

# BROADBACK

*A Wild Ride Down the Rupert River's Southern Neighbour*



photo: Fabien Coulombe

**The estuary of the Broadback River in James Bay. Miles of water but only inches deep, especially if you don't have the proper tidal tables.**

By LESTER KOVAC

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 GIS 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 just melted into the background of the dense boreal forest. We were getting more desperate. We were using the compass and yelling every few metres. Now we were lost in the jungle of Longue Pointe, with the food barrels abandoned somewhere east of us, and the main group somewhere west of us, and it all seemed like a scene from the Blair Witch Project.

Luckily, the main group eventually responded to our calls and we found them just as we left them - tired and quiet. At least the bugs were merciful; they were almost non-existent. By that time I figured out the mysteries of my GPS receiver and was able to track it east to the food barrels. Afterwards, we were able to push through the dense woods another 200 m to the rocky shores of Lac Evans, which were battered by big waves.

It all started soon after my long summer trip in 2004. The Missinaibi River was a great experience, paddling the river according to Hap Wilson's book describing every rapid. However, I longed for more - a river where I would have to investigate maps and search for all available information. I wanted more of an "into the unknown" type of travel. My initial candidate was the Attawapiskat, another James Bay river in Ontario. However, very early on I realized that my mere 3 week vacation would not be enough for the 800-1000 km long route. I started to look into other James Bay river options that were about 500-600 km long. The first one I found was Rupert, nevertheless, with Hydro Quebec closing in on it with its damming intentions, I wasn't sure when exactly it would be closed or even if it wasn't, whether we would have to paddle along the construction sites. Then I found Broadback. It is Rupert's southern twin sister and my early investigation - talking to the people who paddled Lower Broadback (section from James Bay Road to Waskaganish) - suggested that it is a beautiful and quite challenging river. Plus, it had an Upper "unknown/exploratory" part, where there was almost no information about it.

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 Troilus, 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 Frotet (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 sign 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 Avranches, 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 Frotet, adding almost 50 km to the official river length. After Lac Avranches the river widens 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, roseberries, etc. It was visible that it is good 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.