



# ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Bob Hayes: Shedding Light on Wolves and Wilderness

By Kelly Milner | Photo by Cathie Archbould

**B**ob Hayes read lots of books while growing up. Most were stories about cowboys and soldiers, but one that really struck a chord was Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire."

"I didn't really understand what it was about," Hayes says with a laugh, "but I knew the North was this mythical place and it was somewhere I wanted to go."

He kept searching and found other authors writing stories about the North and its wilderness. Then, after reading *Never Cry Wolf* by Farley Mowat, Hayes started dreaming of becoming a wolf biologist. When it came time to attend university, he chose a degree in biology. The day after he graduated, he packed up his young family in their Volkswagon van and headed to the Yukon.

His introduction to northern life was working for the City of Whitehorse, driving a Zamboni at the local arena and keeping the locker rooms clean. Eventually, he met biologist Dave Mossop and landed a job as his assistant, studying peregrine falcons and migratory birds in the northern Yukon. For the next four years, Hayes worked for the Yukon's game branch, sharing his time between Whitehorse and the Old Crow Flats.

Just as the falcon project started to wind down, fate intervened. He was offered the job as the Yukon's wolf biologist. "I literally just happened to be sitting at my desk at the right time," he explains. "[My supervisor] walked by and said he needed someone to do some work on wolves and I was it."

For Hayes, it was a dream come true, but not without its challenges. A large-scale wolf-control program was in the planning stages for the southern Yukon, and his first task was figuring out how to implement it.

"It was pretty conflicting," Hayes admits. "My issue was that we didn't know enough about wolves and we needed to understand them more before doing control programs."

However, as a scientist, he saw an opportunity to take a long view and study the role that wolves play in the Yukon's ecosystem. Along with other biologists, Hayes spent the next two decades working on a series of research projects, where he learned more about wolves and their importance to naturally functioning wilderness systems.

"After 20 years, we now know wolves are the most important part of the ecosystem," Hayes says. "They control the number of moose and caribou, keeping them at naturally

low numbers. When there are wolves, there is a sort of natural balance, something that many think of as true wilderness."

Hayes says wolf-control programs don't work over the long term. They provide a short, dramatic increase in moose and caribou populations, but wolves quickly recover and bring prey populations back down to naturally low levels within about 10 years. So while wolf-control programs may provide a boom in harvestable wildlife species, they quickly go bust, making the programs costly and unsustainable.

"Wilderness and wolves are closely connected in the minds of people," he explains. "In the Yukon, we have something unique, something you don't see in many other places in the world. It is a primary wilderness that has a natural predator-prey ecosystem. It isn't strongly affected by people. We just don't have enough of us here to make a significant impact in remote areas away from roads."

When Hayes finally retired, he wrote a book to share what he learned during his time as a wolf biologist.

"I really wanted to have some sort of legacy piece, to give something back to Yukoners for all the science and research that was done," he says. "I wanted it to be something the average person could read and connect with."

His book, *Wolves of the Yukon*, was published in 2010 in both English and German. It was well received and led to book tours across North America and Europe. Hayes enjoyed the process so much he was inspired to try his hand at fiction writing.

His fictitious story *Zhob* tells of a wolf pack and group of prehistoric people living in northern Yukon right after the ice age and explores survival and the interactions between humans and animals. It also weaves in biology, natural history, and First Nations culture and language. The book has been in progress for two years, and Hayes has plans to publish it this spring.

Along with writing, he still finds time for consulting work. He also keeps busy with other creative projects, like developing a puppet show for kids and playing music.

"I like doing different things," he says with a laugh. "That's been one of my objectives, whether it is being a biologist or running a bluegrass festival or writing books. I've always looked for challenges, and I love when I've been able to do it." **Y**

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## Joe Tetlich: Rising to the Challenges in Porcupine Caribou Management

By Kelly Milner | Photo by Cathie Archbould

For Joe Tetlich, caribou are everything. “It’s my passion,” he admits. “Caribou are so important to my culture. They have done a lot for me.”

Tetlich is Tetlit Gwich’in and grew up around Fort McPherson, N.W.T. He learned about caribou while living on the land at his parents’ camps. For the past 21 years he’s been the chair of the Porcupine Caribou Management Board (PCMB), a co-management body set up under the *Inuvialuit Final Agreement* and formally established in 1985 through the Canadian *Porcupine Caribou Management Agreement*.

The idea for the board began when Justice Thomas Berger was commissioned to lead the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in the mid 1970s to investigate the environmental, economic, and social impacts of a proposed oil and gas pipeline through the Northwest Territories.

“[Berger] went to all the communities in the area and all he heard was, ‘You’ve got to protect our caribou,’” Tetlich explains.

The Porcupine Caribou herd is one of the largest barren-ground caribou herds in North America and has one of the longest migrations of any land mammal in the world. The caribou are integral to the lives of the Gwich’in and Inuvialuit who live within the herd’s 250,000-square-kilometre range that stretches from the Alaskan Arctic coastal plains to the mountains of the Mackenzie Delta.

“We had our own caribou management within our communities, but because of all the development that happened in the ‘60s and ‘70s we had no control because we had no voice,” Tetlich says. “It’s really important that now we have a voice [through the PCMB]. That is big.”

The PCMB has eight members who represent federal, territorial, Inuvialuit, and First Nation governments with responsibilities for managing the Porcupine Caribou herd. Tetlich says their role is to ensure the wellness of the herd. But in order to do that, the communities need to be part of the discussion to ensure local and traditional knowledge is incorporated into management decisions.

Since its creation, the PCMB has been involved in many different issues, including protection of the herd’s calving grounds in Alaska, helping identify research needs to better understand the herd, and finding ways of improving harvest management.

“I think the biggest challenge is getting people and the parties to move forward together,” Tetlich admits. “It’s a challenge because everyone still has their own

interests and agenda. We’ve got to come together and respect each other’s point of view and be willing to give and take for the conservation and well-being of the caribou. It’s definitely the goal, but it is also a challenge at certain times.”

Despite these challenges, the PCMB boasts some great achievements. Tetlich is most proud of the 2010 *Porcupine Caribou Harvest Management Plan* and how all communities came together and agreed on a harvest strategy for the herd.

“Twenty years ago, people were always saying, ‘It’s my aboriginal right to harvest wherever and whenever and take as many caribou as I want,’” he says. “We’ve gone through a lot of challenges over the past 20 years with other caribou herds across the North. That has helped people look at it now and say, ‘I have aboriginal rights, but I also have a responsibility to make sure caribou are there for future generations.’ That’s a big success story.”

Tetlich says there will always be new issues the PCMB will have to tackle. Harvest reporting and ethical harvest practices are ongoing topics that require attention, plus monitoring development and its impact on the herd’s range are things the PCMB keeps tabs on.

To address the fact that the herd crosses international boundaries, the *Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America on the Conservation of the Porcupine Caribou Herd* was signed in 1987. This agreement established the International Porcupine Caribou Board (IPCBB). As chair of the PCMB, Tetlich is also a member of the IPCBB. This group has become more active over the past few years and is beginning to look at ways of sharing data and managing harvest across borders.

From Tetlich’s perspective, things are looking good for the herd’s future. Population numbers seem on the rise—currently at about 200,000 caribou—and members of the PCMB are committed to ensuring the herd doesn’t begin declining like many other herds across the North.

As Tetlich clarifies, the PCMB was established to deal with the fact that people who relied on the caribou had no control over what was happening to the herd and its habitat.

“Out of a bad situation, we have all gotten to a point where we all want to work together for the wellness of the Porcupine Caribou herd.”

**For more information, visit the Porcupine Caribou Management Board website at [pcmb.ca](http://pcmb.ca). Y**







# NORTHERN ADVENTURERS

Wayne Merry: Finding the Essence of Adventure on El Capitan

By Kate Harris | Photo by Cathie Archbould

It's sort of weird. I do something stupid half a century ago and now ...," Wayne Merry says, chuckling as his words trail off and he shakes his head. Students pack the room at the former Atlin, B.C., hospital on a bright August morning. These 20-somethings have spent the past two months studying glaciology on the Juneau Icefield, a cold spill of rock and ice they crossed with the aid of harnesses, lightweight nylon ropes, and locking titanium carabiners. This modern safety gear bears little resemblance to the brittle coil of what looks like oversized twine against the wall next to Merry or the display of medieval iron hooks and spikes next to that. It's all the more astounding that the spry 85-year-old used such equipment to do the "stupid" thing he's here to talk about: the pioneering ascent of the south buttress of El Capitan, "The Nose," in Yosemite Valley, Calif., which today is the most celebrated rock climb in the world.

The Kodachrome slides in Merry's presentation have the gritty, vintage look of bygone days. The millennials in the audience discreetly snap iPhone photos of the legendary climber to post later on Instagram. None of these things—digital cameras, cellphones, social media, the sport of rock climbing—existed in 1957, when Merry was a seasonal naturalist in Yosemite. One evening, he drove his 1950 Studebaker into the park and came into unusually perfect radio reception at the pullout beneath El Capitan, a half-mile surge of sheer rock that lords over the Yosemite Valley. Alone in what's been dubbed the "Valley of Light," with all that pale, glacier-polished granite glowing over him as the sun set, Merry listened to the Eastman Symphony perform Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Only in retrospect did this seem a harbinger. "At the time I didn't have the slightest idea I'd ever lay a finger on that rock," he admits.

Less than a year later, Merry was recruited by Warren Harding to attempt what was considered impossible: scaling the 900-metre wall of El Cap, whose steepness varied from vertical to overhanging. Rock climbing was so novel in 1958 that Harding and Merry (along with their support crew of Rich Calderwood and George Whitmore) had to improvise gear: pitons from sawn-off woodstove legs, water bottles from one gallon paint-thinner cans, and hardware-store expansion bolts pounded into tiny hand-drilled holes. "I wouldn't hang a picture from them today," Merry says, "but back then we hung our lives on them."

With each detail, the students' eyes widen: the meager diet of raisins, tinned fruit, and sardines that propelled the men up the wall; the narrow ledges the climbers slept on with yachting ropes knotted around their army surplus sleeping bags; and the bush-tailed wood rat that chewed into those bags one night, decorating the men's whiskers with down for the rest of the climb. Lacking Gore-Tex, the men huddled beneath tarps during three days of snow and rain. "Not easy changing clothes when you're roped up and hanging, as I'm sure you know," says Merry to the audience.

Stunned silence from the students; they nod their heads but do not know—not at all.

After 11 grueling days, Harding, Merry, Whitmore, and Calderwood topped out on El Cap, popped some champagne, and overnight turned into what one newspaper called "rock-climbing royalty." Today, climbers make pilgrimages to Atlin—where Merry and his wife, Cindy, settled 40 years ago—just to shake his hand. Yet he's most proud of what he did after summiting El Cap.

"Park rangers had long considered climbers somewhere between hippies and bears," he explains. "It was not a cordial relationship." But Merry managed to convince rangers and the climbing community to form Yosemite Search and Rescue (YOSAR). After moving to the North, he wrote the best-selling book *Official Wilderness First Aid Guide* and a manual on search-and-rescue techniques. He spent years travelling across the territories and Alaska to run training courses based on both, efforts that led to Merry being awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal.

Though he's most famous for risking his own life, Merry devoted his career to saving the lives of others. "If there's a moral to the story, I don't really know it. Other than that the impossible is sometimes possible," he says as he concludes his talk. After the presentation, the students pepper him with questions: Was the ascent of El Cap his hardest climb? "Mentally, yes. Physically, a route called 'Worst Error' in Yosemite was harder." Does his wife climb? "She climbed until she caught me!" Did he follow a strict training regimen for the El Cap climb? "We trained on red wine! And sometimes hung from doorsills by our fingers. Today's climbers are real athletes, real pros, but no, we didn't train."

The director of the Juneau Icefield Research Program thanks Merry and dismisses the students, though many of them linger and ask more questions.

"How did you handle fear?" one inquires.

"I don't know how to answer that," he replies. "Recognize when you don't feel up to something. Otherwise grit your teeth and go for it."

Merry pauses, searching for a way to further articulate what no explorer can really put into words—a reasonable explanation for the unreasonable impulse to do something as useless, risky, and beautiful as scaling a skyscraper of granite or walking on the moon. Fear is essential for such endeavours and perhaps a healthy stupidity is too. If you're smart, you'll be too afraid to climb El Cap, but if you're not smart enough, your fearlessness might finish you off.

Somewhere in between is the essence of adventure, which requires going so far that the only way back is going even further. Or as Merry puts it to the students: "When you face a choice between up and down, you get to the point when going down is no more appealing." Y