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NASTAWGAN

The Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association

FALL 2021

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Fall 2021 Vol. 48 No. 3 Journal of the Wilderness Canoe Association

Hiking on an esker, overlooking the lower Elk River.

Discovering Alex Hall's Secret and Favourite River

Lorne Fitch, P. Biol.

We are told the scientific explanation for Northern Lights involves the collisions between electrically charged particles from the sun entering the Earth's atmosphere. But when you emerge from your night-time tent, to be overwhelmed by suspended sheets and swells of yellows and greens swaying and dancing in semi-transparent rivers around the horizon, the objective explanation of charged particles doesn't register. Add in the benevolently watchful constellations of Cassiopeia, Andromeda and Perseus blazing directly above and it seems we are poised between heaven and earth. Like a conductor, we wave our arms thinking the symphony of colour across the sky can be directed. It is almost enough to make my wife Cheryl and me forgetful of the initial pressing reason for leaving a warm sleeping bag.

This is a phenomenon Alex Hall experienced many times over nearly half a century in his intimate association with the Canadian subarctic tundra, known as the "Barrens". Unfortunately, we never got a chance to hear this from Alex and explore a treasure trove of memories. He was a wildlife biologist with a Master's degree in wolf ecology. But it was exposure to the Arctic that began a lifelong love affair with the Barren Lands and helping others experi-

Twin Otter taking off.

ence and appreciate them through guided wilderness canoe trips.

Our first attempt to travel with him was stymied since he was already booked for the season. Alex took ill and died of cancer the following year. In year three we booked with his protégé Dan Wong only to have Covid slam the Northwest Territories borders shut to outsiders. Fourth time lucky we travel on Alex's secret (and mysterious) river with Dan and Evan of Jackpine Paddle, a guiding company based in Yellowknife. Dan, the owner of Jackpine Paddle is in his mid 30s, dark haired and of medium height with a spare frame. He initially comes across as solemnly serious but that erodes as we get to know each other. It's obvious he is a masterful organizer, an adept canoeist and an experienced paddling guide, qualities that put many of our fears to bed. As we learn, Dan is also socially and environmentally con-

Assembling Ally canoes at first camp.

Jackpine Paddle guests hike across a sandy esker.

Lorne Fitch looks out to the clear waters of the Elk River watershed.

scious, with experience working for the Territorial government (on public health and climate change), a former city councillor for Yellowknife and someone who at age 18 ran for the Territorial legislature. If I had to describe him in a couple of words it would be quietly impressive.

Evan is in his early 20s, tall, with a perpetual smile. He is endlessly cheerful, even when cooking over a smoky fire in the rain. A soon-to-be graduate in environmental science, he has learned his lessons well and is a font of information on plants and animals of the Barrens. Dan and Evan kibbitz back and forth, questioning each other in a good natured, teasing manner. But it is also clear they are a team committed to our safety, comfort and maximizing our experience in the Barrens.

Alex defended the secrecy of many of his favorite rivers. An excerpt from a trip information package from his early days reads like a classified document:

"This canoe route is being divulged to you under the strictest confidence. The upper Taltson and Elks Rivers are largely unknown as canoe routes and I'd like to keep them that way. We've never seen anyone else on either river and if my clients keep the names of these rivers a secret there is probably little reason why this absence of people can't continue. Complete isolation and wilderness in its wildest, most pristine state are key ingredients of my trips and can only be maintained in the absence of people. …I trust you will honour my request and keep the names of these rivers a secret."

Someone must have snitched and now Alex's secret river is known, but still hardly paddled. That's what attracted us to the Elk River, to share the reverence Alex had for this place in the Barrens. The river is badly misnamed since the northern extent of any elk herd is more than 500 km to the south. Perhaps the current name resulted from some garbled interpretation of an aboriginal word for caribou. In the spirit of correctness and connection, let's call it Alex's River.

Alex paddled his river over 40 times and bequeathed a legacy of maps, camp sites, rapid locations, portages and wildlife sightings to Dan. Based on our travels with Dan I think Alex should rest easy as his favourite river is in good hands.

Alex's River will remain a destination for only the truly committed. Jackpine Paddle advertises it as one of the most remote tundra rivers in Canada. This is no mere promotional boast. Getting there is a seriously long flight and a costly one (but ultimately, worth it).

We fly east from Yellowknife, over Great Slave Lake and far beyond in a Twin Otter on floats. A long journey, but one that provides a perspective that our planet might have been named "Aqua", not Earth. There seemed to be more water than land. The lakes we fly over are uncounted and mostly unnamed.

Continental glaciation scoured this

land, and the ice has retreated only recently, as Earth time goes. Massive ice sheets, now melted, have left bare the old Precambrian bones of the Earth, etching it with grooves and gouges. Low growing vegetation ekes out an existence in shallow soils collected between bedrock and water. We fly north of the treeline where trees only have a tenuous toehold in sheltered valleys, beside rivers.

Towards Alex's River more signs of glaciation become evident. It is a refresher course in the landforms built by glaciers. The ice sheets were like great excavators and conveyor belts. Anything carried on the belts was dumped off when ice sheets slowed forming irregular, rubbly heaps called moraines. Boulders up to the size of pickup trucks were gouged out of bedrock, carried along in the ice flow and then unceremoniously dropped, helter-skelter across the landscape when the ice melted. These boulders, mostly of granite, are coated in

The group camps at one of Alex Hall's "premium" A+ campsites along a rapid on the Elk River.

Camping along a spectacular esker snaking across the barrenlands and along Damant Lake.

Jackpine Paddle guests and guides find a line down a rapid on the Elk River.

centuries of multi-colored lichen growth.

The most striking features are eskers, pointed out by Evan from the air. These are long, sinuous ridges of sands and gravels that wind their way through the flat landscape. Rising sometimes over 50 meters above the terrain, eskers are the remnants of long dried-up glacial rivers that flowed through tunnels at the base of ice flows. Ice formed the sides and roof of the tunnels and the melt flows carried the lighter sands and gravels. Their loads were deposited on the ice-tunnel bed. As glaciers receded and the surrounding ice melted these former river beds became tall ridges, snaking their way through the Barrens.

The plane touches down in a sheltered bay, bordered by an esker. A steep walk to the top reveals to us that eskers provide pathways for wildlife (tracks of grizzlies, muskoxen and caribou), offer scenic vantage points and are high

Enos Evans and Robert Atkinson navigate a riffle along the Elk River.

enough to catch a breeze which briefly defeats abundant biting insects. "We have to pay the land to enjoy it" rationalizes Evan for the depredations of blackflies and mosquitoes. Beyond refuges from insects, eskers contribute to sand beaches on lake shorelines reminiscent of tropical paradises. In our two-week trip we cross multiple eskers, camp near many and use them for extensive, exploratory hikes.

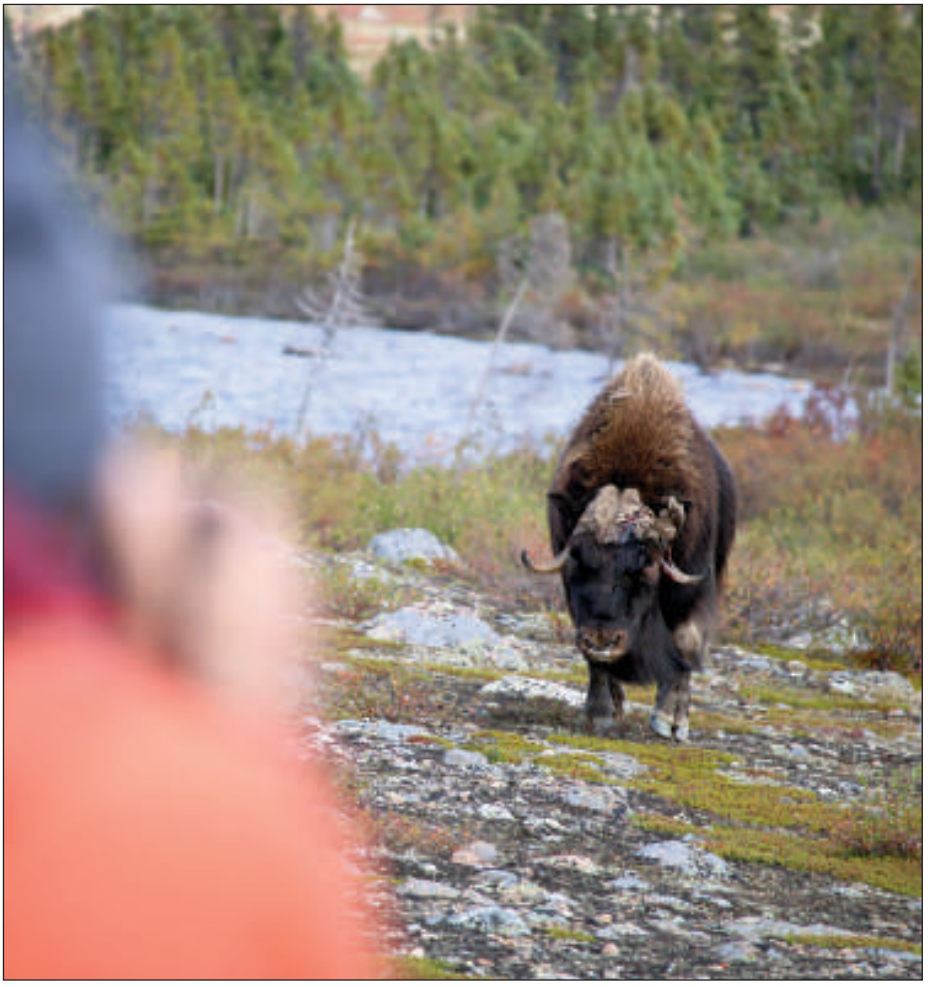
Our first group task (maybe a team-building one) is to assemble our folding canoes, or as Dan puts it, "boat in a bag". These Norwegian Ally canoes have a tough but flexible PVC exterior, a closed-cell foam floor and are internally framed with a structure of jointed aluminum poles and ribs. The tools for assembly include a mallet with a rubber head and a variety of expressive and unrepeatable phrases. For remote locations like Alex's River, where the cost of freighting conventional canoes would be prohibitively expensive, these are a welcome adaptation.

Alex's River is a series of lakes connected by bedrock chutes, boulder rapids and shallow runs. Most of the rapids are runnable, but two required portaging. At the portages the lesson is that in addition to there being no free lunch, there is no light one either. The rest of the fast water is paddled through, albeit with some challenges.

On a boulder-infested rapid, Cheryl and I follow Dan, but cannot keep to his line of descent. A boulder hangs us up, from which we are able to wriggle free. That swings the canoe perpendicular to the current and threatens to send us down the rapid backward. With mighty strokes we get to shallow water, jump out and reorient the canoe. At the bottom of the rapid it isn't clear if the water in the canoe was from the river, a result of cold sweat, or a warmer liquid!

Granite Falls, near the confluence with the Thelon River is an impressive series of white-water rapids and plunges. Our trip ends before the river carves this rapid descent to the Thelon.

A normal river has a defined channel and discernible flow that even the most unaccomplished neophyte can follow. Alex's River, by contrast, is mostly made up of lakes with convoluted shorelines, islands, sweeping peninsulas and multi-



Lorne Fitch takes a photo as a male muskox approaches.

Dan and Evan running a rapid.

Dan's breakfast offering.

ple dead-end bays. Navigating a route through this maze to find the outlet of each is a challenge. Yet, Dan never lost the way, turned correctly every time and found hidden outlets that were invisible to us until the last moment.

Ours is an early autumn voyage so we are treated to a kaleidoscope of vivid color. The bearberry has turned a deep red, almost burgundy. Dwarf birch has hues of oranges, yellows and light reds. Contrasting the deep greens of the white and black spruce are the golden yellows of the autumn tamarack (the conifer that sheds its needles in the fall). The leaves of small cranberry and bog Labrador tea are evergreen, a deep, emerald green, arrayed against the stark white of reindeer lichen. The palate of color combinations seems artistically perfect. Plants of the Barrens do not have the stature of the hardwood forests of eastern Canada but in their own diminutive way are as colourful in the fall.

What isn't diminutive are the illimitable skies meeting the ancient bones of the earth, with horizons stretching to the curvature of the globe. It is the land of long looks – long, long looks. The scale humbles us.

What also brings us back to earth are the long lake passages. In this place you are left with contradictory feelings about the wind. On one part it is a spirited zephyr that keeps the bugs at bay. In another it turns what could be an easy and pleasurable flat water experience into unnerving swells and waves that require hours of putting your back into constant paddling to make progress. We soon learn a new respect for the term sweat equity as an essential for achieving a wilderness paddling experience.

Every campsite is a combination of utility (flatness for tenting) and beauty (stunning viewscapes). Each produces its own memories. Two of our camps are near caribou ambush points, a narrowing of the river where the animals would cross. Each has large boulders where one can imagine hunters crouching, waiting for animals. The ground is littered in shards of quartzite from the making of stone tools, presumably as hunters waited for caribou. Scrapers, spear points and arrowheads lie where they were discarded or lost, each covered with a patina of lichen indicating the antiquity of the site. We consider the stone tools and marvel at a culture that was able to sustain itself in these harsh and unforgiving lands.

Many of us jumpstart our day with Evan's authoritative coffee, perked until it had to be coaxed out of the pot. It is strong enough to carry a canoe by itself and fuels us through challenges, surprises and rewards. Our guides planned ahead to ensure our dietary fiber needs are met at breakfast (they can do little for our moral fiber ones) as well as essential calories for the day.

When the going gets tough, the tough eat a good meal, and we do. Dan and Evan spoil us with an array of scratch-built, home-style meals. Dutch-oven delights, fresh fish (lake trout) and salads — all filling, sumptuous and innovatively prepared. Then there are the desserts, notably the bear poop cake, a combination of a dark chocolate-fudge layer, with a lighter milk-chocolate layer

forming a dome in the middle and sprinkled with fresh picked cranberries. Fortunately the effort of paddling was roughly proportional to our food intake and a semblance of balance was maintained between intake and expenditure of calories.

Perhaps food is the place where Jackpine Paddle and Alex Hall's operation diverge. My sister-in-law, Anne was on an earlier Thelon River trip with Alex. She recounts the breakfast and dinner meals were "spartan, utilitarian and somewhat forgettable; fuel rather than a sumptuous repast". But lunch, by comparison, was the not-to-be-missed event. Several varieties of canned fish (including sardines) and canned meats (notably Vienna sausages) were served with Wasa crackers (dismissed by some as glorified cardboard) and supplemented by chocolate bars and orange Tang. In his memory, Dan and Evan stage an Alex shore lunch one day.

What is gained in autumn colours is sacrificed in the opportunity to see the abundant bird life of the Barrens, the go-to place for nesting and rearing of so many species. Most have already migrated, yet we still see 21 species. Three species of loons — common, Pacific and red-throated — serenade us with their eerie, sometimes haunting calls. Large skeins of Canada geese pass over us, southward bound. As we move north, one of our fellow paddlers, Robert, muses we might observe and take a lesson from the geese.

We are alert for other wildlife, and the sharp eyes of Dan and Evan locate two wolves. One parallels us on shore at a respectful distance, curious perhaps and howls in that spine-tingling, signature sound of wilderness. Howling back elicits a quizzical response.

What initially looks like more boulders, turns out to be muskoxen. Landing on a sandy shore, the stalk begins, with us crouched at first, then crawling slowly, using the scant cover of dwarf birch until only 100 meters separate us from the herd. It feels as if the tactics of our ancestral hunter pasts are being recreated. In our present incarnation we take only pictures and fling no stone spears and arrows. We repeat this with another herd, getting even closer and perfecting our ancestor's hunting method.

Cheryl and Dan making a birthday cake.

Jackpine Paddle guide Dan Wong enjoys a beautiful evening at camp on the Elk River.

The fall rut is on and the bulls make a low, rumbling, roar-like bellow.

These ice-age survivors are stocky and compact with a long, black outer coat resembling a sombre muumuu. They are admirably equipped for Arctic winters with an inner wool layer – *quiviut* – pieces of which we find ensnared on shrubs. Horns curve downward toward the face, then out and up to slender tips. The base of the horn for males extends to meet as a solid "boss" of thick horn and bone.

At a subsequent camp yet another herd of muskox appears on the near horizon. I position myself in front of a large boulder as two males, likely the herd bull and a pretender to the throne parade in front of me. The bellows sound ominous and aggressive. As the herd bull walks up the ridge towards me, I notice one side of his horn boss is shattered and the horn split at the base. With the bull at 20 meters and advancing, Dan suggests I retreat. During the rut, charging and head butting is the ultimate contest to assert dominance between muskox bulls. The injury this bull sustained shows the extreme force exerted in that contact. Clashes over sex can have grave consequences.

One evening, the high clouds lie in waves, almost to the horizon. The sun makes its usual blinding ball of descending fire, disappearing and reappearing as it ducks behind the lines of cloud. At the last space between cloud and land there comes a glory of diffuse, rich light spilling across the vastness of the Barrens. Every shrub and boulder is lit with brilliance and a staircase of light forms across the lake. A bright wedge of orange then flares under the first cloud layer. Each cloud layer shades to a progressively paler orange, fading to a luminescent coral. Suddenly all the color is gone and the clouds go pale grey, backlit with a soft pearl alpenglow. It is one of those recurring moments when being in the Barrens fills us with a deep sense of wonder and appreciation.

Stone Age artifacts from a caribou ambush site.

Those who do make the long journey from southern destinations will feel the enlightenment that comes from travel through and immersion in the Barrens; the dance of Northern Lights, the exhilarating and liberating feeling of being on a wilderness river or the sight of a herd of muskox, the shaggy survivors of the ice age.

As Alex Hall said, so eloquently and presciently: "It seems that the more you see of the Barren Lands the more you have to return. You can never get enough. A hundred lifetimes wouldn't be enough." His ashes lie beneath a simple rock cairn overlooking a favorite campsite, so in a way he has returned to his river.

We feel privileged to have had the opportunity to discover Alex's secret and favourite river, to have gained an appreciation of a piece of the Barrens, and the man who made this landscape his home for so long. In a contradictory way I hope the river stays largely untraveled as a memorial to Alex, his conservation ethic and vigorous defense of wild rivers. Dan and Jackpine Paddle will continue Alex's tradition of helping people experience the Barrens in a respectful way and become advocates for real wilderness.

September, 2021

Lorne and his wife Cheryl live in Lethbridge, Alberta. They and four other canoeists (Anne, John, Robert and Enos) paddled with Jackpine Paddle in late August and early September, 2021.

Lorne Fitch & Cheryl Bradley paddle on Damant Lake on the Elk River system.

Guide Evan Sullivan describes wildlife tracks on a sandy esker to guests Lorne Fitch and Robert Atkinson.

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Nastawgan is an Anishinabi word meaning "the way or route"

The WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION is a non-profit organization made up of individuals interested in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe and kayak, but also including backpacking and winter trips on both skis and snowshoes. The club publishes a journal, *Nastawgan*, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas of interest to wilderness travellers, organizes an extensive program of trips for members, runs a few basic workshops, and is involved in environmental issues relevant to wilderness canoeing.

Mike Wevrick Wine and Cheese

Date: Saturday, 30 November
Time: 6:30 pm
Duration: 2.5 hours
Zoom Meeting ID: 880 5465 9709

Mike Wevrick Speaker: Cliff Jacobson
Presentation: "Canoeing Wild Rivers"

6:30 pm Social, Zoom breakout rooms
7 pm introductions by Gary Ataman, WCA chairman
7:10 pm – 8:30 pm Cliff's presentation, followed by Q&A
8:30 – 9 pm Social, breakout rooms

We're thrilled that Cliff Jacobson accepted our invitation to be the guest speaker. His presentation "Canoeing Wild Rivers" gets at the heart of why we are drawn to wild northern rivers. There's something in this presentation for everyone, whether your heart lies in the far north, or to less intimidating waters close to home.

Cliff Jacobson is one of North America's most respected outdoors writers and wilderness paddlers. He is best known for his books on camping and canoeing. Cliff was born in Chicago, Illinois. He started canoeing at the age of 11, in northern Michigan. In 1962, he received his bachelor's degree in forestry from Purdue University.

Later, he worked as an outfitter and canoe guide for the Science Museum of Minnesota. He is also a retired teacher of environmental science at Hastings Middle School.

In 2003, Jacobson received the Legends Of Paddling Award from the American Canoe Association. He was awarded the Distinguished Eagle Scout Award by the Boy Scouts of America in 2009. He's a member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America. Check him out at www.cliffcanoe.com

Covid-19 Update

As you all know, the WCA has **suspended** all in-person outings scheduled for **2020 & 2021**, taking into account evolving public guidance on risks of COVID-19 transmission between individuals from different households, and the unavailability of insurance coverage for the benefit of members and the organization covering liability for COVID-19 infection.

The Covid-19 lockdown has introduced one benefit with the introduction of virtual WCA Zoom presentations and workshops. We've had participants from Canada, US, and Europe joining us in those online sessions. Check out the Wilderness Canoe Association YouTube channel for past presentations.

Our Monthly Roundup Newsletter had, hopefully, kept you engaged with the club's virtual activities. Check out past Monthly Roundups on our website.

Over the summer some club members have organized private trips for fully vaccinated family and friends. All reports indicate these trips were successful.

With the gradual increase of fully vaccinated people and the easing of some Covid-19 government restrictions, and continuing reduction in Covid-19 cases, the WCA board has voted to **restart in-person events as of Jan 1, 2022**. To safely launch these in-person events, all participants will be required to:

-Be fully vaccinated.
-Follow club and Covid-19 guidelines/checklist.
-Sign off on an event Release of Liability and Waiver of Claims form.

The WCA guidelines can be found on our website under CLUB ACTIVITIES>Participant Resources and Organizer Resources pages.

Moving forward, we will closely monitor health and government guidance and this decision is of course subject to change per circumstances.

Contact us at info@wildernesscanoe.ca if you have any questions or advice.

Gary Ataman
WCA Chairman

Moira River Access – Changes for Take-out at Latta, Ontario

By Bill Ness and Gary Ataman

The Moira River is one of southern Ontario's finest intermediate spring whitewater trips. The club has hosted trips on it annually for over four decades.

Traditionally, paddlers running the lower Moira River took out in the village of Latta at a broad, flat field at a bend in Hoskin Road on river right. The site, which is part of a farm, was recently sold. Paddlers have been told by the new landowners that they cannot park at the side of the road there or take out at that spot. Some have experienced unpleasant interactions with the new owners. Since there is a dangerous, unrunnable dam downriver, this prevents paddlers from exiting and effectively closes the river to us.

To preserve this important paddling resource, the WCA has been in contact with local property owners in the hope of finding an alternative take-out.

Gary Magwood, who owns a property with river access downriver from our traditional take-out spot, has generously allowed us to use a path from the river that's a little upstream of his house. We are very fortunate to find such a welcoming landowner who will make it possible for us to continue to paddle the Moira.

On the satellite image – zoom in view, Gary Magwood's house is the white roof in the middle of the photo, right next to the dam (which he owns).

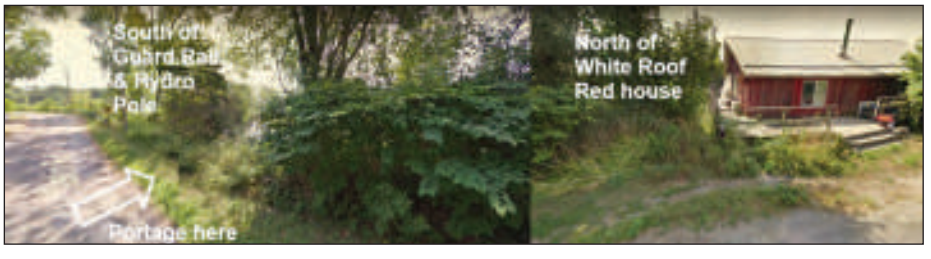
On the Street View image, his house is the red building on the right. The path is on the left side of the image.

The old bridge pilings in the river make a good landmark for paddlers. Pull into the right shore at the pilings. Use caution at high water because it's not a large beach like the old site and it is closer to the dam. Groups will have to carry boats up one at a time. It's often overgrown, and Gary suggests users might want to bring their weed cutter to clear it out before their trip.

Park farther down the road (southward) towards the intersection of Hoskin & Scuttlehole Roads. Avoid parking upriver where the unfriendly landowners are,as they claim they own the shoulder. That's questionable, but there is no need to antagonize them unnecessarily. Their property starts at the beginning of the road guardrail in the photo. At the end of the trip, drive up and briefly park near Gary's place to load up and leave. Please don't hang around or change in front of the houses.

Satellite image – overview

Satellite image – zoom-in



Street View image of Gary Magwood's house and portage access

Gary is a nice guy and we don't want to wear out our welcome with him or his neighbours. If you want to show your appreciation with something like a Tim's gift card or a little wine or beer, I'm sure that would make a positive impression. Landowners like Gary are hard to find and we depend on their continuing hospitality to access our favourite rivers.

On the Way to the Bay, Things Happened in 1956

Story and Photos by Tony Way

Keewaydin Section

This tale is true as affirmed by those who went, plus two movies and the trip log. In 1956, Keewaydin Camp's Section A paddled 550 miles in 50 days from Temagami to Moosonee by way of the Harricana River. In 2014, a train of camp reunions, chance encounters of encounters, and diligent web work recovered home movies by Steve Langford and Pete Meinig, the trip log by Jack Mills, and eight of the ten still living trippers (some still are living in 2021). Nishe (read: Anishinaabe |The Canadian Encyclopedia) Belanger was the much beloved Mattawa Guide who spoke all three local languages. Jack Mills was the Staffman and Tuck Colby the Assistant. The mid-teenage campers were: Ed Trippe, Pete Meinig, Pete Stanley, Steve Langford, Tom Heeter, Tony Way (I was 16), and Ty Wells. These things that happened then should not be read now as a worldly adult but as an inexperienced sixteen-year-old.

The adventure really began before the trip. The train to Temagami had a nighttime layover in Toronto for a few hours. The younger ones were corralled in the station by the staff, but we older ones were set loose with instructions to "Be back in time for the train and do not buy fireworks in Chinatown." We followed directions, if not instructions, and thus the camp had a free show after our arrival.

From the train, the Temagami ferry, the Aubrey Cosens VC, took us to Keewaydin Camp. After a few days on Devil's Island confirming that we could swim, right a tipped canoe, pitch a canvas wall tent, tump a wooden wannigan, and flip a 90-pound canoe, we set off for the Bay in wood-canvas Prospectors with two carry loads each. Stopping along the way at Island 86 to chat with June Keevil, daughter of the Temagami Mine founder, we reached Temagami Station for the first night. While some found a movie, and others found girls, Steve Langford found the Anglican priest (more about him later), as he was instructed. The next day, after portaging through town (a dollar for a truck lightened our load), we resumed our paddle only to be chased by the girls asking us to come back for a dance. We went on.

We stumbled down the steep Devil's

Portage into the Temiskaming with 60-90 pound loads, but the dam keeper sold us pop to brighten our moods. Across the Temiskaming we stopped in a farmer's field where we found a nest of garter snakes that brought us much amazement and amusement. The snakes were not amused. Meanwhile, Steve and Stanley pocketed a tent mouse until it ate its way out. After dinner, Nishe sought out farmer Renee Langevin to save us the long steep climb up the Indian Portage (having done that the year before, I was much relieved). Nishe enjoyed our attempts at school French. Renee and his tractor carried us the next day into Laniel, with a stop at home to pull porcupine quills from his dog's nose. Our lives were filling with new experiences.

After a brief tow from Tuttle's Point we eventually reached Hunter's Point's water-side chapel, where Nishe reminded us to remove our hats. By arrangement, a local lady treated us to a sit-at-the-table meal (not the moose meat we had hoped for). We lost the obligatory ball game, 27-25 to the local Cree (as they called themselves). Meanwhile Stanley learned never to lunge from a canoe after an escaping fish. In the evening, a fiddle and guitar were passed around for music and a stumbling square dance.

On Grand Lake Victoria, a five-mile long peninsula separated us from the Hudson Bay Post, so we tried to portage across on a map-marked winter trail. After much frustration we concluded that the map did not show the massive windfall, and resigned to paddle the long way around. We bought candy at the post but then faced the strategic question of whether to ration or binge. Binge won out. Equally enticing was the bear cub tethered by the Indian family living nearby. Accordingly, the next day, some of the boys traipsed back and bought a mascot for five dollars. "Teddy" was not cuddly and was indifferent about either eating the food presented or the hand that presented it. Finally Nishe took the cub into his canoe, and at the next "pas bouchee" portage Teddy fortunately "escaped".

The two-mile carry into Sabourin Lake became the access road to the Sabourin Club, and an offer to truck our loads was gratefully accepted. The girls of the Club provided us with water skiing, many for the first time (I got up on my first try!) and music afterwards. As we were slightly slow, we trucked from there to Val d'Or where Mr. St. Onge gave cartons of Jersey milk "for the boys". We then passed on eight miles to the bridge over the Harricana. Having seen the "bright lights", some of us tried hiking back to town. Fortunately, Jack and Nishe found a ride and drove us into town where Nishe introduced us to the night life of a mining town. It was a slow start the next day.

After three weeks, we finally saw the cathedral dome of Amos. We camped by the river on the edge of town where a neighborly lady gave us clean water and laundering. Afterwards, we wished our clothes had been labeled. Re-supply was trucked from the train station for $2 and we had our "mid-season" chicken dinner at the Radio Café. Nishe repaired to the Green Dragon while we sang the current hit, The Green Door:

There's an old piano
And they play it hot behind the green door
Don't know what they're doing
But they laugh a lot behind the green door
Wish they'd let me in so I could find out
What's behind the green door

Nishe's favorite bar trick was to declare, when leaving the table, "I'll keep my eye on my beer" and putting his glass eye by his drink. Jack went along to re-

Harricana River route map

Pete Stanley with snakes

Keewaydin '56

Renee Langevin's tractor

Laundry day

Teddy the Bear

turn Nishe. Some boys practiced talking with the French girls (Girls again? Remember we were still young and beautiful!) while Ed and I proved that an empty canoe dumps easily in fast water.

The Harricana River was full of rapids (cried Tuck in the middle of one: "Which way do I go now?") and rain (wailed Ed: "I am out here with nothing on but my shoes and golly it is cold!"), moose for stalking and geese for catching (a broken paddle was a great spear), Indian camps and cemeteries, and of course fish. Jack and Nishe had acquired a license in Amos for Belanger and Mills Prospectors, Ltd. Below the notorious rapids of Seven Mile Island, Nishe, Jack, Ed, Tom and I set out to find our gold only to find rain instead. So much for finding our fortune!

Finally, on day 43, we hit James Bay. We were surprised to see a dog on shore but the mystery cleared when Eddie Trapper and family from Moosonee appeared. We camped on the river before heading to Moosonee. With a canvas fly for a teepee and hot rocks from a fire, we made a steam bath and learned that when you get hot enough you can plunge into a northern river and the icy water rolls off your skin without a shiver. The next day, we started down the Bay but wind and tide drove us back. After lunch we started again. As the tide went out, the water shallowed to poling instead of paddling. We had a cold dinner on the water before we finally had to portage over the flats to a late evening camp amid a cloud of yellow mosquitoes so thick you could hardly breathe (I had to shed my lederhosen for pants to survive and finally found them on a high tussock the next day).

We were windbound for the next three days. Ed and I finally found non-brackish water for the camp but we had two more serious problems. The lesser was that we were running out of food. The greater was that the only train for the week was leaving in the morning. Eddie Trapper, cousin Eddie, wife and two children were camped nearby. He agreed to tow us with his freighter canoe to Moosonee. After waiting for the returning tide, we headed off, but only for an hour before the wind and rain pushed us back ashore. Finally, about midnight, the weather cleared and we set off again with

five canoes loaded into and towed behind Eddie's freighter. With clear weather the northern lights shimmered and the cold descended. And as it got colder my bladder got fuller. In misery from the cold outside and the pressure inside, I pleaded silently for relief until I realized that the only person who could help was the person I was talking to. So, I did what was to a sixteen-year-old until then unthinkable and put my drinking can to better use. Now I was warmed, at least inside, by the thought that I had just taught myself an important life lesson: When in trouble, don't complain — just do something!

We reached Moosonee with only forty minutes to spare for getting our train tickets and loading our gear. We arrived at Temagami Station well into the night. I was dreading having to set up camp in deep darkness, (finding level ground and tent poles for our canvas tents) when Steve's befriended priest, Father Clark, who had greeted us in Moosonee, said, as had been arranged: "Boys, come stay with me" (thanks Steve!). So once again, following the rule to never say no, we piled into the upstairs of the Anglican Mission. In the morning while Father Clark played chopsticks on the chapel organ (I didn't know that was allowed), we ate the last of our food: rice with milk, sugar and maple syrup flavoring, a treat I treasure to this day. After buying supplies and again parting from the Temagami girls, we headed for our last camp before paddling into Keewaydin on Day 50. There we had a few days with love letters, tale telling, and song singing. But as the adventure began, it ended with the Aubrey Cosens ferrying us back to the train (and the Temagami girls) where we could say our final goodbye to summer. We were somewhat older, a bit wiser, and much more experienced.

Should you want to verify the veracity of these events, you can find the video at the Keewaydin Camp YouTube Channel: Harricanaw & James Bay, Keewaydin Temagami Section A 1956 – YouTube. If you are really interested in old-time tripping, you can see my 1955 trip from Temagami to the Dumoine at: Midseason & Dumoine Keewaydin Temagami Section B 1955 – YouTube. FYI: Most of the photos are enhancements of 8 mm movie frames.

Nishe Steve Rapids

Windbound

Section A Returns 1956

Paddling the Big Salmon River

Story by Mike Stacey
Photos by Terry Hartrick and Mike Stacey

Mike on Day 5

Introduction

This account describes a self-guided paddling expedition down the Big Salmon River, Yukon Territory in August 2020, by Mike Stacey and Terry Hartrick.

The author (Mike) paddled solo in a 14' 10" Nova Craft Supernova and Terry, also solo, was in a cruising kayak, both rented from Up North Adventures in Whitehorse. We had chosen the Big Salmon River to test our work-in-process expedition paddling skills and to provide a restorative and game-raising wilderness experience. In the event we found ourselves in a diverse, beautiful and remote wilderness environment, seeing no other recreational boaters throughout. The challenges were sometimes greater than expected, but the rewards were remarkable!

Terry and I had paddled together by solo canoe and kayak on the Bowron Lakes Circuit in British Columbia and on a 5 day descent of the gentle Nisutlin River, in the Yukon, in 2019. Terry had extensive backcountry hiking and ocean kayaking experience and a career as a physician. I had similar hiking experience, commercial fishing ocean experience and a career in maritime search and rescue coordination. Terry has since become a canoe enthusiast; ease of packing and maneuverability among the deciding factors.

Terry on Quiet Lake

The Big Salmon River flows through the traditional territory of the Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation. We saw several shore sites used by First Nations fishers and hunters, drying racks and shelter frames, though none was active during our passage.

After our trip, I contacted the Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation band office in Carmacks to acknowledge that we had traversed their traditional lands (and to donate a book to their library). Website: www.lscfn.ca.

Trip Planning

Pre-trip and en route planning was based on the 1983 map book *Rivers of the Yukon Territory – Big Salmon River, Revised: 2016*, by Mike and Gillian Rourke, published by Rivers North Publications, riversnorth@gmail.com. It includes 1:65,000 scale sketches of the entire route, with hazards and potential campsites noted. Our post-trip observations about changes we had noticed on the river were welcomed by the publisher for inclusion in subsequent editions (published from their updated digital copy when ordered). We also carried two full sets of Government of Canada 1:50,000 topo maps.

We contacted Whitehorse helicopter companies in case we needed a non-distress evacuation. They were pleased to discuss such a "contingency" plan and took enough detail to ensure an effective operation if required. As with the shuttle operators (Up North Adventures and Yukon Wide) communications would be from our InReach sets. Both Terry and I carried these devices, meaning we could also contact each other had we become separated. Distress level evacuations or injuries would be handled through official search and rescue organizations, initiated by contacting RCMP.

The Big Salmon River

It was 300 km from the put-in at Quiet Lake to our pick-up at Little Salmon Village. From its origin exiting the north end of Quiet Lake, the Big Salmon River (BSR) begins as a clear water 20 metre wide stream with a 3-5 km/hr current. It twists and turns between the Big Salmon Range and the Pelly Mountains, gaining volume with each tributary on its way to its confluence with the Yukon River, 240 km away, with a further 60 km to reach Little Salmon Village. The early paddling featured close-to-shoreline passages, several log jams and many sweepers and strainers, sometimes encountered with little warning due to the sharp bends. The later days featured broad valleys, larger volumes with stronger currents through 20-100 metre wide channels, many riffles and gravel bars and the occasional rock-avoiding sleigh ride. Our last paddling day was on the fast (10 km/hr) and wide Yukon River, iconic and powerful.

Campsites were plentiful, though planning was needed to end the day at one suitable for the high water conditions. Most had no "improvements." Several were on open gravel bars or beaches. Some were on higher shorelines in amongst trees. Usage by previous travellers was sometimes evident, though few fire rings were seen.

We did not make any campfires, partly due to the wet weather and partly to conserve the environment. The capability to erect a tarp in the open was a big plus. We used extendable boat hooks as main supports – see campsite photos.

The major factor affecting BSR conditions was the higher than normal discharge rate. The "Mean historical discharge" for our trip dates is 88-93 cu metres/sec, measured at the monitoring station (09AG001) near where the BSR joins the Yukon River. The actual discharge rate during our trip was 130-155 cu metres/sec. The resulting faster current likely necessitated the quick thinking required to pick lines that moved us along nicely while allowing us to avoid hazards: sweepers and rocks in the early going and faster flowing high volumes, whirlpools and rapids later on.

I have not found definitive difficulty ratings for this river, my less than expert assessment would be Class 1 and maybe occasional Class II rapids, for the flow rate we encountered. In any case, I will always remember my excitement when I first saw the river visibly flowing downhill and knowing that we were all in for an exhilarating ride!

2020 Route Map

Getting Started

We flew Air North from Victoria, BC to Whitehorse, YT, arriving August 13 mid-afternoon. After hotel check-in we stopped at Up North Adventures to view the rental boats and obtain local intel. The boats were in great shape and plentiful. Covid-19 meant that the usual influx of European and other tourists was not happening. Yukoners exercised good compliance with local Covid-19 restrictions, which were not very onerous at that time.

Dinner that night with old friends living in Whitehorse featured the news that "it's a record year for mosquitoes…six times the normal amount." Too late to cancel the trip (just kidding)…but there were virtually no bugs when paddling and only a couple of evenings when we needed head nets.

The Up North Adventures 4x4 shuttle truck picked us up at the hotel the morning of August 14. The driver had good local knowledge, having served many years as a Yukon police officer. We stopped to buy stove fuel and bear spray, then took the Alaska Highway 1 to Johnson's Crossing and the gravel surface Canol Road, a WW2 era oil pipeline

Put-In, Quiet Lake

Campsite Day 1

Entering Big Salmon River

Downhill flow

service road, to the put-in, a rustic campground on Quiet Lake, total driving time three hours. A camper there advised that another canoe party was "two or three days ahead of you."

Day 1 August 14

We departed the put-in at 1330 and paddled 11 km to our first camp [61° 11.5'N, 133° 10.1'W], sighting Ospreys in their nest during our transit northward along the lake's east shore.

We made camp in trees 100 metres west of the entrance to the Big Salmon River, arriving at 1600. Light airs, overcast, intermittent rain, 15°C.

Mike presenting a beautiful view

Clear water from a tributary

As we set up camp a strong twenty - minute squall blew through, we were glad to be off the water. Quite buggy once on the shore. This campsite was well-used, as it was a short day's flat water paddle from the road head. There were reddish streaks on the lake's surface, possibly related to the dark red mosquito-like bugs flying low to the ground around the campsite. 10°C overnight.

Day 2 August 15

Departed camp at 1120. We entered the Big Salmon River and passed through the smaller lakes of Big Salmon Lake and Sandy Lake en route to our second camp. Light airs and rain most of the day. Aided by a 3-5 km/hr current we travelled c. 30 km during five hours paddling.

We spotted a pair of loons and several salmon spawners, likely Chinook that had travelled thousands of kilometres from the Pacific Ocean, up the Yukon River and finally the Big Salmon River (BSR). I had been a commercial salmon fisher on the West Coast of Vancouver Island years ago. I wondered if these fish might have been offspring of "ones that got away"! A consideration when choosing the BSR was whether our trip would coincide with the main salmon run, increasing the likelihood of bear encounters, including grizzlies. The salmon runs in recent years have been disturbingly low, however, including in 2020. Late on this afternoon we did spot large bear tracks in the mud, possibly grizzly.

The Rourke map book notated one part of today's paddle: *"LPs AND LOG JAMS – SEVERAL SHORT PORTAGES ARE GENERALLY REQUIRED – USE EXTREME CAUTION…ESPECIALLY AT HIGHER WATER LEVELS..."*. We did make a 100 metre portage around one log jam, dragging the boats through mud, grasses and shrubs.

Late in the afternoon, shortly after re-entering the river after the portage, I rounded a bend to see a recently downed evergreen tree protruding from river left, blocking the navigable channel. I paddled hard to reach the shoreline on river right to avoid getting pressed against the tree and beached my canoe to wait for Terry's approach.

Terry could not get his kayak to shore before fetching up port side against the tree, 20 metres from the river right shoreline. He let the kayak go underneath the sweeper and called out that he was "all good," with a good purchase on the sweeper and that he would get himself to shore hand over hand and branch to branch, which he accomplished in good order.

We boarded my canoe and reached the overturned kayak hung up on the shoreline 75 metres downstream. It was soon bailed out and all items except a paddle recovered, most had remained stowed inside the kayak. Terry came out of it with minor scratches and a reaffirmed reputation for composure under duress! The current at the sweeper was about 5 km/hr.

At 1830 we arrived at what the Rourke map book described as a *"Sandy Camp"* [61° 19.9' N, 133° 20.7' W] that proved to be a fine vantage point from which to watch the river flow by.

Day 3 August 16

Departed camp at 1100. Rain and SE winds increased during the day. Sighted moose tracks, eagles and swans. Current 4-5 km/hr. Distance travelled: 40 km over 6.5 hours.

I learned some gear lessons today. My (well used) Gore-Tex rain jacket soaked through by noon. A hastily fashioned rain cape tied over my shoulders worked well enough to keep me comfortable. By this point we assessed that the water level in the river was very high for August, the steady rain no doubt contributing.

We arrived at an excellent camp site [61° 28.6' N, 133° 33.1' W], river right, marked *"Goodwin Camp"* in Rourke's map book, at 1730. Darkness descended at 2215. We were obtaining helpful weather forecasts from our InReach devices.

Day 4 August 17

It was cool and rainy overnight. We departed at 1140, encountering a faster current of 4-7 km/hr. We maneuvered around some rocks and rapids and frequent sweepers jutting out from the current-sculpted shorelines.

A great day for wildlife: a cow moose in a high grass meadow beside the river; an osprey and golden eagles; a large beaver working on some shrubbery on an open gravel bar that at first sight I thought was a small bear!

The beaver lodges on the BSR were not the symmetrical domes that we had seen on the more sedate Nisutlin River in 2019. Rather they appeared to be rough collections of branches and mud structured in a tent-like arrangement around trees that had fallen (been felled by the beavers?) into the water. My theory is that this design is more secure in a faster moving current, though I stand to be corrected by more knowledgeable folks.

We did see one substantial beaver dam that effectively blocked off a meander from the main channel.

The water in the main channel had become a cloudy grey/green colour. We sourced drinking water from creeks that entered the river.

During the day we spotted a small daypack in good condition hung up on the shoreline. The current was fast so I did not risk a sudden turn to go broadside to retrieve the pack. We saw no related items downstream and I called in the sighting to the RCMP when we arrived in Whitehorse. There were no reports of "missing paddlers," thankfully.

We reached a *"Good HW Camp"* campsite at 1700 [61° 36.9' N, 133° 45.2' W], river right, on a gravel/sand bar. Distance covered c. 30 km over 5.2 hours. Sunny patches during the evening!

Day 5 August 18

Cold overnight, just above freezing. We departed with clear skies and light SE winds at 1050.

We had the privilege of watching a salmon resting in a clear water back eddy in front of our camp during breakfast. This patch of water may have come from Souch Creek, perhaps the salmon was tasting its destination! Its tail and fin tips were worn white from its epic journey. Small diving birds plunged repeatedly and bravely into the slight current. A wonderful display.

The main stream current was about 4 km/hr and the water remained cloudy. High overcast during the day with a perfect halo around the sun at midday.

We made camp at 1730 at a *"Good camp in the trees"* [61° 33.9' N, 134° 07.9' W], river right, having travelled 36 km during 6.6 hours on the water.

Day 6 August 19

We departed camp at 1130 in fine conditions, high overcast, no rain. During the day we were treated to the sight of a cow moose and calf clomping up an embankment and into the bush as we floated by. There were significant headwinds for the last two hours of paddling. Otherwise (my rough log states) "a normal BSR at high flood day"! That means…carefully plotting a course around each bend and new area of turbulence, the occasional burst of speed to exit a developing close quarters situation and constant visual and regular voice contact with each other, discussing best routes and being ready to assist if necessary.

Chinook resting

Another common event: grounding on gravel bars after choosing a less than clear passage among the options available and then pushing and pulling the boat free without allowing it to get away completely! Strong paddles or poles were helpful and sometimes we both worked to free up one boat.

But along with all the above, there were many stretches of gentle paddling conducive to taking photos and savouring the delightful sights, sounds, movement and smells of the river.

At 1800 we camped in trees [61° 41.3' N, 134° 30.8' W], river right. In brilliant sunshine, on a raised bank with a grand view of the river valley, we hung gear out to dry. The day's 42 km over 6.5 hours on the water kept us comfortably within our passage plan. We appreciated a warm and dry evening.

Campsite Day 6

Slump

Day 7 August 20
Cold overnight with a thick mist hanging over the river in the morning. Owls heard during the last couple of nights. Light NE winds forecast. We departed at 1110 helped by a current of 4-5 km/hr.

Overall, our solo paddling seemed to add about 3 km/hr to the speed generated by the current. That included lunch stops and pauses for photos, discussions or just "being there". Our moving average was probably a little faster.

Lunch today was at the confluence of the North Big Salmon River with the Big Salmon River. We spotted a good potential campsite for future trips on a high bank (with steep access) at 61° 45.7' W, 134° 36.9' N.

At 1645 we arrived at our last campsite [61° 52.1' N, 134° 48.8' W] on the BSR, river left, 7 km from its confluence with the Yukon River. We had travelled 45 km over 5.5 hours, helped by a 5 km/hr current.

This site was well used and featured a fire ring and a "table" structure that was handy for meal prep, etc. Likely its proximity to the Yukon River makes it a great destination for weekend campers. It did have a "getting closer to habitation" vibe!

Yukon River

We made use of the easy camp conditions to prepare for our date with the Yukon River the next day.

Day 8 August 21
We departed at 1100 after watching an early morning mist dissipate from the surface of the water. Shortly after we left Terry spotted a black bear just inside the trees on shore, heading towards our just vacated campsite. The bear veered smartly into the woods upon noticing Terry's kayak.

We arrived at the Yukon River about noon, in calm weather conditions, and noted its much stronger current, 10 km/hr according to my InReach. Our plan was to camp at a site identified in the Rourke map book about 10 km back from our potential take-out destination of Little Salmon Village. We intended to paddle to the village the following morning, not wanting to impact an active First Nations hunting and fishing camp by setting up tents there.

Unfortunately, we could not find the site described in the map book, so we continued on to Little Salmon Village, just past the confluence of the Little Salmon and Yukon Rivers. (I talked to the map book's publisher, Jocelyn Rourke, after the trip. Jocelyn concluded that the site that we had not been able to find had likely grown over and she advised that she would correct future editions.)

At 1845 we found space for our tents near the boat landing at Little Salmon Village [62° 03.1'N, 135° 41.1' W], river right, out of the way of potential users. Having to reach the Village to camp made for an eight hour, 65 km day, a long time in the saddle! Though this site worked for us, I would suggest that paddlers avoid setting up camp at the Village without first contacting the Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation. Many paddlers choose Carmacks as a pick-up location.

Little Salmon Village was a lived-in First Nations community until recently. Many intact cabins and game and fish-processing work stations remain, used during seasonal fish runs and hunts. A well cared for cemetery that we did not enter is co-located.

We talked with a three generation First Nation family embarking on a moose hunting trip ("bulls only"); grandad, dad and grandson loading a powerful skiff with some serious looking gear. They were interested in whether we had seen any moose on our trip.

Day 9 August 22
The drive back to Whitehorse included 45 minutes on the gravel surfaced Robert Campbell Highway 4 to Carmacks and another couple of hours on the Klondike Highway 2 up the Yukon River valley, enhanced by the driver's interpretative comments. It was a fine denouement to our adventure.

Reflections on the Trip
The Big Salmon River proved an exciting challenge to our paddling and expedition planning skills and a great learning experience. I will add some "must have" items to my gear list (e.g., dry suit) and carefully research historical river flow rates and any real time data available from river discharge stations when planning future trips.

We found Yukoners to be welcoming and competent, with a "can do" approach tempered by a healthy respect for the hazards of outdoor life north of 60. Our own regard for the rewards of the wilderness experience is stronger than ever.

Trip Summary
River: Big Salmon River, YT, Canada
Dates: 2020 Aug 14-21
Distance paddled: 300 km, *Lake to Little Salmon Village*
Nights camped: 8 nights
Days paddled: 7.5 days
Average hours on the water/day: 6.5 hrs, *includes stops*
Average distance per day: 40 km
Speed overall: 6.3 km/hr, *includes stops – "moving average" was faster*
Current: 3-10 km/hr

Kazan Falls, 1974

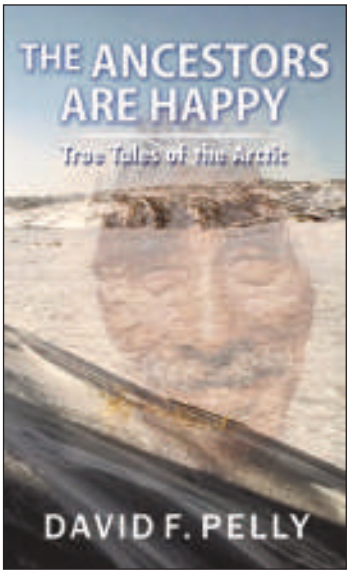
Courtesy of David F. Pelly

WCA and Wilderness & Canoe Symposium friend David Pelly (www.davidpelly.com) has sent a note with half a dozen old photos taken by George Luste at Kazan Falls in 1974. On this trip, George Luste, Michael Good, John Martin and John Blackborow built the cairn at Kazan Falls.

David came upon those photos while he was sorting through his treasure chest of old photos looking to contribute material to the Nunavut Archives and doing research for his latest book *"The Ancestors Are Happy: True Tales of the Arctic"*. Having lived, travelled, and learned in Nunavut for over forty years, David draws on his experiences and encounters with Inuit elders to uniquely illuminate the land as well as many of the northern characters that gently walked on it.

Standing in front of Kazan Falls (L. to R.): Michael Good, John Martin, John Blackborow, George Luste).

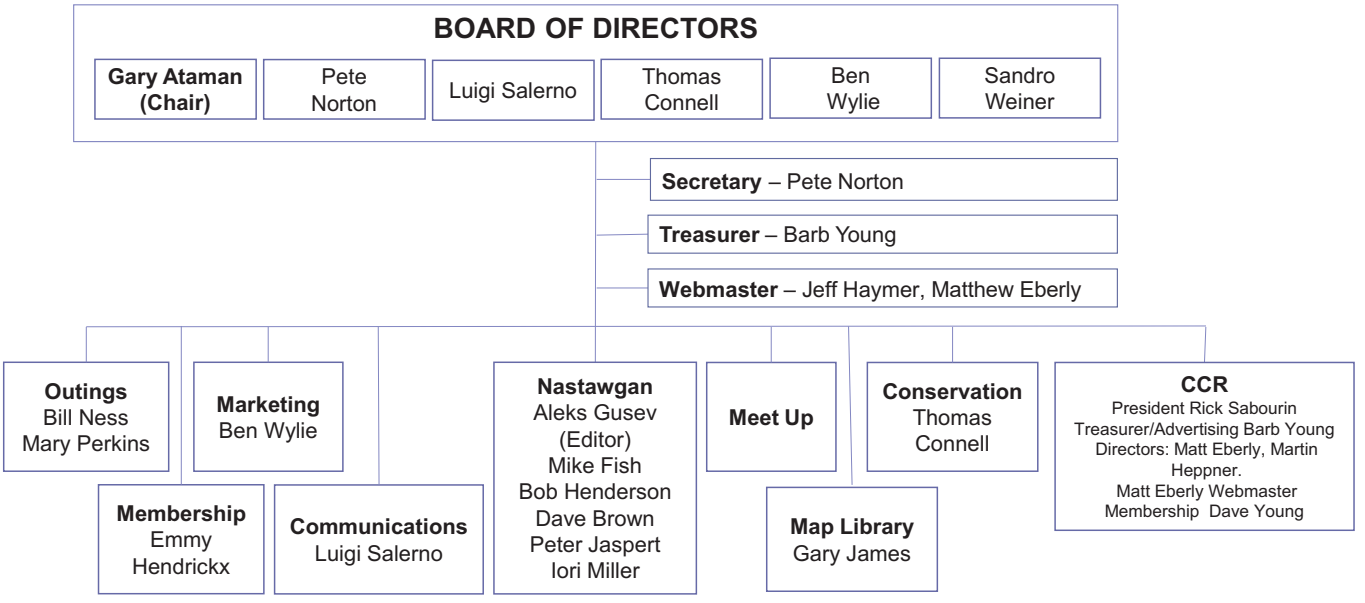
Kazan Falls cairn.



Front cover page of David's latest book.

…in this issue

WCA Governance Structure



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Hiking the World's Longest Esker


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Thiewlaza 2017:
Exploring Sleeping Island and Ho-Hun's River


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Thiewlaza 2017:
Exploring Sleeping Island and Ho-Hun's River


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Cat River Canoe Trip


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Canoe Ungava: Crossing the Ungava Peninsula with No Single-Use Plastics
By Beth Jackson and Eli Walker


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Flat River
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Photos by Dwayne Wohlgemuth and Rory McIntosh


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Where the Rivers are Wild:
A Journey Down the Lower Mackenzie and Mouse Rivers


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My Memory of the Lake Superior INET Centennial Canoe Voyage


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Mountain River


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From Labrador to Chisasibi on James Bay


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Back Door to the Hood River


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60th Parallel
Welcome to the Northwest Territories

Lockhart River – Pike's Portage Canoe Trip


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Up the Grandin River and down the Johnny Hoe River
Story and photos by Dwayne Wohlgemuth


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Palmer Rapids – a home away from home


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Artillery Lake Ice Walk


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Chapleau River 2015