



Introduction

Northern Saskatchewan ranks among the world's great canoeing destinations. Famous rivers such as the Churchill, Clearwater, Cree, Fond du Lac, and Sturgeon-weir flow through a vast forested land of 100,000 lakes. Paddling in Saskatchewan is to follow in the wake of voyageurs with fur-laden birchbark canoes, aboriginal artists who painted mystical images on riverside cliffs, and a who's who of northern exploration: Alexander Mackenzie, David Thompson, Peter Fidler, John Franklin, Samuel Hearne, the list goes on. We can paddle to the secluded log cabin where Canada's foremost naturalist, Grey Owl, was inspired to write his bestselling books and proclaim his message of conservation to the world. It's all here—a compelling history, jaw-dropping scenery, plenty of adrenaline-pumping whitewater, and tranquility to soothe the soul.

While Saskatchewan is often called a prairie province, boreal forest covers more area than prairie. Two hundred years ago, we were focused on the north where settlements took hold in the wake of the fur trade, northern

exploration, and missionary work. The oldest continuously occupied settlement in the province is Cumberland House, founded in 1774 by Samuel Hearne at the strategic junction of the Saskatchewan and Sturgeon-weir river systems. To find the province's oldest surviving building, we head north to Stanley Mission, where Holy Trinity Anglican Church was built between 1854 and 1860 on the shores of the Churchill River. When newcomers first arrived in what is now Saskatchewan, they came to the north, and they came by canoe.

While the canoe has a rich history, it is just as much about the here and now. Unlike early forms of transport that faded into obscurity, the canoe has endured, a proven technology that remains the only practical way to travel many of our waterways. A big fancy motorboat just won't cut it on a remote northern river riddled with shallow rapids, rock gardens, and waterfalls.

Canoeing is also a philosophy of travel: moving slowly and gently through the landscape, disturbing little, while absorbing the sights, sounds, and smells around us. Canoeing is drifting by a feeding moose, floating silently beneath an eagle's nest, or watching otters at play. It's finding that perfect campsite at day's end where we watch the crimson sun dip into a quiet lake, while freshly caught fish sizzles over a crackling fire, and the soothing ripple of rapids is broken by the haunting call of a loon. Well...perhaps we should also add the drone of a few million mosquitoes.

Saskatchewan's special appeal lies not only in its great rivers, but also in the way that so many of our waterways interconnect, with tributaries, creeks, and lakes galore offering mind-boggling possibilities. It's where we can portage across a height of land into a new watershed with new adventures, combine rivers and lakes into a personally customized route, or discover secret hideaways.

Most important, northern Saskatchewan is still blessed with large tracts of pristine wilderness, although wild places are disappearing at a frightening rate. When we first started wandering northern waterways, we realized that seeing this immense country could take a lifetime. No great rush to do it all at once; if we didn't get around to paddling a particular river, there would always be next year or the year after. Today, we sense a greater urgency. The sentiment we hear more and more from those just beginning to discover the wonders of the north is, "How much of the wilderness will we be able to experience before it's gone?"

Besides natural beauty, Saskatchewan's north has timber-rich forests, oilsands, gold and other minerals, and the largest uranium reserves on Earth. Pressures continue for hydro development. Roads keep stretching their tentacles farther into the wilderness. With few exceptions, most waterways in this book lack formal protection; they're subject to

OPPOSITE: *Steepbank Lake, Clarence-Steepbank Lakes Provincial Wilderness Park.*
ABOVE: *Rapids, Clearwater River.*



competing interests in a resource rich part of the country. Unlike most parts of the world that have already allowed their wild places to slip away, Saskatchewan still has time to save one of the last great wilderness areas. But is there enough political will to give wilderness a prominent place in our future?

We need wilderness—for a lot of reasons. Scientists remind us of the crucial role the boreal forest plays in producing oxygen, removing carbon dioxide, moderating our climate, and maintaining the tremendous diversity of plant and animal life. An intact ecosystem is essential for northerners wanting to continue a traditional way of life, and for the economic viability of businesses such as canoe outfitting, sports fishing, or ecotourism.

The educational value of wilderness is simply priceless. But when we paddle through the dramatic canyons of the Clearwater River, stand atop Athabasca's giant dunes, or gaze over awe-inspiring Hunt Falls, we sense an importance well beyond science or economics. These are places where we can connect to the natural world, wonder at nature's mysteries, and find spiritual renewal. As Grey Owl reminds us, "You belong to nature, not it to you."