

Nowleye & Finnie River Trip

June & July, 2002

Normal text was that written in the journal during the trip. *Text in italics was added afterwards.*

Origin of the trip: *John Lentz gave me a call in the spring outlining a trip he had imagined, which would descend a river through a chain of lakes into the SW bay of Nowleye Lake, then follow through a chain of lakes down the Kunwak River and then eventually reach Baker Lake. After looking at the maps, I suggested an alternate route which would take us from Nowleye Lake to Kamilukuak Lake, down the Kamilukuak River to Dubawnt Lake, up a small river flowing into the west side of Dubawnt Lake, and over a height of Land and down the Finnie and Thelon Rivers to the west end of Beverly Lake, where we would end the trip. We agreed on this route. Richard Belisle, who had wanted to join us on our Horton River trip the previous summer but had been unable to get the vacation time, was ready to join us this year. John Schultz joined us as the fourth member.*

The trip participants, and their roles in planning and on the trip:

John Lentz, of Bethesda, MD, a retired international banker, formed an initial plan of the trip. He made a lot of the arrangements such as the air charter from Points North, transportation of the van from Points North to Winnipeg, and the boat pick-up from Baker Lake. He obtained historical information about the location of Inuit camps, etc. He also planned the menu. On the trip, he did all the cooking.

John Schultz, of Jefferson, MD, retired from the Justice Department, obtained detailed maps from the Library of Congress, obtained fishing licenses for NWT and Nunavut. On the trip, he was the designated fisherman.

Richard Belisle, of Shepardstown, WV, a reporter for the Hagerstown MD Herald-Star, obtained the van for the drive to Saskatchewan. Served as cook's helper on the trip.

Bob Schaefer, of Mt. Airy, MD, made arrangements for scheduled air and rail travel, and served as "Scientific Officer," primarily responsible for the medical kit, navigation, satellite telephone communication, wildlife records and photography.

John Lentz and I had been on many trips together in Canada and Siberia. John Schultz had been on the Hood River trip with John Lentz, and many other northern trips. Richard Belisle had done several trips on the Allagash River in Maine, but had not been in northern Canada before.

JL, JS, and RS drove from home in the van, loaded with all our gear and two canoes. They picked up Richard at the Minneapolis airport, since as the only non-retiree on the trip he had limited vacation time and this allowed him to leave home a couple of days later. They continued from there to Points North, Saskatchewan, a total distance of about 2500 miles from home.

Getting to the Start: John Lentz, John Schultz, and I met at the Urbana, MD park and ride at 8:00 a.m. on June 20. John L. was driving our van, loaded with the canoes, etc.

Karin drove me there and John Schultz's daughters drove him. After our farewells, we got on the road and drove to western Indiana the first day, to St. Paul, MN the second day. Strolled around the "St. Anthony Falls" (now a lock and spillway), the only falls on the Mississippi, in the evening. Next morning we enjoyed some of the sights of St. Paul (the Capitol, the Historical Society Museum, the St. Paul Cathedral, the James Hill house) and after lunch, picked up Richard Belisle at the airport and drove to Fargo, ND. The next day we drove past Regina, SK to a small town beside a very salty lake (Lake Manitou). The next day we passed through LaRonge, where we picked up groceries at Robertson's trading post (and tried without success to get a bear banger). We continued north, past the end of the pavement for 300 miles on the gravel road to Points North, where we arrived at around 11:00 p.m. Due to our heavy load, the car's exhaust system took quite a beating even though the road was in very good condition. There was dense smoke from forest fires at several points along the way. Tuesday June 25 was spent getting all ready for the flight in, scheduled for 7:00 a.m. tomorrow. Total driving distance about 2500 miles. Last day was the longest, from about 7:45 a.m. to 11:45 p.m. Rotated driving at about 2 hours each.

Points North Landing consists of a landing strip and a waterfront float plane base on a small lake. It is the main air base in northern Saskatchewan for various mining, forestry, firefighting, sport hunting and fishing, and canoeing activities. Our minivan was so heavily loaded that it had only a couple of inches of road clearance, and even a small rock lying on the road hit the exhaust system with horrendous noises. We each seemed to have our own style of coping with this. I complained that after a half hour of driving through the smoke and dust my eyes were watering too much to continue. John Schultz drove fast but with constant evasive manouvers to avoid the rocks, Richard Belisle drove more slowly but without evasive manouvers, John Lentz drove fast but without evasive manouvers but swore every time he hit a rock.

June 26: Start at mile 579, camp 1 at mile 575. Left Points North in the Otter, pilot Mark Eikel, at 7:15 a.m. but turned around after about 15 minutes because of report of low (<100 feet) ceiling at Kasba Lake Lodge, where we need to refuel. Sat around Points North till about 1 p.m., when word came that the Otter would pick us up in 10 minutes. We packed up and flew to Kasba Lake Lodge to refuel. The main part of Kasba Lake was still frozen. Landed on a small lake just above a fairly long rapid, the plane stopped in the middle of the lake and we unloaded into the canoes. Started off at 5 p.m. and paddled till about 7. Had steak and salad for dinner. Paddling: me and J. Schultz, Richard and John Lentz; tenting, me and J. Lentz, Richard and J. Schultz.

June 27: Mile 558. On the river shortly after 8 (here a lake) with slight tail wind which gradually drops off to nothing. Follow left edge of lake, land on island: herring gull nest with 3 eggs. Trees at most places along river, although sparse at some times. After lunch come to a river section, rapids easy except last one which required rapid rock dodging. Come into next lake, find ice along one shore which was breaking up into candles with nice tinkling. Come to esker with nice campsite, found an inukshuk about a mile and a half up the esker. For lunch ate big bag lunches from Points North, had light supper. Hear thunder to west in evening.

June 28: Mile 547. Wind started out from the west and later more to the north, dropping off in the evening under a beautiful NWT sky with scattered small clouds. The ice near the passage through last night's esker was all gone in the morning, but later we encountered a large patch of it filling the west side of the lake. By following behind some islands we managed to work our way through it. At lunch time J. Schultz was reluctant to proceed on account of the wind but we found conditions not as bad as he thought and continued with respectable progress. Early in the day we changed paddling partners: Schaefer and Belisle and Schultz & Lentz, which gave better match of speed between the boats. At 4 p.m. we stopped to fish where a small river came in between large ice fields (many photos, river = 47° F). J. Schultz caught 2 large trout which made an excellent supper.

June 29: Mile 532. A good day for paddling: light breezes, mostly cloudy and cool. Passed without difficulty through the labarinthine sections of the lake, came to some rapids in the next river section, one was a stony ledge but the others runnable rapids. Came into the next lake and attempted the left shore but were blocked by ice, had to retrace our steps to the right shore of the lake where islands provided cover. Found that we could paddle through much of the ice up to 10" or so thick, as it broke up into candles. Worked our way up the right (east) side of the lake, and finally found a campsite at about 5 p.m. Canoes: John L. and me, John S. and Richard. Sky cleared in evening, but still cool. Noticed that air was much cooler in vicinity of ice!

June 30: Mile 526. This morning gray, a little bit of drizzle, and strong east wind. Stayed in the sleeping bags till late but finally got off around 10:30 a.m. Some heavy waves on lake but get to river mouth and run rapids. Very large flow of water in river. Would be impossible to run a rapid because high water is into the willows. Stopped for lunch but afterwards did not continue because of the wind. Lay on the tundra most of the afternoon in the shelter of some spruces, then decided to camp and hope for better tomorrow. Today I paddled with Richard. He is worried about finishing on time, he has non-refundable air tickets, etc.

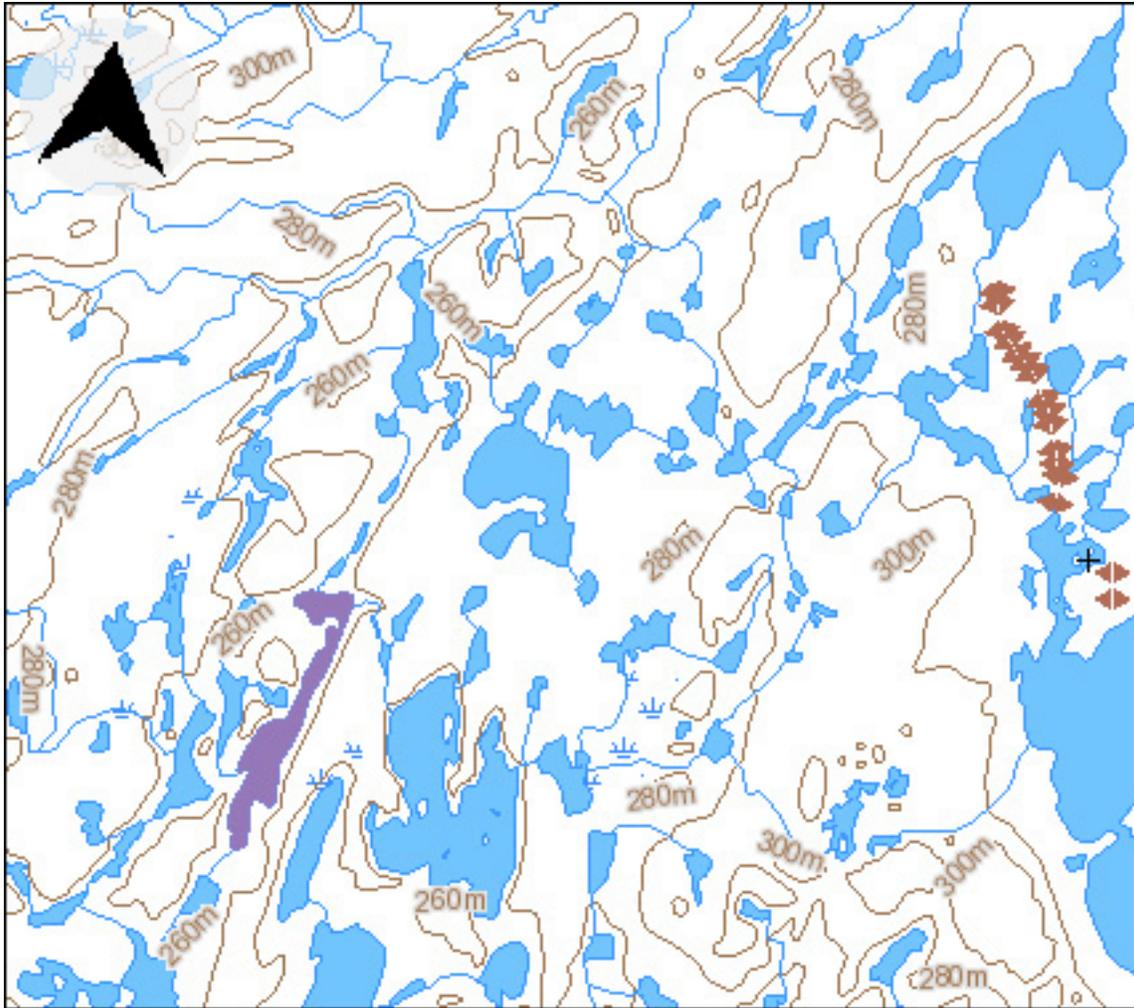
July 1: Mile 516. Wind slightly diminished this a.m., got on the water shortly after 8. Sky cloudy but gradually cleared during the day. For several days have seen light turquoise patch of clear sky to the north, suspect it is the result of ice on the big lakes. Passed through islands in the lake section, came to river section where heavy, choppy waves result from river flowing against the wind. Came to a place where the river splits, took the left (west) channel which had only about 10% of the water. A mile or so of rapids which we ran along the edge, fairly easy because of the high water level. After lunch, however, wind bound again because of a wide river section, camped on bluff overlooking the whitecaps.

July 2: Mile 500. Wind diminished during the night, got up at about 6:10 and on the water early. Wind continued to diminish and by mid-morning it was inconsequential. I paddled today with Richard. By lunch time we had made 10 miles and came at last to the final river-like part of the Nowleye. Went through several easy rapids and came into view of Nowleye Lake – a huge sheet of ice. But before we got there a big rapid, a straight shot

down the middle for a Russian catamaran but a portage for us, which took about an hour and a half. J. Schultz and I carried the canoes, J. Schultz the grub box which is a painful load. After that a short rapid which we could run, and a final rapid which we lined down to the lake (the first experience at lining for Richard). Paddled a couple of miles out onto the almost glassy lake, but then there was a call to take a campsite. John Schultz took a nasty fall when a rock split under him, fortunately seems to be OK. J.L. and Richard very tired after the day's efforts, I do not feel bad at all. Four caribou seen on the point to the south of us after dinner. Canada geese with goslings during the day. A very pale redpoll at campsite.

July 3: Mile 493. Got up at 6 a.m., on the water by ~7:40! Light east wind. Came to ice but with a good shore lead. To avoid going around a long peninsula, with ice on the other side, went into a deep bay where a very narrow carry-over was shown on the map. But actually there was a channel which we could paddle through. Continued into a deeper bay, and after breaking through short stretches of ice in a couple of spots paddled in a wide lead up to the crossing to Kamilukuak. The latter, however, is frozen solid. We are now attempting to contact airlines to fly us to the upper Finnie. Baker Lake has no twin otter, we will call Points North tomorrow at 9:00 to see if they can help out! The evening calm and warm, J.L. and I took baths in Nowleye lake (43°F). Bugs now very bad (mosquitoes, no black flies).

July 4: Mile 366. Good mileage today! I got up at 6:30 and enjoyed a walk on the breezy tundra. Had decided it might be good to end the trip because of the ice, and the possibility of getting tied up with ice on Aberdeen Lake. Talked to the others and became convinced we could speed things up enough at the end to be sure of getting Richard back on time. At 9:00 we called Points North and they said they could take us to the Finnie, the Otter was almost ready to go! We agreed. Went through the food bags and selected a large amount to go back with them, we aren't eating as much as expected, maybe because we can't expend so much energy as when we were younger. Close to noon the Otter appeared and landed after circling once. The pilot (Ron Girou) pulled in to shore and while I held it via a rope, we loaded all the gear and the canoes. After a great deal of effort, Ron got the plane off a rock, jumped in and gunned the engine, and finally pulled away from shore. Put on his shoes, but not his pants, which he had taken off to get in the water. Took off along the ice edge and flew straight to our destination, passing over the ice of Kamilukuak Lake, the K. and Dubawnt Rivers, and seeing the huge white sheet of Dubawnt Lake to the north. J. Schultz saw a herd of musk ox from the plane. Landed in our target lake at a beautiful sandy beach, decided to camp there. In sand were tracks of geese, caribou, wolves and bears. Lapland Longspur making nice flight song, like horned lark but with a richer, thrush-like quality. Semipalmated Sandpiper making distraction display.



Our landing spot on the headwaters of the Finnie
 (lake drains to the North into the Finnie)

July 5: Mile 352. A little rain last night but stopped by the time we got up, still heavy gray clouds and a light east wind, cleared off a little bit during the day. Started off through a chain of small lakes and streams, some dragging but not bad. In a couple of hours reached the main branch of the Finnie, somewhat wider than I expected. Most gravel bars now runnable but got stuck fairly often. Richard slipped and sat down in the water, changed clothes at lunch time. Not quick at jumping in and out of the boat. Mileage for the day, from GPS, less than we estimated. No further animal tracks seen on the river bank. Climbed a couple of low hills, but the terrain is generally quite flat. Mosquitoes quite bad at campsite, which is beside a beg snowbank.

July 6: Mile 346. Wind flapping on the tents this morning and a gray sky with low overcast, but off we went. Wind was from the north and only seemed to strengthen as the morning went on. Occasional light drizzle made seeing difficult also. By about 11:30 we decided it wasn't worth continuing, stopped and set up the tents. From this time on, patches of sun started to appear. Had lunch and then went on a hike up the hills in the

downriver direction. Passed a nice ice field where we saw an arctic hare (the biggest animal so far!) Good views down the river, where it is almost canyon-like. After returning, borrowed a sewing kit from J. Schultz and repaired both of my pairs of pants. After spaghetti supper, went back to the snowfield and hills for more photos in the evening sunshine, but a big cloud came along before we got all we wanted.

July 7: Mile 332. Gray and cloudy again this a.m., wind less than yesterday. Occasional light rain or drizzle. Wind picked up during the day and at 3 p.m. we called it quits, having found a good campsite. At about 6 p.m. we set up the tarp for dinner and soon after that the sky cleared, after supper the wind disappeared. J. Schultz and I went for a walk along the hilltop behind camp.

July 8: Mile 325. A rainstorm before rising, scattered breaks in the clouds when we got up, but still a strong wind. Set off anyway and made fairly good speed in spite of the wind because the current is now mostly rather swift. However, shortly after lunch we came to a broad area where the headwind was too strong – 30 mph? – and stopped to wait. Wind kept up all afternoon so we camped here. Took a nice bath in the evening – water and air not very cold.

July 9: Mile 308. Started off with a thunder shower in the morning, but the wind was light and from the south! After the showers had cleared away we started off and made excellent time. The river dropped steeply today, had to walk or line a few rapids. Black flies have made their appearance in large numbers. Also, spruce trees, which were almost absent before, now become large and numerous. Riverside country included sand dunes and large cliffs, very picturesque. At one point we landed to look for a peregrine nest, only to spot a bear on the opposite side of the river. He walked along the river bank, watching us, and swam the river a couple of hundred yards below us, then started up toward us. We launched the canoes and went past him. Not long afterwards John spotted a second bear on a sand dune, he hurried away. Saw a rough-legged hawk on her nest, another nest with a noisy young hawk. A pair of white-fronted geese with a downy gosling. A flock of green-winged teal. Stopped around 4 p.m. at a good campsite, took a bath because very hot.

July 10: Mile 291. Got out of the tent at 7:00 a.m. today, stood up, and found I was facing a Grizzly about 30 yards away. Called out to warn the others (still in the tents) and kept talking. The bear looked at me with some hesitation, and after about a minute ran away into the woods. Breaking camp after this seemed especially efficient! Proceeded down the river, the gradient had decreased greatly, almost no rapids but good current in many places. Saw a wolf on the beach. Almost glassy calm at times, tail wind at times. The country generally much lower with few large hills or high banks, beautiful sandy beaches and forests. Saw one other distant bear on the beach. In the afternoon, an ominous dark cloud induced us to stop at 2:30 p.m. and set up camp. Shortly after pitching the tent the storm hit, with lightning and thunder, very strong wind and downpour of rain, lasting only a few minutes and then tapering off. Later it cleared a bit. Magnificent view down the river, but not enough sun for best pictures. Cooked dinner and in the tents by 8:00 p.m.

July 11: Mile 270. Perhaps the best weather of any day yet: sunny in the morning, mostly sunny all day with gentle breezes. Off fairly early and made good time down the Finnie, a few more rapids than yesterday. At one point passed through a narrow canyon-like part with R.-L. Hawk nest. Dense forest at some points. By noon arrived at the Thelon, had lunch at Lookout Point, where we encountered tow canoes (2 men, 2 women) from Chicago. They said Alex Hall was behind them with a group of 10. Continued a few miles down the Thelon, J. Schultz caught a good trout (first cast) and camped on a high bluff with fine views all around. J. Schultz having back spasms, Motrin seems to be helping.

July 12: A lay-over day. Rain late in the night and early in the morning, a cold east wind. Lay in the tents and skipped breakfast, about 10:30 got up and used the stove to make some hot chocolate, then returned to the tents. Around 2 p.m. ate lunch, then JL and I walked up the beach for a while. Alex Hall's group of 5 canoes (one with 3 people) went by, but did not stop to talk. Saw wolf tracks on the beach that seemed to have been made since last night's rain: they approached our camp but then turned back. By mid afternoon, some brighter sky seems to be approaching from the west, wind dies down to almost nothing and the bugs get pretty fierce. Finished "Crossing Open Ground" by Barry Lopez (borrowed from J. Schultz), starting on "The Way of Chuang Tzu" (Thomas Merton).

July 13: Strong, steady wind developed overnight and continued most of today. The river looks like the Atlantic Ocean, big waves with whitecaps moving up it. So we have another layover day here. In the morning I went for a walk upriver and found a tree washed up on shore, came back to the camp to get the saw for a cross section. Just as I approached the canoes, looked up on the hill and saw a large wolf right near the tents. Took a few pictures before it ran back into the bushes. Came up the hill and found that J. Schultz had been out of the tent looking at it. He joined me on the trek to cut the wood section. When we got back, had lunch and afterwards J. Lentz and I walked downriver. Many fine. Large and fresh-looking wolf tracks in the sand down there, as well as caribou or musk ox tracks, with calves. In mid-afternoon, wind is diminished slightly, sky still completely gray with very rare thin spots. During our walk downriver, saw a float plane (Otter?) headed downriver, later heard it again, presumably returning. Just before dinner, J.L. again saw the wolf lurking in the bushes just downriver from camp. By 8 p.m. the wind was practically gone and the mosquitoes were abundant.

July 14: Mile 241. The day started off sunny, calm, and mild, but before we had progressed far it clouded up and we had a rather chilly, but mild wind from the south. Met Alex Hall's group stopped on a beach and hop-scotched with them all day, had some good conversations. From Alex: the north side of Ursus Island not very interesting in his opinion, hard to find good campsites. Our last campsite was indeed a wolf den. And Dubawnt Lake does melt in the summer, maybe mid-August. Also we were lucky on the Finnie, he had to abort about 2 out of 3 attempts because of low water. Today I paddled with J. Schultz, his back is still a problem. In late afternoon we took the side channel around the N. side of Ursus Island and found a pretty campsite. Saw a musk ox along the

river, Alex says they have declined greatly here for unknown reasons. Saw a fox at the campsite.

July 15: Another lay-over day – strong E. wind, heavy clouds, rain developing during the day. Went for hike around campsite, beautiful dunes, forest, and tundra, dunes heavily carved by sand, burying trees or exposing their roots. Can see Alex Hall's tents across the island on the main branch of the Thelon. On our branch, broad sandy beaches, in places wet sand that gets softer as you step on it, shakes like jello and turns into quicksand. After lunch return to the tents. Saw a baby semipalmated plover, parent giving distraction display. Heard plane about 12:15, then again sounded like it took off at about 2 p.m., wondered if it took the Hall group. In p.m. cold and wind continues, later in afternoon rain continuous, waiting for a lull to rig tarp and cook dinner. After dinner, went for a walk down the beach and found a tern nest with 2 eggs.

July 16: Mile 232. Wind died down during night and by morning sun was coming out, turned out to be a beautiful day. Completed the passage around Ursus Islands, water very low in places, probably impassable at slightly lower water level. The Tammarvi River had very little flow to add. Saw 2 musk oxen at breakfast, a moose calf beside the river, a wolf catching a goose. Hundreds of flightless geese along the river bank. More swans & w.-fronted geese than ever before. In the p.m., after a dull slog along the N. side of Ursus, spotted a herd of about a thousand caribou, chased after them through willows but then saw them cross a branch of the river, got quite close and very dramatic to watch them stampede back and forth.

July 17: Showers during the night, in the morning windy but with scattered sunshine which soon vanishes. Had breakfast and a walk down to the tip of the island but then saw rain approaching and retreated to the tents. On our walk, a moose appeared out of the willows and then ran back in, giving us a good chance to compare its tracks to those of the caribou (and photograph them). At mid-day the wind is (as usual) stronger than ever, with continued scattered showers. Terns here appear to be anxious to nest on the beach but do not appear to have nests yet: seems very late to be laying eggs! Still a lot of blowing sand at supper time so instead of cooking we eat pilot biscuits with peanut butter and jam. A walk down to the point afterwards and into the tents at 8:45. Expect the wind to be calmed down tomorrow. Everything filling with sand, are using the back door of the tent because sand blows in the front.

July 18: Mile 219. At 6 a.m. John S. called out to look out – a cow moose and calf were crossing the river right off our camp. They came ashore slightly downstream. Wind was down to virtually nothing and the sky clearing, by evening 100% clear. Off early, eager to escape the sand, made good time and came to the point where the river turns sharply right. Beautiful campsite on a hill here, found a tent ring and a pattern of small round stones. On the beach were the ruins of a blue canoe, half buried in the sand. River now narrower, current swifter. Stopped at another hill, below it J. Schultz caught a large northern pike (which he disdains!) and we saw downstream on the L. a cabin. We stopped there and had lunch. A water monitoring station with solar powered transmitter. A cabin with 3 old canoes and a john boat. Old bear tracks on the beach, the first since

the upper Finnie. A couple of miles down the river, two abandoned canoes high on the R. bank. Thelon Bluffs now prominently visible ahead. Camped on L just below the rapids at Thelon Bluffs, J. Schultz and I went for a long hike up the hill, down to the rapids, back up the hill for a view down river, etc. Expect to spend 2 nights at this scenic spot. In the eddy below the rapid were several very large northern pike.

July 19: The 2nd consecutive beautiful day, perhaps some kind of a record. Mostly clear when I got up, but just a few scattered clouds by 9 p.m. Went for various walks up the bluff, down the gravel bar, etc. including a long walk up the hill after supper. Took lots of pictures but the long lens is showing signs of grit in the focussing mechanism, think I need to retire it until it can be cleaned. Saw yellow-rumped warbler in spruces, with food in bill!

July 20: Mile 200. Left about 9 a.m., weather partly cloudy, moderate north wind. Fast current in the river. About an hour out, saw caribou on the tundra, stopped and saw about 50 swim the river, followed by about 30, then 4 more. All cows and calves. Also one musk ox, a fine bull, on the S bank of the river. After lunch, turned NE and the wind became more difficult, stuck first near the N shore then crossed over to the S shore, crept along against the wind and waves 20' from shore, finally got to the point which was our objective. On top of the bluff are excellent campsites and the ruins of an old water resources cabin that John remembered from 1971. On beach could see blue paint from Annie Aggens' canoe. After supper J. Schultz and I took a long walk to the bottom of the bay, saw huge piles of drift wood which I remember from the 1970 trip. Edwin Evo is supposed to be here day after tomorrow.

July 21: Remaining at point at end of Thelon on Beverly Lake. N wind, overcast, scattered showers, wind very strong at times but tents hold up well. Hiked down to bottom of bay with JL and RB after lunch. At supper time, a large wolf was near the tents, trotted casually away when it saw us.

July 22: Calm sunny day, looking for Edwin Evo to appear but no sign by 1:30 p.m. It's just a matter of sit and wait.