

**Encountering the Upper Athabasca Valley by Canoe:  
A Five-Day Trip on the Athabasca River**

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The following is an account of a trip I lead with students in Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Management (ORTM) from the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). I hope it's helpful in guiding others in their trip planning, and enjoying and learning from this stretch of the Athabasca River. This report is not an exhaustive account, nor is it meant as a full guide. The river changes, I missed things, and prospective travellers need to do their own preparation, and attend to the river carefully. I use the convention of 'river left' and 'river right' to note sides of the river, channel, or direction; these refer to the left and right side when a paddler is facing downstream and they do not change. To provide specific locations I use a 6-digit UTM military grid reference, eastings and northings, for the 1:50,000 topo map sheet indicated.

In this brief document, I have tried to bring together information needed for paddling the route, with resources that provide context for the landscapes, features, and places encountered along the way. My approach is to provide initial openings that will hopefully lead to further learning based on readers' interests. I cite authors' works in text, which are fully provided in the reference list. There's always more to discover too.

We (our group) want to thank Ron Pelletier for helping us understand in a gracious and personal way some of his family's history in the Upper Athabasca Valley. Ron works with us at UNBC, is the great-grandson of John Moberly, and works with the Upper Athabasca Valley Elders Council. We also want to thank Parks Canada and Jasper National Park for helping make this trip happen, and sharing their knowledge and experience with us during our visit. We learned a great deal from Jasper's Cultural Resource Specialist, Fire and Vegetation Specialist, and Fire Communication Officer who each spent time with us before we went out on the river. Parks staff at the Jasper Visitor Information Centre and at the Palisades Stewardship Education Centre were extremely welcoming and accommodating in preparation for the trip. Thank you all!

## **Training**

In order to be sure the group could perform basic flat water, moving water, and whitewater strokes, maneuvers, and rescues in and out of their canoes we did four days of flat water and one day of moving water training before starting this trip. Among other topics, we covered T-rescue, self-rescue, safe swimming, up and down stream safety, and throw bag use. Even with this training, paddling a loaded canoe on moving water presents new challenges and a learning curve. We did most of our training in Prince George, on local lakes and rivers, but also at Lake Annette, in Jasper, which was a wonderful place to get the feel of the boats.



Figure 1: ORTM students training on the crystal blue waters of Lake Annette, at Lake Annette Beach, in Jasper National Park; Pyramid Mountain in the background. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

### **Group**

Two leaders: First, myself, a faculty member in Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Management; I've paddled the lower stretches of Athabasca multiple times before, and I've done and taught other canoe trips and canoe tripping classes. Second, a volunteer alumnus with river rescue and paddling training, and with extended canoe tripping experience.

Four students: three novices and one who had flat water canoe tripping experience. None of the students had whitewater experience before this course. Pre-trip training covered the basics.



Figure 2: The group at the put in, just prior to loading our boats. Photo courtesy of Carling Breuning.

### **Canoes/Gear**

We used three open canoes: two Old Town Discovery 169's (16' 9") made of three layer polyethylene, and one Mad River Canoe Duck Hunter (~17') made of Royalex, all are good whitewater tripping and expedition canoes. We packed food, supplies, and clothing using Sealine 115L dry packs and canoe barrels with harnesses. All were lashed into the canoes using accessory cord to prevent losing gear, and to provide limited floatation. A deck for your canoe would be a valuable addition, likely preventing some possible swamps or tips. Students used basic institutional aluminum-and-plastic canoe paddles as well as PFDs with whistles, and whitewater paddling helmets. Leaders had proper river rescue vests and equipment. All paddlers wore wetsuits. The canoes were equipped with knee pads, painters, bailers, rope grab loops bow and stern, and throw bags attached to the grab loops and secured on the deck plates (using bungee) for self-rescue. Each boat had a pair of ropes/lines for tracking/lining if needed.

### **Route**

It should be noted that we were intentionally *not* looking for a risky adventure or remote wilderness experience, disconnected from society. The route was chosen, was rewarding, and is a bit unique because it showcases the histories of the Upper Athabasca Valley, including the development and management of the park. The route let us move through stunning landscapes while learning about canoe travel as one among many past and current ways of engaging the valley, the river itself, and the park. The route provides:

- An introduction to whitewater and river canoe tripping, with challenging rapids and engaging route finding, and with both front country and backcountry camping right from the river.
- A high degree of road access and communication options for safety, scouting, portaging, and logistics. Running a shuttle requires a drive of about 35 minutes (one way) south from Jasper town to the put in, and about 1 hr (one way) east from Jasper to Hinton for the take out. We had a local friend accompany us to the put in to bring our vehicle back to Jasper, who again came to meet us at our take out in Hinton. There are many access points, making the route very flexible.

- Ample reminders of the elements, histories, and land uses that have shaped and continue to shape the Yellowhead Pass, Jasper National Park, and surrounding area to Hinton, as well as the human and non-human populations and their ecological sustainability. These activities include fur trade routes and posts; evidence of glaciation; recent wild and prescribed fire; homesteading history; cartographic survey; mining; railway and automobile history, routes, and activity; pipeline construction and politics; as well as tourism and recreation development. All have occurred in Jasper National Park and the route facilitates learning about this place, in this place.<sup>1</sup>
- An intimate experience of travelling with a Canadian Heritage River that remains undammed, and is historically, socially, culturally, and ecologically significant in that it links the Columbia Icefield (a hydrologic apex of North America) with, eventually, the Arctic Ocean. The route follows the Athabasca as it flows out of the mountains in Jasper National Park and into land used for agriculture, forestry, and industry in Alberta. Downstream from this route, the same water is used in oil sands production near Fort McMurray, a city that was devastated by wildfire in the spring of 2016. The river continues north and joins the Peace River at the Peace-Athabasca Delta, and past the historic community of Fort Chipewyan (est. 1788) on Lake Athabasca. There, the Mikisew Cree, Athabasca Chipewyan, and Metis continue to depend on the productivity of the delta for furs and fish. The Peace-Athabasca Delta is the largest fresh water delta in North America, located within the massive Wood Buffalo National Park, and is a wetland of international importance designated by the Ramsar Convention, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. So, there are national parks at each end of the river, but between it flows through, and is used in, some of Canada's most intense industrial and agricultural activity, and then for long-standing subsistence hunting, trapping, and fishing. As the Slave River, the water flows into Great Slave Lake, and to the Arctic via the Mackenzie River.<sup>2</sup>

We paddled May 14-18 (inclusive), 2016 and the water was relatively low, resulting from a low snowpack, and cold nights. Days were hot and sunny. The river and rapids can change significantly with alterations in water level. We got information on the rapids from *The Athabasca River: Jasper National Park* (Parks Canada, 1981), which provided a basic guide, and we spoke with local paddlers and rafting guides in town and along the river. Getting information about camp, river, and water conditions, for example, before departure is important.

*Put In.* 380431 on 83 C/12, about 9 km down river from Athabasca Falls, where highway 93 and the river converge (heading north) / diverge (heading south), just below a class II rapid. There was no pull out, we parked on the shoulder and carried a short distance down to the river. There is a put-in/take-out used by the rafting companies further North (down river) on highway 93, just

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<sup>1</sup> See MacLaren (2007) for various accounts of these histories and activities in the Upper Athabasca River watershed. MacLaren's edited volume makes an excellent companion reader, and is available at the Friends of Jasper gift shop in the Jasper Visitor Information Centre. See Cronin (2011) for a critical discussion of the construction of 'National Park Nature' and wilderness in Jasper through recreation and tourism. The Jasper-Yellowhead Museum and Archives, in Jasper town, has relevant displays; be sure to see photographs from M.P. Bridgland and the repeat photography project, and check out the Mountain Legacy Project online at <http://mountainlegacy.ca/>.

<sup>2</sup> See Maher, Mullins, and Berkers (2006), Mullins and Maher (2007), and Mullins (2009) for accounts of canoeing this section and more, as well as Loo (2007) on environmental justice and the delta, the Peace-Athabasca Delta Technical Studies Final Report (Macmillan, 1996) on river flow and ecological changes, and Timoney and Lee (2009) on pollution from the oil sands.

across from where the Whirlpool and Athabasca rivers meet. We chose to start a little farther upstream.



Figure 3: Location of our put in on Highway 93 and the Athabasca River. Image courtesy of Google Street View (Note: the image is from June of 2012, with higher water).

*Take Out.* 626201 on 83 F/5, on river left and the down-stream side of Willow Creek Rd Bridge in Hinton, AB. There is a substantial traffic pull out, large enough for multiple trailers (see Figure 17).

*Maps Used.* NTS Topographic Maps 1:50,000 scale. NTS Numbers: 83 C/12, 83 C/13, 83 D/16, 83 F/4, 83 F/5.

*Possible Route Extensions.* Upriver: We did not run it, but a group with more experience might consider putting in and starting the first day just below Athabasca Falls (there is access from Highway 93A), which would add a scenic and more-remote canyon with class I, II and III rapids to the section described here. There are also river runs farther up, ending at Athabasca Falls. Decked boats, or with integrated floatation, are probably advisable for these upper reaches. For a description, see Parks Canada (1981).

Down River: The full length of the Athabasca River can be paddled, with some significant portages and rapids along the way. Paddling out to Whitecourt (+ ~ 6 days from Hinton), Fort Assiniboine (+ ~ 8 days from Hinton), or the town of Athabasca (+ ~ 13 days from Hinton) are attractive options for making a longer trip. The restored/replicated fort at Fort Assiniboine makes a wonderful stop that was, historically, a re-supply and transfer point from the Athabasca River overland to Fort Edmonton during the fur trade. Camping becomes scarce through the more-agricultural land with sandy and muddy river banks. The river becomes much more remote after leaving the town of Athabasca. With co-leaders and a group of students, I have also made the trip from Hinton to Ft. McMurray (+ ~ 30 days from Hinton), which included portaging around the unnavigable Grand Rapids. For descriptions to Whitecourt start with the wonderful hard copy map by Roth and the Alberta Recreational Canoe Association (2005) (Paddle Alberta); and see Lund (2014) for reaches to Athabasca. For a rather-dated but most-complete account of the whole river try to find the out-of-print Parry, B. (1978) *Reach Reports for the Athabasca River System*. Other resources can also be found online.

## Day 1: Getting on the River

Start: 380431 on 83C/12 (at 1:00 pm)

End: 339464 on 83C/13 (at 3:00 pm) Wabasso Campground

Travel: 7 km, 2 hrs on the river, 3.5 km/hr (including scouting rapids, breaks, etc.). Fast water, small rapids.

Running Total: 7 km paddled

### Description:

Two class I rapids indicated in river guide, but the whole stretch has little ripples and swift water. Stopped at Meeting of the Waters road-side pull-out on Hwy 93A (river left) with great interpretive signs on fur trade. When stopping to make camp at Wabasso we pulled off river left along a cobble bank with quick water and camped in sites D29 and D30. A wide gravel trail runs along the forest edge, it's a bit hard to see from the river but obvious when on shore. Without a vehicle, and because the campground was not yet open for the season, we used the empty, clean, garbage cans as bear lockers. A different solution would be needed if the campground was open. A small bathroom/outhouse building is located very close to these sites (just across the road). More-rustic walk-in campsites are available at Wabasso, and they are located a little farther upstream from where we stopped; they looked not well used.



Figure 4: At the “Meeting of the Waters” confluence of the Athabasca and Whirlpool rivers. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

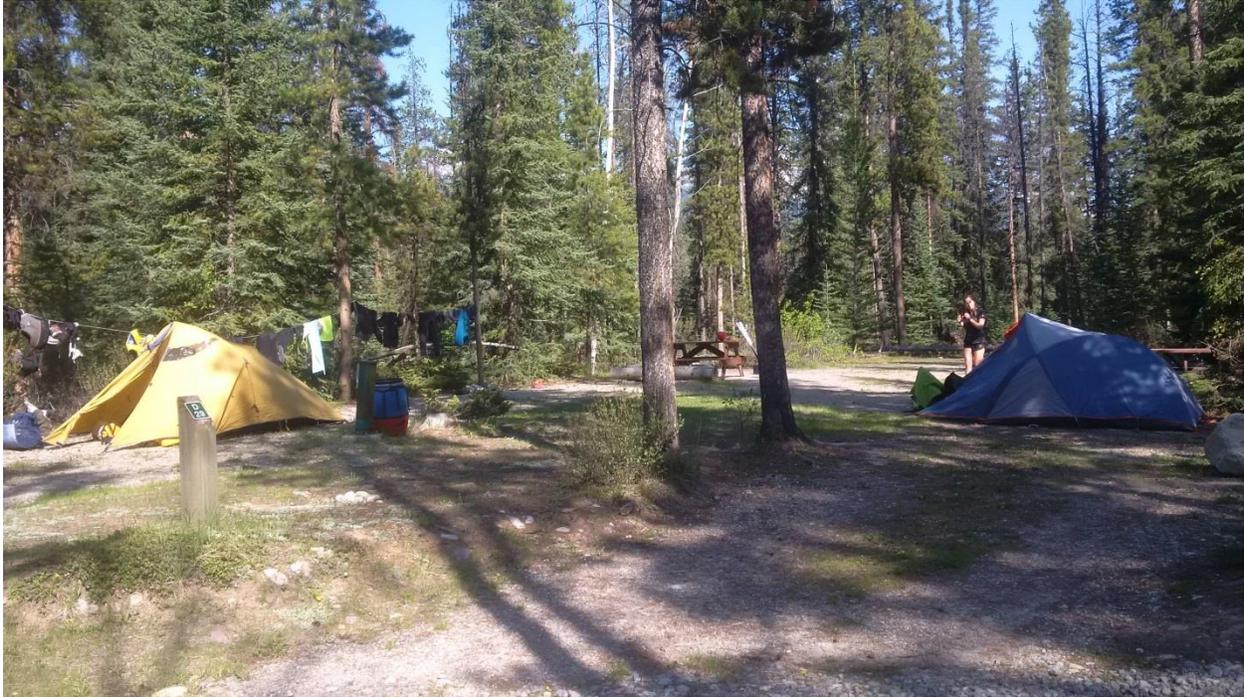


Figure 5: At Wabasso campground, the Athabasca River is beyond the trees in the background, behind me is a small washroom building. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

## Day 2: The Day of Whitewater

Start: 339464 on 83 C/13 (11:25 am) Wabasso Campground

End: 283554 on 83 D/16 (5:00 pm) Wapiti Campground

Travel: 11 km, 5.5 hrs on the river, 2 km/hr. Significant and sometimes technical whitewater, good scouting, good road access.

Running Total: 18 km paddled

### Description:

We waited a bit for heat of the day; we got a late start and I would have preferred to start earlier. Sun/heat started coming around 9:00 am. Eleven kilometers was a big day, with many rapids, requiring a lot of walking and scouting of the river.

### Rapids:

- I. Class I: Big eddy on river right at the top (at this low water level). Walked from there to scout. Gravel/rock outcropping at top river right, then hole centre right behind large rock. Wave train after that. We ran it straight on the left, avoiding the obstacles on river right.
- II. ‘Dunk Corner’ a big huge eddy and swirl where the river meets a geological feature, large rock outcrop. Not a rapid per se at this water level, but very strange water. Rock outcropping is on river right on a left hand bend (outside of the bend), and then the river turns back to the right. We stayed well inside the bend, on river left fairly close to shore, and were careful to simply punch through the strong strange eddy currents and upwelling. No waves, holes, etc. present at this water level. Currents and risk of tipping would be worse on river right.



Figure 6: “Dunk Corner” showing the rock outcropping on river right, and the deep swirling pool indicated by the blue water, with cobble shallows in the foreground. We piled a few rocks as a landmark to aim for as we rounded the corner, staying river left while not running aground. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

- III. Class II: curves around to the right, after Dunk Corner, significant wave train leading the river to plow directly into the river right bank at about 90 degrees, pushing water in both directions. River leads off to the left. We scouted this from the river left bank, landing on a small beach just after dunk corner (visible in Figure 6 far in background). We ran it on the river left side of the wave train, and ready to punch into the large eddy on river left to avoid being carried into the river right bank, where the water was piling up significantly.
- IV. Class II at 310508 on 83 D/16 just before Portal Creek was not described in river guide. It looked complicated with many rocks, holes river right. We scouted a line past them on centre left (avoiding rocks/ledges on river right), then past a rock/hole on our left, and then working further left around holes in middle of the line extending from the river right bank. We eddied out behind/below these rocks on river right. Run was quite clean, but many features are there with significant holes at this water level.



Figure 7: One of our boats running the rapid at 310508 on 83 D/16 just before Portal Creek. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

- V. Class I, just before getting to 5 Mile Bridge, in gravel islands (could shift), a very tight unavoidable line on river right channel between shallows higher up, and then into a nasty-looking hole, followed by waves. The shallows looked like they would make canoe positioning difficult, and a tip might have been likely given the decent hole in a fast narrow braid of the river. We opted to skip this by taking a river left channel through gravel. We then stopped for lunch just below 5 Mile Bridge (below where the rafts put in).
- VI. Class II at 292531 on 83 D/16. Can't recall the details.
- VII. Becker's Rapids: Class III. Rapids are easily scouted from the road on your way down to put in, and by climbing up the steep river left bank up to the highway, and along through the lawn and trail at Becker's Chalets. River makes a sharp right hand turn, causing large standing waves, and then a sharp left hand turn quickly follows. There were three possible channels to follow - a possible sneak far river right looked too shallow and with larger rocks that were hard to see from our vantage point. Far river left, with slower moving water (we considered, but felt it would make cutting into the main current too difficult, and risk poor positioning and getting caught on the rocks on river left). We opted to run this down the centre channel, slightly to the outside (left) side, with the boat angled to right in order to go straight with main current/flow. We had two boats swamp (but not tip), and one ran clean. One swamped boat eddied out river left, the other river right immediately after the main drop, just at the left hand turn. No problems other than being wet. This was a serious rapid, and decked boats or portaging would be good options. Access is good, however, and the run is not particularly technical. Immediately around the corner following Becker's is fairly substantial class I/II water, I think we ran a bit to river right, passed one hole. Not tough, but could be bad with a swamped canoe.



Figure 8: Showing the approach to Becker's Rapid taken from car pull-out at top, outside of the bend, Becker's Chalets would be just to the left.



Figures 9: A closer view of the main rapid at Becker's showing eddies on inside and outside of bend to the left following the main drop.

- VIII. Following Becker's there are many features, swifts, and moves before getting to Boulder Gardens, which were hard to identify until we were in them.
- IX. Boulder Garden: technical tumbling water. Though the advice we received had been to stay to river right to find the deep channel, we weren't able to know when to go right. We weren't able to identify the rapid in advance. I found this to be the most concerning of the rapids we faced because they were something of a 'choose your own adventure' requiring quick work around very large boulders that were submerged. We took a centre channel and ran a bit left to right. Far right probably would have been better, but it was hard to see it coming. We managed to pick our way through fine.

We came around the corner and took out on river left at Wapiti Campground, which was very difficult to see (i.e. no sign). The campsite is up on a steep cut bank on river left. We pulled over when we saw the motel up above farther down river and found a place for access to Wapiti a little farther down on the outside of the bend (the next morning we had to track our boats back up to the main channel – which was heading off to the right – because the channels to the left hadn't enough water). We camped just below a main parking lot with playground on the far side, at a walk-in area with picnic tables and elevated bbq-style fire pits overlooking the river. Very kind of Parks to have opened one small bathroom facility further back in the drive-in camping section.



Figure 10: Camped at Wapiti Campground, overlooking the Athabasca River, below the large parking area and facilities building. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

### Day 3: Swift River, Scenic Mountains

Start: 283554 on 83 D/16 (9:30 am) Wapiti Campground

End: 274795 (3:30 pm) at Athabasca Island (backcountry campsite)

Travel: 30 km, 6 hrs on the river, 5 km/hr.

Running Total: 48 km paddled

#### Description:

In at Wapiti, the class I rapid was significant, with many exposed rocks on river right half of the river, and with a hole on river left. We scouted it from the river left bank. We ran it straight through, keeping just off, to the left, of the rocks on river right. Quite large waves, swamped our lead boat up to the gunwales. Others did fine. Not much for rapids after that, but river goes into small channels and braids as it widens out. A stop and short hike up Old Fort Point provides a wonderful view, with added value for paddlers interested in fur trade history and repeat photography (it was one of Bridgland's stations).<sup>3</sup> The river is still moving fast with some undercut banks, so watch for sweepers and strainers as trees fall in and get hung up on banks and gravel bars. We generally followed the most water. We stopped for lunch at the John Moberly homestead site at 303705 on 83 D/16, we pulled out at a small beach, and climbed the steep bank up to the single-track trail and open field where the remnants of cabins remain with an interpretive plaque. John Moberly and Marie Joachim's family were among other homesteading families (including those of Ewan, Adolphus, and William Moberly, as well as Isadore Findlay and Adam Joachim) who were forced to leave the Upper Athabasca River Valley after the creation of Jasper Forest Park in 1907. Descendants of these families live in Alberta and Northern BC, and they continue to visit the homestead sites and work with Parks Canada for their preservation, interpretation, and management.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Various photos by Bridgland and repeated by Rhemtulla and Higgs for comparison, including from Old Fort Point and along the rail bed beside Brule Lake, can be found MacLaren's (2005) *Mapper of Mountains*.

<sup>4</sup> Contact Ron Pelletier at [Ron.Pelletier@unbc.ca](mailto:Ron.Pelletier@unbc.ca) for more information, and/or visit [mountainmetis.com](http://mountainmetis.com). Also see the chapter *Homesteading in the Athabasca Valley to 1910* by Peter J. Murphy for an interview with Edward Wilson Moberly in MacLaren (2007).



Figure 11: John Moberly homestead site. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

On river left—along Jasper Airfield—Parks Canada has recently been conducting prescribed fires to reduce wildfire risk and restore of the open grassland (as had been done in the past by homesteading families and through naturally-occurring fire). Farther downstream, on both sides of the river, there is evidence of both wild and prescribed fire. At Athabasca Island boats can be unloaded and/or taken out directly under the current large and old tent sign. Many logs jammed up on the upstream end of the island, but the downstream end has a wide sandy beach that is ideal for landing and swimming, but it is a little further from the kitchen site. There is a nice fire ring, a bear locker, a grey water trap/sump, and tent pads (in sand). The wind can be quite strong.



Figure 12: Tents pitched on pads at Athabasca Island backcountry site. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.



Figure 13: Looking downstream towards the beach with the main flow of the Athabasca beyond the swimmers. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

#### **Day 4: Jasper Lake, Swirling Waters**

Start: 274795 (8:25 am) at Athabasca Island (backcountry campsite).

End: 422982 on 83F/4 (1:15 pm) at Brule Campsite (across river from Brule train tunnel) near the park boundary. Note: the campsite is still in decent shape but is unsigned, and no longer supported by Parks Canada.

Travel: 34 km, 5 hrs on the river, 6.8 km/hr

Running Total: 82 km paddled.

#### **Description:**

Woke up at 6:00 am, on the river at 8:25 am to cross Jasper Lake while water was calm, making it much easier to see the channel. Without the channel boats can run aground on the sand and walking may be necessary; so you need to stick to the deeper river channel. The 1:50,000 topo shows the channel relatively well, it's still quite accurate. We had a beautiful paddle across this lake. Then we stopped at Jasper House historic site (river left), which is just past the entry of the Rocky River (river right). There is a good, but narrow, sand and cobble beach for landing. We ate lunch close to where the Snake Indian River enters the Athabasca – the confluence is not clear. While there are no rapids, there are a lot of downed and beached trees, log jams, sweepers and strainers along this section of the river, which often braids, and in places the banks are being strongly undercut by the river causing strange cross-currents and upwelling. We arrived at Brule Campsite (river right) at 1:15 pm; it's just past and across from the Brule train tunnel (river left), on a point of land (upstream side is very sandy) just before the park boundary, and is accessed from down-stream around the bend in the river to the right, away from the tunnel. There are no signs marking the camp, but there is an ATV track and a boat launch on this down-stream side, making for good access. The campsite has flat ground for tents (but no tent pads), a fire ring, picnic table (rotting out in places), and privy. There had been a bear hang pole between two trees very close to the picnic table. One of the trees has now fallen making it unsafe and unusable. There are no bear lockers. We used sealed barrels and stashed our food far up the ATV road. Many trains come through, as many or more than one per hour, even very early in the morning. So, ear plugs might help.



Figure 14: Heading out onto Jasper Lake. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.



Figure 15: At Brule Camp, just before crossing the park boundary, with train tunnel visible in the background on the far side of the river. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

### Day 5: Brule Lake to the Take Out

Start: 422982 on 83F/4 (8:20 am) at Brule Campsite.

End: 626201 on 83 F/5 (2:30 pm) at Willow Creek Road Bridge, Hinton, AB.

Travel: 35 km, 6 hr on the river, 5.8 km/hr.

Running Total: 117 km paddled.

#### Description:

Left camp, crossed out of the park, and made our way across Brule Lake. Like Jasper Lake, Brule Lake is very shallow, and finding the river channel through the sand is very helpful. Unlike for Jasper Lake, the topo map shows nothing about the channel. There are substantial dunes as you enter the lake. Despite our relatively-early start, we had a light headwind that made finding the channel difficult. We had to walk a number of times, but not for long. We eventually found deeper water on the West side, and the water got deeper towards the last 1/3 of the lake. Quick travel once again with rough water coming down from Brule Lake towards Hinton. After going

under the CN rail bridge, before getting to Old Entrance, you can see the abandoned Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR) rail bed on river left, close to the bank. Old Entrance was the last CNoR station before entering Jasper Forest Park and the Rocky Mountains; it has been restored as a B&B that celebrates its history, and offers trail rides. We stopped for lunch there at 11:30 am. The river then passes under Highway 40 bridge and through some stunning rock walls and bends before straightening out towards Hinton. We paddled to our take out at the single-lane Willow Creek Road Bridge with good access (large traffic pullout) on downstream, river left side.



Figure 16: Looking back towards Roche Miette, with its skyward-pointing face pronounced in the morning sun, as we paddle out onto Brule Lake. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.



Figure 17: Our take out at the Willow Creek Road Bridge, Hinton. Photo taken from downstream, on river left, looking back to the bridge towards the direction from where we came. Photo courtesy of ORTM at UNBC.

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