



# Off The Main Road Alaskan Adventure

By Duane Ryks

*Above—A float plane is about to take off leaving us behind in a remote mountain area at the start of a four-day, 53 mile float trip.*

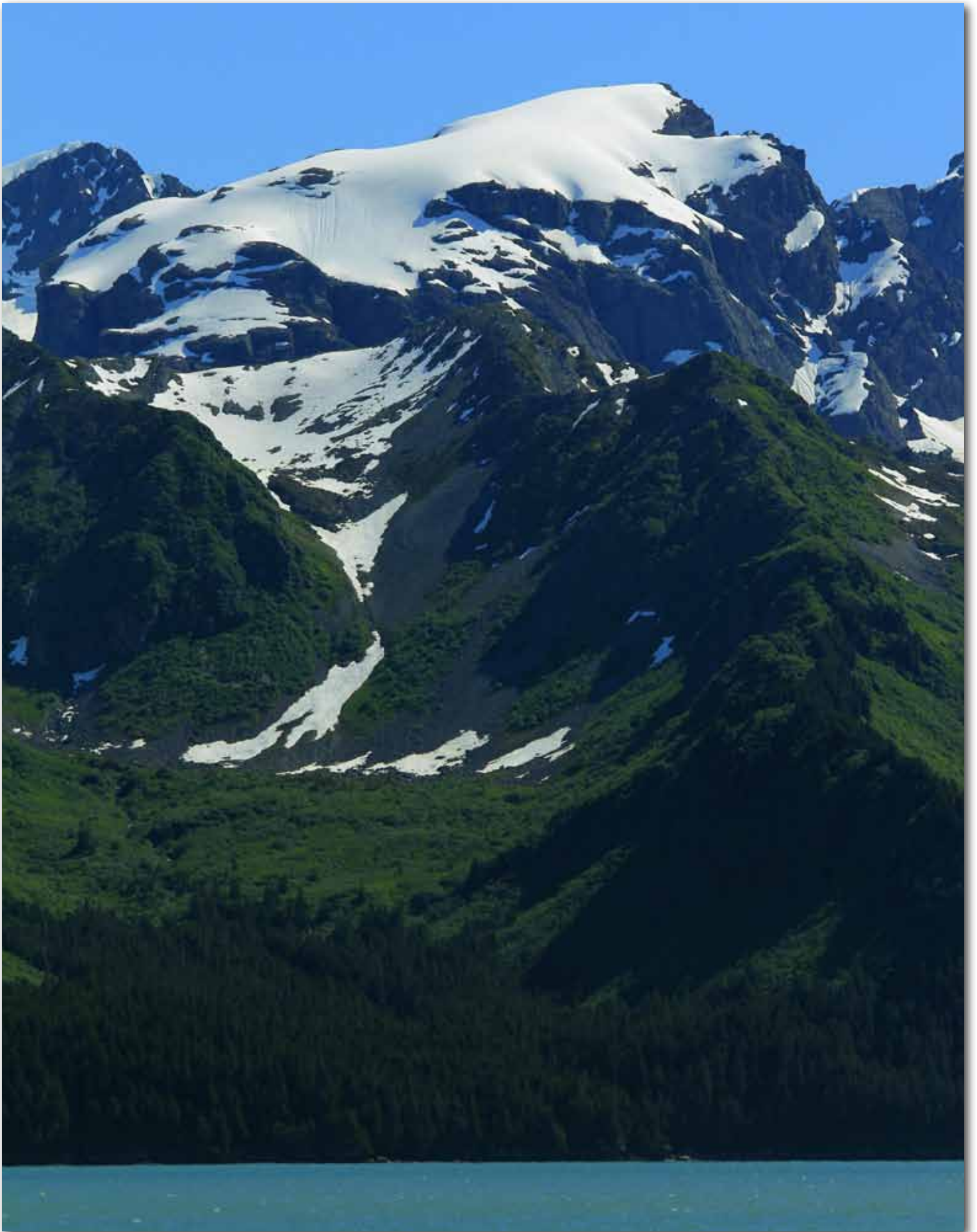
## Foreword

# Introduction

Those that live in the state will tell you, “to really experience Alaska you have to get off the highway, cruise ship or train you are on, take side trips and perhaps a few risks”. This account is of more “off-the-main-road” adventure than the average person may want, but it was truly one of my life’s mountaintop experiences. Our trip covered 22 days, 1200 miles of driving, more than a 1100 miles of flying, over a 100 miles by boat and raft, and more than 30 miles of rugged hiking—all in beautiful, vast Alaska.

This was my second trip to Alaska in three years. On the first trip Sandy and I drove from Minnesota to western Montana, swung north to Calgary, then to British Columbia, through the Yukon to Tok, Alaska; and then down the Glenn Highway to Anchorage. We thoroughly enjoyed that trip, but driving and travel time consumed most of our trip and didn’t leave many days for recreational activities or any fishing. The scenery from the Al-Can Highway and in the National Parks of Canada was truly incredible. We made it around the Alaskan Highway System including a ferry to Kodiak Island; and a stay at Denali National Park on that trip. After 25 days we flew home. Sandy returned last September, 2010, and spent 17 sun-filled days photographing the brilliant Alaskan fall colors. This time we flew both ways and used the extra time to explore the land beyond the highways.

On one of those snowy days last January, Sandy and I sat down with help from our son Troy who lives in Palmer, Alaska to plan an itinerary to decide how many days we would spend, reservations that would need to be made in advance, and



*Sandy's name for this photo is "Heart Mountain" near Seward on the Prince William Sound.*

guide our equipment needs. We planned to do some hiking and backpacking, fishing, and a remote-wilderness rafting trip. Our budget constraints required that we would need to spend much of our trip camping. One always hopes for good weather, but it does tend to rain in Alaska in mid summer, so you have to plan for it. Knowing we would be flying on airlines and small planes meant that we needed to be weight conscious for every single item we brought along.



*Above—Sandy and Duane standing on Root Glacier near Kennecott in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. Regal Mountain is in the background.*

Before I begin my account of our adventure, I would like to share our equipment list. I do not have any product sponsors and am not paid to make any endorsements; I am just sharing a list of what we used or found valuable on our trip. Name brands are included for comparisons. For the most part, we did not do extensive research or try out other brands of equipment. We did get advice from some very knowledgeable outfitters before making our purchases. My advice is to purchase your equipment from outfitter stores that have experienced and trained staff that can guide you through the maze of gear that is out there. We did an inventory and found that we already had quite a number of the items we needed, and then made a visit to Cabela's® to gear up with what we were missing.



*Top-Valdez lighthouse across from the harbor.*

*Right-A bald eagle sits on a stump on the beach along Prince William Sound near Seward.*

*Below-A live starfish on the beach.*



*Photos courtesy of Sandy Kay Photography. Contact her at [www.sandykayphotography.com](http://www.sandykayphotography.com) or email: [sandykay7@gmail.com](mailto:sandykay7@gmail.com).*

## **Our equipment list:**

Our most valuable asset on this trip—our Browning® 4-season tent. Ours is a 5-person dome tent with sturdy, but more expensive, aluminum poles. The rain cover has vestibules on both ends of the tent which came in handy when it was raining. This is one great tent. An extra heavy-duty poly tarp was a good idea for setting up on rough ground.

Alpine® 20° lightweight sleeping bag with waterproof compression stuff sack. Mine was a rectangular shape. Sandy had a mummy bag. Weight was an important consideration for backpacking.

Therm-a-Rest® NeoAir™ insulated sleeping pad—an extremely warm, very lightweight and comfortable 2.5” thick pad. We slept on rocks most nights. Forget your backyard variety air mattress, these are worth the price.

Cabela’s® Backpacks. We used smaller backpacks that could double as a carry-on for the airlines with plenty of expansion room later to handle all our gear. Mine is also used for hunting. Sandy bought a women’s version—which had specially designed shoulder straps to fit a woman’s body. Make sure that you have extra “S” clips and straps for carrying gear and sleeping bags.

Merrell® Reflex™ hiking boots, a respected brand name with a great tread design that are waterproof, lightweight, and comfortable. I was suffering from a previously sprained Achilles’ tendon and these really came through for me.

Omni-Wool® and Smartwool® socks made with merino wool. They kept our feet dry and comfortable all day in hiking and wading boots.

Under Armour® long underwear. A must when the overnight temps drop into the 40’s, or when it is cold and damp.

Cabela’s Gore-Tex® rain suits. Bring good rain gear, you may end up with an all-day drizzle or soaking rain. We also took along lightweight Frogg Toggs® rain suits for backpacking.

Polyester wind pants and jackets. Lightweight acrylic and polyester blend shirts. These are much lighter for backpacking and fly-in trips than denim and cotton, and they dry more quickly.

North Face® and Cabela’s polar fleece shirts. They are warm and lightweight, and make great soft pillows when rolled up.

Medium weight jackets. We dressed in layers when it was cool. Heavier jackets were not necessary.

Waterproof gloves. We used tight fitting neoprene gloves for fishing and rafting.

Alaskan® Hip boots. Inexpensive rubber boots worked fine. We bought these in Alaska so we wouldn’t have to pay for extra baggage.



*Above—Our Browning® four-season tent.*

*Left—Troy cooking fish on the Jetboil® Personal Cooking System.*

*Below—Filtering water from a mountain stream.*



**Katadyn® Vario Microfilter waterfilter.** Don't leave home without one. There is water everywhere in Alaska, but not all of it is safe for drinking. This small portable unit worked extremely well. Camelback® 24-ounce water bottles fit right on the water filter for easy filling.

**Jetboil® PCS (Personal Cooking System).** This is an ultra compact cooking system that uses small Jetpower™ isobutane/propane fuel mix canisters. You can boil a quart of water in 2-minutes. It is great for making your morning coffee and heating water for freeze-dried foods. The small lightweight fuel canisters must be shipped by a carrier to your destination, as they cannot go on a passenger airliner. They cost us more to ship than they actually cost to purchase, but were well worth it for the convenience. They are super efficient.

**Sea To Summit® Dry Sacks.** We bought several sizes from large to small to keep our gear dry. They are strong enough that you could check them through the airlines as baggage. If you plan on rafting, make sure they are submersible like ours.

**Igloo® 5-Day Cooler on wheels.** We bought this at the Sportsman's Warehouse store in Wasilla to ship our fish back with us on the airline. Counting the flight time, check-in, baggage claim, and drive home from the airport it was over 12-hours. The fish were still perfectly frozen with no ice or dry ice needed. The cooler has side eyelets for secure strapping. The telescoping handle and big wheels made dragging this through the airports easier than my luggage.

**Canon® 60D DSLR camera with two lenses.** We had an EF 28-135 image-stabilized macro zoom lens, and an EF 70-200 IS telephoto lens. When you take a trip like this you want to bring back great photos—which we did. Sandy had a Kata® front carrying pack, with a water-proof cover.

**Garmin® GPSMAP® 62S.** My son purchased this GPS unit prior to the trip and we used it extensively. It has many features that made it the perfect GPS for the activities we did. It would have been difficult to navigate the river we were on without it.

**ThermaCELL® Mosquito Repellent.** This unit uses butane and mosquito repellent mats to keep bugs away. They work.

**Mountain House® Freeze-Dried food.** We tried many different breakfast and dinner meals and were satisfied with all of them, and impressed with some.

Don't forget bear spray. You must ship it because you can't take it on the airlines. Thankfully, we didn't need ours, but we kept it with us on hikes and rafting.

The list could go on much longer. We brought along fishing equipment, rods and reels, hunting and fillet knives, a first aid kit, waterproof matches, sunglasses, flashlights, and a bag of elastic straps. All the gear I listed came in close to the maximum allowed by the fly-in service.

