allowing us to paddle for 50 metres or so. We were joined by an adolescent otter fishing and skipping from rock to rock.

After five hours of toil, we approached the confluence of the river where the parched river bed began to open up with little sections of swifts but once it joined forces with its bigger relative it was a full blown river with 'pin hazard's and serious flow. We paddled down into a sandy lake with tree-lined shores overlooked by another massive esker. By the time we reached the shore I knew I had a problem with my feet submerged in eight inches of cold water. We had holed our canoe.

We made camp dodging more flies and got a fire going and tucked into great food on the trail. The next morning we received a 'flyby' from the bush pilots heading out for some interpretive tours. We completed a repair on the canoe and repacked carefully lacing back the spray deck as we had Grade 2 rapids ahead. We were definitely meeting the criteria of 'far from help' which added equal tension and excitement. Half way across the lake we were still taking on water and concluded we must have missed another tear or rip.

We were committed to running the white water so had to 'read and run' the rapids, bailing the rising tide where possible. We broke out into an eddy to scout the rapid, which was identified as bigger and lying on a left-hand bend in the river. Dancing plumes of white water and spray confirmed we needed to paddle to the left of the main wave train before traversing to river left when we ran the rapid. The bow paddlers, Andrea and Ash respectively, received a deluge of cold water so more bailing was required.

PLUMMETING TEMPERATURES

We paddled to a lakeside fish camp and emptied the canoes again of kit to allow us to find more holes. We found one in the bow that looked like a bullet hole along with several other snags. The repair kit earned its keep and we were on our way. Our second campsite on Blackfish Lake was excellent with good shelter, which was lucky as northern winds meant plummeting temperatures.

Rain turned to sleet and then snow. It seemed the season was changing earlier than expected. Our fire offered some escape from the bitter cold as we prepared more camp delicacies. The skies darkened, then cleared, paving the way for a most extraordinary light show with the northern lights showing their true colours. We felt incredibly small, blessed and spiritually connected to this wilderness.

Morning revealed frozen tents. We braved the cold to paddle through more river and lake onto Bain Lake where we would hopefully find a fishing outpost and more eskers to explore. It was lovely to be able to enjoy the comforts of cabin life with some heating to combat the winter chill. Strong winds brought more sleet and snow. This was turning into quite the adventure. We were blessed with more incredible Northern Lights and a full dusting of snow with several inches settling. We concluded it was time to hunker down and await a better weather window. The following day arrived and it was time to leave Bain Lake to continue scouting the river.

We navigated across large open water channels literally surfing down the waves as we battled the elements in another Force 4-5. Our campsite this time was a headland offering sublime views over our watery world. Flocks of snow geese highlighted the change in weather fortunes as they noisily signalled the need to fly south. That evening Hap caught a cold water pike for supper, which we baked on our altar fire. It was delicious and a real treat. More lakes, swifts and rapids greeted our voyage as we paddled on. We had connected with wildlife on the trip on a daily basis, there were plenty of moose and given the lack of human contact they were unperturbed by our presence. Bears also shared our route both on the eskers and also along the river and foreshore. Like so many of my Canadian Adventures I marvelled at being up close to these magnificent creatures.



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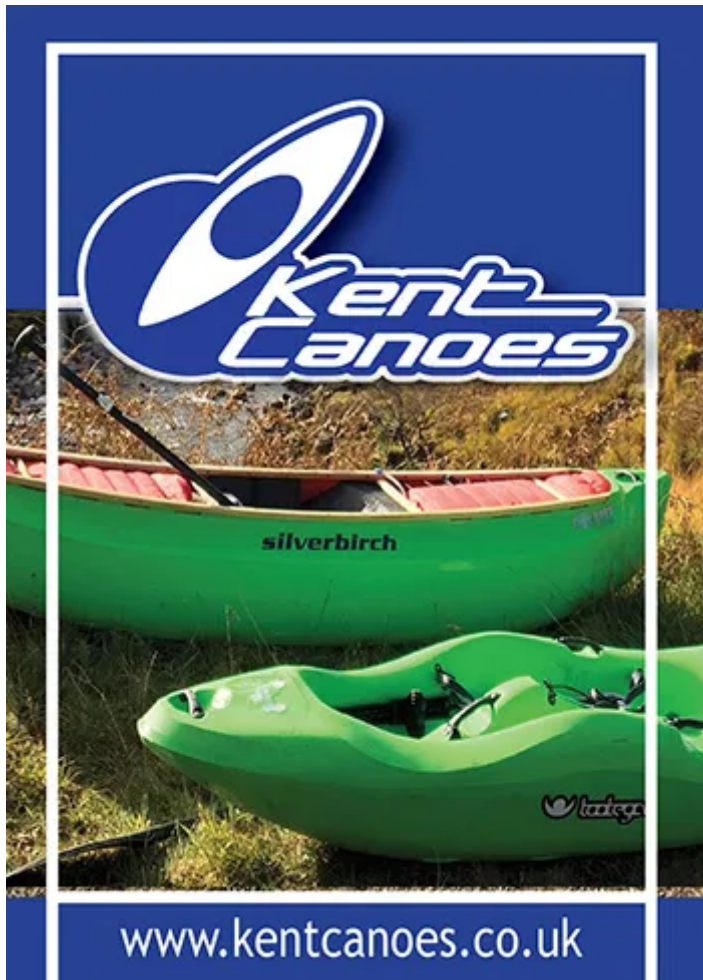
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TIME TO SAIL

The weather continued to deteriorate with regular snow showers and head winds hampering our progress. We reached Stoney Lake and rafted our Pakboats to stay safe. Immersion in these cold waters would be a serious incident. With a shift in wind direction it was time to sail. We utilized our tarp and cruised down the waves with a tail wind. Dark and stormy skies meant it was time to get off the water. We made camp and just in a nick of time as a full blizzard ensued. The beach and trees literally transformed from golden sands to white snow in minutes. Tent bound we waited as temperatures dropped again. Northern Lights by now a regular occurrence, wowed us again.

Shethanei Lake was in striking distance with a 14-mile stretch of the North Seal River remaining with solid Grade 3 rapids between us and float plane extraction with hopes of a hot shower occupying our thoughts. This was the pinnacle of our canoe expedition. Since every rapid had been bigger than anticipated, we decided the rafted canoe was safest. As we entered the channel it seemed to just drop away with much steeper fall. This was it, the white knuckle ride we had all come for. It was continuous and full on as we ran the main flow. The mid-section had a large pool before the next section of white water. The wave trains were huge with a very wet ride for the bow paddlers.

DRUMLINOID

We steered through large holes in the whitewater and navigated past huge boulders. Lower down the rapid it was shallower and we grounded on some flat slabs. The final 5-6km of the river was fast but flat, it slowed as we entered Shethanei Lake, being greeted by an inquisitive seal. The landscape was vast and in the distance we could make out a triangular grey structure looking distinctly out of place. It was a drumlinoid, a huge pile of rocks resembling a bizarre pyramid shape. It was visited by Samuel Hearne in 1769, explorer and factor of the Hudson Bay Company whilst searching for copper deposits.

After a tough final days paddling we camped at the same site as our ancestor. It was a great connection to our past.

Our last camp exposed a range of emotions. We were keen to get a shower and some home comforts but we would be sad to leave this incredible wilderness. We awoke the next morning and climbed the Drumlinoid to get the sunrise picture – it was a special moment. All that remained was to strike camp and paddle the last couple of miles to the rendezvous with the floatplane. We scheduled the extraction for 12 noon and packed kit for departure. Anxiously we watched the wind strengthen as white caps tracked across the lake. Eventually we heard the rumble of the Otter bush plane which banked and landed neatly on the lake and then proceeded to battle to manoeuvre to the beach area. We waded out planning to hold the plane for loading. The pilot struggled with the combination of gusts and rocks in the shallows on the left side. He clunked the sponson on one of them and decided to abort. We were beyond disappointment as he powered up and departed 100 miles back to base.

A POTENTIAL RESCUE

What followed was a frantic few hours trying to sort out an extraction plan. Snow returned to add pressure to the situation. It became clear we were stranded for at least another night. The weather forecast was not good and we were anxious if we missed extraction the next day we might well be creating a potential rescue. Winter was approaching fast and we definitely didn't want to miss Gangler's weekly flight and UK flights the following day.

We walked the esker tracking wolf activity back to a live den. That evening we heard the wolf chorus howling behind our camp. It was touch and go for a while as planes are a rare commodity in the north. The next day, Matt, a Brit pilot landed and taxied into the other side of the spit becoming our new best friend. We had made huge rock piles to tether the plane to the shore whilst loading in strong winds and used tarps to help signal our position. We waded out and loaded our mini mountain of kit. Using Matt's words, *"Two small bumps and we will be airborne."* He was as good as his word.



Our North Seal River expedition had delivered raw wild adventure on a daily basis with extraordinary rich colours of the boreal forest during autumn. We had battled freezing winter conditions, big white water rapids and strong winds to complete our mission. We had photographed and documented some iconic paddling trips for future visitors and generations to explore this pristine environment. Hopefully we had created a paddling legacy and added a layer of detail and inspiration to the maps. With its eskers, unique history and abundant wildlife, Northern Manitoba was firmly in our hearts and future plans.

A massive thanks to Gangler's Adventures and Manitoba Tourism for hosting us and sorting our logistics. Mapping this unique and remote Canadian back water will undoubtedly open up more visitors to explore and marvel at its untamed beauty. To our knowledge only the previous canoe expedition had made this journey, which put us in a privileged select few. Potentially more people (12) have walked on the moon than currently paddled the North Seal River.

Visit <https://gangersadventures.com/> to create your bespoke adventure tour.

A million thanks to Pakboats for supporting the expedition with their amazing wilderness canoes. Thanks also to Canadian Affair for helping with our flights to Canada over the years.



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