

# Nature's bathtub

Once a stopping point for workers carving out the Alaska Highway, Liard River Hot Springs is an oasis in northern B.C.

BY **MARK STACHIEW**



The Liard River Hot Springs are known to the Kaska Dena as Tū Tīkōn, meaning "hot water."

**FOR THE SOLDIERS** and civilians who battled the elements to build the Alaska Highway at a breakneck pace during the Second World War, creature comforts were few and far between. When they reached the warm and inviting waters of the Liard River Hot Springs in northeastern British Columbia after months of hard labour, they must have thought they were in heaven. Recognizing the value of the hot springs as a place for its

personnel to rest and relax, in 1942 the U.S. military set up a rough boardwalk and changing huts near the area's largest thermal pool.

"In the chill of the clear October air the whole surface of the water pleasantly steams. The center of the pool is constantly bubbling, replenishing nature's bathtub with clean warm water from the bowels of the Earth," wrote Harry Spiegel, a surveyor with the U.S. Army's Corps of Engineers 648th

Topographical Battalion, in a letter home to his family. "Like the (mythical) wood nymph, I got into my birthday suit on the timbered edge of the pool and strode in! Its soothing warmth was great! What a swell bath I took!"

Today, the same naturally heated pools are the main attraction at Liard River Hot Springs Provincial Park, established in 1957. And while the boardwalk and changing areas have been improved since Spiegel's skinny





Hot water from deep within the earth pours into a series of swamps that never freeze in the winter. This creates a unique microclimate in the boreal spruce forest.

around the hot springs, and the reintroduced wood bison are hard to miss as they graze on the sides of the highway.

Of course, the hot springs were nothing new to the local Indigenous Peoples, including the Kaska Dena, Fort Nelson First Nation and Métis, who helped surveyors carve out the best route for the Alaska Highway. The Kaska Dena, whose traditional territory spans northern B.C. and parts of Yukon and Northwest Territories, call these springs Tū Tikōn, meaning “hot water.”

Unlike most hot springs that flow into a stream or river, these thermal waters pour into a system of swamps. As a result, the swamps don’t freeze in the winter, creating a lush microclimate. The Kaska Dena followed game here, harvested traditional medicines around the springs and built seasonal camps and trail networks through the area, says Gillian Staveley, director of culture and land stewardship for the Dena Kayeh Institute.

“It’s definitely lived history, but it’s sadly been forgotten in recent times, and we’ve been spending a lot of time and energy trying to revitalize that understanding with visitors to the area that this is a historical and cultural place for the Kaska Dena, and it still is,” says Staveley. She added that the Dena Kayeh Institute is working with partners on new signage at the hot springs to highlight the historical, cultural and ecological significance of the area to the Kaska Dena.

While the builders of the Alaska Highway no longer frequent Liard River Hot Springs, road-weary travellers can take a cue from these early visitors, as well as from the Kaska Dena who live on this landscape, by slipping into the bubbling Tū Tikōn to experience the healing heat of this boreal oasis. ❁



dip, they aren’t a whole lot different from the original setup, says Peter Goetz, a parks and protected areas section head for BC Parks.

“It’s kind of an oasis in the middle of the Alaska Highway and is a great place to stop and recharge,” he says, adding that the water temperature in the main bathing area ranges from 42 C to 52 C.

Nicknamed the “Tropical Valley,” reportedly by the Alaska Highway building crews who were amazed by

the landscape’s lush ferns, the provincial park is home to unique flora and fauna. Among them are the heat-adapted lake chub, which can be spotted swimming in the main bathing pool, and a tiny species of snail about half the size of a grain of rice that’s found nowhere else in the world. There are also 14 species of orchids that thrive in the park, an abundance of birds and the occasional black bear. Moose are commonly spotted in the swampy land