



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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UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

TO : Files

DATE: SEP 16 1977

FROM : Jim Morris

SUBJECT: Trip Report for Utukok River July 5-21, 1977

As part of the BOR's evaluation of recreation, wilderness, and scenic values contained in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, an interagency field inspection of the Utukok River was made.

Participating in the inspection were:

Ray Bane - National Park Service, Bettles
Jules Tileston - Bureau of Land Management, Anch.
Mike Smith - Fish & Wildlife Service, Fairbanks
Jim Morris - Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, Anch.

July 5

In the morning Ray, Jules, and I flew via a commercial flight from Anchorage to Kotzebue. Mike was awaiting us there. At 2:00 p.m., we left Kotzebue with some of our gear and flew directly to Driftwood Camp on the Utukok River via a chartered C-206 from Baker Aviation in Kotzebue. The airstrip at Driftwood is fairly good, but does have a couple of soft spots in it. Driftwood camp is below the confluence with Driftwood Creek and is about 36 river miles below the headwaters of the Utukok River. We arrived at the camp at 3 p.m., and the rest of our gear, transported by a Grumman Goose aircraft from Anchorage, arrived three hours later. We set up our camp and equipment. Our boats for the trip were two 12 foot Avon rafts with a 4.5 hp Mercury outboard on each and 10 gallons of fuel per boat. Before retiring for the night we discovered grizzly tracks across the river. While flying in Ray and Mike spotted a grizzly sow and three cubs south of Driftwood Camp.

July 6

After light rain during the night we awoke to a beautiful morning, with scattered clouds, a light wind from the south, and air temperature of 52°F. We floated down to Nimwutik Creek and stopped for lunch. The river varies in width from



about 15 to 35 yards. The river is mostly a single channel but does braid a little. With a current averaging 2 to 3 mph and a light wind behind us we travelled the six miles to Nimwutik Creek in three hours. The river was shallow in several places making it necessary to drag the boats for short distances. There were also several pools over six feet in depth. After lunch we climbed up on the ridge on the west side of the river. From the ridge top one has a very pleasant view of the surrounding landscape. There are many ridges and knolls and rolling foothills to see as well as the river cutting its path through the valley. The abundant quantity and variation of wild flowers is also very appealing. Before leaving this site we fished for about one hour and caught three grayling 12-14" in length. We saw gyrfalcon, golden eagles, and various shorebirds. We travelled one more mile down the river before making camp. We had to drag the boats quite a bit along this stretch of river. During the evening three more grayling were caught in the 10-12" size range. Jules and Ray hiked west of camp and saw seven caribou and several rock ptarmigan.

Mosquitoes were rather bothersome in camp. At 4:15 p.m., air temperature was 64°F and water temperature was 53°F. (All water temperatures were taken near the shore, usually in shallow water.)

July 7

A continuation of good weather. Clear with a few light scattered clouds in morning with increasing cloudiness in afternoon. Air and water temperatures in morning were 61°F and 50°F. In the evening at 7:00 the air and water temperatures were 68°F and 50°F. The southerly wind of the previous day changed to a northerly wind. Even a moderate wind became quite difficult to paddle against in the rafts.

The river was mostly about 30 yards wide in this stretch. The average depth was about 12" with occasional deep holes and some shallow riffle bars requiring dragging the boats short distances. The river current averaged 1 to 2 mph. We covered about 12 river miles during six hours on the river. Except for entering a braided area at the end of the day, the river passed mostly through a single channel with gentle curves. The riverbed material was rock and gravel.

We stopped at a few places along the river to go on short hikes. The terrain, soil, and vegetation are very easy for hiking. At the confluence of one creek we discovered what may be a very significant archaeological site. Parts of very old wooden kayak frames with wooden pegs were found scattered along the surface. Ray feels this may have been a site used by Utukokmiut people, a group once inhabiting this region and considered a transitional link between the coastal people and inland people.

Another interesting feature we observed were the ripple marks in rocks along the shoreline and ridges. This evidence of an inland sea once being in the area was observed from time to time along the entire length of the river.

July 8

Another beautiful day. No wind in morning, so mosquitoes were bad. Air and water temperature at 6:30 a.m., were 54°F and 55°F. Most of river travelled in morning was braided. The individual channels were about 25 yards wide with a current of about 1 mph. The river was a little deeper here than what we had been through previously. Therefore we had less dragging to do. About 10 am., however, the wind started and it was rough to paddle against.

At lunch we stopped at the foot of Folsom Ridge and climbed to the top. The ridge is a very good scenic viewpoint over looking the valley. We found slabs of rock with ripple marks, fossilized sea life and scraps of chert left by long-ago natives. Ray told us that these people made tools and weapons out of chert while watching for caribou and other wildlife in the valley. These chert scraps and an occasional spear point, arrowhead or stone tool were found all along a continuous ridge on the right side of the river heading down river.

In general we had a very good day. We covered about 12 river miles during six hours on the river. This stretch of river had plenty of water for our boats, few shallow ripple areas, several very deep holes, and a fairly good current averaging 1 to 2 mph. The scenery was very enjoyable. Wide open views from the river and from nearby ridge tops, plus the river passed through a canyon between Archimedes Ridge and Folsom Ridge. The tops of the Brooks Range was visible in the far distance. Interesting geologic formations showing rock which

has been uplifted and turned nearly in a complete circle was visible in some of the steep riverbanks. Wildlife viewing was good also. In addition to the many birds particularly shore birds, we saw a red fox, a caribou, a grizzly about 200 yards from the river, two golden eagles, rough-legged hawks, and evidence of caribou, wolf, and other bears.

July 9

We covered 14 to 15 river miles in six hours of river travel. We covered about five miles during 1 1/5 hours of floating in morning. I stopped to fish for about 30 minutes at the mouth of one creek and caught six grayling in lengths ranging from 10 to 14". At 11:00 a.m., the wind started. It got so bad in afternoon that it was necessary to use the motors off and on for about three hours. No headway could be made paddling the rafts against the wind.

We saw a grizzly bear near the river about 1/2 mile above where we camped for the night. Earlier in the day we saw a caribou cow and calf. At 5:00 p.m., the air and water temperatures were 70°F and 62°F.

July 10

The river segment we travelled this day passed through a very wide, flat valley. The river itself was very braided. Individual channels were about 20 to 25 yards wide. The amount of water in the river even where the braids come together to form a single channel, appeared less than up river. We began to notice, as we were to notice later further down river, that much of the water seeps into the gravel bed of the river, particularly where there is a slow current. Here the river current travels at about one mph or less. We had to drag the boats for short distances across many riffle bars.

The terrain viewed this day was less interesting. The few ridges and knolls seen from the river were much lower than those we passed on the earlier days.

Most of the riverbank was flat or not higher than 10 feet. However, the river does cut through some steep, high banks exposing permafrost.

In about seven hours of travel we covered about 16 river miles. Our outstanding weather was interrupted briefly by a sudden thunder storm which lasted about 30 minutes. We tried some fishing without success and retired for the night to sleep with the sound of a multitude of mosquitoes buzzing outside the tents.

July 11

Another beautiful day. A warm, calm, sunny morning with air and water temperatures of 66°F and 60°F at 9:30 a.m. We travelled only about six river miles today stopping at Disappointment Creek. On the way we saw one caribou and a pair of grizzlies. We watched as the grizzlies caught scent of the caribou, raised up on their hind feet, and gave half-hearted chase. On the east side of Disappointment Creek are a few remains of an old village. There is very little left to see as the river has eroded the site.

We fished a little today without success. The terrain was a little more difficult to walk across in this area than further up river. The cottongrass tussocks are more prominent but still not particularly difficult to walk upon.

The air and water temperatures at 6:00 p.m., were 77°F and 68°F.

July 12

The temperature turned cooler on this morning but still good weather. At 6:30 a.m., the air temperature was 52°F. Before the wind began to blow paddling was easy. We travelled about six river miles in three hours with a current of less than 1 mph. In early afternoon the wind started and the motors had to be used off and on for about two hours. They could not be used continuously because even with short shafts, they could not be used in much of the shallow braided areas. We travelled about 10 river miles in five hours. We stopped and camped at Carbon Creek.

Along the way we saw some cut banks with pleistocene trees exposed in the soil and rock. On a gravel bar we found two whale bone sled runners, one about 12' long. We saw one grizzly.

Carbon Creek would be a good stopping point for most people floating the river. Most of the best walking terrain, the ridges and knolls to look at and to climb, the best scenery, the most large wildlife, and the best boating water are above Carbon Creek.

At Carbon Creek is evidence of early man's use of the area. However, most evidence has been washed away. More sign of modern man's use also appear here. In addition to the typical oil drums scattered throughout the Utukok valley there are trappers caches, and snow machine parts, and lots of trash here and there.

At 5:00 p.m., air and water temperatures were 73°F and 64°F.

July 13

Much cooler but still clear with a fairly constant wind. At 7:30 a.m., the air and water temperatures were 53°F and 57°F.

Much of the river segment is braided. We alternately paddled and motored. The motors were essential to combat the wind. Ray rigged up a sail for our raft which was very useful when travelling with the wind. We travelled 11 to 12 river miles.

We saw a pair of Arctic foxes. More waterfowl were observed than on previous days. We found two more archaeological sites; one appears to be very old as evidenced by extensive deposits of chert chips and bones exposed in soil cross sections.

At 5:00 p.m., the air and water temperatures were 68°F and 62°F.

July 14

We awoke to our first bad weather of the trip. A cold fog bank had blown in severely reducing visibility. We delayed starting off until 11:00 a.m., when most of the fog had burned off. Air and water temperatures at 11:00 a.m., were 54°F and 59°F. We travelled about 10 river miles during the day. We stopped and investigated two sites of chert deposits. Permafrost exposed in several places along river bank. In the evening we saw two moose near camp. At 6:30 p.m., the air and water temperatures were 66°F and 60°F.

July 15

With a favorable wind most of the day Ray and I used the sail on our raft most of the time. It proved more efficient than the motors because it allowed us to pass over most of the shallow areas where outboard motors were not useable. There was little of any interest to see along the river. We hiked

up to a few low ridges and found a few sites with chert scraps. Coal seams are exposed in several areas along this lower section of river. It is a very soft crumbly bituminous type of coal. We saw one golden eagle and some rough legged hawks. With a current of less than 1 mph we traveled almost 12 to 14 river miles. Air and water temperatures at 6:00 p.m., were 63°F and 61°F.

July 16

We traveled about 15 river miles in six hours on the river under quite favorable conditions. The river in many places is quite shallow, too shallow for the motors unless they are tilted much of the time. However we had the wind behind us most of the day. We had the sail up much of the time on one of the boats. The current velocity averaged less than 1 mph.

Some more sites with chert scraps were located along the low ridge. Also we found samples of fossilized leaves and petrified wood.

The views from the river become more confined as one travels down river. River banks up to 15 feet high or low ridges up to 50 to 100 feet high and within 1/2 mile of the river prevent any distant views. There are fewer ridges to climb upon for a view of the surroundings. The only view obtained from a low ridge top is that of gently rolling terrain up to the next low ridge.

July 17

Much the same now from day to day. The motors have to be used almost continuously. However, there are many shallow areas where it is difficult to use the motors. We traveled 16 to 17 miles in 6 hours on the river. Few caribou were spotted during the day.

July 18

For only the second time during the trip we awoke to find a heavy blanket of fog. We delayed starting out until 10:30 a.m. We traveled almost continuously for five hours with little to interest us in stopping. We traveled 13 river miles and stopped at a previously arranged pick-up point.

Our pick-up was not scheduled until the morning of the 21st. We had expected it to take longer to travel the upper portion of the river. However it was not necessary to walk and drag the rafts over extended shallow areas, as expected. If we had started our trip about two weeks later, we probably would

have had problems crossing over the shallow gravel bars. Surprisingly, there appeared to be nearly as much water up river near Driftwood as there was below Carbon Creek. As the river gradient lessens and the current velocity slows down, much of the water apparently seeps down into the riverbed gravel.

July 22

After several days of hiking in the area, preparing equipment, and generally waiting for our pick-up, we were picked up in the evening. A C-207 from Barrow made two trips to take out us and our gear. The gravel bars in the area make excellent landing strips.

Summary

In 13 days on the river we floated about 170 miles. The Utukok River offers only a fair boating experience. However, the river is a valuable travel corridor and offers the traveler an outstanding opportunity to experience the Arctic environment. Originating in the mountains the river passes through the ridges, knolls, and rolling hills of the foothills and across a portion of the vast coastal plain. Opportunities for getting away from the river and hiking are excellent, particularly along the ridges on the upper part of the river above Carbon Creek. The terrain is relatively easy to walk upon, and the slopes are gradual. From the ridge tops one can see long distances across the valley and up and down the river. During July the variety of color in the wild flowers is beautiful. From these vantage points one has a good chance of spotting wildlife such as caribou or possibly grizzly. These same vantage points were also once used by the Eskimos for spotting game. Today's traveler can witness an area barely disturbed since the Eskimos traveled and hunted here. Imagining their presence here at one time is made easier by occasionally finding hard evidence such as a deposit of chert scraps or remains of a village site.

The scenery is not spectacular by comparison with many other areas of Alaska. However the almost unlimited views of rolling hills and high ridges and knolls in the upper river area is very appealing. The close up views of wild flowers, geologic formations, and wildlife adds to the appeal. The water quality is very good with most of the river quite clear. The river corridor apparently contains very high archaeological/cultural values. Wildlife values are very high. Fishing is only fair.

During the period of our trip, July 6-18 the river was floatable. Probably two weeks earlier the river would have been in much better condition for floating. Two weeks later there probably would not have been sufficient water to float through the shallow areas, particularly in the braided channels. Dragging the boats would be difficult and unpleasant.