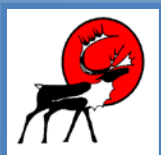




# Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge: Amphibians

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*Information from the GTC Department of Cultural Heritage/Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute's digital archives*



Nits'òo Gwiidandaii Yeendòo Łagwee'aa Geenjit Gòo'ait: Gwich'in Tribal Council  
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## Introduction and Executive Summary

In May of 2016, the Gwich'in Renewable Resources Board requested Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge information about amphibians from the GTC Department of Cultural Heritage – Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (DCH-GSCI). The DCH-GSCI has a large digital archive of Gwich'in oral history, traditional knowledge, and other cultural information from numerous projects dating from the early 1970s.

To extract information about amphibians, the DCH-GSCI used the following search terms within ISYS search software (with the approximate number of distinct hits).

- Frog (350)
- Toad (0)
- Amphibian (0)
- Salamander (0)

Many of the hits for frog were for several key Gwich'in place names which refer to frogs. These names are discussed below.

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*Cover photo credit: Brian Gratwicke - Lithobates sylvaticus (Woodfrog). Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0), 2011.*

## Gwich'in Traditional Place Names

There are seven Gwich'in traditional place names which refer to frogs, all clustered and related. The following map shows the location of these names, and the place names are listed below along with a description from the DCH-GSCI's place names atlas.

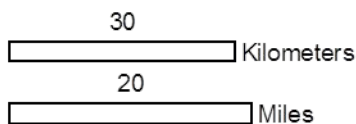
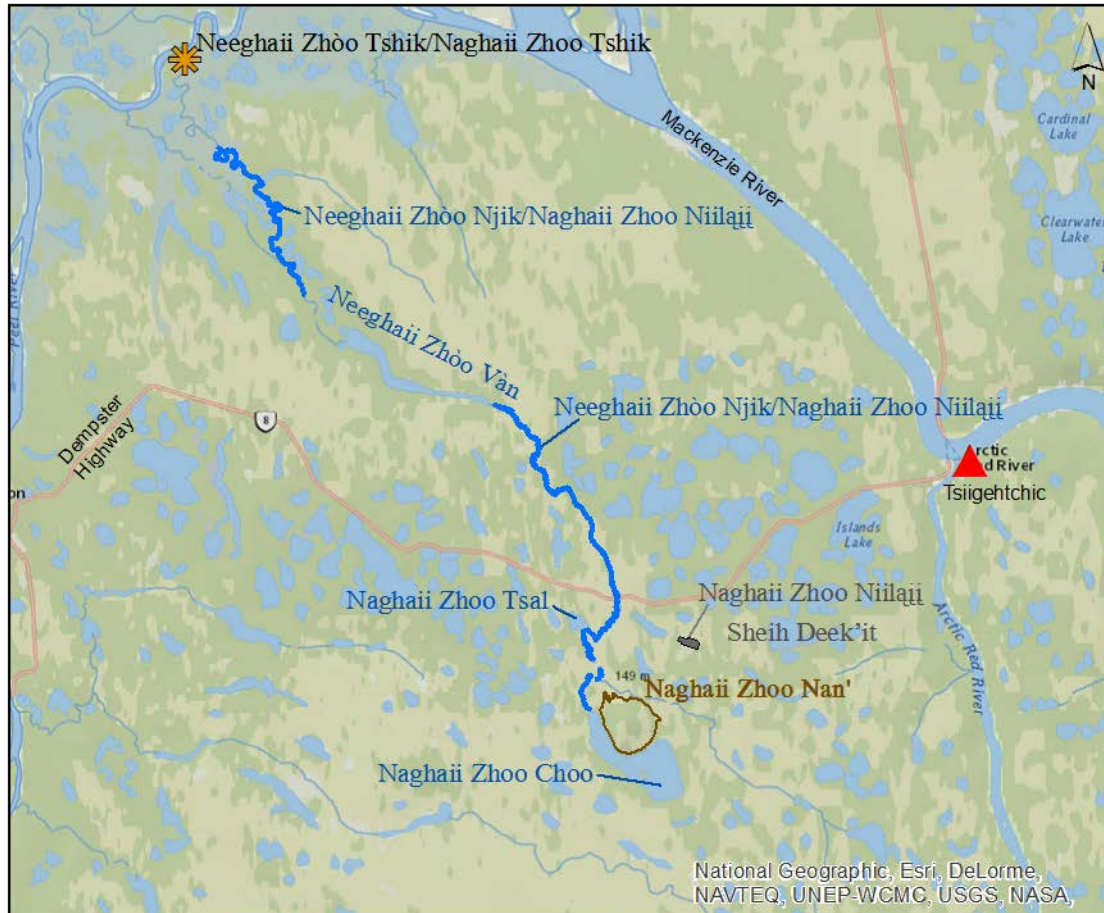


Figure 1. Gwich'in Place Names

**Neeghahi Zhòo Njik** (Teet'it Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-creek*)

**Naghahi Zhoo Nilajj** (Gwichyah Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-(a) stream (that flows out)*)

Also known as Frog Creek. This place name refers to a creek which flows from Neeghahi Zhòo Choo through Neyando Lake and into the Peel River. The Elders discussed the meaning of "hairy" and said it is a description of the many tributaries feeding into the upper reaches of this river. The Gwich'in Renewable Resource book "Nành' Kak Geenjit Gwich'in Ginjik: Gwich'in Words About the Land" also calls this creek Nelson Creek (Annie Benoit and Catherine Semple, EGPN Project 1999, EGPN Elders Workshop, March 29, 1999)

**Neeghahi Zhòo Tshik** (Teet'it Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-at the mouth of*)

**Naghahi Zhoo Tshik** (Gwichyah Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-at the mouth of*)

This place name refers to a site at the mouth of Frog Creek. It is also known as Nelson Fishery or Nelson Creek.

"One white man had cabin there . . . last name is Nelson . . . That's why they call it Nelson Fishery," said Neil Colin. "But real name is Frog Creek." Sarah Simon said, "He was Hudson Bay fisherman, he's a fisherman and his name is Mr. Mason [Nelson?] and marry a native woman and they fish there. That's why they name it after him. That's how places were named."

Lucy Vaneltsi recounted a legend about Nelson Fisheries: "There was a married couple living there all year. In the summer they fished and in the spring they ratted. Early in June the man returned from hunting rats. He was very tired so he went to sleep and his wife started skinning the rats. Her daughter . . . came running . . . and told her that there were two canoes coming . . . The mother looked out and saw that two Eskimo men had just landed. She was afraid and could not wake her sleeping husband . . . The two men walked up to the teepee and both sat down in the doorway. They made a sign to the woman asking for a file to sharpen their knives. She gave them a stone file. After they sharpened their knives they entered the teepee and jumped on her husband and wounded him (they also killed the woman). The little girl ran out of the teepee and started up to Old Fort McPherson. When she got there she told the people what had happened to her parents . . . the father made it into the village but died shortly after. This is just one short story about Nelson Fisheries." (MAP Workshop, November 2010, Bella Alexie, Land Research, 1980, Abe Stewart, TGPN 2008 Project, Neil Colin, TGPN 2008 Project, Neil Colin, Indian Brotherhood Land Research Project 1974, Pierre Benoit, Elders Biography Project 1999, Sarah Simon, Elders Biography Project, 1999, Lucy Vaneltsi, COPE story, "Nelson Fisheries Legend").

**Neeghahi Zhòo Vàn** (Teet'it Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-lake*)

Also known as Neyando Lake. This lake is located about 3 miles north of the Dempster Highway between Fort McPherson and Tsiigehtchic.

**Naghaii Zhoo Tsal** (Gwichyah Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-small*)

Also known as Small Frog Lake. This place name refers to a small lake on the south side of the Dempster Highway between Tsiigehtchic and Fort McPherson. This lake is usually mentioned in conjunction with Naghaii Zhoo Choo (Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names in the Mackenzie Delta, Gwich'in Settlement Area, N.W.T., 1994).

**Naghaii Zhoo Choo** (Gwichyah Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-big*)

Also known as Nerejo Lake. This place name refers to a large lake about 3 miles south of the Dempster Highway between Tsiigehtchic and Fort McPherson. This lake is usually mentioned in conjunction with Naghaii Zhoo Tsal, but it is the larger of the two as indicated by its name (Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names in the Mackenzie Delta, Gwich'in Settlement Area, N.W.T., 1994).

**Naghaii Zhoo Niilajj Sheih Deek'it** (Gwichyah Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-(a) stream (that flows out)-gravel-bed*).

This place name refers to a gravel pit along the Dempster Highway between Tsiigehtchic and Fort McPherson, known as the Frog Creek Gravel Pit. This is a major source of gravel for the Tsiigehtchic and Fort McPherson area. Mike Krutko used to have a camp here at one time (Gwichya Gwich'in Place Names in the Mackenzie Delta, Gwich'in Settlement Area, N.W.T., 1994).

**Naghaii Zhoo Nan'** (Gwichyah Gwich'in, literally *Frog-hairy-its' hill*)

This place name refers to a hill north of Naghaii Zhoo Choo.

## Gwich'in Knowledge

Gwich'in Elders and harvesters have in-depth knowledge about their environment, and natural world.

This knowledge is based on a close relationship and continued use of the land, as well as a system of transmitting and holding knowledge through oral transmission and story-telling.

Although a project specifically targeting information about frogs would provide much greater detail about this creature and its habitat, some information was provided incidentally during interviews for other projects. Frogs were the only amphibian mentioned by Gwich'in interviewees.

### Frogs are present in many places around the Gwich'in Settlement Area

Many interviewees mentioned that they had seen frogs around their camps. Sometimes people mention seeing relatively few frogs, although some say they're more common.<sup>1</sup> People tend to see them around grassy lakes or on banks.

**...there was lots of grasshoppers around this summer [2004], like in the mountains, because I was up that way for a while. Frogs and stuff like that. But up that way, I guess you would see lots of stuff because there's fresh water (Frank Blake, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004).**

**I noticed there's a lot of frogs, too. Like even at Tree River, right on the shore there was quite a few frogs (Alestine Andre, while interviewing Frank Blake, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004).**

**...there's always been grasshoppers. Just like frogs. Some people live here all their lives and they never...they say, 'There's no frogs here.' I remember as a kid again, listening and following the sound and catching a frog. They're [just] not very numerous ... (Willard Hagen, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004).**

**We may have seen one or like the occasional, but we'd have to go to where there was a lake, but right on the Mackenzie [River where our camp is] we may have seen the occasional one and that would be about it. There wasn't like a whole bunch of them (Evelyn Bullock, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004).**

**Frogs? Yes, that is plentiful in all the delta lakes. It inhabits small lakes, small grassy lakes, that kind lives along the shores in the spring, summer, too. Oh, it's about this big...That's the only kinds I've seen around here. It's small.**

(Pierre Benoit, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004)

<sup>1</sup> A dedicated Gwich'in TK study on frogs would likely address whether there are spatial or temporal variabilities in frog populations.

## **Frog population maybe changing**

A few interviewees mentioned that frogs, along with insects, were declining in population.

**Oh, another thing too, I should bring to you guys' attention ...while I'm here is this, just part of our bank it used to be...I don't know how it'll look next summer, but...maybe because so much of it eroded, we used to have an abundance of frogs out there, these tiny little...I guess they're called Borealis frogs? We used to have a lot. Some of them were huge, too, like the size of the palm of my hand. And there's not one this year [2004]. That's really strange. I don't know what happened, if it's because our bank eroded or what happened, but there's none at all this year. ... There used to be a lot of frogs at our camp in the river; we didn't see one this year, mind you though, we didn't go out to the camp much this summer, just because Hector is out of town working most of the summer. So we didn't go up and I just...I don't go out in the middle of summer, anyway. But still, like, when we go out, our first trip is in June— that's what the kids, the first thing they would go and look for frogs and get frogs too, but this year they weren't any (Patricia Campbell, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004).**

**In McPherson used to be lots of frogs years ago. Hardly see any [now] (Mary Clark, while interviewing Wally Tyrrel, Bluenose Caribou Species at Risk TK Project 2014).**

In other places, there may be new frogs, or the frog population may be increasing.

**I remember, we used to look for frogs but now, all you have to do is walk around -there's frogs all over the place. There are light frogs, light green frogs, dark green frogs, almost like a yellow frog. Not a, not a yellow but it's so light it look like a yellow. Brown frogs, light brown frogs, but frogs are getting plentiful and we want to know why. Some scientists say it is because of the climate changing (Anna May MacLeod, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004)**

**Like last—this fall, I went to camp to clean up. Honestly, I never seen so much frogs around. Frogs, yeah. Well, they're frogs. Honest, there was frogs all there. There was sure lots. I couldn't believe it, that it was frogs (Wally Tyrrel, Bluenose Caribou Species at Risk TK Project 2014).**

## **Frogs hibernate in the winter and are seen and heard in the spring and summer**

Richard Ross (Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004) remembered that his mother found a frog frozen in the permafrost once when they were out digging bear roots. She put the frog in the sun, and it awoke. Other interviewees mentioned that frogs are heard in the spring and summer.

**I never see frogs; just in spring time I hear them... don't matter where you go, he's there (Fred Jerome, Gwich'in Environmental Knowledge Project 1998 Northern Pike interview).**



### Other observations about frogs

At least one Gwich'in elder, Liz Hansen, has seen a two-headed frog (while interviewing Patricia Campbell, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004).

Frogs are very small animals generally, "like the size of your thumb nail, even smaller" (Patricia Campbell, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004). However, they may be getting bigger overall. "My kids would catch them and they're getting like bigger. Big ones. They use to be tiny, but now they're big, they're... green, brown, greenish brown" (Ellen Firth, Gwich'in Knowledge of the Mackenzie Gas Project Area Project 2004).

Some fish such as jackfish will eat frogs.

**I think they're 'nighthawks'. I think so. I think in day time they sleep when the sun is up and lay in that, how they work and among grass they just have a really good rest. But at night I think that is when they really do their hunting. They catch the other rats and that. They kill young ducks and everything and little goslings, frogs and everything (Sarah McLeod, Gwich'in Environmental Knowledge Project 1998 Northern Pike interview).**

### Gwich'in Legends

The following Gwich'in legend included references to frogs – from a *tsii deii* times long ago when things were very different than they are now. People and animals could communicate easily.

#### KATCHUKYE [ATACHUUKAII] - THE MAN WHO PADDLED DOWN THE WRONG RIVER OR THE SAGA OF TWO BROTHERS

*Excerpt of a Gwich'in legend recorded by E. Cass, on file at the Gwich'in Language Centre.*

Well now the man crossed over to the Yukon, where it was spring time and he made a magic canoe and he thought nothing could hurt it; he paddled down to the head of the Yukon. Suddenly around the bend, he saw a great big frog, for in those days the frogs were as big as men. And the frog was sitting there waiting for fish. The frog had a spear made out of caribou horn. The man turned himself into a jack fish and he sprang into the water, and with his medicine he managed to break the spear. He swam back up the river to his canoe, got into the canoe, turned into a man again and put the piece of spear which he had stolen into the canoe. Then he went up and met the frog. The frog promptly accused him taking the horn spear, and the man denied it. However the frog was quite generous and took him to his camp and fed him. And the man, being very tired, went to sleep. Well the frog went to the canoe and he took the horn spear from the canoe and woke up the man. The man was very annoyed about it, and he went out and found his canoe broken. He was furious with the frog and he caught hold of him and told him that in the future he would be small and catch only little fish. And the frog who by then realised he was a strong medicine man, begged him to let him be and not punish him. He said that the frog had been



stealing men's food. The frog said never mind about the broken canoe, he could make a better one, which he did. And this time it really was a magic canoe.

Well the man went on downstream and round the bend in the river he saw a pretty little woman sitting on the shore. He pulled his boat into the shore and said good day to her. Now the woman was really a mouse, who was sitting there in human form. Sitting by her was a large ugly woman who was really an otter. Now the large ugly woman offered him meat, but he was very suspicious of this; he took it. It was pemmican made of meat, and he asked her what it was. She told him, "Oh, that's just man meat". So the man, being cunning, pretended to eat the pemmican but really was dropping it down inside his parka. Then he told the woman he'd like a drink of water, and the woman went down to the river. And he said, "On no please," to the Otter woman "I must have creek water. There's a creek up there." So the woman ran off to get the man some water from the creek. Meanwhile, the man asked Mouse woman if she had any meat, and she gave him some pemmican made of roots, which was, delicious. Then, while the Otter was getting him water, he ran down to the river, got into his canoe, said thank you and good bye to Mouse and paddled away.

He paddled down below Fort Yukon, to where there are lots of islands, and among those islands were beavers, and he shot a beaver. As he was very tired with all his paddling, he went to the shore and he went to sleep. Somehow or other, Otter woman, who was of course a bad medicine woman, had followed him. She arrived while he was sleeping and skinned the beavers, tanned the skin and cooked it. The man woke up and found this was done, and she said; "Look, I have cooked you a beautiful meal." So the man told the Otter woman to sleep, and pretended he was very pleased to see her. She told him she was going to stay with him a long time, and he told her again that she must be tired after all her work, and that she should go to sleep. So she thought that he was really deceived by her, and she lay down and went to sleep. Then the man killed her.

Well the beaver meat became red again and the skin became untanned. He took this and he burned it up, and he left, went and took his canoe and started paddling up river again. As he was paddling he met some more Indians coming in the opposite direction in a canoe, and he stopped and spoke to them. They told him that it was dangerous to take the route that he was taking, because they said there was a big beaver who lived in the mountain and he killed everybody; you couldn't pass there in a canoe. Well, the man laughed and said, "I'm stronger than any giant beaver!" And he asked for a long sharp bone, and he sharpened the bone like a saw and he put under his canoe. Then he went straight down the water where the giant beaver and all the little ones were. Now this giant beaver used to slap with his tail against the canoes, break the canoes and upset them and then eat the men in them. Well, when the beavers came along and slapped with their tails against the bottom of this canoe,

the saw on the bottom of the canoe cut off their tails. (And when their tails were cut off, the beavers bled to death.) The man had also smeared poison on the saw, so that when their tails were cut by the saw, they were also poisoned and not one beaver was left.

Now the end of the story is this. From there he went to the United States; the other brother came up the Mackenzie and went to England. And this is the end of this long story which is really the saga of two brothers.