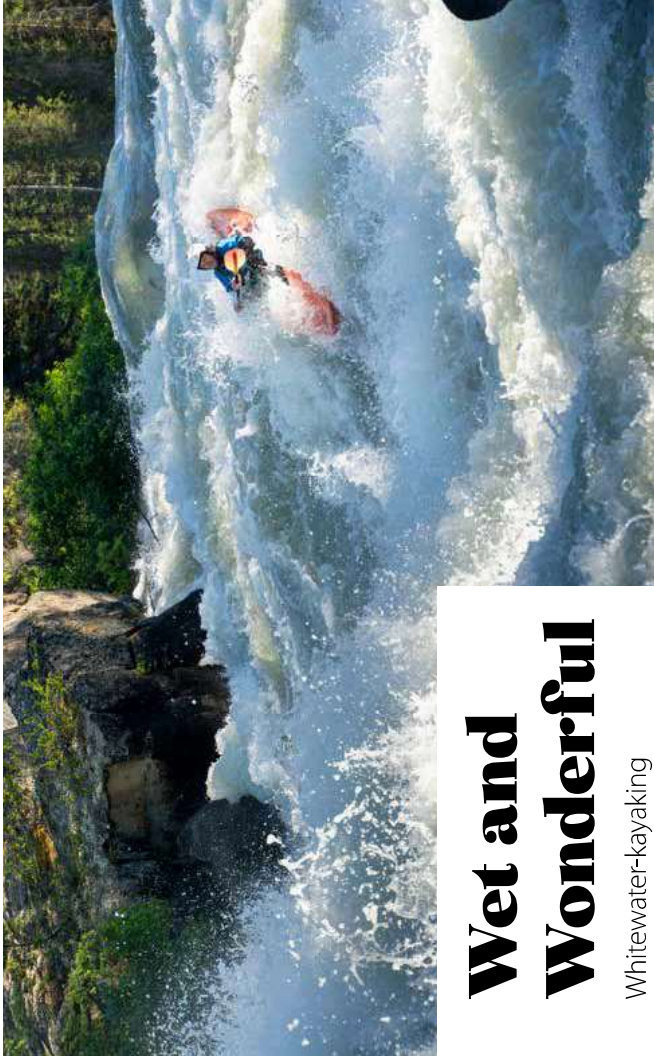




# Wet and Wonderful

Whitewater-kayaking community keeps catching waves

By Karen McCall

**S**troll Whitehorse's Millennium Trail on a summer or early autumn evening and you'll likely see a handful of brightly coloured kayaks on the Yukon River. Some of the paddlers are pulling tricks like spins and loops (a.k.a. front flips) in the big wave under the blue pedestrian bridge. Others are attempting to roll in moving water for the first time. Either way, there are lots of cheers and shouts of encouragement from instructors, fellow kayakers, and bystanders.

The gear has evolved and the haircuts have changed, but a similar scene has been playing out on the Whitehorse waterfront and Yukon rivers for decades.

When Ken Madsen arrived in the territory in the early '80s, there was already a community of skilled kayakers. But the then-young teacher realized many rivers had never been paddled recreationally or written about. In his summers off, he explored—first by canoe, then in a kayak—and he and friends progressed into harder whitewater. Madsen and Graham Wilson compiled their river knowledge in *Paddling in the Yukon*, published in 1989. Almost four decades later, the guidebook and its later editions remain a common sight on home bookshelves, the cover crinkled with use.

While Madsen was writing guidebooks, another keen kayaker was leading commercial trips on the Tatshenshini River.

"Bob Daffe was the main paddling guru in the Yukon when I got here," Madsen recalled. At the helm of Tatshenshini Expediting for close to 40 years, Daffe mentored innumerable kayakers and rafters. When Daffe died of cancer in 2022, the paddling community mourned an icon and friend.

The Yukon Voyageur Club, formed in 1961, transitioned to the Yukon Canoe and Kayak Club (YCKC) in the '90s. That move reflected the small but growing popularity of kayaking, says Walter Brennan, a board member at the time. Around the same time, he and other parents started youth programming. It was free, but it wasn't babysitting. Parents were expected to help in some way. In the years since his own children have grown up, the club has expanded to nearly 300 members. "The growth has been quite phenomenal," said Brennan.

Few people have seen firsthand the development of kayaking in the Yukon like Theresa Landman, a long-time volunteer and board member with YCKC.

## THE DANCER

Fifty years ago, whitewater kayaks were twice as long and made of fibre-glass. When the plastic "dancer" kayak came out in the 1980s, it revolutionized the sport, according to *Paddling Magazine*. As kayakers became interested in playing and performing tricks on river features, boats got smaller and better fitted. Now there are boats for river running and freestyle, as well as hybrid boats with playful sterns.

## RIVER FAVOURITES

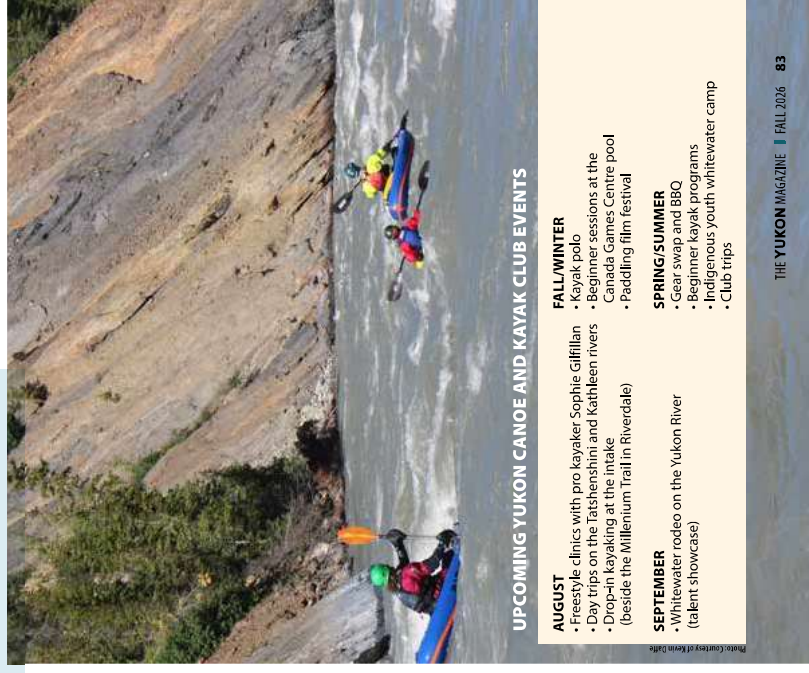
"The Takhini River is still one of my long-time favourites because our kids grew up on it. We were out there so many weekends." — Walter Brennan

"The Wind, Snake, and Bonnet Plume are some of the most spectacular rivers. Or the Firth. Any of those northern rivers are amazing and the wildlife is incredible and the hiking is fantastic." — Ken Madsen

"I love the Alsek. It's very wild and beautiful and it's in our backyard and a lot of people don't realize it." — Theresa Landman

"The Upper Blanchard wins; the most fun hour I've ever had." (That was after a 7-km walk in with a kayak.) — Erik Pinkerton

who taught the youth program, the next generation of paddlers are in the cockpit. That includes Brennan's son, Lawrence, who teaches the youth camp and is on the YCKC board. When the river freezes, it's not unusual to see Lawrence at the pool, paddling one of his young children around in a kayak while chasing the other. Before long, these little rippers will be learning to roll and pushing their parents out of the big waves. **Y**



## UPCOMING YUKON CANOE AND KAYAK CLUB EVENTS

### AUGUST

- Freestyle clinics with pro kayaker Sophie Giffilan
- Day trips on the Tatshenshini and Kathleen rivers
- Drop-in kayaking at the intake (beside the Millennium Trail in Riverdale)

### SEPTEMBER

- Whitewater rodeo on the Yukon River (talent showcase)

### FALL/WINTER

- Kayak polo
- Beginner sessions at the Canada Games Centre pool
- Paddling film festival

### SPRING/SUMMER

- Gear swap and BBQ
- Beginner kayak programs
- Indigenous youth whitewater camp
- Club trips