

The Arctic in Autumn
By Clarence A. Crawford

In the early days of my treks in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, I focused on July. Usually my treks included that entire month, which is mosquito season, and I took mosquitos for granted. However, I eventually came to favor June as my Arctic time, and not just because it is free of insects. That preference resulted from my first June trip, in 1982; the advantages of June became readily apparent. The caribou were moving, the birds were arriving and nesting, wolves and foxes were raising litters, plant life was emerging. It was usually cold early in the month, but the season progressed rapidly. One could see leaf changes from day to day. The weather was generally dry. June remains my favorite month in the Arctic, though global warming has produced obvious changes, such as more rain, as a result of increased open water on the Beaufort Sea.

But we, wife Diane and I and friends, have discovered another beautiful face of the Arctic, the autumn. We had in the past done treks and river floats into mid-August—our time in the Arctic was not restricted to June—but nothing into late August and September except for one river trip on the Porcupine. Our experience was that August was wet, with a real threat of high water; and river crossings are the greatest of all hazards when trekking. But our pilot Kirk Sweetsir often told me that he likes fall the best—animals on the move, the country is alive—and in 2013 we decided to give it a try, trekking from August 17 to August 29. The trip was difficult in some ways: cold rain, snow, bog, and, ironically, lack of water in some valleys; but also rewarding: northern lights, wolves, leaf changes. Our time there did not extend deep into the fall, but it was a taste.

In 2014 we were invited by Heimo and Edna Korth to care for their property on the Colleen River during their absence at the beginning of freeze-up, September 27-October 11. This was a different kind of adventure. Rather than moving each day, we let the Arctic come to us, as it were. We felt completely at home; always something interesting to experience; and the season came to us fast, from bluebird days at first, then accumulating snow, and, each day, increased ice in the river.

Our fall trip in 2015 was August 25-September 8, and came to us as a surprise, because we had planned a trek in the north, close to the Continental Divide, but a storm had kept our pilot Kirk in Fairbanks. So we hiked out from and back to Arctic Village. Our farthest east was Old John Lake. We travelled at the height of the leaf changes. The trip was wonderful.

Recently we accomplished a long-standing goal, of canoeing the Colleen River in northeast Alaska, just west of the Yukon Border. (A word on the spelling of Colleen. The USGS map spells it “Coleen,” and the *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names* states that the name was first reported as such in 1895. However, neither of my unabridged dictionaries list “Coleen” as thus spelled. I will therefore assume that the misspelling occurred carelessly in the past and will use the accepted spelling.) We deferred this trip several times, such as in 2014 when the Korth offer negated the float. This trip, in 2016, spanned August 23-September 7, and we again experienced the height of leaf changes, though that was enhanced for us because we drifted south into the leaf changes as the autumn advanced, from tundra to willow to poplar and aspen to birch. Like the 2015 trip, this trip was open-ended, with no fixed date and pickup point. That circumstance much improves a trip, creating a relaxing flexibility.

One day and night stand out particularly from the 2013 trip. We had circled Conglomerate Mountain from the west and north, and at the northeastern extension of the mountain base encountered the perfect camp, a toe of tundra bounded by a creek flowing around it, east and north. West of camp, a tundra ridge; east and north, tundra plains; south, a gentle slope leading to higher mountains.

As we approached this camp during the afternoon we took a break from walking and seated ourselves upon the mountain side looking north. This is a vast valley, the main river flowing west to east here, the north side of the valley rimmed with distant mountains. We rested, we looked, and we heard the howling of wolves in the big valley. This was not a single or a pair, but a full pack.

We moved on, made our camp, strolled across the tundra. I sat, wrote; Mary walked up the mountain spine (and was eventually accompanied by a black fox, who followed her back to camp); Joyce sketched. The sun was warm on an early fall day. All was well.

That night we heard wolves near our camp.

Though it was late August, the Arctic nights were still short. The twilight-dark was invigorating when I emerged from my tent after midnight. The night outdoors is always stimulating, mysterious, inviting. There is of course no ambient light, no human sound—no trucks in the distance, no airplane, no human rumble. As Josef Pieper writes, “Only the silent hear.” And, consonant with my inward silence, I heard the silence of the night, which included the murmur of the creek. The orange half moon was bright, a few stars were visible in the dusky light, and to the north, along the horizon, the sky was crimson for miles along the mountain rim, though the time was mid-night, for the Arctic sun was not yet in abeyance.

In this setting did the wolves howl. They were near, one individual just across the creek, one group south of us, one group north of us. I heard wolves three or

four other times during the night, scattered, though near, throughout the valley. What kept them so close to us for so long? Some people hate wolves, fear them, and long to kill them, but we can see from the wolves' behavior why they may be subject to domestication, paradoxically becoming "man's best friend" while simultaneously serving as both a symbol and an embodiment of man's worst enemy. For me, they both symbolize and embody the essence of wild.

The next night we were camped among large willows on the main stem of the river. Several days of clear weather had allowed the atmosphere to cool considerably at night, and when I got out during the night the air had that good cold sharp autumn feel. And above, along with our moon and a few stars, the northern lights were at play, forming long dense green ribbons.

In 2014 our friends Heimo and Edna Korth asked us to stay at their cabin on the Colleen River during freeze-up. The dates were September 27-October 11. Heimo had told me several times over the years that he "hated" that time in the Arctic. During the transition it is no longer fall, but it isn't winter: no winter trails, no safe river ice, no trapping. I feel the same about late October and November in southcentral Alaska—no good snow pack for skiing and winter travel—and I also dislike April there, another transition, that being break-up. The stability and activities of winter are gone, but spring is yet far away.

So the Korths used that time to travel for a bit before the work of trapping and winter life. They would use our air flight "in" as theirs "out" on September 27, and the reverse on October 11.

Why not just close up the cabin and leave? They could of course do that. But the grizzly bears are still out of hibernation, and September for the Korths is the time to hunt, and much of the winter meat was hanging in quarters from poles near the cabin, and would make for an abundance of food for bears before hibernation, and for wolves, marten, and birds, particularly gray jays. I was to be prepared to shoot a bear, if necessary (with a permit), but Heimo assured me that that was unlikely, since the wood stove would burn around the clock and a savvy bear would smell that and stay away. In the event, there were bear tracks (and wolf tracks) regularly around the area of the cabin, but they did not venture near, in spite of that large cache of valuable protein.

The meat cache consisted of one entire moose and several caribou. When I walked through the forest and on gravel bars, as I did daily, I was impressed at the self-control, if you will, of the bear. I followed his tracks, or crossed them as I walked. It circled at a fixed distance and I have no doubt whatsoever that its super-sensitive nose told it exactly the nourishment near the cabin. I have often marveled at the intelligence of bears, and in this case intelligence was linked to some sort of judgment which may or may not be simple fear. The odor of wood smoke also

contributed to the information that the bear somehow processed. One is tempted to suppose that the creature has the power to draw inferences from its sensory data.

Late September in Fairbanks, our starting point for our commercial flight to Fort Yukon, is near the end of the leaf changes, mainly birch, aspen, and cottonwood, my gauge of the progress of autumn. In Fairbanks, you know that the Big Dark is coming down. Fort Yukon, one hour of air time north, is of course deeper into fall. Here we met our pilot, Kirk Sweetsir, of Yukon Air, and began our flight north, to the upper Colleen River.

Here one becomes aware of the vast distances of the North. The Yukon Flats scroll beneath the airplane. Hills appear, and increase in size as we fly. True mountains become visible in the distance. Mile after mile of boreal forest unroll beneath the airplane. I trace waterways with my eye: Porcupine, Sheenjek, Boulder Creek, Pass Creek, Marten Creek, the Colleen. After about seventy-five minutes of flying, at 130 miles per hour, Kirk communicates briefly with Edna on the avionics radio, circles the cabin, lines up with the gravel bar; we seem to be travelling impossibly fast for the length of the air strip; and we are down. I am reminded that bush pilots actually fly their airplanes, continually adjusting to conditions and always prepared to make an instantaneous decision. No radar, no autopilot; no ground crew to prepare the “runway”; no mechanic nearby except himself. And we are strung out far beyond the far edges of civilization. This latter observation came home to me with increasing intensity as we settled into our temporary home.

It is early winter. The leaves are all down. Patches of snow. This day was clear, the air crisp; calm; warm in direct sunlight, freezing in the shadows. Heimo and Edna were buoyant, active. To the cabin, a ten minute walk from the river. We were briefed quickly on the workings of the cabin: wood stove, cook stove, utility water hole (not quite pure enough for drinking), drinking water hole. Kirk visits, gets to stretch. Then we are off through the forest to the gravel bar.

One memorable characteristic of Arctic, indeed all, wilderness travel, is the disappearance of the airplane. Kirk loads the gear, Edna and Heimo strap in, Kirk settles into the pilot seat, left side. Pre-flight checks. Warm-up. Taxi into position, as far down the gravel bar as space allows, just off the river. Increased RPMs—this piece of industrial equipment dominates one’s hearing and attention. Movement; gradual acceleration; the tail finally lifts; the strip seems hopelessly short; the wheels separate from the ground; up, just over the river, turn towards the south, climb, gone. The engine noise thins out to nothing in the distance. We are alone.

We settle in, walk around the area of the cabin. We locate the Korths’ local trails, including Heimo’s running track. (He is always fit.) We breath the air,

absorb the sunlight, feel where we are; unpack, orient ourselves to the interior of the cabin. We establish our domestic lives.

During our first several days at the Korths I became aware of the central fact of our lives there—it slowly seeps in—that we are far, far away from everything, “everything” being a blanket word for human contact, human assistance, anything we associate with normalcy, safety, comfort. The isolation is spatial and emotional. You feel the vast distance separating you from the nearest human, in this case in Fort Yukon and Arctic Village. No rumble of traffic, no truck brakes, no power line in the distance. There is not so much as a distant contrail visible, nor any sound of a jet overhead. I am reminded how keyed in we are to the many sounds generated by humans, and also how we screen those sounds from our consciousnesses. To survive among humans, we generate a numbness to much of our surroundings. I love the absence of human noise and visual clutter, and I am reminded of their distance from us.

Now, I have spent a large part of the past forty-five years in the remote wilderness, especially the Arctic, and I am intimately familiar with extreme isolation. But the difference here was the approach of winter, and it was approaching quickly. The nights were not yet long—we were just past the Equinox—but the plunge into the Big Dark would happen quickly. More immediately apparent were the plunge in temperatures, accumulating snow, and increased ice running in the river. (Daytime highs ranged from +15 to +25, nighttime lows from +5 to +15.) The emotional effect was an increased feeling of isolation. The country was empty of humans for hundreds of miles. I liked the excitement of that feeling.

I wrote in my journal that at the Korths I inhabited time, I did not pass through time. Outdoor life and cabin life contribute to that feeling, because you are not living in a box following regular routines. Time is diurnal, to be sure—this remote world is not timeless—but you are in much closer touch with your surroundings than when in civilization, and you are much more likely to do something on impulse, or not do something; to prolong an activity, take another trail, not be concerned about what comes next. There is plenty of work, plenty of activity, but not too much regularity. I see the water supply is getting low, I’ll fetch some from the drinking water spring, drag the sled and two buckets through the forest to the spring and back. A marten ate into the moose, I set a trap. Cut some wood. Walk with the rifle looking for caribou, take this route, try that route, explore the country. Walk down river to see the ice run, walk to the gravel bar to see the sun rise. Spy a wolf track, follow it to see where it goes. Everything is interesting.

Nothing is onerous. We're not on any clock, except watching the earth spin towards sunset and the next sunrise; or watching the snow drift before the wind.

Our fall 2015 trip, August 25-September 8, happened by accident, and was excellent. Our intention was to fly into the mountains to the north, from Arctic Village, but a storm arrived the day we were to fly—a huge storm, covering much of our state, and due to last several days. Our pilot, Kirk, was trapped in Fairbanks by the weather and would be for several days, but he probably couldn't have flown from Arctic Village had he been there. (We made it into the village from Fairbanks because the commercial flight followed IFR, Instrument Flight Rules. Small planes like Kirk's follow VFR, Visual Flight Rules. In other words, he can only fly where he can see.) After a day of pondering and talking to villagers we decided to hike directly from the village, returning to the village, within the boreal forest.

Most hikers avoid the forest, fearing obstructions and bog—even some villagers told us that!—but I knew better because I had hiked in the forest on three occasions. The footing is generally good, there is little understory, and the forest is open enough to allow for easy navigation. In many places it appears that the trees are growing in alpine tundra. The forest is growing near the northern limit of the tree line in North America, and the trees themselves are small by southern standards, almost entirely white spruce—we located one stand of balsam poplar—interspersed with willows and dwarf birch. The limbs on the spruce are short, the height barely thirty feet at the tallest, the diameter at most about eighteen inches, usually much less. (As in any forest, there are a few trees that exceed these dimensions.) These are the trees that allow for the construction of log cabins, and which provide invaluable firewood. These trees are the reason that living within the tree line is considerably easier than living farther north, which fact points to the supreme ingenuity of the Eskimos. (The correctness of this term is evolving; in Alaska the “Eskimo” is grouped as Yupik and Inupiat.)

This was an unusual trip for the five of us, Lori, Joyce, Mary, Di, me. We were not transferring to a more remote location. The logistics were simple, the terrain was novel (to everyone but me), and, most important, perhaps, it was open-ended, in that we were not locked into a daily quota of miles to walk and did not need to attain an end point. An added advantage, which we discovered later, was the beauty of the leaf changes, which would have been much diminished on the tundra farther north.

Another advantage for me was nostalgic. My first big trek was from Kaktovik on the Arctic coast, over the mountains, to Arctic Village. This took twenty-eight days, was strenuous, and was chancy at the time, because in 1974 there were few visitors to the Arctic Wildlife Range, hence very little air traffic (we saw no

airplanes except for perhaps two contrails per week, from Europe I suppose), and electronic communications for ground travelers did not exist. We had no lifeline, no backup.

We saw the glitter of metal roofs when we were in the mountains two days northeast of the village. The fact that our goal was in sight, after weeks of uncertainty, was immensely exciting. Walking into the village two days later was intensely emotional. But I remembered best the walk itself: a land of lakes, including Old John Lake, open forest, good footing; a place that felt like home. I had for decades wanted to revisit the area, but had not. After forty-one years, this was the opportunity.

Our weather was various. We hiked in two rain storms and camped in three snow storms, but after the first big storm moved off we had mostly clear or at least dry weather.

This trip was also unusual because, for me, it was intensely internal. Of course my emotional connection to my wilderness environment is always primary, and the daily narrative is the skeleton upon which the emotional flesh is draped. But on this trip I was unusually sensitive to the ambience of autumn in the Arctic. In particular, the leaf changes were intense and absorbing. The willows were yellow and gold, the blueberry bushes purple, and, most striking, the dwarf birch were a broad range of orange-to-red. (These dwarf birch were, paradoxically, unusually large, some four feet tall.) Every day, all day, we were walking in beauty. Also, we had a long streak of fair weather and cold nights, and the northern lights were active. During the night I got out at least once; the mystery of the dark and the activity of the lights stimulated me. In order to enjoy the cold mornings more fully, each evening I assembled a pile of dry dead wood of various sizes, and my morning routine was to kindle the fire and enjoy the warmth and the frost. I was intensely alive.

From my journal:

“August 29. This day condensed the fleeting essence of the fall: yellow willows, red dwarf birch, the varying reds and purples of bearberry and blueberry. The occasional distinctive odor of fall, very faint. The warmth of the sun, quickly banished by a cloud or cold breeze. The feeling that everything was just right, exactly as it should be. All of this was enhanced by the ease of walking, a great pleasure.”

“September 5. A clear cold night and a brilliant clear day. At about 1:00 AM I got out, and the northern lights were rampant! The bright moon is down to half and the lights had no competition. They spanned the entire sky, and extended well to the west. Behind the northern mountains, a scarlet band.

“This is a sensuous, aesthetic trip and the experience is internal.”

“September 8. On the flight south to Fairbanks I tracked the East Fork Chandalar River from the airplane, and observed the increasing color below. On the approach to Fairbanks we were back into the height of fall, flying south from early winter. The gold of the birches, aspens, and poplars was intense, as if powered by some inner glow.

“This journal [and this essay] does not contain my true emotional response to our changing environment on this trip. I could name facts and describe events, but I could not find words for the emotional connections I felt. I was continually stimulated and delighted, as much by snow storms as by sun. I felt comfortable, at home, centered. I must return, to a base camp or a river float.”

2016. After years of anticipation we finally launched canoes on the Colleen River. (The canoes are Allys, a fine portable canoe that fits into a duffel and is easily packed into a Cessna 185.) Joyce, Chuck, Di, me. Our start date on the upper river was August 23, which was the height of leaf changes on the tundra. We ended September 7, a bit earlier than our preferred date, in the boreal forest downstream. (We adapted to our pilot’s restricted schedule.) We ended at the height of the leaf changes down river—as we floated south we left the tundra for larger willows, then willows and poplars, and on September 5 we saw our first birch tree.

This trip too was open-ended. We had plenty of food, and held open the option of floating to Fort Yukon, on the one hand, or being picked up somewhere on the Porcupine or lower Colleen. In the event we dallied upriver and at the Korths and were eventually picked up on the lower Colleen. Technology makes this possible: reliable satellite phone communication with Kirk.

It is both pleasant and prudent to dally upriver. One great pleasure of an Alaskan river float is observing the changes from headwaters to take-out. Timberline is low in most of Alaska and so there is usually a great contrast between start and finish. Such was the case here. We were at the start of our trip camped on tundra in a big magnificent valley. We were happy to be exactly where we were, and were pleased to both prepare for the float and to hike.

Preparing for the float meant carrying gear to the river, at least a quarter mile away, and assembling the canoes. This work can be pleasurable if there is no pressure to go go go, get on the river, and is even more pleasurable in fair weather. Do some work, look up and enjoy your surroundings. Smell the air. Scan the horizon. Resume at your leisure.

During our second full day, August 25, Joyce, Di and I ferried to the east bank to climb into the high country. The Brooks Range here tails off to foothills to the south. Our mountain was modest in height and extent but put us high enough to see far up four vast valleys, all Colleen water, all with grey limestone, russet

tundra, fringes of spruce. This was a delightful excursion: the vast landscape, the variety and scale and scope of it, the dynamic sky, the radiant heat of the sun, the pleasure of walking.

To the north a cluster of poplars were bright *orange*.

Finally, after years of anticipation, launch day.

The river came at us quickly, the quiet upper river becoming steep only a few hundred yards from where we launched. A mile of continuous fast Class II, then a section of tight corners where the river was cutting a new channel, then a bigger river below the confluence and we're already beyond the alpine tundra, into bigger willows. Root gobs, some steep runs. Then a heavily braided section, probably the most difficult part in which to make decisions, because the river is spread out and it is hard to detect shallows. The Colleen is considered to be an easy river, but it has power and requires attention and judgment. It also offers variety. The river changes, as I have indicated, as it flows south, and those changes are of interest as they reflect gradient and geology, and create conditions for a variety of streamside plant growth. Floating a river from the headwaters is a bit like seeing the world in cross section.

Here, two days down, was my favorite camp of the trip, the night of August 27. Now we are within the northern fringe of the boreal forest. On the approach the gravel bank on the inside curve did not appear to be a good landing, but it was. A small beach, a low bank, open understory in the spruce forest. The camp faced west and on this clear afternoon it was even hot at times, always comfortable. A trail through the flat forest to the east was a temptation. Moose? Heimo? An old grown-over camp fire, on the forest floor rather than on gravel, and cut wood, suggested a winter fire. Willows across the river are gold—the height of fall at this latitude.

One invaluable routine I adhere to on fall trips is the morning fire. I lay it the evening before. I gather my wood, spruce if we're in the forest, willows if on a gravel bar. I sort the wood into three sizes, kindling, build-up, large for sustained burning. I carry a ration of one candle stub per day, and I place this beside my kindling, on gravel or bare ground, in the open (though perhaps behind a windbreak), near water (a necessity for any camping). The first action I perform on a cold morning is light the candle and carefully place the kindling on and around it, then build up the flame with slightly larger pieces. Once this is established I go about the rest of my morning routine: light stove, boil water, mugs of coffee, oats.

We paddled into the Korth gravel bar on August 29, the seventh day of the trip and the fourth of floating.

The transition from wilderness solitude to social engagement was sudden but not jarring. Edna and Heimo Korth spend much of their year in a solitude that would confound and distress most moderns, but they are intensely social people when the appropriate occasion presents itself. This was one such. They are careful to limit access to their lives and property, but they welcomed us enthusiastically—we were invited and expected—and conversation commenced immediately we approached the cabin. Edna is communicative and reserved, Heimo is ebullient.

The Korths use one of several cabins from year to year to reduce their pressure on the country; this was the same cabin that Di and I tended in 2014. We feel extraordinarily comfortable here, in the open flat forest. I don't know exactly why some spaces and areas seem comfortable, others emotionally alien. Of course it has to do with quiet, proportions, visual harmony, and much else; so it is at the Korths. The outdoor space is comfortable; it feels like home. It is home.

We stayed at the Korths for the better part of five days, from the afternoon of August 29 to the afternoon of September 3. We hunted upriver twice, Heimo and I, by canoe, the second time successfully. We hiked, cut wood, fetched a washing machine from an abandoned Korth cabin, dug a hole for a new outhouse, walked the gravel bar, watched for caribou on the mountain, cooked on the outdoor fire, sat by the outdoor fire, and talked talked talked.

Our time passed very comfortably and we were in danger of settling into our shore life and forgetting our river. Edna enjoyed having us, especially enjoying the two amiable and interested female companions; I think Heimo was equally glad to have some society, and someone to hunt with. Edna, Joyce, and Diane spent much time investigating the gravel bars for attractive rocks; Edna discussed and examined various plants that had medicinal and food value (willow bark for headache, "Eskimo potato") and also plants that had aesthetic value; she instructed her friends in moccasin-making. We all scanned the mountain for caribou every morning, and Heimo and I hunted on the two days they were numerous. The second hunt was successful.

Launching a hunt meant taking a minimum of gear in Heimo's 17' plastic canoe pushed by a 6 hp Mercury four-stroke motor. He hunted upstream towards the mountain and Lois Creek, which took about an hour of skillful motoring. Heimo ran the motor in shallow water drive all the time. To properly balance the little boat, I sat as far forward as I could and Heimo kneeled in the middle, running the motor with a tiller extension. I came to admire his skill in difficult sections of river, where the river raced through the shallow sections, or where he negotiated sweepers, especially when running down stream. This is hard to do with a tiller extension while kneeling, and kneeling for an hour or more is itself very difficult. For Heimo this was all normal.

We each killed a caribou on the second afternoon and were motoring downstream by 6:50 PM into a glaring sun. Heimo did a masterful job without sunglasses or billed cap—I could barely see.

Here I learned of a hunting tradition that I like and intend to follow. I don't know if this is unique to Northern subsistence hunting or not—Heimo says he craves this—but within minutes of our successful return, while we hung the meat, Edna had the fire kindled and the caribou heart, liver, and kidneys were cooked in sequence in light oil. All were delicious. I thought the heart most flavorful, the kidneys most interesting.

We were back on the river the next day. Edna wanted us to stay, and said so, with sadness. I too felt sad as I surveyed the familiar setting around the cabin. Our farewell from Heimo was quite warm.

We floated another forty-four miles before leaving the river. We experienced more fall in the boreal forest: blue skies, golden leaves; cold north wind and scud; the appearance of the first birch tree; western bluffs rich in birch gold and poplar yellow and orange. Our final night was clear and cold, and the northern lights were extremely active.

Such is my autumn in the Arctic.