

Riding the Wild Seal River

A whitewater novice canoes the Seal River through Canadian Shield and raw tundra. En route, from the tiny northern Manitoba community of Tadoule Lake to Hudson Bay, she encounters 42 sets of rapids, from highly intimidating to terrifying.

BY JUDY WAYTIUK

The haystack wave towered a metre above the spray-skirted red Royalex canoe's bow where I kneeled, a terrified whitewater novice. Clutching the paddle, I gaped at the roaring wall of water and went into brain stall. Rob Currie, whitewater guide and sternman, bellowed, "Paddle, Judy! Forward!" I obeyed. The canoe lurched ahead, drenching me and filling my spray-skirt girdle with gallons of northern Manitoba's wild, icy Seal River.

We bucked and bounced down another half-kilometer of one of Mother Nature's more extravagant water tantrums before eddying out into a quiet spot at the bottom of the

unnamed rapids marking the transition from Negassa Lake to Shetanei Lake. Sputtering, I heaved the spray-skirt up to spill out the water it had collected, and heard Rob hoot, "A deer in headlights! Swear-to-gawd, you looked scared as a deer caught in headlights!"

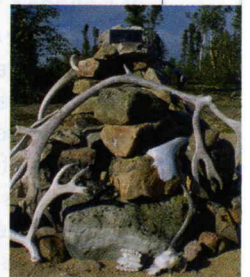
In the second canoe, guffaws rolled out from Mark Loewen, our

second guide, and Eric Lindberg, an American writer-photographer. It was the best fun I'd had in years, and I wanted more. I got plenty more.

That evening, we set up our first camp of ten nights on the river. We hauled food and gear packs to the top of a wide, flat esker. There, a reverently arranged pile of rocks and caribou antlers is topped by a small brass plaque saluting Bill Mason, Canada's premiere canoeist. The plaque reads simply: His Spirit Will Come Through. Mason never got here. He

continued on page 16

Forty-two sets of rapids rate the Seal River as 'high volume' to seasoned paddlers.



"His Spirit Will Come Through" reads the memorial to Canada's premier canoeist Bill Mason.

Photos: Judy Waytiuk



continued from page 15

meant to paddle the Seal in 1988, but died that year of cancer. The plaque, installed by a paddler who intended to accompany Mason, has become a shrine. Passing canoeists carve notes onto bits of water-worn wood and tuck them into the heap of stone and bone.

The Seal springs to life a couple of lakes beyond the tiny northern Manitoba Sayisi Dene community of Tadoule Lake and flows to Hudson Bay through 260 kilometers of pristine Canadian Shield country and untouched tundra. Of northern Manitoba's four major rivers, only the Seal remains utterly undeveloped. One of Canada's wildest rivers, it was too rugged for the early fur traders. It is still considered too remote and raw for mining or hydro development. But it is home to caribou, moose, wolverines, polar bears and thousands of beluga whales that summer near its estuary on Hudson Bay. Native people call this the Land of Little Sticks, after its sparse stands of desperately thin little trees.

The Seal is a hair-raisingly wild ride-of-a-lifetime for the few dozen white-water enthusiasts who tackle it during the short, glorious Northern summer. For every kilometer of placid surface, the river offers up another of churning whitewater – some of it fierce Class VI stuff, studded with jutting chunks of worn rock and peppered with high waves, nasty cross-currents and hidden stone ledges. The river boasts 42 sets of rapids, most of them what veterans call “high volume” or “technical.” To novices, this translates to “highly intimidating” or “terrifying.” Even experts



approach Bastion Rock and Deaf Rapids – the most challenging – with profound caution. Here, paddlers float through a virtually undiscovered piece of the two-billion-year-old Canadian Shield – the oldest exposed part of the planet. This isolation and its remarkable route through a landscape that shifts from green boreal forest to stark tundra are the major reasons the Seal was declared a Canadian Heritage River in 1992. The next year, a massive northern forest fire swept this land. Its results are still visible as burnt-over rock only now being greened by advanc-

ing thickets of shore willow. Ten years after the fire, as we clambered over rugged, stony Bastion Rock to eyeball its rapids for relatively safe passage, dead timber still smelling of charcoal clawed at our slickers and gloves.

Some nights we pitched our tents carefully on sandy shelves overlooking the river. Trying to avoid crushing thick ground cover of ripe, wild blueberries as we moved about, we grabbed pawfuls of berries on the way to and from the cooking fire. Other nights, our tents sat on open sand beaches or squeezed into small spaces

The changing face of the Seal River

The Seal's shoreline radically changes shape throughout its 260 km. Starting with jutting tundra rock at its mouth, it shifts to sand, sedimentary rock cliff and to lake-like conditions.

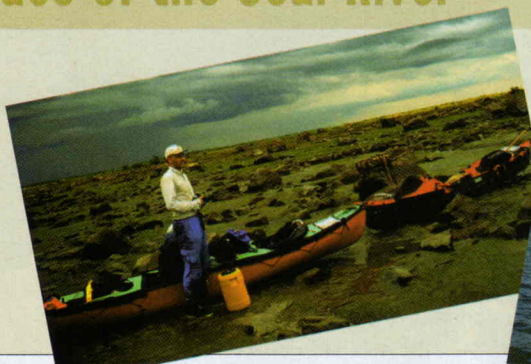


Photo: Rob Currie

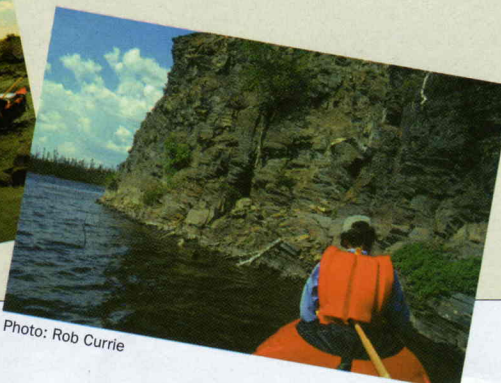
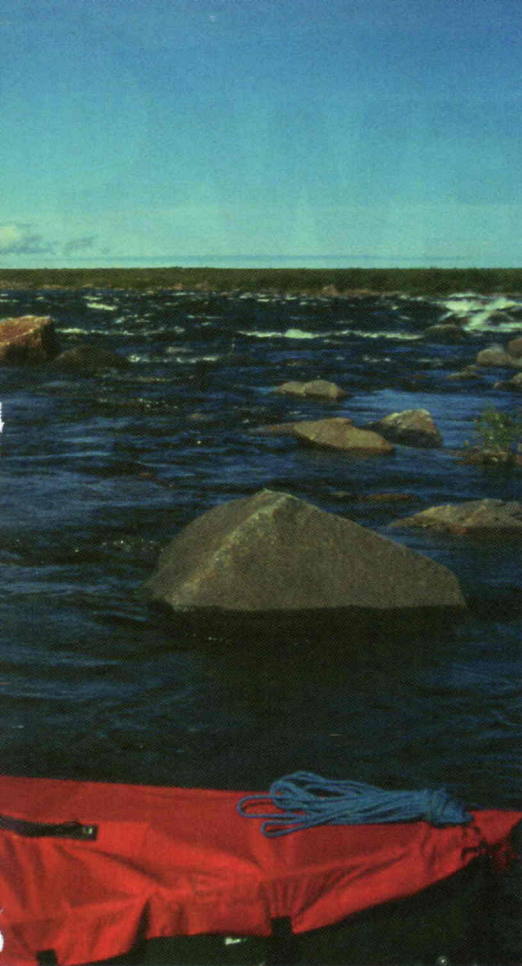


Photo: Rob Currie



Due to its raw nature and remoteness, the Seal River is the only undeveloped river in Northern Manitoba.

shore as we passed by, debating whether to lunch onshore or “raft up” and dine while watching pairs of eagles ride updrafts overhead. If there was enough time before the next rapid, we sat back and munched apples, cheese, sausage, and bread until we heard water growling ahead.

Day by day, deciduous trees grew rarer and spruces smaller and more stunted until we reached spongy tundra, lined with craggy riverside rock. The Seal quieted into a shallow, boulder-strewn channel where harbour seals – the reason for the river’s name – slithered off sunning rocks to bob curiously past us.

By our last morning, our canoes scraped rock as we inched across the river’s stony tidal estuary, aiming for a tiny fisherman’s shack on stilts at the edge of Hudson Bay. We slept there that night, tarp and sleeping bags spread on the shack’s dirty wooden floor.

In the morning, a motor launch rode the deep-water waves of the Bay while we paddled out to be plucked up and carried 46 kilometers south to Churchill and indoor plumbing, hot showers, and people, for the first time in almost two weeks.

For more information on this destination visit the Canadian Tourism Commission website at www.travelcanada.ca. ■

among thick willows, on distressingly spongy ground.

In some spots, the river widened to what seemed a vast lake. In others, it narrowed into a vicious rush of water tumbling through stone gorges. Where the channel was quiet, we paddled past Arctic swans, dignified in single-file formations, the parents bracketing their young, nervous signets. At marshy mid-river islets covered with tern nests, agitated adults swooped overhead as their fluffy babies blinked vaguely at our boats. Startled moose floundered out of shallow bays and fled on

IF YOU GO...

■ **Experienced guides are necessary.** We used **Wilderness Spirit Canoeing Adventures**. 1 866 287-1591 or 204-452-7049; info@WildernessSpirit.com. www.wildernessspirit.com

■ **From Winnipeg, paddlers fly or drive north to Thompson, then take a regional flight to remote Tadoule Lake.**

Calm Air: (204) 778-6471; www.calmair.com

Bearskin Airlines: 1 800 465-2327 or 1 807 577-1141; www.bearskinairlines.com

■ **Canadian Heritage Rivers:** www.chrs.ca

■ **Manitoba Tourism:** www.travelmanitoba.com

■ **Manitoba Parks:** 1-866-MANITOBA; www.gov.mb.ca/natres/parks



Photo: Rob Currie

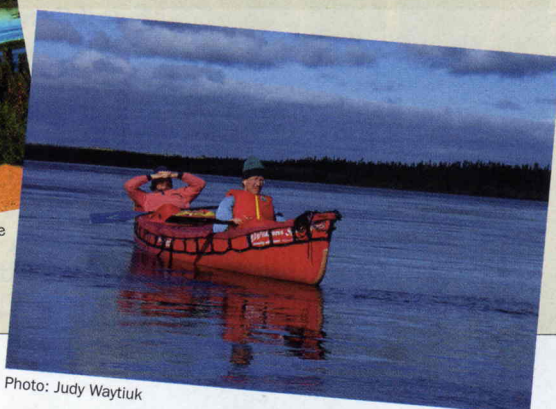


Photo: Judy Waytiuk

A harbour seal basks on the rocks of the river that bears its name.



Photo: John Warden