

MANAGEMENT

THE N.W.T. WOLF KILL - GHOST OF THE PAST?

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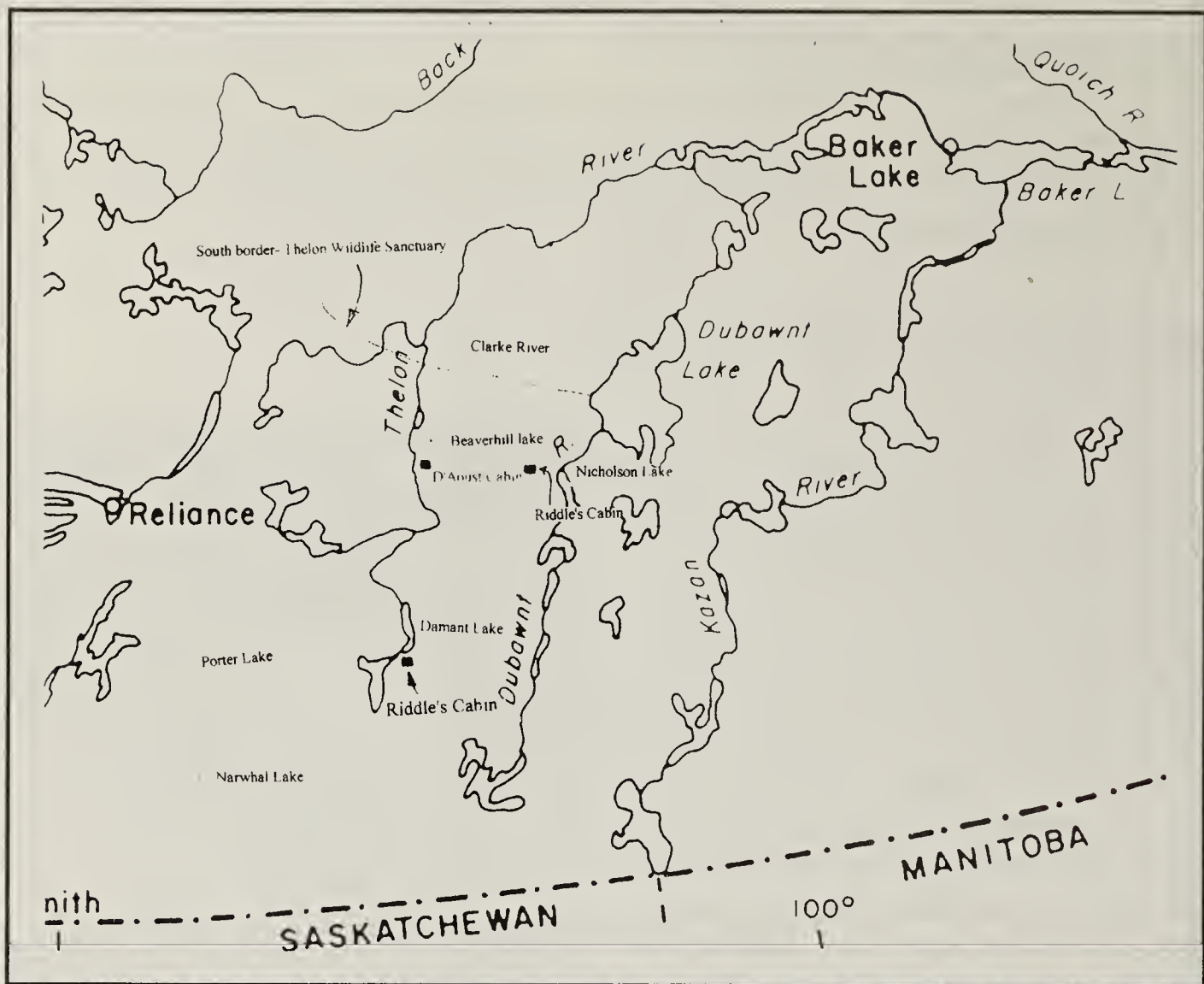
Wolf killing is disturbing to many people. So recent kills by Saskatchewan hunter's on snowmobiles, brought back memories of an earlier wolf hunter I knew. On 25 May 1977, Cyrus Fred Riddle died in the Uranium City hospital at the age of 81 years. It is unlikely that more than a handful of people even remember Fred. Yet, Fred's death was significant in several respects, not the least of which was the fact that his passing marked the end of the era of the government-paid barren ground predator hunter. Also, Fred, nearing the end of that career in the late 1960's, operated from his main cabin near the tree line in the Damant-Rennie Lake area, about 200 km north of the Saskatchewan-NWT border. Today, that same area is in the news again, again as the scene of extensive wolf hunting, only this time by means of snowmobiles and not, as in the old days by using strychnine poison.

Fred was born in Montana on 13 September 1895. From 1917-1919 he served in Europe during World War 1 as a member of a U.S. railroad artillery regiment. Fred's brothers David Richard (born in 1892) and Emmett Calvin (born in 1896) also enlisted in 1917 but both of them died in battle. In 1920 Fred came north to Edmonton where he hunted moose. He saw the shipments of Arctic fox coming out of the north and decided to become a trapper. Aside from occasional trips to visit his aged mother in Montana (Vessa Riddle died in 1962), Fred remained in the north ever since.



Poisoned arctic fox (note blue fox), RCMP compound, Stony Rapids, SK. SK game officer Chick Terry (left), with Fred Riddle.

Fred Riddle began his trapping on Boyd, Barlow and Carey Lakes along the upper Dubawnt River, north of Stony Rapids, Saskatchewan. Later he operated out of his cabin half way between Nicholson and Mosquito Lakes, well north of the so-called treeline (although the size of his cabin logs said otherwise!). He usually trapped alone, 90 km from the nearest human beings (Gus D'Aoust, another of the predator control officers, and Delphine Lockhart, working out of their Beaverhill Lake



cabin west of Mosquito Lake and 450 km NNE of Stony Rapids). Fred covered hundreds of kilometres of trapline as far north as the southern border of the Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary, 70 km away. Several of his lines extended east-west, at right angles to the migration corridor of the Beverly Lake caribou herd. In addition to the migratory caribou, wolves and Arctic fox travelled along, as part of this mobile community. Fred also trapped wolverine, marten and otter. He exterminated the only red squirrel ever reported from that northern area after the squirrel had invaded his cabin and made a nest in one of his rolled up fishnets, chewing great holes in the process!

A major problem no doubt was the short daylight in December and January. I've often wondered how Fred could cover his traplines adequately during the dark and bitterly cold days of mid winter,

all of this without adequate maps. Although he had a few line shacks, he often camped out in his tent, undoubtedly in the small spruce clumps only he knew the location of.

In the early 1950's Fred and several other barren ground trappers were offered contracts by the Federal Government to kill wolves by means of strychnine poison. The original monthly stipend was \$450 and the predator hunter was paid one-way air transportation for himself and sled dogs to his main camp. In addition, the hunter was allowed to keep all pelts of poisoned wolves.

In contrast to many northern trappers, Fred looked after his pelts well, meticulously cleaning and combing the well-stretched pelts. His furs, sold at auction in Edmonton, always fetched top prices. Many trappers were envious of



***Fred Riddle, Nicholson Lake, NWT, holding poisoned wolverine.
Second wolverine skin nailed on cabin wall.***

the predator control officers' contracts and perhaps justifiably so. Wolves were not the only species attracted to the poisoned bison or caribou baits and, by accident or more likely by design, Riddle found that shallowly-buried strychnine cubes in the bait would readily kill Arctic foxes as well. Fred told me once that he had stopped setting leg-hold traps for fox altogether as he was taking the foxes on the baits, a much more convenient way of killing! Foxes, of course, were easy to skin and much preferred to wolves for ease of fleshing, drying, storage and transport. One day in spring 1958 when Fred returned to Stony Rapids with part of his catch, he received permission from the local RCMP to dry his fox pelts in the compound. With great audacity he hoisted his 50-60 poisoned white foxes (and a few blue foxes) up on the flagpole for all the people to see!

Many people thought of the barren ground predator control officers (as they were then called) as ruthless killers. In addition to the thousands of wolves killed on the baits, the non-target "by-

catch" consisted of foxes, wolverines, ravens, gulls, eagles, a few grizzlies, the odd Gray Jay and even the first European Starling ever recorded in the NWT fell victim to the baits. Some control officers accidentally poisoned a few of their own dogs and I know of a native trapper whose dogs were poisoned after feeding at a bait station from which the warning sign had blown away.

The best known of the predator control officers were Fred Riddle, George Magrum (his main cabin was just west of Aylmer Lake), Matt Murphy (first at Muskox Lake, later near Aylmer Lake where he lived in a sod cabin) and Gus D'Aoust (Beaverhill Lake), Wilfred McNeill (Fort Smith) and Red Noyes (Upper Taltson River), but Fred Riddle was the "greatest" of them all. For much of the time that I knew him, he was a government worker, being employed (as I was) by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS). He worked hard and diligently, usually under extremely difficult conditions, at the job he knew best - killing wolves. He was hired to do that

job and he did it well, and for that he cannot be criticized. Also, my migration study of tundra wolves by means of ear-tagging would not have born fruit without the cooperation of Fred Riddle and George Magrum who took ear-tagged wolves on their poison baits and advised me of details. Hopefully though, there will never be another predator control officer like Fred Riddle.

Did the killing of thousands of wolves result in increasing caribou numbers? To my knowledge it has never been shown that there was a relationship. Caribou numbers increased after the 1960's and so did wolf numbers.

From 1961-1965 Riddle killed just over 200 wolves annually from his base camp near Nicholson Lake. He then moved his main operation to the Damant-Rennie Lake area and in winter 1965-1966 he killed 398 wolves, followed by 274 wolves the next winter. His CWS contract allowing him to use strychnine was terminated in 1968 but with Adeline Chaffee of Stony Rapids he continued to trap out of his Damant Lake cabin until shortly before his death.

We now seem to have come full circle. Caribou and wolf numbers in the NWT, at least until recently, are at satisfactory levels and killing of wolves on a large scale is again in vogue. Though strychnine is not being used this time around, the method of killing wolves (chasing them to exhaustion by snowmobiles, running them over and finishing them off by gunfire) to most people is just as obscene as poisoning them. It is illegal in most of Canada.

The Rennie-Damant-Wholdaia Lake area in most years contains parts of the Beverly Lake caribou herd, with their attendant migratory wolves, many of which were raised in dens along the Thelon River, as my 1960-1968 studies

of ear-tagged wolf pups have shown. Recent studies by the NWT government show that elements of the Bathurst herd (normally wintering in the areas north of Yellowknife) have moved southeast of Great Slave Lake. The possibility that this unusual movement is due to greatly increased industrial development disturbances in the area southwest of Bathurst Inlet (Lupin and BHP Mine exploration along with increased road construction, air and road traffic) remains a concern. It is likely that this herd's attendant wolves have moved with the caribou and, in part account for the alleged high concentration of wolves north of the Saskatchewan-NWT border. Concentrations of wolves in this area are not unusual. In March 1968 I recorded a high density of one wolf per 6.9 sq. mi. on a portion of the Beverly Lake caribou herd's winter range, a wolf density that could only occur at times of maximum compression of the prey population.

The number of animals killed as of early March 1998 has been reported as 460 wolves (the "tip of the iceberg" as one NWT biologist told me recently) but this is only the total reported by hunters operating from northern Saskatchewan. NWT resident hunters may have increased this number significantly, particularly since the caribou will remain on their winter range for much of the month of March and their attendant wolves will remain vulnerable to hunters on snowmobiles.

Will there be long lasting effects of this year's wolf hunt? I do not believe so, but if this type of hunt is carried out unregulated year after year, wolf numbers will plummet. No one knows how many wolves there are and what level of "harvesting" they can tolerate. The decline of wolf numbers will be reflected in fewer wolves being seen and photographed, among the most



Damant Lake. From right: Fred Riddle (holding wolf skulls), pilot John Langdon, Elsie Kuyt, daughter Pamela. Poisoned wolf carcasses at right.

treasured of wildlife observations made by tourists travelling down the Thelon River in summer. Alex Hall, tourist guide and expert on Thelon River wildlife saw 57 wolves along the river in 1992 but only 10 wolves in 1997. Further declines can be expected if large-scale wolf killing continues. If the Bathurst caribou herd wolves now wintering southeast of Great Slave Lake will be persecuted to the same extent as the Beverly Lake caribou wolves are, tourists at the Bathurst Inlet Lodge and associated naturalists' camps in that area will experience similar losses of wildlife experiences.

From experience I know that not all caribou shot by hunters are used by them. Wolves will find caribou before hunters can return to collect them in those instances where weather or fully loaded toboggans prevent hunters from returning to retrieve their kills. Modern hunters, using snowmobiles, could take advantage of this by simply leaving a few dead caribou on the middle of large lakes as bait to attract wolves.

One also wonders how much benefit the hunter's families derive from this non-traditional hunt and how much of the profits go towards fuel, oil and spare parts for the labouring snowmobiles.

I remember my few hours with Stony Rapids caribou hunters, sharing with them the results of their hunts. But that was 40 years ago, a different time, before the era of snowmobiles. Now I am saddened by the spectre of convoys of these machines flushing out wolves and running them to exhaustion and death. It is probably unreasonable to expect that this cruel "hunt" can be stopped, as it ideally should be. It is hoped that the hunters, governments and other stakeholders involved can mutually agree to curtail the hunt and ensure the continued presence of these fine animals for others to enjoy.