

Discovering Willsboro Bay

Monday, July 9, 2004 – Port Kent, NY south to Willsboro Bay

Distance: 12.5 miles

Weather: Cloudy to start, light winds, then threatening clouds, Strong NW winds, temperature in low 79s

Today is the day we discovered the west shore of Willsboro Bay! We're not the first one's to appreciate its incredible beauty, of course, but we did not know about it until we got there. Our experience from a kayak seemed particularly dramatic both because of the slow speed we traveled and how close we could get to the precipitous cliffs. We were so enthralled it prevented us from worrying about the weather-at least for a time.

Now, weather can be a very boring subject, but this summer, it has been a constant factor. Sometimes, it has even been interesting. We have certainly been more aware of the weather than ever before in our lives. It may be enough of an introduction to say that we had scrubbed a possible trip the day before because of a forecast for winds and storms. That afternoon, I watched with a feeling of vindication for our joint decision and a little awe, as pea size and occasional quarter size hail banged against the windows driven by high winds. And once again I realized that, but for a lucky smart decision, we could have been out there in that storm.

But, this day dawned cloudy with a forecast for later clearing to partial sun with a potential for afternoon showers but no storms. We were game but wary. It took almost 2 hours to set up the cars and boats including dropping my car at the ramp site at the base of Willsboro Bay. We pulled up to the Port Kent ramp amidst the ferry traffic, unloaded our kayaks, and parked the car. On the way back from the car, Cathy chatted with an older man who told her that the weather forecast had changed to cloudy with "thunderstorms moving in". Oops, another tick up on the wary meter but enough already! We shoved off.

It is hard to understate the visual differences in the two sides of the lake in this particular section between Plattsburgh and Willsboro on the west and Grand Isle and Shelburne on the east. As Vermonters' we know the Chittenden and Island shoreline pretty well. We also have kayaked most of it by now. We are more used to the layered mostly black rock with its twists and upheavals. And while there are many places where access to the lake is a precipitous drop, the cliffs are rarely higher than 50 feet and the water at the bottom is usually shallow. In fact much of the northern shore that we have paddled has been shallow. In Chittenden, Grand Isle, and to a lesser extent, Franklin County, the shoreline is either settled or open farmland. For the most part, the land gently slopes back from the shore to the distant Green Mountain ridge. The Vermont side of the Champlain Valley is often a rich farmland. On the New York side there is little open, flat land. Rather the hills

and small mountains rise from the lakeshore. These differences shaped early settlement attracting farmers to the Vermont side while the New Yorkers relied on the manufacture of potash for cash.

Pushing away from the boat ramp at Port Kent and heading south, we were again passing a wooded undeveloped shoreline. Thanks again to the railroad. But as close as the railroad track is, it is not very visible except for an occasional avalanche of small rocks created during construction or subsequent washouts. We also have seen a number of work vehicles rumbling up and down the track. The beach was long and shallow, streaked with black sand. Was that the natural color of the sand or evidence of earlier pollution? We have not found the answer. Posted signs dotted the trees unlike other beaches under the railroad. These were signed by a private party.

We seemed a long way from anywhere when we rounded the cliffs at the end of the bay with one eye on the sky and one on possible places to pull out if needed. It felt as if we were in an exposed, uninhabited area. But, around the next bend we found ourselves in front of a well maintained house where two women were working on the beautiful gardens.

The many lovely homes along Trembleau Point only distracted us a bit from Schuyler Island about half a mile to the west. We did notice on the mainland, the first of many trees that we were to see that day which appeared to have been snapped off their roots by high wind by yesterday's storm. There had been reports of many trees down in this area and we were witnessing the damage along the lake.

Looking out at Schuyler Island reminded us again of the courage and luck of Benedict Arnold and his men during the American Revolution as they fled south from the pounding they had taken at the hands of the superior British fleet at the Battle of Valcour 8 miles to the north. Arnold led his damaged boats silently south through the night and cover of fog. When he got to Schuyler Island, he was forced to sink two of them which were damaged beyond repair, to prevent them from eventually getting in the hands of the British. The engagement of the fledging American Navy and a stronger British fleet was to continue as the ships moved south. We looked forward to paddling eventually to Arnold Bay, Crown Point and Fort Ticonderoga, experiencing the wind and weather that played so important a role in those naval battles of October 1777. Living in the Champlain Valley is to be constantly reminded of its long history.

We had planned to circle Schuyler Island but with great respect for the long line of black clouds blowing from northwest to southeast over our right shoulders, we decided on a more conservative route staying close to shore. Luckily, neither one of us capsized our kayaks as we strained to turn our 60 something year old heads in owl-like fashion to

check on the clouds. We Vermonters are used to having the whole lake to look across to see what weather is coming our way. On the New York shore that is an unheard of luxury. A storm cloud can be upon you before you can see how deep or long it might be and whether it is followed by blue sky or more clouds and rain.

Rounding the point and heading southeast with Schuyler behind us, the railroad again insured a wooded shoreline. The next beach was made of small cobblestones which were the first we had seen. On a 1776 Brassier map, this stretch was aptly named Stoney Bay. The land was not posted and a pair of kayakers were enjoying the deserted shore. Further on, we saw our first pair of redstarts. Nearby, a bluebird called.

Port Douglas was straight ahead, recognizable not for its many houses but rather for its somewhat elaborate launch site, picnic area, and beach. Time for lunch! We paddled around the floating lines which seemed to indicate a number of possible swimming levels, and landed on the sand beach. Looking back to the northeast there was a great view between Schuyler and the mainland, of Providence Island and the South Hero shore. Burlington was directly across from us and we could see the skyline of the city 10 miles away clearly visible today across what is the widest point in the lake. What a contrast in populations between the two shores, at this point in the lake!

Several small children played nearby, watched over by a woman who was reading. It reminded us of how contented our children used to be with some sand, pails, and their own imaginations. Rain soon drove us to shelter under the roof the bathroom/life guard building.

Two of the young men there said they were the daily life guards. We wondered aloud how much business there was. They assured us that they had almost none and that it was a great way to spend the summer. Leaving Port Douglas behind, the shoreline to the south was mostly wooded, rising fairly steeply from the water.

The best was just about to come! The west shore of Willsboro Bay is spectacular. The closeness of the fall lines on the shore and the depth of the water printed on the chart, including depths of 150+ feet right at the shoreline, only hint at the majesty of these cliffs. The water beneath our kayaks was black, only suggesting the depths below. We could paddle so close to the cliffs that we needed only to leave room enough for our paddles to dip into the water and not hit the vertical rock. It felt like we were flying. The delicious scent of evergreens slid down to the water in between the cliffs. We saw and heard numerous waterfalls, and wondered if there were so many because of the storms the day before or whether this was the normal flow from the upland watershed.

Looking down, it felt like we were in deep water. Here in the lee, the water had kind of a

slosh to it that sure didn't feel like the shallower water we were used to. It reminded me of kayaking under some huge bridge (imagine the Golden Gate) where the piers plunge directly down into bedrock. Unlike other cliffs we have seen, these fell straight down below the waterline and out of sight. The tops of the cliffs were only visible by arching back along the stern of the kayak. (This also proved helpful for backs which had been too long bent in the other direction.) The sound was almost a slurp, slurp as the water moved against these giant structures.

The wonder that we felt is the only explanation that I can come up with for Cathy's reversion to childhood language. At one point, in order to get a sense of scale, she asked me to paddle ahead "quick like a bunny" so she could take a picture. I almost fell out of my kayak laughing. But, like a good girl, I complied. (So maybe I should have just said "Get you butt over there lady! Fast!" So much for being polite, majestic cliffs or not. That sounds just like something my kids would complain about, never forget, and remind me of forever!).

There is a great cleft in a cliff toward the inner end of the bay which slices the rock from the top to deep into the water. In more dramatic (or corny) language which the scene evokes, it looks much like a mighty bolt of lightning had struck, cleaving the rock asunder. I was able to back my kayak into the breach and be entirely hidden from the view of all except Cathy circling at the mouth taking pictures. The fall lines on the chart at this point indicate that the cliff is 400 feet high and the water depth is 116 feet.

Yet, we were surprised when we took our kayaks out across the bay to look back and find that the drama of these cliffs was not obvious from that distance. These cliffs deserve an up-close experience.

The railroad also crosses these cliffs, at some point blasted out of rock which has fallen in small avalanches to the water. Looking up it is hard to believe that the railroad bed has something to rest on. In fact at one point it doesn't! There, a very high trestle spans a waterfall. Our impression of the precariousness of the track was underlined when we saw that two trains, one heading south and one north were moving very slowly. It must be a train trip with incredible views.

In Ralph Nading Hill's book *Lake Champlain, Key to Liberty*, he says "in an epic achievement of track-laying along and through the rocky escarpments bordering the west shore, the long gap between Ticonderoga and Plattsburgh was at last closed in 1874-a railroad milestone of such significance that the first train from Albany to Montreal...carried such luminaries as President Chester A. Arthur, John Jacob Astor, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and J. P. Morgan."

We remarked on the contrast between Willsboro Bay and its almost mirror image, Shelburne Bay, where we had paddled a week earlier. In Shelburne Bay, it is the point at the end of the peninsula that is the height of land, although much lower; in Willsboro, it is the mainland. The water depth in Shelburne Bay reaches 130 feet at the mouth and is a little less than that down the middle, but the shores are shallow. That is in great contrast to the depths of the west shore of Willsboro Bay. Shelburne Bay is heavily developed on all shores, and has (by Vermont standards) a large boatyard and and two busy anchorages while Willsboro's development seemed dense only in the most inner part of the bay.

Perhaps energized by our encounter with the cliffs, we decided to cut across from the inner end of the bay to the marina on the east shore and continue north to the end of Willsboro Point and then turn around and come back to the boat access where we had left our car. But, no sooner had we gotten into the middle of the bay than a stiff wind came up making it a challenging paddle to get to the marina under menacing clouds.. A quick calculation told us we would be paddling 3.5 miles into a strong headwind. We quickly bagged that idea and head for the boat launch. We loaded up at the impeccably maintained launch site and headed home. By the time we arrived, the wind had died, the skies cleared and it was a beautiful evening. We seem to be learning firsthand about the effects of heat, water, and wind on late afternoon weather!

Birds Sighted: Redstarts, bluebird, bluejays