

# Grizzlies and guinea pigs on the ghost road.

**Mountainbike pioneer CHARLIE KELLY has been dying to ride where no man (or woman) has ridden before. A deserted 200-mile stretch in the world's most inhospitable territory finally gave him his opportunity.**

I ALWAYS get jealous of those who achieve historic mountainbike firsts like conquering Kilimanjaro or Mont Blanc. But this year I was offered the chance to put my tyre tracks where none had been before.

The bait was irresistible: a ghost of a road, just two hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle in the rugged tundra and mountains of Canada's far north. For company, five fellow mountainbikers, and a breathtaking assortment of Canada's wild game. Grizzly bears, moose, caribou and wolf are everywhere, roaming the normally frozen wasteland, stockpiling food for the long winter ahead.

The road that tempted us there, the Canol Road was built at enormous expense and hardship during World War II to supply oil from Norman Wells to Whitehorse, some 600 miles away. But, only a few months after the first barrel of oil arrived in Whitehorse, its strategic importance disappeared and the road was abandoned. The 200 miles of the Canol Road that stretch into the wild and rugged Northwest Territories hasn't been touched for over forty years. Four decades of neglect makes it impassable to motor traffic. And perfect for mountainbikes.

The last outpost reachable by vehicle from Whitehorse is Oldsquaw Lodge, a summer observation post for naturalists studying the region's unique flora and fauna. By August, however, the birds have shed their brilliant mating plumage, the

wildflowers have bloomed and the naturalists have gone home. So Oldsquaw's operators, Nancy Eagleson and Sam Miller decided to experiment with a mountainbike tour along the Canol. And we were the guinea pigs ('explorers' we preferred to think). Three men and three women pushed off on a brilliantly clear late summer day, our bikes loaded with gear.

The Canol road is a perfect game trail, and less than a mile from Oldsquaw Lodge we saw part of the reason. The road is

**Grizzlies love petroleum products. They'll drink motor oil if they can find it.**

washed away so badly that no four-wheel drive motor vehicles can venture further; the hunters stay one side, the game the other.

Low willows grow along the sides of the road, a natural habitat for bears. Tracks, and what the locals refer to as 'sign' are everywhere. Sam had told us: "These are wild grizzlies, not park bears. They're not used to people, but aren't nearly as fierce as people think they are; if they hear you coming, mostly they'll just run away. But if you come around a corner fast and run into

one or scare a cub, you're in trouble". We kept our pace down.

Riding down into a valley and we came upon a work camp, a residue from when the road was built. The officer's quarters had been turned into a makeshift stable for the pack trains that use the road, and the walls are scored with scribbled names and dates. Trucks once parked in neat rows have been moved around by the action of the permafrost and the salvagers who retrieved the tyres and wheels.

A few dozen barrels are stacked as they have been for forty years. The unhealed scars of a shallow quarry which supplied the gravel road surface attests to the length of time it has taken for the tundra to recover from the insult. On the cliff high above us a magnificent pair of golden eagles kept watch over us from their nest.

Descending to our first creek crossing we encountered another form of northern wildlife. Insects. The lot we met share something in common with 130 other species in Canada: they all bite. Canada's national bird is the mosquito. In other parts of the world, mosquitos bite. Here, they have been known to carry off pets and children.

The mosquitos attacked as we carefully took off our shoes and socks in preparation for the crossing. It was the last time we bothered. From then on it was deep breaths, and straight into the cold, hip-deep water in jeans and boots. As water blocked the route every mile or so, you



### **Elsewhere mosquitos bite. Here, they have been known to carry off pets and children.**

never dried out. Cold and wet feet are a fact of life in this country, and since everyone has them, it's no use complaining.

We were told we would see some unusual sights on this trip, but one of the most surprising was Archie Knill. Archie came spluttering into view astride a tiny trials motorbike, as surprised to see us as we were him. Loaded down with food, camera gear, tent, sleeping bag, rifle and an inflatable rubber raft, he was completing a journey he started the previous summer from Norman Wells at the end of the Canol.

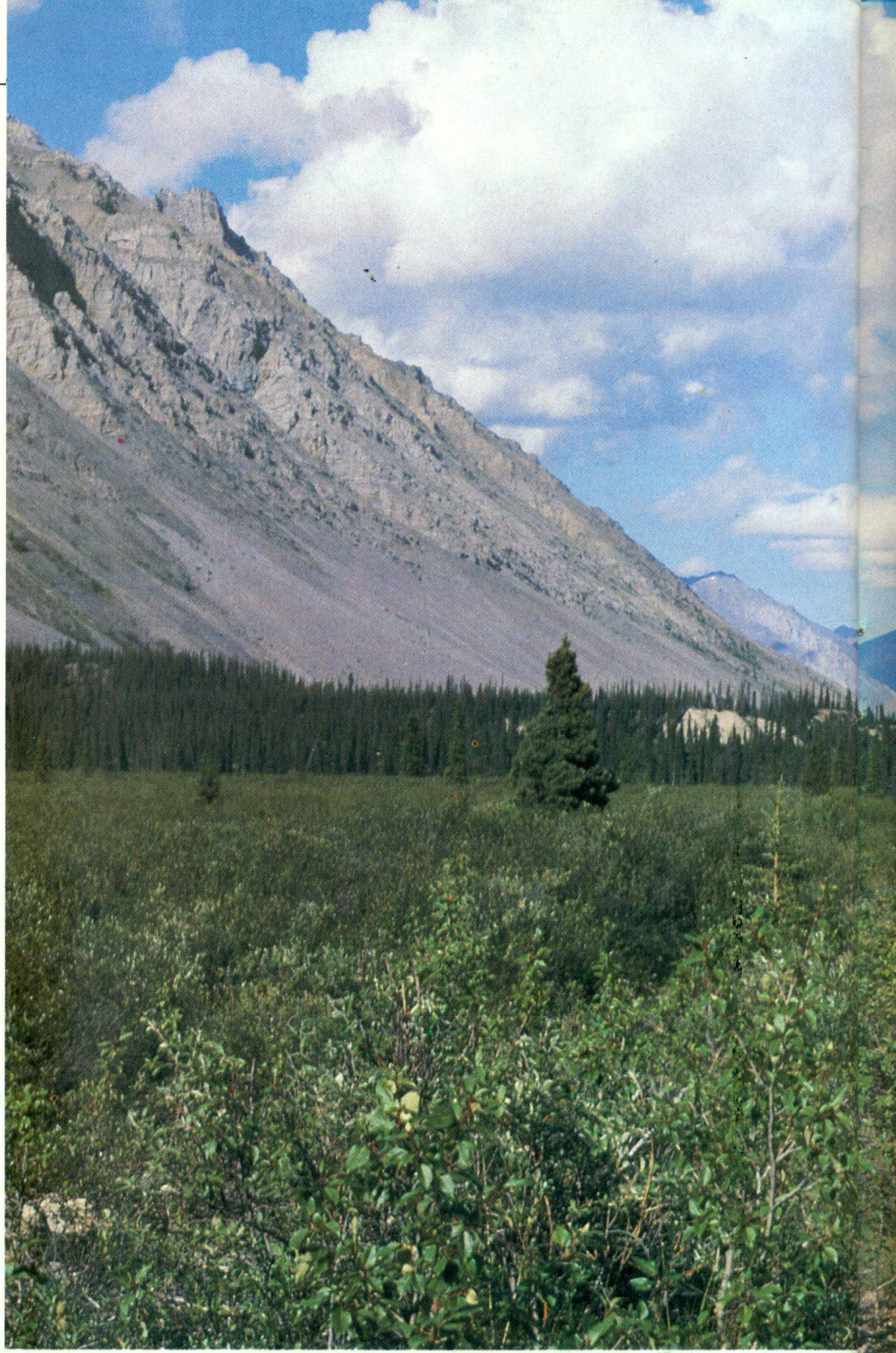
Caught the previous August by bad weather, he had stored his bike in a camp hut and flown home, to return a year later. Archie had harrowing first hand experience of the river crossings ahead of us. The previous year his raft had capsized and dumped him, complete with his motorcycle and gear, into the river. He told us we would be facing some action ourselves the next day as we followed the Ekwi River. 'I had to cross it seven times' he said 'but you should be okay seeing you can carry your bikes'.

Archie couldn't resist leaving without telling us a couple of his 'I've been chased by bears' stories. Grizzlies are more numerous than people in this part of the world and it's a tradition in the north to regale travellers with bear stories before letting them venture into the area. Despite such stories, no-one who told such a story had actually been eaten by a bear. Recorded instances of such behaviour on part of bears are extremely rare in the NWT. Strangely though, it seems that everyone, but everyone has escaped the Canadian version of Jaws by the merest of margins.

Even though life and death struggles with Grizzlies are rare, everyone takes precautions when storing food and possessions against the huge creature's perpetual search for food. Our first night's camp - a tiny cabin built in a treeless valley from old telegraph poles and washed out bridges - had nail-studded, iron-bound boards bolted over the doors and windows. One corner of the cabin had been clawed by a bear seeking the chainsaw oil inside. 'They seem to love petroleum products,' explained Sam, 'They'll drink motor oil if they can find it'.

That special fresh air bike riding appetite we've all experienced was well catered for. Fishing was excellent, the Ekwi river yielding plenty of fat arctic grayling. Sam had laboriously delivered supplies of food and firewood to the cabin a few days before. Nancy tried out the local breakfast on us. 'Bannock' is a staple of the north and consists of flour, salt and water, fried in oil and washed down with 'camp coffee'.

Special techniques are required for the consumption of camp coffee and acquiring



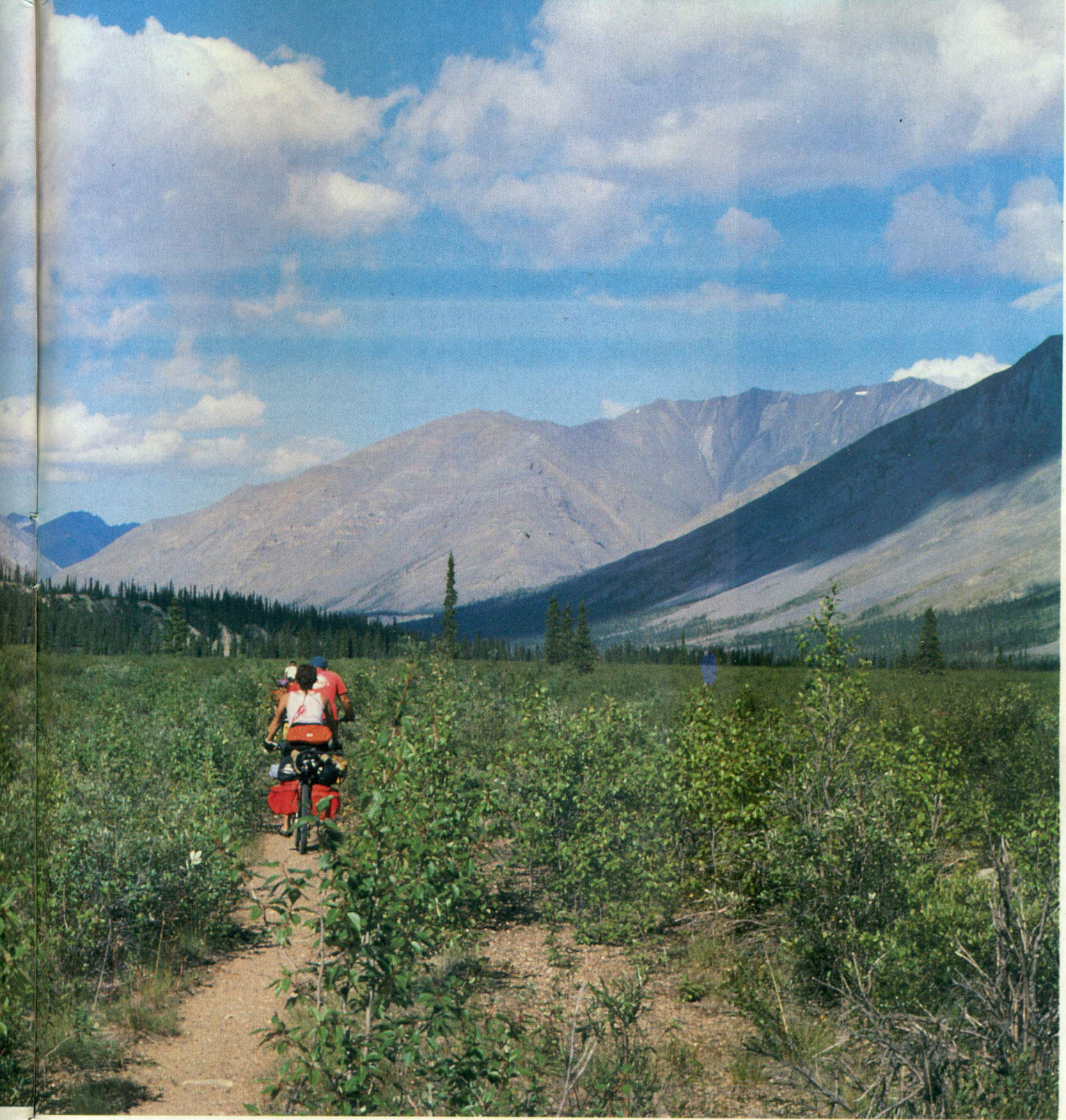
them takes some skill. Preparing it is the easy part: you dump coffee grounds into boiling water. There are two schools of how to drink the result: the chewers and the strainers. The second group drink slightly more delicately, straining the grounds through teeth or moustache. The chewers can go at it with more gusto, swilling down the liquid, leaving the grounds for slightly later consumption.

The next day was clear, warm and blue. On a glorious morning like this it is hard to believe that the country lies under snow and ice for most of the year. As we followed the valley of the Ekwi, the road deteriorated until we found ourselves struggling down a canyon with sheer sides and no trace of road. It was time to start river crossing in earnest.

The slippery rocks and cold, rushing water made carrying a loaded touring bike a real chore. But the thought of removing panniers and ferrying everything across in several loads was too boring and time consuming given the number of crossings we had to make.

As we struggled our way down the canyon, a grizzly - perhaps a quarter of a mile away on the other side of the valley - ran into the brush and disappeared. High above on the barren ridge, a lone bull caribou profiled his magnificent antlers against the sky. It was one of those glorious touring moments when the rest of the world seemed a million miles away.

The thirty-five miles to the deserted landing strip and small cabin that was our camp were hard going and took us most of



the day. A bush pilot had flown a cache of food in and we stuffed our panniers with the supplies left for us in a padlocked barrel.

We spent the next day exploring, hiking and fishing in the area. Just before lunch, we came across the most rare of the area's commodities: people. Although they are few and far between, those people who do venture into the area, concentrate their activities around what's left of the Canol. A backpacking German couple were the first to cross our path. They brought bad news of a river too deep and wide for us to cross without a raft and we cancelled plans to strike on further up the road.

The frustration at not being able to go further was compensated for in the most

unexpected way. A helicopter spotted us and settled in for a landing a few hundred feet from us. Having heard about our sortie into the area, the crew decided to pay us a social visit. We gave the three men coffee. In exchange they made an offer we couldn't refuse - you don't say no to an aerial touring service in the middle of nowhere.

Flying rules are, it seemed, a little more relaxed in this part of the world. The thrilling ride we took, would've been - should've been - illegal anywhere else in the world. Swooping along the valley, missing rugged mountain peaks by what seemed like inches and, with the thrills, a birds-eye view of this bleak and beautiful wilderness. On the ground and the helicopter headed homeward. It would be in Oldsquaw in

**The vast arctic wilderness of Canada's North West Territories lies under snow and ice for most of the year.**

half an hour, a journey that would take us two days by mountainbike.

We found the going much easier on the homeward leg, but it was still a solid days riding to make the thirty-five miles to the Caribou Pass campsite. Lunch was by a shallow river, cold and crystal clear. Suddenly a bull caribou appeared running unsteadily down the middle of the stream.

As it came near, we could see a large and recent wound on his neck. The fresh blood showed that it had only moments before escaped a hungry predator - a wolf

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being the most likely candidate. We river-side theoreticians figured that the longer-legged caribou had eluded its pursuer by running down the stream, a course more difficult for the smaller wolf.

We lingered in the Caribou Pass area, all of us reluctant to leave this peaceful and beautiful spot. We explored the area in groups, some riding whilst others opted to hike. The bikers had to endure a few anxious moments when the hikers were long overdue. It turned they had encountered a

bear and gone on a much longer route than originally intended in order to avoid it (and, perhaps, other members of its family).

From our camp we could see the wild Dall sheep on the high ridges. While we slept, the animals were busy scavenging. The winters are long in this part of the world and, when the snow's gone, the pursuit of food is endless. In the morning, we could see clearly the tracks of the night's curious visitors. Moose, wolf and wolverine had all come for a look at the strange creatures who'd temporarily invaded their domain.

The morning brought signs of other activity. The weather had decided that summer was due to end and the skies turned leaden and a cold wind whistled down the valley. We did not waste any time in getting back to Oldsquaw. There is an amazing difference between wet feet on a warm day and wet feet on a cold day. The sauna at the lodge was a magnet.

By late afternoon we were all clean, warm, well fed and, beers in hand, ready to match bear stories with the best of the locals. Three days from now we would be back in our civilized haunts. I may not have climbed Kilimanjaro or Mont Blanc, but I'll bet those guys haven't got a grizzly story between them.

*The expense and rigour of getting to Oldsquaw is considerable, but for those who can make it, it's the ride of a lifetime. Details about the Canol ride from: Oldsquaw Lodge, Bag Service 2711, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, Y1A 4KB.*

**Sporting a deep wound, the result of an attack by a wolf, this frightened caribou bull had escaped by running down the middle of the stream to escape its shorter-legged attacker.**

