

## Into the Refrigerator (Sort Of)

Running the Alsek River - Yukon Territories to Alaska



Left to Right: Confluence camp kitchen, me on Walker Glacier, last night - Alsek Lake camp

### Introduction

It feels like a long time since I've written about someplace new that really blew me away. I don't know if my lack of adequately poetic language when attempting to describe this trip has to do with my rusty psyche when it comes to expressing awe - or whether I simply ran out of appropriate words. Going down the Alsek River was, relatively speaking, a last-minute decision made 2 months before when an unusually early spring finals schedule became apparent. The Alsek had long been on my wishlist; I first learned of it in 1994 when I met Richard Bangs, 1 of the first to run this river in the mid-1980s (since then, less than 4000 people have gone down this legendary river). Remarkably, too, I had never been to Alaska. Indeed, part of my motivation in choosing the Alsek involved my simple interest in finally seeing this state. Over the years, many things have kept me from Alaska: tales of horrific weather (e.g. Jenn's month-long bike-trip through SE Alaska, during which only 3 days were downpour-free), modest scenery that involved only distant mountains (e.g. Jay's bike-trip from Haines to Fairbanks), and the fact that both my most serious ex's were from dismal-sounding Fairbanks. Nevertheless, there have been two recent bright spots: Patagonia Sara sent me postcards from her Wrangell-St. Elias vacation last year, insisting the place was bigger, better, and wilder than South America (notably, she enjoyed great weather). And my father - of all people - encouraged me to go, insisting June was the sunniest (he spent much of 1987 doing audits around Alaska). This trip was outfitted through Alaska Discovery, a recent acquisition of Mountain Travel Sobek (with whom I had done trekking in Nepal). Our enthusiastic guides attempted to persuade me to proclaim Alaska Discovery better than OARS - my usual rafting provider. Indeed, Alaska Discovery was EXTREMELY good. Although it has been more than tempting to deem the Alsek the BEST rafting trip (possibly the best trip) I have ever done, I wrestle with that assertion. The Alsek was REALLY amazing, but it is challenging to compare this river with the Grand Canyon, the Middle Fork of the Salmon, or the Selway. As I said to trip leader Brian: I never thought I'd enjoy a trip with only oar-boats and few big rapids. But the Alsek provided remarkable stimuli to the contrary - whether in terms of constantly mind-blowing scenery or brutal temperature fluctuations. Contrary to conclusions many passengers (myself included) made based on pre-trip literature, the Alsek is not located predominantly in Alaska. It should be considered a mostly-Yukon trip because 6/12 days on the river were in said province (with 3 in B.C. and the rest in the northern end of Alaska's Glacier Bay National Park). At somewhere between 177-191 miles long (based on various accounts, none of which claimed to be using accurate maps), the Alsek is an expedition-level undertaking. It is also one of the largest rivers - physically and in terms of flow - in the world. At times, the river valley was 3 miles across, the water charging down in rolling waves that undulated 50,000 cfs of gray, glacial-till-colored water. Once, we clocked a representative section of current to be moving by at 12-15 miles per hour. No river I have ever rafted compares to the scale of the Alsek (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT - this still holds true as of 2014). Given that this trip marked my 1000<sup>th</sup> river mile, I believe I can make such credible comparisons. And so I will proceed to the report.

### Getting to Haines

I came into this trip on antibiotics, having suffered through a strep infection that was acquired in New Orleans at a professional meeting 10 days before. For those days, I debated about canceling the Alsek given lingering bronchitis. But in the end, 9 of my 10 friends felt I should go. Pharmacy in tow, I left on June 8, flying from Portland to Seattle (20-seater, double propeller plane), Seattle to Juneau (737), and Juneau to Haines (8-seater, single propeller plane). Had the Seattle to Juneau run not featured a completely clear view of all the Olympics (severely put to shame during this trip), I would have been my typically panicked flying self. Had the 8-seater flight been longer than 30 minutes and not surveyed several massive glaciers, I would have been in a fetal position on the floor. The Juneau airport was impressively small, the cafeteria limited - unfortunate given that Alaska Airlines had NOT provided us any lunch (only a small cup of ice cream). During the final 2 flights, I was befriended by a talkative 19-year-old kid from Eugene on his way to spend the summer in Haines, working for his uncle on a fishing boat. Contrary to hopes, the Haines airport was 10 minutes by car from the small town. Fortunately, Wings of Alaska (the final airline) provided van service that dropped me off at my hotel. It was unclear whether they expected payment - so I gave them what seemed fair and the driver seemed pleased. Haines, the apparent model for the town in Northern Exposure, was pretty - surrounded by towering snow-clad mountains. In combination with the water, these features made for a fjord-like feeling. Haines was mostly sunny - but with many clouds shrouding the surrounding hills, and the air distinctly cold. When a Haines resident on the final plane heard my plans, she said the prior 2 weeks had been sunny, hot, and clear; thus, she was concerned they were now due for a big spell of rain. After checking in and dumping things in my hotel room (formerly part of Fort Seward), I took an hour-long stroll around the quiet and mostly empty streets - heading first for the docks (where the new high-speed ferry was just arriving, and a small fleet of fishing boats occupied a small marina) and then along the main streets. Although there were many arts and crafts shops, only a coffee stand called to me. While balancing my Chai, I recall that my camera dropped out of its case but was caught mid-air by its tether. Two days later, I would discover the entire front lens was cracked. At the time, I recalled this moment in Haines; upon developing my film, however, I discovered that the camera had - in fact - been dropped or crushed near put-in (the last non-cracked picture was our party getting out of the van). I arrived back at the hotel around 4, endured the WORST shower in hotel history (extremely variable water pressure and temperature), and took a short nap. At 5:30, I made my way downstairs for an overpriced but tasty steak dinner in the hotel restaurant. The mandatory planning meeting began at 6:30 and I barely finished dinner in time. Our team of 10 included 3 guides (Brian, Sam, and Brock) and 7 passengers: 3 professors (Dennis, Liz, and I), 1 nurse (Carole),

1 general contractor (Dennis), 1 software engineer (Pam), and Sheldon. From here on out, the Dennises will be distinguished as "Philosophy Dennis" and "Contractor Dennis." Notably, this was Brock's first trip down the Alsek; in the process of licensure, he was not allowed to have passengers until the Alsek merged with the Tatshenshini (about 80% of the way down). This group was – HANDS DOWN – the BEST team I have ever worked with on any river trip. Although some passengers had never done any river trips, everyone was interesting, enthusiastic, mellow, supportive, and ready to help and work – despite the intense environment. Despite such lofty remarks now, I didn't come away with notable impressions of the team at that first meeting (I think I was still digesting my too-copious dinner). After 2 hours talking about the trip and receiving specialty gear (unfashionably full-on rubber Helly-Hansen overalls and jackets, and high-end rubber boots), we returned to our hotel rooms. Packing for the Alsek had been challenging. We basically needed everything: a substantial daypack for hiking, hot weather clothing, freezing weather clothing (all synthetic, no down), and serious rain gear. In addition to my usual mid-latitude gear, I brought thick fleece pants and a heavy wool sweater (I REALLY enjoyed the latter, having forgot how warm wool is). I used - and abused - ALL of it on this trip (indeed, EVERYTHING was trashed by the sandy till that found its way to every camp). Because of all the flight issues, I opted to rent a sleeping kit and tent from Alaska Discovery. ALL rented/provided gear was top-notch and I was impressed not only with its quality but also with its cleanliness - particularly given the brutal camping conditions sustained. Brock correctly described this trip as "class IV water and class V camping." After unpacking, leaving a few things to storage (Alaska Discovery shipped one duffel per person back to their Juneau headquarters), and re-packing one last time, I went to bed. Falling asleep around 10:30 p.m., I awoke twice in the middle of the night (around 12 and 2) – both times shocked at the lightness. At its darkest, the night was as bright as the hour before a typical dawn in the Northwest. Living with light for 2 weeks straight was an interesting sensation and it has been difficult to return to dark nights.



Left to Right: Haines harbor, Alsek headwaters (sort of), van drop-off where hike to put-in began

### River Day One

The next morning, we rose for breakfast and were on the road by 8:30 a.m. We rode in a van with Brian up the Haines Highway over Chilkat Pass. Somewhere en route we crossed into Canada and had to provide identification at a border post. Our re-entry into the U.S. would be while on the river (at an uncontrolled access point) and many jokes were had about what GWB would think of this and why such porosity - god forbid - still exists at our borders. The Chilkat Pass region was long and extensive, comprising a vast, tundra-like plain with chains of rounded peaks. Abundant snow covered most of the land. Following the lengthy pass, we began dropping into more greenery when we spotted a grizzly with a lame paw about 200 feet from the road. This, of course, required a major stop, during which time the bear itched itself silly on an alder (standing up and doing the whole routine - back to the trunk). The air felt freezing and everyone seemed somberly silent. After stopping to gawk at the bear, we descended in spitting rain to Haines Junction, Canada (not to be confused with Haines, Alaska) where lunch was enjoyed at a crowded bakery, the drizzle having turned to drenching showers. From the bakery, we proceeded across the street to the Klauene National Park Visitor Center, where only the reasonable weather forecast posted on the bulletin board perked me up. From here, we were 15 minutes from the place where we would likely disembark from the van and hike 6-7 miles to put-in. A few hours before, Brock and Sam had been driven all the way in with all the rafts using an appropriate 4WD truck. I remain slightly disappointed that we also didn't just all drive to the put-in – although it would be unfair not to explain that Brian did offer the truck to anyone who didn't want to hike. Of course, none of us wanted to look like losers so early in the expedition. It was at this point that my camera suffered an unnoticed dropping or crushing event (which begs the philosophical question: if no one saw the camera drop, did it really break?). The weather as we set out was not pleasant: a strong wind and spitting rain kept up throughout the day. Most of the road was in the open, exacerbating the effect of the winds and angular rain. Although I was told that my Chaco's would be fine, I stepped into muck and my socks were soaked within an hour. But I kept walking and my feet felt warm and comfortable. I cannot honestly say we were an enthusiastic bunch that first day. The level to which we eventually bonded would not have been predicted by interactions during our quiet slog. After 5 miles, Brian must have detected this because he flagged down the truck driver (now on his way out) and ordered us all to climb in bed and hold on. I think it is safe to say that we all breathed a silent sigh of relief. In my no-doubt weenie opinion, anyone doing the Alsek should use a high clearance 4WD vehicle to access the put-in for MANY reasons: morale, avoiding the daily upriver winds that typically start mid-afternoon, and getting on the river day one (instead of camping at put-in). Of course, I do fully understand why a leader may prefer camping at put-in, especially with an unknown group: to test our tolerance, to make sure we know how to deal with real camping at least one night BEFORE embarking unto the wild, to make sure those of us on antibiotics do not progress to any life-threatening scenarios.

Brian had warned us extensively that he wasn't sure we were going to get on the river today. Shortly after we arrived at put-in (around 3 p.m.), he decided the winds were too high and going downriver would be futile; we would camp here. Incidentally, put-in was technically on the Dezadeash River. The Alsek does not exist until the point that the Dezadeash joins with the Kaskawulsh – about 5-6 miles downstream. There are no formal or established camps anywhere along the Alsek. Certainly, there are a couple of popular stops - but everything was extremely pristine (more than on ANY other trip I have done). Put-in was no different. Given that we were only the second party of the year going down, we experienced especially rustic conditions: a new season of alders and rocks to contend with along the narrow beach. Brian gave an extensive demonstration of tent set-up that confounded a few people. I found the tents slightly cumbersome at first, but easy by the third camp. Each of us singles (i.e. everyone but Liz and Dennis) had his/her own private tent (which probably explains why everyone got along so well). Sufficed to say, 10 people using 9 tents (each of which could sleep 3-4

people) was WAY decadent. At put-in, Carole and I were close neighbors, with others spread out more than I would have guessed given that we were in grizzly territory. The weather was cold and damp, the rain enduring. After setting up my tent, I threw my gear inside, changed my wet socks, climbed into the amazingly warm sleeping bag, and meditated silently for 30 minutes. Although I was still nervous about my health, I felt reassured by how quickly I dried out, warmed up, and lost all thoughts about work, stress, and world events. Shortly before dinner, Brian gave a standard speech about meal etiquette. Although Brian had warned us that the food may not be as extravagant as some of us were used to from other trips, all meals were as elaborate as food on FAR more civilized rivers. Indeed, that these guys could pull off 12 days of AMAZING food with no re-supply (as is done on most lower-48 trips of this length) was ASTOUNDING. Tonight: halibut in a curry sauce over rice with broccoli. After dinner, Brian did the standard toilet etiquette talk and tour; in contrast with other trips, this usually lively discussion was delivered with little gutter-mouthed fanfare - probably because walking far from camp in grizzly country was a more serious undertaking (case in point: the groover ticket was a weapons-grade canister of pepper-spray). The passengers were all in bed by around 8:30, as would be the case most nights. Our apparently unique sleeping habits confounded the guides - but being well-rested was yet another reason we all got along so well. Under the gentle sound of light rain, I slept well given all the bear speeches. Given my intense grizzly phobia, it was a miraculous thing for me to sleep well 11 nights straight among the great bears - not to mention by myself in a tent. Something about 9 people close by and the overwhelming sensation of endless land put me at ease. Even so, I followed Carole's self-described lead that first night and "added indoor plumbing to my tent" in an effort to avoid going outside (i.e. pissed into a Ziploc freezer bag). I did awaken at least four times throughout the night, noting the lack of darkness - which also made me feel strangely safe.

### River Day Two

As was the case most mornings, Brian had us up at 6:30 a.m. My daily first order of business was to drink at least 2 cups of tea before breakfast (today - pancakes and sausage). Today's weather featured sun and lots of clouds in all directions. During breakfast, a black bear and a grizzly were spotted across the wide river. Afterwards, I packed at a leisurely pace because I correctly guessed that others would be slow. Indeed, we were not on the river until 9:15 (Brian aiming for 9). In what would be a constantly amusing sight, all us passengers wobbled onto the shore wearing our armor of rubber, the relatively scantily-clad guides running around packing and lashing things. Truly, I felt useless. I rode with Brian that first day, chatting mostly with Philosophy Dennis (being that his specialty was evolution and religion). I don't recall if some wind was present right off the bat or if it came on insidiously (and swiftly). I do recall that Brian had us paddling a fair bit - which was difficult and awkward given our attire (I'm not sure what I would have done had I fallen out, aside from being splayed out and floating - hopefully face-up). Compared with the last 10 days on the river, the first 2 were somewhat bland in terms of scenery: low, rounded, partly snow-covered peaks. What made the land interesting was the substantial snow, the contrasting and intensely green meadows, and the vastness of the land in all directions. In many ways it reminded me of Sara and my first impression of Los Glaciers National Park, Argentina: low rolling hills in the immediate vicinity but massive peaks in the distance... this sense that everything went on and on (and we were VERY small elements). In response to this comparison, Brian remarked: but remember there are NO towns, trails, or people for miles up here. Indeed, there was a remote wildness and ruggedness to this land that was lacking in Patagonia. I was also coming to the conclusion that the weather here was colder and less forgiving than that in Patagonia (I hoped I was wrong). Within a few hours, we were fully occupied with a driving upriver wind. Brian was rowing hard with assistance from us. Around 1, we came to the confluence with the Kaskawulsh (where the Alsek began) and a visible, tangible current emerged as if from nothing. For the next 2 miles, we navigated tricky braided channels, Brian having us ready to paddle as he stood up studying the current in the wide and confusing river. When not paddling, I found it most comfortable to sit back to the fiercely cold wind. Even so, we floated into this massive sunspot for a 2 p.m. lunch, locating a gorgeous rocky island to dine upon. Although the rubber was annoying, it did serve to immediately harness all radiant energy and substitute for a comfortable portable heating device. As with most folks, I ate a gigantic sandwich, found a flat spot in the sun, and enjoyed an excellent nap.

After lunch, we floated another hour. In what seemed out of place, the land became covered with interesting lava sections that reminded me of pillow formations in the Olympics. At first, only an occasional bulge would appear alongside the river. Downriver, the configurations grew larger, covering massive portions of land. We pulled over on river right just before Lava Creek, our camp for the night. After docking the boats in a sandy bay, we scrambled up this 300-foot headland pass via a rugged route blazed by Brian. Everything - rocks, river, snow, and even dunes - seemed oddly juxtaposed. Brian explained that there were more extensive dunes downstream; upstream winds carried said material to this point. From the pass, we climbed up a steep and crumbling slope covered with broken lava and delicate plants. After 5 minutes, we topped out on a thin meadow - behind which was thin forest. Commanding views up and downriver were enjoyed for about 30 minutes, most of us laying in the grass and nodding off yet again. It was here that Liz noticed my camera lens was cracked and I fell despondent, having brought 17 rolls of slide film. As we pulled into camp, a mother and baby moose bolted into the river - struggling immediately in the current. We felt awful watching them fight the water. Fortunately, they gave up crossing and floated briefly downstream before eddying out and vanishing into the brush. Lava Creek camp was sunny and open, with bulges of light-colored lava and tiny plants variously. Carole, Pam, and I decided to help each other erect all our tents. Although we were efficient that first night, subsequent nights of sharing this task grew ineffective to the point that we often gave up our socialist tendencies. More than once while pounding NIN tent stakes into the unforgiving, rock-strewn landscape, we discussed how completely lucky we were to be doing this in the warm sun. Drinking my mandatory 2 cups of pre-dinner tea, I found myself finally enjoying the promise of reasonable weather and interesting surroundings (even if I would be unable to capture any of it on film). After too many crackers with cheese, I could hardly fit any of the actual dinner: Thai vegetables and chicken over rice. Once again, most of the party was in bed by 8:30. Surrounded by Pam and Carole, I slept soundly all night.

### River Day Three

Today, we were up at 6 a.m., anticipating a substantial day on the river. Parties can only camp 2 nights in this part of Kluane National Park. Today's target, glacier-fed Lowell Lake, was in the next region, the Alsek/Tatshenshini Wilderness. We were also excited Lowell would provide our first layover campsite (i.e. we would spend 2 nights there). After a breakfast of made-to-order omelets, I was struggling to put on all my rubbers when Brock knelt down beside me with his waterproof point-and-shoot camera. Although he claimed to have another camera, I never saw it and feel guilty to this day that he gave me his only camera. Even so, I took many pictures of Brock, and provided him with prints after the trip. Riding again with Brian, I was surprised to find that the river was still getting faster. Given sunny but frigid morning conditions, I drank, easily, 4 mugs of tea (thermoses were carried on all boats). When we pulled over for

a light lunch near this raging side-creek that ran through open tundra, we were all expecting to freeze our asses off. In fact, we realized that it was at least 10-15° colder ON the river. It was downright BALMY on dry land. This was the first time in hours that all us passengers seemed to lift our cold and weathered expressions. Despite a relatively late lunch and long float thereafter, Brian lead us on a moderate hike just prior to arriving in camp. Presented as a short, easy climb up the Lowell Glacier's upriver moraine, this excursion proved a wee bit longer... setting the stage for all subsequent passenger re-interpretations of Brian's hiking descriptions. Bear in mind - again - that there are no trails. Brian realized after we crested the first of 3 more ridgelines along the rolling moraine that we should have floated about 10 minutes more downstream before proceeding up. Although this hike was supposed to be dry, I bogged out within 10 minutes of slogging through an alder thicket. After wetting my feet, we proceeded straight up rotten talus, scrambling fluid rocks and dirt for 10 minutes... repeat, repeat. The final view - while amazing - was still far from the actual glacier given that Lowell, like most glaciers, has been receding dramatically. About 150 years ago, the Lowell Glacier actually dammed the river at this point, causing the formation of a giant lake all the way back to Haines Junction. Over the last 2 days, Brian had been pointing out all kinds of geological evidence of this massive event. I'm not sure any of us really appreciated the size, scale, or significance of this event until we stood on the moraine and realized how far we'd come - and, consequently, how large the lake would have been. We took a different, more direct route down to the river - although, once there, we hiked 10 minutes upriver along the beach. Here, HUGE grizzly tracks were noted in the sand.

Camp was on the opposite side of the river, 10 minutes downstream. We arrived there at 7 p.m. This was the only camp that required shuttling gear up a moderately steep hill of sand. Lowell Lake camp was stupendously situated: it looked out over said lake and glacier - huge, snow-covered peaks in all forward directions. Behind camp, Goat Herd Mountain (5500 feet) towered, its massive north face rocky and sheer, several ribbon-like waterfalls streaming down cracks between the facets of stone. Goat Herd's eastern face, in contrast, was green and reminded me of Sahale Arm, tapering upriver into gentle emerald meadows. On the upper flanks of these meadows, we counted 38 mountain goats grazing. About a mile of flat to bumpy rock and sand separated camp from the vertical face of Goat Herd. We had been warned that this was 1 of 2 camps where grizzly would pass (i.e. via this one-mile-wide corridor). Said warnings likely explained why we all camped close together behind the wind-shielding "anthill" (a 40-foot mound of sand and rock between camp and shore). The ladies' socialist tent-set-up system that night, for me, was frustrating - probably because it had been a long, cold day and I was hungry. Dinner made up for all these feelings: a substantial spinach salad, rice, and either grilled salmon or sesame-encrusted tofu. I have thus far failed to mention that Brian and Sam, both vegetarians, REALLY knew how to cook vegetables and tofu. Having watched then-die-hard vegetarian Jenn suffer through many meals on our OARS Colorado/Grand Canyon trip (meat dishes replaced with Gardenburgers), I felt MORE than privileged to be eating Brian and Sam's gourmet vegetarian fare. Brian would go so far as to dehydrate the tofu slabs for 30 minutes prior to marinating them in all sorts of wildly delicious, on-the-spot creation sauces. In addition to 3 tofu "steaks," I also drank so much tea that I had to pee 3 times that night. Incidentally, I was now going immediately adjacent to my tent, as was the recommended pee protocol - seriously - because of grizzlies.



Left to Right: Lowell camp (Goat Herd behind), Brock on Goat Herd summit, unnamed peaks reflected at Lowell camp

#### River Day Four

Today was our first big hiking layover day. The night before, Brian had discussed several options: not hiking, hiking half-way up Goat Herd, hiking all the way up Goat Herd. I knew from many descriptions that Goat Herd was a major haul: a 3500 foot climb that was graded 1000-1500 feet per mile - the first mile up requiring class 2 scrambling. Even before the trip, I had been prepared to forego climbing Goat Herd to save my health for the whole trip. Being who I am, I rationalized that bowing out of Goat Herd would be a fair karmic trade for good future weather. Thus, when we awoke to cold and cloudy conditions, I had no problems telling Brian that I would remain in camp. Although Brian was accommodating, I don't think he was expecting me to bow out on ALL portions of the hike. Consequently, I felt I had him scrambling a little with my decision - perhaps nervously given my well-established grizzly issues. Although the sane regions of my brain told me that I would be perfectly fine, I wrestled with the bear situation all day. Brian's insistence that I be given my own canister of whoop-ass AND be taught how to fire the flare gun added to this anxiety level. Brian's explicit instructions were to fire a flare into the air if a bear came near (although he never really defined "near"). If I found myself still being approached, I was to fire a flare into the ground between the bear and I. If THAT didn't work, I was to fire at the bear's head and get ready with the pepper spray. Brian handed me said protection with the statement: "I suppose you are going to sit here all day with these in reach - aren't you?" Noting the narrow corridor behind the camp, the answer to this question was: "of course - you know me SOOO well!" Making matters worse, Brian's final words to me as everyone left: "remember to hold your ground, Sarah" (and, no, he was not smiling when he said this). Roger will, no doubt, have a good laugh over that one.

The party left camp at 8:30, anticipating that half-way folks would be back by 1-2 and summiteers would be back by 4-5. Determined to catch up on my journals, I donned ALL my warm gear and situated one of the camp-stools on a wind-free portion of the anthill. With the pepper spray and flare gun kit at my feet, I spent the next 4-5 hours writing - in between scanning the corridor every 5 minutes. Yes - it was pathetic but what do you expect given my historic paranoia? Every hour, I hiked down to camp, checking the team's progress using the spotting scope. By 12:30, the half-way folks were returning. Within 30 minutes, the summit team (Brian, Brock, Carole, and Philosophy Dennis) was on top - notably beneath a promising hole of sunny, blue sky. The half-way folks arrived back in camp around

1:30. Most informed me that I had made the right decision, describing the lower part of the climb as brutal. A key reason some people came down early (in addition to being fried) was the prospect of taking a hot sponge bath. Upon arriving in camp, Sam placed all dishwashing buckets on the fire, encouraging us to mix said water with cold water and then vanish among the rolling mounds of sand with our cleansing agents. After swearing up and down that I was not going to indulge, I could not pass up a bath given that the sun was now fully out (it was, honestly, WARM). I did avoid washing my hair because I did not trust the sun to stay out long. Given that I had never discussed lunch in between all the hoopla surrounding the flare gun and whoop-ass, I pathetically begged Sam for a peanut butter sandwich once he appeared unoccupied with other tasks. Said items were quickly unearthed from somewhere on the boats. It may surprise hard-core grizzly campers that food was kept on the boats in non-bear-resistant containers. By 4, the summiteers had returned and were regaling us with stories. And then we all settled into pre-dinner relaxation mode. For me, relaxation now included the intense application of moisturizing agents. By dinner - around 7 - the sky was clearer still, the sun radiant over the snow and ice. The ravenous crowd tremendously enjoyed the steaks, salads, butter/sour cream-covered Yukon Gold potatoes, and fudge brownies. Afterwards, I slept - for the first time on this trip - nearly naked and without waking until dawn. Although I would like to think that my body was finally thermo-regulating according to the cold, I suspect that improving weather and BIG food was an equal force.



Left to Right: navigating icebergs on Lowell Lake, retrieving ice (right)

#### River Day Five

In what seemed a miracle, the sun shone out against mostly blue and cloud-free skies from the moment we arose at 6:30 a.m. Only far in the distance, obscuring the summits of Mts. Seattle and Hubbard, did any high clouds linger. Although I must often sound like I state platitudes to the effect of "this was the best day ever," I would say that the subsequent day on the Alsek receives my top prize for the most jaw-dropping scenery and activities (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT - this still holds true as of 2014). Aside from the spectacular weather, we proceeded not only to navigate the icebergs of Lowell Lake but also to run our only class IV rapid - gateway to the truly alpine section of the river. Within 10 minutes of leaving camp, we approached a seemingly impenetrable band of small to medium-sized icebergs that had been blown to a far lobe of the lake. It is difficult to express the extreme size of Lowell Lake, sufficed to say that we were nowhere near, like, the massive calving ice face of the Lowell (or the truly large bergs that began their melting journey at that point). Being a tiny party in 3 rafts faced with icebergs in the middle of nowhere is a mind-blowing experience and I had to convince myself several times that here I was actually doing and seeing these things. Today, I switched boats to ride with Sam, electing to ride in the back so I could photograph the rafts and the scenery. It was not until I rode with Sam that I realized how often Brian - also a professional photographer - was snapping pictures (indeed, we signed model releases before this trip - and made it into the catalog, among other things). In contrast with always-busy type A Brian, Sam was a wonderfully mellow presence whom I grew to enjoy immensely given the unendingly huge scenery, the massively large and fast-moving water, the eternal light, the deafening sound of the river (which, if you listened carefully, sizzled - the particulate till constantly foaming). Anyway - from the back of Sam's boat, I watched Brian's team (paddles in all hands) attempt to use speed and force to move through the raft-sized icebergs. Our boat quickly followed as Brian's team broke a temporary path - with Brock immediately behind us. From this point, we entered a smaller lobe of the lake with even smaller icebergs. In the distance (10 minutes away), we could tell that we would have to break through another band of bergs to pass into the major final lobe of the lake. But first - given the small ice - we needed to replenish the ice-chests. Brian and Sam's boat teams were each responsible for capturing 1 chunk of ice (the size of a 20 lb frozen turkey). Liz and Sheldon, in the front of Sam's boat, were in charge of retrieving ours. Sam provided Liz with a plastic compactor bag and advised in the selection of a good berg. Liz - wearing all her usual gear - was to lean over the boat and bag the ice (Liz analogized this process to trying to catch a greased pig). Sheldon's job was to make sure she didn't fall in. The whole time, of course, Brian is going nuts with his cameras. It was next Philosophy Dennis' turn (Liz' husband) to bag ice for Brian's cooler. I think Dennis' capture went more smoothly - but only because he had studied Liz' model technique. The next ice blockage required some creative double-boat ramming, but eventually we made it through. At first, it was unclear whether there was ice blockage at the final lake outlet. Often, the current will bring bergs to this point but then they bottom out where the riverbed again grows shallow. Brian and Sam debated different routes; in the end, we played it safe and took the longest, most certain way... not wanting to paddling upstream through ice if we had to turn back and re-route.

On the shore adjacent to the river outlet, we stopped for a major safety talk. Although we had heard some general raft safety talks previously, they were not about whitewater, throw-ropes, high-siding, swimming, etc. At this point, we were 90 minutes from class IV Lava North. Brian anticipated we would stop for lunch in 45 minutes, and then again to scout and suit up at the rapid. Although there were many class II's between here and Lava North, it was difficult to call them anything more than long wave trains (the highest crest/trough 4-6 feet). The maximum air temperature that day exceeded 75° and it felt blistering. At lunch, we seemed lethargic - mostly because extra steak from last night's dinner had been put out for sandwiches - along with avocados, cheese, etc. Needless to say, I did NOT lose any weight on this trip. About 20 minutes after lunch, we arrived at the scouting beach (on river right) for Lava North. Given the size of this rapid, I had been expecting some big dramatic canyon landscape to take over the terrain. Thus, when we came to this open area surrounded by non-descript hills, I was surprised there was anything resembling a class IV downstream. We hiked 10 minutes to a big raging hole surrounded by choppy and irregular waves with many smaller holes all around. While this deafening mess scared the crap out of all beginners, I wasn't bothered by it. What did make it impressive - and different from other big water I've scouted (e.g. Lava Falls in the Grand Canyon) - was the fact that its scouting viewpoint was eye level to the biggest

hole/obstacle. The route we would shoot for was obvious (not that I could maneuver it - but I have gotten to the point where I can interpret routes through some rapids) and the simple objective was to avoid the big raging hole. The S-shaped route would enter from river left, cut river right, and then cut back. Adding to my impression of this rapid as safe (especially with experienced guides): there were no objective dangers downstream. Even if someone came out of the boat, they would be cold and wet but it wasn't like they were going to slam their heads into a rock or break their limbs against any walls. The river was too deep to expose boulders and there was at least a mile before the current turned right, surging against a substantial wall of crumbly rock. While the guides huddled in discussion formation before the raging hole, I did my best to convince 2 rafting virgins that everyone should feel very secure. The guides seemed calm, light, and studious, adding to my solid feeling that we would all be fine.



Left to Right: Lava North from above the scout, at the scout, and post-running removing the drysuits

We hiked back to the beach and spent the next 30 minutes donning dry suits. I - and at least one other person - begged to just go down in rubbers (it was SO DAMN HOT). But even the guides donned the dry suits, insisting it felt better and was necessary (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT - and Canadian law, see Chilko-Fraser report). The dry suits were excitingly purple, featuring dull black rubber cuffs on all appendages and around the neck, plus this metallic, waterproof zipper that angled from just over one shoulder down to the opposite hip. After struggling to put the damn suits on, we stretched open the neck and crouched to vent air from the system. If we THOUGHT we were sweating BEFORE putting the suits on, we were soaked by the time we had struggled with all the impossible cuffs. Upon standing, we all looked like vacuum-packed plastic-wrapped food. The color scheme, angular metallic zipper, and puffed shoulder tips caused me, upon surveying our now-properly-attired team, to comment that it looked like we should all be extras in a Michael Jackson Thriller-era video. This description was deemed accurate by the team - although, surprisingly (given this group), no one broke into any 80's dance moves (probably because it was SO FUCKING HOT!). In contrast with comparable moments that preceded other big events, always-talkative Brian did not extend our onshore wait with any more speeches about safety, etc. He had, just before the suiting up, apologized for the fact that we would all have to run Lava North together - one after another (meaning that no one could be on the shore snapping pictures of boats in the rapids). He also advised everyone to put cameras away and focus only on holding on. Given that I was using Brock's camera, I followed orders. Brian's boat headed down first with Sam's/our boat following close behind. From the raft's low perspective, the approaching/downstream view of Lava North seemed confusing, choppy, and more difficult to interpret. I understood how people could lose track of where the big hole was. Almost from nowhere in the nondescript mess of waves, the hole appeared to our right. Although it didn't seem as large from the boat, the scary thing about it was how easily you could wind up in or dangerously near it. Just as the hole appeared, Brian's boat - who was more river left than us - seemed to slow (he was in a slower region of current). Meanwhile, Sam's boat (more river right, in stronger current, closer to the hole) zoomed ahead, passing Brian. It was surreal to be passing - as though in slow motion - 10 feet from another boat in class IV whitewater. We were all, like: see ya. Given sustained 6-8 foot waves, folks in the front took plenty of full-body/face water and did appreciate the dry suits. But, honestly, I would get wetter on far less scary wave-trains during the last 3 days of this trip.

We floated 10 more minutes past Lava North. After making the aforementioned turn in the river, we entered a dramatic canyon. Although the walls were not sheer, they featured high angle crumbling rock that bore a surprising array of colors (reminiscent of St. Helens' crater). Banks of snow lingered low on the slopes, many thick along the water's edge, providing an amazing contrast to the higher golds, oranges, and browns. This SOARING, GORGEOUS, unnamed peak towered above and I was going nuts because Brock's camera was locked away. I finally asked Sam if I could retrieve it (yes, of course). After all this fuss - as is often the case with Alaska - we enjoyed this view for, like, another hour or two (that is how big everything is). Indeed, my pictures from this trip are often these collections of 5-10 shots that got bigger and bigger because you start shooting so early, not realizing how distant everything is. Shortly thereafter, we pulled in by a clear blue side-creek where we collected drinking water and de-suited. Entirely unable to stretch my ankle cuffs off, I had to ask Contractor Dennis to help me out of my suit. Given sunny skies, we sat cooling down and drying off 20 minutes before suiting up in our rubbers and heading down the river again. Because we had all SO enjoyed the layover day at Lowell Lake, Brian had no problem convincing us to put up with a super-long day so that we could enjoy ANOTHER pair of nights and hiking day at Plug/Supercub Creek - another EXTREMELY scenic, canyon-dominated hour away. Honestly, we ceased to consider the time we were on the river. Often, we would arrive in camp, set things up, relax, finally start eating, and find out we hadn't gotten in until 6 or 7. Even though we were pulling these 12-hour days, it honestly never felt that way. Brian had commented at the beginning of this trip that people typically came to sleep less over time with the constant light. I, on the other hand, felt I slept more, better, and longer (although I'm sure that the intensely long days and filling meals were equally-contributing factors). Upon arriving at Plug Creek, Sam and Brian were surprised to see the aforementioned HUGE peak RIGHT in front of the camp. Apparently, they had never seen this view on a clear day. Behind us, portions of this even larger unnamed mountain above the Supercub Glacier glowed golden in the evening sun. Incidentally, Supercub refers to the type of plane that some guy emergency-landed on said glacier (not, as I feared, a grizzly incident). Downstream from Plug Creek was this expansive sandy beach that provided our WONDERFUL campsite. I took up residence next to Contractor Dennis (what can I say after he manhandled my dry suit off?). Actually, I hate to admit it: I enjoyed having burley Dennis camped next door after 3 nights with just the women. Tonight's dinner, which I had been craving for several nights, was SPAGHETTI with meat sauce, salad, and loads of bread and cheese. As we all sat in our dinner circle, Pam (with her CLASSIC British accent) states: There's a BEAR! I don't think anyone believed her but, damn it, there was a grizzly approaching from Plug Creek.

Upon seeing us, it loped behind camp and up toward the Supercub. Brian suspected it had just crossed the Alsek (unnoticed by the ravenous team) before stumbling into camp. My eyebrow-raising comment: Shit, now I won't be able to sleep at all - any noise and I'll be jumping in Dennis' tent. Predictably, I was teased for that one (frankly, our team was not nearly as lewd as other teams I've worked with given ample fodder on this trip). Poor Dennis - such a quiet and peaceful man to wind up with me as his neighbor. I probably snored, mumbled, and whimpered in my sleep too. After dinner, Brian stunned us all by calling a 9:30 a.m. breakfast time. I almost fainted at the delicious prospect of sleeping in. After dinner, we strolled over to examine the fresh prints left by the bear. It was a restful night, although it did rain lightly for 30 minutes in the early morning hours.



Left to Right: post-Lava North Canyon; Plug Creek camp kitchen

### River Day Six

Today was the day that superhuman Brian lost our trust in terms of his perceptions regarding hike length and difficulty (I say that laughingly but seriously). Brian described the Supercub hike as easy and short – with little elevation gain relative to that on Goat Herd. Encouragingly, the weather was promising with partially sunny skies. Although the guides encouraged us all to wear our rubber boots (as they did), most of us (including me) wore our hiking boots. By the end of this trip, I was SHOCKED that I could hike in rubber boots given all my foot problems. First, we hiked 10 minutes upriver to the outlet of Plug Creek, after which we proceeded up Plug Creek for 20 minutes. Supercub Creek came in from the right and we followed it, immediately seeing our fate in the distance: a dirty glacial snout of rocks and dark ice followed by a blinding white snow-covered mass of ice. I had been hoping to be walking on, like, big blue ice (having seen pictures of the famous downstream Walker Glacier). Thus, I was a little disappointed by the Supercub, worried that folks might not want to do the glorious, standard Walker sidetrip later. Making up for the lack of blue ice, however, was this HUGE-ASS, UN-NAMED peak that looked like it could have been razed from the Cordillera Blanca; said peak had an enormous, nearly vertical face of fan-shaped icefalls, above which hung fluted snow that draped over the rock in scalloped patterns. I was speechless. All through the Alsek corridor, I felt like I was passing through mountain ranges I'd seen from all over the world. Apparently, the geology of the area explains my impression of SE Alaska as this merging mess of many masses of land and rock types.



Left to Right: Supercub hike - approaching glacier, looking down Glacier (half-way up), Brian calls lunch

Anyway - as we approached the Supercub, our route climbed steadily, always on the edge of the right-hand moraine. We headed for this big pile of steep rubble alongside an ice cave that circled the mouth of the emergent creek. Despite frequent debris (rocks, dirt, mud) careening down the steep ice face to said mouth, the guides lead willing folks down a wicked slope of mud/rock over ice. After timing debris falls, said crazy people vanished for a short while into the ice cave. At least 4 of us (myself included) thought they were nuts and sat this side-trip out. Indeed, it was difficult - having completed rock/ice training - to be traveling without a rope and crampons on a glacier. Even the place where I sat it out was scary: 4-10 inches of mud-gravel that had the consistency of setting concrete. Stepping on it sloughed it away, causing major slippage, and revealing solid ice beneath. After everyone regrouped, we climbed the concrete-like shit for 10 minutes - hugging this pointy ridge of rocky debris. To the left, a safer-looking field of snow (over ice) assumed a more inviting slope and so we proceeded across a band of mobile rocks to reach this corridor. After YEARS saying I prefer rock/earth to snow, I have never felt more comfortable on snow - preferring it FAR more than rock/mud scrambling. Carefully following the guides, we climbed several hundred vertical feet of snow-covered glacier. Although it usually did not feel like we were on a glacier, there were some vivid reminders: visible crevasses and bulges of dark ice. After an hour, some folks were teasing Brian about his interpretation of this hike and lunch was called. We had each carried portions of said meal and thus spread our respective meat, cracker, cheese, and cookie booty out on some big rocks. By this point, it was outright sunny and I was beyond sweating. I am not pleased to say that my new Patagonia crewneck pullover (the first such top I've purchased in 14 years) had NOT been working out. Thus, I traded it for my always-trusty original red Patagonia turtleneck. Of course, I hesitate to imagine - given said top's threadbare age and my always bra-less status - how much of the boobies were visible. Fortunately, I am at a point in my life where I could care less (especially on a trip like this). Having been typically bundled in 5 layers up to this point, I was just happy to see the old mosquito-bites at all. After lunch, Brian explained that it was possible to climb higher - to a point where the glacier flattened within an upper cirque where the entire big un-named peak above was visible. Brian estimated it was another 30 minutes, to which the peanut gallery responded: that means 30 (Brian time) X 2.5 (normal people factor). I lost track of who went down - but at least 3 people descended with Brian. The rest of us

proceeded up with Sam and Brock. In fact, it did take only 30 minutes. We sat in the sun on this second island of rocks 20 minutes before heading down. Down was an absolute blast - except for the fact that my boots were full of snow, my socks completely soggy. Only the last 100 feet of mud-shit was ugly and wiggled me out a bit. And then the slog down the two creeks seemed to take FOREVER. But it was pleasant hiking and I had to metaphorically pinch myself many times about this being REAL. I would estimate that we arrived back at camp around 4 - at which point everyone dispersed to their tents for naps, quiet time, and moisturizing. Dinner, around 7, was this amazing Asian-style barbecued chicken served with THE best stir-fry vegetables I've had in ages. Despite the short and relaxing day, I think we were all beat from the combined activities of the previous week. As usual, most of us were in bed by 9 because Brian had warned us that tomorrow would be a big day: we needed to get to our next camp (Tweedsmuir/Turnback) early (early being defined as around 4 p.m.) so that we could de-rig the boats and prepare for an even earlier and crazier day eight.



Left to Right: Little Serengeti, Tweedsmuir/Turnback camp - preparing to de-rig, dinner

### River Day Seven

Once again, the weather was mostly sunny. Even so, the winds were fierce, persistent, and Patagonia-like. Despite an early rise, our team was occupied the hour after breakfast by a large grizzly across the river. In what seemed unusual behavior even to the guides, the bear would amble a few minutes along the high cut-bank and then sit down pet-like (head on paws) for 5-10 minutes watching us. Then, it ambled some more and did the same thing - over and over again. Within 15 minutes of the show, I began tearing down my tent and packing. I'm sure everyone else thought I was weird - but, honestly, bears don't do anything for me in these kinds of situations. In fact, I spend most of my time trying to avoid them - partly for reasons of fear and safety, but partly because big mammals just don't float my boat. I think it was Brian who - during some big mammal sighting on day 2 - teased me about what I hoped to see on this trip if it wasn't animals. My answer: big rock and ice. All this explains, too, why I am a MICRObiologist (case in point, I was more into hearing about Brian's history with Leishmaniasis than I was with the macrofauna). After the grizzly whoopla died down, I rode with Sam again. Of all the days on the river, I remember the least about this one in terms of specific details. The whole day was MAJOR WIND and HUGE mountain overload. The river remained a roaring, undulating wave-train all day. Our first MASSIVE peak was Blackadar, named for a famous MD who made the first solo kayak attempt of the Alsek (his boat was shredded in Turnback Canyon, although he was eventually rescued by his alert bush-pilot). I swear we had Blackadar in sight for 5-6 hours straight as we circled 180-270° of its massive flanks. I was flabbergasted to learn that Blackadar, which could have been plucked from the Himalayas, was only about 8,000 feet tall (I guessed 12-15,000). Within an hour of first seeing Blackadar, we stopped for an easy hike, nap, and lunch at a place the guides called Little Serengeti, across the river from Blackadar's icefall-laden north face. After pulling the boats onto a sandy beach, we thrashed through 300 feet of alder and then gradually climbed this grassy promontory (the wind howling). Although Brian insisted there were ALWAYS bears here, we saw no bears. But I was STUNNED STUPID by the 360° mountains. Where Blackadar looked entirely Himalayan, the unnamed peaks across the river looked North Cascades-esque. Most people - in a simple effort to avoid the wind - lay down low and nodded off for a spell. Sam and Brian eventually returned early to make lunch, with Brock leading the rest of us back.

After lunch, we only floated another 90 minutes before rounding a bend that offered our first view of the Tweedsmuir Glacier. Although I was stunned speechless by the austere, barren, arctic landscape, I had specific recollections of Ellen's memorably freaked-out response to our first night at Upper Jean Lake/Wind Rivers - babbling on about how we were out of our league and she'd never seen anything so damnably desolate and scary in all her life. I'm sure Ellen would have shit twice if she'd seen the Tweedsmuir camp. Yikes. Definitely, the MOST remote and OUT THERE place on earth I have ever been. To this day, I have never grasped the full extent of my feelings about this camp. Having just floated by these North Cascadian peaks - their warm-feeling emerald meadow flanks - we seemed to pass into the ice age in a matter of 15 minutes. The inhospitably rocky Tweedsmuir/Turnback camp was on river right, at the base of Blackadar's nearly snow-free south face, an extremely high-angle field of rubble (with a blue hanging glacier tucked into a pre-camp ravine). Across from us was the 10-mile wide and mostly flat terminus of the Tweedsmuir Glacier. Most of said glacier is covered in rock/dirt or snow and so it appeared as this undulating and expansive field of non-living, harsh material. Way off in the distance marched a profile of snow- and/or glacier-capped peaks. Down-river, mounds of variably colored rock bulged up from the camp, defining the mouth of Turnback canyon. Had you dropped me at this spot without knowledge of what lay downstream, I would have NEVER guessed there were 8 miles of class VI down there. As with the Lowell Lake camp, this site provided a narrow wildlife corridor - in this case, less than a quarter of a mile wide. As we pulled up, Brian warned everyone about the serious likelihood of bears and advised us to camp close, leaving a clear breach between the tents and Blackadar's steep flanks. Given a few clearings amongst the rocks (obviously made by other rafting parties), it was not like we had a lot of options. But first, we assisted with taking ALL gear off the rafts. I know a lot of us would have loved to be more useful but, at some point, we became more trouble because only the guides knew what things were and where they should go. It was at this point when we all set up our tents. Given that Blackadar was behind us, we lost direct sunlight immediately after the tents went up. I made the mistake of under-dressing for the first time on this trip and, over the course of the evening, became chilled to the point of shivering. That tonight's dinner (boil in the bag Indian fare) seemed later than usual didn't help. Even so, Brian tried to rally the troops into an after-dinner hike up one of the Turnback mounds so people could see the first section of said canyon. Being cold and feeling socially distant, I (and 3 others) were not in the mood to hike. Instead, I discovered that sitting around the campfire was really warm (you'd think I would have figured that out earlier). I can't recall if I went to sleep before the hikers returned or just after. I know that Philosophy Dennis found HUGE grizzly tracks 200 feet from the area I shared

with Dennis/Liz and Pam. Consequently, I nervously and restlessly tossed and turned for several hours before I finally had to pee. In what was a memorably weird moment, I cautiously scanned the area for bears through my plastic tent window, unzipped the vestibule, and tripped from the tent ungraciously. Given that Dennis/Liz were to my right, I stumbled left. There, I almost stepped on Brian who was sleeping without a tent or hat. Needless to say, I urinated audibly in the small space between my and Dennis/Liz' tent. I then fell asleep immediately and slept all night long after realizing I had manly Brian guarding to the left. Sexist but true.



Left to Right: chopper portage - at Tweedsmuir camp, in the air over the Tweedsmuir, drop-off below Turnback

### River Day Eight

Day eight - which included the infamous helicopter portage - was one that many people who do this trip relish, claiming it the highpoint of the whole journey. Having done the whole trip, though, I think this claim does the Aisek a TERRIBLE injustice and diminishes all the fantastic things running this river embodies. I can only assume that people who say this have suffered through terrifically bad weather or something. They CERTAINLY did not see the sights we did, that's for sure. At some point while de-rigging gear the night before, Brian asked whether I was going down with the first helicopter drop. At the time, I assumed that neither his question nor my affirmative response were that serious. Later, over dinner, Brian described what was probably going to happen the next morning (and it did, mostly on schedule). The single helicopter would arrive between 9 and 11 a.m. (mostly weather-dependent). Brian explained that 4 people went down first, mentioning then that I had volunteered to be on the first team (ha ha, really?). The first group would carry emergency provisions in case something happened and they had to spend the night (these included 1 tent and 1 sleeping bag). Suddenly, WHO I would be traveling with seemed more important given that we were expected - in such an unlikely event - to puppy-pile with our new friends. I raised my hand and said something to the effect of: now, wait a second - I want to know whom I'll be sleeping with. Brock, Carole, Contractor Dennis, and I (having approved my possible tent-mates) became team 1. We were expected to be ready to work our asses off once the second load (a deflated raft piled high with gear), was carried down. The chopper would then return with another group and so on until everyone and everything was portaged. Brian also gave everyone a fire and brimstone lecture about helicopter safety: uniting close in a designated, distant spot whenever the helicopter was in view or trying to land; moving only when signaled by a guide or the pilot in terms of approaching the chopper; and not walking anywhere past the passenger doors (i.e. near the tail). The final order of business: sort out who was in the coveted front seat. Although I was interested in this legendary spot, I was not honestly sure I could handle it. Contractor Dennis was my only competition and it was easy to give it to him.



Left to Right: chopper ride/portage down Turnback, over the Tweedsmuir, re-rigging the boats

After a 6 a.m. wake-up to a freezing but clear morning, we worked quickly to tear down camp and eat breakfast. We were done and waiting by 8:45 a.m., having designated a group zone where we would amass once the chopper was seen. At 9:15, Contractor Dennis was the winner of the contest to spot the chopper first. With everyone humming the MASH theme, we all moved in formation. The helicopter was this cute green and white thing that looked like a big grasshopper head. The nice thing about being first was that Doug (the pilot AND coroner of Haines Junction) actually turned off the main rotor so he could chat with the guides for awhile. We would be the only team to enter the chopper without the big rotor spinning (although the tail rotor and main engine were on at all times). Brian, having loaded our emergency provisions, summoned team 1 to the chopper. After introductions, Doug shook all our hands and asked where we were from. I also slipped in a question about the weather forecast: major heat wave, Doug said, they're predicting 90's by the end of the week. Although I was thrilled with this news, it seemed no one else heard this information. Likely ebullient, I recall moving 1 step into the off-limits tail-zone because I was trying to pass daypacks to Brian while others got on board. I realized my indiscretion when Brian pretty much blocked me (not in a threatening way or anything - but it was memorable). I'm sure, had the main rotor been going, I would have been more cognizant but, for some reason, I wasn't too freaked by the big green grasshopper chopper. In the back seat, we were crammed like well-packed sardines. When Brian closed my door, it physically squished into me (and I was already feeling pretty cozy with Brock). We were handed headsets for ear protection and to hear Doug's exciting commentary (seriously). Almost instantly, the chopper rose. Given my freakish response to any form of jet-based turbulence, I was expecting to hate this ride for all the unpredictable moves. In what remains shocking, I found the maneuverability of the craft and its overall feel to be WAY too comfortable and exciting. Nevertheless, I'm sure Brock will, if asked, recall the numerous "shits" and "fucks" that came out of my mouth during the ride, not to mention the dozen times I reached in front of him to grab the shit/fuck/christ handle (take your pick).

After rising 50 feet, we headed STRAIGHT downriver and into Turnback Canyon. Given the massive windows, I can assure you that the views were fine from the back. Doug flew 30-100 feet above the curving river, swinging side to side and up and down as we zoomed down the serpentine whitewater. It is my understanding that the actual face of the Tweedsmuir Glacier forms river right. Being seated on river left and more than occupied during this ride, I really cannot comment on the consistency of the glacier. River left, sometimes TOO close, was solid rock - relatively dark, serrated, and lumpy looking. The width of the Alsek is reduced by 90% in Turnback Canyon (that's right - 90%). ALL of the water was churning in boils and rapids. Near the end of the canyon, Doug instantly raised the chopper about 500 feet - well above the canyon walls. This was the ONLY time during the whole ride that I freaked (had to shut my eyes and silently talk myself down), confirming suspicions that my issues with flying are about height, not motion. With this rise, the MASSIVE Tweedsmuir Glacier was visible. Although not as pretty blue and white as idealized glaciers, the Tweedsmuir was a jumble of hummock-y mounds of rock and dirt interspersed with big ice. Doug took the liberty of buzzing up and down over the glacier, pointing out all sorts of features (caves, transient lakes, big crevasses...). I was, again, definitely gripping the shit/fuck/christ handle and muttering swear words every time we lurched (which was often). After this survey, we made a B-line for a long gravel beach - our portage end-point. Of course, Doug HAD to fly harrowingly close to a green hill and then make a diving turn 180° down to the beach. Upon disembarking and thanking Doug, we were all strangely quiet - albeit in a speechless and awestruck manner.

After landing, Brock designated a safe zone where we were to amass during gear drops and landing events. We then changed clothing (as, suddenly, it felt very warm). After 20 minutes, Doug appeared again. The second arrival was gear (700-1000 lbs) suspended in a big net. Doug could control the release of the net from the air, first placing it on the ground, next lowering slightly, and finally unhooking. Owing to Brock's excellent leadership, Contractor Dennis' strength, and our combined anal-retentive tendencies, our FABULOUS team - in 20 minutes - had the gear from atop the deflated raft removed and organized, AND fully inflated the raft. The next flight brought the 4 remaining passengers, Philosophy Dennis having won the front seat. Given chaos theory (i.e. "more people = less structure") and higher levels of post-flight hysteria, folks didn't come close to finishing the next palette of gear. The final raft shipment arrived third - with raft 2 maybe halfway inflated. Needless to say, I offered up a goading line about how OUR team had managed to inflate the first raft before team 2 arrived. Brian and Sam were the last drop. Doug may have been crazier in his flight pattern with them - but it did not approach stories we'd heard about other guide-only flights (at least one involving perpendicular moves). After an hour, we were putting in again (it was around noon). I was, frankly, stunned at how efficient the whole re-rigging went. All the women stormed Brian's raft for what would become a surprisingly LONG day; being a total SNAG, Brian was more than secure with all the X chromosomes (future comments will no-doubt amuse a few people as to this women-initiated event). Given the efficient portage, Brian was not exactly sure where we were going to camp for the night - but nobody cared. At this point, we were in the process of leaving the rain-shadowy desert part of this trip (true B.C. coastal range would be officially reached at the point the Alsek merged with the Tatshenshini, about 20 miles away). Consequently, it was suggested we should be prepared for a serious weather change to frigidly foul. Traveling from a warmer/drier climate to a colder/wetter climate paradoxically distinguishes the lower Alsek with MORE glaciers (hence, a phrase we often heard: into the refrigerator). Upon mentioning Doug's forecast, I was assured that Haines Junction was an effective continent away - so even if it was true, it said nothing about coast range weather. Oh well. The week before I left, I called Jenn to whine about my usual fears; her only memorable response: I am jealous of the helicopter and you ALWAYS have good weather karma - it's probably going to be fucking sunny the whole trip.



Left to Right: put-in below Turnback, Noisy Range (Enchanted Valley X20), approaching confluence camp

After an hour of wavy floating, we enjoyed lunch by a clear stream. Given that we could not take drinking or cooking water from the silty Alsek, we stopped daily to fill several plastic buckets. The guides maintained annotated maps labeled with dependably clear streams, good firewood, camp areas, hike-able terrain, etc. After lunch, several folks took baths and/or washed hair - given that the incoming stream filled a slightly less chilly lagoon before dumping into the frigid Alsek. Mostly, this amounted to Sheldon and Contractor Dennis amusing the women by lathering up their hairy chests and bellies, and then dumping buckets of water over their heads. I took the liberty of NOT documenting this on film (you are welcome). After lunch, we floated a LONG time - the river corridor curvy with steep, high, and foliage-covered hills towering on both sides. We then entered a long, straight stretch that offered these endlessly distant vistas. To river left was the Noisy Range - the peaks steep and rocky, with occasional snow patches and a few small glaciers tucked into shadowed ravines. On river right, the massive Vern Ritchie Glacier extended down from a huge icefield (that shared ice with all regional glaciers, including Tweedsmuir and Lowell). Given that the river was, at times, 2 miles wide (albeit braided), we never got anywhere near the Vern Ritchie proper. Flanking the Vern Ritchie were countless, unnamed peaks covered in more snow and hanging glaciers. At some point, Brian lead us up a small creek on river right, describing a copper mining project that had been thwarted a decade ago. Given that specifics about this story are lacking, I suspect I was taken by the relative sensation of quiet achieved within minutes of leaving the Alsek. People always talk about doing these kinds of trips for peace and quiet - but, honestly, it is hard to convey how deafening life on the Alsek was. The other thing that shocked me once we entered "silence" was all the bird twittering. Nearly every day during the last part of our trip, we were treated to twittering birds, some of whom sang throughout the night.

Returning to the Alsek, we continued floating the long straight corridor, the Noisy's resembling the Enchanted Valley X20: rugged, snow-covered summits with waterfall-striped emerald flanks. Brian was considering something called "island" camp. In anticipation, we

stopped to gather firewood - a charming near-daily task I have yet to fondly describe. Being that I grew up playing camp and burning things in my grandparent's backyard, I found the ritual of stopping along driftwood-covered beaches to gather wood a highlight of our weirdly pioneer-like existence. The guides would lay out pairs of long securing straps and we would set our many loads thereon. And then the piles would be rolled and strapped onto the fronts of the boats like primitive ornaments. Several times, I asked if we could PLEASE run a big wave with the strap-on wood-roll firmly in place (now there's a line Jenn will appreciate) - but, alas, we restricted our wood gathering to post-rapid times right before camp. Given that the river was running high and much of the island camp was underwater, Brian decided to push on to the popular "confluence" site. Although some people disagreed, I thought the confluence camp was the best on the whole trip (not by much, though). As suggested, this camp is where the Alsek and Tatshenshini join (20 miles from Turnback). Confluence camp occupied a central peninsula surrounded by (clockwise): Verne Ritchie Glacier, the Noisy parade, Melbern Glacier, and - MOST IMPRESSIVE TO ME - a 120° cirque/wall of glaciated peaks (reminiscent of the North Cascades X20). From a single sitting position, I counted 38 glaciers. Like I said: I came for big rock and ice. AMAZING. The confluence camp was the first place, though, where we found evidence of human impact: micro-trash, invasive dandelions competing with wildflowers that painted the site all these friendly colors we hadn't seen in awhile. Given the brilliant sun and clear skies, I put on my bikini and sponge-bathed straight from the frigid river, the wall of glacier-covered mountains towering above pasty me and the 3-mile-wide Alsek-Tatshenshini point of merging. The reason some people did not prefer this camp was that - for the only time - we had to deal with mosquitoes. Having dealt with FAR worse mosquitoes on the Wonderland Trail, I was not bothered much - although I did don my camouflage print head-net, purchased from good ol' Bi-Mart. This fashionable accessory added to my new reputation as trash-burning queen. Indeed, some folks were surprised to learn that flammable trash would be burned nightly. Trash buckets were either "organic" (food debris thrown in the river, another shock) or "burn" (flammables - burnt in camp). Early on, Sam joked - as he gingerly selected burn bucket items and set them into the roaring flames - that we would eventually come to anticipate the entertainment value of this activity. Indeed, trash burning became like TV (probably better). After the confluence, I took over most trash-burning duties, having mastered the art of spotting thrillingly flammable items (e.g. plastic jars oozing with a thick residue of jelly). People who have not spent this many days on a semi-arctic river will not appreciate the trash-burning ritual. Although we arrived late and were not eating stroganoff until 7, our stay at the confluence camp was gorgeous and relaxing. Given the openness of the site, the sun seemed to go on and on. I sat outside until 10:30 catching up on my journals. I finally lay down for an excellent slumber, rising to pee at some point when there was interesting light across the big cirque in front of my tent. I had to stand and stare in complete awe (despite wearing only undies).



Left to Right: wood-gathering (Carole and Brian), confluence view, trash-burning 101 with Sam

### River Day Nine

As usual, we were up around 6:30, the skies totally clear and gloriously blue. The night before, Brian had suggested 2 possible hikes: a strenuous/steep climb of the Nose (a non-traditional side-trip few parties do) and the Walker Glacier (a popular hike that EVERYONE does). Although Brian seemed to personally favor the Nose (given that we were a hiking-hardy bunch and he liked off-the-beaten-path things), he admitted that it was a long-shot because the winter had been heavy and low snow could make the approach impossible. Being the strongest hiker/climber among the passengers, Philosophy Dennis was also WAY into the Nose. Given that everyone else was quiet on the topic, I felt the need to express my unequivocal feelings for doing the Walker. Everyone but Sheldon (and Philosophy Dennis) then voiced preferences for the Walker. Consequently, Brian put Philosophy Dennis and Sheldon with Sam (on call to do the Nose if it looked safe). Fortunately, we could spread folks out because, having merged with the Tatshenshini, Brock could now take passengers. Indeed, Pam and I must have seemed offensively loud to Brock who looked so peaceful rowing by himself each day. Given that the 3 of us represented the youngest team members, we did nothing but discuss screwball things like relationships (e.g. Do people settle for sub-standard partners as they age? What are the merits of dating less attractive people? Should you have flings with gorgeous people just for the sake of that experience?). Distressingly, I was the oldest in the boat, with Brock somewhat close behind, and Pam FAR back in her early twenties. Our comments - how they agreed or disagreed - seemed an interesting product of age. And that's all I'm gonna say. In addition to the yammering, there was a MASSIVE river and unending peaks and glaciers in all directions. After an hour, we reached the Alaska border (an ugly swath of cut foliage that staggered up mountainsides on both sides of the river). Here, the Alsek felt oceanic and I had to fight panicky moments of agoraphobia and motion sickness. Brock pointed out the Nose, which seemed unimpressive and nondescript. Brian noted snow all the way down to the water's edge and called this option off. We then rounded a bend and, within 30 minutes, arrived at the Walker - which sat below this impressive, unnamed mountain. Before heading up, we downed cold vegetarian burritos in the baking heat. Above, the Walker was completely visible, all snow melted from the lower portion of the glacier that we would be ascending. From the rocky beach, there was an obvious trail through an open sandy area. We then crossed through an alder thicket, passing a pond with GIANT grizzly tracks along its shore. Consequently, BIG NOISE was made as we ascended the rubble-strewn moraine, adjacent to a dense hillside of brush. We eventually pieced our way down the moraine - although I was never exactly sure where the mud/soil ended and the ice began. Once on ice, we proceeded over this flat open section for 20 minutes. The first part was embedded with rocks and grit, providing traction. But then it was pretty much just ice. Even so, the surface was surprisingly rough. Soon, however, we began hitting crevasses and I freaked (as expected). I would estimate that we jumped 15-25 crevasses, all 8-20 inches wide (the widest featured a foot-high step). Where everyone else liked to gape down into them, I could not bear to look down as I focused intently only on making it over each long crack. We then began ascending, watching our footing as we selected a safe path up this rise to the icfall above. Here, the ice surface grew more polished and I began

to question going higher. Indeed, Sheldon and I called it quits 30 vertical feet lower than others, eventually covering one another via held hands as we pieced our way down the slick and uneven ramp. My personal decision to exercise caution was not about any life-threatening danger; it was about knowing I was 6 weeks away from hiking the southern 150 miles of the John Muir Trail - knowing that ANY stupid fall could screw up appendages I needed in working order. Of course, the view ANYWHERE from the glacier was awesome and I felt no need to get any closer to the towering seracs before us. The view down to/across the river - to gigantic mountains with comparably sprawling glaciers - was also something to behold. Although Philosophy Dennis had been initially disappointed by the Nose decision, he openly admitted later that Walker was TOTALLY worth it.



Left to Right: Walker Glacier - distant, en route, and highpoint

One decision our team did unanimously vote on the night before was that we wanted another layover day. Brian proposed this unique spot they had only used once before (something they called "Purple Haze" - I do not know why). Purple Haze was 2 miles from the Novatak Glacier and the guides had always wanted to reconnoiter a way to some large lakes near its face. Although everyone was into this mission, it is fair to say that setting up tents and packing gear every morning was tiring. Given clear and sunny skies ALL DAY, I had long shed my rubbers (always dangerous, even when it looks SO nice). After a wood run, we hit a minor riffle that splashed me full on down the front. Given British Pam's penchant for scandalously retorting, "That wave went down me hole" (referring to the hole down the front/chest of the life-vest), I had to corrupt her line further (with my bad British accent): "That wave went down me hole - to me hole." Indeed, I was sitting IN icy water until we arrived at camp (notably, the ONLY day I had worn synthetic underwear). Wet pants and all, we saw camp and I COULD NOT believe we were going to tackle this site. Purple Haze was on river right - at this point where the Alsek was making a large, fast, and turbulent bend to the left. At the same time, the smaller (but no-less-rapid) Novatak was entering in the middle of the bend. Together, these rivers defined the triangular camp and made pulling in and maneuvering extremely challenging. The object was to pull in along Alsek river right before the Novatak entered (this amounted to a 300-foot section of edge to aim for, the Alsek moving at 12-15 mph). The most mind-boggling feature of the site: it was high atop a crumbling 15-foot cut-bank. As Brian's lead raft pulled in, one passenger (I can't recall who) leapt from the raft with the bow-line, landing awkwardly in the fluid, high-angle surface of the dirt/rock bank - Brian immediately behind, soaring over gear and people to secure all levels of unwieldiness. Sam came in second, bumping Brian's boat as the awkward securing procedures repeated themselves. We had the easiest time because of the barrier created by Brian and Sam's rafts. Passengers were told to stay on board until the guides had fully anchored the rafts and built a safe set of switchbacks up the unstable bank. I did not have a problem with this, although it was unnerving to be bouncing in 50,000 cfs current, the guides above and out of view. One mishap and we were gone, gone, gone. After ascending a rapidly engineered ramp that rounded the apex of the triangular camp, we learned that the guides had built a "deadman" (analogous to a snow bollard) using webbing and a large log. An hour later, they built a second deadman from another angle as a backup.



Left to Right: Purple Haze - triangle apex and secured rafts, Contractor Dennis along the Novatak, Mt. Fairweather and Alsek

Remarkably, this was the first time we formed a bona fide fire-line - me still in my visibly wet pants (earning a few good laughs) and concerned about getting chilled. That my clothes were thoroughly dry by the time we finished is testimony to the quality of the gear and the amazing weather. I then set up my tent adjacent to Sheldon and Contractor Dennis. At some point during set-up, the women (most in serious relationships) held an accidental meeting to express, confess, and celebrate our common lust for the guides (contrary to popular belief, I did not initiate this discussion). Of course, the most memorable moment was when Philosophy Dennis stumbled into the exchange and said: "Shoot - I'm a man and even \*I\* think these guys are GORGEOUS." Given that Brock would joke during dinner that it was reaching the predictable point during a trip when the passengers started hitting on the guides, I'm fairly certain they were onto us (and all our cackling). Many claimed Purple Haze as the best site of the trip but I would only rank it 3rd or 4th. I found the approach scary, the terrain rocky and unpleasant to walk on, and the sensation of 2 rivers on both sides of camp dizzying and terrifying. The high banks and fast water brought back memories of many camps along the Colorado where one wrong step spelled certain death. The edges were constantly eroding, sending audible debris crashing into the water every 10-30 minutes. As an illustration: the deadman closest to the Alsek was dug 12-15 feet from the bank edge that first night; when we left, only 5-6 feet of land were left. Nevertheless, we had a 360° view of mountains in all directions - including 15,300 foot Mt. Fairweather (something many people never see on this trip), the Novatak Glacier, and 3 major ranges of mountains, including the Brabazon. As with the confluence camp, this

site's central location and distant skyline made direct sunlight seem to last forever. Dinner for most was scallops in tarragon sauce over mashed potatoes with salad (I substituted seafood with tofu steaks). This was the first night I watched/saw alpenglow - mostly off distant but massive Mt. Fairweather. Consequently, I did not get to bed until 11 (my latest on the whole trip) because Brian said we were not going to adhere to any set wake-up the next day. Joy, Joy.

### River Day Ten

Day ten was an odd but necessary day. Once again: hot, sunny, not a cloud in the sky. After a substantial breakfast, those interested in charting new territory (i.e. everyone but Sheldon and Contractor Dennis) started up from camp, Sam's GPS unit plotting/plodding what would be our embarrassing course. Our first task was to climb another 10-foot bank to this higher plateau. Here, it was more than obvious that everything in the immediate foreground was covered with snow. Brian and Sam, both wearing flip-flops, asked that we wait for them to go back to camp and get their boots. While they were away, we filled Sam's backpack with a big rock (which he noticed immediately). In retrospect, Brian's should have been filled first as he would probably have not caught on so fast given the large and heavy pack he always hauled around (shit - he would have ENJOYED more weight). We trudged an hour in nearly solid, deep snow before giving up and agreeing to trudge left to the bank of the Novatak River, have lunch, and then slog back to camp along the river's edge. When we arrived at the mostly snow-free jungle of alders that comprised said bank, we added "take nap" to our activity list. In the end, we hiked a big 5-mile polygon (according to Sam's GPS). Although we promised one another that we were going to make up grand stories to Sheldon and Contractor Dennis, they knew by the looks on our faces that we were all losers (albeit well-rested and well-fed). It was around 3:30 when we got back and the rest of the afternoon was spent lazing around even more. We needed it. Prior to our fine dinner of burritos, we enjoyed a happy hour of Novatak snow margaritas (Tequila and instant pink lemonade mix). After dinner, we enjoyed an excellent trash-burning show followed by more magnificent alpenglow.



Left to Right: final view of Alsek Lake from flower hill, Alsek Lake - Mt. Fairweather and icebergs

### River Day Eleven

From Purple Haze, we were only about 3 hours from Alsek Lake - our final camp. It seemed as though we rose a little later (maybe 7 a.m.), ate a substantial meal, and then took what seemed like a LONG time packing up. Some of us were definitely ready to not sleep in a tent and move camp anymore. Although not quite to that point, I was fondly pondering sleeping in my own bed and breathing non-cold air at night. Given interesting stories about highly energetic Brian and Brock and an upcoming feature called the "channel of death" (which involved phrases like "paddle for your lives"), I decided to ride with always calm and quiet Sam. The float to Alsek Lake didn't feel like it took 3 hours. It felt like we floated an hour before we stopped for a short hike up something the guides called "flower hill." After pulling the rafts onto a wide sandy beach, we climbed an obvious path through intense blooms of fireweed, sweet pea, and more colors of Indian paintbrush than I have ever seen in one location (yellow, lime, red, orange, magenta...). We climbed over this low hill that was part of a long spit of land separating the river from one small lobe of the lake. Here, a large collection of icebergs floated, having drifted down from the Alsek Glacier. Unfortunately, the sky was too light and bright and clear - to the point that our unobstructed view of Mt. Fairweather appeared washed out not only in the camera but also through our overwhelmed eyes. I'm sure that folks who have done this river and never seen Fairweather because of foul weather will find this complaint ridiculous. Given the soaring temperatures, most of us lay down on the sand or meadow and took another short nap. I daresay, I have never slept with so many people for so many afternoons. Lack of caffeine, I tell ya. After hiking back, we voted to establish camp before lunch - even though it was after noon and some people were hungry. Within 5 minutes of the flower hill beach, we approached the island where Brian had to make the call about whether we were going to do the channel of death. Apparently, there are 2 ways into Alsek Lake once you reach this island: you can take the channel to the left of the island (the channel of death) or you can proceed to the right. The flow of the river (80%) goes rushing to the channel of death side, meaning that you have to actively try to avoid it. The problem with the channel is that large and moving icebergs frequently get blown into the narrow channel, meaning that you can get trapped between them. The problem with the non-channel of death side is that in low water, it gravels out - leaving you portaging the rafts if you can't get out. Brian was unhesitatingly confident that the swift channel of death would be safe given the lack of wind and so we took this route without incident. It took about an hour from the time we entered the channel to when we arrived at camp, during which time Pam took to rowing in the forward position (she was surprisingly natural for someone who had never rowed a raft), distracted only by the fact that Brock had taken his shirt off. As we passed the front of the island, Brian pointed out a small bald spot half way up the island's abrupt hill, indicating that this was a good viewpoint if folks were up for a hike later.

I am still not exactly sure what I thought of our final camp. I can honestly say that I was so over-stimulated with impressions of all the scenery up to this point - not to mention freaking out about everything coming to an end tomorrow - that I could not even think straight. We arrived in camp around 3, the plan being to set up camp, eat lunch, and then head back out on the lake to examine monster icebergs at closer range. The camp was located on a flat, spacious beach of small to medium-sized rocks at the base of a surprisingly steep hill of dense foliage. From our tents, we enjoyed commanding views of Alsek Lake and Glacier, the Grand Plateau Glacier, hundreds of mostly distant icebergs (said to be the largest in Alaska, owing to their calving into a HUGE freshwater lake and not the mobile, salty sea), and Mt. Fairweather. Behind/west of camp, we looked out onto a completely flat region of land that we knew was the way out: the Pacific. It was a hard contrast to grasp: all this elevation in front of us and all this nothingness behind. Carole and I put

our tents low on the beach, about 30 feet from the water. After setting everything up, Brian (who hadn't initially noticed where we had erected our tents) commented that we may be wise to move things onto the highest part of the beach (i.e. 1 vertical foot from our current position). His reason: if any large faces of ice broke, it was not uncommon to generate massive waves that would cover where we were camped. He made these comments while indicating that there was no fireweed around our tents - but there was on the highest portion of the beach. Carole and I thought about it and decided that we would take our chances, figuring that the worst that could happen was that tents would momentarily flood (given that it was the last night - what the hell). Indeed, there had been minor explosions of ice since we arrived at the lake - and this would continue ALL night long. After lunch, all but Sheldon headed out to tour the icebergs. Mysteriously (ahem), Pam moved onto Brock's raft, leaving just Sam and I. It was a pleasant, peaceful trip (at least until Sam's influence wore off on me and we took to trying to facilitate the break-up of small icebergs near camp using oars, paddles, and lots of laughing and cussing). But before degenerating, we headed for two big icebergs (house- and small-building-sized, and that was just the visible portion) that had been sub-calving - the sound large and explosive. It was hard to imagine what one of the full bergs would sound coming off the glacier face. Although Alsek Lake was amazing, Sam and I agreed that we liked our trip across Lowell Lake better - something about being so close to that ice was more interesting and intimate. At some point, I asked if they ever rowed across the lake to view the faces of the glaciers. The answer was yes - but that involved a full day. Sam explained that, on 1 such trip, mid-day winds came up so strong that they had to emergency bivouac on the small piece of land between the two glaciers. Again - it was hard to imagine such an extreme scenario with all this sun and not a cloud in the sky. Even the guides marveled at our extreme weather fortune, Sam with slight concern given that he would be leading a 16-day "hiker" Alsek trip 2 days after we returned. After 90 minutes, we had wound our way around only 3 major bergs and it was obvious that everything else was immensely far away. I can't say our team was running out of steam and ready to go home... but there was this strong awareness that tomorrow we were done and people seemed filled to capacity with everything. There was nothing else that could elevate this trip anymore.

After returning to camp, the guides said they would be busy for 2 solid hours cleaning the rafts in preparation for take-out. Brian described some packing issues that we should address: how to sort things according to what borrowed gear would go back with Sam/Brock (who were flying to Haines) and what would go back with him/us (flying to Yakutat and then Juneau). The raft cleaning produced an impressive amount of large-scale trash, including 8 cardboard boxes. Once the sun mostly vanished, the temperature plummeted and we crowded around the blazing fire eating pasta/pesto and salmon or, in my case, Gardenburgers (which the guides seemed concerned about giving me in light of my stories about Jenn). Across the lake, the golden light on the glaciers, icebergs, and mountains was breathtaking. After dinner, Philosophy Dennis reminded Brian about the hike option and I think it was the first time that Brian looked almost tired to me. Wearing a frightening balaclava, Brian unflinchingly hauled a few brave souls (not me) up this brushy-looking route while the rest of us continued burning the trash booty. Sam and Brock discussed installing some trip-lines on the trail - but it is my understanding that they didn't have the heart to pull this prank off. I retired before the hikers returned. Unfortunately, I slept like shit. Brian's damn stories about calving glaciers and tsunami-sized waves kept me on edge every time something loud cracked and crashed. At least 3 HUGE (HUUUUGE) explosions after midnight propagated 5-20 minutes of audible waves along the shore and had me poking my head out wondering if I should run for it. Making matters worse, after several nights of sleeping in the buff, I lost my ability to thermo-regulate in the frigid conditions that night. Getting out of my bag to check for waves or pee every hour did not help. And finally, the winds were RELENTLESS (in contrast with all our previous nights). Anytime there is wind, I find myself trying to hear every little sound - in this case trying to decipher if it was a bear or a tidal wave (or both). Given Brian's - EGAD - 5:30 a.m. wake-up time, I would be surprised if I slept more than 3 hours total.

### River Day Twelve

After rising at 5:20, I was pretty much packed first. Only packing my tent was problematic - as I had been cheating the whole trip. The guides had instructed us to fold the tent into thirds and then roll it around the poles before stuffing. Well, that NEVER worked and so I would messily stuff the tent body and fly, and then store the poles in my daypack. Fortunately, Pam (a camping virgin before this trip) was now an expert in tent folding/rolling - and so, on morning 12, she helped me. As had been the night before, the morning was freezing. Although there was hot water available, breakfast was intentionally cold and simple. The goal was to be on the water by 7 a.m. and we actually were ready 10 minutes early. I can't speak for others but Philosophy Dennis (with whom I had not ridden since days 1 and 2) and I agreed to full-circle/complete the trip by riding out the last day with Brian. It is REALLY hard to describe the mood and sense of quiet that dominated the float out. I don't think anyone on our raft said hardly a word the first hour. I don't know if it was the initial cold, the lack of sleep, the scenery, the optimism about finally showering and sleeping on a mattress, the sadness and anxiety about having this trip end, the fact that we all felt so close that there was nothing else to say... it was certainly all of it. Although downriver surroundings were flat, brushy, and barely above waterline, we could look back and see Fairweather and her neighbors until the end. After an hour, the other/tamer side of the Brabazon Range became visible, looking very much like the eastern Olympics. Interrupting our quiet, however, were the increasing sounds of motorized crafts: boats coming upriver and ORVs on the shore. The former were allowed all the way to Alsek Lake and Brian said we'd been lucky none of them had actually been staying with us in or near camp. I don't think the ORV paths go all the way to the lake - but they serviced a variety of primitive hunting shacks, cabins, and tent facilities open through the summer. We rafted 2 minor rapids and watched a lone eagle harassed by several dozen gulls who chased it to the ground. At some point, Brian took us river left where a nondescript side channel entered the flat landscape of alder and brush. Within 15 minutes, we pulled up to this gravel bar that anyone not paying attention would have missed. It was THE MOST primitive take-out site I've ever used. A couple from a Canadian group who just ran the Tatshenshini was sitting in the shade, almost invisible. The temperature was easily and shockingly 80-85°F.

A couple of paths lead from the take-out shore to a clearing occupied by a utility shack and the rest of the Canadian group (they had camped here for the night, their flight canceled due to engine problems). Hauling all the gear up the hill in the blazing heat immediately gave me a splitting headache and I had to sit down in the shade and cool down. Over the next 90 minutes, planes (4-6 seaters to a 20-30 seater) came out of nowhere, landed, and eventually took off via a gravel airstrip just beyond a corridor of brush. It was amazing: you would see them come in low and then vanish into the trees. One of the small planes belonged to the company with whom we were booked (they were picking up hunters from another party). The friendly pilot greeted Brian and said he should be back around one (it was currently noon). The good news was that they were running on time. The bad news was that he/his plane was it and so our team would have to fly to Yakutat via 2 back-to-back trips (meanwhile, Sam and Brock - and the majority of the rafting gear - were going back

to Haines in another plane that would not arrive until around 2:30). Brian called for volunteers. Pam, Contractor Dennis, Brian, and I would wait for the second flight. In the meantime, everyone deflated the rafts, made/ate lunch, and then tried to find shady nap spots. Around 1:30, the first plane arrived. Sadly, everyone in group one was so excited to be close to a shower that they ran on board and nearly forgot to say goodbye to Sam and Brock. After about a minute, they re-emerged to engage in hearty embraces, despite high levels of filth and BO. Given my history at the end of long rafting trips, I was certain I was going to lose it big-time on this trip. But so far, I was holding together well. After the first plane departed, the rest of us went down to the gravel bar and laid down in the shade. Sam, Pam, and I had to keep from screaming with laughter as Brock and Brian (lying between us) fell into these deep naps dominated by syncopated twitching and snoring (it's no wonder I had yet to cry). Watching all this, though, I wondered how these guys physically managed to do what they do. Brian and Brock seemed so utterly spent. Several times during the trip, I commented to the guides: how frail, delicate, and weenie we passengers must seem to you. Watching us shiver and wobble around in our 50,000 layers must seem laughable to these sturdy half-dressed men. And yet watching Brock and Brian zonk out on this rocky shore - howsoever funny - I wondered if they just had some trained ability to store their exhaustion until some designated time after a trip was over. I have had the privilege of working with spectacularly tough people - but these guys were in a category all by themselves given the expectations of this trip, the duration, the assaulting temperatures, and the passengers they had to keep track of. After doing the Alsek, I'm not sure I'll revere guides in the lower 48 quite as much. It's like - unless the water is 33°F and the wind is howling upstream - rafting is just not going to be the same for good long while.



Left to Right: Leaving Alsek Lake, take-out with Brabazons behind, primitive airstrip at take-out

The first of the Sam/Brock/gear flights landed around 2:15 p.m. The men loaded 75% of the gear into the 5-seater (including the deflated/rolled rafts) and then the plane left. The pilot would be back around 4 for Sam, Brock, and the remaining gear. Meanwhile, our plane landed around 2:30. For a brief moment, my eyes welled up - but I averted total loss and said goodbye to Sam and Brock. Had I not been nervously distracted with the notion of getting into yet another very small plane, I'm sure I would have been bawling. The pilot and Contractor Dennis sat up front - with me sandwiched between Pam and Brian in the back. I was WAY freaked out for 15 of our 40 flying minutes. Gripping the front seats with visibly white knuckles, I could casually glance down to my left AND right and see land below (from about 5000 feet up). Meanwhile, the pilot was full-body turned around, talking with Brian face-to-face. At some point, he cupped his hands over mine (come to think of it, I don't recall his hands on the controls much either) and laughed - more at Brian: "She doesn't like me not looking out the window, does she?" Brian laughed heartily, far too amused with my predictable fear. After a while, I found that if I focused just on 1 side, I had an easier time looking down. The plane didn't seem as small, the view more like fake TV. Despite my being fully gripped, it was a pretty flight: over flat marshlands and beaches, the Pacific to the west, the Brabazon to the east. In front, we saw Mt. St. Elias and Logan - blazing white against the already bright sky. Apparently seeing them is also something many people don't ever experience. I guess it was shameful how chicken I was being given our extreme fortune.

Yakutat was an interesting town - reminiscent, in my opinion, of Calafate, Argentina. Alaska Airlines just dropped major bucks into the airport - specifically the construction of a more jet-worthy second runway. It was hard to believe that THAT many people came here. I believe I was told that less than 500 people live permanently in Yakutat. Even so, the airport seemed as large as that in Juneau (home to 40,000). Shower access in Yakutat was not something we had been told about prior to the trip - probably because some parties do not get to enjoy any layover time here. Given our 6-layover, Brian recommended we spend \$7 at the local bar to use the "resort" shower facilities. Although some of the women found said facilities frighteningly dirty, I was more surprised at how clean they were (this should tell you about my lack of house-keeping skills). But Yakutat was, after all, a manly man-town run by manly Alaska men - such as the bartender who handed Contractor Dennis (my bodyguard) and I thin, white, smoke-scented towels through the blue-gray air. Stepping out behind the bar, we were directed to the first of about 3 cabins. The main door opened to a common laundry area with a coin-operated washer/dryer and 2 more doors: men/right and women/left. Within the women's room, a long narrow hall with three sinks preceded the back toilet/bathtub/shower area (1 toilet and 1 tub/shower combination). Although a second door separated the sink area from the bath area, neither it nor the main door locked. I figured the pile of filthy clothes in the sink area would provide an obvious and effective sign that the facilities were occupied. A surprising thing about my long-awaited shower was that - in all the excitement - I NEVER looked at myself in the mirror to see how disgusting I was. I was so fixated on getting clean (and making certain the bartender didn't stumble in) that it never crossed my mind to bear personal witness to my hair and face. From the bathroom, I could hear Brian and Dennis talking - and eventually singing (presumably Brian giving his charming tendency to sometimes sing while rowing) through the paper-thin walls. Although I would not call the bathroom totally disgusting, it was not exactly clean. The tub was discolored and the water smelled like sulfide (presumably a sour well). Given that I had not washed my hair in 12 days straight (subjecting it, the whole time, to constant glacial till), it should have been no surprise that I left a solid gray band 4 inches high/up around the whole tub (not kidding - it took 3 full rinses to completely wash this away). I'm fairly certain that most of it came from my hair/scalp given that my body had been scrubbed down three times during the trip. If I haven't said it already: this WAS the dirtiest I have EVER gotten on ANY trip.

Given our lack of knowledge about the showers, none of us had reserved a clean set of clothes. I had 1 reasonable pair of underwear, 1 once-worn polypropylene shirt (still smelled like BO), and my shorts (dirty-looking but not stinky). Having packed no hair-care products, I washed everything with a bar of industrial strength soap, leaving wild tangles everywhere! Having worn sandals without

socks most of the blazing day, I had acquired a splotchy red burn - which did not color-coordinate with the brown, leathery patina down all limbs, the latter acquired over the course of the entire trip. Upon stumbling outside, I was summoned by Liz, enjoying a large inn balcony (just inside, the Dennises were playing pool in a common game room - animal heads glaring down from the walls). Carole, who would be staying in Yakutat before going on a multi-day kayak trip in Glacier Bay, was settling in her nearby room. I did not stay long as I was holding a reeking stuff-sack full of clothes and I just wanted to find my bags (left on some benches between the airport terminal and the bar) and a Coke machine. En route, I passed Brian and had to do a double-take because he looked so different to me clean, clean-shaven, and wearing clean city clothes. Indeed, Brian with a clean face was wrong: something about those pasty white patches previously covered with stubble and glacial till juxtaposed with swarthy, tanned zones. Given a 6:45 flight, we started moving things into the airport around 5:30, at which point we had to plastic-wrap personal bags with aliquots of community gear into combined 50-lb. bundles. Brian orchestrated this task given that there were many dry bags of company gear (e.g. tents, sleep kits) that he was responsible for taking back to Juneau. Despite Yakutat's casual and rustic appearance, we were subjected to the usual searches using the latest airport security equipment. Our 737, coming down from Anchorage, was nearly empty. Liz, Philosophy Dennis, and I had been cognizant enough to change our seats to the more scenic east side of the plane. As such, we were BLOWN AWAY: Mt. Logan, St. Elias, Fairweather, the entire Alsek route up to Blackadar, ALL icefields and glaciers. That was the single best jet flight I have ever experienced. After landing, an Alaska Discovery staff member was waiting outside the terminal with the company van. We stopped briefly at company headquarters, exchanging rental gear for stashed gear - and a quick change into non-stinky clothes. We also got to visit "HELL" - a stock room full of nothing but Helly-Hansen rubber clothing and boots. Brian then took over driving downtown, selecting a fish-dominated restaurant (Bonefish Grill, I believe). Outside, one of those damn mega-cruise ships had just unloaded at least 1000 people onto the streets - offensive given that we had not seen any other people for 12 days straight. Although everyone had been looking forward to a big dinner, we all remained overloaded, increasingly exhausted, and more quiet than usual.

I should have predicted what was about to happen... but I didn't because, so far today, all kinds of potentially emotional moments had proceeded without incident. After dinner, we made 2 hotel drops (after which Brian would take Liz and Dennis to the airport). Pam and Contractor Dennis were staying at the same place and we dropped them off first. Dennis escaped with a friendly hug but then Pam's eyes welled up as she began hugging everyone goodbye - and that sent me over the edge. By the time we got to Sheldon and my hotel 10 minutes away, I was a complete mess. I felt sorry for Brian, having to deal with this crazy emotional wreck at the end of this immensely long day. But, alas, I fully sobbed all over Brian last - before Sheldon facilitated check-in, and moved baggage to respective rooms. I must have been saving that one up a long time - why, I'll never fully understand. Some time around midnight (after watching some crazy cable show about cats and remembering to hang the "do not disturb" sign outside), I finally went to sleep. The next day was strangely calm. I enjoyed a long bath and then packed once and for all. Given that my flight was not until around 2:00, I left my major bags at the front desk while I explored Juneau on foot. Incidentally, my supposedly "upscale" hotel did not come close to fulfilling expectations, including website claims that they offered a free shuttle to the airport (perhaps because they had recently been bought out by a major cruise line). Consequently, I decided NOT to patronize the hotel restaurant for breakfast. Instead, I made my way downtown in search of Chai and pastries. I had also learned that it was exactly 1 hour before the first of a few cruise ships would arrive; for that hour, I enjoyed a fine conversation with 2 native Juneau-ites at a very Bohemian coffee shop. Although I visited several touristy gift shops in search of local art, I was unable to find anything unique (and in my price range). Given the large shadow of the disembarking ship, I decided to spend my last 90 minutes at the recommended museum of history. The combined quiet and air conditioning - alone - were well worth the \$5 entry fee. I was most impressed with a temporary 20th Century Eskimo art exhibit brought down from Anchorage. Heading back to the hotel, I ventured into a low-end gallery where I fell in love with and purchased a woodcut style original print called "Ice Passages" by a local woman artist. A minute late, I gathered my belongings and hopped into the awaiting cab. My flights home were non-monumental. My amusing lack of skill driving my own car home from the Portland airport, however, was to be expected given everything I'd seen and done the two weeks prior.



Left to Right: Brian (safety talk, Lowell Lake), Sam (30 minutes pre-Tweedsmuir camp), Brock (30 minutes post-confluence)

#### Obligatory Guide Section and Closing Thoughts

After this trip, I remarked to Ellen that I had this inescapable feeling that one or more of the guides knew I did some writing in my spare time - and if they didn't, they learned via Pam, who had discovered my site before the trip. In any event, I hope everyone will forgive me for my always-crazy attempts at honest reflection. Anyway, people who have never experienced a real (real = multi-day) rafting trip have no concept of how significant guides are. Over time, I have learned that oarsmen are some of the most gifted and interesting people - and often represent a significant reason why trips succeed. Of course, my many male colleagues (in particular) like to tease me about why it is that MY rafting adventures ALWAYS seem to involve good-looking male guides. For better or worse, the answer to my colleagues' question reflects the gender bias in the field and the fact that these people ARE rowing large rafts all day, among other things. Although guide-ogling predictably happened, it was not the over-heated occupation it was on other trips I have done (e.g. desert trips with less clothing). Oregonad Brian, our leader, was the oldest - 42. Brian is a world-class oarsman and has - by a long shot - the most impressive rafting resume of ANY guide I have ever met. I felt completely privileged - if not awestruck - to have someone THAT good leading pathetic me anywhere. As trip leader, Brian was often serious and intense, but he could also be extremely light, warm, funny, and not afraid to share interesting personal stories or wear his agreeably liberal politics on his sleeve. I will never be exactly

sure what exactly I liked and respected most about Brian - except that he was the perfect leader for this remote and challenging trip. Unfortunately (and Pam will KILL me for recording this), I will NEVER be able to forget Pam's impression and description of Brian's perfect ass while rowing standing up. But Pam should not be singled out because way too much of Brian was given high collective marks by all of the women (and Philosophy Dennis). Meanwhile, Arizonan Sam (35, which made me feel REALLY old), reminded me of a trash-burning and ice-trundling version of Harrison Ford circa 1977. During the latter parts of this trip - and in the aftermath of the trip - Sam has most impressed me for his peacefully calm demeanor. Much as I loved Brian's intensity, statuesque presence, and terrific experience, I equally loved the effortless quiet of Sam and I am neither surprised I wound up riding with him on the most challenging days, nor am I surprised that my most favorite day (Lowell Lake to Plug Creek, including Lava North) was spent quietly on his boat. For many days, I could not decipher what it was about Sam that kept me trying to figure him out but then, on day 8, he explained that he was a serious writer and something clicked in my mind about who Sam was. Having said that, none of us could EVER figure out how Sam could spend so many hours in shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and flip flops. Finally - when I first laid eyes on Alaskan Brock (age 32), 2 things came to mind: Barry Manilow (the hair) and Brian from the all-boyz Yellowstone trip of 1999 (the small, wiry stature). Brock remains an interesting and warm soul to me. Throughout the trip, he was always smiling, happy, positive, and genuinely kind. Although Brock rowed alone the first 8 days, he bonded tremendously with all of us immediately (i.e. he wasn't the outsider guy rowing the gear boat). Brock seemed to have the most diverse experience guiding in Alaska, including Glacier Bay kayaking trips and rafting in the arctic. Among many spare-time occupations (including a fairly long and ongoing history in social work), Brock also instructs outdoor leadership and skills courses through the university in Juneau.

In closing, I wrestle a lot about recommending this trip to "normal" people (i.e. who would be attracted to a multi-day rafting trip in the Grand Canyon). My first reaction is - hell no. But then I think about Pam and Liz, neither of whom had rafted or seriously camped before this trip. And my second reaction is: people who consider this trip need to unconditionally love wilderness and be prepared for seriously harsh situations. I, personally, would not want to go on this trip with no camping experience. Being a cold weather person who loves glaciers, rocks, and rivers, I found that these elements made up for all challenging components of this trip. That we enjoyed 9/12 mostly to completely sunny days (AMAZING) certainly made the trip WAY more enjoyable (I cringe at the thought of my report had it rained 9/12 days). Having said that, though, no one should confuse "sun" with warmth - as cold river winds and freezing nights defied the inviting appearance of the sky. Desert rafters accustomed to good weather, straightforward hiking trails, running around half-naked, and bathing regularly may not like the demands of the Alsek. Over the course of the last 3 days, our party developed the following list of ways people should prepare for the Alsek - and thus I will close with my no-doubt incomplete recollection of these skills:

- (1) Practice walking and then running up and down stairs while wearing roller blades\*
- (2) Wrap yourself in several dozen heavy-duty plastic bags and move heavy objects between a cold shower and a sauna\*
- (3) Practice urinating in a semi-public place while wearing (2); save all toilet paper for (9)\*
- (4) Practice bathing in just your dirty underwear with only a bucket of water in a semi-public place\*
- (5) Spend hours cooking a hot, elaborate meal, place in refrigerator 5 minutes, then eat as fast as possible in a cold shower\*
- (6) Practice stuffing twice as many objects into spaces designed to hold only half the volume\*
- (7) Practice retrieving a 20 lb frozen turkey from a pool using a plastic bag while wearing (2) and poorly-fitting rubber gloves\*
- (8) Apply fine sand to your entire bed, and plenty of sunscreen to your entire body before going to bed every night\*
- (9) Burn ALL your daily waste using wood you gathered on the way home from work and secured to the front of your car\*
- (10) Tie bowline to front of your car; JUST as you pull into your drive-way, throw car into neutral, jump out, and pull car up\*

\*All preferably with an industrial fan running.

#### Dedicated to the Awesome Team

The big chief railed on  
And spun his tales of brave conquest  
About the moving of his little band up to Alaska  
Where the caribou run free  
See he had been there putting in telephone lines  
For the army during World War II  
Even brought back a picture of a frozen mastodon  
For the little Indians to see  
And some mukluks and some sealskin gloves  
And a coat with beads around the collar  
His wife kept them in the mothballs...  
And every once in a while he'd get all wound up  
With one of his stories, he'd put them all on  
And dance around in that blue TV light  
Like it was some campfire blazing away  
Well he stamped and he hollered  
But he could not stay warm in that living room

- John Hiatt, Seven Little Indians

