

## RUNNING THE RAPIDS

*Impressions from a summer 1991 trip; by Jon Berger with help from Kit Wallace, Michael, and Erika.*

A grey overcast sky turned to blue clear with bright light as we approached the first rapids. Although we had been out more than two weeks, this was our first real downstream run. Even though I had been down the Miniss River, which flows northeast of Sioux Lookout in northwest Ontario, three other times, the nervousness of the first run built up as we neared the top of the drop. Kit and I manoeuvred the canoe through the shallows and I pulled up and secured the stern so I could scout the water.

Kit stayed with Michael and Erika as I went down the rocks and over and under the overhanging cedars. At various points I checked the water. The rapid was not difficult it's a straight shot if you stay off the boulders that create the large waves near the bottom. I checked again and weighed all that might go wrong. When you run with your children in the boat, and travel with only one canoe, a second and third look are mandatory.

Back at the canoe, I nodded to Kit, and said, "It's okay, but you should check it." Kit went off for her scout and I chatted with Michael and watched the sleeping Erika. Kit returned and we both gauged the current and the whole situation. Inside I felt the familiar fright mixed with the anticipation of the run. The thoughts went through my head bright clear, cool breeze, straight shot mixed with an almost sickening feeling of inability to act. I have had this fear at the top of rapids many times before. It is an old companion

that I know well. I can shake it by looking down the rapid at the landmarks and by trying to get a feel for the rhythm of the water. This way I can understand the speed and the current's direction and I know when to make my own strokes.

I knew this type of rapid — not much manoeuvring, a lot of water, a big surge, and then the need to hit a needle-like line at the bottom. I knew if we missed that opening we would go through without any problem, but we might take a bit of water. I anticipated these events because although I knew the route down the rapid, I did not feel in the groove. I was only guessing how the canoe would behave during the run. Certainly it was a very educated guess, one that allowed a safe run. I was just rusty. If we had run miles of the stuff in the weeks before I would have had the confidence. I knew that feeling would return after the run.

Kit agreed that the run was safe. Again we checked the line from the top. We put on the life jackets and off we went. At this moment, I still felt unsure. I kept repeating to myself, "Ride it, ride it, keep the line." We went in fast. The ride is much faster for Kit in the bow than it is for me in the stern, and we moved quickly through the top section. I could feel the current bite on the paddle. I could feel the surge lifting the stern. I sensed rather than heard the roar of the whitewater. I saw the explosion of the haystacks, and at one point, each little droplet of water stood out. A wave rose on my right; we were too close to the big surge at the bottom. I gave a twist of the paddle to move us to the left, but the wave leaped across the gunwale and we took a bit of water.

