

skootamata-black

A spell of mild weather in mid-March gave us hope that winter, after changing its mind several times, had really decided to leave. Accordingly, we headed east to the Moira watershed to where three steep tributaries tumble off the Canadian shield to the St. Lawrence lowlands. The upper Moira again looked too shallow, so Bob Almack and John Cross ran the upper Skootamata on Friday, finishing at Flinton where we would meet the others next morning for the more exciting portion of the river.

The ice-covered expanse of Skootamata Lake, chilling the wind that blew beneath the deceptive bright sun, raised our apprehensions somewhat, on two counts. The upper Skootamata has several wide, slow expansions where the ice might well be, like that on the lake, unbreakable. (In fact, cottagers were still driving snowmobiles out to ice-fish.) And of course, the open, rapid sections posed the hazard of a dumping which, wool-clothed or not, we particularly wished to avoid.



Sure enough, several kilometres from the start, the river widened out and solidified in a white sheet far smoother than our thought-furrowed brows as we slid toward it on the following wind. We were now to run through our complete repertoire of ice-canoeing techniques, some of which we invented on the spot. The skin of new ice was easy to slice through with the bow of the aluminum canoe, though the jagged shards rasping down the sides gave out an unsettling roar. When the ice thickened, we paddled hard up on to it and broke it with out weight, ice-breaker fashion. It was quickly becoming apparent that we could not go far this way: we were tiring, our paddles were shredding, and the ice was thickening. We kept heading for shore until the ice became too thick for the canoe to break but not, we feared, trustworthy under our feet. It was now we hit on the "Isaac's Third" method of propulsion, which sometimes works in floating logjams as well as on ice, as the Dickey Creek trip was later to demonstrate. One or both partners inch the canoe forward by violent backwards jerks of their bodies. The good work accomplished by the equal and opposite reaction would be all undone as they moved back into position for another jerk, were it not that one partner has dug his paddle into the ice, thus retaining the gain made. So with Bob leaning on his paddle and me jumping like Cheetah, we reached shore to consider

the gloomy prospect of a bushwhack portage - around a lake! We cheered up when some careful experiments revealed that the ice near shore was very solid indeed; solid enough to "scooter" (Keep one foot in the canoe and push with the other). As we gained confidence in our ice, we transferred both feet to it so we could walk along, pushing. (We never dared go far enough from the boat to tow it on a rope.) In this way, we passed to the more orthodox obstacles of the open river.

The upper Skootamata has some attractive elm swamp meanders, fortunately with not many fallen logs; some steep chutes which must be portaged; and some runnable rapids, particularly lower down where the influx of tributaries raises the volume of flow. It is not really a "whitewater" trip, however; that epithet is better applied to the section below Flinton.

We were unable to do the whole of that section on Saturday because of a time-consuming episode on a rapid a few kilometres from Flinton. A large rock in the middle of the fairway might conceivably be passed on either side: Bob and I, perhaps because of insufficient planning and communication, were not entirely settled on which it was to be; the river impartially settled the matter by taking one end of the canoe to each side of the rock and wrapping it, with irresistible force, around the immovable object. We spent as few seconds as possible in the water, appreciating the value of helping hands, rescue ropes and canoes, waterproofed clothesbags, and hot drinks waiting on shore. Then we proceeded to the harder task of rescuing the canoe.

Luckily, a thirty metre line was attached to the stern of the canoe. Unluckily, it was attached to the little clevis-pin-and-split-right shackle that Grumman does not guarantee. Luckily, the shackle held together just long enough to haul the canoe off the rock. (It fell apart in Jim's hand when the canoe floated to shore.) John and Leslie rigged the rope to a tree on the bank and attached another rope, a slack-taker-upper, with a prussiking knot (which we should look up and learn). Then all seven of us pulled, tightened, stopped, rested, ate gorp, pulled some more, Cameron placed a lever, pulled, until off it came, looking like a beer can on a site invaded by conscientious WCAers. Since I left the trip at this point to run back to Jim's car, I'll pass the narration on to Jim.

The rest of the day went without further mishap, probably because what had happened to John's canoe made us, perhaps subconsciously, a little more cautious.

The Skootamata is not a good whitewater river for open canoes as compared with Beaver Creek, Crowe and Black rivers. The rapids are separated with long sections of flat water with many of the rapids being sharp drops over ledges and falls which means many short but bothersome portages. Those rapids which are runnable are mostly steep, narrow chutes with standing waves at the bottom.

We were off the river reasonably early, 4:30, but getting the car shuffle completed and then a second car shuffle to get John and Bob back to their car at Lake Skootamata took considerable time. It was dark when we parked on the main street of Madoc, searching for a restaurant. The only place open was a restaurant which hadn't been redecorated for decades. However, it was clean and offered both Canadian and Chinese food.

Supper over, we headed north to Bannockburn, then east to Cooper and continued east to the Black River. The last five kilometres were on a dirt road with lots of soft spots. It wasn't until driving out to do the car shuffle next morning that we realized just how soft and goeey that stuff was.

John Cross
Jim Greenacre