



Nunavut Parks & Special Places – Editorial Series

January, 2008

OVAYOK TERRITORIAL PARK



Long ago, there were three giants, Ovayok, Inuuhuktuq, and Amatok. They came from the sea to the north of Victoria Island (Gelinik), where they had been eating seals, walrus, and whales. Travelling overland, they could not find food, because they were not used to eating small animals like caribou and muskox, and died. The woman, Amatok, collapsed and died first, and then the boy, Inuuhuktuq, then the man, Ovayok. Their bodies turned into mountains, which remain there today.

So goes the legend of the three mountains on Victoria Island near Cambridge Bay. Today the 200 metre high mountain called Ovayok is part of **Ovayok Territorial Park**. It is 16 kilometres from Cambridge Bay, and is accessible by road, a 30 minute drive or 4 to 6 hour hike.

Ovayok has always been an important stopping place in the seasonal movements of the Copper Inuit (*Gelinikmeot*). They moved inland in summer to hunt caribou, and back to the coast in the fall. The area around Ovayok was an important area for fishing and hunting waterfowl during migrations, so the people spent time here in spring and fall. They built many stone caches to store winter clothing and hunting gear that they did not need to take inland.

A prime attraction of **Ovayok Territorial Park** is its wildlife and birdlife. There is an excellent chance of seeing *umingmak*, or muskox ("the shaggy ones") in the park, as there is a herd which stays in the area year-round. Sometimes they can be seen from the road on the way to the park, and sometimes hiking is necessary to see them. These relatives of the goat are 1.2 - 1.5 metres tall and dark brown with long flowing guard hairs. They shed their undercoat (*qiviut*) in summer, and at that time appear to have a light "saddle" on their backs. Herds are best observed from a distance. Cows are concerned about their calves and will flee when approached on foot. Bulls, b^{to} katjaqnaaq listen to the land aliannaktuk en osmose avec la terre



especially lone bulls, are less afraid, and can be aggressive. Photograph muskoxen from a distance, with a good telephoto lens!

Caribou are also frequently seen in the park. These are referred to as "island caribou" and are likely a hybrid between the barrenland caribou and the endangered Peary caribou found only in the arctic islands. They are smaller and have heads that are more triangular than barrenland caribou, but are larger and a bit darker than Peary caribou. This herd migrates to the mainland in winter, crossing the Coronation Gulf on the ice. As a result, the "island caribou" is susceptible to problems that are caused by climate change, especially the late formation of solid sea ice.

Arctic foxes and arctic hares are often seen in the park. These are white in winter and brown and tan in summer, so are a bit hard to spot – look for movement and then try to pick out the animal. Voles and lemmings are also found in the park, and their burrows, runs, and nests of tangled grasses can be seen, usually at the bottom of slopes or edges of wetlands. A summer trip to the park is a birder's dream. The tundra pond areas around and in the park support large breeding populations of arctic birds, and the road provides easy access to their nesting habitat. With a good spotting scope, many of these arctic nesters can be observed doing courtship displays or rearing their young. Some of these species are not easily observed anywhere else in the world during the breeding season. These special birds include the yellow-billed loon, king eider duck, snowy owl, and a host of shorebirds including the black-bellied plover, red phalarope, ruddy turnstone, red knot, and sanderling. Many birders see these on migration in the south, but few have the opportunity to see them in their glorious breeding plumage. Red phalaropes, for example, winter at sea, so are seldom seen except in very restricted northern areas. To be able to drive to find nesting red phalaropes is very special indeed.

Yellow-billed, Pacific, and red-throated loons, tundra swans, long-tailed and king eider ducks nest on the edges of the tundra ponds. Shorebirds nest between ponds, or on the gravel slopes, and can be seen feeding anywhere there is exposed mud. Black-bellied and golden plovers nest on the tundra uplands. The red-necked and red phalaropes spin like little tops in shallow tundra ponds, feeding on small invertebrates dislodged by their busy feet. Sandhill cranes forage on the open tundra or in wetland areas, seeking mostly lemmings. Because of their size, it is easy to spot these big birds, and their courtship displays are marvels of grace and agility. Snowy owls nest on hummocks or small hills, and also hunt voles and lemmings on the tundra. Peregrine falcons and rough-legged hawks nest on the steep sides of several ridges on the northeast

side of Ovayok. Long-tailed, pomarine, and parasitic jaegers nest in the park. Look for dark gull-like birds, sometimes harassing gulls or nesting snowy owls. Willow and rock ptarmigans are around all year, though not as common in winter. These feed on the buds of the woody plants.

Ovayok has relatively few plant species but many of these bloom in great profusion in July. Purple mountain saxifrage, mountain avens, cushion oxytrope, arctic poppies, and moss campion occur on the mountain crest and in gravel areas. Arctic white heather, large-flowered lousewort, woolly lousewort, and mountain sorrel are common on the slopes, and purple bladder campion, bistort, and arctic cotton in the wetlands.

TRAVELLING THROUGH THE PARK

There are 22 kilometres of trails in **Ovayok** Territorial Park. Each of the five trails are marked with numbered and colour-coded posts and interpretive panels that coordinate with a printed guidebook, but the surfaces are not altered or prepared in any way so visitors are encouraged to wear appropriate footwear. The short Cycle of Seasons Trail leads from the trailhead at the entrance southwest down the lower slopes and passes by many old campsites with stone tent rings, storage caches, and waiting places (*taluit*) where the people awaited the return of the caribou. The Tolemaqk Trail leads from the park entrance trailhead southeast along the lower slope of the mountain, and circles two small lakes. Muskoxen are often seen in this area. Tolemagk means "ribs" and refers to the parallel ridges above - the "ribs of the giant". This trail connects to the short Neakoa *Trail*, which runs southeast to a wonderful archaeological site on the shore of a large lake, with many tent rings. The Ovayok



Trail ascends the southwestern slope of the mountain, and circles the summit, with great views out across the lowlands and down into the "Giant's Ribs" gorges. It's a good place to look for peregrines, rough-legged hawks, caribou, and muskox. The longest trail (8 kilometres) is the *Keakoa Kengmetkoplo Trail*, which heads north from the *Neakoa Trail* at the southeast end of the park. It circles the mountain along the lower slopes and joins the *Ovayok Trail* about halfway up the slope to the summit of the mountain. This trail is best done as a two-day hike, camping at Neakoa.

The Ovayok Territorial Park Guidebook is very helpful in exploring this park and contains maps and good information including lists of birds, mammals and plants. It is available at the Arctic Coast Visitors' Centre in Cambridge Bay, which provides a good introduction to the natural history, history, and Inuit culture of the region through displays of artifacts, clothing, and artwork, as well as maps and photographic exhibits. On display is an old caribou skin kayak, and a very large *kudluk* (stone lamp) historically used in a dance *iglu*. A large map displays the routes of many of the expeditions that searched for the Northwest Passage. Elders often gather at the centre for coffee, and there is a small library of northern books. The visitors' centre is staffed full time during the year and for extended hours in summer. In the centre, showers are available for use by campers.

For more information on **Ovayok Territorial Park** and the Arctic Coast Regional Visitors' Centre, check the Nunavut Parks website at www.nunavutparks.com, or call Nunavut Tourism at 1-866-NUNAVUT to request the Nunavut Travel Planner, which lists all licensed tourism operators, accommodations and services.

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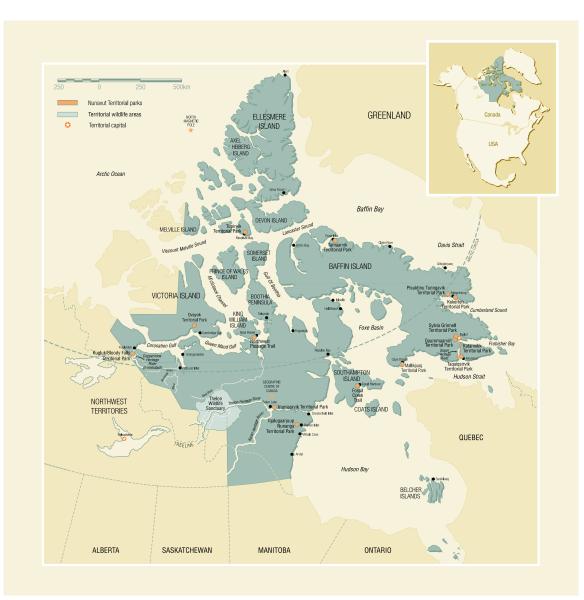
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SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL IN NUNAVUT

Nunavut's Territorial Parks offer some of the most breathtaking scenery and magnificent wildlife imaginable, but there are risks when traveling in a remote area. You must be self-reliant and responsible for your own safety. The extreme environment can change quickly, challenge your survival skills and face you with an emergency. Also remember, when you travel in Nunavut you are in polar bear country. Polar bears are strong, fast and agile on ice, land, and in water.

For more information on Safe and Sustainable Travel and Polar Bear Safety in Nunavut please visit our website at www.nunavutparks.com.



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