

Paddling The Rideau Canal

A Guide to Canoeing and Kayaking

By: Don MacKay

The Rideau Canal stretches 202 km from Kingston to Ottawa, connecting boaters and visitors with an earlier time when canal building was a means of improving trade and defending a growing nation. Today the canal offers the perfect setting for relaxation and recreation, particularly for the paddler.

The Rideau system encompasses 47 locks, 24 lockstations, historic buildings, and two large watersheds: the Rideau and the Cataraqui. The canal was built in the early 19th century under the direction of Lt. Colonel John By of the British Royal Engineers, but native people of the area had been travelling the lakes and rivers of the Rideau route for centuries. In fact, only 19 kilometers of the system is cut channel. The Rideau offers a number of natural paddling environments -- lakes, rivers and wetlands -- showcasing the beauty and diversity of the system. Imagine yourself gliding across the calm waters of the Rideau on a crisp, bright September morning ... the following tips will bring you closer to this enjoyable Rideau Canal experience.

Some hints and suggestions on paddling the canal:

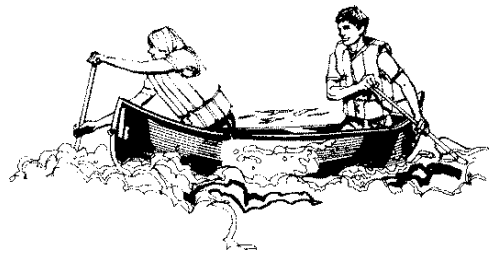
Class of Paddling. Open lake with capsize potential on the large lakes, particularly in extreme conditions such as thunderstorms and strong winds, and Class I river (so long as you avoid the dams - Class IV to Class VI).

Best Time to Paddle. The shoulder season: May, June, September and October.

Why?

- Fewer powerboats, moderate temperatures.
- Best choice of places to pitch a tent and watch an amazing sunset or invigorating sunrise.

Paddling During Peak Season. If you wish to paddle during the height of powerboat season (July and



August), the trip can still be fantastic. Unlike powerboats, canoes and kayaks do not have to follow the channel. In fact, most paddlers prefer to follow the shoreline and take a less direct route from one lock to another, away from the noise and wake of powerboats, and closer to interesting sights on shore. You may even decide to portage into the canal's numerous feeder lakes and rivers.

Paddling Environment (*Following the navigation route*). The canal offers five different paddling environments: lakes (various sizes and depths), marshes, open rivers, narrow channels, and populated rivers.

a) **Kingston to Upper Brewers Locks** - Starts with the Cataraqui Marsh (Class I Wetland) followed by Kingston Mills Lockstation and Colonel By Lake (a shallow, stump littered lake with a shoreline of low rocks and few trees, it expanded as a result of flooding during the construction of the Rideau). The lake leads into a narrow channel and canal with cattails, grasses and overhanging trees.

A great place to paddle and to escape the wind (with the exception of Colonel By Lake, which can become quite rough) with few interruptions. Camping at all lockstations.

b) **Upper Brewers Locks to Narrows Lock (including the Big Rideau)** – Beautiful, clear, scenic lakes with natural shorelines featuring local flora and fauna. Short sections of canal as you enter and exit lockstations along the way. This stretch of the canal is the most popular with boaters and visitors. Great for swimming and fishing. There are many bays and islands – an ideal atmosphere for paddling.

c) **Beveridges Locks to Long Island Locks** - Marsh, winding canal and river intermixed with smaller, shallow, flooded lakes and marshy shorelines.

Preceding Detached Lockstation in Smiths Falls is the Swale (Class I Wetland), the Tay River, the Tay Marsh (Class I Wetland) and Beveridges Locks. Following Detached Lockstation, there are numerous locks that make this area an ideal choice for short day trips, with easy take-out and put-in. En route is a Federal Bird Sanctuary and Class 1 and 2 Wetlands located upstream from Merrickville.

- d) **Long Island Locks to Ottawa** - Winding canal lined with overhanging trees. The density of residential development along the shoreline increases as you approach Ottawa. An urban type of paddling – a chance to get out on the water without having to go far from the city. Largely sheltered from strong winds and waves.

MAPS - There are two excellent sources of maps:

- 1) The *navigation charts* that can be purchased at most lockstations or the main canal office in Smiths Falls.
- 2) *Topographic maps* cover a wider area (feeder lakes, rivers and streams along with highways and road access points) than the boater navigation charts.

Best Direction to Paddle. If you wish to paddle the Rideau in its entirety or to travel a large section, the best direction to paddle is from Kingston to Ottawa for two reasons.

- 1) The prevailing southwest winds blow in that general direction. There is nothing worse than tackling a large lake such as the Big Rideau and paddling for miles into a stiff and rough south wind.
- 2) As you approach Ottawa, the current becomes a factor to a small extent.

Safety Tips

- a) For your safety, *stay away from any dams and waste weirs*. For the most part, these hazards are located near lockstations and marked with either signs or orange and white booms.
- b) *Watch out for boatwash or wake, and be prepared to handle the on-coming waves* either by turning into the wave or using a low brace to stabilize the boat.
- c) *Wind* - check weather forecasts before heading out, and choose your route accordingly. During a multi-day excursion, think ahead and check with lock staff as to the conditions for the next leg of your journey. Know the wind direction (not always a prevailing wind) and how this will affect your craft (head, side, or tail wind).
- d) *During periods of high water (April to mid-June), river flows/currents* increase in strength and paddlers

should be cautious. However, paddling current on the main channel does not exceed Class I. Other sections of the canal (dams and their run-off) can be classified as Class VI.

- e) *Make sure that you carry the following equipment:* a) a lifejacket for each person, on or within easy reach; b) an extra paddle; c) a bailing can; d) a whistle or a horn for emergencies; d) a throw rope - floating rope is preferable.

FEES AND FACILITIES

Camping. Camping is permitted at all lockstations along the Rideau Canal with the exception of Ottawa Locks and Combined Lockstation in Smiths Falls. (Detached Lockstation and Old Sly's Lockstation are a very short paddling distance from Combined – within eyesight). Most lockstations have drinking water, picnic tables, barbecues, and washrooms. Camping \$12 per party (up to 10 people, \$2.00 for each additional person).

Places to Camp or Stay other than Lockstations -

There are several options:

Camping is available on Colonel By Island on Big Rideau Lake. This government island has a beautiful two-km walking trail and an interior lake that opens onto the main lake. Lost Lake is not suitable for powerboats, but great for a nice evening or morning paddle. Deer, osprey and loons are but a few inhabitants of this island.

Murphy's Point Provincial Park, located on the Big Rideau, has several paddle-in camping areas. Rideau River Provincial Park is located near Becketts Landing northwest of Kemptville.

If you prefer other accommodations, there are a number of hotels, lodges and bed & breakfasts along the way.

Lock Passes – The Rideau Canal has developed a lock pass to meet the needs of canoeists and kayakers: the transit pass. This pass enables the paddler to travel the 202 km from one end of the system to the other (either north or south) with no time limit. It is valid for the entire season. However, once you pass through a lock you cannot go back in the opposite direction without purchasing a different type of pass.

The cost of the transit pass is \$3.85/ft., so a pass for a 16' canoe or kayak would total \$61.60 (tax included). It's a bargain! Locking is a great opportunity to rest, have some trail mix, and soak up some sun while the lock staff move you to your next level of paddling. Also, it's a great time to ask the knowledgeable staff about the best places to paddle, or how far it is to the next lake or lockstation.



If you don't wish to buy the transit pass, you may portage around the locks at no cost; or portage at smaller lockstations and buy a single lock or one day pass to eliminate long-distance portages at the large, multi-chamber lockstations.

Length of Trip (end to end) - Obviously, this depends on the weather and skill level of the paddler. In general, you should set aside 6 - 10 days to paddle the entire Rideau Canal. If you'd like to paddle the lakes and rivers throughout the Rideau and the Cataraqui watersheds, plan for an entire summer of canoe tripping.

Two Suggested Paddling Trips

Perth to Beveridges Locks (1 day)

Put-In/Take-Out: *Perth Basin or Beveridges Locks* (Port Elmsley - County Road 18) - Ample parking at either location.

Length: 12 km (7 miles)

Type of Paddling: A gentle winding river and canal with overhanging trees. Includes a section of Class I Wetland Marsh. Very relaxing and scenic with little powerboat traffic.

Hazards: None so long as you stay away from Beveridges Dam. Very protected and sheltered.

Features

- The historic town of Perth with its many old buildings, tree-lined streets and interesting shops.
- As you paddle down the river, you can see sections of the Pike River from which the Tay Canal was built.
- The Tay Marsh and associated wildlife.
- Beveridges Lockstation - this lockstation features two locks separated by a short canal. It's home to a pair of osprey nesting atop a telephone pole near the lower lock. There is an on-site exhibit and a short trail to an overlook.

Hints: The current runs from Perth to Beveridges Locks.

Upper Brewers Locks to Newboro Locks (2 days)

Put-In/Take-Out: *Upper Brewers Lockstation (County Road 12, off Hwy 15) and Newboro Lockstation (County Road 42, off Hwy.15)*. Both places offer ample parking and camping.

Length: 39 km (24 miles)

Type of Paddling: This section of the canal is almost entirely small lakes with a variety of shoreline ranging from steep cliffs to heavily forested shores.

Hazards: During extreme weather conditions, the lakes can get nasty. However, the shoreline is usually not far away.

Camping: The best place to relax *the first night* is Jones Falls Lockstation. Pitch a tent by the turning basin or higher up near the Horseshoe Dam. *The second night*, pack up or stay at Newboro Lockstation, where there are many places to pitch a tent.

Features

- Upper Brewers Lockstation - two manually operated locks in flight.
- A slight detour into Morton Bay from Whitefish Lake. This long, deep, narrow bay has a rocky shore with two very large rock outcroppings: "Rock Dunder" and "Dunder's Mate" on the right shore. This is an excellent spot to swim or to take a hike to the top of the rocky ledge.
- Jones Falls Lockstation (3 locks in flight followed by a turning basin and a fourth lock). This lock also features a working blacksmith shop, a 19th-century defensible lockmaster's house with a commanding view of the lockstation, and a 60-foot keystone arch dam which, at the time of its construction in the 1830's, was the third highest in the world and the largest in North America.
- Davis Lock - the "wilderness lock." This lock is the most isolated of the lockstations, and is situated between two beautiful lakes. A great place to have a quiet lunch on day two.
- Chaffey's Lock - one of the most popular on the canal. It features a stone lockmaster's house, now a local museum, and a number of excellent places to eat.

- f) Newboro Lockstation - one of only three electric hydraulic locks on the Rideau. It also has one of the four blockhouses built to defend the canal from attack.

Hints: The best direction to paddle is from Upper Brewers to Newboro Lockstation so that the prevailing winds are at your back. Also, Jones Falls is a steep portage - 60 feet in vertical height if you don't buy a lock pass.

Free Information

"Rideau Canal - Between Kingston and Ottawa" - brief history, small overview map and list of services available at the lockstations.

"Boating Safely" (Rideau Canal and Trent-Severn Waterway) - aids to navigation information plus a chart in the back with paddling distances from lockstation to lockstation and various places in between.

"Hours of Operation and Fees" - lists the various types of passes available and the hours when locks are in operation.

The Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority has produced several suggested canoe "loop" routes that include parts of the Rideau System. Copies available from the Rideau Canal Office, or at the CRCA, 1641 Perth Road, P.O. Box 160, Glenburnie, Ontario. K0H 1S0
Telephone: (613) 546-4228 Fax (613) 547-6474.

Useful Names, Numbers, Addresses and Information Guides

Rideau Canal Office
34A Beckwith St. S.
Smiths Falls, ON
K7A 2A8
Telephone 1-800-230-0016 or (613) 283-5170
E-mail: RideauCanal_info@pch.gc.ca.
Web Site: <http://parkscanada.pch.gc.ca/rideau>

Another source of information about the Rideau Canal is Ken Watson's Web Site: www.rideau-info.com/canal/

Exploring St. Lawrence Islands National Park: Just off the main boating channels of the St. Lawrence River, among the 1000 Islands, a fascinating world of natural sights and sounds awaits the observant paddler in back bays and small streams and along rugged natural shorelines. The best times to visit are in the spring and late summer to early fall.

For further information, write to St. Lawrence Islands National Park, R.R.3, Mallorytown, ON, K0E 1R0, or E-Mail: ONT_SLI@pch.gc.ca

Tel: (613) 923-5261

Ask for the publication "A Paddler's Guide to Exploring the 1000 Islands and St. Lawrence Islands National Park."

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