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Part II: The Elk River

Part III: The Thelon River (five days ... interrupted)

Coda

## Extras:

Rainbows (extended footage)

Fishing Tips (fly-fishing patterns and technique)

Birds (extended footage - birds identified)

Mammals (extended footage)



Aug 2, 2005

Exerpts from  
field journal  
(Summer 2005)

I decided to camp on a sandy shallow, and it's a great spot. One giant rock, and huge views. The immensity and scale of the landscape is staggering: the endless sea of hills, valleys, and plains, studded with gardens of rock and pockets of muskeg and meadow. I thought of Hanbury canoeing with two Greenlanders along the very same pools and bends I was seeing. What were their thoughts, were they laughing and excited, or in awe of the distances, and the impossibility of a quick return. I also thought

of some of some of the early canoeing parties on the river, paddling quickly for weeks on end to make it to Baker Lake before things got too cold. In comparison, I have it easy, and this region will only become more accessible with time. The Inuit and the Dene continue to make a livelihood from the land, and scientists continue to study its wildlife and changing climate. The area is not at all immune to change. There is a burgeoning diamond mining industry in the Territories, and geological prospecting not far from my location. What do we want this place to be? What kind of experience do we want to have when we take the effort to come here. What is the meaning of this place, and our relationship to it?

July 24, 2005

Caught two grayling for dinner, got some good camera work, and otherwise have been in awe looking around. This is exactly the kind of place I wanted to visit. It is a jumble of fractured rocks blossoming from the earth, left standing just the way they fell. They are like the spines of something swimming through the ground, a structure of imperceptible movement coiling and tumbling with gravity, and ultimately breaking apart as scree suspended aloft in the soil.

There is a promontory near where I am camped. It is the favorite roost of a seagull. It has remarkable views, and is perfectly situated to the rising or setting sun. It has a lot of power to me, a place to forget yourself, to become small and starkly still. The drone of the river, the intimidating otherworldliness of the rocks, and the reflective glade nearby, all serve to inspire a productive exchange, a delirium of large proportions.

August 1, 2005

When the wind is calm, the river becomes smooth as a mirror, and only the undulations of the moving current are visible. Looking far ahead, the river takes on the appearance of a mirage, the horizon an infinite recess, and the vast and unobstructed landscape a distinctive frame on both sides. It makes for a grand scene, another mood on this trip.



July 31, 2005

Was an amazing evening. Rain came through, and so did a beautiful double rainbow. Was making dinner, and had to let it sit while I filmed. Such beautiful twilight colors on the hills and canyon. It was like a dream, a verdant green garden with a cascading river through the middle of it. So lush, so full of life, and so unadulterated by anything that doesn't belong (except for the seeing eye) ... I have many creature comforts and gear to buffer myself from total immersion, but just a sampling will do. I just want to touch the experience, peer in from the border zone, say I was there and have that as a memory and resource to draw on in more reflective times. Perhaps I'll remember eating a grayling to a horde of buzzing black flies in a verdant oasis bathed in beautiful northern twilight. Cloths cinched in around the collar and wrists, heavy rubber boots on soft damp moss, no worries for the evening. It is an awesome feeling to be here. I don't feel the distance anymore from the rest of the road filled world. My world now is this, and the next day. I take what comes next, and each day brings new discoveries.

## The making of this video

The challenge of making a video in deep wilderness is not without its obstacles or compromises. I took a small handheld prosumer standard definition video camera with me on this trip. In general, I was pleased with the visual rendering, but stymied by less than optimal audio quality. I used a small lead-acid belt pack for recharging the camera, which allowed for a possible 18 hours of filming. I brought a small tripod, but most of the footage is handheld. Camera shake was sometimes a problem, in part because of the impinging demands of bug protection (the waving and swatting of arms), but also due to the requirements of maintaining a minimal footprint on the land. While certain erratic clips can be slowed down, I hope the unprocessed quality of much of the video adds a certain creative dimension, and conveys some of the sense of excitement and immediacy of being on the land, and my own sense of wonderment of canoeing alone in a demanding and remote terrain.

The cast for this film is as large as the number of viewers. It should come as no surprise that a video camera can be a reassuring presence on a solo trip. I have not attempted to minimize this important role of the camera. I believe we can only have limited contact with the reality that exists outside of our senses. Technology can render and preserve the transparency of surface existence, but it does not capture the rich inner moods of awareness and feeling that lend an experience its significance and personal meaning. I have attempted to involve the viewer in the making of this video. I have done this, in part, as a defensive gesture to help mediate the extremes of solo travel in an austere and imposing land. But I have also done it as a matter of creative direction. By having the camera as a partner in my travels, I hope to provide a crucial point of contact for the viewer to that personal and imaginative center that is the creative vision of this video. To those countless numbers of people who will travel with me as a consequence of this visual and verbal document, I thank you in advance for your tireless and diligent company.

Post-production was done in Chicago on a G4 Apple Powerbook, or in the anthropology computer lab at the University of Chicago. Some of the software programs used to make this video include: Final Cut Pro, Soundtrack Pro, DVD Studio Pro, Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, Microsoft Word, iTunes, and iPhoto.



July 31, 2005

It seems there are always shadows in this landscape. Walking back from fishing, I was spent and exhausted, and couldn't take my eyes off my shadow. It's like the sun wanted to remind me of my labors (in case I would forget).

July 27, 2005

Walking an esker is an haphazard affair. There is a significant one at my camp tonight. It has arroyos for run-off, tree ringed ponds, mountains of sand, shoreline, skyline, and multiple ridges. It is a self-contained hiking mecca with all the variation one finds in two or three different climate zones. Parts of it resemble impact craters on the moon, others like alpine forest, and there is typical barrenland's tundra throughout consisting of rock and lichen gardens on various connecting ridges. You very easily get side-tracked, veer off on an animal trail, explore the shore of a pond, hop over to the next ridge for a view, and then to the boulder to sit a spell. Before you know it, you've criss-crossed a large area, and have to find your bearings to make it back. If I were following my own tracks, it would be hard to tell my thinking based on my direction alone. Animal trails are much the same. They travel over the same area time and time again, cutting out deep grooves in the sand. Mother and cub, wolf, moose, and caribou. Tokens of a living mystery in sand.



“Across the sub-Arctics of Canada”

by J. W. Tyrell

London: T. F. Unwin, 1898

“Sport and Travel in the Northland of Canada”

by David T. Hanbury

London: Edward Arnold, 1904

“Thelon: A River Sanctuary”

by David F. Pelly

Ontario: Canadian Recreational Canoeing Assoc., 1996

“Discovering Eden: A Lifetime of Paddling the Arctic Rivers”

by Alex Hall

Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2003

“The People of Denendeh: Ethnohistory of the Indians of Canada’s Northwest Territories,”

by June Helm

Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2000

“The Thelon and Elk Rivers: A Canoe Expedition Across Canada’s Tundra”

by Bill Layman

[www.townoflaronge.ca/features/blayman/stories/ThelonRiver.php](http://www.townoflaronge.ca/features/blayman/stories/ThelonRiver.php)

DVD features:  
book and still  
photo credits

## Filmmaker’s biography

My first canoe trip was with my Dad, portaging a little over 40 rods from our home in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to the urban wildlife refuges on Lake of the Isles to fish for largemouth bass. We had many memorable trips. I have been fortunate to live in several different places in the Western U.S. and Canada, and consequently have extended my range. Canoeing has always been an important part of my life. I am currently a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Chicago. I am writing a dissertation based on several years of research in Saskatchewan on First Nations governance and treaties. I have done many different things over the years: curriculum development, oral history research, ranger for the U.S. National Park Service, political consultant, and teaching. This is my first film. I hope to continue my skills in this area in years to come, and am always interested in meeting other people who have an interest in film, canoeing, anthropology, and the social and political issues of wilderness preservation, sustainable development, and maintaining a life on the land. Please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail and let me know if you have enjoyed this film.

