

The Lisburne Traverse

Pack-rafting in Arctic Alaska

On a map, the Lisburne Peninsula pokes out from Alaska's barren northwest coast, projecting westward into the mostly frozen Chukchi Sea. It is the final spit of land on the North American continent, beyond the last range of mountains, drained by the northwestern-most river. If the world were still believed to be flat, this would be its edge. Follow adventurers Tyler Williams and John Govi through this timeless frontier as they travel by pack raft across a vast rolling tundra roamed by caribou, and ruled by curious barren ground grizzlies. This is Arctic Alaska. This is the Lisburne Traverse.

Words and Photos: Tyler Williams

LISBURNE PENINSULA
68 24.690 N - 165 53.140 W



Barren ground grizzly bears are smaller and skippier than their salmon-eating cousins farther south.



The team reaches the crest of the Banks Range.



The gentle Ipewik River flows through a land covered in wildflowers and lichens.



Using his paddle as hiking poles, Gavi schleps a massive pack across the tundra.

From a half-mile away, the bears spotted us. It was a mama grizzly and her yearling, and they were coming our way. The nearest tree was a hundred miles distant. A swarm of mosquitos gathered as we stood still, and waited.

One minute later the bears reappeared from behind a knoll, looking too damn close in my binoculars. The yearling shook and romped like a playful puppy. The mama zig-zagged along a ridge, clearly aware of us but acting coy as she angled in slowly, within 80 yards now. For a moment, her broad stout head dropped low and came straight in, but then she swerved off again and stood up, sniffing and looking. I put my arms out and called "Hey bear." This was likely the first human voice she'd heard, and it confused her. She paced and grunted, her offspring mimicking at her heels. I said to my companion, Gavi, "Are you ready with that gun? We might have to fire a warning shot."

We'd wavered on our decision to bring a 12-gauge shotgun to Alaska's Western Arctic. It was inaccurate, and heavy. We probably wouldn't need it. It would separate us from the food chain. We couldn't decide if that was a

good thing or a bad thing. Philosophically, from the comfort of my home, it sounded like a bad thing. Standing there in Arctic barrens, face to face with a grizzly, it seemed like a good thing. Still, shooting a bear was a final option, and probably ineffective except at point-blank range. We decided that if the gun were used to kill, it would only be after one of us was getting mauled, and we hadn't even considered the possibility of two bears. Mama bear snorted again. For a dozen seconds, everyone—bears and humans—seemed to be wondering what would happen next, nobody really in control of their own destiny.

It was day four of a 220-mile, mostly water traverse of the Lisburne Peninsula, the fat bird's beak that sticks out from the coastline of northwest Alaska. The traverse route jumped off the map at me once I stepped back to look at the big picture. There, incongruously winding down the spine of the peninsula, was the Ipewik River. Near its source lay another river called the Kukpowruk, a stream that ultimately flows north but initially runs east to west, directly in-line with the Ipewik. If we could float down the upper Kukpowruk with pack rafts,



In late May, snow was falling and the rivers were still frozen. Our mid-June timing, carefully calculated to coincide with optimal water levels, fewer mosquitos, and ice-free conditions, looked like it was all wrong.

The tiny North Fork of the Ipewik was deep enough to float packs, but not people.

make our way overland to the Ipewik, and then paddle to the sea, we would make a complete lengthwise crossing of the Peninsula, finishing at the village of Point Hope. Starting our river journey was simply a matter of flying into the bush and crossing the Brooks Range.

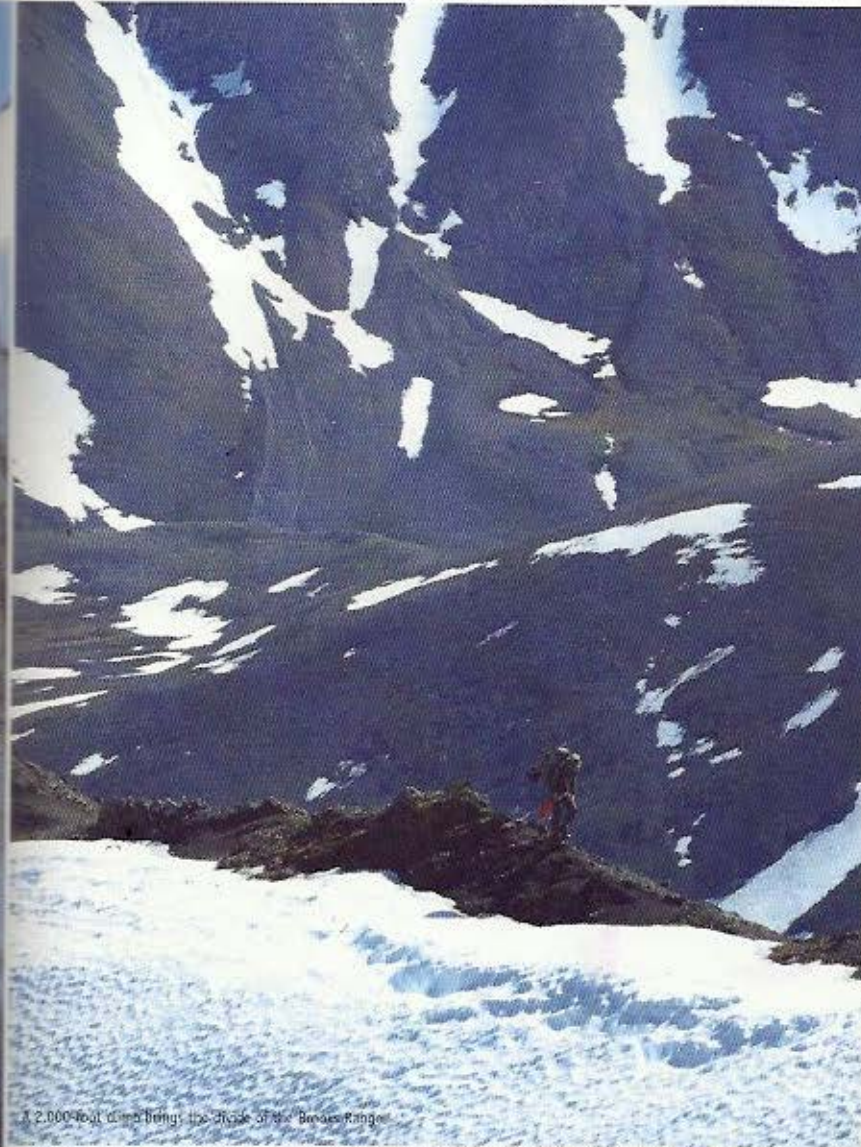
Sweeping across northern Alaska in a shallow arc, the Brooks Range lies north of the Arctic Circle for its entirety, separating spruce-covered interior Alaska from the barren tundra in the north, a region known as The North Slope. The mountain range is highest in the east, attracting adventurers to its granite spires and swift rivers. The Western Brooks, by contrast, is the forgotten quarter. The peaks are not as tall, the rivers not as swift. Yet the terrain is still spectacular, and because jet service is available to the nearby town of Kotzebue, reaching the backcountry is more affordable.

Still, nothing is cheap in the isolated Arctic. Grounded by weather in Kotzebue and resigned to wait, we visited the strictly controlled liquor store and paid an excruciating \$33 USD for 18 "cheap" Pabst Blue Ribbon beers. "Maybe it will appease the weather gods," said our pilots. They were right. By morning we looked out the window of a Cessna 206 as our pilot, Eric, swerved and banked looking for landing options, but the rivers were high and gravel bars were few. At one point, the river we flew along vanished beneath a half-mile wide sheet of snow and ice. I looked back at Govi. His brow furrowed.

Rivers in Alaska's north come to life dramatically, transforming from solid channels of frozen white to seething floods of tumbling ice in a matter of days. This quick metamorphosis, called "break-up," usually occurs in late May, and soon after the big melt, rivers drop steadily. In low-snow years, waterways like the Ipewik can be reduced to a trickle by early July. But this year Alaska was experiencing its coldest springtime ever. In late May, snow was falling and the rivers were still frozen. It was an unexpected twist from a warming climate, but counter-intuitive seasonal shifts are happening more dramatically at high latitudes than in any other part of the world. Our mid-June timing, carefully calculated to coincide with optimal water levels, fewer mosquitos, and ice-free conditions, looked like it was all wrong.

With limited options, Eric landed on a grassy flat several miles from our preferred starting point. Not ideal, but we were glad to have it. After a handshake and good luck wishes, he was off, a tiny humming speck against a backdrop of snowy mountains. The sudden silence was intimidating. Govi loaded the shotgun.

Our trek was a mix of river crossings, snowfields, barren ridges, and grass tussocks—dreaded tussocks. Valleys that appeared to be pleasant and smooth were often covered with tussocks, a soggy bunch grass that is too tall and floppy to step upon and too tightly spaced to easily walk around,



A 2,000-foot climb brings the Brook of the Brooks Range.



Numerous North Slope rivers were studied before Williams took a step back to see the obvious Yukon route.



Day one brought hot weather and heavy packs.



Caribou like this are known as "winter caribou" because they remain on the tundra throughout the year.

Naked earth is a landscape fully revealed, and in the Arctic, wildness is everywhere, an open book in its vastness. This primal reverie would resonate with me in time, but at the moment I just wanted the bugs to stop and the grizzlies to leave.

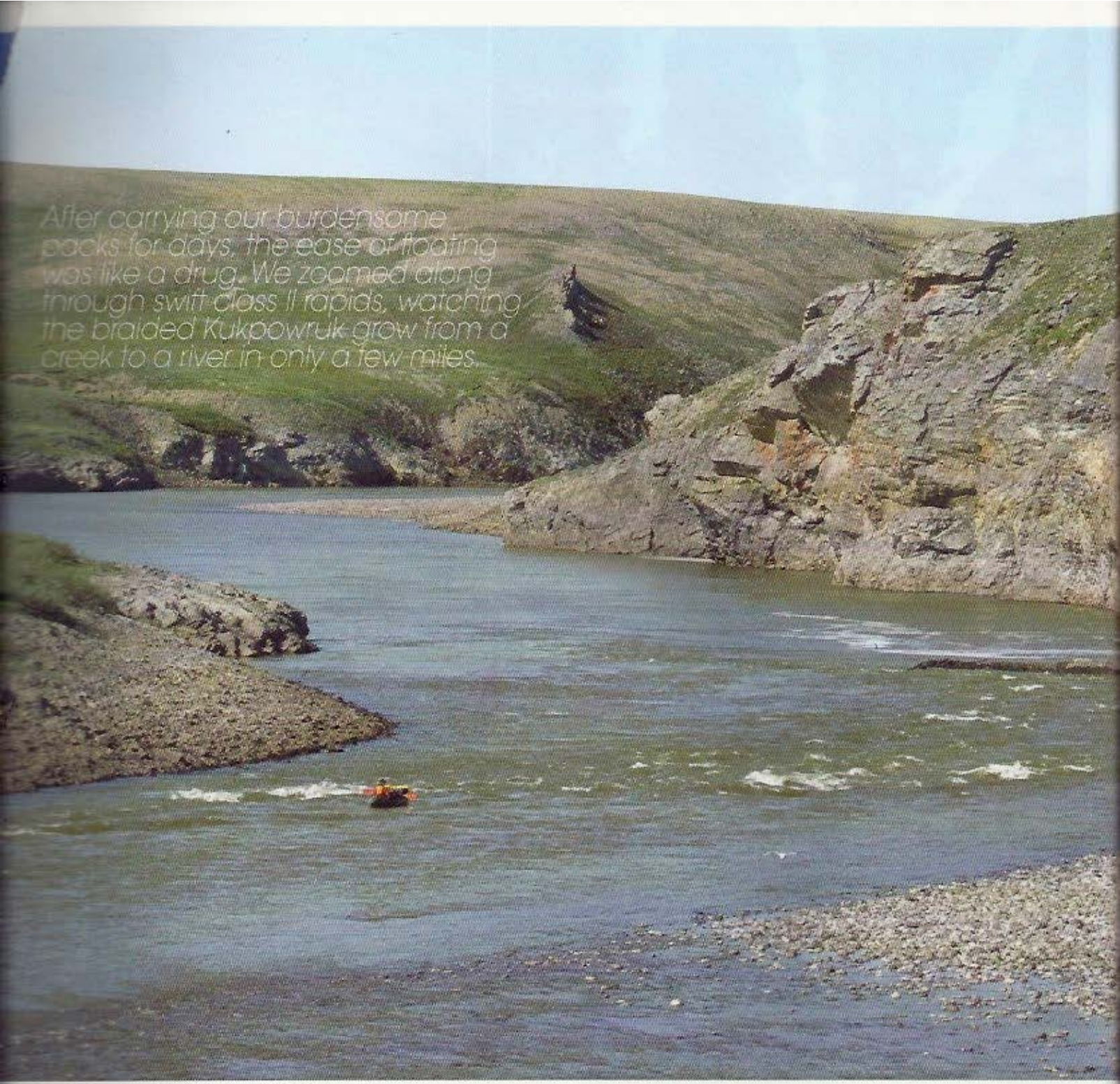
requiring a careful high stepping stride that is exhausting, slow, and perilous. Much effort was placed on finding routes leading around the tussock plains, and anticipation of our river float built with every step. But we tried to keep our thoughts of paddling at bay, lest we lose sight of each small goal—linking caribou trails through knee-high brush, tip-toeing over snow-bridged creeks with the sound of whitewater pulsing ominously from below, and occasionally suffering through a tussock marsh. But the respite of evening provided ample reward. The record cold weather of spring gave way to record heat, and we sat comfortably in evening sunshine at 10 pm, watching caribou and grizzlies from a safe distance.

We named one mountain trench "The Valley of the Bear," because every time we paused at a high point to glass ahead for grizzlies, there was one. They marched along peacefully, sometimes stopping to take a dip in a meltwater pond before continuing to wherever they were headed, opposite our direction. When we camped at the head of the valley, a bear ambled into the basin and took up residence a couple hundred yards from our tent, browsing for hours completely unconcerned with our presence. As mountain shadows finally fell over camp at midnight, Govi said, "That bear doesn't care about us," and rolled over to sleep, the bruin chomping happily just a 5-iron shot away.

We pushed to the crest of the mountains on our third day, hopeful that a short descent on the far side would have us on the water, but our first view of the Kukpowruk was disheartening. The river cut a slot canyon in deep drifted snow. It appeared tantalizingly runnable, but there was no escape from the slick white walls, and a few blind corners potentially held deadly ice sieves. Our mountain walk continued, post-holing through rotten snow, and leaping across icy side stream gorges. Shoulders cramping, legs weary, we yearned to float, but every section of open water ended in an undercut of ice.

At last we saw no death traps ahead, and went to river's edge to inflate our boats. Buried in our burdensome packs for days, the little rafts now provided pure joy. The ease of floating was like a drug. We zoomed along through swift class II rapids, watching the braided Kukpowruk grow from a creek to a river in only a few miles. The change in landscape on the north side of the Brooks Range was immediately apparent. Hills were rounder. Strange swooping birds were prevalent. A cold polar-tinged breeze washed down tributary streams. It spun us in lazy circles as we drifted and watched caribou graze the slopes.

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd is the largest in Alaska, numbering between 200,000 and 400,000 animals. Most of those caribou retreat south to the shelter of the taiga for winter, before returning to the North Slope in summer. But some, like the ones we saw, remain on the barren tundra throughout the year.



After carrying our burdensome packs for days, the ease of floating was like a drug. We zoomed along through swift class II rapids, watching the braided Kukpowruk grow from a creek to a river in only a few miles.

One of the few rapids on the Ipewik River, located amidst the Lisburne Hills.

Herd of ten to fifty dotted the grassy slopes, or laid in respite on patches of spring snow. Over the course of the day, we counted roughly 500 animals.

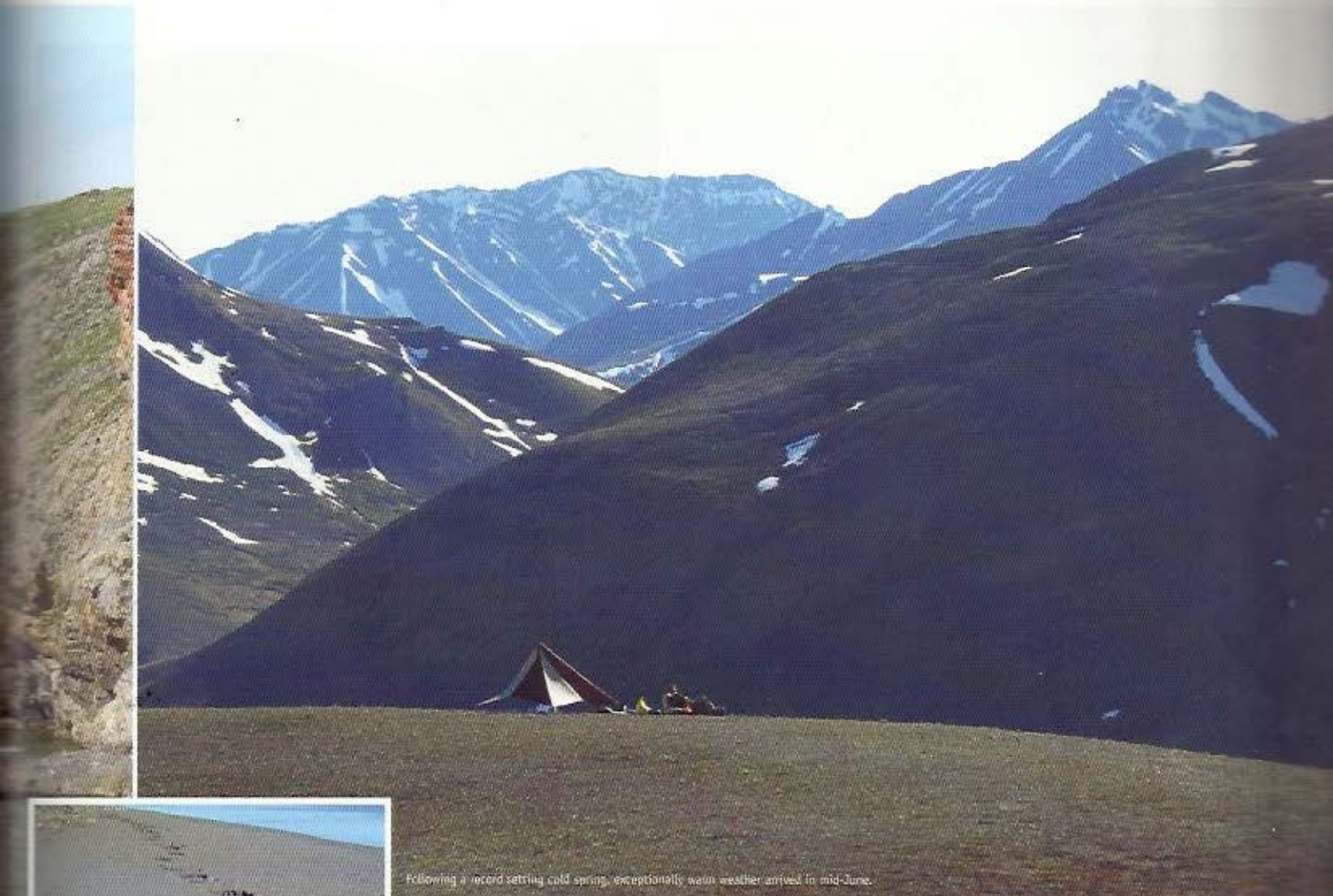
When a clear stream entered from the south, it was our signal to exit the Kukpowruk. The desire to keep riding the current was strong, but the Ipewik—our key to the Peninsula traverse—lay to the west. We deflated our boats and re-tooled for hiking mode beneath a hot sun. Climbing a gentle ridge, an arctic expanse opened. Peaks of the Brooks Range rose in the far distance. Nearby, flat-topped mesas hemmed massive valleys. It was greener than before, and the richness brought bugs. Mosquitos had been almost nonexistent for the first few days, but as we started across the green tundra they arrived in force. Clouds of them gathered when we stopped to watch the approach of mama bear and her young one.

The grizzly standoff was not something we sought. Nonetheless, the rawness of the situation was an essential piece of the Arctic experience; immersion into wild nature amidst a wide open landscape, exposed to the bare basics of existence. In a land without trees, nothing can hide. Naked earth is a landscape fully revealed, and in the Arctic, wildness is everywhere, an open book in its vastness. This primal reverie would resonate with me in time, but at the moment I just wanted the bugs to stop, and the grizzlies to leave.

We talked and moved our limbs slowly, hoping the bears would see us as something other than prey. Slowly spinning and grunting, they began to meander away. We breathed a sigh, but then they turned to watch us from 500 yards, contentedly sitting down right in our desired route. After several minutes of fruitlessly waiting for them to go in another direction, we shouldered our packs and started around the far side of the mountain.

A few hours' march delivered a campsite where we could pitch our floorless tent tight to the ground, creating a bug-proof shelter. When I crawled in at 11 pm, the sun still beamed on our lonely teepee, creating sauna-like conditions inside. I laid motionless dripping with sweat, too hot to sleep, too tired to get up. Clouds arrived by morning, casting soft patterns of light across endless undulations of brown and green tundra. The bugs were quiet, and big skies stretched in every direction. A flatness in the northern distance indicated the Arctic Ocean. The scene was tranquil and inspiring, but we remained anxious for the Ipewik. Unlike the robust Kukpowruk, it drained low hills mostly void of snow. Would it be big enough to float? How much walking did we still have ahead?

The banks of the Ipewik's tiny north fork offered a channelized 50 cubic feet per second. This was enough water to float our packs, but not sufficient to always carry our body weight in the rafts. We alternately paddled and



Following a record setting cold spring, exceptionally warm weather arrived in mid-June.



Fresh bear tracks tell the team that the finish line is not yet theirs.



The 12-gauge shotgun was both a bear deterrent, and an emergency hunting device if something went horribly wrong.



No mosquitoes and warm sunshine at 10 p.m. had spirits high.

walked down the little creek toward the much-anticipated south fork. The last major tributary for a long way, its flow would determine whether our remaining 150-miles of Arctic travel was a river trip, or a low water survival slog.

Our gnawing uncertainty vanished at the confluence. The south fork entered deep and swift, more than tripling the Ipewik's flow. A chorus of shouts and high-fives was insufficient expression of our ecstatic relief. This mysterious blue line on the map was actually a runnable river! Terrain rolled past as the Ipewik slowly gained volume, leading into long flat pools that required a steady paddling pace. Swift narrow runs broke the monotony, allowing us to drift across the tundra with hardly an ounce of effort, pure bliss.

Days later, I awoke with a start to Govi's voice, ready for a bear in camp. "There's water in the tent," he stated matter-of-factly, working through his sleepy confusion. I unzipped the front door to see a wave train roaring past. The brown water lapping at our feet was an eddy. My mind leapt to the boats. We'd left them on the beach pinned with heavy rocks so the wind wouldn't blow them away, but they weren't tied to anything. I grabbed two food bags from under the water and chucked them to higher ground, then crawled out the back of the tent to look for the boats. Luckily they were still there, only a few feet from the river. We quickly moved the rafts, and heaped the tent onto tundra above. Some of the strongest thunderstorms

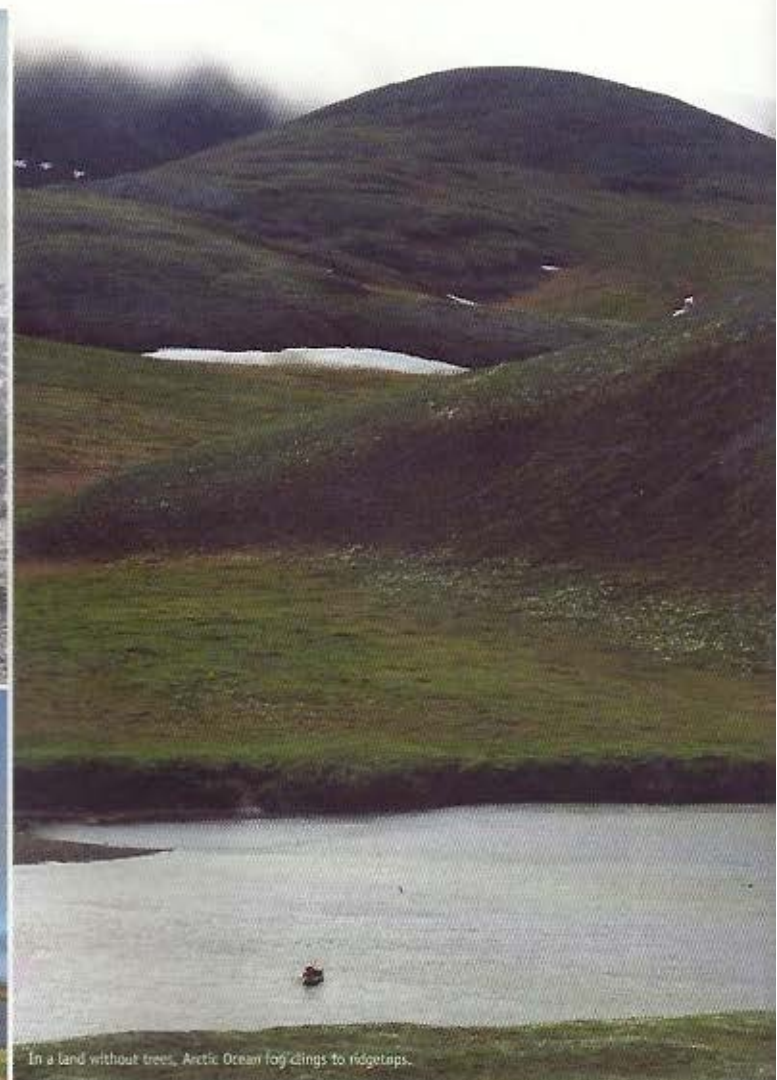
ever recorded on the North Slope had swelled the river while we slept.

The high water helped us reach the Lisburne Hills, gateway to the coastal plain. A strong tailwind ushered us into the hills as a cold polar fog wipped over ridgelines behind us. A scraggly fox with a vacant axe-murderer stare watched us float past, perhaps one of the rabid population known to inhabit the area. Renowned explorer Dick Griffiths once desperately fought one off with a ski pole somewhere in the vicinity. We made a few more miles, and camped on the opposite shore in the lee of a willow thicket, where our evening routine commenced: Bleed air from the boats, change clothes, raise the tent, patiently start a cooking fire with weak-burning rotten willow.

As the Ipewik swept through the last of the Lisburne Hills, orange lichen-cliffs rose from the water, casting the first natural shade we'd seen in weeks. As the Ipewik left the hills and its polar mists behind, the tailwind faded, and we spilled onto the coastal plain amidst a riot of wildflowers. At the confluence of the Kukpuk River, an old village site named "Kayak" prompted us out of our boats to pay homage. The local Inupiat plied these waters in handmade boats long before the first European sailors labeled their maps with titles like "Lisburne," and "Pt. Hope." Point Hope, where we hoped to catch an airplane home, is the second-most continually inhabited community in North America, and for most of that history its sole name was Tikigaq. Our arrival there was



Once reaching the sea, a walk down the foggy coastline led to the village of Tikigaq.



In a land without trees, Arctic Ocean fog clings to ridgetops.



Govi, left, and Williams bundle up on the frigid coast near the end of the journey.



With all gear neatly arranged for paddling mode, the pack raft is inflated.

As the Ipewik swept through the last of the Lisburne Hills, orange lichen-clad cliffs rose from the water, casting the first natural shade we'd seen in weeks.

almost imminent now. Thoughts of hot showers and cold beers tickled my psyche, but as we stepped out of our boats to stretch our legs, we walked into fresh grizzly tracks in the mud. The finish line was not yet ours.

An incoming tide slowed us to a crawl, a cold breeze blew in our faces, and little waves incessantly slapped at our slow inflatable boats. A dark fog hovered over the Chukchi Sea just ahead, luring us toward our goal. But the tide strengthened, forcing us to shore. I walked up a steep embankment to scout. Royal blue lakes partially covered in ice dotted a wide prairie. Parcels of low cloud blew overhead, riding a frigid wind off the sea. Geese and gulls squawked and circled over an infinity of tundra. Somewhere out there was a beach that would lead us to Tikigaq.

We aimed for two cookie-shaped humps in the distance. The landscape was a patchwork of bog and pond, interlaced with mossy balance beams that bordered the watery polygons. Inevitably, our path was a circuitous route of S-turns to avoid the water, interspersed with straight-line bog crossings where there was no practical detour, where we lost patience and slogged through

ankle-deep wetland, one gloppy step at a time. At a deep blue pond, we stopped and filled empty drybags with a few inches of fresh water, hopeful that we'd be camping on salt water soon. But when we looked through the binoculars from a rise, hoping to see the village, all we saw was endless tundra. In a mantra-like trance, we stepped forward at a slow forever-pace.

A vague ethereal light washed over the prairie to my right. I crept closer, squinting, trying to separate cloud from sky from water. Water! Waves lapped in the mist, crashing onto a gravel shore. Resigned, humbled, and triumphant, I raised my arms and let out a roar. We blew-up our boats once more to paddle across a small inlet, and pitched a final camp within sight of the village.

Standing there, on the northwestern-most point of land in North America, at the brink of icy seas where humans first crossed onto this continent, where the land is quickly succumbing to a rising ocean, it was impossible not to see our "exploration" in the context of time. We were two puny creatures in a primal landscape, traveling with the benefit of boat technology on the life-blood of the continent—water.