

My Trek on the Canol Heritage Trail

by Bryan Much

My first introduction to the Canol Heritage Trail was when I read an article in the August 96 issue of Backpacker Magazine describing someone's experience trying to hike it. Although the author was not able to complete the entire trail, his article inspired me to take a shot at it. Although I have backpacked, camped, and even dog sledged, I never really took a trip this far out into the wilderness. My outdoor experience and training as an Army officer would serve me well, I thought, if I made a good assessment of the risks and planned to minimize them where I could. In February 97 I decided to make the trek.



Jonathan Phibbs and Bryan Much at Norman Wells Canadian Legion Post prior to setting out on the trail

My assessment led me to believe that it was not wise to make this trip alone. I started looking for a partner for the trip. Another Army officer I work with, Jonathan Phibbs, is usually up for adventure and when I approached him it took about five minutes for him to say he wanted in.

I conducted several months of information gathering, assessment, and planning. I upgraded some of my existing outdoor gear to ensure I had quality gear across the board.

I sought out information about the trail from the Norman Wells Historical Center, two books, a pamphlet, several brochures and magazines, and a few Norman Wells residents. I obtained World Aeronautical Charts, 1:250,000 topographic maps, and 1:50,000 topographic maps. Nearly all of the 1:50,000 maps were printed in black and white. I also obtained government pamphlets and brochures on hunting, fishing, firearms, customs, and bear safety. This information was particularly helpful. I also read six books about grizzly bears and their behavior. (What I learned was there aren't many consistencies in their behavior.) I exchanged faxes with North-Wright Air concerning flying, food drops, and costs. North-Wright impressed me with their efficiency and service. Carolyn Wright, and her daughters, were very kind and helpful as were the rest of their employees.

For background information, the Canol Pipeline was a US Army Corps of Engineers project undertaken during WWII to get oil to Alaska. Oil was being shipped along the Pacific coast, but it was vulnerable to Japanese attack. Someone decided that it would be better to build a pipeline across the wilderness from Norman Wells (NWT) to Whitehorse (Yukon). At Whitehorse, a refinery had been shipped from Texas and reassembled. The pipeline amounted to a 4" pipe that was laid on open ground. Accompanying the pipe was a narrow gravel service road. Constructing the pipeline was an extraordinary undertaking - bigger than the Alaska Highway was at the time. No roads or railroads led to Norman Wells. All of the hundreds of miles of pipe had to be brought from the south over frozen rivers and lakes or by barge during the relatively short open water season. Timbers for bridges and wood to build thousands of culverts also had to be shipped from the south. As quickly as

the pipeline was completed, it was abandoned. The pipe was sold and salvaged in 1947. All of the bridges have been destroyed by ice or floods. Most of the trail is intact in some form - even as a shadow of what it was - but much of it has been completely obliterated from the landscape. Remnants of vehicles, equipment, and supplies brought there during the war are reasonably well preserved and are visible along the length of the trail. They include abandoned pump stations, vehicles, radiators, empty cans of antifreeze (US Army markings), tires and wheels, oil drums, sections of pipe that were not salvaged, and scattered abandoned wanigans (caboose on skis)- none of which are serviceable. We were walking a 222 mile portion of the pipeline route. The portion beyond McMillan Pass to Whitehorse is actually a gravel road maintained for mining operations in the area. We were starting at McMillan Pass and crossing the wilderness back to Norman Wells (the opposite direction). Norman Wells is still isolated. Access is by barge (in summer), airplane, or on a seasonal winter ice road along the Mackenzie River. Norman Wells is an industrialized town of about 650 people. Esso maintains an oil drilling operation there.



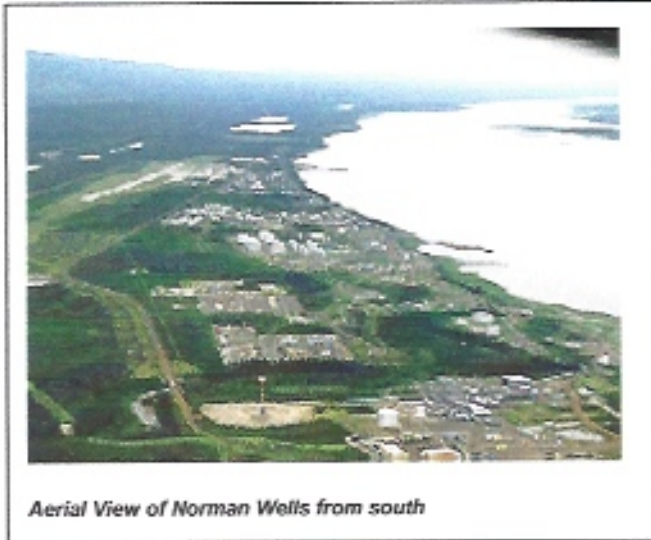
Our 737 Cargo/Passenger ride north

On 14 Jul 97, we left Chicago headed for Norman Wells. After being delayed in Toronto at Customs (no trouble, just a long line and a close look), we arrived at Edmonton, AB, for an overnight stop. Since it was already late, and we had an early flight, we slept with our baggage in the airport lobby. The next morning we boarded a Canadian North 737 cargo/passenger plane - "The Spirit of Norman Wells". The front of the plane contained a cargo pallet while the rear contained standard

passenger seating. We understood the schedule to be a daily flight from Edmonton to Yellowknife, to Norman Wells, to Inuvik and return by the reverse route. The approach into Yellowknife revealed a barren landscape. Water, rock, and scrubby vegetation reminded us we were coming into the sub-arctic. After a one-hour stop, we headed to Norman Wells. We landed in the rain. I noticed that the pilot didn't waste any time getting the wheels down at the very beginning of the wet 6000' runway. At the other end, we reverse taxied back to the terminal. The terminal is a modern and pleasant structure that was about four years old. Carolyn Wright thoughtfully met us at the baggage claim (I guess we were easy to pick out) and took us around town to do our business. We made our bush flying arrangements, got fuel, meals, a place to stay (thank you Carolyn!), hunting and fishing licenses, beer, and managed to trade a cap or two with some of locals.



Yellowknife Airport



Aerial View of Norman Wells from south

Our plans had been to fly out the next day. Weather kept us in town for the next two days. Since rooms in town were full, we stayed in a very nice cabin that the Wright's kept at their float plane base.

By Friday, 18 July 97, we were anxious to get going. We had covered most of the attractions in town (historical center, Legion Post, restaurants, a Coast Guard boat docked on the Mackenzie River). The historical center had an interesting library of video tapes that helped us pass the

time. One was about the Canol Project and showed some interesting film of it being built. Some other interesting films were about bush flying and ice roads.



Twin Otter at float plane base

On the 18th we got the call. North-Wright was able to get the weather along our route by talking to hunting camps on the short wave radio. Apparently there is a network of outfitters and pilots who exchange information about remote parts of the region. Although it would be close, we could make it through the mountains. We loaded up our gear and took off. We planned to fly our hiking route on the way to mile 222 so we could get a feel for the varying terrain and

ecosystems, and take a look at the river crossings. We were not able to make Devil's Pass, near mile 108, since it was blocked by clouds.

As we flew, I noticed that the pilot carefully followed our route on his chart which was annotated with hand drawn red lines that were possible routes through the mountains. On the way we saw several hunters/hikers and a few caribou. We were awed by the beautiful scenery and the remoteness of where we were headed. Being a pilot, I was impressed by the bush flying our pilot was doing.



Scud running the mountain passes

Hugging mountainsides and clearing passes under low clouds takes a lot of concentration. I also appreciated how taking a wrong turn could put you in a dead

end ravine that you might not be able to get out of. I noted some of the "airstrips" we flew past. Some didn't offer too much.

At last the airstrip (a good one) at mile 222 came into view. The mountains of the continental divide at the Yukon/Northwest Territories border were nearby and quite scenic. After a quick recon of our strip I noticed our pilot snuggling his seatbelts down tight. I did the same. The pilot put it down on a narrow strip of undulating gravel. We unloaded our gear and noticed the air was a little cooler and a little thinner. The pilot pulled two five-gallon gas cans out his plane and poured them into his left wing tank. He said good-bye, started up his plane (with a little difficulty), and headed out. We both watched the plane until it was out of sight. At this point it sunk in that we were on our own and had 222 miles of hiking to do to get out of the wilderness. Oh well, let's get going.

Our first water crossing was only a few hundred yards down the trail. We took off our boots, put on our water shoes, and waded across. It was cold, quick, and clear. Grizzly tracks caught our eye and kept us watching the bushes.

Airstrip at mile 222



High alpine tundra



We walked about 14 miles on the 18th. The first four miles of the walk were uphill. I noticed that I never really seemed to get my breath - which I attributed to not being acclimated to the elevation that approached 5000 feet. The weather was cool. Between frequent water crossings, perspiration, and a strong cool breeze we chilled quickly during rest stops - lasting only about five minutes before having to trek on to

restore warmth. We got a little dehydrated the first day as we hadn't yet settled in to a routine of drinking and eating in accordance with our needs instead of waiting until we were hungry or thirsty. Eventually we got to Pump Station Six. It was a sorry site. Lying in a ravine along a tributary to the Intga River it was soggy with a lot of water running about the surface. Someone had converted the pump house to a makeshift horse corral (using empty fuel drums as a fence) and it was a

Pump Station 6



mess. A second building at the site offered no shelter. A window had been pushed in; apparently by a bear attracted to some abandoned bags of nutrition supplements for horses. We found a dry spot next to the pipeline road and pitched our tent. We hung our food on the roof of one of the buildings. That night it rained.

On the 19th we got up, packed up, and ate breakfast. We took advantage of an outhouse that was still serviceable since the war. We headed down the trail stopping to look at abandoned vehicles and equipment. At this time I didn't yet appreciate that most of the equipment we saw was low capacity compared to today's standards. When we got into the tougher portions of the trail, it was hard to believe the scale of work they did with these small vehicles. As we marched on in our damp clothes I started to get chafed. After much aggravation, I discovered that it was better to walk without underwear. We also settled down to a better routine. We would eat a freeze-dried entree for breakfast, eat two power bars at intervals during the day, and eat another freeze-dried meal for supper. At breaks we would take off our boots to dry our feet. We tried to manage changes of socks and sock liners to take care of our feet. Later we would discover that all the shoe and sock changes mattered little, we were still going to end up with wet feet every day.

The valley of the Intga River and Caribou Pass were beautiful places in the treeless barrens. We trekked on the clearly visible shadow of the Canol Road. The going was good - except for washed out water crossings that were sometimes tricky. The going along the trail must also have been good for animals as well. We were walking along the tracks of an adult grizzly bear and her cub. I noticed that her rear footprint was larger than my size 11 ½ hiking boot. Ptarmigan were everywhere. It seemed like a Ptarmigan would appear on the road a few feet in front of us as if to lure us away from a nest. The birds were so close we could have killed them with a rock.



As we approached the Intga River, we were surprised to meet some people on motorcycles. A bearded man with his wife and children rode up to us on a two wheeled and a three wheeled motorcycle. A dog was running behind. He told us that he had been checking a cabin that they maintained further down the trail. The man apparently was a guide from the Old Squaw

Lodge that is about ten miles in from where we landed. We understand that the Old Squaw is a private wilderness lodge that people visit to study animal, plant, and bird life on the barrens. We talked for a little while, mostly about the grizzly sow and cub. As we talked about the bear, the bearded man's eyes searched the hillsides. In a few minutes, we parted on our separate endeavors. That night we camped near Caribou Pass having made about 15 miles.



On the 20th we heard a high flying jet. We also saw a bush plane twice. We made good mileage; about 15 miles. By now we were suffering blisters. Careful maintenance and taping kept them bearable. Again we made a lot of water

crossings and spent a lot of time in a narrow gorge. We also came across a lot of grizzly tracks. Having been spoiled by low vegetation and sweeping visibility, the change to the limited visibility of the gorge was not comfortable. The ecosystem was changing as small trees were starting to appear in the valleys. After looking at some abandoned equipment, we camped in a quarry. We carefully burned all of our garbage.

On the 21st we continued down the Ekwi River toward Godlin Lakes. The scenery continued to awe us. It was like being in a slide show of beautiful vistas. Each scan of the valley and surrounding mountains was inspiring. The trail got tougher and more overgrown. In a couple of spots, extensive rock washouts obliterated any sign of the trail at all. When crossing a broad rock wash, we would have no idea as to where to even search for the trail on the other side.

Fortunately, some hunting outfitters in the area used horses. Piles of dried horse manure served as guide posts in areas where the trail disappeared. I suppose that the horse manure lasted a lot longer in this climate than it would at home being that it was frozen much of the year. In fact, I noticed this about a lot of animal



Broken bridge (Ekwi River)

waste. It was concentrated on our route. Later in the evening we came to Pump Station Five. There was a fuel tank and a few buildings there, but they were in poor shape. We thought about staying there - in one of the ruined buildings - but not finding suitable shelter, we pressed on another couple of miles to an outfitter's cabin at Godlin Lakes. We made about 12 miles that day.

At Godlin Lakes we enjoyed one of the highlights of our trip. We stopped outside the electric bear fence (charged by tractor batteries) surrounding the "cabins" of Ram's Head Outfitters. There was a small grass airstrip and a float plane landing site on a nearby lake. We met Kris Lashmore of Cremona, AB and Alan Jones of Calgary, AB. We asked if we could camp nearby and they suggested we set up our tent right outside the fence gate. We put up our tent right on the trail. Awkwardly we felt each other out and soon made friends. The guides invited us into their main cabin (made of abandoned telegraph poles from the trail) and we sat at a table and talked. They offered us coffee, tea, and baked snacks. Inside the cabin was a big wood stove apparently abandoned by the Army. A



Godlin Lakes we enjoyed one of the highlights of our trip. We stopped

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Godlin Lakes airstrip/camp

short wave radio crackled occasionally, powered by Caterpillar tractor batteries that were solar charged. My partner and I signed in to their notebook where visitors registered. Mentioning we were Army officers, the guides told us that Chuck Yeager was scheduled to fly in there to hunt on 16 August. We talked about the trail we had covered so far and the trail ahead. I told the guides how much we appreciated their horses keeping the trail open and the horse manure marking the indistinct spots. When we first met, the guides studied us pretty carefully. One observed that we were wisely carrying a shotgun full of slugs. They laughingly referred to bear spray (capsicum pepper) that we carried as "backpacker picante" - making it clear that they held little stock in its value.



Ram's Head guides at Godlin

As we talked about the trail, the guides pointed out that some people wanted to make the area a provincial park. This would restrict much of the activity carried out there and would certainly prohibit hunting and guns. From what I could tell, there were only a very few visitors to the area - maybe a dozen backpackers and the few hunters and naturalists that could afford to get there. This was vast country. There is a marginal gravel road that ends at the

Yukon - Northwest Territories border near where we flew in to start our hike. Because of this, the western end of the Canol Trail is more accessible. People can be trucked in to the Old Squaw Lodge and horses can be ridden fifty miles to Godlin Lakes. After Godlin Lakes, the terrain and accessibility get tougher and the potential for visitors (other than through hikers and fly in hunters/fisherman) gets much less. Leaving the area in its current wilderness state, regulated as it is now by fish and game laws, seems to best serve those who use it.



Bryan Much

We talked about bears and the guides at the lake told us they got charged by a grizzly a few days ago while packing out a sheep. A shot in the air at about 20 yards sent the bear packing.

We talked about through hikers. The guides thought that they saw 6-8 through hikers a year. They said that some walk from 222 to Godlin where they are picked up by air. We looked at pictures that they kept at the lodge. Most were hunting and fishing.

The guides told us that they keep food and fuel caches stashed throughout the area. The Piper Cub outside had 32' tires and can land in some pretty tight spots. Once they had a Cessna 150 wreck on their airstrip.

The guides said that they often encounter bears while on horseback and try to chase them to condition them to stay away.

They keep the camp open from about 1 Jul to 15 Sep. It is a two-day ride on horseback to get the 50 miles back to 222. Last fall they went out with snow up to the harness on the horse.

The guides warned us that when it rains, the washes run hard. When the rivers get high, they get very high. We would discover exactly how serious this was in short order.

I inquired about drinking water. Phibbs and I filtered all of our water to purify it. The guides had a long hose that they used to divert water from a nearby stream directly into their cabin. I asked what they did to purify it - nothing! They kept a screen on the far end to keep the chunks out and that was all. I was very surprised. There was animal manure all over the place and certainly giardiasis was a threat. In fact, we carried prescription medicine to overcome giardiasis in case we had a problem. Apparently it is not uncommon for people to draw unfiltered water to drink.



Jonathan Phibbs in the Ekwi



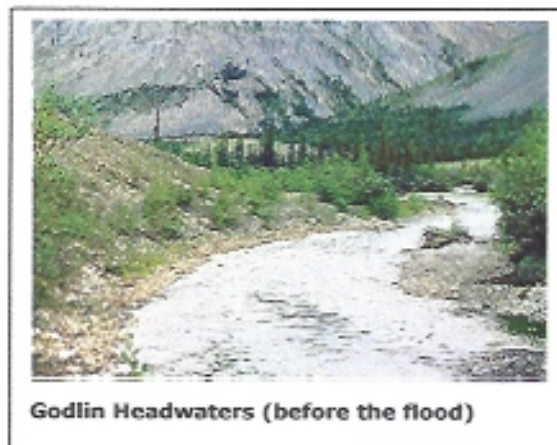
What Rain Does

The guides pointed out that when they go back south they have a hard time adjusting. After walking or riding horses, things go by too fast when you first return to driving a car.

Time for bed. Phibbs and I returned to our tent where we slept comfortably. The guides warned us that their horses were "down by the river" but that they would come back in the morning.

The next morning, the 22d, we awoke to horses standing all around our tent. One was pushing pretty hard on the fabric so I punched him in the nose with my fist to get him to back off.

Phibbs and I got up, ate, packed and sorted our gear. We had our pilot drop our first resupply package with the guides at Godlin on his return trip. We sorted through the drop and found that we were not consuming at the worst case rate we planned for. We happily donated our excess supplies to the guides at Godlin. The night before one of them had given me a fishing lure, recommending that I use it further down the trail. As we packed up, a helicopter dropped in. Inside was a Deputy Minister for Tourism, a woman I believe, who was doing some business in the wilderness.



Godlin Headwaters (before the flood)



Trail Between Godlin and Twitya

As we packed, the guides went and rounded up two horses (tricking them by hiding the harness behind their backs) and hooked up a primitive wagon. They said they were going to get wood and pointed out that it was difficult to keep wood around with women in the camp (their wives/families). They offered to give us a ride on the wagon. Up for adventure, and willing to save a mile walking, we jumped on. It may have been better to walk because it was a rough ride. A mile down the trail they turned off to cut wood. We headed down the trail toward the Godlin River. After shaking hands and heading

out, Phibbs and I talked about what nice guys the guides were. I genuinely enjoyed the time we spent with them.

We got down to the Godlin and made the crossing. The water was cold and clear and had a moderate current. Today it started to rain. The trail disappeared from time to time in some steep banks and washouts. We had some difficult trail. We camped at a wash. It continued to rain.

On Wednesday, 23 July, we continued along the Godlin in the rain. It had been raining for 20 hours when we came to a wash we couldn't cross. Black silty water was charging down the side of the mountain in a narrow gorge. Rocks were cracking and banging as the current rolled them down the steep grade. Not yet knowing that the primary danger of this trip was water and not grizzlies, we decided to find a way to cross. We scouted up and down the steep wash but found nothing suitable. The danger here was that if you lost it during the crossing, there was probably no stopping you from being washed all the way down the mountain into the Godlin which had since swelled into a muddy raging torrent with standing waves. Phibbs and I found that we could probably negotiate one spot by working across an oddly angled gravel bar to a narrow spot only about six or eight feet wide. I volunteered to go first. I worked my way across the bar maintaining my balance by holding onto a taut safety rope that Phibbs held upstream while I balanced with a walking pole. Even on the bar, the current pulled at my feet trying to send them down river. When I got to the final narrow crossing, I inched my way into the current. My legs and feet seemed to tremble as I tried to keep my footing. When I got into the worst part, I was trapped. I could not go forward or backward without losing it.

As I stood there, trying to hold on, a rock rolled down in the current. It hit my shin hard, scraping the skin open, and then dropped onto my foot. I don't know why I didn't lose it right then but I held on. Even though the water was only a little above knee deep here (anything higher and I would have been swept away), it rolled up my thighs and over my chest, sometimes splashing up to my face. My feet would



Drying Out

shift and I would have to catch myself. Finally I looked out the side of my eyes toward the shore (I was facing upstream) and decided to lunge for the slower current next to the bank. I was sure I could scramble to safety. I announced my intentions and timed it with Phibbs so he would give me some rope. Since I had no real purchase to push off with my feet, I sort of fell toward the shore and scrambled like hell, grabbing for a branch at the same time. I made it! My bright red gore-tex parka was now black red and two slightly smaller than fist-sized lumps of muddy silt were inside the outer lining, filtered out of the muddy water as I stood trying to keep my balance.

Now it was Phibbs' turn to try. With me on the far shore, it should be easy to get him across. I had the rope and all I had to do was pull him in if something went wrong. Phibbs took the same route and had the same trouble trying to hold on in the current. He started to wobble and then both feet were swept out from under him. He went face down into the black water and started to be washed downstream. I took off running with the rope and pulled him from under the water onto the bank where he continued to hold onto the rope with his head down. As he got to the bank, he scrambled out of the water. His hair, face, and clothes were black with silt. We did a little dance to celebrate the crossing. Had we been wiser, we would have waited a day - but we didn't know that until now.

We hurried down the trail to find a campsite, build a warming fire, and dry out. It was hard to find a place to camp. We were on a steep mountainside. Eventually we found a spot only slightly inclined that was above a cliff that dropped about 140' to the Godlin. We built a fire, got water, and set about to cleaning up.

As we worked about the camp, Alan (one of the Godlin guides) flew over in a float plane. He was barely moving, perhaps 50-60 knots and appeared to be carefully surveying the raging Godlin - or perhaps he was checking on us. We waved to signal all was well and he answered by wagging his wings.

I remember the warm feeling I got when I saw the plane and we acknowledged one another. We were cold, wet, camped on a hillside above a cliff, listening to the Godlin roar and listening to rocks crack and bang in the current. We lost part of our potential escape route should we encounter a bear, and it had been raining for over 20 hours. On top of all of that, we just learned a bad lesson about water in the mountains. Seeing someone and making a connection with the outside was comforting.



On the 24th, our goal was to get off of the Godlin River. We wanted no part of crossing raging washes and by no means wanted to cross the Godlin in its current state. We walked about 13 miles getting away from the Godlin, crossing a large swamp in a valley, and heading along higher ground to the dangerous Twitya River crossing. We were in an area of small pine trees and bushes. As we walked the mountain sides along the Godlin, we got a glimpse of the trail crossing the valley and swamp miles ahead. You could pick out the trail as a mark through the vegetation - like power lines make. As we got away from the Godlin, the single track game trail we were on

reverted back to the shadow of the WWII Canol Road we enjoyed earlier.

We passed some abandoned equipment and generally enjoyed the walk. The worst of it was a mile long stretch in the swamp. The roadbed had sunk in several places. Large ponds blocked our route. Some ponds we walked through, some ponds we walked around. We climbed to higher ground making the crossing from the Godlin to the Twitya watersheds.

Throughout the day our bear bells had been ringing steadily and we were feeling confident that they were doing their job warning grizzlies away from us. In thick vegetation, I would blow a small boat air horn to warn of our approach. We also blew whistles from time to time. The goal was that we were to have no surprise encounters and only wanted to see a grizzly at a distance.

At about 1930 hours, we were walking along a reasonably good trail coming down from high ground toward the Twitya River. Phibbs was leading and we were moving right along downhill. All of a sudden he abruptly stopped and said "bear!". There in front of us, about 30 yards away (on the other side of a ditch) was a big brown grizzly bear in a small vegetated opening in the woods. The bear looked at us and woofed. It watched us a moment longer and then abruptly wheeled to the right and bounded off into the woods. I was amazed at how big the bear was and how agile it was when it decided to move. I unstrapped the shotgun and conducted a rear guard operation while we hustled down the trail away from the bear. Along the trail were some discarded rafting materials that backpackers must have left over the years for others to use to cross the Twitya - the most dangerous crossing of the trail. This material was of no use. All of it had been bitten or shredded by bears or ruined by extreme cold.

We knew not to try to cross the Twitya where the trail crossed - it was too narrow, fast, and dangerous there. Instead, we dropped down through the woods about two miles upstream in a more braided area. The river was intimidating. It was big, fast, and deep. We picked a campsite among some logs that had been washed onto a higher portion of the gravel bar. We built a fire, kept a bear watch, and did our camp business.



Camp on the Twitya River - tough crossing

It was now about 2220 hours. Of course it was still quite bright since at this time of the year it stayed light most of the day. It turned twilight in the middle of the night, otherwise it was more like day. This changed rapidly toward the end of our trip. I learned to tie a sweat rag over my eyes to sleep in the evening - otherwise it was too bright. Speaking of sleep, one sleeps much better with the 12 gauge shotgun full of slugs next to your sleeping bag.

We scouted the river. Still a little shaky from our encounter with the wash, both of us were rather subdued as we looked over potential crossing sites. Over time, we saw that the river was going down, so we hoped for better conditions in the

morning. At one point, as we pumped up two inner tubes that we packed to build a raft at this crossing, we briefly discussed charging across the bastard tonight - sleeping much more calmly once this obstacle was behind us. If we wouldn't have had to break camp, I believe we would have done it.

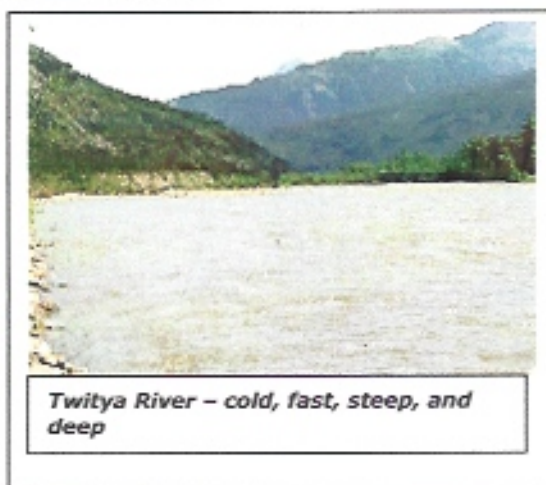


Twitya River - We crossed just below the top bend - be careful!

The next morning (the 25th) we got up, searched for bears, ate, and began to pack for the crossing. We didn't talk. Each of us was silent with our own anxiety.

When the time came, we rigged up a 100' safety rope between us. Whichever one made it across would drag the other to safety. We fastened an inner tube to each of our packs and used the pack as a raft. We decided to hang on the pack and swim like hell. (At this time we didn't know we didn't need the inner tubes. The waterproof bags in the packs made them pretty good rafts on their own).

We walked up to the top of the gravel bar seeing shallow water that would allow us to wade out into the current before starting out. The water had gone down a foot overnight but was still moving right along. The river seemed about 10'-15' deep here. We picked a spot where the current would sweep us to the far bank so we wouldn't be swept downstream for an extended distance. Phibbs and I started side by side, floating our packs with us. We stood close together, balancing one another as the water got deeper. I was leading. When I got out only a short distance, to where the water was knee



Twitya River - cold, fast, steep, and deep

deep, I got swept away. I announced I was going to take off. When I went under I found the water was cold - damn cold. I swam as hard as I could toward the far bank. Between bouts of being bobbed under I remember seeing the bank streaming past as I was swept along in the current. Phibbs was somewhere behind me - also swimming like hell. We were probably yelling encouragement to each other as well. The current took me to the far bank and I scrambled to get a footing on rocks that rolled under my feet. Eventually I got close enough to the steep bank to crawl up it with only half of my body out of the water. I jerked my pack onto the shore and started pulling at the safety rope to start to reel Phibbs in. He made it to the bank and scrambled as I did. At first we lay on the bank, half in the water, panting hard from the difficult swim. Then we crawled up the bank, dragging our packs to level ground. We did the "celebration dance" with all of the hooting and howling that goes with it. The sun came out and life was good. We were now about 90 miles down the trail and accomplished the most dangerous crossing.

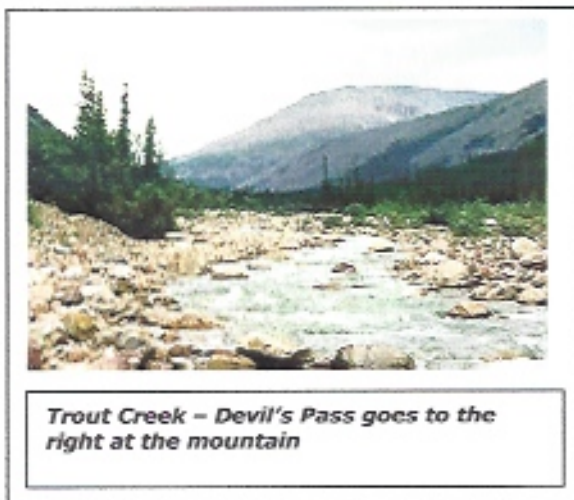


Phibbs drying out gear after the Twitya swim

We took our time cleaning up, drying out, and recovering from the crossing. We looked around and saw the hot springs further up the mountain and briefly considered making the trek for a hot soak. I decided to scout the immediate area as we were on another rock bar that had large patches of brush on it. The place where we landed turned out to be across the river from where we camped. We started one or two hundred yards upstream and landed about even with our camp. I noticed that there were fresh grizzly bear tracks there, as if a grizzly had stopped at the bank across

from our camp. I took the shotgun and looked around. No sign of a trail, only a combination of walking on the bar and bushwhacking on the side of a mountain.

Phibbs and I packed up. We headed along the river to try to intercept the trail about two miles further down. As we walked along we found ourselves on the bar with some small cliffs to our left and some patches of trees and brush to our right. We came upon some fresh grizzly tracks in the sand that were heading the same way we were. It was clear that there was a grizzly bear on this bank of the river with us. The bear, like us, was channeled by the river, steep mountainside, and cliffs. We got the gun out and operated on full alert, making lots of noise. Eventually we ran out of river bottom and had to take to the mountain side. We walked on game trails which seemed to be everywhere and go no where. It was miserable. The forest floor was soggy and soft with lots of holes and snags. At last we found the Canol. We both agreed that the bushwhacking on the mountainside was the worst walking to date.



Trout Creek – Devil's Pass goes to the right at the mountain

The trail took us away from the Twitya and the larger Keele River as we climbed toward Trout Creek. Trout Creek is a steep river running through a steep sided valley that takes us toward Devil's Pass. We managed to get partway up the trail toward Trout Creek. We met a moose on the way. After looking at us for a moment, the moose turned off the trail. It was hot and we were hurting for water. When we camped on a hillside near the trail, we had to rig up a system to capture water. We dug a hole in a depression with barely trickling surface water and used a trowel to redirect the trickle into

our water bottles. It took a long time to gather the water and filter it, but it was our only option. We slept well.

On the 26th we walked uphill for miles. It was hot and it rained. It threatened still more rain. (By the way, when it rains, the brush holds the droplets and rewets you all day – just like pushing through a car wash.) After our previous experience with water in the mountains, we wanted to get out of Trout Creek and into Devil's Pass. As we walked up the narrow Trout Creek valley, we came onto a primitive (and very small airstrip). Someone had cut small trees so that they fell away from the trail. The trail here got to be about 8 feet wide - it was one of those great spots where it looked like it might have 50 years ago. Someone must be landing a STOL plane or Piper Cub on this small uphill strip. I was impressed - as a pilot I wouldn't try it. We passed two cots and a stove that were in the open. Someone must have dragged them out of a deteriorating wanigan years ago.



Primitive airstrip at a "good spot" along Trout Creek

Today we saw an outfitter's plane twice.

Then the trail disappeared and we ended up crisscrossing Trout Creek. The water was clear, fast, and cold. The crossings got worse and worse (odd because we were traveling upstream). As we pressed on we saw that the river was often kept in by what seemed like rock levees. We would sometimes climb from below the river up a rock bank to find the river above swiftly moving along. As I was struggling to cross a steeply falling tributary I slipped and injured myself. I lost my footing and my leg went straight

down between some large rocks. I landed on my backside, sitting straight up, but the current was pushing me and twisting my leg. One of my trekking poles snapped as I fell. For a moment I was trapped in the current with the weight of my pack and my trapped leg keeping me from moving. Eventually I unwedged my leg and struggled onto the far bank. My right knee was injured. I also doused my electronic camera. Phibbs and I continued upstream, trying to find a decent route. Our goal was to get above Trout Creek to land that wouldn't flood or leave us trapped by high water. By evening we got to where Trout Creek and a tributary from Devil's Pass converge. We got on



Abandoned 4" pipe

the far side of the streams and found a safe place to camp. As I gathered firewood, Phibbs went scouting to try to find the trail (which

we had not seen for many miserable miles). When he found it, I think he kissed it. Going up



Phibbs dreading another rock picking crossing of boulders from a washout

Trout Creek was some of the worst walking to date.

We made camp and I worked on my knee (quite swollen by now) and repaired my broken trekking pole. I spent several hours walking with only a single pole and I don't recommend it. You must constantly balance a heavy pack up, down, and across steep obstacles. A single pole does not do the job. You need two to be safe.

On 27 Jul, we headed up Devil's Pass. It got well into the 80s and the sun was bright. We both got pretty sunburned. My knee bothered me a little. As long I was walked forward and didn't twist it things worked fine. The air seemed thin. It was about five miles up the pass and two miles down to a pump station that was the halfway point of the trail (114 miles along the way for us). We had to stop frequently and guzzle the cold stream water -



Cool, clear, cold, water starting up Devil's Pass



Bryan Much rests in hot sun atop Devil's Pass

filtered of course). The land was rock and little else. Only some small green plants were in the pass and no trees.

Eventually we cleared the pass and got to the Pump Station 4 (mile 108). There was a good bunkhouse where backpackers left their food drops. In fact, several food drops were there now. There was a journal where hikers from years past left messages. We added ours to the list and scrawled a little



Jonathan Phibbs descending Devil's Pass



Pump Station at mile 108- halfway

graffiti on the walls to add our mark to what was there. In the journal were some humorous stories told in the

classic understatement of a weary backpacker. I wish I had copied them down - they were great!



The odd thing about the shack is that it is hard to judge what was put there yesterday versus what was put there three years ago. The journal sorted

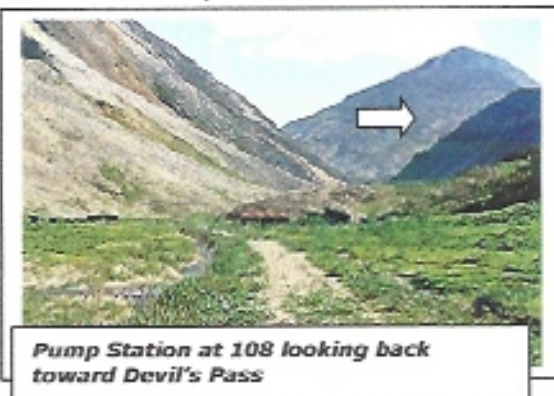
some of this out.



Sunburned Much and Phibbs adding to the journal.

We hung around for a while and then decided to add a few more miles to our daily log. Our goal was to get across the Carcajou River before more storms hit. By now, we were acutely aware of the threat of high water. We started down the trail which roughly aligns with Bolstead Creek. In this valley (years earlier), one of the North-Wright pilots landed a Twin Otter on skis and dropped fuel barrels. Looking at the terrain, I was pretty impressed.

As we headed down the trail we saw some people coming toward us. We met at a rocky hillside, dropped our packs, and talked. It was great. A professor from Edmonton and his family were on the trail doing research relating to the environmental impact of a project like the Canol Pipeline. It sounded like a great study. He comes every ten years and makes observations along the trail. Indeed, we saw some of his markings from ten years ago and from now. The interesting part is that the preservation properties of the climate made it difficult to recognize what was ten years old.



Pump Station at 108 looking back toward Devil's Pass

The professor was not a through hiker. He was operating at selected points along the trail. We assured him that his resupply was at 108 and that it was intact. He told us that our food drop was ok down at Camp 80. We traded information about the trail and our experiences. The professor carried a

pistol on his pack. He explained the restrictions and permits required of handgun users in Canada. We gave the professor some foot powder and he shared some trail insight using the satellite photo maps he carried. We got good tips on all major water crossings which were now of significant interest to us. As we talked, a caribou walked around the valley near us. The professor told us about a wolf sighting they enjoyed. As we would soon see, wolf sign was abundant in this area.

As we talked, two more hikers appeared a mile down the trail. They caught up and we all got together. They too were headed for 108. For a moment, Phibbs and I debated walking back to 108 with everyone - it would have been a fun camp. We wanted to press ahead, and we hated to retrace steps, but looking back I wish we would have.



Carcajou River

Anyway, the two new hikers were from Oregon. They were in a hurry to get to Godlin Lakes

where they were scheduled to fly out. They had been lost down along the McKenzie River for nearly three days. They were anxious to make up time. Phibbs and I schooled up the Oregon crew on the pass, Twitya, Trout, bears, swamp, and Godlin. They were nice guys but nervous. They warned that Dodo Canyon was miserable. The Oregon guys said they saw three wolves at the Carcajou River.

It started to get late and we each headed in our own directions. Phibbs and I camped along Bolstead Creek by a big field of blue ice. The ice cracked and boomed from time to time. The water in the creek, at the ice,

was damn cold. We had only scrubby willows to burn. That night it rained. It got really dark. When I looked outside the tent I saw why. We were inside a cloud. Thunder and lightning flashed in the distance. We nervously slept worried about lightning strikes and what the Carcajou might be like tomorrow.



Ice Field at our camp site at Bolstead Creek



Flooded Andy Creek - Couldn't Cross

On the 28th we packed up and headed down to the Carcajou. The building at Camp 100 was a wreck. It was raining and it was cold. The wind chilled us and blew the rain. Rest stops were short as we needed to keep moving to keep warm. When we crossed the Carcajou we found that it was not deep. It was wide, braided, and ice cold. There was a lot of ice about. The temperature was about 40 degrees. We walked on tundra for a while as the trail was in a severe

wash. It was soft and soggy. We made a long uphill climb on the side of a mountain, only to drop back down to the Andy Creek crossing. Like all wooden bridges constructed years ago, this one was destroyed by ice and floods as well. Not a single bridge is available on the trail. When we got to Andy Creek we found a raging torrent. We scouted for potential places to cross but there were none. Phibbs flat out wisely refused to cross no matter what. By now we were somewhat hypothermic. We were soaked and shivering. We got under a short span of bridge far away from the river and built a windbreak. There we tried to cook hot food out of the rain. We ate and then camped on top of the approach to the bridge where we would be safe from flash floods. We got in our sleeping bags and stayed there for about 13 hours. It seemed I was always on the verge of shivering - never really feeling warm at that time.

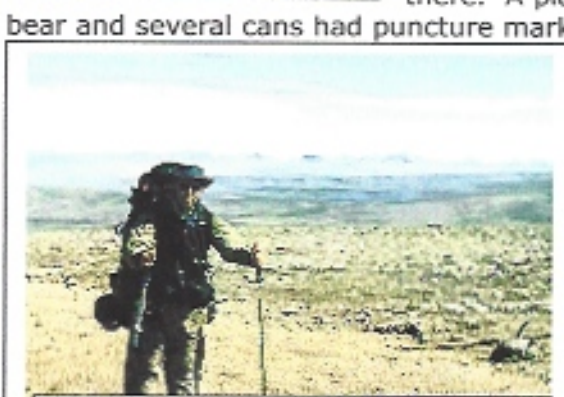


Andy Creek once the water went down

Looking down on Andy Creek



On the 29th we were in no hurry to get up as we had to wait for the river to go down so we could cross. We got up about 1430 and checked the river. It had dropped about two feet. It was still fast but many of the standing waves were gone. We decided to go for it. With the safety rope, I walked into the river dragging my pack to float it across. I was able to work across, being washed by the current, by using the leverage of my feet getting purchase on the bottom to move me sideways against the force of my pack being pulled downstream. Phibbs followed along and we got out on the other side at an abandoned wanigan (caboose on skis). The wanigan was no good, so we built a fire nearby and dried out. There was a bench mark sign there. There was some litter around the wanigan as if some snowmobilers or hunters camped there. A plastic gas can had a chunk bit out of it by a bear and several cans had puncture marks from bear teeth. I was impressed.



Much atop Plains of Abraham

There were also teeth marks on the metal survey sign. This was Camp 90. From here we had to climb about 2000' to a barren plateau. We started up a long a difficult climb. It was only about five miles of switchbacks to the top. This was our goal.

About halfway up we walked into a cloud. Up until then, the view was great. Now things were cold and wet. We found a place to camp on the mountain side and slept. No good vegetation or decent wood to burn.

On 30 July we walked the rest of the way up the mountain to the Plains of Abraham. This was one spectacular view. The clouds lifted as we crossed. The plains were a barren rocky landscape. A deserted wanigan was up there. Finally we could see Camp 80 in the distance. There was a lot of abandoned equipment around the broken down buildings. There was an "airstrip" there that allowed STOL aircraft to land on the rocky plateau. When we got to the camp, we found that a wanigan had been "fixed up" for hunters. Someone nailed some canvass over the roof.



*"Restored" wanigan (minus the skis)
at Camp 80 (hunt shack)*

Outside the wanigan was tied a guard dog. I recognized the dog as one I had seen in the back of a pickup truck back in Norman Wells. Apparently a hunter brought the dog out by plane and left him at the shack while he scouted. We found our undisturbed food drop in the shack and sorted through it.



Road Maintenance Camp at 74.5

In case I hadn't mentioned it before, I put a couple of beers in each drop. These were very tasty and very welcome! Phibbs and I sorted our supplies and left the extra in the shack for someone in need.

We then headed down the trail, in a narrow wash, toward mile 77 where the trail was supposed to give out. It was steep and narrow and tough going. We could see the tracks of the hunter from Camp 80. I ended up spending some time in the creek with my boots on.

My notes tell me that my sleeping bag had been wet for a while and I had been cold at "night". One reason I was cold was probably a shortage of calories - I lost 20 lbs on this 18 day trek. On this day the sun was good, but it was still windy and cold. Eventually we got down to the Pump Station 3 at mile 74.5 (about 148 miles in for us) and looked for a place to sleep. We scouted the quonsets but only one was serviceable and it had been badly torn up by a bear. Eventually we set up our tent inside a generator shack. I took a rock and found some nails from a burned building and nailed a couple of boards over the windows to keep the winds out. After looking at equipment and buildings, we closed the doors and went to sleep. Low wet clouds had come in and the valley along the Little Keele was cold and damp. We wanted to get here tonight to avoid being caught in the narrow wash with a potential flood.



One of our Grizzly encounters - this guy left right away.

The Little Keele River here was crossable. It was fast but we wouldn't be crossing it for about two days. Two days down river it would probably be much worse.

On 31 July we worked our way downstream along the Little Keele. There were many washouts and lots of rock picking. As we walked along we walked up on a grizzly bear about 70 yards away in a wash. The bear looked at us for a moment and then headed toward some trees. I managed to get a picture of this one. Out came the shotgun and we proceeded on.

Finally we got to where we had to turn off to get to Blue Mountain. The professor told us the turn off was hard to find and reinforced this with his satellite photo. We found a piece of colored tape he left and pushed into some trees and brush. It was a tough and overgrown trail. There were some treacherous washouts. Early on we lost the trail and had to drop our packs and go looking for it. Once we got onto the side of the mountain it was tough. In the open areas, the trail was steep. Each corner revealed still another climb. In some spots there was



Mountainside trail.

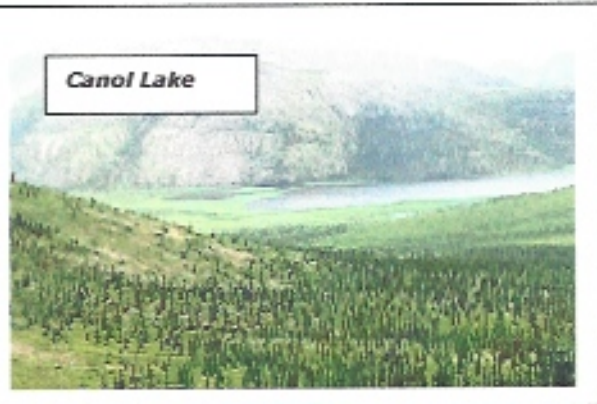
vegetation blocking the path. The mountain was so steep that there was no going around it. You had to press through the brush on this notch of a trail on the side of the mountain. In places, the vegetation was so thick it seemed to hold you or hold your pack. It stripped my bear bell and I never knew it. Sometimes there were washouts where you would have to back down, drop over the side, climb up the wash and up to the trail beyond the wash. In some places, this was steep and treacherous climbing as there was little solid footing. I stepped on a large rock, about the size of a small desk, and it skidded down the mountain from under my feet. In the valleys near the mountain we saw caribou and moose. The views were great. There was plenty of water. I wondered how they built the road. We got to the crest of the trail and saw where it wound its way back down a valley toward Canol Lake. We camped just over the top. At first it was dead quiet, then a wind came up that seemed to moan and tumble across the top of Blue Mountain. The wind blew hard all night long and it rained some more. I had to roll my body against the windward side of the tent to hold it down.



Mountainside trail

On 1 August we started down the valley. We ended up walking another goat path up more high ground that gave us a great view of Canol Lake. Then it started raining again. We worked our way back downhill through trees and brush to the Little Keele. We saw lots of sign from the professor here. This looked like significant bear country and we were being careful. Our goal was to get across the Little Keele before the rain made it impassible. Amidst swarms of hungry bugs we scouted the Keele.

We were anxious to get across because we could see shelter on the other side (Camp 50). Phibbs and I recounted the Oregon guys telling us how they crossed the Little Keele in a thunderstorm being washed through two-foot standing waves. We picked a line between two rapids where the current would carry us to the far bank. We prepared our gear, tied on the safety rope and started across. We made it handily! We headed for shelter, feeling really cold and wet. We found a small building that was fixed up by hunters and moved in. There was dry wood under the cot and we started the stove. I set out to find more wood and replenish the dry stocks inside. I sawed up a big pile of firewood. It got hot in the cabin and we dried a lot of our clothing and equipment. This was comforting as it continued to be cold and rainy outside.



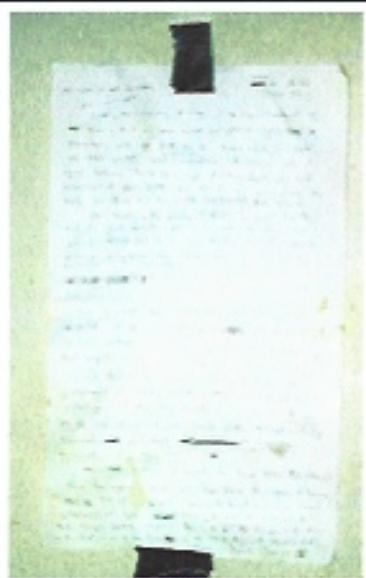
Canol Lake



*Little Keele at low water - bugs ate us
Up on this crossing*

The first thing we saw when we entered the cabin was a distress note left by some Canadian soldiers who were on leave in the area. The note said that some people there had expected rescue by helicopter. Since no helicopter had arrived, they were leaving on the 30th to walk to Norman Wells (about 50 miles away) to get help. They hoped to get there in 72 hours. Reading the journal at the site, we found that a group of about 10 soldiers on leave had a bad time with the Little Keele and high water. Apparently there were trying to make a rope crossing which resulted in a

near drowning and the underwear being stripped off one of the crossers. Some must have also lost their packs. The journal continued that those that got across



*Rescue note from
Canadian soldiers at
Camp 50*

left the others on the far bank. In the cabin they redistributed food and took the time to fix up the cabin quite nicely. It looked like they stuffed moss into the cracks of the loose window panes to seal them up. Fortunately, the distressed travelers found matches in the cabin so they were able to build a fire.

As a side note, here is what we figured out later on. Ten people were in this group of soldiers on leave. Two got across the river, had a near drowning, and left the others on the other side. These two then went for help. They were picked up by helicopter trapped on a sandbar at the Carcajou River crossing 25 miles further on. In the mean time, the water went down and the others got across the Little Keele leaving a large emergency note for any rescuers in the cabin saying that they were pressing on. Helicopters rescued these 8 from Pump Station 36, about 14 miles further on. Besides all of this, a lone Canadian soldier on leave was rescued from Dodo Canyon after losing his rifle and camera in high water there.

Maybe this could have happened to Phibbs and I. Although we easily traversed all of the sections where others had trouble, it is probably because we got there during favorable conditions while the unlucky 11 who were rescued by air did not.

I remember reading my notes where I had remarks about the unlucky soldiers on leave.



Inside Dodo Canyon

My ending remark points out that despite all of that Phibbs and I were safe

and warm that night. The cabin was about 8 X 20 and had 3 cots with plywood over the springs.

On 2 Aug we got up feeling good. We stoked the fire a few times during the night and a suffered a small explosion relighting the stove in the morning. Phibbs and I were on the home stretch, the last 50 miles, so we unloaded all of our excess supplies to stock this cabin for others in case of emergency. We left our inner tubes and pumps for anyone that wanted to use them to cross the river thinking we would not need them for the



Drying clothes at Camp 50

Carcajou. We left food, matches, water purification tablets, and a variety of other items.

At 1130 we left and headed six miles up hill to the top of a pass. This was bear city. There was fresh scat (full of abundant berries) everywhere. At first it was hot and sunny. By the time we got to the top of the pass it was overcast and rainy. There was a thunderstorm nearby. Even so, the view at the top of the pass was spectacular. We could see all the way back to the Plains of Abraham.

After we cleared the pass, we headed down a tributary of Dodo Creek. It was muddy and silty. We picked through about four miles of rocks. Finally we got to the Dodo at about 1800 (forty miles left). We walked in an open wash and made good time. The canyon started to narrow. There were lots of sharp turns and narrow chasms. We made many water crossings in a stiff current.



Another Grizzly bear, this one somewhat pushy (our 3rd encounter of four grizzlies, a black bear, and a cub).

We made lots of noise as this seemed to be a poor spot in which to meet a bear. While walking through the canyon near mile 37 I noticed that the cliffs were not so steep near Dodo Lake. For some reason I looked up and saw a bright brown colored

grizzly bear standing on the top of the bank looking at Phibbs and I. I thought the bear would soon turn into the woods and walk away so I went for my camera to take a quick picture. Imagine how surprised I was when the bear started down the hillside toward us. Phibbs and I dropped our poles and I took up the shotgun. We backed toward the river making noise - but not too much noise as somewhere I read it was good not to irritate a bear. When the bear got to the canyon floor it circled to get downwind of us. Phibbs and I dropped our packs and backed to the river. As the bear stood up on it's hind legs and sniffed the air downwind of us, I pulled up the shotgun to plan for what I would do if he charged. As I held the gun and sighted toward the bear I planned to fire a warning shot as soon as the bear advanced. If that did not deter the bear I was going to shoot to kill at about 25 yards. All the while I kept thinking that the bear was likely to be so fast that the timing of my plan wouldn't matter. I also wondered if the shotgun would fire after

the many rainy days and river crossings. Phibbs unconsciously crowded next to me. He also looked for a spot on the canyon wall across the river where we might climb up and be safe. We continued to halfheartedly blow whistles and yell at the bear until finally it reluctantly turned and walked down the canyon from where we had come. We gathered our gear and headed toward pump house 36, shotgun in hand. At pump house 36 we found that the government had done some work to



Part of Dodo Canyon

rehabilitate one end of a building for snowmobilers that ventured out the 36 miles from Norman Wells. There was a large stove. Phibbs and I foraged for firewood in the grey drizzle while carefully guarding against an unexpected bear encounter among the brush and buildings. We lit a nice fire and slept on cots. Inside the building were some still wet shoes from the Canadians rescued by helicopter from this site only a day or two before. This was a nice spot. There were six to eight cots and a Coleman lantern. We saw lots of footprints but saw no messages from the rescued hikers.

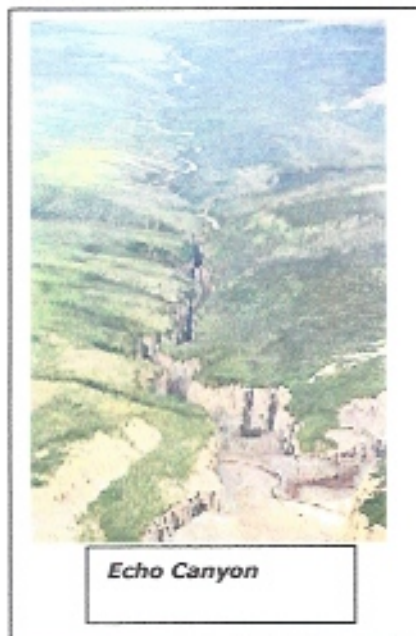
My journal says that we saw lots of wolf prints that day.

On 3 Aug, we walked through Dodo Canyon for about 10 miles. It was miserable walking on rocks with many crossings through the water that crisscrossed the canyon. The water crossings got tougher as we went further along. I got swept on

one crossing and soaked my camera for the final time. This was some of the worst walking of trail.

Our water filter finally gave out and we had to replace it. Too much silt lately.

My ankles felt like stumps. The constant rock picking really took its toll. As we walked a helicopter popped into the canyon and flew over us at about 100 feet. As we neared the mouth of the canyon some islands of vegetation grew out of the alluvial fan. A caribou walked along with us, about fifty or a hundred yards away. Then I saw black bear tracks. I showed Phibbs and announced that this was good news. After being shaken by the third grizzly encounter the day before, we were not anxious for more bears. I postulated that blacks and grizzlies don't populate the same neighborhood so I thought we were through with grizzlies. As we spoke we heard rocks dropping from the canyon wall. This was not unusual because I noticed they did that quite frequently on their own. When looked up though I saw a black bear climbing the canyon wall with a cub behind her. She was probably trying to get away from us. The poor cub was trying to stay with mom, but mom kept unintentionally dislodging



Echo Canyon

rocks that fell all around the ducking cub. We were pleased to get to see the bear. Then the caribou that was walking near us took to the canyon wall and climbed up a steep bank. I couldn't believe that a caribou could climb something that steep. It looked like it was climbing a ladder.

One of the best feelings today was seeing the mountains near Norman Wells on the horizon about 30 miles away.



Phibbs at Pump Station 36 in Dodo Canyon

We camped about a mile short of the Carcajou. It was a difficult day. It was sunny and hot. At 2300 it was blue sky, sunny, warm, no mosquitoes, and our campfire smoke was laying low. We sat with our shirts off.

On Monday, 3 Aug, we packed up and headed out. Our plan was to get across the Carcajou and then go as far as we could. It was about 25 or 26 miles to Norman Wells (four miles of that was river).

After being bug free, we stepped into the woods and were swarmed by mosquitoes. We were even inhaling them. We struggled across the bottom land along the Carcajou, much of it muddy and all of it obviously reshaped by huge floods. We made a few minor crossings. When we got to the other side of the bottom land, we got to the main channel. Phibbs and I detected no obvious heavy current and figured we could swim across. We didn't even rig the safety rope. We stepped into the river and got swept away

right away. We swam hard and got to an angled bottom of round rocks. As I tried to get a footing my feet would just roll the round bottom stones. Finally I got to the inside of the turn where there was little current and stood up. Phibbs and I dragged our equipment on shore and started looking for the trail. We searched and searched. It was hard to find. It was important that we find it right away as we were entering a more



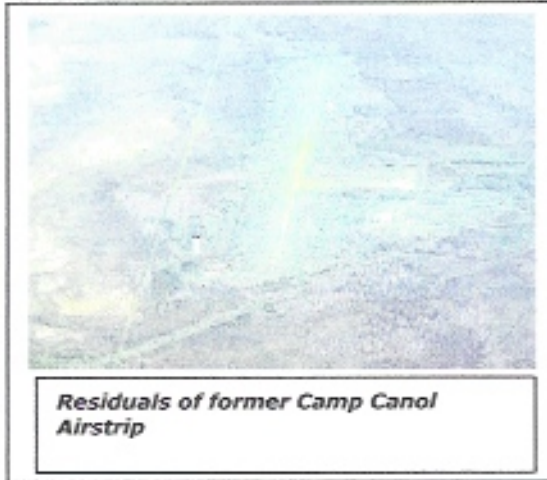
Dodo Canyon - 18 miles of hell



Carcajou Crossing at low water

heavily wooded area. We found it and started out. The bugs were bad and it was hot. Water was brown or green and we bypassed some thinking we would find better. I was so thirsty it hurt. Finally we filtered brown swamp water that remained brown but tasted good. At mile 17 we met our last bear - a grizzly - at 10 yards. We had been making noise and think that we

probably met the bear head-on on the trail. The bear must have stepped into some brush next to the trail to see what was up. When we got close - Phibbs at 10 yards, me at 15 - the bear wheeled and crashed and splashed through the brush. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if there had not been two of us . . .



Anyway, out comes the shotgun for a while. Now we are blowing the whistle quite regularly and making lots of noise. I contacted the airport using my portable aircraft radio and asked for Frank Pope to pick us up in a boat at 2300 hours. A pilot on final approach took the message and said he would pass it on. Phibbs and I walked hard and fast (making about two miles/hr), sometimes through waist deep water where the trail had sunk, to get to the McKenzie trailhead. Near the Camp Canol airstrip (abandoned) we came to a trail crossing wherein we had to use our compass. I can see how the two guys

from Oregon got lost on the first day. Since all of Camp Canol had been bulldozed, there were no structures, even though they appeared on the map. Cuts for seismic lines for oil exploration also mess you up. For a while I had my doubts that we were headed the right way. I checked and triple checked the map. Eventually we came to a narrow water crossing that I later named "Dirty Trick Creek". Some snowmobilers probably laid some pallets across the previously frozen water. I stepped onto the pallets and sunk chest deep into the muddy water. I then had to try to climb up a steep slippery bank to get out. We were only a couple of miles from the trail head. Phibbs struggled through the creek like I did except he knew what to expect.



Looking across the MacKenzie River from Norman Wells toward the trail head. We just walked 222 miles through those mountains in 18 days. Barge dock is in the foreground for barge traffic when river is open.

At 1105 PM we arrived at the MacKenzie River. We could see the Esso plant and its flame across the river. We could see oil derricks on nearby islands. It was calm and still.

No boat was there or in sight so Phibbs and I wondered if our message got through. We built a signal fire and I turned on a strobe light aimed at town with the black fabric of my pack as a backdrop. I didn't care if anyone came or not. I could have slept soundly on the beach knowing that town was four miles away across the river - though bears

routinely patrolling the bank probably would have made this a bad idea.

After half an hour we heard a boat motor off in the distance. Then we saw the boat. The boat was picking its way along as if trying to avoid sandbars. Eventually Frank Pope's son and some other gentleman beached at the trailhead. We passed them our gear and they worried about us stepping into the water to get into the boat. Heck -we had been in and out of the water all day.

We got in the boat and headed across the river. I pulled out cigars for everyone and we lit up. As we cruised along we unexpectedly ran aground on a sand bar way out in the river. We all got out and dragged the boat off. Again, they were worried about us getting our feet wet.

We got to the barge landing and were met by Frank Pope – a lovable character with an Irish (?) brogue. We squared up with him for the cost of the shuttle and he gave us a ride to the Rayuka motel in the back of his truck. It was still light and some kids were playing ball in town.



At the Rayuka (essentially a trailer on stilts) two squishy sounding backpackers carefully undressed on the linoleum part of the floor of the room so as not to get the carpet messy. We washed our clothes in their washing machine (we had nothing to wear) and I took one of the best showers of my life. I lathered and washed over and over and over. I then comfortably laid between clean sheets waiting for my clothes to dry. Phibbs took his shower and did the same. Room service brought us a couple

of sub sandwiches and beers. When we got our clothes we dressed and went to the bar. We ordered beers two at a time and just relaxed watching the other people that were there.

I found that when I was not in my boots, my feet hurt me badly. I had difficulty walking now. Perhaps the last 20 mile stretch (in a single day), after 18 miles of rocky canyon, was too much for my feet.

We slept great - no longer needing to be subconsciously alert for bears.

The next morning we rose early. I called the RCMP to tell them we were back. They said they were worried as they got a report that one of us was injured (must have been from the helicopter in Dodo seeing us picking through the canyon). North-Wright brought us our stuff that we stored with them so we could pack. We managed to change our plane tickets - we had finished in 18 days instead of 24.

We had a nice breakfast in the lounge and then sat on a bench watching the people in town.

That afternoon we flew out on a cargo/passenger jet.

When we got to Edmonton for a layover, we went to a hotel bar. We met some hunters that had been in the Canol region. When we swapped stories, they were mighty impressed that we walked 222 miles across the region. They got their friends out of their rooms and we all had drinks together. The extent of walking for these guys was from a bush plane to a hunting spot.

Trail summary:

Planned for 22-24 days, did it in 18 (222 miles).
May have needed the other days for weather delays or if we had dallied along the trail more.

Bought a fishing and small game license. Never wet a line.
No significant small game in season.

The enclosures list the equipment we took and tells how we organized our drops.
In retrospect I submit the following:

The biggest danger turned out to be water hazards and not grizzly bears. Certainly grizzly bears were a significant threat. Even with our bear deterrent behavior we still had four grizzly encounters. I wonder how many bears saw us that we never detected . . .

Luckily, we didn't come upon any bears with cubs (that we saw) except for the black bear.

I am enclosing some notes on our packing lists that indicate my post trip evaluation of what to take and what not to take. I hope this helps.

Good advice - record the contents of each of your drops so you can reference it on the trail.

I also listed the contents of each of my kits.

Daily Summaries:

14 Jul 98 Flew out of Chicago to Edmonton
15 Jul 98 Edmonton to Norman Wells
16 Jul 98 Weather - couldn't leave
17 Jul 98 Weather - couldn't leave
18 Jul 98 Flew to McMillan Pass, hiked to 14 miles to pump station 6
19 Jul 98 Hiked about 15 miles to near Caribou Pass
20 Jul 98 Hiked about 15 miles to a quarry near the Ekwi
21 Jul 98 Hiked to Godlin Lakes (about 12 miles)
22 Jul 98 Hiked about 10 miles along Godlin
23 Jul 98 Hiked 10 miles, bad water experience stopped us along Godlin.

24 Jul 98 Hiked about 13 miles to Twitya, met grizzly.
25 Jul 98 Crossed Twitya, hiked about 7 miles toward Trout Creek.
26 Jul 98 Hiked up Trout Creek about 6 miles to Devil's Pass.
27 Jul 98 Hiked about 12 miles through Devil's Pass to Bolstead Creek.
28 Jul 98 Hiked about 15 miles to Andy Creek. Stopped by raging water.
29 Jul 98 Got across Andy creek and hiked 3 miles up the mountain toward the Plains of Abraham.
30 Jul 98 Hiked 14 miles across the Plains to Camp 80 drop and beyond to Pump Station 3.
31 Jul 98 Hiked 14 miles along the Little Keele (2d grizzly encounter) and up Blue Mountain.
1 Aug 98 Hiked about 10 miles to Camp 50 at Little Keele crossing.
2 Aug 98 Hiked about 14 miles to Camp 36 (3d grizzly encounter).
3 Aug 98 Hiked about 10 miles through Dodo Canyon to near Carcajou crossing.
4 Aug 98 Crossed the Carcajou River and hiked about 22 miles to the Mackenzie River.
5 Aug 98 Flew to Edmonton
6 Aug 98 Flew home. (and they were right, it does take a while to get used to all the noise and the speed at which things go by when you drive)

This trail is truly remote. It takes a long time to complete. There is significant risk of injury or other mishap. Trips must be well planned and include food caches along the way. The terrain is difficult and only strong hikers should attempt the trail. I do not recommend hiking the trail alone. Navigation is pretty straight forward using terrain association and topographic maps. Rewards include incredible scenery, history, and the satisfaction of overcoming the significant challenges the route presents. Remember that challenge sometimes means danger and challenges should not be looked upon lightly. Regarding bears, I don't know if our experience with encountering four grizzlies and a black bear is unusual or not. Thinking back, the grizzly encounters could have been much worse had cubs been involved. Note that even though we had a shotgun full of slugs, in only two of the four grizzly encounters would we have had time to get it in hand and use it if the bear had charged immediately. Both of us carried readily available spray, but I doubt that it would deter a determined bear. I encourage all who can to hike this trail - but be safe!

Anyone who wants detailed information can contact me by phone, mail, or e-mail. I will be glad to help. I wished I had been able to debrief someone who preceded me before I went and am happy to help others.

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Enclosure – Packing Lists, Kit Contents

Repair Bag

Gore Rip Kit
Shaker Jet Stove Kit
Gen Repair Kit
Thermarest Kit (used it twice to patch mattresses)
18 zip ties
Spider Wire fishing line (tough stuff)
Duct Tape
Matches
Small Flashlight

Tie Bag

100' cord
20' bunji
3 straps
3 mini beaners
8 clips for drying clothes (used a lot)

Gadget Bag

Batteries (never really used)
Pocketknife
Whistle
Footfile
Glasses pouch (extra)
GPS (don't need, maps are fine because of obvious terrain features)
Signal Mirror

Shaving Kit

5 potable aqua (never used)
4 lighters
2 nail clips (toe/finger)
pen knife
floss
deck of cards (never used)
cotton swabs
toothpaste
afterbite
camp soap
utensils
baby wipes (good to have)
comb

Medical

Sam splint; elastic bandages; suturing set; syringe with needles; lidocaine (prescription); extra water filter; large bandage; latex glove; hydrocortisone; aloe vera; neosporin; second skin; eye drops; iodine; tweezers; safety pins; rehydration salts; burn pads; spiroflex bandage; sponges; closure strips; moleskin; manual; aircraft radio; Desenex; Motrin; vitamins; stretch gauze; tape (used a lot for blisters); antiseptic towelettes; benzoin; irrigation syringe; thermometers; waterproof matches; Benadryl; cold caps; Tylenol; decongestant; Mylanta; triple

antibiotic ointment; bacitricin; Motrin; Diotame; dehyra tabs; Diaarest; Dristan Cold; Tinactin; Advil; hand cream; sunblock. Sounds like a lot but most of it was individual packages of two tablets each.

1st Drop

Fuel (gallon can)

10 large meals (much more food that we ate, left for others along

11 small meals the trail at abandoned buildings)

10 gatorade

20 powerbars (I hope I never see another one of these . . .)

20 coffees

2 socks/liners (pack as many as you can, this was not enough, throw the old ones away as you get a new drop, 5 pairs available at a time is needed)

1 drawers

1 washcloth

6 candles

1 chapstick

2 DEET

batteries (never needed)

2 lighters

1 large soap

1 cotton swabs

2 toilet paper

2 baby wipes (baby wipes are great - small resealable packs)

tire pump

2 tubes

2d Drop

1 gallon fuel

6 large/2 small meals in bear tube (Built a bear tube out of PVC pipe with a screw in plug on one end - cheap and effective)

8 small meals in a bag

6 gatorade (stopped drinking gatorade when I couldn't get the swelling in my knee to go down)

16 powerbars (by the end I hated powerbars, especially hard to chew and swallow when it is cold - but I needed them badly (calories) - had to force myself to eat them)

16 coffees

1 sock/liner

1 drawers

1 washcloth

6 candles

1 chapstick

2 deet

batteries

2 lighters

1 swabs

2 toilet paper

2 babywipes

Pack

20 degree sleeping bag

waterproof bag
inflatable pillow (good thing)
folding saw (used this a lot)
plastic trowel

Waterproof Box

camera batteries
fishing tackle
pencils
Leatherman knife/pliers

Clothes Bag

2 socks/liners
2 gloves (1 gore, 1 poly)
2 bandannas
1 hanky
1 drawer
1 poly top/bottom
1 shorts
1 polartec vest
1 goretex liners socks
1 ls shirt
1 long pants
1 gore-tex pants
1 gore-tex parka
1 hat
1 headnet
1 bugsuit (handy and lightweight)
8 large meals
3 small meals
12 powerbars
16 coffee
5 gatorade
2 toilet paper
2 babywipe

Kit Bag

medical kit (contents listed above)
multifuel stove/bottle/pump (broke pump early, but not fatal)
cup
2 nalgene bottles
1 binoculars
1 bear deterrent (capsicum spray) in chest holster (get a gun instead)
water filter
compass
3 deet
50 cigars
air horn
tackle
water shoes
platypus water bottle (dumped it as it leaked)
animal track booklet

collapsible fish pole
trail towel
waterproof automatic camera
good camera with telephoto lens
19 rolls of film (take more film)