

Near noon the pick-up boat appeared through the fog. We raced about packing gear. I almost had to fight with Bill to keep him from carrying too much and eventually we got our gear out onto the slippery rocks. Loading was difficult with the canoe being bounced around by the surge and we gave up at getting the spray cover snapped all the way aft. When we were loaded and ready to launch we briefly reviewed our plan. The swell was running at three feet and timing was important. On the rising swell Bill clambered aboard, I shoved off and leapt into position in the stern and we paddled like all hell to get out of the cove before the wave could drop out beneath, leaving us stranded on a rock and at the mercy of the next breaker.

It always surprises me how close one can be with impunity to waves breaking against a rocky shore. Hardly a canoe width away on both sides the water looked like a class 4 rapid and yet we bobbed through nicely. No more than a canoe length out of the cove and we had an easy float over to the pick-up boat.

The boat trip to Nain was a delight once I got over my traditional bout of power boat-induced sea sickness. Once purged I felt fine but the first few hours were a fresh hell of repeated trips to the rail. We stopped at

Hebron, had a steak dinner (your meals were great, Tija, but ...), and got the first-class tour of the mission site the next day from a young fellow doing his doctorate on Moravian churches.

We arrived at Nain at about one in the morning. Later that day we toured the town where the scars of mining exploitation are already visible. These are hardy people but I don't think they will survive prosperity. We were lucky (you need it if you're travelling up there) and got flights out to Goose Bay and, eventually, Montreal where my van had been left.

In retrospect we might have been able to continue the trip from Miriam Lake but one doesn't know. In the absence of professional diagnosis every error should be on the side of caution and I feel reasonably good about the decision to request pick-up. It is unlikely that the same opportunity would have presented itself later in the trip if it had been needed. One must always keep in clear perspective the objective of a wilderness trip. We were there for the enjoyment and not to prove our survival skills, our courage, or our perseverance. We do that every day here in Ontario.

THE ESKER

Camped at the base of an esker that looked to be 60 metres high. Looked even higher from canoe level. Just around the nose of the esker where it met the river, there was a wide flat spot and a sheltering grove of trees. Too scenic to pass up. One look into the eyes of the buddies said that the vote to camp here would be unanimous. Later, after setting up camp, all of us hiked up to the top of the esker for a look around.

Tough climb up to the top. Soft sand. For every two steps up, slide one step down. My feet tell me that we've done this dance before. Once at the top the esker was fairly level. Relatively easy to walk along the ridge as long as you didn't lose altitude. Good view on both sides of the esker for quite a distance. The setting was so dramatic that we decided to follow the ridge for a kilometre or two and do a little exploring.

Looking at the notes of the hike. Made four entries:

- Lots of footprints going across the esker. Some old, some not. None of the prints made by man.
- A buried tree slowly re-emerging from a depression in the sand.
- Exposed rocks blown clean by the wind.
- Scattered shrubs struggling to survive. As porous as the sand is, the plants must have a widespread root system to capture rain before it sinks out of reach.

Either that or they must have deep roots.

Marvelling at how clean the sand is. It could be packaged right up as is and sold for use in children's sandboxes back in the city. Thought how much better it would be to bring the children here instead. They could discover more about the natural world and where sand comes from than they ever could from a sandbox. Sand in sandboxes eventually disappears. What the children learn here would be with them forever.

This esker could be with us forever too. It could be with us till the next ice age. That is, if we choose to leave it alone.

According to the map this esker stretches on for 15-plus kilometres. I wonder what it would be like to take a couple of days and hike it to the far end. What awaits at the end not touched by the river. Always the unknown. Maybe that's why we keep coming back. The chance, the golden chance to explore the unknown.

Man was born to wander. We are tied by families, jobs, and obligations; but the urge to wander must be a root that also goes very deep.

Greg Went