



# WaterFlying

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**Pilot of  
the Year**

**Water Flying Vacations**



# Two Lakes to

**a** former Navy Flight Surgeon on Kodiak Island, Alaska, Tom Tuxill wanted to show his wife, Sue, the Alaska he remembered. I had first traveled to Alaska to fly-fish with Tom years ago, and got hooked on the Beaver and Otter flying in addition to the extraordinary fishing. So, after careful planning and packing, our two Lake Renegades began this 10,000-

mile trip at Syracuse, New York and traveled separately across Ontario, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota and Montana, dodging the usual line of mid-summer thunderstorms in the upper Midwest.

*The astonishingly beautiful Harding Ice Field, Kenai Peninsula. Photo by Ed McNeil.*

*Upper right: Approaching Muncho Lake along the Alaskan Highway. Photo by Tom Tuxill.*



**to the  
polar ice  
cap and  
back**



1. Bozeman, MT
2. Lethbridge, AB
3. Fort Nelson, BC
4. Watson Lake, YT
5. Whitehorse, YT
6. Northway, AK
7. Fairbanks, AK
8. Bettles, AK
9. Prudhoe Bay, AK
10. Fort Yukon, AK
11. McGrath, AK
12. Katmai Peninsula, AK
13. Kodiak, AK
14. Kenai Peninsula, AK
15. McCarthy, AK
16. Northway, AK
17. Whitehorse, YT
18. Yellowknife, NWT
19. Thompson, MB
20. Pickle Lake, ON
21. Geraldton, ON
22. North Bay, ON
23. Watertown, NY



# **10,000 miles** **Alaska** **by lake renegade**

*By Ed McNeil*



# ...we were camped in the legendary **Brooks Range wilderness**

We met on the ramp at Bozeman, Montana where we filed a cross border flight plan. We departed in high winds for Lethbridge, Alberta to clear Canadian customs and immigration before flying past Calgary and Edmonton and on to Grand Prairie. After a day's hold-over in bad weather, we departed early through holes in the patchy fog and climbed up into a layered sky. We were VFR-on-top bound for Fort Nelson, flying over Dawson Creek and Fort St. John on the way. After fueling at Fort Nelson, we flew the Alaskan Highway through the hills and mountains of northern British Columbia, crossing into the Yukon just east of Watson Lake. We checked in by radio

on 126.7 at Watson Lake and continued up the highway toward Whitehorse in slowly deteriorating conditions.

We ultimately crossed over the Continental Divide in a narrow pass east of Teslin in light

rain and a lowering ceiling, directly above the highway, following the bush pilot's rule of staying to the right in case traffic was coming the other way. We landed for the night at Whitehorse in improving weather, tied up our Renegades in front of the tower, paid our parking fee, and took a cab to historic downtown, along the Yukon River.

After a night in Whitehorse, we checked weather at flight service under the tower, filed our cross border flight plans to Northway, Alaska, refueled at the Shell dealer, and started off up the highway again, toward Kluane Lake and the Alaskan border. We crossed the border at Beaver Creek and landed at Northway, Alaska for customs, fuel, sandwiches, and a weather briefing at flight service (on the field). Then it was off to Fairbanks, flying over both the highway and the pipeline, which runs from Prudhoe Bay in the north to the sea terminal at Valdez on Prince William Sound. We navigated the VFR corridor through the MOAs of Eielson Air Force Base talking to the range controller until just south of Fairbanks.

Only four days had elapsed since leaving Bozeman, Montana and we were already dining on fresh Alaskan halibut, five minutes north of the Fairbanks airport.

The next morning was cloudy and dark, with scattered showers forecast throughout the day. By now we were used to margin-





al weather, so off we went, north to Bettles, in the Brooks Range, for fuel, crossing the Arctic Circle south of Bettles, then continuing northwest along the southern slopes of the Brooks Range to Walker Lake, headwaters of the Kobuk River.

A perfect campsite was spotted at the north end of the lake in the shadows of the Arrigetch Peaks, where we set up camp on the sphagnum moss typical of an arctic boreal forest. Within minutes, we spotted a bull moose, walking the shoreline just across the lake from us. On our fifth day out of Montana, we were camped above the Arctic Circle on a beautiful lake, in a perfect setting, in the legendary Brooks Range wilderness, feeling self-satisfied about having achieved one of our major goals so quickly. As the rain started and

the insects as well as the coming chill. Dehydrated meals these days are quite good, we discovered, and we enjoyed two days and nights in our Arctic campsite. It is hard to sleep in a tent when it never gets dark. Not being able to sleep the first night, I took photographs of wolf and



**Welcome to Bettles, AK.**  
**Photo by Sue Tuxill.**



**Storm clouds in the Kenai Mountains.**  
**Photo by Bob Hampton.**

**Lower left: Walker Lake in the Brooks Range.**  
**Photo by Ed McNeil.**

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moose tracks on the beach in front of camp near the airplanes at 11:30 at night.

We broke camp early on Walker Lake, loaded the two Renegades and cleaned up our campsite, leaving little trace of our having been there. We took off to the south along the spine of the lake, climbing to 4,500 feet before turning north to cross the Brooks Range. Continuing the climb to 7,000 feet took us up under a broken ceiling and into an eerie mix of clouds and dark rock spires. We circled and flew among the Arrigetch Peaks, some of the most jagged mountains on earth. Another of our major trip goals was to fly to the headwaters of the Noatak River, on the north slope of the Brooks Range, which flows northwestward to the Bering Sea. I did a touch-and-go in a small lake near the headwaters of the Noatak, while Tom and Sue flew alongside taking photos of an incredible landscape (lime green tundra and a cobalt blue lake nestled in green foothills topped with dark jagged peaks, well north of the tree limit).

The Brooks Range and surrounding wildlife refuges combine to be the nation's largest wilderness, and we were left with a profound respect for its beauty, and renewed awareness of the importance of being prepared to survive on our own if we went down. A trip with two airplanes is a safe option, as it places your rescue coordinator overhead in the event of an emergency landing. The Renegade is a superb airplane for this kind of trip, as the Canadian north and Alaska have lots of water, providing many places for an emergency landing.

We carried everything needed to perform oil/filter changes enroute, including oil sample kits, Lycoming additive 16702, AVBlend and safety wire. We needed only a source of oil, and a place to dispose of the old oil to complete our oil changes. No mechanical problems were



**One of the many glaciers on the flanks of Mt. Douglas, Katmai Peninsula. Photo by Bob Hampton.**



**Lunch stop, Alaskan style. Photo by Tom Tuxill.**

encountered in 98 hours of flying over 24 days (a testament to good maintenance) and we performed three oil changes enroute, at Bozeman, Montana, Fairbanks, Alaska and Thompson, Manitoba. We found fuel to be easily available, and cost \$2.50-2.85 in remote Alaska. \$3.26 a gallon was the highest we paid, and considering that many places we visited had to have fuel flown in by DC-6 or C-46, that was a nice surprise.

From the Noatak drainage, we flew back over the Brooks Range to Bettles, staying the night at the Bettles Lodge, where our friend Bob Hampton from

Syracuse would join us in the morning for 10 days. After Bob arrived, we flew north up the Wild River, crossing the Brooks Range for the third time, crossing over to the North Slope, east of Anaktuvuk Pass, and heading north across the tundra to Deadhorse and Prudhoe Bay. Along the way, we picked up a radio mayday from an injured hiker southeast of Anaktuvuk Pass and organized his evacuation by air.

We decided to fly over Prudhoe Bay and continue north to the polar ice cap, which we could see in the distance. I found some comfort in having another airplane in loose formation at my side, but one feels completely at the mercy of the engine when over such forbidding landscape. The ice cap we saw was so rough as to be unsurvivable in an emergency landing. The ice is not smooth, and in addition to ice ridges, the breaks between floes have vertical edges that would make any landing abrupt, to say the least. The colors on the ice are every shade of white and blue imaginable. Seventy-two degrees north



# ...the ice and snow blend with the clouds to give little visual horizon

latitude was as far north as we flew, but it was enough. We quickly began to appreciate the majesty and danger of the ice cap and, at the same time, its vulnerability to global warming.

An itinerate Grizzly kept us from walking to the office to pay for fuel at Deadhorse, the airport next to Prudhoe Bay, so we hitched a ride in a pick-up truck. The oil companies are clearly trying to minimize their impact at Prudhoe Bay, and their well sites and gathering pipelines look very neat from the air. Rapidly deteriorating weather caused us to head south, back across the Brooks Range for the fourth time, this time over Anaktuvik Pass, arriving back in Bettles in time for dinner at the Bettles Lodge. We became quite fond of that place and, considering its location north of the Arctic Circle, found it remarkably comfortable.

From Bettles we embarked on a whirlwind of flying: east to the Yukon border at Fort Yukon; back to Fairbanks for a night to do laundry, change the oil, and have a wonderful dinner; on to McGrath (on the Iditerod trail) for fuel, and south to Lake Clark and Iliamna for the night, visiting Rainbow King Lodge, where Tom and I have been fishing each September for the past 5 years. Gus, the manager, met us at the airport and conveyed us to the

lodge for a great dinner and sleep. We went off the next morning to the Katmai Peninsula, flying over our favorite trout fishing waters, then up onto the glacier at Mount Douglas. We landed in a remote lake between the Kulik and Brooks rivers, sharing our beach picnic with a curious marmot. We flew back to Iliamna for one more night of a superb bed and elegant food at Rainbow King Lodge before continuing our journey.

Our over-water survival gear at the ready, we flew south over the Katmai Peninsula, around Mount Douglas, and over the strait separating Kodiak Island from the Katmai Peninsula in absurd winds, with seas too high to ever land in. Even at 7,000 feet, the seas looked huge! We lunched in Kodiak, toured the town and fishing harbor, and then took off around the high peaks eastbound for the Kenai Peninsula, where we spent an afternoon flying the high ice fields that are the birthplace of the Kenai fiords glaciers. What astonishing beauty! Flying these ice fields is a challenge, as the ice and snow blend with the clouds to give little visual horizon, but the risk is worth the reward. We took many rolls of film over these glaciers and ice fields and will not soon forget those images. We ended this day in Homer, savoring another delicious meal of fresh Alaskan halibut.

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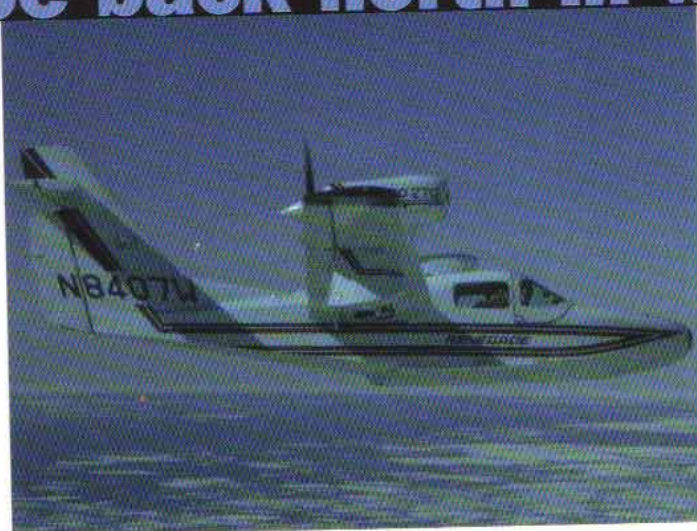
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# We were left with an overwhelming wish to be back north in wilderness

We flew on to Anchorage for an overnight and a Blue Angels air show at Elmendorf Air Force Base. Bob departed for Syracuse via Delta Airlines, while Tom, Sue and I departed for McCarthy and Kennicott, flying up the Chitina Valley into the gravel strip at McCarthy for another great surprise. Kennicott, an abandoned copper mine and town on the side of a glacier, gives one a remarkable glimpse of the past. The Kennicott Glacier Lodge, located in the abandoned mining town, was one of our best overnight stops.

Leaving Kennicott and McCarthy required a circling climb over the Kennicott Glacier to 11,500 feet before turning northeast toward Northway, across the high plateau of the Wrangell-St. Elias Mountains. This 100-mile trip was like flying the Himalayas in your own plane,



**Left: Staying close together over the polar ice cap. Photo by Ed McNeil.**

**Right: Early morning over the Matanuska Glacier, Chugach Mountains. Photo by Ed McNeil.**

with 16,000-foot mountains nearby. In the morning sun, the glaciers looked magnificent, and the mountains majestic. It was a fitting end to our tour of Alaska. From Northway, we flew over the Yukon Territory and Kluane Lake, reentering the United States north of Haines, Alaska, where we descended into the Lynn Canal and Skagway for fuel and lunch.

Leaving Skagway, we climbed up the Chilkoot trail over the ghosts of miners headed for the Yukon gold rush. We flew on to Whitehorse for the night. From Whitehorse, we

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took the long way home, flying across arctic Canada, picking a route that would give us certain fuel and four-hour legs. We first flew direct to Fort Simpson, crossing a frontal system that gave us low visibility and continuous rain; then on to Yellowknife on Great Slave Lake, for the night. The next day, we pushed on to Stony Rapids in northern Manitoba for fuel, then on to Thompson, Manitoba in light rain.

We stayed the night in Thompson, where the frontal system caught up with us again, and changed the oil the next morning before leaving in a driving rain for Pickle Lake, Ontario. We refueled at Pickle Lake and pressed on for Geraldton, Ontario, arriving at dusk to be befriended by a wonderful man who took us to town, organized our motel, drove us to dinner, then met us in the morning for breakfast and delivered us back to our planes. Caught again by the front, we refueled in a steady rain, and departed for North Bay, Ontario, arriving just before the start of an air show that included a US B-1B bomber. After refueling, we departed just in front of the B-1, landing back in the United States at Watertown, New York for customs, then on to Syracuse where we ended our 10,000-mile, 24-day, 98-flight-hour adventure.

We returned from this trip with an overwhelming appreciation of wilderness. Even small villages were oddly disquieting when we had just come out of a pristine landscape such as the Brooks Range. We need outposts of civilization for food and fuel, of course, but we were glad to be back flying over the roadless areas soon after. These feelings pervaded our thoughts every time we arrived at a larger outpost, and especially at Anchorage. Arriving back at Syracuse, each of us was left with an overwhelming wish to be back north in wilderness! □

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