

coppermine river, 1986

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The Coppermine River combines several features that make it appealing to the adventurous canoeist: historical intrigue, exciting whitewater, and great scenic beauty. The first European to explore this river was Samuel Hearne, who followed its final stretches to the polar sea in 1771. At a set of rapids near the ocean he was witness to the brutal slaughter of a party of Inuit by the Indians who accompanied him as guides. He named the site "Bloody Fall" (see map) and described the horrifying spectacle in his journal. Fifty years later (1821), John Franklin surveyed the Coppermine from Obstruction Rapids, at the southern end of Point Lake, to the Arctic Ocean. He then charted the coastline east to Bathurst Inlet. On the return journey overland, many of his men died of cold and hunger. Others who travelled on the Coppermine in later years include John Richardson (1827), John Rae (1851), David Hanbury (1902), and George Douglas (1911 - 1912). Recreational canoe-tripping probably started in 1966 with a trip led by Eric Morse.

It was with a sense of this history that we set out on a two-week trip on the Coppermine River from Rocknest Lake to the Arctic Ocean, 12-25 July 1986. Our party consisted of eight: Pat Bowles and Geoff Hodgins who led the trip for Wanapitei Wilderness Centre, Glenn Brown, Beth Gervais, Paul Hubber, Larry Turner, and ourselves.



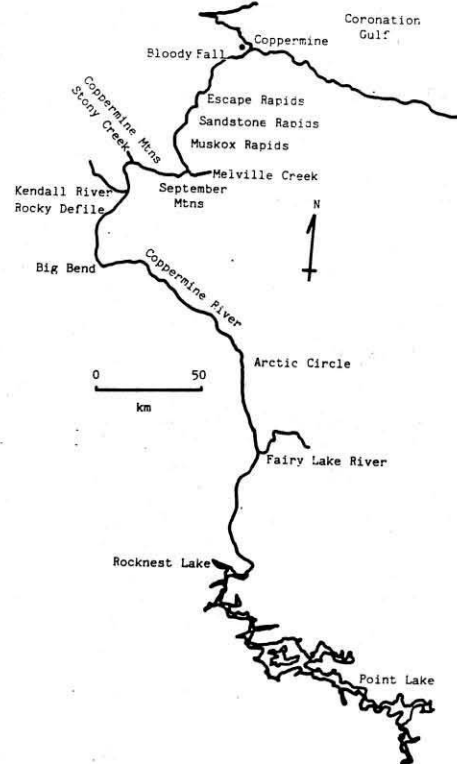
The crew at Rocknest Lake.

We flew from Yellowknife in a Twin Otter and a Cessna 180 for two hours over the magnificent Barren Lands before touching down at Rocknest Lake. The pilots taxied up to a smooth sand beach to unload the gear. We were expecting a momentary twinge of panic when the planes took off but, instead, we felt relief that the canoeing could finally begin, after weeks of anticipation. We made camp and spent the afternoon organizing our gear and fixing spray covers to the canoes.

The next morning, a following wind carried us past one of Franklin's campsites and we tried to imagine the conditions under which his party travelled, i.e., no mosquito netting or waterproof packs and inadequate rain gear. Beyond this was the huge rock plateau for which Rocknest Lake was named. Soon the channel narrowed and we came to a substantial RII, a couple of hundred metres long. It had very large standing waves which we backferried around with empty canoes. Carrying the packs over the portage, we had our first encounter with really thick clouds of mosquitoes.

After running some swifts, we came to a long, violent set of rapids. We carried our gear to the base of this set and made camp. In the morning we portaged the canoes around the most difficult section and ran the rest. At this set, Glenn scooped a handful of water from a pool between the rocks and realized after he had drunk it that there was a decaying caribou carcass in the bottom of the pool.

Thin black spruce trees and dwarf willow lined the river banks. As we travelled north, the black spruce grew more spindly and were spaced further apart. In spite of this, we had no difficulty finding firewood until the last two days of the trip. The colorful wildflowers more than compensated for the diminishing forest. Altogether, we counted sixteen species and there were more we couldn't



identify. One of the most beautiful was dwarfed fireweed, or broadleaved willow herb. It grew in clumps at many of our campsites. Blue lupine was also abundant and was blooming at its peak. In some open areas, we saw moss campion, with its tiny purple star-shaped flowers, spreading like a carpet over the rocks.

We passed through numerous swifts and wide, shallow rapids that were not difficult technically, but demanded concentration for long periods of time. That night we camped in the midst of a cluster of frost polygons and had our first supper of grayling.

For us, the most enjoyable rapids were those just above the confluence of the Fairy Lake River and the Coppermine. There were two sets of rapids, each several kilometres long, and many swifts. As the rapids progressed, the boulders kept getting closer and closer, forming an increasingly challenging slalom course. There is a large glacier at the Fairy Lake River mouth and we stopped here, and elatedly toasted each other with Drambuie on ice, compliments of Larry.

We encountered no rapids for the next three days, but were at times daunted by headwinds. The first day we crossed the Arctic Circle and celebrated with party whistles brought by Pat and Geoff. Larry announced us all with river water and accepted us into the fellowship of Arctic Adventurers.



Larry anointing Paul at the Arctic Circle.