

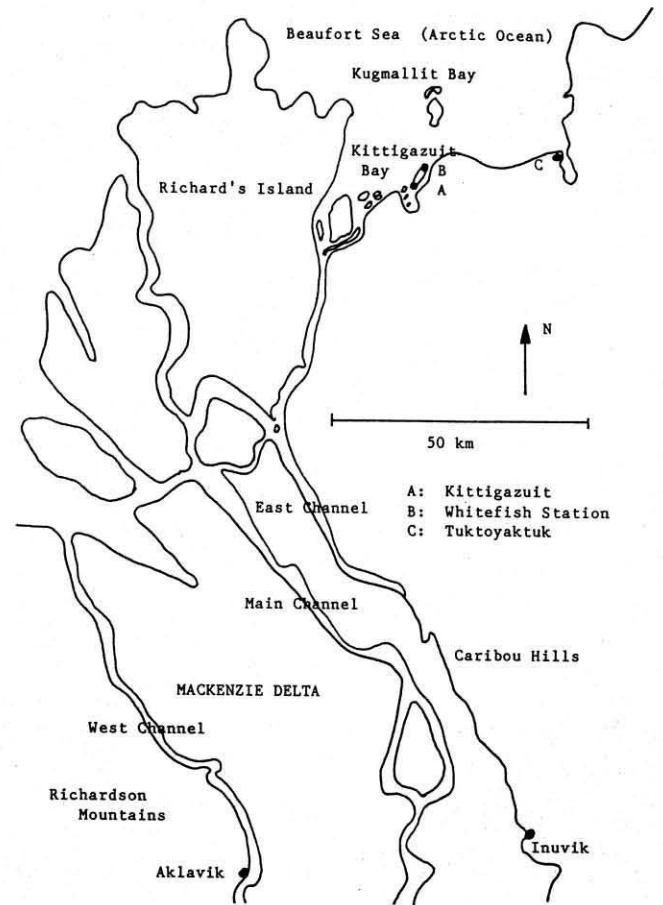
I eventually put in on 12 July and began paddling down the twisting East Channel of the broad Mackenzie. The narrow, spruce-lined channel had a peacefulness only occasionally punctuated by the drone of the motor of an approaching small boat. The bright sun and gentle breeze contributed to the idyllic atmosphere.

About lunch time I decided to head for a nice sand-covered stretch of shore for a break. I threw both legs over the side of the cockpit and jumped to my feet. But my feet just kept going down into the thick muck and didn't stop until I was thigh deep in mud. Guess it wasn't sand after all. Only by hanging onto the kayak and thrusting my paddle into the mud was I able to extricate myself. Since both shores of the channel were either covered with dense willows or with patches of soft mud, I realized this was to be a day without shore leave.

By evening I was beginning to worry a bit about finding a spot to camp when I saw a cut in one bank that led to a beautiful little bay which had one small beach with just enough space for a tent. I found I could get ashore by paddling into a marshy area and then gingerly walking across the plant roots. I spent half an hour making a driftwood boardwalk from the beach to my boat so that I could easily unload. Only afterwards did I notice the fresh grizzly tracks right across my proposed tent site. I decided to leave this little bit of paradise to the bear and paddled off, glad to know that the sun wouldn't set before I found a campsite (unless of course I couldn't find a site within the next two weeks).

A few kilometres downstream I reached the beginnings of the Caribou Hills which form the eastern border of a portion of the Delta. I found a boulder-covered shore whose solidity and lack of bear tracks greatly outweighed its roughness and tilt. But after dinner I noticed three bears swimming across the river towards my camp. I was reassured by recalling the advice I'd received on bears in Inuvik. One guy had asked, "Aren't you afraid of bears, travelling alone by yourself?" "No," I replied, "should I be?" "No", he answered, "it's just that most southerners are." Then he went on to explain that since the bears are hunted up here, they are afraid of humans and thus are actually less of a problem than the bears in parks and protected areas down south. That thought was reassuring as I watched the bears approach with my camera in one hand and flares in the other. But even more reassuring was seeing the three bears transform miraculously as they emerged from the water into three wolves.

In the middle of the night I heard the same three wolves near my boat and pack. I unzipped my tent and stuck my head out to see what they were up to. I yelled at them to leave my stuff alone which prompted one of them to mark my pack and sent another one running towards me. He jumped right into my tent and only then did he miraculously transform from a wolf into an unusually friendly sled-dog. Further down the river I found out that while everyone else keeps their sled-



dogs staked out in the summer, the one guy whose fishcamp I had been near lets his dogs run free.

The next day I paddled along the Caribou Hills, which form the eastern boundary of the Delta. On my right were the sandy, esker-like, 150-metre-high hills. On my left was over 60 kilometres of flat, featureless delta. The locals warned me to be very careful with navigation in the Delta; you can easily get lost there. But since my route took me along the Caribou Hills much of the way, navigation was easy.

I didn't get tired of looking at the Caribou Hills, as they would change appearance as the light changed; and with 24 hours of daylight, there was a lot of light to change. On still days the hills were perfectly reflected in the river.

On the second day I approached one of the landmarks I had read about: the abandoned settlement of Reindeer Station, which had been established for the Inuvialuit when the government decided to turn them into reindeer herders. A herd of reindeer was driven from Alaska to this spot, a feat which took over two years and resulted in the deaths of most of the initial reindeer. The herd which arrived was predominantly made up of animals who had been born on the trek. After a brief period, the experiment failed and the remaining herd was sold off.