

Wild River Guides

2010 Season Report



August 12th, 2010
Accessibility Paradox Expedition

At the headwaters of the Ongivinuk River. (L-R) Larry Demirelli (Blind), Nicole Parsons (Paraplegic), Wayne Dewall (Amputee), Mark Rutherford (support), Kitt Daly (support), Beth Livingston (Paraplegic), Anaca Rutherford Murphy (support), Malcolm Daly (Amputee)

On August 12, 2010, eight outdoorsmen and women departed Dillingham in float planes and were dropped off at Ongivinuk Lake with 3 rafts for a self propelled trip. We planned to raft the Ongivinuk River in Togiak National Wildlife Refuge in southwest Alaska to its confluence with the Togiak River. An adventurous trip to be sure, but what was different this time is of the eight participants, two were paraplegics, two were amputees and one was legally blind. The two amputees would each captain a raft and I would have the helm of a third raft.



(John Merritt 2005)

The trip fulfills an ongoing commitment shared by outdoorsmen John Merritt*, Malcolm Daly**, and Mark Rutherford, making Alaskan wilderness expeditions more accessible to significantly disabled campers. We believe that if Erik Weihenmayer, totally blind, can summit Mt. Everest and that Mark Wellman, a paraplegic, can climb El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, that others with disabilities might consider taking on expeditionary challenges. In this case a self propelled adventure across a vast Alaskan landscape. We undertook the first self propelled Alaska expedition with participants with significant disabilities in 2009 and completed a second in 2010.



That 2009 group found that traversing the tundra, canyon, and glacial terrain while rafting Alaskan rivers was do-able for hardy disabled adventurers. Additionally the many experiences that an Alaskan river traveler has including rowing boats, setting up tents, chopping wood, cooking over the open fire, et cetera are to varying degrees accessible for the disabled. This is not to say these tasks are easy but with planning & teamwork they are do-able.



While 2009 inspired us further and gave us a bit of confidence to put together an accessibility trip for 2010, a question remained; where is the line drawn between accomplishments which are “do-able with focus and effort” and those attainments that are only do-able with “unreasonable suffering”.

This trip had been in the planning stages for 11 months and while it was ambitious to include so many disabled participants with different types of disabilities the trip was logistically straight forward and all the campers were hardy high mileage outdoors persons!



The group was transported in Rick and Denise Grant's Dehavailland Beaver to the outlet of Ongivinuk Lake, where rafts were inflated, and Nicole and Beth reassembled their wheel chairs.

Then we embarked down a wild Alaskan river. From the outlet

of the lake the Ongivinuk took us across a vast wetland of moose and waterfowl habitat and then into a canyon. We understood the rare privilege we were enjoying to be traveling through such a glorious and wild landscape. What

the group didn't know was that they were launched into a collision with a major Alaskan storm with gale winds and accompanying floods.



Downriver our first camp was selected and we put in motion the concept of “full participation for all”. The group divided into tent teams, kitchen teams, latrine teams, and so forth to share the tasks defining Alaska bush travel.



In hindsight the teamwork that was practiced in that fair weather would be tested later. But on this first night in the lovely low angle sunlight we were “wheeling” up and down the gravel bar, wading the river, and exploring the camp environs. All the accumulated travel stress to get to this beautiful moment in time was shed like water off a ducks back.



For three days the group traveled by raft through twenty five miles of glacially carved mountain scenery. For three nights our camps were made on gravel bars chosen for the wheelchairs.

But what about Larry who has very little sight remaining?

Indeed laying out a camp with Larry the blind participant presented challenges especially in the form of guy lines for tents and kitchen tarps. However because he was involved in every aspect of the camp layout and construction his navigation challenges proved manageable. Of course there were stumbles, for all of us.



Camp dinners included freshly caught Dolly Varden Char. And it clearly didn't matter whether the Char were taken fly casting by a blind fisherman, taken by a chair bound fly fisherwoman or a man wading with a prosthetic leg.



The storm slammed into our layover camp at three am August 14, 2010 bringing down the kitchen tarp with sounds like the desperate thrashing of some huge flapping beast. On a layover morning with no need for an early start we lingered in the sleeping bag listening to the wind howl. By mid morning the winds were changing the group's focus from taking joy in the simple tasks of Alaskan river life to

hunkering out of the wind and minimizing damage to tents. A tent team rallied and reinforced the tents, staked out all the guy-lines and switched aluminum stakes out for logs buried as deadmen deep in the gravel. Two rafts were conscripted as wind barriers for the kitchen and everything was strapped down, weighted, clipped in or otherwise battened down securely. As the storm intensity increased through midday, inches of rain per hour poured down. Mainly we dealt with it by getting “tougher”.



We still were thinking that “Plan A” which was to have a layover day at this camp was viable. So as storm winds lifted sheets of water up off the river and hurled it at camp Larry and Anaca played blackjack. Kit hurled large streamers into the wind and was rewarded with some remarkable salmon and char. Malcolm held the center pole steady keeping the Parawing kitchen shelter from collapsing while the rest of us huddled under the fly and had a nice warm lunch. The group

estimated the late morning wind gusts were in excess of 40mph. But then the weather began to deteriorate.

If there is one thing we might do differently the next time we’re camped in a gale it would be to get the wheel chair campers out of their tents early in the day to participate in the wind whipped camp chores. But since this was scheduled to be a layover day and it was miserable out in the wind, the chair bound campers had the option to remain in their tents while the rest of the crew scampered about.

Initially we believed we were just making camp “comfortable for a weather day” and it seemed humane that some be spared the weather exposure. Wrong, we found out we needed all hands on deck as the weather deteriorated further and changes of plan needed to be considered.



The Ongivinuk River, originates in a crystal clear mountain lake, and generally remains clear and fishable long past when foul weather “blows out” other Bristol Bay watersheds. In part that is why we chose it. Not this time. This was a direct hit by a Bering Sea fire hose aimed at the river. By noon the river lost its beautiful clarity. Mud and debris were washing past propelled by monsoonal torrents. This normally tranquil class-I river was increasingly angry. The stage was set for major flooding. All across the Bristol Bay region, on hundreds of salmon rivers, the fishermen and campers were starting to

deal with a rapidly shrinking number of riverside gravel bars on which to camp and dealing with flood waters on which to travel. Fishing was essentially out of the question for an indefinite period and raft based and lodge based operations were disrupted as their camps flooded. We heard no float planes that day just the wind.



Every Alaska river trip needs contingency plans for changeable conditions. At one end of the spectrum one has planned a remote float trip to a spot of undiminished solitude hoping for terrific fishing and lonely riverside camping but as your float plane arrives at the chosen river there is another group camped at the “put in”. In this case a contingency “Plan B” involving another nearby river drop off option is recommended along with a set of “Plan B” maps.

Alternatively there are trips going as planned on one’s chosen river except for an over abundance of biting insects, or garden variety cruddy Alaskan weather. “Plan B” for this is the head-nets you brought, and for your really good rain gear, and for the big kitchen tarp under which you are drying gear in the breeze and drizzle. Then at the far end of the spectrum are river trips with serious accidents or nature’s extremes of weather, dangerous wildlife, or mishaps involving white water and river bank sweepers. All these possible and changeable conditions are the backdrop to Alaska trips for able bodied or disabled participants alike and so from time to time “Plan B” becomes necessary.

By 12:00 noon on August 14 the river was rising at more than one inch per hour and we started thinking about a “Plan B” placing the group’s survival above our prior focus on comfort in the storm and outdoor recreation. What concerned us was the increasing likelihood for flooding of our camp gravel bar in the dark of night!



The possibility of evacuating a camp in the teeth of a gale, after dark, surrounded by flood waters was a grim reality for us. Having had some prior experiences with that scenario I was becoming very concerned. Not “concerned” in an abstract way but rather concern that stimulates one’s adrenals.



Concern that catalyses various hormones and endorphins which ultimately ignite a fire in your brain stem. If you are an adventuresome person then you know this combination of brain chemicals affects your decision making both in positive and negative fashions. In this case my own concerns and our group’s collective concerns merged, stimulating us to act preemptively before crisis narrowed our options to mere survival.

As the storm intensified so did our concerns about gale, flood, and our team strengths and weakness'. At some point that afternoon I crossed the threshold where only one objective remained: to help get our group through each minute with no injuries, each hour without incident, and home safely.

We initially considered two contingency plans to deal with the storm: Plan B, relocate to higher ground adjacent to our gravel bar camp without rafting. Plan C, break camp and relocate by raft to a hillside or bluff above the flood plain and bivouac.

Plan B was ruled out for lack of adjacent higher ground. If the river rose twenty four inches then the entire surrounding landscape would be flooded out. Meanwhile the very rugged 3 season mountain tents in use were overstressed and wouldn't last the day. While we stood and deliberated further about plan B the low spots on our gravel bar filled with water becoming channels. Plan B was a fairy tale we wanted to believe in. The prospect of breaking camp in that weather was awful.



Plan C provided for near certain physical safety from the rising flood waters and required breaking camp then rafting only a few tenths of a mile to tundra covered bluff we could see across the river. A rough bivouac under our MSR Parawing kitchen tarp could be arranged. We could then hunker in our rain gear and waders for a day if necessary until the weather sorted itself out. We probably couldn't set tents up satisfactorily on the tundra slope in the gale and that was disheartening. The most negative aspect of plan C, the wet bivouac in the wind, was potential hypothermia even though this was a warm monsoonal "pineapple express" storm. For amputees and paraplegics the circulation in the extremities can be compromised so the potential of hypothermia can be greater. We decided that a weather exposed bivouac in the tundra above the high water mark was only slightly less terrible than plans A or B.

For awhile, as sheets of rain pounded the kitchen we were stuck unable to solve an equation that balanced the risks of leaving versus the risks of staying. After stewing for a little longer we got the maps out and in doing so another option presented itself. If we could break camp and if we could handle the rafts in the ferocious wind gusts there was a cabin I'd marked on the map some years prior. So plan D became: to break camp and evacuate our group downriver toward the confluence with the Togiak River where camps above high water have been traditionally located by generations of Yupik hunters, fishermen, and berry pickers.



Contrasted with our glum deliberations of plans A, B, and C contingency plan D was chosen gleefully, although not casually. The cabin had seen decades of hard use when I last saw it in 2005 and I said “it might be dry.” The plan entailed the risks of breaking camp and rafting under demanding weather and water conditions. The plan would move the group during daylight hours in the direction of rescue or

medevac should that be needed later. We would aim for the cabin I’d seen in June 2005 on a warm summer day with my wife Nancy and daughter Anaca who was 9 at the time. I recalled the plywood cabin with some uncertain prospect of protection from the storm.

By the time plan D finalized it was starkly clear that our pleasurable Alaska river trip was over. Survival concerns outweighed the recreation dreams we harbored. Every team member began determinably packing. Beth and Nicole were fully mobilized with the crew outside. With practiced hands the teams again packed everything back into dry bags ready to load into the rafts. One couldn’t believe the change three days of practice made for the group. Whether blind or in a wheelchair there was no motion wasted and wheelchairs and arms loaded with dry bags were moving toward the beach.



Even so it took more than five hours to strike the camp! A minimum of four persons were needed to take down each tent, six worked better. Still one tent exploded with shards of aluminum poles penetrating it. Using what remained of the daylight effectively was critical. The rafts were “rigged to flip” with loads lashed against any eventuality, PFD’s cinched tight, rescue throw ropes handy. A long safety discussion followed.



We pushed off at 6:55 pm. propelled by gusty winds. Thankfully it was tail winds! If one wasn’t at the oars you sat low in the bow, hunkered down presenting no profile to the wind. Still the rafts tended to weathervane in gusts. None of us had rowed in circumstances like this. The closest an oarsman normally comes to handling a raft under these conditions is when gusty downdrafts from an imminent thunderstorm makes life tough for a spell on a river trip.

The readers know that 2 of our rafts were captained by amputees. Was this a concern? No. If an amputee or a normal wants to learn to row whitewater or to carry fly anglers the person to learn from is Wayne. I’d ride anywhere in his boat. Did I worry about Malcolm, the other one legged oarsman?

Yes a bit. Malcolm shattered both legs and then froze them in an Alaskan climbing accident some years ago so his prosthetic leg is actually better than his “normal” leg and this was a day that an oarsman needed to brace ones feet and give it all you’ve got. We loaded his boat a little lighter than the others and he had no problems.



In my journal dated August 14, 2010; I wrote about travel under these circumstances and with our group in particular. “Each step has to be thought out and the sequencing is critical... We passed beneath 2 nests of Bald eagles which Anaca photographed. She and Beth were curled up in the bow without enough room.”

With tail winds behind and floodwaters below we clocked six to ten miles per hour on the GPS and passed downriver without incident in less than two hours. As promised there was an aging and battered plywood structure on a river bluff high above the flood! Ascending this bit of trail to the glorious shelter was the time that the paraplegic participants, Beth and Nicole were most reliant on the team to be carried! From time to time prior to this they would ask for a short carry to save time transferring into an airplane or boat but those were for expedience. In this transfer we owed a debt of gratitude for Kit Daley’s strength and determination. It was a bit of an “otter slide” up several hundred feet to the cabin.

The cabin that sheltered the group from the storm that night was a classic time and weather beaten Alaska hunting structure. It was in fact mostly dry inside and so a wonderful hot meal could be prepared by Anaca. Rain jackets were removed to dry, a cup of cocoa sipped. The wood stove was not to be trusted. What I will never forget was the multi-hour smiles and the “Gales of Laughter” that night. It was impossible not to laugh with relief. The hilarious relief came from contrasting how we currently felt like we were guests in the “Executive Suite” of the Ritz compared to being out in the storm just moments prior.



The sheer luxury of 4 persons sharing two single camp cots for the night was joyful. Likewise the luxury of sleeping on a floor the size of a folding card table for 4 of campers. Life that night seemed about as good as it gets.

While we basked in sheltered luxury, other campers, rafters, hunters, pilots, and fishermen caught out were less fortunate. Over the hours and days that followed emerged stories of trips cut short, of camps evacuated, vacations ruined, boats and planes damaged, and gear lost.



Come daylight our group in the cabin awoke hearing voices outside. A party of 2 men and 2 young boys had been flooded out of their gravel-bar camp on the upper Ongivinuk at four in the morning. Like a nightmare they awoke with river water running through their tents, abandoned camp for the raft in the dark, threw their salvaged gear into the raft's bilge and floated down with no other options.

Unaware of the existence of the cabin they floated through the storm propelled downriver by hope and more than a bit of luck. Three of the four rafters were shivering through the early stages of hypothermia. However when warmed up with hot drinks and a hot meal, and dried out, it was a simple matter of using a Satellite telephone to arrange for their pickup on the Togiak River by floatplane, some miles downstream.



Given the flood stage of the river it was clear that our original week long Ongivinuk float plan was utterly unworkable so the group made the disappointing decision to shorten the trip. As large pieces of driftwood, clumps of tundra sod, and occasionally entire Cottonwood trees were propelled downstream the participants loaded boats one last time. We left that wonderful little cabin and with well practiced moves loaded boats then rafted down to a rendezvous with a float plane on the Togiak.



Wilderness travelers out that week were tested by the most unseasonable storm of 2010, by some accounts the toughest summer weather in two decades. Dillingham's airport reported winds in excess of sixty (60) miles per hour. While the Paradox group finished strong and in fine health, that doesn't mean that the participants did not suffer. For each of us there were moments of personal suffering under conditions that none of us chose. And collectively there was the loss of a vacation trip we'd dreamed of.

So some questions arise, "Was the trip plan too ambitious? Did we go beyond the line between do-able into the realm between untenable and heinous? Were the actions and wilderness travel

methods we took in response to the storm so outrageous and difficult as to leave scars on bodies and psyche?” Or does an adventure like this build strength at one’s core?



After debriefings with trip members, my opinion is that we operated in the do-able range throughout but at some point the trip crossed over from wilderness recreation to something else uncomfortably close to survival. “It was too hard” said Beth succinctly. That coming from a woman who ice climbs and competed in Salt Lake in 2002 as a Paralympics Nordic skier. Nicole, an adaptive sea Kayak guide, points out for the benefit of future Alaska bound self propelled disabled campers that, “You should have plenty of prior camping experience!”

Still the experience of the evacuation from our storm camp did not measure on the same scale with the excruciating and desperate circumstances of Aron Ralston’ wilderness self amputation of his right arm, nor near the scale of Sir Ernest Shackleton’s epic self rescue, nor of Christopher McCandless’ tragic Alaskan demise. Months later, however I find myself still wondering what exactly it was about our experiences on the Ongivinuk that keeps the memories of the adventure so raw, so fresh, and so close to the surface?

Lessons learned

From the participants about the logistics of accessible expeditionary travel.

Be aware that I have no professional training nor anything that remotely qualifies me to speak about the needs of disabled outdoorswomen and men except the experiences of a few weeks in the Alaska bush in 2009 and 2010. My interest is to put out the stories of what we did in the context of Alaska expeditions that challenge disabled and able bodied alike and then to explore what might be possible in the future.



The two paraplegic outdoorswomen who traveled down the Ongivinuk River in 2010 were indeed as brave as you imagine they were. They managed well with considerable grace and humor under tough conditions. Likewise the amputees and blind outdoorsman. Nothing in this report should obscure the very considerable challenges Alaska bush travel poses to everyone. From their experiences let’s find other and better ways of expeditionary travel...

Working with Beth and Nicole this summer taught me that paraplegic Alaska wilderness campers might benefit from a designated “buddy system” 24/7 for the duration of the trip. In both 2009 and 2010 we used a team approach and it worked okay but there are advantages to a designated buddy. That buddy job could be held by different group members over time, but a rock solid buddy system should be a foundation. If the para** (The term “para” is used as a contemporary and casual term for a paraplegic person. It is familiar and respectful) is having a great week and the buddy relationship seems silly; it becomes the para’s decision to relax the relationship. Who is that buddy? It might be a family member. Ideally the para can choose and bring along her buddy, her son or daughter for instance. If the para wants a tent mate the buddy would be available.



Lessons were learned about everyone’s favorite wilderness topic, bodily waste. Pooping and peeing in the woods, in camp, & in the tent have to be manageable and well practiced. The para participants have used the Pett toilet system and W.A.G Bags these past 2 seasons for poop, and catheters for pee. There may be other ways to deal with waste but whichever is used the para camper should work through the complexities prior to an AK expedition. We know that it is critical to be well hydrated and it follows that we need lots of stops to pee. The prospect of bladder infection is serious and preventative measures as well as antibiotic drugs for emergency use need to be considered by paraplegic travelers.

Outerwear for Paras can be problematic for the lower extremities. The rain & wind jacket for the upper body should be absolutely bomb proof so core temperature is well controlled. (this is true of all Alaska outback travelers. A good rain jacket is essential.) From the abdomen down however is a real challenge and I’d like to hear how other outdoor paras deal with it. Top notch Patagonia Gore-Tex waders have worked for 2 AK paras and Patagonia rain pants with high top rubber boots worked for Beth. We do not want wet or cold lower extremities! Whichever outerwear is chosen the camper has to have proficiency getting it on and off in the confines of a tent and at pee stops which adds to the challenges and increases the value of one’s buddy! The insulating “core layers” of clothing for all participants but in particular the para campers needs to be really good. For a para that is not generating much body heat through motion an extra vest and layer of fleece need to be packed.





With the wheelchair: This may seem obvious but we've learned that after packing the raft and putting a cargo net over all the gear in the stern, the wheelchair straps on last. It will be needed at every stop along the way and can be secured to the cargo net with 2 cam straps. There is also the necessity of the chair having quick release wheels. At the push of a button the wheels are removed for fitting into an aircraft. The chair will likely have a special foam seat custom

fit for the individual and we want to take care to keep it dry as much as possible. The chair needs knobby off road tires (Mtn. bike tires).

Nicole has adapted her chair to off road surfaces with an "all terrain" wheelchair front end like the "FreeWheel" model. Based on her experiences it seemed like a reasonable way to avoid having the front caster wheel come up hard against a stone on the gravel bars that could pitch her forward face first. The alternative is maintaining a "wheelie" indefinitely while crossing uneven terrain and this is not unusual for accomplished chair users.



Final thought regarding the chair is that it would be nice if it could be stowed in the tent vestibule at night. In 2011 we will try out a 4 season tent made by "EXPED." The Venus III model reportedly stands up well to winds and has room for a wheelchair in the vestibule and 2 inhabitants.

Wayne and Malcolm, the two "below the knee" amputees of course put considerable stress on the limb where the prosthesis fits. Wading with a prosthesis takes practice but is quite doable. More stress and different kinds of stress are applied to the limb on an expedition and swelling and inflammation occur. Wayne for example made adjustments to his prosthetic leg in the field by removing, cutting away, sanding, or filing material that was creating discomfort. The demands of self propelled Alaska wilderness travel require that participants have more experience with their prosthesis than a commercially guided, or jet sled outfitted, or lodge based trip require.

Lessons learned from Larry who is legally blind: Can you imagine a challenging river trip with just barely enough sight in one eye to be able to navigate uneven terrain and no sight at all in the other eye for gauging depth perception? Larry's success depended in part upon having a huge "cache" of prior experience outdoors. His outdoor skill set and fly-fishing skills had been honed years prior to this trip. He got involved in everything the sighted group did so that he knew





his way around all the gear in both camp and boat. Most of the time Larry made it look easy getting past obstacles, negotiating muddy trails, or casting to surface feeding Grayling beyond the range of his vision. Plus Larry's sense of humor got us through the really tough moments. We knew we were privileged to be in his company but we didn't know how lucky we were until we got to hear the story about when as a teenager in the 70's he homesteaded in the Alaska bush. That is a story worth hearing!

Some raft rigging thoughts. I've had the best experience with 3 Aire Puma series rafts for wheelchair participants. I've experimented with a Puma, Super Puma, and Super Duper Puma plus a variety of other rafts in my fleet. What I like about the Puma series is that in the bow the tube curves smoothly through a long radius that keeps a lower profile than other rafts. The lower profile make transitioning from a wheel chair over the tube into the raft pretty smooth compared to rafts with oversize tubes and a shorter radius (more rocker) like the Maravia and Sotar boats I'm familiar with. In my experience it seems like all the rafts on our adaptive trips should be rigged the same so that anyone disabled or abled can ride in any boat, any time, without rigging changes.



The 2010 expedition was funded in large part by one outdoorsman with MS who makes charitable donations to Paradox Sports. His wish is for outdoor enthusiasts with disabilities to get out and experience the Alaskan rivers and travel through the bush while they are able to do so.

Every participant wants to express their gratitude for all that went into making this trip happen. Thank you John!

* John Merritt in the early stages of MS loved to travel and fly fish in bush Alaska. His biennial expedition was inspirational to all who accompanied him and helped Mark develop the confidence to continue offering expeditionary support to disabled campers after John was no longer able to participate. John's financial support allows this work to go forward.

**Malcolm Daly is a member of the board of Directors of Paradox Sports. www.paradoxsports.org. Paradox Sports is a 501(c) (3) organization whose mission is: "Providing inspiration, opportunities, and the adaptive equipment needed to participate in human powered outdoor sports". He is an avid rock and ice climber, rafter, fly fisherman, and a father. Charitable donations to Paradox Sports paid the expenses of the disabled participants.