

Boaters with good intermediate paddling skills and wilderness survival skills will find the Chitina to be an excellent wilderness trip in the heart of the nation's largest national park—Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, encompassing more than 13 million acres. Born in the St. Elias Mountains where four glaciers meet at the Canadian border, 100 miles northwest of Yakutat, these glaciers flow about 30 miles to become the terminus of the Chitina Glacier. The Chitina River begins at 2,000 feet and flows 112 miles in a profusely braided manner past spectacular mountain scenery, carving its way through a glacial valley with peaks rising over 16,000 feet, before emptying into the Copper River.

The Chitina Valley is a rift separating the Wrangell Mountains from the St. Elias Mountains. One of the scenic highlights is floating past MacColl Ridge, where waterfalls cascade from steep cliffs of multicolored rock, carving deep ravines through bedrock to expose rich strata of geologic history. Hiking is excellent in the upper river, especially in the desertlike terrain surrounding the Chitina Glacier, where the river first emerges.

As the river descends, each new tributary adds force and volume. The clearwater tributaries are very tempting as camping spots, but grizzlies also find these spots attractive, particularly when the salmon are running. Respect wildlife and your own safety, and camp away from these spots. The river is big and cold, with silt so dense you can hear it singing on the bottom of your boat. The Chitina, a fast-moving complex of shallow channels with numerous gravel bars, requires good skills in reading turbid water. Though only moderately technical, the river runs through a region that is wild and remote.

Small bands of Athapaskans moved into the region of the Wrangell Mountains and the Chitina Valley about 2,000 years ago. These Ahtna called the river Chitina, which means "copper river." The Ahtna utilized copper long before non-Natives ever appeared in the valley. Beginning in 1819, traders made several attempts to ascend the Chitina River, but all failed, in part because of the hostility of the Ahtna. In 1885, Lieutenant Henry Allen became the first American to ascend the Chitina. He found the Ahtna friendly, but the environment harsh. He and his men nearly starved to death.

Prospectors followed in the footsteps of Allen's expedition and many mines were established in the late 1800s. The big discovery, a large vein of copper named Bonanza, was not found until 1900, beginning the boom days of the Chitina Valley. By 1911, with construction of the Copper River and Northwestern Railway, Chitina had a population of 2,000 people.

**Rating:** Class II. May involve 2.5-mile portage (5 hours or more) to get to the main river channel.

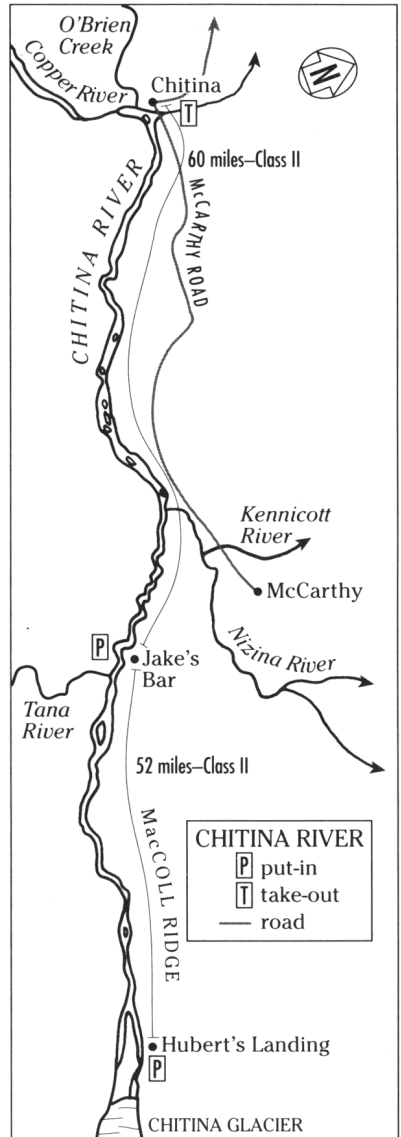
**Cautions:** Grizzlies often frequent the mouths of clearwater tributaries (Chakina, Gilahina, Lakina, and Tebay). Cold, silty glacial water; harsh weather.

**Trip length:** 112 miles between Hubert's Landing and Chitina, at the confluence of the Chitina and Copper rivers; allow 7 days. 60 miles from Jake's Bar to Chitina; allow 4 days.

**Season:** Late May through mid-September. River flow fluctuates tremendously depending on time of day (glacier melt during sunny weather) and precipitation. The Chitina generally hits peak flow in late July and early August.

**Watercraft:** Rafts of all sizes, inflatable or hard-shell kayaks, decked canoes.

**Access:** In—Put in by air from Chitina, McCarthy, or Gulkana to Hubert's Landing area, a bumpy tundra strip just below the terminus of the Chitina Glacier. Then portage 2.5 miles to the main river channel. To avoid this grueling portage, put in by wheelplane at Jake's Bar, Mile 52 on the Chitina. Out—Take out on right side of the





*Flood waters on McCarthy Creek, after three days of heavy rainfall.*

river at the Copper River bridge at Chitina. To do this, stay on the far right side of the Chitina for at least a mile above its confluence with the Copper. When you begin to see steep bluffs on the right, get ready to pull in on the right immediately at the end of the bluff. Then drag or carry your boat between a quarter-mile and a half-mile upstream. Or, take out at O'Brien Creek, the first obvious creek entering the Copper River, 3.5 miles downstream from Chitina. If you take out at that point, be sure to get way over on the right-hand side as soon as you enter the Copper River. If you miss O'Brien Creek, you'll have to run 100 more miles on the Copper to the next take-out point.

**Land manager:** Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve; state; Ahtna Inc. (See Land Managers section at back of book for address and phone information.)

**Maps:** McCarthy A-2, A-3, A-4, A-5, A-6, B-6, B-7, B-8; Valdez B-1, C-1, C-2.

**Fish:** Sockeye, coho, chum, and pink salmon spawn in clearwater tributaries of the Chitina. **Wildlife:** Brown and grizzly bear, Dall sheep, moose, wolf, coyote, bald eagle, migratory waterfowl. The Chitina bison herd may be seen in the vicinity of the Chitina's confluence with the Tana River.