We like to canoe and map "less travelled" yet spectacular routes, and over the last few years, our focus has converged on Northern Quebec and Nunavik, a canoescape relatively unpaddled by others (compared to other better known routes in the Canadian North). In the north of Quebec, we've paddled rivers such as the Broadback, Moisie, Charpentier, Leaf, De Pas and George rivers.

The Vachon River is even farther north (north of 60°) than any of our previous expeditions, and 350km north of the treeline. The river rises from the lakes at the base of Pingualuit Crater - an impact crater originally named Chubb Crater (1950's-60's) after diamond prospector Frederick W. Chubb, a possible distant relative of Lynette's. The Crater, visible from space, was renamed "Cratere du Nouveau Quebec" in the 70's, and has now finally reverted to it's truly original Inuit name "Pingualuit". Laco used this toponymic history to entice Lynette (Chubb had to visit Chubb Crater!) into yet another adventure in Nunavik. Some long term planning was required: The logistics of getting our canoe that far north into Nunavik were complicated and expensive, so we decided to paddle the canoe north in 2009 via Schefferville, and the Du Sable, Caniapiscau and Koksoak River systems to Kuujjuaq. This was a challenging 32-day paddle via magnificent places like Eaton Canyon, Limestone Falls and Manitou Gorge (see our trip reports at: http://sites.google.com/site/landltrips/). We over-wintered our canoe in Kuujjuaq, from where a Parks cargo flight continued it's journey north to Pingualuit Park where our 2010 Vachon River expedition would start.

Though there is usually much interest from fellow canoe trippers in participating in our trips, we often end up travelling in a grand group of two, due mostly to factors such as the expense, remoteness, vacation time and skill level required for our annual expeditions. On the Vachon, we were delighted to be joined just nine days before departure by two intrepid paddlers who were able to get last minute flights and bring with them a "canoe in a bag". Curt and Wes contributed a big safety factor with their expertise, and an enjoyable experience with their company.

The establishment of Pingualuit National Park (created in 2003 and inaugurated in 2008) greatly alleviated access to the Crater with regularly scheduled charter flights into the base of the Crater from Park HQ in Kuujjuaq. On July 7th, the four Vachon Expedition members flew from Kuujjuaq to the Crater via Kangiqsujuaq (where the Park's interpretation centre is located). We set up our tents in the vicinity of the Park cabins at Camp Manarsulik on Lac Laflamme, while other day tourists hiked to see the crater. When the charter departed, we were left with four Inuit guides led by Noah Annahatak. Until the next flight out, they were our hosts and guides, as well as continuing with repairs & construction at the camp. We did two long hikes in the park - circumnavigating the Crater and visiting the Puvirnituq River canyon. Pingualuit Crater is 3.4km in diameter, 400m deep, and its water’s purity is world-renowned. Our circumnavigation,
mostly along the top rim, took us almost 9 hours and 18.1 km to complete. The terrain was very rough - mostly rock hopping through the huge shatter zone - so it was a slow, relaxed hike with many stops. Lake Pingualuk (the lake filling the crater's depression) was still mostly frozen (and so was Lac LaFlamme) when we arrived, but both were melting quickly during our four days there. There were many big snow patches everywhere, and luckily for us, no bugs at all. Caribou, at this time of year migrating north, were our constant companions, in the Park and throughout our entire trip down the river.

On July 11th, we packed our canoes and left the base of the Crater, headed for Kangirsuk, 331.5 km away, accompanied by Inuit Tommy and Bobby in a Park canoe until the first "M" on Eric LeClair's Vachon canoe guide maps. (The Park, in cooperation with the village of Kangiqsujuaq, had sponsored Eric in 2009 to paddle and map the Vachon for potential paddlers). Although we usually do our own mapping, Eric's maps were very accurate and expedited our progress down the Vachon considerably. All our maps are available free from the CartesPleinAir.org database. Because we travelled the river at a lower water level than Eric had, we did consult with Eric after our trip to advise him of a few minor alterations. The Vachon headwaters originate from lakes surrounding the crater on three sides (north, east and south). These lakes are connected by a series of steep & shallow rock gardens, very hard work to navigate. The original Inuit name of the Vachon River was "Ikkatujuaq" which means "All Shallow". Eric marked the shallows on his maps with the letter "M" (for "Maigre" in French, meaning very little water passing through). It became our trip-long running joke on the various ways the word "meagre" could be used in our daily conversation. Meagres were our constant struggle until we reached the end of the lakes at km 268 (measured from the end of the trip in Kangirsuk). The crater rim was our constant horizon over our right shoulders as we traversed the lakes around its base on our way south.

From km 268 until it joins the Payne River at km 68, the Vachon is a continuous drop and pool river - rapid after rapid - many of them quite challenging, but all, with the exception of one small waterfall, proved to be run-able, meaning we were able to paddle them. (A word of Caution: that would be "run-able" by those who are trained and experienced in navigating strong, technical rapids safely with a loaded canoe in such a remote area.) This was the most continuous white-water-fun river we have ever paddled; if this river was flowing through a settled area it would have most likely been dammed, and if not, there would be hundreds of paddlers all along it. But up here, north of 60° in Nunavik, it is protected by its remoteness, the short paddling season and unpredictable weather of Ungava and the hordes of insects... speaking of which... mosquitoes finally came on July 15th and from the next day they were in big numbers, interrupted occasionally only by bad weather.

With the help of Eric's maps we located two historic Inuit sites, one of them quite large - many tent rings. Sitting comfortably in our own modern campsite, we pondered about the people who camped there so many years ago and what their lives must have been like. Good weather (a relative term in Ungava conditions), the open expanse of the treeless tundra and the deep Vachon valley provided us with excellent hiking opportunities which we took advantage of like never before. We enjoyed the scenery, photography, the caribou and bird life. Falcons would get very vocal if we passed too close to their nests.
Caribou would wander right past us if the wind was right and we stayed still and crouched amongst the rocks.

On July 24, about 5 km before the Vachon joins the Payne, we came upon a cabin with two Inuit families, one from Kangirsuk, the other from Quaqtaq. They were repairing damage done by the local bear. As we pitched our tents in their bay, the bear lumbered past, checking who was now visiting "his property" and almost became a victim of the cabin owner's gun. After a hike in the rain & dense bugs to the top of the hill where we could see the Vachon joining the Payne, we visited the cabin. It was Johnny's birthday and the evening was filled with friendly conversation on various topics - Pamiok Island, hunting, fishing, religion, philosophy and ghosts (there were three haunted cabins about 28 km up the river).

In the Vachon delta our companions Curt & Wes chose a different channel and enjoyed the last "meagre" of the trip while we startled seals from their sunbathing posts. Paddling on the Payne river had a completely different character - the river there is almost 3 km wide, with a powerful current strongly affected by the ebb and rise of the world-record Ungava tides. We carefully avoided paddling in low tide and, in time of need (fast dropping tide), found the most beautiful campsite of the trip high in the cliffs. The next day, caribou flooded the area, even swimming (south now) across the fjord. That day, we reached "Hammer of Thor", a spectacular almost 3m tall stone structure in the shape of a cross, theorized to have been erected by Vikings in the 11th century. After two days of ugly weather we were able to paddle into Kangirsuk on July 29th. As we landed, village representative Minnie Abraham welcomed us. She knew about our expected arrival from someone who had been watching our progress on our SPOT map. Technology is everywhere these days.

Minnie was able to find us lodging in Kangirsuk for several days until our flight out. We used the time to do some hiking, exploring the village and the surrounding tundra. Most importantly, local politician Joseph Annahatak was able to 'hook us up' with unilingual (Inuktitut) but very friendly and quite expressive local guide Iitsak, who took us downriver to show us an amazing historical site on Pamiok Island (Farley Mowat wrote about it in his book "The Farfarers") with 2 longhouses and other stone structures and cairns left behind, most likely again by Vikings.

We feel privileged to have been able to explore such a unique and little-known part of northern Canada, steeped in such history and 'hidden' treasures. We thank the Royal Canadian Geographical Society for their support of our expedition and for their philosophy of encouraging continued exploration of the more remote and thus lesser-known geographical features of Canada. We also would like to thank all the wonderfully hospitable, helpful and friendly people we met through all stages of our expedition.

In their ‘other lives’ in Ottawa, Lynette Chubb is an artist (AcrylArt.ca) and canoe instructor and Laco (aka ‘Lester’ & ‘Ladislav’) Kovac is a software developer. Full Canoe Trip Reports from L&L:  http://sites.google.com/site/landltrips/ Quebec Recreational Map Database:  http://www.cartespleinair.org/ Parc Pingualuit:  http://www.nunavikparks.ca/en/parks/pingualuit/index.htm