Traveling the Upper Naskaupi River, Labrador
Orma Lake to Seal Lake (?)

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Photos: R. Rothwell & R. Irwin

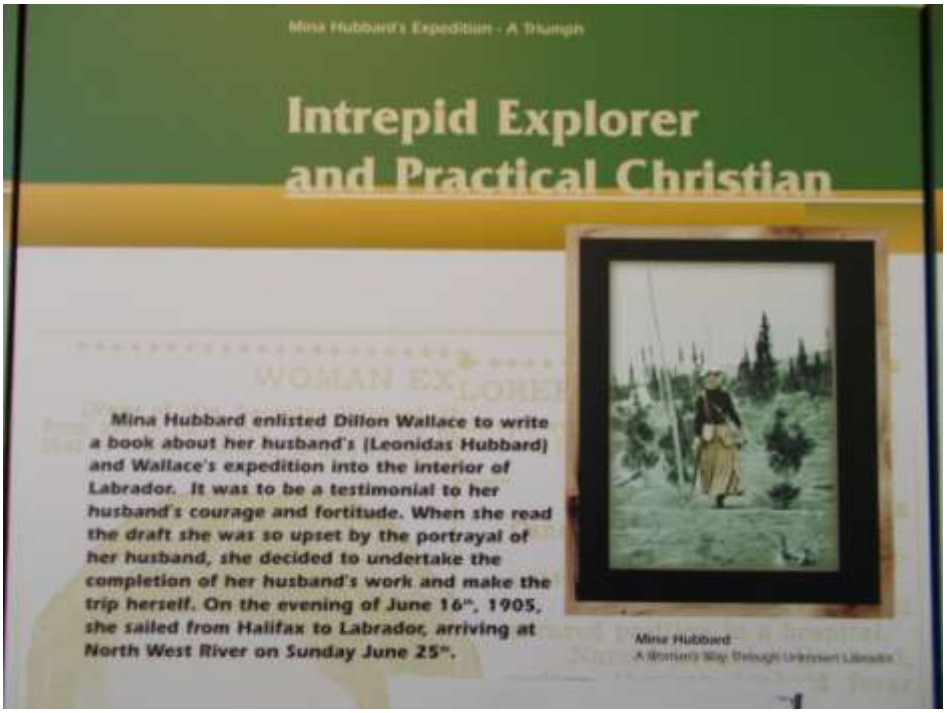
Background

My cousin, Robert Irwin, of Vankleek Hill, Ontario, and a friend of his, Philip Schubert, have been canoeing in Labrador for a number of years. They are attracted to its vast, untrammeled lands so unlike much of their surroundings in southern and central Ontario and nearby Quebec. More specifically, they have taken great interest in some 'expeditions' conducted early in the 20th century by Leonidas Hubbard, Mina Hubbard and Dillon Wallace.

The original 1903 'expedition' was organized by Leonidas Hubbard, a writer for a New York outdoor magazine. It was his intent to travel from Northwest River, Labrador, north and west up the Naskaupi (Nascaupee) River to the height of land, then north down the George River to Ungava on the north coast between Hudson's Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. For this trip, Hubbard recruited an acquaintance, Dillon Wallace, and a Scot/Cree named George Elson from the Moosonee/Moose Factory area on the south shore of James Bay. At that time, the information about the route Hubbard proposed was very poor, because travel by the Innu (native people) through much of the country had decreased significantly then. And, although there were still well-worn Innu trails, no one in Northwest River had appreciable knowledge that could help them once they travelled up into the interior of Labrador beyond the massive, 65km (40 mi) long Grand Lake just east of Northwest River. Most of the people from that area trapped lower down and did it in the winter when there was snow on the ground, making travel by trail and river irrelevant to them.

Hubbard, Wallace and Elson got a late start that year and, when they got to the west end of Grand River, began to ascend the wrong river, the Susan, instead of the Naskaupi because of poor information and because the mouth of the Naskaupi was not evident to them. The Susan was smaller and much rockier, so their progress was dramatically slowed. They met with many challenges, including struggling with their water-logged wood and canvas canoe and considerable supplies and equipment for the several-month trip over boulder-filled waters and many portages. By October, having just reached the vicinity of the height of land, or hydrographic divide, between the Naskaupi and the George Rivers, they realized they had to retreat as winter bore down on them. They made it to within 30km of Grand Lake before Hubbard died, basically of exhaustion and starvation. Elson and Wallace were saved by trappers from Northwest River moving out to the west end of Grand Lake to begin their winter trapping season.

During the next year, Mina Hubbard asked Dillon Wallace to write an account of the trip to memorialize it and finish what her husband had started. Wallace did this, but Mina, who seemed an odd person, was disturbed by Wallace's account, which she believed discredited her husband and placed blame on him for the failure of the expedition.



Mina Hubbard information at Labrador Historical Society museum.

In order to vindicate her husband, she began planning an expedition of her own to take on the very trip her husband had hoped to complete- Northwest River to Ungava. In a separate effort, Dillon Wallace began planning the same thing. The trips were planned independently, and Wallace was initially unaware of Mina's plans. In the early summer of 1905, they both embarked from Northwest River at about the same time. Elson and three other individuals named Job Chapies, Joe Iserhoff and Duncan McLean were in Mina's party. With Wallace was another small group of men. Mina's group took a route that followed the Naskaupi starting at its outflow into Grand Lake. Wallace took a major detour around the lower Naskaupi canyon by traveling north on the Innu Portage beginning some 15km upstream of where the Naskaupi flowed into Grand Lake.

The two parties eventually made it to Ungava after much hardship. The book, "Great Heart" by James West Davidson and John Rugge provides a thorough and fascinating account of the 3 'expeditions'. Wallace's book, "Lure of the Labrador Wild", and a book about Mina, "The Woman Who Mapped Labrador", by Roberta Buchanan, Anne Hart, Brian Greene, and Mina Hubbard, provide additional reading.

Robert and his friend, Philip, have canoed and explored much of the routes of those 3 parties over the past decade. Philip soloed large sections, including his impressive retracing of the last half of Mina's party's route from the height of land down the George River to Ungava. Philip has documented most of his travels on his website (http://www.magma.ca/~philip18/HWSaga/), as has Robert on his (http://www.betterfarming.com/vkh/c_home.html).

One trip Robert has wanted to do, which Philip soloed in 2005, is the upper Naskaupi River. (Philip has a very informative account of that trip on his website.) Robert asked me last fall if I would be interested. This trip, along a section of Mina's party's route, travels along a wild and very scenic river with rugged waterfalls and chutes. It travels through a vast wilderness, at its most remote point well over 160km (~100 mi) from any human development. We would travel downstream from the river's headwaters, the opposite direction of the Hubbard and Wallace parties. We agreed to two potential 'take-out' points. The first was Seal Lake, approximately halfway between where we would put in and the river's terminus at Grand Lake. The second alternative was the town of Northwest River, some 300km from the river's headwaters and at the east end of Grand Lake. We decided to see how the trip was going before we made a final decision on where to come out.

The first half of our route would include two major detours around impassable falls, gorges

and high-class rapids. The first, Job's Portage, is a ~13km detour around the Maid Marion Falls gorge, which was pioneered by Job Chapies of the Mina Hubbard party. That detour involves, at our beginning (the upstream end), a series of short- to medium-length (~100m - 1.25km) portages between lakes and ponds; and it finishes with a 3-day, almost 3km portage overland through an extensive, late 1980s burn. Down lower on the river, and within 30km of Seal Lake is the Seal Rapids portage, a ~5km detour involving a short channel to a long, narrow lake of ~2.5km, then an overland portage of just over 2km. The pick-up at Seal Lake would mean we would do the first 150km of the River from its headwaters.

The lower half of the River is primarily in a canyon with various class rapids, including some several kilometers long that we would not be able to run with the canoe and load we were going to have. That meant taking a detour around much of it starting just below Seal Lake, which includes 30 portages, some of which require carrying overland up to 8km. This was the route Wallace took in the early part of his 1905 expedition. We decided we would have to be very motivated as we progressed to opt for taking on the detour around the lower canyon. However, we planned food, logistics and other aspects for a trip of 30 days just in case. Our detours and portages on the upper Naskaupi in the first half were to provide a perspective....

I had been to Labrador once before a couple of years ago to canoe with Robert and Philip near the headwaters of the Naskaupi. The province is an immense wilderness with unique vegetative communities and innumerable lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams. The weather is dramatically variable, and the insects are formidable. The few people there are both interesting and uncommonly friendly. They are a mix of natives, people of mixed ancestry and multi-generational tenure there, Newfoundlanders, Europeans, and people who came for the high-paying mineral and energy jobs and stayed.

The Approach

Robert and I left his home in Vankleek Hill, Ontario, on June 27. We traveled east along the north shore of the St. Lawrence Seaway, crossing the mighty, fijord-like Saguenay River at its confluence with the St. Lawrence via Quebec's highly efficient ferry system there. We could see several white beluga whales some distance out from the ferry. This area is very popular as a whale viewing area.

We traveled on to Baie-Comeau that night. The next day, we turned north and ascended to the interior Labrador plateau paralleling the drainage of the Manicouagan River, then traveled northeast to Labrador City. When we arrived, the highway between Lab City and our next destination, Churchill Falls, some 230km away, was closed. A forest fire just south and east of town was the cause. They had tried to convoy cars across the remote, lightly traveled Trans Lab Highway earlier in the day, but the second one was turned back because the smoke was creating poor visibility and terrible air quality. Increasing winds and temperatures and decreasing humidity each day in the late morning and afternoon were creating conditions that allowed the fire to grow out of control.

At the roadblock, we ran into Dan Michelin Jr., son of a friend of Robert's in Northwest River. Robert had recruited his father, Dan Sr., to ferry our vehicle from Churchill Falls to Northwest River so it would be there when we finished our trip. Dan Jr. and his family, traveling home from Newfoundland, had been there since the day before. We watched water bombers and helicopters with water buckets flying back and forth across the sky to and from the fire. After we were told by the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary (RNC), which is

equivalent of the state police, that the road would not be opened before the next morning, we all dispersed. Robert and I looked for a place to camp for the night, agreeing with Dan Jr. that we would let him know what we found so he could camp with us.

We went to Lab City's mall for some supplies and found that the grocery store there was having a run on bottled water and food. People in Wabush, a small sister town adjacent to Lab City to the south were being advised to prepare for evacuation since the fire was approaching town. Long lines began to develop at the gas stations since many felt they may have to flee west toward Baie-Comeau, 584km (365mi) away. We filled up when we arrived earlier in the day, so we were OK on fuel. On the north side of town we parked momentarily on a hill overlooking Lab City and Wabush to watch the fire in the distance. We then drove up a dirt road north of town to its little ski area and found a nice place to camp on the 'lawn' of the ski lodge. We called Dan Jr. and had him bring his family up to camp with us. When we called him, they were in the local Canadian Tire store buying a tent and sleeping bags.

Early the next morning (July 29), we packed up and drove to the Trans Lab Highway road-block at the east end of town. Smoke lay thick on the ground several kilometers to the east. We waited for the wind to rise and, hopefully, disperse the smoke so we could get through before the wind and temperatures increased enough to stimulate the fire. A few hours later we where hurriedly organized to be convoyed through the fire area, a distance of approximately 50km. We traveled through blackened, burned out, still smoking black spruce forests on both sides of us along a highway covered with ash that blew up from the tires of the vehicles in front of us like dust billowing up on a dirt road.

Convoy through Lab City fire.

Once through the danger zone, we sped east to Churchill Falls, a Nalcor 'company' town developed and sustained for employees of the massive Churchill Falls hydro project (generating ~3800 megawatts at any given instant in time). Robert had made arrangements with an acquaintance there, Allan Gosling, to ferry us and our equipment 90km up a small, nasty bush road to Orma Lake at the head of the Naskaupi River. We were to have been there later in the day we first arrived in Lab City and were now a day late. Allan worked the night shift and was leaving on holiday the next day, so we did not have the luxury of arriving in Churchill Falls, spending the night in the motel there and getting organized to be transported to the end of the bush road. Upon arrival in late afternoon, we had to off load all of our stuff to Allan's pickup truck, make a couple of quick phone calls home and race north so he could get back to go to work mid-evening. Robert left his vehicle at Allan's house for Dan Michelin Sr. to pick up and ferry to Northwest River after waiting several days to ensure we were on our way down the river.

The Trip

We arrived at our drop-off point in the early evening after almost three hours of punishing driving over that nasty bush road. In order to get us there and get home for work, Allan drove at speeds that made us both happy it wasn't our vehicle that was being used for the ferry. These weren't dangerous speeds, but were abusive on the tires and suspension. We quickly off-loaded our gear, and Allan drove away, leaving us 90km from civilization and ready to embark on an adventure of a lifetime.

We were to be only the sixth recorded party of white people to have traversed this route. Mina's party did it 1905. The next party, Stewart Coffin's, did it in 1968. Coffin's party was the last to do the Naskaupi in its untamed state before the Churchill Falls hydro project diverted an enormous amount of its natural flow. Wayne Halley and Carl Mclean did the entire route from Northwest River to Ungava for the centennial celebration of Mina's trip in 2004. Philip Schubert soloed the Naskaupi from Orma Lake to Seal Lake (one of our alternatives) in 2005. And, Rory Matchett's party did the Naskaupi from Orma Lake to Northwest River in 2009. Philip and Rory provided us with some waypoints for take-outs and put-ins on the big portages, and Rory told Robert he had blazed some of the trail on Job's Portage. We found some of the blazes, mainly at the beginning in the unburned portion of Job's Portage, which provided a check that we were travelling in the general direction his party did.

The main equipment we off loaded from Allan's truck for the trip included the following:

- Equif 17.5ft (5.38m) **Twintex*** expedition canoe with front and rear flotation bags.
- ~60 liter plastic food barrel with packing harness. The barrel has a plastic top with a rubber seal and a rim clamp to seal it. The harness with shoulder straps and a hip belt allows it to be carried like a backpack. Much of the food was carried in it.
- A large Mountain Equipment Coop (MEC, Canada's equivalent to REI) backpack with 3 **bear** vaults containing food.
- My 84-liter dry pack, a waterproof single compartment 'backpack' in which I was able to carry most of my stuff.
- My daypack, which I clip in front of me regardless of whether I am in the stern or bow seat. It contains all the things to which I need immediate access, such as rain-coat and pants, GPS unit, bug spray, sun block, bug jacket when I am not wearing it, Leatherman, gloves, and sometimes on this trip, my ditch kit. The ditch kit is a fanny pack I usually wear at all times, in which I carry everything practical I need to survive if I need to (space blanket, signal mirror, weatherproof and windproof matches, fire starter, bug spray, flashlight, emergency shelter, insect head net, granola bars, knife, compass, etc., etc.).
- Robert's large Black Feather canoe pack, an amoeba-like, unpadded pack in which he carries his tent; first aid kit; satellite phone; cooking wear, including stove; and a multitude of other miscellany.
- Two medium-sized dry bags in which Robert carried clothing and footwear and sleeping bag and sleeping pad.
- Shotgun and ammunition, including rubber bullets in a waterproof scabbard.
- Two personal PFDs, one spare PFD and a bailer. Robert carries a personal locator
- beacon (PLB) in his PFD.
- Robert's small dry bag, which he clips to his seat and contains his S.P.O.T. device, camera and other valuables.
- **Solo Stove twig stove** and a MSR Whisper-lite stove with 3 gas bottles as back-up.
- Other miscellaneous small supplies and equipment.

***Terms and items in bold text are discussed in the 'Notes' section at the end.**

Esquif canoe & other equipment.

We each had a GPS unit with 1:50,000 topographic maps of that part of Labrador loaded on them and **laminated 'hard copy' map sections** of the route with mileages and critical features marked on them with permanent marker.

All the larger items (packs, food barrel, dry bags, gun) had a cord or length of webbing with a carabiner attached to them so they could be clipped into the canoe (around a thwart) in case of a wreck. We estimated our equipment weighed ≤136kg (≤300lb).

Summer days where we were in Labrador (above the 52nd parallel) have light from ~0400hr to after 2200hr. So, when Allan Gosling dropped us off at the end of the bush road on the shore of Orma Lake, Robert and I agreed we would use the several remaining hours of the evening to cross Orma Lake and begin working down the rapids connecting Orma Lake to the larger Marie Lake below (east) of it. We had been advised by the 2 preceding parties about the two short routes ('rapids' or 'waterways') between the lakes. Philip had taken the southern route, which turned out to be a dry boulder field that took him three days to traverse. Rory's party had taken the northern route, traversing it in a long day. It turned out to be only somewhat better than the route Philip took. It was essentially a boulder field disguised as a stream channel flowing little water.

Rapids between Orma and Marie Lakes.

Robert and I dragged and lifted the loaded canoe over much of that northern route's watery boulder field for ~3 hours that evening. We were able to float it only short distances through occasional small patches of open water. We camped up a steep bank in the black spruce forest on a carpet of caribou moss that night. Robert activated his S.P.O.T. device to notify people on his list of where we were and that we were OK. Then he called his wife, Silvia, on the satellite phone to

provide her comments to add to the trip website (http://www.betterfarming.com/vkh/c-robert13-lab.htm) and get a weather forecast.

Evening calls to Silvia were a routine part of Robert's Labrador trips. He provided very brief comments to add to the trip log on the website and, on this trip, got weather forecasts for Churchill Falls, south and west of us, and Goose Bay/Happy Valley, on the east coast near Northwest River, so we could plan the next couple of days. We then knew whether to plan for rain, wind or other conditions. We wanted to know rain predictions so we could anticipate breaking down and setting up camp (canoeing in the rain was less of a concern). And, we wanted to know about wind because it had a great potential influence on us doing lake travel; high winds on large lakes would wind bound us. Unique to this trip would be obtaining information about forest fires. We could also provide Silvia with information to forward to my family.

Campsite at west end of Marie Lake.

The next morning, we continued our labors down the stream channel between Orma and Marie lakes for an additional 3 hours before we finally reached its end and entered slow, open water leading to Marie Lake. We soon reached the upper end of the lake at a narrows before its main body. On both sides of this narrow were gravelly flats of openings and alder patches.

We elected to camp there for the night since the wind was picking up and, although it was at our back, it was blowing at gale force and beginning to raise white-caps further down the lake. Our heavily ladened expedition canoe sat low in the water, and since camping sites are not common in the dense vegetation along Labrador's lakes and rivers, we didn't see a need to push on and have to struggle to find somewhere else to spend the night. This narrows in the lake looked like a logical animal crossing, so we had some concerns that it might be a place we could encounter a **bear**. That turned out to not be an issue despite the fact that we were delayed there an additional day.

Solo Stove twig stove.

The next day, July 1, was inclement and windy, so we were essentially pinned down. We spent the day in and out of the tent, depending on the weather at the moment. We had the opportunity there to put Robert's new twig stove to its first use.

After a one-day layover because of wind and weather, we left camp early on July 2 to get down the lake before the high winds we were expecting picked up later in the morning. By the time we reached the east end of Lake Marie, it was blowing at >40-50kph. We would find that from there on, for a number of days, it would be fortunate we were on the river and not on lakes, because high winds after mid-morning became the norm.

Rapids at the head of the Naskaupi River .

First pool in the Naskaupi River .

Once there, we spent an hour or so negotiating the complex east end of Lake Marie looking for the beginning of the Naskaupi River. Consisting of convoluted shoreline, small bays and small islands with alder-choked shorelines, that end of the lake presented a challenging puzzle that required 'testing' each potential passage. Finally, we could hear rushing water and found the outlet of the lake (the source of the river). What we then encountered was yet another boulder-filled waterway with some additional water flowing through it. Here, and for a considerable distance down the river, there was enough water that we could mainly float the canoe, walking alongside it and alternately floating it and dragging it over rocks in the many swifts (small rapids) we would encounter. For a number of kilometers below Marie Lake, these 'rapids' were interspersed between short sections of moving water that we could paddle.

Shortly after leaving Marie Lake, while we were dealing with one of the bouldery rapids, I stepped up out of the streambed on river right and climbed up on some bigger boulders to assess the route ahead. I looked down, and lying there in between the boulder I was perched on and the one adjacent to it, was a canoe pole. A canoe pole is a long (~3m) pole approximately 5 cm in diameter with a short, hardened, blunt 'spike' protruding out each end. A metal band maybe 2-3 cm wide is driven or shrink fit over each end of the pole to keep the area around the 'spike' from fraying or splintering. Although pretty much a lost art, canoe poling is a means of driving a canoe upstream or in shallow water while standing between the midpoint and the stern. Done correctly, it is an efficient and very accurate means of propulsion.

There are several recent or current experts with this skill, one being the now deceased Bill Mason, an iconic upper mid-western canoeist. Others include Garrett Conover and Rory Matchett, both of whom have written books about the technique. Since Rory did this route in 2009, and the weathered appearance of the pole suggested it had only been there for a few years, I assumed it was his or one of his party's. Whoever it was may have discarded it because he realized it was not going to be useful and, in fact, would be an inconvenient burden on the rest of the trip, or he may have inadvertently left it there by mistake.

This and subsequent sections of the river were to be more tests that proved the bullet-proof nature of the Twintex canoe. Ultimately, after dragging the loaded and empty canoe over rock both in and out of the river, sometimes seeing huge bulges in the hull as it was dragged over rocks, the canoe came through with essentially only cosmetic scratches. The Twintex withstood abuse that, without question, no other material, especially of a similar weight-to-strength ratio, could have withstood.

Typical 'rapids' of the Upper Naskaupi.

In several instances that day, we encountered small cascades or waterfalls over wide, rough rock bands that we couldn't line. So, we portaged to the end of each and reloaded the canoe, often from precarious positions, such as rocky ledges. At one, characterized by Philip on his trip as a steep trough flowing water swiftly down to a pool below, we had to portage our equipment and canoe along the left shore and over a rock wall to the terminal pool. Next to the main flow, and in the only place we could secure the canoe for loading from above, was a small diversion of water that poured water into the pool ~1.5m below it. We had to carefully position the canoe so this small waterfall was not pouring water into the back of it. In this position, Robert carefully handed me each item, in the sequence it needed to be loaded from front to back. I then gently each forward, installed it in its place, clipped it in, then worked my way to the stern for another hand-off. We successfully loaded the canoe, and Robert gingerly lowered himself off the rock into the stern after I moved to the bow seat, and we were off.

The 'trough' on river right with the small waterfall just off center.

Canoe parked next to small waterfall. The bottom of the ‘trough’ is on river right.

A short distance down river, we came to Isabella Falls, which was more of a long chute in a wide, low rock band. It required us to portage the canoe and our equipment along the water over the smooth rock adjacent to it. We put everything back in the canoe and, after paddling for a few kilometers downstream, we camped up off the river in a nice spot after hacking a trail to it through the alders.

Isabella Falls from above

Isabella Falls from below

On July 3, we spent most of the day traveling to just above Gertrude Falls, one of the more technical portages we were to make. On the way, we negotiated several short rapids and chutes, which were now becoming more water-filled, but we still had to line and wade the canoe through them. We 'bumped and grinded' through a couple of the last ones. One at midday and one later required getting the canoe over low 'drops' in rock bands crossing the river. The last one led us into a large pool, or small lake, above Gertrude Falls.

One of the several rock bands above Gertrude Falls we negotiated (left from above; right from below).

The last obstacle before Gertrude Falls.

Pool above Gertrude Falls. The pool forms a crescent shape around the boulder area (peninsula) in the center, and the falls is at the distant left.

Camp at Gertrude Falls in north end of the pool above them.

The Twintex canoe took a mighty beating that day and continued to perform well.

This day, we experienced lots of smoke emanating from forest fire(s) to the west of us. We presumed it was from the Lab City fire, but smoke became so thick that we questioned where the fire was with the strong daily winds and where we were in relation to it. We camped in a small shallow bay past the 'inlet' to the falls in the large pond backed up behind them. It was a beautiful location with diverse and interesting geological features.

Gertrude Falls starts with a short, unassuming gap in a rock wall, a rock wall that backs up the water in the large pool or small lake where we camped.

The river flows through the notch in the rock band, beneath which is Gertrude Falls.

Water pours forth through the gap to cascade several tens of meters to rocky channel below, flows as a cascade a little further, then rushes down something that could be categorized as

somewhere between a rapids and a chute to end up in a large pool below.

Gertrude Falls and chute below.

The portage around Gertrude Falls is one of the most technical one could imagine. It would involve carrying the canoe and equipment up over a large, water-sculpted rocky area contiguous with that forming the head of the falls and lowering everything down a small cliff into a staircase slot that varied in width between ~3 and 6 meters. Midway down this slot was an alder-filled pocket. Beyond that, the canoe would have to be raised up and over a narrow spot in the rock walls. It would then have to be lowered down again over a steep section to a small gap in the rocky face at the water's edge in the terminal pool.

Sculpted rock at the beginning of the Gertrude Falls portage, and the staircase slot from above.

Some before us had resorted to lowering canoe and equipment over a 12m cliff to the water's edge. We scouted the route in the evening and planned our portage for early the next morning and determined that we could maneuver our stuff down the staircase slot.

On July 4, we portaged around Gertrude Falls. It took us a couple of hours to do this portage. At the bottom, we slid the canoe into water, then carefully moved packs and equipment forward to their specific places where we clipped each in. We then boarded the canoe and paddled into the pool at the base of the falls.

The portage around Gertrude Falls.

After eating a quick lunch on the rocks in the terminal pool below the end of the falls, we did a few more 'bump and grinds' interspersed between deeper moving water sections. We then lined the canoe down a long run of water into a lake where we were to start 'Job's Portage' around the Maid Marion Falls Gorge.

The last rapid before Job's Portage.

Our canoe rests in a terminal pool after being lined down a rapid.

The lining of this long rapid was a process we repeated many times on the trip in the bigger rapids and chutes. In lining the canoe, we, the bowman and sternman, lengthened and shortened the lines at our respective ends of the canoe to maneuver it through chutes and around boulders while holding the canoe back in the strong current. We drew the stern in, and the bow was allowed to go out, to get the canoe to slide further into the flow. And, the opposite happened to steer the canoe around boulders and back into the shore. If the canoe hung up on a boulder, we alternately drew in our respective ropes and gave them slack, sometimes repeatedly, to gently work the canoe off it. The idea of lining a canoe is somewhat like 'sailing' an acrobatic or fighting kite with dual control lines. Lining can also be done by one person controlling both lines. In addition using the lines to steer the canoe through rapids, we used them in various ways to pull the canoe through tight spots or over boulders.

After paddling across the lake below this last set of rapids, we found the take-out for Job's Portage, an opening in the thick alders lining the river's right shoreline. The path, clearly an ancient remnant of an Innu trail, led ~10m (30ft) up a gentle hill to a ~6-7m (20ft) vegetated cliff. We unloaded the canoe and carried it and our equipment to the base of the cliff. Some before us described this as crumbling limestone cliff that ultimately required using a rope step to complete the final climb after getting their equipment up it. I found the ascent to be relatively straightforward. After hauling the canoe up it using the lining ropes, and after Robert lifted his big red canoeing pack and his loose dry bags up, I was easily able to carry the remaining packs and loose items up a narrow but clearly defined rock 'staircase' to the left of where we did the hauling. The transfer of those items up the staircase and the few meters to the first lake of the detour took a matter of minutes.

Cliff at start of Job's Portage.

First lake on Job's Portage.

We finished the day by loading the canoe, paddling across that first lake, portaging to Razor Lake, then portaging a few hundred meters to a small lake/large pond that we camped near. It had been a long day, with two pretty technical portages, especially the one around Gertrude Falls.

The stretches between lakes at the beginning of Job's Portage set the precedent for the rest of the overland carries. The portage to our campsite between the first lake and Razor Lake, and the portage between Razor Lake and our campsite, involved me scouting the route and flagging it with short sections of florescent plastic tape I had gathered over the years while elk hunting in the Snowy Range of southeastern Wyoming. These had been left in the forest by dirtbags who had apparently used it to mark the route to their kill in order to retrieve the carcass and never bothered to clean it up after they were done.

After flagging each section of the route on these and all other portages, I returned to discuss my findings with Robert and begin carrying equipment. Sometimes we carried that day, other times we waited until the next morning if I flagged late in the day. When we ferried our equipment overland, I typically carried the canoe and my daypack first; then returned to carry the food barrel, PFDs, gun, and a paddle; then returned again to carry my 84-liter dry pack and a paddle while picking up the flagging tape used to mark the route. Meanwhile, Robert carried his red canoe pack, a paddle and one of his dry bags, then the MEC pack with the bear vaults, another dry bag and his second paddle. These repeated trips over each section of overland portions of the route meant that, for every section of route, I was doing at least 7 trips (e.g., 700m for every 100m). Often over the course of the next several days I would have to flag and reflag sections of our route as I encountered obstacles, lost and found the faint Innu Trail and located easier paths. This was especially true later in the long Job's Portage while traversing an extensive 30-year old burn that reached from Angle Pond to beyond the point at which we re-entered the river.

At first the canoe was heavy, and my carries were only a few hundred meters. As the days and the carries passed, I 'hardened' and could go twice as far. The length of our carries became more limited by our concern over leaving our gear unattended for long periods of time and being found by a bear as we shuttled loads from one point to another.

Innu trail through black spruce & caribou moss.

That first day of Job's Portage, we traveled along a faint, difficult to follow remnant of the ancient Innu Trail through open, mature black spruce forest with a carpet of off-white caribou moss.

At the end of the second day on Job's Portage, we could not make the entire 1.25km to the next lake, the inaptly named Whale Pond (It was actually a large lake.), so we camped near a large

pond some 500m short of it.


Camp west of Whale Pond and a small pond near camp that provided us with water.

Upon reaching Whale Pond the next morning (July 6), we paddled across and portaged a short distance to Angle Pond. Again, we traveled along the faint Innu Trail through generally open black spruce forest with a blanket of caribou moss and a variety of shrubs and forbs in the understory. This day and the day before, we continued to experience a lot of forest fire smoke. The air was thick with it, and the smell was strong.


Thick smoke on the lakes of Job's Portage.

We had trouble finding the take-out at the far end of Angle Pond for the portage to Mina Lake. Once we found it, we decided to call Silvia to see if she could give us insight about fires. We wanted to either stop worrying and focus on our work or start deciding what to do if we were at risk. Silvia checked, and when we called back later, she told us that, based on the prevailing winds, we were likely getting smoke from large fires in the East Main area of Quebec east of James Bay. East Main is another massive hydroelectric project in the country's far north. Due to the wind direction, we determined we were not in the smoke plume from the Lab City fire. Now knowing we were not at risk, we could pay attention to the long, arduous detour we were on.

I then spent a lot of time finding and flagging the route away from the Angle Pond take-out point toward Mina Lake. The first carry was to be up a steep hill into another drainage and into an old burn we had seen along the north shore of Angle Pond at its east end. I was able to see Mina Lake, which is actually a pond, from a hill between it and Angle Pond through the burned out timber. With a little more scouting, I determined that, rather than going to it directly, it would be better to follow the path of least resistance down a shallow draw, around the hill and along a slightly larger draw to the lake. There was no water between Angle Pond and Mina Lake, and we anticipated 3 carries to get to it. We could find no good camping

place at the take-out, so after a lot of dinking around at the east end, we finally found an acceptable place along the south shore of Angle Pond almost half way back to where we put in earlier in the day. We had rain that night and were expecting the next couple of days to be cooler, which would help with the portages.

On Sunday, July 7, we portaged from Angle Pond to Mina Lake. It was a steep climb out of Angle Pond and into the burn, then down the first draw into the larger one. We were able to make the entire portage in two sections. As I flagged the final section of the route to the edge of Mina Lake looking for some solid ground in the marshy upper end to put the canoe in for the short paddle across it to our next campsite, I walked into a flat bench overlooking the upper (west) end. I looked down and saw laying on the ground a small, very old ' blown' or molded glass bottle with a long neck obviously designed for a cork stopper. I picked it up and examined it. The bottle was narrow front to back (~2-3cm) and about 4 times as wide. The neck was perhaps 5-6 cm long from the 'shoulder' of the bottle and had a thickened rim. On the front, up near where the main part of the bottle met the neck was the word "DAVIS"; on one of the narrow sides was the word "VEGETABLE"; and on the opposite side was the word "PAINKILLER".

Davis Vegetable Painkiller bottle found at Mina Lake.

I looked around to see if there was anything else lying nearby and returned up the route to show Robert. Both of us were excited because it was pretty evident, based on the age of the bottle and those that might have been in the area at the time it was discarded, that it was most likely from the Mina Hubbard expedition.

We returned to the location to mark it with my GPS unit and to photograph Mina Lake from that point. I also took some photos of the bottle, but having the usual problems seeing anything clearly through the sun-caused glare on the %$&# LCD screen on today's digital cameras, the bottle is slightly out of focus in most of those photos (A pox on camera manufacturers!!).

The location where the bottle was found is:
N 54 degrees 13.087'
W 062 degrees 43.832'

We were later to jokingly question whether perhaps Mina and her party consumed a lot of the Davis Vegetable Painkiller, whose main ingredients were ethyl alcohol and opiates, on their trip since they traveled up hill and upstream on the Naskaupi River section, carrying much heavy equipment, including a wood and canvas canoe that, when fully water logged, probably weighed over 45kg (100lbs). Although they didn't carry through the extensive burned out area we encountered on Job's Portage (It burned in the late 1980s.) they undoubtedly had their own challenges, including having limited means to deal with the voracious, blood-seeking insects and dealing with the fully untamed flow of the Naskaupi in those days.

Mina Lake looking east from where Davis Vegetable Painkiller bottle was found..

During the rest of this 13km detour (Job's Portage), I occasionally wondered how Job Chapies, credited with finding it for Mina Hubbard's party, was able to locate it. How evident was any Innu trail to him? At that time the forest was mature and unburned. On the early section of our trip, going east from the beginning to Angle Pond, before we reached the burn, it was relatively easy to see the faint remnants in the caribou moss, although sometimes I wondered if it wasn't a game trail. East from the top of the hill between Angle Pond and Mina Lake, a point from which the detour trended downhill toward the river, the land was all but devoid of live trees and the carpet of moss and lichen because of the late 1980s burn. We could see long distances, often to our destination the next day, so staying on the general route was not a problem. The difficulty was finding the easiest path to carry our stuff through the sometimes nasty blow down and scattered, dense shrub patches. Without evidence of an Innu trail, Mina's party would have no idea of the correct direction in the forest without someone climbing the occasional nearby mountain and trying to see off in the distance. I understand that some of that happened, but it must have slowed progress considerably.

Camp east of Mina Lake .

Upon carrying our equipment and canoe to Mina's Lake from the portage's midpoint, we loaded the canoe opposite the small drainage from where I found the bottle and paddled the 5-10 minutes to its east end where we camped for the night. After an early dinner, I flagged the route the 1.2km downhill through the extensively burned-over area to the next lake, which we could see from Mina Lake. Here again, this involved reflagging several sections as I encountered blow down blockages, boulder fields and patches of thick alder regrowth.

On July 8, we portaged from Mina Lake to the next one over the route I had flagged the evening before, taking ~6 hours. High winds during the latter part of the days were driving away the dense smoke we experienced earlier. The air and sky were much clearer. Carrying the canoe in the open, burned areas in the brisk winds was a challenge. The wind tried to push me sideways in one direction or the other. Because the wind was at my back, the threat of it taking the canoe away from me and sending it through the air was lessened because it had minimal chance of catching it underneath since the stern was lower than the bow. However, I often worried about the canoe sailing off out of my grip.

Once we got all our stuff to this unnamed lake, rather than push on, we paddled across it and camped on the opposite (east) side.

Unnamed lake 1.2km east of Mina Lake. Put-in on left; take-out and camp on right.

After we ate, I scouted and flagged the route up a hill, through some of the nastiest blow down and alder regrowth we had encountered so far on Job's Portage.

A challenging section of the portage out of the lake after (east of) Mina Lake. Our camp is at the bottom of the hill on the near side of the lake barely visible in the background..

I flagged the route past a couple of small ponds that others had put in and paddled across. The shorelines of these ponds were shallow and muddy, so I thought it better to carry around them than deal with the mess I was sure we would get into if we didn't.

One of the ponds we decided to carry around rather than trying to negotiate.

The next morning, we portaged to the far end of the last pond in two carries and ate lunch. I then scouted and flagged a route down ~500m along the left (north) side of the head of an unburned drainage that appeared to be running in the direction of the put-in on the Naskaupi at the end of the long, final overland section of the Job's Portage detour we were now on.

This time, I carried my 84-liter dry pack while I flagged to save a trip, something I occasionally did afterward in order to lessen the number of carries. I did this particularly if I was scouting and flagging a route section during the same day we were trying to do a long set of carries.

I actually flagged the route a couple of hundred meters beyond where we camped, crossing back over to the right (south) side of the drainage. It still wasn't clear whether we should be on the north or south side of the drainage as we progressed downhill the last couple of kilometers to the end of the portage. I returned to the pond where we had lunch, carried the canoe, then returned to carry the food barrel and some remaining loose stuff while pulling the flagging. It rained lightly on and off during the day while we were portaging.

We now had under 2km, all mainly downhill, to get back to the river. While Robert set up the tent, I scouted the north side through the burn along the unburned vegetation in the drainage. That side got increasingly difficult to walk through because of boggy areas and thick shrubs. If we chose to follow the drainage down on the right (south) side, we would encounter nasty riparian and boggy conditions as other small drainages join this one. Unsure of which side of the drainage we should be on, we called it a day and decided to worry about it in the morning.

On July 10, we portaged from last night's camp, 1.6km from the river, to within 600m of it. We traversed more of the extensive burn, but here downfall and the terrain were worse. I flagged and reflagged sections of the route in an attempt to find a relatively easy way through,

expending a lot of energy and time. This was by far the hardest day of Job's Portage and of the trip so far. We were exhausted and, anticipating rain the next day, we decided to stay put until Friday, July 12. We found a spot near the end of my reflagged route to camp.

Generally, comfortable spots near water had been difficult to find. The ground seems everywhere to be rocky and lumpy, and we frequently spent a lot of time wandering around looking for a site. Today was no exception. We finally found an acceptable spot in which to pitch the tent for the next two days. Water nearby was more difficult. The riparian vegetation was thick, and the little stream was down below deep banks that made accessing it awkward. We were only able to scoop up a liter or so at a time to fill the collapsible fabric bucket we used to store water and from which to filter it.

It is perversely fascinating that a small flat place to pitch a tent is so difficult to find. Along the river, the 'beaches' are narrow and often stony, and alders choke the land just above them. Beyond the alders, trees often form an almost impenetrable barrier. The uplands may be open black spruce with clearings, but the clearings are usually bouldery and/or not level. Finding the combination of a nice place that was comfortable and easy access to water was much harder than one might imagine.

The next day, July 11, we had some dry, sunny periods and during a long one in late morning, I was able to flag the route to the river before the afternoon rains came.

Almost back to Naskaupi at last. The old burn we had been traversing extends east out of sight.

Although only 500-600m, it was perhaps the most difficult section of Job's Portage. We were going to have to cross a couple of little drainages with dense, unburned vegetation and poor footing, 'side hill' 100m or so to above a beach next to a pool in the river, then fight dense alders and blow down to that beach. The alternative was to go straight for the river and have to get the canoe and equipment down a rocky gully where one of the small drainages made a steep final drop to the water. That would mean difficult footing going up and down that gully as we ferried our stuff to the water and a tricky time reloading the canoe off a precarious

perch. We opted to ‘side hill’ to the beach.

Thick riparian vegetation of two streams impeded our progress in the last 100m of Job’s Portage.

There was going to be no relent from the struggles of the last half of this overland journey. It had all been through the extensive, late 1980s burn with thick shrubby growth, lots of blow down and difficult stream crossings, these all being navigated while carrying a >27kg canoe or one of several 18-23kg packs and dealing with swarms of insects. I was looking forward to ending this overland section and being back on the river again.

On July 12, we got up early in the morning and began our advance to the river because a 60% chance of rain was predicted for the afternoon. Just after our first carry to the midpoint of that last half kilometer, it clouded up and began to rain -- more misery to our final, hard day of this portage. We hustled to move our stuff toward the beach. Fortunately, the shower passed and we were able finish in the dry. However, within 30 meters of the beach, we were stalled by the dense vegetation and blow down I had been dreading.

The last 30m of Job’s Portage were the worst – a final indignation.

We got our canoe and equipment to the top of the final shrubby, blow down-cluttered slope, loaded the canoe, and slowly slid it to the beach over that nasty stuff, using the lining ropes to control its descent.

The skies began to clear, and although we arrived by late morning, we agreed to stay at that lovely spot until the next morning since rain was predicted for later in the day. We were able to clean up after several sweaty days; wash our clothes for the first time, have a couple of

A lovely day at the beach.

leisurely, not-freeze-dried-meals; make a serious attempt at recharging the satellite phone battery with the little solar charger we had; and relax. The rains never came, and the weather just got better and better as the day progressed.

Trying to recharge our troublesome satellite phone batteries.

We had 3 batteries with the satellite phone and went through the charge on the first one at an alarming rate. We were having trouble getting it and the second one to fully charge. The first one seemed to be defective, but we couldn't tell. We could increase the charge on the second one, but it was agonizingly slow and didn't seem to hold well. This was making us very nervous. When Robert next talked to Silvia he advised her that as a backup plan, if she didn't hear from us for a while, he would send her three S.P.O.T. messages in succession--one advising we were OK, one Help message, then another OK message. The S.P.O.T. device automatically sends the location with each message. This series of S.P.O.T. messages would indicate to Silvia that we were OK and were ready to be picked up by the float plane, and they would have our location. From then on, we were very conservative with the satellite phone and tried to recharge the batteries at every opportunity. We had the third, fresh battery as a reserve.

That evening we sat on the beach and watched a Common Goldeneye alternately resting on the far side of the pool in the river in front of us and try to land in the top of a snag across the river in the high evening wind. The Goldeneye is a cavity nester, so we assumed it was trying to land at its nest. It made one brief landing, but without grasping feet, it appeared to have trouble hanging on to the top of the snag, so off it flew again. A kestrel hunting nearby, apparently with great aspirations, made a couple passes at the Goldeneye. Bird species diversity on the trip had been fairly limited so far.

Early in the morning on the day after arriving at the beach (Saturday, July 13), we broke camp, lined the short rapids just below the pool we had been camped on, and advanced ~28km down the river. We 'bumped and grinded' over a number of shallow rapids along the way.

First rapids after Job's Portage

When we arrived at Halley/McLean Falls a short distance down river, we 'lifted' over the rock band the two small falls poured over.

Halley/McLean Falls

The river continued to grow in size and increase in depth, although there were still many shallow rapids and swifts.




After traveling down more smooth moving water and small, shallow rapids, we arrived at what Mina Hubbard had named 'Hole in the Wall' and described as water pouring forth from a mountain.

Mina Hubbard's 'Hole in the Wall'. Water flows through the notch in the center.

Actually, what we encountered was another taller, sloped rock band crossing the river with a large notch in it, similar to what formed Gertrude and Halley/McLean Falls. The upstream end of this rock barrier created some chutes as the water poured over its sculpted surface before pouring through the notch.

The shore along the left side of the river above Hole in the Wall was sloped rock, so we couldn't walk along it and line the canoe down to the pool below. We had to lug our equipment up the rock, then haul the canoe up by the ropes we used to line it.

Shore on river left just above 'Hole in the Wall' (looking upstream on the left and downstream on the right)

We then carried everything some 100 meters across burned and unburned vegetation to just above the end of the rock wall across the river that created the 'Hole'. Trying to get directly to the pool below was going to be extremely difficult, because of a lot of unforgiving rock that we would have to get everything over and dense alders we would have to struggle through. So, we elected to load the canoe with much of the heavy stuff, slide it down off the hill and through a narrower alder patch, load everything in it on the smooth rock surface at water's edge, and run a short chute through the notch in the rock wall.

Getting gear down to the water from the portage around 'Hole in the Wall'.

After carrying everything up the sloped rock and around the trees on river left, starting around the corner in the distance, we put in and shot through the notch in the tilted rock band.

During all this maneuvering, we had a brief rain shower to further dampen ;-) our enthusiasm.

One of 3 shallow rapids in one section of the river created by the river splitting into channels at a drop. The river splitting like this at rapids was a common impediment that required dragging the canoe or wading beside it.

After paddling to a gravelly shore on river left below Hole in the Wall we grabbed a quick, cold lunch and continued down river. We encountered more swifts and rapids. The river was increasing in size and volume, so fewer and fewer of these features had to be waded or 'bumped and grinded' through. However, frequently at these places the river elected to break into two to several channels, each with only a fraction of the total flow, so abusing the canoe over rocks in shallow water was still a common occurrence.

We were seeing more beaver houses as we continued down the river.

Beaver house along the river.

As it got later and later that day, we searched for a camping site somewhere along the seemingly unending gravelly, alder-lined shoreline. After watching for several kilometers, we finally found a nice little grassy 'nook' in one of the side channels of the river. In front of it was a small sandy point where we could cook in the wind sweep to minimize the hassle of bugs.


A rare, good camping place

Black flies on a section of the tent.

Generally, the black flies, mosquitos and large biting flies (e.g., deer flies and 'stouts') had been, so far, not as bad as we had expected given that we were on the trip during what is usually the height of the black fly and mosquito season. On the water, none of them were much of an issue except that the occasional cloud would follow us out from shore until the wind blew them away. When we were along the river or near upland riparian vegetation, the black flies could be a problem if our bug jackets and hoods were not secured. They were a continual, distracting cloud of persistent little devils trying to find any weakness in our defenses. They were normally a problem during the day and evening. Mosquitoes were generally present in abundance in the morning. The large biting flies were most common as we worked through the burned out upland sections of Job's Portage. Many nights, hundreds of black flies would trap themselves under the tent fly and create a relentless sound like rain as they bounced against it.

When we entered the tent, we prepared to get in just outside the door on each of our sides. Then we quickly opened the door and dived in. First order of business was to zip up the door and start killing bugs. Interestingly, the black flies (and most of the large biting flies) that got in the tent seemed to be obsessed with getting out and bothered us little. The mosquitoes however, would eventually be seen flying around inside gorged with blood if they weren't killed immediately. The black flies that did get in the tent, and there were many, were generally all dead by morning, so as we packed up the tent, we had to pour them out. The most dreaded activity on the trip was going to the bathroom. This was a guarantee of many intensely itching welts in one's most sensitive areas.

On Sunday, July 14, we made it 20km down the river to the take-out for the Seal Rapids portage. As we traveled along this stretch of river, we encountered fewer rapids and more

deep, smooth water with a strong current. More water was entering the river from tributaries. The strong winds of the latter part of this day and the previous ones propelled us along at a rapid pace. As we passed through Caribou Lake and sections of the river above it, we encountered many flightless family groups of a lesser race of Canada Goose.

More streams flowing in mean more river volume.

The Naskaupi continues to grow and tame.

The End

As we rounded a gentle bend of the river near the Seal Rapids portage take-out, we saw smoke ahead of us. We then noticed that the tops of hills on both sides of the river, including what appeared to be along the long, narrow lake that constituted the early part of the detour, were burned out. Our view was blocked by the dense band of alders that lined much of the river and the trees immediately behind them in the foreground. So, we couldn't see much, but it was obvious that a forest fire had recently burned across the river from northwest to southeast right through Seal Rapids and the area of our portage. From the maps and reports from previous parties, we understood this portage to consist of moving our canoe and gear from the river up a deep, narrow stream channel for a hundred meters or so to a long, narrow lake heading east. At the end of that lake was a~2km overland portage that, based on our previous experience, would take a couple of days.

Upon reaching the small stream entering the river at the take-out, I explored up it. About 50 meters through very shallow water, I encountered a beaver dam spanning the deep, narrow drainage. The beaver dam instantly created a ~1.5 meter 'canal' through the dense shrubby vegetation lining the channel. I couldn't go any further without the canoe because the banks of the channel were overgrown and steep, and the vegetation on land above the channel was so dense as to be impenetrable.

Take-out for the Seal Rapids Portage. The portage begins with a ~0.5km long stream leading to a lake.

Now what? We made an unscheduled call to Silvia to see if she could do some research on the fire to determine any information about it. Later, in a follow up call, she reported that the RNC and the Labrador Forestry Department were unaware of it. There were 5 major fires active at the time in Labrador, some threatening large hydropower infrastructure and the Trans Lab Highway, but we were the first to report this one. This was not a surprise given the vast landscape of the interior of Labrador. We knew that even when they did know about them, often the authorities had to let fires burn because they were impossible to try to control and they burned in remote areas where there was no urgency to control them. This appeared to be the situation with our fire.

We spent the rest of that day strategizing. It appeared to be highly likely that the fire burned through the ~2km overland portage portion at the end of the detour. That meant, at the least, we would have to carry and camp in dirty, sooty conditions. It was likely, based on the smoke rising from that direction, there were still hot spots and embers that could damage much of our equipment, including packs, tent, clothes, and sleeping bags. Worse, the high afternoon winds could cause flare ups that could put us at great risk.

Although we had intended to portage around the Seal Rapids, we were now weighing the alternative of trying to negotiate them some way. We understood they could 'sometimes' be lined. What does that mean?! We questioned whether, if they could ‘sometimes’ be lined, could we carry our stuff around along the shore if need be. Our 1:50,000 maps (laminated hard copy sections and in our GPS units) provided us with little insight. We could detect 3-4 rapids separated by smooth water of different lengths. The middle rapids appeared to be in a narrow (canyon-like?) area with tight contour lines. That was the one that concerned us the most since it might be that there the shoreline was steep and difficult to traverse while lining the canoe or carrying everything around it. Additionally, not knowing the nature of the fire (How recently had it burned through this area? How wide was it? What was the vegetation like on the other side of its swath?), we did not know what getting downwind of it might pose for us. It might be that, if we got up very early in the morning, long before the strong mid and late day winds rose, we might be able to get through the rapids and ~20km downstream in a day. But, we didn't know how long it would take to get through the rapids, and what if the winds really blew and changed ever so slightly to due westerly instead of northwesterly as they had been? The lack of information about the fire was very frustrating.

Adding to our dilemma was the fact that we were two people well over 160km from anywhere and needed to continue to take the safe, conservative approach to travel we had been practicing. We had avoided running all but the most low class rapids and had cautiously traversed areas of portages with hazards in order to reduce the likelihood of injury since we

were in many places where rescue would be difficult. Even if an air rescue was possible, what then happened to the other person and our canoe and equipment? Certainly, the uninjured individual would probably be taken out too, but retrieval of the canoe and equipment would be so costly, especially if it had been left in an area only accessible to a helicopter, that we might have to determine whether it was better to cut our losses and leave all the stuff way out in the bush. Running Seal Rapids as one of our last resorts might place us in an alternate form of jeopardy, compounding our situation.

We went back and forth over our alternatives. It became more and more obvious that the portage was not a wise choice. Robert called Silvia again to see if she had gotten any further information from the authorities and to have her contact Jim Burton, the person with whom he had made tentative plans for a float plane pick up wherever we terminated our trip. We were now only ~30-40km from Seal Lake, the first potential pick up site we had discussed as we planned the trip. We weren't sure Jim could get us with his small, single-engine Beaver. Although the river channel at our location was ~75 meters wide and deep enough, and it was clear of sand bars, it appeared as though he might not have enough distance between the short, rocky rapids we could see some 300-400 meters downstream before the river turned east and entered the narrows where the Seal Rapids were and any features that might be in the river upstream around the gentle bend out of our sight. As well, as the river bent gently to the west above us, there was a pair of small hills on its south side that Jim would have to turn around as he gained elevation.

Smoke rising above Seal Rapids and the Seal Rapids Portage.

That evening near sunset, we could see smoke rising off in the distance east of us in a 30-40 degree swath of the sky just above the nearby trees. It was in the direction of the end of the Seal Rapids narrows and the portage around them. There was still fire in our path.

We did enjoy a beautiful sunset, but there was still the distraction of the dilemma we faced.

Sunset on the Naskaupi River.

Robert and the food barrel deliberating our fate on a beautiful Naskaupi evening.

When I got up in the early morning of July 15 and got out of the tent to take a pee, the air was still and heavy with smoke. It was much like mornings early in our travel across Job's Portage. It smelled strongly of burning fuels, and the nearby forest and hills were dark and foreboding. We took little comfort in the fact that we were generally upwind of the fire. We knew we were uncomfortably close to it, and any reversal of the wind would put us at risk.

To add to the suspense, during all these calls regarding the fire and our options, we still had the gnawing concern about the satellite phone's lingering battery issues. The day before - the day we arrived and began our fact finding on the fire and our deliberations on what to do - we had the phone on its little solar charger every minute we could. It didn't seem to be making much progress. We had one questionable battery, the first one we used at the beginning of the trip that went down so quickly - much faster than it should have at the rate and duration of the calls we had made. It seemed to not take or keep a charge. Equally worrying, within the first days of the trip, the phone appeared to turn itself on while stored in its Pelican (waterproof, shockproof) case. After we had discovered this, at my suggestion, Robert started storing the phone with the battery out of it. He had never experienced this issue in all the previous trips on which he had used the phone. The second battery was down, and we couldn't seem to get the charge back up despite good sun all day on the 14th (yesterday). Then we had the third, as yet unused, battery. We were OK but nervous....

About 0740hr, it started to rain, and it continued on and off for ~2 hours. It undoubtedly suppressed the fire to some degree, but it would only take clearing, hot weather and the routine high winds in mid- to late day to possibly reverse the situation. Those conditions were coming later in the day.

We waited until business hours, then Robert contacted Jim Burton, as Silvia had advised Jim he would do the day before when she forewarned him we might need his services earlier than originally scheduled. Jim advised us he would research our location and give us his opinion later in the morning. We called him back an hour or so later. He had looked at the site on Google Earth and didn't think he could pick us up. He needed 1540m (5000ft) to take off in his fully loaded plane. We thought he might have enough, but deferred to his extensive experience flying, landing and taking off in southern Labrador. The two hills just off the southern shore of the narrow river corridor that he would have to clear were an obvious concern to us. Robert, who had flown with Jim in the past, knew how very far Jim had to fly once in the air to gain any appreciable altitude. That option appeared to be out.

We even questioned whether Jim couldn't pick one of us and some of the equipment with his Beaver and take them to Wuchusk Lake, a large, long lake on the river some 20km downstream, then return for the other person and the remaining equipment. He could then load up everything and both of us there where he would have ample distance and no obstacles. Jim didn't like that option either. Quite frankly, neither did we because that left one person at either end during the ferrying with only part of the equipment. Any problems (e.g., an issue with the plane) would mean someone would be left off by themselves and in potential jeopardy.

Jim advised that Air Labrador, based next to him and with some twin Otter float planes they used to service the many remote coastal villages and some back country fishing lodges on lakes, might be our best bet. He volunteered to walk over to their base office nearby and discuss our situation with them. Silvia had forwarded yesterday's automated S.P.O.T. email message to him since that contained our location as part of the device's message. This information would help him and Air Lab make a determination. As the morning progressed, the winds began to pick up. By now they were at their typical ~50-60kph velocity and were blowing at a ~45 degree angle to the river (from northwest to southeast).

When we called Jim back an hour later, he advised Air Lab thought they could get us, but they had another flight mid afternoon, and they would have to come for us soon. We had not been anticipating such an immediate retrieval; we had been thinking it might be in the next day or so. We hurriedly made up our minds that we needed to seize the opportunity, take no further risk that the fire might back up into us, and get out of there. Jim gave us Air Lab's phone number so we could discuss the pick up directly with them. He also asked us to put the canoe in the water and paddle both up and down the river to ensure there were no sandbars protruding into it. If Air Lab had to fly up ~240km (150mi) to get us and not be able to land, we would be stuck with a very expensive bill and would still be sitting on the river wondering what to do. So, we put in and paddled around.

Earlier, I had thrown a stick as far out into the river as I could and timed its progress. It appeared the flow was a relatively lazy ~3 meters per minute. As we paddled up river around the gentle bend to the north upstream of our campsite, we found a 'rock garden' of boulders spanning the river in the smooth water. We had forgotten about this, but it appeared to be far enough up the river that it would unlikely be an issue.

We returned to camp after ensuring there were no hidden obstacles, and Robert called Air Lab. They advised they would be to us in an hour or so. We quickly packed up all our stuff except for the tent. We wanted to leave it to the last minute in case we got rain before they came and in case for some reason they couldn't land. We could find no good camping places when we arrived the day before, so we had to mash down a patch of small-stemmed willows next to the river's narrow beach and the small beaver stream that constituted the beginning of the portage. If we had to stay, it would be a hassle setting up the tent again if we took it down. We agreed to quickly take it down and cram it in Roberts big, red canoe pack as they made their landing approach...if they could land.

As the time approached that they would arrive, a violent rain squall hit us. We skooched in under the vestibules on either side of the tent with only our heads poking out of the zippered flaps watching and listening down river (downwind, sort of) for the plane. The squall finally passed, and the sky began clearing, but we could see more weather coming over the hills to the northwest across the river's flood plain. We banged on the tent's fly to knock as much water off as we could so it would be as dry as possible and waited.

Soon, we could hear the faint sound of the plane, and all of a sudden the high-winged, twin-engine Otter swung into view around the sharp bend in the river downstream in the direction of the Seal Rapids. It came in slow over our stretch of the river at a few hundred meters off the water, passed by us, turned east, and disappeared over the tree tops. My first thought was, "Oh, shit, they can't land." We couldn't hear them. The silence, except for the strong wind ripping across the river and through the vegetation, was very sobering. But then I thought, it was reasonable to expect them to make an initial pass to do a reconnaissance of our location and their prospective landing site on the river. We waited….

Then a few minutes later, the plane swung into view again from the same location. It passed over us once more at a slow rate. Again, after getting up river of us, it banked east and disappeared over the tree tops. More silence except for the wind. Now we were really concerned that, after taking a second pass and making sure they couldn't do it, they had headed back on the long trip to their base at Goose Bay. We would have to call in an hour or so to have the bad news confirmed. I began to wonder what the weather would be the next morning and how we might make our break through the fire's swath and down the river as far as we could, starting before dawn and paddling late into the evening. I was sure we could make it to Wuchusk Lake in a day if negotiating Seal Rapids didn't hold us up too long. That lake is just upstream of Seal Lake where Robert had made tentative pre-trip plans for Jim Burton to pick us up if we decided to go out from there. Could we get through the rapids by

noon? By then, the winds would be up and the remnant hot spots might begin to flare up since the immediate forecast for the weather was for warming and drying. We had no details about the rapids and didn't know what kind of challenge they would be.

As I was standing there rolling these thoughts around in my head, the beautiful white twin Otter swung into view downstream, this time coming at us low and with full flaps. It slowly passed us by just a few tens of meters off the water then splashed into the river upstream of us.

Robert yelled that it didn't look like they could stop it before reaching the rock garden up the river, but they 'slammed on the breaks' (full reverse props), and with engines screaming, the plane drifted to a stop. It then turned around and began taxiing back toward us. We frantically began tearing down the tent. The plane slowly approached, looming ever larger.

As it approached our canoe on the shore, the pilot swung the front out into the river and gently backed it into the narrow sandy beach, nice as you please - much like one would back a car into a parking space. As the engines wound down, the copilot opened the side doors near the back of the fuselage on the left side of the plane. I went around to that side and yelled to him, "What do you want first?" He yelled back, "The canoe."

One of the things that had to be confirmed in our discussions with Jim Burton and Air Lab earlier in the day was the length of the canoe. Jim could take about any length since he attached it to one of its floats. Canoes had to be carried inside the Air Lab Otter's fuselage, and it could take nothing longer than 5.5 meters (18ft). Our canoe was 5.38 meters (17.5ft) long.

We fed the canoe to the copilot through the doors and he slid it up into the fuselage, stood it up on its side against the right wall and began strapping it in at the front and back. The bow was right up against and partially blocking the door into the cockpit, and the stern was hard against a rear bulwark that created a small compartment behind it in the tail. We then started retrieving our equipment from the shore, Robert handing it to me from the water's edge, and me relaying it down the left pontoon to hand it in the door to the pilot and copilot. They strapped each item to an anchor point on the wall. The interior of the plane was essentially bare except for a row of tubing seats with sparse upholstery that were attached to and folded

up against both sides of the fuselage. Once all the equipment was loaded into the plane, they folded down 2 seats on the left side of the fuselage for us.

We had been snapping pictures as we got our stuff together and loaded the plane. The pilot, an older gentleman about our age asked me if I could take a few pictures with his smart phone. He said, "We just don't get to do this kind of flying much anymore." Their routine, as a small commuter flight company was to fly from their base on the large Lake Melville at Northwest River to remote communities up the east coast of Labrador and to remote fishing lodges on large back country lakes, much like flying to small airports in towns around Wyoming - very routine. I got the impression they got a kick out of the challenging mission they were now on.

We snapped a few photos on everyone's cameras while we introduced ourselves. It turned out that the pilot, Lester Powell, was, according to his copilot, George Barrett, one of the most experienced float plane pilots around with over 40 years of experience. George himself had around 20 years of experience. We found, once we were back in Northwest River, Goose Bay and Happy Valley, that Lester was universally known and had the reputation of being the guy that, if you had to be picked up in a tenuous situation, was your man.

As we found our seats, belted in and readied our cameras for the flight, Lester manned the controls and George closed the cargo door behind us. As he passed by us while moving to the front, in one breath he quickly rattled off most of the safety message one routinely gets from flight attendants on your typical commercial flight. We all took some amusement from that; and I asked him when the tea, coffee and beer would be served. He advised it was waiting for us in Northwest River.

Lester raised the engine speed, slowly worked the plane off the narrow beach and turned it upstream. The wind was now blowing strongly at an angle from our front right quarter. Lester then began backing up the plane. Once he had it moving briskly backward downstream, in a move that was reminiscent of my teens when we would get a car drifting backward then put it in first gear and drop the clutch, leaving a pair of hooked black streaks, he 'punched it'. The plane leapt forward, throwing us back in our sparsely appointed seats, and we began picking up speed as we headed toward the rock garden in the river a few hundred meters upstream.

As I watched the pilot and copilot through the open cockpit door, I noticed that George was resting his left hand lightly on the back of Lester's right hand as Lester worked the overhead twin throttle controls. I assume this ensured George could instantly take those controls if anything were to happen to Lester during that critical take off period.

The plane quickly gained speed, and Lester pitched it into the air. As we rose above the alders and trees, the strong, quartering crosswind pitched the plane violently to the left. Lester corrected and banked the plane eastward.

We could see from the air that the fire crossed the far end of the lake and the ~2km overland portion beyond it that constituted the Seal Rapids Portage.

Gaining altitude, I could now see the burn that had blocked our way. It had crossed the river in a wide swath and completely torched the overland portage portion of the detour around Seal Rapids. There were still smoking hotspots on both sides of the river, including one right on the north (left) river bank just below the last rapids. The swath extended far to the north. The rains that morning appeared to have suppressed the fire, but it was not out, and the winds and sunny weather were sure to reinvigorate it in the days to come.

George dropped his hand from the back of Lester's, and we continued to gain altitude as we winged southeastward. We rose to approximately 1230 meters (4000ft) and, for the next hour, flew at ~190kph (120mph) over a vast land of countless lakes and millions of hectares of wild lands. On and on we flew, traversing pristine lands and some large areas touched at some time by wild fires. We flew over complexes of massive lakes; wild rivers; dense black spruce forests; and open, tundra-like habitats. Robert and I snapped photos and yelled observations to one and other.

Scenes from Central Labrador on the flight to Northwest River.

We began to see the western end of the massive, 65km (40mi) Grand Lake that extends west from Northwest River and is the terminus of the Red Wine and the Naskaupi Rivers. We flew around to its south shore and followed it toward Air Lab's base on the shore of Lake Melville, the saline lake on the east side of Northwest River that extends toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Grand Lake in the distance on the right.

Soon, we could see occasional cabins on small remote lakes, dirt roads extending outward into the forest, then the Trans Lab Highway and civilization off in the distance. We flew out over Lake Melville, turned north and approached Air Lab's base on the west end of the lake. Lester splashed it in near the dock and taxied it to rest at a dock. Attendants quickly tied the plane off as he shut it down.

We opened the cargo door and began off loading our equipment. Dan Michelin Sr., who had shuttled Robert's vehicle to Northwest River from Churchill Falls at the beginning of our trip, had dropped it off there earlier in the day when Silvia called him and advise him we would be returning in the afternoon. Jim Burton, who was our original potential pick up pilot (using his Beaver) and who was so instrumental in coordinating Air Lab's flight to retrieve us, met us at the dock. We exchanged greetings and offered our thanks to him. He took a couple of photos of us on the dock by the plane, and we finished loading Robert's vehicle and settling up with the air service on our bill. We then headed into town to find a place to stay. The air lift bill was staggering, but we really had no choice, and our amazing pick-up, as well as the flight back over the stunning interior of southern Labrador, made it somewhat worth it.

Epilogue

It is hard to tell, but it appeared I had lost ~3kg on our trip. We subsisted for the most part on freeze dried meals, which have become very palatable over the years, and some tinned meat, nuts, oatmeal and granola bars. And, we worked hard most days, often portaging for up to 6-8 hours on Job's Portage or lining, carrying or paddling in the river for the same amount of time.

Over the next couple of days, we went to the Labrador Historical Society's museum in the original Hudson's Bay store in Northwest River to donate to it the Davis Vegetable Painkiller bottle I found at Mina Lake. We met with Ernie McLean, the president of the Society to make the donation. We were interviewed about the find on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's counterpart of the US's NPR (http://www.cbc.ca/labradormorning/episodes/2013/07/18/retracing-the-steps-of-mina-hubbard/)

Presenting the Davis Vegetable Painkiller bottle found at Mina Lake to Ernie McLean, President of the Labrador Historical Society at its museum.

We spent a good part of the next day in Northwest River visiting with Robert's friend, Dan Michelin, the person who shuttled his car from Churchill Falls, and Dan's wife Carol.

We also paid a visit to Louie Montague, another of Robert's friends who just published a fascinating book about his life as a trapper, fisherman and government natural resources agency employee; about the Northwest River/Goose Bay/Happy Valley area; about the coming of the huge NATO base to Goose Bay in the mid 1900s; and about its closing and the aftermath of that in the late 1900s. His book, "I Never Knowed It Was Hard" is a must read for anyone interested in life in the wilderness of the North and about that area in particular.

Louie Montague .

We then spent a nice late morning at Liz Dawson's house (Louie's partner) house just down the street from his on the eastern shore of the little lake next to Grand Lake. Liz, who recorded Louie's memories and organized them into the text of his book, invited him, Jock Campbell, another acquaintance of Robert's, Jock's

On Liz's deck.

sister, and Jock's wife over to visit with us over refreshments on her lovely side yard deck. We talked about our trip, Louie's book and the stunning landscapes that provided settings for both.

Having gotten our visiting done, we departed the next day. We were facing more potential delays and convoys on the Trans Lab Highway. One of the major fires we were made aware of while dealing with ours at Seal Rapids, the Gull Island fire, was just a short distance east of us. When we passed through that area, we found that the weather over the past couple of days had suppressed it to a point that it was not an issue. We stopped in Labrador City for the night after a long day of driving and after passing through the burned out country east of it where we had been delayed on our way to our canoe trip. The next day, between Lab City and Baie-Comeau, just after we crossed into Quebec south of the Labrador highlands, we passed through another large burned out area in the Manicouagan River drainage. It was the result of another fire that had been burning while we were descending the Naskaupi River. Helicopters and ground crews appeared to be taking advantage of the cool, wet weather to rush around and put out hot spots before weather favorable to fire incited it again.

After almost two days of crossing Labrador on the Trans Lab Highway on the way back to Robert's home, I was struck by the fact that we could drive for hours and only see another vehicle or two. Where else in North America but the extreme northern parts of the Canadian provinces can you do that? Labrador is vast, and except for a few towns and facilities associated with enormous mines or hydro projects, it is unimaginably sparsely populated. There are few roads, and most people traveling the main one, the Trans Lab, are going somewhere else. Those who think places like Wyoming are big, wild landscapes are thinking far too provincially.

Upon returning to Robert's home after the trip, we watched a video of movie footage taken during the 1968 trip down the Naskaupi by Stewart Coffin's group. They did it before the Churchill Falls hydro project was fully functional. That project diverted the headwaters of several rivers near the height of land, including the Naskaupi's. The footage of the Naskaupi at that time shows a dramatically different river flowing considerably more water. The Naskaupi River was a powerful, thundering and intimidating sight prior to the Churchill Falls project.

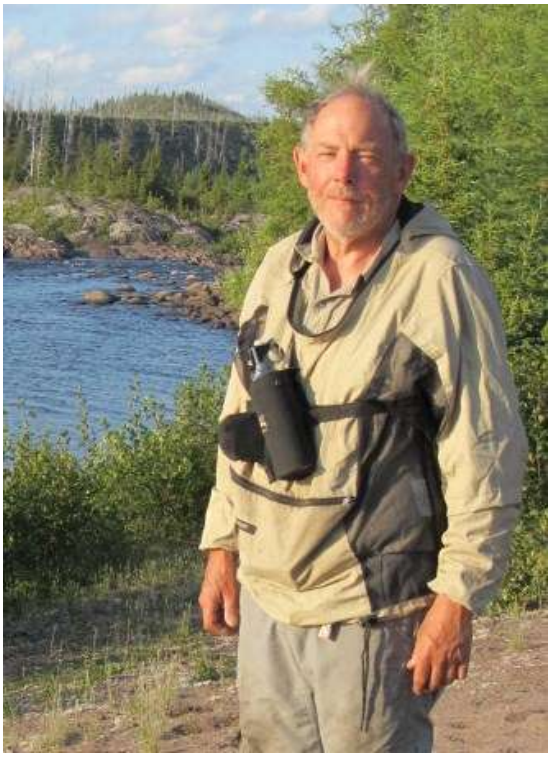
Much of what we saw in the video was unrecognizable to us, but we did see what we were sure was Gertrude Falls – a much more powerful feature than what it is now. This video provided us with an important perspective about the very different river we experienced. The river we and the three previous parties travelled was a relatively small one by comparison (a large stream at its upper end). And many features, such as the rock bands that formed Isabella Falls, Halley/McLean Falls and Hole in the Wall, were probably much less prominent before the river was emasculated. I wonder about the dramatically different river Mina and her party, and Stewart Coffin and his party, experienced. Could it be that what Mina described as water pouring out of a mountain when she described 'Hole in the Wall' was not water pouring out of a notch in a large rock band spanning the river, as we saw? Rather, was it an entire mighty river pouring through a narrows between two hills and blasting over that mostly submerged rock wall?

Caribou Lake, downstream of Hole in the Wall, was transformed from a large lake to just a continuation of the normal river channel in a large valley - a very different thing than what is portrayed on old maps. All the rocky rapids we struggled to negotiate were probably much more powerful and more potentially dangerous, with the boulders we dragged the canoe through and over hidden below the river's surface. I now understand how the large expanses of water-carved rock we encountered at many of the falls we portaged around were formed. For millennia they were subject to the unending force of the river's enormous flows. Now

they are mostly exposed with a much smaller volume of water pouring over their lowest points.

The night before I left Vankleek Hill (July23), Robert and I called Rory Matchett at his home in New Brunswick to discuss our trip and ask him questions we had about his travels down the Naskaupi River in 2009. During our conversation, I asked him about the canoe pole we found next to a set of rapids in the river just below Marie Lake. Rory was not aware the pole had been left and speculated that it was left by another member of his party. He shared our wonder at the mutual experience we shared, and he agreed that the Naskaupi pre-1970s and now was an entirely different beast. We enjoyed sharing details about one anothers' experiences and acknowledged how hard it is to express what it was like to do that trip to people who had not.

It is no wonder Robert and others like him find Labrador so intriguing. It is truly wild country - on a scale so vast that it can only truly be appreciated in a flight like ours from Seal Rapids to Northwest River with Air Lab.



Notes

Twintex is a roving made of commingled E-Glass and polypropylene filaments which can be woven into mats designed with high mechanical properties. It offers an excellent stiffness/weight ratio and superior impact properties over traditional fiberglass. It looks like a coarse fiberglass mat in an epoxy matrix. The Esquif canoe we used weighted in at just over 23kg (61lb). As we experienced throughout the trip, it was able to withstand extraordinary abuse that I believe other hull materials such as Royalex could not have endured.

Solo Stove - This twig stove is approximately the size of a backpacking stove, but uses small branches and twigs for fuel. The stove nests in its 800-900ml pot, and the whole kit, stored in its own stuff sack, is very lightweight. The stove normally takes under 10 minutes to boil water, considerably longer than the newer white gas or butane stoves, but who's in a hurry, and fuel (and its weight) is never an issue. The stove performed well throughout the trip, even with slightly damp materials. Normally, we could find twigs and branches in tree patches that had been sheltered from rain, and often we would collect and store them under the canoe immediately upon arriving at a campsite so, in case it did rain, we had dry fuel. Using the generic fire starter blocks would probably really enhance starting. We also used open fires when we needed a lot of water or were cooking non-freeze dried meals that required a long time to simmer.

Laminated 'hard copy' map sections – Map sections 'clipped' from 1:50,000 topographic maps produced by the Surveys and Mapping Branch of the Canada Department of Energy, Mines and Resources. See map appendix at end.

Bears & bear equipment – Canoeists in eastern Canada have reported many experiences with black bears, ranging from behavior that appears to range from curiosity, to attraction to appealing scents, to obvious habituation, to activity that is clearly aggressive or predatory. All recent parties that had done our proposed route reported sometimes scary encounters of some type, either on their Naskaupi trips or on other trips to the general area. The black spruce of the taiga forests in Labrador are not practical for trying to suspend bear attractants out of their reach. The food barrel, although not bear proof, was pretty 'scent-proof' since it was plastic with a plastic lid that had a rubber seal and a 'band clamp' much like that used to seal the lids of large cardboard drums used in industry and wholesale. The 3 bear vaults were as about as secure for food as we could get. Bear vaults are large (11.5 liter) polycarbonate, wide mouth 'jars', somewhat like the large plastic jars pretzels come in. They have a locking screw top and are of a size and shape that makes it difficult for a bear to handle in order to break into it. These have been tested under the auspices of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee and approved by it.

We each constantly wore bear spray on chest harnesses. I prefer the chest harness because it holds the spray can in front and out of the way. When wearing a pack (or the food barrel with its shoulder straps and hip belt), the pepper spray can in its chest harness is not in the way as a can in a belt holster would be. In addition, if the nozzle of the pepper spray can is pointed forward, it can be fired while in the holster if necessary. My long association with bear management and the IGBC while working for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department provided me ample proof that pepper spray is the best bear deterrent if there is an encounter. There is a wealth of evidence in the West, much of it available on the IGBC's website, that pepper spray is effective with grizzly bears and black bears. Perhaps the greatest limitation of pepper spray is wind, specifically if the bear is upwind in an encounter - the fog could blow back into one's face. Firearms should always (and only) be used as a last resort.

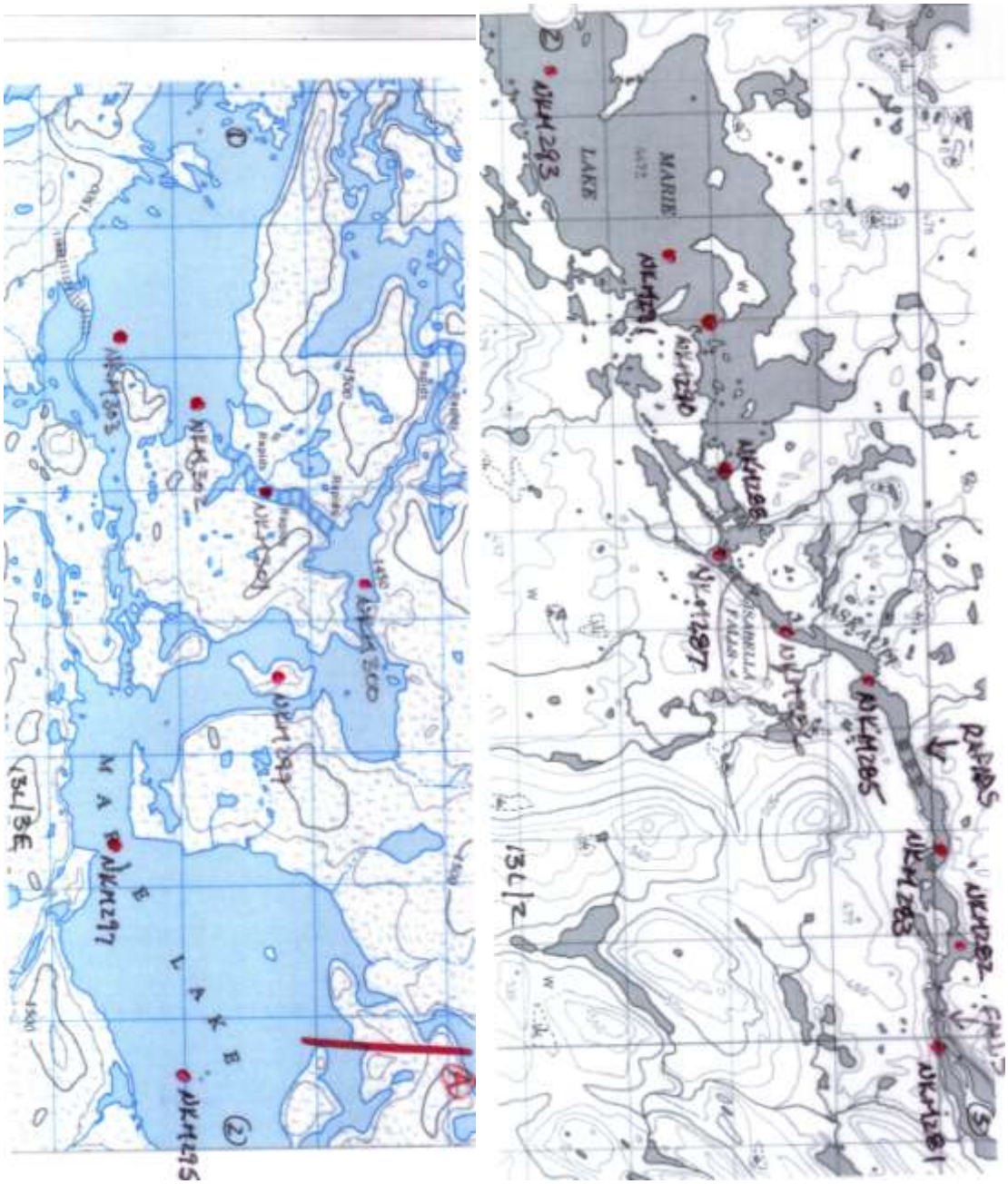
We also carried 'bear bangers' These are loud flare-like cartridges fired from a spring-loaded

launcher about the size of a large ink pen and with an ink pen-like pocket clip. The cartridge is screwed to the end of the launcher and the firing pin pulled back for release. The cartridge is propelled 20 - 30 meters into the air before the charge explodes. We also brought a marine flare gun and several cartridges. To cover all possibilities, Robert brought his 12-gauge shotgun and a half dozen each of rubber and lead slug cartridges.

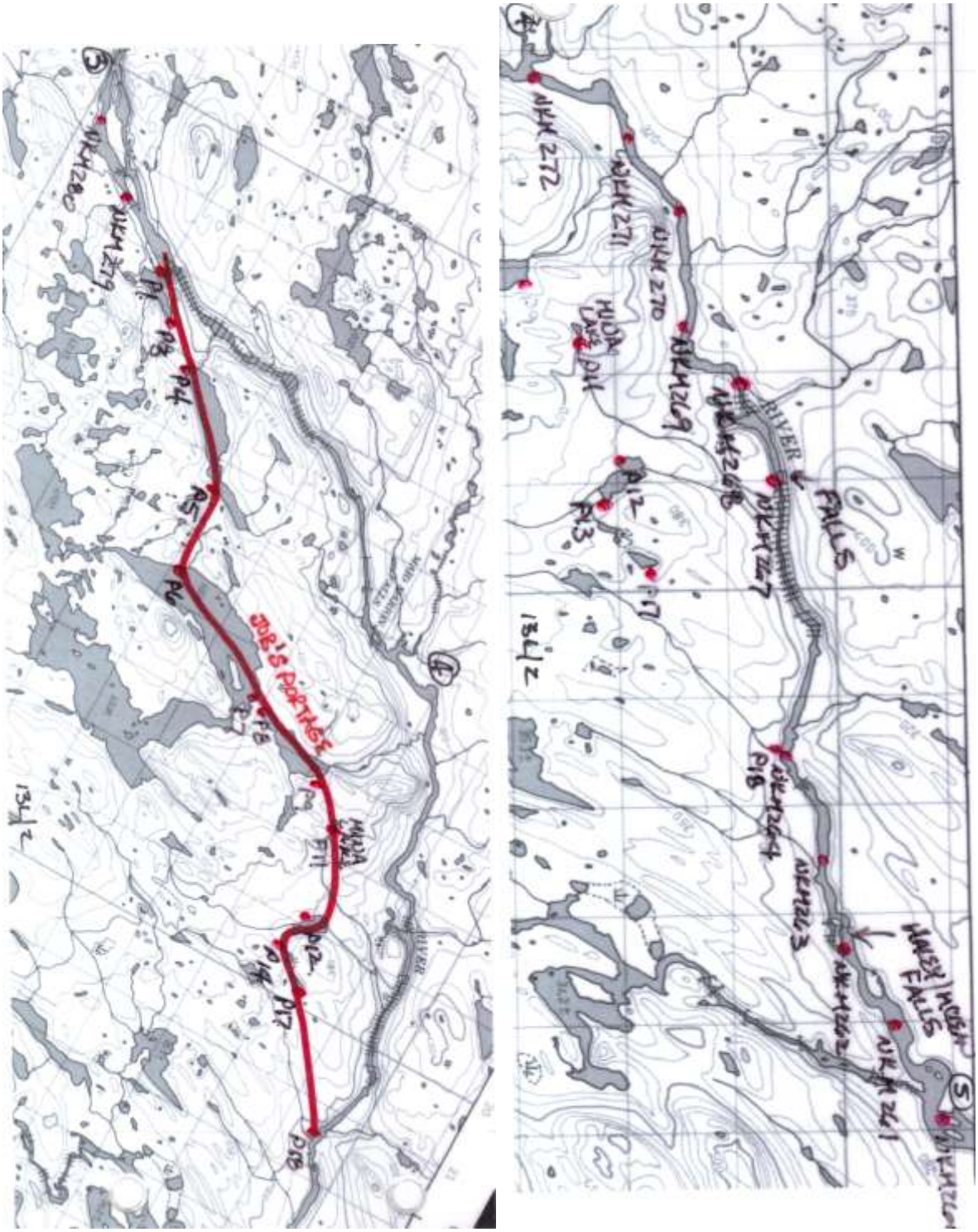
Finally, I brought a bear bell my sister had given me a number of years ago. This is a Christmas-like bell on a short hook-and-loop (Velcro) strap that had a small, elasticized mesh pouch attached to it. Sewn into the pouch was a magnet. When the bell was in the mesh pouch, the magnet stopped the bell's 'clanger'; when the pouch was off the bell, the bell rang when jostled. We attached the hook-and-loop strap to the MEC pack and, at night, we attached the MEC pack to the food barrel with one of either's straps, then attached one of them to a tree so, if a bear began messing with them they would stay put. We always put them down wind, as recommended, from the tent. In addition to keeping the tent out of any possible 'scent stream', this allowed us the potential to send a fog of bear spray toward the barrel and pack - and the bear - from the vicinity of the tent. The intent was to use the bear spray and bear bangers as we were scrambling to address any bear intrusion at camp. The were to be the first response while someone else was readying the shotgun in case we needed it. As it turns out, we saw no bears on the trip.

<u>Map Appendix</u>:

Upper Naskaupi River Map Segments - Orma Lake to Seal Lake



Map 1 (bottom) and Map 2 (top)



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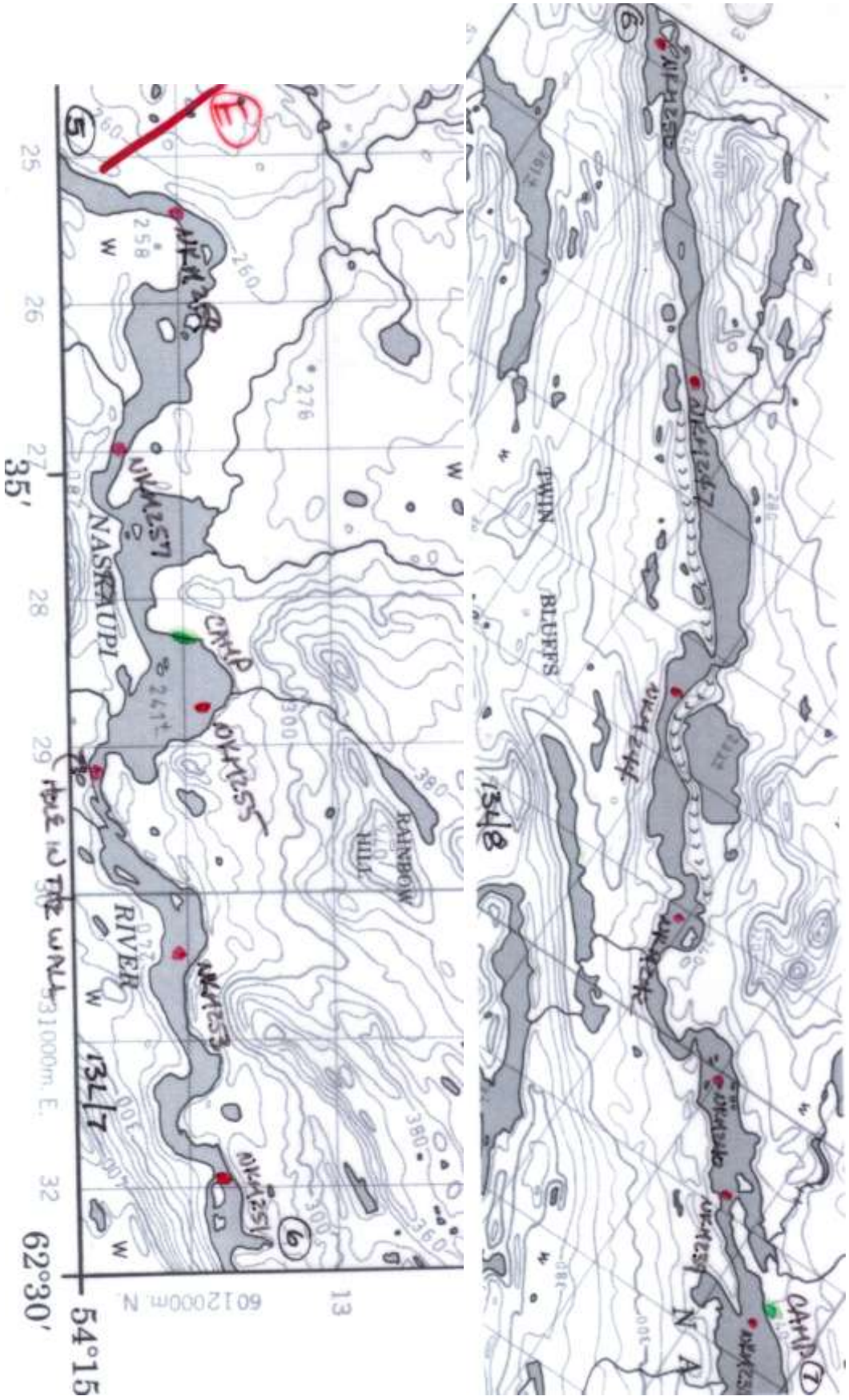

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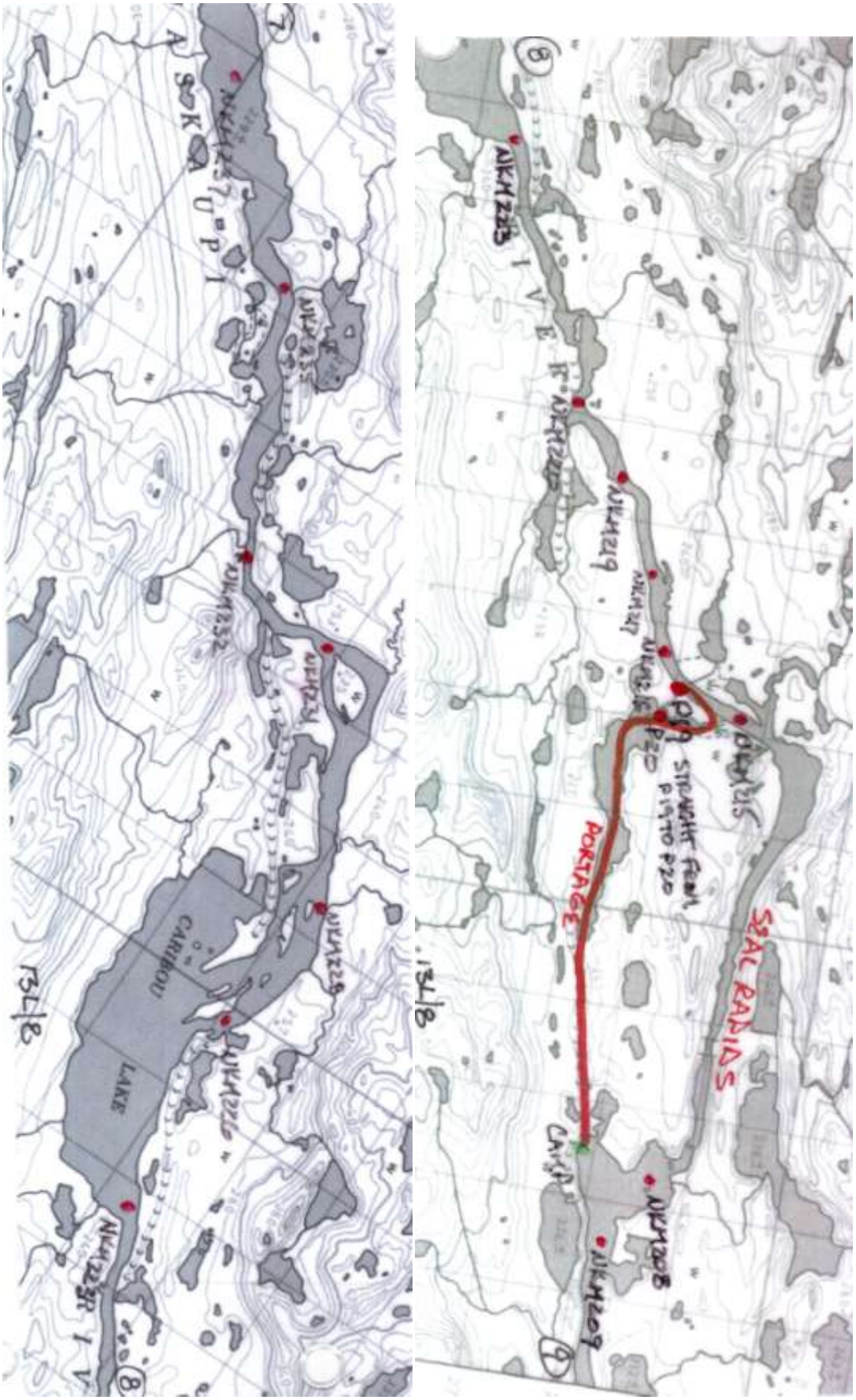
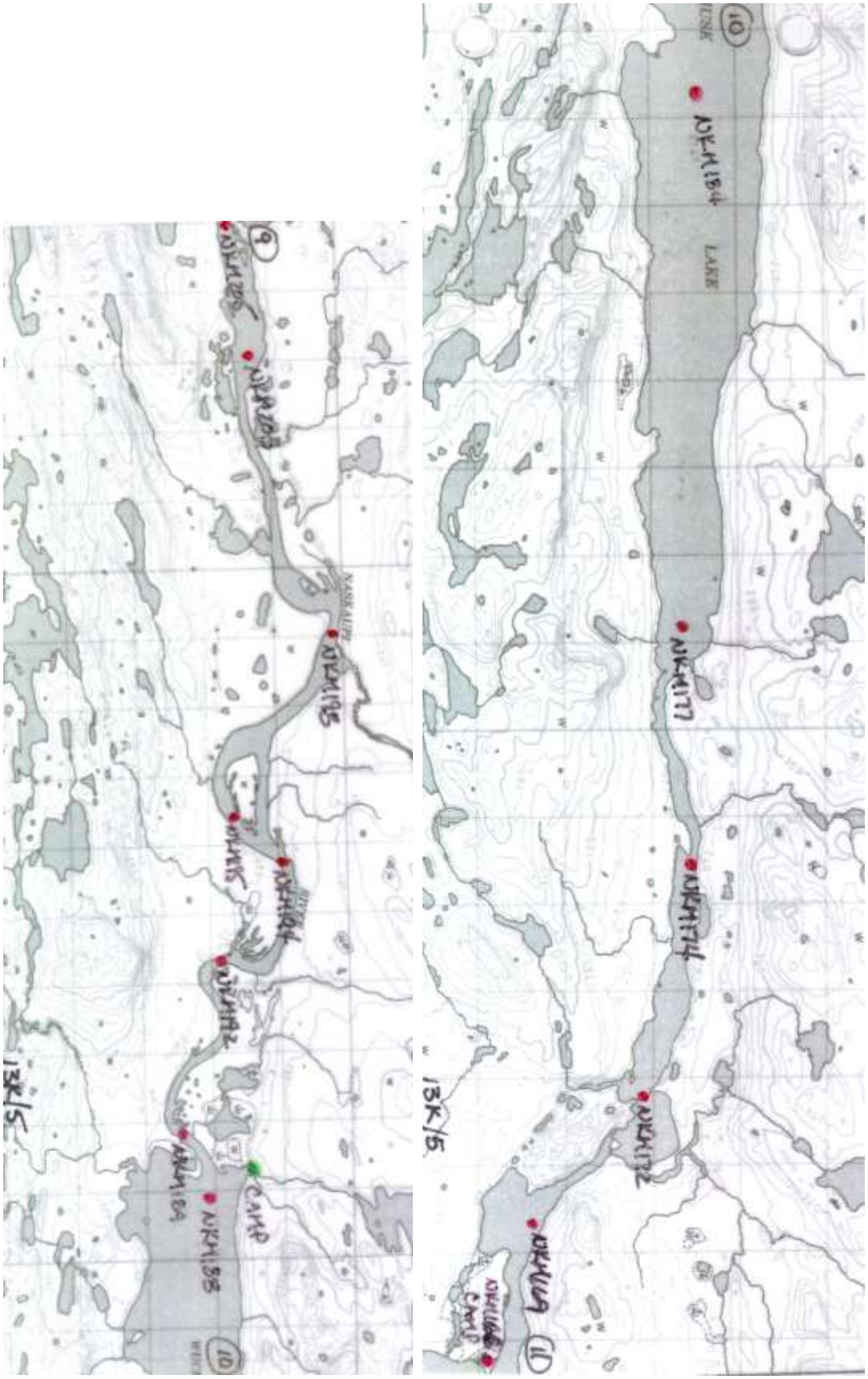


Map 7 (bottom) and Map 8 (top)



Map 9 (bottom) and Map 10 (Top)


SEAL LAKE
NKM163
LAKE
CAMP
NKM159
THE NARROWS
13K/6
NKM154
NASKAUPI
LAKE
NKM151

Map 11