

CCS/WREAF - KOBUK RIVER 2015

NORTHERN RIM OF THE BOREAL FOREST III

COMPLETING A 900-MILE CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF THE WESTERN BROOKS RANGE

AUGUST 12 - AUGUST 30, 2015

Photo: Steve Gorman. All photos and art are from the crew as credited. Uncredited art, photos, and text are by Rob Mullen

The Wilderness River Expedition Art Fellowship (WREAF) became a program of The Center for Circumpolar Studies (CCS) in April 2013. Our focus on developing “Visions of the Boreal Forest” with the Smithsonian’s Arctic Studies Center (ASC) at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) remains unchanged apart from new colleagues and the addition of an accompanying book based on the expeditions to date and the natural history of the Boreal Forest.

Expedition Goals:

1. To complete the circumnavigation of the western Brooks Range that WREAF started on the Noatak in 2012 and continued by crossing the Brooks Range in 2013: “Northern Rim of the Boreal Forest I & II. The idea of the circumnavigation arose from our 2011 Visions of the Boreal Forest planning conferences at the NMNH in Washington DC. The circumnavigation would provide a ‘Source to Salt’ narrative of two Arctic rivers from their alpine glacial origins near Mt. Igikpak to their confluences with the Chukchi Sea near Kotzebue, Alaska. Along the way, the rivers would encompass the full breadth of the transitions between Arctic Tundra and Boreal Forest at the northern and westernmost extent of the ecosystem’s range in North America.
2. To add to the paintings, sketches, and photographic art available to the exhibition and book covering this transitional and storied region.

Route:

With the Noatak (top of this map) done in 2012, after the 2013 expedition (Ambler) 165 miles of the Kobuk remained to the Chukchi Sea and 195 to Kotzebue. Having found the upper Kobuk to be remarkably beautiful on the 2013 expedition, yet being unable to take the time to appreciate it fully, we decided to retrace much of the 2013 route. Accordingly we started at Minakokosa Lake which is floatplane accessible and after an easy 15 mile paddle, joins the Kobuk only two miles downstream of where I had entered it from the Reed River in 2013.



Crew:

Dan Berns, NY – Expert canoeist/fisherman

Stephen Gorman, VT – Expert canoeist/pro photographer

Julia Hargreaves, BC – Leading Canadian wildlife artist

Rob Mullen, VT – Verging on expert canoeist, nationally known wildlife artist

Dr. James Vogelmann, SD – Senior research ecologist USGS

Equipment:

Pakboat Pakcanoes: as has been true of the last two and now this third expedition to Alaska, our canoes were all Pakcanoes by Pakboats. Shipped to and from AK by USPS, they performed flawlessly as has been the case now on the entire 900-mile circumnavigation. When one crewman left the expedition at Ambler as per plan, the third canoe was simply shipped back from the small Post Office. A hard hull would have had to of been towed or abandoned.

Bear preparedness: every crewmember had pepper spray kept in a holster. Steven Gorman had a 12-gauge shotgun with sabot slugs and I had my .45-70 carbine.

As per regulation in Gates of the Arctic Nat'l Park, all of our food was stored in bear barrels provided by the Park. All cooking and eating was done well away from the tents and food was stored overnight well downwind.

Communications: Delorme InReach text capable satellite locator.

Photo: Steve works on coffee one raw wet morning.



The Journey Begins

August 9, 2015

Bonnie dropped me off at Trudeau airport in Montreal at 5:00 am. It was not as rough as the 2013 trip, because this time we'd be on an easy river the entire way and I'd have company. Nonetheless, it is a long flight in any event and I had bad luck with layovers and route. The Montreal – Minneapolis – Fairbanks route was not offered, so it was Montreal-Chicago-Seattle-Anchorage-Fairbanks. Even with the time lag, I only got into Fairbanks at about 10:30 pm and got a cab to Sven's Hostel. Sven's offers a bunk in a communal tent with a serviceable bathroom and good company and coffee in the cook shack in the morning; all in all a well appreciated value at about \$25.

August 10, 2015

I called a college cross-country and track team mate Kent Karns who picked me up and took me to a local store for some of the things I either forgot, or couldn't fly with (there seems always to be something). We met bush pilot Art Mortvedt at Sam's Sourdough Cafe. After breakfast, Kent, being a responsible businessman with work to tend to, left Art to take over taxiing me around. First and most critical stop was UA Fairbanks and the map store. Of all of the things to forget: individual map set for everyone forgotten at home. Load of work. Couldn't afford the full 1:50,000 series, either on budget or space, so opted for the 1:250,000 series. My GPS had the 1:50,000 series loaded in, so it wasn't as big an issue as it would have been a few years ago. **However, a note: I do far prefer a paper map in a case to the GPS. A paper map can be referred to hands free at a glance, with instant orientation and context. Orientation takes longer on the GPS and you need to scroll to see the surrounding country which makes context hard to follow. Referring to it drains the batteries. GPS is great: fantastic data available that no map can provide, but for basic river navigation, the map has it hands down.**

Art had an outhouse at his cabin on the Kobuk that he wanted us to stop by to help upright. It had been carried off of its moorings by flooding. I had seen the cabin on the 2013 trip, so had it marked on maps – that I had forgotten, so he gave me coordinates. Took me out to one of his planes on the way back to the airfield for Wright Air's afternoon flight to Bettles and I arrived around 2:00 pm. I set up in the hangar and got to work, assembling and disassembling the canoes, sorting through the piles of gear and food, and assessing and field stripping as I went. Most of the crew arrived in Fairbanks through the day.

August 11, 2015

Rain. I continued organizing gear in preparation for the crew's arrival that afternoon. Some other trekkers were in and out of the hangar, but it would be good to have company. I had weighed the gear and all was good. If everyone else was just bringing themselves and moderate extra gear,

we'd be fine (*an oddity of this trip was that due to a combination of sleep idiosyncrasies, social proprieties, and schedules, all five crew members had their own tent. This added not only weight to our load, but increased the time and space required to set camp*). The Cessna was in pieces, so we were going to be flown in two Beavers – at the Beaver and Cessna rate if our weight was not over 1,700lbs. Over that, and we would have to shell out an extra \$800 for the full Beaver rate.

The Wright Air flight arrived and we all met up. For the first time in several journeys, I had met everyone prior to the trip, so that was something. There was more extra gear and especially food than I had counted on. It was going to be close. We winnowed out some that could be forwarded to Jean Bibber's in Kotzebue via post and went to dinner: I had an extra (much appreciated) beer – Steve's treat.

August 12 – 3 miles / 3 miles total

The weather improved and we were on. We all stepped onto the scales with our gear. Despite all the work and editing, we were 4lbs over. In the office, there was a wee bit of tension between the owner and the operations manager, but happily we didn't have to all go hit the head or leave the Pop Tarts behind: saved \$800. The flight in was uneventful and scenic with some spits of rain (Jim's first float plane flight). We set down at the southeast end of Lake Minakokosa, tipped Loren and Jim, the pilots, and assembled the canoes. We decided to push out, which was just as well since the planes brought another party in just as we were set to launch. That would have been good to know ahead of time, but happily, no matter. Dan and Julia were in one tandem, Steve and Jim in the other, and I paddled the solo. Good fishing for Dan



Jim, Rob, and Dan in the hangar - photo: Steve Gorman





immediately with Grayling. Delicious fish fry of grayling with dinner. Mostly overcast and 50's.

Above: close up of Steve in window of other plane

Photo: Steve Gorman

Camped on a nice beach river left a short way down Beaver Creek with a stony ripple on our side and plenty of good fishing for Dan who caught several Grayling.

August 13 – 13 miles / 16.6 miles total

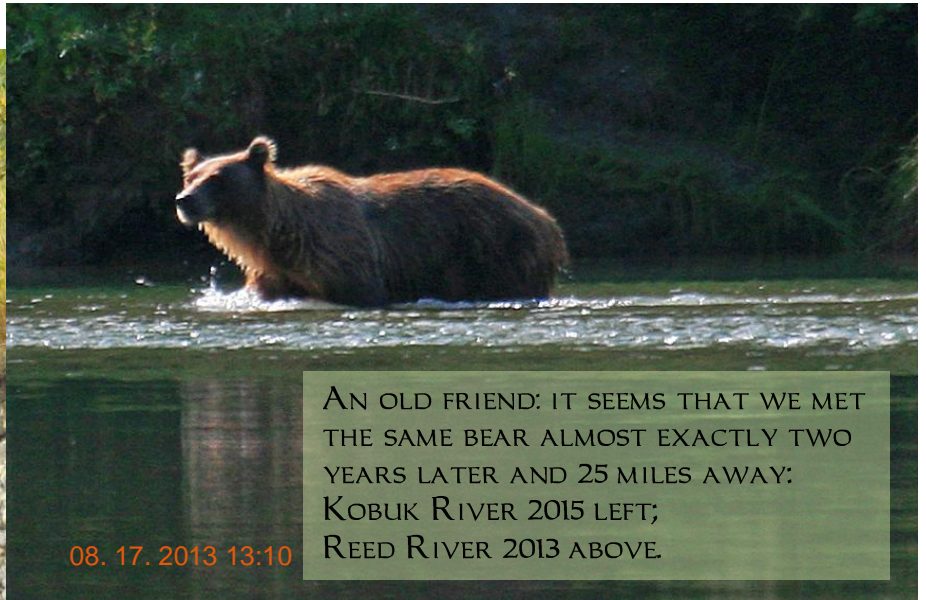
I was awakened at 2:45 am by a large animal in the shallows next to camp. It was walking back and forth, sometimes fast. I listened for half an hour and debated going out with my flashlight; then decided that it was leaving us alone, so I would leave it alone. I went back to sleep easily. Comparing notes after everyone was up, all but Dan had heard it. Jim found large grizzly tracks upstream of our camp that we hadn't noticed gathering firewood the evening before. Dan caught a nice salmon right at camp and released it. On the water late, about 10:30 am and Dan caught more Grayling as we paddled, then stopped for a snack. Then as all three canoes were together approaching a right hand bend we saw a bear on the left bank. It slipped into the brush. As we moved around the bend, there were two bears at the end of the straight; again near the left shore, but in the water. All together, they were Jim and Dan's first grizzlies. Jim, Julia, and I had eaten our lunch during Dan's snack stop, but after the bears we stopped for a full lunch complete with large stew pot. We saw two more bears after lunch. Reached the Kobuk in the afternoon and camped a short way past where I had met Hendrick in '13. Weather mostly overcast with showers in the mountains – two rainbows with dinner, which I dreamed about that night; a sky full of them. Pike augmented dinner: Dan kept it but released several grayling. I cleaned it and Jim and Julia practiced grilling under Dan's tutelage; team building.



Mom and cub: the first and second, or second and third bears of the trip: personally I think the second and third

August 14 - 15 miles / 31.6 miles total

Wolves howled over night and bears were everywhere. Jim was surprised by bears while he was bathing at dawn. Talk about a primal showdown! Another large bear approached camp while we were moseying around. It was on the opposite bank, but crossed to our side just below camp, gave us hardly a glance as it shook like a big dog and ambled up into the brush. As I was photographing it, something seemed oddly familiar; especially its unusually straight nose/forehead profile and distinctively somewhat goofy ears. That impression was only heightened by its behavior: super laid back, non-aggressive and almost oblivious to us.



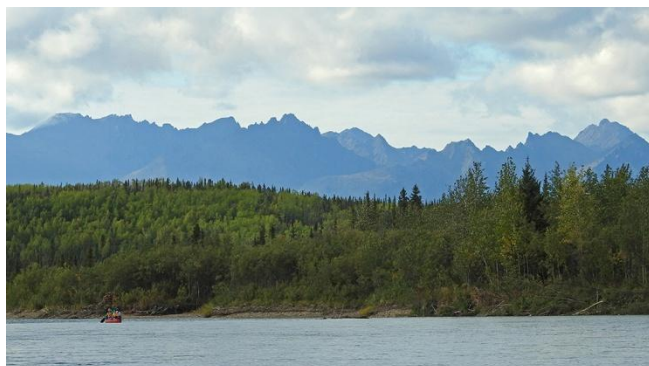
AN OLD FRIEND: IT SEEMS THAT WE MET
THE SAME BEAR ALMOST EXACTLY TWO
YEARS LATER AND 25 MILES AWAY:
KOBUK RIVER 2015 LEFT;
REED RIVER 2013 ABOVE.

08. 17. 2013 13:10

08. 14. 2015 13:01

Especially after reviewing my photos from 2013, I am as certain as I can be without DNA proof, that this is the same bear whose peaceable manner helped settle my nerves at least a little bit after my violent encounters on the Reed River.

Lunches were unaccustomedly long affairs, so Julia and I tried to get some artwork done during them. I recognized a stream that had had a lot of salmon in it when Hendrick and I had been there so scouted it for my underwater filming. Dan came over and fished it. Caught a salmon and I got some shots. Saw a nice Grizzly also salmon fishing on the opposite bank. We made about 15 miles. Weather continued to hold fairly well with occasional rain.



08. 14. 2015 22:27

Dan Julia under Angayucham peaks of the Brooks Range and a salmon fisherman

August 15 - 23.5 miles / 55.1 miles total

Hard freeze overnight, but blue sky and warm for the day: our best weather. Off at about 10:30 to meet Art at his cabin and to upright his outhouse. Steve and I spotted a large school of Sheefish in a pool upstream of Art's place, so Dan and Julia stopped so Dan could fish. I saw Art's plane moored on the left bank about a quarter mile below his cabin (too shallow to approach nearer). Art had interrupted a grizzly's breakfast by landing, making me glad that I had both bear spray and the .45 as I worked my way up to the cabin. Once I found it, I led the rest of the crew in and we met Art on the beach. After considerably more work than we originally hoped, but less than might well have been necessary, we succeeded in restoring the proud privy to its rightful (and stable) perch. Art suggested possibly linking up at a point below the Pah River. InReach texting worked well staying in touch with Art. The rendezvous was too shallow for Art's plane, so we proceeded downstream from the Pah and camped on an island past a huge Sheefish pool I'd passed in '13 after parting from Hendrick on my birthday. Julia and I started some paintings despite thick no-see-ums. Good views in several directions. Dan had kept two Sheefish and we all had as much as we could eat for dinner. 23.5 miles, weather wonderful. Rain overnight.



Paddling beneath the Brooks Range below and above; Jim Vogelmann in camp Aug 15



August 16 - 25.5 miles / 80.6 miles total

Dan caught two more Sheefish before leaving camp, prompting a shore lunch during which Julia and I started sketches. Dan and Steve switched boats and had a race to settle a debate over which canoe was loaded more heavily. I kept tabs on them from behind in the solo. Passed the spot where Buddha Bear had watched the salmon swim past in a fishy stupor in '13, just past the Selby River confluence. Common birds on the river are Tundra Swans, Canada and White-fronted Geese, Osprey, Bald Eagles, Merlins, Northern Harriers, Red-throated Loons, Sandhill Cranes, Red-breasted Mergansers, Glaucous Gulls, Gray Jays, Chickadees, and Ravens. The Ravens had a very wide and different vocabulary to the Ravens back home and we heard both Great Horned and Barred Owls. Rain a few times during the day; saw a few of the outlying fish camps upstream of Kobuk village – some occupied this time unlike last and with large racks full of drying whitefish. Passing one, a young boy ran out from a cabin and yelled to me, “Keep up Old Man!” (I was paddling in second position, but 50 yards behind Steve and Jim in the lead canoe). “I’m trying” I called back. I was a little taken aback being called an “old man.” Sometimes I forget I have nearly white hair and among the Inupiat would be considered an Elder.



August 17 - 19.4 miles / 100 miles total

Very heavy rain overnight and away by 10 am. After a long lunch stop during which Dan caught whitefish and a salmon, we arrived in Kobuk village and were met at the boat landing by a familiar face: Bryson – the young boy who had called me “old man” the day before. He was ever so slightly abashed to encounter us directly, but soon recalled that he led a group of boys that had followed me around the last time I’d been in the village almost two years before. He toured us around the village again and helped procure a grate from a refrigerator that Dan could use for grilling fish. In the two intervening years, he had learned to charge for his services. Stopped at the store where the same clerk was at the counter. Got some info on our planned route through the delta from Carl, who had a step parent who lived



Paddling after a rainstorm and Sandhill Cranes.

in Vermont. Pushed on and made camp after the third left hand bend after the village (about 5 miles). Started a couple paintings while the rain came and went. Grizzly and wolf tracks all over the place, but then that was normal on almost any beach. 19.4 miles.



Left: Julia talking to an Inupiat woman under a fish drying rack in Kobuk village and right; Bryson giving a tour with Jim and Julia – photos: Steve Gorman

August 18 – 19.3 miles / 119.3 miles total

1:00 am, an owl hooting (Great Horned) and then a wolf, right on the edge of camp who sounded very put out that we were in the middle of its accustomed route. Rain in the morning. 2-3 hour lunch during which Julia and I got some work done. Not our usual routine, but it works. Not enough time to finish necessarily (I took some time out to eat too), but got the pieces to a point where I could decide whether to finish them or not. We bypassed Shungnak out of concern for the low water in that side channel. 19.3 miles.

August 19 – 20 miles / 139.3 miles total

Rain and headwinds and other delays kept us to 20 miles. Not having someone cook does hamper painting production, but much of this day was too wet for work anyway. The system we had on the Noatak was not replicable (*Linda Besse volunteered in 2012*), but the idea of 3 or 4-person cooking teams taking turns prepping meals that we employed on the 2011 expedition (Julia was on that) would have helped.

August 20 – 15 miles / 154 miles total

The morning brought no improvement in the weather and for a bit we toyed with the idea of taking a shore day, but our progress had been a bit slow to easily allow it since Jim had a flight to catch in Ambler on the 22nd. It was a long wet day of paddling; even the eagles were wet and none too happy (photo right). Just cold enough for hypothermia to be a continued issue and paddling was a necessity for keeping the entire crew warm.



Made a very wet camp at the same beach I did above Ambler in '13 which offered a good position from which to reach the town early rather than dragging in late. Thankfully, we did not have the strong headwinds I dealt with two years ago, but it never did stop raining or warm much. Put up the storm tarp again. A young couple (Max and Sara) came by in an inflatable kayak that weighed only some ridiculous amount (8 lbs?). Steve and Dan had done some of the developmental test paddling in them on the Hula Hula in the ANWR. They were soaked, exhausted and pretty miserable, but young and locked in and not stopping until Ambler. They had come all the way from the Haul Road over the mountains and accessed the Kobuk from the headwaters. Intense.

August 21 – 5 miles / 159 miles total

Arrived in Ambler at about 10:30 am. Set up at the Kobuk River Lodge. Jim was departing the next day. Dan opted to camp out on an island offshore from the lodge. Shirley offered him dinner even so and had (in collusion with Bonnie) baked me a wonderful birthday cake. We cleaned out the 16' canoe as best we could and hoofed it over to the Post Office where, with some other gear that had proven extraneous, we shipped it back to Vermont and other points south and east. Showers and laundry and shopping in the store rounded out the day. We had all shipped our second half supplies ahead to the lodge and that proved the only fly in the ointment: and quite a big fly at that. For some reason the lodge operator had seemed somewhat short with me on the phone through the planning, though he seemed friendly enough once we arrived. However, the supplies, which I had to make a case for him to receive (unlike two years ago when he suggested it: four people instead of one?) had been stored in an open shed under the back of the building. Mine were in a watertight plastic barrel, but the others' were in cardboard boxes and had been sorted out by squirrels: happily rather picky squirrels, as much was left untouched, but it required replacing and reapportioning from our combined stores. Not a good situation and not made much better by the offer of buying replacement supplies at cost in the store (no cost to the store, double

cost to Dan and Steve especially). I had extra food which minimized the store purchases. Julia was on the fence about continuing, especially in light of the cold and wet since her rain gear was inadequate. We forced her to continue (well, we did encourage her) and she bought a rain suit at the store. It turned out to be junk, but she was as solid as anyone else on the crew. ***Prices, reliability, and stock make shipping supplies ahead generally economical.***

August 22 – 24 miles / 183 miles total [*I had not treated water until Amber: did thereafter*]

Bade farewell to Jim and were away a bit late, 11:30. I left the uneaten birthday cake (regretted later). I was now paddling with Dan, and Julia was with Steve. It stayed that way for the rest of the trip. Some rain, but generally a great day for paddling and to bank some miles, especially since we were now on river I was not familiar with. We were in the area of the “Onion Portage” which is a major caribou crossing of ancient lineage. Still are hunting camps there and sign of extensive caribou hunting. Many bulls were taken but the antlers left.



Photo: Caribou antlers at Onion Portage with the Jade Mountains in background – Steve Gorman

In Labrador, the Innu said they don't much like the bulls during the rut since they are very gamey so that only white hunters take them as trophies. The antlers were left here, so don't know quite what the difference would be. No one around to ask and forgot to later. Except for a protracted lunch, it would have been a 30 + mile day.

Great campsite on a very wide gravel/sand beach: bit far to the bushes, but few insects. Beautiful sunset and moonrise with Sandhill Cranes.



Moonrise: Rob Mullen



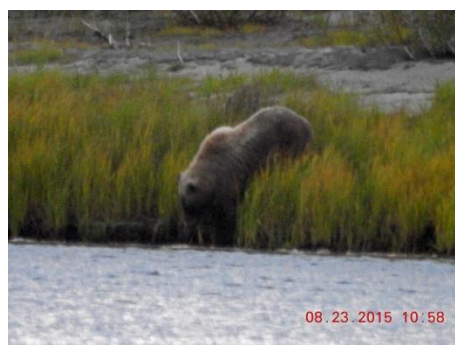
Sunset photo – Julia Hargreaves

August 23 – 23 miles / 206 miles total

I rose early to beat possible rain and was treated to a wonderful sunrise behind the Jade Mtns.



Shortly following that, we heard the bawling of a grizzly cub and sure enough, into view came mom and child. Mom went down to the river bank just across from us and snagged a salmon and they retired into the brush to dine while we made our own breakfast.



And as Dan and I worked on breakfast, Steve shot a morning panorama with a color spectrum in the river and the Jades behind.



We had a crew discussion re the long lunch stops and all agreed to shorter cold lunches as often as possible. *Trying to fit this trip into three weeks instead of our usual month/month+ did solve some logistical problems on the planning scale, but created others on the river – and undercut some of the main goals. There are always tradeoffs.* It was another great paddling day, though with headwinds in the morning and a couple hours of rain in the afternoon. We had lunch near an abandoned cabin on a bluff over the river and an Inupiat motorboat came by headed downstream as we were departing. Made camp early (4pm) on a wide beach river right and spend a good amount of time looking for poles to set up the storm tarp; loads of scrub willow, but not much spruce near to shore. Max and Sara were camped around the next bend at the brook that leads to the Sand Dunes. Bonnie was in constant touch with us via InReach and the forecast was for rain the next day, especially in the afternoon. For that reason, we decided to pass on the Dunes. It is a two mile side trip and bushwhacking all the way – and back. If in the rain, it could take most of the day and our progress still didn't allow for unforced days ashore. Sad news from home that evening from Bonnie; a good friend of ours who had been sick for a long while had died. Steve and Julia joined me in a toast to her on the river. There was a bit of a discussion re the pros and cons of such news being relayed to expeditions. A personal call I'll grant and there are practical arguments against, but I come down on the freedom of information side and sharing the burden with a loved one.

August 24 – 24 miles / 230 miles total (14 or 15 grizzlies so far) *Jim Vogelmann's birthday*

I was up early again to hopefully beat the rain for a while. No rain at 6:00 but steady by 7:00. At the same time, Jim's birthday was welcomed by a wolf howling just upstream from us on the opposite bank. We broke camp in showers and the rain was off and on for the morning which actually made for very good paddling. Dan is obsessive about food and fishing and was making an effort to stop to fish less. In the afternoon, however, the temperature dropped markedly and the rain became steady and hard. We made a cold wet camp when it became apparent that a bit of hypothermia was nosing about Julia. Debate about whether the camp was a good enough one or not was cut short and tents and a fire shelter were set up. Julia recovered well with some hot dinner and dry clothes.

The bears didn't seem to mind the weather. A lone bear swam the river to our side and was fishing for salmon upstream from us for a while, My tent fly had ripped; still serviceable, but I decided to go back to the old-school system I had used so successfully in '13. I set up the canoe and tarp. Got a bit Rube Goldberg about it with multiple tarps because of the foul weather – always a mistake – but it ended up fine and very snug and comfortable. An Inupiat motor boat came upstream while I was relaxing and the occupants gave me a big thumbs up.

August 25 – 14 miles / 244 miles total (21 or 22 Grizzlies)

We gave some consideration to staying put, but considering we still were having trouble getting the entire crew to focus on getting distance done when necessary, decided that we should push on. The rain was light as yet. Saw five bears while breaking camp including a sow and two cubs. The mom was a bit bothered by our presence, but the cubs didn't care: they just wanted to eat and were bawling quite loudly. Poor mom. ***The canoe and tarp system had major advantages in those conditions since you plenty of room to pack under cover and only the tarp gets wet. The rest of the crew took turns packing their tents under the storm/cooking tarp. The cook tarp was a lifesaver as they always are.***

Soon after we were afloat, the rain strengthened. Dan and I saw two more grizzlies on shore, though it was so wet I didn't get much for shots. The rain was steady all day. At one point, Dan's admirable resolve to curtail the fishing – and my resolve to be more assertive – crashed. It was a hard temptation, but it led to a dangerous situation. We passed a cabin, obviously intended for fishing; and for good reason. A small stream came in river right at a hard left hand bend and the pool was chock full of sheefish and salmon. Dan could not get anything in the boat and lost two lures: "Just one more" became an obsessive chant. Steve and Julia had gone ahead and I could see them ashore over a half mile downstream. We had been there 20 minutes – my cutoff – and I was just going to insist we move on, when an urgent yell echoed up the river from Steve. Alarmed (and a bit chagrined), I cranked as hard as I could for the 1,000 yards. Much to my relief, there was no acute emergency, but Julia was again becoming hypothermic which certainly was an emerging emergency. We pushed on after some discussion. We decided that the best

option, rather than stopping yet again for lunch, was simply to stop at the first and best looking place to camp. The map indicated a cabin a bit down river. At 2:00 pm I spotted it up on the bluff river right. In the binocs it looked good: possibly a porch that even if locked, we could shelter on. Better still, it was an “open to all” shelter cabin. It indeed had a bit of a porch and a stove. It was a horrible mess with pancakes still on the plates from the last people through (not long ago), but it had a wood stove and didn’t leak. We collected wood and cranked the stove, sorted gear, strung up drying lines and Julia cleaned the entire cabin; even scrubbing the floors. I put out a request through InReach for a detailed weather report. Jim and a couple other replies had general info that was reassuring and Bonnie came through with an hourly that proved very accurate. The rain eased off a bit at 5:00 pm, as per her report, but we decided to stay put, dry out, and rest.

Max and Sara came by after a bit as did a giant snag that had been stalking us for days. Max and Sara were debating calling it quits in Kiana.



August 26 – 19 miles / 249 miles total

It was still raining in the morning, but as per the weather report Bonnie had provided, it started to ease off and at Noon, we were again headed downstream; much restored and dried out. Had a reasonably fast lunch at a fancy cabin river right that was totally sealed shut; we ate on the cobble beach. Close to Kiana. Headwinds were becoming a problem with the clearing weather, so we took a side channel that would shorten the route to Kiana and offer some shelter from wind even if it had less current. The current held on it pretty well and we did get some break from the wind from time to time, but it was hard going. We didn’t want to get too close to Kiana since we would be camped and the dogs in Ambler had kept Dan up much of the night, but campsites were few and far between: as in none. Shirley Gentemann at the KRL had told us that a friend of hers ran a lodge about 5 miles upstream of Kiana, but the only building that we saw that wasn’t abandoned or firmly shuttered was a large fancy building far up from the river. We were not inclined to investigate and finally found a sandy ridge of an island-like shore thing only a mile and change from town. We made sure to camp as far up from the river as possible since the water was rising.



August 27 – 13.5 miles / 262.5 miles total

The river rose over a foot in the night. No rain in the morning, but the wind was already strong out of the west-northwest. We stopped in Kiana for some supplies: mostly gas for the stoves which was exorbitant (\$41/gal), but at least in stock (there had been none in Ambler. There was discussion about the wisdom/necessity of buying gas, especially at that price, but I (and most of the crew) considered it to be an absolute safety issue if available. Yes, we could manage without, but why – particularly given the stretch of cold wet weather we had been enduring? If another case of hypothermia hit, the speed and reliability of a gas stove over wood or sterno (my emergency backup), could make the difference. Met Dr. Chris Stein at the beach; a “Native” doctor, who was very knowledgeable and friendly. He was concerned for our welfare and asked us to email him when safely off the river. Naturally I didn’t dig out my trip log to write it down and subsequently lost his email. Dan had



stayed with the canoes and talked to a local about conditions downstream while the rest of us were at the store. A super friendly Golden Retriever, “Maggie” was “guarding” the store and very anxious to show us her favorite toy. Young Korean owners who own several Northern Stores in the Northwest Arctic



Borough.

Leaving Kiana, the SSW fetch of the river shielded us from the worst of the wind, but a right hand bend was about 5 miles down. An Inupiat motorboat with an enclosed cabin (much larger than our canoes) hailed Steve and Julia (in the lead) on its way back upstream a short way from Kiana and warned that they had turned back due to 6 ft waves several miles downriver. The map showed a side channel that cut off river right before the bend: hoping that the smaller stream would provide some shelter or at least smaller waves, we targeted that. It worked beautifully. The wind was still bad, but the waves were well within our safety margin. We stopped for lunch on a beach just before a fork where to the left, the channel rejoined the main river and to the right, it continued on a more northwesterly bearing. The wind was ferocious (30 mph according to the woman on the Inupiat boat), so we sat in the lee of some willows. The whitecaps on the main river were clearly too much for our open canoes, but happily, in the right-hand continuation of the channel, the waves were modest and so kept progress possible, even if very difficult. When the channel bent back SSW we caught a welcome break from the wind and saw a cow and

calf moose swimming the river, but then we had to rejoin the main channel finally and things deteriorated.

The river was running a few points west of the wind, so we were able to stay out of the high waves by hugging the right (northern) shore, but it was getting dicey, especially on some small points where breaking surf forced us further out: all of it into a mean wind. Dan and I were doing OK, and Julia is a strong paddler, but Dan and I possibly had slight advantage in having two men in the canoe. When Steve and Julia's canoe was lost to sight, we pulled to shore to wait. When they didn't show quickly, I walked back on the shore until I spotted them – likewise resting at the shore about a quarter mile back upstream. Continuing up with them, Steve and I quickly decided that pushing on in the blow was getting foolhardy. I was able to keep pace with them easily on foot headed back to Dan and the other canoe.

We found a spot a short distance on with semi level ground that wasn't soaking wet and even had the protection of a large downed spruce providing a very effective windbreak. The decision to stop was not unanimous. Our planned route – the Melvin Channel - was another side channel that broke off from the main river about 2 miles downstream and Dan felt that we could make that and find a better camp (we had been told – erroneously as it turned out – that there were many Inupiat camps on the northshore of the Melvin Channel). In those two miles, however, the river swung ever so slightly back northward and therefore more directly into the wind. Steve and I strongly felt it too risky for an unsure reward. It was early (4:00 pm), but it had been a hard 13.5 miles, so we decided to have a hot meal and see what happened. The wind and whitecaps were still raging after our early dinner, so we stayed put – amidst some tension. Naturally, well after dinner the wind totally died and the white capped river turned to a millpond.



Tensions were at least somewhat eased by a restful evening, a beautiful sunset, and a Barred Owl who perched in the downed spruce and serenaded us late that night.

August 28 – 22 miles / 271 miles total

We were up early to beat the wind and on the river by 8:25 am. Still millpond conditions and we easily made the run down to the Melvin Channel which was our main concern. Some 20/20 hindsight vindication for not pushing on the previous evening was that there was no suitable place to camp for miles. The morning paddling had fantastic light (*photo below: Steve Gorman*) and



we were treated to a moose and a flock of Greater Scaup; one of the few duck species other than Red-breasted Mergansers that we saw.

Bonnie had warned us that the forecast was for very high winds continuing for days. Happily for us, we had no wind until late morning and even then it was quite moderate. However, by early afternoon it was back to 30 mph+ with whitecaps in the middle of the channel. We had to work the banks for shelter from wind and to pick safe crossing points. Progress sometimes came to a grinding halt or a few yards could be gained with enormous effort. Finally, at the upstream point of a large island formed by a minor channel branching to the left, we saw a fish drying rack up a steep, but short bank. Investigated and found a dream camp site well up in the spruces and sheltered at least a little from the howling wind. It was a site that someone intended to build a cabin on as there were building supplies, but nothing but a tent platform had been completed. It was very early to stop, but we'd done 22 miles and progress was increasingly slow, exhausting, and dangerous, so we called it a day. Through the afternoon and evening, we kept an eye on the wind and river and considered the side channel that split off to the left. It would bypass much of the Melvin Channel, but eventually – if a reliable through channel – get us to our goal.

August 29 – 25 miles / 296 miles total

I awoke at 5:00 am. It was still dark, but still dark with light rain and some wind. I noted in the journal that I could hear waves which sent me back to sleep.

A big concern for a couple days at this point, was our crossing to the Baldwin Peninsula from the delta. The shortest (and the only option being considered) was a four mile open water crossing from near the mouth of the Melvin Channel. We had done a 2 mile crossing in '12 from the Noatak delta to Kotzebue and during the planning phase, and much of the trip, I had hoped to paddle the entire circuit. However, the wind was a major worry. The recent pattern of relatively calm mornings and ferocious winds all afternoon and evening was putting the fear of open water back into me: especially Chukchi Sea water. Accordingly I had asked Bonnie and Jean Bibber for a name of a boat operator we could ask to stand by in the now likely event we needed assistance once we reached saltwater. Jean had come up with a boat operator for us; Bob Shaffer and Bonnie had undertaken the daunting task of coordinating between the parties. The miscommunications were epic. In addition to the normal difficulties of second and third hand information, we couldn't talk directly, but only text. Being old people, that was not easy. Then we had cultural differences (apparent only in hindsight) when dealing with getting advice on best routes and schedules. Apparently in Inupiat culture, it is impolite to make direct suggestions of where to go in the field (maybe it is seen as assuming superiority over someone else's bush skills). In any event, in answer to Bonnie's inquiries as to whether we should meet Bob at any particular place, he would reply with "yes, they could do that" or some such vague comment. Moreover, Bob used local names that were not on the maps. Then we also had local information that turned out to be almost 100% wrong (such as that there were several camps we could shelter in on the north bank of the Melvin Channel: there were none – not that we were looking, but still, remarkably wrong information). All in all, it was a gigantic stressful mess – that by dumb luck and good fortune actually ended up for the best. Maybe. Happily, all of this was in pursuit of the safest, easiest course of action, not the only safe course of action.

Anyway, we had also been told in both Ambler and Kiana – and by Bob Shaffer via Bonnie – that there was a cultural camp somewhere in the area. One suggestion Bob had made, was that we could stay there and meet him. The camp was reportedly "near the coast" on the Melvin Channel. We found it 10 miles downstream from our camp (15 miles from the coast). It was not on the Melvin Channel, but you could see it from the Melvin Channel ... briefly if you happened to be looking in the right direction as you passed a gap in the trees on river right. It was about a quarter mile up a side channel that continued up to the northern rim of the delta (the Ogriveg River: the Melvin Channel emptied out on the western margin). The caretaker, a "good friend" of Bob's who would "certainly let them stay there", was friendly enough after a bit of softening up, but nonetheless refused to do so. The caretaker (who was not Inupiat) told us Bob's usual route was the north channel (he did not call it the Ogriveg River) and that that might be our best route to rendezvous. He was headed to Kotzebue (by boat; there are no roads) to pick up his wife at the airport and said he would check on us on his way back. He departed as we prepared to leave. Despite his advice to us, he then went south to the Melvin Channel. Seemed odd, but possibly he figured the narrow crossing to the Baldwin Peninsula, and a sheltered run up its windward shore would be his best route with the dangerous wind. We never saw him again.

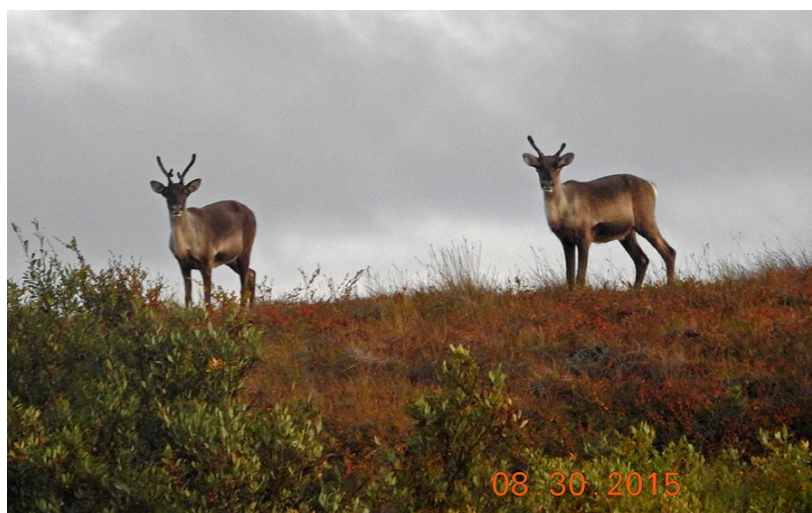
I finally got some lat/long coordinates for Bob's camp that confirmed my suspicion that it was on the north shore of Kotzebue Sound, not near the mouth of the Melvin Channel as had been suggested at some point. That made going north on the Ogriveg River seem sensible

We headed north on the Ogriveg and I received a text from Bonnie that all was good. Great; all that confusion was settled; except she had not received our GPS reading yet for some reason and thought we were still headed south and west on the Melvin Channel. By the time that was cleared up, I figured we were committed to the north route, which would bring us close to Bob's cabin in any event, saving at least 30 miles of open water travel for him.

As we approached the coast, the wind strengthened. Fortunately, the river turned back east before reaching Ekichuk Lake, or York Bay as many locals call it, giving us a rare and welcome tailwind. The river was brackish at this point and our welcoming reception to the Chukchi Sea, a very curious and playful Harbor Seal, met us in the river.

There were no hoped for beaches for camping near the coast and the entire river at that point was basically marsh, so we headed across Pontoniek Lake to the hard shore. The shoreline was obstructed with shallows and thickets, but a quarter mile north of where the tundra bench came down close to the water (default camp), we found a route in to a low point in the shore. Even so, the tussocky nature of the ground made searching for a campsite a bit of a worry, but we found one on a slight knob just south of our landing. We were largely exposed to the wind, but high and dry and met by another welcoming committee. They were Julia's first caribou, so I took them as a sign.

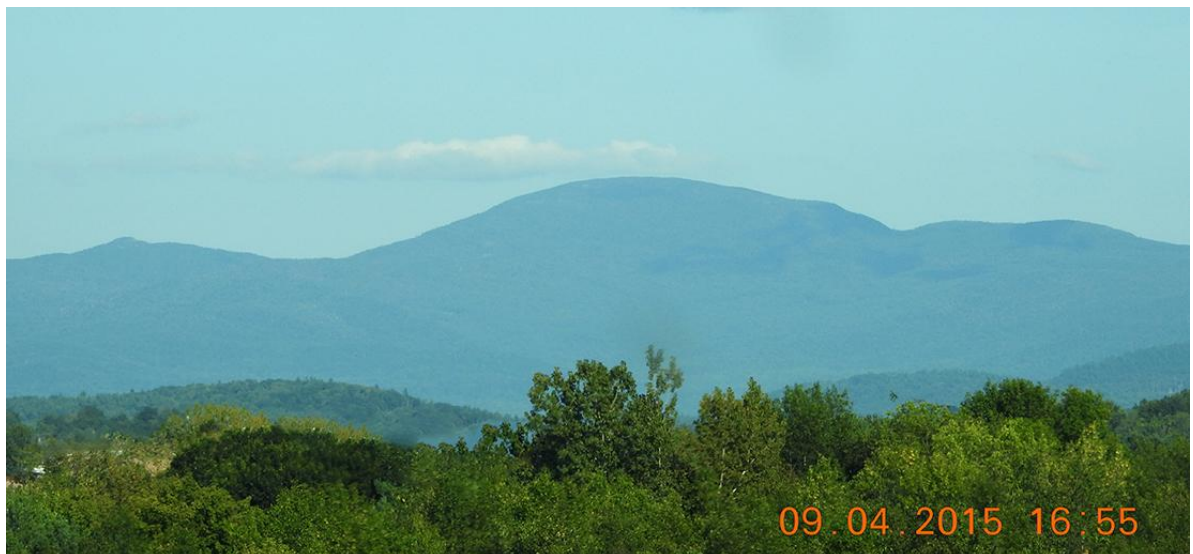
Moonrise was wondrous and there was a mountain to the east that gave me a pang of longing for home. I had to do a double take.



This was (is) the mountain to the east of our camp.



This is the image etched in my mind's eye since early childhood:



August 30 – Chukchi Sea: 6 miles / 302 miles total

The wind was mild in the morning, with bright sunshine and all seemed possible. There was some renewed talk of finishing on the paddle, but expanses of the north side of Kotzebue Sound would be a lee shore with the winds we were expecting and not worth the risk. Another miscommunication had us lazing about camp waiting on word from Bob. We could see a building on the north shore. We had considered it the night before, but the wind on the bay was too dangerous. Late in the morning, but happily not too late, we heard from Bob through Bonnie that he knew of the building and would meet us there. Now with miles of open water between us and the building, we broke camp in a hurry to beat the wind. At just under one mile into the day's paddling, we officially reached the Chukchi Sea and completed the circumnavigation – albeit without paddling into Kotz' like we had in 2012.

The building was large and started to look funny as we neared it. We reached it before the wind picked up significantly. A moose was browsing in the “yard” (*I was hoping to something funny with this shot, but it was too fast and I couldn't manage the depth of field*).



The building was indeed quite distinctive. It was falling into the sea – apparently heaved by ice and gave the impression of already being at sea inside. It was hilariously disorienting. We decided not to camp in it ... just in case.



We set camp near a stream that came into the bay and obviously had been the cabin's water source. We contacted Bonnie and gave her our position to relay to Bob. More miscommunication led to our agreeing to be picked up in the afternoon instead of the morning, but it led to some fun and more time on the coast, so that was OK. Julia was concerned for ghosts. Before dark, we all went up to the hill, paid our respects, and left a gift of rum and M&Ms which we hoped would propitiate the spirits.



August 31 – 32 miles by powerboat

Steven, Julia, and I spent the morning photographing and exploring about. All of us then went up to the hilltop again, set up some targets with a backstop and let Julia fire the rifle and shotgun. She had never fired a gun before and did very well. Back in camp we packed up. While at it, I spotted a bird preening near the bank. I thought it might be Red-throated loon at first, but it was a cormorant. The bill was oddly thin though. Turned out to be a Life Bird for me; a Pelagic Cormorant. While we waited, the millpond morning wore into its usual whitecapped windy afternoon.

Bob showed about half an hour late. He was puzzled at why we wanted to be picked up in the afternoon after the wind had grown strong, instead of in the morning. Almost funny after all the trouble getting things nailed down; we had the impression he preferred afternoon because of his schedule. Anyway: we had an exhilarating ride in the open forward section of the boat (the aft cabin was for the captain only). Bob was a good steersman. He was particularly skilled at getting the entire 28' craft airborne off of large waves: a feat he accomplished by hitting them just right at full speed. The hanging in mid air sensation just before impact into the oncoming wave was an experience not to be missed. Especially when repeated over and over for 30 miles (there were some relatively smooth sections).

We arrived in Kotz' and Bob's daughter ferried us and our gear over to Jean Bibber's B&B. Jean made a point that the only reason we had rooms was that she liked me (we stayed with her after the 2012 expedition and I did again in '13). President Obama was due in town September 2 and the Marine guards for the Presidential helicopter were filling her establishment. She turned away Fox News to accommodate us. It was great to see Jean again and be back at Bibber's. Home away from home.

September 1 – 0 miles

Breaking down canoes, schlepping gear to the Post Office and shipping it all home. Steve splurged for a liquor license and we bought some "supplies."

September 2 – 0 miles

Jean and her son Eugene were invited to be among the few townspeople to meet President Obama off of his plane. Very exciting. Jean wore her finest sealskin coat (photo: not Jean and Eugene).



We watched the motorcade. I guess I saw his SUV.

I also photographed the one protester (she was apparently successful however).

Summary

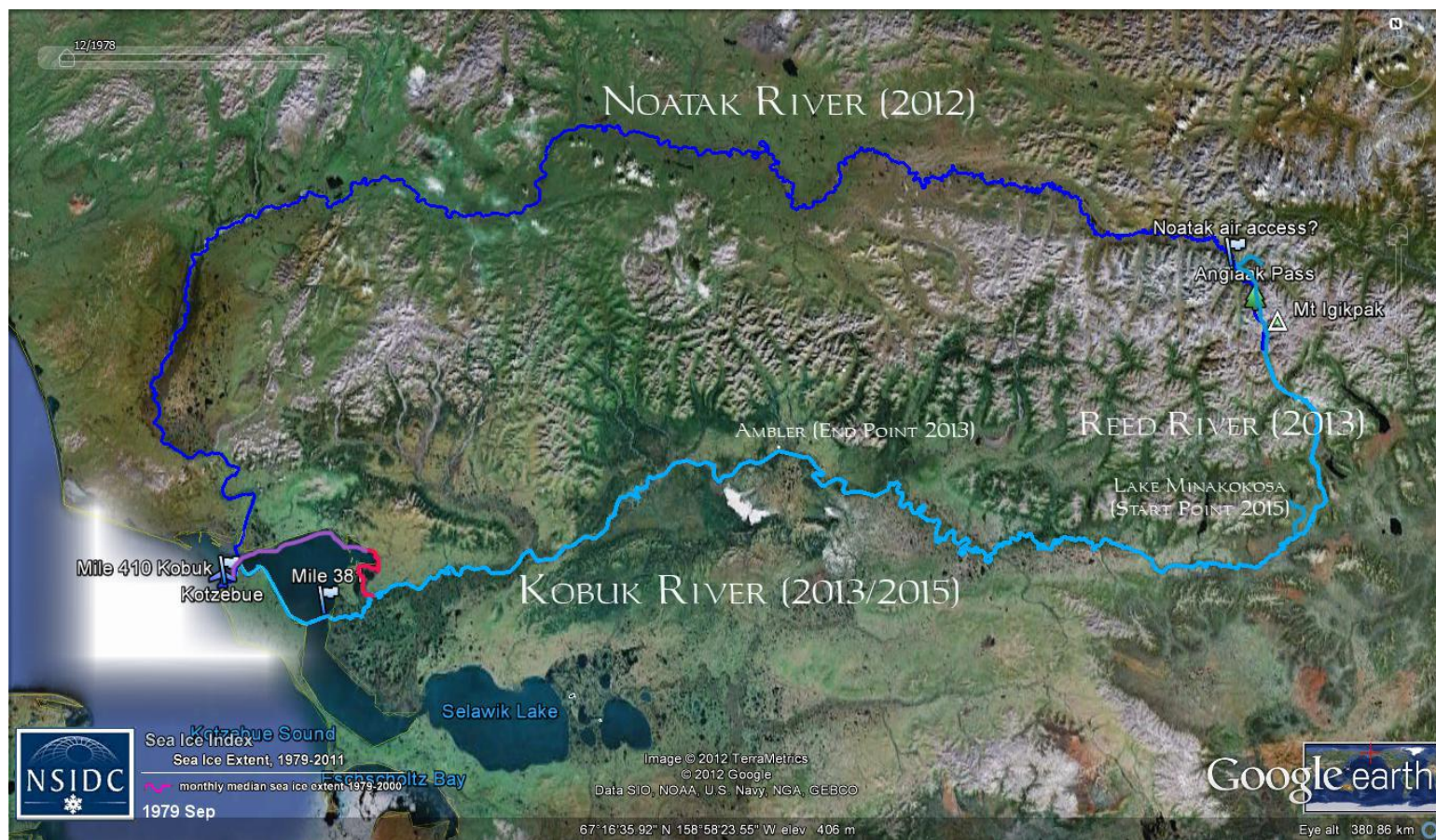
Great crew, great trip, great Kickstarter supporters, and mission accomplished. We did have a lot of lousy weather and some nasty insects. From a safety and 'getting down the river' perspective we are always prepared for those (and other) challenges, but they can affect the amount of artwork that can be done.

We reached the Chukchi Sea, and to the extent possible, consistent with reasonable safety, we completed the circumnavigation of the western Brooks Range via the Noatak, Reed, and Kobuk Rivers. In hindsight, we may have been able to stick to the original plan to paddle into Kotzebue since the morning of the 30th stayed calm (at least where we were) and we could in theory have made our four mile open water crossing with time to spare. Once on the east shore of the Peninsula, we would have been sheltered from the wind until rounding the point just east of Kotz' (then we would have just had to wait to make the short dash into town). However, that was in theory. Calm mornings were not in the forecast (and not Kotz' did not have them like we did) and undertaking a literal do-or-die four mile open water crossing on the faith the wind wouldn't come up in the 2 hours or so we would need, might not have survived a reasonable risk/benefit analysis.

We saw 22 or 23 Grizzlies with good photos of several; artwork to follow certainly. We only saw a couple Black Bears, one of which was shot in Ambler after we watched it very selectively and neatly pick a nice salmon off a fish drying rack: sad; a clever bear with style – but too clever. Two wolves close to camp with one or two sightings. We saw several moose; all cows or cows with calves including two swimming the river in front of us. Unlike the hundreds we saw on the Noatak starting 70 miles upstream from the coast, we only saw a few seals and none on the Kobuk itself until within a mile or so of the sea. However, also unlike on the Kobuk, there are Sheefish in the Kobuk. We saw no siks siks as we did (by the dozens) on the Noatak

Two Life Birds for me: Short-tailed Shearwater and Pelagic Cormorant along with numerous Sandhill Cranes, Red-throated and Common Loons, Red-breasted Mergansers, Tundra Swans, Bald Eagles, Merlins, Northern Harriers, Ospreys, Gulls (mostly Glaucous), Gray Jays, and Black-capped Chickadees (I was expecting Boreal).





KOBUK RIVER EXPEDITIONS 2013 AND 2015

DIVERSION FROM PLANNED 2015 ROUTE

POWERBOAT TRANSPORT DUE TO DANGEROUSLY HIGH WINDS