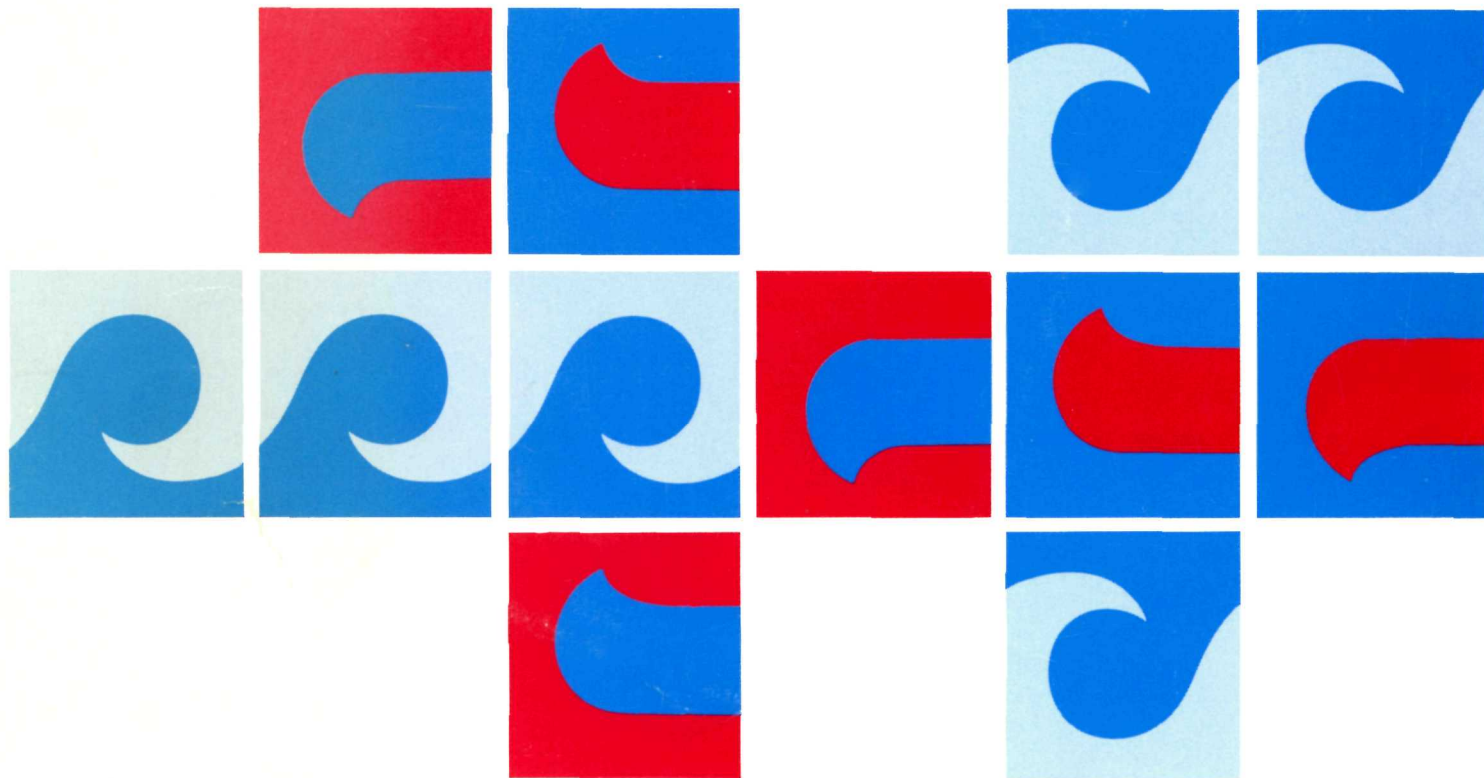




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Wild Rivers: **The Barrenlands**



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Wild Rivers:
The Barrenlands

Wild Rivers Survey
Parks Canada
ARC Branch Planning Division
Ottawa, 1979



Rocky Defile, Coppermine River

“It is difficult to find in life any event which so effectually condenses intense nervous sensation into the shortest possible space of time as does the work of shooting, or running an immense rapid. There is no toil, no heart breaking labour about it, but as much coolness, dexterity, and skill as man can throw into the work of hand, eye and head; knowledge of when to strike and how to do it; knowledge of water and rock, and of the one hundred combinations which rock and water can assume – for these two things,

rock and water, taken in the abstract, fail as completely to convey any idea of their fierce embracings in the throes of a rapid as the fire burning quietly in a drawing-room fireplace fails to convey the idea of a house wrapped and sheeted in flames.”

Sir William Francis Butler (1872)

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Metric symbols used in this book

mm - millimetre(s)
m - metre(s)
km - kilometre(s)
km/h - kilometres per hour
cm/s - centimetre per second
d - day(s)
h - hour(s)
°C - degree Celsius

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Foreword

Wild rivers are a priceless part of our natural heritage. Untouched by the march of man's technological progress, these waterways are the arteries of our land, and one of the main elements in its growth to nationhood.

Long before Europeans laid eyes on them, these rivers served the native peoples as sources of food and means of transportation. Later, the rivers were to carry the Europeans on voyages of exploration and exploitation throughout the vast interior of the continent. The settlers who followed travelled the same routes.

The waterways were the mainstay of the fur trade; they were the highways to the gold rushes. They did much to provide the economic nourishment through which Canada grew to its present stature.

With the advent of modern technology, some of our rivers were harnessed to serve our newfound needs. But thousands of kilometres of waterways, and the land they pass through, remain essentially untouched.

Today, Canadians are gradually rediscovering these fascinating wild rivers. They are recreating the adventures of the explorers; struggling over the same portages as the heavily-burdened "coureurs de bois", running rapids which once hurled "voyageurs" and their precious cargoes toward the markets of Montreal, gently floating down majestic rivers which once carried thousands of anxious prospectors towards the promise of gold.

Introduction

A canoe trip on any of the Barrenland rivers offers the canoeist a rare opportunity to enter an environment totally different from the lushly vegetated southern regions. It will require stamina to endure the portages and lining of rapids; courage to keep on moving when your body wants to rest and a great deal of spirit to keep from becoming discouraged by the huge expanses of water to be crossed and the elements that will be encountered.

The seemingly endless tundra as seen from the river can become monotonous, but does not compare to the frustrations the canoeist may feel, when facing the vast stretches of tundra surrounding the three big lakes, Beverly, Aberdeen and Schultz on the Thelon River. One searches the horizon for any hill or animal movement as a distraction from the rhythmic paddling.

The Barrens are truly an experience: certainly, one is not awestruck by grandeur as in rugged mountainous regions, but there is a feeling of space and timelessness to these vast expanses of rolling tundra. Stretching so far for so long, the Barrens tend to get on one's nerves and any diversion, no matter how insignificant, is welcome.

The Indian name for Barrens is Illechin-u-le, meaning 'no trees'. Without the trees as a wind break and over the wide expanses of the 190 km of open lake, winds can build up very rough waters and keep a party windbound for days. Swamping in heavy waves or violent rapids, could prove fatal. With little wood fuel for a fire to dry out wet clothes canoeists must be very cautious in their movements.

Climate

Reading books on the journeys of early explorers, such as, David T. Hanbury, J.W. and J.B. Tyrrell, Warburton Pike and Samuel Hearne will give the reader extra insight into the real character of the rivers and if one can relate certain points of interest to how they were described back in the early years of exploration, a new dimension is added to the journey. Maybe knowing that you have joined the ranks of those early explorers in surviving in this barren land gives meaning to your journey, with the added satisfaction that every paddle stroke reveals country that only a handful of other people have ever seen.

Climate is a very important factor in planning a canoe trip in the Barrenlands. Arctic summer lasts from mid-June until mid-August, but many of the larger lakes do not break up until mid-July. The summers are generally dry and sunny with average daytime temperatures around 13-16°, but daily maximums and minimums can range from -5° to 30°C. In June and July there can be more than twenty-two hours of sunshine daily. This allows long days of paddling, but watch out for sun-burn.

Autumn in the Barrenlands begins in mid-August and brings with it high winds and low temperatures. Arctic gales blow in quickly and may prevent canoe travel on lakes for several days.

Permafrost and lack of forest cover result in a high and rapid rate of run-off. What little rain falls during the arctic summer can cause rapid and drastic changes in water levels. During rainy periods, be sure to camp and secure the canoes well above water level. Portage trails are often harder to find during periods of high water.

Planning the trip

In planning a canoe trip in the Barrenlands, allow 25 to 30 km/d paddling on big lakes and 25 to 40 km on downstream sections with portaging. Always allow extra time and food for such unforeseen events as being windbound or delayed by rain.

If egress is to be by plane make such arrangements before you begin the trip.

Be sure to check with the R.C.M.P. giving them your route and expected time of arrival. And do not forget to check out with them at the end of the trip.

Permits for fires and fishing may be required. Extreme caution should be exercised in the use of fire. Campfires should be built only on rock or sand; when

breaking camp extinguish them completely with water, smother them with sand or soil, and stamp down firmly. All garbage should be packed out with you.

A sturdy canoe capable of handling well in rapids, equipment for its repair, are essential. Aluminum canoes were used throughout the wild rivers surveys, and proved most practical.

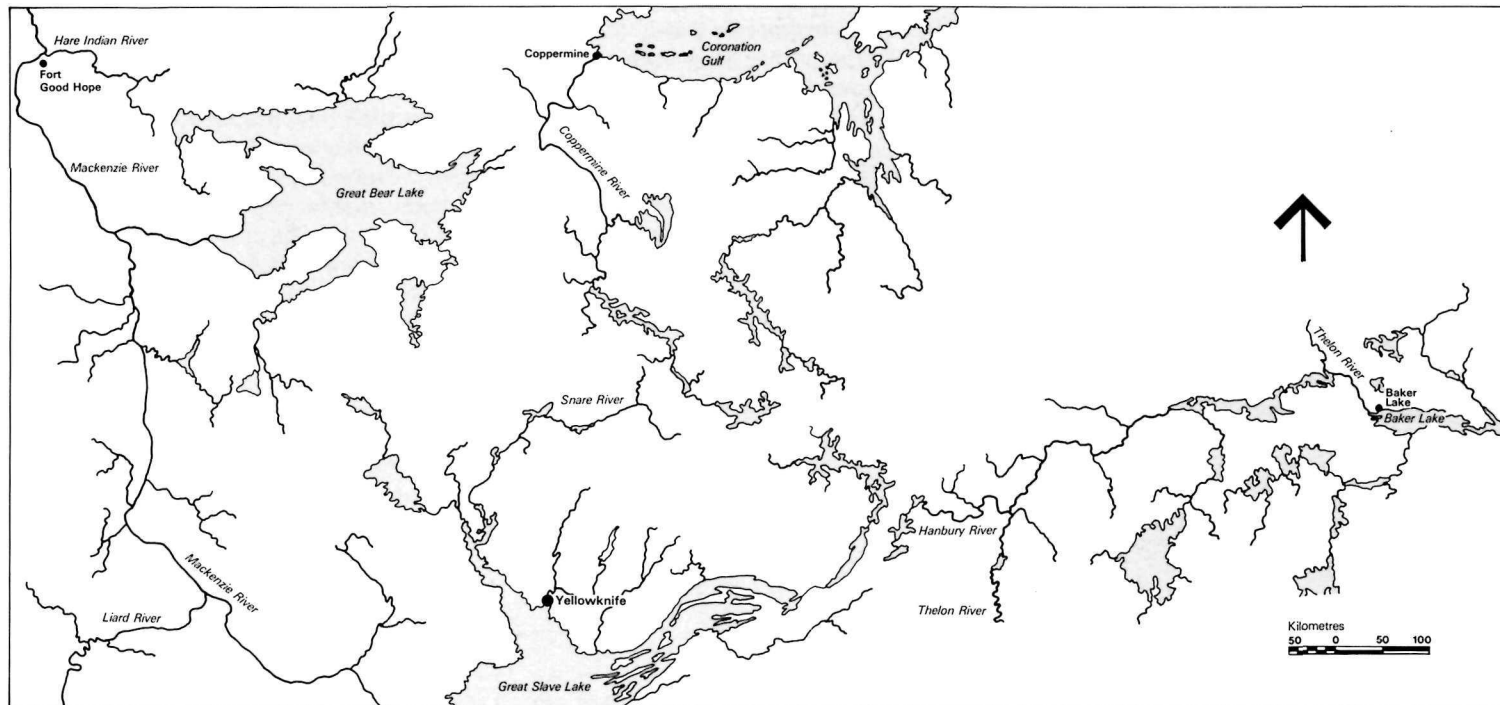
Since lining and hauling are often necessary, lengths of strong rope are essential. Several pairs of high-cut running shoes, or other sturdy footwear, which can take the abuse of rocks and constant wetness are also needed.

In the more isolated regions an emergency survival kit is advisable. The kit should contain high-energy food rations, waterproofed matches, fishhooks and line, and emergency rescue flares for signalling aircraft. These items should be well waterproofed; if the kit is small it could be worn on your belt.

Firearms are never necessary. Maps in the National Topographic Series are available from:

Canada Map Office,
Room 147, 615 Booth Street,
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0E9

Take careful note of magnetic declinations on topographic maps. True north and magnetic north as indicated by your compass vary considerably in the Arctic.



1 Hare Indian River

Hare Indian River

Access and egress

Map Required

Headwater lakes to Mackenzie River

Length

10 to 12 d (256 km)

No portages

Date of survey

August, 1972

The headwater lakes region is only accessible by float plane. There are no roads or trails into this area. Upstream travel is possible during high water levels from Smith Arm of Great Bear Lake to the headwaters of the river. During low water, however, lining and portaging may be necessary. The Hare Indian enters the Mackenzie five kilometres below the community of Fort Good Hope. An upstream paddle is necessary to reach the settlement where a float plane may be chartered.

N.T.S. 1:250 000 scale

96 K Lac des Bois

96 L Lac Belot

106 I Fort Good Hope

About the river

Geography

The Hare Indian flows through a subdued and gently rolling landscape typical of the barrenlands.

Flora

The region is thinly forested by stunted black spruce. Below the headwater lakes, white and black spruce intermingle in increasing density along the river's banks. Where the river widens and islands begin to occur, alder, poplar, birch and tamarack associate in increasing density with the spruce. Near the river mouth, spruce cover is 50% and poplar 40%. Willow bushes line the banks along the entire river and increase in density towards the mouth. Labrador tea, mosses and lichens comprise ground cover.

Fauna

The river abounds with grayling throughout its length. Northern pike frequent the headwater lakes, while inconnu, whitefish and pike are found in the lower reaches. Black bear and moose can be seen along the river and loons, whistling swans and numerous species of ducks nest along its banks. Ospreys and several species of hawks were noted.

The canoe trip

To enjoy this trip plan to go early in July when the water is relatively high. Navigation during low water conditions is difficult but at no time dangerous. The hauling of canoes over short stretches of gravel bars in the upper reaches will at times be necessary when the water is low. If the water is too low, then a trip should begin where river depth will enable an aircraft to land. In the upper reaches campsites are scarce but become more plentiful where the river widens. The last 16 km of river have either thickly vegetated or steeply inclined shorelines.



Upper Hare Indian River

The Hare Indian River

The uppermost of the two lakes which form the headwaters of the river is nine kilometres long and averages one kilometre wide. Connecting the lakes is a shallow, narrow and meandering log-jammed stream 2.5 km in length. Sweepers, and log jams occasionally cover the entire width of the stream. The second lake is 6.5 km long and one kilometre wide. Campsites along the shores of both lakes are few owing to the uneven covering of moss and partially stunted black spruce forest cover.

The Hare Indian River leaves the lower lake as a slow six-metre wide stream bordered by swamp grasses and black spruce. Three kilometres after leaving the lake the river widens to 60 m and has an average depth of 20 cm. This wide shallow reach of water extends three kilometres and flows between a small icefield 1.5 to 2 m thick. Below the area of ice the river again becomes narrow and relatively deep, characterized by a slow current in a meandering and very slightly incised channel. The width is 10 m the depth ranges from one to two metres and the velocity is less than 1.5 km/h. The banks are thickly covered with tall grasses

and bushy willow which are immediately backed by black and white spruce. The narrow channel along with the thick vegetative covering on the banks provides a corridor effect. For the most part this pattern continues for 72 km with the river increasing in volume and width slightly. In the upper reaches the smooth flow is interrupted at times by shallow and often rapid section which may necessitate the hauling of canoes. Eighty kilometres below the lakes region the river channel becomes wider and shallower and the

flow increases 5 km/h. Small islands, gravel bars and shoals occur at intervals from here to within 16 km of the river mouth at which point it becomes a single deep channel with negligible current.



Headwater lakes, Hare Indian River

2 Snare River

Snare River

Access and egress

Maps required

Winter Lake to the Power Plant and Dam Site

Length

15 d (241 km)

10 portages

Date of survey

June 15 to June 30, 1972

Access to Winter Lake is by chartered aircraft based in Yellowknife. Egress can take place at the town of Rae located on the east shore of Marian Lake. The Yellowknife Highway passes through Rae and leads to Yellowknife, 101 km to the southwest.

This river trip ended at the power plant and dam site located 16 km below Big Spruce Lake. The remaining 145 km of the Snare River was not canoed, but a brief description of this section of the river is given in this report.

N.T.S. 1:250 000 scale

85 J Yellowknife

85 K Rae

85 O Wecho

85 N Marian River

86 B Indin Lake

86 A Winter Lake

About the river

The Snare River is in the Mackenzie District within the Northwest Territories. Situated northeast of the Great Slave Lake, it trends southwest for 373 km in a river lake pattern to empty into Marian Lake north of the north arm of Great Slave Lake at Rae (62° 50' N. lat. 116° 5' W. long.). The headwaters of the river lie 1.5 km northwest of Jolly Lake (64° 7' N. lat., 112° 14' W. long.) 160 km by air from Yellowknife.

Geography

The river lies south of the southern limit of continuous permafrost. It straddles the dividing line between the Pre-Cambrian Shield in the east and the Interior Plains to the west. The river runs a pattern of river and rapid interspread by large lakes with no current.

Flora

Willow and alder shrubs often line the river banks. The gently sloping back shore is thinly vegetated with spruce, alder and birch. Ground cover consists of moss and lichen.

Fauna

Moose, beaver, caribou and bear inhabit the area along with several species of ducks. Loons, arctic terns, herring gulls and sandpipers were also seen. Lake trout and grayling can be caught anywhere along the river.

History

Parts of this route were well used by early explorers. Both Sir George Back and David T. Hanbury used sections of this route to continue their early arctic exploration in the mid-and later-1800's.

Sir John Franklin built Fort Enterprise on the north shore of the Snare near Winter Lake in 1820 as a winter home in preparation for his expedition to the Arctic coast the following summer. Very little of it is visible today.

The canoe trip

The first 48 km of the Snare to Winter Lake, consists of many interconnected small lakes. This section could not be canoed because of ice conditions. Mid-June proved to be the earliest time the river could be attempted.

Winter Lake to Snare Lake

The first 105 km of the trip takes one through three elongated lakes; Winter, Roundrock and Snare. Solid pack ice was encountered on Winter Lake, the first large body of water situated 48 km below the headwater, and only 90 m of water were open for paddling at each shore of

the next large lake. Luckily, enough open water was found on the southwest end of Winter Lake to allow a single-engine Otter aircraft to land. The result of this early start was that a large volume of water was passing through the river sections, producing many kilometres of unnavigable white water. The short rapid sections between Winter and Roundrock lakes both required portaging. The first, immediately below Winter Lake, should be portaged on the left.

Possibly, if water levels are lower in the latter part of the summer, this rapid could be run with an empty canoe. The route is well defined; avoiding the large standing waves requires little manoeuvring. The other two rapids may both be bypassed on the right.

Snare Lake to Indin Lake

Proceeding past Snare Lake into the 29 km rapid section, some very formidable rapids will be encountered due to the 85 m drop. The first three rapids are short and shallow and are easy to navigate. Portaging the 12 rapid sections that follow is hampered by difficult walking through granite rock knob topography and willow and spruce bog. If lining procedures are chosen, tangled willow and alder bushes overhang the undercut embankments creating a very difficult situation. Great care must be taken as footing on the boulders along the shore is precarious.



Water velocity varies from 15 to 24 km/h. The depth averages three metres, and rock ledges and shallow boulder accumulation characterize these white water sections. Geologically, the Indin Lake physiographic unit is comprised of faulted lavas and sedimentary rocks. In the distance can be seen the rugged Indin Hills with a local relief of 150 m and a composition of resistant lava structures. Immediate to the water level are granitic rock faces. Campsites are scattered but no great problem to find along this 40 km stretch.

Lining rapids on the Snare River

Indin Lake to Kwejinne Lake

The two rapid sections which drop 23 m and 25 m respectively in a distance of 23 km below Indin Lake had to be lined. A short meandering section follows the first marked falls which required a portage on the left limit. On most rapids encountered, straightforward lining and portaging conditions are present although care must be taken with the slippery rocks and boulders. Within this reach are sections of steep talus slopes dropping down to water level where huge boulders lie along the water edge.

Kwejinne Lake to the Dam Site

Both Kwejinne and Big Spruce lakes are typical of Pre-Cambrian physiography. The margins of the lakes vary from rock shelf to rounded and broken cliffs with intermingling spruce and birch valleys. Terraced boulders covered with moss border the river and provide adequate campsites for some distance inland. At the dam site communication is made with the outside world. The generating plant has a staff housed at the site.

Down Snare River from the Dam Site

Aerial reconnaissance between the power dam and Slemon Lake revealed approximately 17 rapids practically all unnavigable without lining and portaging. Rock ledges, boulders and granite cliffs characterize the shoreline, and cause considerable turbulence. This section is by-passed by a route of lakes and portages to the lower end of Slemon Lake. The lake route offers no more serious navigational hazards than were encountered at the rapids below Indin Lake. There are no marked rapid stretches of the Snare River below Slemon Lake.

3 Coppermine River

Coppermine River

Access and egress

Maps required

Length

17 to 21 d (320 km)

4 portages

Date of survey

July, 1972.

Historical water routes connected by lengthy portages enable one to reach the Coppermine, but a journey of this nature would be long and arduous. A more convenient alternative is to charter a float-plane from Yellowknife. Landing near Obstruction Rapids on Point Lake will cut out much of the lake paddling and leave a three-week trip down the Coppermine River. Once on the river there is no route in or out, except charter or commercial flights that run out of Coppermine.

N.T.S. 1:250 000 scale

76 D Lac de Gras

86 A Winter Lake

86 H Point Lake

86 G Redrock Lake

86 J Hepburn Lake

86 K Sloan River

86 N Dismal Lakes

86 O Coppermine

About the river

This river is located in the Northwest Territories and winds its way north from its headwaters at Lac de Gras (64° 30' N. lat., 110° 30' W. long.), to empty into Coronation Gulf near Coppermine (67° 50' N. lat., 115° 5' W. long.).

Geography

The Coppermine River runs through typical barrenland topography. Rock and boulder shorelines of glacial origin alternate with steep eroded sand and clay embankments and low marshy flood plains. Back from the river, barren hills reach an elevation of 710 m above sea level and can be seen in the distance. Terraced hillsides with low shrub and rock outcrops as well as snow in scattered crevices are prominent features and are characteristic of the September and Coppermine mountains. The topography does not level off as the coast is neared, but continues in sandstone cliffs and rolling barren hills. A canyon 40 m deep at Rocky Defile, and the red sandstone cliffs of Sandstone Rapids add geological variety to the landscape.

Flora

Ground cover typical of the Barrenlands includes strawberries, cotton grass, silverweed, sedge, bluegrass, horsetail, wheatgrass, cranberry and patches of black spruce. Black spruce stands 1.5 km deep border the river for 531 km of its 644 km length. Areas devoid of trees are above the narrows on Rocknest Lake and below Muskox Rapids and Coppermine. A transition zone allows small scattered patches of spruce to be found beyond these limits.

Firewood presents no problem until below Muskox Rapids when it is necessary to scan the shoreline for driftwood and broken trees pushed up on shore by ice movement. Back from the river, hills are sometimes covered with dwarf birch and willow at their base followed by heath, lichen, and boulders in ascending order.

Fauna

Moose are frequently seen on the Coppermine, as well as whistling swans and various species of ducks. Arctic char, lake trout and grayling are easily caught everywhere.

History

In the summer of 1771, Samuel Hearne and a party of Chipewyan Indians reached the Coppermine River after a long and arduous journey from Fort Churchill, Manitoba. Hearne struck the Coppermine about 50 km from the sea, and by following the river down to the last rapid, he became the first European to reach the Arctic Ocean. *En route*, Hearne's Chipewyan companions came upon a party of Eskimos fishing for salmon. Despite Hearne's protest, his Indian companions massacred the Eskimos. In memory of the massacre, Hearne named the rapids Bloody Falls.

The man credited with the first explorations of the entire river is Sir John Franklin. In 1821 Franklin journeyed from Obstruction Rapids on Point Lake and followed the river to the sea. The country was unvisited by Europeans from 1851 until 1902 when David Hanbury ascended the Coppermine River. The chronicles of these explorers' gruelling adventures provide excellent background reading for anyone planning to canoe the barrenland rivers.

The canoe trip

Because of the extensive ice cover on Point Lake this part of the Coppermine River was not surveyed, and the trip begins near the outlet of Redrock Lake.

Redrock Lake to Rocknest Lake

This 65 km stretch of the Coppermine River is lake paddling with open stretches up to three kilometres long and averaging 1.5 km in width. A minimal current of 30 cm/s and strong headwinds blowing out of the north and northwest can slow progress.

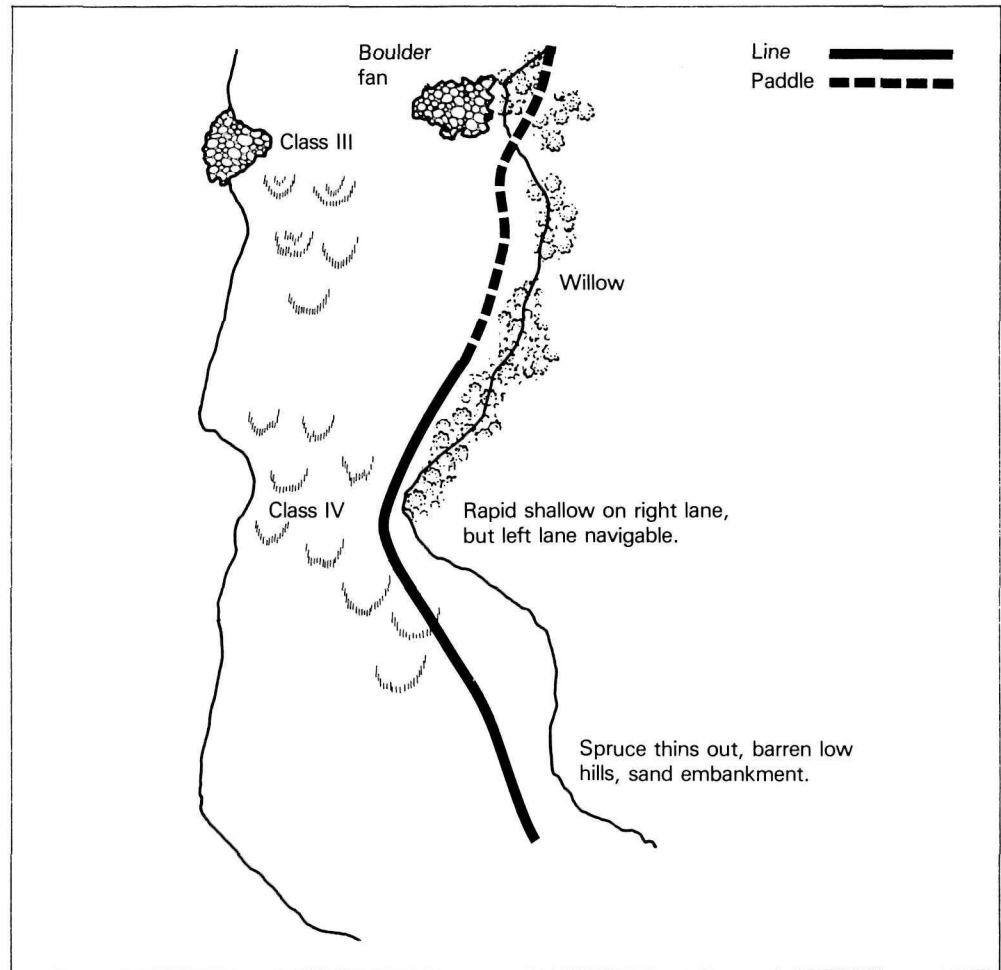
The first rapids are encountered in the narrows between Redrock and Rocknest Lakes. One is merely turbulent riffles and the other an S-pattern with 50 cm high standing waves at the end of the run. Both are navigable.



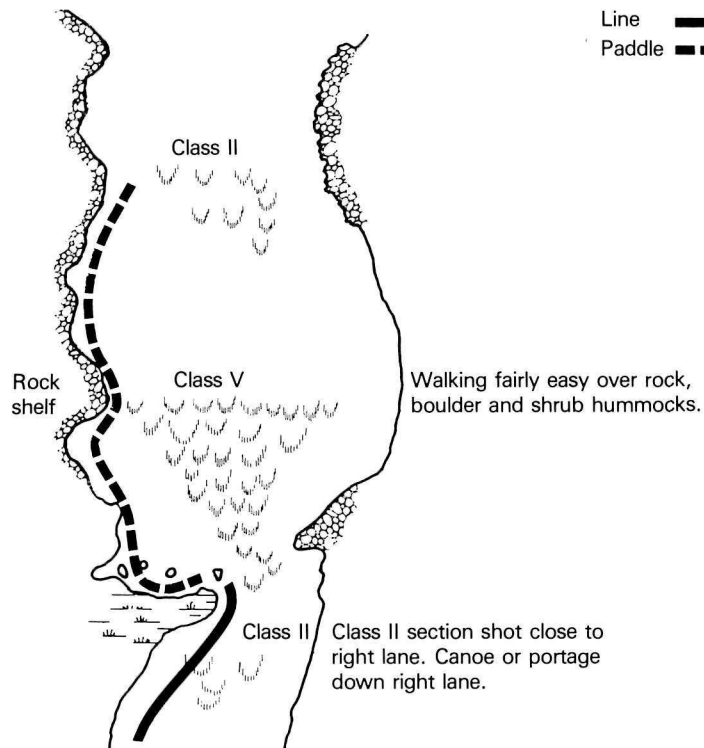
A scene on the Coppermine River

Napaktolik River to end of Hepburn Lake

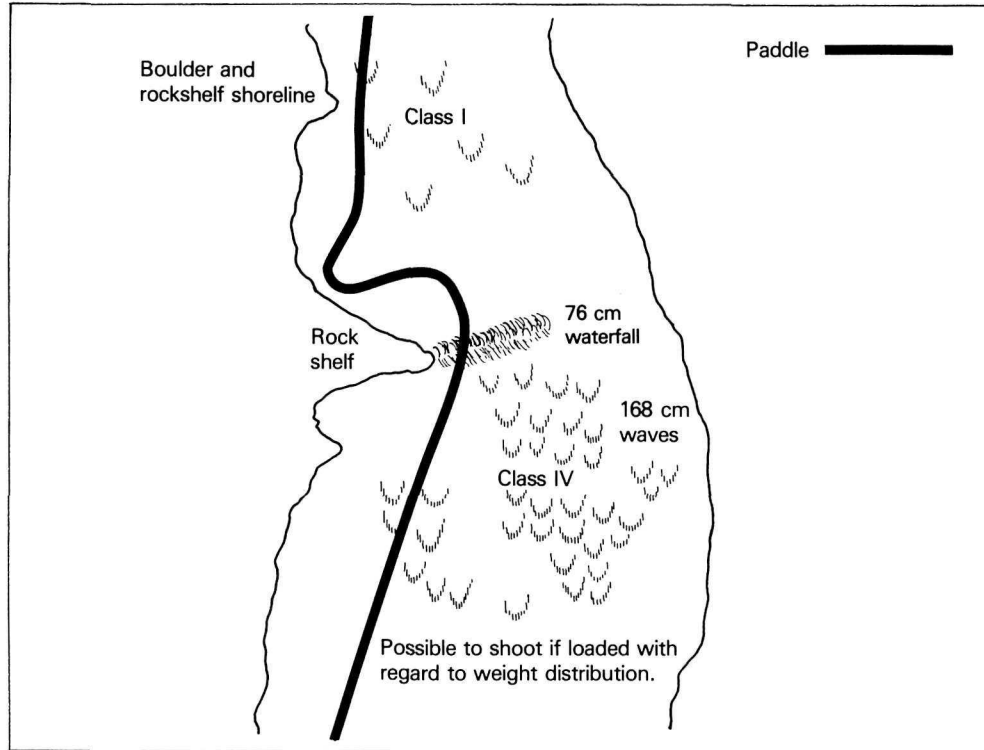
This 193 km stretch enables the canoeist to average 32 km/d, as the Coppermine narrows to 500 m with a velocity of 1 to 3 m/s. Four rapids will be encountered 1.5 km past the Napaktolik River. A distinct characteristic of many Coppermine rapids are the boulder fans at the foot of the rapid. The first rapid can be partially lined and then run down the left limit. The



Rapid No 1, Past Rocknest Lake



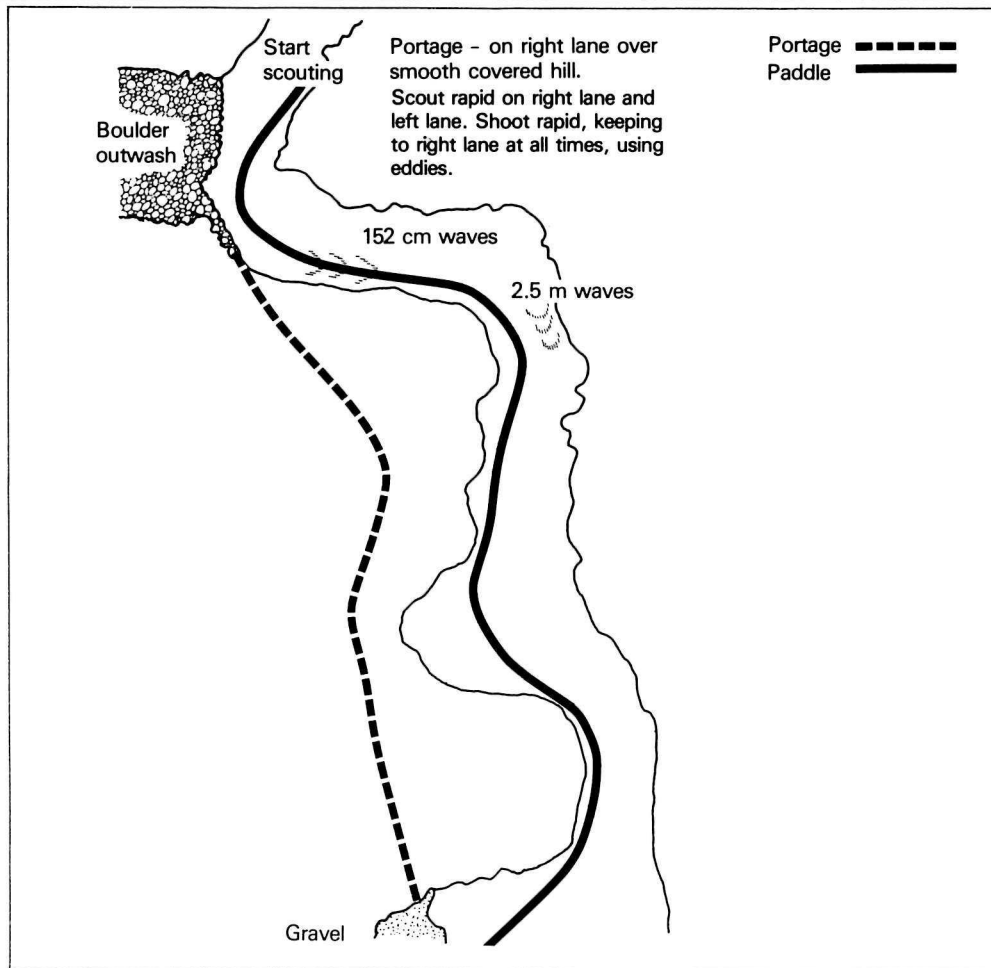
second rapid may be portaged on the right limit over rock, boulder and shrub terrain on a level slope, or lined down the right limit past high standing waves. One can then navigate the lower section of the rapid. Lining is comparatively easy with no bushes at the shoreline. The third rapid provides a challenge and may be run along the right limit over a one-metre ledge. The current is very strong forcing the canoe into two-metre high standing waves. The wide spacing of the waves allows this rapid to be navigated success-



fully. The fourth rapid section is close to 1.5 km long and requires manoeuvring around boulders on its right limit. A distinctive sand-bluff on the right signals the end of rapids as the river expands into 1.5 km lake pattern with a narrowing mid-section. Barren hills are ever-present in the distance.

The set of rapids marked on topographical sheet 86 J was shallow, ending in a boulder fan that extended across the river. It is best navigated by running left of the island and keeping left on this channel. Two more boulder fans are encountered before the junction of the Fairy Lake River. Some hauling was required to complete the first run but the second of these rapids was congested with large boulders at its base and considerable lining was required along the right limit.

Fairy Lake rapids are about 1.5 km long with boulder fans and shallows. Some precise manoeuvring is necessary but otherwise, the rapids posed no problems. A current is perceptible although very strong headwinds were encountered in the next 32 km stretch. A 48 km paddle of 5.5 h is a fair estimate of the progress that can be expected on the middle section. Campsites are few in this stretch of the river because the low marshy flood plain makes access to the backshore difficult.



Sloan River to Muskox Rapids

In the next 114 km before the Big Bend site, the river narrows considerably; swirls and boils occur frequently in mid-stream. At Big Bend, the current velocity increases to 1.5 m/s in a narrow 55 m section. Boils and swirling water continue in a narrow channel with the exception of another widening before Rocky Defile Rapids. A three-metre standing wave marks the mid-section of this impressive 60 m deep 500 m long canyon. Throughout the river's meandering course in the canyon, large standing waves and strong whirlpools challenge the canoeist's ability to safely navigate this dangerous stretch of water. A lightened or empty canoe should be used if this rapid is attempted.

Sticking close to the right limit and utilizing small eddies allows one to avoid huge waves on the outside of the corner. A portage can be made on the right. Walking is easy over low shrub and hummocks with steep grades to be climbed up and down at either end of the portage. The river never loses a good current from this point to Coppermine and many unmarked rapids provide continuously good canoeing waters. Several large islands in the stretch below Rocky Defile Rapids seemingly decrease the width of the river's channel, and cobble shallows are common. Many unmarked rapids were encountered before Muskox Rapids were reached.

Often boulders and shallows must be avoided in the 6 to 10 km/h current. Camping sites are not ideal, but level spots can be found inland from the boulder beaches and below the steep thinly-treed embankments. Mud between the boulders was quite damp due to ice melting during the day.

Muskox Rapids to Bloody Falls

Scouting from the hills close by and at water level revealed two sections of Muskox Rapids to be much closer than the topographic sheet 86 O indicated. A rock point on the right, before a sharp right turn, hides the second rapid from view. Five hundred metres of relatively calm water separates the two rapids. The first may be run down the middle with relative ease. However, the second was

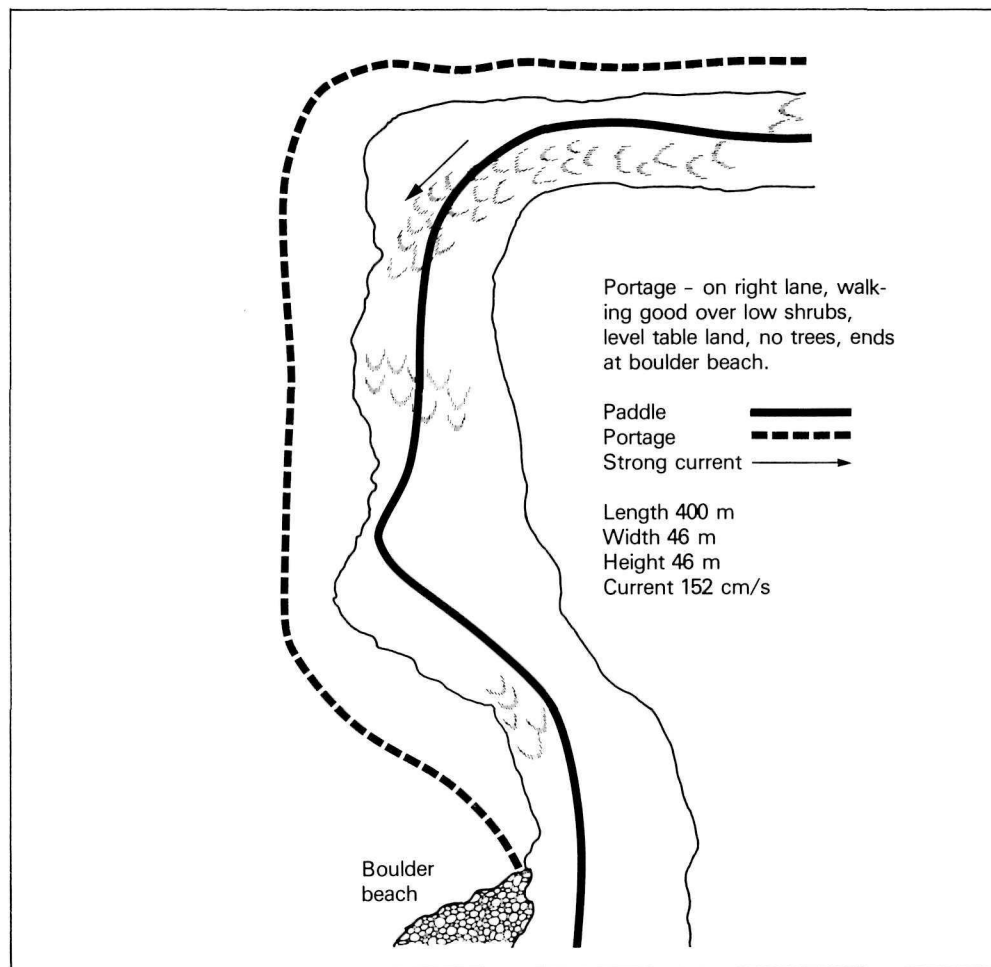
more difficult, with high standing waves down the centre and a short rock ledge with difficult standing waves immediately following. A back eddy after this ledge allows an easy, fast exit if one chooses the left limit. The other alternative is a 500 m portage on the left limit over easy walking terrain. Two kilometres below the second rapids the river splits around a boulder island. The left channel was free of boulders and no trouble to navigate. Immediately after the island there are several unmarked rapids that are easily navigated. Beautiful 50 m red sandstone cliffs indicate the approach of Sandstone Rapids. Canoeists are advised to keep to

the left and very close to the cliff face on the first section of the Sandstone run. There were several large boulders to skirt, but an exciting fast ride around these enables one to avoid a one-kilometre portage with a steep 30 m cliff to be negotiated at the beginning. Sandstone is a difficult rapid and should not be taken lightly. Before Escape Rapids is a series of rapids usually occurring where the river turns sharply. As a general rule it is possible to avoid large standing waves on the

outside of curves by staying close to the inside corner. However, in the last rapid of this series rock ledges force the canoeist to enter the middle channel. Here one-metre waves from all directions bounce the canoe about. No sooner has one bailed the canoe than the awesome Escape Rapids are seen in the distance. Scouting these rapids is best done from the cliff top on the left limit. The usual rule of sticking to the inside curve cannot be followed. Two-metre waves roll along the left limit, then at the left corner, push the water hard over to the right limit. The water goes over a boulder ledge halfway down the rock wall before relatively calm water is reached. This difficult rapid can be run, but extremely hard paddling is necessary. It is a challenging rapid and, if

time and weather do not preclude drying out in case of a swamping, well worth the ride, wet or dry, to avoid a 1.5 km portage on the right limit. If the canoe has swamped, avoiding large waves off the rock point at the end of the rapids is difficult; otherwise the waves are easily avoided.

Continuing below Escape, another rapid is navigated by going right around a large boulder island. This channel is easier and shorter than the left. A few unmarked and runnable rapids follow before Bloody Falls is reached. In total, some 23 rapids are found in this 60 km stretch and it is difficult to tell where one finishes and the other begins.



Escape Rapid, Class IV



Bloody Falls to the Town of Coppermine

Bloody Falls turned out to be more of a formidable rapid than a waterfall. There are upper and lower sections, both with standing waves high enough on every side to swamp canoes. The lower part of the rapid has been run before, close to the left limit, but the water levels during the survey definitely overruled this idea. Bloody Falls can be portaged on either side. In the remaining 16 km the Coppermine River presents one more rapid that requires some manoeuvring to avoid the shallows and boulders. The water is quite murky from the white sandstone above the falls. The river is 1 to 1.5 km wide and

has a good current. A few buildings and an electric generator five kilometres below the falls indicate the proximity of Coppermine and the end of a long and challenging journey. Nearing the end of this section it is advisable to stick close to the right shoreline to catch the current and avoid sand shallows and bars connecting low-lying alluvial islands.

The Coppermine is a river that should be attempted only by canoeists experienced in white water. The region is totally isolated; the water is fast and cold and serious mistakes can be fatal.

4 Hanbury and Thelon rivers

Hanbury — Thelon Rivers

Access and egress

Map required

From Sifton Lake to Baker Lake
Settlement

Length

40 d (758 km)
8 portages

Date of Survey

August 2 to September 11, 1972.

Access to the area is by chartered aircraft from Yellowknife. Road access is possible to Yellowknife from Edmonton, Alberta. Egress at Baker Lake is possible via scheduled air service to Churchill or Yellowknife.

The trip began on Sifton Lake (63°45'N. lat., 106°30'W. long.) 58 km downstream of Campbell Lake, and 402 km east-northeast of Yellowknife, N.W.T. The trip terminated at Baker Lake Townsite on Baker Lake (64°18'N. lat., 96°4'W. long.).

N.T.S. 1:250 000 scale

75 O Artillery Lake

75 P Hanbury

65 M Clarke River

66 D Tammarvi River

66 C Beverly Lake

66 B Aberdeen Lake

66 A Schultz Lake

56 D Baker Lake

About the river

Geography

The trip begins in an area of transition from moderately heavy spruce forests and rocky knoll landscapes into true barren-land topography. Seen from the air there are snakelike sand eskers and the colourful green-brown lake flats patterned by polygonal frost upheavals and caribou trails.

Flora

The area around Sifton Lake consists of thin forests scattered in patches over boulder-strewn, hilly lands, covered with dwarf birch and willow as well as lichens, mosses and heath.

Rock and boulder lined shores and occasional thickets of arctic willow hamper access inland to the level tundra. Odd spruce stands and granitic cliffs, dot the backshore adding a bit of interest and variety to an otherwise unchanging environment.

Fauna

Caribou grizzly bears, wolverines, muskoxen, wolves, arctic foxes and ground squirrels, were seen during this trip.

History

Routes of the early explorers of this river system, the Tyrrell brothers and David T. Hanbury, are still followed today. In 1893-94 the Tyrrell brothers, J.W. and J.B., followed the Thelon from the east end of Beverly Lake to beyond Baker Lake.

In 1924-25, John Hornby and Capt. J.C. Critchell-Bullock made an investigation of the wildlife on the Thelon for the Canadian Department of the Interior. A concern for the endangered muskox population gave rise to the establishment in 1927, of the 38 850 km² area known as the Thelon Game Sanctuary for the preservation of this disappearing species.

The historic site of John Hornby's cabin can be found near B.M. 528 as shown on the Tammarvi River Sheet 66 D. It was in this cabin that John Hornby and his two companions starved to death, apparently depending for food on a caribou herd that never came. Three wooden crosses mark the site where the men were buried. The cabin is somewhat difficult to detect from the river as it lies about 45 m inland among thick stands of spruce and willow trees.

The canoe trip



The outstanding recreational feature of this river is not its white water, nor its scenery, but the opportunity it affords to view wildlife in its natural habitat throughout the Thelon Game Sanctuary. A permit must be obtained from the Territorial Wildlife Branch to travel this river system. All firearms will be sealed and cannot be used without good reason.

It is advisable to plan the trip for July ending during the first two weeks in August to assure the best weather. After mid-August, the weather can be very unpredictable and the party may be forced to abandon any schedule to wait out stormy days. Winds are the biggest factor to contend with on the Barrens. Without the trees as wind break and over the wide expanses of the 193 km of open lake a party may be windbound up to 10 d at a stretch.

Along the route to Beverly Lake one may have to store driftwood for fuel. Beyond Beverly Lake to Baker Lake, the party should have a small stove. Some piles of driftwood are available up to the junction of the Dubawnt River but after that, wood becomes very scarce.

Sifton Lake to Northern Outlet of Hoare Lake

Sifton Lake lies 56 km downstream from Campbell Lake, the headwaters of the turbulent Hanbury River. Campsites can be found anywhere amidst the boulder-strewn shoreline. Access is somewhat hampered by a boulder beach usually stretching 10 m inland.

After 13 km paddling on Sifton Lake, the current becomes perceptible at the first narrows, where the Hanbury River really begins. Low water levels at this time of year may cause heavily-loaded canoes to ground on unmarked boulder swifts. Careful manoeuvring is essential.

The first marked rapid shown on the Hanbury Sheet 75 P is boulder stream but may be run following the current. At the base of the rapid a fan has formed with the most navigable channel near the left limit. If a portage is decided upon, the left limit provides the best route around this rapid and may easily be crossed. A stone marker on the horizon indicates the general direction to be followed.

Rock cairns have been placed in critical locations by Eskimo hunters to signify events that have taken place there. More often than not, they mark the route of the

river at several critical points and serve to assure the canoeist that the right route is being followed. Following the wrong channel is easy. Strict attention to a compass bearing and shore outline is very important.

The second marked rapid on the Hanbury topographical sheet requires a 15 m haul over a rock shelf on the right limit, so as to bypass a ledge rapid 150 cm in height. A short portage could be made on the right limit beginning just above the ledge. Shallow, boulder-strewn waters mark the approach to this ledge. Below the ledge a boulder fan spreads out but it can be navigated by following the main current.

Boulder shallows are characteristic of the narrow section of the river above Grove Rapids. These shallows need not be portaged, although some manoeuvring is required to avoid huge boulders.

Grove Rapids is 1.2 km of strenuous work. A portage over uneven and rocky terrain is possible on the right limit. Choosing to line and shoot the rapids calls for a lot of strenuous hauling, tricky lining and tight manoeuvring.

The second section of the Grove Rapids was a maze of exposed jagged-rock islands that divided the river channel in two. Lining, hauling and manoeuvring will be necessary to follow the left channel. The first stock of dead spruce was found on the left limit of this rapid and provided a welcome fire. A stretch of 7.5 km of good current lies ahead before the next marked rapid is reached. The river meanders, dropping 50cm/km through several easy swifts.

Hanbury Lake looms large and expansive in contrast to the closed-in quarters of the Grove Rapids. With a strong south-east wind its five-kilometre expanse can generate waves that could "windbind" a crew. A few spruce groves dot the flat landscape in this region.

The rapid at BM 1048 is best portaged on the right limit over rock boulder and shelves by a three-minute walk.

Within the next 15 km stretch, sand flats provide the only distinctive topographical feature and several swifts are encountered. In the narrow sections terminating at BM 1039 is a rapid formed by a ledge. Except for the boulder fan and ledges at its base, this rapid is navigable on the right limit around a sharp right corner. The final drop will require some hauling and should be approached carefully.

Swifts separate the last two five-kilometre reaches, before a Water Resources cabin is sighted high up on the right shore. This cabin is on a cliff overlooking the marked rapid before Hoare Lake. The rapid which goes through a 16 m canyon of reddish rock was only swift water at the time of the survey. Hoare Lake is a further 2.5 km down river.

Campsites are fairly easy to locate up to this point. Rock and boulders hamper access inland from the shoreline but above the embankments the level tundra offers possible sites if the wind is light.



Typical scene on the Thelon River

End of Hoare Lake to Junction of Hanbury and Thelon Rivers

Below Hoare Lake, the Hanbury loses its characteristic lake and river pattern as it narrows considerably. A perceptible current flows over a boulder bed causing several small rapids. The shoreline is composed of boulder beaches and gently sloping barren grasslands. Odd spruce thickets and granite cliffs dot the backshore. The river takes a sharp U-turn eight kilometres above MacDonald Falls and changes course to south-southeast.

The approach to MacDonald Falls involves two rapid stretches which can be navigated quite easily. A good campsite can be found on the left limit immediately above the falls and provides a good base for the 230 m portage. The first drop of the falls is three metres and is followed by swift but fairly calm water. Two more shallow boulder ledges bring the river to a

calm below, amidst sand bars and boulder beaches. Portaging this fall is not difficult, as the hike is downhill most of the way, apart from the first easy ascent to the level tundra above the river.

Dickson Canyon is approached through swift water and two easy rapids. The canyon itself is a three-kilometre stretch of completely unnavigable water for numerous ledges and small falls throughout its narrow 60 m wide reach create turbulence. The river descends in a succession of S-turns, through the 30 m deep canyon and past an old abandoned river bed. A 10 m falls after the third turn is an impressive sight sending up spray as it crashes against the steep canyon walls.

The portage on the right limit is long and arduous and with four trips and rests will take seven to nine hours to complete. The trail passes by a three-metre gorge formed by an old river course and through some wetland but generally the walk is over gentle sloping tundra terrain. One and a half kilometres may be cut off the portage by ending the route at a small cove just below a steep hill covered with dense spruce. This cove is below the last of the ledges and canoes can be launched here, although the surging water makes matters difficult. A 60 m paddle in the swift waters below this cove takes the paddler around a left turn into a boulder fan rapid, which seems best to run along the left limit. In sections, considerable manoeuvring is necessary and in one spot the main current drops the canoe through a boulder-strewn chute on a sharp right and then left turn. Ten minutes of easy paddling follows this.

The Hanbury River sheet shows that Ford Falls is a part of the Dickson Canyon rapid and the portage goes around both sections; however, there is no need to portage both, for a calm section after the boulder fan allows 10 min of paddling before entering a narrow 90 m stretch of swift water leading to the falls. The portage has steep grades on either end, but is level for most of the route. The seven-minute portage ends at the base of a steep, heavily-vegetated sand embankment. A boulder fan rapid stretches for 500 m below the falls and can be run along the right limit.

Spruce groves through this section provide adequate firewood. The final 19 km to the junction of the Thelon River has an 8 km/h current.

A section of extensive sand bars and shallows occur before Helen Falls. The approach to the falls involves a 180 m rapid with one-metre ledge in its upper portion. This can be lined along the right limit with a crossover made to the left limit so as to land just above the 12 m falls.

The portage around the falls on the left limit can be made as short as thought wise. The shortest route involves a portage of 30 m over the rock shelf on the left limit to a precipitous three-tiered cliff, just to the left of the base of the falls. Lowering the canoes down this six-metre precipice is probably best done by a chain of people standing on the shelves. The 150 cm ledge at water level is just wide enough to hold the canoes and gear. Surges and turbulence caused by the falls create some difficulty in loading. The rough water continues for one kilometre before a ledge hampers progress. Here, the canoes must be hauled over the ledge, then launched in an eddy. The current is strong and requires effort to avoid the cliff wall in attempting to get out of the eddy.

This is the last major obstacle before the Hanbury-Thelon junction is reached and indeed, is the last major obstacle on the voyage to Baker Lake. Several boulder swifts are encountered *en route* to the junction, but no portages are necessary. For the remaining 612 km it will be the weather rather than the rapids that will cause any hindrances.

The junction of the Hanbury and Thelon Rivers is an impressive sight. Barren tundra gently slopes away from the river edge and sand flats stretch out over the water downstream creating shallows and some riffles.



Thelon River, near Clarke River

Mouth of Hanbury to West End of Beverly Lake

There are few suitable campsites along the 26 km stretch from the Hanbury-Thelon confluence to Grassy Island. Sand bars stretching far into the river make access to dry and level ground difficult.

The journey from Grassy Island to the site of John Hornby's cabin is a day's paddle through waters that, for the most part, are calm with only three or four riffles breaking the surface over the next 40 km. The width of the river varies from 250 m to 1 km and the depth is less than three metres in the main channel. Shore-

lines are composed of gravel and sand. In this section caribou and musk-ox may frequently be seen.

A swift current carries the canoeist down to Lookout Point and past extensive sand flats of pure white sand. Thick willow brush and the occasional stand of spruce provides the only covering of any height in this area. The current remains good to Beverly Lake with one or two short swifts occurring in narrow sections.

The river banks narrow close to the Thelon Bluffs. A Canadian Wildlife Service cabin stands on the left limit upon an embankment preceding the first large bend to the Bluffs. The rapid at the Bluffs is formed as the water turns sharply to the right through cliffs of sandstone. On the outside curve the standing waves may reach up to high water mark. This rapid was easily run close to the right limit.

Barren hills rising to 160 m above water level are seen on the south shore until BM 291 is reached. From that point on, the distant scene takes on a grand scale, as the sand flats of Beverly Lake are neared.



West End of Beverly Lake to East End of Schultz Lake

Even though Beverly Lake is the smallest of the three large lakes to be crossed, it looks very expansive. As a general rule, it is wise to wait for a fairly calm day or night before setting out across these lakes. It is also best to stick quite close to shore wherever possible in case a strong blow suddenly springs up.

The largest expanse of water crossed on Beverly Lake was a passage of 13 km before the protection of a maze of deltaic sand and cobble islands was reached. This maze continues for the last 24 km and disguises the entrance of the Dubawnt River from the south. On the south shore of Beverly Lake and on many of the islands, large quantities of driftwood have accumulated on the boulder and gravel beaches.

Upon leaving Beverly Lake our party took the first channel to the east leading over to Aberdeen Lake. The comparatively narrow section between Beverly and Aberdeen lakes had a slow current that picked up perceptibly, while the embankments rise to six metres in height on either limit.

Aberdeen Lake is 77 km long. Distances become impossible to judge and even the closest line to a receding shoreline cannot be estimated accurately. Following a compass bearing did not prove nearly as satisfactory as just keeping close to the shore. This is covered with boulders and cobbles and a gentle embankment of heath and sand leads up to the level tundra, where the view of gently rolling hills stretches for kilometres.

Average progress was 5.6 km/h. This, of course, depended on the winds and their direction over the 77 km expanse of lake. During the canoeing season from early July to late August, winds and cloudy weather will likely occur. In fair weather, crossing Aberdeen Lake is a two-day journey but 64 km/h winds can keep a party windbound for days. On many of the hills, and especially around Aberdeen Lake, there are rock cairns placed in prominent positions by the Eskimos. In 1893, J.W. Tyrrell mentioned the existence of these stone pillars at the east end of Aberdeen Lake and indeed, in spots that could be identified, they are still standing today.

Finding the outlet of the lake is somewhat difficult if the canoe is far out on the open water. A compass bearing and the 150 m hills are reliable guides. Thirteen kilometres of open lake paddling past gravel and cobble islands brings the canoe to a narrows that has a current of 3.6 km/h in a 500 m to 1 km wide valley. One last widening is quickly passed before the rapids leading into Schultz Lake are encountered. This was merely turbulent water during the survey and was located 1.5 km farther upstream than the map indicates.

Upon entering Schultz Lake, one immediately is impressed by the rugged range of hills on the north shore. These hills stand in hues of red, grey, green and brown – the autumn colours are quite intense in the early part of September. Schultz Lake varies little from the two previous lakes.

East End of Schultz Lake to Baker Lake

The last stretch into Baker Lake is one of the most enjoyable portions on the whole Hanbury-Thelon system. The current varies from 11 to 13 km/h and the river averages 270 m in width. The 10 steep gravel and schist banks provided a closed-in sense of speed not experienced since the river narrowed before Beverly Lake.

The Halfway Hills are the most distinct topographical feature and rise 200 m. angling towards the river all the way to Baker Lake.

The first set of marked rapids was run on the right limit and presented no problems at this time of year. The second rapids are 322 m wide and over 640 m

long. The many shallow channels were studded with large rock islands and smaller boulders. The rapids was run with little difficulty along the right limit.

A few minor rapids are encountered before reaching Baker Lake but all are easily navigated. Deltaic sand flats mark the entrance of the Thelon River into Baker Lake. From here Baker Lake community lies 13 km down the left side.

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Western Canada

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