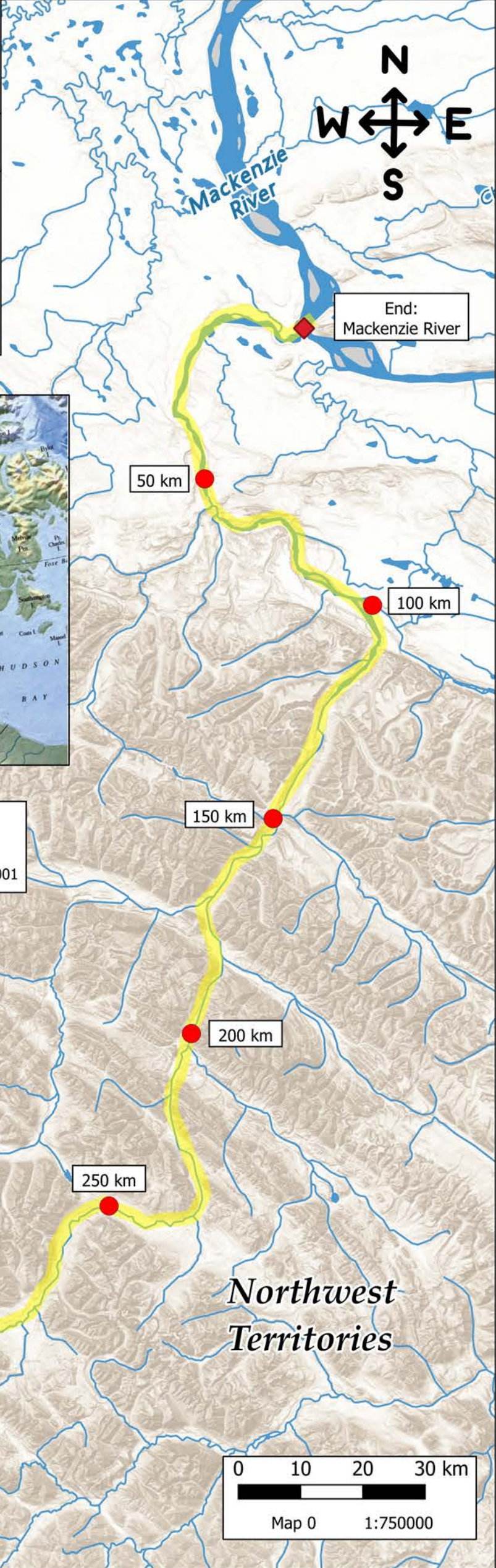


Mountain River, NWT Canoe Route Map

Map version 2 - @2025 Roland Paris (rparis@uottawa.ca)
Designed to be printed in colour on legal-sized paper.

WARNING: This map likely contains many errors and will be inaccurate at different water levels. Use at your own risk.

Paddling the Mountain River demands advanced whitewater canoeing skills and extensive experience in remote wilderness travel, where rescue may be difficult or delayed. At very high flows, some canyons can become unrunnable and offer no portage options. As with all mountain rivers, water levels can rise or fall quickly. If in doubt, choose a guided expedition.



Water Gauge:
Mountain River Below Cambrian Creek (10KC001)
Environment Canada website (real-time data):
https://wateroffice.ec.gc.ca/report/real_time_e.html?stn=10KC001

Date	Sunrise Time	Sunset Time
June 15	3:22 AM	1:35 AM
July 1	3:31 AM	1:32 AM
July 15	4:18 AM	12:49 AM
August 1	5:20 AM	11:48 PM
August 15	6:09 AM	10:56 PM
September 1	7:04 AM	9:53 PM

Credits: This map draws upon many different sources, including other excellent maps that prospective Mountain paddlers should also consult. Please see the list of credits and other resources within this map.

Logistics

Float plane flights to/from the river

- From Norman Wells, NWT: North Wright Airways, <https://north-wrightairways.com> (Twin Otter and Pilatus Porter)
- From Mayo, Yukon: Alkan Air, <https://alkanair.com> (Beaver, Cessna Caravan, Turbo single Otter)
- From Finlayson Lake, Yukon: Kluane Airways, <https://kluaneairways.com> (two Beavers?)

It is also possible to arrange a boat pickup from the Mountain-Mackenzie confluence.

Canoe/equipment rentals

- Norman Wells, NWT:
 - Canoe North Adventures, <https://canoenorthadventures.com> (note: in 2025, renting canoes from Canoe North require staying at their lodge before and after trip)
 - Jackpine Paddle, <https://jackpinepaddle.com>
- Whitehorse, Yukon:
 - Up North Adventures, <https://upnorthadventures.com>
 - Kanoe People, <https://www.kanoepeople.com/>
- Finlayson Lake, Yukon:
 - Kluane Airways, <https://kluaneairways.com/canoe-kayak-rentals-and-shuttles.php>

Spray decks are a must for the Mountain River.

Accommodation in Norman Wells

- At the float plane base:
 - Canoe North Adventures, <https://canoenorthadventures.com>: \$290/person/night + tax in 2025, including group meals and airport shuttle. (Note: their clientele included a steady stream of trophy hunters when we were there.)
 - North Wright Airways lodge – large open dorm accommodation with a large living room and kitchen (make your own meals). \$60/person/night + tax in 2025.
- In Norman Wells:
 - Heritage Hotel, <https://heritagehotelnwt.com>
 - Yamouri Inn, <https://spectacularnwt.com/accommodations/yamouri-inn/>
 - MacKinnon Territorial Park (camping – keep an eye on your gear), <https://www.nwtparks.ca/find-a-park/mackinnon-territorial-park>

Duration

- Try not to speed through the mountains. Our trip was 20 days, with several layover days for hiking and relatively short paddling days (until we left the mountains). You're paying a lot to do this – enjoy it!

Guided trips

- Blackfeather, <https://blackfeather.com>
- Canoe North Adventures, <https://canoenorthadventures.com>
- Canadian River Expeditions, <https://nahanni.com/river/mountain-river>

Additional contacts

- RCMP – Yellowknife HQ (867-669-1111); Norman Wells detachment (867-587-1111); Fort Good Hope detachment (867-598-1111); Whitehorse HQ (867-667-5551); Mayo detachment (867-996-5555).
- Norman Wells medical clinic (867-587-3333)
- Sahtu Helicopters (867-587-2827); Canadian helicopters (867-322-9101) – both in Norman Wells.

Insurance

- Check your coverage; extraction can be extremely expensive. Emergency evacuation is generally covered by local authorities – but check to be sure. Voluntary extraction (e.g., due to a broken canoe or high water) may not be considered an emergency. Follow-on medevac transportation (after the initial SAR recovery) may also involve additional expenses exceeding what other provinces repay. Check private insurance plans for coverage, limits, and exclusions. Note that Garmin's basic insurance covers the search-and-rescue phase only and may be redundant. Again, it's best to check all this first – accidents happen.
- One insurance provider, if needed: Global Rescue, <https://www.globalrescue.com>

Map Details

Map coverage

This map covers trips from Dusty and Norseman Lake to the Mackenzie.

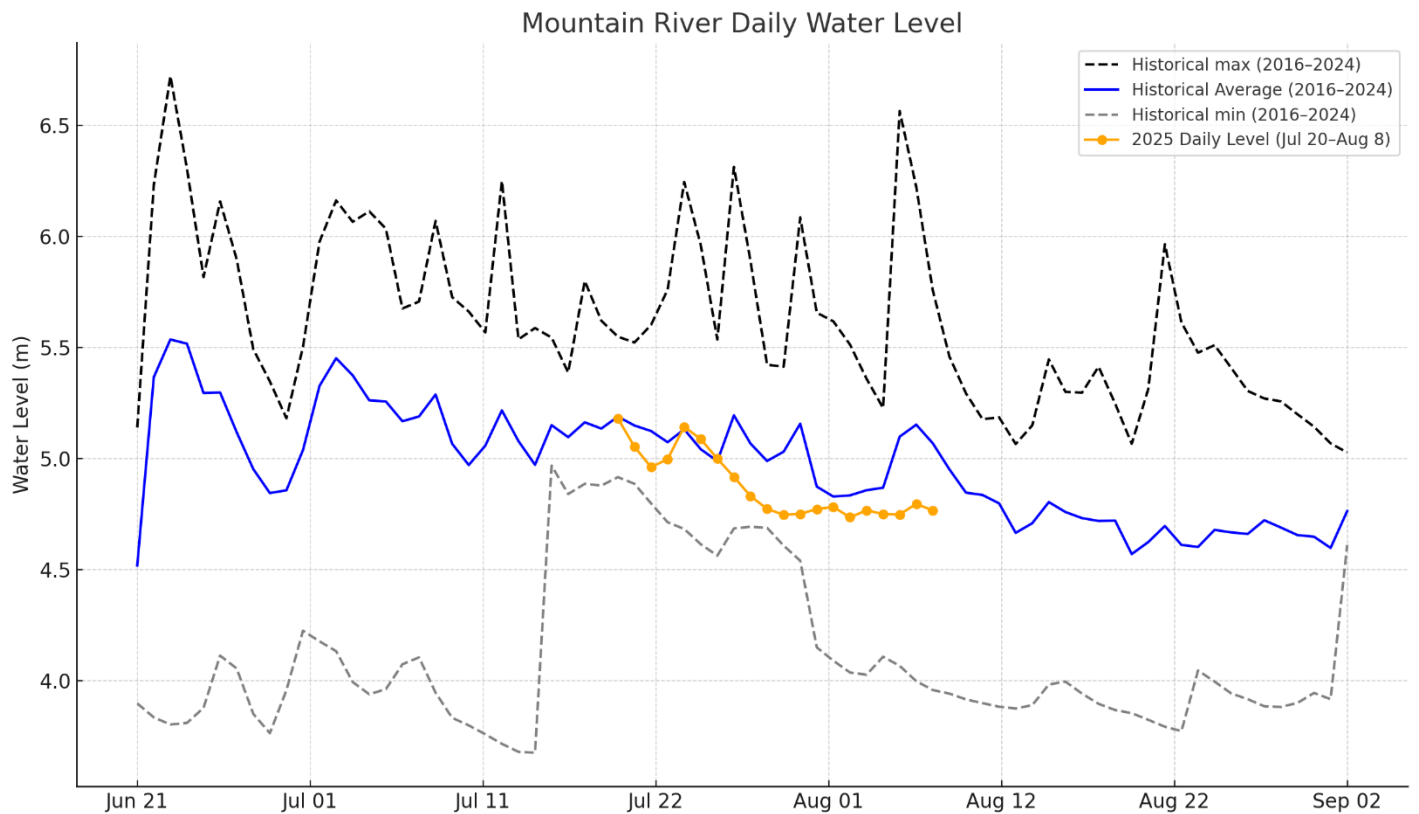
It is also possible to start at Willow Handle Lake and descend Black Feather Creek to the Mountain River. (For this option, consult one of resources listed below under “Other maps.”) Also, trips can continue down the Mackenzie River to Fort Good Hope.

Rapids ratings and water levels

The rapid ratings (Class 1 rapids are shown as “RI”, Class 1-2 as “RI-II”, etc.) come mainly from Benard Goutier’s 2023 map (see “Other maps” below). A.D. Charbonneau’s 2016 map likewise provides details on each rapid.

The water level was on the low side of medium when we paddled the Mountain in 2025. We found that Goutier’s ratings were generally higher, by at least a half-class, than what we encountered (i.e., his “RII” was generally RI-II for us, his “RIII” was generally RII-III, etc.) I’ve left Goutier’s original ratings in place on this map because at higher water levels his ratings are likely more accurate – and it’s better to prepare for more, not less.

For reference, the following chart shows average daily water levels for 2016-24, along with levels during our trip on July 20-August 8, 2025:



Water levels are measured at the hydrometric station in 5th Canyon, on Map 11, where the river leaves the mountains. To view real-time data from this station, visit https://wateroffice.ec.gc.ca/search/real_time_e.html and type “Mountain River” into the Station Name field.

Caution: As with any mountain river, the water can rise quickly and unexpectedly, including after rain far upstream of you. High water in the lower canyons is what makes the Mountain more challenging than many other rivers in the Mackenzie Mountains. If a canyon or rapid seems un-runnable at very high water, sit tight and wait for the water level to drop. It will – eventually.

Other maps

Benard Goutier (2023), <http://www.cartespleinair.org/Canot/Canada/MountainRiverGoutier2023.pdf> (in French)

Ariel Desjardins Charbonneau (2016), <http://www.cartespleinair.org/Canot/Canada/MountainDesjardinsCharbonneau2016.pdf> (bilingual Eng/Fre)

Campsites

The campsites indicated on this map (with green triangles) are compiled from three previous maps. Most have not been checked. Their viability will depend on water levels and the shifting course and banks of the river. Most campsite markings on this map should be used only as a rough guide to potentially viable camping areas.

Kilometre markings

Kilometre markings show every 5 kilometres of the route. It may be somewhat longer in reality; it all depends on how much winding you must do through braided sections.

To download a GPX file of the kilometre markings, visit: <https://www.rolandparis.com/canoeing>.

Other navigational markings

Most of the map pages show both UTM and Lat-Long coordinates on the frame. Grid squares are based on UTM; each square indicates one kilometre. The contour interval is 25 metres. The north arrow indicates true north, not magnetic north. Magnetic declination (for a manual compass) is +19°.

Braids

Because braided sections of the river change from year to year and over a season, the channels indicated on this map are not a reliable guide for navigating braids. (This is true for all base maps of the area.) Watch for sweepers, strainers and debris, particularly around blind corners.

Hiking

Possibilities are almost endless. Grizzly Meadows is rightly considered a great base for hiking, but virtually every spot in the mountains is a potential start of a hike through an incredibly beautiful landscape. (Be aware of flash-flood risks in creek canyons, and take what you need to manage for a prolonged period if someone gets injured.)

Drinking water

The Mountain River is silty from the Dusty/Norseman put-in all the way to the Mackenzie River. Clear water can be collected from many feeder creeks, although some of them are also silty. Bring a spare water filter and, when possible, allow water to settle before filtering.

The water in the Mackenzie River contains a lot of suspended mud. We let it settle but still had to backflush our filter – a lot. If possible, collect water on the Mountain well before you enter the Mackenzie.

Wildlife

Watch for Dall's Sheep, caribou, black and grizzly bears, wolves and moose. Tracks and droppings indicate that all are plentiful along this beautifully wild route.

Wildfires

Real-time wildfire map: <https://cwfis.cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/interactive-map>. Smoke forecast: <https://firesmoke.ca/forecasts/current>. NWT wildfire: 1-867-445-5484, nwtfire_info@gov.nt.ca.

Previous trip reports

- Nicola Ross (2012), <https://wildernesscanoe.ca/sites/default/files/storage/Nastawgan/2012-3.pdf>
- Voyageur Tripper (2023), <https://tripreports.voyageurtripper.com/mountain-river-dusty-lake-to-mackenzie-river>
- Martin G. (2017), <https://www.myccr.com/phpbbforum/viewtopic.php?f=124&t=46342>

Credits

In addition to drawing from previous maps by Goutier and Charbonneau (see above), this map benefited from input from my tripmates – Dara Finney, Dawne and Dave Robinson, Suzanne Rochford, and Rod Rogers – as well as Al Pace and David Hibbard. Thank you.

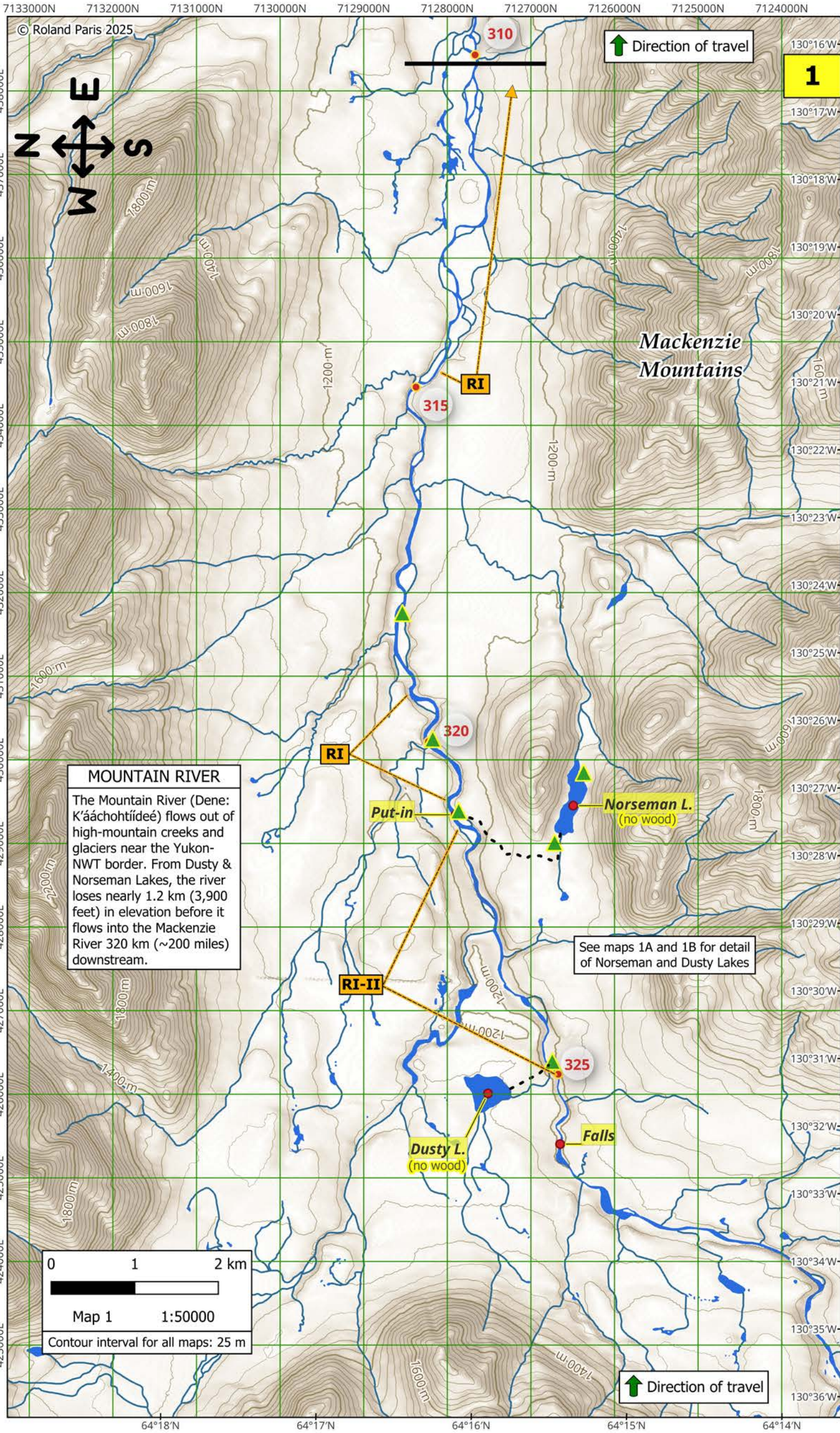
The map was created using QGIS open-source software, <https://qgis.org> (version 3.42.2-Münster).

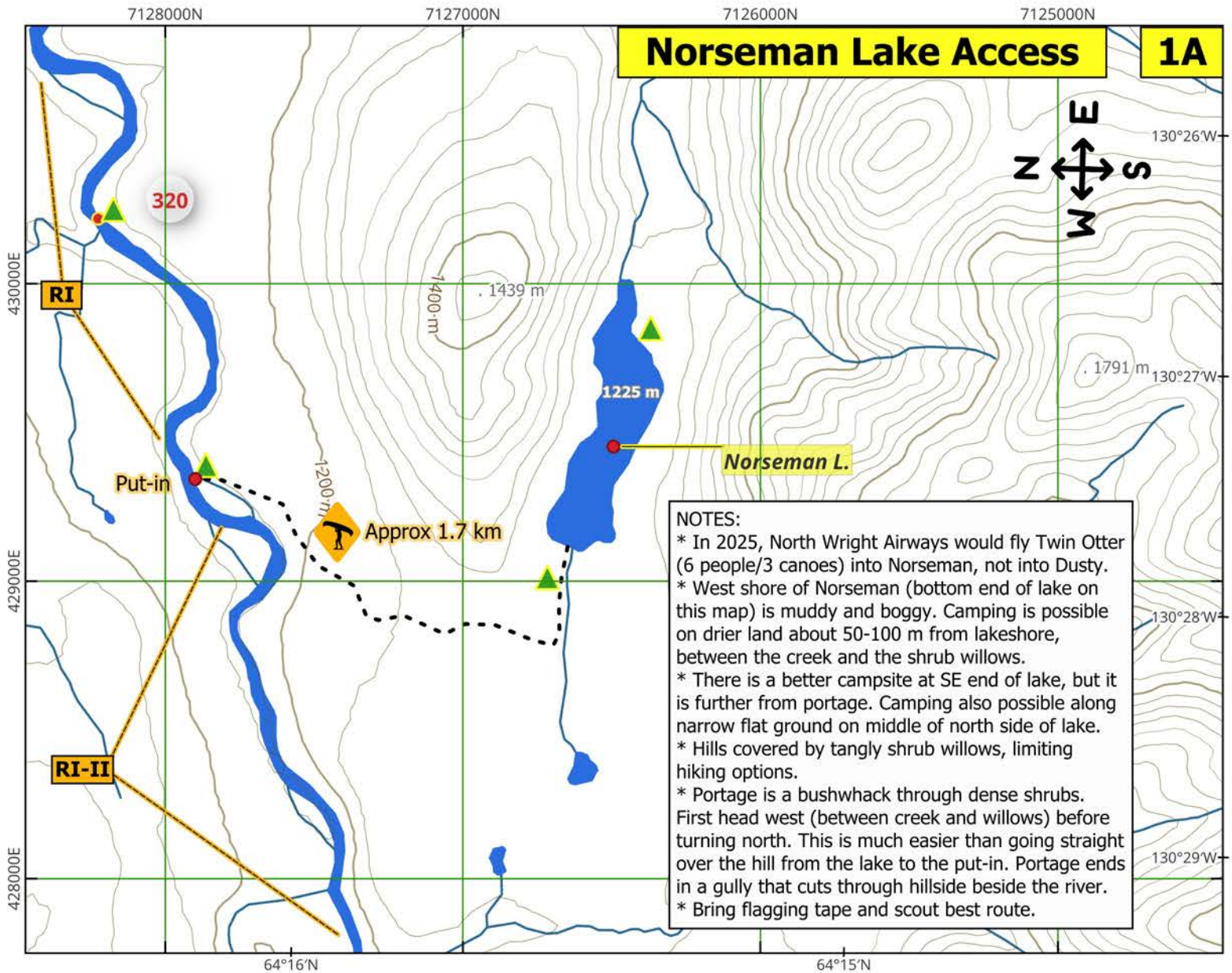
Map layers: CanVec Series, Natural Resources Canada, <https://open.canada.ca/data/en/dataset/8ba2aa2a-7bb9-4448-b4d7-f164409fe056> (Government of Canada, open source). Projection: EPSG:3978-NAD83.

WARNING

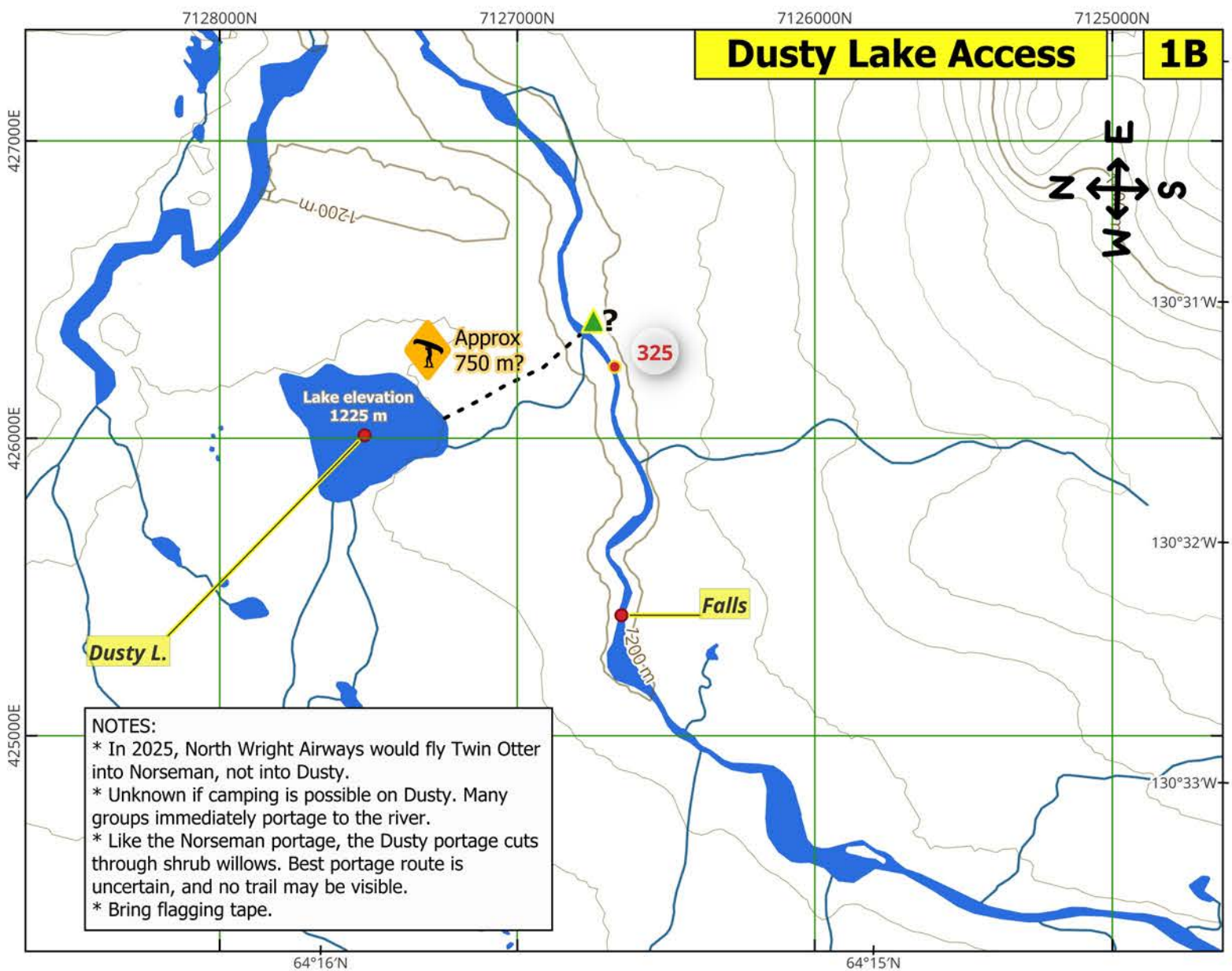
These maps likely contain many errors and will be inaccurate at different water levels. **Rely on your own judgement; use these maps at your own risk.**

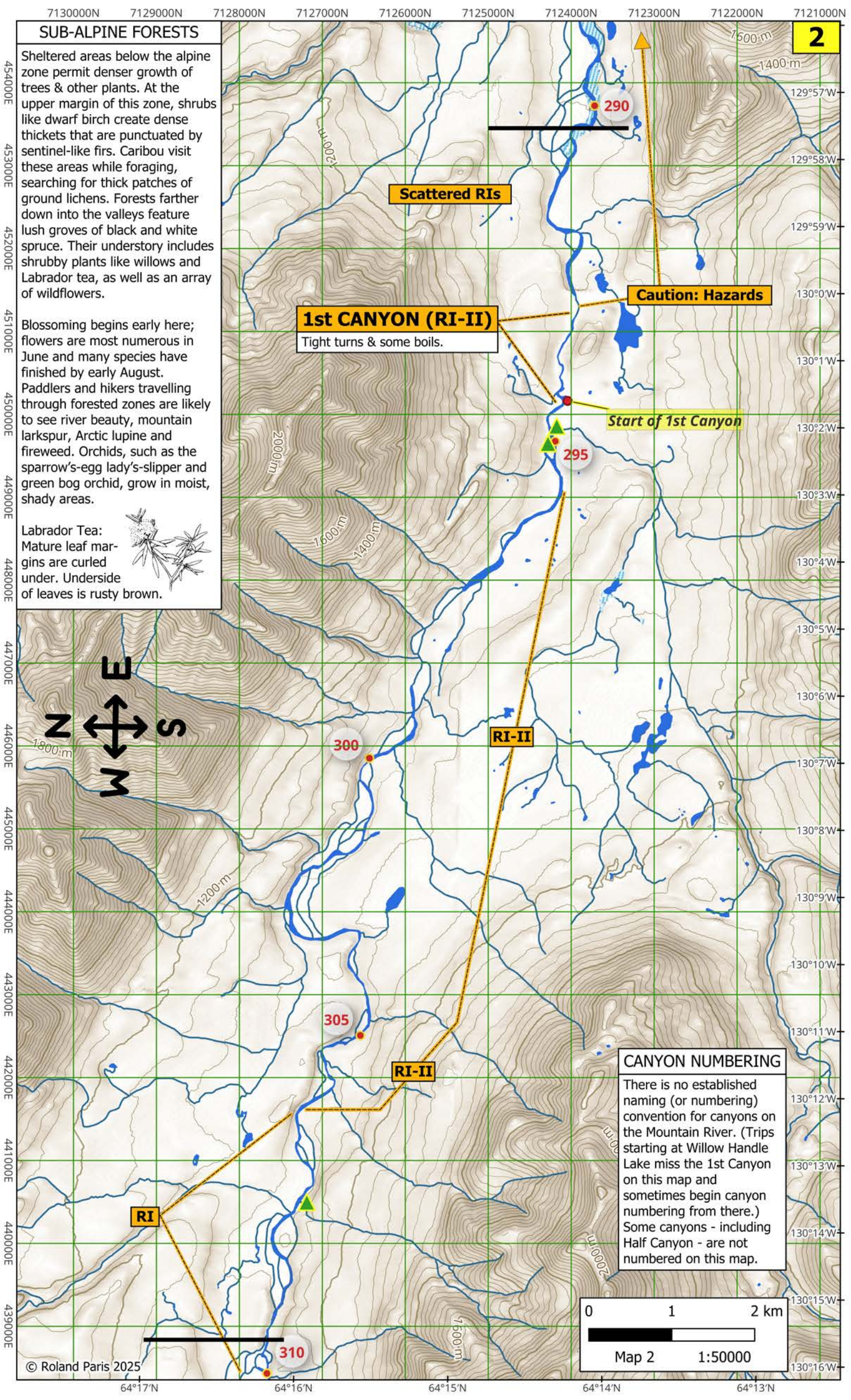
Paddling the Mountain River demands advanced whitewater canoeing skills and extensive experience in remote wilderness travel, where rescue may be difficult or delayed. At very high flows, some canyons can become unrunnable and offer no portage options. As with all mountain rivers, water levels can rise or fall quickly. If in doubt, choose a guided expedition.

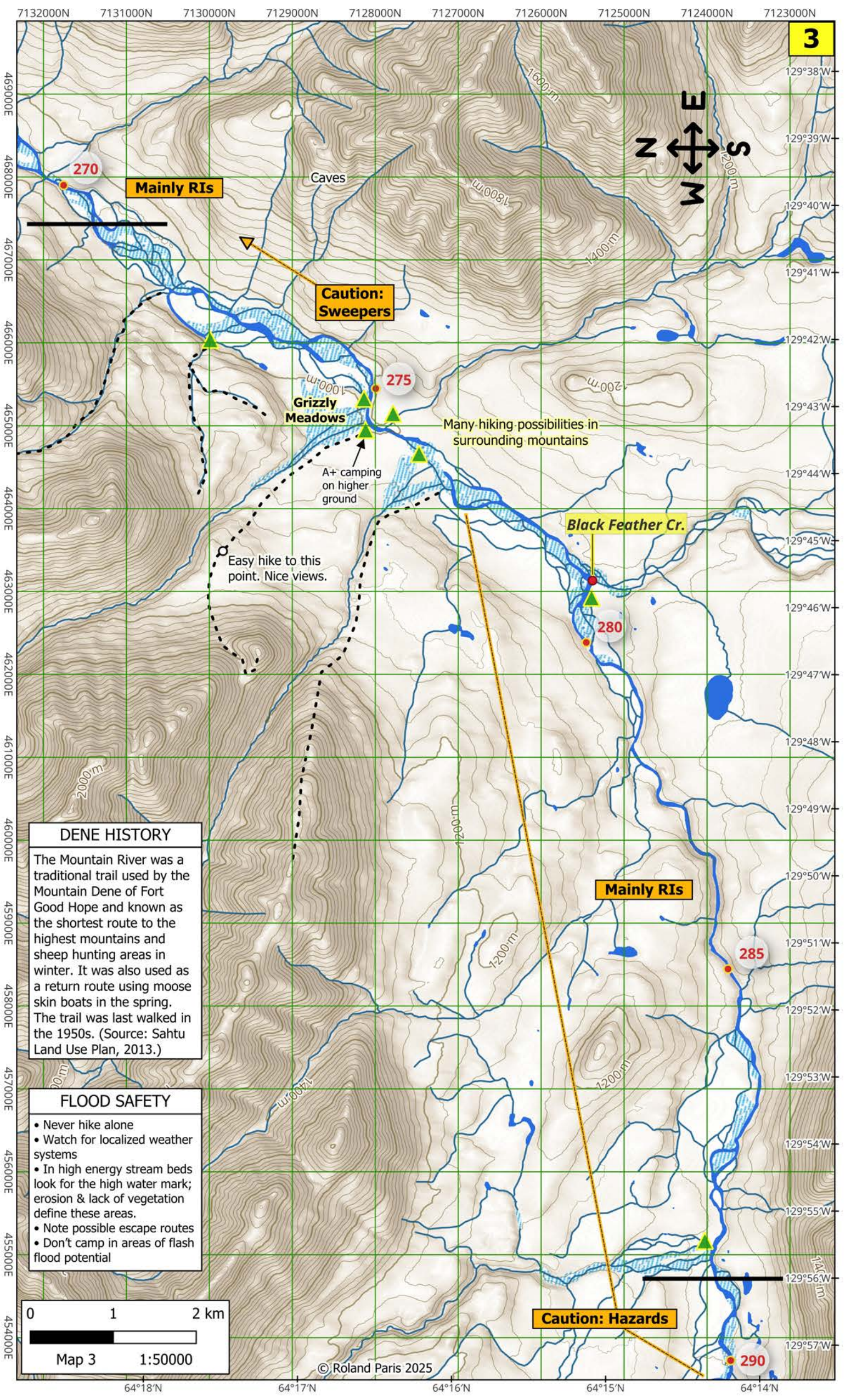




Scale: 1:20000. Grid lines: 1 km. Countour interval: 25 m.







3

Mainly RIs

Caution:
Sweepers

Grizzly
Meadows

Many hiking possibilities in
surrounding mountains

A+ camping
on higher
ground

Easy hike to this
point. Nice views.

Black Feather Cr.

Mainly RIs

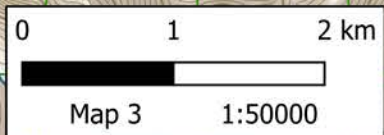
Caution: Hazards

DENE HISTORY

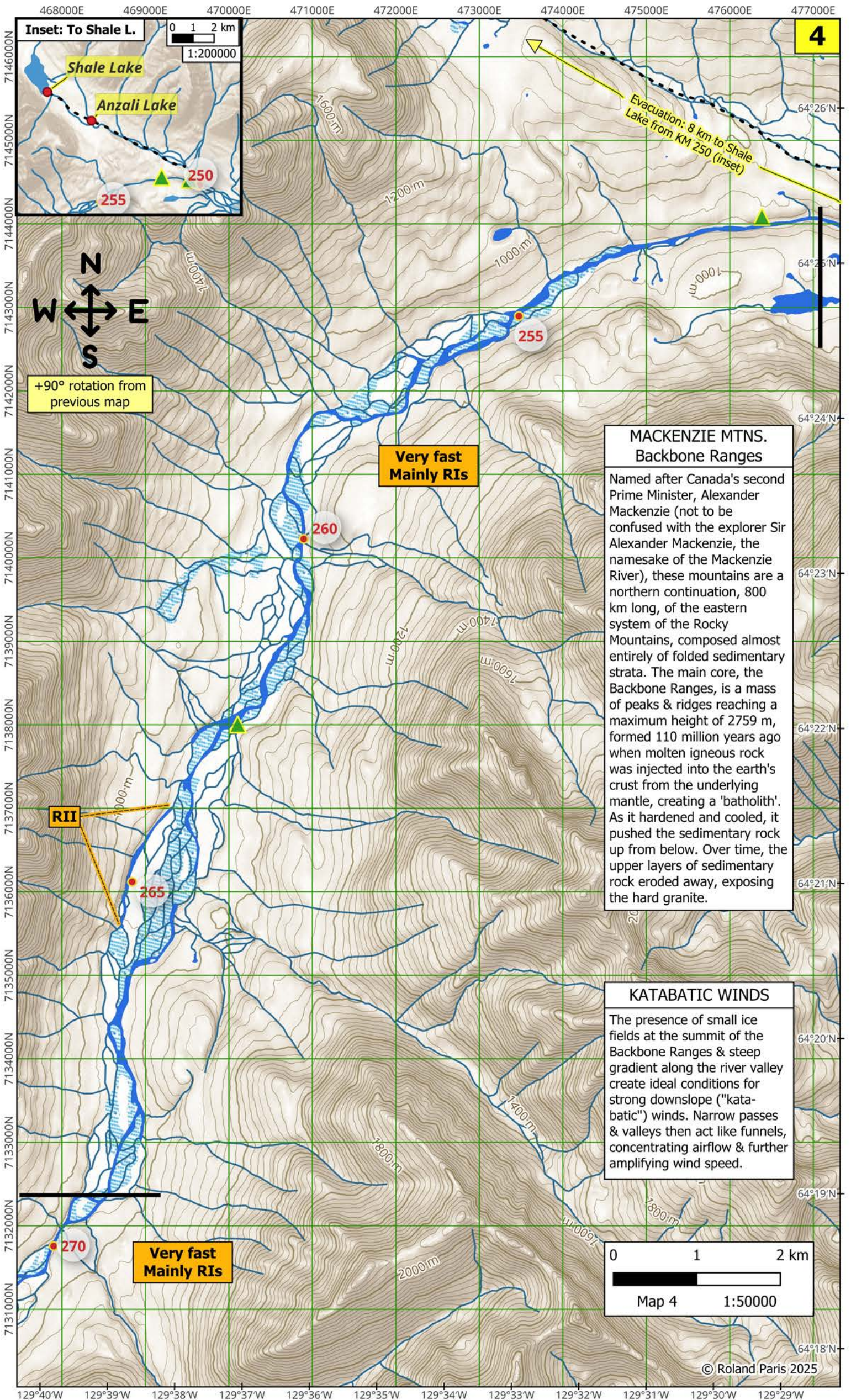
The Mountain River was a traditional trail used by the Mountain Dene of Fort Good Hope and known as the shortest route to the highest mountains and sheep hunting areas in winter. It was also used as a return route using moose skin boats in the spring. The trail was last walked in the 1950s. (Source: Sahtu Land Use Plan, 2013.)

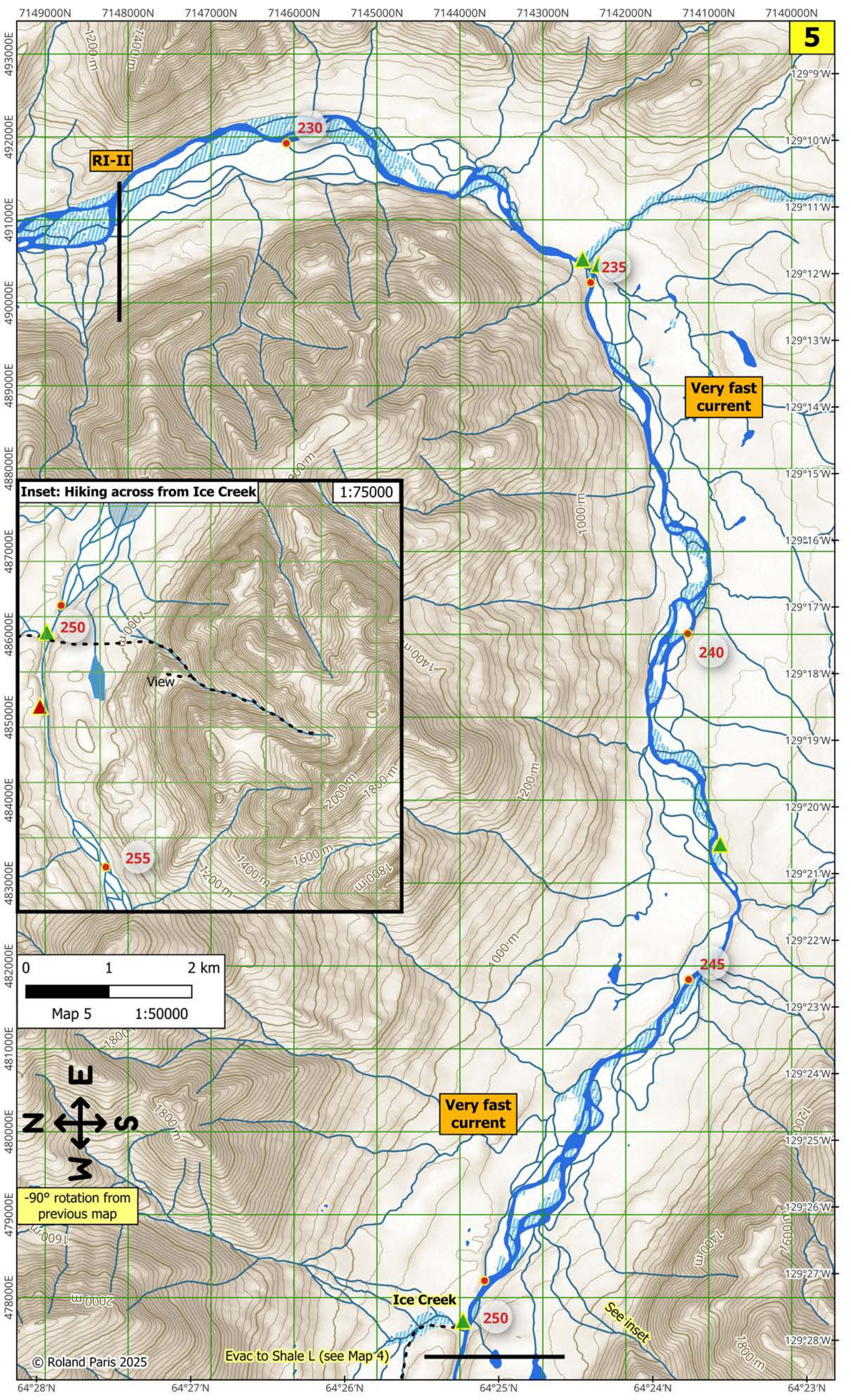
FLOOD SAFETY

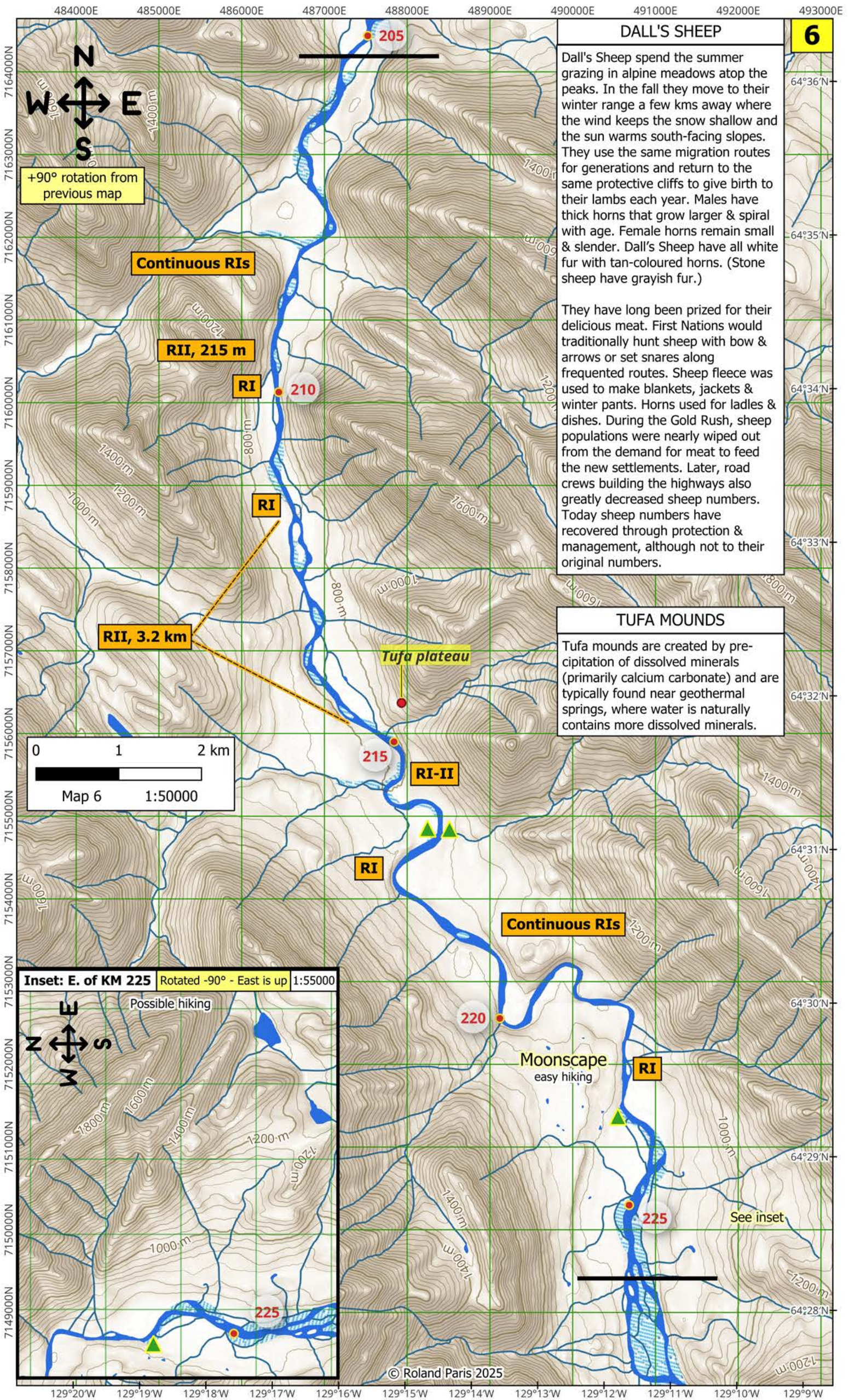
- Never hike alone
- Watch for localized weather systems
- In high energy stream beds look for the high water mark; erosion & lack of vegetation define these areas.
- Note possible escape routes
- Don't camp in areas of flash flood potential

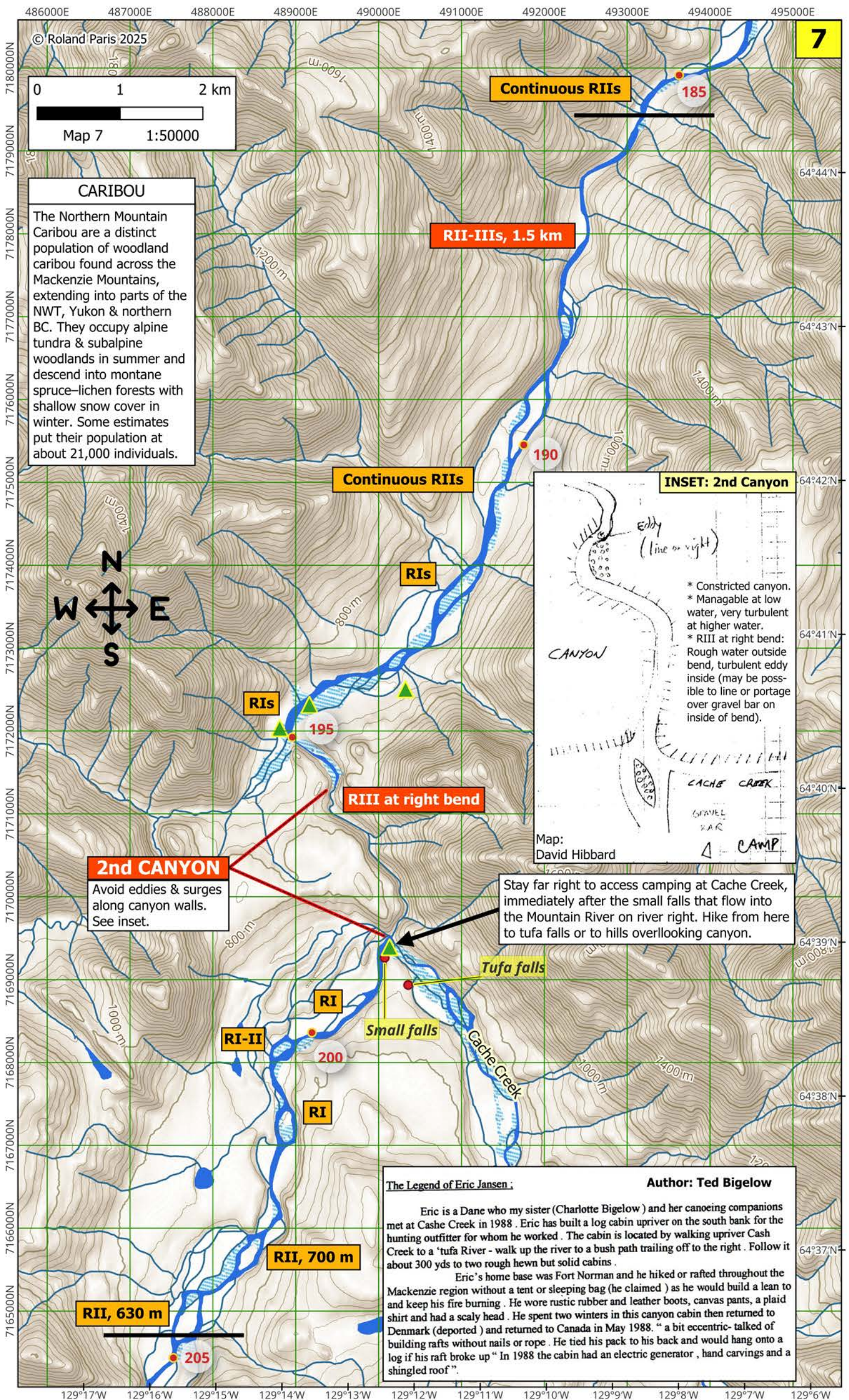


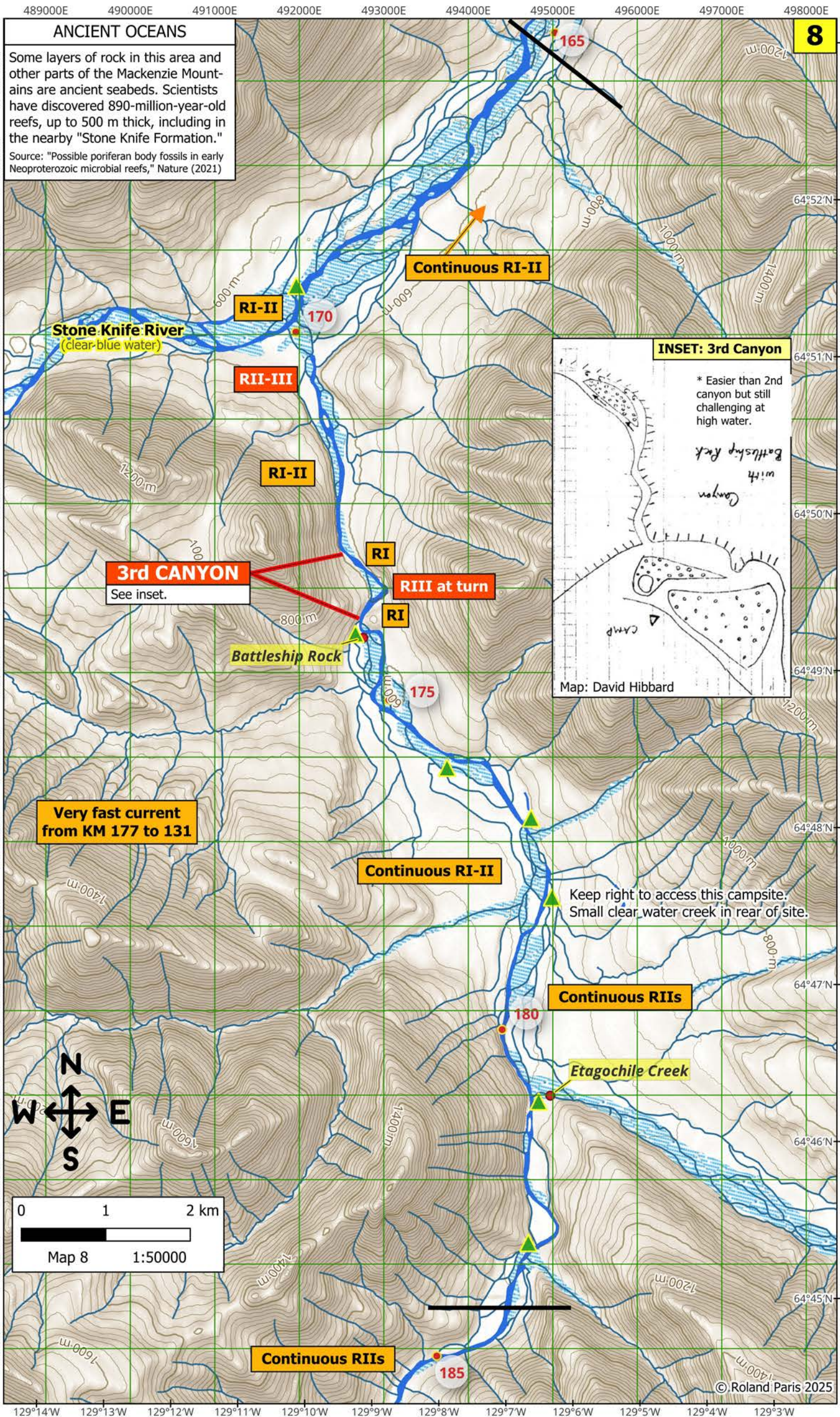
© Roland Paris 2025











ANCIENT OCEANS

Some layers of rock in this area and other parts of the Mackenzie Mountains are ancient seabeds. Scientists have discovered 890-million-year-old reefs, up to 500 m thick, including in the nearby "Stone Knife Formation."

Source: "Possible poriferan body fossils in early Neoproterozoic microbial reefs," Nature (2021)

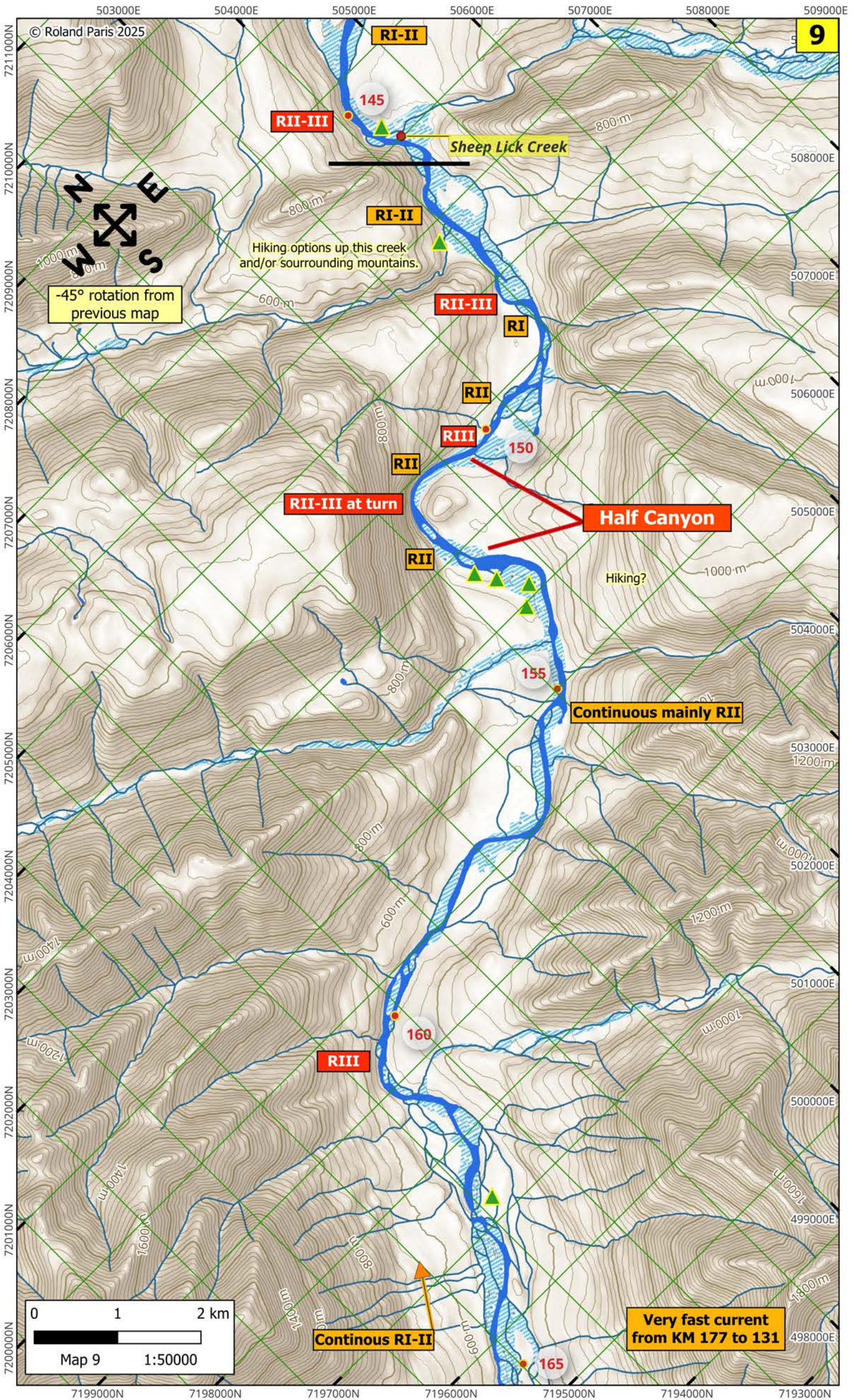
INSET: 3rd Canyon

* Easier than 2nd canyon but still challenging at high water.

Battleship Rock with Canyon

Camp

Map: David Hibbard



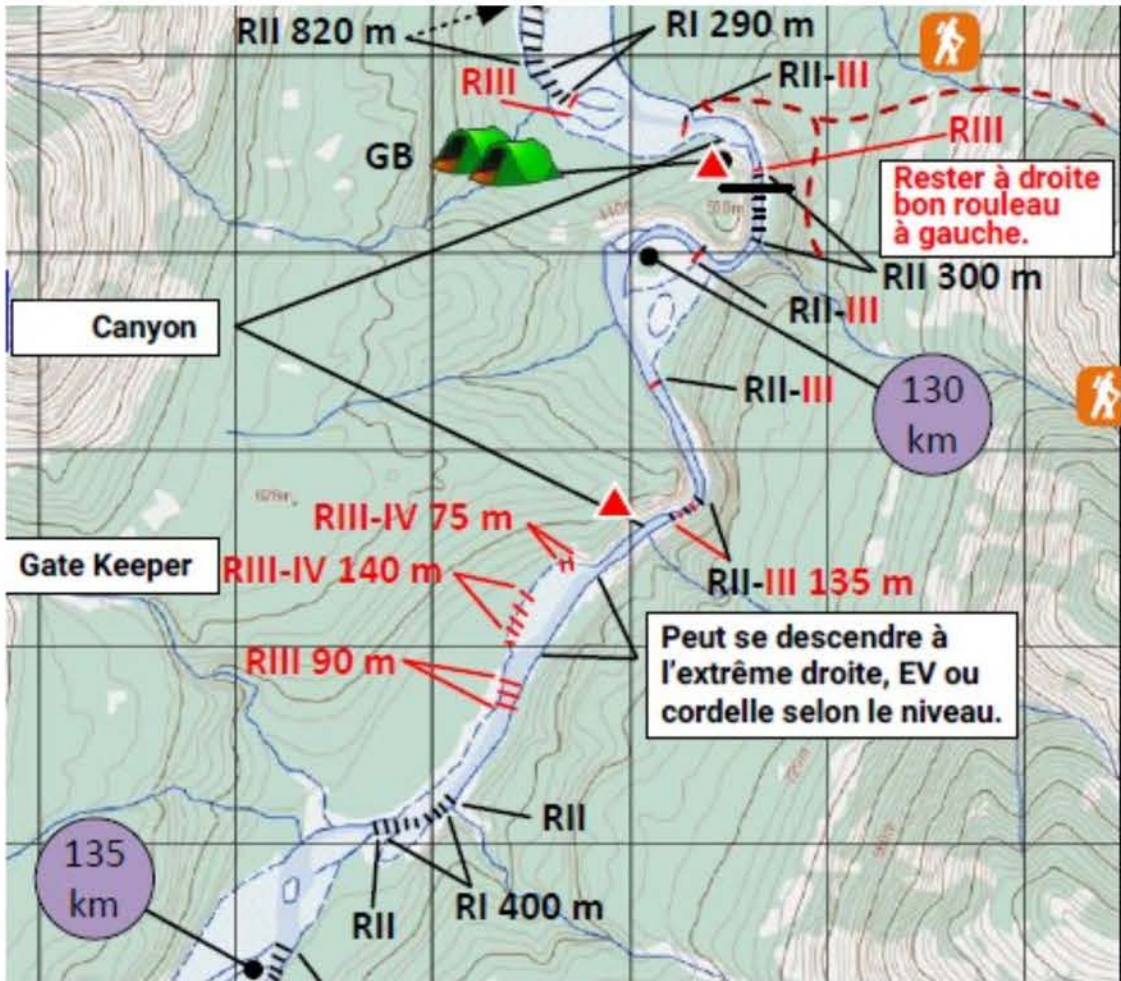


4th Canyon Detail

10A

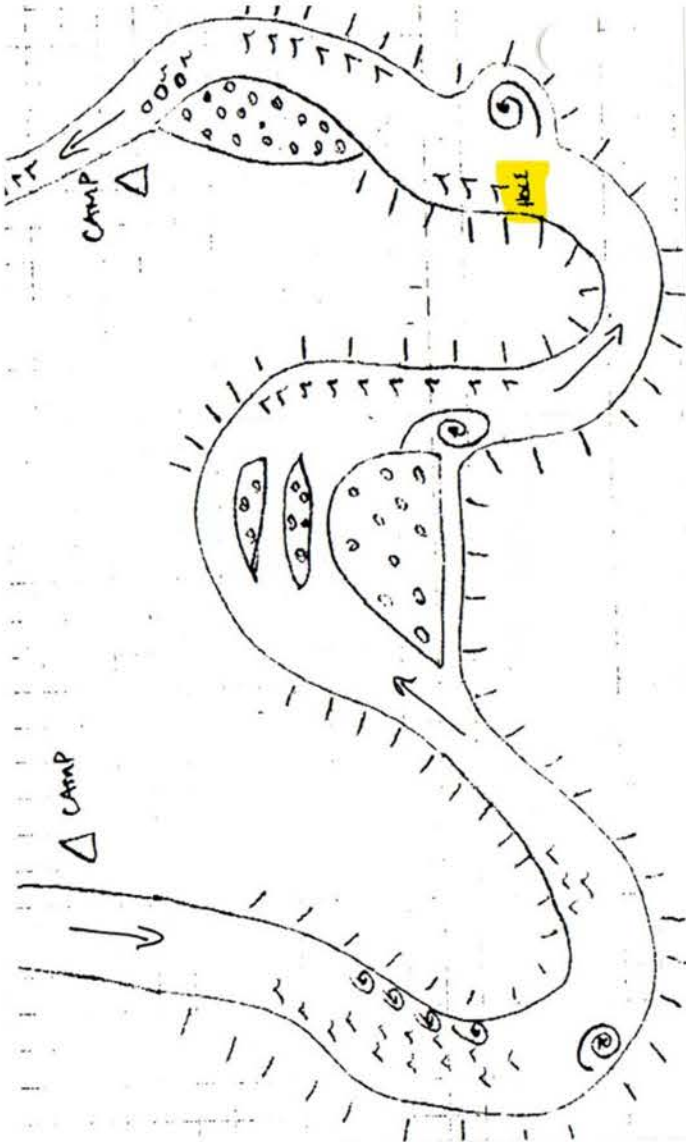
This was a relatively easy run at our water level, but can be very difficult when level is higher. Exercise extreme caution.

Source: Bernard Goutier map (2023), <http://www.cartespleinair.org/Canot/Canada/MountainRiverGoutier2023.pdf>

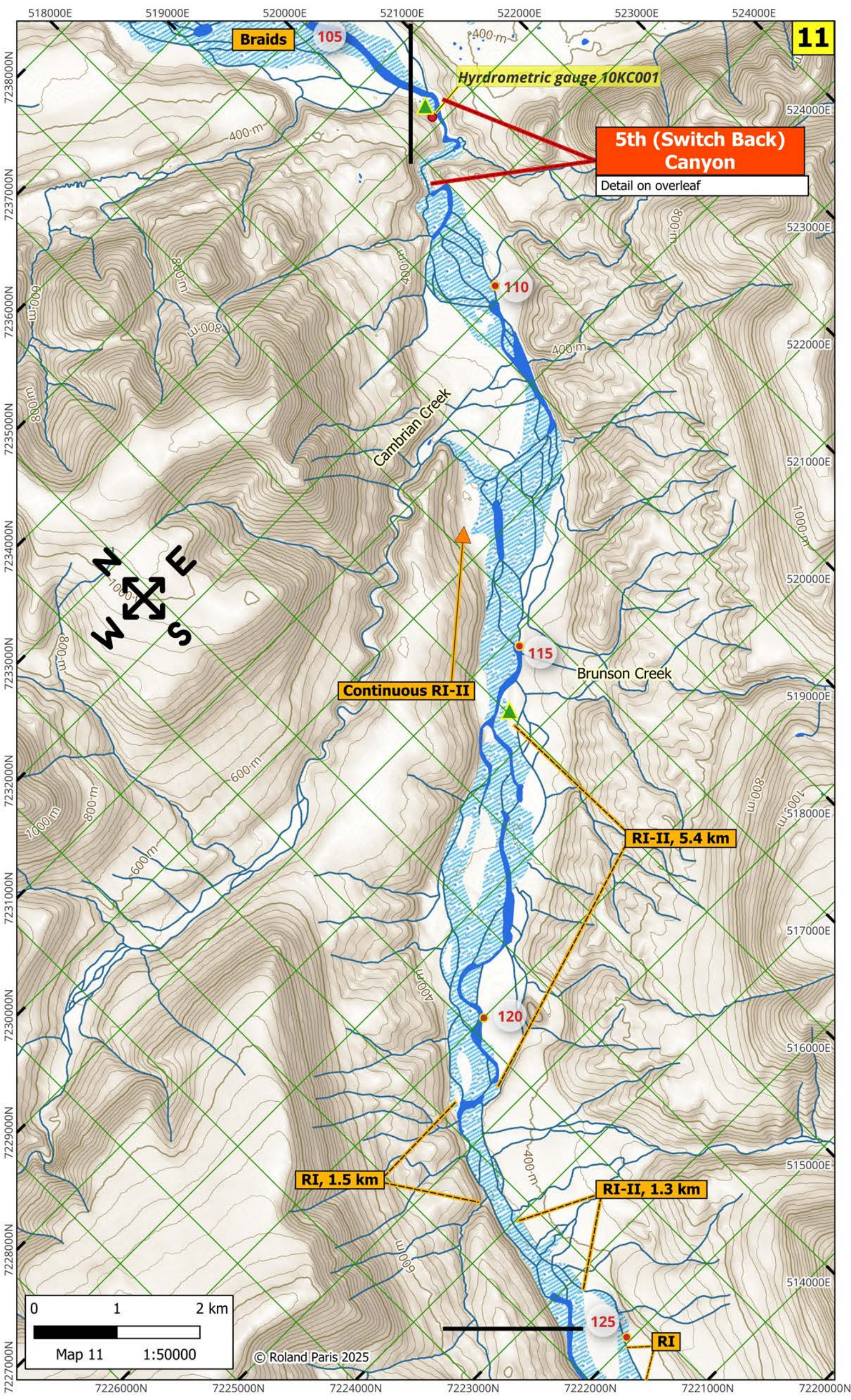


- * The upstream part of Gatekeeper (marked on Goutier's map as "RIII, 90 m") was easy at our water level.
- * There's a big gravel bar (at "RIII-IV 140 m") just before the first right turn into the canyon (at "RIII-IV 75 m"). We eddied out at this gravel bar to scout the entrance of the canyon. We ran the first right turn ("RIII-IV, 75 m") by staying right, tight against the gravel bar. We could have also lined it. At higher water levels, this will be a harder maneuver, although it *may* be possible to lift over the gravel bar and avoid the first right turn completely.
- * Near the end of the canyon, Goutier warns about a big hydraulic hole on river left (near the black horizontal line on his map). The same hole is noted on the map below. It is definitely there - stay on river right.

Source: David Hibbard

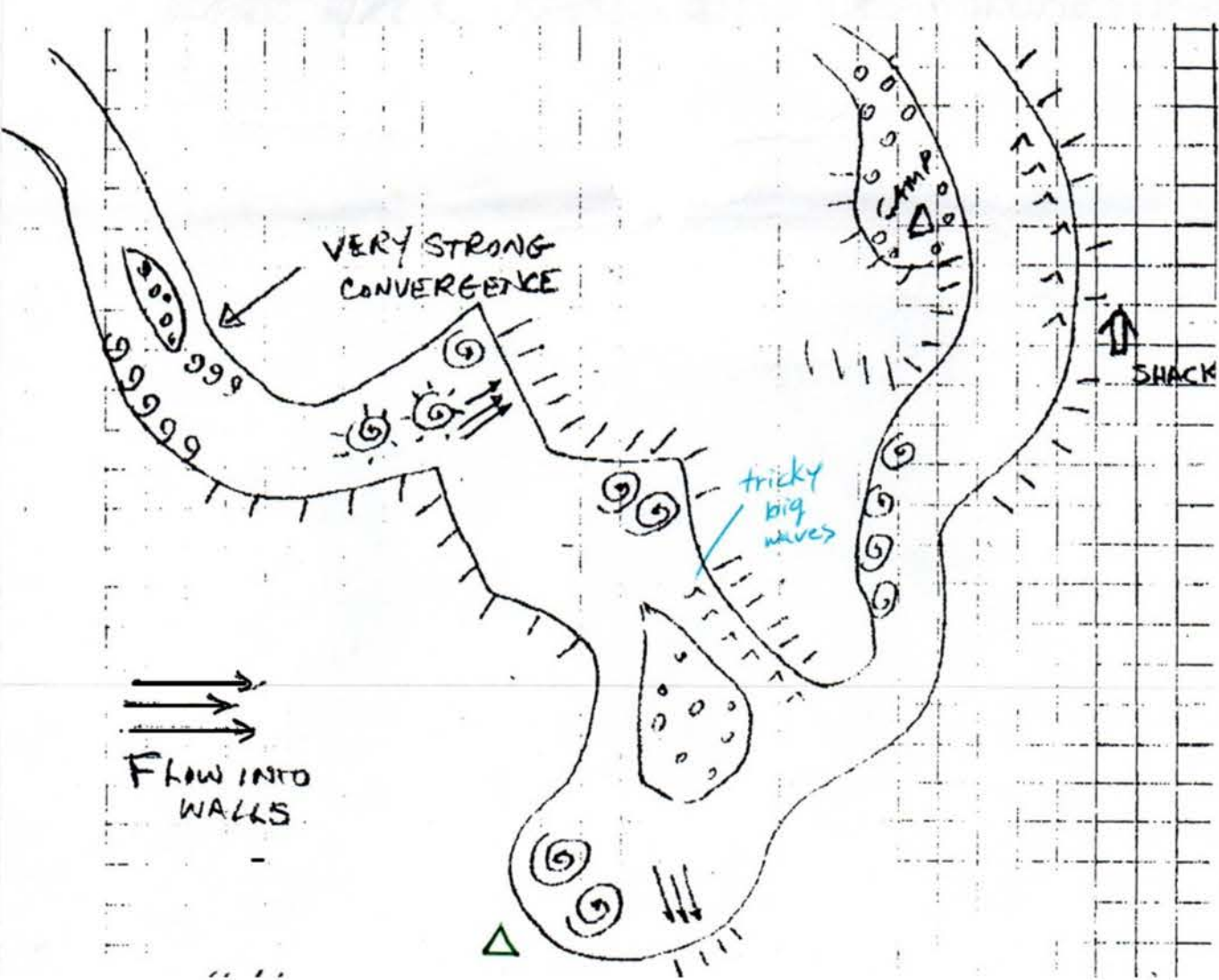


- * This map, by Dave Hibbard, starts below the first right turn into the canyon (described above). Note the position of the two campsite markers on both maps to orient yourself.
- * This map also shows the approximate position of large waves and boils.
- * As in Goutier's map, this map shows a hole (highlighted in yellow) near the end of the canyon, on river left.
- * For another hand-drawn map of this canyon, see Nicola Ross' 2012 article in Nastawgan. (A link to her article can be found in the "Other trip reports" list in the opening notes of this route guide).

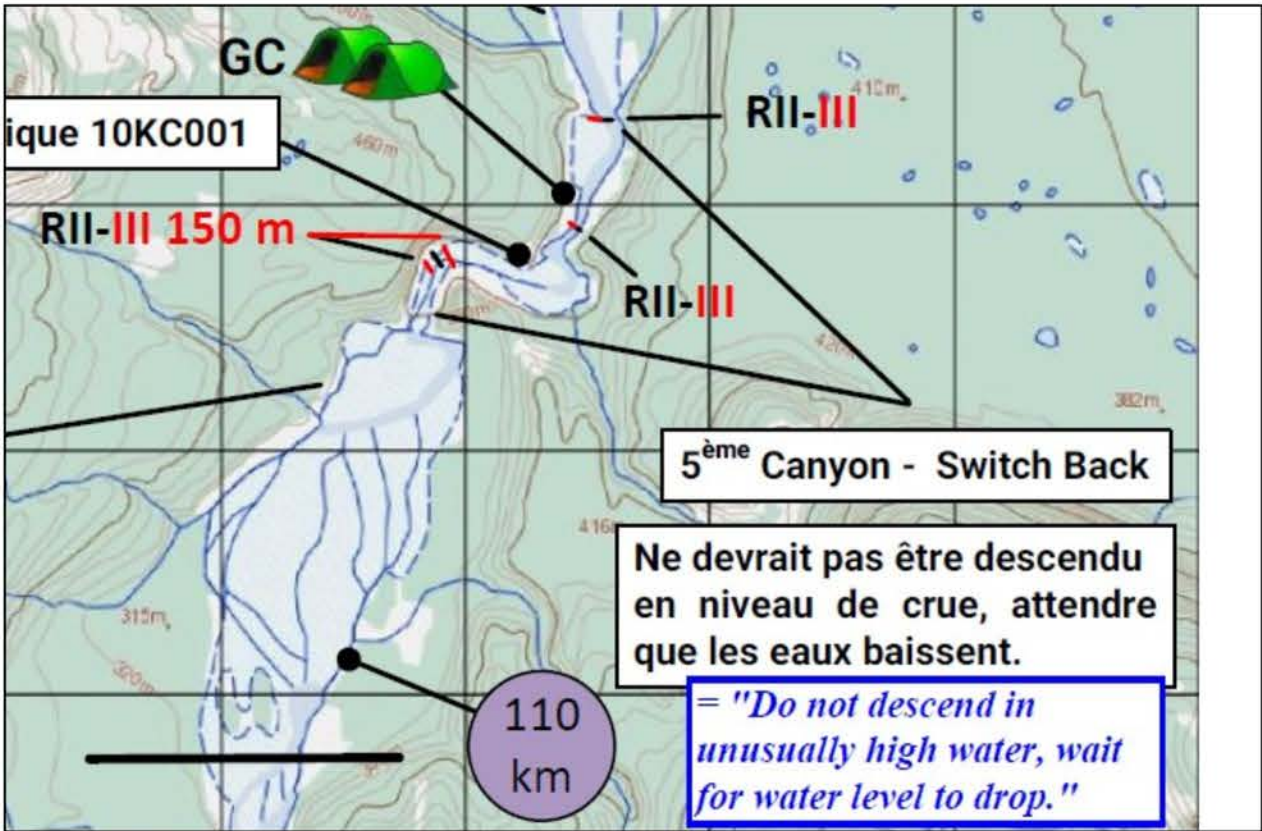


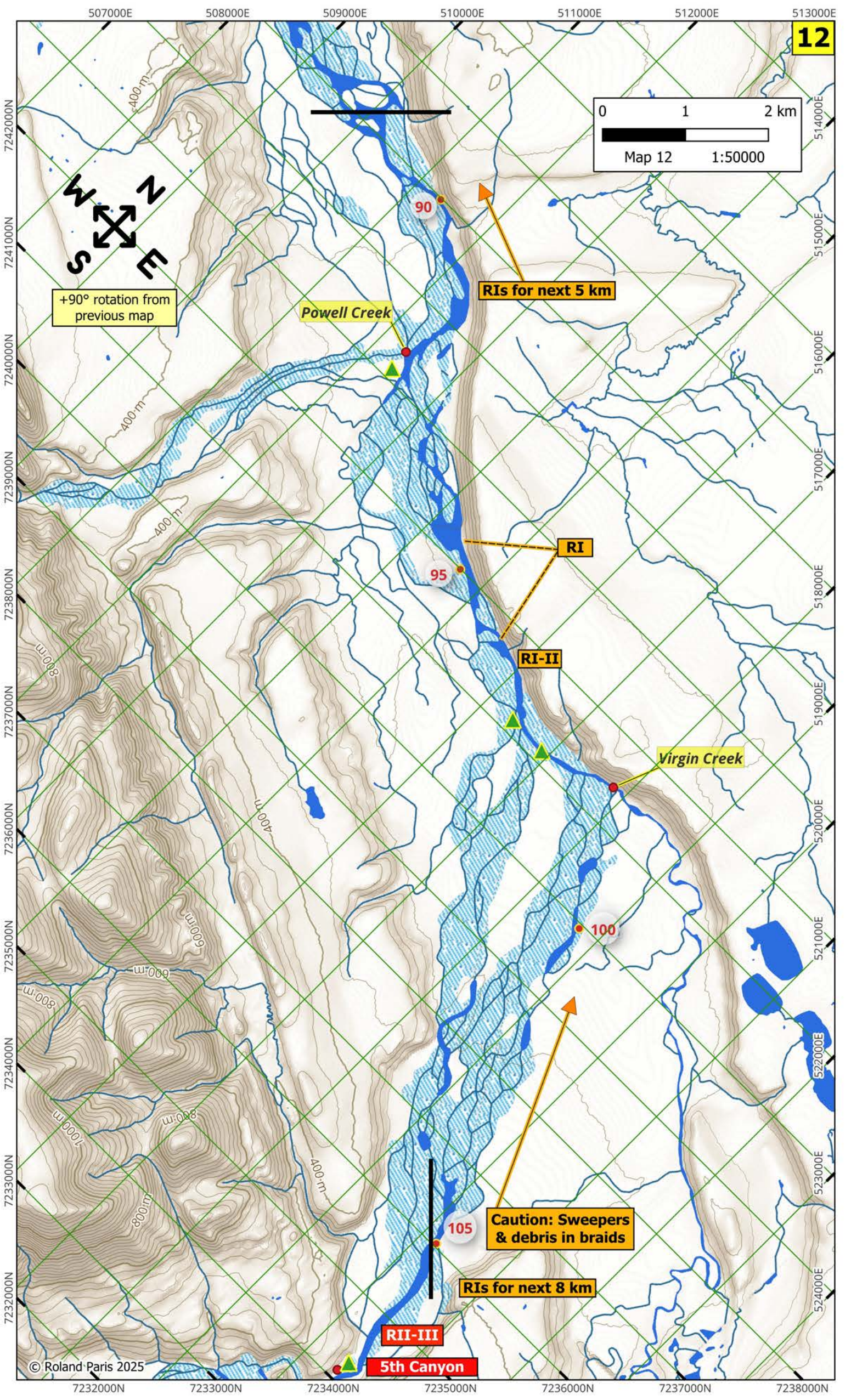
This was also a relatively easy run at our water level, but by reputation it is the most likely place on the river to capsize, particularly at high water. Exercise extreme caution. If water is high and it seems unsafe to run, stay put and wait for the water level to come down.

Source: David Hibbard



Source: Bernard Goutier map (2023),
<http://www.cartespleinair.org/Canot/Canada/MountainRiverGoutier2023.pdf>





0 1 2 km
Map 12 1:50000



+90° rotation from previous map

Powell Creek

RIs for next 5 km

RI

RI-II

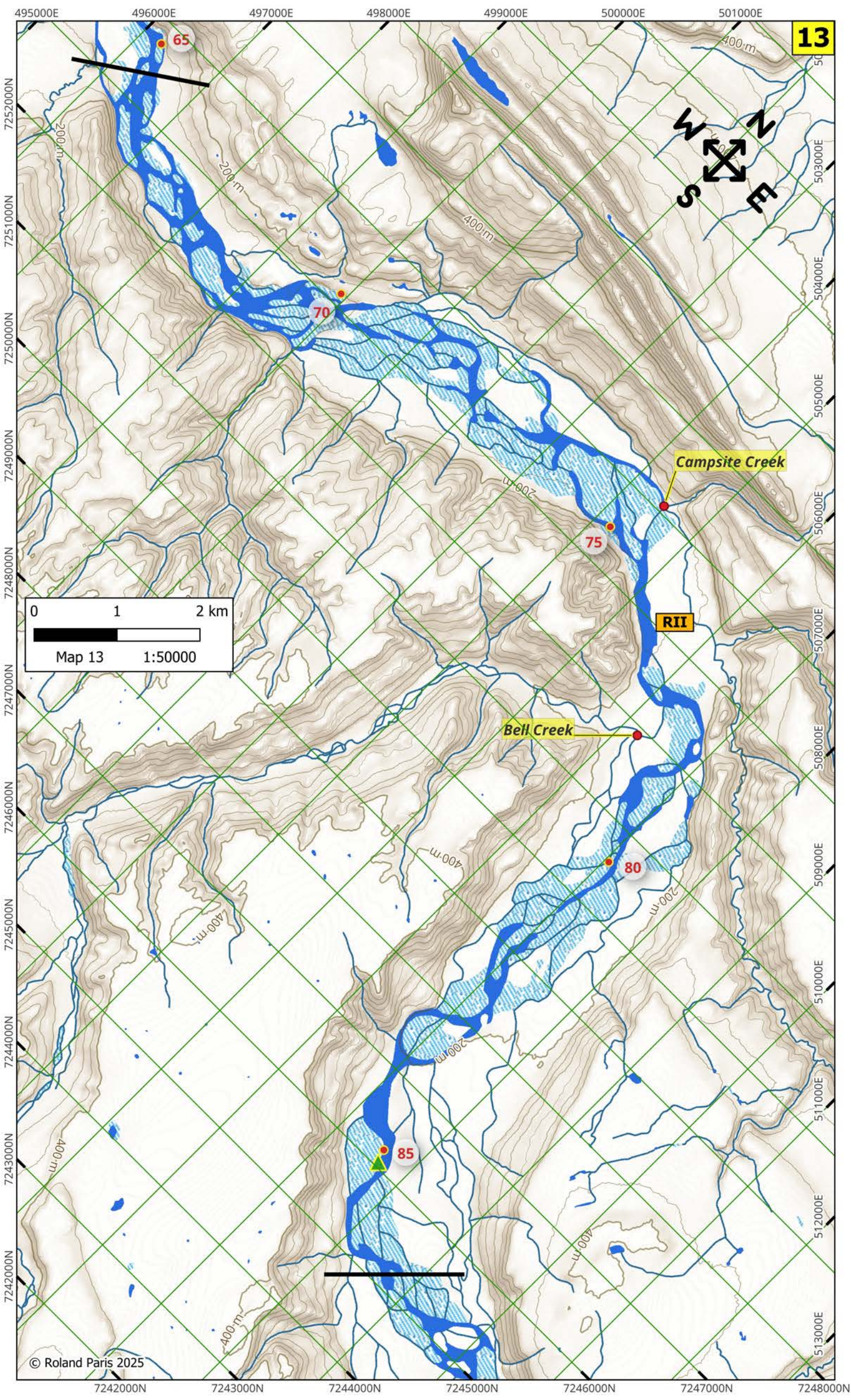
Virgin Creek

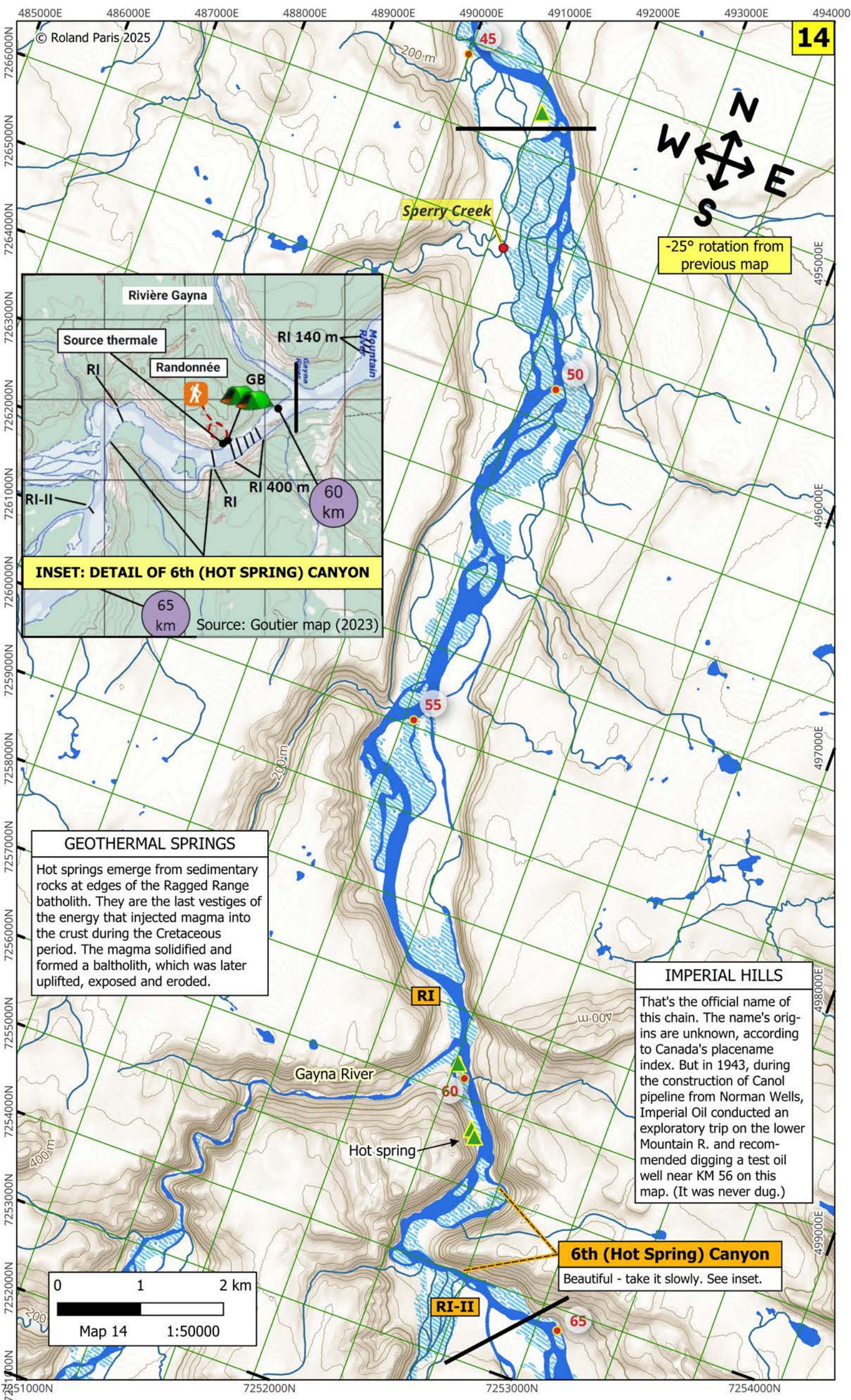
Caution: Sweepers & debris in braids

RIs for next 8 km

RII-III

5th Canyon

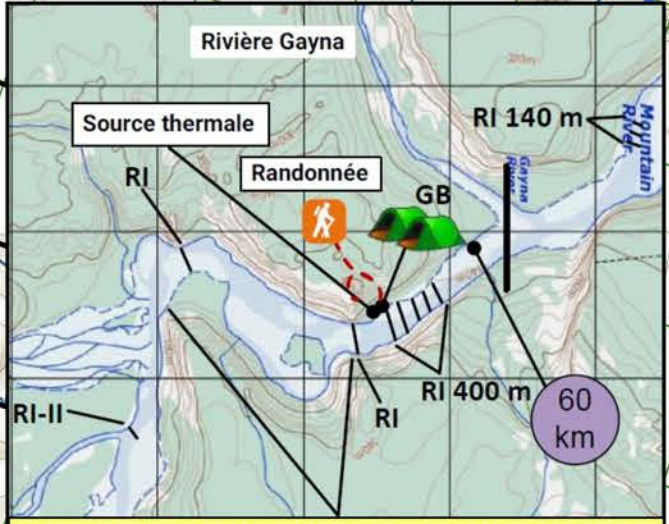




14



-25° rotation from previous map



INSET: DETAIL OF 6th (HOT SPRING) CANYON

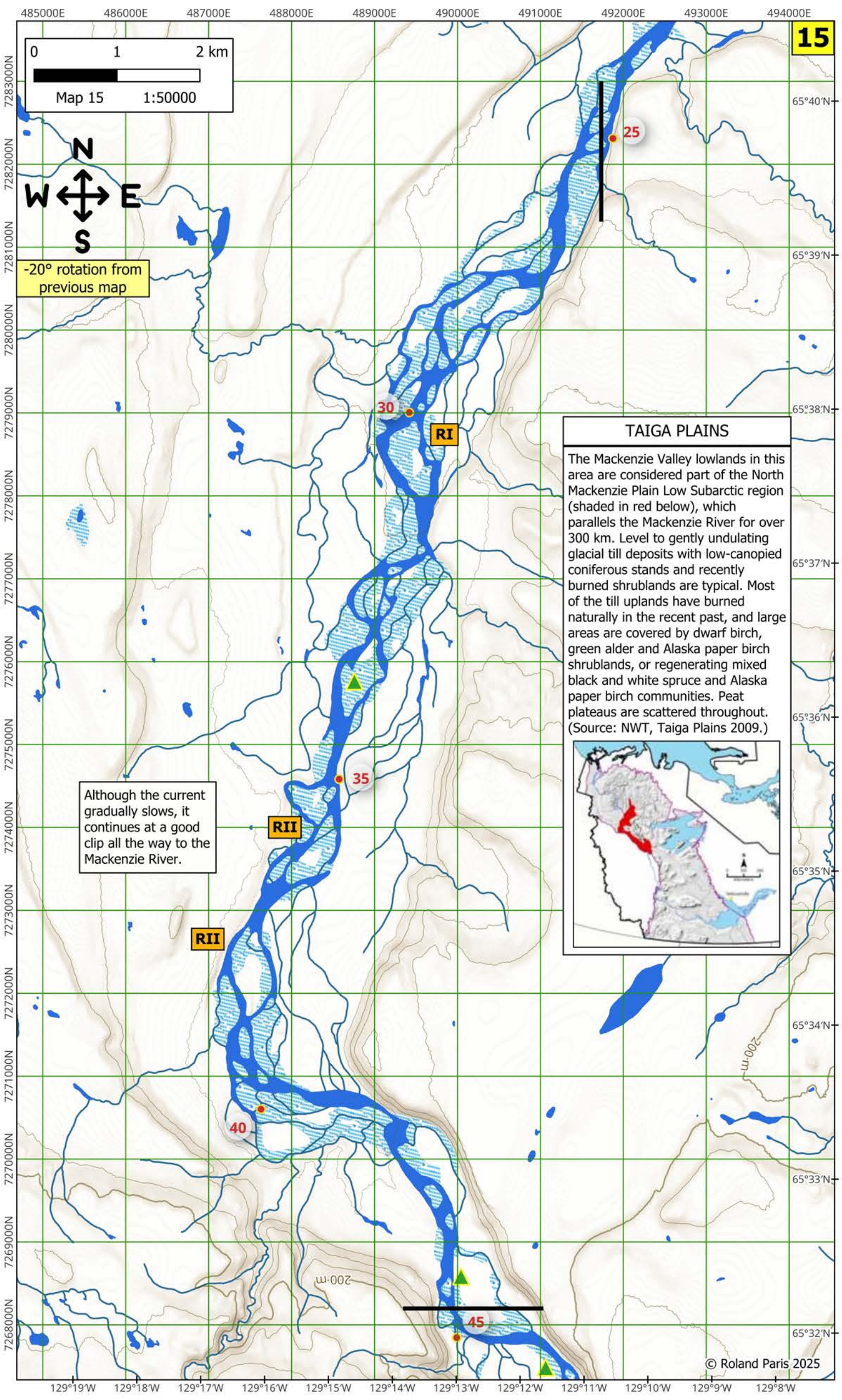
65 km Source: Goutier map (2023)

GEOHERMAL SPRINGS
Hot springs emerge from sedimentary rocks at edges of the Ragged Range batholith. They are the last vestiges of the energy that injected magma into the crust during the Cretaceous period. The magma solidified and formed a batholith, which was later uplifted, exposed and eroded.

IMPERIAL HILLS
That's the official name of this chain. The name's origins are unknown, according to Canada's placename index. But in 1943, during the construction of Canol pipeline from Norman Wells, Imperial Oil conducted an exploratory trip on the lower Mountain R. and recommended digging a test oil well near KM 56 on this map. (It was never dug.)

0 1 2 km
Map 14 1:50000

6th (Hot Spring) Canyon
Beautiful - take it slowly. See inset.



15

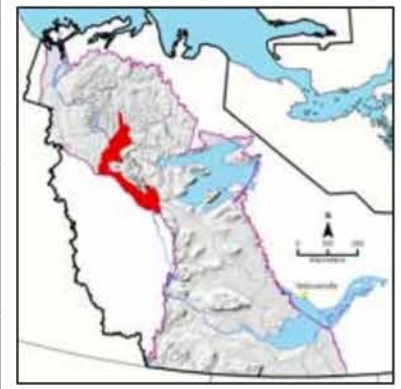
0 1 2 km
Map 15 1:50000



-20° rotation from previous map

TAIGA PLAINS

The Mackenzie Valley lowlands in this area are considered part of the North Mackenzie Plain Low Subarctic region (shaded in red below), which parallels the Mackenzie River for over 300 km. Level to gently undulating glacial till deposits with low-canopied coniferous stands and recently burned shrublands are typical. Most of the till uplands have burned naturally in the recent past, and large areas are covered by dwarf birch, green alder and Alaska paper birch shrublands, or regenerating mixed black and white spruce and Alaska paper birch communities. Peat plateaus are scattered throughout. (Source: NWT, Taiga Plains 2009.)

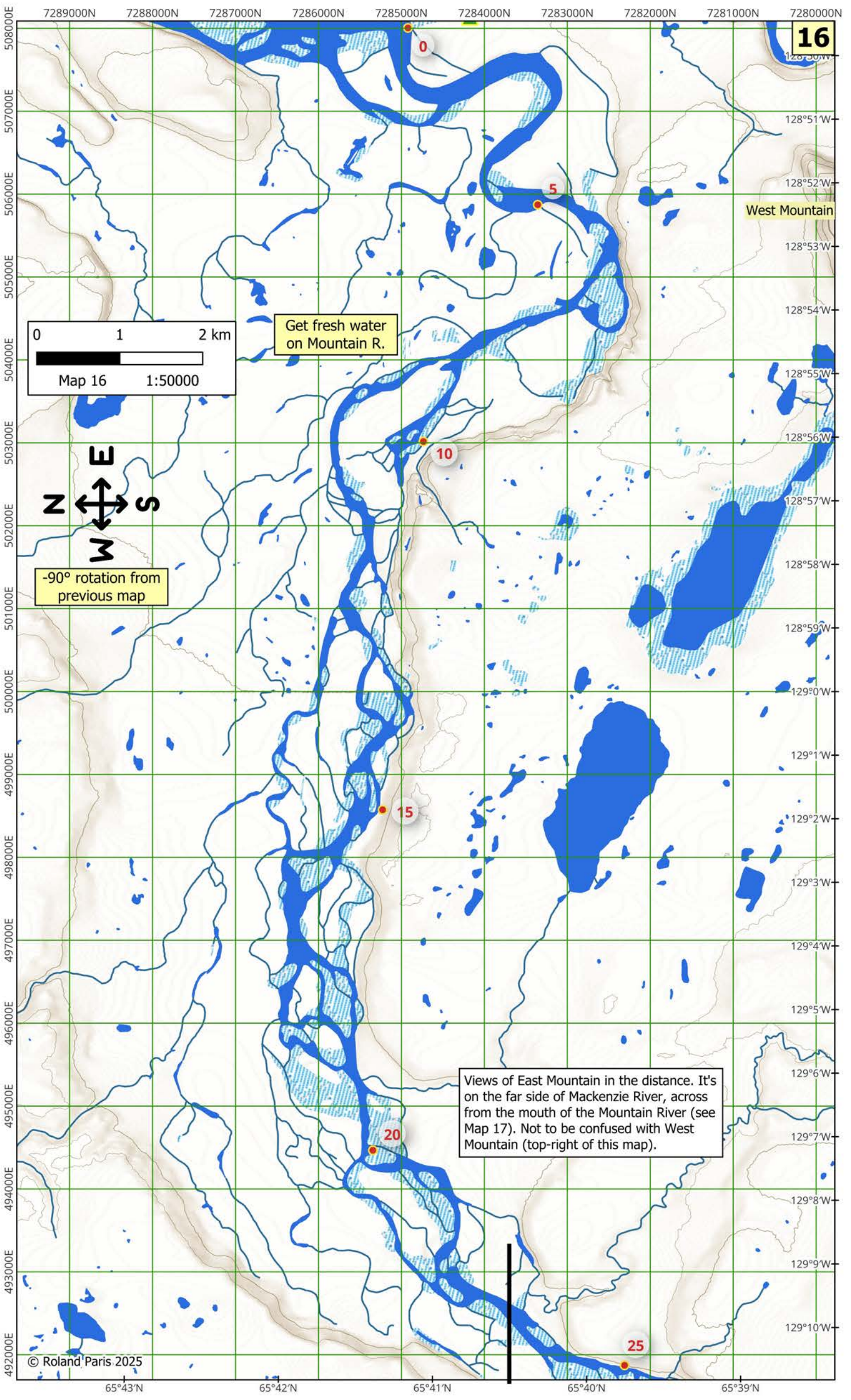


Although the current gradually slows, it continues at a good clip all the way to the Mackenzie River.

RII

RI

RII



16

West Mountain

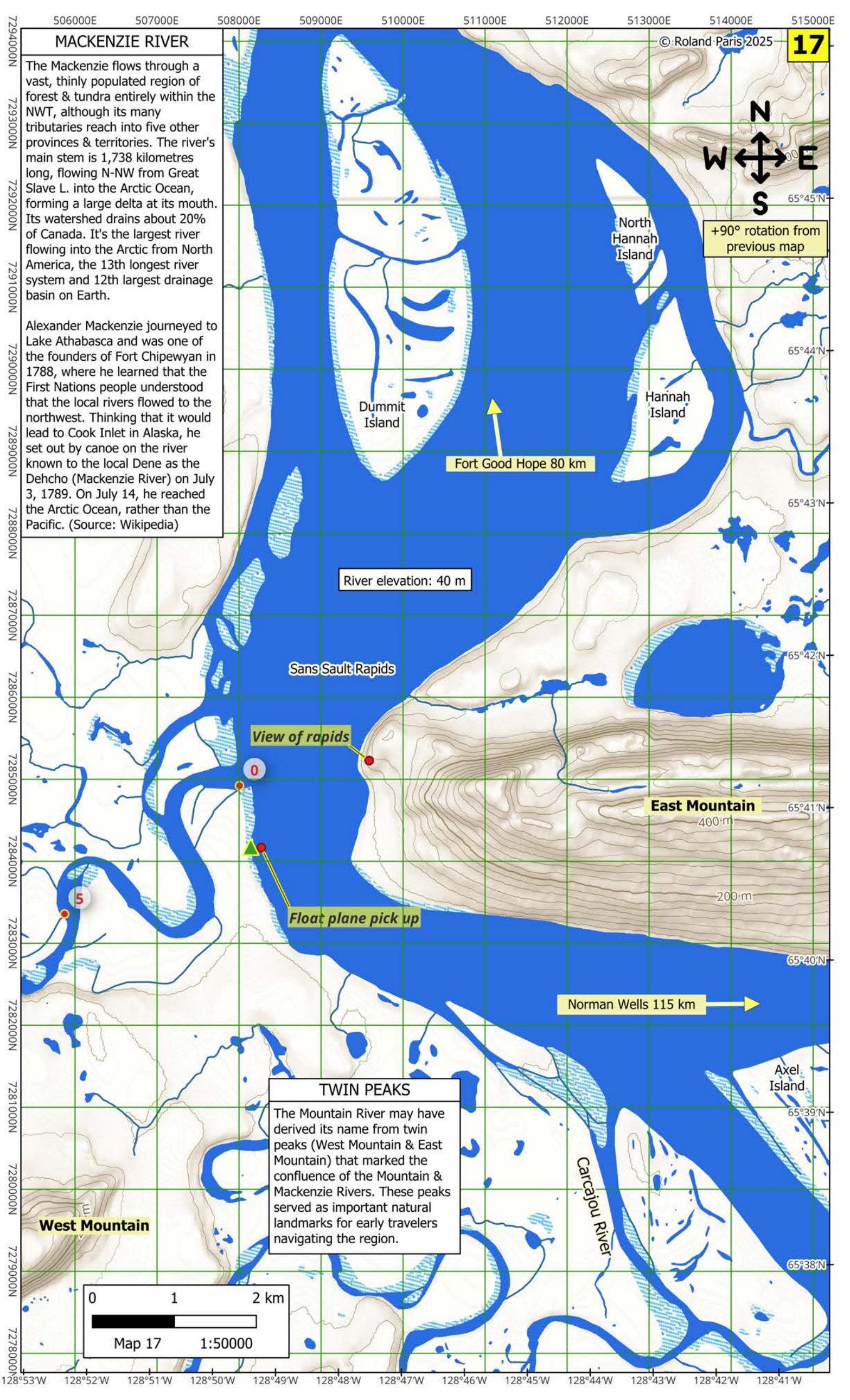
Get fresh water
on Mountain R.

0 1 2 km
Map 16 1:50000

N
E
S
W

-90° rotation from
previous map

Views of East Mountain in the distance. It's
on the far side of Mackenzie River, across
from the mouth of the Mountain River (see
Map 17). Not to be confused with West
Mountain (top-right of this map).



MACKENZIE RIVER

The Mackenzie flows through a vast, thinly populated region of forest & tundra entirely within the NWT, although its many tributaries reach into five other provinces & territories. The river's main stem is 1,738 kilometres long, flowing N-NW from Great Slave L. into the Arctic Ocean, forming a large delta at its mouth. Its watershed drains about 20% of Canada. It's the largest river flowing into the Arctic from North America, the 13th longest river system and 12th largest drainage basin on Earth.

Alexander Mackenzie journeyed to Lake Athabasca and was one of the founders of Fort Chipewyan in 1788, where he learned that the First Nations people understood that the local rivers flowed to the northwest. Thinking that it would lead to Cook Inlet in Alaska, he set out by canoe on the river known to the local Dene as the Dehcho (Mackenzie River) on July 3, 1789. On July 14, he reached the Arctic Ocean, rather than the Pacific. (Source: Wikipedia)

TWIN PEAKS

The Mountain River may have derived its name from twin peaks (West Mountain & East Mountain) that marked the confluence of the Mountain & Mackenzie Rivers. These peaks served as important natural landmarks for early travelers navigating the region.