

Rafting the Alsek River in Kluane National Park & Reserve



Photo: L. Gorecki

A Canadian Heritage River

Fed by glacial meltwaters from the world's second highest coastal mountain range, the Alsek River offers an extraordinary opportunity for wilderness travel. From its source at the confluence of the Dezadeash and Kaskawulsh Rivers in Kluane National Park & Reserve, the Alsek River flows through the glaciated valleys of the St. Elias Mountains before draining into the Pacific Ocean. It traverses 250 km of pristine wilderness across the southwest corner of the Yukon Territory, northern British Columbia and the Alaskan panhandle.

Because it is an outstanding example of northern natural heritage, the Alsek River was named a Canadian Heritage River in 1986. Rugged glacial valleys are home to golden eagles, mountain goats and a large population of grizzly bears. Sand dunes and glacial till provide a contrasting environment for the diverse vegetation found here. Breathtaking vistas of glaciers such as the Lowell and Fisher offer the visitor rare glimpses into the heart of Kluane.

Cultural Significance

The portion of the Alsek River that runs through the Yukon and British Columbia lies within the traditional lands of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations. Historically the river's rich resources supported Tlingit communities in the lower reaches of the river basin and Southern Tutchone people in the interior. The river also had strategic importance as a route between the interior and the coast during the early years of European exploration.



Photo: S. Corneloup

Today traditional harvesting of various resources continues throughout the Alsek valley. The Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, together with Parks Canada and BC Parks, cooperatively manage their traditional lands within Kluane National Park & Reserve in the Yukon and the Tatshenshini-Alsek Park in British Columbia.

Special Protection

Within Kluane National Park & Reserve a 45 km stretch of the upper Alsek River is protected through a zoning system that classifies this portion of the river as a Special Preservation Area. The purpose of this zone is to preserve grizzly bear habitat and a number of rare plant species found in the valley. Much of the river valley vegetation is very fragile and easily disturbed. Specific regulations therefore apply to visitor use within this area.

Ensuring a Wilderness Experience

The Alsek River flows through Kluane National Park & Reserve in the Yukon, Tatshenshini-Alsek

Provincial Park in British Columbia and Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve in Alaska. Collectively these parks are part of a United Nations World Heritage Site. As a result of this international recognition, visitor use of the river has increased dramatically. In order to ensure a wilderness experience and protect natural and cultural resources, the number and frequency of rafting trips are controlled by a permit system. Departure dates are limited to one departure every other day and distributed equally between commercial and private trips. Maximum group size for private trips is 15 people.

Planning Your Trip

Careful planning before arriving in the park will increase your enjoyment of a trip on the Alsek River. All members of your group should share responsibilities for the trip and be aware of its special restrictions. **Please note that collecting fees for private trips is prohibited.**

Trip Options:

To begin your trip, put in at Serpentine Creek, that is accessed via the Alsek Trail. This four-wheel drive road enters Kluane National Park & Reserve from the Alaska Highway at km 1022.

The full trip to Dry Bay, Alaska in Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve takes approximately 10-12 days. There is no road access to the take-out point at Dry Bay. Return charter flights may be arranged from Dry Bay to Yakutat, Haines, Juneau or Whitehorse (contact Glacier Bay for a list of air charter companies).

Two shorter trip options include traveling to Lowell Glacier (3-4 days) or Turnback Canyon (6-8 days) and flying back by helicopter or small fixed-wing aircraft. All flight arrangements should be made prior to arriving in the park. A landing permit is required for a Lowell Glacier take-out. Fees apply. A landing permit can be obtained when you obtain your Wilderness Permit.



Required Permits:

All river trips must reserve their **departure date** and obtain a **Wilderness Permit** from Kluane National Park & Reserve. Trips travelling through to Dry Bay must also obtain a **permit and departure date** from Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve in Alaska. A permit is not required to travel through Tatshenshini –Alsek Park. Separate fees apply to each of the three parks that you will be travelling through. **Be sure you have the latest information on fees and registration procedures by contacting these agencies directly.**



Photo: L. Gorecki

How to Reserve Put-In and Take-Out Dates:

1. If you are making the full trip to Dry Bay, Alaska, you must obtain a take-out date from Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve **before** you can reserve a start date from Kluane National Park & Reserve. Fees apply.
2. A waiting list is maintained for Dry Bay trips. Send your name, address and telephone number to Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve (see contact list).
3. Once you have a take-out date, reserve a start date from Kluane National Park & Reserve (see contact list). Doing this as soon as possible will help ensure you get the date that works best for you.
4. Contact BC Parks to pay applicable fees (see contact list).
5. Obtain your **Wilderness Permit and Landing Permit** and pay applicable fees at the Kluane National Park & Reserve Visitor Centre in Haines Junction the day prior to, or the day of the start of your trip.

Safety on the River

The Alsek River is a large volume, glacial river. The water is extremely cold (just a few degrees above freezing), swift, and wide in many sections. The river also contains a number of rapids that must be negotiated. Large standing waves, rock gardens, holes, eddies, silty water and swift currents increase the difficulty of sections of the river. River travellers should be competent with Class III and IV rapids.

Travelers must ensure they minimize the chances of capsizing and must be prepared for a long cold swim before they are rescued or are able to get themselves to shore. A number of injuries and deaths have occurred due to travelers underestimating the powerful flow and cold temperature of the water. Hypothermia and drowning are the two most common causes of death on the river.

A rule to remember: **Do not travel a section of river unless you are properly prepared to swim that same section.**

Equipment:

1. **Boats** – Four-metre rafts or larger in good operating condition are recommended. Rigid kayaks and covered whitewater canoes with floatation are suitable only for paddlers experienced with Class III and IV rapids. A minimum of two boats per party is recommended for safety. Folding kayaks and open canoes are not recommended.
2. **Personal Floatation Devices (PFD's)** - Ministry of Transport regulations require that one approved PFD must be worn by each traveler. A Type III or Type V PFD is recommended, as they offer a greater amount of floatation.



Photo: L. Gorecki

3. Thermal Protection - The air and water temperatures are cold, particularly when it's windy. Warm clothing that retains heat when wet is recommended. Synthetic fleece and wool layers are preferred to cotton. Wearing dry suits with warm layers underneath is strongly recommended when negotiating rapids.

1) Sam's: UTM: 7V 0665400 E; 6674400 N or 61° 10' 29" N; 138° 01' 06" E Map Datum: NAD 27

2) Lava: UTM: 7V 0666580 E; 6670500 N or 60° 08' 21" N; 138° 0', 1" E Map Datum: NAD 27

A number of accidents have occurred at these two rapids. Groups may consider having the majority of the group walk along the shoreline downstream, with only a minimal number of occupants in the rafts.

Travelling through Turnback Canyon is not recommended. This canyon is a 7 km-long run of continuous **class V-VI white water** and a spilled raft or kayak invariably results in tragedy. Travellers are advised to helicopter portage Turnback Canyon. Turnback Canyon is located in Tatshenshini/Alsek Wilderness Park. Please contact BC Parks for more information.

3. Ice Floes – The Alsek River passes by the toe of the Lowell Glacier, and at times, large blocks of ice drop into the river and flow downstream. These ice blocks can be massive and may roll or break as they melt, crushing or capsizing a raft that is too near. Ice is also a hazard at Alsek Lake in Alaska, where several glaciers calve into the lake.



Photo: L. Gorecki

4. Helmets – Whitewater helmets are recommended for all river traveler, especially when negotiating rapids.

5. Emergency Equipment – All boats should pack emergency rescue gear in case of an accident. This includes throw bags, a comprehensive first aid kit, repair kit, spare paddles and oars. All rafts with fixed floors must carry a bailing bucket. Carry extra food for unexpected delays. Emergency equipment is only useful if easily accessible, you know how to use it and have practiced with it.

6. Communication Device - Satellite phones are recommended in case of the need for emergency contact. Cellular phones do not work on the Alsek River.

Hazards:

1. Cold Water – River water can be extremely cold, only a few degrees above freezing. Dry suits are strongly recommended in more difficult sections where capsizing could be fatal.

2. Powerful Rapids - Two sets of Class III-IV rapids below the Lowell Glacier should be scouted before running. Paddlers should know exactly where these are prior to their trip as they are difficult to see while on the river. These rapids are located at approximately:

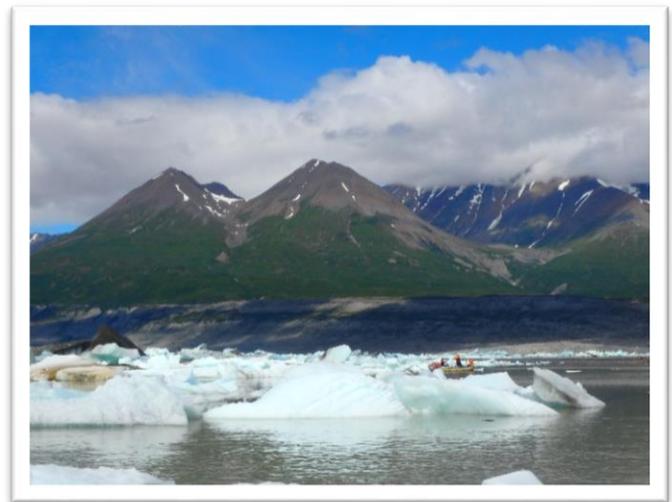


Photo: S. Corneloup

4. Weather Delays – Bad weather may require extra days on the river or delay flights to and from Dry Bay. Be prepared to wait out delays with a supply of extra food.

5. Wind – The Alsek flows through a broad open valley in a southerly direction, and is subject to strong south winds up to 100 km per hour. Be prepared to spend extra time battling the wind as well as silts and sands carried by the wind.

6. Giardia -- River users should purify all water used for drinking and cooking by boiling for three minutes or filtering with a less than 0.5 micron filter to avoid the intestinal parasite, **giardia**.

Camping in Grizzly Bear Territory

For the safety of both people and bears, Kluane National Park & Reserve works to keep human-bear encounters to a minimum.

The whole of the Alsek River valley is prime grizzly bear habitat and serves as a major travel corridor for the bears. In order to build up food reserves for winter, grizzlies must spend the majority of spring, summer and fall searching for food. Food sources are scarce, and although Kluane National Park & Reserve is a large protected area, less than 20% is suitable grizzly habitat.

At the start of rafting season, grizzly bears are moving from higher elevations to the river valley. The potential for human-bear encounters therefore exists at all campsites along the river.

through an area designated as a Special Preservation Area for Grizzly Bears. Although traveling in grizzly bear territory needs special attention at all times, specific consideration and camping restrictions apply within this area.

1. Camping is permitted only in **designated campsites and zones** (see map).



Photo: S. Corneloup

2. River users are not permitted to camp at a distance greater than 100 metres from the river high water line.

3. Rafters must not leave rafts or camps unattended while hiking. At least one person should stay to watch the boats and camp.

4. Camping between the confluence of the Kaskawulsh and Dezadeash River and campsite #9 above Lowell Lake is limited to **one night only** per group per trip.



Photo: B. Bakker

Bears and Food:

Extreme care must be taken when camping in grizzly bear territory. It is the responsibility of each group traveling the river to ensure bears do not gain access to human food or garbage. The use of approved bear-resistant food containers or an electric fence is strongly recommended.

Keeping campsites clean, handling food and garbage properly, and choosing campsites carefully, minimizes conflicts with bears.

Camping Restrictions:

Near the beginning of your trip you will be traveling



Photo: N. Tattam

5. **Camping is prohibited in the Goatherd Mountain closure area and is limited to the eastern edge of Lowell Lake.**

6. To reduce the risk of encounter and disturbance of bears, off river travel (such as day hikes) within the Special Preservation Area is not encouraged.

7. Approved bear resistant containers (approved coolers, canisters, raft boxes) and/or portable electric fences are highly recommended and encouraged to help prevent bears from accessing human food. A list of certified bear resistant food storage options can be found here: <http://www.igbconline.org/index.php/safety-in-grizzly-country/bear-resistant-products>.

The following restrictions apply to the whole river.

8. Fire pans are required for campfires. Camp stoves are recommended, since driftwood and deadwood are limited and difficult to obtain.



9. All garbage and human waste must be packed out.



Photo: S. Corneloup

10. All human waste must be packed out of the Alsek Valley. **Human waste disposal systems** are available for rent from commercial suppliers. Please be sure to arrive at the park with an appropriate waste disposal system. A dump station is available at Dry Bay.

11. Firearms are prohibited in Kluane National Park and Reserve.

Note: Further information “Alsek River and Travel” is available upon request.

Preserving National Park Values

In choosing to make a trip within national park boundaries, please be aware that you are agreeing to abide by special regulations governing visitor use.

Camping restrictions and National Park Regulations must be followed in order for your Wilderness Permit to be valid.

National Park Regulations:

1. It is illegal to carry firearms or to hunt within Kluane National Park & Reserve except for traditional subsistence activities of entitled First Nations people.



Photo: S. Corneloup

2. Removal of natural or historical objects from the park is prohibited.

3. A permit is required for all overnight travel and camping within Kluane National Park and Reserve.

4. It is illegal to feed, harass, or cause any undue stress to wildlife.

5. Motors are prohibited on the Dezadeash and Alsek Rivers within Kluane National Park & Reserve.

6. A national park fishing license is required within Kluane National Park & Reserve.

A trip down the Alsek River offers one of the finest wilderness river experiences in North America. You will be travelling through part of a World Heritage Site that forms the largest international protected area in the world. With your cooperation, Kluane National Park & Reserve will continue to protect wildlife habitat and maintain ecosystem integrity while at the same time providing the highest quality wilderness experience for visitors.

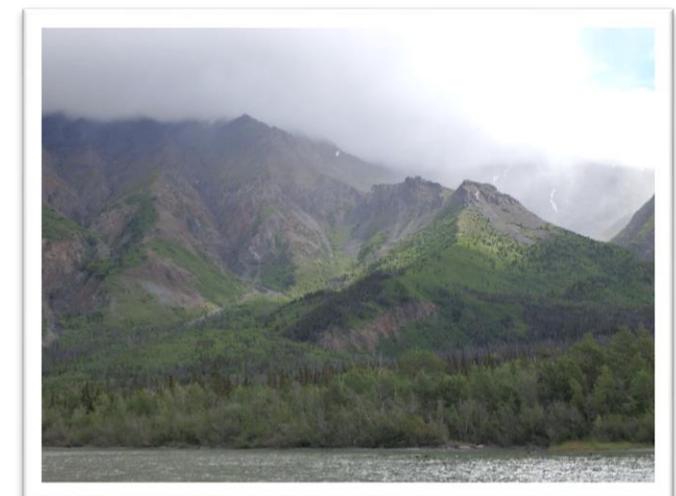


Photo: S. Corneloup

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Kluane National Park & Reserve

Box 5495
Haines Junction, Yukon
Y0B 1L0 CANADA
Phone: (867) 634-7250 Fax: (867) 634-7208
Web site: www.pc.gc.ca/kluane

Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve

Yakutat Ranger Station
Box 137
Yakutat, Alaska
99689 USA
Phone: (907) 784-3295 Fax: (907) 784-3535
Recorded Information Line: (907) 784-3370

Tatshenshini-Alsek Park

Summer:

Micheal Jim, Sr. Park Ranger
Box 5544
Haines Junction, Yukon
Y0B1L0, CANADA
Phone: (867) 634-4248 Fax: (867) 634-2108
Email: mjim@cafn.ca

Winter:

Postal Bag 5000
Smithers, British Columbia
V0J 2N0, CANADA
Phone: (250) 847-7320 Fax: (250) 847-7659

To Pay Fees: (250) 952 0932

Champagne & Aishihik First Nations

(A river management partner, but not currently staffed to respond to public information requests)



FOR TOPOGRAPHICAL MAPS CONTACT:

Mac's Fireweed Books

203 Main Street
Whitehorse, Yukon
Canada Y1A 2B2
Phone: 1 800 661 0508 or (867)668 2434

U.S. Geological Survey

Earth Science Information Centre
Room 101 – 4230 University Drive
Anchorage, Alaska
USA 99508
Phone: (907) 786-7011

Topographical maps (1:50,000) for the Canadian portion of the Alsek river are:

115A13 (Haines Junction - Dezadeash River)
115A12 (Upper Alsek)
115A05 (Lower Alsek to Lowell)
115A04 (Below Lowell to B.C. border)
115B01 (small portion below Lowell)



Photo: S. Corneloup