



where the muskoX roam

Like Ahab chasing his whale, *Up Here* associate editor **Jessa Sinclair** embarks on a star-crossed journey down the Thelon River, hunting a quarry that's huge, ancient, shaggy – and utterly elusive.

“TRY NOT TO WANT IT SO MUCH,” says Jon, as I scour the Barrens with binoculars. “You’ve gotta think like this: If the muskox want to see me, I may be available, I may not.” Make them come to me? It’s easy for him to say – Jon Squires and a fellow Colorado multi-millionaire booked their trip on a whim a few weeks ago, whereas I’ve been waiting for years. But I give it a try. “Have your people call my people,” I offer unconvincingly to the scrubland around me. The mosquitoes sense the carbon dioxide in my breath and buzz more frantically, but there’s no stampeding of muskox hoofs. I put down the binoculars, defeated. I’ve never learned how to use them properly anyway.

I’ve heard the Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary described as the circumpolar Serengeti, a fragile yet subtly rich ecosystem. Standing on an esker in this giant triangle of tundra on the central Barrenlands, I’m not convinced. It seems like nobody’s home, and I could forgive an exploration crew for thinking this place was made for mining and otherwise valueless. Lonely and melancholic, this place could pass for a dead planet tagged by an intergalactic fleet for resource extraction.

Maybe it’s just my despair talking. It’s day 11 of a 14-day canoe trip down the Thelon River, and nothing has come easily. At the very beginning of the trip we were stranded in the Dene village of Lutselk’e for four days, finally having to fly back to Yellowknife and onward to the Barrens, doubling our costs. We’ve been paddling nine-hour days like galley slaves trying to make up for lost time, and the bugs are unbelievably brutal. If I get to see a muskox, it’ll all be worth it, but we’re already past the “Welcome to Nunavut” sign on the riverbank, signifying the border between the NWT, through which most of the river flows, and Nunavut, in which it terminates. So far, we’ve seen no trace of them. My best and last hope is the hike that lies ahead: the journey to Muskox Hill. *Continued...*



LESLIE LEONG

“It’s not just about saving the



MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH A HERD of muskoxen was terrifying and bewitching, and I’ve been in love with the things ever since. Four years ago on the Northwest Territories’ Horton River, not far from where it meets Franklin Bay on the Arctic Ocean, our Inuvialuit guide Enoch spotted the elusive beasts on a high tundra plain, and we scrambled up the hillside to get a closer look.

It was the smell that hit me first – a potent barnyard whiff of manure. Then the adults assumed their defensive circle around the calves in response to our arrival. Though I was almost charged by a bull later that day, the sight of a herd of Ice Age bovines stampeding across the tundra left me craving more.

Stumpy-legged with a lumbering, rocking-horse gait, the muskox was once felt by certain Inuit groups to be the spiritual counterpart of the bowhead whale. The long, dark coat, curving horns and a foul reek add menace to the cetacean impression, but when a herd decides to run, its flight is imbued with grace and agility (think of the elephant ballerinas in Disney’s original *Fantasia*). Flowing hair blends with the waving summer grasses of the tundra. I try to imagine them fending off scimitar cats and steppe lions in the Pleistocene era. A woolly mammoth would not be out of place on this landscape.

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IN 1927 THE THELON GAME SANCTUARY, through which my group is canoeing, was created with the mandate to guard around 250 remnant muskox from the over-hunting that had decimated them. Globally, their numbers were as low as 13,000. Protection worked. Thelon muskox populations have increased tenfold, and the worldwide figure could now be as high as 170,000.

David Livingstone, the director of renewable resources and conservation at Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, sees the muskox of the Thelon as an exception within an exception.

When I'd met him in a Yellowknife coffeeshop a month before my trip he was the only guy in shorts and a T-shirt, stubbornly observing the nominal summer. "It's not just about saving the muskox anymore," he said, but about protecting the whole Thelon ecosystem – an oasis of moose, caribou and, in protected pockets, glades of spruce trees well above the normal treeline.

Political attention has been channelled increasingly toward the Thelon ever since the formation of Nunavut split the refuge in two, explained Livingstone. Though it's a protected area on both sides of the border, only Nunavut's side has a management plan. In the NWT, the Akaitcho First Nation and the Métis have interests in the Thelon, and they've opted not to sign onto any plan until their respective land claims are settled. Nunavut went ahead with its plan even though, arguably, it has the strongest immediate incentives to exploit the area economically. Livingstone was instrumental in drafting the plan but thinks it unnecessary: "What's all the fuss about?" he asks rhetorically. "Just leave it alone. And leave the boundaries alone. There's talk of expanding it, but once you open that can of worms, you could lose more than you gain."

With uranium at its dearest in three decades, there's a real possibility that reopening the border question could be disastrous from a conservation standpoint. Plans are underway to mine the element from sandstone formations just beyond the refuge boundaries, and even that could have downstream effects. Then again, the immediate concerns could be rendered moot by global warming. Climate change is expected to spread the boreal forest north, and winters up here are milder already. There are even reports from Inuit hunters of muskox huddling on the ground during freak wintertime sleet-storms, only to become literally frozen in place, their long guard hairs welded to the earth.

Jon Squires is mostly amused by my fixation with finding muskox. With a square jaw and smile lines, he has "successful American CEO" all but written on his forehead. Squires lays claim to an age I find impossibly old, and so will not repeat here. An early riser, he would greet my morning emergence from my tent with a cup of coffee and a casual: "You just missed the muskox."

Packed with him is a device that turns into an unlikely keystone of the trip: A portable version of Wikipedia – the web-based encyclopedia fast becoming a compendium of everything known to humankind. We use the thing to determine how to fend off bugs, settle bets about history and read entries to the group like campfire stories. On the day before our trip to Muskox Hill, Squires asks the oracle about the Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary and takes the wind right out of my sails. "There are just over 2,000 muskox in the 142,400 square-kilometre area of the Thelon drainage basin," he reads. Given that the beasts would be clumped in herds, that pegs our chances at slim. We only had a 200-metre strip of visible tundra on either side of the river before the first high ridge obscured our view. If the beasts weren't on the banks, they might as well be on the moon.



DAVID SINCLAIR



JESSA SINCLAIR

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT: (Top left) The Thelon and its tributaries meander some 900 kilometres through the Barrenlands of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, making it the region's biggest – and most commonly paddled – river. Boaters share the drainage with some 2,000 muskox. **WINGED CREATURES:** (Top middle) For a bird watcher, the Thelon won't disappoint. All manner of eagles, swans, ducks – and, of course, ptarmigan – flock along its banks. **EASY COASTING:** (Above) Wide and deep, the river's currents pose little challenge to skilled boaters, but experience in wilderness survival is essential for unguided trips. With shoddy satellite-phone service and few fellow paddlers, help could be days away. **BORDER CROSSING:** (Left) A handmade sign marks the boundary between the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. The two territories co-manage the Thelon Game Sanctuary, through which much of the river flows.



Early on the day we were to reach Muskox Hill we run into Lee Sessions, who suggests we might indeed find muskox there. Hailing from Portland, Oregon and a veteran of Arctic river-tripping, Sessions is waiting for his pickup plane at a narrowing of the waters known as the Gap. He fishes out old maps from his previous trips, marked up with notations like “Campsite, Day #3: Bear” and “Fox’s Den.” “It’s not easy walking, but

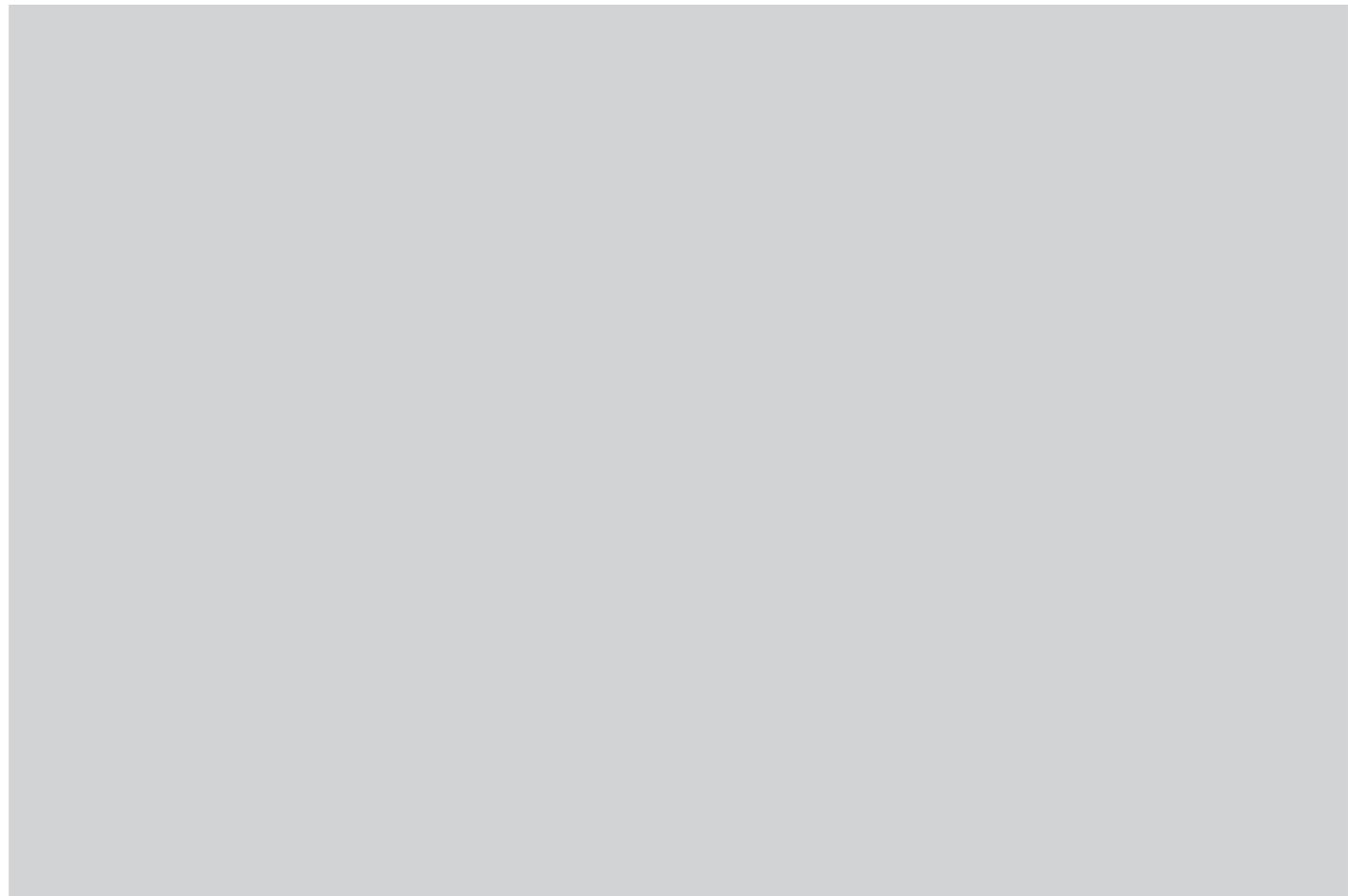
it’s worth the trip to Muskox Hill,” he assured us, pointing at a target of concentric circles on the topo map. “I’ve seen muskox standing right on the hill itself.”

After another few hours paddling, we spot the prominence – four kilometres north of the riverbank, but visible from much farther away due to its pancake-flat surroundings. It’s the only pingo known to occur within the Thelon Wildlife Sanctu-

ary, and it’s probably the farthest south of any in the Canadian Arctic. From my perch on the first ridge out from the river, I see it’s a mature one, slumped in the middle from exposure and the melting of its ice core. It looks like a sparsely vegetated volcano.

Between me and Muskox Hill there’s nothing but waist-level brush, locked together by thickly entwined branches. Looking more closely at the terrain I must cover, I see octagonal patterns on the ground. Before I’m told this is a common tundra formation (formed by freezing and thawing), I imagine these are some of the prehistoric tent rings advertised as archaeological features of the area. Pre-Dorset hunters used sites like Muskox Hill to sit for hours waiting to spot game. A muskox would provide scapulae for skin stretchers, a cranium for a chamber pot, skin for mittens and a boat-load of meat.

Then guns and trappers and traders came and dealt muskox a sucker-punch. In the late 1800s, the animals were hunted beyond any sporting chance of replenishing themselves. If it wasn’t explorers looking for the Northwest Passage or adventurers seeking the last remains of the Franklin expedition, it was Nordic whalers or Hud-



son's Bay Company traders buying hides of *le boeuf musqué* from aboriginal communities. More importantly, they didn't leave enough for me.

Our group hacks its way through the bushes, sealing bug shirts and sweating buckets. Our arms and backs are strong from hours of paddling, but our legs have forgotten the feel of hard use. The ivory pingo gets larger every time I look up. I don't see any telling black dots (potential muskox), but I'm looking forward to the climb itself, and the view from the top. The willows keep getting taller, and I'm panting by the time I reach the last row of them. In the final few metres between me and what looks like open space around Muskox Hill, the bushes tower above my head, and the ground turns swampy. Never mind, the water filling my shoes will cool me off a little – as long as the bog doesn't suck me down. One more branch clawing across my face and I'm in the clear.

Or not. The space between the willows and the hill is, I see to my dismay, a moat. It must be a seasonal one, but it's huge and impassable. I gaze up wistfully at the pingo, resigning myself to saving the climb – and the muskox – for another year. Still, as I



take a few swigs of water and look around I have an urge to walk into the moat, slosh past the pingo, step up onto the opposite shore and walk out onto the Barrenlands. My group could watch me run away for weeks, as the saying goes. I wonder if the impulse has something to do with the tendency for things to move from high concentrations – such as lonely huddles of paddlers grouped around a pingo – to

FREE RIDE: (Left) A rare tailwind offers the author's crew a respite from hard paddling. **HEAD FOR HIGH GROUND:** (Above) The author's party contemplates their approach through the dwarf willows to Muskox Hill. Named for its shape rather than its proximity to muskox, the hill is a pingo – likely the southernmost in Canada.

low, the largest wilderness area in North America, allegedly sprinkled with muskox. I suppress my urge to seek out the beasts and turn back toward my canoe. 🐾