



*The William's complex riverbed with sand of varying depths visible below the water surface. In the lower left corner is the start of the creek which runs from the William River to the northeast part of William Point.*

## BUTTERSCOTCH PUDDING AND WHIPPED CREAM

As we neared the mouth of the William River, the huge sand dunes of the west bank gave way to forested sand hills, then to the forested lowlands of the delta. Unlike most of the other major dune fields, the William River field does not border Lake Athabasca, but is separated from it by a series of ancient beach ridges, many with peat bogs between them.

The sand-choked delta fanned into the lake. Semi-stabilized sand bars were scattered everywhere, some forming low islands where vegetation had taken hold. We were faced

with a mind-boggling array of channels, none of which appeared deep enough for a canoe. Finally it was no use. We had to forget about paddling and ended up walking while trying to keep the canoe afloat in the shallow water. It was little better when we entered the lake, since the water beyond the delta was so shallow that we were forced to continue wading until we were far into Lake Athabasca.

Seeing the William River from the air was pure magic. At the end of our trip when we flew over the braided river and delta, the William was transformed into a gigantic abstract painting, in many places resembling butterscotch pudding marbled with whipped



*As the William River nears Lake Athabasca it begins to widen into a delta.*

cream. Multi-hued golds and beiges indicated varying depths of underwater sand bars. Above-water sand bars appeared alabaster white, deeper channels ranged from copper to chocolate brown, and suspended organic matter in the water gave the delta a purple tinge. Framing the entire painting was the vibrant green of the forest and the white slip faces of dunes dropping into the water.

The Athabasca Sand Dunes never failed to surprise, fascinate and delight us. But if we were to choose one defining experience, it would surely be the flight over the William River. It was as if we were given a second set of eyes through which another face of nature was revealed—a face of exquisite beauty, mystery and wonder.

#### UP THE CREEK

Since our first trip down the William River in 1990, we have made several canoe trips upstream as far as the last set of rapids. To avoid the sand-clogged delta, we take a short creek which branches off the William River about three kilometres from its mouth and empties into the lake on the northeast part of William Point. In years when the lake level is low, we have to wade over shallow areas at the creek mouth until we reach deeper water upstream. The concentrated flow in the narrow creek makes for a strenuous paddle against the strong current, so much so that even a slight hesitation in paddling or a stroke lost to swatting a mosquito begins to sweep us downstream. Resting means pulling into



*Delta of the William River.*

shore or hanging on tightly to tree branches.

The creek twists and turns as it follows a path among ancient beach ridges. It has almost a jungle-like feel to it, with both banks clothed in thick bushes. The first time we made this upstream trip, we were helped along by thoughts of how much fun it was going to be to ride the creek downstream a few days later. Little did we realize just how exciting it would be.

We drifted downstream on one of those perfect northern July days, pleasantly warm with just enough breeze to keep the mosqui-

toes at bay, fluffy white clouds floating in a deep blue sky, and the forest a glorious green. We had to do little but steer around the tight turns as we zipped down the narrow creek. Robin casually mentioned that the only thing missing on this most perfect of days was a bear or moose on shore to photograph as we passed by.

It was a classic case of being careful what you wish for in case your wish comes true. As we rounded the last curve of the creek and began to slow down for the sand bars near the lake, there stood a large bull moose feeding