

Riding the Hulahula to the **ARCTIC OCEAN**

By Don Mankin

A condensed version of the title chapter in Don's recent National Geographic book, "Riding the Hulahula to the Arctic Ocean: A Guide to 50 Extraordinary Adventures for the Seasoned Traveler"

My doctor's words were like a punch in the stomach. "Don, I think it's time we looked into this," he said while looking at the results of my latest blood test. I was leaving in a couple of weeks for my latest "trip of a lifetime" and did not want to hear about anything that might get in the way.

I had been dreaming of this trip for years – an 11 day raft trip starting near the headwaters of the Hulahula River deep in the Brooks Range in northern Alaska, running through the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and ending on a mere sliver of an island a mile or so off the coast in the portion of the Arctic Ocean known as the Beaufort Sea. (The river was named by a crew of homesick Hawaiian whalers stuck in the ice at the mouth of the river in the late 19th century.)



The doctor scheduled me for some further tests. The problem was, besides the potentially life threatening implications of the results, there was no way I would get the results back before leaving for my trip. He assured me that there was no reason I couldn't go on the trip.

Being a true obsessive and a hypochondriac to boot, I couldn't imagine enjoying the trip with the test results hanging over my head until my return but my doctor and, most important, my wife prevailed. Several days later I left for my trip as originally planned.

Adapting to a Unique Environment

We flew into our put-in point the mountains in groups of three in a small plane specially designed to land and take off in places too confined for more conventional aircraft. This came in handy as we came in for a landing on a small gravel beach beside the river. The pilot slowed the plane to what seemed like an aeronautical version of a crawl, hovered for a second or two before plopping down on the gravel, and came to a stop in just a few bumpy feet. It was

probably the strangest airplane landing I have ever experienced.

After we set up camp for the night, it was time for our orientation to life in the Arctic – high rubber boots for walking on the spongy, mossy, marshy tundra; individual canisters of bear spray, also for walking on the tundra; and the ubiquitous shovel and ditty bag of toilet paper for...well, you get the picture.



David, the lead guide from Arctic Wild, our tour operator (www.arcticwild.com), also showed us the shotgun that he would always have at the ready, just in case of bears, and instructed us to be sure to talk, sing and otherwise make noise whenever we wandered off for a walk or to take care of "business."

While our guides made dinner, we explored our surroundings, slogging up and down hills with the spray canisters grasped firmly in our hands, constantly scanning ahead for bears.

We also had to keep our eyes on the ground just ahead. Much of it was made up of tussocks of moss, lichen and tiny yellow, white and purple flowers. There were also low woody shrubs, mats of tightly clumped plants, lots of rocks, and tufts of grass but no trees or bushes. From the many bluffs, ridges and rises up and down the river valley we could see snowcapped peaks and wide, ice-crusting river banks



The author with bear spray canister to ward off bears

sparkling in the slanted rays of the evening sun. The sun, which never set through the entire trip, cast long shadows and brought out the varied hues of green that make up much of the color palette of the Far North.

Getting Into the Flow of the Trip

For the next two days, we drifted and paddled down the river, past huge banks of ice still remaining in the long, first few days of the Arctic summer. Mountains lined the river on both sides and waterfalls cascaded down to meet us. I thought of little else but maintaining a steady paddle stroke and the beauty that surrounded me.

At the end of the third day, we set up camp on a high bluff near a bend in the river with a spectacular view up the river from where we had come. Standing on the ridge overlooking our camp site, surveying the Arctic landscape that stretched before me in the extended dusk of the midnight sun, I started to think about the still unknown medical test results awaiting my return. Curiously, I did not seem to care. All that mattered was the awesome beauty surrounding me.

Through the Foothills, Down to the Coastal Plain

Over the course of our trip, the scenery changed dramatically. After about three days floating through a broad, relatively level river valley, we hit a patch of faster, more turbulent water as the river dropped through a narrow canyon in the foothills before spilling onto the coastal plain. The set of rapids in this canyon were rated an adrenaline-pumping Class IV and looked and felt every bit of it.

Soon the river took us through the foothills and down onto the wide open coastal plain. In the coastal plain the Hulahula turns into a very different kind of river – wider, slower and very shallow, so shallow that we sometimes had to get out and guide the raft as it bumped along the bottom.

The scenery here is quite different than it is in the mountains. To the east and west, the views went on forever and to the north, a misty haze hung over the pack ice a few miles off in the Arctic Ocean. To the south, the mountains and deeply carved valleys of the Brooks Range, where we had been just a day or two before, frame the unbroken expanse of the plain.

I have rarely felt so insignificant and small, nor so exhilarated by such dramatic, untouched beauty.

The wildlife viewing was also exceptional. The trip was scheduled to overlap with the annual migration of the Porcupine Caribou herd from Canada to their calving grounds on the coastal plain of the refuge.

This year, a heavy snow fall late in the year had trapped most of the caribou herd in Canada so we saw fewer of them, and therefore, fewer grizzlies than usual. Nonetheless, we did see more caribou than I have ever seen before plus musk oxen, sheep, arctic birds, moose and bears.

“The set of rapids in the canyon were rated an adrenaline-pumping Class IV.”

To the End of the Continent and Beyond

Our trip ended on a small island, little more than a gravel bar, about a mile off the coast in the Beaufort Sea. It was as close to the end of the world as I had ever been. The view from the island south, back in the direction from which we came, was incredible with the Brooks Range framing the horizon as far as the eye could see.

Oh yes, about those test results. They were negative!

Don Mankin, Ph.D, is a travel writer, business author, psychologist and organizational consultant. His latest book “Riding the Hulahula to the Arctic Ocean: A Guide to 50 Extraordinary Adventures for the Seasoned Traveler” is from National Geographic. For more information, go to www.adventuretransformations.com.