

Big Canoe Run: Paddling from Tobermory to Manitoulin Island

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALBERT BEDWARD

The Big Canoe Run, as my friends and I term the kayak route, starts inside the shipwreck graveyard called Fathom Five National Marine Park off the tip of the Bruce Peninsula at Tobermory, crosses 35 km of open water past Fitzwilliam Island near Manitoulin Island, and ends in South Baymouth Marina. It can be one of the most treacherous runs as weather and water explode like fireworks. Consider the 22 sunken ships inside the Marine Park.

▲ Albert Bedward practising in a sea kayak in wind storm conditions on the Great Lakes.



▼ One of Albert's colleagues, Louise, paddling north from the southeast end of Cove Island toward the lighthouse, on the successful first crossing from Tobermory to Manitoulin Island.



▼ Albert's colleague Brian, admiring Cove Island Lighthouse.

I didn't believe I could be halfway between Cove and Fitzwilliam islands in a kayak, but I was. I knew if the wind kicked up an additional 10 km/h from the west, our only choice would be to follow the waves into the middle of Georgian Bay.

In July some years ago, I had joined a group of six daring kayakers to paddle the 50 km from Tobermory to Manitoulin Island – what we dubbed the Big Canoe Run, after the Chi Cheemaun Ferry.

I remember the previous year's first attempt: we stood on the Chi Cheemaun Ferry dock at Tobermory, watching one-metre waves crashing into whitecaps. Weather Channel forecasted a Lake Michigan storm could strike by noon tomorrow. We could wait the storm out, but we only had three days before

returning home. And there was a second storm rolling in from Lake Superior a day later. And a 280-km drive home is safer than bouncing around in the middle of Lake Huron or Georgian Bay praying for rescue.

On this, our second attempt, we paddled out of Lands End Park on the Bruce near Hay Bay, in smaller waves and under cloudless blue skies. The marine radio squawked: "Warning for western Lake Superior, extreme weather alert: winds blowing at 45 km an hour gusting to 65. Wave height: two metres increasing to three overnight..."

"That's only 700 km away!" our team leader John exclaimed.

Stranded on Cove Island
Paddling up the east coast of Cove Island, half-metre

waves rose to a choppy metre. As we neared Cove Island Lighthouse at Gig Point, we saw one- and two-metre whitecaps in the 15 km open stretch north of us. John pointed towards the rocky shoreline below the lighthouse, and moments after we dragged the last kayak ashore, the shoreline exploded into whitecaps.

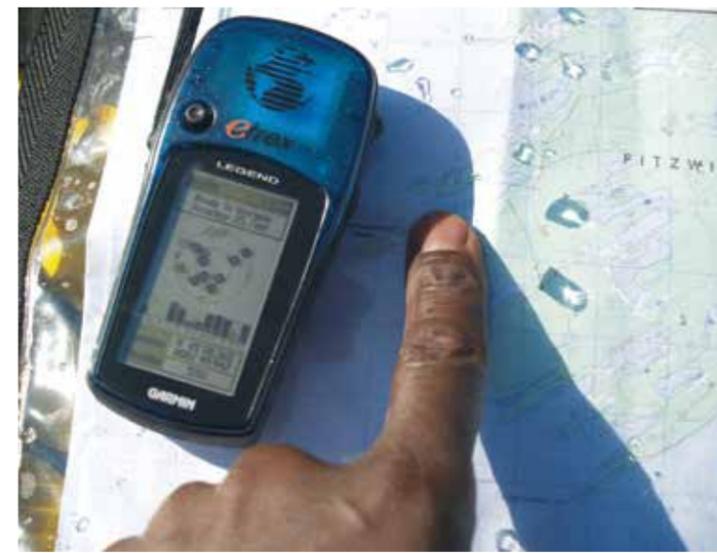
There was no turning back now. All eyes turned to John who said: "Raise your tents and break for lunch. Use heavy rocks to anchor your tent cords down. We may be here a while." At 12:30 we sat facing north, watching waves repeatedly crash into waves like pods of Orcas simultaneously breaking the surface and diving.

After lunch, we ran through the list of standard safety emergency gear: maps in



▲ Sketch map, not to scale, created by Albert Bedward, showing the successful route from Tobermory to Manitoulin Island.

◀ Team leader John inspecting his sea kayak during a rest at Cove Island Lighthouse to let one of the paddlers recover from slight dehydration. Everyone on this trip went on to complete the crossing to Manitoulin.



▲ Location of overnight campsite on west side of Fitzwilliam Island during the first crossing.

◀ Leisurely paddle from Fitzwilliam Island to South Baymouth Marina, Manitoulin Island, during the first, successful 30-hour crossing from Tobermory.

waterproof casing, compasses with a mirror, flare pistol with four unexpired flares, large orange plastic sheet with the letters SOS, waterproof LED flashlights, back-up batteries in waterproof containers, backup battery for the VHF radios, paddle float, second set of paddles fastened to the decks of each kayak, waterproof boat light.

Some would say the next two days were about being stranded on Cove Island, but

when the air temperature is 21 degrees C, you have hiking gear, food and water for three days, a good book to read and writing supplies, it feels more like a vacation. Some of us sunbathed by our tents, wondering why it took so long for the server to show up and ask for our bar order.

"This was nothing like last year's paddle," Helen reminisced. "It was calm blue everywhere, sky, water." Instead of paddling on to

South Baymouth from Cove Island, we had camped on Fitzwilliam island, three km south of Manitoulin island, because two of the paddlers had stiff backs from sitting in their kayaks for so long.

About 1:30 a.m., I had woken up to Elaine whispering outside my tent "Albert, you've got to see this!" The Milky Way was shimmering in a sky carpeted with a billion stars. From the east, two shooting stars had raced across the sky

to the northwest. "This is worth the paddle," I'd said to Elaine.

Then dawn had greeted us in gold, red, pink, still water, the sound of tent fabric brushing against sleepy bodies, pots and pans shuffling inside kayak hatches. We had slowly paddled out of Wild Bight to the ferry dock, taking deep breaths with each slow paddle stroke. We'd arrived before the Ferry departed; we had been lucky on that trip, as very few complete the paddle across.

But today, on the third morning of our second attempt, we awoke to darkening grey skies from the northwest, whitecaps topping two metres, and a gale warning from Environment Canada stating that every boat should be off northern Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. The sheltered water on the east coast of Cove Island appeared calmer, with waves only a metre high. We had enough food and water for another day,

maybe two if rationed, but we didn't know if our tents could withstand the 65-km wind gusts forecasted. We thought of finding shelter in the lighthouse, but it was unsafe.

Safe Paddling

"Stick together from here to Lands End Park," John yelled. "No one paddles away on their own. Water's always cold. If you flip, need rescue, the closer you are to the group, the quicker the rescue, if you

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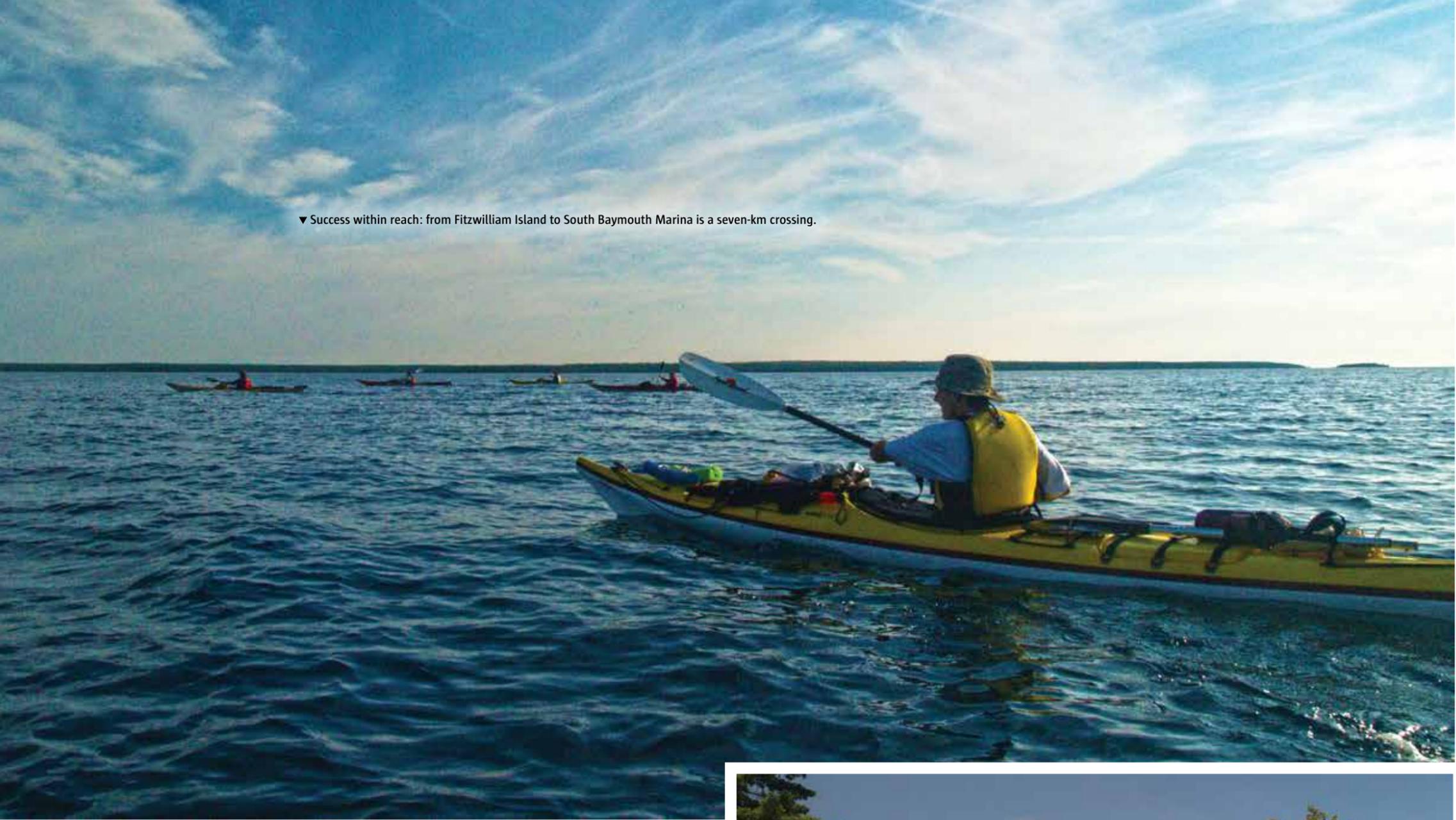
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▼ Success within reach: from Fitzwilliam Island to South Baymouth Marina is a seven-km crossing.



► Homeward bound: carrying sea kayaks to Chi Cheemaun Ferry at South Baymouth Marina, Manitoulin, after successfully crossing from Tobermory.

can be rescued. If we can't rescue you, hold onto your kayak, we'll call for help. And if help is not too busy saving someone else..." The group was silent. Even the wind stopped for a moment.

We hugged the southern coast, past South Otter island when Elaine announced she was in pain with carpal tunnel syndrome. "Which wrist?" I asked. "Both," she quietly responded. I blew three successive blasts on my whistle to catch John's attention. He

paddled over, clipped both our tow ropes to the bow of her kayak, had us arrange in V-formation with Elaine's boat at the bottom of the V, and paddled forward into the two-km unprotected stretch to Russell Island, then we towed Elaine to Lands End Park.

The Ojibway have been crossing the lake by canoe for hundreds of years. I don't know if I will ever be that level of paddler, but I have learned this much: that an adventure can be safe and

enjoyable if I live by a simple rule. Before a paddle, I will stand on the beach, observe the sky, water, boats; watch birds and other mammals' behaviour, and if it doesn't feel right, go somewhere else or go home. Alive, I can always tell the tale. **NEV**

Albert Bedward is a writer, videographer and avid paddler-explorer. He produced the film Clarity and is releasing a book of poetry, Odile, this fall on Amazon.

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