

PLANNING A RIVER TRIP IN ALASKA

Alaska has over 100 rivers to choose from depending on your time and resources. They offer exciting opportunities for boaters of all skill levels, from flat water to white water and from road-accessible day-trips to bush-plane adventures. The following tips will help you plan a float trip that suits your tastes and abilities.

- **INFORMATION:** There are few brochures or descriptive materials available for Alaska's rivers, so be prepared to do some homework (some references are listed at the end of this handout). Take U.S. Geological Survey maps (scale 1" = 1 mile) of the area you plan to visit. If you contact an agency for further information, specify area or rivers of interest, type of boat being used, kind of access (road or air) you prefer, amount of time you have, and your skill level.

- **ACCESS:** There are relatively few rivers with road access at more than one point. Get a basic road map of Alaska and study it carefully. Because of the great distances involved, shuttles can be difficult to work out. If you're looking for road-accessible rivers, plan on driving your own vehicle. Many car rental agencies will not permit their vehicles on gravel highways, and rental cars don't have boat racks! There is no public bus transportation on Alaska's highways. You can use a bicycle for shuttles if you're in good shape and the distance is manageable.

Some road-accessible rivers include the Kenai (Sterling Highway), Nenana and Chulitna (Parks Highway), Delta-Clearwater and Tanana (Richardson Highway), Delta and Gulkana (Denali and Richardson Highways), Copper (Richardson Highway and Tok Cut-off), Fortymile (Taylor Highway), Birch Creek and Chatanika (Steese Highway), Jim River (Dalton Highway), and Chena River (Chena Hot Springs Road and multiple points in Fairbanks). The Yukon River can be reached at Whitehorse and Dawson City (Yukon Territory), Eagle, Circle, and the Dalton Highway. These rivers vary in difficulty from Class I to Class IV, so be sure you know what you're getting into!

You may have to fly to or from the river of your choice – or both. An inflatable raft or collapsible boat such as a Klepper-type kayak can be carried as baggage. Most bush planes must carry hard-shell canoes separately from passengers, requiring multiple trips, and aircraft licensed to take both passengers *and* canoes, such as a DeHavilland Beaver, cost upwards of \$300 per hour. (For more information, ask for our handout "Chartering Aircraft in Interior Alaska").

- **EQUIPMENT:** Plan on bringing everything you need with you. There are few businesses that rent outdoor equipment, and on a long trip returning it can be a logistical nightmare. Check with local visitors and convention bureaus or the Alaska State Vacation Planner for information on equipment rental businesses (see "Additional References").

- **GUIDES AND OUTFITTERS:** Stumped by transportation problems? You may want to go with an experienced and knowledgeable guide or outfitter. National Parks and some National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska provide listings of the guides/outfitters and air charter services with permits to operate in their areas. Check with local convention and visitors bureaus or the State Vacation Planner for additional listings.

- **SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS:** Rivers in Alaska pose special hazards to boaters. Experience in other states may not prepare you for Alaska. The water is extremely cold and hypothermia is a very real danger even after a brief submersion – especially during wet weather, which is common. Some rivers are high-volume. You may be in very wild and remote country where help can be many hours or days away. For these reasons, **rivers in Alaska should be treated as if they were one class higher on the International Scale of River Difficulty** than they would be elsewhere. *You must be responsible for your own safety and be completely self-sufficient.*
- **The water is cold!** Clear rivers are usually in the low 40°s F (for comparison, a heated swimming pool is usually 80°-85° F). Glacial rivers, or rivers with glacial tributaries, are near freezing and if you fall in, the cold will immobilize you in just a few minutes unless you are wearing a full wetsuit or drysuit.
- **Watch for sweepers and log jams.** Sweepers (strainers) are trees that bend low over the water or have fallen completely across. Many rivers meander through forested valleys and sweepers are common along the cut banks. Log jams pile up on corners, deposited by spring floods and high water. The current tends to pull towards the bank and right into sweepers and log jams. Stay alert! Sweepers are common on Class I rivers and can take a relaxed boater by surprise.
- **Know how to read the water.** Understanding river currents and hydraulics can save you not only from denting your boat but from disaster. Stay clear of recirculating holes and never get broadside to a rock, sweeper or log jam: the current will tip your boat and you may be pinned beneath and your craft seriously damaged or sunk. If you lose your boat or wrap it around a rock, you may face a tough hike through remote, trail-less wilderness to reach help. If you come to a difficult stretch and have *any* doubts, **STOP, scout ahead, and line down from the bank or portage around.**
- **Water levels change quickly.** Pay attention to the weather: long, dry spells may mean shallow water. Conversely, heavy or prolonged rains can quickly bring rivers to flood stage. Water levels will rise anywhere from a few hours to a few days later depending on how far downstream you are, so camp above the high water mark. Glacial rivers change with some predictability – warm weather increases glacial melt, so glacial rivers rise during the day and drop again in the evening. Heavy rains can contribute to glacial melt enough to cause local flooding. As days grow cooler in autumn, glacial rivers gradually drop in level and clear up.
- **High Water** puts more debris in the water and greatly increases erosion along cut banks. Sweepers and floating logs and stumps are especially hazardous during high water. The current is faster and pushier and riffles may become Class II rapids with large standing waves. You can generally upgrade a river by at least one class at high water. Be prepared to change your plans!
- **Maps.** Most public information brochures do not have enough detail to provide an accurate picture of your route. You need U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps (scale 1"= 1 mile) and a compass. Many Alaska rivers loop back on themselves (meander) – mark each bend on the map as you pass to keep track of your progress or you can get very disoriented.
- **Where to camp?** Except during very high water, gravel bars are easy to find and make good campsites: you can see bears and they can see you (and avoid you)! Open areas tend to be breezier and can bring relief from biting insects. Make sure you camp above the high water mark and tie up your boat. **DO** practice minimum-impact camping techniques, make sure your fire is dead out, and erase all signs of your presence before you leave. Pack out *all* your garbage, don't bury it because wildlife will dig it up.

• GENERAL BACKCOUNTRY SAFETY

◦ **Wear an approved, well-fitting flotation device (life jacket) at all times.** Don't take chances even on a day trip in hot weather: the water is extremely cold and if you take a spill, you may be disabled or unable to reach the shore or the boat quickly. If you're planning a whitewater trip, wear a helmet and a full wetsuit or a drysuit with plenty of warm clothing underneath in addition to a life jacket. Travel with a partner or group.

◦ **Know your paddling skills** – don't expect to learn them as you go. You can get into big trouble even on Class I rivers, where you may have to do some quick maneuvering to avoid sweepers, rocks, or log jams. Minimum skills should include eddy turns, bracing, ferrying, sweep and draw strokes, and backpaddling. Take classes in canoeing or go with experienced friends.

◦ **Take at least one complete change of clothes and plenty of matches in a waterproof bag.** Synthetic fleece and "polypro" clothes provide good protection, as they dry quickly and provide warmth when wet. Keep some matches in a waterproof container in your pocket. Be prepared for cold, wet weather – take good rain gear and warm clothes. Take a throw-rope for rescues, extra paddles, first aid kit, emergency flares, and boat repair materials, and don't forget insect repellent, sunscreen and dark glasses.

◦ **Tie your gear into your boat securely.** Even if you flip your canoe, you won't lose your gear to the river if it's tied in – but don't overload your boat. Take extra flotation bags if you plan on whitewater touring.

◦ **Practice bear safety.** Read all bear safety information provided. Keep a clean campsite, store your food away from your tent, and avoid camping on game trails. Make noise when in densely forested or brushy areas or near rushing water.

◦ **Boil, filter, or chemically treat all drinking water.** *Giardia*, a microorganism that causes intestinal trouble, is widespread in Alaskan waters.

◦ **File a "float plan"** with a friend or with the government agency managing the area so they can initiate a search if you are overdue, and when you get back, be sure to let them know! Allow extra time for bad weather and take extra food in case you are delayed.

• **ADDITIONAL REFERENCES:** The Alaska Public Lands Information Center carries brochures and maps on state and national parks, forests, refuges, and recreation areas in Alaska. The Center also has information on chartering aircraft, bear safety, and minimum-impact camping. Center staff can help you plan your trip.

River Logs: The Center also has a collection of trip reports filed by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other agencies on rivers surveyed for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

Books: *Alaska Paddling Guide*. 1992. Jack Mosby and David Dapkus, J & R Enterprises, Anchorage, AK. \$7.95.

The Alaska River Guide. 1998. Karen Jettmar. Alaska Northwest Books, Seattle, WA. \$16.95.

Fast and Cold: A Guide to Alaska Whitewater. 1994. Andrew Embick. Valdez Alpine Books/Falcon Press Publishing Co. Inc., Helena, MT. \$24.95.

The Yukon River Guide: A Journey Through Time From Dawson City to Circle. 1998. Gerri Dick and Dean Littlepage. Alaska Natural History Association, Anchorage, AK. \$17.95

Topographic maps: USGS Map Distribution, Box 25286, Building 810, Denver Federal Center, Denver CO 80225. Phone toll-free 1-800-USA-MAPS.

Alaska Atlas and Gazetteer. 1998. DeLorme Mapping, Freeport, ME. \$19.95.

Web Sites: Alaska Public Lands Information Centers: www.nps.gov/aplic

Alaska River Forecast Center: www.alaska.net/~akrfc

U.S. Geological Survey: www.usgs.gov

Leave No Trace: www.lnt.org

Free Visitors Guides: *Official Alaska State Vacation Planner*, call toll-free 1-800-862-5275.

Fairbanks Visitors Guide, Fairbanks Convention & Visitors Bureau, 550 1st Avenue, Fairbanks, AK 99701. Call toll free 1-800-327-5774 (in Alaska, 456-5774), fax 452-4190.

Anchorage Visitors Guide, Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1600 A Street, Suite 200, Anchorage, AK 99501-5162. Phone (907) 276-4118, fax 278-5559.

• INTERNATIONAL SCALE OF RIVER DIFFICULTY

Class I: Moving water with a few riffles and small waves. Few or no obstructions.

Class II: Easy rapids with waves up to three feet high; clear channels are obvious without scouting. Some maneuvering is required.

Class III: Rapids with high, irregular waves often capable of swamping an open canoe. Narrow passages may require complex maneuvering and scouting from shore.

Class IV: Long, difficult rapids with constricted passages that often require precise maneuvering in very turbulent waters. Scouting from shore is often necessary and conditions make rescue difficult. Generally not possible for open canoes. Boaters in covered canoes and kayaks should be able to Eskimo roll before attempting passage.

Class V: Extremely difficult, long and very violent rapids with high, congested routes which nearly always must be scouted from the shore. Rescue conditions are difficult and there is significant hazard to life in the event of a mishap. Ability to Eskimo roll is essential for kayakers.

Class VI: Difficulties of Class V carried to the extreme. Nearly impossible and very dangerous. For teams of experts only after close study and taking all precautions.

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