Report to The Explorers Club

Flag 76 Expedition
to the Muskwa-Kechika

June 22 to July 5, 2011
By Robert W Butler and Wayne Sawchuk
Introduction

James Hilton’s fictional story *Lost Horizon* published in 1933 tantalized the world with a mystical Shangri La in a harmonious valley set in a remote Himalayan mountain range. Its success struck a chord with the war weary times and the notion of lost civilizations that had discovered a peaceful existence out of touch of the rapidly developing technological world.

The roots of lost worlds had already been planted before Hilton’s book was published. A few years earlier, a rumor began to circulate of the existence of a ‘Tropical Valley in the Far Northwest of Canada’. Somewhere in the distant mountains, so the legend went, lay a valley warmed by hot springs where plants flourished. The rumor became a reality when a Colonel Williams and his mechanic flew a seaplane in search of the mystery valley in 1925. What they saw below was the existence of a 40 to 50 mile long valley filled with lush plant growth and home to a rare white moose. The report was not quite a discovery of a Shangri La of harmonious living but it was sufficient to stir the adventurous spirit of a young botanist in Philadelphia.

Mary Gibson Henry was already dreaming of an expedition not of a lost civilization but something more prosaic - a search of rare plants. In 1931, the young botanist Henry began an expedition into what would later become the Muskwa- Kechika. She and her family traversed the Halfway River, Redfern Lake, Prophet River, Tetsa River, and Toad River Hot Springs areas.

Henry was not alone with ideas of adventure in the northwest. Charles Bedaux was a well-known socialite and one of America’s wealthiest men. A man of big ideas, Bedaux hatched a plan to lead a 1200-mile expedition across uncharted northern British Columbia to the Alaska Panhandle. His entourage would include five Citroen track vehicles, 130 packhorses toting 20 tons of food and equipment, 53 cowboys, his wife and mistress, and Oscar-winning Hollywood filmmaker Floyd Crosby. The Bedaux Expedition begun in July in Edmonton, Alberta soon slowed when the Citroens could not navigate the muskeg and a few weeks later were abandoned in favour of horses. The expedition carried on into the Northern Rockies where the rough mountain terrain and coming of winter finally halted travel. However, not all was lost. The Canadian government contributed funding and surveyors Frank Swannell and Al Phipps to draw the first maps of the area. Portions of the route taken by Bedaux are mapped and we would retrace his steps on our expedition.

The Alaska Highway, begun in 1942 provided access to northeastern British Columbia and became a catalyst for regional development. Today, the region is undergoing rapid
development of gas and oil fields, and mineral exploration. Guide outfitters lead hunts for large game in the Muskwa-Kechika and there is a small demand for recreation. However, the remote location in British Columbia and difficult access results in much of the Muskwa-Kechika seeing few people each year. Encroachment by developments prompted the establishment of the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area Act (1998) to secure the wilderness values while providing some opportunities for resource extraction.

**Serengeti of the Northern Rockies**

The Muskwa-Kechika, pronounced (musk-quah-ke-chee-kah) Management Area is a globally significant area of wilderness, wildlife and cultures covering 6.4 million hectares, or about the size of Ireland. The Muskwa-Kechika is managed under a Provincial Act to establish a world standard for environmental and economic stability. The model attempts to balance human activities such as resource extraction and tourism while conserving its environmental values and wilderness state over time. About one-quarter of the Muskwa-Kechika is protected in Provincial Parks and Protected Areas and 75% is in management zones allowing resource extraction at a higher standard than other places in the province. The Serengeti moniker refers to the healthy numbers of caribou, stone sheep, mountain goats, wolves, black and grizzly bears, wood bison and whitetail and mule deer in the region.

In 2004 writing in Bioscience, Andrea Laliberte and William Ripple sharpened the focus the global significance of the Muskwa-Kechika in maintaining the large mammals of North America. They compared the historic and current geographical ranges of 43 North American carnivores and ungulates to identify large-scale patterns in range contractions and expansions. Seventeen of the species had experienced range contractions over more than 20% of their historic range. In areas of higher human influence, species were more likely to contract and less likely to persist. Range contractions followed wherever human settlement was widespread. A rapid collapse in the ranges of many species happened in 1 to 2 centuries. Northern British Columbia is one area that has been largely unaffected and therefore increasingly valuable as part of the last refuge for several species.

The large mammals of the Muskwa-Kechika have been the subject of much research but very little is known about its avifauna. Early written descriptions of bird distributions in British Columbia began nearly a century ago when Alan Brooks and Harry Swarth wrote the first summary of birds in the province in 1925. James A Munro and Ian McTaggart Cowan updated the review in 1947 followed by Wayne Campbell and his co-authors’ four volumes published between 1990 and 2000. Despite almost a century of ornithological study in British Columbia, a large gap of unexplored territory remained in the northeast. To the best of our knowledge, our expedition was the first to systematically document birds in the Muskwa Kechika region. Lured by the unknown, this would become the purpose and destination for our Flag Expedition in 2011.
“The great rivers have provided means of travel for as long as there has been life on Earth. There are fish that swim up and downstream, birds that travel along the shores, and mammals that traverse seasonally between mountain pastures in summer and winter range in the valleys following the rivers. Each river takes the least resistant route abiding by the Law of Gravity. Around mountains and through valleys the routes are carved. One of those great routes is along the Peace.” - Rob Butler, Field Notes, June 22, 2011.

Team

Expedition Leaders: Dr. Rob Butler (FI 2008) and Wayne Sawchuk (FI 2009)

Team Members: Penny Birney, Doug Butler, Maryann Emery, Jim Murphy and Peter von Tiesenhausen

Photographs: Rob and Doug Butler

Our Objective

Our aim was to document for the first time the distribution and abundance of breeding birds in the southern Muskwa-Kechika region for the British Columbia Breeding Bird Atlas Project.

The Muskwa-Kechika lies at an ornithological meeting place for eastern and western North American bird species. The eastern foothills have a decided eastern flavor whereas the Northern Rocky Mountains harbor western counterparts. Some examples of respective eastern and western counterparts include the Blue-headed and Cassin’s Vireo, McGillivray’s and Mourning warblers, Townsend’s and Black-throated Green warblers, and Red-breasted and Yellow-bellied sapsuckers. Present also are species of the subarctic whose ranges are generally north of British Columbia such as the Gray-cheeked Thrush, Boreal Owl, Spruce Grouse, and Willow and Rock ptarmigans.
The Muskwa-Kechika is a vast wilderness area in northeastern British Columbia. Our expedition began along the Sikanni Chief River in the lower right corner of the region and ended less than one-third the way north along the Prophet River (courtesy of MK web site).

Over 300 species of birds breed each year in British Columbia - more than any other province in Canada. Sixty-five species breed nowhere else in Canada and for several other species, British Columbia holds the majority of the world population. For these reasons, British Columbia plays a pivotal role in Canada's bird conservation efforts.

The BC Breeding Bird Atlas is a seven-year project (2008-14) to determine the distribution and relative abundance of birds across British Columbia. It is the first time that a project of this scale has been undertaken in the province. The results will form a foundation for conservation policy and legislation and to ask important questions about how climate change affects our environment, species at risk, environmental assessment and how to keep common birds common.
The British Columbia Breeding Bird Atlas follows an approach that relies on systematic visits to collect data from the province. Bird Studies Canada leads six partner organizations and oversees more than 1200 volunteer birdwatchers that report their sightings using a standard internationally recognized protocol. Our expedition from June 22 to July 5 coincided with the time of year that most birds would breed in the region.

History of Flag 76

Our expedition was given the honor of carrying Flag 76 of The Explorers Club. This flag first flew on an expedition led by Ernest F. Fox in 1937 to Afghanistan. Subsequent expeditions where the flag was flown include Capt. Lawson Brigham in 1993 on NE Water Polyna in Greenland, Jennifer Murray’s 2006 Around the World via the North and South Poles, Louwrens Hacquebord 2007 Large-scale Industrial Exploitation of Polar Areas (LASHIPA – 04), Martin T. Nweeia’s 2008 Narwhal Tusk Research, and Andy Tutchings 2009 Botswana Giraffe Research Project.

Achievements
Our itinerary and expedition details are summarized in Appendix 1. We spent 193 hours listening and recording birds in 13 atlas squares mostly on horseback traversing the region. Nearly 80 species were identified and the data entered into the British Columbia Breeding Bird Atlas web site. A summary of all species seen and the maximum breeding evidence is shown in the Appendix 2.

Many of the birds recorded were singing males on breeding territories so it required a good ear and knowledge of the songs of birds. In the early morning near dawn, the birds sing loudest. Often the dawn chorus is cacophony of singing birds but not so in the Muskwa-Kechika. On some mornings, the air was eerily silent. Chipping Sparrows, Tennessee Warblers and Dark-eyed Juncos were stalwarts at these point counts but even they were sometimes scarce.

A Short-billed Dowitcher seen near Richards Creek was unusual and likely a migrant. It was recorded as ‘observed’ rather than breeding as a consequence. A Boreal Owl heard near Trimble Lake was an unexpected record because of its nocturnal habits. It is a northern species whose range extends south into British Columbia. A trip highlight was a Peregrine Falcon that screamed as it circled overhead near a massive cliff face where it might have nested. The falcon has been making a steady return to the province but it remains scarce in the region. Jim and Penny saw a Willow Ptarmigan at close range above Richards Creek camp. It is a species of the alpine zone but its secretive habits means it is often overlooked. Rob, Doug and Maryann were within a 100 meters of the bird but did not see it. An isolated breeding population of Rock Ptarmigan on Pink Mountain near the start of our trip was a teaser that we might find the species in the uncharted Muskwa Kechika. However, we were only rewarded with sightings of Willow and White-tailed Ptarmigan.

A few Black and White Warblers were seen and heard in an aspen grove and a Blue-headed Vireo singing near the start of our expedition proved to be the only sightings of these species. Both the warbler and the vireo are eastern species whose ranges barely extend into British Columbia. A glimpse at a Rufous Hummingbird on the South Caribou Range camp and Harlequin Ducks in the Sikanni and Prophet rivers were equally interesting as the warbler and vireo but for the opposite reason. The hummingbird and duck are western species that are rare in the northeast of the province. These records helped to define the respective western and eastern limits of their ranges.

We saw Northern Harriers in two locations coursing along mountain ridges. This hawk is not common so the chance sightings were a nice addition to the list of birds. We saw Greater Yellowlegs on several occasions at the eastern end of Trimble Lake where they likely nested.
Excerpts from the Expedition Log

22 June 2011 – Mile 177 AK Hwy to Sikanni Chief Trailhead UTM: 495142 6346776

Our journey north along the Alaska Highway is uneventful and an opportunity to get to know each other. We turn off the highway near where it crosses the Sikanni River to follow a gravel road into the forest. After a dusty ride, we come to the trailhead where we will camp for the night. The sun is shining and the horses snort anxiety to get out of the trailer. They are high-spirited and require careful handling. A thundercloud rumbles in the distance so we scurry to get our equipment beneath a large tarp. Few birds sing this late in the day and I resort to sighting of a lone a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker at our camp.
Expedition team prepares breakfast at Sikanni Chief trail head.

23 June 2011 – Sikanni River to Ess Creek Camp 480277 6344782

Morning comes early this far north and breakfast is soon eaten. The horses are rounded up and Wayne gives us a lesson in how to saddle them up. I learn the hard way that packhorses have big feet. My foot will ache for a day or two. We depart about 11 am to begin our journey along a road that dives deeper into the bush.

Rain begins to fall and by late afternoon we have been initiated into horseback riding in the bush. We have forded a stream, pushed through several willow thickets, and passed through aspen and spruce forest. We arrive at Ess Creek about 200 meters from its confluence with the Sikanni River. In the rain, we get a fire going and string a tarp between trees. The horses are unpacked and we set our tents in the forest. The rain pelts down. A wind rises and the fly on our tent whips in the air. Birding is near impossible but Jim Murphy discovers a Harlequin Duck in the Sikanni River. Thunder cracks overhead and the wind howls in the trees. It will be a fitful sleep in the raging storm outside the tent.
Fording streams by the packhorses and riders became a regular routine. Spotted Sandpipers were often seen along streams and rivers.

24 June 2011 – Ess Creek to Trimble Lake 466052 6347304

We rise in the rain, start a fire. Wayne has coffee on the go and breakfast is being prepared. The storm front appears to be moving on and I think to myself that we could be in for some good weather. Wayne, Jim and Peter go in search of the horses while Doug, Penny, Maryann and I pack up the panniers and gear. About 30 minutes later they return with the horses in tow. We saddle up and depart about 1100 h. The trail fords Ess Creek and winds along an abandoned gas exploration road. We are riding in the foothills moving west towards the Northern Rockies. The hills are becoming taller and willow shrub is being replaced by spruce. The mountains continue to grow in size and the pack team winds across the slopes of wide valleys.
Trimble Lake lies at the edge of the Eastern Foothills. To the west rise the Northern Rockies. The birds we saw were a mix of eastern and western North American species. The muskeg and shrubby habitat here held Blackpoll Warblers, Varied Thrushes, Tennessee Warblers, and Lincoln Sparrows.

“The landscape is thrilling and therapeutic” - Rob Butler, Field Notes, June 24 2011

By late afternoon, I can feel weariness of a long ride. My legs ache and cry to be back on firm ground. I think my horse might agree with this notion. Down a wide valley covered in birch scrub a lake comes into view. This is Trimble Lake and the gateway to Northern Rockies. We make our way across the broad valley to the eastern end of the lake where we will make camp for the next two days. We unsaddle the horses about 100 meters from the shore. The sound of snorting belled horses fades as they depart for the meadows leaving behind only the sound of a crackling fire, human voices and the wind. We eat dinner and I go in search of birds.

The air is eerily silent. I climb into my sleeping bag and lull off to sleep to the winnowing courtship displays of Wilson’s snipe and a distant hoot of a Boreal Owl. Both are unexpected records. I smile before nodding off to sleep.
25 June 2011 – Trimble Lake

I awake about 0400 h to the monotone discordant whistle of a Varied Thrush. I rise to go in search of birds. Perhaps the morning will be more rewarding than the evening.

I record Tennessee Warblers and Wilson’s Warbler, two species that are widespread throughout the region. A Lincoln’s Sparrow warbles in the wet shrubby areas and I hear an Alder Flycatcher there too. A White-crowned Sparrow sings on a distant shrub. This will be the only record I will have for this species on the expedition. A pair of Greater Yellowlegs calls out by the river. I complete several point counts for the atlas project and retire to bed at 630.

Later in the morning, I arise for breakfast. Jim tells me he has located a Blackpoll Warbler. We duck into the marshy forest and before long, the bird is back where Jim had seen it previously. These little birds will leave the MK in late summer on a migratory route that will include a trans continental southeastward flight to New England followed by a trans Atlantic flight to the Caribbean for the winter.

A pair of common loons begins to trade songs across Trimble Lake in the evening sunlight. Doug and Wayne go in search of grayling but return with a sighting of Common Mergansers. In the dying light of the evening, a caribou puts in a brief appearance on a distant ridge and a pair of elk browse a mountain slope where Wayne said bison are sometimes seen.

The land here is a transition point between the northern foothills and snowy rugged mountains that are part of the Northern Rockies that will be our destination tomorrow.
Trimble Lake camp. Most of our gear was stored in panniers that became tables and seats around the campfire where meals were prepared.

Wayne and Peter saddle up while Penny steadies the packhorse. Panniers will be secured around the saddle for the day's journey.
26 June 2011 – Trimble Lake to Besa River Falls 458504 6354220

I arise early and Jim tells me he has seen a fledgling Varied Thrush nearby. This is another good record of this elusive forest-dwelling songster. Peter tells me about a pair of small hawks that were calling at him that from the description sound like Merlins. We go to investigate but the birds have departed.

We pack up and depart along the northern shore of Trimble Lake. The late spring and ongoing rain has flooded our route so that the horses are up to their bellies in water in places. Water tops my boot. We wind through the forest until we arrive at a Guide Outfitters Camp on the northern shore about half way along Trimble Lake. There we take a break to enjoy the sunshine. Two pairs of barn swallows are nesting on the cabins. This species is seldom seen away from human habitation.

Fording the east end of Trimble Lake. Common loons, Greater Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpipers and Common Mergansers were seen on or around the lake.
Wayne leads us north into a long climb above the lake. The views are stunning back the way we came. The route takes us higher into the scrub birch and eventually arrives at a saddle overlooking a dramatic view of the Besa River meandering through the Rockies.

“The horses stood seeming as much in awe of the beauty as the seven of us. The Besa wound off to the west toward misty Northern Rockies still holding substantial snow packs. For 270 degrees, we could see the lay of the land.” – Rob Butler, Field Notes 26 June 2011.

The horses stood atop a ridge looking at the mountains ahead. In the distance, the Besa River winding out of the Rockies would be our destination. The alpine zone was home to Townsend’s Solitaires and Golden-crowned Sparrows.

Following a bout of picture taking and soaking in the vista, we lead our horses down a slope. We have a long descent through the forest before saddling to ride an access road to Besa River. We scramble down a gravelly roadbed that winds around a gravel bank where a stone sheep watches us pass. Besa River Falls soon can be heard and we unpack the horses at 1900 h in preparation for the evening. Once again I remark at how few birds are present. “Virtually nil at 2030h walkabout”, I jot down in my notebook. Thunder rumbles and lightning flashes in the distance. The wind was so fierce that it drowned the roar of the falls.
I arise early and hear only a few birds. We eat breakfast and saddle up the horses. That was the easy part. We now have to get the horses across the gorge raging near our camp. The river surges through a small passage before cascading into several deep pools. Across this gorge runs a narrow metal bridge with a grated floor and it is the only place to cross the river. It would frighten any horse.

Wayne chooses the calmest horses to cross first. His thinking is that the packhorses will be anxious to join the others on the opposite shore. I manage to get ‘Paint’ to cross with a little urging. We return to get the packhorses by corralling them between our outstretched arms. Gradually we inch them toward the bridge. The herd begins to snort and turn away. We shepherd them ever closer until one of the horses bolts uphill followed by a thundering of hooves that knocks Maryann to the ground. The stampede runs over her in a flurry of hooves as we look on in horror. Eight tons of panicking horses sends us scurrying out of their way. Surprisingly the stampede steps around and over her as she lay curled up on the ground and she was not badly hurt. We make several more attempts before Wayne decides he will lead a few of the horses across the bridge. The roar of the river below the grated bridge surface sends fear into the horses. They bolt across the bridge. One of the pannier-laden packhorses panics as it gallops across
the bridge knocking Wayne hard against the bridge rail. He fortunately is not seriously injured. One by one the horses are coaxed, cajoled and led across the bridge. Little did we know that more excitement would greet us that day.

We rode along the river for a while and by about noon met a Guide Outfitter riding an ATV. He told Wayne about a short route to the alpine via a trail marked with a yellow rain hat. After several miles of riding, we set off into the forest where we entered a muskeg. The first horses got through but left deep holes. One of the packhorses suddenly became mired. Wayne calmed it with a reassuring voice and removed its saddle. It waited a moment before lunging forward to dry ground. Then another call went out. This time it was a saddle horse. Penny and I scrambled back along the trail to find Peter leading his horse Cassiar minus a saddle. He began to lead it through the muskeg gingerly seeking a trail while Penny and I lugged the saddle through the muck to high ground. We rested the horses and ourselves. The route out of the muskeg now led up a steep trail. We began to climb uphill for a long while leading the horses. It was a time to listen for birds but few were singing. Eventually we summited with great views of the surrounding mountains.

The expedition required regular arduous hikes out of the muskeg and up steep slopes.
We took a short rest on the summit and began another descent leading the horses as we bushwhacked through shrubs and trees. Near a stream at 5200-foot elevation on the slope of Mt Dopp, we set up our camp. Saddles off, horses set free, a fire blazing and dinner was soon to follow. In the evening, we watched elk and caribou on a distant slope. A bull moose antlers in velvet pranced near the camp. We fell into our sleeping bags about 2200 h.

Our camp at 1580 meters on Mount Dopp was on the edge of the forest and alpine zones. Hermit Thrushes, Boreal Chickadees, Gray Jays and Spruce Grouse frequent this habitat with caribou and moose.

28 June 2011 – Mount Dopp to Richards Creek 457524 6366508

I rose before 0600 h to find a Spruce Grouse near the tent. This grouse sports an orange tip to the tail, which means it is the Taiga subspecies. A Boreal Chickadee, a Myrtle race of the Yellow-rumped Warbler, Gray Jays and a few other species put in an appearance.

After breakfast we saddled up to set off down slope. Wayne dismounts several times to cut a path for the horses even though he is hurting from a nasty collision with a packhorse a few days earlier. We emerge at a grassy creek side where we take a break. Then we begin an ascent that takes us into the alpine. Golden-crowned Sparrows, Townsend’s Solitaires, Chipping Sparrows and Savannah Sparrows sing there.
“There we unfurled The Explorers Club flag, photos all round. A snowfield lay across the upper ridges. The view was splendid.” – Rob Butler, June 28, 2011

“At the end of a spur, a monumental mountain with no name rose in front of us. The foothills reached off to the east and the Rockies to our west. The view from here was heart stopping.” – Rob Butler, June 28, 2011.

We began a long descent through the forest and as we approached the Besa River a Peregrine Falcon circled overhead calling at us. The cliffs along the river are a likely nesting place for this species and this will be an important discovery. It circled overhead several times.

We arrived at Richards Creek camp at 1800 h and unpacked the horses. We were now getting quite good at the routine of setting up camp. The camp is located between a fast flowing river and a crude airstrip cut out of the forest. We held an impromptu toast to the expedition success and unfurling of the flag. Doug surprises everyone with a bottle of champagne that is uncorked and consumed. I present the others with Explorer’s Club crests, showed them the brochure about EC and make a few comments about notable accomplishments of the club.

“The surprising conclusion so far is how so few birds breed here. Often it is deathly silent.”- Rob Butler, Field Notes June 28, 2011.
There are vast areas of the Muskwa Kechika covered in scrub birch used by nesting Tennessee Warblers and Chipping Sparrows.

29 June 2011 – Richards Creek to South Caribou Range – UTM 453980 6371601

We saddled up in mid-morning to ride along the airstrip. Wayne showed us a remnant of a First Nations monument designating the area a sanctuary. We ride on to a Guide Outfitters camp ravaged by bears. Garbage is strewn about the place. Antlers of past kills hang on an outside wall of a log cabin. The damage done by these bears is testament to their immense strength; doors are torn from hinges and windows pulverized.
Wayne talked about how the views of many must be considered in caring for the land and that the Muskwa-Kechika management model, might be suitable for other places in the world.

Farther downstream we will ford the Besa. Water tops my boot again as the water rises above the horses bellies but they seem undeterred. Upslope we entered an aspen forest and in the sunshine ride for an hour or more in its warmth. I admire the strength and endurance of the horses.

We stop for lunch in a parkland setting and then ride on downhill into a forested grove where we will spend the next two days. The horse bolt down slope and I hang on for dear life. We get off the horses to walk to the camp. Doug says his aching legs make him feel like the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz. The campsite Wayne chose was also used by the Bedaux expedition and we will follow their route when we depart.

30 June 2011 – South Caribou Range UTM 450796 6382300
The day began bright and sunny. I rose at 0400 hours and conducted point counts near the camp. Few birds were present. An icy cold creek ran near the camp through a series of cascading pools where I splashed my face to try to wake up.

Following early morning birding and a wash, Wayne suggested a hike to the top of nearby knoll. Doug, Maryann and I set off across country climbing into a saddle where a small pond formed in the low-lying depression where we startle a pair of Solitary Sandpipers. A nest or young birds must have been nearby but it was near impossible to locate either of them. Doug flushed a Short-billed Dowitcher from the wetland and I got close enough to see the distinctive white slash of feathering along the back as it flew off to circle farther along the wetland. There are very few records of this species in British Columbia let alone the Muskwa-Kechika. It is likely an early migrant.

We climbed the alpine knoll and gawked at the view. A wind was stirring clouds in the distant Kiely Creek valley. I sat down to paint in watercolors the view before me. Gradually the wind began to grow and storm clouds fast approached. Far below, great wafts of yellow pollen were being carried on the wind. Suddenly the wind began to howl as Penny and Jim arrived. We pulled on our jackets and slipped into the lee of the knoll to begin our descent. We arrived back in camp in the sunshine about 45 minutes later. Jim and Penny arrived a short time later reporting that they had encountered a male Willow Ptarmigan on the knoll. This was our first record of this species on the expedition.

Within half an hour of this photo being taken, storm clouds blasted the slopes. Despite the capricious weather, Townsend's Solitaires and Willow Ptarmigan breed on this slope.
1 July 2011. South Caribou Range to Richards Creek Camp

“The day started at 325 a.m. with a white-throated sparrow singing ‘Sweet, pure, Canada, Canada, Canada’.” - Rob Butler, 1 July 2011, Canada Day.

Doug has a Rufous Hummingbird visit his red bandana and a Black-backed Woodpecker alights on a nearby tree. These would be our only records for these species. We broke camp about 1030 h and headed for the high country of the Caribou Range. About six caribou along the trail and the wildflower show was spectacular. A pair of White-tailed Ptarmigan ran off into the undergrowth. The wind blew along the ridge.

Now well into the alpine, the view of the Rockies and the foothills was awe-inspiring. We halted on a dry ridge where we took out The Explorer’s Club flag once more and got an official photo of all of our horses, the mountain views and us.

“The experience of wilderness as far as the eye can see, with rolling alpine meadows and rugged peaks will stay with me forever.” – Rob Butler, Field Notes 1 July 2011.

We rode along a knife-edge ridge that dropped off many meters on either side. Once across, we got off the horses and began a descent for 1.5 hours arriving at Richards Creek about 1800 h.

Above treeline is home to alpine species such as ptarmigan, Townsend’s solitaires, and golden-crowned sparrows. To get there required crossing muskeg, bushwhacking, and long hikes but the birds and views were worth the effort.
2 July 2011. Richards Creek to Prophet River Hot springs. UTM 439393 6390930

“*It is so beautiful, it almost makes you cry*” – Peter von Tiesenhausen, 2 July 2011.

We packed up and departed in mid-morning through a verdant valley. We began a long descent into the valley to arrive at an Outfitters Camp where we encountered yet another Barn Swallow pair and were pleasantly surprised to see an American Kestrel. A Common Yellowthroat sang and became the only record of this species on our expedition. A Northern Harrier glides along the treetops. The hillsides here were a verdant green against the sunlit blue sky.

We followed the bank of the Prophet River in search of a shallow crossing. Spotted Sandpipers were a common sight along its shores.

Hours later we arrived on the banks of the Prophet River. We forded the river and made our way along the shore between oxbows. At a creek opening into the Prophet, Maryann’s horse stumbled and both toppled. Jim and I jumped from our horses and ran up the trail to find Maryann coming up the bank and Wayne removing the saddle from the horse. Maryann was shaken but fine. The horse stood up and climbed the creek bank. Then it was my turn to cross the gap. Paint hesitated. He saw the deep mud and moved upstream. Gingerly he tested his footing and then leapt across the gap. Maryann
got back on her horse and I moved ahead to help Wayne repack one of the packhorses. We set off again and soon stopped for a second lunch. By 1800 h we were at the Prophet River Hot springs.

The camp was in a grove of black spruce on the edge of a scrub birch meadow. The Prophet River ran along the southern edge of the meadow and the hot springs bubbled across a ledge before dropping into the river about half a kilometer upstream.

After dinner, Wayne led us to the hot springs. We ducked into a grove of trees about 200 meters from the hot springs to wait. Before long, a herd of Stone Sheep arrived. Jeremy Ayotte’s graduate research at the University of British Columbia indicated that sheep, goats, elk and moose make regular visits to the Prophet River Hotsprings to lick and drink carbonate from the water to balance the pH in their rumens. This was the first time I had seen this species of thin-horned sheep. We returned to camp and went to bed.

3 July 11 – Prophet River Hot springs

Stunning views were a bonus of the Prophet River Hotsprings camp. Ruby-crowned Kinglets, the Myrtle subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warbler and the ubiquitous Tennessee Warbler were seen here.
I arose at 505h to conduct point counts. The sun was up but the air was cool. The camp was asleep. Like previous counts, few species were seen or heard. I scoured the meadow, near the hot springs and in the forest near the camp for birds.

Peter and I had a long discussion about conserving land. He told me how he had copyrighted the artwork on his land and how that had been used in a court action to prevent a pipeline from crossing his property. We spoke about the inspirational value of land to society and pondered the concept of a simpler life. Traveling by horseback into the Muskwa-Kechika is a vanishing life and it occurred to us that we were very fortunate to relive this means of exploration used by early explorers.

Wayne departed with camera in tow to photograph animals that visited the hot springs. I followed later and was rewarded by 16 Stone Sheep that had made their way within about 100 m of Wayne and Maryann in the forest. I whispered to Jim my arrival and he told me of a moose that had just crept by him within a few meters.

Stone sheep leave the safety of cliffs to lick salts from the hot springs alongside the Prophet River where they are often joined by elk, moose, and caribou. Carbonate in the hot springs aids their digestion of vegetation.

“The falls give off the sulfuric smell of hot springs and tufa oozes over the rock wall before spilling into the Prophet River.” – Rob Butler, Field Notes, July 2, 2011
The Prophet River is about 15 meters wide near the falls and is green with silt. The hot springs bubble out of the far riverbank and pour across a tufa ledge into the river. The animals visit the hot springs to drink from the water and lick the rocks. Wayne has seen sheep, moose, and elk together at the falls. Today we are rewarded with a herd of stone sheep most of which are shedding winter fur but one of the males is sleek and in prime condition. Wayne says the ‘Chadwick Ram’ taken from the Prophet in the 1940s was the largest stone sheep in the world.

The Muskwa Kechika is home to about half the world’s stone sheep.

4 July 2011 – Prophet River Hotsprings to Prophet River Headcamp

A westerly wind rushed up the valley carrying a squall as we left the hot springs for the head camp. Our route tracked the Prophet River and required several crossings. A Dusky Grouse with a chick flushed from the undergrowth. Much of the ride was in forest but eventually the trail led uphill through a forest fire burn to the Prophet River Falls. The river cascades down several falls in a deep threatening roar. It is a welcome relief to get off the horses and drink deep of cold mountain water. We heard the first and only American Dipper sing here.

By late afternoon, we arrived at the head camp. A crude runway has been cut out of the forest and a few outfitter log cabins are the only buildings. Across the Prophet River spectacular peaks dominate the southern horizon. We set our tent on a ridge overlooking this stunning view. I ponder where we have come and what we have accomplished.
Over dinner, Jim tells me saw another harlequin duck in the river. Tomorrow we will fly out of the Muskwa-Kechika.

5 July 2011 – Depart Prophet River Headcamp for Fort Nelson by Twin Otter

The morning is gray and rain threatens to fall. The clouds are above the mountaintops but they are slipping down slope. Wayne contacts the airline that is about to depart Fort Nelson. Our gear is packed and we await the arrival of the plane. The Twin Otter arrives to find an elk on the runway. I yell at it to shoo it away and after a few passes the plane sets down. We meet a new group of travelers, pack our gear and bid farewell to Wayne. The flight takes us over the hot springs and high country where we passed a few days earlier. Gradually the foothills lower and we fly over the flat, forested land to alight in Fort Nelson.

Closing Remarks

The Muskwa Kechika holds close its mysteries. Few people have experienced wild places with a full complement of predators and prey. This year, the human population on Earth will exceed 7 billion people. In many places, throngs of people are present every hour of day and night. Some of the popular parks such as Yellowstone that were established to protect wilderness values require advanced booking. One does not have to look far to hear or see signs of recent human visits in these places. Experiencing wilderness is not possible now in many places on Earth. Contrast this experience with our expedition where we saw one person in 12 days of travel. Although we camped where others camped before and traveled on some roads and trails used for years and even centuries, only the contrails of jets overhead were the closest we came to humans. To travel by horseback in a similar fashion as early explorers of the past century into wild places is a rare treasured opportunity few will experience. Preserving these vanishing experiences need to become part of the narrative to save wild places on Earth. The Muskwa Kechika if not allowed to remain wild, will become a lost world.

Bibliography


British Columbia Breeding Bird Atlas (On line www.birdatlas.bc.ca).


Sawchuk, W. 2004. The wild heart of Canada’s northern Rockies. Chetwynd, BC.


Appendix 1.

**Itinerary and Route**

22 June 11 – Mile 177 AK Hwy to Sikanni Chief Trailhead 495142 6346776

23 June 11 – To Ess Creek Camp 480277 6344782

24-25 June 11 – To Trimble Lake 466052 6347304

26 June 11 – To Besa River Falls 458504 6354220

27 June 11 – To Mt Dopp 453205 6357970 – Flag unfurled

28 June 11 – To Besa River 457524 6366508

29-30 June 11 – To South Caribou Range – 453980 6371601

1 July 11 – To Richards Creek 450796 6382300 Official group photo

2-3 July 11 – To Prophet River Hot springs 439393 6390930

4 July 11 – To Prophet River Headcamp

5 July 11 – Depart Prophet River Headcamp for Fort Nelson by Twin Otter

**Expedition Details**

Number of horses: 17 (7 saddle horses, 9 pack horses, 1 spare)

Weight of gear: 20-25 kgs each carried by pack horses

Food: Mostly dehydrated carried in panniers by pack horses
Appendix 2.

Bird species and the maximum breeding evidence recorded on the Muskwa Kechika expedition. The Muskwa Kechika lies within the Peace River and Fort Nelson atlas regions. Species names in bold are particularly important records for the region. Breeding evidence codes: OBS=observed in the square, POSS=possibly breeds, PROB=probably breeds, and CONF=confirmed breeder (see atlas web site for definitions).

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