

beaver dam, and portaged north through an oak thicket and then west over a hill to Alice Lake.

Alice Lake runs north for almost two kilometres. There is a lot of glacial till in the hills surrounding its southern half. The acid precipitation and heavy metal particulate fallout denuded much of the area. This led to massive erosion. Now, the lake is milky with suspended clay.

A small flock of seagulls was perched on an island in north Alice Lake. The north shore is rimmed with cattails. Beyond them towers the Coniston slag heap: one square kilometre, up to 50 metres high. I was directly in front of the face, so I could not accurately judge the slope. My guess was 40 degrees. From the northwest bay of Alice Lake, I portaged to Baby Lake. The portage landscape was extremely odd. Baby Lake originally drained through the southwest into Daisy Lake. In 1909, CP's rail bed diked the outflow. Since then, Baby Lake has drained northwest into Alice Lake, which has left part of Baby Lake's original lake bed exposed. There is little soil in the drainage basin, and what remains is acidified and contaminated by metal particulate. Nothing grows on the portage. Quite eerie.



Since 1972, when INCO's Coniston smelting operations ceased, Baby Lake has begun to recover. Its pH has risen from 4.05 to 5.8, and the metal levels have declined 60 to 90%, with the strongest rates of decline in the most extant metals, nickel and copper. To date, the recovery has not included life. Can you say phytotoxic? Too big a word? Then just chant fire and brimstone.

The 500-metre carry between Baby and Daisy lakes starts with a 30-metre-high CP rail causeway. Water draining northeast off the causeway into Baby Lake flows into Georgian Bay via the Wanapitei and French rivers. Water draining southwest off the causeway flows into Georgian Bay via the Whitefish River. Bedrock to the northwest is part of the Southern Province, which is relatively unmetamorphosed rock. Bedrock to the southeast is part of the Grenville Province, which is primarily highly metamorphosed rock. The Grenville Front and a local fault run up the middle of Daisy and Baby lakes. The rail cut at

the north end of the causeway is through wanapitei quartzite, while the cut at the south end is through quartz monzonite. Quite an intersection. Too bad it's sterile.

I left my boat on the causeway and scrambled another 30 metres up the quartz monzonite to watch the sun set. The view to the south was exceptional, for the topography was rugged indeed. Once the sun went down, I finished the portage and set up camp beside Daisy Lake, at the head of the wide canyon which the portage had followed.

The next morning, after breaking camp, I paddled southwest down Daisy Lake for two kilometres. The water was turquoise, due to the lake's high acidity. At the southwest end of the lake, I portaged west-northwest out of the Dead Zone for one kilometre over a couple of 25-metre ridges where a link between Highways 69 and 17 is being proposed. Water from the lake I was portaging to eventually flows into Georgian Bay via the Vermilion and Spanish rivers. Unfortunately, the lake turned out to be a beaver marsh, which presented a problem. Portaging around it would have added another kilometre over rugged territory, so I tried poling across while sitting up on the back deck with one leg tucked underneath me. The extra leverage this position afforded made poling through the mat possible, but only just. The poling was extremely slow, and raised vile smelling gas. Several times, I found myself literally bogged down while methane and odorous hydrogen sulfide bubbled around me. Quite a difference from the sterile lakes in the Dead Zone.

After crossing the marsh on a more or less west-northwest line, I portaged west-southwest for half a kilometre to Perch Lake. The put-in was delightful! I carried through tall reed grass until I found a beaver trail, and then followed the trail until it lowered and widened into a canal. I poled down the canal until it opened up into the lake.

Perch Lake is about one quarter of a square kilometre, so the paddle west across it was too brief. A small flock of ducks rose as I approached the lake's outflow, which was blocked by a marsh. I paddled north, up the west bank, until I came to a large beaver canal running west. It was three metres wide, ran straight as an arrow for over 200 metres, and was dotted with beaver and muskrat lodge entrances. Mondo condo. The channel ended at a beaver dam just a few metres from the western arm of Lake Laurentian, which was exactly where I wanted to go. Beavers never cease to amaze me.

I surprised a family of homo sapiens when I hauled over the dam. They were quite lost, and were heading directly away from where they thought they were going. After turning them around, I paddled out into the main channel of Lake Laurentian and followed it north-northwest for one kilometre to a 30-metre wanapitei quartzite ridge, where I took out at the Nickel District Conservation Area nature chalet. A few minutes later the lost family happily wandered in.

While I was loading my boat onto Rocinante, a friend from the local cross-country ski set asked me where a nice place to walk was. After thinking about how alive Perch and Laurentian lakes were when compared to Alice, Baby, and Daisy lakes of the Dead Zone, I pointed to where the lost family had emerged. Trick or treat? You tell me.