

by Shelley Wood

I am not a swimmer. It's impossible not to think this, as I take yet another hearty gulp of lake, willing my weary arms to claw through the seemingly endless water. It is a rare overcast, mid-summer day and from my perspective, the only difference between the iron-grey sky and steely water is that I'm hoping to inhale more of the former than the latter.

I am not a swimmer. Yet here I am, splashing my way slowly to the opposite beach, my pink swim-cap just one of several hundred moving resolutely from Rattlesnake Island to shore. Swimmer-friends tried in previous years to convince me to join them for one of the Okanagan's cross-lake events, but I've had plenty of excuses. I've swum in a pool for years, but not religiously—any habitual swimming on my part usually signalled some kind of injury that was preventing me from doing my regular bone-crushing, earthbound pursuits.

Now, several orthopedic mishaps behind me, I'm trying to reinvent myself as a swimmer or at least a person who swims. This is an important distinction. Swimmers >>>



PLUNGE INTO THE DEEP BLUE YONDER

Who needs a pool when there are so many lakes? Open-water swimming is like aqua-yoga—a way to connect with yourself and the natural world in a single plunge



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are born that way, emerging from the womb with webbed fingers and toes, prompting their canny parents to enrol them in the sea sprites or the mini-Ogopogos swim club for their entire childhoods. Even if they never compete or get dolphins tattooed on their ankles, they'll always know how to do flip turns and they'll always be great swimmers. I took piano lessons.

I used to muddle down the medium-fast lane at Parkinson pool year round until it occurred to me on a glass-calm summer day that driving to the pool when I live five minutes from the lake was laughable. I borrowed a secluded bay from neighbours who actually pay waterfront taxes, donned my goggles and set off.

To my surprise, I loved it—loved the way my mind wandered as I swam, unconcerned about counting lengths or fighting for space in a lane with other nearly naked bodies. I swam without worrying the time or how hard I was pushing myself. I simply swam.

Soon I was heading to the lake two or three times a week, usually just to swim languidly in my regular bay. A few times I managed to convince someone to patiently paddle a kayak alongside so I could venture into what, for me, were uncharted waters, the kayak helping me to keep on course and shielding me from boat traffic.

Somehow swimming in the open water has become what hiking or yoga seems to be for other people, a way to completely clear my head, become attuned to my own breathing, allow thoughts and ideas to surface that normally don't get the chance. I write for a living and some of my best work has come to me, not at my laptop, but as my cluttered brain was lulled by the lake.

According to Kelowna open-water swimmer Brent Hobbs, this is what the sport is all about. Brent, who moved to the Okanagan seven years ago and used to pool-swim competitively, discovered open-

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OPEN-WATER SWIMMERS ARE "A VERY RELAXED GROUP OF PEOPLE"



THERE ARE THREE OPEN-WATER SWIMMING EVENTS IN THE OKANAGAN TO CHOOSE FROM, ALTHOUGH RUMOURS ABOUT INFORMAL SWIM CHALLENGES

water swimming via triathlon and is so hooked that he spent his spring doing laps across the lake. When I spoke to him, he was just weeks from swimming the English Channel — without a wetsuit. He tells of befriending seals in English Bay and bumping into dozing carp in Okanagan Lake.

"I find it very relaxing," he says. "You're at one with nature, you're in this vast body of water and in this part of the world you're often surrounded by a vista of vineyards and mountains. There's something very spiritual about it. In a pool you have a set distance, you have to do turns, you follow a black line along the bottom and if you're into competition you're training against a clock. You have none of that in the open water; it's just you and the elements. It's very Zen."

After becoming an open-water enthusiast, I needed a lot less convincing to try the annual Kelowna Cross-the-Lake swim. I showed up wearing a circa 1987, sleeveless wetsuit, faded from black to mottled mauve, discovered in my in-laws' basement. Somewhat daunted by the press of neoprene bodies — nary a faded water-ski wetsuit among them — I took my place towards the back of the bobbing pack, waiting for the start of the race.

When the horn went, I had a few moments of anxiety over finding my accompanying paddler and navigating around other swimmers, but as the crowd thinned out and my paddler pulled alongside me, I fell back into my own rhythm and made it across the lake no problem.

Buoyed, so to speak, by success, I started hunting

DOING A TRIATHLON AS PART OF A RELAY TEAM OPENS UP MANY MORE OPTIONS FOR OPEN-WATER SWIMMING IN THE OKANAGAN, AS LONG AS YOU'RE NOT DAUNTED BY THE MASS STARTS

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around for other open-water events. I now know of at least three formal outings in the Okanagan, although rumours abound about informal swims by clubs and recreational groups.

Kelowna's 2.1-kilometre Cross-the-Lake swim is the first of the season, held every July.

In early August, Peachland hosts the Rattlesnake Island swim—seven kilometres total or 3.1 kilometres if you opt to get dropped off by boat and swim back to town.

Later that month, the Apple Triathlon now includes an open-water swim-only competition with distances of either 1.5 or five kilometres. Many of the triathlons sprinkled around the Valley permit relay teams. If you want to try more open-water events, just find a cyclist and a runner to do the on-land legs of the race, and don't be too daunted by the mass starts.

I can't imagine myself "racing" as an open-water swimmer. As I've said, I'm not a swimmer and will never hone my stroke enough to be much more than an above-average non-swimmer. But if there's one thing I love about these events it's that they attract people of every age and every shape—almost all of them what Brent describes as "a very relaxed group of people." The aqua-hippies of endurance sport.

I've made a few concessions, however. I'll endure the chlorine-pool mid-winter so I feel strong and confident in the water by the time spring rolls around. I've also invested in a proper swimming wetsuit, the kind used by triathletes with plenty of flexibility around the shoulders. Fearful of accidentally tearing the neoprene of my beautiful new suit, I've started keeping my fingernails clipped short—something, ironically, that I also did for my piano lessons.

I am not a swimmer. But I've become, over the years, like a sailor or a surfer scanning the horizon at dawn, checking for wind and waves. In my case, however, I'm hoping for stillness and calm. **OL**

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TIPS

- Build strength and confidence: You can't beat the pool for a safe, controlled environment for building up some basic strength under the watchful eye of a lifeguard.
- Mastering it all: A masters swim group is a great place to meet other swimmers, get stronger and hear basic feedback on your stroke. Some masters form unofficial open-water swimming groups in the summer.
- Different strokes...: Make sure you ease into swimming so as not to injure yourself with the repetitive motion. It's a good idea to warm up and warm down using a mix of different strokes.
- The right stuff: Brent Hobbs' number one piece of advice is for swimmers to "don't have the right attitude," get over any fear of the water and embrace the creatures and plants that make it their home. They're part of the experience.

Okanagan Trail

BX FALLS AND BX CREEK

Slip into something cool. Just two kilometres off Silver Star Road, between Vernon and Silver Star Resort, the BX trails offer true relief from scorching summer sun. Within 300 metres of the parking area on Tillicum Road you'll find three options. Walk the upper trail for one perspective of BX Falls, climb down to the base of the falls for a quick close-up view or continue on the same trail beside BX Creek. Along this route you'll see the remains of a dam, flumes and channels that once fed into the Grey Canal irrigation system, a key feature in the success of early agriculture in the region. The moist enclave of birch and cedar

is worlds away from the dry hillsides and ponderosa woodlands beyond. Follow the two-kilometre path to Star Road and return by the same route or take Star Road north for 300 metres to connect with an informal trail (about 500 metres long) that carries on to the Grey Canal trail. —L.C.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Open water adds some safety concerns. Swim with a buddy or an organized group and follow the shoreline or stay in shallow water. Gyro Beach in Kelowna and Kin Beach in Vernon are popular with open-water swimmers. If you venture out with a paddler, choose a time of day when the lake isn't being shredded by boat traffic and have the paddler carry an extra life jacket in case you need it. Never swim in stormy weather.



IF YOU GO...

A wetsuit extends the swimming season and also gives you buoyancy in the water—a real confidence booster. Ideally, splurge for a proper triathlon model, available at most outdoors and some sporting goods stores. Get detailed advice on fit. Make sure that you're buying a wetsuit for swimming, not other water sports. The wrong suit can chaff at the neck and arms or drag in the water, spoiling a great swim.

