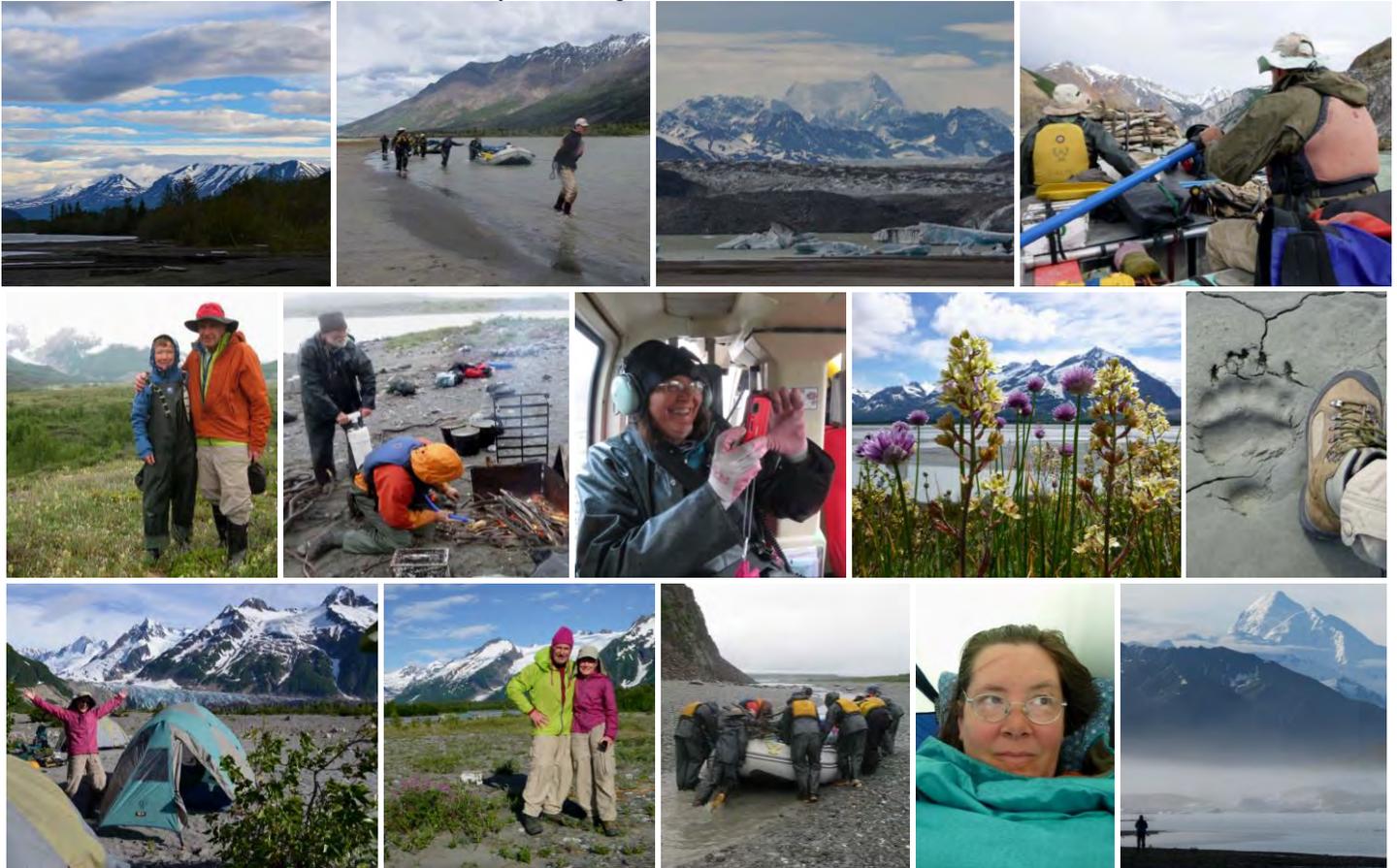


Into the Refrigerator AND the Dishwasher (No Doubt)!

10-Year Anniversary: Running the Alsek River - Yukon Territories to Alaska



Left to Right: (top) Dezadeash put-in, towing rafts against wind, Mts. Kennedy & Hubbard from Lowell, quintessential Alsek near Lava North; (middle) Alsek dinner wear, Serengeti North, fire-starting along Tweedsmuir, helicopter ride, Chive Island, HUGE grizzly tracks; (bottom) Susie celebrating Walker, Roger/Susie downstream Walker, portage, 40-hours in tentia (sort of), Mt. Fairweather AGAIN!

Introduction

Ten years ago and somewhat on a whim, I ran the Alsek River with Alaska Discovery (see separate report). Since then, the Alsek has mostly managed to hold onto its status as the best professionally lead trip I've taken, and my favorite river. When Roger/Susie announced they'd booked the Alsek on my good word, I was excited - but also a tiny bit concerned because I really hoped they'd also noticed how many times I discussed its many challenges - not to mention our off-the-charts great weather. Having done plenty of serious self-guided trips in Alaska, though, I was fairly certain Roger/Susie would endure and hopefully love the Alsek. Although I'd considered doing another light early summer trip with my mother, I ultimately chose to join Roger/Susie on the Alsek - knowing full well that one cannot step into the same river twice.



Left to Right: Juneau airport, rainy parking lot, old-school pizzeria (beer, popcorn, AND video games), noisy hotel

June 20-22, 2014 - Juneau in June... That's a LOTTA Rain!

Roger/Susie had never seen Juneau and so we met there 3 days before the rafting trip commenced. Our respective two-part flights merged in Seattle and then proceeded, mostly viewless, to Alaska's state capital. There, it was raining. After landing at 3, we headed to our nearby hotel - Roger having rented a great car for our stay. Last time I was in Juneau, I stayed downtown with no car. The suburb-y area near the airport - hotels, strip malls, and cookie-cutter housing nestled between boxy forest tracts - was all new to me. Although Roger/Susie did not have issues with our (IMO) too-expensive hotel, I found it noisy (and that is WITH earplugs); my sense was that it catered to one-night airport-bound people (many getting off cruises), most with very early departures. The wrap-around wooden decking did not help as people lugged and wheeled luggage over rickety planks in the pre-dawn hours. Of course,

Roger/Susie also did not have fire-alarm battery or lighting failures. After settling into respective rooms and cleaning up, we headed over to one of the strip malls – Roger determined to find a sporting goods store and this well-rated pizzeria. Alas, Roger will never live the latter down. Where to begin? Probably the blinding wall of video game monitors as you entered the cafeteria-like dining area (notably empty). After a slightly intense discussion about escaping, we ordered beer (with popcorn appetizers), a salad bar (the kind with mostly white lettuce, canned peaches, and cottage cheese), and a large “everything” pizza (made, I swear, on a frozen Totino’s crust). The pizza tasted much better the next day, in the context of a grueling hike. Heading around the block to the Safeway complex, we picked up a few items for lunch and, given their expansive deli area, made the decision that remaining dinners would be “grocery.”



Left to Right: trailhead, Mendenhall Glacier and lake-shore, Susie and lush ferns along cables, more cables, northern ground-cone

The next day, we set out to hike the West Glacier Trail (6.5 miles, 1300 up/down). Driving 20 minutes, we located the trailhead along the western shore of Mendenhall Lake. Although it rained overnight, it never rained while we tackled this – at times – challenging hike. Of course, the first mile was flat, passing spur trails to viewpoints along the placid lake shore, and crossing swollen streams under canopies of devils club. The trail then began to climb – the terrain rocky but lush: mounds of maidenhair fern and goats-beard, tangles of alder. Long stretches of cable were installed along steep, wet rocky areas – occasional openings offering partial glacier views. Next, the now cable-free trail entered this gentler green cirque with our best glacier view of the day. After that, we came to a few challenging stream crossings, throwing our one hiking pole across multiple times because everyone needed it for rock-hopping balance. Around here, we made a fateful decision based on this hand-made sign: ice-caves right, or viewpoint left. Given no guidebook mention of ice caves, we chose left. In fact, most people went right, hiking down the cirque and right to the glacier’s edge; indeed, we watched quite the ant procession from above – and I have since seen some pretty spectacular photographs from many on-line reports.



Left to Right: best glacier view, one of a few hairy stream crossings, cliff lunch-spot, pizza tastes better when slightly desperate!

Meanwhile, our trail began climbing again, eventually arriving at this soaring, south-facing cliff. The problem: we could look down at the edge of the glacier and lake, but brush blocked our view up the glacier (i.e. to the icefield and mountains). It FELT like we were REALLY close to an unobstructed view, but the trail quickly took a turn for the terrible. Given all the rain, the polished rock was wet and muddy – and we gave up after several dangerous slips. No one wanted to sustain any injuries on this now-annoying hike, knowing we had a promising (and expensive) rafting trip looming (and, in my case, a huge trip to Italy after that!). Returning to the cliff, we enjoyed our leftover pizza. Hiking down, we passed several parties – many in rubber boots and/or jeans, with children and/or dogs. I, for one, do not regret giving up and, frankly, would not do this hike again. It was, simply, a royal – and dangerous - pain in the ass.



Left to Right: Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center – walk to Nugget Falls, Moraine/North Shore boardwalk area and lupine

Being that it was only 1:30, we headed over to the official Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center, a joint Forest Service and Recreation site. Most people, it seemed, came here via bus – probably as an add-on cruise trip. Which reminds me: all day, starting around 10, fleets of helicopters (also likely cruise add-on’s) buzzed up and down the Mendenhall. Although the views of the glacier, lake, and icebergs were very good, I was most excited to see impressive Nugget Falls up close; we’d seen the high-angle whitewater creek ROARING

down the hillside from this morning's hike, albeit across the lake. From the visitor center, I hiked the flat trail in 20 minutes – and it was totally worth it. Unlike Roger/Susie, I did not spend much time in the visitor center, although I did pay \$3 to make a quick run through the thick crowds. To avoid repeating myself later, we came back here the next day, hiking the short Moraine Ecology and North Shore trail – which provided quieter, head-on views of the glacier, lake, and icebergs.



Left to Right: MASSIVE cruise-ship, downtown Juneau, good luck with the name of that was... who is the crazy pink person?

The next morning, we awoke to even suckier rain, which SHOULD have been OK given plans to spend the day downtown. The actual problem became that I had REALLY built up the Alaska State Museum; when we found the place closed for remodeling for the next 2 years, it was a big blow to our plans. Although the “older” area of downtown seemed intact relative to my last visit here, we were disappointed that a high-end, cruise-patron focused shopping block has expanded towards the docks (of course, I have no idea who would want to buy over-priced jewelry and watches in Juneau!). After a coffee/pastry break (where, ironically, I ran into one of my 2008 Norway cruise guides), we took a driving tour across the bridge to Douglas Island. Aside from some kind of mining festival (the rain now pouring), there wasn't much to do except patronize some filthy public restrooms in the small park. We then headed back to the Mendenhall (doing the aforementioned ecology/north shore hike), before locating this spot where a lot of classic Juneau/Mendenhall images have been captured: near Brotherhood Park and the start of the Kaxdigooowu Heen trail (see sign above). Although the famous meadow was not in full fireweed bloom, the walk was beautiful – featuring Susie-sized skunk cabbage and cow parsnip. After 3 miles total, we retired to the hotel for some R&R: in my case, a bath, TV, and my floor exercises. As indicated earlier, dinner was courtesy of Safeway – specifically a mess of Chinese take-out – which we ate in Roger/Susie's room while watching the PBS news hour. In contrast with small-town Oregon Safeway Chinese take-out, Juneau's was really good. After returning the rental car and walking ~15 minutes back to the hotel, it was time to pack-up and get to bed given tomorrow's 6 a.m. departure from the hotel.



Left to Right: stuck, typical ferry views, improved moods and weather in Haines, gear storage room, panic with brownies

June 23-24, 2014 – Ferry Bad, Pie Good... Making Our Way to Haines, Haines Junction, and Dezadeash Put-In

Ferries out of Juneau depart from Auke Harbor, 20 minutes beyond the airport (many hotels, including ours, provided free shuttle service there). A few weeks before, Roger alerted me to a problem he hoped would not rear its ugly head again: our ferry was out of service at the time. Although said vessel was back on the water June 18th, it failed today. SEVEN hours later (when we FINALLY left, sitting on the boat the whole time!!!!), officials tried to say it was a scheduled engine service event but this was in direct contrast with earlier crew-broadcast messages stating engineers did not know what was wrong. Needless to say, we were extremely frustrated and made a lot of phone-calls: to Alaska Discovery, to our trip leader, to the local airline who flew to Haines (how I got there in 2004). Not surprisingly, all Haines-bound flights were booked until tomorrow – AND currently grounded because of fog. SURELY, we thought, other Alsek clients are also going to be late – so Alaska Discovery ought to be able to wait, right? In fact, we were the ONLY party in this predicament... there would be no waiting if we weren't there by 8 a.m. tomorrow. We FINALLY set sail by 2, arriving in Haines by 6. Views were not great, but they also didn't suck completely. And miraculously - it was sunny in Haines! Getting off the boat was a mess because we had managed to bring our insane pile of luggage up to the viewing deck area (vs. everyone else understood to leave it on a designated cart on the vehicle deck). A van from our hotel appeared promptly, whisking us and this hipster Swedish musician (not affiliated with our Alsek trip) away from the clearing dock. A lot of Haines looked familiar to me but, alas, we did not have any time to explore it given that our group meeting began at 7. In contrast with Roger/Susie (who were FAMISHED), I had eaten lunch and dinner on the ferry; nonetheless, I joined them on their fast and stressful run down the hill to a fish 'n chips cart. We'd HOPED to eat at this legendary Mexican restaurant run by AZRA/Colorado rafting guide extraordinaire Martha – but there was no time. As with my first Alsek trip, I don't remember having strong feelings about our team at the group meeting – other than its larger size (11 this time, vs. 7 before) and different gender ratio (there was definitely more of a man-vibe on this trip, with only 27% female clients, vs. 57% on our last trip). Although the 2004 group had a fair number of professors and scientists, this group was composed of 73% scientists – biology, chemistry, computer, atmospheric, and medical. Sam – as in Sam from our previous trip – was our leader this time around; I'm not exactly sure how Sam, who is more of a free-form writer-type (as were most remaining team-members), felt about having so many scientists around 24/7. After a very brief trip overview, we walked down the block to the Alaska Discovery gear warehouse – “Hell” – where we were handed the splendiferous and legendary Helly Hansen heavy-duty fishermen overalls and hooded rain-jackets, rubber

boots, ammo cans, and dry bags. This time around, I brought my own arctic-experienced XTraTuf boots. Hauling Susie-sized dry bags back to the hotel, we vanished into respective rooms to clean up and pack. After a mostly relaxing shower, I managed to pack fairly quickly – and so I went down to Roger/Susie’s room, suspecting correctly that one or both of them was officially overwhelmed (as I remember being when I first did this trip – and that was WITHOUT travel problems just getting to Haines). Indeed, Susie was upset on a few levels: the amount of gear, the threat of bad weather, the uncertainty of being out with an unknown group for so many days. That they had just returned from a challenging canoe trip down the Green River exacerbated her feelings on all fronts. Fortunately, Susie did recognize that the dry bags were HUGE and getting all the gear packed into them was not going to be a problem. And of course we had fudge brownies and hard liquor. After mostly packing, I did feel the final need to give Susie a long reassuring hug, promising I would take care of her, and insisting that it would be a good – but hard - trip.



Left to Right: (top) hotel, gear-truck, people-van, Tatshenshini headwaters overlook, view from the road on the dry side of the mountains; (bottom) bakery lunch stop, huckleberry pie and lentil-garlic soup, young grizzly, dirt-road to put-in, we walk from here!

The next morning, the goal was to leave at 8 for our ~3-hour drive to Haines Junction, Yukon Territories. As the hotel did not serve breakfast in our timeframe, most people walked to this coffee house with a few pastry and yogurt-granola items. As forecast, the skies were cloudy and it rained much of the way to rain-shadowing Chilkat Pass. While Sam and 9 passengers rode in the people-van, 2 of us (me included) rode in the gear-truck. En route, we presented passports at the border-crossing facilities (no pictures!). I felt we had fewer views during today’s pre-pass drive than in 2004, even though both trips seemed equally rainy. After the pass, we glided down through drier, open tundra – the low mountains less snowy than in 2004 (consistent with the river being lower this time around). About 30 minutes east of the pass, we arrived at a fancy new Tatshenshini headwaters viewing platform, which we enjoyed rain-free. The “Tat” is more regularly run than the Alsek, although both unite at the confluence. The Tat is a lower commitment and cheaper trip than the Alsek in the sense that it is shorter, and lacks a costly and challenging helicopter portage. Although I’ve considered it a few times, I’m not sure one can go backwards – i.e. run the Tat after the Alsek... that seems like it would be disappointing. After another 30 minutes, we arrived at Haines Junction – which looked VERY different to me: the town had more sprawling hotel/RV development (not to mention fewer trees), the bakery seemed five times larger (with a comparable increase in food options), and the Klwane Visitor Center totally moved (so we couldn’t visit it after lunch because it wasn’t next to the bakery anymore). In 2004, lunch options were limited to traditional bakery items; today, the choices included virtually any kind of sandwich, several casseroles/quiches, several soups, pizza... PLUS amazing desserts. Probably because I was already sensing the strong man-vibe (i.e. much meat in my future... not the tofu dreams of our previous trip), I decided to go vegetarian today: a lentil-garlic soup with a fat slice of not-too-sweet huckleberry pie. Pleasantly, we ate outside on the deck – nonetheless watching dramatic clouds over the distant mountains.



Left to Right: fancy new Alsek/Kluane signs, hike views downriver – and upriver, put-in is under the rock formation!

Climbing back into respective vehicles, we made our way to the put-in – the turn-off road for which was 10 minutes away. We were only the second party down the river this year. Put-in is along the Dezadeash River, which joins the Kaskawulsh 5 miles downstream; at that confluence, the wild and remote Alsek is born. This upper area (through downstream Lowell Lake) lies in MASSIVE Klwane National Park, Canada’s neighboring equivalent of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. The unmaintained put-in road is subject to regular

flooding and wash-outs; passenger vans cannot make it all the way, but high-clearance gear-trucks can, meaning clients hike wash-out dependent distances. In 2004, we hiked 4 miles and then the returning gear-truck transported us the last mile given persistent rain; today, we hiked just over 7 miles... with no gear-truck assistance despite rain and wind. Unfortunately, confusion also added to today's mileage: our caravan stopped a couple miles short of the intended drop-point, having hit the first of several side-creeks running over the road. Here, we waited 2 hours for the raft gear-truck (i.e. a second truck that took the other guides and all the rafts in) – unaware that they were waiting the whole time for us 15 minutes away at a different wash-out. As dark clouds accumulated over adjacent peaks the whole while, we were an increasingly squirrely bunch. Sensing this, Sam delivered his hiking/bear safety talk and turned us loose; soon after setting out, we met the second gear-truck driving toward us (having also decided to hit the road). Although I enjoyed the hike in more this time (because I was fully expecting it this time around – and it was more scenic), I know hiking a boring road wasn't everyone's cup of tea; I also know the fast pace was tiring and knee-stressful for a few party members. During the final mile of the hike, I correctly spotted the riverside rock feature that I recalled was above and across the river from put-in. Given major up-river winds, I knew we were NOT going to put-in today (such was the case last time). While parts of the put-in camp were familiar, it seemed more overgrown in places: before, it felt like we camped in thin trees but now the tree area was too thick, leaving us setting up clusters of tents on more open beach. Of course, the trees did provide an excellent wind-block and groover area. Although there were elk tracks everywhere, I believe this was one of only two sites on this trip that did not contain extensive grizzly tracks.



Left to Right: put-in campsite – rain-tarp, rafts, tent-area, dinner is served – in the SUN no less!

But I am ahead of myself: When we first arrived at camp (5 p.m.), we met our secondary guides (Joe and Thirsty) and Sam confirmed that we were staying the night. Because it was still spitting rain, job #1 was to erect the giant oar-supported tarp, under which meals were cooked and eaten. It was also going to provide a tent set-up staging area but - perhaps not surprisingly - the rain let up (and it actually became partially sunny) as we wrapped up tarp set-up. As with the 2004 party, there were many tents, and many solo campers: 3 double tents with 6 people, and 5 single tents with people like me (not including the guides). Although tonight's dinner was late (8 p.m.) because of obvious cumulative factors earlier in the day, many dinners throughout this trip seemed too late, with lots of hungry people come line-up time; as one client articulated several days into the trip (no-doubt justifying some HUGE portion of food – probably bacon): "I find myself eating more and more at breakfast and lunch because I'm never sure when my next meal will be." Tonight's dinner was a fresh salad, broccoli, rice, and a Dutch oven "casserole" of halibut slabs in some mixture of sour cream, spices, and breadcrumbs. In contrast with my 2004 experience, there were no protein substitutes if you were vegetarian or did not eat fish. Although Roger/Susie have been working hard over the years to improve my fish tolerance, I ate little halibut that night. Fortunately, I had that slab of pie earlier and didn't wake up hungry in the middle of the night! Meanwhile, Roger/Susie were delighted with their fish – not to mention, the comfort achieved once in camp... after an otherwise and still overwhelming day. I cannot remember when I went to bed but it was soon after dinner given the late hour. One of my new camping luxuries was my Thermarest pillow, which greatly improved my ability to find and maintain comfortable sleeping positions. Given so many people and Roger/Susie always camped close, I was never preoccupied with bear-thoughts – readily putting in my earplugs, "pretending I was someplace else," and falling asleep rapidly and deeply most nights (testament to this: neighbors regularly reported much snoring emanating from my tent!).



Left to Right: promising morning... waiting, waiting... gee – it's hard to pee in all these layers... even if you are a MAN!

June 25, 2014 – Unsinkable Susie... Did We Really Only Raft Four Miles Today?

As with most mornings, wake-up was around 6 a.m. for coffee – with breakfast 30-45 minutes later. Likewise, most mornings – at this early hour – began with promising skies and little wind. Most people were very good at waking up on time, tearing down tents, and getting gear packed and to the rafts – but our party did have one father-son pair who struggled with the process. Of course, part of this was a surprise given that dad was an Alsek veteran... but the son was a young 14 (the minimum age allowed by Alaska Discovery), causing some of us to question whether Alaska Discovery should increase the age limit to 16 (the threshold on most Grand Canyon/Colorado trips) and require recent camping experience. Ultimately, we did not get on the river until after 10 a.m. Although this was our latest start and longest wait, it was a substantial challenge for several folks who were not used to (a) the pace of a complex, huge-gear rafting trip like this; and/or (b) not being able to help more effectively (i.e. because, as was noted by client onlookers, at some point only the guides know where things belong on the rafts). Unfortunately, this extra-late start meant that the winds picked up

by the time we put in – causing another series of cumulative and frustrating challenges. Parties – including ours – aim to make it past the upper confluence where the Alsek officially forms (again – about 5 miles down-river); it is at this point that a strong enough current exists to counter what are persistent afternoon upstream winds. Today's winds were strong enough that about 30% of the time we were paddling to simply stay in place (or not be further blown up-river). We tried everything: valiant and strong paddle-assist (our many manly men thankfully stronger and more eager than me), tying the rafts together and paddling Viking style to try to reduce wind resistance by drafting the rear boats, and eventually physically pulling and pushing the rafts from the shoreline of the many sand-bar islands (which were more plentiful this time, owing to lower flow).



Left to Right: the fun begins – rowing separately, trying to draft, tying boats together... Roger and I fighting for the last of the Pringles

Of course, we didn't try the last method until after our 2 p.m. lunch. Sadly, we could still see put-in from our river-left lunch spot – as we gobbled up huge sandwiches, fruit, Pringles (always a hit), and 2 trays of cookies (our typical lunch rate per day). People were very cold day one, even while paddling – and the relative warmth on the wind-free meadow above the river was almost shockingly welcome. Some of us even took the guides' advice and made instant soup or cider using hot water from thermoses. Much as we all did not enjoy wearing Helly Hansens, the point was well-understood today. Indeed, I hated my Helly Hansens significantly less on this trip – partly because our weather was, as a whole, colder and more challenging; and partly because I found them more useful (e.g. you could sit anywhere in them, and they provided a great surface covering in the tent vestibule). After gorging ourselves, we set out again with little success. Following Joe's lead, we pulled up along this LONG sand-bar island and each guide rope-towed his raft from along the shore; because the wind pushed the rafts against the sand, the rest of us did our best to push or pull the rafts away from the edge – a constant problem being stepping into deep or soft spots and getting water down the boots. Nevertheless, we made better progress at this task than rowing/paddling – to the point that we could finally see the confluence point in the distance (~1 mile away). Unfortunately, then the sand-bar island ended and things got VERY, VERY messy. At this point, the river bottom was variably deep and quick-sand-like. Susie and I did not know this as we slogged towards Sam's boat – which was about 20 feet away. Susie went into the quick-sand first, notably holding her non-water-proof camera. While Susie will try to tell you otherwise, everyone in hearing range (n=4) agrees that she let out a short series of scream-like cries, fully believing she was going to sink and drown. That's when I moved towards her, hit the quick-sand, and tipped over onto my knees – water in my boots, and fully up to my waist (all clothing soaked). Somewhere in there, Susie's camera was passed to Roger (who also closed in) and then we were tugged out.



Left to Right: (top) promising skies before sand-bar of doom - grizzly print, raft push & pull, cotton grass; (bottom) Susie napping with drying gear, camps along lumpy meadow, Joe boils water at our beach-side fire & dining area, evening light on mountains

Given a high number of now-soaked body parts (on more than just Susie and I), we made a B-line for the nearest solid land. Locating a slightly muddy and elk-stomped meadow through the trees and above the beach, several of us (me included) removed and hung all our wet gear, and then enjoyed some R&R. Meanwhile, a majority of manly men headed out to try and find a more suitable campsite. After about 90 minutes, none was found and Sam decided we would stay here for the night. Fortunately, the dry and less lumpy edges of the meadow were suitable enough for all our tents – and, in the end, we all agreed that the views were great and the sunny warmth divine. Thanks to said conditions, ALL gear was mostly dry by the time our tents were up. Dinner, a delicious beef stew with fruity/nutty

coleslaw, was served earlier thanks to our shorter day. Ironically, my best night of sleep was in the lumpy meadow – probably because I – thanks to my Norwegian heritage, eating habits, and impressive scoliosis - am also lumpy and crooked.



Left to Right: setting out from meadow camp, Alsek is born, break-time, smiling Susie during morning break, Rogers on break

June 26, 2014 – Susie Starts to Gets Her Groove Back

Knowing we HAD to make up time today, Sam called a 5 a.m. wake-up, getting us on the river by 8:30. Thankfully, the winds were not as mighty as yesterday, allowing us to hit the confluence around 9. Of course, the Kaskawulsh was more like this HUGE plain with many small channels - a palpable current forming as if from nothing. Today's skies began blue, albeit streaked or splattered with cloud formations. We rafted along some low banks being sawed away by the river, trees falling – or on their way to falling – into the curving current. Then came the colorful lava formation section, covered with erratics (the result of a Missoula Lake-like back-up at downstream Lowell Lake) and/or sandy dunes (the result of wind blowing fine glacial till upstream). At one such formation, we stopped for a short pee-break. Given sunny conditions and big, fast current, Susie – all smiles - was clearly starting to get her groove back. Indeed, I had told her and Roger the first 3 days of this trip – regardless of conditions – are overwhelming in a “why am I doing this?” way... but then it starts to get easier, more routine, and overwhelming in a “wow – this is AMAZING!” way. Their responses were right on schedule.



Left to Right: Lava Creek – lunch, creek, campsites, looking back as we departed

An hour later, we pulled into what I recognized as our 2004 campsite following put-in (i.e. we made it this far on day one): Lava Creek, given away by its golden-orange Smith Rock-like formations and the spot where I remember setting up my tent. While the guides mixed up tuna salad, the rest of us explored the extensive bench - slopping in the creek, playing in this muddy liquefaction zone, and studying the HUGE grizzly tracks. After lunch, we floated another 90 minutes to a new site for me, one I'd always wanted to see: the largest of the Alsek dunes. Pulling up on river-left, we scrambled up a moderate, messy bank, hiked across a scrubby plateau (maybe half a mile), and then ascended the full-on dune – classic snowy peaks in all directions, an amazing contrast. From a distance, the dunes were a light beige – but closer inspection of the sand yielded as many flecks of colors as could be seen in the wild river stones.



Left to Right: Alsek dunes – the top, contrast between sand and snow, looking upstream at wild terrain; wood-gathering

We didn't spend a huge amount of time at the dunes; I was hoping Sam was going to push hard and get us to Lowell Lake for a layover night... but, alas, that was not to be. En route, we began the nearly daily task of gathering wood – something I loved in 2004. I'm not sure what it was this time – but it never seemed as satisfying; the wood was harder to come by, the search distances seemed longer and more frustrating, and found wood was wetter and sloppier. If our campsite had a name, I never heard it; it seemed like it was on this non-descript bench with no major landmarks. Susie's initial response was memorable because she could not believe we were going to haul all our gear up what was a high and messy cut-bank. And once we reached the top of the bank, there was nothing but a good half-mile of open grassland. Although Roger lead a small group far off into this distant small band of trees (thinking we needed wind protection), the decision was ultimately made to camp pretty much right above the boats. Of course, the groover was installed in a larger and equally distant band of trees that worried enough of us that we used it in safety pairs. Which reminds me: the “signal-key”

for our groover was an air horn (not, as in 2004, a canister of pepper spray). Any initial doubt Susie felt about this site was eliminated by the glazed salmon that was produced for dinner, and the lack of appreciable wind. By this point, our blue skies had been replaced by a mid-range layer of clouds. Around 11 p.m., I had to pee and chanced to see the most amazing under-cloud sunset – one of the few I was up for on this whole trip.



Left to Right: campsite view up-river, manly men's science circle looking down-river, salmon, under-cloud sunset

June 27, 2014 – Mostly Down-Day at Lowell Lake

As stated, we lost our ability to layover at Lowell Lake/Glacier. Given that every moment of delays today meant less time = at Lowell (which famously lies at the base of Goatherd Mountain, a 3000-foot scramble), we made another strong effort to wake up and get on the river early. I knew going into today I was not going to attempt Goatherd – half because I didn't feel there would be enough time for me to go at my own pace, and half because the route is sometimes treacherous (with wet/muddy rock sections a la West Glacier trail)... I did not want to jeopardize anything given my pending hiking trip to Italy. After a bacon-filled breakfast and a slide-y boat-load down the cut-bank of doom, we were on the river around 9. Weather-wise, today was one of the most sunny and beautiful – which also made it more tempting to rest, relax, and bathe once we arrived at Lowell.



Left to Right: (top) beautiful morning, beautiful bacon, first view of Lowell moraine, short rest before rapid; (bottom) rapids with view of Goatherd and green trail area, first big view of Lowell, Lowell with Mts. Kennedy and Hubbard, rafts at base of dune-climb to camp.

After an uneventful 90-minute float, we pulled over on river left, Lowell Glacier's lateral moraine towering like a low-lying beast. In 2004, we did a moderate hike up said moraine – but, again, that was because we had 2 full days to explore this area. After gorging on snacks and peeing among the alder, we climbed back into the rafts for our first section of small rapids. Although Susie (who, if I haven't said it before, has never rafted) was nervous, there was nothing more than class II splashing. Before us, Goatherd's emerald flanks looked tempting. As before, the Lowell campsite was up this steep dune-like sand-pile adjacent to the scenic "anthill," all terminal moraine remnants (including the ground down rock-face of Goatherd towering over camp). Susie thought yesterday's cut-bank of doom was crazy, but her perspective on this trip evolved quickly - i.e. she accepted today's even crazier Lowell dune-climb as just another Alsek reality... and more easily today because the view up the glacier/icefield was breathtaking. Indeed, today's weather and views were better than those at Lowell in 2004. The other impressive difference this year was how low the lake was and how many more icebergs were in the lake. Although the river runs along the Goatherd plain, there was a HUGE sand-bar island between the river and the main lake. Arriving at noon, most people erected tents while the guides set up the kitchen and prepared lunch – and so Goatherd climbing commenced by 1:30, with this group's activity cohorts very different. In 2004, I stayed in camp alone (a memorable experience, to say the least) while all 3 guides took everyone else up Goatherd - half making it to the summit, half stopping at the 2000 foot mark. This time, 4 clients (including Roger/Susie and I) remained in camp with Joe and Thirsty; the remaining 7 went up with Sam (of them, 5 made it to the summit). Impressively, the fast and motivated summiteers ranged in age from 14 to 75, with most others in their 50's. En route, they enjoyed sightings of mountain goats and a grizzly. Although some camp-folk received mocking/grief for not going up, Roger put it best when he said: "you know what - we just needed a break in the action." Of course, I remember Roger teasing me pre-trip for my non-bathing habits in 2004; in response, I reminded him that I was never a big bather in the wilderness – but then I laughed

seriously and said: well, it's also not like there's a lot of time on this trip. Indeed, it is extremely telling that Roger, who prides himself on daily bathing, had to wait 3 full days on this trip before there was, in fact, enough of a break in the action to bathe.



Left to Right: (top) lateral moraines, weed-out Goatherd base, camp; (bottom) clean hair, Thirsty & jambalaya, high peaks everywhere

Before bathing, most camp-folk congregated on the anthill to search for wildlife. Within 5 minutes, a GIANT grizzly was spotted rooting around rubble-piles near the base of Goatherd (said area provides a narrow grizzly corridor, allowing movement up/downstream). Then the bear started approaching camp – even standing and smelling the air. A few hundred feet from our tent area, something scared it and it raced off – kicking dust up in its tracks, cartoon-like. For today's Alesk day-spa, each of us used buckets of cold water to scrub down with (slightly out of view but still near the tent area). Thirsty also heated a bucket of warm water for hair-washing – which we did more group-style (i.e. Susie poured mugs of hot water over my hair, then I lathered, and then she poured to rinse). Having cut my hair shoulder-length before this trip, everything dried in 20 minutes. I cannot remember when each of the Goatherd subgroups returned, but eventually we were all reunited for a delicious dinner of jambalaya.



Left to Right: (top) Lowell camp boat-load, into the icebergs, my favorite iceberg "Chinese Dragon," back to paddling (bottom) end of lake with Goatherd profile, Lava North scout, looking back upstream at Lava North, dry suit and classic peaks

June 28, 2014 – A VERY Full Day: Icebergs, Lava North, Weather Decline!

In 2004, today's equivalent was one of my all-time favorite rafting experiences - which of course means that it wasn't as mind-blowing this time around. I have to say that this was unexpected because there were, like I said before, MORE icebergs in Lowell Lake... it's just fewer were positioned where we were rafting. An equally contributing factor, though, was today's overcast skies and their darker reflections in the gray water. Of course, Roger/Susie's different response should be recorded since, unlike jaded me, they were as awestruck as I was with blue skies/sun in 2004. As usual, we were up before 7 and not on the river until a little after 9. Today's iceberg rafting time seemed shorter (even though it probably wasn't), and included the mandatory ice retrieval step (i.e. someone from each boat captured a frozen turkey-sized ice-chunk for replenishing the ice-chests). Following the icebergs, there was a long slack-water stretch that involved upriver wind and required some paddle-assist. Although my impressions of the lake/icebergs were duller this time,

I was fascinated by the changing and extensive views up Goatherd's glacier-chewed face – especially several impressive waterfalls, rugged chutes (some filled with snow), and colorful rocky hues... none of which caught my eye in 2004. Right before returning to real current at the end of the lake, we pulled into this little bay on river right and did a more extensive whitewater safety talk and then ate lunch (being that it was now after noon). After lunch, we enjoyed a low-key float for about an hour. Another thing that escaped my attention in 2004 was that there was, along this section, some branch-point that – if you chose poorly – placed you in a bona fide class IV. In contrast with this rapid and downstream class IV Lava North, the landscape here is rather sedate: mostly low rounded hills, little impressive topography near the actual river. Pulling over on river right (above Lava North), we spent 20 minutes hiking a surprisingly challenging beach littered with shitloads of rocks (half embedded, half mobile) – some folks giving up before the impressive vantage point BY the raging hole of doom. Accessing this scout in 2004 was an easy 10-minute walk, indicating the beach-rock situation has changed dramatically in 10 years of time. But the rapid looked the same... didn't scare me then, didn't scare me today. Although the morning skies began dark and brooding, the weather had been improving since lunch... the sun right on time to cook us as we donned the mandatory dry-suits (Sam said these were the same suits as in 2004). As in 2004, I rode in the back of Sam's raft down Lava North. Going in nervous, Susie seemed happily relieved when Lava North was over; indeed, from this point on she started to actually enjoy the whitewater. There was a little confusion at the de-suiting pull-out area below Lava North, Joe's raft getting separated along the rugged shoreline... and then our group taking longer than expected because of a bounty of firewood (i.e. Sam called an impromptu log gather). But soon we were all together and heading down one of the most beautiful and memorable Alsek stretches – 2 incredibly impressive mountains soaring above: a rocky orange monster in the foreground, and a more Alp-like glaciated peak set back/down-river. Try as I might to find the names of these mountains using on-line mapping tools, I have no idea what they are.



Left to Right: one of my favorite Alsek views, looking downstream from camp, orange monster flanks and camp, colorful fire circle

In reviewing time-stamps on the above photographs, I was surprised to note that we completed our de-suiting and wood-gathering around 5 and then rafted another 90 minutes to camp, essentially at the scree base of the aforementioned orange mountain. Looking at the seeming proximity and recalling my impressions of the length of that float, I was surprised to learn it took quite that long... particularly because, in 2004, we rafted from Lowell to Plug Creek camp – another 45 minutes downstream from the tonight's scree site. Although the scree site was interesting, it was not my favorite – and, frankly, I found it rather intimidating (particularly in light of recent fatal slides in the lower 48). Above, 2000 feet of grayish-white loose rock seemed precarious – hopefully settled into a long-term angle of repose. Slightly upstream, a lower but no less dramatic naked ridge of orange scree provided a colorful point of contrast. If the grizzly-travel corridor at Lowell seemed small, THIS was freaky tiny. We were basically camping IN a 200 foot wide corridor, the only place on this side of the river grizzly could walk. Indeed, our closest grizzly encounters in 2004 were at downstream Plug Creek – one walking right through dinner, and one on the opposite side of the river. Tonight, it was hard not thinking a little about the likelihood of bears in camp... fortunately, that didn't happen (or if they were about, no one saw them!). Tents were erected by 7 given that the skies were dark and we knew rain was imminent, but dinner (spaghetti with red sauces and garlic bread) wasn't until 9... and a majority of folks very hungry tonight, with an uptick in commentary to that effect. After dinner, there were some readings of Jack London by the welcome fire, the colder temperatures clearly heralding in what would be one of our coldest and rainiest day ON the river tomorrow.



Left to Right: wishful thinking the sun will emerge, almost ready to go, fog and rain, you know it's bad when SAM is wearing rainpants!

June 29, 2014 – Rain, Rain, Go Away

Not going to mince words: most of the morning sucked, and the rest of day was not much better. But we were fortunate in that it was not raining as we packed up. Nonetheless, it had rained overnight – meaning our tents were wet. The guides handed out garbage bags so we could separate wet rain-flies from dry tent bodies. Eating breakfast, we were already wearing some kind of raingear - if not full-on Helly Hansens - cold and fully expecting more rain. Once on the river, both got worse and/or came true. By our first pee-break, many people had cold hands and feet – and were doing all kinds of exercise-y things to warm up. Few people turned down warm drinks. Post-break, it was more of the same until noon – when, much to my surprise, Mt. Blackadar was largely out, framed in clouds and fog. Pulling over on river right (HUGE grizzly tracks all over the beach), Sam and Thirsty began lunch while Joe led the rest of us on an hour-long hiking trip – in relatively dry conditions. Our outing began with a bushwhacking climb UP and THROUGH a 150-foot alder band that rose to a higher meadow plateau. Alas, the only photo taken of the “alder birth” (below) was – like many shots today –

marred by moisture/condensation (i.e. putting my waterproof camera into a wet case – which fogged up the lens – and then not wiping the lens down). Trekking across the open, gently rising meadow, we headed towards an obvious knoll – the local highpoint of a VAST peninsula unofficially called “Serengeti North.” In 2004, views from this point were stupendous, nearly 360° of glaciated mountains against a totally blue sky. Today – not so much. As in 2004, we saw ZERO wildlife – despite assertions that this was THE PLACE to find it. Returning to a feast of build-your-own bagels, I tried to reassure Susie that we didn’t miss a lot of scenery prior to Serengeti North. I honestly don’t remember for sure – although I definitely did not take a lot of photos until this point.



Left to Right: (top) Blackadar, lunch, alder birth, looking down at route up Serengeti north; (bottom) no wildlife, but plenty of flowers, me and Blackadar, Thirsty rounding Serengeti north – some other high peaks teasing us

Within 2 hours (including a challenging and wet wood-stop), we arrived at Tweedsmuir camp – where the helicopter would pick us up tomorrow, portaging us over just-downstream Turnback Canyon (the class VI river section between the active Tweedsmuir Glacier and steep mountain flanks). In contrast with my 2004 Tweedsmuir impressions (i.e. that this was the most remote and austere place I’d ever been), it felt more impacted today: there was less snow on the glacier, more fog obscuring the vast surrounding mountains, all kinds of human-built rock-circled campsites, and more colorful flora. Unfortunately, we had to set up wet-flied tents in a light rain. Although some effort to first erect the rain-tarp was made with the intent of assembling tents there-under, this system broke down because it was slow. In the end, our most rapid tent-erectors went around helping everyone else in the open, with light rain. Like most others, I then found the immediate need to put on all new clothes – not to mention my WARMEST set (mountaineering weight fleece pants and a thick down jacket) – and climb into my sleeping bag for awhile. Alas, I think that lasted 15 minutes before all hands were called on deck to pull out and de-rig the rafts... and I changed back into rain-gear and unhappily went back outside.



Left to Right: (top) flora, rain-tarp erection, camp; (bottom) first trip paintbrush, Tweedsmuir ice detail, boat tear-down, dinner

With so many more people, I felt less a part of this trip’s de-rigging activities than I did in 2004. Given that most of our team males were strong go-getter types, the retrospective desire to have stayed in the tent was great. But much as I wanted to crawl back into my sleeping bag as things took form, I knew de-rigging would go quickly and then dinner would be fast because, as in 2004, it was all

vegetarian boil-in-the-bag Indian food. Pre-dinner entertainment was a not-to-be-missed highlight as well: in a medieval fashion, Joe – with various assistants (including a delighted yours truly) - used the raft air-pump as a bellows substitute for starting the fire under, by far, our most challenging conditions yet. Like I said at the time: better than TV (and I love TV). I cannot remember at what point Susie admitted the following, but I will end today's summary on one other high-note: she LOVED today's rolling whitewater and confessed that she might have to do another rafting trip. That says a lot given how exceptionally cold, rainy, windy, and sucky today was.



Left to Right: (top) loading gear units onto rafts, helicopter; (bottom) people & gear loads, Roger, Susie, Sam, and I ready for the ride

June 30, 2014 – Rain, Rain, Go Away... Part II

Going to bed, we knew tomorrow was not going to be a blue-sky day... the kind you DREAM about for the helicopter portage. And it wasn't. But the portage didn't suck as much as I thought it would given a mat of low clouds hovering at around 1000 feet; frankly, most of us were shocked the helicopter flew at all. Sadly, the old and famously wild pilot (also the Haines Junction coroner) and his tiny chopper (5 crammed seats) were no longer flying... replaced by this professional operation, manned – in our case – by a Kiwi pilot (given high marks by Susie) and a larger chopper (7 spacious seats). In contrast with the old pilot (who was late in 2004, despite better conditions), the new guy was 40 minutes early (as least in terms of Sam's presentation). Although most gear was packed, not all had been piled and gathered onto one of three netting units: each had one raft and weighed 1000-1500 lbs (the latter being the maximum load the helicopter could carry). Thus, there was some last-minute scrambling; given that not all hands were on deck, I instinctively went into "teacher mode" and called out the aforementioned pair who struggled with many aspects of this trip. Let's just say that this exchange did not go well and we didn't interact thereafter. Oh well - it was pointed out to me that the pair seemed more helpful after my call-out. Anyway – the other issue that came up (literally) was that several personal gear piles had not been secured or moved to the safe zone – and suffered gear blow (although we did eventually find all the hats and gloves that took to the sky).



Left to Right: Turnback portage – entering canyon, note cliff-hugging moves and waterfalls... final shot – mostly over Tweedsmuir

Given all the drama, I went in the last of the passenger loads – with Roger, Susie, and Sam. All in all, the helicopter made 6 passes: 3 with people, and 3 with gear. Being in the last people-load, we waited probably 90 minutes upstream. Even though the helicopter and

pilot seemed less rugged and/or crazy, I totally enjoyed this ride - more than last time, even with the poorer weather. Mostly, I felt less afraid BECAUSE this guy was so smooth. We headed straight into the mouth of Turnback, following the churning water near the height of the canyon (which isn't very tall). Swinging side-to-side with the curving river, we got super-close to some impressive rock and waterfall features along the mountain flank side of the river. Indeed, I felt this pilot was more precise and thorough with Turnback – covering it as though it was a helicopter tour (not just a portage). Unlike the 2004 ride, we never soared straight up and toured the Tweedsmuir to any extent; but this was fine given that that experience definitely freaked me out... plus the glacier views today would have been limited. When we landed on the other side, our busy crew was well along in the re-rigging process – to the point that my job was mostly to carry and redistribute bags, before another fine lunch. Given our pilot's early arrival and the busy crew, we were back on the river around 1 – pretty much the same time as in 2004. Thankfully, it was not raining during re-rigging or lunch. Alas, I cannot say the same about the rest of the day once we got back on the river. Indeed, the term "squall wall" or "wall of squall" provided an apt description for several interesting deluges.



Left to Right: (top) post-portage, Noisy's, Vern Ritchie Glacier, Noisy camp; (bottom) dinner and dessert, Alsek dinner wear

In 2004, we enjoyed memorably blue-sky views of the impressive Noisy Range and Vern Ritchie Glacier. This time, we were rafting in variable rain – most of the mountains shrouded in low clouds... and so I was a little down and frustrated. In 2004, our attempt to camp on an island in the middle of the Noisy Range (with views up-river to the Vern Ritchie) was thwarted by high water – to the point that we had to float all the way to the Tatshenshini-Alsek confluence camp on this day. In contrast, said island was dry this year – and so we pulled into camp around 3, hoping the rain would stop at some point. And, remarkably, it pretty much did as we unloaded our personal gear, enabling us to promptly set up camp. Indeed, the evening only got better and better – both the weather, and dinner (salmon, pasta, and salad)... but mostly: our first Dutch oven dessert on this trip, chocolate brownie cake. Mmmmmmm.

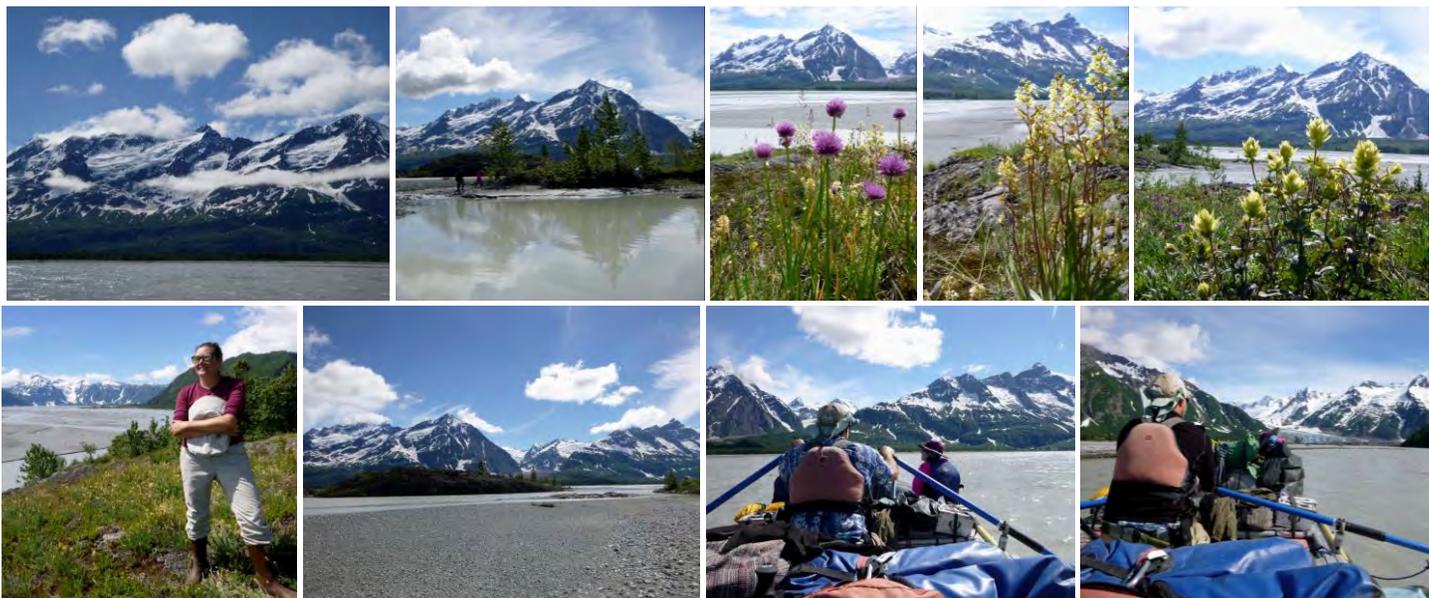


Left to Right: Noisy's start clearing in camp, Roger/Susie are VERY happy (yes – that is a kiss THROUGH Susie's head-net and in PFD's), Vern Ritchie and Noisy's from river, AMAZING views at Tatshenshini-Alsek confluence

July 1, 2014 – A Kiss-Through-Mosquito-Net-Worthy Day

It was hard to know what the weather would bring, although we all went to bed hopeful that last night's clearing would increase... and man did it ever. Of course, it did take its time – meaning we didn't get on the river until nearly 11 p.m. By this point, it was sunny, warm (to the point that most of us did not wear Helly Hansen's on the rafts), and the photography and gawking level was at an exciting high – most of us transfixed with every cloud movement or clearing. Or, in the case of Roger/Susie, SOOOO overjoyed that they had to do a very rare PDA in their PFD's. Getting onto the river seemed to correspond to an exponential rise in clearing (or realization of clearing beyond) – the entire sky back up-river above the Vern Ritchie (and even farther to the Tweedsmuir) was clear. Having said that, I never had that same 2004 sense of the Noisy's marching forever down the straight river corridor – largely because they just didn't clear sufficiently in the brief time we floated by the remainder of the range. Indeed, we were less than an hour from the confluence with the Tatsheni. Although the confluence was large, the river did not seem as oceanic as it did in 2004 – probably because there were more obvious shallows and sand-bar islands. I was also surprised that I could not see the exact campsite we used before (literally called "confluence camp") – although the issue was not that there was nothing... it was that there were so many jutting peninsulas or islands

with that view – who knew which one was which? But the confluence view was unmistakable – and, honestly, we had slightly bluer skies today than in 2004, making the day even more dramatic. Less than an hour downstream from the huge confluence area, we pulled over on a new feature for me: a rocky, flowery feature known to the guides as “Chive Island.” Chive offered staggering views of the dozens and dozens of huge glaciated peaks, an easy stroll, and a beautiful variety of colorful flowers – including blooming wild chives. After making the stroll around and then up the mossy, flower-strewn rocks, we returned to another fabulous sandwich-building exercise. I believe this was Susie’s single favorite place on this entire trip. She was nearly speechless.



Left to Right: (top) mountain detail, Chive Island – little bay, flowers, flowers, flowers; (bottom) me and upriver view from Chive, little beach, back on the river... final view to Walker Glacier area

Back on the river by 3, we floated ~2 hours to Walker Glacier, tonight’s camp. From the river, Walker looked about the same as it did in 2004; tomorrow’s more proximal hiking/scrambling inspection, though, demonstrated major recession. We also saw the first of a few other parties – a private group of kayakers who had come down the Tatshenshini. Indeed, seeing parties was more pronounced and affronting on this trip (vs. in 2004 when we saw no one until the final airstrip). Rafting to Walker seemed a longer and more convoluted process than in 2004: we rafted very far downstream (parallel to the end of the glacier) and then paddled up this still clear channel fed by side-streams farther up. Of course, Roger/Susie were excited about this for bathing because it was warmer and less silty than the main river. And even I did some partial bathing in a slightly private area beyond the raft area. But you didn’t want to go too far: Walker had, by far, THE most scary sign of grizzly of all our camps: MASSIVE and numerous prints, with several very fresh and well-defined sets in a mud playa less than a third of a mile from the tents (pictures later, taken during tomorrow’s hike).



Left to Right: (top) Walker Glacier, my tent & bear plain, Roger/Susie’s tent with laundry, glacier ice bar; (bottom) Joe’s PUDC – rings & crush, batter, cooking next to Thirsty’s steaks, finish; alpenglow... Susie saving laundry from sudden squall!

We all set up our tents just in or beyond the brushy strip by the shore... my tent – initially - the farthest it had ever been from anyone else. But then the grizzly print reports started coming in from our always-exploring fast hikers: SO many HUGE prints crisscrossing that big bear plain just beyond my tent. Given that the tents were free-standing, I dragged my whole tent – fully loaded – right next to

Roger/Susie again... and received plenty of ribbing for that. Unlike me (who did a simple standing bath, scrubbing under my bikini top and shorts), Roger/Susie did a naked scrub-down AND washed a boatload (no pun intended) of laundry – which they promptly strung everywhere to dry. And then it was the glacier ice bar (limes, gin, vodka, tonic water...) and Joe's pineapple upside-down cake 101. As a major PUDDC aficionado, I was most impressed that he used crushed pineapple to fill all the holes within and gaps between the rings – which he noted during his narrative. There were also steaks, slaw, and potatoes. I stayed up the latest tonight – along with most everyone else – because it was clear the alpenglow was going to be quite spectacular... and it was. The only momentary wrench was a light sprinkle that seemed to come out of nowhere – sending Roger/Susie scrambling to move still-wet drying gear into their tent. By 11, it was downright chilly – and I do not recall sleeping as well as usual given all the bear chatter.



Left to Right: wake-up clear skies to west, 1 hour later looking east during pack-up, 2 hours later – skies fully turn as we head to glacier

July 2, 2014 – Wacky Weather Changes All Day!

Although my distant recollections about today were that we enjoyed a lot of great views, I was surprised to look at all the pictures in one fell swoop... because there were a lot of dark skies and even some mid-day rain. The beginnings of this breakdown are illustrated above. Overall, I did not enjoy the Walker visit as much this time around – partly because the skies weren't as good, partly because getting around the lake was uglier, and partly because the glacier access and ice wasn't as beautiful (thank you – NOT – global warning!). But I digress: we awoke to CLEAR blue skies around 7 a.m. For the next 2 hours, high clouds arrived from the east, consuming the west. We made a point to tear down much of camp during this time – the goal being to return from the hike, eat lunch, and promptly get on the river. When we finally set out to visit the glacier, it was 9:30 – and most of the skies above the glacier were white (and would grow completely white during the hike). As mentioned, we found MANY huge grizzly tracks crisscrossing the “bear plain,” including very fresh (i.e. within 24 hours) prints in a mud playa. Given that we had to crash through a few thin bands of alder, there was – needless to say – a lot of no-joke “here bear” calling. At the glacier lake edge, 2 of our party (one guide, one client) returned to camp because of an apparent (but mystery-source) GI illness that thankfully resolved over the next 24 hours. The rest of us continued around the lake on a rocky boot-beaten path.



Left to Right: (top) grizzly mud playa, civil path sections, uncivil path, uncivil scramble on and then by mud-covered ice (bottom) on the moss-covered ice, mossy crevasse detail, Roger/Susie and I head back over uncivil path sections

Soon, however, said path took us into this thicket of alder that required some full-body wrestling to get through – not to mention some climbing. When we broke out again, we were maybe 100 feet above the lake – a nasty descent on loose rock and dirt awaiting us. It was not pretty. Once back at the lake-shore, most of us scratched our heads wondering why we just did that – as opposed to going beach-side the whole time (and we scratched our heads even harder when we easily did just that on the way back, not wanting to repeat the unnecessary climb). From here, we walked along the water another 20 minutes before climbing through this hummocky area with a lot of loose dirt, rock, and mud – eventually arriving at and then traversing this short knife-edge ridge (also of loose dirt and rock). Heading up, I don't think I (or others) appreciated that this was all debris on ice – but it was... and later perspectives definitely showed that the knife-edge sides both dropped to dark, muddy crevasses. At a few points, I considered stopping – but decided I, at the very least, wanted to get to the edge of the blue ice. This was reached within 15 minutes. The usual fast and motivated hiking group were

rarin' to go onto the ice – and promptly started down. Roger/Susie and I elected to sit and enjoy the view, although I think – in retrospect – Susie probably should have gone. For me – well, I'd done it before... plus, the 2004 ice-walk was far more level, had fewer crevasses and debris, and we ultimately went farther up near this scenic icefall that wasn't as impressive this time. Indeed, all the ice was more beautiful before; this time, there were moss colonies everywhere, making the ice more dirty brown. Once the others started climbing back up, Roger/Susie and I decided to slowly start back – knowing we'd be slower on the uncivil rock/dirt/mud sections. Indeed, we all regrouped back at the lake-shore and, as stated, chose a non-climbing beach-side route all the way back. Back at camp, we enjoyed some pita sandwiches, finished all the packing, loaded the boats, and were on the river by just after 2 p.m.



Left to Right: (top) dark clouds, fireweed & firewood, camp - clouds and Brabazon, clearing up-river; (bottom) channeling Forrest Gump, staring circle, Sam & Roger with pre-posole, groover view of Brabazon, clouds ensue – Novatak and groover set-up

I didn't include many pictures of our ~3-hour float (including stops to gather firewood and clear water) to this unnamed camp occupying a HUGE open peninsula on river left - just upstream and across from the 2004 Purple Haze camp and the massive Novatak Glacier. This camp offered 360° views of AMAZING mountains – including the Brabazon Range (downriver) and this jaw-dropping view of the Walker Glacier complex (upriver). Given that the skies started really clearing as we erected our tents, I grew increasingly concerned that maybe we should have camped just around the corner where legendary Mt. Fairweather would have been visible (i.e. what if today was our only shot seeing that peak – one that EVERYONE who does this river hopes to see?). Time would tell what kind of gamble we'd chosen in moving such a short distance downstream. But it was nice to have another leisurely and sunny day to sit and stare at such magnificence. While tonight's dinner posole was spicy for me, the plentiful buttered corn bread was a good neutralizer.



Left to Right: (top) morning clouds, Susie-sized dry-bag, good weather upriver above Novatak, less inspiring Brabazon views downriver; (bottom) Flower Hill – rainy hike through WET brush, every-hued paintbrush, Alsek Lake in mist, back to river, lunch!

July 3-4, 2014 – Dishwasher Pot-Scrub Cycle

Some folks were surprised when it started sprinkling after breakfast... but I was expecting it given pretty much all clouds from the moment we woke up. Nevertheless, everyone was in good spirits - looking forward to this being the last time we moved camp – i.e. we

were finally going to enjoy a layover on this trip: 2 nights at Alsek Lake! The big question: would Fairweather come out? Heading out onto the river, it felt like our last day of nearly all rain on the river (i.e. Serengeti North). As we rounded the big bend (Purple Haze camp nearly gone – having been eaten away by the bending river), we enjoyed a BRIEF view up the massive Novatak: WAY up high on the icefield, everything was sunny... a massive ethereal range of peaks reminiscent of Mts. Kennedy & Hubbard as viewed from Lowell Lake. Indeed, SOMEWHERE up-river it was – as is typical – sunny. Looking downriver, however, was NOT encouraging: coastal gray and spitting rain. After 2 hours of rainy floating, even I was surprised that we bothered with the “flower hill” hike to what typically represented Alsek Lake’s most iceberg-choked lobe. But we did. Pulling out on river left, we made our way up what seemed like a taller and more substantial sand-hill and beach, the initial quarter mile through sharp grass interspersed with deciduous trees. And then the DEFINITELY longer-feeling mile through seriously wet and thick alder; this went on FOREVER and seemed thicker and more circuitous than before. As should be obvious from the last photo set, nearly all of us hiked this whole thing in full Helly Hansens AND PFD’s – over raingear... it was that cold. At times, this wet slog briefly opened into small meadows filled with multi-colored Indian Paintbrush (as in 2004) – although I waited until the hike back to photograph them. During the final quarter mile, the route followed a more open, boot-beaten path – which was notably shared with a track of recent and large grizzly prints. The final beach was sort of miserable; although it was clear there was ice EVERYWHERE (I mean EVERYWHERE) on the lake, the immediate area was littered with mud and broken timber... oddly junky. I contrast with the 2004 experience, not a lick of mountains were visible – the entire sky white to gray. After returning to the rafts, lunch was procured – the rain letting up a little. And then the fun REALLY began...



Left to Right: (top) Knob Island in the distance, channel of death scout, skirting channel of death – seeming up the water; (bottom) now we are committed to the quasi-portage channel... making things passable

Within an hour, we arrived at this very decisive point along the river: left leads to the so-called channel of death (where the majority of the Alsek flows directly into Alsek Lake), and right leads to what I will refer to as the quasi-portage channel (where, at least this year, a teeny-tiny portion of the Alsek flowed around Knob Island – the place where virtually all parties camp on their last night. I was under the strong impression that, in 2004, we did not attempt the channel of death. Alsek 2004 leader Brian’s totally scary stories about the channel had so infiltrated my brain that I totally thought we avoided it before. But then I opened up that old report and, lo and behold, we ran it no problem... or, more accurately, no icebergs. The problem with the death channel – as was seriously obvious this year – is that if there are a lot of icebergs, those get blown by the prevailing winds into the main current of the entering river. The last place you want to be is on a river-driven crash course with a wind-driven iceberg coming right at you... or worse, between many icebergs moving to crush you between them. I’m pretty sure Sam knew this was going to be the situation given the view from flower hill beach; nonetheless, he must have been equally certain that the quasi-portage channel was going to peter out – or else he wouldn’t have so seriously pulled over on river right to scout, notably up this hairy slope of loose rock... only a few hardy non-guides venturing up for what seemed a LONG time. But the decision was made: NO channel of death. Instead, we crossed the river to near the channel of death (a brief view of icebergs, Alsek Lake, and some of the Fairweather complex/glaciers peaking out from under the cloud ceiling) but headed down this tiny channel that, from a distance, seemed to defy gravity – the water swelling and moving uphill... at least for a moment. Initially, I thought all would be well because there seemed to be a lot of water all of a sudden; unfortunately, it was just a shallow, still pool – seemingly hemmed in downstream by flat gravel bar stretching the length of adjacent Knob Island. Pulling up onto the bar, the guides and a few of our men took off on foot, searching for ANY channels – mostly along the base of Knob. When they returned, Sam seemed slightly less hopeful than his usual even-keel-to-upbeat self about a small series of pools along Knob’s base. I think he was ultimately shocked at the level of motivation and industriousness with which our team attacked the problem. Indeed, any of my concerns about not feeling like a coherent team earlier in this trip were entirely wiped away during the subsequent 90 minutes of serious work. And what was more impressive: nobody lost their heads or freaked out... we were not motivated by fear, hysteria, or concern. It was more like watching a swarm of ants confronted with a big job – and then just doing it. The initial task was to clear plant and log debris from the channel mouth – and our father-son were already doing that as Sam returned to the rafts. Said channel (6-15 feet wide) curved along the brushy base of Knob for about 300 feet and then petered out into a 10-foot stretch of gravel, another series of pool-channels below that. Another group of our men had already started shoveling down the first short gravel stretch, literally trying to engineer a water canal for the rafts. While they never, like, created a full-on canal system, their efforts greatly eased the subsequent raft-pushing and -dragging. In sum, there were 3 more such pools separated by short gravel stretches before we reached running

water again (i.e. where the Alsek came around the island). We took rafts one-by-one down the quasi-portage channel. When we reached gravel, everyone circled the raft and basically pushed-dragged it over the shovel-flattened and wet sections. Even the guides were shocked when we realized it was only going to take 30 minutes to move each raft. My impression of Sam's initial less-hopeful expression was that he was fully expecting that we were going to have to de-rig and fully portage at least one segment of this pool system; the fact that we didn't have to, IMO, was a total surprise. Equally surprising was the fact that Susie, as noted to her the next day, would have totally freaked had this happened earlier in the trip... and yet she, like all of us, seemed amazed and delighted at the effort and execution.



Left to Right: more quasi-portaging – push, pull, drag... neighboring party at Alsek Lake – note massive icebergs

Note – I didn't get to the following sections until almost a year later... so, alas and no-doubt, the final sections will probably be less detailed BUT I do have hand-written journals (visible in one of the following "cabin fever" in tentia shots below). From the final gravel push-drag, we still had about 20 minutes of floating to go before reaching camp. As we rounded the downstream side of Knob Island and rowed back up into Alsek Lake proper, it was clear that the best, front-center campsite (the one we used in 2004 – notably by ourselves) was occupied by a private rafting party who had come down the Tatshenshini (conversations suggested that they had to do a full-on portage given less water/rain the day they came down... not that we enjoyed the rain). It was also clear that the ENTIRE lake was clogged with MASSIVE icebergs – some pristine white, and others black as coal. Camp set-up proceeded better than expected because it wasn't raining much at first. But there was no question that the tarp was going up and, not unexpectedly, the rain began in earnest as we gathered for dinner: Thai-style chicken over rice.



Left to Right: cabin fever - (top) rainy camp, our only natural color, under the tarp (is this, like, Survivor?), food porn I (GCS); (bottom) still rainy camp, journaling, listening to the rain – yup... still raining, umbrella walk view, food porn II (RVC)

For nearly 40 hours, it rained: it rained overnight; it rained all of the next day (July 4th); and it rained all of the next night. People occupied themselves in various ways on the day of all rain. Donning full gear (and umbrella), I took several walks along the front perimeter of the island so I could keep in some shape for Italy... in between journaling and napping in my tent. Although some guides

appeared a sub-party of the fast hikers with an INSANE bushwhack up to the Knob Island viewpoint, I did not partake (I skipped that in 2004 too – albeit for completely different reasons... namely: we could see EVERYTHING). And when we ran out things to do, we congregated under the tarp – drinking and succumbing to glory days or bawdy talk - the latter revolving around the impressively filling groover. Of course, I most laughed my ass off when Sam, taking it all in, commented that it might be time to have some “corn races” – namely, feeding the guests corn kernels and then seeing who poops them out the fastest as signaled by a short burst of the air horn when the deposit was made. Although Sam claimed it had gotten that cabin-fevery on other trips, no one was ever certain whether Sam was telling the truth. Nonetheless, within an hour, some of our funny (and prolific) groover users started regularly tooting the air horn... if nothing else to categorically demonstrate they were leaving a(nother) big pile of shit! On a different (but poop-creating) note, the high point of the day (IMO) was lunch: the guides made grilled cheese sandwiches with tomato soup as we all sat under the drippy tarp looking no-doubt despondent and cold. Although we could not see Mt. Fairweather and some of us were growing worried about being able to fly out tomorrow, it was promising because – despite low fog and clouds – we could hear small planes downriver at Dry Bay... and even a Coast Guard helicopter was heard and briefly spotted making rounds. So – we may not ever see Fairweather on this trip... but we probably would escape on time. Despite everything, 40 hours of rain did not totally suck – and our final dinner (a can-based Mexican fiesta) was festive and spirits were high. The frosted red velvet cake was also surprisingly moist and delicious!



Left to Right: (top) off to the races, promising morning, Susie/Roger see Fairweather, Sam; (bottom) dreamy Alsek Lake, take-out

July 5-6, 2014 – Fairweather, Indeed

By the next morning, the rain had stopped and we were, at first, surrounded in a thin fog. Although many of us were often chomping at the bit to get moving most mornings, today was different: people knew we were right on the edge of seeing Fairweather, and the longer we took, the more chance we would see her... which we did in 2 hours. While I know all the Fairweather virgins were excited, I was happy for them (and the lack of rain)... but my equal thought was: smaller than I remember. I'm sure that will disappoint Roger/Susie a little – but, having seen Fairweather 6 full days (representing 3 different vantage points over 2 trips at Alsek and Glacier Bay), that is how I felt about it. When we finally hit the water, it was 8:30; the guides entertained us by paddling close to some of the icebergs – but most were behind us in the current, having hung up on the shallow lake bottom farther back. I was more impressed with the Brabazon Range peaks this time around – but probably because snowy peaks and emerald green slopes had been in shorter supply on this trip. The current also seemed more impressive this time, including a few fast and noisy mini-rapids; of course, these probably impressed me because the river was shallower and there seemed to me more mini-bergs and bits grinding through the water and over the gravel. We arrived at take-out at 11:30. The entire area around the take-out has changed completely – thanks to the river pretty much changing its path. Where in 2014, we were a mile more west – in this calm sort of side-lagoon surrounded by more trees – the current take-out is on the immediate edge of the swift main Alsek – along a bare gravel bar with an extensive beach.



Left to Right: take-down, deflate-gate, now THERE is a new form of transportation for me!

This new location has created some new issues, needs, and industry because now you must arrange transportation between the river and the airstrip (which hasn't moved). Said transportation comes in the form of a support vehicle I'm not even sure what to call: ghetto ATV hauler? In any event, we worked efficiently to de-rig, clean, deflate, and roll all the rafts – and organize, package gear... while

setting aside/hiding lunch materials for later (with a concerted effort to make sure no one ate all the cookies and potato chips). I think the ATV support crew (some kind of seasonal, local enterprise – probably sprung from the local hunting/fishing industry) arrived around 12:30, taking several trips with gear out over the next hour. In what still doesn't feel right to me, there was quite the rush to move major gear, guides, and 1 chosen client first because there was only 1 plane serving 2 needs: first – getting guides and gear back to Haines to get the next trip going; second – getting the rest of the clients to Yakutat (i.e. we would be waiting 2 hours for the plane to turn-around and come for us... hence the need to organize lunch materials for a guide-free experience). Making things odder and more distant-feeling to me, I was in the final ATV hauler trip... leaving little real chance to say good-bye to the guides. Watching the plane vanish into increasing clouds with all the guides and gear, some of us were squirrely about whether we were going to be stuck here... or late for what was becoming a tight connection in Yakutat (to a commercial Alaska Airlines run). In 2004, there were not only 2 different planes for each destination – but our leader also accompanied us back to Juneau for a farewell dinner, and to make sure all gear (e.g. dry bags) was organized and returned.



Left to Right: (top) waiting on the porch, airstrip single-engine otter prop, self-guided lunch, flight to Yakutat; (bottom) views during flight to Yakutat, landing in Yakutat, famous and now-shower-free lodge, interior

Thankfully, though, there were no issues with the single-purpose plane shuffle; the otter returned on time and we enjoyed the short (~20 minute) flight to Yakutat. Despite the still OK local weather, there were plenty of clouds obscuring full views of the impressive mountains (which notably include Mts. St. Elias and Logan). Having arrived on time, we enjoyed a comfortable, nearly 2-hour layover. Unfortunately, I – and Roger/Susie... and possibly others – assumed the infamous airport-adjacent Yakutat Lodge was still offering rental showers for what had been a legendarily filthy but memorable clean-up step last time. In fact, they stopped this service some time ago (clogged drains perhaps?) and so we all sat in the bar eating fried food and cold drinks. Our nearly empty flight back to Juneau was more scenic, putting us on the ground around 6 p.m. There, a van-bearing MTS agent returned everyone to respective hotels – with instructions to leave empty dry bags at the front desk for pick-up tomorrow. Now without transportation, food options were limited to what we could find on foot; I cannot recall what Roger/Susie did but I went for what turned out to be a really good Chinese place – downing half of my Mongolian Beef meal (fridging the rest) and going to bed for 12 hours straight (earplugs firmly in place).



Left to Right: (top) views from flight to Juneau, back to the nature walk along the Kaxdigoowu Heen trail, farewell dinner

After a very late start the next morning, we met for a 3-hour walk around 10:30 – making our way back to the aforementioned Brotherhood Park, hoping that the fireweed was now in full bloom. Alas, it was not – although there were more visible than last time. Heading down the Kaxdigoowu Heen trail farther than before, we managed a bona fide loop – somehow finding our way back to the Safeway complex. Here, we each picked up either lunch or lunch supplements in my case (given that I still had take-out remains). Enjoying respective lunches, we then retired for a couple hours (in my case – PT, bathtub soak, and a short nap) before meeting up to take the 4 p.m. free hotel shuttle back into downtown Juneau which, we were told, was swarming with something like 9K cruise people. Even though the shopping district was crazy, we endured – dropping money variously on art and trinkets. Although our celebration dinner was at the same place as in 2004, it was not as good as before – too noisy, less classy... felt like a Red Robin near a mall. Hotel shuttle service ended at 7, meaning we had to find and pay for a taxi back... not hard, as long as you avoided pick-up near the

shopping area. The next morning, we were off to the airport – saying our good-byes in Seattle, where I stayed a few days with my mom before flying to Venice for our Three Sisters and Marshall trip to the Dolomites.

Closing Thoughts

There are many reasons it took me a long time to finish this report – the main reason being that Italy came so quickly after this trip and was so impressive that the timing and desire of that experience simply overwhelmed my memories and motivation. But a secondary reason was that, honestly, this time down the Alsek was less satisfying than the first. Susie half-jokingly, half-seriously needed me at some point near the end of this trip about whether I was going to be moved to tears at this end of this journey; and I quickly and definitively said no. There is no doubt I felt much more intensely for the trip as a whole, the guides, and the smaller, more coherent group on the 2004 trip. Maybe it was because there were fewer big personalities... or maybe there was something about Brian's more schedule-oriented leadership... or maybe it was just the better weather that allowed for more active layover days... or maybe it was just that "first-time-love" thing (although I have not found that to be the case with, say, Patagonia – which has seemed to produce bigger love each time). I did feel more expectations on this trip because I knew Roger/Susie were going largely because of my prior experience – and it was initially hard because Susie was uncomfortable at the start. After my "no tears" answer to Susie, though, I did say this trip represented a more authentic Alsek experience, particularly in terms of the weather aspects. And it was a joy to see Susie get her Alsek groove on – you definitely need it on this trip. But as for direct comparisons, I will just let each report speak for itself.