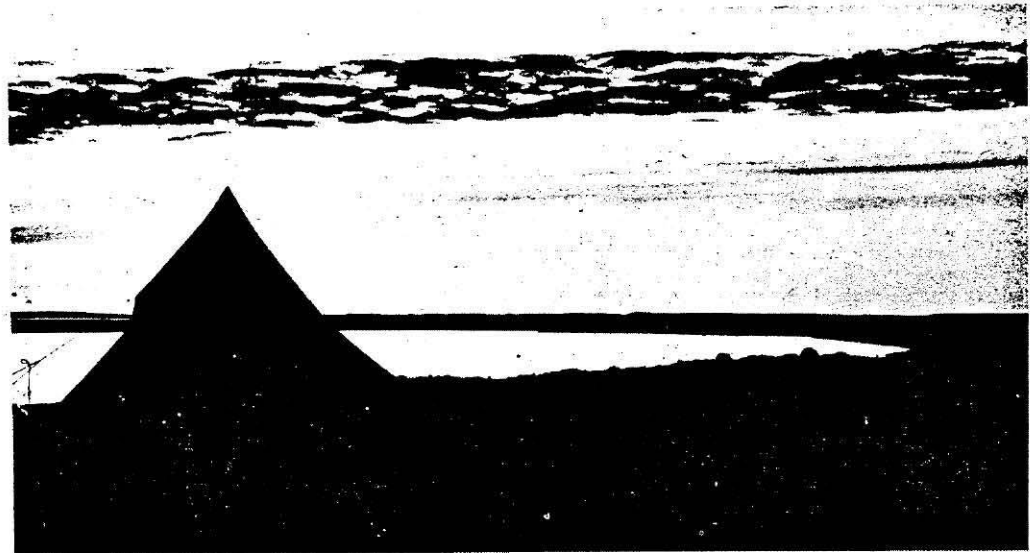


back river

Ken Ellison



The Back River is located in the north central region of the Northwest Territories flowing approximately 1100 km from Artillery Lake to Chantry Inlet on the Arctic Ocean. The first white man to travel this river was Captain George Back in 1834, who had been commissioned by the English government to search for Capt. Ross who was presumed lost while looking for the Franklin expedition. The expedition was perhaps one of the most successful of its time. Unlike other journeys at that time, Back's trip was without major incident despite a late break-up and bad weather. It was completed in an incredible three months, a round trip of some 2200 km.



Since Back first travelled the river, very few parties have travelled its entire length. The extreme remoteness and isolation is perhaps the most discouraging aspect of travel along the river. The weather unlike that in some parts of the Territories is usually quite stable, with temperatures of 15-20° C being quite common during June, July and August. Bad weather, particularly high winds can move in quite quickly as demonstrated by a July snowstorm we encountered; however this is the exception rather than the rule.

During the summer of 1980 I was afforded the luxury of traveling extensively around the Beechey Lake area on the Back River while working for the Geological Survey of Canada. Our small mobile camp, of four people and three tents, enabled us to travel from Beechey Lake north to the Ellice and Western Rivers approximately 80 km south of Bathurst Inlet on the Arctic coast.

Through my travels the abundance of wildlife, particularly muskox, caribou and wolf, was quite startling. Herds of 500 caribou were common, particularly during the month of August. The muskox concentration was also quite large; several herds of up to 15-20 muskox were spotted. Several times an arctic wolf stumbled through our camp, pausing only to have a look at the strangers within its territory.

The general character of the land is typical of the arctic tundra, rolling hills covered with moss and lichen. In most cases the rivers have cut wide deep valleys which often intersect ancient glacial remnants such as eskers and moraines. This is particularly evident at the south end of Beechey Lake and near the Baille River, where there is an abundance of sand dunes and eskers. South of Beechey Lake towards Casey Lake the land is much more rugged. Granite outcrops and endless hills of felsenmier (frost heaved boulders) gives the area a moon-like appearance. This prompted Capt. Back to describe the area as looking like the slopes of Mt. Vesuvius. Travel in this area is very difficult and arduous. In several areas there are large, deep gorges, up to sixty m deep. These features, which seem so out of place in an area of gently rolling hills, were formed from glacial meltwaters which tore through the thin, fragile topsoil and easily fractured slate bedrock.

Eagles commonly nest on the cliffs. It usually takes little time when hiking through the gorge to realize who is the intruder, particularly after you are dive-bombed by an irate mother.

North of Beechey Lake the area becomes more tundra like with kilometres of relatively flat, undulating land dotted with literally thousands of lakes. After a while most small lakes begin to appear the same, and since very few prominent landmarks exist, navigation

