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Wind River wilderness threatened

Greenland kayaking adventure

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The Wind River



Photo by Charlotte Jacklein

Travels in a changing landscape

by Charlotte Jacklein

Scrambling along the rock scree that skirts the steep ridge above us, I pause to catch my breath and look back. Far below, the blue oval of McClusky Lake sparkles like a million gemstones in the sunlight. To the west, the sweeping valley of the Wind River stretches to the north and south, giving us an eagle eye view of the braided channels, forested slopes and towering mountains. After only an hour or two of hiking up the steep mountainside, the bright yellow tents of our shore-side camp are barely visible amid the expanse of tough scrag-

gly spruce trees. Following the glinting channels of the Wind River through our binoculars, we watch the river weave around gravel bars and forested islands to gradually disappear into the jagged mountains to the north.

Together with its sister rivers, the Snake and the Bonnet Plume, the Wind River flows through some of the most undeveloped wilderness in the world. Beginning in the Wernecke Mountains and flowing north towards Fort McPherson and the Mackenzie River, the Wind River travels past a series of

spectacular landscapes. In recent years, the Peel Watershed has been increasingly debated in the media and politics as the formerly untouched wilderness has come under threat from mining ventures seeking to develop uranium, coal and precious metal deposits in the area. Yet, at present, the only hints of potential development are the occasional trace of mining explorations and the overgrown winter road that shadows

Above: Looking down the Wind River valley after a day of hiking in the mountains



Lining boats down the icy mountain creek from McClusky Lake to the Wind River

sections of the river. Gliding along the icy clear current, watching caribou and Dall's sheep in the distance, savouring sunny afternoons in alpine meadows, the Wind River remains a dream come true for wilderness paddlers.

Compared to the Snake and Bonnet Plume, the Wind River is the least technically challenging of the Three Rivers. The long stretches of continuous Class I and occasional Class II rapids of the Wind River are a joy to paddle and can be easily navigated by competent paddlers without extensive whitewater skills. However, the Wind River's long stretches of fast-moving water, remote location and braided channels still make this a Class II river. Beginning high in the mountains, the upper stretches of the Wind River require occasional lining and speedy manoeuvring to follow the twisting channels and dodge frequent sweepers that jut from undercut banks. Flowing through the mountains, the river gradually widens and gains

Hiking offers sweeping views of the braided river valley and multi-coloured mountains.





Photo by Charlotte Jacklein

Crystal clear water rushes over the polished rocks below Mt Royal.

volume, descending at a rapid pace into the sprawling plains of the lower Wind. Approaching the powerful Peel River, the Wind passes multi-coloured cliffs and gravel bars scattered with chunks of natural coal. Other than the potentially challenging Peel Canyon, the final section along the Peel River requires less technical manoeuvring, but offers dramatic cliffscapes and a distinctively different atmosphere than the upper Wind.

Together with its sister rivers, the Snake and the Bonnet Plume, the Wind River flows through some of the most undeveloped wilderness in the world.

Paddlers preparing for a trip on the Wind River can find numerous online trip reports, as well as some excellent books published in the last few years (see list at end of article). As with any remote river trip, paddlers need to be experienced and well-prepared for varying river conditions, extreme weather and unexpected situations. As in most alpine and arctic areas, weather can vary wildly, even at the peak of summer. Be prepared for sub-zero temperatures at night – one midsummer morning we even had to

crack through a thick layer of ice in our water jug. Lower down, the estimated July mean temperature for Peel plateau is 15 degrees Celsius, with 30 degree swings possible in a 24 hour time span. On our last trip, we were blessed with days of sunshine and only a frosting of snow

on the mountains, but the previous year an acquaintance spent three weeks paddling through non-stop rain. In short, be prepared for any weather and you should be just fine.

Most paddlers choose to paddle an approximately 275 km section of the Wind River that starts at McClusky Lake and ends at Taco Bar on the Peel River. However, paddling an additional 200 km to Fort McPherson can eliminate the need for a second expensive float plane trip. Departing from the float plane base just outside the town of Mayo, Black Sheep Aviation has taken paddlers into the Three Rivers headwaters for years. The hour-long flight to the put-in at McClusky Lake takes you skimming above tundra lakes, snow-crested mountains and deep valleys. Occasional roads zigzagging along the slopes indicate past and present mining ventures, including the extensive silver mine at Keno, once the second largest silver mine in Canada.

A steep descent past the scree slopes of Mount Braine brings you to McClusky Lake, a few kilometres east of the Wind River. The old hunting cabin on the hummocky north shore of the lake is surrounded by small clearings for camping. Taking a quick paddle across the lake leads to great hiking with excellent views



Photo by Charlotte Jacklein

Waterfalls plummet down the bleak cliffs after an afternoon of rain.



A canoe skirts the rapids below the cliffs of Mt Deception.



Looking down on our gravel bar campsite, the view from Mt Deception shows the dozens of braided channels on the lower Wind River.

of the Wind Valley and beyond. A short 300 m portage – the only mandatory portage of the trip – takes you through shoulder-high scrub and over the small height of land to an unnamed creek. The creek’s clear, icy water descends quickly down pebble runs and boulder islets, past occasional strainers and sharp bends. A couple hours of lining down the chilling fast-flowing water of this mountain creek will quickly reveal who came prepared with the right footwear!

While the multiple channels of the river are often only a stone-throw in width, the valley itself is easily a kilometre or more wide.

As you enter the Wind River, the swift current will quickly take you into a world of thick spruce forest, broad gravel bars and marshy side-valleys. The channels of the upper Wind River weave in and out as if a playful giant had designed an obstacle course for paddlers. The current

sweeps past an endless series of S bends framed by large gravel bars and undercut banks with strainers. Occasional log jams block even the larger channels, but can be avoided by lining back up to another channel or lifting over the gravel bars to a better route. Keep a sharp eye ahead, pick the largest channels, stay on the inside of the curves, and you’ll zip past most potential hazards.

In mid to low water, the broad gravel bars along the upper Wind River offer a multitude of picture-perfect camping options. With a little bit of searching, you’ll even find the ideal combination of sheltering willow shrubs, soft sandy gravel for the tents and big rocks to make a cooking area. Most gravel bars have plenty of dry driftwood deposits from the spring floods. Lower down along the river, the muddy shores often show tracks of previous visitors such as caribou, moose, wolf and grizzly. As in any area with bears, follow bear protocol and be aware of your surroundings. Bears in this area fortunately are not habituated to human visitors, but they still might come investigate interesting smells. Do your part to avoid potentially dangerous encounters.

While the multiple channels of the river are often only a stone-throw in width, the valley itself is easily a kilometre or more wide. Standing in an open area, you can watch half a day’s worth of incoming weather spell itself out against the distant mountains – better than any weather forecast. Alongside the quieter corners of the valley, flooded only in high water, the marshy ponds and lakes make great areas for moose-watching. Depending on your choice of channel, you may see completely different sections of the river for a half day or more. The skyline of rugged mountains is distractingly visible from most parts of the river, but at times the thick forest seems to block access into the alpine world. Simply follow a channel to the furthest edges of the valley, and even if the forest seems thick, a short bushwhack will soon take you to open alpine terrain.

Leaving the cool riverside to go hiking into the dense forest may seem a little intimidating when the mosquitoes are out in full force, but a determined charge through the clouds of bugs will soon take



Photo by Scott Caspell

The point of no return – steep cliffs mark the entrance to the Peel Canyon.

you to the gloriously windy, mosquito-free mountains. Keep your eyes open for small groups of white Dall's sheep and be prepared for a surprising number of white, sheep-like rocks scattered on the mountainside. Travelling from south of the Wernecke Mountains, the Nacho Nyak Dun people once also traversed these steep slopes in search of sheep and caribou. Hiking skywards, the short grasses and lichens are soon replaced by seemingly bare rock. Yet even amid the acres of razor-sharp rockslides, hardy wildflowers grow wherever they find a speck of sheltered soil and sunlight.

While some of the biggest peaks are best scaled only by experienced mountaineers, any competent hiker can find his or her way to stunning mountain views with basic map and compass skills. In many areas, the winter road is visible along the west side of the river, an incongruously straight line surrounded by sinuous channels and sloping mountainsides. In 2007, the Yukon government approved a mining company's proposal to further develop this winter road in order to reach uranium claims. Beyond the direct impact of bulldozing

and expanding this road, the mining of radioactive material such as uranium poses a significant threat to the future of the Wind River.

Yet in the long sunny days of summer, the possibility of mining development seems a world away. As you paddle northwards, the river gradually gains volume as mountain creeks tumble down from neighbouring valleys. Anglers will find delicious grayling in the clear pools alongside the river banks – pick a good spot, and in half a dozen casts you'll have a meal of fresh fish. While many of the caribou head north for the summer, chances are good that you'll see occasional solitary caribou along the Wind Valley. Just south of the towering mountains at Bond Creek, one particularly curious caribou stared at us in astonishment as the current swept our canoe closer. Head high, the caribou splashed across the river a few boat lengths ahead of us before charging up a steep bank. According to an environmental assessment by the Yukon Environmental and Socio-economic Assessment Board, mining cat trains are supposed to mitigate their impact by giving caribou the right of way; but, seeing this caribou's wide-eyed reaction to one silent canoe, I can only imagine its stunned response to a convoy of noisy bulldozers.

Before reaching the plains at the Bear River confluence, huge bleak cliffs tower over the west bank of the Wind River. While beautiful on a clear day, rainy weather sends milky rows of waterfalls cascading down the steep grey rock. In one broad section of the river, an unexpected island of thick ice covered several acres of the riverbed, giving a vivid demonstration of why the water was still so cold in late July. The river continues to descend rapidly, with the continuous swifts and Class I rapids as the crystal clear water shoots over perfectly polished river rocks. Just before leaving the mountains, the landscape becomes even grander in scale, with Mount Royal reaching skywards to the west and unique layers of tilted sedimentary rock along the eastern shore.

Leaving the dramatic mountains and entering the forested valleys, the landscape evokes memories of other boreal rivers in Ontario and Quebec.

Occasional landslides, steep forests and rocky hilltops mark the banks of the river as it charges onwards. As you approach the confluence of the Little Wind River, a series of Class II rapids marks the left side of the river, but these are easily avoided by staying to river right. Missing the mountains already? No worries. The Illyd Range provides a variety of hiking opportunities, though on a smaller scale than the majestic Wernecke Mountains. As the river valley broadens and spreads across the plains, the channels multiply and become increasingly confusing. Seemingly harmless side channels abruptly cut into the forest under a swath of strainers, log jams pop up out of nowhere, and entire trees suddenly float past your canoe. Good scouting from your boat and staying to the main channels will help you choose the best route through this maze of swift-moving options.

This area also saw the last days of the Lost Patrol.

Easily visible from miles away, Mount Deception looms up from the relatively flat surrounding landscape. The rapids at the base of the sloping cliffs are easily avoided by staying close to river right as you pass the mountain. A short, steep climb up the brambly hillside leads to spectacular views of the braided channels to the north and south. While any artefacts have long been swept away by the spring floods, the mouth of Beaver Creek is believed to be the location of “Wind City”, an impromptu community of approximately 70 miners who were caught here in the winter of 1898. This area also saw the last days of the Lost Patrol, an ill-fated Northwest Mounted Police patrol who made the mistake of dismissing their local Gwich’in guide and soon after were lost in -60 degree weather on the 760 km route from Dawson City, Yukon, to Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories.

As you approach the confluence with the Peel River, crumbling black lumps of coal litter the surface of the shore – a mere fraction of the 600 million tonnes that lie beneath the lower Wind River and Bonnet Plume River. Various mining companies have eyed this deposit as source of both profitable “clean-burn-

ing” coal and coal-bed methane, but the remote location and lack of roads has slowed exploration and development. Several uranium claims are also located in this area in the lower Wind River. Though less visible than the surface coal, uranium mining is potentially an even greater threat to the ecological health of the Wind River.

Unlike the crystal clear waters of the upper Wind River, the water in the Peel is murky and full of silt. Filtration-based water treatment systems that worked smoothly on the Wind River may quickly become clogged up on the Peel, so it’s wise to bring some back-up method of treating your drinking water. Mudslides along the side of the river reveal colourful layers of ancient sediments; occasional lucky paddlers have even come across ancient mammoth tusks exposed by the crumbling riverbank. Geologist Charles Camsell reported finding hot springs near the mouth of Mountain Creek early in the 1900s, but so far they have evaded rediscovery.

Paddling in moose-hide boats, Gwich’in families traditionally made their annual springtime trek downriver along this section of the Peel en route to their summer hunting grounds. Slightly hidden by a mass of little channels, the mouth of the Bonnet Plume enters the Peel just over 20 km downstream from

the Wind River. Named after Gwich’in explorer and guide Andrew Flett Bonnetplume, the Bonnet Plume is a Canadian Heritage River.

A couple kilometres onwards, the dramatic entrance to the Peel Canyon funnels the river into an even faster-flowing pace past the steep, narrow cliffs. Twisted rock formations along the canyon show the incredible tectonic forces that shaped this landscape. Navigating the canyon is fairly straightforward at low to medium water, but at high water this section may be the most hair-raising ride of your entire trip. Just after entering the gates of the canyon, a gravel bar on river right allows you to scout the most difficult section: a long wave train surrounded by powerful whirlpools and eddies that can vary dramatically depending on the water level.

Beyond the Peel Canyon, the current continues to move rapidly past broad gravel bars and tall cliffs. Watch your head – miniature avalanches of loose shale frequently cascade down the crumbling cliffs. Peregrine falcons nest high in the cliffs, defending their territory with fierce shrieks. Rare in many parts of the world, these speedy birds of prey can sprint up to 300 km per hour when hunting. On a slower note, you may also see signs of beavers that make their homes along the side creeks and



The towering cliffs on river right mark the take-out at Taco Bar.

Photo by Charlotte Jacklein



marshes. Mosquitoes also flourish in the warmer conditions of the Peel River valley. At one particularly buggy campsite, dozens of dragonflies hovered around us for hours, helpfully feasting on the mosquitoes who were feasting on us.

Multi-coloured, mosaic-like cliffs mark the shore in the final kilometres before the Snake enters the Peel River. Just over two kilometres downstream from the confluence of the Snake and the Peel, the big gravel plain of Taco Bar marks the take-out for most Wind River trips. Taco Bar is indicated by a small float plane sign, but, depending on past river action, this sign may be tipped over or tilted backwards into the trees. A more reliable landmark is the towering wall of cliffs on river right, just across from Taco Bar.

This pristine wilderness may indeed disappear or change significantly in the near future as mining developments threaten the cultural and ecological integrity of the region.

Flying back towards Mayo from Taco Bar will give you an aerial view of the route you travelled over the last days of your trip. As the float plane veers away from the Wind River valley, the gleaming channels, sweeping plains and rugged mountains disappear swiftly from view. This pristine wilderness may indeed disappear or change significantly in the near future as mining developments threaten the cultural and ecological integrity of the region. Yet, considering the intrinsic value of wild places in this world, surely many people will take action to continue protecting the Wind River watershed.

Good books on the Wind River:

Wild Rivers of the Yukon's Peel Watershed – A Traveller's Guide by Juri Peepre and Sarah Locke

Three Rivers: The Yukon's Great Boreal Wilderness by Margaret Atwood, John Ralston Saul, Courtney Milne, Juri Peepre, Sarah Locke and Others

Useful websites:

Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), Yukon Chapter

<http://www.cpawsyukon.org/peel-watershed/index.html>

Black Sheep Aviation

<http://www.flyblacksheep.ca/>

Yukon Tourism Information

<http://travelyukon.com/>



Photo by Scott Caspell

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