

Adventure at the Arctic Circle

By Ron Davis

This trip on the Yukon River started where I left off last year. In an earlier report for the newsletter, I wrote about a trip between Eagle and Circle in the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. That trip went well and the thought of a longer trip was hard to resist. Plane tickets were purchased and I went into my "trip mode." The latter consists of many things, including obtaining needed maps and putting latitudinal/longitudinal grids on them for easy GPS use in the field; choosing what gear to take and inspecting all; buying needed food and repackaging to get it as compact as possible; and mailing excess food and gear to my friend in Fairbanks, which is worth the cost. It can be hard to get your kayak, food, and gear under the 2-bag/70 lbs. each limit. It's also tough to carry any more to the airport. And last, but not least, when adding up the cost of everything, I dismissed it under the "life is short" clause.

With the busywork done, it was time to relax, wait for my departure date, and think about the upcoming trip. The July *National Geographic* had an article titled, "The Untamed Yukon River". In it was a two-page photo of the Yukon Flats with the caption, "You won't like it". A canoeist was warning the author about the trials of navigating this vast aquatic maze called Yukon Flats. As the beginning of the Flats was where my trip was to begin.

I would soon find out for myself. The plan called for about a two-week solo wilderness paddle. I didn't get locked into a set distance as I didn't know what to expect in the Flats. Three previous trips to Alaska have taught me it can be a moody, powerful place not to be taken lightly.

7/24: I flew out of National Airport. After past experiences I made a few changes in how to get about 150 pounds of gear and a boat to the check-in. Instead of strapping on the Feathercraft backpack, I used a folding luggage cart to tote the boat and carry-on; a duffel bag with wheels carried the gear. Still a real handful but it worked well enough. A new record may have been set in the longest time to check two bags. I wanted to put extra insurance on my gear; it took nearly 20 minutes and \$30. After all that, the supervisor said one of my bags was 3 pounds over and they should charge me \$50 extra, but since I had taken up so much time they would let it go this time. It better not be over on the return trip! At least this flight was all in one day, Washington to Minneapolis/St. Paul to Fairbanks. No overnight "stay" in the Anchorage airport! At times when flying over the Yukon Territory in Canada I could see the Yukon River below. Maybe someday I can do the upper river, no signs of man could be seen. I arrived in Fairbanks with daylight to spare. At the check-in I was told to claim my bags at the office since they had been extra insured; however, they came out with all the other luggage. Oh well.

7/25-7/26: I visited with my friends in Fairbanks, sorted gear, and picked up a few last-minute items. My friend, Mark, said he would drive me to Circle since he wanted to get out of town and do a little fishing on the way back. Circle is one of three places with road access on the 1,200 miles of the Yukon River that flow through Alaska.

7/27: I loaded up the truck and headed for Circle about a 4-hour ride. The Steese Highway travels through a variety of terrain. The most impressive is the area around a 12-mile summit. It's vast, stark,

steep mountain tundra. It is the kind of view that can't help but have a humbling effect on most that see it. We got to Circle by early afternoon.

I assembled the K-1, and started to load gear. A heavy rain began to fall and we retreated to the truck to wait out the worst of it. After it lightened up, I finished loading everything, said goodbye, and headed out. Soon the small town disappeared and I was alone. The sky was clear and I was moving right along. The usual doubts at the beginning of such a trip started to fade away, anything seemed possible. After about 6 hours, I stopped on one of the many gravel bars and made camp. The current was still moving well, and I had covered about 31 river miles.

7/28: There were almost no bugs last night. I got on the water about 10 a.m. The sky changed often throughout the day: there was sun, light rain, and some wind. With all the braided channels, it was hard to stay in the main one. Even when letting the current pick the channel I still ended up in some slower water. I paddled and drifted with few stops till about 3 p.m. A man in a fish camp waved me in for coffee. As I paddled up, a number of children appeared on the bank. A friendly young man about 12, named Lloyd, walked right up and introduced himself. As I walked into the cook tent, their grandmother, who had not seen me paddle up thinks I am a Fish & Game officer and lets me know her feelings on the subject. It seems like lone Americans, who are not local Athabascans, are rare in these parts. I am the third "drifter" they have seen this year, most all being German or Japanese. After assuring her I was just a guy on vacation she gave me a cup of fermented cranberry juice.

We talked and I got a tour of the camp. They said a bear had been in camp the other night. As some of the children were quite small, it was easy to see where this would be a real concern. The fishing had been very poor this year and the water level was lower than anyone could remember it ever being.

After about an hour, I thanked them for inviting me into their camp and headed out. It was interesting to get to see an Athabaskan summer tradition firsthand. I stayed on the river till 7:30 p.m. then made camp in a large open area. I had to carry all my gear a ways to a good tent site, but at least there were no bugs. I ended up covering about 36 river miles that day.

7/29: I got a late start, and didn't get on the water until 11 a.m. It was partly cloudy. A strong headwind was building and I had to work for the miles. I crossed the Arctic Circle by early afternoon and arrived at Fort Yukon around 3 p.m. I thought about checking out the town, but a man working on his boat said I might not want to leave my gear unattended. Since I didn't really need anything and felt like making camp soon, I headed out. As I left, I saw a kayak on the shore so I decided to paddle over. It belonged to a Japanese man named Satoru, who had come down the river from Dawson. As we talked, a man came crashing through the brush, beer in hand, and dominated the conversation. Senator Young wasn't even from Alaska, did I know that? There was beer and satellite TV, what more could I want? Also, he advised me, since my boat was so narrow I should tie two boat-length logs along the sides to help me keep from tipping over, no kidding. Turning to go downriver, I told Satoru to feel free to stop in if he saw me.

The wind was a pain, so the first good gravel bar a few miles past Fort Yukon became home for the night. A large barge, the "Rampart" powered upriver, throwing off a big wake. These barges travel to some of the towns a few times each summer and are the only way to get big items in. Satoru showed up

and camped about 100 yards away. We talked a bit. He had been on the river last year and had gone from Whitehorse to Dawson. There is a book in print by a Japanese doctor and the river is well known by adventurers there.

7/30: It was windy all night. I got up early and was on the water by 8:45 a.m. Satoru was still breaking camp. The wind was building and it looked like there wouldn't be any easy miles. In sections of water that got the full effect of the wind, there were whitecaps and what looked like standing waves, like when a stiff wind blows against a strong outgoing tide. Even when using a rudder and corrective strokes, the boat was slow to respond in the funky currents. I stuck to the main channel.

Miles downriver, I spotted a shed moose antler and landed to check it out. It was very large and weighed around 25 pounds. The animal that it belonged to might have been over 1,200 lbs. It was quite a souvenir and I wondered how to get it out. Tying it to the rear deck of the K-1, I decided that if it affected the stability of the kayak it would get left where it was. Surprisingly, the boat was still quite stable. In the boat was also a 12-gauge shotgun, just in case. I guess all the gear, food, and water in the boat balanced the deck load, but the antler was still tied on in a way that it would be easy to cut loose with my vest knife if I got into trouble. On long solo paddles stable boats carry the day!

The wind continued to build and the river started to look like a bad day back home on the Chesapeake Bay. I needed to go back and forth across the channel a number of times in order to make any headway--often water would break over my bow. This was not the drift I had read about. Miles downriver, after passing a tight bend, I paddled right through several small whirlpools! They were not big enough to pose a danger, but they still gave me a bit of a start.

Large gravel bars looked like desert sandstorms in the high winds. The clouds and views were at times stunning, but it was hard to really take it all in under the demanding conditions. I spotted Satoru on shore and paddled over. He had traveled down a longer slough and had experienced an easier time. There were fresh grizzly prints all around us in the mud. We paddled a few more miles and made camp on a large gravel bar around 5 p.m. After dinner we talked a bit and could more or less understand each other, but some of the finer points got lost in the translation. He said some people wondered why he would come to such a place, it seemed crazy to them. After reaching the conclusion that we were quite sane. I said goodnight and walked back to my tent.

I thought about our conversation. Satoru was on the river for about a month traveling light, with no PFD, one paddle (no leash), and his only map was a Rand McNally road map. We seemed to be a study in contrasts gear-wise but we had a number of things in common too.

As I sat by my tent writing notes in the early evening, the sun was still high and bright and the wind was blowing strong. We were camped just south of the Arctic Circle. My day of kayaking above the Circle [only a short 25-mile section of the river runs north of the Arctic Circle, the rest of the river falls below the Circle] was tough, but that seemed somewhat fitting. I had paddled about 7½ hours that day, covering 30 river miles.

7/31: I got up at 6:30 a.m. and the wind was still. By the time camp was struck and the boat loaded, about 8:45, the wind was back. It seemed worse than yesterday. Satoru was going to start later so I headed out.

Some of the big channels were real rough, 1- to 1½-foot chop and funny currents. I had a lot of water on my bow. The country, clouds, and changes in light, etc., were again really something to see today, but I needed to keep focused on what I was doing, there was not much time for daydreaming.

The wind, by now, seemed to have developed its own personality. I know that may sound silly but it had. My nemesis would be charging a toll for each mile it let me pass. It's funny the things that can go through your mind in the wilderness--maybe you are never really as alone as it might seem. I went down a short slough to get out of the wind and took about an hour break. I thought about making camp there but didn't. There were a lot of trees and cover nearby, but the place just didn't have a good feel to it. Often there is nothing to such feelings, but since I had not covered too much distance that day, I pushed off and went a few more miles. After several more hours and many twists and turns later.

I saw Satoru and stopped. We both seemed to be running out of steam about the same time. His random channel picks were again better than mine; he left later and arrived sooner than I did.

As we talked, a kayak approached, paddles flashing in the clear arctic light. It was Masai, a Japanese man Satoru knew from last year on the river. Last year Masai paddled the whole 2000 mile Yukon River from Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, to the Bering Sea in 2 months in a little Feathercraft K-Light! He comes to Alaska or Canada every summer. I grin. We were the only people in many miles and happened to run into each other. After about an hour, Masai left, wanting to go farther before making camp.

Satoru and I set up our little camps some distance apart. After dinner, I walked over to Satoru. We chatted a bit and I finished my last two shots of JD Old No. 7. My friend, Mark, had given me a little ½-pint bottle when leaving Circle. Later, as I was writing my notes for the day and looking at a map, Satoru walked over and gave me a small wooden Shinto token wrapped in paper. He said a friend had given it to him for protection from "bad water." I thanked him, as there seemed to be plenty of that on this trip. After 7¼ windy hours on the water, only 22 river miles had been covered.

8/1: I was up early, so I packed and was ready to go by 7:45 a.m. Before leaving, I showed Satoru some of my safety gear and encouraged him to take some on his next trip. It could make all the difference.

It was really a nice, sunny day, with a light wind. That weather was considered normal for that time of year and was what I had been expecting for most of the trip. The wind slowly started to build and I made use of the sloughs to get out of it as much as possible, spotting several beavers and bald eagles along the way. By early afternoon the wind was back to its bad old self and was whipping up the river. It was a wet ride crossing the channel to get on the right bank above the town of Beaver.

An older man walked up as I got out of my kayak. His name was William. He showed me the village store; it was closing in a few minutes for the weekend. William also showed me how to work the town's water pump.

Later, as we walked by his cabin, he showed me an older cabin of his that he didn't use much anymore and said I was welcome to stay there if I liked. I thanked him but decided to stay in my tent; it was snug and I just felt like being outside. A woman we passed said "that bear" was in town again. If he made a habit of it his days would be numbered.

Satoru showed up and later Masai arrived. We set up tents on the bank. I had thought about traveling into the night when the winds died down as it was still pretty light, but I was too tired and didn't want to push it. The island between Beaver and the main channel was a lot bigger than it looked on the map and if I missed the small channel above the village I would have passed the town and would have had to back track up a long slough. Earlier in the day I started to see mountains in the distance at spots. After 8 hours on the water, I have traveled 29 river miles.

8/2: Last night, boats were coming and going at all hours. The locals were making use of what calm weather there was to check nets and fishwheels. Sometime in the middle of the night.

I heard a noise at the foot of my tent followed by a big dog trying to crawl into it. I awoke about 4 a.m. from the tent shaking in the wind. It was really windy, the worst yet. There would be no traveling today.

I talked with a man named Paul who was checking his net beyond our tents. He said it was not normal to get these high winds that time of year; it was going to be a bad winter. Even the locals were not going out in their river boats. Not much was going on in the village; some people rode around in the vehicle of choice: small four-wheel- drive ATV's.

8/3: It was windy all night with some rain. The wind was going strong and the sky was overcast. At least I found some cardboard at the small store, and with a few rolls of tape got the moose antler wrapped up and mailed home. I walked around the village, went to the store, rested, and read in my tent. Satoru and I pretty much kept to ourselves today, only getting together to talk a little. I really wanted to be on the river again. It rained for about an hour around 7:30 p.m.

8/4: I awoke around 7 a.m. It looked like rain but the winds were down a bit. Some of the village teenagers had been blowing off steam well into the night. At times they would drive ATV's along the gravel paths, sometimes whooping as they blazed along. At least you pretty much knew where your kid was around there, I thought, as there was only so far that they could go.

Satoru took off by 8:30 a.m. I said goodbye to Masai and told him he should write to Feathercraft as he had most likely set some kind of record in their little K-Light. Paul was down by the water and said if I ever passed by again to stop in, he lived just right up the bank.

The wind was back, not as bad as it had been but still tiring. I turned off into Whirlpool Slough to get out of it. A clearwater stream fed into the slough that was not on the map. It was the first one I had seen on the trip and I got out my filter to top off my water bags. Deeper into the slough, I passed within 20 yards of a large black bear, with a mostly brown coat, up on the bank. The bottom of the slough had no current and was exposed to the wind. Three small geese (goslings?) walked along the bank, seeming to mock my slow progress.

Back in the main channels the river got wide. I stopped to stretch and saw fresh grizzly tracks in the mud. Around 2 p.m. it started to rain--very heavy at times. With my Gore-Tex jacket on over my sprayskirt, I stayed pretty dry and decided not to stop to make camp as long as a steady rain fell, however long it took! With snacks and water within easy reach, I settled into a slow, steady pace, going till 7:30 p.m.

The rain stopped as I came to a huge gravel bar. The river was low and a lot of it would normally be under water. I quickly set up my tent and got my gear under cover. As I cooked dinner, a light rain started to fall. I was very tired and not too hungry, but knowing if many meals are missed under those conditions it will catch up fast so I chowed down anyway. After 10 hours in the kayak, I had traveled 39 river miles.

8/5: I awoke to rain. I had slept like a log. I made and ate breakfast before the rain sent me into the tent. Since this was, after all, a vacation I relaxed and waited for the rain to let up. About 11 a.m. it did, so I broke camp and pushed off about 45 minutes later. The sky was quite dark so it was no surprise what the day would hold.

By early afternoon it was raining, so heavy at times it looked like ball bearings bouncing off the surface of the river. This wasn't pleasant but at least the wind was down. Like yesterday, I planned to paddle till it stopped. It was like I was trapped in some kind of dreary dream. The world consisted only of heavy browns, grays, greens, and black. Sometimes big chunks of dirt fell from the banks into the river.

Around 5 p.m., the rain stopped and the paddling was nice. Passing a gravel bar with a view of a mountain far in the distance, I stopped and made camp. The sun came out and the wind stopped. If only this would be the rule rather than the exception! I spread gear out to dry, made dinner, and dreamt of fair weather. After 6 hours, I had covered 32 river miles.

8/6: It started raining about 2 a.m. and kept up till 2 p.m. During a lull, I broke camp and headed for Stevens Village. The wind was up and it was tough going. True to its name, Windy Bend was--as if on cue--serving up a "micro cell, demanding even more effort on my part.

Around 7 p.m., rays of intense sun broke through purplish clouds, real dawn-of-creation stuff. As tired as I was, it would be hard to not realize that that was my reward for the day. Sights like this are rare and don't last long. They also do not photograph well, but stay in the mind's eye forever.

I reached Stevens Village around 8:45 p.m., taking longer than I thought it should take. Walking into the village, I asked a man where the public phone was. He told me the building burnt down but that Joe had a phone I could probably use. There was a sign on Joe's door: "Don't knock, just come right in." Several people were in the room. I told them I had come down the Yukon River by kayak and needed to check on a plane ride back to Fairbanks. "Sure, no problem."

I got out my calling card--not an item many people would pack for a wilderness trip--and dialed the main flight service into the village. The following entertaining conversations ensued:

"Hi, I need a ride to Fairbanks tomorrow for myself and about 125 pounds of gear."

"We are only flying out of, not into, Stevens Village tomorrow."

"Huh? So there aren't any seats on the flight?"

"No, there is one seat left."

"I would like that seat."

"Okay."

"By the way, there is room for my gear, right?"

"No, it's a small plane."

"I can't leave all my gear here, what should I do?"

"If some people cancel, maybe there will be room."

"How would I find that out?"

"You could call the local coordinator."

I called the number, it's wrong. They told me she does not have a phone. I made several more calls to other services with no luck. They were "only flying mail tomorrow, etc., and, yes, they were sure of that, maybe Tuesday."

Today was Friday. Joe said to come back early tomorrow and call again. I asked how early and they said they were open 24 hours. Joe had a storeroom that he sold goods out of. It was getting late and I walked back to my kayak and paddled over to the island across the slough. It was not the best campsite but I was not too picky at this point.

I thought about what to do the next day. If I could not get a flight I would paddle to the bridge; it was about a good day's travel downriver. I would still need to get back to Fairbanks, but I could work it out. The next village, Rampart, was about 2 days below the bridge. It was also small and with the way the weather had been I might have to wait for a flight there as well.

That might be cutting it a bit close. I was at the end of the Flats and the river formed one main channel flowing west through a valley. It would funnel the winds pretty well as they had been coming from that direction. It was after 11 p.m. when I crawled into the tent. After traveling for 6½ hours, I had gone 23 river miles.

8/7: Up early, I ate a quick breakfast, loaded up, and paddled over to the village. It was before 7 a.m. when I got to Joe's. Seeing the sign, I walked through the door. The room was dark and Joe and his wife were sleeping. Right about then it dawned on me that they had been kidding about the 24-hour part. I apologized and turned to leave but Joe told me to come in and use the phone. Dialing up numbers,

I thought how things are more laid back up there on the river than I was used to. After a number of calls it was not looking too good. I called another service and the man told me no problem, he could get a plane in around noon. Telling him I didn't want to be a pain but if there were any doubts that he wouldn't be able to make it, would he please let me know now? My boat was packed and ready and if I broke it down what looked like a passable travel day would be lost. He said don't worry, I could count on it, 90+%-as good as it gets up there. He had Joe's number if there was a problem.

Walking back down to the shore, I packed my kayak and gear into several large bags. Joe showed up with his ATV and hauled my gear to the landing strip. It was cool and cloudy. I laid back on a wood plank by the strip and dozed off. Around noon a plane landed. It wasn't the one I was waiting for. The pilot asked if I needed a ride. I had called his service earlier and they had said they would be only hauling mail today. As we talked, two people with reservations showed up. The now-full plane left.

After 3 p.m., I called the service again and a woman told me they wouldn't be flying in after all. Another plane landed: it's a charter. They didn't have a seat for me but could take my gear. I jogged over to the person who handled the other service and she said there was one seat open on a plane due in about an hour.

Feeling lucky--and at this point I really could not tell you why--I loaded all my gear except what I was wearing onto the waiting plane and watched it disappear in the sky on its way to Fairbanks. I went back to Joe's for coffee and large 1-foot-plus strips of smoked salmon. Good stuff!

We talked and Ben said I could stay and help him take down a fish camp. I needed to leave the watch behind and forget about time for awhile. It sounded interesting, but if I cut it too close with the way things had been going I might miss my flight home. By local standards I may have been a little hyper. I was on a schedule, even at the edge of a vast wilderness. Maybe they got a good laugh out of it anyway. The plane showed up and we headed out to the strip. There was some oil on the side of the engine covering but it didn't seem to bother the pilot. As we buckled in, a small girl asked her mother if we were going to die. The pilot said no; he had things to do in Fairbanks tonight. Sounded good to me, let's ride!

The plane took off and I looked down at the wild country. In about an hour we were landing in Fairbanks.

I went into the office to pay for the flight and then walked about a ¼-mile to pay the freight and pick up my gear. Back at my friend's after a shower and a few beers, some of the hardships of the trip started to fade.

After I returned home, a letter arrived from Satoru in Japan. He ran into Masai in the lower flats and they traveled together, reaching Galena on the 20th. Every day it was rainy or windy and the waves were "high like the sea." He is planning to do the lower Yukon next summer.

My trip ended up somewhat differently than planned. I had thought of covering around 400+ miles and reaching Tanana, but weather and delays rewrote the plan. In the end, this may not have been such a bad thing. I met interesting people and saw a lifestyle far different from my own.

The final trip, counting all the sloughs, was a bit over 260 river miles with around 66 hours of paddling at almost 4 mph. Not a long or fast trip by Yukon standards but I will call it a success.

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