

En plein air

By Nate Smelle

A couple of years ago I had the chance to get up above the Town of Bancroft and the surrounding area with MNR helicopter pilot Doug Holtby as a volunteer with the aerial fish stocking program. Although on our flight we were only in the air for approximately 45 minutes, the experience permanently changed my impression of North Hastings.

Visiting and depositing fish in five different remote and semi-remote lakes hidden in the forests around town, I could not believe the sea of green and blue stretching over the landscape below. Having explored most of the highways and backroads around town in my car, on my bike and by foot, I thought I had a decent sense of the local geography. By the time I had made it back to the ground I had realized how naïve my understanding of the local landscape truly was.

Taking off from the airport in Bancroft it did not take long to become disoriented as we flew away from familiar paved paths underneath us.

Hopping from one lake to the next in the yellow whirlybird with our precious living cargo, the natural beauty filling our senses from all directions as we travelled was jaw dropping.

Checking out the retrospective of Whitney artist Gertrud Sorensen's work currently on display at the Art Gallery of Bancroft I speculated about all of the intimate encounters with this wildness the artist must have experienced while creating her paintings in the great outdoors.

How many treasured places had she come to know personally through the countless hours she has spent soaking them in while painting them en plein air over the last 30 years?

Logging a significant amount of time studying some of the area's more isolated lookouts and lakes, Sorensen has come to know the lay of the land she loves by immersing herself in it.

My mind darting back to Operation Fish Drop in 2013, I remembered a curiously placed canoe that I noticed from the helicopter as we released the fish from our tanks. Not seeing any way in to the lake upon our descent I wondered how this heavy aluminium vessel had found its way so deep into the woods. Whose sacred destination had we dropped in on so far away from the streetlights and traffic downtown? Certainly the individual or individuals who dragged this beast of a boat over the rock and root-filled surface must have had a powerful motivation for doing so... painting maybe?

Perspectives from people like Holtby, Sorensen or whomever portaged that heavy old canoe deep into the heart of North Hastings could provide useful insight for the strategic planning process underway in municipalities like Hastings Highlands that are striving to adopt a homegrown approach to progress.