

# NORTHERN RIM OF THE BOREAL FOREST

## PART ONE: NOATAK RIVER, ALASKA

JULY 29 - SEPTEMBER 2, 2012

Noatak Sunrise - photo: Rob Mullen

### Overview

by Rob Mullen

This nearly 500 mile 5-week journey and next year's on the Kobuk River will incorporate Alaska into our story of the Boreal Forest with an artistic circumnavigation of the western Brooks Range by canoe. The two rivers flow parallel to each other on the north and south slopes of the Schwatka and Baird Mountains, encompassing the transition zone from the northern and westernmost extent of the Boreal Forest in North America to Arctic tundra. They both arise near Mt. Igikpak, highest peak in the Schwatka Mountains and Gates of the Arctic National Park and empty into the Chukchi Sea a short paddle away from Kotzebue, Alaska.

These conjoined expeditions (our first in Alaska) are the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> in a series of art expeditions extending back to 2001. Altogether they provide work, from artists grounded in experiential knowledge of wilderness, for a multi-disciplinary exhibition on the Boreal Forest; the largest terrestrial ecosystem on Earth and the world's greatest remaining wilderness. Specifically, these two expeditions will contribute a compelling American component to the Boreal Forest exhibit, showcasing its northern extreme in the "Last Frontier". The exhibit is being developed for the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and will fuse art, science and native perspectives of the Boreal set within a shared background of wilderness journeys; on foot, by snowshoe and especially by canoe.

For thousands of years, wilderness travel has been of necessity, central to the human experience of the ecosystem; and still is. Canoes and snowshoes have made it possible. They are both indigenous inventions inspired by two of the forces that shape the Boreal Forest; water and winter. The Boreal Forest contains most of the liquid fresh surface water on Earth and with its vast labyrinthine network of wetlands, streams, innumerable lakes and rivers, the canoe was to the Boreal Forest what the horse was to the Great Plains. For natives, artists, scientists or recreational adventurers, canoes are still one of the best means of travel and therefore, together with the waterways that help define the ecosystem, present a poignantly apt framework for this exhibition.

### Goals

1. Artwork for the NMNH exhibition based on:
  - a. Firsthand experience of the transition to Boreal Forest from Arctic tundra as we entered its northern limit canoeing downriver from the Noatak's headwaters
  - b. The entire "Source to Salt" story of this Arctic river; from the glaciers of Mt. Igikpak to its reincarnation in the Chukchi Sea: the landscape and wildlife of the changing environments as the river matured on its (and our) journey to the Ocean
2. Canoe the first half of the circumnavigation of the western Brooks Range, to be completed on the Kobuk
3. Recon of Angiaak Pass in preparation for crossing the Brooks Range to the Kobuk River in 2013
4. Become familiar with regional resources and potential community partners to facilitate the Kobuk River expedition next year, with its greater focus on indigenous residents



# Crews

**Mountain Recon Crew:** July 29 – August 7

(*Lucky Six Creek/Noatak River-Tupik Creek-*

*Angiaak Pass-Tupik Creek-12 Mile Slough/Noatak River)*

1. Bill Brody, AK/FL – Painter ([www.billbrodyartist.com](http://www.billbrodyartist.com))
2. Rob Mullen, VT – Painter ([www.robmullen.com](http://www.robmullen.com))
3. Dustin Van Wechel, AZ – Painter ([www.dustinvanwechel.com](http://www.dustinvanwechel.com))
4. Derek Wicks, ON – Painter ([www.derekwicks.com](http://www.derekwicks.com))

<http://youtu.be/c3lOrQ6RqRs>

Dustin, Derek & Bill on scree slope

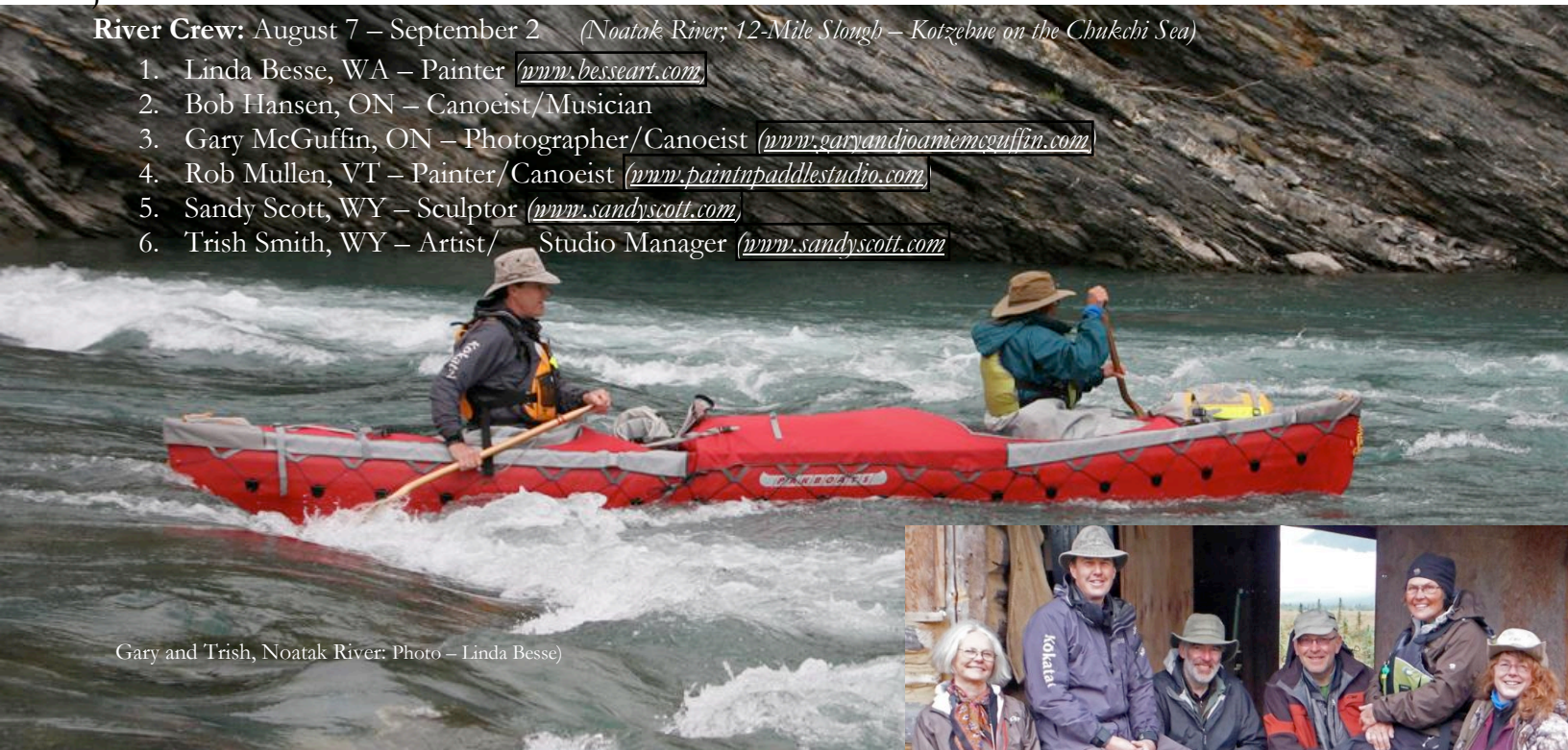


Photo top: Unnamed glacier on “Mons Innominatum” – Rob Mullen

Above: Panorama, Dustin, Rob & Derek “Above Tupik Creek” – Bill Brody

**River Crew:** August 7 – September 2 (*Noatak River; 12-Mile Slough – Kotzebue on the Chukchi Sea*)

1. Linda Besse, WA – Painter ([www.besseart.com](http://www.besseart.com))
2. Bob Hansen, ON – Canoeist/Musician
3. Gary McGuffin, ON – Photographer/Canoeist ([www.garyandjoanmccuffin.com](http://www.garyandjoanmccuffin.com))
4. Rob Mullen, VT – Painter/Canoeist ([www.paintnpaddlestudio.com](http://www.paintnpaddlestudio.com))
5. Sandy Scott, WY – Sculptor ([www.sandyscott.com](http://www.sandyscott.com))
6. Trish Smith, WY – Artist/ Studio Manager ([www.sandyscott.com](http://www.sandyscott.com))



Gary and Trish, Noatak River: Photo – Linda Besse)

Right: Sandy, Gary, Rob, Bob, Trish and Linda at Ricky Ashby’s cabin Aug 29, 2012  
Photo: Ricky Ashby (on Bob’s camera)





# The Expedition

Sunset on the Noatak; Mt. Memelak on right – Photo: Rob Mullen

## Mountain Section; Angiaak Pass Recon: July 29 – August 6, 2012

### July 29

The mountain recon crew assembled in Fairbanks July 28 and headed for Coldfoot, Alaska 250 miles north on the Prudhoe Bay haul road (the Dalton Hwy) early on the 29<sup>th</sup>. We were scheduled to fly into the headwaters of the Noatak River near Lucky 6 Creek on the 30<sup>th</sup>, but due to deteriorating weather, an hour after unloading we were aloft with Dirk Nickisch of Coyote Air in a DeHavilland Beaver. As we skimmed the dramatic mountain landscape, clouds built up, wreathing the peaks amid rain and rainbows.

It was raining as we reached the Noatak and the normally clear headwaters were high and muddy. The first of two gravel bars Dirk usually landed on was flooded, but the second had just enough room. It was an exciting landing; for a rear seat view of it, press Ctrl + click on the link below:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7x2WCTceWO8&feature=youtu.be>

Dirk suggested trying to cross the river immediately because it would continue rising. We hiked downriver for a couple of miles; however, the current was too deep, fast and cold to allow a safe crossing and we made camp at 10 pm. Shortly thereafter a Grizzly crossed the river upstream of us (I noted that he had to swim). Intercepting our course, he turned to follow it and approached camp until he saw the four of us. My long trusted camera took this opportunity to go into its death spiral. After staring a bit, the beautiful cinnamon bear turned back upstream.

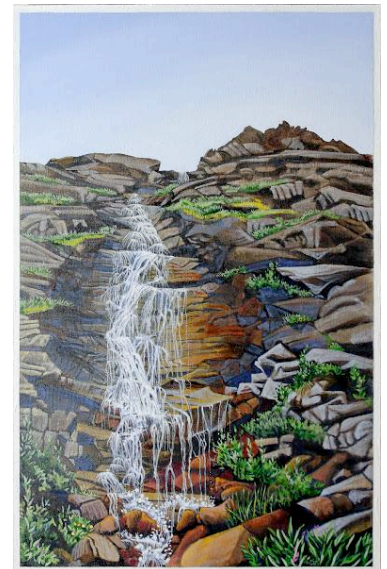
### July 30

The river was even higher in the morning and therefore remained unsafe to cross, so we spent the day on a painting/photography hike up to a waterfall above camp. We all agreed to each do our own interpretations of the scene. Bill's (the first completed) is pictured at far right. The river crested during the day and by evening was dropping so we scouted out a likely crossing point that evening. I used the sat-phone to call for a back up camera body to hopefully come in with the River Crew and cached gear that would not be needed until the river trip.



Bill sketching the waterfall

Photo: Dustin Van Wechel



“Noatak Waterfall” – Bill Brody



## July 31

We crossed the river at a braided section that split the river's volume into manageable portions. Even so, still unable to see the bottom and with a powerful icy current mounting to mid-thigh, we paid strict attention to all safety precautions for the crossing. We continued downstream and then started ascending the upstream side of Tupik Creek (east bank of the Creek; "River Right" relative to Tupik Creek). We made camp early at a scenic prominence with good views up the Tupik Creek valley and back out across the Noatak and Bill and I worked on some sketches.



Left above: unnamed peak we nicknamed "Mons Innominatum" at the base of Angiaak Pass



Right above: looking back out on the Noatak



Far left: Bill and Rob sketching  
Photos: Dustin Van Wechel



Left: one of the sketches – Rob Mullen



Bill's sketch of a waterfall above camp July 31



Rob's sketch of waterfall above camp July 31

on Bill's recollection of the ground from his last hike here in 1997. However, this route necessitated traversing several difficult boulder and scree fields and detouring high around the deep scar of one of the side creeks. The side creeks generally present a different problem; dense impenetrable thickets of willow and alder. To cross these without having to give up elevation by descending back to Tupik, it is necessary to find a game trail, most of which usually passed through the thickets with ease. In a long day of hiking, made possible by the nearly 24 hours of daylight, we made the head of the valley and climbed to the start of Angiaak Pass where we set camp under the hanging glacier on an unnamed peak that we dubbed "Mons Innominatum".

## August 1

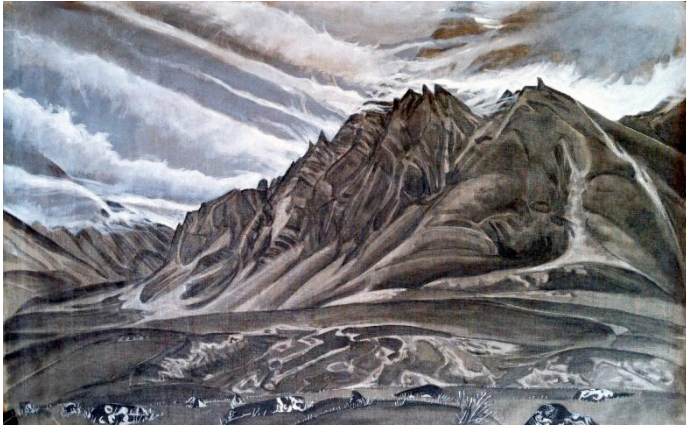
The tundra in this area is very deceptive. What often looks like an easy walk across a sheep pasture (Dall Sheep trails are everywhere, though we only saw the animals themselves on the higher slopes), is most often in fact an obstacle course of tussocks, brush and wetlands; footing is usually very difficult and progress with a full pack, slow. We crossed Tupik Creek and ascended on the west side ("River Left" relative to Tupik Creek), based



## August 2

The day dawned cold and wet. After breakfast Bill and I sketched from the cooking tarp. In the afternoon, once it became clear that it wasn't likely to improve, Dustin and I went out to recon the pass, hoping to descend the first few miles of the Reed River. We made it through the pass, but increasing rain and heavy fog made descending far down the other side pointless. Bill had kept working on his sketch.

**Right: view near Angiaak Pass camp:** from video – Rob Mullen (SLR kaput)



**“Angiaak Pass” – Bill Brody** (field study left; finished studio painting right) **Below; pencil field sketch from Angiaak Pass – Rob Mullen**

## August 3

Concerned about getting back across the Noatak, which we needed to for the rendezvous with the River Crew at 12-Mile Slough August 7, we had decided to head back down Tupik Creek early if the weather didn't clear off. Indeed it was raining hard in the morning, so we slept in again, hoping that the weather would lift a bit later on. The rain let up late in the morning and we set off shortly before noon. We descended straight down to Tupik Creek in order to cross and walk the east (“River Right”) shore on the way down in order to have a comparison of the two routes. Even Tupik Creek was too deep, cold and fast to cross initially, despite being very high in the watershed. However, a short distance downstream, the bed braided into several channels, which allowed us to cross and have lunch on the opposite bank.



The east bank was much easier traveling than the west and is a much better route for next year. The two main keys to walking were watching the vegetation to avoid wet areas (and dense brush) and as mentioned before, using game trails to negotiate the dense alder and willow that usually border the side creeks. We crossed the creeks high where the gullies were typically smaller. The only exception was the last and lowest in the valley (first ascending). This one paradoxically was a full blown canyon coming out of the mountain – impassable without technical climbing gear and had to be crossed very near to Tupik Creek. We reached our camp of July 31 at about 7pm and camped there again. I picked up my cached defunct SLR camera and deep-sixed it in my pack. The weather looked to be improving and the waterfall that Bill and I had sketched on the 31<sup>st</sup> was nearly dry, so we were hopeful of being able to cross the Noatak the next day.

Two notes: 1. Re the willows along the river; while generally impenetrable, with a sharp eye, imagination and flexibility, game trails will get you through them. 2. Walking upstream in low water should be easier due to the wide gravel bars. This would make the top of the Noatak feasible; possibly easier than Angiaak and certainly no harder.



## August 4

The weather held, but the Noatak had risen. It took several hours casting up and then downstream checking rapids and braided sections (during which time I spooked up a Lynx on a game trail next to the river) before we found a point to cross downstream of Tupik Creek where the river braided into three channels. Even so, it took a canoeist's river reading experience to plan a safe route. I still needed to return to our first camp several miles upstream to retrieve my cached gear for the river trip, so Bill and Derek made camp while Dustin and I headed out. On the way we encountered another Grizzly to whom we gave a wide birth. He paused to look at us occasionally, but mostly just kept foraging. Sadly, Dustin had committed the cardinal sin of forgetting his camera (mine was dead). Happily, the cache, which was obviously within the bear's jurisdiction, was intact. On our return the Grizzly was still there. We figured that he was probably the same bear that had approached our camp July 29. We skirted his position again and continued back to where Derek and Bill had finished setting the tents and the cooking tarp.

## August 5

The weather was cool with scattered sunshine as we set off for the 12-Mile Slough (about 9 miles downstream). Footing remained a major problem, but without having to climb all day (and everyone being in better shape after a week in the bush), we made good progress. We saw our first Musk Ox during a rest stop near lunch time; a lone bull who approached us fairly closely before veering off. It gave no indication of knowing we were there. In trying to find the best route around the eastern end of the 12-Mile Slough, Bill and I saw a wolf. It was alone and from the amount of sign in the area, it seemed likely that there was a den nearby. The howling and yipping the next four nights lent some supporting evidence to that suspicion and it was later confirmed when we met the Superintendent and Chief Ranger for the Park further down the river. We made camp on the shore of the Noatak and called Brooks Range Aviation to let them know we were in, just in case they needed to come in early as we had on the 29<sup>th</sup> (another reason, given the weather that we had wanted to get in by the 6<sup>th</sup>)



**The Midnight Sun from 12-Mile Slough Aug 6**

Photo – Dustin Van Wechel

## August 6

Spent an easy day in camp and worked out the portage to the Slough in preparation for the River Crew coming in the next day. Bill did a study of the midnight sun as the rest of us contented ourselves with photographs.

**Mountain Crew in Angiaak Pass**  
**L-R: Bill Brody, Dustin Van Wechel,**  
**Rob Mullen and Derek Wicks**







© Linda Besse

## River Section: 458.6 miles August 7 – September 2, 2012

Bob & Sandy on the Noatak River: Photo – Linda Besse

### August 7

The DeHavilland Otter landed on 12-Mile Slough at 2:30 pm. Sandy, Trish, Linda, Gary and Bob and over half a ton of gear came off, Dustin, Derek and Bill boarded and the river section was about to begin. From my perspective, that was it. However, from the rest of the River Crew's perspective, this was not only the beginning of a much anticipated adventure; it was also the culmination of days of hard work. While the river travel would be physically far easier than trekking about in the mountains, logistically it was an order of magnitude more difficult. The mountain crew had been four experienced backcountry outdoorsmen, traveling light for nine days (hence being able to be airborne an hour after arrival at Coyote Air). The river crew in contrast, was six people, three of whom were novices and would be traveling heavy for a month. Gary and Bob spent days sorting and editing the collection of gear in Bettles, securing bear barrels from the Park Service that were in good working order and figuring out how to arrange it all in the brand new 17' "Pak Canoes" - and fit under the deck covers.

**Left:** Gary and Bob weighing gear



**Right:** Loading the Otter in Bettles Photos – Linda Besse



I had called out on the sat-phone for a replacement camera body and in the shipping complications inherent in Alaska shipping in general and rush orders in particular, ended up with two. Certainly beat having none.



Sketch from near 12-Mile Slough August 7, with Mons Innominatum still visible on left Pencil – Rob Mullen

### August 8

The weather, in dramatic contrast to the cold and wet conditions of the mountain section, had turned warm and sunny. We spent much of it assembling canoes and sorting gear and had a safety review of the two weapons and bear spray with the crew. Again, after dinner, I went out and did a painting of the scene I had sketched the night before.

### August 9

We set off downstream under auspicious conditions. Not only did the weather continue to be ideal, but a sow Grizzly and her yearling cub accompanied us down the first couple of miles, apparently hunting Siksiks (Inuit name for the ground squirrels that were common about). It was a bit of a “Hudson Bay Start” in that we only went a few miles, camping on a long gravel bar with fantastic views of Mt. Igikpak. Igikpak is the highest peak in the Schwatka Mountains and in Gates of the Arctic National Park. When Dirk had flown the mountain crew in, he had mentioned that he had not seen Igikpak all summer. With the weather we had, hiking about its feet, we could believe it, but it was out in all its glory now. I took advantage of the late light and set up to work on a painting of the reclusive mountain, still with the now very familiar outline of “Mons Innominatum” visible in front and to the west of it.



Acrylic field painting kit and field study of Mt. Igikpak and Noatak River, August 9, 2012; photo and painting by Rob Mullen



## August 10

We took a shore day. Gary, Linda and I went on a hike on the far bank (River Left), climbing up and generally heading back upstream to try for a better view of Igikpak and the other peaks (i.e. Tupik Towers) for artwork and photography. I found a great view of Igikpak and the peaks at about 3,000 ft and as I set up to sketch I spotted a Grizzly foraging far below near the river. I kept an eye on him as I worked in case he decided to head up toward me to hunt Siksiks.

## August 11 – August 15

As everyone settled into the rhythm of river travel, we made good progress. The first 100 miles or more were through the mountains and the scenery was spectacular. The weather had gone back to cool, windy and cloudy with occasional light rain, but was fine for travel. With it staying light enough to work until midnight and the rain not often a major factor, I did as much painting as I could; cold and sleep being the primary limiting factors.



Above, top & right: acrylic field studies  
Aug 10, 11 and August 13 – Rob Mullen



Left: “Double Feast” Red Fox “15 x 24” Studio Oil – Linda Besse

The folding Pak Canoe 170’s performed brilliantly, even loaded with a month’s worth of supplies. We finished the mountains with a 10-mile+ section of R2 rapids (with a couple of R3 drops) that the canoes handled easily and that Bob exclaimed was one of the most enjoyable stretches of river he had ever paddled. It was the epitome of “Wild and

Scenic” with whitewater perfectly tuned to stress-free fun. The tents were all excellent as well. The Mountain Pass 3-person tents were light enough for backpacking through Angiak Pass yet withstood the high winds and rain, and still roomy (and durable) enough for a month long expedition on the river. The big Northern Breeze 12’ x 12’ was generally acclaimed one of the favorite pieces of gear on the trip, being a great communal space out of the weather where Bob would entertain us with music on his guitar some evenings. It suffered more from strong winds, but extra guy lines usually sufficed.

August 14 we left the mountains and made camp on a silt/gravel bar that was a short way out onto a wide plain; with the Schwatka Mountains looming behind and in front of us, open tundra stretching wide to the faint blue and purple of the Baird and De Long mountains far to the south and north. Ominously, while only intermittent rain was falling on us, we could see a deluge in the mountains we had just left; upstream of us. And I had seen earlier how fast the river could rise. On the 15<sup>th</sup> we slept in due to early rain and then took a shore day due to high wind; even moving our camp inshore to the shelter of the willows. However, as evening came on, the river showed no sign of rising.

“Siksik Still life” pencil tundra study – Rob Mullen





## August 16

By morning the river had risen dramatically, increasing in width by well over a hundred yards. Gary and Bob moved the canoes and we took an unscheduled shore day due to high wind. Linda spotted a Musk Ox bull on the far shore and we all got to photograph him. We later spotted our largest caribou grouping; about 25 cows, calves and bulls all together skirting to the north of camp and a Pacific Loon was in the bog pond behind camp. We eventually saw all four species of North American Loons on the trip; all but the Common Loon were “Life Birds” for me.

## August 17 – August 25

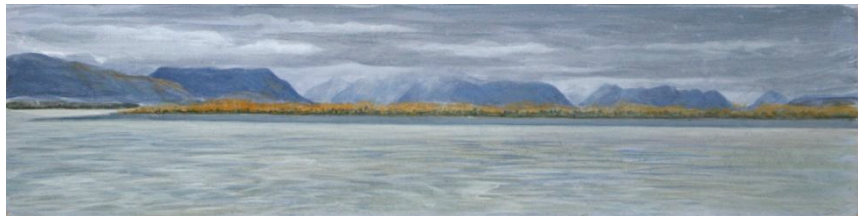
The next 200 miles traversed a wide expanse of mostly level tundra with the river winding and cutting through glacial till and alluvial deposits. We had been warned that it would be “boring; a hundred miles of clay banks”, but it had a subtle beauty that was as captivating in its way as the mountains. We saw more Musk Oxen, Grizzlies, Caribou and Wolves, everybody photographed and I painted. While so employed one evening on bluff above camp, I noticed a notch through which the river flowed miles in the distance (light colored V, right of center in the painting).

When we reached it the next day it turned out to be the breach in what looked to be a glacial moraine leading into a long deep gash. You could just imagine an ancient glacial melt lake backed up behind it until the water overflowed and cut this long channel thousands of years ago.



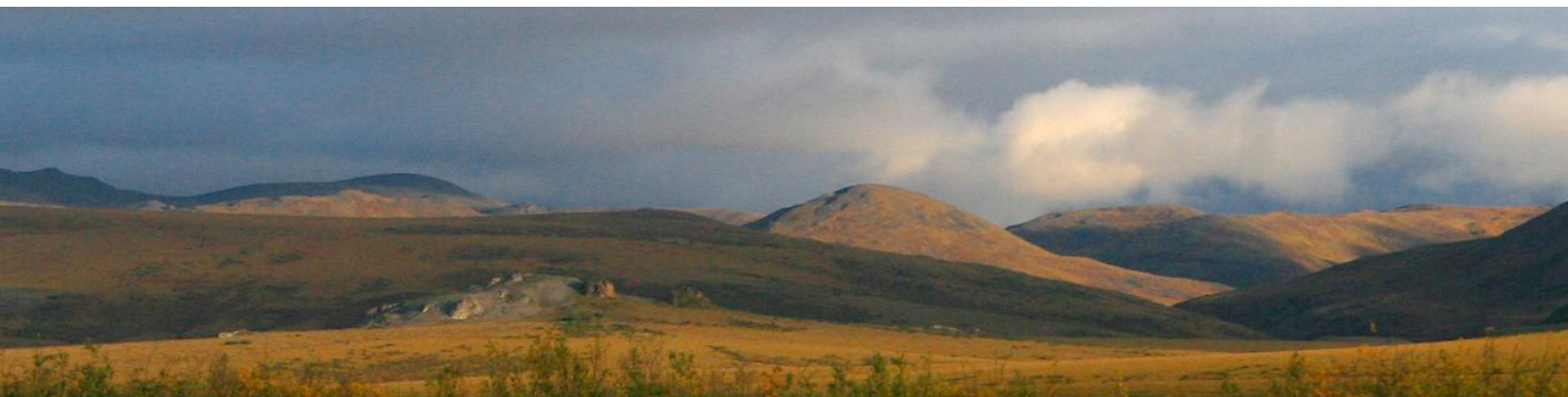
9"x 12" acrylic field study August 19 – Rob Mullen

That night we made camp on an island separated from the left bank by a narrow slough within sight of mountains to the west. The next day was my birthday and while tucked in out of the wind overlooking the river and working on a painting of the rain across the mountains that we were nearing to the west, I heard something weird. It was Linda in an oddly loud yet casual tone going on about being human and not good to eat. Turned out she had encountered a young Grizzly just outside of camp that came within 25 feet of her before turning and running away. A good lesson on the wisdom of carrying bear mace at all times.



Acrylic field study August 21 – Rob Mullen

Tundra hills Photo – Rob Mullen





The braiding in this section gave rise to Sandy half jokingly referring to a musical piece Bob was working on as the “Gravel Bar Blues”. Camped on just such a bar and taking a shore day on August 23, I found a comfortable place to

sit and work on two paintings; one of which suited the title particularly well.

9”x 12” acrylic field painting, “Gravel Bar Blues”  
August 23 – Rob Mullen



### August 25

With some excitement, I noted and photographed our first spruce trees; the very beginning of the Boreal Forest. Like the first Poplar or Aspen of a couple of days ago, once they appeared, they quickly became increasingly common. Less exciting was a small leak in my canoe. We had also entered back into the mountains and were approaching the “Grand Canyon of the Noatak” above which we wanted to camp and spend a shore day, so we planned to

stop early. We found a good beach within sight of the canyon mouth. It was only a short distance downstream of a sow Grizzly and two cubs, but at the water heights we had, campsites could be few and far between and not to be bypassed casually. Linda had a mild case of hypothermia that in hindsight had been starting to manifest itself at lunch. We got her settled and warmed and as the sun gave tantalizing hints of clearing skies, I found the small leak at the bow of my canoe and scouted a painting site for the next day from where I could see the start of the canyon and sit comfortably out of the wind.



One of the two yearling cubs watching the other canoes – hadn’t seen us yet.

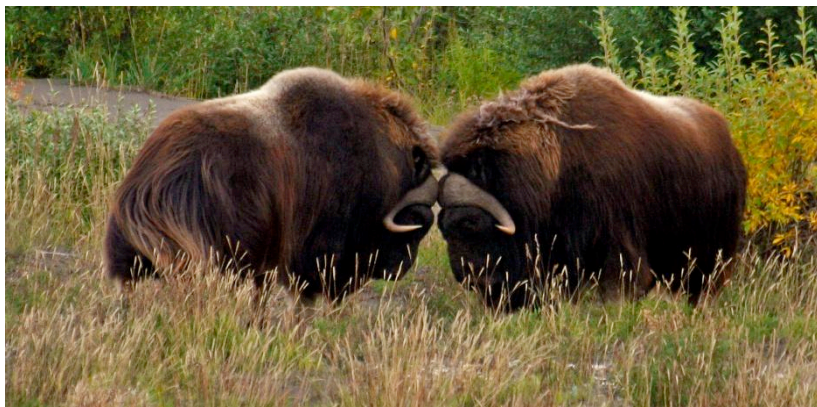
Photo – Rob Mullen

### August 26

The clouds had not moved out as hoped for, but at least it wasn’t raining. We spent a mostly laid back day with Gary and Bob using a new repair material Bob had to fix the nick in the canoe. After dinner, while all of the others were chatting in the big Northern Breeze tent, I opted to make lemonade out of lemons and do a pencil piece in the cold gray light from the site I had picked for my painting. While sketching, I kept hearing a strange “thunking” sound and finally went to investigate. To my surprise and pleasure, I found two Musk Oxen butting heads. I immediately made my way back to camp and fetched the crew and we all spent about a half hour photographing them before they bedded down within sight of camp.



Pencil sketch of the canyon mouth Aug 26 – Rob Mullen



Dueling Musk Oxen, August 26 - Photo: Rob Mullen





"Titans of the Tundra" 15"x 36" studio oil by Linda Besse

## August 27 – August 31

It was raining (again) in the morning. The canyon, while not comparing to its namesake in Arizona, was spectacular, especially from a canoe. Clearing it we were looking for a lunch stop when we spotted a white

bucket on the left shore. Near the bucket were incongruously beautifully constructed stone steps; intrigued, we put in. The steps led to the cabin of Inupiat elder Ricky Ashby (Qaagagliq or Kugalik). Ricky invited us in for coffee and then to camp in his front yard. We cooked him dinner and he told stories late into the night. The next day was steady with rain in the morning, so Ricky treated us to a sauna, a hike into the bush, fresh blueberries, a fresh salmon dinner and more stories. Ricky is a traditionally trained Inupiat leader with a great deal of lore that he wants to pass on. He lives in his cabin, 50 miles from Noatak, the only village on the river. There was no sign of a seaworthy boat and when I asked how he got to town when he needs anything, he matter-of-factly said he walks. We have images of his annotated USGS maps that Gary photographed and his contact information.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> we pushed on. The current carried us rapidly past the Ranger station at Kelly River (unoccupied at the time) and into the southward bend as the Noatak started its final run to the sea. Bob and Sandy spotted our first Osprey and I got some quick shots of a Grizzly Linda spotted (though like all of the rest we'd seen so far, it was very timid). This is an area of vast gravel bars and islands with the river intricately braided and up to a mile wide. However, the main current is easy to follow and by 6:00 pm we had covered 45 miles. We camped on a gravel bar about 10 miles from the village. A strong wind came up in the night and with periods of rain kept us pinned down the next day. We moved the Northern Breeze tent into the willows for shelter, but left the Mountain Pass tents on the bar. Sandy and I did some artwork in our tents and Linda spotted another Grizzly across the channel from us.

### Rainy Day bird studies off camera LCD in tent – Rob Mullen

August 31 - We arrived in Noatak at about Noon the next day and had lunch at the general store. Everyone was very friendly and seemed to know who we were and they all knew Ricky (many professed to be his cousin). Continuing on, the cut-banks below town exposed enormous blocks of permafrost and we were seeing many curious Harbor Seals in the river. 20 miles

further on, we were about to turn straight into a strong ENE wind and could see enormous waves breaking and forming against the outside of the coming bend. It looked like a major rapid, though we had not heard or read of any such being here. On river left, there was a small sandy gravel bar/island with only the shore vegetation providing any shelter from the wind. We went to shore and looked for a campsite within the vegetation. There was none, but now, chilled with the stop I was not anxious to contend with the mysterious maelstrom downstream. It was therefore welcome news when Bob came back from looking the island over and said he thought it was feasible. It took a major engineering feat to prepare our beloved communal tent for the contest of "Northern Breeze v Arctic Wind". I slept in the big tent that night to make sure that if it blew down, someone would know immediately.





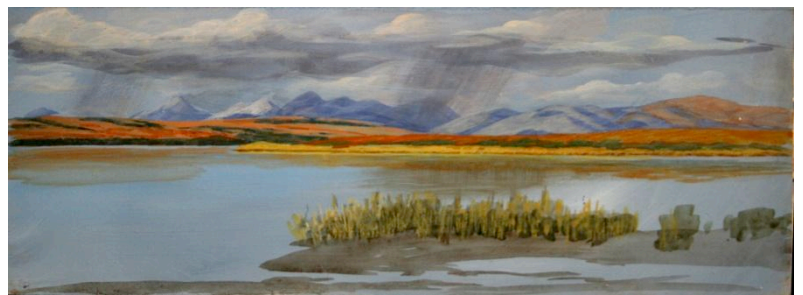
## September 1

Instead of the accustomed gentle patter of rain as a wakeup call, September started off with the unmistakable snort of a Grizzly --- not far from my left ear. No Grizzly had ever snorted in my ear before and yet I just knew it was a Grizzly -- I suspect that there is something deep in human DNA with information stored on the subject. I also heard it start to run and amazingly, for a brain only 3/10s of a second out of sound sleep, I also could tell it wasn't coming toward me. Since there was also no one screaming, I did what any self-respecting wilderness adventurer does when afield with a mixed gender crew; I put on my pants. Nonetheless, I was out of the tent with the rifle in a few seconds, though too late to see the bear that had just plunged into the brush across the narrow channel between us and shore (the reflexive choice of rifle over camera might have been the influence of DNA as well). I saw Sandy kneeling by her tent with her shotgun. She had been awakened by the bear when it first came on the island and had watched it walk within a few paces of Linda's tent and then out to the end of the island. It had then turned and come back. As it passed by me, apparently something about the Northern Breeze (or something "on the breeze"; it could have been my fresh clean scent from Ricky's sauna) alarmed it and it snorted and started to run (waking me up). It had raced within 25 feet of Gary and Bob's tent, hit the water and disappeared into the brush. A Grizzly appeared on the far shore of the river later in the morning while Gary was calling in to the newspaper. Sandy couldn't tell if it was the same bear.

The waves we had seen the evening before turned out not to be a rapid at all, but just a result of the strong wind pushing against the current on the outside of the bend. There was no sign of them as we got underway; a possible explanation for an account I'd read from the initial Department of Interior survey of the Noatak in the '70's that reported giant standing waves. The river cuts through a range of hills at the coast creating Lower Noatak Canyon, which was quite dramatic and then we were out on the delta. All semblance of current was gone and the gravel bars and islands were now heavily covered in alder. There were no campsites. It was actually quite late and just about 30 miles later when Gary spotted a sliver of sand on one island and it happily grew into a very nice campsite. The light was quite dramatic and I tried for a fast painting (very difficult when having to wait for acrylic washes to dry in the cool air).

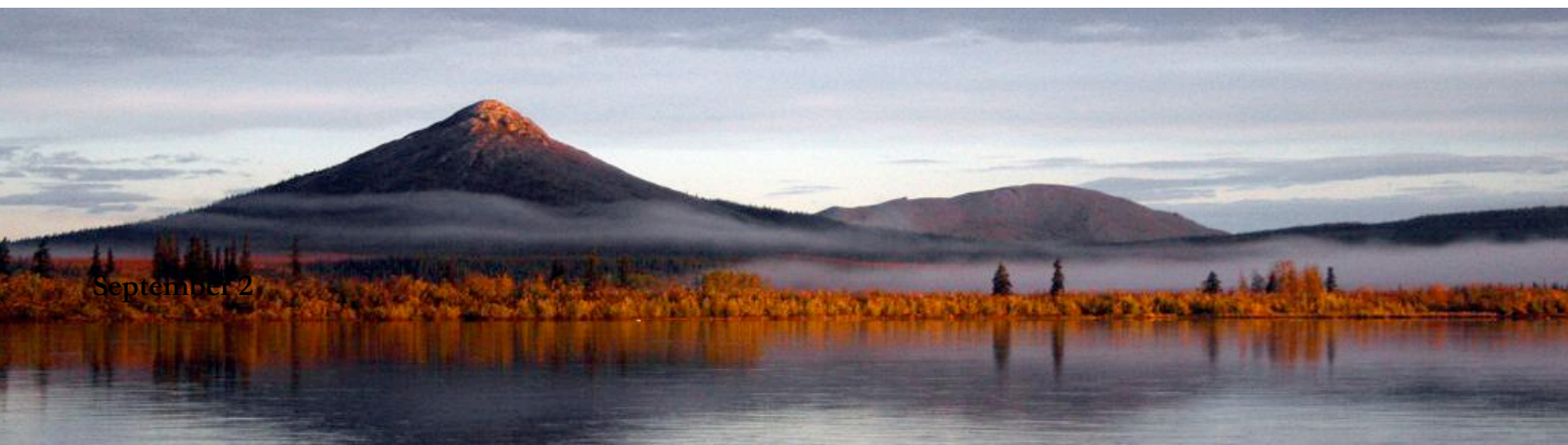


Rob painting – Photo, Linda Besse



Last Camp, 4" x 12" acrylic field study September 1, 2012 – Rob Mullen

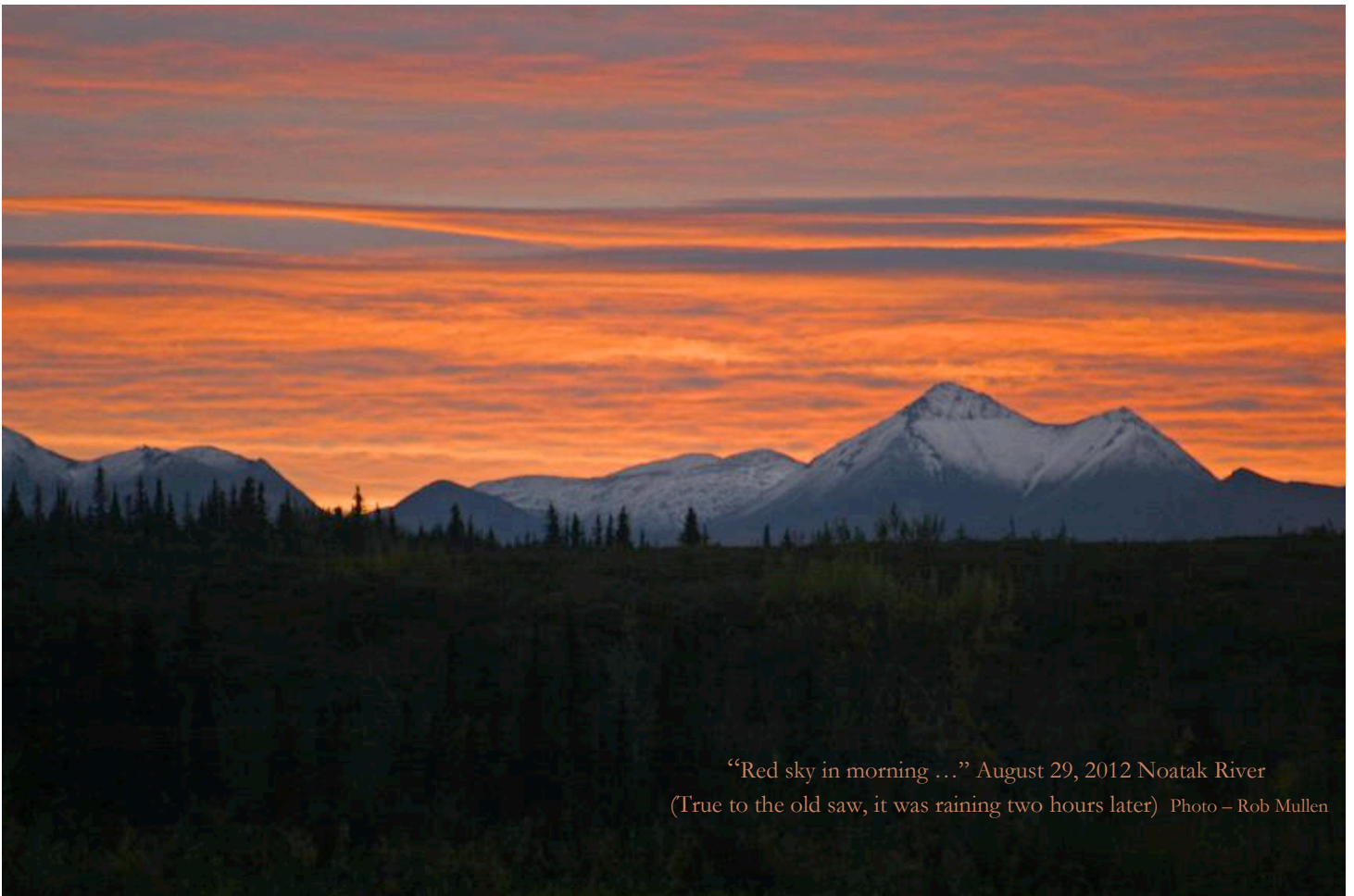
Mt. Memelak Dawn September 2, 2012 – Photo, Rob Mullen



## September 2



Since August 29, above Noatak, we had been able to receive reports on Gary's weather radio. In consideration of the amount of rain and high wind we had encountered, when we heard the favorable forecast for the first few days of September, we opted to push ahead faster than we had originally intended, so that we would have the greatest chance to cross the open water to Kotzebue; no one wanted to finish the first half of the circumnavigation with an asterisk by calling for a pick-up within sight of our goal. We stopped for one last shore lunch (with the omnipresent Grizzly tracks on the beach), rounded the point and struck off across the straight. I had first read of the Noatak in a National Geographic book in the '70's "Still Waters, White Waters". As we had neared the coast, thinking back on that book I recalled a photo in which the author is pictured walking in shallow water pulling a canoe. In my mind's eye, I could read fragments of the caption and in it the names "Chukchi Sea" and "Kotzebue". Sure enough, as we cleared the last shred of land and headed into open water, occasionally the paddles would hit bottom. Then more often until the water was only a foot deep half way across. There is very little tidal action here, but it wouldn't have taken much for us to have been walking. The weather was beautiful and the waves minor, but with major rain storms visible all about we were happy to be getting in. Gary called Jean Bibber on the sat phone, whose B&B we were booked to stay in for September 4 and 5 (and me the 6<sup>th</sup>). She said she could take us in early and so an hour later we ground to shore at the foot of Lagoon St. Kotzebue, Alaska.



"Red sky in morning ..." August 29, 2012 Noatak River  
(True to the old saw, it was raining two hours later) Photo – Rob Mullen





# Summary

Mt. Memelak Sunset – photo Rob Mullen

The expedition succeeded in all its goals despite what turned out to be the wettest and coolest summer and August on record for Alaska. Considering that the entire expedition was above the Arctic Circle that speaks well to the skills and judgment of the crew, the thoroughness of our preparation and the quality of our equipment.

Watching the story of the river unfold mile by mile inspired and will continue to inspire. It is a dynamic and exciting story that shows many of the forces that shape our world and help life flourish. And for thousands of years, this river's story has happened to occur right in the middle of another story. The Noatak is ancient; older by necessity than the mountains through which it has cut canyons and unimaginably older than the ecosystems through which it now flows. However, as the brawling glacial brooks collect into a blue river and then grow and finally spread into the immense quiet flood that flows out onto the sea, their age-old story of passage is by accident of climate and geography now set amidst and an integral part of another. For as we traveled with the river toward the sea and away from summer, we also witnessed the Arctic Tundra give way to Boreal Forest. And in the entire wide wilderness about us, it happened first on the river. That is why we were here.

We gained valuable information on crossing the mountains for next year. A wealth of information can be gleaned from topographic maps, but nothing beats walking the country and we now know two viable routes, one on each side of Mt. Igikpak.

And we are half way to completing the circumnavigation of the western Brooks Range. These expeditions will bring a compelling American component into the Boreal Forest exhibition, incorporating wildlife, culture, history and adventure in America's fabled Last Frontier, all the while exploring the region that gives birth to the Boreal Forest in North America at its western and northernmost extreme.

In Kotzebue I met with Parks staff and Fish and Wildlife personnel regarding community partners and advice on wildlife opportunities for next year's trip on the Kobuk. On my way home from Kotzebue, I met with Dr. Aron Crowell of the Arctic Studies Center in Anchorage to get acquainted and touch base on the exhibit. We also discussed more possibilities for community partners to coordinate Nancy Howe's work in the Inupiat villages next year and the potential for using Ricky Ashby's knowledge and lore in the exhibit. Preparations, funding and crew selection are already in high gear for the Kobuk River Expedition, July – September 2013.



# Acknowledgments

**Johnson-Outdoors** and **Eureka** provided tents packs and gear. Ashore, the tents were as important as the canoes were afloat. Their blend of features reliably provided safety and comfort under harsh conditions. Lightweight and strong, they stood up to the rigors of over a month above the Arctic Circle. The packs kept gear safe, dry and organized and easily portable.

[www.johnsonoutdoors.com](http://www.johnsonoutdoors.com) Photo – Linda Besse



**Alv Elvestad** and everyone at **Pakboat** supplied these superb **Pak Canoe 170s**. They saved thousands of dollars in transport and their flexibility makes them great in waves; I actually preferred them to hard hulled canoes for the R2's we ran.

[www.pakboats.com](http://www.pakboats.com)



**Gordon and Lili Colby** at **MTI** provided the entire river crew with PFD's. Gordon Colby supported the first of these art expeditions on the Missinaibi River in 2001 when he was at Mad River Canoe in Vermont

**Grey Owl Paddles** supplied the river crew with 20 oz. bent-shaft paddles <http://www.greyowlpaddles.com>

**Joe's Sports and Surplus**, Sault Ste Marie, ON <http://joesportsandsurplus.com>: sponsored the airtime for the satellite phone interviews Gary McGuffin conducted with the SooToday written by Carol Martin

<http://www.sootoday.com/content/news/details.asp?c=45645>

**Quattrra SCS**, Sault Ste Marie, ON <http://www.quattrascscs.com>: provided a loaner satellite phone for the river expedition, which was necessary for the newspaper interviews but also an important safety back up

And a thank you for excellent service to:

- Coyote Air Service - Coldfoot, AK; Dirk Nickisch and Danielle Tirrell [www.flycoyote.com](http://www.flycoyote.com)
- Brooks Range Aviation – Bettles, AK; Judy and Jay Jespersen [www.brooksrange.com](http://www.brooksrange.com)
- Bibber's B&B – Kotzebue, AK; Jean Bibber

<http://www.merchantcircle.com/business/Bibbers.B.And.B.907-442-2693>