

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

TO : Files

DATE: September 16, 1974

FROM : Patrick Pourchot

SUBJECT: Log of Upper Kobuk River Field Inspection - 8/81 through 8/20/74.

The following is a day-by-day account of a field inspection of the Upper Kobuk River from Walker Lake to the village of Kobuk conducted August 8 through August 20, 1974. The purpose of the trip was to provide technical assistance to the National Park Service in analyzing the resources of the Upper Kobuk River in terms of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers program and BOR's other Alaskan river studies. The following people participated in the inspection:

*Buff Bohlen	Dept. of the Interior, Washington D.C.
Ted Swem	National Park Service, Washington D.C.
Ted Swem, Jr.	"
Scott Grundy	Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game, Fbks.
*Debbie Clausen	Fairbanks Center for the Environment, Fbks.
Ed Porter	Univ. of Alaska, Fairbanks
Pat Pourchot	BOR, Anchorage

*Buff went out and Debbie came in just below Lower Kobuk Canyon, Aug. 13.

August 8. In a.m. I took Wien flight to Fairbanks where I met Scott and Ed. We left Fairbanks 11:00 a.m. in Dept. of Interior Goose and arrived in Bettles around noon. After eating lunch we flew to Walker Lake and then down the Upper Kobuk River about 35 miles, to below the Lower Kobuk Canyon. The river was clear and looked at normal water level. It appeared we would have to portage short rapids just below Walker Lake outlet and perhaps line around rapids in Lower Canyon.

We arrived at camp, set up by John Kauffmann of the National Park Service at north end of Walker Lake, around 3:00 p.m. With John was bush pilot Charlie Allen and his Cessna 185 on floats. John and Charlie reported having just survived a tremendous downpour moments before we arrived. But the weather was then clear and sunny with 62°F air temperature, 57°F lake temperature.



Tried fishing at stream mouth near camp but no luck. Stream very muddy after rain.

About 5:00 p.m., Buff, Ted, Ted Jr. and Will Troyer of the Fish and Wildlife Service arrived in another Dept. of the Interior Goose.

Between 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. Ted Jr. and I climbed small peak in back of camp. Very steep hiking/climbing but not very brushy. Saw adult peregrine falcon near top in same place John had reported seeing immature bird the day before. We assumed there must be nest in vicinity but couldn't locate. John also saw black bear near camp the day before.

August 9. Will Troyer and pilot left in morning. Rest of party shuttled down to south end of lake in Charlie's plane and spent most of day fishing and hiking around outlet river. Weather overcast with 58° air temperature and 58° river temperature in afternoon.

Grayling fishing was excellent at outlet; caught dozens of 10-12" grayling and about 2 dozen 12-15" ones. No lake trout.

Walked down to rapids about 3/4 mile below Walker Lake and found them unrunnable by canoe. Selected a portage route high on east side which was fairly good walking.

That evening Ed Hall and Richard Stern, two archeologists working around Walker Lake, joined us for fish supper. They showed us some stone chips, scrapers, and projectile points which they had excavated from various sites around the lake.

August 10. Shuttled people and gear down to outlet in morning and Buff, Ted, and Ed went for short overflight of Mt. Igikpak and the Arrigetch Peaks. The three 17-foot Grumman canoes rented from Dave Ketscher in Bettles had been brought in to Walker Lake several days before by Jerry Coser in his Beaver. John had used them around the lake and then Charlie had shuttled them down to the outlet.

We ate lunch and started down the river at 12:45 p.m. The weather was excellent, p.m. air 70°F, water 58°F clear skies, light wind upriver.

Easy Class I water first 3/4 mile, then 1/3 mile of Class V rapids. Four major drops of several feet for a total drop of about 20 feet, many large boulders scattered throughout channel, lots of hydraulics, and cross-currents, haystacks, and no clear channels or chutes. Needless to say we portaged around on east side over a high bench with game trails and sparse tree cover; fairly easy walking with only brief uphill and downhill stretches. Everyone made 3 trips and completed portage in 1 hour. (Ron Yarnell told me later that there was very good trail along west bank which they used). Rapids easy to hear and no trouble getting out in time.

Below rapids, 1/2 mile of good Class II whitewater requiring maneuvering around rocks and through riffles but not dangerous. One chute had 2 foot standing waves. Below this stretch all Class I water to camp.

River below Kobuk River confluence 25 yards wide, 4-5 feet deep with 10 foot holes, 3-4 mph current, extremely clear with visibility to 10 feet. Outlet river joins main Kobuk about 4 miles from Walker Lake. Main Kobuk slightly more volume than outlet river.

Camped 8 miles below Walker Lake. About 2-1/2 hours on river - very little paddling.

Just below Class II whitewater we saw about 10 chum salmon spawning in the river. Caught one, about 5 pounds, in pretty poor shape.

Mountains in Walker-Lake area visible from river much of time and together with the 100 foot bluffs along the river made very beautiful scenery. Birch-white spruce forest over area with alder and willow along river banks.

Some litter from previous camp found at our camp. Went for quick swim in river at camp.

August 11. Beautiful day, 11:00 a.m. air 64°F, water 54°F; 1:00 p.m. air 68°F, water 56°F; 9:00 p.m. air 60°F, water 58°F. In afternoon headwinds 10-20 mph made paddling tougher.

In roughly 4 hours on water traveled 13 miles to new camp downstream of Nutuvukti Lake outlet. River at new camp 40 yards wide,

4-5 feet deep, 3-4 mph current. Very few gravel bars; appeared to have fairly stable water levels.

Grayling fishing fair at tributary confluences. Saw a few more chum in river, several merganser broods, lesser Canada geese, 2 ospreys, 2 old raptor nests possibly osprey, very few large animal tracks.

Nutuvukti Lake outlet 20 feet wide, 2 feet deep. Upper Kobuk Canyon very scenic, S-shaped 1 mile stretch with 100-200 foot bluffs on either side. Easy Class II water in canyon with 1/2 mile stretch of scattered boulders requiring some easy maneuvering. Rest of river all Class I smooth water with few riffles.

Vegetation, mostly white and black spruce with scattered birch and poplar groves and willow and alder along river banks.

Good campsites not plentiful because of lack of sand and gravel bars and heavy brush along banks.

August 12. Rain half of night and on and off all day. 11:00 a.m. air 56°F, water 53°F; 9:45 p.m. air 55°F, water 54°F; some clearing in evening. Traveled 14 miles to new camp 3 miles below Lower Canyon.

River at new camp 50-60 yards wide, 3-5 feet deep, 3-4 mph current, still clear water.

Lower Canyon about 3/4 mile long and consists of 3 major sections of rapids. We stopped and scouted first bend of rapids from right bank and then all 3 canoes successfully ran them and pulled out again on right banks. This first set is probably low Class III **has** 2 foot standing waves below first chute, strong current, and some easy but critical maneuvering to avoid rock outcrops. First bend about 150 yards long.

The second major bend of rapids is about 1/4 mile downstream of first but is easy to get too far into because of rock barriers just upstream, off right bank. After scouting it looked like we could run first chute against left wall and get out quickly before going through second and larger chute. Ted Jr. and I and Buff and Scott successfully shot first chute with no water shippage although getting out below on right bank required some fast and careful work because of swift current. Class III rapid. Ed and Ted

lined around through small backchannel on right bank. Second chute was 5 or 6 foot v-shaped chute through which the whole river plunged with a 3 foot high resurge swell at the end. It appeared too heavy to take an open canoe through without filling with water, so we all lined around a huge boulder on the right side separating the chute from a small back channel just wide and deep enough to float a loaded canoe.

The third and largest stretch of whitewater was about 1/3 of a mile downriver and consisted of 2 major channels of whitewater divided by a continuous wall of huge boulders. Each channel had about 4 drops over the space of about 100 yards. Although hard to see the left one appeared to have heavier water but straighter approaches and chutes. The right one required several radical maneuvers between drops to go down chutes at proper angle. Both were Class IV. Ted Jr. and I successfully ran right channel although the stern hit the rock ledge on 2 of the drops and we shipped 3 to 4 inches of water in the bottom of the canoe. The canoe was extremely difficult to handle with the extra weight by the end of the rapid. Rest of party lined around and down right channel from right bank and except for some rock-hopping was fairly easy. Near bottom had to get in canoes and skirt along edge because no bank or rocks to stand on. A couple places required close attention and firm holds on lines by bow and stern men to avoid strong current from taking canoe out into rapids.

It took 2-1/2 hours to get through canyon. Quite exhilarating, and despite rain, very scenic. Canyon walls rise right from river 150 feet and bedrock material visible throughout canyon floor. The tightly-folded shale that comprised the banks lay in sharp sheets almost vertically along the river. Associated with this shale formation was quartz. Large chunks of jasper or jade were also present.

Two beaver in dammed-up channel behind camp. Saw many chum coming up riffle in front of camp. Grayling fishing slow. Bear and wolf tracks at camp, saw more Lesser Canada geese and mergansers.

Spruce at camp 11-15 inches in diameter. More poplar along river than previously. Large burn above canyon. Saw old cache and cut trees on left bank just below canyon.

August 13. Rain all day; 9:00 a.m. air 54°F, water 53°F; 10:00 p.m. air 55°F, water 52°F.

Chopper arrived about 12:45 p.m. with Debbie despite bad weather and Buff returned to the real world leaving us to the rain. Broke camp about 1:30 p.m. and traveled 14 miles downriver to about 3 miles beyond Beaver Creek confluence.

River at new camp 60-70 yards wide, 5-8 feet deep, 3-4 mph current, not quite as clear as before but still not turbid from rain. Reed River also clear and fairly large - about size of Tinayguk River (20 yards wide).

Caught 10-12 grayling at Reed River (12-15 inches long) and one chum. Several chum observed going up Reed. Saw a wolf on gravel bar near Reed.

Few good campsites due to lack of gravel bars with sand or open grassy areas in timber areas.

August 14. Rain most of night and on and off all day. Low overcast obscured hills and mountains in adjacent areas. 10:00 a.m. air 57°F, water 52°F; 5:30 p.m. air 59°F, water in Selby River 52°F.

Traveled 25 miles in 5 hours on the water, steady moderate paddling. Camped across from Selby River confluence.

River at new camp 70-80 yards wide, 3-5 feet deep, 3-4 mph current. Many fast smooth riffles during day. Water still surprisingly clear.

Caught about a dozen grayling at mouth of Selby although fishing fairly slow. Saw several chum going up Selby. Yearling moose swam across river in front of us. Near Selby 8 gulls, 14 ravens in tree tops in one area. Also saw mature bald eagle along river.

August 15: Rain all night stopping briefly in morning, then on and off all day. 4:45 p.m. air 59°F, water 54°F.

Climbed ridge in back of camp and saw Native grave site - small A-frame structure made of sawed lumber. Grave building had been torn apart, presumably by animals, but no remains around.

Left camp 3:30 p.m.; arrived new camp at Pah River confluence 5:00 p.m. Covered 8 miles in roughly 2 hours on water.

At Pah, sod building with spruce pole inner frame. The sod had slipped down from flat roof on sides about 2 feet. Looked like more of a shelter than a cabin which was lived in. New cans and footprints around site.

Excellent sheefish fishing at confluence. We caught and released about 8 fish and kept the smallest one, an 8 pounder, for supper. Scott took high honors with a 23 pound, 41 inch sheefish. In late evening sheefish were rising.

During day, we saw sharp-shinned hawk, marsh hawk. Mosquitoes fair at camp.

Rain quit late in evening and clouds lifted long enough to see many surrounding hills and mountains to the north.

August 16. **Rain** most of night but stopped much of day. Still overcast. 12:00p.m. air 59°F, Pah water 52°F.; 10:30 p.m. air **53°F**, with west wind.

In morning, hiked 1/2 mile up Pah to 2 graves which Scott knew of. Two long doghouse type structures located on small knoll on west side of river. Saw dead chum along bank of Pah. Sheefish not biting in morning.

Left camp 3:30 p.m. and stopped several times before making camp about 7:30 p.m. 2 miles upriver from the Mauneluk River. Distance traveled about 10 miles in 2-1/2 hours on river.

Stopped at freshly cut poplar fish drying rack just down from Pah. Stopped at Killak River and watched pairs of chum swim up shallow riffles and spawn in the creek. Dozens of chum were in the river at the confluence of this creek and in the lower creek. Creek **6-8** feet wide and **6** inches to **1** foot deep near mouth. Many grayling in creek following chum for eggs. A well-used camp was at confluence and Native allotment notice by Billy Tickett of Kobuk was in a can on a tree.

Also stopped at Nelson Walker's new plywood house under construction downstream a couple miles from Killak. He is a local guide and had a new river boat tied up in the river and **a** gravel bar airstrip out front of his place.

At new camp black bear sow and **3** young cubs walked up gravel bar to within 250 yards of camp before leaving us and running into the woods. About 1/2 hour later we saw them again across the river from camp continuing upriver. One cub was a runt and really had to scoot to catch up with rest of family, swimming the river

Log, field insp. Upper Kobuk - 8 - September 16, 1974

must have been quite a chore.

August 17- Light rain most of the day; 5:00 p.m. air 53°F, water 53°F. Spent 2 hours on river, covered 8 miles to new camp, 2-1/2 miles upstream of Kollioksak River.

Stopped at several Native allotments, 2 of which had old cabins which are marked on the map. At one site was an old 12 foot frame of a 2-man Kayak. Cabins all down except one elevated cabin/cache still standing but in disrepair and unused.

Caught and released 2 fairly fresh looking chum near one allotment site. Although we camped where Ken Alt of Fish and Game said major sheefish spawning area was, none seen or caught. Spawning usually takes place in September. Caught several grayling and small pike near new camp.

Firewood was very wet and evening's campfire came in last place for the trip in the categories of heat, light, and joy.

August 18. Rain all night and all day, continued low ceiling.

Left camp 2:45 p.m.; arrived new camp 3-1/2 miles downstream of major fork in the river 7:30 p.m. Traveled 7-1/2 miles in 1-3/4 hours on river.

Just downstream of last night's camp, passed 3 natives traveling upriver by river boat.

At major fork we took north channel. This channel much smaller than south branch; before forks, river 100-120 yards wide, 4-10 feet deep, 3 mph current. North branch 25 yards wide, 2-3 feet deep, 2-3 mph current. Very intimate stream and nice change of environment - similar to upper river area.

One mile down north fork, stopped at geologist's tent camp. Talked with wife and 2 kids of Anaconda Copper Company in Nevada geologist who was out with helicopter and pilot, meeting with local miners. She said they had been in Chandalar area and had just arrived here night before. She saved our morale by giving us a roll of toilet paper and a six-pack of beer.

We stopped'downstream where the village site of Kalla is marked on

the map but couldn't locate it. As we were eating a late lunch, the 2 men and a boy we had passed earlier came by in their boat, the Wynona. They stopped for tea and told us that the Kalla site was marked wrong on the map and was located upstream at the major fork in the river. One man was from Nome and the other man and the boy were from Shungnak. They had guns in the boat and said they were out "looking around". (Moose season had not officially opened).

Several planes and two helicopters passed over today.

August 19. The weather broke! It stopped raining during night and by 12:30 p.m. clear, blue skies, unbelievable, after 7 days; 12:30 p.m. air 56°F, water 52°F; 4:30 p.m. air 65°F, water 55°F; 8:30 p.m. air 58°F; 10:00 p.m. air 46°F; 11:00 p.m. air 43°F.

Because of short distance to Kobuk and to take full advantage of sun, we layed over a day at camp and dried out clothes and equipment, took a bath, picked blueberries, and layed in the sun.

Caught lots of small grayling only on flies. Water in river dark but still clear, visibility 3 feet, no noticeable rising of river throughout past week.

August 20. Clear, beautiful weather; 7:30 a.m. air 42°F. Broke camp 10:00 a.m.; arrived Kobuk village about 3:00 p.m. . Covered 13-1/2 miles in 3 hours of steady, moderate paddling.

One-and-a-half miles down from camp saw small grizzly along river; came within 50 yards before he heard us and hit the brush. Near Kogoluktuk River we saw several ravens, a mature bald eagle and a golden eagle perched in the same small grove of poplars along the river. Looked like an animal kill site although we found nothing.

Three channels of Kogoluktuk River confluence quite muddy. Became diluted after North branch joined larger south branch. Main river dark colored with visibility 2-3 feet.

Weather recorder at Kobuk said overnight low was 34°F, and 3:30 p.m. temperature was 62°F at the village. Talked with BLM people in Kobuk who were examining Native allotments in area. Many sheefish were drying on rack in village and strips of moose meat, killed recently, were drying.

We got picked up by Jim Pickering in Dept. of Interior goose on the river in front of the village. All 6 of us and all our gear and Woody Woodworth of BLM took off at 4:30 p.m. and flew back up the river on the way to Bettles. We arrived Bettles at 5:30 p.m. returned Dave Ketscher's paddles and life vests, and departed for Fairbanks. Arrived Fairbanks. 7:00 p.m., ate, said good bye to Debbie, Scott, and Ed and departed for Anchorage. Arrived Anchorage 10:00 p.m. In Bettles, we confirmed arrangements to have Jerry Coser pick up canoes in Kobuk with Beaver and return them to Bettles.

General. We traveled the 121 miles from Walker Lake to Kobuk in roughly 30 hours on the water. Most of the time was light to moderate paddling. In addition 3-1/2 hours were taken in portaging upper rapids and scouting, lining, and running through lower canyon. We had more than enough time to cover the distance and see things along the way. If the weather would have been better we would probably have utilized more of the "extra" time not spent canoeing, in hiking away from the river.

Despite the rain, the trip was extremely enjoyable. The river environment was quite varied, and even with the obscured visibility, there was ever-changing scenery immediately adjacent the river and in the valley background. Canoeing never became boring. The moderate current and occasional riffles along much of the river and the short but exciting upper and lower canyon sustained our interest in the river travel throughout.

Good fishing for grayling, chum salmon, and sheefish was spotty, but the hot spots provided considerable fun and excellent meals.

Float plane access is good at Walker Lake and at many downstream points (including beyond Kobuk) but costs of transporting canoes become greater the further from Bettles one travels. Fold-boats or rafts could easily be flown in by charter and commercialized 'out from Kobuk or other villages downstream

A wilderness environment exists downstream to about the Pah River when Native fishing and hunting camps are occasionally encountered. These sites are very interesting from a cultural standpoint as they show activities relating to the subsistence lifestyle of local people.



ADDENDUM

July 29 - August 4, 1980

The Kobuk was floated again in rafts in August 1980, with staff from NPS. We covered only about 86 miles (just downstream of the Pah River) in five and one-half days on the river.

The weather was generally good except for the last two rainy and windy days. The rapids about $3/4$ mile below Walker Lake were Class **III** which we portaged $1/8$ mile around on the left or east bank. This was the only area too rough for the 12' rafts. The Upper Kobuk Canyon consisted of 100' - 150' high bluffs and scattered large (4'-8') round rocks easily oared around in the rafts. The Lower Canyon consisted of two Class **II** rapids followed by a series of Class **II-III** drops at the bottom of the **1** mile long canyon. At the water levels we experienced it would also be possible to line around the rapids on the right shoreline.

Campsites were spotty along the upper river, increased some below the lower canyon but were never very plentiful. Scenery is varied with distant vistas north into the Brooks Range as well as the nearby spruce covered ridges and numerous rock outcrops. Grayling were present throughout the area we floated with the best angling in the upper river area and at the confluences with the smaller tributaries. Sheefish and Northern Pike were caught at and below the Pah River.

The area remains natural without much evidence of previous use. Below the Pah River there are numerous cabins and the river is a travel corridor for subsistence activities.

UPPER KOBUK

Description: The upper Kobuk traverses a wide, forest covered valley with sweeping views from the river of nearby mountains. A wilderness environment exists downstream to approximately the Pah River area. Further downriver, the Kobuk is a major travel corridor for local inhabitants.

Watercraft: Raft, kayak, or canoe all suitable.

Time: Six days from Walker Lake to Village of Kobuk; 2-3 mph current downstream from Kobuk.

Attributes: Extreme headwaters, Walker Lake, and Upper and Lower Canyons are particularly scenic. Hiking, except in extreme headwaters, is not good due to dense undergrowth, tussocks, etc. Fishing for sheefish, northern pike, grayling, whitefish, chum salmon and lake trout (Walker Lake).

Special Considerations: One-third mile of WW3-4 located $\frac{3}{4}$ mile downstream from outlet of Walker Lake; can be portaged on left bank. Lower Kobuk Canyon (1 mile of WW2-3) can be lined along west bank.

Access: IN - Floatplane from Bettles or Ambler to Walker Lake.
OUT - All villages along the Kobuk River have scheduled commercial air service.

USGS Maps (1:250,000): Survey Pass, Hughes, Shungnak.

Public Land Manager: National Park Service

