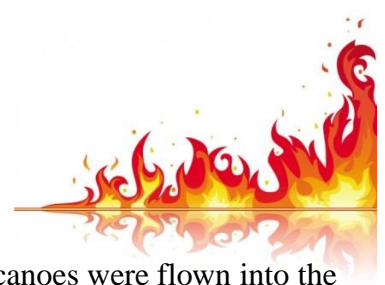


# The Impact of Boreal Fires

## By Vern Fish



### The Mission

On June 10, 2023 three paddlers (*Vern Fish, Dave Fish and Hank Ostwald*) and two canoes were flown into the heart of the Wabakimi Wilderness, Whitewater Lake. This is a big lake located in north central Wabakimi Provincial Park. Our goal was to work our way north from Grayson Lake up to the height of land and try to find a way to get into the Montcrief River system. We had planned to meet a fourth paddler at Montcrief Lake who would be conducting bird surveys as part of the Ontario Bird Atlas.

### Fires to the North

As we were paddled north of Best Island, along the north shore of Whitewater Lake on our second day, we spotted a column of white smoke reaching into the sky over the north shore. Later I found out that this smoke was about 16 kilometers or 10 miles to our north. We knew that there were fires popping up across Canada because the smoke was blowing into the lower 48 states and making headlines. However, to our knowledge there were no fires in Wabakimi Provincial Park upon our arrival.

I used my In-reach satellite phone to report this sighting to our outfitter, Wabakimi Fishing & Canoe Outfitters.

*Column of smoke to our north*

Lindsey David, who was our contact with the outfitters, responded:

*Jun 11, 2023 5:34 PM*

*Small fire started a few hours ago about 1 km east of Montcrief. Current size: 1 ha. Current status: being observed. Bruce says premature to be concerned.*

We camped on a lovely point in the northwest corner of the Whitewater Lake. Looking north we could still



see the plume of smoke. Lindsey continued to update us that evening with a string of In-reach emails:

*Jun 11, 2023 5:58 PM*

*We will monitor. LD*

*Jun 11, 2023 5:59 PM*

*MNRF Map just updated fire size to 300 ha. Will continue to monitor. LD*

*Jun 11, 2023 7:02 PM*

*Yup. East of Montcrief. Stay tuned.*

*Jun 11, 2023 8:06 PM*

*Very tiny (less than an acre) being fought north of Redman Lake. Thta one no concern. But one a mile east of Montcrief already up to 300 ha.*

I found it alarming how fast the fire had grown from 1 ha to 300 ha in just a couple of hours. Three hundred hectares is about 741 acres (1 ha equals 2.471 acres). Finally, that evening Lindsey sent her final message for the day:

*Jun 11, 2023 8:40 PM*

*What is your plan for today? MNRF Fire Map still shows fire size: 300 ha Status: being observed. LD*

I did not see that message until the next day when I did my normal In-reach check-in when we stopped for lunch. I told Lindsey where we planned to be and asked that she keep us posted on the fire.

**The Montcrief River crew has stopped to rest, portage or camp.**

Jun 12, 2023 12:00 PM

Keep us posted

Jun 12, 2023 12:02 PM

Grayson lake

We finally got over the Grayson River portage series and found a place to camp on Grayson Lake. I send my standard, preset message out everyone who was following our trip and then I asked Lindsey for a “Fire update”

**The Montcrief River crew has stopped to rest, portage or camp.**

Jun 12, 2023 4:41 PM

Fire update?

Jun 12, 2023 4:45 PM

The latest info is size: 300 hectares, and no firefighting crew due to fire size. It quickly jumped from 1 hectare to 300 yesterday.

Jun 12, 2023 4:57 PM

Yessir! of course

Jun 12, 2023 5:03 PM

are you at the outpost?

Jun 12, 2023 5:11 PM

Bruce here. Nothing to worry about EXCEPT big and getting bigger east of Montcrief

When Lindsey asked if we were at the outpost cabin, it became obvious to me that she was concern about where we were. So I asked her if it was safe to try and push on to Montcrief Lake.

Jun 12, 2023 5:12 PM

Our we safe to try to get to montceif lake?

At this point, I shut off my In-reach to save power and started doing normal camp stuff. The next morning I turned on the In-reach and got this message from Lindsey:

Jun 13, 2023 8:03 AM

No fires near you at this time. One serious 300 hectare (3 sq km) fire east of montcrief. Too big for firefighters. Fire risk in park has also increased...

## The Decision

I shut off the In-reach and we pushed into the north end of Grayson Lake to try and find route into the Hood Lake. We came to a dead end and spent lot of time looking for an ancient, unmaintained portage. It was pretty obvious that this was going to be a very difficult and possibility dangerous crossing. The idea that we might be paddling into a raging forest fire was also weighting on my mind. Putting those two thoughts together, it just did not make sense to risk a crossing and then request an emergency exit in a couple of days. I turned on the In-reach to see if there was a fire update. My message box was flooded with mail.

Jun 13, 2023 9:20 AM

We will contact MNRF and flying service.

Jun 13, 2023 9:26 AM

Bruce's opinion is stay away from Montcrief until it rains for 3 days. Fire size just updated to 600 hectares!!

I also got a question;

Jun 13, 2023 11:02 AM

What is your current plan?

The fire had now grown to 600 hectares and Bruce Hyer, the Father of Wabakimi, was telling me to abort my plans. Standing in the bush surrounded by biting deer flies while trying find a portage that no longer existed, it seemed pretty obvious that it was time to give up the trip and find a safe place to wait out the fire. I told Lindsey we were heading back to Grayson Lake and then I sent my standard “we are here” In-reach message at 11:31 AM.



In addition, a second fire of equal size is burning just west of Wabakimi Lake along the Flindt River. These two fires will have impact on caribou habitat and canoe routes. In addition, there are 25 bird song meters scattered along the shore of Wabakimi Lake. The Friends of Wabakimi helped to purchase some of these Automatic Recording Units (ARU). These units are also at risk at this time.

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying the Ontario Forest Fire Info Map. The page title is "Forest Fire Info Map" and the date is "June 25, 2023". The URL is "lioapplications.lrc.gov.on.ca/ForestFireInformationMap/index.html?viewer=FFIM.FFIM". The page features a search bar with the text "Looking for fire by fire name or MNR District?". The main content is a map showing Wabakimi Lake and surrounding areas, with a large red area indicating a fire zone. The map includes labels for "Whitewater Lake", "Wabakimi Lake", and "Flindt River". The left sidebar shows "Layers" with options for "Restricted Fire Zones", "Emergency Area Order", and "Forest Fire Danger Ratings". The "Forest Fire Danger Ratings" section is expanded, showing "Low/Faible (L)", "Moderate/Modéré (M)", and "High/Élevé (H)". The bottom of the page includes a footer with "Powered by Land Information Ontario" and "© King's Printer for Ontario, 2023".

## The Lesson

To be honest, this is my first experience with fire in the backcountry. I had not planned for a fire and I really did not know what to expect or know how to react. So I have learned a few things:

**1) Carry and use a Satellite Phone.** I have been very happy with my Garmin InReach Explorer+. It allows me to maintain a line of communication with the outside world. In this case it allowed me to gather critical information in a timely manner to make an informed decision.

**Please note, short text messages (140 characters) are an imperfect communication tool!**

**2) Access the Ontario Forest Fire Info Map** – I had never seen or used this website before.

However, my outfitter had access to this valuable tool and was able to provide me with current information on the growing fire. Again, because I was carrying and using a satellite phone, I was able to maintain line of communication with my outfitter. This is the url for this valuable tool:

<https://www.lioapplications.lrc.gov.on.ca/ForestFireInformationMap/index.html?viewer=FFIM.FFIM>

**3) Train Your Guardian Angels** – I maintain a line of communication with who I call my Guardian Angel. My Angel keeps track of my trips and feed updates to the “Friends & Family” of the paddlers on my trips. In this case, my Angels had not been trained in how to access Fire Info Map. In the future, my Angels will know how to access and use this website.

**4) Outposts Cabins** – There over 40 outpost cabins scattered across the Wabakimi Area. Most of them are outside of Wabakimi Park. These cabins have docks and the pilots know how to find them. Cabins may “reduce” your wilderness experience but they are invaluable as an “emergency exit”. Mark these cabins on your maps and make sure your Angel knows where they are!

