

Uranium City – 2006 Trip

The recent forest fires near Uranium City made me think: what if all the forests, along with other memories of the town, all burned up? That would be quite unfortunate.

Luckily most of the area didn't burn down, but rather than do a posthumous review of old memories, I decided that I'd better swing into action and put down some of the observations made during a trip that I made in the summer of 2006. Due to serious procrastination, this write-up is quite a bit late, but better late than never.

Like other trips, the preferred travel alternative was a rental airplane. This time, it was going to be a Cessna 172, equipped with retractable landing gear. This allowed it to have a faster speed than a regular Cessna. Plus the landing gear made it a bit more complicated, and thus less desirable for most student pilots.

I had to take a bit of additional training to learn more about flying the more complex aircraft, but then I was ready to depart Calgary. I made the trip from Calgary to Fort McMurray with minimal problems. There were a few low clouds to dodge around, but nothing too severe. I stayed overnight at a friend's place, and then prepared to depart the next morning for Uranium City.

Although the weather in Fort McMurray was sunny, the weather-office suggested that a stormy weather front was forecast to hit Uranium City in a couple of hours, which would be around the time that I would be arriving, and they advised not going, especially since there was no weather-office in Uranium City. I phoned to Dean in Uranium City, who said that the weather looked okay at the present time.

I had an alternate destination arranged to visit another friend in Ile a la Crosse, which was planned for the trip back home. I phoned over to them and discussed that I had some potential weather problems up north. They told me to come on down to Ile a la Crosse, as they were planning a BBQ that evening, so my timing would be good. So I filed a flight-plan for Ile a la Crosse, and flew over there.

Ile a la Crosse seemed like a border between Northern and Southern Saskatchewan. The trees were similar to the north, but bits of Alfalfa growing in meadows around the town, was definitely like the south. I landed uneventfully, and rode into town. A busy evening socializing, and then it was time to prepare for the flight up north.

The weather front from the north did come through later in the evening, causing some rain and wind. And a separate weather system moved in overnight, bringing more rain and low clouds to the area.

I was really checking the weather at the Buffalo Narrows airport, which was the nearest major airport, the morning of departure. The weather was just at the limits for travel, but further north, the cloud ceiling rose and Uranium City was reported to have sunshine.

The only risks were a large number of forest fires burning in the province, which were causing reduced visibility due to smoke.

Flying from Ile a la Crosse, would mean a different route, because I would be crossing on the eastern end of Lake Athabasca. I flew over a large area of Northern Saskatchewan, that was all forest, lakes, rivers, and sand, with basically no visible habitants. As I flew further north, I started to see some smoke from a few fires.

Fires were burning parts of the south shore of Lake Athabasca. Fortunately there wasn't a total smoke situation, so I had reasonable visibility. The smoke from various fires appeared to go straight up, and the sky was otherwise clear blue. I was able to see Lake Athabasca in the distance.

The "new policy" of the Saskatchewan government was to "let fires burn naturally". From internet forest fire maps, I could see that a large area of forest had been burnt. I mused that if there was a higher percentage of fires occurring than normal, due to man-made global warming, then the government should have been spending some money to fight the fires, rather than let the fires burn large areas of the province's forests.

Time will tell what the ultimate state of the forest becomes, after several years of letting the forests burn, with minimal intervention. I know from previous experience, that it takes a very long time for trees to grow in Northern Saskatchewan.

I crossed the eastern end of Lake Athabasca, which gave a spectacular view of the large blue body of water. I then turned to the west, to follow the north shore towards Uranium City. There was some other air traffic in the area, as a scheduled flight from Fon-du-lac was enroute to Uranium City. So I communicated that I would fly over the town to do a bit of sight-seeing first, before setting up for landing, which would allow them to land first. The advantage for me, of the larger plane landing first, was that I could find out which direction they were landing, which would save me some time having to over-fly the runway.

I did a fly-over of the town, and the lakes and surrounding forests. I then headed east, flew over the airport, turned to and line up with the runway. A quick landing and a 180 degrees turn, and I taxied back towards the airport terminal.

I parked the plane, then got out and walked towards the office to use the pay-phone and, terminate my flight plan. As I stepped in the office, a guy said "hi John", so I said "hi", without stopping to think that the guy had just called me by my name. It turned out to be a certain conservation officer named George, who now lived in Stony Rapids. But he was spending some time vacationing with his family, in a cabin on Ace Lake beach.

I proceeded to get my equipment sorted out, and assemble my mountain bike, and started riding my bike to Kiwanis Beach. It was a leisurely ride, and the weather was nice, which made for an enjoyable trip. Once I got to Kiwanis beach, I set up my tent, and had some lunch.

I felt pretty full of energy, so I decided that I would bike all the way to Don Lake, and get that part of the trip out of the way, especially since it was such a nice day. The problem with rental planes is that there is always a very tight deadline, and since I had now lost a day with going to Ile-a-la-crosse first, I didn't have much slack time. That meant one night in Uranium City, and then another night in Fort McMurray on the way back. So there wasn't much time to tour around Uranium City.

As I proceeded on the road to Jean Lake, I encountered substantial trees that had bent over the road, and were blocking the road. I had not seen this in the north before, so I assumed it must be some sort of indication of global warming. Perhaps the trees weren't getting enough moisture, and their weak root systems couldn't support the limbs, so they all started to bend over. Whatever had happened to the trees, they had blocked the road, to the point that I had to drag the mountain bike under various limbs, and climb over other ones. Access was very slow.

I got closer to the road to Don Lake, and it was also blocked with trees. Unlike the previous year, when I had encountered a road that had been recently cleared of trees and shrubs, the road was now completely impassable. Since I couldn't quickly ride my bike through the deadfall, I had to give up the attempt, and turned back towards town. The road would have to wait for someone to clear the brush, for me to try again in the future.

I proceeded to ride through town, and checked out various areas. The town was actually fairly active, thanks in part to work being done on the planned mine at Goldfields. The town seemed more alive than it had been in recent years, which meant that perhaps the bottom had been reached, and things were starting to rebound.

I stopped off at the Esso agency, to visit with Dean. He confirmed that the previous day, a storm did hit just about a couple hours after I had called him, meaning the forecasters got it right. I would have been caught in the storm, which might have made travel more difficult.

Another guy in the office was associated with the gold-mine. We discussed the potential for eco-tourism in the area, amongst other opportunities. There clearly was outdoor related tourism potential, that could be promoted. The only obstacle was getting people easily to Uranium City, due to the distance from populated areas.

I toured around town some more. Candu School was as dilapidated as ever. The hospital was still standing, but was scheduled for demolition, in the not too distant future. It was a quiet evening, so I headed down to the beach, to get set up for the night.

I had actually brought a satellite phone with me, meaning I had easy telephone access, wherever I was. I called the aviation weather office, and they stated that Fort McMurray had poor conditions at the present time, and wasn't forecast to improve till later in the next day. I thus knew that I shouldn't be in a rush to get to the airport, for first thing in the morning.

I then heard the sound of floatplane, which then circled and landed on Martin Lake. I helped grab a float as the plane sputtered up to the dock. The pilot worked with the mine, and he was trying to get to Fort McMurray, but had to turn back due to poor visibility caused by the heavy smoke over Lake Athabasca. He said that he would have to try again the next morning, because he needed to catch some sort of flight to get to Vancouver, for some meetings.

I proceeded to go for an evening bike-ride, biking up to the radio tower, to get a good view of the surrounding area. I then followed some old trail/road, that took a winding tour through the bush. It eventually intersected the road that went to Fredette Lake. I took a leisurely ride back towards Martin Lake, then headed for Kiwanis. The forests on the sides of the road to Fredette Lake, had been hit with some forest fires, 30 years ago. But they had now grown back fairly lush. I got back to my campsite, turned in for the night, and caught some sleep.

The next morning, I awoke to the start-up of the float-plane's motor, and then the idling as the plane taxied across the water, followed by a louder roar, as the pilot gunned the engine and took off. I decided that I would bike to Jean Lake, do some fishing, and have some lunch, before going back to the airport. I had arranged that I would catch a ride with Dean, later in the afternoon. I would also get the plane refueled, at that time. Given the poor weather conditions at Fort McMurray, it made sense to wait in Uranium City, for awhile.

Uranium City was sunny and clear skies, so no problems with the weather. I proceeded to bike out to Jean Lake, dragging the bike around various dead-fall trees, once again. It didn't take long to catch a fish, which I promptly filleted and put in my pack-sack. I decided to head down the road to Saint Mike's mine, which I knew would eventually intersect with Bushell road, close to the far west end of the town.

The road also had some deadfall trees, so it was slower going. I passed by the "sand-pit" which had previously been the scene of many bush parties. It had also been a good place to scavenge for beer bottles, and make a few dollars. The sand-pit was fairly overgrown with bush, but there was still enough sand to make the place recognizable.

I continued down the road, and came to the fork in the road, and promptly took the left turn, which would get me closer to the town. There had been a small creek that crossed the road, before Bushell road could be reached. Unfortunately the creek had now grown into a large swamp, which meant I had to walk around the swamp, to try and reach the road.

This proved to be a very difficult obstacle, especially since I had to push my bike through the brush, which had grown in very thick. I eventually realized that I didn't have a good line of sight through the brush, and I couldn't pick up any sort of trail. So I activated my GPS, and proceeded to walk in a certain southerly direction, which I knew would eventually intersect with Bushell road.

As I went through the thick brush, I eventually saw what looked like a tree-trunk, but as I got to within 10 feet of it, I realized that it was a wooden telephone pole, at the side of Bushell road. The brush had grown so thick, that it was impossible to tell how close the road actually was, until a person was ride by the road.

Once I got onto the road, I proceeded to bike towards the town. I passed by the old “condo style townhouses”, on the west end of town. They were becoming fairly run-down, but still looked modern in their styling, and were definitely modern when they were built in the late 70’s.

I proceeded to get closer to the old Cinch Lake beach, where I would fry up my fish with my propane burner. Near that end of town, a forest fire had burned, just the previous summer. This was a bit close for the comfort of the residents, but the fire had been contained. The burnt pine trees were fairly barren, and a lot of ground cover had been burnt off the pink granite rock.

I had some lunch, then headed back to the Kiwanis beach. I first stopped off at the Esso Agency, to let Dean know that I was getting ready to depart. He arranged to pick me up at 3:30, at the beach, where we would load my stuff, then head for the airport. I packed up my tent and sleeping bag, then loaded up Dean’s truck, once he arrived.

I still had some time to wait before Fort McMurray cleared up, so I rode out to the old Eldorado mine site, then stopped off at the Beaverlodge docks. I had some supper, then headed back to the airport, to begin the journey back south.

It was a clear evening in Uranium City, making the forests and lakes, very colorful. I took off, then did a long circle over the town, shooting video. I then departed over Lake Athabasca, and over the sand dunes, managing to fly over some of the taller dunes.

The different colors made for excellent video, but unfortunately I had neglected to check the actual image that the video camera was recording, and I didn’t notice that a bug had splattered on my windshield, right where the camera was recording. So that excellent opportunity to capture colorful video, was somewhat marred by the image of bug remains on the screen.

The flight to Fort McMurray was okay, except when I noticed a problem with the battery charging light, then couldn’t get the landing gear to extend. I pumped it down manually, and did a fly past the tower, who said my landing gear was down. Eventually the landing gear lights came on, indicating they were locked in position. So I landed uneventfully.

After staying overnight, the route back to Calgary was marred by some thunderstorms that I had to detour around, which made for a longer trip. But I eventually landed alright, and got the plane back on time. It is all part of the adventure when trying to go north, and one that I would plan to repeat again, some time in the future.