

# moods on the nahanni

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The first part of the account of our two-person expedition across the Continental Divide, which began on 3 April 1985, 228 km northeast of the settlement of Ross River in the Yukon Territory, was presented in the winter 1985 issue of *Nastawgan*. That part of our journey concluded on 3 June, 15 km downstream of the Moose Ponds, with a final haul down to the ice-lined banks of the South Nahanni River. The second part, described below, would take us on a magnificent and challenging 600 km descent of the South Nahanni and Laird Rivers to Fort Simpson, N.W.T., which we would reach on 10 August.

(Editor's note: I accidentally left two important words out of the second but last sentence of part 1, which should read: "We looked forward to a leisurely paddle down the lower stretch of the South Nahanni River." Sorry, D and D.)



The Nahanni area held visions for us of some of the most spectacular and varied country in Canada. Patiently we watched the moment-to-moment transformation of the South Nahanni. The 31st of May marked ten consecutive days of magnificent weather with +16°C temperatures, cloudless skies, and warm breezes hastening deterioration of the snow-pack. Spoiled by the warmth of the sun, we were to be disheartened by 23 consecutive days of rain in June and 19 days of rain in July. An above-average snowfall, a quick spring thaw aided by 15 days of intense heat, and the endless spring rain put the Nahanni into a rage that would greatly challenge our limitations of patience, common sense, and endurance.

In the past, the Nahanni had been recorded to rise three metres overnight. This caused us concern as our first high and dry camp began to flow with the onset of rain and snow. From camp the entire river resembled a churning cauldron of one- to two- metre curling waves with appropriately spaced boulders effectively eliminating navigable routes. The river drowned out all sound and we had to shout to make ourselves heard on shore.

We were accustomed to daily sightings of caribou near camp. Often they raised their heads adorned with velvet-covered antlers, sensing some message on the wind. Their scarred and weather-beaten coats conjured up images of a hard winter.

We scouted downriver from Camp 21 thrashing through two-metre-high willow and birch thickets. Expectations played an important role. We had anticipated a great deal of what confronted us but the constant rain and low temperatures not only stressed us but increased the difficulty of paddling. The most frustrating problem we would encounter was the continual search for non-existent eddies. With the current of this mighty river stretching from shore to shore we began to look for an eddy in the form of a good strong limb overhanging the bank.

Heavy upon us was the pressure of time to get down this river and meet our 1 July food drop. We had 23 days to cover 100 km to Island Lakes; our progress was limited to two to three kilometres per day at times. It was our decision to travel alone without means of contact, yet at times we desired the security of additional support and rescue crews should the need arise. We had faith in our capabilities and resourcefulness to handle any survival situation; caution and respect were foremost in our minds.

While watching new caribou calves spindly-legged and awkward never straying far from their mothers, we sensed the change and noted the ensuing activity as two wolves plodded along savoring the scent of their prey. Soon all was over the ridge leaving us wondering.

Imagined promises of a warm summer came with the onset of spring as the south-facing slopes greened up beautifully. Brilliant flowers and the leafing-out of willow, birch, and aspen added a warmth to the cool, grey days. As much as all living things depend on the river, so too was it our lifeline, our link to the outside world. The reality was that we had to safely navigate this rock-strewn torrent with a heavily loaded boat.

Our third portage, a five-hour slog to Camp 23, passed a section of river we christened the Roller Coaster, where this mad current constricted to a 15 m channel - big holes, big waves, and big rocks. Our choices were few. We were fatigued; our bodies ached from the difficult terrain and heavy loads. Trails were nonexistent as we plodded and thrashed through unyielding willows, constantly wet and cold until one of our many tea breaks.

The 12th of June was a typical day on the upper Nahanni. We were able to run a short set of rapids after scouting with the usual battle through the bush. We rode out the large water after setting over into position, but had difficulty landing. Waist-deep in the icy water we waded around the next bend. Numb by the 5°C water it was time for a tea break. We then ran a short section while hugging the left shore and backferried to the inside, again having difficulty landing in the swift current. We encountered whitewater around the next three bends. Was it runnable? The water was too large, too risky, so we lined down another two sets followed by a tea break.

We sat on the bank warming ourselves by the fire. We had scouted carefully, and were on the right bank one kilometre upstream of a 90° left-hand bend with a 30 m sheer rock cliff on the outside. We planned to backferry across the river picking our way through rocks to a large and rare eddy on the left shore. Seven metres from shore, just downstream of us, was a rock, 2.5 m across, the water at times breaking over its surface. We had plenty of room and were planning on being downstream of it when we started our backferry. From the small eddy we attempted to move into the current, backpaddling and sideslipping to control the entry angle, but remained suspended in time on the shear zone. Water boiled by us on the left. We wanted in that current. We shouted to each other over the roar: "Watch the angle, not too sharp, keep paddling, we are almost over, not too much pry, here we go, here we go, David the angle is too sharp, the rock, the rock. . . ." Like a mighty fist the current grabbed the stern and instantly we were broadside, then wrapped around the rock. All I could hear was the breaking boat, and then my gasping for air. The upstream gunwale had dipped as we piled up onto the rock. I went under the boat, grabbed the bow line and was bobbing in the curling wave downstream of the canoe. I could see David, hear him shouting at me, and saw the gunwales like bayonets splintered and spear-like amidships. Paddle in one hand, line in the other I was unable to reach shore. David clambered from the rock to the floating gearbags, then down the line to me and we eventually found slippery rocks under our feet and worked our way to shore. We tied the bow line to the largest spruce we could find.

