A Report

on the

Ogilvie and Peel Rivers

Yukon Territory

(unedited)

Ian Donaldson
National Parks Service - Planning
National and Historic Parks Branch
Department of Indian Affairs and
Northern Development

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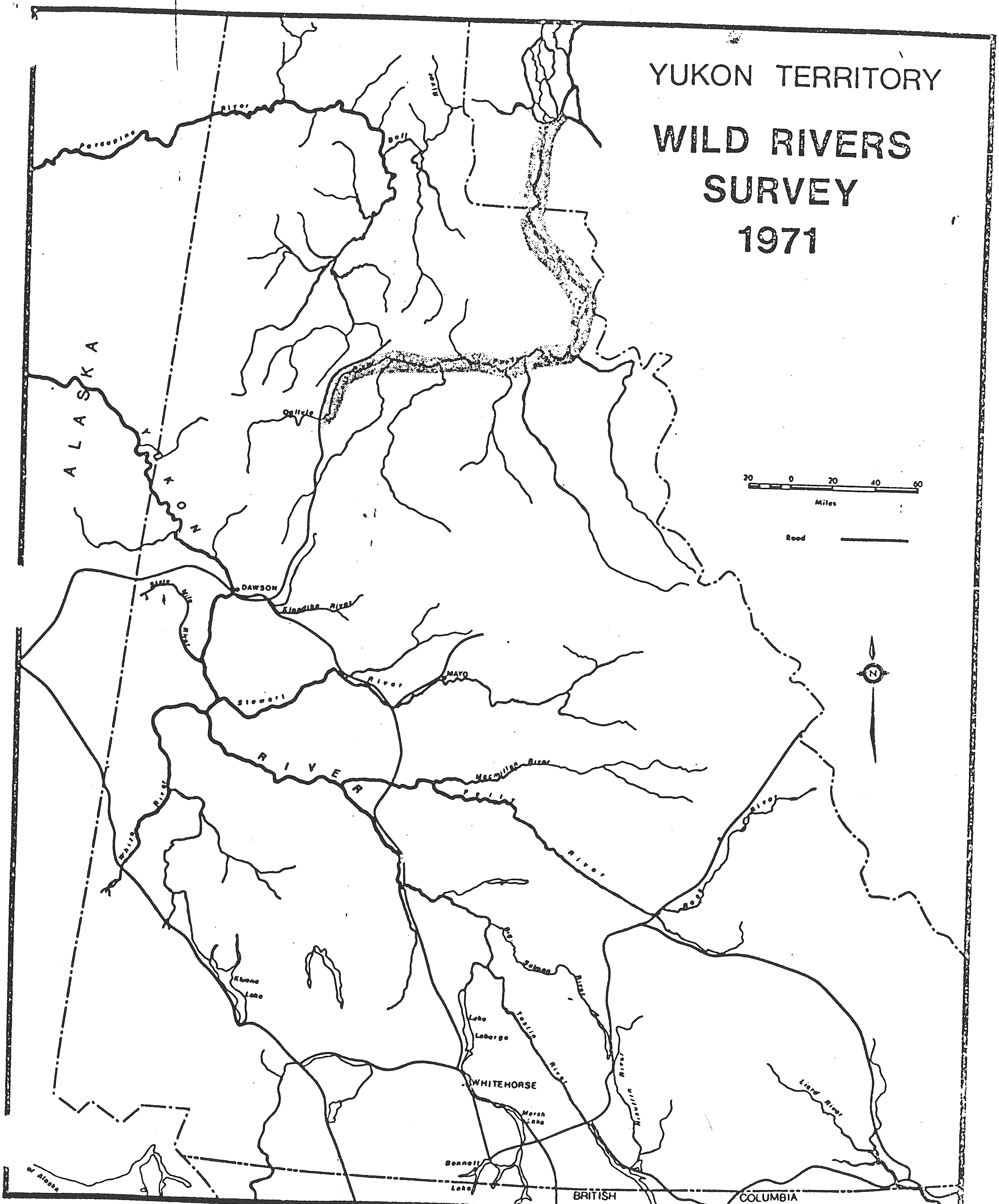
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INTRODUCTION

The Ogilvie and Peel 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, Tagish Lake, Marsh Lake Atlin Lake and Atlin River
5. Pelly River
6. MacMillan River
7. Ross River
8. Bell River
9. Porcupine River
10. White River
11. Sixty Mile River
12. Klondike River
13. Big Salmon River
14. Stewart River

This is the only river system of those surveyed that empties into the MacKenzie River. The above-mentioned rivers all drain into the Yukon River.

A four man crew with a seventeen foot and a nineteen foot canoe took three weeks to travel from the Ogilvie River bridge to Inuvik, N.W.T., a distance of approximately four hundred and thirty miles. Each man carried personal gear and equipment required for a canoe trip.

The Ogilvie and Blackstone Rivers rise in the Ogilvie Mountains north of Dawson City to converge on the Porcupine Plateau where they form the Peel River. The Peel River drains the eastern slopes of the Richardson Mountains and the northern slopes of the Ogilvie and Wernecke Mountains north of the Stewart River drainage basin. It cuts a deeper valley through the Porcupine and Peel Plateaux until the banks attain a maximum height of 1000 feet. The Peel enters the MacKenzie River Delta below Fort McPherson at an elevation of fifty feet above sea level, approximately 100 miles south of the Arctic Ocean.

Water level will determine the ease of travel on this system. A low water level may necessitate many short portages and lining on the Ogilvie River. High water forms large volume rapids on the Peel River below the mouth of the Hart River. Most of these rapids are caused by the river flowing over rock ledges. Many rapids offer more than one route the choosing of which will depend on how a canoe is equipped for white water, and the level of experience of the canoeists. Manoeuvering is necessary through most of the rapids.

Prolonged rains in the mountains will raise the water level of the Peel a few feet over a period of twenty-four hours. This should be taken into consideration when selecting a campsite. The Peel River, as well as the Ogilvie River, affords numerous cobble and gravel bar campsites. The water is potable, firewood plentiful, and insects limited due to the lack of sheltered places on these open bars. Below the Road River, islands are scarce and camps must be made along the shorelines or in the bush. Gravel shores in the MacKenzie Delta offer excellent campsites.

Wildlife indigenous to the Ogilvie and Peel Rivers consists of moose, black bear, grizzly bear, wolf, beaver, muskrat and a wide assortment of small animals and bird life. Caribou as well as sheep may be seen in the Ogilvie Mountains.

Major tree species are black spruce, white spruce, balsam poplar, aspen poplar, larch, alder, willow, as well as small shrubs. Niggerheads and muskeg are common to open areas especially towards the mouth of the Peel.

THE OGILVIE RIVER

Ogilvie River bridge to mouth of Blackstone River:

Access to the Ogilvie River may be gained at Mile 123 on the Dempster Highway where a bridge spans the river. The Dempster Highway parallels the river for thirty-five miles before turning northwards. From this point to approximately fifty miles above Fort McPherson, the canoeist can look forward to 250 miles of wilderness travel.

The Ogilvie River, below the Ogilvie River bridge, flows in a single channel one hundred and twenty-five feet wide, confined by the thirty to forty degree talus slopes of the Ogilvie Mountains. They are generally bare of vegetation and attain heights of three thousand to four thousand feet above sea level and almost close to two thousand feet above the river. Their knife-edged crests with sharp and often precipitous peaks are composed of limestone and appear fortress-like.

The Ogilvie Mountains are left behind at mile 20 and the exit from the mountains onto the Porcupine Plateau is marked by ledge rapids between miles 15 and 20. In particular, the rapids at mile 15 and mile 20 may pose a problem to navigation.

The rapids at mile 15 may be navigated at high to very high water levels. If they cannot be run, a small chute along the left limit will enable lining. Immediately after passing this ledge, the canoeist should move to the right limit and land to scout the small chute one hundred yards ahead. This small chute is navigable as it forms between a bar and the shoreline. The left hand channel with the most volume of water flows over a ledge with a drop of two to three feet.

A few navigable rapids will be encountered below mile 15 but at mile 20 the rapid should be approached along the right limit. Scouting is required and the canoeist should be prepared to line most of the rapid with a fifty foot portage over a two to three foot ledge at the end of the rapid. The rapid is situated just above spot height 2,875 feet along the left limit.

The slopes of the Ogilvie Mountains are generally bare of vegetation. The valley flats are narrow in many places and are covered by black spruce, white spruce, and poplar, with willow and alder lining the cobble shoreline. Cobble and gravel bars occur frequently and offer excellent campsites. The river is shallow as it flows at approximately 4-5 m.p.h. over a cobble bed. Water level will determine whether or not it is feasible to run the many small chutes that are present, thus influencing the ease or difficulty of travelling this mountain river.

At the point where the Ogilvie enters the Porcupine Plateau, a sudden change of landscape is noticeable. Low, rolling, and thickly vegetated hills replace the bare, grey slopes of the Ogilvie Mountains. This landscape will continue for the rest of the length of the Ogilvie River. At times the river will be bordered by two hundred to three hundred foot hills.

The Ogilvie Mountains, five to ten miles to the south, are visible at all times, their rugged, pointed peaks rising over a flat poplar and spruce-covered landscape. The landscape to the left of the river is not as flat as that to the right, but is a gently undulating tableland with spruce and poplar intermingled on its slopes.

The water flows at an average velocity of 3-5 m.p.h. over a predominantly cobble bed. Islands are numerous and in many places the river becomes multi-channelled. Sweepers and gravel bars are common but may easily be avoided by staying in mid-stream. The Ogilvie again forms a single channel before it joins the Blackstone River sixty-six miles downstream from the Ogilvie River bridge. Downstream from this point the traveller is on the Peel River.

THE PEEL RIVER

Blackstone River to Hart River:

The Peel River is formed at the junction of the Ogilvie and Blackstone Rivers. The volume of the Peel River is twice the size of the Ogilvie and the velocity is 4-5 m.p.h. It is incised ten to twenty feet into the Porcupine Plateau with a gravel and cobble shoreline. The river is characterized by boils and surges flowing through an island-strewn channel resulting in a multi-channelled or braided stream. The main channel is not difficult to follow although most side channels appeared navigable.

The right limit of the Peel to the mouth of the Hart River is generally low and rolling, while on the left limit, the river cuts into a low ridge running parallel to it, that rises from three to five hundred feet. The view if confined by this relief and by the vegetation. Less than ten miles upstream above the Hart River, the valley begins to narrow and the river

takes on a single channel. At several locations the river begins to cut into the left limit forming cutbanks two hundred to three hundred feet high. At these locations, ledge rapids occur.

The first ledge rapid of any significant size is at mile 91. It may be scouted from the right limit and may easily be navigated. Three to four foot standing waves form at an intermediate water level and can easily be avoided. The rapids are not difficult and should pose no problems to navigation.

Rapids are situated at approximately mile 93 immediately upstream from a cutbank along the left limit. These ledge rapids may be run through a small chute located to the right of mid-channel. Once through the chute, the canoeist will be able to manoeuver his way towards mid-stream by passing through a small area of rock outcrops.

The ledge rapids at mile 97 occur immediately upstream of a one hundred and fifty to two hundred foot rock wall. A small but runnable chute is located directly along the left bank. However, the canoeist may have to duck over-hanging trees.

A mile before the mouth of the Hart River, the river bends west. At this bend the water is forced up on the rock face of the left limit and small haystacks or "dancing horses" occur in mid-stream, as the current of the river is met by the water moving back off the wall. By directing the canoe through these haystacks no difficulties will occur, although a larger volume of water may produce higher and stronger waves. These are the last set of rapids or rough water before the mouth of the Hart River.

Hart River to Bonnet Plume River:

The valley of the Hart is low and flat, covered mainly with willow and scrubby black spruce as it enters the Peel from the south. A forest fire scar that extends for miles along the right shoreline of the Peel, has left an extensive scar along the right limit of the Hart. With the increased volume of the Hart, the width of the Peel increases to an average of four hundred feet. The river gradually becomes more incised into the Porcupine Plateau and upon encountering the southern limits of the Richardson Mountains it has cut its way down and through them, forming a canyon one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet in depth for nearly twenty miles.

The down cutting action of the Peel has resulted in five major ledge rapids below the mouth of the Hart River and before mile 119, at which point the river narrows considerably to make it unnavigable.

The first series of rapids occurs three to four miles below the mouth of the Hart. At this point the river is six hundred feet wide with the rapids extending across the entire channel and stretching downstream for nearly five hundred feet. There are three or four ledges that extend across the river with major turbulence in the right half of the river. The water is shallow as it flows over the ledges, and strong back eddies and turbulence occur beyond each ledge. In order to run the entire rapid, a considerable amount of manoeuvering is required for a canoe to pass from one chute to the other, as there is no single passage through the rapids. The rapids may be run and lined along the left limit which consists of bed rock dipping gradually into the water. The right limit rises vertically twenty or thirty feet to the flat-topped and burned-over plateau and a beach is, at times, non-existent along this bank. The rapid should be approached along the

left limit, but for viewing the rapid and the surrounding landscape, one should land well upstream from it along the right limit and climb the vertical bank that borders the white water.

Six miles below the Hart River or two miles downstream from the previously mentioned rapids, sections of white water occur for one and a half miles in a narrow channel of the river. These are a result of ledges and the funnelling effect of the narrower channel. The medium high water during the period of this survey caused waves six to eight feet high in the middle of these rapids. The rapids may be approached along the left limit and the canoeist should be prepared to paddle, line and portage through this area. A lower water level may enable the canoeist to use the right limit which is bedrock with a very gradual slope. At this stage of water, the river has increased velocity and rides high and fast along a cut bank prior to reaching the rapid. At the rapid, the current moves to mid-stream making landing procedures along the right limit very precarious, thus it is advisable to keep to the left hand side while approaching the rapids. A gravel bar has formed above the rapids on the left limit and, by following close to its shoreline, the increasing current may be avoided and landing procedures may take place with ease. Short portages consisting of moving equipment over ledges that rise three to four feet out of the water will take place next to the high waves. Below these ledges the left limit gives way to a vertical wall that dips directly into the river. At this point a ledge with a two foot drop is encountered and the lining of canoes can take place through a small chute close to the rock wall.

The chute has formed in such a way that a canoe being lined through it should have a man in it to help guide the canoe through the chute. A strong

back eddie is located along the left limit just below the ledge and caution should be exercised, when the canoe reaches this area, to avoid being flipped. Below this section the water runs fast, is turbulent and boiling before making a left turn. The river widens to approximately six hundred feet as more rapids stretching close to half a mile in length and filling the river completely are encountered. Wave heights reach to three feet but are easily navigable. At the inside of this left turn a small indentation in the vertical rock walls will enable the canoeist to land, rest and scout the rapids ahead if deemed necessary.

Below these last rapids the river flows in a wide valley, incised ten to thirty feet into the landscape. Approximately two miles downstream a stream enters from the north. A cabin is situated a few hundred yards up the mouth of this stream. This new cabin is so situated that it can barely be seen from the Peel River and is among a large stand of white spruce fronting low wet lands. Five miles below the cabin, a final set of rapids will be encountered before the upper Peel Canyon and Aberdeen Falls.

This rapid consists of a series of ledges and should be scouted before being run, to determine a proper course through several chutes. The right limit consists of a shale wall rising 50-70 feet and fronted by white water. These waves are three to four feet high, becoming lower towards the left hand side of the river. If portaging is thought to be necessary it should take place along the gently sloping left limit. Downstream from this rapid the river becomes incised to reach a depth of one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet, bounded on both sides by vertical shale walls.

By following the right limit very closely the white water above Aberdeen Falls may be avoided. It will be necessary to drop over a ledge to reach

a low beach beyond the vertical walls. Below this ledge the water is shallow and lining may have to take place. If the water level is low, portaging may be required to reach the excellent campsite on the low beach ahead. Beyond this beach the rapids continue to the head of Aberdeen Falls and may be lined and run along the right limit. The water volume was too large at the time of the survey for an open canoe to navigate in mid-channel.

The river channel constricts considerably to form Aberdeen Falls, a torrent of white and foaming water with a width of fifty to one hundred feet. The gradient is relatively constant and the river resembles more a rapid than a fall. This torrent continues for approximately three miles. Here the river has formed a gorge one hundred and fifty feet into the rock strata and a portage of four to six miles is required to bypass this section.

The best portage route, involving a climb through poplar growth to the flat land above is along the right limit. Niggerheads, muskeg and scrubby black spruce dominate the landscape above the water. In the distance the view is open to low rounded hills reaching elevations of 2,500 feet above sea level. The occasional larch tree is evident, and, looking towards the end of the portage, forested slopes of white spruce and poplar stand out. Walking over this area is difficult since there are no well-defined trails, and a mile before the end of the portage the terrain becomes hilly. The end of the portage is marked by a hill in the distance, downstream and along the right limit of the river. It may be seen from the beginning of the portage above the water and is the only hill in sight. The river winds through its valley making a 90° turn at the base of this hill and then turns to the right a few hundred yards further on. The portage ends on the inside bend of the right turn at the base of the hill. The base of the hill is the

first area along the portage that is accessible to the water from above.

A portage along the left limit may cause some difficulty. At the water level, gradually sloping bedrock is evident and seems to follow the length of the gorge. However, towards the end of the gorge the bedrock is interrupted by vertical walls necessitating an "up and over" route. The walls would have to be climbed and descended to reach the water. Both sides may be used as a portage but the right is recommended.

The water level of the Peel will determine the length of the portage. At the time of the survey the water was high enough to cover ledges and enable paddling and lining above the falls. At a low water level the portage above the falls may be lengthened due to the low water conditions which expose the ledges.

The river is one hundred feet to one hundred and twenty-five feet wide with small choppy waves and a 4-5 m.p.h. current at the end of the portage. The right limit cliffs which are seventy-five feet high and covered by alder and spruce rise to a five hundred foot hill behind. The left limit walls are composed of two hundred vertical feet of shale. The Peel continues for four miles flowing at 5 m.p.h. through one hundred and fifty to two hundred foot vertical shale walls one hundred and twenty-five to two hundred feet apart.

Four miles below the end of the gorge, the canyon widens to 1500 feet, giving a view of low rounded and dissected hills covered by spruce and poplar on the left limit. These are immediately behind and above the vertical walls of the left limit. The vertical walls of the right limit give way to gradually sloping hills covered predominantly by poplar. The Peel flows for a mile in this setting, around two islands before the

canyon walls again move closer together.

River width from mile 125 to mile 135 varies between three hundred feet and five hundred feet with breaking waves found in the odd stretch of water. These may be scouted from the canoe while approaching and should pose no difficulty to navigation. In the vicinity of mile 131 and mile 132, grade II rapids will be encountered with the most turbulence along the right limit. The valley of the Wind River enters the Peel Canyon from the south. It is low and characterized by low bush, compared to the tops of the cliffs which are covered by alder, birch and some spruce. A mile below the Wind the canyon gives way abruptly to a flat low basin.

The basin's low flat landscape with a river valley ont to one and a half miles wide, interrupted by many willow poplar and spruce covered islands, is in direct contrast to the confined river valley previously experienced. To the south is a level wooded plain that eventually reaches the Wernecke Mountains, while to the north the basin continues before touching on the Richardson Mountains. The water flows by the many islands and bars at 6-8 m.p.h. with swells one and a half feet high.

Eight miles below the upper canyon, Mountain Creek enters from the north. It was used as an overland route followed by Indians to avoid the swift waters and the lower canyon. This overland route joins the Peel again at the mouth of the Trail River, where the current begins to slow considerably. Below the Bonnet Plume River, the valley gradually contracts in width and from a distance appears to close.

Bonnet Plume River to Snake River:

The Peel River has cut a deep and narrow passage through the low range of

borders the basin on the east side. This marks the beginning of the Peel Plateau. These banks rise from one hundred feet to five hundred feet on the second canyon. It is from this point to thirty or thirty-five miles above Fort McPherson that the river flows through the Peel Plateau cutting a deeper valley northward until the banks attain a maximum height of 1,000 feet below the mouth of the Snake River.

Approaching the lower canyon, there are large swells in midstream to two feet high and a large powerful back eddie is formed on the right limit by a point. The river moves into the canyon which averages five hundred feet in width, to pass through a narrow portion 150 feet wide. Although it cannot be seen from the entrance, rapid water is encountered for approximately one hundred yards in the two mile canyon. A ledge protruding from the left bank causes standing waves three or four feet high with two powerful back eddies located on either side of the white water. The back eddies, which are irregular and heavy, have been referred to at times as whirlpools. In fact, where the surging and boiling back eddies small whirlpools with four to five hundred diameters are noticeable. These rapids should be approached with caution in an open canoe.

The walls of the canyon are composed of vertical black slates rising two hundred feet to five hundred feet, with small creeks cascading down their faces. Beyond the constriction, the canyon widens to five hundred feet and gravel beaches become more common.

Two miles below the entrance of the canyon the valley widens to form a large basin four miles long and one and a quarter miles wide. The basin is enclosed by five hundred foot hills but offers a large field of view. The river is multi-channelled but the main channel is approximately one thousand

feet wide with a velocity of 6-8 m.p.h. characterized by rolling waves or swells. Mixed and pure stands of birch and black and white spruce rising forty to sixty feet on the well drained soils, are unique to the area. The islands support dense balsam poplar that attain heights of sixty feet, fronted by thick stands of willow and alder.

The river contracts below the basin and flows in a valley averaging one half mile in width from mile 161 to mile 187 where the Snake River enters from the right. It is confined by five hundred foot vertical cutbanks of soft shales and sandstones. Swells are common in this section of the river, as the current varies between six and nine miles per hour. Where the river meets the valley limits, large swells with breaking crests and upsurges and turbulence.

The cut banks are continuously dropping fragments of rock into the water especially where ephemeral streams are cascading over their faces. Lush growth occurs on those banks that are not bare of vegetation. Large stands of white spruce reaching heights of sixty feet are outstanding in this region as are thick stands of poplar and alder along the cut banks. The river is generally a single channel but where islands or bars have formed, turbulence can be expected. Where the river bends, strong back eddies are frequent and should be avoided by staying in the rough waters that by-pass them.

Below the second canyon the river is completely navigable to its mouth without any hazards. It's velocity and five hundred foot vertical walls give an awesome impression. The full force and strength of the Peel River can be felt while travelling to the mouth of the Snake River.

Snake River to Fort McPherson:

Signs of recent forest fires scar the landscape along the right limit just below the Snake. The black, brown and green colours of the burn stand out against the lush green landscape surrounding it. It is at this point that the Peel makes a 90 degree change in direction to the north from its easterly course.

It is also here that a change in valley and river characteristics takes place. Sand and gravel bluffs five to nine hundred feet high replace the shale walls as the river begins its northward journey cutting into the Peel Plateau to a maximum depth of one thousand feet. Immediately below the Snake River islands and bars appear, and the river winds its way between them and its valley limits at 6 m.p.h.

The valley is completely straight with vistas, both downstream and upstream, through the ends of the valley. Both limits confine the view to the immediate surroundings even though the banks begin to decrease in size.

From Caribou Creek to the mouth of the Trail River the current of the Peel becomes noticeably slower. As well, the number of islands begins to decrease. Abandoned oil camps, fishing camps and trappers' cabins become numerous toward Fort McPherson. Flat land appears along the right limit with dissected hills parallelling the left. By mile 285 the river has widened to eight or nine hundred feet and the flat topped valley walls are no higher than two hundred feet above the water level. The left limit still has some relief compared to the flat low relief of the right limit.

Shiltee Rock, an outstanding geological feature, is found at mile 308. This sandstone pillar of rock stands above the landscape and can be seen from a

few miles upstream. There were at one time three pillars, but weathering has reduced this number to one. From this point to Fort McPherson is 11 miles.

The river widens, the current slows to 2 m.p.h. and islands occur less frequently, from the mouth of the Trail River to Fort McPherson. High winds may hamper travel along this portion of river and may be experienced in the Satah River area. The Satah River was once used as an overland route for winter travel to cut off approximately twenty miles of travel on the Peel River. It was on this route that a N.W.M. Police patrol froze to death in the early 1900's. Monuments at mile 272 and mile 294 stand in their remembrance.

The buildings of Fort McPherson will be seen along the right limit about a mile before the settlement is reached. The settlement is located seventy-five to eight feet above the river on a cut bank, the only significant height of land in the area. The native population consists mainly of Loucheux Indians and a few Eskimo families. A Hudson Bay Company, a few small stores, a nursing station, post office, a regional public school, and an R.C.M.P. detachment form the basis of the community. The settlement is supplied by a barge that plies the MacKenzie River receiving supplies from the south and Inuvik. Float planes land with ease on the Peel River which has a current of 1 m.p.h. at this point.

A canoe trip down the Ogilvie and Peel Rivers may terminate at Fort McPherson. However, to fly south, it is necessary to go to Inuvik. To limit the cost of a trip on this river system and also to be able to enjoy a trip through the MacKenzie Delta, it is recommended to terminate at Inuvik.

Fort McPherson to Inuvik:

The MacKenzie River is twenty-six miles below Fort McPherson. The only hazard to navigation below Fort McPherson will be high winds that can result in waves reaching heights of six feet. This occurs most frequently on the MacKenzie River where the land is flat and the river has a width of up to three miles. The Peel flows at a velocity of less than one mile per hour between cut banks of mud ten to thirty feet high which are covered by dense stands of spruce and poplar. This eventually gives way to scrubby spruce willow and alder at the river's mouth. The water, besides being sluggish, has a very high silt content. Drinking water may have to be taken from the Peel since there are very few areas of clear water.

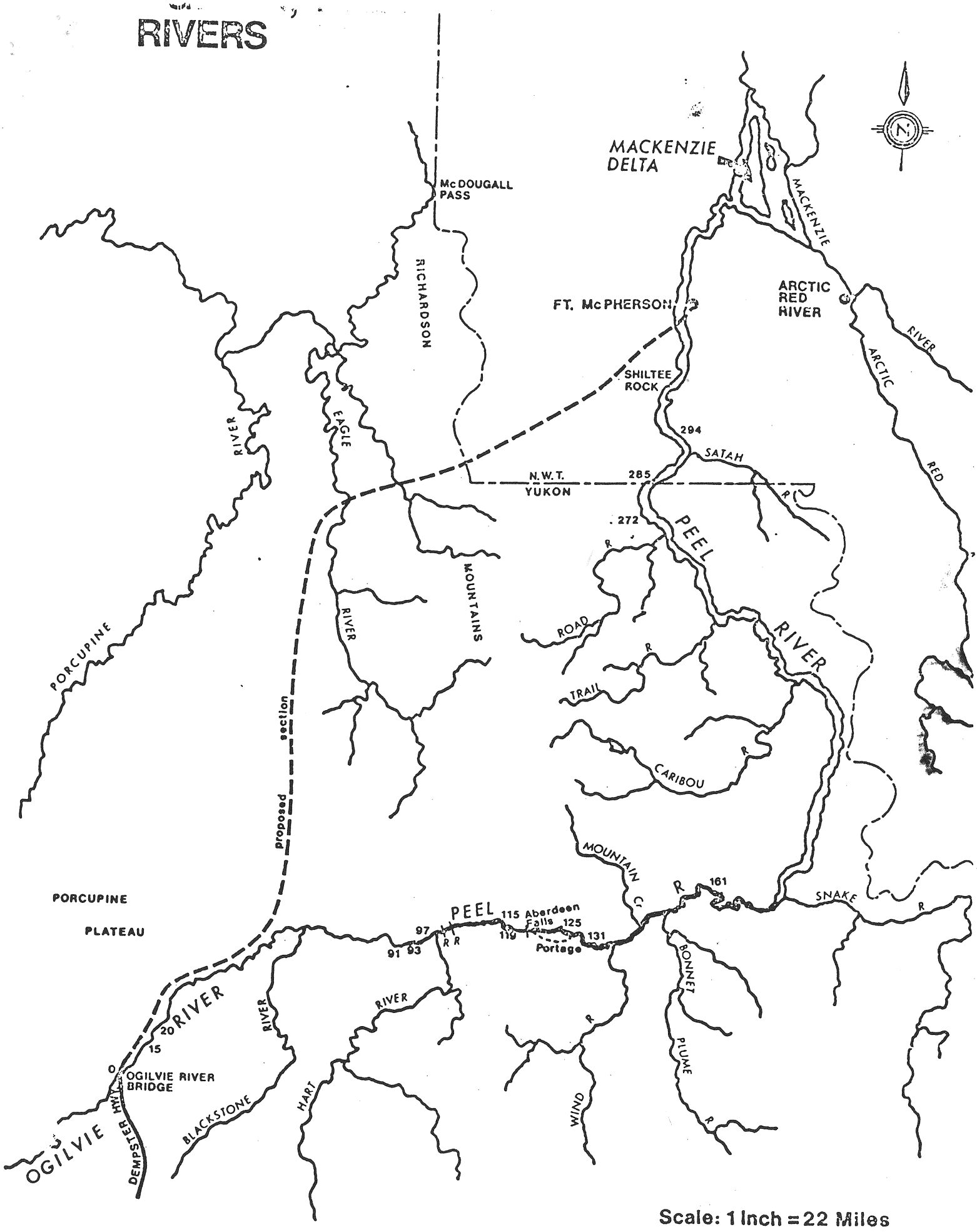
The East Channel of the MacKenzie Delta leads to Inuvik. To reach this channel the Delta has to be crossed. Two means of reaching the channel are possible. A small channel is present approximately one mile up the MacKenzie River from the mouth of the Peel. This channel cuts through the maze of islands that are directly across from the mouth of the Peel. It will lead to the main channel five miles south of the East Channel. From here it is a matter of crossing the MacKenzie River to reach the entrance of the East Channel. Another alternative is to paddle fifteen miles upstream on the MacKenzie, cross the river at Point Separation, follow the right limit to the East Channel and then on to Inuvik.

The width of the river, the low bush-covered landscape and the outline of the Richardson Mountains fifty miles to the west, are indications of the flat and immense landscape of the MacKenzie Delta. Five days should be allowed to travel the 120 miles between Fort McPherson and Inuvik. Two or three extra days may be added in the event that winds should hamper

travel.

Accommodation and food prices are high in these northern communities. There are very few campsites in Fort McPherson or Inuvik but suitable and safe campsites may be located by checking with the R.C.M. Police in these communities.

RIVERS



Scale: 1 Inch = 22 Miles