

# PADDLING THE FLOODED FOREST



## THE LOWER SAINT JOHN RIVER

The Saint John River begins its journey lost in the remote forests of northern Maine, where it is the quintessential wilderness river familiar to many East Coast canoeists - fast, narrow and strewn with boulders. However, soon after it crosses the border into New Brunswick, the Saint John widens and lags and by the time it reaches Fredericton, over a hundred miles later, it has become a maze of intertwining channels capturing low-lying islands and creeping onto an expansive flood plain. In the summer its current creeps along, and paddling progress is influenced more by the winds, which usually blow up the valley from the bay.

The river empties into the Bay of Fundy at the city of Saint John where, during the ebb tide, it flows unobstructed into the ocean. Near its mouth the turbulent Reversing Falls are popular with whitewater kayakers who have the skill - and nostrils - to stomach the odours from the huge pulp mill overlooking the gorge. During the flood a surge of seawater backs the river up 80 kilometres and a tidal range can be observed almost as far as Gagetown.

This is the largest river in the Maritime Provinces and it is navigable past Fredericton to

Maқтаquaq, where a hydroelectric dam blocks boats and the salmon that once blessed the waterway. It was the main transportation route for the Natives and the early European settlers, whose large paddle-wheel steamers plied the river until the early 1900's. Today it is the realm of the pleasure boater and the cottage crowd seeking to escape the Fundy, with its incessant fog and treacherous currents. It is also a great route for the canoeist and kayaker.

My favourite time to come here with my kayak is during the springtime, when a raw Atlantic is scarcely warmer than the Arctic. I prefer the section between Burton and Hampstead, where the the Freshet, the local term denoting the spring melt, invades the flood plains (and sometimes even the TransCanada Highway), opening up a tangle of tree trunks and canals - an environment that is unique in Canada and is reminiscent of the mangrove swamps of the southern United States.

The rising river carves the banks and inundates the islands, depositing mud and silt to nourish a particularly rich native flora. There is rarely a rock to be found, a far cry from the rugged terrain of my own Eastern Shore. Exotic (for me, anyway) specimens of bloodroot, skunk cabbage, lady slipper and a variety of lilies put on quite a show. Fiddleheads, those delectable young sprouts of the Ostrich Fern, poke up through the water along the river banks, the first sight of green in an otherwise dull decor of muted colours. Barren tree branches sound a cacophony of warblers, pausing on their way to their nesting grounds further north. The woodpeckers can be heard (and often seen) tapping into widespread deadwood. This is one of the best times for birding, before the unfolding foliage obscures the view. Osprey also set up home on the bleached trunks of the dead American elms that once lined this valley (and elsewhere in North America) before they were decimated by Dutch elm disease.



In early spring there are few other boaters out on the river and most of the sail and motor craft still lay in their cradles along the shore. But you won't be totally alone either. Shad fishermen will tend their nets out in the main channels and the eel traps are set in the small fingers of water that curl into the flooded forest. Eel fishing can be quite a lucrative venture. You may encounter a small barge transporting cattle back to the islands, for another summer of fattening without the need of fences. And at several points along the river, ferries carry cars across.

There are no people living on the river islands today, but fences, stone walls and even forlorn homesteads tell a tale of a much different past. In the middle of Gagetown Island, on the shores the Creek which almost slices the island in half, you will find a mysterious stone house of unknown origin, perhaps dating back to the French era. It lies underneath the only hill on any of the islands, an idyllic spot, hidden from the mainland where majestic maples, oaks, ashes reach into the breezes. It is even beyond the sounds of traffic on the adjoining mainland which occasionally can interrupt the otherworldly tranquility of this waterworld.

Paddlers seeking the pristine might want to avoid the Saint John River during the height of summer, but when October again chills the coastal world, and the motor boats are in hibernation, consider another visit. The huge maples will put on a spectacular colour show. Camp on the islands, uninhabited except for the cattle, or stay a relic from the days of the paddle steamer. The Steamerstop Inn has been renovated and you can paddle right up to the back door.

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