

The Old Crow Flats and Whitefish Wetlands

*Protecting a vast mosaic of wetlands, rivers and lakes
in Canada's western boreal forest*



Ducks Unlimited Canada
Conserving Canada's Wetlands

Active by nature.



Introduction

The North Yukon is in the traditional territory of the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, which literally means “people among the lakes.” The area is gifted with internationally recognized wetlands, large intact ecosystems, healthy wildlife populations, and a wealth of natural resources. It is also experiencing an increase level of economic development activity, which will be beneficial to many Yukoners, but will also have environmental impacts on the land.

On June 29, 2009, the Vuntut Gwitchin and Yukon governments formalized the full protection of two important wetland complexes from development – the Old Crow Flats and Whitefish Wetlands.

The Old Crow Flats was identified as a Special Management Area in the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement in 1993. A management plan for the area called for the protection of the core wetlands on First Nation lands, and a 25 year interim protection of important adjacent areas.

The Whitefish Wetlands were protected through the North Yukon Land Use Plan – a plan designed to protect the significant natural and cultural resources of the region while still allowing for current and future economic development opportunities.

The Old Crow Flats and Whitefish Wetlands total 12,600 km² (3.1 million acres) and are of significant importance to the community because they contain a number of features and values of territorial, national and global significance, including both heritage and ecological resources. They are approximately 75 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle. The areas are also significant to Ducks Unlimited Canada because they are key waterfowl and wildlife habitat in North America.

Ecological Importance

The region contains portions of six distinct ecoregions, within which are three major wetland complexes—Old Crow Flats, Whitefish Wetlands and Bluefish-Cadzw Lake Wetlands. The Bluefish-Cadzw Wetlands were designated as highly sensitive and assigned the least level of development under the North Yukon Land Use Plan. Almost all of the large lakes in the region are contained in these three wetlands. Present in the region are 150 species of waterfowl and birds, 40 species of mammals, and 18 species of fish. Protecting these habitats is a proactive initiative that ensures these populations land will have an opportunity to thrive.

For example, Old Crow Flats supports a significant portion of the continental ducks, swans, and other waterbirds and contains the highest

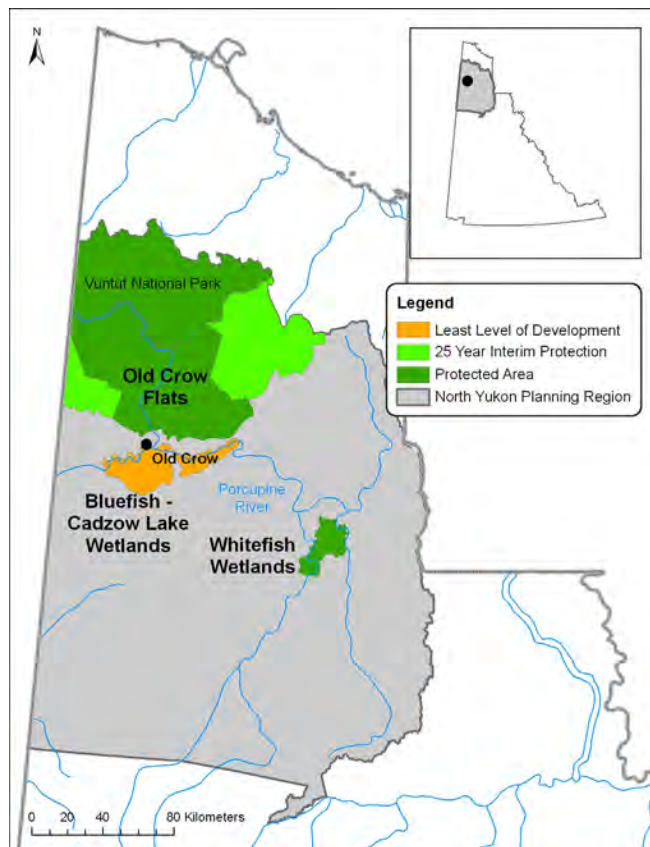
density of waterfowl in the Yukon. In waterfowl alone, 17 different species can be found there, including species that are experiencing severe continental declines – scaup, scoter and pintail.

Cultural Importance

Subsistence hunting, gathering and trapping are still very important economic and cultural activities in the region. A high participation rate in the traditional economy is important for the maintenance of Vuntut Gwitchin culture, ties to the land, and community well-being.

Historical Importance

The entire region is part of Beringia, an area extending from the Yukon to Siberia. Through Beringia, the land, people and wildlife share a common past – they have coexisted for several thousand years. The region holds some of the oldest recorded sites of human occupation in North America. The region also contains two fur trade era Yukon Historic Sites – Rampart House and Lapierre House.



Protecting Old Crow Flats and Whitefish Wetlands will ensure healthy wetlands and productive populations of waterfowl and wildlife for North America.



Old Crow Flats

Old Crow Flats is the largest wetland complex in the Yukon, and a pristine watershed almost completely undisturbed from development. The area under protection is 12,122 km² (3 million acres) and is of continental significance for migratory waterbirds. The wetland complex is recognized internationally under the United Nations Ramsar Convention for critical wetlands and associated migratory birds. It is one of 35 ecologically significant sites selected by the Convention across Canada.

The Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation relied heavily on the Old Crow Flats for subsistence hunting and trapping. Caribou is the main source of food for the Vuntut Gwitchin. Muskrat trapping, fishing, and duck hunting are also important activities currently and historically carried out in the area.

Since 2003, DUC has provided science support by conducting waterfowl surveys and sitting on the technical working group, which developed recommendations for the Old Crow Flats Special Management Area. DUC was the only non-profit group invited to sit on the working group as the wetland and waterfowl expert. DUC also conducted a wetland traditional knowledge workshop and waterfowl surveys to support the North Yukon Land Use Plan.



"All the people go to Crow Flats for the spring, for subsistence...", Alfred Charlie, Elder, Old Crow

Whitefish Wetlands

The Whitefish Wetlands complex is a 468 km² (115,000 acres) area of significant ecological and cultural importance. Conservation and management of the Whitefish wetlands complex is important partly due to the fact that it is within a portion of the Eagle Plain oil and gas basin, and has received substantial historical exploration effort. The Whitefish Wetlands also contains some of the highest ecological values in the region. Land-use activities have a high risk of causing significant impacts to wetland habitats, and the wildlife and fish populations that rely on wetlands. Similar to the Old Crow Flats, the Whitefish wetland complex is an important subsistence and cultural use area for the Vuntut Gwitchin and Tetlit Gwich'in First Nations.

Those that depend on the wetlands

- Breeding waterbirds that occupy the Old Crow Flats depend on the wetlands as travel routes and resting areas during spring and fall migration.
- Waterfowl populations within the region appear to be stable or increasing, even for species of national conservation concern like scoter and scaup.
- Old Crow Flats is used by more waterbirds than any other Yukon wetland area.
- A half million breeding and moulting waterbirds use the Old Crow Flats each year, including lesser and greater scaup, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, white-winged and surf scoter, and tundra swans.
- The Whitefish Lake wetland area is important to waterbirds during multiple stages of their life cycle.
- Approximately 600 plant species have been documented in the area, 93 of which are considered rare.

North Yukon Land Use Plan Highlights

- The plan provides a sustainable development framework for land management in the North Yukon Planning Region.
- The Plan addresses two key issues:
 - 1) oil and gas development in a significant portion of the annual range of the Porcupine Caribou herd,
 - 2) management of development of impacts in wetlands outside of the protected areas.
- Of the total region, 54 per cent is the Integrated Management Area and can be considered the “working landscape,” 32 per cent has long-term protected area status, and 13 per cent is affected by the North Yukon Interim Land Withdrawal.
- Conservation measures for the entire Whitefish and Bluefish-Cadzow wetland complexes, and the Richardson Mountains.
- Managing the effects of multiple land-use activities through the application of land-use thresholds.
- Additional specific recommendations related to achieving social, economic and ecological objectives.



Ducks Unlimited Canada in the Yukon

Since 2002, DUC has taken a strategic approach to wetland and watershed conservation in the Yukon.

DUC's approach to conservation is community-based, relying on regional planning processes that are an integral part of Yukon First Nation land claims.

The settlement of First Nation land claims has necessitated a new approach for conservation planning in the Yukon. Regional land-use decisions require agreements between affected First Nation and the Yukon governments. Land Use Planning Commissions have special status and responsibilities when it comes to decisions around conservation and planning.

In this organizational structure, conservation groups like DUC need to develop strong, trusting relationships at all levels of government, community groups and local citizens. With most of the Yukon untouched by development, DUC has the opportunity to be proactive and ensure a framework is in place that will sustain our wetlands and wild places when development does occur.

DUC is proud to have been part of the Old Crow Flats Special Management Area and North Yukon Land Use Plan processes by providing wetland information and leading wetland workshops for the community. The protection of the Old Crow Flats and the Whitefish Wetlands will be an integral part in providing healthy wetland habitat for waterfowl, waterfowl and all Yukoners.

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