

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.

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

TO : Files

DATE: OCT 10 1978

FROM : David Dapkus

SUBJECT: Field Inspection of the Sagavanirktok River
June 19-30, 1978

A field inspection of the Sagavanirktok River (Sag River) was conducted June 19-30, 1978, by an interagency team as part of a **HCRS** study of the river area. The **HCRS** study is being done as technical assistance to the Bureau of Land Management in evaluating river related resources within BLM administered areas. The area in this study is in part of the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline corridor. The approximate upper 2/3 of the river is located within the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline corridor under the administration of BLM. The lower 1/3, including the Prudhoe Bay area, is on lands that are owned by the State of Alaska. Participating in the field inspection were following people:

Hope Reed, Div. of Parks, State of Alaska
Terry O'Sullivan, BLM, Fairbanks District
Elliot Lowell, BLM, Fairbanks District
Don Pendergrast, BLM, Fairbanks District
LaRalle Smith, BLM, State Office
Mike Brown, **BLM**, State Office
David Dapkus, **HCRS**, Anchorage

LaRalle took the first half of the trip from the 19th thru the 24th and Mike was on the second half from the 24th through the 30th.

Two 17 foot (shoe keel) gruman canoes and one 17 foot (standard keel) gruman canoe were used for the river inspection.

June 19

I picked up a **GSA** Ford van at 7:30a.m., drove to the office and loaded the gear. Hope Reed and LaRalle Smith met me there for the drive north. We left the office at approximately 9:30 a.m., and drove to Fairbanks. We overnighed at the Fairbanks Inn.



2 - Sag River

June 20

The remainder of the inspection team met us at the Fairbanks Inn for breakfast. We all then left at 7:00a.m., in two vehicles to drive to the Sagavanirktok River via the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline (TAPS) haul road. We had a two hour delay at the Yukon River bridge crossing, which I've found not unusual. We arrived at Galbraith Lake which is the start at the Atigun River at 8:00p.m. The plan was to float ten miles of the Atigun to where it joins the Sagavanirktok and then float the Sag to Franklin Bluffs. We observed six black bear between the Yukon River bridge and Dietrich camp, three red fox and two moose. We camped overnight near the bridge crossing of the Atigun River near Galbraith Lake.

June 21

While most of the team remained in camp getting ready for the start of the float Terry and I shuttled vehicles to Franklin Bluff's camp which was our planned take-out point. The road was extremely muddy. During the drive Terry and I saw two sandhill cranes, about two dozen ducks, 30 caribou and a wolf.

Broke camp early afternoon and floated down about two miles down the Atigun before making camp again. The Atigun is a small clearwater river, 50 feet wide, one to five feet deep, with an average 4 to 5 mph current. The water appeared high. There were numerous stove and refrigerator size boulders in the river and some sand along the banks. This part of the Atigun River was Class II on the International Whitewater Scale.

Dominant vegetation was alpine tundra with some low (4') willow brush immediately along the river. We found many good campsites on the gravelbars, limited firewood was available. The narrow valley offered good hiking from the river up the fairly steep ridges which are part of the northern mountains of the Brooks Range. The scenery was no less than spectacular. The Atigun River flows through a 1/2 to one mile wide valley that lies within the northern mountains of the Brooks Range. These rugged mountains are either talus sloped or have vertical rock walls that were capped with heavy snow.

The weather was quite cool with heavy clouds that omitted sprinkles first and then rain. The clouds and rain dissipated by evening, leaving a brilliant blue sky to magnify the beauty of the Brooks Range.

3 - Sag River

June 22

It was a windy, rainy, and cold day. The river appeared high and all Class **II** water as we started out. About 1/2 hour floating time down the river we were into Class **I I** mixed with some Class **III** water. The river was covered on this area with refrigerator size boulders. All of a sudden a large boulder jumped out of the river and tried to eat our canoe. The next 45 minutes were spent fighting the vicious rock. During this process **I** was swept away but finally managed to swim to shore. Terry continued the battle while standing chest deep in the river, finally freeing the canoe. We tossed two lines to him, one he attached to the canoe and the other to himself; **we** then pulled both to shore. It was a wonder that Terry had not gone under considering the time spent in near freezing water. The only damage done was we lost one of the office rain coats and had gotten most of Terry's gear and the tent wet. No one was hurt. Elliot and LaRalle had quickly come to our rescue. Hope and Don were downstream some distance, but quickly came upstream to aid. **We** spent the rest of the day drying out. **We** put the coleman stove inside of the wet tent, which dried quickly and well. This is somewhat dangerous, therefore no one should spend much time in the tent due to possible carbon monoxide poisoning.

June 23

We awoke to a fresh 1/2" cover of snow and 30°F temperatures. It preceded to snow lightly all day, and remained cold (32°F). The river continued to rise. Before going further we decided to dry more clothing, by the previous evening most of the team had much wet clothing and hike downstream through Atigun Canyon to ascertain the rivers character.

The map (and our view from camp) indicated that the canyon was getting narrower, **I** was concerned that we might encounter non-navigable water in a walled canyon that would be difficult and dangerous to the extent that someone might get seriously hurt. Terry and LaRalle stayed at camp drying more clothes, while Hope, Elliot, Don and **I** hiked down Atigun Gorge. **We** hiked about three miles in the snow before being stopped by an almost vertical talus slope which ran into the river at a bend. We could not see past the talus slope to ascertain the river was runnable, lineable, or practically impassable. The river from camp to where we had walked was all Class **III** water, was high and silt laden, with boulders the size of a refrigerator and bigger. Four foot high rollers were common. The river was also fairly narrow averaging maybe 60', with no recognizable shoot. Precipitation the prior week changed what must have been Class **I I** into Class **III**

water. Two weeks earlier the Atiguk was reported as being shallow, and perhaps too low to float. Heavy June rains in the Brooks Range probably account for the high water. Perhaps later in the summer it is shallow and requires lining. There are several clear side streams (3' wide, 1' deep) running down to the Atigun. One stream had cut a beautiful waterfall through limestone rock about 150' above the valley floor. After consultation with Don, an excellent canoeist, I decided to line back upstream to the road and then put in on the Sag where it and the road are in close proximity. Don and Hope had their canoe tied about 1/4 mile downstream from camp. They decided on the return to camp to start lining their canoe back upstream. While lining they dumped the canoe, almost losing Hope, and losing a fiberglass paddle.

The scenery along the Atigun River was very beautiful. The rugged mountains exhibited talus sloped and vertical rock faces. Some caves were spotted. We also saw a band of twelve sheep on the south bank of the Atigun. They were all ewes and lambs. We also found a fresh fox track. Spent a second night in the same camp.

June 24

We broke camp in mixed sun and snow. It was still very cold (32°F) and had snowed more overnight. It took us three physically taxing hours to line up to the highway bridge. After finally arriving there we found that someone had siphoned gas out of the pickup, leaving us only about 1/2 gallon. LaRalle and Hope took the pickup to Pump Station #4, which was approximately five miles away and after two hours of begging managed to obtain some gas.

Terry and I then took LaRalle down to Happy Valley Camp where we were to meet Mike Brown (who was being flown in by BLM). We got there about 8:30 p.m., but the plane had left 15 minutes earlier. It was not suppose to have come in until 9:00 p.m., and then was suppose to wait a reasonable time. The pilot had told Mike to call Fairbanks if we needed an airplane. Happy Valley Camp was closed (TAPS completion) as are most of the camps, so phones are not readily available. We drove back to Pump Station #3 where the guard was kind enough to let us phone Fairbank. After two hours LaRalle was promised a plane which was to pick him up the next day at Chandlar Camp.

At 10:00 p.m., LaRalle dropped Terry, Mike, and I at the put-in spot on the Sag River this was approximately at Township 8 South and Range 14 East, Section 5, where the road and river are close together. LaRalle then went back to the others that were camped at the Atigun River and spent the night.

5 - Sag River

We observed several animals along the road, including six moose and more than 10 caribou.

June 25

The remaining team at Atigun River took LaRalle to Chandler Camp (south side of the Brooks Range), then drove back to where Terry, Mike, and I were on the Sag. They arrived about 1:00 p.m. We floated about 10 miles through the first really nice sunshine of the trip. The wind picked up at about 3:00 p.m., and was very hard to maneuver against. The river was split in several channels, each loaded with basketball to refrigerator sized boulders. It was fairly clear, flowed along about 3 mph. The channels were 75' wide and 5' deep except there was only one channel then and was approximately 150 feet wide. It was all fast Class I water broken every eight of a mile by Class II and some Class III rapids. These rapids can be easily lined. We ran all the Class II and some Class III, lining for three Class III water. After traversing the Class II and Class III rapids without any problems, Elliot and Mike dumped in a very slow easy spot about one hundred yards from the evenings camp.

The Sag followed the pipeline and haul road the entire day. Scenery consisted of rolling foothills and tundra on three sides with the magnificent Brooks Range on the south. We saw two rough legged hawks and numerous Arctic ground squirrels, several with young. Made a comfortable camp on one of the numerous large gravelbars along the Sag.

June 26

We had an exciting float through consistently encountered Class II and easy Class III rapids as we floated to the Lupine River. The Lupine was a very clear, large creek. It was a very scenic stream. It was cloudy with some wind and very cold. This part of the Sag is for experienced canoeist or rafter. The rapids were filled with VW to stove size boulders. These rapids occurred ever mile and were usually a series of two or three Class II rapids or two Class II rapids then a Class III rapid. Each set of rapids were approximately 150 feet long. All could be lined. The Sag was very clear, running at 4 mph. Where there is one main channel, it was usually 150 feet wide. There were many gravelbars of sufficient length for a small wheeled plane to land. The TAPS line was within view the entire day.

The scenery remained basically the same as the previous day. Low bluffs appeared further diversifying the scenery. One can easily hike the ridges lining the river. Good campsites with sufficient firewood are plentiful. The source of firewood is the low willow (up to 10') brush scattered along

the river. This wood is either standing deadwood or washed down during high water.

We observed a peregrine falcon, several long tailed jaegers, terns, gulls, and ducks. Elusive grayling were observed in several of the side streams. Three caribou were also seen.

June 27

We woke up to bright sun that stayed all day. A light breeze made it a very comfortable warm day. We floated from the Lupine River to the Ivishak River, a distance of 32 miles. We did not find a good place to land a small plane at the confluence of the Ivishak, which was hoped for. The Ivishak has been recommended as a wild river. Gravelbars were plentiful, but not sufficiently long enough for wheelplanes and the river is not sufficiently deep or straight enough for a floatplane. The Sag continued to be clear, running at 4 mph, had many 50 to 150 foot wide channels, and was inches to six feet deep. It was mostly Class I water with the exception of one nice Class II rapid about 200 yards long near the Lupine River. The large boulders encountered previously changed to fist size rocks.

The scenery was high quality with Sagwon Bluffs and two smaller bluffs just before and after Sagwon camp adding to the surrounding rolling tundra covered countryside. The Brooks Range was easily seen in the background. The evening sun turned the foothills and the Brooks Range striking shades of red. There continued to be plentiful campsites with lots of firewood. Hiking was also easy along the rolling ridges that lined the river.

Sagwon Bluffs consist of sandstone, but were reported by F&WS to be a peregrine falcon nesting area. We floated by these bluffs very quickly and quietly, observing only one peregrine falcon at the upstream end of the bluffs. Other wildlife seen along the river included 30 caribou, 2 rough-legged hawks, gulls, and ducks.

The riverbed and gravelbars change drastically a few miles after the Lupine River. As previously mentioned, the boulders disappeared and became fist size rocks with only an occasional boulder, the bars became a mixture of fist size rocks and sand. The TAPS line continued to be in view of the river. The Sag flowed under two abandoned road bridges where connected to roads from the highway on the west side to material sites on the right side. These were obviously no longer used since this spur road had been washed out between the bridge and the haul road. Passed the abandoned Sagwon Camp which lies on the old (TAPS) winter road (right bank of the river).

7 - Sag River

Observed debris along the riverbanks in this area. The debris consisted of different kinds of markers, drainage pipes, and 55 gallon drums. Also saw a small caterpillar and a truck, both appeared abandoned.

June 28

The day dawned sunny, but not warm. A light breeze blew all day. We floated approximately 18 miles in five hours to our take-out point about three miles below Franklin Bluffs camp. The take-out point was approximately 150 yards from the haul road, a very easy walk across the tundra flats. Franklin Bluffs camp **was** easily seen from the Sag River, however the camp is about a mile away from the river.

The river was braided and continued to clear. It was up to six feet deep, but averaged two to three foot deep. It was all Class I water. The channels merged in some areas into half mile wide lakes with 1/2 mph current. Current outside the "lakes" was 3 to 4 mph.

The surrounding countryside was FLAT except for Franklin Bluffs. The countryside is so immense that it appears to engulf Franklin Bluffs and diminishes their effects. Tundra vegetation remains dominant along the river. Animals observed were 15 caribou, Arctic ground squirrels, and small passerines. We loaded all the gear into the van, putting three canoes on top and preceded to drive south on the haul road to camp where we had originally put in on the Sag.

June 29

Departed camp at approximately 9:00 a.m. Ran out of gas at the north end of Atigun Pass. After siphoning two gallons from the pickup we almost made it to the top of the pass but ended with the pickup pushing the van over Atigun Pass. We coasted within 1/2 mile of Chandler Camp on the south side of the pass. Gased up there again at Five Mile Camp and drove on to Fairbanks arriving about 8:00 p.m. Saw only a few animals along the way. Traffic was heavy, particularly large trucks, between Livengood and Fairbanks. The weather was mixed sprinkles and sunshine, We overnighted at Fairbanks Inn.

June 30

Checked out of motel at 7:30 a.m., to find a flat tire on the van, changed to spare, finally leaving Fairbanks at 9:00 a.m. We arrived at Anchorage at 5:30 p.m., dropped gear at office and van at motor pool by 6:45 p.m. Arrived home at 7:30 p.m.

General

We covered about four miles of the 10 miles planned on the Atigun River and about 76 miles of the 100 miles planned on the Sagavanirktok River (the Sag is approximately 180 miles long). The Atigun River Gorge should be observed carefully just before attempting to float, water levels are assumed to change drastically. The Sagavanirktok River (portion floated) offered a good mix of Class **I-II-III** whitewater and **was** extremely fast except near Franklin Bluffs camp. I estimate that the 110 miles between the TAPS bridge on the Atigun River and Franklin Bluffs camp could be run in six river days. The haul road and/or pipeline are almost always in view from the Sag. Attributes of the river are the easily observed animals (also just as easily seen and in greater number, from the haul road) and the good whitewater floating.

The Atigun and Sag river's are accessible by floatplane on the put-in and the Sag is accessible by wheeled plane and possibly floatplane for the take-out.


David