

Kayaking Beyond the Edge

James Bay Kayaking Expedition Analysis

James Bay has a history of being a tough place to survive. The Bays first victims were also its first visitors, four crewmembers from Captain Thomas James's ship the 'Henrietta Maria'. They died in 1631 as they wintered over on Charlton Island during the first detailed exploration of James Bay. In more contemporary times, the nineteen eighties and nineties, saw nine perish.. The first three became fish food while trying to canoe from the Albany River to the Moose River. Six others perished when their 32 foot canoe freighter was overwhelmed by sea water. I would be the first solo kayak expedition to challenge these waters and hoped not to be the tenth fish food victim.

My first visit to James Bay was a recon mission to explore environmental conditions. This exploration lasted for almost fourteen days. On a first expedition to a region one must develop a plan of attack based on reliable data. On this particular expedition little information was available from which to make life and death decisions. No one lived long enough to tell what happened out there. The locals, Cree and whites alike, seldom venture to these shores in non-ice conditions. Even the Ministry of Natural Resources and Polar Bear Provincial Park Rangers lacked accurate information on shore and shoal conditions.

What I found was both remarkable and daunting. The tides could be as high as four meters with a very soft topography. That meant tidal shoals up to eight miles in depth. This was some seriously flat land. Being caught on the shoals in a storm would be fatal. Sea water temperatures hovered around 38 degrees. Storms were consistent at two per week and the sun shined maybe, two days a week. This was not a great place to work on your tan!

Drinking water, however, was the biggest obstacle to overcome. Finding dependable and consistent fresh water was very difficult due to saltwater intrusion into the tundra and muskeg terrain. This terrain is present on the majority of the west coast of James Bay. I found out later that I was drinking at least 3 percent seawater most of the time.

Shoal conditions also presented serious mobility issues due to their inconsistent surface conditions. The best was hard- pan sandy clay. The worst and most prevalent was very sticky 6-inch mud, which made mobility radically difficult.

Lastly was the verdant mosquito population. I do believe that James Bay mosquitoes are the worst that I have ever encountered, anywhere. These were just some of the environmental issues. Coupled with the logistical, medical and safety issues, I could see that attempting this expedition would be a very difficult, if not an impossible endeavor.

Kayaking the nine miles down the Moose River was no big thing. I left on a semi-clear day with winds that were quite breezy, enough to white cap the Moose. Near its mouth, the river is probably close to a mile wide. One aspect that struck me about this part of Canada is the remoteness that one feels a mile from town. It is an interesting feeling to be alone so quickly! As I paddled past the east end of the Ship Shoals Island I turned the bow north into the heady waters of James Bay. The excitement welled up inside me, I was finally here!

The sea state was calm with waves running about four foot, James Bay is seldom flat! I paddled about three miles north of the island before moving to shore for my first encampment on the Bay. The tide by this time was heading out. I pulled my kayak, the Minnow, into the sea grasses and then way into shore to setup camp.

After camp was setup and dinner eaten I decided to discover some of the land and shore around me. Fortunately, there usually was a welcome wind which helped keep the mosquitoes at bay when hiking around. In addition to some water, I also always carried my shotgun whenever I hiked around. There are lots of black bears down here. As I moved farther north of Attiswapiskat polar bears would replace the black bears. You can never be too prepared when wandering around polar bears.

James Bay is actually pretty country, even if it is, quite swampy. A sea berm is fairly continuous all along the coast and I found out later that this was the right spot to be. It is the highest place, seemed to have fewer flying hazards and was always dry except in the rain. The tidal shoals kept getting larger as the tide rolled out and it went out in a hurry. It receded at the pace of a fast stroll. This was totally awesome for me to see. The surface was a silty sticky 6-inch muck that was difficult to hike in but I was too excited to stay ashore. As I moved farther into the shoal zone, I realized that the mosquitoes stayed closer to the shore. This I completely enjoyed!

I also discovered that only the first mile to three miles of the shoals was a muck zone. Beyond this the shoals were a harder surface and much easier to walk on. It occurred to me that getting caught in a storm way out on the shoal would be a horrific experience. The waves could beat you to death and the cold seawater would probably sap all your life giving heat. The reality of that suspicion was confirmed on the following season's northern push.

I glanced at my watch and saw it was getting close to 9:30 p.m. The sun was heading for its nightly nap and so should I. As I trekked back to camp, I thought about what a great learning experience this walk had been. It gave me a rather interesting appreciation for what was in store for me in the future. Back at my tent I performed my ritual of jumping up and down and swinging my arms and legs wildly to get the mosquitoes off my outer clothing. Finishing the mosquito dance I dove into my tent and secured it for the evening. At this point the next ritual started, smashing all the little visitors that snuck into to my tent to devourer me during the night. I dispatched over a hundred into mosquito heaven each night. The only time they left me alone was when it was raining, windy or when I was out on the water.

At some point in the night I realized that my little tent home was no longer attached to mother earth but to the sea. I was afloat. It seems the tides came in much deeper than I had believed, which was another needed lesson. It was kind of messy with four inch's of water setting me adrift but also soft and comfy. Not much could be done about it now, other than sleep in the comfort of a dry floating tent. This was one of the best night's sleeps I had in the wilderness. It sure does beat sleeping on an ice wall at -25 degrees. Fortunately, before leaving home, I seam-sealed my tent numerous times and this was the marvelous payoff.

My regimen for the next seven days was to kayak, explore, observe and record in journals all that I experienced and of course to move my tent to the high berm. I learned a great deal about this region of Canada. I remembered my exciting and long 186 mile train ride from Cochrane,

Ontario to Moosonee on the Moose River. Then after paddling the last nine miles on the river to James Bay, I realized how immense this area was. The Bay was larger than life and more beautiful than I expected. The most important lesson though is that James Bay wanted to kill all that challenged her. It would be difficult not to become fish-food. I promised myself that this next victim would not be me. One other constant irritant was heading out into the wild to add to the fertilizer stock. Once the mosquitoes saw exposed flank-skin they attacked with a vengeance. You did your business quickly and covered up. They won more often than I on these excursions. I really did enjoy the stormy weather at these times.

The following June found the Minnow floating down the Moose River again, better prepared for the conditions that I experienced the summer before. As a mountaineer, ice climber and rock climber you seem to always understand your ability to breathe after an expedition. On this expedition with all the unknowns I understood that my chances were not great at either getting to Peawanuck or even surviving. There were still so many variable conditions that I have so little knowledge. I completely understood these odds but decided I possessed the skills to survive at the very least. I was sure there would be some very sporty days ahead. I just needed to apply my mountaineering and kayaking skills to the task. Now, though the river was white capped and the tide was up, as I neared the Bay. As the Moose turned to the Bay I could feel the power of the waves, currents and tides beneath my boat. In the back of my brain I knew things were not good but decided to continue north to my area of operations the year before. There I would stay for a day to get a good feel of what was happening.

That feeling was a bacterial infection in my gut. The next morning I was feeling fairly sick. I generally carry an assortment of antibiotics, mostly for respiratory infections, sinus infections and soft tissue injuries. Not much for intestinal infections except Flagly for giardia. I suspected that Cipro was necessary but had not packed this in my medical kit. Medical issues are serious problems on solo expeditions; even a small injury or illness can be fatal. I broke camp and headed back to Moosonee.

Kayaking up river sick is a lot less enjoyable than going downstream well. Getting back too late, I just set up my tent in the park and went to sleep. In the morning, the clinic confirmed my diagnosis, a bacterial intestinal infection. I was given some antibiotics and told to rest for sometime. Sometime turned into three days in bed at the Polar Bear Lodge with another four days of recuperation to gain back my strength and do some refitting and elimination of gear.

Feeling better and much lighter, I launched on the Moose, again. This time I had no feelings of impending doom. James Bay greeted me with four foot seas and an incoming tide. The Minnow was moving much quicker as she had shed about 25 pounds. That afternoon I regained my previous position, made camp, did the mosquito dance and went for an early visit with the dream dude.

Waking up early on this new day I wanted to get to a position just north of North Bluff Point. North Bluff is actually one of the more visually identifiable points on the Bay. It has a three foot elevation gain at high tide. These are huge cliffs by James Bay standards. The weather was just about perfect, partly cloudy, temperatures in the 50 degree range with the wind chill, water about 38 degrees, and a wind blowing off shore at about 10 mph. The sea state was acceptable with small waves, maybe four feet high. An almost perfect day to kayak!

The tide was moving in so I would be in good water for the next 6 hours or so. Paddling along the shoreline I met a fox that was walking north. He stopped and observed me as I did him. I am sure he was wondering what kind of knucklehead was hanging out in his territory. I also saw literally thousands of Canada geese. Small bays were filled with the birds. This was an awesome sight!

As the tide was pulling back I headed to my safe haven on the sea berm. My GPS pegged my position as just south of Little Pisquamish Point about ten miles from where I started in the morning. Not a bad day of learning and reacting to the water. One aspect that did alarm me was the amount of swamp between the shore and the sea berm. I had to drag the Minnow a couple of hundred yards inland to be near the berm for a safe tie down point. I hoped that this was just an isolated case rather than being the norm.

Since I had a significant amount of daylight left, I thought a nice hike was in order. Packing up the shotgun and water bottles I went out to search for some water. The tide was moving out so the streams should be clear of salt water. My map showed a medium size creek near my camp. Hiking behind the berm I searched for the creek. The map had to be wrong. There was no creek to be found in this super flat land.

I headed back to the berm to gain a little high ground for a better observation position. As I scanned with my binoculars I saw in the distance a small depression in the grasses. I hiked down and found that this was my medium sized creek. I pumped water through my filter to fill all of my water bottles. It was fairly brackish, tannin stained and brownish red but was the best that the area offered and it was wet and cold. With tea or a flavored drink powder, the water actually turned out to be quite tasty. At this point, I did not know that this tasty water was about 3 percent saltwater and not very good for my kidneys. However, at the current moment, ignorance was bliss. The water was wet and was keeping me alive.

That afternoon I hiked many miles in this backcountry area. I saw a few animals, more fox, some mink and tons of mosquitoes. The bears seem to stay inland away from the mosquito filled coastal swamp. Thankfully there was a constant wind blowing to help keep them mostly away from me.

Back at camp dinner was next on my schedule. On this expedition I ate, tasty MRE dinners. I knew from the previous year that dependable good water would be a challenge. Usually on expeditions I use dry food stocks such as soups and noodle dinners with textured vegetable proteins and dehydrated vegetables. These are tasty, light in weight and provide adequate nutrition. This expedition required food that was already hydrated and ready to eat. Wornick Foods answered the call with all the Meals Ready to Eat, or MRE's, for the expedition and training. These dinners are the same military rations that all the US military services eat while in the field. Wornick dieticians worked with me to get a ration that contained about 1700 calories in less than a half pound of food. I ate three of these each day. Each meal was composed of an entrée, applesauce, a pastry, crackers with cheese and peanut butter, a chocolate cookie, hot chocolate, a drink powder and tea powder. Some of the entrée's were ham slices, macaroni and cheese, chicken patty, Italian dinner, Mexican dinner and my favorite, meatloaf. I would club a shark for my meatloaf dinner days. As a side note, when I ran out of water I would scavenge my applesauce as my drink. I did run out of water on a couple of occasions.

After my mosquito dance I played my little handheld video poker game. This was my one comfort item and served as my only entertainment. Sleep came soon to me on this wonderful night.

The dawn was quite nice. A high tide was due in at about 10 a.m. I had about six hours before the tide was out too far into the tidal shoals zone. My resupply in Attiswasipat was about five days out. The next supply point would be at the end of the expedition in Peawanuck, almost 450 miles from Attiswasipat. Attiswasipat is the only village on the coast that could serve as resupply point. While I had planned the expedition well, I was still curious to see if I had enough supplies to finish this Hudson Bay section alive. That is why I was taking it a little slower on this James Bay section to see how things were working or not working. The Hudson Bay section of the trip was very close to the edge of survival. Any mistakes north of Attiswapiskat would probably be fatal. Mistakes here were not much better. Fish food is just a mistake or two away in these waters. With a little water under the Minnow and the promise of more I headed to Big Pisquamish Point and hopefully a decent shore line just to the north of the point.

The sea state was a bit higher today with waves running about five feet. Still these waves were nothing serious and actually a bit more fun than the flats that I had been running in the previous days. Today was great exercise and a way to test my body and skills. Kayaking in shoals is a bit sportier than in an open ocean with deeper seafloor topography. In shallow water the waves reform quicker and bounce off the shallow shoal. This extreme movement of water allows waves to form in all areas and move in all directions. It is like kayaking in a washing machine, everything from everywhere. It gets exciting and more challenging as the waves get more turbulent. However, kayaking is much slower, takes much more energy and diverts your attention away from much that is going on around you.

As I moved closer to the safety of the shore at high tide I could see a storm moving in from Hudson Bay. It appeared to cover most of the northern horizon. I started to move north at a brisker pace. To my dismay the swamp did not seem to be any smaller. Here I began to look at my quickly diminishing options, continue north or head inland through the swamp now. I wanted to be north of Big Pisquamish as the maps indicated the swamp to be nonexistent there. As I headed north the tide also began heading out. Here is where I made an almost fatal misstep. As the tide headed out so did I. I was so intent on gaining a position rather than solidifying a safer position that I could have made when the opportunity was there. By the time I did get north of the Big Pisquamish Point I was over a mile from the shore and in thick mud, with a storm starting to bear down on my position. The most serious issue was that the maps were dead wrong, the swamp was deeper here and the safety of the berm was well over two miles from me. As they say, things were not looking good in river city my friends.

With my boat beached on the shoal I started the one mile portage back to the shoreline. This meant carrying all 200 pounds of my gear in slick muck back to the relative safety of the shoreline. Slogging through slick mud for over five hours I managed to portage all this gear and the Minnow to a safer position but still too far from the sea berm for real safety. The storm now was larger and uglier as it approached. Winds were being felt even though the bulk of the storm was still sometime from striking the area. Waves were smashing into the shoals 5 miles from me. High tide was due about 11pm or so. After looking at all my options I knew that retreating the eighteen or so miles back to North Bluff Point was my best option. Getting inland to the berm

was not a great option. Getting caught in the shallows in storm surf would be hell. I would rather depend on my skills in open water than to be beat to death in a swamp from storm surf. Cold storm surf too! Hypothermia was an ever present enemy even in a dry boat. My plan, I would wait until 10 p.m. and then head into the maelstrom. It would be dark by 11 to 11:30 p.m., after that I would navigate with my headlamp shining on my cockpit mounted compass. This would be a sporty evening for sure and possibly my last sporty evening.

Sitting on the shore I ate a great MRE dinner and made a satellite phone call to my wife, Barb, back in California. We did a little 'hey how are things in the golden state' and then I told her to call Doug in Mosoonee if I did not call by eight in the morning California time. I explained my situation to her 'I was up to my butt in hungry alligators and none were happy'. I detailed the looming storm to her, and the pleasant little midnight paddle on James Bay that I had in store. My instruction for Doug, who was an officer in Mosoonee with the Ontario Provincial Police and a friend, was for a body search. If I did not check in I checked out sometime that night. This was a wonderful conversation to have with your wife. She knew from my past expeditions that this is the cost of doing business. Some never see the next sunrise. With those words we said our closing greetings and I went on with some final preparations in the remaining daylight. I cuddled up in the Minnow, munching some food between combat naps waiting for the storm and the incoming tide.

As predicted the tide and the storm both rolled in. What a fun event this was going to be! The storm was blowing fairly strong with sustained winds at about 20 mph. The rain was lashing my face with the force of a slap from a jilted lover. This was not good and I was still on shore. I started to head south the eighteen or so miles to North Bluff. It was about 10:30 pm and my night was just beginning. By 11:30 the light had diminished to total darkness. The clouds absorbed any light from stars or moon. The only light was my headlamp shining in a vast sea of water and waves and wind. The sea state was getting wild as the wind howled. Waves would rise and fall breaking and reforming driven by these maniacal winds. The noise was deafening as water collapsed upon itself in this dance of uncontrolled motion. On the crest of the wave the Minnow balanced for a few milliseconds and I wondered if I would move forward into the next trough or slide sideways and roll into a very cold watery bath and serious rescue situation. Time seemed frozen as we teetered on the crest. Finally, the nose dropped as we raced into the deep trough of the next and new towering wave. The bow of the Minnow dug into these waves and climbed the next steep watery escarpment. My spray skirt shed waves as they washed over me.

At times I was wondering if I should be slogging my way through a wet, miserable swamp but deep inside I knew the decision was the correct one. My training and determination convinced me of this. Concentration and focus were the keys to survival. Each movement of my paddle and correction of my rudder moved me closer to land and safety. Exhaustion and fatigue were set aside. The power and determination to win, to survive took over. These are powerful weapons to defeat becoming fish food.

It was almost 4 am, and the sun began to cast its glow on the eastern horizon. Remarkably, I was still alive and actually fairing pretty well. The storm was still raging with lots of rain and wind and that jilted lover still slapping me in the face.

Later I was to find that this was one of the larger summer storms from the north. I was the fortunate one to be right in the middle of experiencing it, yeah right! The winds were well above 40 mph with gusts exceeding 50 mph. in Mosoonee. The waves were incredible ranging up to 14 feet and possibly higher. I was able to measure some of the troughs by the length of the Minnow. She is a Seda Kevlar hull 16' 6" boat. I am sure some of the waves that we plowed through were longer than her hull.

I was still fairly dry in the cockpit and pleased with my tenuous hold on life. One problem that was bothering me was that in the darkness I was holding a south/southwest heading as well as I could. As light began to appear, I noticed land was farther away than I would have liked it to be. Not a good position to be in life or on James Bay for that matter. Being pushed out into deeper water was actually better for me. In the shallows, I had the washing machine effect that I would have fought all night to remain in my boat. Out a couple of miles or so the water was deeper and softer. Even though the waves were larger, they were predictable and fairly consistent. Sometimes mistakes can aid you, even on James Bay if you have the skills to use these mistakes. I kicked the course to due west and continued to paddle hard.

I finally made shore about 5 a.m. alive and quite well. Tired, cold even after all the calories used, hungry and pleased to have survived what no one had done before. James Bay, in a storm, at night! Give me the 'stuck on stupid prize' for the week. As the adrenaline stopped flowing and exhaustion began to set in, I realized just how happy I was to be alive.

Once I made it to the sea berm I set up my tent and made two phone calls. The first call was to Barb, I told her of my exciting evening and my obvious success. After that Doug in Mosoonee received a call from me. Living nine miles from the Bay he was not sure if I had survived through the night. He recounted how bad the storm was in town, I recounted how totally awesome it was on the water. Now I was safe and sleep came quickly to me. Around me the storm still raged feeling that it missed an opportunity for James Bay to claim another that violated her presence. I was not fish-food delivered by this storm.

.Later that day I crawled out of bed and munched some breakfast as I relaxed on the sea berm and reflected on the past 24 hours. I was fortunate to be breathing. Looking at the Bay in a more tranquil state it is hard to believe its anger the previous night. I had experienced part of its fury and bore the bruises and damage to prove it. The Minnow sustained significant hull damage when I came into the shore and the rocks. She had one area that was almost holed through. She is a double wrap Kevlar boat and very tough but she was beaten up quite well. While this damage could be repaired in the field, I did not have the needed equipment. Secondly, I was glad to be breathing and did not have any aspirations for another day or night like the last one. As I gazed out to sea I decided to end this attempt to solo kayak James Bay. Paddling back to Mosoonee gave me time to relax and reflect on these past 10 days or so. I began to analyze what went right and wrong on and apply these lessons to my next attempt to solo kayak the Bay. This challenge lingered in my mind.

Upon returning home and consulting with my advisors, both in Canada and the US, we concluded that the largest hurdle is finding consistent fresh water supplies. Salt water intrusion is evident up to nine miles inland on the larger rivers. We concluded that finding good water would be very difficult. Without dependable fresh water no expedition can move forward. My docs also

found that I had sustained some minor kidney damage from the water that I had been drinking. We surmise that most of my water had at least a 3 percent saline concentration. Thus far we have found no way to mitigate this issue. If a dependable water supply could be found I would not hesitate to push my luck again. James Bay is a great challenge. I have over 150 miles on the waters of the Bay, solo and alive. I would love to make the complete push to Peawanuck.

As I continue to research the technologies for desalination in an extremely small hand pump system my attention has turned north again. My challenge for 2009 is a 2,000 mile plus kayak trip on the Yukon River then to Nome across the Bering Sea. More fun and games for me, along with adventure, serenity and of course a new challenge!