

Chapter Four

Field Trip, Summer 2011

David Young visited Russell Willier in July 2011 so they could travel to the different areas where Willier picks his medicinal herbs. The purpose of this field trip was to photograph the plants when they were in full bloom or bearing fruit. Because Willier believes it is important to document the kinds of environments in which plants are growing, Young took several general photographs whenever they stopped, followed by close-up photographs of individual plants. If there was some doubt about the identity of the plant, they took samples of the entire plant, including roots, and enclosed the plant between sheets of heavy white paper, sealed with tape. Willier's name for the plant was written on the outside of each packet. The purpose of preserving plants in this way was to assist Robert Rogers, a botanist and coauthor of this book, to provide a positive identification.

Young visited Willier again in October 2011 to photograph the same plants as they appear after the frost and are ready to be harvested. This second trip followed the same route as the first. They also visited a couple of additional places to photograph plants they had not been able to find on the first trip. On the first trip, Willier and Young were assisted by Willier's son, Russell Jr., and later on by Willier's partner, Norma. On the second trip they were assisted for the entire trip by Russell Jr. and Norma. On the first trip, they traveled more than 1,000 kilometers and made thirteen stops to photograph plants. The descriptions of these stops in the following pages are taken directly from Young's research diary for the July trip. Because they followed the same route for the October trip, that trip is not described.

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Unless indicated otherwise, all photographs are by David Young. Those marked “research team” were taken by individuals on the 1985 field trips; photographs contributed by Robert Rogers are so indicated.



Russell Willier's house on the Sucker Creek Reserve,
northern Alberta

Stop 1

Traveling from Vancouver Island, I arrived by plane in Grande Prairie, Alberta, at four in the afternoon on July 12, 2011. Russell Willier and his son, Russell Jr., picked me up in a fifteen-year-old truck. I loaded my bags in the open back that was already full of camping equipment. The front was a little crowded too for three people. We drove to a spot near Kelly Lake, British Columbia, where we photographed Northern Valerian (*Valeriana dioica*), Purple Avens (*Geum rivale*), Diamond Willow (*Salix bebbiana*), Tamarack (*Larix laricina*), Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana*), Indian Paintbrush (*Castilleja raupii*), Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*), Lungwort (*Mertensia paniculata*), Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*), and Wild Aster (*Aster puniceus*).



Clockwise from left: Russell Jr.; Russell; Our truck

STOP 1 HABITAT



Top: July; Bottom: October

Stop 2

We then drove to Dawson Creek, British Columbia, where we stopped for lunch. After eating, we crossed back into Alberta and drove north to a spot about thirty-five miles south of Spirit River, where we took a dirt road into the bush to a camping spot in a swampy area Russell has used before. We camped between two signs that said “Absolutely No Camping!” It was about 10:00 p.m. by the time we got the tent set up and the air mattresses inflated.

I was exhausted, so I crawled into bed while Russell and his son took off down the dirt road with a gun to look for moose. I did not hear them return, without a moose. When I arose at about two in the morning to go to the toilet, I didn't need a flashlight because it doesn't get very dark this far north at this time of year. We all slept in until eight the next morning (July 13) and then got up to fix coffee and fry some ham over an old camp stove.

After breakfast, I took some photos of plants in the immediate area: Wild Mint (*Mentha arvensis*), Wild Rose (*Rosa woodsii*), Angelica (*Angelica genuflexa*), Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*), Diamond Willow (*Salix bebbiana*), Diamond Willow Fungus (*Haploporus odorus*), Green Alder (*Alnus crispa*), Wild Sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicaulis*), and Labrador Tea (*Ledum groenlandicum*). We then hopped in the truck and drove up the mud road to a well-trampled area where moose come to lick the deposits that a salt spring brings out of the ground. We came across a young bear there. We took some photos in the area and then continued up the road as far as we could in search of Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*), but were forced to turn around as the road became impassable. On the way back, we stopped to photograph False Solomon's Seal (*Smilacina racemosa*), Fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*), and Trembling Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*). After returning to camp, I walked up the road a fair distance to find a place to do my morning business. I found a downed tree to sit on and unwittingly settled into a nest of Stinging Nettle. The experience stayed with me the rest of the morning.

STOP 2 HABITAT



Clockwise from top left: Mud road; Swampy area where we camped; Habitat for False Solomon's Seal; Salt lick

Stop 3

After packing up camp, we traveled to Spirit River, where we picked up Route 49 east, passing vast fields of peas, canola, timothy grass, and wheat. We stopped in Rycroft for lunch, after which we continued to McLennan. A little later we stopped at the Big Prairie community hall to photograph Gumweed (*Grindelia squarrosa*), Sage (*Artemisia frigida*), and Canadian Goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*).

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Top to bottom: July; October;
Field behind the Big Prairie community hall in July

Stop 4

We then took a dirt road toward Grouard, stopping to photograph Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*) and White Spruce (*Picea glauca*).



July

Stop 5

Our final stop before reaching home was Grouard, where we filled up with gas and then drove on to the Sucker Creek Reserve, arriving around 9:00 p.m., having traveled around 700 kilometers to find our plants. By the end of the day, we had photographed around 90 percent of Russell's repertoire. We were way ahead of schedule because of the good weather and because Russell knows exactly where to go for each kind of plant. After supper, we went to a swampy area near the railroad track on the Sucker Creek Reserve to photograph Saskatoon Berry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), Purple-stemmed Aster (*Aster puniceus*), Seneca Snake Root (*Polygala senega*), Yellow Pond Lily (*Nuphar variegatum*), Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*), and Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*).



Swampy area on the Sucker Creek Reserve

Stop 6

The next day (July 14), I spent the morning identifying and labeling the photographs we had taken so far. I made a sandwich for lunch, after which Russell, Norma, and I drove toward Lesser Slave Lake, stopping along the road to photograph Narrow Spinulose Shield Fern (*Dryopteris carthusiana*).



Left: Norma; Right: Habitat for Narrow Spinulose Shield Fern

Stop 7

About halfway to Lesser Slave Lake, we turned north for a few miles, where we stopped to photograph Sweet Flag (*Acorus americanus*) in a swampy area just inside the fence of a farmer's field.



Sweet Flag habitat

Stop 8

We then continued on to Lesser Slave Lake, recently burned out by a fire. We went through what was left of the town and partway around the lake, traveling north. Then we turned right on a gravel road and went as far as we could until the road was flooded with water. Norma stayed in the truck while Russell and I walked about three miles to where we could wade into the swamp along the road to find Pitcher Plant (*Sarracenia purpurea*). We photographed a couple of Pitcher Plants, Peat Moss (*Sphagnum fuscum*), and Waxpaper Lichen (*Parmelia sulcata*) and then started back, stopping to photograph Paper Birch (*Betula papyrifera*), Bog Birch (*Betula pumila* or *B. nana*), Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*), Raspberry (*Rubus idaeus* or *R. strigosus*), Buffalo Berry (*Shepherdia canadensis*), Cattail (*Typha latifolia*), Northern Gooseberry (*Ribes oxycanthoides*), Wild Rose (*Rosa woodsii*), and Arctic Raspberry (*Rubus arcticus*). We returned to the truck and traveled a little further north to a park, where we photographed Creeping

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Wintergreen (*Gaultheria hispidula*), after which we returned to Lesser Slave Lake, where we ate supper and visited the hospital where Russell had promised to visit the friend of one of his nieces. By the time we arrived there, the friend had already gone home.



Clockwise from top left: October; Flooded road in July;
Pitcher Plant habitat

Stop 9

We then went on to Kinuso, where we parked the truck and Russell and I hiked along a dike protecting the town to where we could photograph some of the main plants used in a combination to break bad curses: High Bush Cranberry (*Viburnum opulus*), Choke Cherry (*Prunus virginiana*), Pin Cherry (*Prunus pensylvanica*), and Hazelnut (*Corylus*

cornuta). We photographed Black Poplar (*Populus balsamifera*) on the way home. When we arrived home, we packaged some of the plants we had collected. I went to bed around ten. The next morning (July 15), we got up at nine and had breakfast. I then interviewed Russell about some of the plants that I had photographed but about which I had no information. Russell informed me that the most basic plants in his medicine bundle are Sweet Flag (*Acorus americanus*), Purple-stemmed Aster (*Aster puniceus*), Northern Valerian (*Valeriana dioica*), Yellow Pond Lily (*Nuphar variegatum*), and Seneca Snake Root (*Polygala senega*). He said that if you have these plants, you can deal with just about anything. About twelve-thirty, Russell went to town to buy dog food, and I took one of Russell's two quads out for a practice ride along the fence line, turning right onto a cut line to a large field owned by Russell. I had no trouble with the quad, though I thought I might get stuck a couple of times in large, deep puddles where the wheels spun quite a bit before I got through. I returned home around one. In the afternoon I worked on my notes and packaging some of the plants we had collected earlier. The next morning (July 16), I continued working on organizing the plant photos and attaching scientific names.



Habitat near Kinuso



Russell with Spotted Water Hemlock

Stop 10

Later in the morning, Russell and I took the truck on a two-hour round-trip southwest of the reserve toward Enilda Tower to photograph and collect specimens of Spotted Water Hemlock (*Cicuta maculata*).

Stop 11

Around four-thirty, Russell, his son, his granddaughter, and I took two quads on a trip into the fields and bush near Russell's house, driving on otherwise impassable bush roads with some of the puddles deep enough to come up over the running

boards. We stopped at one place to pick Sweet Grass (*Hierochloa odorata* [*Anthoxanthum nitens*]), as well as Yellow Avens (*Geum aleppicum* or *G. macrophyllum*), Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Arrow-leaved Coltsfoot (*Petasites sagittatus*), and Twining Honeysuckle (*Lonicera dioica*). We came to a halt at a lake where Russell has a 340-acre hay field. There were hundreds of ducks and geese on the lake where Russell goes for hunting. An African man and his wife from Edmonton were supposed to visit here today, but there was some kind of mix-up. The Edmonton couple thought Russell was coming to Edmonton instead. The wife went to her home country in Africa recently and returned with the mind of a twelve-year-old, apparently due to some kind of dementia. Russell thinks she was cursed while in Africa. The next morning (July 17), I interviewed Russell about general issues such as how he became a medicine man, the current state of Indian medicine, etc. Among many other things, Russell said that when someone gives him a new combination or trades one with him, he will not use it until after he has observed its effects on a patient of the healer who gave him the combination.



Fields and bush near Russell's home

Stop 12

After lunch we stopped on the reserve to photograph American Mountain Ash (*Sorbus americana* or *S. decora*), and then went to Faust to visit Albert and Emmy New. Albert is an eighty-seven-year-old medicine man who has exchanged combinations with Russell. Albert has an herb shack where he has jars of labeled, dried herbs, as well as herbs hanging from the ceiling. The shack is heated with a wood stove. Russell took a combination, including Arbutus (*Arbutus menziesii*) from British Columbia, for Emmy because she is having trouble walking after several bypass surgeries in which arteries were taken from her legs. Though Arbutus is not part of Russell's traditional repertoire, he was impressed while visiting our home on Gabriola Island that an Arbutus tree will heal over a wound pretty quickly with new growth. He intends to experiment with it on some patients in Alberta. After Russell doctored Emmy, we were invited into the house (an old but very neat and cozy trailer), where we were served bannock and tea. We returned home about two-thirty in the afternoon, at which time I brought these field notes up to date. The next morning (July 18), I went over all of the data to ensure that it is complete. I also reviewed all of the Cree names for the plants, trying to spell them phonetically so they can be pronounced in a way

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that is similar to the way Russell says them. This afternoon, Russell got out his tipi cover to examine. It is in good shape, so Russell gave it to me to pay me back for money I loaned him some years earlier. Emmy New called to say that she was already getting better from the treatment.



Top: Albert and Russell talking in Albert's shack;
Bottom: Albert and Emmy New

Stop 13

The next morning (July 19), we left early for Grande Prairie, stopping near Valleyview to photograph and pick Buffalo Berry (*Shepherdia canadensis*) and Wolf Willow (*Elaeagnus commutata*). We also took photographs of Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) and Purple Vetch

(*Vicia cracca*). I left by plane to return home around one-thirty in the afternoon, having achieved all we had hoped to do on the research trip. Russell has people coming from Goodfish Lake and Edmonton on Thursday and Saturday for doctoring. Otherwise, he would go moose hunting. Russell seems to have two or three parties a week come for doctoring. He sometimes goes to other places to doctor or for counseling. Not too long ago, he was asked to go to Fox Lake, an isolated community in the north, to counsel young people who were sniffing gasoline. Some of these young people had never been out of their community to cross the Peace River by ferry as it is too expensive. Russell helped run a survival camp for the community, but he says such camps are a waste of time as they want all the luxuries such as toilets and electricity. He says that most young people would not be able to survive if they were stranded in the bush or if the services went down. Sometime during the day, Russell mentioned that the combination he had prepared for my wife, Michiko, when she was in a coma in 1987, consisted of plants for removing a curse, plus Green Alder (*Alnus crispa*). He also told me that the four plants for opening the door to the spiritual world are Sweet Grass (*Hierochloe odorata*) and Diamond Willow Fungus (*Haploporus odorus*), used in Alberta; Sage (*Artemisia frigida*), used in the prairies; and Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*), used in the West.



Left: Buffalo Berry; Right: Wolf Willow