



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.

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UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

D3450 Alaska

TO : Files

DATE: September 12, 1974

FROM : Patrick Pourchot

SUBJECT: John River Field Inspection Log (July 8 through 19, 1974)

The following is a day-by-day account of a field inspection of the John River conducted July 8 through July 19, 1974. The purpose of the inspection was to provide technical assistance to the National Park Service in analyzing the resources of the John River in terms of the national wild and scenic rivers program and BOR's other river studies in Alaska. The following people participated in the inspection:

Pat Pourchot	BOR, Anchorage
John Kauffmann	NPS, Anchorage
Alan Batten	Univ. of Alaska, Fairbanks
Dave Schmidt	Sourdough Outfitters, Bettles

July 8. I left Anchorage in the early afternoon, flew to Fairbanks and on to Bettles via Wien arriving about 5:30 p.m. Alan also flew to Bettles from Fairbanks. We met Dave in Bettles and the three of us took an overflight of the river in the early evening with Jerry Coser in Merric's Cessna 185.

We flew up the John from its confluence with the Koyukuk to the village of Anaktuvuk Pass in its headwaters, landed briefly at the village, then returned down the river to Bettles. Approximate flying time was 1.8 hours. The water was extremely low and very clear. Above the Hunt Fork confluence, the river appeared navigable by canoe only four or five miles before becoming so shallow and rocky that one would have to portage, line, and drag the canoes more than riding in them. Shallow riffles and "rock gardens" were observed upstream of Hunt Fork for about 22 miles to the vicinity of the lake just west of the river marked with an elevation of 1968 on the map. Upstream of this lake the river character was entirely different with low gradient, few rocks, and considerable meander loops. Although extremely small, the channel appeared navigable by canoe in this upper 13-mile stretch to within a mile or two of Anaktuvuk Pass.

Of the three possible put-in points, Anaktuvuk Pass, the 1968-foot



lake, or the lake at the Hunt Fork confluence, we decided to put in at the Hunt Fork Lake because of the 20-mile stretch of rocks above. It was difficult to visualize that stretch in higher water, although it seemed that *many* of the rocky places and shallow riffles might "wash out" and become navigable. Several places could also become more serious rapids in higher water. Around Till Creek the main channel flowed directly into a rock wall in at least one place and could become a major obstacle in higher water.

Downstream of Hunt Fork no rapids, log jams or dangerous sweepers were observed. We saw one blond grizzly lying near the river around Till Creek and several moose in lakes in the lower river area. There was recent snow on the mountains surrounding Anaktuvuk Pass. Overnight in Bettles Lodge.

July 9. Flew in to Hunt Fork Lake with Jerry Coser in Beaver on floats around noon. Carried in 2 canoes (rented from Dave Ketscher in Bettles), all our gear and Dave, Alan, and myself in one trip. Roundtrip time was approximately 1-1/2 hours. Weather was cloudy with periods of very light rain. Air temperature at 4:00 p.m. was 52°F, at 8:45 p.m., 40°F. Very few mosquitoes.

We camped on a small ridge on the north side of the lake near a USGS benchmark, elevation 1149. Campsite showed some prior evidence of use - ground dug up and leveled at one spot, some litter on lake margin, cut stumps. About 1/2 mile east of camp along John River were remains of old burned cabin. Many cans, animal bones, and debris around cabin clearing. Sled or snow-machine trail had been cut between cabin and lake.

Fished lake but nothing caught. We saw several grayling follow lures. Saw a porcupine near old cabin. Moose, wolf, and bear sign were observed near camp. Large flock of scoters on lake when we flew in.

Mostly white spruce and birch trees located around camp. Timberline on south-facing slopes above Hunt Fork was 2,000-2,500 feet in elevation whereas trees on the north-facing slope were growing only 100-200 feet above the river. At camp the largest spruce were 36 inches and 40 inches in circumference at breast height.

At the confluence the valley floor is about 1-1/2 miles across.

Very few rock exposures on mountain slopes rising above river and virtually no snow visible.

July 10. Weather overcast in morning, partly cloudy in late afternoon and clear by 9:00 p.m. Afternoon, high of 52°F and low of 38°F at 11:30 p.m.

Hiked up the John from camp; round-trip about 13 miles between 10:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. We walked up river bars about 2 miles, had to cross river several times, easy fording. Then crossed to east side of river and hiked up to first bench about 300 feet above river and continued through open country along the east side of the valley another 4 miles. Then climbed up to about 2,000 foot level about 800 feet above river and could see Publituk Creek confluence and northern tree-line just beyond.

Came back along second bench on mountain side. Good hiking most of way with rock - alpine tundra surface except for occasional brushy ravines.

Caught 2 grayling in river 1 mile up from camp, 10 inches and 12 inches. Saw ptarmigan and brood and many parka squirrels on hike. Near camp saw young muskrat in lake, some porcupice, and 3 snowshoe hares.

Several planes flew over during day. On hike, found beer can and Dall sheep skull. Several man-cut trees on west bank of river about 1 mile from camp.

After dropping down onto flood plain on hike back, we walked along the Hickel Highway (winter haul road) for about 1/2 mile. The surface of roadway was very smooth and quite distinct because of its linear configuration and small berm on either side and because of the distinct differences in vegetation found on the road versus alongside the road. The road surface was covered by small plants and shrubs seldom exceeding 2 feet whereas adjacent areas were covered with large poplar trees and willows. No significant erosion was observed in this section. The roadway paralleled the river about 100-200 yards away separated by thick floodplain vegetation. The road makes frequent crossings of the river where the river meanders from one side of the valley to the other. Such crossings we observed made use of gravel bars and were not readily visible from the river at most oblique angles to the road.

July 11. Weather in the morning clear and warm, by late afternoon mostly cloudy, a little rain, and occasional light wind. High near 60°F, 9:30 p.m. temperature 56°F.

Hiked east to Pamichtuk Lake and back, roundtrip 10 miles. Left camp 10:30 a.m. arrived lake 2:00p.m., left lake 4:00 p.m. and arrived camp 7:00 p.m. Walking very rough most of way high on south side of John tributary canyon. Although above treeline and mostly open tundra, ground was very hummocky and intersected by alder-filled ravines. Tundra surprisingly dry but mosquitoes plentiful.

Sweeping vistas from slopes and view into Pamichtuk Lake drainage quite scenic. Lake margin very marshy and buggy. Water in lake murky and had very noticeable aftertaste to it; 55-gal. drum found at west end of lake.

Saw moose across tributary valley above timberline traveling west. Saw 2 adult ptarmigan and brood and a few ducks and terns on Pamichtuk Lake. On Hunt Fork Lake saw adult muskrat in Hunt Fork **Lake**.

July 12. Weather much improved, mostly sunny, high 71°F, 9:00p.m. temp. was 66°F, Hunt Fork 53°F, 9:00p.m. John River temp. 58°F.

In morning portaged canoes and gear from lake to Hunt Fork. **One-** half mile portage over open marshy tundra and gravel bars fairly easy, took 2 hours. Took quick swim in Hunt Fork.

John Kauffmann flew in with Jerry Coser in Beaver about 2:30 p.m. and we started down river about 3:15 p.m. Hunt Fork joined main river about 1/2 mile down from put-in. Arrived camp near Crag Peak at 6:15 p.m. 12 miles downstream of put-in.

River beyond Hunt Fork 30-40 yards wide average depth 2 feet, 5-6 mph current. Although shallow, hit rocks in riffles only 2 or 3 times and had to get out of canoe only once to drag through shallow riffle. All class **I** with exception of one class **II** bend and riffle with sweepers and small standing waves. Much of distance river was braided with extensive gravel bars; many fast riffles. Water was extremely clear with visibility to bottom of 5-6 foot holes. Hunt Fork somewhat smaller than John at confluence.

Good vistas up and down river. Much narrower valley than other Brooks Range rivers, such as North Fork Koyukuk - valley floor 1 mile wide. Many mountains sloping right down to floodplain. Mostly spruce and balsam poplar and willow along river banks.

Around Hunt Fork Lake saw female merganser, several ptarmigan, pair of widgeons. Near camp bear & wolf tracks. Lots of mosquitoes at Crag Mt. camp.

Old cabin with caved-in roof 1/2-1 mile upstream of camp on east bank, apparently trapper's line cabin - very small - several planes and 1 helicopter over during day.

July 13. Weather clear, sunny, 4:00p.m. air 84°F, water 60°F; 11:30 p.m. air 56°F. River up 4 inches overnight and a little less clear, visibility 1-1/2 feet.

Left July 12 camp 11:30 a.m., arrived new camp 2:15 p.m. 2-1/2 miles below Tangleblue Creek. Traveled 10 miles.

Hiked to top of 3,700 foot peak nearest river up from camp base elevation 900 feet, five miles roundtrip, 3 hours up and 1-1/2 hours back. Excellent hiking with mostly rock ridges and alpine tundra stretching right down to river. Great views up and down John River valley from top; could see upriver to just below Hunt Fork and downriver to Threetime Mountain. One patch of snow near top. Few mosquitoes most of hike. Went for quick swim at camp upon return.

At camp river 30-40 yards wide, 3-4 feet deep, 3-4 mph current. River slightly slower than previous day, more high cut banks and sweepers; hit rocks once in shallow riffle, all class I and very easy canoeing.

In morning at previous camp saw Dall sheep ewe and lamb on Crag Peak. Raptor nests on cliffs on Crag Peak. Saw black wolf on gravel bar 100 yards from new camp. He barked and howled briefly at us before running into brush. Saw Dall sheep sign and caribou antlers but no game on hike. At camp rabbit, lynx, wolf, and moose tracks.

New camp at Hickel Highway river crossing. Roadway brushy but very distinct from adjacent areas because of difference in height and type of vegetation. A couple fruit cans were found

in roadway.

July 14. Clear and sunny all day, 9:15 a.m. air 68°F, water 56°F; 1:30 p.m. air 77°F, water 58°F; 6:15 p.m. air 84°F, water 61°F; 11:00 p.m. air 63°F, water 58°F. River up 2 inches overnight.

Alan and John hiked up Hickel Highway to cabin and cache at Tangleblue Creek. Roof caved in; appeared to be old trapper's cabin. Hickel Highway not eroded but cut into tundra 1 to 2 feet and very marshy in places, mostly sedges and grasses in 50-foot roadbed with small tussocks, very little shrubby vegetation like adjacent areas.

Dave hiked up Eagle Creek (dry) and found miner's old tent camp, several old implements, name "Claus" on ~~box~~ from Anchorage. I took another ~~swlm~~ at camp.

Left camp about 2:30 p.m. and arrived new camp near Gunsight Creek about 5:30 p.m., a distance of 6 miles. On way, we hiked short distances up a slough and Sheep Creek which was dry. Found small old trapline shelter at Sheep Creek confluence.

Section of river exceptionally scenic with rugged mountains surrounding river at close distances. Views of Gunsight Mountain especially outstanding. Many cliffs and exposed rock on mountain top ..

No luck fishing at previous night camp. Saw one stand of birch trees along river. Mosquitoes good most of day but high temperatures brought out the horse flies which were biting bare legs. In evenings temperature dropped and mosquitoes came out.

River becoming more mature, only 1 riffle in 6 miles although current still averaging 4 mph. Still silty from some unknown upstream source.

In evening climbed up knolls to the west of camp. Great hiking on good rock ridges and alpine tundra 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., 2 miles roundtrip. Found one juniper bush up on south-facing rock sheltered area.

July 15. Another clear, sunny day. 9:30 a.m. air 74°F; 3:00 p.m. air 76 °F, water 62°F. Winds upriver in a.m. 5-10 mph, in p.m. 10-15 mph. River dropped 3-4 inches overnight.

Left camp 11:00 a.m., arrived Allen River 2:30 p.m., ate lunch, then floated down 1/2 mile to Crevice Creek, hiked up 1/2 mile to Fikes' homestead, visited Fikes family and geologists there, left Crevice Creek 7:00 p.m., arrived new **camp** at Grizzly Creek 8:00 p.m. Total distance floated 16 miles. Last hour hard, steady paddling.

River much slower, bigger - 40-50 yards wide, 3-4 feet deep, 2-3 mph current. Allen River only tributary except Wolverine Creek so far with water in it at confluence. Allen very clear, less than a foot deep, 15 feet wide, 66°F at 3:00 p.m. Crevice Creek had no water at confluence but a little at Fikes' 1/2 mile upstream (probably similar to other dry tributaries).

A group of 8 or so geologists and Fikes' 4 kids were down at Crevice Creek confluence swimming when we stopped. The geologists were working for a private consulting firm doing work for an unidentified mineral development company. They contracted to use Fikes' as a base of operations and worked out of there with a helicopter everyday in adjacent mountain areas.

Fikes has the only real homestead in the arctic with a log house, front lawn, airstrip, barn, 25 acres of hay and oats, 4 or 5 horses, 20 chickens and 4 geese. He makes money principally through guiding hunters in August and September. He leads 4-6 hunters a year by horseback into nearby mountain areas for sheep, bear, moose, and caribou (principally sheep). Appears to be very sensitive to the environment, game management, fair-chase hunts, and provision of quality hunts. He stated that he would like to get into photographic and non-hunting pack trips. Fikes had recorded 4 straight days in 80's with 89°F high.

From camp at Grizzly Creek we hiked back 1/2 mile to east to a lake Fikes had told us about for pike fishing. Caught 2 little pike, no keepers. Back at camp we saw land otter swimming down river. Also lots of mosquitoes.

July 16. Another great day although partly cloudy. 9:30 a.m. air 70°F, afternoon high in mid 70's, 6:30 p.m. water 62°F, 11:30 p.m. air 49°F. River dropped 1 or 2 inches.

Left camp 11:00 a.m., arrived lunch at Threetime Mountain 1:00 p.m., climbed Threetime; left Threetime 5:30 p.m., arrived new camp near Button Mountain at 7:30 p.m. Distance of 18 miles for the day.

Tough hiking up Threetime, lots of brush most of way, 1-1/2 hours up, 1 hour back, roundtrip 4 miles. Great view from top up and down John and behind into valley where Hickel Highway runs. Nice rock ridge along top. Took long swim in river upon return.

Four hours of hard paddling today. Lots of slow water, less than 2 mph current. River fairly clear and very low.

Saw cow moose in slough from top of Threetime. Mosquitoes somewhat worse today because of little wind. Saw a couple owls, goshawks.

July 17. Yet another great day with mostly clear skies. 9:00am air 64°F, light wind; 2:00 p.m. air 76°F, water 65°F; 8:30 p.m. air 70°F, water 66°F.

Left camp 11:00 a.m., arrive lunch 2:00 p.m., 11 or 12 miles downstream, after several stops arrive new camp just on to Bettles Quad map at 8:30 p.m. Total distance 24 miles in 6 hours of moderate, steady paddling.

River clear, low, 50-60 yards wide, 4-5 feet deep, slightly more current than yesterday - 3 mph; mostly smooth meandering water except several riffles, all class I.

After Button Mountain, large burn over much of area with large fields of fireweed. Hills and mountains usually within sight from river. A few impressive rock outcrops and high eroded banks along river.

Saw pair of rough-legged hawks and a chick in a nest in tall spruce along river. Also large bull moose lying down on gravel bar, a cow moose, several arctic loons, terns, and sandpipers. Stopped to fish old ox-bow lake off river - only mosquitoes biting. As along upper river, lots of wolf tracks observed. Fished Goose Slough, again no luck for pike but saw beaver, muskrat, geese, and ducks. No luck for grayling in river - getting hungry for fish.

Stopped at old log cabin and cache at Timber Creek. Roof caved in, several old cans and pipes around, cache down. Again, several planes over and back as in all previous days.

July 18. Weather cloudy, threatening, short rain during night.

10:00 a.m. air 67°F; 2:00 p.m. air 64°F, water 64°F; 8:00 p.m. air 58°F, John water 62°F, Koyukuk water 61°F, light rain, overcast, windy.

Left camp 11:00 a.m.; arrive new camp at Koyukuk River confluence 3:45 p.m. Total distance 15 miles in 3-1/2 hours of moderate, steady paddling.

River still low, clear, slow with many spots less than 2mph although some stretches of 3-4 mph current. Koyukuk River also low, clear, about twice size of John with similar current.

One very scenic bend with rock bank showing tight vertical strata 30-40 feet high. Saw small black bear along river.

From confluence we hiked 1 mile down the Koyukuk to old Bettles on north bank. Many old buildings and cabins still standing - very interesting historic site - 2 cabins had been lived in recently.

July 19. Drizzly weather most of day. Spent 3 hours lining canoes upstream, 5 miles to Bettles Field. Lining was very easy from large gravel bars and required ferrying across river only 4 or 5 times. Although somewhat faster and easier with 2 people on bow and stern, one person could line alone successfully. Needed about 40 to 50 feet of rope on both bow and stern to get canoe in deep enough water and allow you to walk on dry ground.

Arrived in Bettles about 2:30 p.m. and got Dave Ketschev's truck to move canoes from river back to Dave's store and canoe rental in back of Bettles Lodge. John, Alan and I caught a ride back to Fairbanks in an Air North plane in hopes of catching an earlier flight out of Fairbanks to Anchorage. However, all flights were booked and John and I returned to Anchorage on Wien's 9:00 p.m. flight.

General

From Hunt Fork to the mouth of the John is approximately 101 miles which we covered in approximately 22 hours on the river plus an additional 5 miles up the Koyukuk in 3 hours. Most of this time on the water was moderate, steady paddling. The eleven days out was just about right to allow time for off-river hikes, frequent stops, and short paddling days. At no point did we feel that we had to push to make mileage. If one were purely

"floating" the river and not wishing to paddle, they should probably allow an additional 15-20 hours on the river.

The river is an excellent family canoe river with virtually all class I water from Hunt Fork - current except in a few lower river areas, is moderate. Hiking opportunities are excellent from the river, especially in the Gunsight Mountain area. Many "high and dry" ridges come right down to the river affording great hiking routes up nearby mountains and into alpine areas. The great relief and proximity of adjacent mountains to the valley floor also provides outstanding scenery over much of the upper and middle river area.

Despite the great visual scar of the winter haul road as viewed from the air, the John River valley is surprisingly pristine and primitive. From the river the Hickel Highway was only seen where it occasionally crossed the river and most of these crossings utilized gravel bars and large bank cuts or timber cuts were not observed. With the exception of several old trapping cabins and the Fikes homestead, few signs of man were seen along the river. However, aircraft traffic up and down the valley was significant and detracted somewhat from a wilderness experience.

Wildlife **was** only occasionally observed, although sign was very common. Fishing **was** poor; this was probably affected by extremely low water conditions and time of the year.

Pourchot:vu

