

### **Trip Reports:**

I just got off the Tat/Alsek on August 24, with a put-in of August 14. What a wonderful trip, just off the scale of anything I've ever done before!

We staged from Haines. Two of our group drove to Haines with my cataraft and gear, while four of us flew from Pittsburgh to Seattle, then to Juneau, then we took the fast ferry of the Alaska Marine Highway from Juneau to Haines (2 hour trip.)

We used Stan Boor as our outfitter, email [skiboor@hotmail.com](mailto:skiboor@hotmail.com). It's better to call him, his phones # are (907) 766-3307 and (801) 571-5980.

A guidebook and map are available from Cloudburst Productions at: [www.cloudburstproductions.net/about.html](http://www.cloudburstproductions.net/about.html).

We rented a sat phone from Alaska Guides and Climbing School in Haines, Phones (907) 766-3366 and (800) 766-3396, email: [climb@alaskamountainguides.com](mailto:climb@alaskamountainguides.com)

I recommend going to the put-in early in the morning, rigging, then running the 14 miles through the canyon and camping below. The river runs at least 6 mph at that point. We made it in less than 3 hours. The canyon is continuous Class III when we did it, technical but we did it at low water. I understand that in July it will be higher, less technical, with holes and reactionaries. I have read that the difficulty level can go up at higher water. It is not to be underestimated, it is not pool/drop but continuous with sharp rocks, and many groups have had a lot of problems there, but we didn't have any trouble with it.

The guidebook recommends camps, and we found the recommendations to be good, but there are other camps that aren't in the book that are fine also. Sediments Creek on the second day has a two-part hike, we just did the lower part but you can go clear up to the alpine. The hike is in the book. This makes a good layover camp, but you can only have one layover day at any of the three best camps, Sediments Creek, Walker Glacier, and Gateway Knob. We also really liked the Melt Creek camp, we camped on a point of land just downstream of the Melt Creek outwash delta kind of between the creek and the river. We saw several bears there, a grizzly crossing the creek and a blackie swimming across the river directly toward us. (It veered off downstream when it saw us.)

Below the canyon there are braided channels like none I have seen. One channel will have other channels draining into it and gain more water, while another channel will have channels draining out of it and lose water. The choice is not obvious, either, as you can't see what the channel is going to do ahead. If you choose wrong, you'll likely get hung up on shallow areas and have to push the boat for awhile until you get to another channel. If you choose correctly, that's ok for about a few hundred yards, until you have to choose again with the same consequences. Another problem is that it is not always obvious where the current splits for the various channels, and you may quickly be sucked into a channel you didn't intend with

no way of jumping channels due to the speed of the current. Also, the raft behind you could be sucked into another channel, to disappear for up to 20 minutes or so, until you are reunited when the channels converge a couple of miles downstream. It is unnerving to lose all sight of your companions on the river and yet still be side-by-side. The river gets 1/2 mile wide in spots, and later on, a mile wide. It may be better with more water in July, hopefully some of the shallowest channels are better padded.

We got on the Alsek at 100,000 cfs, but in July it isn't that high. It is a huge and impressive river. After entering the Alsek, don't miss Walker Glacier, you can hike on the Glacier--a great experience. On downstream, the entrance into the lake can be tricky. The guidebook describes Doors 1,2, and 3 into the lake and describes the scouting spot very well for checking out the doors. When we scouted, we discovered that Doors 1 and 2 were completely blocked by icebergs with no possibility of making it by. We took Door 3, which is often too low, but in our case it was fine and we camped on Gateway Knob, which is a great camp--you can watch the bergs. I can't recommend enough the importance of scouting--the channel into the lake is called the Channel of Death, and when you see the bergs, you can understand why it can be so dangerous. Some are up to 150 feet high. We watched them turn over and calve, and send waves up the beach. Apparently the winds tend to blow the bergs against the entrances to the lake. We did discover that you can't see everything from the scouting spot on Doors 1 and 2, but it gives you an idea of whether you can get by.

We saw 12 bears, some grizzly and some blackies. None of them bothered us, we kept a clean camp and kept the food and coolers stored on the boats. You are supposed to burn all of your trash, including food leftovers. We rented bear spray from Stan and took airhorns to scare away any bears, but we didn't have to use any of them. Firearms are prohibited in the Canadian parks, and Stan said that the commercial groups haven't taken firearms since the early 90s. He didn't feel they were necessary. We felt that having firearms in camp might be more dangerous to us than to the bears.

For our flyout from Dry Bay we used Alsek Air, out of Yakutat, it is on the Internet. Les of Alsek Air arranged another plane to fly the gear and a couple of guys back to Haines, and he flew four of us to Yakutat to fly home. This can get complicated, but if you're flying and not driving, it is better to fly out to Yakutat, since you have little or no chance of getting fogged in and stranded at Dry Bay. The gear and at least one person have to fly back to Haines, and it does get fogged in sometimes, so this person may get stuck at Dry Bay for a day or several. Also, the plane to Haines is \$790, while the plane to Yakutat is only \$290 (or something like that.) We then flew from Yakutat to Juneau and from Juneau to Seattle and from Seattle to Pittsburgh.

In general, the logistics were daunting but we worked through them. Don't be deceived by the rating for the river, that is, that it appears to be not whitewater. It is big, and some of the flatwater had 3 foot wave trains, and often there were big hydraulics in spots, and strainers near the banks. These were usually easily

avoided, but you have to be vigilant. The scope of the river and the braided channels, and the real possibility of the group getting split up make the trip for folks that are experienced river runners. Look out for upstream-pointing wood, also. You might want to read some of the trip reports that are in the archives of the message boards. Some are pretty illuminating.

Hope this is helpful, feel free to email with questions, and I hope you have a great trip. It is awesome (in the traditional sense) beyond belief.

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Just got back from two months in coooool Alaska--why am I in Tucson??

The Tat runs about 120 miles from near Haines Junction Canada to Dry Bay Alaska. It is wilderness all the way.

We made the Tatshenshini into a real adventure. We under-estimated the undertaking and were very casual about it---we paid.

I wasn't rowing since we decided to go with only two rafts for five guys to cut expense on the fly-out at Dry Bay. That was a mistake. We loaded the boats like for a Grand Canyon trip without regard to weight and they were very heavy. It turned out we had to pay for two planes anyway so we should have taken three boats with lighter loads.

We put in on June 17th. Water was very high because the spring thaw was late in the area. In fact when I stopped by in late May on my way to a fishing trip in Homer the road to the put-in at Dalton Post was still closed with snow and mud. This road is about 40 miles west of Haines Junction. It is unsigned and I had trouble finding it; local inquiries were no help. I finally found it by driving to the Blanchard River bridge on the highway and then driving back east seven miles to the road.

The canyon section on the first day was very high with many class-five features. Our boat hit 37 of a possible 40 targets (my estimate) including rocks, pour-overs, snags and cliffs. It was only by the grace of God we didn't flip. This would have been bad since we decided this river was nothing compared to the Grand Canyon so we didn't take wet suits. It would have been a long swim in this section.

The next few days were pretty mellow except for navigating the braided river and gravel bars which would have been a lot easier in lighter boats. Hip boots were better than knee-high boots for pulling the boats.

Our next adventure was dramatic but short-lived. A feature of the river that haunted us were snags that pointed upstream. We watched for them but one boat got speared by a three-inch branch that jammed between the frame and the tube, then behind his seat and under some gear that was strapped down. The entire boat levered out of the water. Luckily a quick high-side broke the log and freed the boat with no damage.

A few miles above the confluence with the Alsek, Bob Finkbine

aka "Fink" (who has been rowing for over 30 years) was telling a great story when he hit a hole on the right side of the river. We were kicked off to a rock outcropping on the bank and then wrapped a point of rock (Fink's Point). We high-sided and Fink was offering the observation that "well, at least we can't flip" when the lower tube was torn open and we did flip.

Fink and the other passenger swam to a nearby gravel bar while yours truly climbed on the overturned boat and was swept downstream. The other boat had seen the problem coming and had pulled over to wait for us. They threw me a rope but I was way too far out and I wasn't inclined to try the swim in the 48-degree water with a 7-mph current. They stayed there to pick up the other guys.

I stayed on the overturned boat thinking about the Alsek coming up. It is a mile or more wide with up to 300,000 cfs braiding through a dozen channels. I saw myself ending up in Dry Bay some 65 miles away on top of the boat. But, I didn't see myself arriving there alive as I was freezing (no wet suit for this casual river and temperature was 45 degrees with rain that day). Finally, the boat passed a gravel bar close enough and I jumped in and swam a short distance to shore. After a while the other boat showed up and the five of us were soon back on the river looking for Fink's boat.

It was eddied out within a half mile. We righted it and floated for a short distance to camp on river left. The next day we sewed up the 40-inch, L-shaped tear in the tube after stuffing it with empty 7-gallon water jugs and a couple of extra pfd's. Unfortunately, nobody thought to let air out of the other side of the boat and as the sun warmed it blew out the front baffle. Now, half the boat was without flotation except for our jury-rig jugs. We solved this, kind of, by carefully cutting out the non-removable thwarts and stuffing them in the other side from the water jugs. God, it was ugly but the boat floated and off we were.

We were not done adventuring yet, however. As we approached Alsek Lake we encountered a bit of red flagging on a branch on the right bank. We were still trying to figure out what it meant when Fink in the lead boat started back-rowing like crazy as he approached a wall of ice. We thought the river passed by this feature but we were wrong. This was the famous "ice dam" created when the ice floes from the huge Alsek glacier get blown across the lake and block the mouth of the river. Some are unbelievably huge--as big as ocean-going ships. The river flows under and between them.

Fink's boat got sucked between a couple of big floes and disappeared. We managed to pull to a bar on the right. We heard a couple of toots from their air horn and then nothing for a hour. We thought they were dead as we saw several of the huge floes turn over in that hour creating big waves. Then we heard a shout and saw someone waving an oar about a quarter-mile away in the middle of the ice field. Later we learned the passenger had jumped out with the radio when the boat was squeezed to an almost vertical position between two converging ice floes. He was talked back into the boat when the ice floes separated. They continued to push through the field and emerged on the lake after another hour.

We camped and waited till the next day when a lead opened on the right through the dam. We rowed and pushed through as fast as we could. The rest of the trip was uneventful, although the slog through the sloughs to get to the airstrip was a drag. Just keep turning left.

The weather was unusually good on the trip and we had little rain, a lot of sun and great views of the mountains and glaciers. Mosquitoes were bearable if we stayed out of the woods.

We saw lots of ducks, bald eagles and a few moose but no bears which is unusual for this river. Trips before and after us saw bunches of brown and black bears, including some in camp.. We did see fresh bear tracks at every campsite, as well as wolf tracks and just about everything other kind of track from porcupine to wolverine.

The ranger at the take-out commented that he always wondered what would happen if someone hit the hole that caused our flip. That about summed up our trip--our problems were self-inflicted. But they did not stop us from having the time of our lives and we all want to go back.

Bob Kerry in Tucson

#### TATSHENSHINI: S-TURNS AND DISASTER

After eating lunch and refilling our water jugs at Towagh Creek springs, we pushed off into the icy, turbid, glacier melt of the lower Tat. My family and I were running lead in front of 4 other boats with my friend Doug running sweep. The afternoon weather was like most of the others, sunny, warm and visibility endless, totally not what we expected. The only way to describe what we were seeing as we were racing by in the powerful swift currents was, scenic overload, eyegasms as Lyman's guide aptly names our visual overload.

Alaska's large rivers such as the Copper and the Tatshenshini are unlike anything down in the lower 48 to put it rather mildly, for many reasons, not the least of which is the speed and volume of the current. The size too, a veritable ocean it seemed, especially after the confluence where even this mighty river, the Tat. became a true Goliath, as the cfs neared 100,000 after becoming the Alsek at the flood stage we were on.

As we came out of the latest braiding of this awe inspiring river, the channels rejoined, creating a single channel with huge hydraulics on several outside outside bends. The size and sound of these holes at this level were not much different than most large drops, the only difference was they were for the most part easily avoidable by pulling early to the inside of the bends, strong current but lots of room to maneuver.

As much as we tried to stay together it seemed that the tricky currents in the braidings upriver had other ideas, and so it wasn't surprising to not see all the boats this time too as we pulled into Melt Creek camp. Our sweep boat with Doug, Mike and his 12-year-old son Mark were nowhere to be seen.

Myself, and the other boat captains huddled up, what the heck happened to Doug? All sorts of scenarios were tossed around, some positive, until someone noticed a

small drybag several hundred yards out in the current, speeding by. No denying it, they were in trouble. We had already tried to hike upstream but Melt Creek at 23000cfs was not fordable, so that option was out. There was nothing we could do except give them time to self rescue and then call out the Mounties if they could not.

The 8:00 deadline came and the call went out via satellite phone, after many minutes a Corporal Putnum from Haines Junction was finally appraised of our situation, and he assured us that a helicopter would be dispatched to fly down the river within the hour.

Time has a way of fueling speculation when you're feeling helpless, but eventually we heard the the rotors of the large aircraft in the late daylight of the 11 pm Yukon summer evening. As the doors opened and our friends and rescuers jumped out, let me tell you, our relief and joy was readily evident on all our faces.

Their story of what happened. Twenty-five miles into a 32 mile day, Doug was beat. One of the outside bend holes snuck up on him and over they went, Doug and Mark washing up close to shore. Mike ended in the river next to the boat so as soon as it shallowed up to his waist, he was able to stand and attempt to pull the boat over. But he lost his footing in a deeper hole and had to let the boat go, just in time though as the cold was really kicking in and it was the last chance to catch the same embankment as the others. As the boat raced away, they couldn't help but see their immediate future take a serious turn for the worse.

What would we do in the bleak situation these guys were thrown in? Hopefully our survival instincts would function as well. They immediately started building a shelter and started laying out lifejackets to catch the attention of any would be rescuers. Fortunately for them, the weather was warm and dry, so their clothes dried quickly.

Later as they were flying to camp, every eye was focused on trying to spot their wayward raft. As they got to camp and the boat hadn't been seen, the bummers of their situation began to kick in, no clothes except what they were wearing, no sleeping bags, no tent, no toiletries, nothing that we as boatmen have come to accept as part of the basic trip requirements to exist. Needless to say, we all pitched in to fill these basic needs as best as we could (I'm not sharing my toothbrush).

We spent most of the next day arranging by phone to hire a helicopter to look for and hopefully rescue their boat, which was set up for early the following morning.

Six a.m. and we're ready with ropes, pullies, prussics, beener's and drysuits as the copter sets down. Minutes later we spot the boat, pinned upside down under an enormous sweeper at the bottom of a 30' cutbank. The copter sets us down a few hundred yards above it in the only clearing inset in the dense alder and brush hillside. We bushwack and repel down to the log, climb out onto the boat and about that time the pilot after attaching a sling to the bird, hovers over us as we attach the sling to several d-rings. We signal all clear and the wonderful machine pulls the boat out and lifts it to an island where the pilot reattaches the line, re-flips the boat and sets the mud laden raft rightside up into the water. He then picks us up and deposits us next to the boat, takes an imprint of Doug's visa card and roars off, all in less than 40 minutes, I'm deeply impressed, especially after hearing what the charge was.

We derigged the boat cleaned the many inches of sediment out of the boxes and coolers and drybags that had built up after 2 nights and a day upside down. F.Y.I. the only bag still completely dry: Watershed, and it had thousands of dollars of camera equipment in it. We rigged the boat, evaluated his losses; 1-aluminum drybox, 1-caract oar, 2-drybags, 2-camaras (in hand at time of flip). 5 minutes into our float back to camp, we were rewarded with coming within 10 yards of an enormous coastal brown bear, standing to

get a better view of us. But it wasn't even close to the last bear we would see.

#### THE BEAR AND THE BIBLER

Part of putting together this trip included getting as much information as possible about Grizzlies/Coastal Brown Bears. You notice I capitalize these species names, it's because they deserve respect. The Tatshenshini/Alsek host good numbers of these majestic and powerful creatures and the chances of us encountering them were high. So I went out and bought a couple of books by the experts to try and understand them. Twelve books later my understanding improved, but I wouldn't say dramatically.

One thing you do realize after reading some of the real life accounts is, once you enter their domain, you've entered the food chain. Another thing about the Tat you find out is no handguns are allowed in Canada or their parks, and neither are they or any other firearms allowed in Glacier Bay National Park. We brought pepper spray, hoping that we wouldn't need them and secretly knowing that realistically they would enhance the taste of our juicy flesh with cajun seasoning.

By the time we reached the peninsuls above Alsek Lake our group had counted 14 Griz/Brown bears sitings, some fairly close and we'd had one Black bear sow charge and then reconsider as her cub swam across the river and climbed to the top of a 100-foot tree. We had been pretty carefull about camp hygiene and careful following safe hiking practices, so we weren't overly concerned with the possibility of a too close encounter. This is the camp right before entering the lake through the infamous "Channel of Death" and it's three doors that hopefully are not blocked by icebergs are sometimes the size of a large cruise ship that seem to get blown up there by the afternoon winds.

As I looked for a suitable tentsite for our large 4-man Bibler tent, I was very conscience of the bear tracks in the mud that seemed to follow a game trail past the prime tentsites. Being on a terminal moraine as with alot of camps, our choices were limited. My son and I pitched our tents anyway, and soon were eating like pigs with the standard voracious Alaska appetite after a long day on the river. Our trip was nearing it's end but the margaritas had held up well and so it was our job to finish them off that evening. Our group was made up of several families and close friends and we had fun recounting the sites and experiances of this as well as other river trips we had done together, and of course resolved to plan another, maybe the Alsek next year....

As the sun diminished a bit in the western sky behind the Brabazon peaks, the adults reluctantly hit the sack. It seemed like that no sooner then my tired body settled into the plush air mattress, I was awakened by noises.

In reality it was 2 a.m. and I'd been asleep for a couple of hours. As I struggled to decipher the sounds I was hearing my wife too opened her eyes. "Do you hear it, what do you think it is?" she whispered. About all I knew was, that it was large given the sounds it was making as it was snooping outside our tent. My heart was pounding fast but it was the decibal of noise it was making that had me worried, bass drums announcing my fear. At least it seemed that loud. I could see the shadowy animal as I leaned up slowly on one elbow and peered through the no-seeum screen, yep, a bear and a large one at that.

Pepper spray, what a joke when faced with the reality of this massive, incomprhensibly powerful animal. We held our breaths it seemed forever, until the bear slowly walked off headed towards the lake. A collective sigh of relief along with a urine stream of relief outside the tent, helped me to slow the ticker back down and we drifted fitfully back into dreamland.

"The bears back" my wife whispers, dragging me back to conscienceness, I looked at my watch, 2:45. This time the bear was sniffing at our tent and what sounded like licking, we

could feel the tent moving gently as he explored some interesting scent not 2 feet away from head. After satisfying its culinary compulsions, it wandered off in the direction it had originally come from. At least that's what the tracks the next morning indicated.

It's a good thing we had gotten up to a leak earlier I reflected as we tried to calm down, scared the piss out of me anyway. Sleep finally came and it was morning too soon. After getting up, I studied the tracks and all around the tent area, big, deep tracks. "What the heck was he sniffing at on our tent?", I asked myself. After looking at it, I could see where a pop had been spilled on it. We cleaned it thoroughly before breaking camp.

Tatshenshini-Alsek

Alaskan whitewater called Fast and Cold: A  
guide to Alaska Whitewater by Andrew Embick

### Trip Report

On our trip we had 11 people (4 rafts). Only 2 were rookie-rafters. Here is the journal from one of our participants:

Yesterday, I completed the run down the Tat (as its called). Im sitting here in a rustic hostel cabin in Haines trying to figure out what meager words I could possibly put together to give you a clue about the feat.

It was a feat an expedition not just another river trip. The Tat (pronounced tot with a short a) is a wild river, meaning that it flows through wilderness country from put-in to take-out. The voyage is about 140 miles long and took about 10-13 days, depending on how you count it. We put in at Dawson Post in Yukon Territory, ran through British Columbias Tatshenshini-Alsek Provencial Wilderness Park, to Dry Bay, Alaska on the Gulf of Alaska.

And what wilderness it was! Craggy granite mountains roughly carved by ages of glaciers, some with vast snow caps and others with huge patches of slowly melting snow pack. Mammoth glaciers cut in between the mountains white at the top, yielding to aqua blue, pushing sand, pebbles, and boulders in their path. Emerald green hillsides basked in the light of 19-hour days. And always the powerful river, milky white with glacial silt, rushed to the sea.

My companions for the trip were all from New Mexico. Seven men and four women made up the expedition. All except one of the women and me were experienced rafters who between them had done hundreds of river trips. Only the trip leader Karen, a 35-year old river guide had ever done the Tat before. We ranged in age from Ben, the 20-year old river guide in Moab, Utah to Max, the 68-year old politician from New Mexico. All except me had rivered together in some combinations before. I knew only two of them when the trip started. They took me in like a brother (or a uncle) and they taught me the ropes. I loved them all when it was over.

Unfortunately, Jackie was unable to make the trip. She had to leave me in White Horse, YT on June 23 to fly back to San Diego to take care of some bothersome family business. I missed her companionship immensely. We have been together 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the past three



months. I felt as if someone had amputated a part of my body after she left. Alone on the river, it was maddening not to have her to share it with me. (Shell join me in Anchorage on July 17 oh happy day!)

Karen and another woman drove a big truck up from Santa Fe with all the gear. We met in the beautiful fishing town of Haines, Alaska. We met up with Ben here, too. The four of us drove north about 75 miles across the Canadian border to the put-in. The river was raging when we arrived. We later found that it was at its highest level in over 20 years. We ended up camping for three rainy nights on the bank of the river as we put the gear together, added to our provisions, and fixed some problems. We bathed ourselves in mosquito repellant that had modest effectiveness against the swarms that attacked us. The Yukon had had a lot of late snow and a late spring thaw, so we hit the hatch at its peak.

As I lay there alone in my tent on the shore of the river I was filled with anxiety. My only overnight river experience was on a 3-day commercial trip on the Green River, but I'd never been out in the real wilderness. What was going to happen? Was I carrying the right gear? Did I have the Right Stuff? I didn't know enough about the river, the wilderness, the wildlife, my companions, our gear, or a million other things. I had to overcome my need to control and surrender to the situation.

We finally shoved off on July 1 as the sun began to burn off the clouds. We were all worried about the condition of the high water, but usually high water washes out the rapids, making them easier to run. We knew we would find out soon because The Canyon lay only about 30 minutes ahead. Descriptions of the river (supported by Karen's recollection from her trip 5 years before) indicated Class III rapids on the first day of the run and few problems further down the river. It was estimated to take about an hour to get through the rapids.

When we arrived at the canyon rapid, we found out how wrong we were. The gorge was filled with huge waves and deep roaring holes that were at least Class IV and probably Class V. One raft got caught in a swirling eddy from which they escaped after about 20 minutes of maneuvering and hard rowing. Another raft dove into a hole that drenched them and nearly flipped them into the river. The trip through the canyon took only half the time as in normal water flow.

The frightening thing about the run was not just the severity of the rapids, but also dire consequences of getting thrown in the river. The water was frigid, about 48 degrees. The canyon sides were steep with few banks to swim for safety. The water was rushing at about 15 miles per hour so paddling a rescue raft back upstream was impossible. If you went in the water, you were a goner stranded at best, dead at worst. A commercial group that left the day before us told us later that they would never run the river again if the water was as high as that. They'd run the river many times and never seen anything like that.

The good news is that we all made it. As each boat landed on the first dry gravel bar below the canyon, we yelled, sang, and felt deep gratitude that we were all there. Everyone was wet to the bone despite our best clothing preparations (polypropylene underwear, fleece, and Gore Tex). We all pulled off our wet clothes and spread them out on the rocks to dry. It looked like a yard sale.

Another consequence of high water is that many of the usual campsites were

underwater. When we pulled off that first gravel bar below the canyon (Silver Creek) we were confident of finding another place to camp an hour or two down the river. We didn't find another one for about 4 hours. By then the adrenalin of the canyon run had faded and we were exhausted.

Another kind of work began each day as we got on and off the river. The kitchen had to be cleaned, dismantled, and repacked on the four boats. We probably carried about a ton of stuff with us for the journey, including food, water, cooking implements, as well as personal and boat gear. Schlepping was a tedious task that took up about 3-4 hours per day. It was like going to the gym every day. I'm a lot stronger for it.

The busy-ness of the trip was the routine of breaking down the camp, schlepping, packing, boating, unpacking, schlepping, and setting up camp. It was easy to get wrapped up in all the tasks that had to be done. When we stopped on a gravel bar for lunch on our second day out, the youngest among us, Ben, noticed that we were all pretty tightly focused. He called us all around in a circle, which normally meant that someone wanted to air a complaint or a caution. Instead Ben said, This is going to be a little difficult since we don't have any drugs, so we'll just have to do it the hard way. He lifted his hands to the heaven and said, Blue skies. Then, gracefully lowering his arms toward the ground he said, Green earth. Now you do it three times, he said. We did. That simple exercise pulled us back to an appreciation of the beauty of the day and the world around us.

We ate well on the trip primarily because a friend of the group from New Mexico named Blaine prepared most of our meals. Most of the meals had a southwestern flavor to them. Blaine's name was spoken most frequently in the sentence, God bless Blaine. As we traveled down the river our load of food got lighter and that too was a blessing.

Actually, we ended up carrying some of that previously eaten food down river with us because we had to pack out our solid waste. Our toilet affectionately known as the groover was a metal rocket box with a toilet seat mounted on top. We had filled two cans by the time we exited the river. At each campsite the team responsible for the groover that day would find a location that offered a modicum of privacy and a beautiful view of the scenery. The worst was on a small island with the water rising when it was only 6 feet away from the kitchen (partially) behind a rock. The best was behind a huge boulder overlooking two enormous glaciers that fed icebergs into a green lake.

After the canyon the river stretched out wide and long. The flow slowed a bit, but it still moved briskly. Because the river was filled with glacial silt it emitted a high pitched tinkling sound as it swirled and eddied downstream. It was eerie like a high frequency radio buzz. As the river spread out, it split into hundreds of threads. In between the threads were sand or gravel bars that could hang up a boat requiring the crew to get out and tug it off the bar. The captains of the four boats had to maintain their concentration to stay in the main flow of the river. This was extremely difficult because every bend in the river brought another breath-taking view. The river was milky and swirling making reading it very difficult. Because the river was running fast the consequences of missing the channel could mean a lot of paddling and pushing.

The weather was mostly cool, but not cold. We had only two rainy nights after we put on the river. The good weather was a singular blessing. In this part of the world it could easily have rained every day. It would have made it a much less comfortable trip. The sunny days were glorious. One day after we'd been out about a week we landed at camp early and heated water for showers. After we were clean we basked in the sun in our shorts. We called it Beluga Beach because of the beached whales and sang surfing songs till dinner.

We saw a lot of wildlife (critters) on the trip. Bald eagles soared everywhere. They were about as common as crows. On the 4th of July, as if on cue, we saw 6 eagles a gravel bar near our camp. I saw a wolverine as we sped along the river. One day we stopped and unloaded all our gear on a gravel bar and began to make camp. As I was erecting my tent I looked up and saw a big grizzly bear about 50 yards away. I alerted the camp and we all began making noise (and snapping pictures). The bear was pretty annoyed at our intrusion on his grazing area, but he began to walk off the other way. Shortly, however, he turned around and headed back our way. He wasn't threatening. He just seemed to have decided that he was going to go on about his business despite us. I wonder if our noise-making stirred his curiosity. We decided that the bar was his space, and we packed up and to leave. As we departed the bear squatted and took a dump. I could almost hear him say, Take that, humans! On the next gravel bar down the river we passed another grizzly standing on the shore. We decided that he was the lifeguard. We saw one other grizzly that same day and no more on the trip.

Near the end of the trip, however, we had a close call. Dick, Richard and I tended to get up early each morning to make coffee. Richard and I were drinking coffee and having a heavy discussion about life and such. Dick had gone off to the groover. After a while we heard Dick coming back from the groover. He was beating gently on a tin can and saying Hey bear. Hey bear. We thought at first he was trying to wake people up. When we turned around we saw Dick walking slowly up the hill with a black bear about 20 yards behind him. We started making more noise while simultaneously packing up the breakfast goodies we'd taken out of their metal containers. The bear, though, was curious. He wandered past the groover toward us and the boats. When the bear started to get on Richard's boat Richard got pissed. He started shouting at the bear to get off his boat! Then he threw rocks at him. Fortunately the bear decided to abandon his claim to Richard's boat and go back into the woods. We were lucky he didn't charge.

It seemed that every day was the best day on the river. Each day brought beauty like we'd never seen before. Several of the folks had been down the Grand Canyon just last month. They said it didn't compare to the Tat. Sometimes it was so eye-poppingly beautiful that my eyes would ache. It inspired silence and reflection between grateful expressions of awe.

About two-thirds of the way down the river, the Tatshenshini River merges with the Alsek River. Here the river is as much as a mile wide. Braids of water and bars weave a treacherous course. The water is calmer here, but it is BIG water because by then 5 or 6 rivers and 50 or more creeks have contributed to the flow.

Not far beyond the confluence of the Tat and the Alsek we came upon Walker Glacier, one of the highlights of the trip. As we came down the river we rounded a curve and were greeted with a blast of cold wind blowing off the glacier several miles away. We camped near the foot of the glacier on a

sandy beach. Next morning after breakfast, we scrambled over the sand dunes and glacial scree to the foot of the glacier. We donned our crampons and hiked for nearly 6 hours. It was unbelievable. Deep crevasses cut across the lower half-mile or so of the glacier. A false step could have frightening consequences. A series of ridges suitable for careful climbing sloped up to the face of the icefall. The icefall was several stories high. It was created by glacial ice slowly falling over the face of a mountain cliff. Broken ice sculpted the icefall into waves, spires, and crags. The colors were stunning. The face of the icefall itself changed color with the sun from deep blue to aqua. Pools of crystal clear water in the ice were cradled in nests of blue that got bluer as it got deeper. We drank water from the pools and touched the icy face of the fall.

The glacier is alive. Huge chunks of ice calve off the foot of the glacier and crash into the lake formed there by melting icebergs. Rocks large and small crash into crevasses and down icy slopes as the sun melts the ice supporting them. Surprisingly, several types of algae grow on the ice. Who knew?

Near the end of the run we were bone tired. We were very happy that we were going to camp for two days at Gateway Knob on the shore of Alsek Lake. In the distance Mt. Fairweather glistened like a huge diamond. The lake is about 3 miles across and twice as long. It is fed by the river and by the convergence of two glaciers that calved mountain-sized icebergs into the lake. This is where we had our run-in with our pal the black bear.

When we arrived the commercial group that had laid over a day here greeted us. The river guides in the group had constructed a sauna out of paddles and a tarp. They heated river rocks in a big driftwood fire and then moved them into the sauna. We were delighted when they agreed to leave the sauna for our use when they left the next day. I can't describe the spiritual unfolding I felt while reflecting quietly on the lakeshore while preparing for a sweat. Nor can I describe the joy of sweating out nearly two weeks of grime, glacial silt, and insect repellent. And I can't even begin to tell you what it felt like to run out of the sauna and plunge among the icebergs into the frigid lake. Shocking!

We reached Dry Bay, Alaska on the afternoon of July 9. We slipped off the river into a slough. We began seeing signs of civilization, if you can call it that: small boats, gill net buoys, and a fishing cabin or two. We heard the roar of an ATV, the principal mode of land transportation in these parts, even though this is part of the Glacier Bay National Preserve.

When we beached at the take-out everyone went silently about the task of dismantling the boats and equipment that had carried served us so well. What had been so functional on the water looked like a pile of junk on shore.

Dinner picked up people's spirits. After dinner we sat in a circle around our last campfire and passed a talking stick, each taking time to say what the trip had meant for us. For me, this journey was another opportunity to confront my fears and insecurities, to relinquish control of my life for a while and trust others to show me the way. It made me realize how much I love being outdoors, and resulted in a vow to live somewhere where that is more possible. It demonstrated once again the power of community and the

loving nature of groups that work toward a common purpose. It gave me a new set of friends with whom I will always share the experience of a lifetime.

After the circle ceremony, a fisherman drove up on his ATV to chat. During the course of the conversation we told him of our disappointment about not being able to have salmon because fishing season wouldnt open till tomorrow. To our great joy, he said he had one fish that we could have. The next morning we arose at 5 a.m. to the smell of salmon roasting over the fire. We dove in like starving animals and ate all of a 15-pound fish.

The first of four planes that would haul us and our gear back to Haines arrived an hour late at about 9 a.m.. It landed on the gravel runway, taxied up to our camp, and we got aboard. Then we were airborne flying up the same river wed spent over a week floating down. It was like a rewind of our journey at 4,000 feet. We saw Alsek Lake and recognized some of the same icebergs. We saw Walker Glacier where wed climbed just a few days ago, as well as a hundred other glaciers wed only glimpsed and lakes wed missed entirely. We even spied Beluga Beach.

As we flew over the beautiful, vast wilderness, it struck me that I am one of the luckiest men in the world. I cried for the joy of this place and the blessing of having shared a bit of it. In the word of the song, Mine eyes have seen the glory.

River: Tatshenshini and Alsek, in the Yukon Territory, British Columbia, and Alaska

Participants: Cataract: Susan Klimas at the oars, with Turner Sharp;

Raft: Will Sharp at the oars, with Tim Lewis, David Lohr, and Mike McClanahan as paddlers.

Dates: August 14 through August 24

How to begin? This trip is on a scale that I could not have imagined. It transcends any river trip I've ever done, even the grandeur of the desert rivers in Utah and the mellow beauty of the Idaho rivers. We had to contend with one of the largest concentration of black and grizzly bears in North America (we saw 12 bears, both black and grizzly). We began on a relatively small river and ended up on a river of 100,000 cfs, a mile wide in places, with multiple braided channels, many of which are larger than most rivers. We passed by so many glaciers we stopped counting. We bathed in a clear cold stream with flecks of real gold gleaming in the sand at the bottom. We walked on a glacier and looked down into crevasses with waterfalls flowing into them so deep you couldn't imagine the bottom. We saw the aurora borealis like a green curtain across the sky. We made our way into a glacial lake where two out of three of the entrances into the lake were entirely blocked with masses of icebergs, some up to 150 feet tall. We spent two days camped on the lake beach listening to icebergs calve with sounds like cannons, sending waves and small bergs way up the beach.

We ran the Tatshenshini River to its confluence with the Alsek River, and continued on the Alsek to Dry Bay, which is a part of Glacier Bay. We did 150 (more or less) miles of wilderness, beginning in the Yukon Territory, continuing through British Columbia, and ending in Dry Bay, Alaska. The entire trip was through the largest area of wilderness in North America—the entire length of the Tat/Alsek is protected wilderness.

I had been on the waiting list for a permit for this trip for 3 years (I hear that it's now up to 5 years). After I got a trip date, we had been in the planning stages for 8 months. At first the logistics seemed impossible. We had to arrange for airline tickets on several airlines, bush pilots, a shuttle, gear rental, and just getting us and our gear to the put-in. We got to Haines, Alaska by truck (Turner and Mike), and airplane and ferry (the rest of us). We picked up our rented raft and satellite phone, and shuttled to the put-in at Dalton Post, Yukon. We all rode in rafts, because it is prohibitively expensive and logistically difficult to fly the kayaks out at the end of the trip. After we experienced the cold and huge water, we were all happy to be in rafts and not in our kayaks.

The trip begins on a relatively small glacial river, already milky colored from glacial silt. It is green and tree-lined, with mountains in the background. Within an hour of putting on the river in our cataract and raft, we saw a mama grizzly bear and her two-year-old cub on the right shore of an island. We immediately decided to take the channel to the left of the island. Those bears were really, really big, and were unmistakably grizzlies.

Soon after the grizzly sighting, we entered the whitewater canyon. We had been warned about the canyon—the outfitter from whom we had rented the raft told us that the last group who rented from him had flipped, torn a gash in the raft, and were stranded in the canyon for two days. The canyon is continuous technical Class III at low water, with sharp rocks, few raft-sized eddies, little opportunity to rescue swimmers, ice-cold water, and one very tricky rapid at the end. We negotiated the canyon with only one incident—Will hit a rock at the same time that Mike was in the act of throwing a bucket of water overboard, and Mike went in the water headfirst. Mike was quickly recovered, however. At one point, Will was going down a wave train, and was about to wash into a huge ledge hole. His passengers learned a new paddle command at that point: **“aw-sh\*\*~all-back!”** (one word.) We were through the canyon in less than an hour, as the water moves at anywhere from 6 to 8 miles per hour.

Our first few camps were on the Tatshenshini just below the outwash deltas from inflowing creeks. The second camp, below Sediments Creek, was a layover camp since there was a long hike available to the top of a large knob that provides a panoramic view of the river basin.

On our layover day, we hiked to the top of the knob through a forest, after crossing Sediments Creek with the help of ropes. We saw bear claw marks on the trees, and found bits of bear fur snagged on the trail, since the trail we followed was clearly not only a human but a bear trail as well. The highbush cranberry bushes along the trail with ripe cranberries explained why the bears follow the trail. After the hike, the guys decided to take a bath in the clear stream across the outwash delta. (Sediments Creek itself was milky with glacial silt.) While bathing, they noticed bits of gold flecks in the sand—real gold, but so small that they weren't able to grasp any. David was muttering about panning for gold, rigging a placer set-up, but we were able to talk him into continuing the trip with us.

We missed our intended fourth day's camp. We were in an area of braided channels, and when we drifted by the camp, we were in a center channel about  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile out from the camp and had no way of getting over to the far river left channel, which appeared to be very low anyway. The braided channels were unlike anything I had imagined. One channel will have other channels draining into it and gain more water, while another channel will have channels draining out of it and lose water. The choice is not obvious, either, as you can't see what the channel is going to do ahead. If you choose wrong, you'll likely get hung up on shallow areas and have to push the boat for awhile until you get to another channel. If you choose correctly, that's ok for about a few hundred yards, until you have to choose again with the same consequences. Another problem is that it is not always obvious where the current splits for the various channels, and you may quickly be sucked into a channel you didn't intend with no way of jumping channels due to the speed of the current. Also, the raft behind you could be sucked into another channel, to disappear for up to 20 minutes or so, until you are reunited when the channels converge a couple of miles downstream. It is unnerving to lose all sight of your companions on the river and yet still be side-by-side. The Tatshenshini, by our third and fourth days, was gaining a lot of cfs. Two creeks doubled the flow of the river, and another creek doubled it again. In places, with the braided channels, the river is  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile wide. Although it is not considered whitewater, it requires constant rowing and vigilance to navigate the channels, avoid the wood in the water and the occasional hydraulics, and negotiate the wave trains and big water.

At one point, we got hung up in a shallow spot in a channel, and Turner got off the boat to push us off. After the cataraft caught the current, I started floating away at 6 mph or more, and Turner turned around to pee in the river! I had visions of Turner being stranded in the middle of the river, while I floated away, unable to retrieve him. I back-rowed, trying not to get swept away, but it didn't do any good with the power of the current. Luckily, I was able to ground out again, further down the channel. When Turner finished and caught up with me, we had to push the cataraft off the sandbar again. He was lucky not to be stranded, and I let him know this with many forceful words, some of which can't be repeated politely, a number of arm gestures, and a few facial expressions.

We finally found a camp for the fourth night a couple of miles below our intended camp, just above the delta outwash plain of the Tkopec River. We camped in the open, with the groover (the potty) in a thicket of alders next to the hill nearby. It was unnerving to see an animal trail just in front of the groover with huge grizzly prints, as well as moose and wolf. We didn't see any wildlife there, but going to the bathroom was a little scary. I approached the groover calling, as recommended, "Hey Bear! Hey Bear!" to warn any bears that I was in the vicinity so they could hightail it away.

Up to this point we had beautiful weather, better than we had any right to expect. Most groups doing the river experience rain and mist and clouds. The Alaskan summer had been unusually sunny and warm this year, and our first few days were hot. The Tkopec River camp was very windy and cold, though, and we saw the wind blowing huge clouds of glacial silt up the Tatshenshini River and also up the Tkopec River. The sandstorms were really impressive looking, but luckily we weren't in range.

The fifth night's camp featured a bear sighting of a mama black bear trying to get her small cub to cross the creek, with the cub refusing to cross. Our sixth camp was downstream of the outwash delta for Melt Creek, and it was here that we experienced our first rain, albeit light rain. The fog lowered, and played around the mountains next to us and across the river, first lowering and obscuring the mountain, then lifting, then lowering again. There was a small glacier across the delta from us. We saw a bear crossing the Melt Creek drainage, a grizzly, and later saw a black bear ferrying across the Tatshenshini toward us. I worried about the bear in the very cold, very fast water, but the bear was an extremely strong swimmer. Once he saw us, he quickly turned downstream to avoid a confrontation. We had our bear spray ready, though. (Firearms are not permitted in the Canadian parks through which we were traveling, and we followed the rules, relying instead on our air horns and bear spray. Yes, we had all heard the jokes—over and over again.) From Melt Creek we could see the confluence with the Alsek. It looked close, but was actually several miles downstream. At this point, the Tatshenshini was a huge and powerful river, with a velocity of 8 miles per hour.

The next day we entered the Alsek River. We had waited until the fog lifted, but as we passed a glacier the fog lowered again, and we were rowing blindly, losing sight of each other. This was unnerving, and we decided to ground out together on a sandbar in the middle of the river and have lunch while waiting for the fog to lift, with the water running over our boots. After the fog lifted, we were faced with a huge bowl-shaped area, where the river appeared to end in a circle of mountains. We figured out that the river actually went left when we saw an airplane fly in that direction, and also remnants of fog drifted that way. After turning the bend, we saw a panorama of glaciers, river, mountains of a scale much larger than we had seen before. We saw Walker Glacier, our goal for the day, on river left, but still several miles away. The approach to the camps here is tricky, but we stuck to the river left and made camp on the plain near the glacier.

We made camp out in the open, so that the wind could blow away the bugs. However, the wind picked up that night, and blew down our kitchen fly, so we relocated the next day in the shelter of some alders. Out of the wind it was warm, but in the wind it was very cold. That night, our tents thrummed with the wind. During the night, Turner got up for a call of nature, and saw the aurora borealis in the sky. It began as a yellow-green shimmering curtain, which turned red and then green. After returning to the tent, Turner woke me up, and I sat up in my sleeping bag, unzipped the tent, and stuck just my head out (it was really cold). The northern lights were a green curtain across the sky, but it was so cold that I only watched for a few minutes.

The next day was a layover day. After a little bit of rain and a beautiful rainbow that went from one side of the river to the other, we hiked to and on the glacier, which was an eerie and beautiful experience. The hike took about an hour to get to the glacier, even though it looked much closer. We had to traverse a scree slope to get there. On the glacier, we saw huge crevasses that went into the depths of the glacier, some with waterfalls running into them, some full of water, some empty. The blues of the crevasses ranged from light baby blue to sapphire blue to a deep blue. Some of the crevasses had waterfalls dropping into the interior of the glacier. The seracs above us were blue as well. Even though they looked small from a distance, they were huge. I was very aware that if one of us fell into a crevasse, we wouldn't survive.

We had several bear sightings at this camp, several on a sandbar and several on a snow slope across the glacier. We also saw several bear wallows near our camp. The only other group we saw on the river was camped at another campsite near us. They left after our first night there, and we were alone again.

On the morning of Day 9, the wind was blowing very hard from up and across the river. We waited awhile for the wind to abate, but it never did, so we put on the river anyway. I had to work hard at the oars to not be blown into the riverbank until the river rounded a bend a couple of miles down. We passed Sapphire and Novatak Glaciers, and many other unnamed glaciers. We later found out that Novatak Glacier extends all the way to the ocean near Yakutat. There was a



rapid with large, irregular waves in front of the Novatak Glacier. After we rounded another bend, we saw the rarely-seen Mount Fairweather (at 15,320 feet, one of the highest peaks in North America) in the distance. It was a clear, beautiful day, and it was clearly visible. Many if not most groups never see it due to mist and clouds. The river is a mile wide here, and has many channels, each of which alone is the size of a large river (although it also has some shallow channels among the main ones). The cfs was around 100,000 at this point. The silt-laden, milky water made a sizzling sound like bacon frying as it flowed beneath the hypalon tubes of the cataraft. The sound was disconcerting because it sounded something like air hissing out of the tubes.

This was the day we had to enter Alsek Lake. There are three possible routes into the lake, known to river guides as doors. Door #1, the main route of the river, is also known as the “Channel of Death”. It is often blocked by huge (and very dangerous) icebergs. The prevailing wind pushes the bergs against this entry point. Door #2, along the left shore of Gateway Knob, is also often blocked by bergs. Door #3, along the right shore of Gateway Knob, is usually open but is often too shallow. The scouting spot is upstream and up a scree slope. We climbed up the scree slope, and were greeted by the sight of an unbroken expanse of icebergs completely blocking any possible entrance into the lake from Doors 1 and 2. Door 3 looked like it had enough water to navigate, but it didn’t matter—if it didn’t, we would have portaged. Fortunately, Door 3 had enough water, and we were able to enter the lake.

We spent two nights camped on the shore of Gateway Knob, watching the icebergs, with Mt. Fairweather looming over it all. Sometimes one would calve, or a glacier would calve, and there would be sounds like sustained cannon fire. Waves would wash up the beach, and small bergs would wash up to 12 feet up the beach. Our boats got washed several feet up the beach during the night. The bergs ranged from sapphire blue to chocolate-vanilla ice cream colors, and in size from a foot across to more than 150 feet tall. They jammed the lake several miles from shore to shore. This was a buggy camp for about 6 hours every day, and we wore our bug hats during this period of time. The only problem with wearing the bug hats was during dinner—we had to raise the netting to eat, and consequently spent dinner hour walking around to keep the bugs from settling on us. At one point, I put Turner to work whipping instant pudding while he was wearing his bug hat. The evidence of pudding on the netting in front of his mouth gave him away, since he tried to sneak a preview of the pudding without removing the netting.

Day 11, our final day, arrived, and we rowed out of the lake, accompanied by a number of smaller icebergs. The current in the river was about 12 mph. After two rapids, we finally found the slough that led to the Dry Bay airfield. The airfield was a gravel area between the trees. We unloaded, packed up our gear, and awaited our bush pilots the following morning. Four of us flew to Yakutat with our personal gear in one tiny plane, then flew from Yakutat to Juneau, then to Seattle, then to Pittsburgh. Turner and Mike and all the rest of the gear flew back to Haines in two tiny planes, to begin the 7-day road trip home. Often groups flying to Haines are delayed for several days by weather, as the small planes fly by line of sight, and I had packed extra food in case this happened. However, they were able to fly out with no problems.

What can I say? It was a grand adventure, and we were lucky to have wonderful weather and no mishaps. As the guidebook says, there is an occasional rare group that has a mellow float on these rivers, and we were it. The beauty and scale of the river and surroundings were off the charts, and I realize how lucky we all were to have experienced it at all, much less with great weather and no mishaps.