



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

TO : Files

DATE: OCT 6 1977

FROM : Bill Powell

SUBJECT: Field Inspection of Awuna River July 7-17, 1977

The Awuna River was studied for possible inclusion into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System and for the BLM land use plan for NPR-A. The Awuna lies completely inside of NPR-A and BLM has the responsibility for surface management of the reserve.

Participating in the inspection were:

Dick Myron - National Marine Fisheries (Auke Bay)
Bill Gabriel - BLM State Office, Anchorage
Jim Larson - NPS, Anchorage
Bill Powell - BOR, Anchorage

Two 12 foot Avon Redshank rafts were used for the river inspection. The use of 4 hp outboard motors was planned but because of shallow water this plan was discarded. Prevailing winds are mostly headwinds and motors are recommended if the river is floated in June.

July 7

Arrived on the Awuna just below the unnamed tributary in the northwest corner of T. 3 S., R. 24 W., at 10:45 in the morning by helicopter. No sites were found where fixed wing planes could land in the headwaters area, so helicopter transportation is almost mandatory on the trip into the river. The weather was clear, warm, sunny, and windy. Prevailing winds from east and northeast. Pumped up and loaded the rafts while waiting for the second chopper load to come in. Tried the fishing and caught nothing, used small spinner and fly. Second load came in at 3:30 pm, and float started shortly thereafter. First camp was made at 8:20 pm, after four river miles had been covered. The river was a maximum of 20 yards wide and had shallow gravel bars that the boats had to be dragged over. In some instances the water was so shallow that most of the gravel was half dry. In contrast some holes were as deep as 3 1/2 feet and 50-80 yards long.



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Headwinds were a problem as far as river travel was concerned, but any wind was a lifesaver as far as mosquitos were concerned. When the wind died the mosquitos were almost unbearable. Headnets and repellent are mandatory. Mosquitos will congregate on the lee side of anything. River bank is thick on both sides with several types of willow and leaving the river results in swarms of mosquitos until you get back into the wind. Even where the water was deep enough to float much dragging of the boats had to be done because headwinds were too strong.

The water was very clear and had a very good taste. Saw several fingerlings and a few larger fish (12-20 inches) but they moved away rapidly in the shallow water and identification was uncertain.

Bill Gabriel (BLM) and Jim Larson (NPS) were the bird experts in our crew and identified the following birds today: raven, longtailed jager, golden eagle, American golden plover, willow ptarmigan, lapland larkspur, white crowned sparrow, and tree sparrow.

No wildlife was spotted from the river but one caribou and one grizzly bear were spotted from the helicopter on the flight to the river.

An old off-road vehicle crossing was seen near our first campsite in the central area of T. 3 S, R. 24 W. This appeared to be an old trail but it was still well defined.

All vegetation observed was small or stunted in comparison to other parts of the state. Various willows comprised almost all of the woody plants, the one notable exception being the dwarf birch. Various flowering plants made portions of the landscape very beautiful.

July 8

Clear, warm, and windy all day. Our wind gauge was broken by the last helicopter takeoff so we had no way to measure wind velocity. We could safely say that it was too strong to paddle against. We left camp at 8:00 am and traversed 10 river miles making our second camp at 9:10 pm. Very slow and physically demanding travel because of shallow water and wind. Came across a sandstone bluff that had a lot of ripple sandstone and fossil imprints.

The river character did not change from the first day. There was a lot of shallow gravel bars and rocky areas that are hard on men and boats. One hole at a bend in the river was

about five feet deep. The bottom could easily be seen. The bed and bank character, general topography, and vegetation were about the same as yesterday.

Saw one caribou today. It seemed to be more curious than afraid of us until it got our wind. In a few more days our wind won't be so hard to get. All gravel bars along the river bed have caribou tracks on them and some seem very fresh.

There are Arctic ground squirrels on every well drained area, and heavily populated colonies on rocky shale or limestone bluffs. They also are curious and all sit up to watch as we pass. Some seem rather large, about 10-12 inches high (sitting up) and approximately 2-3 pounds.

Three grayling were caught today. The largest was about 10-12 inches. Several fingerlings were seen but could not be identified and some larger fish were tentatively identified as whitefish.

The river made a turn and ran in a southerly direction for almost two miles and we actually got to float for a while. The wind was at our backs and moved us about 2-3 miles per hour where the water was deep enough.

The helicopter dropped in on us to see how we were doing. He will check on us when he passes by. That's good to know in case of an accident. Saw or heard no other aircraft today.

Not much problem with insects today as long as we stayed in the wind. Bird sightings were the same as yesterday with the addition of several adult and young white front geese. The parents take the little ones up in the willows then try to lead us away from them, but the little ones will not stay put. Adults have to double back quick to keep them from scattering.

July 9

Clear, warm, and windy all day. Water temperature taken around noon was 58°. Seems colder than that to me. Left camp at 10:00 and traveled eight river miles to camp three at 7:30pm. Had to drag boats almost all day because of strong headwinds and shallow water. Should have had about two miles of wind-pushed floating from Discovery Creek but water was too shallow.

The general topography and vegetation are the same--rolling hills and a blanket of green. The lupine is beginning to show up in full bloom on the ridges and adds a beautiful contrast to the predominant green landscape.

There seems to be more sandstone and shale exposed in the bluffs, especially on river bends, as we move downstream. The river bank seems to be very stable, probably because of thick woody growth on both sides. River bed is still very rocky and has many exposed gravel bars. In spite of the long shallow areas there seems to be larger and deeper holes at each major bend. The water quality remains excellent and very clear.

We saw one nice caribou bull today. He had a cow with him and she came over to see us. The bull kept his distance and moved away quickly but the cow seemed curious about these strange river beasts. The gravel bars all still have a lot of caribou and geese tracks on them.

Fished pretty hard in a nice looking hole at Discovery Creek but Dick Myron caught the only fish, a 12 to 14 inch grayling which he estimated to be about nine years old. It had a stomach full of small snails. We kept seeing fish, fingerling and adult, dashing away as we approach dragging the boats but we can't see well enough to identify them. The fact that all the fish we have caught have had full stomachs may be the reason we have not caught more in the better areas. Discovery Creek has the first hole so deep we couldn't see the bottom.

A parasitic jager was identified by Bill Gabriel today. White-front geese sightings, both adult and young, are increasing. We saw about 15 to 20 total geese today. They move pretty fast down the shoreline, and the young keep up very well. I get the impression that we are "herding" them in front of us as we move down river. I don't like this situation because it tends to separate the young from adult protection for a while.

Had a float plane pass over very low today. No danger of it landing on the Awuna. Saw or heard no other signs of man. Finally got smart and started cooking inside the tent to get away from mosquitos. Also turned our tent around so that the door was facing the wind. Since all the mosquitos congregate on the lee side of the tent this puts them away from the door and keeps them out of the tent.

July 10

Clear, warm, mild wind in the morning to cloudy and dead calm in the afternoon and evening. Left camp at 9:20 am and arrived at our new camp at 7:30 pm after covering eight river miles. Our luck is holding in one respect-- we should have had about two miles of wind pushed floating today but shallow water and no wind made us continue dragging.

Even with no wind the river movement is so slow that headway cannot be made without paddling all the time. Each major bend in the river seems to have a bluff and a hole 5 to 7 feet deep. These deeper holes have a sharp sloping shoreline making dragging the boats difficult, but at least we get to drag them in water deep enough to float them.

There was no change in general topography or vegetation except that the flowers seem to be increasing in number and brilliance each day.

Caught two small grayling and saw many more but they would not hit flies or spinners. Again, the ones caught had full stomachs, mostly small snails.

Saw a young bull moose browsing on the willows next to the river. He wasn't curious and left immediately. Also saw two more caribou. They were like the others, more curious than afraid until they got wind of us then they moved off. More sand is showing up on the gravel bars and most of the animal tracks seem to follow these veins of sand for easier walking.

The wind stopped about mid-afternoon and the mosquito swarm was absolutely fantastic. I honestly can't imagine early travelers or animals retaining their sanity without a good repellent or headnet. The sound alone was unbelievable. We all wished for a tape recorder. I woke up during the night and thought it was raining, but it was only nosquitos flying into the outside of the tent. Cutters repellent works good on them but washes off our hands nretty quick when we have to move rocks to drag boats.

We observed 12 to 20 geese today, all white fronts. Jim Larson added the red-poll to the list of birds identified.

July 11

Clear, warm, mild wind during the morning. Mosquitos waiting in ambush for their breakfast to come out of the tents. A strong wind came up about noon and the bugs disappeared into the willows and grass. Left camp at 10:30 am and made new camp at 6:30 pm seven miles down river. Weather so far on the trip has been excellent. Wind has been so strong that we have to anchor our tents with large rocks and put all our gear inside them before we hook them up to the frame. However, that is much more desirable than no wind and all mosquitos.

The most unusual thing about the river, topography, vegetation, and bed character is that there is no apparent change from day to day. Each time we come around a bend the scenery looks just like the last bend we saw. One change today is that there is more undercutting on some sections of the river bank and definite high water marks are 8 to 10 feet above the present water line. The water is still clear and cold and we found another hole that was too deep to see the bottom (10 feet).

Woke up at 2:30 this morning to the sound of several caribou trotting thru camp and saw three caribou during the day. One came within 15 feet of us and was very puzzled until it wined us. Its face was covered with mosquitos and it was obviously very uncomfortable because of them. Should have some great pictures if they come out.

Caught two more small grayling today. We are not catching many fish for the time spent in some of these good looking fishing holes. I caught a small (3 inch) sculpin in my hand and saw several more. When I put it back into the water it headed straight for a 10"x10" rock and went under it. I lifted the rock up but could not find the sculpin. That was very puzzling because there was no place for it to go.

Still coming across several geese (white front) with young. Saw two gyrfalcon and a nest but could not see from our angle if young were present. Saw two adult golden eagles but if they were near their nesting area we could not see it. Saw two adult and four ptarmagin chicks and eased boats to within six feet of them. The chicks were well hidden and the adults would not leave them. After several excellent pictures we decided to see how close they would allow us to come, and the male flew into our faces twice. If all ptarmagin parents are that protective it is easy to see why we jumped so many of them when we walked on the river bank and adjacent ridges.

There are still many shallow gravel bars that we have to move rocks out of and use our feet to scrape a small channel to help float the boats through. Slow going--good training for a football team trying to get in condition.

July 12

Very cool and foggy with very little wind in the morning. Everyone dug out warm coats. About noon the fog burned away and it became clear, warm, and windy. In mid afternoon our thermometer registered 68o. I think all its readings were high. Left camp at 10:00 and traveled eight river miles to our new camp at 6:30 pm.

The river speed has not varied at all. Width and depth haven't varied much and most variance is in the deep holes at major bends. Much more alge is observed on the rocks and it is very slick to walk on, especially in deep areas where bottom drops off sharply. The river bottom is becoming more deceiving also. What looks like 100 yards of deep water may actually be a series of small pools with shallow gravel bars about 3 to 4 inches underwater. One could very easily ruin an outboard motor in this situation if extreme care was not taken,. The high water mark is sometimes 12 feet above water level now and the bank has been badly scarified by ice chunks in places. Willows are ripped out or scraped of all leafy parts in areas as much as 60 yards long. That kind of force could be dangerous if boats were on the river with the ice.

Arctic ground squirrels have been seen in profusion for the last two or three days. Large caverns are visible on some hillsides and they give insight to the power and determination of a hungry bear. These arctic ground squirrels remind me very much of Texas prairie dogs in appearance and mannerisms.

Fishing holes look better every day but no fish are caught. Dick Myron has tried several fly uatterns and the rest of us have thrown just about every spinner and spoon we can find.

A very pleasant day, insect wise. The cool weather this morning and the wind during the afternoon have kept them in hiding. It still amazes me how they can appear out of nowhere and congregate on the leeward side of anything. A random sample count on the back of Jim Larson's red and black checked wool shirt showed about 500 mosquitos.

The birdlife observed today was the same as in past days. A glaucous gull was added to the list and again several white front geese were "herded" along in front of us. Sure is a relief to see the adults take off and double back to their young. The adults will not hesitate to go cross country on foot and show good speed, but the young are very reluctant to leave the water or immediate river bank.

We heard a low flying plane today but could not sight it. The NPS helicopter dropped in on us at 10:30 pm on its way back to Umiat with a load of archeologists.

We punched a hole in one raft today. We have had to patch a couple of pock-marks in the bottom of boats but this is the first tube puncture. Had a good downwind float area today (3 miles) but as usual there was a lot of shallow water and we had to drag the boats.

July 13

It was cold and foggy until about 11:00 this morning. Warm coats were definitely called for. Fog cleared about noon but the rest of the day was cooler although it was clear and sunny; The usual wind was present and even though it caused us to wear jackets all day it was welcome to control the mosquitos. Left camp at 9:50 and made new camp at 6:35 nine miles downriver.

Some stands of willows are taller (5-6 feet) and have larger diameter trunks than what we have been seeing. The various flowering plants enhance the landscape beauty more every day.

The river character remains unchanged except for one stretch of water about 80 yards long and 45 yards wide that was 8 to 10 feet deep with no shallow spots. The wind was at such an angle to this stretch of water that we were able to paddle through it. The alge on the rocks and sharp slope of the bottom would have made dragging the boats difficult. Walking on these alge covered rocks is like walking on a bed of greased golf balls. Everyone has gotten water in their boats from slipping and its amazing that no one has fallen down. The water is still very clear and the only time any current can be seen is when we hit these very shallow gravel bars. More undercutting and bank scouring is also being seen.

A red fox appeared walking down the opposite side of the river as we broke camp this morning. It was searching for food and showed no signs of alarm until directly across from us (30 yds). It moved away as we attempted to take more closeup pictures but was still not particularly alarmed. I took some good closeup pictures of an Arctic ground squirrel on the river bank.

Several good looking fishing holes seen today but no fish were caught in any of them. We almost stepped on a 22 to 24 inch burbot in shallow water. It moved to an area about 12 to 14 inches deep and Jim Larson caught it. Small scalnin are observed in every shallow area as are other fingerling fish that move out before they can be identified.

The topography and scenery are still the same but more flowers are appearing and the ridges and bluffs seem to be higher and more prominent. These bluffs and ridges have dry topsoil but shallow digging will produce soil wet enough to stick to the shovel and hands.

Saw about a dozen adult white-front geese and about 10 young. Other birdlife has not changed much since the first day of travel.

Floating wise this was our best day yet. We actually got to float some without paddling when we got on a downwind leg with some water deep enough to float the boats. Even at that we punched more holes in the rafts today. We put patches on at night and drag them off the next day. We have gone through one patch kit already.

July 14

It was cold and foggy until about 10:30 this morning. It cleared off about noon and became clear, windy, and cool for the rest of the day. Free air temperature during the lunch stop was 51o (2:00 pm). Again the cool temperature during the morning and wind after that kept the insects in check. Left camp at 10:50 and made a new camp nine miles down the river at 7:30 p.m.

More holes with deep water (6 to 8 feet) were evident today. Unfortunately the wind was too strong to paddle through them and we had to drag most of them. Shallow areas are still just as bad and the dragging just as physically demanding. The undercutting and scouring of the river bank is more evident than in past days. The river bed runs from fine grained sand, to gravel, to alge covered rocks.

Three moose were seen today. One was a young bull, one a large cow, and the other was a large animal but was too far away to tell what kind. It stood out very vividly against the bare, green tundra as it move across to the next drainage.

Fishing has been so bad lately that no one even tried today. When we had time or opportunity to fish everyone was too tired from dragging the shallow areas or paddling against the wind. Several bluffs with raptor nests were spotted today. One bluff had both a rough legged hawk nest with young and a gyrfalcon nest with young. The gyrfalcon made a pass close to the hawk nest and both parents jumped him. It was no contest as the falcon outflaw both hawks easily, but he left the hawks nest area. The gyrfalcon young was alaoast as big as its parents but still had a lot of downey feathers. Another rough legged hawk nest with young was observed on another bluff. Around the next bend we saw a flock of about 60 adult white front geese. There were no young with this bunch and only about 2 or 3 birds took to the air as we approached. The rest ran crosscountry or down the river bank. An inspection of the area showed many feathers and a large accumulation of droppings indicating that these birds were probably molting and had been in this area for some time. We also saw a flock of about 12 to 15 Canada geese with young on a gravel bar below a long, steep bluff. As we approached they all ran un the bluff with such speed that I doubt if any human could have stayed with them to the top. If our survival had depended on catching a molting goose we would have starved. We also saw a lone merganser today.

We punched a hole in the bottom of a raft today and took on some water. Since the weather has been so good we did not have everything in waterproof bags and we had some stuff get wet. We will correct that mistake tomorrow.

The helicopter flew over and checked us out again today. It did not land but we could have easily waved him in if necessary.

Our camp was at the confluence of Birthday Creek and a large deep hole was found in this area. Since we have a long southerly stretch tomorrow everyone is looking for a good float.

July 15

Again the morning was cold and foggy but gave way to a clear, windy, and cool afternoon and evening. Free air temperature at 2:00 p.m., was 51~~0~~ and the insects were controlled by mother nature again. If the wind drops at all they are still waiting to pounce. We left camp at 10:40 this morning and set up a new camp at 5:45 p.m., seven miles downriver. Yesterdays hopes of a float were dashed by long stretches of shallow water and gravel bars. Today was even harder than yesterday and really exhausted everyone. The boats are taking a beating too. It's a credit to the toughness of Avon that they have stood up as well as they have.

Even though the deep holes are getting deeper and the shallow gravel bars longer, the water quality has remained clear and excellent. The river level has dropped about two inches each day since we started.

Three grizzly bears were spotted today, a sow and yearling cubs. They were digging out roots on the hillside and moved down to the water about a quarter of a mile in front of us. The cubs played like a couple of kittens both in and out of the water and then mama took her bath. They effectively blocked the river for about an hour before crossing and moving up on the opposite hillside. As we moved on downriver and turned a corner they got our wind and moved up over the hill on a dead run.

This was the first day of the trip that we did not see any geese. The rest of the bird list remained the same. No fishing was attempted today. Campsites are plentiful and are chosen according to the size of rocks we feel like we can sleep on for that particular nite. Campsites may not be so easy to find early in the summer when the water is higher and all gravel bars are inundated.

Had to do a lot of repair work on the boats at our new camp today. Most of the smaller patches in the second kit have been used also.

July 16

This morning dawned clear and mild with a good strong wind to control the mosquitos. The wind died late in the afternoon and the swarms started. Insects were especially bad at our new campsite since it was partially protected from what little breeze there was by a small hill. We left camp this morning at 9:50 and arrived at our new camp nine miles downriver at 7:00. Besides being partially protected from the wind this campsite was on a narrow, fairly rocky bar. The last 500 to 600 yards was traveled with a large hole in a raft tube so we could not afford to be too selective in campsites. This site was at the Lookout River confluence and had a large, deep hole, (45 yards wide and 85 yards long and 10 feet deep) but no fish were caught here. Daily inspection of the boat bottoms revealed a thumb sized hole worn in the new raft and both tubes worn paper thin. The other boat was in about the same shape. After consulting with the other team members I made the decision to await pickup here. To proceed would have guaranteed that the boats would have been unable to make the Meade River trip which was to follow this one.

There are many more areas of riverbank that are undercut, and willows are scattered along the banks. Hills continue to be thickly vegetated with small flora, woody plants, and sedges. We climbed one hill to look at the river farther downstream and confirmed that it is very shallow with many areas where dragging would be very tough on men and boats.

Three caribou were seen today and their curious attitude is still in evidence. A half dozen white front geese with young were observed today. One of the goslings came right up to the boat before diving and swimming away.

The helicopter flew over us twice today changing NPS archeologist crews but did not land.

July 17

It was clear, fairly cool, mild breeze and the usual swarm of mosquitos. We were awakened this morning at about 2:00 a.m., by several caribou crossing the river and trotting right through our camp. At this time there was a very slight fog directly over the river but it was gone by 8:00 when we got up.

Jim Larson and Dick Myron examined a limestone shale bluff across the river and found many fossil imprints. Jim and Bill Gabriel noted that the lupine which was starting to bloom fully as we started this trip on the seventh of July, was beginning to wither. Dwarf blueberry and crowberry fruit were beginning to form but showed no signs of ripening yet. The plants in this region seem to have to do their growing in a short period of time.

The RB 57 aircraft which was doing high altitude photography of NPR-A for NPS and BLM was observed today making several passes over our general area. We were told later that our camp would show up on these photographs.

The helicopter came in at 4:00 p.m., and I flew to the Meade River to check the water in it. The Meade was just as dry as the Awuna and I decided not to attempt to float it. We returned to the Awuna at 8:00 p.m., and Bill Gabriel and Dick Myron were transported to Umiat with half our gear. At 11:55 p.m., Jim Larson and I were picked up with the last of the gear and taken to Umiat. We chartered back to Anchorage on July 19 with part of the gear and the rest was brought in to Anchorage with the NPS gear in early September.

Summary

Over the course of nine and one half days on the Awuna River we covered about 80 miles averaging a little under nine miles per day. The water was extremely shallow and a float with any type of boat is inadvisable at this time of year or later. An overflight of the river on June 14, 15, and 16 indicated ample water for a float. An almost constant headwind (east and northeasterly) was experienced which necessitated vigorous paddling to make headway.

The general topography varied very little during the trip and the same was true for the scenery. The first few days were interesting and the country was beautiful but after that it was repetitive. The same was true for the vegetation of the immediate river and surrounding ridges and bluffs. A few changes were noted in the river bed material and the actual river banks but even this was minimal. More sand and small gravel was observed as we moved downriver and the banks and river bank vegetation was damaged to a greater extent by ice. Even the character of the water did not vary much. From the access point to egress we went from deeper areas at river bends to gravel bars before and after these deep holes. The quality of the water was excellent during the entire trip, and adequate campsites can be easily found all along the river. This may not be true however, earlier in the season when the water is higher.

Wildlife observation, especially birds and raptors, was good. Some of the most enjoyable experiences of the trip were associated with the close observation of raptors, geese, ptarmigan, and caribou. The sportfishing was poor. Very few fish were caught in relation to time and energy expended. The most prolific and wild "wildlife" were the mosquitos. It is very difficult to put enough emphasis on words to express how uncomfortable these insects can make a trip when the wind does not blow. If the people on a trip to this area are not prepared the mosquitos could ruin a trip even with the best of scenery.

Access to the river is pretty well limited to helicopters. Very few of the gravel bars or deep holes of water were long enough or wide enough for fixed winged planes. The water that was deep enough for float planes would be unsafe for landing unless closely inspected a few days before use, because of sunken rocks, uneven bottom and rapidly dropping water level. Most of these deep holes were at river bends which added the hazards of bluffs and wind changes that are difficult to gauge. Comparable factors would make gravel bars very uncertain and hazardous also. If enough water could be found in the Awuna to allow floating to the Colville River several gravel bars are available there that could handle small aircraft. Some sections of the Colville itself or adjacent lakes are adequate for float plane service. A float trip could proceed on down the Colville to Umiat or to the village of Nooiksut or to the Beaufort Sea coast.

The single most dominant factor of the trip was the quiet, unpolluted atmosphere that is prevalent in this very sparsely populated country. The only evidence of man was an occasional aircraft overhead and with sufficient water to float a nice wilderness trip could be experienced.


Bill Powell