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The Class Menagerie

David B. Williams sends dispatches from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

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David B. Williams is a freelance natural-history writer based in Seattle. He is the author of *The Street-Smart Naturalist: Field Notes from Seattle* and has written for *Smithsonian*, *Popular Mechanics*, *National Parks*, and *The Seattle Times*.

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Monday, 08 Aug 2005 FAIRBANKS and AICHILIK RIVER, Alaska

The Alaskan part of the trip begins at 12:30 a.m. on Aug. 1, when we arrive at the Fairbanks Airport. We are met by Karen Jettmar, who owns and runs Equinox Expeditions, our guide company. Karen gives us dry bags for our gear and tells us to be back at the airport at 7:30. We catch several cabs to the dorms at the University of Alaska and try to fall asleep. I toss and turn for an hour, keyed up about our adventure. The next morning with the group in near revolt, we make a panic stop at a coffee shop before driving to the airport. (This is a group of Seattleites, after all.)

To get to our put-in on the Aichilik River, we fly north out of Fairbanks. I am amazed at how quickly we lose sight of anything human. The last large feature I see is the oil pipeline from Prudhoe Bay, and then trees disappear and we begin to climb over the Brooks Range, with stark, sharp peaks occasionally higher than us. After three hours of flying, we land on a barely visible airstrip, cleared out of the tundra, next to the Aichilik. Before Ken the pilot leaves, he shows me how to use the shotgun, but we find no shells. "In that case, I'd just try and hit the bear with this end," Ken says, as he thrusts the handle toward me. And then he is gone and I am alone. (Because of logistics, the rest of the group flew to Arctic Village to talk with members of the Gwich'in community.)



On the right track.

At first, I am nervous. I have never been in grizzly country, moreover by myself, 45 miles from the nearest sign of people. At first, I stay close to the gear and the shotgun, not that it would help, but as I start to walk and notice the landscape, I begin to drop my trepidation. I find wolf and caribou tracks in the soft mud by the river. A dab of yellow flies by, a sulfur butterfly, and lands on a purple *Oxytropis*.

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Photo: Nate Mantua.

Small purple gentians, yellow cinquefoils, bluish harebells, pinkish valerians, and white louseworts dot the low-growing willow and cotton grass. My first bird is a glaucous gull, one of the refuge's 180 bird species, many of which overwinter in the Lower 48.

The rest of the group arrives over the next six hours. We put up our tents, chat about logistics, eat dinner, and hang out, quickly adapting to life without darkness. Throughout our week on the river, we don't eat breakfast until 10 a.m. or lunch until 4 p.m. Dinner occurs at 10 p.m. or later. People go on walks at 1 a.m. As with so many aspects of the Arctic, we discover something special in this new landscape at the north edge of the continent.

[Story continues below](#)

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The following day, we cross the Aichilik, hike across tundra, and climb up to 2,500 feet, along a ridge of tear-pants limestone. The Aichilik flows in a wide, braided channel north across the coastal plain to the Beaufort Sea, where sea ice appears to butt up against the barrier islands that lie just off the coastline. Through my binoculars I pick out Kaktovik, where a fire burns, sending a plume of smoke high above the horizon. From 1,400 feet above the coastal plain, the land looks eternal and limitless.

When I was flying into our put-in, one initial thought was that I understood the pro-drilling argument that development would only mar a small part of this huge landscape, but when I stand atop these final foothills of the Brooks Range and look across the horizontal and seemingly featureless coastal plain, I realize that this vastness also means that any development would significantly and negatively affect the experience of being in this place. The vastness is not just a visual vastness but a mental one, where knowing that humans have had and still have a microscopic effect is central to the experience and magic of the landscape.

We start our float trip on our third day in the refuge. We have two four-person paddle rafts and one two-person inflatable canoe. Like everyone else, I wear rubber boots, rain pants, long underwear, rain coat, and a hat. We climb into the boats and paddle away from shore. The water moves us swiftly for perhaps 200 yards, then we run aground. We hop out, pull the boat to deeper water, clamber in, and begin to paddle. Again we only go a short ways before bottoming out.

Paddle, pull, paddle, pull will be a constant throughout our 40 miles on the Aichilik. Like all



There is no evidence

'There is no evidence'



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Mouths Where Their Money Is. Emily Gertz sends a dispatch from a summit on climate change and investing.

And Now, a Word From Our Sponsors. Four environmental funders join the debate over the movement's future.

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the rivers on the coastal plain, the Aichilik flows across a flat, wide bottom in many small channels. Known as a braided river system, this type of flow pattern results from rapid and frequent changes in water volume, often in flat areas associated with glacier-derived runoff. The pattern makes navigation challenging but fun, as we try to follow the dark emerald line of deeper water.



Don't fall in!

Over the next few days, we begin to be swallowed by the vastness of the coastal plain. I find myself powerfully attracted to the land. I do not completely understand what specifically is so seductive, but in part I cannot get over the amazement I find standing on the coastal plain and looking out over cotton grass tussocks in all directions and seeing the horizon at exactly the same level everywhere. And yet, this vastness is complemented by the incredible complexity of what is at my feet. On a low mound, I find numerous snowy-owl pellets, several vole skulls, long-tailed jaeger poop, and caribou hair, in addition to a host of yellow, purple, and white flowers. I am humbled by the life that survives in such a harsh landscape, by the austere beauty of tussock and sky, and by the fact that we have the opportunity to protect this landscape for future generations.

Our most exciting day is No. 6, when we see a grizzly bear. We can only see it through our 45x spotting scope, but I can feel the palpable energy in the group. The most common comment as we look through the scope is a simple "Wow," punctuated by the occasional "I think it's getting closer." I am surprised by how blond the bear is and how it digs up the tundra looking for food. Since we do not want to surprise the bear, we build a small fire, hoping that our scent will drift down toward it. When I go to bed around midnight, the bear is still out there.

On our final day on the river, we paddle out to an unnamed barrier island, about a quarter mile from shore. It is mostly barren but covered in driftwood. We build a huge fire and celebrate our adventure by diving into the Beaufort Sea. We run back to the fire, clean and exhilarated. Again, I sense an energy in the group, but now it is an energy of joy, a joy to be alive in this stunning landscape of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

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Arctic Refuge

Dear Friends,

Thank you for posting the Class Menagerie.

I am writing because I am deeply concerned about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I spent a month in the Refuge in 2001, and visited Washington DC this spring to lobby on its behalf. The fate of the Arctic Refuge will likely be determined in the next two months.

It is critical to realize this fight is not over! The Bush administration and its allies are working to create a sense of inevitability, and to foster the impression the decision to drill the coastal plain is a done-deal. In March, a Senate amendment to remove the drilling provision from the budget lost by two votes. In the next step, the resolution process, the budget made it through by the thinnest of margins - five votes in the Senate and three votes in the House. When Congress reconvenes in September, the Senate and the House will work on the budget reconciliation, that part of the budget process which has the force of law. The Refuge provision is hanging by a thread, and there are enough Republicans opposed to drilling that it may yet be stripped from the final budget.

My hope, and the hope of untold others, is that this threat will not only be stopped, but it will mark a turning point in which American conservationists speak out so loudly they cannot be dismissed. As Tom DeLay (R-TX) so candidly admitted, "It's not about drilling the Refuge, it's about being able to drill anywhere." I would add it's also about despoiling our lands and waters, extirpating plants and animals, undermining wildlands protection, and tearing down bedrock environmental laws that have well served our nation for decades.

There are many things you can do:

- One of the most important is to begin calling and writing the offices of your Senators and Representative, and let them know how strongly you oppose oil development on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. If members of Congress hear this again and again they will take notice. Call early, call often. [Capitol switchboard #202.224.3121] It's always best to write a personal letter or email, rather than sending an automated message.
- Perhaps even more important, is to begin contacting sympathetic friends and relatives around the country and ask them to write and call their delegation. It is imperative that people not get suckered by the ploy of this administration into thinking the Refuge has been opened to drilling. Many people are anxious to help and just need a little direction toward effective action.
- Support the efforts of those who are taking to the streets of DC in defense of the Arctic Refuge. Or better yet, COME TO THE CAPITAL AND JOIN THE MARCH ON SEPTEMBER 20TH!! This action has the potential to be very large - people are frustrated and are poised to act. Contributions can be made to the Alaska Wilderness League, 122 C Street, NW, Suite 240, Washington DC 20001 and earmarked for "Arctic Action Day".
- Visit <http://www.ArcticRefugeAction.org> for more information.

The scale of the environmental crisis now goes beyond any individual's ability to fully comprehend. Many of you are working on issues ranging from endangered species, to wilderness designation, to legislative issues in state government, while also raising families, taking care of your health, and trying to find time to do the things you love. Sometimes it all seems too much. I sincerely appreciate any help you can give in defense of the Arctic Refuge and wild nature.

Thanks ...

... Tim Hogan

by [Tim Hogan](#) at [3:40 PM on 17 Aug 2005](#)

Treasure America

Thanks for the great report. I'm glad you guys got to experience the refuge!

We rafted the Canning River in June and spent some time in Kaktovik. The purpose of the trip (in addition to having a great time) was to look at some of the economic reasons why opening the refuge is a backwards idea, as well as to debunk some of the myths that drilling advocates have been passing off as truth. Among them:

1) Myth - ANWR will lower gas prices.

Truth - Drilling in the Arctic Refuge will have no noticeable effect on gas prices. Even oil industry execs admit that the Arctic Refuge contains a maximum of less than a 3 year's supply of crude. With worldwide demand surging, the impact of that amount of oil is likely to mean less than a nickle off a gallon at the pump.

2) Myth - ANWR will reduce dependence on Middle Eastern Oil.

Fact - Only 31% of US oil imports come from Arab Countries. Most is from Mexico, Canada, Venezuela and Domestic Sources.

Source - <http://www.snopes.com/politics/business/saudigas.asp> Any small impact ANWR has will be dominated by reductions outside the mideast.

3) Myth - ANWR means a stronger economy.

Fact - Better fuel efficiency standards are much more important in keeping America strong. If cars got 20% better mileage, the average person would have \$500 more in their pocket every year. Compare that to the one-time \$300 Bush tax credit. ANWR does nothing to encourage better fuel economy, in fact it moves us directly in the opposite direction - away from strength, and away from growth.

4) Myth - ANWR oil will be used for the domestic American demand

Fact - With China and India embracing a car culture, there is a strong likelihood that much, and possibly all, ANWR oil will be shipped overseas.

Source -

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2002245699_export17m.html

Source - <http://www.ncseonline.org/NLE/CRSreports/natural/nrgen-25.cfm>

5) Myth ANWR has no environmental/health impact

Fact - Drilling in ANWR may or may not hurt wildlife. But continued burning of petroleum products has immensely negative health effects for Americans in all areas of the country. From asthma to cancer, many costly diseases can be traced directly to combusting gasoline. Even in the pristine north slope, there is currently a smog cloud (caused by Prudhoe Bay operations) as brown as any over a major city.

We have a video in the final stages of production and would be very interested in having it shown on Grist and other sites. Please check out www.treasureamerica.org.

Thank you!

+++++ Nick Aster www.triplepundit.com
www.treasureamerica.org

by [nickaster](#) at [2:41 PM on 18 Aug 2005](#)

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