

## The Bay Beckons

- by Tim Dyer

There is a certain mystery to this wild corner of Georgian Bay, brought on by few roads, far too many islands for one short lifetime, and sparkling reefs just waiting for a southwest blow. A land that needs respect.

Never a hub of commerce, there was a time a few short decades ago, when steel magnates dreamed and schemed for a “Pittsburgh of the North” to spring from its shores. Distance, weather and her own secret ways kept this from happening. It’s our blessed luck, because today this land of rock, trees and water has become a paddler’s dream.



Nobody has really said for sure, but the northeast seems to begin at Parry Sound. It’s a good place to start. Historic and deep, “The Sound” has been home to people for thousands of years. To the west are the Mink and McCoy Islands, ancient summer camps and fishing grounds for the first people of the Bay.

In more recent times, the southern Minks were home to several families working some of the most productive fishing grounds on the Bay. Now, the islands are left mostly to themselves, with a few very determined summer residents. These rocky isles are some of the last as one looks to the open west. There is a special feeling to be camped out there and experience a westerly blow from a well-anchored tent! The Mink and McCoy group is lonely yet close. From Snug Harbour, a quiet cove north of Parry Sound, a three-hour paddle will bring you there. But those can be three long hours if the wind rises. Go with care.

Journeying north to Pointe au Baril, cottages, powerboats and summer people abound amongst the myriad channels. But for the intrepid paddler, a more solitary challenge awaits. Keeping to the outside, the Hangdog Reefs guard the near wilderness of the place where Bay water meets shore. Once past the Hangdog, the coast becomes both quieter and tougher.

Perhaps the most difficult piece in a southwesterly blow is the Head Island Reefs. Innocent looking in a breeze, they need to be given a wide berth when things get wild. But the Bay gives back. The outlets of the Naiscoot River empty on this shore, and provide a wonderful refuge from Bay winds. You can spend days exploring these back channels.

North and beyond lies Byng Inlet, the mouth of the Magnetawan River, and home to the villages of Britt and Byng Inlet. Long ago, the people there thrived on trees. Logs, floated down the 'Mag', were gathered, milled, boomed and shipped to insatiable southern markets. Much quieter now, today's residents are a friendly, community-minded folk who have made their own way with the rugged landscape.

Byng is a good starting point for the real northeast corner of the Bay. A few kilometres up lies Champlain Island, site of an old fishing station and dotted with excellent camping spots. Paddling north, the Churchill Islands and the One Tree Island group appear. The latter is well out and exposed to the open Bay, but affords spectacular vistas for the adventurous traveller.

In this corner of the Bay, Key Harbour is the last access on the east shore. Be ready though for a 13 kilometre paddle up the inlet to Highway 69 and the nearest road connection. This distance, and the lack of other access has been the single most important reason why the area hasn't been overrun with boats and people. Simply put, it takes some effort and will to get here. It could have been different.

The harbour of the Key was the site of iron ore loading docks back in the early 1900s. Huge deposits in northern Ontario were to be processed at the Key and shipped south. Some ore was transported, but developers finally realized the costs involved and shut it down, closing the door on a future of industrial development. For several decades afterwards, coal was shipped into the Key to supply rail operations farther north, but that activity too, quietly passed on.

Heading westward brings the Bay traveller to the French River delta. The outlets of this famous river of the fur trade and its labyrinth of channels and smooth granite could be cheerfully explored for a life-time. Protection from Bay winds is gained here, and many a summer's day can be whiled away in special spots, picking blueberries and swimming in the clear water. It's a favourite place for boaters, but paddlers can escape by seeking the shallow channels and reefs where larger boats can't venture.

The Bustard Islands offshore from the delta have been called the jewel in the crown of Georgian Bay's islands. Once home to a flourishing fishing station, like other out-island communities along the Bay, the commerce has now gone. The islands beckon by seeming to be close, but many a paddler has been caught confidently heading out to them and having to turn tail with the rising wind. Once there, the possibilities are many. The east and south sides provide the most relief from powerboats, and with all the places to explore, a couple of utterly unproductive and perfectly lovely weeks could be spent here.

There is a sense of heading out when paddling westward from the Bustards. The coast is still friendly, but there are very few islands for protection. The big hurdle for paddlers has

always been Point Grondine. Not a large obstacle, but what can make it nasty is the shallow reefs offshore in a southerly blow. It supposedly got its name from the fur-trading voyageurs who thought the rocks groaned from the voices of lost canoemen. One wonders if it was simply their groans from long hours battling a headwind. Whatever the reason, this spot can be gentle and calm ...sometimes. The reward farther along is an enchanting scatter of islets called The Chickens. They are a paddler's delight with a maze of routes through low-lying rock and pine islands.

Once through, heading west, a paddler comes to a decision point: whether to be gathered into the bosom of welcoming Beaverstone Bay and the shelter of Collin's Inlet, or to be the carefree adventurer and explore the exposed south shore of Philip Edward Island. The former has history on its side. The First People of the area, and afterwards the Voyageurs, both chose the quietness of the inlet whenever the Bay looked threatening. But to take the exposed side is to laugh the adventurer's laugh, face the wind down and carry on. Beckoning forward are the Fox Islands, a group of high, pink, granite domes with campsites one can only dream about. The white quartzite hills of Killarney are a striking backdrop to this wild waterscape.

Collin's Inlet is framed by the north side of Philip Edward Island and the Killarney mainland. Deciding to paddle its narrow, sheltered water west takes the paddler past the historic mill town of Collin's Inlet. In its day, the mill churned out hundreds of thousands of board feet of pine. A lumber schooner was reportedly constructed right there at the mill site. Farther along, native rock paintings on the north side give silent record to the passage of ancient canoes. At the westerly mouth of Collin's Inlet is Chickanishing Creek. There is a road here and the creek gives access to both the inlet and the south side of Philip Edward Island.

To the open west lies Killarney Bay, a large, exposed stretch of water. Once traversed, the paddler can escape to the Killarney village channel and a deserved stopover. The town site was once a native fishing encampment, a fur trade post, more recently a fishing village and now home to a few hundred year-round residents. Thousands of summer vacationers visit Killarney by car and boat each year. This is the last major community in the northeast Bay before Little Current and the entrance to the North Channel. Between the two is an enchanting paddling area comprising Frazer Bay, Baie Fine and McGregor Bay. Cloaked by the La Cloche Mountains, this area deserves lazy exploring, with many opportunities for hiking the quartzite hills from water's edge campsites.

A very special part of the Bay, the northeast coast is wild, gentle, travelled and remote. A place of contrasts, meant to be visited softly and with grace. A place meant for paddle people.