

A Report
on the
Bell and Porcupine Rivers
Yukon Territory
(unedited)

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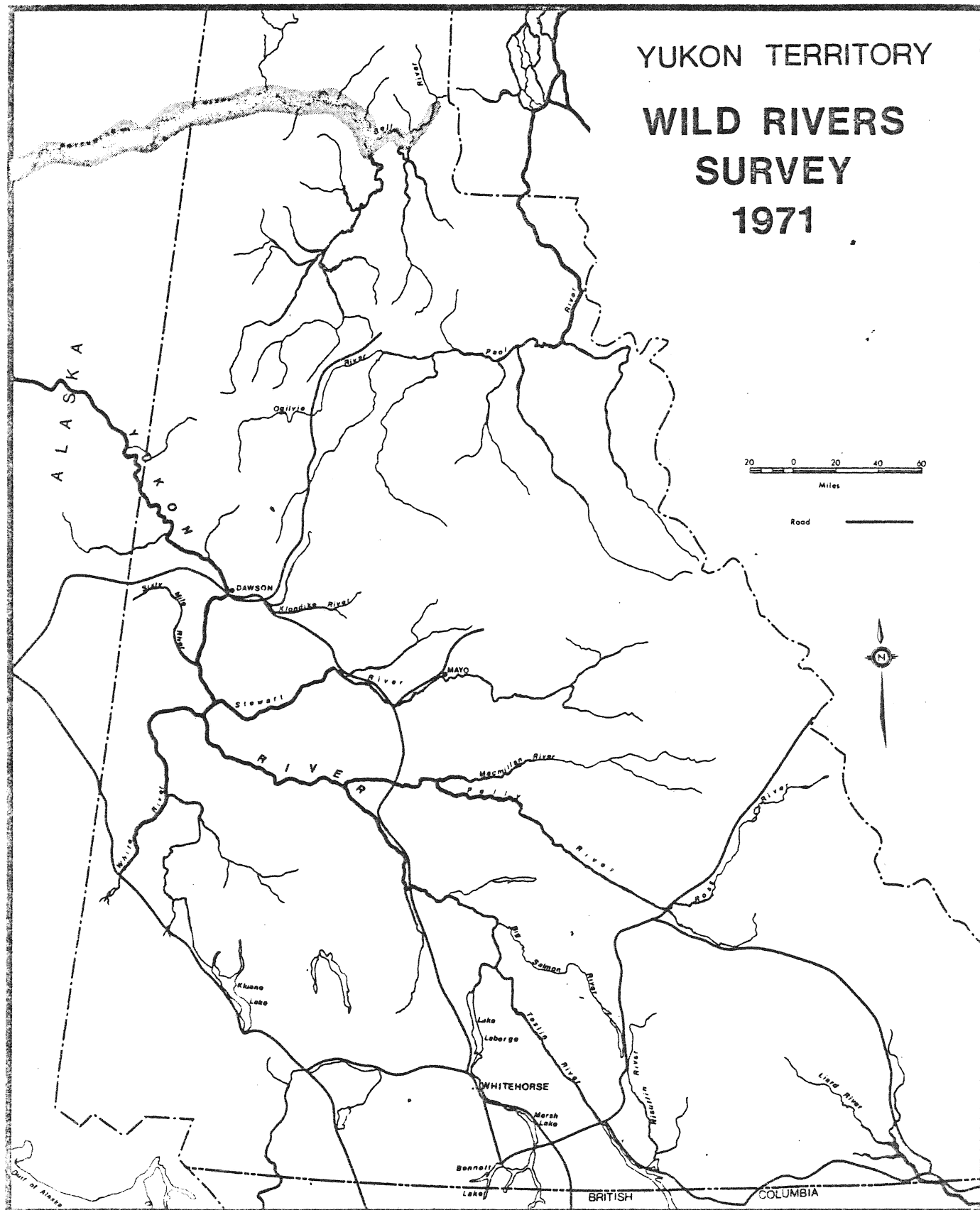
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YUKON TERRITORY

WILD RIVERS SURVEY

1971



INTRODUCTION

The Bell and Porcupine Rivers were two of fifteen rivers surveyed during the summer of 1971 in the Yukon Territory. This Wild Rivers Survey was conducted by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, National and Historic Parks Branch, Planning Division.

Rivers surveyed during the same period are as follows:

1. Yukon River
2. Nisutlin River
3. Teslin River
4. Lake Bennett, Taguish Lake, Atlin Lake, Atlin River, and Marsh Lake
5. Pelly River
6. Ross River Yukon River Drainage
7. MacMillan River
8. White River
9. Sixty Mile River
10. Klondike River
11. Big Salmon River
12. Stewart River
13. Ogilvie and Peel Rivers MacKenzie River Drainage

A four man crew in two seventeen foot canoes took 18 days to travel from Summit Lake in the MacDougall Pass to Fort Yukon on the Yukon River, a distance of 508 miles. Each man carried personal gear and equipment required for a canoe trip.

The entire route is north of the Arctic Circle, skirting the northern limit of trees. This river system heads to the east in the Richardson Mountains at Summit Lake in the MacDougall Pass and empties into the Yukon River 508 miles

to the west, in Alaska.

The mean daily January and July temperatures are -20° and 50° to 55° respectively. Mean annual rainfall is 5 inches with approximately 3 inches falling during the summer months of June, July and August. The entire area is north of the southern limit of permafrost.

The route lies in the transition zone between the Tundra and Boreal Forest Region. Tree growth is limited to the river banks, with tundra vegetation situated beyond the banks. In the more southerly Yukon Flats area the timber is larger and wildlife is also more abundant. In late summer and fall, migrating caribou cross the Bell and Porcupine Rivers on their way south to their wintering grounds.

Access to Summit Lake may be gained by float plane or paddling from the MacKenzie Delta and up the Rat River into MacDougall Pass. Before the surge of Klondikers over the Pass in 1898-99, it was part of a major Hudson's Bay Company route used to connect Fort Simpson with the more remote outposts of Lapierre House on the Bell River, Rampart House on the Porcupine River, and Fort "Youcon" on the Yukon River. Egress may take place at Old Crow or at Fort Yukon, Alaska, where air services connect to other northern centres.

Water levels in August are sufficiently low to make travel by canoe difficult in the upper reaches of the Bell and Little Bell Rivers. The best water levels may be encountered from the middle of June through July. Water levels may also vary from four to six feet overnight depending on rainfall in the mountains.

Good campsites are infrequent on the Bell River and upper Porcupine, due to steep and high river banks. Gravel bars and islands are excellent campsites especially when insects are numerous on the shore, but may also be dangerous if the river is rising.

Summit Lake and Creek to the Little Bell River:

Summit Lake is surrounded by mountains that can be easily hiked and provide excellent views of the Rat River valley, the entire MacDougall Pass, the Little Bell River valley, and the Richardson Mountains. Mount Russel is one of the best view points of those that are available.

The Pass seems to be an east-west air route as several fuel caches can be found along the shoreline of Summit Lake. The moss banks of the lake provide excellent campsites, however, firewood can be scarce.

A creek drains the western end of Summit Lake running into the Little Bell River. When there is water in it, the width varies from one to three feet. It is incised ten feet to fifteen feet below the valley floor and is heavily overgrown by willow and alder. A portage from Summit Lake to the Little Bell is the alternative to plowing, dragging and cutting a route through the creek.

The Little Bell River:

The thirteen mile portion of the Little Bell River is twisting, with undercut banks, snags, sweepers and incised with mud banks twenty feet high. Small rapids located at the mouth of the river flow over sharp rocks. These may be run at high water and lined during low water. Due to the steepness of the banks, campsites are difficult to locate.

A view of the surrounding Richardson Mountains is present if the canoeist climbs

out of the incised river valley.

The Bell River:

The River is relatively wide with a slow steady current and endless meanders.

No problems of navigation are present at moderate and high water levels.

Campsites are difficult to find as the banks are high.

The country side changes from the Richardson Mountains on the upper reaches to lowlands and tundra in the Eagle River and Porcupine River areas. Black spruce (*Picea mariana*), willow (*Salix* L), poplar (*Populus balsamifera*), birch (*Betula papyrifera*) and the occasional larch (*Larix laricina*) line the banks while scrubby black spruce and tundra are found on either side of the banks. Moose, ducks and geese are abundant.

Lapierre House, an old Hudsons Bay Company trading post, is located on the Bell River. Two run down cabins and a cache are all that remain of this abandoned post. A few miles from the mouth of the Eagle River is where the famous man hunt for the "Mad Trapper of the Rat River" came to an end.

PORCUPINE RIVER

The Bell River to Old Crow Settlement:

From the mouth of the Bell to the mouth of the Driftwood River the Porcupine river flows slowly and often in long straight stretches that resemble lake paddling. There are no major navigational hazards and the current increases through narrows when approaching the Driftwood River area. The surrounding countryside is flat with broad expanses of moss and stunted spruce growth. The shorelines are treed with willow and alder, and the occasional groves of large spruce provide the best campsites.

Cabins are located on the right limit above Berry Creek, below Rat Indian Creek, and above and below Driftwood River.

Below Driftwood River the current increases in velocity, the timber becomes larger and the surrounding countryside takes on more relief. Below Lord Creek, at which a trapper's cabin is located, the Old Crow Range and Mt. Shaeffer become visible to the northwest.

At Old Crow settlement is an R.C.M.P. detachment and a store to replenish supplies as well as air service to southern points in the Yukon.

Old Crow to Fort Yukon:

From Old Crow to Caribou Bar Creek the river meanders and winds between high bluffs, with the Old Crow Range still dominating the view to the north. An excellent cabin and campsite exists on the left limit about thirty-five miles below Old Crow.

At Caribou Bar Creek, the river valley narrows and the river is canyonized between five hundred foot walls. This marks the beginning of the Upper Ramparts. The Ramparts are the high point of the trip down the Porcupine in terms of scenery. The current becomes swift and a few chutes are encountered. This section lasts for about fifty miles. Excellent campsites are found throughout this section.

New Rampart House is an exceptionally scenic location. The buildings, although they are collapsing and not habitable, are very interesting. Sunagun Creek enters from a picturesque valley to the north, the mouth of which marks the Yukon-Alaska border.

At Salmon Trout River is Old Ramparts. Excellent grayling fishing in a four

hundred foot canyon can be found a mile up from the mouth of this small river.

At Red Gate, the Upper Ramparts ends. For a thirty-five to forty mile reach, the surrounding landscape is flat and islands are more frequent.

Canyon Village, five miles below Red Gate, is a fairly recent but abandoned native community. It appears as if some people still live here occasionally. A trapper lives in a cabin on the right limit above Coleen River.

The Lower Ramparts are far less spectacular than the upper section. The current through here is slow and the canyon walls are about three hundred feet high. This marks the last immediate relief before entering the Yukon River Flats.

Below Lower Ramparts, the Porcupine enters the Flats which are part of the more extensive Yukon River Flats. This section extends for roughly one hundred and twenty river miles, and is distinguished by meanders, sloughs, gravel bars, and severely eroded cut banks. At intermediate and high levels of water, short cuts through sloughs save miles and are often more intimate than the main channel. Throughout the Flats, cabins are fairly numerous and some are abandoned and habitable. Joe Ward Camp is locked and boarded up.

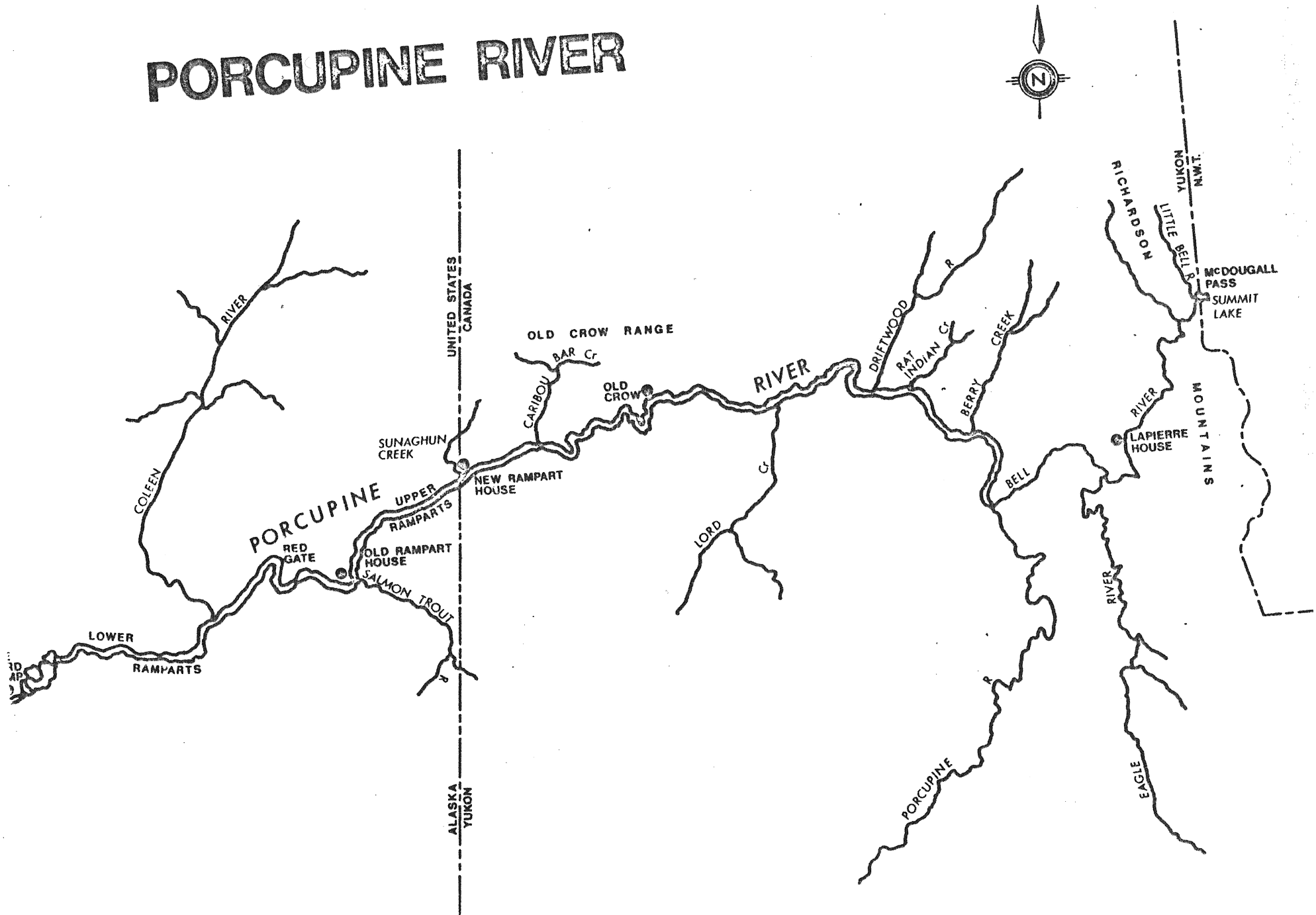
Fort Yukon lies two miles above the junction of the Yukon and Porcupine Rivers. The current in the Yukon is too strong to paddle against, and therefore a back door route to Fort Yukon is recommended. A previous description of this route follows:

Fort Yukon sits on Hospital Lake, a U-shaped slough, once an outlet for the Porcupine and still overflowed by the Porcupine in particularly high spring floods. An old portage trail 300 yards long leads from the N.E. tip of Hospital Lake to the Porcupine River. The trick is to find the start of this portage on the Porcupine side. Near the upper end of Homebrew Island (from

which one can load across at the radar installations of Fort Yukon) is a long gravel beach. Here also is an excellent campsite. Standing near the upper end of the gravel bar and looking across at the south bank of the river one sees three breaks in the spruce, the lowest and by far the widest of which marks the head of the trail. Willows in this spruce gap and a lowering in the height of the cutbank mark the obvious spot where the Porcupine sometimes spills over. The trail starts in the spruce just above the willows. Piles of drift along it indicate where the water has overflowed, and lead one to the marshy N.E. end of Hospital Lake. Canoes and gear can be left at a dock beside the air strip whence a truck can take them into town.

(Eric W. Morse's report, page 8)

PORCUPINE RIVER



Scale: 1 Inch = 20 Miles

APPENDIX

TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP COVERAGE:

1:250,000 MAP SERIES, N.T.S.

NAME

SHEET NUMBER

Bell River

116 P

Old Crow

116 O, N

TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP COVERAGE:

1:250,000 U.S. ARMY MAP SERVICE,
CORPS OF ENGINEERS SERIES Q501

NAME

SHEET NUMBER

Coleen, Alaska

NQ7, 8-1

Black River, Alaska

NQ7, 8-5

Fort Yukon, Alaska

NQ5, 6-8