

# Travels with Bruno

Through Northern British Columbia and Yukon Territory - May 2012

*Overall impressions – vast boreal forests, mountain ranges, glaciers, lakes and rivers; and abundant wildlife. We covered 6 000 km and with the exception of the stretch along the Alaska Highway travelled on quiet roads.*

Our first two nights were spent in William's Lake to have the truck serviced and walk around the small wetland reserve, and what a gem it is – despite being flanked by the railway line and a busy sawmill. Several pairs of Canada geese had goslings, others



were sitting on eggs. Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds in full

courtship display in the sedge beds; Horned Grebes, Common Loons and several duck species getting themselves worked up into breeding mode. Then there were the muskrats industriously swimming from food source to food source – size for size they would give the top human swimmers a major challenge!

Then it was northwards to Prince George, a small university town built around the logging and timber industry. The intention was that whilst Mathilde was



sitting the exam I would stroll around looking for subjects for the camera. Signs everywhere warning of bears and moose, but it was not these that kept me under cover but the biting cold Arctic wind and the snow showers.

From Prince George we pointed the truck's snout northwards. From here on all settlements were small and with little character; history here is but very short, the country was "opened up" by fur trappers and gold panners not generally known for their architectural marvels.

Throughout the trip we divided our time by spending nights in our camper and in frontier motels and cabins. The further north we got the longer the days

and shorter the nights. So much so that at our turning point it was only dark by 23 h 00 and then only a dawn darkness. Motels boasted heavy drapes and curtains so one could get a good night's sleep.

After our departure from Prince George our first night was spent at Tahe Lake and our first night in

the camper. Very suited for our needs! And also for the first time we clearly and repeatedly heard the eerie call of the Common Loon, quite a sound. We followed the Cassiar – Stewart – Highway and found ourselves on a 'bear-run' down to one of the Pacific inlets and the dying town of Stewart on the Alaskan border.







At this time of year bears are emerging from their hibernation dens and the best source of food lies in the green grass and dandelions

along the road verges. Despite their long, dark shaggy coats one can see that they will need to pack on a lot of fat before the next winter. So in the 60 km run we literally encountered Black Bears at nearly every turn. The run is also memorable for the rugged mountains



flanking the road and the Bear Glacier that pokes its nose into the appropriately named Bear River.

In praise of things old: a new bridge

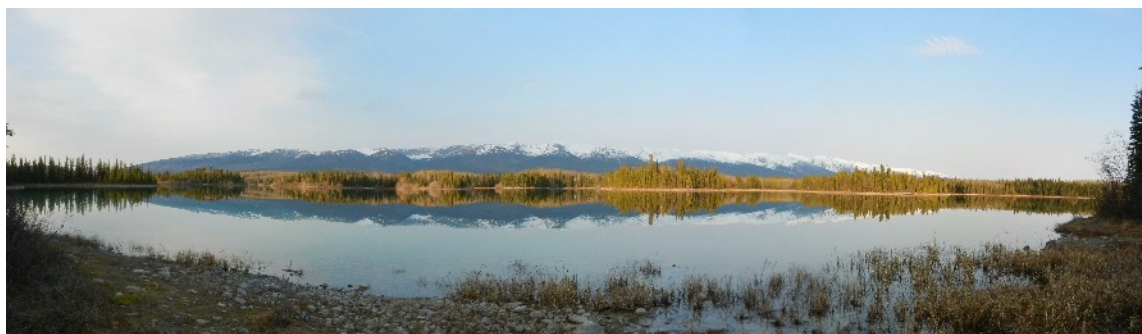
was washed out by flooding but the old one-lane wooden bridge was still in place and drivable. At the edge of the Portland Canal we got a glimpse of the great old rainforest hung liberally with Old Man's Beard lichens. From here on northwards the lakes were still frozen over and we had left most of the migrating waterfowl behind.

On the way into Dease Lake settlement we had good views of three groups of Mountain Caribou in snow. As with many ungulates we saw on the trip they were

gleaning salts from the winter's road gravelling, very convenient for the cameras.



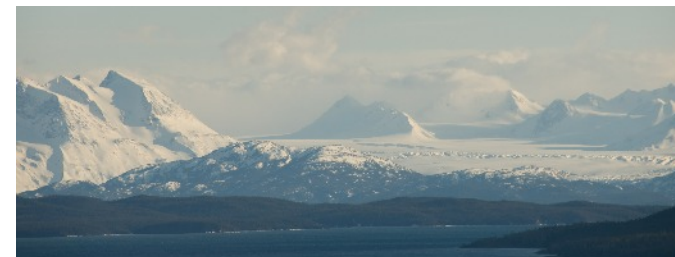
In general park and reserve campgrounds are good but those in settlements are bare, desolate places so it is in these places we opted for accommodation. We had hoped to do more wild camping, but these northern areas are dominated by permafrost and marsh – not safe terrain for even 4 x 4 driving.



In Boya Lake provincial park we had the most pleasant camp on the entire trip. Blue sky, placid pale blue lake, the call of loons and marsh frogs. The camp 'attendants' were ruffed grouse and grey jays! The latter are inveterate thieves and all must be secured but the one sneaky fellow flew off into the forest with our soap!! A Least Chipmunk was very trusting and posed beautifully for the camera. We now start-

ed to encounter the first spring flowers, the blue Prairie Crocuses.

Next stop was Atlin – in the north-western corner of British Columbia near the Alaskan border and only accessible from the Yukon Territory – incredible lakes and mountain scenery all around us.



Here we hired a cabin that looked southwards over the lake to the immense snow-bedecked mountains and glaciers. After breakfast we moved out to repack the truck without due attention! This cost us the

chance of photographing a moose cow and yearling at just 10 m distance.

Next day we entered the capital of Yukon Territory,

Whitehorse. This has a population of just over 20 000 folk, with a further 10 000 spread over the whole territory – an area twice the size of the United Kingdom ( that is before Scotland breaks away!). We had entered the town in a snowstorm, which later turned to rain. Spring had definitely not yet arrived in these northern climes. Our main reason for visiting Whitehorse was to take a look at the wildlife park



that exhibits the large game occurring in Yukon in impressively extensive camps.

We also paid a visit to the Beringia Museum. Beringia was that extensive area created when sea levels dropped as the ice fields and glaciers expanded and absorbed vast quantities of water. Siberia and Alaska became one and animals moved across the land bridge from the Americas to Asia and Asia to the Americas. This glacier-free zone became the range of mammoths, camels, small horses, giant bison, short-headed bears, sabre-toothed cats and much more. Then of course along came man out of Asia and the rest is history (and prehistory). If you are ever in Whitehorse, spare an hour or two for this small museum!



Then we drove on to Carmacks on the Yukon River, forever famed for its gold rushes, fur trappers and unpredictable waters during the short summer and its dangerous ice in the long winters. Carmacks boasts an excellent eatery, the Gold Panners Restaurant, basic and aimed at truckers, loggers and miners, with immense moose antlers as backdrop. Although we were still to head a considerable way northwards on

our return we wanted to travel the mainly gravel Campbell Highway of which we had heard mixed reports. A local Royal Canadian Mounted Police constable really went out of his way to ensure we had the very latest information. He made up for the rather poor level of policing we have encountered in some other areas of Canada.

We had excellent views over the mighty Yukon River, including at the historic Eagle's Nest where paddle-steamers battled the upward current to Dawson City.



How many people today would have the stamina and perseverance to do what those early miners, traders and fur-trappers did – winters dropping to minus 40°C or worse, blizzards and avalanches?

The only negative aspect of the trip was our camp at 5 Mile Lake: a beautiful campsite, Bonaparte's and Mew gulls on the lake. This was shattered when a horde of local "First Nations" folk arrived with blaring music, drinking heavily and abusive. Listen to reason they would not! An RCMP officer cruised by in his truck, we stopped him and his only response was they were not being excessively noisy and off he drove. So we packed up and headed for a

local motel. Hence our praise for the constable of Carmacks!



Our northern most point was Keno-City – a silver mining settlement in its early history, now barely surviving on the few tourists attracted by its history during the short summer. Not much to write home about and access to an alpine area we would have liked to have accessed was still blocked by almost a metre of snow. Following the Robert Campbell Highway eastwards we reached Faro, where we hoped to see Fannin's wild sheep. It is an interesting tale of evolution – two races of wild sheep are found in these northlands, Dall's which is white and occurs in Alaska, extreme northwest British Columbia and Southwest Yukon, and Stone's which is variably grey and occurs in southern Yukon and northern British Columbia. In between is Fannin's wild sheep, most taxonomists do not recognize it, it tends to have characters of Dall's and Stone's sheep. All are products of survival during the last Ice Age and each developing coat colours best suited to its surroundings.

The village of Faro had a Sheep and Crane Festival the weekend before we arrived. Faro lies along the



major flyway of the Sandhill Cranes heading to and from their northern breeding grounds. We were informed that this year the cranes had passed over early, although we did hear a few calling that night. The sheep had also not cooperated on the festival weekend, none were seen then, so we were not too optimistic!



Yet, luck was with us as we saw a fine young ram and 25 nannies. They are superbly camouflaged on the slopes and cliffs but once one's

eyes are 'tuned' you find them. At this time of year the pregnant ewes come to a specific birthing slope to drop their lambs in relative safety, from the attentions of wolves and golden eagles. Although a cold wind was blowing we enjoyed our time with those Fannin's sheep ewes.



*Wolf droppings*

Further along the Campbell Highway for about 400 km southeast and then south one passes through boreal forests, and past lakes aplenty. Although we did not see any, moose and wolves were abundant as there were few stretches without their tracks or droppings in evidence. In Yukon we saw many Arctic ground squirrels and surprisingly regularly North American Porcupines. They are much shorter spined than our African fellows but have the ability to easily climb trees as we found out when we tried to corral several for the camera. Very appealing beasties they are.

Also unlike our African porcupines these regularly sit on their haunches to increase their area of vision.



Mainly nocturnal where we live in Clearwater, BC, here towards the Arctic Circle with those almost 24 hours of daylight the porcupines have no choice but to forage in daylight.

As we head southwards the roadsides green up and bear sightings increase again. On the border between Yukon and northern British Columbia wild-

life is concentrated along the road verges of the Alaska Highway: many bison shedding their winter coats, an 'explosion' of bears. We encounter our first grizzlies of the trip, a sow and two "teddy bear" cubs – one blonde, one brunette and they performed perfectly for the cameras, as did many black bears.



In the Muncho Lake Provincial Park we saw a magnificent Stone's Sheep ram next to the road, as well as a ewe and yearling female. The latter two picked their way up the steep slope but the youngster took a wrong turn and could not go up or down, left or right. The wise old ewe saw this and turned back, reassuring the lamb and then leading it off on a secure route.



North-eastern British Columbia is not as attractive as the north-west, as it is carved up with gas and oil concessions. Motels are taken over by gas crews! Because of torrential rain we cancelled our trip to Pink

Mountain – memories of our flood adventures on the way to Sandstone, Western Australia, returned; we instead put up for the night in the Buffalo Inn! A black South African manager sporting a Springbok rugby shirt greeted us, and because of national common ground we got dinner on the house!

Next morning it was still pouring down and after a good breakfast in a local diner (bacon, eggs, sausage, hash browns and toast) we press on along the Peace River valley and see quite a few mule and white-tailed deer at the roadside. In Chetwynd settlement we have a look at their chainsaw carving collection, some truly amazing work. How do you do that with a chainsaw? This town and Hope in the south of BC compete to be the chainsaw carving capital of the world. And these 'artists' are not just Canadian, but





One must always think of the now extinct Passenger Pigeons. The gas and oil explorations – don't smoke in public places but the gas flaming and oil spillage, what harm to the environment?

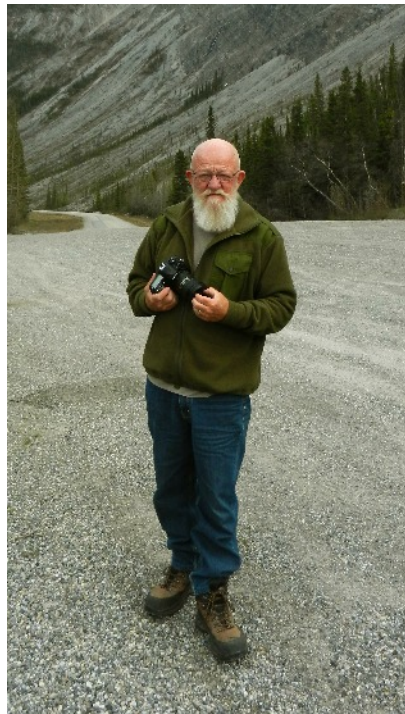
Yet at present the north is a wonderful wilderness. We enjoyed it so much that from May to September 2013 Mathilde will walk away from her medical practice and we will continue our explorations of the northlands, Alaska, Yukon and North West Territories.

come from all over the world, with some of the best pieces carved by an Estonian and a Slovak!

We see more Stone Sheep along the road, locate a raven nest above the highway in a cutting, the chicks raising open beaks at the sound of each passing vehicle. As we draw closer to Clearwater and the end of the road, quaking aspens and paper birches are now in full leaf, just two days north they were barely showing themselves.

Vast country, incredible scenery, abundant wildlife, especially outside conservation areas. Few people and a wilderness feel like almost nowhere else we have travelled.

But of course there is always the downside: One has to wonder about the impacts of the logging industry despite seemingly endless tracts of boreal forests.



*Arctic ground squirrel*



*Least chipmunk*



*American Black Bear*



*Grey jay (right)*