

Barren Heifers of the Hulahula and Nataroarok - High-Flying Thrills at Denali

Rafting the Brooks Range, Coastal Tundra, and Arctic Ocean... Plus Some R&R Down South (so to speak)



Left to Right: near headwaters of Hulahula River/Brooks Range; inadvertent raft of Arctic Ocean; flight-seeing around Denali

Introduction and Getting to Fairbanks

In contrast with last year's Alsek trip (which has to be read for background and comparison), I signed up with Alaska Discovery (AD)/ Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS) for the Hulahula (HH) far in advance - specifically, the day after GWB was re-elected. Prior to that, I had been wavering between trekking in Peru and rafting in the Arctic Refuge (which I will not debase by using any acronyms). But the thought of GWB in office again scared the shit out of me, particularly in terms of implications for Alaska's wilderness and I figured I better get up there before he screwed up the place up for good. Politics aside, arctic rafting was a seed planted while I was on the Alsek. Although Brock's tales of the Kongakut were mesmerizing, I went with leader Brian's advice because the HH sounded more geologically interesting and whitewater-intense - and because it actually ended IN/ON the Arctic Ocean (where Kongakut rafters take out in the middle of the coastal plain - long before the ocean). The Kongakut, rated a "strenuous" on the difficulty scale (as was the Alsek), is more well known for wildlife and hiking, not whitewater. The HH, in contrast, was rated "ultimate challenge" (hardest - as was the John Muir Trail, which I completed last August), its description making reference to ice floes (which I assumed would be occasional chunks of ice in the water) and class III-IV rapids. Unlike the Alsek, both the Kongakut and HH are all-paddle trips, with no oar-only boats - not even for gear. Going into this trip, I knew it was going to be hard. Part of my motivation for doing an arctic trip earlier in my so-called "5-year plan" (a reference in the Alsek report) was because the Alsek made me truly realize that some trips involved conditions I questioned whether I would want to do, say, after I hit 60. Indeed, over the last year I started to sort regions of the world into before-60 and after-60. Ironically, I was faced with a reality check along these fronts when I developed a grapefruit-sized, GI/bladder-stopping ovarian mass in November and underwent full-on abdominal surgery in December. Although I was back to my usual workout routines by March, I was nervous going into this trip because it was my first big trip since all the trauma of November-January. Given that the surgery had occurred within 6 months of the trip departure date, I was required to disclose it on the pre-trip survey (i.e. I wondered whether they were going to kick me off). But they didn't.

Getting to Fairbanks seemed less complicated than getting to Haines, in part because only 2 large planes were required. Although Fairbanks did not strike me as THAT dismal prior to my heading farther north (in contrast with most of my friends' assertions), it entirely lacked the charm and beauty of Haines and Juneau. During my wanderings post-rafting, however, I did find the place uglier and sprawling in an unorganized way. I WAS impressed with the university campus both times, surprised at the many new-looking and expensive buildings - particularly given how few students attend (about 9000). Fairbanks was also FAR more expensive than anything I encountered in Haines or Juneau the year before. A Super8 room ran \$140/night, car rentals \$35-60/day, and fast food breakfast \$5 (the same meal runs \$3 in Oregon). Our guides said they paid \$1300 for our 10 days of food at the local Fred Meyer - which seemed HUGE given my experience organizing comparable menus for that many days/people in the lower 48. Although AD recommended/used one of the B&B's (supposedly a more reasonable \$85/night), the owner failed to return over 4 calls I left between February and April (other passengers had similar stories) and I gave up on them. After checking into my overpriced Super8 (I was the only non-camouflaged non-hunting person, not to mention 1 of only 3 women total) - I drove around town, picked up dinner, and showed up at the 6 p.m. planning meeting (at the aforementioned B&B). Two things about the party - which I had learned in advance - were distinctive: 6/8 of the passengers were female (yes, even the guides were surprised) and 1 of our 2 male guides was the legendary Mike Speaks, someone I had always wanted to do a trip with. In terms of the team: Martha and Andrea, 40-something east coasters with ties to the EPA, had done the Kongakut with our leader, Joe, a few years before - as well as sea kayaking trips to Glacier Bay. Although 30-something New Yorker Ann, an information technology administrator, vehemently denied having any real outdoor experience, she had - among other things - paddled nearly all monster rapids on the Colorado and Futaleufu. At 70, Sarah G. sometimes felt like me projected in time. A now-retired Ph.D. psychologist, Sarah G. had lived many years in small-town Iowa, traveling the world in between her family practice work, before retiring to Colorado. Her recent (as in over 60) traveling resume included everything from climbing Kilimanjaro to sea-kayaking Icy Bay in Wrangell-St. Elias. At just over 50, Ginnie was the Jenn-equivalent on this trip, introducing "shining my bitch crown" into my phraseology. Ginnie, who never seemed a day over 35, was down to earth, funny, real, had been rafting and kayaking since she was 18 (including 2 runs of the Alsek); she currently worked as a radiation dosimetrist in the Bay Area. Ginnie and I bonded because she had also dealt with a gigantic ovarian cyst - in her case, over a decade ago. Of all the women, it must be mentioned (given the report title) that only Sarah G. had been married or bore any children. Our men were likewise eclectic: 50-something Marty, a real estate broker from Atlanta, had decades of river experience - including twice running the Alsek (which was how he also knew Joe). Tom, a 40-something resident of Haines and close friend of Joe, ran a cycle shop. It was interesting to have so many guide-groupies on this trip (Martha, Andrea, Marty, and Tom - all via Joe). Although I have been tempted to guide-groupie after the Alsek, I have never wanted to fall into that rut. I'd also been on another trip where a passenger was a close personal friend of the guides (Cataract Canyon with OARS) and all I will say regarding both experiences: lines are too blurred when friends go because, invariably, they get involved in guide activities. As can be imagined, clients also invariably speculate on what kind of

discount the friend is getting and, in a circular fashion, start treating the passenger as a guide. Although Tom was extremely helpful, there were days that some of us in Joe's boat felt Tom was a serious conversational distraction for Joe.

Given comments above, I also do have to state upfront that I remain disappointed about one trip-defining decision regarding raft organization: you were committed to the boat and position you first chose (although rules were broken on our boat as bodies started failing variously). I thought a lot about this during/since the trip and I have no clear answers as to why this decision was made (although I wondered whether it had to do with Tom/Joe, both in the back of the boat). When I think about paddling the Middle Fork of the Salmon - with WAY more huge rapids - there was never anything like this going on. In fact, our paddle raft commander had to deal with new faces and/or arrangements (most of whom had WAY less experience than anyone on this trip) daily. Large rapids on the HH were restricted to 1 key day and never amounted to anything above a low class 3 (if that). Given that I was on Joe's boat (with Tom, Marty, and Ginnie), I hardly got to know Mike - and, as the trip progressed, Joe did wear me out with his Robin Williams-esque style (and, make no mistake, I love Robin Williams - but I wouldn't want to live with him). There is a reason all the other rafting trips I have done allow and encourage passengers to rotate through the boats: so we (guides and passengers) don't burn each other out with our various personality quirks. Anyway - in addition to meeting everyone at the planning meeting, we were given a run-down of what would hopefully happen on the river. As will be evident, plans evolved severely as the trip progressed (to the point that we wound up, by the end, on a different river). Because we were the first AD team on the river this season, nobody had a clear idea about current conditions (e.g. ice/snow). By the end, several passengers were privately asking one another why AD didn't just send a pilot down to check things out - but I actually think I know the answer and it may trouble would-be HH passengers: the day we put-in, the pilot did check things out and it was said to be solid snow/ice from the coastal plain to the ocean. In just the 6 days it took us to move from the Brooks Range to the open tundra, much of that would melt (but not all...). And such is the problem with arctic rivers: finding that tiny window between all snow/ice and enough water to run the river - not to mention minimizing mosquitoes! So - people who can't deal with that level of uncertainty and the possibility of coping with serious problems really should not do arctic rivers. Speaking for my own tastes, the HH touched my upper threshold of tolerance in both regards. Regardless, Joe and Mike handled every challenge extremely adeptly and maintained constant communication with both company headquarters and local bush pilots - to the point I was NEVER fundamentally concerned about our overall ability to get out (although I was personally scared shitless at least once).

Going in, our plan was to fly to Arctic Village in a 10-seater the next day (about 200 miles). While Joe joined/escorted the passengers, Mike and the rafts would be proceeding to near the HH headwaters in a 4-seater Cessna (the nondescript river-adjacent gravel bar landing strip is officially known as Grassers). Over the next several hours, 2 Cessna's (including the one that initially shuttled Mike) would run passengers and remaining gear from Arctic Village to Grassers (about 100 miles). Joe anticipated spending 6-7 days in the mountains, representing half the 80 miles of river rafted. The final 5-6 days would be on the coastal tundra plain. Joe made it well known even at the planning meeting that there were unknowns, including the snow/ice situation and the possibility of trip-altering weather at any point. Based on experience, the guides had also revised plans over the years to now include a 1-mile portage (yes - that's 1 entire mile carrying boats and gear overland). As with most rivers, the glacier-fed HH braids and silts out as it nears the ocean. The main flow favors a westerly direction that places parties significantly far from final target (Arey), an offshore and easterly island with the only good landing strip. Rafting this way and sailing open ocean was considered dangerous given pack ice and foul weather. Although it was possible to piece through east-flowing sub-channels, these usually silted into mudflats - not pleasant to portage. Given such past problems (each of which, we ascertained, had plagued other trips), the guides now favored camping upstream from the severely braided HH area and then spending a day portaging 1 mile across dry/firm tundra to the easterly Okpilak River, whose well-defined channel sent rafts almost straight to Arey. Although we were likely all aware of the possibility of moderate portages in the event that wrong channels were chosen or shallows were encountered, some of us were surprised to hear that a serious, long portage was now standard operating procedure on this river.



Left to Right: safety talk at put-in, Mike basket-weaving during cabin fever days, my raft/team at the mouth of the Nataroarok

June 10, 2005 - To Arctic Village and Just Beyond Grassers

That I had rented a car (which I normally don't do because I find rooms at the same location as the trip meeting) made things a little problematic the next morning. A couple weeks before the trip, I checked with AD staff in Juneau about whether the Arctic Village flight would depart from the main airport as it would mean I could return my rental car and then meet everyone for our flight. In fact, our guides were using a charter service (because we needed to transport propane) that departed from a different airport. Indeed, the devil is always in the details - and a little better detail communication between guides and staff would have been nice (and less costly). But the guides made a special trip to the main airport and all was fine. It should be noted, also, that half the passengers had been unable to get rooms at the recommended B&B because of aforementioned

problems with the owners. This meant, in general, that a lot of special trips to other hotels were made that morning. AD may be wise to adopt the MTS model that makes the first night's hotel room part of the trip cost to avoid these hassles - whether in terms of renting cars to make it to the pre-trip meeting or picking people up from all over the place the next morning.



Left to Right: flight to Arctic Village (10-seater), walking around Arctic Village

We took off by 8:45, the conditions clear and calm all the way to Arctic Village - although I was glad I brought earplugs. The marsh and lake-dominated scenery was interesting - but non-mountainous until the last 20 minutes of the 90-120 minute flight. In contrast with expectations, the still-distant Brooks Range looked snow-free (and, for the most part, they were). Although I never had expectations of mind-blowingly glacial Alsek scenery on this trip, I grew to wonder how much of this lack exacerbated other feelings during/about this trip. Arctic Village remains home to around 200 native Athapaskans who, we strongly ascertained, would prefer not to have any outside intrusion. The gravel airstrip was located 20 minutes (by foot) from the small town. Nearby: a new campground with a pit toilet (apparently, it is not uncommon for Brooks-bound parties to land and then get stuck here due to weather - as had been the case on Martha/Andrea's Kongakut trip). Beyond, villagers lived in moderately dispersed wooden houses among low shrubs. Several featured yards of dogs chained to shanty structures, sending echoes of barks throughout the town as we proceeded. A few men on ATVs zoomed by several times, checking us out. However, we saw no people in yards or on porches - but suspected they were inside twitching curtains and discussing the situation via cell phone or short-range radio. Snow had covered the land until, we were told, early in May - hard to believe given how green and warm it was. A post office, interesting church (I believe Presbyterian), and surprisingly large school lay on the far end of where we walked. But the only signed store appeared closed - despite the fact that it was mid-day. Given the negative vibe, most of us turned around and headed back to the airport after seeing the major public structures. Back at the airport, the winds were picking up - which was good given the blistering heat and prevalent mosquitoes. Joe sent Martha, Andrea, and another person I can't recall over first with a bunch of gear; I only recall Martha and Andrea because he rightfully figured they deserved to leave first, having had to weather a night out here on their last trip. The ATV posse showed up again, questioning us about how many people and planes were involved with our party. Shortly thereafter, the second plane arrived and everyone but Marty, Joe, and I flew off. By now, the winds were really big and many albeit puffy white clouds began amassing over the range. The prospect of flying through that did not amuse me - although I never questioned our getting over the mountains that day. A Sierra Club hiking team en route to the Jago River drainage (east of the HH) then landed and I greatly enjoyed talking with their 75-year old female leader (YES - 75) about her over-15 trips to Alaska's Arctic Circle. Nevertheless, I detected clear disdain in her opinions about rafting groups and their impact. Eventually they left too and Joe attempted to amuse Marty and I by leading a nature walk. While we were off admiring flowers and trying to spot wildlife, our plane actually landed and was fueling up as we climbed back up to the airstrip.



Left to Right: 4-seater plane in Arctic Village, flying over the southern Brooks Range, near pass to northern Brooks Range

We BARELY managed to fit all remaining gear into the last plane. Marty and I actually sat on very full drybags in the back, with Joe in the co-pilot's seat. We were given headsets with ear protection and I enjoyed listening to Joe and the pilot discussing concerns about Arctic Village airstrip fees not being forwarded from tourists to villagers (i.e. each of us had paid \$10-20 for using the strip as part of our flight cost but how money actually got to the locals was not clear and the pilot suggested instances with other companies where money was not being transferred). Suddenly, the ATV posse made a lot more sense. Flying through the Brooks Range was interesting but, again, not tremendously scenic in terms of snow/ice. The route was clear and there were toothy mountains in all directions, the highest mountains less than 12K. Most of the range is limestone - crumbly and quarry-like. The final tight gap we flew through - minutes before Grassers - was sexy because we passed through a notch of partly-snow-covered mountains, the plane lower than the peaks (7000-9000 feet tall). In no time, we were on the ground - fishtailing down the rocky runway. I was surprised to hear that even when Martha/Andrea et al. had arrived, Mike had already completed all boat preparation. After the Alsek - where team participation during the de-rigging, helicopter portage, and re-rigging was essential - I had been looking forward to being equally engaged during this trip. But it never felt like we were - and I think that is one reason I enjoyed the Alsek so much more. Even Mike, that first day, struck me

as someone who would rather do everything by himself. The more I got to know Mike - and how he has pretty much lived by himself in a cabin near Denali for the last 25 years - the more I at least came to a better understanding of the way he did things (and I have definitely been close to those kinds of independent men before - lord knows, I am probably the female equivalent myself). With all gear, Joe and Mike took to finally loading the rafts. As compared with the Alsek, the HH looked miniscule - barely 50 feet across and extremely shallow. The boat configuration on this trip - 2 paddle rafts - was interesting. All gear was piled in the middle of each boat (with things parsed in such a way that if the boats were separated, each had correct personal stuff and half the food), with 2 folks in the back (including the paddle leader), and 3 folks in the front. One of the 3 front people would not be paddling. Although it was initially stated that positions were locked from the start, our boat switched off greatly in the front owing to fatigue, pulled muscles, and photographic urges. Mike's folks, however, seemed far more rigid than ours, leaving Sarah G. doing nothing for most of the trip. I think I can accurately say that she was greatly and justly disappointed about this - particularly given her recent credentials paddling no-small-potatoes Icy Bay.



Left to Right: Grassers, camp one views and tents

Donning Helly-Hansen specials, we set out after about 30-45 minutes, intending to float a couple miles to avoid other parties possibly en route (i.e. they could camp by themselves by the runway). In what remains shocking to me still, there is no permit system on the HH. You can just, like, show up. I would think - given ongoing Arctic Refuge issues - that someone would be interested in knowing how many tourists and outdoors-people (both of whom have invested large sums of money in the local economy via, minimally, bush plane access - not to mention guide serves) are enjoying this great wilderness and would likely be pissed off if it became subject to oil development. Anyway - it spit light rain on us at some point (pretty much the ONLY rain during the whole trip - AMAZING). I paddled about an hour that first day - but then partly threw out my lower back and messed up my hip, reducing my paddling over the next 4 days because said parts continued to cramp frequently. Given that I never had such problems paddling before, I assume the cold (and it was) was screwing up my muscles. We quickly learned that the biggest technical problem on the HH was landing on rocks in swift current. Indeed, the grade of the river (2500 feet over 80 miles) was very steep and dropped in a sustained manner, providing strong force and little decision time given the shallow waters and rocky bottom. Although we were all wearing knee-height rubber boots, the guides and Marty donned full hip waders - and, unfortunately, this meant they were usually the ones out of the boat pushing/pulling because the water was too deep for the rest of us. I'd venture to guess that everyone in regular boots stepped in too deep at least once, wetting themselves and necessitating a sock change (which meant you had to be cognizant enough to pack fresh socks in your daypack every day). This brings up another trip quirk: lack of ammo. cans. On an oar-raft, there is a metal frame for easy lashing. Since we were using paddle rafts, we had to put daily items inside our daypacks, which were - in turn - awkwardly lashed to the top of the gear pile. Although we had reasonable access to things (provided we packed them), this system was more cumbersome. The other thing that impacted most folks (for different reasons) were the zip-up life vests. Previously, I'd always used clip vests (4 clips down the front). I could easily hang my camera on a clip and readily shoot pictures. Lacking clips and ammo. cans, I missed a lot of neat pictures (as did others on our boat). After we returned to Fairbanks, other women gave the life vests poor ratings because they were not boob-friendly (clip-style vests allow differential adjustment/widening). Given my A-cup status, I was less concerned about boobies than I was about quick-access to my camera.

We floated about 2 hours, paddling steadily. My impression was that Joe had us paddling more - either that or he forgot to call stop and we kept going. Given constant light, we stopped using any form of time or schedules on this trip (at least until the last day when we were prisoners to the bush pilots). Nevertheless, the sun - during the mountain portion of the trip - did disappear behind the ridge at night, causing a severe plummeting of the temperature. Even when we hit the coastal plain and had visible sun all the time, the temperatures still dropped at night (consider that we were still 1000 miles from the north pole). For some reason, I wasn't expecting that. When we pulled into camp, our views had not changed much. Although parts of the HH were like the Alsek in that way (i.e. you'd see something for hours on end), there were many lower sections where you had only a small window to capture an image (say, with a camera). The HH flows due north in a nearly straight line - which means you can see almost all the big mountains or flatness behind and in front of you, respectively. We landed in camp probably around 7 or 8, the sun still high and visible. Behind us, we could still see Grassers and the high peaks above it. My journal says we also saw 50 dall sheep but I don't remember if that was while we were on the river or in camp. Getting off the river seemed deceptively cold - a seeming reversal of our experience on the Alsek (where it almost always seemed reasonably warmer on land). I think, in fact, that I failed to put on enough clothes that first night because the skies truly looked that sunny. To the north, the brown grass and mountains seemed almost depressingly autumnal. Eerily, a distant fogbank formed over the coastal plain, presumably because of the ice/snow. Over night, it would envelop our camp entirely. This fog formed/moved every night for 4 nights - and when it stopped, the guides knew the ice/snow was adequately melted to proceed. Again - if you can't deal with that kind of uncertainty, reconsider the HH or go later in the season... although few companies do this river any time. Several of us were disappointed with AD's new Eureka tents. Used to Mountain Hardware equipment, many of us rolled our eyes when the frightening orange beasts emerged (giant logos and exclamation points emblazoning the fly exterior). Fortunately, we had them first. I hesitate to imagine how few runs AD is going to get out of

these lightweight tents. Of course, they did provide 2 improvements: the pole/clip system was easier and all parts did fit into 1 stuff sack without a lot of cursing. I should also note that half the problem with the tents was that whoever seam-sealed them was WAY too overzealous - slopping into several zippers. Ginnie and I assisted each other in erecting our tents, a shared task repeated throughout the trip. The other gear provided by AD (sleeping bag and pad) were of the same high quality as before. I also preferred the dry-bags used on the HH to those on the Alsek. On the latter, we each were issued 2 small dry-bags (1 for personal gear, the other for sleep kits). On this trip, we were each issued 1 giant dry-bag and, surprisingly, I found it MUCH easier to organize. After dinner, I went to bed shivering and it took a lot longer to warm up than on most Alsek nights. Our meals were extremely good for having only 2 guides and being in the arctic. While they were not as elaborate or memorable as those on the Alsek, they were as filling and they were FAR better than those on the John Muir Trail. Unfortunately, I made no effort to record meals. This trip also lacked the self-serving dishwashing line. Instead, 3 volunteers rinsed, washed, and bleached materials riverside using minimal containers and hot water. Although half the party partook in an after dinner hike (which returned around 1 a.m.), I was too tired and cold to run around on what looked to be boggy tundra at midnight.

A final random comment after day 1: all drinking water was taken directly from the river and consumed untreated. Apparently, this is the policy on all AD arctic trips. Personally and professionally, I had a serious problem with this. Giardia, my biggest concern, appears 2-4 weeks after exposure. It's not like most fecal bacterial diseases that come on between 7-48 hours (i.e. guides would know if people were getting sick during the trip). What if people were catching Giardia, experiencing symptoms long after the trip, and nobody was making the connection? Although most acute Giardia responds to treatment, some people wind up with subclinical infections that become chronic and/or cyclic and can lead to long-term liver problems. Although Giardia has a reputation for being a hiking disease, it is present in 99% of all surface waters tested and actually affects WAY more urban folks (e.g. kids in daycare, retirement home residents...). An old college advisor of mine examined small animal GI contents as a function of elevation near Rainier, finding Giardia in all samples tested up to 8000 feet (i.e. snow-line). So, much as I'd like to think arctic waters are pure, I don't believe human impact is the only thing that defines potability. Natural reservoirs of Giardia live in the Arctic Refuge and, given the lack of a permit system, who knows how many people are there leaving fecal germs? Given that 10 Giardia cysts define an infectious dose, I would advise people who can't deal with drinking unfiltered river water (i.e. crazy microbiologists who know too much or people who have poor immune systems) to bring filters. Finally, I'd like to note that I met a former Kongakut guide (not with AD) down in Denali after this trip; when she heard about our trip, she was shocked and said that was NOT the policy on any of her trips.



Left to Right: dayhiking from camp one, Mt. Michelson (I believe) in right shot

June 11, 2005 - Layover Day Hiking the Brooks Range

The next morning, we enjoyed a 10 a.m. breakfast (this was not formally called - it just happened that way), downtime until a whopping 1 a.m., and a leisurely hike until 6. During breakfast, a distant black/brown fox was spotted - although some folks still insist it was a wolf. I woke up with major back and hip pain, neither of which was helped by sleeping on the bumpy tundra. Doped up on massive ibuprofen that eventually exceeded label recommendations, I decided - after much internal strife - to partake in the hike: 1200 feet up to this saddle. Although the first half-mile had several boggy spots, the rest was not bad (overall, Alsek hikes were wetter or equally wet). I succumbed to wearing my well-waxed Raichle's boots and, although they remained dry, I had wicked blisters on 4 toes by the end of the day. Ginnie, a non-hiker (her sole and forgivable flaw), remained in camp studying for a major board exam... which (for some reason) reminds me: HH guides carried a full-on shotgun and a .357, I believe. The reason Alsek guides did not carry such items was because CANADA - not the US - did not allow them in their wilderness areas. While in camp, though, Ginnie was only taught to use bear spray and flares (although the shotgun was left there). I can't say that today's scenery was particularly striking. As we ascended a lower pre-saddle, a small herd of caribou (13-15) passed by camp, dust-bathing in this sandy area a quarter mile downriver. Mostly via binoculars, we watched them for 15 minutes - Marty so taken that he requested returning to camp to photograph them at closer range (unfortunately, they moved on before he arrived). Although the caribou were cool, we never saw the legendary numbers associated with the Kongakut (indeed, this would be the largest group we saw en masse). Anyone who hopes I have fancy animal pictures will be disappointed as we never got close enough to permit my zoom lens an obvious image. In general, wildlife enthusiasts who can't deal with using binoculars and spotting scopes for everything will be frustrated with the HH. Having tried to get into the mega-fauna on this trip (i.e. actually carrying a pair of binoculars), I was not disappointed or unimpressed... but I did come into this trip expecting to see everything from a substantial distance. After ascending the first low saddle, we enjoyed lunch. Mike, who repeatedly demonstrated an uncanny ability to spot wildlife from immense distances, located a lone musk ox WAY downriver. Getting to his cliffy vantage, though, bothered my fear of heights. After lunch, we dropped to a small valley cut by an alpine creek before climbing again. The final big saddle provided bigger views across the HH - but did not gain much in the way of new views within this side of the range. After an hour napping and swatting bugs (our only serious encounter), we took a different line down. The whole time, I knew my toes were bleeding (and they were).

For 2 weeks after this trip, my feet suffered weird sensation problems. Initially, I assumed it was the cold - but over time, I realized it was wearing boots so long. Over dinner (which didn't happen until 8-9), we were told that tomorrow would be a substantial river day - with an earlier breakfast call if need be. Even so, Joe did not define a wake-up time and was actively uninterested in invoking timepieces. Over time, I found this leadership style unsatisfying - which was interesting given that I don't wear a watch and that I did not have such issues with the sometimes free-flow nature of the Alsek trip (although Brian never refused to state times or recommend wake-up estimates for people who liked watches).



Left to Right: first views of the aufice, rocky section before camp

June 12, 2005 - 15 Miles Down the Alsek

Although Joe was opposed to timepieces, he did make tent rounds, crowing like a rooster when he decided we needed to get moving. Given our responses, he never crowed again - although he was occasionally mimicked by the peanut gallery. My journal entry for this day reads like a shopping list of large animal sightings. Even Mike enthusiastically claimed this day as a personal best for mega-fauna sightings. Given ongoing back/hip pain and cramping, I took the non-paddling position between Ginnie and Marty. As the trip progressed, I was able to switch off with Marty because things did improve (a combination of muscle relaxants and resting). Even though the river seemed small and shallow, we hung up frequently on rocks. About 15 minutes down the river, we spied a lone, male musk ox - probably the same one from yesterday. Initially, I pointed it out but others thought it was either a rock or a carcass because it was not moving. But then it stood up. We pulled up to a sandbar 200 feet away and watched it for 15 minutes. Although caribou had provided a key draw to the HH, I became more interested in musk ox once I started reading about the Alaskan Arctic prior to this trip. When I was 11-12, my hometown zoo had acquired musk ox and built this arctic tundra habitat - which I found mesmerizing. Alas, this would be our last live musk ox sighting - a product of grizzly predation following near-extinction by human hunting. Our next animal sighting was likely a repeat too: 13-15 caribou running down sloping tundra across the river relative to their position yesterday. Shortly thereafter, we encountered our first "aufice," a new term for me. Aufice is lingering ice in and along the river. Like glacial ice, it forms layers that correspond to specific storms/snow events - appearing white, gray, blue... I remain uncertain whether some aufice never melts during a given year. The aufice that most concerned us was obviously in the river - jutting out from the sides. The guides were concerned about several aufice features: it could shred the boats, the current often continued under it and could suck us in, it was often undercut (i.e. the boats may fit but we might not make it), and there may not be a path through it (which would bring on the latter problems quickly and fatally). Although we'd been warned that some aufice would require scouting, we actually did this only once - in the context of tomorrow's major hike. As someone who sometimes thinks she can interpret rivers a little, I have to say that aufice was impossible to read - and ALWAYS felt dangerous. From even a short distance, the flat ice melded with the flat river and seemed a jumbled maze. While the first aufice section jugged out from both sides of the river, the second was planted on terra firma along the left shore - permitting us to walk on it. This stop also corresponded to the point where, in my opinion, all modesty vanished when it came to public urination. Of course, it is MUCH harder to want to squat given that this act means losing the life jacket, the long rubber jacket, the giant rubber overalls, and digging through - seriously - 3 more layers... all while trying to NOT lose accessories to the wind and to NOT piss on the overall straps which are dangling in the zone. Needless to say - using toilet paper didn't happen. And did I mention that I was seriously on the rag the first 5 days? Tampons were neither shot nor attempted - in favor of my friend: giant pads.

Soon, we enjoyed our - in my opinion - best wildlife sighting on the whole trip: wolves - my first sighting in a natural habitat. Initially, we spotted a dark, wolf-like silhouette against a patch of snow/ice a few hundred feet above the river. Pulling the boats up, we then spotted its mate running across the tundra in the opposite direction. Mike suspected they had a den in this low cliff of bare earth adjacent to the snow/ice patch - and so we set up the spotting scope. Sure enough, 3 pups could be seen poking out of this obvious hole in the side of the hill. Notably, numerous wolf and grizzly tracks peppered the sandy shore where we stood. After this point, we entered the first of 2-3 "canyons" along the HH's length. An arctic canyon appears to be a point where the river flows within walls that are 20-30 feet tall. While, from a distance, this doesn't seem like much - it was impressive from the water, particularly when enhanced by aufice clinging to crevices. A couple golden eagle nests were built into the serrated nooks and slabby ledges. As we rounded the last major bend, a blond grizzly traversed high along the distant tundra. We pulled over on a muddy/sandy beach alongside an impressive slab of aufice, hoping for a better view. But, alas, the bear vanished into rolling tundra and willow. We then more closely investigated the aufice face down the beach. As we approached, we could hear the ice - alive with rivulets of melt-water that culminated in this head-level waterfall. Virtually everyone took a refreshing drink straight from the tap, so to speak. After 1-2 more hours floating, we stopped just shy of a big aufice section that we'd scout it during tomorrow's hike. Pulling up on river left, HUGE hummocks of earth-covered ice burst from near a clear side-creek (Kolotuk). Although novices thought this was permafrost, it was more like subterranean aufice - the whole camp cracked by fissures - solid rising ice, sloppy mud, and melt-water. Disturbingly, a large old wolf trap with bare white leg bones hung from a willow near where we pulled in. The guides removed these items to someplace that would not be found again. Strangely, the day - which had been sunny but windy - felt finally warmer. After dinner, many of us - including me - took a 45-minute walk around the hummocky camp. The length of this walk, however, does not convey how dicey the

footing was: leaping between slick earth/ice toadstools, slopping through bogs, peering into surprisingly deep crevasses. At one point, Mike thought he was standing on something safe - only to have the ice give way with a giant crack, sending him and the earth straight down a few inches. Speaking of cracks, the guides erected the groover for the first time (mostly because this was a popular campsite). And that reminds me of a story I've forgotten to tell. Up until now, we were digging and squatting - which likely took a few people by surprise given that this WAS a rafting trip. Working with tundra, I can assure you, is interesting given that the land is a variably thin spongy mass of vegetation and sandy soil. Consequently, Joe had explained in GREAT detail how we should employ his "flap" approach: using a garden shovel to dig a circle in the tundra (8 inches in diameter) but leaving the final 3-4 inches of the edge attached. That way, you could lift the circle by the flap, dig out a hole under the flap, take a shit, and then fold back the flap without questioning whether you had put it back right. Although I found Joe's method easy and useful, enjoying a sit-down shit was worth way more than digging a flap.



Top Left to Right: Joe helps Sarah G. cross Kolotok, ascending ridgeline, fabulous views down to ice-laden Kolotok
 Bottom Left to Right: windbreak breakfast, major auifice section by camp, hairy tundra flowers seen during hike

June 13, 2005 - The Best Hike

The program (an oft-used Joe term) for the day was a short morning hike up to this obvious knob along the ridgeline above Kolotuk Creek. Afterwards, we would proceed downstream to a site that would provide our second layover camp. After a leisurely breakfast, we did not even set out until 11 a.m. Joe estimated that it would be an hour up and less down. Mike did not join us - which ultimately saved us because he was able to tear down the group gear when he realized how late we were running (3 hours up, 1 hour napping, 1.5 hours down). Although the messy terrain near camp did hamper progress, the bigger factor was the creek crossings: I think we made 8 iffy crosses, despite the fact that there were maybe 3 braids total (i.e. we did a few twice after coming to impassable crossings from islands in the channels). Regardless, though, this was the best hike of the whole trip. After re-negotiating the crazy ice/mud crevasses again, we began walking firm ground at the mouth of this emerging valley - where Kolotuk began braiding out over the flattening terrain. All creek crossings were long endeavors that involved partially submerged rocks. But Joe, wearing his waders, shepherded everyone across with 1 minor slip but no complete dunks. Eventually, we made it to the foot of the hogback ridge, our goal. Ditching our boots (in my case for Chacos), we proceeded through 5 minutes of brushy shit and then started climbing hard, dry land that was in the early stages of bursting forth with interesting flowers. An obvious path lead up the ridgeline. The vistas were sprawling and magnificent in all directions - but particularly up the valley (including, emerging views of Mts. Chamberlin and Michelson, the second and third tallest peaks in the range). Tomorrow's hike destination was also visible downriver: a low green/brown mountain. After an hour, we arrived at our target knoll. Amidst boulders, we snacked and napped in the outright warm sun. And then we headed down, knowing we were terrifically late. Although Joe hoped we would have more luck finding better places to hop the creek down low, I can't say we were any more successful (particularly since the water was now higher). Arriving in camp at 5, we were greeted by Mike and Ginnie, who had done their best to pack up everything they could. Within an hour, we were rafting 3 miles through major auifice. We arrived at camp (the base of tomorrow's mountain) sometime between 7 and 8:30.

June 14, 2005 - The Annoying Hike

Well - the title says it all. Although this hike looked as reasonable and interesting as yesterday's, the route was boggy tundra 90% of the way - not good given that today was far more substantial: 7-8 miles, 3000 feet (yesterday was 4 miles, 1000 feet). The route was so spongy that, by the end of the day, several of us felt we actually gained 4000 feet (if not more) given how much we sunk into the ground with each step. And, for the record, I did the WHOLE hike in rubber boots. That skies were overcast did not add to my mood (although it never rained outright). After another late start (1 or 2 p.m.), we began hiking. Tom, incidentally, had left hours before, having been given special permission to wander alone; he would meet us near the summit. The first 30 minutes crossed boggy rolling tundra. It seemed we ascended and then descended 3 small ridgelines before finally beginning a committed route UP the peak. A third of the way up, some folks spotted a porcupine in the distance.

I didn't see it, however - with or without binoculars. By this point, we had gained a ridgeline that we thought - like yesterday - would be solid. But it was sponge, and so I felt downtrodden until lunch - 10 minutes below the summit. Although I considered stopping, I openly stated that I would only give up if Sarah G. gave up. Of course, I was fairly confident she was going to make it (despite the fact that she said she was thinking about quitting too). Detecting bonking, Joe called lunch at this notch. After filling up, admiring the view, and resting, everyone made the short final climb. Despite overcast skies, the views from the summit were spectacular: Mts. Michelson (east), Chamberlin (west), the rolling and distant Sadlerochit (northwest), this curving creek (Katak) cutting through a high tundra valley beneath Chamberlin. Although the summit, from the north, appeared slightly formidable in the rocky and vertical sense, it was very broad - with long, gentle ridgelines descending to the west. Even though the terrain looked tempting for cross-country explorations, I was - by this point - highly skeptical about tundra hiking (although, honestly, I had been expecting most hikes to be WAY more boggy and wet). A family-like grouping of 5 sheep were descending a rocky outcrop/ridgeline as we rounded the summit's south face. Joe excitedly suggested we all get down on our bellies and quietly snake toward the vanishing line of the ridge - hoping the sheep would be visible again. I joined for part of this exercise but, having seen lots of goats and sheep, was far more interested in the wandering the summit. Eventually, we all regrouped back at the lunch spot.



Left to Right: today's "mountain" as viewed from yesterday's hike, lunch, views up the Hulahula

Heading back, we took a different, steeper line of descent that pretty much went straight down the river-facing mountain front. I took to following Sarah G. as she was the only person making reasonable switchbacks. We arrived back in camp around 7, and were eating dinner by 9. Ginnie, Sarah G., and I were virtually the only ones to bed early (typically 11 p.m.). By this point, though, we started noticing that Sarah G. was in her tent most of the time, coming out only when there was food or hot drinks. Indeed, Ann reported that Sarah G. was extremely cold, struggling to maintain warmth even in the sleeping bag. Even I had to put on at least 4 layers just to sit outside during dinner. And still, parts of me - mostly my feet - never warmed up before I fell asleep. Every permutation of socks, booties - nothing solved this problem. Over time, I found the only useful thing was taking a walk before diving into the tent - to get some circulation going.



Left to Right: biggest canyon just before biggest rapids, Mt. Michelson from the coastal plain, ice along the coastal plain

June 15, 2005 - Big Rapids... Not Really

After rising around 8, we were not on the river until 11. The clear-looking day was extremely promising in terms of bona fide warmth. Today was supposed to be the big rapid day, including a class IV triplet in the largest canyon - right before we emerged onto the upper reaches of the coastal plain (albeit still over 1000 feet above the Arctic Ocean). Given the small size of the river, however, I was skeptical about whether the rapids would be substantial. For the first hour, we did our best to avoid parking on rocks - which was difficult given the still-fast current. Looking back at the whole of the river, I never considered any of the so-called big rapids to be dangerous or particularly exciting. The biggest problem, in my opinion, was parking on rocks and having the river swell up against the raft - threatening to come over the sides and fill us (which would obviously lead to more serious problems). Although we parked on a lot of rocks on, say, the Middle Fork of the Salmon, the HH current and water temperature were far more menacing. Our views north/downriver grew increasingly eclipsed by large local peaks - the river clearly vanishing into this serpentine canyon between immediate sidewalls. Near the formal canyon entrance, we spotted 8-12 dall sheep on the shore - who, of course, promptly took off up the rocky hillside. After a pee/picture break, we negotiated some class II whitewater - difficult because the river constantly made tight curves, rocks protruding everywhere. For 20 minutes, the canyon walls were substantial and vertical - probably 200 feet high. They reminded me of eastern Oregon's Steens Mountain and what I imagine the Owyhee to look like (still on my list to run). Unfortunately, my photographic record of this area is limited - partly because of the whole life vest clip problem. But mostly because when we arrived at the pull-out beach for scouting the biggest rapids (3 in a row but - not surprisingly - I didn't record their names), Joe had all the passengers (except, of course, Tom) stay put while they hiked 10 minutes up this 40-50 foot bluff over the canyon. Not inviting passengers to scout remains a serious gripe given that the vantage point clearly offered nice views up/down the canyon - and a few of us were feeling picture-deprived. While scouting, the guides spied a sleeping bag across the river near

the rapids. Mike hoped to paddle there, determine whether it was in use, and - if not - take it (in part to alleviate Sarah G's suffering). In the end, the rapids were maybe high class II but, honestly, the only difficult thing about them was the vertical sidewalls and tight curves. Perhaps the HH has more whitewater than the Kongakut but it doesn't come close to the Alsek... so I don't understand where its reputation comes from. Information from this trip suggests, in fact, that Canada's Firth has the biggest whitewater of all arctic rivers. After enduring the HH, though, I'm not sure I'm up for any more arctic anything.

As we emerged from the canyon, a mother and baby moose scampered off into the rolling hills. I was originally under the impression that once we left the mountains, we were going to, like, be able to see endless land... maybe even the hazy line of the Arctic Ocean. But like I said, we were far from flat or sea level. In fact, my first impressions of the coastal plain were of 30-foot hills - how I picture the Tibetan plateau (also on my to-do list). After running the whitewater and scaring the moose, we pulled over to enjoy lunch and a long nap. For the first (and only) time on this trip, it was actually too hot. Ginnie and I sought out shade in spindly willows along the river's edge while everyone else sprawled out in the open sun above. By now, I was suffering nasty face problems from the sun, cold, and wind: my nostrils were burning and peeling (despite applications of aloe and sunscreen 4 times a day), my eyes were crusty and ablaze because the wind and exposure were making them constantly water, and my period-associated facial blemishes were not healing (wearing a filthy balaclava over my chin and mouth were not helping - but neither was challenging my immune system with so many extremes). Even though my hair was greasy, it was typically buried under 3 layers - which meant there wasn't as much dirt matted in the mess (like there was on the Alsek). While several women reported the same problems as me, most men regularly shaved and looked WAY too clean for a trip like this - not to mention way too vain for the frequent references (by Joe) to other women passengers for wanting to shave their legs during these trips. But I digress... Upon returning to the rafts, we continued another 3 hours. Interestingly, a few big wave-trains actually rivaled the "real rapids" above. Seeing the river now - flanked regularly by aulice and patchy snow - it was scary to wonder how recently this stuff broke up/melted... not to mention what lay ahead. At the time, we thought we were the first party down (in fact, we were more like 4-6). Mike's boat, leading, spotted a mother and baby grizzly near this shanty cabin used by Inupiat from Kaktovik. Indeed, grizzly, musk ox, wolf, caribou, and sheep prints abounded at our campsite, a 100% tree-less exercise in tundra bathroom challenges. Nevertheless, we enjoyed a blazing fire built from the surprising amount of driftwood (I daresay, it approached the size/scale of the Alsek) and a gorgeous view upriver - Mt. Michelson's ice dome brilliant against the stark blue sky. After dinner, I joined half the crew for a hike up this knoll. For some reason, I thought we might get a more open view north. But no: just the vast gold of the September-like plains. Attempting a different route down, we briefly boot-slid some snow patches and variously avoided boot-sucking bogs.



Left to Right: major aulice and fish camp cabin right before the wrong turn, definitely flooding out, emergency camp

June 16, 2005 - Shooting the Tundra, Part I

Day 7 began with overcast skies. Since setting out, we knew that past trips had encountered challenging scenarios along this stretch, owing to substantial aulice that diverted the river in confusing ways. Joe emphasized that today's crux was taking the left channel when the majority of the aulice ended. Apparently, right looks like it has more flow but, in reality, it floods into nothingness. The guides apparently had learned this the hard way, dragging boats from tundra nothingness to the real channel for almost a day. In general, the guides feared any form of tundra flooding - although they admitted that even the left channel often temporarily flooded, leaving parties shooting open tundra for 15-20 minutes until a channel emerged again. For the first hour, though, it was rocky wave-trains with snow/ice on the banks. At one point, we passed a 2-story fish camp cabin used by Inupiat from Kaktovik. For the last 2 days, in fact, we had seen a disturbing number of abandoned hunting sledges - sled-like trailers that can be attached to snow machines - along the river. Near the fish camp cabin, we passed the only other party we ever saw on the river - clearly having started before us. Owing to the giant ECOCHALLENGE.COM verbiage that emblazoned their single blue raft, we assumed they were representatives for said program. And thus began our longstanding joke - that we were vying with the Ecochallengers. In fact, they were privates (2 from Seattle and 2 from Anchorage) who had bought their raft pre-emblazoned via some auction. Their party's other notable feature was a teepee style dining/social tent (which contrasted with our lean-to raft cook-station and windshield). About 30 minutes from Ecochallenge camp (sorry - that name will stick, regardless of its inaccuracy), Joe located the big channel decision point. All I remember about the spot was that there was a lot of ice and we'd definitely been passing a great deal of ice for awhile. I don't recall thinking that there was more flow going right; everything looked like it spread out equally in all directions, honestly. Thinking back, I would be interested to know what - geographically and physically - contributes to this hardy aulice. I assume there is some sustained low or funneling point for particularly cold wind patterns from the Arctic Ocean - but nothing, aside from an increase in river braiding, strikes me upon examining high resolution topo maps of the area.

Proceeding left, we headed out into what increasingly looked like a gigantic marsh - weirdly Everglades-like. Consistent with expectations, we proceeded - doing our best to keep in the channel with the most obvious and visible current. As with my first impressions of interpreting aulice, I was at a 100% loss to judge current. Thus I was, frankly, shocked the guides kept us even remotely on course. The fractal pattern of watery tundra was confusing, abounding, and scary - because the prospect of

getting stuck and having to haul all this gear amused no one. Even so, we spent little time outside the boat. Mike, in the lead, hung up maybe 4-6 times and was out in his hip-waders pushing and pulling. Our boat's unspoken strategy seemed to be to hang back and let Mike do all the route-finding. This is not to say that Joe and Marty were not out a few times. After about 45 minutes, Joe made the fateful remark that - and I can almost quote this verbatim - he was used to 10-20 minutes on tundra, never 30-40. Indeed, there was NO sign of an obvious river channel beneath us, no signs of dry banks. In fact, the usually silty HH was now crystal clear and all we could see were plants swaying in the current. Shortly after Joe's comment, Mike dead-ended in the distance, his crew reporting later that his cussing level reached an all-time high (gotta respect Mike for that). From our position 100 feet back, the water stretched out in all directions. Mike, now hauling his boat back, favored dragging the boats a few hundred boggy feet east - to what looked like a reasonable right-heading current; Joe favored back-paddling to a reasonable left-heading current west. A friendly debate ensued and we headed left. This is the point where GPS-guru Roger has, based on my abbreviated email accounts of this trip, seriously questioned why the guides didn't read our position in order to make a more informed decision. And I can't answer that - nor can I answer whether heading right would have sent us to the main HH channel. The bottom line: we definitely and unknowingly left all braids of the HH at this point. I couldn't tell you the time this decision was made or how long thereafter we floated - but it was on the order of 2-3 hours. For the first hour, we occasionally fought shallows and foliage... until we learned to aim for the willow tops (because those were the tallest and therefore the water would be the deepest). An hour before stopping for the night, the guides noticed a familiar hill/bank WAY in the distance. At the time, they indicated that that was our goal - although they seemed noticeably concerned/surprised with how far the landmark was. If you recall, our original goal was the camp right before the big portage (i.e. we'd be hauling gear a mile overland to the Okpilak). Over the next hour, more and more dry land appeared and, given this, the guides questioned where we were because dry land typically meant you had arrived at the distant hill/bank. And so we pulled over on waterway left, the guides finally pulling out their GPS. Shortly thereafter, lots of noise was heard when it was discovered we had flooded WAY west - into an entirely new drainage: Nataroarok Creek. Despite great initial levity (i.e. we could be the first to run the Nataroarok!), things settled down once the gravity of the situation sunk in. A few initial reality check items (and, believe me, there were MANY more moments as the trip progressed: Could we run this or would we have to portage god knows how far across the marsh/tundra to the HH? If we could run this, how would we get out - i.e. was there an airstrip or would we have to make our way back to the HH - possibly via the Arctic Ocean? Given that we were less than 6 inches above the waterline (and the land appeared level for miles), would we get flooded in our tents if we stayed the night? What if the aifice dam melted and broke? It could totally flood us... AND THEN re-route the water back to the HH, leaving us high/dry in a tiny creek that may no longer be run-able. Joe promptly had AD headquarters on the sat-phone and proceeded to send, I believe, the general manager on a massive hunt for as many answers as he could dig up regarding initial issues above.



Left to Right - tundra marsh near decision point to keep heading left, kitchen, emergency camp along tundra marsh

After a brief private meeting, the guides decided we were staying here for the night. It was 8 p.m. by the time we had the tents up. At some point, AD headquarters called back with some information. First, half a dozen other parties (not affiliated with AD) had this same situation happen and successfully ran the Nataroarok to the ocean (boo-hoo for our first descent). But it was not clear what the airstrip situation was at the other end and we would have to wait until tomorrow for Kaktovik bush pilots to have a flyover conversation en route to picking up another non-rafting party. During dinner, Joe announced that he, Mike, and Tom would be hiking (2-3 miles one way) to the HH to check out the situation there, their intent being to explore the possibility of portaging in the event there were no landing options at the mouth of the Nataroarok, and to determine whether there was better flow there (or if it was, as he predicted, all here in the Nataroarok). Before departing, they gave us some serious words about bear safety, openly leaving us with all the whoop-ass canisters. Nevertheless, we could easily see EVERYTHING in a 100+ mile radius (which means, of course, that proposed oil platforms - planned for this precise area - would also be EXTREMELY visible... not to mention flooded out and spilling material across the tundra given these conditions). For a variety of reasons, nearly all of us stayed up to wait for their return - around 1 a.m. Looking despondent, they reported that most HH water was, in fact, in the Nataroarok (good as long as the dam didn't break) and that portaging was not feasible. Everyone promptly retired, with Joe anticipating an 8:30 a.m. flyover conversation followed by another discussion with AD headquarters. Indeed, I think it is safe to say that timepieces and schedules were now being embraced/invoked.

June 17, 2005 - Shooting the Tundra, Part II

Right on schedule, our bush pilot appeared and Joe flipped on his radio. Everyone agreed it was cool to be watching and listening to the plane/pilot simultaneously. The pilot seemed confident there were a couple alternative airstrips near the mouth of the Nataroarok (although he never flew out there to check for us): Anderson Point to the west and some unnamed barrier islands to the north. Shortly after breakfast, Joe announced he had made a decision about our short-term plans: we would be heading all the way to the Arctic Ocean today because he didn't want to risk the aifice dam melting/breaking. Once we arrived at the coast, we would rest up and then begin to tackle the airstrip problem. Given that we currently had 3 days to play with, he felt confident we'd solve the problem. At least for today (thank god), the sunny and clear weather was mostly with us. For the first couple hours, we were shooting open tundra with absolutely no sign of a channel. Although there were a few

spots where the hip-wader men were out pushing, pulling, and dragging, the rafting seemed remarkably and unexpectedly straightforward. Those of us without hip-waders also enjoyed helping move the boats by bouncing, running, and jumping around to distribute weight during the pushing, pulling, and dragging. I got to paddle the most today because Marty was showing more signs of fatigue - not to mention wanting to take more pictures. Thus, our rigid boat positions were coming down - although we never got to, say, paddle with Mike. Miraculously, a 20-foot channel with bona fide banks and a rocky bottom appeared as if from nothing shortly before lunch. Given its narrowness, curvy disposition, and large volume/current, we enjoyed some of the most fun rafting on the whole trip - and some of the most unique rafting I have ever done (not that any of it would look impressive on film - you had to be there). Unfortunately, the winds also decided they were going to pick up - and so, once those banks appeared, Joe called lunch because we finally had a slight windbreak. Joe and Mike were in especially excited moods during lunch, openly proclaiming the Nataroarok as MORE beautiful than the HH because it was clear, blue, and - so far/relatively speaking - running a decisive channel.



Left to Right: shooting the tundra, me standing on the Arctic Ocean

After lunch, the channel continued for about an hour. A couple hours from the coast, the Nataroarok - like the HH - started braiding again. The guides' enthusiasm vanished because they knew that many HH braids turned into big mudflats near the coast (which explained the Okpilak portage). Who knew what the Nataroarok had in store? Even so, a still-obvious current - albeit in a very narrow channel (sometimes only 8-10 feet) - was evident. With the now-high winds blowing hard to the west, staying in the constantly-curving channel was more than challenging. Joe attempted to teach us front paddlers some special J-stroke that could be used to push away or pull towards the bank as needed. The stroke, however, was extremely taxing for Ginnie and I as it required you hang out over the water and use WAY different arm muscles. It also would have been useful to stop the boat and be given a lesson - as opposed to having it verbally explained in the heat of rounding crazy bends. Both of us fried - mentally and physically - within 30 minutes. Consequently, all boat positions (except Joe) changed many times over the 2 hours we fought the winds and skinny channels. Even more surprising were the many miniature "tundra-falls" - spots where the river poured over these 2-5 foot drops in the landscape. To the guides' utter shock, the Nataroarok hit the Arctic Ocean with as strong a current as it had maintained all afternoon. There was no muddy lagoon, no vanishing depth... in fact, the river flowed in a defined, rock-bottomed channel, widening only during the final minute to - at most - a 500-foot delta. Along the shores were defined banks of dry tundra and, stunningly, the remnants of a sod house - ASTOUNDINGLY in use until 1957. Disembarking by said structure, we walked 5 minutes to a beach along the Arctic Ocean. The pack ice - which doesn't melt/break up until early July - was variously visible. Immediately before us, the ice was a mile out - a dramatic line of white pressure-ridges and serac mountains. This trend continued to the east, presumably because of the HH flowing out. To the west, though, the ice arched toward the coastline, hugging it almost solidly. This was of concern because Anderson Point was in that direction - FULLY frozen in (and portaging ice was out of the question). We were unable to discern any barrier islands due north. Given that these land masses were often transient sand formations, they might not even exist anymore (either that or they were buried by ice or ocean). Indeed, our mood surveying this scene was not promising in terms of what lay ahead - despite enthusiasm for having made it here and being, like, standing at/in the Arctic Ocean. Unlike some parties, however, no one stripped naked and jumped in.

After a 30-minute nap (literally sprawled along the perimeter of the sod house), we returned to the rafts, Joe and Mike having made the decision to camp across the Nataroarok delta. Getting across the slightly swift and serpentine body of water was interesting. From the delta, the camp looked like almost any public beach: golden grass, driftwood/lumber, various metal items (including our best friend, the CAN). The shore where we pulled up was abrupt and slick. Even Mike slid slightly when he jumped out to secure his raft. Although I'd previously managed to impress the team by pulling our boat ashore (a skill we HAD to learn in WAY uglier conditions on the Alsek), I knew this jump was not going to go well. So, with everyone watching, I slipped fully on my ass, down the bank, AND up to my waist in arctic water (NOT pretty because both my boots filled - fully wetting 3 layers of pants, including my fleece bottoms). However, I still do not believe that this counts as falling into a river, something I have never managed to do. Nevertheless, it was a shocking experience. Joe had long warned us that if anyone fell into the river our priority list would entail immediately stopping, and getting that person stripped naked in a bag with another similar-ungarbed teammate (meanwhile, everyone else would start a raging fire and erect tents). As the arctic river water filled my boots and started working its way up my front, 2 things went through my mind: stand up, and - hmmm - I wonder who I want to be naked with in a sleeping bag? Roger and Jenn will be surprised to hear that I did not have an immediate answer to that question, despite having considered it for a few days. But, alas, this was not the Alsek - where I would have had an easier time coming up with a name. Getting back to the real situation, I found that walking around quickly warmed the feet and boot water up. Ginnie and I quickly set up my tent and I was inside within 5 minutes of the initial soak, replacing all clothing. Now, the biggest problem was that all the water in/on my gear had puddled up the tent - problematic given that Ginnie was still throwing more gear into my tent. Notably, this was the only time I used my bathing chamois - albeit not for washing. Over the next 12 hours, I was impressed with how quickly all my clothing dried. Only my thickest pair of wool socks, the boots, and their now-removed inserts were still mushy the next day. I would estimate that we pulled into camp around 7 p.m. Owing to my

situation, I took a long nap to fully warm up in my bag. I can accurately say that we were not eating dinner until some time between 11 and 12. I did not emerge until after 10 and it was fucking freezing. I learned later that the coastal temperatures were, starting today and continuing for the next 48 hours, 32-38° F. The 20-40 mph winds also battered us for the next 48 hours, lowering the effective wind-chill temperature to 10°F. So, that upper right shot - taken around 11:30 p.m. - may look awful pretty but the conditions for the next 2 days proved to be a major endurance test... helped only by the CAN.



Left to Right: camping along the Arctic Ocean, our great friend and saviour - the CAN

June 18, 2005 - Cabin Fever

As planned, today was a total down day: 100% rest, recovery, and relaxation. Breakfast, around 11 a.m., was accompanied by calls to/from AD headquarters and our pilot contact. I have this strange recollection that the guides had to dip into whatever emergency/back-up sat-phone batteries were carried, an apparent first (but I could be remembering things wrong - i.e. Joe joking about this possibility). Joe and Mike had, by this point, ruled out Anderson Point. Even after setting up the spotting scope, we could not see the pilot-claimed barrier island (despite insistence that it was due north). You could tell already that Mike was not into the barrier island plan. If it was there, it was small and less than a foot above sea level - meaning that if anything happened (i.e. a storm or the pilot was wrong about being able to land there) and we had to stay the night - things could evolve into a life-threatening scenario. Many of us novices were perplexed as to why the pilots could/would not just land on the tundra given that it looked so flat. But apparently they had issues with any mud or hummocks. Even so, Mike and Joe did drop a few hints that we may be out "building an airstrip" if things got too ugly. I call this the cabin fever day because - despite clear and sunny skies - the sub-zero wind HOWLED constantly, leaving everyone in their tents for hours on end... at least until they could not take it and emerged (3-5 layers deep) to stand around the CAN and achieve a temporarily different perspective on reality. For me, the wind was truly defeating - mostly because not even the earplugs cut the sound... and I thrive on some daily silence to keep my sanity (which explains why Joe sometimes got on my nerves). After catching up on journals for much of the day, I attempted to re-read this novel ([Solar Storms](#)) that I liked when I read it back in 1998 on an Olympic National Park backpack with Jay. Unfortunately, in the context of deafening arctic isolation, this often-disturbing story came across as negative, consuming, and troubling to the point that I had to stop reading it.

Some random anecdotes: After the groover tent (a necessary accessory given the 100% lack of topography and flora) began to blow away, the men amused themselves by constructing a 3-sided wooden privy from the many interesting items around the beach site. It should be noted, however, that the guides were not thrilled with the amount of non-solid material in the groover. Given that they'd never had so many women at once, we made sure they were fully educated about the reality of women's anatomy (i.e. certain processes often happened simultaneously and there was not a goddamned thing we could or would do about it). Notably, they never mentioned issues with the groover again. We also enjoyed a surprising number of animal sightings, usually via the spotting scope. Early on, someone saw a distant, lone, white object, proclaiming it a polar bear (I was said to have shot out of my lazy sitting position, cursing); but they were promptly corrected as it was just a caribou. Although there were several known polar bear dens nearby, Joe insisted all bears had long departed for the ice. Later, we watched 6-8 caribou pass, although it was not clear what kind of grouping this was. After a few folks swore they saw mothers and calves, Joe - looking through the scope - announced: no, those are just a group of barren heifers. Instantly responding to our similar group, I responded: hey, hey, hey - I take that personally. And thus the title of this report was spawned. Lastly, we enjoyed an arctic fox several times, typically leaping about some hummocks about 1000 feet away. Meanwhile, Mike, capable of finding pleasure in any environment, had taken to weaving a basket - gloveless - using willow roots and stems. One of my greatest regrets: not having the nerve to ask Mike for a close-up picture of his beautiful hands (although I did, obviously, get one of him and the basket). Even though I don't feel I interacted with Mike much, he was an extremely familiar soul to me given my experiences with Jay (and, like I said, being a similar soul myself). Both men represent ultimate bachelor/mountain men types, extremely comfortable with their chosen lifestyles and solitude (having apparently abandoned any notion of marriage decades ago). Although I knew Mike was originally from Alabama, I learned he intentionally moved to Alaska when Watt was appointed WAY back when. Prior to moving, he worked in the forestry industry (of course, Alabamans call them tree plantations). These days, Mike lives in a cabin near Talkeetna, an eclectic town south of Denali. Although I knew about some of his international rafting exploits, I was not aware of his ongoing work in Afghanistan (which he'd recently visited with a peace-oriented volunteer group), and his extensive climbing experience with Denali (among other places) - manifest in his friendship with Kantishna-based pilots I would become addicted to during the next leg of this trip. Needless to say, I remain intrigued with the possibility of doing another trip with Mike. Given that I am - once again - discussing illustrious male rafting guides, it should be stated upfront that the HH never spawn overt lust (as was rampant, by this point, on the Alsek). Maybe it was just too cold. Maybe not enough of our basic needs were being met. Maybe there were too many women, and our estrogen was neutralizing the sparing men's testosterone. Even so, Mike was probably the only man who stood a chance at overcoming any hypothetical hormone barrier. But Mike, in my opinion, transcended lust. Even so, one of the women after

the trip aptly remarked: "well - he certainly cleans up nice." But I digress. Dinner was never called or served that night, something Joe may never live down. After lying in my tent for HOURS, I made my way outside at a memorable 2 a.m. There, only Marty was stirring. Fortunately, there was hot water in a thermos and we used it all for instant chicken soup, supplementing with crackers and cookies. I recall at least a couple others joined us, disappointed we'd used all the hot water (oh well - what can you expect at 2:30 a.m.?). And, yes, the skies were still clear and light - the wind frigid and howling.



Left to Right: camp privy, night 2 along Arctic Ocean, mouth of the HH reached during day 2 hike

June 19, 2005 - Slightly Less Cabin Fever

Breakfast, served between 9-10, was well-received by the ravenous team. Detecting rampant cabin fever, Joe did everything short of outright order us all on a hike: 3 miles east to the westernmost braid of the HH. Of course, we were also on a mission to solve the getting-out problem. Believe it or not, today's weather actually seemed worse: the winds were stronger, the skies less clear. Although most of us preferred the change (because it opened up different possibilities - like the wind finally leaving so we could paddle SOMEWHERE), we all seemed concerned it was going to get worse before it got better. Within 10 minutes, Sara G. announced she was turning around (which she did). Despite the second sleeping bag, Sara G. was still suffering in the cold. The rest of us continued to hike via 3 routes: the majority of the team on the tundra shelf above the beach, a couple of us (myself included) on the muddy beach, and Mike - alone on the fairly continuous ice hugging the shore. Today, it should be noted, was Mike's birthday - although he insisted there be no singing or overt celebrating. Hiking to the HH, huge, freezing winds battered our faces, constantly pushing us backwards - which tells you how crazy we were... what we were willing to endure to avoid another day in the tents. En route, we observed several frighteningly large polar bear paw prints on the upper portions of the beach, which seemed to defy Joe's insistence that they all had ventured out onto the ice.

Most of us agreed that we barely hiked 2 miles before arriving at the muddy flats where the HH emerged. The final half-mile was promising in that there was a HUGE flat semi-dry beach. Joe seemed eager to ask the pilot about using this as a landing strip. Of course, this scenario would still mean portaging 2 miles. Even so, Mike seemed more enthusiastic about hauling the boats by line along the coast, the rest of us hiking gear across the tundra. Locating a large driftwood log, we sat back to the wind and enjoyed lunch. Needless to say, the hike back was WAY easier. The only thing worth mentioning: finding what we thought - at the time - was a wolf paw and lower leg (the former covered in fur, the latter mangled with a disturbing bone protruding). I could barely look at the thing... it was a very negative object to me (sort of like the mythical monkey's paw - bad juju). But, of course, others decided to carry it back and give it to Mike for his birthday. Unlike me, he seemed tickled with the gift. Of course, he immediately declared our identification as WAY wrong: this was a baby polar bear's paw. THAT, to me, was even worse juju - NOT good given expectations to get out of here tomorrow. At some point before dinner, our Kaktovik pilot called and nixed the pre-HH beach as being too muddy. He did say that the weather was briefly calming (briefly being defined as 1-2 days) before the winds changed and something nasty came in. We HAD to move tomorrow. Later, he did a flyover/wing-tip to indicate the barrier island. And with that, a semi-final plan was developed: pack early, paddle like hell to the barrier island, shuttle everything to Kaktovik via several plane trips, camp in Kaktovik, fly back to Fairbanks the next day. Ginnie and I, of course, began secretly discussing sharing a hotel room in Kaktovik as the notion of camping by an airstrip did not hold any appeal at this point.



Left to Right: into the void, packing for and setting out on the Arctic Ocean

June 20, 2005 - There Are No Words

Morning 11 saw a miraculous lack of winds. We had, literally, forgotten what silence was like - to the point that it was mesmerizing to finally hear it again. Although there were local clear spots, fog fully shrouded the ocean, which meant we would be traveling using a limited set of tools. Consider (ROGER) that the pilot's wing-tip flyover provided no GPS coordinates and, really, did not match anything on the map. All we had was a general compass bearing and the pilot's assertion that it was about 1-1.5 miles out. The next 4 hours would prove to be some of the most freaky and beautiful moments I've ever

experienced in a raft. Although I was not fundamentally afraid of the situation because we were in very good hands and had a number of people keeping track of us, I was afraid of the surroundings in a way I haven't been on any trip before. Heading out into the white nothingness of the Arctic Ocean in often-zero-visibility fog was terrifying... like what I imagine it must have felt like to be on a Viking ship in the ocean during the Middle Ages. And it wasn't just me. Most folks later expressed great fear and concern about this situation - as indicated by the virtual silence on both rafts. For the first 40-60 minutes, we were paddling calm waters in zero to low visibility fog. Mike noted that we were drifting east in a noticeable current and he and Joe discussed concern about this fact - mostly because we should have reached the barrier island by now if our information was accurate. There were substantial patches of ice in all directions, making matters worse (although the water was often very shallow - making me feel more at ease). After 10 minutes of heavy debating, Mike insisted that this whole barrier island plan was not good: the current was taking us east (toward Arey Island), the weather was good, the water was calm - it was time to commit to Arey because we had accurate GPS readings for its location (about 5 miles away) - AND it would provide safe haven whatever the weather or pilot situation brought. Joe was visibly torn. But the rest of us were 100% with Mike and many of us heartily and verbally agreed with him. And so our plans were changed again - albeit in a way that did satisfy everyone (except maybe Joe - just a little). With the GPS re-focused on a known point, we started paddling like super-hell. And, miraculously, the fog began to lift. Of course, within 20 minutes I had to pee and so we stopped at a very sandy island that butted up against mountains of pack ice. Although I felt guilty at requesting a stop, these feelings vanished when EVERYONE proceeded to run off the boats and drop their pants. After leaving lots of little puddles in the sand, we all jaw-droppingly gaped at the magnificent scenery all around. It was as though we could finally enjoy our predicament - because we somehow knew we'd be out of the woods shortly. Unfortunately, I ran out of film, having neglected to put an extra roll in my daypack (there were plenty of extras buried deep in my inaccessible drybag).



Left to Right: more Arctic Ocean rafting, my mandatory pee stop

We were on the ocean-facing side of Arey within 2 hours of our decision to go for it. In the distance (20 minutes by bush plane), we could see the DEW (Defensive Early Warning) structures of Kaktovik. We briefly joked about paddling all the way there and saving some bucks on the flight transport. But Joe wouldn't hear that. We should NOT push our good fortune, and it was important to enjoy our final night - the beginning of solstice - on scenic Arey Island... not in what we would learn was depressing and ugly Kaktovik. Given the sun, calm skies, and beautiful surroundings, I did not regret that last night in a tent. On normal HH trips (although, after hearing many tales, I'm not sure there is such a thing), teams approach Arey from the south non-ocean-facing side via a muddy, shallow lagoon/delta that usually requires major hauling, dragging, and portaging. Given that we were coming from the open ocean, we were still being told to be prepared for hauling, dragging, and portaging once we tried to make our way to the island's south-side landing strip. Also of concern, the north side of the island appeared to be heavily iced in. Thus, the guides were equally concerned that we may not be able to even find a passage to the south, which would mean hauling, dragging, and portaging over ice and then land. Miraculously, though, there was an easy channel that provided deep enough water (i.e. about 20 inches) all the way to the landing strip. And thus we pulled RIGHT up to the sandy shore, well aware that we had done what apparently no AD team has every managed to do: raft the HH with no team portages. THAT alone was worth the entire last 2 days of cabin fever. It was TRULY miraculous - so miraculous that the guides joked about re-writing the trip itinerary. Despite all joy and levity, however, we all agreed that rafting the Arctic Ocean was NOT something one could count on as safe or recommended.



Left to Right: best two breast pictures from this trip (nut-bra and grilled chicken), midnight - the night before solstice

Even though we escaped portaging, we still had to carry all gear and rafts 700 feet up onto the island. Although tedious, this act was completed in no time. Desolate, flat, and open, Arey Island was striking and scenic regardless. After too many days sleeping on tundra that - I swear - swelled up under every bad pressure point along your spine, slumbering on forgiving sand

was oh-so-sweet. Ginnie and I seemed giddy as we set up our tents, knowing it was going to be just 1 more night! We also promptly converted our abodes into day spas for several hours, breaking out every towel and moisturizing agent in our stashes (these included hospital-grade full-body handwipes that Ginnie kindly shared with me). Given the afternoon sun, the tents were like saunas and - for once on this FREEZING trip - I actually enjoyed a fabulous nap, clean and naked, on top of my filthy bag. Some folks may be surprised to hear that HH does refer to a real connection with Hawaii. Some native whalers from said islands historically came to this area during the summers to hunt. As some readers know, of course, I own a Hawaiian nut bra - and have worn it in some remote places. So - what better place to wear a nut bra than on the HH? After 12 days of hiding the nuts, they came out... along with the pimp-daddy sarong and the lei - all worn over 4 layers of gear. Shockingly, folks were not expecting this from me and the guides had never seen a nut bra donned on this trip. So, I'd like to think I was the first person to wear a nut bra on Arey Island. Although I amused and slightly impressed Joe and Mike, they were disappointed when I did not match my outfit with some sort of dancing. But that is me: deadpan, straight-faced, nut-bra wearing. Of course, it was tempting to get a little nuts (no pun intended) when - lo and behold - the Ecochallengers were seen hauling and dragging their boat across the lagoon and - after about an hour - a long strip of ice along the shore. Poor things. Of course - we had the spotting scope on them the whole time, speculating wildly about how they fared down the shallow HH (i.e. how much hauling, dragging, and portaging they'd done before today). Joe and Mike pleaded with me to go down there and greet them with a dance and some kisses. But that seemed too cruel. Shortly before dinner, Joe did visit them for a spell - even inviting them to enjoy our big meal. By this point, they were finally on the beach setting up camp. But they never approached our camp. In retrospect, Joe didn't say much about their relative adventures - although we were admittedly enjoying cocktails, a massive eating frenzy, and a ROARING fire by the time he returned. Virtually everyone made a concerted effort to stay up until midnight. Despite the sun, temperatures were brutal - colder, in my opinion, than on any other night. Given ample driftwood, I took it upon myself to keep the fire HUGE until 1 a.m. (indeed, it was amusing to run around in the nut bra with arm-loads of wood - the joke being that the nuts provided protection from my substantial stacks - all puns intended). Wispy clouds accumulated throughout the evening, consistent with the forecast. Given good spirits, massive food, and my pyromaniac-inspired fire, I went to bed fully comfortable - something I cannot say I felt much on this trip.



Left to Right: bush plan on Arey, flying over breaking-up ice, Kaktovik

June 21, 2005 - There Are No Words... But For Different Reasons

The next morning was bitterly cold. Given our 10 a.m. departure, Joe was making wake-up rounds around 7. I heard Ginnie memorably respond to his rousing: Is it cold out there? She admitted later she was not fully awake when she asked that question. The white sky did not bode well to my eyes, my concern being obvious: it would start snowing and we'd be stuck here or in Kaktovik god-knows-how-long. But camp pack-up proceeded well, Joe confident we would all be in Kaktovik before noon. Mike would, notably, not be flying via out via Kaktovik. Instead, he would be picked up by a different bush pilot who would take the rafts and major group gear back to Grassers for the next AD HH trip of the season (actually, the only other HH trip they run). There, Mike would meet that trip leader, giving him a rundown of our trip (ha ha, we imagined might be uttered), and then return to Fairbanks. Mike's next trip, less than a week away, was actually leading the Kongakut. Given these commitments, many of us were concerned that Mike would not make it to our big celebration dinner tonight. I think, though, Joe and Mike secretly knew that he stood a better chance of getting there before us - precisely what happened. Our bush plane landed shortly after 10 a.m. Although we had been prepared to use the Kaktovik pilot yesterday, the pilot who landed was with from AD's pre-arranged company (the same guy who flew me/Marty/Joe to Grassers). Ginnie and I (on the first flight out) also sat on luggage in the back because Joe really stuffed each flight to avoid what happened in Arctic Village (i.e. the last run having so much gear that the pilot almost had to make another run). After taking off, I was utterly shocked at the amount and extent of pack ice still very frozen across the Arctic Ocean. For some reason, I thought it melted/broke up in early June - NOT July. Although some parties saw polar bears on the ice, no one saw them today. Kaktovik, an Inupiat establishment (I'd estimate around 500), is located on Barter Island. The Inupiat are allowed to hunt whale every season. Thus, we were warned that the landing pattern would take us directly over a well-carved whale carcass. Given all the whoopla surrounding recent whaling by native people in Washington's Neah Bay, I was surprised that the residents of Kaktovik proceeded with their rituals so quietly. The whale - pretty much just dark bones - was, in a word, ugly.

The Kaktovik airport was shockingly simple, unkempt, and unsightly. A large hanger full of emergency vehicles (most actively frozen in place - like, seriously, partially embedded to the icy floor and walls), weird construction materials, and broken pinball machines (not making this up) stood by the simple gravel airstrip. Several smaller pre-fab structures were located nearby, including the office of the pilot/company who had been assisting us previously (indeed, we were asked to thank him heartily for his help). It was amazing that ANY airline maintained a flying schedule here. Our flight - on a local Alaska airline called Frontier Air - was scheduled to arrive at around 4. It apparently made a series of stops between Fairbanks, Kaktovik, and Barrow. After unloading the plane, Ginnie and I decided to wait for the whole party to arrive before heading into town. Joe, meanwhile, would don his heaviest down jacket and stay with the gear (mostly asleep) all afternoon. Within an hour, we were all together again - in a strange silence (at least, that is, once the plane left). The town, a modest walk (i.e. 30 minutes to the

target public destination, a hotel/café/store/hang-out/catch-all called Waldo Arms), was situated across a small and frozen bay. To get there, we walked the length of the runway and then arched through a confusing mess of industrial-looking structures. I'm not sure what I was expecting from Kaktovik - and I'm sure my comments about the place will offend a few people. Kaktovik was, in my opinion, one of the ugliest places I have ever been or seen on earth. Still semi-frozen, the town was a patchwork of strange houses - some pre-fab, some built from shipping cargo boxes, most assemblages of everything... all sewn together with mismatched plywood sections. Most stood on giant concrete blocks or heavy stacks of lumber, raised above the ground as though waiting for a flood. The amount of wild shit in peoples' yards was insane: broken down cars and snow machines (Alaskans apparently don't say "snowmobiles"), unidentifiable machinery, children's toys half-buried in filthy snow. Notably, though, we counted few satellite dishes. And finally there were all the clearly-inbred dogs short-chained to shanty structures. Virtually all looked more like white German shepherds than traditional huskies. After meandering about 6 blocks, we passed the local sheriff - a notably very white and blond man. His brand new house and enormous truck seemed a shameful contrast with all the poverty elsewhere. For a variety of reasons, I took few photographs once in town.



Left to Right: airport, looking across bay at Kaktovik proper, Waldo Arms entrance

After finding Waldo Arms, I am quite sure many of us broke Joe's heart by not eating the lunch he and Mike had prepared... but there was an uncontrollable urge for French fries all around. As we walked toward the shanty entrance, a HUGE crowd of tourists was leaving - apparently heading over to the Canning River. If they were doing rafting, however, their gear (suitcases and canvas duffles) sure didn't look ready to go. We caught some interesting looks from the extremely clean party; I'm certain, in fact, we scared the shit out of them - particularly those who looked like they were not into being dirty. Waldo Arms, an assemblage of 5-6 mobile homes, was dank and smelled musty and old. Where each building section had been added, the floors were unevenly joined. The 70's era carpeting was hideous and filthy. We walked through what reminded me of a REALLY dirty college dorm common room (complete with a crazy library, a coconut on one of the bookshelves, wicked velveteen couches, and a pool table), eventually entering the dining area. The white American cook (and waitress and possibly owner) was your classic bad-mood diner stereotype. French fries alone were \$2; grilled cheese sandwiches and fries were \$8; the full-on cheeseburger and fries (my meal) was \$12. We all took seats around a large set of mismatched tables that, together, seated 12-18. Around the perimeter were smaller tables with a couple local natives, and a big TV blaring America's Funniest Home Videos and Full House re-runs. As we proceeded to madly disrobe (being that it was blazing hot), the locals attempted to make small talk about what we had been doing - although their first question (after finding out how long we'd been out) was: oh, you probably want to hear how the Michael Jackson trial turned out? You have GOT to be shittin' me. Strangely and sadly, their next fixation regarded why we were not scared of the bears and how we managed not to have any in our camps. Fortunately, they left soon and we turned off the television. At some point, I made the first of many trips to the bathroom and - EGAD - I was a hideous mess. My nostrils were wreaths of peeling skin - burnt, red, hairy with flakes (cleared after 24 hours in non-freezing conditions). Shortly thereafter, this clean, stylish group of Germans showed up. They took immediate interest in us because they were on their way down the HH, filming a special on the Arctic Refuge for European public television. Of course, we accurately guessed that they had never done any multi-day rafting of this magnitude. We visibly scared the shit out of them too. By then, our meals had arrived - and, man, were they excellent. I hate saying that too exuberantly, of course, because our food down the HH was awesome... but you cannot duplicate greasy fries and ice cold Coke on a camping trip. While we were eating, an apparently famous wilderness writer from Fairbanks showed up with her best friend; both had been backpacking a couple weeks in the Sadlerochits, west of the HH. This woman had been featured among several other famous contributing authors (like Jimmy Carter, Peter Matthiessen, and Terry Tempest Williams) in Banerjee's recent book about the Arctic Refuge ([Seasons of Life and Land](#)). Lo and behold - the Germans had been hoping to interview her. Although I appreciated this woman as a concept (her lifestyle, wilderness ethic, devotion to the environment), she was extremely forward (almost aggressive) - to the point it turned a few of us off. It's sort of, like: you know, you're preaching to the choir - there is no need to be so demanding. Of course, after that many days outside - people do lose social skills... so who knows what she is like in a normal setting?

At around 3:30, we left Waldo Arms and made our way back to the airport. An hour passed and no plane. The high clouds appeared to be descending, small flakes of snow intermittently falling in swirling patterns. By now, we were certain Mike was already back in Fairbanks, probably enjoying a shower. We were not certain that we'd be so lucky. Joe explained that we would know when the plane was coming because dozens of residents would precede the landing, arriving in/on pick-up trucks and ATVs. Around 5 p.m., a couple of locals on ATVs arrived to tell us the plane was delayed in Barrow. Apparently, the single town fuel truck left the airport for an undisclosed place and reason. Par for the course in Alaska. They estimated it would be here by 6. The only good thing: larger planes used actual instruments for guidance. Thus, it was extremely likely the pilots were not going to abandon us in the fog/light snow. But 6 p.m. rolled around and still no plane. Joe encouraged us to warm up walking down the airstrip to look at the whale carcass. Ginnie and I declined. At 6:30, 6-8 vehicles showed up, including the Fairbanks author and friend (notably transported by the Waldo Arms airport shuttle service - i.e. the owners in their pick-up). And, within minutes, we could hear the plane banking a wide turn as it aimed for the runway. For a 20-seater

turbo-prop, our little plane was simply splendid. After numerous boxes were unloaded from the plane, our heaping pile of our gear was jammed into the surprisingly large rear of the plane. Because this was a commercial flight, there was some initial concern expressed about our empty propane tanks. But Joe and Mike had done whatever they were supposed to do to flush the system, rendering them convincing enough to place on board. The nearly all-black plane interior made it seem - to me - like some swank leathery private jet... even though we were crammed into tiny, narrow seats (1 on each side). With no fanfare, we were back in the air. Given the clouds, I held no hope for actually seeing anything during the flight. Thus, I was SHOCKED when, about 15 minutes later, we could actually see Mts. Chamberlin and Michelson... not to mention being precisely OVER Mt. Mush (the annoying hike) and a huge expanse of the HH itself. Indeed, we were pretty much flying precisely up the HH river drainage and over (WAY higher) the notch we'd come over 12 days ago. The total flight was about 90 minutes, during which time we learned that several fires had broken out north of Fairbanks, leaving the air smoky once we were south of the Brooks Range. Although it was currently hot and sunny in Fairbanks, they had also been subjected to several days of unseasonably high winds and rain - and thus we considered ourselves lucky to have enjoyed our mostly dry and sunny weather. Unfortunately, Mike would report that his truck canopy had leaked while parked outside the B&B, leaving tons of gear moldy. Despite HUGE towers of thunderhead-like clouds, the flight was smooth as butter. After landing around 8:30, we made an interesting journey through hoards of flight-bound cruise ship passengers (even in landlocked Fairbanks, you could not escape the damn cruise industry!!!!!!). Still in 2-4 layers and filthy, we earned a full-on comment by this woman who notably remarked: it looks like you've seen Alaska in a very different way than us. NO SHIT! Mike - who, indeed, had cleaned up nicely (having arrived over 3 hours ago) - was near the gate waiting for us.

The plan was to meet at Pike's Landing - along the Chena River and near the airport - at 10:15 for our final team meal. Sarah G. and I both rented cars again, and helped to ferry folks back to the B&B. It should be noted that Sarah and I were the only ones staying in Fairbanks after the trip, also both heading to Denali for 4 days via train in 2-3 days. After dropping my carload off, I made my way to downtown Fairbanks - to the Best Western's cheap sister hotel, my home for a few nights (and my home again after Denali. After a quick shower and change, I was back to the B&B by 10:10. Given that it was the official solstice evening, it was sort of nuts everywhere. Although it had been warm, 10 p.m. in Fairbanks is still cold and wearing shorts was not the right decision. Folks seemed more tired and spread out than we'd been after the Alsek. Indeed, trying to socialize at a loud and crowded restaurant with 10 people around 2 tables was more difficult. I knew LONG in advance that I was not going to have the emotional response to this trip that I'd had to the Alsek. Following a late and so-so meal (over-battered coconut shrimp, lukewarm French fries, and too-runny coleslaw), it was 5 to midnight. Half the passengers headed downtown where, supposedly, there were more festivities. But the rest of us - me included - were ready for bed. Although there was talk about getting together in the morning, only Ginnie and I met for breakfast and shopping - mostly by accident (i.e. her flight was 3 hours late). As can be imagined, my sleeping patterns and body temperature were fucked up for a couple weeks after this trip. That first night was like trying to sleep in a sauna - sweat unending because I was so NOT used to being in a space with central heating. After breakfast with Ginnie - including a no-holds-bar discussion of trip - I attempted to enjoy the being-remodeled university museum (but it was WAY too crowded and unkempt). After a little more shopping (I was CRAVING cotton, having been suffocated by synthetics), I returned to do laundry and sleep off the rest of the day.

Conclusions About the HH, Visiting the Arctic

This is a hard section to write up, I'm afraid - and it is because the Alsek had been so perfect and grand. Brock will likely someday read that and roll his eyes because I suspect he was worried that would happen. Indeed, everything about the Alsek will live on for years - just like Patagonia and the All-Boyz Trip to Yellowstone. Anyway, here are my itemized thoughts: First of all, I went into this trip knowing I would be less impressed with the scenery than I had been with the Alsek's massive glaciers and towering peaks. For better or worse, I would say that the Brooks Range and tundra precisely met my expectations. Being a glacier, snow, and granite person, I found the crumbling and rounded peaks of the Brooks Range to be more desert-like. Even the ice on the Arctic Ocean was mostly flat and barren - opposed to towering and blue. However, the aurface did amaze and scare me. After this trip, I made it through half of Lopez' Arctic Dreams and wish I'd read that before the trip so maybe I'd appreciate the landscape for its different and desert-like qualities. I was also expecting the landscape to be more alive-looking with summer-bursting plants. Although signs of foliage were abundant if you were eye-level in the tundra, the overall vista of the land was brown, gold, and autumnal - somewhat unsatisfying given how much I had been craving summer mountain colors. Even so, I did find the challenge of photographing the region satisfying - probably because I had, before the trip, found a website of artists who ran the HH and posted their stunning watercolors and oil paintings as part of a refuge protection project. In terms of the river (or should I say rivers), I had WAY bigger expectations of more whitewater and there is no way to avoid saying that the HH rapids were a letdown. Aside from the cold water, aurface, and rock-parking, though, I perceived little danger or urgency about most paddling the first 7 days. After that, I perceived more danger/urgency in our need to get to the ocean fast once we realized we'd flooded into the Nataroarok, and during the infamous paddle on the ocean. Doing what paddling I did and watching the paddlers in my boat, was sometimes frustrating. Even though the moves did not seem as demanding most of the time, the paddlers were always occupied - and I detected that some folks felt Joe was not calling appropriate stops (or not paying attention to call them) and/or would have wanted to take more pictures. I can't speak for folks on Mike's boat - but I felt especially sorry for Sarah G. who was not asked to paddle until around day 8 (notably when someone else's hand/wrist started going) - despite extensive experience sea kayaking and rafting. I know she often felt left out and, sadly, I think it had a lot to do with perceptions about her age. In terms of the weather, I want to first recall a memorable question Joe (seriously) asked back in Fairbanks: was going this early in the season worth it? Joe remains one of the few guides I have ever worked with who readily recounted other trips and passengers, the majority of which seemed wrought with serious weather-related problems (that lent to REALLY bad portaging, delays, mutiny attempts, etc.). Although I appreciate his candor, I question whether this topic sends the wrong message and makes people lose their trust. Although I like to be honest as a leader, I am extremely conscious about over-discussing negative trips because I think you can come across as a bad karma magnet - either that, or you do have to ask yourself why so many of your trips turn out that way. Joe's question made me wonder whether he sincerely/finally thought there had been too many weather/season-related problems to justify rafting the HH so early. Initially, I assumed folks did the HH early so there was enough flow to have big whitewater.

But, having now seen it, I'm like - what big water? While I CAN appreciate going early to avoid bugs, I'm not sure if it is enough to justify enduring all the unknowns with augeice and extreme cold. Case in point: the Firth River is only commercially run in August - bugs and all. And - just for the record: if someone threatened me with doing another arctic river - I would choose the Firth. Lastly, in terms of wildlife - this is a tough section for a couple of reasons. While on the river, I would have said only great things about our wildlife sightings. And, regardless, our rate and diversity of sightings was spectacular. However, I then went to Denali and, in a matter of hours, this park blew the HH out of the water in terms of megafauna numbers. Although some caribou frequent the HH drainage, it is not as caribou-rich as the Kongakut or Firth - so if you want to see caribou, I'd recommend those trips based on a lot of trip feedback from guides and passengers. Bird people - of which I am not one - will LOVE this trip (although they would probably equally love any trip to the Arctic Refuge). Finally, the grizzly situation. I was shocked we saw any grizzlies on this trip given that they are reported to be so much more prevalent in southeast Alaska. Given the immense openness of the land, I really did not question our safety in terms of bears. But then I returned home to find out that a couple from Anchorage - literally camped 3 miles from us - was mauled/killed in their sleep by a marauding grizzly. This happened about 15 miles from the ocean while we were on the Nataroark and they were on the HH. Their camp was said to have been in perfect order - and they even had an undischarged gun in the tent with them. This news was truly chilling to me - not only because it was so close but also because I kept wondering if our party's sometimes loud and late-evening antics had pissed off this bear, sending it on a rampage across the tundra to the HH. Given all these things, I would be more hesitant to do another Arctic River. I think it's the kind of trip people who enjoy wilderness should do once, the kind of place that needs to be experienced directly to understand - and I'm glad to have survived the variation we did. But I knowingly chose the word "survive" because that is what it sometimes felt like. The Alsek is to enjoy. The HH is to survive - and I'm sure glad I put it on my before-60 list.



Left to Right: Denali from the air, major glacial river (likely from the Muldrow), the most frequent view of Denali (from the bus)

June 23-26, 2005 - Denali

My responses to Denali - which have been called over-the-top by some friends - are likely colored and elevated by having visited it immediately after the challenging and desert-like Arctic Refuge. But it would be wrong to say that seeing ANY green would have impressed me. Knowing that 11 nights camping in the Arctic was probably not going to be comfortable, I had - long in advance - booked 4 very luxurious days in Denali. Many people I know have told me horror stories about Denali, including the frequent complaint that they never see the mountain (and, for the record, I will not be calling the mountain McKinley - it has always been Denali to me). A lot of people say the same thing about Rainier - but that has obviously not been a problem for me. Denali is an interesting park with fascinating access regulations. First, you can't bring your car into the park - which means you have to get on a bus (national park, official tour, or lodge-operated). The exception is some lottery-driven free-access period in September - about which I know little more. Second, there are few official hiking trails in the park. People who manage to get permits to backpack do so cross-country using minimum impact methods. For folks who don't want to camp, there are 4 backcountry lodges - all located at the very distant end of the main park road (Kantishna, about 100 miles driving - which, given the roads, takes anywhere from 4-7 hours). All are expensive (averaging \$400 per person per night) - although they include meals and guide services for many daily activities. The place I chose was Denali Backcountry Lodge (DBL) and I would recommend them highly. Prices there are mid-range in comparison with those of other lodges (North Face = \$\$\$, Kantishna Roadhouse = \$\$, Camp Denali = \$). As an aside, Camp Denali is the oldest of these lodges - apparently started by a pair of women in the 1950's or 60's as the first "eco-tourism" destination of its kind in the US. Something in the way our hiking guide told this story suggested they were lovers - notable because Alaska has such manly-man associations that need dispelling. To access Denali, I rode my first real train (at least as an adult) - from Fairbanks. Although I was looking forward to this experience, I cannot recommend it to people who - say - spend as much time outdoors as me. The views were limited and uninteresting, and the damn train moved at an annoyingly slow speed of 30-35 mph. The train system also has an interesting relationship with the public high schools, training and hiring students in the summers to promote tourism and retention of Alaskans in Alaska (which, given personal history with 2 ex-Alaskans, remains a problem).

Anyway, I left Fairbanks around 8 from the new train station (so new, in fact, that my shuttle driver did not know it existed; and he had lived in Fairbanks for 10 years, having moved here from Detroit because he was "tired of all the guns"). Although the weather was pleasant in Fairbanks, it was nasty and drizzly at the Denali station. The only mildly interesting scenery was the last 30 minutes when we rode through the Nenana River gorge, a popular whitewater rafting destination (albeit only via short daytrips). Sadly, however, the access rules that govern Denali have spawned an UGLY explosion of development outside and along the park boundary. Large hotels scarred the land - the valley/canyon walls, in many places, stripped, leveled, or scraped clean to accommodate them. Disturbingly, a lot of recent expansion is directly related to the cruise ship industry - that is also sleeping with the railroad. Interestingly, the cruise lines pay the railroad to attach their own well-labeled, private cars to the main train body. Regardless, once all those people arrive, there's little room in the park - so everything outside is being over-developed. The DBL bus was not scheduled to pick us up until 1 and so I needed to find cover from the rain. All new park entrance facilities stood among dripping trees a few 100 yards away: visitor center, gift shop, and cafeteria. The latter was

annoying given that the railroad staff - ignorantly or selfishly - said there would be no food at the entrance, causing me to spend \$12 on a nasty train sandwich and drink. After retiring to the visitor center for an hour, I returned to the train station where an older single woman and a large family of 7 from New York stood waiting for DBL. It would be another 25 minutes before the bus showed up. Prior to doing this ride, I had been dreading spending 7 hours on a bus - even if it was in Denali. I don't know where those hours went but they were amazing. Not even the kids ever got bored or whiny. For the first hour, we climbed through vast brushy meadows with stands of trees. En route, we passed a cluster of low hills dotted with 40-50 dall sheep, requiring a big stop. We made our first major bathroom/snack break at Teklanika River. It was refreshing to see nothing but busloads of people and no cars. I was also amazed by the number and cleanliness of pit toilets - something other parks should aspire to. Everywhere above: green, green, green.



Left to Right: buside views of mountains, cliff-hanging road towards Polychrome Pass, DBL cabins

As we climbed back into the bus, we were memorably treated to the most remarkable home-baked peanut butter cookies I have had in years. At different points along this section, we stopped to see 7 grizzlies (4 in a single field of view), 1 wolf (who darted in front of the bus and loped a whole minute along the side of the road), 2 foxes (both outside a well-known den), and 5 caribou. I'd love to tell you I have awesome pictures of the animals but my little Pentax was not going to do the job from the window of a bus (and you are not allowed outside except at designated stops - which do not include random animal sightings). We were told that only 30-60 wolves and 200-300 grizzly live in the park, owing to its low carrying capacity (compare that with 1000 wolves and 600 grizzly in Yellowstone). Shockingly, Alaska's governor has made killing alpha wolves outside the park state policy - in an effort to keep the moose population high for tourist hunters who want this trophy animal. We then crossed another major river channel on a substantial bridge and began the long ascent of Polychrome Pass. Although I could have driven this in my car, there were many hairy edges (none with railings) that were frightening. After 40-60 more minutes of contouring, we passed the currently-closed Eielson visitor center. I believe this spot represented the first theoretical location where Denali was visible - but I cannot be certain given the cloud-cover. We then proceeded through perhaps the only dull section: a long ascending drive by these low green hills - the bulk of whatever huge valley lies beneath the Denali massif. Several large glaciers and river systems were pointed out across this expanse, although the visible portions of most were heavily covered in rocky debris (i.e. not big white or blue things). After crossing another mini-pass, we began a LONG and gradual drop through brush, ponds (most housing busy beavers), and tundra to Wonder Lake, gateway to the interesting community at Kantishna. Our enthusiastic driver remained hopeful that we would see our 1 missing park mega-fauna (the moose), threatening that if we didn't - she was going to call ahead and have DBL staff put on the costume and run around by the lake. I may be mistaken but I believe we actually passed/stopped at Reflection Pond prior to Wonder Lake. The latter is famous because Ansel Adams' images of Denali were taken here - not, as is commonly thought, Wonder. We stopped at Wonder because a mother moose with 2 calves was marching through another shallow pond across the road. As we all were focused in said direction, I happened to glance back toward Reflection and, damn, if the clouds didn't briefly part - revealing this small but glowing gold face of Denali. At the lodge (5 minutes away), we were greeted by the mostly-female staff (including owners, guides/naturalists, and cooking/cleaning). Being that we were slightly tardy for the "late dinner" (8 p.m. - as opposed to the early dinner shift at 6), we were asked to unload gear, quickly freshen up, and return to the main hall for food. DBL scored big points for awesome rooms - although I did share a wall with kids who, I can assure you, were not as well-behaved as they had been on the bus. I was also slightly disappointed there wasn't a full-on bathtub. Following an excellent dinner, the lead guide gave an overview of tomorrow's activities and we were introduced to the representative from the Kantishna Air (who did know HH Mike), the only official company that runs tours on this side of the mountain. Many other companies run flying tours from the south side of Denali, including those chartered by climbing parties (they come in on aircraft with skis, landing at the glacial climbers' camp at about 10K feet). Alas, though, Kantishna didn't do any glacier landing - just flight tours and flights to/from Denali from as far away as Fairbanks and Anchorage. Were I to do this trip again, I would take the bus in - but then I'd take Kantishna Air back. I had long made the decision that - if I did survive the Arctic bush flights - I would be spend about \$250 on Denali flight tours. I actually had no idea how cheap the tours were (\$100-125 per person for an hour); given this prelude, it should be no surprise that I went out twice. Since I didn't know much about the DBL hike ratings (easy, moderate, challenging), I decided to it safe and sign up for a moderate hike tomorrow (to a moraine down in the valley under Denali). I promptly retired at 9 p.m. and, after 30 minutes of child noises, thoroughly enjoyed a luxurious sleep.

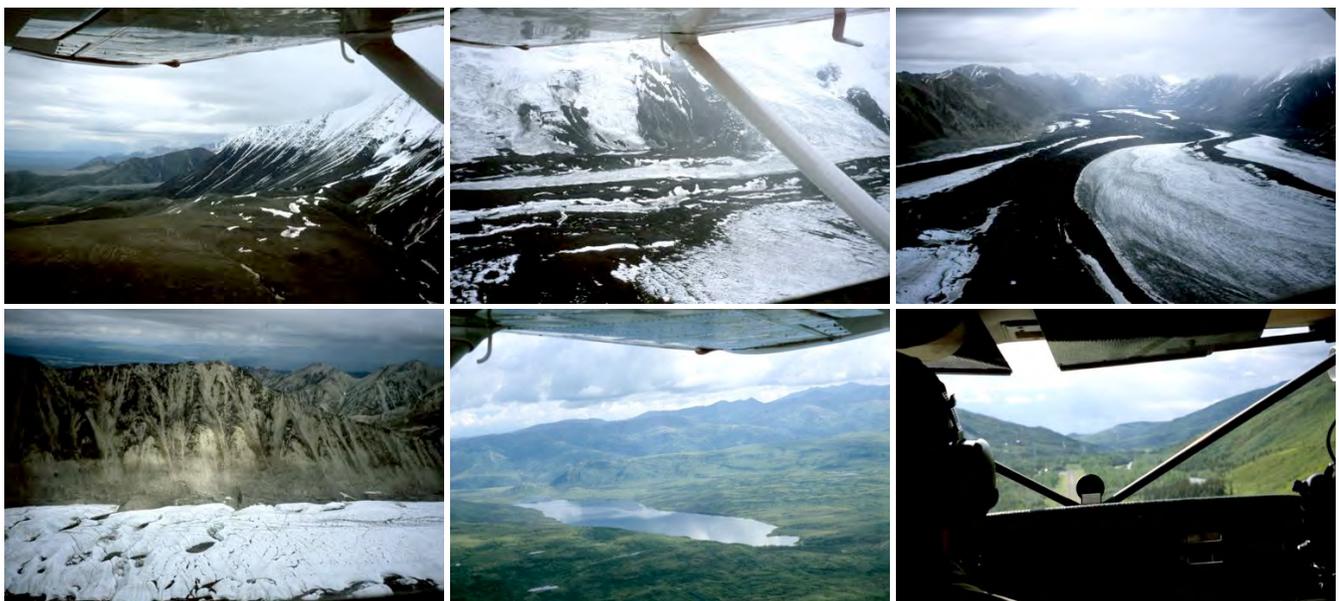
The next morning, I noticed that the challenging hike was cancelled (no takers). And then I overheard this couple (who turned out to be from Eugene) discussing with the challenging hike leader the option of climbing Mt. Bouchet - a substantial peak above Kantishna (2500-3000 feet gained/lost). Pretty soon, they had goaded me and another couple into this climb. Our leader was this WAY tough woman (Sherry) who formerly had guided the Kongakut (not with AD). At first, Sherry didn't look like she trusted me because I was a new face (the other couples had proven themselves earlier in the week). But we all got along splendidly once we started hiking - despite an extremely foul-weather day. At around 9:15, a DBL van dropped us 5 minutes from Wonder Lake. A faint path lead up wet brush, leaving shoes and pants instantly wet. And, yes, I did wear actual boots (and got actual blisters). Within 10 minutes, the path vanished and we were told to fan out and make our way down to

and across this creek; Sherry essentially pointed across this valley to a clearing and said: everyone go there using different routes. She had no real concerns about large animals, which - early on - was nerve-racking. It was then that I realized DBL ratings were extremely hardcore. Although most folks fought heavy brush, me and Eugene guy descended through an open gully, crossed the tiny creek, and found another social path to the clearing. Even so, we were ALL walking on spongy, wet tundra. From here, it was up, up, up this LONG semi-spongy hogback to the rocky summit. Of course, it then began to DUMP. At the time, I thought: hmmm, this is the wettest I've been hiking in years (and then I did the Alps...). At the summit, temperatures plummeted as winds picked up. Shivering, we downed sandwiches and continued along the open ridge for 20 minutes - at which point we descended a different hogback, following a muddy social trail. We were all SO wet that, by the end, we slogged full-shoe through everything. Although we received some weather reprieves, the skies dumped again as we hit the valley floor. Also, ANY time it was nice, CLOUDS of mosquitoes appeared - to the point we all donned our face nets. At the bottom, we hiked old roads through dense foliage, passing dilapidated cabins with mine tailing piles. Sadly, we approached the lodge through staff housing: tent cabins assigned to everyone from dishwasher to guide. It looked like a shoddy MASH unit and I felt sorry for the hard lifestyles these folks accept to hold such positions. Given that were done by an astonishing 2:30, I enjoyed a LONG nap - and, later, another fabulous dinner of braised lamb shanks. At some point, I reserved a flight-tour for the next morning. I also joined several others for the 9 p.m. ride to Wonder Lake - a nightly event given the mountain's propensity to appear in the evenings.



Left to Right: Mt. Boucher hike - nearing summit, on summit, returning to lodge

Given my 10:30 a.m. flight-tour, I enjoyed a leisurely morning before the 5-minute van-ride down to the airstrip. Kantishna planes each seated 6, with 4-5 flights taking off at a time. Amazingly, my pilot was Roger from Hillsboro (a famous city for flying in Oregon that hosts our International Air Show). Roger, in blue suede Birkenstocks (seriously), laughed about needing to give me a Mike Discount (he actually tried to when I came back for more). Within minutes, we were in the air - and I was suddenly nervous, wondering how I thought to get into another bush plane. Planes take off north and circle back around several low hills, including Bouchet (shown earlier from the air). We then flew over the lake-laden tundra - a thick blanket of white overhead. Roger hoped to poke through the clouds near Gunsight Pass (just west of Denali) but, alas, things were too socked in. We made this stomach-lurching turn by the Wickersham Wall (Denali's north face) and Roger took us on a gorgeous tour up/down several glaciers, the best being Muldrow (shown in most shots below) - how early climbers, and climbers who don't want to cheat by flying, approach/ed the mountain. The left shot/middle row shows the pass leading down to the Muldrow by which climbers typically start their glacier ascent. Wonder Lake is also shown in the bottom row. Although I would later see the whole mountain, I found this tour - even without the summit - totally worth it. Notably, Roger was the first pilot in the air and the last on the ground, testimony to how much he wanted us to see as much as possible.



All Shots: flight tour number one in order - approaching Denali, various shots of glaciers, Wonder Lake, landing

After the flight, I enjoyed an excellent lunch and lazed around in the sun by the river, reading and finishing my journals - and, no doubt, vanished to my sunny room for a long nap. I don't recall dinner specifics because the Kantishna Air folks showed up

with word that the mountain was coming out. Me and this other older woman (my seat neighbor from this morning), said: what the hell? And there I was again, wondering how I thought to get on another bush plane. Our flight plan this time was different, although the cloud situation almost didn't look promising. But Denali's summit was, unlike this morning, visible - albeit above puffy white clouds. As we neared the range, Roger began seriously spiraling upward. I hadn't really thought about this - but it's not like, given the short distance - you can go from 0 to 14,000 feet quickly. I think we made about 4-5 big spirals that definitely made my head spin. I also hadn't thought about the fact that these small planes could not fly above around 14,000... and thus we would be far below Denali's over-20K summit. Notions that we were going to, like, fly over the summit were wrong. I don't know how high Gunsight Pass is but that was our aim. As we went over it, we flew not only through dynamic clouds but also by these HUGE hanging glaciers - maybe 1/8 mile from the window. Often times when I am flying, I try to calm down by trying to pretend the views are, like, TV (i.e. not real); given all the sensations of this flight, however, I was never able to talk myself out of the massive reality out the window. We crossed to the south side of the mountain and it was fucking awesome: this huge cirque surrounded on nearly all sides by steep, glaciated, rocky peaks. A LONG flat glacier proceeded as far as the eye could see southwest, forming the only side of the cirque without ramparts of rock and careening ice. At some point, Roger tipped the wing for a nearly straight-down view to the climbers' camp - a collection of maybe 10 tents and gear several thousand feet below. I thought I was going to lose dinner - and, needless to say, did not get a clear shot (not that the tiny tent dots would have shown up). We spiraled a little more, flying near the true summit - which is, contrary to popular belief, not visible from the north side. The complicated faces of Denali and the strangely more rocky south side were truly incredible and I felt totally privileged and lucky to have gotten these amazing views. Roger, though, did not dally with any extensive stay on the south side. You could tell he was a bit nervous that the Gunsight cloud situation could go either way (in fact, it actually grew more clear as the night - and last round of flight tours - progressed). And so we headed back through the puffy white clouds and spiraled back down near the Muldrow Glacier - and back to the lodge. For being a quiet man, Roger was clearly ecstatic we'd gotten our great views! The Mike Discount that Roger attempted to give me was returned in the form of a tip.



Left to Right: flying through Gunsight Pass, over basecamp, complex summits and false summits of Denali

Given that we returned after 9, it was time to pack and go to bed. Tomorrow featured an ungodly early breakfast followed by a 6 a.m. shuttle departure. Making matters worse, my train didn't leave until 4, meaning a 5-6 hour wait at the park entrance. But the skies were crystal clear as we left - permitting 2 hours of seeing Denali against cloudless blue skies. Of course, after and beyond that, clouds were well on their way to socking everything in again. In contrast with the ride in, the ride out was only to take 4-5 hours - NOT stopping for every animal sighting. We did stop at both Wonder Lake and Reflection Pond given the spectacular views, our driver insisting this was the first such day of the month. But after that, we only made stops at Polychrome Pass and Teklanika. At the final stop, we were approached by 2 ragged climbers, both still wearing all their gear. Word quickly spread that they were the leaders of a group who had just spent an extra 7 days coming down the Muldrow Glacier because the crevasses had opened so severely. Apparently, crossing this section in good conditions usually takes about 15 hours. The more vocal of the 2 said they had managed to fit the rest of the group on a late bus yesterday. Meanwhile, these 2 hadn't eaten in 36 hours and were asking anyone on our bus for food. While the driver handed out cookies and granola bars, I handed over my MASSIVE ham and cheese sandwich. The more vocal leader was extremely thankful and eagerly shared it with his co-leader/friend. I felt such respect for anyone who could manage anything on Denali - and I felt I owed someone for the amazing weather and views today. Of course, the main dude was also a cute redhead and I have a weak spot for redhead climbers - regardless of their level of starvation or ability to deal with Denali.



Left to Right: Wonder Lake views of Denali and Alaska Range during morning drive out, train station

Once back at the train station, I - with only \$4 cash on my person (and no ATMs in walking distance) - bought hot cocoa and tea at the cafeteria, and sat reading for 2 hours. I blew another hour at the gift shop - followed by whatever time was left at the

visitor center (the downstairs nature exhibit of which, I discovered, was still under construction - as in: artists/naturalists building wilderness scenes while the public watched). And then it was back to the exceedingly busy railroad station, the train arriving 15 minutes late. Even so, I had nearly a whole car to myself - which seemed ironic given all the cruise ship patrons clamoring into jammed, private cars with too-large logos. Thankfully, the train cafeteria did take debit cards - and so I finally enjoyed sustenance. Back in Fairbanks, the hotel shuttle amusingly picked up me and half a dozen railroad employees - and I got to see the light, funny, and slightly crude side of these otherwise polite and overdressed individuals. After a leisurely morning, I hopped another hotel shuttle to the airport for my noontime flight home. Although the hour-long flight to Anchorage was pleasant (featuring more views of Denali and a great conversation with several scientists returning from an arctic/polar research cruise), my flight to Portland was 90 minutes late, leaving MANY angry passengers who became extremely vocal at the crowded gate (the mob booed this well-dressed business woman who had the nerve to come forward when "people with special needs" were called for boarding). Once finally on board, though, my window seat view of the whole coastal mountains all the way to Washington was SPECTACULAR. Indeed, we even saw Mt. Fairweather in all her glory - and well up the Alsek, leaving my heart longing to return to that amazing love of mine. For the month after this double trip to Alaska, Denali was all I could talk about. Although I certainly plan to return there someday, though, my rationale brain did kick in while I was struggling with nasty-ass weather and viewless frustration in the European Alps - because, indeed, I KNOW that's how some people feel about Denali and Alaska. But Denali was EXACTLY what I needed after the HH trip. I do freely admit, though, that I think my response to the flight-tours would be equal regardless - because they were something. Of course, I don't think I would have had to balls to do them had I not been prepared by my experiences on the HH. So - it's a catch-22.