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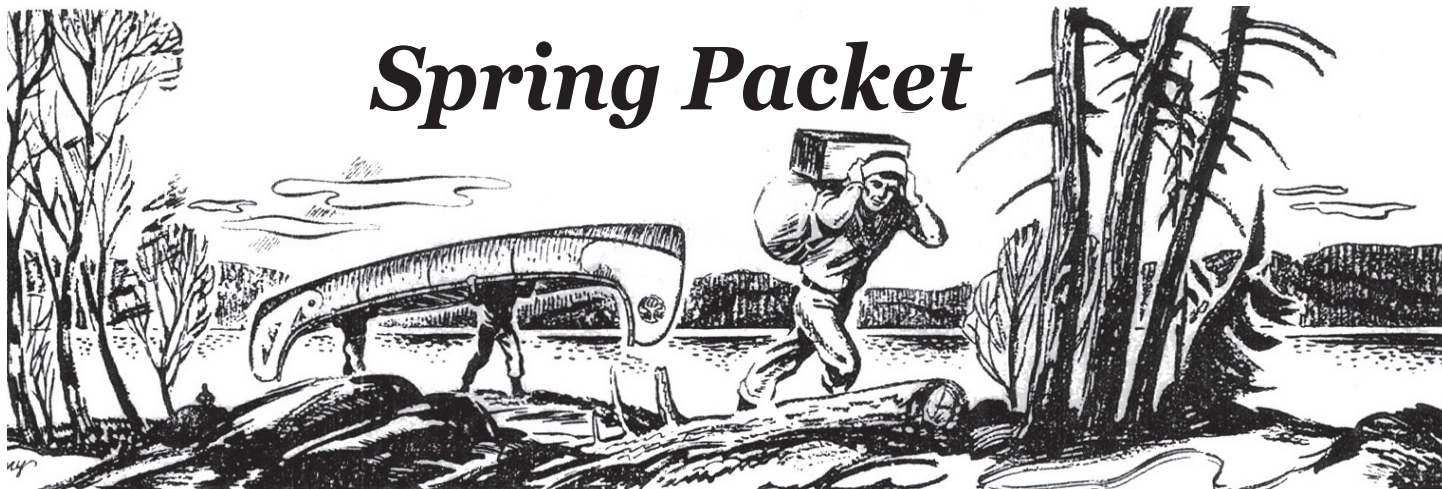


photo: Susie Harings

**HAWAII YA! -** Holding the Yukon Territory flag, Cliff Jacobson, right, is joined by fellow Snake River paddlers Jim Mandle and Dick Person (centre) in a hula-style celebration of their crossing the Arctic Circle in northern Yukon. The threesome were part of a group led by Cliff down the river and through the scenic mountains of the region. Cliff's trip report begins on Page Six.



# Spring Packet



As always, it was great to hear from **Alan Kes-selheim**, who along with wife **Marypat Zitzer** seem to be building a fine second generation of canoeists out there in Montana with their three children **Eli, Sawyer and Ruby**.

**H**ope you've received my renewal check by now. Sorry to lapse from time to time. Believe me, it's nothing personal, and *Che-Mun* is one of the very few publications I hold on to. I'm happy to see your index in there. I look back at old issues fairly often, for one reason or another, so it's a handy service. Speaking of that, you got my name in the index slightly wrong. It's Alan, not Alex. It's usually Marypat's name that gets mangled! [Editor's Note - It's been corrected!]

"As you know, we completed a family expedition down the Kazan last July-August. It was rigorous conditions during our passage. Lots of wind and tough weather. Black flies were out in force. But we came together as a family team in a very rewarding way. The kids never whined or complained, and I realized at some point that I wasn't interacting with them as my children so much as I treated them as trip mates. They pulled their weight and became full partners. Most rewarding of all, since we've been back, they've all talked about wanting to return to the Barrens again.

"This summer is the second in the coming-of-age trip series. ( Each of our kids has a "fetal river" -- a river trip for which they were in the womb. The Kazan River is Eli's. Sawyer's is the Yellowstone River. Ruby's is the Rio Grande along the Mexican border.) We are doing the entire Yellowstone, Sawyer's river, from Yellowstone Park to North Dakota, roughly 600 miles across Montana.

"Should be much more relaxed and less logistically challenging. As a bonus, we plan to hike to Younts Peak, in northern Wyoming, which is the headwaters of the Yellowstone. The hike should take us about eight days, round trip, and it is some of the most remote wilderness in the US, outside of Alaska. Big-time grizzly country."

One of our original subscribers, **Blair Richardson**, is still with us and, more importantly still paddling. He now lives in Oakville, Ontario.

**I** still eagerly await each edition of *Che-Mun*, and enjoy reading all the articles. In 2005, I did several canoe trips, but the jewel in the crown was a two-week fly-in trip down the Turnagain River to its confluence with the Ketchika River and then down the K. to the Liard River in northern British Columbia."

"We did a short stretch on the Liard, taking out at Coal Camp. The trip was organized by Laurel Archer, who was doing research for her next book on northern B.C. rivers. We were six, including friends of Laurel's from Saskatoon and Waterloo. It was a very rigorous trip, cool temperatures with rain every day but the last. There is a 7 km. portage around a gorge and Falls on the Turnagain. We hired a helicopter to take us around that stretch -- it felt like cheating! We then walked back along the portage, so Laurel could complete her notes -- it was in very rough condition and hilly as you might expect.

"Fresh bear sign was every where, so we made a lot of noise as we walked along. Especially when one of us stepped on a hornets nest! The fishing was excellent and the bugs were really not a problem. The white water was challenging, but we were very careful scouting, and the river info from one of Laurel's guiding colleagues was very helpful in avoiding some problems. [Ed.Note; his article had previously been published in *Kanawa*.]

"We had no dumps, just one scare when a canoe wedged between two boulders. It was right by the shore, and we were able to pry it loose and empty out the water. Laurel said only a handful of groups do this river; it is remote and there is the expense of flying in. But it was truly spectacular mountain scenery, even reminiscent of the South Nahanni river, which is not far to the north. Of course, it lacks the height of the Nahanni's canyons.

"I would recommend the trip highly; when Laurel's book is published, I am sure it will inspire many more to do the trip!

"This year, we are planning to canoe closer to home; the Petawawa R. again for our Spring WW warm-up, the Madawaska, Salmon and Moira rivers, and then two trips in Quebec: the Mistassibi Nord-est and the Ashuapmushuan."

We had a brief note from noted paddler **Bill Layman** about an excellent web site for canoe gear reviews and opinions.

**T**he link to my article, *Canoe Gear for the Subarctic*, can be found on the main page of <http://www.townoflaronge.ca/Welcome/>. This article will soon be featured at [www.mycr.com](http://www.mycr.com) and a link to it will be set up at <http://paddlingcanada.com/resources/>. This is a revamped copy of an article I have been posting year over year and it gets a large number of hits so I think the advantage to your readers is significant. Please look through the article to find reference to you gear which I am using and have reviewed."

One of our subscribers sent **Jeff Traversy** Outfit 122 knowing of his interest in the Douglas expedition of 1911-12.

**I** am a professional fishing guide and spend my summers guiding on Great Bear Lake, N.W.T. After some research and discussion with a couple of other guides we went looking for the Douglas cabin up the Dease River and in July of 2005 we found it along with another cabin likely Hodgson's at the same site.

"I am currently looking for Hornby's cabin which was built just east of Ft. Confidence. In August 2005 I found a stump field near the suspected site but the remains of the cabin were not found. I hope to continue the search this summer.

"I've sent a few pix of the Douglas cabin and fireplace dated July 2005 (see Page 12) As you can see 95 years have really started to take its toll. We have contacted the Yellowknife Heritage group and they have made note of its location and existence. I have flown Douglas' route from Great Bear across to the Dismal Lakes and on to the Coppermine River and it is truly remarkable .

"I am heading north to Great Slave in May and then on to Great Bear for July and August Hopefully I will return to the site and continue my search for Hornby's cabin. As you know, it's possible that the cabin could be long gone due to Hornby's cabin building reputation. After all, he spent one winter in a dugout cave!"



## Editor's Notebook

We have two wonderful books under review in this Outfit on page four; *Ten Rivers* and *Being Caribou*.

The latter is something truly unique. For those of us lucky to have been on extended northern trips of pure wilderness travel, you know that something changes in you and how you perceive nature. That has been something hard to quantify - until now.

I think that is what writer Karsten Heuer has done in *Being Caribou*. The book succeeds on many levels but what is completely unique to this reader, is its account of the connection with a different life form.

I think a great analogy was seen in the big power failure in 2003. In my city of three million, Toronto, the night sky shone with millions of stars heretofore unseen. They have always been there but it is the city and modern civilization that shuts that out. The very noise of our modern world and the speed that we move conceals much of the natural world.

Karsten Heuer caught some of that other-worldly sense when he heard the 'thrumming'. It was a distant and hard to discern sound that came from the heart of the great herd of caribou, this diverse life force that tours the barren north. It was, like a dream, at the very end of their senses - but it was there.

One amazing passage told of the hikers overlooking a giant docile herd with a pack of waiting wolves on the distant ridge. It just took two croaks from a passing raven to, first, alert the caribou and then the wolves, to a foreign presence and completely change the scene. Heuer sensed that the wolves were somehow angry at him. When he got to the other side, he found a gully where the caribou had been heading before the raven call, littered with dozens of successful kills over the years. But not this time.

Something happens out there we are not a part of - unless we listen, and we can only do that when we pay the price . . . and really want to.

Michael Peake.



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## Canoesworthy

Hydro-Quebec will invest \$25 billion for new hydro dams on Quebec's North Shore and in Nunavik. The plan is to generate 4,500 megawatts with 1,000 megawatts earmarked for export sales. The utility has not identified the new projects yet, although studies are advanced on damming the Romaine River on the lower north shore of the St. Lawrence, with a potential to generate 1,500 megawatts.

Hydro-Quebec could also dam other rivers on the lower north shore or projects in Nunavik, as the northern third of the province. They would also like to convince Newfoundland to develop the 2,200-megawatt Gull Island project on the Lower Churchill River in Labrador.

But Quebec premier Jean Charest said his government has no plans to develop Great Whale River, which flows into Hudson's Bay, in spite of its potential generating capacity of 3,212 megawatts. In the 1990s, the northern Quebec Cree, waged a successful campaign against Great Whale. It was shelved in 1994.

Natural Resources Minister Pierre Corbeil said Quebec plans to use a "portfolio" approach in developing the new hydroelectric projects between now and 2015. The new dams are expected to create 70,000 person-years of construction jobs.

The "portfolio" approach means that instead of developing new projects one at a time, Hydro-Quebec would develop three or four projects simultaneously. The minister estimated this would trim five years from the regulatory and construction timetables.

Two federal departments claim Hydro-Québec has not taken the necessary steps to lessen the impact of mercury from the Rupert Diversion on the Cree population, according to a Radio-Canada report.

Health Canada and Natural Resources Canada claim Hydro-Québec has not taken the necessary steps to lessen the impact of mercury from the Rupert Diversion on the Cree population.

Under the \$4 billion plan, the Rupert, renowned for its wild rapids and tremendous fishing, will be redirected some 300 kilometres to the north, powering turbines at two new power stations and existing facilities at Hydro's La Grande complex. Four dams and 75 dikes will divert 71% of the river's flow. Organic matter flooded by the new diversion bays will release methyl mercury into the water, forcing restrictions on how much fish can be consumed.

Health Canada says efforts to diminish the Cree population's exposure to the mercury are insufficient. Natural Resources Canada says Hydro-Québec has not gathered enough information on the level of mercury in the ground. It also says the provincially owned utility has not looked into plans such as complete de-forestation or removing topsoil.

Hydro-Québec didn't give an official reaction to the charges, but one of its experts maintains that those ideas have indeed been looked at. Hydro figures the deforestation would not have a big impact, while removing topsoil would cost \$1 billion.

Hydro says the solution is to put stronger restrictions on eating fish for the next 15 years.

The Rupert Diversion would create 888 megawatts of new capacity, according to Hydro-Québec — power that is urgently needed to keep up with energy demands from Quebecers.

Jean Charest, the Premier, has made the Eastmain-Rupert project a centrepiece of his economic plan for the province. His Cree counterpart, Grand Chief Matthew Mukash, once paddled into New York City to oppose the Great Whale project and more recently campaigned against the Paix des Braves. Hydro-Québec is hoping to get the green light to start work on the diversion by December.

Uranor, a uranium exploration company, has found encouraging indications of uranium east of, near the Koroc River, just outside the limits of a proposed Kuururjuaq Park — and there are also indications that more uranium lies within the park's boundaries. Occasionally, Quebec has "un-reserved" land set aside for parks.

But Daniel Epoo, the president of the Nunavik Mineral Exploration Fund, told delegates at Makivik Corporation's recent annual general meeting in Kangirsuk that he doesn't think the

Continues on Page 5





## Ten Rivers

Adventure Stories From the Arctic

By Ed Struzik

231 pp CanWest Books, 2006 \$28.95

ISBN: 0-9736719-4-7

Books reviewed by Michael Peake

The name of Ed Struzik has popped up on my radar screen very often over the past 20 years. Mainly because he was doing things that I wanted to do.

As a reporter for the Edmonton

Journal, and a frequent contributor to the now defunct *Equinox* magazine, he focused on things northern and his byline was found in numerous frigid and far-flung corners of Canada's northland.

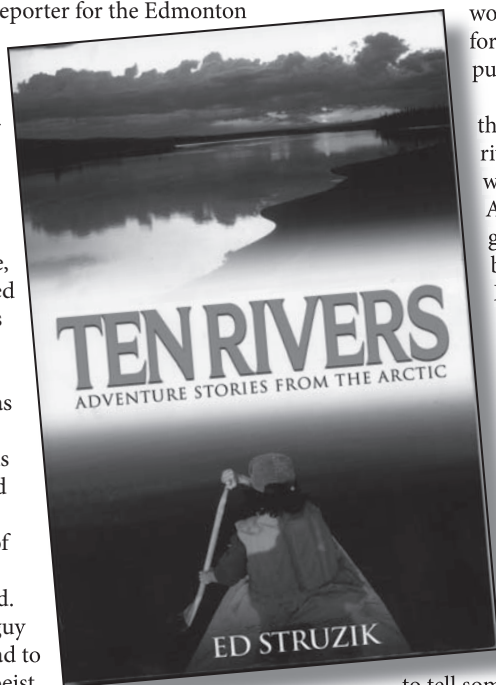
This guy clearly had to be a canoeist.

For surely he had found the right way to feed his habit of things northern. It turns out he was and is a northern paddler and his ten rivers, is by no means your next door neighbour's listing of paddling destinations.

This book hits a home run for *Che-Mun* readers, and this reviewer. Imagine, a book about paddling remote northern rivers interlaced with exotic historical knowledge and hand-on experience from a variety of natives and locals.

Now granted, a couple of the rivers are household names, the Nahanni and Mackenzie, but trips down the frigid barrens of the Thomsen and Nanook, and the less remote and seldom travelled Snowdrift reach into the realm of esoteric paddling destinations.

There is also quite a lot of the science writer in here, something Struzik is known and won awards for. He often travels with bear experts and other scientists who dig, often literally, way deeper into the subject matter of a typical canoe trip.



His choice of partners, and the risks of going with unproven paddlers, proved particularly trying on the Nanook which winds its way across the central plain of Victoria Island. The party split up and two strange but true paddlers headed out on their own, not mentioning it when they passed the other group in the morning. The race for the end of the river, and plane meeting, was harrowing but ultimately successful.

This is a small book with a section of superb colour photographs in the middle. It certainly would have benefitted from a larger format but such are the economics of publishing.

One of the most interesting parts of the book involves the trip to get to the river. Struzik ends up in an open boat with a group of natives headed by Jack Anawak, a member of the Nunavut government. They were battling the big waves up the west coast of Hudson Bay enroute to Wager Bay. A truly surreal moment is related when the group of seven ranging from nine to 58 takes shelter in an old trapper's cabin on the shores of Hudson Bay battered by the winds. Having finally settled in and made some food the group was playing cards when . . . the phone rang. Turns out Jack had buried a satphone deep in the gear and had to give a CBC radio interview on some news story.

*Ten Rivers* is a great read.

Struzik threads in many elements to tell some great stories. There are a lot of interesting historical nuggets that I haven't heard of - probably an assist from his friend Prof. Ian MacLaren - a fun guy with a keen research background.

Struzik is honest, analytical yet very tender and touching when he has to be. This is a book for canoeists who take an interest on whose been there before them and who still is there. And if you're a *Che-Mun* reader - that's you.

## Being Caribou

Five Months on Foot with an Arctic Herd

By Karsten Heuer

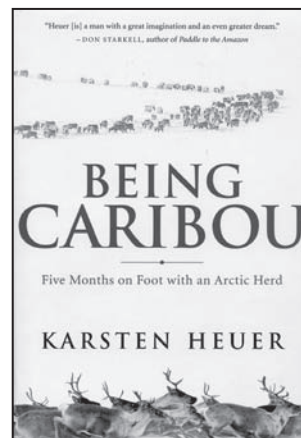
235 pp Toronto, McClelland & Stewart,

2006 \$36.99

ISBN: 0-7710-4122-5

Encounters with wild animals are a highlight of most northern canoe expeditions. But as *Being Caribou* reveals, they are only the beginning of a much bigger revelation.

In was an encounter with a mass migration of caribou in the late 1940s that began Farley Mowat on his path to be an author and a messenger. Karsten Heuer appears to be on that Mowat path of writer and crusader. He does



the best job I have yet seen, of explaining what that 'purity' or 'wilderness sense' is that comes from being on an extended trip.

For five months, Heuer and his wife, Leanne Allison,

traveled in and out with the Porcupine caribou herd as they migrated to and from their calving grounds in northern Alaska. That protected area, oft-reprieved by the U.S. Congress from oil exportation, continues to be a target and one Heuer and wife rightly wish to keep inviolate. They are campaigning to protect the area and that is the focus of this book.

*Being Caribou* recalls the book *Arctic Wild* by Lois Crisler, a tale of another couple filming that same herd 50 years earlier who, in their case became fascinated by wolves and began to change public opinion. Allison produced the companion film, which is winning awards and Heuer, a former Parks Canada warden on the Firth River, wrote their wonderful story; funny, touching, poetic and real. Their trip was incredibly arduous skiing, walking and finally canoeing across the top of the Yukon. Facing grizzlies, raging rivers to be forded, savage winds and near starvation and not to mention traversing great stretches over barrenland tussocks - among the hardest walking on earth. To be sure, satphone technology made such a journey possible but their accomplishment is significant.

You really sense that these animals live in a parallel but separate state of being from humans; breathing the same air, but reading the world in a whole other way. It is something Karsten and Leanne got a rare glimpse of. The door to that sanctum can only be opened by living the animals' existence, by 'being caribou'. It is a thrilling and unique premise - boldly undertaken and captured by this remarkable young couple. We will be hearing more from these two, I'll bet. See their web site at [www.beingcaribou.com](http://www.beingcaribou.com)



## CANOESWORTHY *continued*

government will budge in this case, no matter what the mineral potential of the park lands may be. Kuururjuaq boasts spectacular scenery near the Korok River and the Torngat mountains, including Mount d'Iberville and the slightly smaller Nuuvugilaa, a natural 1,466-metre high tower of rock.

Other areas of Nunavik also appear to be rich in uranium ore, just as the demand, and price, for uranium grows. After 20 years of those depressed market conditions, the market for uranium is now booming. Nuclear energy is seen as a cleaner alternative to diesel or coal produced energy - and nuclear energy needs uranium. However, uranium mining can be a mixed blessing: it provides money and jobs, but in the past it also has been associated with many negative impacts to human health.

**N**unavik recently held its first official muskox hunt, after biologists determined the region's population now exceeds 2,000. A 2004 Quebec government survey found the Nunavik's muskox herd is growing due to excellent forage conditions in the region.

In fact, the herd's numbers have multiplied substantially since 1967 when 15 young muskox were transported from Ellesmere Island to an experimental farm at Old Chimo, the original site of Kuujjuaq located across the Koksoak River.

By 1983, when the farm's operations ceased, 52 muskox were let loose on the land.

Muskox are now a common sight along the Ungava Bay. Quebec decided to allow a "controlled hunt" of the region's muskox population in 2006, following consultations with Makivik Corporation, Quebec, Kuujjuaq, Tasiujaq as well as those two communities' landholding corporations and local hunters and trappers associations. The hunt, now on a five-year test basis, will be carried out in designated areas around Kuujjuaq and Tasiujaq.

Initially a subsistence hunt only, the hunt may be expanded later so some sports hunters can participate. This year, there were eight tags distributed randomly in a draw among interested beneficiaries 18 and older in Kuujjuaq and Tasiujaq. Only adult male muskox over three years of age were harvested in the region between Kuujjuaq and Tasiujaq.

**P**uvirnituq residents were terrified by a small earthquake that struck their community in April, creating an explosive noise that sent people running outside their homes. There were no reports of injuries or serious damage.

Four or five quakes of similar intensity strike eastern Canada each year, although scientists now say earthquakes are on the rise in some areas of the Arctic, and that some of these may be associated with global warming. The recent increase in the number of "glacial earthquakes" supports the idea that Greenland's glaciers and its ice sheet are melting.

Glacial earthquakes occur as enormous ice-sheets melt away, so that the weight on the land is removed and the ground rises. When certain areas rise faster than others, the difference causes tearing and grinding deep in the ground, triggering earthquakes.

The seismologists also found that glacial earthquakes occurred mainly in summer months, which suggests these movements are associated with rapidly melting ice. Normal earthquakes occur at all times of the year.

Nunavut and Nunavik are already among the most earthquake-prone zones in Canada. According to data gathered by the Geological Survey of Canada, the northeast coast of Baffin Island and the High Arctic islands have a particularly high incidence of earthquakes.

Over the past 80 years, nearly 2,000 earthquakes have been recorded in Nunavut. Over the past 10 years, there have been on the average

about 40 earthquakes per year in the territory.

In 1989, on Nunavik's Ungava Peninsula, a magnitude 6.3 earthquake tore open the tundra and shook up surrounding communities. The earthquake shattered stone, partially drained one lake, and created a new lake where none had previously existed. Last week's earthquake in Puvirnituq registered at 4.0.

**G**reenland needs to immediately reduce its harvest of beluga and narwhal, or the health of these populations will decline and both Greenland and Canada will suffer the consequences, an international commission says. That stern advice came from the Canada-Greenland Joint Commission on the Conservation and Management of Narwhal and Beluga, which met earlier this spring in Iqaluit.

According to researchers and international marine mammal management bodies, beluga numbers in West Greenland have been cut in half, while the narwhal population there has declined to only 25 per cent of its original size. There may be as few as 1,500 narwhal left — down from a population of about 30,000 not so long ago.

The health of the walrus population in West Greenland, which is probably shared with Canada, is also of concern, the joint management group noted in a news release on its meeting. There has been "significant improvement in the assessment of beluga and narwhal stocks" in Greenland, but the commission said more has to be done to avoid "grave implications for Greenland and Canada."

That's because the international community doesn't see any difference between the populations in the two jurisdictions, so punitive measures could affect both countries.

Two years ago, Greenland adopted its first hunting regulations for beluga and narwhal hunts, but the quota of 300 narwhal was still way above the 135 recommended by marine biologists.

Last year, the late-season slaughter of 68 narwhal in Uummannaq, which had already gone over its quota, infuriated conservationists and biologists in Greenland. The Nuuk newspaper, AG, said the fisheries department granted an additional quota to Uummannaq, although a "serious over-harvest" had taken place in the northwestern municipality.

**A** scientist with the Geological Survey of Canada plans to study how quickly the Penny Ice Cap is shrinking. The sprawling glacier, which covers 5,100 square kilometres inside Auyuittuq National Park, on Baffin Island between Pangnirtung and Qikiqtarjuaq.

Most glacier studies are done in the High Arctic, at sites such as the Devon Ice Cap. This means that in the world of glaciology, not much is known about the big hunks of ice found in the lower reaches of the Arctic, such as in the South Baffin.

Over the last few years they have studied the Grinnell glacier, about 100 kilometres south of Iqaluit, on the western shore of Frobisher Bay. At about 860 metres above the sea, it's also at a lower altitude than the Penny Ice Gap, in an area where storms off the coast cause heavy melts during the summer, and heavy snows during the winter.

A more high-tech approach was used: weather-reading instruments were stored inside a metal post that's drilled into the ice and supported by guide cables. But when researchers returned the following year, there was no sign of their gear. It had completely vanished. Eventually they spotted the edge of a metal post, poking out from the snow. The pipe had broken in high winds, and then became buried in snow.

Recent findings all point to the same dramatic shrinking found in other parts of the Arctic, he said. The greatest melting occurs at the edges of the glaciers, while the least occurs at the highest altitudes near the centre.



# Slithering down a chilly Snake



By **CLIFF JACOBSON**

**A**round midnight I awake to an icy breeze. Susie loves fresh air, and as is her habit, she has left her vestibule wide open. Chilling air pours in and I snug deep into my down sleeping bag. Minutes later, I hear the determined patter of rain. Oh no, not again! It is the fifth day of our canoe trip and it has rained every day. This time it is particularly nasty—icy and persistent, the kind that chills you to the bone. I shine my light on the large dial thermometer that hangs off our vestibule. Thirty-four degrees. Nothing new; it has been below freezing every night and in the forties during the day.

We are camped in the heart of the Bonnet Plume mountains, at an elevation of 3600 feet. Our tents are snuggled between tight, snow-capped peaks that tower a thousand feet above us. My GPS gives reluctant readings; it can barely keep the satellites in view. This section of the Snake River at our doorstep is aptly named. Barely 100 feet wide, it twists like a garden snake and pours powerfully downhill at

nearly 10 miles an hour. Eddies are as uncommon as fallen meteorites, and there are no flat spots between rapids. Getting ashore requires advance planning. And the water is low, very low. And also cold—48 degrees by my thermometer. Long ago, we gave up trying to avoid rocks. The prevailing attitude is “survival!”

Previous parties reported 40 mile days, so we planned conservatively at 22. But it is day five of our canoe trip and we are only at mile 32. We are lucky to average seven miles a day. Our crew is a 60/40 mix of experienced and inexperienced paddlers. One canoe team has had such serious problems that I split them the other day. Last night I scouted below our camp to the bend of the river. There appears to be no let up in the rapids. The map suggests that they will continue to book for miles—just like yesterday, and the day before, and the day before.

I am worried about my crew and the real possibility that we will not make Fort McPherson on time. We are currently 78 miles behind schedule, and there is no indication we can pick up time. No one has a wet suit so we dare not canoe difficult drops until the weather

improves. I don’t even want to think about a capsizing.

I try to put all this out of mind and get some sleep, hoping we can bank on the adage, “Rain before seven, dry by eleven”. I doze off into a deep sleep and a frightening dream. Around 5:30, Susie shakes me awake and says, “Hey, wow, look out there, it’s snowing!” In a flash, she’s up and out, smiling and throwing snowballs at the other tents. I peer through the bug-net. “My God, it is snow!” Real snow. And it’s coming down real good, and sticking to the ground. I peer at the thermometer—24 degrees.

I decide we are not going anywhere until the weather warms. So, I dress slowly and meander over to the giant tundra tarp, where two people are already huddled. I begin to shiver, so I return to my tent for warmer clothes. I emerge wearing wool long underwear, a wool shirt, down jacket, Gore-Tex/fleece hat and rain coat. The temperature has warmed to 29 but the wind is blowing bloody murder. Dick (Person) has a fire going and the kettle is on, so there’s no need to start the stove.



I pull Dick aside for a consultation. I see concern (fear!) in his eyes.

We agree to postpone our start till noon. Hopefully, the sun will be out by then. Besides, everyone is dog-tired and can use more rest.

By 9:30, the temperature has warmed to 36 degrees, the wind has dropped and the snow has changed to rain. There is no sign the weather will improve. I consult with Dick and the decision is made: Today, we'll just hang around, even if it means getting farther behind. Hopefully, tomorrow will bring a better day.

Attitude has deteriorated from deep concern to the edge of panic. The crew is bummed by the weather and the continuous rapids. One man fears for his life. He believes that winter has set in and that a helicopter rescue is our only out. We have nine days to canoe 308 miles to Fort McPherson. I doubt that we can average 34 miles per day.

Convinced we cannot make up lost time, the crew pressures me to use my satellite phone and call Peter Firth, a member of the Gwich'in band, who operates a river taxi service (30 foot river boat), out of Ft. McPherson. Peter will pick up paddlers anywhere on the Peel River. The first access point is 148 miles from here, at "Taco Bar"—a large gravel bar at the confluence of the Snake and Peel.

The pressure builds and reluctantly I make the call and confirm a pick-up at Taco Bar. As the phone rings off, I experience a gnawing dichotomy. On one hand, there is the satisfaction of knowing that now, we won't have to hustle. On the other, is the realization that, by making this call, we have just changed the nature of the trip. I did not have a satellite phone on previous trips. If we got behind schedule, we just hoofed it night and day to make up lost time. For example, twelve hour days were usual on our 1995 Caribou River (Manitoba) trip. Even then, we barely made our float plane. In 1998, we canoed the Tha-Anne River to Hudson Bay. Our final day began at 4 am and ended at 10:20 pm. The alternative was to miss our chartered boat to Arviat.

Yes, a satellite phone does change (spoils?) the nature of a trip. Giving up becomes an option.

Canoing the Snake River began as a dream in 2000 when my friend, Jim Mandle, suggested that Dick Person—an internationally known outdoorsman who lives in Teslin, Yukon—and I, co-lead a trip in the Yukon.

We focused first on the Bonnet Plume, but abandoned it for the Snake because the Snake looked more intimate. The Snake has been described as a downsized version of the famous Mountain River, which Bill Mason so

loved. The Snake begins high in the Mackenzie Mountains at an elevation of 4100 feet. It falls 4000 feet by the time it reaches the Peel River, 160 miles away. The average drop is 25 feet per mile. Leave your bent-shaft paddle at home. There are continuous rapids all the way!

Generally, there are just two portages. The first comes at the start, at Duo Lakes where the float plane sets you down. When the water is high, this portage—which meanders through trail-less tundra and dwarf willows—is a bit over a mile. It grows in length as the river drops. The second carry, which comes around mile 90, bypasses a marginally runnable (Class IV) canyon. It's an easy quarter mile over tundra. Everything else on the Snake is either canoeable, line-able or drag-able.

Dick turned 74 this year (shortly after our canoe trip!), and he keeps himself in marvelous shape. Still, he has a bad hip. As we approached the time of departure, he questioned his ability to pull his own weight. I told him not to worry—that our macho crew would carry his share, and that canoeing the Snake would be a grand birthday adventure. Susie was quick to say that I would be 63 in September, and was no spring chicken either.

"Maybe you guys should write up this trip for AARP, she giggled." As it turned out, she wasn't far off target. The average age of our ten person (seven men, three women) crew was 55.

Whitehorse was the gathering place for our Snake River adventure. Susie and I drove our van from River Falls, Wisconsin (ten days

on the road!). Everyone else flew in. With a population of just over 19,000, Whitehorse is the Yukon's largest town. Over half the people in the Territory live there. Whitehorse is a progressively modern western town. Coffee shops and bistro's abound, and there's a bustle and enthusiasm that's normally associated with larger cities. But go beyond the city limits and there is wilderness. Only wilderness. One hundred and fifty miles between gas stations is not uncommon.

The plan was to rent a second van in Whitehorse then drive both vehicles 250 miles to the small community of Mayo, where we would meet our charter float plane and fly to Duo Lakes. We had arranged for Sharron Chatterton (Dick's wife) and her friend, Debbie Greenwood, to shuttle the trucks (drive the Dempster highway) to Fort McPherson at the end of our trip.

First stop was Norcan Auto Leasing, where we rented a Chevy Astro van. The tab came to \$748 (for just four days)! We learned there is no such thing as "free mileage" in the Yukon—you pay for every bone-jiggling kilometre you drive. And don't you dare say you're taking your rental car on the Dempster highway!

A rainy start turned to sun by ten, and we pulled into Mayo on schedule at 2pm. I had booked our flight (and pre-paid) with Blacksheep Aviation & Cattle Company—a curious name. A tour around Mayo took just five minutes and revealed nothing in the way of float planes. There was a lake, of course, and lots of cows. I began to wonder if we'd been had.

We parked the trucks near a cow pasture



**Catching a few zzzs on the Snake.**





and I went in search of a human, who immediately said, "You can't park here!" I asked him where the float plane lands. "Right there," he said, pointing to a jiggly dock. "But you can't park here." "Yeah, yeah," I countered, and we drove down a weedy path that terminated at the lake.

Almost on the scheduled minute, a refurbished Turbo Otter landed and glided right to the dock—a perfect landing. It was the prettiest (new seats!) bush plane I have ever seen! Right then, I developed new respect for cows.

In minutes, the first flight was off and the adventure began. If you've seen the Disney film, "*Never Cry Wolf*", which was photographed in the Bonnet Plume watershed, you know how spectacular this country is. There's a part in the movie where Rosie the pilot is standing on a float, hammering away with a wrench in an effort to get his wheezing old De Havilland Beaver running again. Suddenly, the plane fires and Rosie jumps inside. He yanks back the stick and the plane soars skyward, just in time to clear the mountain by millimeters.

That was a movie of course, and we didn't expect it to mimic our flight into Duo Lakes. It's roughly 140 air miles from Mayo to Duo, and you fly over—and through—the mountains all the way. The plane sets down on the largest of the two (Duo) lakes, which is barely half-a-mile long, and sandwiched between rugged peaks that rise to 10,000 feet. The pilot must negotiate a narrow slot between two high peaks then suddenly, cut power and drop into the tiny lake below. This requires considerable skill. Susie, who is known for her calmness under trying conditions, screamed and grabbed me when the right wing tip appeared to nearly scrape the mountain. The pilot later told us we had 300 feet to spare.

The pilot's take-off from that tiny lake was quite impressive. Suddenly, I understood the need for turbo power!

Within minutes after the plane took off, it began to rain, so our first order of business was to pitch the tents and tundra tarp. After that, Jim and I turned our attention towards putting together Dick's folding (Scansport Pak) canoe. When we had finished, we turned the boat belly up and pressed down hard on its flexible skin.

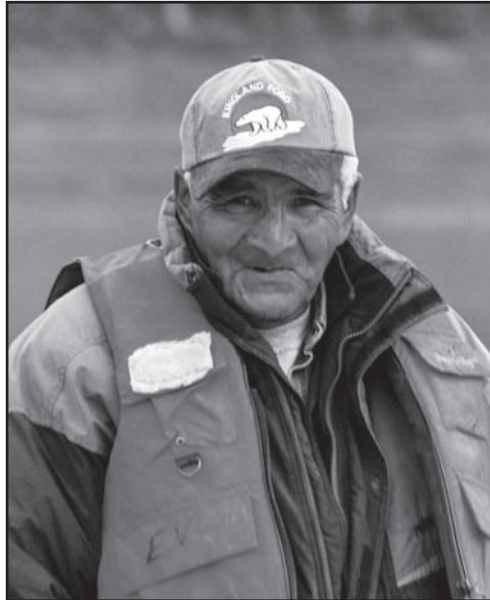
"Looks pretty wimpy," said Jim.

"Wait and see," I countered. "These boats are amazing!" Turned out, they really are. The side-bar, "Boats and Paddles," tells all.

We awoke the following morning to a clear sky and a delightfully cool portage temperature of 45 degrees. It was Sunday, August 3. Someone remarked that a "Sunny Sunday"

brought good luck. "Look at the sky—not a cloud anywhere. It's a good bet it won't rain for weeks."

Most parties complete the portage out of Duo Lakes in half a day. We needed 10 hours! But, the scenery was spectacular—described later by Jim Mandle as "Just like in the 'Sound of Music,' but no nuns to help carry the gear."



**Ernest - their boatman - well, one of them!**

A cold drizzle began around 9 pm just as we were setting up camp. It rained all night and well into the next morning. Still, we were out by ten A.M., dragging and wading our canoes down a tiny tributary which, we hoped, would eventually flow into the Snake. It was late afternoon before the "main river" appeared. Immediately, the rapids began. They never let up till we hit the Peel!

Arctic rivers usually start out slow and pick up speed as they near the ocean. The Snake, however, is quite the opposite. It rushes furiously downhill at the start, then levels off as it approaches the valley. In the upper reaches, the river flows between canyon walls that seem to touch the sky. You can see and sense the downhill slide. Ninety degree turns appear abruptly. You must understand currents, and you must know how to backferry. There is simply no space to turn and run upstream. One person remarked that he felt like he was in a slot car on a twisting race course.

Those who were able to take their eyes off the river momentarily, saw herds of white Dall sheep grazing on the mountains. We sighted many caribou along the way—all of them had

giant racks.

Susie and I were in the lead when, coming around a bend, two grizzlies on shore (a sow and cub) stood up and curiously looked our way. They were maybe 20 feet from our canoe. For a while, they watched contentedly. Then, they turned and ran.

Bugs? There were none. Okay, just a few—but far less than at our Wisconsin home. That, everyone agreed, was a highlight of this trip.

August 10 (day nine) was peppered with close calls. The first came at a long and pushy Class III drop above a low canyon. Susie and I went first and eddied in (I believe this was the only eddy on the river!) below a large boulder. I remember telling her to "hang tight—I think we're gonna lose some people here."

Charlie and Shelley followed in their Dagger Venture. No problem. They eddied in behind us and waited. Dick and Doug were next. Their Dagger Legend climbed a huge wave, then plowed and rolled. Suddenly, two men were in the icy water.

Dick abandoned the canoe immediately and swam to a gravel beach nearby. I yelled to Doug to "Let go and swim!" But, he rode the capsized canoe for about 100 yards, before he released his grip and swam ashore. Fortunately, neither man was in the water for more than a minute or two. It was a textbook perfect rescue and everyone took part: Susie and I captured the capsized canoe; Shelley, Kurt and Betsy and Mike pulled warm clothes from packs and got out lunch; and Jim and Charlie had a blazing fire going almost before Dick reached shore. Dick lost a favorite paddle, that's all. A change of clothes, hot tea, warm hugs and food, and in an hour, we were on the river again.

Susie and I were on deck for the next near disaster. Susie saw a nice caribou rack laying along the beach. It measured nearly four feet across the tines. We set it on top of our spray cover, where it rolled—and nearly twice fell into the river. Susie then demanded that we "tie it on". I explained that this was not a good idea as we were encountering frequent over-hanging trees (strainers) along the river.

"If a branch catches this rack, we're in big trouble," I warned. If you know Susie, you know that she didn't hear a word I said.

As we exit the mountains and emerge into the valley, the nature of the river begins to change. Now, pointy spruce trees poke out from every outside bend. Ferry the inside curve and you'll be slammed aground and around by the powerful current. Stay inside the bend and you'll be speared by spruce trees.





There's no down time between strainers—one oxbow bend blends to another. This is very treacherous canoeing, and I fear for my crew.

Just ahead, is a tight left turn with spruce trees spearing out from the outside wall. It's too fast to backferry so I set up well ahead for a forward ferry. I tell Susie to "point her to the (inside) wall and paddle like hell.

We almost make it. But the bow runs aground and the canoe spins around. A low, over-hanging branch barely catches a caribou tine and we spin around again. Suddenly we're on the outside bend and facing upstream. Seconds later, a wrist-thick branch snaps into the caribou rack, and we come to a dead stop.

Now, we are really in a mess. The tree is locked to the caribou rack and the caribou rack is tied to the canoe. We are facing upstream, going nowhere fast, with the current going hell-bent-for-leather all around us. What to do?

My first thought is to cut loose the caribou rack. But Susie won't hear of it. Besides, the tines are pointing straight at me. I fear they will spear me if I cut the cord. There's another strainer a canoe length below us, so sawing off the branch is no good answer. We can't go forward, back or side-ways. But, we can't sit here with the current rushing by, forever.

I tell Susie I'm thinking of capsizing the canoe. I figure that if we're upside down the canoe will clear both strainers.

"Okay, cut it loose," says Susie, in a ticked-off tone.

I look hard at those sharp tines that are pointing straight at me and pray God I won't be speared. Then, I draw my sheath knife and cut the cords.

Turns out, it's no big deal! The rack simply somersaults and slides under the branch. I cut a ferry angle as we power ahead and suddenly, we're on the inside bend and out of danger. The caribou rack? It's still there. And Susie is all smiles.

The strainers continue for the rest of the day. We camp—in the rain again—in trepidation of what lies ahead.

In the morning, we discover, much to our delight, that the strainers are gone. The rain—and the sour moodiness—returns. We are now ten days out and it has rained every day.

Finally, on the morning of the 11th day, we awake to a streaming sun. The temperature reaches 75 degrees F. We find a beautiful campsite. People go swimming. Everyone smiles. The sky is blue from horizon to horizon. And we made 35 miles—a record! We rejoice that the rain is finally behind us and the sun will shine again tomorrow.

Wrong! Day 12 and it's raining again. The sky is packed with gun-gray clouds. The rapids are gone but the determined current persists. My GPS says we're averaging eight miles an hour. We are now at mile 130 and will reach the Peel River—and our appointed pick-up place—in a few hours. But there are five days left on our canoe trip, and no one wants to sit around on a mucky campsite and wait. It's 160 miles from the Snake/Peel River junction to Fort McPherson. The consensus is to paddle the Peel down to mile 60 then take the power boat.

No one is disappointed; the final miles are all flat water, little more than a large lake. I phone Peter Firth and tell him that we have changed our plans. Peter notes the new location and tells us he'll be there.

We arrive at the appointed pick-up place (a rough gravel bar) at noon on August 16th, a full day ahead of schedule. We are well into lunch when we hear the sound of a motor. Minutes later, a 30 foot flat-bottomed boat powered by a 40 horse Honda outboard, scrapes ashore. The man introduces himself as Ernest Vittrekwa, a member of the Gwich'in band.

"They told me to come up and get some canoeists," he said. "Another boat was supposed to come too, but he didn't show."

I ask Ernest if Peter Firth sent him.

He looks at me quizzically and replies, "Peter doesn't have any boats".

Now, I'm really confused. Three days earlier I had spoken with Peter. He said, "I'll be there!" Besides, our pick-up is scheduled for tomorrow, not today. What gives?

I ask Earnest if he knows Peter.

"I know his brother," he says. And again, "Peter doesn't have any boats."

I tell Ernest I am going to call Peter and check this out. I do, but no one is home. I leave a message thanking him for sending Earnest—and saying that we are on our way out.

Vittrekwa's boat can accommodate five people and two canoes. Dick, Doug, Mike, Kurt and Betsy go out first. Charlie, Shelley, Jim, Susie and I, stay behind. Earnest tells us it's a five hour run to Fort McPherson.

"If I don't make it back tonight, I'll be here at nine tomorrow," he promises. Then he hands over a plate of freshly grilled whitefish and a stringer of just-caught ones.

Around 5pm we hear an engine—a boat is coming up the river. The boat stops at a decrepit cabin on the opposite shore and picks up a piece of plywood. Then, it slowly chugs our way.

"They told me some canoeists were up here and needed a ride to McPherson," calls a man.

I ask if Ernest sent him. I say that Earnest said he'd pick us up tonight or tomorrow morning.

"Maybe Earnest won't come back. We can take you now."

Confusion compounds. The boat is small, maybe 24 feet, and it already has a crew of three.

I say, "Thanks anyway, we'll wait for Earnest."

Ernest arrives at 9:15 the following morning. He knows nothing about the boat that came for us last night.

Our trip ends at Fort McPherson (N.W.T.), at the ferry boat crossing on the Dempster highway (the Peel River is the dividing line between the Yukon and the Northwest Territories). There is no bridge, just a mucky landing and some well-worn wooden boats. Everyone, except Dick is gone when we arrive. He tells us that a native family who lives nearby, has invited the crew to their home for tea and caribou soup. A Gwich'in woman, whose name is Winnie, said her grandfather liked canoeists because they "loved the land and treated it with respect". Before he died he made her promise that she would always "look after paddlers". She certainly did.

Our two vans arrive later that day. As we are loading up, a man walks up and introduces himself as Peter Firth.

"I thought I was supposed to pick you guys up this morning," he says.

"What? Didn't you send Ernest? Didn't you get my message?"

"Yeah, I got your message but I didn't send Earnest."

"How'd he know to come for us?"

"I dunno," shrugs Peter. "But no big deal; you guys got out okay and that's all that counts."

I tell Peter that we paid Ernest quite a bit of money and that he should probably get some of it.

"No matter," says Peter. "Just glad to see you guys got out okay."

With that, we shook hands and parted.

So how did Ernest and the other boatmen know about us?

Shelley gave us food for thought: "I think they were listening in on the radio-telephone when you called Peter," she said. "Everyone scrambles for business up here. They saw an opportunity and grabbed it."

Perhaps so. We'll never know. I figure it's just part of the mystique that comes with canoeing wild Canadian rivers.



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*photo: Jeff Traversy*

**CABIN BOY -- In August 2005, Great Bear Lake fishing guide and northern historian Jeff Traversy sits next to the fireplace in the cabin used by George Douglas and party in 1911-12 near the mouth of the Dease River in the northeast corner of Great Bear Lake. Jeff and his friends went looking for the cabin and are now searching for the remains of a nearby shelter built by John Hornby. He says he will report back on this summer's findings. Great place to have a job ... in the summer!**

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