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North to Alaska: One Erstwhile Northeasterner's Ongoing Journey toward the Elysium of His Dreams

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North to Alaska

*One erstwhile Northeasterner's ongoing journey
toward the Elysium of his dreams*

Jeff Fair



FOR ME, IT WAS A PASSION FOR A LANDSCAPE I'D NEVER SEEN. All my life I have been drawn toward the North, the wild North Country. No matter what life-trail I followed or where I have lived, I have always felt a determined tug in both mind and heart, like a gravitational pull, ever northward. The greatest romance in my life has been with latitude. The attraction is intrinsic, indelible, and irrevocable. I cannot escape it. I have lived and longed for the boreal lands and been haunted by them since I remember. Heaven is for me a snug and solitary cabin among the pointy timbers. I love the long nights and low-sun colors of northern winters, snow-laden spruce in the moonlight, the sparkle of hoarfrost—and the all-night sun of summer. I don't mind 40 below nearly as much as I detest neighbors within sight and the bumper-to-bumper traffic on northbound Interstate 93 on a Friday night in June. I'll take the untrammelled Arctic tundra over the roaded Rockies any day. I wish never again to live without one boot in what Robert Service described as "the wilds where the caribou call."

My northbound obsession has surely been exacerbated by a lifelong bent for northern literature. The first book I remember owning and listening to my parents read back in Annville, Pennsylvania, was the 1954 "Little Golden Book" *Pierre Bear* by Patricia and Richard Scarry. It described the life and times of the highly anthropomorphized title character, who lived in "a windswept cabin, away up north." Pierre went moose hunting on the snow with a rifle (I still have the book), and I remember my folks laughing at the line about him putting up thirteen jars of minced moose meat. The image was prophetic. My freezer today is crowded with packages of Alaskan mooseburger—literally, minced moose meat.

After that came Sterling North, Sigurd Olson, and many others with images of the northern forests of the lower 48, Le Beau Pays in southern Canada, loons, wolf howls, and canoe trails. Thereafter, stories from the Far North, by Muir and Marshall and McPhee, Murie and Mowatt and Michener, London and Lopez, Dillon Wallace, Lois Crisler, Earnest Thompson Seaton, and Richard Nelson. The list goes on. And though this literature did not spawn my Arctic dreams, it surely fed them well.

My travels began to take me north. The first summer after high school took me to Keewaydin Camp in Vermont and its huge fleet of Old Town

Jeff Fair's driveway in Palmer, Alaska. JEFF FAIR

and Chestnut wood and canvas canoes. Old-time woodsmen there taught me the traditional Cree methods of paddling and portaging, which I practice to this day with a deep and certain pride. I was mesmerized by the camp's elaborate and devout Four Winds' Ceremony around the fire circle and its extended paddle forays into the Canadian wilds, although I never got farther than Lake George that summer. Four years later I attended graduate school in New Hampshire, paddling around its North Country when possible, and then returned to the Granite State and Maine as well for a major chapter of my life, stalking loons—those elusive spirits of the North—across their semi-wild northern waters. In between, I found the Rocky Mountains, where I held a young biologist's dream job, capturing grizzlies for the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team in the Yellowstone backcountry. Oh, I loved the Yellowstone ecosystem, but there were problems. One was the tourist traffic that reminded me of the growing business of New England. Every time I came down from the mountain, I encountered streams of sedans and SUVs, campgrounds chock-full of Winnebungs and the smelly, plastic, overflowing restrooms. The other was that Yellowstone was surrounded by civilization. I longed for the wide-open spaces that did not stop. I wanted to live on the edge of things. The northern edge.

New Hampshire and Maine sufficed for quite a few years. I built a log home among a few spruces for my family and chased around the local North Country as much as allowed. Lake Umbagog became my touchstone and spirit land. "Little Alaska" some of its regulars called the place for its quietness, loons and moose, a pretty fair fishery, and that patch of muskeg off the northwest shore where the ospreys nested. "It's not the final North," my friend MacLachlan used to say, "but you can see it from here." I fell asleep many nights in a bunk on the porch of a cabin near the mouth of the Rapid River, listening to its white roar filtering down through the cedars. I poked around the more extensive wilds of upstate Maine. Once I made a fishing trip up the Quebec-Labrador rail line well north into Labrador. True North, at last. But only a week of it. My companions dragged me home.

My Alaskan adventure began on my 40th birthday. I was lying on my back in the mud and gravel of my New Hampshire driveway underneath a 1967 Dodge Power Wagon, my nemesis plow truck, with brake fluid in my beard, when I heard the phone ringing. I thought of ignoring it, but realizing that it might be family calling from Pennsylvania, I hustled up to the cabin.

It was the U.S. Forest Service, Alaska Region, calling from Anchorage, wondering whether I'd come up to talk to their biologists about common

loon management. They could not pay me but would cover all my travel and expenses.

On the flight from Seattle to Anchorage, I sat by a window on the right side of the airplane and gazed out for hours across the glorious, impossible, wild and unending mountain terrain of British Columbia and Southeast Alaska. For the next week, I visited every district on the Chugach National Forest from the lake and glacier country south of Anchorage to the mountain-lined Copper River Delta east of the fishing town of Cordova (which has no road access). I fell in love.

TWO YEARS LATER, AFTER MY FAMILY IRREVOCABLY FELL APART AND I HAD little to look for but new horizons, I loaded up my truck and drove north by west. Nine and one-half days on the road in January from Magalloway, Maine, to Anchorage, Alaska. No time wasted. 5,300 miles. The romance I was following did involve a woman, but it was also based upon my selection for landscape and latitude. I would not have moved to Texas.

In *Coming into the Country* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), John McPhee wrote of certain Alaskan immigrants who had come to the wilds along the Yukon River just after World War II, that “they had chosen the country in a way that someone else would choose a career.” That is how, I now realize, I have chosen most of my intentional moves. I picked the canoe-staff job in Vermont, graduate school in New Hampshire, grizz-trapping job in Yellowstone, loon monitoring duties in New Hampshire and Maine . . . and now the cross-continental migration to Alaska. All chosen for those pointy timbers, the boreal forests, the wilder North Country. I came to Alaska with no job on the horizon, only what I could make from my pencil and notebook and a bit of seasonal consulting back in Maine. Unlike many who showed up here in the oil and pipeline rush of the 1970s and those who continue to arrive for temporary lucrative work in Anchorage or Prudhoe Bay, I did not come for the money. I came to investigate my connection with the homeland where I’ve felt, for so long, that I might belong.

THE BEST THING ABOUT ANCHORAGE, ALASKANS USED TO SAY, IS THAT it’s only ten minutes from Alaska. That used to be true. Now it’s twenty minutes, maybe half an hour, from a place where you can get lost or stumble across a grizzly without garbage in its diet. More people, more development and business, heavier traffic. Half of Alaskans live in Anchorage. I survived life in the city for ten years, until my second marriage and my patience

ran out. In the depths of despair and rejection, but again with the void that allowed new horizons, I took a powder and moved 50 miles closer to the Pole.

I'd heard that a funky/rustic little cabin (as the owners put it) was available for rent on Lazy Mountain outside of Palmer. I brought my Brittany spaniel, Tripper, along to check it out. Driving up the long driveway leading to only this cabin and farther on, the landlord's house, we passed through a forest of white spruce, paper birch, quaking aspen, alder, elderberry, highbush cranberry, and wild rose reminiscent of northern New England—but with stands of devil's club and huge, old cottonwoods to remind me of our Alaskan locus. When I opened the outer door to the arctic entry (an Alaskan mudroom), Tripper went on solid point, his nose frozen toward a slanted, manger-like shelf on the wall of the empty cabin. When I investigated, I found that it contained a pile of ruffed grouse tail feathers. An omen and welcome, we thought. We moved in before the floors were repainted.

One night that first winter, I walked out onto my porch to have a talk with the spruces, the local grouse, and the owls just up the hill. They are all good listeners. But before I could say a word, the land spoke. A round, yellow Alaskan moon rose behind the grandfather spruce out by my fire circle, limning the snow-mantled mountains a few miles beyond and silhouetting the steeped timbers that poked above the birches and cottonwood. My God, I thought—I *live* here. That was the message. In the bleak midwinter night, the message was life, my life, in the country I'd dreamed of. In the cold abyss of intimate human rejection, I had found my passion requited by the wild landscape. At the peak of an emotional blizzard, a vision of peace appeared, affording comfort, and, yes, even joy.

This little cabin has treated me well. Its walls carry my snowshoes, collected caribou antlers, family photos, fly rods, and my library. Up in the loft, I reach my desk from my bed in seven paces. Downstairs, I cook and feed the fire. When writing escapes into its common inertia, I go downstairs and pace, throw the pencil, talk to myself, build spirit, cry, laugh, sing along with the radio (either of two excellent public radio stations here; I divorced television years ago), dance alone on the rough wooden floor, and at some point ultimately surrender. Only then, but nearly always, an inspiration arises, and I sprint up the twelve steps to my keyboard. Yes, that all could

happen in a cabin in Maine or New Hampshire, but from this one I can walk outside and piss off my porch with impunity (cf. McPhee) while observing the Chugach Range, a string of Mount Washingtons splayed out across my southern horizon, and Polaris, the North Star, nearly directly above my chimney. Sixty-one degrees north latitude. This makes a difference.

The winter after Tripper died, an ermine moved in under my cabin. I found his signature in the snow and encouraged his tenancy with an occasional chicken heart. He made his living on the mice, voles, and shrews that had formerly made their livings inside my cabin on dog food, crackers, and bacon grease left overnight in the skillet. While he was in residence, the latter were not. This was the only critter the old Alaskan prospectors and trappers enjoyed having in their cabins; weasels do not eat your flour or crackers, but they will rid your home of the smaller critters that do. I felt touched by tradition.

The first time I saw him, I was washing dishes at the kitchen window when my hanging suet feeder, about five feet from my eyes, began to dance wildly. I suspected a large bird—hairy woodpecker perhaps—but at first glance saw nothing at all on the feeder. Then I descried a dark flash beneath it. Finally, eyes and brain engaged, I recognized the indistinct outline of an ermine—a winter-whitened short-tailed weasel—nearly invisible against a background of snow except for the black tip of his tail. Later I would watch him climb up onto the front tire of my pickup and disappear under the hood when I'd returned from town, apparently to enjoy the warmth of the engine. I had evidence that he'd been in the cabin once or twice, and always liked that possibility, though I could never tempt him through a door or window.

He or one of his clan, always a male, returns every winter now, leaving only when threatened by a visitor's dog or the first spring thaw that moistens his hideout. Along with the local magpie family, he is my winter companion. From what I've read about his species, he's probably moved his camp a number of times as well, from henhouse to squirrel midden to suet feeder, always seeking his own Elysium.

PERHAPS MY SOLITUDE CAN BE CONFUSED WITH LONELINESS. Occasionally a friend from Outside, usually back East, will ask me if I ever plan to move back there, to leave Alaska. And I answer quietly but immediately, "No." A quizzical *why not?* stare often follows.

Good point: Why stay? Why endure the long, dark winters that can erode human desire and feed depression? Why put up with the wicked temperatures reaching 60 below and colder, with the late-spring ice and snow followed by hordes of mosquitoes thick enough to exsanguinate a caribou and blacken your head net, with summers so short and overcrowded with tourists on the few, narrow, winding roads, with nights too light for sleeping, with the best fishing spots on the Russian River lined with dozen after dozen of shoulder-to-shoulder combat fishermen, jealous for the precious salmon and rancorous over twisted lines and snagged tackle? Why live in embarrassment at the source of the world's most erroneously ridiculous "reality" TV shows? Why suffer a world of wounds and rejection by a team of politicians completely and single-mindedly dedicated to drill, dig, develop, and build roads everywhere, who fight against the protection of federal conservation lands and anything a wildlife-loving American conservationist might suggest, who legislate the aerial gunning down of our wolves, the gassing of wolf cubs in their dens, and the snaring of bear sows and cubs? Where our lone U.S. congressman refers to everyone with an environmental conviction as "enemies of the state"? Why stay in a place so distant and disconnected from the rest of the nation, and so far away from . . . family?

Many a New Englander, Minnesotan, and Montanan now rooted in the Last Frontier answers like this: "I came out here to fish (prospect, build boats, cut timber, can salmon, play music, hunt caribou, climb a mountain, screw around, make a few bucks, avoid the law) for a week, a month, a season . . . and, hell, I never left." And those are the ones who had *not* planned to stay.

The gold-rush poet Robert Service described the phenomenon well in his "Spell of the Yukon":

I wanted the gold, and I got it—
Came out with a fortune last fall,—
Yet somehow life's not what I thought it,
And somehow the gold isn't all.

No! There's the land. (Have you seen it?)

. . .

Some say it's a fine land to shun;
Maybe; but there's some as would trade it
For no land on earth—and I'm one.

You come to get rich (damned good reason);
You feel like an exile at first;
You hate it like hell for a season,
And then you are worse than the worst.
It grips you like some kinds of sinning;
It twists you from foe to a friend;
It seems it's been since the beginning;
It seems it will be to the end.

What is it that has woven me into lasting friendship with the Great Land? In my case, I think of one evening up along the Chipp River with my yellow-billed loon research colleague Joel Schmutz, when we were setting up our tent in the lovely, golden preternatural glow of the midnight sun, and I saw something move in the near distance. Caribou, I thought at first, but no. Bear! No, too lanky. *Wolverine!*

I think of crouching on a low ridge in the northern foothills of the Brooks Range one July, looking out over a gorgeous, rolling tundra grassland reminiscent of the shortgrass prairies that once covered much of the central lower 48, no one else about, no buildings in sight except for my tent a few miles off. And 10,000 caribou of the great Western Arctic Herd streaming through the hills and vales like blood through living tissue, swarming up the ridge toward me, only to notice me with quizzical looks and then part to pass me by just a few yards on either side—the same way they do the sated grizzly bears sleeping next to their partly devoured caribou carcasses. Life. Crazy swarming wild life, timeless and immutable as the tides.

I think of that night cruising down Icy Bay in Prince William Sound with biologist Howard Golden in his little 17-foot Whaler, when the humpbacks suddenly began breaching all around us, huge living, intelligent tonnage bursting up from the depths of the sea.

I think of watching an amoeba-like mass of 40,000 western sandpipers lifting in synchrony from the beach at Hartney Bay and rising, rising, then disappearing westward toward their nesting grounds 600 miles and several mountain ranges away on the Yukon–Kuskokwim Delta.

I think of sitting by McNeil Falls with sanctuary manager Larry Aumiller, watching 40 or more brown bears, some just a few feet away, fish for salmon and argue over ownership of the best spots. Combat fishermen themselves, the bears at least forgive and forget as soon as their discussions are over.



Jeff Fair holds three silver salmon he caught fly fishing along the shore of the Beluga River, an hour west of Anchorage by float plane. SCOTT CHRISTY

I think of the August silver salmon run in the creek just a few miles from my cabin door, where I can fish without competition from my canoe, while the sandhill cranes squawk and argue from untold resting spots during their own autumnal migration.

And I think of winter nights here, snow sifting down through the spruces, hoarfrost on the porch rail, and myself, nestled in the warmth of a crackling

spruce-wood fire, a pot of Mother Yukon's predator-prey stew (of moose and black bear) bubbling fragrantly atop the stove, a good book in my lap.

But there's more than the huge and wild landscape, the wildlife, and my little cabin to keep me here. A number of years ago, I attended a gathering at a bookstore down in Anchorage to celebrate the release of an anthology that carried the theme of travel in Alaska. Many of the authors read short selections from our stories in the volume. Several who read before I did described themselves as born and raised here—an admirable trait, a source of pride. When it was my turn, I noted that I was not born here, but that I'd come here by choice and not by chance. The loud applause that followed surprised me. When I looked out at our audience, I realized that the lifelong Alaskans were applauding, too. This is the Alaska that I love. I came for the landscape, the latitude, the distance, the solitude, and the wildlife. I stay for all of those reasons. But I stay also because I enjoy the people, the spirit of my neighbors here in this little human village we call Alaska.

I think of the many Inupiaq, Yupik, and Athabaskans I've met in their tiny, far-flung villages, suffering the embrace of one too many cultures but still within reach of a spirit 10,000 years old.

I think of all the biologists and conservationists with whom I work in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and across the frontier to maintain the ethical edge of stewardship and the protection of wild beauty and human experience in the face of rampant, reckless economic drive and despoilment, of anti-predator pogroms, of land-use idiocracy.

Yes, and I think of many friends who work for Big Oil up on the North Slope, and how they too care about the wild lands and wildlife there in the land of paradox.

I think of my friend, Scott Christy, who will call me the night before and ask, "Say, Jeff, will you accompany Jean and me into The Wilderness tomorrow?" He means, will I ride in his little Maule airplane from Anchorage down to his little cabin, called The Wilderness, on the Gulf of Alaska. All I'm required to do to earn my ride is to drop bowling balls to check the safety of an ice landing, or in summer to help him navigate his Zodiac down the rushing river into tidal waters for some fresh sea-run silvers.

I THINK OF THE SWEET, HOMEMADE MUSIC EACH APRIL IN JUNEAU during the Alaska Folk Festival. Not just that from the stage, but even more so the unplugged twists of melody from the nooks and crannies and dark

crowded bars around town, where you might see, for example, a young couple with guitars and a provenance of fish scales, sawdust, or dog hair (or all three) spilling out of the cuffs of their stained and well-worn Carhartts, performing the songs they'd written through the long, dark winter somewhere far out of town.

I think of the ready friendship and camaraderie around the bonfires in my fire circle, the way certain longtime Alaskan families have adopted me as their own, and in similar fashion the manner in which Alaskans far from their families at Christmas or Thanksgiving gather together to share in celebration and *become* family. The Alaskan family.

Finally, I think of the guy in blown-out jeans, an old canvas shirt with fish blood on the sleeve, knee-high rubber boots, and a sun-faded, sweat-stained *Arctic Wild* baseball cap over an untrimmed silver beard in the Anchorage airport not long ago, running last-minute to pick up his nicely attired parents who had flown up for their 50th wedding anniversary. He'd got off the river late, and couldn't find his Crocs.

That guy was me. I'm that Alaskan, and proud of it. I now own a share of what Seth Kantner calls "our hard-earned Alaskan mystique." Only I think it's more like simple, lovely, high-latitude freedom than mystique. I prefer living among the traditionals, the misfits and black sheep, and independents and creative spirits of this latitude. My closer Alaskan friends have become family. The wilder North Country surrounds me now. And if this little cabin is ever overrun by newcomers, I'll find another at higher latitude, somewhere farther out. But for now, life is good, here in my Alaskan home. The ermine and I have made it.

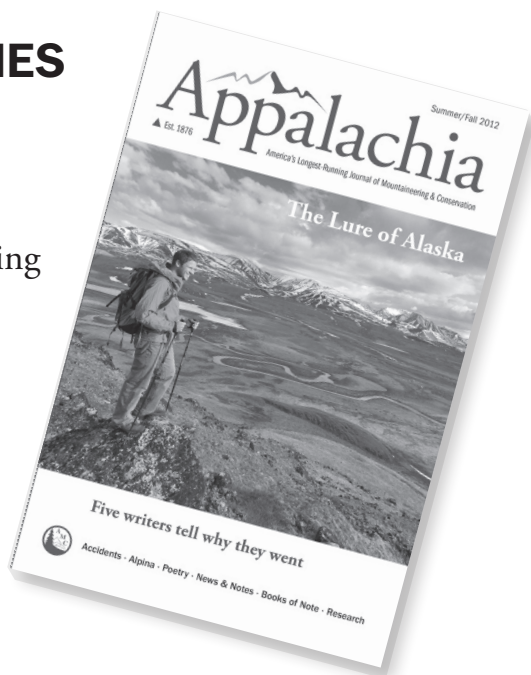
Chief of *Appalachia's* Alaska Bureau, JEFF FAIR recounted his drive from Maine to Alaska that fateful January in our December 2000 issue. His writing about Alaska's arctic appears in *On Arctic Ground: Tracking Time Through Alaska's National Petroleum Reserve* (Braided River, 2012) and *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point* (Seven Stories Press, 2012).

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