

# MOUNTAIN RIVER

## Length of Trip

21 days from Dusty Lake to Fort Good Hope  
19 days from Mountain Lake to Fort Good Hope  
15 days from Palmer Lake to Fort Good Hope

## Total Distance

377 km (236 miles) Dusty Lake to Fort Good Hope  
359 km (224 miles) Mountain Lake to Fort Good Hope  
312 km (195 miles) Palmer Lake to Fort Good Hope

## Average Gradient

20 ft per mile (4 metres per km)

## Start

- A. Dusty Lake
- B. Mountain Lake
- C. Palmer Lake Outfitters camp

## Finish

Fort Good Hope

## Accessibility

The closest float plane base to the headwaters of the Mountain River is Norman Wells, which is also served by scheduled jet service from Edmonton and Yellowknife. Arranging in advance with the Northern Transportation Company Limited to ship canoes by barge to Norman Wells from Hay River is an alternative to flying the boats from your starting point.

Return from Fort Good Hope is by scheduled small plane service, or on days when the scheduled flights do not meet the jet in Norman Wells, by air charter.

A. **Dusty Lake** (64 degrees, 16'N lat. 130 degrees 32'W long./Grid ref. 4267128 106B, NTS 1:250,000)

Dusty Lake is the local name for a very small lake high in the MacKenzie Mountains. By starting here paddlers can extend their trip, and spend more time in the high country. Most float planes cannot land on this lake because of its small size, with the exception of a STOL aircraft such as the Pilatus Porter. A half mile portage is required over hummocky terrain to reach the Mountain River from Dusty Lake.

B. **Mountain Lake (may be Willow Handle Lake)** (64 degrees 7'N lat. 129 degrees 50'W long./Grid ref. 4597109 106A. NTS 1:250,000)

Mountain Lake is the local name for small lake accessible by air charter from Norman Wells. The small river leading to the Mountain River may not be navigable, in low water levels, and paddlers are advised to check with air charter pilots in advance for up to date conditions of this stream.

**C. Palmer Lake (may be Shale Lake)** (64 degrees 28'N lat. 129 degrees 37'W long./106A NTS 1:250,000)

Palmer Lake Hunting Camp is suitable for both single and twin engine aircraft. Outfitters offer guiding services by horseback for hunters interested in large game such as Dall Sheep, caribou, and moose. To reach the Mountain river from this camp, a five mile portage is necessary. The first two miles involve relatively easy walking over distinct paths and horse trails. However the last three require hiking over hilly terrain, through spruce forests and frequent wet areas.

### **Maps Required:**

(1:250,000)

- Bonnet Plume Lake106B
- Mount Eduni106A
- Sans Sault Rapids106H
- Fort Good Hope106I

### **River Notes**

#### **Introduction**

The Mountain River is a major west bank tributary of the MacKenzie River. It flows swiftly through several ranges of the MacKenzie Mountains through the MacKenzie Lowlands Region, and enters the MacKenzie River above San Sault Rapids. The settlements of Fort Good Hope and Norman Wells are located fifty miles and sixty-four miles downstream and upstream respectively from its mouth. This is a true whitewater trip, offering many large volume rapids, heavy water, and hazardous sections through several canyons. Paddlers should be experienced in whitewater canoeing, and wilderness camping skills. This route is very isolated, and the river water is icy cold. Typical of all mountain rivers, water levels on the Mountain can fluctuate drastically on a daily basis, sometimes rising five feet in a few hours. Canoeists should be aware of this extreme variability, and make preparations accordingly. Spray decks are recommended for open boats.

#### **Climate**

The weather in the MacKenzie Mountains is unpredictable. Moisture filled air masses from the Pacific Ocean collide with the MacKenzie Mountains throughout the summer season, creating precipitation in the form of frequent, heavy summer rainstorms. Sudden drops in temperature may occur, and hailstorms and snowstorms are possible. Temperatures range from mid-twenties centigrade during the day to freezing temperatures at night. Rain gear, warm clothing and a good sleeping bag are essential.

#### **Geography**

The Mountain River flows through two physiographic regions - the MacKenzie Mountains and the MacKenzie Lowlands.

The MacKenzie Mountains mark the eastern front of the Western Cordillera and are a northern extension of the Rocky Mountain system. With the Ogilvie and Selwyn Mountains to the west, the mountains form a drainage divide between Yukon and MacKenzie watersheds and present an impressive topographic and climactic barrier. Rising to heights of over 2700 metres (9000 feet) the MacKenzie Mountains are the highest point of land in the District of MacKenzie.

MacKenzie Mountain rivers cut through successive ranges of Paleozoic and Mesozoic rock formations on their downhill run to the MacKenzie Lowlands. The names of many of these ranges - Backbone, Thundercloud, Sawtooth Canyon - serve as helpful reminders of a rugged, and at times unforgiving environment. Limestone and dolomites of buff, grey and cinnamon, black pyritic shales, green, grey and maroon siltstone and sandstones provide the canoeist with a vistas of rugged beauty.

The 96 km (60 mile) long lower section of the Mountain River, flows through the MacKenzie Lowlands Region. The wide valley here contrasts markedly with the mountainous section upstream. The river in this stretch is bordered by cutbanks rising to barely 100 metres. The river valley varies between one to three km in width and contains numerous gravel bars. Low rounded hills infrequently rise above the gently undulating landscape.

## **Fauna**

In the area where the Mountain River flows through the MacKenzie Mountains, an abundance of large game such as caribou, moose, Dall's sheep and grizzly bear is found. Other wildlife inhabiting this region are wolves, rodents, eagles, hawks and a variety of song birds. Lake trout are found in the mountain lakes and grayling abound in the major tributaries and the river itself. Towards the mouth of the Mountain River, pickerel, Dolly Varden and whitefish may be caught. Inconnu can be sometimes found at the confluences of the many creeks and rivers along the MacKenzie River. In the MacKenzie Lowlands, there are many ducks, Canada geese, and black bears.

## **Flora**

Black and white spruce cover the lower slopes of the mountains, with alpine tundra generally occurring above 1200 metres. Willow, poplar and alder border the river, increasing in density and size towards the MacKenzie Lowlands. Vegetation in the lowlands section is relatively lush and dense. Firewood is available for the entire trip, however, it may take some scrounging in the higher alpine region.

## **Human History**

The drainage systems of the Keele and Mountain Rivers are the traditional homes of the Mountain Dene. Today most of their descendants live in Fort Norman on the MacKenzie River. Prior to their move into villages during the mid 20th century, these people inhabited the eastern slopes of the MacKenzie Mountains from the North Nahanni to the Mountain Rivers. They lived by hunting Dall's sheep, mountain caribou, moose, hare, ptarmigan and fish.

The Mountain Dene speak a dialect of Slavey known as "Mountain."

During the late 19th and early 20th century the mountain people hunted and trapped the headwaters on both sides of the Continental Divide. In the last spring they built large moose skin boats in the headwaters of the mountain rivers. These boats were loaded with dry meat, fat, and furs which were taken to the trading posts in the valley. After breakup in the spring, the boats were navigated down the Keele and Mountain Rivers. Once trading was completed at Fort Norman or Fort Good Hope, the Mountain Dene walked back to the Mountains where they would spend the winter in small family bands.

Canoeists who find the remains of any of their ancient camps are urged not to disturb them. For more information they may contact the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife.

## **River Notes**

Dusty Lake is one of the highest accessible starting points for this trip. From here, the Mountain River is generally shallow, flowing around many sharp bends. Keeping to the inside of the bends and avoiding the faster outside corners at the cutbanks is usually the safest route. Canoeists should watch for submerged boulders along this first stretch.

The canyon on the Mount Eduni 106A topo map represents the first of series of major hazards for paddlers. At the entrance, the river turns at a 90 degree bend to the right. In the middle of this bend, is an undercut headwall, which paddlers must avoid to prevent entrapment. Along the two miles of fast water between the canyon walls there are some eddies, and no hazardous obstructions.

Good camping spots are easy to locate along the entire river stretch through both the mountain and the lowland regions. Some of the better spots are located on the cobblestone and gravel deltas formed at the confluences of many small tributaries and the Mountain River.

Parties who have planned a few extra days for side trips can hike to the higher alpine surroundings. At grid reference 4697128 on the Mount Eduni 106A topo map, is a fascinating series of caves which can be explored in a day trip. At the caves hikers will likely find evidence of Dall's sheep, one of the most spectacular animals living in these alpine regions. In this area, they may also see some of the many birds of prey which nest in the high alpine tundra. Hikers should be careful to avoid disturbing these raptors at their nest sites.

Although the river volume increases after the first canyon, the paddling difficulty does not increase. Red Mountain on river left is a major landmark to look for as canoeists paddle downstream from the canyon. The Dene call this mountain DAYIWETELLA

Further downstream, the Mountain river becomes a braided stream, with multiple channels. During periods of low water, paddlers may have difficulty in selecting the correct route. This area is used by hunters from the Palmer Lake camp as well as the Dene from the MacKenzie Valley. Campsites and horse trails are thus in abundance along the shores.

The river's volume increases as it turns north. This is due to the increasing number of stream and rivers emptying into the Mountain River. Turbulence and

standing waves are encountered at these confluences and caution is advised. Since there are few eddies and few calm stretches, a high level of whitewater canoeing skills is required. The river also makes several turns in this section, and paddlers should be wary of unexpected sweepers which may have fallen as a result of eroded vegetated cutbanks at the outside of the bends.

The second canyon begins at the mouth of Cache Creek, and may be hazardous during periods of high water. The Mountain River narrows considerably as it enters the canyon. Its width varies from 60 to 100 metres as it flows between 100 metre vertical rock walls, characterized by scree slopes at their base. At the half way point, the river takes a sharp turn to the right, creating turbulence at the inside bend, and rough water at the outside where it rages into the vertical left limit. This canyon has been run successfully at low water levels, but may be unnavigable during high water. Cache Creek offers excellent fishing opportunities for Dolly Varden, and grayling. Nineteen kilometres (14 miles) below the Cache Creek canyon the river enters another range of mountains, and a third smaller canyon is encountered. At its entrance, an enormous house-sized rock splits the channel with most of the river flowing to the right. The right limit offers the best route as the left side contains many obstructions.

Mountain River widens considerably as it flows toward the Carcajou Range. Paddlers will encounter sections of heavy whitewater in this stretch. There are prime hiking opportunities along ridges surrounding the river valley.

A fourth canyon is found approximately four miles above the mouth of Brunson Creek. An accurate description of the stretch through the canyon is impossible because of the extreme variations in water levels. While this canyon is recognized as a major hazard, reports vary as to its navigability. In early summer, when the melting glaciers send great volumes of water into the river, fourteen foot impassable waves have been noted at its entrance. Parts of the canyon have been run at the end of July, but paddlers must still contend with four to six foot standing waves. (This is the upper limit of navigability for open canoes). At medium water levels, the entrance to the canyon presents some standing waves, and ledges which can best be negotiated on river right. The main channel turns to the left, and then to the right around a large boulder bar with a trickle to the right of the bar. This entire section becomes a giant chute at higher water levels. When the river is at navigable levels, canoeists are still advised to portage this section by walking the boulder bar along the left bank of the trickle. Caution is advised in crossing the eddy line at the outflow of the trickle. Large waves and huge sized boulders choke the right side of the next section making it critical that canoes stay upright crossing the eddy line and stay to the left thereafter. The river takes a sharp left soon after re-entry. Scouting the remainder of the canyon is possible on the flat gravel bar on the left inside bank of this turn.

The fifth canyon marks the entrance to the MacKenzie Lowlands region. It is shorter, and can be run during medium water levels. Data for the hydrograph in this report was gathered from the water survey station found here. There is a marked increase in the river's width after this point, and the channels at times become numerous. Paddlers should stay together to avoid getting lost.

A sixth and final canyon is encountered at the western end of the Imperial Hills. Fifty-four km of braided channels through the wide open lowlands of the river valley must be navigated from this last canyon to the confluence of the Mountain and MacKenzie Rivers. Paddlers will hear the roar of the Sans Sault Rapids on the MacKenzie as they approach the mouth of the Mountain. They should hug

the left bank to avoid its large waves. On the flat, 80 km stretch of the MacKenzie River to Fort Good Hope, canoeists are faced with hazards of high winds, and barge traffic. A final rapid is encountered where the river narrows at the Ramparts, spectacular sheer rock walls towering approximately 150 metres (450 feet) above the river. The safest route for paddlers is near the channel markers on the right side.

The settlement of Fort Good Hope marks the end of the trip, although canoeists have the option of continuing down the MacKenzie to its mouth at the Arctic Ocean. Fort Good Hope was the oldest fur trading post in the lower MacKenzie Valley. At present, this community of 450 residents has a hotel, R.C.M.P. station, nursing station, Hudson Bay Company store and an airstrip.

### **Source Information**

Parks Canada Wild Rivers Survey, The Mountain River, 1972.

Tom Andrews, Personal Journal of the Mountain River Trip, July 1984. And Verbal Communications with Tom Andrews, Dick Spaulding and Andrew Spaulding. January 20, 21, 1986.