

CRYPTOZOOLOGY AND WILDERNESS CANOEING

Ron Jasiuk

"... Cryptozoologists concern themselves with creatures that have been rumored to exist in shapes, in places, in sizes, or in time periods whereby they somehow violate what is expected."

From *The Flight of the Iguana* by D. Quammen

In the summer of '88 my wife Ann and I were looking for an out-of-the-ordinary canoe trip. We wanted a questing-type expedition. Since both of us were trained as biologists, something along the lines of searching for barren-ground grizzlies in the Northwest Territories or photographing freshwater seals in Ungava would have been most suitable. Unfortunately, as in previous years and most likely for a few more years to come, lack of resources (money and time) limit our wanderings. In spite of these limitations we discovered for ourselves a tripping area a mere four-hour drive from home that fulfilled our desire for some canoeing exotica.

The setting of our trip was the lower French River, west of Highway 69 and south-southeast of Sudbury, Ontario. We started at a marina within earshot of the highway. The first part of our route was to take us down the French River to its mouth, then east across a portion of Georgian Bay. The return leg of the loop involved travelling north and east up the Pickerel River to a portage east of Highway 69 that took us back to the French just upstream of our put-in. The rivers and the route can be traced on a road map of Ontario. The journey appears simple and straightforward. The true nature of the area, though, is one of a vast array of channels, thick with ice-scoured, wind-swept islands and deceptively long bays.

The paddling attributes of the area are quite varied. One morning we paddled large open sections of Georgian Bay, entranced by its emerald green waters and limitless horizons; by the afternoon we were in protected channels so narrow that we could touch both shores at the same time with outstretched paddles. We ran two easy rapids, lined down a third, and made only five portages during 80 km of canoeing. The portage at Recollet Falls involved dragging our loaded canoe along a wooden tramway. The multitude of islands and channels in the area gave us an almost infinite number of possible route variations. During our four days of paddling we saw only two other canoeing parties. Fishermen in small motorboats were quite common in some areas, particularly as we neared the highway crossings of the French and Pickerel Rivers.

The historical importance of the French River is well known. A historic marker on the west side of Highway 69 on the south shore of the river commemorates the passage of the Voyageurs and others. We explored another historical feature not as widely known as the routes of the Voyageurs, the remains of the town of Coponaning. Little is left of this

town along the shores of the Main Outlet of the French. Reid and Grand write that in the 1890s the town had houses for 300 people, two hotels, and two churches. While exploring the shrub-covered town site, we found old rusting boilers and the foundation of a mill. There was an abundance of game trails crisscrossing the site. It was here that we found the carcass of a black bear. Unexpected, but not what we were searching for.

For us the allure of this area was the possibility of encountering some of its unusual fauna. It is in this part of Ontario that one has the chance of seeing such cryptic creatures as rattlesnakes, elk (also known as wapiti), and bison. The rare massasauga rattlesnake, Ontario's only surviving rattlesnake, is said to be abundant at the mouth of the French. Both the elk and the bison are present as re-introduced species. The wapiti is the second largest member of the deer family next to the moose, and the bison is the largest terrestrial mammal in Canada.

It was with these insights that Ann and I went to the lower French River to enjoy the paddling, the sense of history, and to search for signs of massasaugas, wapiti, and bison. Like all good quests, success was not assured. It was the prospect of discovery that gave our trip its exotic flavor. We felt that seeing a snake would be most likely and would please us greatly, but finding any clue indicating the presence of wapiti or bison would send us into ecstasy. As it turned out, the massasaugas eluded us, and the bison took on a mythical form, but the wapiti came through spectacularly. To describe the encounter I have deciphered, transcribed, and fleshed-out our map notes.

Fri. Aug. 19 Map Reference: 41-1/2 Delamere, Grid reference - 143945

Another windless, sunny, bug-free morning. Late start this morning, 10:00 am, as we went for a swim, lingered over breakfast and waited for the dew to evaporate off of the tent. From the large island to the north, we heard low moaning snorts. Deer, wapiti, bison, moose? Toured a small marshy bay to the east of our site to search for rattlers and hoofprints. No luck, though green frogs were plentiful. As we entered Canoe Channel saw the head of a large deer-like animal about 100 m to the north swimming from east to west towards the island. We watched through binoculars as it got up on the near shore. Description: A very large antlerless "deer." Tawny colour. Ran into the woods. Ron searched site of emergence from water for hoofprints while Ann searched for hair that might have been brushed off as it entered the woods. (Had we found any hair we would have taken it to a biologist or taxidermist for identification.) Tried to trail the animal, no use. Found one track in earth, measurements 7.6 cm wide and 12.7 cm long.

At first Ann and I called the creature a DELK for although we got a good look at it, neither of us could positively say whether it was a deer or an elk. We have seen