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# The Great Alaskan Dinosaur Adventure

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# The Great Alaskan Dinosaur Adventure

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

This is a true adventure story about five men who went to the North Slope of Alaska in 1994 in search of frozen, unfossilized dinosaur bones. The primary text of this book was adapted from the journal of John Whitmore, the trip leader. Major additions to the original text were made by Buddy Davis and Mike Liston. We need to thank many for the publication of this book, especially our spouses and families who supported us in prayer while we were in Alaska. Above all, we thank the Lord whose hand was so evident during our journey.

The expedition was funded by private contributions from the team members themselves and from members and friends of the Creation Research Science Education Foundation (CRSEF) of Columbus, Ohio. Cedarville College provided some funds to help with the travel expenses of John Whitmore from the faculty development fund.

Major editorial comments and additions were provided by George Detwiler, Dan Specht, Ken Ham, Jamie Whitmore, and Kay Davis. We are deeply indebted to them for their help. The photographs contained within this volume were contributed by all of the team members. The original drawings were made by team member Buddy Davis.

The expedition team included:

Buddy Davis, Bladensburg, Ohio. Buddy is a dinosaur sculptor, artist, and owner of Wildlife Studios. His sculptures

and taxidermy are valuable assets to his position as curator of the Answers in Genesis Creation Museum. He is also a recording artist and tours with Answers in Genesis seminars worldwide. Buddy is an explorer, veteran ark searcher, and has been on numerous dinosaur digs.

George Detwiler, West Liberty, Ohio. George taught science and math at Urbana High School from 1965 to 1995. He is now teaching the same subjects at Calvary Christian School in Bellefontaine, Ohio, where he is free to teach all aspects of biblical creationism. He has a B.S. in chemistry from Wheaton College (IL) and a M.A.T. for science teachers from Michigan State University. He has an Ohio permanent professional teaching certificate covering all major areas of science. He has also taken students on geology/ecology/backpacking/camping trips to the southwestern United States.

Mike Liston, Gambier, Ohio. Mike is president of his own company that designs and makes outdoor and rescue gear. He can best be described as an outdoorsman and explorer. He guides and trains groups for cave exploring and rappelling trips. Mike travels and speaks often at churches, seminars, and television interviews about his creation adventures.

Dan Specht, Westerville, Ohio. Dan is a dentist in Columbus, Ohio, and has been in private practice there since graduating from Ohio State University's dental school in 1961 with a D.D.S. Before that he was in the U.S. Army, Army Security Agency, from 1951 to 1954. He is an experienced white water rafter and has led numerous rafting trips in West Virginia.

John Whitmore, Cedarville, Ohio. John has been teaching geology at Cedarville College since graduating

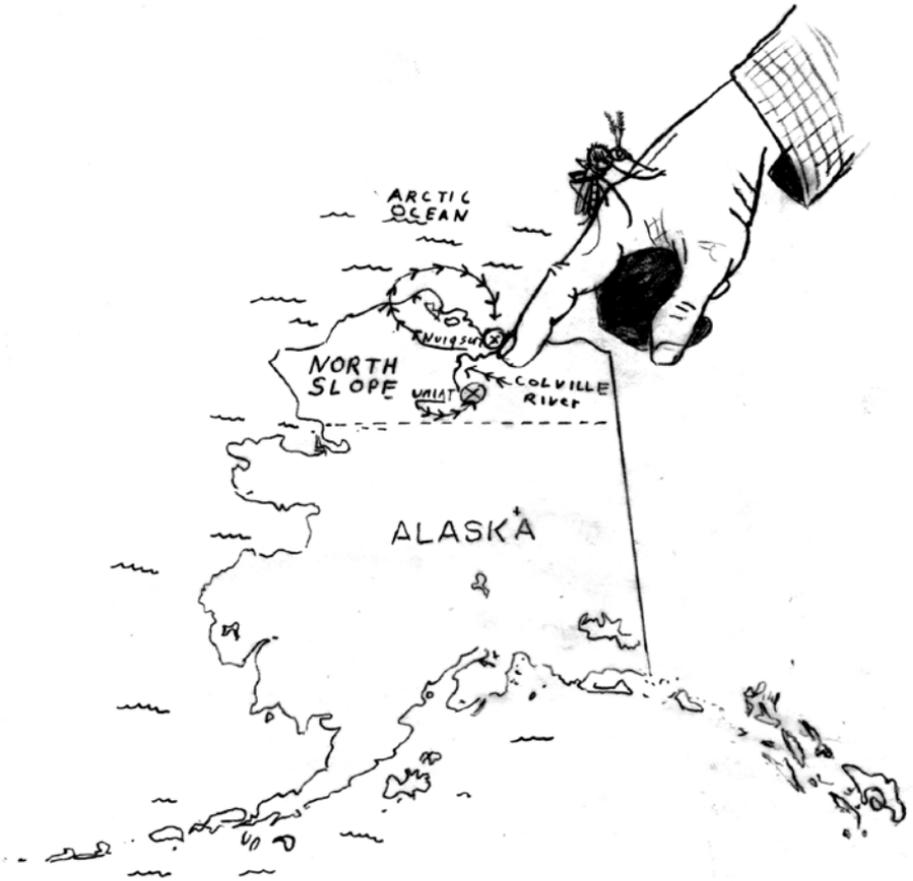
from the Institute for Creation Research in 1991. He has an M.S. in geology from ICR and a B.S. in geology from Kent State University, Kent, Ohio. He speaks frequently in churches and schools on topics related to biblical creationism and geology.





Map of Alaska





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## North to Alaska

Monday, July 11

Our small bush plane headed north for the land of the midnight sun. Five minutes after leaving Fairbanks, there was nothing but wilderness as far as the eye could see. Our destination: the Colville River, 200 miles north of the Arctic

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### The rugged Brooks Mountains of central Alaska.

Circle. The Colville drains the Brooks Mountain range and flows north into the Arctic Ocean.

The pilot crammed the five team members of our expedition and all of the gear we would need to survive in the rugged terrain for two weeks into the tiny plane. We prayed that we had the proper gear for our journey into the unknown. We were going to be out of contact with the rest of the world for two weeks and there was no way of knowing about some of the hardships that we would face — or the many triumphs with which the Lord would bless us. Our Arctic Alaskan adventure had begun!

John Whitmore, from Ohio, led the diverse group. George Detwiler was the most experienced outdoorsman of the group. He also shot the video for the expedition. Buddy Davis is a veteran explorer of Mt. Ararat, and

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brought with him his vast knowledge of dinosaurs. Dr. Dan Specht took care of our medical needs. He was the only one who had significant white water rafting experience. Mike Liston provided valuable insights into the equipment, clothing, food, and gear that we needed for the trip.

After six months of serious planning we were finally ready to go. Mike and Dan were flying out of Columbus early in the afternoon. Buddy, George, and John left Cedarville at 10:30 a.m. for Indianapolis. The flights to Alaska this time of year were so full that it was impossible for us to travel on the same flight, although we tried. Understandably, most tourists also head to Alaska during midsummer. We had started to “pipe dream” about this trip about a year earlier. Now, it was finally becoming a reality. It had only been two weeks since we bought our tickets, finalized transportation on the North Slope, and knew for sure that we could go. Not just anyone can go and excavate these bones. We had to have permission from the Bureau of Land Management (B.L.M.) since they are on federal land. The permits came just days before our scheduled departure.

Our destination was the Liscomb Bone Bed on the North Slope. Frozen, partially fossilized dinosaur bones can be found in abundance in the coal and shale layers of these beds. These bones attracted us. Part of the research John had been conducting involved the chemical analysis of dinosaur bones. Where could be a better place to collect pristine, unaltered bones than here? An added attraction of these bones was their frozen state. If original organic remains were still left in the bones, the cold temperatures may have helped preserve them. There are other closer and less remote areas where dinosaur bones can be found.

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However, we were after these bones in the hope they would contain organic remains that would support the creation model of earth history.

John, Buddy, and George's flight did not go as planned. For some reason the plane on which we were to fly from Denver to Seattle never arrived in Denver. Of course, this bungled all of the other flights we were supposed to be on from Denver to Seattle to Anchorage, and then on to Fairbanks. We became anxious because we were due to meet Dan and Mike in Seattle and had no way to communicate with them and tell them otherwise. Also, our bush plane was scheduled to leave Fairbanks at 8:00 a.m., and we wondered if we would make it on time. We did manage to make it to Fairbanks after some rerouting and patience by 2:00 a.m., Tuesday morning. (Only two hours late!)

After a 14-hour flight and passing through four time zones, we arrived quite tired. Nevertheless, the flight up the coast of Alaska was unforgettable. As we were flying, we witnessed a beautiful sunrise. It was about 1:30 in the morning! The mountains below were absolutely spectacular. They were snow covered and had glaciers hugging their valleys. Although we were dead tired, we could not sleep. It was a geologist's paradise! Between the clouds, the shoreline could be seen where the mountains and glaciers met the ocean. Just before arriving in Anchorage we could see Denali (Mt. McKinley) which is the highest mountain peak in North America — it dwarfed everything around it.

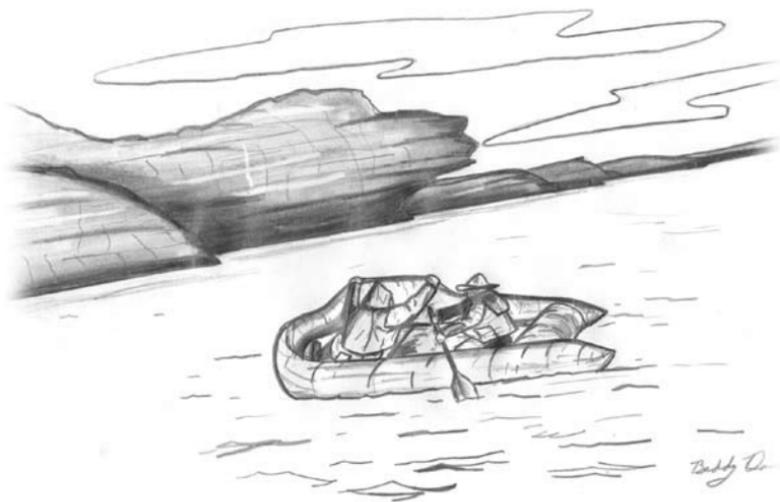
Tuesday, July 12

Dan and Mike made it to Fairbanks two hours earlier than the rest of the party. We had arranged ahead of time

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to spend the night in the hangar of the bush pilot who was going to fly us north in the morning. The hangar was on the opposite side of the airport from the commercial terminal. Buddy was fascinated with all the mounted Alaskan wildlife near the baggage claim. (Before he started sculpting dinosaurs, he was a taxidermist.) We wondered how much of this wildlife we would see. All three kinds of North American bears live in Alaska (grizzly, black, and polar) and this was one bit of wildlife we did not want to run into unexpectedly. We brought along a 12-gauge shotgun with slugs and a rifle just in case. After picking up our bags, we hailed a taxi for the four-mile ride around to the other side of the airport. The taxi driver asked where we were from and where we were going. After he found out we were headed to the North Slope, he burst out laughing and said "I hope you guys have some plasma — the mosquitoes are going to eat you alive!" Well, we were in Alaska and we had swatted a few mosquitoes outside at the airport, but they were bearable. We thought this guy must be exaggerating, trying to poke fun at a few Alaskan rookies.





Near disaster strikes only minutes after launching our boats onto the Colville River from Umiat. Mike and George's raft almost sank in the cold, glacial stream. Mike is paddling and George is holding up the far side to keep it from sinking as they are being swept along in the swift current.

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## What Did We Get Ourselves Into?

When we arrived at the hangar, Mike and Dan were already sleeping. It was now 3:00 a.m. and all of the doors were locked. When we finally pounded hard enough on

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the glass office door, we saw a strange figure arise from the floor. It was Mike sleeping in his full mosquito gear! He was wearing his headnet and bugsuit. Mosquitoes were inside the hangar! After getting inside, Buddy, George, and John quickly followed suit with their mosquito gear and bedded down for a short night. The mosquitoes weren't bad, but the bug stuff and netting were necessary. If the mosquitoes were no worse than this, we could live with them. Little did we know what was to come!

By the time we got to bed it was already light outside. Since Fairbanks has only a few hours of semi-darkness this time of the year, this would be the last hint of darkness we would see for the next ten days. The sun stays up all night north of the Arctic Circle in the summer. That's where we were headed in a few short hours — the land of the midnight sun.

Though we were very tired, we could not sleep. It must have been a combination of the mosquitoes, light, and anxiety. As we tried to sleep with the smell of "bug stuff" and our mosquito nets over our heads, we wondered what we were about to encounter. John gave up trying to sleep about 5:00 a.m. He was not alone. The others were awake as well. The hot shower in the hangar bathroom that morning would have to last nine days. There would be no modern conveniences, flush toilets, or hot water on the tundra. Our bush plane could carry only 1,500 pounds plus fuel and pilot. This limited us as to what gear we could bring, so we each had to pack judiciously. It felt strange to leave on a camping trip without a flashlight but they wouldn't be needed due to the 24 hours of sunlight. Trying to decide what to take and what to leave behind at the hangar was difficult. It was especially hard when we were

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dead tired wading among all the gear and bodies. For a while it amounted to mass confusion! There was a large scale, kind of like the ones once used in banks, on which we weighed all of our gear, food, and bodies. Because of Mike's expert advice and our careful packing in the weeks before, we barely came in a few pounds under our 1,500 pound allowance! Dan was even able to take his portable plastic toilet seat — though he received much ribbing from Buddy and Mike.

A man in greasy jeans and t-shirt began to load our gear and prepare the twin engine Navajo Chieftain for the two-and-one-half hour flight at 7:30 a.m. After topping off the fuel tanks and checking the oil, the "mechanic" jumped into the pilot's seat and fired up the engines. He then hollered at the five startled team members, "Let's go!" It was with shock that we realized the "mechanic" was really our bush pilot — and a very good one at that!

Warbelow's Aviation flew us over central Alaska from Fairbanks to Umiat. We left the ground at 8:15. Once our plane was airborne, the city of Fairbanks was quickly swallowed up in the majestic Alaskan wilderness. It was an unusually clear day, according to our pilot. The Brooks Mountains were spectacular. As we traveled north, we found a delightful mix of mountains, tundra, woods, and rivers. We could see the fabled Yukon River and the Alaskan Pipeline. It was worth the trip to Alaska just to ride in the bush plane. The skilled pilot would jockey the small plane around the rugged mountain slopes, pointing out abandoned and working gold mines and searching for big game animals. There were no roads and towns; it was completely barren, desolate, and wild. After crossing the rugged, but not particularly high, Brooks Mountains,

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Umiat, with the Colville River in the background.

we had our first glimpse of the North Slope. The terrain was very flat and featureless except for the braided and meandering rivers that scarred the landscape along with glacial kettle lakes. It is usually less than three months between snows this far north, so there were no trees, only endless miles of green, grassy tundra.

Many Alaskan bush pilots fly like the old timers — by the seat of their pants. Our pilot told us stories of fatigued pilots who failed to use their instruments and eventually flew their aircraft into the ground. Not many landmarks for reference can be found on the flat and featureless terrain. From the air, the tundra looks very much the same, making this type of flying very hazardous. Getting lost would be very easy. The pilot told us that if you crashed your plane up here the mosquitoes would suck you dry if

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the crash didn't kill you. We found that kind of hard to believe at first. As Umiat appeared in the distance we could see the Colville River meandering across the landscape. To its west was the beginning of a high bluff that we would follow for most of the 120 miles while on the river. It was in the outcrop of rock along these bluffs where the dinosaur bones would be found. We wondered what the Lord had in store for us in this barren landscape.

About five minutes before landing in Umiat, our pilot reached behind his seat and grabbed his Deep Woods OFF from his flight bag. He began to apply his "bug stuff" liberally. We began to think this was premature until we landed in Umiat on the gravel runway at 10:30 a.m. Suddenly, we were shocked at the swarms of mosquitoes outside the plane. Had we made the right decision about coming this far and being left behind with so many mosquitoes? From our vantage point inside the plane, they sounded like an angry swarm of bees and they were waiting for us to come out so the feeding could begin. We had prepared physically for the mosquitoes with 100 percent DEET, mosquito headnets, and bug net shirts, but we were not prepared mentally. (Bug shirts are hooded shirts made of mosquito netting with elastic around all the openings.) How in the world could there be this many bugs? The only time during the next nine days we would have a break from the mosquitoes was when the wind would blow harder than ten miles an hour, or while safely in our tents.

We had never seen a pilot work so fast. He had the plane unloaded and was up in the air again within five minutes. He didn't even stick around to say goodbye or let us have a second look in the plane to make sure we had gotten everything. He probably took off so fast to make sure we wouldn't change our minds and go back

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with him. After the pilot left, we sat around in shock on top of our pile of gear wondering what we were doing in such a desolate place. The DEET kept the mosquitoes from landing on our exposed skin, but we could do nothing about the swarms that constantly enveloped us. Had we made the right decision? Would we ever make it home alive and sane? What had we gotten ourselves into?

Umiat is a strange little ghost town. Its heyday was probably 20 years ago when the oil industry was booming and it created new towns as exploratory wells were drilled. Umiat often shows up in USA Today as one of the coldest places during the Alaskan winter. Now, only three people live in Umiat — at the most. O.J. is the town's only permanent resident and self-declared mayor. He is a veteran pilot of World War II. When O.J. came walking out of the trailer, he was not wearing a headnet! When we asked him



The Umiat Hilton

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about it, he just said, "Oh, you get used to them after a while." We thought he was absolutely nuts and incredibly tough to put up with the mosquitoes. Little did we know that within a week we would be just the same as O.J.

Bob was also there when we landed, sitting on a picnic table among the mosquitoes. Ray, with whom we had made all of our raft rental arrangements, was in Fairbanks picking up supplies. He had taken one of Umiat's small planes. We never got to meet him. We really expected Umiat to be a little bigger, because it shows up in bold print on most maps of Alaska. The town is full of abandoned trailers that look similar to those you would find on a construction site. Oil companies must have used these as barracks to house their workers and then left them there. The "office" in Umiat consisted of three or four of these trailers connected together. The front of the office had several moose and caribou racks above the door along with a sign that read "UMIAT HILTON, POPULATION: ONE." Large tanks sitting around the buildings contained diesel fuel. This was their energy for the long winter. A fuel plane flies to Umiat every few months to fill them. A satellite telephone is the only way Umiat is connected to the outside world. Umiat sits on the banks of the Colville River. It was here we rented our three small river rafts and began our adventure.

Bob and O.J. do not get away from Umiat very often. They seemed to enjoy talking with us longer than we really wanted. We were anxious to begin our journey. We paid them \$1,000 to rent three small rafts, life jackets, and paddles. The rental price included O.J. flying to Nuiqsut to pick them up ten days later. Due to our very limited budget and the high cost of everything in the Arctic, we

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could only afford the three rafts. We would much rather have flown directly to the dig site in a helicopter. We were going to have to do this the hard way — with rafts and no outboard motors. When we saw our rafts for the first time, the sight of them gave us quite a jolt! They were sitting in a large pile only half-inflated with some patch kits on top. All of the rafts had patches where previous leaks had been. All of the paddles were of different lengths and some were even cracked and split. We paid \$1,000 for this! But this is the Arctic — you can't just run out to the store and get what you need.

While we pumped up the rafts, O.J. gave us some advice about where to camp and what to expect. He said, "Boys, this is a beautiful part of Alaska. When you're camping on the river, try to keep it that way. Stay out of the willows 'cause the grizzlies like it in there. Whatever you do, don't fall in the river. It will kill you within minutes." Bob and O.J. took us down to the river in two old pickup trucks. The only way to get this kind of vehicle this far north is to drive it there in the winter — when the ground is frozen. The trail to the river was bumpy and we crossed several small streams along the way. We must have been quite a sight riding with our fully inflated rafts and gear in the backs of the dilapidated pickups. The Colville is only slightly narrower than the Ohio or Missouri, but probably not as deep. It is a large river draining the entire north side of the Brooks Mountains. It was cold (from snow melt) and very muddy.

After unloading the trucks, we had to decide who would ride in which raft. We had five men and 15 duffel bags to fit into one small raft and two medium rafts. Where do you put all your gear — at one end or in the middle? We

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didn't have a clue! Adding to the confusion, O.J. threw us a couple of patch kits and said, "One works for the neoprene raft and one for the PVC raft. I don't know which one is which." He also gave us three air pumps. We found out later that only one of them worked. O.J. also told us we could float to our pickup point in the Eskimo village of Nuiqsut in just 24 hours. We were about to prove him woefully wrong.

Dan's expertise at rafting showed when he and Buddy were sharing ready to go before the others. They pushed off and immediately were swept downstream by the strong current, so it was quite funny when Dan hollered out, "Which way do we go?" We could tell that O.J. was thinking he would never see us or his rafts again! It was only 15 minutes later that the strong current had carried Buddy and Dan out of sight. John was alone in the small red raft. Mike and George were in the other and they had just pushed off. They really didn't have a chance to settle among their duffels or grab a paddle, since the swift current pushed them along the sheer bank at a dizzying speed. Suddenly, their raft began to sink. Somehow it began losing air, and they didn't know why. They could hear air escaping but with all their duffel bags in the way they could not find the leak. George had to hold up the deflating side of the raft while Mike paddled frantically to get to shore. The current was swift and the ten-foot bank dropped directly into the water preventing them from landing. They were swept along for some distance before they could drag themselves onto a small ledge. The raft nearly sank before they could get to shore. It was only because of God's help that they got to shore before certain catastrophe. After beaching themselves, they discovered

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that some gear was on top of a valve and apparently had dislodged it, causing the escaping air.

While standing on the narrow, crumbling ledge, one of them had to hold on to the pitching raft, or it would be swept away. The other pumped it up and rearranged their gear. It was with much hesitation that they got back in and started off again. They were later to find out that their raft had the only working air pump in the group. If one of us had fallen into the river, it is not certain that we could have survived before being taken over by hypothermia. The water was very cold. Mike and George were also very fortunate that they had not lost any of their precious gear. Mike never really trusted that raft again. He rode in a different raft for the remainder of the time — always listening for that foreboding sound of hissing air.

By this time, the rest of the team was spread out on the river, with Buddy and Dan close to a mile downstream. They were wondering what had happened, but we had no way of signaling to each other in case of trouble or if we got separated. This was to hurt us more than once in the days to come. Buddy and Dan decided to pull up on the first available gravel bar so that we could regroup.

While we were stopped we ate lunch and gave thanks that George and Mike had escaped certain tragedy. We wondered how we were going to survive the next nine days. We had already had one close call; what would the river bring us next? If somebody got seriously hurt, we did have an aircraft radio with which we could communicate with any planes that flew overhead, but we hadn't seen any. Eating quietly, we contemplated what might happen in the days to come. We had to put our complete trust in the Lord. The Lord alone had supplied the necessary funding for our trip, had allowed us to obtain the

## The Great Alaskan Dinosaur Adventure • 29

necessary permit, and was completely in control of our circumstances. Knowing the Lord would provide gave us a true feeling of peace.

Each of us brought 28 MREs (meals ready to eat) along for food. These are the same meals used by the military. There were 12 different menus from which to choose. Each package contained a complete self-contained meal, including a main course, crackers, cheese, jelly or peanut butter, candy, dried fruit or dessert, fruit drink, chocolate drink, coffee, matches, toilet paper, gum, silverware, and a wet wipe. The meals had more than enough food in them. They were precooked and could be eaten hot or cold. To heat them, the package simply had to be placed in boiling water. Additionally, the meals were completely sealed (so



Every time we heated water for our MREs, mosquitoes would flock toward the heat and end up in the water. It was impossible to heat water without making "mosquitotea."

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we wouldn't have problems with bears and other animals smelling them). All of the trash was completely combustible (no dishes to wash). Although we were tired of MREs by the end of our trip, they were definitely the best food some of us ever had while in the wilderness. Some of us planned the particular meal they were going to eat, but some chose to be surprised. When meal time came, they just reached into their duffel bag and ate whatever they grabbed hold of. We tried once to have hot chocolate and coffee, but heating water without making mosquito tea first was impossible. The mosquitoes are attracted to the heat, and one could always count on a dozen or so ending up in the drink before it was boiling. The main courses included spaghetti, sliced ham, chicken and rice, tuna and noodles, and pork and rice.

While the others were eating, Mike got out the G.P.S. (Global Positioning Satellite System). This is a small hand-held unit that works by satellite signals to tell you your position (latitude and longitude). It is supposed to work anywhere in the world. Mike was having trouble getting it to accept the coordinates O.J. had provided for the tributary channel leading from the Colville River to our pickup point at Nuiqsut. This was important because there was only one correct channel from the Colville and all the others ended in the Arctic Ocean. After we had finished lunch and gathered our scattered wits, we pushed on down the river.

The river probably flowed several miles an hour along most stretches. There were several areas with muddy rapids and shallow water. Still, for the most part we could drift comfortably along without too much paddling. In a few places we had to get out and pull our boats over some shallow rapids when we could not get into the main current.



The many channels of the Colville River near Umiat. Parts of the Colville are what geologists call a "braided" stream, where the stream is not confined to a single channel, but flows through many intertwining channels. We often became separated from one another in the maze of channels.

We wanted to make as much distance on the river as we could, because the bone sites were still far downstream. (The Colville flows from south to north and ends in the Arctic Ocean.) As we drifted, we saw occasional rubble tumbling down the 150-foot bluff on our left and observed the falcons, which nested near the top of the bluff, soaring high above.

Mike took the opportunity during the easy rafting to continue working on the G.P.S., but had no luck. The G.P.S. wouldn't accept the coordinates back at Umiat and

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The mosquitoes loved Mike's black sweatshirt. We had to wear headnets, gloves, and wool clothing to protect ourselves from the bugs.

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he was still having trouble getting them entered. He had written all of the coordinates down on a piece of scrap paper, but they wouldn't do us any good without the G.P.S. working correctly. When the breeze picked up, the mosquitoes would take cover down inside the raft. When the breeze died, they were back in the air hovering about us. If we wanted to send a few mosquitoes on their way, all we had to do was whack the raft a few times with the paddle when the wind was blowing. This would jar them loose and they would blow away in the wind. We spent the remainder of the day floating with the current and doing some occasional paddling. We thought to ourselves that if the rest of the trip goes this way, it wouldn't be so bad.

Most of the clothing we had brought was for cold weather, but with the 24 hours of sunlight it got quite hot during that first day on the river. Everyone needed to wear a heavy wool shirt and pants. In addition, we all wore headnets and hats to keep the mosquitoes from biting through. We sat quietly and suffered in the heat.

As evening approached, we decided to make camp on a high sand and gravel bar about 9:00 p.m. Fourteen miles were covered on the river. That wasn't bad for the first day. The mosquitoes seemed to get worse and it was getting colder. The temperature for most of the day had been about 70 to 75 degrees (F). When we stopped to camp, the usual routine was to drag the rafts up on the beach and put the paddles and pumps under them. Then we piled rocks on top of the boats and tied the bowline to bushes or rocks. We would not want to lose a boat or two during the night by an unexpected rise in the river. Then we hauled our gear to where camp was to be set up.

We were glad to finally get our tents up. It seemed like it took an eternity because of the swarms of mosquitoes

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among the small willow bushes next to the river. They were beginning to drive us crazy. Never in our worst nightmares did we think they would be this bad. While setting up our tents we realized a potential problem: How do we get into our tents without taking all of the mosquitoes in with us? We began a ritual that worked, for the most part. We would run around as fast as we could, trying to leave all the mosquitoes behind. Then we would open our tent zipper as quickly as possible and slide into the tent through the smallest possible opening. The next 15 to 20 minutes would be spent killing mosquitoes that had followed us into the tent. After all this, we were finally in a mosquito-free zone! We thought we would have trouble sleeping because there was no darkness. Yet, after the long plane ride, two hours of sleep the night before, and riding in the raft all day, we dozed off quickly — thus bringing to an end a long first day in the wild Alaskan tundra.