

# Recommendations for Developing Ecotourism in the Northern Boreal:

*Nibinamik Bird Survey, 2005*



Prepared by:



A co-operative venture of Nibinamik First Nation,  
Ontario Nature and the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas

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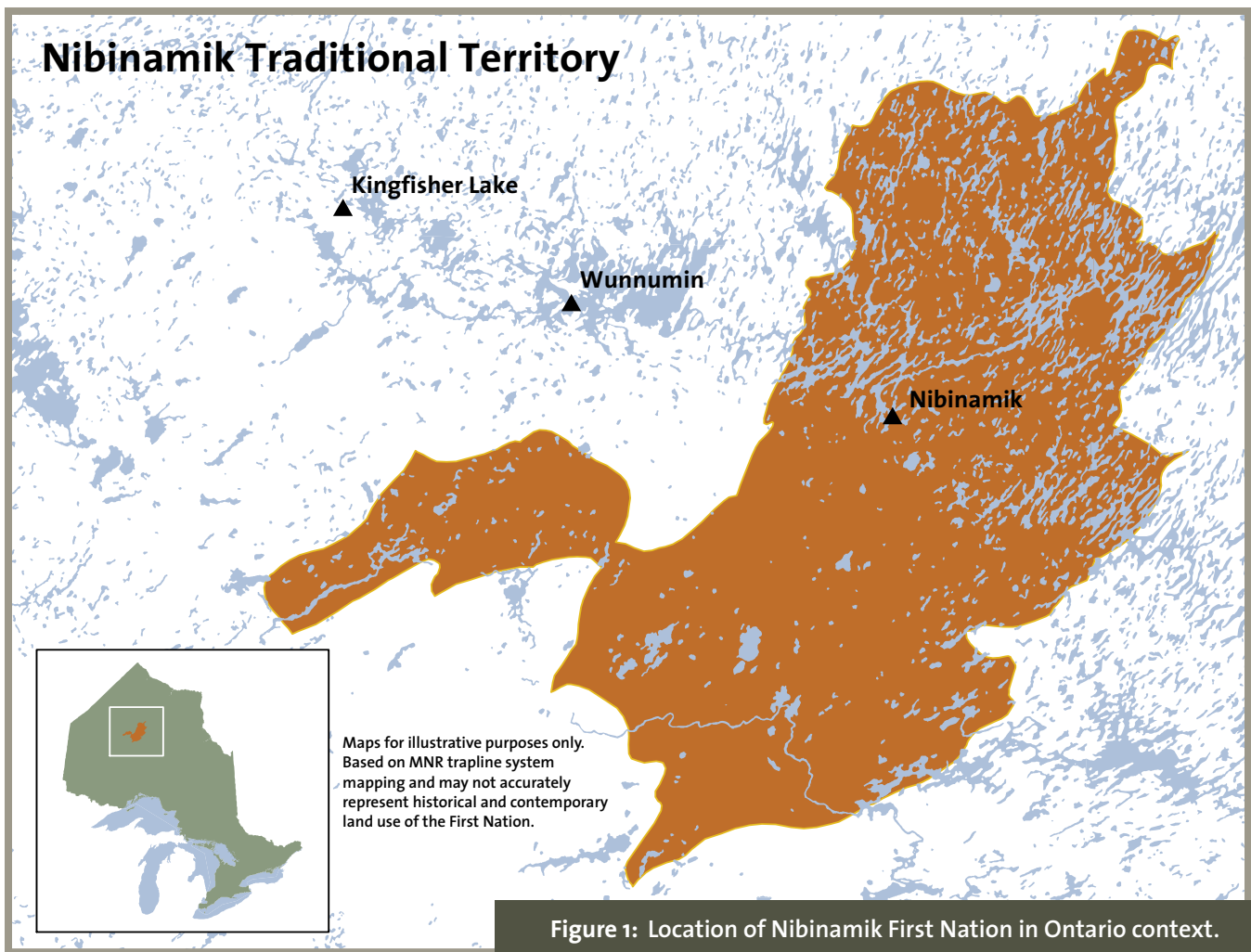
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## Project Description

From late May to July 2005, Ontario Nature and a field crew of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas worked with the community of Nibinamik (Summer Beaver) to undertake a special wildlife research and ecotourism potential project. This unique and collaborative approach partnered traditional ecological knowledge with western research techniques of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas to establish baseline bird population data in this northwestern boreal region of Ontario. As new industrial development opportunities reach Nibinamik First Nation, it is particularly critical to gather base-line wildlife data. We have focused on birds because they are excellent proxies for overall environmental health. Nibinamik is currently undertaking land use planning and

implementation activities, and breeding bird data will be useful for developing land use decisions and monitoring protocols. With regard to economic development, birds are also of major interest for many ecotourists.

Project coordinators Pete Read and Josh Shook worked in cooperation with community elders, guides and community members to compile information and gather data on bird distributions and abundance. The information collected through the project has been analyzed regionally and in the context of the boreal forest as a whole. Detailed local information, together with compiled data, can feed directly back into land-use planning efforts and development monitoring by the communities, and also contribute to the provincial Atlas baseline data.

# Highlights

- Bird checklist prepared for Nibinamik;
- Ecotourism potential reports prepared for the community;
- Wildlife data for breeding bird distribution and population abundances collected; currently being analyzed through Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas project for regional and provincial status; results will contribute to Atlas project and community land-use planning;
- Community outreach and project

participation completed successfully during summer 2005, including presentations, radio interviews, gathering of traditional knowledge on wildlife information with Elders, and hiring of local researchers and guides.

The following report summarizes some the ideas and specific information derived from the work carried out in 2005 and through discussions with the community.

## Recommendations for Developing Ecotourism in the Northern Boreal

### What is Ecotourism?

- Economically viable
- Culturally appropriate
- Nature-based
- Low impact
- Responsible use
- Education
- Environmental protection
- Community involvement

### What is Ecotourism?

In the field season of 2005, Ontario Nature and the Breeding Bird Atlas project coordinators Josh Shook and Pete Read conducted field research in partnership with the Nibinamik First Nation. The field research and community dialogue focused on the potential of the communi-

ties' lands for ecotourism, in this case specifically tourism linked to wildlife viewing and nature appreciation.

Like the term sustainable development, ecotourism has been defined in a variety of ways. However, in good practice, it refers to economically viable, culturally appropriate, nature-based tourism activities that promote education, interpretation, environmental protection, conservation and involvement of local communities<sup>1</sup>.

Ecotourism features low impact activities, environmental and cultural appreciation and sensitivity. It often focuses on the educational aspect of an experience and relies heavily on the responsible use of the natural

resources in the area. In many cases, ecotourism offers a combination of adventure, cultural and natural history features. Ecotourism appeals to a growing market in the US and Europe. Since international ecotourists come primarily from heavily industrialized countries to visit destinations that offer unique natural environments, remote locations and the absence of large-scale industrialization in the far north can be an asset for cultivating the ecotourism market.

However, the development of a sustainable ecotourism industry requires a planned approach that recognizes and addresses environmental and social impacts as part of its overall strategy for growth. In the absence of a management plan for tourism development opportunities, and the economy built upon them, are no more secure than any other single resource economy. Only a well-built and thoughtful approach to ecotourism will add sustainability, dimension and depth to a region's economy.

### Trends in Ecotourism

The value of international tourism exceeds US\$444 billion<sup>2</sup>; nature-based tourism may

## Challenges for ecotourism in remote communities can include:

- Underdeveloped attraction and services base – not enough established activities and attractions for visitors once they decide to visit the region;
- Not enough services designed to meet specific visitor needs;
- Lack of a local workforce trained in hospitality industry skills.



comprise 40-60 percent of these expenditures and is increasing at 10-30% annually<sup>3</sup>. According to a 1993 survey conducted by Statistics Canada, adventure travel and ecotourism were driving the Canadian tourism industry in all regions across the country, with a growth rate of 12.9% in 1992<sup>4</sup>. Opportunities for the development of First Nations tourism products are clearly evident. Aboriginal tourism is a major growth industry in Canada – in 1999, aboriginal tourism generated about \$250 million and employed about 12,000 people. Revenues are expected to reach the \$1 billion mark in 10 years<sup>5</sup>. The profile of tourists interested in First Nations tourism products is similar to that of the ecotourist<sup>6</sup>.

While it may be that birdwatchers or any other specialized nature-watchers may not be interested in a remote wilderness experience, there is certainly a market segment for this kind of remote tourism. Canoeists and hikers who enjoy combining relatively easy paddling or hiking or a combination of travel methods in natural surroundings, who also would like to take time and enjoy historical, cultural, or natural historical points of interest would have an interest in these remote areas. These are people who expect some adventure with their outdoor experience, and who take part actively during their trips.

### Requirements for Ecotourism Planning and Development

Some planning is required in order to understand and develop the ecotourism potential in the communities visited by the project team. At a minimum, communities should undertake the following<sup>7</sup>:

- Inventory of primary tourism attributes

and assets, including culture and heritage, wildlife viewing, provincial parks, and adventure tourism locations;

- Evaluation of existing infrastructure and gap analysis, including access issues and fly-in only desirability;
- Assess level of community interest in ecotourism;
- Develop checklist of requirements for viable ecotourism industry; and
- Agreement on community tourism standards (i.e. environmental, social, and cultural considerations or concerns).

The bird checklist is one of many information pieces needed to develop ecotourism options for the community of Nibinamik.

## Challenges To Tourism Development

### Access

Ecotourism in remote areas is contingent on the development and maintenance of an ecotourism infrastructure to support and accommodate such visitors. Some attributes of an area that can attract one type of visitor can also serve to keep others away: extreme climates and distant locations, for example. The distance from major tourism corridors can be a limitation because of the additional expense and time required to reach and travel within remote regions. On the other hand, remoteness creates opportunities in the niche adventure market. As a 2004 report by Ontario Nature and CPAWS Wildlands League, and studies completed by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources have shown, remoteness is a quality that sells in the higher-end ecotourism market.

Promotion and Marketing	Access to Remote Wilderness	Logistics & Infrastructure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus advertising and promotion in publications that cater to naturalists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize remoteness and pristine surroundings to promote lodges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase opportunities to view birds and other wildlife near lodges</li> <li>• Offer guides trained with local knowledge of forest plants and animals, including birds</li> </ul>

### Competing Industrial Land Uses

Mining activities and their impacts are a main concern and interest for some of the First Nations communities the project team visited. The team heard from some community members that there are significant impacts around mining sites but this industry also provides some benefits, through jobs and capital, for the community. Most mining operations are fairly localized, with test drilling being less intrusive and less destructive than the actual mine site, but community members worry about the pollution that appears to follow from test drilling and certainly the disruption from the mine sites.

Complete studies of these areas should be undertaken prior to development of mining operations. All aspects of study need to be included, from First Nation studies on cultural and historical components to environmental studies. It is important to do inventories of local wildlife, as was done with the bird populations. Mapping of these types of values is an important part of developing tourism resources, and ensuring that economic development is sustainable in other sectors.

Ecotourism plans should be created using knowledge gained from the values inventories as well as information regarding the location of potential mining operations. Tourism facilities, such as trails and canoe routes, should be separated from sites that would be preferred for mining, and should be considered incompatible.

Mining claims have been and will continue to be staked in the area. This presents a challenge for developing an ecotourism industry in that mining activities and development can conflict with tourism where

they overlap. Furthermore, staking before planning is finished closes off options for tourism in the future. Areas with high mineral potential versus areas with high tourism potential should be mapped and evaluated by the community for preferred economic opportunities. Furthermore, other values, such as cultural sensitive areas, or sensitive seasonal areas for fish and wildlife, may be considered incompatible for both mining and tourism opportunities, depending on the specific impacts.

Since large-scale forestry operations are some time off, as the distance to processing facilities make commercial timber harvesting not economically viable at this time in these areas of the northern boreal, the potential for conflict does not yet exist as it does south of the 51st parallel. However, it will take good planning to ensure that wilderness areas for the ecotourism industry stay part of the landscape in future.

### Suggestions for Community Ecotourism Development

#### Promotion and Marketing

The target client is likely someone with a broad interest in natural history. Large, showy bird species such as owls, eagles, and sandhill cranes are natural candidates for use in promotional materials, especially if reliable opportunities exist to view these species. The enthusiastic birdwatcher intent solely on adding new species to his or her “life list”<sup>8</sup> is not likely to pay to see birds at a fly-in facility or community, because most boreal forest birds can be found at more accessible locations.

To help attract visitors with strong, general natural history interest, it is recom-



## Capitalize on opportunities in niche markets, including birders

- Promote birdwatching as a component of a comprehensive ecotourism package

mended that advertising be focused on publications catering to the all-around naturalist rather than birdwatchers specifically. Examples of such publications are *Canadian Geographic* magazine, *ON Nature* magazine, published by Ontario Nature, or *OFO News* – the newsletter of the Ontario Field Ornithologists.

### Access to Remote Wilderness

There will always be areas of boreal forest more easily accessible to ecotourists than fly-in lodges. What makes fly-in lodges and communities unique is the opportunity to access areas away from highways and industrial activity access roads.

In these remote areas, the stars and the aurora are not dimmed by city lights, and visitors can hear birds singing without a backdrop of traffic noise. This remoteness, and the pristine nature of the surroundings, should be heavily emphasized when promoting ecotourism in northern Ontario.

### Logistics and Infrastructure

Viewing wild birds in the boreal forest can be frustrating and difficult at times, even though birds might be plentiful. It is recommended that efforts be made to increase viewing opportunities near lodges. Such efforts might include: setting out feeders for hummingbirds and seed-eating birds, planting fruit-bearing shrubs, or installing nest boxes for waterfowl, small owls, swallows, and other cavity-nesting birds.

Although ecotourism requires little infrastructure, of key importance is a well-planned network of trails to provide access to various habitats and points of interest. Communities interested in catering to wild-

life viewing should offer trails to several different habitats: coniferous, deciduous and mixed forests, bogs, swamps, beaver ponds, rock outcrops, cliffs, hilltops, meadows and old fields, recently burned areas, small and large lakes, streams and rivers, etc, while planning carefully for the impact trails might have on wildlife.

Having guides on staff with some knowledge of bird and other wildlife identification and behaviour can greatly enhance the experience of the visiting ecotourist. Items to consider having on-hand for tourists include: binoculars, spotting scopes (these are great for viewing wildlife at a distance but are also useful for looking at the moon and stars), canoes, insect nets, and a good selection of field guides to birds, mammals, trees, flowers, butterflies, dragonflies, rocks, stars, etc.

Time of year is also an important consideration. Many songbird species are most conspicuous in late spring and early summer when newly arrived males are actively singing and setting up breeding territories. Many resident species like owls and woodpeckers are nesting at this time of year and can therefore be reliably found if nest locations are known. Late spring to early summer may be a good time of year to bring in ecotourists, before the major onslaught of biting insects.

### Bird Species of Interest to Ecotourists

There are many road-accessible areas where birdwatchers can see boreal birds. As such, it is unlikely that birds alone would attract many people to a fly-in wilderness lodge. Birdwatching could, however, be promoted



## Photography

- Promote nature photography as a component of a comprehensive ecotourism package



as an important part of an ecotourism package. Some “flagship” boreal species that are very difficult or impossible to find in more southerly areas include:

- Spruce grouse
- Northern hawk owl
- Great gray owl
- Boreal owl
- Three-toed woodpecker
- Black-backed woodpecker
- Gray jay (also known as Canada jay or whiskey jack)
- Boreal chickadee
- Connecticut warbler
- Pine grosbeak
- Red crossbill
- White-winged crossbill

Other species are more wide-ranging but of interest to birdwatchers because they are generally hard to find or are unique or interesting in some respect. Reliable locations (e.g., known nesting or feeding areas) for viewing and photographing the following species could be promoted to attract ecotourists:

- Red-necked grebe
- American bittern
- Birds of prey including osprey, bald eagle, northern goshawk, broad-winged hawk, merlin and peregrine falcon
- Yellow rail
- Sandhill crane
- Owl species including great horned, barred, long-eared, short-eared, and northern saw-whet
- Common nighthawk

## Photography

Photography could be promoted as an ecotourism activity at fly-in lodges. Birds and animals in remote situations are often less

wary and more approachable than wildlife in more populated areas, very desirable features for the photographer. Existing hunting infrastructure (e.g., trails, blinds, bait stations) could easily be used for photography.

A variety of bird species occur regularly in the south in winter or during migration but breed only in the boreal. These species may be of particular interest to wildlife photographers seeking to photograph birds nesting or displaying breeding behaviour.

These include:

- Common loon
- Bonaparte’s gull
- Olive-sided flycatcher
- Yellow-bellied flycatcher
- Warbler species including Tennessee, Cape May, palm, bay-breasted and blackpoll
- Rusty blackbird
- Fox sparrow
- Lincoln’s sparrow
- White-crowned sparrow

Conducting photography workshops led by professional photographers and having sets and apparatus in place to photograph birds or mammals may also attract photographers. Of course, it would be important to ensure that any activities didn’t interfere with wildlife, both for the good of the animals and the sustainability of the program.

## General Canoeing Potential

### Major Routes

The community has extensive knowledge of the surrounding waterways. While most water travel by locals occurs by motorboat, there are canoes available, some owned jointly by the community and some that are personal property. One important com-

## Land Use Conflicts

- Identify potential land use conflicts (e.g. hunting and ecotourism) and ensure that public safety is considered in tourism planning



munity asset is the extensive traditional knowledge of canoe routes, and portages. Most portages were well kept but set up for motorboat travel. This means logs on paths for rolling boats, which can pose a hazard for walking if not navigated carefully with the help of a local guide.

Canoe tripping would likely be a major ecotourist attraction. Since the area surrounding the reserve boundaries is made up of designated trap-lines, family-owned and run, permission would be needed to develop these routes.

The ecotourism potential for these major routes could be improved if some portage routes were clarified through the use of signs and brush clearing. Designated campsites perhaps with wilderness privies could be created and mapped. Points of ecological, recreational, and cultural importance could be mapped out, as well. Access points to short hiking or interpretive trails that allow canoeists to see different upland habitats could also be mapped and marked, and garbage would have to be removed in some spots to increase tourism potential.

### Side Routes

While travelling along the waterways and lakes, many tributaries and wetlands were encountered. These provide interest to canoe and wildlife enthusiasts. Exploring these is interesting for the various flora and fauna, and while some are shortened by the inevitable beaver dams, short portages over these can lead to even more extensive upstream venues. Inclusion of these wetlands on maps and canoe routes would enhance the out-tripper experience.

### Trapping and Hunting

As with all land uses, planning will need to occur to ensure that ecotourism does not conflict with traditional land use endeavours, and vice versa. The area around the reserves tends to have fewer signs of wildlife, other than birdlife. Many of the larger mammals have become less numerous and wary near the community. Despite that, the opportunity to see wildlife is there and moose and other larger animals can be seen farther afield on canoe trips. The number of eagles in the area is impressive, and beaver continue to be prevalent and easy to find.

Another consideration is that hunting continues all year round. This presents a potential hazard for ecotourists when travelling on trails. Trippers need to be registered so that people know where they are to avoid any problems, and it would be wise for the trippers to wear bright clothing or hunting vests while in the bush.

### Guides and Human Resources

The project team enjoyed the services of many guides while visiting the remote communities. There is much to learn from these relationships, which add positively to the visitors' experience. Local guides had great knowledge of the surrounding wilderness areas and had the ability to repair outfitting equipment and solve logistical problems along the way.

However, to develop more personnel for trips, it would be good to give some training in communication skills for guiding ecotourists. Experienced ecotourism guides could be brought in to train interested locals or the community could explore opportunities for interested guides to attend locations outside the community for training workshops.

Guides should also be trained in basic first aid skills.

While most guides were knowledgeable about wildlife, especially commonly hunted species, some training regarding common but not hunted species, such as songbirds would be useful for ecotourism. Visitors will question guides about songs that they hear, and species they encounter on the trail. This is also true for plant species, especially more common ones that might be encountered.

Elders are valued members of the community, particularly respected for their knowledge of social, spiritual, historical and natural history information. Learning from the Elders about the value of each of the plants and animals, and some historical legends would be of interest to tourists. Further to this, Elders and translators in communities could be encouraged to give talks and tell stories to tourists who come

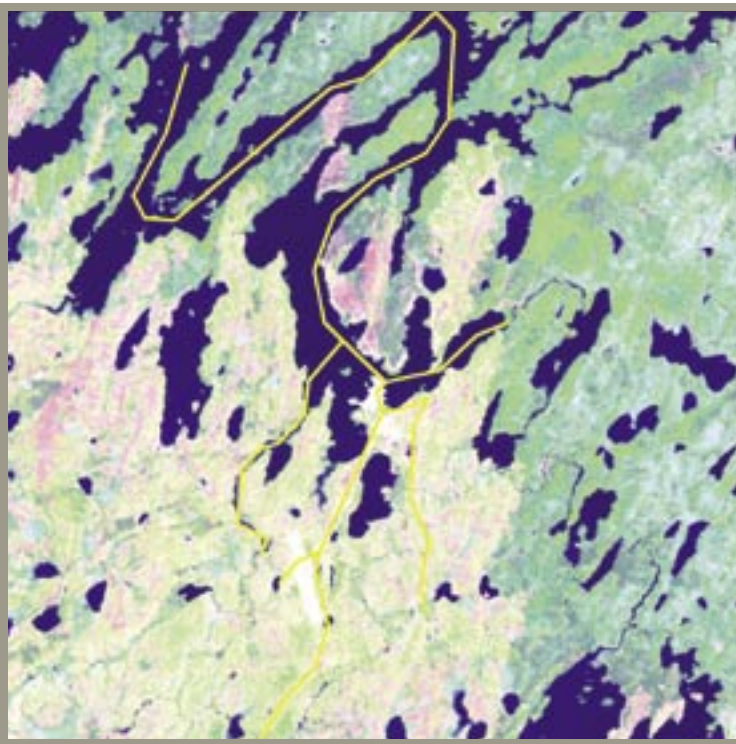
to the community. Others who have knowledge and wisdom of the interesting topics such as historical or cultural information could also participate.

Tourists are fascinated by the life of the people in the north, so demonstrations of traditional crafts and ceremonies could be offered as well. Annual Traditional Gatherings are a good example of potential events that could coincide with ecotourism packages, where appropriate.

It is possible to purchase objects made of moose hide while in some communities although generally these items are being sold to distributors for retail further south. It is not clear whether the community or local business people are formally organized in these efforts or whether it is self-initiated, but it is possible that greater economic benefit would come from an organized approach, perhaps through the economic development officer at the band office.

## Nibinamik Maps: Survey Squares and Survey Notes

Map produced by J. Boan (2006), using Landsat 7 (2000).



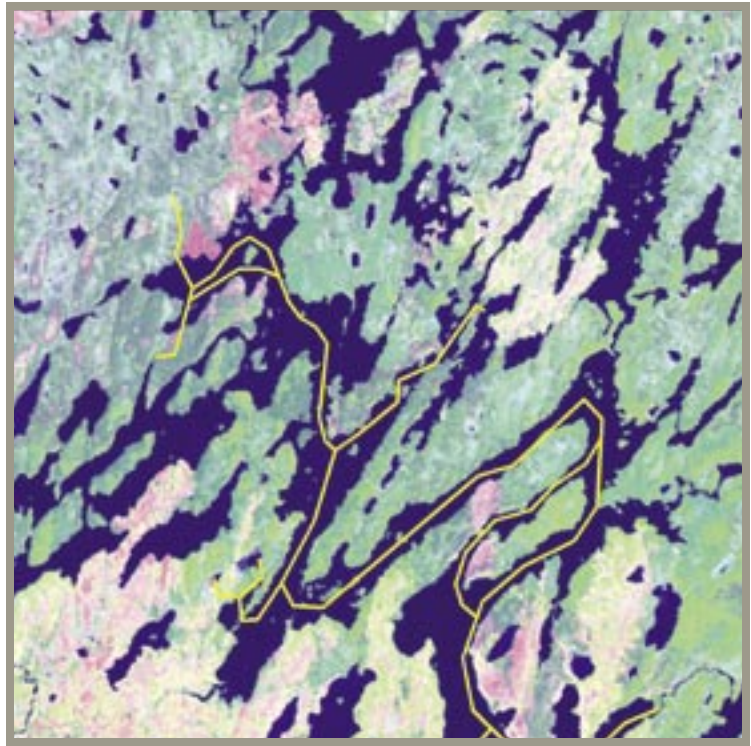
Summer Beaver

### 1. Summer Beaver

This was the home square so it was extensively surveyed. The crew travelled the roads and trails near the community. One trail roughly followed the esker that runs to the airport. A road runs south to the sewage lagoons and was surveyed almost to where it left the square in the southeast. The airport was surveyed out to a bog lake. The crew also walked to end of square past the airport. This trail continued south, but there was not enough time to follow through to the end. The crew also started the trip from the village to the north part of the map where Nibinamik Lake meets the Winisk River (see North of Summer Beaver map). They also canoed to the east of the village and then past the community and up several waterways.

## 2. North of Summer Beaver

This route consisted of an outtrip along the Winisk River, which is a wonderful canoe route with some available camping spots. About halfway up the map on the west side of a peninsula-type landform is a large First Nation “retreat”, which is used by various groups during the year. The crew travelled all the way to the top north part of the map, and explored the lake there. The river actually leaves the map midway up the map to the west. The crew covered the square doing point counts, in some cases extensively (see northwest corner) and by boat to the northeast. The lower southwest spot was the crew’s campsite. They also covered past a burn to several small lakes and travelled slightly south into the map area below.



Map produced by J. Boan (2006), using Landsat 7 (2000).

North of Summer Beaver

### Endnotes

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- 7 Rural Alaska Tourism Infrastructure Needs Assessment. 1995. URL: [http://www.dced.state.ak.us/oed/toubus/pub/1\\_north\\_slope\\_section.pdf](http://www.dced.state.ak.us/oed/toubus/pub/1_north_slope_section.pdf)
- 8 Avid bird-watching enthusiasts keep lists of species they have observed .