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Travelling the Northern Woods & Water Highway Part 1

Celebrate Canada's sesquicentennial by exploring Nature's best in the western provinces. Tour being planned for departure from Winnipeg on June 19, 2017, depending on interest.

June 5, 2017

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Dale Harrison



Story & photos by Dale Harrison

In the mid 1970's, a retired CN employee from northern Alberta conceived a highway route. He envisioned a different way to travel from Dawson Creek, BC to Winnipeg, MB utilizing the roads that were in the northern parts of the provinces. He got together a small group of RV friends and set out to travel the roads. They stopped in communities along the way to explain where they were going and the idea of a third east-west highway. For several years, George Stevenson travelled the highway taking campers in both directions. He eventually created an organization, named the Northern Woods & Water Route. That group, made up of representatives of communities along the highway, lobbied the provincial governments to recognize the roads that they had been travelling and to install signs identifying the highway as well as including the highway symbol on provincial highway maps. Thus, the Northern Woods & Water Highway was brought into existence.

I first travelled the Northern Woods & Water Highway by car over 25 years ago, to produce a tourism guide promoting the highway. For five years, I made numerous trips back and forth from Winnipeg to The Pas, across to Nipawin, through northern Saskatchewan, Prince Albert, Shellbrook, and Meadow Lake to Cold Lake, Alberta, then onto Lac La Biche, Slave Lake, Peace River and into Dawson Creek, BC. I took photos and talked with people along the highway about producing the highway guide. Remember, these were the days when the internet was just beginning to unfold as a communication tool.

The Northern Woods & Water Highway was promoted as a Holiday Highway. It is aptly named, as the highway journeys through small towns that are close to rivers and lakes and meanders through the boreal forests. Unfortunately, I always travelled the roads too quickly to take in all the richness that the 2,500 km trip exposes. There are the historic roots from the fur trading and early settlement days; places like Fort Dauphin, Lac La Biche Mission, Grouard Mission, Historic Dunvegan, and of course Dawson Creek - Mile Zero on the mega project of the Alaska Highway, which is celebrating its 75th Anniversary in 2017.

In 2016, I decided to see if I could rally support to start promoting this scenic highway again. Having now joined the RV fraternity, I travelled solo from Winnipeg to Dawson Creek in an older Class C motorhome. I enjoyed the freedom to explore a bit more and stop overnight in locations between the motels that I stayed at previously. The remainder of the article explains a bit of what you will see and experience along the route.

Manitoba is the home of big lakes where inland fisheries send the big boats out to handle the potential waves. Once you leave these shores heading north, you start into some of your many excursions into the boreal forests of northern Canada. The forest is a mix of evergreens and deciduous trees and home to deer, elk, moose, cougars, and bears as well as squirrels that will keep you entertained for many hours at your campsite. There are many rivers and streams that feed these watery eco-systems and provide habitat to game fish.

The southern Manitoba portion is low-lying terrain with lots of big water. My first overnight stay on the route was at the Rubber Ducky Resort, a great family campground where I enjoyed the heated pool and hot tub. The Highway ventures north close to the eastern shores of Lake Manitoba, then crosses over to the west side of the lake through the Narrows. The highway pops out on the west side of Lake Manitoba at Ste Rose du Lac. There is a great campground and a replica of the Notre Dame de Lourdes grotto. Venturing north you come to Ochre River and Dauphin Lake with a public beach and picnic area. As you travel further north the trees get bigger and the forest gets more dense. South of Dauphin is Riding Mountain National Park and north of Dauphin is Duck Mountain Provincial Park. Although both parks are technically slightly off of the NWW highway, both have a multitude of treed campsites and access to water for swimming and fishing. Dauphin itself hosts several large events throughout the year, including the Canadian Ukrainian Festival, Countryfest, and it also has the historic Fort Dauphin.

Continuing north on Hwy 20 through a mix of agricultural and lakeland will bring you to Winnipegosis on the lake of the same name. The campground is adjacent to the lake and allows swimming and a boat launch.

Winnipegosis is home to some of Manitoba's inland commercial fisheries. You can also choose to travel north of Dauphin on Hwy 10 along the east side of Duck Mountain. Here the streams and lakes are full of game fish like lake trout, walleye, northern pike, brown trout, rainbow trout, and perch.

As you travel further north you start to see evidence of the forestry industry that processes wood from the boreal forest to create pulp, paper, lumber, and oriented strand board (OSB). For many communities in the north, this is the primary industry and the lifeblood that keeps the communities alive. If you have an interest, many of the mills that process lumber offer site tours where you can see raw logs transformed into finished products. Minitonas has an OSB plant just east of the community.

There is a great golf course located at Swan River. One of its claims to fame is as the most northerly 18-hole course in Manitoba; another is the well groomed, challenging treed course. Many of the golf courses have walk-on tee times during the week with leisurely rounds available. Swan River is where you start to leave the population behind as you head north.

There is one section of the Northern Woods & Water Highway that is still unpaved west of The Pas to Nipawin. Therefore, you get to decide where your exploration will take you: (1) North of Mafeking there is a junction with Highway #7 that will take you west into Saskatchewan at Hudson Bay and onto Carrot River and Nipawin, or (2) you can brave the gravel section west of The Pas, or (3) continue to venture north to Flin Flon into the unique land of the Canadian Shield with pristine lakes with solid rock shores. I overnighted at the town's unserviced campground on the shores of the Saskatchewan River. It is interesting to see trees grow out of rock. Flin Flon is known as a mining town with a huge smokestack from the zinc mine and unique aboveground water and sewer lines that service the community as they have little to no top soil and solid rock foundations. The forest thins out for a while as you near Flin Flon but thickens again travelling southwest on the Hansen Lake Road that will take you past some beautiful secluded lakes and campsites in northern Saskatchewan. It is a 320 km jaunt from Flin Flon to Smeaton, so be sure to fuel up before you leave town. I overnighted at Deschambault Lake but past numerous small wayside campsites.

I encourage people to set aside several weeks to enjoy a leisurely trip across northern portions of the four western provinces. Another idea is to do the highway in sections, either way you will not be disappointed. Let your ideas of what the prairies look like be expanded to include the vast number of lakes, rivers, and creeks. The forests are home to an abundance of birds and wildlife. There are lots of places where blueberries and saskatoons grow wild just off the side of the road. If you need a little water time you can camp beside streams and rivers or along a lakeshore with the gentle lapping of the water and the serene call of the loons. Enjoy longer hours of daylight followed by nights under the Northern lights.

For anyone interested in joining a guided cavalcade, there is a tour being planned for departure from Winnipeg on June 19, 2017, depending upon interest. The plan is to travel the Northern Woods & Water Highway in bite sized pieces, playing a variety of golf courses over a two or three-week period. If you are interested, check out the Northern Woods & Water Highway website www.nwwr.ca for more details and tentative itinerary.

Dale Harrison is president of the Northern Woods & Water Highway Association. He travelled and published the Northern Woods & Water Highway Guide for five years in the late 80's and early 90's. On June 19, 2017, Dale and his wife will be venturing forth in their new/used diesel pusher to travel the highway and do some golfing and promoting of the highway again. Follow their blog or join them. There is information on the Golf Cavalcade itinerary on the website www.nwwr.ca/golf. This trip will take two weeks from Winnipeg to Dawson Creek travelling between 100 & 200 km on most days, another week will take the cavalcade into the lower mainland of BC. Feel free to email Dale at info@nwwr.ca for any additional information.

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