In the year-round wild and scenic river system of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980, the upper stretch of the Delta River, all of the Tangle Lakes, and the Tangle River were recognized for their outstanding scenery and natural and cultural values. These Bureau of Land Management National Conservation Lands embody our vision for conserving our public lands. Open to everyone, they offer us our unique opportunity to explore our nation. Whether you fish, hike, hunt, or hike, these lands represent our way of life, a living link to the past and our pledge to our future.

A ‘Wild’ river is free of impoundments, access to the river is unobstructed, and there are no impingements on its natural flow. A ‘Scenic’ river is one whose natural beauty is little altered by man, one whose natural characteristics as part of the National Wild and Scenic River system by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980 are largely undeveloped, but are accessible by road. ‘Recreational’ segments are accessible by road and may have some development along their shorelines.

Season and Climate

The river running season begins in early to mid-June, depending on ice breakup and precipitation. Average annual precipitation measured at Pasir is 11 inches of rain and 120 inches of snow. July is commonly the wettest month. During the summer, temperatures range from 55°F to 70°F, with occasional highs in the 80s. By mid-September, shorter days and colder temperatures bring the river running season to an end.

History and Prehistory

Native people may have lived in this area as long ago as the end of the last ice age (about 10,000 years ago). Approximately 226,660 acres in the Tangle Lakes area are designated as the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District. This area has hundreds of archaeological sites that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The first recorded use of the Delta River was as a route of exploration by the U.S. Army in 1890. A gold strike along Rainy Creek led to the establishment of the Eureka Creek Mining District, as many as 250 people worked in this District between 1900 and 1910.

The Setting

The Delta River watershed is in the Alaska Range in Southcentral Alaska. River access is along the Denali Highway, about 22 miles west of Paxson. Year-round recreational opportunities abound throughout the river’s watershed, which includes 150,000 acres of land, 160 miles of streams, and 21 lakes. The Tangle River connects several of the Tangle Lakes and then drains into the Delta River, which joins the Tanana River, before flowing into the mighty Yukon River.

The terrain around the Tangle Lakes is predominantly tundra-covered rolling hills with glacial features such as moraines, eskers and kettles. Gravel benches above Lower Tangle Lake show that the current lake was about 50 feet higher at one time. The land adjacent to the upper Delta River includes steep alluvial slopes, rock cliffs and spectacular geologic features.

Elevations average 2,800 feet at the Tangle Lakes and the drainage falls 650 feet in 51 river miles. Several hundred lakes and ponds are scattered throughout the surrounding spruce-dominated forest.

Plants

Vegetation ranges from arctic tundra to spruce-poplar forests. Grasses, sedges and forbs grow on the highest, most exposed slopes and above the brush line. Willows grow on moist lowland sites and in the many brushy draws draining the side slopes. Dwarf birch occupies drier sites with well-drained soils. Alder grows on steep slopes of hillsides and canyon walls. Forests of white and black spruce grow in small pockets along the river; and on some hillsides below an elevation of 3,200 feet. You will find open spruce-poplar forests on lowland sites along the river and on some mid-slope hillsides. Understory plants are varied and abundant. Fireweed, bistort, rose, mountain avens, burnet, and shrubby cinquefoil are just some of the many plants in the area. In August, many people travel to Tangle Lakes to pick blueberries. Other harvestable berries in the Delta River area include crowberry, alpine bearberry, cranberry and red currant.

Animals

A variety of wildlife call this area home. Wildlife provides opportunities for hunting, trapping, photography and viewing. Hunters seek moose, caribou, bear, dall sheep, ptarmigan, waterfowl and snowshoe hare. Trappers harvest beaver, fox, wolf, marten, lynx, wolverine, otter, muskrat and mink.

Of the 110 species of birds identified in this area, most are summer residents (May to September). Nesting bald eagles can be observed from Tangle Lakes to the lower Delta River during the summers. Wildlife viewing is best in the early morning.

Adventures on the Delta Wild and Scenic River

Vegetation varies as you travel south along the Delta River.

Fishing

Tangle Lakes and the Delta River contain grayling, round whitefish, lake trout, burbot and longnose suckers. Most fishing is for grayling, but good lake trout fishing is available in late winter and early spring.

Salmon are not found in the Delta River due to the 15-foot-high falls and the heavy silt load entering from Eureka Creek.

You can purchase an Alaska fishing license and view sport fishing regulations online at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Web site, www.adfg.state.ak.us, or buy in person from license agents throughout the state, including stores in Glennallen, Delta Junction and Tok.

Fishing on the Delta River.

Land Use

There are a number of active mining claims in the Rainy Creek area along the lower end of the Delta River. Near MP 212.5 of the Richardson Highway, you may see mining equipment crossing the river that is associated with state or federal mining claims. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline System, built in the mid-1970s, is visible from the Delta River for three river miles before the take-off on the Richardson Highway at MP 212.5.

Cover photo: Canoeing the Delta Wild and Scenic River.
Lower Tangle Lakes and Upper Delta River

Begin your two to three day trip at the Tangle Lakes Campground, MP 21, of the Denali Highway. Here you will find a boat launch and canoes.

From Round Tangle Lake, follow the Tangle Lakes north. The initial nine-mile stretch of the trip runs through areas of the Tangle Lakes, which are connected by shallow channels of slow-moving water. During low water levels, it might be necessary to use canoes and rafts for short distances. Ice can remain on the lakes until early to mid-June. The Delta River flows north from Lower Tangle Lake, then continues through the Amphitheater Mountains and the foothills of the Alaska Range. It is 20 river miles from this outlet to the take-out point. The first one and one-quarter miles of river are shallow and rocky Class II water.

NOTE: Portage trails are not marked or maintained in the Upper Tangle Lakes. Float planes may land at Dickey Lake. For additional information on the Middle Fork trip, refer to the BLM brochure, The Gulkana Wild and Scenic River.

Low Impact Guidelines

Trips on the Delta River and Tangle Lakes are wilderness adventures known for their spectacular scenery. If you choose to travel them, you are responsible for maintaining their wild character for all who follow. Here are a few ways you contribute.

• spare oars or paddles
• shovel
• insect repellent and head net
• matches in water tight container

After this first section, there is a portage around un navigable waterfalls. The river portage take-out is on the right side of the river and marked with a sign. The half mile maintained portage trail leads across steep, rocky terrain.

Below the falls, the river narrows to approximately 60 feet and the velocity increases significantly. Boaters must have whitewater experience to successfully float this one mile section of shallow, rocky Class II II/III rapids. After the rapids, the next 12 river miles are slow, meandering Class I water.

At the confluence of Eureka Creek, the clear river changes to cold, silty glacial water. The last seven miles are often shallow and braided with numerous channels and gravel bars. Here, the water is swift and generally Class II. Nearly everyone who floats the Delta River takes out just north of Phelan Creek at MP 212. In the Tangle Lakes, the exact take-out location varies from year to year, due to changes in the river channel. Parking is available adjacent to the river, and the take-out is marked with a large yellow sign. The vehicle shuttle distance from the Tangle Lakes launch to the take-out is 49 miles one way.

Lower Delta River

If you are an experienced kayaker or whitewater rafter, you can continue downstream 16 more river miles past Black Rapids Glacier. After the MP 212.0 take-out, the Delta River becomes very swift with high standing waves and glacial silt. This area is not recommended for open canoes, and Black Rapids is rated Class IV-V. There is no designated take-out point for the Lower Delta River trip, but the Richardson Highway parallels the river in numerous locations.