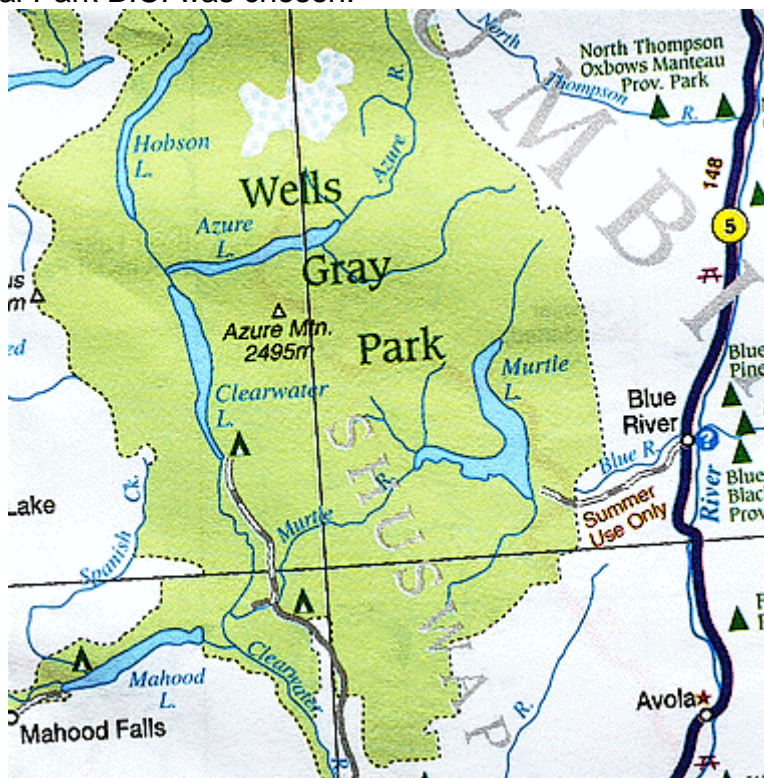


Murtle Lake Cruise – Wells Gray Provincial Park BC Canada

By Thom Vetromile

Last winter the word went out from Kim Apel, the intrepid Scuzbum canoe adventurer, on where to go for the summer 2005 adventure. A few sites were considered: the Rio Grande River in Texas, Ross Lake in Washington State and Atlin Lake near the Yukon Territory in BC Canada. However, given time constraints, travel modes and availability of canoe rentals Murtle Lake on the eastern side of Grays Provincial Park B.C. was chosen.



Nestled in the Cariboo Mountains at 3600 feet elevation, the Murtle lake west arm stretches into the Quesnel Highlands and Pill Pill Mountain. The west arm is also the exit for the lake down the Murte river. The north arm hugs the steep and above timber line Wavy Peak range. Both arms are separated at the top of the 'Y' by twin peaked Central Mountain. This is rugged, remote country. Joseph Hunter a surveyor with the Canadian Pacific Railway first visited the lake in 1874. and naming it -- rumor has it -- after his birthplace in Scotland. Since glacial times the lake was without fish due to six impassable waterfalls. In 1929 the Canadian Department of Fisheries stocked Rainbow trout and in the late 40's the B.C. Game Commission stocked a 100,000 kokanee. The lake now abounds with fish. It became so popular with sportsmen flying in to fish from outboard boats, that in the 60's the BC government limited access to a 14 mile rough road from the town of Blue River to a parking lot. One off loads the vehicle of gear and boat to travel on foot a 1 3 / 4 mile portage to Murtle Lagoon where a launch is provided to enter the lake. Murtle Lake is now one of the largest paddle only lakes in North America.

July 7th Thursday Arrived at Blue River BC with the guide boat in tow after a 7 1 / 2 hour drive north from Seattle. The scenery was a tour de force with the pastoral fields and rolling hills of Abbotsford and Chillwack along the Fraser River, through the ever steeper mountains past the town of Kamloops into Clearwater along the rushing North Thompson River. Set up camp at Ralph and Leigh Budgell's Blue River Campground and RV Park. The rest of the party: Kim Apel, Gordon Bundy and Jim and Carol Mayberry were due in later that night after a flight from LA to Vancouver where

they rented a vehicle to drive to Blue River. Tom & Chris Jeter were already in BC traveling in their VW Westphalia camper with their Old Town canoe on the top.



Parked beside the rather high fast flowing North Thomson River in Grays Country. A hint of the wet weather just a few miles further north.

July 8th Friday Woke at 5:00 AM to rain and cool temperatures. Had not heard Kim and Tom's vehicles arrive next to my campsite during the wee hours of the morning. Grabbed a quick shower and rather than wake the others, motored the pick up into Blue River to the Husky House restaurant and gas station for a hot breakfast. Spoke with the waitress on the insistent rain outside. She said that it has been raining for over a month – everyday – and that her garden is full of mushrooms but no produce.

Sorting gear undercover from the rain. The Jeter's VW camper is in the background with their Old Town canoe.



As the rain continued into the morning we moved to the common shelter at the campground and sorted gear. The idea was to see if the clouds would lift towards noon and we would begin our journey. The weather did lift and after purchasing fish licenses from Ralph (he has a picture of John Denver on the office wall about to explore Murtle lake) we loaded up the rented 18 foot Clipper canoes and started out to the Murtle Lake launch site along the 14+ mile dirt road.



The caravan in parade formation along the Murtle Lake road. Yes it's still raining, but less so...

The guide boat loaded with a weeks gear pausing at a creek bridge on the Murtle Lake portage trail.



After a flat tire change on the Jeter's VW we arrive at the Murtle Lake trail head parking lot and off load our gear to the boats which are mounted on carts. These small boat carts allow the portage to go much easier and reduces the effort to only one trip.



Tom and Chris Jeter catch up to the guide boat on the portage trail

Kim & Gordon, Tom and Chris launch at the Murtle Lake Lagoon.

Note the carts locked to the rail stands on shore for safe keeping until return.



The launch goes well with the Mayberry's already in the water and the rest of us making our way onto the lagoon. We paddle out the lagoon as the rain seems to be holding off to just sprinkles. At the mouth of the lagoon to the lake are two campsites. The decision is to camp at site # 2 tonight as we can get our tents and cook tarps up while the rain decides what it will do. The decision turns out to be a good one as we are able to enjoy good food and conversation while staying mostly dry.

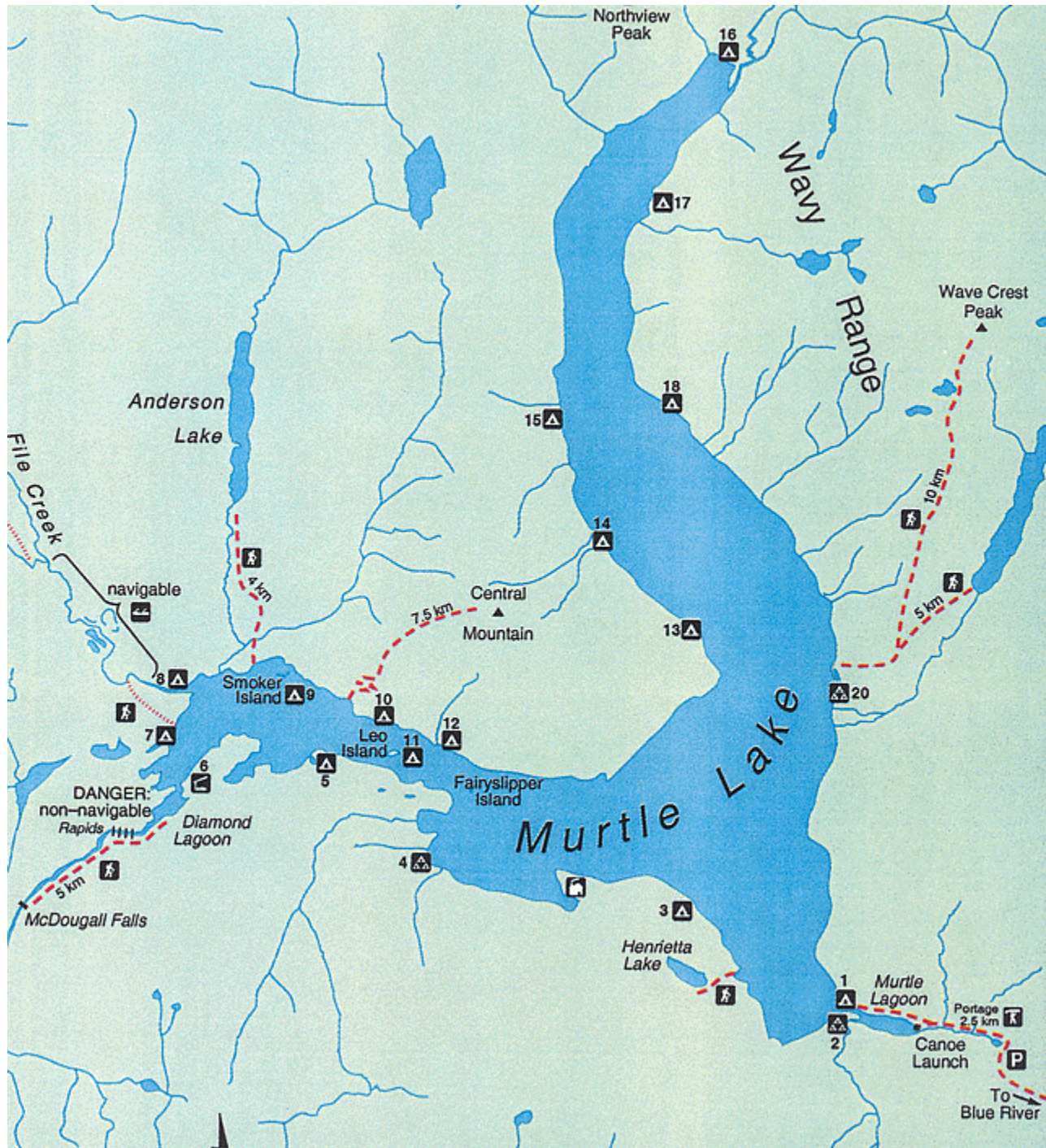
Leaving Murtle Lake Lagoon. Gordon and Kim in the left canoe and Carol and Jim Mayberry to the right. The rain clouds hang low in the background.



Murtle Lake has sandy beaches! Here the boats are 'parked' for the evening here at Campsite #2.

With camp set up the preparation of supper commences. Note Carol Mayberry's headdress, a mosquito hat that was very effective and became 'haute coutuer' around camp. The rest of us used DEET products, but mostly slapped ourselves silly when the breeze abated trying to keep the biting critters away.





July 9th Saturday Morning struck with sunshine peaking through heavy clouds. We breakfasted and began to break camp. Then the rain started. We decided to continue noting the possible emerging pattern of the weather lifting as the morning wore on. The goal was to paddle/row up the Murtle Lake west arm to campsite # 7 or 8. Before shove off the ranger assistants showed up in their aluminum skiff with a 4 stroke Honda – the only motor boats allowed on the lake. They had a bucket of toilet paper. All the outhouses are stocked by these folks with toilet paper, washed and swept. They also rake those campsites they come upon that are empty in their daily rounds!

The sky was threatening with dark gray clouds moving west to east from Shuswap Highland across the lake to dump rain into the north arm of Murtle lake. The clouds rose over Central Mountain only to be halted by the steeper Wavy Peak mountain range.



Above: The crew departs Campsite # 2
Below: The water view looking up into Murtle Lake north arm and the Wavy Peak Range just offshore from Campsite #2.



We paddled and rowed past Fairyslipper Island (no longer allowed as a campsite as the island is ecologically too fragile) to Campsite #10 on the east side of the west arm (see map above). Here we just got ashore as a fierce wind/rain cloud touched down creating large waves and spitting

snow. Even thunder and lightning accompanied this squall. We raced to put up an overhead tarp as the Jeter's canoe scooted to the beach. Lunch was brought out as we bundled against the wind and cold and huddled under the tarp. Soon the foul weather moved on; the lake calmed and the sun peaked out. We bailed the boats and moved on.



Left and below: Forest floor flower and mushroom bloom.



We continued across the lake heading west to Campsite #7 with the wind again increasing in strength right on our bows. It was an effort to keep forward progress. Finally, after a long day on the water -- Campsite #7.



Above: The Jeter's red canoe heads for #7's beach while the Mayberry's scout a landing spot. We are in the lee as the wind line shows out on the water. Central Mountain is in the background to the right.

Hunkered under the overhead tarps after supper, Jim Mayberry tends the campfire while Kim reads from the book A Walk in the Woods by Bill Bryson – a most humorous look at .the world of the backpacking hiker.



July 10th Sunday Awoke to sunshine, a breeze and cumulus clouds a-building. The decision after breakfast was to stay here at ole site #7 and explore this area of the lake. Tom Jeter looked over the maps and discovered a trail leading away from the outhouse that should lead to File Creek a tributary entering Murtle Lake from McDonnall Lake. The fishing is supposed to be excellent in this creek. The trail was narrow and wound around the forest which abounds with marshes and bogs as can be seen on the map below. These bogs were the breeding grounds of the pesky mosquito.

The number '80' rests on File Creek with Anderson Creek just beyond.



There were narrow boardwalks made from the cutting of downed trees lengthwise with a chain saw, sometimes two boards wide and at times one wide board. A balancing act to stay out of the marsh water as we followed the trail to File Creek. The trail ended at the creek edge with no bank to fish from as the forest went right to the water. This may have been due to the huge amounts of rainfall in the past 4 weeks raising the creek level -- not normal for this time of year.



Gordon beginning the hike back to camp. File Creek is in the background with the foothills of Pill Pill Mountain to the left.

The rest of the day was spent on camp chores, exploring by canoe the mouth of File Creek, 'discovering' the mouth of Anderson Creek, and fishing. Kim and Jim took one of the canoes up the mouth of File Creek. They said it was deep, wide with a fast moving current.

Gordon precariously perched on an old downed tree purifying drinking water from the lake.



The guide boat resting aside a gravel beach up about a quarter of a mile into Anderson Creek.

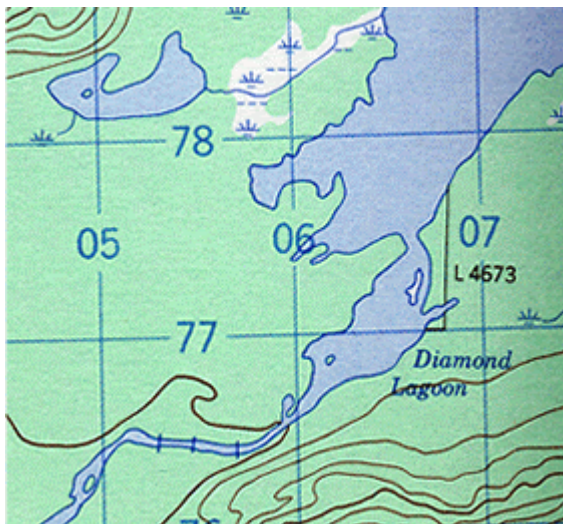
Jim Mayberry catches the first fish. This feat encouraged others to try their hand. Catching fish was so successful we had fresh fish for dinner for the rest of the trip!



July 11th Monday Dawn brought the patter of rain on the tent. Rolled out to be greeted by cold and wet. We assembled breakfast of hot 10 grain cereal with re-hydrated blueberries, cranberries and other fruit. Kim made a blueberry biscuit on a camp stove in a fry pan with a lid. Then we decided to see if we could venture to Diamond Lagoon, pick up the trail along the Murtle River to McDougall Falls. There was a bit of trepidation as the rangers back at Campsite 2 said a bear had been sighted working the rapids “a big bear”...!



The Scuzbums adventurers in review. Left to right: Chris and Tom Jeter with Kim Apel behind. Carol and Jim Mayberry with Gordon Bundy. Note the rain gear including pants – worn every day of the trip.



Diamond Lagoon forms the Murtle River headwaters. A trail leads down river past the hash marks illustrating the rapids. Kim and Jim entered the mouth of Diamond Lagoon and felt the current was too strong to safely continue -- not so much a problem going downstream to the trail, but to be able to paddle/row back to the lake. We learned later that the trick to this was to cut inside the island where there is less current (as the lake was high, no beach was apparent to even indicate the island as shown to the left just inside the lagoon). We abandoned the excursion.

Below: Gordon & Jim work the Old Town to the lagoon.



July 12th Tuesday We decided to break down camp; load the boats and head up lake to the Anderson Lake trail head. The goal here was to hike to Anderson Lake, enjoy a lunch, then hike back to the boats and paddle/row to Smoker Island (Campsite #9) to make camp.

The water tribe prepares to hike the Anderson Lake trail. This was no small chore as the trail was hard to find and negotiate due to lack of maintenance. Downed trees blocked the trail, and the mosquitoes rising from the bogs were around us like clouds. To keep moving was imperative through the warm humid forest.



We tested our balance across the tree bridges – here Anderson Creek itself.

The hike ended in a bust as a mass of trees blocked the trail just short of the lake and with the forest so dense it was all but impossible to go around. Back down the trail we went arriving at the boats with tired feet and though we snacked on the run, no sit down lunch this time.





Smoker Island is found on the east side of the west arm of the lake, just below Central Mountain (in the background above). Again, one must get the view angle right to discern that there is even an island. After camp set up most of the crew went fishing.



Smoker Island is a neat location with the camp tucked under the trees. The site has a nice feel and we could have stayed longer if the weather was more decent. We used the early evening to catch some of the infrequent sun and do some camp chores. Keeping gear dry was the biggest challenge.



Kim rows the guide boat with Smokey Island in the background

Jim shows off another 'trophy' rainbow caught on a very small rod -- maybe 5' with 2 Lb. test line using a simple Mepps spinner. The combination assures an exciting catch no matter what size fish.



Kokonee at the top and a Rainbow on the bottom. These fish have red/orange flesh not unlike a Copper River Salmon.

About 6:00 PM or so the sky darkened and a big black cloud began to descend from the north and west down onto Smoker Island. The wind blew hard. The mosquitoes ran for cover. We checked our gear so it would stay in one place. Tom Jeter was still fishing from his canoe. Then the rain came in sideways with the increasing wind. Tom managed to snag the beach at the far side of the campsite and get himself and canoe onto dry land. We all hunkered in waiting for the chaos to pass. After awhile the wind and rain lifted and mom nature gave us another show – the most beautiful clearly etched double rainbow this old boy has ever witnessed!



July 13th. Wednesday We awoke to a misty drizzle and after breakfast broke camp. The weather lifted and the sun came out. So nice to experience sun out on the open water. Then, like it has for the past 6 days, the clouds came in bringing wind and rain. We headed for the ranger cabin as they have a dock on the south side of the lake out of the west arm and located on a peninsula. The plan was to assess the weather and decide if going up north arm was an option. Up north arm are a few campgrounds. Campsite #20 has a trail nearby leading to Wave Crest Peak. Kim wished to hike this trail and maybe stay overnight. But the rain and wind was not abating. We lunched at the ranger dock, taking shelter in one of the boathouses. Finally a decision was reached. We would head for Murtle Lagoon and take out. Most everyone agreed that a hot shower, a dine out meal and a motel bed in Blue River would be a welcome improvement. So after 6 days of wilderness water travel we said goodbye to the eagles, ospreys, the common loons and headed out.