

Sam White, Alaskan

By Sam O. White



The author and his plane while doing summer charter work.

Part X—Contract on the Kobuk

IN the spring of 1952 I obtained a contract with the U. S. Geological Survey to work in the Kobuk River Valley, God's own country, so far as I'm concerned. The party consisted of two botanists, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Sigafos, and two geologists, Don Nichols and Art Fernald. They had had a previous season, but had not had a plane under full-time charter before and were somewhat amazed and very pleased at what a plane could do for them. It made the party's movements more flexible.

Our first camp was at Shungnak in what had been Ferguson's old trading post and later a Civil Aeronautics station, but which was now abandoned. In the mornings I would fly the botanists out and leave them on a lake or river, and then take the geologists out to their work at a different spot. At noon I would return and move them all to another location. So we worked it all summer.

The ice in some of the lakes was very late in moving out that spring, and Kobuk Lake (Hotham Inlet) held on later than any. I had an order in for plenty of gas at Kotzebue, but couldn't get at it until the ice went out. In the meantime, it wasn't long before I'd used up all the gas on the Kobuk River, plus what small shipments Wien's mail plane could bring me on regular trips. Johnny James was flying the mail plane at that time. He was a natural, not only on the flying part, but he seemed to know what everybody in the Kobuk needed and I needed

gas and he knew it and never lost a chance to bring as many cans as his load would allow. Even so, on a few occasions I had to use some very questionable gas.

Two seasons before, I had left three drums of gas at Kiana, so I flew over to get it. The people I'd stored it with were very vague but finally admitted that "it might have been used." Goodbye to that gas. However W. R. Blankenship let me have the last can of a small quantity he held in reserve and that, plus another shipment via the Wien mail plane, got me through until the ice went out of Kobuk Lake.

About that time, May Brown at Kobuk Village became alarmed over the continued absence of a family of three who were overdue on a trip into Norutak Lake. From this lake they had to walk thirty-five or forty miles back to the Kobuk River where they could drift down to the village. So I made medicine with my party for release to go see what was holding them up.

I left Kobuk Village about eleven p.m. and was over the lake shortly after midnight. There I found that the daughter of the family, a very attractive fourteen-year-old, was ill and unable to make the overland hike to the river. So I flew them out, and the girl subsequently made a complete recovery at the Kotzebue hospital. Her parents were so grateful that her mother made bread for us for the rest of the summer which I picked up on a regular day each week. They wanted to furnish the flour for this too, but the chief

of our party would not permit them to do so. Anyway we had the luxury of fresh bread all summer long.

My regular bread runs into Kobuk Village also led to many a tasty lunch with May and her father, Harry Brown, a longtime trader on the Kobuk. Actually May was then Mrs. Tony Bernhardt, but she was so well known as May Brown, that's what everybody called her. Tony, her husband, was very much interested in my float ship, and I often saw him leaning in the door, studying the controls and gauges. He is an accomplished pilot now, with an enviable record.

After a time we moved our camp to Kavet Creek, a short stream which rises in the Waring Mountains on the south bank of the Kobuk River. This is near what we used to call the "Big Sand Blow"—miles and miles of rolling sand dunes which look quite out of place so far inland. I first saw the dunes in the early 1930's. At that time Mr. Blankenship of Kiana told me he thought they were spreading. A few years later I marked down a spot in the southeast corner where there was a good stand of timber covering several acres between the dunes and Kavet Creek.

When we flew in to make our camp I observed that the dunes had moved over the timber so that just the tops protruded from the sand. The creek, which used to flow to the head of the dunes, skirt around them on the southeast side, and then flow north into the Kobuk, had disappeared right under the corner of the dunes and then reappeared about three-quarters of a mile away in its customary banks. The sand was too porous, apparently, to dam up the creek, as it appeared to be running well within its old borders. It looked to me that summer that the dunes were about a mile longer than when I first saw them. I estimated they were, in 1952, about six miles long, north and south, and two-and-a-half miles wide, east and west. There is another smaller set of dunes fifteen or twenty miles east of these, situated farther back from the river, and still another set between the Koyukuk and Huslia rivers.

Well, camp was duly moved and set up below a big cut bank far back in a meadow at the edge of the brush line. The members of the party were a bit confused when I selected a site so far back from the water, but accepted my judgment when I told them that the

water would rise steadily for the next few weeks. It was a beautiful spot, and we had a ready supply of firewood and excellent water. Also the river rose right on cue, as predicted, and we wound up with a four-foot path between the tents and the water's edge.

During the season the geologists wanted to go to the heads of just as many tributaries as possible. I would land them in a pot hole or a blind slough where I could get in loaded, all right, but in many cases I was pinched to get out, even empty. Then I'd have to resort to draining gas to the extent of having just enough left for one take-off run and the trip back to camp. The two geologists had a fold-boat apiece to make the journey back down to the Kobuk. I would keep track of them from the air, and usually pick them up about a week later on the river.

On one of their trips down a tributary, they stopped for lunch on a bar in a bend beneath a 300 to 400-foot cut bank of crumbly gravel. They had their lunch all spread out and ready to eat when they spotted a huge grizzly on top of the bluff. He showed unmistakable signs of his intention of joining them for lunch. But when he placed one paw over the edge he started a gravel slide, so he pulled back and elected to go around the bank. By the time he reached the picnic grounds, the boys were in their fold-boats making time down the river, leaving their lunches neatly laid out for Mr. Bear.

Miles and miles of rolling sand dunes lie along the Kobuk River, just south of the Arctic Circle.



Photo by Dolores D. Roguszka

From our Kavet Creek camp we made spike camps first at Selby Lake and then at Maneluk Lake. Selby Lake, northeast of Kobuk Village, is in a beautiful setting of high mountains, with its south end just emerging out onto a flat bench. It is shaped like an hour glass, and the two loops combined make it about fifteen miles long, north and south. The water is clear and cold, and in some places very deep. It has a fair supply of lake trout, grayling and pike, and its shores have a plentiful supply of grizzly bears.

Our next trip was to put a spike camp at the head of the Selawick River where there was a group of three lakes above timber. I'd been to these lakes before, and had also seen photographs of them which had been taken by the U. S. Air Force. But when we flew in I got very confused. Instead of three lakes, there was one big lake—and that didn't jibe with my memory or with the pictures. It took some thinking to figure that out, but the geologists and botanists pooled their talents and came up with the answer. This was permafrost country and also peat country. And what had happened was that the neck of land between each lake had simply sunk and disappeared.

Just before we left our camp on Kavet Creek, one of the geologists, Don Nichols, and I had a rather disconcerting experience. We had just taken off to check up on some good looking geology we had seen from the air, and had acquired about 800 feet altitude when the motor



Photo by James Balog

The ice in some of the lakes was very late in moving out that spring.

blotted out completely. There was not even a snort left in it. We were over a timbered area with the tail towards the river, so I made a quick turn while the speed was still up. Right away it became apparent that getting over a rim of higher trees right along the river bank was going to take some real strategy.

I was shooting for all or nothing. I managed to keep the speed up to seventy-five miles per hour but when I got to the line of trees the tops were right even with my eyes. I popped the flaps with a quick jerk. The ship rose, passed over the trees, and then fluttered on the verge of a stall. But I pointed the nose down at the water, and we landed smooth and nice without even a bump. We were above camp so we drifted down and tied up at the usual place. It all went off so well that Don was as cool and unruffled as he would have been in a rocking chair. Which was more than you could say for me.

What happened to the motor? Well, the "questionable" gas I'd burned earlier had had its effect. John Cross came by the next day and the message went out. So a few days later I was in the air again with my spare motor. I shipped the ailing engine out to Art Whitaker at Portland, Oregon, for overhaul. I typed the following message on a tag and put it on the engine: "On July 31 this old mill swallowed a valve and gave up the ghost on the Kobuk River at the mouth of Kavet Creek, near the big sand dunes. Poor old Sam." When I got the motor back the same old tag was on it with this message, "We certainly appreciate this note. We know now right where it happened. Art Whitaker." I kept the tag and have it in an album. The spare engine was an identical motor, and we finished out the season with it.



Photo by James Balog
A lake in the tundra country with thunderclouds overhead.

After doing the Kobuk Valley to Walker Lake and the Selawik Valley, we moved on down to Kiana where we did the Squirrel River Valley and then took a quick look at the Noatak River. I had some gas cached on a long narrow lake there and one day the other geologist, Art Fernald, and I stopped to load up. A large herd of caribou was milling around the lake. Art poked along the shore and then wandered off. I had gassed up one tank when he ran back and hollered, "Do you see that bear?"

I hadn't, but I looked up on the side of the mountain across the lake and I saw him, all right. He was no customer to try to bluff with a .22 caliber emergency gun.

"What's he going to do?" Art asked.

"He is coming right over here after us," I said, and quickly started mapping our strategy.

"Throw four cans of gas into cargo," I said. "The bear can have the rest. When he gets to that rock we will cross the lake to the other side and gas up the other tank."

The bear came down to the shore on the opposite side, and I had a bad moment thinking he was going to swim over to us. But he didn't. He took off down the shoreline for the end of the lake. The caribou cleared out of his path as he progressed, but they didn't run away. They seemed to know he had something else in mind for a menu for lunch. We jumped into the plane as he came barreling around the end of the lake, and taxied to the opposite shore. There we filled the other tank while the bear amused himself by flattening out the remaining gas cans.

Then he got interested in us again, and started back around the lake. The caribou just parted out of his way as before. We had to put some oil in for the next hop, so we pulled out into the lake and

did this as we floated around. Again we kept a weather eye on the big bruiser to make sure he didn't start to swim out to us. Fortunately, the nice shiny cans intrigued him again. He seemed to think they looked better all flattened out.

We took off from there with no regrets, and flew up the Noatak, over to Cutter River, back to Kavet Creek for more gas, and then into Kiana.

Shortly after that we moved into Kotzebue, and our last trip of the season was to Imuruk Lake where the botanists wanted to check the vegetation. We flew out there early in the morning on the first of September and spent the whole day. While the botanists were busy collecting samples, I spotted a movement about fifty yards from where I had the plane moored. I took the .22 rifle and went over to check.

It turned out to be a big wild goose with a broken wing. He was obviously downed and had been left behind by his south-bound companions. He had selected a little indentation in the shore-

line, and had cropped the grass in a circle for about fifty feet around the pool. He was excessively fat since he had been getting no exercise.

As I approached he moved into the center of the pool and hissed at me. I could have killed him, but I didn't. I went back to the plane for a small geologist's spade and cut some turf that was out of his reach and arranged it around the pool. While I was doing this, my eye caught another movement. About 300 to 400 feet away was a red fox lying on his belly watching me. I bounced a .22 bullet off a rock alongside him, and he sure took off with his tail flying. The shot flushed another red fox out of the grass, too, and sent it scurrying up the hill. I dropped a few more bullets near them before they disappeared. Of course, they would be back.

That afternoon we left the lake and flew back in to Kotzebue. It had been a wonderful summer on the Kobuk for me, among congenial and diligent workers.

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