

THE OUTAOUAIS' MODERN-DAY LORD BYRON

By Dave Brown
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Standing in his Speedo, Rick Taylor is six-foot-two of sculpted muscle, Dave Brown writes.

Rick Taylor is an “open water swimmer” and that’s something easier to understand through a description than a definition.

For a start, to get to open water protected by nothing more than a skimpy Speedo, you may have to wade through a swampy bay, unable to see your feet because your legs are buried to the knees in something that feels like “wet turkey stuffing.” The description is his.

As the water deepens, you have to push your way through slimy weeds until you can swim, and be prepared to fight off long and strong weeds that tend

to try to tangle. When eventually you reach clear deep water, you are open water swimming.

Or as Taylor, 58, says: You're in Heaven, where with a little imagination you can commune with the man credited with starting that kind of long-distance swimming, British poet Lord Byron (1718-1824).

Sometimes you can approach a cottage owner and ask if you can access open water by diving off the dock, but such people are often protective of their docks and lakes.

There are 30 lakes of varying sizes in the Val des Monts Federation of Lakes, an area where Rick and his wife, Dale, bought a cottage last year. When the neighbours heard they had a new Lord Byron among them — Rick is a writer and a writing teacher — they asked him to write something. Sure, he said. He would swim every one of their lakes, and write about it. He would swim the circumference of the smaller ones, and the length of the large ones.

There were guffaws. Impossible. Then the doubters saw him swim. Like most who grew up in the summer community of Norway Bay, near Shawville, Rick can't remember when he learned to swim. One of the rites of passage there is that if you can walk, you can swim, and you're enrolled in swimming classes, like it or not.

The Taylors, parents of daughters Sky, 26, and Quinn, 21, have had a lifelong love affair with water. He conquers it by swimming. She captures it by art and kayak. She paints, works in stained glass, and provides safety for exceptionally long swims or anyplace with heavy motorboat traffic. Her bright red kayak is her husband's safety marker.

Sometimes Dale swims with him, able to match his pace only by wearing fins. He never uses them.

During my 35 years at Norway Bay, Rick has been a familiar sight. It's five kilometres across the mouth of the bay and he sometimes stops by. There's never any doubt about who's coming, because nobody else swims out that far.

Always happy to see him, but there's an awkward spot. He pulls himself out of the water when it's knee deep. Standing in his Speedo, he's six-foot-two of sculpted muscle, and a reminder that I'm not. I feel short and fat and

aware I'm wearing a bathing suit that could be used as a cover for a small car.

Dale, too, is a testament to the benefits of swimming as exercise.

Even our dog feels awkward around Rick. The 36-kilogram mutt loves water and considers himself the fastest swimmer around. But he can't catch Taylor. Annually, the open waterman is the first in and the last out, using a wetsuit in the cold seasons.

One of the secrets of open water swimming? Goggles.

"I suggest to anybody wanting to try it, to start by snorkelling. It gets you used to the underwater world and you learn there's nothing there that can hurt you. Eventually it stops looking unpleasant."



Water vegetation and slimy weeds don't stop open water swimmer Rick Taylor.

He is also a lifesaver. Snapping turtles hunt ducklings, and he often sees snappers shopping the shores like supermarkets. He interferes. He sides with the ducks. He's not similarly disposed to the safety of fish. He'll pause

during a long swim to tell fishermen there's nothing under them, and he'll point to where there are big ones.

The Taylors plan to vacation in Hawaii this winter, as Rick is also an accomplished surfer. Oceans are also used by open water swimmers, and Rick says there's nothing like it to make one appreciate a lake or river.

In fresh water, one is a man exercising, and loving it. In an ocean, there's a touch of what it feels like to be a fish, and a possible menu item.

Taylor has written several books, many touching on the subject of swimming. He teaches writing at Carleton University, and has a website: www.taylorswave.com.