



62. Gulkana River, Main Fork, Middle Fork, and West Fork

The Gulkana, a National Wild and Scenic River, is one of Alaska's most popular whitewater rivers because of its road accessibility and because of the outstanding fishing opportunities it offers. From its headwaters in the lake and plateau country at the foot of the Alaska Range, the beautifully clear Gulkana flows through forested rolling hills for 83 miles before meeting the Copper River. It has two major tributaries, the Middle Fork and the West Fork. To run the Main Fork of the Gulkana, you must row or paddle 3 miles down Paxson Lake to its outlet. The first 3 miles out of Paxson Lake are shallow, rocky Class II rapids. Here the river drops about 25 feet per mile; continuous fast water and small rapids require alertness. Several old cabins with sagging sod roofs can be seen on the riverbanks

From the river's confluence with its Middle Fork are 15 miles of Class I paddling. Here the river becomes deep and quiet as it meanders lazily through spruce forests. At River Mile 18, a canyon begins and a sign marks a quarter-mile portage on the left side of the river, around Canyon Rapids. Experienced paddlers may wish to run the Class III to IV canyon after scouting. As the current quickens, the river drops 50 feet per mile for the next 8 miles, and many a canoe has been crushed here.

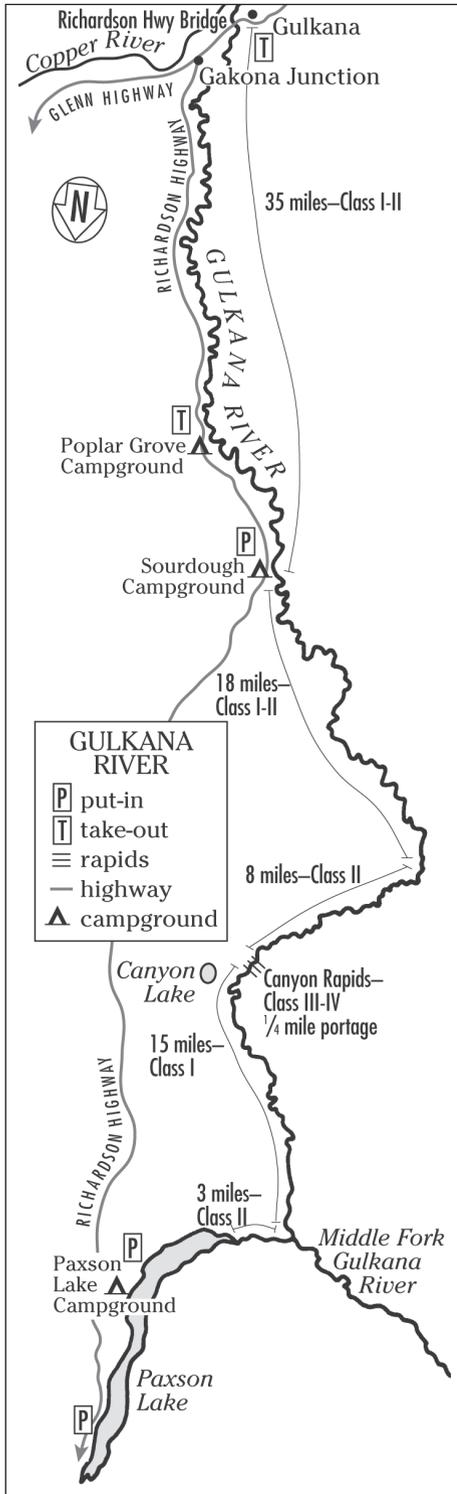
From River Mile 18.5 to Mile 26 are rocky Class II rapids, with lots of

maneuvering around rocks and logs. At the first bend below the portage, a trail leads 1 mile to Canyon Lake—a nice hike. The river then flattens in gradient and the float to Sourdough Campground is generally Class I.

From Sourdough, the river flows 35 miles to Richardson Highway bridge (Highway Mile 127). This section is Class I, with some Class II water in the last 8 miles, with an average gradient of 15 to 25 feet per mile. Because the river closely parallels the highway, it is popular with less experienced boaters who want the challenge of trying a Class II river. At high water, there may be a 50-yard Class III rapid 2 to 3 miles below Poplar Grove Campground. On the lower end of the river, you may encounter powerboats, likely en route to campsites along the river to fish for salmon. Summer weekend use of the lower Gulkana is heavy.

The Middle Fork Gulkana rises in the Tangle Lakes, a wide, hilly plateau south of the Alaska Range set amidst the Amphitheater Mountains. Amidst spectacular peaks and sweeping glaciers, Tangle Lakes is a 24-mile-long system of glacial lakes and interconnecting streams running across open tundra meadows. It forms the geographic divide between the Yukon drainage and the Copper River drainage.

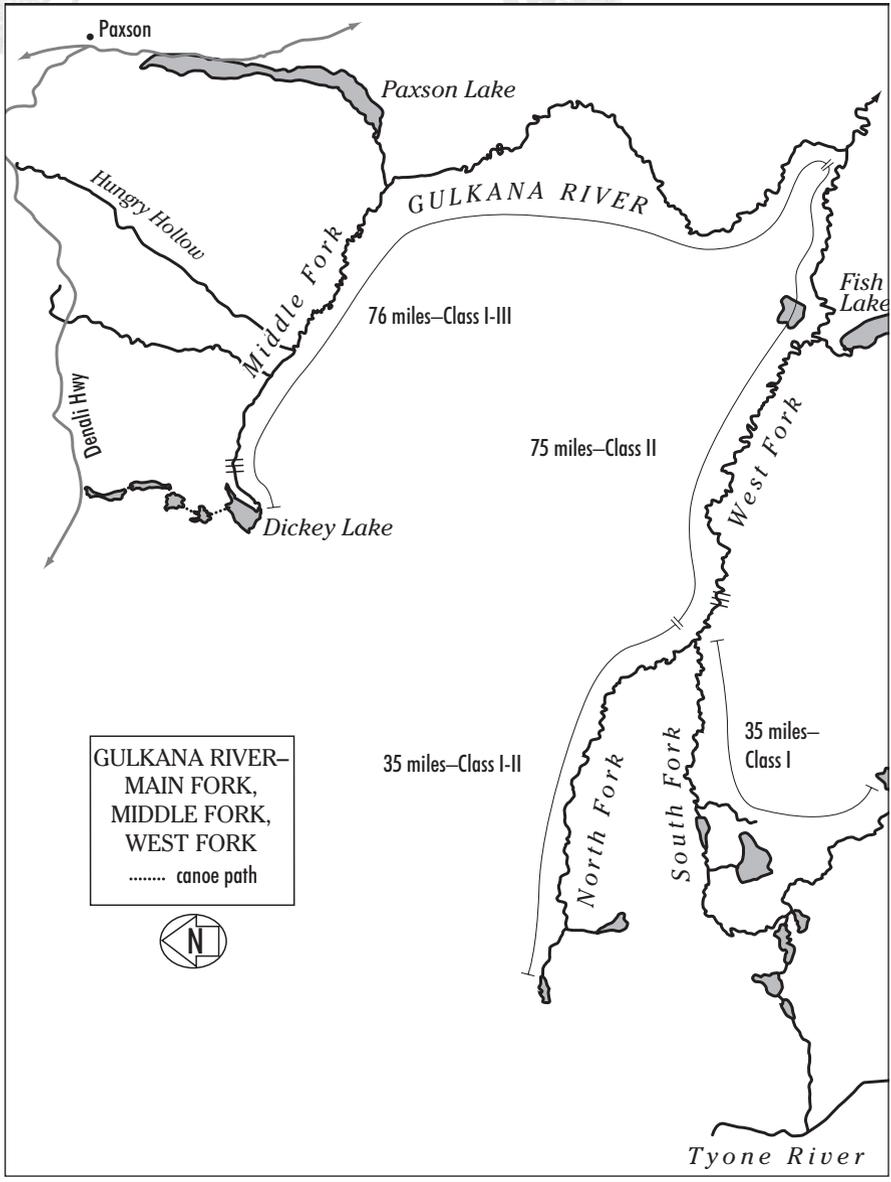
The Tangle Lakes and Tangle River offer some of the earliest and most continuous evidence of human



occupation within North America (10,000 years ago). Stone tools hand-fashioned from local materials have endured the acidic soil conditions of the Subarctic tundra for thousands of years. More than 400 excavated sites contain “some of the densest concentrations of archaeological resources in the North American Subarctic.”

The main access to the Middle Fork is from the boat launch located at the Delta National Wild and Scenic River Wayside (Milepost 21.5 on the Denali Highway). Travel south through the Upper Tangle Lakes. Two short portages lead to an unnamed muddy, shallow lake. From there, either continue to the south end of the lake, where two short portages and a third mile-long portage lead to Dickey Lake, or line up the Tangle River (off the muddy lake) and paddle the 1-mile portage above Dickey Lake. The terrain is low brush tundra, and ridges allow for scouting. USGS topographical maps (Mt. Hayes A-5 and Gulkana D-5) are essential for the portages. The Tangle River, draining Upper into Round Tangle Lakes, rushes along a rocky course, interspersed by small brushy islands. If you don't want to portage you can go by small fixed-wing floatplane to Dickey Lake.

Dickey Lake's outlet is at the extreme southeast point of the lake. The first 3 miles of the Middle Fork flows through shallow riffles and rocks at a gradient of 30 feet per mile. Abruptly, the river plunges into a short, steep, swift Class II to III canyon. Portaging or lining is recommended, as large boulders make



maneuvering difficult. After the canyon, riffles and rocks are common for about 6 miles. The gradient drops to 25 feet per mile and finally to 1 foot per mile before joining the Main Branch. From Tangle Lakes to Sourdough is 76 miles; allow 6 to 7 days. From Dickey Lake, allow 5 to 6 days.

The West Fork Gulkana River is comprised of two branches, the North Branch and the South Branch. Both branches are characterized by a series of slow, meandering river bends with many oxbow lakes and numerous sweepers and logjams.

The South Branch of the West

Fork begins at Lake Louise, continues through Susitna Lake, and then down the Tyone River (see write-up on Tyone River). Next, a series of four portages between muskeg areas and shallow lakes are necessary to reach the South Branch of the West Fork. The route then traverses lake-dotted wetlands. This is one of the most remote and least visited areas of the Gulkana watershed and is only for the intrepid, as the portages are arduous and “wood” on the South Branch may hinder progress.

The South Branch joins the North Branch to form the West Fork. From this junction the river flows slowly for 4 miles. Below is a Class II canyon through small rapids and large boulders. Below the canyon, the river mellows to its confluence with the North Branch.

Access to the North Branch is via floatplane to one of two unnamed lakes at its headwaters. The North Branch is a slow, meandering Class I river with occasional Class II rapids. If you choose to run either branch of the West Fork, allow 7 to 14 days to go the 110 miles on the North or South branches to Sourdough Campground.

The Bureau of Land Management encourages strict “Leave-No-Trace” policies and encourages boaters to use portable toilets for carrying out all human waste. A waste pump station is located at Sourdough Campground for the convenience of river runners.

Ahtna Athapaskans occupied the Gulkana River Valley at least 1,000 years ago. In the 1890s, many villages and sod houses dotted Paxson Lake,

a strategic spot for caribou hunting where the animals were driven into the lake and speared from skin boats. The Ahtna traveled between Tangle Lakes, Paxson Lake, and the tributaries of the Gulkana River, using the rivers and overland trails to take advantage of hunting, fishing, and gathering opportunities throughout the spring, summer, and fall, and returning to winter villages before the first snows.

Mining gained prominence after 1903. Prospectors, trappers, and opportunists moved into the Gulkana Valley. Roadhouses and lodges were built along the Gulkana and its tributaries as these became travel routes for the miners. Sourdough Lodge (Mile 147.5 on the Richardson Highway) was established in 1903 and housed travelers until December 1992, when it burned to the ground.

RATING: Class I–IV. River is Class I, with Class II rapids from Paxson Lake to the Middle Fork, Class III–IV at Canyon Rapids (can be portaged), and Class II for 8 miles below Canyon Rapids. The upper river, from Paxson Lake to Sourdough Campground, should only be run by experienced paddlers who are prepared to portage boats and gear around quarter-mile-long Canyon Rapids.

CAUTIONS: Canyon Rapids (Class III–IV); sweepers; logjams. The upper 45 miles are far from the road; water is fast and cold. Strenuous portage from Tangle Lakes; potential portage around Canyon Rapids; watch for powerboats in lower river—move over to shallows to allow passage.

TRIP LENGTH: 80 miles from Paxson Lake to Richardson Highway bridge; allow 4–7 days. 45 miles from Paxson Lake to Sourdough Campground; allow 3–5 days. 35 miles from Sourdough Campground to Richardson Highway bridge; allow 2 days. For trip down Middle Fork Gulkana: 76 miles from Tangle Lakes to Sourdough; allow 6–7 days. If you fly in to Dickey Lake, 5–6 days. For trip down South Branch or North Branch to West Fork, and on to Sourdough, distance is about 100 miles; allow 8–12 days.

SEASON: June–mid-September.

WATERCRAFT: Raft; inflatable kayak; hard-shell kayak or canoe for experienced paddlers.

ACCESS: In—Put in at Paxson Lake off the Richardson Highway, either at Mile 179.5 (Paxson Lake Wayside) or Mile 175 (Paxson Lake Campground). Launching at Paxson Lake Wayside requires a 5-mile paddle down Paxson Lake to its outlet. For a shorter trip, and to avoid Canyon Rapids, put in at Sourdough Campground (35 miles above Richardson Highway bridge) or at Mile 147.4 Richardson Highway (20 miles above the bridge). Out—Take out at Mile 127 at the Richardson Highway bridge. (For a one-day Class I family trip of about 13 miles, put in at Sourdough and take out at Poplar Grove.) For access, read description of Middle and West Fork Gulkana.

LAND MANAGER: Bureau of Land Management, Glennallen; Ahtna, Inc. The upper Gulkana River is a National Wild and Scenic River. (See Land Managers section at back of book for address and phone information.)

MAPS: Gulkana: A-5, B-3, B-4, C-4, C-5, C-6, D-4, D-5, D-6. BLM has a detailed boating guide to the Main Stem Gulkana, from Paxson Lake to Sourdough, downloadable at www.blm.gov/ak/gdo/gulkana.html.

FISH: The Gulkana is one of the most popular sport-fishing streams in Alaska. The surrounding lakes have good populations of lake trout, burbot, and whitefish. The Gulkana supports a highly productive and popular grayling fishery. The river also supports king, sockeye, rainbow trout, and the northernmost confirmed runs of steelhead trout.

WILDLIFE: Caribou, grizzly and black bear, moose, wolf, fox, beaver, river otter, bald eagle.