

Nowadays Reindeer Station is a group of cabins and tumble-down houses. I decided to stop and take a look around, but was daunted by the stretch of mud between the water and the solid shore. With a little experimentation I found I could use the two pieces of my aluminum take-down paddle as "mudshoes": lay down a blade, step on it, throw the other blade forward, step on it, etc.

On reaching shore I scrambled up the bank to the group of cabins. Some of them had been fixed up as winter hunting camps. Leaning outside one cabin was a wooden komotik and its canvas tank used to hold the gear onto the sled. I examined it to see if it might suggest improvements to my winter camping sled. Other cabins had the standard northern roof repairs of blue or orange tarpaulins tacked to the roof using furring strips. One cabin sported an old snowmobile on its roof, while a meadow of wild rhubarb almost hid the shell of an old Bombardier bus. I wandered through a deserted two-story house and was especially interested in going into its cellar to see the exposed permafrost, but the cellar had filled with water.

The vegetation of the Caribou Hills is a combination of alpine and tundra species: alpine mountain avens and little willows less than 30 cm high. I was enjoying seeing some of the tundra vegetation I recalled from the Barren Grounds when my walk was cut short by the appearance of something else I recall from the Barrens: clouds of persistent little black flies crawling over my clothes, looking for a way inside. I thought my bug jacket would make me immune to their attack, but the constant bending over to photograph tiny plants exposed a narrow strip of my back, resulting in an almost solid red welt of fly bites. I was driven back out onto the river, where the breeze kept the black flies at bay. It was only when I reached into my pocket for my knife that I found a handful of black fly stowaways.

I was now paddling near the northern limit of the trees, but the black spruce were still growing profusely in sheltered hollows. It's not the latitude or the cold that gets the trees, it's the wind.

I was enjoying the scenery and the solitude. When I travel with others I try to gain their approval — even to the point of doing things which often have the opposite effect. I'm more relaxed alone and see more humor alone. For example, I keep my map in a waterproof case under an elastic cord on the deck of my spray cover and tied to a rib of the kayak. When I get out I put the map down onto my seat so it won't blow into the water. When I get back in I invariably forget to retrieve the map and only when I want to check out where I am do I recall that I'm sitting on my map. The thought of navigating "by the seat of my pants" would cause a burst of laughter. Well, maybe you had to be there.



*View from Caribou Hills across Mackenzie Delta*

Back on the river I spent a lovely day paddling along the Caribou Hills, the East Channel slowly winding along them. At one stage you'll be paddling right up next to them, then the river will bend away from them through a flat plane of willows lined at the water's edge with the brilliant green of the sedges. A few more bends and you'll be paddling back towards the hills.

That evening I chose a lovely sand beach right up against the hills for my camp. The next morning I spent several hours hiking up the hills and enjoying the view. You could look back across the delta lying in a great flat plane below you. When you looked away from the river you saw that the hills formed the edge of a rolling tundra plateau, where you could stroll for great distances. The hills get their name from the Bluenose caribou herd that frequent this area, but I saw only hoof prints.

By evening I was in the tidal region of the river so set up camp on the narrow strip of ground between high water and the willow thicket. I had made a new tent for this trip because I wanted something that could withstand high winds, yet be easy for one person to set up in the wind. I settled on a simple pyramid design with a single pole and large sod cloths on each side to enable one to easily anchor the tent down with rocks. Its bright yellow color was chosen for visibility.

I'd forgotten to get a tide table in Inuvik, so used sticks to mark the height of the river every hour to get an idea of the timing of the tides. In between sticks I strolled the beach as others had done shortly before