

YUKON STEREOTYPES

FACT OR FICTION?

Finding the truth in what
Outsiders believe about northern life

Story by Jesse Winter | Illustrations by Cass Collins



I woke up to the wet nose of an overeager husky in my ear. Unimpressed, I scratched the dog's ears and stiffly rolled over in my sleeping bag to see my friend Luke grinning smugly behind his iPhone.

Click. "I'm gonna send this to you in December, when you're drowning in exams in Ottawa," he said with a smirk as he took a photo.

It was the end of July, and we were at a friend's lakefront cabin an hour from Whitehorse. Behind me, mountains reared above the still water. I shuffled inside my cocoon. My shoulders ached. My sore hands were calloused and split, with stubborn dirt under my fingernails.

We'd spent the previous day with a dozen friends helping fell, chop, and stack enough firewood to see the cabin through the coming winter. The air was filled with the snarl of chainsaws and the ring of axes. Dogs were everywhere. Pretty much everyone, it seemed, was wearing plaid. After the work was finished, we retired around a campfire and sang until morning.

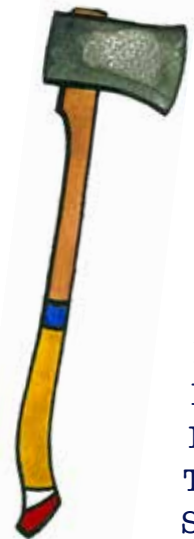
"This has been the most Yukon 24 hours of my life," I said to Luke through bleary eyes.

"Yup. And now you'll never convince anyone you aren't a total hipster," he replied, snapping another photo.

By now, you've probably heard about the latest fashion trend in New York and Toronto. (Actually, since you're likely either in the Yukon or pining for it from afar, maybe you haven't.) It's called "lumbersexual." It is, as the denizens of Twitterdom assure me, a recent replacement for the now outdated "metrosexual" of the early 2000s. Skintight-jean-wearing, hair-gel-using, pointy-shoed-strutting men have been supplanted in the salons of Greenwich Village and the bars of Queen Street West by plaid-jacket-wearing, shaggy-beard-having, faux-battered-workboot-tromping hipsters.

They appear, by all accounts, to be pretending they're from the Yukon Territory, and this baffles me. Why would someone fake being from a place that, according to *UrbanDictionary.com*, is "any place that is boring as hell"?

What does anyone from Outside even know about the Yukon? National news outlets have been known to refer to Whitehorse, N.W.T., or Yellowknife, Yukon. To be honest, before I moved to the North I could easily have made the same mistake.



A 2009 DEFINITION OF THE YUKON TERRITORY ACCORDING TO *URBANDICTIONARY.COM*:

"THE YUKON TERRITORY, BELIEVED TO EXIST BY MANY, MAY ACTUALLY BE NAUGHT BUT A FANTASY OF THE CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY."

"Snow," says my friend Shannon, emphatically. "When I think of the Yukon I just think of lots and lots of snow. Is it true that it never gets dark?"

Shannon grew up in Ontario and is one of my classmates in grad school. I asked her to play a word-association game about the Yukon, and she humoured me. She actually did me one better and polled her family as well. All the usual stereotypes came up: Yukoners live in igloos and take dog teams to work. It's either perpetually dark or the sun never sets. All men have beards, mine for gold, drink too much, and go home at the end of the night with a hairy-legged cancan dancer.

"Your mosquitos must be the size of swallows. That's a common one," says Yukon MP Ryan Leef. I cajoled him into talking about the territory, as well. Since I left Whitehorse in August it's become my favourite topic.

"Actually, the joke on Parliament Hill is that—because of Senator Dan Lang and I—everyone from the Yukon must be short and bald because there's no sunlight," he says, laughing.

Leef spends a lot of time talking to school groups when he's not busy in the House of Commons, and though he politely declined to say whether Parliamentarians or school children have the silliest questions, he did offer some doozies.

"Someone once asked me whether Robert Service actually cremated Sam McGee. They actually wanted to know where along the marge of Lake Laberge the *Alice May* was."

This past October, even long-time CBS correspondent Bob Simon got in on the mythmaking. "The Yukon: a place that's changed very little since the first gold rush over 100 years ago," he cooed, ironically invoking images of the Klondike to open a story about a tech-savvy prospector using drones to hunt for gold.

The 14-minute piece on *60 Minutes* hit on almost every single stereotype in the book. It all fits perfectly into the myths of the Yukon, but that isn't terribly surprising to Leef. "People want to believe in the fiction, and I think so do we, to a certain extent. I mean, our motto is 'Larger than Life,' after all," he said.

Maybe that's true. Yukoners love to guffaw over a pint about how silly the Outsiders are for believing these clichés and yet don't do much to dispel them.

I ran this idea past another friend of mine. Like Leef, Steve is a born-and-raised Yukoner. Having grown up watching people visit for a weekend, move into a cabin, and never leave, he said a big part of keeping the mythology alive is the Outsiders who become Sourdoughs.

"A friend of mine came up to visit and brought a bag of B.C. cherries because they thought that would be the greatest gift ever, you know, because we don't have any fresh fruit."



"There's a real misconception about the weather. They've heard all the stories about it being super dark all the time and it's freezing cold. Anytime I complain about the weather here [Ottawa], someone says, 'Are you kidding me? You're from the Yukon!'"



"What are the plugs hanging out the front of your car for? Does everyone drive electric vehicles?"



"I've lived here my whole life, and I've never had to chop wood for heat. I've never been hunting except by accident one time on an outdoor-education trip," he said. "Other people come here and build a particular lifestyle that they want, and I think that's awesome."

In the Yukon, you can live out your Jack London fantasy without having to give up your pumpkin-spice latte. But does that really mean we adopted Yukoners are faking it too? Are we any different than the slouchy-toque-wearing lumbersexuals of Brooklyn?

My buddy Gavin definitely thinks so. He moved to the Yukon, in 2007, from Saskatchewan. When he's not at law school in Ottawa, he lives in a cabin, goes in an outhouse, and owns an awful lot of flannel. He'd be the perfect lumbersexual if he weren't doing it all with complete sincerity.

"I used to come home and I'd be the outlier, but now the stuff I have kicking around my cabin is suddenly in vogue, except that I'm not doing it ironically. I do have three chainsaws, and I canoe to work every day in the summer. But my red-and-black-plaid jacket that everyone suddenly wants smells like engine exhaust," he said.

It was his cabin that we surrounded back in July with axes and saws. The difference between the Yukon and Ontario, he says, is that when people down south have a "lumberjack party" folks show up with plastic toy axes, cans of cheap pilsner, and an arsenal of ironic jokes about moose. In the Yukon, they bring Fiskars or Husqvarnas, a flat of Yukon Gold, and actually spend the day chopping down trees.

"I'm worried about what happens when this trend is over, 'cause I'm not going to change," Gavin said. "Walk into the Gold Rush [a Whitehorse bar] on any given night. The people there would all look just as at home in a bar in Portland or Seattle, but I guarantee you no one in bunny boots is doing it ironically." **Y**

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