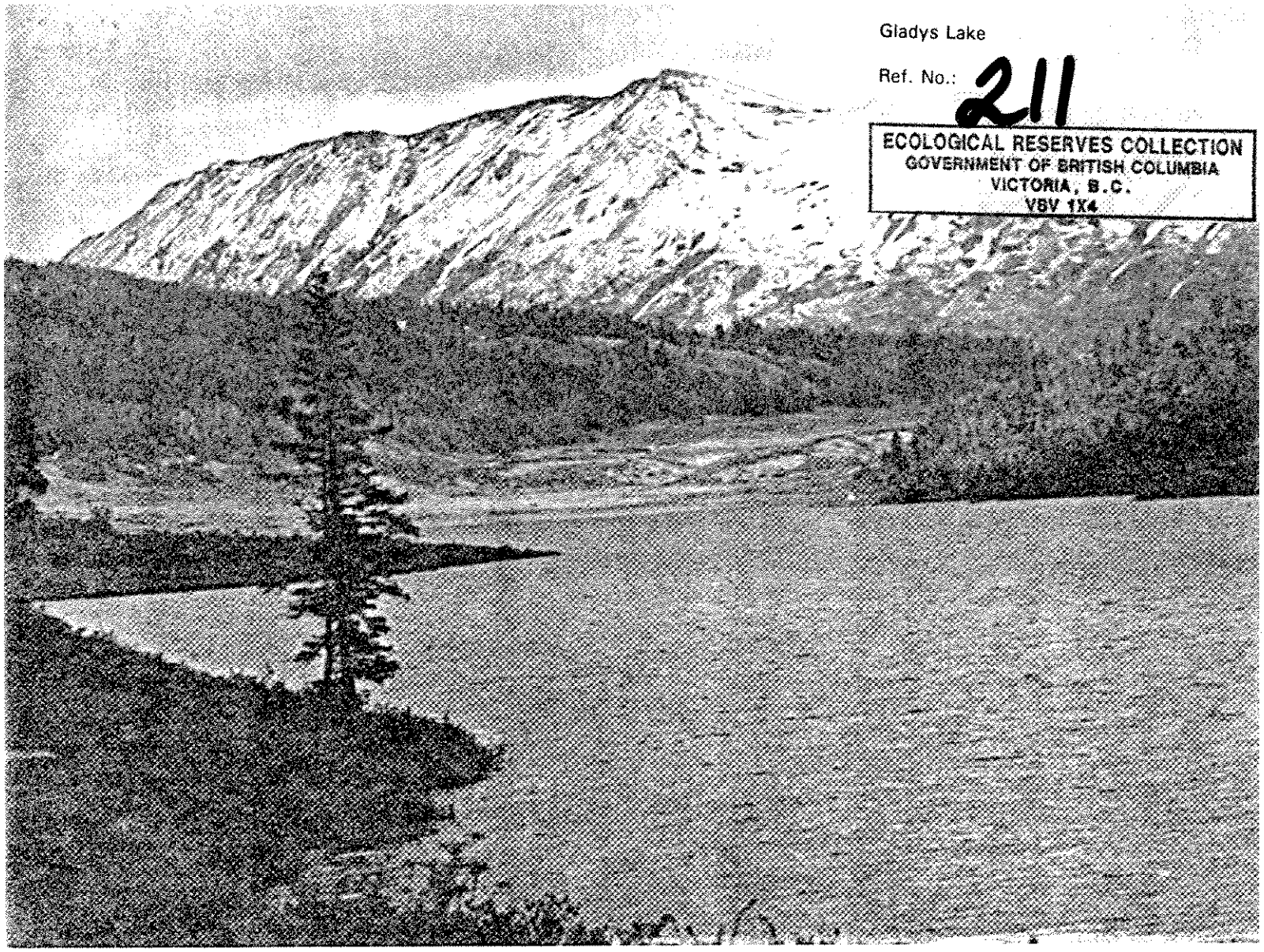

Klahowya Lake, Rosemary Fox

Spatsizi - Land of the Red Goat

by ROSEMARY J. FOX

Until recently few people, even British Columbians, had heard of the Spatsizi. The area first came to my attention in late 1974 when my husband and I were considering taking a backpacking trip in northern British Columbia. We had read a newspaper article about efforts to preserve the rich wildlife of the Spatsizi Plateau region of the northwest part of the province, which described the area as follows: "This high country has gently sloping mountains, wide valleys, subalpine meadows, abundant wildlife and is the source of the Stikine, Nass, Skeena and Finlay rivers. It is open, park-like country, unique amidst the densely forested wilderness of the rest of northern B.C." Our destination was settled.

Information on the Spatsizi was hard to find. We contacted Tommy Walker*, a well-known conservationist and retired game outfitter, who told us it was good walking country for much of it was above timberline, and also because many of the valley bottoms are untimbered and dry to a large extent.

**Editor's note: T.A. (Tommy) Walker, a registered guide in the Spatsizi from 1948-68, has published a book entitled* Spatsizi *(Autonson Publishing Ltd., formerly Nunaga Publishing Company Ltd., 1976).*

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Mrs. Fox is Director of the B.C. Mainland Group, Sierra Club, Western Canada Chapter.

We read the diary of Samuel Black, the Hudson Bay Company Factor who, in 1824, travelled up the Finlay and across to the Turnagain River in search of fur country and passed close to the Stikine a little to the northeast of the Spatsizi Plateau. His account indicated that travel was difficult owing to the ruggedness of the terrain. Describing the efforts of his party to follow one of the tributaries of the Stikine, he wrote that his voyageurs, normally vigorous, were "slowly, sullen striving along" through the bogs and underbrush of the boreal forest.

We also read Valerius Geist's account of his study of mountain sheep on the edge of the Spatsizi Plateau in the Eaglenest Range in the 1960s. What stood out there, in contrast to the impression we had been given, was the abundance of moisture: rain and roaring torrents. One August he experienced 21 straight days of rain! Dry country? Good walking? We wondered. Even maps failed to give us a clear picture of what to expect, as there are none of that region of a scale larger than four miles to the inch with 500 foot contours.

The Spatsizi, as we learned, is a 3,000 square mile area lying between the Stikine and Klappan Rivers from their source to confluence. Ranging in altitude from below 3,000 feet along the Stikine and Klappan Rivers to more than 7,700 feet at its highest peak, it falls within the boreal forest, spruce-willow-birch subalpine and alpine tundra zones. Much of the region is gently sloping along the undulating contours of the Spatsizi Plateau, while the Eaglenest Range and adjoining area, where the plateau gives way to the Skeena Mountains, are correspondingly steep and rugged. The Spatsizi River intersects the region.

The flight from Smithers in July 1975, in a Trans-Provincial Airlines Beaver was unforgettable. The day was heavily overcast, forcing us to take a roundabout route which enhanced our impression of the vastness of the rugged mountain wilderness of northern B.C. For over two hours we followed densely forested valleys, skirting tundra-coated mountain ridges and by-passing icefields and glaciers. Four of us landed on Klahowya Lake, where we made base camp. The ground was wet and uneven, but we managed to find tent sites and soon had our food supply (160 pounds for 26 days) dangling out of reach of grizzly bears and wolverines.

Our camp looked across to the green slopes of Crescent Mountain which rose steeply to a fringe of bluffs along the crest. Stands of fairly large firs, interspersed with meadows at the lower elevations, gave way to brush and then to tundra higher up the mountain. Behind our camp was an extensive and thick, almost impenetrable, forest of alpine fir.

It rained intermittently that first day. The second day it rained practically all day. The third day we awoke to two inches of snow on the ground. It rained, hailed or snowed on 18 days out of 22. We later learned that 1975 was the wettest summer on record. There were few evenings when we did not eat our dinner huddled under the two small nylon flies, which were our only shelter aside from our tents. However, as we were adequately equipped we did not mind the wet and cool conditions.

Hardly a day went by without our seeing wildlife. Among the four of us we saw more than 40 caribou, about 20 mountain goats, 10 moose, one grizzly, and beaver, marmots, ground squirrels and chipmunks. Although, to our regret, we neither saw nor heard wolves, we saw tracks almost daily. We also saw many signs of grizzlies. Perhaps even more impressive than the wildlife were the flowers, which provided a display of colour that the greyest of days could not dim: purple monkshood, larkspur, yellow ragwort, arnica, cinquefoil, pink epilobium, salmon-coloured columbine, countless saxifrages and others.

We identified few species of birds, due no doubt to the poor weather which made viewing with binoculars difficult. However, we did see several not recorded in the area previously: Arctic loon, Canada goose, wandering tattler, northern phalarope, Bonaparte's gull, pine grosbeak and snow bunting. The most common birds during our brief experiences were tree sparrows, golden-crowned sparrows and spotted sandpipers around Klahowya Lake. The golden eagle was the only raptor, and, surprisingly, we saw only one raven.

We spent five days at Klahowya Lake, exploring the area and hoping for the weather to clear. We made our way through muskeg and dense thickets of birch and willow, and walked along low dry ridges in the valley floor and up the mountainsides into the tundra region.

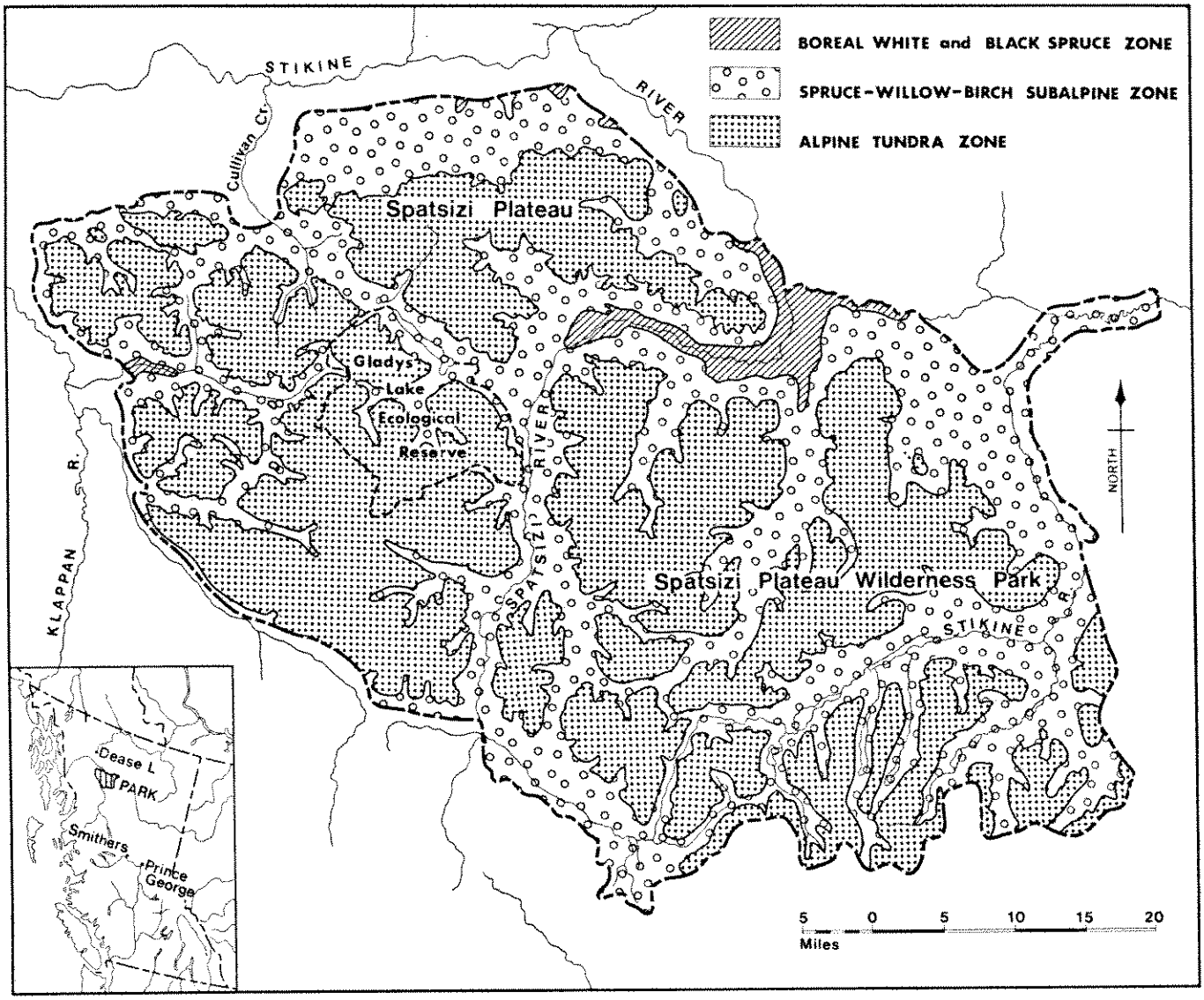
On the sixth day we left on an eight-day backpacking trip. The first day out was through almost continuous marsh, possibly made wetter by the rain. On the second day we crossed some dense forest and understood what Samuel Black meant by "slowly, sullen striving along". On our third day we made base camp at the foot of the mountains to the north of Crescent Mountain and spent a couple of days hiking and exploring that area. Far from being "gently sloping" the mountainsides were extremely steep. We moved camp on up the valley on the north side of Crescent Mountain, passing a salt lick much frequented by goats, judging from the clumps of white wool hanging from the bushes. The lick itself was a mire of mud, trampled by hundreds of hoofs. On the north side of Crescent Mountain, perhaps giving it its name, is a broad crescent-shaped bowl, mostly above timberline, and here we made our last camp before crossing the mountain back to Klahowya Lake.

It was a spectacular area, ringed by mountains with some steep cliffs and large patches of snow. This was the land of the hoary marmot which filled the air with its piercing whistles at our approach.

Spatsizi ("Spat-zee-zee") is an Indian word meaning red goat, and it is the name of a river in northern British Columbia which winds through the Eaglenest Mountains and eddies at the foot of a red slashed peak. High up on the rubble slides of this mountain goats roll, and their hair becomes tinted by red sandstone. Spatsizi — the Land of the Red Goat. . .

Spatsizi, T.A. (Tommy) Walker, Antonson Publishing Ltd., 1976

SPATSIZI PLATEAU WILDERNESS PARK and GLADYS LAKE ECOLOGICAL RESERVE



Original map prepared by Dr. Vladimir J. Krajina, University of British Columbia. *Cartography Earl Maahs.*

After a day of rest and reorganizing back at Klahowya, we set off on another trip. This time we crossed the valley of the Ross and made base camp in an alpine bowl in the mountains between the Ross and Stikine. From there we watched mountain goats on the cliffs around our camp. Once half a dozen caribou came into camp, looked at us in mute surprise and vanished as silently as they had appeared. One night there was a spectacular display of aurora borealis. The shafts of light in the northern sky, the brilliant canopy of stars, the nearby mountain cliffs silhouetted starkly against the sky remain unforgettable.

Crossing into the headwaters of the Stikine we finally found a valley that epitomized the dry valley floors we had expected. Our stay in the Stikine valley had the best weather of the trip: the sun shone, mosquitoes hummed and the temperature went up to a record 20°C. However, mares' tails drifting across the sky indicated that fine weather would be short-lived. Back at Klahowya two days later, our scheduled day of departure dawned grey and ominous. Our aircraft came on the second day of waiting, just as we had begun to think of rationing our five extra days' supply of food.

Flying back to Smithers we noticed with a new understanding how densely forested those unending Skeena Mountains are, right down to the banks of the streams in their boggy V-shaped valleys. We realized with fresh appreciation what an exceptional area the Spatsizi is, with its broad valleys, largely open and walkable if not always dry, its limited forest belt which, while it may hinder, does not prevent access to the untimbered high country, and its abundance of wildlife and wildflowers.

Lois Crisler wrote: "Wilderness without animals is mere scenery". The Spatsizi has scenery, but it is more: it is true wilderness.

Wilderness, as the term is used in North America, generally means a roadless area unaffected by human developmental activities. *True wilderness* might be further defined as a region sufficiently extensive to embrace a naturally sustainable ecosystem containing its historic complement of large mammals, which has not been modified by human activities. True wilderness as

such has disappeared from most of North America and is found only in northern Canada and Alaska.

The Spatsizi provides for a rich variety of wildlife, including two mammals found only in northern B.C. and the Yukon: the Stone sheep and Osborn caribou. Because of their black or grey bodies and striking white rump patches, belly and leg trimmings, Stone sheep have been described by Geist as "sheep in evening dress". The Osborn caribou is the largest race of the mountain caribou, only slightly smaller than the elk. The Spatsizi reputedly supports not only the largest herd of Osborn caribou but the largest animals as well. While Dr. Geist has made an overall assessment of Osborn caribou no thorough study of this magnificent animal has ever been done.

Can the Spatsizi be retained as a pure wilderness, a natural ecosystem sustaining the Osborn caribou, Stone sheep and other wildlife and the ecological base upon which they depend? Events since the summer of 1975 provide grounds for cautious optimism.

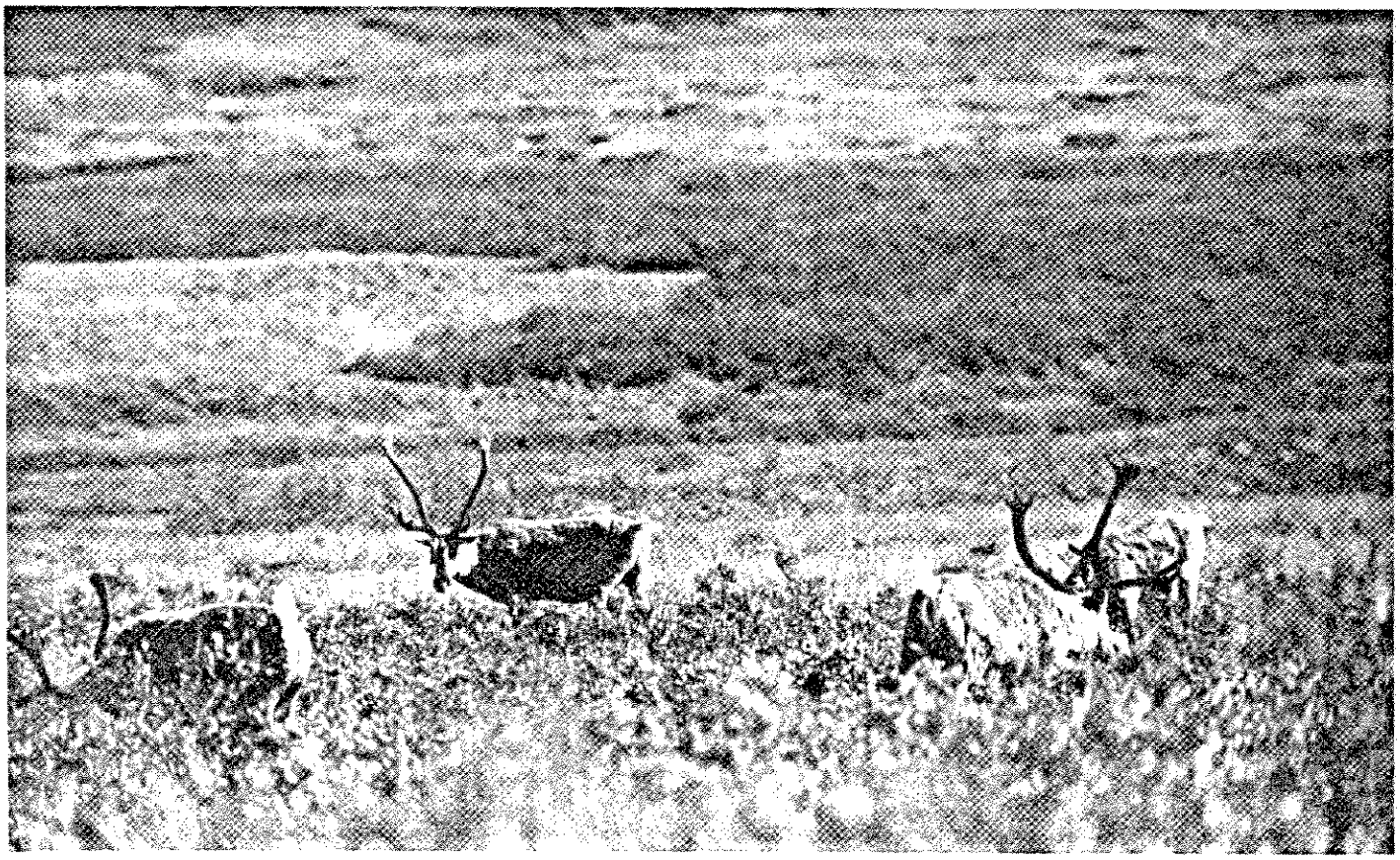
Creation in November 1975 of the 2,600 square mile Spatsizi Plateau Wilderness Provincial Park, containing within it the 82,000-acre Gladys Lake Ecological Reserve, was the culmination of many years of effort by a number of people to have the Spatsizi preserved. In announcing the new park and ecological reserve, then Resources Minister in the B.C. provincial government, Bob Williams, referred to it as a wilderness-wildlife preserve and likened it to the great game parks of East Africa. The Order-in-Council which established the Park acknowledges its special values, recognizing that "such unique wildlife areas require exceptional protection and management to ensure that the values associated with the wildlife are retained and not permitted to degenerate in quality." The Order-in-Council further states that: "The area will be maintained as a wilderness landscape in which natural communities are preserved intact and the progressions of the natural systems may proceed without alteration".

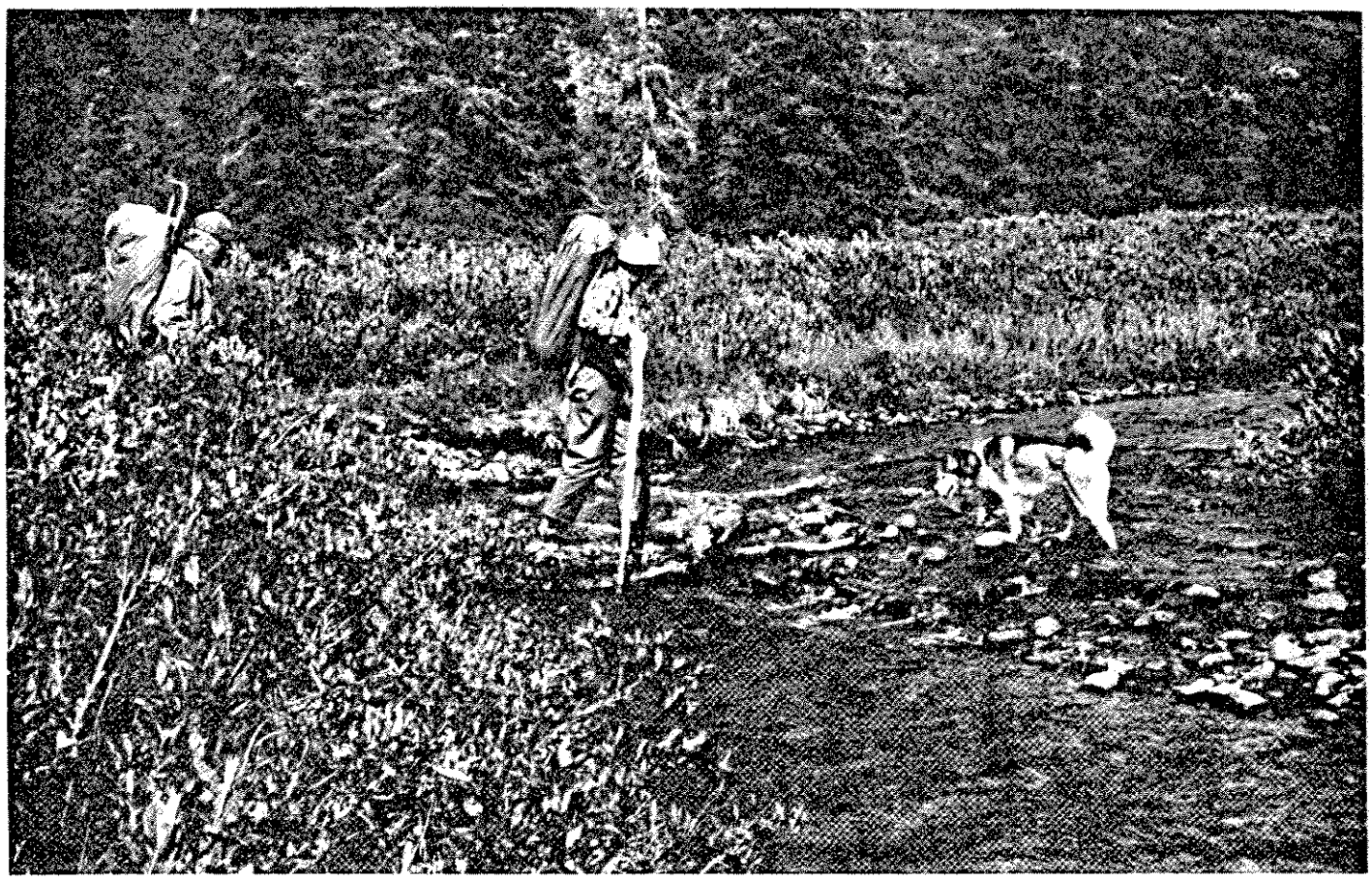
Until a decade ago the Spatsizi ecosystem was protected from undue disturbance by its remoteness. The major violation that has occurred has been the intersecting of the area by the Dease Lake extension of the B.C. Railway, which comes up the Skeena and follows the Little Klappan and Klappan Rivers. The railroad now forms the western boundary of the park and the headwaters of the Klappan, once the natural boundary of the Spatsizi, have been cut off. The Stewart-Cassiar highway at Eddontenajon passes within about 15 miles. The railroad, which as yet has no tracks, can be reached from the highway via a construction road, thereby providing vehicles with access. Furthermore, aircraft, from no farther afield than Eddontenajon, are able to land on all but the smallest lakes, bringing not only hunters but backpackers like ourselves into the heart of the wilderness.

Increased hunting in the Spatsizi in recent years has resulted, according to reliable accounts, in a severe depletion of the Stone sheep and mountain goat populations in the area that is now the Gladys Lake Ecological Reserve. In 1975 before establishment of the park the registered guide in the Spatsizi area took out 154 animals — including caribou, moose, wolves, bear, sheep and goats. This was twice as many as were ever killed before

Bristol Foster

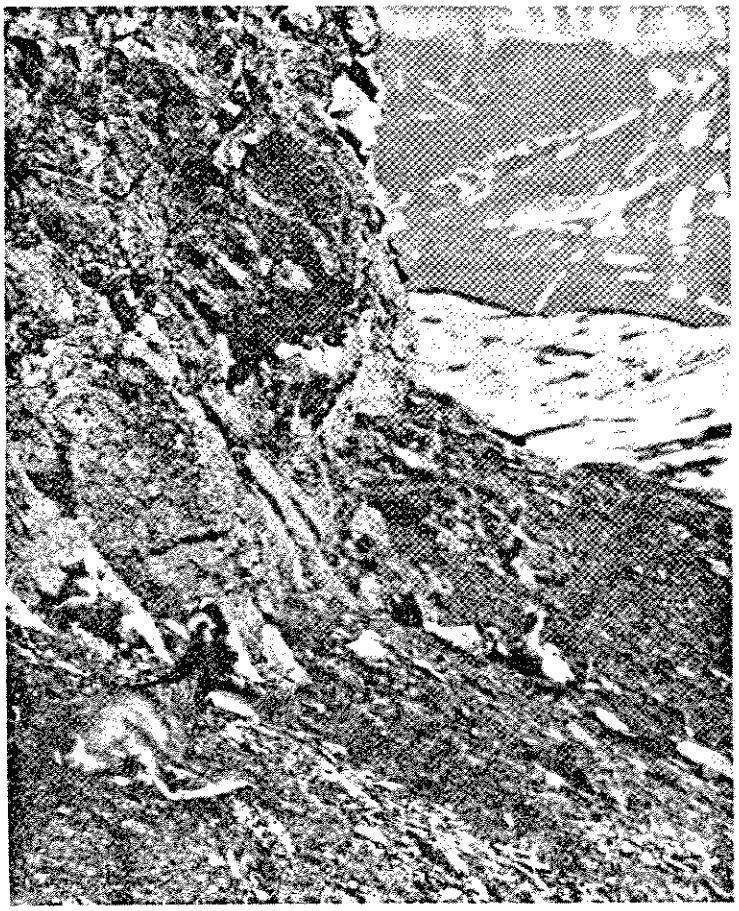
The Osborn caribou is a race of the mountain caribou. The Spatsizi may support the largest herd of these magnificent animals.





The author's party fording an alpine stream. *Rosemary Fox*

Bristol Foster



Decimated by hunters a few years ago, Spatsizi's Stone Sheep are now protected in the Gladys Lake Ecological Reserve.

Hoary marmot. *Patricia Halligan*

in any one season by guided hunters. The combined kill by resident and non-resident hunters was reported to be well over 200 animals.

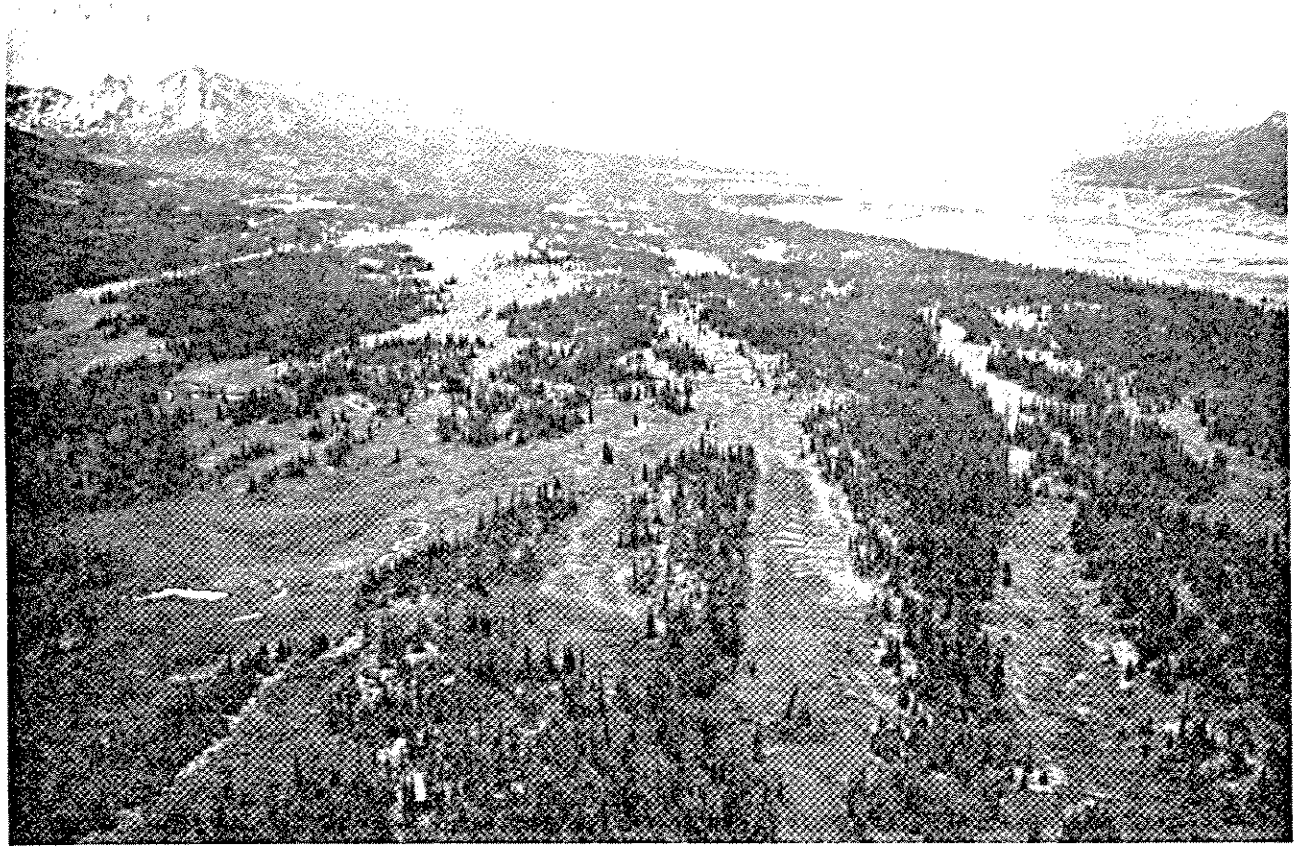
While the damage caused by overhunting may be readily evident, it is not always realized that the so-called non-consumptive outdoor recreationists — hikers, horseback riders, boaters, mountain climbers, etc. — may also have a detrimental effect on a wilderness ecosystem, particularly when in large numbers. Horses already pose a particular problem, through erosion of trails and grazing. In the Spatsizi their grazing has apparently almost eliminated one species of wheatgrass. The gathering by campers of limited supplies of dead wood is another problem, and potentially a serious one in the Spatsizi where so much of the country is close to, or above timberline. One of the more subtle and least appreciated problems is the effect of disturbance on wild animals. When an animal is alarmed it uses up needed stores of energy, which it must then try to replace by eating more. In a rigorous northern environment, such an increase in the animal's cost of living can be serious.

One conservation group (The Sierra Club of Western Canada) has made the following recommendations to the B.C. government:

- that ecological studies be carried out that will provide a sound basis for management so that the park's ecological systems can be preserved and its wildlife values retained for future generations;
- that hunting be systematically regulated to avoid unnatural disturbance of the ecosystem, and *should be suspended* until the necessary studies have been completed;
- that other forms of recreation — hiking and backpacking, boating, horseback riding, etc. be strictly regulated to avoid disturbance of the wildlife and impairment of the wilderness character of the park, and that this step should be taken *before overuse occurs*, possibly through instituting a permit system, as has been adopted in many of the U.S. parks and wilderness areas.

There has been considerable disagreement on whether a suspension of hunting is necessary to achieve the aims of preserving the park's ecological values. The B.C. Fish and Wildlife Branch has maintained that a suspension of hunting is unwarranted in the absence of concrete evidence that overhunting has occurred, although it did place a closure on grizzly bears in 1976 on the basis of possible overhunting. The Gladys Lake area, where it is acknowledged that overhunting of sheep and goats took place, was already closed to hunting in 1975 and now lies within the ecological reserve where no hunting is permitted. The Sierra Club and others have taken the position that this is a unique wildlife park: let us stop all hunting *now* before its wildlife values are impaired, and study the area to find out how much use it can stand.

It may be asked why hunting should be allowed at all in a wildlife park. Hunting is not allowed in the wildlife parks of Africa. In B.C., hunting is permitted in provincial parks under the *Parks Act*, and the Spatsizi's Order-in-Council expressly includes hunting as one of the forms of recreation to be permitted in the park. While there are those who think that hunting should be banned completely, the Sierra Club takes the view that low intensity hunting need not be incompatible with a prime-



Ian MacNeil

Above: Stands of firs are interspersed with meadows at higher elevations of the Plateau.

Below: Can the Spatsizi be protected as pure wilderness? Unless regulated, outdoor recreation will have a detrimental effect on the Spatsizi's ecosystems.

Bristol Foster

val wilderness, since primitive man was part of the wilderness scene. The trouble with applying this notion to wilderness in the 20th century is that, while man may be part of nature, his technology is not. Therefore, if hunting is to be allowed in a park like the Spatsizi, it must be managed with exceptional care so that it does not exceed the tolerance limits of the park's ecosystem. It is obvious that, if preservation of ecological integrity is one of the park's major objectives, an understanding of the park's ecosystem is necessary before appropriate hunting regulations can be established.

Preliminary studies of the park's fish and game populations began in 1976 by biologists working for the Fish and Wildlife and Parks Branches. Aerial surveys were carried out to assess the range and population of the caribou herd. More than 1,100 caribou were sighted within the park boundaries in early fall, with several hundred more outside the boundaries. It is evident that the herd ranges well beyond the park's boundaries, which indicates that serious consideration should be given to adapting the boundaries accordingly. If these cannot be changed to conform more realistically to the ecosystem, special management zones adjacent to the park will need to be established and agreed upon with other government agencies to provide the necessary protection.

An example of the dangers facing the park's ecosystem through habitat destruction is a proposed hydroelectric project on the Stikine, 58 miles upstream from Telegraph Creek, which would create a 50 mile long reservoir extending halfway between the Klappan and Spatsizi Rivers along the northern boundary of the park. This would destroy critical wintering habitat for the park's caribou, moose and wolves and interfere with seasonal movements of wildlife. Incidentally, the Grand Canyon of the Stikine, which is one of northern B.C.'s most spectacular scenic wonders would also be inundated. The possibility of mining close by is another potential threat.

While the large number of caribou sighted in and close to the park in the fall of 1976 gives hope that the Spatsizi herd is alive and well, the fact that calves made up only 7% of the number observed and adult females outnumbered males by four to one, may be a warning, according to scientists, of an unbalanced and potentially unstable population. Studies of predator-prey relationships in Alaska show that heavy hunting pressure besides natural predation can lead to major long-term population declines with other ecological repercussions.

During aerial surveys in the fall and spring of 1976 a pack of 29 wolves was sighted. A pack of this size is exceptional and the question arises of there really being a pack this size in the Spatsizi or whether two or more packs had temporarily joined forces on both occasions when seen. Although no one knows how many wolves are in the park, government biologists believe the number is high. They also now believe the grizzly population to be a healthy one, although there was concern earlier that grizzlies had become scarce. Summer ground surveys indicated nearly 300 sheep and more than 500 goats in the park.

Hunting continued in 1976 for all game species except grizzlies as mentioned earlier and mule deer of which there is a small marginal population on the edge of its range. Some restrictions on hunting, including curtailment of seasons, were imposed, and officials undertook to monitor hunting activity. The kill of animals by hunters in 1976 was greatly reduced from the previous year. This may have been due at least partly to bad weather.

The Parks Branch is now developing a management plan for the park based on conservation of the park's resources and has met with special interest groups to exchange views on different management options.

Meanwhile, university and government biologists are setting up a research program that would provide an understanding of the park's ecosystem and lay an effective basis for sound management practices. Its realization however, will depend on the availability of funding, much of which will apparently have to be found outside government sources. To raise money the Spatsizi Association for Biological Research, a non-profit, charitable organization based in Vancouver, has recently been formed.

These developments give some hope that ways will be found to give the park the exceptional protection and management it needs. In this way and with strict controls imposed on access and use, preservation of the park's wildlife may yet be assured for future generations to enjoy.

In North America, wildlife has oddly enough been viewed as something apart from the wilderness heritage, with the result that in the United States (which has a large system of wilderness areas) preservation of natural ecosystems that include the large mammals is not a central consideration. Canada has not yet initiated a strong effort to preserve its wilderness areas. The Spatsizi could become the prototype for a system of primeval wilderness parks which would keep part of Canada's unspoiled natural heritage for the future, and also ensure the perpetuation of large-mammal ecosystems that are an intrinsic part of the web of life on our planet.□