



WHERE THE *Wild* THINGS ARE

Rafting the Tatshenshini and Alsek Rivers in Canada's North

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY BY Ann Britton Campbell



Soaring mountain peaks, glaciers, and icebergs on Alsek Lake make the Tatshenshini and Alsek river trip one of the world's most breathtaking

The grizzly bear emerges from the bush on the banks of Melt Creek, its low-slung head swinging side to side as it lumbers toward the swift-moving water. Two cubs follow, as oblivious as their mother to the fact that 15 slightly freaked out river rafters are watching from the opposite shore.

Moments earlier Brad, lead guide on this 11-day Canadian River Expeditions rafting trip down the spectacularly remote Tatshenshini and Alsek rivers—from Dalton Post in southern Yukon, across the north-western tip of British Columbia to Dry Bay, Alaska—interrupts a lazy afternoon around camp with a clarion call.

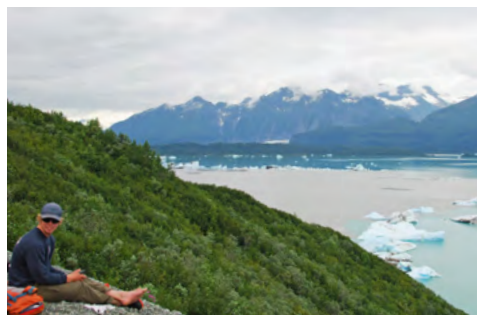
“Everyone together. Here. Now!”

We drop our books and campfire-side conversations and double-time it to where Brad and fellow guide Tyler stand overlooking the creek. We’re thrilled to see the bears and slightly crushed when we realize only Edna has a camera, and it’s a modest point-and-shoot. Tyler reads our wildlife-photo-obsessed minds and gives the order: “No one goes to their tents to get their cameras.”

A third guide, Alene, returns from a sweep of camp (including the out-of-the-way outdoor toilet) and confirms all 12 guests are assembled. The guides coolly unclip their bear bangers (noisemakers to launch above the bears’ heads should we need to scare them away) and bear spray (should the situation become dire). Note, we do not have a gun.

We watch with mounting concern as the mother grizzly enters the glacier-fed creek and begins paddling toward a point of land 100 metres upstream from us. The cubs plunge in behind her and are quickly overwhelmed by the strong current. The mother spies her flailing offspring and launches toward them. With a powerful sweep of her forelegs she gathers in the cubs and heads back to the far shore.

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Glaciers hang between mountains, forming part of the largest icefields in the world outside the Poles; Rafts carry guests, gear and supplies for this epic 255-km river journey; Wildlife viewing parties, complete with binoculars and spotting scope, are near-daily affairs; The Fairweather Range, home to Mount Fairweather, BC’s highest peak at 4,663 metres, provides a dramatic backdrop for the final day on the Alsek River; Bocce is a rough-and-tumble affair; River guides including Brad (left) and Tyler keep spirits high and stomachs full with impressive riverside meals; A hike up Gateway Knob leads to a lookout over Alsek Lake





The flight back to civilization includes bird's-eye views over Glacier Bay National Park's Alsek Lake and its glaciers **BELOW**, FROM LEFT Camp life includes time for reading and contemplating the spectacular surroundings; bear claw scratches are reminders that this remote wilderness is the bears' playground



IF YOU GO

TAKE THE RAFT TOUR

For more on Canadian River Expeditions' Tatshenshini rafting trip: nahanni.com/river/tatshenshini-river. **EXPLORE**

FARTHER To discover other adventures in the Yukon: travelyukon.com.



Our collective sigh of relief is short-lived as the mother does a wet-dog shake on the gravelly bank and heads back to the water for a second try. Thankfully the cubs want nothing to do with it and head for the bush. The mother grizzly turns, sees her offspring disappear, and follows.

With the danger passed, we all begin talking at once—loudly, excitedly, and with more than a little adrenaline coursing through our veins. It's obvious that, although a deep desire to connect with pristine wilderness is why many of us signed on to this trip, few were prepared for how intense those wild encounters might be.

Not that Meta Williams didn't warn us. We meet Meta on our first day when the van shuttling us from Whitehorse to our launch site stops at Kwäday Dän Kenji, Long Ago Peoples Place. Meta leads our merry band of adventurers—eight Ontarians, two British Columbians and two Brits, ranging in age from 14 to mid-70s, as well as three guides—through a recreated traditional First Nations village. Along the way she shares stories of how her people have survived on the land for thousands of years. "We let the wilderness know we are here," she says, explaining the importance of being heard in the bush. She stresses respect for bears. "We are in their playground."

In fact, over our 11 days, as the Tatshenshini grows from little more than a creek to a swift, broad, braided river that joins the mighty Alsek before emptying into the Gulf of Alaska, we see constant reminders that this land belongs to the wild things. Silty riverbanks are tattooed with moose, wolverine, black bear, grizzly and other predator and prey tracks. Bear claw scratches and snagged tufts of hair adorn spruce and aspen trees. Fresh scat with flecks of red berries serve as warning signs on the trails and open spaces we explore. Peregrine falcons, bald eagles, belted kingfishers and the like take wing above us. Exquisite blankets of wildflowers—pink-purple River Beauty, magenta fuchsia, cottony mountain avens—are trampled in spots, suggesting creatures great and small have passed through.

And what a stunning landscape it is to pass through. The Tatshenshini and Alsek rivers carve a verdant corridor through the peaks and glaciers of the St. Elias Mountains, home to the most extensive non-polar ice fields in the world. Hardly a day goes by that we aren't ohing and aahing over distant hanging glaciers or snowcapped mountain peaks or getting a close-up look at the effects of glaciation, none more vivid than the day we hike to the jagged, crystal-blue face of Walker Glacier.

Unfortunately (and surprisingly for a summer trip) there aren't many days that don't also include rain. We try to stay upbeat about the weather and make the most of every sunny break, to dry our gear, to hike and to play killer games of bocce. Certainly the guides keep us well fed, impressing us with blueberry pancakes, eggs Benedict and fresh-baked cinnamon buns for breakfast, salads, sandwiches and, on one special day, elk sausage hot dogs with sauerkraut for lunch and hearty dinners such as lamb souvlaki with spanakopita and a Chinese-Canadian themed spread with chicken chop suey, spring rolls and fortune cookies.

But there comes a moment on this soggy trip, after rain showers silence another round of optimistic chirping that maybe, surely, possibly the weather is improving, Keith suggests a drinking game. "One slug for each time someone says 'it's clearing.' Two slugs if someone says 'I see blue sky.'"

Thankfully, on day 10 we wake to bright, blue skies and fill our memory cards on a leisurely paddle amongst icebergs that float like ginormous white and aquamarine ice sculptures on Alsek Lake. Kent jokes, "I've got three pictures of trees, one of bears and 800 of icebergs." Distant booms and thunder-like

rolls dial up the drama as enormous chunks of ice, some as large as apartment buildings, calve from the Alsek and Grand Plateau Glaciers and drop into the lake.

In the afternoon we must wait for ocean-like waves caused by calving to subside before we can scramble along the vegetation-choked shoreline and up a steep, slippery path to a lookout on Gateway Knob. Brad describes the spot as "the best place in the world." Looking across the iceberg-choked lake to the massive glaciers and mountain ranges beyond, I have to agree.

On our final day we enjoy a rare, clear view of the 4,600-metre-high peak of Mount Fairweather as we pack the rafts one last time and paddle alongside chunks of ice to our river journey's end.

There is one last thrill as our chartered aircraft takes off from Dry Bay's grassy runway and circles up and up and up again so as to gain enough altitude to clear the mountains that lie between us and Whitehorse. I marvel at the on-high views of the majestic glaciers, soaring peaks and expansive river valley through which we travelled and imagine that, far below, I can spy a certain glacier-fed creek where a mother grizzly is teaching her cubs to swim. ●

Dragon[®] Medical Practice Edition 4 (this is the version you've been waiting for)

Upgrade to cutting edge
speech technology!



Dragon Software
Installation & Support
EMR Integration & Training



CONTACT US TODAY!

speakeasysolutions.com

1-888-964-9109

speech technology specialists for 18 years