

Canada's North invariably leaves a searing impression on anyone who has been there. First there is its size — some of the Arctic Islands alone are larger than several European countries. To travel across its expanse from east to west in a small plane is to be airborne for 24 hours. Then, the landscape — dense forests, awesome glaciers, rugged mountains and half of Canada's fresh water. Also there is a profusion of life which belies the widespread desolation: over 800 known flowering plants, more than 75 species of bird as well as the familiar caribou, polar bear, musk-oxen and whales.

Canada, north of 60° latitude has two immense territories, the Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) and the Yukon Territory. The Northwest Territories cover 3,246,400 square kilometres, some 35 per cent of Canada (the second biggest country in the world). From the 60th parallel in the south the N.W.T. stretch 3,560 kilometres to the North Pole, and 4,256 kilometres from east to west.

Geography

It is a land of stunning contrasts, a reflection in part of its geographical areas. The N.W.T. can be divided fairly neatly into taiga and tundra. The taiga is the broad boreal forest that covers the world's sub-Arctic zone. The tundra is the windswept, rocky Arctic region, where the cold climate has stunted vegetation; trees do not grow there. In

the N.W.T., the treeline separates these two areas as it runs southeast from the Mackenzie River delta on the Beaufort Sea to the border with the province of Manitoba at Hudson Bay.

One of the most remarkable features of the N.W.T. is the Mackenzie River, one of the world's longest at 4,241 kilometres. It drains an area of approximately 1,812,992 square kilometres in three provinces and two territories and accommodates barge navigation from Hay River north to the Arctic Ocean. Much more barge navigation took place before the opening of the Mackenzie Highway in 1961.

Average January temperatures in the N.W.T. range from -25°C at Hay River to -36°C at Eureka. Average July temperatures range from 4°C in the Arctic Archipelago to 16°C in the Mackenzie Basin. Precipitation is slight. The annual snowfall in the Arctic can be as little as 30 centimetres, the equivalent of a single Montreal snow storm.

The climate and the landscape have long been a hindrance to transportation in the North. Long dependent on dog sled and water transportation, the N.W.T. took a giant leap toward development with the arrival of the bush plane. Because of the geography, ground transportation is much more difficult. An important milestone, however, in 1979 was the completion of the Dempster Highway connecting the Mackenzie Delta with Dawson in the