

YRQ2018 Boat 41 'Sheep Stations'



The Yukon River Quest is currently the longest annual paddling race in the world, down the Yukon River in western Canada, from Whitehorse in the south, almost directly due north to Dawson some 715km away. The Yukon is a big river, roughly the size of the lower Murray at Whitehorse, but growing to some 2km wide in places toward Dawson. It flows anywhere from

3km/hr to 12km/hr seemingly at random, and regularly braids into many channels.

The race is non-stop save for two compulsory breaks, one of 7hrs at Carmacks (300km point, and accessible by support crew), and 3hrs at Coffee Creek (520km point, and inaccessible by support crews). The race is open to all paddlecraft including 6 and 8-person Voyageur canoes (deceptively fast and consistent), C4's, C2's, C1's K2's and K1's, SUP's, and this year even a double SUP.



This voyageur 'Ts'alvit' is halfway through a 'huck', with the centre two paddlers about to change sides on their special sliding seats, which are connected by ropes so they move together. The sternman is 74 years old, done the YRQ 14 times, and was the best navigator I have seen. I was at least 1km/hr faster on the flat, but they still beat me home.

Craft must satisfy a minimum length to width ratio of around 10:1, so an Epic 18x doesn't pass, but an 18x 'sport' does. I chose to paddle the 18x sport because I could fit in it, and rented one from a local supplier (which is another story in itself). The boat was very light even if relatively old, and didn't break so I'm not complaining. Mandatory equipment required includes tent, sleeping bag, dry clothes, stove, fuel, an oddly specified first aid kit, Canadian or ISO approved lifejacket, spare paddle, throw lines and spray skirt, food and water etc. You must be able to sit out a storm on the river bank unsupported for 24 hrs till rescue arrives if you need to.

Information on teams entered can be found on the YRQ website, but suffice to say many countries were represented, including Estonia with 3x craft. This year was the 20th anniversary of the running of the race, which is superbly organised and supported by a large number of local businesses and volunteers. I was sponsored by Acrite Northern Ltd, with thanks!

There were several Aussies and ex-pats paddling, including Peter Fitzgerald, with brother John.



Waypoints mentioned below can be found here: [YRQ Waypoints as displayed on the Race Tracker](#)

The race



I blasted across Lake Laberge feeling great, swapping washride leads with the winning double canoe (above) but bidding them farewell at the start of the river proper at Lower Laberge. I had to stop for toilet breaks, while they could go 'on the go". I'd practiced the process on Lane Cove River, (in the cover of darkness) and was pretty comfortable with it. Just prior though, I filled my recently consumed second water bladder with river water, and popped in the silver nitrate tabs needed half an hour before use, and had a feed of boiled potato. Adding some Torq electrolyte for taste, I swapped to this new water supply a while after Bayers Woodyard.

After a few hours on the river proper, Akita No. 34 (aka Wayne), had caught up to me to my surprise and seeing him fly past in the fast water, I jumped on his tail to try to learn to 'read' the water. He didn't take to this too kindly and immediately stopped paddling. I paddled on for a while, being a little quicker in a straight line until he overtook me again in faster water. Again, I jumped on his tail, again he stopped. Approaching 4th July, he realised that he couldn't shake me and admitted he would have to paddle with me to the finish and see what happened in a final 'sprint' to the line, some 550km away. He perhaps didn't realise that at least I knew the finish line fast water was on the left, so his advantage would have been annulled. I later found out he washrode the Fitzy's the whole way across Lake Laberge.

It was here that my recently consumed race food demanded an emergency exit. Was I in the midst of a possible DNF, or was it something that would pass (no pun intended)? I parted ways and after some 'rectification' works on an island made my way downstream at a more relaxed pace. Somewhere around Eriksons Woodyard, I was caught by the Bickersons (15), a couple in a double canoe, who enquired how I was. The pharmacist in the front seat produced a treasure trove of medications including Imodium, which was immediately beneficial (his wife recommended ginger, but they couldn't find it). However, it was probably a double strength dose and I became rapidly drowsy, almost falling asleep in the boat on a couple of occasions. I realised I had to get off the water, and was feeling quite depressed.



By providence, Little Salmon checkpoint appeared around the corner, and I was given a thorough check-up by the remote area first aid crew, Anne & Rye. They diagnosed the gut problem cause as the river water, and put me to 'bed' for an hour.

Before I knew it, they were waking me and getting me back in my boat, no arguments. I'd lost only 90 minutes.

"You are doing really well, and you're not pulling out now!" they said. Amazingly, I felt like a new paddler, fresh and ready to go. I got down to the task, and paddled through the 'night' (twilight), donning a spray jacket and beanie at midnight.



"The photo above shows the GPS at 3.52am, and drifting downstream at 9.2 km/h. Compulsory throw bag on top, and food pack to the left. Garmin inconveniently locked on 139.6km. "

Once again this dressing procedure did not require getting out of the boat, as the jacket was within reach on the deck behind me. Thanks Tom Simmat for this advice and much more.



I paddled largely alone, faster crews already kilometres ahead, and the slower ones not making much ground on me. At around 4am, the temperature dropped but it didn't seem to affect me as much as some others, who had to retire due to hypothermia. I put this down to a diet of solid foods, great for energy maintenance and arranged in 6-hour ziplock packs of:



- 1x small boiled potato
- 1x boiled egg
- 1x banana
- 1x torq energy bar
- 1x diced fruit cup in syrup
- 1x Clif Bar

consumed one item on the hour. Between times, I had treats such as 'rum' balls, chocolate or butterscotch lollies alternating with Szechuan beef jerky, and other treats. I did occasionally have a Perpetuem tab just for something different. I kept all the packs on the floor under my legs, while the current supply was in the deck bag (may thanks, Anjie). Across the lake, and also following my 'indiscretion', I had absolutely no gut problems and felt great internally the rest of the race. And I NEVER risked river water again!

The race took me through the whole gamut of emotions, from depression at the gut problems, to relief when things came good again, frustration (read expletives) in my inability to read the water as 'slower' paddlers rocketed past me, and awe at the incredible beauty of the landscapes and rock formations the river helped create.



Carmacks appeared ahead around 11.30am next morning, after around 22 hrs paddling, and my wonderful landcrew Alanna with helpers Liz and Eric went through the checklist we had prepared earlier, tending to abrasions and Garmin issues (never-ending), giving me a damn fine feed of carrot and ginger soup, spag bol and cake, before putting me to bed in our rented RV (yes, we are soft!). I'd not taken any medication at all, except for the Imodium necessary for the gut problems

and the body was feeling a little sore. The compulsory stop of 7 hrs was very welcome. However, noisy neighbours (yes, other paddlers and their families!) made for a fitful sleep, and all too soon we were up preparing to get underway again.

I paddled without gloves, taking Tom's lead again. I'd started applying Vaseline the week leading up to the start, and applied more throughout the race, even though it made the paddle grip a little slippery. After an hour, the Vaseline was absorbed and things were back to normal. Alanna taped my thumbs and several new areas of wear on the fingers, and especially around the coccyx, where things were less pleasant. This was one of the major problem areas, caused not by the seat itself, but movement above the back support (for stretching) which was not resecured at Carmacks. Something to work on in future.

Leaving Carmacks, my crew took a breather and did some essential business in Sydney whilst they still had internet, then raced to get to 5 finger rapids before I did, but in vain as I slid, (with one support stroke) over the fairly short sharp descent (I had imagined much bigger waves here), and on to Rink Rapids which if taken on the right-hand side were no rapids at all.

To my surprise and delight there were my faithful crew at Minto, in the wee small hours around 1am to see me through. I should have stopped and attended to a couple of niggling issues, but the pleasure of seeing them cheering as I slid by at around 16km/h temporarily blocked any common-sense.

A couple of hours later Fort Selkirk appeared in the early morn. It was the early outpost in the infiltration of western governance in the Yukon region, accessible only by water, and has been preserved and restored to some extent. I'd managed to catch up a couple of paddlers plus Fitzy and John and we discussed the chance of a quick guided tour. Pretty slim, we figured.

The Pelly River enters close by, and dumps more water into an ever-widening expanse, making the selection of fastest line even more difficult. The decision has to be made early, as ferrying from one side to the other in slower flow takes more time than you can make up in the fast water. Fitzy and John were struggling, with John's back giving grief, his hands

badly blistered. They were managing the fast line much better than I, but the regular rest stops were slowing them down.

The next compulsory 3-hour stop at Coffee Creek appeared as I joined several other boats, and we all headed off to get a couple of hours kip. I dosed down in the open, only to be rudely awakened by rain an hour later forcing me to move under the crowded tarpaulin shelter provided. I was woken by a panicked volunteer who admitted he had missed my wake-up call by 20 minutes. The paddlers I arrived with were about to leave.

I packed up as fast as I could, fortunately having prepared most of my kit before sleeping. Still, I was 15 minutes further behind, and had more importantly lost the assistance in navigation my former companions provided. Fitzzy and John pulled in as I was leaving.

No sooner had I set off, than I was hit by a torrential downpour that lasted around 4 hours before easing off into sporadic showers. Visibility was cut, but I was quite comfortable in my Gore-Tex jacket. I was luckier than the lead Voyageur which was buffeted to such an extent they nearly capsized and had to wait on the bank for 40 minutes till the storm passed. They had such a commanding lead that this did not affect the overall result, however I witnessed the power of that storm lower down the river where the top half of most of the pines along one side of the river were smashed to matchwood.



The channels are braided, and extreme care needs to be taken in watching where the largest volume of water is headed. The wrong decision means you might be stuck in dead calm water, washed against log jams almost the full width of the river, or even going backwards as the fast flows stream by in other channels.

I made several disastrous choices from here and on through to the confluence of the White River. Many regular Yukon paddlers commented that their usual fast lines were non-existent, and the lower-than-usual levels made reading the water very difficult.

Still, I had one win which lifted my spirits greatly when I saw all the locals heading down one slack channel while I sped by in another. I milked that joy for several hours!

Not long after, I was also hit by strong winds which threatened to tear my desert paddling cap off my head. I tucked it under my spray deck until things calmed down a little, then

replaced it, but haphazardly. Sure enough, up came the wind again, and with both hands on the paddle I was unable to prevent it being blown off behind me. I abandoned chasing the boats in front and paddled back to try and find the hat, but to no avail.

Now, having lost both guidance and hat, I donned my beanie and proceeded to grind it out to the finish.

Wildlife was scarce in the upper reaches, but lower down the river, bears were seen at the river's edge, along with the occasional moose with youngsters. I saw another paddler stopped by the bank in the distance, so paddled across to see if they were OK, but couldn't find them as I approached. The bears and moose were also difficult to keep in sight.

Evening descended for the second time, and as per regulation, I donned my headlamp for the 4-hr compulsory period of 'darkness'. It was warmer than the previous evening, however with less energy to burn, I remained in my Gore-Tex. This is all I wore besides my Thermal Skins. They are a relatively new product but I can't speak highly enough of them. Warm in cold weather with an inner thermal layer, they also work in the heat as perspiration evaporation keeps them cool. A beanie was also used but it did not effectively keep the water off my glasses. If I had my desert cap with me, I'd have put this over the beanie.

I was vaguely aware that Alaska Eileen, No. 57 was also doing well in the Solo class, paddling her self-made cedar strip boat made off the plan. Her first attempt at boatbuilding, it showed the determination she possessed that would see her to the finish. She is a single mother, and had her 3 teenage kids in tow as landcrew. She paddled consistently and read the river well enough to see her with a significant lead over me toward the finish. I was content to enjoy the experience as well as race, so on several occasions while giving my painful butt a break, I drifted silently down alongside towering, artistically chiselled cliffs enjoying the serenity.



Wherever it was possible to access the river by road, a First Nations parent of one of the paddlers would sing and beat a deerskin drum high on the cliffside. This was always a very special moment, and his timing seemed to follow me down the river in many places. It brought relevance to the connection between First Nations people and the river.

Two boats make a race, and as the final kilometres approached I was caught by another locally-crewed Voyager making reasonable pace to the finish. They were in good spirits, and doing intervals trying to pass me. We played cat and mouse, pushing ahead for an advantage till around the bend Dawson appeared and it was on. There followed a 2km sprint neck and neck to the line, where I think they may have pipped me at the post by centimetres as I manoeuvred for an easier path to the get-out on the other side of the river. I would not have imagined that either crew would have so much to give in the final throes of the race, but that is what this event does to you. You push through barriers all the way, but also learn things about yourself that bring you back to earth with a thud or a giggle.



Alanna, Eric and Liz were cheering from the bank, and as I got out of the seat for only the 4th time in 62 hrs, Anne and Rye from the Little Salmon checkpoint flashed their cameras and congratulated me too. They had raced down to Dawson once duties at their checkpoint were over just to see me finish. We have become firm friends, to the extent that the word Voyager has been uttered in conversation for future years. Alanna has been captivated also, so who knows...

Some paddlers stick around the finish to see others in, but I was too exhausted and sore, so I finally relented to taking some anti-inflammatories and dropped off to sleep.

Late next morning, I wearily rose to find Alanna washing up my paddling gear.

'Whats' that?' I asked

"That's your hat"

"No, I lost mine on the river"

"That's *your* hat!"

"Did you buy me another one?"

'No, it was in your boat along with all the other stuff'

After the Race:

This was a special year, the presentations coinciding with Canada Day celebrations on the 1st July. Paddlers and YRQ volunteers were invited to march in Dawson's Canada Day Parade, which we gladly did, almost doubling the numbers. Then it was on to the school auditorium for presentations and a great lunchtime feast.



It was interesting to hear the other paddlers' stories. My tribulations were overshadowed by others, who went for swims, also got river gut and hypothermia and great performances like Wolfram (74), who built his own folding skin and frame kayak that travelled as stowed luggage on the plane. He was on his third attempt at finishing, which he did this year, with a huge smile.

Many kayak paddlers mentioned swollen hands after the race, and I had difficulty closing my right hand for several days. In addition, any areas that were even remotely susceptible to rubbing suffered badly in the constantly wet environment, such as archilles tendons, tops of toes, lower back, and for Eileen, two fingertips rubbed raw, that were nowhere near the paddle...they just happened to touch each other. I had a strange blister at the

tip of my little finger, where the pressure of the paddle caused some swelling next to the nail.

Paddling that distance was easier in the YRQ because of the extended hours of daylight....the natural sundown that prompts sleep was non-existent, so one just kept paddling. Apart from the Imodium noddies, I didn't feel sleepy, just increasingly occupied seeing wildlife and looking for my hat...