



Canoe Trip #1

Village of Ile-a-la-Crosse - Churchill River - Otter Lake

Length of Trip: 386 kilometres (240 miles)

Time Required to Complete Trip: 10 to 15 days

Number of Portages: 13 to 20 (depending on choice, and experience of canoeists)

Warning:

Water levels and canoeing conditions on many Saskatchewan rivers and lakes vary from time to time, causing changes in the appearance of the various landmarks described in this booklet, as well as causing hazards not described herein. It is the canoeist's responsibility to proceed with caution and alertness, using discretion and good judgement at all times. The information in this booklet is intended to be of general assistance only, and the Government of Saskatchewan assumes no responsibility for its use. Canoeists are reminded that they travel at their own risk at all times.

Access to Starting Point:

Canoes may be launched from the community of Ile-a-la-Crosse, approximately 175 kilometres (109 miles) north of Green Lake via Highways 155 (paved) and 908 (gravel); or from the community of Patuanak, approximately 95 kilometres (59 miles) north of Beauval via highway 918 (gravel). Beauval is located 103 kilometres north of Green Lake via Highways 155 and 165. Starting from Patuanak shortens this trip by approximately 65 kilometres (40 miles) and two to three days.

Arrangements for the safe parking of vehicles can likely be made with outfitters, or other responsible persons in either of these communities.

Canoes may also be launched at either of the two Saskatchewan Government camp kitchens on the west side of South Bay of Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse, off of Highway 155. Vehicles should not be left unattended at these camp kitchens for any extended period of time.

Maps:

- 73-O/5 Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse
- 73-O/9 Sandfly Lake
- 73-O/10 Pinehouse Lake
- 73-O/12 Black Bay
- 73-O/13 Shagwenaw Lake
- 73-O/14 Dipper Lake
- 73-O/15 Bentley Bay
- 73-O/16 Belanger
- 73-P/10 Otter Lake
- 73-P/11 Kavanaugh Lake
- 73-P/12 Black Bear Island Lake
- 74-B/3 Studer Lake
- 74-B/4 Little Flatstone Lake

About the Trip:

This is a long and somewhat difficult trip which will be enjoyed by the experienced canoeist. It is definitely not recommended as a trip for beginners. This is a big lake trip with considerable exposure to wind and waves. Because of the vagaries of weather, ample extra time should be allowed to wait out bad weather which may make lakes unsafe to travel. There are also quite a few strenuous rapids to run during this trip. Bigger canoes, rather than smaller ones, should be considered for use on this trip.

Fishing is excellent throughout the trip. Northern pike and walleye are found in all waters, especially below falls and rapids. Lake Trout also occur throughout much of the Churchill River system.

The Churchill River route is very rich in history. Most of the great explorers of the Canadian northwest passed over this waterway.

Big lake scenery is unsurpassed, and the number of good natural campsites is unlimited.

Leaving the village of Ile-a-la-Crosse the first settlement the canoeist passes is Patuanak on Shagwenaw Lake, a few kilometres east of the north end of Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse. Limited supplies may be available at

Patuanak.

On Snake, or Pinehouse Lake at the community of Pinehouse general supplies are available. Pinehouse, however, is located somewhat off of the main route of this trip. There are no further sources of supplies until Missinipe on Otter Lake, the end point of this trip.

Although the voyageurs paddled and portaged both up and down the Churchill River system in days gone by, nearly all recreational canoeists will choose to make this trip from west to east, or 'downstream'. The only exception to this would be at the lower end of the trip between Birch Rapids and Otter Lake. For this reason, portage descriptions are given for 'downstream' travel only until Birch Rapids. From this point, descriptions are given for both 'downstream' and 'upstream' travel to assist fishermen and canoeists who may wish to travel from Otter Lake to Nipew (or Dead), Trout or even Black Bear Island Lakes.

The Canoe Trip:

Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse is a long, narrow lake with frequent attractive sandy landing spots which often have good natural camping places back of the beach. This lake can become very rough during periods of high wind, in which case canoeists will likely be wind-bound. Shagwenaw Rapids occur in the narrows linking Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse to Shagwenaw Lake. These moderate rapids should present no problem to the alert canoeist.

After crossing Shagwenaw Lake, follow the outlet channel to the north. There some well used campsites on the island just above Drum Rapids.

Drum Rapids is divided into four segments. The first stretch of moderate fast water can be run without danger by the average canoeist. The left side appears easiest to descend. After about 400 metres (437 yards) of quiet water, the second stretch of the rapid occurs. This is a sequence of mixed fast water and Class 1+ rapids which most canoeists will elect to run after surveying them. The more cautious canoeist should wade, or line down the right hand side. The end of this second stretch of Drum Rapids is marked by two large boulders projecting from the water near the right hand shore.

The main, or third, section of Drum Rapids starts about 400 metres (437 yards) below the end of the second stretch.

Portage Number 1 - Around the Main Part of Drum Rapids:

Connecting the north end of the channel north of Shagwenaw Lake with quiet waters below the rapids. Approximately 290 metres (317 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 3 rapid. The start of this portage shows as a break in the willow lined shore 200 to 250 metres (218 to 273 yards) above the start of the rapids on the right or south shore (Grid location 352099 - Map 74-B/4).

About 400 metres (437 yards) below this portage the fourth part of Drum Rapids occurs. The average canoeist will run this rapid without trouble.

Leaf Rapids occurs approximately 500 metres (547 yards) below the last part of Drum Rapids. Most canoeists will elect to run this Class 2 rapid after surveying its entire length from shore. If in doubt, the canoeist should either make optional portage number 2 or line down the side of the rapid.

Portage Number 2 (Optional) - Around Leaf Rapids:

Approximately 775 metres (847 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 2 rapid. The start of this portage is on the right, or south, side at a small break in the willows about 40 metres (44 yards) before the start of the rapids. At the lower end of the portage there is a well used camping place, with berries nearby in season. The portage ends about 45 metres (49 yards) southeast of the rapids. The next rapids occur about 6 kilometres (3 3/4 miles) below the end of Leaf Rapids. The Mudjatik (or Deer) River enters the Churchill River from the north one third of the way along this stretch.

The next rapid, known as Deer Rapids, is in two parts separated by about one kilometre (2/3 mile) of quiet water. Both parts of Deer Rapids are class 2 to 2+. Most experienced canoeists will run both parts of Deer Rapids after surveying them carefully from shore. The more cautious will wade down the side of the rapids, or use the old, overgrown portage trail on the right side of the second part of the rapid. The area around, and between the two parts of Deer Rapids has several good rocky campsites.

The next set of rapids, Dipper Rapids, occurs about 13 kilometres (9 miles) below Deer Rapids.

Portage Number 3 - Around Dipper Rapids:

Approximately 335 metres (366 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 4 rapid. This portage starts conspicuously on the northeast, or left, shore just below the start of minor, preliminary rapids (Grid location 476040 - Map 73-O/14). A shorter alternate starts on the left, or north, shore at a large flat rock ledge immediately above this dangerous rapid. Within 25 metres (27 yards) this alternate joins the main portage.

From Dipper Rapids, travel generally eastward across Dipper and Primeau Lakes to Crooked Rapids. Crooked Rapids are in three parts. The first part is an easy Class 1 rapid; the main, or second part is Class 2+; and the third part is Class 2.

WARNING: Watch for deceptively fast water after the first part of this rapid. This deceptive stretch is immediately above the second part of the rapid which is distinguished by a small island in the middle. If in doubt, the safest choice is to make portage number 4 around the entire set of rapids.

Portage Number 4 (Optional) - Around Crooked Rapids:

Approximately 1100 metres (1203 yards) long and in good condition.

This portage starts on the right, or east, shore about 200 metres (219 yards) below the lower end of a willow covered island (Grid location 663969 - Map 73-O/14). The start of the rapids cannot be seen from the start of the portage as the rapids start around a bend in the river. Canoeists may have to push inside the shoreline reeds to pick up the start of the portage trail. There is an old camping area at the lower end of this portage.

The next rapids, known as Knee Rapids, occur approximately three kilometres (1 3/4 miles) below the end of Crooked Rapids.

Knee Rapids are divided into two parts approximately one kilometre (2/3 mile) apart.

Portage Number 5 - Around Knee Rapids:

Approximately 325 metres (355 yards) long and in fair condition. This Portage by-passes a class 2 rapid.

This portage starts on the left, or north, shore at a large sloping rock shelf after descending about 100 metres (109 yards) of fast water. The trail beginning is not readily discerned as the portage traverses bare rock at its start. The start is immediately above the main rapid.

The second part of Knee Rapids, a class 1+ rapid, can generally be run after careful survey from shore. If in doubt, a descent can be made by wading down close to shore.

From below Knee Rapids, there are two possibilities for crossing Knee Lake. The first alternate is to travel in a generally southeast direction to the southern tip of the peninsula which separates Bentley Bay from the remainder of Knee Lake, then northeast to the small native settlement of Elak Dase. The second alternate takes the canoeist in a generally easterly direction to a portage across the narrow neck at the base of the peninsula which separates Bentley Bay from the main body of Knee Lake. This second alternate may be the quickest, and safest way to cross Knee Lake in periods of high wind.

Portage Number 6 (Optional):

Connecting the northeastern portion of Knee Lake with Bentley Bay. Approximately 435 metres (475 yards) long and in generally good condition, but wet at both ends.

This portage, which is actually an old winter trail, starts as a clear break in the willows at the southeast end of a small bay (Grid location 830931 - Map 73-O/15).

The native settlement of Elak Dase consists of about one dozen residences plus a church.

The Haultain River enters the Churchill River about one and one half kilometre (one mile) below Elak Dase.

There are many channels through the marshes near the southwest end of Dreger Lake. The most northerly channel shown on the maps (Grid location 857802 - Map 73-O/15) is passable and is the shortest route.

The minor class 1 rapid at the southeast, or outlet, end of Dreger Lake should present no problem to the average canoeist.

Sandy Lake is an attractive lake surrounded by high hills. There are a number of beautiful sandy beaches and campsites on the lake shores.

Snake Rapids start at the east end of Sandy Lake and are divided into three parts, each separated by about one kilometre (2/3 mile) of quieter water. The first part is class 2, the second part is class 2+ and the last part is class 1.

The Key Lake Road (Highway 914) crosses the Churchill River at the start of the first part of Snake Rapids. A number of options are open to the canoeist in negotiating Snake Rapids: 1) Run the entire series after careful survey from shore; 2) Run the first part, make optional portage number 7 past the second part, and run the last part; 3) Laboriously wade down the right, or south, side of the different stretches of rapid.

NOTE: The long portage shown on the left, or north, shore on some maps is not recommended as it is actually a winter road, and very wet.

Canoeists planning to make optional portage number 7 should, immediately after completing the first part of Snake Rapids, move to the left shore and go to the left of the rocky point (actually an island on the northeast shore).

Portage Number 7 (Optional):

Around the second part of Snake Rapids. Approximately 75 metres (82 yards) long and in fair condition.

This portage starts on the bare, sloping rock on the east side of the island immediately above a small falls and rapid. The trail, indistinct at first, winds across the island and ends in thick bush at a poor, rocky landing immediately below the main part of Snake Rapids.

The island across which the portage is made offers an attractive natural campsite.

From this point, travel across the northern portions of Pinehouse (or Snake) Lake. It should be noted that, in case of necessity, supplies, communications, air transportation and road access via Highway 914 are available at the community of Pinehouse on the west shore of the lake.

Some older maps show buildings at a point named Belanger in the narrows leading to Sandfly Lake. There is no settlement at this point.

Portage Number 8 - Around Rapids at Outlet of Sandfly Lake:

Approximately 40 metres (44 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 3 rapid. This portage starts about 80 metres (87 yards) north, or left, of the more northerly set of twin rapids (Grid location 354740 - Map 73-O/9).

Approximately one kilometre (2/3 mile) below this rapid, Needle Rapids occur.

Needle Rapids are divided into two channels by an island. Both alternates can be negotiated with considerable difficulty after careful study from shore. The left, or north, alternate appears slightly less dangerous.

Portage Number 9 - Around Needle Rapids:

Approximately 365 metres (399 yards) long and in fair condition, but steep at the start. The trail skirts a muskeg and the footing is poor in places. This portage by-passes a class 3 rapid.

The portage starts, after passing through some preliminary fast water, on the left side of the left channel about 80 metres (87 yards) above the start of the main rapid.

Approximately two kilometres (1 1/4 mile) below Needle Rapids, the canoeist encounters Needle Falls.

Portage Number 10 - Around Needle Falls:

Approximately 50 metres (55 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 5 rapid. This well-used portage starts approximately 90 metres (98 yards) to the right, or south, of the falls.

The canoeist should now travel in a generally northeast direction on Kinosaskaw Lake to Silent Rapids.

Silent Rapids:

These are not difficult rapids to run. It is, however, advisable to land on the rocks above the rapids and study them. Generally, in running these rapids, it is advisable to stay on the left side and to swing into quiet water as soon as possible to avoid the big whirlpools below the rapids.

Black Bear Island Lake:

It is easy to get lost on this very complex lake. Frequent reference to map and compass to check one's position and progress is essential.

If the canoeist is interested in Indian pictographs, write to the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, Albert Street & College Avenue, Regina, Saskatchewan, S4P 3V7 in advance of the trip for a booklet on Indian pictographs. Several such pictographs occur on the rocks and cliffs of both Kinosaskaw and Black Bear Island Lakes.

There are three basic ways to cross Black Bear Island Lake. Each route involves descending a different set of rapids. The route described in this guide is the central one which takes the canoeist to rapids located at Grid location 535675 on Map 73-P/12.

These central class 1 rapids are not difficult, they should however be surveyed from shore prior to running.

Proceed east to the outlet of Black Bear Island Lake at Birch Rapids. These rapids are divided by a fairly large island. Birch Portage is on the south shore of the southerly part of this divided set of dangerous rapids (Grid location 752602 - Map 73-P/11).

Portage Number 11 - Birch Portage:

Connecting the east end of Black Bear Island Lake with quiet waters below the main rapids. Approximately 200 metres (219 yards) long and in excellent condition. This portage by-passes a class 5 rapid.

From Black Bear Island Lake, this portage starts as a break in the shoreline vegetation on the south shore about 45 metres (49 yards) above the more southerly set of rapids.

From the quiet waters below the main part of Birch Rapids, this portage starts on the southwest shore about 45 metres (49 yards) to the left of the southern set of rapids.

Approximately one and two third kilometre (one mile) below Birch Portage there are more rapids of a less severe nature divided by an island. There are three options open to the canoeist: 1) Run the carefully surveying it; 2) Follow down the left-hand shoreline where some wading may be necessary at times of low water. This is the easiest and safest alternate; 3) Make optional portage number 12.

Portage Number 12 (Optional)

Around rapids below Birch Rapids: Connecting quiet waters below Birch Rapids with the southwest end of Trout Lake. Approximately 145 metres (158 yards) long and in fair condition. This portage by-passes a class 2 rapid.

There is a longer version of this portage which is 280 metres (306 yards) long and goes completely around the entire rapid. This longer version should be used by upstream paddlers.

From the upstream end, this portage starts about 40 metres (44 yards) above the rapid on the right shore at an inconspicuous break in the alders and willows. The shorter version ends in fast water at the base of the rapid. The longer version ends in quiet water.

From Trout Lake, this portage starts on the left, or south, shore below two conspicuous rocks in quiet water below the rapid.

The canoeist should now proceed northeast to the outlet of Trout Lake. There are three sets of rapids

between Trout Lake and Stack Lake.

Portage Number 13 - Trout Portage:

Connecting Trout Lake with quiet waters below the first rapid. Approximately 145 metres (158 yards) long and in good condition, but rocky and steep in spots. This portage by-passes a class 4 rapid.

From Trout Lake, this portage starts on the east, or right, side of the outlet about 60 metres (66 yards) above dangerous rapids. From the quiet waters below the rapid, this portage starts on the left bank about 30 metres (33 yards) from the base of the rapids. Within about 300 metres (328 yards) the next set of rapids is encountered. Most canoeists will run these rapids which should however first be surveyed from shore. If in doubt, the canoeist should take optional portage number 14.

Portage Number 14 (Optional):

Connecting consecutive sections of quiet water between rapids separating Trout and Stack Lakes.

Approximately 110 metres (120 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 2 rapid. From the upstream end, this portage starts at a poor landing on a big flattish rock on the right shore immediately above the rapid. The trail improves back of the landing.

From the downstream end, this portage starts on the left shore at the base of the rapid at a high rock exposure. This trail is mostly used by upstream canoeists, and there are some excellent campsites along it.

The next set of rapids occurs in about 600 metres (656 yards).

Portage Number 15:

Connecting quiet waters below the second rapids with Stack Lake. Approximately 90 metres (98 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 3 rapid.

This set of rapids is divided into two channels by a small island.

From the quiet waters below the second set of rapids, this portage starts about 60 metres (66 yards) above the rapids on the right shore of the right, and larger, rapids.

The left channel has a Class 2 and a Class 1 rapid in it. For downstream travel only, these two rapids can usually be run after careful survey from shore.

From Stack Lake, this portage starts on sloping, bare rock about 30 metres (33 yards) below the base of the rapids on the left shore.

The outlet of Stack Lake is divided by a number of small islands. The right hand choice involves descending through moderate fast water which should present no problems to alert canoeists. If in doubt, canoeists can wade down the shallower channels on the left.

The upstream canoeist should wade up the shallow channels on the right hand side.

500 metres (547 yards) below this rapid, the canoeist approaches Rock Trout Portage.

Portage Number 16 - Rock Trout Portage:

Connecting consecutive sections of quiet water between Stack and Mounthey Lakes. 260 Metres (284 yards) long and in excellent condition. This portage by-passes a class 3 rapid. Going downstream, this portage starts on the right, or east, shore at a sandy landing 15 metres (16 yards) above the start of the rapid.

Going upstream, this portage starts on a sloping rock shelf 30 metres (33 yards) below the end of the rapid.

500 metres (547 yards) below this portage, the canoeist encounters another set of rapids split by an island 140 metres (153 yards) wide. The right, or southern, course is the deepest and most easily run. Most canoeists will elect to run this rapid. An alternate is to make a short carry of a few metres (yards) over bare rock on the left channel.

Going upstream, the canoeist should make a short carry of a few metres (yards) over bare rock on the right channel.

At the outlet of Mounthey Lake there are several minor rapids which most likely would require wading for upstream travel.

Portage Number 17:

Connecting waters below the outlet of Mounthey Lake with waters leading to Nipew (or Dead) Lake. 190 metres (207 yards) long and in good condition, but steep at the lower end. This portage by-passes a class 2 rapid.

This portage starts on the northeast, or left, shore in a cove 125 metres (136 yards) above the main rapid. A shorter 100 metre (109 yard) alternate starts immediately at the head of the rapid and, after climbing a steep embankment, joins up with the longer alternate.

Going upstream, this portage starts on the right bank at a steep embankment at the foot of the rapid.

There are intermittent minor rapids below the end of portage number 17 which are not dangerous, and which can be run by the alert canoeist. Some wading may be necessary at times of very low water. Going upstream, wading would most likely be required.

After entering the west end of Nipew Lake, travel in a generally northeasterly direction to the narrows

leading to Hayman Lake. There is considerable current in these narrows, leading to a class 1+ rapid (Grid location 058720 - Map 73-P10). Wading would most likely be required for upstream travel. Be sure to select the most easterly outlet from Burgess Bay of Hayman Lake.

Portage Number 18 - Great Devil Portage:

Connecting Hayman Lake with quiet waters below Great Devil Rapids. 1090 metres (1192 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 4 rapid.

N.B. The first obvious trail on the east side of Burgess Bay IS NOT the portage trail, rather it is a five kilometre (three mile) winter road which by-passes both Great and Little Devil Rapids.

From Burgess Bay of Hayman Lake, this portage starts in a cove on the north, or left, side 60 metres (66 yards) above the rapid.

From the quiet waters below Great Devil Rapids, this portage starts in a cove 135 metres (148 yards) below the rapids on the right, or northwest, shore.

Portage Number 19 - Little Devil Portage:

Connecting quiet waters below Great Devil Rapids with Devil Lake. 840 metres (918 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 2+ rapid.

From quiet waters below Great Devil Rapids, this portage starts in a small cove on the north, or left, side 70 metres (77 yards) above the rapid.

From Devil Lake, this portage starts in a cove on the north, or right, shore immediately below the base of the rapids.

A shorter version of Little Devil Portage exists on the right, or south, shore. This involves two shorter portages as shown on map 73-P/10, but these have not been surveyed.

There is a Saskatchewan Government campground on the east shore of Devil Lake (Grid location 170680 - Map 73-P/10), and road access to Otter Rapids and Missinipe.

Portage Number 20 - Otter Rapids Portage:

Connecting Devil Lake and Otter Lake. 565 metres (618 yards) long and in good condition. This portage by-passes a class 3 rapid.

From the south end of Devil Lake, this portage starts on the east, or left, shore just after passing a prominent rock, and immediately to the west of the Water Surveys building located at the head of the rapid.

From Otter Lake, this portage starts on the east, or right, side in a quiet cove at the base of the rapids. Below the cove there is considerable fast water.

Canoeist planning to end their trip at the bridge across Otter Rapids need only portage 350 metres (382 yards). Others will complete the portage and paddle on to Missinipe Townsite on Walker Bay at the west end of Otter Lake.

At Missinipe, the end point of this trip, there is a Saskatchewan Government campground. There are also several fishing camps, an air charter service and a small general store. Radio, airplane, telephone and highway communications are possible with La Ronge which is situated 80 kilometres (50 miles) to the south.

WRITTEN BY: Original script by Peter Gregg, reviewed in 1989 by Historic Trails Canoe Club.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS:

To minimize your impact on the environment while canoeing along Saskatchewan waterways, please keep in mind these safe and sensible practices:

Make every canoe trip a clean trip! Follow the pack in - pack out rule. When breaking camp, erase all evidence that you were there. Leave your campsite cleaner than you found it.

Consider the wildlife and their habitat: While portaging or camping, stay on the trails to prevent any disturbance to the wildlife and natural vegetation.

Fire Prevention: Forest fires along canoe routes are an ever present danger. It is vital that all campfires are kept small and are thoroughly extinguished with water after use. Never leave a fire until you are sure it is 'dead'.

