

Alaska

Go prepared and you will find that touring our 49th state can be fun, adventurous and safe

by DON DOWNIE
AOPA 189441

The March PILOT carried Don Downie's report on "Flying To Alaska." This month's article continues that trip.

Alaska is so big, so varied, and flying is such an integral part of the life-style of the whole state, that a pilot can feel right at home.

The easy route for a lightplane flight to Alaska begins with the Alcan Highway. Usually, your first Alaskan landing will be at Northway, where you clear U.S. Customs, fuel up, obtain a flight briefing, eat and perhaps spend the night. The airport and village have a showplace FAA FSS, usually with current charts and briefing for all of Alaska.

Flights up the shorter coastal route from Vancouver, B.C., to Juneau are not recommended for single-engine landplanes, either by former FAA Alaskan Regional Director Lyle Brown or Ken Eichner, President of Temsco Helicopters, Ketchikan.

Eichner spoke to me about flying the west coast of Alaska. "Even in the summer months there's really no reason to carry life jackets with those water temperatures. You'll last less than 15 minutes in the water—even if you land successfully. We continue to have an increasing number of wheel-plane traffic, but we lose a good many airplanes . . . In this far north country, I'd recommend an ADF where there are more low frequency aids. An

Omni is okay primarily for finding the airport and making a landing."

We began our survey flight of Alaska at Northway after clearing Customs from Whitehorse in the Yukon. Floyd Miller (AOPA 81061), the fixed-base operator at Northway, doubles as a bush pilot—flying mail, supplies and jet fuel to a number of mineral exploration camps in the area. He was on his way to Anchorage, so we followed him with our 180-hp 1952 Cessna 170B, keeping in radio contact with his Cessna 206 for the first half of the trip. Our route was direct, through Suslota Pass to Gulkana and then along the Glenn Highway and Copper Canyon to Palmer and Anchorage.

We had our first glimpse of the glaciers of the Chugach Mountains west of Gulkana en route to Anchorage. On our return, we followed the highway up the Copper River almost to Tok Junction before heading east to Northway. This scenic route is only slightly longer and provides the friendly companionship of the highway.

You can't get from the Canada/Alaska border without crossing the Alaskan pipeline. We crossed it just two miles from the Gulkana Airport on our Northway-to-Anchorage flight. At first glance, the pipeline doesn't seem destructive to the vast but delicate ecology of Alaska.

Of the eight airports developed for construction of the Alaska pipeline, only three remain in operation: Five

Mile, Prospect Creek and Galbraith Lake. These are operated by Alyeska Pipeline Co. as private airports for their own use. No services are available at these strips and fuel is available only at Bettles, just south of the Brooks Range, and far north at Deadhorse on Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Ocean. Limited services at all these stops are very expensive since the areas are not set up for tourists. Everyone with whom we talked in the summer of 1978 recommended against flying north along the pipeline.

Anchorage

A brand new Anchorage VFR Terminal Area Chart, which became available after this flight was made, includes excellent, large-scale topography and shows reporting points for the Anchorage area. The back of the chart lists both approach control frequencies and low-altitude IFR traffic routing. Make this chart a "must" portion of your homework before visiting Anchorage.

Anchorage is busy, yes; but we found it far less complex and crowded than Southern California, the San Francisco area or Seattle. One minor problem persisted during a week of airport hopping in the area: FAA tower operators at Merrill Field handle enough local traffic so that the occasional transient is somewhat of a rarity, and it takes about three calls spelling out "I'm a

continued

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR



Alaska

stranger here," before they'll stop requesting that you report over "the bridge," "Muldoon Road" or "Hart Tower."

What you see and do in the Anchorage area depends on your inclinations, pocketbook, time available and the weather. Merrill Field is "right downtown," with motels and cafes either on the airport or across the street. Transient parking may be a problem because this airport is jammed.

If you're planning to rent a car while in Anchorage, the "out-of-town" International Airport presents no problems for light aircraft other than those normally associated with air carrier traffic in the pattern.

Alaska is the "flyingest" of all 50 states. With a population of just over 300,000, one out of every 125 Alaskans owns an airplane, while more than 6,300 are licensed pilots. Cash a check there and the bank teller will prefer your pilot's license to an out-of-state driver's ID.

Alaskan pilots, like others on many frontiers, are opinionated about most everything—including flying. When you talk with the friendly FBO or the briefer at the Flight Service Station desk, expect opinionated answers. Then, balance the advice against your

experience and the capabilities of your airplane—just as you would in the Lower 48.

Listen to Anchorage radio stations and you *know* that this is a flying community. Learn-to-fly ads and ads for charter services for hunters and fishermen are frequent. KJAR (59) even picks up the FAA FSS weather tape. Unfortunately, many of the tapes are cut to put four minutes of weather into a two-minute slot, and the result is not very intelligible.

When you pick up a copy of the *Anchorage Times*, you'll find 2½ columns of classified ads on aviation services, aircraft and accessories. Within the next two years 150 new tiedowns are planned for International Airport. There's a three-year waiting list for seaplane spaces at Lakes Hood and Spenard, which adjoin International, and some incredibly small lakes near Anchorage are ringed solidly with floatplanes.

On one side trip we toured the Anchorage area and shot a couple of landings at the smooth, 3,000-foot gravel strip at Portage within sight of the blue-white Portage Glacier. The airstrip, now managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), badly needed a couple of windsocks at the

time of our visit. Even a slightly downwind landing on a gravel strip tends to louse up your planning.

We continued on south to Seward, then northwestward to Soldotna and Kenai. With so much spectacular scenery, it's impossible to pick a favorite. However, the flight from Seward up the low-altitude route and across Skilak Lake is spectacular and lonesome. Flying the beach at low tide, from Kenai northeastward back toward Anchorage reveals huge, scattered boulders. Some of these beach areas are used for landing. We saw a couple of planes there, but local pilots recommend this only for aircraft with large tires. It's a long walk home.

We joined Dr. Robert H. Sutherlin (AOPA 119374) to try a few circuits and splashes with his newly renovated Piper PA-14 on floats. Lake Hood tower handled a brisk traffic on a drizzly midday and we marveled at the wall-to-wall seaplanes based there. Flying off the water there is an experience long to be remembered.

Our other water trip was to attend the Grumman Widgeon fly-in at Big Lake, 25 miles north of Anchorage. We flew in with George and Ruby Pappas (AOPA 117279) in their beautifully restored Widgeon. Nine vintage





Grumman amphibians gathered for the splashdown.

Mt. McKinley

From Anchorage to McKinley Park Airport we headed north for Windy Pass. We picked up the Alaska Highway at Willow, which is near Wasilla, the site of Alaska's new state capitol, now in the planning stage and scheduled for full operation in 1994. Then it's a comfortable trip following the highway and railroad.

The 3,000-foot gravel strip of McKinley Park has canyons on both ends that can produce strong downdrafts. The FAA cautions that "people and moose may be on the runway," and recommends that no takeoffs or landings be made over the Riley River Canyon at the south end of the flight strip. Aircraft parking is near the railroad depot with the Park Hotel and Train Motel just across the Denali Highway.

Adjoining the airport at McKinley Park is the Station Hotel, with modern rooms and economy railcar accommodations. Reservations are a must during the summer season. A 130-mile guided motor-coach tour through the national park departs daily in the summer at 6 a.m. and 3 p.m.

Highway, railroad, river and ADF combine to make the flight on to Fairbanks a simple navigation problem.

However, some aircraft continue to fly into the wrong canyon in marginal weather. A contributing factor, in our opinion, is the failure to chart all substantial landing strips, whether usable or not, on sectionals. A large, paved runway at the south end of Windy Pass—X'd out but with a hangar and two planes on the ground when we passed—was not charted, while a 1,200-foot dirt strip at Eva Creek north of the pass was. It is a simple matter for a visitor to think he has made a navigation error when airports, closed to the public or not, are not shown. Inconsistent charting of airstrips was also found in other parts of Alaska.

This was our time to sample some of the back country. Lake Minchumina, a popular pike-fishing area, former FAA station and now a BLM fire-fighting tanker base in the summer, was recommended. It's 150 miles southwest of Fairbanks. There is an NDB with a single-channel VHF line (that frequently doesn't work) on the airport, and the wreckage of a WW-II C-47 that had attempted a takeoff with controls locked. There are two separate runways, which were once linked together. A camping area is at the tip of Runway 29. We put up our tent and with a sporadic rain dripping off the Cessna's high wing, seemed to be at the end of the earth.

That illusion was shattered early

the next morning when the first of four planeloads of pike fishermen came in for the day. One group from the Satellite Communications Base at Clear even brought a rubber boat and small outboard for a better chance at the fish. Clear is a key link in the DOD early warning net north of Mt. McKinley, shown on the charts with the notation: "CAUTION. Possible damage and/or interference to airborne radio due to high-level radio energy vicinity R-2206."

It was interesting to note that even residents of small Alaskan communities find the need to get away from it all and fish in isolated lakes and streams. Both Anchorage and Fairbanks radio stations carry many advertisements for charter operations that fly groups to hunting and fishing sites. But at isolated airports, remember the wilderness credo: "Take nothing but pictures; leave nothing but footprints."

Fairbanks

The Fairbanks area differs in many ways from Anchorage. During most summer months, the weather is frequently much warmer and drier than in the south, but August is its wettest month. The FSS seems to take a more aggressive approach in soliciting in-flight PIREPS and has a more casual

continued





Alaska

manner of handling traffic. Perhaps Anchorage facilities are inundated with international jets, while the northern specialists have more time to work air taxis and general aviation.

You have a choice of three airports at Fairbanks. There are good general aviation facilities next to the FSS on the east side of the International Airport. As at Anchorage International, there's a large floatplane base right at the air carrier terminal. Line service is good, particularly from Matt Johnson and his Fairbanks Ramp Service; 100 octane averaged 99¢ per gallon.

Check your sectional charts for detailed inserts of Anchorage and Fairbanks. Landing at Fairbanks from the south, you'll find a ski strip about 3,000 feet long crossed by a taxiway and Runway 1R. The two are not connected, and taxiing there can be a little tricky for first-timers. Don't be bashful about asking for directions. The FSS is in the midst of the FBO's in the general aviation section, so weather and airport briefings are readily available. Dual flight time in a Cessna 150 in Fairbanks was listed at \$42.

In Fairbanks, motel rates vary widely, but are generally above the Alaskan average. Singles run from \$35 to \$60, doubles \$40 to \$65. Reservations are a must during summer months. Meals in restaurants are expensive, but you can take a bucket of fried chicken and a six-pack to your motel room and save a small bundle.

Many first-time visitors to Alaska want to fly north of the Arctic Circle. The easiest way is to fly 150 miles out of Fairbanks on the 003° radial across the rolling White Mountains to intersect the Yukon River at Fort Yukon.

Fairbanks FSS has a good remote radio station at Fort Yukon complete with VOR and ADF, so you can maintain almost constant communication at 8,000 feet along the route.

Everything you purchase in Fort Yukon comes in either by air or by barges, which operate during a short, four-month season when the river is not frozen. Prices are high, but the people are friendly.

There are a number of hot spring resorts in central Alaska. One of the best known is Circle Hot Springs, across the White Mountains northeast of Fairbanks. There's the old 22-room Arctic Circle Hot Springs Hotel, a restaurant and a popular bar. It is billed as the "Farthest North Resort Area in Alaska." Its key attraction is the huge, covered swimming pool fed by 455 gallons per minute of 139°F water. An experimental hydroponic garden is being developed. Some partially furnished cabins are available for visitors with sleeping bags, and camping out is permitted near the 4,050-foot airport—although the nearby outhouse is really "out," with no walls. An airport-oriented subdivision is in progress.

Circle Hot Springs has operated commercially since 1914. The wooden hotel was built in 1930. Lon and Sandy Parish run this operation. Reservations are taken by the Fairbanks Travelers' Service, since there's no direct telephone line to the resort.

One Alaskan state trooper, "Skip" Chevelier, has a beat that covers 10 native villages and 30,000 square miles, including Circle Hot Springs. He relies on bush pilots to take him on his rounds, and is learning to fly.

At Eagle, farther south upstream on

the Yukon River, there is a choice of two airports. The recommended 3,500-foot state gravel airport is a mile east of town while an 1,800-foot county grass strip, located right in town (population 105) is not recommended by the FAA for transient aircraft. The grass is slick when wet and there's both a bump and trees on the approach end of Runway 6. It was formerly the military parade ground. Aviation gas is available at the general store. The flight from Eagle up the Yukon (south) is picturesque but, if you're going far enough to cross the border back into Canada, you will need to notify Canadian Customs at Dawson City.

Our one unscheduled overnight stop in almost three weeks of travel in the far north was at Talkeetna. We departed Fairbanks southward after dinner, plowed along in headwinds and moderate turbulence through Windy Pass near Mt. McKinley. We watched our groundspeed drop as we headed down the plains toward Anchorage where fog off Cook Inlet was making VFR intermittent.

We passed Talkeetna with a safe fuel reserve and went another 35 miles where clouds and wet trees met. We made that classic 180° turn. Circling a small flight strip, Rustic Wilderness, we could find no signs of current habitation, so we flew another 20 minutes in heavy rain back to Talkeetna.

Another decision: The downtown Village flight strip (1,200 feet long) was crowded with holiday pilots as we circled, and some sort of cookout was in progress. Open fires and parked airplanes glistened in the rain, and ex-

continued

panding puddles of indeterminate depth showed on the runway. We opted for the wide, 4,000-foot lighted FAA strip nearby and a short ride into town. The Talkeetna Motel was one of three in town and furnished welcome courtesy transportation.

By the next evening we were safely back in Anchorage. A 4th of July fireworks display began at 11:30 p.m. and it still wasn't quite dark.

Alaska Flying Tips

There are no EFAS (Flight Watch) weather reports in Alaska. PIREPS are spotty. We found that FAA facilities in the Anchorage area tend to ignore PIREPS as much as possible, concentrating on flight plans and position reporting. North of Mt. McKinley and the Alaska Range, FAA units were actively soliciting in-flight weather information.

Some local charter pilots are reported by FAA staffers to be reluctant to advise FSS when nearby passes are open. It seems that their competition will use this information to expedite their own flights. In any event, there's nothing to keep you from making your own PIREPS. We did.

J.S. "Pat" Patterson, a WW II veteran who has logged more than 24,000 hours, commented that, "North of 60°N, magnetic compasses are practically useless." In most of Alaska, your true heading will be at least 30 degrees greater than your magnetic heading, with strong, locally induced errors. The VOR compass roses on charts show corrected magnetic headings, as do runways. A 270° magnetic compass heading does not mean that you are headed directly west, and most light-plane compasses become less and less useful the farther north you travel. Here's where a good ADF is almost a must. If you don't have one, take a careful tail bearing on the VOR near your departure airport and plan pilotage from there until within close range on your destination VOR (if any).

Local pilots and all the officials with whom we talked cautioned against landing on some of the smaller bush strips and beaches, even though there might be other aircraft on the ground. A number of the Indian villages, such as Tyonic, 20 minutes from Anchorage, do not welcome visitors. Visiting pilots frequently catch the Indian fish, litter the area, provide prohibited alcohol and generally interfere with the regular way of life of the natives. Also, considerable vandalism to aircraft has been reported. Approach any small airstrip with a briefing and a bit of caution.

Each season, a number of visitors and local Alaskan pilots break up airplanes when they try to make like a bush pilot, usually with overloaded aircraft and/or a lack of training and



Charting the Way

Since part of the enjoyment of every flying trip is in poring over maps, reading someone else's experiences, picking up travel brochures and generally absorbing as much as possible about the destination, a first trip to Alaska can be savored before, during and after the flight.

AOPA's Chart Department can provide a complete package of current Alaska maps, supplements, IFR and en route coverage.

If you write the Aviation Section of the State of Alaska for information, be sure to include your type of aircraft, the season of the year of your intended visit, your flying experience, whether or not you are bringing your family, and whether or not you plan to camp. Useful data can then be obtained from Jim Moody (AOPA 204653), special assistant to the commissioner, who was born in Alaska, grew up in Fairbanks, and has flown the same Cessna 170 for 19 years. The address is Pouch 6900, Anchorage, Alaska 99502.

The *Milepost* is a 500-page travel guide that covers British Columbia, Alberta and the Yukon Territory in Canada, and includes details about

all parts of Alaska that are available by car. The publisher plans a special aviation section in the 1979 issue, "because even slower aircraft go too fast for the auto section." Motels and restaurants that advertise in the book get preferential treatment, but it's still an excellent data bank. Cost of this hefty publication, now in its 31st edition, is \$5.95 plus 75¢ for fourth class or \$2.00 for first-class postage and handling. Order from Box 4-EEE, Anchorage, Alaska 99509.

As a direct result of our AOPA survey flight, pilots planning an Alaskan flight are now able to obtain full aviation brochure material and FAA Alaskan Region flight information in a consolidated package by writing Alaska Division of Tourism, Pouch E, Juneau, Alaska 99811. Current NOAA publications, including the Alaskan IFR Terminal supplement, "Alaskan Airport Supplement," come directly from NOAA's Distribution Division, C44, Riverdale, Md. 20840.

All in all, you may end up with 20 pounds of maps, supplements and brochures, and local information sheets. Remember your weight and balance.

Necessary Equipment

Alaska state law requires at least the following minimum items for summer flying:

- Food for each occupant sufficient to sustain life for two weeks
- One axe or hatchet
- One first-aid kit
- One pistol, revolver, shotgun or rifle and suitable ammunition
- One small fish net and an assortment of tackle, such as hooks, flies, lines, and sinkers
- One knife
- Two small boxes of matches
- One mosquito headnet for each occupant
- Two small signaling devices such as colored smoke bombs, railroad fuses, or Very pistol shells, in sealed metal containers.

The following additional (minimum) items are required from October 15 to April 1:

- One pair of snowshoes
 - One sleeping bag
 - One wool blanket for each occupant over four years of age
- Most Alaska-based planes carry a permanent survival package, usually aft of the baggage compartment.
- Carry an airplane tiedown kit as part of your travel package as strong winds frequently occur, and many smaller airports do not have tie-downs. Include three pieces of stout nylon rope and either canvas bags and a shovel, or six aluminum extrusions about three feet long that can be pounded into the ground (two at each tiedown point).

experience necessary to handle the very short, rough open spots that pass for bush airports in this area.

While you can fly all over Alaska and touch down on nothing but pavement, it would be good insurance to brush up on short-field and soft-field takeoffs and landings. Unless you plan a landing part way up Mt. McKinley (don't), density altitude should not be a problem, but a speaking knowledge of mountain-flying wind and turbulence patterns will certainly help. Try to do this pre-trip training with an instructor, in the airplane you'll take northwest, and at the weight you'll be flying it.

Unless you have time to spare, thermal underwear and a true enjoyment of below-freezing conditions, we'd recommend your first trip to Alaska be in midsummer months when there is warmer weather, more sunshine and, of course, more tourists. But summer also brings on the mosquito season—and this is a constant problem.

Mosquitos and gnats swarm in hordes and can cause panic even in the calmest pilot. Though we did not carry them, headnets are recommended. An ever-present squeeze bottle of mosquito repellent, to keep those little devils from ruining your trip, is a number one priority.

In Central City, just south of the Arctic Circle near Circle Hot Springs, we joined an open-air, bear-and-boar barbecue prepared by the "Over the Hill Gang" held each 4th of July weekend. Even heavy smoke, mosquito repellent and profanity didn't dissuade the "no-see-ums"—in our experience similar to chiggers, whose itch remains for at least a week. After a bout with the "no-see-ums," local pilots recommend a good meat tenderizer paste to make living and flying tolerable. There is a price to pay for the scenic wonders of Alaska.

There are so many fun, challenging and beautiful destinations in Alaska that you could fly there for several summers without finding them all.

As you run short of time and money, the nose of your aircraft will reluctantly point back toward home. On your return, rugged scenery will seem less awesome than it did a few days before. Areas with no communications will seem less lonesome. If you backtrack, through Northway or Dawson City, Whitehorse and Watson Lake, airports and facilities are now on a first-name basis. And no matter your route home, it's going to be almost impossible to top the scenery you've just viewed.

To Alaska by lightplane continues to be a great trip. If you haven't made it, you certainly should. If you've been there before, you'll probably go back again and again—as we have and will. □

E
T
C
t
C
a
y
C
t
C