Franklin, OOPS, Mud & Cupcake

OTHER BOOKS BY MICHAEL D. PITT

Three Seasons in the Wind: 950 Kilometres by Canoe down Northern Canada's Thelon River.
Second Edition. Hornby House Publications. 2000.
(co-authored with Kathleen Pitt)

Beyond the End of the Road:
A Winter of Contentment North of the Arctic Circle.
Agio Publishing House. 2009.

Franklin, OOPS, Mud & Cupcake

CANOEING THE COPPERMINE, SEAL, ANDERSON & SNOWDRIFT RIVERS IN NORTHERN CANADA

MICHAEL D. PITT

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DEDICATION

To Kathleen, my companion in life and adventure.
People often tell me how lucky I am to have a wife
who shares my passion for "roughing it" in northern Canada.
I usually smile, and simply nod my head in agreement.
"That's right," I say. "I sometimes think that Kathleen enjoys paddling
down wilderness rivers even more than I do. I am one very lucky guy."

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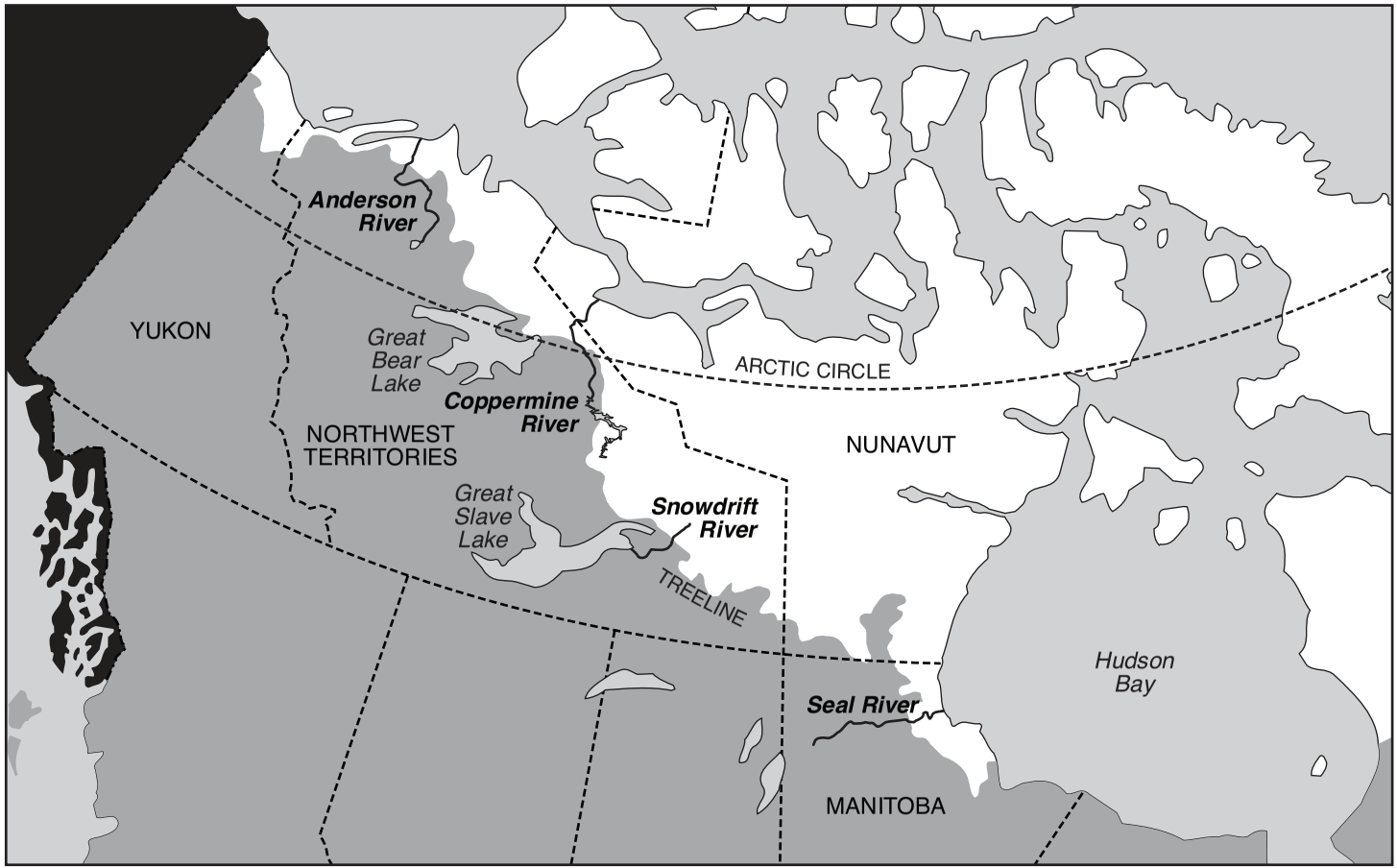

Anderson River
YUKON
Great Bear Lake
Coppermine River
ARCTIC CIRCLE
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
NUNAVUT
Great Slave Lake
Snowdrift River
TREELINE
Hudson Bay
Seal River
MANITOBA

INTRODUCTION

This book details four extended canoe trips in northern Canada. For me, the Coppermine, Seal, Anderson and Snowdrift Rivers offered true wilderness experiences because no towns or villages existed along any of their banks. And, despite obvious similarities among all paddling expeditions, each of these four adventures offered distinct memories and surprises, most of which were enjoyable but some of which were decidedly uncomfortable. I should warn you, however, that no one died on any of these canoe trips. No one broke any bones. No one even got sick. This book is not about danger lurking around every bend or harrowing escapes from near-death situations. No. This book is simply about what it's like to be on four glorious rivers.

In 1995, Kathleen and I joined one other couple to descend 645 km down the Coppermine River. Well, "descend" might not actually be the most appropriate word to describe this trip, which began by flying in a Twin Otter approximately 230 km north of Yellowknife to Winter Lake, very near the site of abandoned Fort Enterprise, where Sir John Franklin overwintered in 1820/21.

The primary problem with this starting point, from a canoeing perspective, was that the Coppermine River system could be reached only by

crossing over the height of land. From our first camp at Winter Lake, we spent 11 days dragging, portaging, tracking, lining and occasionally paddling our canoes 110 km to reach the Coppermine River system at Point Lake. From there, we travelled another 16 days to reach the village of Coppermine (now Kugluktuk) on the Arctic coast, at 67°50' N. Our trip began in the mostly treeless country between Winter and Point Lakes, passed through dense spruce forests surrounding Redrock and Rocknest Lakes, and ended in the mountains and rolling hills of the tundra, also known as the Barren Grounds.

Of all the northern rivers Kathleen and I have paddled, the Coppermine, by far, was the most physically demanding. This river also tested the limits of our paddling skills with numerous and often very difficult rapids.

In 1997, Kathleen and I ventured out alone down the Seal River in northern Manitoba. Of the four major rivers in northern Manitoba, only the Seal remained completely undeveloped. We chartered a Beaver float plane from Lynn Lake to fly into Shethanei Lake, just downriver from the small Chipewyan community of Tadoule. From there, we paddled 280 km down the Seal River to its mouth on the western shore of Hudson Bay, approximately 70 km north of the town of Churchill.

Until early 1997, Kathleen and I didn't know anything about Manitoba rivers but became intrigued by the Seal River based on what we read in a four-page brochure produced by Manitoba Natural Resources for the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS):

> *The Seal begins its course ringed by magnificent sand-crowned eskers. Its velocity accelerates dramatically into the rapids and gorges which surround Great Island. Beyond the island, the river leaves the boreal forest and enters a sparsely-treed, transitional sub-Arctic environment of tundra and heath, christened by the native peoples as the "Land of Little Sticks." Finally, the Seal flows through barren Arctic tundra, huge boulder fields and complex rapids, spilling into a beautiful estuary where its fresh waters mix with the salt of Hudson Bay.*

Now that sounded very interesting. There also existed the exciting

possibility of seeing polar bears. Churchill is famous for polar bear watching, particularly in October and November, when the bears congregate in town waiting for the ice to re-form on Hudson Bay. Before then, during the summer months, the bears wander up and down the coast. We would almost certainly encounter these true predators.

In 1999, Kathleen and I paddled down the Anderson River. Twenty-seven days and 557 km from Colville Lake to Wood Bay/Liverpool Bay on the Arctic coast, at 69°42' N. A trip of constant daylight. A trip that took us from the boreal forest out onto the open tundra.

Kathleen and I began this journey not by flying into the headwaters from a northern community but simply by paddling away on June 20 from our isolated one-room cabin where we had been overwintering since January 31.

Our 141 days in that cabin at the north end of Colville Lake are chronicled in my 2009 book, *Beyond the End of the Road: A Winter of Contentment North of the Arctic Circle*. If you have ever fantasized about living simply on the frozen shores of a quiet northern lake, I think you would enjoy our story.

Anyway, back to the Anderson River. Kathleen and I canoed away from the cabin immediately after breakup, on the spring flood, and spent a great deal of time scouting and running high water through narrow, twisting canyons. Along the way, we encountered grizzly bears and cold temperatures. We often struggled against strong headwinds, and sometimes wondered and fretted if we would ever reach the Arctic coast.

In 2001, Kathleen and I ventured out alone again to paddle 26 days and 330 km down the Snowdrift River, from Lynx Lake to Austin Lake. We intended to start this trip at the exact location where we began our Thelon River adventure in 1993 (chronicled in Kathleen's and my book, *Three Seasons in the Wind: 950 Kilometres by Canoe Down Northern Canada's Thelon River*). Instead of travelling east toward Hudson Bay, however, we planned to paddle west toward Great Slave Lake. We would start at the same spot on Lynx Lake but would end up in completely different watersheds. The Thelon River leads to Hudson Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The Snowdrift River leads to Great Slave Lake, the Mackenzie River and then beyond to the Arctic Ocean.

According to a six-page summary prepared by Ed Struzik as part of the series of Northwest Territories River Profiles:

> *For someone looking for a bit of everything in a northern river, [the Snowdrift] is the river for you. Beginning in the tundra ecosystem, the Snowdrift flows through the tundra/ treeline transition zone into the thick of a mixed forest system. There are lake(s), fast portions of river, and many extremely picturesque waterfalls. Although it is relatively close to Yellowknife, it is rarely travelled.*

So there's a brief summary of the kinds of adventures each of these four rivers provided. Before beginning the river accounts, however, I will devote a chapter to tell you a bit about how Kathleen and I prefer to paddle wilderness rivers. I'm not saying that our way of river running is the best way. I'm just saying that's how we like to paddle. It's the best way for us.

CHAPTER 1

RIVER RUNNING

ONE COUPLE VERSUS A GROUP

Kathleen and I very much prefer to paddle on our own, an approach that is considered wrong, even foolhardy by most "experts" and wilderness paddling books. The general recommendation is that all wilderness canoe trips should include at least three tandem boats. If one boat is lost or damaged by capsize or broaching on a rock, then the remaining two boats can each accommodate one of the unfortunate paddlers. Also, three tandem boats with six people provides a critical mass for camp chores and the flexibility to spell off a tired or sick paddler. All of this makes good sense.

I should say though, that Kathleen and I never capsize on wilderness canoe trips. Never. I'm a firm believer that you should never capsize on wilderness rivers. Despite this confidence bordering on hubris, people still ask us, "Well, what if you do capsize?"

I tell them again that we don't capsize. Ever. Kathleen and I are experienced. We know our skills. We work well as a team. We are always reading the river, anticipating what hazards might be waiting for us downstream. And, if the truth be told, as I am about to tell you, more boats and more people sometimes just inject bravado and peer pressure into the paddling expedition.

Imagine that six people are standing on shore, looking at the rapid, and deciding whether or not to run. One pair of paddlers is definitely worried and apprehensive. They would rather portage. The other four paddlers start saying things like, "I can run this. You should be able to run it too. Come on. We don't even need to scout the entire rapid. Let's just go. What are you worried about?"

So all six people climb back into their canoes and turn down into the noisy, rocky maelstrom of white and foam. The worried pair of paddlers becomes hesitant. Their strokes become tentative. Hesitation and tentative strokes often produce very bad results in a rapid. The frightened paddlers make it halfway down before broaching on a midstream rock. Their Kevlar canoe wraps, shudders for a second or two, and then shatters into pieces. Gear and now-panicked canoeists float away at the mercy of the unforgiving current. Maybe all of the gear and both canoeists are saved. That is certainly the best-case scenario.

So, one of the tandem boats has been lost. The remaining two boats now have three paddlers and approximately 50% more gear. This is not a good option. On all of our wilderness canoe trips, our boat is full, pretty much from the beginning to the very end of the trip. Kathleen and I really don't have room for more people and more gear in our canoe.

In this example, the recommended group size of three canoes and six people caused the problem. The capsized couple, on their own, would almost certainly have portaged the rapid. No one has ever capsized on the portage trail. There would have been no shattered canoe. There would have been no potentially missing gear or food. There would have been no frightened paddlers.

PREPARATION AND AVOIDING PROBLEMS IS THE BEST APPROACH

Kathleen and I feel quite safe on our own. We never run any rapid unless both of us agree to run. We often scout where others might not. We are alone on the river, so we must not capsize. Ever. Kathleen and I actually feel secure in our aloneness, not threatened. We are free to paddle when we want. We are free to camp where and when we want. We are free to take unplanned rest days and hikes when we want. We are free to stop to botanize and birdwatch when we want. We are free to be ourselves.

I should also point out that larger groups do not even guarantee rescue of capsized paddlers and gear. I have read and heard of many fatalities that have occurred among larger groups. A mid-river capsize on a large, Arctic river can initiate fatal hypothermia before help arrives. A foot entrapment can cause drowning before help arrives. Large groups can improve safety and security, but they provide no such guarantee. Wilderness canoeing emancipates the paddler from regulations and rules. Travel in groups if you wish. Paddle alone if you prefer. It's your choice no matter what anyone says.

I am not, however, recommending that anyone should just go out, buy a canoe, charter a float plane, and head off down any of the rivers in this book. Such a recommendation on my part would be irresponsible. Appropriate wilderness and paddling skills are absolutely essential before heading out. I began backpacking into wilderness areas at the age of 12. Wilderness travel has remained a nearly constant aspect of my life since then. Kathleen and I took up canoeing in 1986 and immediately joined the Beaver Canoe Club in Burnaby, British Columbia. This was the best decision of our paddling lives. The club provided basic instructions in canoeing and paddling safety. The club also provided companions and guides for year-round canoeing throughout southwestern British Columbia. Nearly every Sunday for four years, we paddled with the club to develop and hone our whitewater skills and confidence.

I'm not suggesting that Kathleen and I are elite paddlers. We are not. But in our prime, we were very competent. We have good forward strokes

and excellent balance in the canoe. We have a strong forward and backward ferry. We can hit eddies nearly at will, along river banks as well as behind rocks in mid-channel. We can side slip confidently into slower water while descending rock gardens. I have a strong high brace. Kathleen has a strong low brace. Both of us have effective stationary and sculling draw and pry strokes. We lean the canoe instinctively when crossing eddy lines. We communicate very well and have nearly identical approaches to running the river. These skills took a long time to develop and have allowed us to enjoy the rivers described in this book. If you don't know what these strokes are, or if you are not skilled with these strokes, then I recommend that you don't attempt to paddle wilderness rivers on your own.

The first wilderness canoe trip that Kathleen and I took was with two other couples from our Beaver Canoe Club, on the South Nahanni River in August of 1990. Most paddlers have heard of the Nahanni River and are aware of the whitewater challenges in the Rock Gardens below the Moose Ponds, where we began our trip. This headwaters section of the Nahanni River is approximately 50 km of nearly continuous Class II–Class IV rapids, depending on water levels. Our flights into the Moose Ponds from Blackstone Landing on the Liard River were delayed two days due to heavy rains. Canoeists coming off the river reported that Kraus Hot Springs was under water. The Liard River itself was choked with logs and debris pell-melling down the river. Our group of three canoes likely faced higher than normal water levels and more difficult rapids than usual in the Rock Gardens. We ran them all without incident, and, except for the first rapid, without scouting. I mention this to give you an idea of our paddling skills so that you might better judge whether you should attempt the rivers in this book.

IRC SCALE FOR RATING RAPIDS

You will notice throughout this book that I often refer to the class of a rapid. For those of you who aren't familiar with this classification, I offer the following from Madsen and Wilson's *Rivers of the Yukon*.

INTERNATIONAL RIVER CLASSIFICATION SCALE

Class I: Moving water with a few riffles and small waves. Few or no obstructions.

Class II: Easy rapids with waves up to one metre (three feet). Channels are wide and obvious without scouting. Some manoeuvring is necessary.

Class III: Rapids with high, irregular waves that could swamp an open canoe. Narrow passages often require scouting and complex manoeuvring.

Class IV: Long, difficult rapids with constricted passages that often require precise manoeuvring in turbulent water. Scouting from shore is often necessary, and conditions make rescue difficult. Generally impossible for open canoes. Boaters in closed canoes and kayaks should be able to Eskimo roll.

Class V: Extremely difficult, long and violent rapids with complicated routes that should be scouted from shore. There is a significant hazard to life in the event of mishap. It is essential to be able to Eskimo roll.

Class VI: Difficulties of Class V carried to the extreme of navigability. Nearly impossible and very dangerous—(only) for experts who have taken all possible rescue precautions. Serious risk to life.

In my experience, virtually all serious canoeists can learn to paddle Class II rapids with confidence after only a few weekends of practice. It is also my experience that only a very small percentage of serious canoeists ever become confident and proficient in Class III rapids.

SPRAY DECK

Note that Class III rapids "have high, irregular waves that could swamp an

open canoe." Kathleen and I always paddle wilderness rivers with a spray deck on our canoe, which means that we are not truly an open canoe.

We use a spray deck for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, the spray deck keeps our gear dry when it rains. The spray deck also seems to reduce wind resistance. And, the spray deck certainly can deflect large waves that might otherwise swamp an open canoe. I should say, though, that our spray deck does not ever influence our decision about whether or not to run the rapid. We run the rapid because we think we can, based on our paddling skills without the spray deck. I strongly believe that it is a potentially serious mistake for people to run rapids that they normally would portage just because they have a spray deck. A spray deck does not substitute for, nor does it augment, paddling skills.

Commercial spray decks for canoes generally come with the spray skirt permanently attached to the deck. Perhaps it is only canoeing mythology, but we had heard that capsized canoeists had occasionally drowned because they became entangled in the spray skirt. So Kathleen made our nylon spray deck and spray skirt as two separate pieces. After fitting the deck to the canoe, Kathleen cut out cockpits for the bow and stern paddlers. She then sewed a sleeve on each cockpit, leaving a small gap in each sleeve. We then inserted a poly butyl pipe into the sleeve, with the two ends held together with a plastic connector. Kathleen then made the two spray skirts with a sleeve at the bottom to enclose elastic that fitted snugly over the poly butyl coaming. Another sleeve at the top of the spray skirt contained a drawstring to hold the spray skirt tightly to our chest. This design would prevent water from pouring into the cockpit, and would also allow the spray skirt to easily come loose from the coaming in case of a capsize. We would never become entrapped, and we could wear the skirt or not, depending on river and weather conditions.

We attached the spray deck with stainless steel snaps to the underside of the wooden gunwales of our 16-foot (4.9 m) canoe, a model known as the Explorer, made by Mad River. We paddle the Explorer because we believe it is an excellent all-purpose boat. It has good secondary stability, and is slightly rockered, bow and stern, for manoeuvring in rapids. Yet it tracks

well on lake water, even under windy conditions. The Explorer weighs 72 lb. (32.7 kg), and is light enough and short enough for me to portage on my own. Longer and heavier canoes are too unwieldy for me. I am not particularly strong at 5 ft. 6 in. (1.67 m) and 140 lb. (65.5 kg). Both Kathleen and I, however, do have stamina and determination. *[Note: Canoes are still marketed in imperial units, which is why I presented the length and weight of our Explorer canoe in feet and pounds, with metres and kilograms in parentheses, respectively. Similarly, I'm an old guy, and still think of my height and weight in feet and pounds, respectively.]*

ROYALEX VERSUS KEVLAR VERSUS FIBREGLASS VERSUS WOOD AND CANVAS

Our Explorer is made of a type of plastic known by the trade name of Royalex. The canoe hull has two layers of Royalex enclosing a foam core, plus an outer layer of vinyl on each side. This canoe hull can be fairly easily repaired in the field but is very resistant to damage. Early in our canoeing career, Kathleen and I saw a Royalex canoe wrap around a rock, with its bow and stern nearly touching. The group pulled the canoe free, towed it to shore, and jumped up and down a few times on the jackknifed hull until it popped back into shape. The paddlers then got back in and happily canoed downstream. At that moment, we decided that a Royalex canoe was the canoe for us.

Royalex canoes, though, are not as rigid as canoes made of fibreglass or Kevlar. Royalex canoes tend to flex, which means that they are slower than fibreglass or Kevlar canoes of similar designs. That doesn't bother me, though, as I am not in any particular hurry on a wilderness canoe trip. Kathleen and I once gave a slide show on our Thelon River trip to an audience in which sat the owner of Western Canoeing & Kayaking, maker of the iconic Clipper Tripper canoe. After the presentation, he said, "You know, you can do these northern trips in my fibreglass canoes. They are a lot lighter than Royalex."

I told him about the time I saw that wrapped Royalex canoe paddle away

after being pulled off the rock. I also told him about the time I saw a Kevlar canoe burst into a zillion pieces as it wrapped around a post in a very slow-moving current in the Fraser River delta. "That's why I paddle a plastic boat, Marlin. Because a person might wrap around a rock."

"Well," he asked, "how often have you ever wrapped around a rock?"

"Never," I said.

He looked smug, as though he had proven his point. And maybe he had. Even so, I like to paddle a Royalex canoe. *[Note: In April 2014, Royalex went out of production. It could be that there will be no more Royalex canoes, which would make many wilderness river paddlers very unhappy. The good news is that Esquif Canoes, in Quebec, announced almost immediately that they were developing a material called T-Formex that will be "10 percent lighter and 20 times more abrasion resistant than Royalex." Very good news indeed!]*

You might be wondering about those classic canoes made of wood and canvas. Such canoes are certainly beautiful. Such beauty comes with a price, though. Wood and canvas canoes are heavy, particularly when wet. Wood and canvas canoes require a keel to protect the canvas, which means such canoes require deeper water and are more difficult to manoeuvre in rock gardens. I have never seen anyone paddling a wilderness river in a wood and canvas canoe. I'm not saying it doesn't happen. I'm just saying I have never seen it. A wood and canvas canoe would certainly not be my choice.

NAVIGATING WITH TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND COMPASS

I also like to travel with topographic maps and compass. I love looking at the maps. I enjoy working with a compass. I don't need, or even want, a GPS. The compass doesn't need batteries. The compass doesn't need satellites. For me, topographic maps and compass seem to signify wilderness trips. By reading the map, I always know where I am within 100 m or so. Well, I know where I am almost all of the time. Okay, I know where I am most of the time.

And in reality, in most situations, I don't need to know exactly where I

am. Besides, how can I get lost on a river? The river goes downhill. The river has banks on both sides. The river has tributaries spilling in from the sides. I can locate tributaries on the topographic maps. The river has canyons and rapids and calm sections and waterfalls. I can locate these features on the topographic maps. I can't get lost on the river. Well, it doesn't seem likely that I can get lost on the river. Yes, I know what you're saying, there was that time on the Thelon River in 1993 when Kathleen and I had misplaced ourselves for three to four hours. Even so, topographic maps and a compass will always be my familiar, comfortable, navigational tools.

PLANNING OUR RIVER TRIPS

Before each trip, I estimate the distance to be travelled on each paddling day by using the "three times forefinger-drag method." Let me illustrate. Suppose that I am using 1:50,000 maps. Gridded squares on these Canadian topographic maps are all 1 km × 1 km. I place my right forefinger at the starting point and drag it along the map, usually next to the shoreline, to get my best estimate, 1 km at a time, for the day's journey. I estimate when I have dragged 1 km by looking at the gridded squares as my finger passes through. The first bit of shoreline might go through 20 percent of the length of a square. The second bit might go through 50 percent of the length of the next square. The third bit might go through the full length of two squares or more. When I drag a little way into this third bit, I count *one*. I do this very quickly. I can count off 20 km in less than 30 seconds. I don't explicitly measure anything. I do this for the entire tentative itinerary, writing down the daily distances as I go along. I then hide this piece of paper and repeat the process after I have forgotten the recorded distances. It usually takes only a few minutes for me to forget. I then repeat the process a third time, and assume that the average of the three numbers is my best estimate of the distance.

The gridded squares on 1:250,000 topographic maps measure 10 km × 10 km. For these larger squares, I use the same "three times forefinger-drag method" but estimate distances in 5-km chunks.

I prepare this tentative itinerary to determine approximately how long the trip will take. I don't necessarily expect to be exactly where the tentative itinerary suggests on any particular day. While on the trip, however, I frequently refer to the tentative itinerary to make sure that I am making reasonable progress. Falling too far behind the tentative itinerary suggests that longer days, or fewer rest days, might be necessary.

For your information, I have listed these distances and tentative itineraries, in both kilometres and miles, for each of the four rivers, at the end of their respective chapters. I think that you will enjoy these stories more by referring to this information.

For all those readers who prefer imperial units of measure, I have provided some kilometre and mile equivalencies in Appendix 1. For your information, 1 km equals 0.62 miles. For a quick and easy ballpark estimate, you can simply divide the number of kilometres (km) in half (and then add little bit more).

Finally, I commonly refer to distances in metres. It's OK if you just read "yards" when you see metres. Although a metre is actually a little more than 3 inches longer than a yard, my references to metres were always just visual estimates. When I say, for example, "I saw a sow grizzly and her cub heading directly toward the tarp, only 100 m away," I didn't actually measure the distance. So it's fine if you just read 100 yards. In fact, 100 yards might very well have been more accurate than 100 m anyway.

EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION

Accidents and medical emergencies can certainly occur on wilderness canoe trips. As members of the Beaver Canoe Club, Kathleen and I were able to borrow the club's Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) for all of our northern canoeing adventures. In an emergency, we could simply push the button to send out a signal, and rescue would soon be on its way. Or so the theory goes. There is, however, no voice communication with an EPIRB; it only provides a signal that help is needed. So, if one of us had suf-

fered a burst appendix, or a broken leg, we could push the button and hope for the best. We would not have known, however, if help was actually on the way.

Many articles have been written on the usefulness or appropriateness of an EPIRB on wilderness canoe trips. Many of these articles recommend against EPIRBs. Current literature stresses the importance of satellite phones. Indeed, many outfitters require their clients to carry satellite phones. Kathleen and I paddled these isolated northern rivers without taking any communication device (apart from the aforementioned EPIRB). Is that approach prudent? Likely not. Is that approach wrong? Not if that's how we feel comfortable travelling. I paddled these four rivers to escape. I would not have truly escaped while clinging to an umbilical cord. That's just how I felt.

Without doubt, satellite phones can be extremely useful in situations of a burst appendix or a broken leg. They are next to useless for a paddler with a foot entrapment, whose head has been pulled under water by the current. In such a situation, the paddler's life expectancy equals the amount of time they can hold their breath. Satellite phones are totally useless when they are submerged in a pack beneath a log-jam after a capsize. Satellite phones increase safety and security, but they guarantee neither. Caution, good judgement, skill and experience provide the greatest degree of safety and security.

All that being said, I have recently heard of three cases where wilderness canoeists suffered heart attacks. Two of these people survived because their group carried a satellite phone, which they used to arrange for emergency evacuation. As I become older, and increasingly aware of my own vulnerability, I am more inclined to take a satellite phone on future wilderness canoe trips. I seem to have misplaced the bravado and sense of invincibility of my younger days.

FIRST AID AND OTHER REPAIRS

Heart attacks, burst appendices and broken legs do not happen very often.

Minor accidents and less significant medical issues are much more likely. Kathleen and I always take a first aid kit with the following items:

CONTENTS OF WILDERNESS AND CANOEING FIRST AID KIT

SUPPLIES
Adhesive wound closures (1/8 × 3 inches)
Alcohol wipes (6)
Bandages (assorted)
Cavit (temporary tooth filling)
Compresses (12, non-adherent, 4 × 3 inches)
First aid manual
Gauze cleansing pads
Lighter/matches
Medical tape
Moleskin
Pressure bandage (2)
Q-tips (100)
Scissors
Tensor bandage (1)
Triangular bandage (1)
Tweezers

EXTERNAL MEDICINES
Bactroban (antibiotic ointment)
Dermovate (cortisone to aid healing)
Fucidin (antibiotic ointment; prescription)
Nerisone (anti-inflammatory; prescription)
Second Skin (5)
Stop Itch (bites, minor burns, cuts, rashes, sunburn)
Sting Stop (bee stings)

DRUGS
Aspirin
Acetaminophen (pain reliever)

Novo-Nidazole/Metron/Dazole (Giardia; prescription)
Novotrimel/Trimeth/Sulfamethx (infection antibiotic; prescription)
Seldane (antihistamine)
Throat lozenges

We have never used most of these supplies. The worst accident we've ever had is when I spilled very hot tea on my bare thigh, after which I applied Second Skin. I removed the Second Skin after two days because the burn wasn't healing by being all covered up. Exposed to the air, the wound dried out and healed very quickly. Perhaps the Second Skin wasn't necessary or even useful. I'm not actually a medical doctor, so I don't really know.

We also take a repair kit that contains many items: Cold Cure, a two-part epoxy for glueing broken things back together; stir sticks, mixing cups and spreading brush; fibreglass or Kevlar cloth for repairing a damaged canoe; spare shoelaces, clips, screws, D-rings, plastic connectors and buckles; small crescent wrench and screwdriver with multiple bits; duct tape; ripstop nylon; needle and thread; replacement cap for fuel bottle; Therm-a-Rest valve kit; glues such as Goop, Vinyl-Tec or contact cement; 3-in-One oil for the white-gas stove pump gasket; and extra mosquito netting for the tent. The list goes on and on. I try to anticipate what might break and what I would need for repair. You should do the same.

STOVES, BUGS AND FOOD

Kathleen and I always take a Coleman white-gas backpacking stove for (1) those days when we are too tired or rushed to cook our supper over a campfire, or (2) Barren Ground rivers, such as the Coppermine and Snowdrift, that have long sections with no firewood. We actually take a second stove in case our primary stove fails.

Mosquitoes and black flies pose the greatest threats to human comfort on northern Canada canoe trips, particularly trips out on the tundra. Kathleen and I protect ourselves primarily by wearing open-weave bug jackets that we saturate with a product that contains 95% or 100% DEET. In our experience,

nothing works like DEET. We have tried alternatives. Compared to "insect-proof shirts," our open-weave light-mesh jackets, with hood, makes it more comfortable to work hard for long periods in sometimes hot conditions. Depending on how much one is sweating or working in the rain, one bottle is usually enough for the saturated bug jacket to be effective for about two weeks. A little more DEET applied to hands and face makes for a relatively bug-free environment. We have never felt overly tormented by bugs and have never taken a mesh tent for cooking and eating in. If the bugs are particularly bad, we simply retreat to our sleeping tent after supper. In the tent, we drink tea, study our topographic maps, and read historical journals or plant books. The mosquitoes and black flies remain outside the tent, where they belong.

We try to live as simply as possible on our canoe trips, and that includes meals. As you will discover in this book, Kathleen and I generally have tea and bannock for breakfast, soup for lunch, and one-pot meals for supper. We also both enjoy one bag of gorp (raisins, nuts and liquorice all sorts) per day.

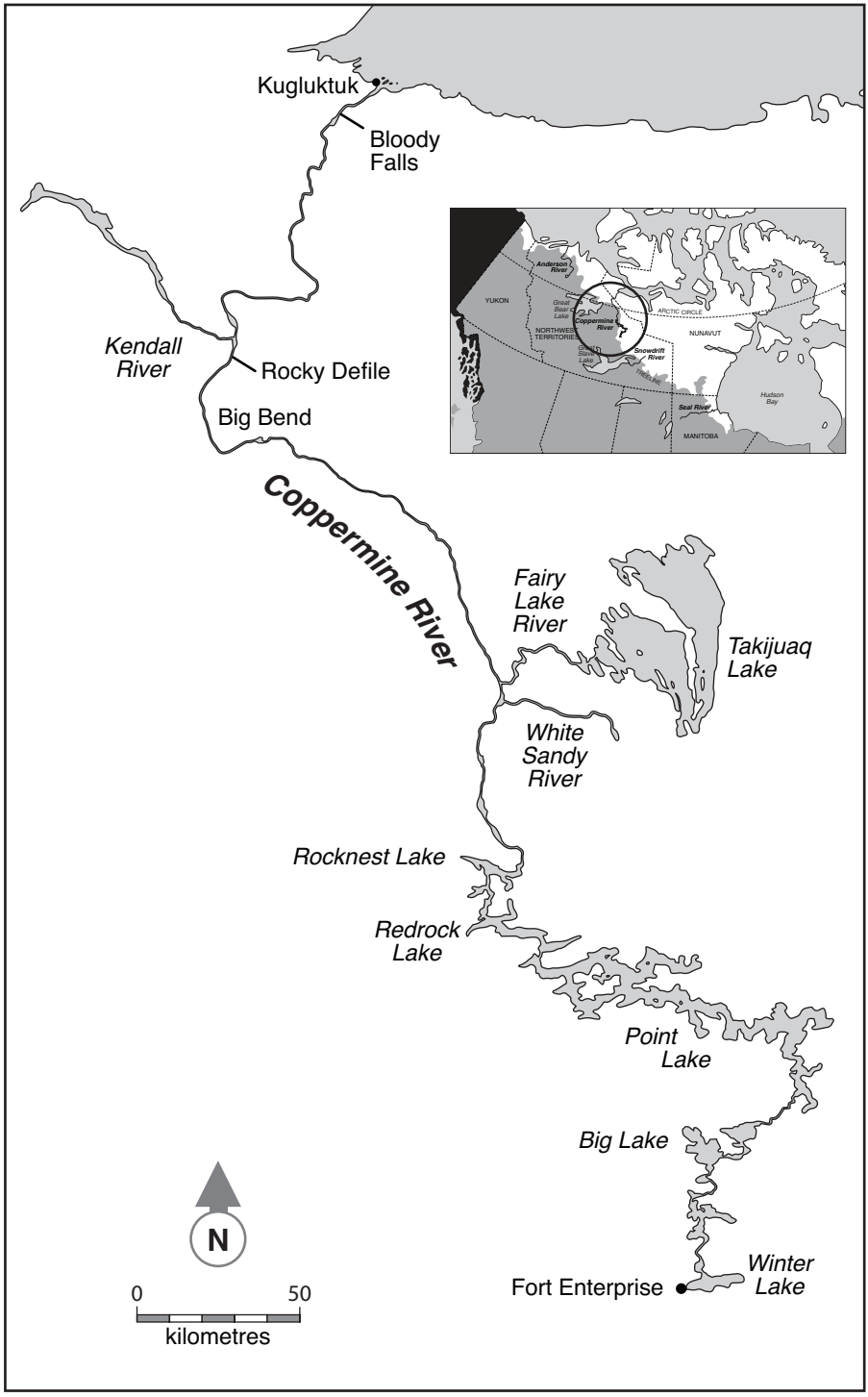
For those of you who might not know, bannock is a thin, flat bread that originated in Scotland, and was traditionally made with oatmeal or barley meal. Kathleen prepares our bannock mixture from scratch. She sets our largest mixing bowl on the table, and adds four cups of flour, two tablespoons of baking powder, one teaspoon of salt, four tablespoons of dry milk powder and two tablespoons of sugar. Next she cuts in one cup of shortening and mixes thoroughly. Kathleen then measures out a cup-and-a-quarter of the bannock mixture into each of five individual freezer bags, and ties them off with twist ties. Repeating this process five more times gives us thirty bannocks. On the river, we simply squeeze out the contents of a freezer bag into a skillet, and cook the bannock to a golden brown. This hot, fresh bread, smothered in butter and jam, provides a very satisfying morning meal.

I admire the truly exquisite suppers that people often prepare on their wilderness canoe trips. That is not our style, however. Evening meals with three or four courses, followed by dessert, just seem like too much work to Kathleen and me. We generally cook and dehydrate all our suppers at home, and then package them in a Ziploc bag. At the beginning of each day on the

river, we put the evening meal in a Tupperware container filled with water. Our supper rehydrates while we paddle. We then need only to heat it up over an open fire or the small, white-gas stove. Quick and easy. Thirty minutes, including preparation and clean up, and it's all done. Is this the best way? It is for us, particularly if the evening is windy, or rainy, or particularly buggy, or at the end of a long or difficult day. Would we enjoy a more elaborate meal? Very possibly, particularly if someone else prepared it. Would we enjoy a cappuccino? Very likely, especially if someone else made it and packed all the necessary equipment.

For the occasional treat we bring along a fruitcake, which packs and keeps very well. We also take one litre (34 ounces) of brandy and allow ourselves one small cup per week. We usually finish the trip with brandy left over. I'm not in favour of getting tipsy on wilderness canoe trips, not even in camp.

So, that's how Kathleen and I travel on wilderness canoe trips. With that background out of the way, it's time to travel to northern Canada, step into the canoe, and paddle down four fantastic rivers.


Kugluktuk
Bloody Falls
Kendall River
Rocky Defile
Big Bend
Coppermine River
Fairy Lake River
Takijuaq Lake
White Sandy River
Rocknest Lake
Redrock Lake
Point Lake
Big Lake
Winter Lake
Fort Enterprise
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YUKON
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
NUNAVUT
MANITOBA
ARCTIC CIRCLE
Great Bear Lake
Great Slave Lake
Hudson Bay
Seal River
Snowdrift River
Anderson River
Coppermine River

CHAPTER 2

THE COPPERMINE RIVER

Overland from Fort Enterprise

In the spring of 1993, Carey Robson called to ask if Kathleen and I would be interested in paddling the Coppermine River with him and his wife Janice Power. Carey and Janice were members of our Beaver Canoe Club in Burnaby, British Columbia. Carey was arguably the most prominent member of the club. He was President of the Recreational Canoeing Association of British Columbia, and was also the perennial Training Director of our canoe club. He was, in fact, the most skilled paddler I knew. Carey had taught Kathleen and me much of what we knew about canoeing, and we were flattered that he would want us to join him and Janice on their Coppermine River trip.

Carey had also invited us on the South Nahanni River trip in 1990. He therefore knew and trusted our paddling skills. Carey also preferred to travel with couples. Not just any two people in a tandem canoe, but true couples.

He preferred to paddle with couples who had experience paddling together. People like Kathleen and me. When Kathleen and I wake up in our tent in the morning, we both know our respective tasks. We know where the pots and pans are. We know who starts breakfast. We know who takes down the tent. We know who does the dishes. We know what items, and in what order, go in each of our three large Duluth-style canvas packs. We know where each of these packs goes in the canoe. We are efficient. Carey highly values efficiency. Carey's trips are always highly organized and efficient. He expects people to be ready to paddle at a specific time every morning. He does not countenance delays. People new to paddling with each other just can't perform up to Carey's expectations. For those people who are not prepared to meet those expectations, paddling with Carey can be challenging.

When Carey called in the spring of 1993, however, Kathleen and I were already committed to our Thelon River trip. "We can't go on the Coppermine, Carey. We've already made plans to go on the Thelon River."

I thought that would be the end of it. Carey would go with someone else, and we wouldn't have to actually decide whether or not to join an "efficient" trip down the Coppermine River. But no, that was not the end of it. Carey didn't go on the Coppermine in 1993 but called again in the spring of 1994.

"So do you want to go on the Coppermine next year, Mike?"

"I don't know, Carey. After our Thelon trip, Kathleen and I kind of prefer to paddle by ourselves."

"Well, think about it. It will be a great trip. I plan to start at Winter Lake, near Fort Enterprise, where Sir John Franklin overwintered in 1820. Then, like Franklin, we would go overland to the Coppermine River and paddle down to the Arctic coast. It will be a great trip."

For many years—I don't know how many, perhaps 10 or 15—Carey had been fascinated with the Coppermine River, particularly in relation to Sir John Franklin. Maps of the Coppermine River adorned Carey's basement walls. Carey was driven to paddle the Coppermine River. Carey was destined to paddle the Coppermine River. He wanted us to join him.

"I don't know if Kathleen would like the overland part very much, Carey."

In fact, I was pretty sure that Kathleen wouldn't like going overland from Fort Enterprise to the Coppermine River. In 1988, Kathleen and I saw a presentation of people dragging 140 km up the Rat River, in the Northwest Territories, to get over the height of land to reach the Bell and Porcupine Rivers in the Yukon. They spent a lot of time struggling in deep water and clambering through dense, riverside brush.

"That's an interesting trip, Kathleen," I said afterwards. "Maybe we should do that someday."

"I'm not going up the Rat," she replied.

Kathleen didn't even think about it. She was very definite. Every once in a while I would suggest the Rat River trip again, just to get Kathleen's reaction, which never changed.

"I'm not going up the Rat."

So if Kathleen wouldn't go up the Rat, then why would she go overland to the Coppermine? I didn't see it happening.

"I'll talk to Kathleen, Carey, but I don't think she would want to go."

The next Sunday, at the end of a Beaver Canoe Club day trip, while waiting for the shuttle, Janice asked Kathleen to accompany her and Carey on the Coppermine River trip. The pressure was mounting. Other than Kathleen and me, I don't think there were many other paddlers who would want to, or could, join Carey and Janice on their Coppermine River adventure. It was a long trip of about 30 days, not counting getting there and back. Most people wouldn't have that much available time. The trip also required overland travel. Most people wouldn't want to go overland with a canoe. The Coppermine also featured many difficult rapids. It was an expensive trip that necessitated flying into Winter Lake, as well as flying back to Yellowknife. And it would require a calm, patient personality to spend 30, often strenuous, "efficient" days with Carey.

Let me illustrate. Every summer, the Beaver Canoe Club headed into the interior of British Columbia for Rivers Week, where we paddled four or five rivers with varying degrees of difficulty—a fantastic week that provided an opportunity for people to improve their paddling skills. Carey, as the best and

most experienced paddler, was always and logically in charge. On this one particular evening, as we sat around the campfire enjoying snacks and happy hour, the discussion turned to tomorrow morning's departure. The paddling day was going to be short. Only a few hours down the Coldwater River to reach the town of Merritt and tomorrow's camp on the Nicola River.

"No need to get up early," someone said. "We don't need to leave at nine. We could sleep in, and head out at say ten, or even eleven."

All eyes turned to Carey. "No. We leave at nine."

Grumbling and moaning ensued, followed by more discussion, most of it leaning towards a later departure. Carey remained firm. "We leave at nine."

Finally, someone, whom I'll call Gary, because that was his name, asked, "Why do we have to leave at nine just because you say so?"

Uh-oh. This should be good. In his defence, Gary was new to the club. He didn't know any better. Carey looked at Gary and simply replied, "Because I can paddle class four rapids and you can't."

Now that might seem like an illogical response to you. Just because Carey was a better paddler, did that mean he got to decide when we left camp in the morning? Well, it sort of did. I repeat: Carey was the best paddler. Carey easily performed canoe-over-canoe rescues when people capsized. Most everyone felt more secure with Carey on the river. Carey assumed responsibility for people's safety on Beaver Canoe Club trips. Carey had earned the right to be in charge, and to make decisions for the group.

Still, the discussion continued. Not mutinous, but certainly persistent. Finally, someone suggested a vote. Carey indicated that a vote was not needed. "Why not?" I asked. "A vote can't hurt." I was a veteran member of the club. I could afford a little impertinence.

So we voted on whether to leave at nine or ten. I don't know how many people were there. Maybe 25. Maybe even 40. I'm an early riser. So, along with Carey, I voted to leave at nine. There were several abstentions. It seemed, though, without actually counting, that everyone else who voted indicated a preference to leave at ten.

We left at nine.

That's how I remember the famous Coldwater River vote. I think you see my point. Travelling with Carey on the Coppermine River might require acknowledging his position as the presumed trip leader. Not necessarily an easy task for strong-willed people whose opinions might differ from Carey's point of view.

OK. I hear what you're saying. "But, Mike. You've already been on the South Nahanni River with Carey. And that must have worked out fine if he's asking you to go on another trip."

You're absolutely right. The Nahanni trip did work out great. No problems at all. We loved it. In 1990, however, Kathleen and I had never been on a wilderness canoe trip before. Since 1990, we had developed much more confidence in our own opinions and paddling skills. Things were different now. Kathleen and I were much more likely to prefer our own approach to paddling wilderness rivers.

Anyway, Kathleen probably wouldn't want to go on the Coppermine River. She wouldn't go up the Rat, after all. But I was wrong. The next day, on Monday, Kathleen and I went to the University of British Columbia library on our lunch break to review the topographic maps. Kathleen said her plan "was to show that this trip couldn't be done without a lot of work and struggle." The topographic maps featured countless small lakes and streams haphazardly spread along any potential route to the Coppermine River. Well, maybe not literally countless. Too many for me, though, to want to count. After studying the maps for maybe 20 minutes, Kathleen looked up and said, "It's not possible to get to the Coppermine River from Winter Lake. Let's do it."

I never understood why Kathleen wanted to go overland to the Coppermine River once she decided that it wasn't possible. After all, she absolutely refused to go up the Rat River, even when the route was obvious and very possible. Didn't make sense to me. But there it was.

So, I called Carey that night to tell him that we were "in." In some sense, Kathleen and I had now come full circle. It was Carey and Janice, after all, who had invited Kathleen and me on the South Nahanni River, an experience that gave us the confidence to paddle the Thelon River by ourselves. Carey

Kathleen said, "It's not possible to get from Winter Lake to the Coppermine River. Let's do it!"

and Janice had also introduced us to bannock, a breakfast tradition on all our wilderness canoe trips. How could we not accept their invitation? How could we not join Carey and Janice as they chased their dream of paddling down the Coppermine River?

Yes, we welcomed the opportunity to join Carey and Janice when they ventured overland from Fort Enterprise—a trip that Kathleen and I would not likely do on our own. Travelling with Carey and Janice, though, would make a strong foursome. They had excellent paddling and wilderness skills, and we highly valued their judgement and experience.

The following Inuit creation legend describes the origins of the Coppermine River:

> *It is said that a long time ago an Inuk, who was named Upaum, was being chased by a brown bear. As he ran north, he bent down and drew a line with his finger in the earth. Immediately a great stream of water gushed along the line,*

growing into a huge river. This great river flowing north became the Coppermine.

The previous quote is how Kathleen and I begin our Coppermine River slide shows, many of which we have given to people in hospitals and long-term care facilities. On one such afternoon, after the quote, an elderly, indignant lady in the back of the room shouted out, "If you're going to lie to us, then we're not going to listen." Apparently her "truth" did not include Inuit creation legends.

This little anecdote regarding "lies and truth" might sometimes also apply to my description of the Coppermine River trip. Carey and I both kept diaries, but I have used only my diary for this story. I have no doubt that Carey's version would differ in minor, and even some major, aspects. For example, at the end of the trip I had tallied four trackings totalling 1.7 km, 13 drags upriver totalling 5.8 km and 15 portages totalling 9.6 km. Carey's numbers differed markedly. Such is the challenge of recording what seems obvious. Different people have different interpretations. Nevertheless, what I present here is, to the best of my knowledge, entirely accurate without any embellishment or revisionist thinking.

In addition to its historical use and significance to the Dene and Inuit peoples, the Coppermine River was very important in early European exploration of northern Canada. Samuel Hearne, led by the famous Chipewyan hunter, Matonabbee, reached the Coppermine River in 1771, in search of the copper that native peoples had been bringing to Fort Prince of Wales on Hudson Bay. Indeed, the river and town of Coppermine derive their names from this source of copper. In 1996, the community of Coppermine changed its name to Kugluktuk. I have read two versions of the meaning of Kugluktuk: either "place of moving water," or "place where the river drops," in reference to Bloody Falls.

Sir John Franklin, in 1821, was the next European to travel down the Coppermine River. Sent by the Royal Navy, Franklin's task was to map the

Arctic coast from the mouth of the Coppermine River to Hudson Bay, as part of the British quest to discover the Northwest Passage.

Joining Franklin on the expedition were men whose names are now associated with early European exploration, including Sir John Richardson, Robert Hood and Sir George Back. As you might know, Sir John Franklin achieved a great deal of notoriety for his 1845 voyage to seek the Northwest Passage—a voyage on which he and all of his 128 men lost their lives. Franklin's Coppermine River trip was nearly equally disastrous. Of the 20 men in the Franklin party who travelled to the Arctic coast in 1821, nine voyageurs died due to fatigue and starvation, Robert Hood was murdered by Michel Teroahaute, and Teroahaute himself was then executed by Richardson.

Although this history is intriguing, Kathleen and I looked forward to paddling the Coppermine River primarily because of its isolation, and the fact that it ran north to the Arctic Ocean. It seemed a perfect adventure to renew our fascination with, and love for, Canada's northern landscape.

So, I sent away for the necessary topographic maps, and using the "three times forefinger-drag method" I developed and submitted a tentative trip itinerary to Carey.

We would begin by flying to Winter Lake on July 28, intending to reach the town of Coppermine on August 28. Kathleen and I would have preferred to start a couple of weeks earlier to maximize the amount of daylight on our trip. It is fair to say, though, that Carey and Janice hate bugs. Perhaps they even detest bugs. Accordingly, Carey and Janice preferred to begin the trip as late as possible, hoping that an early frost would provide some bug-free days later in the trip. We were happy to defer to their wishes.

In July of 1995, Kathleen and I loaded the van, drove away from our home in North Vancouver, and headed north to Yellowknife. We pulled into the campground there on July 27, and joined Carey and Janice for beer, wine and potato chips. Our last night in civilization, and we indulged ourselves with junk food and alcohol. The next morning, July 28, we loaded our gear and canoes on a chartered Twin Otter to fly north from Yellowknife. Below us, the expanse of tundra and lakes rekindled the peace and contentment that

Kathleen and I felt on our 37-day trip down the Thelon River two summers before.

We approached the site of abandoned Fort Enterprise, just below the outlet of Winter Lake, in only 90 minutes—much easier than Franklin's gruelling portage and drag of 16 days. Sir John Franklin reached this location at the end of summer in 1820—too late to reach the Arctic coast before winter. His native guide Akaitcho suggested that he stay here and use the large stand of trees to build cabins for the winter before continuing down the Coppermine River the following summer.

We intended to land at the northwest bay where the Snare River drains Winter Lake. Instead though, because of the rocky shore, the pilot put down at an island opposite the Winter River, 6 km up Winter Lake. The wind was calm in the lee of the island, but waves on the lake indicated a brisk breeze. We loaded the canoes, quickly ate a sandwich, donned our PFDs, stepped into the canoes, and paddled around the point. *[Note: PFD stands for personal floatation device, commonly called a life jacket.]*

Kathleen and I immediately renewed our acquaintance with the northwest wind, which we came to know so intimately on the Thelon River. Straining to put as much power as possible into our strokes, we paddled slowly toward shore, 1.5 km distant. The wind had obviously welcomed our return, and had apparently been waiting for Kathleen and me since 1993.

We reached shore, set up camp, and ventured onto the tundra to visit our plant friends: Crowberry, Cloudberry, Labrador Tea, Prickly Saxifrage, Lapland Lousewort. Only moments later, swarms of mosquitoes forced us to retreat back to our windy, sandy beach. An hour later, the wind increased, the sky filled with masses of black clouds hurtling over the northwest horizon, and we retreated even farther—into our tent.

Kathleen and I lay next to each other, in silence. It was as though we had never left the Thelon River. The tundra's unpredictable weather extremes are so predictable. Our beach felt like home, but we were somewhat anxious about the arduous 110 km over the height of land to reach Point Lake.

During a short walk across the tundra after supper, Carey and Janice seemed discouraged by the harsh extremes of wind, rain and bugs.

"What made you want to paddle the Coppermine, Carey?" Janice asked.

"I'm beginning to wonder," he said.

We rose the next morning at 5:30, to a temperature of only 5°. After our first tundra bannock in two years, we paddled west down Winter Lake, into a slight breeze, towards the site of abandoned Fort Enterprise. Near the outlet, we spotted two herds of caribou, nearly 200 animals, swimming toward shore, where they exited, one after the other, just like in nature films. While walking down the Snare River, we spotted more caribou, swimming the river between rapids, and then disappearing into a spruce and bog maze of centuries-old caribou trails.

[Note: I have reported temperatures in degrees Celsius. To obtain a reasonable estimate of Fahrenheit, you can multiply the Celsius temperature by 2, and then add 30. For example, 5°C would equal approximately 40°F. The actual conversion is to multiply Celsius by 9/5, and then add 32, meaning that 5°C actually equals 41°F. Pretty close, don't you think? For your convenience I have provided some Celsius and Fahrenheit equivalencies in Appendix 2.]

Using site descriptions in diaries from the Franklin party, plus aerial photographs taken by an archeological investigation in the 1970s, we found the cairn marking the spot of Fort Enterprise in about two hours. Nothing remains of the three buildings that comprised the fort, as the Franklin survivors, after they returned from the Arctic coast, burned most of the fort for cooking fuel, and to keep warm. Carey had finally realized his quest of many years to stand at the site of Fort Enterprise. He was obviously pleased and satisfied.

"The trip's objective has been achieved," he declared. "Time to get to Coppermine."

I told you Carey was focused. The efficient, highly organized expedition had begun.

Back at the northwest bay where we had left the canoes, we gathered

firewood from the abundant spruce, and ran before the wind, covering 5.5 km in 55 minutes.

In the tent at 8:00 p.m.; 10° with cold winds bringing one squall after another across the northern horizon. Kathleen and I again studied our route to the Coronation Gulf on the Arctic Ocean. From Winter Lake, we planned to go upriver to Lastfire Lake, which was named by Sir John Franklin on his 1821 expedition. Lastfire Lake would likely be one of the last places that our group could count on finding firewood until near the outlet of Point Lake, nearly 200 km away.

From Lastfire Lake we would continue up the Winter River through Little Marten Lake, to Big Lake, over the height of land to Starvation Lake, and then down the Starvation River to Point Lake. We anticipated this 110-km leg of the trip would take six days. We then planned about one week for the 165 km through Point Lake, Redrock Lake and Rocknest Lake. After Rocknest Lake, the strong current of the Coppermine River would carry us the final 370 km to Coppermine (Kugluktuk) on the Arctic coast.

You probably know from looking at the tentative itinerary, that I had scheduled tomorrow as a fishing and hiking day. Well, our group decided not to take this rest day. Today was already pretty restful, and all four of us were eager to get going. The topographic map showed 12 symbols for rapids spread evenly along the 1 km of the Winter River leading up to Lastfire Lake. This suggested that the rapids would likely be more or less continuous.

July 30. We woke to a 6° morning, with a brisk wind, and set off precisely at 9:00 a.m. for the Winter River, which we reached in about an hour. Following a short hike to a ridge to view Lastfire Lake, Carey and I elected to track our canoes up the Winter River. Or should I say, Carey elected to track our canoes up the Winter River. I would have gladly portaged, as I had never tracked before, but was willing to give it a try. Tracking was certainly preferable to paddling, as the rapids were too swift and rocky to canoe up.

Tracking, by the way, is when two people (or sometimes one person) stand on the shore, holding the bow and stern lines (technically known as

Canoeing up the Winter River to Lastfire Lake.

"painters"). Carey took the bow painter and began pulling upstream, ensuring that the bow remained pointed in toward the shore. Ideally, the bow would be right up against the shore to ensure that it did not swing outward into the current. If the bow did swing outward, the canoe would become broadside to the current and would likely broach on one of the many boulders that choked the Winter River. That would be bad.

I took the stern painter to help guide the canoe around rocks. I also needed to make sure that I didn't pull so hard on the painter that the stern would swing to shore, causing the bow to swing out. This tandem tracking required good teamwork, particularly because some of the rapids to Lastfire Lake were Class II+, maybe even a low Class III.

We successfully tracked Carey's canoe to Lastfire Lake in two hours, and returned for my canoe. Well, it wasn't all tracking. Sometimes we stood in the water or on boulders to pull and guide the canoe upstream. Janice and Kathleen, who had been watching from the shore and taking pictures of the adventure, suggested that we eat lunch, and rest before beginning the second

half of our somewhat gruelling task. But Carey and I were feeling good. We were ready to complete the job, and we sauntered back downriver with only a sausage to replenish our energy.

Tracking was actually kind of fun. I was enjoying the challenge, and welcomed this new skill to my canoeing repertoire. Things were going even better this time than on the first trip up the Winter River. We were 15 minutes ahead of that initial trip, and in good spirits, when we reached the last major rapid before Lastfire Lake.

Perhaps Carey and I had become complacent—confident and pleased with our work. After all, there was just one major rapid to go. Whatever the reason, though, a diagonal wave in that last major rapid suddenly grabbed the bow and began to pull the canoe under. As paddlers know, virtually all capsizes occur to the upstream side of the canoe, and this would be no exception.

To avoid immediate capsize, Carey had no choice. He let go of the bow painter and yelled, "Hang on, Mike!" The bow swung out, my canoe wallowed, turned broadside and overturned. I braced against the jolt that was sure to come when the canoe reached the end of my stern painter, and managed to keep my feet to belay the boat into an eddy.

Both of our boats had homemade spray decks, which keeps the gear dry during rain and also prevents (or so we hope) the canoe from taking on too much water when running rapids. As it turns out, a third benefit of the spray deck is that it keeps the gear in the boat when the canoe overturns. Glancing downstream, I didn't see any gear floating away. This could only be good.

Carey ran to my assistance and rolled the canoe right side up. He then did most of the work of unsnapping the spray deck bit by bit to unload the gear. We then dumped the water and reloaded the canoe. Carey seemed very apologetic. It wasn't his fault, though. Things happen. And, in fact, nothing was lost. Not even our tea cups and water bottles, which had been floating loose in the canoe. I should mention that we never tie gear into the canoe, which would just add additional time and effort to unload and reload on portages. And, as I've said, the spray deck kept all gear in the capsized canoe.

Kathleen had been away from the river, standing on a ridge taking

pictures, when she had heard Carey yell out, "Hang on, Mike." She saw him bolt downstream, out of sight. She ran toward the river, not knowing what had happened, and fearing the worst. She was relieved, a few minutes later, when she again saw Carey and me with the canoe upright, making our way slowly back upstream.

Our spray deck had been badly damaged, and all the canoe packs and liners were filled with water. Kathleen and I always place our gear in double garbage bags, even though the gear is already in an ostensibly waterproof liner. Our caution proved useful, as everything was mostly dry. Unfortunately, the garbage bag in a day pack had a small hole, and all my books were wet. Oh well, they will dry out.

I have learned since this trip that the bow is generally quite vulnerable to being pulled under the water when tracking. It is often recommended that an under-the-keel bridle be looped around the bow. This approach gives much greater control than simply pulling on a painter at the end of the bow. I have recently seen videos of this technique, and am very impressed. It would be interesting to try it sometime.

In the tent that night, Kathleen cried because of the anxiety of the day. She felt particularly guilty just standing around on shore watching me work so hard. She wanted very much to help.

Despite the capsize, I'm glad that we tracked the canoes rather than portaging everything to Lastfire Lake. Janice was suffering from fibromyalgia, a disorder in which a person has long-term, body-wide pain and tenderness in the joints, muscles, tendons and other soft tissues. Fibromyalgia has also been linked to fatigue, sleep problems, headaches, depression and anxiety. Janice said that she can carry no more than a 25-pound (11 kg) pack. Portaging would have been slow. I think Carey's concern for Janice might have been his primary reason for suggesting that we track up the Winter River rather than portage to Lastfire Lake. I would have done the same for Kathleen. You had to give Janice a heck of a lot of credit for even attempting this trip.

July 31. We broke camp quickly, and headed upriver toward Little Marten Lake. A gentler gradient allowed us to make faster progress because Carey and I were each able to track our own canoe. Soon, though, the rocky shore forced us into the water. As I dragged upriver, I often had to balance from one rock to the next to avoid plunging into waist-deep water. Every once in a while I would stop to look upstream, only to see the rocky current disappearing around the bend.

We tracked and dragged up five rapids today, ranging in distance from 200 to 600 m. Kathleen eventually jumped in to help me. Bruises covered her legs that night, from her thighs to her ankles. She said that she mentioned to Janice in the morning, "that I feel useless just watching Carey and Michael do all the work." Apparently Janice said, "Don't worry about it. They're guys. They love it."

And you know what, people? Janice was right. I was loving the physical challenge. I had never done anything quite like this before. I was having a good time.

We enjoyed seeing Dog Rib Rock throughout the day, a prominent landmark for native peoples, and a feature that the Franklin survivors used to find Fort Enterprise on their return from the Arctic Ocean in 1821. We set up today's camp near the upper end of the Winter River flowing out of Little Marten Lake. Climbing onto the bank to assess a potential campsite, we saw a herd of 75 caribou standing on the ridge only about 100 m away.

We were pretty darn tired, and likely still five days from Point Lake. Although we did have some moments today when we could actually paddle upstream, even that was hard work. In the tent that evening, Kathleen read in Farley Mowat's book *Tundra* about the exposed, wet, miserable conditions suffered by Samuel Hearne during his trek across the tundra in 1770–1771:

> *On the 3rd of July the weather was again very bad, but we made shift to walk ten or eleven miles, until we were obliged to put up because of not being able to see, due to the drifting snow. By putting up, no more is to be understood than we got to leeward of a great stone, or into the crevices of rocks,*

> *where we smoked our pipes or went to sleep until the weather permitted us to proceed.*

Compared to Hearne's conditions, our situation was much better. We had nothing to complain about.

August 1. Up at 6:30 a.m. Weather still cold at 6°. Away at 9:30 a.m., hoping to make good distance today. Based on my reading of the topographic map, I expected that we would have to drag the canoes at least one more time—at a spot where the Winter River narrowed before reaching Little Marten Lake. And drag at that spot we did. We also had to drag the canoes two more times, when the water in the Winter River simply disappeared into a rocky stream bed.

When we finally reached Little Marten Lake, we stopped for lunch and waited 45 minutes for the north wind to slacken just a bit. We then paddled toward a point on the east shore, a 1-km crossing of open water. About 3/4 of the way across, the wind and whitecaps returned, slowing our progress to a laboured, worried struggle.

We beached in the shelter of a rocky cove and waited three hours, until 5:00 p.m., before agreeing to end our paddling day. Kathleen and I disagreed slightly with Carey about our wind strategy for tomorrow, but eventually he accepted our preference to be ready to leave at 7:00 a.m. The last few days had been calm in the morning and windy in the afternoon. Kathleen and I thought it would be best to be ready to leave early. This was a significant compromise for Carey, as his methodical, organized approach is to be ready to paddle at 9:00 a.m. Carey seemed somewhat worried about our first day of severe wind problems. In fairness to Carey, though, we were nearly one day behind our tentative itinerary, even though we had paddled on our scheduled rest day. We all knew, however, that this was going to be a challenging adventure.

August 2. Up at 4:00 a.m., with a departure at 6:30 a.m. Cool, with a slight breeze that persisted all last night. No bugs, though. We completed

two—almost too windy—open crossings of Little Marten Lake by 11:30 a.m., and paddled up a side current that would take us out of Little Marten Lake.

Moments later, we reached a short (100 m), rock-strewn stream leading to a pond, followed by a second, equally short, rock-strewn stream leading to an unnamed lake that would take us away from the Winter River watershed. Much of the first stream was too shallow to track or drag, so Carey and I portaged the two heaviest packs from each boat to the unnamed lake. We then tied the bow painters of our boats together, and in double harness, Carey and I dragged the more lightly loaded canoes along the soft moss, lichen and Bog Birch shoreline.

Kathleen and Janice offered encouragement by waving from the opposite shore, then walked toward the second pond, where they met us two hours later at the end of the second rock-strewn stream. We were happy with our morning's progress and were now just north of Little Marten Lake, parallel to a striking esker.

We stopped earlier than usual, at 3:00 p.m., at the mouth of the river flowing toward us from Big Lake. A difficult day, but 18 km closer to the height of land, beyond which lay Point Lake. The river leading to Big Lake was wide, with a gentle current. I would be misrepresenting the group's mood to say that we were ***expecting*** an easy passage upstream to Big Lake. Fairer to say that we were ***hoping*** for an easy passage upstream to Big Lake, which was only 21 km away.

According to the topographic map, we should be able to paddle all the way to Big Lake on wide streams and lakes. So there was no reason we shouldn't be able to reach Big Lake tomorrow. In fact, I had indicated on the tentative itinerary that only one day's travel lay between the mouth of the river from Big Lake and Big Lake itself. But, as you know, I made up that tentative itinerary at home, on the floor of my bedroom. I had never seen the river leading to Big Lake before. We would see tomorrow what the river to Big Lake actually looked like in real life.

The map indicated that there should be water here somewhere.

August 3. We slept well last night and set off in the morning even more hopeful that this large stream would allow us to reach Big Lake without having to drag or portage any more. After three hours, however, the canoes started scraping and bumping across the rocky stream bed, until we eventually ran out of water not even half way to Big Lake. We were all becoming a bit frustrated, but none of us blamed Carey for having suggested that we begin this trip on the opposite side of the divide between Winter Lake and the Coppermine River. We had all signed up very willingly for this adventure.

We collectively agreed that it would be easier to not bother with a dry river bed, and we simply started portaging straight across the tundra in the general direction of Big Lake. We came across more water, sufficient to float the canoes, after only about 1.5 km.

We gained only 14 km today, including 3 to 4 km by tracking and dragging and the 1.5 km of portaging. We were only two days, I hoped, from Starvation Lake. Kathleen and I used to be backpackers but switched to canoeing for two reasons. One, canoeing allowed us to take more gear for

longer periods of time in the wilderness. And, two, canoeing allowed us to generally float through the wilderness without having to carry everything on our backs. An over-the-height-of-land canoe trip, however, is a lot like backpacking, only now we had to carry a canoe as well. I don't remember ever seeing any other backpackers with canoes on their backs. I might have missed it, but I don't think so.

By now the group had become very efficient at portaging. For example, when we reached the end of water on a lake or pond, we didn't just nudge the canoe gently up to shore. Oh sure, we slowed down, but only just a little. When the bow touched shore, we pretty much leaped out of our canoe and dragged it up onto the beach. We then quickly unsnapped the spray deck and chucked all the gear out onto the tundra. Kathleen and I then immediately changed from our wetsuit socks and canvas shoes into our hiking boots, which we packed conveniently at the top of our green Duluth-style canvas pack. *[Note: Each of our three canvas packs is a different colour so that we always know its contents, and who is responsible for portaging it.]*

Now you should know that there were never any actual portage trails. We certainly knew what general direction we wanted to go, but the most direct and easiest route was not always obvious. So the first trip was usually a scouting trip. None of us wanted to carry our heaviest packs, or our canoe, to scout out a potential portage trail if that trail didn't work out. On the other hand, we didn't want to scout completely empty-handed, either.

Kathleen and I always take two white, plastic buckets on canoe trips. One of them is our "kitchen bucket" with stove, pots, pans, plates and cutlery. The other contains food—such as gorp, cheese and crackers—that we would be eating in the next day or two. These white buckets also served as chairs at camp. The primary downside of these buckets is that they are very cumbersome to lug by hand over the portage trail, particularly if one is also burdened with a heavy pack. So as soon as we were ready, Kathleen and I each grabbed a white bucket, donned a light day pack, picked up another hand-held item, such as a fishing pole or paddle, and headed out across the tundra to scout the ideal portage trail.

Once the best route had been determined, particularly on longer portage trails, Carey often assumed the role of Hansel and Gretel. Instead of dropping bread crumbs to mark our route, however, he left little bits of colourful gear along the way to guide us between our beginning and ending points. After Kathleen and I had each carried three loads to the end of the portage trail, we immediately changed from our hiking boots into our wetsuit socks and canvas shoes, repacked the canoe, snapped the spray deck into place, and shoved the canoe back into the next stretch of water. No discussion was necessary. We all knew what needed to be done.

At camp that night, Carey was pleased, chatting merrily away about being on an "elite" wilderness canoe trip. He might have been right. I can't imagine very many people wanting to do this. If the truth be known—and I'm about to make it known right now—I was generally enjoying the trip too. A lot of work, but quite an adventure. *[Note: I don't want to appear too pretentious by claiming elite status, so I must admit that I have read many accounts of wilderness canoeing exploits that were longer and more challenging than this Coppermine story. Even so, Janice, Carey, Kathleen and I were on quite an adventure. You gotta give us that.]*

Kathleen was much happier today, as she joined me in the river tracking and dragging our canoe upstream. She also carried packs over the portage trail. She now felt like a contributing member of the expedition. We were on the water from 8:30 a.m. to 7:45 p.m. As I said, a long and difficult day.

August 4. More of the same today. More hard work. Four more portages and one more drag upstream. Twelve more hours to gain only 12 km. We finally reached Big Lake, though, where we paddled approximately 5 km along its eastern shore to camp at the beginning of the portage to Starvation Lake. Once again, though, there was no "official" or marked beginning of the portage to Starvation Lake. We had merely selected a spot on the east shore of Big Lake that we believed and hoped offered the best route to Starvation Lake.

Our chosen route was not the shortest distance to Starvation Lake yet

offered two "large-ish" lakes on which we could paddle part of the portage to Starvation Lake. We would begin our trek to Starvation Lake by portaging about 1 km to the first large-ish lake, across which we intended to paddle east approximately 5 km. Then, almost a 1-km portage to the second large-ish lake, up which we hoped to paddle north a little over 2 km. At that point, we would be only slightly more than 2 km from Starvation Lake, some of which would require portaging but some of which, maybe 600 m, might be paddleable on a "small-ish" lake.

We had originally hoped to reach Starvation Lake by August 3, which means that we would be two days behind our tentative schedule if we reached Starvation Lake tomorrow. Not too bad. There's still a long way to go on this trip, with many opportunities to make up time. Anyway, my tentative itineraries were indeed tentative. As I mentioned previously, I don't actually expect to follow the itinerary exactly. I make the itinerary primarily to determine if the trip is likely doable in the time available.

Today was rainy, wet and cold. Combined with our struggles, the day had to rate among the least pleasurable wilderness days of my entire life. But then, as I kept reminding myself, we hadn't come on this trip for sheer pleasure. The 5 km of actual paddling on Big Lake, however, did bring some satisfaction. We endured only a slight drizzle, with no wind. We enjoyed a smooth lake surface, with loons calling through the mist.

In August of 1820, Franklin reached Winter Lake and intended to proceed to, and return from, the Arctic coast that summer. Akaitcho argued against Franklin's plan and told him that 40 days would be required to reach the coast. The first 11 days would be through country with no wood. Most importantly, Akaitcho told Franklin that there would be no caribou to hunt, as winter was soon approaching.

Franklin, however, remained confident, and replied, in what I presume was an imperious and condescending manner: "We informed him that we were provided with instruments by which we could tell the state of air and water and we did not imagine the winter to be so near as he supposed."

Oh those British naval captains can be very smug. As we huddled in our

wind-bound, cold camp nearly two centuries later, I reflected on Akaitcho's response, as presented in Farley Mowat's book *Tundra*:

> *Well, I have said everything I can to dissuade you from going on. It seems you wish to sacrifice your own lives as well as the Indians who might attend you. However, if after all I have said you are determined, some of my young men shall join your party, because it shall not be said that we allowed you to die alone having brought you hither. But from the moment they embark in the canoes, I and my relatives will lament them as dead.*

Fortunately for Franklin, he accepted Akaitcho's advice and postponed his trip down the Coppermine River to the following spring. If he had not, it is likely that all 20 men, not just 11, would have died.

August 5. Stormbound at Big Lake; 10° with a driving rain, and a howling wind that persisted incessantly throughout the day. Both couples lay in bed in the morning, reluctant to get up unless the other did so first. Kathleen and I slept and dozed until noon. Our enforced rest day was welcomed by our weary bodies, which were so fatigued and tired from the previous two days. I lay in the tent and thought about how it might be kind of nice to paddle in the warmth of Alabama or Georgia. Such paddling excursions might be more relaxing holidays than portaging gear and canoe across the tundra. But again, as I kept telling myself, we hadn't expected this expedition to be relaxing.

In the late afternoon, I joined Carey and Janice beneath the tarp, where they were preparing supper. Each couple alternated cooking supper for the group. Each couple was responsible for their own breakfast, lunch and snacks.

I should mention that Carey is a master at putting up tarps. I like to say that Carey can put up a tarp in a vacant shopping centre parking lot, in the middle of a strong gale. You don't believe me? Wait a minute. I'll be right back.

.....

You [☺] are here, in between these lines of dots, waiting patiently for me.

.....

OK. I'm back. I've scanned in the slides from our Big Lake camp, and have entered the images on my computer monitor. I can see the tarp and our very bleak camp. I had actually forgotten how extraordinarily bleak and exposed that Big Lake camp was. Let me describe the image on my screen. We're camped on flat tundra "adorned" with a spattering of small to medium-sized boulders. No trees in sight. In fact, the scrubby vegetation barely exceeds 10 cm (4 inches). Whitecaps whip across the surface of Big Lake, shrouded beneath a nearly black sky filled with angry, scudding clouds. I usually don't like to impart emotions like "angry" to weather, which I consider to be emotion free. But I need you to think very bleak and exposed.

On my screen, I can see Kathleen, Janice and Carey huddled beneath the tarp, decked out in rain gear and toques. Yes, although our camp is very similar to a vacant shopping centre parking lot being battered by a gale, there stands the tarp. The side of the tarp facing the wind is nearly at ground level, tied down to the bow and stern thwarts of Carey and Janice's canoe. The middle of the tarp is raised up with Carey's telescoping tripod. The tarp then angles outward toward the front to meet a paddle handle attached to a short line with a clove hitch. Another line, also attached to the paddle handle with a clove hitch, leads downward, where it is tied to the thwart of our canoe using a taut-line hitch. By adjusting the angle of the paddle before tightening the taut-line hitch, the paddle stands firmly and proudly in the wind, without even needing to be driven into the ground. A similarly arranged paddle, tied to a boulder with a taut-line hitch, secures one of the sides of the tarp. This all took only a few minutes. Carey taught me everything I know about putting up tarps.

OK. Now back to the story about me being under the tarp with Carey and Janice that afternoon. I couldn't see out the back of the tarp, as it was nearly at ground level. For some reason, I suddenly decided that I needed to get up, just to look around. Perhaps I had some kind of premonition because as I stood up and looked south, I saw a sow grizzly and her cub heading directly toward the tarp, only 100 m away. Of course, I had left my can of bear spray in the tent. So I just stood there.

The sow halted abruptly as soon as she saw me, then turned and bounded toward the low ridge, stopping periodically to look back in my direction. I turned, stepped back beneath the tarp, and sat down on a white bucket. Trying to remain calm, I said, "You know, Janice and Carey, there's a grizzly bear coming."

"No there's not."

Perhaps I was being too calm. I spoke a little more urgently. "Yes there is. In fact, there's two grizzly bears coming."

This time they believed me. We got out from underneath the tarp just in time to see the mother and cub disappear over the ridge. We all went to our tents to get our respective cans of bear spray. The sow had probably smelled our supper cooking and was coming to investigate. She hadn't been aggressive, but I'm glad I had stepped out from beneath the tarp when I did. If she had come all the way into camp, the incident could have turned out quite differently. It could only have turned out worse. The sow hadn't threatened us, but we were certainly a little more on edge for the next few hours.

August 6. The wind continued to blow all night. Our tent rattled, and the sheltering tarp flapped loudly. A constant din that kept me awake from 2:00 a.m. until my alarm sounded at 3:30 a.m. Yes, I know it sounds goofy to have set an alarm, but I wanted to wake up early to see if the weather conditions had improved. If the weather had improved—if the wind had slackened—we could make an early start on our portage to Starvation Lake.

I heard Carey and Janice talking in their tent, and unzipped our tent fly to look outside. A very blustery, rainy, cold, still very bleak scene. Carey and Janice probably felt the same way, as they didn't seem to be coming out of their tent. I snuggled back down into my mummy bag, next to a sleeping Kathleen.

At 8:00 a.m., Kathleen and I rose, scurried to the shelter of the flapping tarp, hunched over our small Coleman backpacking stove, cooked a breakfast bannock and boiled up a thermos of tea. Still no Carey and Janice. After breakfast, Kathleen and I returned to the warmth of our sleeping bags.

Just before noon I heard Carey calling, from his tent, for a group discussion. Peering out of the barely open cracks of our respective tent doors, the discussion went something like this.

"What do you want to do, Mike?"

"I don't know, Carey, I'm thinking we want to wait until the rain stops."

"Why? It's not raining that hard now."

"Kathleen's worried that I might slip on a wet rock while portaging the canoe and perhaps twist or break an ankle."

I don't think Carey responded directly to this very flimsy excuse for not starting out toward Starvation Lake. It certainly sounded like a weak argument to me. Besides, there's lots of ways I could hurt myself on this trip. Slipping on a wet rock is only one of them. Anyway, we all eventually agreed to break camp and head toward Starvation Lake. We all felt a restlessness to do something positive—even a desperation, you might say—to leave this exposed, windward tundra shore of Big Lake.

Seven hours, two lakes, two portages, and approximately 10 km later, we were camped within sight of Starvation Lake, now less than 2 km away. Another very difficult, miserable day; 12°, boggy terrain, driving rain and a direct headwind. A direct headwind, though, was better for portaging a canoe than a wind coming from either side. It's extremely difficult, almost impossible, to go forward while portaging a canoe when strong winds batter you from the side. So, as you can see, there were some good aspects of the weather conditions today. Also, I didn't slip on any wet rocks. Both of my ankles were fine. Thanks for asking.

Today was actually quite momentous, as we had crossed over the height of land. We were camped at approximately 440 m above sea level, while Starvation Lake is at 433 m. It was all downhill now, only 565 km to the town of Coppermine on the Arctic coast. You might be wondering why we didn't just portage our gear the last 2 km to Starvation Lake if it was all downhill. Good question. Well, the shoreline of Starvation Lake would certainly be quite exposed to the wind. We were now hunkered down in a little gully-like

depression behind a ridge that offered some relief from this never-ending onslaught of wind.

About 20 km east of our camp, the returning, weary, starving Franklin party was blocked at Obstruction Rapids for nine days in late September of 1821 as they attempted to cross the Coppermine River. That delay proved extremely costly, as the men began to die in early October, only 68 km from Fort Enterprise. At one time, Carey and I had discussed making a side trip to view Obstruction Rapids. As we crouched beneath the tarp in that tundra gully, however, the topic of side trips didn't seem to come up.

Our group did well today. We persisted, and now rested comfortably, although soggily. We were dining on Kathleen's shepherd's pie while sitting beneath our tarp erected around both canoes and our packs, which all provide additional windbreaks. We would almost certainly reach Starvation Lake tomorrow. We hoped for calm weather that would allow us to paddle its south shore, which is so exposed to the fetch of the prevailing north wind. We needed this calm weather if we were to reach the outlet of the Starvation River, where we would have moving water, and possibly better protection from the wind. We had already endured three days of continuous rain and wind. Surely, we wouldn't be inflicted with a fourth successive day. We were now three days behind our tentative itinerary and would require some good weather to make the town of Coppermine by August 28th.

August 7. The day began as usual: cold (8°), rainy and windy. We lay in the tent, somewhat depressed about our situation. When we arrived here yesterday, Carey announced that we would stay in this leeward camp—in our gully behind the ridge—until the storm broke. Kathleen and I believed that travelling conditions were now slightly better than yesterday, but were content to lie in our sleeping bags, waiting for better weather.

At 8:00 a.m. we headed to the tarp to prepare tea and bannock. Carey and Janice remained silent in their tent. After breakfast we took our tea thermos back to our tent, where Kathleen read a book and I studied our maps. I love looking at maps.

At 11:00 a.m. we joined Carey beneath the breezily flapping tarp, where he was cooking his bannock breakfast. Carey reported that "Janice is stuffing our sleeping bags, just in case the storm should break by 2:00 p.m. We shouldn't leave today, though, unless we're sure of reaching the Starvation River. There probably won't be any suitable camping sites until then."

Carey was probably right about the camping. The shoreline along Starvation Lake was likely very bleak, even without wind. Not much more bleak, though, than our last two camps. Kathleen and I both believed that we could start out now, which would give us more time to reach the Starvation River. It was only 11:00 a.m. We agreed to wait, though.

At 2:00 p.m. exactly, Carey strode to the ridge and returned to announce that everyone should cook a bannock and be prepared to leave for the Starvation River by 3:30. "With some easy paddling on the lake, we should be able to reach the river by 9:00 p.m., even if it means going without supper."

"You know, Carey," I suggested, "I think if we are going to leave today, we should do so now, to maximize our daylight hours."

Kathleen argued against beginning a nearly full day's work at 3:30, and explained that "We're getting a late start today because we got a late start yesterday." She stated, firmly for her, "It's best to begin a full day's work at the beginning of the day."

When asked for her opinion, Janice said, "I'll do whatever Carey and you guys think is best, but I prefer to remain here and dry out."

I repeated that my preference was either to leave now or early in the morning. Kathleen pointed out that even leaving now didn't provide any guarantee that we could paddle down Starvation Lake, which, through our binoculars, still showed whitecaps. The group agreed to stay.

At 6:00 p.m., the sun returned for the first time in four days, the wind died slightly, and a few bugs rose from their ground-hugging retreats. No one likes bugs, but bugs mean calm conditions. Bugs meant that the storm was over. Portaging would now be easier, and paddling would be more pleasant.

Kathleen and I strolled casually across the sun-dappled tundra, seeing scores of caribou. A hunting Short-eared Owl flew a few metres above the

ground, and two Arctic Terns angrily chased a pair of predatory Long-tailed Jaegers. It seemed that the calmer weather had energized everyone. I certainly hoped that this weather would hold. We were four days and 55 km behind schedule.

August 8. The day broke with beautiful sunshine and perfect calm. We rose at 4:45 a.m. Ice on the tarp; 0°. Despite the cold, innumerable bugs swarmed upward as soon as they were touched by the sun's rays. Innumerable bugs signified that calm weather had definitely arrived, bringing with it good paddling conditions. Sometimes you have to appreciate, even outright love, innumerable bugs.

We quickly made our way over two short portages, broken conveniently about halfway by a 600-m paddle on the east end of a narrow lake. It felt good to see the lines of people and gear making progress to the end of what we hoped would be the last portage before Point Lake.

On Starvation Lake, we enjoyed a beautiful, joyous, two-hour paddle to the outlet, and the beginning of the Starvation River. I love these tundra lakes when they are quiet and placid. Lake bottom rocks slid by below in crystal clear waters that reflected billowy clouds above. Have we ever had bad weather on this expedition? I don't remember any.

At the outlet to the Starvation River, we immediately faced our third portage of the day. On the Barren Grounds, as in most regions, rapids always occur at the outlets below lakes. It is to be expected. I don't know why I thought, even for a minute, that the portage downhill to Starvation Lake could have been our last portage before Point Lake.

We then paddled a serene, slow-moving channel through willow-lined banks until reaching our fourth portage of the day, to bypass a steep drop in the Starvation River. Six more kilometres put us at a third drop, around a tight corner—another portage. Very soon after that we reached a 250-m chute flowing through a rock-choked channel.

Carey and Janice ran down the chute. Kathleen and I pulled out to portage, dejected at our comparative lack of skill. Our personal defeat dampened

what had otherwise been a glorious day of warmth, sun and splendid paddling. We were now only 10 km from Point Lake, leaving us 3.5 days and 60 km behind schedule. Five more sets of rapids lay between us and Point Lake. I hoped Kathleen and I would be able to run at least one of them. As you can probably tell, I was feeling a little discouraged at not having been able to run down that chute.

August 9. We rose at 6:00 a.m. in bright sun to a 4° morning, which quickly warmed to 15° by 8:00 a.m. We had camped halfway through the portage, and Kathleen and I carried our gear across the second half in about 30 minutes. As we waited for Carey and Janice to paddle down to us, we saw scores of caribou cross the river to work their way up the wide, boggy valley. These were soon followed by hundreds more, until 1,000 to 2,000 animals were trailing, snorting and grazing up the valley. All four of us climbed a small knoll to view, photograph and film this natural spectacle, which reminded Kathleen and me of the wildebeest herds we saw on the Serengeti Plains of Kenya.

After returning to the boats, we set our minds to the day's obstacles. The topographic map showed five more marked rapids between us and Point Lake. Based on our experience with the Starvation River yesterday, each of these could require portaging. I'm sure that we were all somewhat resigned to a slow, tedious descent down the Starvation River.

We paddled down to the top of the first of these marked rapids and beached our canoes. Kathleen and I wanted to scout the rapid before paddling it. We headed off downstream while Carey and Janice enjoyed tea and snacks as they sat on a beautiful slab of pink granite. Carey and Janice didn't need to join us as we scouted. They knew that if Kathleen and I decided to run the rapid, that they could run the rapid too. Also, Carey and Janice likely wouldn't run the rapid if Kathleen and I preferred to portage. We were a group, and groups need to stay together. Carey and Janice pulled out yesterday afternoon, only halfway through that 250-m chute, as soon as they noticed that Kathleen and I weren't following them down. So Carey and Janice

waited while Kathleen and I decided what we wanted to do. We appreciated their patience.

After scouting the rapid, Kathleen and I returned to the beautiful slab of pink granite to file our report: "We're gonna run this, Carey."

With Carey and Janice in the lead, we set off caroming through the shallow rock gardens until we entered a narrow side channel, only 1 m wide. Our canoe gained momentum as it shot through an overhanging canopy of stream bank brush. Around a tight turn, we suddenly came upon Carey, standing in the water, pulling his grounded canoe off a rock. We were barely able to stop before crashing into Carey's legs. That could have been a lot worse than slipping on a wet rock. All four of us then portaged the remaining 100 m of the rapid. As we loaded the canoes, Carey said, with some surprise in his voice, "That wasn't an easy rapid, Mike."

"I didn't say it was easy, Carey. I said we were gonna run it."

Everyone is entitled to a little bravado once in a while. Even me. Only four portages to go. Maximum.

After two hours we reached the next rapid and pulled out on river left for lunch, and to scout. Kathleen and I agreed to run it, and enjoyed the higher volume of water, which offered easier manoeuvring through the rocks. Only a maximum of three portages to go.

The next rapid was a simple, fairly wide drop. Only a maximum of two portages to go. The following rapid had too little water to paddle, so Carey and I jumped in and guided our boats through 300 m of boulders. Tiring work, but now only a maximum of one portage to go.

The last rapid, where the Starvation River entered Point Lake, dropped steeply but had plenty of water. One narrow chute, however, shot directly into a large boulder, with deep holes on both sides. The left bank was clear of rocks, and had good footing, so Carey and I lined the boats down to Point Lake. Lining downstream is the reverse of tracking upstream. Carey held the bow painter to guide the boat down, while I held the stern painter, making sure that the stern stayed close to shore and did not swing out into the current.

Of five potential portages today, we had to carry our loads a total of only 100 m. A very successful day.

We camped that night on a rock bluff overlooking a completely still Point Lake. We were happy to have completed this leg of our expedition, undaunted that we remained 79 km behind schedule, with approximately 120 km of Point Lake ahead of us. I hoped this fine, calm weather would hold, and that we would be able to paddle Point Lake every day. These large lakes are prone to strong winds that could confine us to camp.

Kathleen and I finally felt like we were on holiday now that the most difficult overland part of our journey was over. Tonight, for the first time since flying into Winter Lake 13 days ago, Kathleen and I bathed, washed our hair (I still had some hair then) and changed clothes. In the tent, we sipped tea, relaxed and applied first aid treatments to the various cuts, gashes and abrasions on our hands and legs. We're having some kind of fun now.

August 10. My alarm sounded at 5:30 a.m., and I easily rose from my warm sleeping bag to try my luck at fishing. Six casts later I landed a 58-cm (23-inch) lake trout. After a leisurely bannock breakfast, we started down Point Lake, towing the lake trout behind my canoe on a short stringer.

At lunch, Kathleen and I saw a Yellow-billed Loon, and a lemming (probably a collared lemming) which scurried away into a rock crevice.

Back on the water, the wind began to blow as soon as we rounded a point. We struggled against waves in a series of large open crossings, which totalled 3 to 5 km. We beached to set up camp at 7:00 p.m., on a peninsula about 8 km west of Keskarrah Bay. *[Note: Keskarrah was one of Sir John Franklin's guides, and was also the father of Greenstockings, whose brief liaison with Robert Hood produced a daughter.]* For supper, we all feasted on the lake trout, smothered in margarine, and complemented with a cornbread bannock.

The day remained warm, at 18°, even at 10:30 p.m. The evening was calm. We paddled 40 km today, but remained 75 km and 2.5 days behind schedule. Two more paddling days like today, though, and we would reach

Kathleen enjoyed her lunch break on Point Lake.

the brink of moving water—and trees—where we could enjoy cooking over a campfire.

August 11. During breakfast, we saw two caribou swimming the 4-km crossing of Point Lake toward our camp. Soon after putting on the water in a calm, 14° morning, we startled a family of flightless Blue-winged Teal. A warm sun shone upon our backs.

We met our first people of the trip today, two tandem canoes, including a guide, from Wanapitei, a company specializing in wilderness canoeing adventures. The paddlers were huddled up against the bank and seemed tired. We paddled over but exchanged no more than cursory pleasantries. I don't remember where they began their trip, although they hadn't gone overland. I also don't remember how far down the Coppermine River they planned to travel. Maybe we didn't even ask them. Maybe they told us, and I wasn't really paying attention. After the brief conversation, we paddled away and never saw them again.

The wind resumed its usual afternoon attack, and we stopped at 4:00 p.m., at the beginning of a 5-km crossing to the large island near the western end of Point Lake. We travelled approximately 30 km today. As this was tentatively scheduled to be a rest day, we were now only 1.5 days and 45 km behind schedule.

August 12. We rose at 3:30 a.m. and put on the water at 6:15, attempting to begin our day before the wind began its day. Our clever ruse, however, failed miserably. The wind apparently never truly sleeps, and must have been watching us all night. By 8:30 we struggled into a strong headwind, taking rollers over the spray deck on several occasions. This is another reason why we always travel with spray decks. You might think that spray decks are useful primarily for running rapids with large waves, and you're probably right. But large waves on exposed, wind-battered lakes can also swamp open canoes.

I have a friend, Tom Stuart, with whom I shared a house in graduate school. Tom had recently read our Thelon River book when he asked me the following question: "You say that you like wilderness canoeing, but where in that book were you actually having fun?"

In retrospect, Tom had made a good point. There's a lot of talk in our Thelon River book about wind, bugs, rapids, portages and other sorts of physical challenges. The sorts of challenges wilderness canoeists always face. I have to say, though, that our Thelon River adventure was much more idyllic, relaxing and out-and-out enjoyable than this Coppermine River trip. So far, pretty much every day had been hard work. We never just lounge around.

Moreover, having to organize this hard work around other people's needs and expectations adds an additional layer of challenge. This morning, Kathleen complained that she doesn't even feel connected to me. I assume that Carey and Janice were experiencing some of the same feelings. Again, though, it's the price to pay for having companions, and I was very satisfied to be travelling with Carey and Janice.

We took off the water at 4:30 this afternoon, in an area indicated on the map as being forested. The map exaggerated reality, as only a small grove of spruce stood on a boggy shore opposite our camp. After supper, Carey and Janice canoed over to the stand and collected approximately one day's supply of firewood. This was a very welcome addition to our fuel supply, as we had only three days of white gas left. This actually represented fairly good planning on our part, as we brought only a little bit more white gas than we thought would be necessary. We certainly didn't want to bring an extra seven to ten days of gas, which would have added unnecessarily to the weight and volume of items required to carry over the portage trails.

And, in fact, we expected to find wood soon. My 1:250,000 topographic map indicated that we would enter forested country at Redrock Lake, which we planned to reach tomorrow. The Northwest Territories brief *Explorer's Guide to the Coppermine River* refers to the "meandering and spruce wooded shores" from Redrock Lake to Rocknest Lake. Mary McCreadie's book, *Canoeing Canada's Northwest Territories: A Paddler's Guide*, says that the shores of Redrock Lake "are wooded with black spruce." *[Note: For the rest of this chapter, I will refer to this guide as simply the* Paddler's Guide.*]* Based on all this information, we would be more than just a little disappointed if trees didn't show up at Redrock Lake.

We progressed 35 km today, leaving us still 1.5 days, but now only 37 km, behind our tentative itinerary.

August 13. A beautiful, sunny morning, with calm conditions. On the water at 6:45 a.m. Point Lake offered a satisfying exit to its strenuous paddling, often across deep, windy bays. We were exhilarated with the current emptying into Redrock Lake, and we slowly meandered along its spruce-lined shore, in the lee of a slight breeze, with the sun on our backs.

For lunch, we lay on a cobblestone beach, warming and dozing in its 30° surface heat. Only reluctantly did we climb back into the canoes to begin our final two open crossings on Redrock Lake. The wind had obviously been waiting for us to make these open crossings, as it immediately sprang up.

As we turned north, a cluster of buildings on the opposite shore came into view. This surprised us very much, as no buildings were indicated on the 1:250,000 map, and we had never read or heard about any buildings on Redrock Lake. Through binoculars, we saw that the little community was pretty darn elaborate and fancy—perhaps a little too fancy to be a remote Northwest Territories fishing lodge. As we continued to study the opposite shore, a powerboat came across the lake to greet us, and its three occupants invited us to come on over for coffee.

"I don't think we can," I said. "It's getting late, and we need to find a good campsite."

"You can stay with us. You could have a shower if you like."

The three visitors seemed to be upping the ante. Our group of wilderness adventurers seemed to be wavering. Even so, I didn't want to unpack and then repack just to have a shower.

"It's a long way over there," I continued. "And it's windy. It would take us several kilometres out of our way. It would cost us valuable time."

Time was important to us. We were behind schedule, you know.

"We'll tow your canoes."

This was a nice offer, but sometimes being towed by powerboats can be disastrous. Capsizes often result.

We looked at each other. Carey and Janice seemed eager. Kathleen also appeared to welcome the opportunity. I was wavering a bit myself.

"OK, then. That sounds great. Just don't go too fast."

A few minutes later, we stepped into a completely unexpected world filled with luxury and convenience. A very elegant lady introduced herself as Marjorie.

"Welcome. Come on in. We've been waiting lunch for you."

Carey, Janice, Kathleen and I sat down at a large, linen-covered table to enjoy the promised cup of coffee, plus a hot, homemade pizza topped with fresh vegetables and shrimp. What the heck was this place? It was like a dream. Was this actually happening to us way out here on the Coppermine River?

After finishing our meal, we wandered around the dining room looking

at photographs on the walls. Most of them featured airplanes, including some that bore the insignia of Wardair. It then slowly dawned on us that we were being hosted at the private lodge (well, it wasn't likely a public camp, was it?) owned by Marjorie and Max Ward, founder of Wardair, which was later purchased by Canadian Airlines.

We then met Max himself, who led us to our sleeping quarters—a very large, red and white striped circus tent. "You guys should put your gear in here and get what you need for your shower. I'll show you where the facilities are."

A person probably shouldn't use terms like "jaw dropping" to describe shower facilities. But see what you think. Remember, we were way out there on the Coppermine River. Carey, Janice, Kathleen and I each had our own separate stainless steel shower stall. The common areas of the bathroom were also stainless steel. "There's plenty of water," Max said. "You could all shower at once if you wanted to. Be sure to get your laundry going."

[Note: I didn't write these details in my diary, so I might be embellishing just a little. And, in fact, I am relying quite a bit on Kathleen's memory of that day. If we are wrong about some of these physical details, try to remember that we were probably still in somewhat of a daze at this point.]

"After you've cleaned up," Max continued, "come on over to the dining room for happy hour at 6:00 p.m. Supper begins at 7:00."

This was truly unbelievable. I didn't use an exclamation point in the last sentence, and I don't think I needed to. Even without the exclamation point, I'm sure that you understand the excitement that we four wilderness adventurers felt.

After showering, I strolled around the compound and met Max hauling some cots down the boardwalk to our sleeping quarters. "Have you seen in any of the cottages?" he asked.

"No I haven't."

"Well, why don't you go over to the one over there and let yourself in. Doors aren't locked around here."

So that's what I did. I went over, opened the door, and stepped inside.

A woman, approximately 30 years old, stood in the centre of the room, only partially dressed. She didn't actually scream, but she was quite adamant that I should leave. She seemed upset. I didn't get a very good look at the cottage. Heck, I didn't even have time to get a very good look at the young woman. And that's not like me.

After a brief nap and rest in our very large, red and white striped circus tent, Carey, Janice, Kathleen and I wandered over to the dining room, which featured teak furniture with china place settings on the tables. Vases of fresh gladiolus, flown in from Yellowknife, provided colourful centre pieces. The four of us had arrived exactly at 6:00 p.m. for happy hour. Two weeks in the wilderness had destroyed any desire on our part to arrive fashionably late. Any drink was ours, simply by asking. While I sipped a glass of white wine, Max came over to ensure that everything was fine.

"Couldn't be better. We really appreciate this, Max. I can tell you, we certainly didn't expect it. We had no idea that this place even existed."

"When I was a bush pilot, I fell in love with this spot, which I call Rockhaven. I met a lot of people in the airline business, and I used to bring executives from Boeing up here to go fishing. In fact, the large tent that you're staying in was the tent that we originally used. So, did you get a chance to see inside that cottage?"

"Well, I went in, as you suggested. But there was a woman in there getting dressed. She told me to get out."

"That wasn't very hospitable of her, was it?"

I don't know what Max meant by that. What was the woman whose privacy I had invaded supposed to do, in his opinion? How hospitable was she supposed to be? Ever since then, I have always wondered if Max knew that the woman was in the cottage. At the time, he seemed to have an impish gleam in his eye.

"You know, Max, when I got out of the shower, I stepped on the scales, and was surprised to see that I have lost 12 pounds since we landed at Winter Lake a couple of weeks ago." (The scales read in pounds only. I had lost 5.4 kg.)

We had no idea that Max Ward had a luxurious retreat, way out here, on Redrock Lake.

"What do you expect? You've been working hard."

Even so, I was quite surprised. I had never felt hungry after supper, and always went to bed feeling full. But, as Max said, we were working hard, in damp, cool weather, often wading in cold rivers for hours at a time. And our diet was lean. No alcohol. No snacks other than gorp. Before the trip, Kathleen had dehydrated all of our suppers, which store much longer if they contain no fat. For suppers such as shepherd's pie, which include meat, Kathleen began by cooking very lean meat, and then draining off all the fat before dehydrating. We have actually kept unused, dehydrated meals at home in our closet for two years, and then used them on the next canoe trip.

Carey, who stood over six feet (1.8 m) tall, had told Kathleen and me that he would need 6,000 calories a day to maintain his body weight. Difficult to provide on a lean, relatively fat-free diet. After the trip, Carey told me that he had lost 16 pounds (7 kg) by the time we reached the Ward compound. Wilderness canoeing is a great way to lose weight, particularly if you go over the height of land.

"When your boat came to get us this afternoon, Max," I continued, "I was reluctant to come over here."

"My man said that all of you looked very comfortable out there. Most people coming down the Coppermine look pretty tired by the time they get here."

"How could I not look comfortable? I was in my canoe. I love being in my canoe."

Between 6:30 and 7:00 the other guests began to arrive. Throughout the summer, Marjorie and Max host week-long events, each intended for a particular group of people. For example, last week had been set aside for immediate family members. This week featured business associates of his son, most of whom were from eastern Canada, particularly Toronto.

It turns out that the Wards purposefully scan Redrock Lake looking for paddlers to entertain their guests. If I remember correctly, there were six tables that night, each of which had eight settings. Carey, Janice, Kathleen and I each sat at a different table so as to spread our entertainment value among as many guests as possible. Supper was stuffed chicken breasts with shrimp, chilled pasta with garlic, and Bavarian mousse with fresh strawberries. It was a sumptuous feast, served by waiters dressed in white coats and black bow ties. Toward the end of the meal, a very well-dressed, nicely perfumed woman asked me, "How were you able to take baths out there?"

"We weren't able to take baths. But I think it was on day 13 that I actually washed my face."

I wasn't being facetious. Just trying to answer her question as factually as possible. I had the impression, though, that any appeal wilderness canoeing might have held for her instantly evaporated. Another guest asked me about clothing, as in how much clothing do I take on a 30-day trip. I listed off the number of shirts and socks, the kinds of footwear, and eventually got on to underwear. "I normally take two pairs of underwear."

"Only two pairs? For 30 days? How can that be?"

As I always say when answering this question, "Well, how many pairs of underwear do you wear at one time? Only one, I suspect. When that pair

gets dirty, you wash it and put on the other pair. No sense taking clothes and gear you don't need."

Silent incredulity enveloped my table. I hoped I was being sufficiently entertaining. Although I didn't tell my table mates, I actually usually take three pairs of underwear on wilderness canoe trips, just in case one pair is lost or otherwise damaged. I sometimes even wear the third pair, but not all at once.

In case you were wondering, I didn't recognize any of the Toronto women in the dining room that night as being the woman whose privacy I had invaded. But then again, I didn't get a good look at her. Somewhat disappointingly, she didn't introduce herself to me. I could have explained to her that it wasn't my fault. Max told me to go into her room.

After supper, Kathleen and I lay in the red and white striped circus tent, reflecting on our day. "You know, Michael, most days on this trip have been very unpredictable and unexpected, but always in a bad way. Our canoe capsizing on the first day. Running out of water on the river to Big Lake. Waiting out wind storms. But in my wildest dreams, I never could have imagined such an end to today."

We now had a complete set of clean clothes, were freshly bathed, and physically refreshed. It was like starting the trip all over, even though we were about halfway through. Nevertheless, a luxurious location like Rockhaven did intrude upon, and interrupt, a wilderness experience. We were now 25 km and less than a full day behind schedule.

August 14. The next morning we arrived early at the breakfast table. No other guests were there. I guess none of them were behind schedule. The waiter asked us what we wanted to eat, and I requested bacon, eggs, toast, fruit and juice. I could have asked for bannock, I suppose, but a change of pace seemed appropriate. I didn't write in my diary what Carey, Janice and Kathleen had for breakfast, but I can assure you that it was a made-to-order breakfast of exactly what they wanted.

During our meal, Max came by to wish us well on the rest of our journey

down the Coppermine River. "There's a lot of rapids on the Coppermine," he said. "Many of them quite difficult."

"We know that. But we expect that we can run all of them, except, of course, Bloody Falls."

I don't know if it was Carey or me who said that. Could have been either one of us. Carey can run just about anything. I can't, but always believe I can, at least until I get there. You probably remember that Kathleen and I had already portaged one rapid that Janice and Carey ran.

Max looked skeptical. "Oh really? There's a set of very difficult rapids about 50 km north of here. And they're not the worst on the Coppermine. There's been several times that canoeists get to these rapids and realize they can't handle the Coppermine. They paddle back here, and I fly them out to Yellowknife."

Well, I thought. I still expect to run them all. This was not bravado on my part. It's just what I expected.

As we waited for our breakfast, Kathleen read aloud from the *Paddler's Guide*. We were interested in what the guide had to say about these rapids. Carey objected, suggesting something like we shouldn't put too much value in guidebook descriptions of rapids. He was right, of course. But Kathleen and I like to read the descriptions anyway. I said something like, "It's interesting to hear what other people have to say. We don't necessarily accept everything they say. But we want to read it."

We paddled away from Rockhaven at 9:00 a.m. and travelled through Redrock and Rocknest Lakes comfortably and easily, beneath a blue sky dotted with pleasant, fluffy clouds. A few kilometres upstream from the Napaktolik River, we pulled out on river left at 3:45, on a long, beautiful beach. A very relaxing day. Although I certainly enjoyed the interlude at the Wards' lodge, I much preferred the beauty and serenity of our riverside camp.

In the tent, Kathleen read to me from Samuel Hearne's diary, as presented in Farley Mowat's book *Tundra*. Samuel Hearne was the first European to travel to the Coppermine River, reaching Bloody Falls in 1771. He had tried

and failed on two previous occasions to reach the Coppermine River from Fort Prince of Wales on Hudson Bay. For his third attempt, Hearne arranged to be led by the native hunter Matonabbee, who was shocked to hear that the British did not travel with women. Matonabbee explained his position:

> *For when all the men are heavy laden they can neither hunt nor travel any distance. And in case they should meet with some success in hunting, who is to carry the produce of their labour? Women were made for labour. One of them can carry or haul as much as two men. They also pitch our tents, make and mend our clothes, keep us warm at night—and in fact there is no such thing as traveling any considerable distance without their assistance. More than this, women can be maintained at trifling expense, for as they always cook, the very licking of their fingers in scarce times is sufficient for their sustenance.*

This kind of attitude wouldn't go over too well today. I like to believe, however, that Matonabbee's perspective reflected the immeasurable value of women to the success of Inuit and Dene societies. European diaries, written by the expedition leaders, such as Franklin, largely ignored the contributions of people who did most of the work and who provided all of the local knowledge and expertise.

After our slide show presentations in the Vancouver area, we always entertain questions from the audience. At one such presentation featuring this Coppermine River trip, at the Dogwood Canoe Club's Burnaby clubhouse, a man raised his hand to ask, "So where do I find those kinds of women that Matonabbee talked about? Wilderness canoeing would be a whole lot easier."

He got a good laugh. But I don't think such women—women who are willing to serve essentially as slaves to their men—exist anymore. At least not in the canoeing circles in which I have paddled.

Tomorrow we will reach moving water on the Coppermine River. Kathleen and I were anxious about the rapids just north of the Napaktolik River. The *Paddler's Guide* indicated that there were four rapids in an 8-km

stretch, the "first real whitewater challenge paddlers will encounter" on the Coppermine River. "The rapids are characterized by boulder fans which create hazardous shallows, large standing waves and ledges. This section requires technical paddling, lining and/or portaging."

These are likely the rapids Max Ward said are very difficult, and which occasionally send paddlers back to Rockhaven to be flown out to Yellowknife. Despite our anxiety, Kathleen and I were confident that we would perform well. After 30 km today, we remained a little over one day and 45 km behind schedule.

August 15. We've enjoyed a second successive short day of paddling, 30 km from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. I would have liked to have travelled a bit farther, but Carey and Janice had been pressing for earlier starts with shorter days. They first began mentioning looking for a good campsite at 2:00 p.m. Kathleen and I were happy to stop, though. By now, we certainly deserved to savour some leisurely days.

At 8:30 p.m., Kathleen and I were sitting in our tent, pitched on an esker ridge, overlooking an unnamed lake, with the western sun streaming into our front door. Stripped to our underwear, we basked in the 24° heat.

While Kathleen read from Sir John Richardson's diary, I eagerly and quickly devoured my daily ration of gorp. Since leaving Rockhaven, I seemed to be always hungry. Interesting how I was never hungry during the overland trek, when I had worked hard and long in cold weather. Now with shorter, easier, warmer days, I couldn't wait until my next meal or snack.

One reason we all agreed to stop early today, I believe, was the harrowing experience in the rapids after the confluence with the Napaktolik River. The first one featured a quite strong, pushy current and large, diagonal waves that we needed to cross to reach the inside bend. As both canoes rested in the eddy, Carey said, "See, Mike. That wasn't as hard as the guidebook suggested."

"Well, actually, Carey, it was harder than I expected."

The real difficulty for us occurred in the Class III rapid in the west-trending

portion of the Coppermine, about 5 km below the Napaktolik River. As we approached the rapid from up against the left bank, Carey suggested that we "back" around a very large rock jutting out from shore. The rock outcrop was large enough that we couldn't see what lay behind. Our experience had virtually always been, however, that an eddy lies behind such large rocks projecting into a river.

"We can get in the eddy," Carey said, "and then get out to scout if we want to, or run, if it looks OK."

"Sounds good to me, Carey."

Now, "backing" is a lot like lining. The two paddlers ensure that the stern stays pointed to shore so that the canoe does not swing around broadside in the strong current. Backing would also allow us to simply back into the eddy, stern first, as soon as we cleared the boulder. This contrasts with the "normal" way of hitting an eddy, which is to drive the bow into the top of the eddy. We didn't want to do that, however, as we were in strong current and wanted to make sure that the stern would not swing out into even more powerful current. Besides, backing around obstacles, particularly in tight turns, is fun. Well, it's fun most of the time.

The Coppermine is a big river, with impressive hydraulics. We backed around, quite nicely, I might say. But there was no "normal," calm eddy behind the boulder. Instead, as the Coppermine raced around the boulder, it filled the void behind the boulder by reversing its current—what is known as a back eddy. We were immediately thrust back out into the main current and were now headed toward the middle of a rapid that didn't look like anything Kathleen and I would ever want to run. Particularly on a wilderness canoe trip. This didn't look good.

I know people often exaggerate their exploits, but I'm telling you the truth. Huge holes and diagonal waves reared up to greet us. There were no downstream Vs or any apparent routes through. We would just have to wing it and hope for the best. Kathleen and I plunged over a ledge and into a hole that seemed like a 1.5-m drop. We powered out of the hole but were slammed by a diagonal wave that spun the canoe around. We were still upright, though.

We then plunged, stern first, into another hole, but somehow came out, still right side up.

I turned my head around to see that we were hurtling toward another hole, perhaps larger than the last. As you can imagine, we didn't like the idea of plunging into holes or over ledges going backwards. Our stern was now passing by a wide boulder with a somewhat calm eddy behind it. Calmer than the current, anyway. That's all we needed. I plunged my paddle into the eddy, held on, and the boat swung around, like swinging around a fulcrum. We were now going bow first. That was very good. The bow glanced hard off the edge of a boulder and plummeted into a huge hole below. Our spray skirts blew off the cockpit coaming, and water poured into the canoe.

We were still upright, though. We could see Carey and Janice, on river left, up against a cliff bank. They were bailing water in a very small eddy, perhaps no wider than a canoe. We headed over, hit the eddy (in the "normal" way), and bailed the water out of our canoe.

We looked downriver. We were only about halfway through the rapid. Janice looked at Carey and said, "I'm not getting back in the boat."

I don't remember if Carey replied. Didn't really need to. Everyone had to get back in the boat. We were up against a steep, high cliff. There was no real shore that we could walk on to line the boats. The only way out was to paddle the rapid.

We forward-ferried 100 m across the river to put ourselves beyond the huge haystacks at the bottom of the drop. We then turned down and finally reached calm water on river right. We beached our canoes and got out to rest our nerves. Janice was shaking, claiming that it was the most horrendous rapid she had ever run. And that's saying something. On many day trips with our Beaver Canoe Club, we had seen Carey and Janice paddle stuff that Kathleen and I only sat on shore to watch.

Before we got back in our canoes, Janice made Carey promise that we weren't going to run any more rapids unless we scouted first. Carey agreed. But I know Carey. He scouts from the boat. As long as he can see his next place to get off the river, he continues paddling. Even so, we did scout the

next rapid from shore. After all, Carey had promised—a promise that he quickly cast aside. Except for Muskox Rapids and the very serious Rocky Defile and Escape Rapids, that was the last rapid we scouted on the trip.

In the afternoon, as we sat around the campfire, all four of us chatted happily about our success. Carey said that when he and Janice were in that sliver eddy, he told Janice to "Hurry up and bail. We need to get back out there to rescue Mike and Kathleen. They aren't going to make this."

Carey knew our skills. He expected us to capsize.

We had made it, though. Kathleen and I have excellent balance in the canoe. We get a low centre of gravity. We have strong bracing strokes. We certainly got lucky with that eddy behind the boulder, which allowed us to get turned around bow first. Without that, we would never have been able to make the sliver eddy on river left. We then would not have been able to bail. We then would not have been able to ferry to river right. We then almost certainly would have capsized in the large haystacks at the bottom of the run. No telling how long it would have taken Carey and Janice to catch up with us. No telling if Kathleen and I and our canoe would even have been able to stay together as the current flushed us downriver. I don't like to think about these "what-ifs" too much. We paddled well, and we made it. As we mentioned to Max Ward, we expected to run all the rapids.

We had reached dense stands of spruce at Redrock Lake, and were happy that we no longer needed to rely on our now meagre supply of white gas to heat our food. Meals cooked over a campfire are so much more relaxed, social and aesthetic compared to those cooked on small, one-burner, white-gas stoves. Kathleen and I always bring a grate—with collapsible, adjustable legs—that provides a relatively flat cooking surface, even on uneven ground. This grate is large enough to heat supper and boil tea and cooking water at the same time. On most mornings, before breakfast, Janice and Kathleen organized gear for the paddling day. Carey and I were responsible for cooking breakfast. We enjoyed squatting over the grate. Just two guys, simultaneously cooking and admiring our respective bannocks.

In our evening tent, Kathleen read from Farley Mowat's book *Tundra*. In

the chapter summarizing Sir John Franklin's 1821 descent of the Coppermine River, there is obvious reference to the same rapids that we ran today:

> *We embarked at 9:00 am … and descended a succession of strong rapids for three miles. We were carried along with extraordinary rapidity, shooting over large stones, upon which a single stroke would have been destructive to the canoes. They plunged very much, and on one occasion, the first canoe was almost filled with waves. But there was no retreating after we had once launched into the stream, and our safety depended on the skill and dexterity of the bowmen and steersmen.*

The voyageurs stayed up late that night repairing the damaged canoes. The next morning, Franklin's journal, as edited by C. Stuart Houston in the book *Journey to the Polar Sea*, indicates that "before embarking I issued an order that no rapid should in future be descended until the bowman had examined it and decided upon it being safe to run."

Interesting how Janice and Franklin reached the same conclusion. We had certainly read this passage several times before the trip. Perhaps we should have read it again yesterday. On the other hand, running rapids in birchbark canoes differs greatly from running rapids in shorter, plastic canoes. No direct comparison exists. And, as we told Max Ward, we expected to run all the rapids. All I know for sure is that the Franklin expedition survived the rapid without scouting first, as did the Robson/Pitt expedition.

We remained 47 km and 1.5 days behind schedule. Only 336 km, however, lay between us and the community of Coppermine. Even if we took three rest days, we would still have ten paddling days left. We would need to average only a very manageable 34 km per paddling day to reach our goal on time.

August 16. Today we paddled from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and completed 50 km, including nine rapids, the last of which extended more than 1 km. It was shallow with strong current pushing through a boulder field. I don't understand how commercial recreational companies can advertise the

Coppermine River as suitable for novice canoeists. On the west shore of the lake opposite the White Sandy River, where Franklin's party had camped, a shiny object lying on the beach attracted our attention. We stopped to visit the carcass of an aluminum Grumman canoe. This was the second canoe fatality we had seen, the first occurring halfway down the Starvation River. Yesterday we so very nearly added our canoe to these shoreside reminders of misjudgments or inadequate skill. Both Janice and Kathleen acknowledged today that they had trouble sleeping last night, as they reflected on our near catastrophe.

As we paddled north of the Fairy Lake River, in calm water, searching for this evening's campsite, we came upon six elegant, white Tundra Swans floating serenely down the river. We were now only about half a day and 25 km behind our schedule. No more rapids for 130 km, until we reach the Rocky Defile. Any rapid with a name has just got to be taken seriously.

August 17. A leisurely 8.5-hour paddling day, covering 42 km, leaving us still half a day and 30 km behind schedule. We faced a brisk, 18° north wind all day but enjoyed the sun in the afternoon as we paddled across the Arctic Circle. One moose, Tundra Swans and scenic riverbanks of lacustrine clay added to the day's enjoyment.

The particular place to camp each day was selected by the couple responsible for making supper. That meant that either Janice or Kathleen usually chose our campsites.

When it was Kathleen's turn to choose the campsite, she and Carey got out of their canoes and tromped up the beach. They wandered around for a while to determine if the potential site had an appropriate cooking area, a good supply of wood, suitable spots for our two tents, and an area where canoes and gear could be stowed for the night.

After a few minutes, Kathleen would hopefully say, "OK, I like this place," as she pointed to where she wanted her cooking area. She and Carey then tossed their PFDs on the spot each had chosen for their tent.

At this signal, Janice and I started to unsnap our spray decks as Kathleen

and Carey returned to the canoes to help unload the gear and carry the appropriate packs to either the kitchen, tent site, or overnight storage area. I then gathered rocks for our campfire and placed a pot of water on our cooking grate. I then started the fire with kindling and wood that Carey and Janice had been bringing back to camp.

All four of us then sat down for a bit of a break while we enjoyed tea, after which Carey and I set up the tarp. Each couple then organized their tent and sleeping bags for the evening before returning to the campfire, where we discussed the day's adventures while watching—and occasionally helping—Kathleen heat up our supper. Afterwards, Kathleen and I boiled more water for tea and for washing the cooking and eating utensils.

We altered this routine when it was Janice's turn to select the campsite. On those days, Janice and I got out of the canoes to assess the site. If Janice decided "yes," then Kathleen and I collected firewood while Carey and Janice organized the cooking area and supper. This camp set-up became a comfortable nightly routine that gave a predictably satisfying end to the paddling day—particularly after having reached spruce forests and firewood.

August 18. We paddled 50 km from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. beneath grey, somber clouds, joined by a brisk east wind, which made the 16° day seem cold. Because today was tentatively scheduled as a rest day, we were now 20 km ahead of schedule. Ten days remained for us to cover 200 km. We should easily reach Coppermine sooner than our intended August 28 arrival.

For the first time since the Starvation River, we saw many groups of caribou, often swimming across the river right in front of our canoes. We were also treated to a large male grizzly ambling along the beach; unfortunately, we were upwind, and he retreated to cover, far in advance of a photo opportunity.

We passed by the Hook River, leading to Great Bear Lake. It was here that Franklin met with Hook, one of Akaitcho's hunters who were supplying food for the expedition. Franklin arranged for Hook and his men to meet him at Great Bear Lake should the Franklin expedition return by that route.

Because today was our once-a-week brandy day, Kathleen and I retreated to the tent soon after supper. We enjoyed fruitcake with our libation, studied our maps, read from Richardson's diary, and contemplated the approaching four rapids named Rocky Defile, Muskox, Sandstone and Escape.

August 19. We woke to 10°, and an overcast sky, which progressively cleared throughout the day. By the time we put to shore to set up camp at 4:00 p.m., we basked in 24° warmth, beneath a clear, blue sky.

During the paddling day, as we approached the Big Bend, the river narrowed and wound through very scenic gorges, with caribou and one muskox feeding along the bank. As we turned north around Big Bend, the Coppermine River suddenly seemed very eager to reach the Coronation Gulf, as we sped through the last 6 km in only 30 minutes.

Kathleen seemed to be enjoying the adventure more now. She laughed and smiled tonight in the tent as she read from Richardson's journal and compared his comments with our experiences. Nonetheless, we both sometimes felt that this journey was like a task, something we must accomplish. We had become very regimented. My wristwatch alarm beeps 30 times at 5:30 a.m. Up at 5:45. Cook and eat bannock at 6:00. Begin packing canoes at 7:00. Paddle away from the beach at 8:00. Stop for lunch at 11:30. Munch gorp while floating in the canoe at 2:00 p.m. Begin looking for campsite at 3:00.

Despite this regimentation, today was one of our most enjoyable paddling days so far. It might be our last relaxing paddle, however, as we will reach the first ominously named rapid tomorrow around noon—the Rocky Defile. I hope we're able to run it. I know that I told Max Ward that we expected to run all rapids, but the following description from the *Paddler's Guide* does sound intimidating:

> *To avoid getting swept into the canyon at Rocky Defile, paddlers should pull out on river right well above the entrance to the defile. This rapid is 500 m long and … the well-used portage trail on river right starts from a rocky cove before the cliffs begin. Scouting this rapid is difficult from the heights*

> *of the canyon and impossible from water level. Only expert paddlers should attempt this canyon because of the large standing waves, whirlpools and ledges. Several people have lost their lives in Rocky Defile and anyone who capsizes risks a long, cold and possibly fatal swim.*

That didn't sound easy. Kathleen and I consider ourselves to be highly competent paddlers, but perhaps not expert paddlers. We covered 37 km today, leaving us 6 km ahead of schedule. Only 170 km to go to reach the town of Coppermine.

August 20. We made it. We paddled through the Rocky Defile today and are lying in our tent at the confluence with the Kendall River, with a marvellous view eastward to the September Mountains.

We experienced a highly varied day. We began paddling in a wide, calm stretch of the river, in a cool (8°) morning. Mist evaporating from last evening's gentle rain. As we entered swift-flowing water, the morning sun shone brightly and warmly as we quickly covered 26 km through some scenic narrows toward the Rocky Defile rapids. As we neared the canyon, an ominous north wind blew strongly. Two river bends later, the river dropped quickly to the narrow, red chasm, so aptly and picturesquely named the Rocky Defile.

We stopped to scout. My heartbeat quickened in anticipation. We lunched in noon-hour heat, at a cairn erected in memory of David and Carol Jones, who died here. The plaque read, "David and Carol Jones drowned in these rapids August 14, 1972. They loved the north and its people. They respected honesty and truth."

I can't remember where, but I have read that at least six other people had drowned in the Rocky Defile between 1972 and when we arrived in 1995. I wonder if these people inadvertently missed the takeout on river right and were accidentally swept into the rapid. Or perhaps they miscalculated their paddling abilities.

Their fate heightened my anxiety as we trudged back down to river level and stood peering around the corner of the canyon.

"The river's moving like a freight train," Carey said.

I looked at Kathleen. She appeared confident.

"You know, Kathleen, we don't have to run this if you don't want to."

"I think we can run it, Michael."

"We don't have to, though."

If the truth be known, I was trying to get her to say she didn't want to run the Rocky Defile. I wasn't completely positive we could do it.

"No, we can run it. We just have to make one move. All we need to do is paddle out a little bit to get our angle, and then power over to the point there, and cross the eddy line to the inside bend."

She was right, but I remained worried. Back in the canoe, we stroked strongly toward the 1.5-m waves piling off the entry to the canyon on the inside bend. We powered through the trough leading to the eddy behind the point, and just like that, we were in the eddy. That wasn't so bad. We then sneaked down on river right, right up against the canyon wall in relatively calm water, easily avoiding the ledges, holes and whirlpools spread

Kathleen assessed the entry to the Rocky Defile rapid: "We can do this, Michael."

throughout the rapid between river centre and the left bank. As is often the case, the reality of the rapid fell short of the self-inflicted terror created by fantasy and worry.

We then drifted easily on a strong current, without rapids, 10 km in one hour to the Kendall River, where we set up camp at an apparently abandoned, or intermittently used, fishing camp. We enjoyed the amenities that had been left behind: tables, chairs, a real fire pit with a large grate, and plenty of large spruce rounds already bucked up for firewood. All four of us felt nearly as pampered as we had at the Ward compound.

For hors d'oeuvres, we enjoyed an Arctic grayling that I caught at the confluence with the Kendall River. Minestrone soup, bannock and vanilla pudding, courtesy of Janice, comprised supper and dessert. After supper, in the tent, Kathleen and I sipped tea and nibbled on fruitcake. I was feeling quite content.

We travelled 36 km today, and are now one full day ahead of schedule. We plan to take our scheduled rest day tomorrow, the first time our group has actually enjoyed the luxury of choosing our own rest day. All other layover days had been imposed by bad weather. Only 130 km from Coppermine, which we will probably reach on August 26, two days ahead of schedule.

August 21. A beautifully restful day. Just like a rest day is supposed to be. We woke late—8:30 a.m.—and enjoyed Janice's breakfast of pancakes, strawberries and whipped cream. Well, actually, it was Dream Whip, but mighty, mighty satisfying. We then put into our canoes to paddle 20 minutes up the slow-moving Kendall River, past crumbling sedimentary cliff walls, to the first rapid. We quickly caught five Arctic grayling, ate lunch in the 24° afternoon sun, and drifted casually downstream back to camp.

While Kathleen and I dozed in the warmth of our tent, Carey caught a 66-cm (26-inch) lake trout, which we eagerly consumed at supper. Way to go, Carey! After stuffing ourselves, Carey and I cooked up the Arctic grayling for tomorrow's supper.

We'll be back on the water tomorrow, one day ahead of schedule. Only

two marked rapids appear in the 48 km between us and tomorrow's destination of Melville Creek.

August 22. We paddled away at 8:15 a.m. in a cool (4°), autumnal breeze. Around the first bend, we sighted a grizzly bear foraging on a mid-channel island. We beached on the opposite shore to take pictures as the bear stood up on its hind legs, looking in our direction. Moments later, he lumbered away, stopping periodically to peer back to make sure we weren't following. Or so it seemed. He forded the river, shook himself dry, looked back again, and then ran up the bank, eventually disappearing into a thin stand of spruce on the ridge.

The northwest wind increased, sending chills into our bodies as we paddled by beautiful limestone and basalt cliffs framed by a crystal blue sky. After lunch, we turned north past Melville Creek, directly into an even stronger wind, and entered an extended, quick, shallow, rocky rapid. We stopped at 4:15 p.m. to scramble up a boulder-strewn cliff to camp in the lee of a hanging meadow drained by a small, burbling stream, probably Burnt Creek. If that's where we were, then we had completed 58 km today, leaving us only 75 km from Coppermine. We were now approximately 58 km, and more than one day ahead of schedule.

We easily negotiated the three marked rapids today, all of which were little more than fast-flowing ripples over a few rocks. Based on the lateness of the season, and the height above the river where the more-or-less permanent vegetation occurred, we were quite certain that we were paddling at low water levels. This was good. I was glad not to be paddling the Coppermine River at high water, which would certainly have produced pushier water with larger standing waves at the bottom of rapids. Only 22 marked rapids to go, including the named rapids of Muskox, Sandstone and Escape.

[Note: I just checked the monthly mean discharge for the Coppermine River at the outlet of Point Lake, between 1965 and 2011, as reported by the Water Survey of Canada. The second highest average monthly discharge occurs in August, at 202 m^3/s (7,130 ft^3/s). The average discharge in August

1995, when we were on the Coppermine River, was 170 m^3/s. We were indeed paddling on water levels less than normal for August.]

Each night, Kathleen read from the Franklin party's diaries for descriptions of the upcoming section of river. She said she wished she hadn't tonight, as a notation on one of their maps pretty much indicated that the rest of the trip down to Bloody Falls contained "rapids frequent and dangerous." As always, this worried us. Even so, as I told Max Ward, we expected to run them.

August 23. And run them we did. Today we paddled numerous unmarked rapids and 19 marked rapids, including Muskox, Sandstone and Escape. We scouted Muskox Rapids before easily running on the left bank and then punching across the wave train deflecting off the point, to reach the eddy. As always, Carey and Janice went first, and were on shore watching our progress. When we reached the eddy, Carey yelled out, "Good job, Mike." High praise from Carey. I naturally felt pleased with myself.

A man and a woman from Colorado were camped at Muskox Rapids, and we exchanged a few bits of conversation before putting back on the river. About 10 km later, we paddled through Sandstone Rapids. No scouting. No worry. No problem.

We stopped for lunch in a calm section of the river, and our conversation focused on Escape Rapids, which was reported to be a Class IV drop. Let me remind you about Class IV, which, according to the International River Rating Scale:

> *… has long, difficult rapids with constricted passages that often require precise maneuvering in very turbulent waters. Scouting from shore is often necessary and conditions make rescue difficult. Generally not possible for open canoes. Paddlers in covered canoes and kayaks should be able to do the Eskimo roll.*

I have never seen two people in a tandem canoe do an Eskimo roll. I

doubt if it's even realistically possible in a tandem canoe fully loaded with gear.

After lunch, we ran three difficult rapids. So difficult that we wondered if we had already paddled through Escape Rapids without realizing it. That was not likely, though. We would recognize a Class IV drop, even at low water levels. It was not possible that we had already paddled through Escape Rapids without knowing it.

The rapids came in quick succession now, until Escape Rapids obviously came into view. My spirits plummeted. The opening to the canyon looked intimidating. This would certainly require a portage. Franklin's party ran this rapid in 1821 and reported that "we barely escaped foundering."

The following description of Escape Rapids is from the *Paddler's Guide*:

> *This is the most difficult rapid of the trip and should be carefully scouted. The river flows through an S-curve gorge creating turbulence near the canyon walls on the outside curves. Two metre waves roll across the left limit at the first bend and a large ledge blocks passage on river right. Canoeists who decide to run this rapid should do so in empty boats.*

There's no way we would take the advice offered in the last sentence. Running in an empty boat would mean that we would have portaged all the rest of the gear anyway. If we portage all of the gear, we might as well also portage the canoe. No, we would not run in an empty boat. We would run or portage, not a combination of the two. Besides, a fully loaded boat is more stable than an empty boat. Maybe not as manoeuvrable, but more stable.

We beached our canoes on river left and trudged along the cliff edge. I began to change my mind. This might be runnable. In fact, I thought it was runnable. We needed only to ferry over toward river right to avoid the large waves at the entry on river left and then ferry very aggressively back toward river left, using an eddy behind those large boulders. This would allow us to avoid the ledge extending out from river right.

Carey and I agreed on the route. Carey seemed confident. Of course,

he always does. I was not completely confident, though. "Do you think I'm underestimating the rapid, Carey? We're a long way up, and the waves are certainly larger than they appear from here. Do you really think Kathleen and I can do this?"

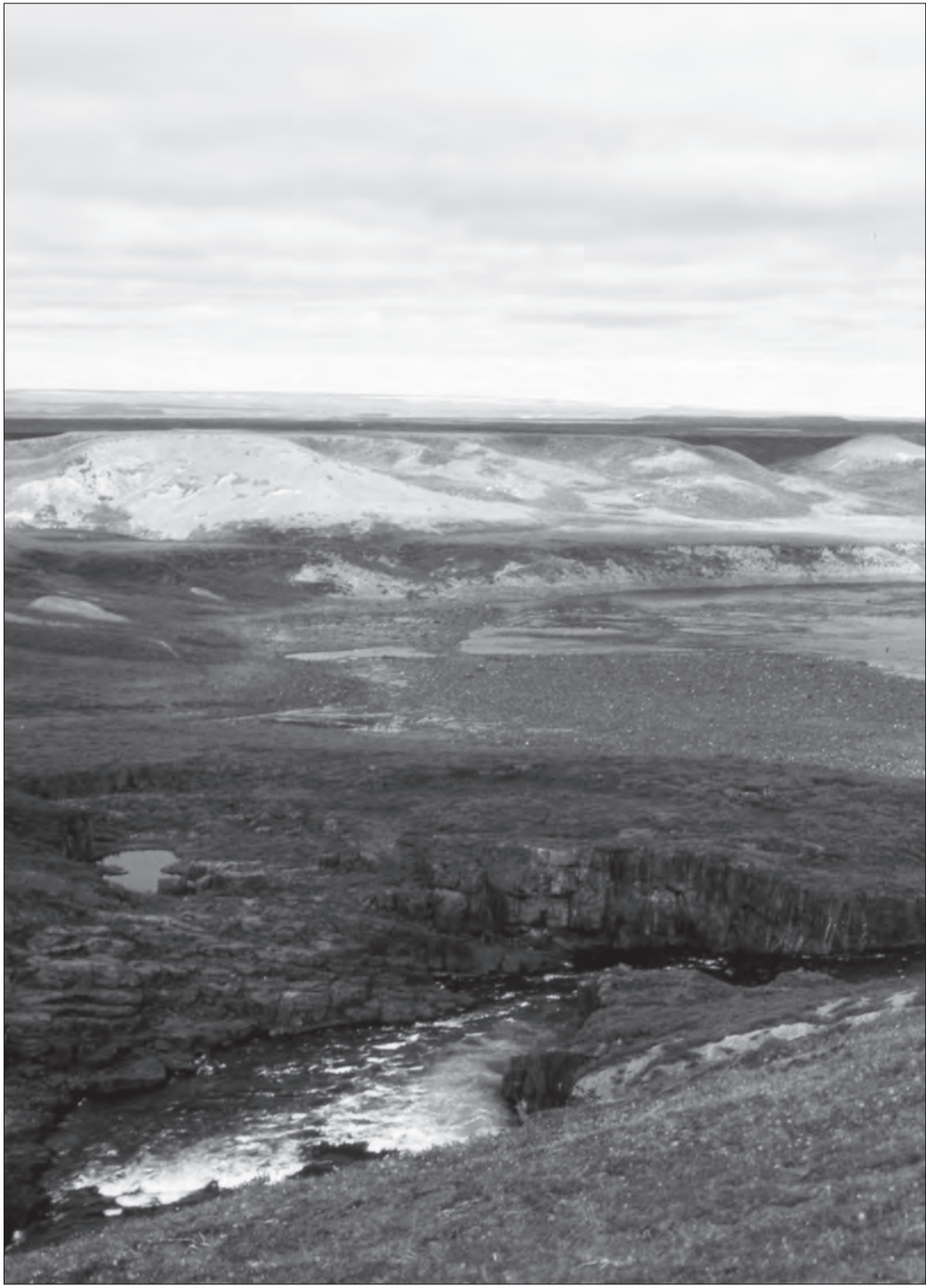
If I remember correctly, Carey seemed noncommittal. Certainly the decision to run or not to run belonged to Kathleen and me. No one should ever run simply because someone else says they can. Carey left the decision to us.

Back in the boats, we forward-ferried over toward river right, slowly dropping down below the large waves on river left. We then began forward-ferrying back toward river left, hoping to drop just below those large waves. I was stroking very hard. I felt a genuine urgency to get back to river left to avoid going over the ledge on river right. You would have felt the same urgency, I'm sure. I grunted involuntarily with each stroke, like a tennis player on television, putting everything I had into every stroke. We were now close to the boulder eddy, and gaining on Carey and Janice. How could we be gaining on Carey and Janice? We don't gain on Carey and Janice. Perhaps we were too close to the eddy and should back off. No, that can't be it. Everyone knows it's almost always best to hit an eddy as high as possible. I stroked and grunted, stroked and grunted some more, and ran into the stern of Carey and Janice. We didn't bump them hard, or on purpose. We just wanted to get into that eddy.

Seconds later we were in that eddy. We turned downstream and paddled out of Escape Rapids.

Kathleen and I celebrated in the tent that night with fruitcake and brandy. Only three marked rapids and 34 km to go. We should be in Coppermine in two days, a full three days ahead of schedule.

August 24. Kathleen and I camped at Bloody Falls, named by Samuel Hearne after his guide Matonabbee led his Dene hunters into a massacre of Inuit as they lay sleeping in their tents on the left bank. We reached the portage trail at 11:00 a.m. after 2.5 hours on the water. Following a leisurely lunch, all four of us completed the portage by 2:30 p.m. Along the way, we



On the portage above Bloody Falls.

made a brief hike to the ridge top, which afforded spectacular views south up the Coppermine River and north to the Arctic Ocean. I suggested to Carey that it was a beautiful day for a portage.

"It's never a good day," he grumbled, "for a portage."

Perhaps he was right. The late Bill Mason, Canada's iconic wilderness canoeist, has been quoted as saying that "Anyone who says they like portaging is either a liar or crazy."

I am neither crazy nor a liar, but under the right conditions, I sometimes like portaging. As Bill Mason wrote in his classic book *Path of the Paddle: An Illustrated Guide to the Art of Canoeing*:

> *Portaging can be a welcome change from paddling and a chance to stretch your legs. The trip back for a second load gives you a perspective and a closeness with the land that you don't get from a canoe.*

That's exactly how I felt about our portage of Bloody Falls. I actually enjoyed it. And I repeat. I am neither a liar nor crazy.

At the bottom of Bloody Falls, we said goodbye to Carey and Janice, who continued on to Coppermine, hoping to catch tomorrow's early flight on NWT Air to Yellowknife. Kathleen and I stayed behind to absorb the place and spirit of Kugluktuk, "place where the river drops." I fished in the same spot where Inuit have fished for thousands of years before me. While Kathleen organized camp, I attempted to catch a whitefish for supper. Although I hooked one every 15 minutes or so, their mouths are very soft, and the strong current kept tearing the hook away. At least that's how I explain my lack of success. After persevering for two hours, however, I finally kept my promise that we would have fish for supper.

Kathleen and I were enjoying being all alone on the river. Soon after our meal, however, four groups from town arrived by powerboat. Five people stood on the left bank. Nine people clambered up the right bank. They had come to fish at the falls. Our few hours of being alone on the river were over. We shared short conversations, during which Rachel told us that she worked

for NWT Air, the company that we planned to fly with back to Yellowknife. After quickly saying goodnight to our visitors, Kathleen and I crawled into the tent and zipped up the door. Sixteen kilometres to go to Coppermine, but it felt like we were already there.

August 25. No journal entry today. Way too busy. Please proceed directly to August 26.

August 26. I'm sitting in Yellowknife, enjoying pizza and red wine, out of the wind, with a showered body and clean clothes. Yesterday, we left Bloody Falls at 8:45 a.m. beneath blue skies. Moments later, the sky darkened, bringing a gentle rain and a beneficial southerly tailwind.

We drifted between the left bank and an island, and dropped through a series of unmarked, easy rapids. Nonetheless, a diagonal wave slapped over the gunwale, struck me disdainfully in the face, and funnelled into my lap. I guess I should have still been wearing my spray skirt. After all, we were still on the river. We were not actually in Coppermine yet.

Kathleen and I paddled contentedly on a wide, smoothly flowing river that unceremoniously ended its journey at the Arctic coast. No last rapids. No last drops or ledges. The Coppermine River just simply disappeared into the Coronation Gulf. We turned left around a point and headed west toward the town of Coppermine. Between sandy shoals and the shore, the water depth provided only a few centimetres (inches) of draft, and minutes later we were dragging our canoe across the tidal flats, in the rain. Our last physical struggle on the Coppermine River. But the worst was yet to come.

We had read in a brochure that the town of Coppermine had recently built a campsite to accommodate paddlers coming off the river. How convenient and considerate. We beached at the designated location, only to discover, with disappointment, that the toilet facilities were still just a shell, not yet serviceable, and that no running water was available. To compound our disappointment, a strong wind now blew from the northeast, sending waves and chill across the completely exposed, potential campsite of the distant future.

Oh well, Coppermine, with a population of slightly more than 1,000 people, seemed like a bustling, interesting place. We'd just get a room at either the Coppermine Inn or one of the two Bed & Breakfasts. We planned to spend two days there, and were quite prepared to pay the advertised $250.00 nightly accommodation rate.

We sauntered up the slope and came first to the Coppermine Inn. We walked inside and inquired about a room.

"We don't have any rooms available until September."

Not to worry. We just continued up the hill to the nearest Bed & Breakfast, where we were told, "We don't have any rooms available until next Wednesday."

Now if you're reading this book without a 1995 calendar at your side, I should tell you that August 25 was a Friday. A room next Wednesday would not meet our needs. We now had only one option left.

"That's too bad," I said. "What about the other Bed & Breakfast in town?"

"They're closed."

Uh-oh. This wasn't working out too well. We had arrived in town thinking that there were four potential places to stay. Less than an hour later, we had nowhere to stay.

We knew that the next NWT Air flight out of Coppermine wasn't until next Monday. Until then, 2.5 days from now, we were homeless in a windswept Arctic community. We walked slowly back to our canoe on the beach and discovered that someone had already gone through our gear, likely looking for alcohol. Kathleen and I had finished the trip with some brandy left. We always carry our brandy in an unbreakable, red Sigg fuel bottle, which the potential thieves didn't realize contained booze. Nothing was missing. Even so, we wouldn't feel comfortable camping there.

We then walked over to the NWT Air office just after noon, hoping to ask Rachel for assistance and advice. The office was closed for the rest of the day. Kathleen sat on the steps and cried slightly at our misfortune. I tried to encourage her with the unsatisfactory suggestion that camping on the beach

perhaps wouldn't be all that bad. "We could use the NWT Air restroom during the day, and could probably get fresh water at the hotel."

We then wandered over to the office of First Air, where a sign in the window said closed until 2:00 p.m. We waited, and were pleased when the agent returned exactly at 2:00 p.m. We followed him into his office to ask about shipping our canoe out and whether we could get space on their next scheduled flight, which we believed to be Sunday.

"Sure," he said.

We told our story of having no place to stay. A young native man working in the back room overheard us and came to the front desk to say, "You can stay in my house. I will be away hunting caribou for the weekend. Just come on in and make yourself comfortable."

"That's very generous. We just might do that."

I preferred to get out of town, though, hopefully tomorrow. From previous research, we knew that no one had scheduled flights to Yellowknife on Saturday. It didn't hurt to ask, though. Our previous information about a campground in town turned out to not be true. Maybe our information about Saturday flights was also wrong.

"Do you or anyone else, such as Ptarmigan Air, fly on Saturday?"

"No. No one flies on Saturday, but we have a flight to Yellowknife tonight."

"You do? We didn't know that. We'll take it!"

So here we are, our second night as tourists in Yellowknife, eating pizza and drinking wine, when only two days ago we were struggling in rapids and portaging Bloody Falls. Twenty-eight days by canoe from Winter Lake to Coppermine. Ninety minutes by jet from Coppermine to Yellowknife.

Already, the marvellous memories of the expedition, particularly pride of accomplishment, were beginning to dominate our thoughts and conversation about the Coppermine River. We were already talking about our next canoeing adventure, perhaps the Horton River, another one of mainland Canada's most northerly rivers. No matter what river, however, next time Kathleen and

I will paddle alone so that we can savour the landscape according to our own whims and desires.

Before then, though, I must thank our paddling companions—and fellow adventurers—Carey and Janice, for inviting us on this "epic wilderness canoe trip." Kathleen and I likely wouldn't have—perhaps couldn't have—done it without them.

PROPOSED COPPERMINE RIVER ITINERARY (1995)

Date	*Activity*	*Kilometres*		*Miles*	
		Daily	*Total*	*Daily*	*Total*
July 28	Fly to bay at NW end of Winter Lake	0	0	0	0
July 29	Visiting Fort Enterprise	0	0	0	0
July 30	Fishing & hiking at Winter Lake	0	0	0	0
July 31	Head of lake north of Lastfire Lake	17	17	11	11
Aug. 1	Mouth of river from Big Lake	27	44	17	28
Aug. 2	Big Lake	21	65	13	41
Aug. 3	Starvation Lake	15	80	9	50
Aug. 4	Starvation River	12	92	7	57
Aug. 5	Point Lake	18	110	11	68
Aug. 6	Fishing & hiking at Point Lake	0	110	0	68
Aug. 7	Cove on east shore of Point Lake's first bay	25	135	16	84
Aug. 8	Small, narrow bay on north shore of Point Lake	25	160	16	100
Aug. 9	SE shore of "large island" in Point Lake	35	195	22	122
Aug. 10	Narrows to Redrock Lake	33	228	20	142
Aug. 11	Fishing & hiking at narrows to Redrock Lake	0	228	0	142
Aug. 12	Narrows to Rocknest Lake	27	255	17	159
Aug. 13	Napaktolik River	24	279	15	174
Aug. 14	Lake below "3-rapids Island"	38	317	24	198
Aug. 15	Fairy Lake River	29	346	18	216
Aug. 16	Left-bank tributary	28	374	17	233
Aug. 17	Entry to wide, sandy channel	47	421	29	262
Aug. 18	Resting at entry to wide, sandy channel	0	421	0	262
Aug. 19	Big Bend	50	471	31	293
Aug. 20	Rocky Defile Rapids	32	503	20	313

Aug. 21	Scouting/portaging/paddling to Kendall River	10	513	6	319
Aug. 22	Fishing & hiking at Kendall River	0	513	0	319
Aug. 23	Melville Creek	48	561	30	349
Aug. 24	Sandstone Rapids	25	586	16	365
Aug. 25	Escape Rapids	26	612	16	381
Aug. 26	Scouting/portaging/paddling to Bloody Falls	17	629	11	392
Aug. 27	Portaging Bloody Falls	1	630	1	393
Aug. 28	Coppermine (now Kugluktuk)	16	645	10	403

MAPS FROM THE CANADIAN NATIONAL TOPOGRAPHIC SYSTEM

These 1:50,000 maps were essential for the overland section between Winter Lake and Point Lake:

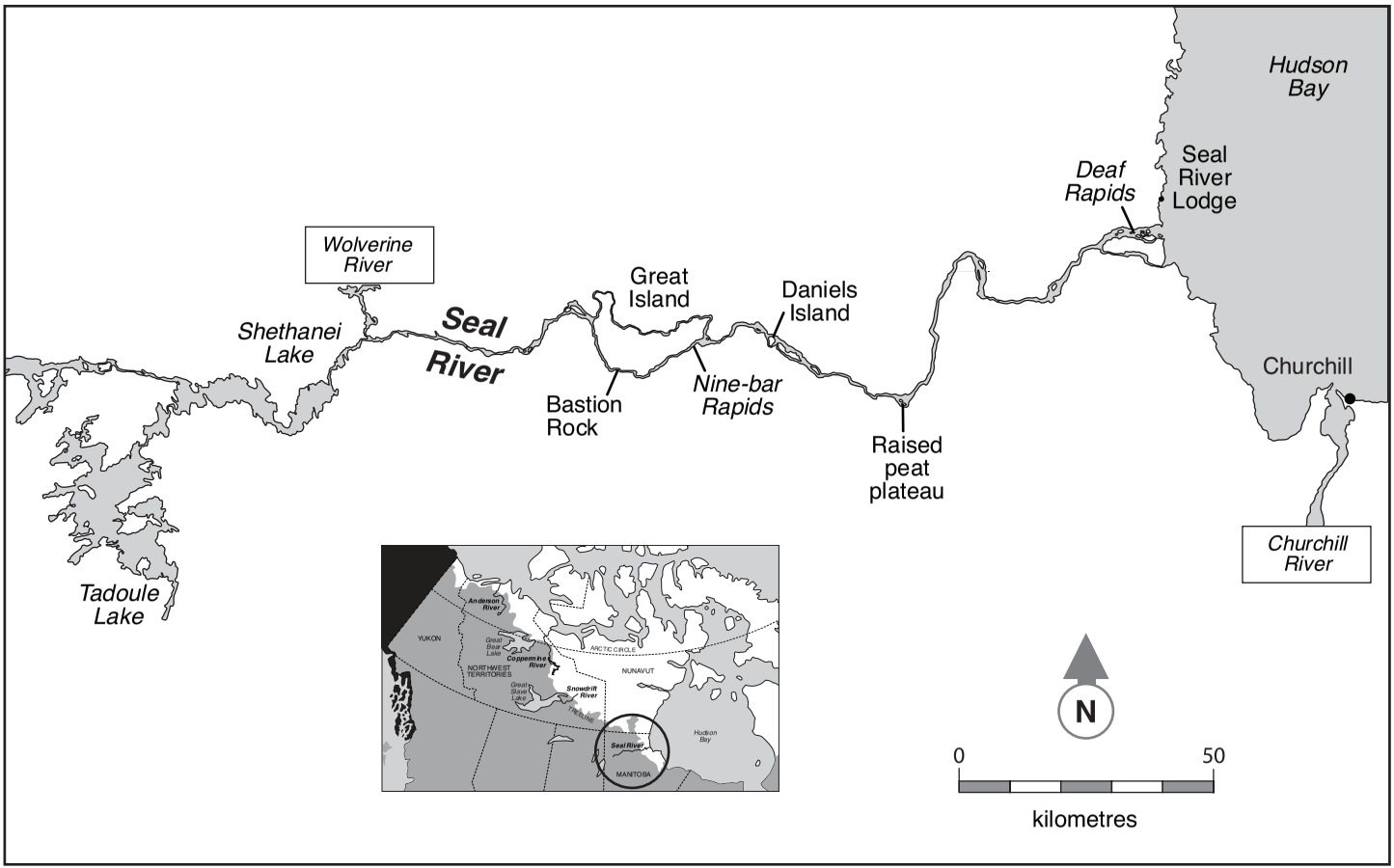
86 A/6 Fort Enterprise
86 A/11 Angelique Lake
86 A/10 Shaw Lake
86 A/15 Starvation Lake
86 H/1 Lake Providence

1:250,000

86 A Winter Lake
86 G Redrock Lake
86 H Point Lake
86 J Hepburn Lake
86 K Sloan River
86 N Dismal Lakes
86 O Coppermine

1:1,000,000

NQ-9,10,11,12 Great Bear River


Hudson Bay
Seal River Lodge
Deaf Rapids
Wolverine River
Great Island
Daniels Island
Shethanei Lake
Seal River
Bastion Rock
Nine-bar Rapids
Raised peat plateau
Churchill
Churchill River
Tadoule Lake
YUKON
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
NUNAVUT
MANITOBA
ARCTIC CIRCLE
Seal River
N
0
50
kilometres

CHAPTER 3

THE SEAL RIVER

Plans A & B

> *The canoe took me away from the crowds and introduced me to places that had remained unchanged for centuries. And in the going I discovered a sense of freedom that has never been equaled in any other way.*

These words by Bill Mason in his book *Song of the Paddle* describe so well why Kathleen and I canoe wilderness rivers. Wilderness canoe trips have given us the opportunity to live free from the intrusions, noises and demands of modern civilization. And, as you will find in this story of the Seal River, some, if not most, wilderness canoe trips serve up completely unexpected adventures.

You might remember at the end of our 1995 Coppermine River trip,

while enjoying pizza and red wine in Yellowknife, that I mentioned the Horton River in the Northwest Territories as our most likely next adventure. Sometimes, though, events conspire to change my plans.

Kathleen and I have been very fortunate in our professional careers. As part of the management team in Information Technology Services at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Kathleen received six weeks of yearly vacation. That was plenty of time for us to drive up to northern Canada, paddle for a month, and get back to Vancouver before her holiday time ran out.

As Associate Professor and Associate Dean for Student Affairs in Agricultural Sciences at UBC, I enjoyed only four weeks of paid vacation. As you can immediately see, this was not enough time to be able to drive up to northern Canada, paddle for a month, and get back to Vancouver before my holiday time ran out.

I suppose I need to explain myself. Now, I don't wish to sound like a martyr, nor do I expect you to feel sorry for me, but like most faculty members responsible for research, teaching, administration and community service, I worked pretty much seven days a week, including most evenings. The public impression that university professors just hang out pontificating and generally having a good time during summer is absolutely false. In fact, research is the primary responsibility for all faculty members at major universities like UBC. The axiom "publish or perish" is entirely and unequivocally true. Successful research requires nearly constant applications for grants, supervision of graduate students, writing papers, and making presentations at conferences. If one is not totally committed to the process, then one will simply not succeed in the academic world.

As part of my commitment, I estimate that I worked, on average, 60 to 70 hours per week. There was no overtime pay. In the years that I didn't paddle in Canada's north, I usually took no more than two weeks of vacation time. There was no banking of unused holiday time. The holiday time simply vanished. The reward for my commitment, hopefully, would be academic success. UBC's motto, *Tuum Est,* translates to "It is yours," or "It is up to