NATLA-KEELE RIVER TRIP REPORT

LOCATION

The Natla and Keele Rivers are located in the MacKenzie Mountains of the Northwest Territories southwest of Norman Wells and Fort Norman. Beginning at a small lake named O'Grady, the Natla flows for about 110 kilometres in a northeasterly direction until it spills into the Keele. The Keele flows in a westerly direction for about 180 miles or 300 kilometres before it spills into the MacKenzie River.

COORDINATES (O'Grady Lake)

Latitude - 63.00'
Longitude - 129:03'
Elevation - appr 4,260 feet

DISTANCE AND TRAVEL TIME NEEDED

The journey from O'Grady Lake to the confluence of the Keele and MacKenzie Rivers is about 109 kilometres. Allow for at least two full weeks of river travel. Sixteen days or more would be better. Add another two days if you plan on paddling down the MacKenzie to Fort Norman. O'Grady is the only possible starting point for a trip that includes the Natlas. There are no other lakes downstream suitable for a float plane to land. There are several points along the Keele River suitable for this kind of landing. That, of course, would result in a much shorter trip.

CLASSIFICATION

Natla River - Grade III to IV with rapids ranging from Class one to six all along the route.
Keele River - Grade II with rapids ranging mostly between Class one and Class Two, and occasionally Class Three.

WHAT KIND OF RIVER IS IT?

The Natla and Keele rivers represent a challenging mountain river trip that should be contemplated only by expert paddlers. Beginning on the stunningly beautiful O'Grady Lake high on the alpine tundra near the Yukon border, the Natla starts off as a shallow, swift moving stream which gets progressively more difficult as it spills down the mountainside through a series of narrow canyons. The water is ice cold and clear, and teaming with Dolly Varden, Arctic Grayling and Mountain whitefish. Successive boulder gardens pose the greatest difficulty, especially within the narrow canyon areas where lining is extremely hazardous. The rocky shoreline is extremely slippery. There are some boulder gardens which are nearly impossible to navigate, so scouting ahead is highly recommended.

The Keele, on the other hand, is just as fast but much deeper. The boulder gardens disappear, but in their place, high standing waves - some rising to four feet - can easily swamp an open canoe. The Keele often braids into several channel, and it is almost inevitable that the paddler will choose the wrong one. Getting back into the main stream can be perilous as these shallower channels often narrow quickly into a chute.

Plenty of wood is available along most of the trip, except perhaps at O'Grady Lake where there are only willows to be found. Expect a diverse mix of weather, including snow.

HOW TO GET THERE?

The most convenient start-off point in the Northwest Territories is Norman Wells. The community is located along the MacKenzie River 684 air kilometres northwest of Yellowknife. Daily jet flights from both Edmonton and Calgary are available through Canadian Airlines.

Since the cost of flying in canoes via air is prohibitively expensive, paddlers have the option of trucking them to Fort Providence, and then barging them to Norman Wells. This is also expensive and must be arranged well ahead of time to guarantee delivery.

An alternative is to rent canoes in Norman Wells. Canoe rental services are as of 1992 available through Western Arctic Adventures and Equipment Rental Ltd., Box 1554, Inuvik, N.W.T. X0E 0T0.

Air charter services are available in Norman Wells. In 1992, North Wright Air was the only operator. Consult your Northwest Territories Explorers' Guide for the name of the companies. When arranging a charter either by mail or telephone, be very specific about dates and time of arrival. Often, the charter company is on an extremely tight schedule in the summer months, and any delay of arrival could well mean several days of waiting before another time for departure opens up.

REMEMBER TO NOTIFY THE RCMP DETACHMENT IN NORMAN WELLS BEFORE SETTING OFF ON A CANOE TRIP.

AVERAGE DEPTH, VELOCITIES

The river on the upper reaches of the Natla ranges from 20 to 30 meters wide, two to three feet deep, and flows at a velocity of between two and four miles per hour. The river increases in volume mid-way through, and slows down considerably except in a few places. The last ten kilometres are the most perilous as the gradient is about 20 feet per mile.

The Keele is generally deep and quick moving, although it shallows considerably where it braids into several channels

HISTORY

This area of the MacKenzie Mountains represent the northern most range of the Kaska tribe of the Nahanni Dene. These aboriginals had frequent contact with the coastal Tahltan and Tlingit and adopted many of their clan and potlatch ways. The explorer John Campbell was among the first to have contact with these people when he passed through the region in 1838. Legend has it that a medicine woman saved his life on several occasions.

It wasn't until the time of the Klondike goldrush in 1898 that more non-native people settled into the area. Lured by reports of a lost gold mine high up in the Nahanni Valley, many men took their chances and travelled up the Nahanni River to winter int the region just south of the Natla River. The most famous of these were the McLeod brothers (Willie and Frank) who journeyed up river around 1905. A year later, their bodies were found between the first and second canyon below Virginia Falls. Their skulls were missing from the skeletons.

Since then, stories about what happened to them flourished. And they become more bizarre with after visits from newspapermen and writers from around the country. One account told a tale of an Indian Princess who ruled the area with a heavy hand. Another tells of an evil tribe that went around murdering people and burning down their cabins.

Most of the legends are debunked in exhilarating personal accounts of river trips and life on the Nahanni by R.M. Patterson in the book THE DANGEROUS RIVER and Dick Turner in NAHANNI. Another somewhat exaggerated but entertaining account is depicted in the short 1962 National Film Board production entitled NAHANNI. This entertaining documentary

dramatizes the relentless effort of Albert Faille to find the illusive gold mine.

Another group of prospective gold miners travelled further up the MacKenzie to the Gravel (Keele) river, then across the MacKenzie Mountains to the Klondike. In 1908, geologist Joseph Keele did the trip in reverse from the Yukon to the MacKenzie River via the Gravel. The Gravel was later re-named in his honour.

Between 1942 and 1944, an oil pipeline was built between Norman Wells and Whitehorse just 20 kilometres north of the Keele River, mainly upon the insistence of the American government which was concerned about a secure fuel supply in the northwest during the war years. The pipeline was poorly built and cost four times the original $24 million price tag. It was abandoned in 1945 after only 18 months of operation, and the debris - trucks, bulldozers, garbage - that was used to build it was left behind. Today, the debris is a popular hiking route and a historical landmark.

The Slavey Dene of Fort Norman continue to venture part way up the Keele to hunt and trap. The community has about 300 people.

GEOGRAPHY

The Natla and Keele Rivers are located in the Western Cordillera (MacKenzie mountain) physiographic region of Canada. O'Grady Lake and the upper reaches of the Natla are within predominately alpine tundra marked by scattered open woodland near the river's edge. Soils may be described as eutric brunisol with rocky and stony phases predominating.

The Natla descends into open woodland country of the boreal forest, most noticeably as one moves closer to the Keele River. This marks the physiographic transition zone into the Northern Platform Lowlands (MacKenzie Lowlands).

FLORA

The plant life of the alpine tundra includes Arctic Bell-heather, a variety of sedges, bluegrass Mountain Avens, lichen and shrubby willows. Blueberries, cranberries, and crowberries as well as labrador tea are also common to the area. As one descends into open woodland, the landscape is primarily made up of dwarf willow, needle-leaf trees such as spruce and larch, and birch and aspen.

WILDLIFE

Both the Natla and the Keele rivers offer excellent wildlife viewing opportunities. Caribou, moose, wolves, and grizzly bears are common along the Natla River. At higher elevations, one is also likely to find Dall sheep. Thee is a variety of birdlife on the river such as common loons and various species of ducks.

The fish in the river include Arctic grayling, Dolly Varden, and mountain whitefish. Lake trout can be caught in O'Grady Lake.

REMEMBER TO PURCHASE A NORTHWEST TERRITORIES FISHING LICENCE BEFORE EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY.

CLIMATE

July and early August are usually characterized by hot dry weather. But it can also storm rain and even snow at this time of the year, so a variety of protective clothing is recommended. Low clouds in the mountain regions may also prohibit the landing of float-planes, so paddlers should allow for extra down time at the beginning of the trip.

Our journey during the last two weeks in August experienced more than ten days of snowfall. About ten inches of snow fell in 20 hours.

Annual rainfall - 38.1 cm out of an annual total of 53.3 cm.

- July - mean high 25.6 C
- July - mean low 12.2 C
- Winds - NW at 16 km/hr

RIVER PROFILE

NATLA RIVER - For the purposes of this trip report, the Natla will be divided into four sections: O'Grady Lake; the upper Natla which is the first 40 km of the river; the middle Natla which is the next 60 km; and the lower Natla which represents the last ten km of river before it spills into the Keele.

O'GRADY LAKE - At an altitude of over 4,000 feet, O'Grady Lake is situated on a plateau in the alpine tundra region of the MacKenzie Mountains. To the northwest of the lake are the Itsi Peaks and Selwyn Range; southwest is the headwaters of the legendary South Nahanni River; the Natla Valley and river descend from the east end of the lake, first as a shallow stream which has sufficient water to carry a canoe. An outfitters' outpost camp is located near the river, so if you plan on hiking in the area, it may be advisable to inform them of your route and whereabouts. The hiking opportunities in the lake region are superb. But the high, thick brush around the lake make it difficult to spot grizzly bears which are common in the area. O'Grady Lake breaks up between mid-June and the beginning of July.

UPPER NATLA - The Natla flows swiftly but inconsequentially out of O'Grady Lake. Topographical maps should be used but not be relied upon. One hits rapids well before those that are marked on the 1:250,000 or the 1:50,000 maps. However, these are only of Class one and two difficulty and represent no serious hazard.

The 1:50,000 map shows a set of riffles preceding the first set of rapids. There are nine of these in the space of about two kilometres. Most are of Class two, possibly Class three in higher water. The main difficulty in running these is the rocks. There are so many of them that it is extremely difficult to make the turns fast enough. On occasion, the deep channels run perilously close to the cliffsides.

There are two more rapids, both of which are Class two and three in difficulty before you reach a glacial looking stream of some note on the right side of the river. Eight more rapids follow before we set up camp at the first rapids marked on the 1:250,000 Skewi Mountain Map.

From this point, there are at least 22 more rapids of significance before you reach the Middle Section of the river. These range from Class one to four. While water volume is not a problem, the rocks are. Quick maneuvering is essential. One of our canoes got hung up on one boulder, and it required an entire afternoon to get it off. The canoe was very nearly bent in two.

NOTE: Due to water levels, counting of rapids may prove imppossible. The river may be nearly continuous white water in this section.

Most of this upper section is located deep within a valley, so views are often obscured. However, snow-covered mountain peaks occasionally come into view where the river opens up.

MIDDLE NATLA - The river changes rather dramatically about 40 kilometres downstream of O'Grady Lake. Although the river gets deeper, it moves perceptibly slower. Trees - mostly spruce, larch and occasional stands of birch and poplar line the shore, but thin out quickly higher in the hillsides. There are a few rapids on this middle section, but most are navigable. Again,

scouting ahead is recommended.

The mountain scenery along this portion of the river is spectacular, so if that is what you came to see, it is perhaps best to spend an extra day or two here because it doesn't get much better downstream.

LOWER NATLA - The last 10 kilometres of the Natla is by far the most challenging. The river's gradient is 20 feet per mile, and occasionally the river cuts right through rock outcrops. The 1:50,000 map shows five rapids along this last portion of the Natla, but we counted many more. One might well be classed as a waterfall. It has to be either portaged or lined. While lining, we tried the right side of the river. With hindsight, it appears as if the left may have been easier. The drop from the cliff edge to the surface of the water is not quite so high. Most of the rapids before this waterfall are runnable.

Additional note: During high water, the ``fall'' may only appear as an extra-large rapid (not a class 6). GPS values for exact location are possible North 63degrees30.1'/West 127degrees58.6'.

KEELE RIVER - The Keele is a much deeper river, but still fast-flowing - about four to six m.p.h. upstream and three to four kilometres further downstream. The Keele frequently braids into several shallow channels, some of which can be quite tricky when they narrow and spill back into the mainstream. The river width varies from between 600 and 1200 feet upstream and up to a half mile further down. The main channel is almost always more than 10 feet deep.

When braided channels join, or when the river abruptly changes directions, be on the lookout for high standing waves boils, and whirlpools. The Keele gets progressively more silty as you approach the MacKenzie.

Traveler's Report: An unstable rock wall has been observed, where rock slides were occuring every few seconds. These areas should not be occupied over extended periods. GPS: North 64 degrees 20' / West 124 degrees 55'.

MAPS REQUIRED

SEKWI MOUNTAIN	105P
WRIGLEY LAKE	95M
MOUNT EDUNI	106A
CARCAJOU CANYON	96D
FORT NORMAN	96C