

Yukon Territory, June 23-July 5, 2016

Introduction

Al Harris and I had some botany-related fieldwork in the Yukon in late June, so we extended our stay to hike and hopefully see some new mammals. There aren't any community trip reports for the Yukon, so I thought I would provide a brief update to Jon's 2006 report, including comments on logistics.

Participants

Robert Foster, Al Harris, Lana Bresele

Itinerary

Flights were remarkably cheap (\$460 return CDN, Thunder Bay-Whitehorse) so my wife Lana joined us for the latter part of the trip once we were finished work. Car rentals are available at the Whitehorse airport or in town, but availability can be limited during peak periods so booking ahead is advisable.

The Yukon does have as extensive a road network as one might expect, in part because there is very little commercial logging. The Alaskan Highway (Hwy 1) connects to Alaska via Kluane National Park, and the Klondike Highway (Hwy 2) runs north from Whitehorse to Dawson City and beyond. The Dempster Highway runs almost 900 km from its junction with Hwy 2 (Stewart Crossing) to Inuvik NWT. Flat tires are a real risk and gas stations far between on the Dempster, so a full-sized spare and a puncture repair kit are recommended. Confirm that your rental car agency allows vehicles on the Dempster (mainly due to punctures and cracked windshields). The road can apparently get rutted and slippery during wet periods, but 4WD is not essential.

The Yukon Wildlife Viewing Guide (2016, 12th ed.) remains the best source of general information on where to see mammals in the Yukon. A digital version of it and other wildlife brochures are available at

<http://www.env.gov.yk.ca/publications-maps/brochures.php#wildlifeviewing>

Carmacks (June 23-26, July 3)

Carmacks is a small village with a gas station, motel, and restaurant. It does have a nice little campsite wedged in between Hwy 2 and the Yukon River, with hot showers and greasy (but tasty) fries and burgers. We were participating in a bioblitz (a one-day biological inventory) of the Carmacks area and were focussed primarily on plants and insects, so didn't particularly search out mammals. The Mount Nansen Road (to the west) and the Robert Campbell Highway (which heads east to Watson Lake) provide access to riverine, grassland, forest, and alpine habitats with little traffic or development.

Aishihik Lake (June 27-29)

The primary reason for our trip was to conduct a botanical survey at the north end of Aishihik Lake on the traditional territory of the Aishihik Lake First Nation. Written permission is required to access First Nation lands, but most of the 120 km gravel road passes through Crown land and is open to the public. The road can be challenging depending on recent rain and degree of maintenance; mud and ruts may necessitate a 4WD. There are also a couple of somewhat dodgy bridges. See <http://explorenorth.com/wordpress/exploring-aishihik-road-otter-falls-yukon/> blog and links within for more information on this road. There is a primitive campsite at the south end of Aishihik Lake and the area is apparently good for seeing moose, wolves, and other boreal mammals. Apart from escaping the crowds, the main appeal is the potential for seeing wild wood bison.

Klondike Highway (June 23, 29, July 3-4)

Mammals, including ungulates and bears, are frequently observed along Hwy 2 and adjacent campgrounds, pull-offs, and other viewing areas (see YT wildlife viewing guides for details).

Tombstone and the Dempster Highway (June 30-July 3)

Tombstone Territorial Park is a spectacular area with boreal forest, mountains, and open tundra that has good viewing opportunities for mammals. The Dempster Highway cuts through the park and there are a small number of day and overnight hiking trails. You also can hike off-trail in alpine and tundra, where sweeping vistas make it easier to spot wildlife (and navigate). The main Tombstone Mountain Campground (privies and running water, but no showers) is just off the Dempster in a scenic valley, and has a very good visitor centre with a wildlife sightings book.

Tombstone is the best (only?) place to see the Yukon endemic Ogilvie Mountains Collared Lemming (*Dicrostonyx nunatakensis*) (<http://www.env.gov.yk.ca/publications-maps/documents/OgilvieMountainsCollaredLemmingSurvey2013TR-13-01.pdf>). However, they are unlikely to be encountered casually (even in their alpine habitat), and a permit is required to live-trap small mammals in territorial parks.

Dawson City (July 1)

Dawson City is a scenic, historic tourist town of only 1300 inhabitants, a far cry from the 40,000 who flooded in at the peak of the 1898 Klondike gold rush. There are fairly limited mammal-watching opportunities, but it has accommodation, good grub, and is a handy spot to resupply if camping at Tombstone.

Kluane National Park

This area is well-known (and reviewed by Jon) for spectacular scenery and wildlife, but we did not have time to visit it in 2016. Al camped and hiked there in 2014, and saw many of the species we saw on our 2016 trip.

Mammals Observed

A total of 13 species observed live, with a few additional ones by tracks or scat:

Brown Bear (*Ursus horribilis*): Having had past (too-close-for-comfort) encounters with brown bears in NWT and BC, Al and I weren't eager to run into any on the trail but would have liked to have seen one from a safe distance. Unfortunately, the closest we got was fresh scat on the aptly Grizzly Trail in Tombstone.

American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*): Extended view of a cinnamon-coloured individual immediately roadside along the Klondike Highway.

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*): single individuals observed in alpine tundra (near Carmacks), roadside near Aishihik Lake, and along the Dempster Highway (including black phase).

Grey Wolf (*Canis lupus*): tracks observed near km 130 on the Dempster Hwy.

Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*): one ambling across road in Aishihik Lake area.

Beaver (*Castor canadensis*): Observed swimming in the Yukon River at Carmacks

Hoary Marmot (*Marmota caligata*): Lone individuals observed in the alpine zone on a couple of occasions on both the Goldensides and Grizzly trails in Tombstone Territorial Park.

Arctic Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus parryii*): observed commonly along roadsides and grasslands in the Aishihik Lake area, Hwy, along the Dempster Highway, and in tundra in Tombstone Park.

Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*): campground at Carmacks.

Least Chipmunk (*Tamias minimus*): observed on several occasions in the Carmacks area.

Snowshoe Hare (*Lepus americanus*): pellets common in shrubby alpine zone near Mount Nansen west of Carmacks and in the tundra at Tombstone.

Collared Pika (*Ochotona collaris*): one individual observed at close range for 20 minutes on a talus slope on the based of an isolated hill on west side of Dempster near km127. Park staff do routine monitoring of this species at a number of locations in Tombstone (e.g., <http://www.env.gov.yk.ca/publications-maps/documents/PikaSurveyReport2013.pdf>), so check at the Visitor Centre for recent sightings if you are targeting this species.

Moose (*Alces alces*): a cow and bull observed in shrub tundra near the campground in Tombstone Park; tracks and pellets along Dempster Highway, Carmacks, and Aishihik Lake area

Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*): one seen from the highway about 25 km north of Whitehorse; pellets and tracks at Tantalus Butte near Carmacks

Thin-horned / Dall Sheep (*Ovis dallii*): three individuals, including female and lamb, observed on scree on near the Engineer Creek sheep lick (~km180) on the Dempster Highway.

Barren-ground Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus*): tracks, pellets, bones, and antlers observed at several locations (e.g., Windy Pass) between km90 and km120 on the Dempster Highway. In some years, the migratory Porcupine herd overwinters in the Blackstone Uplands portion of Tombstone Territorial Park. They calve approximately 400 km further north along the coast of the Beaufort Sea.

Woodland Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*): Pellets observed Grizzly Lake on the Grizzly Trail at Tombstone, and other backpackers saw several individuals near Talus Lake, a bit

further beyond. The Hart River Herd is resident in the Tombstone Mountains; they are considered the mountain ecotype of the Woodland Caribou subspecies (caribou taxonomy could probably use some revision). Hart River caribou, grizzlies, and other wildlife can sometimes be seen in the alpine zone west of the communications tower and Surfbird Ridge near km98.

Wood Bison (*Bison bison athabascae*): This free-ranging herd of approximately 1200 individuals was established in the Aishihik area by transplanting 170 bison in the late 1980s from the Northwest Territories to the Nisling River area near Aishihik Lake (http://www.env.gov.yk.ca/publications-maps/documents/bison_management_plan.pdf). The bison can sometimes be observed near the road in the Aishihik Lake area in the summer and fall; they are sometimes hunted by the local First Nation and more wary in the fall.

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Wood Bison (R. Foster)



Wood Bison habitat along Albert Creek on Aishihik First Nation traditional territory



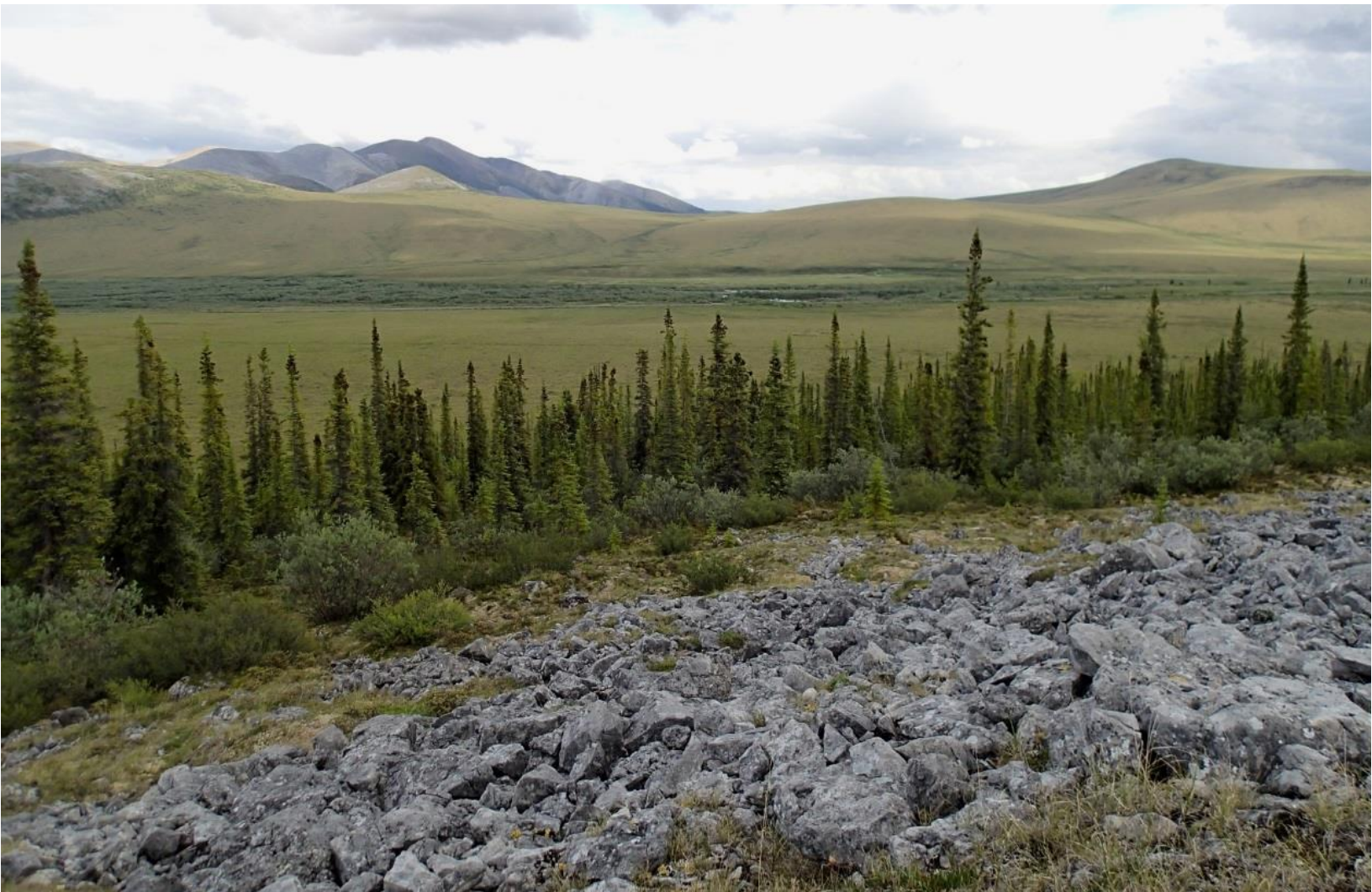
Arctic Ground Squirrel (R. Foster)



Hoary Marmot (R. Foster)



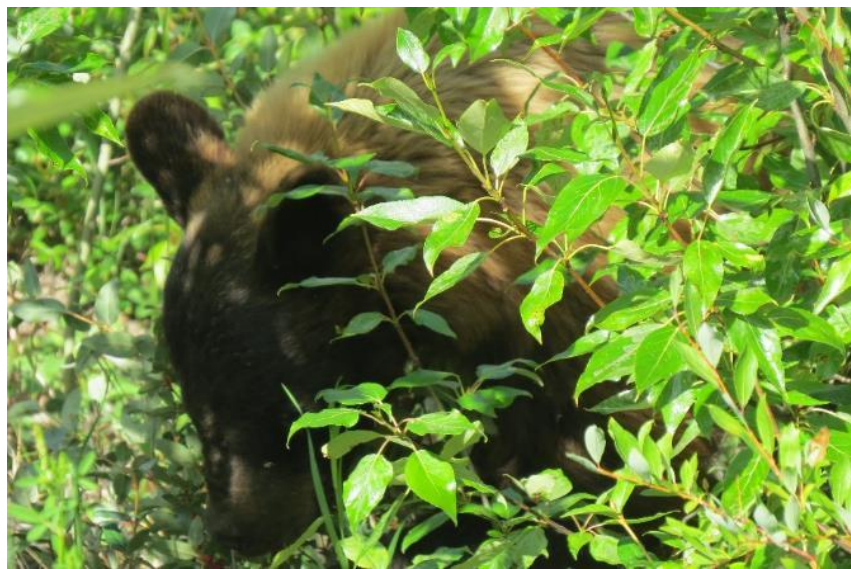
Collared Pika (R Foster)



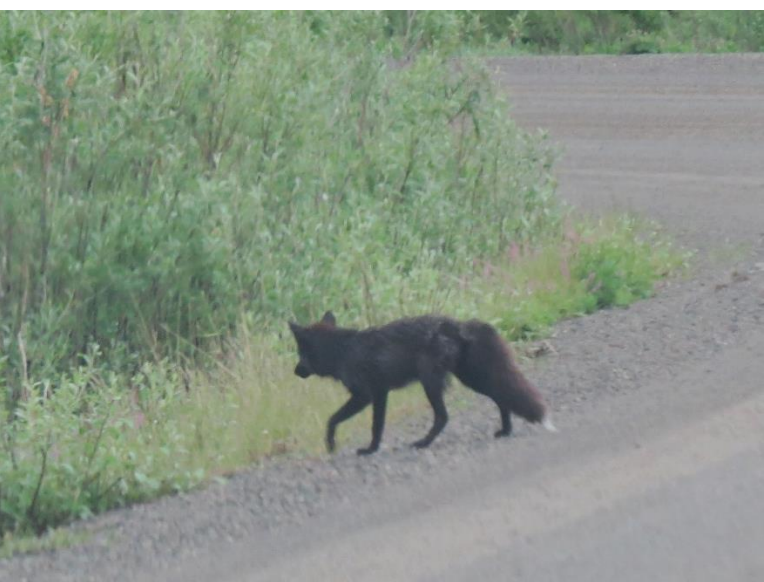
Pika habitat in the Blackstone Uplands (R. Foster)



Dall Sheep (R. Foster)



Black Bear (R. Foster)



Red Fox (R. Foster)



Canada Lynx (R. Foster)