



OUT THERE

VOLCANIC WALKABOUT

A RUGGED HIKE ACROSS SKOOKUM
by Michael Engelhard

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SKOOKUM'S NORTHEASTERN FLANK, abutting the snow-veined, somber flatter, evokes Utah's canyon lands more than it does Alaska. Shouldering daypacks at the trailhead on the Nabesna Road—an unpaved 42-mile spur into Wrangell-St. Elias National Park—my wife and I tackle this 7,125-foot telluric fist, the western Wrangells' only volcano accessible by car.

Exquisitely ruined, dabbed with a Martian palette, it contrasts with the younger ice-capped glory of its neighbors Mounts Blackburn, Drum, and Sanford. Skookum repeatedly blew its lid between 3.5 and 2 million years ago, belching hot gas and ash clouds, tingeing vents around a collapsed caldera leaking magma. No walks for old men, the loop cutting five miles through Earth's guts and an overnight option bare the slipping of continental plates, molten upwellings at the planet's crustal seams.

Skookum has roots in the Wrangell Volcanic Field, a

2,000-square-mile arc linking the border and Glennallen. It thrust up a crop of North America's tallest peaks, including shield-shaped Mount Wrangell, among the world's largest active volcanoes, twice Skookum's height. The Ahtna call Mount Wrangell "the one who controls the weather." Its depths chamber warmth sometimes escaping in steam plumes.

Mount Churchill spewed ash much more recently in the field's eastern reaches,

Above: Taking a breather on the way up Theresa Dome.
Right: Boulder of basaltic chunks welded together, at the foot of Theresa Dome.

near McCarthy, smothering parts of the Upper Yukon basin. One inch can kill plants, which 1,400 years ago perhaps forced Gwich'in ancestors into northern Alaska and eastern Canada. The shocks echoed like Outback origin stories recited as "songlines." Athabaskans to the northeast recalled a giant wrecking a mountain and voices inside remarking on burn smells before a blaze consumed the alp and its indwellers. A second tale chronicled ground pirouetting, a landscape instantly altered.

Contemplating tectonic



fervor, my wife and I had to pry ourselves loose from the breakfast campfire. Ice clinked in our water jug; hoarfrost silvered the tents. We now chase the trail

through spruce bearded with lichen mint-green, through alders whose shed leaves my hiking pole spears. Windup-toy squirrels churr. Jay cackles alert the woods to our

presence. Somewhere a porcupine bawls disconcertingly like a lost bear cub.

Hopscotching back and forth across a rill claimed by a dipper curtsying, we climb past the tree line. Skookum's name, a ranger said, rubbed off a brook plunging from its brow swift and brawling each spring, snowmelt on steroids. In the Chinook trade jargon, the word, a moniker also for hardworking folks, means "strong," "brave," or "impressive."

The sun struggles to pierce gauze overcast. When it succeeds, hills appear: banded



chalk-white, buff, sulfur, dove, and charcoal ignite. A pass 1,900 feet above the trailhead separates Skookum's bulk and Theresa Dome. Swirls reminiscent of tie-dye fabric or marbled bookend papers mark that outlier's barren slope, which looms over us on our ascent. Frost-cracked basalt dragon-backs on the reverse slope. These graphite-gray dikes, resisting erosion better than the surrounding pink and caramel scree and compacted ash, are remnants of magma filling fissures in older formations. Lichens bright as safety vests spatter the dikes.

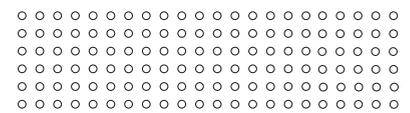
We follow the ridge past a pinnacle cluster to the dome's summit. Sips from the Nalgene bottle bring brain freeze. It's blustery, but my shadow shows. Variegated chevrons on Skookum's bottom two-thirds point at cliffs and the crown farther up. Rockfalls make me

Left: The trail-less valley leading back to the Nabesna Road. **Right:** Volcanic dike and the summit of Skookum.

glass for sheep—pellets at daybeds we pass mingle with hair and bones, braided into wolf scat. We lounge vis-à-vis the panorama. Motley country at long last coheres. The Nabesna Road, a potholed gravel dead end that even seasoned Alaskans admit never having traveled (it punctured two of our tires in May), squirms between the Mentasta Mountains and forest mantling the volcano's piedmont, where heavenly spotlights currently play. It leaps Jack Creek whose meanders swell the Nabesna, Tanana, and regal Yukon, all Bering Seabound. Up-valley, near Mile 2, it bridges the Slana, which feeds into the Copper River and Prince William Sound. To apply at the mine along the road, men during the Depression tramped 100 miles from the Richardson Highway. We, seeking beauty, a different relief, drove 300 to hike 10.

After lunch, descending on ball bearings, we meet another Fairbanks couple recreating in their virus-imposed bubble. We swap route details and

WE SURVEY THE RIOT OF COLORS, OF RICHES, DRINKING THEM AS CASTAWAYS WOULD SWEET WATER.



pleasantries body lengths apart.

The return leg to the road, a ravine on the far side of the pass, taxes knee joints. Rockhounds, however, would swoon at its marvels. Scoria sponges crowd brick-red cobbles seemingly baked in a kiln. Elephant skin coats one upright slab; iron-oxide ferns bloom across smaller, tan bits. Lava chunks sintered into boulders big as dumpsters. Frailty survives amid such brutes: fireweed flushed with the year's lateness.

We survey the riot of colors, of riches, drinking them as castaways would sweet water. They're a boon to draw on when, in months to come, I'll rebound from shoulder surgery while Fairbanks hunkers cold, unwalkable, dreary, starkly black and white, its residents dreaming of summer. 🍷

Michael Engelhard has trod volcanoes in Hawaii, Arizona, and Mexico parched, shivering, breathless, or altitude-sick. Interfaces of fire and ice or generation and destruction still excite him.