Alaska Backcountry Adventure Planning Guide
by Josh Spice, Park Ranger

Your trip in Alaska will be very different than any trip in the Lower 48, as services are less developed and infrequent, trails are non-existent in many regions, the land is wilder and often very remote, help, if needed, is farther away and difficult to summon, and the amount of information available is relatively low, while the complexity may be high.

Are you ready?!?!

Planning a Trip
The methods of selecting or designing a backcountry adventure can be broken down into the following four factors:
- Where?
- What type of recreation?
- How long?
- Goal or desired experience?

These four individual views of planning a trip could lead you to any combination of backcountry trips, but when combined, will certainly guide you to an appropriate trip, given your personal desires and constraints.

To most effectively select an appropriate adventure:
1. Determine what your goal is or the experience you would like to have on the trip. For example, let’s say it is to see thousands of migrating caribou.
2. Establish how much time you have available. Maybe you’re in between jobs and you have a month off in the fall.
3. Select the type of recreation or methods of travel you would like to use. Ex: you’re a highly experienced canoeist.
4. Choose where would you like to go on an adventure? Do you have a specific place or region in mind? Are there qualities of a landscape that would direct you towards a certain place or area? Let’s say you’ve always wanted to see the Brooks Range, north of the Arctic Circle.

By answering each of the above questions individually, you determined the best trip may be a 30 day float on the Noatak River in the fall, to see thousands of caribou on their annual fall migration in the western Brooks Range. This is an excellent trip, as very few regions of Alaska or Alaskan rivers would allow 30 days of floating or in the Brooks Range, with such high potential for viewing high numbers of migrating caribou on a daily basis, as on the Noatak River. This specific trip was planned by the focused answers to each question. Changing one answer might lead to an entirely different adventure. If the cost of the trip, season, or other factors render the adventure impossible, start over and place a heavier emphasis on the other less-limiting factors that went into the creation of the adventure.

Make sure the adventure is appropriate for the person/group in the following ways:

Experience
Assess the level of the trip you are considering. Past experience provides time and opportunity to develop outdoor skills and hone your decision making process, in order to be ready for whatever conditions and situations you may encounter on a backcountry trip. Make sure your level of experience has provided these opportunities for the trip you are planning and that you are comfortable with what you may experience.

Skill
Based upon your experience, have you developed the skills necessary to complete the backcountry trip you have planned? Do you possess the knowledge and ability to perform under adverse conditions or in emergencies? Base what is realistic to undertake or accomplish on what you know, the skills you have obtained, and past experience.

Physical ability
Are you up for the physical challenge of:
- carrying a heavy pack over rough terrain?
- paddling a canoe all day for a week straight?
- lugging around a heavy raft?
- sleeping on the ground?
- eating freeze-dried food, snacks, and sweets?
It is best to try these things and more in a controlled environment or on a preparatory trip of shorter duration and distance, before the big adventure, to see what works and what doesn’t.

**Gear**

Durability and performance are paramount in regards to Alaskan gear. Bring gear that is able to handle the extreme weather, physical environment, and heavy abuse that it will experience on your trip. If the weather is so bad that it breaks your shelter or renders it unusable, what will you do?

Most important in your gear, is a reliable set of waterproof jacket & pants. You must be able to stay dry in order to be comfortable and warm. Many people have become needlessly uncomfortable, hypothermic, or even died because they could not stay dry, and therefore, warm.

*What we’ve all learned:* 1970s-era or department store gear is probably not up to the challenge of Alaskan weather.

**Financial constraints**

Bush flights can be very expensive, depending on how many flights are required to get all the gear in or out and how many people are on the trip (or that can fit in the plane with all their gear). Any gear rented or purchased, or if any shuttles or transportation are required to get to or from the start or end of the trip, can escalate the trip cost quickly.

**Duration & Weather**

Have you ever hiked alone for a week? What about off-trail, in bear country, ‘in the middle-of-nowhere?’ How do you handle stress, decision making, and performing in uncontrollable situations? Each person’s psyche and personality plays a huge part in the outcome of the trip and will greatly influence the lasting memories of the experience.

- Can they handle being self-sufficient or any emergency that might arise?
- How about psychologically? Do they break under pressure or stress?

High winds, heavy & incessant rains, or even prolonged & intense sun, coupled with swarming mosquitoes and dangerous wildlife encounters, can create challenging psychological experiences, as well. For example, two weeks of rain can ‘ruin’ a trip for some people. Make sure your mind & gear are up for the potential pressures of time & weather.

**Goals or Experience**

For some, it’s about the journey, and others, the destination. For example, those who venture into the mountains throughout the year focus their trip on different things: hiking through the mountains, climbing them, summiting, skiing down, floating, photography, etc. It is good to make sure your group shares the same goals for the trip. If this is not the case, some people may have very different decision making factors or become unsatisfied with the outcome of the trip.

**Region of Alaska**

The five regions of Alaska will provide extremely different experiences, in regards to vegetation, recreation type, accessibility, scenery, weather, animal inhabitance, culture, etc. Use the following as a guide to what type of experience you would like to have, which will help guide you to the right destination or region of Alaska.

- Forest or open tundra? The forest offers protection from poor weather, but the tundra has more expansive views.
- Boreal forest or coastal temperate rainforest?
- Rugged mountains or lower elevation river valleys and hilly terrain?
- River float or on land-based hiking?
- Whitewater rapids or flatwater rivers and lakes?
- Trail hiking or off-trail wilderness trekking?
- Remote destination or quick & easy access?
- Is the weather important? Certain regions and seasons can have unpleasant temperatures, wind, or precipitation.
- Are you looking for specific plants, birds, or animals? Bloom, migration, or seasonal salmon runs or gatherings?
- Would you like to experience a specific culture or historical atmosphere?

**Accessibility**

Alaska is, more often than not, complicated in terms of accessibility to specific places or areas, and even sometimes lacking a good place to park a vehicle! How you will begin your trip or access the area is a critical part of trip planning. How many hours, days, or miles will it take to get to your destination, whether it be driving, flying, hiking, floating, etc? Will you...
- Put in or take out on a river or along a road?
- Fly in or out?
- Charter a flight or boat ride?

Get the Appropriate Maps
Having too many maps for a trip can make navigating challenging, as you’ll have to go back and forth between maps, but having a map that is too large of scale omits necessary detail for most trips. Find the appropriate scale for each trip.
- 1:63,360 (Alaska specific)
- 1:250,000
- National Parks Trails Illustrated map
- Create a custom map by using MapSource, TOPO! Software, or National Geographic map kiosk

Understand land ownership and use regulations, as each land agency or owner may have requirements for access or specific uses. Land ownership maps may be obtained at the Alaska Department of Natural Resources Land Sales Office.

Logistics
Assess the logistics for the entire trip. As many seasoned-Alaskans are well aware, the only thing you can plan on, is for the plan to change! Be ready for the unexpected.

Departing Fairbanks:
- One car or two? Is the start of your trip the same as the ending location? If not, how will you get back to the vehicle?
- By plane, train, boat, or tour company?
- What is the destination and how long will it take to get there?
- Will you have to sleep upon arrival? Camping or lodging?
- Boat upriver so that if something happens, you can float back down.
- Or, get flown in and hike/float back out, as to not get stranded due to weather or scheduling of the pick-up flight.

During the Trip:
- How many days will the trip take?
- What if the route or miles per day has to change? How will you alter your plan to compensate?
- Are there other pick up or pull out spots?
- Methods of emergency communication – satellite phone, radio, beacon, etc?
- Is the plan or itinerary realistic, all things considered?

Returning to Fairbanks:
- Is a shuttle of vehicles required?
- Is a pick up by an outside party necessary?
- How long will it take to return and is camping or lodging necessary?
- What about food for the return trip or after having returned?

Research & Seek More Information
There is no such thing as too much information.
- How many miles per day will you hike or float?
- How steep, flat, smooth, bumpy is the terrain?
- How much will your pace change with changing conditions?
- How big are the tussocks?
- How fast does the river flow?
- Is the water clear or glacial?
- Are there good camping areas – gravel bars, dry ground, open vegetation, etc?
- How thick is the vegetation?
- When does the snow melt in spring or when is leaf-out?
- When is first frost or snow?
- When do the mosquitoes appear?
- When do the salmon run and will there be high bear concentrations? Are there seasonal animal closures?
- What are the seasonal or historic weather trends?
- What is the current weather and recent weather conditions – flooding, etc?
- Are there limiting factors to completing the trip, such as amount of gear/weight or unexpected conditions?
- What are the land use trends during that season, in both type of recreation and amount?

Safety
The most important aspect of all; paramount in every decision to be made.
- Assess gear and go through a gear checklist. Don’t forget anything, but also don’t bring too much stuff.
- Bring the appropriate and desired safety gear for the trip and also conditions and wildlife: bears – spray/gun/fencing
- Water safety requires PFDs and appropriate rescue gear, filtration/purification, & executing safe river crossings.
- On any adventure, whether it is on the road or in the backcountry, make sure to store your food in a bear-safe manner. Bear-resistant food containers can be rented free of charge for trips in National Parks & Preserves. Keep the bears safe by protecting them from your food, as a bear that learns human food tastes well and is easy to acquire, will most likely have to be destroyed. Remember, ‘A fed bear is a dead bear.’
- Airplanes: almost all pilots make safe decisions, but remember that they are under high stress and working long days to get as many people in and out of the wilderness as they can. Make safety a priority. It’s your life in their hands.
- Set up a contingency plan for dealing with changes in the destination, recreation type, duration, transportation, itinerary, weather, and emergencies. Having back-up plans increases flexibility and keeps pilots happy!

Steps You Can Take To Prepare Yourself:
Search for classes and training opportunities that can be taken locally, in order to gain skill and hands-on experience, plus gain local knowledge. Join clubs of your recreational interest to meet others who enjoy the outdoors. Meeting the right people is often the most difficult and most crucial step of advancing your skill, experience, and level of comfort for many types of recreation. It would also offer opportunities for many outings with more experienced enthusiasts. Start small and work up to bigger adventures, more nights out, longer distance, etc. Go with others who are experienced and ask many questions. Research before you go, have fun, and learn from even the smallest of mistakes.

General Gear Checklist
[ ] Hiking footwear
[ ] Rain jacket & pants
[ ] Warm jacket
[ ] Shelter
[ ] Sleeping bag
[ ] Sleeping pad
[ ] Stove & fuel
[ ] Pot & spoon
[ ] Bear-resistant food container
[ ] Food
[ ] Water bottle
[ ] Water filter
[ ] Trowel & toilet paper
[ ] Insect repellent & headnet
[ ] Fire starter
[ ] Knife
[ ] Map & compass
[ ] Camera
[ ] Trip itinerary left with friend