



Take
me to
Waskesiu

Against the odds, this national park lake retreat has

By Jim Sutherland Photography Kamil Bialous



survived, with the help of some political bigwigs



Waskesiu is small enough that cottagers can get around by bike or on a rented quadcycle, a four-wheeled pedal vehicle (p. 63), available at the Grey Owl Center (left), a local business offering everything from a gym and DVD rentals to ice cream and Ecuadorean clothing.



Y

our cabin or cottage—and the land it sits on—have a history. But not the kind of history that Guy Edlund's has.

How many historians have written about your plot of land in how many books, with how many footnotes? How often have Ottawa mandarins submitted reports, and on what occasions did concerned federal cabinet ministers journey up to your sparkling northern lake? Finally, how many prime ministers have personally intervened in controversies involving your cabin's very existence?

The point, we trust, has been made. Yet Guy's cabin doesn't look like a relic of great historical import. It's built on a footprint of exactly 434 sq. ft., with a sleeping loft up the steep and narrow stairs and a free-standing, fully plumbed bathroom out the back door. This candidate for an appearance on *Generic Cabins Tonight!* sits in a tightly packed row of very similar generic cabins. And also, by the way, not only are these cabins crowded together, and a fair walk from the shoreline, they are leaseholds. Finally, by sternly enforced regulation, they can be used only from April to October.

And yet, these cabins change hands at prices around \$300,000, putting them in the same territory as freehold waterfront addresses on a lot of other lakes nearby.

So, fine, you say, conceding gracefully. Where the heck is this place? There can be only one answer, one lake where land-use decisions so tortured would not have ruined the place, and that is Waskesiu, in Saskatchewan's Prince Albert National Park.

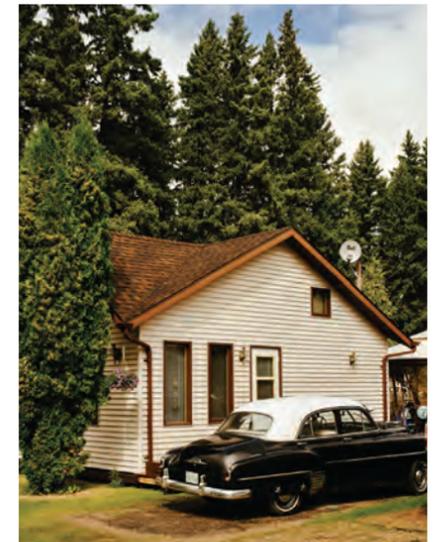
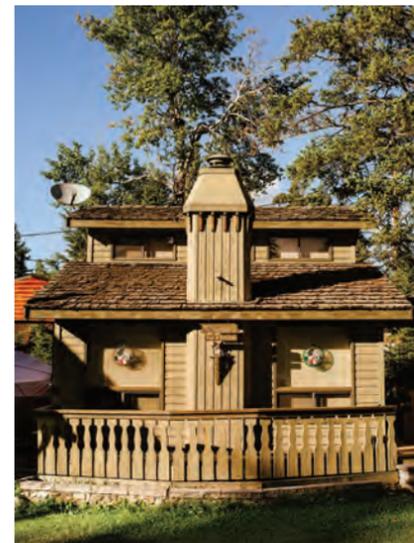
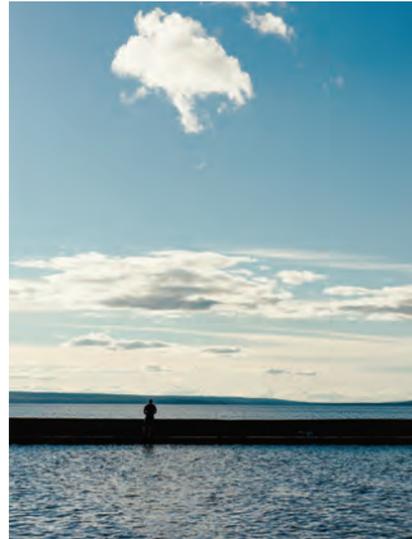
Guy is surprisingly sanguine for someone who spends many a summer weekend on the Plains of Abraham of cottage living, but then he's been making the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Saskatoon to Waskesiu since he was seven. Two years after his first trip, his parents purchased this place, though of course it wasn't exactly this place then, but rather a crude canvas-roofed structure, in accordance with the directives of the day. "We came up when school was out and spent the whole summer here," he says. "Home sweet shack tent."

At the current, much more comfortable descendent of that first controversial abode, Guy spends his days doing pretty much what most people do. This weekend happens to be Waskesiu's annual Lakeside Festival, and he is lying on a green lawn in front of the stage, passing a mostly favourable assessment of the band that's playing. Back in Saskatoon, the recently divorced 58-year-old has a blues show on a community station, and his judgment is not to be dismissed. Otherwise, Guy's Waskesiu day looks a lot like anyone else's. He'll ride his bike along the beach and through the fine network of forest trails and pop in to Pizza Pete's, a restaurant-cum-watering hole, which is run by an old friend. This evening he'll connect with other residents of the 500-plus cabins here or maybe with some of the non-cabin-owners who pour in, packing campsites and filling up rentals to give Waskesiu a summertime weekend population of about 5,000. »



Despite the more than 250,000 people who visit Prince Albert National Park each year, Waskesiu—“red deer” or “elk” in Cree—has preserved its quaint

village atmosphere. In early years, cabin owners shared community washrooms and cooked together at outdoor camp kitchens, both facilities provided by



the park. There were also no fences between the cabins, but there were iron stakes or concrete blocks (with a line down the middle) sunk level into the

ground to show property lines. Visitors to the Waskesiu Heritage Museum can see these and other artifacts, such as a movie projector that was used for



more than 50 years in the local cinema, before the switch to digital. The swim-friendly beach (p. 70) has always been an attraction. In a lifeguard record

book from 1965, on display at the museum, the note for July 17 reported 6,500 to 7,000 visitors and noted that the day's weather was “Beeyootiful!”

Where the heck is this place?

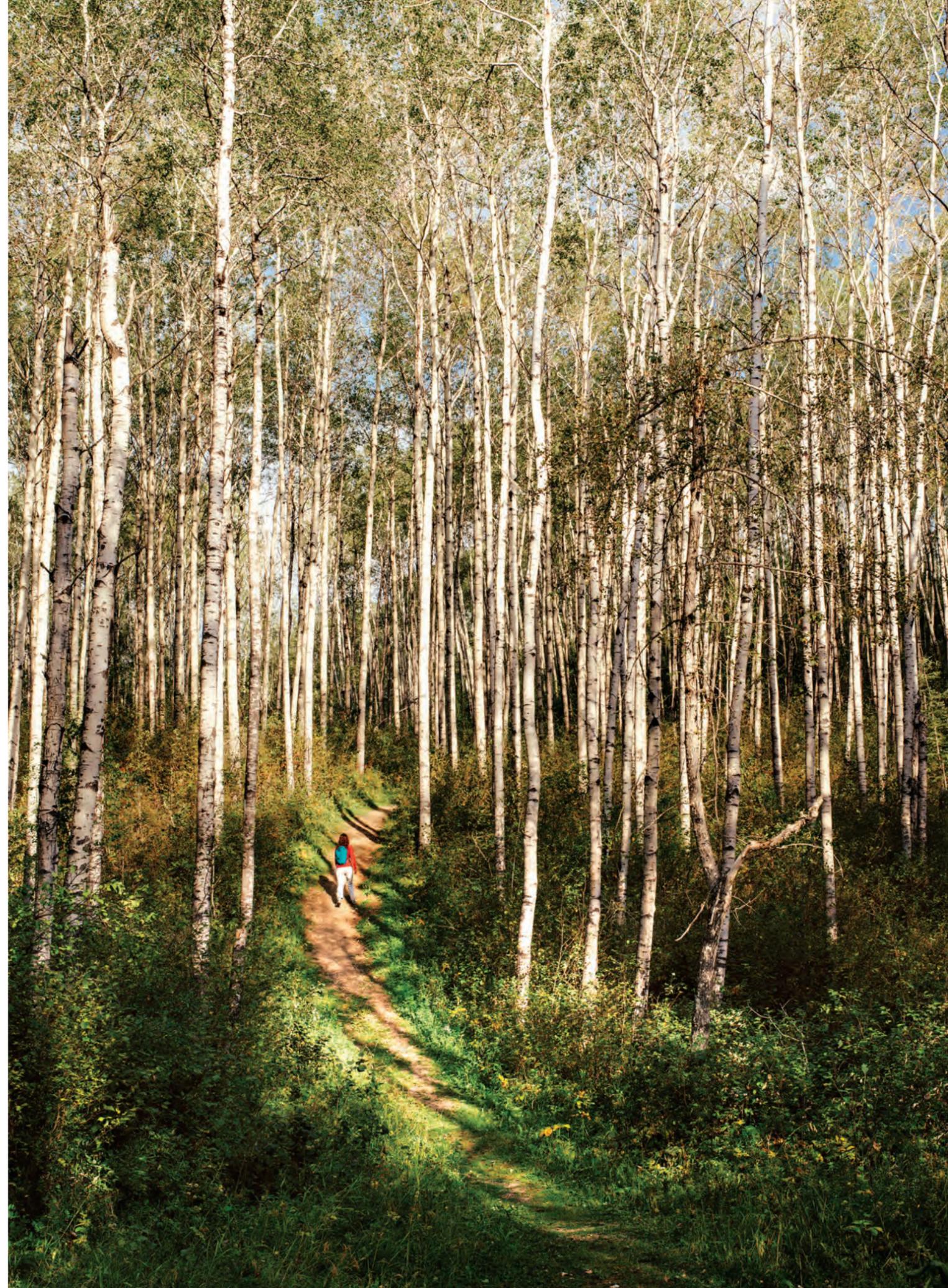


With three trail loops totalling about 17 km (opposite), cottagers and visitors have plenty of options for enjoying nature. To explore history and the last standing shack tent (left, with volunteer Mona Finlayson), they head to the Waskesiu Heritage Museum.

Some sunny days Waskesiu's sandy beach is as crowded as a Miami or a Malibu, and the charming little townsite as busy as a Banff or a Jasper, except that Waskesiu is not nearly as international. "Mostly Prince Albert and Saskatoon," suggests Guy, about where the people who cottage here come from, though Saskatchewanians from all over do venture up into the boreal forest. Of course, there's also the odd licence plate from Alberta or B.C., at one time even Guy's, as he and his family continued to make this their summertime base during a 12-year stint in Calgary.

Oh, it's a scene, all right—but only in the townsite. Guy doesn't have a boat, but the relatively few who do can pull off something that won't happen on many other water bodies. They can depart the marina (the only place where you can keep a boat) and circumnavigate a lake that is about 25 km long, quite possibly spotting a bear or a moose along the way but no sign of humans or human habitation. Outside of the townsite, the lakeshore is home to just one building, a cabin built before the park's creation and grandfathered in. Development is not merely controlled, it simply doesn't happen, since national parks like Prince Albert regard the conservation of the natural environment for the enjoyment of all as one of their principal missions.

Obviously, a mission like that can have implications for cottagers, and, in fact, Prince Albert National Park's dual roles as both nature preserve and recreational







Waskesiu cottagers have few regrets about their townsite. For Dorell Taylor, it's the closure of the post office two years ago that rattles. Guy Edlund (left), would like to make the trek to Grey Owl's cabin on nearby Ajawaan Lake. He may bike there someday.

These cabins are tiny but in demand



playground have played a big part in the mostly strange and often fractious development process of sites like Guy Edlund's, from tents to shack tents to officially sanctioned and minutely prescribed cabins.

No one knows this better than Bill Waiser, a University of Saskatchewan history professor who retired early to write books (he won a Governor General's Award last year for *A World We Have Lost: Saskatchewan Before 1905*). Waiser, who is responsible for a significant chunk of the footnotes pertaining to Waskesiu's cottaging history, doesn't have a cabin here, but he and his wife arrive from Saskatoon a couple of times a year to canoe, hike, and enjoy the air. "One of the saving graces of the park," he says, "is that something like four out of five visitors never leave the townsite."

That might suggest a bias toward the conservation element of the park's mission, but you'd be hard-pressed to find anything other than diplomatic neutrality in Waiser's description of how Waskesiu's cabins came to be the way they are. It all started back in 1925 when Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King lost his seat in the general election and shortly afterward became the MP for Prince Albert, after winning a by-election. The Prince Albert Board of Trade wanted to establish the city as Saskatchewan's gateway to northern recreation and figured that a national park would not only draw visitors, but also get some decent roads built. Obliging, King proclaimed exactly that, a massive new park complete with a deliberately winding highway (for the picturesque effect), a small cottage subdivision, and, later, a golf course that would reign for many years as the finest 18 in the province and that has lately been spruced up again after a struggle with winterkill. The Board of Trade responded by building a cabin for King. "He spent exactly one night there," says Waiser.

By then, though, the province had descended into the deepest of economic depressions. What people could afford was a tent, with the result that the campground was almost perpetually overflowing, and the lake quickly became known as "a poor man's paradise," as one camper described it at the time. Many families spent their entire summers at Waskesiu and came to regard their campsites as almost their own private neighbourhoods; an area of the campgrounds was even set aside for summer-long residents, who were also allowed to turn their tents into "shack tents," with wooden floors and walls, but canvas roofs.

All of this seemed acceptable until the late 1950s, when the economy picked up, and Waskesiu began to gain the reputation as paradise for a lot more people. The Toronto Maple Leafs goalie Johnny Bower purchased one of the hamburger joints, and pals like Gordie Howe—just famous, of course, but famous *locally* for being able to reach the green on the 335-yard first hole of the golf course with his persimmon driver—became frequent visitors. On Howe's death last

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year, his son Mark said that Waskesiu was his father's favourite place on earth. The park began to create a succession of small lakeside subdivisions that today rival the original enclave beside the golf course as the lake's most coveted, home to cabins owned by families with last names that will be familiar to many Saskatchewanians. Mona Finlayson's name is not one of those, though she was the assistant principal at Guy's school. "People call my place Mona's Museum," she says, of a vintage lakeside cabin that is crammed with memorabilia bearing witness to, among other things, her role as an originator of the annual Slobstick Golf Tournament, a play on the course's informal description as the Lobstick, after a notched tree in the middle of the first fairway. Most of the original cabins, like hers, have been replaced by grander-looking (although still regulation-observing) and often winter-ready structures, leading to pressure on park authorities—firmly resisted—to open it up for 12 months of the year. Mona is content to leave things the way they are. "I love the place," she says. "But I'm not going to sit here in a snowbank."

A couple of hundred metres away, Dorell Taylor has driven from Victoria, B.C., back to her childhood haunt every year but one since 1969. "It's sort of like going home every year," she says of her little neighbourhood, where a lot of the cabins retain that classic national park charm. Then again, Victoria isn't built on ground with muskeg-like qualities, causing the ground to roll and heave. "My dad used to come up in the fall with jacks and level this place," she says. Eventually, she hired a pro, who managed to stabilize it sufficiently so that jacks are no longer necessary, though the kitchen floor is not quite level and the fridge has to be constantly adjusted.

In Guy Edlund's memory, the shack-tent era was nothing other than golden. He was only a boy, so he remembers daily things as acts of near mystical significance that could not have been more charming: lighting the Coleman lamps; the truck that brought ice, sawed from the lake during the winter, then stored for use in people's ice boxes. "I cut my finger

once, whittling wood from the woodpile," Guy recalls wistfully. "It was great."

Behind the scenes, however—heck, right in front of the scene—a battle was brewing. On the one hand, the shack-tent residents were pretty happy and, as long-time park habitués, felt that Waskesiu was truly their summer home. On the other, both park authorities and visitors found the shack tents unsightly and rued the sweet deal that allowed their owners to spend summers there at the lowest of costs. A 1960 report slammed the shack tents as "a case of special privilege and fancied right...and a contradiction of national park purpose," before outlining a plan to eliminate them within five years.

It would take another 15 and the attention of both a former prime minister, John Diefenbaker, and a future one, Jean Chrétien, then the minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, before the shack tents would be, not eliminated, but instead legitimized. The process involved lots of visits by bureaucrats and ministers, lots of contentious town hall meetings, and lots of declarations and reversals. Then came the regulations enabling families like the Edlunds to replace their existing structures with real cabins, virtually all of them built to the precisely dictated maximum allowable square footage from a handful of approved designs.

Everyone agrees that cabin life has become a lot calmer in the four decades since the outbreak of peace. There's an active resident's association that, notwithstanding the odd disagreement, gets along pretty well with the park administration, and, although none remain in use, that humblest of summer abodes, the shack tent, has taken on a nostalgic sheen. In fact, the last one in its original form is in the centre of town, in the kind of spot reserved in Europe for a statue of a notable cardinal or military hero, as part of a museum complex that other summer resorts are going to have a tough time matching. There's all that tumultuous history, of course; nor does it hurt that this is a national park, so lots of museum pros have had a hand. But it's also germane that the park was home in the 1930s to Grey Owl, the writer and conservationist whose books topped bestseller lists both here and in England. The Friends of Prince Albert National Park maintain a replica of his cabin, and



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realistically that cabin is not only more notable than the shack tent, but is perhaps the second most famous one on the planet, even if well behind Thoreau's.

Grey Owl landed at the park's Ajawaan Lake in 1931 after cooking up a deal to publicize the national parks. Already an established authority on wilderness and conservation issues, the putative son of a Scottish father and an Apache mother, along with his Iroquois Mohawk wife, Anahareo, would set his books inside the parks; in return, park authorities would furnish him with a salary and a suitable place to live.

Only later did it come out that Grey Owl was not part-Apache but entirely English and also something of an alcoholic. Visitors to the replica cabin learn that the writer regularly requested that park authorities deliver crucial supplies: apples for his pet beavers, whisky for him. Grey Owl and Anahareo each had a cabin, and both have been well-maintained. The two-day hike or canoe journey from Waskesiu to remote Ajawaan are as enjoyable as they are iconic.

The appeal of some summer destinations lies in how much there is to do. Others are more about the exquisite perfection of doing little. Waskesiu can be fit into either slot, but today Guy is taking advantage of the latter, having settled into a comfortable chair to catch up on his reading. These days Guy sells forklifts for a living, but before finding that niche, he had other ones, including co-founding Calories Restaurant, which, three decades later, is still one of Saskatchewan's best known, then converting the city's mouldering Broadway Theatre into a landmark repertory cinema and concert house. Through it all—the marriage, kids, and divorce included—Waskesiu has been a constant in his life, and if he has any regrets about the place, not getting to Grey Owl's Ajawaan cabin might qualify. Of course, for a Waskesiu loyalist like Guy, there's still time. "I've been to other lakes," he says. "Saskatchewan has a lot of them, and there's a real lake culture here. But this one is mine." 🐾

Jim Sutherland wrote "We, the Beachers," in the Early Summer '16 issue.



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