

historical sites & travel routes

Traditional fish camps are still common along the lower Peel River. [KM]



First Nations Historical Travel Routes

Historically, different First Nations groups traveled across the Peel River watershed on their way to hunting and fishing areas and to trade with other groups. Although it is impossible to show all of the different routes used, some of the main ones are illustrated on Map 22. The following account is adapted from *The Wind, the Snake and the Bonnet Plume: Three Wild Northern Rivers* (1998).

The Northern Tutchone traveled north from the Stewart River to the Peel watershed, using both water and land, to hunt for caribou and trade with the Gwich'in. Common trade routes ran via the headwaters of the Wind and Bonnet Plume rivers. The Northern Tutchone would often bring salmon, which do not occur in the Peel River watershed, for trade with the Gwich'in.

The Gwich'in moved across the Peel landscape

to hunt, gather and trade. In the winter, family groups would travel throughout the mountains hunting caribou. Several family groups would also get together in the fall to cooperatively hunt migrating caribou using caribou fences. Other animals such as moose, sheep, black bear, porcupine and ptarmigan were hunted as well.

When the snow began to melt in spring, the Gwich'in would move down to the rivers. Here they would build boats using moose hides and travel down the rivers to summer fishing camps along the Peel River or, in later years, to the trading post in Fort McPherson. Some of the common boat-building spots were the mouth of the Wind River, Hungry Lake, and the mouth of the Snake River. Sometimes as many as 10 families traveled together in one boat. When the boats reached the Peel River Canyon, all the women, children and dogs would get out and walk along a portage route, while the men navigated their boats through the turbulent water. A feast

was often held at the other side of the canyon when everyone had safely made it through.

After reaching Fort McPherson in the spring, many Gwich'in went back on the land for the spring hunting and trapping season, returning only to Fort McPherson to trade furs at the post. They then headed out to their summer fish camps along the Peel River. Small groups consisting of a couple of families, would camp together at fish camps. Once winter came, the people would travel back into the mountains.

From time to time the Gwich'in also traveled out of the Peel River watershed to hunt and trade. There were various routes that led people from the upper Caribou and Trail Rivers across the Richardson Mountains to the more resource-rich western side of the mountains (Gotthardt, 2002). The travel route between Fort McPherson and Dawson (via the Little Wind River and across the Hart River) later became a patrol route for the

North West Mounted Police. This route passed along Black City, on the shores of the Blackstone River, where trading between the Gwich'in and the Northern Tutchone would take place.

Early Explorers

The first known non-Aboriginal person to enter the Peel River watershed was John Franklin in 1826. He named the Peel River after Sir Robert Peel of Britain (Slobodin, 1962).

In 1826, John Bell ascended the Peel River as far as the mouth of the Snake River and then continued up the Snake River, although it is unknown exactly how far up the river he traveled. He also explored the Rat River to the north (off the map sheet), where he met a group of Tetl'it Gwich'in trading with Gwich'in from the Porcupine River area. This route along the Rat River became a major fur trade route and in



A Dawson trader operated a trading post at Chappie Lake in the late 1930's. [RR]

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1840 the Hudson's Bay Company established a post on the lower Peel River. This post, Peel's River Post, was later moved and became Fort McPherson (Slobodin, 1962).

In 1893 a traveler from France, Count de Sainville, and two local guides, paddled a canoe up the Peel River to the mouth of the Bonnet Plume River. They left the canoe here and walked up the Bonnet Plume River for 40 kilometres before crossing over to the Wind River and following it back downstream to the Peel River and the canoe (Norris and Hopkins, 1977). De Sainville drew a map of his travels, which was later used by some people trying to reach the Klondike Gold Rush from the Mackenzie River (Graham, 1935).

Klondike Gold Rush

The Peel River was one of the lesser-known travel routes used by a small number of stamperders

trying to reach the Klondike gold fields during the rush of 1898/1899. These people started in Edmonton and traveled from Athabasca Landing by boat down the Mackenzie River to the mouth of the Peel River. From there about 400 gold seekers chose the easier route crossing McDougall or Stony Creek Pass to reach the Porcupine River. Approximately 100 men, however, chose the more difficult route along the Peel River (shown on the map) in order to prospect for gold along the way (Coates, 1979).

By fall of 1898 the fastest had only made it as far as the mouth of the Wind River. About 70 men spent the early part of the winter living in a temporary tent city they named Wind City. Another 30 men were scattered in smaller camps further down the Peel. The Tetl'it Gwich'in kept them supplied with meat. Many prospected for gold along the way but although rumours abounded nothing was ever found. Several men died of scurvy during this winter (Coates, 1979).

In January of 1899 the prospectors started to move on, hauling their gear on sleds, with the help of Tetl'it Gwich'in packers. After they made their way up the Wind River they crossed over to the headwaters of the Stewart River, made boats and descended the Stewart River to Dawson (Coates, 1979). None of the men that used the Peel River route ever struck it rich in the Klondike. By the time most of them reached Dawson there were no more promising claims to be staked (Coates, 1979).

Contact with the gold seekers caused the Tetl'it Gwich'in to travel to Dawson in increasing numbers. By 1901, the majority of the Tetl'it Gwich'in were spending at least part of the year at the Han community of Moosehide outside Dawson City. After the gold rush, and when the fur prices rose in 1914, the Tetl'it Gwich'in moved back to the Peel River area to trade out of Fort McPherson (Coates, 1979).

Northwest Mounted Police Patrol Route

In 1904/05 the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP) established a regular patrol route between Dawson and Fort McPherson. The route followed a well-established Tetl'it Gwich'in travel corridor (see map). In the winter of 1910/11 the Police started from Fort McPherson instead of Dawson and failed to hire Gwich'in guides as they had in other years. The patrol, lead by Inspector F.J. Fitzgerald, was unable to find the turnoff from the Little Wind River to Forrest Creek, the creek that would have led them over the Hart River divide. The group turned back to Fort McPherson too late. Bad weather hampered their progress on the return trip and they ran out of food. All four patrol members died and their bodies were found in two locations on the Peel River, only 25 miles from Fort McPherson. The regular yearly patrol continued until 1921 (North, 1978).

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Sites of Historic Significance

1. Mouth of Trail River

Many people had cabins close to the mouth of the Trail River in the early 1900s. A fish camp was located on the east side of the Peel River, across from the mouth of the Trail River. An old winter portage trail starts here (Fafard, 2001).

2. Fish Trap Head (map location is approximate)

This was a popular gathering place for the Gwich'in after spring ice break-up. It was also a principal summer fish camp. It is believed that explorer John Bell visited this site and met the Gwich'in people in 1839 (Slobodin, 1962).

3. Mouth of Caribou River

Many people had cabins close to the mouth of the Caribou River on the Peel River. From here, people would move up the Caribou River to hunt and trap (Fafard, 2001).

4. Caribou Lake Creek Winter Village

At the confluence of Caribou River and Vadzaih Creek is the site of a winter village used since before there was contact with people of European descent. A very old trail passes the

village. People often stayed here around Christmas to hunt caribou and moose. Today it is still used by people on snowmobile (Fafard, 2001). In 1938 the Tetl'it Gwich'in made their last big trip to Dawson and set up a camp of 52 tents here. (Kritsch, 2000).

5. "His Den"

"His den" consists of a large hole at the base of a cliff at the lower end of the Peel River Canyon. Legend has it that a Peel River man who was a sole survivor of a massacre by enemy groups hid here to survive the ordeal (Gotthardt, 2002).

6. Bubbling Up/Burning Rock

Families often came down from the mountains and gathered here in spring before thaw to build moose-skin boats for the journey down to the summer camp at Fish Trap Head. The name of the site comes from the turbulent water in this stretch of the Peel River. A number of hot springs in the area and exposed and burning strata of lignite reported by Camsell (1906) have also given it the name of Burning Rock. This was an important camping place for chiefs and leading men of the band (Slobodin, 1962).

7. Chappie Lake

In the late 1930's a Dawson trader named Chappie opened a trading post here. All goods were brought in by plane and trappers came to trade furs and get groceries (Gotthardt, 2002).

8. Wind City (exact location not known)

This was the small settlement set up by approximately 70 Gold Rush stampeders en route to Dawson in the winter of 1898-1899. Gwich'in traded with them at this site. The camp was abandoned in January 1899 when the men continued their journey up the Wind River (MacGregor, 1970).

9. Hungry Lake

This was a spring meeting site of the Tetl'it Gwich'in. It was also the site of a large winter meat camp when in 1903-04 approximately 40 families gathered here. The majority of the families were from the Peel River watershed, although some traveled from the Crow and Porcupine Rivers to this location and a few Han families stayed here as well (Slobodin, 1962).

Gwich'in people on the Peel River.
[Yukon Archives]



10. Margaret Lake

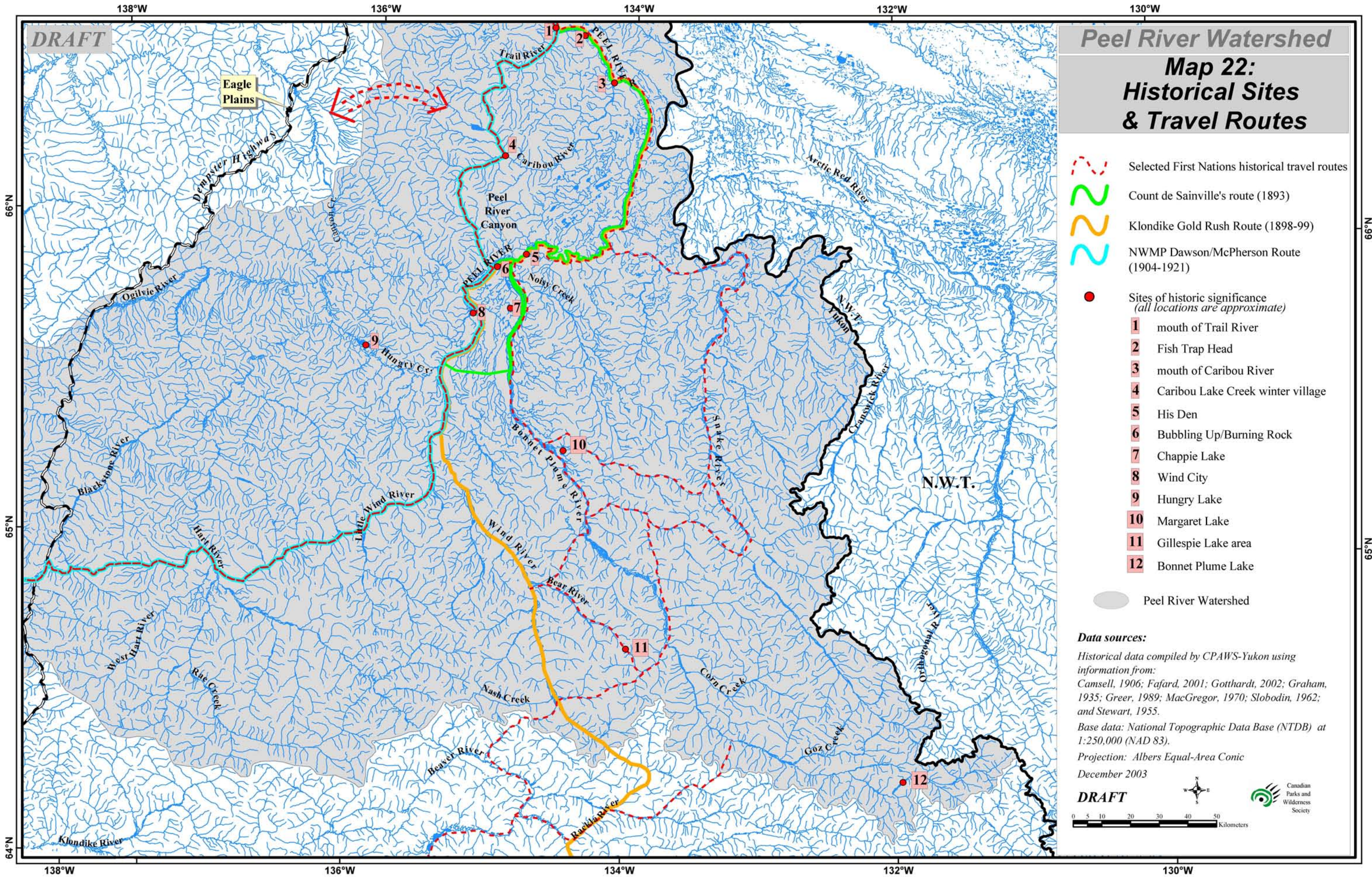
In the 1920's, 30's and 40's several trappers were based out of this lake (Gotthardt, 2002).

11. Gillespie Lake area

The site of an old Tetl'it Gwich'in winter village. One of the Gold Rush stampeders was nursed back to health here after a knee injury (Graham, 1935).

12. Bonnet Plume Lake







In the winter of 1908-09, this was the site of a large winter meat camp shared by Nacho Nyak Dun, Tetl'it Gwich'in and Arctic Red River Gwich'in families (Slobodin, 1962).



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Peel River Watershed

Map 22: Historical Sites & Travel Routes

-  Selected First Nations historical travel routes
-  Count de Sainville's route (1893)
-  Klondike Gold Rush Route (1898-99)
-  NWMP Dawson/McPherson Route (1904-1921)
-  Sites of historic significance (all locations are approximate)
- 1** mouth of Trail River
- 2** Fish Trap Head
- 3** mouth of Caribou River
- 4** Caribou Lake Creek winter village
- 5** His Den
- 6** Bubbling Up/Burning Rock
- 7** Chappie Lake
- 8** Wind City
- 9** Hungry Lake
- 10** Margaret Lake
- 11** Gillespie Lake area
- 12** Bonnet Plume Lake
-  Peel River Watershed

Data sources:
 Historical data compiled by CPAWS-Yukon using information from:
 Camsell, 1906; Fafard, 2001; Gotthardt, 2002; Graham, 1935; Greer, 1989; MacGregor, 1970; Slobodin, 1962; and Stewart, 1955.

Base data: National Topographic Data Base (NTDB) at 1:250,000 (NAD 83).

Projection: Albers Equal-Area Conic
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