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224 Argilla Road, Ipswich, MA 01938
Change Service Requested

October 2012 Volume 21, No. 5

www.atlanticcoastalkayaker.com \$3.00



LAKES OF OCTOBER ISSUE

INSIDE:

Exploring the Adirondack Lakes
Five-Years Around Long Island:
the Slowest Circumnavigation in History!
Paddle Swim to Safety
And Much More!



A Tale of Two Lakes

Article and Photos by Ralph Heimlich



Adirondack Lakes from Long Pond Mountain.

Any extended trip requires choices: How far? How long? Camping or hotels? How wild or tame? Every year, I organize an escape from the often torrid heat and humidity of the Chesapeake Bay to the cooler, drier northern climes. The lakes, ponds, and rivers of the Adirondacks are a favorite destination for these trips (see “An Adirondack Adventure: The Bog River, Lows Lake and Bog Lake,” *ACK* October 2011).

For this year’s foray, I decided on two areas close in geography, but different in their essential character.

Saint Regis Pond

With some of the usual suspects sidelined by injury or new employment, I was joined by long-time paddling partner Dick Rock, Brad Roberts, and Shriver Foster, who

has family in the area. After driving from Maryland and staying Saturday night at the NY DEC Fish Creek Pond campground (it is a bad idea to drive ten hours and try to get back into the wilderness all in the same day), we convened on the shores of Little Clear Pond, one of the access points to the Saint Regis Canoe Wilderness.

Our destination was Saint Regis Pond, the heart of the eastern half of the wilderness area and a major stop on the fabled Route of the Seven Carries. Little Clear Pond is the source of water for a NY DEC Fish Hatchery, so does not have any camping facilities. An intern from Paul Smiths College interviewed us about our boat cleaning habits and encouraged us to retard the spread of invasive Eurasian mille fleur and Zebra mussels by carefully washing out

our boats after every paddle.

On a beautiful sunny August morning, we paddled across Little Clear Pond to one of two carries on the west side. As we approached the carry (Adirondackers prefer the term “carry” to the more universal but francophile “portage”), we were met by several groups of canoes packing out after the weekend. It is my practice to always start these extended trips on Sunday since many visitors to the popular campsites in the wilderness areas are weekenders. We queried each passing group as to which campsite they had been in and which was the “best”. While never unbiased, we at least learned which campsites were likely to be empty.

The essence of the Adirondack wilderness is a necklace of ponds and lakes connected by inflowing and outflowing riv-



Brad Roberts on Saint Regis Pond inlet.



Campsite #4 on Saint Regis Pond.

ers and streams, and linked by a series of more-or-less strenuous footpaths or carries. As Paul Jamieson, dean of Adirondack canoeing writers observes, "By history and design the canoe is an amphibious craft. Two positions natural for it are bottomsides down in the water and upside down on the shoulders of a single carrier."

We were a mixed group of canoeists and kayakers who would test that notion and the implicit compromises of different watercraft in several ways over the week. Shriver and I were in lightweight canoes with a couple of large waterproof backpacks each, while Dick and Brad were in long sea kayaks with many small dry bags and assorted packages jig-sawed into the compartments. As soon as we beached at

the Little Clear Pond end of the 0.4 mile carry, the canoeists shrugged on one pack and hoisted their craft onto their shoulders and trudged up and over the rise down to the long boardwalk into Saint Regis inlet. The kayakers, by contrast, rigged their detachable wheels on fully loaded boats and attempted to roll them uphill across gnarled roots and rocks. They soon discovered that 1) the smaller, harder wheels were less efficient than the larger, fatter pneumatic tires, 2) pulling a couple of hundred pounds of kayak and gear uphill is not a one-man job, and 3) one long pull with a nearly immovable object on wheels may not be preferable to several trips on two legs. As the canoeists approached the Saint Regis Pond end of the carry with their first load, a brother-sister pair were just concluding that using tow straps to pull their large, fully loaded canoe uphill was not likely to succeed.

Being good sorts, we offered to carry some of their stuff back over on our "deadhead" lap. We also offered to lighten their load by a half-case of beer we spied amongst their duff, which offer was quickly accepted. We canoeists were heading back on our second trip before our pair of kayakers was even finished with one boat. With a little help, all four boats and associated gear made it from Little Clear to Saint Regis inlet, but as we launched off the

boardwalk, a lone middle-aged canoeist in a well-worn old Winona hoisted his single backpack and the boat and walked off with ease to do the carry "in one," making us all feel like overly encumbered tenderfeet.

The inlet to Saint Regis Pond is a winding channel choked with boggy mosses and stunted black spruce and aswarm with frogs in all stages of development. Late-blooming cottonsedge, bog goldenrod, Arrow tearthumb, green wood orchid, and gentian dotted the mossy inlet. A more typical Adirondack landscape would be hard to imagine, and it set the mood for our days on this lovely pond.

Accommodations on the pond, as in

"Many a guide and party of hotel guests traversed [the seven carries route] in the days of glory of Paul Smith's Hotel and the Saranac Inn. Those fashionable resorts lay at opposite ends of the route. Lunch baskets were prepared at one or the other hotel, and parties of several boats each made an all-day outing of it. The carries were then, and still are, in excellent condition, fit for the 'most delicate ladies,' to use pastor Murray's Victorian way of describing the easier paths over uneven Adirondack ground."

the rest of the Saint Regis Canoe Wilderness, consist of a few three-sided log lean-tos and many more designated campsites with stone fire rings and privy seat boxes atop pit toilets (see <http://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/70572.html>). The 12 designated sites on Saint Regis are in flux as DEC closes some that have been overused, relocates others, and opens some new ones.

Managing camping in a wilderness is a bit like rotating crops in a garden, I suppose. We did a circuit of the pond, noticing that only one island site remains (there had been four). The lean-to was occupied by a trio of very fit looking teenagers. We came across a husband-wife team of light and fast kayakers with a single pack each, crammed into ten-foot swift-type kayaks who told us that one favored campsite with a well-placed waterfront rock for a beach had been relocated way up the hill. We ceded the site to their lighter loads and passed on some

“trail magic” in the form of a couple of our newly acquired beers.

We continued a half mile down the western arm of the pond to a bluff nearly separated from the shore with a stand of tall white pines shading campsite #4. After setting up camp, working up a supply of firewood, and participating in the obligatory “bear bag Olympic” competition (throwing food bags as high as possible into the thinner branches of nearby trees), we settled in for a campfire as a trio of loons called mournfully from the pond and evening faded into blackest night.

After a good night’s sleep, we decided to paddle and walk up to Fish Pond. Paddling down the Saint Regis outlet, we came to a small dam designed as a barrier to fish, which we portaged around, then paddled up the narrow stream hoping to cross the Fish Pond ski trail. However, we soon ran into several beaver ponds and forward progress ceased, so we turned back. After a little map reading we found that the trail to the dam crossed the ski trail. We abandoned the boats and hiked up the trail for a couple of miles and lunched at Fish Pond. Fish Pond is typical of many of the small ponds in the Saint Regis Canoe Area that can only be reached by carries, often in a sequence of several ponds and carries. Ultra light packing, even in a canoe or kayak that can accommodate a great deal of gear, is the key to navigating the carries and ponds of the Saint Regis Canoe Wilderness Area, but we had opted for creature comforts and more of a base-camp approach.

Wildlife in the canoe wilderness is abundant. We noted a variety of frogs, many turtles, including a huge snapper at least 18 inches long, and abundant bird life from squadrons of loons to about 30 fishing ducks described to us as “Mohawk birds” (Common Mergansers). We also saw several Bald Eagle and listened to choruses of owls and at least one pack of coyotes.

On our second day, we tried a little pond-hopping, paddling up to the east end of Saint Regis Pond to do a portion of the legendary Route of the Seven Carries.

Jamieson describes its heyday:

“Many a guide and party of hotel guests traversed [the seven carries route] in the days of glory of Paul Smith’s Hotel and the Saranac Inn. Those fashionable resorts lay



“Mohawk birds” - Common Merganser ducks hang out on Saint Regis Pond.

at opposite ends of the route. Lunch baskets were prepared at one or the other hotel, and parties of several boats each made an all-day outing of it. The carries were then, and still are, in excellent condition, fit for the ‘most delicate ladies,’ to use pastor Murray’s Victorian way of describing the easier paths over uneven Adirondack ground.” Jamieson, 1981 p. 110.

Our route involved carries of 200 yards to Green Pond, then a quarter mile to Little Long Pond, another 300 yards to Bear Pond, then two in quick succession of about 20 yards each from Bear to Bog Pond, and Bog to Upper Saint Regis Lake. Once again, the light weight canoes proved considerably handier than the more awkward kayaks, not only on the carries, but with numerous entries and exits. It is a lot easier to step into and get out of a canoe than a kayak, especially on rocky shores and nonexistent beaches. My knee-high neoprene boots were also a good alternative to continuously wet feet, as long as remembered how deep I could go before spillover would occur.

These are five of the original seven carries between Little Green Pond (SE of Little Clear Pond) on the Saranac Inn property, and Upper Saint Regis Lake, which communicates via Spitfire Lake and Lower Saint Regis Lake, with the site of Paul Smith’s Hotel (now the site of the college). From the carry, we paddled Upper Saint



Froggie goes a-courtin’ on Saint Regis Pond.

Regis Lake past Ward Island and up North Bay. Here, as oases of public access in an otherwise privately held shoreline, are two DEC lean-tos, one overlooking Marvin Pond on the canoe carry from North Bay to Lower Saint Regis Lake, and one overlooking North Bay itself. Another interesting feature is a ten-mile-long glacial esker running roughly north-south from Mountain Pond along the western edges of Long Pond and Black Pond, along the canoe carry and down the western side of North Bay, where it forms the boundary of Spectacle Ponds, then down the edge of Spring Bay, Ochre Pond, and ending at Fish Pond. A path follows what is called the Jenkins Esker over



Shriver kayak paddling his canoe on Lower Saranac Lake.



Site #4, Eagle Island, Lower Saranac Lake.

what is a mix of public and private land.

We had originally thought of ascending Saint Regis Mountain via the trailhead at Spring Bay, but after only five of the “ladies” carries, we decided to husband our energy for retracing the five carries after lunch. The SE breeze blowing up North Bay and Upper Saint Regis Lake proved the wisdom of that choice, and five carries later, the SW breeze blowing between the end of the Green Pond carry and our campsite at the western end of Saint Regis Pond put a cap on a strenuous day of hiking with boats.

That evening, over dutch oven biscuits (another joy of canoe packing), we decided we’d exhausted the possibilities of Saint Regis Pond and its surroundings and opted for a whole other experience.

Next morning we packed up, reversed the 0.4 mile carry out to Little Clear Pond and got back in our vehicles.

Shriver’s brother Lee met us and conveyed us to downtown Saranac Lake for delicious lunch at the Lakeview Deli overlooking Flower Lake. Then we checked into a campsite on Lower Saranac Lake.

Lower Saranac Lake

Where Saint Regis Pond was wilderness, silence and deep black nights, Lower Saranac combines the piney woods, rocky shores, and mountain views with electric lights, power boats and a lot more company. Some 86 campsites occupy islands and shoreline originally leased by NYDEC for “permanent” camps, but rescinded in 1975 and converted to the Saranac Lake Islands Public Campground.

After paying for our site at the registration center on Second Pond (just off route 3), we drove around to the public launch and parking area at Ampersand Bay, loaded

our boats, and paddled off against a stiff SW breeze blowing 10-15 knots. Here the tables were turned regarding boats. My short (12 feet) pack canoe so handy on the carries was at a distinct disadvantage to the sea kayaks on the larger waters of Lower Saranac and in a blow, and Shriver’s longer, narrower canoe similar but better. After a long pull, we arrived at our second campsite #4 on Eagle Island. Campsites on Lower Saranac are more luxurious than in the wilderness, with cement fireplaces and iron grates, enclosed privies with metal seats, and picnic tables. The campers are generally more energetic about hauling in all the amenities of home, from coolers to chairs to lanterns and huge multi-room tents. Several arrived on pontoon boats with outboard motors, but many were paddling livery canoes piled to the gunwales.

Inholdings of private land along the lakeshore are home to some fabulous Adirondack great camps, including the Knollwood Club on Shingle Bay, built in 1900 by six prominent Jewish families. Famous visitors included the wilderness champions Bob, James, and George Marshall, whose father Louis was a club founder and the prominent jurist who framed the “forever wild” clause in the New York State constitution, and Albert Einstein, who was vacationing there in August 1945 when news of the Hiroshima A bomb was released.

Several other less distinguished private properties border the lake in places, but other than their electric lights, they are generally silent and good neighbors. The power boats are generally more of the “putt-putt” than “vroom-vroom” variety, but the occasional bass boat and jet ski did intrude. We had closer camp neighbors on Eagle Island and did hear them at times, in contrast to the utter silence of Saint Regis Pond.

Thursday we were up and eager to explore. With the wind still fairly strong at ten knots out of the southwest, we opted to thread our way among the islands to the outlet of Lower Saranac and follow the Saranac River to First and Second ponds, and then through the lower locks and around to Oseetah and Kiwassa Lakes.

We passed the registration area just beyond the Route 3 bridge on Second Pond, and then the river narrowed down to a flowing strip of waving eel grass with Wild Forest Area on the left bank and the High Peaks

Wilderness Area on the right. I grew tired of trying to keep up with my stubby little canoe and turned back at one of the lean-tos on the river, but the others kept on. The rest of the group paddled on to the lower locks, where they joined a short line of boats. As the lock attendant worked his two queues through the locks, they speculated about how many times he had had to repeat the same instructions to boaters preoccupied with coolers of beer and overactive children. Passing into Lower Saranac through shallows marked by many tree trunks, the group observed many houses on shore, most not accessible by road. With mounting winds, they beat a hasty retreat back through the locks. Meanwhile, I took a more leisurely paddle back to camp, stopping to examine the high rock face of Bluff Island and some of the other campsites on Burnt, Halfway, and Fern Islands.

On Friday, our last full day, the southwest wind had abated and we had two destinations. First, we paddled across to the mouth of Fish Creek (yes, another one), which meandered through weedy flats for a half mile or so before bogging down hopelessly. We watched a mature Bald Eagle fish on the creek, but then headed across to get a closer look at the Knollwood Club on Shingle Bay, then squeaked through a narrow gap between a small island and the north shore.

We aimed down Lower Saranac to thread through the Upper Locks and another segment of the Saranac River to Middle Saranac Lake. Even with calmer winds, paddling the Pack Canoe on the lake was more work than pleasure, so I opted to stay closer to our camp and explore, while the others paddled on through the remaining islands of Lower Saranac Lake and into yet another section of the Saranac River connecting to Middle Saranac Lake. They had another set of locks (the upper) to negotiate and found another nice set of campsites on islands and the shoreline of Middle Saranac. On returning, Brad got into a conversation with a group of college-age girls paddling in rental canoes. The group used a wide sandy beach for lunch, then paddled back to camp.

Paddling back to camp around Green and Sable Islands, I decided to circumnavigate Eagle Island, where our camp was located. Three of the most imposing camp-



The lower locks on the Saranac River.

sites on Eagle are Toms Rock Camp (#2), an unnamed site with another large rock that is currently prohibited for camping, and a much smaller campsite atop a rock (#1). The northeast shore of Eagle Island has had some storm damage, including one gigantic white pine whose shallow roots gave up and exposed fresh rock.

Upon returning to our camp at #4, I wanted to see more of Toms Rock Camp, so I bushwacked out until I spied the rock lean-to. The camp has an absolutely stunning view over the lake and Saranac River to the High Peaks, but the nearly vertical climb from the landing would be difficult with much gear, or just to get water every day. The rock lean-to, built in 1922 is unique and has a plastered ceiling that would reflect heat from the fireplace into it (the reason Adirondack shelters are built with three sides). Built on top of a huge glacial boulder, the area is a stone "patio," and has another large stone patio just below it overlooking the water. A white-blazed trail leads down off the rock to the northeast and then nearly circles the island. I hiked around, passed the blowdown, and climbed steeply at the eastern end to a view labeled "Heart Stop Rock" by the trail crew.

On Saturday morning, our hearty breakfast included a trick I've always wanted to try. I put a Bisquick dough in my frying pan, put that over the large pot with some water in it, covered it with the small pot, and put the whole double-boiler oven on the stove. The resulting bread takes a while to cook and steams more than bakes, but it tasted

good, especially with the last of the honey.

We packed up and loaded our boats for the paddle back to the launch at Ampersand Bay where Shriver's brother Lee waited, and we decided on a side trip to the Wild Center at Tupper Lake, a museum dedicated to the natural history of the Adirondacks (www.wildcenter.org/). After touring the exhibits, meeting a one-eyed Barred Owl, and walking down to the St. Regis River flowing by on the museum property, we left to check into Fish Creek Pond campground for our final night's stay.

That evening, we ate on the terrace at Nonna Fina overlooking Lake Flower in Saranac Lake and enjoyed fine Italian food and a wonderful Sicilian cake for dessert. Sunday morning, we quietly broke camp at sunrise and headed down the road to the Chesapeake Bay area, our tale of two Adirondack lakes at an end.



Dick Rock at Nonna Fina, Saranac Lake.