

The weather up to this point had been for the most part sunny and hot, and we were becoming very sunburnt. That night it rained and we woke to an air temperature of 7°C. In the afternoon we passed a broken-down cabin where previous trippers had carved or written their names. By 8:00 p.m. the air temperature had fallen to 4°C.



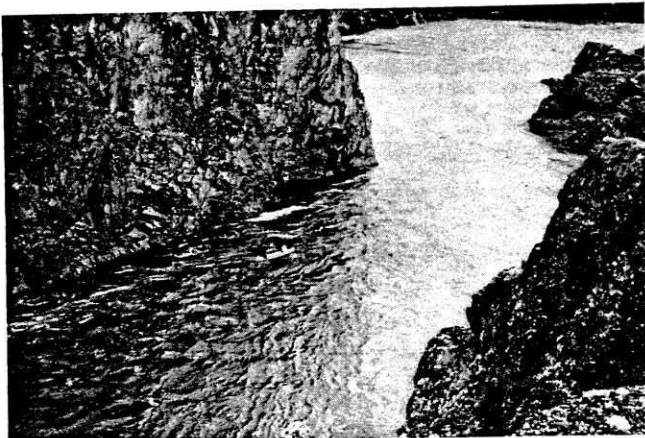
Bluffs near the Arctic Circle.

Wildlife was plentiful in this section of the river. Among the species we saw were red-breasted mergansers, common and white-winged scoters, lesser yellowlegs, Bonaparte's gulls, willow ptarmigan, whistling swans, bald and golden eagles, arctic ground squirrels or 'sik-siks,' moose, and the ever-present arctic terns.

The current picks up quickly at Big Bend and there are swifts and short rapids most of the way to the gorge called Rocky Defile. the power of the river becomes apparent; everywhere there are surges of current and small boils. We saw our first caribou after the second set of rapids below Big Bend and some of the group were able to get within about 20 m of it.

The approach to Rocky Defile is very ominous: large green waves disappear between two immense shoulders of reddish rock. The rapids are described graphically by Franklin as follows:

"The river here descends for three quarters of a mile, in a deep, but narrow and crooked, channel, which it has cut through the foot of a hill of five hundred or six hundred feet high. It is confined between perpendicular cliffs resembling stone walls, varying in height from eighty to one hundred and fifty feet, on which lies a mass of fine sand. The body of the river, pent within this narrow chasm, dashed furiously round the projecting rocky columns, and discharged itself at the northern extremity in a sheet of foam. The canoes, after discharging part of their cargoes, ran through this defile without sustaining any injury."



Rocky Defile.

Some of our party ran these rapids without gear after scouting carefully from above. We chose to portage along the top of the gorge, passing a cairn erected in memory of two canoeists who drowned there in 1972. Gyrfalcons were nesting in the cliffs and we could just make out a downy chick huddled in the nest. Two more scrawny caribou were resting on a rocky island just below the canyon and were so well camouflaged that we didn't notice them until after we had eaten supper.

We paddled through swifts and shallow gravel rapids to the junction of the Kendall River and the Coppermine, a photograph of which appears in George Douglas' book, Lands Forlorn. Opposite to where Douglas camped to repair his canoe after descending the Kendall River, we came upon a camp of fishing guides with whom we had coffee and a chat. Char fishing is good here and though we didn't catch any, the guides offered us two 3½ - 4 kg char to have for lunch. These char would likely be permanent freshwater dwellers as sea-run char don't generally ascend this far upstream.

As we were finishing lunch, a caribou swam across the river towards the bank opposite us, and stopped on a shoal three-quarters of the way across. In a few minutes we realized why, for there was a huge, white, shaggy tundra wolf following it along the bank at a distance of about 100 m. The wolf kept stopping and regarding us warily and eventually retreated back to the hills. When we paddled away, the caribou was still standing on the shoal, belly-deep in ice-cold water.

That night we camped near Stony Creek between the Coppermine and September Mountains: barren, low, rolling mountains, mostly green but with terraces of purplish-brown rock. There were patches of snow in the higher depressions.

The following day was cold and drizzly. We were fighting the depression and irritation that fatigue and physical discomfort bring. Then, below Melville Creek, we came upon another fishing camp where we met a white guide and an Inuit guide with his family. We warmed up in their cookhouse and had a very friendly chat with them. They had just seen three large grizzlies moving north along the river.

Below this camp the river is very wide, perhaps ½ km across. We camped a short way above Muskox Rapids. The temperature at 8:30 the next morning was 0°C. More swifts and unmarked rapids were encountered before arriving at Muskox Rapids. This set has two sections, though it is difficult to determine where the unnamed rapids end and the named rapids begin. We ran the first section and stopped on the left bank to examine the next one. This section is about 150 m long and would be rated as an RIII in southern Ontario. It is fairly straightforward until near the end where there are some very large diagonally curling waves. The authors opted for the portage trail, while some others ran the set without mishap. The combination of cold air and water temperatures and swiftly-moving water below the set made the run unappealing from our point of view.

The Coppermine River from Muskox Rapids to about 10 km past Escape Rapids is almost continuous grade II and III whitewater with dramatic sandstone cliffs on either side, and flat, treeless terrain above. Very large standing waves pile up on the outside where the river makes a turn.

Sandstone Rapids begins about six kilometres below Muskox Rapids. Several hundred metres above the "basalt dyke" of Sandstone Rapids (shown in Douglas' Lands Forlorn), we misjudged the power of the current and got swept into some huge standing waves on the outside of the canyon. Though we didn't dump we had a very bad scare. We stopped on the left-hand shore, bailed out, and collected ourselves before running the chute on the right hand side of the dyke. We carried around another difficult section of Sandstone Rapids and ran the rest, scouting from the water.

The next named set is called Escape Rapids, presumably because a very strong ferry is required to escape the large standing waves and souse holes in the main part of the channel. The entire group ran this set.

Finally, we arrived at the infamous Bloody Fall. We portaged on the left, over a hill covered with wildflowers and camped with some trepidation at the site where we believed the Inuit had been murdered 215 years before. These rapids are very dangerous and almost never run. Local legend has it that an Inuit man ran it once and was dared to run it again. The second time he didn't survive. In the autumn, arctic char move up the Coppermine to Bloody Fall to spawn in enough numbers that they can be speared, but we were not successful in catching any.



Looking downstream at Bloody Fall.