

THELON RIVER

LOCATION

The Thelon River headwaters are found at Lynx Lake which is located about 400 kilometres (250 miles) from either Yellowknife or Fort Smith. An alternate starting point is at the junction of the Hanbury River. Another starting point is on one of the lakes of the Hanbury River.

CO-ORDINATES (Lynx Lake)

Latitude - 62.5 degrees

Longitude - 107 degrees

LENGTH OF TRIP

Allow for about three weeks from Lynx Lake to Beverly Lake. For those heading on to Baker Lake, seven to ten days extra should be planned. It should be noted, however, that the high winds on the three big lakes heading into the community of Baker Lake can make travel impossible. Navigational skills are also required for this portion of lake travel.

WHAT KIND OF RIVER IS IT?

There isn't a river in the Northwest Territories that offers such a rich variety of wildlife-viewing opportunities combined with classic lowland tundra scenery. The bonus is that there is a forest oasis located halfway through the trip, which makes for a startling and welcome transition in landscape and wildlife. The Thelon is not the most challenging river in the North, especially from the junction of the Hanbury River. But the thousands of caribou, the muskoxen, grizzly bears, wolves, eagles, falcons and swans make up for whatever lack of excitement there might be in the paddling.

It would be unwise to assume, however, that the journey will be an easy one. In this part of the North, there is a good chance that you will experience the four seasons in a single day. And when you're not fighting off the weather, you'll be warding the mosquitoes and blackflies which seem to lord over this part of the North more than anywhere else.

The route is as remote as you're likely to encounter on the Northwest Territories mainland. Although successive paddlers have travelled through the area since the days when surveyor J.W. Tyrell did it in 1893-94, there are no communities located anywhere near the drop off point and the end of the journey (Beverly Lake). But the route is rich in history. Remnants of a number of ancient Indian and Inuit camps are located along the way. So is the cabin of the famous John Hornby, the adventurer-trapper who perished along the route with two companions in 1927 in what was one of the more dramatic tragedies to have occurred among the non-native visitors in the North during the days of exploration. The biggest tragedy, however, was that of the starvation of hundreds of Inuit in the area throughout the period past the turn of the century. It is one of the sadder and least publicized chapters in Canadian history.

There are plenty of opportunities to hike the surrounding countryside along the Thelon although excursions of more than a day tend to cover the same sort of country. Fishing is excellent along the faster sections. And while most of the trip is without trees, there is enough driftwood along the way to build a daily fire.

All of these features combine to make the Thelon River route one of the quintessential wilderness canoe trips in Canada. The experience outdoors-person will not be disappointed.

HOW TO GET THERE

The headwater of the Thelon are accessible by float-plane from either Yellowknife or Fort Smith, about a 400 kilometre or three and a half hour flight. Yellowknife can be reached via Canadian or Northwest Territorial Airlines from Edmonton on a daily basis. Fort Smith can be reached via Canadian Airlines from Edmonton.

An alternative route is to drive up on the MacKenzie Highway. Fort Smith is about an 18 hour drive, Yellowknife closer to 20 hours from Edmonton.

There are a number of air charter services in Yellowknife and at least one in Fort Smith that you can make arrangements with to get into Lynx Lake. For the names of these and more information about the air or road trip, consult the Northwest Territories Explorers' Guide for the year you plan to travel.

For those who do not feel comfortable about making such a challenging wilderness journey on their own or for those who do not want to spend all the time and money shipping equipment and canoes this far north, an alternative is to go with guide. For names of experienced outfitters, consult the Northwest Territories Explorers' Guide.

CLASSIFICATION

Sections of the river extending from Lynx Lake to the Hanbury junction rate from Class I to Class Six. Most individual rapids along this section rate no higher than Grade 3 with the majority of them rating a Grade 1 and 2. There are a few relatively short portages along this first section, the longest being the 1.2 km trek around the falls near the section of the river lying east of Jim Lake. A number of sections may have to be lined depending on skill and water level.

The journey from the Hanbury Junction to Beverly Lake is slow and meandering. Virtually the entire route is of Class 1 rating with the occasional Grade 2 rapids. There are no portages along this last part of the trip although there are a couple of tricky sections that can be easily avoided. (See River Profile for more details).

HISTORY

Archaeologists have discovered evidence of man along the Hanbury dating back to 6000 B.C., the most notable site being located near Warden's Grove (near the site where the Soviet satellite Cosmos 954 crashed in 1978). It is believed that the people were part of a caribou hunting culture.

Evidence of the Inuit Thule culture dating back 1000 years has also been found along the Thelon. Unlike the coastal Inuit who lived primarily off seals and fish, the caribou Inuit, as they are called, followed the migrating herds as they crossed the Keewatin region. Slight shifts in caribou migrations often resulted in periods of starvation. The world-renowned ethnologist Knut Rasmussen reported the deaths of about 100 people due to starvation when he travelled through the area in the 1920s. This represented nearly one-fifth of the total population. Periods of famine occurred right up until around 1940 in this particular area and until 1958 in the more northerly region around Garry lakes. International pressure finally forced the federal government to take action to stop the suffering. As a result, most of the migrating outpost communities were relocated for a more permanent settlement in villages with government services. Many of the Garry Lake survivors were relocated in Baker Lake which remains today as the only inland Inuit community in the Northwest Territories.

Samuel Hearne was probably the first European to reach the area when he made his overland journey from Churchill to the Coppermine River guided by the Indian Matonabee. It was the Tyrell brothers, employees of the Geological Survey of Canada, who conducted the first scientific expedition through the area in 1893-94. J.W. Tyrell has written a number of articles and books describing those trips. Many are published in the Canadian Geographical Journal, now known as Canadian Geographic.

The famous British traveller David T. Hanbury made two journeys into the region by dogteam in 1899 and 1902. He was accompanied by Inuit guides.

The most famous figure of the Thelon, however, is the adventurer, trapper and prospector John Hornby. A prolific, although somewhat reckless traveller, Hornby surveyed the area in 1924 and 1925 along with James Critchell-Bullock. Their reports were fundamental to the establishment of the sanctuary which aimed at preserving the dwindling muskoxen population.

But Hornby was a romantic at heart and a seeker of great fortune. In 1927, he set off with two relatively inexperienced men, his young cousin Edgar Christian and Harold Adlard, a native of Edmonton, to trap on the barrenlands. Hornby had spent 19 previous years exploring the North and at least one winter on the Thelon. But the ability of living off the land, which he often boasted about, eluded him on this journey. Hornby and his companions reached the junction of the Thelon and the Hanbury in the fall of 1926, too late to take advantage of the migrating caribou. Instead of retreating, however, they stayed on hoping that more caribou would come by later. Hornby died of starvation in April, Adlard 18 days later. Edgar Christian managed to hang on until June, just around the time that the animal migrations were due back in the area. Christian left behind a painstaking tragic account of the winter and spring that led to his own death and the deaths of the others. It is highly recommended reading for those planning this trip.

There is not much left of Hornby's cabin. The curious can find what's left in the forest growth at Hornby Point right at the benchmark. Please do not disturb the site or remove any artifacts from the area.

Today both the Inuit of Baker Lake and the Dene of Lutsel K'e (Snowdrift) venture into the area each summer to hunt for caribou. Inukshuks and tent rings are found everywhere indicating their camps and routes. Most of the people in both communities rely heavily on the area for food and clothing.

GEOGRAPHY

Much of the Thelon River passes through the folded sedimentary hills of the Canadian Shield. Lynx Lake is located in Pre-Cambrian shield country giving way to the rolling tundra at the waterfalls located west of Jim Lake. The forest oasis within the Thelon Game sanctuary rises out of an isolated sandstone plain of the same Canadian Shield physiography. While much of the region is made up of low Arctic tundra, the oasis may be best described as open woodland. The entire area is located near the southern boundary of continuous permafrost and as such, gives rise to surface-rooting plants that do not have to penetrate very far below ground level. The forest oasis is an exception.

The countryside on this part of the trip to Mary Frances River is marked by white sand hills and numerous eskers - common features of this type of Canadian Shield physiography. The Thelon Bluffs located near the end of the trip before Beverly Lake are the most prominent topographic feature of the river. The land flattens out considerably heading into the big lake system that takes you into Baker Lake.

FLORA

There is a rich variety of plant life common to both the low Arctic tundra and the open woodland along this route. The tundra growth includes low plants such as dryas, sedges, labrador tea, blueberries, and crowberries. Medium-sized plants include willow shrub and bog birch. A few stands of birch are found scattered along the route, outcrops of the forest oasis. Wildflowers bloom for a short period, usually around the beginning of July for about two weeks. A guide to plant life of the tundra and open forest is recommended.

The isolated stand of forest growth situated in the Thelon Game Sanctuary may be a welcome relief to some who tire of the continuous tundra landscape. But it is a lonely stretch of the river route made even more despairing by the reminder of Hornby's fate and by the stunted nature of the forest growth. There are many old stands of spruce and larch located here. The shorelines are often thick with willow shrub.

WILDLIFE

The wildlife is the primary attraction of the Thelon River. Most notable are the barren ground caribou, part of the Beverly herd which migrates through the area in July. The approximately 200,000 animals in this herd make the chances good that paddlers on a three week trip will see at least hundreds, if not thousands of the animals along the way. There is nothing more mesmerizing than watching 10,000 caribou cross a river.

The Thelon Game Sanctuary also has a very healthy muskoxen population. These prehistoric-looking animals can be seen individually or in groups of about up to 30, grazing or resting along the shoreline. While photographers may be tempted to approach the muskoxen for close-up shots, be wary that they will charge and can cause serious injury.

Although it is not yet known how many barren ground grizzly bears inhabit the region, virtually all trips have reported sightings. Many in recent years have reported aggressive bears as well, so extreme caution should be taken. It would be wise to contact the Northwest Territories Department of Renewable Resources to get more information on ways of detecting and deterring bears before a dangerous situation arises. Ursus Island, the name of the set of islands on the Thelon Route before making the last major turn to the Canadian Wildlife Service cabin suggests that the region has more than its share of bears. However, there is nothing to back this up. Besides, it is unlikely that anyone would be tempted to stop and explore this bushy uninviting section.

Late June and early July is a superb time to view tens of thousands of tundra swans and Canada geese that nest along the Thelon River in the swampy section. Many of the higher banks and cliffs contain nests of peregrine falcons and rough-legged hawks. A guide to birds of North America is recommended.

There are plenty of fish in the faster moving sections of the Thelon. The most desired and tasty are the lake trout and the Arctic grayling. Northern pike are also found. It's been reported that Arctic char can be caught in the lower reaches of the Thelon. However, this could not be confirmed.

CLIMATE

The Thelon River is located along the most southerly point on continuous permafrost. The weather is extremely variable. Canoeists have a good chance of experiencing warm sunshine, heavy rain, snow and sleet in a single day. The predominately flat landscape leaves very little contour to shelter a canoe from the strong winds that seem to constantly blow on the lowland tundra. As a result, paddlers may find themselves wind-bound on the wider sections of the rivers and the open lakes. Allow for extra time to get to your final destination.

The following statistics give you a good picture of what to expect.

July mean high - 16 C

July mean low - 6.0 C

Winds - N at 21.6 km

Rain - about 13.8 cm rainfall out of an annual precipitation total of 23.5 cm.

NOTE: Minimum lows in July and particularly in August often go below the freezing mark.

RIVER PROFILE

LYNX LAKE - A word of caution right off the start here. Lynx Lake is a large body of water with more than its share of bays. Before landing, ask the pilot to do a fly-over of the point where the lake meets the river. Landing a distance away from the river risks the chance of getting wind-bound or having to cover two or three times the distance by following the shoreline.

LYNX LAKE TO MARY FRANCES RIVER - The river is relatively fast, but an easy paddle for the first 17 kilometres. However there is an unmarked rapid that might cause some problems at the point where the river runs northwards after opening up considerably. Paddlers should scout this section and, if necessary, line the canoe down the three-quarter kilometre rapid. There are two more unmarked rapids before you reach the long narrow lake which is not named on the map. The last rapid heading into the lake may be portaged on the right side. It is a relatively easy half-kilometre hike.

A series of rapids are located downstream of the long narrow lake where the river makes a U-bend, first to the south and then to the north. The first set of rapids may be portaged on the left bank while the second set of serious rapids, located about 1.5 kilometres downstream, may be portaged on the right side.

The longest, most gruelling portage of the trip is located another 25 kilometres downstream at the waterfalls marked west of Jim Lake on the map. It is about 1.2 kilometres long and passes over some pretty rough country. Beyond this point, this trip enters into true low Arctic tundra. The river is deep and fast, but easily navigated until you get to the section south of the Mary Frances River which is rock-strewn and spotted with ledges. Considerable maneuvering is required to get through this 12 kilometre section safely.

MARY FRANCES RIVER TO HANBURY RIVER - There are many runnable rapids through this section of the river to the Thelon Canyon. However, some of them may have to be lined or portaged depending on level of expertise and water levels. Access to the portage around the Thelon Canyon is located on the right side of the river. A less attractive alternative is to line the canoe on the west bank. Previous reports show this is very tricky.

Keep your eye out for the bird life that nests on the 30 metre canyon walls.

There are two more runnable rapids before you reach the Hanbury River, one located south of the Clark River, the other about one kilometre south of the Hanbury.

HANBURY JUNCTION TO BEVERLY LAKE - It takes about 10 days to two weeks to do this stretch of river. There is virtually no obstacle to worry about although travel on the river through the Thelon Bluffs should be carefully scouted to avoid the high standing waves and rock outcrops that are characteristic of this section. The 65 kilometre route to Hornby Point is wide and very shallow. Given that the main channel is often difficult to discern, paddlers would expect to have to abandon boats and line the canoe occasionally. As you head into the forested stretch of the river, watch out for moose which often come down to the river edge to escape from the swarming bugs.

WARDEN'S GROVE - a popular winter dwelling for numerous explorers and surveyors that

pass through this area is located about 11 kilometres downstream of the Hanbury junction behind a stand of spruce. The Soviet satellite Cosmos 954 crashed near here in 1978.

GRASSY ISLAND - is anything but grassy. It is a thick bug infested section of flat land that no person in their right mind would plan to camp on. Better sites are located at the right side of the river.

HORNBY POINT - is a very long day from Grassy Island. Paddlers may choose to take a second day, but should be advised that the opportunities for camping are very thin along the way. It may take some searching to find the remnants of Hornby's cabin since that is all that is left besides the three graves. But a good starting point for the search is at the benchmark found on the Tammarvi Map (66D). Remember not to disturb anything at this site.

URSUS ISLANDS - The name suggests bear trouble, but there is nothing to indicate that this area has more than its share of bears. The inhospitable nature of the area probably won't lure many people out of their canoes for a hike through the area.

THELON BLUFFS - These high hills look positively mountainous after nearly three weeks through relatively flat country. The river bend that heads into the canyon here is a good spot to take out your canoe and camp. A walk up the bluffs may seem like an endless climb as you reach one plateau only to find another higher one beyond it. But the view from the top puts it all into perspective and you won't be disappointed.

The paddle through the canyon of the bluffs can be little tricky. The safe way is to stay close to the right bank. That way you avoid the high standing waves and rock outcrops on the left side of the river. This part of the river should be scouted first.

BEVERLY LAKE - is the first of three big lakes heading into Baker Lake. Don't underestimate the crossing. If the winds are calm at the beginning of the crossing, they can easily whip up some dangerous standing waves by the time you reach the shelter of the islands 13 kilometres on the east side of the lake. It is best to stay close to the shoreline.

Most paddlers wisely end their trip at Beverly Lake. Planes can land on the lake in calm weather. But if conditions are poor, it might be best to arrange an alternative pick-up on the Thelon River about one kilometre before it spills into the lake. Be sure the pilot is aware of the last set of fast water on the right side of the river before the lake. Landing too close to this section may be dangerous.

MAP REQUIRED - (1 to 250,000 from Lynx Lake)

Beaverhill	75 I
Lake	75 P
Hanbury River	65 M
Clark River	66 D

Tammarvi 66 C
Beverly Lake