

# YELLOWKNIFE RIVER

## Length of Trip

Canoeists should plan for 11 to 14 days to paddle from the Greenstocking Lake to the City of Yellowknife. Ten days is required for parties beginning at Upper Carp Lake, and four (4) days is needed to paddle from Fishing Lake to the City of Yellowknife.

## Total Distance

260 kilometres (162.5 miles) from Greenstocking Lake to the City of Yellowknife.  
175 km (109 miles) from Upper Carp Lake to the City of Yellowknife.  
100 km (62.5 miles) from Fishing Lake to the City of Yellowknife

## Average Gradient

The average gradient from Greenstocking Lake to Yellowknife Bay on Great Slave Lake is 0.9 metres per kilometre (4.7 feet per mile).

The average gradient from Fishing Lake to Yellowknife Bay on Great Slave Lake is 1.2 metres per kilometre (6.2 feet per mile).

## Start

Canoeists may start at the Yellowknife River headwaters, or at several of the lakes along its course. Three (3) of the more popular starting points are: Greenstocking Lake, Upper Carp Lakes and Fishing Lake.

## Finish

Canoeists may finish at the Yellowknife River Bridge or at the City of Yellowknife.

## Accessibility

Any of the lakes along the Yellowknife River system may be reached by air charter from Yellowknife. Canoeists may also travel upstream from Yellowknife Bay, re-tracing Franklin's route of 1820. This route is considerably more difficult, requiring lining and portaging over falls, ledges and rugged terrain.

Yellowknife is accessible by road on the all weather, gravelled Mackenzie Highway. Canadian Airlines North and Northwest Territorial Airways fly regularly scheduled flights from Edmonton and Winnipeg to Yellowknife.

## Maps Required

(1:250,000)

Winter	86 A
Lake	85 P
Carp Lakes	85 0
Wecho River	85 J
Yellowknife	

\*\*\***Note:** Canoeists are advised to purchase the larger 1:50,000 scale maps to cover this same

area. These maps show the alternate routes much better than the 1:250,000 series.

(50,000)

Squalus	85 P/14
Lake	85 P/13
Wecho Lake	85 P/12
Frodsham Lake	85 P/5
Nardin Lake	85 O/8
Mossy Lake	85 O/1
Barker Lake	85 J/16
Quyta Lake	85 J/9
Prosperous Lake	

## **River Notes**

### **Introduction**

The Yellowknife River runs from Greenstocking Lake above the treeline down to Great Slave Lake. On the way, it passes through the gently rolling hills and eskers of the barrenlands and the rocky but wooded Precambrian Shield country around Yellowknife. The river offers canoeists a combination of exciting whitewater canoeing and lake paddling. Rapids are typically around the outlets of its many lakes. There are also several portages around its scenic waterfalls, ledges and rapids. Many of these rapids may be lined and the portages are generally short. Canoeists are cautioned to scout rapids thoroughly to avoid surprises. Fluctuations of water levels affect the locations of rapids and their level of difficulty. A dry year will leave the upper parts of the river very shallow. Canoeists planning to paddle the Yellowknife River should have basic river paddling skills. Although the route is relatively accessible, and in close proximity to Yellowknife, it is isolated from any services or communities. Therefore, canoeists must also be skilled in wilderness camping and survival.

One of the major hazards along this route is the winds on the lakes. Sudden winds can whip an otherwise calm lake into a rough, white capped hazard. However, these winds generally calm down in the evening. Given the long daylight hours in the summer, canoeists may extend their paddling schedules to include the evenings.

### **Climate**

Spring breakup on the Yellowknife River occurs in May, yet the lake often remains frozen until June. Canoeists should check with air charter companies to find out when the lakes will be ice free. Temperatures over the summer average between 13 C (55 F) to 16 C (60 F) although highs of 32.2 C (90 F) have been recorded. The weather is a little cooler at the treeline. Canoeists should carry raingear, a three (3) season sleeping bag and warm clothing.

In Yellowknife, there are only four (4) hours of twilight between sunset and sunrise on the longest day (June 21). This stretches out to eight (8) hours by late August. Because of the angle at which the sun sets during the summer months, long hours of twilight predominates, allowing daylight activities even after the sun has set.

### **Fauna**

Canoeists can see a variety of wildlife along the river. Moose, black bear, beaver and river otters are common. The northern portion of the river lies within the Bathurst caribou herd's wintering grounds.

Bald eagles and several species of hawks nest in the cliffs lining parts of the river. The lakes are the summer breeding grounds for a wide variety of waterfowl - mergansers, loons, teal, pintail and many others.

Lake trout and northern pike may be caught in any of the lakes along this river system. The best location for hooking grayling are found below the cascades, ledges and in many of the rapids.

## **Flora**

In the Greenstocking Lake area, stunted spruce and birch trees grow in sheltered nooks along the lake shores and river valleys. Since this region is along the fringe of the tundra, vegetation is sparse and characteristic of the barren lands. During spring and early summer (late May to June), many of the wild flowers come into bloom.

A 32 km (20 mi.) paddle south brings canoeists well below the treeline. The size of the trees increases as canoeists descend the river. Black spruce becomes the dominant tree species, with poplar and birch being the secondary species. Along the shores are thickets of willow and alder. Labrador tea, cranberry, bunchberry and bearberry are all edible plants that may be found along the entire Yellowknife River route.

## **History**

The Yellowknife River is named after a tribe of Dene people who travelled the area from Yellowknife Bay, east to Artillery Lake and north to Contwoyto Lake. The name stems from Sir John Franklin's observation that they possessed hunting implements made of copper from along the Coppermine River. Anthropologists disagree over whether the Yellowknives were a Chipewyan sub tribe from the south eastern corner of Great Slave Lake or a separate tribe. Several waves of epidemics decimated the Yellowknives and the survivors were assimilated by the Dogribs and Chipeweyans.

An early explorer in the area was a Northwest Company fur trader, Laurent Leroux, who established "Old Fort Providence" on the shores of Yellowknife Bay. He also set up a smaller post at Lac La Martre during travels in the area. "Old Fort Providence" is not to be confused with Fort Providence located on the Mackenzie River.

In 1820, Lieutenant John Franklin led the first party of explorers up the Yellowknife River and in to the Coppermine drainage system in search of the Polar Sea. They were guided by Chief Akaitcho and several Indian hunters. On August 2, 1820, Franklin, along with John Richardson, George Back, Robert Hood and a crew of voyageurs, left Old Fort Providence and ascended the Yellowknife as far as Winter Lake. This site was chosen by Akaitcho as a suitable spot for winter quarters. The three (3) log buildings, storehouse, main hall and voyageurs quarters were named Fort Enterprise. Little remains at this site today, as it was abandoned shortly after it was constructed. If you happen to come upon this or any other historic site, please remember that the artifacts at old sites, such as camps, graves, cabins, etc., are vital to revealing the history of the NWT. 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.

## **River Notes**

### **Greenstocking Lake to Upper Carp Lake**

The Yellowknife River begins at Greenstocking Lake, 200 km (125 mi) north of Yellowknife. The lake is 24 km (15 mi) south of the abandoned Fort Enterprise on Winter Lake. Many of the rapids over the first 12 km (7.5 mi) must be portaged and others lined. Water levels will

determine which sections are navigable. Here the river still runs through the tundra and trees do not become common until the Hunter Lake area. The outlet of Hunter Lake is difficult to see because of the overgrown willows. The portage is located on the left bank from the outlet past a very furious section of the river.

The 15 km (10 mi) long Reindeer Lake can become very rough due to winds. Canoeists must therefore be extremely careful when attempting to cross this lake. The outlet is at the most easterly side of the numerous bays.

There are several boulder rapids on the stretch of river between Dissension and Reindeer Lakes. These can be bypassed more quickly by portaging than trying to line through.

Below the second marked rapid between Reindeer Lake and Upper Carp Lake there is an unmarked 10 metres cascade. At the bottom of this cascade the river widens and flows into Upper Carp Lake. This section is more like a series of roundish lakes linked by narrow straits.

### **Upper Carp Lake to Fishing Lake**

The first Carp portage (on Carp Lakes, 85 P map) marks the beginning of a hazardous section of the river with its many beautiful falls and rapids. At their beginning, the rapids look deceptively simple, but out of sight downstream is a two (2) foot ledge followed by large standing waves.

For the next 20 km (13 mi) , the river flows through a narrow valley, surrounded by 150 metre hills. The main channel is about 20 metres wide. Only those very experienced in white water canoeing should attempt running this stretch. There is an alternative route following John Franklin's Nine Lakes (Wecho River, 85 0 map). Although this may require more portaging, it is considerably safer. Franklin used this route on his voyage north in 1821. The Nine Lakes route will bring you back on the Yellowknife River at Icy Portage just west of Lake 950+.

In the stretch below here, canoeists can expect to find three (3) major portages. These are marked on the map. The last one, just before Fishing Lake, is a series of lift-overs around two (2) rocky ledges. Depending on the time of year, the river may be very shallow below Sandy Portage. The countryside here is typically Precambrian Shield with the many rock outcrops and spruce trees nestled in the more fertile hollows. Trees, willows and berry bushes grow right up to the river and lake shores.

### **Fishing Lake to the City of Yellowknife**

There is an old burn area at the outlet of Fishing Lake, which creates difficult walking conditions on the portages. Canoeists are reminded to carefully scout all the rapids between Fishing and Rocky Lake. The level of difficulty of the rapids depends on the water levels. The last section before Rocky Lake is about 2 km (1.25 mi) long and contains a series of drops and ledges which must be portaged.

Rocky Lake is named for all the numerous rocks found just below the water at the northern end of the lake. Canoeists are advised to carefully scout the rapids found below here.

After entering Clan Lake and paddling around the long point to pick up the river outlet, paddlers will encounter a power line on the east bank. The portage around the next falls begins on the right bank before the line crosses the river.

The Yellowknife River from Clan to Quytta Lakes has several falls and many rapids. Most of the rapids have to be portaged or lined. There is a winter trail on the east bank of the river that can be used as a portage to Sito Lake. This lake is called Green Tree Lake on some maps.

Between Sito and Quyta Lakes are four (4) major portages, the longest being about 400 metres, the shortest 200 metres. The last and longest portage brings the traveller into some fast water below the rapids on the north end of Quyta Lake.

There is an unmarked rapid and falls between Quyta Lake and Bluefish Lakes. The portage is on the east bank about 10 metres above the falls. Maps show only one (1) foot difference in the water surface elevations between Quyta and Bluefish Lakes but the falls are two (2) metres high. Bluefish Lake was created by the building of a hydro dam to supply Yellowknife. Canoeist should watch out for submerged trees on this lake. The portage around the rapids and the dam starts at a small cove on a large island southeast of the dam but northwest of the water intake. The trail is easy walking over a road, and is about 1.6 km (1 mi) in length.

At the base of the cascade is a good grayling fishing spot. Prosperous Lake is relatively large and winds may create sizeable waves at short notice. At the end of Prosperous Lake, canoeists have the option of continuing to paddle to Yellowknife, or of finishing the trip at Cassidy Point, where there is road access to the Ingraham Trail.

Where the Yellowknife River leaves Prosperous Lake, the Tartan Rapids are found. The portage around these rapids is well marked and cleared. A boat dock on the left bank marks the beginning of a short carry over, a ridge and down to a cove below the rapids. During medium water levels, these class 11 rapids are runnable. However, during higher water levels they may become hazardous.

From here to the Yellowknife Bridge, the canoeist will encounter flatwater, with some shallow sections. Strong winds may create large waves. A boat launch and picnic area are provided at the bridge. This is the recommended finish point for all parties. Although only 8 km of lake paddling remains to the City of Yellowknife, winds and large waves on the open water of Great Slave Lake present serious hazards to canoeists. Those who decide to paddle this last leg of the journey, should stay close to shore and watch for sudden winds.

Yellowknife, the capital city of the Northwest Territories, is located on the shores of Great Slave Lake. Founded in 1934, after a successful search for gold, this urban centre has become the base for government at the Federal and Territorial level. In addition, there are two operating gold mines - Giant Yellowknife Mines and Cominco. Yellowknife offers a variety of services including hotels, restaurants, a theatre, shopping centres and several gift shops where local arts and crafts may be purchased. There are a couple of out door stores which provide canoeing supplies, including freeze-dried foods, camping gear and clothing, canoe sales and rentals. A campground is located at Long Lake, near the Yellowknife airport.

### **Source Information**

1. Yellowknife River Trip Report, Travel Arctic, GNWT, Yellowknife, NWT, 1979
2. Franklin, Captain John. Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1819, 20, 21 and 22. New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers. 1969
3. Wray, O.R. BY Canoe Up the Yellowknife River in 1932, Part One. Muskox 26, 1980.

### **YELLOWKNIFE RIVER CUMULATIVE DISTANCE**

<b><u>LOCATION</u></b>	<b><u>KILOMETRES</u></b>		<b><u>MILES</u></b>
Greenstocking Lake Outlet	0		0
Upper Carp Lake Inlet	66.0		41.5
Fishing Lake Inlet	141.5		88.5
Clan Lake Inlet	193.0		120.5

Yellowknife River	253.0	158.0
Bridge	260.0	162.5
City of Yellowknife		