

Temagami Spring Trip: Sturgeon, Chiniguchi, Obabika

**by Ed MacPherson
April 30 – May 16, 2007**

The ice went out early this spring in Temagami but I was unable to get away until Monday April 30th. I was on the road at 6AM, traveling to Sturgeon Falls and then into the bush via the #805. This was to be mostly last year's trip that I didn't get to do. I would start on Wawiagama Lake, head down the Obabika River to the Sturgeon River and then south to Kelly Lake (Ozhway Lake). From there I would travel into Chiniguchi, via Maskinonge, Matagamasi and then Chiniguchi Lake, working my way up through Dougherty, Frederick, and Stouffer before getting back onto the Sturgeon River. The plan was to then travel south to where Pilgrim Creek enters the Sturgeon and from there I would go east to Yorston Lake and then south again via the Yorston River to where it joins with the Sturgeon at Upper Goose Falls returning via the Obabika River and back to Wawiagama.

That was the plan and I had lots of time to travel at the pace of a snail if necessary.

The trip along the 805 was uneventful, at least until I got to somewhere north of Emerald Lake. For those readers not aware of the 805, it dies off and becomes an un-maintained logging road north of Emerald. I didn't see a soul until I got going down a slight slope and I ran into a red pickup stuck in the centre of the road. It turns out it was a couple of young locals who I happened to know. They had wandered into a mushy spot. With some effort we managed to rock the pick up out of its trap and get it going backwards down the hill a bit. Now we had to figure out how to get both vehicles over this long oozy spot.

Bush roads can get quite mushy in some naturally wet areas, when the frost comes out of the ground. This mushy period usually lasts for a couple of weeks following the spring thaw before they start to dry out and get stable.

After cutting down several saplings from the side of the road we laid these lengthwise into the ruts. I got to be the guinea pig, but our road repair efforts worked and we both got through this mess and back on our separate ways.

Eventually I arrived at Wawiagama Lake where I planned to leave my vehicle and to stay on the lake for a bit, at one of my favorite campsites, before setting out.



This particular site on the south shore of the lake has these funky looking cedars that appear to be bent back laughing at the wind and at anyone else who looks at them.

On Wednesday I started down the Wawiagama River. It was mostly uneventful. I had put a blade in my bow saw and kept it handy as I went down the river. Just as well, there were some tree obstacles that needed removal and several small beaver L/O's to negotiate. We reached Obabika River after an hour and a bit to be greeted by a log jam that required a portage. This blockage, about 50m south of the Wawiagama River exit has been here for about 5 years and there are crude portages on the left and right hand sides, but I would recommend taking the one on river right. Do be careful as it presently runs right along the edge of the river embankment and that is not stable. Following 3 more L/O's we arrived at the 975m portage at the bottom of the Obabika River around the falls and rapids that lead you onto the Sturgeon River.



The first part of this portage is along an old logging road and it is quite easy. As you get towards the end and go down to the river, the fun begins. The river has eroded the bank and you have to cross the eroded face, a mixture of sand, clay and tree falls which is very mucky in spots.

Pepper, my travel companion on this trip, is about 20 feet up on the top trying to decide how best to negotiate the problem, but when you come equipped with full time four wheel drive it's not too difficult. This portage is a serious candidate for relocation before it caves in on someone and buries them.

In the spring you can put in at the drop pool and run the last rapid out to the Sturgeon where another 35 minutes of moderate paddling effort on this fast moving river took us to Lower Goose Falls.

Lower Goose used to be a beautiful place to camp, but since the missing span in the logging bridge that crosses the river has been replaced the road is now an ATV super highway. No, I didn't see any ATV's, since it was the middle of the week, but there were plenty of signs indicating they had been there just recently and in significant numbers.



The above picture of Lower Goose Falls was taken from the embankment on the east side of the Sturgeon River. The campsite is located under the tall pines, in the centre of the picture, on the opposite shore.

We left the next morning heading downriver towards Kelly Lake portage, at Latitude 46°, 47', 19.0" N and Longitude 80°, 23', 06.6" W. It was a slow start to the morning which had greeted us with sunshine and freezing cold temperatures. It was so cold the water bucket had a layer of ice on it. The dog jumped out of the tent to do her thing and was back inside in 30 seconds, wanting to be covered up with her blanket.

The Sturgeon is a very winding, meandering river and if you don't watch your map you will soon be lost. Well, you will not be lost, after all you are on a river.... but whereabouts on the river? Having been "lost on the Sturgeon" in the past, I decided to keep a good eye on my map. Needing a break, we stopped at lunch and did a GPS measurement to determine that I was where I thought I was and we were not lost this time. As the day progressed, the temperature came up and we had a very warm, sunny trip that got us to Kelly Lake campsite at 3 PM. The campsite is up high on the banks of the creek just before it empties into the Sturgeon. It took most of 40 minutes to huff and puff and portage my gear up this steep incline. I cursed all the beer I had consumed over the past several months, as I had laid about like a hibernating bear. Now I was paying the price for my slovenly lifestyle.

The site is a small grassy clearing that appears to be a part of an old farmstead. Bits and pieces of old implements and wood burning stoves are visible in the grass and bush.

I wondered what kind of hardships these people had faced in their attempts to farm this rough and tumble piece of Canada.



The next morning we got going at about 8:15AM. You know.... it is a good thing to get an early start in case things go badly for you later in the day.

According to Hap's book there are 2 ways to go from Kelly (Ozhway) Lake into Maskinonge Lake. You can take a 3,500m portage directly into Maskinonge or you can take 5 separate smaller portages through to Kelly then into Gamagowong, across a small lake into Gawasi and then into Maskinonge.

Well there is no way this old guy is doing any 3,500m portage, especially this early in the game. I opted for the more scenic route.

I started out for Kelly Lake. The trail, a short 400m carry over slightly mushy, but easily traveled terrain began directly behind the campsite. On the way, I spotted a cabin on my right as I traveled through an open area of the trail that runs roughly parallel to the creek, and in 10 minutes I was standing beside Kelly Lake. On the way back I spent about 40 minutes removing tree falls and brush along the trail. The cabin I had spotted turned out to be a hunt camp, complete with a multitude of broken beer bottles lying around the building. It needed no further investigation, except that I think this is where the 3,500m trail must start from if any of you contemplating this trip are into self inflicted pain.

Well Hap's map on page 53 of his book looks as if the 875m portage out of Kelly is located in the south east bay and takes you to Gamagowong Lake.

We paddled to the southeast bay to look for the portage. And we looked and we looked. There was no portage to be found. After burning up most of 40 minutes, I reluctantly concluded that there was no portage in this area. Now what should I do? Check the map again! Yep the map shows the portage coming out of the south east bay. OK, before we backtrack and confront the 3,500 m beast lets take a look over in the southwest corner of Kelly Lake and see if there is a portage over there. The topo map shows a creek and a marshy area in that bay. Maybe Hap got it wrong. We paddled up the bay into the marsh to see a well constructed/maintained beaver dam that looks to be about 5-6 feet high. Hmmm. Gamagowong flows into Kelly and this thing is damming up the flow in the creek joining the 2 lakes.



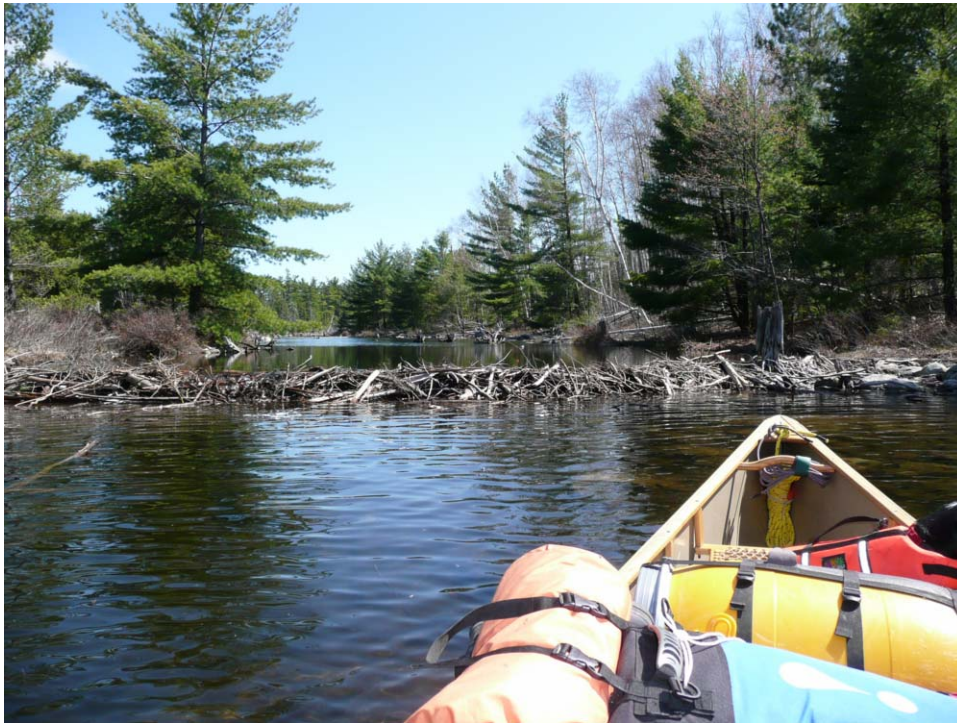
Up and over we go, paying homage to the beavers that put this thing in place and we paddle our way to Gamagowong.

The route map from Gamagowong to Gawasi shows an 825m portage split into 2 separate carries by a water crossing over Gagnon Lake, a small pond between the 2 larger lakes. The portage was easy to spot in the south west corner of the lake. Well it

looked like a portage. There was an open area and an overturned boat there. It turned out to be an ATV trail, but it was leading off in the right general direction so I took it. A short distance along, there is another ATV trail going off to the right. It seemed to be going in a better direction, so I traveled along it for a bit and came out to the shore of Gagnon Lake. As I start to go back for a second carry, I see the real portage on my left and I travel that along through the bush coming back to Gamagowong about 30 feet west from the landing I was at.

We crossed over Gagnon Lake and completed the portage into Gawasi Lake, exactly according to the route map. The portage out of Gawasi is shown as a 700m trail starting from a small bay in the northwest side of the lake. As we paddle to this area, the starting point is not immediately evident. After a fruitless search up and down the coast line in the designated area, I conclude there is no portage. The topo map shows a creek connecting Gawasi to Maskinonge starting from the extreme west side of the lake.

As we enter the creek it seems as if it can be paddled for a way. Maybe the portage is somewhere up the creek? Hmmm. We keep paddling along looking for a portage. There is none. We come to a small 2 foot beaver dam across the creek and as I let the canoe over it, I must again pay homage to the smart creatures that put it there. We are now on Maskinonge Lake and we have avoided a 700m carry. It hadn't been a bad day after all.



Looking back up Gawasi Creek from the Maskinonge side.

Maskinonge is quite pretty, seems to have only a few cottages/camps on it and one boat out fishing on the lake, in this north end. We paddle about 1 1/2 km north to an island campsite on the east side of the lake arriving by about 3:30PM. We stay there for

Saturday also. A good decision, as the NE wind came up later in the morning and it would not have been a good day out on the lake even though it was sunny and not too cold. I spent the day cleaning up the site, which has a lot of broken glass, aluminum and steel cans, 2 broken down lawn chair frames, a myriad of discarded plastic items, etc. etc. Since I can't possibly carry this mess along with me, I carefully piled it up on top of an old unused fireplace in the hope that a cottager might come along and take it off the island for proper disposal. Back in the bush was an old unused bush toilet. This one had 3 horizontal poles nailed to 3 trees to form a platform in the shape of a triangle, a piece of plywood as a front piece, so that you wouldn't whiz in your pants, an old plastic seat, that was now laying on the ground must have been used on top of the horizontal bars. To top it off there was an old blue plastic tarp hanging in shreds from the trees, where it had been nailed many years ago to provide privacy to the users. Privacy was not needed as the apparatus was situated in the middle of the island up high in a small depression, completely invisible from the main site or from the lake. The trees had grown out such that the nails were completely buried in the trunks. What an eyesore. I wonder if the constructors had ever given a thought as to how this mess would look after many years. This was just one of many such structures that I would see as I traveled through the greater Chiniguchi area. The constructors must be learning to build these things from their daddies, since there were many new ones about, as well as older dilapidated versions such as this one.

It is now Sunday May 6th as we start out again, heading up Maskinonge Lake. The lake is much calmer than yesterday and as I paddle north, I begin to reflect on what I have seen during the past few days.

For early May, the weather has been remarkably warm.

The Sturgeon River was receding from the Spring high this year and was at least a foot below this year's high water mark on May 2nd.

The portages and land are very dry, reminding me of summer conditions.

The deciduous trees are beginning to come out in bud and it is still only the first week of May.

I am beginning to see signs of early black fly activity.

As I paddle into the narrows towards Rice Lake, I pass by what looks like a summer canoe camp. It turns out to be the Taylor Statten outpost camp on Maskinonge. A pile of canoes are up on racks eagerly waiting to get onto the water, 4 big war canoes are on a separate rack and several young people are walking about the property. I paddle on through Lower Matagamasi towards the portage into Edna. There are 3 boats parked here, 2 with motors, so I expect to see some people. On Edna there is 1 boat using an electric motor to troll about the lake. I later find out the pike season is open and these are hot spots where the locals like to fish. At Karl Lake portage, I see a second boat which comes over to the portage as they are getting ready to leave. The fishing has not been successful. They plan to leave the boat there for the summer, taking only the

motor with them. They had pulled it in on a little trailer over an ATV trail that seems to run around the lakes in the area.

The trip from Karl Lake to Matagamasi Lake is up a short section of the Chiniguchi River through a series of drops and pools. The scenery is quite nice and the pools look as if they would provide good swimming holes in the summer months. There are some nice campsites situated along the route. As I come up to Matagamasi Lake, I am expecting to see a concrete dam but all that is there are the remains of a rock dam across the river. This is quite a sight. There is a large red sign pointing downriver warning canoeists of fast water. I see this just as I notice a small trickle coming down from the remnants of this dam. I had already passed by a more concentrated flow a few hundred meters downriver, so I was curious about this sign. Then I saw a very official and large portage sign indicating that I was close to arriving at a portage. As I traveled the portage I saw a series of 8 different arrow signs directing canoeists as to the way the portage goes. The trees with the signs had arrows pointing in both directions, to ensure that no canoeists could possibly get lost on this small 60m portage. At the upper side of the portage was another official looking portage sign directing people traveling in the other direction along with a second big red sign warning about the fast water that was trickling over the dam remnants and several large yellow safety floats chained in position across the face of the now defunct dam.

I wondered about the cost of all those signs and the intellect of the bureaucrat who had placed them. Clearly an example of our tax dollars at work, protecting us from our careless ways.



Fast water on the Chiniguchi River at the North Matagamasi Dam

We camped on an island in the north part of McCarthy Bay close to where the portage from the Laura Lake loop exits. We left the site at about 9AM on Monday, paddling south down the NE arm of the lake into an increasingly strengthening headwind. By noon I had managed to make about 7 km and get around the point into the NW arm. It was going to be one of those days. As we rounded the point, I decided that I would stop early even though the wind was now with us. I found a nice site on the west shore of the arm just north of a small island. At about 4PM, 2 yellow birds passed overhead flying East on their way to a fire, along with a helicopter, that I never actually saw. This all went the other way at about 7PM as they returned to their base. We would see them once more on our trip and hear them but not see them, on another occasion. It must have been a busy few weeks for the fire fighters.

On Tuesday we continued our paddle north to Silvester Lake and then into Wolf Lake. The area between Matagamasi and Silvester lakes is very pretty. The water is a clear turquoise, reminding me of Sunnywater Lake in Temagami, where you can see deep down into the lake. The last portage into Silvester Lake has the Paradise Lagoon beside it. It is well worth the time to stop and go down there to see the lagoon. It must be a very popular swimming spot in the summer months. It is one of the most scenic spots I have seen in Ontario.

We arrived at Wolf Lake early in the afternoon and visited the Flag Resources drilling site.

This former campsite is now completely destroyed:

<http://www.ottertooth.com/Temagami/News/newsbriefs-052.htm>



Drilling pipe lays about the site along with oil covered soil wherever the ancient drilling rig was stationed. A building on the site has been burned to the ground and much industrial detritus was evident.

I could only find one drill hole that was open and had not been stuffed with garbage. I dropped a stone down into it and estimated that it was only about 10 feet deep.

I began to wonder what kind of a scam was going on here.

For this, Wolf Lake was not included into the new Chiniguchi Park.

For the full story go to: <http://www.ottertooth.com/Temagami/News/06/chini-park.htm>

Saddened, at seeing this needless destruction, I left the drill site, traveled across the lake to a high rock site on the east shore and set up camp there. A beautiful site in a mostly beautiful setting.

About 5PM, 7 canoes with 15 people appeared on the lake. It turned out to be a Sudbury school trip and since I had the best site on the lake they camped on an alternative site in the north end. This gave me an opportunity to visit with them the following morning as I resumed our travel. Since they were heading up to McConnell Bay on Chiniguchi Lake, I advised the leader that I would not stay there, leaving them the opportunity to pick the site of their choice. A bad mistake as it turned out. I traveled through Dewdney and into Chiniguchi Lake, then north passing McConnell Bay going into the NE arm. The sites marked on Haps route description no longer appeared to be there. The area marked as Pelouins Point had several shanty like fish camps on it. I didn't feel comfortable camping on the beach, connected to this community, even though there did not appear to be any sign of activity.

I pushed on into Sawhorse Lake crossing over an ATV trail at the north end of Chiniguchi. The portage out of Sawhorse towards Adelaide Lake appears to have been rerouted a bit. As you travel into the NE bay on Sawhorse there is a very small clearing which has a plywood sign on a tree with a "P" painted on it. Below the "P" are 2 crossed paddles. This route follows a very old logging road that connects with a newer but still old road. At this point you turn left and follow that until you come to an ATV trail. Turn right for about 100 feet then make an immediate left onto an older (logging/ ATV) trail that seems to run in the direction of Redpine Lake. I arrived at Adelaide Lake at about 5PM. There are no campsites on the Lake, but I was able to camp on the road/ATV trail beside the lake.

The next morning we went from Adelaide through to Button Lake. The portage at the north end of the Adelaide has a small beaver dam on it. Take out there on the left hand side which I flagged and cleared out a bit and cross the road/ATV trail into Button Lake. The 560m portage into Dougherty Lake is the most difficult one in the entire trip according to Hap's description.... It climbs a fairly steep hill at the start and descends one at the end. There was a lot of small tree falls and debris on the trail which I spent some time to cut through, pick up and remove.

Dougherty is a beautiful lake with lots of pine and jackpine lining the shore line, several islands and several campsites. We camped on a small island in the south end, staying a second night due to a strong NE wind. It was the kind of wind, that Canoebear likes to talk about. It was kicking up a fuss on this little lake that is about 5 square km in size, with 2-3 foot swells. This wouldn't normally be a problem but the next 2 lakes in the chain, Frederick and Stouffer run along a NE/SW line so I would be battling these winds pretty much all day. Best to sit it out and enjoy the day, rather than fighting with it. The siren song of the NE winds would not call me out today.

The island site however was very pretty and we enjoyed our second day.



I left Dougherty on Saturday May, 12th, for Frederick Lake. Hap's description calls for a portage into Frederick which was there as expected, then a second portage over an old logging bridge at the first narrows going north on Frederick. The bridge was truly old and has fallen into the lake. The centre span has deteriorated and you can paddle straight through. The 190m portage into Stouffer was also uneventful and I paddled to a site near the north end of the lake on a large island. This was not the most picturesque site but it was serviceable. The island had some very large old growth white pine on it in the centre.

The next morning we left for the Sturgeon River traveling to the north end of Stouffer and taking the 860m portage. There appears to be 2 entrances to this portage which is now along an old logging road. I mistakenly chose the entrance located in the extreme west end of the northeast bay only to find that it linked up to another shorter trail further

east in the bay. This section of logging road was littered with many small tree falls and broken branches and looked as if it was not used very much at all. After about a 200m trek, I came to a second flagged trail that came up from the lake on my right and I concluded that this must be the right route. On my return carry, I spent a good hour clearing away the deadfalls and brush and took this down to the proper lake access, which I flagged, to keep others from making the same mistake that I had made. It looks as if the original portage was taken over by the logging road, when that was put through. There are several places where the trail seems to split going around an obstacle before rejoining the main trail.

I started down the Sturgeon River and as we came up to the border between Turner and DeMorest Townships we came across a nice campsite on river left. This is an ATV site which has access via the old logging trail on the east side of the river. The site was clean, a surprise, but it had one of those improvised “curtained in” bush privies that these people seem to favor. As you may notice Pepper is checking it out.



Judging from an outline on the ground, it appears as if there was a large wall tent in place for a period of time. Perhaps the site was used as a hunt camp in the Fall.

Further downstream we came to a set of rapids which needed to be portaged. The portage was in pretty bad shape with 4 tree falls blocking the route. I left a large 24" deadfall, to someone with a chain saw, but I de-limbed and cut through the others so that I could make it through.

Shortly after that we came to an unnamed lake with 2 campsites. We stayed on the lower site which is on a point and had some wind to keep the bugs at bay. The other site was along an ATV trail within the park boundaries on the east side of the river.

The next day had grey skies and they remained that way with some light drizzle from time to time. This section of the river has many portages to do as I made my way to the drop pool where Pilgrim Creek enters the Sturgeon. I brushed a couple of these out. The CII rapid that Hap refers to as the Gorge was running well in these Spring conditions and surprise, surprise, someone, maybe Ontario Parks had removed the huge log that had blocked access to the rapid now for several years. This was my 3rd time on this part of the river and my first time on this run. It was a good run and it was over before Pepper realized what was happening. She has been in a few upsets in the past and gets a bit fretful in fast water.

I had to do 6 portages but was able to run the other rapids before arriving at the beach site where an old logging road used to cross the river. Before setting up, I went along the trail towards Pilgrim Creek. This is a few minute walk along an old logging road that has now become an ATV trail. This trail is not used much but connects with another trail that runs past Yorston Lake and crosses Pilgrim Creek about 2km north of the drop pool. The trail I was on abruptly ends at Pilgrim Creek where the Bridge is no longer in position. The location is in the middle of a rapid, with a fair bit of water coming down them. It didn't take long to determine that there is no safe way to get across this maelstrom of black boiling water and slippery smooth rocks.

I noticed a flagged portage crossing the trail and surmise that it must be the one that canoeists use to portage around these rapids when they are traveling along Pilgrim Creek. I think to myself that I could portage north along this, cross Pilgrim Creek above the rapids and then bushwhack my way back to the trail on the other side. Hmmm! I will sleep on that and see what the weather does tomorrow.

We were in the tent early that night as much thunder and lightening was about and Pepper was most upset. It rained on and off, heavily at times and I began to conclude that a trip to Yorston was not about to happen this year.

The following morning we awoke to more grey skies, much mist, some drizzle and cold temperatures. It was Tuesday May 15th. I knew this would be our last full day out on this trip.

The trip to Upper Goose Falls and on down to Obabika is usually a good run with lots of CI and CII rapids to negotiate. As I had done the run before I was somewhat relaxed and did not tie in my gear.

One of them almost got me.

It was a CII with lots of maneuvering required to get down it. I could see 2 rocks coming up and I could maybe go between them or to the right of them. I chose to go right. Decisions made on runs are made very quickly and are usually mostly irrevocable. To the right was another rock, one that I hadn't seen. It reached up and grabbed the bottom of my canoe and lifted it out of the water while spinning it crosswise to the river flow.

Under these conditions, I expected to be getting very wet soon.... but nothing happened. Water should have poured in over the upstream side of the canoe. But it didn't. It just sat there. I looked over the side, knowing that if I didn't do something pretty soon, I would indeed be swimming in the river. The river god had given me some respite. I could see fresh green paint. It was marking the rock I was sitting on. I thought that maybe I can stand on it and fix this problem. I got out onto the rock, managed to swing the canoe parallel to the flow and move it slightly off the rock. I got back in again, now facing up stream, thinking to myself that this is starting to look like a Kevin Callan video clip. I pushed off going down the rest of the run backwards until I could eddy out and face forward again.

I went to shore and tied in my gear knowing that the river god had given me a second chance to stay dry today and that he had several more opportunities to play his game with me.

I camped at the upper end of the Obabika River portage that night and made Wawiagama on Wednesday May 16th. I paddled across the lake to where I had parked my van and I was drinking my first beer in 2 weeks at 1:35PM.

This spring trip was over.