

*We should have gone into the wilderness.*

*That is where healing is, and sanity.*

*When you go into the land,  
you go into yourself also,  
in dreams, in memories,  
in talk with the spirits and the dead.*

*Things get clarified in the wild.*

*Wayland Drew*

## OPENING UP

**W**e might have thrown a dart at the wall-map, nearly, for all the consideration we gave to which river this trip would follow. In the end, the decision was made for us, in many respects, though those details are not worth mentioning. But in that very fact lies the essence of this jotting. We are on a river somewhere, in what we choose to call wilderness, by which we mean there is a remarkable absence of other people or of modern sign of their presence. It takes a few days, but inevitably with the passage of time, the "wilderness" will embrace us in ways with which we have become familiar, and enjoy, but which remain difficult to describe to others who don't know them. It's a feeling, rather esoteric.

We know we can count on it: something will happen to make the day, or this stretch of river, special. Today it was the swim in a small lake we discovered near the end of a hot five-hour hike over the tundra, a day spent enjoying spectacular panoramic views. It was one of those magical days in the barrenlands – just enough wind to eliminate the nuisance of biting insects, clear blue skies, warm enough that a t-shirt suffices and you think "perhaps I should've brought shorts on this trip." (I've never taken shorts, but there's usually at least one day where I wish I had.) We walked, and paused, and soaked in the beauty and the solitude ... and thus the day passed happily. But by late afternoon we were, all three, hot and sweaty and in need of a pick-me-up. Then we spotted a tiny lake, its clear blue water sparkling invitingly – a relatively rare phenomenon in this particular area of

# ARCTIC RIVER DIARY

by David F. Pelly



A fresh wolf track, the size of a six-year-old's hand.

caramel-coloured, milky, silt-laden lakes and rivers. We found a rocky shore, drank our fill of fresh, cool water, stripped off our clothes, and swam. The last leg of the hike, back to camp, just a half-hour, was completed with a lighter step. It was a grand day.

## WILDLIFE

It is to some extent part of our definition of “wilderness” that we see lots of wildlife, and this trip is fulfilling that requirement. We watched a thousand caribou swim across the river as we ate dinner one evening. On a few other occasions, we’ve seen similarly sized herds, including once when we paddled up to a group of several hundred caribou standing at the water’s edge – they were within a canoe length away. Yesterday we awoke to find 20 or so musk-oxen grazing just outside our tent. Several other herds barely noticed our passing as we paddled by. There are birds aplenty: snow geese, Ross’ geese, Canada geese, white-fronted geese – it is goose country to be sure – and king eiders, white-winged scoters, rough-legged hawks, peregrine falcons, both long-tailed and parasitic jaegers, golden plovers, and the list goes on. We enjoy keeping track.

The most majestic of all our wildlife sightings, so far, happened earlier today, one of those whom Rudyard Kipling called “the Free People,” a wolf. (Our bedtime reading, chosen by the six-year-old member of this threesome, and read aloud for us all to enjoy, is *The Jungle Book*.) We came around a corner in the canoe and in the same instant, it seemed, we saw the wolf and the wolf saw us. A lone, white, male wolf. He was as respectful and curious as we were, it seemed, but not afraid, and nor were we. He

loped up a gentle slope to improve his view. We watched. We sensed communication. It lasted a few minutes, but it felt like more, so significant and so anticipated was this sighting. Only this morning, we saw fresh wolf tracks on the beach of our campsite, and realized he had passed through as we slept. Seeing a wolf, for us as for many wilderness travellers, offers the ultimate confirmation that we are in the wilderness. They are the embodiment of the wilderness we seek to be part of. It’s their sense of “being free” which speaks to us.

## GOOSE COUNTRY

In 1938, Angus Gavin, manager of the Hudson’s Bay Company post at Perry River, observed and reported local nesting activity by Ross’ geese. The report caught the attention of Peter Scott, son of Scott of the Antarctic, and a famous British ornithologist in his own right. World War Two delayed his plans, but in 1949 Scott assembled an expedition to the Queen Maud area of the Arctic coast to see the Ross’ geese for himself, and to document goose activity in what was then – and still is, for most people – a very remote and inaccessible corner of North America.

In reading Scott’s account of his summer in this goose country, you can tell he is excited, despite his typical British reserve. On one lake alone, he observed 350 pairs of nesting Ross’ geese, a bird which had never been scientifically observed at its nest in the wild. “We were, we felt, achieving some of the main objects of the expedition,” he wrote, “seeing new things and making new discoveries which were of real importance and significance. No ornithologist had ever before seen Ross’ geese at this juncture of their lives.”

For us too, this is goose country. They are everywhere, in numbers greater than any other birds, anywhere we’ve ever been. Try as we might, we’re still unable to be certain in differentiating between the snow goose and the Ross’ goose, with its somewhat shorter neck and more compact body. But we know we’re seeing lots of them, and either way – snow or Ross’ – they make for a stirring sight as they fly off in formation, snow-white with black wingtips against the blue sky.

*We watched a thousand caribou swim across the river as we ate dinner one evening.*

Caribou in late July, beside the river 100 km inland from the Arctic coast.





## ROCKS

Paddling along today, I was gazing up at the rocky hills – they look soft, weathered, grey. Smooth on top, often, in contrast the sides and ridgelines are dotted with sharp edges, boulders that were dropped there as the glaciers retreated 8,000 years ago. When we walk up the slopes, I can see that the rocks are coloured by their lichen cover; underneath they are mostly pink. I’m no geologist, but the hard rock looks like pink granite to me. What a different world this place must have been, for some centuries after the ice age, before the rocks acquired their grey blankets. Imagining all these rocky hills as pink features casts an entirely different aura across the landscape.

## STORM

We are about to bed down in our cosy tent for the fourth night at this same spot. We had planned to be at the coast tonight, but it is still 40 kilometre away, down river, probably two days’ travel. The storm began on our first night here. Winds so strong they whipped the river in front of our camp – no more than 100 metres across here – into a tempest of whitecaps. Our tent was buffeted violently and noisily until I wondered if it would hold up. (This same model of tent was used by the first Canadian expedition to successfully ascend Mt. Everest – it is a good tent, designed for windy conditions.) After 15 hours of that night’s winds, one of the fly’s aging panels gave up the ghost, a one-metre tear opened from seam to seam, exposing

our inner tent to the lashing rain. The downpour continued non-stop, as hard as any I’ve ever seen in the barren lands, for 24 hours. Our canoe, left upright and weighted down with at least 50 kilograms of rocks to prevent its unplanned departure on a solo-flight across the tundra, half-filled with wonderful crystal-clear rainwater. That’s a lot of water. After 24 hours of absolute fury, the storm’s rage moderated slightly, but rain and wind continues yet, two days later. We hope perhaps tomorrow’s conditions will permit our departure, but the fate of that wish is utterly out of our hands. It’s good for us, though, to know this, to accept this. Meanwhile, we’re comfortable, dry and well-fed. Huddled in our tent, we’ve cooked hot meals, drunk cup after cup of tea, read our books, played games, and talked. Life is reduced to its basic needs: shelter, food, warmth and companionship. It’s good for us. And the sun will return.

## LAST DAY

Oh, did I forget to mention where we are? It is not significant, but to satisfy your curiosity, I’ll tell you it is one of the rivers flowing north out of the barren lands into the Queen Maud Gulf. The place, in that geographical sense, is not important. The place, as it was for a time “our wilderness,” was of the utmost importance.

The trip ended today, as our paddles dipped into the salt water of the Arctic Ocean. We headed out to sea, to a small island with a perfect beach – we’ve been here before – “perfect” for a six-year-old to run on, and “perfect” for a floatplane to load at. Farther out to sea, we can see the white ice glimmering in the sunlight. On the windward side of our island, chunks of ice, most as big as a musk-ox, are drifting past, having broken off the main ice-sheet. Occasionally, one comes up on the beach. (One of the many things I’ve learned by travelling with Inuit friends is how to harvest fresh water from summer sea ice.) This evening, to celebrate our trip’s end, we put ice cubes from the Arctic Ocean in our voyageurs’ punch. A fitting conclusion. 

*“ They make for a stirring sight as they fly off in formation, snow-white with black wingtips against the blue sky.”*

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The rolling landscape near the Queen Maud Gulf.



*Regular contributor David Pelly has been canoeing barren lands rivers and keeping journals on his trips, for the past 25 years.*