

GAAR Archaeological Site Monitoring
North Fork Koyukuk River: The Gates to Bettles

Trip Report
August 17-23, 2000

Background

The goals of this float trip were to relocate and examine archaeological sites initially reported during Mike Kunz's 1984 survey and to assess damage and possible natural and human impacts/threats to the sites. Following the timetable established in the 1998 Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve Cultural Site Monitoring Plan, Eileen Devinney (Anthropologist) and Mike Junkins (Maintenance) flew to the upper regions of the North Fork Koyukuk to examine archaeological sites and to deal with several operations projects while en route.

The focus of the year 2000 monitoring activities were along the middle sector of the North Fork Koyukuk, from the confluence of Ernie Creek down to Eroded Mountain. Due to the floods of 1994 and more recent changes in river conditions, it was not possible to safely land on gravel bars north of The Gates. Therefore, we flew to the Gates (Frigid Crags/Boreal Mtn.) via heliocourier with Jay Jespersen of Brooks Range Aviation. As a result of the conditions, two sites slated for monitoring were not examined: WIS-073 and WIS-079. These will be added to the 2001 season monitoring schedule and may be examined by persons travelling by foot out of Anaktuvuk Pass or down from Summit Lake at the headwaters of the North Fork. Initial plans called for substituting site WIS-092 (from the Lower North Fork Koyukuk zone) but this proved difficult for reasons described below.

The original schedule called for a departure time of 10am on August 17th. However, weather conditions required that we wait until early evening. We landed at the Gates at approximately 4:45pm. Although the allotted seven days seemed an ample amount of time, it turned out to be a bit short, owing to the time needed to deal with some of the side projects we were asked to accomplish. Our means of travel was an inflatable SOAR canoe (using seat panels loaned to us by Brooks Range Aviation – many thanks to them!).

The two archaeological sites that were relocated (WIS-076 and WIS-097) were fairly easy to find, as they were atop prominent, distinct terraces. Site WIS-092 was eliminated from the monitoring for this year after noting its distance from the riverbank and seeing the terrain in which it must be located. As it turns out, this site was originally discovered by means of subsurface testing. It was decided that the site would be very difficult to relocate as no artifacts were present on the surface. In addition, as neither datums nor site identification tags were found at WIS-076 or WIS-097, it was determined that similar conditions at WIS-092 might make it virtually impossible to find, given sometimes inaccurate map coordinates. It should be noted that the lack of datums and site tags is surprising, since sites found during the same season in other drainages (such as the Itkillik) were marked with datum spikes and tags¹.

Originally, I had hoped to try to visit as many cabin sites as possible, but the schedule allowed for very few attempts to locate cabin sites. We tried to locate FP-104 (Lower Tinayguk Cabin) for approximately 2.5 hours but were unsuccessful. Notes say that this cabin is difficult to see, even from the air. Ranger Al Smith had located it in July, making it more depressing to us that

¹ In his 1985 report *North Fork Koyukuk, Middle Fork Koyukuk, Glacier and Upper Itkillik River Drainages, Report of Phase II of a Cultural Resources Survey and Inventory in Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, Volume I*, Kunz states "All sites were marked with a site tag and assigned State of Alaska Heritage Resource Survey numbers" (p. vi).

we could not find it. Because time was short, we decided to abandon our search. We figure we must have come very close to the structure on several occasions, though we never did see it. We also visited FP-101 (Squaw Rapids Cabin). A Log Structure Recording Form was completed for this cabin and photographs taken. On the final day of the trip, we made a brief stop at NA-130 so that I could take a few photographs and get a Garmin reading.

A Garmin 45 handheld GPS was used to record locational data (datum used was NAD27 Alaska). Lat/Longs were recorded in degrees, minutes, seconds.

Site Data

WIS-076

Date: August 18, 2000

Rainy, cool, gusty winds

GPS coordinates: N67°44'01.3" W150°56'25.4" NAD27Alaska

This site is located on a prominent east-west trending bedrock ridge, approximately 150 meters above the valley floor and 400 meters east of the Koyukuk River. We climbed to the ridgeline and found the prominent knoll which lies directly north of a distinctive 2335 foot hill that is situated between Resdstar Creek and an unnamed creek just south of WIS-076. WIS-076 is atop the crest of the southwestern end of the ridgeline.

We first noted hearth feature near the summit, then looked for artifacts described in Phippen's notes and Kunz's report. Spent roughly two hours looking. Could not locate datum and Phippen's hearth sketch did not seem to match hearth stone arrangement on site.

Found a small 2cm chunk of quartzite (possibly obsidian – was clear) on SE side of the knoll. After this, a few more items were found, including a brownish grey flake and a retouched black chert flake. Finally managed to find a obvious lithic – a large flake of light green/gray chert exhibiting reworking and removal of fragments. This artifact seemed to match Phippen's description for artifact #10 and when we laid it on top of his artifact sketch it matched perfectly. This confirmed that the site was WIS-076.

Aside from the aforementioned artifacts we found little else. Phippen's sketch of the site shows a datum, but this was not found. We did note several small mammal bone fragments along the east facing slope. No likely human impacts at this location, and minimal natural impacts. It is well off of the river and very high, protecting it from flooding. On rare occasions, a river traveler may hike up to this knoll for a view but the impacts from such activities would seem minimal at this time.

WIS-097

Date: August 20, 2000

Clear, cool, gentle breezes

GPS coordinates: N67°40'19.8" W150°59'00.2" NAD27Alaska

Overshot the lakes and had to hike back up to Redstar Creek. Hiked up game trail along south side of creek, then crossed over to north side and emerged near the south end of the westernmost lake. We first hiked up between the western two lakes, walking to the north end of the middle of the Redstar lakes to pick up trash left behind from a recent incident in which a bear broke into a food cache. Turned out that someone had recently flown in and removed most of the debris, although we did find a few food wrappers. We then hiked up along the low ridgeline that runs along the north end of the lakes and were able to see a single, low knoll just northeast of the lakes, the only high point in the valley for some distance as one looks from the ridgeline along the north end of the lakes.

Upon reaching the summit of the knoll, the hearth like feature and "L" shaped stone arrangements were very obvious. Spearman's notes match precisely, although no datum or site tag were found. Spearman did not indicate a datum on his site sketch. After looking over the surface of the knoll for some time, the only lithics found consisted of 1cm sized black chert flakes. The flakes were found separately and mainly within 2meters of the hearth like feature running north and westward. Curiously, none of the diagnostic artifacts described by Spearman were found.

FP-101 (Squaw Rapids Cabin)

Date: August 22, 2000

Overcast, rainy, snowing

GPS coordinates: N67°19'38.2" W150°42'57.5" NAD27Alaska

This is a public use cabin/shelter located just above Squaw Rapids on the western side of the Koyukuk. Location description in the cabin file are very good and accurate.

The cabin is in fairly good condition but could use some repairs:

- 1) The north side of the roof has been damaged along the edge (by bears according to the file). This needs minimal repairs to be resolved. Replacement of the slats, sod and plastic sheeting in that area would suffice.
- 2) The door latch mechanism needs to be repaired – the arm in which the locking bar rests has been split in half and nailed back together.
- 3) Needs a roofjack installed.
- 4) One course of logs on the north wall has been pushed in, possibly by bear activity as they claw at the roof. Move the two pieces of log back into place.
- 5) Patch small sections of missing moss chinking.

(see Log Structure Recording Form in the cabin file for more information)

NA-130

Date: August 23, 2000

Clear, cool, gentle breezes

GPS coordinates: N67°04'00.2" W151°02'53.2" NAD27Alaska

Brief visit – to obtain GPS coordinates and a few photographs.

Other Projects

We spent August 19th at the site of Jim Swearingen's sunken jet boat, working on getting a line and cable attached so that it could eventually be raised up onto the bank. Mike was successful in getting a rope tied to the bow and, using a come-along, he winched it snug to the bank. A metal cable was then attached to the original rope bowline and secured to a spruce tree on the bank. We were not able to raise the boat up onto the bank owing to steep conditions and a lack of necessary equipment. This might require two or more come-alongs and several more people. A few grappling hooks might be helpful in flipping the boat over. An alternative might be to bring along a lot of rope and try to winch the boat over to the east bank where there are shallow waters and a gravel bar. The jet motor is still attached to the stern (at least what is left of the motor). The stern panel seems to be peeling off at the welds, probably as a result of being hung up on gravel by the motor. The steering console is crushed and floating next to the boat on the side furthest from the bank. See report by Mike Junkins for more detail on this endeavor.

On August 20th we came upon a large piece of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch plywood that ranger Al Smith had found during his patrol in July. We came prepared with a keyhole saw and Mike cut it in half so we could boat it out. We eventually cut it into quarters so that it better fit in the boat.

General Notes

Travel was somewhat hampered by cold weather and rainy conditions which made it difficult to remain warm at times. Snow fell on August 21st, 22nd and 23rd. On August 22nd we decided to stop in at Squaw Rapids Cabin to warm up and dry out since all of our clothing was damp or wet. We arrived there at approximately 3pm and ended up spending the night at the cabin. Our final day of paddling began at Squaw Rapids at 9:40 am and ended at the gravel bar in Bettles at 9:15 pm. I would recommend 10 days to more adequately monitor and document sites along the North Fork. This gives time for weather delays and for hiking well off of the river and more carefully documenting each site.