

*Tamarack Lake-Boiling Sands River, Smoothrock Lake-
Lookout River, Onamakawash Lake, FOW Trip Report*

[Trip Summary \(Eight pages & photos follow, YouTube video\)](#)

Entry-Exit Lake/River	Hwy 527, Trail Lake road to Tamarack Lake to Boiling Sands River- Smoothrock Lake –	Lookout River – Onamakawash Lake and Schultz’s Trail – train back to Armstrong
Length Of Trip	50 km ?? not sure	(km, mi)
Trip Dates/# Days	Sept. 7 to 16, 2021 10 days (Many could do this in 5-7 days)	
Trip Leader Name	Dave McTeague (aka Oregon Dave)	
Number Of Paddlers	Two (Dave and daughter Brianna)	
Portages	# Ten	
Portage Length Range	In meters: 163,482,1147,105,39,51,191,68,173,170	
Topo Maps Used Other Maps Used	FOW Vol. 3, Maps 16 & 17 Wabakimimaps.com: I have two of Laurence Mill’s route map collections, which included Lookout River & Boiling Sands River maps.	
Access Points	Clem Quenville shuttled us from his house in Armstrong down Trail Lake (then Tamarack Lake) road. Portage to Tamarack Lake. Returned to Armstrong by Via Rail, from Schultz’s Trail from Onamakawash Lake	
Route followed (provide map if possible)	Entered at Tamarack Lake, paddled north (downstream) on the Boiling Sands River to the bottom of Smoothrock Lake, then down the very south arm; to the channel to the Lookout River, traveled upstream in a SW direction, through Spring Lake and upper Onamakawash Lake to the main lake and Schultz’s Trail.	

Trip Arrangement Details

Route description (one way, circuit, paddle in/out)	Shuttle in; train out. This is a modest and great introductory route. It could be done in less time than we took. Portages very clear and mostly in good shape overall.
Average distance traveled each day	No idea, but a short trip by Wabakimi standards. We took it slow and easy, with three layover days. (km, mi)
Source of non-resident Crown land camping permit or provincial park interior (backcountry) camping permit	Wabakimi Provincial Park online
Outfitter/provider used	Clem Quenville
Outfitter services provided (lodging, canoe rental, outfitting, licenses, permits, shuttles, flight)	<p>Mattice Lake Outfitters-cabin</p> <p>Clem Quenville, Armstrong - shuttles, safe parking, SPOT gps rental & canoes. (807) 372-1346</p>
Mode of shuttle to entry/from exit (road, rail, float planes)	Road shuttle in; Via Rail train out
Location of vehicle left behind	Stored car at Clem's. We left a set of keys and he moved the car to the train stop the day before we arrived.
Primary road used, if any, to access Wabakimi Area (Hwy 527, Hwy 599, Graham Road)	Hwy 527
Secondary road(s) used, if any, for access/egress to/from your trip insertion/extraction locations	Trail Lake/Tamarack Lake Road

*One of my best trips ever!***Day 1:**

After staying the night in Mattice Lake's Cabin # 1, we found Clem's house from his pictured map (which he sends via text). Since the Coin-Op gas station was closed, we learned the Reservation also has a one-pump gas station (news to me), which opened at 10:00 a.m.; so we drove over a very bumpy road to that so we'd have full tank for our drive to Thunder Bay, in case the train ran late when we took out.

Gail's Restaurant was closed so Clem made us a substantial breakfast, most appreciated. Clem's communications via text are typically very short, but in person he's a font of local knowledge and stories. Clem is Armstrong's Postmaster so his shuttle services are a part-time gig for him. We parked our car at his place and loaded all our gear and canoe onto his pickup for a bumpy ride down Trail Lake Road; and past this sign.



Clem contended that Trail Lake road veers off to the right at a fork (towards the lakes mentioned in the sign) and we were on a spur road that heads west to the clearing at Tamarack Lake. We drove by the portage going south to Rocky Island lake (cleared by yours truly and the Wabakimi Project in 2015). The portage to the lake on the north side at that same spot, that we also cleared, looked very overgrown.

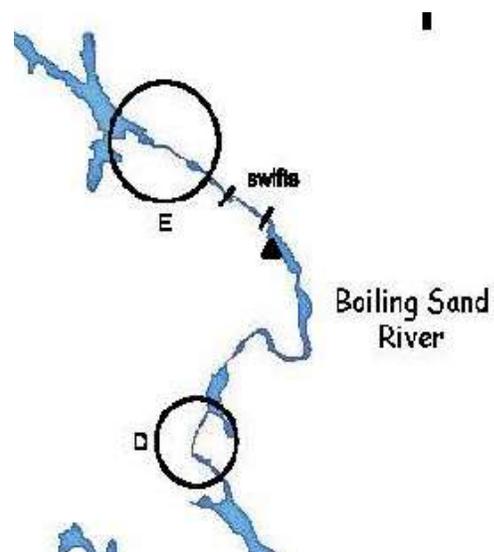
(There's debate about how "open" this road is to recreational use. I found one MNRF document which acknowledges this. Local outfitters are using this road. Any good high clearance vehicle will do just fine. Even if it was considered closed, Clem as a Whitesands Nation member, my understanding is has rights to use this road.)

At the clearing where there's an abandoned camper and just beyond, there's two starting points for the well trodden portage which merge a ways down. A small Parks sign is nailed to a tree at the lake end and a boat & motor signal the first of many cached boats.

We launched into drizzle to find our first campsite on the east side, passing a nice one and taking the next one. (Campsite # 185 on the Paddleplanner.com map). Brianna tried to exit the canoe with dry shoes only to slip on the landing slope. This one-star site had poor tent sites and not much in the way of flat surfaces. Put up my CCS tarp over a sitting log on a slanted rock slope. Slipping was a constant hazard. A group of tandem canoes paddled by coming from the north, looking for a camp site; and I shared there was a good one just down on the right. This was a group outfitted by [Bruce Hyer's Wabakimi Outfitters](#) on day 9 of their trip.

Day 2: We headed north up Tamarack Lake to the scenic Brightsand River. Portage # 32240 in Circle D, 164m, was an easy walk. At the north end was one cached boat and yellow canoe-reportedly belonging to an elderly local Elder. The "swifts" at low water were merely rock gardens with a narrow path through. We camped at "Laurence's" lovely five-star site in wide small lake section before the river narrows again. This site is NOT noted on the FOW map, but is on the wabakimimaps.com map. Good landing, nice tent spots, fire next to a rock ridge, great views, I've seen other photos taken from this camp. However, while trudging up a short incline to find my tent spot and carrying my big pack, without a paddle to steady myself, I tripped and fell hard on

my side. While not seriously hurt, I was surely bruised. You can't let your guard down for a minute!



Day 3:

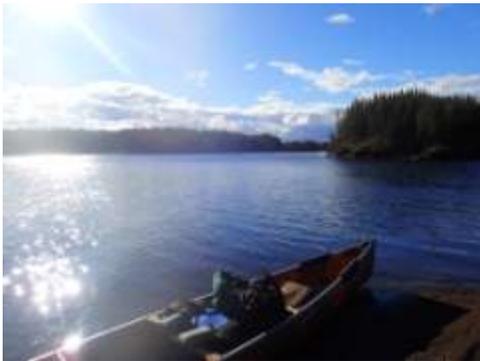
Continuing north, we carried over the 482m portage in Circle E to the Smoothrock Lake channel. A bit more strenuous with some uphill, but still a nice portage with no stepovers or obstructions. The FOW shows a campsite at the south end, not very attractive and no visible fire ring. At the north end was something akin to a camp, and some decaying wood planks, and if memory serves me right more cached boats.



We put some trolling plugs on going up the channel and voila, some pickerel (that's Canadian for walleye). We ended up with two "eyes" and one northern pike. Dinner!! A 2nd group of paddlers mentioned a great camp site on the island just as you leave the channel to the bottom of Smoothrock Lake. It was indeed a great campsite, and we gladly took it.

Day 4: Layover day. Breakfast was Fish Cakes. Flaked the cold northern into a mashed potato mix then fried the patties over a hot fire. Add maple syrup. A bright

sunny day. We fished and explored around the immediate area; catching no fish though. Stunning views in three directions! Pictures & video were taken.



Day 5: Leaving our five-star camp site, we headed SW into a more open part of Smoothrock and just enough wind/waves to have me on edge. Fortunately, there are enough points, islands and sheltered sections to reach the long south arm of Smoothrock Lake. At the bottom is the channel to the Lookout River—very pretty, and where the river flows in were colorful yellow bushes. The beginning of the 1147m portage is a campsite with fire ring next to big boulder. A bit a junk in the fireplace. A good lunch spot too. I think maybe there's one really good tent spot. There were two green poles with a rope or net in between (gear for the spring sucker run?).

This portage goes through a relatively open and level wooded area. Not maintained recently, there are about 20 stepovers. Lots of past portage clearing work and cut logs were evident. This portage was one of my main challenges for this trip—being long. While I carried the canoe a ways, then dropped it and back for a pack, using the hopscotch method, my intrepid daughter who's been on an intensive PNW hiking program, zooms to the end and back to help the old man out. With numerous rests, I finally make it to the very pleasant campsite on a rise. It has a nice fire ring, sitting logs and lots of flat tent spaces. There's a short 5m drop to a back channel for water and another 30m down the portage to the Spring Lake landing.





Day 6:

On this layover day, we fishing and explored the north part of Spring Lake. We noticed a small furry animal on a rocky point, thinking first it was an otter because of crawfish leavings nearby; but no, we determined it was Pine Marten, with that cute impish and furry face. The FOW map shows a structure in the north bay, but all we could see from the canoe was the old remains of a rotting dock.

We did find Walleye Hotel though just past a point with wind blowing by. Numerous passes back and forth we had bites almost every time on the plugs were pulling. My crawdad imitation was a winner, but others worked too. One of the fish we cleaned had a tummy full of those small reddish crustaceans.



Day 7:

On down Spring Lake we passed two marked campsites on the right (the second of which was marked by Laurence as a good site). We watched an eagle fly and land nearby. The next relatively short and scenic sections were punctuated with six well marked portages. We encountered two guys in a tandem canoe headed the other way trying to catch some fish while we loaded up our canoe; also outfitted by Bruce Hyer and beginning their trip at Shawanabis Lake (near the rail line). The Lookout River had A

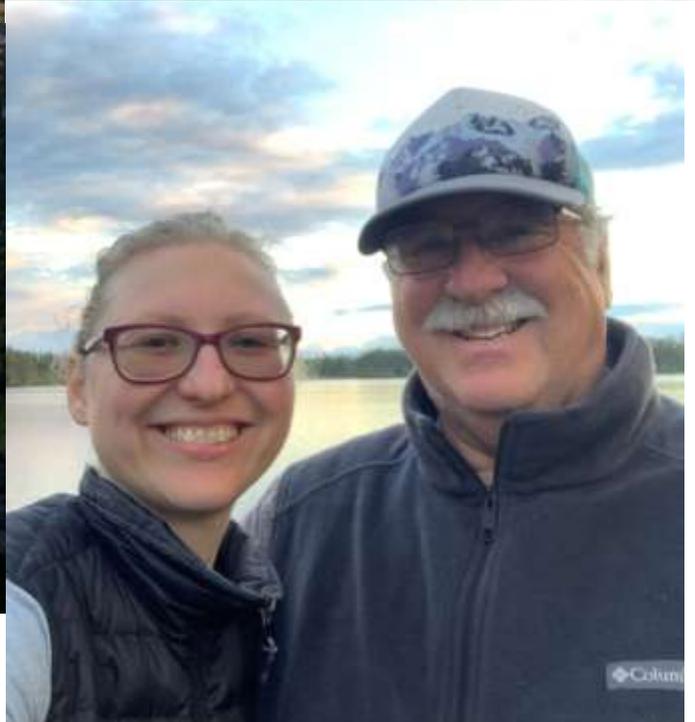


LOT more flow than the Brightsand. There's a 191m portage these falls in Circle E on FOW map 17.

We camped at the top of the last short 68m portage in Circle D. We never actually saw the marked campsite in the small bay to the right.

Day 8:

Our third layover day. Our camp was next to another impressive drop (not sure you'd call it a falls, but dang close). No fishing, but Brianna went for a cold swim and enjoyed it thoroughly! I took photos and videos. It was nice sunny beautiful day, and then the storm clouds arrived suddenly and we took shelter under my CCS tarp that I'd set up the night before. [The downpour was swift and heavy, and then it was over.](#)



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Day 9:

On down this lake which I'll call North Onamakawash Lake to the 173m portage (# 32278) to the main Onamakawash Lake. (Ken Babinchak says it's pronounced, "Oh-na-mah-kay-wush") On this and a couple previous portages were some fresh saw cuts. A study of our FOW trip reports revealed that Jeff & Julie Dano had done some portage clearing on [their early August trip](#). This is a good example of how canoeists can work together to keep portages clear and usable.

Of course, it was my turn too, and efforts were made with my Agawa Boreal Saw. I made a note to try out other boreal saws, perhaps with a bit more bite.



A bright and sunny day on Onamakawash Lake, not too windy.



We stopped for lunch on the island's nice beach in a small bay, with a campsite nearby.

Here we saw caribou prints in the sand and a curious half circle.



There are a number of outpost cabins in the SW arm, none of which were occupied. Paddled up the far end, but didn't see the portage from Shawanabis Lake, though I know it's there. We finally figured out that Schultz's Trail starts right below the two cabins (as clearly shown on Laurence's map if I'd looked). There's also a storage shed right next to the landing with the lock knocked off. Brianna walked the trail up to the train tracks, but didn't at first see that "Schultz's Trail" was painted on the rock outcrop—that shows up better when wet. We camped right below the cabins (one abandoned, the other locked but not in good shape), dried out and watched our stuff since there were numerous borderline aggressive red squirrels claiming this territory. We wondered

who the heck Schultz was and what's the story there???? Made a mental note to ask Bruce Hyer as he's sure to know.

Schultz's Trail landing



Taking no chances, we portaged up to the tracks early and made coffee and oatmeal on the rock outcrop. My dear wife was tracking the train and sending us messages via InReach. However, the train gave us a whistle warning about an hour before expected. Easing up to our location, we lifted our canoe and gear up to them. I was ready to hand them \$100 CAD, but they neither asked for that, or checked our ticket. A pleasant ride went past the community of Collins where five folks got on the train. Back in Armstrong, our car was waiting for us, and the drive back to Thunder Bay where we spent a pleasant evening with Sandy Sargent - who regaled us with stories of the far north during his time as a traveling judge.

