

Public Use of the Canning River - Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

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With beautiful scenery and good headwaters access, the Canning River, along with its major tributary the Marsh Fork, is the longest north flowing river on the Arctic Refuge. The river's delta area, which begins about 15 miles from the coast, becomes extensively braided and wide before it empties into the Beaufort Sea.

Recreational use in the Canning and Marsh Fork river area occurs in association with refuge access sites. A majority of floaters begin in the Wilderness area at upper reaches of the Marsh Fork, then take out at a site upstream of Shublik Island or airstrips at either the upstream or ocean end of the Canning delta. Other floaters start on the Canning at an airstrip several miles upstream of Franklin Creek, then float to the take-out at the upper end of the delta.

Since 1988, the Canning, including the Marsh Fork, has been the Refuge's fourth most used river by commercial guides and their clients. In the last five years, four to six float trips have occurred on the River annually. Three of those years, half the trips traveled to the delta; the other two years 70% of the trips ended there. These trips averaged seven people and lasted an average of 11 days. Guides and their clients usually spent time hiking near the river corridors throughout these river trips, including within the Shublik and Sadlerochit mountains near the middle and lower part of the Canning. Shublik Spings is a popular destination, and the valleys to the east of Shublik Island offer good circular hiking routes.

There also were numerous commercial hiking trips that began and/or ended along the Canning. A majority of these groups stayed in the mountains of the Marsh Fork and upper Canning, or ended their trips near the middle Canning. Records show that occasionally, but not every year, a hiking group traveled all the way to the delta area. They also show that groups commonly hiked from the landing strip at Sunset Pass in and around the Sadlerochit Mountains and the Ignek Valley. Visitors hiked around the mountains, between Sunset Pass and the Katakturuk Valley, or north of the mountains as far east as Carter Creek to an access site along Camden Bay.

According to the last five years worth of public use data collected from recreational guides and air taxi operators on the refuge, a majority of the recreational use (hiking and floating) in the area takes place between late May and the middle of September. During the last five years, visitors hiked the river corridor and surrounding mountains from May 30 to September 20, with a peak in early to mid June. The boating season on the Canning River generally starts a couple of weeks later (June 10) depending upon icing conditions, and ends several weeks earlier (August 16). The average peak use period for boaters on the Canning is the last two weeks of June.

Refuge staff does not specifically track private recreational use due to the size of the Refuge and the myriad opportunities for access. Anecdotal information indicates that the use is only a small percentage (probably 5-15%) of the commercial activity, with some users hiking and occasionally camping north/northwest of the Sadlerochit Mountains to see the coast and wildlife including caribou, bears and muskoxen.