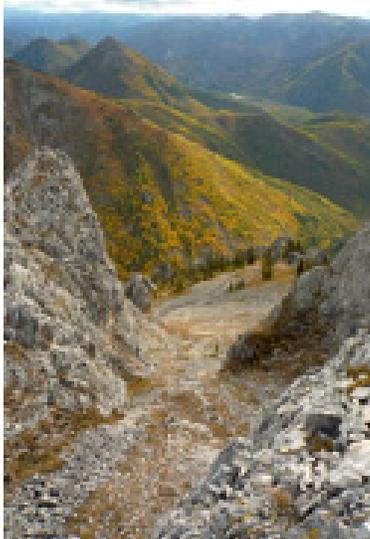




## Planning a Hiking Trip In Interior Alaska

Alaska's many public lands offer unlimited opportunities for day hikes and extended backpacking trips in some of the most diverse and spectacular wild country in North America. However, few developed trails exist, and Alaska's enormous size and lack of roads can make planning a difficult task. Depending on how far 'away from it all' you plan to go, you may need to do considerable initial research, but your reward will be an unforgettable experience.



The best hiking routes are up high, above treeline and on ridges.

### Where To Go

Please study brochures describing Alaska's state and federal recreation lands. Once you narrow your choice of areas, our office or the agency managing the area can offer you further assistance. Specify how much time you plan to spend, whether you plan to drive, boat, or fly to your destination, and how much wilderness camping experience you have. We can provide brochures, trail descriptions (if available), and information packets, but you may also want to get a good guidebook; several are listed under 'Additional References.'

### Trails

Developed trails exist near some of interior Alaska's larger communities such as Fairbanks and in Denali National Park. There are extensive, well marked trails in the Chena River State Recreation Area and White Mountains National Recreation Area, as well. Expect other hikers sharing the backcountry with you on developed trails. For the adventurous, there are multiple lifetimes worth of backcountry hiking and camping opportunities in places like Denali, Wrangell St. Elias, and Gates of the Arctic National Parks, as well as many other public use and recreation areas.

### Backcountry Travel

Most of Alaska's public recreation lands are rugged wilderness. Trails do not exist and you must chart your own course using topographic maps and a compass. Vast areas of Alaska are wetlands; a mosaic of forest, marsh, muskeg, meandering rivers, and thousands of lakes and ponds.

The best hiking is above treeline on ridges and along gravel bars of larger rivers and streams. Focus your routefinding to these areas, especially avoiding vegetated drainages, where alder thickets can prove impassable. However, avoid alpine meadows that appear to offer easy hiking. They could be fields of tussocks; unwieldy clumps of vegetation surrounded by mud and water and almost always barriers to enjoyable foot travel. Swift rivers and streams are extremely cold, and crossing them is often hazardous. Maintain a flexible schedule and be prepared to re-route your trip.

### Trail Information Sources

For the main hiking trails in Alaska: <http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/aktrails/ats.htm>  
Chena River State Recreation Area Trails: <http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/units/chena/trails.htm>  
UAF Trails: [http://www.nscfairbanks.org/ski/pdf/UAF\\_Trails\\_Map\\_All.pdf](http://www.nscfairbanks.org/ski/pdf/UAF_Trails_Map_All.pdf)  
Creamer's Field Nature Trails: [http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=refuge.creamers\\_trails](http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=refuge.creamers_trails)  
BLM - White Mountains Trails: <http://www.blm.gov/ak/whitemountains/trails.htm>  
Hiking/Backpacking in Denali NP: <http://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/things2do.htm>  
Denali State Park Trails: <http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/units/denali2.htm>  
Hiking/Backpacking in Wrangell St.-Elias NP: <http://www.nps.gov/wrst/planyourvisit/hiking-and-backpacking.htm>

Remember, in a remote wilderness area you will be a long way from help. You must be completely self-sufficient and responsible for your own safety!

## Access

The Dalton, Denali, McCarthy, Nabesna, Steese, and Taylor Highways lead to some outstanding hiking areas but are mostly unpaved. If you rent a vehicle, check the rental agency's policy regarding driving on unpaved roads. There is no public bus system for Alaska's highways, and there are only a few private shuttle businesses. The Alaska Railroad provides service from Seward and Whittier on the Kenai Peninsula to Fairbanks, in the interior. The Alaska Marine Highway (ferry system) serves Southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound, Kodiak Island, and the Alaska Peninsula. For remote areas, you may need to charter a boat or bushplane to reach your final destination.



Public cabins provide rustic comfort and shelter, available by reservation and for emergency use.

## Public Use Cabins

There are many public use cabins in interior Alaska, accessible by boat, floatplane, or trail. Most of the Fairbanks area cabins are designed for winter use and are difficult to reach in summer, due to wet terrain. For information on locations and how to reserve cabins, please go to <http://www.alaskacenters.gov> and select 'Cabins.'

## Minimum-Impact Camping

Arctic and alpine vegetation is slow-growing and extremely susceptible to damage, even from overnight camping. Avoid fires in such areas and use a backpacking stove. Read all

minimum-impact materials provided and make sure to leave a clean camp and pack out or burn all waste. Keep your distance from wildlife to avoid causing them stress and avoid danger to yourself. If you want to see wildlife up close, use binoculars or a telephoto lens. For more information, please visit <http://www.LNT.org>.

## Equipment

A few, quality outdoor gear shops are located in Fairbanks (see our Equipment Rental brochure for renting gear). Be prepared for cold, wet weather. Take good quality raingear and warm clothes. Wool, fleece, and polypropylene clothes provide good protection, as they dry quickly and insulate even when wet. Make sure you have a quality tent with mosquito netting and a rain fly, a backpacking stove, first aid kit, emergency flares, insect repellent, sunscreen, and sunglasses. Some parks require the use of bear-proof food containers. Inquire prior to your trip.

## Guides and Outfitters

Stumped by planning problems? You may want to go with a 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

### Weather

Spring arrives in late May (later in Arctic and coastal areas) and autumn begins in late August. Weather conditions during this short season can include everything from sunny temperatures of 90°F to cold, weeklong rainstorms. Snow can occur at any time at higher elevations. Fall colors are beautiful in September, but be prepared for rain, snow, and sub-freezing temperatures at night. Dehydration and hypothermia are dangers that must be considered in all seasons. Interior Alaska is generally the warmest and driest region, while coastal Alaska is often cool and rainy. Rivers and streams generally run high until late June, although rainstorms can cause local flooding at any time.



Winter conditions can quickly become deadly. With blinding snowstorms and temperatures that can plunge below -50°F, frostbite, hypothermia, and death can occur very quickly. Be prepared.

## Bears

Black and brown (grizzly) bears inhabit nearly all of Alaska. Read all bear safety information available and follow the proper procedures for camping and hiking in bear country to reduce the chances of a negative confrontation. While firearms are popular in many areas as bear protection, they are not allowed in some parks, so check with the managing agency before you go. A highly-effective capicum-based aerosol spray is available in many sporting goods stores and has been proven to deter aggressive bears. It should be enclosed in a sealed container or several layers of plastic bags during transport, as to avoid possible impairment of the driver and/or passengers. Transportation onboard aircraft is often forbidden, so please check with flying service or pilot before trying to bring it onboard. Make noise, sing, talk, and travel in groups to keep bears aware of your presence. Be cautious in thick vegetation.



**Warning:** While bears may look playful and cuddly, they are wild animals and need their own personal space, too!

## **Insects**

Mosquito populations are highest in June and July and are followed in August and September by biting flies and gnats (no-see-ums). Insect repellent and a tent with mosquito netting (preferably gnat-proof as well) are essential, as is a headnet during summer. Choose a campsite on a ridge or on a riverside gravel bar where a breeze may bring relief from insects. If you are sensitive to bees or wasps, bring appropriate medication.

## **Water**

Boil, filter, or chemically treat all water before drinking. Giardia, an intestinal bacterium that can cause great discomfort, is widespread in Alaska. Glacial rivers are full of silt which may clog filters. Let water sit overnight so the silt settles out, or filter it first through a clean handkerchief.

## **Maps**

Most public information brochures do not have enough detail to provide an accurate picture of your route. Get U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps (scale 1" = 1 mile at 1:63,360) and a compass, and know how to use them! See 'Additional References.' PLEASE NOTE: Topographic maps of Alaska are 10 to 60 years old. Trails, cabins, roads, and even some villages shown on maps may have moved or no longer exist. Inquire if you have any questions.

## **Private Land**

Much of Alaska's backcountry contains mining claims and private lands, including Alaska Native Corporation and village lands, on which you may not be welcome. For permission to camp on Native-owned lands contact the village council. See 'Additional References' and the local agency for possible access.

## **Permits**

Permits for campfires or backcountry hiking are not required on most public land units in Alaska. However, check in advance with the land managing agency, because campfires may be prohibited due to fire conditions. Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park (Chilkoot Trail) and Denali National Park are two areas that do require backcountry permits. Contact FAPLIC or the respective park for more information.

## **Trip Plan**

File a 'trip plan' with a friend and the agency managing the area that you plan to visit. Most importantly, let them know when you get back! Always allow extra time for bad weather and take extra food in case plans change. It is not uncommon for planes to be grounded for a week due to weather. It can happen!

## **River Crossings**

River crossings are potentially dangerous and should never be attempted without a full consideration of the area, local conditions, and your abilities. Choose your crossing locations carefully. Look for wider sections of river, where the water tends to be shallower and moving with less force. When crossing a river, plant your legs sideways to the current (towards the opposite bank), but angle your hips slightly upstream. This position minimizes the force of the current, conserves energy, and directs that energy where you want it to go, across the stream. Never face downstream, as the force of the water will push against the back of your knees and cause your legs to buckle under.

If you have your backpack buckled, undo it so that if you lose your footing you can remove it quickly. Drowning can occur from a backpack full of water, which can drag you downstream, under the surface. Shuffle across with small rather than large steps, moving one foot at a time, and only when the other foot is securely placed. Do not cross your legs, but keep them apart in a stable, braced position. A stout stick makes a great 'third leg' and allows you to always have at least two points of contact with the river bottom. Beware of glacial and snowmelt streams, as cold water river crossings are chilling and can cause numbing, decreased sensation, and loss of mobility in your feet and legs. Store your clothes in plastic bags or dry sacks to ensure dry clothes if you were to swim. Drink hot liquids and eat some hot food before continuing your hike.

*Do not panic* if you do lose your footing and are swept away. If you stay calm, you have a good chance of getting back on land safely. Get the pack off your back and forget about it (quick release pack straps could save your life), and float downstream on your back, feet first. Keep your feet up to fend yourself off rocks and logs. Swim across, not against the current, to get to shore. Never allow yourself to be swept up against logjams or fallen trees, as you will, most likely, be trapped and drowned by the force of the water dragging you under.

Remember that several hours can make a large difference in water levels. Early morning is the best time to cross glacial streams, because during the late afternoon and evening, water levels can be considerably higher from the ice melting during the heat of the day. Plan your trip to allow for time delays and always be willing to make a detour, change your route, or even turn around and go back, rather than risk your life in a dangerous river crossing.



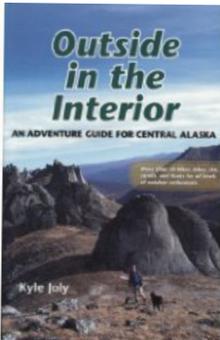
River crossings are one of the most dangerous aspects of backcountry travel.

## Additional References

The Alaska Public Lands Information Center carries brochures and handouts on state and national parks, forests, refuges, and recreation areas in Alaska. The Center also has information on planning river trips, chartering aircraft, bear safety, minimum-impact camping, treating drinking water, water safety, and hypothermia. Center staff can help you plan all your Alaska wilderness adventures. Books on hiking and related topics are available from the Alaska Geographic Association (907) 274-8440 or <http://www.alaskageographic.org>

### Alaska Hiking Publications

Hiking Alaska. Dean Littlepage, 1997. Falcon Press Publishing Co., Inc., Helena and Billings, MT.



Outside in the Interior: An Adventure Guide to Central Alaska. Kyle Joly, 2007. University of Alaska Press. Fairbanks, AK.

Denali Trails: A Guide to Entrance Area Hiking. Sheri Forbes, 2001. Alaska Natural History Association. Anchorage, AK.

Denali State Park Map and Guide. 2003. Alaska Natural History Association. Anchorage, AK.

Denali Walks. Kris Capps, 2007. Alaska Natural History Association. Anchorage, AK.

Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska Backcountry Companion. Jon Nierenberg, 1997. Alaska Natural History Association. Anchorage, AK.

Adventuring in Alaska. Peggy Wayburn, 1988. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, CA.



*Backpacking in Wrangell St.-Elias National Park & Preserve*

Alaska's Parklands. Nancy Lnage Simmerman, 1991. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.

Alaska Atlas and Gazetteer. 1998. Delorme Mapping, Freeport, ME. [www.delorme.com](http://www.delorme.com)

Hiking in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. 2000. Danny Kost. Anchorage, AK.

Leave No Trace: A guide to the New Wilderness Etiquette. Annette McGiveny, 2002. The Mountaineers. Seattle, WA.

Wilderness Navigation. Bob and Mike Burns. 1999. The Mountaineers. Seattle, WA.

Alaska Wilderness Guide. Alaska Northwest Books, Seattle, WA. (Updated every two years, and contains addresses of village councils).

**Hiking Other Alaska Regions**  
Discover Southeast Alaska with Pack & Paddle. Margaret Piggott. 1974. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.

Hikers Guide to the Chilkoot Trail. Alaska Natural History Assoc. Anchorage, AK.

Juneau Trails. 2003. Alaska Natural History Association, Anchorage, AK.

Kenai Pathways. 1994. Alaska Natural History Association, Anchorage, AK.

Klondike Trail. Jennifer Voss., 2001. The Mountaineers. Seattle, WA.

Sitka Trails. 2003. Alaska Natural History Association, Anchorage, AK.

Soft Paths. Bruce Hampton and David Cole, 1995. Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA.

### Topographic Maps

U.S. Geological Survey, Alaska Distribution Section, Federal Building & Courthouse, 101 12th Avenue, Box 12, Fairbanks, AK 99701. Phone (907) 456-0244.

USGS Earth Sciences Information Center, 4230 University Dr. Anchorage, AK 99508-4664 (907) 786-7011

USGS Website:  
<http://mapping.usgs.gov>