


*For a first taste of Alaska, it's tough to beat a week of exploring in **WRANGELL-ST. ELIAS**. Bigger than Switzerland, it's America's largest and emptiest national park.*

*by* MICHAEL BEHAR *photographs by* WHIT RICHARDSON



# Into the Great Wide Open



**T**HERE ARE ONLY THREE RULES YOU have to remember when whitewater rafting in Alaska,” says my 26-year-old river guide Gaia Marrs. “First rule: Don’t fall out of the boat. Second rule: Don’t fall out of the boat. Third rule: Don’t fall out of the boat.” It’s July, and I’m lying supine in the sand on a riverbank in Alaska’s Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. My head is wedged between granite boulders, my legs are pinned together like disposable chopsticks, and my arms are splayed perpendicular to my torso. Marrs is standing over me, and I can see myself in her sunglasses. I look like a fallen scarecrow. “In the event you end up in the water, the position you’re in now is how you’d want to go downriver,” she continues. “Feet first, on your back, so your butt hits the rocks before your head. Oh, and if you try to swim, use the backstroke. Anything else and you’ll probably drown.”

Thundering next to me is the Jacksina Creek. Marrs has to shout to be heard. The Jacksina Glacier is less than a mile upstream. It clings to the sheer north slope of the 16,000-foot Wrangell Mountains and is flanked by a half-dozen other unnamed ice fields. During the nightless warm days of midsummer, the insomniac sun can liquefy enough seasonal snow and ancient ice to flood the Jacksina drainage with up to 8,000 cubic feet of water per second — sufficient to fill five Olympic-size swimming pools every minute. The Jacksina would be deemed a formidable Class IV river in the lower 48, but here in Alaska, where everything is supersized, it scarcely earns a measly “creek” status. Never mind that. This river is big — up to half a mile wide in some sections — frighteningly fast, and cryogenically cold. The time it takes for glacial melt to reach the riverbed, from block ice to raging rapids, is so short that the water temperature in the Jacksina rarely tops 36 degrees Fahrenheit. Curious, I plunge my arm elbow-deep into a murky eddy (powder-fine silt stains the river the color of chocolate milk). The pain is instant and agonizing, and I promptly yank out my throbbing limb. Marrs says that the average “swimmer” (river-guide lingo for “man overboard”) lasts 15 minutes before blacking out. I’m wearing a dry suit, which, in theory, should more than double my survival time. “Let’s not put that to the test,” she suggests.

THIS IS MY FIRST TRIP TO ALASKA, AS WELL AS MY inaugural whitewater experience, so the safety briefing from Marrs is comforting. So far she’s given it on nearly 100 guided trips, and she hasn’t had a single swimmer. Listening solemnly is the man who invited me here, 54-year-old Fred Dure. Born in Texas, Dure is halfway through his third decade of living in the Alaskan bush. His log home on a bluff above a river at the end of an overgrown trail is not so much off the grid as off the map, a four-hour hike from the town of McCarthy. Near the center of the park, and the nearest thing to civilization for 125 miles, McCarthy was once a supply hub for a local copper mine. Now it’s a cluster of relic clapboard

**JUST YOU AND THE BEARS** And the fish, too, though they weren’t biting this afternoon at Grizzly Lake.



structures, some turn-of-the-century, that serve as a base camp for summertime outfitters (apologies to the dozen or so permanent residents).

Last fall I told a friend, an adventure-travel pro, that I had been entertaining the notion of exploring a respectable chunk of Wrangell in a week. He laughed and said, "You can spend your entire life up there and not see squat." That's because Wrangell-St. Elias is larger than Switzerland. The biggest national park in the U.S., it spans 20,625 square miles and encompasses four mountain ranges (Wrangell, St. Elias, Chugach, and Alaska). There are abundant glaciers, including the impressive 125-mile-long Bagley Ice Field. The park's boundaries trace a 200-mile route from the state's forsaken interior to the Yukon to the Gulf of Alaska. There are no maintained hiking trails and only two (unpaved) roads, which barely penetrate Wrangell's outermost frontier. It also happens to be one of the only national parks in the country in which subsistence hunting is still allowed, which should tell you something about the kinds of folks who choose to live there.

My friend said Dure was an avid whitewater junkie, that he ran a guiding outfit in Alaska for 20 years and has rafted nearly every inch of whitewater in Wrangell. Today he owns an ecolodge in the park ([alaskaecolodge.com](http://alaskaecolodge.com)); he's trying to find an equity partner to help him develop it. If anyone knew how to tackle such daunting wilderness in a week or less, he would be the one.

When I telephoned Dure, he immediately suggested the Jacksina. "You get a little bit of everything," he said. "Glaciers, high alpine, tundra, spruce forests, canyons. It's an intimate river, and it brings you as close to the wilderness as you can get without taking months to hike overland through the park."

A few weeks later I'm bouncing along a dusty gravel mining road in a flatbed truck heaped with provisions and gear. Sparse stands of black spruce and hemlock sprout from plains of spongy green muskeg. I scan the forest for wildlife while we drive. Dure picked me up in Anchorage, and after seven hours on blacktop we have begun the jour-

ney on the McCarthy Road — 61 miles of potholes, ruts, and washouts that cul-de-sac just inside the southern entrance to Wrangell. There is talk of paving it, an endeavor that would likely waste \$100 million — as with everywhere in the Alaskan outback, frost heaves would tear the asphalt to pieces in a few years. Dure and most of the other "end-of-the-roaders" who live in McCarthy are wary. "Wrangell is way off the beaten path and very hardcore," says Dure. "As it is now, the road acts like a screen to filter out traffic and keep the park pristine." There's fear of the same development choking the highway into Denali; easier access would also mean busloads of socks-and-sandals-wearing day-

trippers swarming into McCarthy for snapshots and espressos. "Wrangell is one of the least visited parks in the U.S.," notes Dure. "We'd like to keep it that way."

FROM A HARDCRABBLE FLAT that serves as a makeshift runway for our bush plane, we lug our gear 300 yards to the put-in on the Jacksina. We came to the river in a Piper Super Cub that the pilot, Kirk Ellis, built himself. It was one of six flights (four with Ellis and two with pilots Don Welty and Kelly Bay) required to shuttle me, Dure, Marrs, photographer Whit Richardson, and 800 pounds of equipment and food to the headwaters of Jacksina Creek.

Five days from now, and 40 miles downstream, we'll rendezvous with the planes, but only if we can stake out a decent landing strip beside the river, avoid or survive any grizzly encounters, and endure "the canyon" — a Class IV gauntlet of boils, backrollers, standing waves, holes, and strainers that drops nearly 900 feet in five miles.

Bay's general rule of thumb for a suitable airstrip: "A thousand feet is great, 800 feet is good, and no rocks bigger than an orange." A cursory survey of the landscape through my binoculars confirms that this is ludicrous. Locating a level stretch of tundra three football fields in length in this glacial labyrinth would be like finding flat water at the Banzai Pipeline. Dure doesn't appear concerned; he knows these pilots don't rattle easily. Every day on the job they're navigating rock-strewn airstrips or detouring around freakish squalls that can materialize in bluebird skies, enduring wind shear up the ying-yang. They're unnervingly nonchalant. Take Welty, for example, who (and I'm completely serious here) washes his plane by flying it through a lake. He was once brutally mauled by a grizzly and survived. Legend has it he landed in a meadow to nab a souvenir set of moose antlers he'd spied from the air. He was steps from his plane when a grizzly charged, clamping its jaw onto Welty's skull while slashing his upper body with its claws. Just as abruptly, the bear bolted, leaving Welty's scalp in tatters and his torso gashed. Lacerated and bloodied, he managed to limp to his plane and pilot it to the nearest settlement. He landed safely, staggered from the cockpit, then crumpled to the ground unconscious. Another pilot flew him to a hospital in Anchorage, where doctors managed to piece him back together.

"It's the whole bear thing that really rounds out the Alaska experience," says Dure. "The constant fear gives every trip that extra edge." The loaded .44 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver religiously holstered to Dure's right hip betrays his frequent close calls with bears. An angry sow once trapped him in his toolshed for more than an hour when he got between her and her cubs. A young grizzly charged his camp during a rafting trip, then repeatedly hissed and snarled at Dure and his wife Ann until the couple packed up and fled. Is Dure a bear magnet? Or just unlucky and perhaps a bit obsessed? His cabin is chock-full of gruesome tales, books with

**YOU CAN GET THERE FROM HERE** A gravel bar doubles as a runway; the author and guide Gaia Marrs.



**LAND OF FEW AIR-STRIPS** The pilots searched for a place to put down.

“The grizzlies,” responds Dure, in his usual and unmistakable deadpan manner. “The moose helped, too.”

We’re in the epicenter of grizzly country. The waist-high, subalpine brush is choked with ripe wild blueberries. I pick a few to munch, then blurt out to nobody in particular, “We’re standing on their food!” Freshly ejected scat is everywhere, still moist and mottled with undigested bits of blueberry rind and seeds. Snapped twigs and branches indicate that something very big and very heavy lumbered through here a short time ago. We cross a dry creekbed, and the grizzly track in the mud is unmistakable: a deep depression, perhaps 16 inches in length, with slender claw lines, each longer than my middle finger, extending from the paw. I’m not frightened; odds are far greater that an indignant moose will trample my ass before I encounter a bear. Indeed, right alongside the grizzly track is the telltale heart-shaped hoofprint of a full-grown moose.

We continue uphill toward the Wrangell Mountains, which are unlike anything else in North America. The Rockies are a grand but dying range; erosion will whittle them down to Appalachian scale soon enough. In Alaska, however, Mother Nature is in active labor. On some days plumes of subterranean steam spout through fissures in the rock. Though quiet today, the mountains here are responsible for several of the most explosive and catastrophic volcanic erup-

## Alaska, says Dure, is “humbling. But I get strength from it. Because if you mess up, YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN.”

titles such as *Danger Stalks the Land* and *Bear Attacks of the Century*. “I’ve only had to fire my gun once, during a hike,” he tells me. “Just a few rounds into the air to scare the bastard off.” Still, we’re not taking any chances. We all carry pepper spray. On day hikes we’ll sing loudly. We’ll be very careful with food — not even toothpaste in the tents — and Dure will sleep with the .44.

By the time we finish rigging the boats (two 15-foot Sotar rafts: a standard self-bailer and a twin-pontoon cataraft that’s an especially nimble rapid-dodger) it’s already past five in the evening and too late to start downriver. Even though we’re far enough north that night never arrives (during our trip the sun only kisses the westerly horizon for a few minutes before rising again), we attempt to maintain a normal eat-sleep schedule. We make camp, and Dure suggests a short hike to the Jacksina Glacier, where we can scramble onto the creeping icefall. After a few minutes of bushwhacking we stumble onto a well-trodden path climbing gently toward the glacier.

“Who built this trail?” I ask.

tions on geological record. Rich mineral deposits, including copper and gold, tinge the slopes the pinkish hue of Caucasian baby flesh. It’s as though these newborn peaks emerged from the earth just hours ago, still raw and chafed from birth.

A runoff creek from a nameless ice field has blocked our route to the glacier. It’s shallow but too violent to cross without a rope belay. Suddenly, black clouds appear and start pelting us with fat raindrops. In the downpour we head back to the river, where Marrs has propped up a huge tarp to keep us dry. Dure prefers to sit under the open sky; the tarp, he complains, “adds a delineation of structure that shouldn’t exist.” Marrs has built a blazing campfire under the shelter and is prepping thick New York steaks to grill for dinner, along with steamed broccoli, roasted potatoes, fresh bread, merlot, and homemade brownies. There’s enough to feed us *and* the band of coyotes howling nearby. “Rafting is as much about the food as it is about the whitewater,” Marrs tells me when I confess to eating my weight in beef and brownies. “We call it float ‘n’ bloat.”

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**FOR MORE ALASKA ADVENTURES, TURN THE PAGE AND UNFOLD.** →



(continued from page 73) THERE ARE REALLY TWO worlds on this whitewater expedition. One is quiet and contemplative, with hours spent ambling beside the river, patiently scanning the hillsides for wildlife. It's a place to drink beer, nap on a warm rock, watch bald eagles expertly hunt field mice, ingest copious feasts, and then drink more beer. When we finally put in after breakfast, we're thrust headlong into the second world. It's loud, fast, and aggressive — an in-your-face assault full of whiplash and numb toes, sudden soakings and overwhelmed senses. New scenery comes and goes so quickly it's like watching a slide show of somebody else's vacation. Click: glacier. Click: waterfall. Click: canyon. Click: another glacier. The light-speed travel makes time hard to gauge. I'm sure we've been on the river all day, but it's still only two o'clock by the time we reach our second camp.

From here my topo map shows a three-mile hike to Grizzly Lake. "This warrants a two-night stopover," I tell Dure, hoping to get some use out of the fishing rod I had packed. The next morning we trudge across a soggy meadow, hopping between tall tussocks emerging from the muck. The lake is wedged in a narrow valley that creates a natural wind tunnel. I cast into a 20-knot gust, but the wind boomerangs my line back to the beach. Dure isn't having much luck either. I tromp through waist-high reeds to find him looking forlorn and alarmingly red.

"Fred, did you put on sunscreen this morning?" I ask. "It's wind-burn," he snaps back. Dure is no doubt one gene shy of albino, a poster boy for melanoma. "You're cooked," I tell him, offering my sunscreen. It's useless. Dure is stoic and stubborn, battle-hardened by years of living in this unforgiving outback. He is indifferent to advice, eschews rules, and challenges authority — character traits that pretty much sum up every Alaskan bushman I meet. "Down in the states, you got all those signs and fences and private property and boundaries — so many constraints that you feel completely surrounded," he says. "When you come here those constraints are wiped out. It's humbling, but I also get strength out of it, because if you mess up, you're on your own."

FROM THE MOMENT I MET DURE, HE HAS BEEN MAKING ominous references to "the canyon." The canyon is the crux of the Jacksina. There is no escape and no safe take-out. A swimmer should expect to wrestle the rapids until the rock-hemmed canyon expels him downriver. A hairpin turn hides the entrance, so we hike up a bluff to get a preview. Only the first half-mile is visible, a raging avalanche of whitewater tumbling over tractor-size boulders. Dure scans the river in silence beneath heavy clouds. Marrs says she's scared, but quickly qualifies this so it won't freak me out. "I

**ONE IF BY OAR**  
Alaska transplant Fred Dure at the helm; steaks and beers are in the cooler under him.

always get nervous before running a canyon," she explains, likening her fears to stage fright. I stumble into a nest of yellow jackets and get stung in the right temple — a warning, I presume, from the guardians of the canyon.

We heave the boats into the water. Thus far, I've been sitting atop a white plastic cooler in the cataraft, with Marrs at the oars. For the canyon I switch boats and join Dure in the self-bailer, where I kneel in its bow. An uprooted tree tumbles past, baring its fibrous root-ball like the decapitated head of Sideshow Bob. Dure rows hard, deftly weaving us through whitewater haystacks. Waves drench us. The frigid Jacksina gives me an ice cream headache and numbs my feet into useless stumps. Marrs, who is rowing solo behind us, occasionally lunges into a cavernous trough and vanishes from view.

After 20 minutes of this, which is a long time when freezing water is being splashed in your face every few seconds (ask any interrogator), the canyon yawns and spits us into a lush valley, where the overcast has given way to blinding sun. No swimmers. The glaciers are gone, replaced by stands of emerald spruce. Rivulets trickle from every crack and crevice along the banks. Dense vegetation sags with moisture. Rocks don't moss wigs. The transformation is radical: The canyon is a portal between landscapes — a Narnian closet linking a glacial netherworld with boreal tropics. We stop on a sandy spit, and I waddle off the boat like a drunken giraffe because my legs are frozen stumps from the knees down.

To thaw out, I stoke up a robust midday bonfire.

Farther downstream we find a spacious beach on which a moose left its hoofprints. The warm day has cranked up the snowmelt, and the Jacksina is swelling. We pitch our tents near the tree line, but Marrs insists on sleeping inches from the river. She's worried that a surge during the night will carry off our boats. "If the water comes up, I'll be the first to know," she says, cheerily volunteering for sentry duties. By now our supplies of beer and wine are tapped, and we're passing around a canteen I'd wisely filled with tequila before leaving McCarthy. Dure takes a few impressive chugs and begins waxing poetic. "There's something that gets into your blood and your spirit about this place that becomes part of you," he says.

The next morning it's a short float to our intended take-out. There are plenty of lengthy gravel bars, but from river level it's difficult to judge their potential as landing strips. We stop to scout a prospective site when two yellow planes — it's Welty and Bay — come tearing through the valley. They circle a few times, and at one point skim inches above the ground. Apparently we failed How to Choose a Runway 101, because the planes climb again and head north, eventually landing about a mile downriver. We find them parked between boulders and dead trees, at the end of a bumpy gravel bar striated with trenches from flood erosion. How they managed to land in one piece I dare not inquire. Since I'll be riding shotgun, however, a little insight into our departure strategy would be comforting.

"What's the trick to getting off this gravel bar?" I ask Welty.

"We always take off into the sun," he says. "That way, we can't see all the crap on the ground and get scared."

On the flight back to McCarthy I survey the wilderness for signs of the wolves, bears, moose, coyotes, lynx, caribou, mountain goats, and other assorted wildlife that roam these hinterlands but never made an appearance during our journey on the Jacksina. They incessantly taunted us, stealthily shadowing our campsites but never stepping into view. Then Welty plops us onto a grassy field at Dure's lodge, and when I fling open the copilot door there's a female moose trotting across the airstrip with her fledgling calf in tow. Mom acknowledges us with a brief stare, then both march proudly into the trees and are gone. If I've learned anything, it's that Alaska doesn't surrender its treasures easily. **M**

## HOW TO HAVE YOUR OWN ALASKAN ADVENTURE

The size of six Yellowstones...UN World Heritage Site...location of nine of the 16 highest peaks in the U.S., and some of its largest glaciers...home to 914 native plant species: A list of superlatives about Wrangell-St. Elias National Park could stretch from here to Alaska. So how do you see it all? You don't. But whether you're the most dedicated backcountry adventurer or a suburban ranger more prone to car camping, here are some blow-your-mind tips to get you started exploring the biggest and emptiest of the national parks.

### WHAT TO DO

**RAFT:** Most of the rivers in Wrangell-St. Elias are Class II or III. The Copper, Chitina, and Nizina rivers will give you longer trips, sprinkled with Class III rapids. If you want to see a wide variety of typical Alaskan terrain, rafting the Jacksina is a great choice. Copper Oar ([copperoar.com](http://copperoar.com)) can set it up for you. For high adrenaline, try the Tana River, one of the few accessible big-water Class IV rivers. **HIKE:** For a uniquely Alaskan adventure, start in Kennicott and ask locals where to find the Root Glacier nunatak (a rocky outcropping of land amid a glacier). Hike north out of town on the maintained trail. After about three miles, look for the nunatak. Once you've crossed Root Glacier on it, head downhill to the vegetative area and set up a base camp. Spend the next two to three days exploring and climbing Donoho Peak, due north. Like Shasta or Kilimanjaro, Donoho is not technically demanding; you won't need any ropes, and anyone in decent shape should manage just fine. **FISH:** In a state famous for epic fishing, Wrangell-St. Elias doesn't draw many anglers, though there's an enormous salmon run in the Copper River near the western boundary of the park. You can also fly in to the Tebay Lake area, which in all likelihood will be totally devoid of other humans. Great rainbow trout are for the picking with any rig you like.

### PREPARATION

As water levels can fluctuate dramatically in a single day, Alaskan backcountry experience should not be initiated without knowing how to cross a stream safely. Locals are often happy to educate you on how to read a stream bottom, but as a general rule, never let the water go above your mid-thigh or you'll be in danger of falling

over should you lose footing. Any guide-outfitter in Alaska can give you a half-day course on stream or glacier crossing, often free of charge. In addition, NOLS, Outward Bound, and the Mountaineers offer books covering the basics.

### THE BOOK TO PSYCH YOU

*Coming into the Country*, by John McPhee. No book since has gotten to the unique heart of Alaskans (to the extent it's possible to generalize), and the limitless wilderness that shapes them. By focusing on the smallest of spaces immediately surrounding a handful of Alaskans, McPhee paints an accurate and compelling picture of this vast topography that will have you roaring with anticipation the minute your plane lands.

### WHAT TO BRING

Top and bottom rain gear is critical, even for a day hike from base camp. Cloudveil's Zorro jacket and pant (\$240) are lightweight and completely waterproof (yet still breathe well), and scrunch up small enough for a daypack ([cloudveil.com](http://cloudveil.com)).

### BEARPROOFING

Alaska's abundant grizzlies can break your back with a single swipe. Don't let it happen to you: While out hiking, make noise to avoid surprise encounters, look for signs of recent activity (namely, tracks and scat), and don't linger around draws such as spawning streams, berry patches, or carcasses. Stow your food at least 100 feet from camp in a critter-proof drum (\$70; *REI, Anchorage*). Bear spray, available at most adventure stores for less than \$50, is also essential. Sprays have proved 92 percent effective — better than a bullet, and much less hazardous — but they should be used only as a last measure, before playing dead.



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