

WATER BOY

By Richard Taylor

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Open-water swimming unlocks a magical world.

***"Water is hydrogen two parts, oxygen one.
But there is also a third thing, that makes it water
And nobody knows what that is."***

- D.H. Lawrence

Like a lot of people, I'm addicted to water. Swimming offers the cheapest and most effective relief from stress, depression and restlessness. It buoys you up with a mysterious physical buzz. All winter, instead of concentrating on skiing or skating, I swim 10 km. a week with the Nepean Masters Swim Club.

To keep an edge on, I compete at Provincial and National levels in the 1,500-meter freestyle. Sixty gruelling laps of a 25-meter pool. But I really live for June till mid September when I shun the Band-Aids, hairballs and tepid water of chlorinated pools and give in to the wild beauty of soul swimming.

Luckily, the cottage country of Ontario and Quebec boasts some of the finest open water swimming in the world. Of course, the season is short compared to the tropics, but there are no sharks, jellyfish, sea snakes, gnarly surf, rip tides, undertows, crocodiles or typhoons. You do, however, have to dodge the propellers of motor boats, idiots on jet skis and bolts of lightning from summer squalls. Also, you may have to navigate through ominous tusks of half-submerged dead heads, and pull in your gut as you skim over shallow rocky shoals. With your head wreathed in pursuing deer flies, you may even have to outswim crazed otters, muskrats and beavers.

A rare breed, open water swimmers embrace the magic that eludes the rest of landlocked humanity. Being able to comfortably swim almost anywhere is like having the ability to fly. When you enter the water you tend both to lose yourself and find yourself. As soggy as it may sound, with this naked liberty you are back in the womb, one with nature.



Of course, even the most competent should not attempt a solo swim. It is wise to be accompanied by a partner, or a spotter in a rowboat, kayak, or canoe. Another safe option is to swim with one of those streamlined flotation devices attached by rope to your waist. All summer, there are many clubs and informal groups who meet for an early morning or evening swim.

Aside from a questing spirit and a willingness to get wet, open water swimming requires only a Speedo-style bathing suit (the skimpier the better in terms of drag), a pair of well fitting goggles, and a snug swimming cap to protect your head from the sun and to keep it warm on the cooler days. Some swimmers, especially triathletes, purchase Rip Curl or Orca wet suits for added warmth, flotation and speed. But many connoisseurs prefer to feel as much water as possible on their skin.

This summer I've tasted secret ponds; fast flowing streams; a tree shrouded weir; evening dips with my friend Pete the cop at Meech Lake (including a 9 a.m. 1.5 km race), meandering swims up the Ottawa

river at our cottage at Norway Bay (including an annual long distance swim), a swim with my friend Cara in misty rain at her Algonquin Park cottage, and a near perfect week with my brood up at a tiny, waterfallled lake at Val des Monts.

After you do a fairly brisk 1 to 2 km freestyle, the endorphin rush nearly leaves you giddy. In open water you need to learn how to find a straight line. Pick a beacon in the distance: a large tree, a cottage, a dock, or island. Lift your head now and again to realign your destination; swim with a relaxed rhythm - arm over arm with a long reach, a powerful pull and follow through, together with a steady, shallow kick that will keep you afloat while you're sensually propelled through the water.

Believe it or not, some open water swimmers don't wear goggles because they prefer to swim with their eyes closed. The dark mystery of what is down below keeps many out of the water. But don't give in to fear. Just quietly breaststroke with your head up out of the water for awhile. Take a good look around as you swim along the shoreline of a rocky island fringed with sweet scented cedars and weathered driftwood.

Thinking he's camouflaged among a jungle of reeds, an elegant blue heron gazes back at you, appalled that anyone would dare to enter his domain. Notice the wind gently rustling his feathers, the same wind that ripples the glassy surface of the lake. On a half-submerged log, like a row of German war helmets, painted turtles are sunning themselves. As you approach, each one tilts and plops into the water.

Now take a deep breath and submerge into the SAFE world below. Don't mind the tall fronds of seaweed wavering before you. Then stroke over to the edge of a Monet's garden of water lilies. Swimming among lily pads offers you a vegetal sensation of going through the undulating caress of a car wash. The flowers are white with an exquisite yellow centre, and when you lean in for a whiff, they have the sweet rubbery scent of fragrant soap.

Farther along, hold your breath and glide just beneath the surface. You might notice a gleaming school of minnows, their bodies so transparent all you see are their fine bones and huge eyes. Often you will encounter yellow striped perch, a half dozen coy bass, sunfish, a long,

stunned pike, or meet up with an inquisitive muskie. You may even bond with sturgeon, catfish, eels, crayfish, water snakes, and the odd prehistoric looking snapping turtle.

While stroking through water, I always unravel whatever life's quandaries are perplexing me. The big one this summer has been coping with selling a house and buying a new one.

Finally, dive down deep until you are swimming along the bottom. Then, because you have been swimming with angels all along, gaze upward at the slanting shafts of radiant sunlight, as though you are immersed in some vast ancient cathedral of God.

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