

Wild Rivers of the Yukon's Peel Watershed

A TRAVELLER'S GUIDE
Juri Peepre | Sarah Locke

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Peel | Wind | Snake | Bonnet Plume
Hart | Blackstone | Ogilvie | Rat

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Featuring the

Peel, Wind, Snake, Bonnet Plume, Ogilvie, Blackstone, Hart and Rat Rivers

and

Natural and Cultural History of the Peel Watershed

Whitehorse, 2008



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Foreword



The Yukon's vast Peel watershed, with its eight premiere navigable rivers, offers some of the finest wilderness paddling and hiking in the world—a claim we do not hesitate to make. Still unknown to most people, this country has a fascinating natural history and human story, which offer the attentive wilderness traveller an unmatched northern experience.

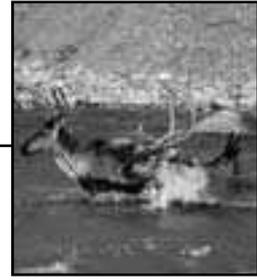
Although called a Traveller's Guide, this book focuses as much on the wonders of the Peel watershed as on ways to travel safely and skilfully there. For many people, the simple knowledge that such a place still exists is reason enough to protect it for all time. Yet today the Peel watershed is on the cusp of changing from a remote and untamed corner of Canada to the forward edge of the industrial landscape.

For a few more years, we may still be able to paddle and walk in these wild places, where timeless beauty and solitude nourish the human spirit—a landscape that still harbours the full suite of boreal and Subarctic life. But behind the ridge, around the corner, the drilling is already underway – for uranium, precious and base metals, coal, oil and gas.

Only an unrelenting effort by all those who value the Peel watershed's wilderness and cultural landscape will save this remarkable place. If you have had the privilege to travel in the Peel country, to dip your paddle in its clear waters, we urge you to add your voice to the call for protection.

Enjoy the wild rivers of the Peel watershed, and relish walking the valleys, high ridges and summits of these ancient northern mountains—above all, please appreciate what the nature of this place has to teach you, and leave no trace of your passing.

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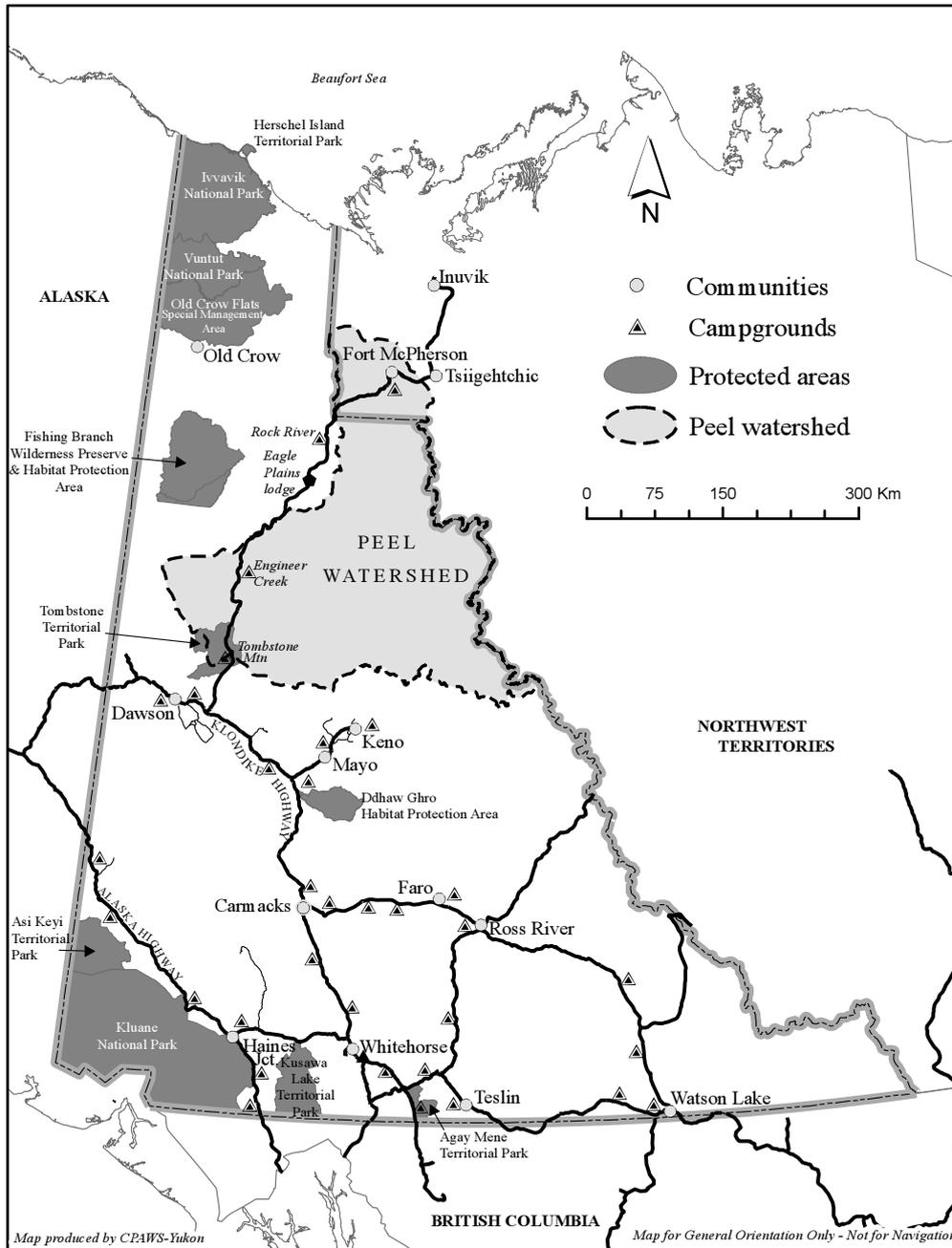


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Peel Watershed and the Yukon





JURI PEEPRE

by Juri Peepre

Conservation and the Art of Paddling

My father taught me how to paddle a cedar canoe on an even bearing across a lake: the art of balancing the pull and turn of the J-stroke, and tipping the belly of the canoe to the windward side—but not too far. Paddling solo was a right of passage, a licence to explore the mysteries of hidden inlets or to venture out to climb the tall pine trees on nearby granite islands.

River trips came later, once I had mastered flipping a canoe from knees to shoulders in one smooth rotation. With paddles properly lashed to the thwarts, you could walk easily for miles with a cedar canoe on your shoulders, stopping only occasionally to prop the bow on a low branch. As part of a longer journey, portaging revealed the lessons and surprises of passage in much the same way as continuous, rhythmic paddle strokes, sometimes accompanied by song, deliver you to the far shore.

By the time I found myself in the North, on the wild rivers of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, it was part of my nature to understand what lay beneath the intricate patterns, telltale sounds and sparkling light of flowing waters. Navigating rough water meant moving with the river, not powering through it. On these northern rivers, time and space take on an ethereal quality that is felt, seen and heard. Our senses blossom with the wind and the silence.

Some dismiss the idea of pristine wilderness as nothing more than a romantic fancy which ignores those who altered or passed through the land before our time. But pristine does not mean unchanged nature; change is the very essence of the ecological and evolutionary forces which still shape the Peel watershed. The loss of wildness is usually incremental, sometimes catastrophic, but in the northern wilderness, the first cut runs deepest through the boreal fabric.

In 2007, a junior mining company exploring for uranium in the Wind and Bonnet Plume watersheds announced that it wanted to build 175 kilometres of winter roads along the Wind valley, with accompanying airstrips and fuel caches. I felt at once irate and despondent. It wasn't the first time speculators had bet on the possibility of mineral riches in these mountains. In 1991 it was copper in the Bonnet Plume; in the 1960s the discovery of a massive iron deposit in the lower Snake River valley created a stir.

During the past 40 years, developers have wet their lips over black gold, natural gas and coal in the Peel watershed, and now it is happening again, especially with the prospect of pipelines to southern markets. The Yukon, after all, has always been an industrial frontier in which places like the Peel watershed are assumed to be there for the taking.

Even with First Nations land claims agreements settled, antiquated Yukon mining laws invite free entry for all those wishing to stake their claim to minerals. Fearing that northern oil and gas development could largely bypass the territory, the Yukon government also vigorously promotes exploration for fossil fuels—often in the Peel basin’s essential wetlands, and unfailingly in advance of conservation planning. In a stroke of bewildering logic, the Yukon also applauds itself as a leader in tackling climate change, provided the extraction of fossil fuels is unfettered.

Wilderness is valued in the Environment Act, and acknowledged in the principles governing First Nations land claims. Yet in practice, wild land—as a deep reservoir for the variety and quality of life—has no genuine standing in Yukon politics and business. Is the Peel watershed, then, with its wealth of free-flowing wild rivers, fated to simply vanish under the advancing surge of commodity dealing? Should we be comforted that the Bonnet Plume is a Canadian Heritage River? Does this not mean that these waters and lands are a national treasure, to be revered and protected?

The work to protect the Peel watershed began with First Nations land claims negotiations in the 1980s, and continued through 2008, as the Peel Planning Commission prepared its land use plan. Local community people, a broad cross-section of the Yukon public, conservation organizations such as CPAWS and, more recently, thousands of Canadians from across the land have supported the protection effort. During this long journey, successive governments made sure they avoided the most pressing questions, such as: *How does our society value wilderness and wildness? What vision for this place will best serve the people and communities for generations to come? What kind of human uses might we foster, while preserving what is most important about these lands and waters?*

After a 2007 community gathering, people from Mayo and Fort McPherson made this declaration:

We are the stewards of this land of plenty and pristine beauty. To be stewards is to have a long-term vision for the future of the Watershed. We reaffirm ... that the Peel River Watershed be protected in perpetuity from all damage to harvesting, wildlife, and fish habitat, and the quantity and quality of water flow.

The Elders present had this to say:

We want our people to protect the Peel Watershed, which means the Watershed remains as it was created, with a high level of protection for the land and water



PASSING ON THE TRADITION—15-YEAR-OLD ALEX PEEPRE, WITH HIS FATHER, ON THE UPPER PEEL RIVER.

and our heritage, and all living things, where we can continue to practice our traditional way of life and care for the land, water, air, wildlife, and medicinal plants.

We ask Yukoners and all Canadians to heed this community vision.

In the spring of 2008, as this book went to press, there was hope that the future of the Peel watershed might not be a foregone conclusion, that land use planning would take into account more than just commodity speculation and tired assumptions about the best use of “economic resources.” In this watershed, home to one of the great boreal mountain landscapes of our nation, there is a compelling case for protecting the entire ecosystem. Whether we argue the case on conservation science, intrinsic value, economics, traditional ways of life or the human spirit, the evidence is clear: keeping the Peel watershed alive as an untrammelled wilderness—a vital sanctuary in these times of global change—presents an urgent task and opportunity for our generation.

Perhaps the art of canoeing teaches us something about conservation. My first paddle, beautifully fashioned out of a single piece of hardwood more than 50 years ago, allowed me to take those tentative early journeys into the nearby wild. Today, when my paddle dips into a Yukon river each spring, I’m captured by an invigorating but familiar sense of discovery and joy. This year’s canoe trips will have their daunting obstacles, their anxious and impossible moments. But if we stay true to the chosen route, never let up on the steady stroke over the big crossings, and pay attention to the pull of the current, we will reach the destination.

The conservation story behind the Three Rivers is told in Three Rivers: the Yukon’s Great Boreal Wilderness, eds. Juri Peepre and Sarah Locke, with contributions from Margaret Atwood, John Ralston Saul, Richard Nelson, Brian Brett and many others.

OPPOSITE: SPECTACULAR TORS ON THE HART RIVER ARE CHARACTERISTIC OF UNGLACIATED REGIONS SUCH AS THE TAIGA RANGES. PHOTO: BOB JICKLING





THE WERNECKE MOUNTAINS FORM THE SOUTHERN RAMPARTS OF THE PEEL WATERSHED.

NATURAL HISTORY

A Land Complete

Wander the length and breadth of the Peel watershed, and you will encounter a wide range of northern landscapes, from barren slopes of rock and scree in the Ogilvie Mountains to lush groves of balsam poplars on islands in the Peel River. The boreal forest, or taiga, reaches its northern limit here, giving way to treeless Arctic tundra in the Richardson Mountains.

It's taken almost two billion years to create this vast watershed, a long time even by geological standards. The mountains rippling across the region began forming long before there was life on Earth. Fossils of early organisms can be found here, including trilobites and bony jawless fish known as ostracoderms, the first fish to swim the seas. Dinosaurs lived here during their heyday on the planet; much later came mammoths, mastodons and other megafauna that survived in the glacial refuge of Beringia.

After the Pleistocene glaciers retreated, the Peel watershed as we know it today began to emerge. At 77,000 square kilometres, equal in size to Scotland, it is a rare jewel. While the gravel-topped Dempster Highway traces its western edge, and the small community of Fort McPherson is found in its eastern reaches, most of the watershed is gloriously free of industrial development—a land complete, where the hand of evolution can clearly be seen.



JURI PEEPRE



JURI PEEPRE

IN THE LATE 1800S, ANDREW FLETT BONNETPLUME SEARCHED FOR GOLD IN THE BONNET PLUME COUNTRY.

The Enigmatic Bonnetplume

Somewhere in the Ogilvie Mountains, in an unmarked grave, lie the remains of Andrew Flett Bonnetplume, the Gwich'in man after whom the Bonnet Plume River is named. While never a chief, he is the only aboriginal person in Canada whose name graces a Canadian Heritage River. But trying to pin down how that came to be, and how a Gwich'in man gained the French-sounding name of Bonnetplume—can be a bit like grabbing at a leaf floating on fast water—it remains just out of reach.

Bonnetplume shows up regularly in the historical record, but the man remains an enigma. He had many different names—Scottish, French and Gwich'in. And even among his own people, noted for their epic journeys through challenging country, he was known as a wanderer. But there is one theme that crops up again and again with this man—if people are talking about gold in the Peel river country, Bonnetplume seems to be somewhere in the picture.

But first the names: In Gwich'in genealogy documents, Bonnet Plume's mother is known as *Ch'ihwhiingah* or *Chigweenjaa*, meaning "throwing things out of the house" or "sweeping or throwing dust away." She worked as a cleaning woman at several different Hudson Bay posts in the Mackenzie District, and her children

possibly had different fathers.

In that era, when aboriginal children were baptized they were often given the names of local HBC employees, so the first part of Bonnetplume's name can be traced to Andrew Flett, an Orkney man who served at Fort McPherson from 1863 to 1875. In HBC account books from Flett's time at the post, the Gwich'in man is referred to as Bonnet de Plume, and the source of that name remains elusive.

Jane Charlie, one of Bonnetplume's granddaughters, says she has often wondered about her French name. She was told that Bonnetplume had been adopted by a French couple working for the Hudson's Bay Company, but if a Frenchman named Bonnetplume worked for the HBC, the reference is buried deep in their well-kept records.

Reverend McDonald, the Anglican missionary who served in Fort McPherson for decades, refers often to Bonnetplume in his journals. A student of the Gwich'in language, McDonald regularly used Gwich'in names when referring to individual Tell'it Gwich'in, but with Bonnetplume, he never seems quite sure what to call him from one year to the next. In diary entries from the 1860s he refers to him as Bonne Plume; Andrew Flett, alias Bonneplume; Andrew Flett, alias



JURI PEEPRE

LOOKING NORTH DOWN THE BLACKSTONE VALLEY FROM ONE OF THE MANY ACCESSIBLE RIDGES.

Blackstone River

Winding its way through the barren limestone ridges of the Ogilvie Mountains, the Blackstone River is a paddler's delight, featuring clear, swift waters and splendid alpine hiking from the river's edge. Rising in the Blackstone Uplands, a Subarctic plateau rich with human history, the river flows within the overlapping traditional territories of four First Nations: the Tr'ondek Hwech'in, Tetl'it Gwich'in, Vuntut Gwitchin and Nacho Nyak Dun. The Gwich'in name for the Blackstone River is *Tth'oh zraii njik*, which translates as "boulder-black-river."

Although a fast current, sweepers and many tight corners will keep even the best paddlers alert, the Blackstone has only moderate rapids and is suitable for intermediate paddlers. It's also the only Peel tributary where you don't have to fly in or out—that is, if you don't mind lining your canoe for a couple of days from the mouth of the Blackstone up the Ogilvie River and back to the Dempster Highway.

Distance and Travel Time

From the Dempster Highway put-in, the Blackstone River flows for about 136 km to its confluence with the Ogilvie River, where these two tributaries form the Peel River. From there, the Dempster Highway is 50 km upstream along the Ogilvie; Canyon Creek on the Peel River is 72 km downstream. To reach Fort McPherson, paddle another 404 km, or



JURI PEEPRE

THIS CASTELLATED RIDGE IN THE MIDDLE SECTION OF THE BLACKSTONE RIVER IS TYPICAL OF MOUNTAINS IN BERINGIA.

Taiga Ranges

Take your time paddling and hiking in the Taiga Ranges. With its many long castellated ridges and high cliffs, it's a mountain paradise. From the first prominent ridge on river right after the forested valley, you can look back on the wetlands and taiga lowlands (UTM 375317E, 7245607N). The mountains descend to river's edge throughout this section, offering plentiful hiking routes.

A few spots merit a special note. After the second broad forested valley connecting through to the Hart River, a long and aesthetic ridge capped with rows of "dinosaur teeth" provides grand vistas to the Hart valley. Plan on a two-hour return trip to the first high point (UTM 389611E, 7254742N). Hiking is first-rate everywhere in the Mount Buno vicinity, on both sides of the river. Some of the mountains offer circle routes where you can climb one ridge and return to camp on another. Ascending and descending the limestone cobble mountains is best on ridge crests, unless your knees are covered by extended warranty.

Listen and watch for peregrine falcons wherever high banks or cliffs drop to the river. These striking birds of prey nest along the Blackstone, feeding on small or medium-sized birds such as lesser yellowlegs. To avoid disturbing the birds, watch from a distance on the opposite river bank, and keep your visit brief.

Most of the Blackstone's more demanding Class II rapids are along this section of river, especially the last 30 km before the plateau. Expect waves and turbulence at sharp corners and cliffs, several boulder gardens, and small rapids or weird currents formed by log jams jutting into the main current. The difficulty of these rapids depends on water level, with low to moderate water being the easiest.



Wild Rivers of the Yukon's Peel Watershed brings to life one of Canada's most exquisite and pristine mountain landscapes. Flowing out of mountains at the far end of the North American cordillera, the crystalline waters of these rivers descend through the most northerly reaches of the boreal forest.

This book reveals different facets of the Peel watershed, from its ancient geological origins to the mosaic of landscapes found there today. While few traces of its human heritage can be seen now, the Peel watershed brims with interesting characters framing the human history of the region.

"The beauty is just so incredible, you can't put it into words."

– Jimmy Johnny, Nacho Nyak Dun elder, speaking at the Elders' Gathering on the banks of the Peel River, 2003

"The area is beautiful and wild and unblighted by the disastrous footprint of our presence. To lose it to any form of development would be to give up on yet another pocket of our natural world, a tragedy of such magnitude that, cumulatively, it qualifies as terminal—that is, it will kill us." – Yann Martel, author of *Life of Pi*, winner of the 2002 Booker Prize for fiction, who travelled down the Hart River.

"A dozen of us canoed the Wind River, paddling its turquoise water above a treasure of coloured rocks, encountering wolf pups and caribou, unpredictable mountain weather, more blueberries than we could ever eat, and the tracks of grizzlies that occasionally circled our camps."

– Brian Brett, poet, novelist and journalist, a participant in the 2003 Three Rivers Journey

