

June 22, 2006, Wisconsin State Line rest stop

I could have been getting on 95 south to go to work or maybe to Home Depot. It certainly didn't feel any different. But it was.

Smooth sailing through Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and most of Pennsylvania. Hit some very heavy rain exiting Pa into northern Ohio. Tuck in between two truckers and turn on the hazards, heavy. The first hint of heading west comes in Ohio. You get stretches of big open fields that doesn't exist in New England. With the heavy rains, a lot of those fields were flooded. A smile crosses my face as I jot down notes while driving – reminds me of 2003.

Light warp streaks of fireflies through northern Indiana and I lose the sun on the first day. It surprises me every time how easy it is to be so transient, to pick your foot off the ground in your home town and then find yourself 1000 miles from the recognizable.

Guided through Chicago sprawl by illuminated billboards like runway lights. After fueling up one last time, I decide to push on to the rest area that I know is on the Wisconsin line. Coast past the front lot, find a corner with less light than the others, and take part in a road trip ritual.. curling up in the drivers seat of the car and falling asleep.

June 23, 2006, Yorkton, Saskatchewan, Canada.

It's a sad thing when you wake up from a dream about driving, to turn the ignition and start driving. After brushing my teeth in the rest area bathroom it's back on the road for me.

Through Wisconsin and into Minnesota. Now is the first time I get the real 3D sky picture. Layers of clouds in the horizontal and vertical direction give a sense that doesn't filter through the tree choked view of New England. I remember in 2003 somewhere along the same highway I drove today I pulled off on an overpass, set up the tripod on my cars roof (denting it along the way) and tried to take a panoramic shot. Waste of space on the memory card – its impossible to bottle something like that.

It starts to settle in now.. the driving. The novelty fades away into a sort of background satisfaction.

After Minnesota it was up through North Dakota and into the first unknown of the trip – Canada. As I drove up I-29 I got a feeling of warm desolation. No visible structures around me, open fields.. its hard to describe. It's a feeling that comes only from being on the road. Raining off in the distance. Out here you can trace the descent by a grey fuzzy veil. Driving toward Canada I'm going through an arch of rain. It distorts the trees in the distance to my left and right, but no drops hit my windshield. Through customs and I'm in the land of the maple leaf.

A billboard reads: Be Grateful. Black letters on plain white background.

Yorkton is a weird little place. Walmart and fast food places, but still a weird feel to it. After searching for a wireless access point for 30 mins, I park in a dark corner of an agriculture store and go to sleep.

June 24, 2006 Mile marker 204 of the Alaskan Highway, British Columbia, Canada

I saw the first sign somewhere near Grande Prairie, Alberta. Alaska. The state is so big there's a sign for it 1400 miles away. Alaska. An involuntary smile.

Woken up 2 times last night by a deafening train horn. I apparently parked about 50 feet from a heavy duty service rail. And one of those mile long trains that you get out here blew its horn the entire way through town.

Breakfast = pop tarts and water from the gallon jug in my trunk. I haven't had a warm meal since I left. Back onto the roads that stretch without feature into the distance, defying perception.

Canada has the most interesting signs. On the way home I'm going to stop and take a picture of some of them. Example, "Important Intersection". I wish life had that kind of signage.

Out of Yorkton, towards Saskatoon, Edmonton, etc etc. The drive begins to get to me. I can't explain it. I think driving is sort of like meditating. In meditation you supposed to, at least as a beginner, isolate and damp all other thoughts except for your breathing. You feel every breath. The muscles moving in your chest, the air rushing through your throat. The slight movements of facial muscles. That single mindedness brings samadhi. With driving its like the same thing. Maybe its that I'm tired, or that this is the first time I've driven such distances without any intermediary points of interest, but the miles and miles (or kilometers and kilometers, we are in Canada after all) with no destination except the next pocket of civilization (a gas store and a tractor dealership) begin to impinge on me like a cramp does during meditation. It goes away eventually, but this early in trip with so many miles left..

Topographically, Manitoba was similar to what I've seen of Minnesota. Low lying, lots of wetlands (and the first time I've seen an intermittent LAKE that was probably a quarter of the size of my home STATE). Moving into Saskatchewan and eastern Alberta, the land changes to be a mix between South Dakota and Montana. Into British Columbia and it starts looking like New Hampshire.

This [Alaska Highway](#), though, has been nothing like I've seen. Open stretches of black ribbon against a bright green background as far as you can see. The Northern Rockies in the distance. It's a perfect road trip road.. I just wish it were shorter.

It's after 11 and still light out. The sun didn't set until around 10. I wanted to drive until around 10:30 and then pull over to try and get as much sleep as possible in an effort to make up for the past two nights. I rationalized that luxury with the fact that the area I'm driving through appears to be saturated with moose and elk. Driving 75 on a two lane road and meeting one of those with my drowsy reaction time isn't appetizing.

I'm getting the flow a little better. Usually takes a few days. Three nights ago I was laying in bed in Mystic. Now, I'm a hundred kilometers from anywhere, next to some creek in British Columbia. Ahead of me is the Alaska Highway and tomorrow, I might just be talking about crossing the Alaska state line.

June 25, 2006 14 miles outside Tok, AK

An hour or two of passing oil and gas fields after I woke up this morning; I was in Fort Nielson, BC. I remember a couple weeks ago playing around with Google Maps, zooming on this town (the Alcan takes a weird 90 degree turn here). There were these peculiar white things lining the main street. After filling up at 730am, I see those white things were lamp posts -must have been the angle of the satellite or something.

A few more hours of driving the same stretches of bumpy blacktop and things begin to get different. The satellite radio gets blinky and I start to see more fauna. Today

I saw two bears (one black one brown) moose, everything. Then, the road begins to lead closer and closer to the mountains that have been closing in around it. Shortly thereafter, signs for Stone Mountain appear and the Alaska Highway becomes a totally different beast.

The [Stone Mountain area](#) is very similar to Glacier National Park. Dramatic drop offs, lots of exposed rock face, mountain goats blocking the road, etc. As part of the Northern Rockies, huge grey faces appear all around as the road descends from a pass. The road is twisty. This combined with the awareness that there are NO cops (maybe the first time in my life that I could drive as I wanted without fear of happening across a cop) and I partake in some spirited driving.

Tim Cahil from *Prudhoe Bay or Bust*: “ I took the wheel out of Fort Nelson and pushed the truck through Stone Mountain Provincial Park. It was the kind of mountain road automobile enthusiasts dream about: moderately challenging, with nicely banked turns winding through staggering scenery. It was, incidentally, entirely free of police. I took the corners hard, listening to the tires scream on the asphalt and though I had never enjoyed driving more.”

I used to not know what made some of the lakes around mountains a brilliant green. In 2003 edification came from a roadside sign in Washington state. Silt carried by glacial runoff or really, any feed, changes the reflection of water, giving it a bright emerald green color. [Muncho Lake in British Columbia](#) is the most perfect example of this I have ever seen. The entire area this road tours is massively expansive. Most of the time, no traces of human existence except this small strip of road, which more often than not find myself totally alone on. It's a strangely intimate presentation because of this. Or maybe I'm just getting really.. really... tired.

Through more fireweed edged roadways, crazy cross country bike riders trudging up and down the hills, 5 moose encounters, geothermally heated lakes, 20 miles stretches of gravel roads, 3 foot undulations in the places that do have pavement I finally find myself approaching the Alaskan border.

After 4000+ miles, something like 75 hours of driving, less than 9 hours of sleep. [I am finally here](#). Alaska. Totally alone at the border. The wind blowing gently through the trees and bush around me. In 1906, a surveying crew cut a swath along the border and it extends in both directions as far as you can see. There's a small piece of wood embedded in concrete as a physical representation of the international border.

I am here.

June 26, 2006 NPS campground along the Seward Highway, Kenai Peninsula, AK

Twilight all night, again. Worse this time. The sun didn't go through the motions of setting until after 11pm. I wrapped a bandana around my head to block out the light – something I'll have to continue doing for the rest of this month.

Wake up, stuff the sleeping bag and pillow in their respective pouches, go outside to brush my teeth with a Nalgene bottle, pop a vitamin, and I'm off again. My existence has become quite transient in the past 4 days, but I don't even really feel it. I'm numb to the road and time now.

The novelty of seeing signs for Anchorage and Fairbanks wears off quickly. In an hour or two I realize not paying attention to those signs has led to an error – I missed the turn towards Anchorage. In a state with only a half dozen major roads, this is a bad thing. Luckily I'm able to pick up route 4 and meet back up with the needed road – only losing a couple hours. The detour did bring me into an unexpected live cell area and I made a lucky call to MaryBeth, as well as bringing me alongside the Alaskan Pipeline! Saw a couple pumping stations and stopped briefly in the rain to take my picture next to the massive steel pipe.

Through the low lying clouds, which eventually clear, I find myself next to snow capped mountains separated by large swaths of gravel bars and dirt colored rivers flowing with haste down steep slopes next to the road. I make movement towards Anchorage. More and more of these incredible vistas. I catch a fleeting glimpse of the terminus of a glacier. Stretches of mountain ranges that trail off in the distance. White clouds swirling around their peaks. It's all beyond words. I'm tired and can't formulate it. Finally, though, after a refreshing (??) stretch of smooth, straight, interstate with normal exits and entrances, I'm in Anchorage. I'm.. in Anchorage, Alaska. The reality of the situation has yet to hit me.

I'm sitting in my tent. Its 7pm and I'll be going to bed soon. I am so tired, it's not even funny. If I stare at something for too long I get sort of dizzy with sleep. Over the past 4 days I've gotten around 13-14 hours of sleep. Perfectly safe, don't worry. I am a professional. But get this for total buzzkill. All day, in fact, for the past three days, I have been looking forward to arriving in grand style in Alaska and taking a soaking, steaming, hot shower. Wash away all the road grime and tiredness. Just stand there under the water... this campsite, and the others I checked, don't have showers. I'll have to wait until tomorrow night. So as you read this, picture me sitting in my yellow tent, listening to the rain fall, watching the mosquitoes pinging against the netting, smelly, but here.. finally.. here..

June 27, 2006 Next to Resurrection Bay, Seward, Alaska

“Heeyyyy bear, you don't want to eat me, I'm human.”

Repeating that over and over again is one of the precautions I've distilled from reading and hearing about bears. Bells don't really work. But instead of just saying “hey bear” like most normal people do, I decide to carry on a one sided conversation with the animals. This can be very embarrassing if one happens across another hiker hidden around a switchback.

It rained last night. Not heavy, and not married to dark, foreboding clouds. Just a sort of constant dripping. I ended up sleeping for around 12 hours of broken sleep, nearly doubling the amount taken since I left home.

One of the “big things” on my Alaska List was a hike to the Harding Ice Field just north of Seward. It's a good hike, about 5 miles one way with 3500 feet of elevation gain. Its terminus is the real attraction though, a view of the largest ice field in North America almost 1000 sq miles.

The weather today was perfect. Mostly sunny, some clouds. High temperature around 70. Warm in the sun, but amply cool in the shade. I found the trailhead, donned

my bear spray and gaiters in addition to normal day hiking equipment, and headed out by 9am. The couple miles of trail snake through forest, some of it dense enough to blot out the surrounding snow capped mountains. Ah, the snow capped mountains. Before I go on I should note that in this part of the state, I'm utterly surrounded by them. It's perfect. Dark green forest running into snow with wisps of white swirling around the peaks. Anyways, the beginning terrain wasn't anything you can't find in New Hampshire, and beside for the elevation gain, Connecticut for that matter.

About a mile in I come across a couple and their small child stopped in the middle of the trail. As I approach the woman says smiling "We're waiting here 'cause there's a bear." She points into a tree about 15 yards away and sure enough a smallish black bear is hanging out. With three pesky humans now encroaching on its personal space, it shimmies down the tree (with amazing speed.. don't even think of out climbing one of these things), looks at us, and then starts walking up the trail. The new problem becomes that he's following the same trail we are. So for the next 20 minutes or so, it's a lot of yelling (with the couple and there child staying conspicuously behind me) and staying aware. A few times I spot him and he goes off into the brush. All well in good, not even 20 minutes in the Alaskan woods and I've come across a bear. Jusst excellent.

The canopy breaks up and stands of trees are replaced with bushes and grass. The tree line is around 2500 feet here. I find myself on a nice ridge. Off to my left I can see [Exit Glacier](#), one of the terminuses for the Ice Field; it's a highly broken sheet of ice. The deep and nearly constant crevasses extend perpendicular to the flow of the ice as it moves over uneven ground. Spotted here and there are small pools of melted snow reflecting a bright blue hue. Also mixed in with the snowcapped mountains to my left and right, the dramatic glacier to my left, the huge gravel wash far below me to my rear, is a mother black bear and three cubs about 10 feet in front of me on the trail.

The bear sees me; I'm close enough to see its eyes. My first reaction is to back away very quickly. Before that response expresses itself, I override. I put my hands above my head waving, and tell the bear to go home in a firm voice. She doesn't seem to honestly care. Just ambling toward me, with her cute cubs in tow, not being the least bit disturbed by my presence. Finally, after closing a few more feet, after I'd already withdrawn the bear spray and popped of the safety, she meanders into some bush near the trail. I swear she gives me a pissed off look as she does this, like, "what the hell, I was here first." Her cubs on the other hand, don't see any threat in me and keep approaching. They clamber off into the bush near their mother, but stay in that immediate area still creeping towards me as they play with each other in the leaves and branches of the thickets that line each side of the trail. It'd be totally amazing if I wasn't so close. At this point, a small crowd has gathered near me. I'm the "guy with the bear spray" and they stay behind me. After a few minutes of footage and dozens of collective photos, the bears finally get far enough off the trail that I feel I can walk by without threatening the mother's cubs. Some people don't agree and go back to the trailhead. I now start yelling "Hey Bear" a little louder.

The trail leads totally out of the bushes and trees and eventually drops into a large snowfield. The path is sporadically marked with [orange flags](#), but the path is clearly worn in the snow. It's still early, but the trail is already slushy, making uphill very slow going. An hour or so later and I find myself on a rock outcropping over looking an intensely massive sheet of ice cradled in between peaks as far as I can see. [The Harding Ice Field](#).

On the way down, a father and daughter tell me to look in a certain direction. On the other side of the valley, two black bears are walking across a snowfield. 7 bears in one day.

The last shower I took was in Mystic, Connecticut the morning of June 22<sup>nd</sup>. Today, the shower I paid 5 bucks for at a local laundromat, may have been the best feeling shower I've had in years. After that decadence, I decided to further splurge and found a brewery in downtown Seward. A salmon sandwich, constituted by an inch slab of the pink meat, was only a dollar more than the burger. The beer tasted beautiful. I've been craving some since day 2.

For the rest of the day, I explored Seward. Spent some time in the [Small Boat Harbor](#), watched guys cleaning some halibut, and scoped out the touristy main street. Tonight I'm stationed next to Resurrection Bay in a grass camping area. For the past couple hours I've been outside in the sun, reading a book, while facing the most magnificent vista of emerald water and mountains.

I'm reading a few types of people here. There are the locals that coexist with the outsiders with as minimal interaction as possible. There are the locals who don't seem to have any problems with them, and then there are the outsiders. So many RVs.. I've never seen such a concentration. Interestingly enough, though, it's mostly Alaska plates, not many other states (I've seen two or three, one was from Florida which would have made it a longer drive than me). Apparently not many people are lunatic drive the Alcan like me.

June 28, 2006 Shore of Bay, Whittier, Alaska

In a land of "biggest" or "longest", the only way to get to the town of Whittier is via the longest auto tunnel in North America. It was blasted out of solid granite in 1942 as the US government established a port in Whittier. As a knee jerk reaction to the reality that Alaska was within range of Japanese aggression (in fact, two islands of the Aluteians were taken and held by the Japanese requiring a force of 15,000 to displace), the military sought to settle ice free ports along the southern coast. Almost always covered by dense clouds and rain, flanked on three sides by rugged mountains, and ice free year round, Whittier was founded.

From where I sit in my car tonight, on the edge of the bay facing the town, I can see two of the government's lasting gifts (they abandoned the town a year after it was built). A 14 story apartment like building that today houses the town's residents, and a more sprawled out complex that is currently abandoned. These buildings are connected together, as well as to schools and other compartments by [underground tunnels](#). This is quite an interesting little town.

Today, the sky is blue with no clouds. A bright sun beats down and makes everything too hot. Alaskans don't like it when it's hot. My kayak tour is delayed from 9am until after 1 pm because of high winds across the bay. I pass the time reading a book entitled "A Reader's companion to Alaska" basically a collection of short stories from

authors diverse, from Ernie Pyle in the '30's to Jon Krakeur. I watch how the small stones on the gravel surface are picked up and moved fractions of an inch by gusting wind – movement detected by peripheral vision; you can't focus on a single section. I listen to the train start to move out of town – a domino effect of loud banging as the slack is taken out of the line of cars. Around lunch time, I swing by a restaurant and order another grilled salmon sandwich. It might be worth it to move here just to have this access to fresh, wild salmon.

Finally I meet my tour guide (Kelly), two other people that will be joining the tour, don the requisite equipment (skirt, life vest, dry bag) and get into the kayak. Now I've never 1) been out on blue water 2) been kayaking in water this cold (the initial shock can cause you to take an uncontrolled breath when you're underwater) 3) kayaked with a skirt 4) used a ruddered kayak. Leaving the harbor, the waves accumulate against a barge and I wait for my kinesthetic senses learn and take over. After a short while, it feels natural and I actually enjoy myself later on in the day when we get into some 4 foot waves (if you time rudder and paddle movements correctly, you can get some hella speed off the top of the wave). 3 or so miles in, we stop at a [pebbled beach](#) to eat a snack. I take breaks from the smoked salmon (so good) with crackers and apples, to skip stones. Kelly tells me the record throw is 7 seconds. This beach is covered in perfect skipping stones. All very flat, with good bulk and well rounded. As we finish up, one of the Alaska Maritime Highway ferries pass by out in the bay. 5 minutes later, when the big ship was out of sight, huge waves travel  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way up the beach, then retract the same distance in the opposite direction. It's like carrying a tray of water and initiating a sway.

After crossing the bay, we approach the second of several dramatic run off waterfalls and encounter [a rookery](#). Thousands of birds. Kelly tells me the name, but I can't recall – basically small seagulls. Apparently they come up every spring from Central America, nest, hatch, and then return home in September.

I gather up a good head of steam and ground the kayak on the gravel shore. 6 hours, about 6 miles, through fantastical scenery. Waterfalls, wildlife, glaciers, snow capped mountains. I get in my car and drive to the [large gravel lot](#) behind some oil containers. Mentioned by Kelly and my guidebook as a free place to stay for the night, I set up my tent near the water. Dinner is instant Thai soup with bread, followed by hot chocolate. As the sun ducks behind one of the nameless peaks in the Chugach range behind me, the temperature drops quickly and I change into long pants and a fleece. I snag some beautiful footage of two bald eagles dancing over the water and then, climb into bed to sleep.

June 29, 2006 Shore of the Spit Pier, Homer, Alaska

“This is a perfect day for it.” The attendant says to the person standing ahead of me in line. Its overcast, with fog only a few hundred feet above our heads, a mist applies a slight layer of water over everything. I notice conspicuously that she says this while taking the guys credit card.

Another big item on my Alaska Checklist was getting to see a tidewater glacier (a glacier that terminates in the ocean) and with any luck, catch some calving (pieces of ice falling off). Prince William Sound, off which Whittier lays, has more tidewater glaciers than anywhere else in the world (another most, biggest, largest, etc etc). Yesterday I choose an operator and booked a seat on a 6 hour tour, promising 30 minutes of time dedicated to one highly active glacier, the Surprise Glacier.

After getting onto the boat and settling down, I meet Ernie and Gloria, an elderly couple from North Dakota, about 100 miles outside of Fargo. Ernie asks if the seats across and next to me are taken (the seats being arranged around a table.) I say no and he and his wife sit down. Handshakes and names exchanged. Conversation begins about the likelihood of getting sea sick. There aren't any whitecaps, and the water appears calm. Apparently Ernie has bad luck with these sorts of things, dating all the way back to his troop transport ship crossing the Atlantic and then the Channel during World War II. I notice he has an Army Air Force hat on. Throughout the day conversation ranges from the weather of various parts of the state, to stories of people they know doing crazy things (like riding a bike from Fairbanks to Patagonia), to what we're seeing outside our picture window. Truly, the trip would not have been the same without those two very friendly and interesting people sitting across from me.

One of the first stops is a salmon hatchery in a nearby cove. Fitting, again, it's the largest hatchery in the world. Being released from the hatchery, salmon come back here to spawn every 2 to 5 years, depending on the species (Red, Silver, Chum). Soon the lightning streaks of silver begin popping up around the boat and I check another item off my list – salmon running.

A swoop of my binoculars: a milky green water, chunks of blue and white ice floating, sea otters laying on their backs- flippers up in air watching us go by, several bald eagles, a large eagle nest (they can apparently get as heavy as 2 tons and have been known to take entire trees down when fully constructed), green carpets capped off by rugged white peaks.

[Surprise Glacier](#) doesn't disappoint. The captain says its 1 mile wide; it looks like a 100 yards. He says we're a quarter mile away; I feel like I can throw a rock to it. Loud clunks and scratching as the boat slowly pushes away ice around it. Then, thunder. As the glacier, which can move up to 10 feet in one day, grinds over the ground beneath it, longitudinal cracks are created in the ice. It is beyond comprehension the energy released when one of these cracks forms, and the sonic noise created by it is fitting. I manage to get a few chunks falling off on tape. The distance is confirmed – the ice is almost in the water by the time the crack and loud rushing noise is heard at the boat.

My attention is drawn to the plasma TV at the front of the boat showing an underwater topographical display. The glaciers we just saw during the last ice age were.. well.. bigger. They carved the multitude of fjords that I've been visiting these past couple days. They also left terminal mounds in dimensions as dramatic as Long Island. Below us the water goes from 600 feet deep, to 100 feet deep, to 1300 feet deep in a giant spike. A submerged moraine. The captain tells us to look at the dead trees along the shore. Surrounding us on nearly all of the intricate shorelines of the fjords and inlets and bays, are a ring of dead, but standing grey trees. The captain explains, during the '64 Good Friday Earthquake (the largest in North America at 9.2, epicentered in Prince William

Sound) the ground sunk around 8 feet. This allowed salt water to enter the root systems of all these trees, killing them, but partially preserving the wood.

A couple hours later, I'm saying good bye to my new friends from North Dakota, getting in my car and making my way to the other side of the Kenai Peninsula, to Homer. I'll spend a day there, taking care of some housekeeping (mail, laundry, showering) and checking out the spit (a 4 mile pier into the bay).

I catch myself, at least once a day, looking around me. Seeing these mountains against this water. Seeing the incredible expanses of this state. Seeing a road sign, giving a city name and mileage to a place I only dreamed about months before. And I laugh a little laugh of disbelief.

June 30, 2006 Homer Spit, Homer, Alaska

As I walk along the shore of this black sand beach, the waves sound different. There's the normal rush as the waves fall onto themselves, but then there's the rattling sound. The beach is covered with small pebbles. As the waves wash ashore and then retreat, those pebbles are slightly perturbed and bump into each other. My wind swept camp is several hundred yards behind me as I move along the beach towards the end of the spit. A lazy day of house keeping, laundry, showers, post office, a splurge on halibut lunch and a local brew.

The spit is a collection of boat fishing charter offices and tourist gift shops. In an odd juxtaposition to the chopped green water and snow capped mountains, I have wifi access.

The rest of the day spent reading and playing cards in the tent. When the wind dies down, I go outside and relax in the breeze of the shore. The cold is unpleasant, but when the sun us out its nice in a fleece and windbreaker. The surrounding shoreline fills up with RVs, those with Alaska plates from Anchorage and around looking for a holiday spot.

Tomorrow is Anchorage to get the oil changed. Then north to the Denali area.

July 1, 2006

The brewpub has been open only 1 hour, yet all the tables are filled. I take my place at the bar with an Anchorage newspaper in hand. The place is called Moose's Tooth pizza and pub, per the recommendation of two people I'd gone kayaking with a few days before.

The ride up was longer than expected. I've driven longer than the longest width of Connecticut in what was considered a short drive between Anchorage and Homer. I type this now, sitting in the parking lot of that brewpub, waiting for the buzz of several beers to diminish before heading north to the Denali area. A classic rock station is on the radio. 100.5.

I order a pint of Pipeline Stout, "they don't call it black gold for nothing" says the menu, and a small pizza to maintain the semblance of actual sustenance. The buzz of a full restaurant mixes with the Hendrix on the radio. I feel the alcohol from the high

percentage beer penetrate my brain as my liver fails to keep up with the incoming alcohol. A warm fuzzy feeling mixes in my blood down to my toes. The first beer buzz in weeks. Good food, excellent beer.. in Anchorage, Alaska. Anchorage, Alas-fucking-ka. After a few drinks (a 5.2% stout, a 5.6% porter, and a 10.2% “Darth” a guy from the Washington area sits down. He tells me about his business. The manufacture and tour utilization of Native American kayaks. He tells me how the kayaks he creates are superior to their fiberglass, modern brethren. When you hit a large wave, modern boats transmit all the encountered forces into the rider. A Native American boat, bends and flexes with its flexible skin. He gives me his business card. One more 5.6% porter and I head out to sit in my car and type a journal entry. My head still too fizzy to drive. This state just... awesome. “American women, gonna mess your mind” on the radio. The radio is equipped with text, the new music is refreshing – I haven’t heard any since British Columbia when I lost XM. Soon the buzz fades and I make my way north, through the rest of Anchorage and into the Interior. My destination, Talkeetna.

Later that day.. About an hour north of Anchorage, my Lonely Planet calls attention to the [Iditarod Gateway](#). Apparently, the official start of the race is in Anchorage, but shortly after they leave city limits (and the photo ops) the teams pack up the dogs and depart from this town of Wasilla, making their way up to Nome. A free museum details the beginnings of the race and some of the hardships along the way. My real goal, however, is marked by the yipping I hear in the distance.

For 10 bucks, you can take a 30 second ride on a dirt sled. I pass on the ride, but spend nearly 45 minutes playing with the dogs. They’re beautiful animals, each single mindedly yearning for nothing more than pulling that sled. The dogs attached, yip and jump to get going. The reserve dogs still attached to their houses, bark and pull to get closer to the lead lines. I meet David, a Texan who has been in Alaska only 2 months. He’s been working toward getting a job with a sled team, and this gig (watering the dogs, reeling in the lead when they come by) suits him fine. Come winter, if he stays, it’ll be pretty sweet to be hooked up with the son of the person who founded the whole race. After going to each and every dog, giving them all a good scruffing on their necks and front quarters ([procuring](#) a couple licks in the process), I’m off again. Contemplating what life would be like raising a team of dogs, somewhere north of Anchorage.

Talkeetna appears to have pulled off the impossible. It’s only apparent livelihood is tourism, yet there is strong sense of life in the town. I buy a Vanilla Cream soda and my hiking boots make a clapping sound as I walk along the authentic wooden boardwalk, passing store facades. Strangely, I catch the faint sound of a fiddle. In the town green a couple has broken out a fiddle and guitar, and a small gathering as formed around them. Away from the coast, the temperature has turned higher, closer to 70. In the sun it actually feels too hot for comfort. I sit down on against a rock, shaded by a nearby tree and listen, my foot unconsciously keeping beat with the bluegrass song pouring from these anonymous strings.

July 2, 2006 Talkneeta, Alaska

“When Sheldon shut down the engine and we stepped out into the sunlight, I was nearly blinded by the brilliance of the white world around us. The glacier formed a vast, silent basin surrounded by massive slopes, a universe of ice and rock. Range upon range of mountains stretched before us into the measureless distance, and behind us, towering almost straight up from the ice field rose Denali itself, with snow blowing from its summit thousands of feet over head.

After a long silence, one of us said, “Good god!”

“Yep,” Don Sheldon said, “I’ve always sort of like this place myself.”

- Charles Kuralt *Overnight on Denali*

We’re at 3500 feet traveling at around 120 knots. For the past few miles we’ve been slowly gaining altitude from the muskegs and braided rivers beneath us. The pilot, Bill, points out three different colors of the three different glacier rivers that meet just north of us. One’s muddy brown, ones milky grey, and the other is somewhere in between. After they meet, they still maintain their separate colors for quite some distance before enough mixing occurs to blend the colors. Glacier runoff is full of “glacial flour” pebbles and debris that the glacier has picked up in its century’s long trek down from the mountains. This debris forms the gravel bars that constitute a braided river. Navigation through this dynamic and twisted environment must be maddening.

I’m sitting in a [7 passenger DeHaviland Beaver](#) headed over the plains of the Sustina Valley toward the Brooks Range, and more specifically Mt. McKinley.

After gaining enough altitude to clear the landing strip, I am immediately disheartened. For my 300 bucks, all I see ahead of me is a bank of dark looking storm clouds. Great, I get to fly through some rain for my money. I’m sitting in the co pilot seat, having won the draw with another passenger (guess a number between 1 and 3, I chose 3.) After 20 minutes we start getting closer to the shrouded mountains ahead of us. As we approach, I catch a glimpse of some sunlight peaks behind the clouds. It appears the weather is only over the valley. Before leaving, I swung by the Talkeetna Cemetery. Not exactly a normal tourist destination, it houses the Denali Climber’s Memorial, with every climber killed on Denali entered on a wooden sign. There are 3 entries from 2005. Also in this cemetery is the grave of Don Sheldon. I know the name for two reasons, 1) He’s the pilot in one of the short stories in my “Readers Companion to Alaska” 2) the glacier landing that I’ve signed up for is next to Don Sheldon Amphitheater. This man pioneered the use of bush planes to ferry tourists into the peaks around McKinley and even built a mountain shelter before the borders of the National Park were expanding to include the 5 acres he bought. In his time he was also known for being a master of bush flying, making runs too risky for anyone else. I think its fitting that this state and mountains he must have loved didn’t end up killing him, it was cancer.

Soon, [the wall](#) of the mountain range appears in front of us. I can visualize the path that Bill has chosen to enter, via a pass to the west. As the DeHaviland climbs we are suddenly immersed in the surreal. The clouds which threatened to trash the entire trip have retreated, and now only puffs of white give a heightened depth to the speed and altitude. We enter “Little Switzerland” a family of rugged, exposed rock with peaks jutting from the glacier floor like teeth. We cruise what feels like dozens of feet (but in

reality might be a quarter of a mile) from icy ridges, looking down on crevasses and the most perfect blue of glacier melt water. It's like a dream, where you're flying among the mountains, separated from the breathtaking peaks only by air. It becomes utterly beyond description as we enter the heart of the range. The clouds have opened up to reveal [McKinley](#) and two sister peaks along our route. The pilot makes circles and loops to show us ice falls, lateral moraines, hanging glaciers, all which is fantastical in this unbelievable environment. A few hours removed, I am at a total loss of words. It is the single coolest thing I have ever done.

Bill pumps on a handheld hydraulic jack in between the pilot and copilot seat. This lowers the skis and retracts the wheels. We are going to [land on a glacier](#). Swooping around a nearby peak we line up with the uphill landing section, delineated only by a few blue sleds, upended in the snow. A typical landing: get close on a controlled descent, pull up a foot or so above the ground to flare, and slowly stall out the wings letting the plane settle itself. A roostertail of snow flies up as the big metal skis make contact and drag the plane to a stop. Bill circles around to head downhill, kills the engine, and we are left to our own devices in the middle of the range, McKinley towering overhead to our north. No other planes or souls (apparently rare on a good day). The single coolest thing I have ever done.

A half hour later we are following the [Ruth Glacier](#) back home to Talkeetna. The gorge that the glacier has carved is the deepest in North America (again, the most of something in Alaska). The ice we are flying over is over 5000 feet deep and hundreds of years old, so deep it could easily fill the Grand Canyon. Stripes of coal black dirt, rocks the size of houses, bright blue pools of meltwater, all buttressed on either side by moraines hundreds of feet in depth. I'm passing over all of it at a hundred and fifty miles per hour, a thousand feet above. We continue on and soon it looks like were simply over more muskeg and forest, but beneath that greenery is still ice. It isn't until another 10 minutes has passed that we've truly left the terminus and are over the valley again, following the gravel bars back to Talkeetna, periodically spotting a cabin or two nestled in the trees.

Tomorrow before I leave town, I'm headed back to [Don's grave](#) to say thank you. Before we left, I stopped by and asked him to make sure the flight was good. For the next few days I anticipate being in Denali backcountry. I decide to get another prepared meal in town. As its only 5:30, I swing by the Fairview Inn for a pint or two before eating. This inn is rumored to have killed a president. William Harding stopped here on his Alaska visit of 1923. While visiting the area, Harding supposedly stopped here, got drunk, and then died a month later in San Francisco of an unknown illness. I'm drinking a local hefewiezen as the band starts to set up. Jazz. Perfect. I man my position at the bar as the crowd begins to build, periodically talking to other "outsiders" that swing by for a beer or two before catching their train or shuttle. On the ceiling is the hide of a grizzly bear. On the walls, among the picture of mountaineers and locals, is the head of a black bear, except there are a pair of silly plastic glasses on its snout. The floors are old planking like you walk on outside. The band (a sax and a keyboardist) play on as locals meander in. Everyone seems to be saying "hi" to a guy named Phil in the corner. A foot long white beard and tired eyes, I wonder what his story is. 6 beers and a pulled beef sandwich later, and I'm upwards of 40 bucks (money starts to become nothing more than paper =

alcohol) into the night. Heh.. night.. they don't have fireworks up here – it never gets dark enough. I meander outside to the village green.

Somehow, out in the middle of nowhere, there is a local contingent, has to be 2 dozen strong of a few different young groups. Under the roofed shelter, several 3 and 4 year olds wander about, their parents just old enough to have been in high school when they were born. It's odd to see 21 year old guys playing with little girls in the grass; all like this is a typical Sunday night. Another group is playing a game in the green. Someone takes a golf ball, throws it somewhere, and then in two teams, 4 balls are thrown to try and get as close to the ball as possible. I watch the progress while chewing on a piece of grass, letting the beer fuzziness melt away in the lowering sun.

July 4, 2006 Riley Creek Campground, Denali National Park, Alaska

I sign in at the register. Name, car make/model/color, date leaving, date returning, comments. I fill in each and put a [www.roadtrippin.org](http://www.roadtrippin.org) plug in. The trail immediately enters thick brush. I'm hiking up Little Coal Creek trail in Denali State Park. My destination is the Kesugi Ridge. On the west will be the Chulitna River valley, and farther west the Alaskan Range. All the big names will be visible (weather permitting) amongst the jagged white peaks including Denali, Forester, and Hunter. To the east will be the Sustina River valley, and most of the hike is on dry tundra. In other words, picture the ideal Alaskan hike, and this is it. Two separate guide books has called this one of the best hikes in the state.

It takes me 30 minutes to find my groove and a little longer to get all the belts adjusted on the pack's suspension. It's been awhile since I've shouldered a full pack.. The trail grows muddier and muddier as it passes an old beaver damn, still holding back nearly 6 feet of water. The trail finds a steady ascent and climbs through dense growth. I begin my repetitive wail of "hey bear" over and over again. Soon the trail climbs out of the denser broad leaf plants and grass, and into waist high alder brush. This is the first glimpse – the range. Eldridge Glacier sits directly west, snaking like a huge river between peaks, a dark stripe down its centerline. The terminus of this glacier, like many in the area, is actually covered with flora. Entire ecosystems exist on top of the moving wall of ice.

The mosquitoes are in swarms along the trail. When I walk through them, they try to attach to me repelled in the last half inch by my coating of 100% deet. I'm soaking in sweat as I hit some scree. 15 minutes of negotiating the sharp edged rocks with my off balance load and I finally enter the tundra. Moving south along the ridge, I quickly encounter a large rockfall. As I approach I think I hear a jet. It's a deep, low murmuring. Once I'm on top of the rocks, however, I realize the sound is coming from underneath the rockfall – a river is running under my feet.

The tundra lays out before me along the ridge, [a whitish green mat](#) speckled with black and orange rocks. I can pick out cairns for miles ahead of me. The clouds clear up further on the Alaskan Range and this is perfect. I notice some of the rocks I'm walking on have long, deep cuts in them. I recall a John Muir short story about Glacier Bay where

he talks about the glacial till that hasn't been polished or worn, the evidence of all that rock scarring energy still visible.

After 8 or 9 miles, I decide to [make camp](#). In the time it takes to travel that distance, the novelty of hiking in this incredible and solitary environment has lost its effect, being replaced instead with the heavy pack and miles and miles to go. It's still light out, and will be for hours, but looking at the map the next reliable source of water and relatively level ground is too far away to reach tonight. I move the food and related equipment 50 yards from where my tent is. I don't really think bears will be a problem on the ridge, but with my bear luck I'm not going to push it. Within 15 minutes, I have dinner ready, dehydrated spaghetti – my favorite. After dinner I go to the creek and pump my filter to fill the Camelback. Mosquitoes swarm against the only non-deet covered surface, my pants. I move some gear around and then climb into the tent and watch the mosquitoes probe the netting above me.

Broken sleep all night. It takes me hours to get to bed, and the wind picks up around 10 or 11, making an array of noises outside my tent. Is that a [bear snuffing](#) the edge of my rain fly? Is that a marmot in my pack? Is that rain, which would mean foul weather on an exposed ridge, that I hear?

I remember some dreams, so I got some sleep. I crawl out of my sleeping bag – a shiver. It's quite cold, even protected from the wind. I don't want to get out and pack my gear.

After a breakfast of energy bars and water, I pack everything up and start moving. Despite walking through mist which turns into pouring rain, I actually feel pretty good. My legs and feet feel fine, and it feels great to be moving again. I'm on the trail by 4am – the sun is already rising. Then I catch a glimpse. In the range to my west, McKinley comes out for a few moments, bathed in the [orange light of alpenglow](#) from a sun rise that I can't even see. 5 minutes later, it's gone and clouds sock in the entire view.

Shortly after reaching the [Ermine Hill split](#), the trail begins to descend from tree line. After fumbling down a slippery sand slope, I'm once again battling alder thickets, tall grass, and broad leaf plants, all encroaching on my progress. Also, mud. Shin deep mud. Stream crossings. Soaked pants and shirt from water collected on the leaves that I continually brush against. Skinny Lake comes into view after 4 unpleasant miles and I finally start heading out of the valley and back up a rock face. And back up means gaining 700 feet in less than a half mile, up slippery dirt tracks that go straight up. I strain against my hiking poles and try to get footing. Alaska trail maintenance crews do NOT believe in switchbacks. After cresting Mt Golog, the hike starts to take its toll. My feet, now soaked, begin to hurt. My legs and shoulders ache too. I can feel myself needing calories, but eating an energy bar almost makes me sick.

I push back onto tundra, only making 2-2.5 mph compared to the 3-3.5 earlier in the day. After I cross some terrain, that according to my GPS, looks to be where I should find the link to the trailhead, I start to wonder if I've missed the junction. Maybe over the next hill. Or the next. Or the next. Down to 2 mph max. Finally the broken sign indicating the trail comes into view and I'm filled with poignant gladness.

The descent starts off harshly. 1500+ feet are lost in less than 1.5 miles. Mostly down slippery, muddy drops – more erosion than trails. Exposed roots run across the trail, adding another obstacle. Putting your weight on those with wet boots is worse than stepping on ice. Finally the descent becomes more gradual and the last few miles slowly pass. Near the end, I can't bear to take a break so close, never mind not wanting to be devoured by insects. Each step is painful and I put more and more weight on my hiking poles. The trailhead comes into site, and I ask the person standing there if he knows where any water is.

There's no piped water, of course, any where near the trailhead or along the trail so I've been relying on my Katadan filter. I filled my Camelback halfway just before the descent figuring I wouldn't need any more and certainly didn't need the extra weight. Hiking solo is bad for a number of reasons, bears being one big one (a group of people is more intimidating - \*thinks back to Montana in 2002\*), the other being that your pack is always inextricably heavier since you can't load balance the tent, the stove, the fuel, the cooking supplies with other people. About 1.5 miles from the trailhead I run out of water. At lower altitude, in the sun and this humid (by Alaskan standards) forest I'm pouring out sweat. Larry, a scoutmaster from San Diego, hands me his half full Nalgene and tells me to finish it. I must have had the same look Ray and I had after running out of water in New Hampshire once a couple summers ago.

After polishing it off in one pull, he asks if I need a ride or something. My car is parked at Little Coal Creek, nearly 20 miles away. I was planning on hitching back, but with my muddy pants and pack, that might be difficult. I gladly accept his extraordinary generosity, and sit down on my pack stretching my legs while I watch his troop assemble and goof off waiting for the van. The boys don't know how lucky they are to have such a good scoutmaster, taking them to Alaska, sheesh. It's nice to see them all having such a carefree, good time too. I remember the weight of being 15 or 16, but in a group like this it's just about having fun. That having fun just happens to be with frame packs on a ridge in Alaska.

I bid farewell, pack my car and head north toward Denali National Park. Near the entrance station, a resort town called Glitter Gulch exists. Luxury rentals stuck up high on the forested hills near the Nenena River. A couple slices of pizza have been calling my name.

July 5, 2006 Riley Creek Campground, Denali National Park

The Athabasqan Indians that inhabited this area of Alaska before white man with boomsticks came around, had a theory of creation that involved a Great Raven. Now the Great Raven came along and made man as well as dogs. At first they could communicate with each other using the same language. After some time passed, the Great Raven observed the world he had created and noticed a problem. He then quickly corrected his

mistake and made the dogs unable to speak with the humans anymore, for when the dogs died it was like a human had died to its owners.

Denali NP has a team of about 30 sled dogs that it uses during the winter to patrol and restock outpost cabins. They don't use snowmobiles because 1) they become unreliable at the cold temperatures 2) they're illegal to use in the vast wilderness which comprises the park. Pound for pound, sled dogs are the strongest pack animals known to man, not to mention being well equipped with dual layer fur, insulated ears, and a weird wolf-like circulation system (the blood is just above freezing at the paws during the winter). Part of the dogs' summer responsibilities is to endure the endless ear and belly scratching that tourist like me impose on them during our kennel visits.

I notice the variety of personalities while I make my rounds. There's the passive-social (lays in the middle of the walkway and pretends not to care when people pet it), the hyper attention seeker (sits on his dog house and howls and barks like a rabid mutt), the deliberately anti-social (sits with his back to people and will not turn around), the scared anti-social (seen only by his blue eyes in the dark confines of his dog house), and the in betweeners.

Today I relaxed. Partly because I got here too late yesterday to really make any plans in this tourist madhouse that's also known as Denali (you should see it when the train arrives) and partly because my legs were so sore when I got up this morning, doing anything on foot was untenable at best. I paid for the camp site, got a bus ticket for tomorrow morning, showered, did my laundry, and stopped at the visitor center to snag some maps and backcountry information, and of course, went to visit the dogs.

Like many other parks in the NPS franchise, private vehicles aren't allowed in the park. Instead you rely on a bus system to drive and drop you along the 90 mile dirt road that stretches into the center of the park (which, incidentally, took 15 years to build). Unlike most other parks, you have to pay to ride this one, up to 35 bucks for the full length which can take you 11(!) hours without stopping and seeing anything. I signed up for the loop as far as Fish Lake per the recommendation of my guidebook. Tomorrow will be another recovery day, as I write this evening I feel fine except for my problem knee, and I'll do the whole be-a-tourist thing on the bus. People can oohh and aww over bears off in the distance. See if they'd be doing that after stumbling into them outside the safety of a metal cage.

July 6, 2006 Riley Creek Campground, Denali National Park, Alaska

“And for when my medication wears off and I roll the bus, there are emergency escape exits in the roof.” Sam. He's our bus driver/tour guide for today. I file onto the bus with 46 other people and settle in. Fish Creek, the last stop on the route I've selected, can take over 8 hours roundtrip. It's another relaxing day – not too much stress in riding a bus, and with the overcast and raining skies over the entrance area I don't have too much hope in seeing the mountain. This doesn't really bother me though as I've seen it twice already. Once from the air and once from a ridge 50 miles away.

[The bus](#) leaves the entrance area and climbs through the taiga of the Savage River plain. On the side of the road there's fireweed and [forget-me-nots](#) (Alaska's state flower) and beyond that white and black spruce. Black spruce are interesting in that they're one of those plants that critically depend on the cycle of forest fires – the heat produced by a

passing fire can kill the tree but also releases the seeds contained in its combs. Sam talks about the need for more buses in the park. NPS limits the amount of people that can enter, and on busy days people are indeed left standing at the front entrance, this segment of their expensive vacation ruined. On each bus is a GPS transceiver. The Park service monitors where the buses are, when they're stopping, where the other buses are when they stop, and later down the road, what the animals do around the buses (via radio collars on everything from grizzly to Dall Sheep.) The project probably costs millions, all to study the impact of 4 or 5 extra buses on this 90 mile stretch of road. The rangers here have their shit together and it shows. This is one of the best run parks I have ever been to.

For the first couple hours, we don't see much of the landscape. Out of the taiga and into the tundra, people on the bus are going absolutely crazy over any and all fauna. From a caribou over mile in the distance, to a damn ptarmigan bird. The bus starts its precarious climb up Polychrome Pass. For all the talk of it, this [is pretty hardcore](#). Gravel road, no barriers, 500-1000ft drop. At the top, [an amazing vista](#) is laid out before us. The rugged peaks of the Alaska range spread out linearly across a vast (and I mean VAST) open tundra, broken by braided, glacially fed, rivers. The water looks like rippled mercury in the cloudy light.

The road then continues its internal path through the park, skirting that open tundra and offering views of valleys, nooks, rivers, and kettle ponds. Desensitization is a normal human process. The brain, in all its incredible glory, needs to classify, prioritize, and route information. Once a stimulus has been processed, and is of continuous exposure, the brain will block it out along with the other millions of streams that are ignored on a daily basis. It's sad when that happens, in a limited degree, to this scenery. These mountains are beyond words beautiful, but I've been immersed in them for weeks. I think about taking out my book and reading through some of the more monotonous parts of the ride.

And then we start descending the final hill to our Fish Creek turnaround. Off in the distance it's just a small part of the base. And this small part of the base dominates the entire view. Sam comes in over the intercom with a matter of fact voice, "and the mountain is coming into view." In an almost cinematic sequence, the clouds start to shed away from her. By the time we reach the turnaround point, Mount McKinley is outlined by blue sky. It is utterly incredible. This [mountain is HUGE](#), rising almost 13,000 feet from its base (Mt. Everest on the other hand, rises only 9,000). Its hulking flanks dominate the skyline. After a few dozen pictures, just to make sure, we start to head back. The people on the bus seem more interested in getting a few extra pictures of the blonde grizzly and 2 cubs we saw a few miles back. To each his own I guess. As I look back before crossing the crest of the hill, I notice the clouds have started to regain around the summit. I swear someone or something is watching over me on this trip.

July 8, 2006 Riley Creek Campground, Denali National Park, Alaska

I load up my pack once more, lace up my boots, Velcro the gaiters and walk to the Camper Bus stop near Riley Creek. The weight settles into the pack easier this time, only a few days off Kesugi. The bear resistant container and tent go side by side in the main compartment, the sleeping bag in its lower compartment, a change of clothes and three

changes of socks in the dry bag on top, the water filter in the front pouch, and miscellaneous stuff (aspirin, waterproof matches, camera, etc) in the fold-over flap. The bear spray is in its holster on the waist belt, and my GPS is in its pouch on the shoulder strap.

At 9:30, the bus arrives and before I know it I'm off on the dusty, bumpy road out into the park. In the seat next to me is a Ranger-chick, in the seat forward of me is Laura and Gabe. The interesting conversation makes the time go easily. The Ranger is off on a two day backcountry patrol, Laura and Gabe are off backcountry camp in the Teklanika area. I'm the odd one out, these girls all work with the land, either through SCA or the Park Service. Laura has an interesting job doing something or other with fire study on the Stampede Trail near Healy. Anyone who's read *Into the Wild* knows this trail well – she's actually seen the bus. On the way out, someone spots a wolf.

Backcountry Unit #7 in the Denali Wilderness is on the eastern side of Polychrome Pass. The East Fork of the Tolkat drains through the valley away from its headwaters at a glacier near Mt. Pendleton. The driver stops the bus in the middle of the narrow road, looks at me in the mirror and says "You're up." I grab my gear from the back of the bus, say goodbye to everyone and step off. As I toss my pack down, the bus doors close and it rumbles off the hill, straining against the steep grade of Polychrome. Soon it's out of earshot, and here I am, [alone in Denali](#).

Things don't go so smoothly from the start. In order to get down to the drainage that I'll use to navigate up the valley (Denali has no trails), I need to manage a steep 40 foot embankment. I slide my way down and then head off on the east side of the river. The East Fork drainage, like most in the park, is a huge swath of gravel, a little tundra on each side, and then alder and willow covered banks rising a few hundred feet up. The river makes its way along these beds, in [numerous channels](#) that switch and cut into each other, hence the term 'braided'. I choose the east side of the river after consulting my topo map. If I choose the west side, I am guaranteed to have to cross at least one large river. On the east side, I might get away with nothing. The park has received a lot of rain these past weeks. Good for forest fires, but very bad for crossing the park's major rivers, especially alone.

After making my way for about a half mile, I hit some severe cutbank. No choice but to head up into the willow and alder and make my way along there until some gravel wash shows itself. I bushwhack through for 30 minutes and then reenter the drainage. Sprawled out in front of me is the valley that the river course through. At its head, snow capped mountains, wisps of puffy clouds boil off their peaks.

I venture on, only having to cross minor 'braids' of the river, and spending some time hiking on the cushy tundra. With no intention to make this a killer hike, I get 4 or 5 miles out, find a nice spot, and set up the tent. I walk 100 yards away and place the bear can and cooking accoutrements. Lunch is a Snickers bar. I break out my book, lay out my Thermarest next to my pack as to make a nice seat, and read through the afternoon. When it starts to drizzle, I go inside my tent.

A couple hours later I grab the spray, my poles, and camera and head upriver to explore the headwaters of the river and some of the hills that border it. Braided rivers are interesting. The water is flowing at almost the same level as the bed. In the main area there are dozens of channels that anywhere from a trickle to a main flow of water can go through. If a big piece of rock happens to fall in the right place, or the silt builds

sufficiently up, the river will find itself down an entirely new path. In fact, the area that my tent is on, while a few feet above the main swath of gravel, is riddled with old cuts. On my way back I find a skull with a [full rack](#) and a few leg bones. I take some pictures and move on.

Back at camp, a curious caribou watches me from the river. He (or she – did you know that both male and female caribou have antlers? And did you know that they both lose them in the winter – except the *pregnant* females? Santa’s sleigh is pulled by prego chicks!) Around 7:30 I walk 200 yards down river and make/eat dinner. Dehydrated meals are a godsend while hiking. I take my time, repack the bear can, and then climb [into my tent](#). I read myself to sleep to the sound of the river burbling a few yards away.

After getting up and taking my time packing camp, I start to meander back towards the road. The way back is more of the same, except the weather is a little cooler and its drizzling. I retrace my steps back towards the road until about ½ mile away. Here is where I first entered the alder and willow when the bank was cut away. During the night the river either rose or change course enough to no cover the gravel route I took out here. I’ll have to cross to the other side to get back – something I specifically did not want to do by myself. I spend 10 minutes surveying the river around me. The safety video that NPS makes you watch before giving you a backcountry permit said that major crossings can take hours, most of it planning and scouting. This crossing isn’t *that* severe, but I really don’t want to end up underwater, dragged downstream. As I stand thinking, a section of the 30 foot embankment above me collapses and tumbles down to my right. I take it as a sign to leave and get moving.

I find a wide spot, unclip my waist and sternum straps (the pack will become an anchor if I fall down) and start probing at the [milky water](#) with my poles. A few feet from the shore and they go down 4 feet. Too deep for me in this frigid, fast moving river. I turn around and head a quarter mile upstream. Here the water is well braided and is above the confluence of a somewhat large tributary. I start crossing, little channels at first, and then a few larger ones. The cold water quickly makes it past my gaiters and bootliners. I keep plodding along and soon I’m across. Wet, but totally without injury, a new experience recorded. I make it back to the road, struggle up the embankment and wait for a bus to come by. As I stand there I look down at the river. I notice an interesting section where a small clear stream, either spring or rain fed, mixes with an equally sized stream of silt filled, glacial run off. The approach and meet at near composite angles. Looks like a classic mixing problem that could be modeled in Fluent or something. A couple hours later, a bus appears.

Back in the entrance area of Denali, I go for a 30 minute run. It’s not masochistic intent that leads me to do it after returning from the backcountry, just the recognition of when will I next have the chance to go running under the peaks of the Alaska Range in Denali National Park. Afterwards, I take a hot shower and do some laundry. My tent is located back in Riley Creek, again, and tomorrow I’ll be headed north to Fairbanks. Adventure in the Arctic Circle awaits.

I head up to the Visitor Center to burn off some time. They have a movie theater showing something called “The Heartbeat of Denali.” It’s a well put together sequence of

pleasant music and some wonderfully shot film. Close ups of wildlife and plants, some aerial sequences, Denali in summer and winter glory – great stuff. I look around to the people near me. I bet for most of them this is as close to it as they'll come. To each his own I guess.

July 11, 2006 Noel Wien Public Library, Fairbanks, Alaska

“Here was this gay scene, this little huddle of homes, one little working, whirring piece of civilization set down in almost the exact center of this enormous land, the great wilderness, thousands of miles of it, surrounding that tiny, whirring, alive spot.”

-Margaret Murie, *Winter in Fairbanks* 1911

Captain Barnette headed out in 1901 to establish a trading post where the Tanana River crossed the Valdez-Eagle trail. After wrecking his own boat, he hitched a ride on the steamer Lavelle Young. Shallow water on the Tanana forced the boat onto the [Chena River](#). When the water there became too shallow to continue (about 7 miles upstream), Barnette was dropped on the riverbank. Fairbanks was founded (so named because, well, the banks of the Chena are very accessible). Soon gold was discovered and the trading post sprouted into a full fledged city, the northernmost major population center in the United States. People then, as with now, have a heightened sense of community. Those that I've talked to and read about all describe this virtue as one of the reasons they find it hard to contemplate leaving. This despite the -40 degree winters. All the parking lots in town have power outlets at the head of each space. When you park your car, you plug in your three separate heaters, to keep the transmission, engine block/coolant, and battery warm. If you neglect to do that, your car won't start until spring. When it gets really cold, even those can't do the trick and the entire town basically comes to a standstill. Airlines won't fly in for fear of damaging their landing gear (metal becomes significantly embrittled at those temperatures and tires will actually flat spot from contact with the ground).

My original intent was to arrive in Fairbanks and arrange van transportation up the Dalton Highway to Prudhoe Bay. This road was built as a “haul road” during construction of the Alyeska Pipeline. Prudhoe Bay is the head of the pipeline, where millions of barrels of 140°F crude starts its journey south, supplying the United States with 20% of its oil needs. A 20 dollar tour would then get me to the Arctic Ocean, the last of the “big list” things to do. The Lonely Planet book I have lists this service at around \$250. Imagine my surprise when, after calling, I found out it's closer to \$450 and there isn't an outbound trip until next week. \*blink blink\* Display some adaptability I tell myself. A few phone calls later and I've arranged air transport to Barrow, the northernmost point in North America for the tidy sum of \$500. This is the only flight with availability for the next week, and still doesn't depart until Wednesday morning, two days away.

First step is to see what there is around here to do. I figured on one day of downtime, but 2.5 days ahead of me is daunting. After consulting the guide books and local literature I make a list and head off.

- Relaxation – It feels awkward to be on a road trip, 5000 miles from home, and intentionally relaxing. I stop by a local tobacco store and get myself [a pipe](#) and blend to put in it. I fill my Nalgene with water and head off into one of the local parks with a book.
- University of Alaska, Fairbanks [Museum of the North](#) – Touted as the best museum in the state, I tender my 10 bucks and wander. The main section of the building (which in itself is quite interesting in design), is divided into the main ecological regions of Alaska. Exhibits range from an 8 foot grizzly bear to Japanese/Aluet WWII internment camps to the northern lights. Upstairs is an art section with some pretty interesting stuff done by the students of UAF/local artists.

I finish the visit off with a stop at the “Room where you listen.” Very neat stuff – they have a radio telescope that translates the signals of the aurora borealis (Fairbanks has one of the highest frequencies in the world for the northern lights, you just can’t see them in summer since it doesn’t get dark) and some sort of seismophone that records earth movements. These sounds are piped into a small white room with an excellent sound system, and soft neon lighting.

- [Alyeska Pipeline](#) - I stopped briefly at a station on the Richardson Highway when I first arrived in the state, but it was raining. Here I spend some time reading the placards that describe the pipelines construction and operation, and then wander around it. This 800 mile piece of engineering has carried almost 15 billion gallons of crude since it started operations. The section I stand under has the anhydrous ammonia cooling fins on each upright. This keeps the 140 degree F oil from melting the permafrost below.
- Walmart - the northernmost Walmart in North America, and quite possibly the world, to stock up on food supply and to get a new butane lighter.

I catch a movie (Superman Returns), spend some time in the library, and even more time just relaxing and reading wherever I can find shade. I’ve been spoiled by the weather south of here. 65-low 70s during the day (perfect), and 50s at night (perfect).

There’s a park in the city center. Has a nice fountain/garden/statue in the form of a “[first unknown family](#).” A 20 foot tall, metal depiction of a man, women, child, and dog coming across the Bering land bridge. The muddy and debris strewn waters of the Chena River flow silently just down the slight slope. With some white birch providing shade, this is a nice spot to read and smoke a pipe.

Across the river (accessible via a pedestrian bridge) is a building labeled Doyon, Inc. One of the several darker skin people mulling around tells me that’s their tribal headquarters as the sounds of drums comically begins. They are apparently practicing for a big pow-wow (almost clichéd use of the word) that takes place in a week or two. As I sit and talk with these people, I recognize a couple things. First, a sense of community. They all know each other by first name and seem to pick up on conversations left off what could have been weeks ago. Second, alcohol is an oppressor to these people. It’s pervasive in their talk and its effect is inextricably not

negative. In Alaska, alcohol is a serious issue. The long, dark days of winter are linked to increased consumption. And for some reason, this is even further heightened by the inexplicable propensity for people of native descent to get pulled, out of control into the bottle. Someone asks me for a couple bucks to buy some (in the friendliest way possible – you can be walking past a few rough looking teenagers but they are always polite and friendly), a woman talks about her court date for possession in the village, a group of kids asks among themselves who's dad buys for them. I don't have any sort of romantic notions about some great and noble people. Native Americans lived in harmony with their environment because they lived in the stone age, waged perpetual warfare on each other, and killed their babies by dropping them in the woods when they couldn't sustain the size of the village. But still, it's sad to see so many people moved aside like that. Go live in your village, here's your yearly check from the oil.

All and all though, an interesting experience these past two days. I like Fairbanks and I like the people I've talked to in it. With tomorrow morning comes the last of the items on the Big List. The adventure is almost over.

July 12, 2006 Tanana Valley Fairgrounds, Fairbanks, Alaska

“ ‘Darr-dit-darr; dit-dit-dit dit.. The operator at Barrow- he did it-we'd get through all right now. ‘Fog lifting, visibility two miles.’ Oh what a grand man! We could see the gray flat coast line now and watched it closely for Barrow. That might be it – a stretch of whitish irregular blocks- houses? No, as we came nearer, they were the strange pushed up blocks of ice pack crushed against a little harbor.”

-Anne Lindbergh, *Barrow* 1931

“I've got a really bad hangover – was up late drinking last night. But don't worry, I've took some pills, thought I don't know what they were, and the colors are just awesome. And I've been flying here in Alaska for *weeks* so you don't have anything to worry about.” Pilot humor. I'm climbing onboard a [Piper Chieftain](#). Holds eight people, twin prop engine. Up front the dual GPS avionics light up and start blinking through their diagnostics. Gary (the pilot) lights up the engines and taxis out to the end of the runway. After doing flight pre-checks we're soon up and flying over Fairbanks, headed to the top of the continent, Barrow, Alaska.

The giant white building that houses UAF's museum soon fades into the distance and we're over the boreal forest that surrounds Fairbanks. This same forest extends around the entire globe, unbroken except for oceans, through Russia, Europe, and Canada. The weather is good, so Gary takes us in low only about 700 feet off the ground

cruising at 200 mph. He points out evidence of recent burning. Over the past few years, the forest around Fairbanks has been subject to lightning induced fires. There are charred tree remains and weirdly, some trees that appear to have just fallen over as if by wind. Gary explains, “The fires heated up the ground sufficiently to melt the permafrost. Those trees literally just fell down.” Also mixed into the giant swaths of apparent destruction are seas of purple-red flowers. [Fireweed](#). I guess I now know where it gets its name.

Gary starts telling us how hellish it would be to cross this, like most of the interior, by foot. It appears to be mostly accessible land from this altitude. But glints of silver from the green beneath betray that actual topography. Most of this land is a boggy mess, consisting of soggy ground in some places, and foot deep water covered by a thin membrane of organic material in others. The mosquitoes would eat you alive. He comes in low, around 500 feet. The windshield begins to get covered with insect smear. At 500 feet! He said he got lower it'd cover the windshield so bad that he'd be unable to see. And of course there are the bears. From Gary you get the non-distilled stories that you don't get from the NPS. He personally medivacs 2-3 bear maulings a year from this area. And carrying a gun doesn't necessarily help either. One group went for a float trip in Gates of the Arctic NP. Took all the right precautions, ate and made food a mile away at another camp, carried bear spray and guns, camped in a gravel bar. Grizzly came and ate them both during the night, not a shot fired. “If they want you, they're gonna get you.”

Just after leaving the taiga, we hit the beginning of the Brook's Range and arrive in [Coldfoot](#). This town, the last stop for services for 240 miles along the Dalton Highway, holds an impressive (though unofficial – no NWS station here) record. In the course of a year, the temperature ranged from -82 F to 97 F, that's 179 degrees of variation. Gary refuels the plane while we stop off for rest room breaks. On return he gives us the bad news. The cover over Barrow is coming down low. If it gets too low we can't land. Normally, with a plane equipped like this one, you could just switch to an IFR flight plan which basically allows you to land on instruments alone. However the FAA dictates that in order to do so, you need to have enough fuel onboard to get to an alternate IFR landing strip – with all of us there's not enough spare weight to get that much fuel on board so we're stuck with visual approaches only. We hurriedly climb onboard and take off, hoping to beat the clouds.

While the weather might be poor 300 miles north of us, it's open and clear where we are. This allows Gary to take the plane high (around 7500 ft) over the Brooks Range and afford us some wonderful views of this mountain range, a rarity according to him as most times the weather is bad above these turbulent peaks. As rugged as any mountains I've seen, there's little snow. But there are [giant open valleys tinged](#) with glacier green rivers. These mountains are the most remote in the United States, accessible only by boat or plane. This range stretches off at this latitude for 200 miles on either side of us and takes us about 30 minutes to traverse. Soon the rugged stone peaks give way to hills, which give way to flatness like I've never seen before – the North Slope.

The North Slope is a section of land between the Brooks and the Arctic Ocean. As the name suggests, it slopes down to the shores of the sea, but not perceptibly. After cresting the last ridge we descend, and at an altitude of 2000 feet, this land appears utterly flat, extending in all directions. Beneath us is a landscape pockmarked by small pools of water and rivers that have seemed to devolve into ponds connected by small threads of flow. There's a peculiar pattern to the land as well. It's divided into small blocks of

irregular but straight edged shapes, separated by darker lines of vegetation. It's quite evident at low altitudes and somewhat so from higher above. The pattern extends from the ocean all the way to the foothills of the Brooks. I have no idea what causes it.

Shortly after entering the slope, the clouds get increasingly lower. We keep descending lower and lower with it, trying to stay below them. If we have to pull up on top of them, we won't be able to descend back through to Barrow without breaching regulations. "See those white spots on the tundra?" Gary banks the plane hard to the left to give a better view, one of the people from New Zealand up front gasps at the sudden maneuver which now has the ground almost straight beneath the left side windows. "Those are piles of bones. When a caribou dies and gets eaten by wolves, they just leave the bones in a nice neat pile like that." There aren't much caribou to be spotted right now, but in a few weeks once the calving season is done this land will be covered with hundreds of thousands of them, Gary explains. It sounds like something out of history from the lower 48, massive animal migrations extending as far as the eye can see.

I look at the altimeter, it reads 600 something. The ground below is about 300 feet in elevation, so we're just about 300 feet from the ground traveling at 200 miles per hour. The clouds push us lower and lower. Finally Gary comes on the intercom, "Ok guys, I gotta pull up. We'll keep heading towards Barrow, maybe it'll break up when we get there." The plane abruptly changes pitch and a minute later has punched through the lower layer of clouds. There's broken blue sky above us. I'm deflated. One of my Big List items was the Arctic Ocean and it looks like that's not going to happen.

20 or 30 minutes later, Gary comes again onto the speakers. He tells us we have a decision to make. Either keep going towards Barrow with our fingers crossed, or turn around and head to another Eskimo village in the northern edge of the Brooks Range. If we keep going to Barrow and it doesn't happen to clear for us, we won't have enough fuel for anything except turning around and going back to Coldfoot. A 4 hour plane ride for nothing. It's worth the shot though, and we all agree to push forward to Barrow.

We're still in the clouds when I hear the hydraulic actuators turn on and watch the flaps lower. Gary comes on the radio, "You guys are the luckiest..." and trails off. He pitches the plane hard into a break in the clouds that I hadn't even seen till we were banking into it. We pop beneath the clouds and the Arctic Ocean is a half mile away, the ice pack still clinging only yards offshore. Barrow is dead ahead. 8 minutes later the controller at Barrow closes the strip to visual approaches, only IFR can get in for the rest of the day.

Barrow is an interesting town. Its population is around 5000, 60% of it Eskimo. The town and the massive expanse that it sits on (the North Slope) is owned by a corporation that the Eskimos formed. These native Americans have done a lot better for themselves than the Navajos I've seen in the desert northeast of Arizona or any of the countless other tribes the US government removed. When oil was discovered and mined, these guys made an unimaginable amount of money. They have billions. And not just billions that they spend on alcohol or snowmobiles, they have it all invested. They've got flush toilets in this arctic wonderland, a bus system, excellent schools (although teacher turnover is extremely high), well maintained (albeit dirt) roads throughout town, a huge town hall/court and a very nice cultural center. The town isn't all that aesthetically

appeasing, with its muddy trash strewn façade, but some things are unavoidable up here. You can't exactly bury your trash when the ground is frozen just beneath the top layer.

A gallon of regular costs \$3.96. Not that bad. A gallon of milk, however, costs \$8. While no vegetables will root in the sandy soil of the tundra, they do get daily deliveries from the Alaska Airline 737s that fly in routinely. They've agreed with the International Whaling Commission, (and by agreed I mean agreed. No one tells these people how to live their lives up here) to stay within a quota for whaling. Bowhead whales are a huge part of the diet, in addition to walrus, seal, fish, and nuts. As the 737s land nearby and the public busses rumble past, whaling is done by teams, and the meat divided amongst the village residents (native and non-native) for *free*. This is a village in some of the truest senses of the word.

As we wait for transportation (inside the plane since it's raining, just above freezing, and winy outside) Gary tells us about an incident at this airport years and years ago. He was flying a Twin Otter and on take off, something broke. The plane took off in steep climb, stalled, and then dove back towards the tarmac. At the last second, Gary threw the throttle open to full, saving himself and his passengers. The plane repeated this 6 times down the length of the runway and finally settled into normal flight. Gary circled the airport and then landed successfully. In an interview later that day with the NTSB and FAA (Gary was the only one to have successfully survived the type of failure that occurred on that plane) he's asked what made him act the way he did, why did he think to throttle up. "Fear. Adrenalin. Self preservation." All interviews of this sort are recorded and stored. Gary regrets that his moment of fame is summarized like that. One out of every fifty-eight people in Alaska has their private pilots license. One out of every sixty has their own plane. Anchorage is the busiest small plane airport in the world, and has the largest floatplane base in the world. But statistics dictates that with this number of planes, Alaskans have their share percentage of accidents. The leaning twin engine plane to our left was crashed. Engines and avionics now stripped, it sits hunched over and deteriorating on the field (sometimes even a hard landing can sufficiently injure an airframe to render the plane uncertifiable). Gary tells us of a DC10 that on approach and on fire, had to flag off because of some kids on the runway. During the go-around the fire weakened the airframe enough and the wing broke off. Everyone died. I vaguely recall these stories when on leaving Barrow, a red indicator light is active on the control board. This light means the landing gear hasn't seated correctly in a stowed position. Gary slows down, redeploys the gear and then retracts. Still a red light. He checks the gear manually and they're fine – just a microswitch problem and he unscrews the bulb so it doesn't burn out.

We climb into a van that brings us around the town. Our guide, Budda, swings by his mom's house and gets his dog to start howling. We drive up to Pt. Barrow, the northernmost point of land on the continent for photo ops. On the way there we get onto a steel grated, now closed, runway laid down by the Navy 50 years ago. Budda guns it and drives around the mangled sections with pieces of metal sticking out like spikes with the lifted, 4 wheel drive van.

The sand is black and very grainy. The wind is blowing at around 15 mph, its 35 degrees out, and its raining. [The ice](#) is just off the shore, late this year. So much so that it's totally messed up the whaling season. After seeing more of the town, all via graded dirt roads, we stop at the cultural center. Here, after a short delay, we watch a presentation by local kids. A good deal of it is discordant singing accompanied by the banging of caribou stomach lined drums, but quite frequently (especially with the older kids) something clicks. The singing and the drums, and the movement of the dancers is mesmerizing. Fluid motions that transition into jerky climaxes in [the music](#). The entire thing is wrapped up with the blanket toss. A seal skin blanket (which took 8 seals to make – I think of Ryan) is laid out and held by the crowd. A kid jumps up onto it, and then like giant trampoline is thrust up to the ceiling.

We take off again and head back over the North Slope. Soon we're in the Brooks Range, but this time the weather has come in. We're forced into [the valleys](#) that make a network of veritable plane highways back to Coldfoot and Fairbanks. No complaints from me as we bank and turn through some of the ridges. More pilot humor: Gary turns around and looks at us for a few seconds (which we've grown used to by now. At first its disconcerting as the ground is rushing by to have your pilot turned around with no hands on the controls talking with you.) Then, as we're mixed in with clouds and stone peaks and ridges that reach out to touch you, he says "I have no idea where I am!." A passenger from New Zealand finishes up a long cough. Gary turns, "Hey are you ok? Do you want some WHISKEY?" The guy is hilarious.

We refuel in Coldfoot and then an hour later are back in Fairbanks. It's too hot down low, so the plane settles into cruising at 9500 feet. At 10,000 feet Gary would have to don a portable oxygen mask. He also tells us the state requires him to carry a gun onboard and eyeballs the center console. Might come in handy if we get stranded on the ground that's rushing by us now at nearly 250 mph. Apparently a local pilot is just now in that exact situation. On the way in, we were told to keep a half eye out for anything that looked like white debris. A plane had crashed with just the pilot onboard in this area during some weather a day or two ago. On the way back, Gary hears on the radio that they found the plane but not the pilot. Probably making his way down to the Yukon River to flag down a boat, he tenders.

Touchdown in Fairbanks, drive back to the campsite for my last night here. Tomorrow I'll head to a liquor store to grab some [Alaskan beer](#) to bring home and then I head south.

July 18, 2006 Mystic, CT

For the past several days I have been keeping an ongoing record using a digital voice recorder. The effort to return home was intense and did not allow for the time consuming process of writing. Continued below:

Before departing Fairbanks south on the Richardson, I fill the car up with gas, stop at a liquor store to grab a case of Alaskan beer, and spend some time at the library on wireless. The divided highway drops away, not to be returned until outside Edmonton, Alberta. The distinct whine of an A-10 Warthog whistles by overhead. To my left is

Eielson Air Force base. I've always liked that plane. Not very high tech or fast, it was designed in the 50 and 60s. But its one of the most reliable with triple redundancy control systems and a titanium "tub" for the pilot. These planes have come back from sorties with 30% of their wing surface missing. And of course, there's a certain coolness factor to a plane that actually slows down by 25 mph when it shoots its main gun.

The giant hulking mass of the St. Elias range is off in the distance. Clouds are turning dark and the quivering trees of the birches that line the road are upturned. I pass the spot where I slept my first night in Alaska and there's that tinge of acute sentimentality that comes when trips of this magnitude and involvement arrive to their twilight. I pass signs that say "Canadian Border – 100 miles". Only 100 miles left on these roads. I arrive in Tok, Alaska and set up camp for the night as a thunderstorm moves through. Tomorrow will be my birthday and I will wake on Alaskan soil.

My tent packed away, just a dry spot on the ground now. To the east, the sun is just breaching the horizon – it's 3:30am. It's going to take a real effort to reset my sleep schedule once I get home. The skies are painted in [oranges and pinks](#). This is the first real sunrise I've seen here. The slopes covered in the greens of grasses and spruce transform from dreary to new-day brightness. The [distant mountains](#) are bathed in alpenglow. The [XM radio](#) won't have signal until the end of today and I don't feel like listening to the audio book so I scan through the radio. Surprisingly, I get a signal. Probably from Tok. It must be public radio, a mixture of baroque and miscellaneous. Just before the station fades away, something with some Spanish guitar comes on. The right blend of melancholy and cheer to provide relief for the two sounds. In the background of the voice recording this is being transcribed from, I can hear the [gravel](#) start to hit the inner fender wells on approach to the state line. The video camera stays rolling as I climb back into the car after a brief farewell stop at the Welcome to Alaska sign. I head off into the Yukon, the aberration of civilization on these long, desolate roads fades in my rearview.

I'll include the rest of the long drive home in segments, as recorded.

The Alaska highway, for about 100 miles into the Yukon are a return to the rough road. The gravel. The huge waves in the pavement. Potholes that you can't see the bottom to. The northern Rockies mark the transition into 'better' roads and Whitehorse comes and goes. I'm through my second audio book, but the XM is getting fairly reliable reception now. The first song is Fear Factory, Cars. The next mark on the map that I aim for is Fort Nelson.

The bugs sound like raindrops against the windshield. Somewhere in the 8 hours between Whitehorse and Fort Nelson the driving numbness sets in. It's a peculiar feeling and once it engages it's only a short while until the driving restlessness kicks in. Bad. We're on the smooth roads, but I remember thinking on the way up how much even these smooth roads make me miss the interstates of the lower-48. Scenery has changed with no more dramatic mountains or sheer cliffs, replaced now with gentle slopes and rolling green hills.

Along the road, I pick out little images or scenes that I recall from the blur of memory on the way up. It's odd to see the angle or color of a sign in the middle of nowhere, that you saw 3 weeks ago and remember it.

Using endpoints is a tenuous business. When you're driving, every mile is progress. All the trees and grass streaming by, the bends in the road, the mountain peaks that take 10 minutes to pass; every second you have tangible evidence that you're getting closer and closer to your goal. Obviously, for a trip that lasts several days, you can't focus on an endpoint of home. It's way too remote. In fact, when driving 20 or more hours a day, you can't really even focus on the town you're aiming for by day's end. So by necessity you break it down into smaller chunks. This is where the balance comes in. Too long of a distance between goals, and you don't get the reward of achievement. It's easy to get disheartened when the next stop is 7 hours away and it's just a small *part* of your day. Too close, and you start fixating only on the endpoints and then you tend to make them closer and closer and the day will never end. I grab a sandwich and an energy drink (waiting an hour to down it will push the ["awake window"](#) to where I need it) in Fort Nelson. My new target is Dawson Creek, the beginning of the Alcan. It'll be something else if I can drive the length of this legendary road in one day.

The Alcan between Fort Nelson and Dawson Creek is peppered with natural gas wells. Their eerie orange glow of their gas flares poignantly unnatural along this road, in the absolute middle of nowhere. Signs along the road, Duke Energy Compressor Station 12, Trilogy Gas Field 10. Danger, Hydrogen Sulfide gas DO NOT STOP. POISON. I pass the random pull off on the side of the road that I slept on the way up. Continuing on, my eyes scanning the wide swath cut on each side of the road for moose and elk.

Dawson Creek, British Columbia. Mile 0 of the Alcan. Up for 21 hours and ready to go to sleep. It's mostly cloudy but in a break low in the sky I see stars.. for the first time in three weeks.

Back on the road after 4 hours of sleep and other maintenance [air in the tires (front left is losing it quicker than the others), washer fluid, check the oil, brush my teeth, eat a pop tart, get coffee]. Just south of DC the topography changes. No longer am I in anonymous forest, now its rolling farm land. Only against that background of the Alcan is this slight evidence of civilization is reassuring.

On the divided highways of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Giant fields of an almost neon green-yellow crop extend off into the hilly horizon. Might be soy, I'm not sure. Blue skies. Looks like a [Windows XP default wallpaper](#). The large grassy shoulders on each side of the road save me a collision with some deer. 80 mile an hour panic stop as I track two deer sprinting scared from the other side of traffic in a path that is going to bring them smack into me. Tires whine and squeal as the Corolla stops and the two deer trot, one in front of me, the other behind. Thank you Canada DOT for your maintenance.

A road trip wouldn't be a road trip unless I got pulled over and given a break by a cop. Outside of Winnipeg I stop for gas, the last fill up of the day. Leaving the station you

have to get back onto the divided highway without an on-ramp.. because Canadians don't believe in on-ramps. I see a break in traffic and gun it, failing to come to a complete stop. As soon as I get onto the highway I see the cop sitting on the side of the road, he turns his lights on and I pull over. His first comment is "Do the stop signs where you're from mean the same thing as they do up here?" Conversation then moves onto my road trip in Alaska, the stuff I did up there and what kind of time I had. As he walks away he tells me to start paying more attention as the fine would have been \$250. Have a good and safe ride home. And I'm off.

The subtle effects of sleep deprivation. Reflected signs streak and [blur](#). Peripheral vision finds objects that aren't there. If they're becoming perceivable they've been around for awhile. I can feel the energy drink wear off. I'll stop soon and catch some sleep.. in the United States.

My alarm goes off at 7am local time. 5 hours of sleep. On day three, I wake up tired. I won't feel rested again until the end of the drive

The high pitch whine of the concrete highways of southern Wisconsin. Someone passes me, looks down at the roadtrippin.org Alaska 2006 magnets and gives me a thumbs up. Rock on.

Into Chicago, the thermometer ranges between 97 and 100. I've been insulated from summer for the past few weeks. 4 or 5 days ago I was shivering in 35 degree air temps with rain. The new toll stations are awesome. EZpass is accepted and they're full speed stalls. I feel bad for the people stuck in half mile long "Cash" lines. I just choose the left side of the divider and cruise through at 70 like everyone else. The brown haze of smog. Big 747s hanging still in the sky on approach to O'Hare. Billboards advertising crime scene clean up services

As we move, separated only by a few yards at these speeds, along the 4 or 5 lanes that bank and curve their way through the sprawl of this city I think of the precarious situation that's within our comfort zones. Balanced on 4 small contact patches, even a momentary hiccup of control would send me and several others careening towards concrete and metal at high speed. Or maybe I'm just tired. Shortly after thinking this I watch an accident happen on the other side, and then shortly after that I pass the scene of an accident that must have had injuries – further down amongst the stack of traffic I see 3 or 4 ambulances picking their way through the break down lane. I pay more attention and push a little harder to get out of the Chicago area.

Middle of Ohio, I'll get to Pennsylvania tonight setting me up for being home tomorrow late afternoon (traffic dependent). I rub my eyes, up ahead I see a giant animated cartoon with its tongue hanging out moving around. "What the.." I'm startled until I realize it's a big outdoor movie screen. Route 80 brings people to New York City. After all this time it feels good to start seeing signs for something so familiar even if it is a few hundred miles away.

4 hours of sleep and I'm back to tackle the long trans-width track through Pennsylvania. For all those miles, all that time, I wouldn't trade any sort of instant transportation for this last stretch. [It feels good.](#)

New Jersey. I pass a pick-up mounted camper, covered in dark dirt. On the back a cardboard sign: "She ain't a beauty, but she'll do. Maine to Alaska and back." A new found respect for people that have driven the Alcan.

Into Connecticut. A blue, white rimmed welcome sign, and blue fading to white license plates. I'm back home.

My exit comes up and then I'm in my driveway. This huge, momentum-filled machine that was this trip disengages. Slowly turning down as it bleeds off energy. I turn the key off and pause.

I take my map out to put it away. I look at Alaska and take stock. This entire state is beyond words. The wonder and excitement of the trip has been transformed by experience into fond memories. Town and mountain ranges now have depth that can only be formed by being there. Living there, even if only for a short time.

New adventures and experiences, which have a special significance in a world that begs for such things, life defined by their existence. Alaska is someplace every American should go.

Drive Fast. Take Risks.