SPECIAL EDITION

>> NORTHWEST TERRITORIES' SUMMER OF CRISIS: COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE

BEFORE:
AS FIRES CLOSE IN, YELLOWKNIFE ASKS, 'WHAT'S THE PLAN?' P30

DURING:
IN HAY RIVER, THERE'S ONLY ONE ROAD – THROUGH THE FLAMES. P40

AFTER:
FAR FROM HOME, THE SENSE OF LOSS HAS A NAME. P58

Up Here

EXPLORE CANADA'S FAR NORTH NOVEMBER•DECEMBER 2023

IN THE LAND OF WILDFIRES

THERE IS DANGER AND COURAGE. CHAOS AND KINDNESS. GENEROSITY. AND, EVENTUALLY, HOPE. P27

+ ALSO

- HOW WILDLAND FIRE HAS CHANGED
- THE HISTORY OF FIRE SEASONS PAST
- BEYOND CRISIS, TRUE ACTS OF KINDNESS

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Hay River would like to express our deepest gratitude and appreciation to all those that supported and fought the recent blazes and protected our community. Their selflessness and dedication to duty serve as an inspiration to us all. We owe them a debt of gratitude.

Mayor Kandis Jameson


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AN APOCALYPTIC SKY OVER DAYTIME YELLOWKNIFE SEPT. 23

Departments

Outer Edge

Columns

Features

ABOVE
Photo by Tawna Brown

COVER
Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

The wildfire continuum

As the days get shorter and the snow arrives, the Northwest Territories' worst wildfire season seems like a very bad dream. Those scary, disruptive evacuation days are gradually fading, replaced by the usual ups and downs of everyday life. With three months to rethink the experience, we can divide it into these common stages.

First there was the **anxiety** stage. Heavy smoke, no rain, high temperatures and constant reports of new wildfires mainly started by lightning. Something very bad could happen any day.

Then it happened. Evacuation orders were coming fast and furious and to ever larger communities. This triggered the next stage – **stress**. How to get out of here? If by road, is my vehicle ready for a 1000 km+ trip? Will the road be open? How close to the road are the wildfires? With stops and starts will I have enough fuel to reach the next service station over 200 km away? If I choose to go by air, can I take my pet? Where will I end up? Do I have enough money to pay basic costs? What will happen to my home in a deserted community? Can they contain the fire?

After two or three days, most evacuees have landed somewhere. We are housed. We are fed. We are entertained. And daily we huddle around the computer or cell phone for news reports, then breathe a sigh of relief when we hear the fire is being held. After a week of this, the **apathy** stage sets in. The acute fear is gone. Our need for information is sated. Now we wait. Ready to accept whatever the outcome might be. Anxious for the routines of daily life back home.

Finally we're told we can go home. We have reached the **conclusion** of our experience. We know what the drive back will be like. Or the plane trip back. We've done it before. What we don't know is what to expect when we get back. And then we see it. Burned out forests. Gaping fire breaks. Ground stripped bare of its boreal forest cover. Refrigerators growing who knows what from fresh vegetables forgotten at our sudden departure.

Then comes the **epilogue**. We are safely home. Sadly we have lost two firefighters. We have lost property. But we have not lost any residents in the evacuated communities. We may lose some businesses that may never recover from the wildfires. But the Aurora continues to glow, and visitors continue to come here to see the world's best displays of northern lights.

But there is one stage left on the long continuum. And that is the **recrimination and review** stage. Why was an evacuation ordered? What if the one road out became totally impassable? What about lack of communications along long stretches of the highway? Did our governments have the proper plans in place?

We're all thankful we survived the great wildfire season but the reviews will go on for months, if not years. Lessons learned will make any further evacuations smoother…but hopefully, we will never have to go through this wildfire continuum again.

Marion LaVigne, Publisher

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Roy Dahl is an Indigenous journalist originally from the small mining community of Red Lake, Ontario. He has written for many publications over the past 45 years. He currently hosts the morning show on CKLB-FM. He lives in Dettah, NWT with his wife Katheleen and two sons, Zachary and Brandon. His daughter Amanda lives in Vancouver, BC.

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Laurie Sarkadi is a writer, producer and singer-songwriter who lives off-grid in Chief Drygeese Territory near Yellowknife. Her memoir *Voice in the Wild* (Caitlin Press) was a northern bestseller and her work has been cited for national newspaper, magazine and television awards. In 2023 she was an instructor for the inaugural Northern Journalism Training Initiative.

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023
• VOLUME 39 • NUMBER 6

Up Here is published 6 times a year by Up Here Publishing Ltd. in Yellowknife, NWT, Canada

Our office is located on Chief Drygeese Territory, traditional home of the Yellowknives Dene and also traditional lands of the North Slave Metis.

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Editorial contributions: We welcome contributions, but can assume no responsibility for unsolicited material. Material should be emailed to editor@uphere.ca.

Canadian Postmaster: Up Here is mailed under publications mail Agreement No. 40049058 Registration No. 09357. Postage paid in Toronto, Ontario.

DATE OF ISSUE: NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023

Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: Circulation Dept., Box 1256 Stn K Toronto, ON M4P 3E5.

ISSN No. 0828-4253. Registered with the National Library of Canada. Indexed in Canadian Periodical Index and Canadian Magazine Index.

Subscriptions: $24.95 per year in Canada, $44.95 per year in the US, and $59.95 per year for other international orders (prices in Canadian funds). Single copy price $7.95. Visa or MasterCard accepted.

Call toll-free in Canada: 1-866-572-1757.
Or send name, address and payment to: Up Here: Explore Canada's Far North PO Box 1256 Stn K Toronto ON M4P 3E5, Canada
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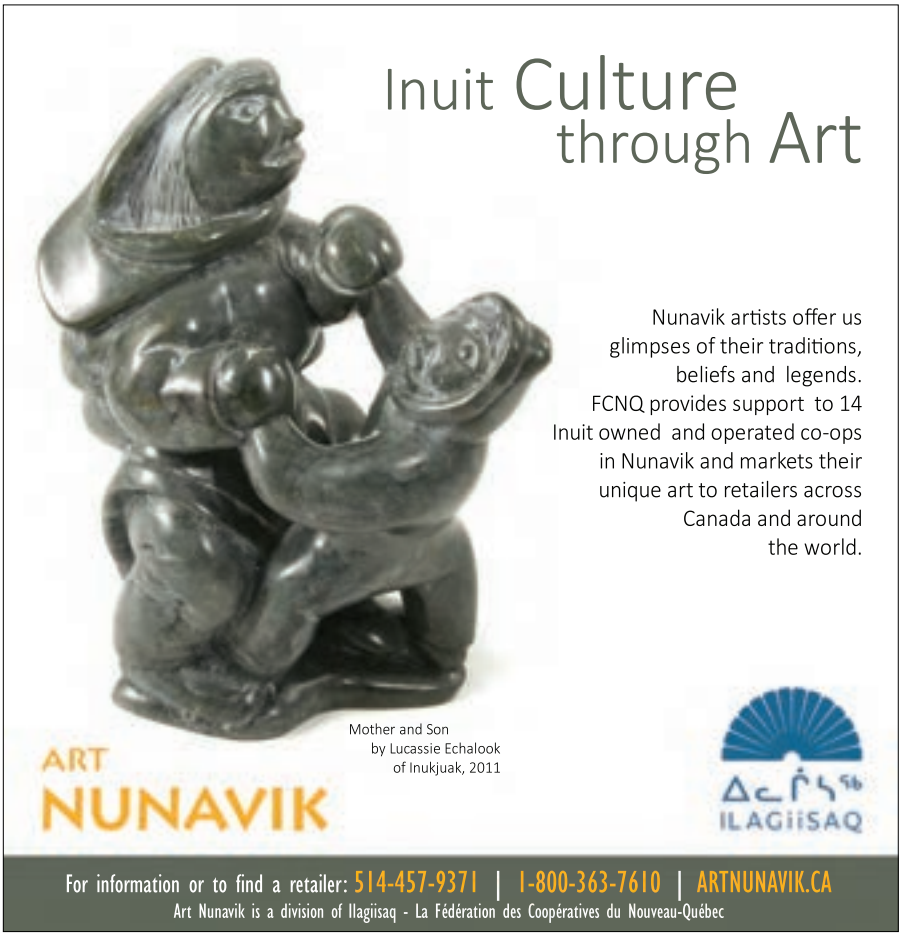
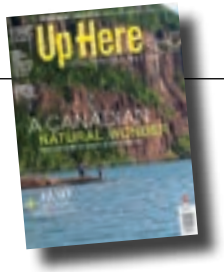


COMING UP

In our next issue, we'll take a look at how much (and how little) the North and the world has actually changed in 40 years. We also look at NWT Devolution to check on progress after 10 years. In the same fact-finding spirit, we name 40 great northern destinations, and we put on our woolies to challenge the Dempster Highway in winter.

• *Don't miss Up Here's* January/February 2024 issue celebrating 40 years of northern publishing.



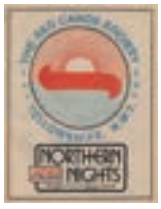
HEARTFELT PRAISE

Dave Olesen's *The Stilled Heart Come Home* article in the July/Aug. edition tells me he is NOT just another snowflake in the snowstorm of life. Superbly written, wonderfully crafted and without an Everest of words! His prose allowed me to be ALMOST with him on a life well lived. Thanks for living UPSTAIRS from the rest of us and showing us that the Rat Race doesn't need to be for everyone. You deserve a rainbow every day of your life for this *sui generis* article.

Tom Davis
Peterborough, Ontario

THE PROBLEM SOLVERS

We have received *Up Here* for a few years and read it cover to cover. This month I really enjoyed the story about The Red Canoe Society. Where else would problem events get solved but at the local pub.



Carla Weddell
British Columbia

ROAD SUPPORT

Congratulations for publishing some of the findings from Guy Dore's work on northern roads. We are lucky to have researchers of Dr. Dore's calibre, but they are spread thin. We need more funding for northern roads, more research and more visibility. Let this article be the first of many.

Robert A. Douglas
Windsor, Ontario

ANY FACTORIES NORTH OF 60?

Really enjoyed your article on the northern "forts." I would like to see something about the places called Factory, both those still standing (Moose Factory) and those no longer around.

Henry Kafka
Via email

A MORE NORTHERLY ROUTE

In the Northwest Passage article in the Sept./Oct. issue of *Up Here* I was a bit

surprised there was no mention of taking the Northern Route through the Perry Channel and over the top of Banks Island before turning south. The Perry Channel appears to be much wider and would assume deeper with fewer shoals than the route through Queen Maude Gulf south of Victoria Island.

Charles Taylor
North Bay, Ontario

Editor's note
Anyone want to weigh in re the pros and cons of using the more northerly route?

KNOW THIS CHILD?

I have a Gabriel Gely print of a young child, male, about age two, Baker Lake 1962. I believe the child's name is written as well. Would be happy to have it identified and returned to the family.

Name withheld

Editor's note
If you are interested, contact us and we can put you in touch with this person.

FOND MEMORIES

My husband and I visited the NWT and Yukon back in 2012 and I admit I fell in love with the area. Now every time we watch the news on TV and see the dreadful fires destroying so much of nature and property, our hearts break. We have incredible memories of the time spent in your area and confess Yellowknife especially warmed my heart. And who could possibly forget Old Town?

Joy Scheifele
Via Email

TROUBLE WITH EUREKA

I just have to point out that Eureka is still marked on your map in two different places on Ellesmere Island. The correct one is the more northerly one.

Dean Morewood
Via email

A SPECIAL HOOK

Eliza and Edward Stanford, winners of our 2020 Arctic Sweepstake trip (who, due to the pandemic, had to wait until this year to take the trip) sent us this personalized thank you gift and a note before they embarked.

"Thank you so much for this trip. It will truly be a once in a lifetime adventure for us. I am calling this rug hooking "Distracted Paddling". Enjoy.

Editor's Note: *We are enjoying it and thank you for this creative piece!*

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NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Regrowth. Just weeks after devasting wildfires.

This year, the Northwest Territories recorded its worst fire season this century, with over four million hectares burned. A disaster certainly, but also a time of rebirth and regrowth for a wide swath of the NWT boreal forest.

Only weeks after fire swept through the Northwest Territories, new growth was pushing through the blackened ground, starting the cycle of regeneration.

According to Natural Resources Canada, forest fires release valuable nutrients stored in the litter on the forest floor. They open the forest canopy to sunlight, which stimulates new growth. They allow some tree species, like jack pine, to reproduce, opening their cones and freeing their seeds.

In a CTV interview, John Clague, emeritus professor at Simon Fraser University said, "Fire is a natural kind of reset for the boreal forest. The trees are adapted to that, and although you might get a fire in one area, the trees will regrow, they reestablish themselves."

In just nine years, the forests burned by the NWT wildfires of 2014 now have a dense green ground cover with deciduous and evergreen trees that are already reaching a height of more than three metres.

And despite the devastation of 2023's wildfires, regrowth is already underway.

PHOTO: Tawna Brown
Taken Sept 10, 2023 along Highway 3 near Yellowknife

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Stephane Caron

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BY THE NUMBERS

As of October 10, 2023

No. of fires: *303 (208 declared extinguished and 95 active)*
Total hectares (H) burned : *4,163,423*
Evacuees: *25,900 (68 per cent of NWT population)*

Dehcho
727,058 H (34 FIRES)

Sahtu
382,732 H (55 FIRES)

South Slave
1,775,523 H (80 FIRES)

North Slave
1,094,556H (106 FIRES)

Beaufort Delta
183,554 H (28 FIRES)

Photo: GNWT, Environment and Climate Change

THE OVERVIEW

Evacuations Timeline

MAY 14
The first wildfire evacuation begins early in the season in the Hay River area. Many residents evacuated to Yellowknife. They are able to return home 10 days later.

JULY 24
Government officials order residents of Behchokǫ̀ (in both communities of Rae and Edzo) to evacuate and head to Yellowknife. Most settle into Yellowknife's Multiplex, where beds and other amenities are set up.

AUGUST 1
Although crews continue to battle the wildfire in Behchokǫ̀, Edzo residents are told they can return home. A total of 19 structures have been lost in Rae and along Highway 3, and an evacuation alert for Edzo remains in place.

AUGUST 8
Behchokǫ̀ residents start their return home, but some come back to rubble. Beatrice and Walter Naedzo, a couple with four children, discover only a concrete foundation remains at the site of their home.

AUGUST 11
Just before 5 p.m. on Friday, the town of Fort Smith issues an evacuation alert due to a nearby wildfire and asks residents to be prepared for a possible evacuation order.

AUGUST 12
Fort Smith's alert transitions to an evacuation order. Hay River offers itself up as an emergency centre.

AUGUST 13
Residents of Enterprise as well as those in the Hay River region are told to evacuate. That same day, the City of Yellowknife activates a State of Emergency for the first time ever.

AUGUST 15
Yellowknife Mayor Rebecca Alty tells the media that "the risk to Yellowknife and Ndılǫ has risen," but wildfires are not expected to reach the city. A few hours later, the NWT

declares a territory-wide state of emergency. An evacuation alert — not an order — for the western edges of Yellowknife is sent out that evening.

AUGUST 16
Early in the afternoon, NWT Finance Minister Caroline Wawzonek tells territorial employees that the government "is not shutting down or sending people home." Hours later, Municipal and Community Affairs Minister Shane Thompson announces that Yellowknife is under an evacuation order and all residents should be out of the city by noon on Aug. 18.

AUGUST 17
Residents rush to get out of Dodge. Hundreds of vehicles make their way down Highway 3 toward Alberta, the only road out of Yellowknife. Those who can't drive wait for hours by Sir John Franklin High School to register for emergency evacuation flights.

AUGUST 19
The city is largely deserted as the last evacuation flights leave.

SEPTEMBER 6
Residents of Yellowknife, Ndilǫ, Dettah and the Ingraham Trail can finally start returning home after three weeks in campgrounds, hotels or homes of friends and relatives across western Canada.

SEPTEMBER 16
Hay River residents head back home. The fire remains 500 metres from the hospital and 10 metres from Highway 2, but fire officials believe enough work has been done to keep the community safe.

SEPTEMBER 18
Fort Smith residents start to return home, while an alert and fire ban remained in place.

SEPTEMBER 23
Yellowknifers wake up to red and orange skies blanketing the city. The smoke is mainly from Alberta fires that have been pushed in by strong winds from the south and the west.

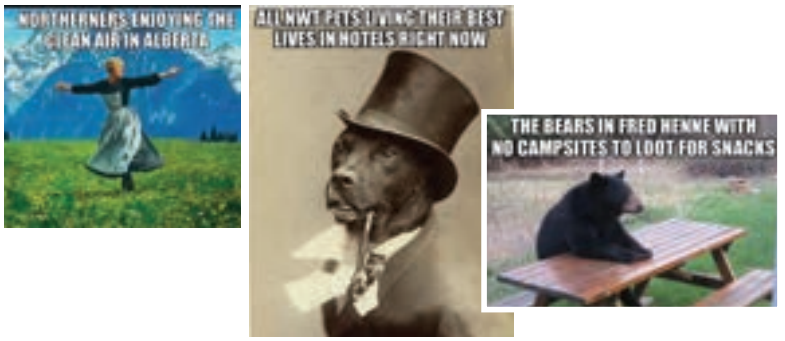
SEPTEMBER 28
As fire activity decreases, NWT Fire announces that it will stop issuing daily wildfire updates for the rest of the year.

YELLOWKNIFE, NWT

Comfort In Comedy

"IF YOU DON'T LAUGH, YOU'LL CRY," IS THE MOTTO OF THE INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT, @YELLOWKNIFEMEMES

> BY DANA BOWEN



Brie O'Keefe's eyes were glued to her phone, watching what was happening back home in Yellowknife. She and her husband, Martin Guadagno, were already in Shuswap, B.C., where they had been vacationing, when the Yellowknife evacuation order came.

The couple headed to Alberta and anxiously waited for their friends, including one who had the couple's two dogs in tow. "I felt so terrified that my pets were going to be trapped there," O'Keefe says. "We were feeling the same as everyone else except feeling helpless because we were already too far away."

Upon arrival in Alberta, they greeted their fellow Northerners with open arms, all of them looking tired, distressed and, apparently, ready for a day at the spa. That's when inspiration struck.

"I saw all my friends getting pedicures and so I thought I'd make a cute meme about how instead of, like, therapy or another way to deal with evacuation and trauma, [Yellowknifers get] pedicures."

The image and its caption offered a dopamine release for O'Keefe and her followers, so she kept making memes out of the news coming from the NWT, editing photos often shared on social media with funny taglines.

Others began sending her their own memes, which O'Keefe shared through her newly created Instagram account @Yellowknifememes. A week after creating the new account, O'Keefe had more than 3,000 followers, many of whom thanked her for the laughs and a distraction from what they were dealing with.

"It's capturing a sentiment or a moment in time that we are experiencing, but also for all of us who are far apart, [it's a chance] to connect and share that sentiment."

The memes poke fun at the rotting food and plants many evacuees came home to, the hectic re-entry plans, and a lack of financial support for evacuees.

Despite the trauma surrounding the wildfire events, O'Keefe and her followers found comfort in comedy while torn from their homes. "There's that old adage, if you don't laugh, you'll cry," O'Keefe says.

She adds that she will continue posting content online about Northern life, as she is sure there will be more absurdities to poke fun at in the future.

Photos courtesy: Brie O'Keefe

GLOWING SKY SMOKE AND FLAMES BEAR DOWN ON FORT SMITH

Photo courtesy Diana Smith

On the Road Out

A FIRST PERSON ACCOUNT OF ONE YOUNG EVACUEE'S TRAUMATIC JOURNEY

> BY BELLE SMITH AND HER MOM DIANE SMITH

"Yay! The beach!" My younger siblings rejoice as we turn into the village near the lake. Usually I would be excited to come to the beach here in Fort Smith, but right now it feels like we have been sentenced to death. This is the farthest point from the fire, and the camper village is made up of people who also couldn't get out fast enough. After driving through the empty town, it feels like these are the last people on Earth.

This morning was so beautiful. Nobody knew what was coming. When it started to cloud over and rain down ash, we thought it was from the fires nearby in Fort Smith. My siblings and I just kept playing outside. Once my parents got the evacuation alert, it took a long time to pack the camper. The sky was completely black when they were almost finished.

When we were ready to go and buckled into the truck, a man pulled up in front of our house. "Don't go south, the road is burning," he yelled. "Go north to the lake and wait there," and with that he sped away to warn others.

Now I wish that the man had kept the info to himself. We could have gone south to safety if he hadn't told my parents to come here. With the camper crammed full of everything we care about, and knowing the fire is so close, it is hard to fall asleep. I check the windows for an orange glow. We may have to jump in the water if it gets this far. Somehow I manage to sleep.

Morning comes and we are still alive. Someone has a Starlink set up and people gather around to check the news on their phones. I take this chance to send a message to my best friend. Her family made it out on time, but once the communication lines went out, she never heard whether I made it. She is worried that I am still stuck here.

The sky is clear and it looks like any other day. We can't see the fire from here. But the feeling of being trapped

and not knowing how to escape makes time stretch out, and not in a good way.

We hear that there is a last flight out, but we won't be able to get our things into suitcases on time. My parents decide not to get on the plane, and I am afraid we will never find a way out.

The person with Starlink says someone got out by road that morning and reported back that they successfully made it to Alberta. Maybe there is hope. That night, we fall asleep to the sound of rain pelting the camper. This will give us a chance to get through. In the morning, dad decides we are going to take the chance, and we pack up quickly and pull out of our village while there are still puddles on the ground.

As we drive I see all the wreckage. It is damp but still smoking. Abandoned cars, dead animals, and burnt forest as far as you can see. The place I used to hunt chickens with my dad is gone. This fire took everything in its path. I realize that the man who told us we couldn't go actually had saved us. If we had tried to leave at the time we were first ready, our camper would have been one of these abandoned vehicles.

We pass Enterprise, where just three days ago I was blowing up balloons for kids at the Jamboree. They had no warning, and their town was destroyed. I feel a mix of grief for the loss, and relief for finding a safe way out. – *By Belle Smith*

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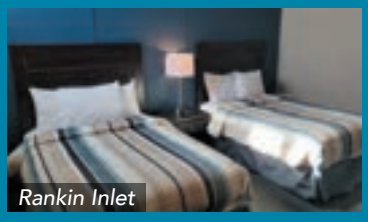
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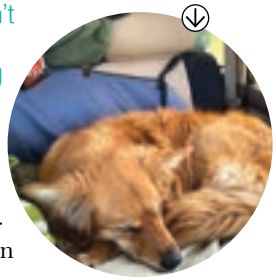
SHE PACKED BELONGINGS AND HER PETS



WAITING IN LIMBO

After leaving Fort Smith, Ashley McLaren wasn't sure if her house would still be standing when she returned.

Ashley McLaren smiles for the camera, her log house's pink and yellow flowers blooming in the background.

"I sent the picture to my family saying, 'I hope this is not the last photo that I take here,'" she says, her voice shaking, sniffling as she recalls watering her garden the morning before evacuating Fort Smith. "It seems silly to think back on that, but we love that house and our area so much."

As the time of writing, McLaren was still waiting to return to Fort Smith and didn't know if her home survived. She and her husband had been prepared for an evacuation, but that didn't ease the stress of what would happen to their home, which they had bought only two years ago. The house, surrounded by forest, sits just west of the community, in the direction of the nearest wildfire.

Though she was reluctant to leave, as the official evacuation call loomed, McLaren knew she had little other choice. So she packed up her belongings and her three pets into her car. Since her husband was already out of town, she made the drive down to Alberta on her own.

Along the seven-and-a-half hour drive, McLaren kept her eyes focused on the road, trying to hold back her disbelief at the massive grey plumes and fire damage by the side of the highway. It was an emotional trip, but when she finally passed through the thick smoke west of the fire perimeter it was, quite literally, a breath of fresh air.

"It was sunny," she says. "It was the first

time in a very long time that I rolled down the windows of the vehicle and could actually breathe."

Days after Yellowknife evacuees returned home in September, McLaren was still waiting for the call for Fort Smith. She checked the weather forecast everyday, hoping for a turn in the wind that would keep her home and community safe.

The wait was full of anxiety, but she remains grateful for those around her — from the friends who brought paintings and treasured items from her house with them as they evacuated, to crews who worked day and night to put out the fires.

"I just want to mention the immense gratitude I think all of us feel for all the people who are back home in our communities," she says. "We're so grateful for those people in Fort Smith." *– DB*

AN EVACUATION VACATION

A visit to her former home of Yellowknife proved fateful for Yukon communications worker Sarah Frey.

On a velvet green chair in her friend's Yellowknife living room, Sarah Frey finally looked up from her laptop and smiled as she closed the screen. "Done!" she said, victoriously.

On a vacation to her former home, Frey was working tirelessly to share information about the wildfires happening across the border in the Yukon. The manager of strategic communications for Na-Cho Nyäk Dun Development Corporation had been gathering information about the fires from the Yukon Government and communicating it to the public, sharing the resources available to evacuees from the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyäk Dun and the communities.

On this particular mid-August day, she had the enviable task of spreading the good news: Residents of Mayo could safely return home after a week-long evacuation. But at the same time, the tides were turning for Yellowknife.

"There was this really intense juxtaposition of feeling so excited and relieved that Mayo gets to go home… but the other community that has so many loved ones and friends is now suddenly under extreme threat," Frey says.

Dog-sitting for one of those friends, Frey waited for news on what would become of the city, while the air outside grew thicker with smoke. At first, she planned to shelter in place, as smoke closed the highway. But then the winds changed, and the road was once again relatively clear. "It felt like a window," Frey says.

Packing up the two dogs she was looking after (as well as her own vacationing pooch), Frey got in the car with two other friends and drove for 17 hours to St. Albert, Alta., arriving at 4 a.m. the next day. On the way there, they sat in a Starbucks parking lot watching the NWT government announce an evacuation order. "We felt a lot of relief that we made the right call," Frey says.

Having lived in both the NWT and Yukon over the last 10 years, Frey has seen

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EXPORTATION D'ANIMAUX
DE LA FAUNE DU NUNAVUT

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LEAVING NUNAVUT WITH THE FOLLOWING?
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EST-CE QUE VOUS QUITTEZ LE NUNAVUT AVEC L'UN DES ARTICLES SUIVANTS?

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- Nanuit amingit
- Amiqiyaungitun amiit

- Legally killed game
- Antlers or skulls
- A gift of meat from a hunter
- Narwhal tusk
- Polar bear hides
- Untanned furs

- Gibier abattu légalement
- Bois ou crânes d'animaux
- Viande donnée par un chasseur
- Défense de narval
- Peau d'ours polaire
- Fourrure non tannée

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Nunavut

her share of wildfires. But this summer's events have given her a lot to reflect on. On the one hand, she struggles with how climate-related emergencies may become the new normal. On the other hand, she saw Northerners reach out to each other and find ways to keep their spirits up.

"I've always kind of subscribed to this idea that Northerners are a bit different," she says. "I think our reasons for coming North are vast, but our reason for staying North is because we value community… and showing up for your neighbour."

Though it wasn't the most relaxing vacation, it only strengthened her love for the North. – *DB*

LABOURING THROUGH A WILDFIRE CRISIS

The birth of Jessica MacIntosh's first child was a much different experience than she had expected.

After six hours in a hospital bed, beads of sweat glisten on Jessica MacIntosh's forehead as her husband, Brendan, grips her hand, offering words of encouragement. Another 40 minutes of pushing and breathing through the pain pass before a cry emerges from their new-born baby. Henry Scott MacIntosh is placed into his mother's arms. The new parents are elated, though Henry's birth is far different from what they had imagined.

Rewind to less than 40 hours prior when MacIntosh received a call in the middle of the night from Yellowknife's Stanton Territorial Hospital informing the couple they needed to be there by 9 a.m. to be on an evacuation flight.

MacIntosh had known an evacuation call was imminent. The summer sky had grown cloudier with smoke all throughout August. But as she neared 40 weeks of pregnancy, her anxiety about the situation worsened.

"I felt kind of stuck, especially when people started leaving before the evacuation was called," she says. "Before I got my phone call, I was like, 'Oh my God, what is going to happen? Am I going to give birth during the evacuation?' "

Although that wasn't quite the case, she did go into labour on the day of her flight. It took more than 12 hours from the time the couple left Yellowknife to reach their hotel in Red Deer, Alta. All the while, MacIntosh was dealing with inconsistent contractions. The next afternoon, as her contractions grew closer, she was finally taken to the nearest hospital.

MEET HENRY
HE WAS BORN
ON THE RUN

"It was definitely one of the best moments of my life, for sure," she says, remembering Henry's birth. "I just couldn't believe he was finally here. I feel like I couldn't believe he was real. And I was just so relieved that he was healthy and he was here and that we were finally together."

The couple's family arrived just in time for the birth and picked up all the necessities, which was a huge help given the parents had little time or room to pack before leaving Yellowknife. Henry got to spend the first three weeks of his life in an Alberta hotel, where his parents had the luxury of cleaning staff to help with the mess.

Then, when Yellowknife announced it was safe to return, MacIntosh bundled the newborn up and made the journey back. "It's crazy to think he's going to grow up here and he hadn't even seen it for the first like three weeks of his life," she says. "We're happy just to be home." – *DB*



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FIRESIDE CHATTER
Mike Westwick became the voice of wildfire information in the summer of 2023.

"AT TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY, DETAILS HELP."

Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

Crisis Communicator

WHEN NORTHERNERS NEEDED INFORMATION ABOUT THE WILDFIRES, MIKE WESTWICK ROSE TO THE OCCASION.

> BY FRAN HURCOMB

While the smoke drew a grey blanket over the landscape, Northerners in Yellowknife and its surrounding communities shut their windows and doors tight, hiding from the air. It had already been a long and stressful summer across the NWT. By mid-August, more than two thirds of its residents had evacuated, some more than once. Before and after evacuations were called, residents opened their phones and turned on the TV desperate to know what was happening.

Taking over the screen was a burly, bearded young man wearing a yellow NWT firefighter's coverall and a black baseball cap. Thirty-two-year-old Mike Westwick, whose official job title is Manager of Communications and Public Affairs for the Department of Environment and Climate Change (ECC), did not fit the clean-cut image of a government communications officer, but he quickly became recognizable everywhere he went.

He spoke in televised interviews with local, national and international press. He also kept evacuees informed about what was happening back home, offering the kind of details about the fires that were most important for Northerners — wind speed and direction, air temperatures, ground temperatures, number of "boots on the ground," the distance of the fires from our home communities. Westwick was the guy with those numbers, and a knack for giving us the information we all craved.

"In crisis communication," he says, "there is a philosophy that I live by — in an environment of uncertainty, details help."

Westwick is not a Northerner by birth. He grew up in Mission, B.C. and attended university on Vancouver Island. While working at a 7-Eleven in B.C. he heard about a communications opportunity in Yellowknife for IServeU, an organization promoting open-source, collaborative decision-making that aimed to give everyone a say in government policy. While some might have been skeptical of how it would work, Westwick was keen on being part of the innovative idea, while getting to explore somewhere new. A year later, in 2016, IServeU was still not up and running. As Westwick told CBC in a 2016 interview, "we overshot our ambition."

He eventually moved on to work for various NWT government departments as an information officer. One of the main foci of his training has been in all-hazards emergency management. As someone who has always been interested in crisis management, he took on the role of communications officer for Health and Social Services during the first year of the COV-

"WE WERE DEALING WITH AN EMERGENCY ON A SCALE THAT WAS NEW TO US."

ID-19 pandemic. It was a strange and difficult time in people's lives, but Westwick says, "there's no other time where you feel a greater calling to help others." His ability to remain calm, collect information and share that with others was Westwick's way of doing his part. "I began to understand firsthand how people respond to emergencies and to understand the anxieties that people can feel in a crisis. I became a better communicator."

It wasn't always easy, as even experts in public health didn't have all the answers. "But ultimately it's just about providing timely, accurate and actionable information to people in terms that they understand and to recognize the anxiety and uncertainty that they're feeling."

Which brings us to this past summer. Ahead of the wildfires, the fire management team discussed the outlook for the upcoming season. Everything predicted a very tough summer, mainly because of the expected drought conditions. Still, none of the information they had could have prepared the NWT government for the impact this wildfire season had on people and communities, Westwick says.

"We were dealing with an emergency on a scale that was new to us and there were a lot of people who really rose to the occasion."

The first community to evacuate was Hay River in May. Behchokǫ̀ followed on July 24 and residents headed to Yellowknife for shelter. Nearly two dozen structures burnt down and in the following weeks, communities including Fort Smith, Hay River and Yellowknife all evacuated. Fire tore through the town of Enterprise, leaving only a few houses standing, and it seemed there was no end to the dry conditions and strong winds coming their way.

Westwick was on the fire lines as much as he could be, even tagging along on a few helicopter surveillance flights, to get the most accurate, real-time info available for Northerners. "There's value in someone being out there," he says. "It gives you a clearer idea of what's going on and the scope of the thing."

But Westwick was not the only one gathering information for the public. He was one of five team members in his department, each assigned to specific fires as the hundreds burned out of control. This meant ping-ponging back and forth between communities.

"I was in Hay River and K'atl'odeeche for their first fire in May and June," he says. He moved to Behchokǫ̀ in July, then to Yellowknife and later returned to Hay River for nearly three weeks.

"I've been honoured to play a role in this huge event," he says "It's been special to work shoulder to shoulder with people who have been fighting wild fires for decades."

He also praises

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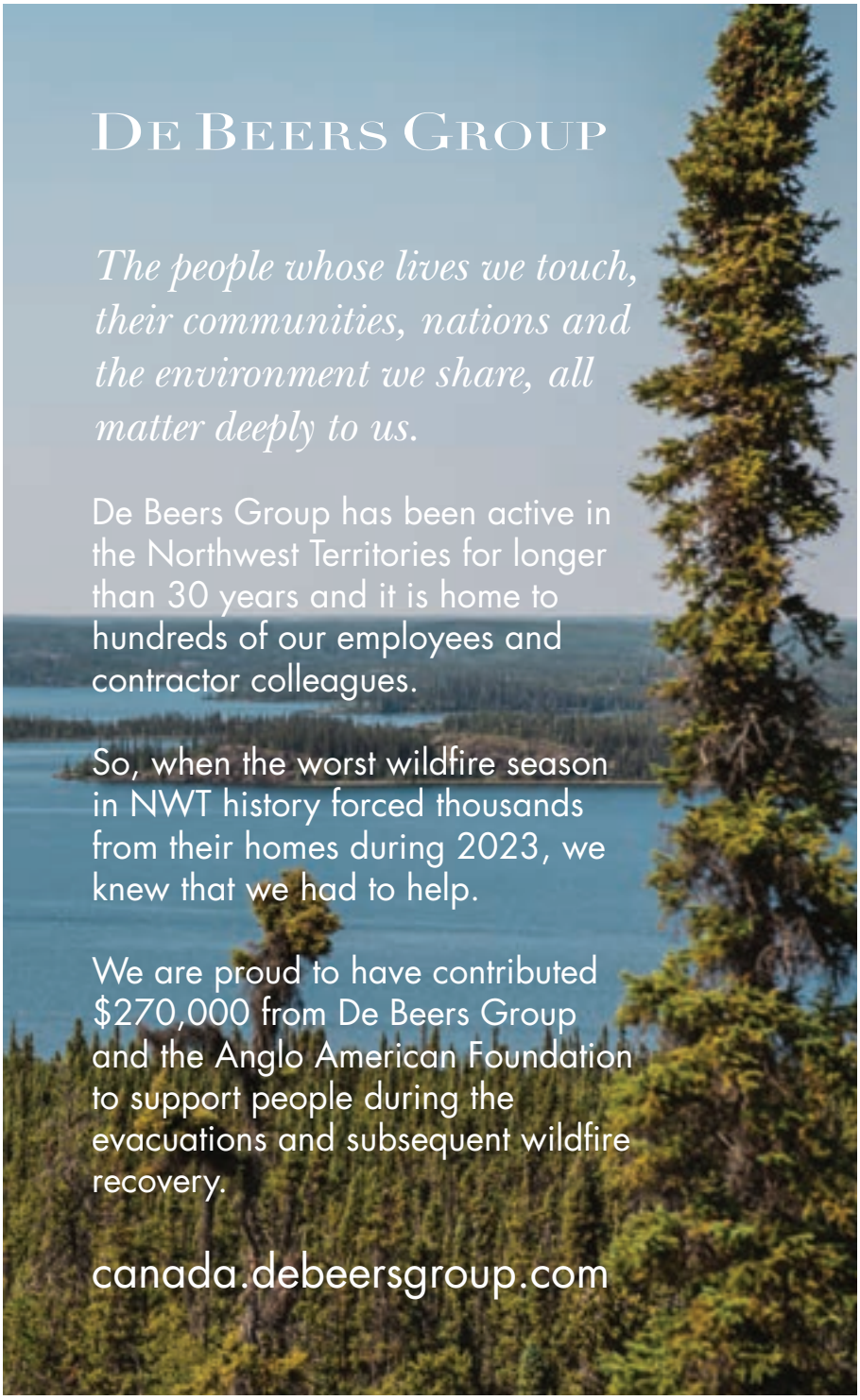

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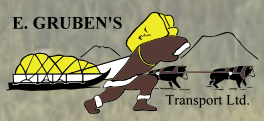

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THE SUMMER OF 2023

THE WILDLAND FIRES THAT SWEPT THE NORTH — AND MUCH OF CANADA — TELL US ONE THING: THINGS AREN'T THE SAME ANYMORE. HOPEFULLY, THE EXPERIENCE WILL HELP US FIND THE WAY FORWARD.

Photo by Bill Braden

THIS PAST SUMMER was one that will go down in the history books. Sadly, for all the wrong reasons. By the end of the season, the territories had experienced more than 300 fires, which burned some 410,000 hectares. More than two-thirds of the population —29,000 people — were evacuated from their homes and communities. Shane Thompson, the NWT minister of environment and climate change, called it "the most damaging wildfire season" the territory had ever seen.

It was a similar story across Canada, which experienced the worst season on record. The Yukon has its own stories to tell with the evacuations of Mayo and Old Crow. Even Nunavut, above the treeline, was touched as fire forced the evacuation of Bathurst Inlet in the central Arctic.

In the pages that follow, we focus on the largest northern story, that of the NWT. In three principal feature articles, we go through a "before," a "during," and an "after". The people, the locations, and times change from one article to the next in an effort to portray a broad-based experience that touched so many communities and individual lives. In between, we go into closer detail on other experiences — the evacuation of long-term care patients in Yellowknife, the experiences of the smallest communities, the lives of firefighters, and the stories of the volunteers who stayed behind to help.

Our hope is that you'll read our stories as a package and, from that, find a rich picture of experiences and emotions. Perhaps even a sense of how we move forward in a changing environment. It's been an emotional journey putting it all together. We can only imagine what it means to the people you'll meet here.

COMMUNITIES THREATENED BY WILDFIRE

When Hay River residents experienced their first wildfire evacuation to Yellowknife last May, no one expected it would be just the beginning of a tumultuous wildfire season. But as hot and dry conditions spread across the North fires burned out of control chasing residents from one hot spot to another and threatening territorial communities and highways through the summer and into the fall. Here is a look at some of the most life threatening fires.

Yukon

1. Old Crow (OC-009): Tack Lake Fires - five km from Old Crow threatened evacuation - burned 290 hectares
2. Eagle Plains (OC-007) the Eagle River fire reached three km from the famous Eagle Plains hotel on the Dempster Highway - burned 4,000 hectares
3. East McQuesten (MA-011) one of many fires in the Mayo/Keno region, was 15 km north of the South Mc-Questen Road, threatened the Eagle Gold Mine and caused a short evacuation - burned 13,688 hectares
4. Mayo/Talbot Creek Fire (MA-033) was four km from Mayo - burned 5,000 hectares
5. Takhini Bridge Fire (XY-019) was two km south of the Takhini River Bridge threatening the Alaska Highway in the Whitehorse area - burned 1,546 hectares

Northwest Territories

6. Inuvik Fire (EV014) reached 12 km from the town threatening evacuation - burned 35,383 hectares
7. Tulita Fires (VQ006, VQ009) one fire reached 12 km southwest of Tulita - burned 55,173 hectares
8. Sambaa K'e Fire (FS001) reached 10 km from Sambaa K'e and the community was evacuated to Fort Simpson - burned 541,766 hectares
9. Sambaa K'e (FS010) was 75 km northwest of Saamba K'e, near Highway 1 to Fort Simpson - burned 139, 145 hectares
10. Jean Marie River Fire (FS 028) reached ten km from Jean Marie River on the access road north of Highway 1, and the community was evacuated to Fort Simpson - burned 328 hectares
11. Cameron Hills, Tathlina Lake Fire (SS 067) on the Alberta border, reached 18 km from Highway 1 - burned 430,000 hectares
12. Hay River/Kakisa/Enterprise/K'atl'odeeche Fire (SS052) breached Enterprise, crossed Highway 1 and reached the town of Hay River. Kakisa was issued a written evacuation order. The fire caused the second Hay River evacuation where Fort Smith evacuees were sheltering - burned 521,681 hectares
13. K'atl'odeeche First Nation Fire (SS05) breached the community and destroyed several buildings. The K'atl'odeeche/Hay River evacuees fled to Yellowknife - burned 3,209 hectares
14. Fort Smith/Taltson Fires (SS022, SS019) reached 25 km from Fort Smith. Fort Smith residents initially evacuated to Hay River - burned 550,957 hectares
15. Fort Smith Fire (SS046) Fire was 23 km from Fort Smith when it merged with SS022 - burned 83,810 hectares
16. Wood Buffalo Complex (Incl SS069) reached within 4 km of Fort Smith causing final evacuation of the town - burned 504,752 hectares
17. Behchokǫ̀/Yellowknife Fire (ZF015) breached Behchokǫ̀, levelled Highway 3 cabins and crossed Highway 3, the only highway to Yellowknife. Behchokǫ̀ residents first evacuated to Yellowknife when it breached their community. This fire was eventually held 15 km from Yellowknife and caused the evacuation of the city, plus Dettah, N'Dilo and Ingraham Trail residents - burned 215,280 hectares
18. Dettah Fire (ZF085) reached 29 km southwest of Dettah, located across Yellowknife Bay from the capital - burned 73,109 hectares
19. Wekweeti Fires (ZF009, ZF008, ZF007) reached two km from the community - burned 50 hectares
20. Ingraham Trail Fires (ZF011, ZF015) swept through Yellowknife cottage country and reached 12 km north of Prelude Lake and 11 km northwest of Prosperous Lake. Residents were ordered to evacuate - burned 215,280 hectares
21. Duncan Lake Fires (ZF019, ZF012) reached the Duncan Dam (part of Bluefish Hydro) and Neck Lake. It was 18 km north of the Ingraham Trail - burned 113, 139 hectares

Nunavut

22. Bathurst Inlet - a tundra fire came within three km of the historic lodge and prompted a Nunavut government evacuation order - burned 150 hectares

“ALL OF A SUDDEN, IT’S LIKE THIS IS THE CULMINATION OF A BUNCH OF GOOD SUMMERS.”

AS SMOKE HUNG HEAVY IN THE AIR, YELLOWKNIFE RESIDENTS HAD ONLY ONE QUESTION FOR THEIR LEADERSHIP: WHAT'S THE PLAN?

> BY COOPER LANGFORD WITH ADDITIONAL REPORTING FROM BILL BRADEN

HEAVY WEATHER CARMEN BRADEN SURVEYS THE SMOKE-LADEN SKY OVER THE INGRAHAM TRAIL AHEAD OF THE YELLOWKNIFE EVACUATION. Photo by Canadian Press/Bill Braden

>> On June 30, a lightning strike near Lake Awry, about 65 kilometres northwest of Yellowknife, ignited a small fire. In other years, it might not have raised too much concern beyond the obvious need to monitor the situation. Fire on the land, after all, is part of a natural cycle that, in the bigger picture, not only leads to forest regeneration but also helps control future fires by consuming available forest fuel in smaller bites. Traditional Indigenous knowledge has long recognized this, and it has informed wildland fire policy over many years, the exceptions arising only when fire threatens human life, critical habitat, infrastructure, or cultural sites and buildings. To squelch every fire, in the words of Mike Westwick, the NWT government's fire information officer, is to take on a debt.

But 2023 was different. The past few years had been relatively quiet on the wildland fire front in the NWT and the forests were laden with fuel. High temperatures through the summer and drought conditions that turned the land to tinder were raising the stakes on a debt that was about to come due.

On July 13, according to the Canadian Wildland Fire Information System, another lightning strike ignited a small blaze at Duncan Lake, 55 kilometres northwest of Yellowknife. It was followed by another strike on Aug. 2 to the southeast, in the vicinity of Watta Lake. In the weeks that followed, wind and dry land would conspire against fire managers, causing those fires

LOOMING THREAT
THE FIRE THAT STARTED NEAR DUNCAN LAKE BEARS DOWN ON THE YELLOW DOG LODGE, NORTH OF YELLOWKNIFE. THE LODGE SURVIVED.

Photo courtesy Gordon Gin

to grow toward the NWT's capital city and the neighbouring communities of Dettah and N'dilo. Eventually, all three would be forced to evacuate — the last of nine evacuations in the territory that summer and the largest ever in NWT history.

GARTH WALLBRIDGE came to a final conclusion as he surveyed the horizon from his cabin compound at Pontoon Lake, where he spent as much time as he could when he didn't need to be in Yellowknife, about a 30-minute drive away. Wallbridge and his wife, Pat, had a home in the city of 22,000's Kam Lake neighbourhood. But the Pontoon Lake property, which Wallbridge nicknamed "the ranch," was perhaps his favourite place.

He had been scaling back his law practice in recent years. In its place, he was devoting more time to restoring an old freighter canoe in the large workshop he had built out here on the Ingraham Trail, a winding road outside Yellowknife that hosts hundreds of cabins as well as campgrounds and boat launches. He'd planned to put the freighter in the water this summer and spend several weeks motoring around the entire circumference of Great Slave Lake. No one had ever made a trip like that before, as far as Wallbridge could tell from the historical record. But now, heading toward the August long weekend, the trio of billowing smoke plumes dominating the view left no doubt: He would have to leave his plan for another year.

Photo Courtesy Garth Wallbridge

Not that the decision came as a surprise. Wallbridge had seen the risk of delay building for weeks. Having worked a number of seasons as a forest fire fighter in his younger years in Manitoba and in the NWT, he was experienced. And, as a proud Métis, he was knowledgeable about the ways of the land. He'd already delayed his departure as he worked to increase the layers of safety precautions at Pontoon Lake, clearing brush, installing water pumps, and running hoses to sprinkler systems. Wallbridge had also

Photo courtesy Garth Wallbridge

PLANS DELEAYED
GARTH WALLBRIDGE **(LEFT)** HAD PLANNED TO PADDLE GREAT SLAVE LAKE. INSTEAD HE SPENT THE SUMMER PROTECTING HIS PROPERTY AT PONTOON LAKE FROM THE WILDLAND FIRE THREAT.

FUEL FOR WILDLAND FIRES HAD BEEN BUILDING UP. SOMETHING WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TO IT.

been paying close attention to evacuations that had already driven residents of Hay River and the neighbouring Kátł'odeeche First Nation from their homes in May and, only a week earlier, from Behchokǫ̀, about 100 kilometres from Yellowknife up Highway 3. Many of those people had come to the city for safety.

Another thing was clear to Wallbridge: He needed more hoses and sprinklers. "I've seen hot embers, and when I say 'embers' imagine something the size of a felt marker… A full-size felt marker, chunks of tree branches flying through the air," he would later say. "If those are landing on buildings or next to buildings, you increase your chances of saving the building if you've got lots of water."

Most of the suppliers in Yellowknife were low on inventory, so Wallbridge got on the phone and started calling stores in Edmonton. By the end of the day, he'd ordered eight new lengths of hose — four rolls at 100 feet and four rolls at 50 feet—basically doubling the amount he already had on hand. A friend in the Alberta capital agreed to pick up the hoses the next day and ship them up.

Back in town, Rebecca Alty was also having foreboding thoughts. As mayor of Yellowknife, she had, in a sense, been playing a role in firefighting since the start of the season. Yellowknife held a central position in NWT emergency planning as a destination for evacuees from other communities. Its multiplex sports facility had already been used that spring as an emergency shelter for residents from the Hay River area. (One, who was familiar with the spartan facilities from the evacuation due to flooding the year before, quipped to local media, "at least we had some idea of what to bring with us.") But Alty had deeper concerns.

The calm over the past few fire seasons had offered welcome respite in a part of the country where the brief, 10-week window of summer is considered payback for enduring the long and dark months of winter. But Alty was concerned: Fire fuel had been building up. Something was going to happen to it, sooner or later. "In 2020, we barely had any smoke. In 2021, no smoke. And then, all of a sudden, it's like this is the culmination of a bunch of good summers."

She was not alone in her thinking at City Hall, where officials were talking to the NWT government's experts in the department of environment and climate change about the rising risks. Calls were also going out to local heavy-equipment contractors to find out who might be available to help reinforce fire protections around the city. A few days later, on Aug. 8, the Tuesday after the long weekend, Yellowknife's city council held a special meeting and voted unanimously to approve emergency fire countermeasures inside the municipal boundaries. Aiding the decision was the federal government's early release of 2024 emergency-management funding a few days before.

"It's very important to stress that our community is not currently threatened by fire," city manager Sheila Bassi-Kellet told the CBC at the time. "We are at this point looking at taking precautionary measures."

FIRE IS NOT INTELLIGENT, but it does follow a logic dictated by its environment. Aspen doesn't burn quickly, and stands can slow the pace of flames. Black spruce does, so fire spreads easily unless it is tempered by rain or relative humidity. Wind will fan flames with additional oxygen and flatten them, heating the ground ahead and making it more vulnerable to combustion as embers and sparks travel through the air.

As August progressed, people in the Yellowknife area were seeing that process in the trio of fires that had started in the Awry Lake, Duncan Lake and Watta Lake regions. The fires had grown massively and were forming something of a distant ring around the city, but it was not an unfamiliar situation. The residents had spent much of the summer of 2014 — the "Summer of Smoke" — indoors as two wildfires moved close to the city and robbed them of a treasured season. Visits to the emergency ward by asthmatics doubled that year, and the NWT government spent $55 million —eight times its budget —fighting fires across the territory.

Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

But 2023 was different, somehow. It wasn't just the smoke or the number of fires. There was a new kind of anxiety. Perhaps it was the presence of evacuees in the city, who carried stories and experiences that might be a foretelling of a potential future for Yellowknife itself. Maybe it was the conditions that many were noticing — ground that crunched underfoot, low water levels that were starving hydroelectric power stations, the greater number of bears in town. Maybe it was the memory of images of past fires that razed Fort McMurray. Or Lytton, B.C. Or Maui.

Whatever the case, people were hungry for information about what might happen next, constantly checking their phones and news outlets for slivers of detail and sharing reports on weather and wind forecasts via social media.

One source where they were finding little relief was in the comments and guidance from municipal and territorial government leaders. It seemed like there was only one message: At this time, Yellowknife is not at risk. Take steps to reduce the risk of fire damage to your property. Set aside a few days' worth of food and drinks. Pack a bag with some clothes and other essentials, such as medications, identification, and insurance paperwork. Just in case.

INITIAL ATTACK SOUTH AFRICAN FIREFIGHTERS DOUSE A SPOT FIRE NORTH OF YELLOWKNIFE.

Photo by Ron Allen

It was thin gruel for a population wrapped in blankets of smoke. They had only one question: What's the plan? The word from the NWT government was basically that everything was under con-

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AIR ATTACK (LEFT)
A FIRE BOSS AIR TANKER DROPS ITS PAYLOAD

IN TOWN (RIGHT)
YELLOWKNIFE MAYOR REBECCA ALTY MEETS WITH MEMBERS OF THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES.

trol. The city, which was busy reinforcing fire defences, was more forthcoming, but equally unsatisfying. The plan was to shelter in place. If sections of the city needed to evacuate — notably the west side enclaves of Grace Lake and Kam Lake, closest to the fire on Highway 3, which was the main threat — those who couldn't stay with friends could go to the multiplex. In the unlikely event that space filled up, people could set up temporary camps in the Old Town, by Great Slave Lake.

Frustrating as the message sounded, there wasn't much more the city could do. As Alty would note, its jurisdiction only went as far as the municipal boundary. "We're all just local authorities. Where a municipality's plan ends, the territorial government's plan begins." It's a fair point, but it wasn't persuasive in the moment. And as it emerged that the city had skipped its FireSmart work over the past two seasons due to a combination of weather issues and budget constraints, people simply tuned out. Their primary sources of information became Cabin Radio, a modestly staffed online station that was providing spectacular minute-by-minute coverage of the NWT's fires, and television updates on CBC North from Mike Westwick, who one observer wryly noted had emerged as the summer's FDR with his nightly "fireside chats."

Out at Pontoon Lake, Wallbridge decided much of it had simply become noise. "The whole idea of shelter-in-place, that's a 20th century concept that has no place in the 21st century boreal forest…. Times have changed. Fire has changed." From here on out, he and Pat would make decisions for themselves. He understood fire, he understood the bush, and they were both grounded, emotionally and financially.

SUNDAY, AUG. 13, arrived as a relief. For the first time in weeks, the air was clear of smoke. It was even sunny. Yellowknife could breathe, but the calm wouldn't last. Out on Highway 3, high winds had whipped the fire, causing it to leap across a burn line that fire fighters had laid down some weeks earlier. The line had been a solid success in blocking the fire's progress toward Yellowknife, but weather conditions had conspired against it. Two small fingers of flame were now on its far side, one on the north flank of the highway, and one on the south.

As the smoke rolled back into Yellowknife, people were digesting news of the evacuation underway in Fort Smith. Within a few hours, the residents of Enterprise, Hay River, and Kátł'odeeche First Nation would be ordered to leave as well in what would become the most frightening evacuation of the summer.

But the situation was deteriorating in Yellowknife, too. Overnight, the fingers of flame that had leapt the burn line had grown into what fire officials were describing as serious breaches. The flames were still 30 kilometres from the city, but tensions were running high, especially with heavy smoke and reduced visibility taking the tactic of water-bombing essentially off the table.

That evening, at 6 p.m., Yellowknife's city council convened a special meeting and declared a local state of emergency, giving the municipality authority to take over privately owned equipment and resources and direct them toward reinforcing fire defences. The following evening, it issued an evacuation alert for the neighbourhoods of Grace Lake and Kam Lake.

Pat Wallbridge was in town working on an art project with friends when the evacuation alert came down. She called Garth at Pontoon Lake to ask if he'd heard the news. The couple talked on the phone, and Garth suggested Pat come out to the cabin, where they'd be farther from the fire making its way toward the city. Pat

agreed and drove out.

Later that evening, the couple talked through their options. Garth suggested that, if things got worse, Pat should get on a flight out of Yellowknife. He'd take their two dogs and their cat, load them into his freighter canoe, and motor off a hundred kilometres or so down Great Slave Lake to somewhere away from the flames. He had everything he needed in the way of supplies, having bought food and gas for his trip weeks before.

THE AIR WAS AS THICK with rumours as it was with smoke on the morning of Wednesday, Aug. 16. The fire on Highway 3 had moved to within 16 kilometres of Yellowknife's nearest boundary (about as close as it would ultimately get) and nobody was left wondering whether the NWT government would issue an evacuation order. The only question was how much longer it would take.

People were already leaving the city in droves of frustration. By mid-morning, long lines were snaking around the ticket counters and the security check-in at Yellowknife's airport as people tried to get onto departing flights. The RCMP announced it was advising non-essential civilian staff to pre-emptively evacuate. The city closed public access to all municipal facilities in the afternoon and its decision was soon followed by the banks.

People could also see government workers leaving in substantial numbers, prompting some to conclude they had inside information. Cabin Radio reported that a message had gone out from the finance department saying non-essential staff was not free to simply leave and expect to be paid by working remotely outside the territory. Anybody who wanted to go would have to arrange annual leave with their supervisor.

The only place that seemed determined to stay open was Javaroma, a local coffeeshop. It had announced that morning it would serve free coffee and tea to anyone in uniform for the next few weeks as a way of saying thank you for their contribution to protecting the city. (It was only one of a tsunami of acts of kindness that NWT residents shared with emergency workers and volunteers, and later received themselves in southern communities supporting them through the evacuations.)

Behind the scenes, an evacuation order was working its way through the territorial government process. There were fears the fire on Highway 3, under certain conditions, could reach the city limits within two or three days. Worse, there was a possibility it might link up with the fire that had started near Duncan Lake, which was burning north of Wallbridge's property and threatening the Ingraham Trail. It's hard to pin down the timelines, but Shane Thompson, the minister for municipal and community affairs who would issue the order, later laid out the scenario in an interview with CBC North. If the two fires combined, it would close the highway, he said. "The airport was going to be non-useable, and we'd have 22,000 people stuck in a situation where the fire would cause a lot of problems. So, we [in consultation with the city] collectively decided to evacuate."

Finally, at 7:30 p.m., and after a brief delay, the news conference that had been anticipated since that morning got underway. Yellowknife and surrounding areas were now under an evacuation order. Ev-

WE'D HAVE 22,000 STUCK WHERE FIRE WOULD CAUSE BIG PROBLEMS.

eryone was expected to leave by noon on Friday. Those who lived on the Ingraham Trail and in Dettah were asked to head out that night to facilitate the flow of traffic. Several communities in Alberta, including Fox Creek, Valleyview, and Red Deer, were offering themselves as host communities. For those who could not drive, evacuation flights would begin the next day. People were asked to pack no more than what would fit into a standard carry-on bag due to space limitations.

GARTH WALLBRIDGE woke up on the day the evacuation order would be issued having rethought the plan he and Pat discussed the night before. Like the government officials working behind the scenes, he was concerned that the two fires might link up. It was a nightmare scenario, one that was beyond anything he could handle in his freighter canoe. He and Pat talked some more. "I said, 'Honey, I really think you should take the animals before there's any evacuation order before the fires close the road. You should take them and head south.' She said 'Yeah, that makes sense.' "

A short time later, Pat got in the car with the dogs and the cat. "The last thing she said to me was, 'Don't be a hero,' And she knows I'm a safe guy."

FIRE FIGHTERS AMID FOREST REMAINS ALONG HIGHWAY 3.

Photo courtesy Government of the Northwest Territories

Wallbridge had also dismissed any thoughts of staying behind to protect his property at Pontoon Lake. The last thing he wanted to do was end up as a "stupid citizen" who finds themselves in trouble and has to distract fire fighters and their resources from their most important job. The thought was mortifying. "At every level, I was thinking about how other people might be impacted because I decided to stick around and try to save my cabin. I just had to say, 'OK. I'm outta here.' "

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HOME TOWN
SAAMBA K'E IS ON TROUT LAKE, SOUTH OF FORT SIMPSON.

Four Evacuations That Didn't Make National News

THE MAJOR EVACUATIONS IN THE NWT THIS SUMMER EARNED HEADLINES ACROSS THE COUNTRY. THERE WERE FOUR MORE IN SMALL COMMUNITIES THAT MUSTN'T BE OVERLOOKED. > By Dana Bowen

Saamba K'e

When fire officials surveyed the risk to Saamba K'e, a tiny hamlet on Trout Lake, west of Hay River, they knew they had to get residents out before smoke from a nearby wildland fire that had grown to more than 80,000 hectares made it impossible. The fire was still 30 kilometres from the community of less than 100 people. But access was fly-in only, and time was of the essence.

With the window to evacuate closing, residents packed onto two flights and headed to Fort Simpson, about 150 kilometres to the north. Over the next few weeks, the fire would grow as close as five kilometres to Saamba K'e. Some buildings were lost when an ignition operation, meant to protect the community, went wrong.

Residents returned after a month, safe from fire but still facing poor air quality. Saamba K'e First Nation stepped in, providing air purifiers for Elders and small children until the smoke naturally dissipated.

Wekweètì

By late June, three fires had clustered together outside of Wekweètì, a fly-in community during summer about 140 kilometres north of Yellowknife. An evacuation order was issued June 28, but residents had to wait for a day for a plane to fly them out to Yellowknife, where many stayed with family. Fortunately, the evacuation didn't last long. The fires were brought under control a few days later and fire crews had built control lines around Wekweètì. The NWT government lifted the evacuation order on July 3 and offered residents free return flights the next day.

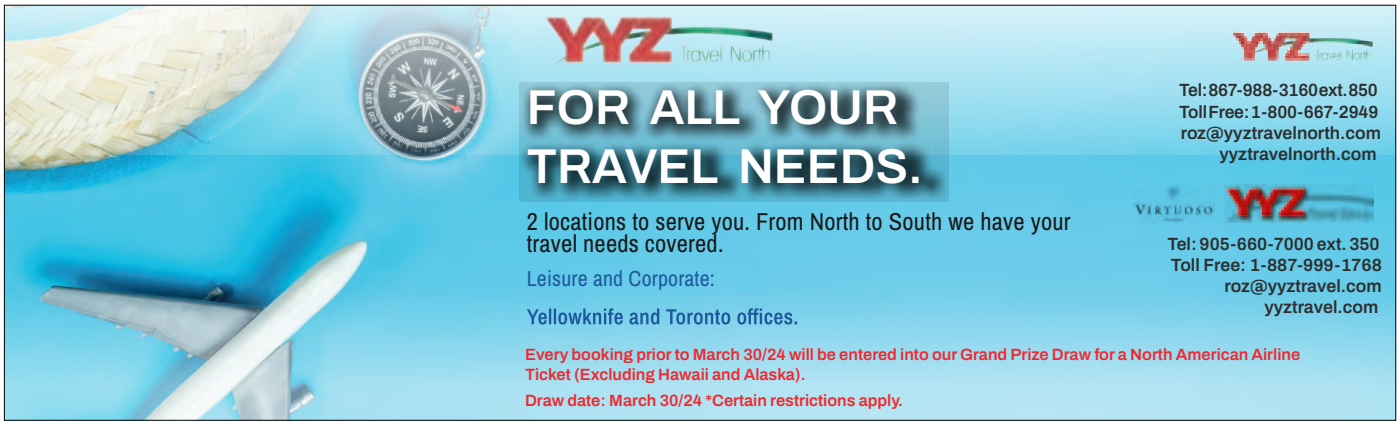
Jean Marie River

Jean Marie River First Nation, a small community southeast of Fort Simpson, was evacuated the same week in August that saw the evacuations of Fort Smith, the Hay River area, and the Yellowknife area. The community is accessible by a road to Highway 1, but the highway was shut down due to fire, officially closing it off as an evacuation route. Some residents braved the drive anyway while others were evacuated by air.

After 11 days, the evacuation order was downgraded to an alert, and Jean Marie River residents, who'd gone to Fort Simpson, were able to return. Telecommunications services were still down, however, and residents would have to go door-to-door to notify each other if another evacuation was ordered. Fortunately, that did not happen.

Kakisa

When the NWT government issued the evacuation order for Kakisa on Aug. 17, telecommunication services to the small community northwest of Enterprise were down due to wildland fire activity. The 40 residents received notice of the order a few days later—by mail. The news was shared largely by word of mouth, and most people went to Fort Simpson to wait it out. The order eventually lifted on Sept. 9, when the territorial government announced on Facebook that the evacuation order had been downgraded to an alert.



“GOD FORBID IF THE FIRE COMES, WE’RE JUMPING IN THE WATER.”

KDFN RESERVE ON THE HAY RIVER, MAY 14

THE EVACUATION ORDER FOR HAY RIVER CAME DOWN ON AUG.13. ONLY A DAY EARLIER, THE TOWN HAD BEEN TAKING IN EVACUEES FROM FORT SMITH. NOW EVERYONE WAS PULLING UP STAKES AGAIN—IF THE HIGHWAY COULD STAY OPEN.

> BY RHIANNON RUSSELL

>> Wayne Korotash woke up around 7:30 a.m., made a cup of coffee, and turned on the TV for a bit of background noise. The house, a rental, was quiet. His wife, Melissa Hofmann, and their two teenaged kids had left Hay River three days earlier for their son's hockey camp in Sylvan Lake, Alta. It was just Korotash and Pickles, the family's Cavalier King Charles Spaniel poodle mix, at home on this clear-skied morning, Sunday, Aug. 13. Although it was windy, Korotash thought perhaps he'd go golfing.

He was looking forward to his family's move back into their own home, which had been damaged in a May 2022 flood that forced them and the rest of Hay River's 3,500 residents to evacuate. Their house is right on the riverbank, and water and ice destroyed the basement and foundation. While it was being renovated, they moved into this rental, about two or three blocks away. Fourteen months later, the work was now nearly done, and the family expected to move back in the next couple weeks. They'd already packed up many of their belongings and were storing them in their car trailer.

A few hours after he woke up, Korotash got a phone call from one of his employees at the local Home Hardware, the business he owned with Hofmann. The staffer was in Enterprise, a hamlet of 100 people about 40 kilometres down the highway, running a concession stand for that weekend's Gateway Jamboree. The employee said a forest fire near the small community of Kakisa, about an hour's drive to the northwest, was moving east at a rapid clip. "I think we're going to be evacuated," she said.

Korotash brushed it off. The air wasn't smoky, the sky wasn't dark—there was no indication whatsoever that Hay River was in danger. Plus, the community had already evacuated once due to a wildfire. Two evacuations in one summer was beyond the realm of possibility. Wasn't it?

AS THE DAY WENT ON, Korotash began to feel unsettled. From his house that Sunday afternoon, he noticed the highway was busier than usual. He drove into town to check in at his store and noticed vehicles lined up at the gas stations. Other residents, it seemed, knew more than he did.

They had reason to be on edge. The summer of 2023 was a summer of wildfires—and not just in the North. Canada experienced its worst fire season on record with 15-million hectares burned, more than five times the 10-year aver-

A WILDFIRE TANKER SOAKS DOWN THE BUSH NEAR FORT SMITH

-(Left) Photo by Rose Wallington; (Right) Photo by Pierre-Emannuel Chaillon

SPOT FIRE FLYING EMBERS IGNITE NEW FLAMES ON HIGHWAY 3 NEAR YELLOWKNIFE.

Photo by Bill Braden

Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

age. Hay River had already experienced the developing season. In mid-May, just after the snow melted, a wildfire forced the evacuation of the town and the neighbouring Kátł'odeeche First Nation (KFN). The latter lost several homes and buildings, including the band office.

At Home Hardware, Korotash backed up accounting information, removed his and Hofmann's hard drives from their computers, and turned off the servers—just in case. "There was a sense of urgency, a sense of panic that I was starting to pick up on," he says. "Your instincts were telling you something's not right."

"IT WAS KIND OF NIGHTMARISH... APOCALYPTIC."

Around 2 p.m., another employee called. She was concerned about the fire but had a shift at the store the next day and didn't want to leave town if it was going to put Korotash out. He told her to go. Her safety and comfort were most important. Then he started checking in with his other staff. His manager texted to say she was leaving for her son's place in High Level, Alta.

Korotash began to realize this was serious. "It was about that time things started rolling," he says. He called Hofmann to let her know what was going on, then drove

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RESPITE A CREW TAKES A PAUSE FROM FIRE FIGHTING IN HAY RIVER.

over to his parents' place to tell them they should leave. His mom didn't think it was necessary—were they really at risk? His parents had endured Hay River's "Great Flood" and evacuation in 1963. That event led to the creation of a new townsite upriver, though some people remained in what's now called Old Town.

As Korotash stood in his parents' house, trying to convince them, an emergency alert sounded on their phones: Hay River was under an evacuation order. Korotash felt sick to his stomach. "That sound is terrifying now," he says.

It was now 3 p.m. Korotash's parents began packing, and sirens started wailing in town as police and firefighters drove around, informing anyone who'd missed the alert. He headed back to his store, packing up the computers and hard drives, so he and Hofmann would have what they needed if the community burned down and they had to start over somewhere new.

As he was getting ready to leave, Korotash had trouble closing the overhead door in the warehouse; it had jumped the track and he didn't want to leave it open and risk products being stolen. He called a technician, but by then, everyone was focused on leaving town. So, he parked his delivery van in front of the door, hoping that would deter thieves. Then he headed home and began filling up his suitcase with clothing and anything else within eyesight before loading up his wife's Ford Expedition—she had driven his Ford F-150 to Sylvan Lake. Ready to leave, he let Hofmann know he and Pickles were on their way.

By early evening, the sky was dark and glowing orange. "It was kind of nightmarish and apocalyptic," Korotash says. That's when another employee called him. She'd been driving out of town but had to turn around. Highway 2 was engulfed by fire and evacuees were being sent back to Hay River.

There are only two ways out of the community. Highway 2 leads to Enterprise, where it ends at Highway 1, which travels south to Alberta. Highway 5 connects Hay River to Fort Smith, to the southeast, where it ends at a short

Photo by Pierre-Emmanuel Chaillon

Photo by Paul Flammond

GIVING THANKS FIREFIGHTERS RECIEVE TRADITIONAL THANKS BEFORE THE EVACUATION OF FORT SMITH AND NEARBY COMMUNITIES.

Photo by Pierre Emmanuel Chaillon

Photo by Pierre Emmanuel Chaillon

Alberta road heading to the edges of Wood Buffalo National Park. Fort Smith, though, had just been evacuated the day before due to another wildfire, and Highway 5 was closed intermittently as the flames travelled across the road. Hay River was now cut off.

Residents who made it out before the Highway 2 closure later told harrowing stories of driving through Enterprise as the fire moving in from Kakisa razed the small community. The paint on their cars peeled and headlights melted. The air was thick with smoke and flying embers under an orange sky, and flames devoured trees along the road. The Town of Hay River, meanwhile, was coordinating air transportation for those who needed it. That night, 215 residents flew to Grande Prairie, Alberta.

The fire bearing down on Hay River had travelled 39 kilometres that day, driven by the wind. Around 8 p.m., it damaged the fibre line in Enterprise, cutting Northwestel telecommunications to Hay River and several other communities in the region. Now, except for the few Starlink satellite customers, there was no phone service, no internet, no way of getting official updates on the fire, no means of communicating with the outside world. Korotash couldn't let Hofmann know that he was stuck in Hay River. He was worried.

That night, he and Pickles drove north through town to the edge of Great Slave

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Lake, where the family keeps an RV. He wasn't comfortable spending the night in their rental, which was located right on the highway. "I didn't want to be waking up in the middle of the night and not have anywhere to go," he says. "So I thought, okay, we'll go to the lake. If God forbid, the fire comes that far, we're jumping in the water."

THE SPEED AT WHICH a wildfire travels depends on a few factors: weather conditions, the type of combustible fuel available, and topography. A fire will spread faster uphill because heat rises and dries out fuel further up the slope. Wind is one of the biggest factors—and the most unpredictable. It can supply a wildfire with more oxygen, dry out fuels, and push the fire across the landscape.

High winds played a role in the Town of Fort Smith's decision to evacuate on Aug. 12, due to a fire in Wood Buffalo National Park. With forecasted gusts of 60 kilometres per hour for the following day, Parks Canada incident commander Jane Park told Cabin Radio that the blaze may move northeast and force a closure of Highway 5.

The community had had the same hot, dry conditions as the rest of the South Slave region that summer. The Fort Smith area typically sees about 64 millimetres of precipitation in August. This year, there were only five millimetres.

Not only were conditions ripe for the fast-moving Wood Buffalo wildfire, its behaviour was also unusual, says Jay Macdonald, Fort Smith's deputy mayor as well as the manager of forest management

Photo courtesy NWT SPCA

WHO'LL LET THE DOGS OUT?

In Fort Smith, that would be Anna Gervais, Robin Wachter, and their team of volunteers at Northern Hound Supply.

Anna Gervais had already been planning to stay behind on Aug. 12 when the evacuation order was issued for Fort Smith. Someone had to look after the pets left behind after people boarding emergency buses and planes were told they couldn't bring their animals. Gervais was in a good position to step up.

A co-owner of Northern Hound Supply, a grooming salon, pet supply store, and boarding kennel, with her fiancé Robin Wachter, Gervais already knew many of the animals in Fort Smith. She and Wachter also had the supplies to care for them.

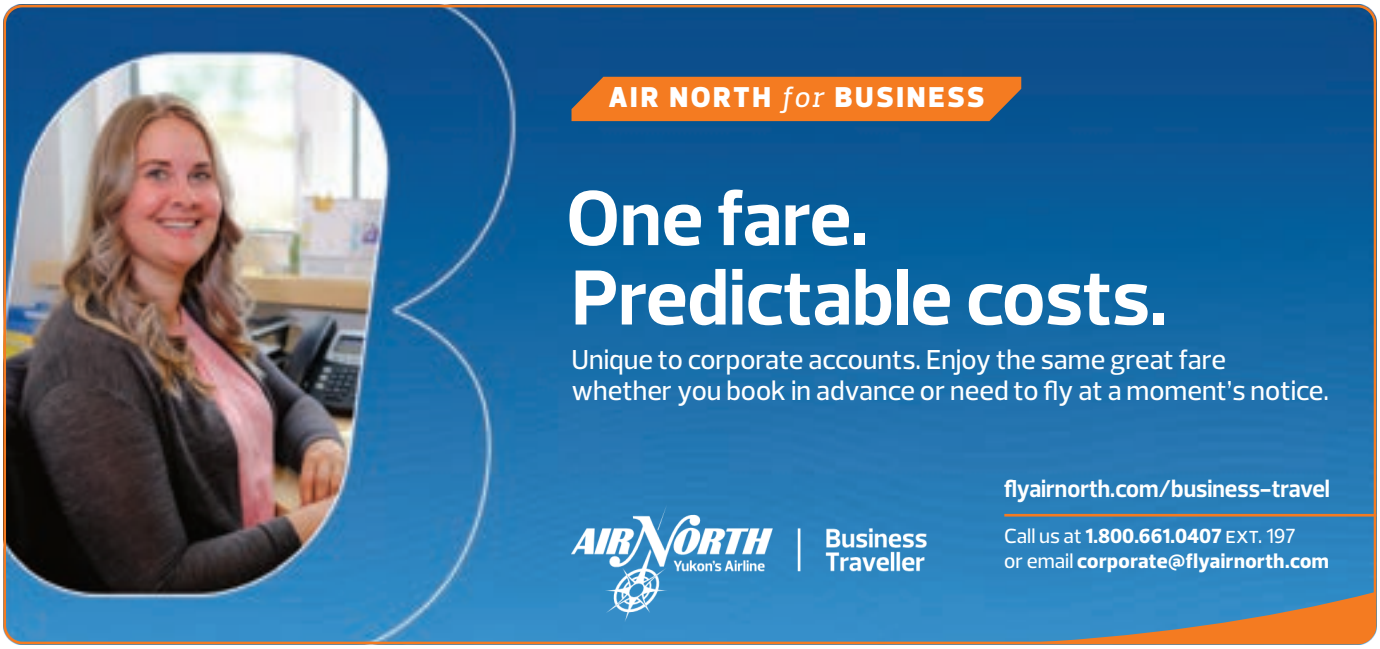
For the first couple of days after the evacuation, Wachter, Gervais, and her parents collected animals that had been left behind. They filled up the 27 kennels at Northern Hound, and then Gervais started a list of all the other Fort Smith pets that remained in people's homes.

In all, there were 43 houses that she, Wachter, and several volunteers divvied up. Every day, they'd go in the morning to let out the dogs or cats (and in some cases, to check on the fish, rabbits, chickens, and birds) and return in the evening to feed the animals dinner and bring them inside for the night. First responders in town, including firefighters and nurses, came by Northern Hound after their shifts to walk dogs.

Gervais marvelled at her community's efforts. After the Northwestel outage, residents who'd left would pass on the passwords to their Starlink satellite internet, which would get posted on their home's front door so the visiting volunteer could inform them about their pet's well-being. Evacuees who left behind gardens sent word that those who stayed could help themselves to vegetables. "It really brought out the best in so many people," Gervais says, "and I'm very proud of my town."

She and Wachter ultimately evacuated Fort Smith on Aug. 23, leaving Northern Hound in the hands of the volunteers who remained. They drove west on Highway 5 in smoky conditions, with occasional hot spots still visible in the ditches, with their three dogs and their landlord's four.

The scenes around Hay River and Enterprise, were devastating, Gervais says. But she and loved ones were safe. And thanks to their efforts, so were the pets of Fort Smith.



HELPING HANDS
FIRE FIGHTERS FROM PENHOLD, ALTA., JOIN THE CREWS IN HAY RIVER.

Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

"TO NOT HEAR FROM HIM FOR A DAY... YOUR MIND GOES TO THE WORST PLACE."

services in the NWT government's Department of Environment and Climate Change. "It's burned through 10-year-old burns that should theoretically slow it down significantly," he says. A change of pace could have made it easier to tackle the fire. "That was not happening."

On Aug. 11, Fort Smith issued an evacuation alert, meaning residents should be prepared to leave on short notice. When the evacuation order went out the next day, people were advised to leave in eight hours. If they had nowhere else to stay, they should head to the Hay River Community Centre, about a three-hour drive away on Highway 5. People registering for a bus or plane out of Fort Smith lined up at the rec centre with their belongings and pets. But they soon learned they couldn't bring their animals and had to leave them tied to the fencing or in crates in front of the rec centre.

WHEN KOROTASH WOKE UP on Aug. 14, Hay River was a ghost town, but it was still standing. All long-term care and hospital patients had flown to Yel-

lowknife. The Town of Hay River posted an update on its website at 10:30 a.m. that noted "significant structure damage" in Enterprise, as well as in the Patterson Road area and at Paradise Gardens south of Hay River. The update—which was likely not widely read at the time, given the Northwestel outage—advised remaining residents to get on a flight leaving for Fort McMurray that morning.

Korotash and his cousin, who was still in town, went to the airport-turned-muster-point to try to get more information. He was hopeful he'd be able to drive out, now that it seemed the fire had moved away from the highway.

During the May evacuation, Hofmann and the kids had left for Grande Prairie but he had stayed in Hay River. That fire was east of town and didn't jeopardize the highway south to Alberta. If it had, or if it had encroached on the townsite, Korotash says he would have left. He'd also felt obligated to stay back in May because he was getting phone calls from fire crews who needed supplies from Home Hardware. He wanted to help.

Now, firefighters again needed gear, including work gloves, headlamps, batteries, and hoses, so he drove to Home Hardware to unlock the store. Then he went home and moved the family's trailer and his daughter's car to a compound in the local industrial park, away from trees and ground cover. He figured the vehicles may be safer there if the fire entered the town.

By that point, some local business owners had shared access to their Starlink satellite internet so people could communicate with loved ones down south. At the Aurora Ford dealership that afternoon, Korotash FaceTimed Hofmann and the kids. She'd expected to hear from him Sunday night, after he left Hay River and got back into cell service in Steen River, Alta., about two hours south. "To not hear from him for about a day… your mind just goes to the worst place," Hofmann says. "Just anxiety-ridden and fearful."

Once she and the kids knew he was okay, they talked about what else to bring now that he had more time to pack thoughtfully. Hofmann requested the ashes of her parents, both of whom had died in the last few years. Korotash buckled the urn into the backseat. Their daughter didn't have any requests; their 14-year-old son asked for his Xbox and his cowboy boots. (Korotash remembered the former but forgot the latter.) "The other material things just really weren't important," Hofmann says."Getting Wayne out, that was

WAYNE KOROTASH, MELISSA HOFMANN, THEIR KIDS, AND PICKLES.

Photo courtesy Wayne Korotash and family

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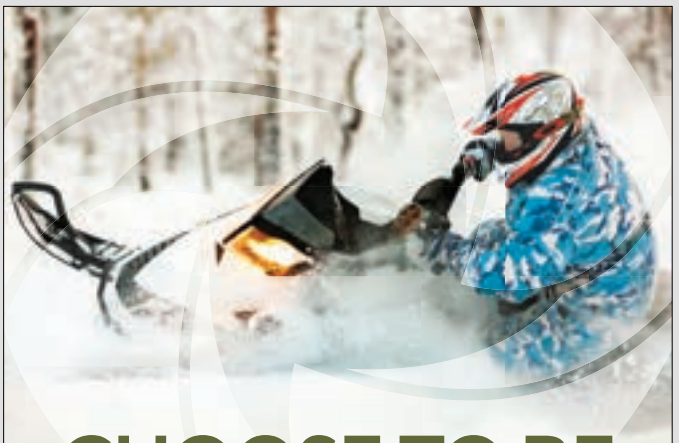

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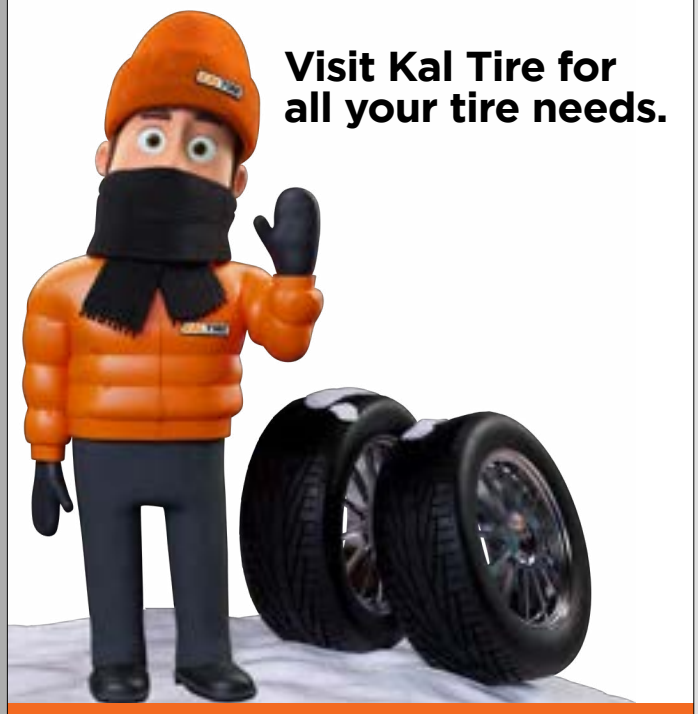

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the most critical thing."

The next day, Korotash and Hofmann had an emotional conversation and decided he'd try to make a break for it via the highway. He'd seen posts on social media the day before by people who'd made it safely to Alberta. Hofmann told him the kids were worried about him, and he knew then that he had to leave. "I get choked up about that phone call," he says. He didn't know what would remain of their home, their community, when they returned.

Around 4 p.m., Korotash drove out of Hay River, after handing the keys to the Home Hardware store to another local business owner in case fire crews needed anything else. The highway south was safe—the fire had moved on—but the scenery was grim. He passed about a dozen vehicles in the ditch, some burned so severely that only the metal frames remained. The landscape was black, covered in charred trees, and the air smelled of smoke. It was a quiet, somber drive, punctuated by occasional face licks from Pickles.

THROUGHOUT THE CHAOS of the summer, Northerners looked out for each other. When gas stations couldn't process electronic payments in Hay River, customers wrote down their names and promised to pay upon their return. Ray Shields, a Hay River great-grandfather, stood in the smoke and heat of the flames on the evening of Aug. 13, warning motorists on Highway 2 that the fire was ahead, consuming the road, and that they must turn around.

In a Facebook group, NWT residents posted inquiries about loved ones they hadn't been in contact with, or cats they couldn't locate in the rush of evacuation. Others shared news of lost pets they'd found. On community Facebook pages, people posted counselling resources, offered guidance on how to access hotel accommodations in Alberta, and shared events held in the province for evacuees.

There were big acts of support—like NWT, Yukon, and Alberta residents welcoming evacuees into their homes and onto their properties—and small, tender gestures. After Brenda Hall evacuated Hay River in May, for instance, a neighbour who stayed behind watered her tomato plants and sent her a photo of her house to assure her it was still standing.

Hall, who has lived in Hay River since 1989, believes that the difficult events of this summer—as well as the 2022 flood—have caused greater bonding between the residents of her community. "It's very stressful," she says. "I think I have more grey hair since everything happened."

Experiences like these can be traumatic. Having to flee your home, combined with the uncertainty of what will remain upon your return, is distressing. "This is a threat in a really existential way," says Geneviève Gagnon, a generalist counsellor with the Canadian Mental Health Association Yukon Division who is also involved in a new project exploring how Yukoners are coping with climate change.

"We need to have access to shelter, food, some level of security. It's no small thing when those things get disrupted, even if our physical bodies aren't impacted or injured. Our mind is telling us there's a threat to our physical bodies and our sense of security."

For First Nations people, evacuations can further trigger feelings related to loss of connection to the land, as well as trauma associated with being forcibly removed from their homes in > continues on p.87

THE BEST LAID

(TOP LEFT) RAMONA LINITSKI IS LIFTED ONTO HER RETURN FLIGHT TO YELLOWKNIFE WITH AIR TINDI. **(RIGHT)** MEMBERS OF THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES ENTERTAIN AVENS RESIDENTS AS THEY WAIT TO BOARD THEIR HERCULES AIRCRAFT FLIGHT TO EDMONTON. **(BELOW)** AVENS RESIDENTS ARE BROUGHT OUT TO THEIR HERCULES ON ON THE NIGHT OF THEIR EVACUATION.

THE SCALE OF THE JOB ON THIS DAY WAS OF A WHOLE OTHER ORDER

AVENS: A COMMUNITY FOR SENIORS WAS PREPARED FOR JUST ABOUT ANY EMERGENCY. BUT NO ONE COULD HAVE IMAGINED THE ONE THAT ARRIVED IN THE SUMMER OF 2023.

> BY DANA BOWEN

PLANS...

>> The passengers were shaken awake as their flight finally made its turbulent landing in Edmonton. It was 2:30 a.m., and rain and hail were pelting against the windows of the Canadian Forces Hercules C-130 that had brought them here. For some of the passengers — 57 long-term-care residents of AVENS: A Community for Seniors and a baker's dozen of support workers — it would have been another disorienting moment in a long, chaotic day, especially for those with dementia or other cognitive issues. But most, likely all, probably felt exhaustion more than anything else. "It was not a typical day," Daryl Dolynny, CEO of AVENS, would later say.

That would be an understatement. But it doesn't mean AVENS, which provides long-term care to NWT residents and affordable housing for seniors who live independently—wasn't prepared. The organization had long-standing protocols and procedures for emergencies that might require removing residents from the facility, possibly to other communities. Prolonged winter power outages. Severe damage to the building. Extended periods of smoke from forest fires. Even fire itself.

Moreover, the staff and residents were no strangers to emergency management. They had already come through the COVID-19 pandemic safely and in general good health. They were also familiar with receiving frail evacuees, notably during the 2022 flooding in Hay River and through the evacuations from other communities in the summer of 2023.

But the scale of the job on this day was of a whole other order.

THE NWT GOVERNMENT issued the evacuation order for Yellowknife on the evening of Aug. 16, but the challenge for AVENS had become apparent a couple weeks earlier. Around the end of July, the NWT's department of health and social services put the facility on notice that, if evacuation became necessary, AVENS would have to be self-sufficient. The government, which funds AVENS, simply didn't have the capacity among its multitude of obligations to manage the job for an independent operation.

It was was unexpected — even shocking — news but there was no time to debate. The AVENS team swung into high gear, developing a new plan for a previously unimaginable situation in short order — working with airlines to arrange for flights, arranging accommodation in Edmonton, and marshalling essential equipment, and more — while doing their best to maintain a semblance of normalcy for the residents.

As the fires moved closer to Yellowknife over the ensuing days, the risk of evacuation increased. By the start of Aug. 16, it was clearly inevitable. Despite assurances from local and territorial officials that the city was not at risk, Yellowknifers were leaving in droves—including a large proportion of the public service. AVENS wasn't immune and was operating with a skeleton staff to maintain service standards. Dolynny decided to make the call and reached out to the airline AVENS had contracted with to fly out residents and staff to Edmonton.

The first sign of trouble ahead came a short time later. The airline called Dolynny back and told him, the NWT government's emergency management organization had taken control of all flights in anticipation of the evacuation order that would be issued several hours later. Commercial flights were being cancelled. AVENS would have to regroup and come up with another plan.

At the end of the call, Dolynny immediately began dialling for help. He found

Photos Courtesy (top right) AVENS: A COMMUNITY FOR SENIORS (LEFT AND BELOW) CANADIAN ARMED FORCES.

Photo Courtesy Sailor 1st Class Patrice Harvey, CAF

HELPING HAND SGT. JENNIFER RAHN ASSISTS GEORGE GREY-EYES AS HE BOARDS THE EVACUATION FLIGHT.

it a short while later in the office of Shane Thompson, the territory's minister for environment as well as municipal affairs. Thompson put Dolynny in contact with the territory's emergency measures organization, which relayed the situation at AVENS to the Canadian Armed Forces. By afternoon, the CAF confirmed it was flying a Hercules to Yellowknife to carry the facility's long-term care residents to Edmonton. The plane would land in three hours.

With the evacuation back on track, AVENS staff began checking in with independent-living residents to ensure they had suitable plans with friends and family to ensure their own safety. Meanwhile, they distributed individualized go-bags to long-term care residents containing medications, personal toiletries, and a change of clothes. (Dolynny had bought the entire inventory of kid-sized knapsacks at the local Walmart a week earlier in case an evacuation was called.)

Outside, small groups of residents began boarding buses for the drive to the CAF 440 Squadron Hangar at the Yellowknife airport, where they would meet their flight. Many required wheelchairs or walkers, making for a complex ferrying operation that required 11 trips and wasn't finished until 8:30 p.m.

To help pass the time at the hangar, Canadian Forces members — roughly 30 were on hand to assist the operation — provided food, drinks, and blankets. A few brought guitars, and the crew entertained the AVENS residents as if they were caring for their own grandparents. The wheels on the Herc finally went up at around 12:30 a.m., following a delicate boarding process that took almost as long as the task of getting everyone to the hangar. Adding to the concerns were forecasts of rain, wind, and hail that would make conditions for air travel difficult further south.

Dolynny, however, was not among the residents and 14 support workers on board the Hercules. He was still in Yellowknife juggling a fresh set of challenges, starting with two residents who could not be accommodated on the packed aircraft and needed overnight care. (They stayed at Stanton Territorial Hospital and joined the rest the following day.) Meanwhile, with an arrival time finally known, he needed to arrange transport to take the AVENS group to the two hotels that had been booked to receive them in Leduc, near the Edmonton airport.

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There was more to come. Upon arrival, it was quickly discovered that more security staff was needed at the hotel than the number estimated and reserved earlier in the month. Without them, AVENS management and staff would be unable to monitor all of the building's accessibility points, an essential task in keeping AVENS residents secure, especially those who would be easily disoriented. The firm supplying the security staff stepped up swiftly and, with relief, the issue was soon resolved.

As the night finally started to calm for the residents, the AVENS team still had their hands full. There were still 26 wheelchairs in Yellowknife that couldn't fit on the CAF flight and two residents in need of transport to Edmonton. The AVENS facility also had to go through a full shutdown, and more. Dolynny worked through to the end of the next day and beyond. Finally, at 3 a.m. — some 40 hours later with a maybe four-hour nap — he got into his car and headed out on the now-empty highway to meet his family near Behchokǫ̀, where they were waiting for him on the other side of the fire line.

AFTER 31 DAYS, the residents and staff of AVENS returned to Yellowknife on Air Tindi, a local charter company with deep roots in the community. Life settled back into its regular rhythms, so much so that on a rain-swept afternoon in mid-October AVENS resident George Greyeyes would look back on the experience with a sort of fondness. He recalled the comfort of the large room he shared with another person and the more than satisfying food and amenities. Best of all, he was able to visit with his daughters and grandchildren who travelled from Saskatchewan, the kind of bonus enjoyed by many residents. "There was a nice big yard out front," he says. "When my daughters came to visit me, they brought the children who were running around in the grass beside me. It was pretty cute, all right."

Of course, Greyeyes wasn't talking about the hotels where everybody landed on that first night. It was emergency shelter, and the management, staff and security firm stepped up when it mattered most. Still, AVENS management — somewhat scattered in Alberta and communicating moment by moment via a text-message group and regular touch-point meetings — needed to find proper care facilities.

Working around the clock over the first three days, Frances Marshall, AVENS' director of care, coordinated with Alberta Health Services and Bayshore Home Health, a homecare services company, and worked tirelessly to find alternatives. In short order, they located space at a community-living complex for seniors in Leduc, called Telford Mews. For residents in need of greater care, there was the Waterford, an independent-living home in northwest Edmonton that also had a dementia-care unit that was at the tail end of a renovation project.

Finding space, however, was only the start of the challenge. AVENS team also had to turn it from four walls and empty rooms into care environments that met the needs of their residents — and do so in an instant. They scrambled to acquire everything from sheets and bedding to televisions and radios. Dolynny even turned to Amazon to find a call-bell system so residents could page AVENS staff if needed.

But life in Edmonton did find a comfortable routine — and it did so at a remarkable pace, despite the turbulent path. Sitting in the family room back at AVENS, surrounded by pumpkins in preparation for a Halloween project, Greyeyes recalled a fond memory of a friend, Mr. Dolynny. "He lent me his radio. I still have it."

Greyeyes' comfort is a testament to AVENS management and staff — and the organizations and businesses that supported them — through a crisis. They recall a harrowing experience, and there are many lessons to be built into future planning. On this rainy October day, however, they could perhaps breathe easier, at least for a few moments as George Greyeyes smiled through windows and watched the world outside his home.

AFTER 31 DAYS, AVENS RESIDENTS AND STAFF FINALLY RETURNED HOME.

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FRONTLINE PROTECTOR

ON THE JOB
KIAH VAIL HOSES DOWN A HOT SPOT IN THE FOREST NEAR FORT SMITH

KIAH VAIL NEVER DREAMT OF BEING A FIREFIGHTER. NOW, SHE WRANGLES INFERNOS IN THE NWT.

> By Francis Tessier-Burns

>> Kiah Vail didn't think Fort Smith could run out of firefighting equipment.

"Our warehouses always seemed endless whenever I've been in them," says Vail, a 22-year-old firefighter who spent this past summer on the frontlines of the Northwest Territories' record-breaking wildfire season.

Now, she feels differently. "There were points when I was on the line this summer, we had run out of gear. I had a couple of pumps that I was passing around multiple crews just because we were so short of things."

Summer 2023 saw the worst wildfire season on record in Canada. The NWT was no exception — about 300 fires burned more than four million hectares of land, dozens of homes, forced about two-thirds of the territory's population to flee and claimed the life of one firefighter.

Vail was there, battling the blaze on the frontlines. It was the biggest challenge of this Northern firefighter's young career, and an experience she won't ever forget.

If you've moved to the NWT in the past decade, you'll inevitably have heard comments about the 2014 wildfire season — the territory's previous worst. That year saw more fires than in 2023, but burned fewer hectares and caused less damage.

Photo courtesy Parks Canada

Photo courtesy Parks Canada

LONG GAME THE WOOD BUFFALO FIRE WAS STILL NOT FULLY UNDER CONTROL IN MID-OCTOBER. **(LEFT)** KIAH VAIL

IN MID-AUGUST, ONE OF THE BIGGEST WILDFIRES ERUPTED IN THE SOUTH SLAVE.

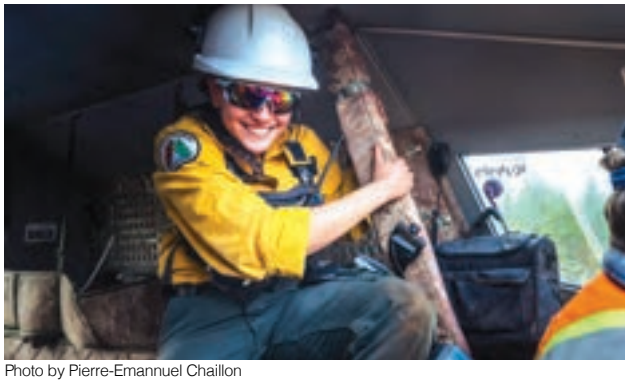

Photo by Pierre-Emannuel Chaillon

Vail remembers it well; the "summer of orange sky" and the dense smell of campfire that year. But up until quite recently she never considered becoming a wildland firefighter.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted her studies at the University of Ottawa. She decided to return to the NWT and look for a job through the territory's summer student employment program. She wanted something that was outdoors and hands-on; as a varsity athlete, she also liked that firefighting had a physical test to pass before even getting an interview.

"I passed it, got the interview and pretty well fell in love with the job since that very first summer," she says.

Vail climbed the ranks quickly — she spent her first two years as a crew member and then was promoted to crew leader for the past two seasons. Crews generally work as teams of four, and one of them that Vail led this summer was made up entirely of Indigenous women. She says it was the first time since the 1980s that the territory saw an all-woman firefighting crew.

Being part of something that can break down barriers is meaningful, says Vail. Still, working in a male-dominated industry has meant having to stand up for herself and other women occasionally. Usually hard work is enough to put a stop to any critical looks from male colleagues. But often, she says, you just sort of learn to ignore it.

"It's kind of a terrible thing," she explains, "but you're not always able to address it, especially when maybe you're on the lower rung."

Despite her short career, this summer saw Vail make another jump and take on more responsibility during two of the year's most devastating fires.

In May, a wildfire flared up to the east of the Kátł'odeeche First Nation reserve. The fire forced the evacuation of the reserve and the Town of Hay River, and unfortunately burned nearly 20 buildings. It was the first time Vail lost houses in a fire she'd been working on.

She says it was stressful and heartbreaking to try and salvage what they could knowing that some residents would return to nothing. She worked shoulder-to-shoulder with some of those same residents.

Seeing the grieving on her colleagues' faces, but also their determination, gave the crews extra motivation to protect the rest of the community as best they could, she says.

That fire was Vail's first chance to lead multiple crews as one of the division supervisors. It took the firefighters about 10 days to get the situation to a state that allowed residents to return. Once it was all over, Vail says they thought they'd seen the worst of the season.

"We had no idea. That was just like the tip of the iceberg."

Later in the summer, hundreds of fires sparked up across the territory. In mid-August, one the territory's biggest fires exploded in the South Slave. High winds and hot, dry weather drove the flames more than 40 kilometres east toward Hay River in a single day. It also engulfed the small town of Enterprise, turning it to rubble and ash.

Equipment and crews were already stretched thin, even as the situation on the ground worsened. For the second time that season, a wildfire — this one bigger, hotter and meaner than the last — forced Hay River and Kátł'odeeche residents to flee their homes.

Vail was deployed once again to protect the two communities. While there, one of the supervisors was pulled away to address another fire that flared up elsewhere. Vail volunteered to take his spot, viewing it as a challenge to "up the ante" and help at a greater scale. She was now responsible for a major fireline that stretched 30 kilometres from Great Slave Lake to Paradise Gardens in Hay River, overseeing anywhere from three to eight crews from different parts of the country.

Time and weather were her biggest enemies. Wind acts like bellows — as it flares up a fire, smoke billows and embers fly, and

the time needed to battle a blaze grows longer and longer.

The crews needed to create a burnt perimeter around the fire's edge — a blackline. Usually a perimeter width of 30 metres is enough to limit a wildfire's growth, but the sheer size and intensity of the second fire that threatened Hay River and Kátł'odeeche meant that crews had to create a one-kilometre-wide blackline. Along with other tactics, it took firefighters about a month to control the fire enough for residents to go home.

As she was trying to save other communities, Vail's own was also being threatened. A grouping of fires that burned large swaths of Wood Buffalo National Park crept northward and converged near Fort Smith and Fort Fitzgerald resulting in the evacuation of both communities. Vail's mom and sister left, but her father stayed behind in Fort Smith to support the firefighting efforts. One day she received a text message from him saying the flames were only a kilometre from their house. Thankfully, the crews battling that fire managed to keep it at bay and, after five weeks, residents were able to return home.

The responsibility she carried in the face of these disasters was a heavy weight, but Vail says she never felt intimidated. "If I did, I don't think I would be in the position that I was in." She attributes her confidence to her mentors — many of them Indigenous — and years of knowledge they've shared.

As the last of the fires are snuffed out or go underground for the winter, Vail is now working on cleaning gear and refurbishing equipment to prepare for next season. The empty warehouses are restocked, but the battle damage is visible.

"Seeing the cleaning in the aftermath, I'm like, 'Wow, this was just chaos,'" she says. It's a chance to catch her breath and reflect on a fire season that's left her reeling.

"I have immense appreciation for everything and everyone that made it through this summer, because it was crazy," she says, with a warning about what's to come. "In seeing this summer and the way things have escalated, I think we're only going to have more and more intense fire summers."

Yet despite the dangerous, gruelling work, she's not deterred from firefighting — quite the opposite. She's hoping more and more young people are considering firefighting as a profession. Because they're going to be needed.

"It's a job that has come to the forefront of our Canadian summers."

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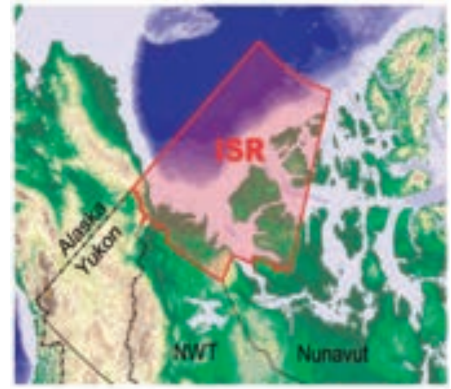

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Josepi Idlout (right) peers out of his old-fashioned brass telescope while Lazarus Kalluk looks out of a newer Bausch and Lomb model. Eclipse Sound, north coast of Curry Island. Winter 1954. N-1979-051-0703: Nunavut Archives Program, Department of Culture and Heritage, Government of Nunavut

Josepi Idlout (taliqpiani) qiniqtuq utuqqan'ngaguyumik atuqhuni qin'nguunmik Lazarus Kalluk qiniqtilluni nutaatqiamik qin'ngunmik atia Bausch Lomb piutaaniq. Eclipse Sound, tunungani hinaani Curry Island. Ukiumi 1954. N-1979-051-0703: Nunavut In'ngilraangnitanik Pivinga, Pitquhiliqiyitkut - Nunavut Kavamanga

Josepi Idlout (droite) regarde à travers son vieux télescope en cuivre tandis que Lazarus Kalluk utilise un modèle plus récent de Bausch + Lomb. Détroit d'Éclipse, côte septentrionale de Curry Island. Hiver 1954. N-1979-051-0703 : Archives Nunavut, ministère de la Culture et du Patrimoine, gouvernement du Nunavut

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THE EMOTIONS THAT FOLLOW BEING EVACUATED FROM YOUR HOME AND COMMUNITY ARE COMPLEX. WORRY. FRUSTRATION. ANGER. BUT WE MUST NOT LET DREAD AND FATALISTIC THINKING TAKE HOLD. WE HAVE A DUTY TO POST ERITY.

> BY LAURIE SARKADI

"THE LONGING AND HOPELESSNESS I WAS EXPERIENCING HAS A NAME…"

PATIENTS FROM STANTON TERRITORIAL HOSPITAL BOARD AN RCAF GLOBEMASTER AT YELLOWKNIFE AIRPORT

Photo courtesy Sailor 1st Class Patrice Harvey, CAF

>> I was about to pay admission for four adults and three grandchildren to roam the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller, Alta., when the cashier slid seven free tickets for my family under the glass. I swallowed back tears. It was Labour Day weekend: Day 19 of the emergency evacuation from Yellowknife, N'dilo, Dettah, and my off-grid community along Ingraham Trail as wildfires advancing from three directions licked at the boundaries of where we lived.

Almost all of the Northwest Territories' South Slave Region was evacuated three days before us: Hay River, Fort Smith, Kátł'odeeche First Nation, plus the tiny hamlet of Enterprise, which had already burned to the ground. Two-thirds of the territory's small, scattered population was on the run from climate catastrophe. We were distracting the children with dinosaurs.

By then most of my kin and I had hunkered down in Calgary where we had my brother and extended family to lean on, but our first muster point was Leduc, near the Edmonton airport. We arrived Aug. 16 and Aug. 17 in staggered droves, women and children first by air: my six-months-pregnant daughter-in-law, two infant grandchildren strapped to their mothers' chests like bundled parachutes, and their three toddlers, who I herded in border-collie fashion across tarmacs and busy parking lots. A hasty call for help to my brother before I boarded meant he'd secured hotel rooms for us to unload our assortment of children's car seats and the meagre amount of clothes and sundry items we'd thrown into suitcases with just 30 minutes to pack.

The hardest part about that first night away from home was damping down the worry for my three sons, who were sandwiched inside the mass exodus of vehicles wending their way south down Highway 3—the only road out of Yellowknife—with just one gas station before the Alberta border. Authorities deemed the highway open and passable with a pilot car to lead drivers through the smoky, active fire zone between Yellowknife and Behchokǫ̀, making a three-day window for 6,182 vehicles to cross the Mackenzie River over the Deh Cho Bridge near Fort Providence. Nine days before, the Department of Infrastructure was made aware that one of the large cables that supported the kilometre-long truss bridge had mysteriously broken. The bridge remained open with traffic reduced to one way and a lower speed limit, but what would have happened if it didn't?

RIGHT: YELLOWKNIFERS WAIT FOR A PILOT CAR ON HIGHWAY 3; **BELOW:** KENDALL TAYLOR ASSISTS WITH EVACUATION OF HORSES TO INNISFAIL, ALBERTA. **BOTTOM:** CARS LINE UP FOR GAS AT THE BIG RIVER SERVICE CENTRE NEAR FORT PROVIDENCE.

Photo by Sienna Hart Keller

Photo by Thorsten Gahl

"ORDERED TO ABANDON OUR HOMES, WE DID NOT KNOW HOUR-TO-HOUR WHAT OUR FATES WOULD BE."

As I laid my head on the pillow that night I pictured my boys' farewells to their families. The way their wives kissed them with urgency and reticence. The way these young fathers kept looking back, just one more glance, at all they prized most on earth. The rational side of me knew I'd see them the next day. The empath within recognized the anguish felt by parents and partners over the ages whose loved ones left home for war or were forced to separate from family because of civil strife, natural disasters… residential schools.

Ordered to abandon our homes, we did not know hour-to-hour what our fates would be. We were climate refugees. We had not lost our country, but increasingly, we were losing our cold.

That evening I fielded a flurry of messages from concerned friends and family in Canada and abroad who I concluded must be consuming frightening media coverage of our predicament—most likely pictures of the charred remains of Enterprise on repeat, or Lisa Mundy's harrowing account of how her windshield cracked as her car melted around her and filled with smoke while she fled Hay River with her young children. While I slept, evacuation alerts were issued in West Kelowna for a B.C. wildfire that would eclipse ours in the news cycle with videos of greedy flames roaring down hillsides to engulf whole neighbourhoods. All of this came just 10 days after Maui's Lahaina wildfire killed at least 115 people and incinerated the entire town.

Tensions were high. The stakes were real. The world felt unpredictable.

Still, there was privilege and ease associated with my overall evacuation experience. I piggy-backed out on a charter plane hired to evacuate a large B.C. construction company that was working in the territory. My son's friend worked for the company and had been tasked by its generous president with filling all extra seats, preferably with families with small children, as a way to ease the overall burden of removing 20,000 people from the capital. My son secured us passage and ordered me to help the moms shepherd my five grandchildren. There's a reason we nicknamed him "911" when he was younger. Because their families had adopted a "no dogs get left behind" credo, the dads would drive out.

Pets were a huge conundrum for evacuees. Northerners are dog people. The scramble for pet crates to take animals on commercial planes was frenzied and eventually the major airlines loosened the requirement. Sienna Kellar from Innisfail, Alta., who used to live and ride horses in Yellowknife, convoyed 18 hours with four trucks hauling livestock trailers *into* the fire zone to rescue horses, goats, donkeys, mini ponies, even some budgies. Over the next two days Canadian Armed Forces flew people out of Yellowknife on Hercules transport planes, owners strapped to the walls with their pets on leashes beside them.

The Edmonton Evacuation Centre registered an impressive 1,300 pets and 7,497 people. Evacuees were given brace-

Photo by Samantha Stuart

lets that granted them free bus transportation and access to recreation facilities while the Canadian Red Cross arranged food vouchers and lodging. Still, much like COVID, there were incalculable hardships for some: the sick and elderly, people with disabilities, the self-employed, people experiencing homelessness, people with mental health issues, unilingual elders; many were caught in a sea of confusion about where to go and how to finance their precarious new circumstances.

I had means and family to host us, so I did not need to avail myself to these services. No, by contrast, as evacuee centres were hastily being resurrected across Alberta, I was inquiring with our Leduc hotel, part of the Hilton chain, if four large husky crosses and a duck toller could be accommodated that night.

The dogs looked stressed and their people bedraggled when they rolled in at suppertime after a 1,500-kilometre, sleepless odyssey. Smoke from the NWT still clung to their vehicles inside and out, making them smell like filthy ashtrays. In a cruel twist, a steady rain began to fall. We awoke to a loud, steely clattering on the roof, hailstones the size of golf balls being hurtled by what looked like hurricane winds, before thunder and lightning seized the night sky. "Geez, what's next, locusts?" my bleary-eyed son asked as he peeled back the curtain.

The dank scent of wet dogs and spent diapers was about as much physical hardship as I would endure during the evacuation, but mentally, a whole lot more was at play.

FOR WEEKS PRIOR I'd suffered a sort of stasis, unable to make decisions about what should be done to safeguard my home, located beside a lake about 30 kilometres east of Yellowknife, beyond municipal boundaries or the reach of utilities. Initially, my husband and I concluded we had no valuables except for our children and grandchildren, therefore, with the exception of our passports, we moved nothing.

On second thought, I drove our photo albums to my son's garage in Yellowknife. Then our handmade beaver mitts (the only ones that keep me warm at -40 C). An old laptop. Heavily redacted files from

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AURORA BOREALIS GLOW OVER AT POP-UP CAMPSITE IN HIGH LEVEL, ALTA. (LOWER LEFT) THE BIG RIVER SERVICE CENTRE CAFE NEAR FORT PROVIDENCE. (LOWER RIGHT) STEEN RIVER, ALTA., OFFERS SUPPORT TO EVACUEES.

Photo Canadian Press/Bill Braden

Photo by Bill Braden

Photo by Tawna Brown

social services that a Sixties Scoop survivor had entrusted to me and that I intended to write about. Gradually, I began to envision myself as a phoenix rising from the ashes, my mother's wedding ring clutched to my chest and a near-holy expression of sentimental appreciation on my face for the foresight I'd had in the before times.

When Yellowknife itself came under fire threat, my sense of futility heightened. I could not bring myself to lug my goods back home. Decision exhaustion set in.

One pro-active move everyone had been advised to undertake was FireSmarting. The preventative measures mainly involved reducing the amount of combustible materials around your home and property. But when you live off-grid in a wood-sided home with a wood deck surrounded by fire-dependent coniferous trees like jackpine and highly flammable spruce, that's essentially everything.

We also use firewood to supplement heating our home. My neighbour had eight cords of firewood delivered on the Friday before the evacuation order, likely the last delivery from Hay River's Patterson Sawmill before it went up in flames that weekend. Earlier in the summer she'd laid wood chips down the footpath to the lake, basically a wick for any wildfire to find her house. We could not see our way clear to FireSmart in a meaningful manner. Instead we soaked down the forest and woodpiles with a series of irrigation sprinklers connected to pumps by the lake while ash fell like snowflakes.

By this point my husband had been called out of retirement to work 12-hour shifts with other retired fire specialists on tactical and logistical defense efforts. I envied him his sense of purpose.

I floundered indoors under a type of house arrest. The number of smoke hours in Yellowknife almost doubled the previous peak of 476 in 2014. That necessitated 92 Air Quality Health Index alerts from Environment and Climate Change Canada up until mid-September. I worried for the birds and animals who had no indoor respite. Connecting to the land and waters on the traditional Akaitcho Dene territory that surrounds me has been what has sustained my mental health for more than three decades. Somehow, I'd taken our air—unsullied from manufacturing, cleansed in part of CO_2 by the great lungs of the circumpolar world, the boreal forest—for granted. Now those lungs were spewing back carbon and particulates in unprecedented volumes. Now that air gave me headaches and made me cough.

The longing and hopelessness I was experiencing has a name. Solastalgia: "The pain or sickness caused by the loss or the lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory," according to Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht, a former environmental studies professor who coined the term in 2005. With solastalgia, you cannot return to the home you are longing for—it is there but not the same—altered in distressing ways by climate change, weather events, fire, or other environmental factors.

In late April and May, when the more than 4,200 kilometres of frozen lakes and tributaries of the vast Mackenzie River system began their melt, there was a foreboding sense something wasn't right. Breakup on Great Slave Lake came fast and early. By mid-summer once-raging waterfalls were reduced to trickles. Sandra Lester and her brother narrowly escaped the fire that engulfed their homes and their family sawmill by driving onto the riverbed of the Hay River. It was bone dry.

Great Slave Lake's water levels have shifted from a record low in 2019, to the highest on record in 2020-2022, back to a new record low this September. "The magnitude and frequency of these fluctuations have not previously been seen in the 88-year record," according to the NWT Hydrometric Network, a territorial-federal partnership operated by the Water Survey of Canada.

The fluctuations are the result of extremely dry and hot weather systems that have moved over the entirety of the Great Slave basin, which includes sub-basins in northern B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and NWT, all places that have experienced substantial wildfires, and smoke, this year. The network reported these weather systems were likely a combination of climate variability from La Niña and El Niño events and climate change.

"NWT temperature records were off the charts this year compared to last year,"


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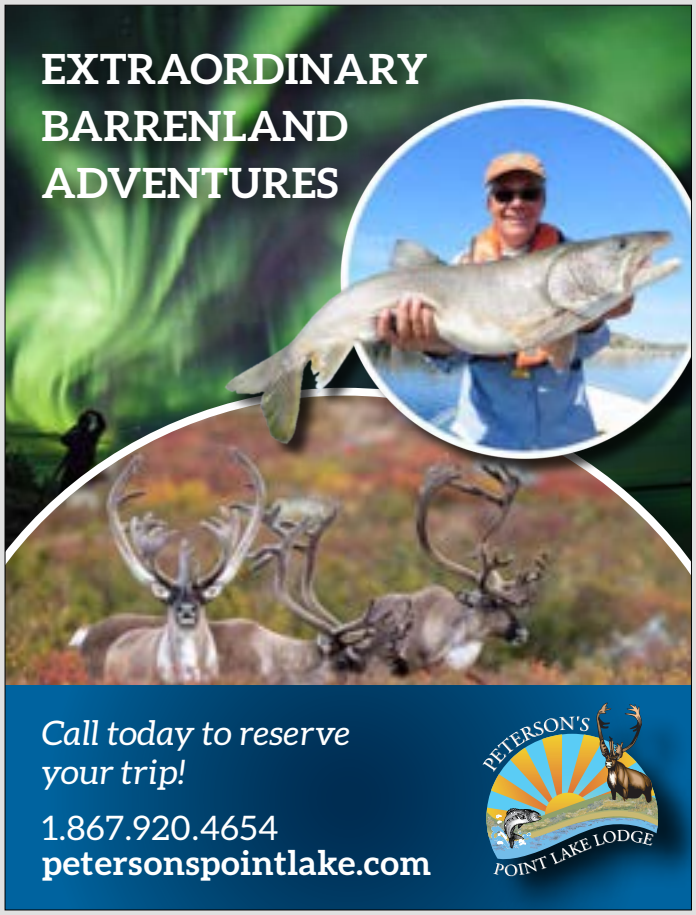
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Photo by Pierre-Emmanuel Chaillon

Photo by Tawna Brown

AFTERMATH (L-R) FIRES BURNED MORE THAN 500,000 HECTARES IN WOOD BUFFALO. IN THE NWT, THEY CLAIMED OVER FOUR MILLION HECTARES.

Jesse Wagar, a meteorologist with Environment and Climate Change Canada, confirmed. Norman Wells reached a record 37.9 C and Fort Good Hope 37.4 C in July. Both communities are just shy of the Arctic Circle.

On occasions when the smoke cleared enough to go for a walk, I noted the impacts of Yellowknife's fourth year of drought conditions and the heat that continued well into September. Once reliable cranberry patches were dried and void of fruit. Spruce bud worms dropped from parched trees onto my hair. I can't remember any mosquitos this summer. These ecosystem changes affected my own sense of identity and security and caused grief. Solastalgia.

THE MENTAL HEALTH Commission of Canada places the grief of solastalgia under the broader umbrella term of eco-anxiety, or climate anxiety, defined by the American Psychological Association as "a chronic fear of environmental doom." True, I could tick off much on the checklist of symptoms for eco-anxiety: obsessive thoughts about climate, guilt related to my own carbon footprint, anger or frustration toward older generations or government officials who have not done enough to curtail climate change.

But I had not succumbed to two important ones: existential dread or fatalistic

thinking. The commission says one-third of Canadians believe it's too late to curb climate change so why bother.

Tell that to your children and grandchildren. Or mine. I believe we have a duty to posterity during our brief time on the planet; that we must take the long view as embodied in the Haudenosaunee philosophy that decisions taken today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future.

In her uplifting 2022 book, *Still Hopeful: Lessons from a Lifetime of Activism*, Maude Barlow says nothing makes her angrier than hearing people with relative safety and security say they've "given up" because there's "no point." Barlow writes: "Hope is a moral imperative for those of us who have had the luck of living in places that are relatively safe or who are born into privilege by the colour of our skin or the financial situation of our families."

Like many lifelong activists, she advises people suffering from any form of eco-paralysis or sense of despair to seek out the power of community: people who share your concerns and are also eager for change. People like my former neighbour, France Benoit.

When the evacuation ended after three weeks in much the same manner as it began for me—with short notice for a return flight to a city still surrounded by active, but less threatening, wildfires and shrouded in toxic smoke. I did not experience the euphoria I had anticipated. Something that helped me awaken feelings of hope was seeing how Benoit's foresight years ago, her long-view thinking, had impacted the effort to rescue the NWT capital this summer.

Benoit saw a need to create greater food security in the North and reduce the emissions and high costs associated with food transportation to remote places, so she started growing food commercially in her off-grid home along Ingraham Trail. Eventually she moved to Yellowknife so she could ditch her vehicle and buy an e-bike or rent an EV from the YK Car Share Co-op, but she planted more gardens and leased a large plot of land for vegetables, which she sold to a former employee who then grew more food and opened a bakery. The woman who bought Benoit's first home expanded its greenhouse operation exponentially.

When Yellowknife shut down during the evacuation, so did grocery stores and restaurants. These commercial gardens and the bakery became important food sources to feed hundreds of firefighters and work crews building firebreaks around the city. Yellowknife's evacuation also shed light on the city's importance as a food distribution hub to outlying communities like Łutsel K'e, which suffered food shortages and received some produce from the gardens.

Photo courtesy Wood Buffalo National Park

"For the people who didn't believe that commercial growing in the subarctic was possible, I say bullshit, we've shown it is and it's making a difference," Benoit says.

In her quest to reduce > continues on p.88

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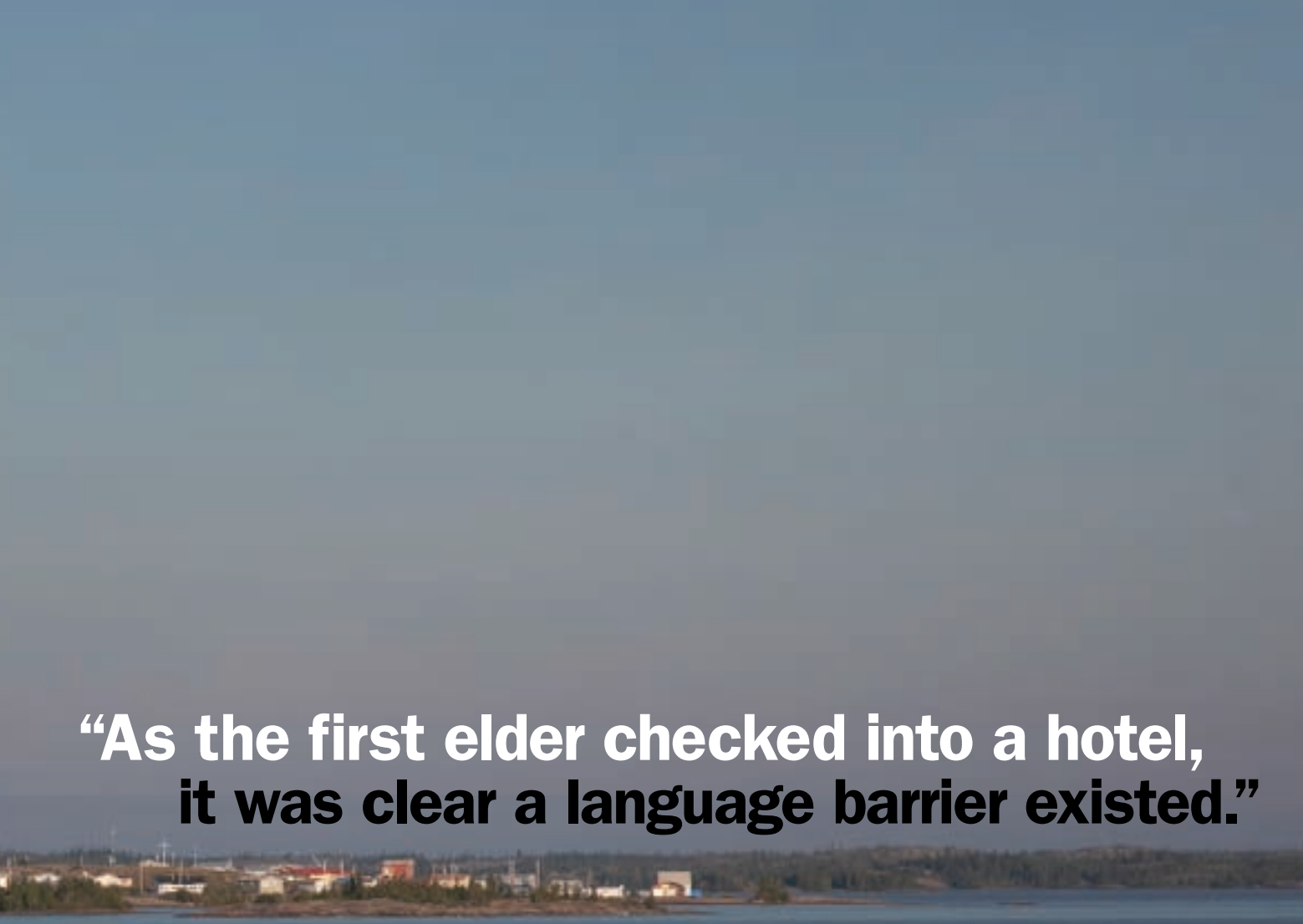

“As the first elder checked into a hotel, it was clear a language barrier existed.”

MEMBERS OF FIRST NATIONS COULD SEE THE LAND WAS CHANGING. **SNOW** AND **ICE** WERE ON DIFFERENT SCHEDULES. **BERRY PATCHES** WERE BARREN IN SUMMER. **TWIGS** DIDN’T SNAP IN JANUARY. AND THEN CAME EVACUATION FROM STORIED HOME LANDS. **> BY ROY DAHL**

>> Somewhere in the memories of the elders is an image of the place their grandparents knew as children. It was a place once lush with tall trees that provided canopies of shade and long grass that seemed to dance in the breeze between rocky outcrops. It was called “dii-doh,” meaning “off the point.”

For countless generations in this place, people built log cabins and tipis made of birchbark or canvas. They used this area as their summer retreat after a long winter in the barrenlands following and hunting caribou. They would return every year laden with drymeat and other goods to spend summers hunting moose, rabbit and muskrat, or fish for whitefish, pickerel, or pike. They would pick berries and gather traditional medicines from the land.

It is said there were over 20 cabins and other camping grounds in the area before the summer of 1900, when about 5,000 people called this North Slave region home. The land provided well for these hardy souls, who knew that as much as the land could give, it could also take away. The delicate balances between life and death, bounty or drought, always had to be observed, so the next generation could reap the rewards of their stewardship of the land and water.

Photo by Bill Braden

In the summer of 1900, however, everything changed.

Fred Sangris, chief of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation in Ndilo and a local historian, recalls the story he was told as a boy. "Everybody was leaving (for the barrenlands)," he says. "One person decided to stay behind and cook himself a meal. It was a really windy day. Cold. When he was done, he didn't completely put out his fire. But he left anyway to follow the people up the Yellowknife River to join the annual caribou hunt."

Sangris said what the people returned to the following March, was nothing short of heartbreaking. "When people arrived back to the area, the trees were all burnt. A lot of the log houses burned as well. There were probably about seven log homes still standing. . . It was all ashes. In the whole area, wherever they walked, it was all ashes. So, they called the area 't'eh daa.' 'T'eh' means 'ash.' 'Daa' means 'point.' So, they called it "ash point" or 'burnt point.'"

Today, the two communities that make up the Yellowknives Dene First Nation (YKDFN) are known to all as Ndilo and Dettah, anglicized versions of their traditional names, although not everyone in neighbouring Yellowknife is familiar with that story.

When the wildfire season of 2023 began in late May, no one seemed to give much attention to the numbers. Almost a hundred wildfires into the summer, however, concerns were elevated. And when the skies filled with acrid-smoke that turned the sun orange and then red—forcing the evacuation of Yellowknife, Dettah, Ndilo and the homes along the Ingraham Trail—more began to wonder: *Was history about to repeat itself?*

By the end of July, the First Nation had spent weeks monitoring the growth of two wildfires. The Ingraham Trail fire (Fire ZF011) was eyed with interest. Several members had cabins and camping spots along the Ingraham Trail, a road that runs through what has become Yellowknife's cottage country, and a few expressed concerns about the fire as it grew. But it was the other fire, southeast of Jennejohn Lake (Fire ZF085), that was of the most concern. It was only about 25 kilometres from Dettah. A majority of members used this region for recreational and subsistence purposes. Traplines, cabins, and hunting grounds were at stake.

Smoke from the fires routinely enveloped the area. On some days, it was impossible to see Yellowknife from Dettah, across Yellowknife Bay. On other days, driving along the Ingraham Trail was reduced to a crawl, with drivers cutting their speed in half from the posted 80 kilometres per hour. People guessed about the causes of the fires. Lightning strikes. Careless campers.

But Sangris identifies a much larger culprit: climate change. "People like myself, we use the land regularly. Climate change has really had an impact on us. Snow is starting to melt early. Ice is not freezing as it used to. The climate is different. In January, willow branches used to break off. Now they don't."

Then there's been the loss of permafrost, Sangris continues, making the land drier since the days of his grandparents. "In those days, the ground was permafrost. The fire couldn't go too far. Only about a foot or two underground, the ground was permafrost. Today there's no more permafrost, so the moss is burning deeper and longer and could last all winter."

"SOME MEMBERS WERE SAYING, 'HOW ABOUT SOME OF US STAY BEHIND FOR SECURITY AND FOR FIRE WATCH?'"

IF A FIRE APPROACHED DETTAH THEY KNEW THEY HAD DONE AS MUCH AS THEY COULD.

Photo by Bill Braden

AS THE SUMMER DEEPENED, the fires continued to pose a threat. "We knew Dettah wasn't in immediate danger," recalls Ernest Betsina, who was elected chief in Dettah in August. "But you never know with the wind. It could blow towards us, that could be a threat. Not only that, but the embers could be flying in the air and reaching the community. We had to be on constant alert."

Concern for Ndilo was mitigated by its location at the northeast tip of Yellowknife and its direct connection to the city, plus the fact it was surrounded on three sides by water. But the YKDFN decided to prepare, borrowing fire hoses and pumps from the NWT government, clearing brush and branches, hosing down ground, and soaking soil. A contractor also created an 85-metre-wide fire break about a kilometre north of Dettah that stretched from the shores of Yellowknife Bay to Duck Lake, about five kilometers to the east.

Everyone watched the headlines, and the wildfires became a central topic of conversation. *Had you heard?* Wildfires were threatening the Katlo-dechee First Nation, Hay River, and Fort Smith. *Did you see the news on TV last night?* There's a big fire outside Kakisa. *Did you hear anything more about it?* But even then, life carried on as usual. People went to work. Children played their games. Elders visited and spent time with family.

At a community meeting on the evening of Aug. 16, the chiefs and council explained the situation to those gathered. Dettah could be threatened if the winds shifted and pushed the nearest fire west-

ward. Nervous members asked questions. *If an evacuation was ordered, who would go first? Where would the elders go? What about security for the houses that would stand empty? How long would the evacuation last? What would it cost and who would pay?* Despite not knowing all the answers, assurances were made that everything would be all right. No one knew for certain what the outcome would be. All they knew, was that if a fire approached Dettah, they had done as much as they could to protect it.

In a moment however, every one of those questions would be answered. Phones throughout the hall began to scream out an unusual tone—emergency alert. The NWT government decided it was time for everyone, including the members of the YKDFN, to evacuate.

"During the meeting, all of a sudden

Photo by Bill Braden

NDILO CHIEF FRED SANGRIS
"Climate change has really had an impact on us."

DETTAH CHIEF ERNEST BETSINA
"All of our phones began ringing at the same time."

"NO BERRIES WERE GROWING. THE GROUND WAS DRY... THE MOSS WAS DRY. WE KNEW SOMETHING BAD WAS GOING TO HAPPEN."

we're getting emergency alerts, all of our phones began ringing at the same time," Betsina says. "Some members were saying, how about if some of us stayed behind, for security reasons and for fire-watch? So that's what I did. I stayed behind."

About a dozen band members volunteered to stay as well, while both Dettah and Ndilo emptied. Some left in recreational campers, others packed as many valuables and clothes as they could into their vehicles. They brought their pets as well. Then they joined the long convoy of vehicles headed southward, on the only highway in and out of the city. For those not able to join the convoys, the only option was to fly. "It was organized chaos," Betsina says.

FOR THE EVACUEES, the First Nation staff and volunteers scrambled to keep track of their 1,700 members. Some had been sent to evacuation centres in Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, and later, Vancouver and even Winnipeg. No one knew exactly where everyone had been sent. Arrangements had been hastily made to secure rooms at the River Cree Resort in Edmonton for most of the elders.

When word emerged several elders had been sent to the unfamiliar city of Calgary, a bus was organized to move them to River Cree. Once the YKDFN staff started getting a clearer picture of where everyone was, questions surfaced about how members were going to sustain themselves. After a meeting with the Red Cross, and the NWT government, funds were made available for meal vouchers and later, a $500 allowance was provided to each member.

For those who drove out, fuel was provided free to all evacuees in places like Fort Providence in the NWT and Steen River, High Level, and other locations in Alberta. A news story emerged a few days after the evacuations started that some Albertans were stealing NWT licence plates to access the fuel, so the rules were quickly changed, requiring anyone filling up to provide an NWT driver's licence.

The stories about hotel stays in and around each evacuation were uneven. While most members reported no issues with their accommodations, several complaints of bedbugs, small rooms or repeated moves to a different hotel started flowing in. Staff at the YKDFN juggled all of these with patience, professionalism and understanding. Observers praised the efforts of the staff and volunteers, to provide care and assistance, as they were available at all hours. Only a few members, it seemed, had issues.

Several members were evicted from their initial accommodations for various reasons, and volunteers with the First Nation had to acquire other accommodations for them.

From the time the first elder checked into a hotel, it was clear a language barrier existed. Volunteers spent time with some to teach them how to use key cards, meal vouchers and the telephone system. In one instance, an elder accidentally called "911" because she misinterpreted directions about how to call another room. When police showed up to offer assistance, the confused elder thought they had come to arrest her. Another used her vouchers to purchase $150 of snacks and treats, not knowing those vouchers were to be used for meals. Using meal vouchers was a foreign concept for many. Daily, volunteers acted as interpreters for elders who had trouble talking to hotel staff or were too shy.

As the mad scramble to evacuate subsided, staff and volunteers seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. Day-to-day problems were addressed, members seemed content. No one knew how long the evacuation would last, and everyone watched news headlines or waited for government press releases to give them some good news.

As the first week passed everyone's mood seemed jovial. Many treated the situation as an unexpected holiday. By the end of the second week however, the mood amongst many became one of boredom and concern. *How long do you think we'll have to wait until we go home?* they asked each other. The novelties of shopping at West Edmonton Mall, gambling at the casinos, and social evenings spent throughout the city wore thin. Even free meals from several local restaurants, free concerts and free attendance at Edmonton Elks football games did little else but provide a momentary distraction from their reality.

When word the evacuation was ending finally arrived at the end of the third week, the moods lifted. Smiles returned.

"TALK OVER A COFFEE, A SHOPPING CART, OR THE PHONE ALL SEEMED TO FOCUS ON ONE THING: THE WILDFIRES."

Photos by Bill Braden

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

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Conversations lightened. Preparations for the long trip home began. Almost a week later, most of the YKDFN was home. Any concern for the communities dissipated upon their arrival.

THE FIRE BREAK at Dettah now greets visitors to the community. The water lines and sprinkler systems have been removed but the YKDFN set the precedent of being able to access the firefighting equipment if necessary. "It feels safer." Betsina says. "(The fire break) gives us time to get ready if it ever happens again."

But questions remain, the chiefs say. Was there an absolute need to evacuate? Could the evacuation have been handled better, perhaps in a more organized, staged fashion, instead of *en masse*? In other parts of the country, members of First Nations are sometimes asked to participate in fighting wildfires. With the YKDFN having a number of members with wildfire fighting experience and training in the past, why weren't they asked to help? Will the First Nation be able to recoup any, if not all, the money spent during the evacuation, from either territorial or federal sources?

Sangris also speaks of lessons to be learned. "This (fire) was different. It was so dry. No berries were growing. For how many years, the ground is dry, the moss is dry. We knew something bad was going to happen. This is just a warning for us right now because the earth is dry in this part of the country. Next year, many years after that, we're going to have to be on our toes. We have to watch and prepare for it, because it will happen again."

During days filled with smoke, ash, darkness and acrid air, a smile—any smile—was a welcome respite from the reality that enveloped residents of the Northwest Territories. A simple "hello" seemed to distract us for a moment from thoughts about the damaged, blackened borealis forests surrounding us. We tended to slip easily into our chosen categories for that moment. Neighbour. Friend. Acquaintance. Relative. But there are other categories that could just as easily, and more accurately, describe us. Evacuee. Victim. Survivor. Witness.

Following the return, conversations over a coffee, a shopping cart, the phone, or internet, all seemed to focus on one subject: the wildfires. And the questions we answered were all the same, in any of the NWT's 11 official languages: *Where were you evacuated to? What did you do during that time?*

We watched in silence as wildfires consumed other places, forcing others to evacuate, survive and rebuild. Fort McMurray, Alta. Lytton, B.C. Add one more: Enterprise, NWT. But it's the smoke that wrapped the capital region like a blanket that's making us rethink our priorities, reflect on our future, and wonder if this will ever happen again.

Orange.

We're not used to waking up to, working and living under, or going to sleep under an orange sky. But this summer we did. Whether we lived in the South Slave, or the Delta regions of the vast wilderness that is the Northwest Territories, orange was often the colour of sky we grew used to.

Yet for the members of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, a different question arises, one that will cause them to remember the summer of 2023 for a long, long time: *Will history repeat itself?*

If it does, they're confident they're ready for it.

RioTinto

Thank you to first responders and volunteers

The 2023 NWT wildfire season that threatened our communities was unprecedented, and so was the response from volunteers and first responders.

To those who showed the courage to face a formidable force of nature, to those who cared for their neighbours – we appreciate your efforts. You have proven the power of community when we work together selflessly, and you have our gratitude.

We want to say a special thank you to our Diavik team members who either flew from site to help or stayed behind in their communities to use their skills and training to fight the threat.

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EXPLORE CANADA'S FAR NORTH

LOUISE BEAULIEU
STAYED BEHIND IN FORT SMITH TO COOK FOR THE FIREFIGHTERS.

HUNDREDS OF RESIDENTS CHOSE TO STAY BEHIND AND DEFEND COMMUNITIES. THEY CUT TREES, CLEARED FIREBREAKS, COOKED FOR AN ARMY OF FIREFIGHTERS ON THE FRONT LINE, AND MUCH MORE. HERE ARE THE STORIES OF A FEW OF THESE COURAGEOUS INDIVIDUALS.

> BY DANA BOWEN, DWAYNE WOHLGEMUTH, AND ANNIKA OLESEN

THE PEOPLE

WHO STAYED BEHIND

Photo by Pierre-Emmanuel Challon

"DIIFERENT WORLD THE LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED FOR MY CHILDREN."

Photo by Terry Freund

Home, Or What's Left Of It

BORN AND RAISED IN FORT SMITH, TERRY FREUND STAYED TO BATTLE THE WILDFIRES, AND WATCHED THE LANDS AROUND HIM GO UP IN SMOKE.

>> Terry Freund stands firmly on the charred ground and looks up at the sky made grey from smoke. Around him hundreds of fallen trees and piles of bramble are pushed off to the side. Just weeks before, this was all vibrant green forest. Now, he might as well be standing on Mars.

"The landscape has changed for my kids' foreseeable future. I'm not sure if my children will know what a tree looks like on Salt Mountain until they are in their late 30s or 40s," he says. "There's going to be a lot of emotional people coming home seeing their landscape changed so drastically."

A heavy-equipment officer, Freund was among a crew of volunteers who had been clearing trees around Fort Smith, ensuring the wildfires wouldn't reach the community. When the Fort Smith evacuation order was first announced on Aug. 12, he went with his family to Hay River to wait things out. Then Hay River announced its own evacuation order the following day. It was time to draw a line. As someone born and raised in Fort Smith, Freund decided that — after seeing his family off — he would stay behind and help however he could.

"My biggest concern was making sure my family was safe," he says. "Once they got to Edmonton, I thought, I can finally get back to concentrating on work."

Between physically tough days that stretched into evenings creating fire breaks, Freund says there wasn't much time to reflect on what was happening to his community. After all, they were "still in the fight," he says.

Now, as the weather cools, he is still involved in the process of rebuilding infrastructure before the winter comes, but is optimistic that eventually the landscape will recover.

Overall, he's grateful. Freund knew he could rely on his crew, who he says worked "exceptionally well together" during the long days clearing the brush. But there are so many more to thank. Everyone from the grocery store clerks to the cleaners, who made it possible for volunteers and workers to stay behind. Because of everyone's collective effort, Fort Smith residents were able to safely return to the place they know and love, even if the surroundings look a little alien.

Trees will regrow and a community can rebuild. Freund says what matters is Fort Smith will survive. "Everyone has a home to come back to." — *Dana Bowen*

Worth 1,000 Words

HOW A VOLUNTEER BECAME THE OFFICAL PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE SUMMER OF 2023.

>> The wildfire rushed through Fox Hole and Salt Mountain, blackening trees and scorching the earth on its way toward Fort Smith. Left in its wake were "ghost trees" — grey areas where trees used to be — and a few remaining trunks bent and crystallized by flame.

"It made me think of some sort of apocalyptic scene," says Pierre-Emmanuel

Chaillon, a local photographer who'd soon become an official recorder of the summer of 2023.

At first, Chaillon did whatever he could to help volunteer efforts during the summer's wildfires. In his spare time, he also took photographs to document the experience. That drew the attention of the NWT government, which asked Chaillon to continue photographing what became an historic event.

For days in the midst of the crisis, he followed firefighters in action, captured helicopters dropping water on flaming trees, and snapped shots of emergency teams protecting structures against fire.

"I used some of my time off to explore more of this dramatic fire landscape," Chaillon says, "trying to capture the essence of this burned forest that vanished during the summer."

By the time the wildfires began to threaten Fort Smith's only exit out of town, Chaillon, his wife and their seven-month-old baby already had their bags packed. The smell of smoke hung heavily in the community for days before the official evacuation call. Chaillon and his family were ready to camp out in Hay River until it all settled. Of course, Hay River was ordered to evacuate the very next day.

"Nobody knew it would happen. We were camping and thought, 'OK, we can relax,'" Chaillon says. But "suddenly, the fire came and it was pretty rushed."

The family packed up their belongings once again. This time, Chaillon turned to his wife and told her he wanted to stay back and help. "Having a baby, you try to show them what is the good thing to do," he says. "I want my baby to know I tried to do something."

With a hug and kiss, she got into their second car and headed south with their baby, while he turned around toward Fort Smith to offer a helping hand. Make that a helping shutter finger.

As the saying goes, a picture is worth 1,000 words. Many thousands of words will be written about this past summer in the NWT, but images like Chaillon's are what will bring the wildfires to life, and shine a spotlight on the stories of both evacuee and essential workers.

Chaillon demurs, suggesting he's "just a photographer," but his images help put the situation and the efforts to save each community into perspective.

"I feel like they did all the big work and I was privileged to be able to document that," he says. "There's so many people who work really, really hard, so I think those people must be on the front page."
—*Dana Bowen*

MAKING BREAKS A PILE OF CLEARED VEGETATION GROWS IN YELLOWKNIFE.

Photo courtesy of Dwayne Wohlgemuth

Emptying A City

ONE CANADIAN RANGER'S ON-THE-GROUND ACCOUNT OF SECURING YELLOWKNIFE.

>> The chainsaw buzzes in my hands while my spouse, Leanne, and our two boys, Emile and Aleksi, drag loads of trees and branches to a distant but growing pile. We've been firesmarting and working on a sprinkler line around our off-grid, off-road cabin, located 10 kilometres north of Yellowknife, for more than a week. Right now it's only 4:30 p.m. in the middle of summer, but the sky is dark with smoke. There's a glow on the horizon from the fire to the north, and large plumes from the other three fires to the west, northeast, and southeast. We don't question if, but when, they'll arrive.

Three days later the evacuation order comes. I'm attending a monthly meeting for the Wiillideh Canadian Ranger Patrol, which has members from Dettah, Ndilo, and Yellowknife, all discussing the need for assistance. The first Canadian Ranger Patrol Group has been tasked with operating an evacuation centre at Sir John Franklin High School. The assistance of any Rangers who could stay behind would be greatly appreciated, we're told. The Rangers are not surprised by the evacuation order, and many have already prepared their families and vehicles for this moment. Leanne and I certainly expected the evacuation order and we had already discussed the possibility that Rangers, including myself, would be asked to stay behind to help.

As I paddle back towards our cabin in the dark, I wish that the evacuation order hadn't come so quickly. Nobody can ever feel fully prepared for such events. The boys are fast asleep, so Leanne and I work on final sprinkler system connections and tests until about 2 a.m. when we finally feel the system is adequate to provide reasonable fire protection for our cabin.

After a couple hours of sleep and a short discussion of evacuation options for Leanne and the boys, we leave our cabin and complete the one-hour boat, hike, paddle, and drive into town. I join a handful of Rangers and a pod of regular military members at the school. Nobody has ever evacuated or planned to evacuate Yellowknife before, so there will be hiccups.

Very quickly a line of people grows around the block like a pea vine in one of the capital's now unattended gardens. We rummage through the school for materials to make a few benches. We call for Port-A-Potties, set down traffic cones, and walk the line to check on people — prioritizing a few folks with disabilities or medical conditions. The line grows throughout the morning to an estimated 800 people. There aren't enough flights available. The mood is sombre but folks are amazingly patient in spite of the long line.

I chat by phone with Leanne a couple times throughout the morning. She's being indecisive about whether to take an evacuation flight or to drive, but finally decides to leave later in the day with a convoy of friends. She's fully capable of managing alone so I'm not concerned. She and the boys will spend the evacuation in Calgary and Canmore with her sister and some friends who used to live in Yellowknife.

By that afternoon, under a surprisingly blue sky, we realize there are more people in line than we can fit on the flights. Flocks of people who've been waiting for hours are sent home and told to come back early the next morning, a Friday. There are dozens of flights booked for that day, and we send out people faster than they arrive, clearing the backlog by midday.

By Sunday, our evacuation centre switches to on-demand mode, with greatly reduced staff. Our Ranger patrol joins firefighters working on the fire breaks on the west side of Yellowknife. We arrive with chainsaws, ATVs, and tub trailers to clear fallen trees from a 50-metre-wide fire break over rough bedrock country.

The days whiz by, complete with noise and exhaust from chainsaws and ATVs. One Ranger straps a Bluetooth speaker to his ATV and his playlist of Bruce Springsteen, Neil Young, Foreigner and the Jerry Cans becomes our soundtrack.

The blackflies, which had been abnormally absent during this drought-stricken summer, now emerge. The smell of bug repellent mixes with ATV exhaust as we take morning breaks under a scorching sun next to a maintenance trailer covered with chainsaws, bar oil, mixed gas, spare parts, helmets, and tools. When the wind direction is just right, water bombers pass low and directly overhead after picking up water from nearby Kam Lake.

During my limited time not working on firebreaks, I visit the homes of friends and acquaintances to remove perishables, empty indoor compost pails and garbage, and harvest or water the occasional garden. People offer food and even alcohol in exchange, but the only payment I need is their happiness knowing the fridge won't be a smelly mess upon their return.

I harvest litres of tomatoes and raspberries and share them with other Rangers. I find watermelon rinds left behind on someone's sofa, rotting onions and tomatoes on shelves, and children's half-eaten bowls of breakfast cereals. Every rotten disaster avoided gives me great satisfaction.

When the City of Yellowknife announces the Sept. 6 return date, we're all elated that we'll soon see our families. One Ranger brings Great Slave Lake fish from his freezer and we celebrate with an all-you-can-eat fish fry.

I catch a flight to Calgary and rejoice seeing my family again. The timing is fortuitous. We visit friends for a few days and then slowly drive north to surprise my parents near Grande Praire, Alta., and celebrate, incredibly, their 60th wedding anniversary. It's a family reunion.

— *Dwayne Wohlgemut*

Full days in an empty city

IN A CITY EVACUATED, WHAT REMAINED BEHIND WAS TRUE COMMUNITY SPIRIT.

>> In our nearly empty capital city, only a handful of cars cruise the roads. Passersby exchange friendly waves, whizzing through the downtown core under blinking yellow stoplights. Litter, sirens, and rush-hour traffic disappear. Those of us still in Yellowknife find joy in each other and in our steady days of volunteer work, staying calm and productive through uncertain times.

Existing friendships deepen and new ones form in the social mixing pot of volunteers. For a few short days, common sense reigns and life becomes very simple.

When the evacuation order comes, I'm in my Latham Island home with my friend, fishing captain, and chosen fire buddy, Stéphanie Vaillancourt.

We're both commercial fishers, and have spent the summer boating through the wildfire smoke between her fishing cabin and Yellowknife. Our freezers are packed with over a thousand pounds of vacuum-sealed fillets representing much of our summer's work. They're plugged into city power, but our own back-up generators wait.

Stéphanie's sturdy boat is packed and ready to leave town for weeks on end, if need be, and that gives us confidence in our own evacuation plan. For the time being, we choose to stay put and try to be of service to the place and people we love.

Friday morning, 36 hours after the evacuation was called, Stéphanie and I join dozens of others at Kavanaugh Brothers Trucking, the newly-minted volunteer base at the far west end of town. City councillor Cat McGurk leads the volunteers with good humour and clear communication. She identifies tasks, and we each step into the roles for which we are best suited.

For the next week, Stéphanie and I become part of Jay Bulckaert's Bush Bruisers volunteer squad, chainsawing and hauling brush at the designated firebreak lines. Jay, who is a local film producer and artist, relays messages from the British Columbia sprinkler team (AquaDiversity), scavenges equipment and fuel for us, and provides direction amidst often-changing plans.

Despite the urgency, and the lack of official certifications or safety flowcharts, we keep each other safe. Our team has combined decades of experience taking risks, but returning safely each day from cutting wood, bushwhacking, and operating heavy machinery.

In that week of work together, we each make hundreds of small, sound, individual decisions about where and when, with whom and how.

Volunteers harvest gardens and bring the fresh produce to commercial kitchens, where they prepare the food and serve crews. We help ourselves to each other's fridges, trying to put a dent in the food waste. Competing contractors work side-by-side, calling on their fellow Yellowknifers' machinery and skills.

The week passes without the predicted winds and heat. Fire crews switch from defence to offence, and slowly the sense of emergency eases. Focus turns to making the most of the resources in place, doing preventative work for future years, and, eventually, restarting the city. The volunteer crews are disbanded on city orders, and we live the second half of the three-week evacuation more as spectators than participants.

What I will remember, though, is the boldness and generosity both among the people around me and those who left to make the whole effort possible.

It was a time when we all had difficult choices to make, and people chose to be good to one another. — *Annika Olesen*

OUTDOOR WORK VOLUNTEERS CLEAR BRUSH AT A DESIGNATED FIRE BREAK.

Photo by Annika Olesen

Heroes

THE FACES AND THE EXPERIENCES OF THE FIRE FIGHTERS WHO STEPPED UP WHEN WE NEEDED THEM MOST.

It's difficult to overstate the efforts of fire fighters to protect northern homes and communities through the summer of 2023. They came from the communites, from across Canada, and from around the world to do their part. You'll see the details in the pages that follow, scenes of challenging days, nuanced strategies, and, when you boil it down, a lot of hard work. Before we let pictures do the rest of the talking, we'd like to offer our thanks to those who shared their valuable services at a time of need and those volunteers who supported them in getting the job done.

Photo by Pierre-Emmanuel Challion

LOCATION: FORT SMITH, NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Fire fighers from Alberta and New Zealand join a circle dance in Fort Smith as residents and elders offer their thanks with songs and traditional ceremony.

WORLD TRAVELLERS

Professional fire fighters from South Africa gather at their staging camp near Yellowknife. The crew battled fires across Western Canada as well as the NWT.

Photo courtesy Government of the Northwest Territoires

Photo courtesy Mary Pennington-DeLargie, Parks Canada

FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE Crews ignited backburns and torched brush piles to reduce the volume of available forest fuel.

IN THE DETAILS

Fires smouldering deep in the tinder-dry forest floor required careful and arduous efforts to ensure they were out.

Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

ON DUTY

CAF members from the Royal 22nd Regiment and 5 Combat Engineer Regiment clear brush from Parker Park to reduce the risk of fire spreading into Yellowknife.

LOCATION: YELLOWKNIFE

Photo courtesy Master Cpl. Alana Morin, JTFN

LOCATION: WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK

Photo courtesy Mary Pennington-DeLargie, Parks Canada

STRATEGY SESSION

Fire team leaders use high-tech aerial surveys to map fire behaviour and plan strategy.

LOCATION: NORTH SLAVE

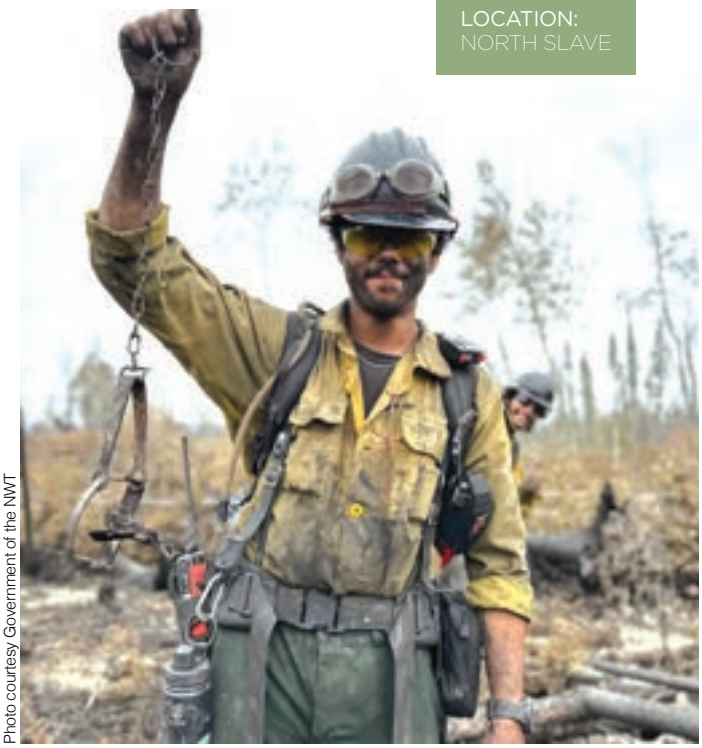

Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

UNSEEN DAMAGE

Traplines were among the losses across more than four-million hectares of habitat lost. Blackend by ash and charred trees, a fire fighter holds the evidence.

ANGRY SKY

A daunting scene dwarves fire fighters as winds drive the flames.

Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

Photo by Pierre-Emmanuel Chaillon

HEAVY GEAR A tanker-pumper crawls along the fire line in efforts to protect Wood Buffalo.

Photo courtesy Master Cpl. Alana Morin

BRIEFING TIME

Fire safety consultant Kris Liivam briefs Canadian Rangers on hose and pump operation.


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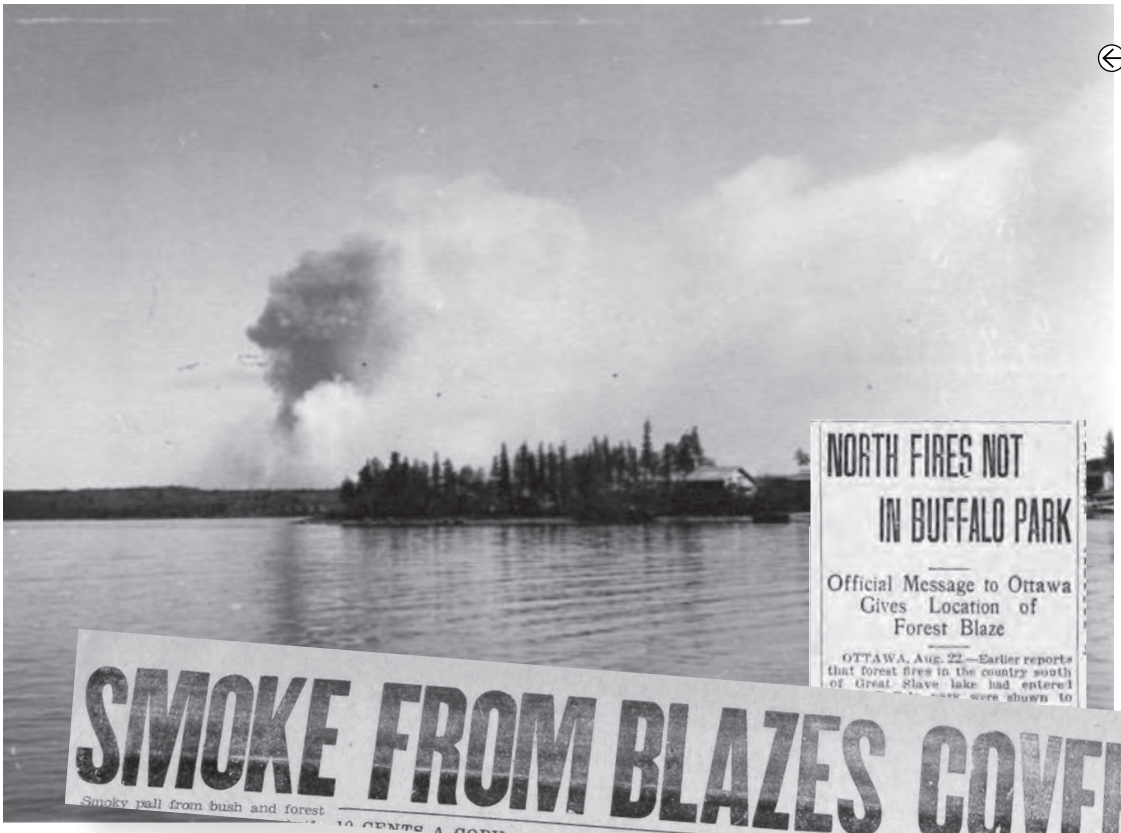


PAPERS OF RECORD LONG BEFORE THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA MADE NEWS UBIQUITOUS, NORTHERN WILDFIRES WERE MAKING HEADLINES.

1964

Mackenzie Area Ravaged By Raging Forest Fires

NORTH FIRES NOT IN BUFFALO PARK

Official Message to Ottawa Gives Location of Forest Blaze

OTTAWA, Aug. 22.—Earlier reports that forest fires in the country south of Great Slave lake had entered

SMOKE FROM BLAZES COVER NORTH

Smoky pall from bush and forest

1953

1927

A Brief History of NWT Wildfires

FOR OVER 200 YEARS THEY'VE BLAZED A TRAIL ACROSS THE NORTHERN LANDSCAPE.

> BY RYAN SILKE

Fire is an important part of the Northwest Territories' forest ecology. Some years are free of the oppressive smoke, other summers are tinder-dry and suffocating as the land burns. Growing up in Yellowknife, I have memorable recollections of thick smoke, road closures, and feelings of impending doom as wildfires burned. But just how often have natural disasters like this impacted the North? I decided to go back through the record and find out. Here is a curated timeline of significant or interesting events in the history of territorial wildfires.

1807

Fur trader W.F. Wentzel journaled an account of dire conditions in the Fort Simpson area: "Great fires have almost overrun the whole country. This is the eighth day since the sun has been invisible to us — occasioned by the smoke which has involved the whole country into almost total darkness. Not a track of any animal is to be seen anywhere."

1927

A very dry summer was reported by the government agent in Fort Resolution, and fires were raging all around Great Slave Lake, from Rocher River to the East Arm. Fort Smith was encircled by a "ring of fire" with the shipyards and

DEBATE RAGED ABOUT THE CAUSE OF WILDFIRES. CARELESS CAMPERS OR HUNTERS? PROSPECTORS OR PILOTS?

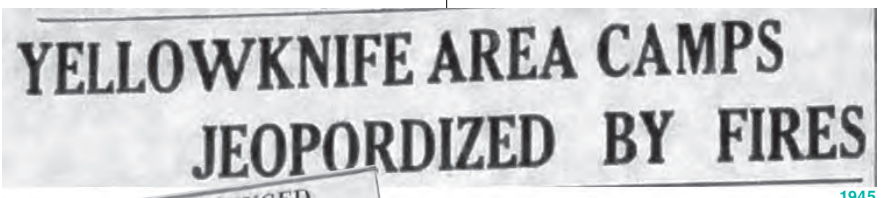
the newly created Wood Buffalo Park under threat. The S.S. Distributor boat reported severe fire activity all along the Mackenzie River: "So heavy is the air with smoke, that even at noon the sun appears merely as a sullen red disk in the sky."

1936

Yellowknife's first significant fire of record started at Duck Lake and traveled north along the east shore of the Bay. The gold miners at Burwash Mine fought back against the flames. At a nearby village, Dene women kept vigil throughout the night to stomp out flames, as the men were in Fort Resolution for Treaty payment. This is how Dettah, which means "burnt point," got its name.

1938-1939

The gold rush to Yellowknife was in full


YELLOWKNIFE AREA CAMPS JEOPORDIZED BY FIRES

1945


FORT SMITH IS RINGED BY FLAMES; DETAILS IMPOSSIBLE TO SECURE

Residents Are All Out Fighting Blaze Which Is Sweeping Southeast Corner of Buffalo Reserve; Other Fires Observed in South

1927

swing and wildfires were rampant over two summers. A big fire southwest of town smouldered towards the Con and Negus gold mines. A quick moving bush fire between Con and Old Town threatened the town's first telephone network and destroyed a shack in Peace River Flats before being extinguished by citizens.

1940-1942

Debate raged in the North about the underlying cause of wildfires. Careless campers and hunters? Prospectors burning off moss to get a better look at the rocks? Bush pilots throwing cigarette butts from their airplanes? Richard Finnie in "Canada Moves North" (published 1943) summarized some of these contributing factors nicely, concluding: "Fire hurts the aviators' business, too, and it may even imperil his life. Some evenings, airplanes circled Yellowknife for a half-hour, desperately maneuvering for a landing, but smoke so blended the shore line with the water that the pilots were at last forced to effect emergency landings elsewhere."

1945

A wildfire burned north from Yellowknife through the Walsh and Banting Lake areas destroying gold exploration camps. Men survived by fleeing into their canoes. Mining engineer John Anderson-Thomson saved his camp at Greyling Lake by clearing away a six-foot wide strip of moss down to bare rock, and dumping bags of water on the fires.

1946

The first NWT forestry and fire warden service was established in Fort Smith.

1950

The Yellowknife fire warden reported 70 wildfires were started because of careless campers.

1958

A tourist from Peace River got lost in the bush north of Behchokǫ̀. He was found five days later after he started a forest fire to attract attention to his location.

1961

Whatì (Lac La Martre) was saved from a 60,000-hectare wildfire after 200 men were conscripted to fight the blaze. Water bombers were used for the first time in the NWT.

1968

A fire around Inuvik flared up in a tinder-dry pine forest. The fire nearly burned down the Hudson's Bay Company warehouse containing most of Inuvik's winter supply of goods. A change in wind direction ultimately saved the town.

1970

Over 100 Canadian troops were sent to Wood Buffalo Park to stop a wildfire from advancing on rare whooping crane nests.

1971

Major fires erupted near Hay River and Pine Point Mine prompting evacuation notices. Seven people were killed in accidents while fighting fires in the NWT — four died when two Canso water bombers collided over the Slave River — and some 930,000 hectares of forest were burned.

1979

A total of 380 fires burned two million hectares of forest in the NWT. Indigenous groups blasted the government's firefighting program, which had allowed the destruction of important hunting and trapping areas near Fort Smith. A federally-funded independent panel recommended the forestry service prioritize protecting key trapping areas and caribou habitat in consultation with Dene and Métis groups.

1980

Infrared thermal scanners were used to help fight fires, effectively seeing through smoke to display hot spots and identifying fires burning underground during the winter. Nevertheless, 780,000 hectares were burned this year.

1981

Enterprise and the Louise Falls campground were evacuated due to wildfire, while a camper truck was destroyed at Polar Lake campground near Pine Point Mine. A total of 888,000 hectares of forest were burned.

1987

Devolution of the forestry and fire programs from the federal government to the territorial government under the Renewable Resources Department.

1995

Fires surrounding Tulita forced its temporary evacuation — the first mass-exodus of an NWT community due to wildfire — and caused concern over the effects of fires on the Norman Wells to Alberta oil pipeline. A total of 2.7 million hectares of forest were burned.

1998

The Tibbett Lake fire to the east of Yellowknife destroyed three cabins, four abandoned mining camps (including the famous Thompson-Lundmark gold mine), and closed all traffic on the Ingraham Trail. In total, 1.4 million hectares of forest were burned.

2014

The legendary "Summer of Smoke" saw over 3.4-million hectares of forest burned throughout the Northwest Territories. Yellowknife was hit with an ominous pyrocumulonimbus cloud, a fire-generated thunderstorm that created its own weather system and turned daytime skies to night.

2023

A new record for wildfires in the NWT with well over three million hectares burned (final stats yet to be released at the time of writing) and nearly 100 megatonnes of carbon released, resulting in the evacuation of 11 communities and the near total destruction of Enterprise.

> continued from p.22

the leadership shown in the communities, thanking K'atl'odeeche First Nation Chief Martel, K'atl'odeeche Fire Chief Mike Sunrise, Hay River Mayor Kandis Jameson, Hay River Fire Chief Travis Wright and Enterprise Mayor Michael St. Amour, for their work.

Now, in October, it feels safe to say that this fire season is finished. Westwick, along with everyone else who worked on the fires, is due a well-deserved rest. The job of a communications team isn't very physical by its nature, but in times of crisis it can be mentally fatiguing from having to be on at all times and knowing that thousands of people are relying on you to accurately and promptly share information. You have to do what you can to avoid burnout. "We were careful to see that people got a couple of days off every two weeks," Westwick says. "It has been a long summer for everyone."

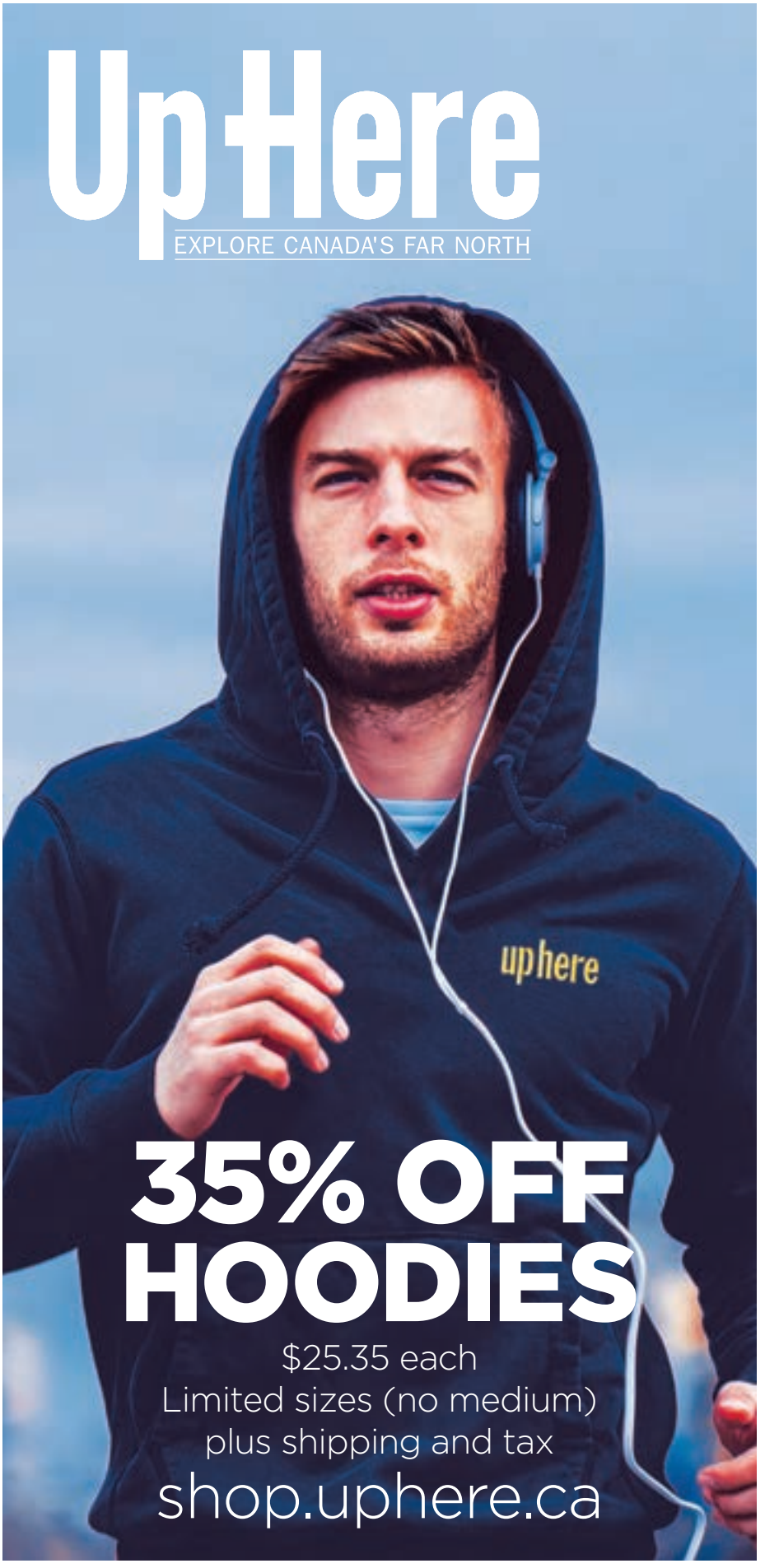
Westwick says everyone develops their own coping mechanisms for handling the stress and fatigue. For him, it was compartmentalization. "My heart was breaking for people this summer, but you've got a job to do and you've got to find a way to cope with what you're feeling inside."

Now that the fire season has ended, one of the biggest takeaways for Westwick is the power of the natural world. "I'm a city boy, so the role of the natural world was really brought into focus for me," he says. "We're co-existing with this huge living, breathing organism, the boreal forest. Sometimes it's going to make decisions for us."

The function of an information officer in an emergency is to tell people what's going on, Westwick says. It's not about public relations. He points to studies that show the public won't panic if given information in a crisis. People are resilient, he says, and adaptable. They just want to know what to do to keep each other safe. Faced with existential threats, we fall back on community. "That's when you often see the best in people," he says. "That sure became obvious this summer."

Although his work is stressful and even scary at times, Westwick has learned in his career that it's best to buckle down and do what needs to get done.

"You need to get timely information out, you need to have a focus on care and comfort. You need to be available and fill in the blanks as much as you can when there is so much uncertainty."



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the past and sent to foster care or residential schools, according to British Columbia's First Nations Health Authority.

The landscape's transformation after a wildfire can also affect mental health by reducing the solace people once found in the environment. A study in Arizona found that, post-fire, residents who experienced grief related to changes in the natural environment were more likely to report psychological distress. Feeling these types of "eco-emotions" is a healthy response for those fleeing from a fire, who've lost their homes, or who are simply reading about natural disasters all over the world, Gagnon says. "These emotions can actually help us to cope with the uncertainty, to prepare ourselves for different types of loss that we might experience."

AS KOROTASH DROVE through Paradise Gardens and Enterprise, he thought about his friends who had lost their homes. He couldn't fathom what they were going through. He thought about his family—how they were safe, and he couldn't wait to get back into cell service and let them know he was okay.

He and Hofmann are high-school sweethearts, both born and raised in Hay River. His grandparents lived there, and now his children are growing up there. "It's home," he says. "It will always be home. And that was the hardest part—are you driving down the highway for the last time? My wife—I love her to death—she said, 'It doesn't matter what happens. We're a family. And wherever we are together as a family is where home will be.'"

The family reunited in Sylvan Lake, about a 12-hour drive south. Then they all drove to Korotash's sister-in-law's house near Brooks, three hours further south. That's where they stayed for the next month, until Hay River residents got the all-clear to return. Korotash, Hofmann, and the kids went back to their rental — the move into their renovated home was delayed by the latest fire, since the workers evacuated too.

Korotash knows some people who considered not going back to Hay River and starting over somewhere new. After three evacuations in 15 months, residents are feeling beaten down. As people come home and resume their routines, though, he knows they'll stand strong together. "We're here for each other. We got through a flood, we got through a fire in May. We'll get through this one."

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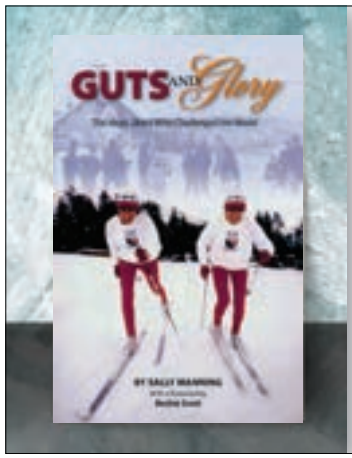

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Sally Manning
This book brings to life the amazing saga of Canada's cross-country skiing pioneers—the talented young Aboriginal racers from Inuvik, Northwest Territories who skied to international glory in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Firth sisters, celebrated on Canadian stamps, are featured.

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> continued from p. 65

her own carbon footprint, she had solar panels installed on her roof in June that feed power into the grid and reduce her fuel bill. A few days after the installation the NWT government announced a $15.2-million subsidy to the NWT Power Corp. to offset the increased costs of running its diesel generators because low water levels in the Snare River Basin prevented hydro generation.

"If they're able to find $15 million on a regular basis, because it seems to be a problem that's likely to occur again and has occurred in the past, why can't they set aside a small portion of that to buy people solar panels so families can reduce their home heating costs and we create power for our community?" Benoit asks.

As I write, my husband is installing lithium-ion phosphate batteries in our house to absorb the charge from our bigger, more powerful solar array, while helicopters burning fossil fuels sling large fuel drops to a nearby mining exploration camp in search of lithium under lakes and rock. The road to renewable energy at times seems circular and complicated but it needs to happen now. Globally, this July was the warmest on record, between 1.5 C and 1.6 C above preindustrial levels, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service. That means people have already experienced the heat of the climate goal set by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which says holding global warming to 1.5 C requires emissions to be cut by almost half by 2030.

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DURING EVACUATION, my family and I participated in some of the free events and activities Albertans graciously offered people displaced by wildfires. When the cashier at the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller handed me free tickets, I cried. Not because I was spared some $80 in admission costs. It was the shared humanity this generosity represented. What it said was, we see you, we understand you're scared and living with uncertainty. Let us help you take your mind off that for a moment.

The entrance to one of the final exhibits, the K-Pg Extinction, was heralded by a long vertical video screen of a raging inferno with billowing smoke. Beside it, under the title, "A DEADLY DAY" in red illuminated capital letters, was an explanation of how an asteroid crashed to Earth 66 million years ago. In its wake it caused chaos, wildfires and species decimation.

"Well this is triggering," my daughter-in-law remarked as she hugged her baby tighter to her chest. I quaked inside too.

Outside, despite wildfire smoke that had drifted in from elsewhere, we took in breathtaking vistas of the majestic rock striations of the Red Deer Valley badlands. The bands of grey-green mudstones and dark-coloured coal beds were flourishing wetlands about 72 million years ago. These ancient, swampy forests buried deep within the planet held onto their energy from the sun until, as fossils, they were mined for fuel that would power the industrial revolution and set us on the path to the climate crisis we are in today.

The Royal Tyrrell Museum did not take my mind off wildfires, or the earth's hottest summer since global records began in 1880. That's okay. They deserve my attention. Astronomer and science guru Carl Sagan once said: "Anything else you are interested in is not going to happen if you can't breathe the air and drink the water." Ultimately, this is the shared fate and humanity that must lead us all to climate action. I hope.

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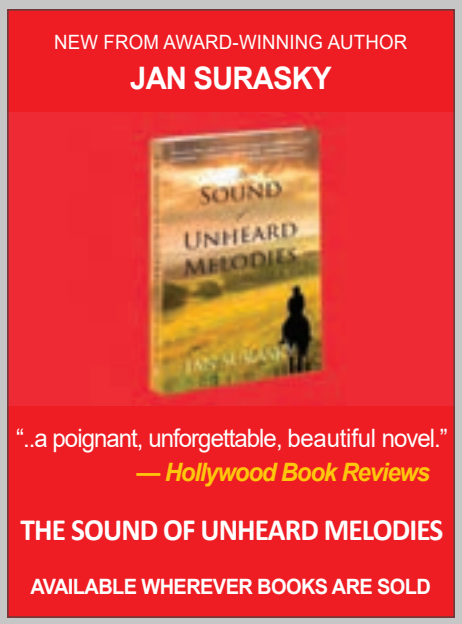
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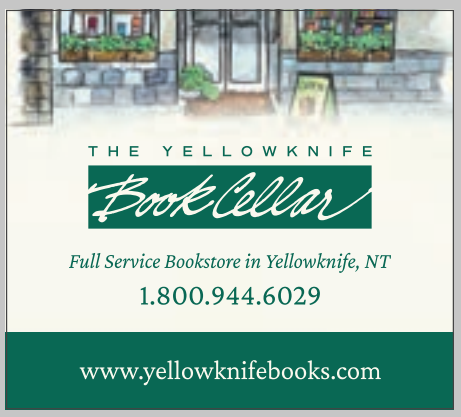
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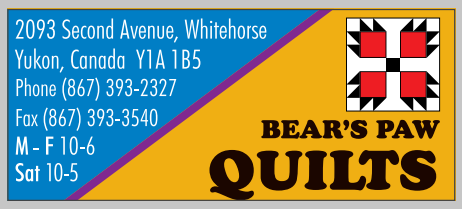
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Photo courtesy Government of the NWT

SMOKE BILLOWS OVER THE FLAMES DURING THE 2014 NWT FIRE SEASON.

Welcome to the New Normal

UNFORTUNATELY, IT'S NOT A GREAT NORMAL. THE RISE OF WILDFIRE IN THE NORTH — AND ITS IMPACT — IS PROOF OF THAT.

> BY ED STRUZIK

Elwin Bay along the northeast coast of Somerset Island in Canada's High Arctic is carved into a steep, flat-topped mountain range by glaciers and sea ice that once covered the region. For as long as anyone can remember, hundreds of beluga whales show up here every year on an annual migration from Greenland through the Northwest Passage of Canada. Their fidelity to this site is extraordinary given the fact that 19th century whalers killed more than 10,000 of them between 1874 and 1898, including 840 during one notably gruesome, 17-day stretch. Whale oil back then was what fossil fuels are today—a means of heating, lighting, lubricating, and processing textiles and rope.

While helicoptering over the bay with members of the U.S. National Science Foundation-sponsored Northwest Passage Project in August of 2019, we saw too many belugas to count accurately in waters riddled with disintegrating ice. Five hundred? Eight hundred? None of us could guess with certainty. Polar bears were there as well—a female and cub in one case—homing in on a dead or dying beluga that had presumably swam too far up the shallow estuary before the tide turned and trapped it in water too shallow for it to escape.

Based on what we saw on our 18-day, 5,634-nautical-mile journey, beluga, narwhal, bowheads, birds, and polar bears appeared to be doing reasonably well in a world in which glaciers are melting, sea ice is retreating, sea levels are rising, and permafrost is thawing

But that was not the whole story.

Part way through the journey, we were flabbergasted by the sight of a thunderstorm brewing off the coast of Cornwallis Island, where there is typically not enough moisture and convective heat to trigger lightning. It turned out to be part of a large low-pressure system that eventually resulted in dozens of lightning flashes at the North Pole, one of a record number in the past decade.

At the U.S. Thule Air Force base on the northwest coast of Greenland, where the expedition began and ended, we basked outside in shirt-sleeve weather instead of the fog, leaden clouds and cold rain or wet snow that are more typical of what to expect in late summer. While we were there, waiting for a military transport plane to take us back to New York, we learned that a month earlier, hikers had to be evacuated from the Arctic Circle Trail because of smoke from a tundra wildfire that was obstructing their ability to see where they were going. The trail stretches up to 200 kilometers (124 miles) from the edge of the ice cap to the fishing town of Sisimiut on the West coast.

Unfathomable as that fire in Greenland seemed to be, more than 100 intense and long-lived wildfires burned above the Arctic Circle during the summer of our voyage. In June alone, these fires emitted as much as 50 megatonnes of carbon dioxide, more than all that Sweden emits in a year. It was as much carbon dioxide as was produced by all the fires that burned in the Arctic from 2010 to 2018. Soot from these fires eventually fell and darkened some of Greenland's icecap and many of Canada's glaciers.

And it is not just soot that is raining down on the Arctic. Wildfire emissions from these fires are emancipating carbon trapped in frozen peat as well as toxins that have been stored in peat for thousands of years. Toxins such as mercury are entering the food chain, contaminating fish, polar bears, beluga whales and other Arctic animals.

The resilience of Arctic wildlife is being tested in ways like it never has since unsettling swings of cooling and warming that have followed the retreat of the Last Great Ice Age over the past 12,000 years. No one knows what the thresholds are for extinctions. What we do know is that saber-tooth cats, short-faced bears, eight-foot-long beavers, and woolly mammoths like the one recently unearthed in the Klondike no longer exist because of climate instability.

More trouble is not far off for Ice Age survivors such as caribou, which are already having a difficult time adjusting to increasing numbers of biting flies and parasites, to overhunting, and to fall and spring rain events that end up turning soft snow into impenetrable ice. The growing number of Arctic wildfires are also destroying slow-growing lichen, the food caribou depend on in winter.

Contrary to what many people think, wildfire is no stranger to the Arctic. I learned that the hard way in the summer of 2001 while on a 66-day solo kayaking trip down the Nahanni, Liard, and Mackenzie rivers. Two days before I was to cross the Arctic Circle, a thick pall of noxious smoke darkened the noon hour sun. Like many who find themselves in situations like this, I had no idea where to go. So, I called my wife on the satellite phone I had brought along and asked her to call the RCMP in Norman Wells.

The next day a fire management team dropped in by helicopter to see how I was doing. It was then that I learned that this fire was nothing like the one that had burned in the region in 1995, forcing more than 1,000 people to evacuate the towns of Tulita and Norman Wells. Nor was it anything as consequential as the fire that torched the region in 1998. Smoke from that fire rose so high into the stratosphere that it caught the attention of the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory. After ruling out enemy fire, scientists there wrongly assumed that it came from a volcano because no one at the time thought that a wildfire could produce so much energy.

There have been many big fires in the Arctic since then. In 2004, some 700 fires in Alaska burned a record 6.6 million hectares. An estimated 1.7 million hectares of forest vegetation was consumed by fire in the Yukon that same summer, far surpassing the long-term annual average of 120,000 hectares.

In 2007, a lightning-triggered fire on the north slope of Alaska burned through 1,000 square kilometres of tundra. The fire released as much carbon into the atmosphere as the tundra it burned had accumulated and stored in the previous half century. The Northwest Territories burned big in 2014. Alaska burned even bigger a year later.

Wildfire scientists have been warning for decades that more lightning, higher

THE NUMBER OF WILDFIRES HAS MORE THAN TRIPLED SINCE 2018 IN PARTS OF THE ARCTIC, ACCORDING TO THE GLOBAL WILDLAND FIRE INFORMATION SYSTEM.

FIRE BURNS IN AN ALASKA WILDLIFE REFUGE IN 2015.(R) ANOTHER BLAZE BURNED INTO ONCE-FROZEN PEAT. (BELOW)

Photo (above) by Matt Snyder. Courtesy McGill-Queen 's University Press.

Photo by Eric Miller. Courtesy McGill-Queen's University Press.

temperatures, and drought were going to raise the risk of fire in the sub-Arctic and Arctic regions. The record-breaking, or near record-breaking fire seasons in Alaska (2004, 2007, 2015), Siberia (2010, 2012, 2015, 2019, and 2020), and in the Northwest Territories (2014 and 2023) have been proof of that.

According to the Global Wildland Fire Information System, the number of fires has more than tripled since 2018 in much of the Arctic. And yet so many people were surprised, as I was, when two-thirds of the residents of the NWT were forced to evacuate in the summer of 2023.

The lesson that has not yet been learned is that the old Arctic that my colleagues and I saw on our trip in 2019 is coming to an end and that a new Arctic is unfolding in many different ways. We're still burning oil as Europeans did in the 19th century. The difference between now and then is that most of the energy is coming from the ground instead of from slaughtered whales. There are also nearly eight billion people burning fuel today compared to the 1.3 billion people who were around in the late 19th century.

Fire is not necessarily the enemy in a future Arctic. The spruce and pine in the boreal forest need the heat of a fire to open up and release the seeds from the cones. Young trees that eventually taken over make the forest more resilient to fire and disease.

But bigger, hotter, and more destructive fires will be coming unless we learn to live with fires as Indigenous people have for centuries before we kicked them out of places like Wood Buffalo because they used fire to manage the landscape for animals such as bison.

Fire has nothing to say except for the fact of itself. It will always be quite simply a chemical reaction, a propulsive oxidation of hydrocarbons shaped by terrain, weather, climate, and the combustible material around it. It doesn't care if it is black spruce rising up from the permafrost in a boreal forest or dwarf birch and other shrubs that are spreading rapidly throughout the tundra.

This was driven home in the summer of 2003 when a Laurier University research camp I planned to visit to see if beavers were continuing their march north on the tundra had to be evacuated because of smoke and the threat of fire. Like the fire that burned down another Laurier research station near Fort Simpson in late October the year before, it was a reminder that the "new normal" in the Arctic is anything but normal.

Photo by Ed Struzik. Courtesy McGill-Queen's University Press.

WILDFIRE SOOT
BLACKENS GLACIERS AND ICE CAPS, SPEEDING THEIR MELTDOWN.

Journalist and author Ed Struzik is a fellow at the Queen's Institute for Energy and Environmental Policy at Queen's University. His new book, **Darkness at Noon: The Future of Fire**, *is published by McGill-Queen's University Press.*

HUB

A sincere Thank You to the many people who stayed behind to protect Northern communities; the people who welcomed thousands of Northerners into their communities and the people who worked tirelessly to ensure populations were safely evacuated.

Despite the catastrophic wildfires, the resolve and resilience of Northerners continues to break through hardships they are faced with.

To help you be prepared, stay safe and recover, we've developed and gathered resources to guide you on what to do before, during and after a wildfire.

Visit HUB's Northwest Territories Wildfire Crisis Resources.

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There Aren't Enough Words

> BY MARION LAVIGNE

Like many Yellowknifers, we were on the "evacuation trail" early Thursday morning, Aug. 17, mere hours after the evacuation was ordered. Two seniors, two old dogs and a few supplies stuffed into a mid sized SUV. And like many other Yellowknifers who had taken to the one road south, we had no idea where we were going to end up. By noon we joined the two-hour lineup for gas near Fort Providence, and by dinner we were in High Level, Alta., where every hotel room was already booked. We decided to push on and reached Manning before dark. Again, there were no rooms available, but the Nova Hotel offered their parking lot as a place to sleep for the night. We decided to have a drink and use the washroom before starting an uncomfortable night in a vehicle.

After we ordered our drink, we chatted with the woman running the restaurant/bar, telling her where we were from and that we would be out in the hotel parking lot for the night. A few minutes later, she came over to our table and said, "I have a room for you at my house. My husband is just making up the bed, and you can bring your dogs in if you want to." We could hardly believe what she was saying. We did decide to leave the dogs in the vehicle, but we enjoyed a good night's sleep and our own bathroom, thanks to the generosity and kindness of Jocelyn and James Peterson of Manning, Alta. Hope we can repay you some day.

This was just one of many acts of kindness extended to NWT evacuees. As residents returned to the North most conversations started with "Where did you spend your evacuation?" And generally, the follow-up conversation was about acts of kindness extended to them in Alberta where most evacuees landed, but also in Manitoba, Yukon, and other NWT communities. There were the Fort Providence residents passing out treat bags to people in the lineups for gas. There was free gas for evacuees at some stops in High Level and Steen River in Alberta. There were signs along the highway in northern Alberta inviting evacuees to park their RVs in fields beside farmhouses.

Photo by Bill Braden

"THE EVACUATION BLOTTED OUT LINGERING RESENTMENT."

And as we were heading south, there were a few vehicles heading north: volunteers with livestock trailers heading to Yellowknife to move horses and other livestock; and fire trucks from small towns in northern Alberta making their way to northern communities, ready to assist in case the fires jumped the fire break and started damaging residential or commercial property.

There were also countless little acts of kindness: our hotel offered free use of washers and dryers and even free detergent; the City of Grande Prairie offered free admission to a range of activities, from swimming to exercise classes.

To this day, Yellowknifers are sharing the good stories from their evacuation weeks. Special wristbands (provided when you registered at an evacuation centre) gave evacuees in Edmonton free tickets to a CFL Edmonton Elks game. One evacuee who went to Whitehorse had the Yukon government help secure a workspace for her. And according to several evacuees I've talked to Fox Creek Alta., (population 2,000) ranked as one of the most hospitable places for evacuees, although all places went out of their way to make us feel comfortable.

Essential workers who stayed behind also performed dozens of acts of kindness, from rescuing and caring for stray dogs and puppies, to checking houses, and harvesting vegetable crops used to feed firefighters.

Then there were the monetary acts of kindness. Donors from across the North and across Canada collectively donated $2.6 million to United Way NWT through the 2023 wildfire season. Funds were dispersed to evacuees and impacted communities.

For those who ended up in Alberta, the consensus was: Our Alberta hosts were the best. As a former Ontarian who rankled at the old bumper stickers *Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark*, the evacuation blotted out any lingering resentment toward stereotyped Albertans. The Albertans we met were caring, concerned people, willing to volunteer their time and efforts in evacuation centres set up in churches or sports facilities, in preparing meals, offering space, entertaining us, and being good neighbours to the territory on their northern border.

Alberta was so hospitable that a few evacuees chose to stay in Alberta. One new resident is a rescued boa constrictor whose temporary Yellowknife home was a large glass cage at a Yellowknife vet clinic. The snake is now enjoying the good life at his adoptive home in Alberta.

I'm certain the boa is grateful for the support and kindness it has received through a time of crisis. Speaking on behalf of the rest of us, we can't thank-you enough to everyone who stepped up when we needed it most.

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THANK YOU

TO ALL FIRST RESPONDERS, ESSENTIAL STAFF, VOLUNTEERS, SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES AND RESIDENTS FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESILIENCE DURING THE 2023 WILDFIRE SEASON. **TOGETHER, WE ARE STRONGER.**

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