

Van Tat Gwich'in Navigation Systems Project

**2014 Research
Interim
Report
Autumn 2014**



Van Tat Gwich'in Navigation Systems Project



Chii Ch'a'an - Bear Cave Mountain

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October 2014

Cover photo: Johnny Abel's cabin at Van Tat

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Van Tat Gwich'in Navigation Systems Project

1. Introduction to the Project

Polar Continental Shelf Project 391-14
Yukon Scientists & Explorers License 14-34 S&E
Vuntut National Park VUN 2014 16219

The Vuntut Gwitchin Government (VGG) Heritage Branch has been conducting a 4-year Navigation Systems Project since 2011. Impetus for the research is twofold: 1) to document the knowledge held by current elders and resource users about their current and heritage navigation systems, including seasonal land and water-based routes; and, 2) to promote the use and transfer of this knowledge by revitalizing select trails, erecting place name signs in Gwich'in and English at significant locations. Thus, research involves a significant Gwich'in language education component and incorporates future resource users and leaders. The project also addresses the need for supplementary background information for many of the over 800 place names in the VGG Place name Database, and further research on grave sites, their location in the traditional territory and individuals associated with them.

The VTG Navigation Systems Project continues the practice begun in previous VGG projects of collaborating with academics and other researchers to expand the knowledge base about traditional Gwich'in history and lands and expose Van Tat Gwich'in to this knowledge and research skills. As well, the project includes training and transmitting project information to the Van Tat Gwich'in and the general public.



Moose above Chuu Tl'it/Whitestone Village on Sheihveenjik/Whitestone River

Van Tat Gwich'in Navigation Systems Project Objectives

- document past and current navigation routes
- erect Gwich'in/English place name signs
- revitalize select trails
- document background Gwich'in place name information
- document and locate graves and burial sites
- collaborate with academics and other researchers
- train and educate Van Tat Gwich'in participants
- communicate and educate through reporting, interpretive materials and programs, on-the-land signage, GPS information, maps and navigation route revitalization.

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Robert Bruce at an archaeological site on the route between upper Troochoonjik/Driftwood River and LaPierre House

The focus on navigation routes emerges from the central place of travel on the land in Van Tat Gwich'in history and culture. Navigation systems link camps, villages, hunting and trapping areas, trading networks, portage routes, fishing sites, and routes to other Gwich'in and non-Gwich'in settlements – all important parts of life on the land and cultural continuity. Patterns of movement and livelihood have changed over time, but the need for knowledge of these networks and systems retains its importance.

The VTG Navigation Systems Project is being undertaken at this time because of the availability of Elders who know the routes and are physically capable of taking part in the project, along with young adults who are keen to expand their knowledge of navigation routes and Gwich'in heritage.

Throughout the project, Gwich'in language is emphasized, particularly in place name research, interviews with elders, and Gwich'in/English signage.



William Josie at Chii Ch'a'an/Bear Cave Mountain in the southwest quadrant of the study area and his ancestors' traditional territory.

2. 2014 Research

The fourth and final year of Navigation Systems research had two foci: a) completing our comprehensive survey of trails and routes in the traditional territory by researching the southwestern quadrant of Van Tat Gwich'in traditional lands, centring on Fishing Branch River/Ni'inlii Njik area situated west of the headwaters of the Porcupine River, and, b) documenting two trails north of the Porcupine River: Chief Peter Moses trail west from the Salmon Cache area, and the Caribou Bar trail north from the Porcupine River.

Concurrent with these objectives was the survey of grave sites to monitor conditions and erect signage, where possible. We continued our environmental monitoring program by recording locations of abandoned and derelict structures, oil drums and other environmental pollutants to assist in their eventual cleanup. We also recorded the condition of a number of camps in Van Tat/Crow Flats while we were in the area to assess their condition and check for disturbances such as bear damage. Finally, we collaborated with researchers Ray Le Blanc (archaeology) and Dave Mossop (ornithology). Dr. Le Blanc focussed on confirming locational data and assessing the condition of known archaeological sites in the general areas where we were working, drawing on his extensive knowledge of northern Yukon archaeology. Dave Mossop continued his 30+ year longitudinal survey of riparian birds in Van Tat.



Trail south from Old Crow toward the flats area across Ch'oodeenjik/Porcupine River

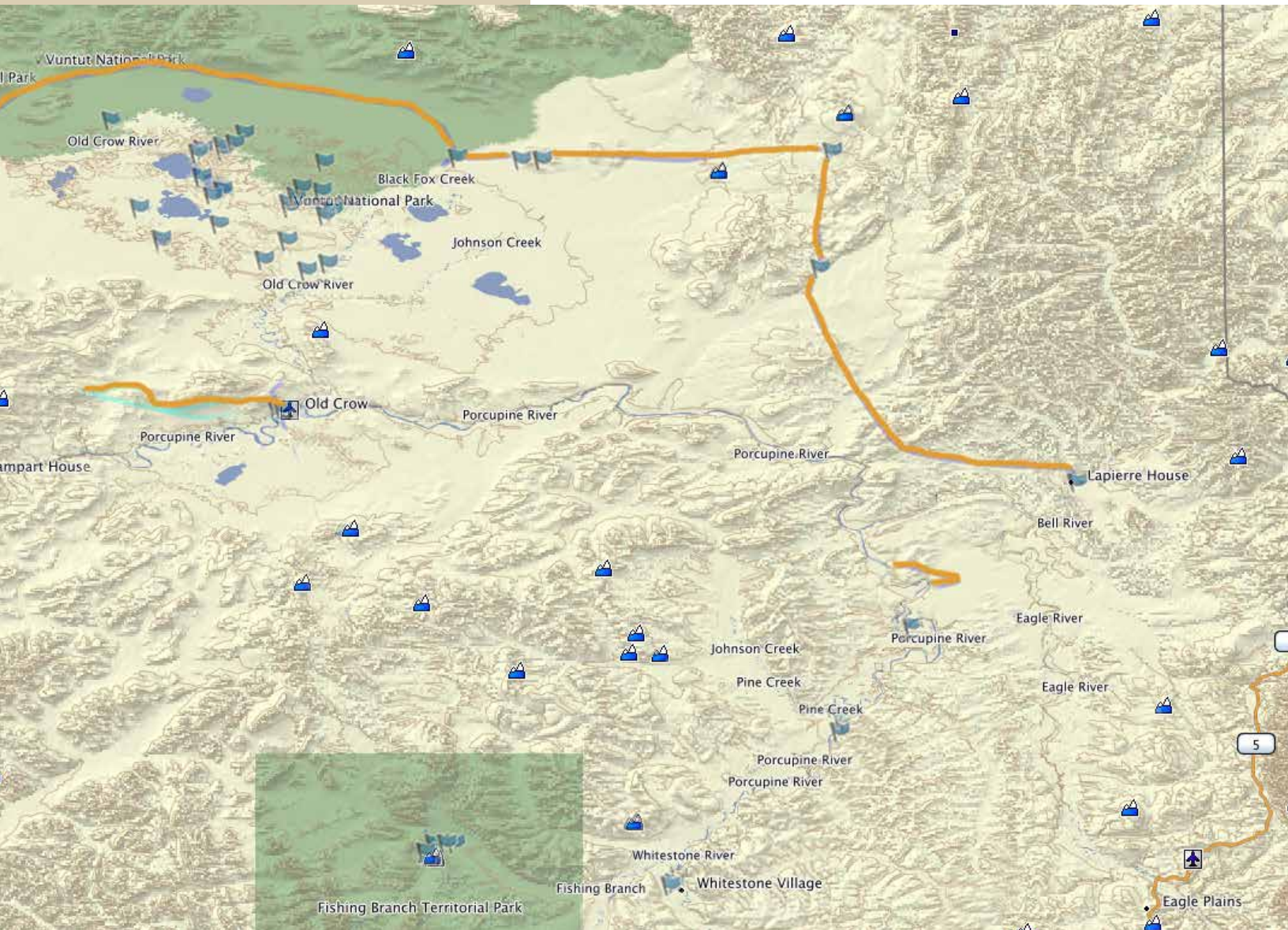


Pilot Dan Monteanu instructs elders John Joseph Kaye, Stringer Charlie and archaeologist Ray Le Blanc in helicopter safety features.



Looking south toward Fishing Branch River from Big Nest Mountain

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Map 1. Locations recorded during Navigation Systems Project research, June 2014



Trail from LaPierre House area east to Fort McPherson

The primary research method in 2014 was helicopter survey. Due to the location of 2014 research sites and funding and personnel, boat access was impractical. We endeavoured to multi-task on each helicopter trip to accomplish our diverse objectives, such as combining recording trails with grave site and archaeological research, and, where applicable, environmental monitoring, assessing camps and erecting signage.

a) Aerial survey

We completed 4 days of Polar Shelf-supported helicopter survey in June 2014. Research combined 3 kinds of objectives: trail, camp and gravesite locational data (including sign installation); confirmation of locations and assessing conditions of archaeological sites; and, environmental monitoring of known or suspected areas of contamination/debris.

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We overflow a number of areas:

- route from Second Mountain to Caribou Bar Mountain
- In the southwest quadrant, the trail from Fishing Branch to Bear Cave Mt and from Gopher Bluff to Whitefish Lake
- routes connecting camps in Van Tat
- assessment of Chief Peter Moses' trail west from Salmon Cache and Berry Hill trail
- inventory and assessment of 17 camps in Van Tat
- routes to berry picking areas at Nakal Van (Salmonberry Lake)
- long trail from LaPierre House north of Van Tat to Schuman House
- gravesites: Top of Hill Mountain (John Kyikavichik); Ellen Creek; Chuu Ti'it/Whitestone Village; Kâachik/Johnson Creek Village
- archaeological sites: MIVm6 Schaeffer Creek winter houses; Forgotten Hill site; Driftwood Hill site
- environmental monitoring: Bonnet Lake abandoned cabins and fuel drums; abandoned fuel drums near Bluefish River; Van Tat camps.

b) Gwich'in bird survey/book

2014 saw a continuation of ornithological research in Van Tat by Dave Mossop and work on the Gwich'in bird book. 27 professional photos and 5 illustrations were added to document species known to Gwich'in.

3. 2014 Research Collaborations

The Vuntut Gwitchin Government's Heritage Branch continued its long-standing policy of collaboration with outside researchers to increase knowledge about Van Tat Gwich'in and lands, and provide research experience for community members.

In 2014, VGG research collaborations were with David Mossop (bird survey) and Ray Le Blanc (archaeology). Both researchers contributed insights and expertise from over 3 decades of research in the area. Dave Mossop continued his longitudinal study of birds in Van Tat, with Van Tat Gwich'in assistants Darcy Andre Josie, Wheeler Netro, Briana Tetlich and Ashlynn Frost. Ray Le Blanc drew on his extensive knowledge of northern Yukon archaeology to accompany the helicopter researchers to relocate and monitor known archaeological sites in the study area, providing locational data where lacking or ambiguous.



Salmon Cache to LaPierre House seismic line and trail by creek



Robert Bruce Jr, Ray Le Blanc and Erika Tizya monitor and record the Driftwood Hill site



Driftwood Hill site: larger stone artifacts

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Fishing Branch River fish monitoring camp



Marion Schafer with mammoth tooth on Sheihveenjik/Whitestone River just up from Chuu TI'it/Whitestone Village.



Northeast from Van Tat looking toward "Ears Mountain", a landmark on the Babbage River route to the Arctic Ocean and Herschel Island

4. 2014 Interim Results

In 2014, we conducted 4 days of helicopter research to overfly and verify trail systems, conduct interviews, monitor environmental contaminant sites, relocate and monitor archaeological sites, install Gwich'in/English signage, collaborate with academic researchers, and deliver a training and education program. We collected GPS data, digital video, audio and photographs.

2014 research was focussed on completing our comprehensive survey of trails and routes in the traditional territory by researching the southwestern quadrant of Van Tat Gwich'in traditional lands, centring on the Ni'inlii Njik/Fishing Branch River area. We also ground-truthed the Caribou Bar trail north of Ch'ooddeenjik/Porcupine River and west of Old Crow and the Vatthàa Gòolii/Gopher Bluff to Ch'ihilii Chik/Whitefish Lake trail, and assessed the Salmon Cache to LaPierre House trail for both heritage and contemporary purposes as practical and accessible routes known to today's elders but less well known to youth.

In 2014 we recorded a lengthy trail from the LaPierre House area east of Old Crow that skirted Van Tat/Crow Flats to the north and ultimately ended at Schuman House in Alaska (our survey ended at the Alaska/Yukon border). This major route is said to have been used during times of conflict and enabled travellers to avoid encountering potentially hostile people on the more commonly used Ch'ooddeenjik/Porcupine River or Van Tat/Crow Flats.

In the course of recording this route, we travelled to Bonnet Lake northeast of Van Tat to determine what remains of an abandoned resource extraction camp (buildings and oil drums). We also documented the location of oil drums on Horseshoe Lake in the Bluefish River area near Ch'ooddeenjik.

Other facets of 2014 research were to record the condition of a number of camps in Van Tat, locate William Ch'itzee's camp near Ni'inlii Njik/Fishing Branch River, and mark 4 gravesites (hampered by flooded or overgrown landing

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sites). We located and assessed 4 archaeological sites (Driftwood Hill, Forgotten Hill, Schaeffer Creek, and Rat Indian Creek). We were prevented from landing at the latter due to the presence of a bear and 2 cubs at the site. In the course of the research, we recorded interviews, shot video and still photographs, recorded GPS locational data, and communicated results in a community presentation, as well as collaborating with researchers (described previously).

During fall and winter 2014-2015, we will process the data: translate, transcribe and index interviews; index video tapes; catalogue photographs; update databases (place names, interview, video, GPS mapping, photographs); prepare reports; create products such as Tr'ahtsii/How-to manuals; plan future research; conduct winter/spring research activities; apply for funding; liaise between Heritage staff, heritage committee, VGG, the community, consultant, government agencies and other researchers.

To summarize, in 2014 we recorded/accomplished:

- 8 interviews
- 34 GPS locations
- 6 GPS trails/routes recorded/assessed
- 1124 photographs
- 7 hours video

Abandoned resource extraction cabins and debris at Bonnet Lake



John Kyikavichik grave site on Top of Hill Mountain east of Van Tat/Crow Flats

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Abandoned barrels site by Donut Lake near Bluefish River



Tor/outcrop at Ddhah Chyah/Flat Mountain at the head of Caribou Bar Creek



Heritage Researcher Mary Jane Moses on Chii Ch'a'an/ Bear Cave Mountain.

5. Proposed 2015 Research

Currently, we have established general directions for our next 4-5 years of research and are in the process of developing those priorities into concrete plans, schedules and objectives. In autumn/winter 2014-2015 the VGG Heritage Branch, Heritage Committee, research consultant, and other team members and resource people will conduct more detailed planning sessions for future research.

Preliminary planning has identified both topical and methodological priorities. The strength of previous research has been its breadth and scope, in terms of individuals involved, geographical area encompassed, historical time period covered and topics/themes investigated. The assembled data has created a formidable foundation for more in-depth research. Consequently, research objectives for 2015-2020 will focus on:

- more in-depth investigation of select topics/area to record the “stories under stories”
- detailed background/preparatory research drawing on the assembled data collections from previous VGG Heritage research
- detailed background research prior to field research
- more intense involvement of a select group of youth who will spearhead aspects of the research and draw in other youth
- as a necessary support for youth, significant mentoring, including activities and involvement for youth while attending high school and post-secondary institutions outside the community

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- include more younger Elders as resource and knowledge sources
- production of more in-depth interpretive and educational materials: e.g., a how-to/education manual on Dzan/muskrats, including Gwich'in knowledge of behaviour, ecology, geography, harvest methods, history, processing, and cultural significance. Request interpretive materials (e.g., information, photos) from research partners to enhance interpretive materials
- geographically focus on select areas, beginning with a few important areas in Van Tat and moving outward to important locations in other areas, e.g., Zhoh Drin Choo/White Snow Mountain, an important gathering, hunting, landmark, and cultural marker on the trail to Kâachik/Johnson Creek Village
- seek to disseminate interpretive materials and Gwich'in history, culture and language more extensively by approaching educational/interpretive settings and offering assistance in interpretation
- continue emphasis on using Gwich'in language
- continue collaborations with academic researchers
- expand training and orientation seminars

Chyah Ddhâa/Second Mountain



Paul Josie standing beside the trail from the Ni'inlii Njik/
Fishing Branch fish hole and weir to Chii Ch'a'an/Bear
Cave Mountain

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Ch'it'oo Choo Ddhah/Big Nest Mountain



Canadian Heritage
Patrimoine canadien



Natural Resources Canada

6. 2014 Project Supporters

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, MUSEUMS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM \$50,000

OBJECTIVES: The Aboriginal Museum Development component of the Museums Assistance Program helps aboriginal organizations enrich and preserve their cultural heritage. This component also seeks to increase public awareness and understanding of the rich and diverse cultures of Aboriginal peoples. The MAP program funded the research of the Navigation Systems Project to support and enhance Van Tat Gwich'in cultural heritage initiatives.

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, POLAR CONTINENTAL SHELF PROJECT 19.6 hours helicopter support [valued at \$52,200]

OBJECTIVES: The Polar Continental Shelf Project provides critical logistical support for arctic research. The PCSP funded the Van Tat Gwich'in Navigation Systems Project under its Traditional Knowledge Program and its commitment to support research relevant to northern Aboriginal communities which fosters development of their research capability.

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Lowbush raspberry at Fishing Branch weir site

VUNTUT GWITCHIN GOVERNMENT

in kind: salaries, office space and facilities, project management

OBJECTIVES: The VGG is directing the Navigation Systems Project, providing the services of the VGG Heritage Manager, Heritage Researcher and seasonal Heritage Department personnel, arranging logistics and expediting for researchers and other project personnel, liaising between community resources and the project, providing office facilities, meeting and storage spaces, facilitating Heritage Committee meetings which direct the project, and general logistical and administrative support. VGG support includes Gwich'in language programs formerly covered by the federal Aboriginal Language Services.



YUKON DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM AND CULTURE, HERITAGE TRAILS \$21,000

OBJECTIVES: The Yukon Heritage Trails program provides support for researching, planning, improvement and development of heritage trails throughout the Yukon. Support for the Navigation Systems Project is directed toward revitalizing and documenting Van Tat Gwich'in heritage trails to make them available to the community, younger generations, and the wider public.



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7. 2014 Project Participants

Elders & Resource people

Robert Bruce Jr.
Stringer Charlie
Freddie Frost
William Josie
John Joseph Kaye
Mary Jane Moses
Esau Schafer

Research team

Robert Bruce Jr.
Jane Montgomery
Mary Jane Moses
Marion Schafer
Shirleen Smith
Megan Williams

Food/Catering

Elizabeth Kaye

Research Collaborators

Ashlynn Frost, bird survey assistant
Darcy Andre Josie, bird survey assistant
Ray Le Blanc, archaeologist
Dave Mossop, biologist
Wheeler Netro, bird survey assistant
Briana Tetlich, bird survey assistant

Youth

Frances Bruce
Paul Josie
Briana Tetlich
Erika Tizya

Filmers

Frances Bruce
Mary Jane Moses
Briana Tetlich
Erika Tizya

Logistics

Dan Monteanu (Pilot)

Heritage Committee

Robert Bruce Jr.
Mary Jane Moses
Jane Montgomery
Marion Schafer