

July 2018

Dear All,

At the end of Part 1 of this journal, we had just arrived in Tuktoyaktuk, an Inuit village on a peninsula jutting into the Beaufort Sea and the Arctic Ocean.

This part of the journal covers our short stay in Tuk, and our subsequent journey back down the Dempster Highway and across the Yukon to the Alaska Highway and British Columbia border.

Wednesday July 4th

We'd arrived in Tuk in good weather, sunny and windy with temps in the teens C (60s F).

As I mentioned in our previous letter, the entrance to Tuktoyaktuk is not pretty, as the new road winds through all the stuff that they kept out of the living area, like rubbish dump, power station, fuel tanks, etc. The biggest surprise though was a bay absolutely jammed with tree debris. There are no trees in sight around Tuk, so why is this bay full of driftwood? Tuk is on the edge of the Mackenzie River delta and the river valley is warmed enough by the river to support black spruce trees, billions of them. These in the bay must have been carried down the river and swept out to the sea which had eventually cast them ashore here. Scrawny black spruce logs have little



value today but they were probably once important to the Inuit that lived around the river's delta.

This was not our first visit to Tuk; we had flown here from Inuvik back in 2004 and been taken on a tour of the village. We were looking forward to touring again but at our own pace.

The dominant view as we approached the town was the DEW (Distant Early Warning) station across the harbour. It is no longer used but is still remotely



monitored, the locals say, so don't try to land on the island or a voice will tell you to leave

The road winds its way between bays and lakes and in places is barely above water level. Occasionally there is a side road going to a few homes on marginally higher land. The whole village doesn't seem to be more than a couple of miles of buildings along the main road.

For such a small place, with a population of less than a thousand, it has an amazing amount of traffic: cars, trucks, motorcycles, ATV four-wheelers. We were creeping in at the speed limit of 15 kph (10 mph), partly because it gave us time to look around. The locals were, of course, zooming past us in all directions.



Tuk has no formal campground, but visitors are allowed to camp at The Point, which also happens to be the end of the road. There were about a dozen other campers there already, mainly truck and van campers, but also a few brave souls in tents. They were scattered around the road's loop/turnaround, with everyone facing the water. We opted for a view out over the ocean, and managed to find a flat spot, on the edge of town, next to this marker for the Trans Canada Trail.. There were no buildings on the Point, and I guessed that in stormy weather it might all go underwater.

We ate lunch while watching the parade of traffic going around the loop and soon got to recognize trucks and motorcyclists. Perhaps the Point had always been a hang-out for the local teenagers, so they'd be cruisin' thru just to see what was going on. But now it had tourists too, so that's another reason for cruisin': to go see what the campers are up to.



We took a stroll around the neighbourhood, spread around this bay. It's a fishing community so no one wants to be far from the sea. We were told that most of the boats were out at their summer fishing camp.



This is a typical Tuk house; with few windows, to conserve heat. The ground underneath the house is permafrost and it must be kept frozen or the house will sink into it, so heated buildings are built on wooden piles driven into the permafrost. There is no town water or sewage system. Fresh water is delivered by a truck and another truck like this pumps out the sewage.





The Catholic church is built on the ground. It probably has no plumbing and is only heated for services.

Likewise the Anglican church. I don't know what this circular building is. It looks like a smaller version of Inuvik's Igloo Church, but there was nothing to identify it, so we'd have to ask.



Graves with extravagant plastic flower displays are common, wrapped in poly against the elements.



Family plots may be fenced with little white pickets.

Our Lady of Lourdes used to transport supplies to the Catholic missions in the Arctic in the 30s and 40s. Sadly it is also remembered for transporting Inuit children away from their families to residential schools. This ground squirrel was clearly in charge of contributions associated with the ship.



This is what Tuk's houses used to look like. They were built out of sod, similar to a prairie house except that their interiors were all above ground; they were too close to the ocean to dig pits. There was another ground squirrel in charge here too.



Tuk does have one very large pit, dug well away from the shoreline. It is the village's freezer, accessed by ladders that lead to each family's cache of meat and fish. Tourists used to be allowed to visit the freezer and go down the ladders, but the village's lawyers were worried about liability. Ricky, our guide in 2004, suggested that the lawyers be tossed into the pit.

As is usual in Canada's remote communities the Northern Store sells everything, well everything you're ever going to get in Tuk. I'd guess that delivery charges are high if goods are ordered online.



The weather was deteriorating. The wind was stronger and the clouds had rolled in. If I was to get my swim in it had to be now. It seemed silly to drive all this way to the beach and not sample it. Sandie, for some

reason, wasn't keen, so I went looking for a good place for me to swim. I couldn't risk deep water in case I cramped up, so we went to the extreme end of the Point where a line of rocks bordered a shallow area. By this time the wind had got cold enough that I was keen to get into the water! It was cold, but not numbingly so. I've swum in mountain lakes so cold that my hands and feet went numb. This Tuk water wasn't much worse than the English Channel in winter. Although I was in the Arctic Ocean, it was somewhat muddy and only faintly salty; probably a mix of seawater with the Mackenzie's river water.

By the time I'd got back to the camper the wind had come up and was screaming. I was determined to have a beach barbecue, but even though I'd built a windbreak I couldn't get the fire started. One of the locals sat down next to me and asked if I needed help.



I was expecting some ancient Inuit trick, but he pulled out a plumber's torch and blasted my pile of wood until it was blazing. I offered him a bratwurst but he said he was just happy to help. A German girl came over to share the fire. By the time I'd finished cooking, rain was lashing us sideways, and she returned to her tent.

Sandie asked me to get rid of the fat from boiling the brats and I tried to empty the pan into the fire but the wind blew the fat onto the rocks. A dog appeared and with one mighty lick scooped up the fat and swallowed it. At this latitude dogs, like people, need their fat!

We had to tighten all the hatches as the wind was threatening to tear them off. It was truly a “dark and stormy night”, though it was only dark from the storm; otherwise it would have stayed light all night. The wind was shrieking around us and shaking us on our springs. The rain was beating on the roof and back door. We didn’t dare open the door in case we lost it. There was nobody moving outside.

Thursday July 5th

The wind turned around overnight so that it was coming straight off the ocean. With high tide and the storm surge, the ocean was a lot closer than in this picture. We hunkered down to wait the storm out.

We were getting wet inside. Our window frames have gutters and drain holes so that condensation will drain away. The gutters were filling up with seawater and there’d be squirts of water onto our table. I had to move the cameras off the table. Too late, Sandie



realized that the same was happening in the bedroom and her clothes had all been rinsed. The wind was picking up seawater and driving it up the windows’ drain holes! It was time to move!

I had to go outside to retrieve our step which was skittering away up the road. Sandie held the door while I slid out. I found that I could stand up, so I reckoned that we could probably drive without being blown over and we got ready to move. We talked to



some other campers, also hunkered down in their vehicles. I heard that the Tuk fishing fleet had been forced to abandon their summer camp because of the storm surge. There was talk of the road being closed, and of Arctic storms often lasting four or five days.

That made up our minds. We’d planned to spend another day in Tuk, but being hunkered down there for four days wasn’t appealing so we set off back to Inuvik. As we were leaving we spotted the dog, walking sideways with the wind. In places the waves were breaking onto the road.

I’d been worried about our being blown over but our main enemy was mud. After about 12 hours of heavy rain, the road had disintegrated. The single track in the centre of the road was churned-up black mud and the narrow shoulders were steep glistening clay, about six feet above the tundra.





At first I couldn't make any headway at all but I eventually got the hang of it, just feathering the accelerator enough to keep us moving at walking pace. After a few kilometres I got stuck on a hill. I stopped rather than risk sliding off the road, but then we slowly slid backwards until one pair of back wheels fell off the shoulder. Possibly the wind had pushed us off and there was a danger that it might push us further and we'd tip over on the way down.

We hadn't seen any other vehicles on the road. We weren't going anywhere without a tow, so I parachuted out of the driver's seat down onto the tundra and climbed back up to the road and the mud and began walking back to Tuk. Sandie was sitting very still and belted in on the high side of the truck, hoping the wind didn't blow her and the camper off the road. It was 4C (39F) and sleeting with a gale force wind and the clay was shin deep so my progress was very slow.

We hadn't seen any traffic so I expected to have to walk for an hour or two. I was walking along with my head down when I was passed by a pickup truck coming out of Tuk, so close that I could have touched it! Sandie said that this one did stop at our camper to ask if she needed help, and she told him I was going for help. He didn't mention that he'd seen me so my guess is that he hadn't; a near miss.

The next driver to stop was an Asian driving a small truck. I asked him for a ride into Tuk and he pointed to his front seat, which was occupied by a pile of electronic gear and said "No room". I asked him to send a tow truck from Tuk but he didn't have enough English to understand.

I had a ball of clinging mud around each foot and I was getting slower, wondering if I'd make Tuk before I froze. Then, a third truck stopped and offered me a ride and not to worry about the mud. He worked for the power company and said that his co-worker had gone off the road too and he was going to Tuk to get some help and then go back to tow him out. They'd tow us out next.

He was obviously used to the road, getting through the mud with a series of slides and recoveries. He had another passenger, a young girl with a small baby. He dropped her off at a Tuk apartment block, noting that the road there was partly underwater. He found the guy who he'd hoped would help us but the guy refused "Not going out into that mess."

Plan B was to get his boss to help so we went to the power plant, noting that the access road was half underwater. "Lost it last month. Looks like we'll lose it again." His boss made sure he had towing gear and set off in his pickup. The idea was to use both trucks to rescue the co-worker.

After a few scary slides we made it to the camper, where he dropped me off, promising to return once they'd rescued his co-worker. Sandie said one of the campers we'd talked to at the Point had come by in his truck camper, apologized for advising us to leave, and wished us luck.

While we were waiting, another pickup stopped. Did we want a tow? This was a pickup with a large service body, possibly as heavy as us but with single rear wheels. It looked very capable. The driver hauled out a very substantial chain and then apologized as it was too big for our tow hooks.

Shortly after he'd left yet another pickup stopped and I recognized the driver as the guy who'd earlier refused to help. "S'pose you want a tow?" He didn't look very enthusiastic but he efficiently hooked us up, and roared his engine, pulling us along while I angled us sideways and up the shoulder. We were back on the road! I tried



to pay him for the tow but he got back into his truck and drove just ahead of us until we made it up the hill.

It was very likely that we'd slide off again. We realized that a big part of the problem was the road's steep camber. It was OK for fast traffic but at walking pace the truck was sliding down the camber. I was having to go into bends on the high edge and stay as far from the low edge as possible. Sandie

found all this nerve-wracking so there was lots of screaming and shouting involved.

We were getting close to the end of the muddy section when we met a couple of trucks at the brow of a hill. I was, of course, in the middle of the road, as were they, and I slowly trundled to my right to give them some space. The first driver went to pass me on the shoulder, realized he was sliding off, and accelerated to get back up the crown of the road. This didn't work and he ended up with both nearside wheels off the road, suspended much as we had been. The second driver waited for us to get out of the way and he stopped to help the other. Shortly after we came to the co-worker's pickup, completely off the road and partly embedded in the tundra. There was no sign of our benefactor or his boss or his co-worker. The road beyond was better gravel and it was easy to see how drivers coming the other way would be surprised by the slickness of the mud.



There was still the muddy section near Inuvik to negotiate but it didn't seem to have had as much rain. It looks really bad in this picture but the road wasn't elevated above the tundra so sliding off wasn't as big a risk.

It had been a long day and we were looking forward to staying at Inuvik's Happy Valley campground and taking advantage of their showers and dump station. We were lucky to take the last site, not a scenic spot but it was flat and had electricity.

I don't remember much about the evening other than washing our personal mud off. The truck and camper and my outside clothes were still smothered of course.

Friday July 6th

We woke late to a gentle rain and got on with the day's business, moving to another site as ours was reserved, filling with water, dumping sewage, and cleaning handles so we could get in and out without touching mud. Inuvik was wet but warmer than Tuk.



When we parked at the Visitors' Centre the first question we got from other travelers was "How did that happen?" They were looking at our mud pack. We were there to look at the centre's art and history exhibits, but most people wanted to know about "the road". We'd arrived at the same time as the campers

who'd stopped at our stricken truck and wished us luck. They were glad we'd made it



OK and he said that it was the most frightening drive of his life. I thought that was a bit of an exaggeration; falling off the road would be inconvenient and very expensive but not life-threatening.

The fish is a char, a colourful Arctic cousin of the salmon. I remember the exhibit from our last trip, also the beadwork and the parka. They've been kept in good condition.

I left a comment card at the centre. Our saviours from the power company had called the Dept of Transportation to ask if there were any tow vehicles available, and the department hadn't even been aware that there was a problem with the road. In my comment I pointed out that the government was promoting tourism to the Arctic and that there were people from Europe who'd be getting off a plane, renting a motorhome, and heading for Tuk. If the road can't be fixed then the very least they could do is make sure there's a tow truck in Tuk capable of hauling a motorhome back onto the road.



We tracked down a souvenir store (hidden away inside a warehouse) and bought a couple of unexciting Inuit tee-shirts. I told the manager that we'd also like to buy a copy of the fleecy she was wearing, a more inspired depiction of the road to Tuk. She said it was one of a limited edition made to celebrate the road's opening, and I was the fourth person that morning to offer to buy.



She said that her husband drove for the post office and that he'd gone off the road 3 or 4 times; he said it was more dangerous than the old ice road.

We ate lunch in the park and then went to the library for its Internet connection, which was free but only adequate for e-mailing text, not pictures

We'd heard about the reindeer chili at Alestine's, so that's where we went for our only restaurant meal of the trip. We'd also heard that they'd run out of chili the previous evening so we were there when they opened. The kitchen is in the school bus. There are only four tables; be prepared to share and talk. We shared with a couple from Sudbury, Ontario. They had come to drive their van to Tuk but the horror stories had changed their minds. We had reindeer chili poutine. Amazingly good. We finished just in time to walk across town to join a church tour.



is its Igloo Church. A member of the congregation told us the history of both Inuvik and the church. Inuvik was built to replace Aklavik, the previous regional centre, which had limited space and was prone to flooding. Inuvik now has about 3000 residents, declining in recent years since exploiting the area's gas fields proved to be too expensive.

Town and church were constructed in the late 1950s, long before the building of the Dempster Highway, so all components had to come in by barge, probably from Hay River, the terminus of the Mackenzie Northern Railway, across the Great Slave Lake, and then down the Mackenzie River. (Explored on our 2013 trip to the Northwest Territory around Yellowknife.)

The Igloo Church was the inspiration of a Catholic pastor and the product of a brilliant but untrained architect, a brother of the church's Oblate Order. They wanted a building more appealing to the Inuit than the usual boxy church. To keep costs down they used windows from another church and ended up with the current blending of styles. They even used old hockey sticks to make some of the gratings. I'm not sure what to think about the igloo font; it fits the theme but looks like a piece of Santa Claus décor.

Inuvik's most famous structure





The church has two shells, exterior and interior. The interior is equally impressive, with a view of the massive wooden ribs. It has near-perfect acoustics and hosted a concert by the Canadian tenors. The striking paintings of Christ were all the work of a deaf-mute Inuit teenager, Mona Thrasher, now famous for her subsequent depictions of the vanishing Inuit way of life.

We were shown a video of the space between the shells; better than climbing up to see it ourselves. The church didn't have access to the pile driving machine so they designed their own permafrost foundation, using layers of air and gravel and a concrete raft.

The church cannot be allowed to freeze so the heating system keeps it at just above freezing point, only being warmed up beyond that for Sunday service. Even so, heating costs \$3000 a month.

The rest of Inuvik's buildings are on piles. Originally they were of wood, but those began rotting out in the early 2000s so now they are of steel. The buildings are connected to city sewer and water, but not under the ground as that would melt the permafrost. Instead there are "utilidors" carrying fluids above ground; continually circulating water prevents freezing.



Older buildings have larger rectangular pipes, perfect as a kids' playground.



Saturday July 7th

We left Inuvik in a fine drizzle, heading south on the Dempster, greasy from the rain but good, firm gravel. It was buggy at the campground and it stayed that way for our first few stops.

We stopped at the Tithegeh Chii Vitaii Lookout, which I remembered had a good view over Campbell Lake. There was a new, groomed trail, which led us a long way down into a swampy area with clouds of bugs. Sandie gave up and retreated while I found the old trail which was steep but direct and short with few bugs. I imagine that some bureaucrat decided that the old trail didn't meet safety standards so directed that another "easy" one be built to replace it. The lookout was worth the short climb.



We had coffee at a river overlook. We crossed the river on this high berm; not a good place to slide off the road!



We came to the Mackenzie River ferry. We considered visiting Tsiigehtchic, the Gwich'in village that occupies the confluence of the Mackenzie and Arctic Red rivers. The ferry would take us there if we asked. I was tempted to ask and show off my pronunciation, but we'd been there in 2004. It had seemed a dour place, but on that day it was brightened by a wedding, with the bride and groom in the back of a pickup and being paraded around town. We decided to keep that as our memory of Tsiigehtchic and bypassed it this time. The ferry was well-loaded this time, with trucks and motorhomes.

We noted that the river valley still had bulldog flies. We'd been really glad they hadn't spread any further north. More welcome were a pair of sandhill cranes, mostly hidden in the brush, but Sandie caught this one when it emerged.



Further south I took a side road that I thought might lead to the quarry we camped in back in 2004 along with dozens of sandhill cranes. It was a quarry track but the wrong one. This one led to a mud wallow with lots of evidence that people had got stuck there. I gunned the truck through the wallow and made it to a steep muddy hill. We crawled up the hill and were relieved to be able to turn around in the quarry. Then it was a very careful descent: 4wd low and first gear and don't touch the steering and let the truck follow its own track. Then gun it through the wallow and back onto the road. After that adventure I wasn't allowed to take any other side roads.

We drove into the town of Fort McPherson, very quiet on a Saturday afternoon. Sandie wanted to visit the Tent and Canvas Company but they're not open at weekends. She wanted to replace the Northwest Territory bag that she accidentally gave away to a friend.

We thought we'd also like to go and see the graves of the lost patrol again. This was an RCMP patrol that set out in 1910's December darkness from Fort McPherson to Dawson City, about 300 miles in the depth of winter. The patrol got lost, turned back, and eventually starved after they ate their dogs. They were found, too late, by Corporal Dempster, who was honoured decades later by giving his name to the highway.



They are buried in Fort McPherson, but as we got closer we could see that the graveyard was full of people, most of the population perhaps, so we assumed there was a big funeral in progress. They didn't need gawping tourists around so we left them to it.

The Peel River ferry site was quiet. We thought that the ferry was coming across empty to pick us up. But it disgorged a solitary cyclist. We also had the ferry to ourselves. These ferries are free, part of the road network, and they are accommodating; they go whenever there is a load and there's no waiting for the ferry to fill up.

From the Peel we had a steady climb up into the Richardson Mountains, mostly bare of trees and shrubs but showing brightly coloured rocks and lichens on the steeper slopes.



The road was being graded and a tanker was spraying calcium chloride to reduce dust when the road dries.

When the road is wet though, we get covered in calcium chloride mud which sets hard when it dries out. The road gets slick too but not luckily soft.

We stopped at the Yukon border, and met a guy I'd talked to at the visitors' centre. He said he was going home. It was reported to be raining all the way from Inuvik to Tuk and he wasn't going to chance driving the road in those conditions. He wasn't too happy with the current condition of the Dempster either.



We found this gem of a campsite, an old gravel pit, with folded strata, a mountain backdrop, and mounds of small flowers.



We had a distant view of the highway climbing into the hills.



This was to be our last campsite north of the Arctic Circle. The weather had cleared and we celebrated by sitting outside around a fire.

Sunday July 8th

That night our solitude was disturbed by a red campervan creeping along the track and parking a few feet from us; really weird considering that there was a half mile of track they could have used. I made sure my axe was close at hand,

but we never saw the occupants. The van had Belgian registration and Belgium is a very crowded country, so perhaps they didn't feel comfortable camping on their own.

We'd planned a clean-up for the morning if it was dry and we didn't feel obliged to be quiet, so we were out scraping the windows, chipping mud off the steps, and beating the carpets. No Belgians emerged.

Later that morning we crossed the Arctic Circle. On our way north we'd had rain, wind, and lightning strikes here. This time we had a clear view of the Richardson Mountains.



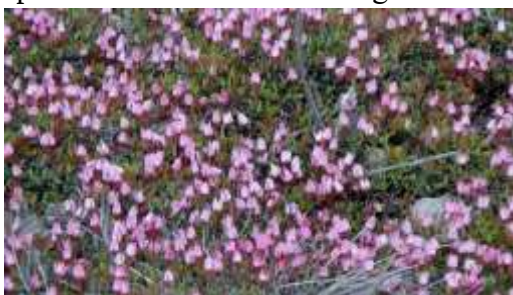
We took pictures of each other. Sandie's photo shows that it was warm enough for her to discard fleecies and gloves.





Sandie spotted this picture on one of the display boards. The two adults are James and Maureen Pokiak. Back in 2004 Maureen served us lunch at their home in Tuk. She fed us caribou stew, bannock, dried and smoked whitefish, dried whale meat (miptu), and smoked blubber (muktuk). She also told us the amazing quantity of food their family would get through in a year: two whales, seventy snow geese, twenty caribou, seals when available, and hundreds of fish. We didn't get to meet her husband James, but Scottish entertainer Billy Connolly did in his Journey to the Edge of the World TV series; he and James went fishing.

Our next stop was at the bridge over the Eagle River. The river features in the other great story of the North, the "Mad Trapper of Rat River". Back in the 1930s the trapper was accused of robbing others' trap lines. He shot and wounded one of the Mounties sent to question him. The Mounties blew his cabin apart with dynamite, but he kept shooting and drove them back. The trapper fled and the hunt was on. He confused his pursuers by wearing his snowshoes backwards, but eventually they caught up with him and a constable was killed in the gun battle. He escaped again, but an RCMP plane spotted him on the frozen Eagle River and that's where he died in the final shootout.



We filled up with diesel and propane at Eagle Plains, in much better weather this time. All was confusion and chaos as four or five vehicles came in at the same time and most of the drivers were confused by the odd pumping facilities, not realizing they needed to wait for the attendant. He managed to keep his cool and manage three customers at a time.

There were patches of these pink bells around our nearby lunch stop

We stopped again at the escarpment viewpoint over the valleys of the Ogilvie and Peel rivers and the distant Ogilvie Mountains. It was drier and warmer than on our trip north, and our pictures were a bit clearer.





We left the plains and entered the Ogilvie Mountains, also clearer without the rain. Likewise, we had a better view of Sapper's Hill, overlooking the iron-stained Engineer Creek.



We found another perfect campsite in one of the creek's snowmelt channels, further upstream, before its colour had changed. We were close to the road but hidden from it. The creek was almost dry but judging by the size of the culverts under the road it's a lot livelier during the spring melt.



From our perch we had a view of thousands of rocks, dozens of different flowers, and a half dozen almost-bald Ogilvie Mountains. It was warm but windy, nice as it kept the bugs away.



Monday July 9th

It was cool and overcast, with no wind; the bugs loved it, not a place for us to linger.

We had a very scenic drive through the Ogilvie Mountains, great piles of rock fragments, with no sign of strata. Nothing tall was growing on their north slopes, only grass and lichen on the others, but in places the rock's colours would shine through. This is a landscape like no other.



We reached the limits of Tombstone Park and the mountains became more jagged. We had a better view this time of the magnificent North Klondike River valley with Tombstone Mountain at its head.



Further on was the interpretive centre, new since our last visit. The exhibits, the stories of the geology and animal life, were well done. We were chatting with the rangers about pelicans and cranes.

After an hour or so

of driving we reached the end of the Dempster Highway, crossed the Klondike River, and headed west into Dawson City. Dawson was the centre of the Klondike Gold Rush in the 1890s. Today its main business is tourism, but there are still gold mining companies pulverizing the Klondike's hills with water jets in what is called placer mining. The town is an odd mixture of preserved old buildings like its saloons and the opera house, abandoned ruins, and brand new town houses



built to match their surroundings. The Flora Dora Hotel was perhaps the closest to reality; a careworn fascia fronting a decrepit building.



The streets were in the midst of reconstruction and getting around town was difficult, tough for the local businesses as their season is so short. We found the Internet and this grocery store. We had a long search for the non-existent entrance to the 1900s Yukon liquor store and when we found the 2018 store the sign said "closed on Mondays".

These were some of our pictures from around town. These leaning buildings show what happens if you build directly on top of permafrost, and heat the building and melt the ground beneath. Eventually people learned to build on wood piles and later on steel piles when they found the wooden ones rotted after fifty years or so.



This is the Bank of British North America as it was a century ago; it eventually merged with the Bank of Montreal.



The SS Keno sternwheeler, now in dry dock, was built to carry silver and lead ore from the mines in Mayo down the Stewart River.



We drove the steep road up to the Midnight Dome, high above Dawson City. It was originally named in the belief that at midnight on the summer solstice the sun would not set, even up there with a view of the horizon. A bunch of people climbed the dome to watch this and, as Dawson's well south of the Arctic Circle, they were disappointed.

But a tradition was born and a tourist attraction created. It is a spectacular view, worth the climb.

The view is dominated by the Yukon River, centre, with the Klondike flowing in from the left. To the right are the southern streets of Dawson City. Out of sight on the right is the



Yukon ferry which leads to the Top of the World Highway and Chicken, Alaska.

In this close-up of the Klondike Valley, the bottom shows the worm casts left by the gold dredges, a practice abandoned over 50 years

ago, and the top shows the scars left by placer mining (water cannon), a practice still in use today.

Down in town, I parked carefully.





Down at ground level we could see some of the effects of dredging, great berms of rocks alternating with ponds of water, no use for anything.



We drove east out Dawson on the Klondike Highway, past the entrance to the Dempster, and on towards Carmacks. We had a brief stop, looking out over the Tintina Trench. The trench stretches across the Yukon and Alaska. The tectonic sliding and faulting which created it brought gold, silver, lead, and other minerals to within range of humans. The trench is also a bird migration route through the mountains. To give an idea of its size, the fireweed in the picture is on one side of the trench while the mountains are on the other.

We camped nearby in a gap in the aspen trees, just off the road. From the debris in the undergrowth we guessed it was once the site of a cabin or a shed. The evening was warm and at some point we must have left the door open as we'd picked up a horde of mosquitos, which kept Sandie awake and my blood pressure down.

Tuesday July 10th

Sandie proclaimed this to be Extermination Day and she was busy with the fly swatter. As usual, I just sat there as mosquito bait.

It was cloudy and dry as we headed east and south. The plan was to have lunch at the Coal Seam agate mine in Carmacks and then head east to look for agates on the Pelly River's beach at Faro. On our way we saw the river at Pelly Crossing and noted that it was running high, not a good sign.

On our way down the hill into Carmacks Sandie saw a baby bear crossing the road; she woke me up and I only managed to get pictures of the bear obscured by trees, not worth printing.

At the visitors' center we inquired about the Yukon liquor store and were told it was behind the saloon bar under the hotel. We found the bar and the barman pointed to the price list on the wall. No viewing or touching of the merchandise before buying. Once, all Canadian liquor stores were similar to this. The barman was

helpful and told us he had both kinds of wine boxes, red and white. We opted for white as it's less likely to be undrinkable.

We went back up the hill only to find that the coal seam mine had been fenced off. I assume someone had been hurt there. On our last visit I'd found a sheep that had been crushed by falling rock, so it certainly was a place to be careful.

We found another mine site for lunch, no agates but a scenic spot, with an overlook of the Yukon River as it winds through Carmacks.





In previous years we've camped near Faro on the bed of the Pelly River and collected many colourful agates and jaspers from its gravel bars, and Sandie was looking forward to repeating this but we we'd



Then we headed east along the Robert Campbell highway, a favourite drive of ours. It runs parallel with the Alaska Highway, a few hundred miles north, but it's quieter and more scenic. It's now blacktopped all the way to Faro but still has the feel of wilderness. It follows the north bank of the Yukon River and then the shore of Little Salmon Lake.



arrived too early. To Sandie's dismay, the river was still running high and the gravel was smothered in mud. A local we met suggested camping up in the mountains near Faro's lead and zinc mine, closed for twenty years.



We crossed the

bridge to the outskirts of Faro. This was one of the mine's dump trucks, displayed here as a tourist attraction, trying to keep the town of Faro alive.

The long road up to the mine was gravel, but in excellent condition. To our surprise the road was busy with workers going home. The mine is in the midst of remediation, paid for by Canadian taxpayers, as the mine's owners went bankrupt.



This was as far as we got before being repelled by more insistent keep-out signs: a view of the tailings from the lead and zinc mine.

We were camping in a gravel pit, mundane but with a good view of the mountains. This was our nearest neighbour in the pit. We had heavy rain and thunder so we didn't venture far from the pit.



Wednesday
July 11th

We went back down the hill towards town. On our way we



found Faro's arboretum and trails, quite nicely done originally but decaying with age; posts displaced or

overgrown.

We went to the visitors' centre, gay with flowers in an almost empty town. We read about the history of the town and the mine and its closure and planned remediation, which sounds like it will take decades. The town will survive at least that long. There is a possibility of opening another mine further back on the mountains, but only if the price is right.

We found Faro's service station, possibly Canada's smallest: a single pump for diesel and unleaded and a tiny hut. The hut door sprung open and a young lady popped out to pump for us.

We returned to the highway, which continued as a gravel road, with blacktop on some of the hills. We'd heard on the radio that the Watson Lake end of the Robert Campbell Highway might close because of a forest fire, but that wasn't a worry as we were planning on leaving it partway and going south on the Canol Road.



We stopped for coffee at the Lapie Canyon, a scenic spot, though its beaches



were inaccessible from the road.

Shortly afterwards we met this blue grouse. All grouse seem to have the same defensive technique; they freeze, hoping to become invisible. This may work with coyotes and wolves but it's ineffective with trucks and cars. If you manage to stop without squashing them they will very slowly take one step on the road, then another, and another until they reach the cover of the undergrowth where they break into a gallop.

We took the Canol Road turning down towards the community of Ross River. We were only there to take a look around; we'd be coming back out to take the Canol Road south to the Alaska Highway.

On our way down the hill we spotted this family of red-throated loons, not as tuneful as their common loon cousins, but quite pretty birds. This one seemed to be saying "Look at me, Mom!"



war it was all abandoned, including the hundreds of trucks and bulldozers used to build it. Today the Yukon government maintains its end of the road, largely for prospecting.

A cable ferry across the Pelly River connects the North and South Canol Roads. From the size of this truck coming off the ferry, we'd guess that the North road had been upgraded since our last visit.



The ferry cannot run during fall freeze-up and spring break-up so there is also a footbridge. This one is brand-new, with steel gusseting and massive concrete anchors. It

replaces the one we used in 2005. The old footbridge had popped nails, missing boards, and a spiral warp; it felt like the Crazy House at the funfair. This new one is much safer but lacks character.

A storm rolled through while we were exploring and we had to dash for cover.





We were taking the Canol Road south to the Alaska Highway. There was a warning sign as we entered to say that maintenance for the year had finished, which I think meant that rock-falls and trees-down were our problem, not the Highways Department's. It added "Use at your own risk". The posted speed limit was 25 mph and the road nearly 150 miles long so this would take a while!

This part of the Lapie Canyon had clearly been an engineering challenge. The road was more like a Jeep track and our camper truck is much wider than our Jeep. Sandie was complaining that she had one wheel

scrubbing the cliff and the other wagging in the air. I pointed out that we only needed the inner wheel on the road but my advice didn't seem to help.



Eventually the scenery became less rugged as we followed the Lapie River upstream and the road mellowed to logging road standards.

We passed a camper like ours, the only vehicle we saw that afternoon. We also met this porcupine, very casual about



getting off the road, and more grouse, some with chicks. There was a rapid stop for a pile of rocks impersonating a moose, but no real ones, even though the habitat looked ideal.

The engine light came on. We were at least a day's drive from anywhere that might be able to read the error codes, and probably at least a week to get a spare part delivered, so we did the best we could; we ignored the light.



We stopped for a late lunch at the Lapie Lakes surrounded by soggy meadows but with great mountain views in all directions.

We were then following Rose Creek downstream and found a noisy campsite at the bottom of a steep slope next to one of its rushing sections. It was a pretty spot but too cold and buggy to sit out.



Thursday July 12th

We had a wet night and it was still raining in the morning but this land was rocky rather than muddy so we had no problem climbing out of our campsite and up to the road. The rest of the Canol Road was very good gravel. We met four or five other vehicles; more traffic at this end of the road, probably for the lakes, boating and fishing.



We passed this ancient grader outside the maintenance depot. There were more relic trucks at the road's exit to the Alaska Highway at Johnson's Crossing, a resort on the Teslin River.





We filled up with diesel and dumped our tanks and then headed east on the Alaska Highway towards Watson Lake. We stopped in Teslin at the Tlingit Heritage Centre to have lunch amongst their totems.

We came to the Cassiar Highway, our chosen route south, but passed it

by to make the short round trip into Watson Lake for Internet, water, and shopping. It was a little smoky from the fire but not bad, by BC standards anyway.

We went back to the Cassiar and headed south, soon crossing into British Columbia. We were still a thousand miles north of Hope and about a week's lazy travel from home. That story will be in Part 3 of this journal.



Love to you all from Pete and Sandie