

## ALASKA CANOE SCHOOL PADDLE POST

### John River: Hunt Fork Lake to Old Bettles



Are you looking for a remote river through the Brooks Range that doesn't cost a fortune but still provides a true Wilderness Experience? If yes, this trip on the John River may be for right for you.

The journey starts with an air taxi ride from Bettles or Coldfoot to Hunt Fork Lake. From there the river flows through the Boreal Forest, south out of the mountains to the flats and ultimately into the Koyukuk River above the abandoned town site of Old Bettles. We think it is nice to start slowly, spending more time in the mountains and then paddling longer days through the flats.

Because you start at the confluence of two streams, there is usually plenty of water, but that water is moving fast. The braiding and narrow channels cause cross currents and tight corners that are sometimes lined with sweepers or strainers. You need to be able to maneuver your boat and read the current. We



*Hunt Fork Lake at the confluence of the John River (on left of photo) and the Hunt Fork River (entering from right of photo). Photo by Don Pendergrast*

recommend paddling skills equal to or higher than ACA River Canoeing Level 3 before taking on this journey. As the river leaves the mountains, it's gradient lessens, and the current slows as it meanders to its confluence with the Koyukuk.

Be sure to visit the Old Bettles town site. Explore but leave things as you find them so others can enjoy this piece of history. From here you can continue downstream to Allakaket, or fly to Coldfoot, or take fly or take a motorboat up the Koyukuk to Bettles.

#### **Wildlife**

As with most of the Arctic, this section of the Brooks Range does not support huge numbers of wildlife. However, rivers are important wildlife corridors and food sources, so opportunities for seeing wildlife are available for those who are paying attention. Bring your binoculars and scan the mountains for Dahl Sheep and the hillsides for Brown Bears. Listen for the call of Peregrine Falcons and look in the evenings for moose. Scan the shores as you travel down river and you may see a wolf, and don't forget to keep an eye out for beaver and ducks as you paddle.

## Scenery

We have led two photography classes with instructor Richard Murphy down this section of the John River. There were plenty of vistas, history and interesting things to photograph. Some highlights are Gun Sight Mountain, animal tracks, and the historical remains of Old Bettles. Be sure to take time to look and explore. There are cabin remains along the way, remnants of the Hickel Highway, and bluffs that you can hike and look back up river.

## Logistics

There are a variety of Air Taxi operators who can get you into Gates of the Arctic. These change over time and the National Park Service usually has a list of permitted Air Taxi Services. We travel regularly with Brooks Range Avi-

ation and Coyote Air and recommend them both. To fly with Brooks Range Aviation you need to fly on a commercial carrier to Bettles, we usually fly with Wright Air or Warbelow's Air. From there Brooks Range Aviation can fly you into Hunt Fork Lake. Coyote Air flies out of Coldfoot, Alaska. You can drive to Coldfoot or fly with Wrights or Warbelow's. The Dalton Highway Express is a shuttle van service that you can take to Coldfoot. Once you choose your Air Taxi operator they can help you figure out the best way to get to Bettles or Coldfoot. Both of these Air Taxi services have some gear available for rent. In general, we believe it is best to show up with all the gear you need for your trip. Canoe Alaska, in Fairbanks, rents inflatable and folding canoes.

Once you have reached the Koyukuk, you can fly back to Bettles with BRA or Coldfoot with Coyote Air. The Bettles Lodge sometimes has a boat shuttle service that will take you upstream to Bettles or you can continue down stream to Allakaket and fly to Fairbanks with Wrights or Warbelow's. It will add over 50 river miles to your trip.



*Unnamed limestone peak at sunset.*

*Photo by Don Pendergrast*

## Important Things to Know

- There is no cell service in Bettles, Coldfoot and Gates of the Arctic National Park
- It can take more than 24 hours for help to come after you have informed them of an emergency. You must be prepared to deal with emergencies on your own.
- We recommend you bring a way to communicate if you have an emergency. Some options are a satellite phone, a SPOT or an InReach. These are available for rent in Fairbanks.
- Water levels can change rapidly even if it is not raining on you. Be sure to pull your boat up every night and tie it off.
- The National Park Service is a great source of information. Check out their website and call the Bettles Ranger Station to talk about your plans.
- There is private property along the John River. Be sure to respect these places.
- There is significant white water through narrow channels in the John River above Hunt Fork Lake. We do not recommend floating from Anaktuvuk Pass unless you are very skilled, have the appropriate gear, and seek more information.
- The John River is a flight corridor for Anaktuvuk Pass. It is not uncommon to hear and / or see commercial flights a couple of times a day.
- You are required to store your food in Bear Resistant Food Containers (BRFCs) as hanging food is not feasible. The National Park Service in Coldfoot and Bettles loans out BRFCs free of charge. Stop in; get your backcountry orientation and BRFCs.



*Floating on the John River in folding canoes (Ally Packs and Pak Boat).*

*Photo by Don Pendergrast*