

Colville Update

Arctic Ploverland News

Spring, 1999

Greetings From the Jim Helmericks Family

Adventures

The bluffs are about 150-200 feet straight up from the water's edge. They are crumbling dirt, mud, and sod with grasses and willows growing wherever they can grab hold. As with many high river bluffs, there are rows upon rows of vertical ridges separating gullies where runoff water has cut deep fissures in the banks. We climb to the top by using a gully and working our way back and forth upward, grabbing willow branches to help pull ourselves up until we reach the top. The view is worth the climb! We can see forever. The high banks run along the west side of the river and rise up to a flat plateau of tundra. The east side of the river is low-lands with gravel bars, braided side channels, and patches of tall willows and alder bushes. Isaac, Aaron, and I are 50 miles upriver on a boating/camping trip in September. By the time we reach the high bluffs in our small river boat, the water of the Colville River is churning and swift, unlike the sluggish water of the delta region back home. Negotiating this faster water adds excitement to the trip.

After a day of adventure we find a suitable spot to camp on the low side of the river with a little inlet for the boat, tall willows (up to 15 feet or so) for a sheltered feeling, and a flat spot for the tent and campfire. We soon have a comfortable camp set up and are off exploring the area. Large moose tracks with little ones following along-side covered the dried muddy area by the stream's edge. Muskoxen tracks crisscrossed the area. Little critter tracks were here and there also, including fox tracks. Ptarmigan were

all around, Northern Shrikes called in the bushes, Redpolls flitted between the willows, and a Wagtail tweeped loudly. All day we had been seeing, and especially hearing, large flocks of White-fronted Geese flying overhead as they migrated south. Glaucous Gulls squawked at us, and a few rough-legged hawks still soared over the bluffs, although all the nests were empty and most of the various hawks and falcons had already gone south. Isaac got out his pole and soon had a big grayling hooked

right near camp, and Aaron returned with a ptarmigan to add to the larder. Dinner over the open fire was soon ready. Aaron made sure the marshmallows were handy.

Our sleeping bags beckoned as darkness approached around 10:00P.M. The 24-hour daylight is nearly a month behind us now. The camp is secured for the night and food stowed away from curious night prowlers. All is cozy inside our tent.

It froze hard during the night, and the ground was white with frost. Morning awakened to the sounds of honking geese penetrating the thick blanket of fog. We soon had a roaring fire outside the tent to cook breakfast over and warm ourselves. Isaac used his little single burner Coleman stove to heat water quickly so we could have

coffee and cocoa first. Later we ate hot oatmeal and the grayling Isaac caught, before buttoning up the camp to go exploring upriver for the day.

Our little 19-foot river boat carried us many more miles upriver into increasingly diverse terrain. We watched five muskoxen on the tip of a sandbar - three cows, a yearling bull, and a calf. A short side trip up a tributary got us into very fast-moving, shallow water. We had to turn back to the main river. Stopping to explore anything that looked interesting or different made the day fly by, and soon it was



Colville River

time to head back down river. Once back at the campsite, we just had time to cook dinner of ptarmigan and duck and settle in for the night before dark.

There was no fog on the second morning, and blue sky was colored with a few wispy clouds. It was nearly calm. After breakfast, braking down the camp and loading the boat went quickly. We had decided to mosey on down the river and see what the day brought, as we were in no hurry to get home before dark.

We stopped at Jimmy Creek and took the boat as far up that little creek as we could go. It is a pretty area hidden between 10 foot banks lined with tall willow and alder bushes, and is one of Jim's old stomping grounds which we had never explored. From there we bundled up tightly, planning to

keep going the remaining 30 or so miles till we got home. It gets very cold in the boat even when it's calm, since we create our own wind of 20-30 mph with the forward speed of the boat. Fortunately it remained nearly calm on the run back down river. We did stop to watch a lone bull muskox at the mouth of one of the Colville's tributaries. It was unafraid of us, and let us climb the bank to watch him from about 20 feet away. We passed over 100 swans that were feeding along the edges of the river, congregating for their long migration south. River seals were here and there along the route home. Once there, the warmth of our big wood stove took the chill out of cold hands and feet.

Family News

All the family is well and active in their various pursuits. Jim and Teena are home at the Colville most of the time and continue with all the work and activities necessary to the running of the Golden Plover enterprises, and just maintaining our large compound.

Derek and Melanie are still living in Fairbanks. Derek now works full-time as an engineer for the Fort Knox Gold Mine outside of Fairbanks. Melanie is finishing up her graduate studies while student teaching in the field of Geology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Jay is nearing the end of his first year of graduate studies for his Master of Electrical Engineering degree, and is the Electrical Design Team Leader for the Student Rocket Program at UAF.

Isaac divides his time between home at the Colville and work in the oilfield on various environmental studies. He is presently monitoring mammals along a winter ice road off-shore from the Prudhoe Bay area.

Aaron is home in 11th Grade correspondence schooling. He earned a special field trip to Juneau to participate in our state's student

government program this spring, and is looking forward to that trip.

The family suffered a poignant loss this year when Teena's father passed on to glory in heaven after a long fight with leukemia. Teena had an emotional reunion with her family in Spokane in August when they all met for a special memorial service to honor a wonderful man. It was a praise service filled with music, one of her dad's special joys.

Other Events

One special event this year was the graduation of both Derek and Jay from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks last May. (Their cousin Marita Wartes also graduated at the same time.) Derek received his B.S. in Mining Engineering and Jay graduated magna cum laude in Electrical Engineering. Besides family and friends from the Fairbanks area, Teena and Isaac were able to join the festivities, along with the Wartes grandparents from Washington state. We are all proud of the accomplishments of the graduates!

As usual, we had a few adventurous outings like the boating trip up the Colville River in early September briefly described at the beginning of this newsletter. Other outings included snowmachining around to check out new oil exploration sites, or exploring some obscure creek gorge. Isaac had a terrific solo trip up inland where he was able to photograph wolves and muskoxen face to face.

Jim was gone on an oil spill clean-up job along the "Haul Road" for quite awhile last spring. He supervised a clean-up for his brothers' company, Colville, Inc. A truck hauling diesel fuel had an accident and subsequent spill just north of the Brooks Range.

With a new oil field (Alpine) being developed about in our backyard, we are nearly surrounded by the oil industry now. Teena and Isaac joined

the local village's oil spill response team, and trained to work on possible oil spills.

We have had many special visitors at different times this year. Teena's oldest brother, Mark, visited last spring after surveying a job in Prudhoe Bay. Teena's youngest brother, Eldon, and his wife Debbie visited in July during our nicest weather of the year. Visitors from England, Canada, and the "Lower 48" came to photograph the many birds and enjoy the wonders of the arctic summer. New and old friends from the "oil patch" visited while we were connected to the road system with an ice road in the spring months, or dropped in by aircraft or boat. It is always enjoyable to show off our homesite and museum.

Wildlife

This was an unusual year for polar bears in our region. For some reason quite a few polar bears came ashore from their usual habitat out on the pack-ice and were roaming the Alaskan coastal area this past summer. We saw several bears in our area and Jim saw others while flying coastal surveys. Personal safety became a significant issue before venturing outdoors for a number of weeks during these bears' peak shore-side activities.

Our usual involvement with birds continues, although our year-round mixed flock has decreased, and our work with summer migrants has expanded.

GOOD BYE FOR NOW!

Colville Village via Pouch 340109
Prudhoe Bay, Alaska 99734
Tel: (907) 448-1588
E-mail Address: < helmer@ix.netcom.com >
Web: <http://www.AlaskaOnLine.com/goldenplover>

*Love,
Jim & Teena,
Derek & Melanie,
Jay, Isaac, & Aaron*