



## Your Trip

Photo: Terry Parker

# The Horton River

## About the River


By Northwest Territories standards, the Horton River journey is as remote a river trip as one is likely to find and enjoy in North America. Even the Inuit of Paulatuk, the nearest community, rarely travel this far. Three outstanding features characterize the Horton River the wildlife (caribou, muskoxen, wolves, grizzly and various birds, including falcons and hawks in abundance), the scenery (rolling tundra, a steep valley and the Smoking Hills on the coastline), and the clear, swift-flowing waters that are generally easy to navigate. Sparse stands of trees are located along the river banks for the first 200 km downstream of Horton

Lake. The trees virtually disappear as one heads farther north towards the ocean.

### HISTORY

The earliest archaeological sites in the Horton region dates back to about 1350 AD. However, human habitation is likely to have come much earlier, with the Paleo-Eskimo migration from Alaska and Siberia during the period 2500 to 2000 BC, followed by the pre-Dorset culture, which existed between 1700 and 900 BC, and the Dorset culture which appeared around 500 BC. The Dorset people are renowned for artistic ivory carvings of animals, human figurines and masks. If we discover artifacts en route, we will leave them undisturbed and report the

details to the Prince of Wales Museum in Yellowknife. Most of the Horton River archaeological sites were inhabited by Thule cultures, which migrated into the Canadian Arctic from Alaska during the period 1100 to 1400 AD. The Thule people were very advanced in their ability to adapt to the harsh Arctic conditions. They were skilled at building skin boats such as the umiak and the kayak. They travelled by dog team, used bows and arrows to hunt, and wore goggles to guard against snow blindness. Today, descendants of the Thule culture, the Karngmalit (Mackenzie) Inuit, live in the community of Paulatuk, which is located about 100 km due east of the Horton River on the coast. The name Paulatuk means coal or soot in Inuktitut. Coal is common to the area and was once used for heating purposes. The Karngmalik took up an active trade with the whalers of the 19th century, but suffered considerably as a result of the

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alcohol and disease that were brought in with the ships. The original community was established in the 1920s at Letty Harbour and subsequently moved to the present-day site in 1935, when the Roman Catholic mission established a trading post there. In contrast, little is known about very early North American Indian habitation in the Horton River area. Among the first to venture into the Horton River region were the Hareskin Indians, whose descendants today reside at the community of Colville Lake (pop. 750). There were approximately 1000 Hareskin Indians spread out among seven bands when the first Europeans arrived in the area. Captain Robert McClure, one of several expedition leaders sent out to search for the lost Franklin expedition in 1850, was among the first Europeans to explore the coastline of the Horton River area. In September of that year he sent out a search party to investigate what appeared to be a smouldering fire in what is now Franklin Bay. The party arrived to find not flames from campfires, but what they described as thick columns of smoke emerging from vents in the ground, and a smell of sulphur so strong that they could not approach the smoke-pillar nearer than 10 to 15 feet. The investigating party returned to the ship with samples of the smouldering, sulphurous rock, and when they set it down on McClure's desk, it burned a hole in it. The naturalist explorer Roderick MacFarlane was among the first Europeans to explore the interior of the Horton - Anderson River area, although he made it only as far as the Anderson River. It was upon his recommendation that the Hudson's



Photo: Mark Kyte

Bay Company established a post at Fort Anderson (named after James Anderson, the man who supervised the Mackenzie District for the Hudson's Bay Company), approximately 50 km downstream of the forks on the Anderson River. MacFarlane remained in charge there from 1861 to 1865, during which time he collected nearly 5000 scientific specimens of birds and eggs. The fort was eventually closed down after an epidemic of scarlet fever decimated the local Inuit population. Between 1908 and 1912 the famous Canadian explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson explored the Horton River valley more extensively and documented his findings in a book entitled *My Life with the Eskimo* (1913). Stefansson was fabulously successful in his explorations, a fact he attributed to his taking up the ways of the native

people. Paulatuk remains as the only permanent settlement in the Horton River vicinity. However, because of its location it remains relatively remote and, in the absence of industrial activities, many of its residents still depend on hunting and trapping for a living.

### GEOGRAPHY

Much of the Horton River lies within the Northern Interior Plain region of the Mackenzie Lowlands. It is generally low, hilly topography marked by numerous lakes and streams. The Horton Lake district is characterized by highly calcareous loamy and sandy till and a moderate to low relief. Limited glacial till found on the Bathurst Peninsula and in the interfleuve areas would suggest the region escaped late Wisconsin

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glaciation. Interior plateau and plains lie on the western extremity of the Precambrian Shield and have developed from sedimentary rock deposited on the top of the Canadian Shield. Again, the area is characterized by various lakes and streams. One exception is the extensive area of badlands which occurs on the lower end of the Horton River. Here deeply dissected Mesozoic rocks are exposed on the steep slopes. This area is largely devoid of any vegetation, giving the area a forlorn and desolate appearance. Vast deposits of lignite, a rock which spontaneously combusts when exposed to oxygen, dominates the coastal region east of the Horton River. This area is known as the Smoking Hills. Constant wind erosion of the slopes tends to maintain the combusive activities. About 150 years ago the Horton River was shortened by about 150 km when a channel was eroded on the east banks in the vicinity closest to the ocean. The river now spills almost directly into the ocean, rather than through the more delta-like maze which is common to other rivers on the Arctic coastline.

### FLORA

Wildflowers abound. Since the growing season is far too short for propagation, most of the vegetation found in the Horton River valley is of the perennial type. Vegetation communities include sedge tundra, which includes willows, cottongrass and labrador tea; shrub tundra, such as dwarf birch, alder, labrador tea, lapland rosebay and Arctic white heather, with a scattering of trees like birch and willow; forest tundra transition, where plant species from both areas intermingle; and open

forest, which is dominated by spruce in a ground cover of lichens. Trees in this area are generally less than 7 m in height and widely spaced. The dominant shrub species of this area include willow and alder, which grow in dense stands along stream and creek valleys.

### WILDLIFE

The Horton is one of those rare rivers which offers everything, including spectacular scenery, a swift, clear river and tremendous wildlife viewing opportunities. Numerous birds can be observed, especially in June and early July. These include oldsquaw ducks, Arctic and common loon, ptarmigan, peregrine and gyrfalcons, bald and golden eagles, black brant, scoters, mergansers and scaup. Shorebirds include various plovers, yellowlegs and godwits, to name but a few. Caribou are likely to be sighted throughout the journey, especially in the area of the coastline, where the spectacular post-calving groupings tend to feed in July and August. The timing of the migration varies from year to year, but it is almost certain that caribou will be seen on this river trip. The animals located along the Horton River are part of the Bluenose herd, whose population is estimated to be in the range of 68,000 animals. There is a sizeable population of muskoxen in the Horton River area. The river is approximately the western boundary of the Northwest Territories current mainland muskoxen habitat. (Other populations occur further east, but in the islands of the Arctic Archipelago.)

The Horton River is prime grizzly bear habitat. The bears here are slightly

smaller (males average around 200 kg) than the bears of the west coast of Canada and Alaska. A number of wolf packs work the Horton River Valley, many which follow the caribou migration. Marten, foxes and various rodents are also common to the area.

### FISHING

Fish are plentiful along most of the river route, although they may be difficult to catch in the early spring when the floodwaters make the river murky. This is especially the case as one heads towards the coastline. Arctic grayling and lake trout are the two most common species caught, although there is a char run in the summer for a short period.

### CLIMATE

Weather in the region is typically good, with clear skies and temperatures that range from 10-30°C (50-86° F). Occasional snow squalls, freezing rain and thunderstorms which may occur in the summer months suggest otherwise, but the Horton River is located in two semi-arid climatic zones. The interior and coastal regions of the Horton River experience the Arctic coastal plain climate, where the mean temperature in summer months ranges from 3.1-5.2° C, but hot days can find temperatures in the high 20's°C. Watch the "How To Pack Video" on the website and follow the clothing list closely and you will be well equipped.



Photo: Terry Parker

## Your Trip

# Horton River - Birds of Prey, Muskox and Caribou

## Itinerary

### Day 0

#### ARRIVING IN INUVIK

Your journey north from your home will be a refreshing departure. You will fly over the largest expanse of wilderness in the world with stunning views on cloudless days. Passing through quieter and friendlier airports, you will meet friendlier and less harried service personnel and begin to immerse yourself in the wilderness experience that is about to unfold. Arrive in Inuvik and make your way to your hotel. We will meet at the Arctic Chalet at 8 pm for the pre-trip meeting. Please note that hotel costs and meals while in

Inuvik are not included in the trip fee. We will answer last-minute questions and prepare to depart the next day.

### Day 1 (L/D)

#### FLIGHT ACROSS THE TUNDRA

We will meet in the hotel lobby at 8 a.m. following breakfast (not covered). Via Twin Otter, we will fly east over the unique tundra ecosystem. We may see frost polygons from the air and will begin to get a feel for this diverse and solitary landscape. We will assemble the canoes and prepare our campsite. This spot offers ideal hiking opportunities and a chance to catch a glimpse of the Horton River's canyons.

## Trip Details

**Mainland Northwest Territories to the Arctic Ocean, journey through the traditional territories of the Inuvialuit:** Approximately 210 km (130 miles) with an elevation drop of 105m (300 ft)

**Cost:** \$10,550 + 5% GST + \$150 land use fee

**Trip Date:** June 14 - June 28, 2019

**Duration:** 12 River days

**Trip Type:** Canoe


#### Skill Level

Canoe: Beginner. Class II moving water skills required.

For more information, see the FAQ's at [nahanni.com](http://nahanni.com)

#### Rendezvous Point:

Arctic Chalet B&B - Inuvik, Northwest Territories

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### Day 2 (B/L/D)

#### DISCOVERING THE HORTON

We embark on the river and the Horton's broad valley stretches out before us. Trees appear only in the very bottom of the valley and along the incoming tributaries. You are now truly immersed in the barrenlands. Our guides will unfold the secrets of viewing the land in traditional ways.

### Day 3 & 4 (B/L/D)

#### WILD FLOWERS AND WILDLIFE

Days will be spent exploring the river and the land. Icy veins in the river bank indicate the layer of permafrost that lies underneath the tundra. The treeless tundra offers ideal hiking. There have been active wolf dens here in the past; with some luck they may be occupied again. The river valley is home to many raptors such as the golden eagle and the gyrfalcon.

### Day 5-9 (B/L/D)

#### HIKING AND MORE WILDLIFE

In this section of classic rolling tundra, three of the four days will be spent

paddling, while one will be a layover, giving opportunity for hiking and resting up. The Horton now flows north, parallel to Franklin Bay on the Arctic Ocean, which is about 30 km to the east. Often a cool wind blows off the ocean, which may require that you pull out that extra sweater. This section of the river provides opportunity to see grizzly bears, wolves, muskoxen and caribou. If we are lucky, migrating groups of caribou from the Bluenose Caribou herd can be seen (estimated population in 2013 was 68,000). Their annual migratory path takes them northward in the hills between the Horton and Franklin Bay.

### Day 10 (B/L/D)

#### BAD LANDS

The Horton River begins to slow in this section, as it nears the coast. The badlands and the geology of the Smoking Hills become evident, with a variety of colours and textures. These hills make for intriguing hikes.

### Day 11 (B/L/D)

#### SMOKING HILLS

Some large meanders in the river are navigated during today's paddle, an

### Suggested Reading

Your guides will carry a small reference library that will include field reference books. Following are some books for winter reading:

**A Naturalist's Guide to the Arctic** by E.C. Pielou

**After the Ice Age – The Return of Life to Glaciated North America** by E.C. Pielou

**The Polar Sea in the years 1825, 1826, 1827** by J.S. Franklin

**Barrenland Beauties. Showy Plants of the Arctic Coast** by Page Burt

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indication that the Horton is an old river. We will likely find ourselves camped at the bottom of a large meander which puts us within a 3 km hike of the ocean.

#### Day 12 (B/L/D)

##### ARCTIC OCEAN VIEW!

This day we will hike from the river overland in search of active vents in the Smoking Hills. Also, with some luck we may be able to see Beluga whales in Franklin Bay. It is possible that Franklin Bay may be covered in pack ice even in early July. As always, we won't stop looking for the caribou on their migration north; they could be anywhere!

#### Day 13 (B/L)

##### ANOTHER SPECTACULAR FLIGHT

The aircraft will pick us up and return us to Inuvik. There may be time to explore the highlights of town after a shower. We will meet for a farewell supper (not included) and reminisce of tundra memories.

#### Day 14

##### HOME BOUND

After goodbyes and a last look around Inuvik, we will head for home with a cargo of fond and spectacular memories.

**Please note:** The above is a tentative itinerary and has been designed with much thought to capitalize on the most scenic and exciting parts of the river, while making time on other sections. Your guides will adjust the schedule to make the best use of river and weather conditions. Meals and pre-and post-trip accommodation in Inuvik are your responsibility - the cost is not included in the trip fee. We have attached a list of Inuvik hotels. Breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks from the pre-trip meeting until the final river meal are included. Any other meals off the river are your responsibility.

## Contact Us

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