



Important Information About the Alaska River Logs

These narratives about trips on Alaska rivers are valuable even decades after they were written. However, we recommend that you to keep the following in mind as you read.

First, a word of warning: use these river logs as one source of information that you will supplement with more. Alaska rivers can be very dangerous because of their remoteness, the climate, their sources, and other factors. Bring adequate and proper clothing, equipment, and food. File a "float plan" with someone who can call for help if you do not return on time. Take a satellite phone or other communications tool if at all possible (but not usually a cell phone because of their limited coverage in Alaska). You should plan carefully for a safe and pleasant trip.

Second, note also that land status information contained in these documents may no longer be accurate. These logs were compiled long before massive land transfers of unreserved public land to restrictive public ownership or private ownership. River users should be careful to follow federal or state regulations where appropriate, and to avoid trespassing on private land. [Here is some additional information Alaska native landowners.](#) You can obtain

information about access on public lands from the [Alaska Public Lands Information Center](#).

Third, be sure to also check current fishing or hunting regulations, as what was legal decades ago may not be legal today. You can obtain information about state fishing and hunting regulations from the [Alaska Department of Fish and Game website](#). More restrictive federal regulations may apply on certain federal lands.

Finally, there may be errors. We are working to make as much of this material as possible searchable by adding a text layer to the original image-only PDF files using a text capture process. This process is ongoing. Where possible, we have also converted these to HTML files. Please note that while we have corrected obvious errors generated during these processes, errors may still remain. There may also be errors in the original material.

[Return to Alaska outdoors areas](#) for more information about boating, fishing and hunting areas.

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IN REPLY REFER TO:

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Memorandum for the Records

From: Jim Morris

Subject: Log of Field Inspection of Canning River including
Marsh Fork, July 17-26

The purpose of this field inspection was to gather general resource information and better acquaint responsible land management agencies with the river corridor.

Participants:

Mike Jacobson, F&WS, Kaktovik
Dave Patterson, F&WS, Anchorage
Bill Long, State of Alaska Div. of Geological and Geophysical
Surveys, Anchorage
Bill Welch, HCRS, Anchorage
Jim Morris, HCRS, Anchorage, Trip Leader

July 17

A "Turbo Beaver" chartered from Sea Airmotive in Anchorage was our transportation to the Marsh Fork of the Canning River. Dave, Bill Welch, and I left Anchorage in the morning and picked up Mike at a refueling stop in Fairbanks. After a long slow flight and a short stop at Ft. Yukon the Turbo Beaver set us down on a gravelbar on the Marsh Fork about 2 1/2 river miles above the confluence with the creek originating near Porcupine Lake (T7S, R26E). This was about as far up river we felt we could float with existing water level and also have a gravelbar suitable for even the short landing and take off capability of a Turbo Beaver. We found ourselves surrounded by some of the impressively beautiful mountain scenery which is typical of the eastern Brooks Range. The Marsh Fork cuts a narrow swath through these mountains all the way to the confluence with the main stem where the main stem of the Canning River continues for an additional few river miles through the mountains. The Marsh Fork appears deceptively shallow from the air because of its clarity. Actually its swiftness and depth make crossing it on foot a somewhat difficult task. During the late evening the river temporarily rose a few inches, probably as a result of snow melt in the headwaters during the day.

July 18

Bill, Mike, and I spent much of the day exploring a small tributary to the east of Marsh Fork. We found the walking terrain to be very good. Above the floodplain the terrain is mostly dry, firm, and free from thick, tall brush or tussocks. Similar terrain is found along the river until the main stem exits from the mountains. We watched a band of over 70 sheep apparently all ewes and lambs along the south slope of the creek drainage. We also spotted a golden eagle and a single caribou. We checked out the creek draining the lake known as Xray Lake (T7S, R26E) and found the water level to be much too low for floating. While walking in the evening on the west side of the river we spotted a wolf and a red fox and three rams high above us on a ridge.

July 19

In the morning we inflated and loaded our two rafts (13' Avon Adventurer and a 12' Avon Redshank) and started off. This upper part of the Marsh Fork has a moderately fast current of about 6 to 7 mph. The river is very braided and the best channel is not always obvious. The river bottom is gravel. We encountered a few narrow places and several shallow ripple bars, some requiring short distances of dragging. Overhanging willow brush is a little annoying but posed no hazards for us. During about 2 1/2 hours on the river we traveled about 10 river miles. Over this distance the river passes through a valley about 1/3 mile wide on the floor, with high scenic rock ridges on either side. We spotted a few sheep and 1 cow caribou during the day. We made camp on a low gravelly bench on the west bank of the river. Firewood is sparse. The air and water temperature at 5:00 p.m., were 62oF and 45oF respectively. In the evening we hiked up a creek flowing out of a narrow canyon typical of many canyons adjoining the Marsh Fork. The terrain on the canyon floor offered easy walking. Poplar trees up to 15 feet high occupied two separate draws along the north side of the particular canyon we walked up. Bill Long arrived by chopper late in the evening.

July 20

Today's floating provided us with the best float boating waters of the entire trip. During about 4 hours on the river we traveled about 20 river miles. The first three river miles are very braided and shallow in several places so that dragging the boats over very short distances occasionally was necessary. A short stretch of Class II rapids with many rocks to maneuver around is encountered before entering somewhat of a canyon where the river is mostly contained within a single channel. For four miles the river offers exciting Class II rapids with some bordering on Class III. The challenge, although not a difficult one in rafts, comes from maneuvering among the many rocks in moderately swift water (averaging about 6 mph). At the north end of the "canyon" are good gravelbars for aircraft use which appear to have received regular

use. A rough landing strip has been marked with rocks and flagging. The next 4 to 5 miles of river includes about **I** mile of braided river and then more rapids, Class **II** and possibly Class **III**. The waves here are higher than those encountered further up river. Some large rocks are in the river and one short navigable falls that a boater may easily avoid. There are also a few sharp angle turns here and elsewhere on the river where the water rushes against a rock wall. These places are easily spotted from a reasonable distance up river. However, at higher water, these places could be very dangerous. The remainder of the day's float was mostly along braided river with intermittent short stretches with rapids.

During the day we saw one bull caribou, a few sheep, and two golden eagles. Dave caught a few grayling up to 12' long and several small Arctic char. We explored a spring spilling water down a steep slope into the river along its west bank. Bill Long estimated the flow to be 20 cfs. Poplar trees about 20 feet high and up to about 5 inches in diameter grow near the spring.

July 21

During about 2 hours on the river we floated about 10 river miles. The river current is about 6 mph. About half way through the days float we arrived at the main stem of the Canning River. In disappointing contrast to the Marsh Fork the main stem was very silty and continued to be cloudy the remainder of the trip. The confluence area of the Marsh Fork and main stem is very braided. Careful selection of a channel is important. We encountered some shallow ripple bars which required dragging the boats very short distances. Below the confluence the river is still very braided but the main channel is obvious. Near the river on the east side is a lake about 1/3 mile long. We saw Arctic char in the lake but were unsuccessful in catching any. A few grayling were caught in the river.

July 22

We traveled about 15 river miles in about 4 1/2 hours of floating. Much of the river is braided but the main channel is easy to follow. The river moves at a good rate with some Class **II** rapids. An upstream wind slowed our progress and made it very difficult to keep the rafts in the main current, away from the banks. The scenery changed drastically as we left the mountains and entered the foothills country. We camped up stream from the outflow of Shublik Spring, a major spring. In the evening Bill Long and I hiked to the source of the spring where we found most of the water coming from 3 places. A relatively lush growth of flowers and other low growing vegetation occurs around the source area of the springs. Tall willow shrub grow along the length of Shublik Creek.

July 23

We floated about 16 miles, camping near the mouth of Ignek Creek. In the afternoon we encountered the first incremental weather of the trip. We had rain, and worse, wind. Even with a good gradient and current the wind makes it very difficult for rafts on the river. Wildlife viewing was very limited. Grizzly bear tracks, but no bears were seen.

July 24

We floated about 20 miles of river during 6 hours on the river and perhaps 4 hours of actual floating. The river now is mostly a single channel with very little braiding. The river maintains a good gradient and a current of about 3 to 4 mph. Some Class II rapids in the river. The main channel is about 50 yards wide with gravel and rock bottom. The surrounding country-side is characterized by low, rolling hills. We found the walking terrain on the low ridges to be pretty good.

July 25

We traveled about 9 river miles during 3 hours on the river. We stopped at a gravelbar suitable for our pick-up plane (Turbo Beaver) to land on. The location is immediately above the Staines River Delta. The terrain is mostly flat, typical of the Arctic coastal plain. The river still has a surprisingly strong current for this close to the sea. The following day while flying out we overflowed a portion of the braided river and noted that the river continues to have a noticeable current all the way to the sea.

July 26

In the morning we experienced rain and heavy ground fog (to be expected near the coast) but our pick-up plane was able to come in during the afternoon.

Summary

The Marsh Fork offers a very good float boating experience in a raft or whitewater kayak. The river has sufficient gradient to provide moderate to fairly fast current, and has frequent rapids and even a couple short, low drops. The use of canoes or large rigid kayaks is not practical because of difficult access. The use of a folding flatwater type kayaks on Marsh Fork is not recommended because of the many rocks to maneuver around. The Canning below the confluence with the Marsh Fork is quite braided but has a moderate gradient and current and offers good floatboating. Less maneuvering is required.

In addition to floatboating the most outstanding feature of this river is the scenery. It is an intimate river where the mountains rise up within easy walking distance from much of the river. Travelers should allow plenty of extra time to walk up and explore some of the many canyons and ridges accessible from the river. The opportunities for hiking in the mountains region are excellent. Although requiring more time, a hike from the Canning River up Ignek Valley between the Sadlerochet and Shublik Mountains is reported to be worth the effort.

The Canning River passes through a very interesting as well as scenic geologic display. The stratigraphic record revealed in the rocks of the Sadlerochit and Shublik Mountains is very similar to that in the area of Prudhoe Bay oil field. Thus a traveler through this area has the opportunity to see and interpret the same rock sequence and phenomenon that is present in the petroleum bearing rocks underneath the Arctic Slope. Viewable from the river are textbook examples of structural features formed by the uplift of the mountains.

Camping sites along the river's gravelbars are numerous. Firewood, however, is generally scarce. Fishing for grayling and Arctic char during our trip was poor. The fishing probably changes with the time of year and with water clarity. Although we did not observe or catch any, anadromous char reportedly run in the river. Except for many Dall sheep observed on the slopes above the Marsh Fork, wildlife viewing was poor. Of course this can also vary with time of year or from year to year.

Access to the Canning River and Marsh Fork for floatboaters is by chartered aircraft. Expense will be high, as it is for access to many north Alaska rivers. Chartering a plane from Anchorage, as we did because of unique circumstances, is not recommended. Kaktovik (Barter Island) is served once a week and Ft. Yukon and Prudhoe Bay receive flights every day. Each of these locations has charter services available, however, availability of desired type of aircraft must be checked and confirmed. The use of the gravelbars require aircraft capable of landing and taking off in short distances on rough terrain.