



BILL ROTH / Daily News archive 2002

Not only does the Anchorage area boast excellent areas to ski, but there also are a lot of training programs to help skiers improve their skills.

Ski training programs are plentiful

■ **FITNESS:** There are year-round programs available for beginners to experts, youths to adults.

By ELIZABETH MANNING
Anchorage Daily News

For Hannah Davis, skiing at noon with other women isn't about becoming a hotshot. It's about getting and staying in shape so simple chores like grocery shopping or climbing stairs don't wear her down.

"I'm not doing this to be a racer," Davis, 55, said as she chugged along on roller skis during a

■ **PICK A PROGRAM:** From beginner to advanced, there is a ski or snowboard training program available to help you improve your skills.

Page H-3

recent workout with Alaska Pacific University's Nordic Skiing Center. "I'm doing it for fitness."

Joining a ski training group like APU's Nordic Skiing Center isn't for everyone. Davis, for example, works out with the center an average of four days a week year-round at a cost of \$900. Increasingly, though, regular folks like Davis have committed themselves to serious

ski-training programs.

Once they do, they often find it changes their lives.

Many of the group's adult skiers are not star athletes or even natural athletes. But they say working out regularly under a coach has helped them meet personal goals and stay fit, particularly during Anchorage's cold season, when the tendency to succumb to evenings on the couch grows strong. Some of the group's skiers also say the frequent workouts help them maintain mental health during long, dark winters.

See Page H-3, SKIING

FIELD NOTES



SNOWMOBILING

Annual swap meet set for 11 a.m. Saturday

The Anchorage Snowmobile Club has set its annual swap meet for Saturday next to the Enstar Building on International Airport Road between Fairbanks and Eagle streets.

Check in is 10 a.m. for people selling gear. Space for sellers costs \$20, or get two spaces for \$30. Buying and trading run from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Machines, parts, accessories and outdoor clothing are encouraged.

The club encourages sales of snowmobile-related items but is not restricting anyone to selling just that. For information, call 566-0272.

CYCLING

California company touting bike alarm

A California company says it is bringing the car alarm to two-wheelers. With more than 1.5 million bicycle thefts reported every year, Factory Enhancements Corporation says something more than chains and padlocks is needed. So it has unveiled the Cy-Curuty system, a motion sensor and alarm that can be hidden beneath a bike seat.

If anyone moves the bike, a 115-decibel siren goes off. The noise, the company says, should deter would-be thieves trying to break bike chains or other devices used to secure bikes. The Cy-Curuty system also has a key-chain trigger that allows a cyclist to activate the alarm from up to 100 feet away.

The battery-operated unit weighs 3 ounces and requires no tools. Cost is \$49.95.

For more information, call 1-800-971-0778 or visit the www.Cy-Curuty.com Web site.

BIRDING

Birder's World offers bird-watching primer

Birder's World magazine is offering a primer on joining one of the country's most popular activities. Bird-watching is one of the fastest growing pastimes in America.

Birder's World celebrates that growth and its 15th anniversary with what it considers the ultimate guide to bird-watching in North America. Copies should now be on newsstands.

Shrouded monument



A group of paddlers prepares gear before entering the rapids through The Gates of Aniakchak. About 2,000 years ago, The Gates were formed when a section of the volcano's walls was breached. Water from the lake within the caldera rushed out leaving behind this 1,200-foot-high gash.

Right: Boulders in The Gates make passage dangerous and difficult. This group had to unload its raft and line it down river with ropes from shore.



Adventurous group slips through clouds to explore volcanic crater



Photos by BEN HARRIS / Anchorage Daily News

An aerial view shows the Aniakchak River as it flows through The Gates of Aniakchak Volcano, forming the headwaters of the Alaska Peninsula's longest river.

By BEN HARRIS
Anchorage Daily News

A NIAKCHAK VOLCANO — Clouds formed a seemingly impenetrable curtain around the crater of Aniakchak as our plane approached. No route over or in was visible. Conditions almost identical to these had forced us back to King Salmon two days earlier, fulfilling this national monument's reputation as a site seldom seen or visited.

Our plans for a week of adventure around the active volcano 450 miles south of Anchorage appeared scuttled as we circled the crater's barren brown slopes. Faces tightened as we pondered forking out \$2,000 for yet another flight.

Then our pilot spotted a break in the clouds. A pass below was visible. He approached tentatively as winds buffeted the DeHavilland Otter.

Suddenly we were through. The ground dropped away from the pass to reveal a volcanic wonderland. Gestures of high-fives and thumbs up flashed around the plane's cabin.

A LAND OF FOG AND CLOUDS

The oft-shrouded mysteries of Aniakchak lured our group of five to this desolate land on the Alaska Peninsula. Only three or four groups explore Aniakchak's crater and river each year, making Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve the least visited units in the

See Page H-4, VOLCANO



BEN HARRIS / Anchorage Daily News



CRAIG MEDRED

OUTDOORS

Scout gear was strange, but boys still had to have it

NORTH FORK SHIP CREEK — Discovery of an aluminum lid to a Boy Scout mess kit near Bird Creek Pass triggered the pondering on the strange, Boy Scouts of America gear many of us used to carry around in the woods.

The Scouts were once a significant American supplier of backpacks, canteens (what we now call water bottles), mess kits, cutlery, bed rolls (what we now call sleeping bags) and hatchets. These items comprised what you might call the basic Scout camping outfit.

The backpack was a canvas version of a paper grocery bag with a lid and a couple straps

sewn on. The Boy Scout manual offered instructions on how to pack it. The instructions were simple:

Put soft objects — bed roll, clothing, etc. — on the side of the pack nearest your back. Place hard objects — the hatchet, mess kit, the cans of pork and beans, bricks for anchoring the tent — behind this padding to avoid some sharp object sticking you in the back all day.

One of the things I remember most about my Boy Scout pack was that no matter how the junk inside was arranged, something al-

ways ended up stabbing me in the back.

The other long-lasting memories are:

- The unbelievable weight of these packs. But what do you expect when you carry Paul Bunyan's hatchet around everywhere just in case you have to clear-cut a forest in an emergency?

- The homemade "trump line." The trump line preceded the hip belt. Both are designed to help alleviate the weight of a pack on your shoulders. Waist belts try to shift the weight to



See Page H-2, MEDRED

VOLCANO: Some sights remain a mystery at national monument

Continued from H-1

national park system.

The volcano itself was unknown to all but Native inhabitants until 1922, when a group of government geologists discovered a 6-mile-wide hole in the earth. Mysteries of the caldera were later reported by the Rev. Bernard Hubbard, who flew to the caldera in 1930. The "Glacier Priest" from Santa Clara, Calif., found remnants of a 7,000-foot mountain that had collapsed during an eruption 3,500 years earlier. He described Aniakchak as "paradise found ... a world within a mountain."

A year later, Aniakchak erupted. Hubbard returned to find a "valley of death in which not a blade of grass or a flower or a bunch of moss broke through the thick covering of deposited ash."

Inside the caldera, he wrote, was a "vision of hell."

"Yellow sulphurs seethed and boiled around the edge of broken blocks of red lava. ... Colored fumes too heavy to rise rolled about like waves on a stormy sea," Hubbard wrote. "We stood awestricken on the edge looking, like Dantes, into a real inferno."

I first read Hubbard's report of Aniakchak a few years ago. Copies of his papers were given to me by Ron Clauson, co-owner of Backcountry Safaris. A trip to Aniakchak has been on Clauson's must-do list for several years.

Hubbard's vivid descriptions of Aniakchak made us curious, but finding other people to split the cost of such an expensive trip took time.

"Notoriously bad weather combines with costly and unpredictable access to discourage most would-be visitors," a National Park Service handout warns.

Fortunately, such conditions couldn't deter Woody Harrell, superintendent of Shiloh National Military Park. Harrell is trying to visit all 385 units of the National Park system, and he was anxious to make the Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve numbers 363 and 364 on his list. Harrell's wife, Cynthia, and Alaskan Brent Shaffer joined us as we headed for the Alaska Peninsula in July.

INSIDE THE FABLED CALDERA

Our float-equipped Otter splashed down on jade-green waters of Surprise Lake within the crater. The lake is a remnant of a larger lake that once filled the entire crater, much like Oregon's Crater Lake.

Peering across the landscape, Woody Harrell said, "It's like the Grand Canyon in the ice age."

Cynthia Harrell was equally awestruck. "I think this may have moved up to number one" on our national park and preserve list, she said.

Volcanic activity since the initial eruption has created a variety of features within the caldera that include vents, cones, craters and warm springs. The caldera is desert, moon-scape and glacier all rolled into one.

Much of the ash and cinder surface has been wiped clean of vegetation. Wind has scoured large areas, leaving behind fingernail-like scratches in the earth.

No alders, no mud, no muck, no bugs and little rain spelled great hiking in the crater. Loose deposits of pebbly rocks made for difficult footing scampering up slopes, but the hiking was otherwise trouble-free.

When the skies cleared over Vent Mountain, the crater's highest feature, we could see the snowy peaks of Katmai National Park and Preserve, more than 100 miles to the northeast. On our climb to the Vent's summit 2,200 feet above the caldera floor, we could see glaciers hanging precariously on steep 4,000-foot-high crater walls between Black Nose and Aniakchak Peak. A couple dozen barren-ground caribou traipsed through



Photos by BEN HARRIS / Anchorage Daily News

Woody Harrell and Brent Shaffer pause atop 3,300-foot-high Vent Mountain while Cynthia Harrell climbs the cinder cone's slopes. Surprise Lake, The Gates and mountains of the Aleutian Range can be seen at center in this view.

snow fields below.

For the rest of our stay, we ventured out alone or in pairs to investigate other features of the caldera.

Woody and Cynthia paddled inflatable kayaks to warm springs the color of pumpkins that flowed into Surprise Lake. The springs have cooled considerably since the volcano's more active days and are now only slightly warm to the touch. Wearing a drysuit, Cynthia stepped into the bubbling waters of the spring.

"You feel like an ice cube in a carbonated drink," she said.

Walking the crater's ash fields reminded me of springtime journeys across the Kansas prairie — seeing patches of brilliant colors pop up from a sea of brown. Small islands of dwarf fireweed, lupine, luetkea and grasses cling to life in this fragile volcanic world.

All of this, combined with unusual cloud formations and nasty weather, contributes to Aniakchak's reputation as a unique place. Clouds churn over and into the caldera's walls, creating what geologist Hubbard described as cloud Niagaras. The Niagara Falls analogy is apt. As the clouds spill into the crater, they spread out like mist from a waterfall.

However, winds that move those clouds can turn ugly. Guidebooks report gusts up to 100 mph in the caldera.

THROUGH THE GATES TO THE SEA

Our passage out of the caldera was by raft and inflatable kayak through a gaping V-shaped slot in the caldera's walls called The Gates.

About 2,000 years ago, a segment of the crater rim collapsed, launching a massive flood. When it was over, what was left was The Gates.

Surprise Lake now spills into the Aniakchak River at the base of The Gates' 1,200-foot cliffs.

My stomach churned as my inflatable kayak sped downstream. At any moment I expected to hit white water that has been described as having intense and powerful rapids with the potential for danger. A few hundred yards into The Gates we spotted boulders and stepped out of our boats to scout.

Downstream, the boulders formed picket fences spaced so close Clauson's raft couldn't get by. We unloaded his boat and lined it past rocky obstacles. Maneuvering through this rock garden, however, was easy for

Shaffer and me in our inflatable kayaks.

The river had none of the Class IV white water that had been reported in guidebooks. At higher water levels, we might have encountered some spills and thrills, but in low-water conditions there were just a few big rocks to dodge.

We traded Hubbard's "vision of hell" for a vision of paradise as The Gates opened into a lush green world.

Later in the day, I looked back toward the caldera from our camp just outside The Gates. Like Jack in "Jack and the Beanstalk," I stood at the door to a giant's castle, a small and insignificant speck of a human peering into a mystical land in the clouds.

FLOATING OUT TO MEET THE TIDE

Clouds continued to hide Aniakchak's secrets as we began our 30-mile river journey to Aniakchak Bay on the Alaska Peninsula's eastern shore. A misty curtain of gray cloaked everything above the river-bank.

We coasted along at a swift pace as the river dropped 75 feet per mile. Where the channel narrowed to as little as 15 feet across, the river catapulted us downstream. Stretches of fast and rocky river provided some white-water thrills without being intimidating.

Everything would have been excellent on a sunny day, but beneath the rainy skies some of us were chilled. A stop for hot cider and tea warmed our bodies, and we added another layer of clothes.

Guidebooks and float reports indicated excitement ahead. I raised my vigilance and kept a can of bear spray within close reach, expecting to see some brown bears; 70 years ago, a survey party organized by R.H. Sargent encountered 57 of them during a study around Plenty Bear Creek. I had nervous visions of rounding a bend and running into a griz.

Or into serious white water. There was supposed to be another boulder-filled section with fast water below Hidden Creek. My fists remained clinched on the paddle. But Hidden Creek was so well hidden that it slipped past everyone without being noticed.

The bears remained hidden too. With the salmon gone, they were elsewhere. Despite hearing and reading about numerous bear sightings along the river, we saw only three brownies

on our trip, and they presented no problems.

In no time we had traveled halfway downriver and reached slower water. The drizzly conditions and long day made everyone eager to get a warm meal, shelter and dry clothes.

The pace slowed for the final day. We meandered around oxbows seeming to go almost nowhere. The pointy landmark Cape Horn stayed in view for hours, signalling our approach to Aniakchak Bay.

A widening river, relentless head wind and incoming tide beyond Cape Horn brought us to a crawl.

A salty drizzle was in our faces; we could taste the sea. The view widened, looking like pictures I've seen of Scotland with its dense green rocky shores.

Finally, we hit bottom. Our boats dragged on the sandy tidal zone. We kept going, however, pushing and paddling until we could see waves breaking on the bay.

SALTWATER LAPPING AT THE TENT

The sound of splashes kept us awake past midnight our first night on the beach. Come morning we noticed the tide had risen to within a few feet of our tents. Our plane was scheduled for the next day, but the weather was miserable.

With no chance of catching a return flight to King Salmon, we hunkered down to read books, eat, sleep and play cards.

The following day began the same way, but by early afternoon the rain had stopped and skies cleared enough for us to see Sutwick Island 15 miles away. Everyone walked around the beach with nervous energy, hoping for a flight.

Unfortunately, clear skies in Aniakchak did not mean skies were clear across the peninsula in King Salmon. A call on the satellite phone to Katmai Air dashed our hopes for a flight. We would be stuck another day.

"I'm beginning to feel like Bill Murray in the movie 'Groundhog Day,'" Woody said. "We're gonna be stuck here till we get it right."

Humor and cards, fortunately, kept everyone in good spirits. We joked about how our situation was similar to the TV show "Survivor" but with everyone hoping to be voted off the island.

On the afternoon of the third day, the weather broke. The clouds began to rise along with the barometer on Shaffer's gizmo watch. We called Katmai Air to ask them to keep the Otter available for the next morning.

We confirmed a flight that morning despite the appearance of clouds that looked ready to drop at any moment. Everyone kept an edgy eye on the sky. A rising tide and building ocean swells promised to complicate the landing and loading of the Otter.

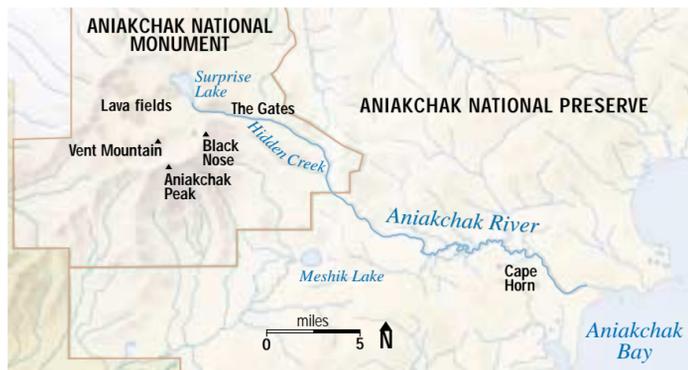
But pilot Chris Larson was a seasoned pro. He made a no-sweat landing. We loaded the plane as fast as possible, and within minutes we were flying back over the path we had just traveled, fascinated at our perspective seen by few.

Months later, I remain curious about some Aniakchak sights the weather concealed. Another visit may be in order. I'll be sure to take along a good dose of patience, a good book and a Visa Platinum card.

■ Ben Harris is a page designer at the Daily News and a white-water kayaker. He can be reached at bharris@adn.com.



Guide Ron Clauson and the Harrells paddle down the upper Aniakchak River, which drops as much as 75 feet per mile. Shaffer follows behind in an inflatable kayak.



Map features from National Park Service

BEN HARRIS / Anchorage Daily News

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Daily flights to King Salmon are available on Alaska Airlines (800-225-2752) and Pen Air (907-243-2323 or 800-448-4226) Round-trip fares cost \$300 to \$375. Float plane charters for a Beaver or Otter from King Salmon to the Aniakchak caldera can be arranged through Katmai Air (907-243-5448) or Branch River Air (907-246-3437) Flight cost is \$2,000 to \$2,500 per trip.

When: July through early August is best. Gear: Good rain gear and shelter that can hold up in stout winds are a must. Rafts should be able to withstand sharp and

jagged boulders on the river. Bring a patch kit just in case. A satellite phone is essential for coordinating a flight out. Bear spray or other protection is advised since bear encounters are likely.

Weather: Delays caused by weather are a given. Plan for some down time. Take care to coordinate flights with air charters.

Getting around: Hiking in the caldera is excellent. Plan for at least three days on the river and no less than 10 total days for a visit.

Information: Contact the superintendent of Aniakchak National Monument and Preserve in King Salmon at 907-246-3305 or see the National Park Service Web page at www.nps.gov/ania/index.htm.



Clauson and the Harrells reach journey's end as they approach a rain-soaked Aniakchak Bay.