



Ivvavik
National Park

The Sheep Creek Hikes



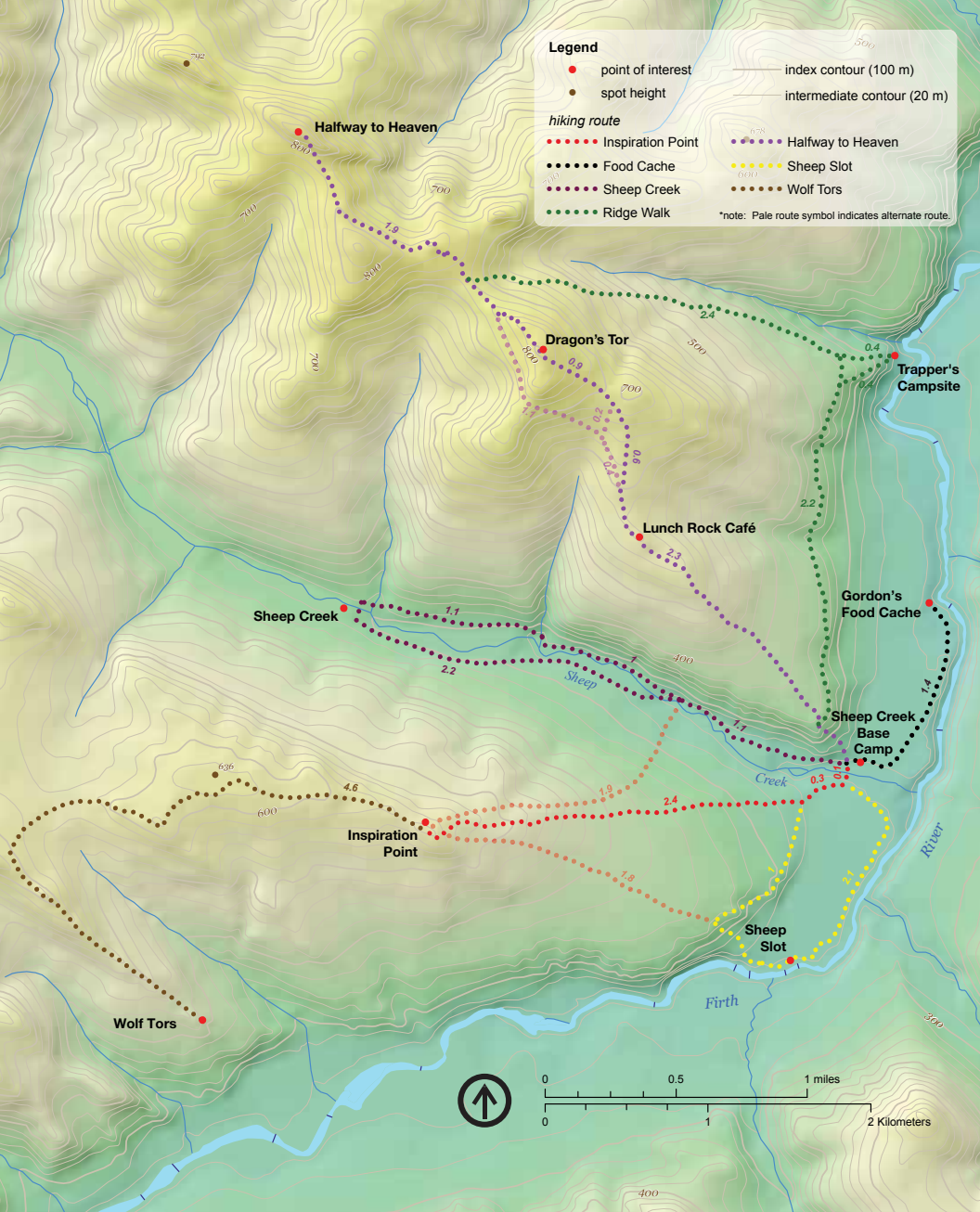
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A full-page photograph of two hikers with large backpacks (one red, one blue) ascending a rocky mountain trail. The hiker in the foreground wears a red backpack and a hat, while the second hiker wears a blue backpack. They are using trekking poles on a path of loose rocks. The background features rolling green and brown hills under a blue sky with scattered clouds. A vertical green border on the right side contains a white topographic map overlay with contour lines and a '600' elevation marker.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT!



AS you read through the guide, if you come across any specialized or unfamiliar terms, check the Glossary provided at the back.



Sheep Creek Hikes

Ivvavik National Park is a gift from the Inuvialuit people to all Canadians. The first national park in Canada created through an aboriginal land claim agreement; Ivvavik is cooperatively managed by Parks Canada and the Inuvialuit. Meaning ‘a place for giving birth’ or ‘a nursery’ in the Inuvialuktun language, the park protects part of the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd. With open terrain and abundant wildlife, Ivvavik has endless hiking opportunities in a unique arctic mountain environment. There are no marked trails, but this guide provides several recommended routes that have been explored and enjoyed by visitors and staff.

Weather

The optimal hiking season is from the floral bloom of mid-June into the latter half of August when autumn colours are at their peak. Hikers in July should be prepared for biting insects. Hikers planning to travel later in the season should be prepared for the possibility of cold snowy conditions and delays in charter flights due to weather.

Weather conditions can change quickly, with freezing temperatures possible even in summer. Please remember that Ivvavik is as close to pure wilderness as it gets. Beyond Sheep Creek base camp and small pockets of taiga forest there is little protection from the elements offered by the open tundra. Strong winds, precipitation or fog may impede travel in the park and may result in flight delays. You should always pack in extra food and fuel to Sheep Creek base camp in the event of a delayed pick-up due to weather.

Bear Safety

All three North American bear species are found in Ivvavik National Park: grizzly, black, and polar bear. Grizzlies are common along the Firth River, especially during and shortly after the Porcupine caribou migration in early June. Watch for bears and bear sign (tracks or scat) and be prepared to cut your hike short if you encounter them. Most visitors pack bear spray and bear bangers, devices that can deter a bear at close range. Please refer to *Safety in Grizzly and Black Bear Country*, a brochure/video available at Parks Canada offices in the Western Arctic.



Water

The Firth River and Sheep Creek have reliable flow, but other water sources along these routes are highly variable. Carrying an appropriate supply of water is especially important on higher elevation ridge hikes. While there haven't been any reported cases of Giardiasis (also called "beaver fever") from drinking the water of the Firth Valley, *Giardia* is common in area wildlife, so boiling or filtering water before drinking is strongly recommended.

Hiking Gear

In the remote arctic mountains of Ivavik, no hiker should travel without insulating, wind and waterproof layers to stay warm, dry and alive! Wearing terrain-appropriate, sturdy footwear is also essential: hiking boots with good ankle support will reduce risk of injury on the loose rock and scree, common on ridge hikes. Also keep in mind that most of the hiking season is bug season. Always pack insect repellent and/or a bug net/jacket. Hiking poles are appreciated by many visitors, especially on steep descents. Creek crossings are easier and safer with sandals or light shoes.

Crossing Streams

Creek crossings occur on **most trails and routes** in the park. **Water levels will change** throughout the summer and even **over the course of the day**. If a stream crossing appears to be very difficult and risky, turn back. There are many techniques for crossing creeks in a group. You should ensure you are well versed in creek-crossing techniques before you leave.

- Try to cross streams **early in the day** when **water levels are often lowest**
- Always **undo the waist strap** of your pack for easy removal in case you fall
- Cross at a **wide, shallow point** that is not above rapids
- Don't cross barefoot; **use boots or running shoes**
- **Face upstream** while crossing
- Use a **sturdy stick or trekking poles** for support and for testing water depth: position the stick upstream as it will provide more support
- **Cross in a group** for greater stability by holding on to fellow hiker's hands or backpack straps



Halfway to Heaven

This is an alpine hike with no accessible water sources. Make sure you pack enough water and give yourself enough time for this trip. It is a nice option for a long day hike, so we recommend you pack a lunch. It's unlikely you'll be hiking fast on this one, since the views will stop you in your tracks!

Distance: 5.7 km one way

Elevation: 594 meters

Time: 3-6 hours each way
(all day hike)

The first leg of this hike (the steepest ascent of all the hikes) is up to Lookout Ridge, where you will enjoy a great view, and can scout other routes mentioned in this guide. From Lookout Ridge, make your way north towards Lunch Rock Café. A great spot to enjoy a lunch break with a stunning view!

Re-energized, continue on to Dragon's Tor. As you make your way up the mountainside, admire the flowers, including the tiny Arctic Forget-Me-Not and the Arctic Lupin. Let your imagination run wild as you approach Dragon's Tor, where the rocky formations do indeed resemble the frozen, spiky back of a gigantic dragon.

From here, make your way along the ridge. Along this section, you may notice dramatically coloured rock including wildly folded purple shale. About 400 million years ago, most of this area was under a shallow coastal sea. As the tides went in and out, shoreline mud was exposed to the air, and the iron in it became oxidized. Over millions of years, it was cemented into rock and folded into these spectacular purple shales, revealed after the top layers eroded away.

About 1.2 km after Dragon's Tor is Kisoun's Rock – a shale formation shaped like a preacher's pulpit that looks out onto three huge tors. Halfway to Heaven is the leftmost tor. What do the middle and right-hand tors look like to you? To Peregrine Falcons and Rough-legged Hawks they look like perfect nesting habitat!

Congratulations! You've made it *Halfway to Heaven*!

For your hike back, consider taking the alternate route that bypasses Dragon's Tor. This is a well-used Dall sheep trail that crosses steep shale and scree. Once you reach the ridge you can see Lunch Rock Café. From there, you're on the home stretch back to base camp.



Ridge Walk

This is a comfortable, middle length hike, with a moderate slope and wonderful views. Watch for the many Dall sheep that forage on the short tundra grass up along the ridge.

Distance: 2.6 km each way

Elevation: 555 meters

Time: 3 hours each way

Start by hiking up the very steep slope behind Sheep Creek Station base camp. From Lookout Ridge, to the west are dramatic tors that rise above Sheep Creek. Golden Eagles often soar above the large nest built on one of these tors.

Follow a short trail through the trees to come out onto the open ridge. Walk north along the ridge, keeping the steep slope that drops down to the airstrip on your right. Choosing your route along the ridge, you will occasionally drop down into small treed valleys, but soon come back up onto the ridge for good views of the Firth River. The open, grassy

tundra up here is important foraging habitat for Dall Sheep.

Keep hiking north until you reach a small creek and see a sharp bend ahead in the Firth River. At this point, you can hike down to the Firth River to meet the Trapper's Campsite trail. Or turn west and walk up the gentle slope, keeping to the south side of the valley. You will gradually make your way up to an open plateau surrounded by dramatic peaks. Turn southeast and clamber up the short, steep rocks to reach Dragon's Tor, or carry on to the northwest to get to Halfway to Heaven. Either way you go, you'll enjoy well-earned views in all directions!



Inspiration Point

This is a moderate hike up the ridge. Pack water, as there are no water sources along the route.

Distance: 2.4 km each way

Elevation: 368 meters

Time: 2.5 hours each way

There are three routes that can take you to Inspiration Point:

Route 1: Start behind the base camp and head along the old mining road. After 2 km the road crosses Sheep Creek. Along this route there are several claim stakes from the families who sought gold here. Please respect all artefacts or cultural resources. After crossing Sheep Creek, hike southwest through thick brush to the opening of the first plateau. Watch for tundra nesting birds such as Horned Lark, Smith's Longspur, Upland Sandpiper and American Golden Plover.

Route 2: Crossing Sheep Creek in front of base camp lets you gain elevation sooner than Route 1, but the creek can be deep and fast in

the early season! Once your feet are dry and boots are tied, go up through thick brush to reach the top of the first plateau. Tread carefully on the *tussocks*... not exactly ankle-friendly terrain!

Above the first plateau, walk on gently sloping tundra where the saturated soil quivers like a sopping wet sponge. Water cannot penetrate the permafrost below. Plants here are adapted to the harsh weather and soil conditions –compact form, fuzzy leaves and flowers, and fast growth during the short summer helps these tiny beauties thrive. As you reach the ridges, you may notice orange *dolostone* rock. Millions of years ago this was a warm, arid seashore. Countless layers of sediment were deposited here in the shallows. Over millions of years the sediments were compressed into stone, the sea rose and fell, the rocks were thrust up and eroded down... shaping the land into what you see today. As this dolostone is revealed on the surface, the iron in the rock rusts, giving the stone its beautiful orange colour.



Route 3: Hike to Sheep Slot. From there, climb northwest up a small bluff. Continue hiking northwest until you reach Inspiration Point. (This is also a nice way to come back from Inspiration Point. The terrain is less ‘tussocky’ and firmer, for easier hiking. It also offers a stunning view of the Firth River valley - often with a breeze that keeps the bugs away!)

All of these routes will take you to Inspiration Point, an aptly named ridge that provides shelter from the wind behind an angled outcrop of shale. The Beringian landscape still looks “prehistoric”. Imagine woolly mammoths, sabre toothed tigers and caribou wandering these hills. (You may not have to imagine the caribou.)

Wolf Tors

This ridge hike takes you from Inspiration Point to the dramatic Wolf Tors, visible in the distance. Packing water is important as there is no water source along the route.

Distance: 7.2 km each way

Elevation: 422

Time: 3-5 hours each way

From Inspiration Point, follow the ridge away from the Firth. You may observe caribou grazing as they cross this windy ridge, always moving on their journey through the park.

Gradual slopes lead to a hummocky section and then a final uphill climb to the majestic Wolf Tors. This spectacular set of rocky pinnacles was named after Wolf Creek, to the north across the Firth River. You may notice scattered small bones, a result of raptors perching, feeding and nesting along the high rocky tors.



Sheep Slot

This short hike takes you along the Firth River plateau on wildlife trails.

Distance: 1.5 km each way

Elevation: 16 meters

Time: 45 minutes each way

From the confluence of Sheep Creek and the Firth River, head south through thick brush where signs of bear and moose are frequently seen. When hiking, hike in a group making loud noises and watch for bear activity. Please refer to *Staying Safe in Bear Country* for additional information. With the Firth River rumbling far below, make your way along the plateau to Sheep Slot. Watch for the remains of gold miners' camps. Prospectors began searching for gold in the area in 1898, and a minor gold rush occurred in 1947. About 200 claims were staked along Aspen Creek and the Firth River, mainly by local *Inuvialuit* and *Gwich'in* people.

Along the Firth canyon you will see examples of *anticline* and

syncline folds in the bedrock. It took many millions of years for the rock to fold like this! It started on an ancient sea floor, where these layers were formed from fine-grained silt deposited by sea currents. The sediment was buried and compacted into rock that was later folded, uplifted and ultimately eroded to become exposed along the canyon today.

Once you reach the clearing of Sheep Slot, you can imagine this site as it was thousands of years ago: a place where the ancestors of the *Inuvialuit*, clothed in skins and armed with stone points, camped and waited for the return of the *tuktut*, or caribou, that migrate past this site en route to the calving grounds along the coast.

As you observe the class IV rapids, please exercise caution. The water is cold and the currents are very strong.



Gordon's Food Cache

This hike leaves the airstrip and follows the game trails along the Firth River canyon.

Distance: 1.4 km each way

Elevation: 126 meters

Time: 30 minutes- 1 hour each way

This short hike takes you past the airstrip and heads north along the edge of the Firth River canyon. Make your way along the ridge through thick brush, being “bear aware”. Hike in a group, make noise and watch for bear activity. Please refer to *Staying Safe in Bear Country* for additional information.

There are signs of the Firth “gold rush” along the banks of the river, including claim posts and campsites.

At Alex Gordon's camp there are the remains of a “stage”, where food was cached to prevent animals from getting at it. Note the tin sleeves on the posts to prevent animals from climbing them. Below the camp is a scenic, rocky bend in the river.



Sheep Creek

This route leaves Sheep Creek Station and follows the “cat-road” up the valley.

Distance: 3.2 km each way

Elevation: 16 meters

Time: 2-3 hours each way

Stay on the north side of Sheep Creek and follow game trails past the first dry creek bed to the second creek. Here, cross Sheep Creek and follow the road back to the furthest crossing downstream. Look for mining claim stakes and mining equipment. Watch for a very large nest of sticks that has been used by Golden Eagles.

The steep bluffs are often used by Dall sheep, who depend on the many naturally occurring mineral-licks throughout the area as a source of essential minerals, not otherwise present in the local vegetation, to promote the growth of their bones, hair and horns.

Glossary

Anticline

A ridge or fold of stratified rock in which the strata slope downwards from the crest.

Beringia

An area around the Bering Sea that was not glaciated during the last glacial period 30,000 to 14,000 years ago. It formed a vast, ice-free land mass that became a refuge for plants, wildlife and humans.

Dolostone

A sedimentary rock formed chiefly of dolomite. Similar to *limestone*, but with more magnesium and iron.

Giardiasis

Infection of the intestine with a flagellate protozoan (*Giardia*) that causes diarrhea and other symptoms. Commonly referred to as “beaver fever.”

Glacial ice

During the last glacial period (110,000 to 12,500 years ago), ice sheets up to 4 km thick covered much of Canada and Northern Europe. The amount of water held in these ice sheets lowered global sea level about 120m, compared to present sea level.

Gwich'in

First Nations group living in the north-western part of North America mostly above the Arctic Circle. The Gwich'in are part of a larger family of Aboriginal people known as Athapaskans, which includes the Slavey, Dogrib, Han and Tutchone.

Inuvialuit

The Inuit people of the Western Canadian Arctic. Inuvialuit trace their origins to the Thule culture,

which developed in Alaska over one thousand years ago and soon after spread into what is now the Canadian Arctic.

Limestone

A hard sedimentary rock, composed mainly of calcium carbonate or dolomite, used as building material and in the making of cement.

Permafrost

A subsurface layer of soil or rock that remains below freezing point throughout the year, occurring chiefly in polar regions.

Shale

Soft, finely stratified sedimentary rock that has formed from consolidated mud or clay and can be split easily into fragile plates.

Scree

An accumulation of loose stones or rocky debris lying on a slope or at the base of a hill or cliff.

Syncline

A trough or fold of stratified rock in which the strata slope upwards from the axis.

Tuktut

Caribou in the Inuvialuktun language

Tors

Outcrops of bedrock that form pinnacles on mountain tops and valley sides.

Tussock

Small grassy hillocks found in tundra and elsewhere. Small tundra lumps without grass may be called *hummocks*. Both are common in permafrost environments, and can be challenging to walk on.