

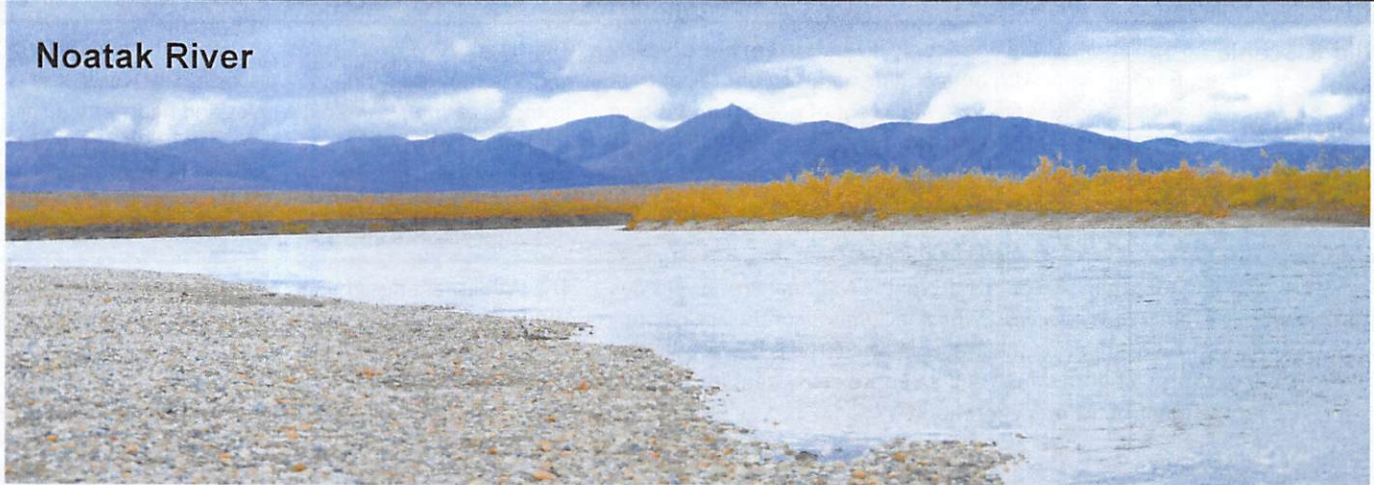
Noatak

National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior

Noatak National Preserve



Noatak River



The Noatak River runs 425 miles from headwaters to mouth, 280 miles of which are in the Noatak National Preserve. Countless tributaries draw water down from the Brooks Range to the Noatak River. For locals, the Noatak River means a place for hunting and gathering and represents a rich history of the Iñupiat. For visitors, recreation opportunities for floating and backpacking abound.

Headwaters

The headwaters of the Noatak River are on the north side of Mount Igikpak, located in the Gates of the Arctic National Park. At 8,276ft, Igikpak is the highest peak in Gates of the Arctic National Park and the Northwest Arctic region. The peak is an attraction for seasoned mountaineers,

as it is a technical climb ringed with glaciers.

The rugged walls of the Brooks Range enclose the Noatak River at its headwaters. In this stretch, the river is up to 30 feet wide and may be waist deep.

Caribou Migration

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd traditionally migrates through the Noatak River valley twice each year. In the late spring, the caribou travel north across the valley to their summer calving and aggregation grounds on the Arctic Slope. In the fall, the caribou travel south to the winter feeding grounds in the Kobuk and Selawik River valleys and surrounding areas.

Caribou populations fluctuate from generation to generation. Folks in the region remember the 1970s when the herd numbered just 75,000. Then in 2003, the herd was almost half a million caribou strong! Today, the caribou population is on a steady decline, numbering 164,000 in 2022. It is important to protect and respect caribou and the tradition of caribou hunting in the region.

However, this migration has been significantly disrupted in recent years. It is not entirely clear why, though Western science shows that climate change and warmer temperatures are much to blame. Traditional Iñupiaq science teaches that interrupting the lead caribou on their migration will prevent the rest of the herd from following.

Subsistence hunting by federally-qualified users for caribou and other animals is allowed in all park units in the region. Sport hunting is allowed only in the Noatak National Preserve.

Sport hunters should purchase a hunting license, review regulations and apply for permits if they wish to hunt while visiting the Preserve.

Fish

Fishing opportunities abound on the Noatak River: grayling, pike, Dolly Varden, and salmon all live here. The vast majority of salmon are chum, but some streams will be flush with pink salmon, and the occasional red, silver, or king may be found. Dolly Varden enter the river in July and can be caught through September.

While visitors prefer a fishing pole, local people may have nets set along the river to catch salmon and pike in the summer and fall.

Review regulations and get a fishing license if you plan to fish while visiting the Preserve.

Tributaries of the Noatak River

The Noatak River is fed by over 55 tributaries. The Kelly River, Nimiuktuk River, and the Aniuk River are major tributaries that drain the DeLong Mountains to the north. The Cutler River, Aklumayuak Creek, and Nakolik River bring water from the Baird Mountains to the south.

These smaller rivers run through impressive mountain valleys and present opportunities for exploring the far reaches of the Preserve on foot or by raft.

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Wild & Scenic River Designation

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System preserves free-flowing rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values for the enjoyment of present and future generations. The Noatak River is designated Wild from its headwaters to the mouth of the Kelly River, a 330-mile stretch.

The Noatak River represents a largely intact ecosystem within a mountain-ringed river basin. The watershed is home to caribou, muskox, wolves and bears as well as migratory birds, and many species of fish. It also holds the history and cultural values of the Iñupiat. All of these aspects make the Noatak River an intensely rich and beautiful place to visit.

Wilderness Designation

More than two-thirds of Noatak National Preserve is designated Wilderness, which includes all of the area along the river within the Preserve. Wilderness is preserved to protect flora, fauna and an entire ecosystem for the enjoyment of future generations.

The Wilderness designation also comes with guidelines. When visiting the Preserve, it is important to practice Leave No Trace principles.

While the visitor's instinct may be to think of this area as untouched by humans, Iñupiat have been calling this land home for thousands of years. Today, locals spend significant time on the land that is now called a park.

Floating

Most floaters will put in between Lucky Six Creek and Pingo Lake. The Noatak River is mostly class I to II water, making for an easy float in most places. At the headwaters located in Gates of the Arctic National Park there are a few places that contain whitewater approaching class II+. This depends on the time of year and amount of rain.

Some people prefer a short float through the portion of the river enclosed by mountains and will get picked up near Lake Matcharak. Beginning just above the Lake the current dies down. Floaters will need to paddle continuously, especially if there is a west wind pushing them back upriver.

Longer trips continue into the Noatak National Preserve. There are many confluences with smaller rivers as the Noatak grows wider, deeper, and braided. The Grand Canyon of the Noatak River is located about 130 miles downriver from Lake Matcharak and is an attraction along the way.

The Preserve boundary ends a few miles upriver from the Native Village of Noatak. Some floaters will stop in Noatak and plan to fly back to Kotzebue on a commercial flight.

Still others will keep floating past the village. Downriver from the village is an especially braided section of river. About 25 miles above the mouth of the Noatak, the Lower Noatak Canyon rises up.

The Noatak River empties into Kotzebue Sound. Though the crossing from the mouth to the Native Village of Kotzebue is just about 10 miles, it can be treacherous with high winds, and rafts risk getting swept out towards the Chukchi Sea.

If floaters plan to cross Kotzebue Sound, they should have contingency plans. Camping safely inside the mouth of the river for one or several nights until conditions improve is a good idea. Travelers may want to research a boat charter service in advance to call if conditions do not improve or if supplies are low.

Floaters will see cabins along the river in the Preserve and below the village of Noatak. Many families own allotments and have built cabins for subsistence hunting, fishing and berry picking. Respect these lands just as you would respect privately owned land anywhere and do not camp on or walk across these lands without expressed permission.

Remember, drop-offs and pick-ups along the Noatak River are almost always by small plane. Gravel bars are the primary landing strip and not every gravel bar is safe for landing. High water can quickly cover gravel bars. Plan to communicate with your pilot in advance and mark your chosen landing strip with a GPS device.

Canyons on the Noatak River

The Grand Canyon of the Noatak lies within the Preserve. Here, the river runs in a single channel, unlike the braids above and below the Canyon. The walls of the canyon rise hundreds of feet on each side for a 65-mile stretch. This area can be a more technical float as areas to rest are harder to come by.

The Lower Noatak Canyon is outside of the Preserve, just a few miles from the mouth of the river. Here the canyon walls are hundreds of feet high and the river is 60 feet deep in some places. This canyon is just seven miles long and an easy float.