

**ARCTIC RIVER DIARY**  
**FERAL CIVILIZATION / CIVIL WILDERNESS**  
“Where is Moose Track, Moose Chips Must Surely Follow”

Tom Arendshorst

I reached my fiftieth birthday invested with ample fat stores for the coming autumn and winter of my life, nestled in physical and economic comfort, and secured by self-eroding cords of complacency. Fifty? Big deal. I didn't feel old. I felt capable, despite gravity's effects on my physique. Gainfully employed, physically pretty active, possessing some notion of a “position in the community,” I had metamorphosed into adulthood. And I missed some sense of vitality.

I knew what I needed. Challenge, the bare-knuckled, credential-stripped rigor and spiritual expansiveness of wilderness.

I wrote away to NOLS, the National Outdoor Leadership School, which I understood to be the premier wilderness education outfit in America. The NOLS catalogue detailed a wide variety of backpacking, mountaineering, ocean kayaking and other courses year-round, including several for people over 25 and one for students 50 or over. I figured I'd rather be an older guy with younger kids and be cut some slack for my infirmities rather than be the youngest in a mature group of triathlon vets, so I signed up for the “25 and over Alaska Arctic River Course.” The course description said, “On this kayaking and canoeing journey north of the Arctic Circle, you will pass through remote mountains and vast expanses of tundra . . . Frequently seen wildlife include caribou, grizzly bears, and a rich variety of bird life.”

More info arrived: a detailed course description, equipment list, risk waiver form, medical exam form. As my plans for this trip congealed, so did my nascent concern about being over my head. I guessed that the average dude signing up for this relatively rugged and austere event would likely be a thirty-year-old triathlon type, someone who could swim the icy waters naked

and fight bears for food, a man or woman who was at one with the wild, who ate nails for breakfast and crapped scrap metal. Although I'd often canoed over flatwater lakes, I feared the prospect of crashing through boulder-strewn minefields of thundering rapids hundreds of miles from the nearest rescue. The course outline stated, "Summers above the Arctic Circle are unpredictable, with weather as likely to be wet and cold as it is to be fair and pleasantly warm. Storms are not uncommon for days at a time, frequently with snow and temperatures below freezing. After a long day of paddling or negotiating yet another rapid, you may cook your supper amid swarms of mosquitoes."

I scheduled my stress-EKG, gestured at reworking gravity-besotted physique, and gathered my duffel of polypropylene and wool layers.

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**Monday, August 11:** I'm lying in my sleeping bag. North of the Arctic Circle, in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. It's hard to believe, hard to integrate. A few consecutive plane flights, a day or of organizing and packing in Fairbanks, a bush light across the Yukon and up the Sheenjek River Valley, and here I am, camping on the tundra in the shadow of mountains in the land of the midnight sun. As we flew north, dense forests gradually gave way to smaller, scattered aspen and spruce. From the air, we spotted caribou and musk oxen, but no sign of human influence for the last 150 miles. Here, up against the south slope of northern Alaska's Brooks Range, dwarf spruces survive only in sheltered drainage clefts. Mountainsides exposed to wind, which is unrelenting and everywhere, are barren, just rock and scree. Grass tussocks, luxurious lichens, and blueberry bushes sprinkle the gravel and tundra we're camped on. Our glacial river valley is several miles wide, branching off between mountain ridges.

There are eight of us NOLS students — five women, three men, from eight different places around the country, ranging in age from 23 to me. The two

instructors, Atilla and Alan, sleep in one tent. As it's working out the rest of us will mix and rotate tent-mates at different campsites, a seething broth of intrigue.

I'm writing now, at 10pm, by sunlight. We had a marvelous first day — sun, breeze, mild, and unbelievably clear in this dramatically pristine place. We spent the afternoon setting up tents to be storm-proof, learning zero-impact camping, and getting acquainted. NOLS stresses camping so that the wilderness is left undamaged — not just nice, but *no trace* of having been disturbed. We don't wash leftovers into the river or into a hole to be buried; we eat it all, or pack it out. We camp on non-degradable surfaces — rock or gravel. After camping, we scatter any rocks or logs we've used. We only burn fires if it's necessary for safety or if cold is a health risk; we use propane mini-stoves for cooking. In order to avoid violating nature, we bury our poop in cat-holes, and use no toilet paper — instead, smooth rocks, spruce cones (with the grain), sphagnum moss, whatever. I find moss to be excellent. Latrine sports are all at least 100 yards from tent or food areas or water drainages.

Alan and Atilla spent an hour teaching us about grizzly bears and wilderness techniques in grizzly country. We are in grizzly country. And as I get a sense of this quiet, enormous wilderness, I can feel that this is *not our* country, human country. We are guests here. If grizzly bears live here, it is *their* country. Because, we're told, there is no recorded history of a grizzly attacking a group of four or more people, we will *always* move in groups of four or more. This means that, when one person hears nature's call, four must answer; three friends must escort him or her to the biffy. We will try to coordinate our bowels and bladders, and get past our cultured senses of propriety. When approaching any brushy or wooded area, or any place where visibility is limited, we call out to warn an unsuspecting bear, like "Hey, Bear!" "Here I come!" "Eat me last, I'm the oldest!" Grizzlies have crummy vision and rely on their marvelous sense of smell. There is an old adage that when a pine needle drops in the forest, the eagle will see it fall; the deer will hear it when it hits the ground; the grizzly bear will smell it. A bear upwind of me cannot smell me, so we are especially watchful when moving into the wind, where we might surprise a bear. We tent at least 100 yards

upwind of our cooking area, because we're in grizzly country, and no food or food-stained clothes go near the tents. We will follow these rules until we leave the wild.

The barren-ground grizzlies of Arctic Alaska are smaller than the brown bears (same species) of the south Alaska coastal area; their lives and diets are more austere. Tundra grizzlies are solitary, each lording a territory of fifty to a hundred square miles. A grizzly prefers a vegetable diet, lots of berries and roots. Where their territories cross, a grizzly may sometimes kill and eat a black bear. He can pulp a moose head with a single blow, but may walk past a grazing moose family kindly, like a king ambling through a public park. To scratch his belly a grizzly walks over a tree, where one exists; the tree bends beneath him as he passes. He generally forages in the morning, and lounges a great deal. Sleeping on the tundra, he restlessly tosses and turns. What he could be worrying about is hard to imagine.

When a grizzly catches the scent of something of interest, he might stand on his hind legs, squinting to see. If a bear is getting ready to attack, he gets down on all fours, head low, ears cocked, and paws the ground like a bull. As if that message were not clear enough, he also chomps his jaws, his teeth clanging like steel on stone. We are advised, if we should encounter a grizzly bear, to stand still and not run. A grizzly, no slower than a racing horse, is about half-again as fast as an Olympic sprinter. Grizzlies climb trees poorly, because their claws are five-inch-long knives, but there are no trees taller than eight feet here. You can't run away from a chasing grizzly, and anything running looks like prey to a grizzly. Should the grizzly approach, advice is inconsistent as to whether to shout or stay quiet (I lean toward noise). Should the bear attack, we are advised to curl up in a ball, hands clasped behind the neck, and play dead, even if he bites. It's not a situation to be in, I guess.

Generally, grizzlies avoid contact with humans. Human scent will almost always cause a grizzly to stop his activity, pause in a moment of absorbed and alert curiosity, and then move away at a dignified pace. But there is no guarantee. The forest Eskimos fear and revere the grizzly. They know that

certain individual bears not only will fail to avoid a visitor into their country, but will approach and even stalk the interloper. It is impossible to predict the behavior of any one bear, since grizzlies are both intelligent and independent and will do what they choose to do according to mood, experience, whim. Grizzlies hide food sometimes — a caribou calf, say, under a pile of scraped-up moss — and a person who innocently moves between the food cache and the bear can be at risk. A sow grizzly with cubs, even grown cubs, will attack anything she believes to be dangerous.

NOLS groups carry no guns. I presume this is for philosophical reasons, since we are visitors in a wilderness we wish not to disturb. I've read, too, that possession of a gun in grizzly country alters a man's behavior, decreases his wary respect and inflates his unconscious arrogance. A gun-wounded bear is, of course, extremely dangerous. Add to this the manifest risk guns present to nearby people, and the NOLS policy seems justified. Here, in this tent, tonight, I'm comfortable with it.

Two hundred yards from our tents we found some recent grizzly scat today. And a fresh trail of grizzly tracks were in the mud at the river bank this morning, fifty yards from our cooking area.

Tonight we talked together about why each of us has come. Our goals and desires for the expedition are surprisingly varied, some vague, some specific. Mine are clear in my mind: I'm here for the challenge, to learn whitewater canoeing skills, and to find in this wilderness retreat spiritual renewal. I will need to make a point of finding time for reflective solitude.

**Tuesday, August 12:** Cold rain. And wind. After hashed browns with cheese, we invested two hours in assembling our "folding" canoes and kayak (rubberized nylon over aluminum shock-corded skeleton), something like wrestling a giant cranky spider. After another half-hour biffy-walk community event, Alan and Atilla taught us river safety, and we practiced canoeing and kayaking techniques. I practiced in the kayak, and found that my rain pants are

not truly waterproof. I sat down in frigid water. The weather has cleared, and my u-trou have nearly dried. There are two rainbows over our glacial valley.

Our two instructors are fascinating people, both widely educated and utterly at home in wilderness. Atilla, thiryish, Brazilian, graduate of Cal-Berkeley, has astounding worldwide wilderness experience, and has been a river-raft guide, has lived with Native Americans, and has raced canoes and kayaks. His good humor is infectious, his personality dominating. Alan is about fifty and, after careers teaching high school and working in the Peace Corps in Africa, has spent the past twenty years mostly teaching wilderness skills to Outward Bound students in the Boundary Waters. Both Atilla and Alan are utterly at home in wilderness. Atilla is on the trail year-round, and has no domicile; Alan's home and wife are in Vermont, where he rests three or four months a year. Both are patient, wiry-strong, gently good-natured, and encyclopedic in their knowledge of nature.

Tomorrow we break camp and get on the river.

**Thursday, August, 14:** The upper Sheenjek has been fast and often shallow, impetuously and repeatedly splitting into braids as it attacks its banks. Its water is grey-green, opaque and gritty with glacier-pulverized rock. I learned back-ferrying and forward-ferrying today, techniques for moving the canoe sideways in fast current. As we approached one divide in the river, we spotted grizzly in the shallows at the point. Drifting toward the bear as it casually shambled into the willow brush of the island, I tried to shoot a picture, only to find I needed to change film. While my canoe-mate guided our craft, I fumbled with my photo gear. When I looked up, we were running aground where the bear had been moments before. Feeling some urgency to move from that spot, we slid to the left; all the rest of our party had taken the right-hand fork. As Wendy and I rounded the first bend, we came upon the bear, swimming in front of us toward the left bank. We back-paddled, giving it as much room as we could. It never looked at us. We rejoined everybody else a couple of hundred yards later. We were excited for the rest of the day. I'm still excited. And still relieved.

We are camped tonight on a gravel-and-sand island in the river. A peach-colored sky highlights the surrounding mountains. I saw both a golden and a bald eagle today, as well as lots of moose and wolf tracks.

This is expansive, wild, challenging country, where small plants struggle to survive with the mosses and lichens, and the country permits the survival of only a sparse list of animals: one kind of squirrel, one rabbit (the snowshoe) one sheep (Dall), two deer (caribou and moose), one bear. The Arctic's austerity requires a relatively large territory for each animal. Life is tenuous. Stepping on a plant may doom that plant in its unequal struggle with the elements. Under a layer of surface soil or gravel lies Arctic permafrost, frozen for eons. Even the permafrost is fragile: if the overlying insulation of soil is denuded, the deeper freeze melts and sinks. Walking on snow in dead of winter can result in the death of underlying plant life, by pressing out its air supply and insulation.

Eight-and-a-half days left on the river — 95 miles — then home. Whither my life? I think more of scaling work back to two-thirds time, to start something new. Teaching? Youth wilderness or experiential work? Writing and painting? Golf? What do I want said about me at my funeral? What do I want to be able to look back on when I'm 75? What's really important? How can I grow and be who I want to be and should be?

**Sunday, August 17:** We're spending today as a rest day, on a sand island with 70 miles to go. Friday seven of us hiked across muskeg bogs, twisted our ankles over grass tussocks and taiga ridges, and then clambered 1100 feet up a steep mountainside to a windswept ridge crest from which we could survey the Sheenjek's broad valley and many miles of "empty" country in every direction. By "empty", of course, I mean empty of people. It was exhilarating, especially after the exhausting ascent, a "The hills are alive with the sound of music" moment.

Yesterday I tried my hand at dry fly casting. Fish cannot see in the opaque Sheenjek, but where clear side streams join there are grayling. After pushing my feet into stiff-frozen hip-boots, I waved my rod tip between 10 and 2

and danced my tiny fly on the rushing metal surface of the brook, but I didn't fool the innocent fish. Tyler and Alan did, though, and the beautiful high-finned grayling were delicious, our first meat on the trip. It became a lovely Arctic summer day — 55-60 degrees, sunny, gentle breeze.

Paddling together, you get to know a person. Little Diane, an internist from New York, attacked the water furiously and never stopped. David, the Virginia psychiatrist, obsessed and compulsed from moment to moment, fretting a grand day away. MaryKay sang oldies tunes with me and wasted little anxiety over onrushing rocks and deadheads. Young Michigan law student Tyler and I drove a Ferrari downstream.

Last night wolves howled from the ridge, and the weather turned. Today has been drizzly/rainy and socked-in. Here under the cook tarp with gathered tinder and firewood, I'm trying to discern how this expedition fits into my life. I have come hoping to find some input, some helpful direction and fuel. I need a more physical life. I enjoy being detached from the ultra-technological, anti-natural life I lead at home. I respect and value simplicity in living, nature and wildlife, non-material values, self-reliance and self-sufficiency, living as a participant in nature's orchestra.

Am I spoiled? Has security make me foolish, restless for greener grass? How much of my interest in youth work and teaching is simple reaction to my son Michael's difficulties, and my feelings of having been inadequate as a father? It probably doesn't matter. What *does* matter, in personal terms, is my own values, my sense of God's call. I believe that I *can* make choices and *hope* to live in a way, doing things, that I will be satisfied and proud to have done in twenty years. I resolve to make time in my life for adventures, quiet reflection and talks with God, artistic development, physical training, family fun, and variety.

The rain has turned to snow. I cooked curried rice with raisins, coconut, sunflower seeds, dried apples, brown sugar, and spices. As in the old moose-chips story, everyone liked it. I'm in my sleeping bag now in multiple layers of polypro and pile and my wool sox. It's bone-chilling cold. Snow on August 17 on the banks of the Sheenjok in Arctic Alaska. Good night.



**Tuesday, August 19:** As the Sheenjek descends toward its rendezvous with the mighty Yukon, it is increasing its gradient, picking up speed and volume. Seen from the air, these Arctic rivers snake back and forth; they are constantly cutting into their banks, driving loops and braids which eventually cut through to the river downstream. Chunks of overhanging riverbank splash heavily into the grey torrent. Old dry courses fill in with taiga, leaving looping tracks visible from many years past. We've gradually become more adept at eddy turns, ferrying, and reading the rapids. Where tributaries join the river, rip currents complicate our novice strategies. "Sweeper" fallen trees lie in wait on the outside of turns where the fast water is. But, so far, none of us has flipped and gone swimming in the icy water.

The day was magnificent, though cold — snow-dusted hills, broad blue dome of sky, sunlight, and wildlife — many caribou in the river, moose, a couple of grizzlies in the middle distance, Arctic and red-necked loons. A lynx swam across the river in front of us. We paddled much of the day in quiet. I was aware of how, as it has all my life, the beauty and intricacy of nature connect me to God. For me, the elegant complexity of the physical world — science — is strong evidence of God's creative genius. And in nature, I feel God speaks to me. In the wilderness, I am acutely aware of the interrelatedness of all things, the flowing pattern of life. With the falsehoods of human self-sufficiency and dollar values stripped away, I feel able to see more clearly the genuine values of relationships and life choices based on my sense of God's call. Surrounded by the majestic silence and spectacular vastness of this wilderness, I feel filled with peace.

As the veneer of civilization wears thinner, we're getting wilder. Only one other student and I have completely bathed even once so far. The prospect of getting into this icy water is forbidding, but our scents have wafted through fetid to rancid. Still, it's a burden we all share, and we nestle in our stinky tents in good humor.

The wilderness has also worn off the veneer of skin from all ten of my fingertips, so I'm having some trouble writing, my fingers all shoe-gooed and taped.

**Thursday, August 21:** The past two days I've paddled stern in canoes with Alan and Atilla, the two instructors. They are both fascinating people, compulsive teachers, and capable of being truly inspirational. I'd love to have my sons be able to take a trip with either of them. Paddling with them was very instructive, and they both are compulsive teachers. At lunch, Alan pulled out his packet of note cards and talked with us about Alaska's history of conflicting land uses, land claims, and politics.

In the long ago when the vastness of Alaska was a territory, its land was coveted only by its scattered few native Indians and Eskimos and a trickle of prospectors and settlers. In all that territorial land, so wild and remote, emigrants from the United States easily established their frontier code: breathe free, do as you please, control your own destiny. But the federal government owned 99% of the land. Statehood arrived in 1958, and as part of that transaction the federal government promised to transfer 103 million acres, a little more than a quarter of Alaska, to state ownership. At that time, the population of Alaska, minute even today, was about the same as the population of Sacramento, and giving them acreage the size of California seemed generous. In 1971 all the historical claims of Eskimos and other native peoples, which had held the state in legal deadlock, were resolved in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act; the sixty thousand natives settled for a billion dollars and 40 million acres of Alaskan land. Oil had been discovered on Alaska's Arctic shore, and the Native Claims Settlement Act opened the way for the Trans-Alaska pipeline and a new age of anticipated commercial development. Because conservationists were outraged by the planned pipeline, Congress had attempted to restore balance by including extensive conservation provisions in the Native Claims Settlement. 80 million acres were allocated to the Department of the Interior to be preserved as national parks, national wild rivers, national wildlife refuges, and national forests.

So, 103 million acres to the state of Alaska, 40 million acres to the Alaskan natives, 80 million acres to the federal government. A battle was joined over which lands should be used for what — a battle that continues today, because, amazingly, *most of the rights to make these claims have still not been exercised*. The majority of these claims have been held in reserve, waiting to see where the most valuable land would be. To further complicate the stew, none of the three have a single clear perspective: natives are torn between preservation of their traditional way of life and enormous wealth; citizens of Alaska are torn between capitalistic economic development and the values which led them to wild Alaska in the first place; and the federal government has ended up being, for the most part, the strongest voice for conservation of Alaskan wilderness.

Alaska contains 40% of America's remaining wilderness lands. As civilization irresistibly spreads, only the most inhospitable and remote areas remain inviolate. When wild country turns out to have multiple possible valuable uses, how should the conflict be resolved? The northern portion of the National Arctic Wildlife Refuge holds oil reserves under its tundra and permafrost. The same area is also the breeding home of Alaska's largest caribou herd, on which the region's Eskimos depend for survival. The refuge, in which we've been basking for the past two weeks, is also a cornerstone of America's remaining wilderness preserves, the world as God made it.

What is the best use of this wild country? How are we to be stewards of the earth? What is the value of wilderness, and how great is that value? How much wilderness do we need, and how much will we need in the future?

The danger and mystique of the grizzly bear remain very much in our minds. Every activity at every stop on the river is organized around the grizzly imperative. We are not tempted to get sloppy about grizzly precautions. I am continually eager to see another grizzly, and continually fearful of meeting one. The implication of the grizzly is unmatched by any other American animal. He is the predominant presence in the Alaskan wilderness, and for him to be in it at all means that there has to be more wilderness like this in every direction, and more of the same kind of wilderness all around that. The grizzly implies a world. He

states to the rest of the earth that this kind of place exists. And we are in *his* wilderness.

**Friday, August 22:** Tomorrow two little Cessnas will land on the grapefruit-sized gravel here and lift us out. I'll soon see my family, and catch up with the changes in their lives.

I'm sitting on the rocky shore of the Sheenjek at its confluence with the Konuss, our take-out point. A little while ago I stripped down to swim trunks, stood at the river's edge, and lathered my head and body with biodegradable soap. I waded into the rushing water, aiming my toes upstream for safety while balancing on the round stones and gritting my teeth against the water's glacial cold. I crouched, leaned forward onto my hands, and lowered myself into the rapids. I didn't stay long. Now I am in the sun, in a clean T-shirt and swim trunks, reclining against a pack. I'm by myself, savoring the pure air and river conversation of this Arctic wilderness. I feel wonderful.

**Saturday, August 23:** This morning the first of our two Cessna bush planes landed on our wide gravel "beach". After clearing the "runway" of the largest of its thousands of grapefruit-sized rocks, we loaded half of our gear and half of our party into the plane. The pilot gunned his engine, released his brake, drove forward, rose into the air over the Sheenjek, stalled, and fell straight down fifty feet into the water. As I sprinted to the river and splashed to the plane, images of gashed and broken bodies ran through my head; I would be our doctor. To our immense relief, no one had been injured. A piece of driftwood had damaged a flap cable.

Like most people, I've come to expect "real life" in our sophisticated, technological society to be predictably dependable. Our evolved notion of liability, of identifiable blame for every adverse event, is the ugly child of our underlying cultural assumption that events are governable, that we humans are in control of our world. But, despite our sophistication and magnificent excellence, accidents inevitably happen. It is the inherent risk of unexpected

technological failures that makes me worry about plans for “clean”, “non-invasive” exploitation of ANWR’s buried oil. One calamity would outweigh the total potential benefit of all of ANWR’s oil, and would last through foreseeable history.

After the horror and near-catastrophe of the crash, our second plane landed. We again policed the runway, loaded up, got in, and flew to Arctic Village. A third plane landed at our campsite later; it took time and a lot of talking, but Diane sat with her fellow crashees in her second plane of the day and they joined us about 10pm. It was a very happy reunion.

**Tuesday, August 26:** Home again, taking a break from unpacking. At various times over the past two weeks, fellow students told me that I’m (quoting now) “one of the most patient people I’ve ever met,” “an excellent communicator,” “phenomenally funny,” and “able to get along with anybody.” This is, I’m sure, *not* how I’d be described by acquaintances here. At home and work, I’m often impatient, frustrated, concerned more with tasks than fun, aware of injustices, pressured by responsibility.

Why the difference? I was patient, and relaxed, and fun, and sensitive to others’ feelings and needs out there. There I needed to concentrate on taking care of myself; nature’s stiff requirements insured that. Totally isolated from the confusion of business and home details, I had no choice but to let the busy world proceed without my help or interference. Burdened with no material goods other than those on my back, I was able to spend most of my time on other priorities. I was happy to go with the flow, to make the best of situations, to enjoy the moment.

And, as I think about it, that’s much of the beauty of wilderness experiences. The challenge focuses my attention and effort, and when nature’s dangers and responsibilities allow me free time, I’ve nothing else to be concerned with but relationships, spiritual reflection, broad long-range thinking, and appreciation of the here-and-now. It’s a wonderful respite, it feels good, and it’s good for me.

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