# YUKON TRAVELS, 2005

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With the summer tourist season in full swing bringing more road traffic and boat noise on Flathead Lake, Montana, it was time to get out of here and head once again to Canada's Yukon Territory in our trusty 1976 Cessna 180 Skywagon (N7782K) with its 280 hp engine. Penny and I had arranged to rent a house in the town of Faro for the month of July.

On July 1 we took off early in the morning for the thousand-mile flight up the Rocky Mountain Trench to Watson Lake, Yukon. With a customs stop in Cranbrook, B.C., plus two en-route fuel stops, we were nearing Watson Lake about 6 pm, but had to circle thirty minutes to wait for a severe thunderstorm (complete with hail) to move on west, away from the airport. We could have landed on the Alaska Highway near Lower Post if the wait became prolonged. The ground was white with hail when we finally approached the runway for an uneventful landing.

We spent a pleasant night at the excellent Watson Lake Airport campground and continued on to Faro the next morning, an hour-and-a-half flight to the northwest up the Tintina Trench. By noon we had settled into our rental house overlooking the Pelly River valley. This was to be our home base for the next three weeks while we explored remote areas of the Yukon.

Our first fly-out was on July 4, a flight to the north for forty-five minutes to locate an airstrip that I discovered on an Internet search. We flew over the huge open pits of the now closed lead/zinc mine north of town, crossed a low mountain range above tree line, over-flew the broad MacMillan River valley (much of which burned in last year's extensive forest fire season) with its numerous small lakes and continued on into another series of mountains. We found the strip, called Andrew, surrounded by mountains, but it was more suited to use by a Super Cub than a Cessna 180. Without landing we then flew in a big loop around to the east for an hour, flying low over Dragon Lake and numerous smaller lakes, looking for moose. We spotted several feeding in shallow water. By the time we returned to Faro shortly after noon, rain showers were beginning to develop.

The next day promised better weather, so we planned a longer trip with an overnight camp somewhere. We took off to the east, following the Tintina Trench, a long, sometimes narrow, valley that extends from Dawson City to Watson Lake. Much of the valuable mineralization in the southeast Yukon is near this geologic feature.

The first airstrip we wanted to find is called "Conwest" in the headwaters area of the Liard River. It was an abandoned mineral exploration airfield used twenty or so years ago. The nearest road was more than fifty miles distant.

After about thirty minutes of flying we crossed a narrow dirt road heading south from the Robert Campbell Highway, threading its way up the Ketza River into the St. Cyr Mountains. On the road below us a "Cat" on a lowboy was being hauled into the mountains. We followed this road back into some rugged terrain where there was some mineral exploration going on. Gold was first found here in 1954 and early exploration was done with either dog team or packhorse support. A high-grade gold deposit was mined from 1988 to 1990 with 100,000 ounces recovered. The mine location was in a scenic place above timberline with snow banks on the north slopes. If one were driving and knew about this road, the area would be a good place to camp and hike into the alpine tundra. The mountain peaks reach to about seven thousand feet.

We looped back through a pass into the Tintina Trench again, following the Hoole River. We over-flew an airstrip that would merit future investigation at a later date. It was constructed in 1973 to support an exploration effort for lead and zinc plus a small concentration of silver. The strip looked like it was usable despite a growth of small trees and brush along most of its length.

Once again we departed the Tintina trench to the south and crossed the St. Cyr Mountains to enter the broad, lake-studded flatlands of the Liard River headwaters. This was definitely moose country and we saw several feeding in shallow ponds. Shortly, the Conwest airstrip came into view, fifty-five minutes after leaving Faro. It was in reasonably good shape and perhaps 4,000 feet long. The coordinates are N61°05',W131°13'. After a low pass, we landed and stopped next to an assembly of old, wooden tent frames festooned with shreds of blue plastic tarps. Beyond this mess, among the stunted spruce trees, was a log horse corral. Nearby, poles were fastened between trees for hanging up meat. Moose antlers were in a pile, some gnawed by rodents. This was obviously a hunting base camp that hadn't been used recently. On a weathered board was written with a black grease pen: "Dick Dewhurst, Aug. 15/2000. Waiting for Plane, 5 PM". He must have made it out, as there were no human remains around.

As it was getting warm and the bugs were pesky, we took off to renew our explorations. Our next destination was a place called Regal Ridge, site of an emerald discovery made in 1998. The gem find was by accident as the geologist was really searching for base metals in conjunction with a larger mineral area at Wolverine. (More on that later.) Before long we were flying over the Emerald Ridge area, located on a mountain ridge at about five thousand feet. There was a major exploratory drilling operation in progress and an airstrip had been constructed. We elected not to land since the strip was short and a wind had come up that created some low-level turbulence. Besides, unauthorized aircraft are not always welcome at active mine locations.

So, we proceeded to the mineral exploration airstrip called Wolverine, one we had visited two years ago. At that time there was no one around and the vehicles were all up on blocks. We landed after a thirty-minute flight. This year it appeared that there was a lot

going on. The runway had been rebuilt, there was more equipment around plus a new road had been constructed leading off to what appeared to be a mine adit.

To make a long story short, after first being told we were really not welcome, we were invited by the head geologist (Gilles) for a cup of coffee at the main camp on the shore of Wolverine Lake. We were shown some of the drill cores from their exploratory work. They have mapped an extensive area of lead/zinc/silver ore and were just getting started on an underground mining operation. The ore body tested on the average 13% zinc, 1.58% lead, 1.43% copper and 379.4 grams/ton of silver. This ore had a rather high level of selenium, which normally discounts its value. But the price of selenium has risen ten times in the last year; so mining here is now profitable.

Wolverine was like most of the mineral exploration airstrips that we visited: there was no road to the site. Heavy equipment was "walked" into the site during the winter and the airstrip built after the ground thawed in the spring. If a mine became operational, then a road was constructed; or if the site was very remote and the ore of high grade, the ore would be flown out. In the case of Wolverine, once serious mining gets underway an all-weather road will be constructed to the Robert Campbell Highway thirty miles to the northeast. (Note: the road has since been built).

Since the Wolverine area is now an active mining zone, we were not permitted to camp here for the night. So, at 3:30 p.m. we took off for another mineral exploration airstrip called Logan, thirty minutes to the south. I had been there last year for a day's hiking but did not spend the night.

We flew low over mountain ridges, with barren, snow-streaked peaks above us. The lower elevation landscape was covered with stunted spruce trees and willows with numerous watercourses flowing into the Liard River. The Logan airstrip soon came into view, located at N60°31', W130°24'. It is situated on an esker, about 3,000 feet long. The landing was up hill to the southwest, but the last five hundred feet at the south end was not usable due to a growth of willows and dwarf birch.

After we parked the plane, I got out the trusty Pulaski (you always have one in your plane, right?) and cut down the brush on the runway. Penny dragged the stuff off to the side. Then we taxied the plane to the upper end where there was a small level spot to camp with a view over a pond and mountains rising further to the west.

After loading the shotgun --for grizzly bear protection--, we started on a hike up the "Cat" road towards the old campsite and the exploration diggings. We passed the usual assortment of old wooden tent frames, a dilapidated outhouse and a large canvass-covered frame building filled with trays of drill core. The "Cat" trail continued up a ridge to a location where the bedrock had been exposed by digging long trenches with an excavator. The exploratory drill holes were marked with a spruce tree trunk stuck down each hole.

The first mineral exploration occurred in 1979, with the airstrip constructed in 1987. The heavy equipment was “walked’ in from the Alaska Highway, twenty miles to the south. At the time of our visit no equipment remained at the site. The surveyed ore body tested 6.17% zinc with 26.4 grams of silver per ton. Estimated reserves are 12,300,000 tons. Four and a half million dollars was spent on exploration. Metal prices will determine future plans. The Logan site is owned by the same company that owns Wolverine.

Under sunny evening skies we set up our camp next to the plane and cooked our supper. At this time of year it is light all “night”. I got up about 3:30 a.m. to relieve myself just as the first drops of rain began to fall. Off to the west was a bank of dark clouds, threatening a major change in the weather. Not wanting to get “trapped” here in rain for several days (which is not unusual in the southern Yukon), we quickly packed up our camp, loaded the plane and were airborne for Faro at 4:25 a.m. An hour later we landed at Faro under sunny skies, and by 6:30 a.m. we were in bed again, but not before draping the wet tent over the porch rail to dry.

At mid-morning a plane circled town and landed. It was our good friend Lowell Hanson from Helena. He stopped to see us on his way to Alaska. Thunderstorms were soon developing, so we showed him around Faro instead of flying anywhere. The next day was good weather, so we decided to lead Lowell on a day of flight seeing to one our favorite places in the Yukon: MacMillan Pass, near the Northwest Territories border deep in the Selwyn Mountains.

Take off was at 9:30 a.m. with full tanks of fuel. We flew low over the terrain in a northeasterly course, the air smooth as silk, seeing several moose feeding in shallow ponds. After thirty minutes we were in the rugged Selwyn Mountains and began our let-down to the Mac Pass mineral exploration airstrip nestled in a narrow valley through which meandered a small river with numerous beaver dams. Stunted spruce trees covered the lower mountain slopes. On the higher, barren peaks snow banks glistened in the sun. We spent only a few minutes here before deciding to come back later for a hike up to the old Tom Mine exploration site.

Our next flight was a short one through narrow MacMillan Pass into the Northwest Territories. Open vistas of treeless terrain greeted us as we descended to land at a gravel airstrip (known as Mile 222, the distance from Norman Wells, NWT) used by hunting outfitter Stan Simpson as his supply base. This was as far as you could drive from Ross River, Yukon, on the old North Canol Road. We walked around the area, exploring a parking lot of old trucks and earth moving machinery dating from World War II, checking out Stan’s huge inventory of equipment and supplies and looked for other relics of the WWII Canol oil pipeline that ran from Norman Wells to Whitehorse. We have camped here numerous times to hike and enjoy the scenery.

We were back at the Mac Pass airstrip by 1:30 p.m. and started the thirty-minute hike up to the old mine site. Just before reaching the mine we came upon a herd of about seventy-

five caribou, mostly females and calves plus a few large males. They merely ambled off up the mountain trails. Most of the gullies were still filled with snow where the caribou would lay to get away from the insects.

The Tom Mine was first staked in 1951 by the Hudson Bay Company, which at that time was doing extensive mineral exploration of the Yukon. Continued tunneling and diamond drilling revealed an ore reserve of over nine million tons grading 69.4 grams per ton of silver, 7.5% lead and 6.2% zinc. Actual mining has yet to take place due to the remoteness of the site and low base metals prices. We did not hike past the old mine site, but numerous “Cat” trails made good access to the higher plateaus.

Flowing out of the mine adit was a small stream of water that was bright orange in color that left a gooey coating on the rocks. The government, in all its wisdom, has posted a sign that warns that it is not advisable to drink the water. Duhhh!

The weather was still good when we took off from Mac Pass so we decided to do a sightseeing flight around 9,685 feet-high Keele Peak just to the north. This is the highest mountain for many miles and is usually obscured in cloud. Keele Peak revealed its massive bulk, flanked by numerous glaciers with their melt-water cascading down into turquoise lakes. Torrential streams carried the melt water into the rivers that flow from the surrounding valleys. One of these rivers was the Hess, which I boated in 1992 in a 4 X 8 foot plastic rowboat, the ultimate white water experience in the Yukon Territory.

We landed back at Faro at 5:25 p.m., at the tail end of a heavy down-pour from a thunderstorm. Lowell left the next morning for Alaska and we took the day off to read at the local library and relax.

After a day off from flying we were ready to head out again to search for more remote airstrips. Our flight planning began by going to the Visitors’ Center when it opened at eight o’clock. The Center had high-speed Internet access for public use and we would look at NavCanada’s web site for a weather briefing as well as the public forecast. At the airport, when we were ready to go, I would phone the Whitehorse Flight Service Station to file a flight plan. I had a master flight plan on file there, so I only had to give them our routing, time enroute, fuel and souls on board and estimated time of departure.

With full tanks of fuel and camping gear for a possible overnight, we left Faro at 11:00 a.m., bound for a former silver mine airstrip called Plata about one hundred and fifty miles to the north. An hour later, when we were circling to land, we noticed an old trapper’s cabin a short distance from the airstrip next to a creek named Fido. The coordinates of the strip are N63°30.33’, W132°02.16’, and it was not shown on the aeronautical chart. The length is about four thousand feet with the gravely surface relatively smooth. At the east end is an assortment of old machinery, vehicles, shacks, wooden tent frames and stacks of empty fuel barrels, present everywhere throughout the North. Most of this stuff came in over a temporary winter road from the North Canol

Road, fifty miles to the southeast. A crudely painted sign on the side of a dilapidated wooden building said “Welcome To Plattaville”.

The former high-grade silver mine is about eight miles to the north, high up on a mountainside, well above tree line. The first real mining occurred in the mid 1970s when eighty-one tons of ore was hand sorted and flown out for refining at Trail, B.C. Mining continued into the mid-eighties. A 1200-foot adit was driven into the mountain and 3,000 tons of high-grade silver ore was mined and flown by DeHaviland Caribou aircraft to Ross River, the location of the nearest all-weather road. The ore tested out at 140 ounces of silver per ton. Of course, this all occurred when there was a strong silver market. There was also lead associated with the ore, which graded 60 to 70 %. The mine has not operated for about twenty years. For the stout of heart, an overnight backpack hike to the mine site would be interesting.

We walked to the other end of the airstrip and followed an overgrown trail through the spruce trees to the trapper’s cabin by the creek. There were two sod-roofed log buildings; one a tool shed housing an old snowmobile and the other cabin the living quarters. Nearby was a cache. Under a roof overhang was a sizable, old fashioned, galvanized bathtub. In the brush was a well-rusted, small rototiller. Hanging from a rack were numerous rusty traps of various sizes plus an assortment of snare wire. Inside the cabin was a sizable wood stove plus a washbasin, wooden bed frame, table and chairs. It appeared from the magazines and calendar on the table that the cabin was last used in 1987. Also, on the table was a spiral, lined notebook that had in neat penmanship the directions on how to trap various species of animals, complete with detailed drawings. Other items of note on the table were trapping equipment catalogues and newsletters, all addressed to Tom Plunkett of Mayo.

The day was getting warm by the time we got back to the plane and took off to the northeast to find another reported airstrip near the headwaters of the Rogue River. Twenty minutes later we were over the strip, located in a fairly large level area at the confluence of the four streams that merge to become the Rogue River. At this ground elevation of 3,300 feet there were few trees except along the streams. Most of the land is covered with dwarf birch and willow, about seven feet high. The airstrip was made by hand grubbing out the brush and appeared to be about 1,500 feet long. The coordinates are N63°46.95’, W131°16.59’. This is a satellite camp for Rogue River Outfitters, which has a 12,000 square mile hunting area. In the trees along one of the streams was a small cabin. There was no sign of anyone being around.

We landed and parked the plane. Our intention was to hike to the cabin, but there was no discernable trail. So we took off, bushwhacking through the seven-foot tall willows and dwarf birch. After roaming around for an hour we never did find the cabin and got lost in the process, finally ending up at the airstrip on the side opposite from where we had begun our hike. We had circled the airstrip and didn’t know it.

By this time at mid-afternoon the air had become quite warm. It turned out that the northeast five hundred feet of the strip was not usable. The brush had only been clipped off, not grubbed out. So, the ground was covered with short stumps that would flatten a tire. We took off into a slight breeze and used almost the entire bumpy usable runway. That fifty extra horsepower in our C-180 is great when you really need it. The "phantom" cabin was again visible in the trees. How could we have missed it?

Our next destination was a mineral exploration strip on the East Rackla River below 7,250-foot Nadaleen Mountain. Thirty-five minutes later we were circling the strip to land. It appeared to be about 4,000 feet long and smooth but the east half had a fair growth of brush. We landed mid-field and rolled out onto the broad parking area at the west end where there was a large assortment of discarded mining equipment and fuel drums. The elevation was 2,800 feet and the coordinates were N64°13.32', W133°13.11'.

Between the airstrip and the river were the remains of an extensive camp, mostly wooden tent frames with plywood floors. Some had plywood walls and roof as well. Inside were bed frames, wash sinks, a washer and dryer, a kitchen, and one was a set up for examining mineral samples. The place was a total mess, taking away from such a beautiful location beside the river. Circling the whole camp area was the remnant of an electric fence to keep out the bears.

The final airstrip to search out on this flight was another mineral exploration claim site called "Marg". These claims were located about twelve miles southeast of 6852-foot high Mt. Patterson. Exploration in the area dated back to 1965, with findings of low concentrations of copper, zinc, lead, silver and gold. The 1600-foot airstrip was located on the side of a mountain at tree line. This would be a good location to land and hike in the alpine terrain. But due to the warmth of the day and gusty afternoon winds, we elected not to land and proceeded to Mayo to camp for the night at the airport.

While at the Mayo airport we met the owner of the Bonnet Plume Outfitters, Chris McKinnon. He showed me on my chart where there are airstrips in his hunting area to the northeast of Mayo and invited us to stop by any time we were in the area. He flies a Cessna 206 and a Super Cub. Two of his guides also have Super Cubs.

After a warm, mostly sunny "night" at Mayo, we took off for Faro at 10:25 a.m., flying low up the Stewart River past Fraser Falls and on up to a mountain area called Kalzas Twins. There is a large deposit of tungsten ore that was first staked by J.D. Randolph in 1978. I met J.D. in July 1992, at his home on the Stewart River near Frazer Falls. The claim area has had much exploration work done and there is an airstrip. However, once again there was too much wind blowing to make a safe landing. So we continued on to Faro, arriving "home" in time for lunch.

The next day, July 12, was a bluebird morning, not a cloud in the sky and calm air. We took off to the east up the Peele River for the forty-minute flight to Francis Lake, a large,

wishbone shaped body of water 20 miles long. We flew all around the lake, the placid waters reflecting the scattered clouds and surrounding mountains. Except for a campground and boat launch where the Robert Campbell Highway briefly nears the water on the West Arm and two cabins on the East Arm, there was no sign of human disturbance.

Next, we flew northwest twenty miles to McEvoy Lake where there was an upscale fishing resort called Inconnu Lodge. The lodge is owned by Warren LeFave, who I first met in 1992. It was Warren that flew me in his float-equiped Beaver to the headwaters of the Hess River in 1992. We landed on the partly completed, dogleg airstrip that had recently been cleared from the scrub spruce forest. It was a half-mile from the buildings, which are located on the shore of the lake. The nearest road is fifteen miles away. The usual resort access is by Beaver floatplane.

Presently, a well-used van pulled up, driven by one of the resort cooks, all dressed up in a white jacket and chef's hat. I asked if Warren was here and he said he was at the lodge and drove us there. I had not seen Warren since he flew me in his Beaver to the headwaters of the Hess River, with my four-by-eight foot plastic rowboat lashed to the floats. When I walked up to him, I said: "Do you remember the guy with the orange row boat that you flew into the Hess? Well, I'm the guy". He was all smiles, commenting "How could I ever forget" and invited us in for coffee.

We arranged to spend the night as the lodge had one vacant cabin. We borrowed a motorboat and tried some fishing (no luck), read booklets in the lodge, watched a storm pass over the mountains to the south beyond the lake and enjoyed a delicious dinner of roast duck complete with a choice of red or white wine. For more information on the lodge, go to Warren's excellent web site at: www.inconnulodge.com.

In the morning, after a breakfast of French toast, we flew back to Faro in an hour. The last fifteen minutes of the flight was into stormy weather with moderate rain. Visibility was down to a mile by the time we landed. With rain coming down all afternoon, it was nice to be in a warm house with a fire going in the wood stove.

In the morning, clouds still swirled over the higher mountains but the forecast was for improving conditions. We flew to Whitehorse to spend the day in the "big city", flying low over the ridges between the higher peaks, which were often obscured in cloud. Our route took us over part of the Big Salmon River, which we had canoed years ago, our first river trip in the Yukon. After four hours in the city with its hoards of tourists and traffic, we took the city bus back to the airport and were home in quiet Faro by 4:20 p.m.

The next day it was time to do some "Pulaski Work". We flew in the morning for an hour east of Faro down the Tintina Trench to the isolated airstrip along the Hoole River for the purpose of cutting some of the brush growing on the runway. The airstrip, constructed in 1973 for lead/zinc exploration, is at an elevation of 3,300 feet and the coordinates are

N61°32.27', W131°35.97'. The length is about 3500 feet with brush making the east 2,500 feet unusable. We came in over the brushy end and landed on the last thousand feet, still getting a green-tipped prop in the process.

For an hour and a half I cut the brush and Penny dragged the stuff off to the side. When we finished, fifteen hundred feet of runway was cleared full width, making the airstrip usable by most planes in an emergency situation. Takeoff in the heat of mid-day was not a problem and we flew to Ross River to eat our sandwich lunch before returning to Faro. Ripe wild strawberries covered the ground near the parking area. That evening we attended the annual wild meat BBQ at the Visitor's Center, along with half the town's population. The meat consisted of moose, caribou and Dall sheep.

July 16 was rainy in the morning and we decided not to fly anywhere. On the advice of Gary Kimpinski, who is a radio operator/weather observer at the airport, we tried grayling fishing on a stream up near the mine. The idea was to use a fly on the end of the line of a spinning rod, tossing the lure into the current. Penny lost her fly and leader to a big one, and I caught three, two of which we kept for dinner.

The next day was still rainy in the morning but the clouds lifted by mid-afternoon. We made a local flight to the west down Little Salmon Lake, then north past the west end of Drury Lake and on into the Pelly River valley near Detour Lakes, where there is an old airstrip. We watched for moose in the numerous ponds and small lakes and saw several. Before arriving back at Faro, we made several passes along Rose Mountain looking for the Fannon sheep that summer on the rocky slopes. None were to be seen. We were gone an hour and ten minutes. It started to rain shortly after our return.

Although clouds obscured the higher terrain, it looked like a suitable day to go to the old placer mining area known as Livingstone Creek, a hundred miles southwest of Faro, where we hoped to do some hiking. With food and camping gear for a night out, we left Faro at 9:35 a.m., but by the time we got to the west end of Little Salmon Lake, the clouds were almost down to the treetops. With a 180-degree turn, we were back in Faro in fifty minutes to our snug house. An afternoon hike near town finished out the day. It rained during the night.

It was still raining the next morning but the weather improved considerably by early afternoon. We took off, flying down the Pelly River valley to the small community of Pelly Crossing. From there we turned south, following the Klondike Highway to the abandoned airstrip at Minto, on the banks of the Yukon River. We parked the plane and walked over to where several natives from Whitehorse had salmon nets set out. The annual run had not reached here yet. This spot would be a good one for airplane camping.

Next, we flew low level up the Yukon River, twisting and turning with the river, passing over the Five Finger Rapids where a century ago the steamboats winched themselves up

through the swift current. At the mouth of the Little Salmon River we left the Yukon and continued back to Faro, arriving at 5:00 p.m.

Following another day of rainy weather, July 21 dawned cloudless with no wind. We packed a lunch and flew to the old placer mining area called Livingstone Creek. We skimmed over the barren ridge tops and dropped low into the valleys, always searching for moose or caribou.

Our first landing was at an airstrip called May Creek, where there is an abandoned placer mine in a gully coming down off a nearby mountain. The last time there was serious mining here was in 1939. The property is currently for sale for US$450,000. We scrambled up the tailings piles, past rusting excavators and other earth moving equipment to where there were some buildings. One had obviously been the living quarters. Looking through the windows we could see rumpled blankets on the beds and dishes on the table, as if everyone got up one morning, ate breakfast and left, never to return.

Leaving May Creek we flew three minutes to the airstrip where the town of Livingstone used to exist. Placer gold was first discovered here in 1894. In subsequent years over a million dollars' worth was mined in the local area. The town, which had upwards of fifteen hundred people, was abandoned in the 1930s. Little remains of the community today. Sporadic placer mining continued until 2001. The area was littered with old mining and transportation equipment, most of which was brought in years ago on a winter road from Whitehorse. The airstrip is at an elevation of 2,700 feet and is in good shape, although it is depicted on the aeronautical chart as "abandoned".

We walked up a steep "road" to another old placer mining site. Once again there was a scattering of heavy equipment, storage sheds and a living quarters of several rooms. It appeared that there were "Cat" roads that led up into the alpine tundra, useful for a long day hike. We got tired of looking at all the trash and decided to go back to Faro.

The air was smooth and we "soared" over the ridges between the mountains, contour flying past cliffs and alpine meadows. Crossing over the valley of the Big Salmon River, with its graceful meanderings and forested banks, brought back many memories of our nine-day canoe trip years ago.

It was Friday, July 22, and there was not a cloud in the sky. It was hard to believe that we had been at Faro for three weeks. We were airborne by 9 a.m. for a sightseeing trip west of the Yukon River, looking for the gold mining area of Mt. Nansen. After flying over the village of Carmacks (where the highway from Whitehorse to Dawson City crosses the Yukon River), we followed the dirt road leading to the Mount Nansen area forty miles further west.

Before long we were circling the mine area. Placer gold was first discovered here in 1899. No major mining activity took place until underground adits were begun in 1947 and major activity began in 1962 with the construction of a concentrator. On-again, off-

again mining operations continued until 1999, including a major open pit. Problems arose with excess water, lower than anticipated yields and high levels of cyanide leaking into nearby Dome Creek. The final year of mining consisted of the excavation of 15,500 tons of ore, yielding 3,738 ounces of gold and 24,917 ounces of silver.

We flew around the area, observing several placer mines in operation in the creeks flowing down from Mount Nanson. There appeared to be little effort on the part of the miners to keep the silt-laden wastewaters from returning to the watercourses.

There was nowhere to land except at an abandoned airstrip several miles away below the mountain, so we continued our exploration flight southwards towards Aishihik Lake. While over-flying a broad valley we saw the remains of a substantial fence that at one time enclosed several thousand acres. This was the release site of 142 Wood Bison that were transplanted to the Yukon from 1986 to 1992. By 1999, herd numbers had reached 500 bison and an annual hunting season was established to keep the population at 450 animals. Natural control factors such as predators were not affecting the growth of the herd.

We landed at the abandoned airfield called Aishihik. It was established in 1942 by the U.S. Army as one of the many Northwest Staging Route airports used to support the ferrying of warplanes to Fairbanks for subsequent delivery to the Russians. The gravel airstrip is at an elevation of 3,200 feet. Much of it is unusable due to regrowth of brush. It was abandoned in 1966. The bison had been using the dry, sandy soil for wallows and there were tufts of hair on the ground. We never did see any of the animals or any people. The scene was eerily quiet under the warm sun.

Nearby stood the original administration/control tower building, constructed of three-quarter sawn logs similar to the one at Watson Lake airport. The maintenance shop was still there, as well as a generator building. The site has a high contamination of mercury in the soil and very high levels of PCBs in the floor of the powerhouse.

This area of the Yukon is part of the Champagne-Aishihik First Nations land claim. In the late 1990s the native government added onto the old WW II buildings and began an alcohol treatment center. It operated as a forty-day program, costing $30,000-$40,000 for each session treating twelve persons. After three forty-day programs it closed in 1999 for lack of funding. Nearby trash boxes held an assortment of empty beer cans.

We walked through the scattered trees looking for signs of bison before taking off to the east for the thirty-minute flight to Braeburn Lodge, a roadhouse along the Klondike Highway that is famous for its cinnamon buns and large portion-sized meals. Our flight took us over rolling brush and grass covered hills with only a few stunted trees near some sheltered streams. We looked for bison but saw none. All too soon we descended to land at the airstrip across the highway from the lodge. We were back in tourist land again with numerous RVs, campers and travel trailers in the parking lot.

Following a so-so lunch of a hamburger that was too small for the homemade bun we flew back to Faro, once again passing over the Big Salmon River and skimming over the higher terrain. After landing, a check of the weather over the next several days indicated good flying conditions. We made preparations for a three-day trip to the mountainous region one hundred and fifty miles northeast of Mayo. After fueling the plane and filling two five-gallon jugs with extra gas, I added the first quart of engine oil since we left home.

The air was calm in the morning when we took off to the north, heading for the drainage of the Bonnet Plume River. We skimmed over the ridge tops and descended into the intervening valleys of the MacMillan, Hess, Stewart and Nadaleen Rivers before crossing a pass two hours later and descending into the drainage of the Bonnet Plume River.

The river is heavily braided, the swift current coursing back and forth across the narrow, mountain-rimmed valley. Soon, we entered a side valley and flew over Fairchild Lake into the drainage of Rapitan Creek. On a rare piece of relatively flat ground there is an airstrip used by Chris McKinnon's Bonnet Plume Outfitters. The camp buildings are about a mile away on the shore of a small lake. The landing was made in a stiff crosswind from the left. Chris had warned me about this being a normal occurrence. The airstrip is at an elevation of 2,800 feet and the coordinates are N65°05', W133°50'.

We were not on the ground for more than a couple of minutes when an old van pulled up driven by one of Chris's employees. Remember, at this point we were at least 150 miles from the nearest road. The van had been driven in during the winter some years ago when there was a winter road into the Bonnet Plume area to support mineral exploration. The men at this camp had recently arrived with the horses that are used for the hunts. It took them twelve days from Mayo.

Chris was not at this camp. Instead, he was working to establish a new base camp at the Copper Point airstrip on the Bonnet Plume River about ten miles from where we were.

Takeoff was a handful as there was a slight hump in the airstrip about mid-point that tended to launch you into the air too soon. If that happened the plane would be drifting sideways with the gusty crosswind into the brush as it settled back onto the ground.

We flew down Rapitan Creek to the Bonnet Plume and up that river a few minutes to the Copper Point Airstrip. This airstrip was built in the nineteen eighties to support a mineral exploration project that lasted several years. The location is N63°00', W134°04.5', and the elevation is 1,800 feet with a length of about four thousand feet. There are no good hiking opportunities at Copper Point but the camping is good. If you should want to do a good day hike, fly into Rapitan where it easy to get into the high country without bushwacking.

About a quarter of a mile beyond the upstream end of the airstrip is the site of the exploration camp. All that remained of the camp were hundreds of boxes of drill cores, neatly stacked ten high on racks made of four by fours and two by sixes. Chris's crew was in the process of dumping out the cores and using the wood to build three cabins for a new hunting base camp. It must be easier to get forgiveness later than to ask permission of whoever owns the mineral cores, which must have cost some company hundreds of thousands of dollars to obtain. We walked down and had coffee with Chris's workers before setting up our camp by the plane and spending a restful afternoon in a glorious setting.

That evening, Chris arrived in his tundra tire-equipped Cessna 206 with another load of building material. Over a cup of coffee, he outlined his guiding business. His exclusive hunt area encompasses 7,200 square miles, an area about the size of New Jersey. Client access is by charter flight from Whitehorse to Mayo and then by his Cessna 206 to one of his four main base camps. Within the hunting area there are three Super Cubs available (two owned by guides) to get the hunters into more remote areas. Big game species hunted are sheep, moose, barren ground caribou and grizzly bear. Hunting season for sheep was due to begin on August first. Because of the step terrain and sparse vegetation, a vast area is required to support even a modest population of game.

The next morning we filled the solar shower for washing up with warm water later in the day, assuming that the sun would be shining later. Despite a cloud layer that cloaked the higher terrain, we departed on a sightseeing flight. First, we flew down the Bonnet Plume and then east up Rapitan Creek at about two hundred feet above the terrain until we crossed a height of land and dropped down into the Snake River valley near the Northwest Territories border. With the higher terrain obscured in cloud, it was like sitting in an IMAX movie as the mountain sides passed beside the wing tips. The flight down the Snake rekindled many memories for me as I had canoed this river several years ago.

Shortly, we turned up a side creek and landed at another former mineral exploration airstrip that Chris uses to access one of his base camps. This strip is located at N65°22', W133°21' with an elevation of 2,700 feet. The usable length is around 2,000 feet, and the remainder of the 5,000-foot strip is either brush grown or frost heaved. Fifteen miles up the side creek was a much shorter airstrip with heavy brush encroachment. It was constructed in 1962 following a major find of iron ore that tested out at 43-65% purity. There was an overgrown winter road between the two strips, so the longer strip where we were parked probably supplemented the shorter one.

This area along the Yukon/Northwest Territories border has experienced extensive mineral exploration, specifically for iron ore. It is estimated, based on drill sampling, that there is somewhere between eighteen and twenty-seven billion tons of iron ore. If that were indeed the case, then this would be the third largest known iron ore deposit in North America.

We checked out the cabins constructed of two by fours and plywood. It looked like a bear had broken out one window in the kitchen. There was even a shower house plus a shed for hanging meat. The site was rather bleak with no trees to speak of, just brush six feet high. The only sign of the former exploration camp was a round, vertically placed fuel storage tank that probably had a capacity of three thousand gallons and, of course, the usual assortment of rusting barrels.

We left the Snake River airstrip shortly after noon and continued down the braided river about five minutes before turning southwest up a side stream between two low, treeless mountain ranges with elevations up to 6,723 feet. Skimming over a low pass, we descended into the broad valley bottom of Knarr Creek where we saw a large bull caribou placidly grazing out in the open. Then, as we neared Margaret Lake, a large bull moose was spotted feeding in a shallow pond, the water glistening in the sun as it cascaded off his antlers.

From here we turned upstream over the Bonnet Plume, at low altitude, following the twists and turns of the river. Before long we were back at our camp at the Copper Point Airstrip. The building crew had been hard at work, with the walls up on the cookhouse and the windows being installed. Chris had flown in the steel roofing in his Cessna 206.

The sun had been out and the shower water was warm enough for a wash up. We enjoyed the warmth of the remainder of the day and picked some blueberries for our breakfast the next morning. I filtered the ten gallons of extra gas that we had brought from Faro into the wing tanks.

The sky was clear all night and we awoke to a heavy frost. The solar shower bag was filled with slush ice. But once the sun came up over the mountains things warmed up nicely. It was well past ten o'clock before we left on a sightseeing flight back to Mayo.

We took a longer route, cutting west up some low elevation valleys, over a gentle pass and into the Wind River drainage. Flying upstream, we watched for canoeists, as this was a popular, fairly easy river to paddle. Not seeing any, we turned up the Bear River for twenty-five miles to circle the airstrip located there. I have landed there before and camped for three days to hike and view wildlife. The coordinates are N64°49', W134°16' with an elevation of 3,300 feet. As part of Chris's hunting territory, there are several cabins along the stream below the esker on which the strip is situated. This site is at the tree line, so most of the valley is vegetated with brush and grasses. What trees that exist are at best five feet tall.

The Bear River airstrip was constructed in 1967 after a winter road was built from Mayo. The path of the winter road can still be seen where it traverses through areas of trees near the Wind River. Indications of iron ore were first reported in this area in 1898, when everyone was looking for gold. When drilling exploration was done in the late 1960s, a

body of iron ore was located that assayed out at 29.2% iron, but the mineralization was not extensive enough to warrant further work.

Returning to the Wind River, we continued our low level flight up the valley, first going past a canoeists' camp and then passing a Super Cub parked on a very short stretch of the old winter road. At McClusky Lake we turned west up Nash Creek, passing another short Super Cub strip before once again turning south direct to Mayo, arriving there at noon to refuel. The price of gasoline here was the highest we paid and there was an exorbitant callout fee as well. After fueling the airplane we flew direct to Faro and began preparing to leave for home the next day as the weather forecast was favorable. We made the rounds saying goodbye to the Faroites that we had become friends with, washed and refueled the car, which we had driven 200 miles back and forth to the airport, and packed our gear.

Our plan was to fly almost due east three hours to Fort Simpson, NWT, to see our friends Ivan and Senga Simons. The weather report was for good VFR conditions for this flight. Just as we were ready to take-off, there was a radio call to us from Stan Simpson, the outfitter who has the supply base near MacMillan Pass. He was coming into Faro on his way to Whitehorse. We waited for him to land and visited with him and his wife Diane for about thirty minutes. Stan said that the weather was getting marginal over the higher mountains with heavy rain showers. So much for the weather forecast!

We flew almost straight east, passing north of Ross River, until we intercepted the Pelly River where it comes out of the mountains. By this time it was raining lightly and the clouds obscured terrain above five thousand feet. We followed the twists and turns of the river as we flew further into the mountains under lowering clouds, getting down to about three hundred feet above the valley floor. Nearing the Northwest Territory border we passed a mineral exploration camp called Howard Pass. The camp was on a level piece of ground just above us. Hidden in the clouds was the thirteen hundred foot airstrip that services the camp. We landed there a couple of years ago.

Moments later we crossed a height of land and descended into the South Nahanni River drainage and followed that for an hour before turning on course for Fort Simpson. The weather improved as we flew along and we were in warm sunshine by the time we got out of the mountains. It is ironic that the poorest flying weather we had over the whole month of July was on the day we left the Yukon.

After an enjoyable night at Fort Simpson, the remainder of our flight home was more or less grinding out the miles. Gas stops were made at Peace River and Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. We spent a night camped at Sundre, Alberta, just northwest of Calgary, cleared customs at Del Bonita and were home by ten thirty a.m., twenty-four hours after leaving Fort Simpson.

We flew a total of about fifty-three hours and never had a mechanical problem. Penny and I both felt that of all our trips "up north" this was the best one we have ever had.

All the airstrips where we landed may not be suitable for every pilot or aircraft. Keep in mind that our Cessna 180 has a 280 hp engine and would be considered a “bush” airplane. I have four thousand hours in this one airplane. Conditions of the airstrips mentioned may change and a careful inspection should be done before a commitment to land is initiated.