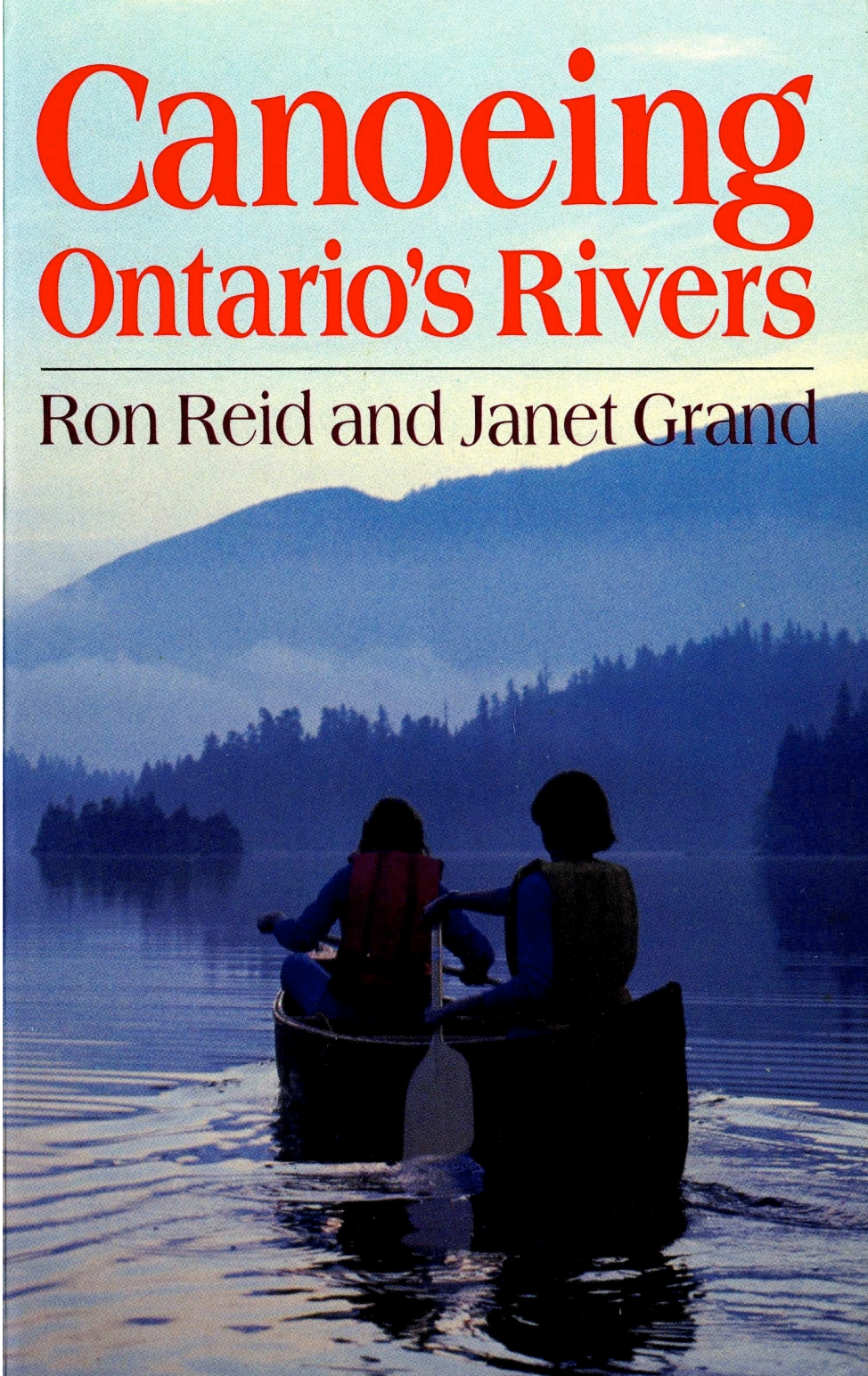


Canoeing Ontario's Rivers

Ron Reid and Janet Grand



**Scroll down
for the text**

The Misehkow: Half the Fun Is Getting There

On the surficial geology map for the country north of Thunder Bay, a wash of green covering thousands of square kilometres shows the thin mantle of soils left by the retreat of the glaciers. Here and there the map breaks into darker green, blue and purple, where deeper pockets provide better growing conditions for the conifer forests that thrive here. But in the corner northwest of Lake Nipigon, the map shows almost all brown—an area of shallow and eroded bedrock where virtually all of the soil has been removed.

Such areas are a forester's bane: trees grow slowly and are difficult to regenerate. But if water is present, the smooth, shallow bedrock can create ideal canoe country. Fortunately water is present in abundance here, in a labyrinth of lakes and tumbling rivers that would take decades to cover completely. This is wilderness canoeing at its very best—portages are short, campsites are frequent and scenic, the waters teem with fish, and the wilderness feeling is unsullied by roads or crowds of competing users.

In 1983 the core of this wilderness area was designated as Wabakimi Wilderness Provincial Park. To the north, the Albany River corridor was identified as a candidate for future park status.

But these accomplishments, gained after years of fierce controversy, were a bitter disappointment to conservationists. Led by Bruce Hyer, a local canoe outfitter, and the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, wilderness enthusiasts fought to set aside a much larger park, including the Misehkow River to provide a link to the Albany. On the other side, the forest industry, led by Great Lakes Forest Products, poured tens of thousands of dollars into an anti-park campaign, including a series of public advertisements designed to undermine local support. Their investment paid off.

After the most bitterly fought wilderness controversy in Ontario history, the compromise solution heavily favoured industry.

Only in the most southerly sections of this route, however, are the threats of new roads and new logging immediate. For many years, you should be able to savour the untouched boreal flavour of a wilderness where caribou, golden eagles and timber wolves proclaim the wildness of the north woods.

The route we have outlined is one of dozens of possibilities, and we would urge you to study the maps to create your own loops or extended trips. While much of the canoeing in this area is exploratory, the Ministry of Natural Resources in Nipigon has detailed maps on portages that cover most route possibilities. As an alternative, several canoe outfitters, including Bruce Hyer of Wildwater Outfitters in Thunder Bay, specialize in trips to this part of Ontario.

The 330-km route from the CNR tracks near Armstrong to Fort Hope will take 15–20 days, depending on how much time you have to enjoy the countryside as you go. For the most part the canoeing is not particularly arduous, though good whitewater skills are necessary in the central and upper parts of the route. It is remote, however, especially on the rarely visited Misehkow, so this route cannot be recommended for travelling on your own unless you are experienced in wilderness survival. Generally the two summer months are preferable for a route this far north.

The Misehkow, which forms the connecting link in the central third of this route, is actually quite a small river. However, since it is only accessible after you canoe across the interconnected watersheds of the new Wabakimi Park, half the fun is getting to its headwaters. At the other end the most logical end point is at Fort Hope, 125 km down the Albany, so this trip gives you a taste of that large river as well.

The Land of Boreas: God of the North Wind

Our route takes you through the heartland of the boreal forest, that circumpolar belt of conifers named after the mythical Greek god of the north wind. Unlike routes further to the south, there are no transitional forests here—this is the true boreal state, undisturbed except by the forces of nature.

Canoeists accustomed to the boreal forest of northeastern Ontario may notice some major differences here. In the east, jack pine grows on dry ridges of sand or rock, while black spruce occupies the wetter lowlands. But here, mixed stands of jack pine and black

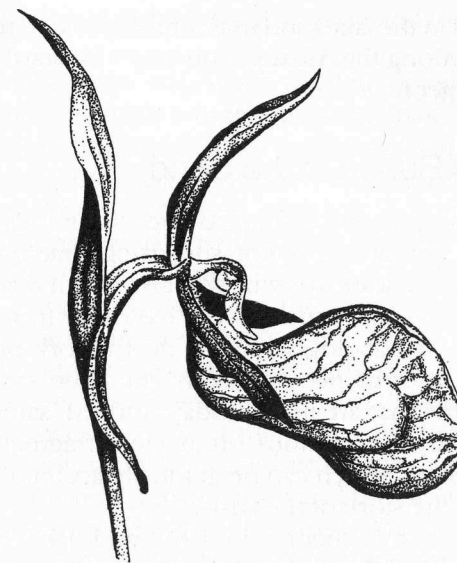
spruce typically occur on upland sites. White spruce, normally a dry-land species further east, is relegated to a minor role on wetter sites here. The reason for this initially confusing ecological switch lies with the climate, for northwestern Ontario is both cooler and drier than similar latitudes to the east. The dryness restricts white spruce and deciduous trees and shrubs, allowing the versatile black spruce to colonize the mossy ridges commonly found here.

The second result of the drier climate is a high incidence of forest fires, so that even natural stands are usually kept in an immature state. Dry lightning storms are a frequent weather pattern in summer, and the resulting patchy burns favour "pioneer" communities such as jack pine and black spruce, or aspen and birch colonizing from root suckers on deeper soils if the burn is not too severe. Even within this dry boreal forest, however, there is considerable variety related to the underlying landforms. Our route crosses three broad belts, each with its own special characteristics.

In the south, around Smoothwater, Wabakimi and Kenoji lakes, the bedrock is granite. For the most part the soil is very shallow, having been scraped and smoothed by the glaciers. Few shrubs can survive in the bed of feather moss under the canopy of spruce and pine here, although a few northern specialties such as mountain cranberry and Labrador tea occur occasionally. This is also good habitat for the pink, or stemless, ladies' slipper, which is easily identified by its pair of broad basal leaves and its wrinkled pink flower pouch.

In more open stands the ground is often covered by carpets of whitish "caribou moss." This plant is not really a moss at all, but rather a lichen, composed of algae and fungi living in a partnership called symbiosis. The fungi, which give the structure to the plant, tend to hold water which can be used by the small algae. In fact you might be surprised to feel a clump of the lichen after a rain, for its normally crunchy texture is changed to a cushiony softness. The algae, in turn, are able to produce carbohydrates through photosynthesis. Their host fungi lack this ability, so they rely totally on food produced by the algae.

Along the Palisade watershed and Rockcliffe Lake, the underlying stone changes to metamorphosed sedimentary rock, sometimes covered with a mantle of poorly drained peat. In these boggy areas pure stands of black spruce, with the accompanying heath shrubs, are common. It is interesting to note that as early as 1535 the explorer Cartier used a tea from the boiled leaves and bark of



The deep pink, heavily-veined flower pouch of the stemless ladies' slipper is commonly seen in the mossy forests of the boreal zone.

Hap Wilson

black spruce to cure his men of scurvy. Later explorers, including Champlain, apparently had no knowledge of this cure and lost many men to the disease.

The most northerly belt, lying along the Misehkow and Albany rivers, has a more complex geology. Along with patches of granite and sedimentary rocks, the ancient volcanic rocks known as greenstone are present here. Besides containing many potentially useful minerals, these greenstone belts are relatively rich in lime, providing a strong nutrient supply for plant growth. As well, the Agutua moraine rises in gravelly hills up to 150 m above the Albany River. As the glacier receded, this area was submerged for a time by Lake Agassiz, and the hills are interspersed with finer deposits of rich sands laid down on the lake floor.

This combination of deeper soils and higher availability of nutrients has created a more mixed forest here, with aspen and white birch accompanying the black spruce and jack pine. A dense shrub layer of dwarf birch, prickly wild rose, green alder and pin cherry is also common. Here too you can find some northern specialties, such as squashberry, a member of the viburnum family that makes delicious jelly.

Fishing is excellent along this route, with large northern pike

and pickerel in the lakes and rivers, and speckled trout found in the Misehkow. Along the Albany, you might be startled by the rolling of huge sturgeon.

A History Buried in the Sand

With a low population dispersed over thousands of kilometres of waterways, perhaps it is not surprising that few details of the history of this area are known. What is known relates mainly to the Albany corridor, and much of that has come from recent archaeological digs. Archaeologists in the north work on the reasonable theory that ancient peoples likely used the same portages and camping spots that are in use today. Indeed, sample digs beneath the surface layer of humus often yield fragments left by these earlier travellers, which can be gradually accumulated as evidence to postulate the story of the past.

Working on this theory, in 1978 and 1979 an archaeologist named David Riddle explored the shores of the Albany River. His research turned up evidence of prehistoric use along the length of the central river, especially at campsites along the major lakes. For example, significant sites were uncovered on Minimiska Lake, both at the entrance to Curry Bay and on a small island near the exit of the river.

The fragments found can be grouped into three general time periods. The oldest, of the Archaic period, fall between 5000 B.C. and 500 B.C., when Indian families moved seasonally within their traditional territory. Since no food supply remained constant, these Indians would move from fall fowling camps to winter hunting and trapping sites, and then in the spring to fishing grounds along the lakes. They gradually became more adept at hunting and fishing, developing bone harpoons and the bow and arrow, with stone arrow points often found on their sites. This was also the great age of copper, with the metal used for a variety of tools and decorations. The only known native copper mine from this era is located along the east coast of Lake Superior at Mamainse Harbour.

The second period of Indian occupation, from 500 B.C. to 800 A.D., is well represented in the archaeological finds along the Albany. Riddle found stone scrapers, presumably used for scraping hides, and shards of the decorated pottery typical of these Laurel people. During this period the Indians learned how to fish with nets, and campsites on points suitable for shallow-

water seining often yield flat notched stones used for weighting nets.

Some of the lakeshore sites also yielded evidence of the Terminal Woodland period, which stretched from 800 A.D. to 1600, when the influence of the fur traders caused a dramatic change in the lifestyle of the northern Ontario Indian. In this Terminal period the Indians had developed a more stable lifestyle, returning repeatedly to the same coastal villages for deep-water fishing in the summer months. Trade with neighbouring tribes, extending even to the Hurons in southern Ontario, reached an advanced stage. No doubt the Albany served as an important trade route during this era.

Without doubt the other lakes and rivers of the area along our route also were occupied by Indians in prehistoric times, though little archaeological work has been done. However, you can find evidence of their passing in several pictograph sites and in traditional grave sites. The local Indians from Osnaburgh still come seasonally to some of the lakes along the upper Misehkow to trap and harvest wild rice, and native use of the Albany River is substantial.

The Albany also served as a fur trade route for the Hudson's Bay Company, linking the main post at its mouth with trading posts along the river from 1777 onwards. A major post existed at Osnaburgh House, and other temporary posts have been recorded on Eabamet Lake and Triangle Lake.

Exploring the River

The local base for trips into this area is usually the village of Armstrong, 241 km north of Thunder Bay on Hwy. 527. It is possible to enter the southern section of this route from Caribou Lake, beginning from an access point 10 km north of Armstrong. However, the preferable starting points are located along the Canadian National Railway line west of that village.

Our route begins at Schultz's Trail, but good routes also lead northward from the Boiling Sand River, Nemo River, Allanwater and the Flindt River. The Albany River portion of this trip can also be started at Osnaburgh House, on Hwy. 599 north from Ignace.

At the end of your trip, it is necessary to fly out from Fort Hope. This can be arranged through outfitters in the Armstrong area. Contact the Armstrong Outfitters Association, Armstrong, Ontario, for a listing of outfitters offering this service.

SCHULTZ'S TRAIL TO BURNTROCK LAKE

This first 100 km covers a series of large lakes and small connecting rivers in the Ogoki watershed. From the train's "request stop" at Schultz's Trail, it is a short walk down a trail to the north to reach Onamakawash Lake. Pine-clad shores and rocky points beckon you to the northwest, providing scenic paddling and easy camping.

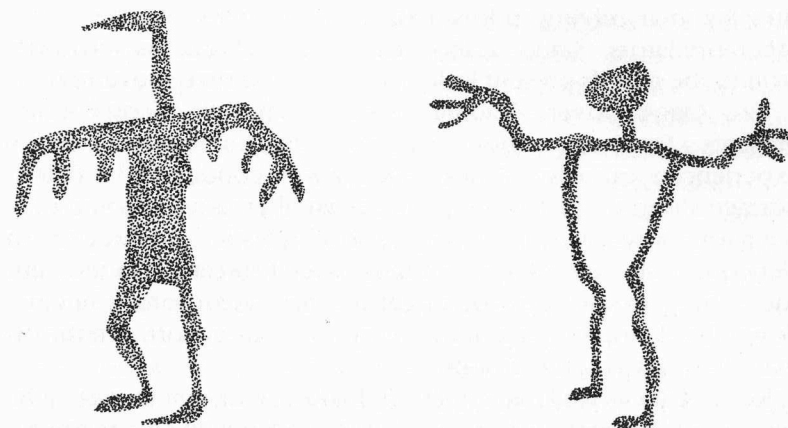
A few kilometres later, a channel to the right leads you to the first portage on the Lookout River. This picturesque little stream leads past characteristic spruce-pine feather moss forests in a series of short portages into Spring Lake. At its exit, your gentle introduction to the trip is ended with a 900-m portage into Smoothrock Lake. Seldom is portaging such a pleasure though. The granite bedrock is covered here with a gravelly deposit, likely an old beach ridge or low esker, so the path leads through an open stand of birch and aspen. White caribou moss, punctuated by large purple and orange fungi and the scarlet clusters of bunchberries, carpets the ground. The whole effect is a kind of fairyland, leading to the apt local name of Fantasia Portage.

Smoothrock Lake is also aptly named, for its many islands have been caressed by the glaciers into flowing whaleback shapes. Around its southern end Smoothrock was subject to a patchy forest fire in July 1981, a natural phenomenon that temporarily mars the scenery but has its essential role in the ecology of the north woods.

As you paddle up the west arm of Smoothrock, you are now along the boundary of the new Wabakimi Wilderness Park. These woods are the home of the goshawk, a forest predator that feeds mostly on other birds. Camped on Smoothrock, you might see the wavering flight of a barred owl in the evening gloom, another predator adapted to the boreal forest.

The most exciting wildlife in this area, however, is the woodland caribou. A small herd of a few dozen roams the open woodlands from here to Wabakimi Lake, a remnant of a once-widespread animal that now depends on isolation for its survival. The appearance of caribou bones in archaeological digs revealed that northern Ontario Indians coexisted with this herbivore, using it as a food source, for over 9000 years. A change in technology, the introduction of firearms, seems to have been the factor that tipped the delicate balance between hunter and prey, and from 1700 onwards the caribou rapidly declined.

At the top of Smoothrock Lake three channels lead northward.



Primitive stone paintings known as pictographs are usually found in the shelter of overhanging rocks, and often depict animals, spirits, and men.

Hap Wilson

The centre passage, down the Berg River, is perhaps the most interesting biologically, since it meanders through flat sandy country to produce superb wildlife habitat. Our route branches to the left, however, leading to Wabakimi Lake. Along the way, short portages bypass a scenic waterfall and several rapids. All the portages are necessary since you are now facing into the current.

The west end of Lower Wabakimi Lake appears to have had special significance to local Indians, who in this area are a mixture of Ojibway and Cree. Pictographs are found on the cliffs and an Indian grave site is near by.

Wabakimi Lake presents the largest stretch of open water on the trip, and a strong wind could easily leave you unable to cross for a day. Soils in this area are somewhat deeper than further south, so that deciduous trees become a more noticeable component of the forest on the surrounding hills. Like Smoothwater, Wabakimi is a major hub for canoe routes in this area. The turbulent Allanwater, which provides excellent whitewater canoeing, enters from the south, and the similar Flindt River marks the west end of the lake.

Our travels take us back out the northeast corner, down River Bay, but you might want to spend a day or two first poking about the islands along Wabakimi's northern shore. Besides offering good fishing and dozens of sheltered passageways to explore, these islands are thought to be the summer calving grounds for the caribou herd, so your chances of catching a glimpse of one are at a peak here. Wildlife biologists think that the caribou choose island

sites for their calving to lower their vulnerability to wolves and other predators. Since caribou can readily swim, the channels around the islands present little barrier to their own movement.

The Ogoki River, leading downstream into Kenoji Lake, presents a fine series of bouldery rapids that can usually be run by experienced canoeists. Under high water conditions, a 600-m portage along the left shore provides an alternative. As you pick your way downriver, listen for the shrill whistles of an osprey to alert you to the nest of a pair of these large fish-eaters on the right shore. In quiet stretches you might also hear the resonant singing-down-the-drainpipe song of the veery, a common northern thrush that often nests on the ground.

Kenoji Lake is well named, for in the local dialect it means "pike lake," and the game fish is found in abundance in this relatively shallow water. Campsites are less frequent here, but rocky points provide excellent camping both where the river enters and on the western arm.

With your entry into the Palisade River system, your surroundings change considerably. The rock now is sedimentary, laid down by some ancient sea, and as the name suggests, it is broken along the river's edge into square cliffs. Just before the entrance of the Slim River, another set of pictographs, faint but still powerful in spirit, graces the cliffs. An impressive rock-fall just around the corner up the Slim River is also worth a visit.

A chain of short portages now leads northward and then west, linked sometimes by small rocky lakes, sometimes by shallow marshes floored with the organic debris affectionately and universally known as "loonshit." Your progress may slow a little, but ascending this remote watershed has its compensations. A family of mink may tumble through the rock-fall, more curious than afraid. Or you might catch sight of one of the endangered bald eagles known to nest in the vicinity.

A final 250-m portage brings you to the more open expanses of Burntrock Lake, where rocky shores offer some of the best camping spots in this generally swampy countryside. A compass might come in handy here, for the numerous arms of Burntrock, coupled with its large central island, can be confusing.

BURNTROCK LAKE TO THE ALBANY RIVER

The central 105 km of this route is remote, unspoiled and beautiful. However, as you cross the height of land, it starts off boggy, buggy and arduous.

A series of short portages brings you to Muskiga Lake, a shallow, reedy lake surrounded by black spruce peatland. At its far end the 1000-m portage can only be described as a stinker—flat but very wet, with bogholes up to your knees and spruce roots everywhere to trip you up. And at its end, there is only a puddle, from which another 300 m trail of similar disrepute leads to Timon Lake.

Timon Lake is also undistinguished, except that its low swampy shores support a breeding colony of Bonaparte's gulls. These small handsome gulls nest in trees across the coniferous forest belt from Ontario westward, but they are rarely seen in breeding season by birdwatchers.

Near the exit of Davies Lake, the next in line, an Indian trapper's cabin shows signs of active use. Amid the jumble of discarded clothes and food tins, wooden hoops for stretching beaver pelts and a pair of 2-metre snowshoes attest to the more traditional side of the winter trapline in this part of Ontario. Keep in mind the firm rule of wilderness travel, that such cabins be left undisturbed.

From this point onward you are actually on the Misehkw River, but here in the headwaters it could be more accurately classed as a stream. Several portages pass the shallowest spots, although wading might be a better alternative.

Rockcliffe Lake, as the name suggests, is bounded by abrupt buttresses of metamorphosed sedimentary rock along its 14-km length. At the southern end a gravelly island is surrounded by wild rice, and the harvesting nets used with the Indians' canoes await their yearly use at the campsite. In this area as well, a pair of infant graves are marked by a blaze at the top of the bank. In traditional native fashion, the graves are enclosed by low wooden fences, and the twin tikinogans, or cradle boards, hang forlornly in nearby trees.

The clear waters of the Misehkw now flow over gravelly swifts and a few larger rapids, necessitating some portaging or lining. The bedrock changes to ancient volcanic debris, in some places broken into sharp wafers. Sand beaches on small lakes have been created where the sediments of former glacial lakes are deeper.

This is good beaver country, and otter are common too. It is also a good place to spot moose, for the narrow twisting stream often takes you close before your presence is sensed. Even then, most of the ten moose we saw were decidedly casual about fleeing, presumably since they are seldom disturbed by man.

The only major portage on the Misehkw is at Iron Falls. You must watch carefully not to miss the beginning of the portage trail

on the right, for the first part of the rapids looks deceptively easy. However, it soon grows into a swift rapids, leading inexorably to a series of chutes and falls. The portage trail cuts across a bend in the river, but an excellent campsite can be found at the falls themselves. Amateur botanists will delight in exploring this area, for the mixed woods host pink ladies' slipper, Hooker's orchis, mertensia and harebells, as well as the more common boreal wildflowers.

Below the falls the river winds for many kilometres between low muddy banks. Occasionally higher ridges of gravel will provide fine camping sites, with well worn game trails leading enticingly back among the scattered trees. Several short portages are available towards the lower end of the river, but most of the rapids can be run by experienced paddlers in normal water. The river now passes through another burn site, this one regenerated with a fine growth of spruce and tamarack. Finally a progressively faster set of rapids between high banks gives you a fine ride, then spills you out onto the Albany.

THE ALBANY RIVER TO FORT HOPE

After so many days on the intimate waterways of the Mischkow watershed, the broad expanse of the Albany, several hundred metres wide, is a refreshing change. Suddenly you feel exposed to the sky and the wind again. Even more, you suddenly feel vulnerable to a very powerful river, for the first bouldery rapid is immediately downstream and the treeless stretch of gravel along the sides attests to the power of the Albany in flood.

Even on the Albany, the aquatic highway of central Ontario, you are 125 km and four or five days travel from the nearest town at Fort Hope. But this is not just the tail end of your trip; the Albany is an experience in itself. Rising hundreds of kilometres to the west, most of the way to the Manitoba border, this river cuts across the grain of Ontario's north. Below the Albany watershed the crazy quilt of lakes and rivers flows southward to Lake Superior. Above the Albany the peatlands soon begin, drained in a more orderly pattern north to the sea. But the Albany charts its own course, an easterly flow that has provided a travel corridor for fur trader and Indian alike. Today it is often used by canoeists coming downriver from the old Hudson's Bay post at Osnaburgh.

As the river twists among the moraines left by the final push of the glaciers, exciting canoeing is provided by the bouldery rapids and braided channels, separated by gravel islands. In slower areas, such as the mouth of the Shabuskwia River and at Howell's Lake,

the rich sediments help in the establishment of productive marshes.

It is not unusual to find evidence along the river bank of native fishing activities, including the shells of Ontario's largest fish, the sturgeon. A very primitive fish, sturgeon have no interior bones, relying instead on the hard shell-like plates on the outside for support. A large sturgeon, which could easily weigh over 100 kilos, is likely to be over 150 years old. This long life cycle, with sexual maturity not reached for 15–20 years, makes the sturgeon very vulnerable to overfishing and pollution. Over the years the range of the sturgeon in Ontario has shrunk drastically, and they are now found only in a few larger lakes and rivers.

At Upper Eskakwa Falls the different nature of canoeing the Albany strikes you again, for the portage seems a veritable expressway, wide and well trodden. This pattern continues at Eskakwa Falls, where an excellent campsite overlooks a barren area of volcanic rocks sculpted by the water. Snake Falls, the third in this trio, requires another short portage, although it is sometimes possible to run empty canoes down the turbulent waters of this long rocky funnel. Watch for golden eagles along this stretch of the river.

On your way to Miminiska Lake, watch for another grave site on the left bank. You might also notice evidence of the mineral exploration carried out at Howell's Lake, one of the threats to the future sanctity of this part of the river. On the north shore of Miminiska Lake, a fishing lodge could provide emergency assistance if required.

Below Miminiska Falls several stretches of fast water bring you to the start of Petawanga Lake. Near the entrance, a cluster of buildings includes an icehouse. Again, a combination of an old idea with modern materials prevails. The ice, presumably used for packing fish, is insulated by moss held down by branches. The building, however, is constructed of modern aluminum, enhanced by axe holes hammered throughout.

The rocky shores of Petawanga are often hidden by a mantle of lacustrine sand, producing some spectacular beaches. The finest is a narrow point at the easterly end, reaching two-thirds of the way across the lake. The point has been a traditional Indian camping site, as well as a modern one.

A 600-m portage on the right side of the river bypasses the challenging rapids leading to Kawitos Lake, though they can often be run by experts. On the other side of this small lake, the rapids

will at least require lining in parts. Take the southerly channel around the island; a 180-m portage on the left avoids the worst of the rapids.

From here, it is a flatwater paddle to Eabamet Lake, broken only by the pull up a small swift on the Eabamet River. The native community of Fort Hope has moved to a new site, very visible from the lake, with only an old church and cemetery to mark the former village. Some supplies, communications and medical facilities are available here, along with good docking facilities for your flight homewards.

National Topographic System Maps

Scale 1:50,000: 52I/5, I/12, I/13

52P/3, P/4, P/6, P/7, P/8, P/9, P/10, P/11

42M/5, M/12

Ministry of Natural Resources Maps

Scale 1:126,720: Armstrong 52I/SW

Whitewater Lake 52I/NW

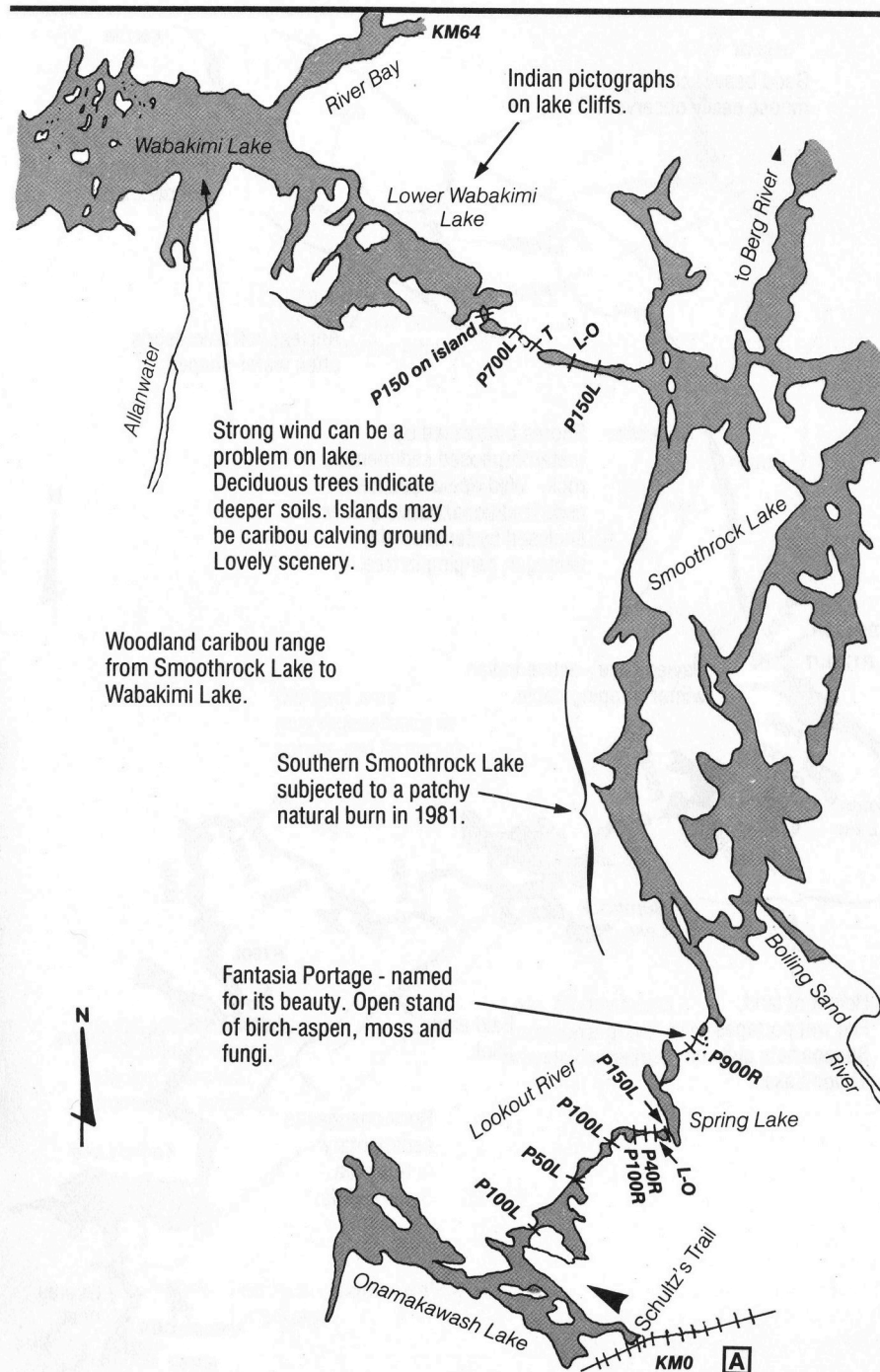
Northern part of route not covered by MNR maps; use NTS 1:250,000 sheets 52P and 42M instead.

Ministry of Natural Resources Offices

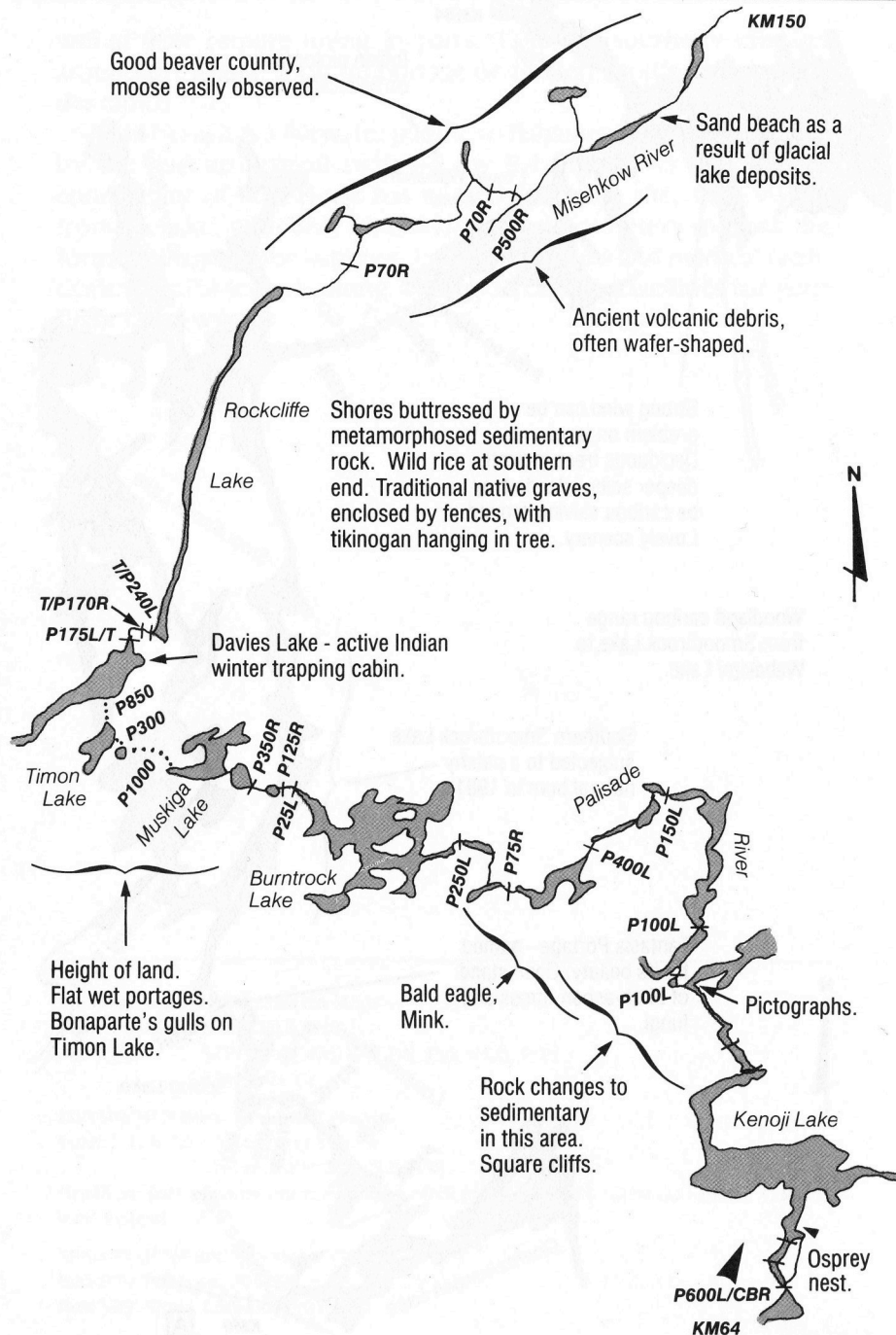
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Box 309, Sioux Lookout, P0V 2T0

Mishekow River-Map 1

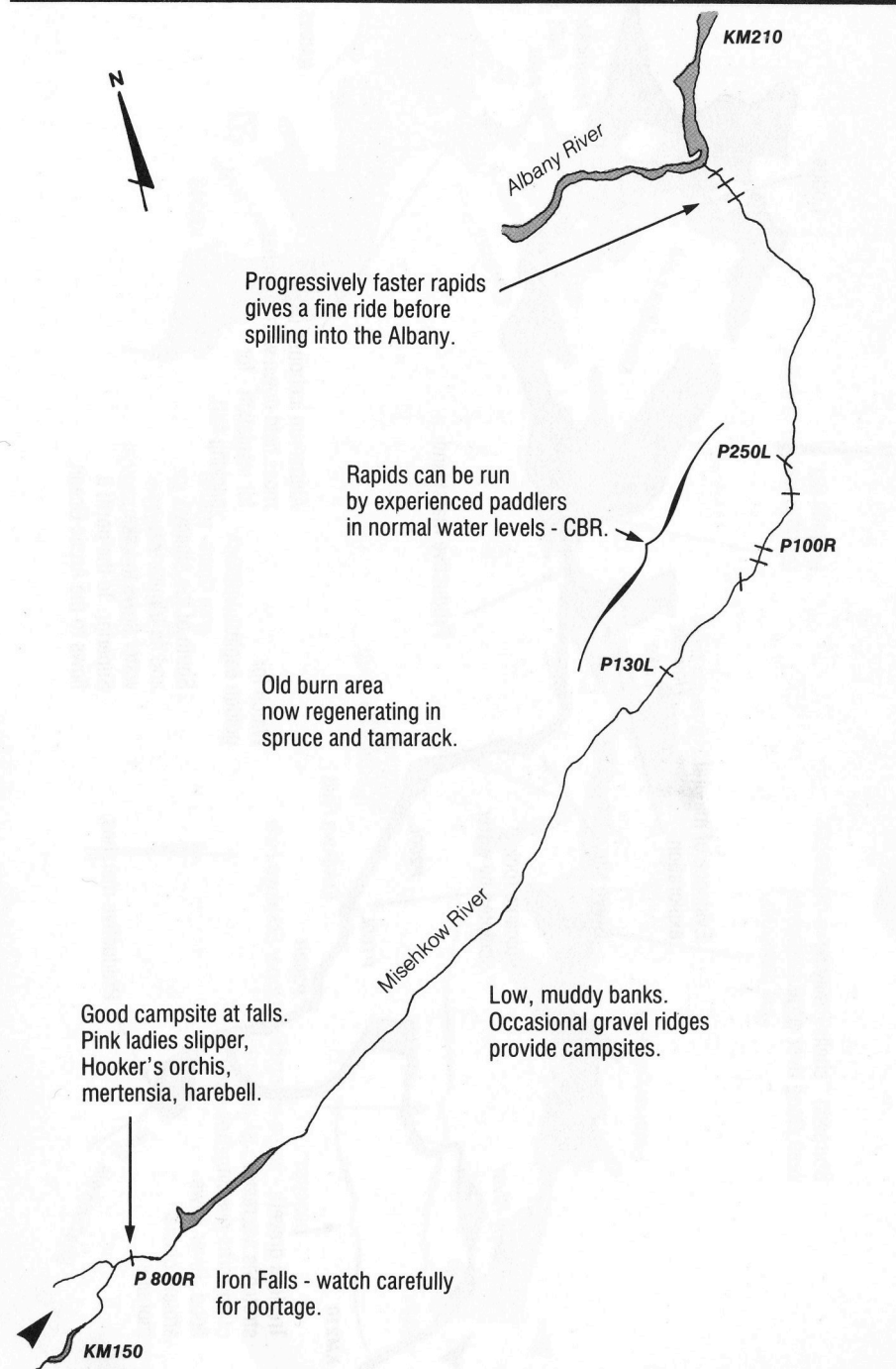


Misehkw River-Map 2



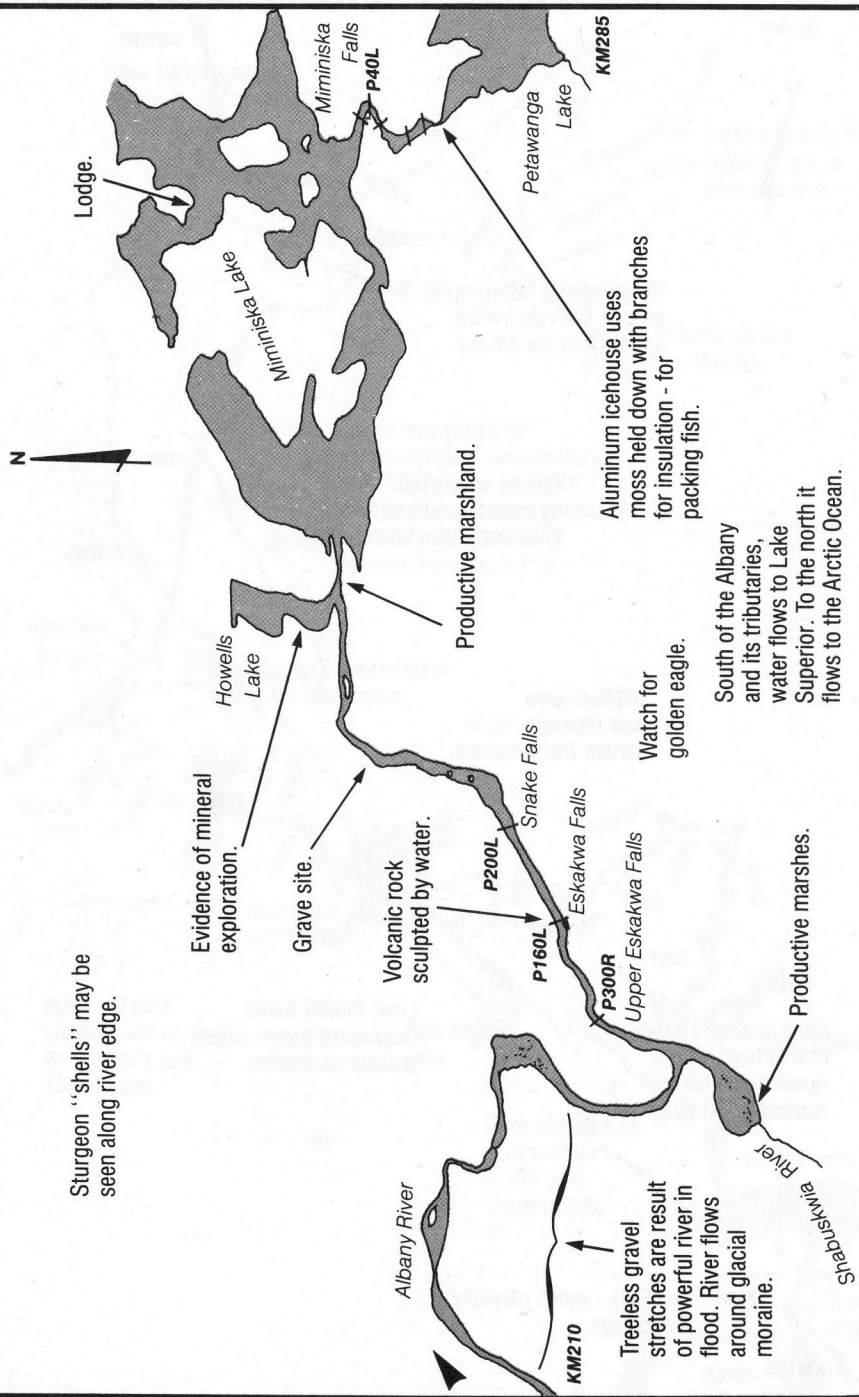
Ref: N.T.S. Map 52I, 52P, 1:250,000

Misehkw River-Map 3



Ref: N.T.S. Map 52P, 1:250,000

Misehkow River–Map 4



Misehkov River–Map 5

