

North Channel Reprise

Episode Two of a Cruise by Jonathan Dart and Kit Wallace

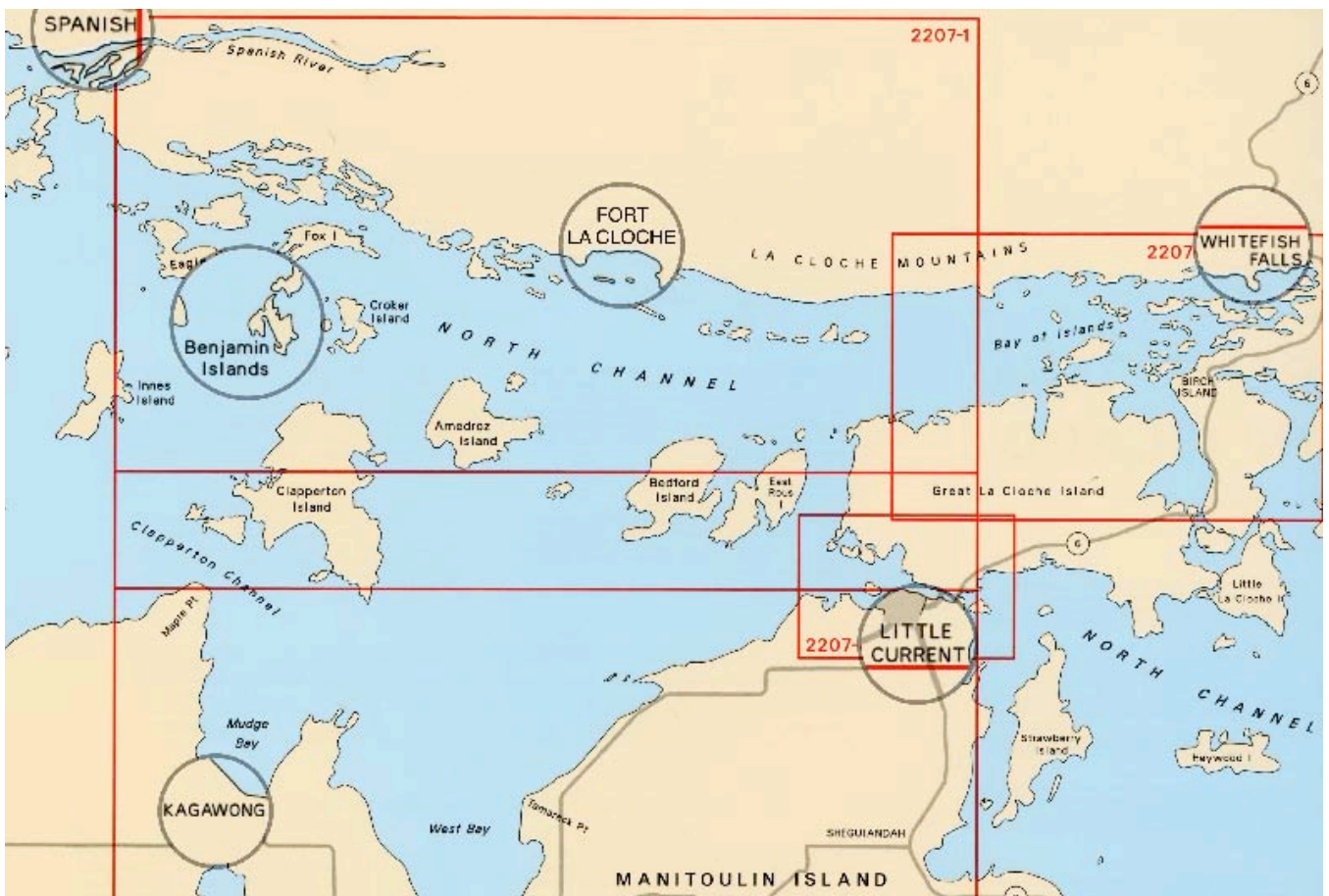
Preamble

I met up with Jonathan Dart in September of 2015 in Ireland where we had a fantastic time sailing together in Lough Derg for the week of the Wayfarer International Rally. It was the first time we'd seen each other since he'd returned to the UK after spending several years in Toronto as British Consul General. We talked of the possibility of another cruise in Georgian Bay's North Channel which we had visited in 2013. Here's a link to the log of that trip:

http://www.wayfarer-international.org/WIC/Cruise.Logs/2013NorthChannel/2013NorthChannelCruise_index.html

At that time our intention had been to sail to the Benjamin Islands departing from Killarney in a westerly direction, however due to very light winds on the first day of our cruise we were forced to rethink our plans. We made it to Little Current on the second day but with only four days available for our cruise, we decided to turn back.

When Jonathan mentioned that he intended to take a leave of absence from work in London and was free to travel in early September 2016, we began thinking again about cruising in the North Channel. This time we planned to get to the Benjamin Islands, but the decision to put in at Spanish meant we were much closer and could approach the islands from the west. Examining the charts, we figured there were several destinations – Fort La Cloche and Whitefish Falls on the mainland's north shore, and Kagawong and Little Current on Manitoulin Island that would provide some interesting options for a longer cruise.



I picked up Jonathan on September 4th at the Sudbury bus terminal to drive back to my cottage near Killarney where I had been staying with Patsy and my daughter Yshia for the Labour Day long weekend. I was a little startled at the amount of luggage he arrived with – a large hardshell suitcase as well as waterproof bags and a rucksack. Surely not all of this was coming in the boat!

The next morning we were to set off for the drive to Spanish, trailing the Wayfarer with Jonathan's sailing gear decanted into more manageable sized bags. After the cruise was over I was contemplating travelling on to the Wayfarer North American regatta in Tawas, driving across to Sault Ste Marie and down the Michigan peninsula and so, along with all the cruising gear, the boat was also packed with racing sails and another boom. As with our previous cruise we intended to sleep ashore in tents with a possible B&B stopover somewhere along the way.

Monday September 5

The drive involved retracing our steps to Sudbury to get to Highway 17 and the north shore of Georgian Bay. By the time we arrived in Spanish it was later than planned and we still had to rig the boat, load it up and launch as well as grab a quick bite of lunch. The public marina at Spanish is well equipped and has a good launching ramp, however there were numerous big powerboats being taken out at the end of the boating season. By the time we pushed off it was 3:30pm and I was concerned we might not get to the Benjamin Islands before dark. The good news was that the weather was perfect, barely a cloud in the sky and with a steady breeze from the south west.

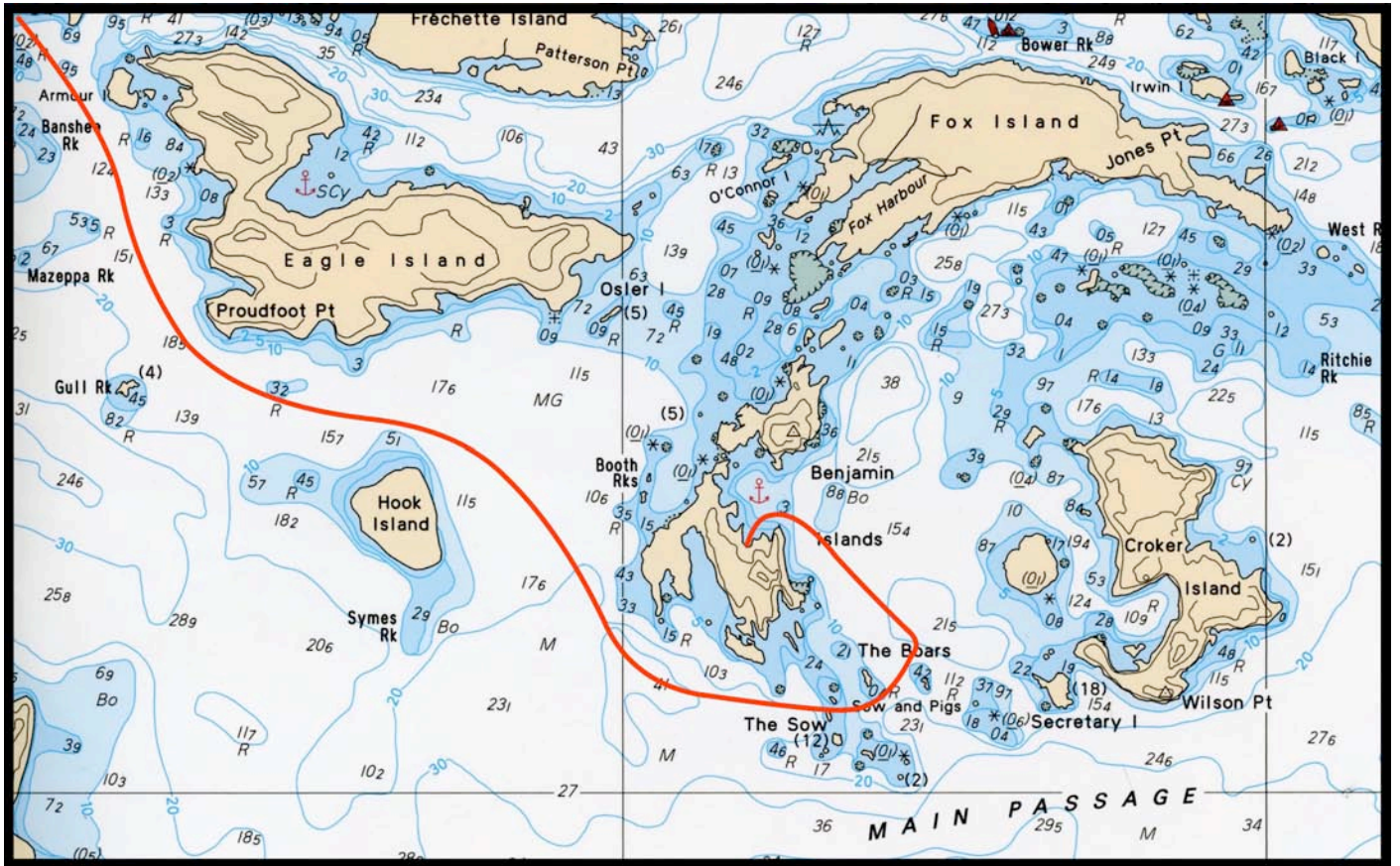


Spanish Marina



We're off- through that little gap in the breakwall.

We tacked out of the marina into the mouth of the Spanish River and then had to tack through the narrow gap north of Aird Island into McBean Channel known as Little Detroit passage. Out in the open part of the North Channel the wind started to pick up as we cruised down the western side of Eagle Island carefully avoiding several rocks offshore marked on the chart. The water levels in Georgian Bay have risen by as much as 0.6–0.8m. this year, so we were fairly confident that we were safe crossing any rocks marked 0.5m or deeper on the charts. The guides do recommend approaching the Benjamin Islands from the south however. There is a minefield of rocks and shallows to the north of North Benjamin.



There are good protected anchorages on both ends of the islands and we were aiming to circle around the south end to reach one of these on the north side of South Benjamin. As we rounded Proudfoot Point on Eagle Island and then passed Hook Island to starboard, the Benjamins came into view. Soon we were well out in open water with a long fetch behind us and the wind building. We were screaming along with a fully loaded Wayfarer on a broad reach coming around the south end of South Benjamin and I admit I was a bit nervous having dumped the boat in a gusty regatta a month earlier. My anxiety was compounded when we appeared to be heading straight for a cluster of rounded red granite islands rising out of the lake. These are the colourfully named Sow and Pigs – one large mother and about six smaller piglets. (You can see photos of these later in the log.) Jonathan had the chart in hand and calmly assured me there was plenty of water in the 100m. gap between two small islands. There was no turning back in any case, so on we flew. The Benjamin Island cluster includes Secretary and Croker Islands to the east and Fox Island to the north in a large circular formation, which we entered, gybing back towards our anchorage.

We had observed a large cruise ship steaming west, which curiously from a distance appeared to be navigating through the small islands. As we got closer we could see that it was well out in the main passage. Apart from that, we hadn't spotted any boats in these parts. The moment we rounded the point at the north end of the island everything was suddenly tranquil; the wind was gone. We saw maybe eight power cruisers and keelboats lying at anchor in the sheltered bay. We ghosted to the very end of the bay and nosed into a reed bed and tiny beach surrounded by red granite rock.

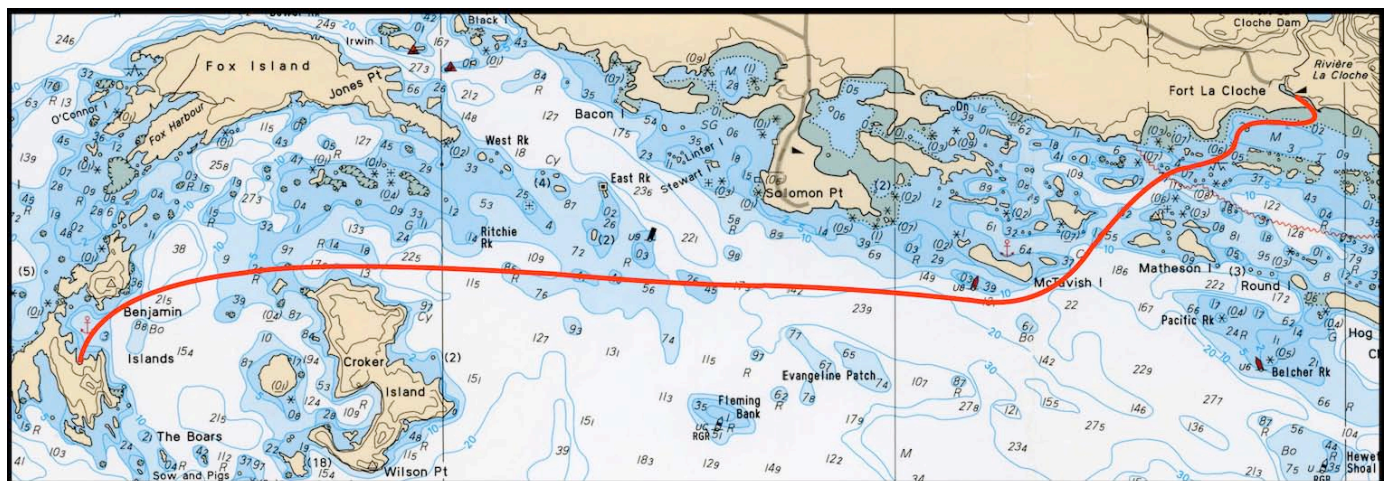




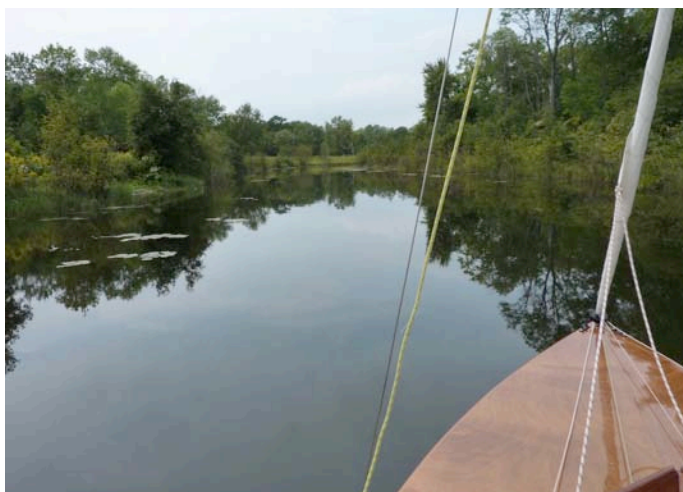
We anchored the boat in shallow water and tied off the stern to shore – the same way some of the big boats were moored. Camping on the rounded rock was maybe not ideal, but provided a great vantage point. The site had obviously been used as a campsite by others and we discovered a couple of soft pads of moss to set up the tents on. It had taken us three hours to sail to our destination the first day, a distance of about 22km. from Spanish.

Tuesday September 6

Our destination for today was Fort La Cloche, the location of a historic 19th century Hudson's Bay trading post on the north shore. It is located in a wide but very shallow bay at the mouth of a river which drains down from the La Cloche Mountains, and is visible from a distance by virtue of a notch in the profile of the mountains. The weather was changing with overcast skies and much less wind than the previous day, but still from the south-west. We set off on a broad reach.



We skirted around the north side of Croker Island slowly sailing due east. The wind occasionally dropped away to nothing and we had to crack out the paddles, but there was just enough breeze to keep us moving as we entered the cluster of small islands outside Fort La Cloche bay. Quite a large area of the north shore here is designated as a provincial park, though people are seemingly not encouraged to visit, and the park is unmanned. We knew from the guidebook there was an entrance to the La Cloche River where we'd find a road and a landing, but at first glance there appeared to be no opening in the shallow reed beds lining the shore. Soon we found the scoured bottom of the bay marking the river mouth and paddled up to a sheltered riverbank where we parked the boat.

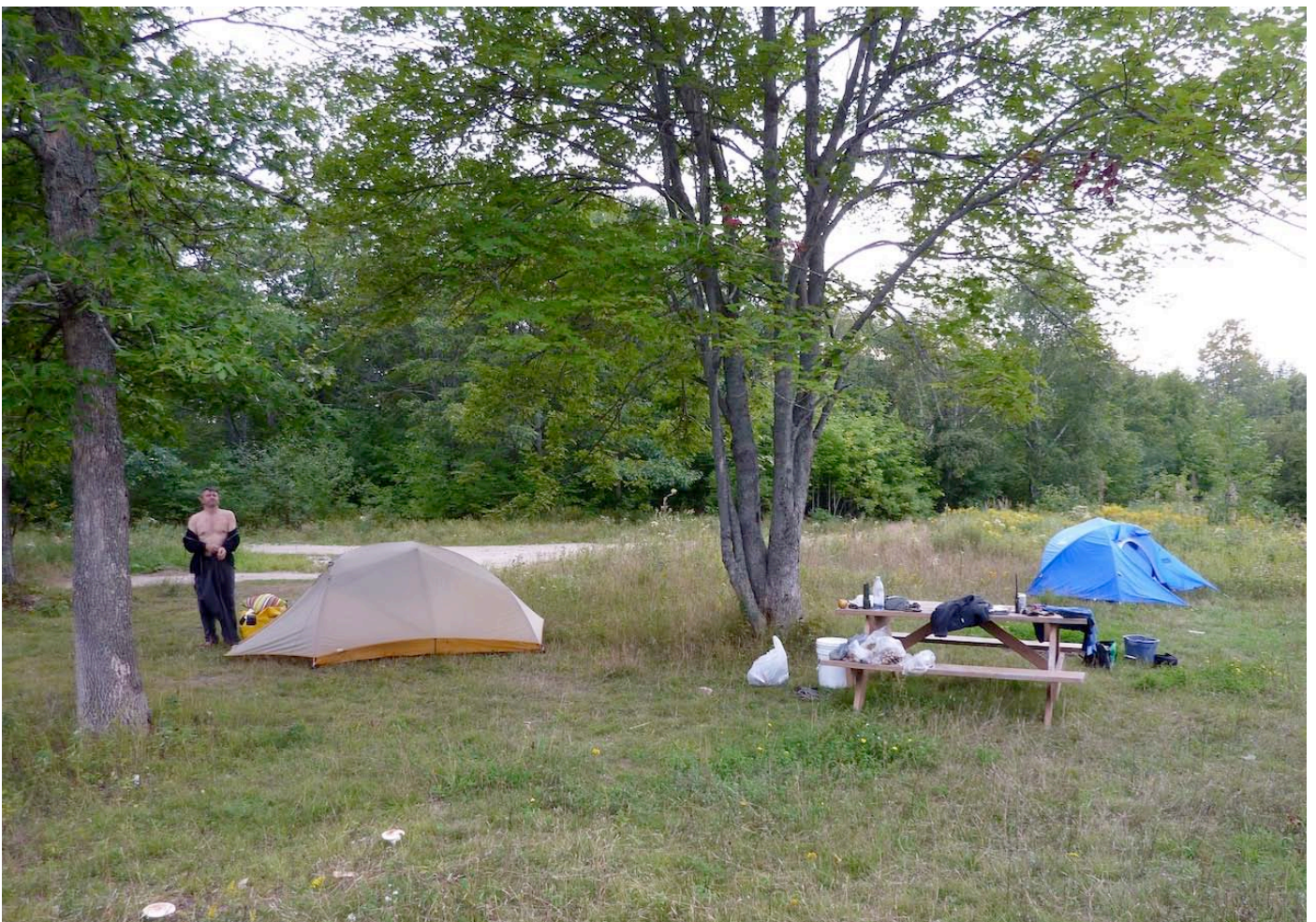


There are a couple of abandoned summer camp buildings and a house for park staff, clearly left unused for some time, but there seemed to be no evidence of the historic trading post fort. The whole atmosphere of the place was rather forlorn.

We had read that there was a trail leading up the white quartz hills and spent some time searching for this. By the time we discovered where it was, we reluctantly decided to turn back because I hadn't brought water or snacks along for what was going to be a long hike to get to the top of the ridge. As a type one diabetic I have to be careful about this, having experienced a severe low blood sugar episode once before on a strenuous hike.



We swam in a pool in the river instead.



Apart from a couple with a fishing boat we had the place to ourselves. We set up our campsite beside a random picnic table by the river. It was a good year for mushrooms - the woods were full of fungi of all descriptions - several can be seen in the foreground.

The marine weather report on the VHF radio for the following day wasn't too encouraging. The wind was definitely softening and rain was predicted some time over the next few days.

Wednesday September 7

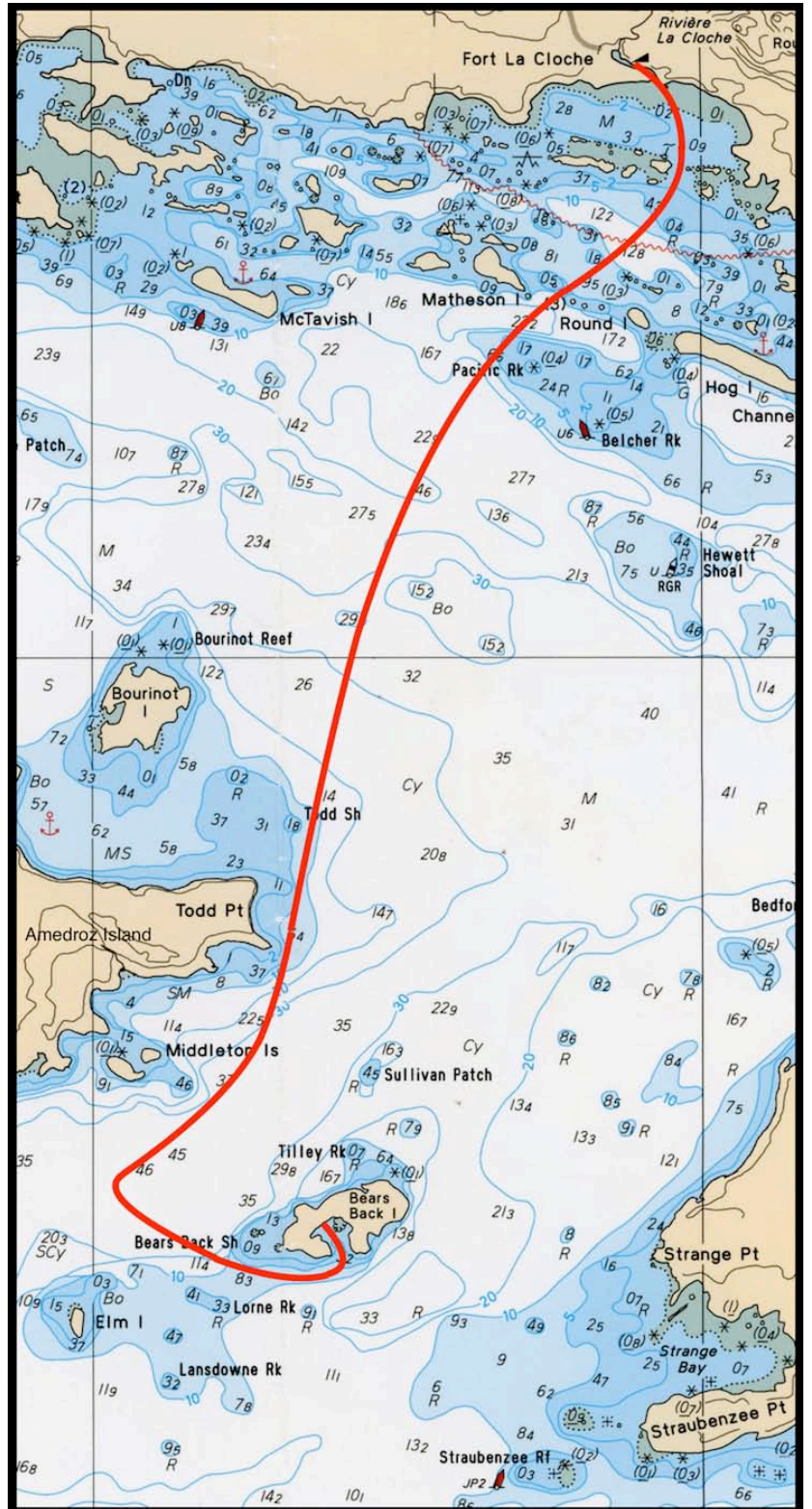
After breakfast we re-packed the gear in the boat and headed down the river into the eastern side of the bay. Overnight the wind had veered around to the north east. With the wind behind us we thought we might be able to make it right across the North Channel to Kagawong on Manitoulin Island, a distance of about 35km. as the crow flies. This would certainly have been possible with favourable winds, but already by mid-morning the wind was light and patchy.

Once we cleared the small islands and shoals off the shore, we hoisted the spinnaker for a lazy run towards the unusually named Amedroz Island. Many of the islands of Georgian Bay were named in the early 19th century by Admiral Bayfield who conducted hydrographical surveys for the British navy. Amedroz was apparently a clerk in the admiralty.

Jonathan had told me he was in the middle of writing a suspense novel which contained many characters with somewhat dubious motives. To entertain me he proceeded to relate the complicated plot set in London, New York and the Caribbean Islands over an hour as we drifted slowly along. The ending, still in progress, was still unresolved, so I was invited to critique the plot. It appeared that Jonathan was intending to kill off the one honourable character in the story, so I pointed out that maybe this heroic guy should somehow survive at the end. (Though perhaps Le Carré would not agree with this suggestion).

Getting back to the sailing ...

By the time we rounded Todd Point the wind had almost died, and though it tantalized us with an occasional burst encouraging us to continue south, we soon decided we needed a fallback destination. The little Bear's Back Island, which in profile has the shape of a rounded rump of a bear, was just to the east of us and had a bay in which we could anchor. Here we found a not very hospitable shore of rocky shale extending into the shallow water and circled by a dense stand of cedar and fir. It didn't look like a great place to camp and so we decided to make some tea, have a bite to eat and wait to see if the wind picked up again.



What we discovered after a reconnoitre, was a perfect little campsite with a couple of grassy flat areas for the tents, a fire pit with firewood, a picnic table and even an outdoor loo! I think the island may have been used for wilderness outings for children. There was recent evidence of such activity at the water's edge.



The wind never did return that afternoon, so we set up camp and went for a swim in the chilly bay.



The fire master in his element! We didn't want to use all the cut logs someone had left, but there was plenty of deadwood to be found for the fire. You'll notice that Jonathan is fully clad in this picture. The mosquitoes were out in full force – a bit surprising considering they are normally gone by September.



Jonathan was also entranced with the BioLite stove we did all our cooking on. It's such a great invention, and not much larger in size than a regular camping stove. Small handfuls of dry tinder in the combustion chamber are the fuel source, and with a thermocouple generating power to fan the fire to extremely hot temperatures, it will boil water faster than a gas stove. Apart from cereal and liquid eggs for breakfasts, all our camp dinners came from freeze dried packages which can produce surprisingly tasty meals. We only needed to boil water to rehydrate the contents of the packages and we could get a meal prepared in 10 or 15 minutes once the stove was fired up.



Thursday September 8

We woke to overcast skies after a night of heavy rain, but at least the rain had stopped and more importantly there was a good wind out in the channel. We were out on the water early, resuming our sail to Kagawong on Manitoulin Island. On our way Jonathan mentioned that he'd spent much of the previous night rethinking the ending of his novel so we continued with that discussion as well.



We started with a nice steady breeze from the north-west. As we approached the lee shore of Clapperton Island I bore off a few degrees, and then a few minutes later, out of the shelter of the island we felt the full force of the wind in Clapperton Channel. Suddenly we were up on a plane and hiking hard on a beam reach. The situation had changed surprisingly quickly, and I was exhilarated to be moving at speed after such a slow day yesterday. We were across the channel in no time and then things calmed down a bit as we passed Gooseberry Island and into the more protected waters of Mudge Bay. Kagawong Village sits right at the end of the bay.



Kagawong has two small marinas; I steered towards the one on the right and pulled into a vacant slip on the shore. I hadn't planned on staying there long because I thought with that location it was most likely a private dock. We thought we'd check with someone and walked over to the general store across the road. Nobody was visible inside but after calling we heard someone coming downstairs at the back of the shop. A very nattily dressed, small, elderly man appeared. We later discovered this was 'Aus' Hunt the chatty 90 year old mayor of Kagawong who is the longest serving politician of any municipality in Ontario – even beating out Hazel McCallion. Anyway, he did say that the slip belonged to someone, but that yesterday he thought he'd seen a boat in the guy's driveway, so it was probably OK to stay there. "But check with the marina manager over at the municipal building just to be sure." After tracking down the manager he confirmed that we could indeed stay overnight free of charge.



Our next order of business was to find a restaurant for lunch and then to locate a B&B for the night. The village proper seemed pretty quiet – the tourist season was obviously over. We hiked a kilometre up the main road where there was supposed to be a gas station with another store and a café. Good that we got there when we did; it was after 2pm and we were the last customers.

Meanwhile the B&B Jonathan had called turned out to be closed, and in any case wasn't very near to the village, so we were in a bit of a predicament. When I asked the café owner if there was anywhere close by, he said in fact there was a B&B on the main street near the marina run by a very nice couple.

We hadn't seen any B&B signs in the village so I was doubtful, but we doubled back and knocked at the door of the most likely looking house. The fellow who answered said that they had given up on taking in guests a year ago when they put the house up for sale. However, when he heard our story he darted around the back and returned to say that he and his wife were willing to put us up for the night – and to give us dinner and breakfast as well. Our very kind hosts were Mike and Karen Free, retired schoolteachers who had come to Kagawong to run a B&B and to get away from the hustle and bustle of Southern Ontario for a quieter life. They told us the winter population of Kagawong was just 25 !

That night we had proper bathing facilities for a change and comfortable beds to sleep in, and in the morning were able to replenish our camping supplies with milk, bacon and eggs.

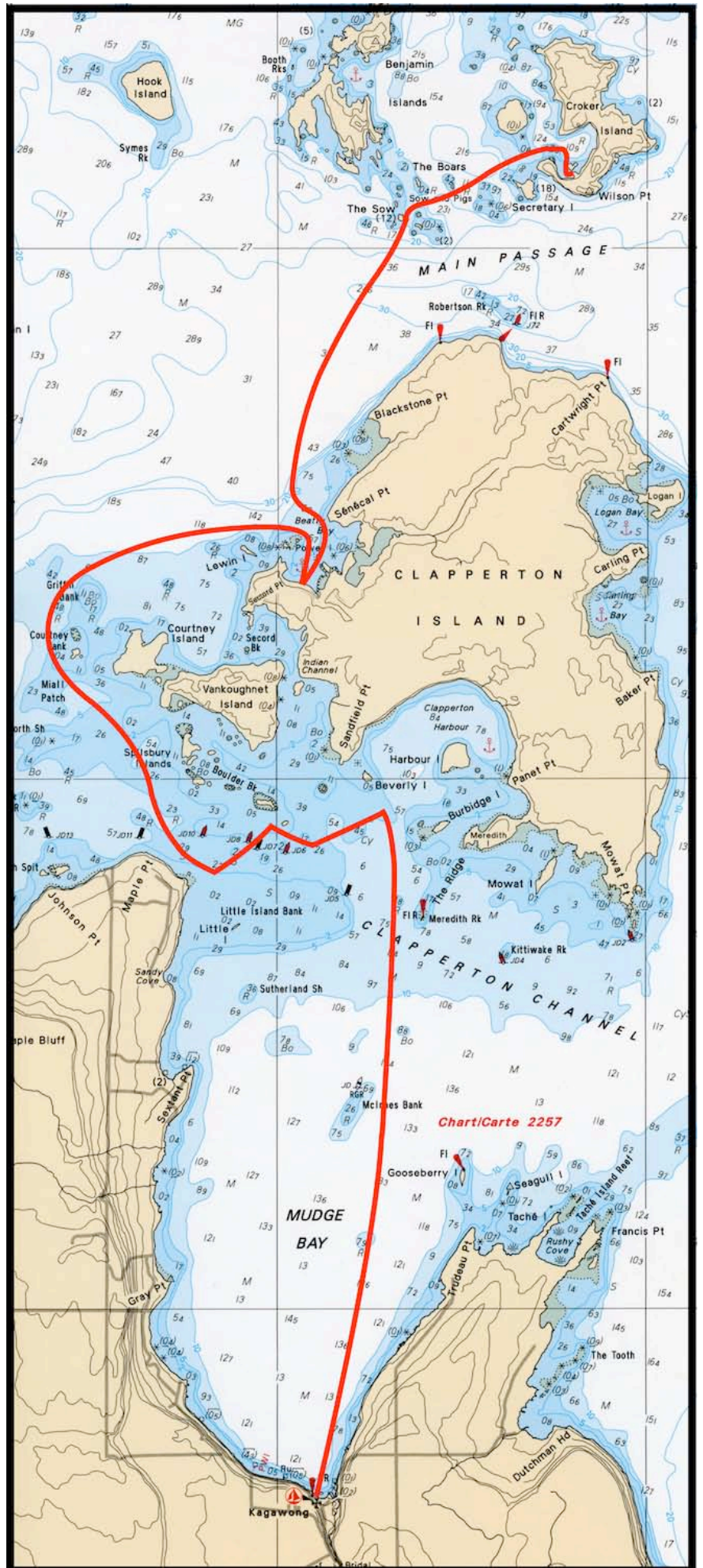


Kagawong's claim to fame and main tourist attraction is the Bridal Falls upriver of the village, which in the 19th century powered mills and now generates hydro electricity.

Friday September 9

I should preface this by saying that by this time we had decided not to go to the regatta in Michigan. We preferred to spend an extra two days cruising in the North Channel than all the extra driving. To go to Tawas we would have had to return to Spanish early on Friday morning to haul out for the long drive.

Karen had mentioned that one of her favourite islands was Croker to the east of the Benjamins. This would be our destination for today. It was over 30km. away from Kagawong but as it was, the day looked perfect for a long sail. The day started out cool and bright, with a light westerly breeze.



We had a sedate sail up Mudge Bay until we reached the northern end of the bay where the wind funnelled down Clapperton Channel. I had trouble picking out the green and red channel markers, which we needed to tack through to get around Vankoughnet Island. We had to be careful not to stray into the many shallow areas, so Jonathan consulting the chart, always had to let me know when to tack.

Once we reached Maple Point we turned north west again to sail around the numerous exposed rocks and submerged shoals off Courtenay Island. We headed towards Beatty Bay where an anchorage was marked and where we wanted to stop for a lunch break.



Jonathan with the ever ready bag of gorp for sustenance while sailing. Food supplies are sealed in the white bucket and 4 gallons of fresh water are in the blue container below the bench. The anchor is in a bucket and the anchor rode on a drum attached to the mast step is below the deck on the right. Other items needed while sailing like clothing, cameras, binoculars, reading glasses, sunscreen, etc. are in the spinnaker bags. It's good to have wet gear handy. Getting wet with spray in light summer clothing, can quickly chill even on a warm day.



Stopping for a sardine sandwich and a cup of tea on a marshy shore in Betty Bay. Note the BioLite stove – it goes everywhere.



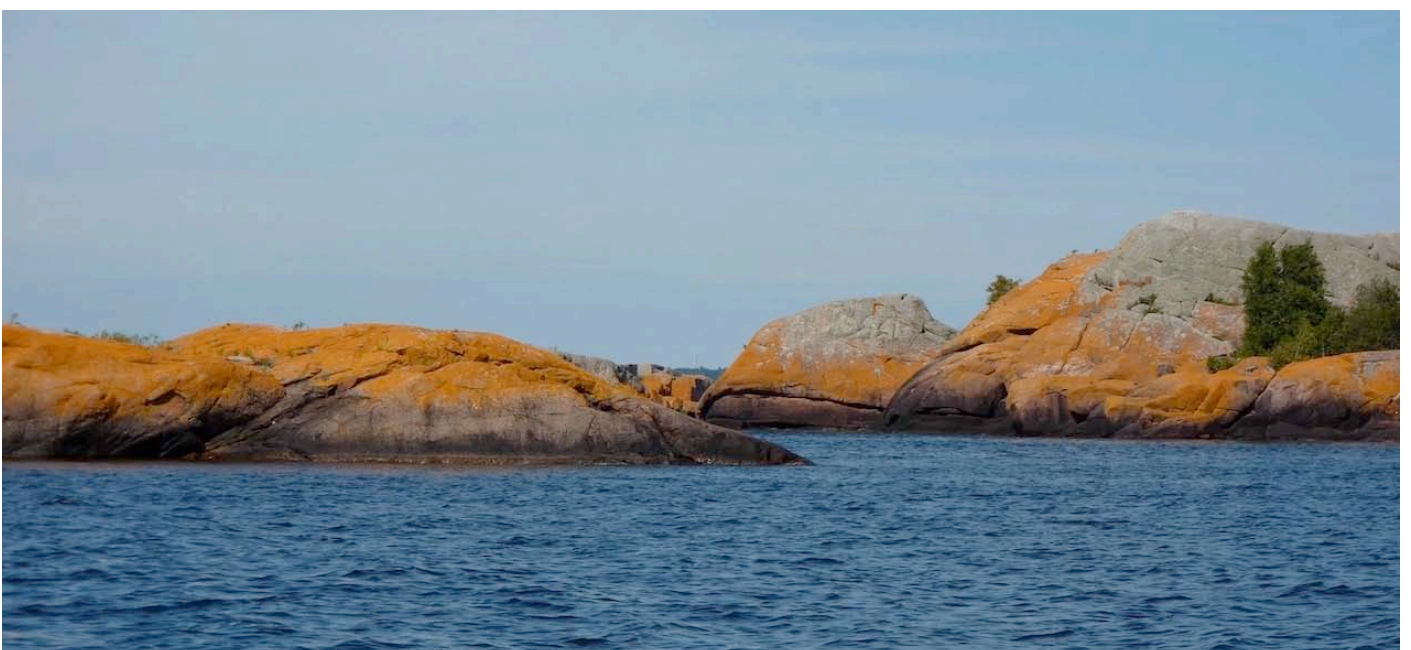
Two yachts on the horizon leave South Benjamin Island, with the north shore in the background.



South Benjamin comes into view on the left, the Sow and Pigs to the right.



Three of the Pigs with South Benjamin in the background.



The Sow and Pigs up close – rounded pink granite islands covered with orange lichen.

As we sailed by the Sow, we spotted a very small inlet on the lee side of the island, which Jonathan was convinced we could get into. We had to drop the sails, raise the centreboard and paddle in very carefully; there truly wasn't much space on either side of the Wayfarer. One of us had to hold the bow off the rocks while the other explored the island.



We couldn't turn the boat around in such tight quarters and had to push the bow off hard to back the boat out into open water. From here it was only a short hop over to Croker Island.

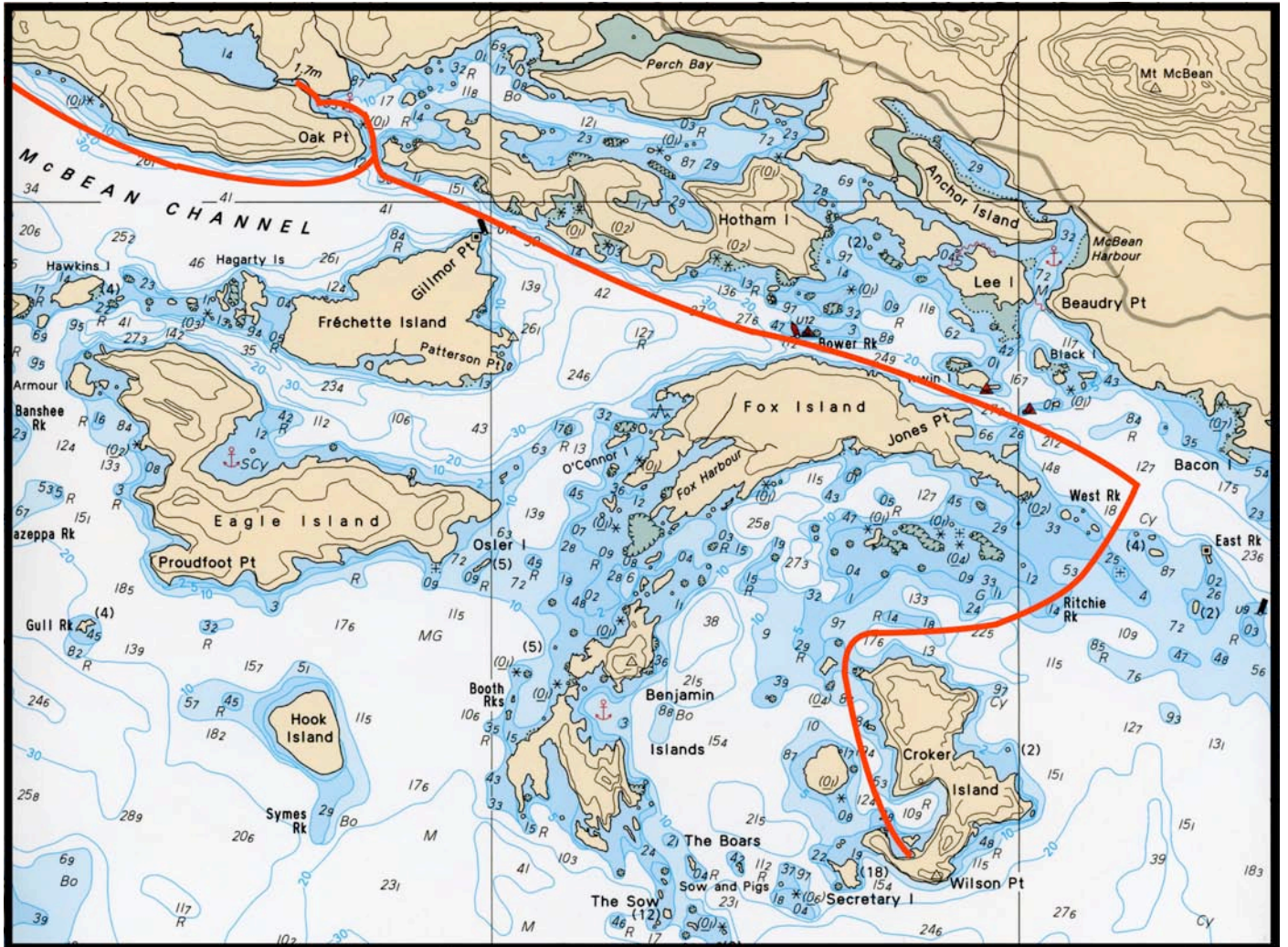


The Pigs as seen from the top of the Sow looking towards South Benjamin Island.



Our campsite on Croker Island on the final night of our cruise. There is one yacht in the distance sharing this tranquil bay with us. Our evening tittle was a bottle of very nice Islay single malt that Jonathan had brought.

Saturday September 10



Unfortunately I have no photographs of the last leg of the trip on Saturday. The sailing was uneventful as we headed north again around Croker Island and negotiated the rocks and shoals to the east of Fox Island. Once through we tacked west and it was clear sailing through the passage north of Fox and Fréchette Islands. At western end of Hotham Island there's a gap into another bay, which in turn leads into a river. Here we pulled in for a tea break and somewhat to my chagrin had to drag out the recently packed away stove and equipment from the rear compartment of the boat. Back out in McBean Channel we hugged the north shore and headed directly for Little Detroit passage, this time with the wind behind us.

We made it back to the Spanish Marina at 2pm for the haulout. Outside the breakwall we dropped the main and sailed in gently under jib alone, only to be confronted with an inflatable dinghy backing up dangerously close to us, music blaring from its console and an oblivious crew. We'd arrived back in civilization!

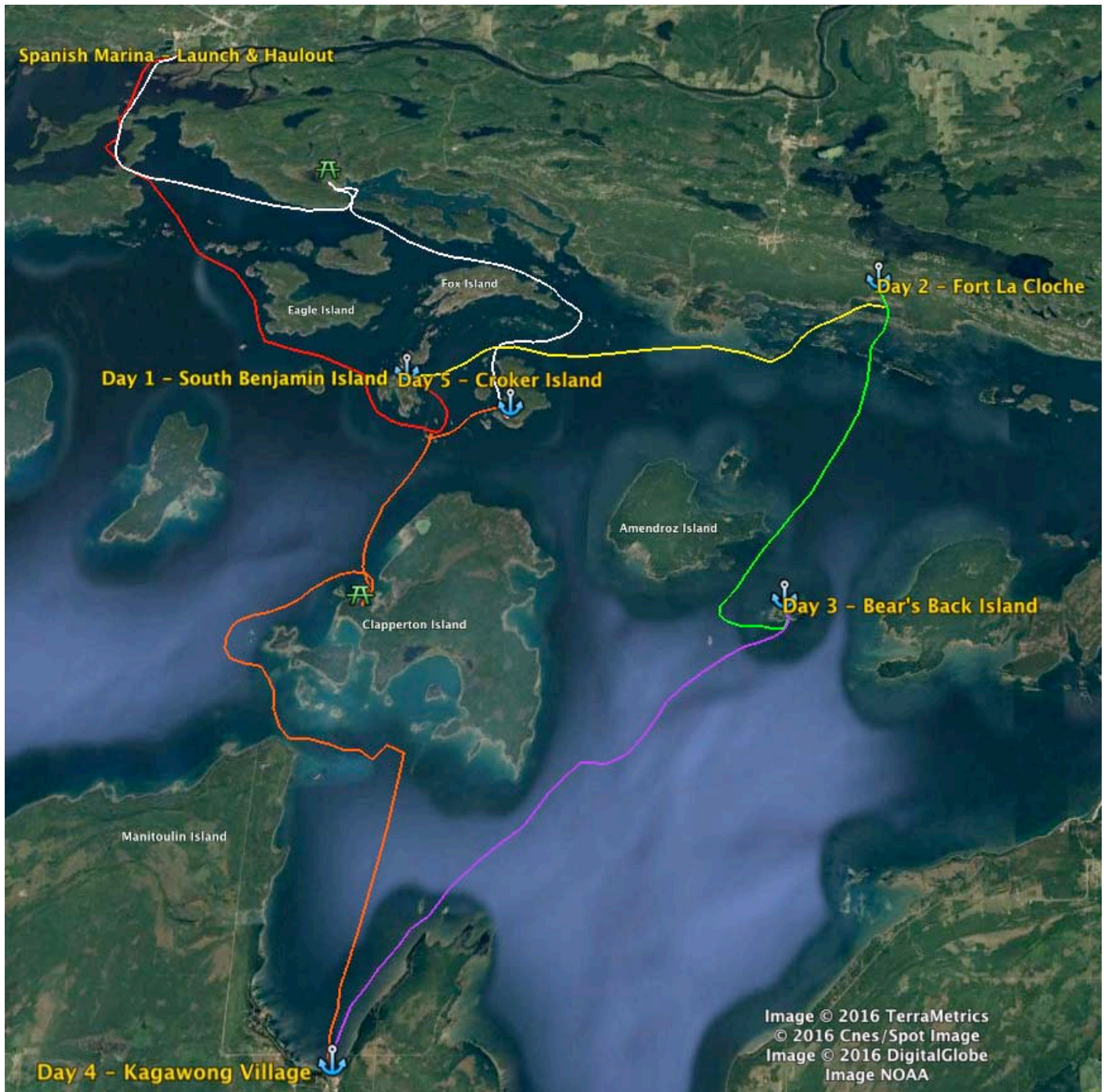
The cruise was just about perfect. We'd made a circumnavigation of a large area of the North Channel, with virtually no overlapping of the route. We hadn't always sailed as far as we'd have liked, but that was a factor of the wind and weather and beyond our control. For the most part, in early September we had the place to ourselves. For me this contributes a great deal to the pleasure of experiencing the wilderness of the region. One of the things I was very conscious of on this cruise was how quickly conditions can change – either with too much wind overpowering the boat, but also with too little, potentially leaving us stranded. Of course the absence of other boats that could give assistance in an emergency, meant that we had to always be safety conscious and self-sufficient. This has reminded me of an incident on the leg to Croker Island - we observed a distant sail that appeared to disappear suddenly so we changed course to investigate until, when we got closer, we saw that the boat was not in trouble.

A big thank-you to Jonathan Dart for his enthusiasm to go sailing in our second adventure in the North Channel. I think we'll be planning another cruise, possibly to the Bustard Islands next time.

Kit Warrack

November 2016

Trip Distances for Each Leg



- Day 1 - Spanish to South Benjamin Island: 22km.
- Day 2 - South Benjamin Island to Fort LaCloche: 15.9km.
- Day 3 - Fort LaCloche to Bear's Back Island: 14km.
- Day 4 - Bear's Back Island to Kagawong: 18.5km.
- Day 5 - Kagawong to Croker Island: 30.5km.
- Day 6 - Croker Island to Spanish: 28.3km.