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**August 17, 2006**  
**Day 78**

## **WE'RE GOING TO BE LATE**

Slept until 7:30 AM due to our exhaustion from yesterday. Unfortunately, the bugs hadn't disappeared. It was definitely a bug shirt morning when we all crowded onto the narrow trail whacked out of the willows. No one could find their gear. Everything was muddy and mixed up. Breakfast was balanced on the top of our canoe. In the midst of the mess, poor Anita was trying to wash dishes from last night. It was chaos, in the extreme. Mark's foot is oozing and not looking good.

The six inches of water in the swamp rushed by with a great current, around bushes and rocks. We loaded and pushed our boat into the current. David sat in the back of the canoe filtering water while the others loaded up. Sadly, the current ran off with the hose for the filter when it accidentally fell in the water. David's life jacket also rushed off downstream, but I swam after it in a brilliant rescue exercise. Once everyone was loaded, we carefully edged our way out of the willow swamp, around all the rock and out onto the river proper.

It felt so good to paddle again. I couldn't help wondering how long the paddling would last. Crossing the bay took three blissful minutes, then we stopped on the point to check out the next rapid. The news was good. David described to us all the eddies, rocks and currents to watch for. One by one, we paddled around the point with spray skirts tied around our armpits. All went well except for a couple pirouettes we did in some eddies.

We paddled across a huge bay and noticed a huge rapid or ledge stretching across the entire river with an island in the middle. The closer we pulled towards the right bank, the more obvious it became that we couldn't run this, or line it. Oh, dear. Mark and Michael inspected the situation and found no portage trail. Worse, still, this forest had burned years earlier than yesterday's bush bash, so everything was far more overgrown. Just to top it off, the rapid was long, just about as long as yesterday's. Help. David began to worry now that we could run several days late getting into Churchill, possibly even run out of food.

Nick suggested that we all get busy clearing a trail. It would be faster that way. Mark led the way, choosing the trail and throwing logs. Nick and David came behind with the hatchet, axe and saw—moving as much as possible. I came behind to clean up the mess, picking up the rotten logs, pulling out Labrador tea bushes, and so on. About an hour later, we had a darn good-looking trail albeit lumpy but clear and wide enough for our packs and canoes. We actually quite enjoyed the trail-building and sadly put down the tools in order to portage our gear. A really steep bank with room for only one canoe at a time finished the trail. We did an assembly line of people, loading one boat at a time. Michael isn't feeling very bright today so he laid down to rest while we loaded.

Once we were back in our canoes, we ran the last part of the rapid. Suddenly the scenery began to change. The rocks look different, built in layers, like dribbled sand, with grass growing on top, then scrubby bushes here and there with trees behind that. So beautiful! We paddled up to one of the most gorgeous, rocky shorelines to check out the next rapid. I held the boat off the rocks while David took Mark along for a second opinion. As I stood in the water, the wind began to blow hard, and we all got cold really fast. Out came toques, jackets and anything else that was handy.

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The news came back that we could line the first part, then portage around some bad “washing machine” action near the bottom. So, with wind howling and a storm approaching, we hopped from rocky point to more rocks, passing the canoe along the rapids. We are getting vastly better at this, thank goodness. Then we unloaded and portaged over a lovely grassy meadow, down to a flat, gently sloping rock. Now it was raining. What should have been a delightful portage became dismal.

Toad wasn't feeling the best and was up to her waist in water reloading their boat, so Mark could attempt to keep his foot dry. We paddled away through the last part of the rapid and scaped on a rock. The next rapid was paddleable, and the scenery was spectacular. A moose grazed on a grassy knoll on our right. So beautiful. We stopped for lunch just a short distance away. Discussion began as to whether or not we can make it to Churchill on time. The general consensus was, “no,” but maybe a day or two late. Our train doesn't leave Churchill until the 24<sup>th</sup> so, if we arrive on the 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup>, we'll be okay. Just no time for polar bear watching.

After lunch, we paddled past another moose on our left. It was a bull with huge antlers. We took pictures but really needed to be closer. Our floating speed now is between 7 and 10 kilometers an hour without paddling. Awesome! It is still quite chilly and, for a while we noticed strange tiny white particles in the air. The girls all swore up and down it was snow and the guys argued against. With just a few minor rapids, all went well for 30 kilometers. Then we arrived at Ballard Lake, a world-famous fishing spot.

The wind was playing havoc, so we paddled point-to-point along the left shore. A fishing camp came into view. There were several boats and three frame buildings that tarps can turn into an enclosed space. Probably a base camp for an outfitter. At about 8:30 PM, we pulled into a beach for a pee break and decided we liked it enough to camp. We were planning to stop at 9:00 anyway. Besides, it's nice to set-up camp and cook while it's still a little light. Nick and Jared stayed out fishing for a while but paddled in with the rain.

**August 18, 2006**  
**Day 79**

## **WHAT A MESS!!**

We woke early to a beautiful, sunny day but, boy, it was cold! By the time I had taken the tent down, my hands were almost numb from the cold. Mark was up early inspecting and redressing his foot. It is doing better this morning. If only he could keep it dry. Anita seems to have caught pink eye from Michael, so she's pretty miserable with that. Hopefully, some eye drops will help.

Today we were able to enjoy paddling off Ballard Lake and back onto the river. It just felt so good to paddle. At each break, we stripped off more layers of clothing. By lunch time, we had clocked 30 kilometers. We had about 6 kilometers before some rapids, so we chose a floating lunch to knock them off while we were eating. Then we'll be ready for the rapids, hopefully. While we quietly floated along, we saw our very first caribou. He was a beautiful specimen with a full rack just standing on shore, half napping and half watching the world go by.

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We pulled up on some huge, beautiful, flat rocks and found an awesome little trail along an old creek bed—one of my favorite portages yet. We paddled across the bay to the next rapid and found the situation didn't look so good. There was no good place to pull up. The bank went almost straight up, then into the scrub. Bracing ourselves for the worst, we unloaded in some bushes and hiked to the top of the bank. To our amazement, the landscape was really clear up there and we seemed to be on an old, forgotten portage trail. We did knock over a few dead trees that were in the way but, mostly, it was clear.

The next rapid, we lined around a corner, then we chose to run a small, steep chute. It was free of rocks but very wet looking. We ploughed through, one canoe at a time, each looking like a bucking horse going through the waves. Some of us caught two or three waves right in the face. By the end, we were all laughing hysterically. Still riding on a high from this success, we peered around the next corner.

The river was quite wide here and the current appeared slow enough that we could ferry across to the other side if need be. Mark and Anita headed out first cutting nice and high with their ferry. We followed shortly behind. I don't know why but I had an uneasy feeling heading into this ferry. Michael and Lauren were doing okay but hadn't cut quite high enough. All of us were being pulled rapidly down the river toward an awful-looking, thundering ledge. We immediately switched gears into power paddling—the kind of paddling you can only keep up for a short time. I looked behind me to see Nick and Jared get caught in a bad current and flip. They were headed straight for the big ledge.

Michael and Lauren were on our right, really struggling to pull out of the current. I had to just look straight ahead and focus because we were also battling it out. Mark and Anita had made it across, but Michael and Lauren were losing ground and ended up pulling into an eddy just slightly down stream. We made it, just barely. I was shaking a little from the exertion and felt sick about Nick and Jared. They had plummeted down something really bad and the rest of us weren't out of the woods yet ourselves.

We were on the edge of an island situated on the left side of the river. Crazy currents were rushing around both sides of the island. We waded and lined our way down the right side. It was very messy work with steep little waterfalls going down everywhere and we just couldn't concentrate on the job at hand. Lauren and Michael, who had made it to the bottom of the island, came to help and shortly we tied up our canoe half way down. David grabbed the binoculars and we bolted through the scrub down to where the green canoe was parked to try to locate our lost paddlers.

Soon we spotted the canoe and one person pulled up on shore at the bottom of the large ledge. It was Nick and he was bailing his canoe that looked to be still in one piece. He appeared to be distracted and concerned, as were we because there was no sign of Jared. Someone had seen Jared swimming away from the boat to the left before they went over the ledge, so we scanned the rest of the landscape. There was another, smaller rapid he might have gone over to the left and then a rocky little island. Beyond that was the big wide river heading off to the left. We couldn't see much of it.

Then David spotted Jared's paddle. It was standing straight up in the air, blade at the top, on the rocky little island. Jared is really strong and smart, so we took this as a good sign. He must have made it to the island and balanced his paddle upright so we could find him. Of Jared himself, there was no sign. Was he injured? Had he passed out? We were definitely in a mess. Our group was spread over three islands with rapids between us. I continued to pray very hard.

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We decided to have Michael and Lauren attempt to paddle over to Jared's island to see what the situation was and arranged a signing system. David and Mark, meanwhile, began lining our canoe down the island while I watched Nick, as well as Jared's paddle, through the binoculars. Nick had taken off into the scrub. Jared suddenly appeared next to his paddle. Thank goodness. He looked cold but fine. Michael and Lauren were really battling to cross several currents between us and the island where we had spotted Jared. They were slowly making progress. Eventually they made it to Jared and got him into warm clothes and gave him a snack to eat for some energy. Our canoe was now down the falls, over the ledge, and we were ready to head in Jared's direction.

As we reached Jared's island, Michael and Lauren were just pulling out with Jared lying on top of their boat. They went off to deliver Jared to Nick and his canoe. Jared looked fine but pretty wasted. Mark, Anita, David and I sat waiting, munching chocolate bars to calm our frazzled nerves and discussing why this whole mess had occurred. Was it a group error, or a personal error?

Soon enough, the other two canoes returned and we all paddled around the next corner and across a bay. Nick and Jared looked very happy to be alive and upright in their canoe. As we pulled up to the next rocky point, it was obviously a portage. We pulled out and pitched camp right there on the rocks. We needed to stop for the day to digest the latest incident and just calm down.

Apparently Nick and Jared had been really tumbled around in the rapid, barely able to grab a breath of air before being tossed around again. Both of them had about died of fright when they saw the ledge they were about to go over but neither had been hurt. Both were completely exhausted and quite shaken after swimming through the currents to reach shore. We really had a lot for which to be thankful.

Mark made delicious gado gado for supper. As we sat on the rocks watching the sunset and reflecting on the day's events, we heard a squeaking sound coming from the top of the rapid. A young otter came swimming down this crazy rapid right around the rocks we sat on. He was doing very well but, from the sounds he made, was definitely in distress. Then we heard more squeaks coming from the other side of the river. There on a rock, on the far side of the river, were four more otters. The young one coming down by himself was obviously wanting to cross to the rest of his family but the current took him right by us and down the right side of the river. We could hear him calling for a long time as he was carried down the river. The rest of the family of otters stayed near the rock, calling occasionally, but not heading downstream.

It was ironic to see this animal family in the same situation we had been in earlier. I wondered where they were off to. Were they visiting family or friends downriver, or were they on a big trip like us. Poor little otter. I hope he makes it back to his family.

Apparently there were good northern lights tonight, all night long, but I slept like a log.

**August 19, 2006**

**Day 80**

**TOTAL CRAZINESS**

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As I went to the bathroom this morning, I could hear the squeaking of an otter just a few bushes away. The rest of the otters apparently camped right across the river from us because they were enjoying an early morning swim in the same place they were last night. I guess the little one spent the night traveling overland back up the river and is probably waiting for us to paddle off before reuniting with his family. Well, that's my take on it anyway!

It took us awhile to decide on the best way off this point—portage, line or run it. We ended up carefully paddling out and around the corner. It was quite technical for so early in the morning. If we had known the river, or had adequate information, we would have, at this point, headed straight down the center for a wet but safe ride. But, as usual, we were running this river blindly, so pulled up on the right shore to check things out.

We ended up doing a short but awful portage. The bugs were horrific, and we just bashed our way through the mostly dead scrub and over logs. David and I were pulled up further away than everyone else, so they were all done way before us. Then I got terribly lost while leading David as he carried the canoe. Ugh!

It was blessed relief to paddle through the next set of rapids and then a couple kilometers of calm water. What bliss. Soon we came to a huge ledge stretching the entire width of the river, with an island in the middle. We pulled up on the left shore. David and Toad went to investigate. They were gone quite a while so Mark, Nick and I dug out David's maps to study what lay ahead. I knew that David wanted to get all the way to where the Little Churchill River joins this river by tonight. Oh, dear! Between here and there was Mountain Rapids and The fours. It looked long and hard.

David and Toad returned with the news that we had quite a wildly awesome portage to do here. It consisted of hiking up a mountain, across a ridge and back down. Wow. I didn't know portages could get anymore crazy! We quickly lined around to a good area for unloading while Mark began clearing a trail for us. The first part went through logs and trees, then the landscape felt and looked like Arizona including a dirt, scrubby mountain that went straight up! Once at the top, we hiked along the ridge and enjoyed a lovely, cool breeze and the most spectacular view. We could see the wild, wild country all around us, for miles, it was incredible, totally untouched wilderness. Down the other side of the mountain we went, to dump our gear and repeat the process. Actually, I loved this portage. The best part was jumping in the water when we had finished to cool off. We sat on the rocks and ate lunch while staring across the bay to the next rapid . . . wondering our plight.

Well, we paddled across to the next rapid and found a tiny little unloading bay for our canoes. A huge, flat, sloping rock going up to the \_\_\_\_\_ and a tiny channel of water pouring out of the back of the bay down what would make an awesome waterslide. I just can't get over what picture book scenery it is. It's the type of rocks and trees they try to imitate in places like Disney World and other theme parks. But this is for real.

David and Michael were taking a long time investigating this one. Oh, dear. Sure enough, when they returned, David was looking quite defeated and forlorn. Apparently this portage would be close to impossible but we had to do it. I couldn't believe my ears. Impossible? I thought we had done that already!. Michael, Mark and team left with the usual tools, then returned shortly with, "Are you sure this is the best way?" Unfortunately, it was. After carting my first load over to the trailhead, all I could do was stand there staring and shaking my head. It was a total log jam as far as I could see. It would be tricky to navigate without a load, impossible while carrying a load. Everyone was out there chopping and sawing away, even Anita was doing her best to move the forest.

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David and I sat down on a rock. Poor David was beginning to despair. This stupid portage may take the rest of the day and we are seriously running out of time. If we can't make it in time for the train on August 24, then Mark is in serious trouble. If we fly him out, then we have to fly Anita out as well. Then, what would we do with their canoe? David felt that if we lost two people, he wouldn't want to finish without them. Well, I thought, only sheer determination will get us through this now so let's go and get another load, and we did.

By the time we had carried all the gear to the trail head, amazing progress had been made by our dear lumber-jacks. We could begin to carry loads through part way. It was still the most technical and treacherous portage ever, but it wasn't impossible. Most of us fell many times as we were attempting to balance on logs, stepping on logs that broke, and so on. Somehow, in a couple hours, we were back in our canoes on the other side. WOW!

From there, we paddled across another bay and lined around a very exciting corner. We had to climb way up onto some high rocks while holding the canoe ropes and running fast in order to keep up with our boats. Anita had rather an exciting swim near the end as she was quite determined not to let go of her rope. Her canoe suddenly shot down a rapid and took Anita along, then she got completely spun around. It was just so funny at the time and we all laughed long and hard. A much needed release of all the tension we had been feeling.

Two more tiny, easy portages through absolutely breath-taking scenery brought us near a large, grassy meadow. We headed over there to camp and it actually turned out to be very rocky, ankle-breaking tundra. We'll be portaging across it tomorrow morning. Mark and Michael took their canoes over the portage tonight while supper was being cooked. As we ate, the most amazing northern lights ever appeared. They just went on and on, forever, all over the sky, reminding us that all will be okay in the end.

*(I think this journal entry will need some help from Naomi and David. Words were crossed out but the changes not entered; hence the underlined blank. The description in Paragraph 3 isn't quite as clear as it could be. David could add more of what he was feeling.)*

**August 20, 2006**

**Day 81**

## **WILD, WET, RIDE THROUGH THE FOURS**

If it takes us all day today to get through The Fours like it took all of yesterday to get through Mountain Rapids, then we are in serious trouble. However, first things first, and that is this morning's very long portage across the tundra. After Mark returned from his carry last night, he declared it to be the worst portage yet. I figured he was joking for sure. Surely, it can't be worse than yesterday's "worst ever." I found out this morning that he was deadly serious.

It is true that we didn't need to move any trees or logs. There were none. The tundra here consists of rocks covered in moss and blueberry bushes. Basically, it was the perfect recipe for injury. I named it the "Ankle-Breaking Portage." I fearfully left on the first trip with David and, boy, it was quite the trip. Because of all the bushes and shrubbery, you couldn't see where a good foothold was. Sometimes there was nothing there and you would sink in up to your waist. We zigzagged across the landscape trying to find the best way through and eventually reached the water.

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I was absolutely dreading our second trip, but it had to be done. Using a paddle as a walking stick helped, but the portage was still unnerving. David was following me on the second trip as he was carrying a canoe on his head but, somehow, we got separated. He was way off to the left and I, meanwhile, had definitely ended up in the wrong place, and found myself up to my waist in blueberry bushes. Then I was in up to my chest and, finally, to my neck. It was so terribly depressing and I couldn't seem to find a way out. The only advantage was that the bushes held me upright. Feeling very alone and lost, I stumbled along in the hope I wouldn't fall and certain I could never be found in the tundra if I did fall.

Back on the water again, our goal is to make it to the Little Churchill River confluence. It's a long ways from here with The Fours in our way. But first we had 14 kilometers of lovely paddling. I spent the entire time praying flat out that we would make it through The Fours in good time. We flew through two prerapids and then a big prerapid. No problem.

We arrived at Number 1, and David jumped out to check. Good news! It was runnable! It was definitely an exciting ride with one scare when Michael and Lauren went over the last part sideways. But we made it. Number 1 down. Number 2 didn't look too bad and, if it had been a sunny day, we might have tried to run it. Instead, we ran most of it and portaged the last 12 meters. Two down! Soon we came to Number 3 and again the news came back that it was runnable. However, as David put it, "Definite spray skirt advisory." Oh! This sounded exciting. After pulling our spray skirts up around our armpits, we ripped around a sharp left corner and down an exciting set of waves past a huge rock. We were all dumped on royally by a big wave. Toad was plastered, Lauren was saturated. Oh, it was fun. *(Not sure here what the word should be for what happened to Toad—might be something other than "plastered.")*

All of us had to bail after that one, so we pulled over for the bailing and had lunch while we were at it. Three out of four down. Things were definitely looking up.

As we paddled straight across the river towards Number 4, we hoped for the best. Carefully we tucked around a few points, then had to get out to portage around the worst of it. It didn't take long. All that was left was a messy section with an island on the right side of it. The Michael and Lauren and Mark and Anita went first. Those of us watching didn't like the look of it at all. We chose to paddle out around the island. It was a good choice as it cut out half of the mess. A duck family playing in the waves encouraged me as we pulled into the mess and then we were out and home free.

We had done it. The Fours were over and actually it had been a real blast. Now we had a lovely stretch of calm water to enjoy except that our friend, the headwind, was back. Battling the wind, we carried on and saw a moose and calf followed by a sighting of a large, white bird in the distance that looked like a swan. I didn't learn until later that there is a huge bird called the tundra swan that nests in this area.

Seven kilometers later, we came to another rapid marked on the map. It didn't have a name, so we were hoping so badly to just breeze on by. It was raining again and quite cold. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a decent rapid that needed much care. Out we hopped to do some tricky lining around the first part. When we could go no further, we unloaded the canoes. The brush and willows were thick but, way back in there, David found another old, forgotten trail that just barely existed. Some of us were feeling super tired and cold. We were pretty wet by now and I'm sure we all felt like just packing it in for the day, longing to crawl inside warm sleeping bags. The trail wasn't just narrow. It was really narrow and it took force to charge through with our gear. Actually, it was such

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good exercise that after one trip through we all felt warmer and happier. Solution for hypothermia: Pick up a canoe and charge through the scrub.

We ran the rest of the rapid but it took all our wits and energy—ferrying back and forth across the river dodging rocks and rapids. It was super hard work so late in the day. All Anita and I could do was laugh because our arms were completely dead—just no strength left and, oh, here comes another ferry.

Out the other side of the unnamed rapid we paddled until it was too dark to see anything. This area was just no good for camping at all and several places we pulled up to were hopeless. Spying a grassy spot on the right, we ferried across to take a look. Anita and I jumped out to investigate and found it to be a swamp. Oh, dear. But as we wandered around some more, we found a small, drier section on higher ground. Maybe it would work? Michael, meanwhile, had found a really good spot way up the slope so I headed up there to pitch our tent. Anita went to help Mark unload. She suddenly felt really cold and began shivering uncontrollably. David didn't like the look of her at all so Jared brought her up to where I was to help get warm clothes on her. This spot is quite muddy. I'll never forget trying to help Anita dig in her bag, strip off all her wet clothes and put dry ones on in the dark, the cold and the mud.

We ended up camping down at the first place. Anita crawled in her sleeping bag and began to warm up while Mark made hot apple cider for everyone. *Zzzzzzzzzz.*

**August 22, 2006**  
**Day 83**

## **SWIMMING DOWN THE CHURCHILL**

This morning I was able to sleep in a bit while the ferrying of gear across the river happened. It made all the difference in the world. Poor David was tired as he diligently got up with the ferrying people. His back was also bothering him. David's breakfast was still spread on the deck of the canoe in front of him as we paddled off.

Mark and Anita were waiting for us just down the river, on the left, after the first rapids. We pulled into the eddy where they waited and heard all about an amazing moose-sighting they had just experienced. Anita had been sleeping on a rock and Mark was standing close-by when a mother moose and her baby came out of the forest right next to them. Both Mark and Anita were wearing bug shirts so, at first, the moose didn't notice them. The pair walked down to the river, drank, then hung around for several minutes before retreating back into the forest. Anita was ecstatic at being so close but feel that moose really should have tails!

After yesterday's scare and a thorough study of the river in front of us, we prayed hard for protection, then pulled out. The plan was for all of us to ferry across to the other side of the river where the rapids weren't so bad. We were now beginning the long, continuous stretch of rapids that David has been worrying about the entire trip. Basically, it looked like another rock-dodging game similar to yesterday except there were way more rocks, faster current and a few ledges thrown in for good measure. **(Need the name of this rapid!)**

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As we paddled into the furious water, it took all of our senses and then some to navigate around each obstacle. The sunshine today is wonderful, but the glare isn't helping at all. On our left, Nick and Jared almost got sucked under by a rock—a close call, but they escaped upright. The next time we looked behind us, we could see that Michael and Lauren hadn't been as fortunate. Their canoe was upside down and they appeared to be stranded on a rock momentarily. We found out later that Nick and Jared ended up floating right past them and helped to get the canoe upright, paddles strapped back on top and passed over their bailer before they were swept away.

There was nothing David and I could do as we were down river from them and having plenty to deal with ourselves. There were rocks everywhere. Whenever we headed for what looked like a clean "V" it was usually another rock. We basically had to hang on tight and plough through absolutely huge waves that threatened to swamp us. Gradually we made it across and came ashore where Mark and Anita already had landed, so we could bail out our canoe. We wondered what had happened to Michael and Lauren and were hoping they weren't freezing to death in the cold water. We couldn't see them anywhere with our binoculars so figured they must have floated around the corner and out of sight.

We pulled back into the river to continue down the right shore but it was pretty wild water. Mark and Anita managed to pull out a little further and bounced their way through but we were hesitant. We hugged the right shore, wading and lining, then portaging over a short, rocky ledge. The bugs did their best to reach swarm levels as we hauled out gear over the slippery rocks. We could see four people in the distance waiting for us on a rock and we wondered whether Michael and Lauren were among them.

They weren't there. Again we scanned the opposite shore for a glimpse of a green canoe. Unfortunately, the left side of the river is a sheer, fifteen meter high cliff for as far as you can see with very little opportunity to get out except clinging to the side of the cliff. Our party of three canoes inched its way further down the right side aiming for the next point where, hopefully, we could see further down the left shore.

This time, after quite a bit of scanning, David just barely made out the green canoe up against the cliff edge. He could also see Michael and Lauren both standing up. It would have been better for them to come to our side of the river to join us but, at 800 meters distance, it was impossible to communicate that. Our three canoes headed through some more rapids and managed to cross the river through some reasonably calm water and pulled into an eddy just below Michael and Lauren's canoe. What a relief to be together again!

Apparently they had tried to bail while hanging onto the sides of their canoe but each rapid filled it up again. In the end, they had climbed onto the gunnels and found it a little warmer than being in the water. Paddling the boat completely swamped, they discovered it was more effective than swimming beside it trying to pull the canoe toward shore. Each time they had tried to pull over to the shore, the current swept them along over more rapids and ledges. When they eventually made ashore, it was 7 kilometers down river from the spot where they flipped. It had taken all of approximately fifteen minutes. Although they were shivering badly from the cold at this point, they managed to strip off their wet clothes. Then they stood against the warm rocks of the cliff edge and baked in the sun. Thank goodness they had a beautiful, sunny day for this adventure or hypothermia could have effected them more.

Now that the emergency was passed, we suddenly became very aware of the magnificent scenery. It was just mind-boggling. From that point, the left side of the river looked fairly clear, until we came

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to another ledge. Oh, dear! Portaging up the side of the rock face was not an option. We grabbed a log sticking out of the water and watched while Mark and Anita headed more towards the center of the river where it looked calmer. Apparently once they had a good look, it looked bad so they retreated back into an eddy. They sat there for quite a while deliberating and also trying to get out of the crazy eddy they were now stuck in.

All of a sudden they popped out of the eddy and headed straight down the middle of the rapid. This is what Mark has referred to before as the “point your boat and pray” technique. The six of us watched, absolutely awestruck, as Mark and Anita experienced the ride of their lives. We couldn’t see a lot from our vantage point but what we did see was Mark’s white hat bucking way up into the air, then down again, out of sight. Then the hat would soar way up into the air again as they dropped down yet another ledge. What they were doing was unbelievable. All we could do was hold our breath. Eventually we could see them at the bottom and they were still upright!! “Absolutely **inconceivable**,” we thought. “They are heroes, indeed.”

Well, there was no way we were trying the same stunt so we just kept creeping around corners with just barely enough room between the rock wall and us. Around the last corner, we whistled down a windy, steep, exciting section, just missing a great, canoe-bending rock, and popping out at the bottom. It was a really fun ride with just enough room for the canoe.

Having experienced more than enough excitement for one day, we stopped for a well-deserved lunch break. There was time to dry out and calm our frazzled nerves. Anita was beaming ear-to-ear as she thought the rapid was a “hoot” while poor Mark was looking slightly pale and feeling stupid for trying to run it. We all worshipped the ground they walked on, and enjoyed sunning and lunching.

After lunch, we still had Kilnabad Rapids to go through but they weren’t really terrible. We did opt to portage around one series of short ledges, then the worst was over. The rock face was now on the opposite side of the river. The sky was blue, the water was calm, and there was no wind. Let me repeat, . . . NO WIND!!

Now we could really enjoy watching the scenery and work toward clocking many kilometers. We realized that we probably wouldn’t make it to where we wanted to be tonight as it was another 40 kilometers at the very least. David really wanted to be on the other side of the last three rapids so that tomorrow would be an easy day paddling into Churchill. Instead of following his original plan, we aimed to camp at the first rapid which leaves 80 kilometers for tomorrow.

As evening arrived, the real tundra began in full force with long sections of flat, green and red rocky ground. We ended up camping on the tundra just at sunset—just before the first rapid. It was decided that we may as well try them in the morning when we’re fresh. Michael and Lauren are a little exhausted after their ordeal today.

While setting up camp, Michael and Lauren discovered that their sleeping bags were saturated from tipping over. Oh, dear, and it was turning into the coldest night yet. Anita very generously offered her bag which meant the three people in her tent snuggled even closer together under two bags zipped together. As I found a place to go toilet before bed, I couldn’t help wondering whether there were any polar bears nearby!

**August 23, 2006**  
**Day 84**

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## **THE FANTASTIC ARRIVAL INTO CHURCHILL**

It wasn't the early, 5:00 AM, start that killed me this morning. It was the cold. I had been pretty cold all night. When we woke up, my feet were still chilly. Our last morning had brought a heavy frost for the first time and, to my horror, my shoes were frozen solid. Ahh! There was no way I was putting my cold feet into frozen shoes so I pulled on my last pair of dry socks and wore Tevas. Perhaps they were not the warmest foot gear for, by the time the frozen tent was packed up, my toes and fingers were numb!

Anita very kindly gave me two pairs of socks which I put on inside my swellies. After breakfast, I was very motivated to wash all our dishes in really hot water so that my feet could go in the hot dish water when the dishes were done. Once all my toes came back to life, I was very happy to be alive and ready to begin the day. With three rapids to get through this morning (Red Head, Running Landing Place, Limestone), we were more than anxious. We really wanted to arrive in Churchill today. With 85 kilometers to go, including the three rapids, who knows whether we will make it.

Two kilometers from camp we paddled through some prerapids—nothing to worry about. We could hear Red Head Rapids but couldn't quite see them around the corner. Carefully we back-paddled, slowly, around the corner. Everything looked fine. Around the next corner and we were out of the rapid. No problem at all! The next rapid was just as easy. David kept checking the map in case we were actually lost and possibly hadn't even reached the rapids yet but, apparently, we were right. Wow. Two down!

Meanwhile we were continuing to drop elevation like crazy. You could feel the river going down like an elevator—a strange feeling. The scenery was turning into more tundra, more bush, and then we hit the third rapid. Again, it was not bad—just lots of fun, with rolling waves and a crazy, steep descent where I think we lost the rest of our elevation. There was much celebration after this as we ripped off our spray skirts, put camera cases back on the canoe deck and prepared to enjoy an easy float to Churchill. We hadn't even had to get out of our canoes once, nor did we bite fingernails in fear. By now we had stripped off most of the extra clothing we had layered on this morning. It was turning into a gorgeous, sunny day.

As we paddled along, there was no wind at all. It was totally calm with a bright, blue sky. What a glorious day for finishing our trip. I was on top of the world. We started placing bets as to when we would see the first seals, beluga whales and polar bears. With no idea when we might see what, I guessed we might see seals 10 kilometers from town, whales at 5 kilometers and bears at one kilometer. While we paddled, David turned on the GPS to see how fast we were going—14.5 kilometers an hour! For fun, we paddled at top speed and clocked 16.8 kilometers. Goodness, this river is still going down!

By lunch time, we had covered 45 kilometers. The river had widened out with lots of bushy islands. The tundra swans were flying again but they are shy and we never see them up close. They are such huge, white birds. While we ate, we were each blessed with a huge cloud of black flies buzzing around our heads. The bugs have finally reached “cloud” proportions here in Manitoba.

Paddling out of this open area the river was quite shallow and we bumped a couple rocks here and there. An hour or so later, we could just barely see Churchill in the distance. This was it. We were

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really, actually going to arrive TODAY! We paddled past the airport, then we headed for a huge boat dock we could see in the distance.

David explained later that because the arctic air is so clear, everything looks much closer than it actually is. It took us the rest of the day to reach that dock. From a distance, we couldn't see where the water emptied into the Hudson Bay. All that we could see was a very thin line of land joining the two sides of the river. Twenty-five kilometers to go.

I'm sure we each spent the next little while trying desperately to come to terms with the fact the trip was about to end. We had been anticipating this moment for three, long months but now it was all ending too fast. As we came closer, I dug out the binoculars and scanned the town. With 15 kilometers still to go, we could see train carriages, a church steeple and lots of houses. Next we came to a big orange sign that said: "Danger! Open Dam!" Oh, dear. We hadn't seen anything on the map about a dam and certainly didn't want to be sucked over one.

A helicopter began buzzing around over the water and landed on what looked like a large rock quite a distance from us. We didn't realize it yet but the chopper had landed on the dam which stretched the entire two kilometer width of the river. Thankfully there were more orange signs to warn us. We paddled all the way to the left side to portage around. However, on arrival it didn't look like the most direct way back to the main flow of water. We paddled back 200 meters or so and chose a high, rocky part of the dam to climb over.

As far as I was concerned, we were very much finished with portages for this trip. Why did they build this dam anyway? A welcoming party arrived to encourage us. Two seals had swum over to watch us reload our boats for the last time. They were very curious and watched us for quite some time.

Because of this latest escapade, we were still quite a distance from town and on the wrong side of the river. A wind had also begun to blow so we would be fighting a side wind and a very strong current funneling off the dam. We carefully dodged more rocks, then began ferrying across the river—the longest ferry of our lives, I'm sure! Once we were through the worst of the current, we started watching for whales. I thought I saw a blow of spray way out in the middle but probably not.

The closer we came to the right shoreline, the more rocks there were to dodge. It was a veritable minefield. Then I saw another spray of water in the distance. This time I was sure it was a whale. In fact, there were lots of sprays, two or three at a time. Now we had a dilemma on our hands. We desperately wanted to paddle with the whales, but they were quite a distance from us. It would mean losing some ground against the current and the wind, ground we had worked hard to gain. The swells were not improving. In fact, they were definitely worsening. We really should stay closer to shore. Hmmm.

The whales seemed to sense our plight for they drifted a little closer. Eventually, we compromised and allowed the current to take us a little closer to them. In no time at all, we could see their white backs and heads clearly, then one whale circled around in front of us about seven meters away. Wow, oh, wow. Feeling elated, we paddled back towards shore, and I began checking through the binoculars for a suitable landing place. I spied a beach near a church steeple.

We tried to head for the beach but that was far easier said than done! The beach never seemed to get any closer, and the current kept pulling us towards the ocean. Then, to our delight, we could see whale spouts between us and the shore, which was still a good two or three kilometers away. How awesome. This time we ended up right in the thick of them. Backs were popping up all around us,

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six or seven at a time. Squeals of delight came from each canoe as the whales breached closer and closer to us. It was impossible to see them all at once. Some were gray. Later we learned that these were the babies.

We left that group of whales behind us but could see a few more in front of us. At least we **thought** we had left them behind. Actually, we each had a whale or two following just a few feet behind each canoe. Whenever we stopped, they were all around us again. I guess they thought we were jolly good fun, and we were just as delighted. So the whales took us most of the way to the beach. We felt very blessed to have such escorts.

Finally, we could see a utility truck and some guy watching us come in. Suddenly it hit me. This is it, we're going to make it. This is our final, long-awaited destination.

We had briefed Jared earlier in performing the voyager's salute. This definitely seemed to be a good occasion to perform the salute for our one member audience. We were closing the gap with all four canoes lined up beautifully in a row and, in a flash, we hit the sand before we could perform the salute. For a moment we were speechless. Then Anita and I jumped out of our canoes yelling and screaming and bouncing up and down. We flew towards each other for a congratulatory hug but we were running so fast that our life jackets caused us to bounce off each other and we both landed in a rolling heap on the sand. Both of us were giggling and crying at the same time. It was an overwhelming moment.

We greeted the guy standing there next to his truck. He must have thought we were quite strange. He asked where we had paddled from and looked wide-eyed when we told him. He directed us around to the next beach, closer to town. The sun was beginning to set, so we scrambled ashore and climbed onto a huge rock for a group picture in the beautiful lighting while holding our Northwest Company flag.

Almost immediately various people began stopping by to see if we needed help. Within an hour, our gear was unloaded and carted off, along with ourselves, to the cheapest motel in town. Nick and I rode in the back of a truck, sitting on top of all the gear, waving to everyone in town. It was a happy moment.

The Bear County Inn is owned by Michelle and Shelton. It is a very lovely place that felt like home. They helped us in every way imaginable and even gave us an extra room for our gear. We ordered seven pizzas, showered, then crashed into a real bed! Wow.

## **THE END**

### **SUMMARY AND AFTERTHOUGHTS**

<b>TOTAL KILOMETERS:</b>	3038 kilometers in 84 days
<b>TOTAL PORTAGES:</b>	59 (3 in June, 26 in July, 25 in August)
<b>RIVERS TRAVELED:</b>	Athabasca La Biche (up stream) Beaver

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Churchill

**TOTAL PLANNED DAYS OFF:** June 10, 17, 24, July 3, August 4 (1/2 day)

**TOTAL REPAIR DAYS OFF:** July 4, 5, 6

**TOTAL WIND DAYS OFF:** July 11, August 5 (1/2 day), August 9, 10, 14

**TOTAL DAYS OFF:** 12

**TOTAL TIPPINGS:**

Red canoe (David and Naomi):	2
Banana Split (Mark and Anita):	1
Banana Peel (Nick/Tami/Jared):	2
Green Machine (Michael and Lauren):	3

**LEAST MILEAGE IN ONE DAY:** 1.5 kilometers on July 11

**MOST MILEAGE IN ONE DAY:**

With Current:	83 kilometers on August 23
Without Current:	60 kilometers on July 31

**LOST TO THE RIVER:**

4 sun glasses	1 bear spray
2 regular glasses	3 paddles
4 hats	1 watch
4 water bottles	1 pair water shoes
1 battery charger	2 hoops
5 bowls	6 spoons
4 bailers	7 sponges