

Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White

Part V: More Game Patrols

ALTHOUGH the airplane was a tremendous help in patrolling the wide reaches of Interior Alaska for the Game Commission in the 1930's, it certainly wasn't the answer in all cases. Lots of times a job called for the use of river-boat, canoe, dog team, shanks mare, or, as roads began to reach out from Fairbanks, my old pickup truck.

On one trip into the Birch Creek country in the fall of 1935, I found that the right combination was truck and canoe, starting out with the truck as a decoy. The Steese Highway touches close to Birch Creek and its tributaries as it winds north to Circle City on the Yukon. At one of these points there was a registered guide who allegedly had been keeping some fifty dogs for pay and feeding them on caribou meat. I wanted to lift his license as I felt that if this was true he was incapable of being a good guide. I had checked him several times by driving over the highway, but I never found the evidence.

Finally I decided I'd take a trip down Birch Creek from the junction of Twelve-mile Creek and Eagle Creek near the highway, check the game population en route, and see if I could catch this guy from behind. There was a telephone line along the highway, so I had an assistant accompany me down to where I launched the canoe and took off down Birch Creek. Then he drove my truck back to Fairbanks, making sure it was seen at many places along the highway.

I proceeded downstream, camping the first night at Harrison Creek, and the second at a trapper's log cabin which was new and built by somebody who really knew how. The place had been given the high-sounding name, "The Great Unknown." The weather was good and the country beautiful. Game was abundant and the moose and caribou mating season was in full swing. In due time I reached Buckley Bar where I made a swing on foot up to Windy Springs where mountain sheep come to lick the minerals.

Below Buckley Bar the Birch is swift and rocky until it flows out from the foothills. I had to snub the canoe all the way down and the going was slow and tedious. But I made the flats by late evening and camped on a large gravel bar. About twenty feet from the water's edge, a long large spruce tree had lodged against the bar. The roots held the bole of the tree about five feet off the bar, and behind the root and under the bole

was a groove about a foot deep made by a swirl in the water. On the root hung dry grass and small roots which I gathered up and laid in the groove under the log as a mattress. With my sleeping bag on top, no luxury hotel ever provided a better bed.

Sometime around midnight I awoke and heard a large animal come down over the bank and splash into the water. I could dimly make out a huge moose who seemed to be in a real hurry. He hit the water, came out on the bar,



The author as a flying game warden.

stepped over the spruce sweeper about twenty feet from my bed and was gone. I was just turning this over in my mind when another huge shape loomed up on the bank. It was a grizzly bear after the moose. He hit the bar just a bit lower than the moose and took off on a fast lope for the woods on the moose's trail. I lay awake for about a half an hour, but finally decided neither was coming back.

I awoke again about five-thirty a.m. It was a beautiful morning. A little spiral of smoke about the width of a pencil was slowly rising straight up from my evening fire, with not a breath of air to disturb it. It was so comfortable, I just lay back.

About an hour later, still snug in my sack, I took a look down the bar and saw a small pair of moose antlers about 400 yards away moving slowly in my direction. As they got closer I could see that it was a "Mulligan Bull" and the mating season was passing him by. He strolled along until he arrived opposite

my camp and stopped just eighty feet away. There he assumed a relaxed position and seemed to be taking a nap, as his head drooped and the eye towards me closed. He looked in real good condition so I decided to take him before he woke up. I shot from my sack at the butt of the ear. He collapsed and never even twitched a muscle. I had rope, axes, saws, knives and a six-foot square of canvas, so I did a real fancy butchering job. I hung the meat on a tripod to drain and cool. There was a heavy frost that night and I kept the fire going, hoping the big bear would not come back. And luck was with me—he didn't.

Early the next morning I was on my way again with a minimum of freeboard on the canoe. The current was swift but there was plenty of water and no more rocks. I had taken the whole moose right down from his ears to his knees, including the nose which I always saved for Grandma Callahan, a much beloved old native woman in Fairbanks. The hide and entrails were left on the bar with the head and feet.

Two days later I beached my canoe less than a mile above where the Steese Highway crosses Birch Creek. It was close to this bridge where the guide was allegedly feeding caribou meat to the dogs. I again hung my moose meat out on a tripod, and readied my canoe light for a dash to the bridge at dog feeding time. About three p.m. I dropped down to just above the last bend and waited. An hour later I heard the general rumpus of feeding time—barks, howls and general uproar—so I got into the canoe and shoved off.

The man was so engrossed in feeding the dogs that I was standing on the beach before he saw me. He had just thrown a hunk of meat to a dog and had turned to pick up another when he spotted me. The look that came over his face was something to see. He just sat down on a box and allowed as how he had been caught red-handed, which was literally true as his hands were covered with gore. Under the bridge and screened by brush, twenty-two caribou were hanging, and parts of other caribou were scattered about. The case was terminated the next day before a U. S. Commissioner in Circle City with a jail sentence and fine.

I retrieved my moose meat and camp gear from up the river, and Johnny Palm, the mail carrier who started this route with dogs, then horses, and now a modern truck, hauled my meat to town for me free. Speaking of Johnny, let me

call you a little story about him and his bosom pals, Riley Erickson and Old Man Staid.

Riley and Old Man Staid ran the Central Roadhouse and Trading Post. Riley handled the store part and post office, and the Old Man cooked and took care of the roadhouse. Johnny, of course, was in and out with the Fairbanks-Circle mail.

When "duck stamps" first came around, 2,500 of them were sent to the Circle Post Office and nobody knew quite what to do with them. About the same time, Riley started feeding several flocks of spruce grouse which were hanging around and dusting in the road. They got as tame as domestic hens. The season on grouse opened shortly before Johnny came to town on his next mail run. He had his shotgun in the truck with him, and could scarcely believe hunting could be that easy. What he didn't know was that those grouse were Riley's tame ones.

Riley was so mad he threatened to turn his friend in to the Game Commission. But since Johnny had the proper license and had done the deed all nice and legal, this wouldn't do. Then Riley thought of all the duck stamps. He had not sold one yet. So he made his bosom

pal buy a duck stamp for shooting his grouse.

Then there was Staid the cook, a fine old gentleman. I was in Central one summer when a couple of young ladies from Fairbanks, neighbors of ours, were on a walking tour and had stopped at the roadhouse for the noonday meal. From the table one could look into the kitchen with a clear view of the stove. There was Old Man Staid, cooking caribou steaks and vigorously combing his beard with the steak fork. And up on the warming shelf sat a pan of dough rising, covered by a towel, and on top lay a pussy cat with the dough bulging out from under. I assured the girls Mr. Staid's cooking was excellent, but they were trying hard not to see.

Duck stamps and duck hunting presented a bit of a problem all over the Interior in those days. It was the general theory that by the time the season opened in September, all the ducks and geese had already gone south. So in the 1920's and extending into the 1930's on a diminishing scale, it was customary for the residents around Fairbanks to indulge in some illegal shooting when the ducks and geese returned in April and May.

In a way, this was understandable. The winters were long and rough, and

in those days the meat markets weren't stocked as they are now. During those winters you could be certain that two cold spells, one in December and one in January, would hit the sixty-five degree below zero mark and stay there awhile. When you looked at your thermometer and saw the mercury resting at minus sixty-five in the morning, and the same at noon, and the same at three p.m., and the same twenty-four hours around for several days in succession, you began to think the darned thing was stuck. Under these conditions, it was small wonder that everyone wanted to get out and do something different when the warm weather and the long daylight hours returned.

Fairbanks was small at that time and there were not the big clearings and fields around. Ducks were sitting in puddles all over town, and geese were on the pools in the ball park. Shotguns often boomed right in the city, and an occasional charge of shot could be heard rattling on a sheet iron roof. A few people objected, but they were a very small minority.

It was, of course, my duty to try to enforce the migratory bird act, which was an international law. But it was absolutely impossible to take a shooter

The advertisement features a black and white photograph of a vintage truck with a camper top. The camper top is shown in two states: raised and lowered. An upward-pointing arrow with the text "UP FOR LIVING" is positioned above the raised camper, and a downward-pointing arrow with the text "DOWN FOR TRAVEL" is positioned below the lowered camper. In the top left corner, there is a logo for "THE ALASKAN CAMPER" featuring a moose head. The background of the photo is dark, making the truck stand out.

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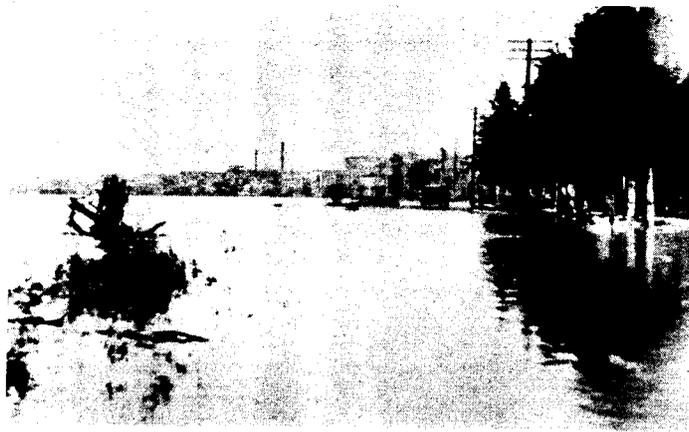
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Fairbanks during the big flood of August, 1937.

into court and get a conviction. So the only thing I could do was to resort to harrassment near town by grabbing a few shotguns and trying to crowd the shooting farther into the country, trusting to time and changing events to some day put enforcement on a firmer basis. Most of the shotguns seized were held for a month or two, and where releases were not obtained, were returned to the owners later. Frequently the owners were not the hunters from whom the guns were seized.

Anyway, for a period of about two weeks in the spring I didn't get much sleep. There were teenagers then, too, who after being pretty well cooped up all winter had to get out and kick up their heels. Many of them had jalopies, and I would take after them in the official pickup and sometimes run them into a blind road and give them a good frisking. One day I overhauled a bunch of these young chaps and shook them down real good without finding any evidence. I was walking back to my pickup when one of them yelled after me, "Hey, Sam, you didn't look in the tool box!" Of course, this story made the rounds and brought many good laughs.

There are lots of jokes tied onto game agents, and I fell heir to my share of

them. One bright May morning about two a.m., I was tooling along the old Valdez Trail, now the Richardson Highway, in my truck when I saw an elderly guy ahead of me with a burlap sack. I stopped and asked him what was in the sack. He grinned sort of sheepishly and said, "My cabin is over there in those trees, and I plant a garden each spring and have to have fertilizer." He was picking up fertilizer along the road from the four-horse teams that hauled wood into Fairbanks. I looked in his sack and vertified this. The next morning the story was about town that I had run my arm into the sack up to the elbow. By afternoon, it was no longer the elbow, it was the shoulder.

Along with the ducks and geese, each spring brought the breakup. And often with the breakup came the floods.

In the spring of 1937 high water covered all of Wendell Avenue, the greater part of First Avenue, and extended up Cushman Street to Sixth. It also came into my driveway at Ninth and Kellum. Since I was equipped with an eighteen-foot canoe and a twenty-foot shovel-nose poling boat, I had several very busy days assisting flood victims, moving them to dry parts of town and retrieving trunks, suitcases and boxes

of valuables that were floating about. Wooden sidewalks also were floating around, as well as dog houses and sections of picket fences.

The hardy people of Fairbanks took this in their stride. At that time, no one was there to tell us the flood was coming, and what to do before it got there, and how to conduct our affairs, and how to save our lives, and what to do afterwards, and so forth. Fairbanks was having a flood—and that was that. Everyone pitched in and helped, and even the victims seemed to take the attitude, "A flood—so what? In a few days it will be gone and we will clean up."

But that year it was quite a flood. One oldtimer had a high shookum fence around his lot on Wendell Avenue. Stove wood and heater wood was floating down the street past him. He opened his gate and rigged a boom, and soon his lot was absolutely crowded with wood all ready for the stove. But that evening the water rose higher than his fence, and the wood took off down the Chena.

Anyway, that was the spring I planned a Game Commission patrol down the Yukon and up tributary streams, and on May 23, Agent Gren Collins and I left Fairbanks in the shovel-nose boat with



Poling boats and canoes were very much in demand.

load of camp gear and plenty of groceries. We stopped at Nenana to take on extra gasoline and oil for our outboard motor and found them also cleaning up after the flood. At Tanana, the Yukon's banks were piled high with ice, and huge blocks of ice were scattered about the streets of the town.

We were anxious to get into the mouth of the Novi (Nowitna on the map) before the trappers came out of the hills. From Tanana to the Novi, the Yukon was walled in by ice towering high above the river level and there was only one place where we could get ashore. As luck would have it, at that place lived an alien who had three big illegal bear traps, twenty-one firearms, and no license. We relieved him of this property, as an alien in those days had to have a license to possess firearms. The traps, dangerous as well as illegal, we sank at once in the Yukon.

Early in the morning of May 28, we entered the mouth of the Novi, and a little later we met the first boat of two trappers drifting down the river. An inspection showed some contraband beaver which was taken over for the government and released by the defendants. Upon ascertaining that they were out of practically all supplies and gasoline, we gave them coffee, sugar, a few beans and a can of milk. We also gave them a gallon of mixed gasoline so they could be sure to hit Kokrines on the opposite bank of the Yukon where they could buy the supplies needed. Then we waved them on.

They looked real confused when they left us, as though they didn't know whether to be happy or sad. We had taken their contraband fur and the .22 caliber rifle it was purported to have been shot with. But on the other hand, they had been given enough gas to cross the Yukon, and food and coffee which they had been out of for several weeks.

As we progressed up the Novi we met more boats. Some of them had contraband and some didn't. We took the contraband fur and the guns they claimed to have shot this with. Then we gave those who were out of gas enough to put them across to Kokrines, and those who were out of food got some of the necessities, along with a little coffee or tea. Each babe in arms got a can of milk. Many of the trappers were traveling with their families.

In one boat we found a small roll of contraband, along with several beat-up .22 caliber rifles. In amongst the guns was a new .22 caliber repeater without a scratch or a speck of rust on it. When I asked the chap which gun he'd shot the contraband with, he pointed to the new shiny one. Taken somewhat aback by this honesty, I waited a minute or two and then picked up one of the

older guns. "No, not that one," he said. "The new one." I tried to give him one more out, and asked, "Are you sure?" But he replied, "I should know which gun I used." Well then, of course, I had to take the new one.

Nearing the high ground forty miles upriver, we saw four-foot lengths of steamboat wood floating through the forests. All this wood had washed up from the Yukon where it had been cut and piled on the banks of the river for the steamboats. The wood-cutters sure took a terrific beating on their wood that year.

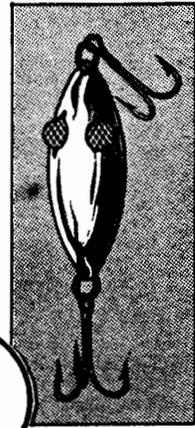
At one point we saw a rabbit floating down the river on a log. He was doomed if he kept going downstream. We pulled over and to our great surprise he leaped into the boat. He cowered under a seat but would raise up and look out on the river every now and then. We were within a mile or two of high ground when he saw a bunch of foam and brush floating by, and leaped out of the boat. He didn't make it. In his weakened condition he struggled only a moment in the icy water and was gone.

Soon we came to a trapper's cabin on the bank with water lapping at the eaves. On its sod roof were only slightly fewer than one million field mice, but we tied the boat to the cabin and moved right in amongst them. They were friendly little fellows, and as soon as we opened the grub box they swarmed into it. We had to stand up to eat, and cooking was virtually impossible. Every time we opened the chuck box we would find a couple of mice in it that had been shut in from the opening before. But they didn't seem to mind a bit.

Then a strange thing happened. Promptly at seven o'clock that evening, every last mouse ran off the roof into the water and swam off into the woods as one mouse. In one hour they came swimming back to us and swarmed up onto the roof again. Then at seven o'clock the next morning the mice repeated their trek to the woods. We were packed up and loaded when they returned, and as they clambered up, we shoved off, leaving some cold hotcakes which we hoped they enjoyed.

About noon we arrived at high ground

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The cabin where we were visited by only slightly fewer than a million mice.

on the Novi and went ashore and pitched camp. As we unloaded the boat we found about a dozen of our little friends from the cabin roof had come along too, and were doing real well by themselves. Two more popped out when we opened the chuck box.

We camped at a bend where we could look both up and down the river, and divided the time into watches to catch up on sleep. According to our list, there was only one man left upriver above

us and we figured he should be showing up soon. After a time he came drifting around the bend, and we hailed him in.

In the middle of his boat was half of a fresh-killed moose. The dogs were eating off one end and he was eating off the other. The flies were eating all over it. He had been out of food for ten days and was hungry. He was a long, lean, good-natured Scandinavian, probably in his late sixties, and he kept apologizing for shooting the moose. He seemed to think that I would see to it that he was locked up forthwith and the key thrown into the Yukon. Finally I convinced him that the kill was legal under the circumstances. We fed him three times before he left our camp, and he really filled up on coffee, hotcakes, bacon and eggs. Then since we were going no farther up, we gave him a good supply of food and plenty of gasoline. He had no contraband. He was very much respected along the river.

Back on the Yukon, we stopped off at Ruby, and then proceeded on to Galena, Koyukuk and Nulato. All were hard hit by the flood. At Nulato, there was still a little water in Pop Russell's store, but we tied our boat to his door

and moved in anyway.

Since there was nothing we could do because of the flood conditions, we volunteered to help Pop clean up. That was a big order. Four shelves which stretched the length of the trading post had collapsed, dumping their contents into the water. These held cases and cases of canned goods and, of course, all the labels came off and no one could tell what was in them. So Gren suggested a "damaged goods sale," and Pop thought it was a great idea. A bunch of washtubs were lined up outside, since the trading post was still knee-deep in mud; Pop put on a very substantial mark-down, and Gren started selling. The natives entered right into the spirit of the occasion. Muskrat skins were legal tender, and Pop ended up sans canned goods and with a haystack of muskrat pelts. Everyone wanted peaches, but many wound up with sauerkraut.

About the only thing that really bothered Pop was that his brand new Sears & Roebuck gasoline motor-driven washing machine had arrived just in time to be submerged in silt water for two days. But Gren and I spent a day taking it to pieces and cleaning every last part of it. Pop was very pleased. On another trip there in later months he demonstrated to me how nice it worked. ▲

(More Next Month)

Letters, Notes and Comments

Continued from page 4

The first thing Minnie did was to open a window so some air would come in and she could breathe. Then she took the wheel and got the boat headed into the seas. She pulled off her petticoat and used it to lash the wheel. She could hear water sloshing around down below, so she held her breath and went down. A porthole was open and water pouring in. She shut and fastened it, but she couldn't stay any longer because of the ether. After she got some fresh air in her lungs, she went down again and started the pump and set the engine at slow speed, just enough to keep steerage way.

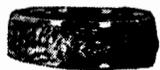
Other members of the crew were lying around unconscious down below, but there was nothing she could do for them right away. They were too heavy for her to carry up on deck, so she opened a ventilator and went back to the wheel house. She had heard that soda pop would get rid of poisonous gas. They

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