

Sailing the Living Sky

by Calvin Liebel

Rolling fields of wheat swaying and nodding in a gentle summer breeze are described frequently as resembling a golden sea. Grain elevators not lighthouses are landmarks used to navigate this land-locked cultivated sea. So a poster inviting members of a yacht club to participate in a sailing cruise titled “In Search of the LOST MOUNTAIN” seemed more than a little out of place.

Talk of prairie sailing encourages the question, “Where do you sail, on your dugout?” The response, “On LAST MOUNTAIN LAKE”, only invites deeper skepticism to ones sanity. However, since no one has located a mountain in the vicinity, Last Mountain Lake has become known locally more appropriately as LONG LAKE. An easy 30-minute drive NW of Regina Saskatchewan makes Long Lake a popular recreation destination. Approximately fifty miles long the lake lies in a NW direction with a short dogleg running to the east at the south end. The lake forms the floor of a valley cut by the run off from melting glacier eons ago. The elements have sculptured the surrounding hills into rolling knolls and gullies supporting native grasses and trees. Groups of summer cottages, located at different points and bays, have names reflecting the terrain and pioneers.

Nestled along the south shore of the east arm is the Village of Regina Beach, a summer resort retreat and home to The Regina Beach Yachting Club. Established in 1913 the club has a very long and colorful history, displayed by cherished photographs in the seasoned clubhouse. Over two hundred members call R.B.Y.C. their homeport. The Search for the Lost Mountain cruise seemed to fit the inaugural R.B.Y.C. summer cruise. Inquiries around the club about sailing to the north end turned up only one current member who had ever sailed the north end of the lake, regrettably he would not be making this trip. Stories told by the power boaters did not tell of any visible mountain, only mountains of rocks. A trophy made from the remains of a lower unit drive is on display in the trophy case as a reminder to all that hitting rocks is the one trophy you do not want your name engraved on.

One thing I dislike, when I read a story about boats, is not knowing what kind of boats are involved, so here is the name and type of the boats on this journey: Sonatina - Serius 21; La Saucier – Tanzer 22; SeaDucktion - Etapp 23; Seraf II – C&C 24; Gypsy Soul – C&C 24; Arbutus – Mirage 25 and one more boat would meet the fleet on the return, Bo Jangles – C&C 24.

The waterline of the six sailboats slowly sank lower as supplies were piled aboard, “one more bag of ice” seems to be the order of the day. With winds out of the west at 12 knots, the flotilla set sail for the marina at Rowans Ravine Provincial Park fifteen miles north. A planned stop at Stone Barn Bay, a favorite lunch stop seven miles up, was passed as we started late and the winds have a tendency to drop off later in the day.

We did not set any speed records on the remaining eight miles and reached Rowans just in time for happy hour. With the fleet secured to the park dock, the cocktail pendants swayed in the dying breeze while tales of a great sailing day were relived.

Traveling north from the park dictates different sailing skills and navigation disciplines. The valley of the south section of the lake takes on a new look a short distance from Rowans, it transforms to rolling cultivated farmland stretching to the horizon. Off to the west the profile of an aging grain elevator identifies a small hamlet. A glance east reveals a few lonely homesteads dotting checkerboard fields glimmering in the sunlight as the sun burns off the morning dew. Turning to the north the lake stretches to the horizon, while a mirage gives the illusion that trees on the shore are dancing in the sky. Nearly three miles wide this section of the lake stretches to her maximum width, while the depth sounder reading of 96 feet a few miles back now reads 20feet. This is the time to keep an eye on the chart and a sharp lookout for birds standing on rocks just below the surface.

We had not found the *Lost Mountain*, so set sail for Big Arm, a bay fifteen miles north on the west side of the lake that offered some refuge if a wind built up at night. The wind gods did not look down on our little flotilla with favor that second day. There is an unwritten law that states “The wind shall drop in proportion

to the heat of the day” came into play. Boy, was it hot, 38 degrees Celsius and zero wind! If it had been breakfast, we could have fried eggs on the cockpit cushions.

Arriving at Big Arm late in the afternoon the boats motored into the bay and anchored on water as still as a plate of glass. Time was running out for Sonatina and La Saucierre, as this was going to be their last night with the northbound group. Time to follow the sailor’s creed “PARTY”. With Jimmy Buffett singing about a cheeseburger in paradise, and cold brew on hand it did not take long for a couple of boats to raft up. Not too many things will stop sailors from partying, but a dragging anchor is a sure bet to take the wind out of their sails. Weed beds do not make good holding ground anytime, but add the extra weight of a rafted boat and a strengthening wind signaled the end of the party.

Last Mountain Regional Park fourteen miles to the north was our goal for day three. We wished the two boats returning home, “safe sailing”, and made ready to test the unknown waters beyond Big Arm. With a wind out of the SE at 15 knots and two-foot waves running up the lake, our run to the north looked more desirable than a beat south. Just after clearing the headlands, Arbutus had the misfortune to have equipment failure. The outboard motor bracket snapped, dumping the engine overboard. Call it a premonition or just blind luck, but by carrying out a neglected safety procedure fifteen minutes earlier, the crew avoided a very bad day. (Always attach a safety line to your outboard). Lashing the waterlogged motor to the stern rail, Arbutus pushed on under mainsail alone as speed was not a high priority without a motor. A little, after the motor loss incident the VHF radio came to life informing the northbound boats that a southbound boat had a collision with the mountain. It was hiding under the water waiting to terrorize all whom approached. The boat had suffered only superficial damage. However, the tremor heard in the voice over the airways, indicated just how shaken the crew was. With the thought of hitting rocks high on all the crews list of adventures not wished to experience, the fleet carefully worked it’s way north.

With the park in sight we needed to select a course, except the chart did not show the depths in detail. Gypsy Soul proceeded north around an island just SW of the park and tried approaching from the west. This was not the course to try without local knowledge, as a reef runs north of the island with only one

small passage. After bumping and thumping over the rocks for a short time Gypsy Soul radioed they were safely across the reef, but did not recommend anyone else to try the same course. SeaDucktion and Seraf II retreated hastily south of the island only to find shallow water barring their way. Bringing up the rear Arbutus turned towards the east shore, hoping to avoid an encounter with rocks. This proved to be the correct course and after a breath - holding approach, the three boats anchored close to the east shore. Gypsy Soul decided to explore the Islands and surrounding waters as this whole north end is National Wetlands Reserve, the oldest bird sanctuary in North America.

Securely anchored it was decided to venture ashore to explore the park and telephone for parts to repair the motor mount. Climbing aboard SeaDucktion the crews traveled the short distance to the finger pier beside the boat launch ramp of the park. On shore, all the niceties of a modern campground were close at hand. In the future, a newly constructed swimming pool will enhance the appeal of the park. With the temperature moving very close to the forty degree mark, ice was a highly sought after item. Campers at the park had made a heavy run on the local supply and it would be a couple of days until stocks were replenished. Ice, a temporary motor bracket, and beer were high on the order placed by the skipper of Arbutus to a son back in Regina. (Thanks, Steve.)

Returning to the dock, it was apparent that something was wrong with the boats at anchor, they all faced different directions from the wind that had switched from the SE to the NW. The boat at the dock, which had floated freely before, was now touching bottom. Pushing the boat a little further out into deeper water, the motor was started and a course set for the nearest boat. SNAFUS happen on boats; however, few sound as infamous as the sound of a motor stalling from a fouled prop. In the rush to reach the grounded boats a stern line was left hanging overboard, and any line left overboard will always find the propeller. One consolation for being in shallow water is the fact you can stand and work on a fouled prop. In no time at all the offending line was back on board and we were on our way out to the grounded boats.

Arriving at Seraf II the skipper jumped in the water and simply walked over to the anchor line and proceeded to pull his vessel to deeper water. It is a great sailing tale regarding prairie sailing. "Now most

people walk their dog, but here in Saskatchewan we walk our boats". Arbutus, with her wing keel, needed a tow by SeaDucktion to deeper water were the anchor was reset.

With the order of ice and beer from Regina, along with the homemade motor bracket, SeaDucktion rafted up to Arbutus. Gypsy Soul, returning from her short sail exploring the local waters, lay along Arbutus. Seraf II, seeing what suspiciously looked like a party brewing, rafted to SeaDucktion. While the crew of Arbutus replaced the motor bracket, they received lots of encouragement. Sailors, make some of the best sideline mechanics, suggesting all sorts of brilliant ideas that materialize especially at happy hour. With the cold beer disappearing at an alarming rate, the repairs were carried out in record time.

"The Land of the Living Skies" is used to describe the prairies ever changing sky but, truly, if you have not experienced a northern latitude sunset, it must be included in your "TO DO LIST". Dusk slowly extinguished the unreserved art exhibition replacing it with a warm darkness studded with countless diamonds across the heavens. How often have you called out, "Oh look at that", when sighting a falling star, only to see it burn out before anyone begins to turn a head? Well that night when the words came out, all heads turned and the trail of the falling star was still visible for all to see. Was it just an illusion? No, it was a night to remember.

Early the next day the fleet set sail for southern waters. Alas, time again forced one boat to conclude the cruise and return home. Upon reaching Rowans Seraf II push on, hoping the wind would hold the remaining fifteen miles. With the odds in favor of the wind dropping the three remaining boats elected to spend the last evening up the lake and turned into the marina. The crew from Bo Jangles offered a helping hand at the docks, club members who would join the fleet for the sail home. The line handlers where eager to hear how the cruise had progressed after Big Arm. The boats that had returned to the club told stories of rocks and lost motors, that evening's happy hour just might have added a wee bit of excitement and drama to the tales.

The answer to what to prepare for the evening meal, when stocks are running low and a desire for a change is in the air lay a short walk to the park. There the galley slaves were treated to a restaurant meal at the recently opened Bistro & Bar. A round of miniature golf at the park was a very different and pleasant way to round out the night. Returning to the marina, we watched a power cruiser from our club pull up to the end dock. Not knowing if they had acquired a key for the dock gate, we invited the crew to join us for a nightcap. Again the camaraderie enjoyed by the boating society brought sail and power together and new friendships were launched under the stars.

Work is a factor of life for most of us and as much as you would like to sail the summer away, time ran out on the cruise all too soon. The last day turned out to be the hottest of the week. With the icebox warming at the same degree as the outside temperature, thoughts of a refreshing ice-cold beer waiting at home took the sting out of the termination of a fantastic voyage. Saskatchewan over the years has earned the name “Next Year Country” but I for one look forward to next years cruise.

P.S. As I sit at my computer reliving last summer, winter sits over the land. I hear the radio reporting the temperature outside at MINUS 35 Celsius with a 50 Kilometer wind making the wind chill factor some thing you only find in outer space. Time to surf the Net and check the Charters in the Caribbean!