We were pushing through the dense forest carpeted with muskeg, when the GPS receiver started to beep, letting me know that the end of the portage should be right where we were. However, there were no signs of water anywhere near us. We had left our main group, resting on the deadfall in the middle of the cold flooded creek and hoping to reach the western shores of Longue Pointe peninsula with two food barrels and then come back for the main group.

Despite the GPS’s beeps, due to a seemingly small error on the topo map or GPS software, we still didn’t reach the end of the non-existing trail. “Mike, we have to go back,” I said, feeling uncomfortable leaving the main group so far behind. We put the barrels down to mark the turning point and then I realized that for some reason I could not use the ‘trackback’ feature on my GPS. There were just too many saved tracks and one long running track, and the GPS was asking me what point I wanted to get to, and I was getting more and more confused. “Don’t worry”, said Mike, “I broke small branches all the way as we walked”. Well, he certainly did. We even found one. But the rest of the north track was just melted into the background of the dense boreal forest. We were getting more confused. “Don’t worry”, said Mike, “I broke small branches all the way as we walked”. Well, he certainly did. We even found one. But the rest of the north track was just melted into the background of the dense boreal forest.

Eventually, I found, on the internet, a person who paddled the whole Broadback; however, she was about to embark on a one year journey throughout Southeast Asia and Australia and she wrote me only one email confirming that her party was able to portage through the Longue Pointe peninsula (significant shortcut on the huge Lac Evans in the middle of the trip). I was able to obtain river maps from FQCK (Fédération québécoise du canot et du kayak). Unfortunately, their notes were really vague and started only from the Assinica tributary, not from the headwaters of the river. Later I also found a young gentleman who paddled Broadback with a summer camp and he had a good enough memory to add some information to my maps.

I scheduled the trip into the two almost separate sections: the first party would start just below Lac Troïlus, and continue to the bridge on James Bay Road where it would meet the second party coming from Ottawa with new supplies. Then part of the first party would drive home and the rest of us would continue to the Cree village of Waskaganish on James Bay.

We met in the wee hours of July 30 on the Chibougamau campground, we had spent a long time eating our last civilized breakfast in a local restaurant, then drove on Route du North to our put in. My Cree contact from Waskaganish, Raymond, (the resource for all our car shuttles) warned me that the area north of Chibougamau was severely affected by forest fires early in the spring, and he was right. All around the Lac Fréchet (highest source of the river) was scorched forest. While we were putting in at the bridge, we were greeted by truck drivers going to and from the nearby mine.

It was great to get the first feel of the river. It was quite narrow at the top, but it didn’t miss the power and gradient. We were caught in the middle of the rapids by the rain – the first signs of the weather to come (overall we didn’t get any rain in 6 days of 22 on the trip). Later in the afternoon, some of us got quite soaked, we reached Lac Avanches, and set up our first campsite. By some sources this is the headwaters of the river (and the river is marked on the topographic map as “Broadback” only after this lake); however, it clearly should be Lac Troïlus, adding almost 50 km to the official river length. After Lac Avanches the river widened and get the standard drop & pool character of Canadian shield.

On the second day we saw, on shore, our first black bear. It was the first of four in total. They all looked fat and happy with shiny dark fur and ever curious as to who would dare enter their realm. This is berry country – blueberries, high bush cranberries, roseberrries, etc. It was visible that it is good food for a bear’s diet. As for the other big animals, over the course of the trip we also got to see two moose and the most spectacular encounter was with the caribou who one evening swam across the river not far from our campsite.

At the first waterfall on our route (Chute Coné) we camped on the right shore in the old burnt forest. There was possible also longer left channel route, with maybe more paddle-friendly gradient, but we didn’t have time to investigate.

By LESTER KOVAC

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