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## Travelogues

Travels Along the Edge...The Northern Edge  
by **Josh Steinitz**, submitted on August 03, 2004

**Places:**  
**Activities:** Backpacking

A solitary silhouette stood out on the ridgeline. Then another. And another. Soon a never-ending procession of caribou began to stream across the hillside, like a train of ants marching inexorably toward some unknown destination, one after the other. We were mesmerized by the spectacle as we sat on a gravel bar next to Baseline Creek: one minute we were enjoying our after-dinner tea under the Arctic midnight sun, and the next we were staring at one of the animal world's grandest spectacles as thousands of caribou from the 123,000-strong Porcupine herd trampled toward us. To say that we felt truly privileged to be witness to this display was an understatement. The "Serengeti of the North" was living up to its reputation.

My friend Francois and I were on a weeklong backpacking trip along the Baseline Creek drainage in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), in the far northeastern corner of Alaska. The trip was run by an experienced outfitter and guiding company out of Fairbanks called Arctic Wild. However, as an "exploratory trip", the route was a new one for the company and had only been scouted by plane and by raft from the Kongakut River, the main river draining the eastern edge of the Refuge, running fast and cold from its source in the Brooks Range all the way down to the Beaufort Sea.




The topo maps seemed to indicate a good hiking route—but topo maps only show elevation profiles, not vegetation and ground cover, and as we were to learn shortly, the degree of difficulty of walking in the Arctic often has very little to do with elevation gain or loss. There are no established trails in the Refuge, unless you count those made by caribou or Dall sheep.

Because there are no roads anywhere near the Kongakut (the only road through to the Arctic Ocean is the Haul Road to Prudhoe Bay), we flew by plane, first on a Caravan turboprop to Artic Village, a small native community on the southern edge of the Brooks Range, and then on a Cessna 185 with ace pilot Kirk Sweetsir, landing on a tiny gravel bar along the Kongakut after an amazing flight through the Brooks Range with the wings of our small plane seeming to graze the slopes of the higher peaks. As we banked around late afternoon thunderheads and headed down, we strained our eyes to find anything that looked like a landing strip but could find none. Yet somehow the little plane with its specially-equipped tundra tires bounced down to a smooth landing on a strip no longer than many driveways.

Our guide Dori McDannold and several other clients were already there and had set up camp (meaning their tents were set up and a kitchen site had been established far enough away to keep bears at a distance from the tents---so we hoped). Dori encouraged us to ditch our watches and to lose ourselves in the timelessness of the short Arctic summer when the sun never sets and no such thing as a schedule exists. As we came to understand over the course of the week, it's amazing how wedded some people can become to the set schedules of fast-paced lives in the lower 48: some of us proved more able to adapt to the flexible lifestyle of summer at 70 degrees north than others...

Since we only had to cover roughly 30 miles in six days of hiking, there was ample time for relaxing, enjoying the light of the extended Arctic evening, and going on a "night" hike for several

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hours after dinner, climbing a nearby ridge or following a creek up a small drainage. These night hikes were a highlight of the trip, as we clambered up to wind-whipped fifty-mile views freed from the weight of our packs, the hounding of the mosquitoes, and soggy ground. On one such occasion we climbed a small hill above camp and were rewarded with a stunning view of the Arctic Ocean ice pack in Demarcation Bay, over some hills and across the coastal plain beyond the confluence of Baseline Creek and the Kongakut River.

Our packs were heavy (we ate very well, as Dori proved to be a good camp cook and we carried PLENTY of food) and it was surprisingly warm on most days, so we took frequent breaks for rest and water. On some days haze from the fires burning in the taiga forests to the south seemed to drift north into the mountains, while on others the sun burned strong through a cloudless blue sky. On the first and second days we walked up and over low saddles between the mountains to reach the Baseline drainage, and afterwards we followed the ice-cold waters of the creek down to its confluence with the Kongakut. Some days would be "wet boot days" when we would wade in and across the creek's numerous braids while walking on the gravel bar (I soon found it was hopeless to try to keep the water from flowing over my Gore-Tex boots), while on others we would attempt to stick to tundra benches paralleling the creek.

All ground in the Arctic is definitely not created equal, and experienced Arctic hands like Dori know how to discern whether a particular shade of green indicates easy walking or painfully slow going. The permafrost (permanently frozen soil) below the shallow defrosted organic soil layer ensures that even in a cold desert like the Arctic the surface is often very wet, since the meltwater has nowhere to go. We kept our eyes out for browner and duller shades, which meant dry ground, versus the wet, boggy ground indicated by the bright green horsetails or cotton grass (a favorite food for the caribou that adds essential nutrients to the mother's milk), or worst of all, the white speckled stalks that indicated tussocks. While we dealt with our share of these humps of tundra vegetation that defy all attempts at balance and would frustrate even the most limber of ankles, Dori informed us that in many places in the ANWR they are far, far worse---too large to step on top of, too close together to step between, and too rolling to hold anyone's weight. Add in a few days with no wind and no DEET to deter the hordes of mosquitoes and it's easy to see how someone could go a bit crazy up there.

In addition to the evening hikes, other highlights included a grizzly walking through our camp (luckily some heads-up shouting by the others prevented the bear from investigating our tent personally while we were inside) and the incredible spectacle of thousands of caribou coming over a ridge and onto a hillside near us to graze. We also spotted some Dall sheep ewes with their young on a ridgeline, and saw another grizzly foraging across the valley. Moose, wolves, fox, ground squirrels, voles, lemmings, and other mammal species are relatively common in the Refuge, and though we did not see them, we saw evidence of their presence in their tracks and scat. The knowledge of the fragility of life at this latitude and the shortness of the season put a finer point on everything---it heightened my senses, it made me appreciate the tiniest tundra flower or butterfly a little more, and filled me with a kind of energized fascination that we were basically alone in a gigantic wilderness. Of course there were other groups of people in the Refuge during our time there (after all, it's 19 million acres), but we didn't see another soul until the day we left. Knowing how severe the climate is there for 10 months of the year made me appreciate the warming sun just a little bit more, and I felt privileged that this wild place had allowed us to walk in its midst for a short time. As someone not usually given to spiritual musings, I can attest that the Arctic can bring out the contemplative side in even the most hardened skeptic.

These revelations, if you want to call them that, only further cemented my conviction that the Refuge should not, must not, be defiled in any way. And that of course includes drilling for oil in the infamous 1002 Area, the section of the Refuge that's been in legal limbo since the 1980 law delineating many of the protected areas in Alaska, the Alaska National Interest Claims Settlement Act. While a huge tract of the northern coastal plain has been set aside for petroleum exploration and production, and another section has been set aside for wildlife protection, the status of this particular section of ANWR was left to the direction of Congress. And it just so happens that this section of the Refuge is on the coastal plain where the 240,000-strong Porcupine caribou herd calves in the spring and early summer. If you've ever seen aerial photos of Prudhoe Bay, the main North Slope oil processing center, you know that any industry claims of "minimum impact" are outright misrepresentation. Unfortunately, with control of Congress and the White House in the hands of oil industry-friendly politicians, common sense is in danger of losing out to corporate greed, with President Bush and his corporate cronies doing everything they can to expedite the development of this pristine landscape. Never mind the fact that the 1002 Area only holds about a 6 month-supply of oil based on current American consumption, and that even if development started today the oil would not reach the market for 7-10 years. The Republicans still tout the idea that opening up the Refuge will promote American energy independence, when the reality is that

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only concrete steps to reduce our dependence on oil in the first place (such as higher auto fuel economy standards and the increased use of renewable energy technologies) hold this promise. Somehow it makes more sense to these people to spend billions defending our oil supplies around the globe and billions more cleaning up the pollution costs of an oil-based economy than to seek rational alternatives to despoiling one of America's great natural treasures. If the Refuge is opened up to drilling, the oil will be gone relatively soon, but the destruction will last several lifetimes. The Arctic isn't the Amazon---plants only have a few months to grow, and animals only have a few months to stock up for the winter. Scars on the landscape don't easily heal and the ecosystem survives in a precarious balance.

Even though we barely scratched the surface of what the Arctic has to offer during our weeklong adventure, we were afforded a peek into its unique rhythms and special charms---raw, untouched, take-your-breath-away beauty and small, subtle beauty that filters into your senses after you let yourself be truly absorbed into the environment, becoming just another living being moving slowly through the mountains and across the tundra. You feel connected to the most basic forces on the planet: the changes of the seasons, the interplay between day and night, the eternal battle of predator and prey, and to water, earth, and sky. All wilderness teaches us humility; the Arctic teaches that and so much more.

### Additional Notes

Fairbanks is the gateway to the Arctic, whether you're headed to ANWR, Gates of the Arctic National Park, or other points north. As the second-largest city in Alaska, it's got all the essential services you would expect and need in preparation for a wilderness adventure.

Arctic Wild is the experienced outfitter and guiding service that ran our trip. Owned by the amiable David van den Berg and his wife Jennifer, Arctic Wild specializes in rafting and backpacking trips to the far north. Examples of their guided trips include rafting the Kongakut River in ANWR, backpacking in the Arrigetch Peaks region of Gates of the Arctic National Park, and rafting the Hulahula River in ANWR. The Baseline Creek backpacking trip costs \$2,250 for 8 days (6 days hiking) and includes airfare from Fairbanks, food, and a guide, plus helpful assistance with gear or logistics. More information on trip schedules, costs and other details can be found on their website at [www.arcticwild.com](http://www.arcticwild.com) or by calling 888-577-8203.

Consider staying a day or two in Fairbanks before or after your trip, taking advantage of the city's colorful history and central location. It's the northernmost community of any real size in North America (82,000 people in the city and surrounding borough) and offers kitschy delights (or places to be avoided, depending on your personality) like the northernmost Denny's in the world. I recommend a short trip out of town to see the Trans-Alaska Pipeline up close---wherever you come down in the oil debate, it's a technological marvel. If you're in town during the summer solstice, spend the evening hanging out in downtown Fairbanks at the city street fair, complete with live music, food, arts and crafts and all sorts of local characters. Denali National Park and the country's highest peak are also only a two-hour drive away.

In Fairbanks, The Pump House ([www.pumphouse.com](http://www.pumphouse.com), 907-479-8452) is a decent restaurant with a scenic location on the banks of the Chena River where you can dine under the long evening sun and enjoy some local brews while watching the paddlewheeler (secretly powered by some large motors) ply the waters. Captain Bartlett's is a bar/restaurant next to the movie theatres with an ambience evocative of a northern rough and tumble joint with a modern sports bar twist. The Bear Lodge ([www.fountainheadhotels.com/bear/bear.htm](http://www.fountainheadhotels.com/bear/bear.htm), 800-528-4916) offers modern and spacious accommodations close to downtown, while those seeking solitude from the hordes of cruise ship passengers on bus tours should head just out of town along Chena Ridge Road to the brand-new Grand View Bed & Breakfast ([www.grandview-bb.com](http://www.grandview-bb.com), 907-479-3388), a comfortable B&B on a hill overlooking the valley with 100-mile plus views to the Alaska Range on a clear day. Owners Dave Thompson and his wife Clodagh used local timber in the inn's construction and designed it to accommodate up to ten guests. Ask Dave about his time spent drilling ice cores in Antarctica. The Fairbanks Convention and Visitors' Bureau ([www.explorefairbanks.com](http://www.explorefairbanks.com) 800-327-5774) is also an excellent source of information about local attractions, festivals, lodging and dining.

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