



Day 15 was our last day in the mountains. The river had become quite clear, perhaps because all the braiding had filtered out the silt from the glaciers and the canyons. This was good timing because that night was our first without a clear water stream. The mountains had receded from the river and the incoming streams were increasingly silty.

We camped on an island. In the brush behind our tents there was a reasonably fresh caribou kill. Blood was still on the bones, and there was plenty of hair, but no flesh. Wolf tracks in the area suggested that they might have been the predators. The island was also covered in sweet, juicy strawberries.

Next day the heat drove us into the water for an early morning swim. The river fanned out in an increasingly complex braid to match its new surroundings — a seemingly endless expanse of flat taiga forest. That evening on the flats was surprisingly bug-free. On the northern horizon we watched the smoke from another forest fire rise in a mushroom cloud over the Bonnet Plume downstream from us.

Our first morning out of the mountains we experienced our first real encounter with the northern bugs. They had us cowering in our tents as we tried to see through them to figure out where our bug jackets were packed. We had a fast breakfast and, still in full protective gear, made it onto the water in record time. This established a pattern that would last until the end of the trip. Our mornings became a battle against the mosquitoes. We were often forced to stay in full bug regalia for hours after we were on the water. Sometime through the afternoon they would clear and if we did not venture into the grass or woods we spent virtually bug-free evenings.

The last day on the Bonnet Plume we travelled unbelievably quickly, covering 60-70 km in 5 1/2 hours. This included paddling through a burnt-out forest that

was still smoldering, and getting lost in the braids. At one point we went two hours without both canoes knowing where each other was. On the evening of day 17 we camped within site of the cliffs of the Peel River, approximately half-way to Fort McPherson, our take-out point.

The 250 km on the Peel River were heralded by everyone as the work part of the trip. It was about 30 hours of paddling which some energetic sorts try to complete in three long days. A change of pace to that speed would have sent our systems into shock so we paddled it in a leisurely but steady five days.

As we started down the Peel River, a bull moose with a full rack stood at the mouth of the Bonnet Plume and watched us go. From here to the Snake River, the Peel passes through high-walled rock canyons. After the Snake River the cliffs become sandy and the river water goes from reasonably clear to murky, to dense, to unbelievably dirty. The current slowly decreases until the last 80-90 km are a virtual lake. Camping sites became increasingly difficult to find. The Peel did have its own beauty, wonderful canyons, eagles, falcons, a lone musk-ox, great sunsets, and beautiful views; but it was not the Bonnet Plume.

We arrived at the Dempster Highway ferry crossing, 10 km from Fort McPherson, 22 days after we had been dropped at Bonnet Plume Lake. A local resident drove us from the ferry crossing to our car. The people we had left the car with had covered it with a tarp to protect it from weather and vandals. The car started without problems and we headed back to Mayo to complete our marathon shuttle. From the high ridges of the Dempster Highway we could just make out the hazy outline of the Bonnet Plume mountain range. It was our farewell to a remarkable wilderness trip.

