

# WALKING THE LINE

The remote wilderness of the N.W.T.'s  
Canol Heritage Trail can be hauntingly beautiful and  
frighteningly indifferent to trekkers who challenge it

The aurora ghosts the sky above Dodo Canyon.

STORY BY **RYAN MURDOCK** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **COLIN O'CONNOR**

“Weather’s changing fast—I want to fly you boys in tonight.”

Photojournalist Colin O’Connor and I had barely touched down in Norman Wells, N.W.T., when a concerned Stan Simpson, owner of Ram Head Outfitters, rushed over to greet us with this news. It didn’t get any better. “Can you be ready in a couple hours? If we don’t go now you could be stuck here for days.”

I thought Colin and I would have the evening to purchase last-minute supplies, double-check the equipment that would be our lifeline and send a final message home before dropping off the map. Instead, we rushed to pack the three crucial food caches that Stan, a virtuoso bush pilot, would later drop at strategic points along our route through the remote northern wilderness. Any mistakes and we could end up hungry, cold—or worse.

Soon, the desolate grey peaks of the Mackenzie Mountains were towering all around us with stony gloom as Stan followed the twisting river valleys, seeking holes in the cloud cover and a safe passage through the storm. His hands were calm on the controls as the tiny Cessna dipped and shook on invisible currents, buffeted by erratic winds that caused my stomach to plunge and roll.

Beneath us, the earth’s surface was gashed open like a dried-up wound. “Dodo Canyon,” Stan shouted over the engine drone as we banked hard left. “That’s the road over there.”

He was referring to the Canol Road, or the Canol Heritage Trail as it’s known to serious wilderness enthusiasts in search of the ultimate challenge. On and on it went, stretching 355 kilometres to the Yukon border. All I could think about was how long it really was outside the abstract pages of a book. The farther we flew from the Mackenzie River, the farther we’d have to walk back.

**THE CANOL PIPELINE WAS CONSIDERED THE GREATEST** construction project of its time, but it remains a shamefully forgotten period of Canada’s war years, largely overshadowed by the concurrent Alaska Highway project.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the Allies suddenly faced a new threat: an invasion along the Aleutian Island chain, culminating in occupation of Alaska and a push south.



**ABOVE:** The Canol Heritage Trail cuts a slender thread of history across an otherwise untouched land.

German submarines were sinking oil tankers in the Atlantic at an alarming rate, and the U.S. navy couldn’t guarantee the safety of such vessels on the West Coast.

The War Department believed that an inland supply route was urgently needed and Canol—short for Canadian oil—was to provide a secure source of fuel for aircraft and vehicles operating in the northwest.

Starting in May 1942, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, including many troops from the south who had never even seen snow, carried out much of the initial backbreaking work on the project. A consortium of three oil companies did the rest. Despite numerous setbacks and the challenges posed by the harsh climate, the project was completed in February 1944. Including distribution lines, nearly 2,700 kilometres of pipe—more than twice the length

## YOU SIMPLY CAN’T COME TO GRIPS WITH THE SCALE OF THE PLACE—YOUR PERCEPTION OF DISTANCE IS DISTORTED AND THE MOUNTAINS LOOK CLOSE

of the Alaska pipeline—were laid in less than two years.

Not only was the work done at an astonishing pace, it was the first such pipeline ever undertaken in the North and, as such, it presented the engineers with entirely new construction challenges. They learned the hard way that scraping away vegetation exposed the permafrost to the heat of the sun, causing newly graded paths

to melt into a muddy quagmire. Trucks and bulldozers sank irretrievably into the ooze until the builders learned to insulate the ground with a layer of gravel or branches.

The pipe-layers and welders followed the road builders, working out of runner-mounted wooden huts that were pulled forward as the road edged its way into the wilderness. The crude



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oil at Norman Wells had a wax base and so would flow at extremely low temperatures, making insulation unnecessary. But the pipe was laid on the ground without supports or reinforcement—with predictable results. The pipeline was left vulnerable to frost heaving, snowstorms and flooding, so spills were common. Some 46,000 barrels of crude were lost in the first nine months of operations alone.

The more than 52,000 civilian workers shipped up to build and operate the pipeline were warned of the severity of the job: brutal weather, spartan living conditions and plagues of mosquitoes. For most, the lure of good pay was difficult to pass up; fewer than half of them completed the nine-month contract. The recruiting posters began with the words “This is no picnic...” I expected a through hike of the Canol to be the same.

STAN SET US DOWN AT MILE 222, THE BEGINNING OF THE CANOL Heritage Trail and site of a remote N.W.T. wildlife management outpost on the Yukon border. Next to it was a collection of wood huts occupied by several biology students who were finishing up a summer of fieldwork. Colin had met one of them in Toronto and

had promised to stop by when we were in the neighbourhood.

Latitude had robbed the late August evening of warmth. As the chill sank into our bones we knocked on a window that radiated the warmth of a wood fire and human companionship. They bundled us inside and set out hot soup, tea and fresh brownies. We were soon joined by wildlife officer Keith Hickling, who regaled us with tales of life in the Territory—a place where everyone is seemingly from somewhere else, and where each person has a scarcely believable story to tell.

Secret stashes of whisky emerged and we sat up late into the northern night, eventually unrolling our sleeping bags in an empty bunk shack—the last comfort we expected to have for 22 days.

Morning brought a late start, fuelled by a leisurely breakfast of pancakes and thick slices of meaty back bacon, chased with a pot of paint-stripper coffee supplied by brew master Keith.

On our first day of walking we crossed the Mackenzie Barrens,

ABOVE: The rusted remains of Canol.

RIGHT: Dropping the packs and soaking up the scenery in Caribou Pass, overlooking the Ekwi River valley.

where the trail was firm and wide. In places like that the soft skin of the earth is easily bruised, and tire tracks that veer off the road are visible for decades. Because of this, it's conceivable that the landscape has hardly changed in 60 years. But that's just the nature of the Barrens. Further down the Canol, rivers and foliage are brushing out the traces of man's grand designs.

The Barrens extended to the horizon, a tangled mass of birch and willow scrub hemmed in by snow-dusted mountain peaks. Sudden clouds and rainsqualls obscured the warm sun, but they passed quickly. The day was ideal for hiking, hovering around 14 degrees. The going was tough but the weather was fine, and the air was cool, pure and bug-free.

We made our first river crossing in early afternoon. A shallow one, but that didn't ease the pain. The submerged stones were slippery and the current swift. After the first couple of steps the icy water chills your feet to the bone. You'd think numbness would bring relief, but instead the aching throb spreads up your legs and begins to burn. It takes an effort of will to make slow, deliberate steps.

At day's end, grey veils of rain drifted in to smudge the horizon. We pitched a hasty camp on the hard-packed roadbed as cold drops splattered towards us across the hummocks. Squeezed into the tiny tent, I plunged quickly into an exhausted sleep.

WE BEGAN THE SECOND DAY WITH ANOTHER FRIGID RIVER crossing before hiking a short distance to see our first major Canol remains, the camp at Mile 208. The doors of the bunkhouse were missing but the walls were sturdy, and a corral had been built to pen the horses of hunters who occasionally stopped by. At a nearby truck dump, row upon row of faded khaki 1940s pickups rusted beneath the lonely northern sky. Their engines and tires had been stripped long ago, leaving only hollow, skeletal frames. Animals nested in some. Other trucks had been swallowed by

foliage, grown over and forgotten as dreams often are.

Beyond another river crossing the road passed into the Intga River valley, in my opinion the most beautiful stretch of the route. Narrow peaks opened into a verdant dale lush with trees and ripe berries, with fertile green side-valleys opening off into the far distance.

The wildlife biologists had warned us about a grizzly in the vicinity and we soon began to see signs. Shallow digging holes lined the sides of the trail where roots had been unearthed. Enormous footprints in soft, muddy sections of the road dwarfed my size 11 boots. And then we began to see large piles of scat at regular intervals, full of undigested red berries. At least we could take comfort that the bear seemed to be eating well.

Still, the last thing we wanted was to surprise a grizzly on the narrow confines of the trail, hemmed in by brush. When their comfort zone is invaded they tend to charge by instinct. We were hiking into the wind and the rush of the river obscured the sound of our footsteps. We began to shout at intervals to alert any creature that might be up ahead.

From time to time willow ptarmigan erupted noisily from the silent underbrush, momentarily stopping our hearts. About an hour later we came across the freshest, largest bear prints yet, followed by an enormous—and very recent—pile of scat. My shouts, until then pathetic and warbling, took on a new ferocity.

Colin grabbed my arm and pointed, at the same instant there was a crashing in the bushes. We froze as an enormous grizzly emerged from the bush and bounded toward the river, casting a contemptuous backwards glance at us as it vanished into the trees.

We continued to walk and to shout as we beat a hasty retreat from the area. The fresh tracks continued in the same direction; the front claws were dug in as though running, until they turned abruptly off into the bush. The bear had clearly been walking





ahead of us when we frightened it off the trail and it doubled back downwind to get our scent.

In the weeks before the trip I had anticipated such a meeting, going so far as to read Stephen Herrero's comprehensive *Bear Attacks* (which only served to keep me awake at night in a cold sweat, contemplating a miserable end). I was glad we'd gotten the first encounter over with early, and was reassured to see that our precautions and methods seemed to work. We didn't stumble upon any more bears, but judging by the signs on the trail plenty of grizzlies saw us.

**ANOTHER DAY'S HIKING TOOK US TO THE END OF THE** narrowing Intga River valley and Caribou Pass. The pass was true to its name—we could hardly walk a mile without coming across three or four of the curious creatures. We'd stand completely still with our arms held over our heads to mimic antlers. With their poor eyesight, the caribou would approach in fits and starts, squinting and sniffing until they got downwind, when they would catch our scent and bolt.

The pass spread out before us, a bowl-shaped meadow with a stream running through it and surrounded by stony snow-shrouded peaks. We spotted the tiny clapboard cabin maintained by a wilderness lodge back on the Barrens and, as is the custom in remote places, we detoured the 100 metres off the trail to stop and exchange the news. The shack, however, was empty save for the angry chatter of a ground squirrel whose peace we had

evidently disturbed. We paused long enough to eat energy bars and continued on our way.

Around a broad curving bend the bottom dropped out and we entered the valley of the Ekwi. Close scrub alternated with many frigid river crossings: two that day and four the next. Each one got deeper, until by the end we were wading precariously through a bone-chilling, crotch-deep surge. The theme of the Ekwi was claustrophobia relieved by intermittent wetness.

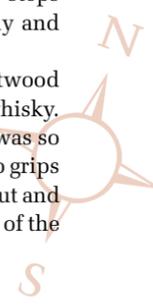
We made camp on the pebbly bank of a small tributary. I was absorbed in pitching the tent when I heard a lonely howl echo through the valley. Smiling because the sound set the atmosphere so well, I looked up in time to see a coal-black wolf emerge quietly from the bushes just across the stream. Colin put down the cook stove and reached a slow hand for his camera.

The wolf stood watching us, totally still, and its bottomless eyes contained all of the wild spirit of the North. I held my breath, afraid to shatter the moment. When it took two hesitant steps forward as if to come into camp, Colin shouted reflexively and the wolf bolted into the bushes. The spell was broken.

The night was clear and not too cold. We sat beside a driftwood fire, where I wrote my notes and sipped a ration of Scotch whisky. The backdrop—the barren spine of the Backbone Range—was so stunning as to seem almost unreal. You simply can't come to grips with the scale of the place; it looked close enough to reach out and touch. That mental disconnect lasts until you step into one of the frigid, rushing rivers, and then it becomes all too real.

**LEFT:** The author fighting the Godlin's icy surge. The river valley was a showcase for the quiet majesty of Canada's North.

**BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Photographer Colin O'Connor crossing the Little Keele; caribou were as thick as flies; Canol remains rusting under the northern sky; grizzly tracks (that dwarfed the author's size 11 boot prints) in the Intga River valley.





With darkness, a chill descended and a warm fire was a welcome reward.

## WE PULLED ON DRY CLOTHES AND COLIN GATHERED DRIFTWOOD FOR A FIRE. WE HAD A DOUBLE RATION OF SCOTCH THAT NIGHT. THE MOST DANGEROUS HAZARD OF THE CANOL WAS BEHIND US

“Yeah,” he replied. “I don’t want to think about it all night tonight either.”

We carefully stowed everything that needed to be stowed in dry bags, strapped on our river shoes, and then took turns blowing up a boating tube from Canadian Tire. It looked cheerful and out of place, hinting at lakeside BBQs and long weekends rather than swift icy rivers in the northern barrens. I hoped that it would float beneath the weight of two 30-kilogram packs.

We lashed our bags to the tube and peeled off layers of clothing, down to shorts and T-shirts. We set the tube carefully in the water and took a step forward. The current grabbed the boating tube and tried to tug it from our grasp.

“You ready?” Colin asked. “Let’s walk at the same time, one on each side.” We began to shuffle forward, fighting against the river’s surge.

“One more step...”

The bottom dropped out and the river tore us from the shore.

“Go back!” Colin yelled.

“Swim!” I shouted back. It was too late for second thoughts.

I clung to the rope with the desperate knowledge that to let go was to lose our food, maps, tent and dry clothing. I pulled with the other arm, gasping spasmodically from the searing cold, unable to catch a breath. After what seemed an eternity, I looked downriver. We were still in the middle. I thought for sure we’d be swept away.

I swung myself around to the back, grabbed on with both hands, and kicked for all I was worth. When I was beginning to think that I could kick no more I heard Colin yell, “I can touch bottom.” We waded the rest of the way to shore and heaved the raft onto the rocks. The cold bite of the wind brought a different kind of misery. Teeth chattering, I struggled with numb fingers to undo the ropes while Colin checked the Twitya’s other braid to ensure that we wouldn’t have to swim again in the morning.

We pulled on dry clothes and Colin gathered driftwood for a fire while I cooked an extra-large dinner for us. We had a double ration of Scotch that night. The most dangerous hazard of the Canol was behind us.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE TO THE CLOYING STINK OF infection in my sleeping bag. My feet had been suffering for several days, rubbed raw by the heels of my boots. The oozing sores had

TWO DAYS LATER WE STUMBLED INTO PILOT STAN SIMPSON’S hunt camp at Godlin Lake. We were welcomed with strong coffee and fresh cookies courtesy of Stan’s wife Debbie and immediately set about sorting and repacking our first food drop.

“I flew over you on my way to 222 this morning,” Stan said. “What exactly were you guys doing there just over the hill? Lounging around?”

“Killing time,” I said. “We got through the Ekwi valley yesterday, so we sat around all morning to time our arrival for dinner.”

Stan grinned his quiet grin. “Well, we got some fresh Dall sheep and plenty of caribou. I’m sure we can fix you boys up with something.”

That night around the table, joined by fly-in hunters and camp guides, Stan entertained us with legends of Canol trips past. About the man who attempted an unsupported through hike from Mile 222 with his dog, only to show up at Godlin with open, weeping sores all over his back. He traded his camera for a flight out. About the party of ATVers who were turned back by the mighty Twitya River and who tried to sell Stan their remaining gear and vehicles. Their machines, new going in, were battered wrecks on the way back. And then there was the one about the man who arrived at

Stan’s wearing only a plastic garbage bag, with his underwear on his head. He had lost everything swimming the Twitya and had walked for several days in that state.

We laughed and shook our heads at the foolishness of those who would tackle Canol unprepared, but at the same time we secretly wondered if we had done enough.

WE LEFT STAN’S AND SET OFF INTO THE VALLEY OF THE GODLIN River. The road was overgrown and crowded with trees, but the walking was easy and the weather was in our favour.

We made one false turn crossing a broad washout, where we failed to pick up the road on the other side and went downhill instead of up. We paid for our impatience with a tiring two-hour bushwhack through spongy hummock and streambeds until we spotted a fallen telephone pole high up a desolate hillside and regained the trail. Lesson learned: when in doubt, drop the packs and scout the far side of any washouts.

Despite the detour, our two days through the Godlin River valley were some of the most enjoyable of the trip. Hemmed in by mountain ridges that sweated tributaries into the river’s burgeoning flow, the valley reverberated with the sheer majesty of

the wild North. We had two nights of perfect riverside camping on broad boulder and sand beds. We sat by a fire and skipped water-polished stones across the surging river, our day’s work at an end, with nothing to look forward to but more of the same.

Nights sank a chill into the valley as the aurora trailed ethereal wisps across the dome of the sky. Colin clicked away but I, wrapped in my warm sleeping bag, didn’t notice. Soon the sound of stones tumbling down the riverbed quickly faded away.

THE HONEYMOON WAS BOUND TO END. BEYOND THE GODLIN, the Canol turned tough. After slogging through swamp and close brush, up and over a low range, we reached the infamous Twitya River at the end of what had already been the most gruelling day of hiking so far. The river flowed fast and muddy, a sickly grey from its clay banks.

This was the make-or-break challenge we’d been brooding over from the start. Cold, hungry and exhausted, I looked with reluctance at this river that had defeated so many.

“Do we do it now or wait until morning?” Colin asked.

“I don’t want to think about that first thing in the morning,” I said truthfully.



# EVERY STEP WAS AGONY AS EACH TWIST AND TURN GROUND THE OPEN WOUNDS IN MY FEET EVEN DEEPER. I PLAYED SONGS IN MY HEAD TO TAKE MY MIND OFF THE PAIN. STILL, WE NEVER MISSED OUR MILEAGE

I dropped my bag and collapsed onto one of the metal cots while Colin built a raging fire from wood and tinder left by a previous party. The room filled with the funk of steaming, sweaty clothes, and the intense heat of the stove tightened the skin of my feet, drying and cracking them. "That looks pretty bad," Colin said, eyeing me dubiously.



he would wait until I was able to secure a lift out. Before switching off my headlamp, for the first time in all my travels I took the medic alert bracelet from my kit and put it on my wrist. If I became unconscious and unable to speak, I didn't want a dose of penicillin to finish me off.

My ankles were swollen and discoloured, and the sores on my heels were several layers deep and oozing pus. "Still," he continued. "It'll make a great photo. Can you stand over there in the light for a sec?" "Bastard." I complied with a wry grin. I had to face the fact that walking on in such condition brought with it a high probability of causing permanent damage. I was also concerned about the increasing likelihood of blood poisoning, given the swelling and discoloration. There was no choice but to seek medical attention.

**BY MORNING I COULD SEE MY ANKLE BONES AGAIN.** The infection still raged but seemed to have stabilized. I placed a call on the satellite phone to request a flight out. Through the cutouts Stan explained that a group of hunters would be flying in to Godlin by helicopter; the pilot would pick me up on the return trip. The only uncertainty was the weather. The mountains were socked in by low clouds. It could be a matter of days or more than a week. There was nothing else to do but wait.

In an effort to draw off some of the infection, Colin boiled two pails of water, to which we added all of our salt. As darkness fell I soaked my feet and we discussed our plans. If the swelling went down by morning, Colin would continue alone. If it was worse,

I passed the phone and the trip off to Colin, an experienced backcountry solo traveller. After a day of rest he hefted a now much heavier pack with all of our shared gear. I watched from the doorway as he shrunk into the distance. He would make it to the end of the road and the Mackenzie River a couple weeks later, becoming just the third person in 2006 to succeed in a through hike of the trail.

stuck to the bag's fabric in the night. I heated a pin, poked holes and drained the sores before bandaging my feet, the only way that I could get my boots on. I had been optimistic that a day's rest at our next food drop (Mile 108) would mitigate the situation, but serious infection was an unforeseen complication.

The day brought a steady drizzle that locked in a leaden grey ceiling. We picked our painstaking way across the broad stony alluvial fan of Decca Creek, past the last remaining timbers of a washed-out Canol bridge. After an hour the trail turned upslope. It narrowed to a track and the brush closed in, dripping raindrops and whipping our faces. It continued like that all day, a tunnel of tangled green, pissing rain and gloom, with a chill that dampened our spirits as it soaked through our clothes.

Every step was agony as each twist and turn ground the open wounds in my feet even deeper. I played songs in my head to take my mind off the pain. Despite thick moleskin and layers of duct tape, things were getting steadily worse. Still, I'm pleased to say that we never once missed our mileage; we always exceeded it.

Near day's end we crossed several bad washouts, descending precarious hand and footholds down loose piles of rock. We pushed on to where the road crossed Trout Creek in the hope of finding shelter at the pumping station there, but the rotting floor of a caboose and some unidentifiable pieces of twisted, rusting metal were all we found.

We pitched the tent and cooked quickly in the pouring rain, then climbed into dry sleeping bags and boiled water for tea out the doorway of the vestibule. Rain pattered on the tent all night as the air turned cold and frosty.

We woke to a dusting of snow on the peaks. We packed up

our wet gear, ate standing up in the rain and trudged on through what the guidebook quite accurately describes as one of the worst stretches of the trail. Several miles of complete washouts would be the order of the day.

The morning was a seemingly endless clamber over boulder beds, paired with continual crossings of the braids of Trout Creek. Our boots were soon sopping with icy water and the scrambling sapped me of all strength. Colin began to hike ahead. For perhaps the first time in my life I felt like I had nothing more to give. But we couldn't stop to rest; more than five minutes and we began to shiver. The only way to stay warm was to walk.

On the other side of Devil's Pass, a collection of tumbledown structures sagged into view, their wood damp and mossy from decades of neglect. The remains of several Quonset huts lay scattered about. The sturdy pump house, bereft of windows, still stood on its solid concrete floor, with bits of machinery sticking up like stumps in a clear cut. A phantom smell of oil saturated the place. It felt lonely and forlorn under a brooding sky that obscured the hilltops.

One Quonset had a newly papered roof and a functioning door held shut by twisted telephone wire. Inside were the spring frames of several bunks, including two grouped around an oil barrel stove in the main room. Stan had placed the plastic tub containing our food drop on the counter.

**TOP:** The truck dump at Pump Station 6 (Mile 208). **TOP RIGHT:** The author's nemesis: his infected feet (Mile 108). **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Drying clothes, resting up and waiting for the weather to change in an abandoned Quonset.





An extra-large dinner and a double ration of Scotch after swimming the Twitya.

I had six days of food, more if I stretched it. A stream that was about 200 metres away would provide water. There was an extra stove in the cabin and plenty of fuel. I could wait out the weather, at least for a while.

Without a watch the long hours of northern daylight, coupled with the dimness of the Quonset, distorted my temporal senses, an experience also common among prisoners. Robbed of the small routine tasks that shape our lives, time warped and stretched like melting plastic.

I hobbled around the cabin reading the inscriptions on the walls. I dismantled, cleaned and reassembled the stove. I stared at the bin that held my food supply and I tried not to eat it all. When the dry wood eventually ran out, I crawled into my sleeping bag to stay warm. As the wind whistled through gaps in the walls and the pump station creaked and groaned, I dipped into a thick volume of Nietzsche and listened to the lonely soundscapes of *The Church* on my iPod. Most of the time I stared out the bleary window and I thought about the Canol.

Anyone with experience and strong skills can hike the Canol Heritage Trail. The hiking isn't technically difficult; navigation is straightforward and the hazards are manageable. Its challenge lies in the mile after relentless mile of uncompromising terrain, in the way that a heavy pack grinds you down day after day, sapping your recovery and steadily depleting your reserves. That and Canol's extreme isolation are what make it a testing ground.

You come to feel its isolation in a visceral way. The beauty of the North is cold and unforgiving. Not malevolent, simply indifferent. The land is tolerating you and that's all. You realize how easy it would be to die out there. You feel dwarfed by the land and by time, and you come to understand the folly of the day-to-day with its shallow self-importance. In the big picture, your existence doesn't seem to matter much, nor do hopes, dreams or schemes.

**THE CANOL PROJECT WAS AN IMPRESSIVE ACHIEVEMENT,** but doomed to failure. The Japanese threat to the West Coast had diminished even before the pipeline was completed. By then, the

cost of oil pumped from Norman Wells was far more than the cost of oil shipped by tanker. In all, the cost of building Canol was more than \$300 million in 1940s dollars, and it consumed more than a quarter-million tonnes of equipment.

Canol's taps were turned off in March 1945, after less than a year of operation. Within a month the workers were gone. Quonsets were abandoned with tables set and beds made. They simply walked away. In the end, Canol amounted to an obscure footnote in wartime history, remembered by few and cared about by fewer.

Still, Canol is more than just a testament to haste and waste. The pipeline was removed long ago, but the Yukon portion of the Canol Road remains open in summer. In 1996, the Northwest Territories designated its portion of the road—abandoned in 1945 and impassible to vehicles—the Canol Heritage Trail.

Thanks to this resurrection, Canol is now a hiking route of legendary proportions: the dream of truly hardcore wilderness enthusiasts, a best-kept secret among the wearers of the boot. Like the original Canol pipeline project, it remains conquered by few.

**THREE DAYS LATER THE WEATHER BROKE, AND A HELICOPTER** shattered the silence of that desolate place as it swooped in to return me to civilization. Beyond the valleys that had hemmed us in lay range after jagged range of mountains, and rivers without name as far as I could see.

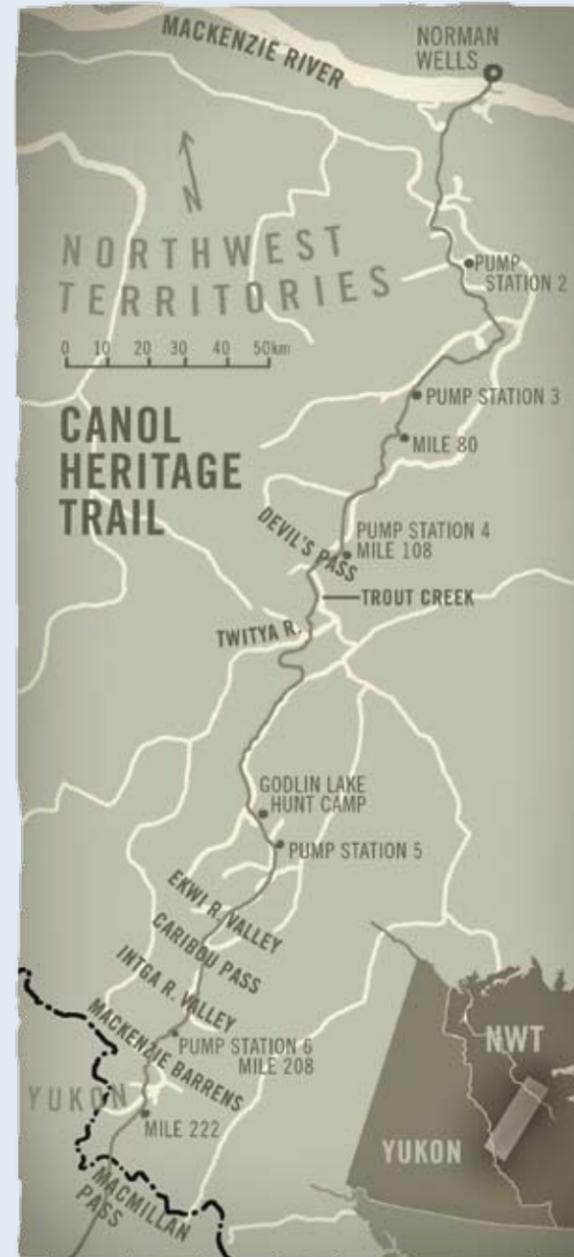
At the helicopter turned toward the east, I caught one last glimpse of the Canol Road. It cut a slender thread of history across a wild and otherwise untouched place. It's already disappearing from the land and from memory, and soon the only proof that it ever existed will be a dusty volume on a library shelf or a yellowed imprint in a fading photograph. 📷

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## OUTPOSTINGS NORTHWEST TERRITORIES



MAP: STEVE WILSON; PHOTO: COLIN O'CONNOR

**Capital:** Yellowknife  
**Area:** 1,171,918 sq. km (over 11 percent of Canada's land mass)  
**Population:** about 42,154 (half Indigenous, half non-Indigenous)  
**Languages:** English, French and various native dialects and languages  
**Major industry:** Mining, petroleum and natural gas  
**Climate:** Cold and dry

### WHEN TO GO

The Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) does get warm weather, but it doesn't stay long. If you're hoping to get some hiking or rafting in, it's best to go in July or August. The winters are long and cold, as cold as -45 degrees, but travelling in the summer can

be a battle too. Insects like black flies and mosquitoes are known to swarm in the heat so bug spray is a must. If you're planning to hike the Canol Heritage Trail, it's best to start in late July when the rivers aren't too high for crossing.

### GETTING THERE

Air Canada only flies into Yellowknife, but leaves from most major Canadian cities, with some direct flights from Edmonton and Calgary. Canadian North flies into several N.W.T. cities, including Norman Wells from Ottawa and Calgary. First Air is also an option if leaving from or connecting in Edmonton. Flying is the quick and easy option, but driving is definitely the more scenic and adventurous one. The Alaska and Mackenzie Highway routes are both viable options.

### GETTING AROUND

There are several small airports in the N.W.T., and charter flights have become very popular among travellers. Some areas, such as the Canol trail, can only be accessed by aircraft. However, if you plan on camping your way across the North, driving will make it a lot easier to get where you want to go and haul all that necessary (and warm) gear.

Be sure to pencil Nahanni National Park into your itinerary for as much time as you can afford; it would take months to max out the adventures this area has to offer. Or trade your tent in for a teepee by booking a couple nights at a cultural camp for a true local experience.

There are several adventure outfitters to help you navigate around the N.W.T.:

**Stan Simpson's Ram Head Outfitters:** Offers organized hunting trips in the Mackenzie Mountains during the summer months. He will also fly hikers to the Canol Heritage Trail and provide three food drops along the way for a very reasonable price. [www.ramheadoutfitters.com](http://www.ramheadoutfitters.com)

**Nahanni River Adventures:** Guided rafting and canoe trips from five to 21 days long. There are trips for everyone from beginners

to experts through the breathtakingly beautiful Nahanni canyons, rapids and glaciers. [www.nahanni.com](http://www.nahanni.com)

### WHAT TO SEE AND DO

The northern lights are one very good reason to bundle up and visit the N.W.T. during the dark winter months. You can see the famous "dancing lights" almost every night between October and April.

You may not even need your binoculars to spot the remarkable wildlife of Northern Canada, which includes black and white wolves, caribou, wolverine, polar bears, muskox and more. Dall sheep is worth a taste. It's said to be very tender and delicious meat when fresh.

### GOOD TO KNOW

If you're planning on camping, have some bear spray on hand and a satellite phone. Both are very smart safety precautions. For obvious reasons, you won't be allowed on the plane with the spray, but grizzlies are not uncommon in the area so be sure to pick some up upon arrival.



ABOVE: Carcajou Lake.