

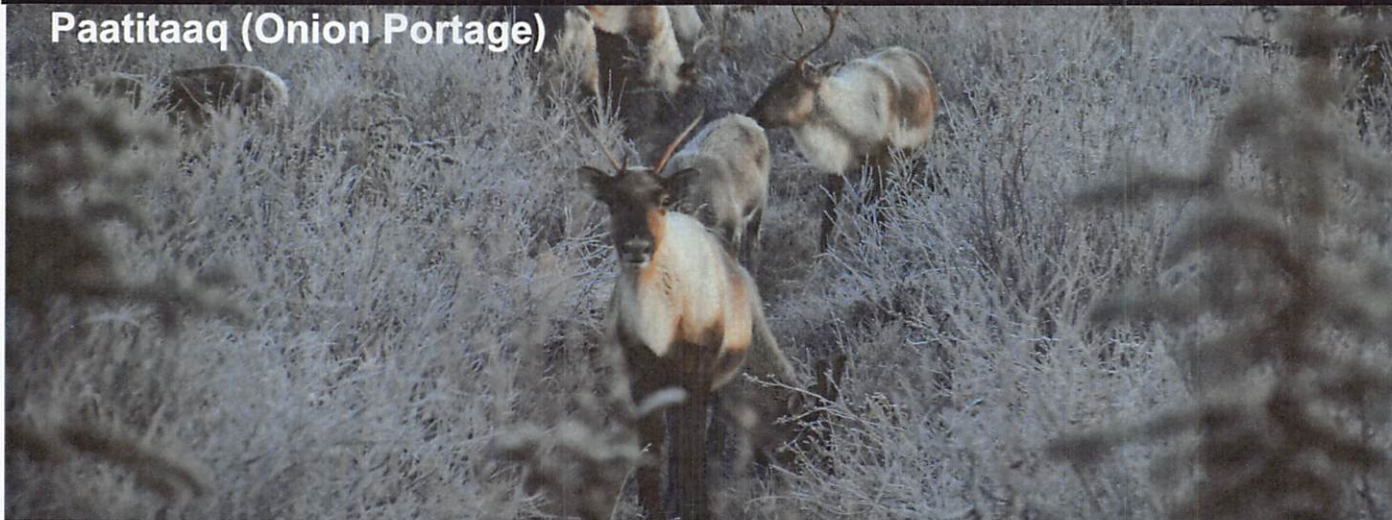
Kobuk Valley

National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior

Kobuk Valley National Park



Paatitaaq (Onion Portage)



Paatitaaq (Onion Portage) is a bluff along the Kobuk River rich in cultural and natural history. The area is known as the main place that the Western Arctic Caribou Herd crosses the Kobuk River in the fall time. As a result, this bluff is an important historical site of the Iñupiat and their ancestors for the past 10,000 years. Located just a few miles downriver from the Native Village of Ambler, Paatitaaq continues to be an important site for caribou hunting today.

What's in A Name?

Paatitaaq (pronounced paw-tee-tock), or onion, is the Iñupiaq placename for the bluff known in English as Onion Portage. The beach at Paatitaaq is known for its wild chives. While wild chives are found all along the Kobuk River, Paatitaaq is an especially good place to gather them.

The bluff also gets the name 'portage' as it is just upriver from a massive meander. Traveling across the land at Onion Portage cuts off almost 10 miles of river. Historically, trails would portage over the land at this bluff. Today, the snowmachine trail portages over the land here, too.

Natural History

About 30,000 years ago, the entire Kobuk River valley lay under a massive glacier. As the glacier melted, Kobuk River was formed and the glacial till left behind was revegetated with the boreal forest and tundra that is seen today.

Paatitaaq lies on the north side of the Kobuk River, less than ten miles from the Jade Mountains, and just a few more miles from the Baird Mountain range.

The Baird Mountains north of Paatitaaq are riddled with the mountain passes and many tributaries of the Kobuk River. These passes are known for bringing especially strong, cold north winds down from the Noatak River valley to the Kobuk River valley. These passes are also the highways for caribou on their migration south each fall. The shape of these passes and the open tundra funnel caribou toward Paatitaaq in the fall time.

Hunting Caribou: Past & Present

The rhythm of life on the Kobuk River has revolved around caribou for at least the last 10,000 years—time immemorial for the Iñupiat who live here. In the spring, caribou cross the Kobuk River on their way north to the calving grounds. In the fall, caribou cross again on their way south to their wintering grounds. While spring is an important hunting season, too, caribou returning in the fall time are fatter and sport thicker fur for clothing and bedding.

Until the early 20th century, families gathered at Paatitaaq for caribou hunting after fishing on the Kobuk River and hunting on the Upper Noatak River for the summer. Men built fences to lead caribou down from the tundra toward the river. The whole community would herd the caribou along. Some men would wait in birchbark canoes to spear caribou in the river.

Then the work really began. Caribou were skinned and hides prepared for tanning. Sinew was carefully separated

from the meat to use as thread for sewing. Meat was dried for best preservation. Bones were crushed to get at the high-fat patiq (bone marrow) inside. Antlers and bones were saved for all kinds of tools.

While hunting practices have changed dramatically in the last century, Onion Portage remains an important place for caribou hunting. In the fall time, hunters drive boats to Onion Portage, and several other well-known places along the Kobuk River to wait for caribou to cross. Hunting still occurs largely in the river.

Cultural traditions around caribou continue to this day. It is Iñupiaq custom that when a young hunter gets their first caribou, it is given to an Elder. For hunters of all ages, it is important to give the best parts of the caribou to those who cannot hunt for themselves. The best parts are heart, tongue, liver, brisket, and any part that is fat!

Kobuk Valley

National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior

Kobuk Valley National Park



Archeology

In 1941, archeologist J. Louis Giddings excavated several sites along the Kobuk River, including house pits at Paatitaaq. At the time, he didn't recognize the age or significance of this place.

Twenty years later, Giddings returned to excavate and learn of the strategic importance of Paatitaaq as a site that the Iñupiat and their ancestors have used for hunting caribou for the last 10,000 years. In 1964, a formal excavation began. At this time, Iñupiaq Nelson Griest of Ambler built the historic Giddings Cabin at the top of the bluff at Paatitaaq.

Though Giddings passed away in 1964, Paatitaaq became the site of feverish archeological work for a team of Iñupiaq and Western archeologists over the next several years.

A number of house pits were excavated to find artifacts from successive cultures stretching back thousands of years. Archeologists found stone, bone, and antler tools, especially related to caribou hunting and butchering. Remnants of cooking were found as well, including extensive hearths, pottery sherds and bone fragments from caribou and other animals that were hunted.

Camping and Visitation

The best time to visit Paatitaaq is between mid-June and the beginning of August. Before then, the plants have not put on their season's growth and ice can make floating treacherous. August brings the rainy season, and visitors run the risk of getting cold and wet with no opportunity to dry. Mid-August begins the busy season of berry-picking and fishing, and visitors may disrupt critical subsistence activities.

You might plan a self-guided float trip down the Kobuk River. Many people begin in Ambler and end in Kiana. Many travelers plan to visit Onion Portage and the Great

Kobuk Sand Dunes on their way. If you would prefer to have a guide for your trip, plan to contact them well in advance using our directory of commercial visitor service providers.

Pack for all types of weather. It can be in the 80s or snowing in July here! **Plan to be self-sufficient. You are responsible for your own transportation, food, supplies, and safety. Weather is unpredictable in the Arctic, so it's a good idea to build in extra days for weather delays and pack your patience.**

Ethics and Courtesies

Kobuk Valley National Park was established to protect the natural and cultural resources found here. Help us meet this goal by practicing minimum impact (Leave No Trace) visit guidelines as you tour the area.

Carry out all of your non-burnable trash. If you don't have a fire, carry out all of your trash. Scrape a shallow depression for human wastes. Burn used toilet paper or take it with you.

Do not molest animals that you see here. Maintain your distance, even for taking pictures. All of the creatures here are wild and all can pose a threat, especially wildlife traveling with their young.

Private lands and cabins are located all along the Kobuk River. Respect them just as you would respect privately owned land anywhere and do not camp on or cross these lands.

Residents of Northwest Alaska may stop by your camp for a visit. The traditional welcome is coffee or tea and crackers. If you don't have these, at least invite visitors to sit and visit for a while. Although local residents may stop at your camp, you should not stop at theirs unless specifically invited. Locals are busy living their subsistence lifestyle, hunting and gathering foods in the Park. Remember, you are the visitor here, and they are at home.

For Further Information

For more specific information on the Paatitaaq and Kobuk Valley National Park, write or call:

Western Arctic National Parklands
P. O. Box 1029
Kotzebue, Alaska 99752
Phone (907)442-3890

Park offices are located at the Northwest Arctic Heritage Center at 171 3rd Avenue in Kotzebue. The Heritage Center includes an exhibit area showcasing the area's native plants & animals and the Iñupiaq culture that has helped people to live in this environment for thousands of years, as well as an Alaska Geographic bookstore and maps and brochures to help you navigate the area. Come visit us!