

The Petawawa River:

A Whitewater Boater's Companion to George Drought's Guidebook

PURPOSE: This guide was written as a supplement the *Petawawa River Whitewater Guide* by George Drought (Friends of Algonquin Park, 2013) for kayakers and canoeists with experience paddling closed deck boats (or open boats with floatation) and who are comfortable navigating whitewater up to class 4.

ABOUT THE RIVER & ALGONQUIN PARK: Paddling a long section of a river like the Petawawa is different than the day trips most whitewater boaters are used to. The primary difference is the amount of flatwater between the rapids. In reality, a trip down the Petawawa is a flatwater journey with a bunch of rapids. So much flatwater and so few rapids, in fact, that most travelers paddle the Petawawa in open canoes and portage the rapids. But the entire river, including all the rapids, can be paddled in long whitewater boats (12 ft or longer) much more efficiently than in tripping canoes. In long whitewater boats, the flatwater will pass by more quickly, though you should be prepared to spend many hours of each day crossing flat sections of the Pet.

The rapids, while extraordinary, are not intrinsically worth the trouble. You can find equally good whitewater on day trips. It's the setting of those rapids as well as the calm sections between them – remote wilderness – that make a trip on the Pet worth it. The lakes you'll cross would be littered with speedboats and jet skis if they were accessible by road. You may not see another person for days. And in between the rush that begins when you see a horizon line and ends in the pool below a big drop, look around and enjoy the scenery. You'll miss it as soon as you get home.

ABOUT THE RAPIDS: Most of Drought's guidebook is sufficient for navigating the rapids of the Petawawa. The more challenging rapids, many of which Drought claims are declared to be "unrunnable" drops or side channels, proved to be quite reasonable for us. Because of this, I wrote this to supplement his guidebook.

The information below coincides with the page numbers in Drought's book as well as the approximate distance from the Brent boat launch on Cedar Lake. I tried to add perspective at both high and low water levels to all of the rapids that were worth further explanation. The rapids for which Drought's explanation is sufficient are not discussed. Some photos of the drops are included when possible.

After reading about the rapids, I have included some further information about paddling the best section in a single day, and camping along the river.

Enjoy!

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Cedar Lake Rapids (6.5 km from Brent; Drought, Page 38)

The dam at Cedar Lake is runnable at all levels. The dam itself makes up only the right half of the lake's outflow. The other half, on the left, is choked with chunky rocks that look to have been placed there intentionally. At high water, we found a clear line down the left that started left of center. At the top of this line, be careful because there are a lot of pinning rocks. The flow is light, though, and pins should be relatively easy to recover from. At low water, there is a break in the main section of the dam on the right that is runnable. However, you will be hitting rocks hard as soon as you drop, and then for the next ten meters or more.

Surprise Rapids (9 km from Brent; Drought, Page 38)

Drought's beta on this rapid is good, though overly dramatic.

Devil's Chute Rapids (11 km from Brent; Drought, Page 40)

On both trips, we took the left channel because it's rated higher and Drought makes a minor mention of a runnable falls. At both water levels, the falls had a horizon line that gave us enough pause for a scout, but after looking we saw a good line on the left (at low water) and from right to left (at higher flow). Then, the ledge was a simple boat scout.



High water line in the ledge at the top of Devil's Chute Rapid (Photo: Joe Young)

Cascade & Whitehorse Rapids (24 km from Brent; Drought, Page 44)

Drought describes a ledge which is unrunnable at the top of this rapid, which I cannot recall. We definitely ran this entire rapid in both low and high water, so not only is it runnable it is not memorable.

MacDonald Rapids (34 km from Brent; Drought, Pages 50 – 53)

The 5 km section of the Petawawa beginning with MacDonald has the best concentration of whitewater on the entire river. On our 2019 trip we enjoyed it so much that after we finished our multiday trip, we found our way back here for a day trip. I will share the details of that excursion after my rapids descriptions.

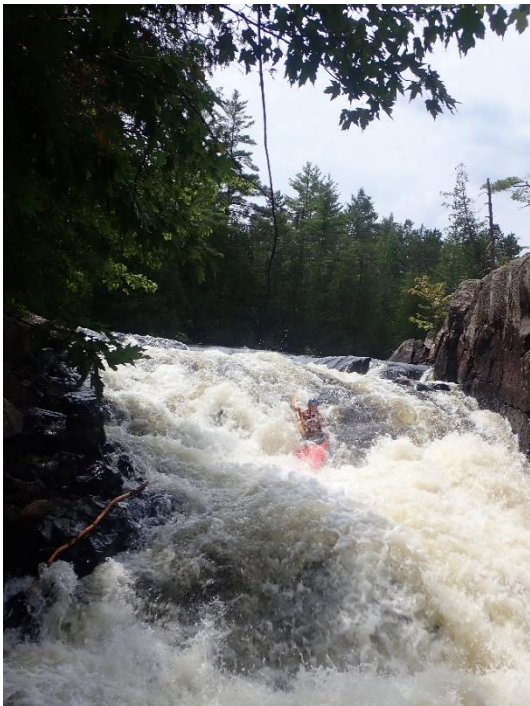
In MacDonald, Class 3 – 4 rapids (some arguably class 5 at high water) are stacked in relatively close proximity for nearly 2 km. In 2014, the official portage trail was the abandoned railbed on river left, but by 2019 park employees had cut a more scenic (aka, rugged) trail on river right. Make no mistake about it: the railbed is far more reasonable for walking and carrying gear, but more than that it is better for scouting. The portage along the railbed ends with an access trail to the left that comes just before the bridge (and remember this bridge if you intend to come back for these rapids another day).

In high water, we portaged two of MacDonald's rapids, but in low water we ran all of it and in both situations we carried our gear the entire way around MacDonald. This takes a long time, perhaps an hour or more, but that way we could run the rapids in empty boats, which I recommend. Even then you should expect to get out to scout a couple more times as you navigate the river. In general MacDonald is a sequence of well-defined, fun drops with little time to recover between. Two drops in particular are worth breaking down, and they come at the two places in MacDonald where the river splits around islands.

The first one is the very first of MacDonald's rapids. The left channel requires dropping into a hole (which we did at high water) and paddling hard to escape its hydraulic. It can be scouted from the railbed or from the island. The right channel can be scouted from the island or from the river right shore, and is a 2 m falls with a flake in the center that can be paddled over easily (the left side of this right channel looks runnable but some retentive hydrology). Below that the rapids are boat scoutable until the next island. The rapids on both sides of the second island are both scoutable from the island. Just like the first island, the channel on the left requires a move through a hole (though easier than the first) and the right channel is more difficult. The right channel is a 3m cascading falls through two holes, and it was the site of our first swim in our 2019 trip. We were glad to have emptied boats for that.



*Low water view of the right channel around the first island in MacDonald Rapids
Right channel (Photo: Matt Pascal)*



*Low water views of the channels around the second island in MacDonald Rapids
Right channel (Photo: Matt Pascal)*



Left channel (Photo: Brian Joly)

Bypass Falls (36 km; Drought, Page 54)

Drought does not provide a description of this 3-drop sequence, probably because the portage of all three is done with exceptional ease (a glance of the map will explain). However, the drops are runnable at both low and high water, and the final drop – an intimidating piece of water – is the one worth scouting.

The first two drops in Bypass are boat scoutable. Then, the third is worth scouting on river left. In high water, we portaged our gear around (and camped on river right at the foot of the bottom falls). The high water line is a “sneak” on the extreme left, dropping into a medium-sized eddy and making a right turn into the outflow. In low water, there is a line that goes straight down the rapid, right of center, which we ran in loaded boats.



The high water line in the second drop of Bypass Falls (photo: Joe Young)



*Lines through the third and biggest drop of Bypass Falls
High water sneak on the far left side (photo: Joe Young)*



Low water line down the center (photo: Matt Pascal)

Devil's Cellar Rapids (37 km from Brent; Drought, Page 54)

Devil's Cellar has one intimidating feature, a large sticky hole at the top of the rapid with no lines around it. At high water in 2014, none of us attempted to run it. Unfortunately, that meant we were portaging the entirety of a long rapid because there was no friendly launch below the hole. In 2019, at low water, we gave it a shot. There is an entry on the far right side of the hole requiring a move to the left just below the hole, but this line caused a flip in shallow water, and a swim. A second attempt at the rapid was taken left of center, punching the hole at a spot where a downstream-oriented seam assists in evading the main recirculation of the hydraulic. It was successful.

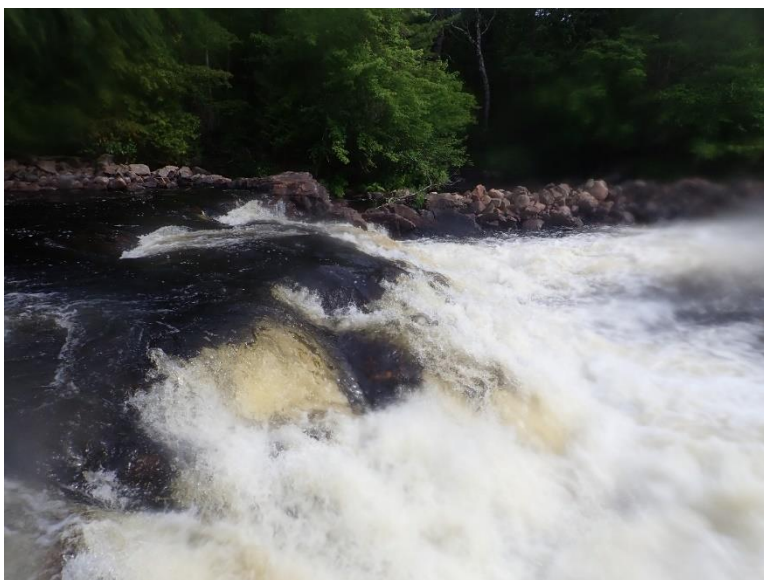
Below the hole, the water is very pushy, but a line is there. It goes around two holes and a series of waves before the river splits in two. The split is caused by a man-made line of rocks and we ran the right channel. In that channel, the line at low water went from left to right through small holes and around boulders.

The Temptations (38 km from Brent; Drought, Page 56 – 57)

Unlike MacDonald, this sequence of rapids has enough flatwater between them to enable recovery in case of an upset. They are all boat-scoutable in low water, and the “unrunnable” channels and falls are in actuality fun, technical low-volume passages through rock gardens. You’re going to scrape and perhaps pin. In high water we ran them all but stayed in the channels that Drought wrote off as easier.

Poplar Rapids (39 km from Brent; Drought, Page 58)

For five years I thought about Poplar. In high water, we portaged without looking at any of it since the portage trail is far from the river. But in low water, we ran Poplar all the way through after getting out for careful scouts at a few different places. The rapid begins with easy, shallow whitewater at an island split. Both channels are very shallow and pinning above the big drops is a distinct possibility. Then, the first big drop comes after the channels behind the islands converge; it can be run over a flake just to the right of the main flow. For the second big rapid, we picked our way over small boulder drops to the right of the main channel, which looked ugly thanks to big, sharp rocks strewn about everywhere.



Low water at one of two big drops in Poplar. We ran off the center. (Photo: Matt Pascal)

The Crooked Chute (59 km from Brent; Drought, Page 64)

The Crooked Chute is without question the most powerful constriction on the river. It is very easy to scout on the right. At low water, the rapid is a wave train with a few nice eddies to catch to control progress. In high water, the Crooked Chute is a torrent. There is an obvious line on the right, but most of the current is pushing into a giant hydraulic and so nobody in our party decided to go for it.

After Crooked Chute, the big rapids are now behind you. Relax and enjoy the remaining small drops. Soak up the amazing scenery, especially at The Natch, and get ready for the biggest challenge – the last 20 km of flatwater across the lakes.

Day Trip: Paddling the “Upper” Pet, from MacDonald to Poplar:

The best whitewater on the Petawawa is deep within the interior of Algonquin Park, but is accessible as a day trip to boaters willing to work through some grit. Even better, it can be done with only one vehicle.

I must first mention that paddling this section of the Petawawa requires about 4 km of hiking on the abandoned railbed to the put-in above MacDonald and then about 4 km of walking or jogging on the road after paddling. The walk to the put in is of questionable legality until you come to the train bridge, which you must cross, and which is clearly posted as trespassing. That being said, by the time you’ve made it to this bridge you will be in the middle of an inaccessible (for the most part) section of the park and the likelihood of being noticed by anybody other than backcountry travelers and wildlife feels to be negligible.

The trip begins with the long drive toward Lake Travers. About 0.5 km before reaching the lake and the bridge over it, a left turn takes you to a point where you can access the abandoned railbed. This road can be found on detailed maps. Leave your vehicle here and start walking up the railbed with your boat and gear. Sneakers are essential, which you’ll also need at the end of the day. The walk is easy but long. Prepare for bugs and, in the summertime, a grueling walk through the heat. When you finally cross the bridge, you’re at the bottom of MacDonald Rapids. The next time you see flatwater on the river, find a launch.

After paddling the 5 km stretch to the bridge over Lake Travers, and all of its whitewater gems, switch back to sneakers and start up the road for the car. It’s only about 4km to reach it.

CAMPING ALONG THE RIVER: Paddling the Petawawa can be blissful if you’re prepared for what the river and forest throw at you. In addition to bringing top paddling skills, you should be prepared for cold water temperatures into June, possible foul weather, and of course the possibility of the Canadian onslaught of mosquitoes and black flies. When you pay your Park entrance fees and camping permits, you’ll need to specify where you are camping, though the rangers admitted to us that rough approximations of camping locations are sufficient. In short, if you want to stop paddling for the day and see a site you like, you should take it, or if you want to keep going past the one you reserved, you might as well.

When possible, our campsite selection was primarily motivated by the winds so as to minimize bug exposure.

Having paddled the Pet only twice (plus a third time down the best section, see above), I only have knowledge of a few sites and other resources should be consulted. The campsites my groups used are detailed below.

- *Radiant Lake* (17 km): The sites on the left bank of the lake past the outflow of the North River are tucked into the trees. The rocky beach is stunning, and on our 2019 trip a strong wind was coming in off the lake, all but obliterating the bug activity.
- *Bypass Falls* (36 km): This campsite is extraordinary and is a perfect set up to run some of the better rapids with empty boats. It sits adjacent to a rock spit that juts out into the big pool below the falls, at the end of the portage trail. In 2014 we left our boats at the top of the portage trail, carried our gear to the bottom and set up our campsite. We spent the evening looking for our line. The next morning, we walked back to our boats and paddled them down to our camp. I can imagine a few days at this site with days spent playing in the three drops that make up Bypass.
- *Poplar Rapids/Lake Travers* (40 km): This site is on the right, just below the bridge over Lake Traverse. It was chosen for our 2019 trip out of convenience: we left our boats and gear at the top of Poplar Rapids and carried our camping equipment to the site so we could wake up the next morning to paddle Poplar. The site was useful for these purposes but it’s in the woods and so the bugs were awful. It is also adjacent to a road, which sees very little traffic, but in the summertime, there will be a truck or two.
- *Lake Travers* (43 km): In 2014 the water was high and our group spent nearly 8 hours navigating only 6 km of river because of scouting, portaging, and a time-sucking episode in which we started down the far left channel at Poplar Rapids and had to bushwack and ferry a trajectory across two islands to get to the portage. After all of that work, we wanted to at least make some mileage so we crossed Lake Travers and took one of the sites on the left bank after the lake narrows some. These sites are accessible by motor boats, and the one we decided upon had a cooking grate, abandoned chairs, and a “table” created out of sticks and twine.
- *The Natch* (64.5 km): One of the most scenic campsites I’ve ever used, anywhere. Just as the big cliff comes into view, we took the first site on the left on a rocky point. It was windy enough to keep the bugs to a minimum, but we still needed netting. The next site, only 50 m away but tucked back into the outside of the bend in the river, was inhabited by a group of Ontarians who were assaulted by mosquitos.
- *Smith Lake* (87 km): One of the last sites on the Pet, we took one of the sites on the right just before the take out. It was selected as a matter of convenience because it was late in the day and we didn’t want to get off the river and have

to find camping. The site was surprisingly good as far as bugs are concerned, and had a beautiful solemnity to it. Then, after dark we were irritated by a lonely whippoorwill screaming for a mate all night long. It even tried mating with one of our tents.

ABOUT ME: I started kayaking on the Potomac River, near Washington, DC, in 2003. I progressed to a class 3 boater within a few years, and then moved to the whitewater state of West Virginia, where my skills and experience progressed into “easy” class 5, but life got in the way of further progress. I now paddle at that level with most of my river days in the watershed of the Cheat River in WV, the Youghiogheny in PA and MD, and the Potomac.

In 2013, I began to look into multi-day kayaking excursions that are within a day of driving from my home in Pittsburgh, PA. In late May 2014, I did my first trip: The 89 km Algonquin Park section of the Petawawa River from Cedar Lake to McManus Lake. The trip took our group three days with camps at Brent, Bypass Falls, Lake Travers, and Smith Lake. The water was high, so we portaged some of the rapids, eager to return someday for another shot. It began an annual tradition of multi-day trips and in July 2019, I went back to the Petawawa with one of my 2014 partners. The water was lower this time, and so we were able to paddle the entire river with no portages.