

# *The Yukon:* Larger than life

Lured north by outdoor pursuits and a chance to photograph bears

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL GAINS

View of the Takhini River  
north of Whitehorse near  
the Klondike Highway.



BY PAUL GAINS

Someone once told me when you get out of your car in the Yukon you're in the wilderness – there's no buffer zone.

It was not meant as a warning. But those words resonated with me as I boarded my flight for Whitehorse, capital of Canada's westernmost territory. Over the years, I've photographed many exotic wildlife in close quarters. I love the outdoors. However, encountering bears is another matter entirely and the Yukon is full of them.

In early September, when I visited, there were apparently some 7,000 grizzlies and 10,000 black bears wandering about the forests and mountainsides, fattening up for their winter hibernation.

My apprehension had been stoked earlier by my not-so-supportive teenage son who calmly asked if he could have my bicycle if I

was eaten by a bear.

Among my first tasks in Whitehorse was to purchase a can of bear spray. The salesperson admitted he never carried the stuff. An odd sales tactic, I thought. Talk loudly in bear country, was his advice.

I wanted to hike Kluane National Park, a massive 22,000-square-kilometre area known for its ice fields, glaciers and the picturesque St. Elias Mountains. There is a tremendous concentration of bears in the region. Needless to say, I left the shop with a \$40 can of spray.

My friends, John and Leslie Carson, moved to Whitehorse five years ago. They lured me north with tales of fly-fishing, canoeing, hiking and mountain biking. At the first chance, John took me hiking on picturesque King's Throne, inside Kluane. The entrance is near the village of Haines Junction, about 158 scenic kilometres west of Whitehorse along the Alaska Highway.

The mountain peaks were hidden by dark clouds as we approached the trail head. The early-morning rain had stopped as we plunged into the forest beneath King's Throne mountain, talking loudly as we hiked as it's never good to surprise a bear. Every few metres I instinctively tapped the canister on my belt for security.

Above the treeline, we entered a series of very steep, scree-covered switchbacks. John's pace was relentless, and in a little over an hour we had climbed more than 600 vertical metres, reaching a flat section known as "the saddle." There, we stopped for a well-earned drink and watched clouds cascading over the mountaintop.

Below was pristine Kathleen Lake. Around us there was nothing but mountains and forests and water, not a sign of humanity.

The moment was interrupted when, as if in a scene from a Hitchcock film, a man appeared through the mist-covered trail

above us. "Willem from Utrecht, Holland," he announced as he descended. We introduced ourselves and a short conversation followed before we posed for photos. Willem continued his descent, while John and I started up toward the summit.

The morning deluge had rendered one vertical section quite muddy and, for me, impassable. With disappointment I conceded defeat and we trudged slowly down to the trail head. Regardless, I had whetted my appetite for Yukon wilderness.

A few days later I returned to Haines Junction in a rental car, having booked a seat on a single-engine Cessna 207 with Kluane Glacier Air Tours. The pilot ensured I would have access to windows that opened at the rear of the plane so I could take photos.

The flight path took us over the St. Elias mountains and gave us a spectacular view of the Lowell and Kaskawulsh Glaciers

**LEFT:** An aerial shot of the Lowell Glacier in Yukon's Kluane National Park. The effects of climate change can be seen clearly as the glacier is retreating.  
**TOP:** A view of White Mountain in southeastern Yukon.

deep inside Kluane. Roughly five kilometres wide, the Kaskawulsh Glacier has receded so much that its melt water has actually changed directions. It now flows south into the Kaskawulsh River, then into the Pacific Ocean, instead of its historical path north to the Bering Sea. Scientists say this is the first case of "river piracy" caused by climate change.

In the distance we could see Mount Logan, at 5,959 metres the tallest mountain in Canada. Much nearer was Mount Kennedy, which is named after the late United

States president John F. Kennedy. The year following JFK's 1963 assassination a group of climbers led by his brother, Robert Kennedy Jr., summited the mountain, leaving some of the president's personal effects on the peak.

Following the bumpy 90-minute flight, I drove a couple of kilometres into Haines Junction to fill up with gas before returning eastward to the Yukon capital. Outside Whitehorse I would have no cellphone coverage and, with little to no vehicular traffic along the Alaskan Highway, I didn't want to be caught with an empty gas tank.

Although I spotted several bald eagles, a pair of coyotes and some elk feeding along the side of the Alaska Highway, I was obsessed with seeing a grizzly bear. I mean, why fly across the country and not see this apex predator?

On the night of my arrival in Yukon, over a plate of nachos, award-winning wildlife



**ABOVE:** A young grizzly bear fishing for salmon near Chilkoot Lake, Alaska



**LEFT:** An adult bald eagle flying across the Lutak Inlet in Alaska after feasting on salmon.

Haines Junction, then south into B.C. The highway crosses the U.S. border at Dalton Cache, Alaska. During the 1896-99 Klondike gold rush thousands of gold seekers passed along this very same path through the mountains seeking their fortune.

A room at the Halsingland Hotel was reasonable considering prices in Haines are geared towards the cruise ships that regularly dock at Port Chilkoot. A 'half' portion of fish and chips at The Bamboo Room, for instance, cost me \$16 US. Dropping my bags at the hotel, I followed my map to the river flowing between Lake Chilkoot and the Lutak Inlet. Sockeye salmon were spawning here, and Mather had been precise with his directions.

Patience is an absolute necessity for a wildlife photographer. For several hours, I watched a pair of juvenile eagles feasting on salmon, wondering if I would be lucky enough to see a bear. It took that long to get used to the pungent fishy smell hanging

in the air.

My skepticism proved unfounded when a large grizzly entered the shallow river from the other side. For the next hour this magnificent animal splashed about the rocks pouncing on salmon, scooping them up with its long claws and tearing into them. Salmon carcasses floated on the surface to be picked at by hundreds of screaming gulls.

The following morning, I learned I had missed a sow and her cubs in the same location because my alarm clock failed. Regardless, I spent most of the next day watching bald eagles fish before driving back to Whitehorse in a euphoric state.

Main Street is where the action is in Whitehorse. Restaurants, outdoor stores and gift shops abound. Most days began

with a coffee and raspberry scone at Baked Café, where backpackers mix with friendly locals who are proud of their lifestyle. One fellow, citing the lack of industry and sparse population, informed me Whitehorse has the cleanest air in the world. Indeed, there are only about 35,900 people in the whole of Yukon and about 25,000 live in the capital.

Up the street there is a bust of American writer Jack London, whose works include "Call of the Wild" and "White Fang," tales set in the Yukon. I had read them in high school but was intolerant of teachers who forced me to read. So at Mac's Fireweed Books, I picked up a copy of "Call of the Wild" and headed down to the nearby Yukon River and sat on a bench to read.

The trip had been stellar thus far. But my friend John recommended I get the true "Yukon experience" by driving down to Carcross, 70 kilometres south along the Klondike Highway. Originally called Caribou Crossing, the location figures prominently in London's books.

Visitors can try their hand at panning for gold and also go for a dogsled ride through the woods for \$35. These dogs are born to pull sleds and, if there was any doubt, one had only to listen to the racket they kicked up once the first dog was connected to the sled. They barked, howled, yelped and nipped each other all with a clear message: Pick me!

Warned by the musher that the ride would get a little bumpy, I took up a position on the front of the sled, holding on precariously with my left hand while attempting to take musher's-eye-view photos of the dogs with my right. Through the woods we bounced along as I gripped my camera tightly, the dogs listening for directions of "gee" to go right "haw" to go left.

Before I left for the Whitehorse airport 10 days after arriving, I put my unused can of bear spray on the shelf near John and Leslie's front door – next to half a dozen other unused cans, evidence of past visitors. ©



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