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TRAVEL

Grey Owl's Cabin: The Perfect Paddle

by D. Grant Black



Photo: D. Grant Black

What if the federal government offered you, your family and your pet beavers a free place to live in a beautiful new national park?

Although you may start to resent being a side-show spectacle for

the curious tourists, you'd probably jump at the chance to work on that long-delayed adventure novel. That's what happened to Canada's Thoreau.

Grey Owl was one of Canada's best-known environmentalists and a Native impersonator. Like a wily Frank Abagnale of the woodlands, Archibald "Archie" Belaney was actually a 17-year-old Englishman who arrived in the wilds of Canada in the early 20th century. Belaney/Grey Owl was a novelist (five wilderness-themed books) and a defender of Canada's wilderness who traveled around North America and several times to Europe to promote conservation to the elites.



Photo: Parks Canada

In 1931, Parks Canada wardens re-located Grey Owl, his Mohawk wife Anahareo and their two pet beavers, Jellyroll and Rawhide, from Manitoba's Riding Mountain National Park to the newly minted Prince Albert National Park.

While most people commute daily into large cities on asphalt roads, Archie Belaney/Grey Owl had a watery pathway from Prince Albert to his forest home along rivers and lakes. Grey Owl frequently traveled alone by canoe from his remote cabin to the nearby city of Prince Albert for supplies, portaging over two

lakes, Kingsmere and Waskesiu.

Grey Owl's cabin, now a National Heritage Site and a lesser-known icon of Canadiana, stands discreetly in Saskatchewan's forested half just a few hours north of Saskatoon on the edge of Ajawaan Lake. A trickle of visitors, mostly from North America and Europe, set off in sleek canoes every summer to discover the home of Canada's first conservationist.

This scenic trip, which I've completed several times, starts from a take-in point on the meandering Kingsmere River that links Waskesiu and Kingsmere lakes. After paddling to the north end of Kingsmere Lake, and a 15-minute portage to tiny Ajawaan Lake, it's only another 15-minute paddle to the cabin site. In good conditions, a group can canoe and portage to Grey Owl's cabin within five hours from the parking lot.

Kingsmere's Northend campground features primitive sites and group camping. The cabin site is appropriately sparse. Grey Owl's cabin contains a beaver lodge, located right inside the cabin, where the mating pair of Jellyroll and Rawhide eventually spawned Wakanee, Wakanoo, Silverbells and Buckshot. A log bed, a woodstove and a guestbook for comments from Grey Owl's most recent visitors round out the contents.



An upper cabin, built in 1932, housed his wife, Anahareo, their daughter and visitors, since apparently only Grey Owl enjoyed sleeping in the same room as busy beavers. Grey Owl aka Archie Belaney, who died in 1938 at 49, is buried beside his wife and daughter near the upper cabin.



Photo: Parks Canada

If the canoe route doesn't interest you, a 20-kilometre hiking trail adjacent to Kingsmere and Ajawaan lakes also accesses Grey Owl's cabin site. But if you want to follow in the path of Grey Owl's paddle, a canoe trip is still the best way to celebrate his eccentric legacy.

IF YOU GO Before setting out to Grey Owl's cabin site, visitors must drop by the Prince Albert National Park office in Waskesiu to register and to purchase backcountry camping permits: **pc.gc.ca**; Waskesiu Marina Adventure Centre provides canoe rentals and guided trips: **waskesiumarina.com**

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