



The route from Camsell Portage to Reliance involved 40 portages. Most were short and easy, on hard ground through open trees. Half showed signs of the original trail, or recent use. I used a compass to check direction all the time. Where there was no sign of a trail I would follow a bearing through the trees, marking my route with orange tape every 20 metres, or where necessary, to leave a trail I could see from both directions. There was something exciting about heading into the bush on a compass bearing and finding a lake at the end of it. On my last carry across a portage I would remove all the tapes. There were no portages between Salkeld and Tronka Chua Lakes, just several interesting narrows. I managed to paddle and line the rapid which flows into the north end of Tronka Chua. By continuing to the end of the arm, I found I was only a 65-pace portage from Nonacho Lake and the Taltson watershed. Near here I heard a loon on the lake crying a very violent alarm. It was rising to and falling from its full height, with breast out and wings paddling. It repeated this many times until it flopped back and began swimming. It was then I saw the large back of a pike which was being dragged through the water as it held the loon's foot. Pike weigh up to 23 kilos in these lakes and are known to eat waterfowl.

Norman Lake is the last in this highway of lakes where little height is gained or lost. I now wanted to reach the Snowdrift River, and managed to connect up five small lakes, a route of no little interest. The portages were fairly easy, and the last one rose through the trees and suddenly burst into the open on the edge of a scarp overlooking the Snowdrift valley. I could see the river meandering in the distance, with its sandy beaches glinting in the sunlight. Later from my camp on a bluff I watched a moose browse on the willows below.

After a day held up by thunderstorms I had an enjoyable 29-kilometre paddle downstream to a point below Robert Lake. There were two rapids; the first an easy run, and the second a short, well-marked portage on the right bank. The portage to Robert Lake took me five hours and was uphill all the way. At the lake I found I had missed a well-cut trail which appeared to follow a ridge of high ground from a point upriver of my camp. Both Dion and Daisy lakes had pristine campsites with sandy beaches and wall-to-wall caribou moss carpeting. I felt quite guilty, despoiling such beauty with my footprints. The sun shone and the light frosts at night cleared the bugs.

From my campsite on Daisy Lake I climbed a nearby hill and looked down toward Meridian Lake and the deep trench of Great Slave Lake. I sighted a couple of float planes, indicating activity at Reliance, and immediately began to feel that the country was getting crowded. Below me was a steep barrier called MacDonald Cliff, down through which I had to find a way. The map showed a break in the contours at the north end of Daisy Lake (75K3681), and I was pleased to find a trail here. This portage to a small lake just before Meridian Lake turned out to be the toughest of the trip, despite losing about 120 metres in altitude. There were several wet, marshy sections and three steep sections, one of which dropped through a rocky gorge, and route finding was difficult. I camped on a bear's favorite sunbathing spot that night, too tired to look elsewhere.

The creek into Meridian Lake was choked by a half-built beaver dam over which I managed to drag the canoe. The lake is surrounded by cliffs. I was held up two days by wind, but was lucky to have the company of three fresh-water otters. At the portage into Charlton Bay (75K4485) a black bear stepped aside and let me descend 60 metres down a good trail in peace. The final portage cut off a finger of land and allowed me to approach Reliance along the Maufelly Point, where I arrived 40 days after leaving Camsell Portage. Reliance has two permanent households, a weather station, and a temporary summer construction camp. I received real northern hospitality from them all, and left my canoe with Roger Catlin to await next year's trip.



WCA member Steve Read lives in England and has spent decades climbing and mountaineering throughout the world. He has taken to extended paddling in Canada's North, where he finds "the combination of history and wilderness travel in the archaic Canadian canoe a magical experience."