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Loving and Leaving the 49th State: Balancing Life, Adventure, and Family

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Loving and Leaving the 49th State

Balancing life, adventure, and family

Matt Heid



WHITE CROSS LANDING STRIP LIES DEEP IN ALASKA'S WRANGELL-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, a lonely patch of dirt alongside a mighty glacial river. According to local lore, many years ago it was the designated pick-up point for a pair of wilderness travelers. Only their pilot forgot about them. Left stranded, they laid out a white pattern of rocks in the middle of the landing strip, hoping to be spotted by a passing plane. Nobody came. Years later, this forsaken spot and its desperate memento mark our final destination on a nine-day backpacking trip through some of the state's rawest wilderness.

I moved to Alaska with my wife, Gretchen, in the summer of 2007, drawn by the allure of the state's vast wilderness. How vast? Consider just Wrangell-St. Elias, the largest national park in the country. At 13.2 million acres, it's larger than Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and two Connecticuts combined. It's also just one of Alaska's fifteen national parks. Combined, they represent more than half of the land in the entire national park system. On top of that, Alaska boasts the nation's two largest national forests, sixteen enormous national wildlife reserves, and a variety of state parks and other public lands.

Alaska is a big place, accounting for roughly a fifth of the United States. If overlaid on the lower 48, Alaska would stretch from New York to Georgia to Missouri, with the diminutive Aleutian Islands reaching even farther, well past the Rocky Mountains. Alaska's closest competitor for size is Texas, yet if you split Alaska into two equally large states, Texas would still only be third biggest. It's funny to catch the Alaska weather report on the local news. They cover the entire state, which is like watching a forecast that includes everything from Boston to Charleston to Dayton.

At the same time, Alaska has fewer roads than Rhode Island. And that's the rub. So much incredible wilderness, yet accessing most of it is difficult, expensive, and time consuming. The majority of destinations require the use of a small plane ("bush plane" in Alaska parlance) for access, a costly proposition when charter flights cost hundreds of dollars per hour.

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park encompasses the southeast corner of mainland Alaska, tucked tightly against Canada's Yukon Territory, and features some of the most massive, weather-beaten mountains in North America. In many ways, the park represents Alaska in microcosm (or perhaps macrocosm,

A long drive down dirt roads, a bush plane flight, and hours of hiking gave Matt and Gretchen Heid this view above Iceberg Valley in the remote Wrangell-St. Elias National Park in southeast Alaska. MATT HEID

given its enormous size). Ice fields, glaciers, grizzlies, massive rivers, active volcanoes, and several peaks that soar well above 15,000 feet—all virtually undisturbed by human presence.

By Alaska standards, Wrangell-St. Elias is relatively accessible. The small hamlet of McCarthy sits smack in the middle of the park on a small inholding of private land and can be reached by a 60-mile stretch of unpaved road. From there, several flight services can quickly ferry passengers to remote backcountry, making it one of the state's more affordable fly-in backpacking destinations. We schedule our trip for late August, near the end of Alaska's ten- to twelve-week hiking season.

GARY GREEN, OWNER AND PILOT OF MCCARTHY AIR, STANDS NEXT to his silver, single-engine Cessna at the wide dirt strip of the McCarthy "airport." A brown fedora perches on his head. With his trim, gray beard and brown leather jacket, he looks like some sort of Alaskan Indiana Jones.

Gretchen and I cram ourselves into the plane. Gretchen squeezes onto a small back seat next to our loaded backpacks. I spaghetti my 6-foot, 5-inch frame into the passenger seat. Minutes later we're soaring above town. The icy visage of 16,390-foot Mount Blackburn—one of the park's four active volcanoes—glitters to the north as we head south toward the start of our trip.

We fly for 30 minutes above nameless waterfalls, alongside jagged mountains, past countless crags and cliffs. Our destination is Iceberg Valley, a raw defile in the park's southeast region. We approach it from the west, fly down its length, then execute a sharp aerial U-turn at a stomach-queasing angle—the steepest turn I've yet experienced in flight.

The plane bounces down and settles on a broad patch of dirt and small stones, an informal landing strip marked only by a single fluttering orange ribbon at its far end. We extricate ourselves. Gary hoists out our packs, then immediately heads back toward the cockpit. I corner him briefly, asking for any local knowledge about our intended route. He dispenses three words of terse advice—"whatever looks good"—before hopping back into the plane and rumbling into the air. Rain spatters down as we watch him disappear.

MY WIFE AND I LIVED IN ANCHORAGE FOR THREE YEARS, RENTING a tiny four-room house near the downtown area. The neighborhood was a slice of anywhere suburbia, a collection of small rectangular lots and unremarkable houses. Unlike most American neighborhoods, though, moose

often tromped down the street. The city's moose population ranges from 300 to 1,000 animals, depending on the season, and they are well acquainted with the urban lifestyle. Indeed, the first moose I ever saw in Anchorage was walking along downtown 9th Avenue, calf in tow, meticulously staying on the sidewalk.

Anchorage is a somewhat schizophrenic city. On one hand, it's ugly, a grim amalgamation of 1970s architecture, strip malls, and industry. On the other hand, it's beautiful. The mile-high peaks of the adjacent Chugach Mountains provide a glorious backdrop visible everywhere in town. An extensive network of bike and walking paths traces the city, running alongside streams that still support annual salmon runs. The shimmering waters of Cook Inlet reflect the sky to the west. Beyond the water, active volcanoes crown distant snow-capped mountain ranges.

Anchorage serves as the primary commercial hub for the entire state and provides the range of services and infrastructure essential for such a vast geographic area. Though it has a population of only 300,000, it feels like a much larger metropolis. It also feels like the very young city that it is. Northeasterners may measure towns in centuries, but Alaska counts in decades. Anchorage won't celebrate its 100th anniversary until 2014. Alaska itself marked its 50th anniversary as a state only a few years ago.



Moose are well acquainted with the urban experience in Anchorage. MATT HEID

IN A WAY, ICEBERG VALLEY IS EQUALLY YOUNG, A LANDSCAPE ONLY recently revealed from beneath retreating glaciers. It's the first ice-free valley north of the Bagley Ice Field, a massive blanket of ice that smothers the coastal mountains between us and the Gulf of Alaska. The valley floor may be open, but glaciers still spill down the flanks of the valley's adjacent mountains, fingers of ice slowly unclenching from a raw landscape. Rocks and boulders litter the valley floor, bulldozed by glaciers like pebbles underfoot. Patches of grass and emerging tundra thinly veneer the nearby slopes.

Gretchen and I moved to Alaska for the wilderness experience—and this was wilderness at its most primeval. Wrangell-St. Elias had been on our adventure list for years. Giddy anxiety fills my mind as I take the first step on our long-awaited journey.

We strike out in light drizzle. Temperatures hover in the mid-40s. A short distance later, we encounter a glacier in our way—it spills off the slopes and onto the valley floor, extending across it in a broad fan of ice. We strap on crampons and clack our way across the gently sloping surface, avoiding the rivulets that flow on top; many abruptly disappear into large holes in the ice. These glacier drainage holes, or “moulins,” appear bottomless; several are large enough to swallow us whole.

Once across, we traverse up the valley slopes toward grassier terrain and discover what we dub the “great wall,” a huge line of rocks and boulders rising ten feet high. It's an old lateral moraine, marking the edge of a recent glacier that once filled this entire valley. A blissful strip of easy walking parallels it on the uphill side. We cruise, savoring the sun as it emerges from a clearing sky, then descend to our first camp in a gravelly fan on the valley floor. A low saddle, our continuing route, rises behind us. In the western distance, mountains and spires rise beyond the gargantuan Bremner Glacier. Night falls sometime after 10 p.m.

IN ALASKA, SUMMER MEANS DAYLIGHT. LOTS OF DAYLIGHT. ON THE longest day of the year in Anchorage, the sun rises around 4:20 A.M. and sets at 11:45 P.M. A dim twilight marks the darkest moment. To sleep through the “night,” we hung opaque blackout shades on our bedroom windows.

Winter, on the other hand, means darkness. Lots of darkness. It was the most challenging part of living in Alaska. Not the snow. Not the cold. The dark. On the shortest day of the year, the sun is up for only five and a

half hours, from 10:15 A.M. to 3:45 P.M. And then it's barely up, rising a mere 5 degrees above the horizon at its highest point.

I had a 9-to-5 desk job three days a week working for Alaska Geographic, an environmental nonprofit headquartered a short 1-mile walk from our house. I would get up at 8 A.M. in pitch black, brew coffee, and contemplate the dark embers in our woodstove while I drank the entire pot. I walked to the office under the stars. Once there, I would flop in my seat and stare in continuing grog at the still unlit morning. At the end of the day, I walked home in the dark once more.

ON DAY TWO, WE CROSS THE LOW saddle and descend to a promontory overlooking the next segment of our route. We stare down on the Tana Lobe, a broad plain of smooth glacial ice. It's an offshoot of the Bremner Glacier, which flows almost due north before abruptly encountering the broad east-west valley ahead of us. Over the millennia, the glacier oozed in both directions. Today it ends a few miles past this junction in both directions. The Tana Lobe is the smaller of its two decaying snouts. Our journey continues across it to the mountains on the far side.

We descend a rocky gully to the edge of the glacier, a dirt-encrusted wall of ice ten feet high. We work our way along it, then find a sloping bench that provides access to the icy surface above. It looks like some sort of geologic superhighway. Large boulders, many the size of cars, litter the glacier's surface, a flow of rocky traffic creeping forward only a few feet per year. Wide avenues of gritty ice run between them.



*Looking down on the Tana River in
Wrangell-St. Elias National Park.*

MATT HEID

Warm sun beams down from blue sky as we work our way across the mile-wide ice field, crossing several huge rock piles en route. Two house-sized chunks of rock crown one of the largest piles like mighty watchtowers. We set up camp on the northern edge of the glacier and watch as clouds roll in for the night.

Raindrops splatter the next morning as we step off the glacier and weave uphill through intermittent clearings hemmed by thick alder brush. We work our way upward, then traverse along the slopes through waist-high vegetation. Our next destination is an unnamed 5,500-foot pass at the head of this valley, which we steadily approach under leaden skies.

A clear, dark lake nestles 1,000 feet and a mile below the pass. Banded cliffs loom on both sides, littering the sparse landscape with flat gray stones. I feel depleted as we ascend toward it for the night. “Your engine looks like it’s dead,” Gretchen notes. I grunt in response.

BACKPACKING IN ALASKA ISN’T LIKE BACKPACKING IN THE LOWER 48. It’s much more work—and a lot more hazardous. There are no trails. The weather is fickle and often wet, chilly, and potentially hypothermic. Grizzly bears roam the landscape. At lower elevations, the vegetation is thick and impenetrable. (When planning our route, we specifically chose a path that stayed above 2,500 feet to avoid such tangled underbrush, which can reduce forward progress to a tortuous mile per hour or less.)

In short, wilderness adventure in Alaska feels more like a game of survival than a casual outing into the mountains. The challenging wilderness conditions, coupled with the remoteness of many destinations, makes the margin for error, the line across which disaster lies, much closer than just about anywhere in the lower 48.

The next day we take our closest step toward that line.

DAY FOUR. THE CLOUD DECK HAS LOWERED ONTO OUR APPROACHING route. Over breakfast, we watch the pass fade in and out of view as the vapors shift. Cold drizzle patters down as we start the ascent, climbing along bands of rocky terrain that trace through increasing snowfields. As we crest 5,000 feet, the drizzle changes to snow and rapidly picks up intensity. At 5,300 feet, we enter the clouds—and total whiteout conditions.

Whiteouts are profoundly unnerving, especially in snow-covered terrain. You can’t see more than a few yards in front, can’t tell the difference between the clouds and snow underfoot. We certainly can’t see the pass above us. We

hew to ever patchier rock bands, climbing steadily toward the divide. Except it all goes screwy. Brief glimpses above us reveal continuing cliffs rather than the flat saddle we expect. We pause in the driving snow to check our GPS coordinates, plot them to the map with chilling fingers, and adjust our course.

As we traverse across fully snow-covered slopes, I use my trekking poles to probe the ground ahead of me. Several times, the poles find no purchase, stabbing emptily into invisible craters more than six feet deep. We weave among them, finally make it to the broad saddle, and regroup. Our map marks this area as a snowfield, yet when I drive my poles down through the fresh snow, they encounter ice. Blue ice. Glacier ice. With large cracks in its surface. Gretchen sums up our situation: “F***.”

ALASKA IS A LAND OF SNOW AND ICE, WHERE WINTER STRETCHES anywhere from six to eight months. At higher elevations, it never really goes away at all.

In northern Alaska, winter plummets deep into bitter realms of ice and cold. During the chilliest months, temperatures routinely dip far below zero, with readings in the minus-30s and below not uncommon. Winter in Anchorage, however, provides a more mild experience. The nearby Pacific Ocean moderates temperatures significantly and creates a winter climate that most closely resembles Burlington, Vermont. (Anchorage is actually less frigid than several major cities in the upper Midwest.) But it’s cold nonetheless, with typical winter highs in the teens and twenties, and lows in the single digits and below.

Other than an occasional, short-lived winter thaw, temperatures rarely rise above the freezing point. And that’s a great thing. The constant low temperatures prevent the incessant freeze-thaw cycles so common in the Northeast, which rapidly transform the dreamiest snowpack into a horrid mélange of slush and ice. For the most part, the snow in Anchorage tends to stay fresh and crisp throughout the season.

Anchorage doesn’t get that much snow—about the same amount as Boston—it’s just that it never really melts, blanketing the city in white for the duration of the winter months. Because of its location in the rain shadow of surrounding mountains, Anchorage also seldom receives large, Nor’easter-style dumps. A significant snowfall in Anchorage would be anything above 6 inches.

People in Anchorage have a completely different attitude toward snow and ice than do residents of other major cities. In the Northeast, an armada



Matt and Gretchen Heid during their wilderness backpacking trip in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. MATT HEID

of plows hits the roads the second a snowflake hits the ground, trying to remove it from every street as quickly as possible. In Anchorage, plows clear major arteries, but secondary and tertiary roads go untouched for days on end. Nobody complains about it. It's just the way it is. Traffic instead compacts the snow to a hard-packed icy layer, which drivers navigate with studded snow tires and four-wheel drive vehicles. During the winter, there's simply a lot of snow and ice underfoot.

WHEN IT COMES TO WALKING ON ICE, few things terrify me as much as

crevasses, the yawning chasms that open in glaciers as they flow downhill. You fall into one deep enough and it easily becomes your icy tomb. Back in our whiteout pass, we have no idea what might lurk ahead of us under the fresh snow.

I take the lead. Before each step, I drive my poles hard in front of me, looking for hidden breaks in the ice. It's exhausting, both physically and mentally.

A safe route down becomes apparent once we drop below the clouds. We're on a tiny glacier that soon transitions to a snowfield lined with rock bands on either side. Snow becomes rain again as we approach the bottom and step onto spongy tundra at the head of a broad, gentle landscape known as Allie's Valley. We slop onward through soggy terrain, ford several rushing streams, and look for a level campsite in the wet, lumpy ground.

Our already wet boots are now completely soaked, prompting in-depth conversation about the demerits of "sock juice," the icky squishy soup that brews inside a pair of sopping boots. Gretchen proclaims it "the most vile substance in existence" and swears she wouldn't drink a shot of it for less than a million dollars. I'm inclined to agree, though my price for a vomitous gulp is much, much less. Clouds envelop the surrounding mountains in a thick gray mass as we finally find a spot for the night.

Day five is a rest day. We luxuriate in not moving, revel in a mostly precipitation-free afternoon. The day's activities include watching our clothing dry and scanning the sky for "blue cracks" and, even better, "blue holes" where the clouds part long enough to reveal the azure sky beyond. Intermittent breaks reveal ragged mountains on both sides. As the day draws down, beams of sun wash distant spires in spotlights of alpenglow.

The weather improves the following day as we continue down the gentle valley, then curve north up a nameless side valley toward our next pass, the third of five mountain crossings on our route. Granite boulders protrude from the landscape. Patches of willow shrubs grow between them. Small flocks of ground-dwelling ptarmigan explode in chattering flight, flushed by our approach. Their plumage has already begun its transition from summer brown to winter white, ghostly wings emerging from still dark torsos.

We work our way to the pass, a rocky saddle speckled with old snow freshly pasted by the weather of the past few days. We follow a line of giant grizzly tracks pressed into the new snow and crest the divide. The map indicates another large permanent snowfield on the far side where we expect to find a gently sloping highway of smooth walking downhill. Except that the snow is barely there. Only a short remnant tongue remains, leaving behind a horrendous slope of large, loose boulders. The descent is exhausting, each step an uncertain test of stability on constantly shifting rocks underfoot.

We finally arrive at a small emerald tarn surrounded by a halo of grass. On this side of the pass, summer green has abruptly exploded into a kaleidoscope of fall brilliance. Dwarf birch flares in oranges, reds, yellows. The valley below is filled with rainbow tundra.

FALL COMES EARLY AND FAST IN ALASKA, BEGINNING IN MID-AUGUST in the northern part of the state and sweeping rapidly south by month's end. Its brilliance is short-lived, yet it is the most spectacular fall foliage I've ever seen. It's as if the forests of New England were shrunk to miniature size and then intensified, a waist-high sea of iridescent glory.

By September, snow is already falling at higher elevations. In Anchorage, the peaks of the Chugach Range become sprinkled with white. Locals call this first snow "termination dust" because it marks the end of the abundant employment opportunities of the summer season. The city's trees completely shed their leaves by month's end. By late October, snow usually arrives. Northeasterners wonder whether it will be a White Christmas, whereas Anchorage

parents wonder if they'll be trick-or-treating in snowsuits. The latest snowfall ever recorded in the city occurred the second week of November.

Spring doesn't return until May, when over a two-week period the birch and cottonwood trees abruptly pop into full greenery. Deep snow continues to linger in the mountains for many more weeks, often well into June or early July. Summer is an ephemeral moment that's gone before you fully realize it's there. As the saying goes, "Summer is a dream. Winter is the truth."

THE NEXT DAY WE DROP INTO AUTUMN AND CROSS THE NARROW VALLEY below us, the first of two parallel cuts in the mountains we'll traverse today. We hop the small rushing stream on the valley floor and wade through thigh-high grass on the far side.

Gretchen abruptly stops. "There's a bear," she notes, staring tensely ahead. A grizzly stands on its hind legs about 100 yards upslope, looking at us intently. We grab our cans of bear spray and wait for the animal's next move.

More than 30,000 grizzly bears live in Alaska, populating nearly every corner of the state, including several areas around—and within—Anchorage. During the summer, grizzlies from the adjacent Chugach Mountains move into the city's outskirts to feed on spawning salmon. In the summer of 2008, bears mauled several people in Anchorage parks; most incidents occurred less than a mile from one of the city's main thoroughfares and hospitals.

Bears are just part of life in Alaska. On a backcountry adventure, their presence adds a significant element of intensity. When hiking, your bear radar is always up, your awareness tuned to a heightened pitch rarely necessary in less rugged wilderness settings. I always carried bear spray—a can of pressurized pepper spray to deter an approaching bear—whenever the animals were awake and active (roughly April through October). It lived in an instantly accessible cargo pocket on my pants at all times.

I've never had to use bear spray on my adventures—and hope I never do. Most of the time, grizzlies want as little to do with you as you do with them. In the wilderness, where bears are unaccustomed to human presence, they normally flee once they recognize you as a foreign creature and potential threat. The biggest danger is accidentally stumbling on one at close range while navigating through thick brush. In open tundra with good visibility, the risk is much less. During my time in Alaska, I had numerous grizzly encounters, mostly from a distance, and always without incident.

In the backcountry, the goal is to let the bear know you're human. Gretchen and I wave hands over heads and shout. "Hey Bear! Hey Bear! Heeey Bear!"

The tawny ursine drops to all fours, walks a short distance, briefly rises again, then ambles away down the valley. We wait until it's gained a safe distance, then continue on our way.

We climb to a narrow cut in the ridge above us and crest the divide. Our final pass, Tana Notch, comes into view across the next valley. A small, steep snowfield sits below it, traced by what appears to be foot-steps, the first sign of human presence we've encountered on our trip. We quickly cross the narrow valley and ascend to the base of the snow bank; the footprints are in fact more bear tracks left recently by a mother and cub.

We continue over Tana Notch and descend the rocky slopes on the far side. Turning a corner, we spook a small herd of mountain goats, which flee up the valley. We set up camp nearby alongside a placid lake surrounded by glorious fall foliage. Goats hover on the surrounding slopes. A large billy perches atop a nearby rock outcrop and keeps an eye on us, long chin whiskers dangling below his short curving horns.

From here, White Cross landing strip is only a mile away, separated by a steep, thick alder-choked gully that marks the final leg of our journey. We've got plenty of time, having banked an extra day into our trip to deal with impassable weather or unexpected difficulties. The next day is exceptional, a warm and sunny rest surrounded by wildlife and brain-popping scenery.

We take a short walk to the edge of the adjacent cliffs and look down. The massive Tana River rumbles below us, flowing south from the glaciers of the Bagley Ice Field. Gretchen descends ahead of me as we continue along a small ridge. A golden eagle abruptly soars up from below, passing within feet of her head. Its outstretched wings reach wider than she is tall. It spirals above us and disappears beyond the surrounding peaks.

The next day we brace ourselves for the final descent as we drop into the gully and soon enter thick and nearly impenetrable alders. Their outstretched branches snag our packs, claw at our faces, reduce our visible world to a few feet around us. We crawl, clamber, and curse through an interminable half-mile of torment to finally emerge on the sandy flats of the White Cross landing strip. It was the trip's longest mile.

The site's namesake cross sits in the middle of the clearing, a haunting reminder left by the forgotten hikers many years ago. According to local lore, the abandoned pair built a cabin in the nearby woods to survive the winter; the small structure is actually marked on today's topographic map of the area. We can't locate it. We are left with our own reflections, thoughts of despairing

eyes scanning the skies for salvation that did not come. I never learned what happened to them.

We do not share their fate, whatever it may have been. The next morning, we hear the distant buzz of an approaching plane. It soon reveals itself to be Gary's swooping silver bullet of an aircraft on approach. He bumps down, steps out, and smiles.

IN MARCH 2010, GRETCHEN AND I WELCOMED OUR FIRST CHILD, a son, into the world. We returned that fall to New England to be closer to family, our days of deep wilderness sojourns temporarily behind us.

Big adventure in the Alaska wilderness requires commitment. It entails significant expense and risk. To me, they are small prices to pay for the profound spiritual nourishment provided by true wilderness.

More significantly, adventure in Alaska requires time. Time on the order of weeks, not days. And time is the most precious—and limited—commodity of parenthood. Some people do take their young children into the deep backcountry for camping adventures, but to me it's not worth the intense logistics and greater risks. I instead focus my time now on the once-in-a-lifetime experience that is parenthood. Alaska will always be there, but children change every day. Now is their time.

Yet Alaska gets in your head, gnaws at your soul. Wilderness is a portal to truth, a glimpse of pristine reality. Few places in the world offer such vast windows into such magnificent, untouched landscapes. Our trip to Wrangell-St. Elias lingers intensely in my memory today, beckoning my return. I have no doubt I'll be back.

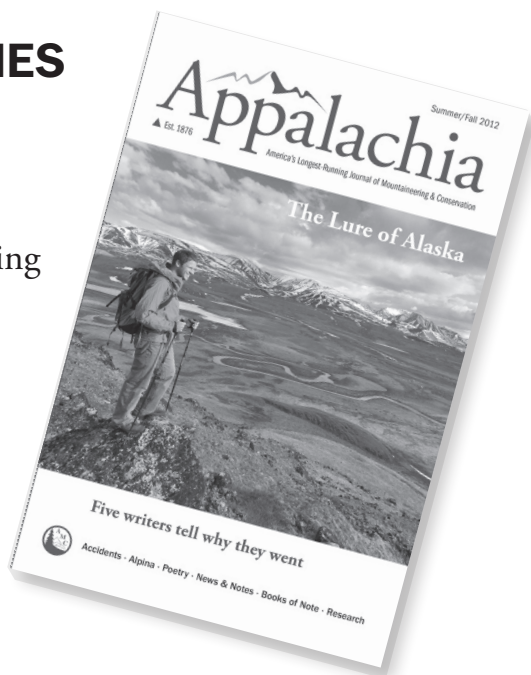
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