

KILLIK CANOE



DATES

Custom Dates Available

REGION

Gates of the Arctic

TRIP COST

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On the northern edge of Gates of the Arctic National Park flows the clear and fascinating Killik River. Its glacial valley is broad between towering peaks and there is something to discover around every corner.

TRIP DETAILS

If you have never heard of the Killik River in Gates of the Arctic, you are not alone. This portion of the Brooks Range is impressively remote and little traveled, but the Killik is important in the human history of arctic Alaska and a wonderful place to paddle.

The Killik flows gently in a broad glacial valley between towering sedimentary peaks. The valley is dotted with lakes, rich with fish and waterfowl. The willow flats along the shore are home to ptarmigan, lynx and hare. And the hills are etched by millenia of caribou migrations, deep furrows pounded into the tundra by thousands of hooves each fall.

The abundance of the Killik allowed Nunamiut families to flourish in their arctic home, and this valley that we now think of as wilderness was (and is) home. Over the generations, Nunamiut hunters built miles and miles of stone fences to direct the caribou toward ambushes where they were hunted with spears, (and later guns) often from kayaks. To stand on a low ridge among miles of caribou fences is to step back in time, to see and almost feel the ancient Nunamiut hunters employing knowledge and ingenuity to harvest caribou from this arctic landscape. We won't disturb anything, but will delight in what we do find.

Our trip starts in the headwaters of the Killik and savors the most scenic and mountainous portion of the river. Our goal is not to speed through the country, but rather to poke around and explore the river and mountains of the central Brooks Range, relishing in the natural and human history of this incredibly remote valley.

August at 68° north is autumn and the landscape will transform during our trip. The verdant green tundra that greets us on the first days of the trip will burst with gold and crimson while the peaks above the river get the first dusting of snow. With each day almost 10 minutes shorter than the last, the all-night twilight will give way to the first stars of the upcoming winter and we'll have a chance to see the Aurora is conditions are right.

Fall brings the ripening of berries. Blueberries, cloudberry, cranberries, nagoon and crow, all will be ripening and will likely add color and joy to our meals. Animals are also at their prime in August. If berries are abundant, bears will spend up to 16 hours each day stripping them from the berry bushes. Caribou are growing fat under luxurious dark coats and heavy antlers, feeding on the last greenery and ambling south towards breeding and wintering grounds. With skeins of waterfowl winging south and the hush of winter not far away, it is a fine time to be in the Brooks Range.

The upper valley offers excellent hiking up the endless ridges for vistas in every direction. Less strenuous hikes will take us to lakes which tend to focus wildlife and host historical sites. And no trip down the Killik would be complete without a visit to the location where the book Arctic Wild was written. In addition to longer forays on our layover days there is lots of good exploring to be done closer to camp after a day on the water or on a longer lunch break on a traveling day. There are sand dunes, flowery meadows, "forests" of willow, perfect sediments for animal tracking, and lots of lakes from potholes filled with green-winged teal to the larger lakes like Tulilik (Loon), Kaniksarak (Snowy), and Udravik dotted with scap and loons.

For the most part the Killik stays to a single channel and meanders through a broad sandy valley and the paddling is a relaxed affair leaving us time to scan the banks and mountain-sides for wildlife. But particularly in the headwaters where the river is shallow we will have to get in and out of the boat and may have to work to nudge it over sandbars. The Killik can also be a windy place and if the wind is from the north we may have to paddle against it to reach our destination.

There is no whitewater on this route but canoe experience is required.

Itinerary

What follows is a general flow of events. Expect the unexpected and prepare to be flexible.

Day 0

Meet your guide for a pre-trip meeting in Fairbanks at 4pm at Arctic Wild headquarters.

Day 1

It's a long day. We fly north from Fairbanks over the Yukon River and Arctic Circle to the arctic village of Bettles. From Bettles we charter a plane into the Gates of the Arctic National Park. We'll land near the river with mountains all around. Welcome to Gates of the Arctic! Once the plane leaves and we are alone with only the sounds of wind and water we can pitch camp and explore on foot.

Day 2

We've started as high on the river as we dare, wanting to take advantage of the mountains for hiking but also wanting there to be enough water for us to paddle down the river.

Our first day on the river will likely be a start and stop proposition and the sound of canoes rubbing on gravel will become familiar. Once we pass April Creek the river gains some depth and the traveling get easier.

We will choose our camping spots carefully to maximize opportunities for hiking, wildlife, and vistas. In the Killik this often means camping near to the bigger lakes which tend to harbor wildlife and historical sites.

Day 3 - 4

The largest tributary in the upper valley is Easter Creek, where we will spend some time exploring the broad valley.

Of special interest (at least to us) is the "cracker-box" a small cabin and former home of Lois Crisler, who spent a winter there raising wolf pups. That adventure is the focus of Crisler's book [Arctic Wild](#).

We can also hike over to Tulilik (Yellow-billed Loon in Inupiat) Lake. Which was a popular hunting area for Nunamiut families in the past.

Day 5 - 6

Unlike many Brooks Range rivers, the glacial origins of the Killik valley are obvious. Below Easter Creek the mountains grow steeper and the valley more U-shaped. The valley floor is pocked with dunes of glacial loess and shallow ponds scraped out by moving ice.

The unique and varied habitats are home to wildlife and the soft sediments provide excellent opportunities to track them.

Day 7

We paddle and hike in turn. Having taken our time in the upper valley where the hiking was best, we will have a few longer days of canoeing towards the end of our trip. But even if we cover a dozen miles in a day there will be time (and plenty of daylight) to explore after camp is pitched.

When we reach the northern edge of the Brooks Range where the final limestone ridges float like ships on a sea of tundra flats to the north, we will take a final hike for views of the coastal plain.

Once north of the mountains, and Gates of the Arctic Park, we have a final day of paddling in the foothills to our pick-up lake.

Day 8

North of the mountains, our pick-up lake will have a new suite of bird-life. Once we pack-up and are ready for the plane's arrival we can enjoy the last moments of quiet in the wilderness, and watch for wildlife.

Weather permitting, the plane will arrive mid-day and bring us back to the tiny town of Bettles, where

we change planes and then fly back to Fairbanks arriving late in the day.

DETAILS

WHAT'S INCLUDED

One night lodging in Bettles

Round-trip airfare from Fairbanks

Food while in the wilderness, stoves, cooking & eating utensils

Boats, paddles, life jackets, safety & repair gear

Professional guide service

Select [Camping Equipment](#) is available through Arctic Wild

WHAT'S NOT INCLUDED

Non-camp lodging

Non-camp meals

Personal clothing and gear per our [Equipment List](#)

Fishing gear, and fishing license

Gratuities for guide(s)

WEATHER & BUGS

A variety of weather is likely, including rainy periods and bright sunny conditions. Temperatures can range from the 60's down into the 30's. Snow is possible. Rain assured. The Killik can also be a windy valley so be prepared for that too.

Bug season should be on the wane but bring a bottle of DEET and a headnet in case of flies.

RECOMMENDED READING

[On Arctic Ground](#) by Debbie Miller

[Nunamiut](#) by Helge Ingstadt

[Land of Extremes](#) by Alex Huryn

[We Live in the Arctic](#) by Constance Helmericks

[A Thousand Trails Home](#) by Seth Kantner

Arctic Wild by Lois Crisler

More Alaska reading is available at our [bookstore](#)