



From Labrador to Chisasibi on James Bay

By Herman Perry

Introduction

This summary is condensed from my 36-day journal kept during this 2017 canoe trip. The trip route took us up and over the Labrador height of land via Menihék Lake and McPhayden River. Once on the Quebec side of the border we paddled west on the Caniaspiscau, Laforge and La Grand Rivers as well as several other lakes and reservoirs to Chisasibi on the east side of James Bay, a distance of over 1200 km. From the departure at Menihék Landing to the des-

tinuation at Chisasibi the canoe route was generally contained within the margins of the 53rd and 55th degree lines of latitude. Temperatures ranged from 5 degrees to around 25 degrees Celcius. Daily progress ranged from a low of 10 km to a high of 47 km depending on the weather and/or the terrain we had to line, track or portage across. We encountered 21 portages around major rapids or power stations along the way, and we lined or tracked 62 sets of rapids. We were able to shoot numerous other rapids. We used a red 17' Royalex

Prospector Canoe and after tracking and lining through some very rugged terrain, I now consider it practically indestructible. We saw some caribou and moose sign along the way but never saw the animals themselves. We heard wolves howling at night and later saw a wolf about 30 km east of Chisasibi. We also saw a couple of bears beside the river on the La Grand reservoir. We saw otters in the river on several occasions and thousands of ducks and geese along with numerous eagles, ospreys and hawks. It was a fantastic trip, and we considered this canoe expedition our contribution to the Canada 150 celebrations.

Planning and Preparation

We spent several years planning and preparing for this trip. After paddling across Labrador in several different legs during 2013, 2014 and 2015, first from Goose Bay via Lake Melville to Rigolet, next from Churchill Falls to Goose Bay via the Churchill River, then from Menihek Landing via the Ashuanipi and Churchill Rivers to Churchill Falls, this expedition across the rest of the Labrador and Quebec landmass to James Bay seemed a natural progression. By

2015 I had decided on the general canoe route, although we made several minor route changes across the reservoir out of consideration for the summer prevailing winds in northern Quebec, etc. I had purchased the 1:250,000 and the 1:50,000 scale topographic maps and after some tweaking I had nailed down the final route details by late 2016 and highlighted the planned route on the maps.

Being physically fit, mentally tough and experienced outdoors are prerequisite for this sort of trip. In Dennis I was fortunate to be accompanied by a paddling partner that had those prerequisites and was undaunted in all sorts of challenging conditions.

It was a challenging but rewarding canoe trip in a remote and scenic wilderness area of the country. The prevailing winds from the west were expected and the amount of rain more than we anticipated. Considering all the factors, I scheduled 43 days to complete the trip and had figured different mileage projections for different sections of the route legs depending on whether it was upriver, downriver or on the reservoirs.

We were actually able to finish a week early and complete the trip in just 36 days. We found that every Quebecker we met and interacted with along the way was friendly, outgoing and helpful. These personal interactions helped make the trip such a special and memorable one.

I had contacted two men in Radisson, Quebec, Donald Berubi and his friend Yves Grenier whose names I got from some online paddling associates. They were able to answer most of the questions I had about the area, such as the condition of the James Bay highway, the northern Quebec weather, changing water levels below the dams, whether or not we would be allowed to camp and portage on Quebec Hydro property around the power stations.

Before departing on our big trip, I paddled routinely on Paddy's Pond just outside of St Johns. While we always seemed to be busy on other projects Dennis and I did get in some portaging practice in between Bells Woods and Portland Creek Pond on the Northern Peninsula, and we had some great endurance paddling sessions around the pond as well. This is a circuit of about 40 kilometers and is not far from my cabin at Daniels Harbour. It served us well and by the end of July we felt reasonably well prepared for our extended canoe expedition in August and September.

Earlier in the summer my friend Narcissus Walsh, a member of the St Johns canoe club helped us with getting the waypoints programmed onto my laptop and into our new GPS units. Along the route Dennis used his unit each day and mine was kept in its waterproof case as backup in case of the failure of the other. The trip would have been much more challenging without a GPS. Rather than keeping the GPS on for extended periods of time and draining the batteries I used the 1:50,000 scale topographic maps. We used a 11" X 16" holder for the 1:250,000 scale maps in the front of the canoe. It allowed us to stay on top of our actual location throughout the day and pursue the highlighted route on the maps that complimented the waypoints



shown on the GPS. It was awkward however transferring the 1:50,000 scale maps between the round water proof map case and the flat canoe mounted map holder every day or two because each map would only last about a day or so before we had covered the distance across it and moved on to the next map portion. During rainy weather this transfer became even more awkward and had to be done in the confines of the 3-person tent. In addition to those maps we took along several laminated 11" X 17" satellite photos of the roads and facilities around each of the seven Quebec Hydro power stations. We hoped these would help us find the best route through those unusual and convoluted portages from the dams above the hydro power generating facilities to the boat launch or the best available canoe put-in locations below the dams.

I also purchased a SPOT device for this trip. It uses GPS technology and I highly recommend it for anyone doing an extended canoe trip. We programmed a basic message on the unit to be sent out with the coordinates. Each day after we finished eating supper we sent out our SPOT message with those new coordinates showing the exact location where we had set up our tent for that night. This went to about a half dozen key recipients including my wife who enjoyed following along and monitoring our daily progress. For \$18, I purchased SPOT insurance along with the unit with



coverage of up to \$100,000 should an emergency rescue ever be necessary.

Quebec Hydro harnesses the Caniaspiscau River and Reservoir, the Laforge River as well as the La Grand River into the overall James Bay Hydro project. Those large reservoirs created a navigational and weather challenge but it all made for some diverse and interesting paddling. In addition to the maps, GPS and SPOT device we had a hand-held compass for backup. In retrospect, we could have included more waypoints on the canoe route through the reservoirs to make it a little easier to follow where there were lots of big and small islands.

One of the challenges in preparing for this trip was the space limitations of a 17' canoe. Our route provided nowhere to replenish our 43-day food supply until we reached the town of Radisson over a thousand kilometers away. To handle this issue, we just purchased all freeze-dried food for the larger evening meals. Some of our favorite meals were chicken teriyaki, chicken noodles, lasagna, pasta primavera, curry chicken, black bart chili, and pepper beef with rice. Very short meal preparation time required for freeze dried meals also allowed us to put in longer days of paddling as well. Some of the snack foods that we took along





had tightened up my belt by two holes so I began to supplement our evening meal with instant oatmeal. At the trip's end, we had both lost 15 pounds.

Two days of driving from Daniels Harbor brought my cousin Dennis, my wife Sheila and me to Wabush where we caught the train the next day to Menihek Landing. After dropping us off, Sheila drove back to Goose Bay where she left the truck until time to pick us up at the trip's end in Chisasibi.

Leg 1 – Down Menihek Lake to the McPhadyen River, Distance - 48 km

We departed on August 4th on the first long paddle, 48 km south from Menihek Landing on Menihek Lake for our first of 11 legs. The departure point was about 40 km south of Shefferville where the train track crosses the Ashuanipi River. It's not far from the site of the old Hudson Bay Company Fort Nascopie Trading Post, vintage 1838. We set up our tent beside the tracks and began paddling the next morning. Unfortunately we didn't make it to the McPhadyen River that first evening as planned because of the headwinds we fought all day long. We found ourselves a good campsite on thick caribou moss in a burnt over area and slept well after the long hard day of paddling.

were several kilos of trail mix, protein bars, candy, jerky, long life bacon and flat compact tortillas as well as a couple of kilos of dried apricots to ensure sufficient vitamin c. Those snack foods

were used for our midday and early afternoon snacks each day. There were several other specialities included that we ate on occasions when we were celebrating the completion of a trip leg, etc. Two weeks into the trip I found that I



Leg 2 – Up the McPhadyen River to the Height of Land, Distance - 112 km

To complete this second leg we portaged and tracked up river for the next 7 days and fought headwinds much of the time. We hoped to average 17 km per day canoeing up the McPhadyen River. We found some good fishing and enjoyed a few meals of grilled and fried fish. Rains were frequent on the trip, and we recorded rain on 30 out of 36 days. A week into the trip, a short portage brought us over the height-of-land into Quebec. On the upper reaches of the McPhadyen and the Caniapiscau Rivers the numerous limestone and other rocks were very sharp and abrasive and during the tracking & lining we must have lost about 5 pounds of Royalex material that got scraped off from the canoe bottom.

Leg 3 – Down the Caniapiscou River to the Reservoir, Distance - 161 km

At first, the river was only about the width of our canoe and a couple of days later we arrived at an abandoned fly-in fishing lodge on the now larger and quickly growing Caniapiscou River. The place was all unlocked so we could have spent the night there but it was early in the day and we felt we needed to get some more mileage behind us so we paddled on. We walked around and checked out the place and had our lunch there on the walkway beside the marine dock.

Several days downriver we found Club Chambois, an active fly-in fishing lodge. They were very friendly and accommodating and had us stay with them for the night. They treated us really good and fed us very well. Our first encounter with them was at a set of rapids about 20 km upriver from the lodge. They seemed surprised to see our canoes and hesitated in coming to the shore where we were located. After a brief delay, they motored in to the shore and we had a friendly chat. It was suggested as we were leaving that we should stop at the lodge and have a hot coffee with the cook, Elva Lavalee. As we departed the guide shouted that we just need to tell her that Sylvain sent us. As we paddled on the weather worsened, the wind came up and it started to rain so the thought of a hot coffee felt very appealing to us. To show our appreciation for their hospitality we lit the woodstove fires and stacked up with firewood in the cabins that afternoon. Elva prepared a fabulous evening meal of ham for everyone and insisted that Dennis and I eat lots so as to be strong and healthy for the rest of the trip. She actually allowed us to sleep on the floor in her cabin since the other facilities were full. We just moved her furniture around and rolled out our sleeping bags and had a great night there. Outside the cabin the weather was wet, windy and cold so this was a timely and welcomed refuge for us.

The Chief guide, Michel Lisotte from Scheferville advised us that in his 25 years of guiding on the Caniapiscou he



had never seen or heard of a canoe paddling through the area. He gave us a large, eight pound ouananiche that we cooked the following day. We actually spent two days eating it. We also had some good fishing for speckled trout on the Caniapiscou River. We reached the Caniapiscou Reservoir on August 17th, 2 days earlier than the estimated sched-

ule and this concluded the 3rd leg of the trip.

Leg 4 – Across the Caniapiscou Reservoir to Brissay, Distance - 128km

The Caniapiscou Reservoir was a massive body of water with thousands of islands in places and elsewhere it was wide open water stretching off to the



horizon like an immense ocean. Here we experienced some beautiful clear weather days when the reservoir was smooth as a mirror. At other times during the crossing we experienced the brunt of over 100 km of fetch during several windy days. Dealing with those waves and the crosswinds was physically demanding.

There were only two or three days where fog was of a concern to us in navigating and island-hopping across the reservoirs. During those foggy days some of the distant islands would disappear for a while and later reappear shrouded in fog. This is where the GPS provided a real comfort level for both of us. We tried fishing for lake trout on the reservoirs several times but had no luck.

We might have been using the wrong lures or perhaps it was just too late in the year.

Leg 5 – From Brissay to Laforge 2, Distance - 80 km

We arrived at the first of 6 power stations, Brissay, on day 17. Here we met few Hydro Quebec employees who treated us very well and shared their work trailer with us for a while. They provided us with a pickup truck and driver to help us cross the portage and really went the extra mile. We would later have to portage 6 more Hydro Quebec dams and power generating facilities before we reached Chisasibi. Few of them, however, proved to be such pleasant portage experience as this one - thanks to Renaud and his group!

Leg 6 – From Laforge 2 to Laforge 1, Distance - 120 km

This section had numerous islands, bays and headlands so I occasionally asked Dennis to check our latitude and longitude coordinates, as well as the location of the next waypoints to confirm our best route forward. I noticed that Dennis had this strange look on his face so I asked him if everything was OK. "I'm not sure", he said with a puzzled look on his face. "My GPS is showing we're 5 km back in the woods and well away from any waterway", he said. I wasn't sure what to make of this initially. I checked the coordinates on my topographic map and it showed us in the same position as Dennis's GPS. I hap-





pened to notice that those topo maps were printed in 1989. From earlier research, I knew that this portion of the James Bay project was not flooded until 1996, seven years after the last topo map update was printed. Essentially, both the GPS and the topographic map data were out of date and incorrect. Now that we were aware of the issue we navigated back to the middle of the waterway and updated the ongoing GPS waypoints much more often to stay on course. We reached LF2 on August 22nd, one day earlier than I had previously estimated.

Leg 7 – From Laforge 1 to La Grand 4, Distance - 80 km

I considered Laforge 1 at 634 km from Menihék Landing the half-way point of our trip. We got windbound several times on islands in those reservoirs but the islands always provided sufficient forest and trees for shelter and lots of

driftwood on the shoreline. We were always able to find or create a small tent site even when we had to chop down a couple of trees.

We met one of the Hydro Quebec employees who helped us with load and move our canoe and gear across the portage using his truck, for which we were grateful!

Leg 8 – From La Grand 4 to La Grand 3, Distance - 193 km

We ran a few rapids, tracked and lined others but in this area we were mostly on big water. The La Grand River was several miles wide, pretty well defined and didn't have so many islands as what we faced on the Caniapiscou or elsewhere on the La Grand reservoir. The wind was a problem however and we found ourselves crossing back and forth in search of more protected paddling.

After crossing the portage at LG3 we

paddled a couple of kilometers downriver and set up camp on a sandy beach which provided a fine tent site. Some red partridge berries picked the previous day provided the main ingredient for a jam we enjoyed after supper with maple oatmeal.

Leg 9 – From La Grand 3 to Radisson, Distance - 161 km

Despite headwinds and rain, we made good progress down the river and arrived at Radisson on September 5th. I was able to contact Yves Grenier and he agreed to come and pick us up. After paddling all day into rain and headwinds we probably looked like drowned rats to him. We quickly loaded up our canoe and gear into his truck and he drove us to the La Grand Hotel. It was a much-welcomed refuge and after we showered and cleaned up we decided we would take a much-needed rest day. We washed



and dried our clothes and other gear. Later that evening we joined Yves at the Hotel lounge for a few beers. He toasted our paddling progress and we toasted his

timely arrival to pick us up.

**Leg 10 – Radisson to La Grand 1,
Distance - 80 km**

With the extra day to rest and relax we



organised a tour of the Radisson power house and nearby facilities. It is named after one of the previous Premiers, Robert Bourassa. At 7722 MG it is the largest underground powerhouse of its kind in the world. The tour was informative and interesting. We saw the massive power house and large spillway structure carved out of the mountain nicknamed The Giant Staircase and got a better perspective when we saw the dams from a higher elevation than we normally saw them sitting in the canoe. After this we visited the Radisson souvenir shop and purchased several gifts.

Our friend Yves had agreed to meet us the next morning and to drive us across the LG 2 portage. It was a beautiful day, a pleasant drive and a good place to get back on the La Grand River. We took a couple of pictures and then paddled on down the La Grand river towards LG 1. We arrived at LG 1 late afternoon and portaged across and around the facilities on the right and camped just below the dam-site, had a cold supper and shortly after turned in for the night.

**Leg 11 – La Grand 1 to Chisasibi,
Distance - Distance - 40 km**

After a few hours of paddling we started to see a few houses of Chisasibi. This was a welcome sight but suddenly we realized that this phenomenal expedition was about to end. We completed the canoe trip just before noon on September 8th. We had arrived on day 36, one week sooner than we had earlier estimated. In so doing we had averaged about 33 km per day over the 36-day trip. We stepped out of the canoe and congratulated each other to have completed this fantastic canoe trip in good health and in good time. We relished in the moment for a short time and after a quick look around Dennis decided to stay at the river with the canoe and gear while I walked up to the nearby road to see if I could flag down a truck to transport our canoe and gear to the hotel. A short time later a truck drove by, pulled over and stopped. After loading up the vehicles Dennis and I each got in and drove off to the Chisasibi hotel. We offered to pay for the transport but the

driver would not accept anything.

My wife Sheila, our shuttle driver, was enjoying a 4-day drive from Goose Bay, Labrador, on her way to pick us up. I had stayed in touch with her via satellite phone. Since we had a half-day to kill before Sheila's arrival, we decided to check things out around Chisasibi. We crossed the river in ferry and did a walking tour of the island and its facilities that are still standing. Although short it's a worthwhile visit if the weather is good. We walked by the old Hudson Bay Trading Post, vintage 1805 which at the time was called the Big River Trading Post but it was long since shut down. The old church was in good shape and a tour of the old graveyard made for some interesting history in the headstones and inscriptions.

We had a great overnight stay and a great breakfast in the hotel and then we all drove out to have a look at James Bay. Dennis and I stepped into the ocean

and wet our hands and feet in the salt water. We then departed Chisasibi later in the morning and drove back east. We arrived in Newfoundland on September 13th after this phenomenal canoe expedition with many pleasant experiences to share. Upon trip completion, I found that I had well over a week's supply of food still on hand and Dennis had plenty of extra as well. Much of the scenery along the rivers and lakes on our route was striking and this nicely balanced the navigational as well as weather challenges that we experienced along the way. For entertainment Dennis had programmed songs and music on his cell phone and we both looked forward to listening to this each evening.

Sheila and Sharon had an amazing experience and were excited to share some interesting tidbits with us and other friends about their pleasant 4-day drive across northern Quebec to Chisasibi. All in all, none of us would

have missed it for the world.

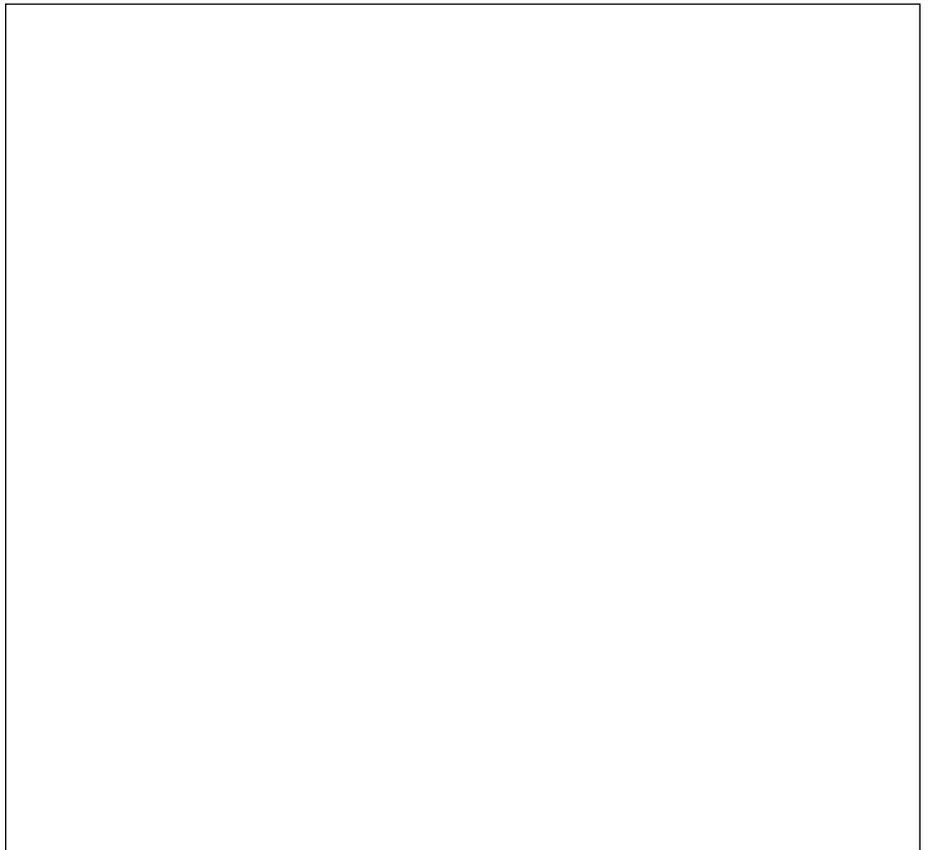
We were advised by employees working in Brissay and Radisson as well as by locals in Chisasibi that this was the first time that anyone had paddled this route across northern Quebec to James Bay by canoe.

If anyone would like more details about this trip, please contact me via herman.perry@outlook.com.

Elevation of the following key locations;
Menihék Lake - 472 mtr / 1550'
Height of Land between Labrador's McPhayden River & Quebec's Caniaspiscau's River - 579 mtr / 1900'
Caniaspiscau Reservoir - 535 mtr / 1760'
LaForge 2 Reservoir - 479 mtr / 1540'
LaForge 1 Reservoir - 431 mtr / 1415'
La Grand 4 Reservoir - 376 mtr / 1250'
LaGrand 3 Reservoir - 236 mtr / 800'
Radisson (LG 2 & 2a) - 168 mtr / 550'
LG 1 damsite - 32 mtr / 105'
Chisasibi - sea level







The Tsichu and Upper Keele Rivers: A Drive-In Trip to the NWT's Mackenzie Mountains

Words and images by Dwayne Wohlgeomuth



North Canol Road from Ross River, Yukon. The Tsichu is paddled by perhaps a couple groups a year and surely some years not at all. The Tsichu is about 40 kilometres long, and joins the more well-known Keele River roughly 85 kilometres upstream of another tributary, the Natla River.

In 2014 my partner Leanne Robinson and I planned a trip that involved paddling down the Tsichu, Keele, and Mackenzie Rivers, ending at Norman Wells, and then returning to our vehicle at the Tsichu headwaters via a roughly 350-kilometre hike on the Canol Trail. For the paddling portion, we recruited four friends from Yellowknife to join us. The combined paddling and hiking trip would take us almost two months.

In our planning we began to refer to the 85-kilometre section of the Keele River that lies upstream of the Natla River confluence as the upper Keele, and the section below this point as the lower Keele. The Keele River's size and accessibility change significantly after the Natla Confluence, where most trips on the Keele begin. The lower Keele is frequently paddled by both guided and self-guided groups, and is large enough for float planes to land on the river itself. Since the Keele River is more commonly paddled and since several past Nastawgan articles have been written about the Lower Keele section, this article will be limited to the Tsichu and the Upper Keele.

The remote part of our adventure begins not on the river, but rather at the Yukon community of Ross River where we begin the drive on the North Canol Road. This road is not like any standard road. A ferry across the Pelly River is required to access the road, and the ferry operates on a limited schedule.

Deep in the Mackenzie Mountains, just east of the NWT-Yukon border and at 63.30 of latitude, lies the headwaters of a small river called the Tsichu (pro-

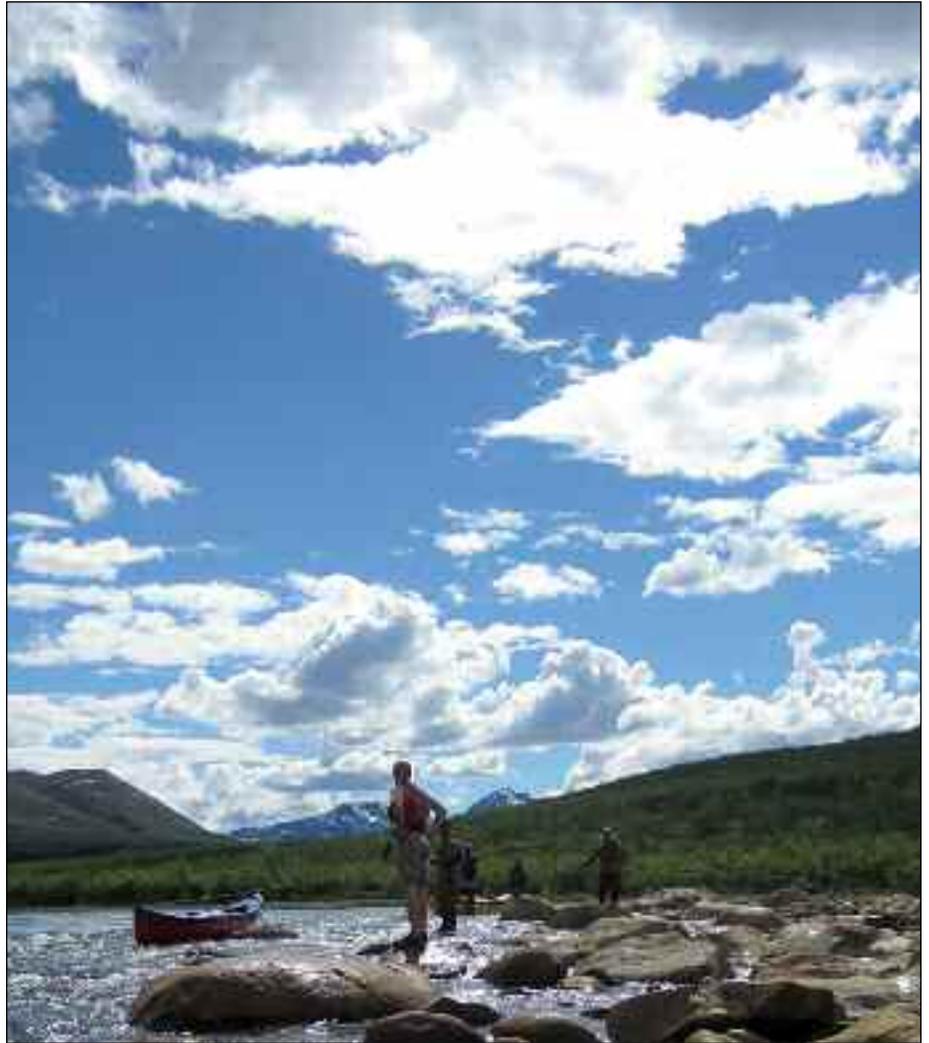
nounced Tissue). It is one of only a few rivers on the NWT side of the Mackenzie Mountains that can be reached by road, in this case via the



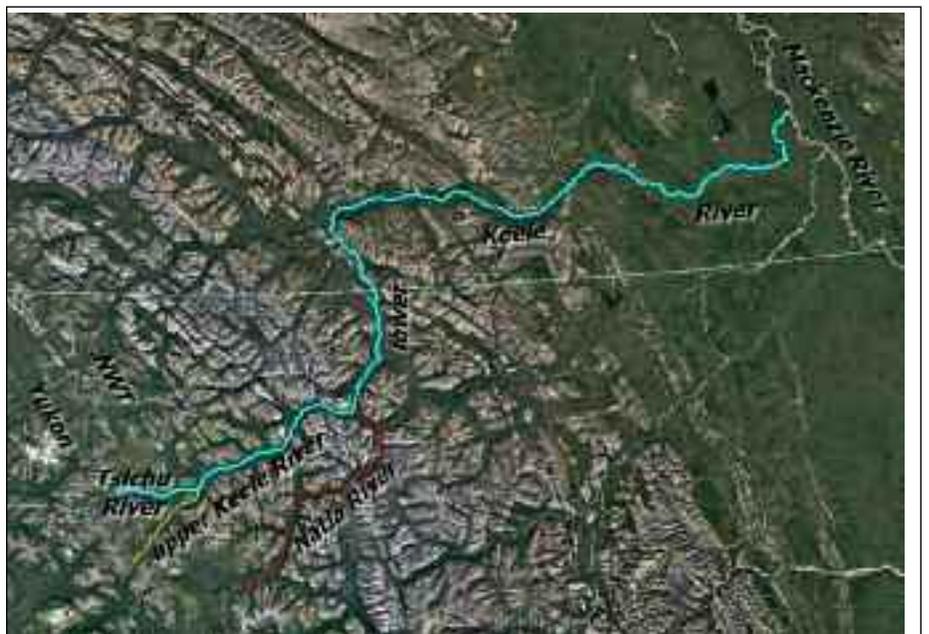
When we arrive, it is operating from 8am to 10am and from 2:30 to 4:30 pm each day. Gas, at least, is available for us in Ross River 24/7 via a pay-at-the-pump gas station.

The road is closed in the winter and the floodwaters of spring wash out the road in numerous places. The road usually opens towards the end of June. We cross the ferry on June 30, and we are one of the first vehicles of the year to drive the road. We stop to chat with the driver of the maintenance grader, and he's still working on the first dozen kilometres. The Yukon maintains the Canol Road as far as the NWT border, and the road is in reasonable shape and has new modern steel bridges, albeit built only for a single lane of traffic. One bridge had just been replaced the previous year. But the road is narrow, often steep, and has many potholes and sharp corners. Sometimes I slow the truck to walking speed when avoiding deep potholes is impossible, and on some of the smoother sections the speedometer hits 60 km/hr. The 230-kilometre drive to the NWT border takes more than five hours. We drive partway in two vehicles, but a mud hole close to the NWT / Yukon border stops the old Chevrolet Tracker. Four of us pile into the cab of the 2WD, half-tonne, regular-cab pickup. I need a break from driving, so I stand on the back bumper and hang onto the canoe rack, while Leanne finds a cozy spot amongst the gear in the box. We say our goodbyes to two friends who came along to drive the Tracker back to Yellowknife, and we wish them good luck for the drive back to Ross River.

There are 16 kilometres of unmaintained road from the NWT / Yukon border to the Tsichu River. There is also an NWT Wildlife Check Station here at the Tsichu River, since this area is a common hunting destination in autumn. This section of the road requires two stream crossings, so we put tire chains onto our truck and slowly drive through knee-deep water beside old derelict wood bridges that have long ago fallen into the streams. On the second crossing

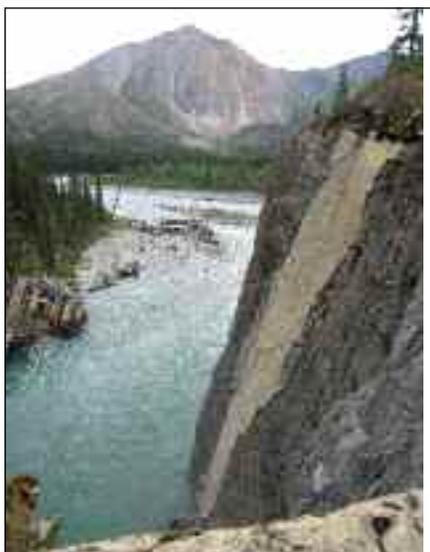


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we puncture the sidewall of one of the front tires, and are forced to put on our only spare. Why didn't we bring at least two spares? These 16 kilometres take us over three hours to drive, and we arrive late in the afternoon at the Wildlife Check Station. Finally, we can relax. We're no longer reliant on motors and inflated tires. Somehow, the road seemed more of a challenge than what I expect from the river. Now it's just us,



the water, and the canoes: the elements and mode of travel that we prefer, the truck being a necessary evil for reaching the river.

We start late the next day, July 1st, at Mile 222 of the Canol Road, just a couple hundred metres east of the NWT Wildlife Check Station, and where the Canol Road crosses the Tsichu River. Parts of the wooden bridge from the 1940s' Canol Road construction are still visible here. The river is small, twisting, braided, and shallow, but we are able to paddle 10 kilometres while only having to line one rapid about a hundred metres long. Water levels seem adequate, but we all feel that we wouldn't want to paddle this river during a dry year or late in the year once flow had diminished. We stop to fish a couple times, and are able to catch both arctic grayling and Dolly Varden. We're all pleased to have fish for dinner on the first day.

The valley is broad and gently rolling, and the land is covered with waist-high bog birch. In a few places the bog birch is over my head. The river's shores are mostly gravel and boulders with the occasional sand beach. The tallest mountains in the distance are still

snow-capped. We camp the first night at a gravel bar that just happens to be facing the first cliff we've seen on the river. There are almost no mosquitoes!

We spend a total of five days on the Tsichu River, travelling slowly and scouting lots from shore. We somehow don't see any caribou or moose, though we see many footprints on the shorelines and find a few shed antlers. We catch fish every day for dinner, either arctic grayling or Dolly Varden. In some places the maps are marked with rapids and none exist, while in other places there are no marked rapids but the river is a continuous stretch of dozens of rapids. The river continues to be rocky and shallow, but after our first day the braids mostly disappear. There are enough large drops and standing waves that we're all happy to have spray decks. We line a few rapids and portage a couple, and eventually reach the steep gradient at the end of the Tsichu. The valley narrows and the river becomes too steep and choked with boulders for canoe travel. We portage about 2.5 kilometres to reach the upper Keele.

One must portage on river left to avoid a hassle at the Keele River. There are many marked rapids at and below the confluence, so we aim downstream and reach the Keele perhaps 300 metres below the confluence. It is a good plan, because we put in and easily paddle what lies ahead. The portage was long, but the forest is sparse and only the shin-catching bog birch presents difficulties. The forest truly begins at the Keele River, with some trees reaching two feet in diameter at the stump.

Campsites on the Tsichu were generally plentiful and good, with many nice gravel bars and a few good islands. We were all surprised by the lack of flying insect life, and I'd choose to paddle this river again just to enjoy mountain scenery and a lack of bugs. None of us ever broke out the bug jackets.

The upper Keele is a much different river. We fly down the river on easy but constant current and only occasionally scout from shore. The Keele is called *Begádeé* by local aboriginals, while

Europeans called it the Gravel River until it was renamed after Joseph Keele who travelled the river in 1907 and 1908. The entire river is gravel, only rarely interrupted by a solid rock protrusion or cliff that creates a pinch and a rapid that requires more attention.

On the Upper Keele we enter the dense forest, and along much of the river the shorelines are falling into the river. We feel like we're on a new, young river. Massive spruce trees lie criss-crossed in the river, their stumps usually upstream and their green branches still alive. Other trees are clinging to the bank, leaning at nearly horizontal angles out over the water, somehow defying gravity. In some places, based on the number of freshly fallen trees, we guess that at least four feet of shoreline have been eroded this season. These trees, or sweepers, are our biggest danger, and some of the small side channels of the river are completely blocked.

Travelling more quickly on the river, and spending more time in our boats, we finally begin seeing more wildlife. One cloudy afternoon we spot a grizzly on the edge of the river, standing on a mostly submerged ungulate. As we drift closer, the bear disappears into the woods. We drift past and then turn around to watch, and a wolf sneaks out of the forest to grab a few bites. Whose kill is it I wonder?

The most memorable rapid of the upper Keele is a 900 bend in the river where it hits a short cliff, perhaps two kilometres upstream of the Sekwi Canyon. It appears as an S-bend on the map, and the 900 corner in question is the second bend of the S. We scout from shore, and the river is fast upstream, so it requires a quick turn to avoid being pushed straight into the cliff. All three boats manage the corner fine, and we are rewarded shortly afterwards with a beautiful hike up the river left side of the deep and gorgeous Sekwi Canyon. At our water levels, there is a small rapid at the top of the canyon, but the canyon itself is calm and peaceful.

After the canyon, the rest of the upper Keele is relaxed and gives us time



to watch the mountains and enjoy the multi-coloured rocks that decorate their sides. Near the end of the upper Keele, the rugged Delthore Mountain on river left looms over the river and is a landmark of the upcoming Natla River con-

fluence.

We continue our journey from here down the lower Keele River to the Mackenzie River, and down the Mackenzie River to Norman Wells. But it would be possible to end a trip after





the Natla River confluence. A float plane can land on the Keele here, or wheeled aircraft as big as Twin Otters can land at the Shell Airstrip which is located on river right of the Keele River about 35 kilometres below the Natla confluence. The Shell Airstrip is across the river from Fortress Mountain and perhaps 5 kilometres downstream of Durkan Creek.

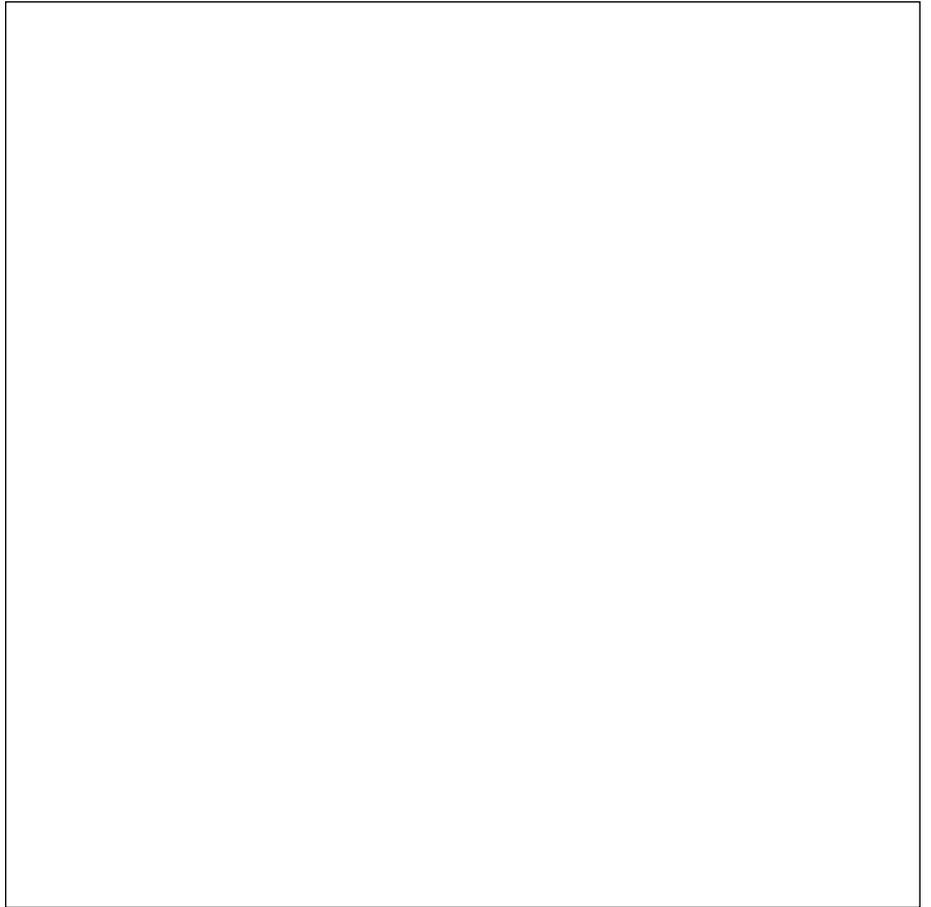
Though we drove to the Tsichu River, it is possible to fly in and land at the gravel airstrip at Mile 222 of the Canol Road. This airstrip was built during the days of the Canol Road construction and is still used by hunting outfitters in the area and by the Government of the Northwest Territories to access the wildlife check station at the location. People often fly

into this location from Norman Wells and from Whitehorse, Yukon. There are no lakes in the vicinity big enough for float planes.

Where the Tsichu River crosses the Canol Road, it lies at about 1240 metres above sea level. Over its 40 kilometre length, it drops to about 1060 metres, for an average gradient of 4.5 metres / kilometre. The steep gradient, combined with a low flow volume, make for lots of exposed rocks. A water flow station was active at the top of the river, where it crosses the Canol Road, from 1975 to 1992. The mean peak spring flow during these years was slightly less than 20 cubic metres per second (m^3/s). High spring flows typically last until the end of June, and by the beginning of August,

the mean flow is less than $10 m^3/s$. This water flow station is no longer active, but there is a flow station on the Keele River just above the Twitya River confluence, and real time data can be accessed via the Environment Canada website. This at least can be used to indicate how current water flows compare to average flows.

There are more photos of the Tsichu and upper Keele Rivers that I have posted on Google Earth, and which can also be viewed on Google Maps.





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Nastawgan is an Anishinabi word meaning “the way or route”

The WILDERNESS CANOE ASSOCIATION is a non-profit organization made up of individuals interested in wilderness travel, mainly by canoe and kayak, but also including backpacking and winter trips on both skis and snowshoes. The club publishes a quarterly journal,

Nastawgan, to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas of interest to wilderness travellers, organizes an extensive program of trips for members, runs a few basic workshops, and is involved in environmental issues relevant to wilderness canoeing.

WCA 2018 AGM

Saturday, March 3, 2018
MEC North York Community Room
(784 Sheppard Ave E Toronto)
Join us for: Outdoor activities, education, business meeting
Look for more details at www.wildernesscanoe.ca
Interested in helping the WCA? Join the Board! Contact any current board member for details.

WWF Canada Needs Help

World Wildlife Fund Canada (WWF Canada) is looking for help in locating paddlers that have good quality high resolution landscape pictures with or without species, which they would use on social media and potentially in media stories. I was given to understand that WWF doesn't have budget for purchasing photos at the moment, so they're looking for donations. They'll of course give a credit to the photographer in any use of their photo. The list of rivers:

- Liard • Dubawnt • Thelon • Kazan
- Horton • Anderson • Taltson
- Stikine • Ekwan • Birch

If you are in position to help, please forward your images along with detailed description to Rebecca Spring at rspring@wwfcanada.org

Events Calendar

Wilderness and Canoe Symposium will take place on 23-24 February 2018. Location remains the same – Monarch Park Collegiate at 1 Hanson Street. Details at www.wcsymposium.com
WCA AGM is planned for Saturday, 3rd March, 2018. Visit WCA website for more details.

Exciting Volunteer Opportunity – Nastawgan Assistant Editor

For over 40 years, the heart of the Wilderness Canoe Association has been our *Nastawgan* journal. Editing *Nastawgan* has been a labour of love for current and past editors including, most recently, Aleks Gusev. However, due to the other commitments, including running the annual Wilderness & Canoe Symposium, Aleks needs help in producing the journal. Therefore, we are looking for an Assistant Editor to work with Aleks towards building the necessary competencies to independently handle some aspects of journal production.

What we expect from the new *Nastawgan* Assistant Editor:

- Passion for paddling and/or the outdoors

- Good writing and communication skills (ability to spell and delete jargon)
- Willingness to network with WCA members to source stories and areas of interest
- Ability to meet deadlines

What we offer the new *Nastawgan* Editor:

- Opportunity to support and give back to the WCA
- Recognition as a valued member of the WCA management team
- Opportunity to expand your skills and expertise (looks good on a resume!)

For more information or to discuss this opportunity, please email: geri.james@bell.net

RCGS Expeditions Committee Grant Deadline

Royal Canadian Geographical Society has supported a range of significant mountaineering, paddling and related expeditions across Canada over the years.

Again this year, there is a call by the RCGS Expeditions Committee for proposals related to significant Canadian expeditions, with a deadline of January 21, 2018. Please see http://www.rcgs.org/programs/expeditions/expeditions_how_to_apply.asp for both the types of grants and sums available, and an on-line application form.

All grants come with certain reporting obligations, however they are not overly restrictive.

If you have any questions, please forward them to muscant@rcgs.org

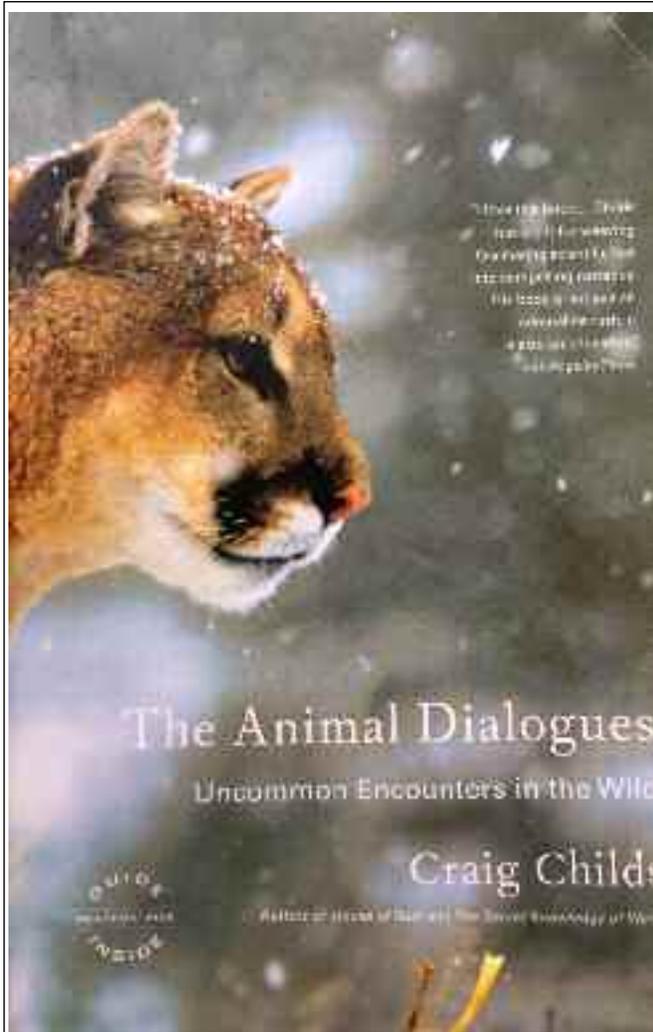
WCA Activities

Want to view all club activities, learn more about our extensive outings program for members, or organize and post a trip? It's easy! Visit the Outings section of the WCA website: www.wildernesscanoe.ca



Animalia

By Craig Childs



I finally knew what I had to do. There was so much else that needed mending, buttons and wire, holes to dig, screws to tighten, but I emptied my hands and walked into the woods. Here, old voices have always gathered—woodpeckers call one another, their codes tapped through the bullhorns of dead trees. Elk stand between naked white aspen trunks, while the aspens themselves migrate across mountains in great, thick herds, singing like water whenever the wind blows.

I arrive in one of these aspen forests, shambling on my two feet, searching for paths in underbrush and flowers. I kneel to wash my face in a cold, swift creek full of brown stones. I eat August's raspberries from thornbushes and catch cutthroat trout, cook them over a fire.

For a few days there is a stock trail. Eventually, I walk off of it. Older trails show themselves, blazes that some industrious person chopped into tree trunks with an ax, but they also fade. I pass the last hunting camp, logs rolled out for sitting, a rusted woodstove packed in by horse, a date carved on a tree, 1968.

After that there are no more numbers to mark the years. Days lose their names. Spiders sew veils that I wear across my face. The map is made of bears trudging into serviceberries and lacy flowers, bending over still stalks of alpine lilies, giving me a place to walk.

The way grows steep. Sweat drips onto the ground, big drops like rain. The mountainside is a cascade of aspen trees where I fall to hands and knees, fingers scrabbling into dead leaves and wormy soil for purchase. A deer bolts. I stop, heart pumping, head craned to see the animal in this dense stand. At a distance the deer pauses and peers back at me through a gap in the trees. This is not the deer browsing mums in the yard, not one wearing a tidy little name tag of genus and species. It is an antlered buck living in a house of ten thousand doors. It breathes through its nostrils, ears big as oven mitts. After a moment, the deer bounds away. I watch it as long as I can and it becomes branch, leaf, shadow, light.

I am heading for a pass still a few thousand feet higher. My hands are powdered white from trunks that I grab like ladder rungs. Bracken ferns uncurl at my waist. Long after the deer I stop again, not because I hear something but because an animal is here with me. There is a smell. It is like sex and fur and sweat. Studying the perimeter, I do not see the animal. A bear maybe. Mountain lion? It is a predator, I am sure.

A chill creeps down my spine. I am being watched. I am not telepathic or supernatural. It is a knack I believe we all still share, becoming alert, seeing how shadows are aligned, that there are places where a watcher can lie in wait. I have stumbled into a predator's lair. It knows I am here. It saw how I slipped under the weight of my pack, grabbed hold of tree branches, clobbered the ground with my knees. I am no threat to it. Why not stick around to see what else I am made of?

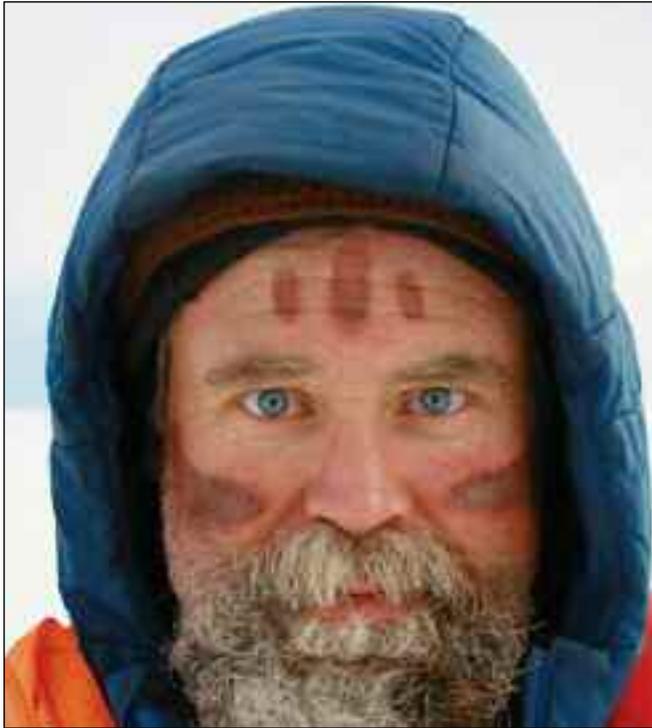
Could be a grizzly, I think, deepening the chill I feel. There are no grizzlies documented here in the southern Rockies, but some believe, even hope, that small populations still exist in isolated mountains where there are no humans to see them. This is the West Elk Range of Colorado, one of those lesser ranges, very few visitors.

It would be a candidate for reclusive grizzlies. That is what I am thinking now. I strain my senses, but no new information arises. I straighten up and climb ahead with mustered confidence.

Something moves behind me. I turn quickly and see a path bending through the ferns. But I don't see any color of fur. More paths materialize, more ferns bend, and the sound of wind enters the grove. It was nothing. Wind. I turn and keep going.

Now I am listening to everything. I follow the chattering warnings of squirrels and birds. Are they telling of me, alone?

I come into a clearing, a place where the earth is freshly torn up, rocks clawed from the ground. I walk to the middle;



it's about ten feet wide. What happened here? Branches are broken, roots ripped up, detached leaves not yet wilted. I touch the soil with my fingers. This was not intentional digging, not a hunt for grubs or ground squirrels. It was a fight. A killing. But there is no blood, no carcass.

Off to the side, I find a single strip of elk skin, curled where it is just beginning to dry. The skin still has tawny fur, and I stretch it out, about nine inches long. It is hardly the width of a fingernail, the width of a claw. I can feel raking pain, a claw swiped down the back of an elk, peeling off a ribbon of flesh. Whose claw, though? It could be lion as easily as bear. The fight was intense, tearing everything from the ground, paws and hooves scrapping hard, somewhere between six hundred and a thousand pounds of animals battling for survival. Tooth and nail, as it is said.

The strip of skin is all I can find. Everything else is gone, no evidence of a successful kill. Maybe a dead elk was dragged off. Or maybe the elk survived and this unknown animal is still hungry, now interested in something smaller, with less kick.

I can't tell whether I'm being watched or my senses are merely elevated beyond logic. I like the feeling. We guard our bodies until they are old and tasteless, when we could have fed ourselves to claw and fur, been literally reincarnated in the cells of a lion sleeping in the sun, the wall of muscle that is a bear crashing through a rotten log in search of ant eggs. Why not return again and again, glistening, gilded every time?

I pocket the skin and move out of the clearing. I'm not ready to get eaten, not just yet. I move fast and with strong shoulders.

Shadows deepen through the forest. I need to set a camp, but not here. I keep going, pushing harder, throwing sweat until I am skirting timberline, where evening storm clouds roll

by, hiding and revealing bald summits. This elevation is utterly exposed, trees all gnarled and bent to the earth; rocks and flowers and the press of dry avalanche chutes. Little rabbitlike pikas peep at me, while marmots chirp and trundle away. A rock outcrop directly over my head is crowned with the rack of a buck deer who is watching me cross below.

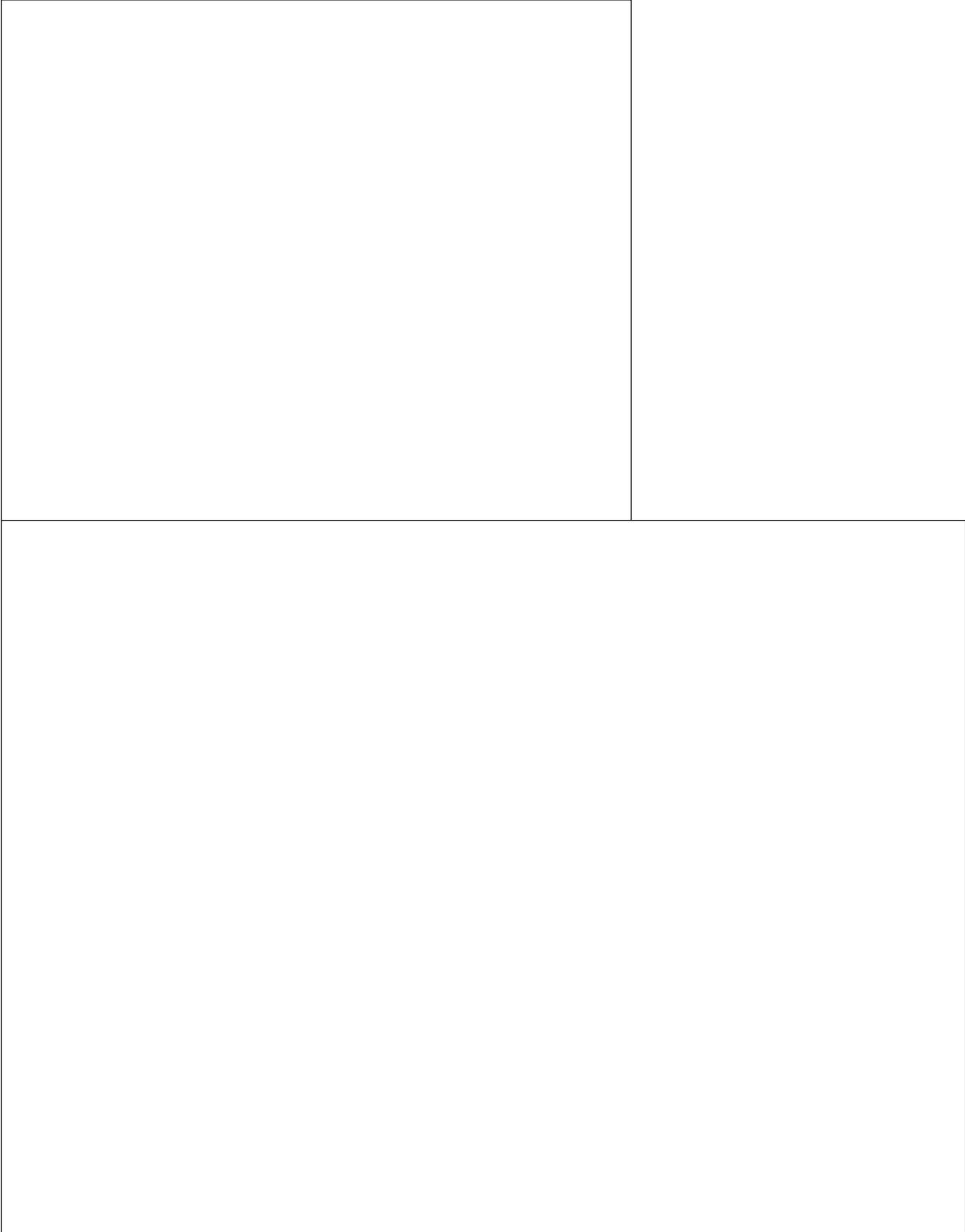
At sunset I finally reach the pass and drop my gear in a rocky saddle drawn between two mountains. I look behind me, where aspens lead down and enter isolated valleys, forests like green seas. I wonder what animal watched me scramble through its territory earlier in the day. It knows me now, made the acquaintance of my smell, saw how I move. At this moment it is alert, as it has been since it was born, peering through the dusk of its aspen grove, perhaps bedded down in softly folded ferns, its whiskers testing the air.

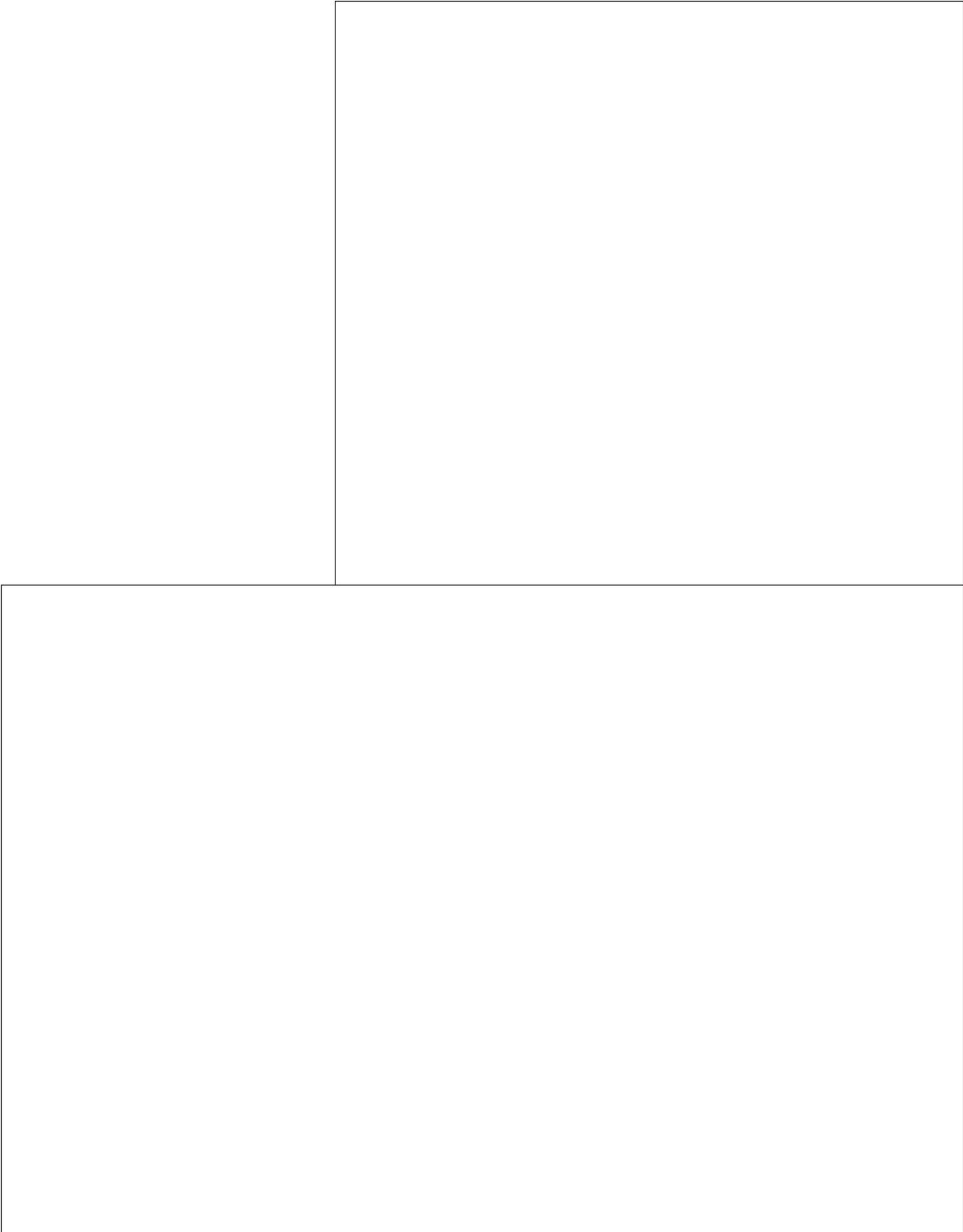
To the west of the pass lies open country, and as evening deepens, the lights of small towns begin to appear, ranching outposts, orchard growers. The world has been very busy making more and more life, always looking for a place to put it all. My town is down there. My house, with its glass windows, doorknobs, and porcelain sink.

I remember the many times I have sat at my table for dinner, not thinking once of creatures roaming the earth, forests laced with territories and birdsong. I remember being absorbed in my world of letters and numbers, so many tasks that needed doing. It would be easy to stare down there, imagining all of my life. Instead, I turn the other way, watching forest and mountain become black, imagining all that is alive.

This story is an excerpt from the book *"The Animal Dialogues – Uncommon Encounters in the Wild"*, reprinted here with the permission of the author. Craig told me he believes in "letting excerpts out", for what I'm deeply thankful. Mike McClelland (*"The Green River: A Trip Back In Time"*, Fall 2017 *Nastawgan*) met Craig on the boat shuttle as they were both departing from the Green river. Dave Brown, our text Editor, later told me that Craig stayed at his home in Craftsbury Common, Vermont, while teaching at Sterling College there. Apparently, Craig wrote some of his stories in the Dave's guest room that I occasionally occupy.

Craig Childs writes about the relationship between humans, animals, landscape, and time. His stories come from visceral, personal experience, whether in the company of illicit artifact dealers or in deep wilderness. Childs has published more than a dozen critically acclaimed books, including his most recent book, *Apocalyptic Planet*, which won the Orion Book Award and the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Men's Journal*, and *Outside*. An occasional commentator for National Public Radio's Morning Edition, Childs lives in Western Colorado and teaches writing for both University of Alaska in Anchorage and Southern New Hampshire University.





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