

### **Alaska Backcountry Warning and Encouragement**

If you are a young person or the parent of a young person who is considering hiking with us in Alaska, it is important that you read and understand the following expectations for this hike. I could understand if a parent, after reading the following pages, might be apprehensive about this hike, and think it is too extreme or dangerous. This is not the intent of these descriptions; rather I am outlining what it takes to be prepared to meet these challenges with appropriate gear and behavior. Alaska is a place where fabulous backcountry adventure abounds for those that are prepared and prudent. My goal is to show the participants how to enjoy the Alaskan outdoors safely, which requires hikers to be responsible and prepared to help themselves and others.

Remember that words like extreme, moderate, dangerous, safe, and radical are all judgment calls, whether you are talking about risk in hiking, mountaineering, or spiritual life. Education and preparation can change an otherwise dangerous situation into a pleasant one. Education and preparation allow a reasonable assessment of risk, while ignorance and lack of faith create unreasonable fear. This hike is an opportunity to grow in both skill and faith. I hope to prepare the participants for the outdoor experience, so Fr. Nathan can do so in life's more important matters.

### **My qualifications to lead you or your kid(s) in the Alaskan backcountry**

When I arrived in Alaska in 1984 I considered myself a skilled outdoorsman, and the sight of Alaska's wild beauty sent me into a frenzy of exploration. It didn't take long to learn that I was dealing with a different animal than I had ever dealt with before, and while my Guardian Angel worked overtime, I managed to survive the learning curve. Eventually I started guiding groups in the backcountry and later became an instructor for the University of Alaska's outdoor education program, where I taught winter survival, technical climbing, and mountaineering. While guiding I learned what it felt like to be responsible for the lives of my clients. I started asking myself "what if" at nearly every moment, trying to find the most prudent response to each situation. I now feel blessed with the opportunity to offer the fruits of 25 years of Alaskan backcountry experience to the Eagle Eye program. I love showing others this beautiful part of God's creation!

## **The Crow Pass Trail**

The Crow Pass trail is a beautiful 26 mile hike through the backcountry of Chugach State Park and Chugach National Forest. It starts near the town of Girdwood, going steeply for about 3 miles up to Crow Pass. This is an area of high alpine tundra with jagged peaks and glaciers and small alpine lakes. Once over the pass it drops moderately for about eight miles to the Eagle River near its headwaters at the Eagle glacier. Here the trail crosses the river (but there is no bridge!). The swift, icy stream crossing can be from knee to thigh deep and may be a challenging part of the hike. From the crossing the trail follows the river downstream for about 14 miles winding through mountains that rise 7000 feet right out of the river. The hike is moderately challenging and very beautiful with potential to see lots of wildlife. Although the trail is well used, it is not “groomed” and is still very much a wilderness experience.

The term “moderately challenging” is meant for someone in fairly good athletic condition with backcountry hiking experience. You may find it difficult or easy depending on your condition, experience, and preparation. I would highly recommend that you do some physical exercise to prepare yourself for a ten mile day over rough mountainous terrain wearing a 35 pound backpack, and give special attention to the recommendations in the following pages.

### **Weather**

August in South-central Alaska’s mountains can be scorching heat or subarctic hurricane, or something in between! It’s always best to prepare for a wide range of weather.

On a beautiful clear day we may see 80 degrees or so, which for some strange reason in Alaska feels HOT! On a cold day we may see 40 degrees or lower with rain, sleet, or snow coming down sideways in high winds. I’m hoping it will be 70 degrees with light winds and clear sky every day, but dreams like that turn to nightmares if you are wrong and ill prepared!

Even days that start beautiful and hot can often change in the afternoon. The warm air from the ocean only miles away gets pushed up into the high mountains, condenses, and forms rain and thunderstorms. Don’t plan on it, but better prepare for it.

The midnight sun will make it light nearly all night. There will be a short period of darkness around 1:00 to 3:00 AM. Because of this the nighttime temperature is cooler but usually doesn’t plummet. A small headlamp or flashlight may be handy but usually not necessary. You will cool off around camp in the evening so make sure you have some warm dry clothes for camp only. I’ll say more about this in the following pages.

### **Bugs**

If Alaska were truly paradise as it looks in photos we would have a population similar to California. The truth is, we have bugs. The mosquito is the Alaska state bird! The good

news is that Crow Pass trail is not prime mosquito country and they most likely will not be too much of a bother while hiking, however sitting around camp on a warm calm night could produce enough to bother folks. I recommend some form of mosquito repellent. Some folks swear by “skin friendly” products like “Skin So Soft”, fabric softener sheets, and Citronella. I’ve found these products smell nice but are only effective if there are practically no bugs around anyway. Products containing DEET are by far the most effective if the bugs are bad. A little DEET goes a long way and a 1 oz. bottle may last years. Make sure you or someone who likes you has some DEET! I really don’t expect the bugs to be too bad, but I’m bringing a little DEET!

### **Yellow Jackets**

In some summers, especially very dry ones, Alaska can have large populations of hornets called Yellow Jackets. Yellow Jackets build nests in the ground and when tread upon become extremely agitated. If you are allergic to bee stings please get a prescription for an epi-pen. Make sure to tell the group leaders about your allergy and where you keep your epi-pen.

### **Bears**

The Crow Pass trail is bear country from start to finish, but really there are no trails in Alaska which are not in bear country (including within Anchorage city limits). Although the chance of a confrontation with a bear is extremely small, this is a very real and dangerous hazard. There are both black bears and brown bears (grizzly bears) in this area. This is something to be cautious of, but not to worry about. With prayer, caution, and good bear country habits we should be fine. The black bears and brown bears are usually shy and seldom the camp robbers that are such a problem in the lower 48 states. They rarely even show interest in humans. They are not looking to attack you, but could do so if protecting a cub or an animal that they have killed. This situation is usually avoided with some common sense habits that we will discuss prior to the hike.

There is no record of large groups of people ever being attacked by a bear, so we are at a great advantage there. Making noise as you walk (especially in dense areas) lets the bear know you are coming which gives him time to get away without confrontation. Pepper spray may or may not deter a bear (it might blind you if the wind is in the wrong direction), and even large caliber bullets may not be effective in stopping a brown bear. You are welcome to bring your own form of bear deterrent if you feel compelled to do so. Feel free to ask me questions about this at any time. The best bear protection is to pray, stay in a group, make noise, and then enjoy the scenery!

## **Gear**

I will list the gear that you must have, but you are welcome to bring anything you are willing to carry. Please leave your electronic devices like radios, cell phones, ipods, etc. at home and give your senses a break from the electronic world. Cell phones and radios seldom receive a signal in the Chugach backcountry anyway.

Expect your pack to weigh about 35+ pounds. Remember that anything more than you need is a burden that will detract from enjoying the hiking. I hope this list does not compel people to go out and blow a pile of money on new gear. Much of my gear and clothing over the years has come from 2<sup>nd</sup> hand stores and garage sales etc. If you don't have some of this gear, and can't find it cheap, let us know and we may be able to come up with something.

### **Personal Gear**

Backpack  
Walking Stick or Ski Pole (optional)  
Sleeping Bag  
Sleeping pad  
Rain Gear  
Water Bottle  
Water Filter  
Plastic Bags  
Lighter  
Mosquito Repellent  
Sun Screen  
Tupperware Bowl  
Spoon  
Toiletries  
Personal First Aid  
Food (about 1 ½ to 2 lbs./day)  
Spare Clothes

### **Group Gear**

(To be organized before the hike)

Tent  
Tarp  
Stove  
Fuel  
Pots

### **Backpack**

You will need a pack sized at least 4000 cubic inches or larger. It can be internal frame or external frame, but the more comfortable it is (and lighter) the more you will enjoy the hiking. Everything inside or outside your pack should be packed in plastic bags. I have found **garbage compactor bags** work best because they are extremely durable. It is best to separate your gear into different bags such as clothes in one, sleeping bag in another, food in another. This keeps your pack organized and you won't have to dig through everything you own in a rainstorm while trying to find a pair of socks. Some type of rain cover over the outside of your pack is also important.

### **Walking Stick**

Many people like to hike with a walking stick. It can be very useful on rough terrain and helps to keep balance with a large backpack on. A ski pole makes a great walking stick.

### **Sleeping Bag**

Your bag should be rated down to 40 degrees or so (a lower temperature rating is fine). It can be synthetic or down-filled. Do not bring a bag lined with cotton. Hopefully your bag will compress enough so there is room for something else in your pack. Synthetic bags are warmer when wet but tend to be bulky. Down bags are worthless when wet, but are light and compressible. Make sure to pack your sleeping bag in a stuff sack and then in a sturdy plastic bag.

### **Foam Pad / Therma-rest**

I highly recommend some type of foam pad or Therma-rest to sleep on. It is very likely we will be sleeping on gravel bars on the Eagle River. Maybe you won't need one, but the older I get the harder and colder that ground gets. I'll have a pad!

### **Water Filter**

Alaskan water is generally not safe to drink without some form of purification. *Giardia lamblia* is a common waterborne cyst in Alaska and becoming infected with it will definitely not make you a happy camper. The water can be purified by boiling (just bring it to a boil), chemicals, or filtering. Water we cook with is boiled so it does not need to be treated before use. Giardia is resistant to chemicals, especially at cold temperatures, which means you must add chemicals and then wait 1/2 hour or more before drinking. The chemicals add a flavor that most folks don't care for. The best method is filtering through a backpacking filter pump. Water will be plentiful along most of the trail so we can stop and filter a quart or two when you need it. This lets you carry less water and stay more hydrated. It would be great if each person had a filter, but we will make do with less if we must. **If you have a filter please tell us ahead of time.**

### **Bowl and Spoon**

The meals are prepared and only require adding hot water and waiting a few minutes. This process works best in a 1 quart Tupperware (round and deep) with a lid. Please bring your own **Tupperware with lid**, a **spoon**, and a **mug** for hot drinks.

### **Water Bottle**

Bring your own wide mouth quart water bottle (or two) and keep it handy. The wide mouth makes it much easier to fill. Drink lots!!

### **Lighter**

A lighter is a survival tool, and it's useful around camp. I usually tape one to a string and hang it around my neck.

### **Rain Gear**

This is an extremely important piece of equipment. Rain pants are highly recommended. A rain coat or poncho is a must. A hood or rain hat is also a must. Lightweight rain gear is fine, but some is so thin that it rips if it so much as touches a piece of brush. Gortex is extremely expensive and my experience is that it tends to leak. Plan to keep your rain gear packed in a place where you can get it out quickly without exposing everything in your pack to a sudden rain.

### **Food**

As a way to simplify and streamline the food preparation time we will pack meals for everyone for the trip. If you have special foods, or drinks such as gourmet coffee, you would like to bring, that would be fine. You should consider any special arrangements for preparing or cooking these items. **If you have food allergies please let us know well ahead of time.** The meals will be simple, nutritious, filling and extremely easy to cook. It will all be purchased and packaged ahead of time.

### **Clothing**

The following list of clothes is a minimum and a must (unless you have an equivalent variation). This list takes into account weather variations and conditions we might encounter. If the weather is fantastic you will have too much. If the weather is really bad you may wish you had a little more. Try not to spend a bunch of money on any of the items for this trip. If you don't have some of this check the thrift stores, garage sales, borrow it, or let us know and we may be able to come up with it.

One item I would like to warn about is cotton. **Cotton is an extremely poor fabric for backcountry clothing.** When it gets wet, it stays wet. Wet in Alaska means cold and cold is bad. Hypothermia is a very real danger even in mid-summer. **Please avoid cotton clothing such as jeans, sweat pants, and sweatshirts.** Fabrics such as polar fleece, polypropylene, and nylon stay warm when wet and dry quickly. Wool also is warm when wet but does not usually dry as quickly.

### **Hiking Clothing List**

Sun Hat  
Light Polypropylene Underwear Top  
Light Polypropylene underwear Bottoms  
Gym Shorts  
Wind Pants  
Polar Fleece Jacket  
Wind Jacket  
Hiking Boots  
Hiking Socks (four pair)  
Or  
Neoprene Socks (**Recommended**)  
River Shoes  
Rain Gear

### **Camp Clothing List**

Warm Hat  
Shirt  
Sweater or Down Vest  
Pants  
Socks  
Shoes

### **Feet**

It is very important to take care of your feet out there. Wear comfortable hiking boots that are **well broken in** and have good socks to avoid blisters. We had many hikers with blisters one year but with precautions we can avoid this painful experience.

The Crow Pass trail (and most Alaskan trails) has many areas that are wet and muddy even high in the mountains. Expect to get your feet wet while you hike. It is simply an unavoidable fact. This makes taking care of your feet more challenging and all the more important. Please consider the following:

I have a suggestion for socks that I have found to work extremely well. Wear a light nylon or silk sock inside of a pair of light neoprene socks. These can be found in outdoor gear stores and catalogs. Neoprene socks cushion your feet so blisters are unlikely. I have never seen a blister from someone wearing neoprene socks. They do not absorb water, so they dry quickly in camp and are ready for the next day. They keep your feet warm when wet so even after a long day of walking with wet feet, your feet will not feel cold and clammy when you reach camp. Once in camp you whip them off and pull on some dry socks and life is good! It's much easier to slip into a moist neoprene sock in the morning than yesterday's sloppy wet cotton sock, or to put on a new dry sock and slide it into yesterday's sloppy wet boot. Yuck! This small item could have a huge effect on your enjoyment of the hike. Give it a try; I think you will like neoprene socks!

No matter what kind of socks or footwear you bring it is important that you have warm dry feet each night. If your feet are wet and cold all day and all night it is not only miserable but dangerous. Trench foot is a possibility and is a serious injury. Bring dry socks and shoes for camp.

### **River Shoes**

We will have to ford the Eagle River on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the hike. The water will be knee to thigh deep, ice cold (fresh out of the Eagle glacier), fast flowing, with a rocky bottom. You may want to bring a special pair of shoes or “water walkers” for this crossing. I do not suggest bare foot crossing. The water is so cold your feet will go numb and then it is easy to injure your feet on the rocks. If you choose the neoprene socks method above, you may just wade with your hiking boots and forgo bringing special wading shoes.

### **Bottoms**

I'll suggest my old standby, but whatever you wear, **do not wear jeans or sweat pants to hike in.**

I wear a pair of polypropylene long johns with a pair of nylon shorts over the top. If the weather gets hot I wear just the shorts. If the weather gets windy and cool I pull a pair of nylon wind pants over the top of it all. Gaitors (ankle and calf covers) are nice. They keep stuff out of your boots and keep your ankles and pants from getting muddy. Make sure to bring something dry to put on in camp.

### **Tops**

As with bottoms listed above, layers of clothing is the best and most versatile way to go. If it is real warm you may want to wear a t-shirt, but remember cotton is miserable if it gets wet. A polypropylene top is best for hiking in inclement weather. Wear a polar fleece jacket if it gets cold, and a light wind jacket if it is cold and windy. Have a special warm dry shirt and sweater and maybe a down vest or light down coat in your pack for sitting around camp.

### **Camp Clothes**

Dry camp clothes are not just so you feel good in camp. This extra set of clothes is a survival / safety item. In an emergency such as falling into water or getting caught in an unexpected downpour, it will be extremely important to be able to get dry. It might even be something you could provide for someone else, either in your group or some unfortunate person you might meet on the trail.

## **Group Gear**

### **Tents**

We will have one tent for every two to four people. How can I say this without sounding like a gear snob... cheap tents from Walmart are great for beautiful summer nights with no wind, and we might have weather like that – but we might not. I hope we can come up with good quality backpacking tents. If the quality of your tent is questionable try setting it up in the yard and turn the lawn sprinkler on it for about 6 to 8 hours, then check for leaks.

### **Tarps**

As a group we will have at least 2 tarp shelters for cooking and gathering in case of poor weather. I should have enough tarps for the group.

### **Backpack Stoves**

Most of our cooking will be done on backpacking stoves. MSR stoves work the best. We will need one stove for every five people or so. If you have a MSR Wisperlite or equivalent please let us know so we can organize the number of stoves needed. Stove fuel will be organized in Anchorage. Cook pots are accounted for already.

### **General**

If you have good quality group gear such as tents, stoves, fuel bottles or water filters that you wouldn't mind sharing, it would be very helpful if you would let us know well before the hike. Tents can be rented from REI in Anchorage but advanced notice is usually needed. We do all we can to keep costs low and make this as affordable as possible so anything individuals might be able to add to the group is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions about what is listed above, or any other concerns, please feel free to email me at [beavandmichele@gci.net](mailto:beavandmichele@gci.net). I look forward to seeing you all!

God bless!

Beav