



*Climbing up from Indian House Lake.*

## **Losing the Trail: Wandering the Quebec & Labrador Barrens**

**Story by Alan Stirt**

**Images by Alan Stirt, Dave Brown and Wendy Scott**

(Note – Place names are taken from Cabot's *In Northern Labrador* and from the 1/50,000 and 1/250,000 scale maps from the Canada Map Office. *In Northern Labrador* is in the public domain.)

“Well, the Moisie’s a nice river but it has too many trees and it’s not very good for hiking. We’re going to more open country.”

In 1986 my wife Wendy Scott and I were on a QNS&L

(Quebec North Shore and Labrador Railroad — now Tshiuetin Rail) train heading for the headwaters of the Moisie River. I was chatting with another canoeist, Karl Shimek, a veteran wilderness traveler and member of the WCA. He and his son were headed toward more barren country and the Kogaluk River, which flows from the Quebec/Labrador highlands to the Labrador Sea.

Although I had glimpsed the barrens a few years earlier

when walking the hills above the George River, it had never occurred to me that I could do a barrens canoe trip without going to the Northwest Territories. I asked Karl if he could send me a trip report when he returned. The next December I received an application to join the WCA and a 5-sentence summary of his trip. It included the admonition “If you go on this trip, don't take our route through the gorge.” My correspondence with Karl developed into an intense desire to canoe the country that lies above the hills of the George River.

I later spoke with Karl again at a WCA symposium. He said that the first 15 km of the upper Kogaluk was largely unrunnable and had steep brushy banks that made portaging difficult. However, it was mostly navigable below the confluence with the northern tributary. Karl's route reached the Kogaluk from its headwaters almost due north of the eastern arm of

Mistinibi Lake.

Another more traditional route was outlined in William Brooks Cabot's *In Northern Labrador*, published in 1912. Cabot was a well-known engineer from Boston who developed a fascination with the north and its inhabitants. He had both the means and the time to indulge this interest. Between 1903 and 1910, Cabot spent eight summers with the Naskapi (now called the Innu). In 1906 he worked out the route from the Labrador coast to Mistinibi Lake. In 1910, his last trip in this area, he reached Tshinutivish, a Naskapi camp on Indian House Lake. Cabot called himself one of the “minor wanderers” of the country. When asked by a Naskapi why he was there he responded “...I was not a trader, not a hunter, and stayed in my own country most of the time; but once in a while liked to travel, to go to a new country, to see the animals and birds and fish and trees and the people; then I went

back to my country again. “ This description fits most of the wilderness travelers I know.

Today, because of infrastructure development — mainly the QNS&L, the Trans-Labrador Highway and the Labrador coastal ferries — those of us with lesser means can travel to this country with relative ease. Cabot's route roughly followed the traditional Naskapi one. He traveled from the coast, up the Assiwaban River (now the Kogaluk) then portaged up to the plateau via the High Portage about 25 to 30 km upriver from the western end of Cabot Lake. Then he followed a route from pond to pond to Hawk Lake then to Mistinibi Lake. From there, it wasn't far to Indian House Lake and Tshinutivish.

Our friends, George Stone and Jill Bubier, had travelled this route from Indian House Lake to the Kogaluk and the coast. They called it “the time we took our canoe on a 10- day hike.” I



*Al and Dick hauling on a frozen stream on the way to Hawk Lake.*

wanted to see the barrens and I don't mind portaging, but 10 days of walking seemed like a bit more than I wanted.

So I plotted another route.

### 1992 TRIP

In 1992 Wendy and I planned a trip from Schefferville to the Kogaluk and then down to the Labrador coast. Our regular trip partners, Dave Brown and Ann Ingerson, were not available so we asked a new acquaintance, Dick Irwin, if he were interested. He was.

We had been introduced to Dick the previous year at a WCA Symposium and discovered that we lived close to each other. (We live about 12 km south of the Quebec border in Vermont. Dick lives just north of the border in Abercorn, QC.) We lucked out with Dick and his vast experience in canoeing the north. He proved to be a wonderful trip companion and friend who was tireless, strong and a great navigator.

The plan was to take the train to Schefferville, go down the De Pas River to Indian House Lake on the George River. From there we would portage east, following Karl Shimek's portage route until we reached Lac Mistinibi. Then, instead of staying on Karl's route, we would follow the traditional one until we reached Hawk Lake. Next, we would leave the trail and head north aiming to hit the Kogaluk on the south rim of the canyon, just across from where the northern tributary drops into the river. We didn't know anyone who had accessed the river that way, but the maps showed that the valley was wooded and steep, but did not appear impassable.

The logistics were a bit complicated. We drove to Labrador City and then took the QNS&L to Schefferville. We planned to end the trip at Nain, on the Labrador coast, where we would catch the coastal ferry down to Goose Bay. From there, a friend of Dick's would drive us to Labrador City where we could pick up our cars.

We had planned for 4 weeks on the river but had to cut back to three weeks because of last-minute scheduling dif-





*Sunrise on Hawk Lake.*



*A vista north of Hawk Lake.*



*A maze of ponds and rock on the barrens.*

facilities with our shuttle driver.

In order to finish the trip following our new schedule, I knew we would have to travel quickly. Dick had traveled many times with a mutual friend, Stewart Coffin. I had followed some of Stew's trip reports from earlier trips and knew that he and his companions tended to cover a lot of distance in a short period of time. The secret, according to Dick, was not to move really fast but to keep moving. We kept moving.

It was an exhilarating trip. We travelled through some of the most remote country I had been in, putting in some long days and making good time down the De Pas to Indian House Lake. I assumed Karl chose the portage out of Indian House Lake, which was south of the traditional route, because it was the shortest way to reach the high country. It paralleled a stream that flowed out of Pallatin Lake.

The walking was tricky in places and the route moved through some thick and swampy country. We camped the first night by a frozen expansion of the stream. The next morning we climbed a hill to see if Lake Pallatin was open. We were pleased to see that the ice was gone, but less pleased to see a black bear and 2 cubs ambling down what would be our portage route through the brush.

The only signs of previous travel here were some flakes of chert I found on the shore of Pallatin Lake.

We followed a route from Pallatin Lake into the Deat River system and took that up to Mistinibi Lake. The lake was a glorious sight. Stretching from west to east, it seemed to be a corridor beckoning toward higher country.

While we ate lunch on an island, the weather started to turn. By the time we made camp, we were in the middle of a full-blown storm that pinned us down for two nights. We woke the first morning to about 6 cm of snow on the ground. We hunkered down for the day and were very pleased when Dick emerged from the woods with a sizeable tree on his shoulders that fueled a large warming fire. The next morning, the wind was quieting down so we headed off to the eastern arm of the lake to start the overland route. The hilltops were covered in snow, creating a beautiful backdrop for our paddling and portaging.

The route to Hawk Lake was reasonably straightforward. We had to cross a wide, rocky streambed at one point. Since the stream was frozen we were able to haul across the ice, avoiding a long detour to find a narrow crossing point. From Hawk Lake we veered off the traditional route to head directly toward the south rim of the Kogaluk canyon. Because the landscape was so barren, it was easy to climb a hill to scout the route.

We were having lunch on an island. "Is that

peanut butter meant to last the whole trip?” Dick’s question triggered the biggest crisis of our journey. We had failed to accurately forecast Dick’s (rather prodigious) appetite in our peanut butter calculations. By carefully husbanding our resources we managed to survive. Much to our surprise, Dick continued to go on trips with us, but he would bring a secret stash of extra peanut butter to augment our meager rations.

Our route to the canyon rim worked out well. In fact, some of the thin blue lines on the map actually had enough water to paddle. As we approached the south rim of the canyon we were surprised by the sheer beauty of the falls of the northern tributary tumbling into the canyon across from us. The country on both sides of the canyon was very stark, barren, and rocky. I knew immediately that I wanted to someday follow the tributary from its source.

The trickiest part of the trip was finding our way into the canyon. Once we dropped below the rim, we left the barrens behind and were confronted with very steep slopes choked with thick vegetation and punctuated with the occasional impassable rock-slide. Dick did an incredible scouting job and after a few detours, we reached the bottom as dusk was falling. I was feeling relieved to have finished the portage when Dick reminded me that he had left his canoe near the top when scouting the route. We rushed headlong back to the top. Because the thickness of the vegetation made over-the-head portaging impossible, we each grabbed an end of the canoe and rushed back down to the river. This was fairly easy since his canoe weighed only about 16 kg.

It was getting quite dark by the time we made it back down, but Wendy had cooked supper and packed all our gear away. There was no good place for our tents on the steep slope so we threw everything in the canoes – including our hot dinner- and ran down a few riffles in the dark until we came to a sandy spot. We hacked out tent spots in the alder bushes, ate supper and went to bed.

We woke up the next morning to a very high river that flowed up to the bushes in some places. After lining a few tricky spots we were able to run most of the rapids. At one point we startled a mother black bear nursing her cub next to the river.

About two days of paddling brought us to where the Naskapi high portage joins the river and then into Cabot Lake. The river beyond Cabot Lake was easy to navigate and featured a scenic falls near the mouth.

After portaging around the falls, we arrived at a fishing camp. A motorboat was coming off the bay and Chesley Anderson, the camp owner, greeted us. He was bringing in some clients who had flown into Nain. After they finished unloading cases of beer



*Taken from the south rim, our first view of the northern tributary.*



*Wendy on the south rim.*



*Wendy and black flies north of Lake Mistinibi.*



*Al and Wendy on the De Pas.*



*A rest stop on our portage out of Indian House Lake.*

from the boat, Chesley invited us in for lunch. We heard that the Taverner, our boat to Goose Bay, would probably arrive in Nain the next day. The wind had picked up and Voisey's Bay was kicking up some waves. We knew it would take us two or three days to paddle to Nain under ideal conditions so we accepted a motorboat ride with one of the guides, Joshua, who was going to make a supply run. After a cold, windy run, we arrived in Nain as dusk was falling. Somewhat dazed and confused by the transition from the wilderness to the hubbub of a town, we stood around the docks trying to decide what to do. A light rain was falling. A gentleman with a soft Texas accent approached, said we looked like lost souls, and offered to take us in. That's how we met the Moravian minister. We had some wonderful meals and a place to stay with his family. The boat was delayed for a day, and we ended up taking advantage of their hospitality for two nights.

Back on the docks, waiting to board the Taverner, I sat next to a slightly disheveled man with untied tennis shoes and an unbuttoned uniform jacket. He turned toward me and asked, "What were you doing in Nain?"

"We just finished a canoe trip from Schefferville and down the Kogaluk River," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I work on the boat."

"What do you do on the boat?"

"I'm the captain."

During the journey the captain invited us up to the bridge, and we shared a meal in the officers' mess.

In a few days we were getting off the boat in Goose Bay.

The Taverner made its final voyage down the coast of Labrador the next year.

The profound beauty of the high open country had affected me deeply and I knew that I wanted to return. Two years later we planned a trip that would bring us to the northern tributary of the Kogaluk.

#### **1994 TRIP**

In 1994 we again traveled down the De



*Wendy and Dick getting protection from the flies.*

Pas to Indian House Lake. Dave Brown, Ann Ingerson, Dick, and Wendy and I wanted to spend as much time as possible in the barren high country so we planned a circuitous route. On the map, it looked like an inefficient way to get anywhere, but it was a great way to spend time on the land.

This time, we took a different portage route out of Indian House Lake that was closer to the route Cabot took. It was about 5 km north of our 1992

route and went over the northern flank of Mont Tshiasketnau. Although it was longer than our first route (about 8 km vs. 6 km to get to the next lake), it was mostly in open country. The scenery was stunning, with views of the lake far below and boulder fields and ponds ahead of us. I had rather fond memories of this portage until I viewed Dick's videos of the trip a couple of years ago while I was helping digitize his VHS footage. The scenes gave me a clearer glimpse of what the portage



*A rocky stream bed near the height of land.*



*Dave heading overland.*

was really like and offered a lesson on how memory can soften events. I concluded that the portage might have been very enjoyable if not for the steep climb, the black flies, the oppressive heat and the heavy loads.

The first night of this day-and-a-half portage, we camped between a pond and an esker. That morning, the esker became our highway until we left it to head east toward Lake Ntshuku Ministuku. The country was mostly open and flat as we neared the lake. Near the end of his slightly different route, Dick came across some old tepee poles and the remains of firewood.

Next we headed upstream to Lake

Kashetsheministukut and then into Mistinibi. Here we left the traditional trail and headed north from the east end of the lake through Lake Cananee and into Napeu Kainiut. Then we headed upstream to Lake Brisson and portaged from pond to pond to get to Lake Dihourse. From Lake Dihourse to the height of land, we followed a string of streams and ponds. The blue lines on the maps seemed so inviting but the “streams” often were more an idea than reality.

The height of land that was the Quebec/Labrador border was a rocky, relatively flat area with numerous small ponds. This unprepossessing piece of land had a certain majesty. It

felt like the top of the world. The place, of course, cannot be separated from the effort it took to arrive there.

We were finally on the northern tributary of the Kogaluk. The small amount of water in the upper reaches of the river forced us to do a lot of portaging and wading. The country was open and remote feeling, and I found it satisfying in a bone-deep way.

Before the trip, I had chatted a bit with Herb Pohl, who had traveled down the tributary, reaching it from the northern end of Indian House Lake. We didn't discuss the route; Herb mostly talked about the almost ecstatic feeling of freedom he had while traveling in that isolated, open country. I agree that there's something about it that draws you in.

From the height of land to the confluence with the Kogaluk, we saw very little sign of recent travel. Aside from a small piece of canoe canvas on a hillside, the only signs of people were the tent rings we found along the way. I was deeply touched by coming across this evidence of use from earlier travelers on the land; people who were much more intimately connected to the country than we were. They called it home.

The tributary became more navigable as we traveled down. We encountered some large lake expansions and we were able to run some rapids. We had to negotiate some short portages around ledges and other unrunnable drops. Old tent rings showed up in many unexpected places. Although we didn't come to this country to relive or investigate its history, history had a way of finding us.

Because we were in mostly barren country, collecting firewood for cooking became a group activity. We were able to find enough twigs and branches of willow, birch, alder and the occasional black spruce to keep our small cooking fires going.

One day we surfed the waves down a lake heading east with a strong wind at our backs. We enjoyed the ride while we could because we knew that it would be over in about 5 km. Our route



*Dick with the firewood boat.*





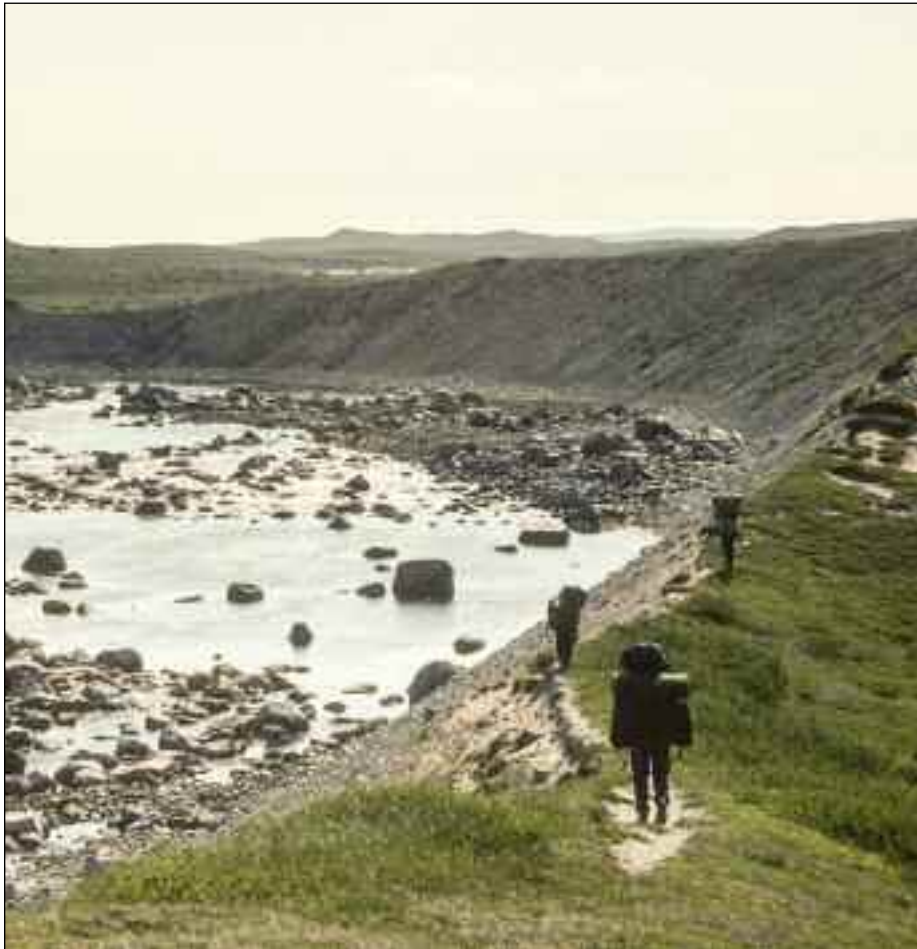
*"This unprepossessing piece of land..." On the Quebec/Labrador border.*



*An expansion on the northern tributary.*



*Dave and Ann on the northern tributary.*



*Portaging around a boulder-choked stream near the height of land.*

followed a U-turn around a point to get to the outlet of the lake. The wind would be in our faces. We pitched camp on a muddy patch of ground and called the campsite “lands end”.

As we neared the rim of the canyon and the confluence with the Kogaluk, the river necked down and started dropping to its final falls, so we left the river and portaged the last 1 km or so to the rim.

We had an incredibly scenic camping place that night at the intersection of a canyon formed by the tributary with that of the Kogaluk. We were able to have our evening cocktails – about 1 shot of rum or whiskey – on ice thanks to a snow bank left over from the previous winter.

Our descent into the canyon was relatively straightforward. I had printed a few photos taken from the south rim in 1992. They showed a steep, thickly wooded slope with no obvious sheer cliffs or other major obstacles. The going was steep at times but with trees to grab onto and ropes to let down the canoes slowly, we were able to navigate the trickiest spots.

The river was lower than on the previous trip and we made it to the coast in good time.

We camped near the beginning of Cabot Lake and got up and paddled most of its length before breakfast the next morning. There are few places to land on the lake and the wind can come up quickly. (Cabot calls it “the Wind Lake of the Assiwaban”.) We stopped on a beach near the eastern end of the lake to have breakfast. A few years later, I noticed that a photo I took that morning was remarkably similar to one in Cabot’s book. Not much had changed in the intervening 100 years. [CabotLakeImages]

Wendy and Ann needed to get back home for work, so we had arranged with Chesley Anderson to pick them up at his camp at the mouth of the river. Due to a miscommunication their ride didn’t appear on the day we thought it would. The motorboat arrived the next day and Wendy and Ann were able to fly from Nain to Montreal.



*Pond hopping as we approach toward the northern tributary.*

Dave, Dick and I paddled up the coast, spending about three more days on the water. We camped on some of the many islands on the journey to Nain and enjoyed paddling amidst the wildly beautiful scenery. We've traveled many miles on the northern Labrador coast and have always felt lucky to be able to go to such wild places. We paid careful attention to the weather, left plenty of time to be wind-bound and carried some fresh water in case we had to rush to shore quickly. One night on the way to Nain, we collected rainwater running from the tarp to use for cooking because there was no easily accessible stream nearby. Once one got past the smoky taste picked up from the tarp, it wasn't too bad.

We paddled into Nain in a strong crosswind and prepared for our return to home. This trip remains one of my favorites. It's very gratifying to pick out a possible route on the maps and then see what's really there.

I knew I wanted to return to the area.

### **2000 TRIP**

In 2000 we planned another trip into the area. The crew was Dave, Ann, Wendy and I. Wanting to see some new country we chose a different route from the De Pas to the George River watershed and an alternate way to get into Mistinibi Lake. We started down the



*Starting our descent to the Kogaluk from the north rim.*



*On Cabot Lake.*

De Pas before heading east. We left the river about 60 km above its confluence with the George and portaged along a stream until we reached a chain of ponds that led to a small tributary of the George. Dick Irwin and Stew Coffin had used this route many years earlier to gain access to the upper George. We had in previous years passed through the headwaters of the George en route to other rivers and wanted to see a part of the river we had never paddled. The portage route was slow going for us and took us through lots of brushy areas and swamps. Once we had crossed into the George River drainage, we were able to paddle parts of the relatively small stream we were on.

The upper George was smaller and the rapids more technical than those on the river below Indian House Lake. There was a beautiful section with fast water flowing between a maze of small islands. Pulling in to a portage around a steep drop, we interrupted an eagle chasing some young geese.

About 23 km above Indian House Lake we left the George to go up the Dumans River. We had planned to go up the Dumans at least to Lac Leif but changed our plans when we saw that the lake expansions were too shallow and rocky for paddling. Consulting our maps, we struck a route that took us from the first lake expansion on the Dumans through another pond and then



*View from an island in the Labrador Sea on the way to Nain.*



*Wendy and Al portaging up the Dumans River.*



*Caribou crossing a narrows on Mistinibi Lake.*



*Huddling under the canoe for protection from the hailstorm.*



*Wendy ready for portaging in the barrens.*



*Ann and Dave portaging north of Hawk Lake.*



*On the south rim of the Kogaluk.*



*South rim campsite.*

into the southwestern arm of Mistinibi. From Mistinibi, we followed our portage route from 1992 through Hawk Lake to the southern rim of the Kogaluk canyon.

The hailstorm hit as we were portaging over a particularly barren piece of ground. It took a little while to realize what was happening. “What’s that noise? Oh, it’s hail. The hailstones are getting bigger. We better duck under cover. There is no cover! Look — Dave and Ann are getting under their canoe. Good idea.” We put the canoes down and huddled underneath them until the hail stopped falling. Dave took a photo of Wendy and me peering out from under the canoe, looking annoyed and uncomfortable. The hailstorm, though relatively trivial, highlighted our vulnerability when traveling in barren country. It’s during moments like these, rather than when running a big rapid or dealing with wind and waves on a big lake or the ocean that I feel most affected by the open landscape. It’s a feeling of both total insignificance and utter freedom. It largely explains my devotion to traveling in this country.

After the storm was over we proceeded to the canyon rim, which is composed of a series of terraces. While having lunch near the highest level, Dave saw a bear with a cub running toward us. When we all stood up and yelled, they turned away.

To ensure that we could complete our descent as quickly as possible the next day, we portaged to the lowest terrace before setting up camp. In the morning, we crashed our way down through the steep brushy terrain and reached the river before lunch. We stopped to camp after travelling some miles downriver. When we were getting organized, Wendy realized that her raincoat was missing. It had been tied to the back of her pack and had probably been grabbed by some of the thick brush we crashed through. Because the weather on the coast is notoriously unstable, we knew we had to outfit her with some protection from the elements. Using a spare plastic liner

from one of our Duluth packs, two stuff sacks, and some duct tape, we fashioned a serviceable though un-ightly raincoat

We traveled down the river, stopping to fish below Cabot Lake. The brook trout were ravenous, and we would often see several sizable trout following a hooked fish that was being reeled in.

Soon we came to the portage around the falls and proceeded to Voisey's Bay. As we paddled up to Nain we had a couple days of good weather on the Labrador Sea.

### Afterword

The land is shrinking. There is a lot of pressure for mineral development in northern Quebec. The Quebec government is implementing Plan Nord, with the aim of developing the natural resources north of the 49th parallel. As of 2015, the government plans to invest about \$2 billion for infrastructure for 17 mining projects over the next five years. The Strange Lake Camp next to Lac Brisson has been evaluating the mineral potential of the area. Substantial deposits of rare earth minerals have been found and there are on-again off-again plans to build a road from the camp down to the Labrador coast at Voisey's Bay.

Whether one sees this development



*North rim campsite.*



*Cabot Lake Pictures.*

mostly as a badly-needed source of jobs and wealth for the region or mourns the loss of a magnificent, pristine area, the area will be profoundly changed.

We feel incredibly lucky to have been able to travel in these wild areas before major development changes them forever. I find it hard to take the long view of the fishing guide I met on the QNS&L railroad a few years ago as we talked about the dam building commencing on the Rupert River. He said he didn't really feel the loss of the river too badly because "in 5000 years you probably won't be able to tell the dam was ever there."

Since my first trip to the area in 1992 I have paddled and portaged through other wild and beautiful areas of the Canadian north, but I still have a special fondness for the haunting beauty of the country around the Kogaluk River.

**About the Author:** For almost every summer during the last 35 years, Al Stirt and Wendy Scott have migrated north to Canada. They have traveled thousands of miles by canoe through the vast wilderness of Northern Quebec and Labrador. They consider themselves lucky to be able to travel in the footsteps of Naskapi and Inuit hunters who call this area home. They have a special fondness for the places where the taiga gives way to the barrens.



*The Taverner in Nain.*