

THE BONNET PLUME RIVER

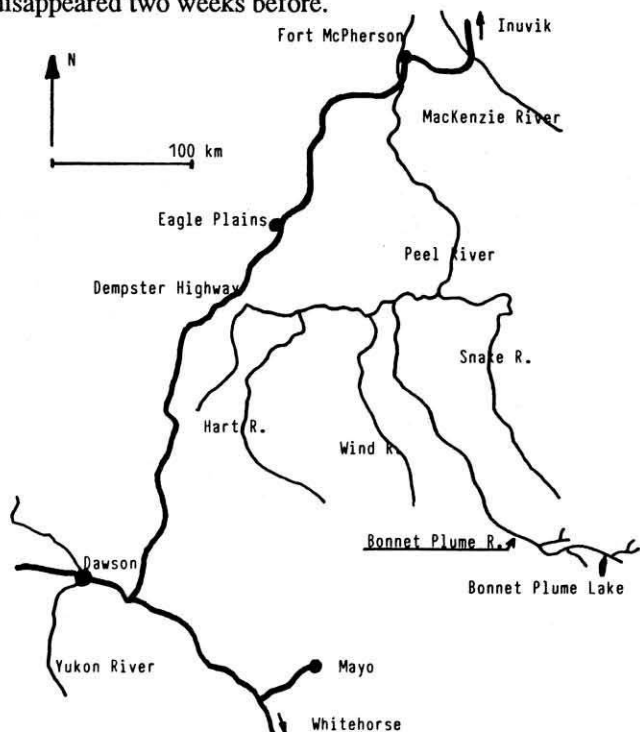
Ross Sutherland

In July, 1989, four friends — Nancy Bayly, Rudy Koehler, Kathy Moffat, and Ross Sutherland — canoed down the Bonnet Plume River from Bonnet Plume Lake in the Yukon to Fort McPherson in the Northwest Territories.

In planning our summer in the Yukon, we wanted to include a long river trip. It had to be primarily in the wilderness, mostly in the mountains (to cut down on the bugs), downstream (we were on vacation), beautiful, and exciting. More and more, our discussions focussed on the Bonnet Plume.

Our first problem was obtaining good detailed information on the river. We reviewed the video shown at the WCA symposium and read a trip report from Wanapitei. Both indicated big waves and stormy weather. We upgraded our rain gear. We discovered that Arctic Edge, a Yukon expedition company, had stopped taking trips down the Bonnet Plume because the river ate canoes. Several short descriptions mentioned two to six portages, three or four canyons, 150 km of whitewater, but gave no details. Nonetheless, most people seemed to have made it down, and all thought it was a great river.

After many phone calls, we arranged with a pilot from Old Crow, The Yukon, who agreed to meet us in Fort McPherson and fly us into Bonnet Plume Lake. This would have allowed us to paddle the 570 km back to both our cars, removing the need for a long, cramped shuttle. Unfortunately, when we arrived in Fort McPherson we could not find our pilot. Instead, we found rumors that he drank too much, was notoriously unreliable (but a good pilot), and that he had disappeared two weeks before.



Our attempts to find a pilot in Inuvik, the only other community in the area with pilots, were unsuccessful, so we started the long drive back to Mayo, 407 km north of Whitehorse and the most common fly-in point for the Bonnet Plume trip. As luck would have it, we were able to arrange a flight in from Mayo three days later.

The car shuttle from Fort McPherson to Mayo was a 12-hour trip one way. By the end of our three trips back and forth on the Dempster Highway, we had broken two windshields, punctured a gas tank, and had one flat tire. The Dempster is also the main thoroughfare for transport trucks into the far Northwest Territories. These trucks drove at the maximum possible speed on a road that was often only wide enough for two cars, showed no inclination to stop, and kicked up a blinding dust storm. When we saw one coming we would pull over as far as possible, stop, and hope for the best.

Except for this excitement, the Dempster was a beautiful drive. Most of it is above tree line passing through the rugged Tombstone Range and then following the top of a ridge that separates the Peel River Valley from the North Slope to the Arctic Ocean, with simultaneous views in each direction.

We flew in from Mayo on 4 July, with Areokon Air. It was a beautiful day — clear and calm. The flight went up the Stewart River Valley, topped a 1,950-m high mountain, and dropped quickly down onto Bonnet Plume Lake. Our original plan had been to fly 15 km further upstream into a small lake and spend four days hiking up to the headwater glaciers. Our pilot had flown into this lake once before, at higher water, and almost killed himself and his passengers. With our full agreement he refused to try again. This left us without enough time to try the longer hike, but the views we had of the headwater valley were tantalizing.

We spent our first two nights camped on Bonnet Plume Lake. The water was crystal clear and schools of pan-sized trout swam within sight of the shore. We caught our breakfast, lunch, and supper out in deeper water. The hiking opportunities were endless. After a short distance of bushwhacking we were onto alpine slopes. On top of the north slope we found a nice ridge to hike along. The only distraction on the lake was an outfitting operation preparing for another hunting season. Other wildlife we saw included a moose and an arctic wolf.

By day three, a daily weather pattern began to emerge that stayed with us until we left the mountains. We would wake up to a bright, clear sky. By the time we were on the water, usually around noon, a few small clouds would appear which would steadily grow bigger through the afternoon. By late afternoon the clouds were threatening and on three or four occasions produced substantial storms. These would clear leaving lovely evenings and nights — a bit of a misnomer since the midnight sun did not give us a proper sunset until the third week of the trip.