

Nahanni River Expedition Report 2025

Geographical Location:

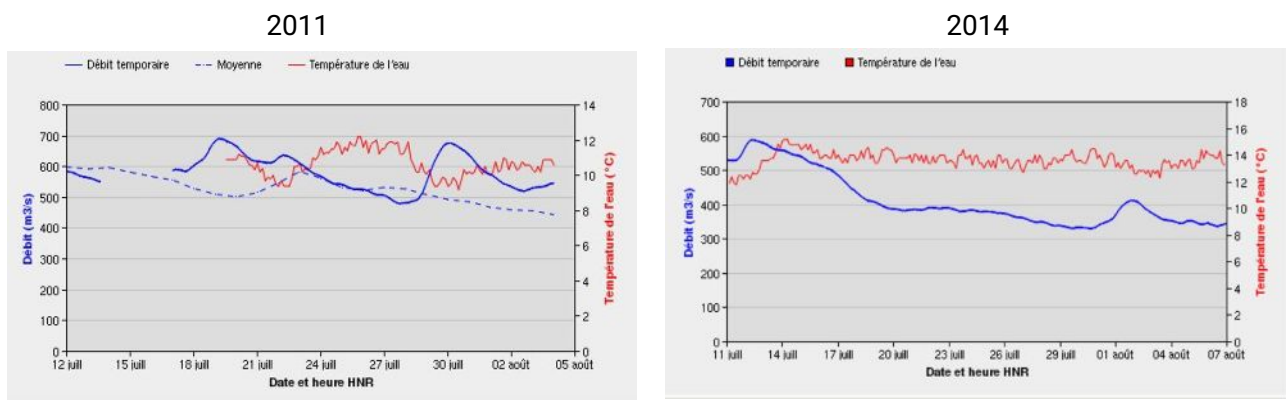
The Nahanni South River (commonly called the Nahanni, as there is also a Nahanni North River that flows into the Mackenzie River) is located north of the 60th parallel and originates in the Mackenzie Mountains on the border of Yukon and the Northwest Territories. It flows southeast and empties into the Liard River 600 kilometers downstream, where the village of Nahanni Butte is located. As the prevailing winds are from the west, you will mostly have a tailwind.

In 2014, the new Nááts'ihch'oh National Park Reserve was created and encompasses the entire section of the Nahanni River that was not within the Nahanni National Park Reserve. Consequently, for safety reasons, it is mandatory to register with the Nahanni Park authorities before starting the descent and to deregister upon completing the river. The reservation is valid for both parks. It will also be necessary to ensure compliance with the current park regulations.

Navigable Period:

The river is navigable from June to September. Departures normally take place at the beginning of July if you want to start from Moose Ponds, which is the head of the river. In this section, the river is narrow and very congested, with a much lower flow rate than further downstream. Starting later in the season increases the risk that this section will no longer be canoeable.

Great care must be taken with the flow rate of the Nahanni River, as it can fluctuate suddenly and significantly during heavy rains. The average river level is between 400 and 600 m³/s during the canoeable season. Here are the flow rate and water temperature graphs from our expeditions in July 2011 and 2014. The station is located upstream of Virginia Falls. In 2014, the water level was lower, and the "Rock Gardens" section truly lived up to its name, requiring us to do some lining. In 2024, the level was even lower than in 2014, between 400 and 200 m³/s, with a lot of lining in the "Rock Gardens."



To obtain real-time water flow and temperature information, you can consult the Environment Canada website at the following address: <http://eau.ec.gc.ca>. The station number to enter is 10EB001.

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Environmental quality

The landscapes of the Nahanni are of exceptional quality and are what make it famous. The river flows through a very wild environment and is only accessible by air. Therefore, you must be completely self-sufficient and extremely careful during the expedition; an accident could easily be catastrophic.



Photo: Daniel Petit



The river water is clear at its headwaters, but from the end of the "Rock Gardens" section onwards, it becomes cloudy due to sediments carried by the various tributaries of the river. Due to the presence of numerous beavers, it is preferable to filter the water. Be careful when using filters, as they clog very quickly if you take water directly from the river. It is better to draw water from the numerous streams that flow into the Nahanni. If this is not possible, you can pre-filter the water using a polyester and nylon towel, which is quite effective.

Photo: Daniel Petit

The average air temperature is around 16°C during the summer months, but it's not uncommon to experience temperatures above 30°C. The water temperature is cold, around 10°C. Thermal clothing is strongly recommended in the whitewater sections to prevent any risk of hypothermia in case of capsizing.

Description of Sections:

The most popular routes are as follows:

Moose Ponds to Blackstone Territorial Park

Distance: 600 km

Time Required: 21 days or more if you want to fully enjoy the river.

Rabbitkettle to Blackstone Territorial Park

Distance: 460 km Time Required: Between 14 and 18 days

Virginia Falls to Blackstone Territorial Park Distance:

250 km

Time Required: Between 7 and 10 days

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Depending on the chosen route, you will travel through the following sections:

1. "Rock Gardens" (located outside the park boundaries):

This is the most challenging section of the Nahanni, starting 15 kilometers after Moose Ponds and extending for a distance of 50 kilometers. The rapids are continuous and very obstructed, ranging from Class I to Class III. The current is strong, and the river is not very wide. You need to be able to maneuver quickly and be comfortable with reading rapids on sight. The difficulty can increase or decrease depending on the water levels.



Photo: Marilène Rubin

2. From the end of "Rock Gardens" to Rabbitkettle:



Photo: Bernard Goutier

This is a calm 160 km section, but with a good current and only one 1 km Class II rapid. The landscapes are spectacular; it is in this section, at kilometer 210, that there is a multi-day hike to the "Cirque of the Unclimbables," renowned for its climbing wall. At Rabbitkettle, it is normally possible, with the help of a guide, to visit some of the most beautiful tufa mounds in Canada.

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3. From Rabbitkettle to Virginia Falls:

A more meandering 120 km section, the current is still present and very fast between kilometers 280 and 300. Between kilometers 330 and 335, it is possible to see Dall sheep on the mountain slopes of the left bank and also moose at Oxbow Lake, which is accessible by going up a small stream. Unfortunately, in our case, the animals were not there.



Photo: Marilène Rubin

4.- Virginia Falls:



Photo Daniel Petit

One of the major and most well-known attractions of the Nahanni is Virginia Falls. With a height of 90 meters, almost twice the height of Niagara Falls, it is located at kilometer 344, just over halfway through the journey. The falls are accessible by floatplane, and some groups begin their river descent here. The campsite is semi-serviced and is on wooden platforms. A warden is present during the summer. Do not forget that it is absolutely necessary to reserve the campsite and arrive on the chosen date. The portage around the falls is on a wooden boardwalk and begins at the campsite (1.9 km). You can save 700 m of portage by canoeing along the bay before the "Sluice Box" rapid. An easy trail allows you to admire the falls. The one-day hike to Mount Sunblood is really worth it. You have to cross by canoe to reach the start of the trail which is on the

other side of the river opposite the campsite. The view at the top is superb and completely unobstructed.

5. The Canyons:

Four very spectacular canyons follow one after the other over a distance of 140 kilometers. The first canyon encountered is called the Fourth Canyon; this is because the early gold prospectors traveled up the river and numbered the canyons along the way. Today's canoeists descend the river and therefore start with the last canyon that the gold prospectors went up. The Fourth Canyon begins immediately after Virginia Falls, and for four kilometers, there are high, pyramidal waves. The waves do not span the entire width of the river, making them relatively easy to avoid. Also, at kilometer 361, there is the Figure 8 rapid, which was once considered one of the most difficult on the Nahanni. The high water level in 2005 significantly changed the morphology of the rapid. The water movements are much less pronounced than before, and the rapid has become easier.

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In the Third Canyon, at kilometer 403, the river makes a hairpin turn nicknamed "The Gate" and passes through a narrow passage with a vertical cliff of 460 meters. On the east bank rises a distinctive peak called "Pulpit Rock." The campsite on the left bank is superb, and a short one-hour hike leads to the top of the cliff, offering a magnificent view of the Third Canyon. There are no rapids in the Third and Second Canyons, but the current is very strong.



Photo: Marilène Rubin

The First Canyon begins with a Class III rapid (Georges Riffle's) consisting of large, irregular waves and unpredictable water movements. Just before the rapid, there is an island from which you can scout the rapid. The First Canyon ends at the Kraus Hot Springs. If you want to avoid the countless mosquitoes, it is best to camp three kilometers upstream at Lafferty Creek, where it is windier and the campsite is very beautiful.

6.- « The Splits » :

After the Canyons, the river widens very noticeably, and we then approach the section called 'The Splits.' Here, the river divides into numerous channels that change from year to year. The easiest way to navigate



Photo: Bernard Goutier

this maze is to follow the channel with the fastest current. We leave the park at kilometer 523, and about forty kilometers further downstream is Nahanni Butte, an Indigenous village where it's mandatory to check out. Just before and after Nahanni Butte, it's very common to see wild bison. Past the village, the Nahanni joins the Liard River and becomes very wide, but there's still a good current. All that remains is about forty kilometers before reaching Blackstone Territorial Park, which is the river's exit point. Don't forget to bring cash or book online for the camping fees.

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Campsites:

It is relatively easy to find group campsites (5 to 6 tents). It is best to choose campsites near tributaries to take advantage of driftwood and the wind, which will help keep away the mosquitoes that are generally present and voracious throughout the day. Be careful, however, as many of these campsites are modified each year by the spring flood and may no longer be as welcoming as the previous year. As the park limits the number of groups at the Virginia Falls campsite, it is uncommon to encounter other groups during the descent.



Photo: Daniel Petit

There are generally no problems finding driftwood; numerous trees are carried by the spring floods and wash up on the riverbanks.

Wood is scarce or non-existent at the following campsites: Rabbitkettle (however, you can camp a few kilometers further on where driftwood is abundant), at Virginia Falls, and at "Kraus Hotsprings" (an alternative is to camp a few kilometers upstream at Lafferty Creek).



Photo: Daniel Petit

Please note that it is forbidden to cut down trees in the park, and it is mandatory to use a fire pan for campfires to avoid leaving fire rings at the campsites. A fire pan allows you to consume much less wood and offers better protection against the wind. It is possible to rent one on-site or to make your own. It is very important not to leave any traces of food at the various campsites so as not to attract animals. Think of those who will follow you.

Wildlife

According to Parks Canada, there are 42 species of mammals. The large herbivores are represented by the Moose, Mountain Goat, Dall Sheep, Mule Deer, and Caribou. The carnivores include the Black Bear, Grizzly Bear, and Grey Wolf. Among the small mammals are the Arctic Ground Squirrel, Muskrat, North American Beaver, Hoary Marmot, and Snowshoe Hare.

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The park is frequented by 180 species of birds. These include the Trumpeter Swan, four species of Loons, the Red-necked Grebe, Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Kestrel, Bald Eagle, Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, and Gyrfalcon. There are no reptile species in the park and few amphibian species.

During our expedition, we saw some black bears, beavers, a moose, and wood bison (outside the park).



Photo: Daniel Petit



Photo: Daniel Petit

Hiking:

The Nahanni is also a true paradise for hiking. Ranging from a few hours to several days, numerous hikes are accessible from the river. However, you must be very careful when hiking in the canyons, as sudden floods caused by thunderstorms can surprise hikers. Deux noteworthy hikes include a short hike at Virginia Falls, which starts at the campsite and offers a superb view of the falls. The hike to Mount Sunblood, which begins opposite Virginia Falls and provides a panoramic view of the Nahanni and its surroundings, the trail is easy and ascends gradually. However, a full day is needed for this hike.



Photo: Bernard Goutier

Logistics

Several steps must be followed when preparing for the expedition if you want it to be successful. It is important to respect the order of the steps, otherwise it can greatly complicate the organization of the expedition. A good way to coordinate logistics among the members of the expedition is to use a tool like "Google Drive" which allows you to share and modify documents via the internet.

Step 1: Booking the campsite at Virginia Falls and registering with the Park.

Before undertaking anything, you must choose the dates for camping at Virginia Falls, it is the only campsite where a reservation is mandatory. The number of places is limited, and the group cannot exceed

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12 people. You must therefore book early; we sent our request at the beginning of December and received the reply at the beginning of January for a reservation in July. The fees for access to Nahanni and Nááts'ihch'oh National Park Reserves were \$231,50 in 2025. The number of campsites is also limited at Nááts'ihch'oh Tué (Moose Ponds), Gahnjthah Mje, Glacier Lake, and Fairy Meadows. These places are of great cultural and environmental significance. Before departure, it will be necessary to register with the Park authorities in Fort Simpson or by telephone. Be aware that if you anticipate not being able to exit on the chosen date during the expedition, it is very important to notify the park authorities; otherwise, they will launch a search for you, and you risk ending up with a rather hefty bill.

Step 2: Booking the Floatplane

Once the campsite reservation is confirmed by the park, we can then choose the number of days we want to spend paddling before reaching the falls and thus determine the departure date for the floatplane, as well as the number of days after the falls to set the exit date. Floatplane departures are available from either Yukon (Alkan Air located in Mayo or Kluane Airways located at Finlayson Lake) or the Northwest Territories (South-Nahanni Airways located in Fort Simpson).

Step 3: Transport of Baggage and Canoes

Due to the distance, transporting the canoes and baggage presents a significant challenge. There are several ways to proceed; here is an example:

Wooden crates need to be found or built for transporting the luggage. Then, a carrier must be chosen to bring the canoes and luggage to Whitehorse or Fort Simpson. After numerous efforts, we finally managed to find a carrier (Manitoulin Transport) for our luggage. The service was impeccable, and the equipment was delivered on time at a reasonable cost. Moreover, they are one of the few carriers with a depot in Fort Simpson. In any case, arrangements must be made with the carrier to store everything before our arrival and to keep the crates for the duration of the expedition in order to reuse them for the return trip. Transporting the canoes overland is possible, but very long crates need to be built to accommodate them."



Photo: Jean Tremblay

Upon arrival, you will need to arrange a way to transport the canoes and baggage to the floatplane base if everything is not already there.

At the end of the expedition, it is necessary to find a shuttle that will bring everyone, as well as the canoes and baggage, back to Whitehorse from Blackstone Territorial Park, It's a long shuttle.

Canoe Rental:

This is the solution we chose due to time and organizational constraints. There are several companies that rent canoes, and by renting the canoes on-site, we avoid the logistics of transporting them back and forth. Spray decks are normally included with canoe rentals. Regarding luggage, the logistics for getting there are the same as previously discussed. However, depending on the amount of luggage we have, we might decide to bring all of it back by plane. 60-liter blue barrels are accepted as checked baggage. We need to be careful about the weight and number of bags, though, as there are now fees for all luggage. It is usually cheaper to bring the luggage back overland.

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Step 4:

You can then book our plane tickets that will take us to Whitehorse. It is possible to reduce costs for those who have Aeroplan points, but reservations must be made well in advance. Please note that you cannot transport stove fuel or cayenne pepper (for deterring bears) by plane; you will need to plan to purchase everything once you arrive on-site.

Step 5:

Then, all that remains is the preparation of the menus and the distribution of the shared equipment.

Safety:

You are in a very remote region; there are no land routes, and the only access to the river is by air. Caution is therefore essential. The nearest help is 600 km away.

It is recommended to have a complete first-aid kit, and it is advisable to have some members of the expedition with a wilderness first aid course.

Having a satellite phone and/or a SPOT device or equivalent can save a lot of time if an emergency arises during the expedition.

Have cayenne pepper and bear bangers for bears. It is best to know how to use them before you need to.

Do not leave food lying around to avoid attracting animals.

Firearms are prohibited in the park.

Mandatory registration before departure and upon exiting the river.

Optional registration at various points within the park; this can facilitate searches in case of an emergency.

In the event of an evacuation, the costs are covered by Parks Canada, provided that the park access fees have been paid. However, it is still recommended to verify before departure whether this policy is still in effect with the Park authorities.

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Documentation :

There are many sources of information regarding the Nahanni River, available on the internet. Here are a few:

Nahanni National Park Reserve website : <http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/nt/nahanni/index.aspx>

Nááts'ihch'oh National Park Reserve website : <http://www.pc.gc.ca/fra/pn-np/nt/naatsihchoh/index.aspx>

Nahanni River water levels : <http://eau.ec.gc.ca> station 10EB001

Equipment transport company : <http://www.manitoulintransport.com/>

South-Nahanni Airways aviation company : <http://www.southnahanniairways.ca>

Alkan Air (Mayo)

Kluane Airways ((canoe rentals and shuttles, Finlayson Lake)

Kanoe People ((canoe rentals and shuttles, Finlayson Lake)

The 2011 expedition video is available on the following site :

https://photos.bernard.goutier.ca/index.php/Canot/Nahanni-01_1

Nahanni River maps are available on the site <http://www.cartespleinair.org>

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