

GOOD TO THE LAST DROP - PARTS ONE & TWO
Epic Federation of Lakes Swim 2011 By Rick Taylor, Lac Brassard

Echoes of our Lakes, July, 2011 & June, 2012



“The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty.”

- John Cheever's, *The Swimmer*

After renting on Lac Brassard for five years, my wife Dale and I bought our own place we named Monet Bay, and I decided to swim all 30 Federation lakes and write about my aquatic adventures. It seemed like a great way to unite and give the people of Val-des-Monts an unusual frog's eye perspective of our precious water.

In an email, Michel Francoeur, fellow swimmer and Federation President, said, “By the way, the nickname “Human Motor Boat” is being used by some to describe your 30-lakes swim.”



Rick Taylor, Lac Bataille

My plan was simple: pick a lake, arrive at someone's doorstep, unload the spiel about my swims, thank the owner, then spear in to swim either the length, or circumference. On lakes with motorboats, I'd be accompanied by my wife Dale in her red kayak.



Dale in her red kayak at the waterfall on Lac Brassard

Hemingway said, "Always put in the weather." Without a breath of wind, it was sunny in early June as we humped the kayak to our friends Don and a Helene's on the edge of Lac Brassard and Lac Dame. I tongued the inside of my goggles so they wouldn't fog up, and dove in. As I settled into a long rhythmic freestyle, the cold glassy water felt like silk and it was deep and clean. Checking out romantic Lac Dame island cottages, I entered a narrow channel where Lac Dame and Lac Grand meet, and quickly swam under the bridge over shallow water, sprint-stroking out into the depths of Lac Grand.

A couple of kilometers later Dale offered a bottle of Gatorade. Up to your throat in cold water, it's a tad awkward trying to drink, but without the

liquid sugar I'd expire, and the only way to keep warm was to continue. Being the middle of the week, early summer, there were no boats; not a single other person on or in the lake. My 3-hour, 8 km circumnavigation of Lac Dame and Lac Grand ended as I swam hard to avoid a current pulling towards the thunderous dam. Climbing out, already aching muscles were morphing into a blissful endorphin buzz that left me giddy and philosophically expansive, as though I'd just finished a bottle of good wine.

Dale and I left one of our cars at the far end of Lac McGregor then drove the 7 km to a spot in Mud Bay where we parked our second car and carried the kayak down to the water. I swam the length of mud Bay until it narrowed into a channel between scary weeds filled with who-knows-what creatures of the deep. Fishermen were netting something big right in front of me. "Do you want me to wrestle it into the boat?" I yelled. So we continued on, under Highway 366 bridge, until I stroked into huge Lac McGregor. Because I swim motorboat free Lac Brassard, McGregor is always a challenge, especially when boat traffic reminds me of Venice canals. For a couple of kilometers I dodged water skiers, pontoon boats filled with jolly revellers raising drinks to cheer me on, and a wake boarder who swerved over to check me out while his undulating wake rolled Dale and me as though we were frolicking in ocean swells.

We passed the river that flows from Lac Brassard and as I approached the end of McGregor, Dale signalled for me to look up. It was like one of those war movies when a plane drops down to strafe running people on the ground, except we were in water. A pontoon plane descended from the sky, getting ready to land on the lake. Dale and I picked up our pace, and ducked our heads just before it swooped over us, sputtering in for a perfect landing.

Echoes of our Lakes newsletter came out with an article about my upcoming swims, so now I showed up at each lake with my bilingual, laminated article to help me get beyond private roads, gates, and suspicious owners. People greeted me as "The Swimmer", or "Le Nageur", which was an improvement on "The Guy in the Speedo", or "Wacko in the Budgie Smugglers".

We followed a sign for a B&B at the far end of Lac Letourneau. The owner's son said, "Sure, go for your swim from our dock." In dazzling sunlight, four young Canada geese floated nearby while I stroked over the tops of weeds until it got deeper and I enjoyed a relaxed swim to the far end of the small lake. In a bikini, a woman with a leaf hooked under her sunglasses to protect her nose from fierce sunlight greeted me as I told her Dale would

be driving by to pick me up. A raft in the middle of the lake was crowded with screaming kids having the time of their lives.

A friend said I could use their dock at Lac à la Perdrix as a dive-in-point, but he warned me that his fiancé was having her bachelorette party, and even he had been banished. Dripping in sweat I dove in, reflecting on my wise decision to avoid the bachelorette party, even though showing up for the ladies might have added a little spice.

Towel around my waist, and haloed in horseflies, I stood forlorn in front of a locked gate at Lac Corrigan one evening. Suddenly a truck arrived. I told the driver about my swims, and he said, “Jump in.” Like many people this summer, he said, “Our lake is one of the cleanest in Val-des-Monts.” Because his place on a swampy bay was filled with hungry snapping turtles, he dropped me off further along. I waded in up to my knees in organic debris the texture of turkey stuffing, breast stroking into a lonely, primeval lake that smelled and tasted gamey, while the surface was dimpled by thousands of flies and fish rising to meet them.

Dale paddled in her kayak and I swam Lac Bataille to the opposite end until we found a spooky 10-foot tall aluminum culvert that allows you to slipstream into Lac Rheaume. On the other side, I endured a long shallow channel filled with a graveyard of waterlogged driftwood similar to the ocean bottom from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Swimming as fast as I could, I tried to breathe, while pulling up my lower extremities to keep as much of myself away from the murky bottom as possible. Finally, out into the glorious open water of Lac Rheaume, I headed to the top end, around islands, looping back and returning to the far end of Lac Bataille, stopping at our friend Diane’s house. After my 8 km swim, while enjoying a drink on her dock, a snapping turtle attacked a family of ducklings and we had to use paddles fend off the snapper.

Even though a roiling sky threatened to storm, by the time I got to Lac Tenpenny, it had cleared up into a beautiful day. Of course there was no public beach so I drove in until I spotted a parked car, got out, and peered into a screened-in porch. “Hello is anybody home?” When a gray-haired woman shuffled over she looked worried as I unloaded my spiel. “We are very protective of our lake,” she said, but as she warmed up to my mission she added, “This is a swimmers’ lake.” Slowly I swam around, savouring a lake almost hidden by trees, feeling simultaneously dorky and triumphant

because there is nothing like an open water swim to give one a sense of being truly happy and alive.

On Blackburn Road, a couple sitting outside their house with a big fleur-de-lis and Montréal Canadiens flags gave me directions to Lac Barnes. I parked off the road and dove into weedy shallows, swimming the perimeter until I emerged like a “swamp thang,” and the woman with a big envelope was waiting, like the water police. She had heard about me from the couple on Blackburn Road, and tracked me down because she wanted to write about my swim for her upcoming association meeting.

Swimming the lakes became a kind of pub-crawl. On one of the hottest summer mornings, we decided to explore four lakes in one day. Arriving at Lac Hardwood, Dale said, “Every lake has its own pair of loons.” I happily swam with the loons for a kilometre, and even though the lake was small with over 50 cottages, I didn’t see a single soul, which was either good news or bad.

At Lac Champeau a couple offered us the use of their beach. Their end of the lake reminded me of Monet’s water pond in Giverny. Unfortunately, it took a while to swim out of lily pads and weeds until I got into the middle of the warm milky lake. Although it was a very small lake, there were four motorboats that were apparently not allowed during early morning or dinnertime.

Driving around tiny Lac Achigan, we saw two chained Chow dogs, vigorously interested in a speedo-clad swimmer. We continued until we noticed a man close to the water. His dog Maggie loved to fish in the lake and was so busy patrolling back-and-forth in the shallows, she barely noticed me as I dove in. A woman gently swished a small girl in the water and I shouted, “Great day for a swimming lesson.”

Lac St. Germain has its own gatekeeper, Mark, who lives near the boat launch. Without shoes, socks or a shirt, he greeted us and expressed how he was thrilled to hear about my swims. “Mark, you must be the only paid Beach Boy in Val-des-Monts.”

Dale jumped in to cool off. Although it’s one of the cleanest lakes in the Federation of Lakes, the bottom near the dock was organic muck, so Dale clamoured quickly into her kayak.

I swam north for many kilometres, around islands, and then, near the border of Val-des-Monts and Denholm, I turned south along the other side of the islands where it was much shallower. Most of pristine Lac St. Germain feels like it hasn't changed since the ice age. I'd been swimming for many kilometres, drinking Gatorade every half hour, until a healthy looking couple with kids invited us on their dock for beer and corn chips.

At the end of July, on the eve of another four-lake swim, it was Shark Week on TV. After surfing and swimming the world's most shark infested waters, I'm always grateful to swim in Val-des-Monts. And I didn't even mind swimming swampy uninhabited Lac à la Truite, which is a moose's dream for dining on a variety of aquatic plants.

A guy named Guy at Lac Claire suggested Dale borrow his kayak because of motorboats. Swimming around a tall treed island in the middle of the lake, powerboats and jet skis roared so close, I could taste the remnants of gasoline. Rounding the top end of the island, we met Lise kayaking. "My in-laws built their place in the 50s when there were only four cottages. Now there are 104, including six on the island. Our water is so clean, we can drink it."

A nice family at Lac Petit Clair stood on a sunny deck beside Ruby, their St. Bernard/Newfoundland mix, the size of a woolly mammoth. Politely holding my yellow Australian swim cap and goggles, I worried about the strength of the dog's leash. Their kids no doubt wondered why someone without a lifejacket was allowed to swim alone in a strange lake. Swimming around the small, almost private lake, I saw only a dozen other cottages, although I could hear motorboats from Lac Clair nearby.

Years ago I swam Lac Marble with my Carleton University writer friend Armand Garnet Ruffo, whose book *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney*, was made into a film starring the ex-James Bond, Pierce Brosnan. Armand had since sold his property, so Dale and I drove around until I recognized Armand's land. A man, in a grandiose log house, said we could use his dock. Dale remained sitting by the water as I swam narrow Lac Marble, entering a small channel that eventually opened into a deep bay where Armand and I had sat on monolithic boulders beneath a vertical cliff. It was still a mysterious place to reminisce about the beginnings of time.



Rick Taylor, Michel Francoeur, and Dale Taylor in the kayak at Lac St. Pierre

Before swimming the length of Lac St. Pierre, we drove to nearby Lac McMullen for a warm-up dip. Behind the 1852 Steel family farmhouse, were fields of hay and a barn. Dale dropped me off and I swam to the far end, where she then picked me up so we could drive to the Federation of Lakes President Michel Francoeur's cottage at the south end of Lac St. Pierre. Dale borrowed two of his kayaks, towing one so I could paddle back from the north end of the lake. Michel, a fit swimmer and water skier, accompanied me for 10 minutes to the green steel bridge on Highway 307 crossing St. Pierre Lake, where we posed in the water for goofy photos; then we waved goodbye. I continued northwards about 4 km on Lac St. Pierre, trying to stay afloat in swells from a carnival of pontoon boats, ski boats, wake borders, water skiers and jet skis. One of the boaters warned us about a dead fish ahead. Already I could smell and taste the bellied-up 15-pound pike, which was like meeting a murdered soul mate.

An enthusiastic kayaker paddled up and asked Dale, “Is HE the ONE? Is HE THE SWIMMER? Now, while I swam, Dale had Barb Cullen to talk with all the way to the north end of Lac St. Pierre, where I got out, chugged back another Gatorade, wolfed down a granola bar and jumped into the extra kayak. In dazzling sunlight, we paddled along water-sculpted shores of Lac St. Pierre until Barb waved goodbye from her lake house and we continued back to Michel’s place.

A jogger at Lac St. Antoine offered us the use of his dock. “The lake is spring fed. It’s so clean you can dip your cup and drink from it.” Swimming to the far marshy end near an old deserted building that was once a summer camp run by priests, I imagined the lake years earlier, filled with the sound of kids playing and swimming all day, and at night by roaring campfires, they would have been mesmerized by a sky filled with stars.

Claude Bergeron, president of the Perkins-sur-le-Lac Association, invited me to swim Lac Maskinongé. A brooding sky was filled with impending electrical storms. Claude’s cheerful wife, Andrea, brought us down to the dock. While she and Dale huddled inside a screened-in tent, I dove in to swim the natural, sparsely populated lake. Rain hammered down on my back, pebbling the water, adding a Gothic atmosphere, and I sang my version of Gene Kelly’s “Swimming in the Rain”. A religious order owned the far end of the lake. In the old days, I wondered how swimmingly the priests from Lac St. Antoine may have gotten along with the Lac Maskinongé nuns.

At Lac Gilmour, we pulled up to a sign, “Nick’s Place”. A pair of Speedos hung on the line, and I smiled. A moustachioed older guy stepped out from a renovation. Wearing an open work shirt and another pair of Speedos, he said rather jauntily, “I swim from April to October. I once saw a 5-foot muskie swim under my dock.” Dale told me she’d drive to the other end of Gilmour and



Rick Taylor, Lac Rheume

wait. I said goodbye to Nick and dove into deep, glassy water, hoping to glimpse the legendary muskie.

The road to Lacs Dodds and McPhee winds through rolling valleys of hay. Dale dropped me off at one side of Lac McPhee. I retrieved a lost fishing rod from a 20-foot depth of water, then dove off gratefully from the owner's dock for a perimeter swim in water so clear I could see sculpted driftwood far below.

At a public boat ramp, Dale reminded me about the federation urging boaters to remove debris from the bottoms of their watercraft. Dale pretended to scrape zebra mussels and Eurasian milfoil weed off my body so I wouldn't cross-contaminate other lakes.

We arrived uninvited, at a huge log cabin on Lac Dodds, where a visiting couple welcomed us. Instead of swimming towards the end, with a half-dozen cottages, I swam toward the lonely crown land where the water was deep and I had the lake to myself. In between billowing clouds, rays of sunlight shone down and refracted in the water. Everything was going swimmingly, until I bumped into a gnarly floating branch that scared the crap out of me.

Late one hot, windless day we decided to do four small Perkins-sur-le-Lac lakes. Being a painter, Dale assured me the light would be fantastic. Initially it was difficult to find Lac Louise because on maps, it is less prettily called Lac Sucker. On her doorstep, a helpful woman named Claire whispered, "Le Nageur," and offered Dale a better map of area lakes. Over shallow shoals, I swam through schools of shimmering minnows and around two flat islands.

Miniscule, exquisite Lac Truite doesn't appear on maps. Chris Hemmingway, who is no relation to Ernest, was sitting on an idyllic, sun-bleached boulder of an island in the middle of the lake with his two small children when I swam out to greet them. Evergreen hills all around created emerald water. As we talked about his lake, and Hemingway, I treaded water while fish nibbled at my feet and legs. I

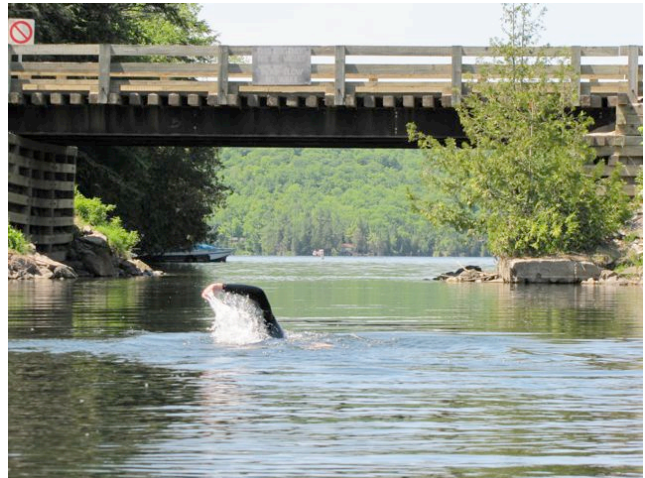


Rick Taylor, Lac des Epinettes

breaststroked around the island and Chris canoed with his kids to meet his wife and Dale as they chatted on their dock.

As the day was ending, Dale left me off in blinding silver light for a quick powerful freestyle swim of Lac des Epinettes. Then we drove like mad to finish with a dip in tiny Lac Chevreuil near a shoreline littered with beaver-stripped saplings. As dusk descended, I kept swimming further until the last rays of sunlight. For the first time this summer my cold hands and feet were numb and tingling from too much swimming.

On August 31, I decided to finish the last lake, Lac McArthur, and swim home via Lac Grand and Lac Dame, the lakes that I had begun my journey with, back in early June. We put Dale's kayak in at Lac McArthur boat launch and I swam around islands along treed cliffs and continued to a stream and waterfall where we portaged to the quiet north end of Lac Grand. In warm glassy water I swam for a couple of perfect hours the entire length without seeing a soul, until we reached the channel that flows under the bridge to Lac Dame. In the old days, long distance swimmers finished epic swims with crowds of cheering spectators. But after a three month, 30 lake, 60 km swim in our clean, wonderful, Val-des-Monts lakes - without getting beaver fever, swimmers itch, rapture of the deep, dysentery, or any other diseases and without losing body parts - the only person I had to share this with was Dale, my long-haired beauty in a red kayak.



From Lac Grand to Lac Dam

Near Lac Dame waterfall as we beached the kayak I said, "Hey Dale, what do you want to do next summer?" She smiled. "How about just enjoying our own lake." So we hiked a few minutes down the road and dove in near the waterfall of Lac Brassard to swim home.