

Lifeline Through Tundra

As remote as the Alagnak River seems to us today, it has supported human activity for thousands of years. From the time of the earliest Alaskans, the river has given much to those willing to learn its ways.

Mid-summer waters teem with salmon. Fall brings migrating caribou herds and a harvest of salmonberries, blueberries, and blackberries. Winter, frozen and seemingly endless, yields fish and game for hunters, trappers, and ice fishers.

The Alagnak's upper reaches have sparse remains of riverside camps used 7,000–9,000 years ago. In 2004 archeologists studied a riverside village 1,200–2,300 years old. Partially underground dwellings were reinforced by sturdy

wooden posts that probably came from far away. Many items point to cold weather use: central fire pits, stone oil lamps, food storage pits, and stone projectile points for hunting caribou.

The Alagnak came to the attention of the outside world in 1852 when Russian Capt. Mikhail Tebenkov, surveying the Alaska coast, sailed up the river from Bristol Bay. After Alaska became US territory in 1867, American settlers built cabins and small villages along the banks. Some of the homes are still there, abandoned to the elements.

In the early 1900s two salmon canneries were built near the river's mouth, connected by a

narrow-gauge railroad. Cannery jobs drew people from all over the world. Commercial fishing is still big business; Bristol Bay is Alaska's largest commercial salmon fishery.

Alagnak Wild River was established in 1980. In this federally protected area many activities are still compatible with preserving the river corridor unimpaired for future generations. Though they no

longer live in riverside villages, modern native people—Yupik, Alutiiq, Denaina and others—carry on traditional subsistence hunting, gathering, fishing, and trapping.

Recreational pursuits like sport fishing, canoeing, and rafting offer you the rare gift of your own connection with the wild Alagnak.

Above: Lockanok cannery at mouth of Alagnak, 1920s. Left to right: moose-hide canoe; local folks trapping beaver, 1930s; young muskrat hunter. Below: Prospector Elbert Sargent by Alagnak, 1947.

CANNERY—COURTESY VIOLET WILSON; BOAT, TRAPPERS, BOY WITH MUSKRAT—COURTESY ALEX TALLEKRALEK; ELBERT SARGENT—COURTESY JOANNE SARGENT; WOLVERTON

Wild Alagnak

From its source at Kukaklek Lake, the Alagnak twists and braids through vast tundra, joins with the Kvichak River, and ends in Bristol Bay. Its uppermost 69 miles are designated a wild river, meaning free flow, no dams, and little human impact.

A major reason for protecting the wild river is its importance to the life cycle of Pacific salmon species—sockeye, pink, chum, king, silver. Salmon hatch in rocky shallows and stay in freshwater lakes for about two years, until they're large enough to journey downstream to the ocean. They spend three or so years in salt water, then return mid-summer to their freshwater birthplace to spawn and die.

Many animals eat salmon—even other fish. Brown bears routinely fish for bright red sockeyes along the banks. The river and its bounty also draw caribou, moose, beaver, foxes, wolverines, minks, otters, and wolves. Bald eagles, sandhill

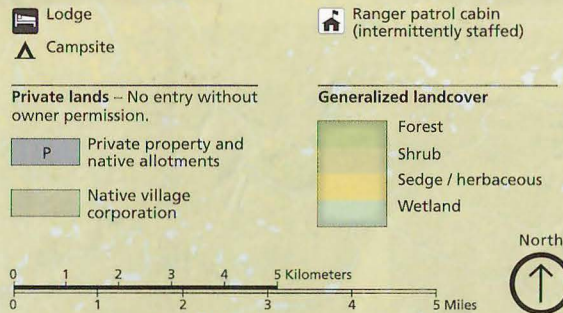
cranes, ospreys, and other birds feast on many kinds of fish that thrive in the cold, clean water.

Alagnak's waters nourish riverside communities of spruce, willow, and grasses. For subsistence use, native residents can harvest salmonberries, blackberries, blueberries, cranberries, fiddlehead ferns, wild celery, and sourdock.

Right, from top: Alagnak through tundra; riverbank spruce forest; sport fishing. Left to right below: Blue flag iris; brown bear; silver salmon; sockeye salmon; marsh marigolds; moose; thimbleberries.

ALAGNAK AERIAL AND FOREST—NPS/ROY WOOD; ANGLER—© RICHARD MASCHMEYER/ACCENT ALASKA; TOP IRIS—© PATTY HANKINS; BOTTOM IRIS, BEAR, AND MOOSE—PHOTO RESEARCHERS; SALMON—US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE/TIM KNEPP; MARIGOLDS—© JOANNE STEVENS; MADISON, WI; THIMBLEBERRIES—© WALTER VAN CAMPEN

Top left: Sandhill crane. Background: Alagnak means "making mistakes" in Yupik. The river channel is elusive amid ever-shifting branches and braids. CRANE—ALEX MODY; BACKGROUND—© TROY HAMON



Your Visit to Alagnak Wild River

Alagnak Wild River was established in 1980 as part of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), which added 47 million acres of national parklands. The wild river designation includes the Alagnak's upper 69 miles to its source lakes in Katmai National Park and Preserve.

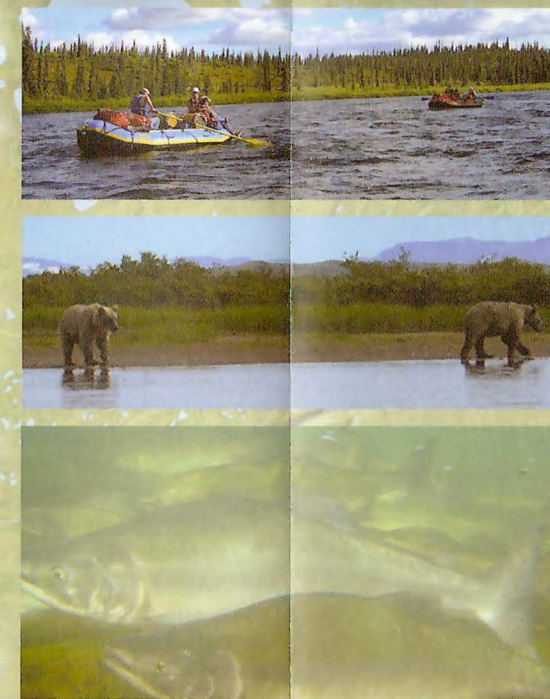
Accommodations and Services

Alagnak is in a remote part of the Alaska Peninsula. There are no roads or scheduled flights to anyplace along the river. Air charters are available from Anchorage, King Salmon, and other points.

The park has no visitor center or public facilities. The park website lists private lodges and outfitters who arrange transportation, accommodations, sport fishing, and float trips. If you plan to visit on your own, contact the park staff in advance.

Private Lands

There are many privately owned parcels and native corporation lands along the river. Don't assume that you can pull up to shore just anywhere. Abandoned cabins should be left as you find them.



From top: A raft trip is perhaps the best way to get to know the Alagnak. Brown bears fish in summer. Silver salmon head upstream.

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Be Bear Aware!

Brown bears are active day and night, and can be anywhere. Salmon-lovers, they are especially drawn to human fishing activity. Do not approach them. While hiking, make noise to let them know you're there. If a bear approaches you, stay calm and stand your ground or back off slowly. Store food, cooking equipment, and trash in bear-resistant containers.

For more about safety, including firearms regulations, visit the park website.

More Information

Alagnak Wild River is one of over 400 areas in the National Park System. For more information visit www.nps.gov.

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