

STAYING ALIVE:

Safe Winter Kayaking from Collingwood to Nottawasaga Island

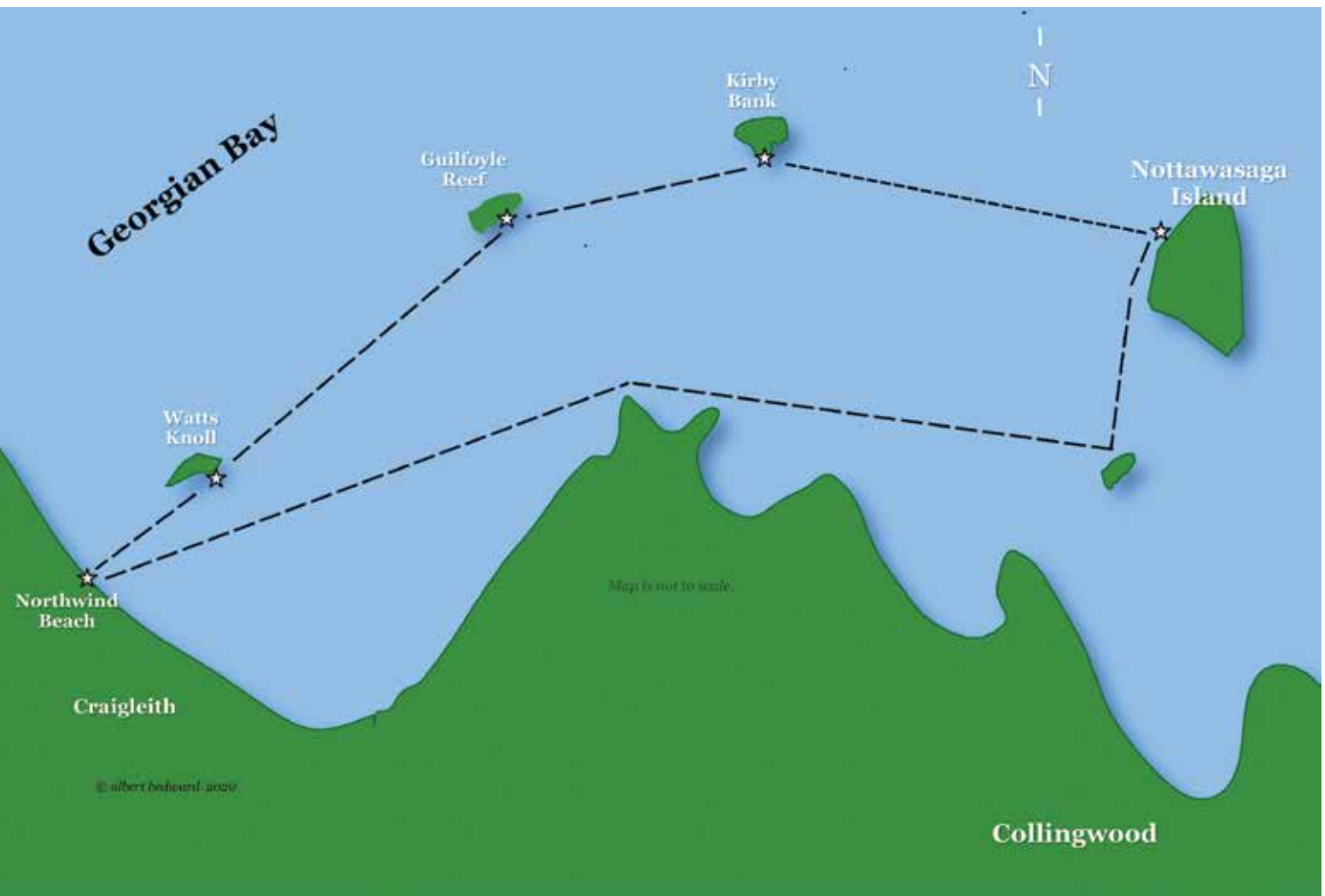
WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALBERT BEDWARD

“**Mayday, Mayday, Mayday.** This is Kayak Cloud. I’m in the water hanging onto a white kayak. I flipped about a half km west of Nottawasaga Island, north of Collingwood. I’m wearing a yellow dry suit with an orange PFD and flashing light. Can’t re-enter my kayak. I’ve been in the water for a few minutes now, and I’m feeling a bit chilled. I’ll call every 15 minutes on Channel 16 or switch to Channel 69 if it’s busy.”

I am an open water paddler, which means if there is an island or a lighthouse in the distance, I’ll paddle to it. There is something calming about being far away from land. It feels like entering another world, leaving work and busy days behind. But the above example of an emergency call is not the type of call I want to make in the winter or at any time of the year. And there is a way to make every paddle, regardless of the season, safe and enjoyable.



To The Lighthouse: Author Albert Bedward and a friend paddling to Nottawasaga Island.



▲ Albert's map showing the route taken on the winter kayaking trip.

I wish I'd known this during an April round-trip paddle to Nottawasaga Island years ago. On that day, the forecast called for 30 to 35 km winds, gusting to 55 km after 2 p.m. So two of us, experienced paddlers, set out about 11:30 a.m. from shore, one km south of the island in Georgian Bay. This was an easy paddle, and we estimated it would be a 25- or 30-minute round trip. Then, halfway around Nottawasaga Island, the wind picked up with metre-high waves, and our short paddle lasted more than 50 minutes.

We returned moments before the winds gusted above 50 km. While my partner was mounting her kayak onto the roof of her van, the wind lifted

her boat off, which could have knocked her down if I hadn't been there. The kayak had not been tied down. Lesson learned. No harm. But it definitely changed the way I plan a paddle, and the healthy respect I have for weather, and water.

Life-Saving Equipment

Mid-fall to mid-spring requires a dry suit if you want to stay alive. A wet suit? It's great for summer but in late fall, winter and spring the cold water trapped between suit and body quickly invites hypothermia; it's like wearing a freezer. A dry suit only exposes your head from the top of your neck, and your hands from the end of your wrists. My dry suit has a built-

in hood, and I wear water resistant, windproof Merino gloves, topped with neoprene mitts, and on my feet neoprene boots. Underneath, fast-drying warm clothes. Simple and life-saving.

In 3- to 9-degrees Celsius temperatures, I team up with an experienced paddler, someone like me who knows how to perform an assisted rescue, so we can help one another. Below 3 degrees, there's no paddling for me, as hands, deck lines, sea kayak deck and everything else ices instantly with freezing spray. I love being on water but I have limits.

Standard equipment on my PFD (personal flotation device) is a marine radio, strobe light, whistle, water

knife, carabiner, and two power bars stuffed in one pocket and 500 mm of coconut water in the other. Around my waist is a tow-rope belt to assist the other paddler or clip to my kayak.

If paddling further than half a km from shore, I carry a flare pistol with four cartridges. In winter, a flare pistol or hand flares are essential for signalling an emergency. Mirrors work too, but a flare shouts: "Emergency! Send Help Now!"

Paddling is not a crapshoot; it's about your life and those who care about you. And everything is decided at the water's edge. If it doesn't feel or look right, find a safer spot or go home. There is always another day,



◀ Albert checking the GoPro camera on his kayak after landing at Watts Knoll. The Blue Mountains of the Escarpment can be seen in the distance.



On Guilfoyle Reef with Albert's friend looking back at The Blue Mountains on the horizon.

but never another life.

Cold-weather paddling demands extra attention, as our goal is to enjoy the paddle and to get back to shore alive, safe and dry, regardless of whether or not we reach our intended destination. I always carry a backup paddle, paddle float, water pump, extra water and a few GoPro cameras.

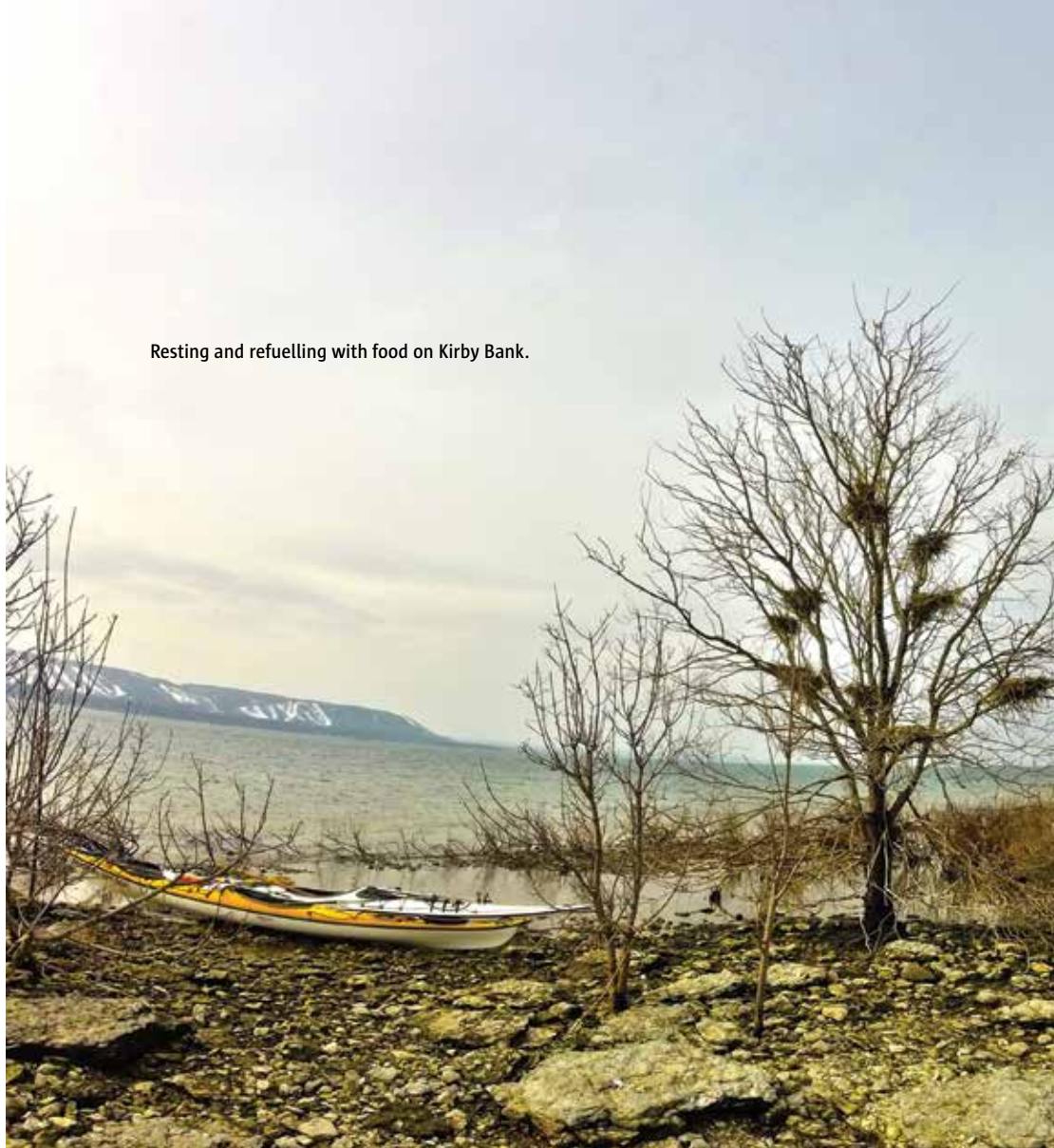
Though we are only paddling for a few hours today, we are always ready for a sudden shift in weather and water conditions, which could result in being stuck on a remote island. We therefore carry what we need to be well, which includes anything from a first aid kit, extra meals, sleeping bags, an all-season tent, extra rope, duct tape and clothing, to garbage bags, toiletries and whatever else might make winter camping both safe and comfortable.

To Nottawasaga Island

“Nottawa” means Iroquois, and “saga” means mouth of the river. This February day we paddled to Nottawasaga Island from Northwind Beach west of Collingwood, resting on the islands called Watts Knoll, Guilfoyle Reef and Kirby Bank. There we ate snacks and admired the beauty of the Blue Mountains of the Niagara Escarpment to the southwest. I have always found the Escarpment breathtaking from the water or while hiking on any of its numerous trails. Open-water paddles, especially in winter conditions, leave you exposed to winds, fog, and high waves, so paddling close to any land mass is usually safer.

Ten days before a paddle, I start monitoring the area weather with an app called Windfinder, which provides graphical weather data, updated every four hours on wind speed and

Resting and refuelling with food on Kirby Bank.



▲ Kayaking in open water toward Nottawasaga Island.





▲ Landing on Nottawasaga Island.



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Barrie, ON, L4M 4S4. 705.721.4730
bearcreeksanctuary.com

Hobbitsee Wildlife Refuge
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NOA 1J0. 519.587.2980 hobbitsee.com

National Wildlife Centre Canada
PO Box 192, Caledon East, ON, L7C 3L9.
416.577.4372 nationalwildlifecentre.ca

Procyon Wildlife
6441 7th Line, Beeton, ON, LOG 1A0.
905.729.0033 procyonwildlife.com

Shades of Hope Wildlife Refuge
PO Box 87, Pefferlaw, ON, LOE 1N0.
705.437.4654 shadesofhope.ca

The Owl Foundation
4117 21st Street, Vineland Station, ON,
L0R 2E0. 905.562.5986
theowlfoundation.ca

Toronto Wildlife Centre
4-60 Carl Hall Rd., Toronto, ON, M3K 2C1.
416.631.0662 torontowildlifecentre.com

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COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF SAFETY GEAR

- PFD, personal flotation device
- Reboarding device (paddle float or rescue stirrup)
- Belt- or pfd-centred tow rope, 15 m
- Sound signalling device (pea-less whistle)
- Bailer or pump
- Compass with optional mirror for signalling
- Navigation lights (needed ½ hour before sunset until ½ hour after sunrise)
- Waterproof flashlight or headlight
- Hand flares or flare pistol with flares if paddling over 1.852 km (minimum 6)
- Radar reflector tape if paddling great distances or in remote areas
- VHF Radio, if licensed to operate
- 1 litre of water minimum
- Snacks (protein bar, fruits, nuts)
- Kayak Skirt
- 2nd Paddle
- Sunglasses
- Hat & clothing for weather conditions
- Sunscreen
- Lip balm
- First Aid Kit

EXTRAS

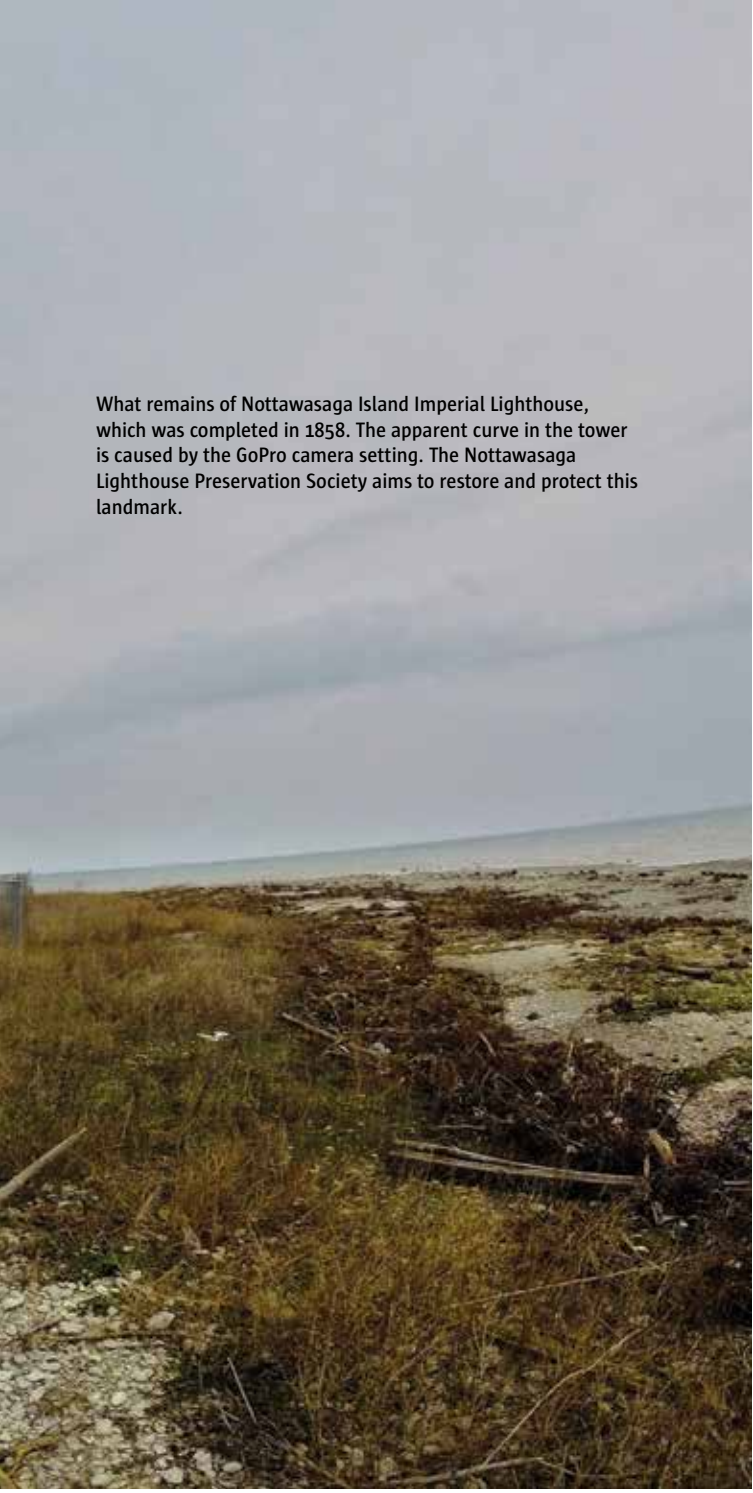
- Kayak repair kit
- Dry bags
- PFD knife
- Map in waterproof case
- Float plan left with family/friend
- Quick-dry spare clothing



▲ The compass in winter. Below 3 degrees Celsius, everything ices over from freezing water.

direction, tides if present, air temperature, clouds, precipitation and air pressure.

Last, we always leave a float plan with a friend or family member. It includes who is paddling and level of expertise; planned route, departure and return times; emergency contacts, kayaks information, equipment...



What remains of Nottawasaga Island Imperial Lighthouse, which was completed in 1858. The apparent curve in the tower is caused by the GoPro camera setting. The Nottawasaga Lighthouse Preservation Society aims to restore and protect this landmark.

and where we left the car(s). Better safe and prepared.

Knowing we were ready for almost anything, we paddled towards Nottawasaga Island without a care in the world. And after all this preparation, we had a beautiful, white-cloud and blue-sky day, and hours of peaceful paddling, focusing on nothing but being

out there, which is one of the rewards for working. **NEV**

Albert Bedward is a trainer, IT specialist, writer, and avid sea kayaker. His last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Big Canoe Run: Paddling from Tobermory to Manitoulin Island," in Summer 2019.

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