



Paddling in technicolour

Sandra Phinney photos



by Sandra Phinney

If you asked someone who knows me where my happy place is, they would immediately say “in a canoe.” I paddle all year. Well, not in snow and ice – although I’ve seen many a Christmas Day and New Year’s when I’ve spent time on the water. But my all-time favourite season to paddle is the fall, in part because the temperature can be balmy. As well, there are no blackflies, the mosquitoes have called it quits, and the water is usually warm enough for a dip.

The biggest bonus? Fall’s showy foliage. Hardwoods in the Maritimes at this time of year can be both mesmerizing and downright riotous. Here are some of my favourite places to paddle when the leaves are ablaze.

BIRCHDALE

For the past 10 years I’ve organized a fall women’s paddle “retreat” at Birchdale, a wilderness retreat on a wonderful system of lakes about an hour’s drive from Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. The main lodge dates back to the early 1900s when Omar Roberts hauled logs over the ice to the shores of First Carrying Lake, inland (and north) of his home in Kemptville, Yarmouth County.

Eventually he added smaller log cabins, and “sports” from the U.S. came to fish and hunt. Fast forward to 1972 when a Carmelite order of monks established a monastery there, called Nova Nada – a name that means “new nothing.” After they left, Helen Matthews purchased Nova Nada.

Many groups (and individuals) make arrangements with her to visit.

There is no electricity in the cabins and it’s really a “bare bones” place in terms of amenities, but Birchdale oozes character and charm, as does its owner. We hunker down here each fall for four nights and five days, using Birchdale as home base from which to plan day trips and moonlight paddles in our kayaks and canoes.

TUSKET RIVER

The Tusket River starts at a lovely lake called the Barrio – accessible from Birchdale if the water level is high enough. The Tusket then flows about 65 km down through Kemptville,

Quinan, Canaan, Gavelton, and Tusket Falls before it reaches the ocean in Tusket.

There are countless places to put in along this river where you can paddle for an hour, a day, or more. Lucky for me, our home is mere feet away from the Tusket River in Canaan, and *your Local* readers have an open invitation to come by any time for a paddle.

Although I’ve paddled various parts of this river countless times, I had never done the entire journey in one fell swoop from Birchdale to the ocean until May of this year. In spite of making our way through challenging sections of whitewater, rain that slanted sideways in the wind, and a couple of brutal portages, it was a memorable (and mostly fun) trip.



Even if the water level is low in the fall, many sections on the Tusket are ideal for day trips, and paddling any part of the Tusket during autumn is a kaleidoscopic experience.

KEJIMKUJIK AND THE TOBEATIC

We are fortunate in Nova Scotia to have not one but two National Parks. The one I’m most familiar with (paddling-wise) is Kejimikujik National Park and National Historic Site – commonly referred to as Keji. As luck would have it, surrounding huge parts of Keji is the Tobeatic Wilderness Area. They are both spectacular places to paddle in the fall as much of this region is old growth Acadian forest that features a wonderful mixture of hardwoods and softwoods.

One of my favourite routes in Keji is called the Big Dam/ Frozen Ocean route (26 km). It’s ideal for a two or three-day outing. Campsites are easy to find, but you definitely need to book well ahead! Each campsite has tent “pads” as well

giant picked up his big bag of marbles and threw them willy-nilly. The “wow” factor was over the moon and when we were there this past July, I couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to be here in the fall.

Speaking of the Tobeatic, our autumn trip this year will start from Sporting Lake Stream, inland from Weymouth and the Sissiboo River. Our destination? Sporting Lake. The draw on this lake is a large “heritage” island. It’s never been harvested and the feeling I get when I roam around the island is that of being in a large cathedral.

Although I’ve been there several times, it’s my first time in the fall, so I am heady with excitement!

WEST ST. MARY’S RIVER

Moving up the province, a place that I loved paddling (but have yet to do this time of year) is the West St. Mary’s River. Friends and family and I took a trip there two years ago in the



as an outhouse, fire pit, firewood, and a pulley to get your food out of the reach of bears. There is no whitewater on this route, and all the portages in Keji are easy to traverse.

For a slightly more challenging route, you may want to do the Peskowsk Lake System (48 km), which encompasses a dozen lakes connected by 13 portages. And if you want an even more challenging trip, slip down from that system into the Tobeatic via Keji’s Pebblogitch Lake and you’ll find yourself on the Shelburne Heritage River. From Irving Lake, head south into Sisketch Lake.

There are enormous glacial erratics in Sisketch. It’s as if a

spring. We put in at Trafalgar and came out at Sherbrooke (62 km; three nights). Because there are so many hardwoods en route, I remember saying – more than once – “Wow. This would be fabulous in the fall.” Although we were in and out of our boats a lot the first seven km because of low water, the river deepened and we sailed through the lower parts. Again, it’s a region rife with hardwoods and the river snakes through gorgeous marshlands and forest. Every few minutes the view is different, and with autumn’s showy colours – it would be sensational.

Time to plan for those fall paddles!