

Greenmantle River

Wabakimi Provincial Park

Trip Report

June 18 – 28, 2019

The Greenmantle River

This wild little river may lack girth and length but it is long on adventure and isolation (See the legend of Green Mantle*). Hidden in the far northwest corner of Wabakimi Provincial Park, the Greenmantle River provides access to a 50 mile swath of protected wilderness. Perceived as too small to navigate, the paddler is challenged by long, twisting technical rapids, log jams, one demanding portage and shallow wetlands. The reward is an opportunity to explore a remote boreal forest and possibly catch an elusive brook trout.

Trip Outline

Trip Dates: June 18 – 28, 2019
Nearest City: Armstrong, Ontario
Put in: Greenmantle Lake
Take out: Miminiska Lake, Albany River
Distance: 75 miles
Water level: “normal”
Boats: Northwind, Bell Canoe Works
Discovery, Old Town
Air Shuttle: Mattice Lake Outfitters (www.walleye.ca)
Paddlers: Hank Ostwald, Spencer, Iowa
Vern Fish, Waterloo, Iowa
Dan Otto, North Branch, Minnesota
Ray Tallent, Iowa City, Iowa
Difficulty: Intermediate – The Greenmantle River offers several long, twisting technical rapids ranging from CI-CII and numerous log jams. Paddlers must have wilderness camping experience and whitewater skills.
Submitted by: Vern Fish, vernfish@aol.com

Access

Our float plane landed in a SW corner of Greenmantle Lake beside a partially submerged dock that served an “abandoned” hunting camp. Heading west, we paddled up to the headwaters of the Greenmantle River. I believe it is possible to portage across the height-of-land into the Ogoki River watershed from Greenmantle Lake. Turning around and reentering the lake, the search for a campsite began. There were at least three sites with cached, timeworn boats or fire pits on Greenmantle Lake in addition to abandoned hunting camp. None of these sites had been used recently. There was a history of people camping on Greenmantle Lake.

Downstream

There were only big two portages on the Greenmantle River. The first portage comes out of Greenmantle Lake and is broken into three separate segments (A, B & C). This portage had not been maintained. It took over three hours to carry and drag the boats and gear over logs and down a rock choked waterway. Barely visible and almost hidden along the route was one ax blaze on a tree and one faded strip of survey tape. Someone had marked this portage in distanced past. We were not the first paddlers to run the Greenmantle River.

A short distance downstream from the portage out of Greenmantle Lake, the river abruptly changed from a small stream to a narrow ribbon of water. This “*Topographic Change*” can be seen on the topographic map but I assumed it was a printing error on the map. However, the river actually became noticeably narrower and much rockier at this point on the map.

Now the river was barely one canoe length wide. There was plenty of depth but no width. More than once the front canoe turned a corner and found a moose blocking the stream or standing on the bank leaning over the canoe. This was entertaining until Dan and Ray came around a corner and found a black bear standing in the water. Dan swears he jumped higher than the bear. Either way they were happy to let Hank and I go first for a while.

The Big Mystery

The segment between Greenmantle Lake and Suzanne Lake was the big mystery. The topo map and satellite images showed a narrow ribbon of water flowing through a big wetland complex. However, there were no trip reports to provide details. Parts of two days were spent twisting and turning through this wetland. Handsaws were used to cut a path over and through down trees and log jams. Two small rapids required wading and lining. To find a dry place to camp for the second night required hike across a marsh and up into the forest.

The river finally dumps into Suzanne Lake where it forms a sandy delta. At this point the wetlands were left behind. At the east of the lake another “abandoned” fishing/hunting camp appeared. The fire pit was filled with green grass but there was room for all four tents around the homemade picnic table. Don Elliot, our outfitter, was getting daily updates on our progress from our satellite phone. After reaching Suzanne Lake the following message came from Don:

“You are the first that I know of that have paddled that section of the Greenmantle. Congratulations, making it to Suzanne Lake. You should have now completed the most difficult portion of your trip.”
Jun 20, 2019 7:30 PM.

Two days were spent on Suzanne Lake exploring and fishing. It appeared that the old hunting camp provided access for fly-in moose hunters and trout anglers. However, the site had not been used recently. The fishing was not great but we did catch a couple of Brook Trout and enough walleye for a fish fry. The portage out of Suzanne Lake was on river left and it looped around a technical CII rapid that was filled with small pools. This is where the Brook Trout were caught. The portage had been maintained and showed signs of being used.

Whitewater

Downstream from the Suzanne Lake the character of the river changed again. The water was now flowing over small rapids, ledges and through rock gardens. All together there were a total of 18 SLWs (Shoot, Line or Wade) between Greenmantle Lake and the confluence with the Albany River. The majority were downstream from Suzanne Lake. Several of these SLWs were long, twisting technical CI or CII rapids. A couple of these rapids were challenging and presented the opportunity to pin a canoe if mistakes were made.

The portage into the Mishekow River should have been located on the segment between Suzanne Lake and the confluence with the Shabuskwia River. Right on cue, Dan Otto found several big blazes on mature trees on river left. These blazes marked the portage over the height-of-land into the Mishekow River. Wandering around the landing I thought I could see a couple of overgrown campsites. At some point in history this portage was an active link between the two rivers.

In 2016 Hank Ostwald and I had paddled up the Shabuskwia River to the confluence with the Greenmantle (Wabakimi Trek, www.canoeing.com). Now the Greenmantle River carried us down to the confluence. There was enough metal and human artifacts at this location to suggest there had been a cabin on the site at some point in history. There was room for all four solo tents and the Cooke Tundra Tarp. A cold front followed by a drizzling rain pinned us down at the confluence with the Shabuskwia River for two days.

Pushing off on day eight the river offered some of the most challenging whitewater on the route. The stretch between the confluence and Patte Lake was filled with manageable but challenging CI and CII rapids. There were no obvious portages and it was almost impossible to scout these rapids. Trip videos show both boats executing sharp turns and bow rudders to avoid foaming rocks. This was one of highlights of the trip.

Albany River

The Shabuskwia River joins the mighty Albany River at Patte Lake. The Albany River is the longest river in Ontario and it played a major role in transporting furs and trade items from Hudson Bay to the interior. The Albany is a BIG river with impressive rapids and falls. The current pushed our little boats towards the sound of crashing water and the horizontal line that marked Upper Eskawa Falls. The portage appeared on river right and led us to a campsite overlooking the pounding water.

The following day the boats and gear was carried over a well-traveled portage around Eskawa Falls on river left. At Snake Falls the Albany River narrows and plunges through a narrow gap. This powerful whitewater run looked like fun but at this point in the trip the portage made more sense. Further downstream the map showed a “hunting camp” on river left high up on the bank. The site was well marked with old blazes on big trees. The slope was so steep a line was rigged to “repel” up and down.

The Little White Church

On the next to last day the sandy shores of Howells Lake provided a flat spot for lunch before entering Miminiska Lake. This is a big lake that required a three mile open water crossing. With a strong tail wind the crossing took less than an hour. Lunch was spent on a small island that was used as a shore lunch site for the fishing camp on Curry Bay. The location had picnic tables, a fish cleaning station and room for four tents. The pickup point, a little white church across the bay, could be seen from the campsite on the island.

The Chapel of St. Andrew was dedicated in 1984 and serves a far flung Catholic congregation that includes the Fort Hope First Nation Reserve and pass through paddlers. The register listed people who were goose hunting, fishing and moose hunting. We signed in and joined the parade of people who had visited this remote little church. At about noon our pilot landed the Otter on the beach in front of the little white church.

Wild & Remote

With the gear loaded the Otter flew down the east side of the Wabakimi Wilderness Complex on its way back to Armstrong. There was a sharp line between the land protected as wilderness and the Crown Lands that were open to logging. There were logging roads, log piles and slash heaps outside of the park. Wabakimi Provincial Park is big but it is still an island of green surrounded by human impacts.

The Greenmantle River is a special place within the Wabakimi Complex. The entire watershed is protected within a designated as wilderness area. It is not recognized as canoe route in Wabakimi Provincial Park and the

route is not maintained. Consequently, this river is truly “*wild and remote*”. The unbroken boreal forest is magical. A paddler should enter this watershed at his/her own risk and respect the wild character it offers.

***The Legend of Green Mantle**

Green Mantle was the beautiful daughter of Chieftain White Bear, an elderly Ojibwa chief in the Thunder Bay area. Her father asked her to devise a plan to deter an approaching Sioux raiding party. She was captured by the Sioux and forced to lead the Sioux on a raid against her people. As required, she led the Sioux party down the Kaministiquia (Kam) River to Kakabeka Falls. However, she did not tell them about the falls and they plunged headlong into the great gorge, killing all. Princess Green Mantle lost her life but her tribe were saved from the raiding party.

I have seen two versions of this story. Second story says she out smarted the Sioux and swam to safety to shore before the boats went over the falls. I can only assume that the Greenmantle River was named after this brave young girl.

Trip Planning

An online search turn up one reference to the Greenmantle River on My Canadian Canoe Route (MYCCR) from 2002. Someone had considered the trip but noted that the Park Superintendent had flown into Greenmantle Lake and wrote that as far as he could tell, *there was no route between Greenmantle Lake and Suzanne Lake...* just a big swamp at the end of Greenmantle Lake.

The topo map was not very encouraging. This map showed a very thin line of water from Greenmantle Lake to Suzanne Lake. This thin line twisted and wiggled its way through a huge wetland complex. The Greenmantle River got bigger as it left Suzanne Lake and there reports of people paddling from Suzanne Lake to Shabuskwia Lake. Maybe the Park Superintendent was right, maybe this river was not runnable from the headwaters down to Suzanne Lake.

Satellite photography has improved dramatically in the last decade. Scanning the satellite photos I could see what I thought was a navigable stream running from the Greenmantle Lake down to confluence with the Shabuskwia River. I could also see trees in the water, small rapids and bluffs. There was a small hunting shack on Suzanne Lake. The river did not just disappear into a massive wetland. Hank Ostwald and I had lined up the Shabuskwia River in 2016 and found a campsite at the confluence of the Greenmantle and Shabuskwia (see Wabakimi Trek, www.canoeing.com).

Phil Cotton, founder of the Wabakimi Project, told me that historically people portaged back and forth between the Misehkwow River and the Greenmantle River. He also told me stories of catching Brook Trout on Shabuskwia River. I was comfortable saying this river could be paddled. Now I had to prove it.

Maps & References

Ontario Parks offers a large planning map for Wabakimi Provincial Park that explains the park rules and the permits that will be needed. The Friends of Wabakimi (www.wabakimi.org) provides a detailed planning map for the entire Wabakimi Area (1:210,000). I used these maps to plan the route. The Friends of Wabakimi map outlines which 1:50,000 series topo maps I needed. These topo maps can be purchased as hard copies or digitally. I ordered digital copies of 1:50,000 series maps from YellowMaps (www.canmaps.com). In this case all of the maps I needed were in NTS Region 52 and came on one disk from YellowMaps. I used the following maps:

52 – P3	Greenmantle Lake	52 – P6	Pruner Lake
52 – P10	Miminiska Lake	52 – P7	Albany River

I digitally “merged” these different maps to create five 19 x 13 inch maps which covered the entire 75 mile route. The Friends of Wabakimi also publish Wabakimi Canoe Route Maps, Volume 1-5 (www.wabakimi.org). These maps provide details on roads, campsites, rapids and portages along Wabakimi canoe routes. **Volume Four, Albany River and Southern Tributaries** provided the maps I needed for this trip. I used the following maps from Volume Four:

- Misenhow River to Shabuskwia River
- Shabuskwia Lake
- Patte Lake to Miminiska Lake

I scanned and digitally cut details from these maps. I then added these details to the five maps I created. These maps were then laminated. Please note that a 19 x 13 laminated map fits into a “Sea to Summit” map case and can be printed at most local print shops.

Permits & Fees

Our Ontario Interior Campsite Permits were purchased from Mattice Outfitters. The total cost for four paddlers came to \$598.80 (Four adults X 10 nights = 40 x \$14.97= \$598.80). The biggest cost, \$4,000, was flying two canoes, four paddlers and our gear into the Greenmantle Lake.

Logistics

Ray Tallent drove up from Iowa City to where I live in Waterloo, Iowa. We drove up to Dan Otto’s home in North Branch, Minnesota. Hank Ostwald drove in from Spencer, Iowa and meet us in North Branch. The next day the two canoes and all of the gear was loaded into Hank’s van and we drove up to Armstrong, Ontario. We spent the night in a cabin at Mattice Outfitters. The next day our gear was loaded into de Havilland DHC-6 Turbo Otter for the flight to Greenmantle Lake.

Highlights & Observations

This wild little river may lack girth and length but it is long on adventure and isolation. Hidden in the far northwest corner of Wabakimi Provincial Park, the Greenmantle River provides access to a huge swath of protected wilderness. Perceived as too small to navigate, the paddler is challenged by long, twisting technical rapids, log jams, one demanding portage and shallow wetlands. The reward is an opportunity to explore a remote boreal forest and possibly catch an elusive brook trout.

The Greenmantle River is a special place within the Wabakimi Complex. The entire watershed is protected within a designated as wilderness area. It is not recognized as canoe route in Wabakimi Provincial Park and the route is not maintained. Consequently, this river is truly “*wild and remote*”. The unbroken boreal forest is magical. A paddler should enter this watershed at his/her own risk and respect the wild character it offers.

The information provided in this report was a faithful effort to document the key features found along the Greenmantle River. It is very likely mistakes have been made or details have been omitted. Natural events like fire, floods, high winds and fluctuating water levels will also change the character of this river through time. Travel along this wilderness river may be difficult if not impossible at times. Therefore it is important that your skills and preparation match the challenges offered by this remote, wild river!

Greenmantle River Wabakimi Provincial Park

"The Park superintendent said that he flew into Greenmantle Lake two summers ago, and as far as he could tell, there was no route between Greenmantle L and Suzanne L. - the satellite imagery bears this out - looks like just big bunches of swamp at the end of Greenmantle L."
MYCCR Jan, 2002

