

## **28<sup>th</sup> Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic**

### **Gerstle River to McKinley Village: Route Description**

#### **Overview**

The race starts 3.5 miles southwest of the Gerstle River bridge on the Alaska Highway, at the end of the mapped gravel road. There is a mandatory check-in at Donnelly Creek State Recreation Site at mile 238 on the Richardson Highway. The race ends at the gravel pit located adjacent to the Parks Highway about 2 miles south of McKinley Village, just south of the Denali Airport.

#### **Gerstle River to Donnelly**

The segment from the Gerstle River crossing of Hwy 2 presents any number of route choices to Black Rapids. The entire area is crisscrossed with ATV and game trails. Racers may choose to head southwest and then north to Donnelly, avoiding the glaciated, more direct “beeline” route, or they may head northwest, around Granite Mountain. In-between there are a limitless variety of routes with lots of options to avoid glacier travel.

#### **Black Rapids to McKinley Village**

*Excerpted from the 13<sup>th</sup> –15<sup>th</sup> Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic announcements (1994-1996):*

The north side of the central Alaska Range-locally known as the Hayes Range offers one of the finest hiking, skiing or mountain bike routes in Alaska. It has been traversed from highway to highway many times, gaining recognition as a classic Alaskan wilderness trek. Game trails lace the tundra, bears are wary, and brush is virtually non-existent. Beyond the easy travel, outstanding big-sky views of the Interior stretch north, while to the south stunning 9,000 to 13,000 foot peaks rise above the tundra plains. The north face of Mt. Moffit climbs 9,000 vertical feet above the Trident Glacier, Mt. Hayes a similar amount above the Hayes Glacier, and the north faces of Mts. Deborah and Hess stab 6,000 sheer feet above the Gilliam Glacier. Farther west the lower mountains are ice-free but retain a rugged aspect incised by glacial streams. The Yanert River valley may be the most beautiful valley in the Alaska Range. The longest east-west running valley in the entire Range, it provides a natural passage along the Denali Fault. The braided Yanert River, from its glacial source to Moose Creek, moves quickly but can be easily managed in a packraft. The total distance along this route is about 140 miles. Other, glacial routes are possible but often cold, uncomfortable, scary and dangerous. A detailed description of the suggested, non-glacial route follows:

Gaining the high plains. From the Richardson Highway at Black Rapids, the Delta River is seen to rumble along in a single channel. The river is high volume, cold, and punctuated

with tall standing waves. While Sherpa packrafts have been used to cross here, it is not advisable for those with vinyl rafts or little experience to attempt it. (2009 NOTE: since all racers are required to have either Sherpa or Alpacka rafts, the vinyl raft comment doesn't matter – the “little experience” comment still matters) A better crossing lies two to four miles downstream where the river begins to braid and slow. Above and below Donnelly Creek (near “Donnelly” at B3 on page 106 [1<sup>st</sup> edition, 3<sup>rd</sup> printing] of the *Alaska Atlas & Gazetteer*) the Delta has been waded/swum, but this is difficult and dangerous. Beware of high winds anywhere along the Delta.

McGuiness Creek drains McGuiness Glacier. Where the creek exits its small canyon and spills onto its alluvial fan in the Delta valley, there stands a large boulder. Looking along the north bank, in the woodland of stunted aspen trees, an all-terrain vehicle road enters the brush. This road leads up from the valley of the Delta to the tundra tables above. Once atop the tundra rim of the Delta Valley, the best route leaves the road and heads west for the Trident Glacier.

Across the plains to the East Fork Little Delta Checkpoint (2009 note: no checkpoint in 2009): Between McGuiness Creek and the Trident Glacier, the ten miles of incised tundra hills require a few moderately steep climbs and several rolling rambles. McGuiness Peak's main and north summits are prominent to the south. Descending to the Trident Glacier's rubble provides a choice in routes. The ice is covered in moraine, but potentially hazardous with moulin streams. No crevasses will threaten here (indeed there'll be no snow this low to obscure them if they were present) and a popular route follows the medial moraine, then drops off the other side in the flat outwash along the west side. This is fine hiking and offers a convenient short cut over to the Hayes Glacier near the benchmark *Glacier* (B2, pg. 106 *Alaska Atlas & Gazetteer*). The Hayes Glacier moraine is more jumbled than the Trident, and may best be avoided by crossing its outwash at the toe of the glacier. Hayes Glacier is unique as the glacier splits to feed two Hayes Creeks – East and West. After crossing East Hayes Creek climb the plateau and descend the West Hayes Creek to a low divide to Whistler Creek and on to East Fork Little Delta. There will be an un-occupied sign-in checkpoint on the East Fork Little Delta River bar between Whistler Creek and the Gillam Glacier Moraine. It will be marked with flagging and obvious. This point is approximately 55 miles from the start. (2009 note – no checkpoint in 2009)

(Note: some racers may consider following the Gillam Glacier up and over to the Yanert Glacier. This will necessitate a steep headwall and possibly crampons. The north branch of the Yanert Glacier may be somewhat crevassed. This route formed a portion of the Denali Dash Mountain Ski Race for three years.)

To the Yanert and Finish. Follow the Little Delta River upstream along the east bank to the Gillam Glacier moraine. Cross the moraine or the river and ascend to the plateau due north. Beautiful views of the spectacular Gillam peaks are visible on clear days from this pocket plateau. A slot pass leads west and down to the upper reaches of Buchanan

Creek. Follow Buchanan creek up to the pass and descend the easy tundra valley to West Fork Little Delta River. There is an airstrip about one mile upstream on the right and a small, locked, private cabin about 4 miles farther and on the left. The cabin is southwest of *Head* benchmark (A6, pg. 105 *Alaska Atlas & Gazetteer*) and is due east of the lowest pass that leads over to the Wood River from the upper, unnamed fork of the West Fork Little Delta. There will be a second un-occupied, sign-in checkpoint at the cabin. (2009 note – no checkpoint) Hiking is easy up and over the pass and down the Wood River on soft, flat schist rock.

The Wood is a small, braided glacial river easily rafted. Horse-packing and game trails abound on the north side of the river through the buck-brush of shrub birch and willow as far as Anderson Mountain. Travelers may choose to leave the Wood at Big Grizzly Creek to pass over and descend Edgar Creek to the Yanert. (There is another private cabin at Edgar Creek, somewhat hidden and difficult to find in the woods on the east side of where Edgar creek enters the Yanert.) The gentle but swift and braided Yanert can be floated for about 25 miles to Moose Creek. Here the Yanert enters a canyon of Class III-IV rapids on its rush to the Nenana. Avoid the canyon by looking for a trail leading left from the bank as the river narrows, and follow it through the muskeg and bog for 7 miles to the McKinley Village airstrip-marked as Denali Landing Strip on some maps (B3, pg. 104 *Alaska Atlas & Gazetteer*). This will be the finish. (Note: There is another, less boggy trail that follows the base of mountains to the south, but we lack detail as to its whereabouts.)”

**2009 Note: GET OUT OF THE YANERT BEFORE IT ENTERS THE CANYON NEAR THE ENTRANCE OF MOOSE CREEK.**