

THE HORTON RIVER

LOCATION

The headwaters of the Horton River are located at Horton Lake about 700 kilometres northwest of Yellowknife. It descends about 450 kilometres downstream in a northwesterly direction into Franklin Bay on the north coast of the Northwest Territories mainland.

CO-ORDINATES (at Horton Lake)

Latitude - app. 67.50
Longitude - app. 123.10
Altitude - app. 1750 feet

DISTANCE

Horton Lake to Franklin Bay is approximately 700 kilometres or 425 miles. Shorter trips are possible as planes with tundra tires can land at various flat gravel bars along the river route. Note that water levels in the Horton tend to drop considerably in August, making navigation in some sections extremely difficult if not impossible. Allow for at least three weeks to complete this trip. Keep in mind as well that the Horton River valley is prone to high winds which can make river travel dangerous or futile. The journey, which this particular trip report is based upon, lost two days of travel to high winds. Class II to Class IV rapids are located along the river route, specifically in the canyon area located on the river due east of the north end of Delease Lake at longitude 124.45, latitude 68.40. Fast water, with frequent ledges are situated through this canyon valley. Paddlers should always scout ahead here and be prepared to either line or portage canoes very short distances. It may be useful to spend part of a day hiking above the canyon wall to scout the rapids. The view is very rewarding.

High winds blowing off the Arctic coast are common throughout the summer months. Occasionally, they can create standing waves capable of swamping a canoe, especially in the wider sections of the river. This is especially the case when one is paddling the shores of Franklin Bay where the abandoned DEW Line (military) station is located. The beach below the DEW line station is the preferable spot for air pick-up as it has a flat, gravel beach suitable for a landing strip.

WHAT KIND OF RIVER IS IT?

By Northwest Territories standards, the Horton River journey is as remote a river trip as one is likely to afford and enjoy in North America. Of the three other canoe groups consulted for this trip report, no other paddlers or people were encountered during the two to three week period. Even the Inuit of Paulatuk, the nearest community, rarely travel this far.

The Horton itself starts off as a clear, swift-flowing river, then tends to get more voluminous and murkier as one heads towards the coastline. This is particularly true of the early season when the floodwaters are still up. There are few whitewater challenges on the Horton, almost all of which occur in the canyon area. (Note that this trip report is based on a journey that began approximately 100 kilometres downstream of Horton Lake, so no reliable information is available for that first leg of the journey. Those consulted on the Horton Lake downstream 100 km portion, however, reported no serious obstacles.)

Three outstanding features characterize the Horton River - the wildlife (caribou, muskoxen, wolves, grizzly and various birds including falcons and hawks in abundance), the scenery

(rolling tundra, steep canyon valley and the Smoking Hills on the coastline), and the clear, swift-flowing waters that are generally easily navigated. Paddlers should plan for at least three weeks, possibly four, to complete the entire river, taking into account two or three days down-time due to weather and hiking opportunities which are considerable.

Sparse stands of trees are located along the river banks for the first 200 kilometres downstream of Horton Lake. While the trees virtually disappear as one heads further north closer to the ocean, plenty of driftwood can be found to build campfires, even along the coastline at the DEW line station.

Fishing is generally very good along most of the river route during the latter part of July when the flood waters dissipate and the waters turn clearer. Earlier in the season, the waters located about 150 upstream from Franklin Bay begin to get murky and fishing is very poor. When fishing is good, lake trout and grayling are the species commonly caught. There is an Arctic char run that occurs later in the summer months.

HOW TO GET THERE?

The most convenient start-off and fishing points for the Horton River trip is Inuvik. There are daily flights leaving for Inuvik from Calgary, Edmonton and Yellowknife via Canadian Airlines or Northwest Territorial Airways (from Edmonton and Yellowknife only).

Since the cost of flying in a canoe is prohibitive, people have the option of trucking their canoes up the MacKenzie Highway, then barging them down to Inuvik from Hay River. This is very expensive and must be arranged very early in the season to guarantee delivery. Another option is to rent canoes in Inuvik. Canoe rentals services are provided by the Western Arctic Adventures and Equipment Rental Ltd., Box 1554, Inuvik NT X0E 0T0. The company also provides guiding service for the Horton River.

Should canoeists desire to organize a Horton River trip on their own, they should have already arranged a twin otter plane to the headwaters of the Horton or to a starting off point along the river route prior to arriving in Inuvik. Be as specific as possible when you deal with the company so that the air charter service knows whether to reserve a plane with tundra tires or one with floats. Organizing the charter can also be arranged through the canoe rental service in Inuvik. Consult your Northwest Territories Explorers' Guide for the name of air charter services and accommodation facilities in the Inuvik area. The Explorers' Guide can be accessed on the internet at nwttravel.nt.ca

Please notify the local Royal Canadian Mounted Police before setting off on a canoe trip anywhere in the Northwest Territories. They'll ensure that a search party will be sent out in the event that your party does not return on time. It is just as important to check into a R.C.M.P. office at the end of your journey to let them know that you arrived safely.

AVERAGE DEPTH, VELOCITIES

- not available to date from Inland Waters Canada as no water station has been situated on the river.

HISTORY

Five Inuit archaeological sites exist in the Horton-Anderson River region, including two Thule winter houses near the Cape Parry DEW Line station (source Parks Canada). Two others are reported to be located at Tom Cod Bay (Parks Canada) and another at Cape Bathurst (Milton Freeman Research Ltd.). The earliest of these dates back to around 1350 A.D. However, human habitation is likely to have come much earlier with the Paleo-Eskimo migration from Alaska and Siberia during the period 2,500 to 2,000 B.C., followed by the pre-Dorset culture

which existed between 1,700 and 900 B.C., and then the Dorset culture which appeared around 500 B.C.

The Dorset people are renowned for their artistic ivory carvings of animals, human figurines, and masks. NOTE - if you discover an artifact along the river route, please leave it alone. Write down the location, describe the location of discovery in detail and report it to the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife.

Most of the Horton River archaeological sites were inhabited by Thule cultures which migrated into the Canadian Arctic from Alaska during the period 1,100 A.D. to 1,400 A.D. The Thule people were very advanced in their ability to adapt to the harsh arctic conditions. They were skilled at building skin boats such as the umiak and the kayak. They travelled by dog team, used bows and arrows to hunt, and wore goggles in the spring time to guard against snow blindness.

Today, descendants of the Thule culture, the Karnqmalit (MacKenzie) Inuit, live in the community of Paulatuk, which is located about 100 kilometres due east of the Horton River from the coastline. The name Paulatuk means "coal or soot" in Inuvialuktun (native language of the Inuvialuit). The coal is common to the area and was once used for heating purposes.

The Karnqmalit took up an active trade with the whalers of the 19th century, but suffered considerably as a result of the alcohol and disease that was brought in with the ships. The original community was established in the 1920s at Letty Harbour and subsequently moved to the present day site in 1935 when the Roman Catholic mission established a trading post there.

In contrast, little is known about the very early North American Indian habitation in the Horton River area. Among the first to venture into the Horton River region were the Hareskin Indians, whose descendants today reside at the community of Colville Lake (pop. 750) which is the Northwest Territories only all-log cabin community. There were approximately 1,000 Hareskin Indians spread out among seven bands when the first Europeans arrived in the area.

Captain Robert McClure, one of several expedition leaders sent out to search for the lost Franklin expedition in 1850, was among the first Europeans to explore the coastline of the Horton River area. In September of that year, he sent out a search party to investigate what appeared to be a smouldering fire in what is now Franklin Bay. The party arrived to find not flames from campfires, but what they described as "thick columns of smoke emerging from rents in the ground, and a smell of sulphur so strong that we could not approach the smoke-pillar nearer than ten to fifteen feet." The investigating party returned to the ship with samples of the smouldering, sulphurous rock, and when they set it down on McClure's mahogany desk, it burnt a hole into it.

The naturalist-explorer Roderick MacFarlane was among the first Europeans to explore the interior of the Horton-Anderson River area, although he got only to the Anderson River. It was upon his recommendation that the Hudson's Bay Company established a post at Fort Anderson (named after James Anderson, the man who supervised the MacKenzie District for the Hudson's Bay Company), approximately 50 kilometres downstream of the forks on the Anderson River. MacFarlane remained in charge there from 1861-65, during which time he collected nearly 5,000 scientific specimens of birds and eggs. The Fort was eventually closed down after an epidemic of scarlet fever decimated the local Inuit population.

Between 1908 and 1912, the famous Canadian explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, explored the Horton River valley more extensively and documented his findings in a book he wrote in 1913 called "MY LIFE WITH THE ESKIMO". Stefansson was fabulously successful in his explorations, a fact he attributes to his taking up the ways of the native people.

Paulatuk remains as the only permanent settlement in the Horton River vicinity. However, because of its location, it remains relatively remote, and in the absence of industrial activities, many of its residents still depend on hunting and trapping for a living.

GEOGRAPHY

Much of the Horton River lies within the Northern Interior Plain region of the MacKenzie Lowlands. It is generally low, hilly topography marked by numerous lakes and stream. The Horton Lake district is characterized by highly calcareous loamy and sandy till and a moderate to low relief. Limited glacial till found on the Bathurst Peninsula and in the interfluvial area would suggest the region escaped Wisconsin glaciation (Source Parks Canada).

Interior plateau and plains lie on the western extremity of the Pre-Cambrian Shield and have developed from sedimentary rock deposited on the top of the Canadian Shield. Again, the area is characterized by various lakes and streams.

One exception is the extensive area of badlands which occurs on the lower end of the Horton River. Here deeply dissected Mesozoic rocks are exposed on the steep slopes. This area is largely devoid of any vegetation, giving the area a forlorn and desolate appearance.

Vast deposits of lignite, a rock which spontaneously combusts when exposed to oxygen, dominates the coastal area east of the Horton River. This is known as the Smoking Hills. Constant wind erosion of the slopes tend to maintain the combustive activities.

About 150 years ago, the Horton River was shortened by about 150 kilometres when a channel was eroded on the east banks in the vicinity closest to the seashore. The river now spills almost directly into the sea rather than the more delta-like maze that is common to other river mouths on the Arctic coastline.

FLORA

Since the growing season is far too short for propagation, most of the vegetation found in the Horton River valley is of the perennial type. Vegetation communities include sedge tundra which include willows, cottongrass, dwarf birch and Labrador tea; shrub tundra which includes dwarf birch, alder, Labrador tea, Lapland rosebay and Arctic white heather with scattering of trees like birch and willow; forest tundra transition where plant species from both areas intermingle, and open forest which dominated by spruce in a ground cover of lichens. Trees in this area are generally under seven metres and widely spaced. The dominant shrub species of this area include willow and alder which grow in dense stands along stream and creek valleys.

CLIMATE

Occasional snow squalls, freezing rain and thunderstorms which may occur in the summer months suggest otherwise, but the Horton River is located in two semi-arid climatic zones. The Horton Lake region is situated in an area known as the continental sub-Arctic climate of the interior where the mean summer temperatures range from 6.7 degrees Celsius to about 12.7 degrees Celsius. The interior and coastal regions of the Horton River experiences the arctic coastal plain climate where the summer month mean temperatures range between 3.1 degrees Celsius to 5.2 degrees Celsius.

The most common time to paddle the Horton River is in July when there is sunlight for 24 hours a day. The author of this report travelled in the first three weeks of July and experienced frequent sunny weather, occasional rain, frequent high winds (bad enough to nearly wipe out the camp one evening) and no snow.

WILDLIFE

The Horton is one of those rare rivers which offer everything including spectacular scenery, a swift, clear river, and tremendous wildlife viewing opportunities.

Numerous birds can be observed, especially in June and early July. These include oldsquaw ducks, Arctic and Common Loon, ptarmigan, peregrine and gyrfalcons, bald and golden eagles, black brant, scoters, mergansers and scaup. Shorebirds include various plovers, yellowlegs, and godwits. This is to name a few. A guide to North American birds is advised for this trip.

Thousands of caribou are likely to be viewed throughout the journey, especially in the area of the coastline where the spectacular post-calving groupings tend to feed in July and August. The timing of the migration varies from year to year, but it is almost certain that caribou will be seen on this river trip. The animals located along the Horton River are part of the Bluenose herd whose population is estimated to be in the range of 50,000 animals. We observed one group which numbered between 4,000 and 6,000.

There is a sizeable population of muskoxen in the Horton River area. The river represents approximately the western boundary of the Northwest Territories current mainland muskoxen habitat. (Other populations occur further east, but in the islands of the Arctic archipelago.)

The Horton River is prime grizzly bear habitat. The bears here are slightly smaller (males average around 450 pounds) than the bears of the west coast of Canada and Alaska, although they are just as dangerous. We frequently saw signs of bear, but observed only two throughout the trip (other parties consulted observed between four and eight bears).

A number of wolf packs work the Horton River valley, many of which follow the caribou migration. We encountered one up very close (about 20 metres) and another pack in the far distance during our journey. Marten, foxes, and various rodents are also common to the area.

Fish are plentiful along most of the river route although they may be difficult to catch in the early spring when the flood waters make the river murky. This is especially the case as one heads towards the coastline. Arctic grayling and lake trout are the two most common species caught although there is a char run in the summer for a short period. Remember to purchase a Northwest Territories fishing licence before embarking on any river trip.

RIVER PROFILE

This particular trip report is based on a journey which began on the Horton River in the vicinity located just outside of the tree-line marked on the Anderson River Map (1:500,000 scale). Other people contacted about journeys which began upstream at Horton Lake reported no major obstacles on the river to this point.

In general, the Horton River journey is characterized by relatively swift-flowing waters with few major obstacles outside of the canyon area which begins on the **ANDERSON RIVER MAP** due east of the north end of Delesse Lake. Paddlers, however, should be concerned about strong winds which can rise up without notice. On one occasion, the winds were so strong that it nearly wiped out our camp and made river travel to more sheltered environs extremely precarious.

The following is a list of highlights and obstacles which paddlers should be aware of while travelling down the Horton River. Remember, that it is not a complete list. While every effort has been made to point out the most important obstacles and more attractive highlights, some may have been omitted. And due to the ever-changing course of the river and fluctuating water levels, other obstacles may arise in one year and not the next.

WHALEMAN RIVER - Approximately three kilometres south of the Whaleman River on

the west bank lie the remnants of what appears to be either an old Inuit camp or a hunting camp left by the whalers who travelled in the area. Three sets of tent rings can be found. As well, there is a very old fence line imbedded in the earth. This was probably used by hunters to herd the migrating caribou for slaughter.

Keep an eye out for muskoxen, mergansers and ducks in the area.

HORTON RIVER CANYON - Begins on the Anderson River map (1:500,000) due east of the north end of Delesse Lake. The map indicates there is only one rapid through this canyon. There are, however, several - all of which should be scouted, portage or lined depending on the water level and individual skill.

The first set of rapids are a little bit tricky in that they are not easily identified as one approaches downstream towards them. Essentially, they are but one of a series of four rapids. This first one is a steep ledge that extends from one side of the river to the other and is most easily negotiated by lining the canoe on the left bank. A second set of rapids quickly follows and can be either lined on the right side, or, for those with skill canoeing abilities, be run. This is essentially a wide cascade that shoots through a series of three-foot haystacks. The third and last notable rapid on this stretch of water is another cascade that shoots through four to six foot haystacks (standing waves). One can avoid this by paddling on the left side of the river.

Heading through the last leg of the canyon river journey, there are several sets of rapids, the first of which should be lined on the right side. Once past this obstacle, paddlers must then ferry over the other side of the river so as to avoid hitting the next set of rapids which are located about 100 yards downstream. The standing waves here are very high (up to five feet high), so one is advised to either line or portage the short distance past them. Experienced paddlers, however, may choose to run this section.

NOTE: THE CHARACTER OF THESE RAPIDS MAY CHANGE FROM YEAR TO YEAR AS THE RIVER CHANGES COURSES AND AS WATER LEVELS RISE AND FALL. PADDLERS SHOULD FIRST SCOUT AHEAD BEFORE RUNNING ANY RAPIDS.

The rapids and fast water become more infrequent and less dangerous as one exits the canyon. With a keen eye, one can easily avoid any rough water by choosing the proper channels.

The canyon route is among the most scenic on the river and resembles, in some parts, the Nahanni River canyons in miniature. Keep an eye out for hawks and falcons nesting in the cliffs through this canyon. Do not disturb them under any circumstances.

STEFANSSON CREEK AREA - the landscape really opens up along this portion of the river. At one point (the location that marks the transition from the Simpson Lake to the Franklin maps - 1:250,000), there is a long section of splits characterized by frequent gravel bars. It is very shallow in most spots and occasionally difficult to find a channel. Keep an eye out for muskoxen and caribou in this area.

There is a series of sandy hills on the left side of the river that look like the Egyptian pyramids. The river slows considerably on this portion of the route and progress can be seriously hampered by high winds.

BADLANDS AND SMOKING HILLS - it is difficult to miss the badlands as the river flows right through them. The vegetation thins out gradually and there is a noticeable absence of lakes and freshwater streams. Eventually, the countryside takes on an extremely desolate tone, and if the wind is blowing in the right direction, one can smell the sulphur burning from the Smoking Hills on the coastline.

Because of the sulphur burn-off, the few lakes in this vicinity are among the most acidic in North America and they are almost completely devoid of any life. One can reach the Smoking Hills taking almost any overland route from the river, but it is advised that you be patient and wait until you get to the north end of the river where it is closet to the coastline.

Once you reach the Smoking Hills, be careful of your footing. The soot and sand formation may appear to be firm, but there are sections that are very precarious. It is best to stay on the firm ground at the highest elevations.

Keep an eye out for caribou along this portion of the river.

MALLOCH DEW LINE SITE - getting to the DEW line site from the mouth of the river can be very tricky given the fluctuating tides and ice conditions. At low tide, it is very difficult to find water levels sufficient to paddle through. And lining the canoe is almost impossible. Once out of the canoe, a person immediately sinks knew or waist-deep into the muck and sand. The only option in this case is to pole your way through - not an easy task given the fact that it is approximately five kilometres to the DEW line station. NOTE: There are not many other options as the gravel bar at the DEW line station represents the best landing strip in the area. Unfortunately, it is not the most ideal place to end the trip. The DEW line site is a garbage heap of broken down buildings, rusted out fuel drums and garbage. There has been little or no effort by the Canadian or American governments to clean this up.

MAPS REQUIRED

Horton Lake	96 O
Erly Lake	97 A
Simpson Lake	97 B
Franklin Bay	97 C
Malloch	97 F
Hill	(optional)