



## **THE CHITISTONE CANYON, ALASKA THE WRANGELL/ST.ELIAS NATIONAL PARK**

For most of us the word Alaska conjures up images of rugged mountains, brawling rivers, abundant wildlife, and the independent people it takes to live in America's "Last Frontier." In reality, Alaska is all of this, and much, much more.

The sheer size of Alaska is staggering. Its landmass is equal to one fifth of the entire United States. If you could lay Alaska on top of the "Lower 48" it would reach from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. Alaska's mountains have more vertical relief than the Himalayas, the coastline is longer than all the rest of the states combined, and its weather covers the full range of extremes, hot and dry to snow on the 4th of July.

Wrangell/St. Elias is the largest National Park in our nation. Over 16 Yosemites would fit in its boundaries. This Park is larger than the entire country of Costa Rica. Of its 13.2 million acres, five million are permanently covered with ice and snow. This region has the largest concentration of mountain peaks over 14,500 feet in North America. Combined with neighboring Kluane Park of Canada, Wrangell/St. Elias has been recognized as a World Heritage Area by the United Nations, and constitutes one of the outstanding wilderness resources in the World.

### **ITINERARY**

**DAY 1-** We will pick you up at your hotel early in the morning and begin our drive to McCarthy. Our route will take us along the Chugach Mountains. Within minutes of leaving Anchorage, the scenery becomes impressive. On one side are steep, snow-capped peaks, and on the other side the tidal flats of Cook Inlet. We will follow the Matanuska River valley where the long days of summer produce the famous sixty pound cabbages. As we approach Chickaloon Pass we will sight our first glacier; the mighty Matanuska.

Glaciers are Mother Nature's pathways into the mountains. They gain altitude gradually, and the hiker can avoid precipitous ridges. Typical cross-country terrain in Alaska can range from hip-deep bogs and muskeg to impenetrable alder thickets. These frozen rivers are highways in comparison.

On a clear day the magnificent Wrangell Mountains will be directly in front of us as we descend from Chickaloon Pass. Mt. Drum will stand out the most, and look the highest, but that's because it's much closer. In reality it is the smallest of these large peaks at 12,010 feet. Mt. Sanford (16,237 ft.) is on the left (north) and the huge dome of Mt. Wrangell (14,163 ft.) is to the right (south), which is the largest active volcano in the world. If it is very clear, it is even possible to see the massive form of Mt. Blackburn in the distance. This peak at 16,390 ft. is the tallest of the Wrangells, and only twenty five miles from McCarthy.

At Glennallen we will turn south towards Valdez until we reach the Edgerton Cutoff. Here we'll turn due east. The large valley in front is carved by the Copper River. It's 35 miles to the old railroad town of Chitina. Across from the Chitina Bar is an old box car from the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad completed in 1910. Along a road just above the bar is an old Model-T with railroad wheels, used after the line was abandoned in 1939 for private transport up and down the tracks. There is still a population of native Ahtna Indians that have inhabited this region long before whites showed up.

**We will continue out of Chitina, through a narrow cut in the rocks that gives you the feeling of being on a steam locomotive over sixty years ago, and turn the corner for a panoramic view of the Copper and Chitina River's confluence. Cross the new highway bridge over the Copper River, and you'll be on the old railroad bed.**

**The next sixty eight miles takes you through spruce forests, alder thickets, along lakes, and over gorges. The Kuskulana Bridge will excite everyone as they get to look straight down over 250 feet to the boiling, silt laden waters below. Small homesteads along the way will show that this is a growing region, where people still hope to carve their livelihoods from the land. Several lakes along the road, Silver and Sculpin, have good fishing, but the further along the road, the more mountains and glaciers begin to dominate the scene.**

**After several hours, the end of the road is in sight. The roaring Kennicott River slices the road like a knife, a lone cable spanning the distance to the far bank. Directly to your left (north) is the rock and gravel covered Kennicott Glacier.**

**A sturdily built steel tram cart rides the cable to the far side. A quarter of a mile walk and then across the next tram. From there it's just a short distance to McCarthy and the Mother Lode Powerhouse, the home of St. Elias Alpine Guides.**

**DAY 2- By foot we will explore the historical towns of McCarthy and Kennicott. In 1899, U.S. Army Captain W.R. Abercrombie led an expedition and confirmed the reports of rich veins of copper having been discovered in the vicinity of the Kennicott Glacier. This massive ice flow received its name from Robert Kennicott, a young naturalist who accompanied the first U.S contingent of scientists who explored Alaska and wrote a report in favor of its purchase to Secretary Seward. It was not long before financiers J.P. Morgan and the Guggenheims with the aid of a young ambitious man named Stephan Birch formed the Alaksa Syndicate to mine the rich copper. But because copper is a few dollars per pound, and not per ounce, everyone knew, mass transportation was needed. More than \$24 million dollars was invested in the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad that went 196 miles from Cordova to the newly-created mill site of Kennecott (a secretary's error spelled the name of the glacier with an "e" and the company has been the Kennecott Copper Corporation ever since). Kennecott was a company town where booze and "women of the evening" were not allowed. McCarthy (at first called Shushanna Junction and then named after a man who drowned in the nearby creek) leapt into existence and into business. There were over a dozen bars, a huge "red light" district and no church. The Kennecott mine earned the Syndicate over \$300 million before the Great Depression contributed to its closing. The last train ran on November 11, 1938, and with it went most of the inhabitants of the region. The 14-storey processing mill and 45 abandoned buildings remain a mute testimony to an incredible era.**

**DAY 3- Early in the morning we will outfit for our trip into the Chitistone Canyon. Each person will lay out their gear, and the professional guides will go over each item, explaining why it is essential or not needed for the upcoming adventure. We will discuss clothing, layering for the cold. We'll talk about different types of material and why wool and polypro are so far superior to cotton. The food for the trip will be laid out and after the thorough equipment discussion, we will talk about the menu. The food represents almost two decades of experience in expeditioning. Its heavier than freeze dried, but is so much more healthy and palatable, weight becomes secondary. It is based on a high carbohydrate diet, with the usual breakfast foods of hot cereal and lunches of peanut butter and cheese.**

**Near noon, we will head for the airstrip, for the short flight by bush plane into Glacier Creek. McCarthy Air Service will take us into the old gravel strip built by an old prospector named Radovan. The size of the group will determine the number of flights needed to get us all into Glacier Creek. Once landed, you will be at the bottom of the Chitistone Canyon.**

High rock walls will soar away from us on three sides. Up Glacier Creek will be wonderful views of the University Range of the St. Elias Mountains. A glacier covered peak culminates at the head of the valley, a first ascent climbed by St. Elias Alpine Guides years before. Alongside the "runway" is an old army trailer, evidence of the mining that went on in this entire region before National Park status was conveyed in 1980. We once found a stub of an old check written to Radovan for \$10,000. It was stuffed in an old tobacco can in the wall of his cabin.

We'll hike down Glacier Creek and pick up a faint trail near the Chitistone River. We will add our footprints to a path that has been used for thousands of years by the original inhabitants of this land. It is the only way from the coastal areas thru the Chitina valley and between the Wrangell Mountains and the St. Elias Mountains to the tundra covered interior to the north.

The afternoon is spent hiking a flat four miles to Toby Creek. The packs are heavy, and we get a chance to break in slowly, easily. Two thousand foot rock cliffs line the bank on the other side of the Chitistone River. Whispy falls cascade from a height we can only guess at. One delicate water fall creates nine tiers as it drains the high plateaus above. In the "Lower 48" this waterfall would not only have a name, but perhaps its own National Park.

We will set up camp in the outwash plain at the junction of Toby Creek and the Chitistone River. Directly up Toby Creek two pyramidal shaped mountains carve into the sky. The vertical rock faces are decorated with hundred foot hanging seracs, narrow ice rivulets form delicate cross hatch patterns and steep fluted ridges sweep up towards the summits. Neither has a name in this vast wilderness. Only one has been climbed.

On a topo map, Toby Creek is nothing but a single thin blue line, a pleasant sounding little stream. In reality, it drains a glacier larger than any that exist in the continental United States, and during spring run off, or hot summer days, boulders the size of fire hydrants can be heard crashing along the bottom. The last thing one wants to do is put their bare ankle, in a light tennis shoe between those rocks, and no way out of this canyon but by foot. Along the bank of Toby Creek, we will discuss several methods that allow the safe crossing of glacial rivers. The pyramid is the most tested, and we will practice it, doing several "dry runs" before shouldering packs and stepping into the fast flowing current.

**DAY 4-** In the early morning we will put to use our new knowledge and cross Toby Creek. A "war" dance will ensue on the opposite bank, as we jump and scream, venting the wonderful feeling of cold feet. With dry socks we'll rekind the trail along the Chitistone and meander through waist high soap berry thickets, spruce trees and alder. The Chitistone has carved away the bank in several places, and depending on the water level, we'll climb off the vegetated bench and walk over boulders strewn alongside the river. Within a mile and a half from Toby Creek, the larger Chitistone River has cut so far into the bank that we are forced to ascend and side hill for nearly another mile. Underneath a canopy of spruce, poplar and cottonwood, we'll munch bright green sour grass, perhaps picking a plastic bag full to carry and have as salad at supper. An hour later we'll be back down onto the Chitistone River bar, and this time for good.

After lunch at a stream so clear it takes a moment to focus on the flowing water to know its there, we will hike towards a huge scar along the southern hillside. Three years ago, the entire side of this mountain let go and came crashing down into the bottom of the canyon. It spilled headlong up the opposite bank, forming an earthen dam. The waters of the Chitistone backed-up behind it, depositing glacial debris until a level plain formed and the water cut an ever growing swath through the landslide. We will find a route through the enormous piles of rock and shattered timber, to walk along the flat sand bars formed by the short lived lake. Boulders the size of small houses are littered throughout the jumble of earth. It is enough to just sit and stare at the enormity and power of nature and to wonder what it sounded like, what it would have been like to witness such an act.

Away in the distance is a barely perceptible narrow defile. A high green bench is along one side, with a rock strewn face that looks as if it were cleaved by a knife. The valley seems to go two ways, and so it does, one to the right, to the Chitistone Glacier, the birth place of the magnificent river we have been

ascending. To the left the valley becomes narrow. Above the defile and bench are high mesas, looking like the American southwest: during the Ice Ages! Woolly mammoths are the only thing missing from this vista. Glaciers adorn the tops of red rock cliffs with their pinnacles and hoodoos that stand out from thousand foot high ice cliffs. It is the upper Chitistone Canyon; our only path to the pass.

The hillside and river slowly merge as we hike closer to the glacier. Through a dry lake bed we will see the signs of timeless movement through this corridor. Bear and wolf tracks are etched in the hard, dried mud. Sign of their spring migration from the low country back into the alpine tundra. Moose and sheep tracks are intermingled, and on occasion a skeleton of a sheep is found strewn with the fallen boulders at the bottom of a dangerous cliff.

We will hike "around the corner," and be met with a view of 16,421 foot Mt. Bona, an icy wind and the snout of the Chitistone Glacier. We'll camp in a hollow formed by gravel deposits laid down by ice and water. It is an other worldly environment. A moon scape of rock and ice, glacier and snow, brilliant green hillsides, red rim rock and delicate pink fireweed.

**DAY 5-** There is a picture in the archives of two men on horseback standing in front of the Chitistone Glacier 50 years ago. The towering rock covered terminus behind them reaches more than 500 feet in the air and the surface of the glacier is the same level as the soft green bench. Today, the bench lies disconnected, a true "island in the sky." The Chitistone Glacier has receded several miles, leaving behind the towers of gravel and disconnected ice that we hike through. Even in the twelve years of my exploring of this route, the glacier has shrunk back an unprecedented mile and a half.

Some years, the silty brown water of the Chitistone River splits into braids, one or more forks disappearing into a tunnel of ice, to reappear several hundred yards later. We will take advantage of these natural bridges, and pick our way across the glacier and the river. Crystalline blue ice breaks off in thundering noise to shatter on impact in the thick water. Chunks of ice sculpted by the hand of wind lie beached along the rivers course. We will skirt blue green pools of water, fed from ice underneath the ground, with soft dangerous quicksand along their perimeters. The sheer hillside rears up from the glacier, its bottom reaches denuded from the tear of ice. Above, the reds and yellows of eroded rock stand in fantastic formations.

We hike out onto the small outwash plain below the Chitistone Gorge. A smaller, thicker brown colored river surges out from the narrow chasm that hides 400 foot Chitistone Falls. This is the Falls River, and since we cross it in the level basin formed by glacial action, it is deeper, but lacks the force of Toby Creek. We hike through boulders and around small swamps formed by run off from above. We enter a small tributary canyon, and then into dense brush. We access a hidden trail that switch backs up 700 feet to burst out onto the alpine tundra covered bench above the falls and glacier. Taking a break, we can see the length of the lower Chitistone Canyon. The landslide, Toby Creek, and just before the final bend is obscured by mountains, the beginning of Glacier Creek and the airstrip. While crossing this natural meadow, we view both upper Chitistone Glacier valley and upper Chitistone Falls valley. The rock covered glacier snakes its way east into massive ice cliffs, tiering up and up to the summit of Mt. Churchill and Bona. Glaciers tumble off these huge peaks in every direction, and the immensity of the land begins to creep in.

At lunch, we sit on an exposed finger of earth, jutting out over the straight drop hundreds of feet below to the Falls River. The view north, up valley is one of breathless beauty. Chitistone falls crashes down into an unseeable grotto, spray pulsing into the air. A narrow brilliant green valley sweeps back from the edge of the Falls, both sides soaring quickly to heights of 9,000 feet, glaciers capping the tops of this canyon country. Our trail curves from the falls, steeply ascending a tributary stream towards the large multi-colored scree slopes that make up the "goat trail" and give us access around Chitistone Falls and into the upper valley.

Small blueberry plants, alpine forget-me-nots, and dwarf fireweed cling to the edges of the trail. We follow Dall sheep tracks up into the reaches of this clear flowing stream. After two thousand feet of

climbing, we camp along the boulder strewn edge of Clear Water creek. At over 5,000 feet, we are at the door to the upper Chitistone Valley.

**DAY 6-** A rest day. A day to explore without a pack on. We will ascend Clear Water creek, scrambling next to exquisite waterfalls. Dall sheep will warily watch our progress. We will hike into a huge basin that stretches all the way to the Nizina River in the west. This is a plateau hunted by bear and wolf, home for sheep, arctic ground squirrel and bald eagle. Sheer rock cliffs border the northern side, immense hanging glaciers straddling their tops. This is the dreamy world of the Hole-in-the-Wall glacier. A region of glaciers and rock formations seemingly touched by the hand of god. The rolling tundra allows solitary wanderings, an opportunity to feel the Alaska wilderness. On a cloudless day, Mt. Blackburn will be seen in the distance, the tallest of the Wrangells to the west, turn and view Mt. Bona, the tallest of the St. Elias to the east. We are indeed between the ranges.

**DAY 7-** We leave camp hiking slightly uphill to a saddle. It is the entrance to the "goat trail." A narrow path built and maintained by Dall sheep traversing scree slopes that plunge down into the Chitistone Falls River below. We slowly pick our way across the first bowl, the multi-colored rocks make us believe we're hiking the Grand Canyon of Arizona. Footing is generally solid, with patches of hard earth that take concentration. The guides will discuss the hiking methods that will enable you to hike along this trail safely, they will point out areas of caution, and explain how to edge your boots and use the terrain to your advantage.

Even though we are ascending towards Chitistone Pass, the "goat trail" actually slopes downward from a high point at the start to give us access to the narrow valley floor. We'll eat lunch after we've traversed the scree, and then begin the hike along the rolling Chitistone Falls River. Our boulder strewn course takes us past rushing tributaries bursting from basins high above and lined with hanging glaciers, free falling waterfalls and hob-goblin rock formations. At another narrow impasse, we begin to climb again and follow the imperceptible trail through a wonderland of tundra covered mounds, to camp below a massive rock tower soaring into the clouds.

**DAY 8-** We grab our daypacks again and silently circuit the enormous tower, climbing gently to Chitistone Pass. We'll spend the day in this radiant cleft between two enormous mountain ranges. This is truly one of the most beautiful places on earth. Caribou can be found high along one side, usually laying down on snow banks, keeping cool till evening. Hoary marmots and Dall sheep roam the hillside on the west, stopping motionless for an instant to monitor our intentions. The pass is a rather large expanse, U-shaped from glacial action. To the east are brilliant glacier covered peaks, the now familiar red rock cleaving through the ice at summits. To the north, a view into Canada, tumbled surface of the Russell Glacier flows into a wide expanse of the White River, which finally merges into rolling hills and distant haze a hundred miles away. To the west is Frederika Mountain and the opposite direction Mt. Sulzer. The west is a Wrangell Mountain, the east is the corner of the St. Elias Range. Both have been climbed only once, over this past decade by St. Elias Alpine Guides.

We don't camp in the pass. The delicate alpine tundra can't withstand the brutality of our presence. And fierce winds can howl through this gap between interior Alaska and North America's Himalayas.

On the way back to camp, we'll leave the trail and scramble onto the surface of the Chitistone Falls Glacier. This picture perfect ice flow is a beautiful example of glacial morphology, and as we walk along its surface, we'll discuss its formation, its growth cycles and its intricate formations of crevasses and ice falls.

**DAY 9-** With packs on we retrace our route to Chitistone Pass. We'll stop and ponder the view of our entire ascent route up the Chitistone Canyon. We'll drop off the northern rim of the pass, and eat lunch out of the wind. Cascading glaciers tumble off the hillside to our left, seemingly close enough to reach out and touch.

After eating we'll walk to a viewpoint of Skolai Valley. A meandering stream curves gracefully away from the jumbled Russell Glacier and forms a large lake at one end of the valley. Opposite, mountains climb back into the sky, cornered by Castle Peak, a mountain so true to its name, it is still unconquered. We drop straight down 1500 feet to the valley floor, where we re-enter willow thickets and enjoy the smell of cranberry and cottonwood. The final four miles to the small airstrip near the lake is accompanied by views of vaporous waterfalls, misting off towering rock walls, to disappear in gusts of wind, only to reappear in spray at the bottom. We'll camp in a thicket of gnarled willows, and walk up a gravel spire for a view of the seven glaciers forming the Hole-in-the-Wall region.

**DAY 10-** A small single engine plane will pick us up in the morning. Two at a time, we'll depart this gracious land, leaving it the way we found it, silent, exquisite powerful. The flight back to McCarthy will give wonderful views of the magnificent Nizina Glacier, and the famous folds in the rock cliffs along this glacier's river. We'll eat a warm lunch in McCarthy and then enjoy scrubbing off the dirt in a log fired sauna/bath house. The therapeutic steam and heat will help ease the re-entry into civilization. At dinner in the Motherlode Powerhouse, we'll relive the stories of this adventure, and talk about new plans and now, old friends.

**DAY 11-** After a hearty Alaskan breakfast, we retrace our route across the hand powered trams to the van at the end of the McCarthy road. Slowly we will drive towards Anchorage, still stopping to drink in the views of wild Alaska, but this time, enjoying in a new way, the comforts of man. We'll drop you off at your respective hotels or Bed and Breakfasts. We suggest that you don't make reservations for flights home this night, but the following, just in case weather delays us in being able to fly out from Skolai Valley.

#### **TOPOGRAPHICAL MAPS-**

- McCarthy Quadrangle (scale 1:250,000)
- 15' Series McCarthy B4, C3, and C4

#### **Chitistone Canyon Backpack Expedition**

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