

Portions of the Gulkana River were designated as part of the National Wild and Scenic River system by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980. A wild river is free of impoundments, generally inaccessible except by trail, has primitive watersheds and shorelines, and has unpolluted waters. The Gulkana was recognized for its primitive character, abundant fish and wildlife, and its geologic, cultural and recreational values. There are 25 rivers in Alaska that are part of this system. The Bureau of Land Management administers six of them.



Kayaker approaching Canyon Rapids.

## Adventures on the Gulkana River

### The Setting

The Gulkana River watershed drains approximately 2,140 square miles in Southcentral Alaska. The river begins in the Alaska Range near Summit Lake and flows south into the Copper River. The Copper eventually empties into Prince William Sound near Cordova.

Several hundred lakes and ponds are scattered throughout the surrounding spruce-dominated forest. Paxson Lake, the largest, is about 10 miles long and 1/2–1 mile wide. The Gulkana River falls 1,250 feet in the 81 river miles between Paxson Lake and the confluence with the Copper River.

### Main Branch

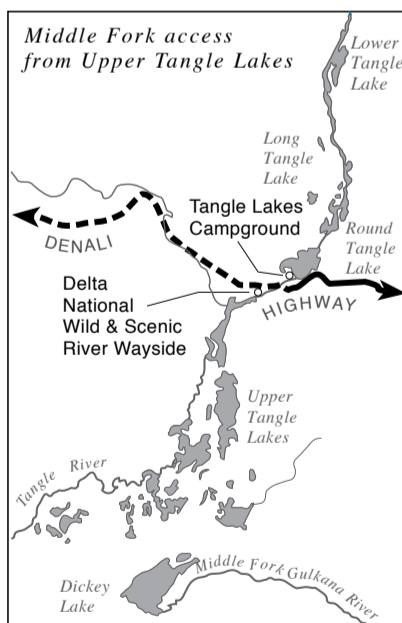
The most popular float trip begins at Paxson Lake and ends at Sourdough Creek Campground. The total distance is about 47 river miles; allow 3 to 4 days for travel. The vehicle shuttle is 31 miles each way between Paxson Lake Campground (MP 175 Richardson Highway) and the take-out at Sourdough Creek Campground (MP 147.5 Richardson Highway).

### Middle Fork

The main access to the Middle Fork is from the boat launch at the Delta National Wild and Scenic River Wayside at Mile 21.5 of the Denali Highway. Travel south through the Upper Tangle Lakes. Two short portages provide access to an unnamed muddy shallow lake.

Two routes may be taken from there: (1) continue to the south end of the muddy lake. Two short portages and a 1-mile-long portage to the south will take you to Dickey Lake which flows into the Middle Fork of the Gulkana River; or (2) travel/line up the Tangle River out of the muddy lake and paddle to the 1-mile portage above Dickey Lake.

NOTE: Portages are not marked or maintained. Float planes may land at Dickey Lake.



The outlet for Dickey Lake is at the extreme southeast corner of the lake. The first 3 miles of the Middle Fork are very shallow and flow through riffles and rocks at a gradient of 30 ft./mile. Then the river abruptly plunges into a steep canyon where it speeds through riffles and around large boulders in Class II-III rapids before quieting down to a series of riffles and slow runs for about 6 miles.

The gradient drops to about 25 ft./mile then finally to 1 ft./mile where the river becomes slow and meandering before joining the Main Branch. Allow 6 to 7 days for the entire trip (72 miles) from Dickey Lake to Sourdough Creek Campground.

Begin your trip at the BLM boat launch at Paxson Lake Campground. Four miles of paddling/rowing southwest on the lake will bring you to the Gulkana River at the lake outlet; this is considered River Mile 0. From here to the junction with the Middle Fork (3 miles), the Gulkana is a shallow, rocky stream with Class II rapids and a gradient of 38 ft./mile. Whitewater experience is necessary to successfully navigate this section.

At the confluence of the Middle Fork and the Main Branch, the river becomes slow and meandering. There are occasional rocks and small waves in the Class I water. Watch for an old cabin that was used by trappers in the region.

Canyon Rapids is at Mile 20. Take-out signs mark the portage on the left side of the river. These rapids may be either Class III or IV, depending on water flow. Only experienced whitewater boaters should attempt to navigate Canyon Rapids! Scout the 1/4-mile length before attempting passage. It is often helpful, and sometimes necessary, for experienced boaters to portage gear prior to running the rapids. At high water levels, open canoes and small rafts MUST be portaged. Even experienced boaters have wrapped and destroyed rafts and canoes here.

### West Fork

A trip on the West Fork (South Branch) begins at Lake Louise and continues through Susitna and Tyone lakes and part way down the Tyone River. Next, a series of portages, low water levels and narrow channels requires extra time and patience to reach the South Branch of the West Fork. The route then traverses lake-dotted country; this is exceptional wildlife habitat and is one of the most remote and least-visited areas of the Gulkana watershed.

The South Branch eventually joins the North Branch to form the West Fork. From this junction, the river flows slowly for 4 miles. Then it enters a canyon where it speeds through riffles and around large boulders in Class II-III water before quieting down to a series of riffles and slow runs until its junction with the Main Branch.

Another trip option on the West Fork begins by flowing into one of two unnamed lakes at the headwaters of the North Branch. The North Branch originates in the Alphabet Hills from the Amphitheater Mountains, eventually joining the South Branch to form the West Fork. From the headwater lakes to the confluence with the South Branch, the North Branch is a series of slow, meandering river bends with many oxbow lakes and numerous log jams or sweepers that may inhibit travel.

NOTE: These are extended wilderness trips with numerous portages. Allow 7–14 days to complete either of these adventures. U. S. Geological Survey topographic maps and good map-reading skills are essential. Consult with the BLM in Glennallen if planning to take either of these trips.

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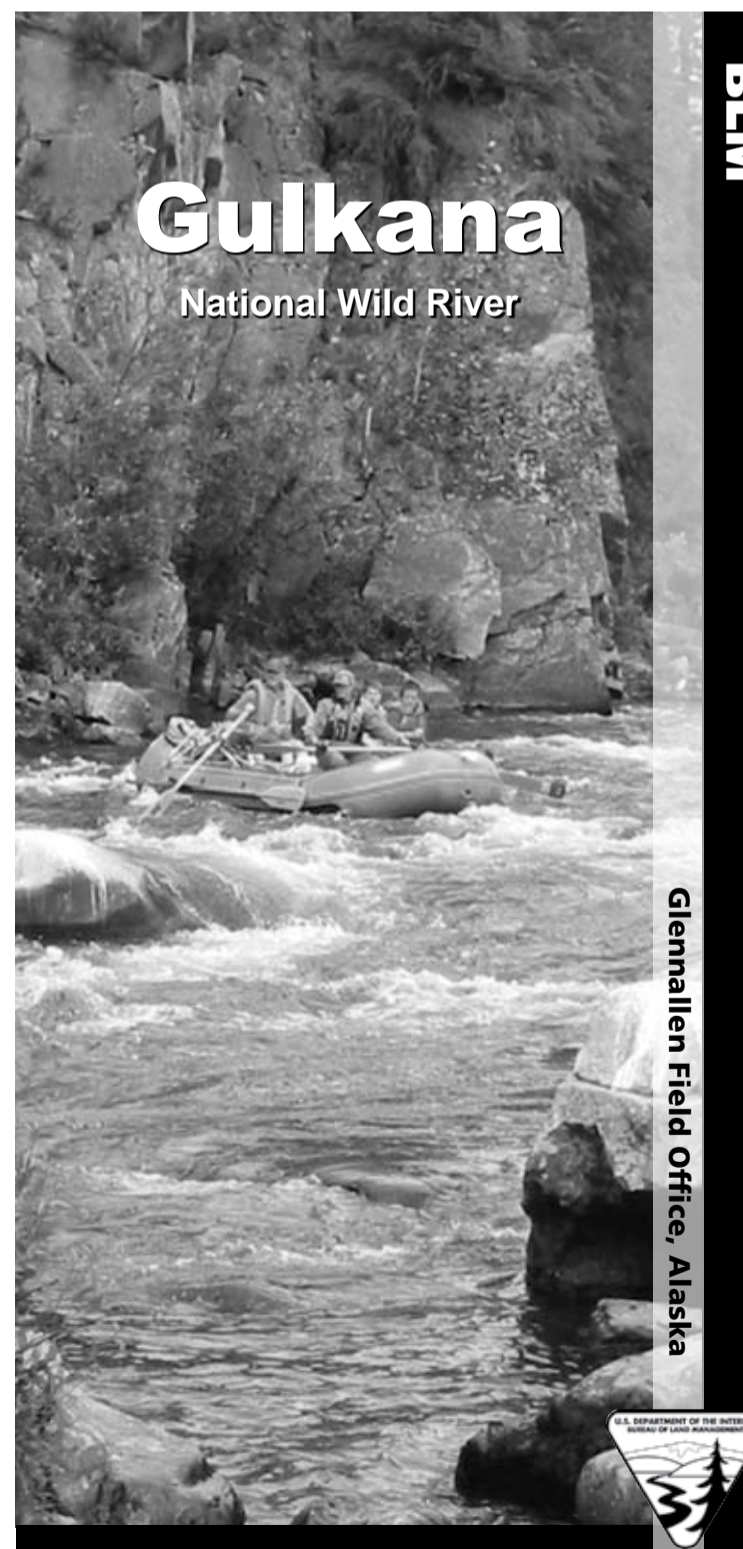
There are several small camping areas at Canyon Rapids. The portage trail and a 1-mile hiking trail take you to Canyon Lake and provides a good opportunity to stretch your legs. Fishing is excellent for grayling and rainbow trout in the canyon.

Below Canyon Rapids, there are 9 miles of Class II and III rapids which are generally shallow and rocky. Many canoes and rafts have been damaged beyond repair in this section of the river.

The West Fork joins the Main Branch at Mile 39. From here to the take-out point, the river is slow and meandering with occasional rocks and riffles, rated at Class I.

NOTE: Powerboats may be encountered on the Gulkana above the West Fork confluence downstream to Sourdough Creek Campground and beyond. This stretch is frequently crowded with anglers and boaters during the summer salmon runs, particularly on weekends. Please respect others' rights to enjoy the Gulkana.

A foater's guide of the Main Branch with recommended campsites and trip planning information is available at the Glennallen Field Office and Paxson boat launch.



BLM Recreation Guide

