Dale Stirling
5-14-81

# Float the Kobuk, Gentle Big River of the Arctic

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY JOEL W. ROGERS

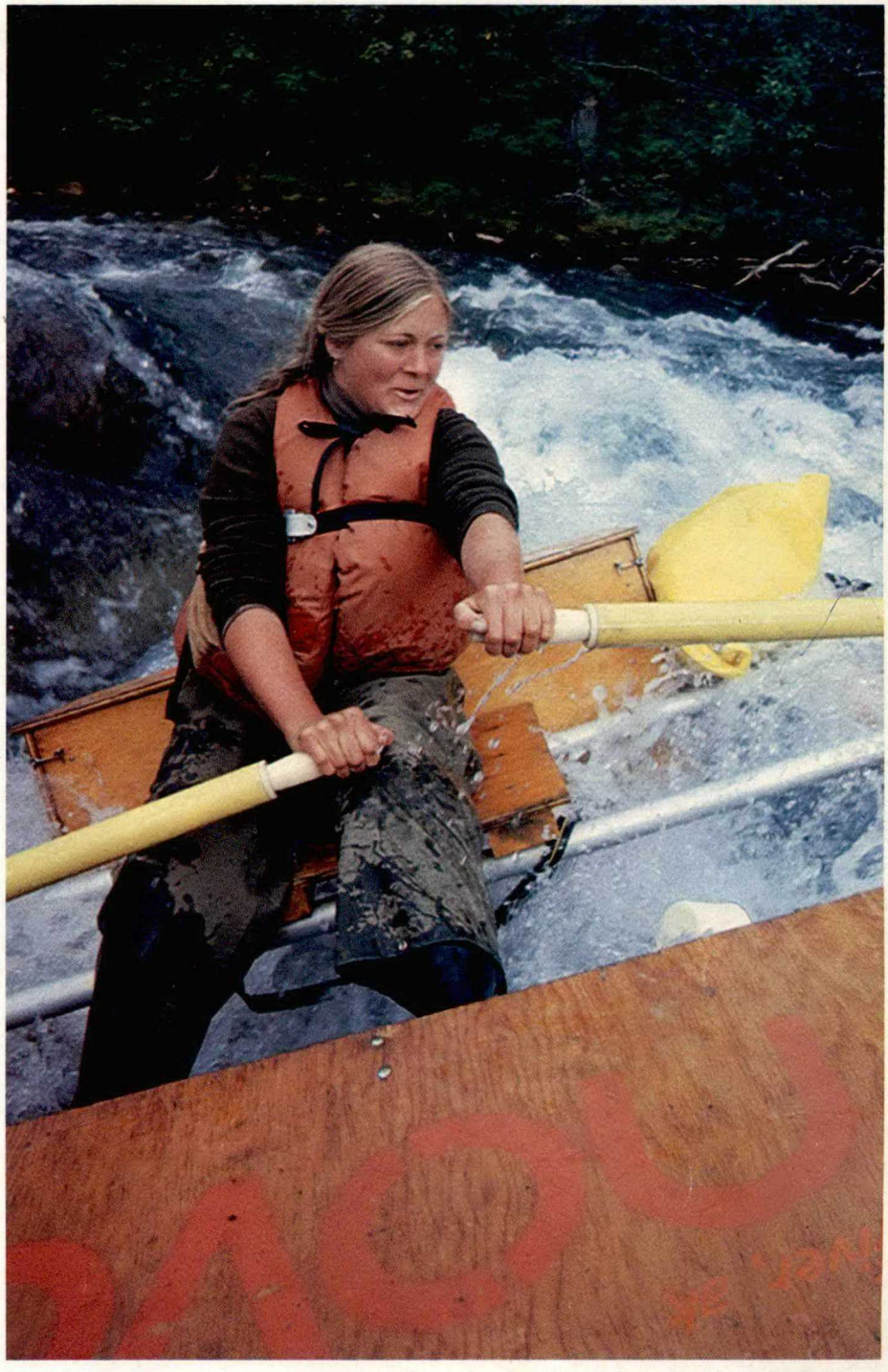
OVER THE PHONE, Nova Riverunners' Fred Duré reads off the list of personal gear I need for eight days on a raft, on a river, in the Arctic: Wool shirt, wool pants, wool sweater, wool cap, wool socks and wool gloves. Three cotton bandanas, suntan lotion, sunglasses and bug dope with a 70 percent or better active ingredient. A compass, a whistle, a waterproof day bag for cameras and bird books. Rubberized raingear, knee-high rubber boots, sleeping bag and a lightweight tent. Options include: fishing tackle, binoculars, brandy, books, and an ugly but effective mosquito hat.

Nova handles the flight arrangements from Fairbanks to Bettles by twin-engine Beechcraft. A classic De Havilland Beaver would fly me the remaining 70 air miles to Walker Lake, in the Brooks Range. My only responsibility: be prepared for a good time.

## Arrival

I am walking the hill above our camp in the southern foothills of the Brooks Range, above the Arctic Circle, in Alaska. The landscape is spare and open, with neat stands of white spruce. Blueberries dot the understory of the spruce woods; it is August, and the berries are ripe. The forest floor is a thick mat of lichen and moss, indented with game trails that head off in all directions. I follow one that takes me into the open. Twenty-mile-square Walker Lake stretches out beneath me, the Arrigetch Peaks stand on the other side, slate blue under threatening rain clouds. Their lower slopes are soft-edged with alpine tundra, the peaks barren and saw-toothed.

Everything here has a quiet way about it. The Aspen leaves make a little rustling sound; my footfalls through the tundra make no sound at all. The rain arrives quietly and I adjust my hood; the sound



***Nova's Lisa Moorehead rows upstream for control as the river pushes the Avon boat through rapids of the upper Kobuk River.***

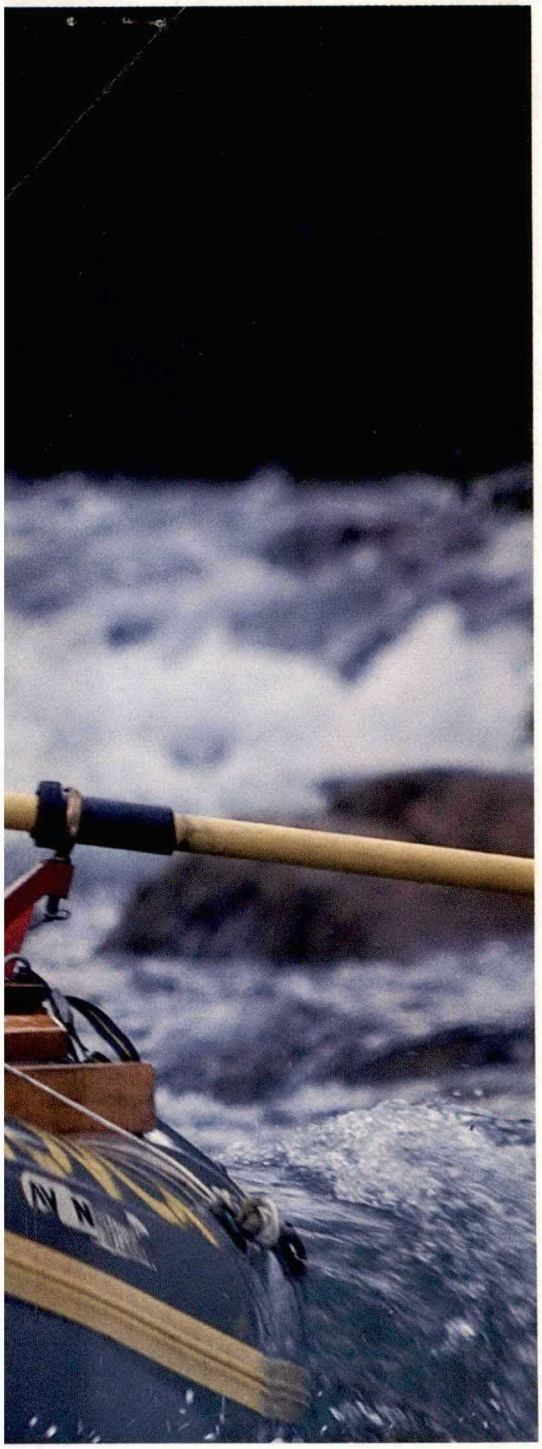
*Joel W. Rogers is a photojournalist of the natural environment. He's out in it every chance he gets. Fred Duré can be reached at P.O. Box 444, Eagle River, Alaska 99577.*







ABOVE–*Passengers and guide plot their route through the boulders and drops.*
LEFT–*At the edge of Walker Lake, a DeHaviland Beaver disgorges the load of equipment that will be needed on the river.*



RIGHT—*Even in sunshine and slow water, a life jacket and boots are the uniform of the day on board the raft.*

*With the tents pitched and the campfire down to coals, the afternoon is given over to grayling cookery.*

*An ingenious camp kitchen in a box provides the party with the ultimate outdoor luxury: full-course, sand-free breakfasts to start the day.*

of the material, the pulling of the drawstrings, seems loud. It is so quiet here I can hear my mind working, like a white sound, active with the imprint of this morning's civilization, the sound of engines, the chatter of friends. These impressions are scrambled by the view of the Arrigetch Peaks before me. The seven-mile wall of arrow-sharp granite, was called "fingers sticking up" by the Eskimos; the peaks stand 6,000 feet over the valley floor.

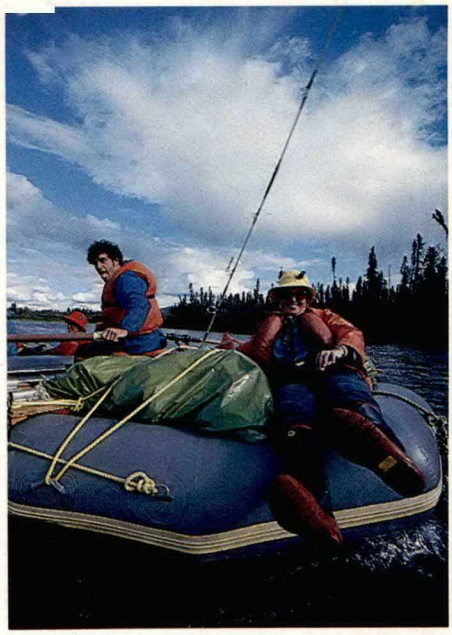
Kobuk means "Big River" to the Eskimos living downstream. It is a clear, cold Arctic river, peaceful in summer, frozen in winter, and violent during spring breakup. Once free from the slopes of the Brooks Range, the Kobuk turns west, meandering through a broad open valley that drains the Angayucham—"Old Man"—Mountains to the north and the Lockwood Hills to the south. For 280 miles the river provides life for countless fish, migrating waterfowl, and 31 species of mammals. It provides a livelihood for the river Eskimos.

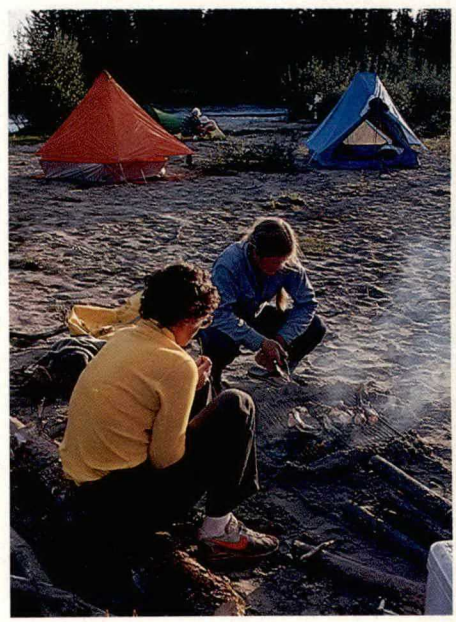
For us the Kobuk is a chance to get away from it all. (We would not see another human being for seven days.) Thanks to Nova, we would rough it in style, yet learn some camping and river skills on the way. But the indelible mark of the river would be the experience of being in wilderness, of being one of 31 species of mammal instead of photographer, or engineer, or river guide. Tomorrow we would play by rules as old as the Angayuchams.

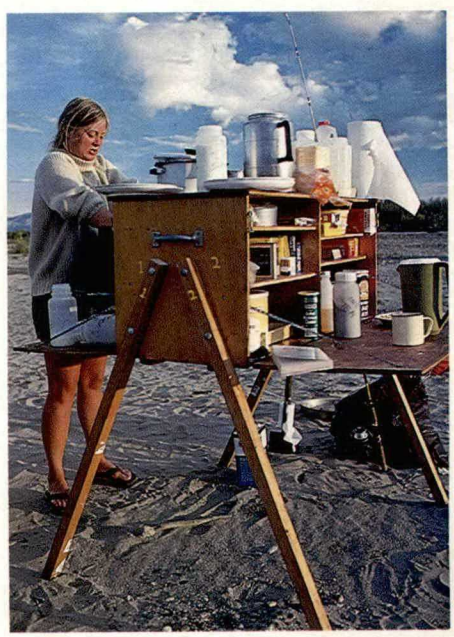
## First Day

The clouds are still with us. The temperature is a mild 55 degrees Fahrenheit. After a leisurely breakfast of seven-grain cereal, bacon, eggs, and coffee we turn to break camp. There are nine of us: four women and five men, ranging in age from 24 to 70. Bill Brooks is a chemical engineer with Alyeska, and his wife, Sally, is a fourth grade teacher. They live in Anchorage and vacation in Alaska for reasons that seem perfectly clear to Bill: "You don't live here if you don't like the outdoors." Liz and Al Robinson are from Anchorage. Liz is to become our resident naturalist, roaming the sandbars for wildflowers while Al tells tales of bureaucracy around evening campfires. Betty Thielsen in 63, a veteran of many river runs and a preeminent winemaker. Her homemade blueberry wine becomes our favorite equipment option.

While we strike our tents and prepare our day bags, the river guides, or "boat-drivers," get the three Avon rafts ready for the river. Fred Duré is one of the principals of Nova Riverunners. He's proud his company is all-Alaskan, and he







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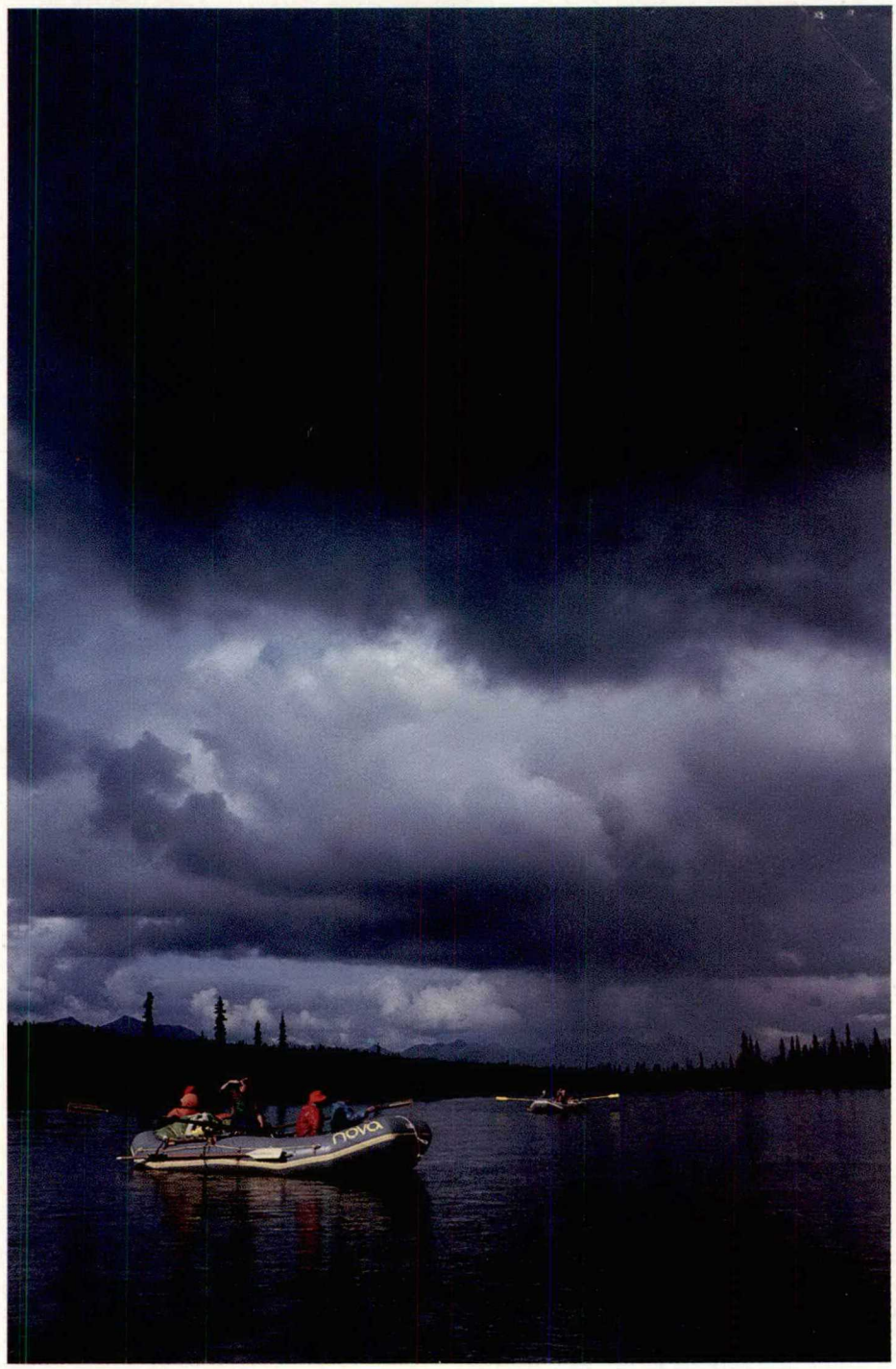
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*Storm clouds dwarf the boat as the party prepares for a thunder shower. In this country, weather is the dominant force.*

is pleased with his profession. Fred is a happy man. Greg Specht has run the Matanuska, the Copper, the Tatshenshini. Like Fred, he lives for the Alaskan rivers; he's the biggest, fishingest boat-driver of the lot. Lisa Moorehead is blond, blue-eyed, strong, and tan. She learned her river running on California whitewater, lives in Anchorage, and is the only guide to have run the Kobuk.

With the gear aboard, we push off from the shore of Walker Lake. The Avon raft is designed for whitewater. These 20-foot rubber rafts have high, rounded sides, a raised bow and stern and a rowing stage midships with space fore and aft for passengers and equipment. We are quite comfortable. Bill gets off his first cast, Al is telling us about the different types of Native housing and I'm on Lisa's boat arranging my nest for the coming day. I decide to keep the raingear handy more as a talisman than a necessity. My day bag contains a Nikon FM camera and five lenses, 17mm to 400mm, a Nikonos underwater camera, "Rite in the Rain" notebook, Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, and *Birds of North America* from Golden Press. My feet straddle the bow, my back is against the equipment box, my life jacket

is on. Lisa rows easily, the lakeshore sliding by, as Al's voice fades away aft.

The lake's outlet to the Kobuk River is roughly 80 feet wide. The hills on either side meet it gently. There is no cascade of whitewater. Instead the land imperceptably tilts and the river flows south as if jogging. We glide over small, smooth river rocks four or five feet beneath us. Grayling, with their distinctive high dorsal fins, jet away across the current, then edge back as if curious. Within a minute, both Greg and Bill have fish on. Lisa has stopped rowing and guides the Avon with periodic steering strokes to keep us in the fastest, deepest water. The setting is parklike.

The tundra grows to the water's edge, leaving only a thin strip of exposed earth. The effect of fresh air, clear water, and the newness of this place is euphoria. As the valley opens, our cloud cover begins to break into separate storm cells that trail showers across the horizon. Throughout the day we dodge the random squalls, keeping in sight of the other rafts. Lisa and I have covered great chunks of our childhood memories, compared notes on college, and we are just into the idiosyncracies of our mothers when Lisa's river experience jogs her memory of what lies ahead. Whitewater.

We pull over to the east bank and call the others in. I join the boatdrivers for a walk downstream to look at these rapids. The river had cut a channel 600 feet long through a band of bedrock. Fred points out his line, Greg and Lisa agree, disagree, variations are proposed, and mentally each guide plots an individual route. I don't know what to think. I've never rafted whitewater before and my apprehension begins to grow. The rapids break in three stages: an open set of uniform rapids with a few boulders, then a chute to the left leading to a series of falls. Once past that, we face what Lisa terms a messy rapid: boulders upstream blocking the logical route and sharp rock just below the drop, set in the curl of the rapid, a place where even the 20-foot Avons can come to grief.

We watch Fred take the first boat through. Avons are simply big rubber rafts. Despite the rowing stage with its 12-foot oars and the muscles of the professional river runner, the boat is sucked to the right by the accelerating current, bounds off boulders, and slides sideways through the first falls. Fred's face is all concentration. He ships some whitewater before slipping into a back eddy. The eddy provides a moment to plan the next move. But no, the river is in full command, pulling the boat through a tight chute, grinding off rocks in a hail of spray, bouncing and turning. Fred, careful not to trap an oar, brings the boat


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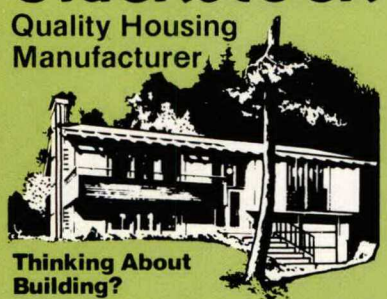
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around and wrestles the boat back from the river. Bill lets out a whoop, Sally smiles and Fred begins to relax. They're through. Now it's our turn.

I decide to risk my camera, and I put on the 17mm wide angle lens. Lisa keeps the boat hard to the left, skirting isolated boulders, riding over others. The Avon absorbs all punishment. The sensation is riveting: the river literally roars. I stand in the bow, shooting back upstream. There is whitewater all around us. We seem to be moving at a tremendous rate. I watch Lisa's eyes for signs of each next move. The oars bite off short strong strokes. I turn to see an imperturbable boulder, as big as the boat, looming up at us. We hit it and the boat bends into the shock and rolls off to the left, down into the curl of the falls. Whitewater coming over! I duck, protecting the camera. The raingear does its job and away we go to calmer waters.

## Third Day

Pilot bread is a flat, salt-free, round, moistureless cracker that keeps forever. Pilot bread with peanut butter and raspberry jam; I think of it now and I want one. By early afternoon thoughts of lunch would draw the boats together. All that would hold us up would be a proper place. There's no point in having lunch without a view. Better weather is bringing out the color of our surroundings. The Angayucham Mountains are a monochromatic grey-blue. They lie east-west, complete, the entire range in clear view. The river meanders grandly through the forest, cutting the bank above to deposit a sandbar below. We gather on an open bar that fronts the mountains. Out comes the camp kitchen, a stand-up, fold-out, compartmentalized pantry containing pilot bread and anything that might go on top of pilot bread.

I explore the riverbank after lunch, walking through lines of willows, sidestepping the sandbar flowers of late summer: monkshood, mastodon flower, Siberian aster, dwarf fireweed, Arctic bedstraw, and grass of Parnasus. Often I come across the cloven-hoofed tracks of moose, and once a set of wolf tracks. I am brought up short by the unmistakable tracks of *Ursus horribilis*, the old name (I prefer it) for the grizzly. They aren't fresh, but my mind races. I follow them up away from the river sand, among the tiny river flowers. The prints are 14 inches long and half as wide, pressed into the soil. Although the bear must have passed through days ago, there being little here for bear appetites, I stop myself from entering the denser underbrush where my vision would be obscured. I suspect there is no finer experience than

sighting a grizzly in its native habitat, but for now just seeing the tracks is enough. The adrenalin burns, my muscles relax, I feel vulnerable, humble, and alive.

## Fifth Day

Decadence. My legs are draped over the bow. I'm down to shorts. The temperature must be 70 degrees. There are some fresh cumulus clouds over the west end of the Brooks Range, but the remaining sky is pure sunshine. I look up from Matthiessen to note the change in view. We are blessed with eagle eyes here, the air is so clean. Distances are difficult to guess; the mountains are twelve miles away, but they look five. Details on a ridgeline are sharp. My eye scans the upcoming shoreline for animals. We had seen a moose cow with calf earlier this morning but nothing moves now in the heat of midday.

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We are an instant case of culture shock. We had not seen anyone since Bettles.

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"And now to catch the elusive Arctic grayling," announces Greg as his Mepps #1 lure arcs toward the back eddy of an incoming stream. There are so many grayling here that he could cast into the spruce forest and have a reasonable chance of hooking one.

The lure hits the water, the rod bends and stays bent. Greg looks surprised. This is no 14-inch grayling stripping out the 10-pound test. We have entered the land of the sheefish, *Stenodus leucichthys.* The French, exploring the Canadian Arctic, named it Inconnu, the unknown fish. In time this name has been skewed to "connie." The fish looks like a salmon and acts like a salmon, spawning upstream, but sheefish refuse to die after mating, returning to the brackish waters of Kotzebue Sound until the urge to spawn forces them again to the gravel beds of the Kobuk. They are a whitefish, averaging 10 to 20 pounds, silver in color with large diamond-shaped scales. Hooked, they fight like a two-by-four that leaps. They taste like halibut. Greg's sheefish looks 15-pounds-plus, but it is too early for a dinner catch. He unhooks the fish, and, leaning out over the stream, holds the connie upright until equipoise returns. (Released too soon, an exhausted fish will turn belly-up and drown.) Fresh tail movement is sign enough and the sheefish swims from Greg's cradling hands.

*Continued on page 65.*




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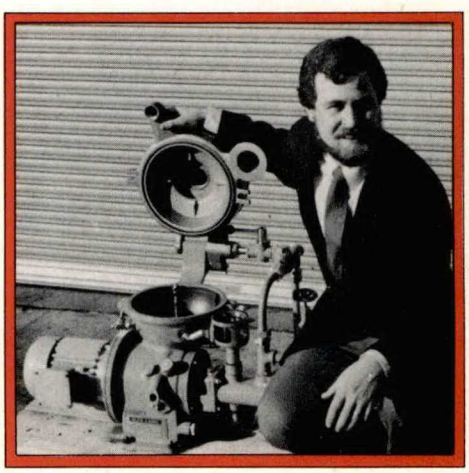
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# Take Fresh Fish and a Norske Recipe

BY SUSAN BUTRUILLE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM THOMPSON

IN THE SOUTHEAST Alaskan town of Petersburg, there's a song that can be heard at gatherings just about any time of year. Reflecting Petersburg's Norwegian heritage and the mainstay of the economy, the song begins:

I like humpback salmon,
Good old humpback salmon,
Caught by a Norske fisherman...

In this town of 2,800 on Mitkof Island, much of life centers on the sea, and the food it provides is often prepared in the Norwegian tradition.

The run of humpback (pink) salmon keeps the local processors running full-time for much of the summer. King, coho, sockeye, and chum salmon are processed along with the humpies.

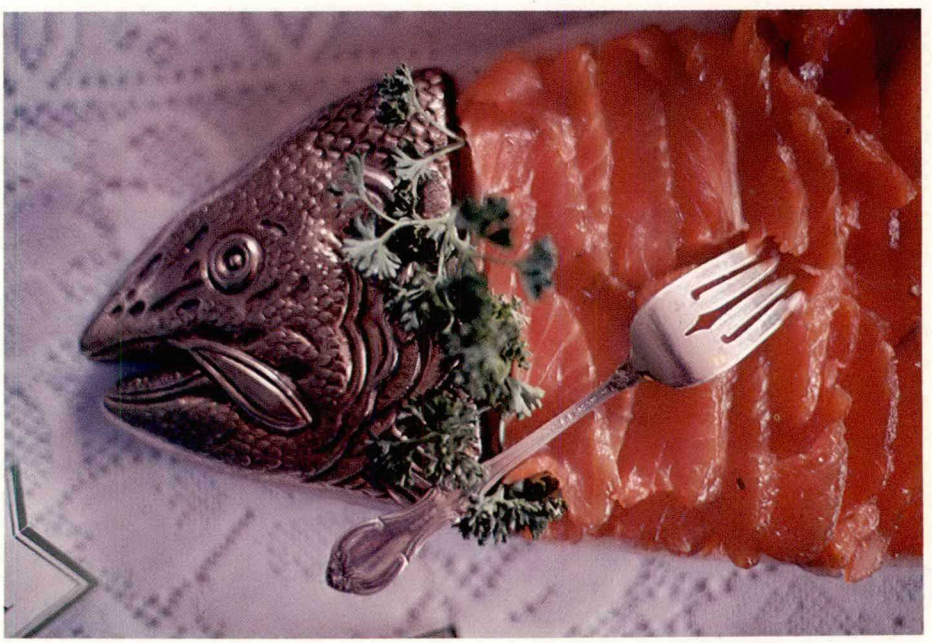
I like crab and shellfish,
They surely make a swell dish...

In 1916, a cowboy from Oregon named Earl Ohmer brought a 45-foot shrimp boat up from "the states" and started Alaskan Glacier Seafoods, now known for Petersburg shrimp. That plant, which also processes crab, is now run by his grandson, Dave. Petersburg has four processing plants today: Petersburg Fisheries (Icicle Seafoods), Whitney Fidalgo, Petersburg Processors, and Alaskan Glacier Seafoods. They process salmon, shrimp, crab, and halibut.

The town thrives on seafood. The people here catch it, sell it, eat it and they all know how to cook it. The Petersburg cuisine is notably Norwegian, but there's Filipino, Oriental, and plain American cooking as well.

---

*After writing for the* Petersburg Pilot *for a year, Susan Butruille is now writing for various publications in Alaska and Colorado. Tim Thompson's photographs have appeared in many national and regional magazines. He lives on Bainbridge Island, Washington.*





**ABOVE—Gravadlox** ***(top) with Norwegian goodies; recipes are on pages 45, 48, 49.***
**OPPOSITE—*The buffet spread of poached salmon is surrounded by herring in sour cream, pickled herring, smoked salmon,* gravadlox, *and* sylta flesk.**

*Continued from page 39.*

## Sixth Day

River Birds: osprey, Arctic tern, white-fronted geese, red-breasted mergansers, belted kingfishers, greater scaup, semipalmated plover.

## Seventh Day

The outboard skiff goes by us heading upstream, 35-horse Evinrude on the back. One of the Natives waves, Sally listlessly returns the wave. We are an instant case of culture shock. We had not seen anyone since Bettles. Until that moment we had no idea how nice it has been, just us, leading the simple life. I have not spent any time on thoughts of civilization and I doubt anyone else has. I think we've developed a true affection for this open land of delicate trees and plentiful fish. Now it is all drifting to an end.

We stop at a trapper's cabin, unoccupied during the warm summer months. Worn ground encircles the trees nearest the sod cabin, proof that the trapper relies on a dog team. Up behind the cabin is a fine log cache 10 feet off the ground. Here, food and furs would be stored away from the bears. We take photographs and mill about, but do not stay long. On the cabin door is a terse note requesting privacy.

Downsteam, we pass Eskimo summer fishing camps. Families retain their traditional sites on the sand bars. A canvas ridgepole tent is set to one side, away from the racks of drying salmon, sheefish, and grayling. The women fish with nets. They catch, fillet, and hang the fish red in the sun. The roe or eggs are saved, and the fish become food for the families and their dog teams during the winter. We drift by slowly, and the young Eskimo children watch us pass.

## Departure

We drift to a stop below the tin roofs of Kobuk village. The day is given over to packing the gear, deflating the rafts and hauling it all to the nearby airstrip. Everyone pitches in until what remains of the trip lies piled beside the gravel runway.

Airborne, we parallel the Kobuk, our eyes following the bends of the river. Sally spots the trapper's cabin. Betty sights the sandbar camp where her blueberry wine was such a hit. Bill and Greg reflect on all the fish uncaught. We cover the last eight days' memories in 25 minutes. The ETA for civilization is 60 minutes as the sound of our airplane drowns further conversation, and our thoughts turn toward home. It's terrible to be back. □


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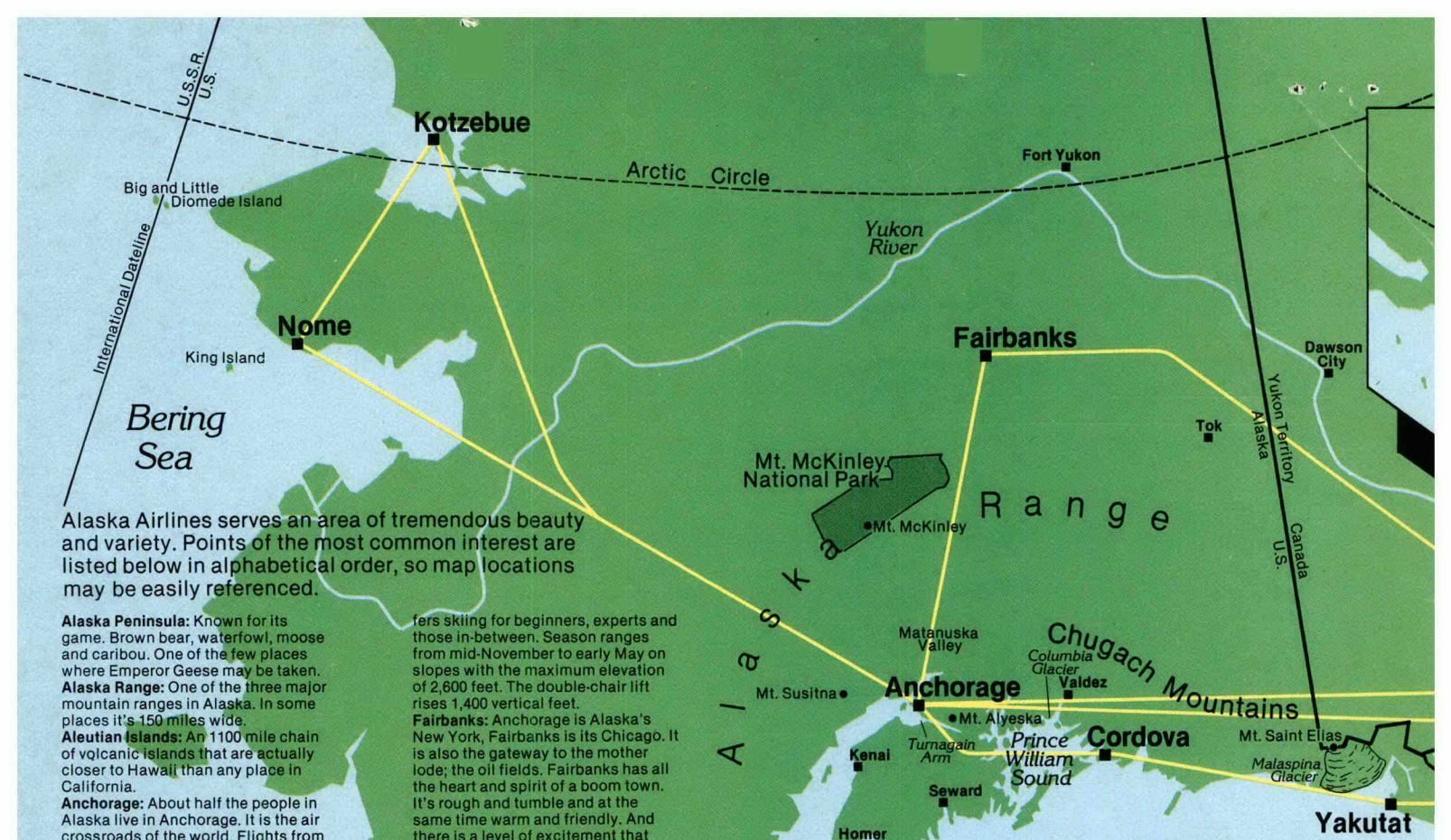
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**Alaska Peninsula:** Known for its game. Brown bear, waterfowl, moose and caribou. One of the few places where Emperor Geese may be taken.

**Alaska Range:** One of the three major mountain ranges in Alaska. In some places it's 150 miles wide.

**Aleutian Islands:** An 1100 mile chain of volcanic islands that are actually closer to Hawaii than any place in California.

**Anchorage:** About half the people in Alaska live in Anchorage. It is the air crossroads of the world. Flights from Europe bound for Asia (and vice versa) refuel here. So it's not uncommon to see aircraft from all over the world resting for a while in Anchorage. There are also more private aircraft here than anywhere else. A truly cosmopolitan city, Anchorage has a well developed sense of fun.

**Arctic Circle:** Almost one-third of Alaska lies above the Arctic Circle. It's one of the few places where a night on the town can last two months.

**Point Barrow:** The largest Eskimo village in Alaska, it's exactly what everyone expected Alaska to be when they were six. Will Rogers & Wiley Post's plane crashed here in 1935. One of the greatest sources of Eskimo ivory carvings in Alaska.

**Big and Little Diomede Islands:** In the Bering Straits. Big Diomede is Russian and Little Diomede, just one mile and a half east is American. The international date line runs between the two. When it is 10 a.m. on Monday on Little Diomede, it is 10 a.m. on Tuesday on Big Diomede. You can say you are looking into tomorrow. In 1743, when Vitus Bering first sailed thru these straits, weather was so low he didn't see Alaska. He first saw Alaska some years later, on his second expedition.

**Brooks Range:** Some of the last unexplored land in the world. It separates the North Slope from the rest of Alaska.

**Chilkoot Pass:** The site of some of the greatest hardships ever suffered in Alaska. Chilkoot Pass was the first real test of how badly a stampeder wanted to find gold in 1897. Many failed.

**Chugach Mountains:** A geological landmark that marks the beginning of Southeastern Alaska and provides a scenic backdrop for Anchorage.

**Columbia Glacier:** Moves at a rate of 4-10 feet per day. And it's big: 300 feet high and 4 miles wide. There's a tour that will take you right up to the face.

**Cordova:** A beautiful city. And it's different from other Alaska cities in that its history is based on copper rather than gold.

**Dawson City:** This is where it all started. The Gold Rush. Bob Henderson discovered gold in the Klondike River in 1896. The gold is gone but the flavor remains.

**Eaglecrest:** Just 25 minutes from downtown Juneau, this ski area offers skiing for beginners, experts and those in-between. Season ranges from mid-November to early May on slopes with the maximum elevation of 2,600 feet. The double-chair lift rises 1,400 vertical feet.

**Fairbanks:** Anchorage is Alaska's New York, Fairbanks is its Chicago. It is also the gateway to the mother lode; the oil fields. Fairbanks has all the heart and spirit of a boom town. It's rough and tumble and at the same time warm and friendly. And there is a level of excitement that hasn't been seen anywhere in the world for at least 50 years.

**Fort Yukon:** About as far west as the Hudson Bay Company ever got. It took three years for goods shipped from England to reach Fort Yukon in 1847.

**Glacier Bay National Monument:** One of Alaska's most dramatic attractions. It is the largest tidewater glacier area in the world. Thundering cliffs of ice. Breathtaking scenery. Highly visible wildlife – from bears to whales. Terrific salmon fishing. Glacier Bay also has everyone's idea of what a remote rustic lodge should be. Complete with solid rugged wooden warmth and a giant fireplace.

**Haines:** Originally called "Dtehshuh" which means: End of the Trail. Famous for its strawberries. And that's the truth.

**Homer:** Home of Alaska's first railroad. It ran from the coal mines to the end of the pier so that ships could be refueled.

**Juneau:** Capital city. One of the largest lodes of gold quartz was found here. Eventually, $80,000,000 in gold was mined. Of special interest: House of Wickersham, St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church and Alaska State Historical Museum.

**Katmai National Monument:** Established in 1918 for the study and preservation of the site of the second greatest volcanic eruption in recorded history. Its landscape is so strange and unearthly that astronauts trained here in preparation for their trip to the moon.

**Kenai:** Alaska's second permanent Russian settlement.

**Ketchikan:** "Salmon Capital of the World." It is the southern-most city in Alaska and the gateway to Misty Fjords National Monument. One of the finest totem collections in the state. Of special interest: Deermount Salmon Hatchery, Totem Heritage Center and Dolly's House Museum.

**King Island:** This is where the natives come from that do the ivory carving you see in the shops in Nome, Kotzebue, and of course, Anchorage. Their homes are built on precarious stilts on the shore of this island. In summer they go to Nome in their skin boats to sell the ivory they've carved during the winter.

**Kodiak:** Home of the King Crab, and site of the oldest permanent European settlement in Alaska. Was the capital of Russian Alaska from 1792-1804.

**Kodiak Island:** Discovered by a Russian explorer in 1673. Home of the Kodiak Brown Bear, the world's largest carnivore.

**Kotzebue:** Was named after Lt. Otto Van Kotzebue, who like Vitus Bering was in the employ of the Imperial Russian Navy.
One of the largest nuggets of the gold rush came from Kotzebue. A bit over 15 pounds. Kotzebue also boasts the second largest Eskimo population.

**Lake Bennett:** Probably one of the only "easy" segments on the route to riches in the Klondike. Men floated north on Lake Bennett to get to the Yukon and Klondike Rivers.

**Lake Iliamna:** Just west of Anchorage, it's the largest lake in Alaska. About 75 miles long, 25 miles wide and a bit larger than the state of Connecticut.

**LeConte Glacier:** Said to be the fastest moving glacier in the world.

**Lynn Canal:** Skagway is at the head of this canal, and the beginning of the famous Chilkoot Pass, over which miners trudged into the Yukon in the early days of the gold rush.

**Malaspina Glacier:** Largest glacier in Alaska.

**Matanuska Valley:** Alaska's breadbasket. Cabbages the size of basketballs are considered small.

**Mendenhall Glacier:** One of the few "drive-in" glaciers. Just 13 miles from Juneau.

**Misty Fjords National Monument:** Located 40 miles east of Ketchikan. Here are fjords, sheer granite mountains, waterfalls, glaciers, forests and abundant wildlife in one of the most spectacular wilderness areas of Alaska."

**Mt. Alyeska:** Alaska's Aspen, the base of its runs is darn near sea level. And the view of Turnagain Arm from the top of the chairlift is spectacular.

**Mt. Edgecumbe:** A spectacular, Mt. Fuji-like volcano that dominates the view from Sitka.

**Mt. Fairweather:** 15,300 feet. Its peak also constitutes one of the monuments of the borderline between Canada and Alaska. Since it is only 18 miles from the peak to the sea, this is the narrowest part of the Alaska panhandle.

**Mt. McKinley:** First attempt: 1903. First verified ascent: 1910. To date, well over 200 people have made it to the top. 20,320 feet.

**Mt. Saint Augustine:** Site of recent volcanic activity. Jan 23-25, 1976.

**Mt. Saint Elias:** Second highest peak in Alaska at 18,008 feet. It was first sighted by Vitus Bering in July 16, 1741 and marks the "official" discovery of Northwestern America by Russia. First ascent: July 31, 1897 by his Royal Highness, Prince Luigi Armedeo di Savoia, Duke of the Abruzzi.

**Mt. Rainier:** 14,408 feet, snow covered the year round.

**Mt. Saint Helens:** In March of 1980 it became the first volcano to erupt in the contiguous United States since 1916.

**Mt. Susitna:** Most residents call it the "Sleeping Lady" because from certain angles, it looks like a lady on her side.

**Nome:** Nome was founded the day that gold was discovered there. About 2,000 people live here now, though at the turn of the century, there were 45,000 living in the immediate area.

**North Slope:** Although it is located in the Arctic, the North Slope is a desert. And it is only one of more than 10 potentially large oil and gas fields in Alaska.

**Olympic National Park:** One of the world's few temperate rain forests.

**Palm Springs:** Famous as a luxury desert resort, Palm Springs is a favorite of royalty and heads of state, the famous and the not-so-famous. With 350 sunny days per year, it is ideal for golf, tennis, sunworshipping or just relaxation.

**Petersburg:** Alaska's "Little Norway." Home base of the world's largest halibut fleet. Famous for Petersburg Shrimp.

**Port Chilkoot:** Home of the famous Chilkat Dancers. Also has one of the only schools established to maintain the traditional art of the Alaska natives.