



LINDA FAIRFIELD

*Blueberries, members of the heather family (Vaccinium), include a variety of edible species. Borne on small shrubs that grow along streams and rivers, the blue-black berries are much sought by bears in July and August.*

*Wild asters catch the sun by the shore of Lake Superior.*

# Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg

Though several place names between Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg recall the fur trade – Ontario’s LaVerendrye Provincial Park and Minnesota’s Voyageurs National Park, for example – fur traders were only among the latest of a very long line of travellers to pass this way. A piece of handworked antler discovered near Morson, Ontario, on Lake of the Woods has been carbon dated to 8,000 years, one indication of how long people have lived in the region.

Trade between the Great Lakes and the Great Plains is also thousands of years old. Spearpoints and ornaments crafted of copper mined north of Lake Superior have turned up in archaeological excavations in Manitoba, hundreds of miles west.

These ancient trade routes followed even older pathways carved by water and ice. The route that served the fur trade for most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century begins at the Grand Portage Gap, a preglacial trough in the highlands along the northwestern edge of Lake Superior. From here, the route follows the international border to Rainy River and Lake of the Woods, before descending the turbulent Winnipeg River to Lake Winnipeg.

Despite nature’s efforts, this was not an easy route. The waterway was convoluted, with numerous portages. But it was, and still is in many places, beautiful and for westbound voyageurs, downstream almost all the way.

Though even today some parts of it are accessible only by water, highway travellers will find its combination of heritage reconstructions and natural beauty worth visiting. The route begins at Grand Portage, where one of the earliest fur trade reconstructions in the United States draws thousands annually, and follows the famous 8½-mile portage through the Gap to the upper Pigeon River. Hikers and skiers can follow this historic trail to Fort Charlotte, a small storage depot on the river, with its

primitive campground. Motorists can access the trail near its mid-point on Old US 61 and the scenic lower Pigeon River from Highway 61. Parks on both sides of the border offer camping and information.

The next 70 miles of the route boasts some of the best canoeing in the United States, with deep gorges, 600-foot cliffs and island-studded lakes typical of the Precambrian Shield. Highway travellers can access the Boundary Waters via the Arrowhead, Gunflint



DENNIS FAST



and Echo Trails; all head northwest from U.S. Highway 61 along the northwest shore of Lake Superior.

Farther west, the fur trade era is recalled at Fort St. Pierre, a replica of one of Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye's early posts in Fort Frances, Ontario, across the Rainy River from International Falls.

The shoreline between here and Lake of the Woods is largely agricultural and in places quite densely settled. This area is also archaeologically rich; the Manitou Mounds at Long Sault Rapids served as burial grounds of a civilization that existed here for more than 1,000 years.

Minnesota Highway 11 follows the Rainy River to Baudette, then heads west to Warroad, just south of the Canadian border. On the Canadian side, the Trans-Canada Highway (No. 11) goes west from Thunder Bay to the Rainy River, then turns north (on No. 71) to circumvent Lake of the Woods on the east side.

From the Rainy River the fur trade route crossed Lake of the Woods. The southern half of the lake to the Northwest Angle and the site of La Vérendrye's Fort St. Charles is shallow and demanding, though with unexpected delights.

Then the lake enters the shield and canoeing becomes a pleasure.

The final portion of the route to Lake Winnipeg bears little resemblance to its fur era predecessor. The once wild and beautiful Winnipeg River has been dammed in a number of places, but the upper reaches still draw paddlers today. Ahead stretches Lake Winnipeg, largely unchanged but for the cottages that line its southern shores. Shallow and tempestuous, it is still a continual challenge for boaters.

The Montrealers' mainline was not the only, or the earliest, fur trade route used. Before it came into regular usage, French traders travelled extensively along the south shore of Lake Superior, following the rivers west and south and establishing trade relations with the Ojibwe and Dakota. A reconstruction and nearby interpretive centre at Ashland, Wisconsin, recalls this era, when northern Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota were important trading regions.

Even during the heyday of the North West Company, Minnesota fur posts continued to do a brisk trade; the reconstructed North West Company Fur Post on the Snake River in Pine City recalls this era, transporting visitors to 1804.

*Setting off at dawn from Fort Charlotte, the hibernants or North West Company winterers, faced a journey that grew as the last two decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century passed. For some, the watery road ahead would take them more than 1,500 miles northwest.*