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photo: Michael Peck

## Beverly Caribou Herd Warning

In what can only be described as truly alarming, the massive Beverly Caribou Herd appears to be in precipitous decline. We examine the issue beginning with an urgent letter from Alex Hall on Page 2. We realize that many Che-Mun subscribers are aware of this situation and we feature many of your submissions to the Nunavut government to oppose the Uraivan Mineral Garry Lake mining project on pages 4 and 5. The bull caribou above spent most of a day with us when we were camped on the Dismal Lakes in August 1991. He swam back and forth a couple of times and had a snooze in between.

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# Winter Packet

*We know this general letter from Alex Hall is now a bit dated for email submissions but felt it was an excellent synopsis of a disturbing story.*

**D**ear Canoeing Companions: I need your help. More accurately, the Barren Lands and the caribou need your help; so I'm asking you for just a few minutes of your time to send an important email on their behalf that I guarantee will make a difference.

The Beverly-Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board has just released the results of limited aerial surveys from last spring on the calving grounds of the Beverly Caribou Herd. This is the herd we encounter on our canoe trips. It's one of the four major caribou herds in the Barren Lands of the NWT and Nunavut. These calving ground surveys from last June indicate the Beverly herd has completely collapsed, the causes unknown. Caribou herds right across the Barren Lands have greatly declined in numbers, possibly the result of long term natural cycles, the reasons for which science still has no answers (the last major decline was in the 1950s).

But the numbers for the Beverly herd are catastrophic. Since it was last censused in the early 1990s (at 276,000 animals), the Beverly herd's population may have dropped by as much as an astounding 98% (as suggested by the aerial surveys conducted last June)! Another very troubling statistic gathered by these surveys was that the number of calves per 100 cows was only one-fifth of what is considered normal. Hopefully, the situation isn't quite as horrendous as the figures suggest; there's a possibility that a greatly reduced Beverly herd may have temporarily joined another large neighbouring herd to the north---the Ahiak Herd. But this is pure speculation on my part. There's no real evidence for it, as far as I'm aware.

This story was picked up on Monday, Dec. 1 by the Canadian Press, CBC, and a number of newspapers across Canada, including our national newspaper, "The Globe & Mail". The fate of the Beverly Herd is a crushing blow, but no real surprise to me because for the past three or four summers we have seen virtually no caribou on our canoe trips. For us, the Beverly herd literally disappeared off the map a long time ago.

In the past few years, while caribou numbers have been dropping, disruptive mineral exploration activity on the calving grounds and post-calving areas has risen dramatically. As of this month, for example, there are 727 active mineral tenures (permits, claims & leases) on the Beverly herd's calving grounds. The only good news in this respect is that some major mining companies like De Beers, Areva and Cameco have declared they will no longer conduct activities on the calving grounds in Nunavut (thanks to the heroic efforts of Monte Hummel of World Wildlife Fund, Canada) because they understand the implications of this activity. And at the NWT Barren-ground Caribou Summit in 2007, delegates (significantly, mostly Aboriginal delegates) voted overwhelmingly in favour of establishing their first priority as "Protect the calving grounds in the NWT and Nunavut" and directed the Government of the NWT to "Meet with Nunavut to begin discussions about the protection of calving grounds" (the calving grounds of the major caribou herds are all in Nunavut).

Now here is where I'm asking for your help. The Nunavut Impact Review Board (NIRB) is presently considering an application from Uravan Minerals for development of their uranium property right on the calving grounds of the Beverly herd just south of Garry Lake (Back River). This proposal before the NIRB will be PRECEDENT SETTING. It is essential that the NIRB send a clear signal to the mining

industry that mineral development on the calving grounds is out of the question. To do otherwise is to accept the decline of the caribou population as unimportant to people who depend on these animals, both physically and culturally. These caribou provide millions of dollars worth of meat annually to the residents and user-communities in Nunavut, NWT, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Not protecting caribou also contradicts the broad desires of Canadians to see this iconic species and its habitat protected for future generations.

While no one can state categorically that the decline in caribou numbers is a direct result of industrial activity, it can certainly be justly argued that their recovery will be rendered next to impossible if the most critical part of their habitat (the calving grounds) is taken over by industrial activity.

I am asking you to email the Nunavut Impact Review Board (NIRB) and urge them to deny Uravan Mineral's application for mineral development (of uranium) on the calving grounds of the Beverly Caribou Herd (deadline was Dec. 12). In the North there are few voices and one voice can make a difference. I have direct experience in these sorts of things. Believe me, if the NIRB receives a dozen emails (even short ones of a couple of sentences) from people like you (and tell them where you are emailing them from), they will be greatly impressed. And it CAN make a difference. Trust me. It CAN!

You may want to do the same. Thanks a million and it will make you feel GOOD!!!!

**Alex Hall, Canoe Arctic Inc.**

*Anyone wishing more info on this proposal can go to the site at <http://ftp.nirb.ca/REVIEWS> and follow the links to Garry Lake. There is a wealth of information there. See who wrote on Pages 4 and 5.*



## Editor's Notebook

In Outfit 134, we featured a story on the cutting down of Blair Fraser's 1968 bronze cross in Algonquin Park and the subsequent admission by an anonymous person claiming it was sacrilege.

With some disappointment, it appears that the perp is a *Che-Mun* reader. I thought I had laid out a good argument about the appropriateness of such markers and agreed it was a topic of interesting discussion - all the while condemning such a cowardly act.

He wrote: "Michael, You will find it upsetting that you will be forgotten, but we will all be forgotten. In 1000 years Osama Bin Laden (*sic*) will be remembered rather than so many people deemed more worthy. George Carlin, were he alive, could have fun with that thought. Who gets in-your-face-never-to-be-removed memorials in a public wilderness park? The people considered most deserving also, by their character and maturity, are exactly the kind who would NOT want such a thing to interrupt our communion with a natural setting. Park your sense of self-promotion."

I have a motto that I love. 'Sic transit gloria mundi' - Latin for 'Thus passes the glory of the world.' I have no illusions about any lasting personal glory. I have seen too much death in recent years to have any pretensions. Still, as a society, we honour the memory of those who came before us. It matters to those who knew them and others who are inspired by their deeds.

Our catiff cutter has assured himself one thing for certain. Hiding anonymously means he will not even rate as a minor footnote in the history of worthwhile achievements of our lifetimes. He and Osama can grow old together with that thought. And it will be our last one concerning him.

Michael Peake.



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# Canoesworthy

Work continues apace on the Rupert River section of the James Bay Hydro Project during a very cold winter in northern Quebec. This photos taken in early November shows the operation of the spillway (on the right) and dam across the upper Rupert River at the point where 71 per cent of its volume will be sent north to the Eastmain River and into the northern La Grande Project by a two mile long underground tunnel and series of lakes.



The dam shown is the largest on the Rupert and located 314 km from the mouth of the river. A total of eight other weirs will be spaced down the river to allow for fish to pass but creating significant change to the river flow. Predictably there will be a numerous unintended consequences. When the first project was built in the 1970s no one foresaw the release of natural mercury into the fish population caused by decaying of submerged vegetation, which in turned poisoned the Crees But this time the Crees voted for the plan.

Globalstar Canada Satellite Co. reported in December that on July 25, 2008 experienced outdoorsman Rejean Able, who was on a six week wilderness trek in Nunavik, located in the remote Ungava Peninsula of Northern Quebec, was rescued using his SPOT Satellite Messenger after a canoe accident left him stranded without supplies. As he was approaching a series of rapids, Mr. Able lost control of his canoe and capsized. Submerged with his feet caught under the seat of the canoe, he was able to free himself and swim to the embankment, but in the process lost his canoe and all of 42 his supplies. He also lost his rifle which he had taken for protection against wolf packs known to be in the area.

Mr. Able had his SPOT Satellite Messenger in his pocket which he was able to use to send a 9-1-1 emergency distress message with his GPS location. His GPS coordinates were immediately dispatched to a GEOS International Emergency Response Center who alerted the nearest Inuit Village to Mr. Able, along with his need for rescue. A surveying helicopter in the area was able to assist local authorities and airlift Mr. Able to safety.

"SPOT literally saved my life," said Rejean Able. "Without it I would be dead." Upon rescue, Mr. Able learned that the location of his accident was at least a 15 day walk in to the nearest village.

After returning to his home in the Mont Tremblant region of Quebec, Mr. Able is recovering from his injuries and the trauma associated with the accident but is thankful to be alive. "I am telling all of my friends who like to venture in the wilderness to make sure they take a SPOT Satellite Messenger with them. It is inexpensive and can save their life". Despite several attempts with Globalstar's PR firm, they were unable to give us any details as to where this exactly happened and how or get us in touch with Mr. Able. So, I guess we should believe them. Or should we?

► CANOESWORTHY continues on Page 11





*Here's a smattering of submissions opposing the Garry Lake mining project from the NIRB web site. A distinguished list of opponents sent in their thoughts.*

I was a member of the third party to descend the Back River when our four-man group completed a successful run of the entire river in 1962. A major experience was paddling through Pelly and Garry Lakes and viewing the caribou there. We had articles in *Sports Illustrated* and *The Explorers Journal*, magazine of The Explorers Club. Many paddlers followed.

I am very concerned to learn of the sharp fall-off in the size of the Beverly caribou herd. Such a decline will require careful management to bring it back, a situation incompatible with mining "development" in the area of Garry Lake. Thus, I would like to register my opposition to the application of Uravan Minerals for a uranium mining permit.

Any mine will come and then go. All of us hope the caribou will be with us forever.

Thank you for your consideration.

**John W. Lentz**

Please register my strong opposition to Uravan's plans for mineral development on the calving grounds of the Beverly caribou. And in your deliberations, please take note of the following:

- At the NWT Barren-ground Caribou Summit in 2007, delegates voted overwhelming in favour of establishing their first priority as "Protect the calving grounds in the NWT and Nunavut" and directed the GNWT to "Meet with Nunavut to begin discussions about protection of the calving grounds."

- Two weeks ago the GNWT revealed their evidence at a meeting of the BQCM that "the numbers of adult female caribou (cows) seen on the Beverly calving ground during June systematic reconnaissance surveys dropped from 5,737 in 1994 to 93 in 2008, and that very few calves were seen during the 2008 survey – only 15 calves for every 100 cows. (In comparison,

usually about 80 calves for every 100 cows are seen on the calving grounds of healthy barren-ground caribou herds near the peak of calving, as was the case with the Bathurst herd in June 2008.)"

- As reported by CP, the CBC, The Globe and Mail, and elsewhere today, "The massive Beverly herd, which roams the tundra from northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan and well into the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, once numbered about 276,000 animals. But a just-released survey suggests the number of caribou cows on the calving grounds of the massive Beverly herd have fallen by a stunning 98 per cent over the last 14 years."

- In the past few years, while caribou numbers have been dropping, disruptive mineral exploration activity on the calving ground and the adjacent post-calving aggregation areas has risen dramatically. As of this month, there are 727 active mineral tenures (permits, claims and leases) on the Beverly calving ground. This level of industrial activity is clearly not sustainable.

- Major mining companies – De Beers, Areva, and Cameco – have declared that they will no longer conduct activities on caribou calving and post-calving grounds in Nunavut, because they understand the implications of this activity.

The proposal before the NIRB at present is bound to set a precedent. It is essential that the NIRB send a clear signal to industry that mineral development on the calving and post-calving grounds is out of the question. To do otherwise is to accept the decline of the caribou population as unimportant to the people who depend on these animals, both physically and culturally – these caribou provide millions of dollars worth of meat annually to the residents of user-communities in Nunavut, NWT, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Not protecting caribou habitat also contradicts the broad desires of Canadians to see this iconic species and its habitat protected for future generations. The NIRB surely has a responsibility to do what it can to protect the caribou and caribou habitat.

While one cannot state categorically that the

decline in caribou numbers is a direct result of industrial activity, we can be absolutely sure that it does not help the caribou, and that their recovery will be rendered next to impossible if their habitat is taken over by industrial activity. NIRB should now declare that this will not be permitted to occur – the only way to do that is to deny Uravan's application.

Sincerely yours,

**James Raffan, PhD**

It has come to my attention that an important legislation is being considered that could seriously effect the precious lands of the Canadian Arctic. As a traveler of these magnificent grounds and admirer of traditional Canadian policies to protect its natural resources, I strongly urge you to deny Uravan Mineral's application for mineral development (of uranium) on the calving grounds of the Beverly Caribou Herd.

During the summer of 2007 I traveled by canoe down the Thelon River and into Garry Lake via the Morse River, which enters from the south. The views and experience I gained in this pristine area gave me a lifetime of inspiration and wonderment I would have not otherwise enjoyed. Coming from a comparatively urban setting in the United States, I have seen catastrophes that have ensued after the development of mining and other mineral abstractions ravage once peaceful lands. The natural habitat and species that inhabit the barren lands will face certain abomination if they are met by industrial imposition. Most of all, the Caribou herds, a Canadian icon, would face yet another obstacle in their quest for survival.

Please consider my humble request and think of the long-standing impacts that mineral development would have on the Beverly Caribou Herd and the barren lands as a whole; deny Uravan Mineral's application, and know that you have preserved a great treasure to be enjoyed for generations to come.

Sincerely,

**Christopher S. Sledzik**



Please convey to the Nunavut Impact Review Board (NIRB) my opposition to Uravan's proposal for uranium exploration and development on the calving grounds of the Beverly Caribou Herd in Nunavut. The NIRB is, of course, aware that on Monday, December 1, a number of newspapers across Canada, including The Globe & Mail, carried the Canadian Press story about the collapse of the Beverly herd. The Board should also be aware that some mining companies operating in the Barren Lands---De Beers, Cameco, Areva---have seen the writing on the wall and have declared they will not explore for minerals within any of the traditional calving grounds of the major caribou herds. If the NIRB accepts Uravan's proposal, it will surely invite the wrath of not only the newspapers, but that of Canadians right across the length and breadth of this land.

When George Bush attempted to give the oil companies access to the calving grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd in Alaska, he ignited one of the greatest conservation crusades his country has ever seen. And there were widespread protests from Canadians, as well, including many from northern Aboriginal Canadians who depend on the Porcupine herd for food. If the NIRB accepts Uravan's proposal, I fear the NIRB will unleash a firestorm that will quickly spread out of its control. I urge the NIRB to do the right thing and the sensible thing by saying no to Uravan.

**Alex Hall**

Please, please consider carefully what is at stake in approving the proposed uranium mine development in the calving grounds of the caribou of the Beverly herd. It is well documented that the herd is in serious decline, and such a development may constitute its death knell. A mine - of a toxic substance at that - is a short term measure that will provide at best, a few temporary jobs for local people, and will enrich a southern corporation which has no deep concern

about the local economy.

Healthy caribou herds have sustained the people of Nunavut and the North West territories, not only physically but spiritually, since time immemorial. In Biblical terms this is like selling your soul for a mess of pottage.

**Gwyneth Hoyle**

I have been following caribou calving issues in the north for the past 10 years and have watched the populations drop. It was recently brought to my attention that the population numbers of Beverly caribou are in serious trouble. I've researched the matter and in my research have asked various experts if this issue is as serious as it has been made. I have found very alarming information in many different sources that supports that the Beverly caribou population is in grave danger.

I urge you, the Nunavut Impact Review Board to protect the Beverly caribou and their habitat.

**Becky Mason**

I am writing to you from Laramie, Wyoming to add my voice to those against the development of the Uravan Mine within the calving grounds of the Beverly herd. I have grown up traveling in the northern lands of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories and consider myself incredibly lucky to have experienced the amazing land and wildlife that are so necessary to our existence as humans for both physical and cultural reasons.

Just this past summer I woke up to a herd of caribou passing right by my tent on the Dismal Lakes---it was one of the most amazing experiences I have ever had. And even though I have had the opportunity to witness the barrenlands and the wildlife they are home to, reasons for preserving the Beverly herd's calving grounds stretch way beyond myself. I am sure you are aware of the multitude of people in the north that depend on the caribou for cultural and physical sustenance. And the

caribou herds themselves are integral pieces of the northern ecosystems through connections we may not even have realized yet.

Please take my voice into account as you consider the Uravan Garry Lake Project and help protect the Beverly herd, and future herds as well as the other communities, both human and natural that depend on them.

**Emily Stirr**

Since the early 1970s, I have been a frequent visitor to the tundra area around Garry Lakes, and north of there where the Beverly herd calves. I am a solo canoeist, a writer and filmmaker that has written about the north and made two documentary films centered on this area, both films for Channel 4 in England and PBS in the States. I've seen first hand the migrations of the caribou, in huge numbers. I was disheartened to hear of the dramatic decline in the herds' numbers and equally dismayed upon hearing of the proposed development plans for the area. The tundra is a delicate membrane, and one of the last wilderness areas of its kind left in the world. The caribou are one of the lands best representatives from the land to us, the human visitors. Their calving grounds are vital to their return in numbers, to become again a thriving part of the land. I hope the developers will re-consider the proposal to develop in this area. I hope the government will be a voice for this choice.

The human family and its unbridled desire to provide for its own, at whatever cost to other living systems and animals, must stop. This is the 21st century. We know how important these eco-systems are to the health of the planet. They are what we can pass on to our children and our children's children, if we temper development. We could even create havens around places like the Garry Lakes, not only for caribou but for our own selves, if we choose. It will take vision to give up short term development for the longer gain of preservation.

**Robert Perkins**







**Rollie Johnson and friends take a break under their 26-foot North canoe enroute to the Churchill River in the summer of 1977.**

## Crane to Pelican in the Summer of '77

*Che-Mun* reader **ROLLIE JOHNSON** of Minnesota sent us this remembrance of his first big trip 32 year ago - something most of us vividly recall. It was the summer Elvis died and canoeing lived large for Rollie.

I stood on the western shore of Crane Lake, Minnesota on June 16, 1977. Our 26-foot fiberglass replica voyageur North Canoe sat fully loaded with my 8 new canoe mates bustling and scurrying about with final packing and loading. I was a naïve 17 year old, between my junior and senior years of high school.

How could I ever know what would lie ahead over the next 2 1/2 months? Little did I know that the next 1,300 miles of paddling, portaging, blazing heat, endless wind, freezing rain, bugs, thunderstorms, conflict and laughter would shape up to be the greatest adventure of my life. Nor could I ever know the long lasting effect this expedition would etch in my mind and soul.

I had signed up the previous winter after a presentation at my high school. The organization Expeditions of North America (ENA) had set up a catchy add loop in our Kellogg High School cafeteria, with brochures and an invitation to view a

longer film in the auditorium after school. The 45 minute recruiting film sparked my imagination and fed my craving for wilderness adventure. Something stirred deep within me as I viewed the film, and I knew I had to partake in this once in a lifetime opportunity.

After applying for and being accepted to be on the team, weekly training sessions began. We were taught first aid, CPR, paddling, lifesaving, route planning and of course lots of packaging of dried and dehydrated foods. All foods were placed into plastic bags, then as meals, then into barrels to be shipped off to predetermined pick up points at post offices, Indian Reservations and Hudson's Bay posts. We would re-supply every 10-16 days where we would also pick up mail and care packages.

*Expeditions of North America* was set up to take kids who had had trouble with the law, drugs or delinquency and place them with kids from "normal" homes and back grounds, mix them up and hope they would both mutually benefit from working together in the rigors of 10 weeks of wilderness travel. Our crew consisted of 2 adults who volunteered for the expedition, and 7 kids.





Our head guide was Jan Nelson, assistant guide Wayne Johnson, and Jeff LaBath, Jerry Fibeson, Mark Symchich, Mike Gerahty, Randy Larson, Jim Falkenburg and myself rounded out our nine man crew. A more diverse, motley and strange group you'd never find.

Our destination was intended to be the headwaters of the Churchill River, Lac La Loche, in northwestern Saskatchewan. Our route began at Crane Lake on the western end of the BWCA traveling up Namakan and Rainy Lakes, down the Rainy River, up and across Lake of the Woods, down the Winnipeg River, up and across Lake Winnipeg, across Cedar Lake, up the Saskatchewan River to Cumberland House to Namew Lake and the Sturgeon Weir River, to Miron Lake to Pelican Lake, to Wood Lake and then on to the Churchill River.

### Days 1-11: Crane Lake, MN to Kenora, Ontario

Namakan and Rainy Lakes tested us from the get go. Strong winds, waves and rain were to be a foretelling of much of the rest of our trip. High rolling breakers forced us to learn to paddle as a single unit paying strict attention to body position, balance and hip swiveling. The bowman would set a steady and strong rhythm, with everyone falling into cadence behind him, and the sternman would paddle and steer. A difficult task in high waves. The strong winds boldly declared from the outset, 'This trip would be tough, demanding long, hard work.'

**Journal entry day 3;** *"I got quite tired and sore today. 70 days is going to be one hell of a long time! I'm homesick already."*

After being wind bound for most of day 4, we took off around 6:30 pm and finally arrived in International Falls around 10:30pm in the dark. A unique ½ mile portage through downtown put us on the bank of the Rainy River in a small city park. What a strange sight we must have been portaging this giant canoe and packs through darkened city streets!

One of the more difficult things I began to realize, is the plain old boredom and monotony of endless hours upon hours of paddling. There was always the natural ebb and flow of conversation and silence, laughter and bickering, and of course the continual going inward to my own thoughts. Our canoe was rigged with wiring beneath the gunwales for 2 speakers and we had a portable cassette tape player that we could play books and music from. This really helped to take my focus away from the work and boredom at hand. To this day if I hear certain Joni Mitchell, John

Denver or Gordon Lightfoot songs I am immediately transported back to the sights, smells and sounds of this expedition.

Day 11 we rigged one of our red rain tarps into a makeshift sail and with a strong southerly wind we cruised down the lake! It was exhilarating to go so fast with virtually no effort. The sailing lifted our spirits and I quietly reflected on how humans have used the wind in such a way for millennia. I felt content, wind in my face soaking up gorgeous scenery as the shoreline flew by. That night we paddled into Kenora late around 9:30 and pitched camp.

### Day 12- 19: Kenora to Pine Falls -The Winnipeg River

Day 12 began with opening 2 barrels of new food & supplies. A trip to the post office gave us our first mail drop. These letters and care packages from home

proved to be a two edged sword. On one hand they really lifted my spirits, yet also made me more homesick for family and friends back home. After repacking it was time to launch onto the Winnipeg River. River is a bit of a misnomer as you rarely recognize that you're actually on a river as it is mostly composed of several huge lake systems strung together by occasional rapids and dams.

The scenery improved and we felt like we were back in "wilderness" again. Good fishing and good Canadian shield country. With long days of paddling in all kinds of weather, our group was beginning to find

its groove and trail rhythm making between 20-40 miles a day. Rain, sun, heat, cold and wind were our constant companions and would play out to influence both our daily moods and shape and mold my life long character.

Wayne our assistant guide was an intellectual and astute observer, often journaling thoughts and ideas of the day. Around the fire one evening he mentioned that he perceived me as very "stoic" and "stolid". I wasn't sure if that was compliment or put down as I had no clue what each word meant at the time. Years later, I now know what he meant and am grateful for the compliment.

Our evenings consisted of camp chores, setting up tents, gathering firewood, cooking supper, baking, doing dishes, reading, journaling, exploring, fishing and conversing around the fire or in the tent on rainy nights. Suppers were usually one pot meals of pasta, rice, or stews with a side of dehydrated vegetables and a dessert. Many nights or wind bound days we baked cakes, muffins, brownies and breads in our two aluminum Dutch ovens. A favorite was the voyageur "Bannock", a very dense fried bread that is both filling and tasty. Though we ate good, well-balanced



**Food - and birthday celebrations (above) - became favourite events for the hungry teenagers.**



meals, hunger and the desire for more food seemed to be constantly on our minds.

Every other day we would have “group time”; a time to share concerns, frustrations, deal with conflict, chart the route, make group decisions, discuss life issues or reflect on our lives back home. The petty bickering and tensions from paddling and living with 9 guys together day in and day out was inevitable and often comical. “Woods Fever” we often called it when crabbiness, irritability, fatigue and homesickness all set in at once. With several hard core smokers in the group it was amusing to watch the value of a cigarette rise the further we got from our last re-supply point. By Day 10 the arguing for those cancer sticks got intense! Luckily I was just a casual observer.

Day 19 found us portaging over three dams; Pickerel, Great Falls and Powerview then arriving in Pine Falls at the South of Lake Winnipeg, and our 2<sup>nd</sup> re-supply and mail stop. Each re-supply point found me gorging on care packages and real food from town. Most times I ended up with a bloated stomach and gut ache from eating too much! As we sorted and packed gear in a small park on the edge of town I could feel my thoughts drifting towards the ominous Lake Winnipeg.

**Journal entry Day 19:** *“Jan says Lake Winnipeg really brings out the best and worst character in people. Frustrations, anger, homesickness and fears. It’s a lake you will come to love and hate. I believe him. I’m looking forward to Lake Winnipeg with anxiety, excitement, anticipation and skepticism, I hope I will prove worthy and learn from it.”*

#### **Days 20- 39: Pine Falls to Grand Rapids, Lake Winnipeg,**

Shoving off from the park in Pine falls at 3:30 pm, with food packs bursting with 14 days of food, we silently paddled the bay leading us onto the 300 mile long, 80 mile wide Lake Winnipeg. Each man was quietly absorbing the size and immensity of the lake and wondering to himself would he have what it takes, and, would we as a group have the mettle to successfully navigate our way through this monstrous body of wind and waves.

**Journal entry Day 20:** *“Gentlemen, you are now entering one of the largest freshwater lakes in North America, and also the most dangerous.”*

His words spoke to us on a visceral, primal level further elevating our already heightened anxiety and tension. Our huge canoe now felt dwarfed by this inland ocean. Its length and breadth combined with relatively shallow waters can create huge and dangerous waves. The term “wind bound” would come to be almost a daily occurrence for us on Winnipeg when we were forced to make or stay in

camp due to high wind and wave conditions. In fact of our 20 days on “Winni,” only one were we allowed to travel for a complete full day.

For most of our trip, and especially on Winnipeg where there were no portages we would paddle for 50 minutes then pause for a “peep” break or pipe break as the voyageurs had done. A brief respite from paddling, wolf down a candy bar or pop in a hard candy, then fall back into the endless rhythm of the

paddle once again. On days when we had a nice tail wind we could really cruise and make up for lost time. On the many days of head winds, it was just plain hard work.

I found early on in the trip that I much preferred the bow position, and when Jan let me, to stern in the rear. Sterning was a great rush, a high honor to be in command of the boats course, and it was a hell of a work out. I especially enjoyed being in front with nothing to block my view but our flag and the bow of the canoe. To feel the wind on my face and soak up the enormous panoramas that continuously unfolded before us, I felt alone with my thoughts. On most days the wind drowned out chatter behind me and I was free to embrace the solitude and quiet of wilderness contemplation.

Most days after a 3-5 hour paddle we’d head for shore and get out the lunch pack. Trail lunch was the same, day after day after day: three rye crisps, peanut butter, honey raisins, tuna, or salami and cheese, bug juice (kool aid), and a planters peanut bar. It definitely lacked for variety, but when you are ravenous from hard paddling it always hit the spot.

On day 26 we passed through the “narrows” where Winnipeg pinches down to about 3 miles wide. If the wind is pushing hard from the north or south it can actually create standing waves and difficult current like on a river. If we swamped here we’d be in for one long drift! We waited until the calm of early evening then shot the traverse and passed through without incident.

“Shooting a traverse” is a term we used especially on Winnipeg. The big lake is filled with numerous long and wide bays sometimes 5-8 miles across the mouth. Rather than waste time and energy following the arc of the bay we would shoot across or traverse the mouth. First we’d rest a bit just out from shore then begin paddling at a better than average pace for 20-30 minutes, then we would really lay into it for another 15-20 minutes, then back off for the final 20-30 minutes of harder than average paddling until we reached the safety of the other shore.

On a couple of occasions the wind picked up dramatically and as we got further out into the bay our canoe began “surfing”. The huge waves were actually picking up the back end of the boat and we’d slide down the wave. It was exhilarating and fast, but quite scary when the waves began breaking in over the gunwales.



**Author Rollie Johnson enroute to the Churchill country 32 summers ago.**





**Journal entry Day 32:** *“After paddling a couple hours in the early morning we stopped for breakfast. We also laid out all the remaining food. I think we were all in a state of shock as we stood and stared at how little was left. Enough for only 4 days and we still have to make 140 miles which we could make fairly easily if the weather would cooperate. But on this damn lake- forget it! An appropriate phrase struck me as I looked over our dwindling food supply. “Give us this day our daily bread”.*

Day 35 found us wind bound all day. We had already begun to ration meals and had just eaten a skimpy supper. Jan announced that we should break camp and at sunset we’d start off for a full night paddle to make up for lost time. So at 9:30pm we apprehensively loaded the canoe and shoved off in the growing darkness. My emotions were mixed. On the one hand excited and thrilled to be trying something new, yet nervous and anxious in the eerie gloom of the night.

The night was clear but moonless and we kept a good mile of distance between us and the shore to avoid rocks.

The northern sky shone in all its glory of stars and the ghostly Milky Way. Around 1:30am the north lights showed up and put on a phenomenal light show that was magnified by the huge reflecting pool of Lake Winnipeg. The whole evening took on a surreal atmosphere in the complete darkness, with nothing to gauge your bearings, speed or progress but the vague darkened silhouette of the shorelines tree tops. Only the dipping of paddles, the gentle breeze and splash of wave meeting canoe were heard throughout most of the night.

Three weeks of living and paddling on Lake Winnipeg had taken a toll on me yet, left an indelible impression on my mind and spirit. Its grand expansiveness, brilliant golden sunsets and sunrises, pounding thunderstorms, endless sand beaches, pebbled terraces, and rocky shorelines are permanently etched deep within my psyche. And the wind; that ever present wind, that infernal inescapable wind will for me, always be intertwined with the name Lake Winnipeg. They say that wilderness travel both reveals character and also builds character. Never was that more true than for us on Winnipeg.

The great lake is a wise teacher and firm task master for those who are willing to pay the price. Arrogance and pride are quickly squashed into humility and meekness. Patience, persistence and perseverance were the required subjects in the School of Lake Winnipeg. Another frustrating 4 days of wind delays, starts and stops, and we finally glided into Grand Rapids relieved and famished.

#### **Days 40 – 52: Grand Rapids to Cumberland House, Cedar Lake/ North Saskatchewan River**

Just outside of Grand Rapids, the Manitoba Hydro Dam blocks the natural flow of the North Saskatchewan River flowing out of Cedar Lake into Lake Winnipeg. Cedar Lake long ago lost its original God-given shape and shoreline to this overflowing man-made reservoir. Dead, bare trees clot the shoreline and stick up throughout the lake, and all throughout the lake we paddled over former forests which gave the whole lake a bit of a creepy, macabre aura. In addition to the strange sentiment I felt here, it’s also a difficult lake to navigate as so much of the actual shoreline is hidden by dead trees, and hard to justify locations with the map. Wind continued to hamper our progress with many days spent wind bound putting us further and further behind schedule.

The most difficult part of the lake though was finding the actual entrance to

the Saskatchewan River. The northwest corner of the lake is a huge maze of grassy, reed choked marshes causing extremely limited visibility, and no distinct landmarks. We made slow progress here, mostly feeling our way as we went. We began to watch for natural clues which we found mostly under the water where the current pushes water grasses. We slowly made our way upstream through the labyrinth and miraculously arrived onto the mighty North Saskatchewan River.

The Saskatchewan’s trademark became the mud. Muddy shores, swampy and watery brush dominated the scenery with hardly any of the pines or rocks we’d come to love from the Canadian Shield. Day 47 landed us in The Pas, and another 5 days of hard paddling against the current brought us to the famous Cumberland House, the first inland trading post of the Hudson’s Bay Company. Sometimes called the “crossroads of the continent” Alexander Mackenzie passed through here on his epic journey of exploration some 200 years earlier. Voyageurs passing through Cumberland House could travel west to the Rocky Mountains or east to Hudson Bay, or south and east to Montreal and Quebec. A much welcomed re-supply of food and mail awaited us at the post.

#### **Days 53- 70: Cumberland House to Pelican Narrows**

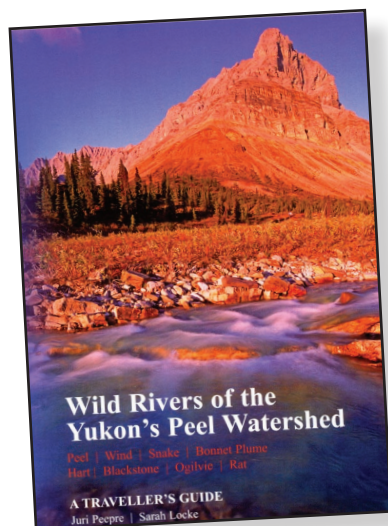
At Cumberland House our group met with some serious decisions to make. Because of so many wind bound days on the big lakes we had fallen desperately behind schedule. Our intended destination of Lac La Loche appeared quite out of reach with only 2 ½ weeks remaining. We felt the Churchill River System was well within our grasp, but the tricky part became choosing a pick up point with road access. Most of the Churchill was still in pristine wilderness with very limited road access.

We paddled on at a relaxed pace and made Pelican Narrows our last re-supply point with one week remaining. We left the village with more food than ever and headed several miles in the direction of Frog Portage and the Churchill River. Our group then voted to stay in the area and finish out the trip fishing, relaxing and doing solos for the last week. I voted for this exact scenario, and over the years have come to regret not pushing on with gusto and determination to make and experience the Churchill River. Hind sight is always 20/20.

On our final day, we quietly paddled in to shore to be picked up by our van at Pelican Narrows. Indian greeters announced the big news of the week; Elvis had died. What a strange way to end our trip, and bizarre place to think of “the King.”

A strong mixture of emotions ran through my heart and head. The joyous elation of being done and realization that I did not have to paddle anymore, and the melancholy of finality and leaving the vast Canadian north. The long van ride home, was followed by a joyous reunion with families and friends upon our return to Minneapolis. For several nights I tried to sleep in my bed, but soon found myself dragging my sleeping bag out to the yard and dozing off on the more familiar terra firma as I had done for the last 70 days.

I now sit more than 30 years removed from this trip, yet rarely a day goes by when my mind doesn’t wander back to the great Canadian wilderness of the north. The sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feel for the wind, the rain, the storms, the rocks, the light, the water and the forest are imbedded in my soul. There is still inside of me a deep yearning to return to the landscapes of this trip and to press on into new territories that I have yet to know.



## Wild Rivers of the Yukon's Peel Watershed

By Juri Peepre and Sarah Locke  
212 pp. 2008

\$24.95 ISBN: 978-0-9810021-0-1

This specialty publication deals with a very small but spectacular area of northern paddling encompassing eight northern rivers in the Peel River system in northern Yukon.

Authors Peepre and Locke are experts on the Yukon having produced the beautiful *Three Rivers* book a few years back. And their new effort shows their expertise in this densely illustrated and superbly researched effort set in the beautiful mountain rivers of the region.

Using a strong Gwitch'in and European historical base, the pair cover the main rivers which, beside the Peel, include the Wind, Bonnet Plume, Ogilvie, Snake, Hart and Blackstone rivers.

What makes this book shine is the great work done on the history of the region and the numerous accompanying maps and historical photos all reproduced in excellent black and white. The HACC is proudly represented with a pair of shots of our ascent of the Rat River which is also covered.

This is a book for historically-based canoeists written by historically-based canoeists. Each river trip is well explained - both past and present with lots of photos and maps and referenced for logistical help. They have recently expanded their website which can be found at [www.yukonwildrivers.ca](http://www.yukonwildrivers.ca).

Even if you're not planning a trip to the upper Yukon - a short while spent with this book might convince you to!

## Race to the Polar Sea

By Ken McGoogan

HarperCollins 381 pp. 2008

\$34.95 ISBN: 978-0-00-200776-4

Author Ken McGoogan continues to mine Canada's rich vein of relatively little known figures of northern exploration. He

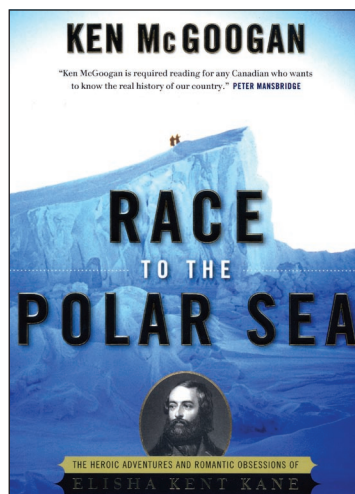
is becoming the new Pierre Berton, taking that mantle from one of the great popularizers of Canadian history by bringing it to life.

McGoogan's unique strength is historical dialogue - breathing life into history by having the characters speak as in a novel. Not the stuff for historical purists, and it must be done with the most delicate touch but movies have been doing it for 80 years.

This time, after taking on Samuel Hearne, John Rae and Lady Franklin, McGoogan turns his sights to one of the lesser-known characters - and an American at that - Elisha Kent Kane - who joined in that monumental search for Capt. John Franklin. It was his ship in 1850 that found the now-famous graves on Beechey Island left behind by the doomed Franklin expedition.

The choice of the Philadelphia-born Kane was a natural one for McGoogan. He was the most literate of all northern explorers of the time and also respected the "Esquimaux" and forged an alliance with them that is still remembered today. McGoogan discovered that a friend had a trove of Kane memorabilia including three large handwritten Arctic journals. In those nearly 800 pages of handwritten history, McGoogan discovered "what I believe to be the most important primary material to surface in the field of Kane studies for 150 years."

And he makes the case that Kane is the most neglected of northern travelers but, critically, the one most relevant to the 21st century.



McGoogan works his magic again here. With a very readable unrolling of all the historical info. He uses less spoken narrative in this book than previous ones for whatever reason. Like Pierre Berton, his training was as a journalist and it always shows in his logical assembly of facts - with a high regard for reader enjoyment.

Kane led a most fascinating life with adventures around the globe. While his Arctic trips are not widely known, he was famed for a very dramatic escape from western Greenland where they had been trapped by ice. They'd survived by working with the local Inuit to whom he left many tools and gifts in return for their life-saving assistance.

We are a much weaker race these days. Kane's incredible travails are vividly described by McGoogan as they laboured mightily in a strange and hostile world but ultimately triumphed. We await the next historical unveiling by Mr. McGoogan. Fortunately there is still a wealth of terrific tales to be told.

## How Peary Reached the Pole

Edited by Susan Kaplan, Genevieve LeMoine and Anne Witty

McGill-Queens University Press \$39.95  
ISBN: 978-0-77-35334-506

The story of Robert Peary being the first person to the North Pole is a staple of American exploration. His assistant, Donald MacMillan wrote this many years after the fact, in 1934 and this expanded edition marks its first appearance since.

Robert Peary was a natural successor to the above Elisha Kane and continued an American push northward into the 20th century. Peary's 1908-09 expedition was a media sensation and many books were written about it. There remained doubt whether Peary actually ever did reach the Pole for a century but a 2005 re-creation of Peary's route did it in exactly the same amount of time - actually five hours faster - and seemingly proved Peary right.

MacMillan's voice, an insider's view of a time now gone, are a most valuable addition especially when combined with a learned introduction, so many years hence.





## CANOESWORTHY *continued*

Exploration companies - which have spent millions of dollars probing the James Bay region in recent years, discovering minerals with multibillion-dollar potential - and the Quebec government have come to view the territory as a promised land ripe for development. But development requires the co-operation, if not the blessing, of the natives. During a special presentation last fall, Matthew Mukash, grand chief of the Grand Council of the Crees, dictated the Cree's bottom line.

"We want the employment and business opportunities (that resource development offers), and we are determined to do what it takes to ensure these potential (mines and mining infrastructures) are developed with our committee's interests front and centre," Mukash told several hundred people.

Reaching an agreement between miners and Cree isn't fast or easy, delegates were told. For example, for two days a month over the past 18 months, Goldcorp Inc. officials have been meeting with representatives of the Cree community of Wemindji and the Grand Council - along with lawyers for all parties - in an attempt to work out an understanding concerning the impending development of a gold mine.

The target date for completion of the "collaboration agreement" is March, Goldcorp executive Claude Lemasson said. After that, the company will release its environmental and social impact assessment, which could lead to a mine permit.

A key challenge for the group is to find common ground between the community's vision of the mine and the company's, Wemindji Chief Rodney Mark said. Almost 60 per cent of the \$430 million spent in 2007 on mineral exploration in Quebec last year was spent in northern Quebec.

Not only is James Bay poised to be a major mining camp, "it is the future of our industry," one miner said. "The area has proven to be rich in gold, iron ore, uranium, diamonds and an array of base metals, the discovered value of the known deposits is pegged at more than \$10 billion." Mines that open there have access to the cheapest hydro-electricity in the world, he said. There are roads, eight airports, 10 villages and a range of services.

A remote Arctic community that held a feast in December to mark the end of a hunt in which more than 500 narwhal trapped by ice were culled were dismayed by protests from southern activists, some of whom have compared the hunters to war criminals.

"It's sad to know that there are still people out there like that," said Terry Audla, head of the Qikiqtani Inuit Association in Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut.

Hunters from the community of Pond Inlet, Nunavut, killed about 560 narwhal that became trapped as they migrated through a strait between the hamlet and Bylot Island. Ice formed both in front and behind the small whales and prevented them from surfacing.

Hunters following polar bears discovered hundreds of trapped whales. Breathing holes gradually froze over and hunger began to take its toll. The nearest icebreaker was more than a week away, so territorial and federal officials decided the most humane solution was to harvest the animals for food. The skin, an Inuit staple, has been shared throughout Nunavut and arctic Quebec.

"Hearts as dark as the foul breath of demons from the bottomless pit of hell

have prevailed," posted Paul Watson of the Sea Shepherd Society, which has often taken direct and controversial action against whale hunting.

On his website, Watson rails against "ruthless Inuit killers" who "laughed barbarously" as they shot the narwhals.

Graham White is a University of Toronto political scientist who studies the Arctic. He said the debate highlights the cultural gap between northerners and southerners.

"People in the mainstream environmental movement do appreciate the cultures of the North," he said. "There are people whose horizons don't go beyond downtown Toronto." White said he was "beyond appalled" by Watson's remarks. "His comments were little short of wanting to bulldoze a culture out of existence."

Members at the federal government's January polar bear roundtable in Winnipeg expressed a variety of views on the controversial and popular topic. At issue was the health of Canada's 13 polar bear populations. On one side, researchers told federal Environment Minister Jim Prentice that the bears could be virtually extinct in a century. On the other, Inuit leaders spoke of bear populations doubling over the past 50 years, proliferating to the point of becoming a pest in many northern communities.

"Forty or 50 years ago, our camping areas were not invaded by these animals," said Gabriel Nirlungayuk, director of Wildlife for Nunavut Tunngavik. "The current population is stable. It is not constructive to exaggerate that situation."

The disagreement points to the many complications involved in diagnosing what - if anything - ails a species whose habitat lies at the intersection of several pressing national debates: northern resource exploitation, Inuit rights and global climate change.

That difficulty was not lost on Mr. Prentice. "There is a certain dichotomy in the views that we've heard," he said. "In some cases, the scientific information points to sub-populations of polar bears that are at risk. Certainly the Inuit knowledge is quite contrary to that."

During a morning closed session, Inuit leaders defended their right to hunt and manage the more than 15,000 polar bears - two-thirds of the world total - roaming Northern Canada, and, according to those in attendance, accused researchers and environmental groups of interference.

Scientists tried to allay Inuit concerns, stressing that any talk of hunting only hijacked focus from more pressing matters, namely the warming Arctic climate. Most in attendance agreed on two main issues: a need to mesh Inuit knowledge with scientific research and acknowledgment that climate change is the polar bear's No. 1 threat because it is shrinking the seasonal ice cover that comprises the animal's winter feeding grounds.

Researchers emphasized that while bear populations appear healthy now, seasonal ice is breaking up earlier with each passing decade, reducing the time bears have to pack on weight for spring and summer fasting. Current projections state that two-thirds of the world's polar bears could disappear by 2050.



**A ROSE AMONGST THE THISTLES --** Members of the Hide-Away Canoe Club received a huge class upgrade when allowed the privilege to dine with delightful author Gwyneth Hoyle at last fall's Beaver Club Dinner in aid of the Canadian Canoe Museum. From left; Andrew Macdonald (Guide), Peter Brewster (Piscine Director & Squire) David Andrew Peake (Quartermaster, Ret'd), Michael Peake (Gov), Tom Stevens, (Fancy Boy), and Rev. Canon Peter Scott (Director of Pastoral Operations).

Photo: Michael Cullen

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