



Little Susitna

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ALASKA RIVER LOGS

INTRODUCTION

These river logs consist primarily of trip reports filed by the now-defunct Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, which surveyed Alaska's rivers for possible inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River system in the early 1970's. They are supplemented by reports from the Bureau of Land Management, the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, and the National Park Service.

The Alaska Public Lands Information Center believes that, although the reports are quite old, the river information they contain is still useful and the detailed river descriptions provided are unavailable anywhere else in a public format.

The logs have also been supplemented with more recent federal and state agency brochures, agency handouts, news articles, and new logs developed by our staff.

A WORD OF CAUTION: As you read these logs, bear in mind that river conditions in Alaska can change drastically from year to year depending on weather and erosional processes. Rivers in Alaska are often given a higher classification on the International Scale of Difficulty than they would in a more temperate climate for two very important reasons: 1) most are very remote and help is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain in a short period of time, and 2) Alaskan rivers are extremely cold, as low as 35 F for glacial rivers, and 40 F to 50 F for clear rivers. During periods of high water, as after spring break-up or prolonged rains, rivers should be upgraded by at least one class, because the current will be much faster and more forceful, and erosion will create more hazards such as floating logs, overhanging trees ("sweepers"), and log jams. Also, most topographic maps of Alaska have not been revised since the late 1970's or early 1980's. Most braided Alaskan rivers change channels every year or even several times in one year, so maps may not reflect current conditions: you must have good river-reading skills in addition to map reading skills.

For more detailed information, please ask for a copy of our handout "Planning a River Trip in Alaska".

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

TO : Files

DATE: OCT 4 1978

FROM : Kevin Apgar

SUBJECT: Field Inspection of Little Susitna River, August 7-10, 1978

As part of HCRS's technical assistance to the Alaska Division of Parks in evaluating river-related resources, an interagency field inspection of the Little Susitna River was made. The vast majority of property bordering the Little Susitna above the Parks Highway is in private ownership, below the highway it is almost entirely owned by the State.

Participating in the inspection were:

Dennis Heikes, Alaska Division of Parks, Mat-Su District
Wally Watts, U.S. Forest Service
Gary Stackhouse, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Kevin Apgar, Heritage Conservation & Recreation Service

One 15' and one 17' aluminum square end canoe were used for the inspection. Two 4.5 hp Mercury outboard motors were used downstream from the Burma Road.

August 7

Our party rendezvoused at the Schrock Road bridge over the Little Susitna, located about 10 miles outside of Wasilla, at 10:30a.m. Little Susitna 25 yards wide, 3' deep, current 2-3 mph at bridge. Loaded canoes and started trip at 11:00a.m. A log jam is located around the first corner, perhaps 75 yards below the bridge, which we portaged around. Encountered three more log jams in the next five miles -- lined through/over two and portaged the other. Log jams vary from year to year. Wally floated this section last year and only encountered one log jam.

Mostly sunny, warm, pleasant afternoon. Water visibility about 6".

No rapids in Little Susitna below Schrock Road. Occasional shallow riffles. Submerged logs and sweepers the most frequent hazards. Water level appears average, perhaps slightly low.



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The river and its surrounding environment are scenic, though not spectacular. It winds through an upland birch-spruce forest with occasional views of the first ridge of the Talkeetna Mountains. Considering that only one 2-3 mile stretch of the 17 river miles between Schrock Road and the Parks Highway is in public ownership, I was surprised to see little evidence of man visible from the river.

Many small gravel/sandbars for camping or rest stops. Dead salmon littering gravelbars.

Wildlife observations included two mink, a black bear who dashed into the bushes, and two scantily clad young female swimmers who did likewise.

Camped on a nice gravelbar a few miles upstream from the Parks Highway. Traveled 15 miles in three hours, 45 minutes on the water. Spent another 45 minutes portaging and lining.

August 8

Mostly sunny in a.m., and until mid-afternoon. Air temp. in low 70's, water 54°F. Little wind and very pleasant.

Six to eight private homes on banks of last two miles of Little Su upstream from Parks Highway. Spent an hour and 15 minutes on the water to reach the Parks Highway. Half a dozen people fishing near bridge, one of whom landed a pink salmon while we were there.

Little Su turns and parallels the Parks Highway a short distance downstream from the bridge. Stopped at Miller's Market, located a 1/4-1/2 mile down the Little Su. Mr. Miller is now in the canoe rental business -- \$20 day/canoe and \$15 day/canoe group rate. He also has a concrete boat launching ramp for motorboats -- \$3 a boat. Several riverboats with up to 60 hp motors tied up at this ramp. Encountered an airboat downstream unfortunately. It produced 10 times the noise of the largest outboard motor we encountered.

Fished a few spots without luck until Lake Creek - Little Susitna confluence. Lake Creek, which is the outlet from Nancy Lake was 15-20 yards wide, 1-2' deep, 1-2 mph, and an incredibly warm 64°F at its mouth. Water much clearer than Little Susitna but slightly brownish from organic matter. Sockeye salmon migrate up the Little Susitna and Lake Creek to spawn in Nancy Lake, making it one of only a few streams in the Mat-Su Valley which support a sockeye run. Dennis caught a 7 lb sockeye here.

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Saw a black bear sow and two cubs, a beaver, and a muskrat today. Many salmon in river, mostly pinks.

Gravelbars adequate for camping spaced every mile or two to Lake Creek, less often after that.

Set up camp on a relatively large sandy gravelbar opposite the Nancy Lake State Recreation Area canoe trail portage. The portage is marked by three small signs which are attached to trees on the riverbank. A trip down the Little Susitna, portage to Skeetna Lake and return to the Nancy Lake Parkway through a series of lakes and portages makes a fine two day trip. The portage from the river to Skeetna Lake is the most difficult, .7 miles long and swampy in a few spots. State Parks has a brochure mapping the trip.

Traveled nine miles in three hours on the water to Lake Creek and another eight miles in one hour 40 minutes to the canoe portage.

August 9

Rained last night. Partly sunny during the day, temp. in the low 70's.

Vegetation and topography visible from the river more appealing below the canoe portage than from the Parks Highway to the portage. As shown on USGS topo maps, large expanses of swamp flank the riparian vegetation 100'-1/4 mile away from the river above the portage. Swamp much less extensive below portage. Birch-spruce forest very open near banks in many places. Occasional 50'-100' high bluffs along the river below the portage add interesting variety to an otherwise topographically flat area.

Photographed a narrow trail cut through the brush and marked with florescent tape crossing the river in the bottom half of Sec 15, T16N, R5W. Apparently this is the Iditarod Trail, according to the Matanuska Valley Road and Recreation map. Searched for the cabin marked on the USGS topo map in Sec. 15 but found no trace of it. According to the State historical people, an Iditarod Trail roadhouse used to be located in this area on the bank of the river.

Caught two pink salmon for dinner in 1/2 hour of early evening fishing.

Arrived at the Burma Road shortly after 8:00p.m. About 10-12 pick-up trucks parked at the end of the road, most of which departed within a few hours. Set up camp for the evening here.

Saw a grizzly bear, black bear, river otter, and a beaver today.

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Traveled 30 miles in 7 1/2 hours on the water with moderate paddling.

August 10

Beautiful, warm sunny day. Air temperature in high 70's, river water an unbelievable 64°F in mid-afternoon.

Using the two 4.5 hp Mercury motors which were waiting for us at the Burma Road we headed downstream at 9:00a.m. I found the motors to be a necessary but disagreeable method of travel - noisy, smelly, disruptive of wildlife viewing and serenity. They are, however, the most practical means of traveling downstream from the last road accessible take-out. We were able to travel downstream at 8 mph at least and upstream later in the day against an ebbing tide at 5-6 mph.

Vegetation along the river below the Burma Road is different from preceding sections. A narrow ribbon of dense alder and willow restrict views from the river, although one is frequently aware of an open expanse of swamp beyond the willows. Here, the river winds along an even more meandering course. Tidal influence begins only a few miles below the Burma Road and steadily increasing amount of dark saturated Cook Inlet mud cover the riverbanks.

Bluffs 50'-100' high are frequent along the river again, approaching the private homestead in sec. 24, T15N, R6W, and further downstream. We observed several raptors in this area, including ospreys, goshawks, and bald eagles.

A guy driving a 12'-14' Zodiac raft outfitted with a 45 hp motor passed us heading upstream. He said he had just motored over to the Little Su from Anchorage to fish. Such a trip is as dangerous as it is convenient. Poor timing, navigation, or engine problems could leave one stuck in the muck far from solid ground, unable to rise with the next tide. Wally Watts said he had previously seen evidence of a 4' tide as far up the Little Su as the homestead in T15N, R6W (about 18 miles upstream from the mouth).

Fear of being stranded by an ebbing tide convinced us to turn around after we had motored about half the distance between the homestead and the mouth of the river.

Passed half a dozen boats and three times as many fisherman on the return trip to Burma Road. Some people catching silvers, more catching pinks. We had no luck fishing.

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Arrived back at the Burma Road around 4:30p.m. Spent 1 1/4 hours negotiating the Burma Road from the Little Su to pavement south of Big Lake. This unmaintained, clay based, former seismic trail had ruts in it a foot deep and one 3'-4' deep washout. A two wheel drive vehicle with lots of ground clearance is adequate to travel this section of the Burma Road when it is dry, 4 wheelers may not be enough when its wet. See the attached map for directions.

General

There are no rapids in the Little Susitna downstream from the Schrock Road bridge. Depending on water levels there may occasionally be shallow riffles. We encountered four small log jams which required portaging or lining on the first five miles, though the log jams vary from year to year. Submerged logs and sweepers are the most frequent hazards. We traveled the following distances in canoes with easy-moderate paddling.

	<u>Miles</u>	<u>Hrs on water</u>
Schrock Rd. bridge - Parks Hwy	17	5 *
Hwy - Lake Creek	9	3
Lake Cr. - Canoe portage	8	1 2/3
Portage - Burma Road	30	7 1/2
Burma Rd. - mouth	30	

*plus 45 minutes for portaging/lining

The greatest recreational attribute of the Little Susitna River is that it offers an easy float trip and reasonably good fishing in an aesthetically pleasing environment within two hours driving time of Anchorage. It is, in fact, the closest such multi-day float trip to Anchorage. The importance of this recreation resource should not be overlooked in future land use planning, particularly in view of the population explosion in this area and the planned new State capitol.

Kevin

Directions to Burma Rd. Entrance to Little Susitna River

