

A new ice-rich-permafrost-system observatory, Prudhoe Bay Oilfield, Alaska:

Landscape evolution on ice-rich calcareous fluvial, eolian, and lacustrine deposits



Skip Walker, University of Alaska Fairbanks

Oral presentation, ICOP 2024, Whitehorse, Session 10B, abstract Nr. 253

Photo by Amy Breen. 2022



NSF Navigating the New Arctic (NNA) Program



Landscape evolution in Ice-Rich Permafrost Systems (NNA-IRPS)

NNA-IRPS Landscape Evolution component contributors: Skip Walker, Amy Breen, Ronnie Daanen, Nick Hasson, Olivia Hobgood, Torre Jorgenson, Anja Kade, Benjamin Jones, Mikhail Kanevskiy, Anna Liljedahl, Dmitry Nicolsky, Jana Peirce, Stuart Rawlinson, Martha Raynolds, Vladimir Romanovsky, Sergei Rybakov, Yuri Shur, Emily Watson-Cook, Julia White, Simon Zwieback

Main points of the talk

1. An update on the new ice-rich permafrost observatory at Deadhorse, Alaska.
2. Application of rediscovered surficial geology maps to the analysis of permafrost and landscape evolution in the Prudhoe Bay region.
3. New landform and vegetation legends and maps.
4. The unique nature of the nonacidic calcareous permafrost ecosystems of the Central Arctic Coastal Plain.

How to put the dramatic changes to Prudhoe Bay landscapes due to ice-wedge degradation in the context of the underlying surficial geology?

Abrupt transformation of tundra ecosystems from ice-wedge degradation in the Prudhoe Bay region

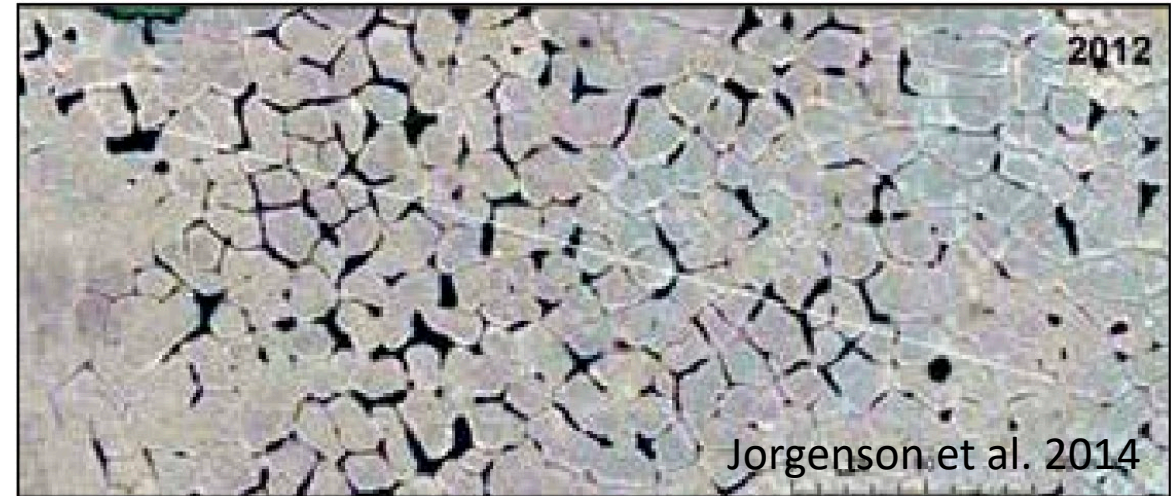
Jorgenson et al. 2006, GRL, 25, L02503

Raynolds et al. 2014, GCB,

Jorgenson et al. 2015, JGR, 120, 2280-2297

Kanevskiy et al. 2017, Geomorphology, 297:20-42

Jorgenson et al. 2022, Global and Planetary Change 216: 203921



Alluvial gravel surficial deposits of the Central Arctic Coastal Plain

Everett and Parkinson, 1977, AAR, 9, 1–19

Walker et al. 1980, CRREL Report 80-14

Walker et al. 1985, AAR, 17, 321-336

Walker, D.A. 1985, CRREL Report 85-14

Rawlinson, 1993, DGGS 93-1

Walker et al. 2001, QSR, 20, 149-163



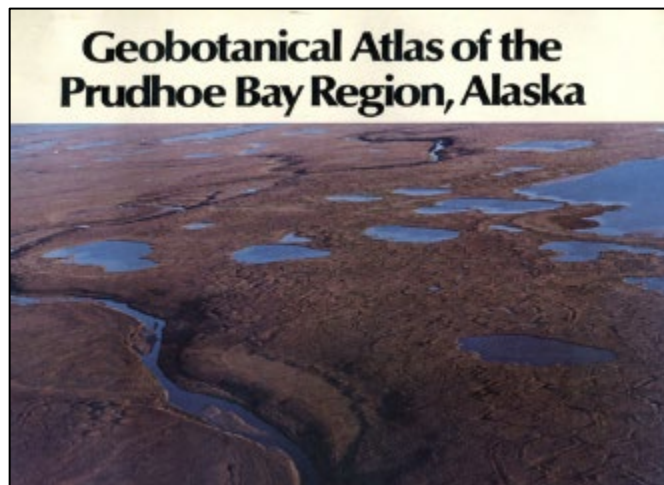
Sagavanirktok River



Locations of the three primary NNA-IRPS research sites, Deadhorse AK

- Eastern part of the Prudhoe Bay Oilfield
- Northern end of the Dalton Highway
- Natural Ice-Rich Permafrost Observatory (NIRPO, focus of this talk)
- Roadside disturbance observatories
 - Colleen site
 - Airport site

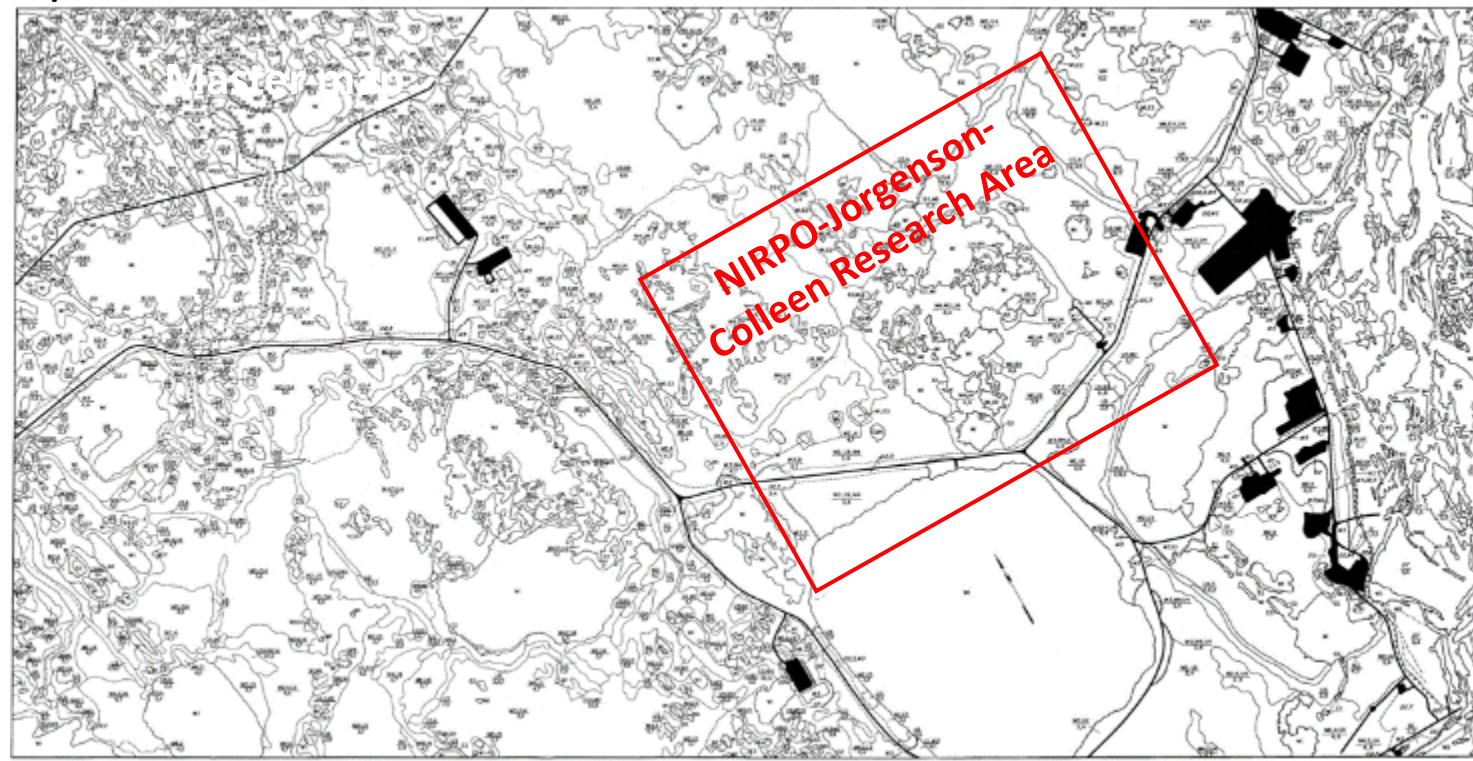
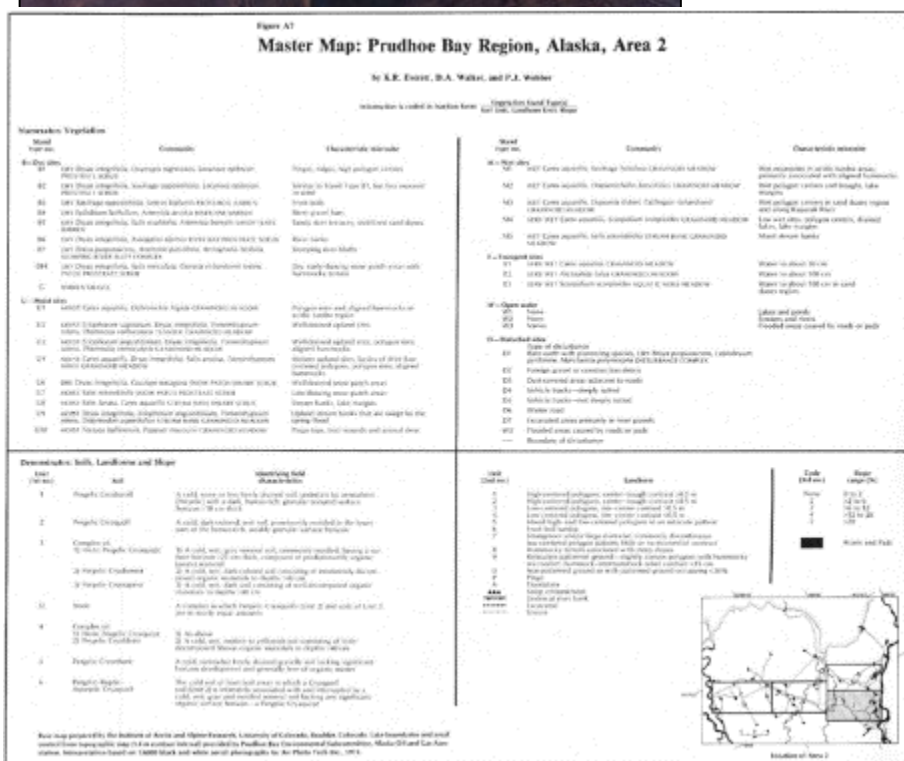
The Prudhoe Bay region has a long history of permafrost and ecosystem research.



Geobotanical Atlas of the Prudhoe Bay Region, CRREL Report 80-14

Geobotanical Master Map: Map Sheet 2

Mapped in 1973 at 1:6000 scale; polygon coding: 1°, 2°, 3° veg
surf. landform, soil



Walker, D. A., K. R. Everett, P. J. Webber, and J. Brown. 1980. Geobotanical Atlas of the Prudhoe Bay Region, AK, U.S. Army Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory, CRREL Report 80-14.

Surficial geology maps: Rawlinson (1993)

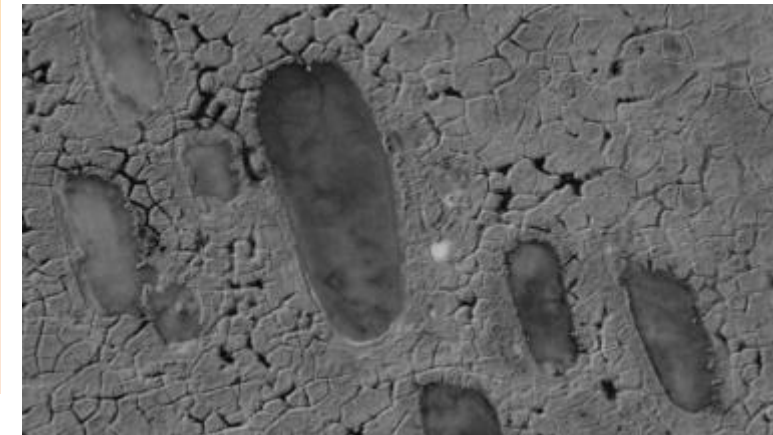
Map Sheet 3 of Rawlinson (1993) covers the primary area of interest of the NNA-IRPS project.



Deadhorse and the Prudhoe Bay Oilfield are in the Central Arctic Coastal Plain (CACP) on calcareous gravelly alluvial plains associated with braided rivers flowing out of limestone deposits in the Central Brooks Range.



Recent alluvial gravel and sand deposits

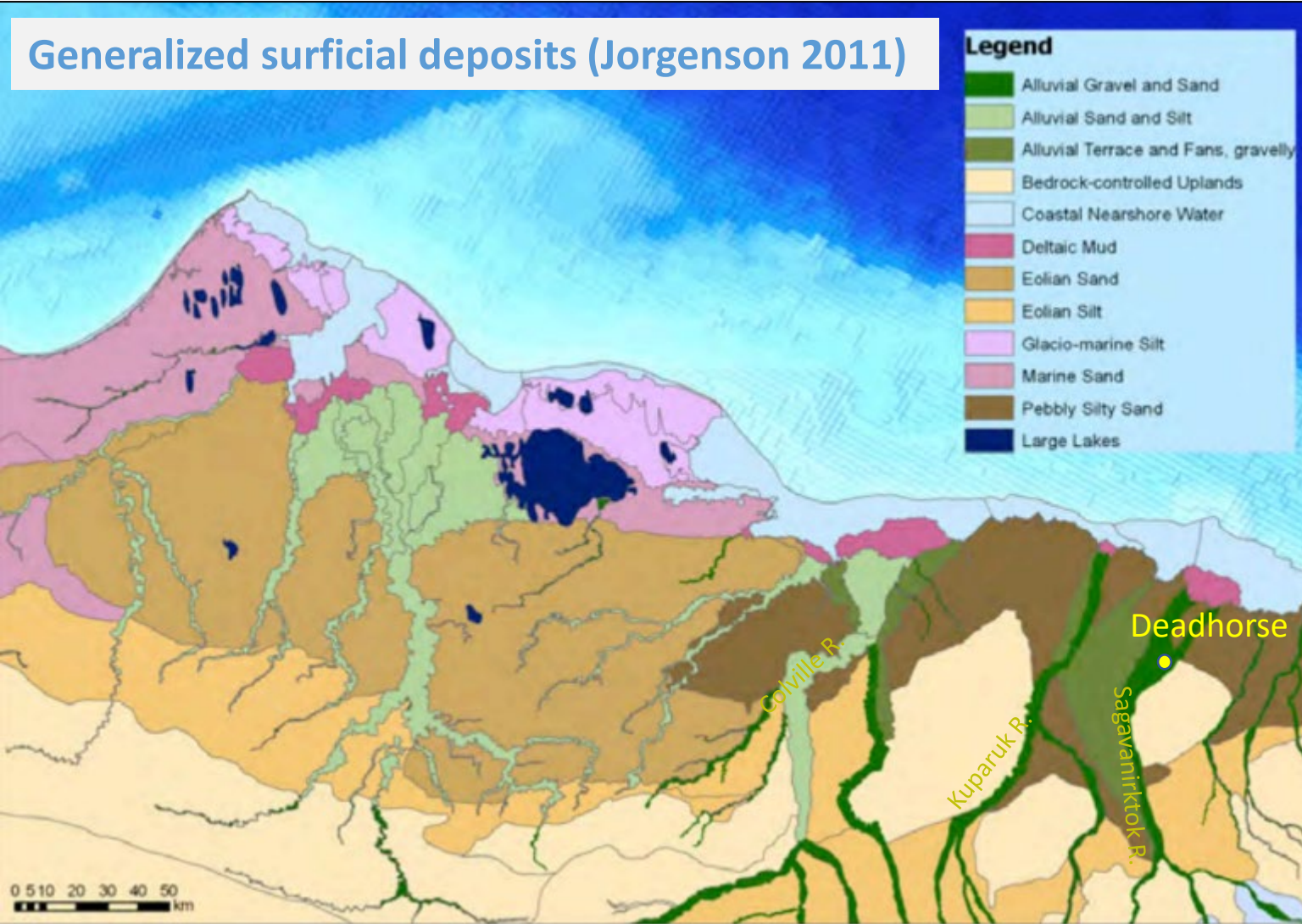


Holocene alluvial deposits overlain by eolian sand and silt, thaw lakes and thaw-lake deposits

Rawlinson, Stuart E., 1993. Surficial geology and morphology of the Alaskan Central Arctic Coastal Plain. Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys, Report of Investigations (RI) 93-1. 172 p, six sheets, 1:63,360.

The surficial geology of the Central Arctic Coastal Plain region is quite different from the western portion of Arctic Coastal Plain which has received more recent attention

Generalized surficial deposits (Jorgenson 2011)



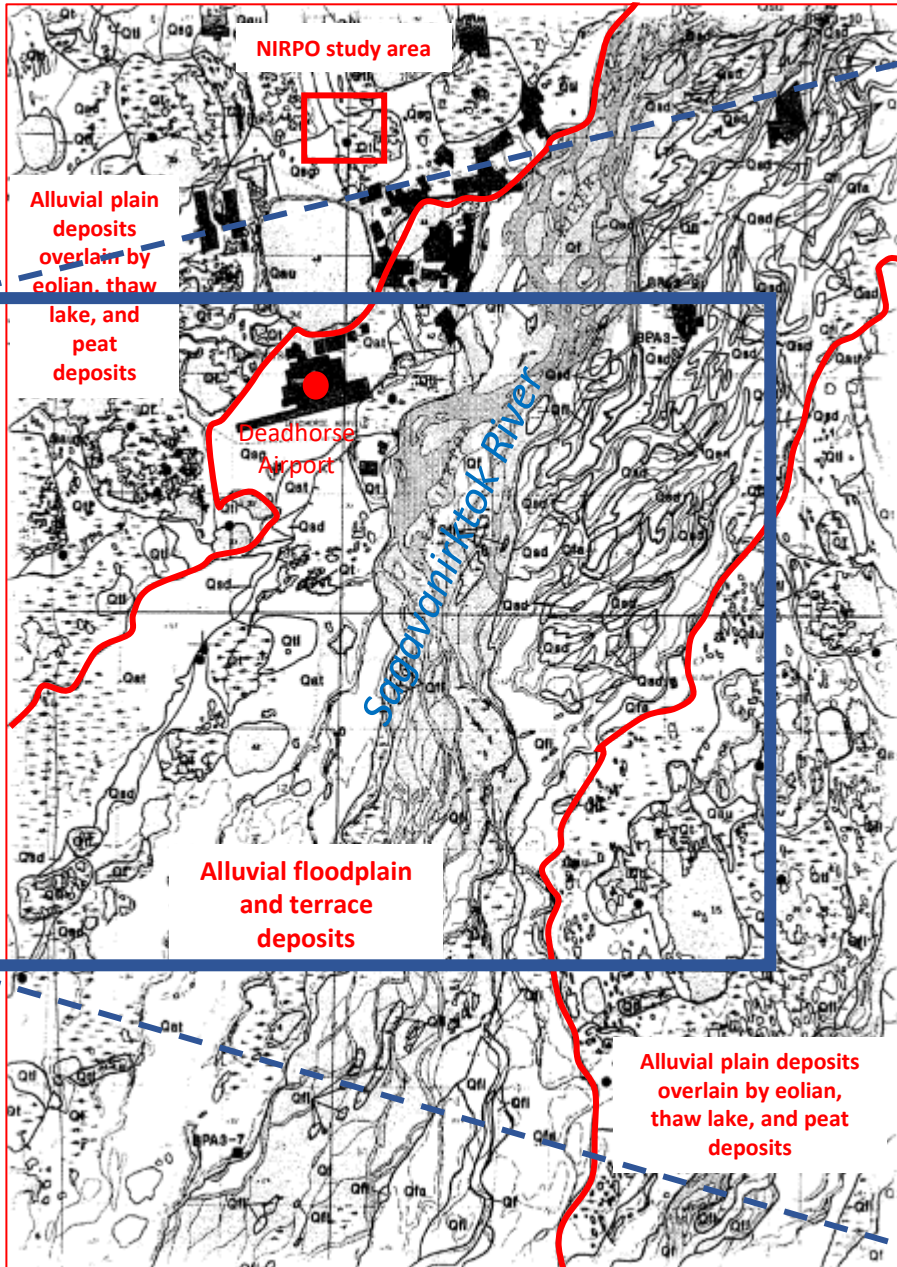
This map by Torre Jorgenson focuses on the western Arctic Coastal plain, an area dominated by sandy and silty eolian and marine deposits and is dominated by thaw lakes.



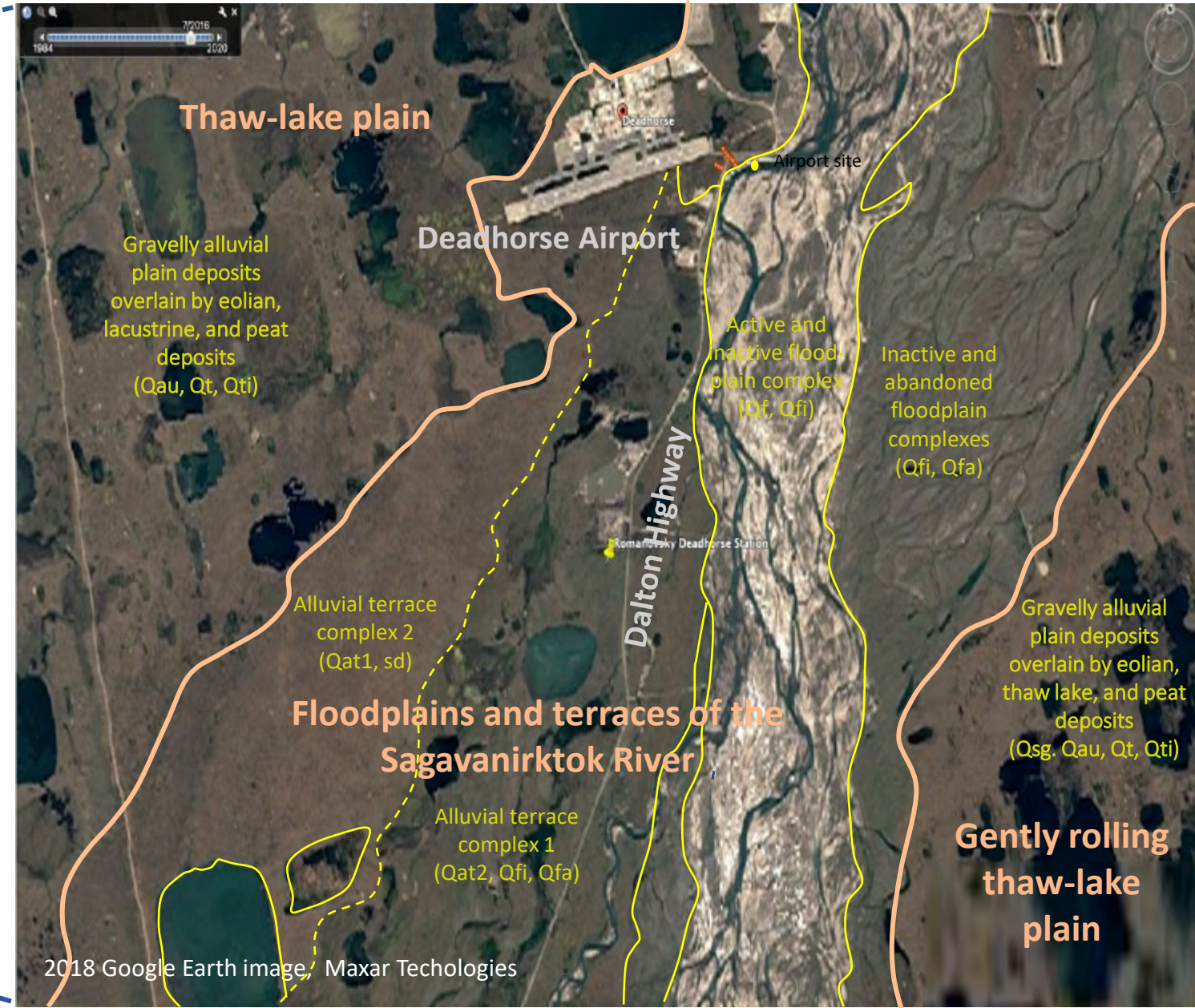
Jorgenson, M. T. (ed.). 2011. Coastal region of northern Alaska: Guidebook to Permafrost and Related Features. Guidebook 10. Ninth International Conference on Permafrost, June 29–July 3, 2008, Fairbanks, AK. State of Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys.

Fluvial and thaw-lake landscapes of the Prudhoe Bay region

Section of Map Sheet 3 (Rawlinson 1993)



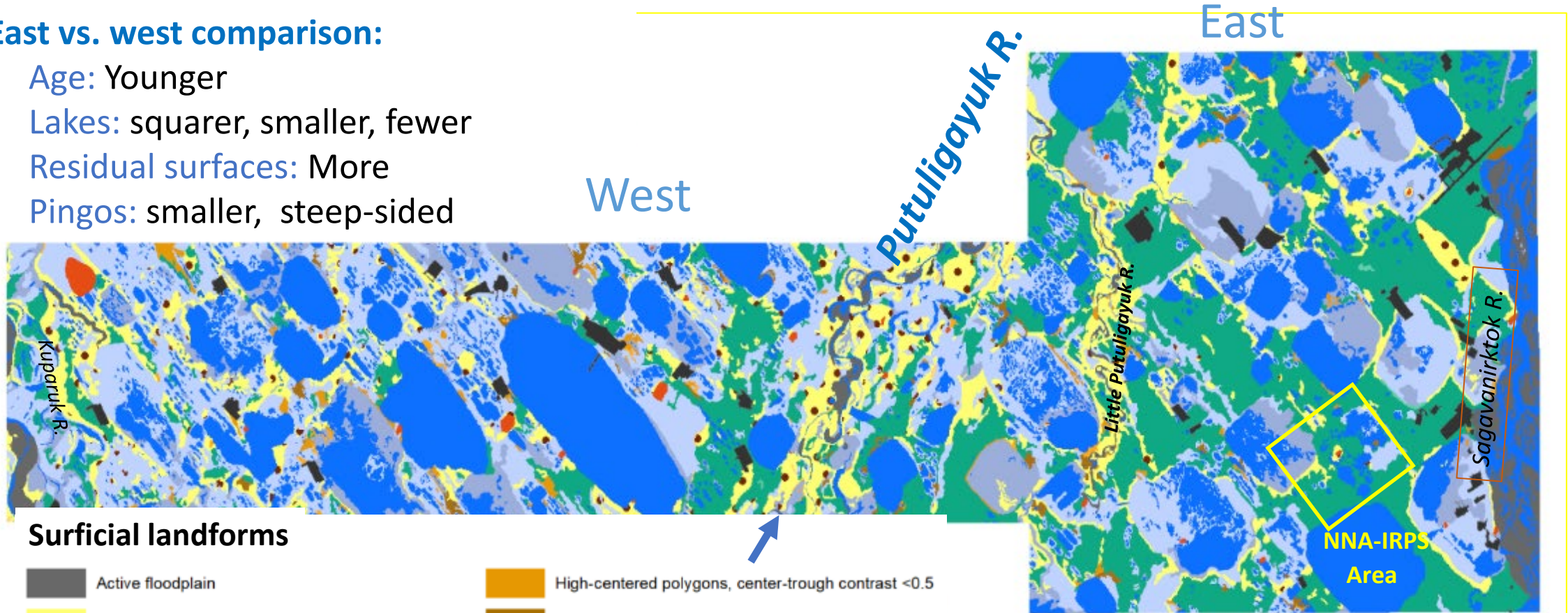
Fluvial, eolian, lacustrine, and peat deposits, eastern Prudhoe Bay Oilfield

















Distribution of surficial landforms across the Prudhoe Bay Oilfield is associated with different age alluvial floodplains east and west of the Putuligayuk R.

East vs. west comparison:

- Age: Younger
- Lakes: squarer, smaller, fewer
- Residual surfaces: More
- Pingos: smaller, steep-sided

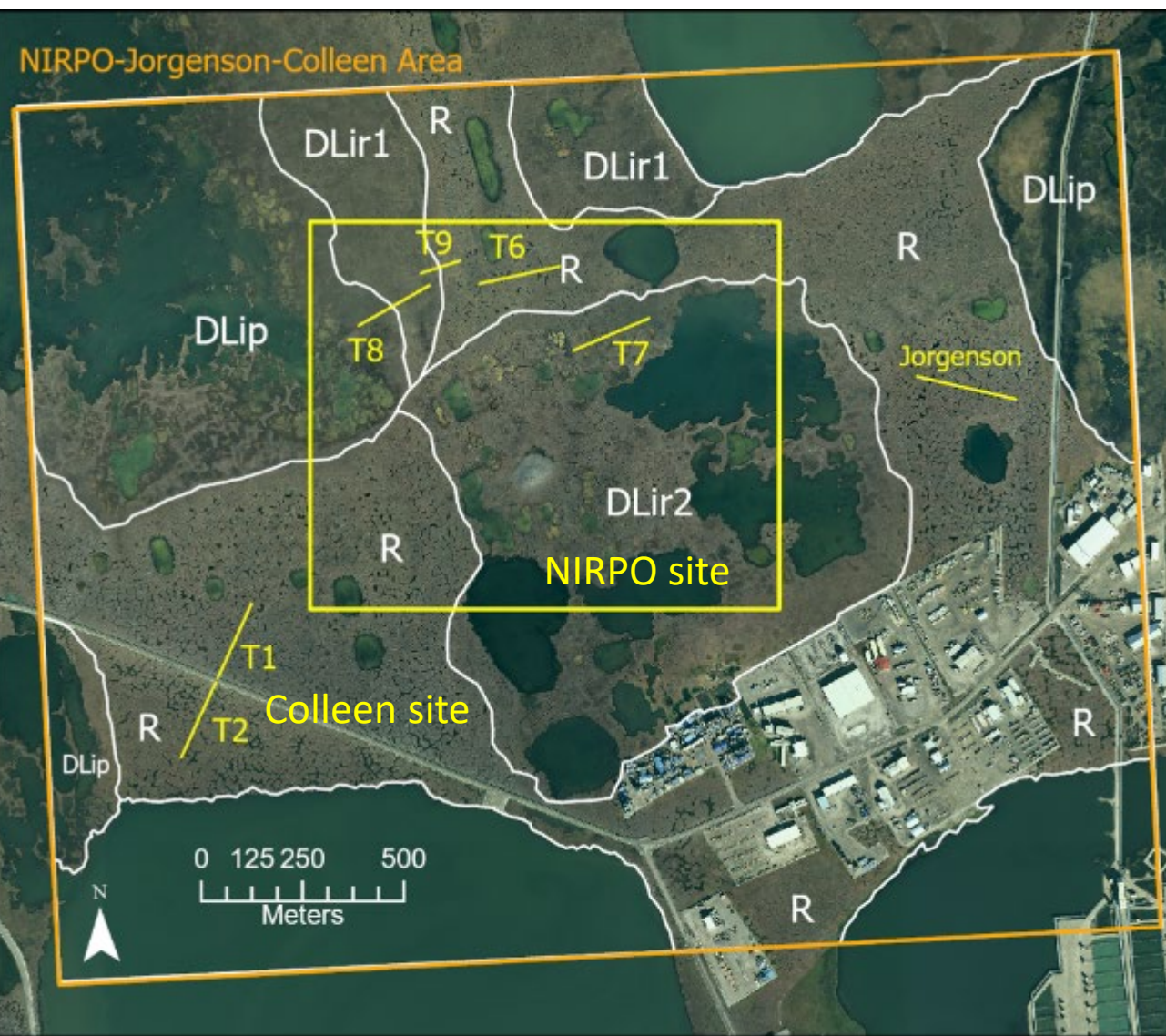


Surficial landforms

	Active floodplain		High-centered polygons, center-trough contrast <0.5
	Reticulate patterned ground		Mixed high and low-centered polygons
	Frost boil tundra		Lakes
	Hummocky terrain assoc. with steep slopes		Featureless
	Low-centered polygons, rim-center contrast <0.5		Disjunct polygon rims
	Low-centered polygons, rim-center contrast >0.5		Pingo
	High-centered polygons, center-trough contrast >0.5		Infrastructure

Derived from Everett. 1980. Interpretation based on 1973 1:6000 scale aerial photos, courtesy of Alaska Oil and Gas Assoc.

Colored map derived from 4 master maps in the Prudhoe Bay Geobotanical Atlas by Amelia Boyd.



Landforms and transects in the main NNA-IRPS research area

- R, Residual surface**
5 transects [T1, T2, T6, T9 east, and Jorgenson transect]
- DLip, Drained Lake basin, ice poor**
1 transect (T8 west)
- DLir1, Drained Lake basin, ice rich, phase 1**
2 transect (T8 east, T9 west)
- DLir2, Drained Lake basin, Ice rich, phase 2**
1 transect (T7)

Code	Primary landform and surface features
R	Residual surface, with transitional polygons, and ice-wedge thermokarst ponds
DLip	Drained lake basin basin, ice poor, mostly featureless
DLir1	Ice-rich drained-lake basin, phase 1, disjunct ice-wedge polygons
DLir2	Ice-rich drained-lake basin, phase 2, well developed low-center polygons and pingos

Corresponding surficial geology units

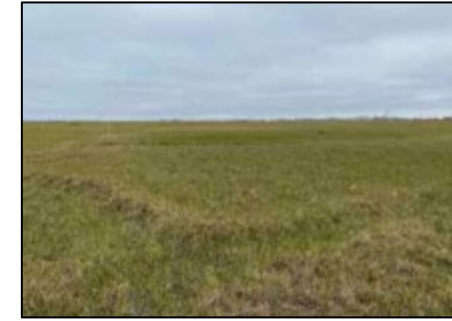
Surficial geology
Qsg, Undifferentiated alluvial deposit overlain by overbank deposits, eolian silt, and peat
Qt, Thaw lake deposit , ice poor (includes lakes)
Qti1, Ice-rich thaw-lake deposit



NIRPO transects: A gradient of different age surficial-geology deposits, permafrost landforms, and vegetation

Youngest, ice-poor, drained-lake basin with two phases of lake drainage (T8)

- Phase 1 (right figure, west end of T8), few disjunct polygon rims or other polygonal features
- Phase 2 (left figure, east end of T8), initial stages of ice-wedge-polygon development, disjunct ice-wedge polygons, small ice wedges, and discontinuous polygon rims..



Older ice-rich drained-lake basin (T7)

- Heterogeneous landscape
- Remnant marl ponds (left figure, west end),
- East end (right figure, east end) well-developed low-center ice-wedge polygons, intermediate-width ice wedges and polygon trough, and some thermokarst in polygon troughs.
- Pingo in western side of lake basin



“Residual” surface (T6 and Jorgenson transect):

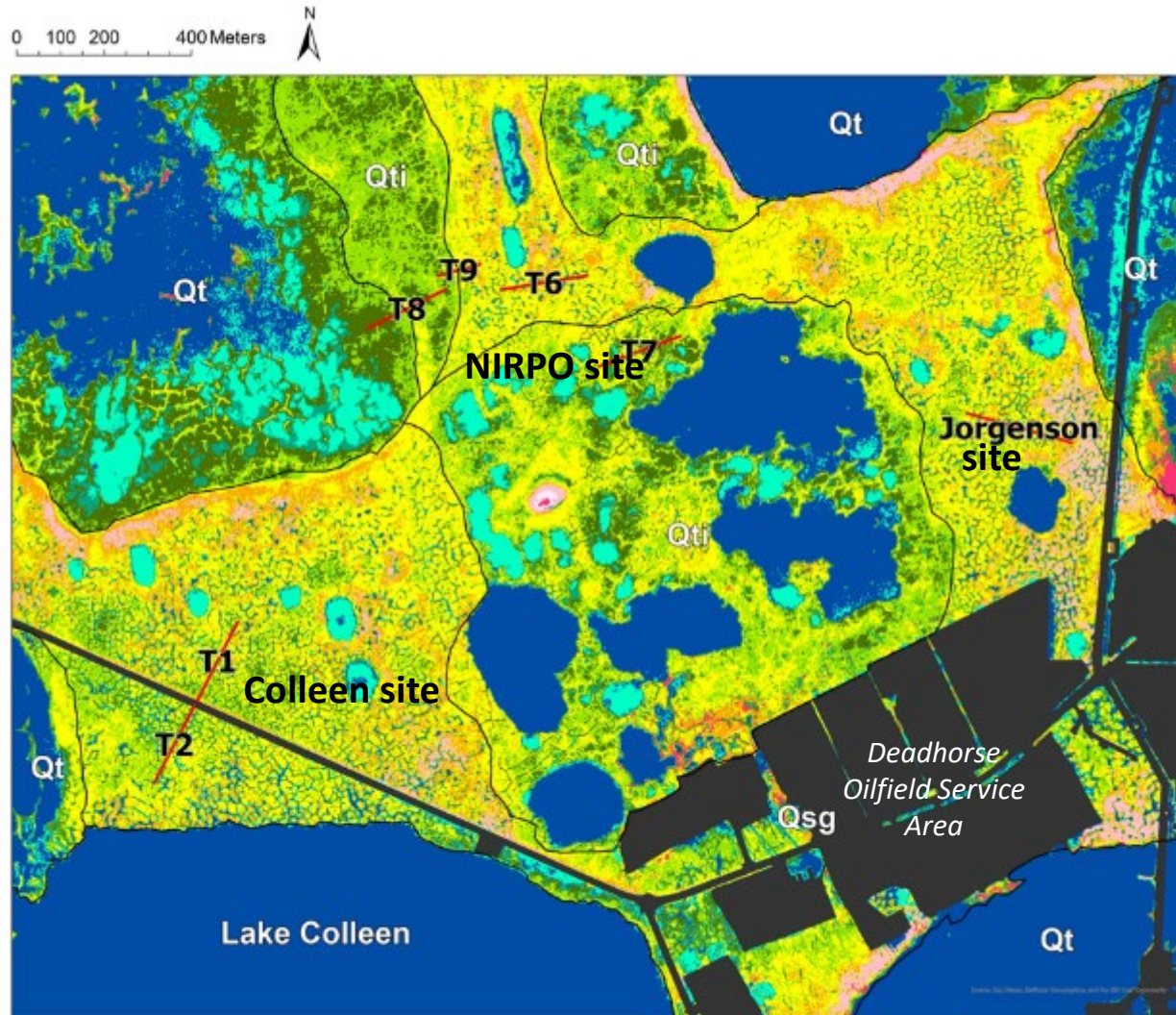
- Oldest surface with no evidence of thaw-lake processes.
- Extensive wide ice-wedge thermokarst ponds (left figure)
- Extensive degraded ice-wedges, subsiding polygon troughs, and “transitional” polygons with remnant polygon rims



Older surfaces



Landcover map of the main NNA-IRPS research area (Olivia Hobgood, 2024, MS thesis research)



Landcover (Veg.-habitat codes)

- Infrastructure
- Dry nonacidic tundra, gravelly substrates (D1)
- Dry/moist nonacidic tundra, organic substrates and snowbeds (D2, D2t, Dsn)
- Moist nonacidic tundra, abundant lichens (M1)
- Moist nonacidic tundra, few lichens (M3, M3t)
- Wet nonacidic tundra, saturated soils (W1, W1t)
- Very wet nonacidic tundra, shallow water (W2, W2t)
- Aquatic vegetation, shallow water (A1, A1t)
- Aquatic vegetation, deeper water (A2, A3t, A4t)
- Shallow lakes and ponds with marl bottoms, some emergent vegetation (A1, L2)
- Deeper lakes and ponds with little or no emergent vegetation
- Enriched vegetation (Dz, Mz, Wz)

**Dry to aquatic
site-moisture
gradient**

M. Moist nonacidic tundra

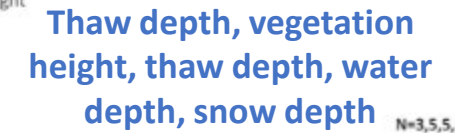
- | | |
|-----|--|
| M1 | Moist nonacidic tundra, abundant lichens |
| Mz | Moist zoogenic vegetation (bird mound) |
| M3 | Moist nonacidic tundra with few lichens |
| M3t | Transitional moist nonacidic tundra |

W1 Wet nonacidic mires (saturated soils)
W2 Very wet nonacidic mires (standing water)

A1	Aquatic sedge marsh
A1t	Transitional aquatic vegetation
A2	Aquatic grass marsh
A3t	Aquatic moss marsh
A4t	Aquatic forb marsh

L2 Shallow ponds and lakes with marl bottoms, sparse vegetation

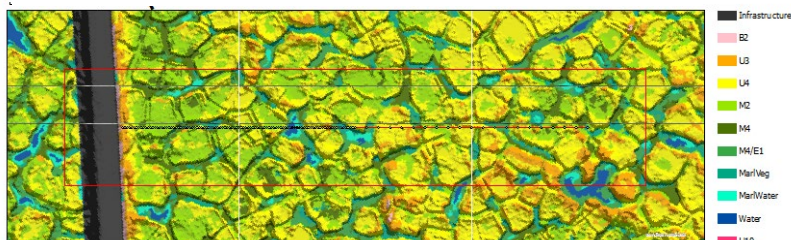
Used to
examine
trends in
ecosystem
variables
across the
site-
moisture
gradient



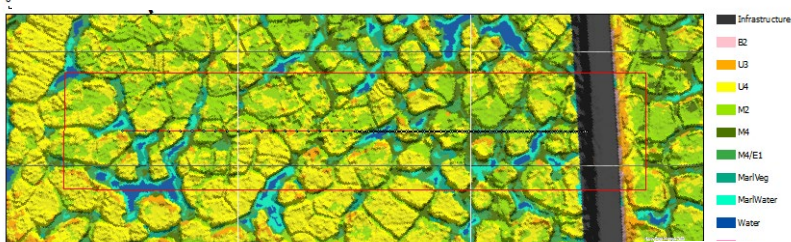
Landcover maps of the transect areas within the NJC research area

Colleen site

T1- Residual surface, heavy dust

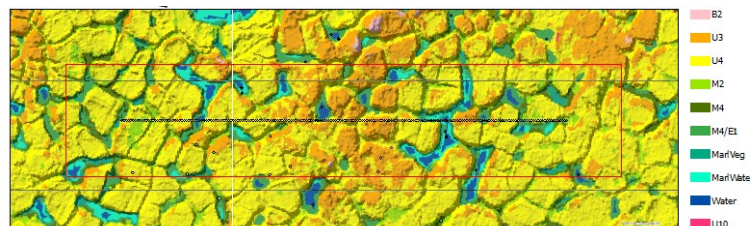


T2- Residual surface, flooded

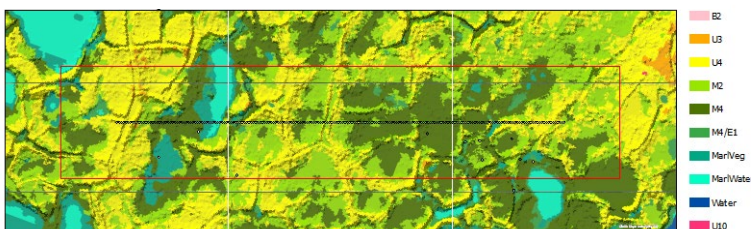


NIRPO site

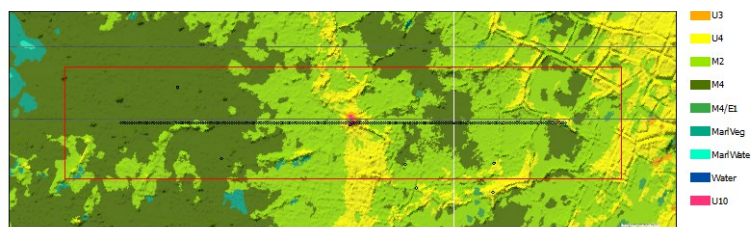
T6 – Residual surface



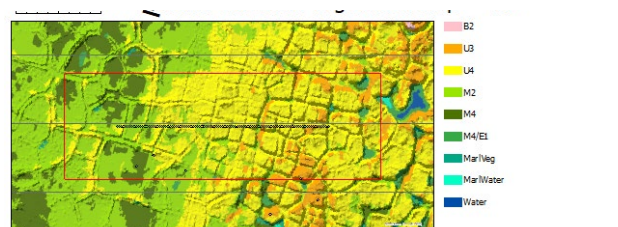
T7 – Ice-rich drained lake basin, phase 2



T8 – Ice-poor (left), and ice-rich, phase 1 drained lake basin (right)

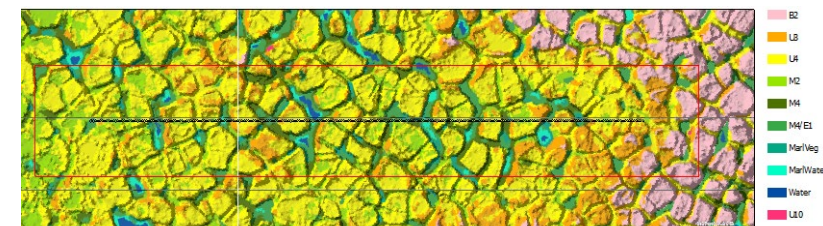


T9 – Ice-rich, phase 1 drained lake basin (left) and Residual surface (right)



Jorgenson site

JS – Residual surface

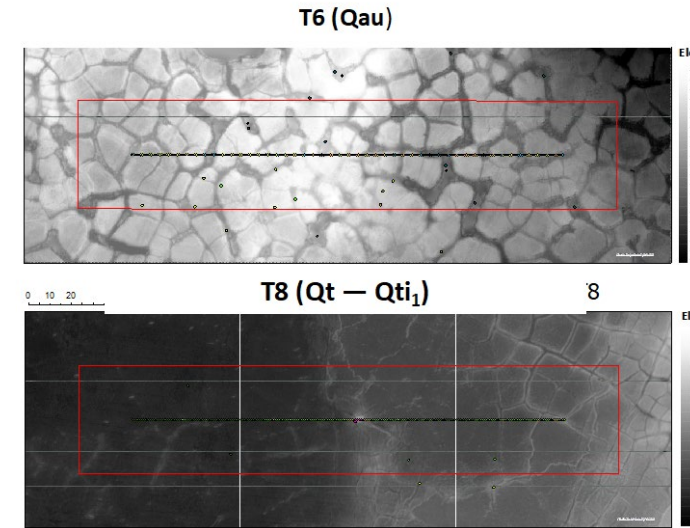
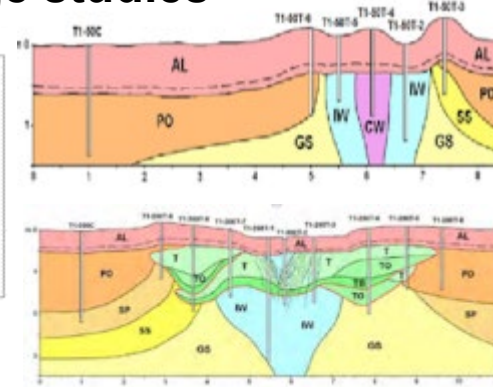
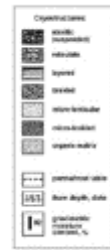


Maps by Olivia Hobgood,
M.S. thesis, in progress

Permafrost research along the transects

D. Nicolsky, V. Romanovsky, M. Kanevskiy, Y. Shur, S. Rybakov,
N. Hasson, T. Jorgenson

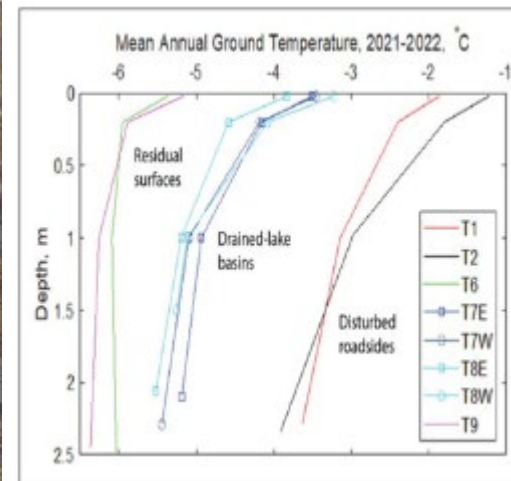
Cryostratigraphy and ice-wedge studies



Active-layer, water depth, dust-layer thickness surveys



Ground-temperatures



Permafrost cores from lake basins and residual surfaces



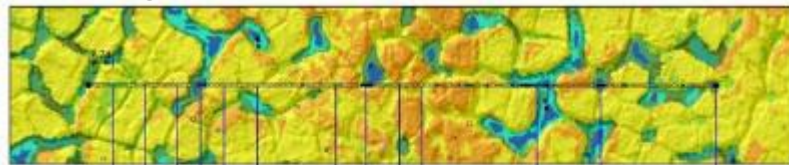
Geophysical research: ERT and CCR surveys

Summer survey 2022-23: Electrical Resistivity Tomography (ERT)

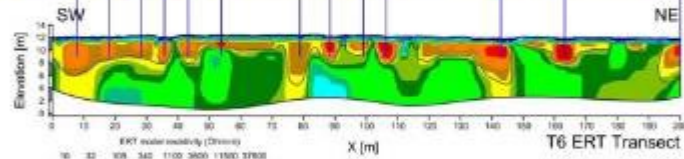


Dmitry Nicolsky
Sergei Rybakov,
Esther Babcock,
Nick Hasson

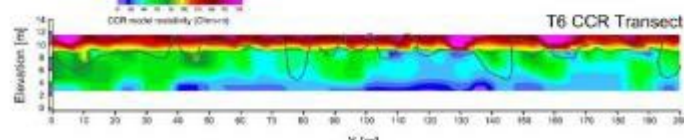
Comparison of the ERT and CCR surveys with vegetation map, T6 residual surface



Veg-habitat map



ERT profile



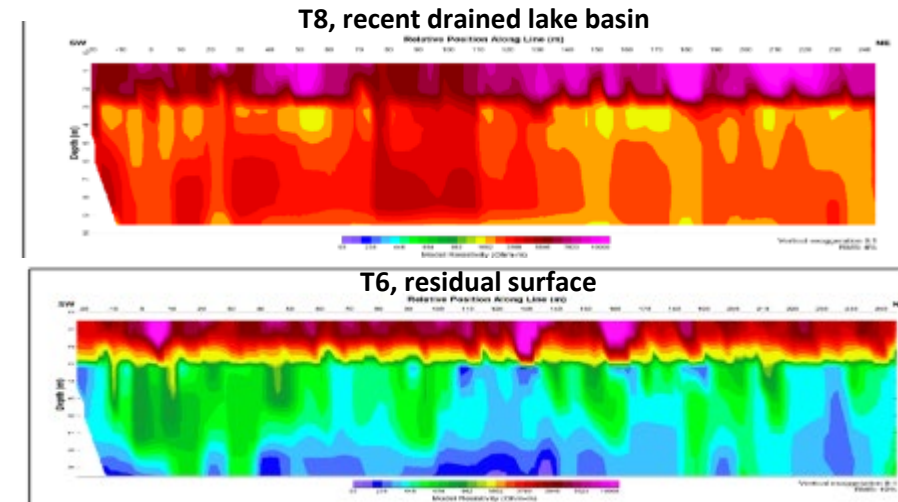
CCR profile

Winter survey 2024: Three dimensional Capacity Coupled Resistivity (3D-CCR) across a gradient of two thaw lakes and a residual surface



Photos: Esther Babcock

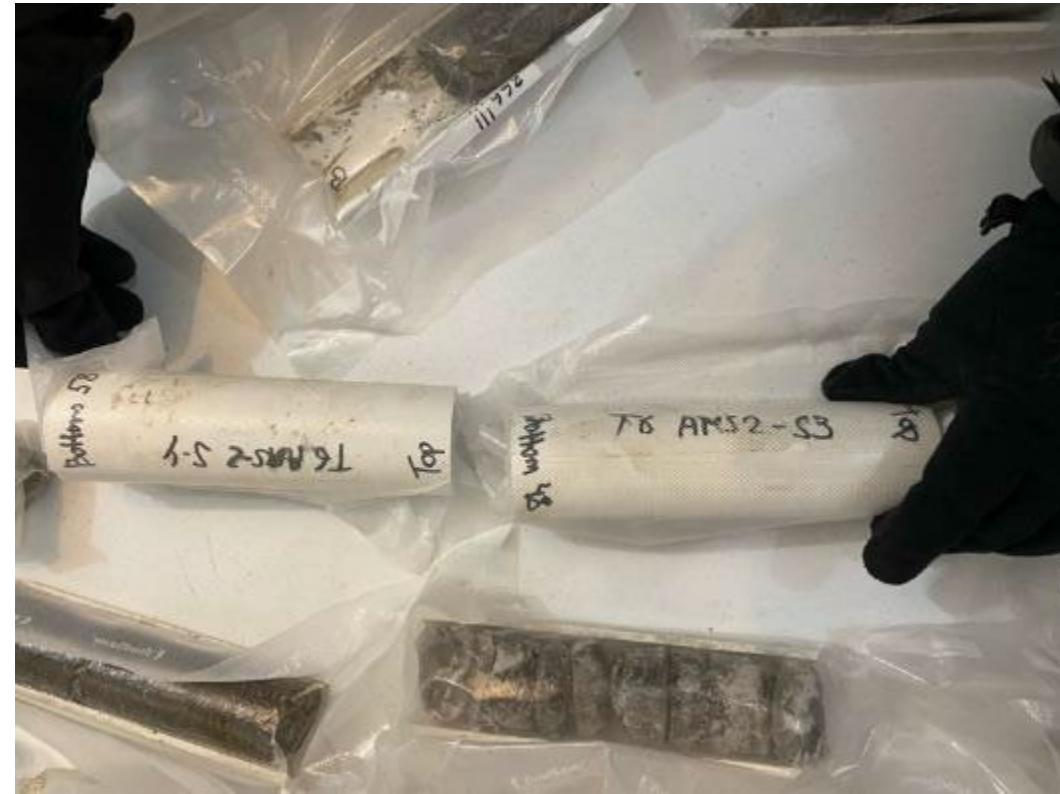
CCR surveys in 2 recent drained lake basins (T7 & T8) and a residual surface (T6)



Photos and surveys by Sergei Rybakov (UAF, GI) and Esther Babcock (Logic Geophysics and Analytics)

Permafrost cores along the transects in lake basins and residual surface

Dmitry Nicolsky, Sergei Rybakov, Nick Hasson



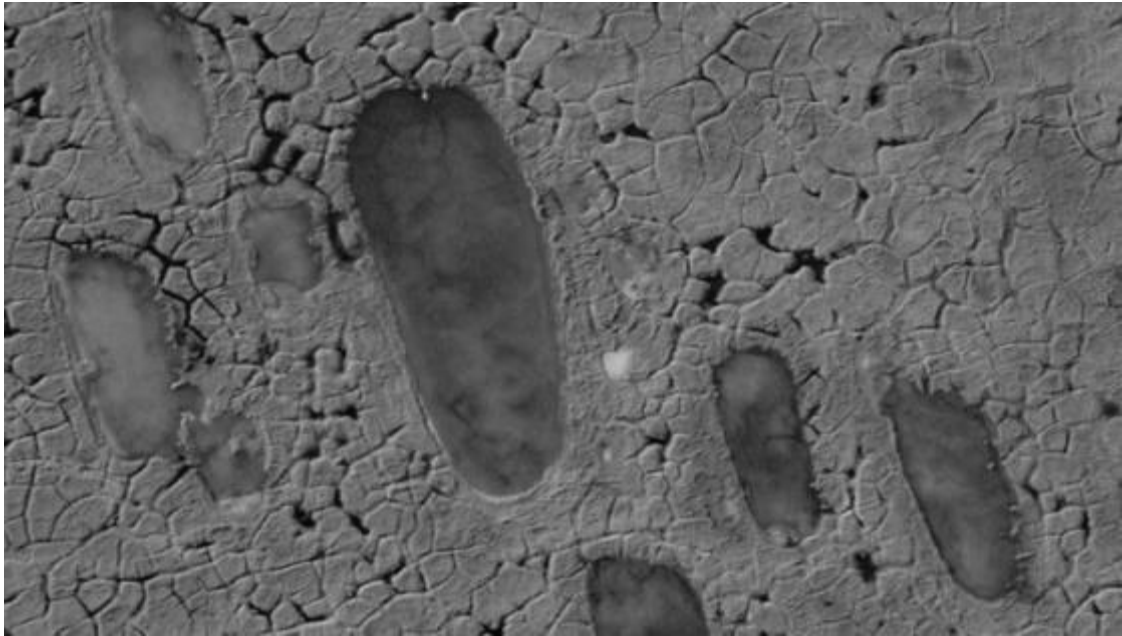
9 cores, approximately 20 meters total

The analysis of the resistivity results and the cores will be the primary focus of the Landscape Evolution studies during the last year of the project.

Conclusion 1. The patterns of Prudhoe Bay landforms, vegetation, and permafrost are strongly controlled by surficial geology.

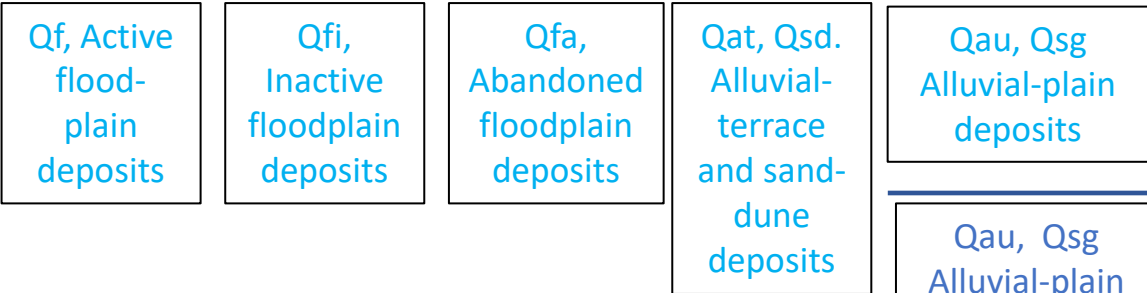


Active alluvial floodplain of the Sagavanirktok River

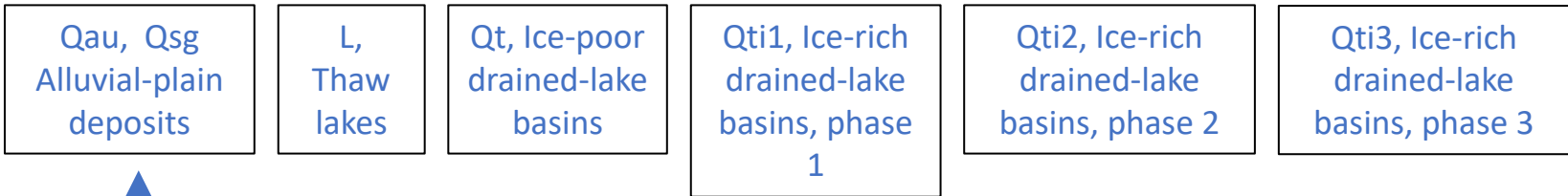


Alluvial plain deposits overlain by eolian silt, and thaw lakes

Active and inactive alluvial floodplains and terraces



Older alluvial deposits overlain by eolian silts and thaw-lake deposits



The histories of the floodplains and thaw-lake landscapes intersect in the alluvial-plain deposits.

Based on Rawlinson 1993

Conclusion 2. Unique aspects of the calcareous alluvial-plain ecosystems are worthy of more detailed studies and conservation.

Calcareous gravel pingos: Focal points of animal activity and plant biodiversity



Mollisol soils



Marl-bottom lakes and ponds

Many Beringian species



Oxytropis borealis

Abundant megafauna



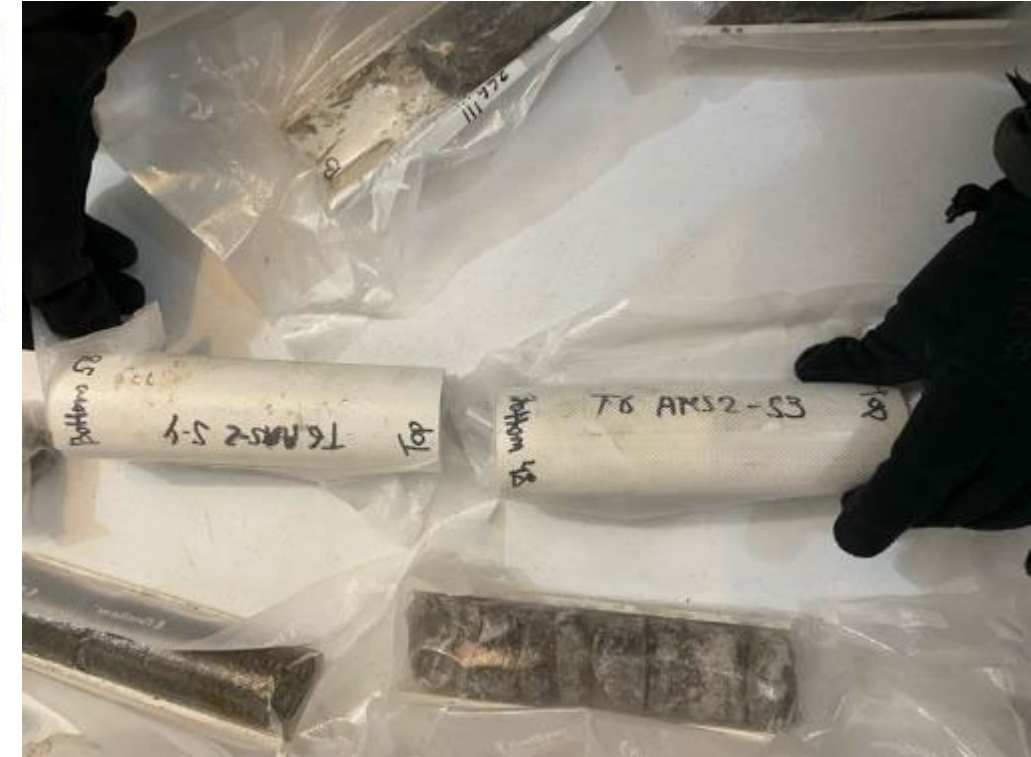
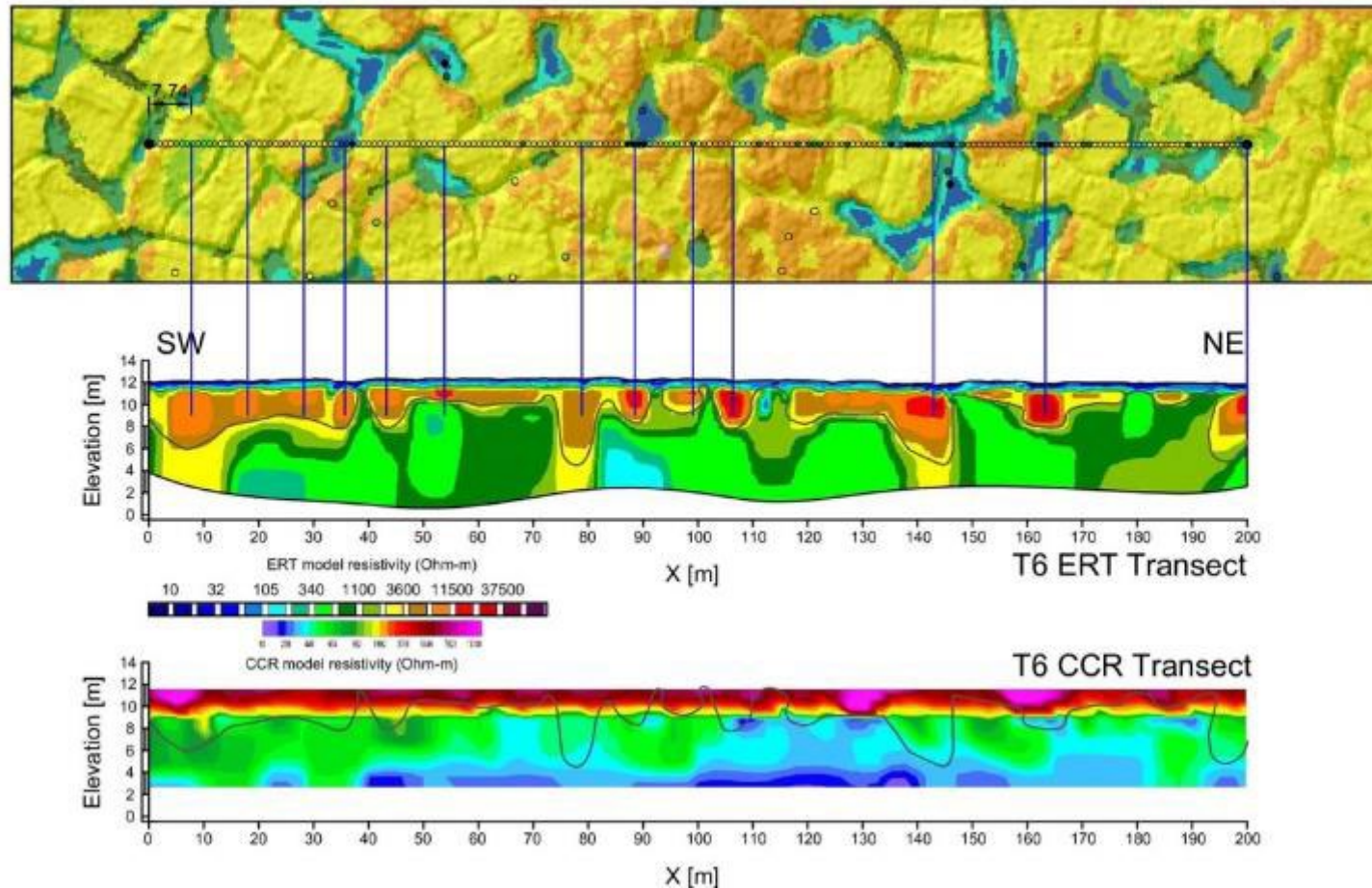
Muskoxen

Rich waterfowl and shorebird nesting grounds



Canada goose nest

Conclusion 3. Future integrated NNA-IRPS studies of surficial geology, landforms, soils, vegetation, and permafrost will likely lead to new understanding of past and potential future permafrost evolution and aid in developing permafrost sensitivity maps.



Thank you!



This talk is the result of many years of funding and assistance from the U.S. National Science Foundation, the U.S. Army Cold Research and Engineering Laboratory, North Slope Borough, the Oil Industry, and many individuals who participated in the studies.

Photo by Amy
Breen, May 2024