

## A family float trip down the Yukon River

by John Morton



*Straight off the water to the telephone, Mika Morton, 11, reconnects with civilization in Eagle after 700 miles on the Yukon River. Her sister Charly, 6, is not in such a rush. The Morton family made the 4-week wilderness trip from Whitehorse, Yukon Territory to Eagle, Alaska by canoe in June. Photo Credit: John Morton/USFWS.*

Two years ago, I took a course in Wilderness Stewardship that was hosted in Girdwood. Four days of training helped me to remember how special our wilderness is in Alaska, and I vowed that I'd have a wilderness "experience" with my kids while they were still young. My rule of thumb is that a trip needs to be at least 10 days long before I stop fretting about work or unpaid bills, or whether or not I turned off the stove.

So in early June of this year, we launched on a 700-mile canoe trip down the Yukon River from Whitehorse to Eagle. "We" included two families, mine and the Usab's, friends from the eastern shore of Maryland. We crammed four adults and our four kids, ranging in age from six to 13, into three canoes and set off for almost four weeks of what we originally (and optimistically) called just a "float down the river."

Now, I've canoed as much as 250 miles a day on the upper Yukon River as a two-time competitor in

the Yukon Quest. But it's equally challenging when young kids are involved and you're worried about making sure they're having fun and are SAFE. This is a tall order when they're inhaling mosquitoes, paddling through water as cold as ice with big hydraulics or camping in bear country.

Our "wilderness" trip got a rocky start as we passed a sign below Whitehorse that cautioned about treated effluent being discharged into the river. Several miles below town we ran into a grocery cart sticking out of a muddy bar in a bend on the river. As we paddled across the 30-mile long Lake Lebarge, made famous by Robert Service's poetic celebration of the Cremation of Sam McGee, we saw abundant signs of humans everywhere: tent sites, rusted cans, old cables, and broken glass.

But gradually these modern archaeological artifacts disappear as we get into dining on grayling and wild onions further down the river. Saxifrage, bluebells, cinquefoil, wild sweet pea, and fleabane are flowering everywhere. Ravens stick their heads into the holes of cliff and bank swallows to feed on nestlings and eggs. As we pass one of many spectacular cliffs along the river, a pair of peregrine falcons double teams a swallow and snatches it out of the air in front of our canoes.

The outbreak of leaf miners on aspen and birch makes the trees growing along the banks unusually silvery as a result of the larvae eating all of the green chlorophyll tissue under the waxy cuticle that covers each leaf.

At one point, we see a black bear trying desperately to swim to shore before we intercept it's trajectory with our canoes. Red-breasted merganser broods are everywhere.

Older signs of First Nation people and the Klondike gold rush that we see further down the river seem part of the natural landscape in a way that the modern litter below Whitehorse did not. Below the mouth of the Teslin River we poke around the abandoned village of Houtalinqua, which once serviced the Klondike steamers and transmitted telegraphs. At the mouth of the Big Salmon River, we have lunch at a site that was once a village for the Tutchone, an Athabaskan tribe,

and later a fur trading post.

At the fully restored Fort Selkirk, below the mouth of the Pelly River, the kids (and the adults) are entertained and educated by Papa Don, a transplanted Ojibwa Indian, who tells handed-down stories of important things to know like why bears have short tails. You'll have to go there yourself to find out the answer.

Somewhere along the way, we pass Stewart's Island which once hosted a couple of communities, including the cabin where Jack London overwintered before the Klondike Gold Rush. He only spent a year in the Yukon, during which time he got scurvy and lost all of his money. But his eidetic memory of the conversations that he had with other miners and trappers during the winter of 1897 gave him the setting for his many subsequent books, including *Call of the Wild*. His cabin was later moved to Dawson City as a historical site, where it was literally cut in half horizontally. The lower half remains there but the upper half was taken to Oakland, California, where Jack hailed from and where a duplicate cabin has been restored.

And somewhere along the way, I get to watch our kids grow up just a little bit more. Despite the absence

of electronic gadgetry, which I had forbidden, they have memorable times panning for gold, fishing, paddling, poking fires, telling stories, and singing. Mika, my eleven year old daughter, grins wildly from the bow as we shoot through Five Finger Rapids. Charly, my six year old daughter, never, ever complains although at one point she is pretty close to being hypothermic.

We so settle into traveling on the river that when we're stuck in our tent for two nights as it rains for 30 hours straight somewhere along the International border between Yukon and Alaska, we just enjoy sleeping and reading and eating and being with each other. I'm not sure who said it's the journey that counts, not the destination, but I think we accomplished a bit of what I had hoped for two years ago.

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