



## Call of the wild keeps physician up North

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In 1971, Dr. George Gibson headed to the Northwest Territories from BC “for a year.” Twenty-eight years later this active, 74-year-old Yellowknife physician and naturalist is planning his retirement there. “Everyone tells me I’m living my life backwards, that you are supposed to go up North when you are young and you go to the Fraser Valley when you are a little older,” he jokes. Gibson practised in Chilliwack, BC, for 20 years before going to the NWT.

He first went to Fort Rae, a remote Dogrib First Nations village of 600 sled dogs and about 1200 people, only 50 of whom were white. The First Nations people still lived a traditional lifestyle, and 6-day dogsledding trips to hunt caribou in frigid weather weren’t uncommon. Like everyone else, Gibson depended on the 100 working dogsled teams for transportation. Because of the shortage of doctors in Yellowknife, he often travelled there to provide anesthesia. He credits nuns, some of whom had worked at the local hospital for 40 years, with helping him cope with the unfamiliar challenges.

After 3 months in Fort Rae, Gibson moved to Inuvik for a short time before settling in Yellowknife and opening a family practice. There were only 2 family physicians, a surgeon and an ophthalmologist working at the 50-bed hospital, and none of the specialists worked in private practice. Because of the physician shortage, he became a doctor of all trades.

Language posed another problem. Radio communication with isolated villages was poor, and the Dogrib language was challenging. Gibson learned it by asking questions. “I could ask about 10 questions. I could ask if they had a cold, I could ask if they had a fever.”

One day he was radioed by a nurse in Snowdrift, a settlement 100 km from Yellowknife. A young mother there was very worried about her young baby, but Gibson could not understand a word. Through the faltering radio, he asked a series of open-ended questions and gradually lifted the language barrier. He tentatively diagnosed a case of rheumatic fever.

In 1974, Gibson added the Workers’ Compensation Board to his workload after it was launched in Yellowknife, and he became its medical adviser. He still owns the clinic

he started in 1971, but now it is a group practice for 4 female doctors and 1 of 4 family practices in Yellowknife.

When he’s not practising medicine, Gibson is an avid birder, a hobby dating back to his days in BC. In summer he frequently visits the Bathurst Inlet Lodge, now in Nunavut, to see yellowbilled loons and rock ptarmigans. Other birders may disagree, but he says Yellowknife has “the most beautiful birding path in Canada,” an old sewage lagoon that’s a prime habitat for many nesting birds. He often takes people there to see visitors like the rednecked grebe, or simply to stroll with his dog.



Northern paradise: sea kayaking and bird-watching

Occasionally, Gibson has been able to combine his birding passion with his practice. In 1976 he got a chance to see some rare birds at Cape Columbia, the northernmost point in Canada, while working as personal physician for the visiting 16-year-old Prince Andrew. When Gibson’s workday was over, his search for jaeger birds led him to the local dump at 1 am, where he snapped off 20 pictures in the

Arctic light. “I was fascinated,” he says.

When Prince Andrew returned to Yellowknife 10 years later, Gibson’s wife, Carol, presented him with one of the photos. “He was always teasing me about my visits to the dump,” says Gibson.

Following the trip to Cape Columbia, Prince Andrew and some classmates flew to the headwaters of the 500-km-long Coppermine River. Travelling in 2-person canoes, they paddled the length of the river. Gibson checked up on them by dropping in by float plane or helicopter at various points during the trip.

Besides his practice and his birding, Gibson is also active in his community. He has been a curling coach for 18 years and a board member at his seniors’ centre, where he started a program to teach older people to use computers. Most of the students had never turned on a computer, but they all wanted to learn email routines. He has also contributed by serving as president of the BC Medical Association; currently, he is a member of the CMA board. As for retirement plans, Gibson, a self-confessed “terrible golfer,” would like to improve his game. He and his wife also plan an African trip this winter to see game parks — and more birds. ?