

The Length of Lough Mask Swim, Co Galway.
Swimmer: Vanessa Daws
19.08.18



Image: The starting point of 'The Length of Lough Mask Swim' at Glentrauge.

On Sunday 19th August 2018 at 7.18 am I set out in the early morning sun from Glentrauge and swam the length of Lough Mask 22.5km up to the Cloon Bridge on the north side of the Mask, it took me 10.22 hours.

That Saturday night before the swim there was torrential rain and winds, I was getting a bit nervous that it may not go ahead. The next morning however, we had glorious sunshine and flat calm water. I started the swim in the beautiful valley of Glentrauge at the end of the Upper Lough Mask. My crew were Fergal Somerville and Claire Ryan who looked after me patiently for the entire swim as observers, safety and feeds, Padraig Canny the boat pilot and Pauline Jordan kayak support. The first 7km was stunning, the early morning sunshine, mountains to the left of me and mountains to the right.

I had broken the swim into 3 sections where there was easy lake access for any emergency and the boat crew to swap over. The Ferry Bridge was the first place the crew changed over, Trish had organised a small crowd to cheer me on which was really nice to see, there were two local triathletes who joined me in the lake for a bit. Pauline finished her kayak support shift here and Gerry took over. Peter jumped into the rib giving Padraic a break from driving, Fergal and Claire both stayed on the boat for the 10 hours.

There was a fast flow through the Ferry Bridge, the water from Upper Lough Mask moving through this narrow point into the Lower Lough Mask, I enjoyed the gliding sensation, but forgot about eddies, so had to strike some strong strokes to get away from the eddy and being taken back to the bridge!

After the Ferry Bridge the swim really started. I knew this would be a tough part as I wasn't really a 3rd of a way down yet and turning into the main large lake, it looked endless and gigantic. I kept brain washing myself about how I was going to do this and all the people who have been so encouraging,

among others, Philip Hodges, David Warby and Rachael Lee, and I thought about their wise words, as well as Ned Denison's eloquent quote "Do it"!

The swim took a route through the middle of the lake. While I was planning the route I had thought we'd stay nearer the shore, halfway up the Lower Mask is Paddy's Bar and that's where the second safety crew swap over point was, but on the day we just went straight up the middle as it was such good visibility.

At Paddy's Bar Sean and James two kayakers came out and swapped with Gerry the kayaker and Padraic came out in a 2nd rib to ensure the swap over was safe and then Peter could go back to Petersburg OEC. I didn't have to worry once about all these logistics, Trish Walsh was back at the Petersburg base on the radios organising everything, I totally trusted my team.

I'm not a 'fun' swimmer on a big swim, I don't tend to have the craic with the team or read messages, I just swim and feed and concentrate on getting to the end. About 4 hours in I could see the mist at the top of the hills and willed it to stay away. But the mist rolled down, and for about an hour (I've no concept of time!) we were in fog, and Carrigeendauv Island we were aiming for as a line disappeared temporarily.

I guess this would have been the lowest point, and I was getting a bit cold even though the lake water was about 17/18°. I had a gentle south west wind most of the way, which helped push me a long a bit. A stronger west breeze developed later and a few waves that kept pushing me a bit too much the the right of our line. Fergal joined me for an hour and we made it into the final bay where the Cloon River flows out. Because of the heavy rain the night before there was a substantial flow on the river and it went about 2° colder. I liked the idea of having a push at the end, to see if I would have any energy left, all good training. The Ballinrobe Swimming club joined me at the end, which was really comforting as we thrashed our way upstream. It was fantastic to see the crowd on the Cloon Bridge cheering me, what a boost at the end. I then very unglamorously wallowed in the shallows and tried to negotiate the slippery rocks as I exited the water, but I did eventually, 10 hours and 22 minutes finish the swim.

I fed mainly on Torq, thanks Rachael for the advise, it was good as it has electrolytes in for the fresh water. (I use CNP in sea swims) I ate a half banana and a Cadbury's chocolate log near the end, and that was amazing! I didn't want treats, or anything different, I didn't care what flavour they gave me, just as long as I knew the carbs were getting into me I was happy, sure what's 10 hours? You can eat nice things after! I was also pleased my shoulders were fine, I didn't need any pain killers, and I wasn't sore after, just a bit stiff.

A big thank you to Trish Walsh, Padraig Canny, Claire Ryan, Fergal Somerville, Peter Walsh, Pauline Jordan, Gerry Ryder, Sean Roberts, Kay Brennan, Alan Stephens and John Craddock, Petersburg OEC and GRETB as well as the supporting crowds on both the bridges. What a team. Trish had arranged that the swim would raise money for the Zambia Housing Appeal and the All Saints Heritage Centre in Clonbur, she had organised collection buckets and sponsor forms.

I had lived in Clonbur for many years working as an outdoor instructor at Petersburg OEC in between my art events and exhibitions. Lough Mask is a very special body of water to me, I have swum in it for many years, but only small distances, it is only in recent years I have realised you can just keep swimming for hours and hours on end. This was the first known swim of the entire Length of Lough Mask from Glentreague to the Cloon Bridge. But it was also an emotional swim, I dedicated this swim to Niamh McGrath.

Press and interview links:

Outsider Magazine: <https://outsider.ie/lifestyle/vanessa-daws-lough-mask/>

Connemara Radio interview: <https://soundcloud.com/swimness/the-length-of-lough-mask-swim-connemara-radio-interview-2018>

* Note: I had mentioned Fergal and Claire, but the interview got cut off at the start and they didn't send me that 1st part.



Image: The Upper Lough Mask



Image: Support at the Ferry Bridge about 3 hours into the swim.



Image: Feeding time. On an official marathon swim the swimmer is not allowed to touch the boat or any human. For the Length of Lough Mask Swim I fed every 45 minutes on a Carbohydrate drink which was passed to me on a string.



Image: The Lower Mask with the 'Dirks' on Maumtrasna in the background.



Image: The clouds rolled in from the hills about half way through the swim.



Image: I felt extremely safe under the guidance of Pdraig Canny, he is an expert on Lough Mask and the surrounding area.



Image: John Craddock from the Ballinrobe Open Water Swimming Club shaking my hand at the end of the swim.



Image: The team at Cloon Bridge the end of the swim. The Kayaker and rib drivers swapped around every 3 hours. Fergal Somerville and Claire Ryan, both experienced marathon and ice mile swimmers from Dublin were support and feeding crew well as official observers and stayed on the rib for the full 10 hours.