

HANDS-ON HUNTING IN -40°C

Harvesting a bison was the goal of a school hunting trip, but the experience went beyond that

Story by Rhiannon Russell
Photos by Peter Mather

The students had been on the land for three days when they found bison tracks in the snow. They knew they were getting close. The group, which included elementary- and high-school students, teachers, parents, and an Elder, pushed on, travelling further by snowmobile on the frozen Nordenskiöld River in hopes of finding the animals.

The next day, tracking continued. Ten sleds moved in a line along the trail until the group's two designated shooters—a parent and the executive director of the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board—went ahead to scout an area up a cut bank. The others waited in anticipation.

“All I just see is people jumping up and down and super excited,” says Kaidence Reynolds-Fraser, a Grade 8 student at the time of the hunt, in March 2020. “And at that point, we knew that we had been successful.”

The shooters harvested two bison. At the kill site, about half a kilometre ahead, the group participated in a respect ceremony, putting their hands on the bison, giving thanks, and honouring them with a moment of silence.

As the sky darkened, the adults began cutting up the animals and showing the youth how to do it. “Field harvesting a bison for sure was new to me,” says Alex Kiriak, who was also in Grade 8 at the time. “I got to pull out the guts—a lot heavier than you would expect.” The process took hours, and, once night fell, the temperature dropped to -40°C . By the end, everyone had blood on their hands. The group made it back to camp around midnight, happy and exhausted.

“After this high of trying so hard all week and putting so much work in, a bunch of us collapsed on the floor of the main lodge and laughed for a solid 15 minutes—like we were crying,” says teacher Alexandra Morrison. “I don't know what was so funny.” She says it was a beautiful moment, the culmination of all the effort they put in together with their feelings of elation and gratitude.

Morrison is one of three teachers at Porter Creek Secondary School, in Whitehorse, who organize the annual hunt. Five years ago, a teacher at Elijah Smith Elementary School approached Morrison with the idea of a mentorship program for students from both schools. A hunt had been running for years at Elijah Smith; how did she feel about having high-school students join and help the younger kids, while learning new wilderness and leadership skills? A hunter herself, Morrison was game. They did that for two years, then, more recently, the hunt has been organized by Porter Creek teachers—Morrison, along with Terry Milne and Brad Gustafson—with elementary students joining in.

Alexandra Morrison, a teacher at Porter Creek Secondary School, was the lead organizer of the student bison hunt.

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CITY OF FOXES

Urban but wild—foxes in Whitehorse

Photos and foreword by Peter Mather



The red fox is well suited to thrive in the rapidly expanding urban-wild interfaces around our planet. Celebrated for their cunning intelligence, foxes have adapted to the human world with astonishing success. A 2020 article in the Royal Society's research journal *Proceedings B* found that urban foxes were developing small skulls and stubbier snouts, indicating that the move from forests to cities could be setting them on a path to domestication. (These changes are believed to result from changing cognitive demands and a different diet.)

Red foxes can be found nearly everywhere in the northern hemisphere, inhabiting northern Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and beyond. You might bump into one in London, England, where the London Wildlife Trust estimates 10,000 of these canids live. By contrast, you might also see a red fox chasing an Arctic fox on the outskirts of Tuktoyaktuk, N.W.T., or watch a red fox while enjoying a bowl of ramen noodles on the island of Hokkaido, in Japan. But perhaps no place is as well-matched to red foxes than Whitehorse, the "Wilderness City," where the fox has found the ideal community surrounded by green space.

Whitehorse and its human residents are learning to live with their wild neighbours, with foxes denning in every neighbourhood. Last summer, I discovered 20 fox dens in the city, but only recently has my hometown become a fox haven. When I was growing up, red foxes were not a common sight. Roaming the streets of Whitehorse in my teens in the '90s, coyotes owned the streets at night. It seems at the same time the coyote disappeared, red foxes took their place.

But coyotes have also begun returning to downtown Whitehorse. It's not uncommon for downtown residents to see a pair of foxes barking in irritation at an invading coyote. In the summer of 2020, at least three of the dens I was monitoring were invaded by coyotes looking for an easy meal.

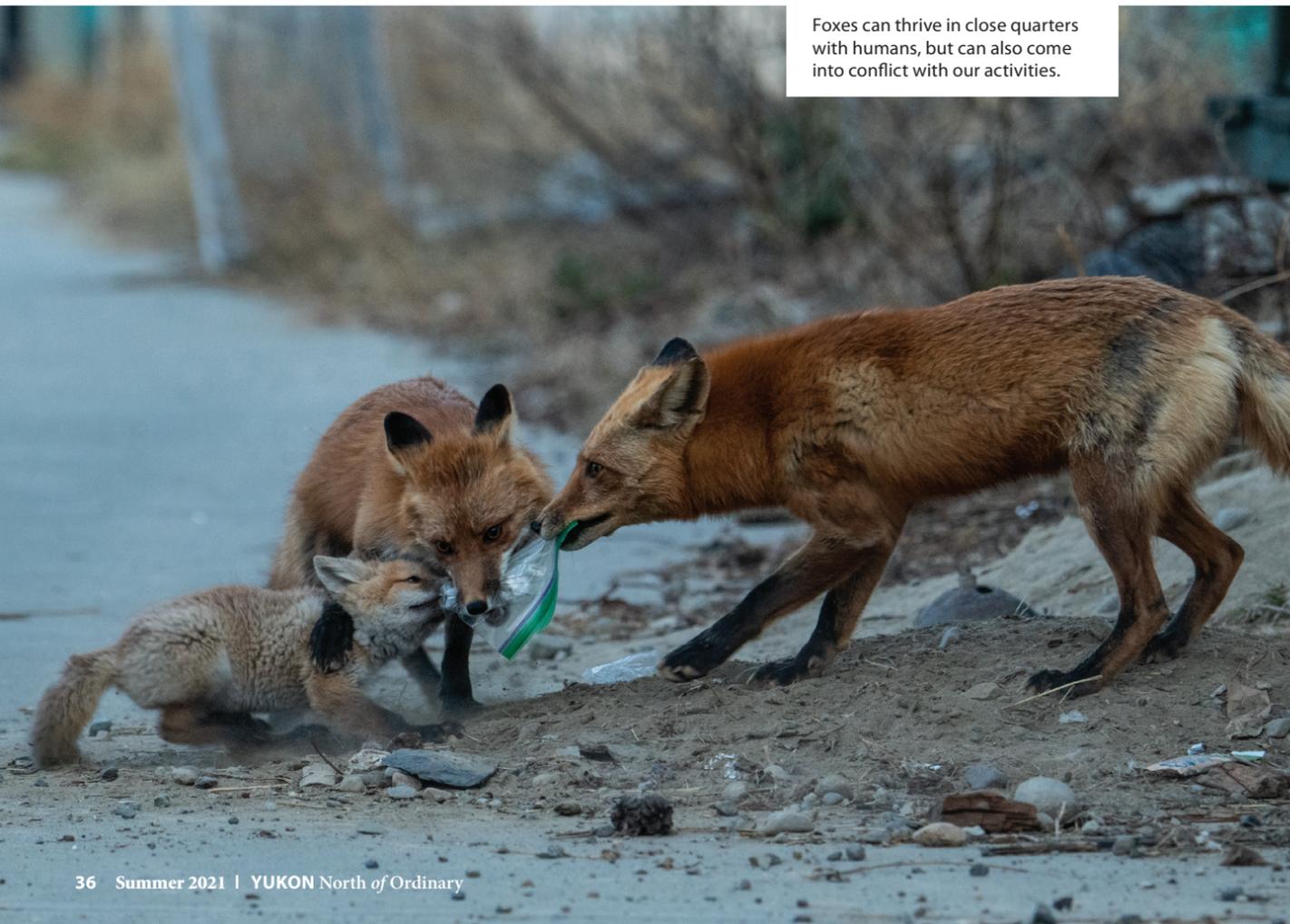
It will be interesting to see what the future brings for foxes and coyotes in Whitehorse. Will the coyotes retake the town or does the red fox have a permanent foothold?

Solitary and territorial, foxes live in boreal forests throughout the territory and near urban areas. Vixen (female foxes) may give birth to up to 10 kits between March and May.

Please
DO NOT
Feed the
foxes



The diet of foxes includes mice, voles, squirrels, and grouse, but foxes are opportunistic and will sometimes kill and eat small pets, like cats.



Foxes can thrive in close quarters with humans, but can also come into conflict with our activities.



Baseball, anyone? Foxes have been known to "procure" items like shoes, gloves, and other clothing. Sometimes these get stockpiled near their dens.



A TRIP THROUGH TIME

Photo: Peter Mather



Photo: Bruce Bennett

Exploring an ancient landscape on the Blackstone River

By Karen McColl

On a paddling trip, there's a lot to feast the eyes on: the river for obstacles, the mountains for scenery, the forest for wildlife. But only when we look more closely at the landscape does it reveal important clues to the area's history.

During a week-long pack-rafting trip on the Blackstone River, in northern Yukon, last summer, my friend Shannon Stotyn, a biologist, got me excited about something right at my feet: plants. It was fun spotting pretty and new-to-me flora around our campsites and on hikes, but the significance of these leafy wonders was lost on me until we returned home.

"Plants can tell us stories from long ago," explains Bruce Bennett. He coordinates the Yukon's Conservation Data Centre and is known for his encyclopedic knowledge of plants and personal herbarium with more than 3,000 species—one of the largest personal collections in Canada.

If, as Bennett suggests, we take a closer look at plants in the Blackstone area, we learn about an ancient landscape where woolly mammoths and giant bears once roamed. He says a botanist many decades ago played a role in unlocking part of its mystery.

The Blackstone River, in the Ogilvie Mountains north of Dawson City, travels through the eastern fringe of Beringia. During the last ice age, roughly 18,000 to 28,000 years ago, when most of Canada and the northern U.S. were covered by ice

sheets thousands of metres thick in places, an area between the Yukon and Siberia remained relatively ice free. Swedish botanist Eric Hultén coined this area Beringia in the 1930s, as he sought to explain how the same plants were found on both sides of the Bering Strait even though they didn't have the ability to send their seeds that far. He concluded there must have been a land bridge between Asia and North America during the last ice age that facilitated the migration of people, animals, and plants. The Bering land bridge—the floor of the Bering Sea—was exposed because much of the world's water was in a frozen state, resulting in lower sea levels than today.

ICE-AGE PLANTS

A major appeal of paddling the Blackstone is the access to spectacular hiking, which my group took advantage of as much as time and weather permitted. Often, a short trudge through black spruce, over ankle-twisting hummocks and tussocks, led to ridges that quickly rose above the treeline. On these walks, Stotyn would frequently stop with an exclamation of delight and pull out her phone. Sometimes I would crouch beside her in the foliage, peering at the latest specimen catching her eye. On Hart Ridge, a long spine connecting the Blackstone and Hart river valleys, she saw Yukon bellflower, Alaska phlox, and one-flowered anemone. On another hike, she found hardy slipper orchids, Arctic bladderpod, and American throwax (identifications later confirmed with iNaturalist, an app where experts like Bennett weigh in.)

Bennett says about 250 Yukon vascular plants (those with stems, leaves, and roots) are considered Beringian, meaning they were likely present during the last ice age. Some of these species dispersed widely.

"Some species have no problem travelling around the world," Bennett says, while others evolved in geographic "islands" and couldn't move out of a specific area.

That's why the Ogilvie Mountains, a specialized habitat that includes the jagged peaks of Tombstone Territorial Park as well as those we paddled through on our trip, are home to plants found exclusively in the Yukon. Those include the aptly named Ogilvie Mountains spring beauty and Ogilvie Range locoweed. Other Beringian species, like Porsild's poa, also have limited ranges in Alaska and the N.W.T. Bennett says this grass, common in the Ogilvies, is unusual for having male and female parts on separate plants (instead of both on the same plant), which limits its ability to propagate.

ICE DAM

To reach the starting point for our trip, we drove north for a couple of hours on the Dempster Highway. The northern edge of the Cordilleran ice sheet, which covered most of western Canada during the last glacial maximum (while the Laurentide ice sheet covered most of the rest of the country), was south of the Dempster, near the Stewart River, says Jeff Bond, head of surficial geology with the Yukon Geological Survey. Bond compiled the most comprehensive map of Beringia available, published in 2019, showing glacial limits and water courses 18,000 years ago. One reason Beringia was spared from the reach of the massive ice sheets was because of its relative aridity. Large coastal mountains, like those in the St. Elias Range, blocked precipitation coming from the Pacific Ocean jet stream, creating a rain-shadow effect.

"You very much were in an unglaciated environment," Bond says about the Blackstone, "and that's of course very unique in Canada."

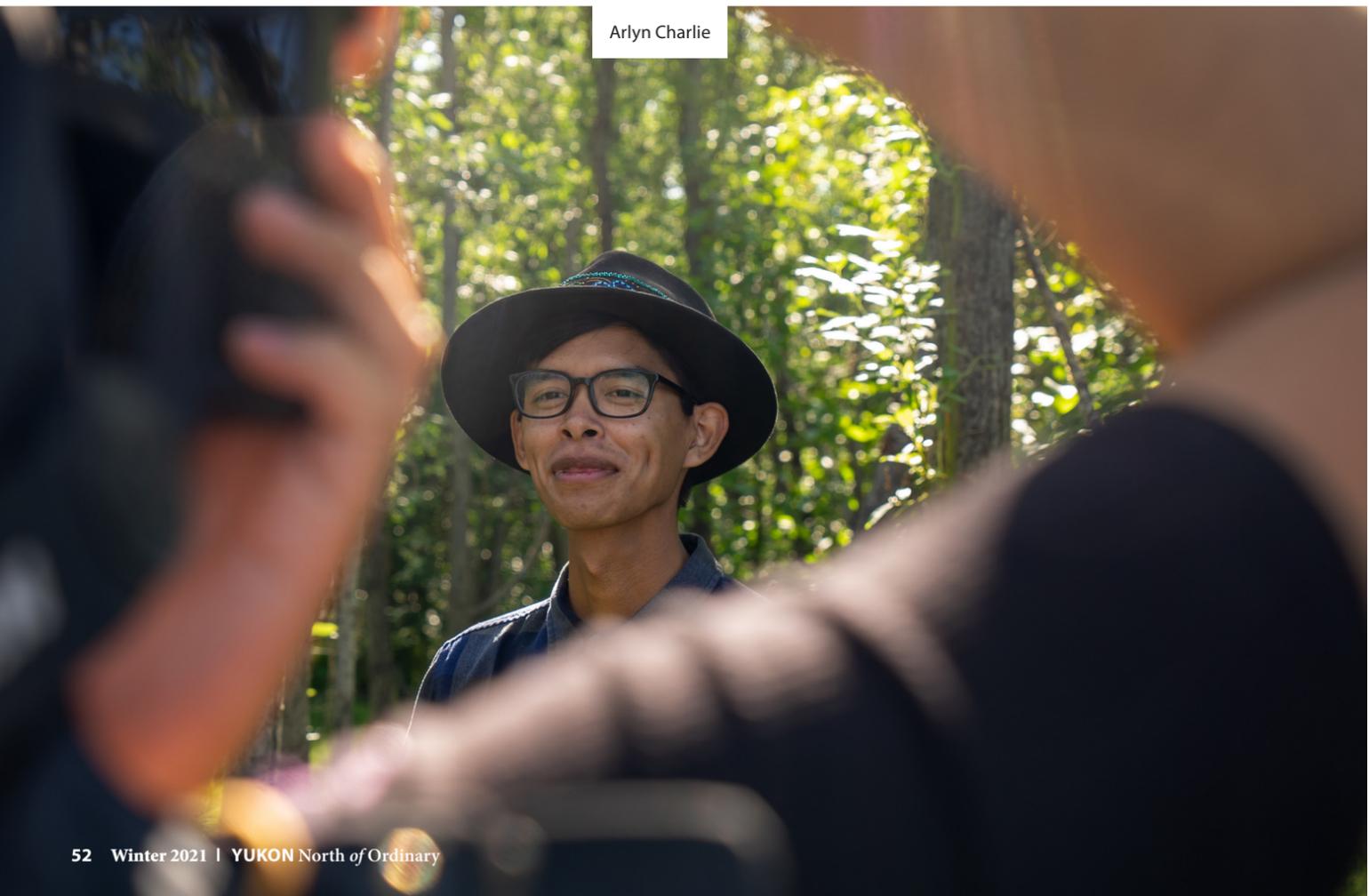
"PLANTS CAN TELL US
STORIES FROM LONG AGO."



Robby Dick



Stephen Joe



Arlyn Charlie

THROUGH THEIR EYES

Meet three photographers documenting life in their communities

By Peter Mather

There is immense interest in the stories of Indigenous communities across the world and an increasing desire to see these stories told by the people from those communities. I've been lucky to be photographing in the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Alaska for 25 years and am excited to see the recent explosion of talented First Nations photographers sharing visual stories through social media and beyond.

Photography has changed in the last two decades. The advent of digital cameras, phone photography, and Instagram have transformed the art and business of photography with both negative and positive effects. On the downside, it's hard to appreciate a layered image with many small details when viewed on your phone. On the upside, you no longer have to live in New York City to be discovered as an artist. Instagram has become the great equalizer. If you have talent, can tell a story, and work hard, it is now possible to get published and make

a career of photography while living and shooting in a northern village of a few hundred people.

I wouldn't be surprised if the world starts taking more notice of Indigenous photographers in the Yukon. Take, for example, Arlyn Charlie, Stephen Joe, and Robby Dick. I've bumped into each of them in the field, and we have formed a bond based on our love of photography and being on the land. We stay in touch, follow each on social media, share advice, and occasionally get the opportunity to photograph together.

We also share the instinctive bond of storytelling and all strive to tell an interesting story with each image we take because one of the best things about photography is the stories people see within each photo.

Arlyn, Stephen, and Robby are telling important stories about their culture and communities from their own perspectives. It's a privilege to introduce you to their work.