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Bathurst Inlet – A Natural Area of Canadian Significance



Cover photo: Wilberforce Falls.

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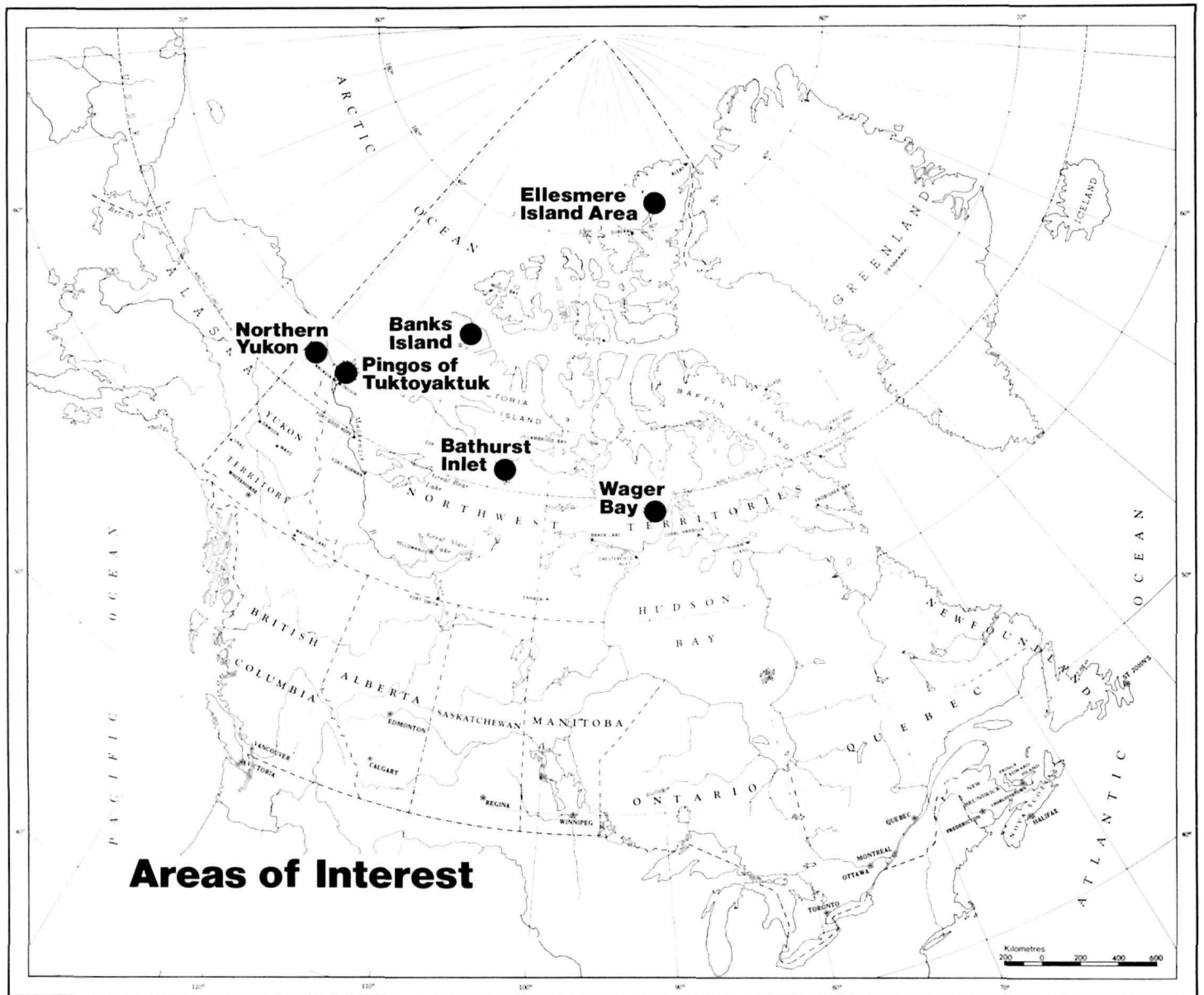
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Introduction

Natural Areas of Canadian Significance are areas which have been identified for preservation in a natural state and are representative of the major natural environments of Canada. They are special places which should be protected as a part of the heritage of all Canadians, now and in the future. The identification and protection of our important natural heritage areas cannot await or accommodate the advances of competing land uses. Action is required while the opportunities exist if the heritage of the past is to be passed on to the future.

Of course, there are many, many different landscapes in Canada, each with its own unique features that inspire love and pride in the hearts of Canadians. To identify the variety of Canada's landscapes, Parks Canada has divided the country into 48 natural regions. It is the aim of Parks Canada to set aside, in each of the 48 regions, an area of outstanding scenery or distinct features, that best portrays the region. So far only 18 of the natural regions have representative parks. Of the 30 regions without parks, 15 are at least partly in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Parks Canada, in its effort to further the completion of the national system of parks, has recently identified 6 of the more impressive natural heritage areas worthy of consideration for new parks. They are:

1. Bathurst Inlet
2. Wager Bay
3. Northern Yukon
4. Banks Island
5. Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg Islands
6. Pingos of Tuktoyaktuk



The Site

The landscape around Bathurst Inlet includes a striking combination of level tundra, rolling hills and rugged uplands. The steep sea cliffs and many islands reveal its origin as a drowned rift valley.

The climate, especially in the southern part, is mild enough to support many varieties of luxuriant arctic plant life and as a result it is a natural habitat for all the tundra mammals, including the largest herd of barren-ground caribou in Canada.

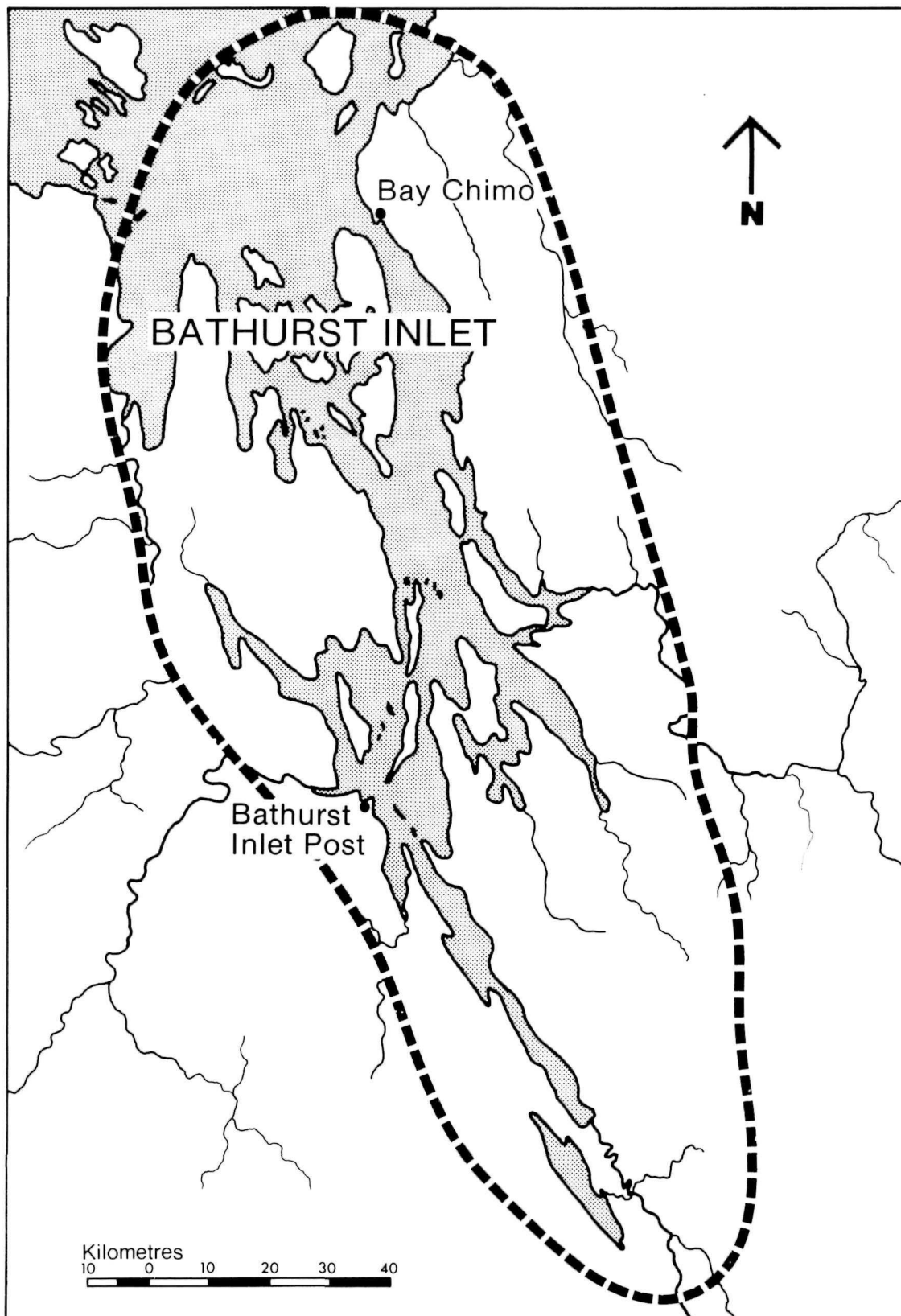
Although Bathurst Inlet is only two hours flight from Yellowknife, the local Inuit have remained quite isolated and continue to follow a more traditional way of life than any other group in the Arctic. Recent mining interest in the area and an uncontrolled increase in tourism may bring an abrupt end to this isolation.

The site under consideration covers approximately 13 000 km² (5 000 sq. miles) of land and water; however, no final boundaries have been determined.

1 Quadyuk Island

1





The Land

The shape of Bathurst Inlet reflects its natural history, that of submerged river system in a massive rift valley. From the lush, protected lowlands of the Inlet, sheer cliffs rise up to a broad, windswept plateau. Islands, some rising 315 m (984 feet) straight out of the sea, indicate an ancient landscape, now underwater.

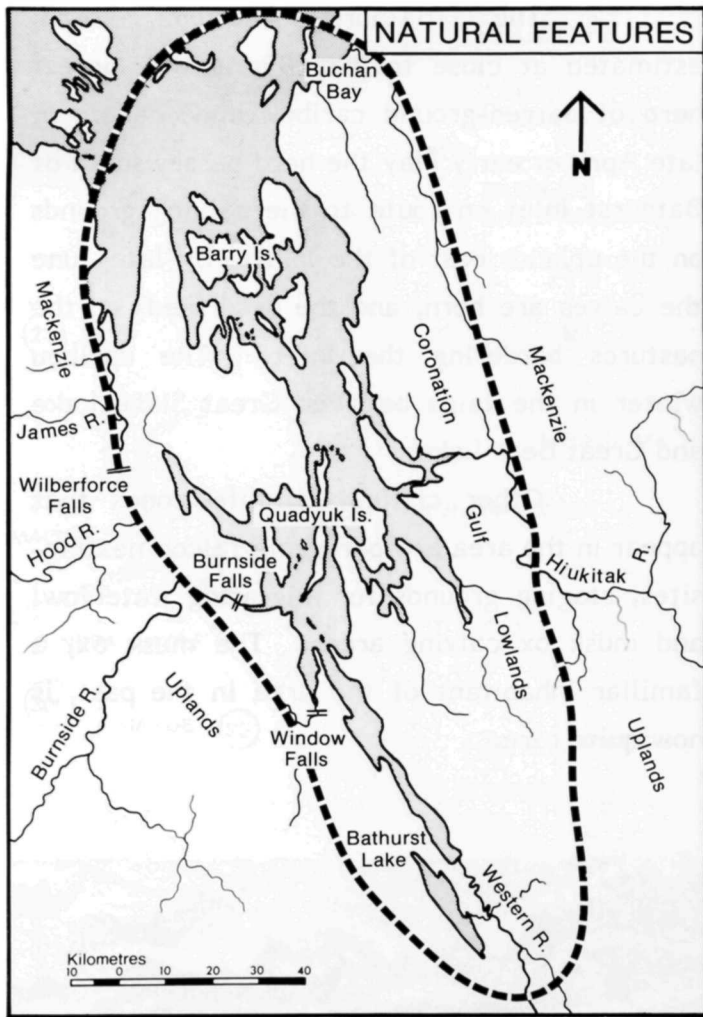
Although the coming of the great ice sheets did little to change the shape of the land, evidence of their passing can be found in the many glacial deposits around the Inlet. The early invasion of the sea into areas left depressed by the weight of the retreating glaciers has resulted in marine fossil beds being found as high as 210 m (700 feet) above the present sea level.

There are innumerable lakes and streams in the area. During spring runoff many of these streams become mighty torrents raging through rocky gorges and cascading to the sea below. Wilberforce Falls, one of the three most impressive, is the highest falls in the world north of the Arctic Circle.

- 1 Evidence of glaciation can be found in the varied landscape of Banks Peninsula
- 2 Striking scenery, northern Bathurst Inlet
- 3 Window Falls, one of the three major waterfalls in the area

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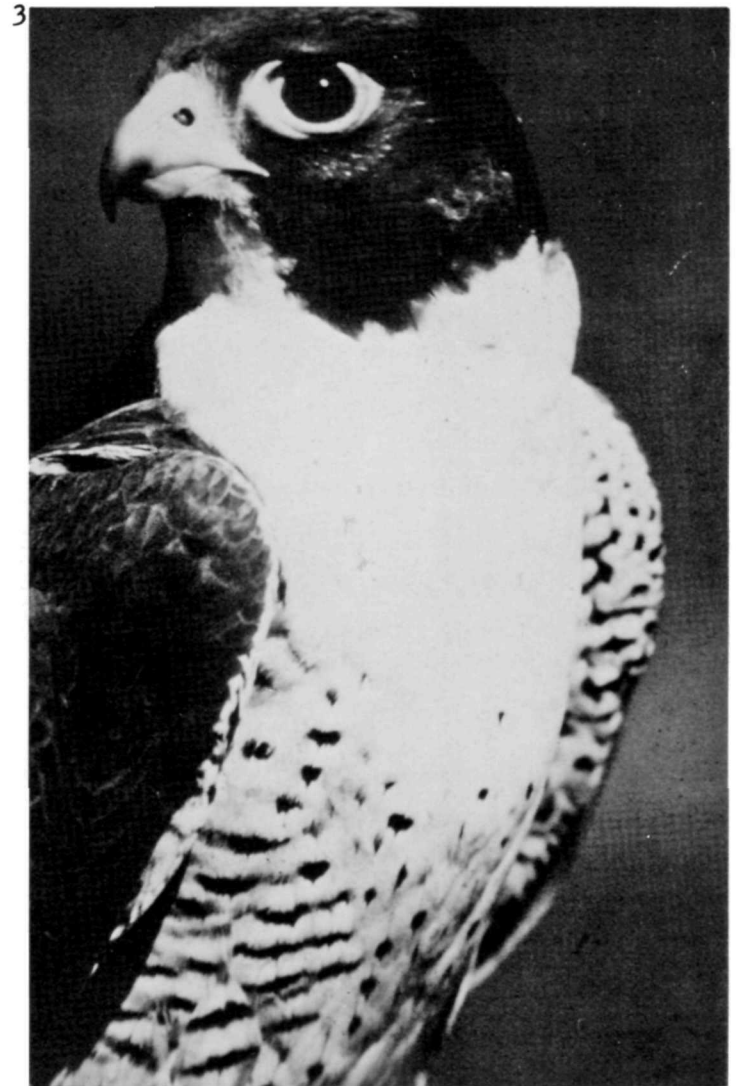
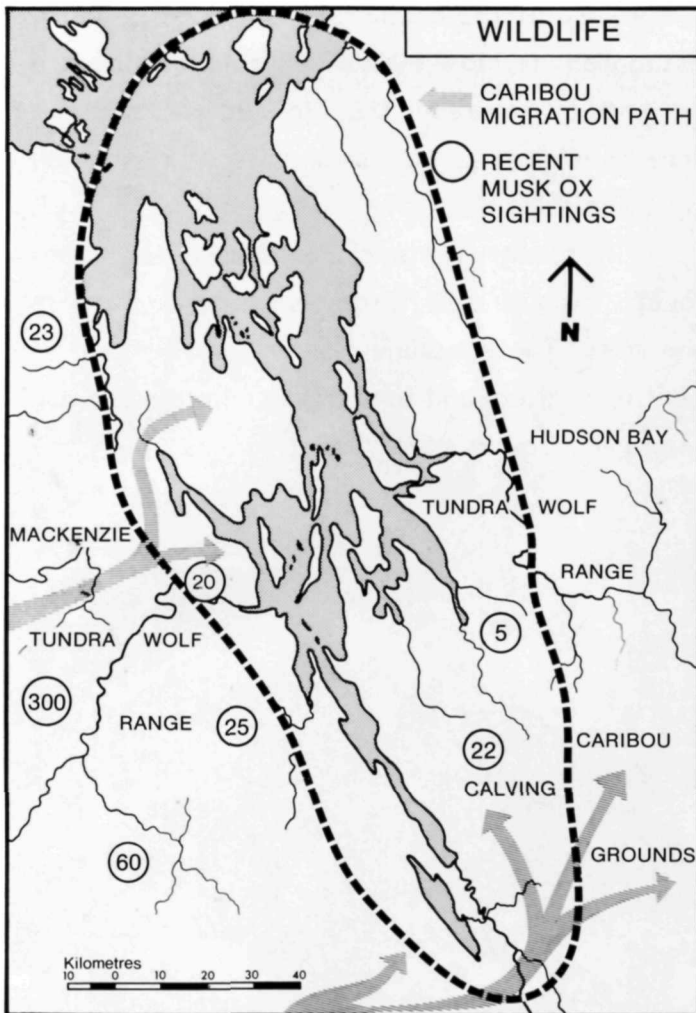
Vegetation and Wildlife

Diverse and luxuriant arctic vegetation flourishes in parts of the Inlet, particularly in the south where summer temperatures average about 6°C (10°F) warmer than at the mouth. As a result, the Bathurst Inlet area is a natural habitat for large populations of tundra mammals including barren-ground caribou, grizzly bears, wolves, foxes and hares, as well as for about 50 species of birds. The lakes, rivers and sea abound with many varieties of fish and large numbers of ringed seal, the only marine mammal seen regularly in the area.

The Bathurst caribou herd, estimated at close to 200 000, is the largest herd of barren-ground caribou in Canada. In late April or early May the herd passes south of Bathurst Inlet en route to the calving grounds on the uplands east of the Inlet. By late June the calves are born, and the herd feeds on the pastures bordering the Inlet. The caribou winter in the taiga between Great Slave Lake and Great Bear Lake.

Other critical wildlife zones that appear in the area are peregrine falcon nesting-sites, staging grounds for migrating waterfowl and musk ox calving areas. The musk ox, a familiar inhabitant of the area in the past, is now quite rare.





- 1 The Bathurst caribou herd in migration
- 2 The wolf is attracted here by the large number of caribou
- 3 The Inlet provides a breeding ground for perhaps the largest remaining population of the peregrine falcon, a rare and endangered species

Human History

When the first European explorers arrived at Bathurst Inlet it was inhabited by two Inuit groups, the Umingmaktormuit in the north and the Kiluhuktormuit in the south.

Traditionally both groups relied heavily upon the caribou as their major source of food and clothing, but musk oxen, seal and fish were taken when available.

Local deposits of soapstone and high quality copper provided the Inuit with materials for domestic utensils, tools and weapons.

Eight trading-posts were established between 1920 and 1935 but were soon abandoned. An Oblate Mission and a Hudson's Bay Company Post remained until the 1960's. Since the moving of these facilities the Inuit population has dwindled to about 150 persons.

Laws prohibiting musk ox hunting, the decline in the caribou herds, and the introduction of new hunting and fishing techniques have changed the pattern of Inuit life radically. Caribou are now less frequently taken; char are netted during the spring and fall runs; seals are netted in spring and summer rather than speared in winter; and fox trapping has become a regular winter activity.

Despite these changes and some government support, the Inuit of Bathurst Inlet are still deeply committed to following their traditional way of life, preferring it to moving to Cambridge Bay.

In recent years discoveries of archaeological sites and artifacts have been made in the area. These include stone blinds, remains of hunting shelters and tent rings along the caribou migration routes, and fishing weirs along the rivers.

1



2



3



- 1 Caribou hunter
- 2 Winter seal hunt
- 3 Fishing weir on the Hiukitak River

1



2



- 1 Bay Chimo is almost deserted in summer when Inuit move to hunting grounds or to temporary camps like this one
- 2 The netting of seals has replaced harpooning as a hunting method

If you would like to receive or contribute information on any of the six areas or to comment on their establishment as parks, please write to Parks Canada at one of the following addresses:

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Parks Canada Prairie Region,
114 Garry Street,
WINNIPEG R3G 1G1
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or

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