

RAINY LAKE CONSERVANCY



Preserving the Rainy Lake Watershed

A Rainy Lake Reflection

School in a Railroad Car by Ed McLeod

I started school in 1942 when I was just short of six years. School was a converted rail coach. Ours was #4. Part of the car was teacher's accommodations and part was the school with different size desks. The car had five stops, including Crilly and Kawene east of Atikokan. Our stop was Rocky Inlet. The school car would stay in one place Monday through Friday while the teacher gave the students their lessons. Then the teacher would give us homework to carry us over for four weeks while he was away teaching at the other four stops. They would move the school car on the weekends.

My first teacher was Mr. Henry Antoniak. He had a wife and a daughter. Then we had Mr. James Chalmers. He also had a wife and a daughter. The school car had quite a few books, National Geographics, and references for different subjects



School car, Mr. Antoniak and family, and students, circa 1946, Ed McLeod in the center

but no music books. It had a blackboard of course. We were taught writing, arithmetic, grammar, social studies, history, and science.

There were about 12 students. Only one girl didn't come from a family of commercial fishermen. Six of the students were our cousins.

Initially my younger sister and I stayed with one of two aunts while we were attending the school. One

aunt was on Lobstick Island. We would go by rowboat to the track, then walk east on the track about two miles to the rail siding where the school car was. Eventually my dad built a houseboat and moved it down from the North Arm for the week we'd go to school.

I completed grade 8 in the school car. It was a unique way to get an education. It meant a lot to us that we could stay at our home on the lake for four weeks out of five, and we got a good education.

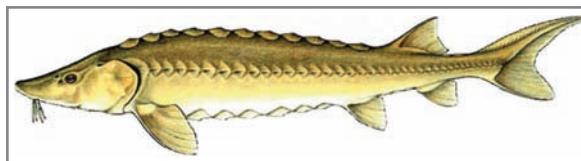
Lake Sturgeons' Surprising Movement in the Namakan River

(Based on a presentation by Darryl McLeod to the Rainy Lake Conservancy and on a poster session presentation during the American Fisheries Society conference in Ottawa, August 2008)

Sturgeon, one of the oldest species of fish in existence, grow larger and live longer than any other North American freshwater fish. They are slow growing but are also long lived, occasionally exceeding 100 years in age. Sexual maturity may not be reached until as late as 25 years with females not spawning every year. Spawning typically occurs in late May to mid-June within fast water, usually at the base of rapids or falls. They spend most of their lives at the bottom of lakes and rivers, stirring sediment with their long snouts and taking in crayfish, nymphs, and other small aquatic animals with their sucker-like mouths.

Prior to European settlement in the region, native peoples found abundant Lake Sturgeon and built a life

around the fish. They harvested sturgeon by spearing or by dragging nets between two canoes in a yearly spring celebration that coincided with spawning.



Lake Sturgeon (Acipenser fulvescens) Image from Ontario MNR

According to accounts of European explorers, thousands gathered for the event, which included dancing, spiritual healing, and

ceremonies celebrating the harvest.

Lake Sturgeon are a species of "special concern" under the Endangered Species Act (2007) in Ontario, and are being considered for "Species at Risk" status under federal legislation in Canada.

The Namakan River contains a native population

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of Lake Sturgeon that has been largely unexploited and unstudied until three hydroelectric generation facilities were recently proposed for development. In May 2007 and April 2008, a total of 34 adult sturgeon were surgically implanted with coded acoustic transmitters and tracked with a fixed array of 13 submersible receivers, with the objective of studying migration patterns, timing of movements and general habitat use. An additional 411 sturgeon (315 in Namakan River and 96 downstream in Namakan Reservoir) were biologically sampled and externally tagged to evaluate movements and population size.

Preliminary findings have confirmed movement through all proposed hydro development sites, including upstream and downstream through Hay Rapids, the lower back channel around High Falls (Eva Island) and Myrtle/Ivy Falls; as well as downstream over High Falls. Telemetered fish also moved extensively upstream and downstream in the river through Three Mile Lake, Bill Lake and Little Eva Lake for distances up to 30 km. Fish were also documented using Quetico River and Bearpelt Creek in Quetico Provincial Park. Sturgeon over-wintered in lake environments and avoided shallow rapids/falls during winter. A high proportion (50%) of fish moved downstream during post-spawning periods to the international waters of Namakan Lake. Maximum distance moved exceeded 50 km.

A total of 12 tagged fish were recaptured during large mesh, gill netting efforts. Tagged fish also helped to confirm both upstream and downstream movement through Hay Rapids, with movement distances of up to 30 km.

A concurrent study is also underway on the Namakan Reservoir with an additional 26 transmitters and 13 receivers. A total of 12 (46%) of these fish have been detected in the Namakan River.

Plans are in place to continue this important and exciting research for two more years. The project is led by Darryl McLeod, biologist for the Fort Frances MNR. Quetico Provincial Park, Voyageurs National Park, and Ojibway Power & Energy Group personnel are supporting the field work, and project equipment is being shared by the organizations. The concurrent project on the Namakan Reservoir is being led by VNP and South Dakota State in cooperation with the OMNR, the Minnesota DNR and Superior National Forest.

Environmental Research contact: Paul Anderson

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Lake Sturgeon Image from MN DNR

A Note from the President

Warm greetings to all you who feel a sustaining connection with the lands and waters of the Rainy Lake Watershed.



Rivers have been on our mind as we raise questions about the ultimate wisdom of the proposed damming of the Namakan River and other wild rivers in North-western Ontario. The lands and waters have, of course, their own existence and thereby offer us humans inspiration and wisdom. An example is a poem by the late Irish writer, John O'Donohue:

*I would love to live
Like a river flows
Carried by the surprise
Of its own unfolding*

I have such admiration for the Board and Executive Committee members, those individuals who lend their hearts and minds to give life and momentum to the Rainy Lake Conservancy. They are both Canadian and U.S. citizens, permanent residents of the area and summer residents coming together to create the strength of the Rainy Lake Conservancy through their dedicated activity making decisions and working together on the various committees.

I want to nudge you, if you are not in the habit, to go to our website, www.rainylakeconservancy.org not only for specific information, but for a broad sense of what the Rainy Lake Conservancy has become over the past ten years. Next year, in 2009, we are anticipating with joy a celebration of what our many individual efforts have created.

You can become part of the flow of this river of people and sustain the momentum, not only through your donations but with your questions, ideas and feedback to board members and executive officers in person or to info@rainylakeconservancy.org, and by stepping forward yourselves to become a part of the Board and its committees.

Warm wishes to you all throughout the winter.

Anne Newhart

Anne Newhart, President

No Brambles ☺ or ☺ Mosquitoes!

“Armchair travelers,” 30 strong, gathered at the VNP Rainy Lake Visitor Center in July for a fascinating look at the latest research pertaining to Rainy Lake and its watershed. Lee Grim, resource biologist, was our main speaker along with a team of experts from both sides of the border



Lee Grim reviews research projects in VNP

who are monitoring many area plants and animals including beavers, spiny water fleas, double crested cormorants, lake sturgeon, lynx, loons and invasive species. They are very interested in cross-border collaboration with local groups who are monitoring or otherwise learning about the plants, animals and fish in our watershed and would like to join in strengthening ties to accomplish even more. Conservancy members share that interest in cross-border efforts and are engaged in monitoring locally.

Nature Outings contacts: Claudia Horne and Ginny Sweatt

A Gathering of Members

This year the Annual General Meeting was held on August 10, at La Place Rendez-Vous in Fort Frances. Keynote speaker, Robin Reilly, Superintendent of Quetico Provincial Park, spoke on the significance of the upcoming Quetico Provincial Park centennial occurring in 2009. Colin Langford, MNR Stewardship Coordinator, introduced the Ontario Stewardship program, a program new to our area, that is designed to work with groups of volunteers in collaborative conservation efforts.



Volunteers help with membership renewals

The president gave a summary of committee accomplishments for the year and welcomed to the Board Mary Ellis of the North Arm of Rainy Lake. Following the meeting the new Board appointed Don Dickson of Fort Frances to the Executive Committee and to the chairmanship of the Membership Committee and thanked Paul Larsen for his service in that capacity. We are grateful that Paul continues to serve on the Board of Directors.

Another effort that touched our hearts was the news that one cottager and his family had traveled all the way from Sandpoint Lake to be present at the meeting.

Next year we celebrate our 10th anniversary! See you at our 2009 AGM.

AGM Committee contact: Anne Newhart

Preserving Land on Rainy Lake

If you wish to get a sense of the urgency of preserving land on Rainy Lake, take a cruise past some of the densely populated islands, then look around at the juxtaposition of pristine wilderness!

The Rainy Lake Conservancy is committed to preserving and protecting the wilderness character of the lake and one way of doing this is through conservation easements on environmentally significant private lands. Approximately 10 years ago, the Ontario Government protected the remaining public land on most of the Canadian islands of Rainy Lake as conservation reserves. At that time, the government threw out a challenge to private land owners to follow its example.

To the best of our knowledge there are no conservation easements on the Canadian side of the lake. This is not for lack of trying! We have surmounted a number of obstacles over the years, but we are still working with the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) to solve the problem of raising the necessary funds for NCC to monitor and enforce the terms of Rainy Lake easements in perpetuity. At present, American members wishing U.S. tax benefits may donate their easements to American Friends of NCC if their properties meet NCC conservation easement criteria. If no tax benefit is requested, it is possible that the Rainy Lake Conservancy could hold the easements.

Presently three conservation easements are on hold. We have been assured by the Nature of Conservancy of Canada that they are committed to working with us on our conservation easement program and that they will develop a conservation plan for Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods in the near future. Once this is done, it is expected that federal funds will be available to help fund the easements.

One cannot adequately explain the importance or the nature of a conservation easement in a short newsletter article. If you are interested in finding out more about easements, please contact me at 807-274-4684 or 807-345-4687.

Tax and Easements Committee contact: Dale Callaghan

Canadian Heritage Rivers Funding

The Canadian Heritage Rivers Initiative is pleased to inform Conservancy members that the initiative has received funding to proceed with compiling the report and proposal to amend the designation of the Boundary Waters – Voyageur Waterway. A consultant will be engaged to assemble the report which is scheduled for completion in mid-winter.

Pam Hawley, curator, Fort Frances Museum

Dragonflies and Little Critters: Field Naturalists Conduct Survey Work

by Ilka Milne, president, Rainy River Valley Field Naturalists

Last year while engaged in district dragonfly surveying, members of the Rainy River Valley Field Naturalists (RRVFN) collected dragonflies and exuviae (nymph skeletons left after dragonflies hatch) from Lady Rapids on the Namakan River. One exuvia collected at that time was confirmed to be the tiny Pygmy Snaketail. Scarce throughout most of its range, the Pygmy Snaketail is apparently unable to live in stream conditions below dams. Finding the



Pygmy Snaketail (*Ophiogomphus howei*)
image by Denis Doucet

exuvia underlines the importance of exuvia collection as a tool to detecting which species are present. To date, this empty nymph skin is the only Pygmy Snaketail specimen on record in Ontario.

The Pygmy Snaketail is the smallest of the snaketails, a group of dragonfly species preferring clear, clean streams. It is so rare in Canada that it is on the 'priority list' with the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada to get its formal assessment report completed, a vital step in determining a species' status under protective legislation in Canada.

In June RRVFN club president Ilka Milne, Mike Oldham of NHIC, and John Van Den Broeck, local MNR Species at Risk biologist checked Lady Rapids and the proposed dam sites upstream in hopes of finding more Pygmy Snaketails. Snaketail species were seen hunting over the riffles in the back channel around Eva Island, a stretch of river that will be altered by the proposed High Falls dam. Two weeks later RRVFN volunteers revisited Lady Rapids again, combing the shoreline for exuviae and kick netting in the shallows for nymphs. Flooded riverbanks made exuvia searching very difficult and cool early summer temperatures so greatly altered dragonfly emergence dates that it was difficult to predict when to look. Hopes are high that next year the Pygmy Snaketail will be found again. Field naturalists can increase the odds of success by using benthic biomonitoring.



Benthic Biomonitoring Sample

Benthic biomonitoring is a way of studying the health of streams and rivers by sampling the creatures that live under stones, in sediment and on logs in debris in streams. Because some of these creatures are more sensitive to pollution, sedimentation and low oxygen conditions than other species, knowing the composition of benthic communities in a stream can tell you whether or not it's in good shape. In August, RRVFN members participated in a benthic biomonitoring workshop organized by Ojibwe Power & Energy Group and presented by Ken Deacon and Lucy Lavoie of Ecosuperior. After a day of training, participants sampled the back channel behind Eva Island, picking up many live dragonfly nymphs and giving field naturalists the idea that a concerted search for suitable Pygmy Snaketail aquatic habitat and benthic sampling will increase the odds of finding this tiny dragonfly again.

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To work with property owners, governments and local communities to preserve and protect the natural beauty, historic features, and ecological and recreational values for present and future generations, particularly within but not restricted to Rainy Lake.

Visit our web site at www.rainylakeconservancy.org