



*Crotch Cruncher*

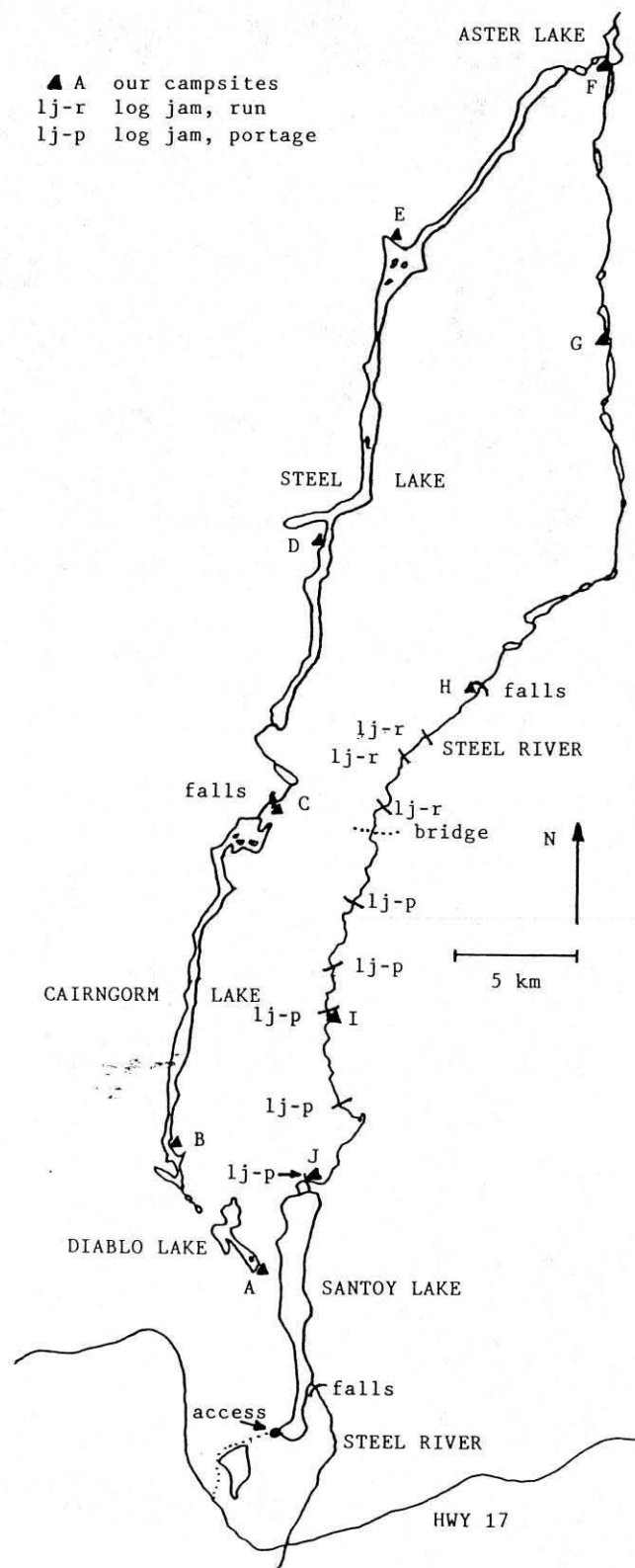
Then, at the far southern tip of splendid 16-km long Cairngorm Lake, the good part begins; from now on the rest of the 170 km is all downhill via lakes and moving water, a drop of 110 metres back to Santoy Lake. After the ordeal of the first four portages — which took us, slow heavily-loaded old trippers that we are, two days to do — we had a much-enjoyed lay-over day at the first campsite we found on Cairngorm, a real beauty on a wide peninsula facing north. The blueberries were numerous, the weather was fine, and sleeping was the order of the day.

Cairngorm Lake, as well as much longer Steel Lake further down, is oriented almost exactly north-south. Both lakes are lined with rolling hills and quite narrow in places, and it is no problem to switch from shore to shore trying to avoid east or west winds. On these lakes we almost permanently had north-northwest wind, however; paddling close to the left shore did give some shelter but not much.

The north end of Cairngorm widens to a bit more lake-like circular shape and has some nice islands. Although we looked for it, we could not find the heron rookery that is reportedly somewhere around here.

The narrow stream that connects Cairngorm Lake to Steel Lake is the first indication of flowing water of the Steel River. This part is not canoeable and ends tumbling over a waterfall into a pool partly filled with logs and deadfall. Because of a lack of official names and for my own identification I called this one First Falls.

This stretch of the Steel River is bypassed via a 400-m portage that begins at the end of a narrow bay at the northeast top of Cairngorm Lake. The easy trail leads to a good campsite overlooking the pool below First Falls. I have never seen such a lush, enchanting forest floor as that crossed by the portage trail just before the campsite. A thick, richly-green, undulating carpet of moss and ferns, accentuated here and there by dark red bunchberries and whitish mushrooms, dead leaves and branches. A perfect spot to just sit on a log and look, doing nothing, absorbing nature's beauty, listening, smelling, feeling.



Below the First Falls' pool the narrow river is very shallow and in places obstructed by fallen trees. Wading the canoe is called for until the river becomes deeper before it enters Moose Lake, a quiet and unremarkable body of water, about 1.5 kilometres long. Two portages and several beaver dam lift-overs later the southern tip of Steel Lake is reached.