



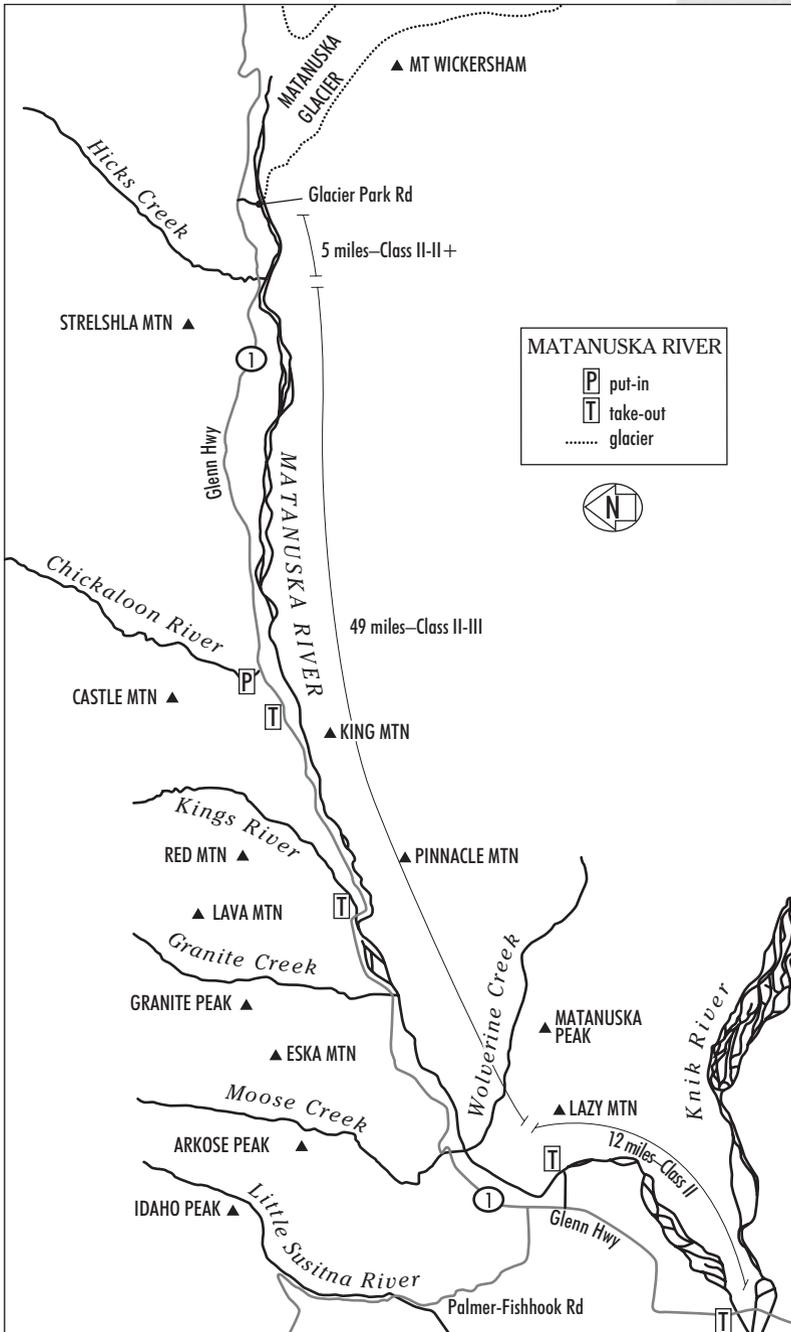
70. Matanuska River

Flowing out of 27-mile-long Matanuska Glacier, the cold, swift and glacial gray Matanuska River is a popular choice for strong intermediate boaters, offering a genuine knock-your-socks-off Alaska experience with its start literally at the terminus of a glacier. The Matanuska flows through scenically spectacular landscape. From the terminus of Matanuska Glacier, the river cuts between the glacier-clad peaks of the Chugach Range and the rugged Talkeetnas, through colorful canyon walls in the river's narrows, then flattens, spreads, and slows through the populated Mat-Su Valley, entering Knik Arm about 25 miles northeast of Anchorage. The river is graced by trees, including spruce and aspen in the upper reaches and rough-barked cottonwoods in lower areas. On autumn runs, the foliage is brilliant. Road accessible in several places, and within a couple hours of Anchorage, the Mat offers a true wilderness feeling as it flows through a deep canyon, far below the Glenn Highway. The 66 miles of river between the Matanuska Glacier and Palmer offer several options, from a one- to two-hour run to a three-day trip. Firewood and avens-covered gravel beaches offer great camping for overnighters. The river braids constantly and changes from year to year. Not for novices, challenges abound with swift currents, big holes, waves, and upriver winds.

The 5-mile glacier run to Hicks

Creek run offers 1.5 hours of Class II–II+ rapids. It's no wonder that this section sees a fair amount of commercial rafting activity at the height of summer. Between Hicks Creek and Chickaloon (20 miles), the river braids through a swift scenic narrows, then spreads to fill the valley, while the Glenn Highway disappears up the canyon wall, and you forget that a road is close by. Gravel Creek offers a good place to stretch your legs or take a day hike. Nearing Chickaloon, the river narrows into a single channel. From Chickaloon to the Kings River (12 miles), the road returns at certain points. The Mat is mostly single channel, with waves and holes to avoid, or playboat, depending on your style. Watch for a long breaking wave at the confluence of Carbon Creek. It flows into the Mat from the left. Here, a bedrock shelf at the confluence creates a long, right-leaning breaking wave. From the Kings River to Palmer (17 to 29 miles), the river follows the Glenn Highway almost to Moose Creek. This section is quite braided. A take-out on the Old Glenn Highway completes a 54-mile run. For an additional 12 miles of river, take out on the Glenn Highway Bridge (Milepost 31.5). Nearing Moose Creek, the river veers off to the south toward the Knik River confluence and eventually into the Knik Arm.

Expert paddlers may opt to run Lionshead, a serious Class II to IV



stretch of whitewater that begins upstream of the Matanuska Glacier, then flows past the glacier, pressed between a rock wall and ice. This hour-long run begins on swift, rocky Caribou Creek and joins up with the glacier run at the Glacier Park Bridge.

Matanuska River comes from the Russian name for the Indians of the Copper River (Mednovtsy), who followed a trail along the Matanuska River valley to trade on Cook Inlet. The Dena'ina name, Ch'atanhtnu ("River from Which Trail Comes Out"), also commemorates the trade route. The Matanuska Valley was named in 1898 by Lt. **Walter Curran** Mendenhall while he was exploring the Matanuska River regions under the command of U.S. Army Captain E. F. Glenn.

Each summer, the contra dance group, Dancing Bears, sponsors the Matanuska River Gravel Bar Dance on a remote, boat-accessible-only gravel bar deep in the river valley.

RATING: Class II–III

CAUTIONS: Freezing cold, swift, silt-laden water; sweepers in lower river; upriver winds. Nova Bend has some serious holes with big waves that should be avoided. Nova Bend is upstream of the Kings River, below the Chickaloon townsite (cable over the river to a private house on the south shore), and below King Mountain State Campground. The road is parallel to and only a few vertical feet above the river at Nova Bend. The rapid is visible while driving by. To scout while driving, stop about 75 yards downstream at a small pull-out by the river. To scout while paddling

downstream, shortly after you see the highway paralleling the river, pull out on river left. Walk about 200 to 300 yards downstream to scout at river level. If water is high and you are not comfortable with the hydraulics, scouting on river left also lets you look at a sneak channel that may be passable along the far left gravel bar, allowing you to bypass the rapid.

TRIP LENGTH: 5–66 miles.

SEASON: The river's main channel is ice-free by mid- to late May, running low until mid-June. It usually peaks in late July with glacial flows. It then drops into late September to mid-October until the ice forms.

WATERCRAFT: Raft, whitewater kayak, canoe for expert paddlers.

ACCESS: In—Glenn Highway Mile 102 and head down the steep switch-back to the Glacier Park Bridge crossing the river; Hicks Creek (Mile 96.4); Chickaloon River Bridge (Mile 77.7); King Mountain Wayside (Mile 76.1); or King River Bridge (Mile 66.5). Out—Old Glenn Highway Bridge 1.5 miles east of Palmer (take out just above bridge on river right); Glenn Highway Bridge (Mile 31.5); any of the above access points.

LAND MANAGER: Matanuska–Susitna Borough; private; state.

MAPS: Anchorage D-3, D-4, D-5; C-5, C-6.

FISH: The Matanuska is generally too turbid and silty for fishing.

WILDLIFE: Dall sheep, moose.