

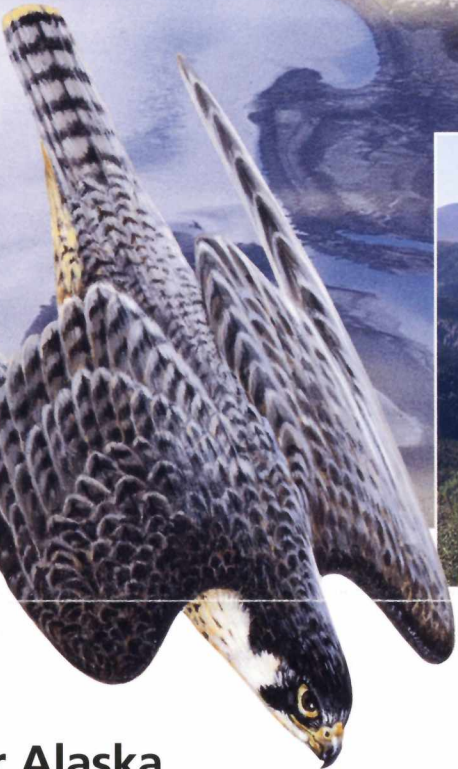
# Yukon-Charley Rivers

Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve  
Alaska

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Winter's Yukon River flows beneath some six feet of ice that freezes up in mid-October and remains frozen until mid-May.



NPS



Barren mountains scored by scree slopes typify park uplands. On Nimrod Peak, you look down the Tatonduk River to its Yukon confluence.

Only experienced river runners should attempt the wilderness conditions posed by the Charley and other Yukon tributaries.

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Salmon drying on river-side racks symbolize the subsistence cultures that endure in this region that is wilder now than it was 100 years ago.

NPS



Tributaries can be explored by lining small craft upstream from the Yukon—or have a bush pilot fly you into the headwaters so that you can float out. Once you leave the Yukon corridor you are completely on your own in this seldom-penetrated wilderness.

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Bags of gold dust bought admission to Circle's opera house in the get-rich-quick, placer mining days that authors Jack London and Robert Service made legendary. Dormant on Coal Creek at the Yukon, this gold dredge tells of later, capital-intensive mining.

NPS

TOP PHOTO: YUKON RIVER BY ©FRED HIRSCHMANN; PEREGRINE FALCON ILLUSTRATION NPS/JOHN DAWSON

## Timeless Rivers of Interior Alaska

Deep in Interior Alaska the great Yukon River strikes through bluffs and mountains of an ancient landscape to unmask rocks whose histories reach back a billion years to life's beginnings on Earth. Axis of the region, the silt-laden Yukon here flows constricted and swift through a great geologic fault. Side-streams tumble from the hinterlands—further passageways long inviting human traffic. Chief among these crystal rivers are the Charley, Kandik, and Nation. Flowing first through upland valley, then through stream-cut valley, and finally onto mature floodplain, the Charley River offers spectacular unspoiled wilderness scenery.

Arising at 4,000 feet of elevation, the Charley empties into the Yukon 700 feet above sea level, for an average gradient of 31 feet per mile and average current of four to six miles per hour. Side-streams have worn away old heights, softening the shapes of all but a few alpine peaks. The 2.5-million-acre Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve includes all 106 river miles of the Charley and encompasses its entire 1.1-million-acre watershed. Eons have passed here without catastrophic change. Today Yukon-Charley persists as a haven largely untouched by glacia-

tion and mostly free of human imprint. Here are prime breeding grounds of the endangered peregrine falcon, calving grounds of the Fortymile caribou herd, choice paleontological sites, superb recreational waters, and the timeless presence of the mighty and historic Yukon River. The preserve lies between the communities of Eagle and Circle, Alaska. New Jersey with its 7.5 million residents would fit between these towns, but there are only 20 year-round residents here. Truly isolated, the preserve is wilder and less populated now than it was 50 or 80 years ago. The late-1800s Klondike and Nome gold rushes turned Circle—2000 population 100—into the Paris of the North, boasting an opera house. Pokes of gold were legal tender. This was the stuff of Jack London's stories and Robert Service's poetry. Eagle's population—about 130 in 2000—was 800. Fort Egbert had electric lights and hot-and-cold running water. Circle and Eagle were south-bank trade centers on the great Yukon River thoroughfare that bisects Alaska east to west for 1,250 river miles and stretches for 1,979 river miles from its headwaters near Whitehorse, in Canada's Yukon Territory, to its mouth at the Bering Sea. When not choked with stupendous, lethal spring and fall ice floes,

the Yukon serves as summer waterway or frozen winter highway. Ancient hunters had traveled through the unglaciated Yukon corridor. Those who stayed probed the uplands for game via the stream-carved valleys. Forays upland took them first through thickets of willow and alder, through stands of white spruce and cottonwood screening the rivers, then across boggy flats punctuated by stunted black spruce. Mixed white spruce, birch, and aspen gave way to brush as the hunters climbed toward dry tundra on the ridges. Above them loomed always the barren mountains scored by scree slopes and topped by granite pin-nacles.

What scientists think may be remnant Ice Age vegetation occurs as patches of arctic steppe on sun-drenched benches and bluffs. Now, winter's darkness and cold conspire to isolate this land abutting the Arctic Circle. Animals go to ground or migrate, or, like the mountain sheep, stand hunched against arctic winds. Rivers and streams freeze over. Deprived of silt from these frozen sources, the winter Yukon runs clear under as much as 6 feet of ice. But the sun returns. The rivers break.

Bird calls herald spring. Peregrine falcons (*illustration above left*) refurbish old cliff eyries, and the swift flight and stoop of these winged hunters take their toll on migrating birds. Salmon begin their runs, first the big kings and then the dog salmon. Here, 1,200 miles from the sea but with many miles left to swim, the powerful fish are still firm of flesh. And as they have for centuries, people gather at fish camps along the Yukon.

People who stayed after the glory days of gold faded—Han Indians already home and recent arrivals who had found a home—settled back into a slower pace, trapping, hunting, fishing, gardening. With easily exploited placer deposits of gold exhausted, mining, too, changed from a rush to long toil. Even today along the Yukon a fish camp may lie just around the bend—fishwheel or net in the water, fish drying on stream-side racks. Hunters track moose and caribou, and trappers test their mettle against the unforgiving land. Life, in all its flintiness, persists here as it has for ages, and a few hardy souls still pit their fortunes against a true frontier wilderness.

### Map Warning

Do not use this folder map for backpacking or navigation purposes. U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps for Eagle, Circle, Charley River, and Big Delta cover the national preserve at a scale of 1:250,000 and are available at preserve headquarters or by mail from the nonprofit Alaska Natural History Association at the park address (see **More Information**). This scale is the *minimum* practical for on-the-ground use. Maps at larger scales are available from U.S.G.S. outlets.

**Note:** Areas of private land exist within the preserve boundary. Respect private landowners' rights. Contact preserve headquarters for details on private land ownership.

### Logistics

Scheduled air taxis serve Eagle and Circle all year. The Taylor and Steese highways, maintained gravel roads, connect Eagle and Circle with the Alcan Highway (161 miles) and Fairbanks (160 miles). Air taxis are available at preserve headquarters or by mail from the nonprofit Alaska Natural History Association at the park address (see **More Information**). This scale is the *minimum* practical for on-the-ground use. Maps at larger scales are available from U.S.G.S. outlets.

Taylor Highway is usually closed by snow from October 15 to April 15. There are no roads, maintained trails, or maintained public airstrips in the national preserve. Most people boat or float via the Yukon River and its tributaries to reach the park.

**Accommodations and services** Several public-use cabins in the preserve are managed on a first-come, first-served basis, with no fees or reservations. The Coal Creek Dredge, Slaven's Roadhouse, and Coal Creek Mining Camp (restored) and airstrip are open to the public. In summer, Eagle and Circle offer food service; basic groceries and supplies, including gasoline; limited lodgings; campgrounds; public boat landings; and charter boat and air services. Near Circle, Central, and Circle Hot Springs there are lodgings, food service, stores, and gasoline. Authorized commercial



guides provide hunting, camping, fishing, rafting, and kayaking guide services. Write to the preserve for a list.

**Special note** Local residents carry on subsistence activities in the preserve with camps, fishnets, and other equipment. Respect their property and privacy.

### Weather

Extreme cold holds sway from late November to mid-March as temperatures sometimes plunge to -70°F. Snow accumulates except where winds scour the land. Breakup in mid-May and freezeup in mid-October may maroon travelers.

Summer brings extremes, too: freezing nights may follow daytime temperatures of 90°F. Thunderheads breed cloudbursts, and high winds produce squalls and whitecaps on the Yukon and wild fluctuations in water levels on smaller rivers. See **Boating Safety** for additional precautions.

### Clothing, Food, and Gear

Self-sufficiency in all respects must be your guiding rule for wilderness travel here. Schedules will probably go awry because of weather or equipment failures in some remote place. Bring emergency food stocks—more than your scheduled time will require. If aircraft will pick you up at a remote location, prepare for being weathered in by bringing food for a couple of extra days.

Quality clothing (plenty of wool) that can be layered for changing conditions, sturdy camping and rain gear, and good insect repellent are essentials. Tents should have rain flies and insect netting and be designed to withstand strong winds.

### What to See and Do

Deep Interior Alaska lies locked in ice, cold, and darkness most of the year. Winter visitors to Yukon-Charley must be expedition-equipped for survival. Yet when the rivers freeze and the black spruce bogs congeal, the land is open to cross-country travel. Returning light and moderating temperatures in March and early April invite experienced winter travelers to explore where human tracks are rare or absent.

Most visitors to the preserve float the Yukon or Charley rivers. The Charley is a premier clear-water float with fine scenery. The glacier-fed Yukon provides recreational opportunities for motorized and non-motorized watercraft of many sizes. Rafts and canoes, with or without motors, allow the greatest

flexibility during the average 5- to 10-day float between Eagle and Circle (*see map*). Floaters camp on open beaches and river bars, where winds keep down the insects.

Motorized boats may start from Circle and go upriver against the stiff Yukon current. A few people fly with bush pilots to the Charley headwaters or other tributary streams and float down to the Yukon and out of the area. Others line their boats up the side-streams. Upland hiking is good in the mountainous regions. Exposed geological features, historic relics, expansive scenery, magnificent summer skylines, and, in less frequented canyons and uplands, the abundant wildlife fill your days with experiences to be treasured.

As a national preserve Yukon-Charley is open to both sport fishing and hunting under state and federal laws.

Eagle and Circle are historic places whose style of life and weathered buildings recall Athapaskan Indian history, gold rush days, the riverboat era, and the frontier spirit. Eagle offers tours of its historic district and Fort Egbert in summer.

**More information** Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve P.O. Box 167 Eagle, AK 99738 907-547-2233 [www.nps.gov/yuch](http://www.nps.gov/yuch)

Purchase maps from the Alaska Natural History Association, 750 W. Second Ave., Anchorage AK 99501, 907-274-8440.

### Precautions

Harsh weather, high winds, and rain buffet the preserve. Guard against hypothermia. River water temperatures are cold and mid-channel spills can be lethal. Once you leave the well-traveled Yukon River corridor in this vast country you are completely on your own. Boil drinking water at least one minute to prevent Giardia problems. Know and test your gear before you arrive. **You must possess good backcountry skills for wilderness survival.**

Leave your itinerary with someone and notify that person when you complete your trip.

**Bears and moose** Respect all wild animals. Moose and bears, especially, should always be considered dangerous. Get and

read a free bear pamphlet before you set out; write to the preserve address for a copy. This information about handling wildlife encounters could save your life. Be sure to keep food supplies separate from your campsite and equipment and make noise while hiking so that you do not startle bears or moose.

**Winter travel is recommended only to those experienced in cold weather camping and survival techniques.**

### Boating Safety

Novice boaters have no business confronting rapids and the hazards of sweepers—trees that have fallen into a stream and lodged perpendicular to its current—on these wilderness rivers. Know your boat or other watercraft and its operation before you launch. All federal and state boating regulations apply. Carry signal equipment and a personal survival kit, including temporary shelter, warm clothing, and extra food. File a float plan with a responsible person and notify that person when you complete your trip. River water temperatures are cold; mid-channel spills can be lethal. Head for shore if you have equipment problems or if the weather worsens. Do not overload your craft.

# Yukon-Charley Rivers

