

COPPERMINE RIVER

Introduction

The Coppermine River is an excellent trip for experienced canoeists; combining flat water paddling over tundra lakes with the rush of white water where it tumbles down to the Arctic Ocean.

The 640 km (400 mi.) trip from Lac de Gras (shorter if canoeists start at Point or Redrock Lakes) takes voyageurs past the tundra, through the treeline and the famous Coppermine Mountains and back to the tundra again as it winds to the north.

This is a fast river with many rapids and whitewater stretches. All falls and many of the larger rapids require portaging. Other rapids demand very good manoeuvre skill and expertise in whitewater canoeing.

You are on your own once the plane drops you off. There are no settlements until Coppermine on Coronation Gulf. Those attempting the trip should be experienced canoeists, with knowledge of survival and first aid skills. It is suggested to plan at least three to four weeks in advance for the trip.

Access To The Coppermine River

There are many large lakes in the headwaters of the Coppermine where canoeists can start a trip.

The most popular starting points are Lac de Gras, the Source Lake and the Winter Lake. John Franklin started out from the Winter Lake in the summer of 1821 for the Polar Sea, Point Lake at the foot of Obstruction Rapids, Rawalpindi Lake and Redrock Lake. Starting from the Rawalpindi Lake and Redrock Lake avoids the long lake slogs. However, the trip from Rawalpindi to the Coppermine River at Redrock Lake includes several carries and shallow rivers. Most of the access lakes are about 280 km (175 mi.) north of Yellowknife. Several air charter companies located in Yellowknife can fly canoes and gear to the starting points.

Point Lake To Fairy Lake River

Starting the trip on Point Lake rather than Lac de Gras will save 142 km (95 mi.) of paddling through some long lake stretches. Depending on the type of winter and summer, these large lakes can be frozen over until mid-July.

Point Lake itself is 122 km (77 mi.) long from Obstruction Rapids to Redrock Lake and the treeline. Sudden winds can keep canoeists windbound, but usually the winds die in the evening. The long hours of sunlight during the summer provide for almost 24 hours of paddling.

A 56 km (36 mi.) paddle along the meandering and spruce wooded shores will bring you to the end of the chain lakes and the start of the river. There are two rapids between Red Rock and Rocknest Lakes which pose little problem. The first portage occurs on the river past the outlet of Rocknest Lake. Here an 8 km (5 mi.) stretch of fast white water rapids can be run empty but others must be lined or portaged.

In some narrow sections the river boils, presenting rough water for the canoeists. Boulder rapids are common, particularly where the river has cut through an esker. The 70 km (43 mi.)

run to the confluence of Fairy Lake River has many rapids and white water. The rapids should be scouted out first because the nature of the river can change yearly and over the course of the summer due to the fluctuations of the water levels.

This part of river valley is wide and sandy, with spruce covering the banks. The barrenland caribou go to the west of the Coppermine River in the winter, and cross over in early spring on their easterly trek to their calving grounds in the tundra.

Just south of the Fairy Lake River confluence, there is a series of rapids around two islands. The right channel is the best. These rapids are the last for the next 120 km (75 mi.), although the river still runs fast.

Fairy Lake River to Kendall River

Up to Big Bend the valley slopes upward, almost 200 metres above the level of the river. It is rich compared to the treeless tundra, and on the plateau rafters can see moose, barrenland grizzlies, whistling swans, wolves and some caribou.

At Big Bend, the river takes a sharp turn to the northwest, cutting through the Coppermine and September Mountains. The river is very fast for 32 km (20 mi.) through the narrow wooded gorge to Rocky Defile. Here canoeists **MUST** portage over the right bank. The start of the portage is located just before the entrance of the steep sided gorge.

Past Rocky Defile, the river gradually opens into a plain where the Kendall River flows into the Coppermine. Here the trees are much shorter in size and numbers, giving way to the tundra vegetation of grasses, lichens and sedges.

The river widens into boulder flats south of the confluence with the Kendall. There is a fairly open route along the east bank, switching over the left before the big island of the river mouth. The wide Kendall River Valley forms part of the caribou migration corridor. Early explorers used the Kendall to take them to Great Bear Lake via the Dismal Lakes and Dease Arm.

Kendall River To Coppermine

The river switches several times skirting the mountain ranges. Native copper is found either in nodules lying on the ground, or wedged in crevices on the outcrops and cliffs. Past the mountains, the river takes its' greatest drop, falling 500 feet in 72 km (45 mi.) over 30 rapids. Most can be shot by skilled canoeists.

The spruce groves dwindle away to tundra vegetation but it is a more lush growth than is found beyond the valley boundaries. Steep cliffs and rock dominate the region north of the Coppermine Mountains, providing excellent breeding grounds for falcons and hawks. Muskox, swan and arctic fox also make this area their home.

Older maps mistakenly call the first marked rapids north of the mountain, Muskox Rapids, but these are almost 5 km (3mi.) downstream. In the two series of rapids, the first portage is on the right bank and the second begins on the left bank.

Sandstone Rapids begins 6.4 km (4 mi.) downstream. The best approach to the first rapids is from the left channel of the large island. The second rapids can be taken through the right channel. There is a portage around the third and fourth rapids beginning in a bay on the left bank. The last rapids in this series can be lines along the west bank.

Downstream to Escape Rapids, the river flows through a high winding gorge, creating large waves near the canyon walls on the outside curves. The Escape Rapids portage begins on the left bank, but canoers must go through some large waves to get there.

The next 16 km (10 mi.) to Bloody Falls takes the canoeist through both marked and unmarked rapids, on a fast 'down-river' run to the boulder fan above Bloody Falls. The portage for the falls, so named for the massacre of an Inuit camp by the Indians guiding Hearne to the Polar Sea, is on the left bank. The Inuit settlement of Coppermine is a fast 16 km (10 mi.) downstream. You have to paddle a short distance across the Arctic Ocean to reach the settlement. **Watch for large waves.**

Kugluktuk (Coppermine)

The Inuit settlement of 800, provides basic services for travellers. Accommodation can be provided through the Coppermine Inn or Enokhok Inn. There is an R.C.M.P. post where travellers can report their wilderness travel plans, plus there is also a nursing station and a general store. It is strongly suggested that you check in with the R.C.M.P. stations. This is for your own safety incase you do not reach your destination.

Going Home

Kugluktuk is serviced by two different scheduled airlines which can ship your canoes and gear back to Yellowknife. The canoes are carried on a space available basis and the airlines should be given advance.

Northern Transportation Company Limited will ship canoes from Kugluktuk to Hay River on their barges. It is up to the individuals themselves to arrange trucking of the canoes from Hay River, down to the south. There is two outbound trips from Kugluktuk a year. The first leaves around the first week of August and the second trip departs around the third week of August. It will take about a month for the canoes to reach Hay River by barge from Kugluktuk.

History

The Inuit of the Coppermine area often travelled to the headwaters, to hunt for caribou and white fox in winter. This area was also utilized by the Dene (Indian people) from the Rae-Edzo and Yellowknife area.

Please remember that the objects and artifacts at the old sites, such as camps, graves, cabins, etc. are vital to reveal the history of the Northwest Territories. If you take away objects or disturb the site you are destroying this link with our past. Such theft or destruction is punishable by fine and/or imprisonment.

Samuel Hearne was the first European explorer to travel to the mouth of the Coppermine in 1771. After two unsuccessful attempts, he reached the Arctic Ocean in company with his Chipewyan guide, Matonabee, and a party of Indians from Northern Manitoba. Hearne bypassed most of the upper reaches of the Coppermine by entering the Sandstone Rapids.

Fifty years later John Franklin along with George Back, John Richardson and Robert Hood, made the trip via another route. Franklin ascended the Yellowknife River, wintering at Fort Enterprise between Winter and Roundrock Lakes. He left the Fort on June 14, 1821 and reached the Arctic Ocean 34 days later.

Four years later Franklin travelled down the Coppermine again, but using a different route. Exploring the northwestern part of the territory, he travelled up Great Bear Lake's Dease Arm and reached the Coppermine, via the Kendall River from his base at Fort Franklin. That trip was repeated by Peter Dease and Thomas Simpson five years later on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Although quantities of native copper was found along the river and in the Coppermine Mountains by Franklin, no effort was made to exploit it. Canoeists can still pick up the greenish nodules along the river.

Climate

Like the Baffin and parts of the Keewatin, this is truly the land of the midnight sun where sunsets blend into sunrises. Non-stop summer activities are possible through much of June and July. Rainfall is lower near the Arctic Coast, averaging not more than 6 cm (2.5 inches).

Breakup on the Coppermine is mid-June although some of the larger lakes are not ice free until mid-July. Freezeup is in early October. Temperatures at Point Lake range 13 C to 16 C during the months of July and August. Extreme lows of just below freezing and traces of snow have been recorded in mid-summer.

Temperatures at the settlement of Coppermine have been recorded as high as 32.2 C (90 F), the average is around 10 C (50 F). Take a down-filled jacket for the possibility of cooler days. The sun never sets in Coppermine for the month of June. During July, the sun is below the horizon for one and a half hours.

Flora and Fauna

The Coppermine system of lakes and tributaries begins in the Arctic tundra above the treeline, home of the caribou, wolf, arctic fox and great fishing for lake trout, grayling, whitefish and northern pike.

The river properly leaves the esker and hill dotted tundra at Redrock Lake and enters the treeline where spruce, willow, poplar and some birch provide firewood for canoeists. The treeline follows the river valley as far north as the Coppermine Mountains. Beyond the valley the tundra predominates with grass covered hills and eskers.

The spruce forests north of Redrock Lake are the wintering grounds of the Bathurst Barrenground caribou herd. Redrock Lake also marks the end of the chain of lakes that form the upper Coppermine system.

In the river valley, canoeist can photograph the barrenground grizzley & moose who frequent the river shores. The caribou stay within the lush valley. Geese and swans make the valley their breeding and moulting grounds. The forest goes through a further transition at Big Bend, where the trees start thinning and shrinking in size. Anglers will find Arctic char in the lower stretches of the river.

Past the Coppermine Mountains, the spruce groves disappear, replaced by a lush tundra vegetation of grass, willows and lichens. The steep rock cliffs in this area provide excellent breeding grounds for falcons and hawks. Muskox, whistling swans and Arctic fox also make this area their home.

Maps Needed 1:250,000

- Coppermine 86 O
- Dismal Lakes 86 N
- Sloan River 86 K
- Hepburn Lake 86 J
- Redrock Lake 86 G

- Point Lake 86 H
- Winter Lake 86 A
- Lac de Gras 76 D

Access To Yellowknife

Canadian Airlines and N.W.T. Air fly regularly scheduled flights from Edmonton, Whitehorse and Winnipeg to Yellowknife.

Or travellers may drive to Yellowknife up the mostly paved Mackenzie Highway. There are plenty of services en route (see the N.W.T. Explorers' Guide for details) to assist you.

Yellowknife is the capital city of the Northwest Territories, providing a variety of services. There are a number of stores where paddlers can buy supplies including freeze-dried foods, camping gear and clothing. A number of hotels and motels can accommodate those planning to stay a few days in Yellowknife. There are several stores that rent canoes.

Many charter companies have bases in Yellowknife and can provide float plane service to the canoeists drop-off points.

Regional headquarters for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police are located in Yellowknife and canoeists must register their wilderness travel plans with the R.C.M.P. there. As indicated earlier this is a precaution for any unforeseen accidents or delays.

For more information on the Northwest Territories tourist attractions and facilities, write to:

NWT Arctic Tourism

Box 610
 Yellowknife NT X1A 2N5
 Phone: 800-661-0788
 Fax: 876-873-4059

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