



OUT THERE

This Old Boat

The Noatak Canyon
is about five miles long.

A maiden voyage lasts a lifetime

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

TOGETHER, WE'VE BEEN THROUGH THICK AND THIN.

Like a loyal spouse, she buoyed me when I was down. She carried me where I wanted to go and where I was meant to be. She has been my home in the wilderness, my means of escape, safeguard from danger, a goal badly needed. She has been my buffer in turbulent waters, always low-maintenance. For days on end, my survival depended on her. I've stood on her thwarts, scanning for campsites along the braided Noatak's deepest channels, far inland and where the river joins Kotzebue Sound. She served as windbreak and anchor for my tent.

In preparation of her grand maiden voyage, I inflated and rigged her in the yard of a friend who no longer is one. The only photo of us is a snapshot he took. Measurements don't do her justice. Length, width, weight, diameter of tubes . . . nothing but silly numbers. She's spacious enough for two. Bouncy. Rotund. Not curved fore and aft as is a true canoe. Runs bow first as well as stern first. On the boat's floor, wedged between larboard and starboard, I'd stowed the 50-gallon oil drum in which she'd been cached at the

headwaters; it became my bear-proof food-locker—an oil company's junk put to good use.

Rowing and craning your neck to see downstream was hard—but it was fourth gear compared to forward-strokes. A muskox parked rocklike midstream we easily missed, as well as grizzlies that reared up on the banks for a better look. One with cubs stalked me when I rested on shore. Pulling like hell, I made a clean getaway. Attracted by oar noises perhaps, a wolf shadowed me half a mile one afternoon.

I'd left this old boat with a pilot who dropped her off on a gravel bar; I'd hiked 600 miles across mountain spines and tundra to reach her. Dragging her from the Beaver's hold, he'd ripped the duffel bag. Half-starved when I unbarreled her after a "night" march, I dug into Cream of Wheat with blueberries before pumping her up, while summits glowed golden.

After that long walk to her, my shoulders had gotten a workout. I rowed my longest continuous stretch ever in her, past crumbling bluffs, lone fish camps, and leaning wood crosses, through pink, mirrored clouds and the dusk that passes for dawn that far north in August. The days ran together that way, all 60 of

them. The only forced break came when my chair strap broke, and I sprawled in the stern after one mighty backstroke.

Already camped one evening, I'd embarked at high water after dousing my fire, jacked up by a late cup of coffee, a brief lull in the headwinds, and proximity of the sea: journey's end. Another boat, a motorized, metal-hulled skiff, lay stove in near Noatak village, and anchor chain caught in a logjam. Aided by summer rains, the torrent had hijacked it. My craft turned sluggish and heavy with rain sloshing around in the bilge. I shouldered her up slippery cut banks and tied her to willows, afraid of the rising river.


Near the Chukchi Sea at last, gulls' unhinged screeches mixed with squeaks from my boat's oarlocks, taunting me. Hunger and lack of sleep drained me. By then the Conoco barrel had rusted inside, so all my gear was stained orange. One challenge remained—the seven-mile crossing from the delta to Kotzebue.

I should have waited for a calm but was eager to finish. Beyond the lee of the mainland the offshore wind worsened. The oars flexed in wave troughs; their blades grabbed air when we crested. I was in limbo, chained to a defective



A wolf watches floaters drift by on the Noatak River.

rowing machine. Town and the spit were not getting closer. In fact, my GPS showed we were fast drifting out to sea. I managed to flag down a Native fishing boat, and calloused hands helped us onto deck. We landed at Kotzebue's cobbled beach in 15 minutes tops. There we both basked, hauled-out seals, flaccid and spent. My trust in her never failed. Despite all of that, I never named her. I'd bought her for this voyage of a lifetime and used her just once.

But I might pull the old gal from storage, unroll, patch up, and inflate her, for one more adventure.. 

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