

# steel river circle route

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This canoe trip was first described in the Canadian Pacific's "The Sport and Recreation Bulletin" in 1922. The description we used was last revised in 1938. Despite the age of the write-up it was remarkably accurate. One portage has changed (from Diablo Lake to Small Lake) and two more log jams have been added to the Steel below Rainbow Falls.

The trip was made by my son John and myself. (Our first long trip with only one canoe.) We left the female side of the family camped in our trailer at Neys Provincial Park just west of Marathon. This is a most interesting park on a magnificent bay (Ashburton) of Lake Superior. The site was a prisoner of war camp during the Second World War, for German officers. Not much remains of the camp today but some cobblestone road work and an escape tunnel that was never successfully used.

The park naturalist drove us to Santoy Lake from which we started the trip. This lake is spectacular with a very rugged and vertical shoreline. Windogo Wigwam Point on the east shore is a fine cliff face rising one-hundred metres above the lake.

The paddle to the first portage is about six kilometres and is to be savoured as an incredible labour is about to begin. The portage to Diablo Lake climbs one-hundred metres in the first five-hundred. The climb is up through a notch in the hills and the land rises sharply on each side of the portage. As well as the steepness of the portage, the footing is very poor and the path rocky. Lake Diablo is a pretty and welcome lake after this torturous climb.

After some searching for the portage out of Diablo, we carried the fifteen-hundred metres into a beaver pond called Small Lake. The final carry of the day was only four-hundred metres and downhill into Cairngorm Lake. John and I were pretty well worn out so after a small supper of cheese sandwiches and tea, we turned in.

Next morning we arose to clear skies and, after breakfast, struck camp and started up Cairngorm. This is another beautiful lake, long and narrow and lined with hills. Much bird life exists - ducks, loons, gulls, hawks and many small birds. At the head of the lake a rookery of blue herons was seen - magnificent birds! We ate lunch while observing the Great Blue Herons.

The portage out of this lake from its northeast bay leads in to a narrow and fairly shallow part of the Steel River. This empties in to Moose Lake, a true moose pasture, shallow with low banks. At this point we sighted a fine bull moose. He pulled himself leisurely out of the water and stood and watched us go by through a screen of trees. The river winds along for about a kilometre and empties into Steel Lake over a small drop that could be run in high water. Another moose, a cow, was sighted in the river and upon seeing us bolted with much commotion into the bush.

We camped that night just past the first point on the east shore of Steel Lake. After cleaning up the place of garbage, we set up camp. This area appeared to be a fly-in camp as the condition of the portages did not indicate all those supplies were carried in (beer bottles and cans, fruit cake cans and many other exotic species of foodstuffs.) An aluminum boat marked with "W.P." was hidden in the bush.

Steel Lake is a gem with crystal clear water and interesting shoreline with everything from sand beaches to sheer rock faces. It is thirty kilometres long and fairly narrow with several deep bays. Of the several campsites noted only two were recently used, one at either end. The rest hardly had any soot left on the fire pit stones.

The lake ends in a large bay with a sand beach. The first riffle on the river out of the Steel Lake was run. The second portage, however, must be carried as the river drops sharply through rocks. This rocky, hilly portage ends in a small pool that empties over a rapid into Eaglecrest Lake. It ends at an excellent campsite where we stayed for two days and filled up on pickerel.

The run down the Steel River really begins at this point. The river drops and twists its way to Waiting Lake. We ran the next four sets. The run to this point would be quite difficult during high water due to the narrowness of the river and the numerous sweepers. The river from here to Rainbow Falls alternates with riffles and lakes. The portage at the falls is on the right, four-hundred metres long and a good trail. It passes an excellent camp site near the end of the trail. The falls are quite spectacular and drop twenty metres in two sets. Below them, for about a kilometre, there are several interesting riffles. The river then levels out and although it has a fair current, wanders and loops endlessly for about fifty kilometres, to empty into Santoy Lake near a camp. To break the monotony there are five log jams with good portages around each. Wildlife is abundant on this stretch. Moose, beaver, mink, muskrat, mergansers and other ducks abound.

We camped at the last log jam and set out next day for the falls where the Steel River leaves Santoy Lake. These falls are just as magnificent a sight and drop about forty metres in two sets.

We camped here at the start of the portage around the falls. This portage drops steeply. It bypasses a rapids that drops through a rocky cut. For the next four kilometres the river is almost flat. It then starts down the last drop to Santoy Bay and Lake Superior.

The first rapid is a dandy and has a portage on the right around the worst section. We lined about two-hundred metres to a bend and then ran the rest down to the Lake. This section is a super white water run! We paddled out onto Santoy Bay. Lake Superior was fairly calm so we started for Ashburton Bay Prisoner's Cove and Neys Campground twenty-five kilometres away. This is a rocky spectacular paddle, passing many inland coves and several large islands including Pic and Slate Islands. (These two islands have native caribou herds that, according to park employees, are doing well and number approximately three-hundred.)

The fishing was good throughout the trip with lake trout, pike, pickerel and brook trout.

The Steel River circle route is a super wilderness canoe trip. During our ten days no other trippers were sighted. (We did see motor boats at a distance on Santoy Lake.) The nature of this route makes it suitable only for experienced trippers, especially during high water. The trip down Lake Superior could be quite hazardous and should be taken with caution. The water is COLD! and some sections have no shelter in the event of a squall.

P.S.: No pictures this trip. The camera is somewhere on Steel Lake!