

### ***Caribou to Cliff via the Raymond River***

**Some backstory:** “Uncle” Phil Cotton passed away in May of 2018. He had spent the last dozen and more years of his life promoting and building the Wabakimi Project, an endeavor to bring in volunteers from far and wide to help document and clear old traditional routes in the Wabakimi area. His love for that country was contagious. Only a week before he passed, he was at Midwest Mountaineering Expo in Minneapolis, continuing to make presentations. Phil already had plans for the upcoming paddling season and routes to be investigated. Many of us were preparing for trips in May, June, and beyond, and we decided to carry out those routes in Phil’s memory; this was only possible with the generous support of Phil’s son and daughter, John and Patricia, and lots of work by Debbie Doyle-Sargent and other Project participants. Bill Pyle and John Holmes led the first three weeks of Project work, starting at Scallup Lake and working on a traditional route up the Raymond River to connect to Caribou Lake. I was able to work with groups in the subsequent two weeks to help complete this stretch. This left only a small (but, as it turns out – challenging) section between Scallop Lake and North Annette Lake, in order to have a route from Caribou to Cliff Lake and the Pikitigushi River drainage. Scott Pirsig, one the participants in the 2018 trips, and I discussed travelling from Caribou on this route to review our work and finish the link over to Cliff Lake. The Covid epidemic prevented any canoe trips from the States in 2020 and 2021, but we had an opening this year. We opted to have a party of four; Pat Deninger, an old friend of Scott’s, and Project veteran Dan Otto joined us.

**The Route:** Boat shuttle (Clement Quenville) to Caribou Lake at Campbell Creek portage, Kellar Bay to Fletcher L to Howie L to Hollingsworth L to “Bob’s L” to Medallion L to Raymond L; down Raymond R to Upper Maddy L to Lower Maddy L to Austin L to Scallop L; down Raymond R to pond; to N Annette L to S Annette L to pond to Butland L to Cliff L. Floatplane pickup (Mattice Lake Outfitters). Distance approximately 70 km. We took 7 camping nights, with one layover at Cliff Lake. This route can be taken as a road to road shuttle trip: put in at creek to Little Caribou Lake (adds about 27 km up to Campbell Creek) and take out at former Bear Camp on Pikitigushi River ( adds about 25 km). In that case, I would recommend allowing 9 to 10 nights camping.

We had high water conditions in June, 2022; due to dense alder allies along the Raymond River, I would not recommend this route at low water conditions. Portages as far as Scallop Lake were in good condition, considering they were last maintained in 2018. Portages from Scallop east to North Annette Lake took more time to read and follow, and they can be brushy in areas; we made one bushwhack of about 150 m in this stretch to avoid high water in a chute. Portages from North Annette to Cliff Lake are more frequently utilized and were generally not hard to follow, though plenty boggy in places. The route is on Crown Land up to where the Raymond River abuts Wabakimi Provincial Park; from there you are in WPP until you get to Ratte Lake and the Whitesand Park (Crown Land permits for the latter, for nonresidents, as it is a non-operating Park).

An overview of this route is provided in Wabakimi Canoe Routes by Laurence Mills (page 49). Portage details (except for the Butland, Cliff, and Pikitigushi section) are not in the Map Books, but I can provide them on map jpg’s on request. Also, for the North Annette to Cliff Lake and beyond section, one could do no better than accessing the amazing trip reports and backstories of a peripatetic fellow named

Albinger (who posts as TrueNorth on myccr.com and Rambling Boy on his own web page); for instance: <https://albinger.me/2014/05/16/up-wabakimis-raymond-river-to-cliff-lake/>

**Narrative, with some details:** (I utilized the Friends of Wabakimi Trip Journal for this trip, making notes with a Sharpie ultra-fine-point marker. The waterproof paper is a boon; the ink may bleed a bit with dampness, but it is legible. This journal format is also available as pdf at the FOW website for contributors to enter info on their treks. All photos were made by Pat Deninger and should be so credited if reused or reproduced.

I left Iowa City on Friday, June 17, and drove up to Albert Lea, Minnesota, to meet Scott Pirsig after he had finished his mail route for the day. We transferred my gear into his vehicle, with his Kevlar canoe on top, and drove north to Dan Otto's place near North Branch, Minnesota, for the evening. Pat Deninger arrived separately, not long after. There, we transferred canoe and gear to Dan's van, to which he added his own canoe and the food and equipment packs, for the trip to Mattice Lake on Saturday. Dan and his wife, Lisa (our communications coordinator for the InReach on the trip), have a very pretty 40-acre spread out in the country. They feasted us with pizza and beer, and we had opportunity to hike around the property and see some of their plantings and bee operation.

Saturday morning we were on the road early, headed north to Thunder Bay. We detoured around Duluth, as Grandma's Marathon was scheduled this day, and joined Hwy 61 at Silver Bay. The border crossing at Pigeon River went smoothly, with our having logged info into ArriveCan beforehand. Thinking we could get Park permits at the government office there, we dropped down James St in Thunder Bay, but they were closed (The Internet is not always up to date. No problem, Kim at Mattice wrote out our permits on Sunday). We were successful, though, in filling our bellies at the Burger Barn! Then on to Mattice Lake Outfitter, about three hours up Hwy 527 for the night, where Don and Annette Elliott had a cabin for us. Or, er, the mosquitoes had a cabin for us (we learned not to have the door open for long)...



Sunday morning, June 19, was overcast with some thunderstorms rolling through. We got our Park permits from Kim in the office (I had obtained permits for our Crown Land nights using a ONE-Key registration online) and were able to chat with Don for a while and freeload on his coffee. Clement Quenville, our boat shuttle, arranged to meet us at the Caribou Lake landing around 11am (EST), after the worst of the storms passed (they would shuttle Dan's van back to Mattice Lake). The lake had a good chop going, but the rain had mostly cleared when we met Clem and his helper, Ed, at the landing. They had two boats, not being sure how much gear we had, but Clem was able to get our two canoes, most gear, and the four of us on his skiff (with overhead rack for the boats). It was about an hour ride up the lake to cover what would have been one long day of paddling to put us at the portage up Campbell Creek to Fletcher Lake. Now the fun starts. We found straight-off that we could readily get all the gear across with two carries, and spent the afternoon travelling up to Howie Lake with a tailwind. We had planned to camp at the Howie Lake campsite we had improved and used in 2018 and were surprised to find it occupied (by the only other person we saw on this trip). It turned out to be Vince, another FOW member, who had independently discovered the nice walleye spot at the north inlet. After a brief chat, we proceeded on to Hollingsworth Lake and the camp on the southwest peninsula to make camp a bit after 4pm. Dan took on all the meal planning and food prep for this trip. He was a great chef, with Scott joining in as sous-chef on the operations. Pat and I (mostly Pat) pitched in on the dishes. Tonight, it was a great start with smoked brats and mac and cheese. Bit of shore fishing (medium pike,



returned) and a southeast wind in a clearing sky by 7pm. Sundown was around 10pm, with the sky staying light a good while longer. Distance paddling and portaging about 6.1 km; portages 3: 243m, 154 m, and 215m.



*Clement and Ed tying on the canoe*





*First of many great meals planned and executed by Dan*





*Dan and Scott philosophizing on the shore of Campbell Lake*

Monday was a short travel day, in which we were off by around 8:20 am and made camp on Medallion Lake shortly after noon. The portages Scott and I had worked on in 2018 were still in pretty good shape: a short one through alders, then along the creek a bit to a bit longer one along a small ridge to a lake we had named for Bob, a fellow in the 2018 crew. At the east end of Bob's lake, we tackled two more carries (keep an eye out for blazes and flagging, as these wind about). Along the way, we cleared a bit of alder that was encroaching and took out the occasional knee-breaker. Camp was on the peninsula site on the south end of Medallion. We had some nice breeze from the se on this, our hottest day (temps up around 90 Fahrenheit). We relaxed; some swam; and Scott rigged a tarp near the fireplace. Scott became the tarp-meister for the trip, using various rigs to provide shade and, in this case, protection from an evening thunderstorm. The sky cleared around 10 pm, with thunderheads still in the distance. Distance about 6.5 km; portages 4: 74m, 165m, 339m, and 360m.





*On Bob's Lake (unofficial name requested by a previous Project participant...)*



*Dan and Ray on Medallion Lake*







### *Medallion campsite skyline*

Tuesday, June 21, was to be a longer day, and it put us into new area (for our group). We were up and out about 8:30am north up Medallion Lake. It took us about a half hour or more to locate the portage north to Raymond Lake (represents a height of land dividing drainage to Caribou via Campbell Creek and northward drainage of the Raymond River, though the height is not large). The portage start was slightly west of where I had it on the map, and Pat spotted some flagging (thank you, John Holmes!). This 842m carry took us about to noon, double-portaging and cutting some down trees and alder. It was not hard to follow, once we were on it. After taking lunch on a small island up Raymond Lake, we paddled the nw channel into the Raymond River. Down the river, John had the 374m carry (river left) well-flagged through alders around some rapids. After that, we were in stretches of very narrow alder alley – sometimes 2 to 3 m wide with branches tangled across the waterway. This stretch could be made easier but would take at least a day of cutting. Dan, in the bow, was more pulling us along and fighting branches... he posed a good question: why so very little beaver and moose sign in these parts? The higher water levels of this June were actually helpful; it could be a real slog in low water conditions.

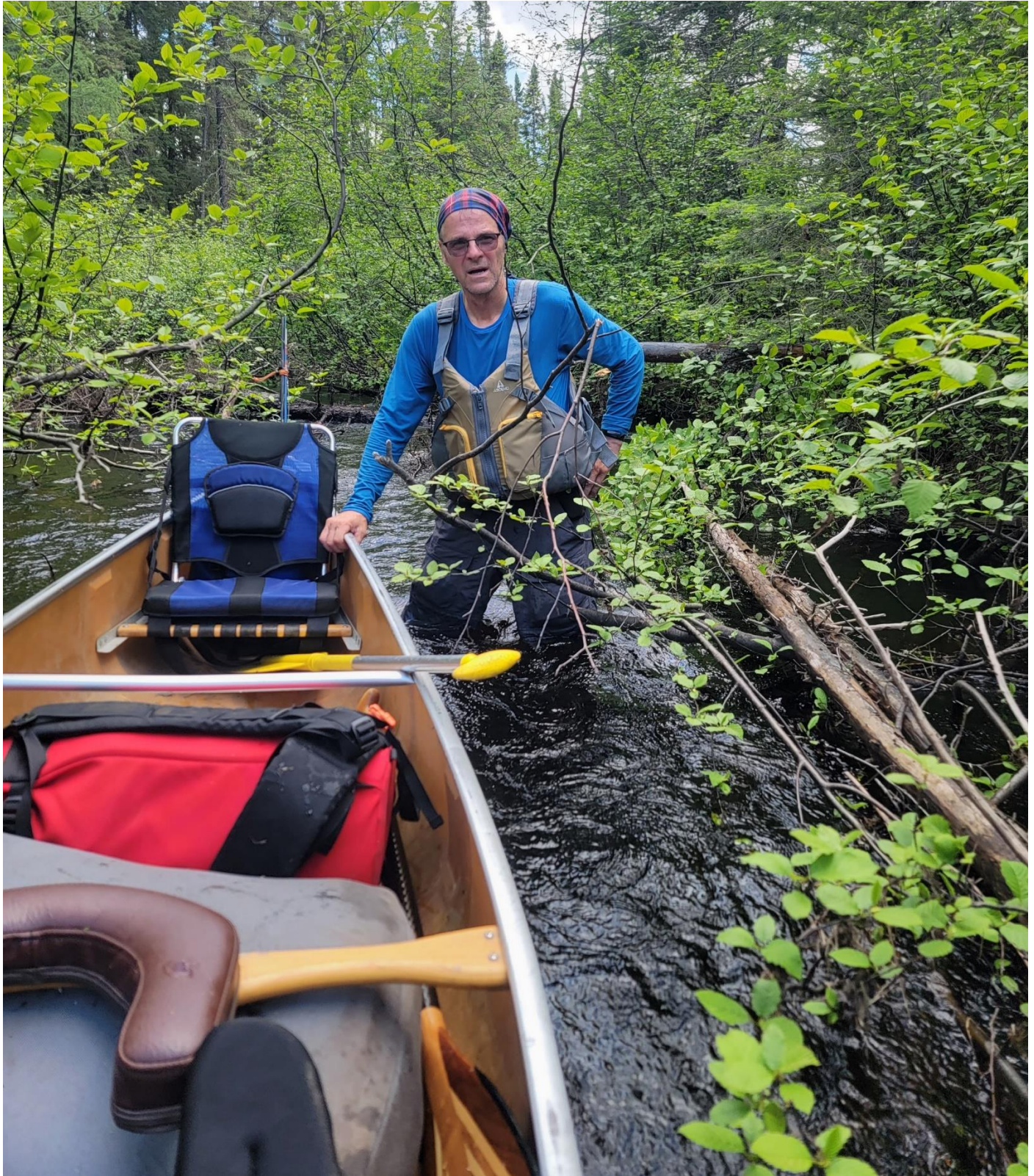
Down the Raymond we missed the 55 m portage John and Bill and crew had worked on in 2018. It may be where we walked canoes through a small rocky drop. In Bill's trip report of 2018, there is a brushed campsite up on higher ground off the portage, river right. Downstream from there (the river is sinuous but trends nnw, overall) we had more alder alleys interspersed with wider, more open meanders.. The final 355m (river left) to Upper Maddy Lake was not hard to spot (old blazes) and was fairly clear to follow. Upper Maddy Lake is the name of the westernmost of the west to east section of pool and drop lakes and ponds on the Raymond River. We brushcamped on higher ground in spruces, river right, where the river opens to the lake, only to spot a nice campsite on the south side of the lake about a kilometer east, the next morning. Distance about 15 km; portages 3: 842 m, 374m, and 355m.







*Raymond River*



*Scott walking the canoe in an alder alley*





*Upper Maddy Lake*

Wednesday, June 22, was to be the longest and interesting day. It had been cool during the night, but warming plenty by noon and sunny with clouds. We were off by about 8:30am and east across Upper Maddy with a tail-breeze to a 72m portage (river left) that looked runnable with a Royalex boat. Then east across Lower Maddy to the next portage (167m river left) into Austin Lake. Portages were not hard to spot. We paddled ne up Austin, again with a tail-breeze, to the 83 m portage (river left) into the nw arm of Scallop Lake, at a nice little chute. Cached boats at this portage belonged to the Ogoki Lodge on Scallop, which also explains the clarity of the trails, here. Up the west shore of the arm of Scallop, we took lunch at a fairly open campsite, before paddling around and down into the big part of the lake. Here, we had a strong tailwind that pushed us to the end of the lake. At the east end of Scallop starts a series of pool and drop challenges, the first of which Bill Pyle's crew had put a portage around, on river right of a north flowage (99 m). From this point on, we were into lesser documented stretches. The Linklater Lake topo map (52-I/10) shows a series of about 6 small pools beyond this point, connected by narrower flow. Bill's portage put us into a small pond. We worked around a beaver dam on the right side and proceeded to a small island where we walked the canoe around on the right, again, then



walked down another rapids after that.... Eventually, we got to a stretch where the water funnels through a chute, with some rock ledge on river left (Lat 50.728200 Lon -88.775711). This spot would be a potential camping spot, though we did not develop it. Here, Dan scouted and we bushwhacked along river left about 150m to put in below (50.728218, -88.774175) and run by some sweepers. We ran another set by some sweepers to get to the last no-name lake before the Raymond River turns north. Here, we searched for the 548m portage on river left shown on old maps. Though it turns out to be pretty much where shown on those maps, we failed to make out its start in the high water conditions (in retrospect, some of the start tread was flooded). The day being late, we searched for a campsite all around this lake, but it is pretty completely wetlands. I suggested we try walking the canoes down the rapid out of the lake (this turned out to be bad judgement). This we began, on river left, but soon got into too pushy current, too strong to back out. The banks were thick with overhanging cedar that we pushed up into. Dan set out to get a route to higher ground, but he had to cross a smaller section of flow, first (the left bank was, effectively, an island at this water level). We were relieved when he called out that he had found the portage trail and workable tent spots on higher ground just past the smaller flow. We bushwhacked up to this, anxious to get a camp before sundown. It had been a long day. Dan cooked up some quick chicken and rice and we had a late supper around 10:30, I think. Scott shared around some rum he had brought... it tasted pretty good, at that point. Distance about 20km; portages 6: 72m, 167m, 83m, 99m, about 150m, and 30m from river up to bushwhack camp on portage.



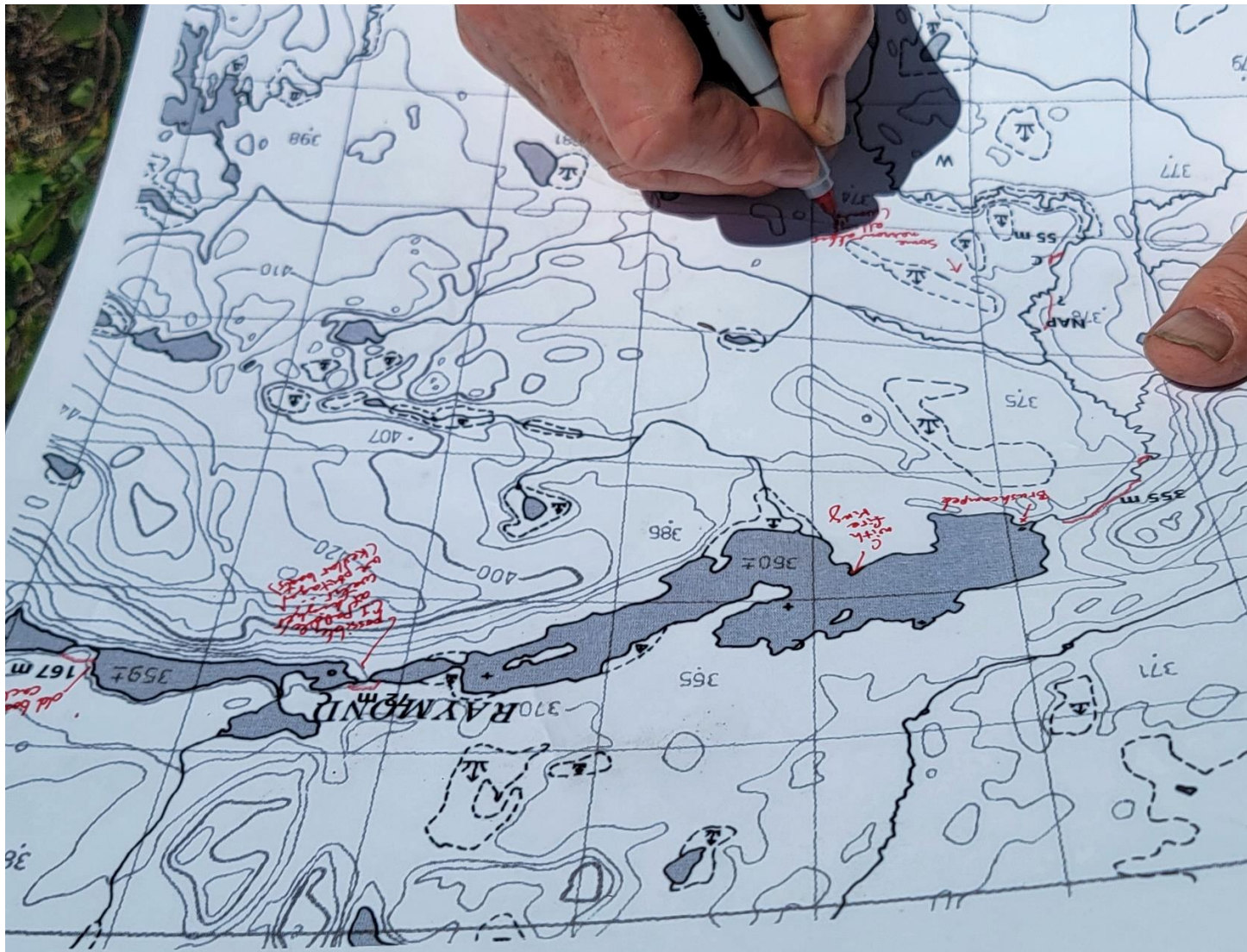
*Ray and Dan on Upper Maddy Lake*





*The cedar thicket. We brush-camped on portage up and to the left.*





#### *Making map notes*

Thursday, June 23 started with some drizzle that abated after breakfast. I hiked the portage back in the direction we had come, in order to see and flag the start (in pooly cedar swamp, river left of the smaller, left flow at these water levels; at 50.731093, -88.759064). It is pretty brushy in that part, but can be followed by tread. We had come in maybe halfway along the portage (marked as 548m on old maps) and did not clean the portage upstream from where we camped. We did clear some trail along our route on the portage to the downstream end, at 50.732119, -88.734978, and carried out to the last east-flowing pond before the Raymond River turns north. This pond flows into another pond, oriented south-north, from which the river flows north towards Whiteclay L. Dan and I walked the canoe down to the s-n pond and went to the north end portage (river left), because the old maps show a spur trail from the east-west pond that joins that portage, providing a route around the rapids we had just walked. The main portage is clear (used by paddlers coming upstream from Whiteclay to get to Butland and Cliff Lakes) but the spur was dim (intersect at 50.733474, -88.750599). Even so, we helped Scott and Pat locate the start of the spur (at 50.733568, -88.752133) and they came across on this. Now we



were all on the s-n pond, and we paddled to a small notch on the southeast end to find the 300 m carry into North Annette Lake (the flow from South Annette to North Annette and out is effectively a tributary to the Raymond River). Into N Annette, we took lunch on the middle of three campsites along the western shore. Going to S Annette were two shorter portages (75 and 85m, respectively), well-described by Mr. Albinger in his trip report. At the south end of S Annette were two longer carries, divided by a pond just over the divide of the Raymond and Pikitigushi watersheds. These two (570m and 680 m) had a lot of mucky stretches and were more taxing. The reward was a beautiful campsite at the south end of Butland, just n of the portage to Cliff Lake. Sunset from the Butland L camp was especially beautiful. Distance about 15 km; portages 7: about 250m (from brushcamp), 120m? (walked stream), 300m, 75m, 85m, 570m, 680m.



*Butland Lake sunset*

Friday morning came on fairly clear, and, after breakfast, we tackled the 1379m carry to Cliff Lake (easy to follow, but with a fair number of boggy spots). Double-portaging, it took most of the morning.



Cliff Lake is so beautiful, we decided to get a stay here on Saturday and see about getting a flight out on Sunday, rather than pushing hard to get down to the bear camp for a road pick-up (this change was facilitated via texting with the InReach device). We set up camp while some light showers passed through. Scott and Pat got a tarp up near the fireplace, and we spent a relaxed afternoon reading and napping. In the evening we paddled over to the north cliffs on the west side and appreciated some of the (many) pictographs on this special lake. The cliffs themselves are spellbinding from below, and we also climbed to the top for the view. Back at camp, Dan made up a great chili for supper, and we sat around the fire into the night.



*Cliff Lake*





*Pat (Tall Guy), Dan, Scott, and Ray*

Saturday dawned with heavy overcast and a breeze out of the east. Rain started in, heavy at times, but Scott kept a fire going near the tarp. Wind came around, increasing, to the west-northwest by about noon, and Dan whipped up a great brunch of eggs, fried spam, and hash browns. We were windbound in the early afternoon but got out in the evening to paddle further down the lake and visit more of the cliffs. The sky was clearing, with lines of cumulus marching by. Dan cooked up a supper of garlic pan bread and spaghetti, and we feasted yet again. We have had a campfire, though often on low, all day. No one complains of the smoke: it keeps the mosquitoes at bay.... Loons for a lullaby.







*Chef and Sous-chef adding secret sauce*

Sunday, June 26, our last day, we were up to a cool, partially overcast morning. Flights had been set back by the weather, the previous day, so we didn't expect ours until noon or so. We packed up most gear and sat by, relaxing and chatting, burning the last of the firewood. We were flown out in two rounds via Beaver aircraft (which carries only one canoe at a time), as the Otter was scheduled for some longer flights. It was something, taking off down that lake and seeing the cliffs from yet another perspective! Our pilot, a young woman named Sarah, had her hands full with the wind and weather and did a great job getting us back to the outfitter. We spent the night in Thunder Bay before travelling to Dan and Lisa's on Monday to pick up vehicles and take our separate routes home. All in all, a great trip and satisfying to finish the details on that loop route, although we did not travel all of it.



*The Beaver*