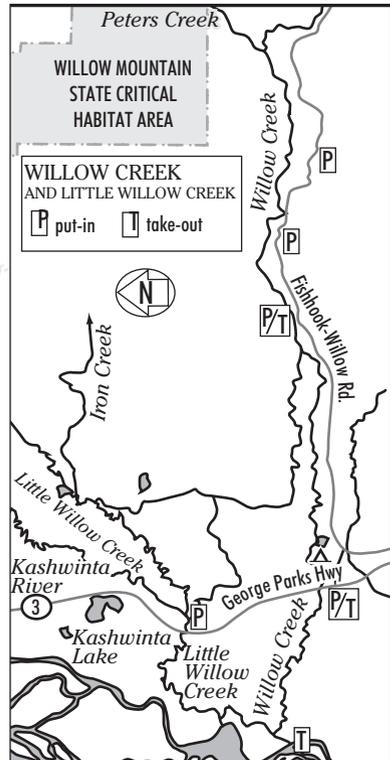


## 80. Willow Creek and Little Willow Creek

Small clearwater tributaries of the Susitna River, Willow Creek, and Little Willow Creek rise from the foothills of the southern Talkeetna Mountains, and flow out to meet the lower Susitna River near Willow. Willow Creek is classic Alaska whitewater gem in its upper and middle sections, as well as a popular sport-fishing creek. A great road-accessible run and beautifully clear and warm by Alaska standards, Willow Creek offers four paddling options, ranging from Class I to IV.

Upper Willow Creek is the first part of a wonderful half- to full day of whitewater playboating—2.5 miles of Class III+ to IV drops. This section, from Guardrail to Redgate, is chock-full of technical rapids; scouting is recommended. Throughout the entire river, watch for sweepers and logjams. Small paddle rafts occasionally do this stretch, but the portage to the river takes some effort. From the Guardrail put-in, the river flows swiftly over big granite boulders through a shallow canyon. Pools separating the rapids harbor Dolly Varden, grayling, and salmon. The first rapid, “Warm-up,” begins where the trail ends at the river. Below is a deep recovery pool, followed by “Drop 2.” From the bottom of “Drop 3,” watch for debris in the river. The next drop, “Slalom,” has a few large holes. Around the corner is “Right Chute,” followed immediately by “Left Chute,” and ending with a drop known as “House Rapid.”



Below House, a long pool leads into “Drop 180,” named for the wave that forms at the bottom. “Fang, the Floating Rock” lurks slightly below water level at the bottom in the center tongue before the river bends left. The next drop leads into a few easier drops, ending in “Yellow Brick Road,” a sweeping left turn with a wall at the bottom, and “Five Fingers,” a blind drop with five small drops between four boulders. The pool below Five Fingers is the Redgate put-in.

The second half of the Willow Creek whitewater run offers 2.5

miles of lively Class III drops easing to Class II, with a good play hole toward the end of the stretch. At the Redgate put-in, the upriver canyon ends, and drops are wider and easier to maneuver. This is a good section for beginning kayakers to practice. With straightforward rapids and lots of recovery space, mishaps have few consequences. The first rapid is the most difficult in this section but only requires one move. "Wave Train," halfway down the run, begins as a large granite boulder in the center of the river, with a steep drop behind it. This can be a good surf play spot. Below this, the cable for the USGS river flow gauge crosses the river. Deep pools and waves dot this section, leading to a bedrock ledge that forms another play spot. The take-out at Shirley Towne Bridge is a half mile downriver.

For a great non-whitewater recreational float, the Shirley Towne Bridge to Willow Creek Bridge section offers a 12- to 15-mile Class I to II run on one of the most productive trout/salmon streams in northern Cook Inlet. Fishing boaters may enjoy continuing down Willow Creek another 10 miles or so. Pass under Parks Highway Bridge at Mile 70.8 past Willow Creek State Recreation Area and continue down to the confluence with the Susitna River.

Little Willow Creek, an even smaller clearwater tributary, flows several miles below the Parks Highway Bridge at Milepost 74.7 before reaching the Susitna River. The Little Willow offers about 12 hours of quiet bliss as it meanders

through the forested Susitna Valley. The creek supports rainbow trout, Dolly Varden, arctic grayling, and silver salmon. When the salmon are running, this is an especially eventful family float. From the confluence with the Susitna, continue several miles to the mouth of Willow Creek at Willow Creek State Recreation Area on river left. Look for sport-fishers lined up along the banks as you approach the mouth of Willow Creek.

**RATING:** Class I–IV.

**CAUTIONS:** Brush, sweepers, log-jams; technical whitewater from Guardrail to Shirley Towne Bridge; bears on upper creek. Watch for (and respect) the lines of sportfishers on the bank or floating down the river. If floating out to the Susitna, watch for swift, silty water transition as you leave Willow Creek.

**TRIP LENGTH:** Guardrail to Redgate, 2.5 miles; allow 2–3 hours. Redgate to Shirley Towne, 2.5 miles; allow 2–3 hours. Shirley Towne to Parks Highway, allow 3 hours. Parks Highway to confluence of Susitna, 12–15 miles; allow 4–6 hours; Little Willow Creek to Susitna–Willow Creek confluence, 15 miles; allow 12 hours.

**SEASON:** June–October.

**WATERCRAFT:** Small whitewater canoe, kayak or raft for upper sections; larger craft for sections below Shirley Towne Bridge.

**ACCESS:** For Class III–IV upper Willow Creek, the standard put-in, known as Guardrail, is reached by taking Parks Highway to Milepost 71.2. Turn off on Hatcher Pass Road (also known as Willow Creek Road); drive east for 8.4 miles. Pull out on right shoulder after going up a large hill with guardrail on the left. Hop over the rail, and follow a well-used sandy trail down through the alders for 20 minutes. Bring along an 8-foot length of line to drag and lower your boat down through Devil’s club and steep, muddy sections.

For the lower Class II–III run, drive 6.6 miles up Hatcher Pass Road to a steep driveway on the north side with a red metal gate and chain wrapped around it. This put-in is known as Redgate. If the gate is unlocked, you can drive down the road (closing the gate behind you) and pass the cabin on the left fork of the road through dense alders to the clearing at the bottom. There is another clearing 50 yards beyond, but it may be hard to turn around there. Carry your boat the 100–150 yards to the trail—a sharp, steep drop from the north side of the second clearing, with a knotted line for descending. Please respect private lands in the area.

Out—From Milepost 71.2 on the Parks Highway, take the Hatcher Pass Road east 4.1 miles, and turn left at the gravel road. There may be a Shirley Towne sign. Continue to the river. Or, continue 5.6 miles down Willow Creek to the Parks Highway Bridge.

To put in on lower Lower Willow Creek, from Milepost 71.2 on the Parks Highway, take the Hatcher

Pass Road east 4.1 miles, and turn left at the Shirley Towne Road, just after the yellow squiggly road sign on the right, and continue down one-quarter mile to the bridge parking area. Out—4-mile paved road from town of Willow to Willow Creek–Susitna River confluence.

To put in on Little Willow Creek, drop your boat in by the Parks Highway Bridge at Milepost 74.7. Take-out is the same as for Lower Willow Creek.

**LAND MANAGER:** State of Alaska; private land. Guardrail put-in is on private land. The landowner has considered charging for access if current pristine conditions are not maintained. Redgate put-in is also on private land. Be considerate of owners’ privacy. Park in such a manner that others have room to park. Consider driving your boats and gear down to the put-in, then taking the car back up the road and leaving it outside the gate. Always return the gate to whatever state it is in when you arrived. There is also private land just below the Shirley Towne Bridge.

**MAPS:** Anchorage C-7, C-8, D-6, D-7, D-8; Tyonek D-1.

**FISH:** 4 salmon runs draw sports-fishers from early summer to fall. Rainbow trout are best fished in spring or fall. Arctic grayling and Dolly Varden may be found in the deep pools.

**WILDLIFE:** Moose, grizzly and black bear, waterfowl.