As the float plane took off and banked away, we suddenly felt very alone; just the three of us, two canoes and a mound of gear. The plane that had brought us to this remote lake did a final run back over the water, tipped its wing in salute and was gone. The adventure had begun.
This classic opening to a wilderness canoe trip unfortunately didn’t happen to us, although the float plane was real enough on Loch Doon, and certainly created the perfect ambience. We, in fact, drove down the lakeside road, parked just south of the Castle and made a nice cup of tea.

Recent blogs had tempted us to Galloway Forest Park to take a look for ourselves at the possibilities around Loch Doon. The map showed a beautiful circuit of lochs in a forested environment, a land of granite boulders which would be a relief from the peat bogs of our last few trips. With such inspiring names as Eagles Isle, Deer Isle and Wolf Rock, this was clearly a place worth exploring.

The weather forecast for the next few days predicted fair conditions and a south-west wind, slowly rising, so we decided to do the biggest lake first, northwards, hoping to take advantage of a tailwind. If the wind got up later on, we should have some degree of shelter in the forest. Doing the circuit this way around had another advantage; the wildest section of the route—returning along the stream to Loch Doon—would have the benefit of being downhill.
Predicted wind directions mean little amidst the mountains, the peaks grab the air, weave it round and funnel it any which way. True to form, and despite the forecast, we found ourselves pulling out into a stiff little chop picked up by the headwind that lies dormant, waiting for us to appear with our canoes.
Loch Doon: the starting point at the mouth of Carrick Lane.

Loch Doon is a pretty stretch of water, set amidst an open patchwork of pines and spruces, now at the height of their spring greens, interspersed with granite outcrops and boulders. But the Loch has the feel of an area well used. There have been problems here in the past with “undesirables”. There are caravans, fire circles all over, and litter, but also clear signs that the problems are being addressed, such as piles of bin bags filled during litter collections.

After three or four miles paddling up the loch, we started looking for the exit stream on the left, which passes under a bridge beneath the road. The bridge was plain to see, but the stream channel took a bit of finding. It is amazing how obvious features on the map hide when viewed from the perspective of your canoe. Once located, the stream took us around a couple of bends but then gave out so we carried up to the forest road that leads easily up to Loch Finlas.
The exit point from Loch Doon; the mouth of Garpel Burn.
Most of the lochs here are reservoirs. These can sometimes be spoilt by eroded shorelines and intrusive dams, but Loch Finlas was truly beautiful. Our first glimpse of it through a break in the trees, where a path led down to the water, gave us an instant high; we could see tree-lined points receding into the distance, with the evening light dancing on the water. We crossed, directly into the lowering sun, Andrew’s canoe ahead dissolving in a shower of sun sparkles; fifteen minutes of fantasy paddling. We started looking for a campsite for the night and after a couple of false leads, found a flat spot in a dense patch of trees that gave shelter from the stiff breeze and a perfect deep bed of spruce needles, which in settling had levelled out the ground. The moon rose over the water; a cuckoo was calling, with an echo bouncing back off the hills. Fair weather, beautiful loch, good campsite, moonlight; the portents so far were for a great route. It had been some months since the three of us had our last canoe trip, but we quickly slotted into our usual trip routines, perfected over a number of years. It was good to be out together again. Because of the recent warmer weather, the midges were just beginning to notice us, but weren’t attacking yet with any real conviction. Soon, finding campsites would be more difficult—trying to balance shelter from the wind with needing some breeze to keep the midges at bay.

An angler enjoying the beautiful evening on Loch Finlas. We paddled round the wooded point in the distance to find a campsite.
Our campsite in the woods came complete with its own dock.
Next day we continued northwest, in wilder terrain now, to our exit point on the loch, marked by a waterworks building, and a very short carry over to Derclach Loch. Crossing this, we headed to our next waypoint, a wall leading up from the water to a shoulder on Doon of Waterhead, which we had chosen on the map as the most likely portage route through to the forest road up to Loch Bradan. As is often the case,
deer had also long ago chosen the obvious and easiest route, and the carry for the most part followed a clear animal track, making for relatively steady going. At the point where it looked like things were about to become tricky—up ahead were a fence and tangle of forest—the road suddenly appeared right in front of us in a dip. It was invisible until you were almost upon it. Another sign that things were going our way. Mike had fitted webbing straps as seats in his canoe to save weight, and the soft yokes these provided for carrying the boat were luxurious compared with regular wooden ones because the webbing conforms automatically to the curve of your shoulders.

*Looking back over Derclach Loch and Loch Finlas, which are separated by a short carry. The portage route onwards towards Loch Bradan follows the wall in the foreground.*
A straightforward carry led up to Loch Bradan, and a good place for lunch near the dam. It was here that we first noticed that the water had an extensive yellow scum, which we reckoned was either a deadly algal bloom, or harmless pollen. The team biologist decided it was pollen, so we filtered and drank the water.
Lunch at Loch Bradan.
The wind was now gusting quite strongly so the Blue Team paddled next to the dam and out behind a point to get some shelter from the wind, then crossed the narrowest part of the lake. Andrew preferred the direct crossing. The map showed a forestry road quite close to the head of the arm of the loch opposite us. Aiming for the shore nearest the road proved to be a mistake because we got entangled with a very boggy and tussocky section. Getting off the loch a bit sooner at the near-point to a well-made walkers’ path leading to the road would have avoided this. The path itself gave us easy carrying to the forest road, then a 1-mile downhill section led to the vicinity of Loch Riecawr. About a quarter of a mile before the loch, an indistinct path rightwards led over a bridge and followed a stream (Balloch Lane) which soon became a navigable little channel and took us to the open water.
Carrying up the track from Loch Bradan.
Balloch Lane, leading to Loch Riecawr.

The Blue Team on Balloch Lane.
Loch Riecawr.

The shores of Loch Riecawr look superficially a bit unpromising for camping, but you have to know where to look. In fact, we were spoilt for choice; after considerable discussion we decided upon the perfect spot complete with a granite boulder for a table, and interesting objects in the surrounding forest (more of which later). Unbeknown to us, our arrival had been clocked by The Protectors and three not physically insubstantial gentlemen came to find out whether we were undesirable or not. We couldn’t really help them, because we weren’t sure either. When they realized that we were only a danger to ourselves, they proved to be very friendly and left us in peace.
The granite table at Camp Riecawr.

For after-dinner entertainment on this trip we took *Canoeists Q&A* by Cliff Jacobson, which gives canoeing “disaster” scenarios, for which you have to decide on the best course of action. You can then check your ideas with those of the experts. It is a good idea for a book, but sadly doesn’t live up to Jacobson’s usual standard. The answers often involve additional factors not given in the original scenario, making the whole exercise a bit pointless. The main entertainment was making up progressively more outrageous scenarios of our own.

Here is one of our scenarios for you to try, in keeping with those in the book:

You are a long way out on a canoe trip, totally dependent on your trolley for monster portages, some of which you have already completed. The portage trolley breaks irreparably and you are not able to move the canoe without one. There is no phone signal. How can you complete your trip with your canoe? (Answer at end.)

We slowly paddled around Loch Riecawr, exploring—another beautiful lake. From the dam, we carried up the road to Loch Gower which marked the end of the first phase of our route. Here, the mown grass and manicured fire circles highlighted the “Little Algonquin Park” atmosphere of our trip so far. Sunshine, too; this was almost too much fun. Up to this point the route had been very civilized, and the Forest Drive could take you back from this point to the car to complete a thoroughly enjoyable
and easy round trip.

Loch Gower.

But to complete our circuit we needed to head into the forest. Our intended route crossed Loch Gower, then followed a potential portage route along firebreaks to Loch Fannie, and so to Loch Macaterick. Loch Gower was very secluded, closely walled by the forest, and choked with reeds and lilies. Andrew pioneered a route through by paddling and wading along the edge then out into open water, then returned to act as a pilot for the Blue Team.
We landed on the boggy fringes at the far side of the lochan, in the firebreak heading due south, towards the sun. The sight that now confronted us apparently confirmed that the easy part of the circuit was behind us. The firebreak was choked with a nightmare of wind-thrown trees, seemingly impenetrable with a pack or canoe. Beyond that, the firebreak was blocked every 50-100 metres with similar, or worse obstacles. However, a little experience with the ways of the forest allowed us to construct a route through, and an hour or so later we emerged onto another forest road. It was hot and thirsty work portaging through the trees but we had a little MSR hollow-fibre water filter that we could just drop into little pools that we passed and simply suck up water, as if through a straw.

*Leaving Loch Gower.*
The firebreak was terminally blocked.

Taking to the forest.
We continued a short distance along the forestry road then a short carry through the trees brought us to Loch Fannie, closely followed by another short portage through to Loch Macaterick. Portage-lake-portage-lake; this really did feel like classic canoe-route country.
Checking the map after the carry through to Loch Macaterick.
Loch Macaterick, a natural lake, is another stunning place, especially now, at the height of its May splendour. Much of the north end of the loch is dotted with submerged boulders and required careful gliding to negotiate. Andrew demonstrated his mastery of this environment by getting out and standing on one of them, looking to all the world like he was walking on water. Our camp was on a perfect Desert Island beach, with the handsome symmetry of Macaterick peak in front. We explored, swam in the loch, toasted waffles and generally basked in the sunshine—everything you do when things finally all come together in that perfect canoe-tripping moment.

The character of the landscape changes after Loch Macaterick, where you feel that you are really entering the wilds. The outflow stream started well, but soon rocked out. The name of the stream, Black Garapel, sounded ominous and seemed in keeping with the barren view from this point. The name means something like rugged stream with dark pools. We could see the stream winding down the hill, making a long curve to the left. It can’t be too bad, we thought, it has been travelled before; MattT and Co. had come this way. As it turned out, the terrain proved to be rather accommodating for this type of situation, if you choose the correct side of the river. There was much firm-ish ground, little tussocky swamp and a good deer path where the forest starts. For connoisseurs of marginal Scottish streams there is much of interest here; paddling, wading, manoeuvring, and carrying, all in a wilderness setting. Andrew’s 12ft Old Town Pack came into its own in the small rocky streams where it could be manoeuvred and lifted in and out more quickly and easily than its 16ft companion. It was also easier to weave around the trees when portaging in the dense forested sections.
The exit from Loch Macaterick: Black Garpel.
The camp at The Bend in the River.
We found yet another level and appealing camp at the Bend in the River, where we spent our last sunny evening swimming and generally relaxing. After tea, the conversation got around to canoe journeys we knew of, or had read about, where parties had made their way up rivers and over miles-long portages for weeks on end, and in situations of real isolation, not within shouting distance of the nearest road. Although sitting by our river in the trees gave a good impression of a real wilderness experience, from a wider perspective our efforts seemed very tame. In previous blogs, canoe travel between the lochs in this area has been described variously as absurd, pointless, and ridiculous, almost as if an apology was needed for straying from the open water, even though such routes might seem commonplace in other canoe areas. Absurd, pointless, and ridiculous are not terms we would choose to describe what has been one of our most enjoyable trips.

After such a comfortable night on a level, springy pitch, listening to the chatter of the river and swish of the trees, you can be reluctant for morning to arrive. But eventually there it is, the dreaded sound of the tent zippers as the others get up, and you cannot put it off any longer. The final stretch of the route next morning was relatively easy going along the beautiful river and involved mainly portaging, with paddling here and there, notably at the widening of Carrick Lane, before rounding the final bend and spotting with relief that the cars were still there, next to the water of Loch Doon.
Approaching Loch Doon.
This is a great circuit. It seemed to flow through the country rather than fight it, as the best routes should. It had the feel of a canoe route in one of the developed North American Canoe Areas; spruces and pines, forest roads, dams, and portages on trails. Combining the first four lochs and using a portage trolley would make an interesting and quite easy circuit. Apart from the last section, the country is not wild; the trip is a shared experience with anglers, campervans, waterworks structures and forestry trucks. There is quite a lot of litter and frequent fire circles at access points, but these do not detract too much from the excellence of the canoeing. There are clearly problems of thoughtless use and car crime in this area, but efforts seem to be being made to accommodate, manage and protect legitimate users.

ANSWER TO SCENARIO
Find a wheelie bin in the forest and use the wheels to make a new canoe trolley.

One of the interesting objects found around Loch Riecawr.

Andrew (Borgwitha)
Graham (Moosehead)
Mike

Graham
Moosehead Canoes and Paddles

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8th-June-2014, 08:12 PM

andibs
More posts than a more established member

Excellent !!!!!!
8th June 2014, 09:35 PM

25272527  
More posts than a more established member

Great blogg many thanks for putting it together.  
Mike

--

9th June 2014, 05:52 AM

jimmi  
Beyond established member

Fantastic blog of a great looking trip. Must be some entries for the "photo comp" there too.thanks,

--

9th June 2014, 08:04 AM

Mal Grey  
Way beyond established member

Brilliant. What an adventure.

Covering as many malmiles as possible before being distracted by the pub! 😊🔥

zęzas

Paddle Points - where to paddle

--

9th June 2014, 08:12 AM

JinjaCoo  
Established member
That looks amazing. Worth all the effort to get such remote looking places like this one...

You should have kept up white lie about the plane, I was falling for it.

9th-June-2014, 08:42 PM

Davy 90
Way beyond established member

Wonderful! Now I really want to go back..

Absurd, pointless, and ridiculous are not terms we would choose to describe what has been one of our most enjoyable trips.

I think in the context of a longer trip with overnight camps en route, I'd completely agree enjoying what the area has to offer is far from absurd or ridiculous - in our specific experience, the lack of success (and probably skill) in finding a campsite on
Riecawr and local advice regarding vehicle security over a bank holiday 'preventing' a camp on day 2, whilst carrying all the kit to enable this made it so.

For balance, in the same blog I did also write:

quote

we were enjoying ourselves with fantastic scenery, sunshine, banter and problem solving as we went along. Finally we'd left the empty beer cans and fire rings behind and the sense of 'wilderness' was creeping in with plenty of deer tracks and other small paw prints dotted about. There were some magical stretches of little dense cobwebs dotted across the banks, heavy with dew and catching the sunlight...

end quote

Like the 'bush' ingenuity with the wheelie bin 😊

Thanks for posting.

my canoe movies