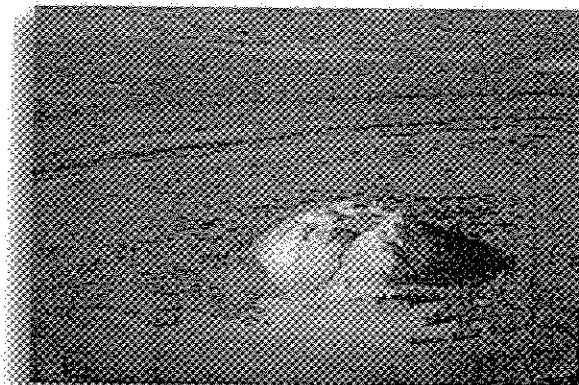


[Main Menu](#) [About Us](#) [The Rivers](#) [Publications](#) [Contact Us](#) [En français](#)



# Thelon River

- ▶ [Geography](#)
- ▶ [Natural Heritage](#)
- ▶ [Human Heritage](#)
- ▶ [Recreation](#)
- ▶ [Visitor Information](#)
- ▶ [Further Information](#)
- ▶ [Additional Reading](#)



Nunavut Water Board  
MAY 30 2006  
Public Registry

[Back to Thelon River Main Page](#)

The Thelon is the largest river in the Nunavut Territory flowing into Hudson Bay. It winds through a broad valley, often lined with thick stands of spruce, yet is surrounded by sweeping barren lands – the treeless tundra of Canada's north. This boreal-Arctic oasis supports a rich and unusually diverse northern concentration of wildlife. The Beverly caribou herd, 300,000 members strong, crosses the river in large groupings at a number of spots during the herd's annual migration. Barren-ground grizzly, muskox, fox, lynx, wolf, moose, wolverine, peregrine falcon and more than 10,000 moulting Canada geese are common here, many in the Thelon Game Sanctuary which surrounds the river's middle reaches to Beverly Lake.

The Thelon, together with its sister river, the Kazan, has long been home to the Caribou Inuit, the only inland community of Inuit in Canada. Thelon shores, particularly from Beverly Lake on downstream, are a treasure-house of pre-historic artefacts and Inuit campsites. Some dating back thousands of years are still in use today.

And the Thelon continues to play a vital role in the lives of the Caribou Inuit. Comprising 1,000 of the total of 25,000 Inuit who live in the Territory of Nunavut, the Caribou Inuit reside primarily in the community of Baker Lake at the river's mouth. It was due largely to their strong desire and effort to have the river and their traditional life on it commemorated by all of Canada that, in July 1990, the Thelon was designated a Canadian Heritage River.

## Geography

From as far apart as 200 km east of Great Slave Lake and the northern Saskatchewan border, waters of the Thelon collect to flow for 900 km across the NWT's Mackenzie district, then through Nunavut into Baker Lake and Chesterfield Inlet. This 142,400 km<sup>2</sup> watershed is the largest unaltered drainage basin emptying into Hudson Bay.

The section designated a Canadian Heritage River includes the river's entire middle and lower reaches, consisting of the 545 km from Warden's Grove, 50 km from the river's junction with the Hanbury, to Baker Lake. The 1–2 km wide, meandering, river channel contains considerable fast water but requires no

portages from the Hanbury junction to the lower reaches where the Thelon widens into three vast lakes: Beverly, Aberdeen and Schultz. From Schultz Lake, the river narrows and a 100 km stretch of fast water leads to the river's mouth at Baker Lake.

Located at the geographic center of Canada and inaccessible by road, Baker Lake is 900 km by air east of Yellowknife, and 1500 km by air north of Winnipeg. Nevertheless hotel accommodation, food, supplies, outfitting and other services are among the best available in the far north, and Baker Lake offers visitors an unforgettable taste of the modern Caribou Inuit cultural way of life.

▲ [Back to top](#)

## Natural Heritage

The pristine wilderness of the Thelon provides abundant and diverse wildlife habitat and many areas of exceptional natural beauty. Its forest-tundra supports a unique assemblage of boreal and arctic species and some of Canada's most important northern ecosystems. Among its more significant features are:

- 330,000 migrating caribou, following the river to calve north of Beverly Lake, sometimes swimming across in a kilometre-wide band;
- the largest flock in Nunavut of the large species of Canada geese, between Beverly and Aberdeen lakes;
- one of few inland colonies of lesser snow geese;
- breeding grounds for the endangered peregrine, gyrfalcon and rough-legged hawk and habitat for the rare wolverine, and for arctic fox and wolf;
- 75–100 moose and more than 2,000 muskox between Warden's Grove and Lookout Point. (The muskox have thrived under protection of the Thelon Game Sanctuary. At the turn of the century, only a few hundred survived, decimated by the late 19th century European demand for muskox robes);
- important denning grounds for barren-ground grizzly preying on geese and eggs in spring and summer;
- an uncommon mix of boreal and arctic fish species in Beverly Lake; and,
- impressive scenic features: extensive flats of pure white sand at the Thelon-Hanbury junction and Lookout Point; 15m high sand embankments fringed by boulder beaches at Thelon Bluffs, where rapids course through sandstone cliffs; seven terraces 20–100 m high – old lake and marine beaches, at West Aberdeen; and, the spectacular Aleksektok Rapids, 70 km from Baker Lake.

▲ [Back to top](#)

## Human Heritage

The Thelon barrenlands, long-time home to the Inuit, have been undisturbed for centuries. A trip on the river is truly a voyage back in time. Perhaps the most dramatic glimpse of past and present Inuit culture is an inukshuk – a pile of rocks standing quite visibly as markers on the landscape. Inukshuk mark almost every vital aspect of Inuit life land and water routes, caribou migratory paths and river crossings, fishing spots, campsites, lookouts, and food caches. Archaeological sites, structures and artefacts which include tent rings, stone fox traps, kayak stands, graves, hunting blinds and quartzite flakes used as scrapers, are plentiful but are protected under federal and Nunavut laws and must be left undisturbed. Much of the area's prehistory can be learned from these sites, and, if disturbed, that opportunity may be lost forever. The best sites are at Schultz and Aberdeen Lakes, Pequetuaq, and Isarurjuaq Peninsula.

The journals of northern explorers who travelled the Thelon can add immeasurably to a trip here:

Samuel Hearne crossed the Thelon on his overland walking expedition from Churchill to the unknown interior, recording it in his 1770-71 "Journey from Prince of Wales Fort to the Northern Ocean".

In 1893, J.B. Tyrrell, one of the great pioneers of the Geological Survey of Canada, explored the Thelon and Dubawnt. His brother, J.W., described the journey in "Across the Sub-Arctics of Canada"

David Hanbury travelled the Thelon in 1889 and returned 2 years later. The detailed journal of his explorations entitled "Life and Sport in the Northland of Canada" is considered, even today, the best written account of a trip on the river.



In 1927, the federal government established the Thelon Game Sanctuary inspired by the 1924-25 explorations of naturalist John Hornby. Although a veteran northern traveler, Hornby tragically starved to death with his companions on the banks of the Thelon, as he waited for caribou which never came. The ruins of Hornby's cabin and the graves lie beside the river.

Cabins still stand at Warden's Grove. Here the finest stand of spruce trees on the river shelter three cabins one built in 1928 by the park's first warden, W.B. Hoare and another in the 1960's by the Canadian Wildlife Service for wildlife research. Ernie Kuyt, famous for his work with sandhill cranes, was one of the first biologists stationed here.

▲ [Back to top](#)

## **Recreation**

---

Designation of the Thelon as a Canadian Heritage River was based, in part, on the unique wilderness recreation experience which it offers. It is virtually impossible to travel the Thelon without encountering wildlife especially the shaggy muskox, often seen foraging in groups of 20 or more. Rough-legged hawks soar and peregrine falcons dart and dive overhead, while tundra swans paddle peacefully along the river.

Canoeing: Although the canoeing season is short, only 8-10 weeks from late June to mid-August, the Thelon offers a first-class experience well known to pioneers of wilderness canoeing. Eric Morse, whose northern voyages marked the beginning of recreational canoeing in the Keewatin, paddled the Hanbury Thelon route in 1962. Now more than 100 canoeists travel down the Thelon each year, most on the Hanbury-Thelon route. The first stretch on the Hanbury, however, is extremely arduous: spectacular waterfalls at Dickson Canyon and Helen Falls, require strenuous portages. The alternative approach, from the upper Thelon, is also arduous, with numerous rapids and an excruciating portage of several kilometres around the Thelon Canyon. From the Hanbury-Thelon junction, however, the 300 km to Beverly Lake is generally free of portages. The current carries canoeists through the boreal forest of the Thelon Game Sanctuary, past impressive sand flats and tundra hills rising 160m, to Beverly Lake. Here and on Aberdeen and Schultz lakes caution and patience are required: sudden storms and frigid waters can be life-threatening. The final 100 km stretch is a stimulating paddle through high-walled banks enclosing a swift current, past the 200m high Halfway Hills and on toward Baker Lake.

Fishing: The Thelon is prime habitat for trophy lake trout, arctic char and grayling. Humpback and round whitefish, cisco, slimy and spoonhead sculpin, and lake chub are also common. A Nunavut Territory fishing license, available at stores and government offices in Iqaluit, is required.

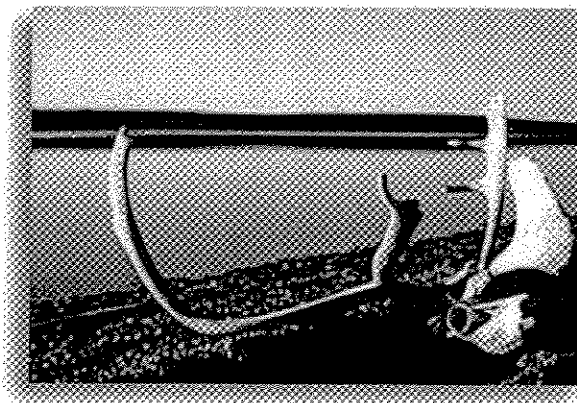
Camping and Hiking: Beaches along the shores of the 'great lakes' section of the Thelon make excellent campsites, as do the eskers overlooking the river and lakes. The eskers also offer exceptional, mosquito-free hiking, with 360 degree vistas over the tundra.

▲ [Back to top](#)

## Visitor Information

---

Access: The closest access to the Thelon by road ends at Yellowknife and by rail, at Churchill. Trips on the upper river have traditionally depended on air charter from Yellowknife. However, other northern communities, such as Baker Lake, now have scheduled airline service and are also offering air charter service to the river.



Canoeists paddling the upper Thelon may

arrange float-plane drop-off on Whitefish, Lynx or Eyeberry lakes and for the Hanbury-Thelon route, on Artillery or Sifton lakes. The lakes on the lower Thelon are also accessible by canoe from the Dubawnt River system, but Dubawnt Lake is frozen well into July. Egress from the Thelon is usually pre-arranged float plane charter, or power boat pick-up from Baker Lake.

Tour operators in **Baker Lake** /Qamani'tuaq and Yellowknife offer canoeing and kayaking trips of up to 4 weeks on the Thelon and short 1-4 day trips by freighter canoe from Baker Lake as far as the Ursus Islands.

Accommodation and Services: Yellowknife, the NWT capital city (pop. 11,500), offers the full range of accommodation and services. **Baker Lake** /Qamani'tuaq, the terminus for many trips, can now serve as a starting point as well. It has one hotel and several lodges, and there is a fishing lodge on Schultz Lake. Supplies are available at the Sanavik Cooperative, the Land Store and the Northern Store. Internationally renowned original Inuit carvings, prints, wall hangings and crafts can be purchased at the Jesse Oonark Arts and Crafts Centre, Ookpiktuayuk Art and Baker Lake Fine Arts. The community also offers outfitting services, and has developed hiking trails, a campground, a visitor reception and interpretation centre, and a traditional summer camp which demonstrates Caribou Inuit ways. (see [www.bakerlake.org](http://www.bakerlake.org))

Apart from Yellowknife and Churchill (pop. 1000), accommodation and services are also available in Chesterfield Inlet (300), Rankin Inlet (1700), Arviat (formerly Eskimo Point, 1300), Whale Cove (250) and Lutsel K'e (formerly Snowdrift, 300).

Topographic Maps: The Thelon is covered by 1:250,000 scale National Topographical Series maps: 56D (Baker Lk), 66A (Schultz Lk), 66B (Aberdeen Lk), 66C (Beverly Lk), 66D (Tamarvi R), 65M (Clarke R), 75P (Hanbury R) and 751 (Beaverhill Lk). Access lake maps include 75O (Artillery Lk), 75J (Lynx Lk) and 65N (Dubawnt Lk). For scientific research, there are 1:50,000 maps. Maps are available from: Canada Map Office, 615 Booth Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0E9, Tel: (613) 952-7000, (<http://maps.NRCan.gc.ca>).

▲ [Back to top](#)

## Further Information

---

"Ten Year Report for the Thelon River", available from the NT Board member (see "[Contact Us](#)")

**Services, Permits and Regulations :**  
Dept. of Environment,

Brown Building  
 P.O. Box 1340  
 Iqaluit, Nunavut X0A 0H0  
 Phone : (867) 975-5922  
 Fax : (867) 975-5980  
 Web site <http://www.gov.nu.ca/sd.htm>

Tourist Information – Accommodation, Air Charters, Guides and Outfitters: Nunavut Tourism, 1-800-491-7910 ([www.nunavuttourism.com](http://www.nunavuttourism.com)); ; Economic Development and Tourism, Baker Lake, Nunavut, X0C 0A0 Tel: (819) 793-2992; [www.bakerlake.org](http://www.bakerlake.org), [ca.epodunk.com/profiles/nunavut/bakerlake/2000135.html](http://ca.epodunk.com/profiles/nunavut/bakerlake/2000135.html); Economic Development and Tourism, P.O. Bag 002, Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, X0C 0G0, Tel: (819) 645-5067; [www.kivalliq.org/eng/rankin.html](http://www.kivalliq.org/eng/rankin.html), [ca.epodunk.com/profiles/nunavut/rankin-inlet/2001922.html](http://ca.epodunk.com/profiles/nunavut/rankin-inlet/2001922.html) - 20k - Travel Keewatin, Box 328, Rankin Inlet, Nunavut X0C 0G0, Tel: (819) 645-2618; Municipal Council, Baker Lake, Nunavut X0C 0A0. Tel: (819) 793-2874; Travel Manitoba, 155 Carleton Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 3H8, Tel:1-800-665-0040 ([www.travelmanitoba.com/huntfish/aircharters.html](http://www.travelmanitoba.com/huntfish/aircharters.html)) .

Canadian Heritage Rivers System: Member for Nunavut, Canadian Heritage Rivers Board, (see Contact Us) or National Manager, Canadian Heritage Rivers System, c/o Parks Canada, Ottawa, Canada K1A 0M5. Tel. (819) 994-2913, Fax (819) 997-0835. E-mail address: [donald.gibson@pc.gc.ca](mailto:donald.gibson@pc.gc.ca)

▲ [Back to top](#)

### Additional Reading

---

Travel Keewatin and Keewatin Chamber of Commerce. "Canoe the Keewatin Wilderness", Available free

Hanbury, David. "Life and Sport in the Northland of Canada". Edward Arnold Co., London, 1904.

Whalley, George. "The Legend of John Hornby". Macmillan, Toronto, 1962.

Dienger, Carol. "The Timeless Thelon". Up Here. Yellowknife, March/April 1990.

Rosbach, George. "By Canoe Down the Thelon" Beaver. Outfit 297. Autumn, 1966.

Thomson, Sheila. "Down the Thelon". Borealis #34.

Thomson, Sheila. 1990 "Journal of a Barrenlander": W.H.B. Hoare. Box 4435, Station "E". Ottawa K1S 5B4

Pelly, David F , . "Thelon – A River Sanctuary", 1996, Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association.

▲ [Back to top](#)

---

[Back to Thelon River Main Page](#)