



bird atlassing on the fawn - severn

George Fairfield

How often do you get a chance to go on a 4 week, 320 kilometre wilderness canoe trip with a good portion of your expenses paid? You would expect that canoeists faced with the increasingly high air fares would be scrambling to sign up for such a trip. Yet when Mike Cadman advertized in *Nastawgan* and several other publications for canoeists and birders to join him on a four week trip down the Fawn River to the Severn and down the Severn to Hudson Bay he was only able to get three people to go with him: Earl Fairbanks, Jim Tasker, and the author.

Perhaps many canoeists were discouraged by the lack of white water canoeing and the large amount of hiking on the muskeg that was involved. After all this was a trip to discover what species of birds nested in the remote north-west corner of Ontario. The canoeing was only a way of getting to them.

Because of the scientific value of the trip Austin Airways agreed to provide air transportation on their scheduled flights at no charge provided that there were empty seats available. In addition the James L. Baillie Memorial Fund made a generous contribution toward the expenses.

Mike planned the trip to fill in one of the remaining hard-to-get-to areas in Ontario. As Directors of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Project (a joint project of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and the Long Point Bird Observatory) Mike's job is to see that the whole province is surveyed for breeding evidence. The southern part of Ontario has been divided into ten kilometre squares with birders assigned to each square. The northern part of the province is so sparsely populated that it must be done in 100 kilometre squares with the participants merely sampling the major habitat types in each square. Our job was to sample three 100 kilometre square beginning 110 kilometres north of Big Trout Lake and ending at Fort Severn on Hudson Bay.

On June 17th, 1983 Austin Airways flew us from Sioux Lookout to the town of Big Trout Lake, where we rented two Grumman canoes. The Hudson Bay Company have a "U-Paddle" service which allows you to pick up a canoe at one of their locations and drop it off at another. Because of the expense of flying the canoes back to their point of origin the rental is high. We paid \$20.00 per canoe per day. This was our major expense but it was

At Big Trout Lake we chartered a small float plane to fly us in to the south edge of our first block on the Fawn River. This placed us in the Hudson Bay Lowlands just north of the Precambrian Shield. We were below the heavy rapids on the Fawn. The rivers drop another 140 metres in the 320 kilometres to Hudson Bay. Most of this is made up of a steady gradient which produces a current of eight to ten kilometres per hour. Most of the rapids were covered by the high water leaving only a few rocks to avoid.

There were some fairly heavy rapids on the Severn River. I had no previous experience with very large rivers and was surprised to find that no single classification could be assigned to a rapids. When the distance across the rapids is over one kilometre you can have, for example, Class II rapids on the right bank, Class IV rapids in the centre and Class I on the left bank. If you placed your canoe correctly you could make a very fast smooth run through the rapids while a short distance away the river was dropping over ledges and piling up in large standing waves.

The only portage of the whole trip was at White Seal Rapids, 40 kilometres above Fort Severn. The portage was 1.6 kilometres long but the walking was easy along the open flood plain.

Good camp sites were rare on the Fawn and Severn Rivers. There was kilometre after kilometre of sloping clay banks, either newly eroded and muddy or covered with a dense growth of willow and alder. The top of the bank was usually flat and well drained but entailed a difficult climb from the river. The best campsites were on level areas near the mouth of tributary rivers and on the occasional low ice-scoured islands.

Firewood was plentiful except on the above-mentioned islands where the outgoing river ice had scraped off every piece of loose wood. Since these were often the only reasonable campsites we were reduced to ferrying wood across from the adjacent shoreline. On two or three occasions when dry wood was non-existent we were glad of a small Coleman stove.

Our bill of fare for the first two weeks was fairly luxurious. We had good luck with the fishing. A few casts at the mouth of an incoming stream would produce all the pickerel and pike we could eat. Jim landed a two pound speckled trout that was delicious when wrapped in