

KOKOLIK RIVER RAFTING



DATES

June 16, 2025 - June 24, 2025

REGION

Western Brooks Range

TRIP COST

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If your interest is wildlife, and in discussing conservation with an exceptional group of people, this is the trip for you.

For 8 out of 10 years our June river trips have seen tens of thousands of caribou swimming the river. We regularly see bears, wolves and even wolverines on this fantastically remote river trip.

TRIP DETAILS

In the far northwest corner of Alaska near the Chukchi Sea is a seldom traveled river we consider the best June river trip in the Northwest Arctic.

The Western Brooks Range is rich country. This is where the Western Arctic Caribou Herd, numbering about 152,000 animals, bears their calves. Grizzly and wolverine populations are higher here than anywhere else in Alaska's Arctic. And the birding, the birding is outstanding.

Starting from its mountain headwaters, we will paddle north toward the sea through range after range of sweeping ridges and steeply folded valleys. As we round each corner we scan the banks for wildlife. With luck, we will intercept bands of caribou swimming the river with week-old calves in tow. Some years we get to watch wave after wave of caribou migrating across the tundra. Occasionally the whole valley fills with the sound of hoofs and bleats as uncountable numbers of caribou stream across the landscape. Even without caribou it is a fantastic trip.

Not only does this area support enormous numbers of caribou, but it also hosts a great diversity of other wildlife. Caribou herds are attended by an assortment of predators and scavengers, namely brown bears, wolves, and the fabled wolverine. Musk oxen can be seen feeding in the willows of the river terraces. The Utukok Uplands region through which the river flows has the highest density of wolverines in the northern Alaska.

Bird watching in the area can be spectacular. Asian bird species such as bluethroats and northern wheatears can be seen. Jaegers are ubiquitous and bristle-thighed curlews have been found on the rocky ridge lines. On our last foray down the river, we saw golden eagles, gyrfalcons, peregrine falcons, and rough-legged hawks nesting along the river. Some years raptor nest are packed into the cliffs in some places with nearly a nest every half mile!

Hiking along the Kokolik River is wonderful. There are seemingly endless ridges running perpendicular to the river where the footing is good and the views are unbelievable. While not a land of dramatic peak ascents and white water, this is a place of wildlife, beauty, and long vistas.

Not only is the place and the leadership exemplary, but the group of participants is without peer. We hope that the conversations about Arctic conservation will go late into the night and that the connections forged and ideas generated on this trip will help all of us advocate for this remarkable landscape.

Itinerary

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

June 15

*Pre-trip meeting with your guides in **Kotzebue** at 6:45 pm.*

June 16

Our trip begins with a planned flight over the Noatak Valley and into the Brooks Range. We fly on and on, watching the world's largest terrestrial wilderness pass below us. After crossing the Brooks Range we land on a gravel island along the river. After unloading the plane and pitching camp we will have nothing but time to explore this pristine area.

June 17

After discussing river safety and boat handling, we inflate our rafts and head downriver. Gravel and sand bars fill the broad floodplain valley allowing us the opportunity to get comfortable in the boats and relax under the broad sky.

June 18

The upper valley hosts not only an abundance of wildlife, but an abundance of fossil life. Coal beds can be reached from the river and marine and terrestrial fossils abound. We will likely take our first layover/ hiking/ rest day to enjoy the mountains and explore away from the river.

The river cuts perpendicular to the east- west ridges that define this part of the Brooks Range. We will have the opportunity to ascend some of these broad colorful ridges on our day-hikes and evening

walks. Alpine species like Alaska marmots and rosy finches inhabit the rocky ledges and the views of the complex geology and endless landscape are spectacular.

June 19 - 23

We will mix paddling days with hiking days. We have some miles we must cover but the schedule allows ample time for exploration on foot and leisure time in camp. As we travel north, the river grows from a large creek to a meandering river. There are obstacles to avoid but for the most part we can devote our attention to scenery and wildlife.

The river cuts through many small sub-ranges of the Brooks Range. In between each of these ranges are broad valleys where you feel as if you could be swallowed by the sky. Our camps usually alternate between the broad basins where we spend a single night and the folded ridges where we can enjoy a hiking day. If we run into big groups of caribou we'll almost certainly spend a couple of nights in their company.

Like all our trips, this is a true wilderness expedition. The land, the river, the weather, the wildlife, along with our desires dictates the rhythm of the trip and the specifics of each day.

June 24

At the appointed gravel bar we will wait for our pilot and then (if the weather allows) fly back to Kotzebue. We hope to be back in Kotzebue by about 6 pm. Time to take a shower!

DETAILS

WHAT'S INCLUDED

Round-trip airfare from Kotzebue

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

Gratuity for guide(s)

WEATHER & BUGS

Temperatures vary from the 70's to below freezing with averages in the upper 50's. Snow is possible; rain is likely. However, this time of the year we generally have lots of sunny dry weather. Strong, cold north winds are common. It is a windy part of the state and the trip is timed to maximize wildlife encounters, rather than weather. There could be bugs so bring a mosquito head net and a bottle of DEET repellent.

There is no weather station near to the Kokolik but Noatak Village is (though further south and warmer) reasonably close and you can study its climate [here](#). [Pt Lay](#) on the coast is another (colder) proxy. If you average the two locations you can get an idea of a "typical" June day.

RECOMMENDED READING

[Being Caribou](#) by Karsten Heuer

[On Arctic Ground](#) by Debbie Miller

[Land of Extremes](#) by Alex Huryn

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

[Caribou and the Barren Lands](#) by George Calef

[Ordinary Wolves](#) by Seth Kantner

[Last Light Breaking](#) by Nick Jans

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