

Portions of the Gulkana River were designated for its wild character as part of the National Wild and Scenic River system by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980. The Gulkana was recognized for its primitive character, abundant fish and wildlife, and its geologic, cultural and recreational values. These Bureau of Land Management National Conservation Lands embody our vision for conserving our public lands. Open to everyone, they offer Americans the unique opportunity to explore and experience the landscapes that shaped our nation. Whether you fish, hike, hunt, or boat, these lands represent our way of life, a living link to the past and our pledge to tomorrow.

A "Wild" river is free of impoundments, generally inaccessible except by trail, and has exceptionally clean waters.

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management**

Glennallen Field Office  
Milepost 186.5 Glenn Hwy  
P.O. Box 147 Glennallen, Alaska 99588  
(907) 822-3217  
www.blm.gov/alaska

 Visit us on Facebook at:  
[www.facebook.com/BLMAlaska](http://www.facebook.com/BLMAlaska)

 Visit us on Twitter at:  
[www.twitter.com/BLMAlaska](http://www.twitter.com/BLMAlaska)

BLM/AK/GI-88/008+8351+050 REV 2018

**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, which eventually empties into the Gulf of Alaska between Cordova and Katalla.

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

**Season and Climate**

The river-running season begins in early to mid-June, depending on ice breakup and precipitation. Average annual precipitation is 11 inches of rain and 48 inches of snow. July is usually the wettest month. Summer temperatures range from 35 °F to occasional highs in the 80s. Be prepared for cold, wet weather at any time. By mid-September, shorter days and colder temperatures bring the river-running season to a quick end.

**History and Prehistory**

The initial seven-mile stretch of the Middle Fork below Dickey Lake is within the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District. This area is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Several known prehistoric sites are located within the corridor. The Ahtna Indians were the earliest known humans to use the Gulkana River. Around 1910, miners used the West Fork and the Middle Fork routes to reach the Denali Mining District, about 80 air-miles to the west. Collection or disturbance of any historic or prehistoric remains is against the law.

**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 three to four 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).

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

At the confluence of the Middle Fork and the Main Branch, the Gulkana River becomes slow and meandering, with occasional rocks and small waves in the Class I water. Watch for an old cabin once used by trappers in the region.

Canyon Rapids is at river mile 20. Take-out signs mark the portage on the left side of the river. These rapids may be Class III or IV, depending on water flow. Only experienced whitewater boaters should attempt to navigate Canyon Rapids! Scout the quarter-mile length before attempting passage. It is often necessary to portage gear prior to running the rapids. If you don't portage your gear, it MUST be tied down securely. At high water levels, open canoes and small rafts MUST be portaged. Even experienced boaters have wrapped and destroyed rafts and canoes here.

Cover photo: Canoeing through the Gulkana River's abundance of fish.



Gulkana Wild and Scenic River

**Adventures on the Gulkana Wild and Scenic River**



**NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS**

**Gulkana**  
Wild and Scenic River



**Map & Guide**

There are several small camping areas at Canyon Rapids. From the portage trail, a one-mile hiking trail leads to Canyon Lake, providing a good opportunity to stretch your legs. Fishing for grayling and rainbow trout is excellent in the canyon.

Below Canyon Rapids there are nine river miles of Class II-III rapids that 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 river 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: You may encounter powerboats 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 River.**

A floater's guide of the Main Branch, with recommended campsites and trip planning information, is available at the Glennallen Field Office.

1920s trapper cabin along the Gulkana River.

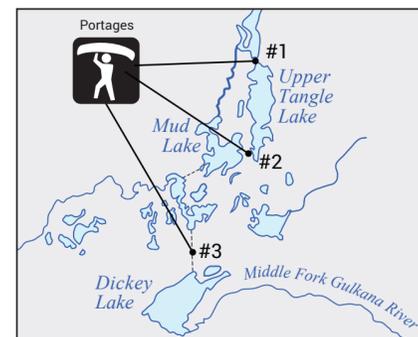


**Middle Fork**

The main access to the Middle Fork is from the boat launch at the Delta Wild and Scenic River Wayside at Mile 21.5 of the Denali Highway.

Float south through the Upper Tangle Lake and make two short portages to reach Mud Lake. Paddle to the south end of Mud Lake and follow the connecting channel to an unnamed lake. Continue traveling south to the mile-long, Dickey Lake portage. The outlet of the Middle Fork of the Gulkana River begins the southeast corner of Dickey Lake.

**NOTE: Portages are rugged, unmarked unmaintained. Float planes may land at Dickey Lake**



The outlet for Dickey Lake is at the extreme southeast corner of the lake. The initial three-mile stretch of the Gulkana Middle Fork is very shallow and flows through riffles and rocks at a gradient of 30 feet/mile. The river then plunges abruptly into a steep canyon and 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 six miles.

The gradient drops from about 25 feet/mile to one foot/mile where the river becomes slow and meandering before joining the Main Branch. Allow six to seven days for the entire trip (72 river miles) from Dickey Lake to Sourdough Creek Campground.

**West Fork**

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

The South Branch joins the North Branch to form the West Fork. From this junction, the river flows slowly for four river miles. It enters a canyon, speeds through riffles and around large boulders in Class II-III water, then quiets down to a series of riffles and slow runs until it joins the Main Branch.

Another trip option is to fly 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 impede travel.

**NOTE: These are extended wilderness trips with numerous portages. Allow 7 to 14 days to complete any of the Middle or West Fork 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.**

A family floats the Main Branch of the Gulkana Wild and Scenic River.



# Gulkana Wild and Scenic River Map

## Travel Safely

### Water

Filter, treat or boil water. Drinking untreated water can make you sick.

### Avoid Bears

Keep your campsites extremely clean. Cook and keep food away from tents. Store food in airtight containers to minimize bear encounters. Pack out all trash including unburned items from the firepit.



### Watch for Hazards

Be alert for approaching hazards such as boulders, jagged rocks, large holes and fallen trees. Scout the rapids before attempting passage.

Capsizing, sinking and falling overboard from small boats account for 70 percent of boating fatalities. Always wear a life jacket when on or near the water.

### Suggested Equipment

- life jacket: type III or V for each person
- first aid kit
- boat repair kit
- spare oars or paddles
- warm clothing in a "dry bag"
- rain gear
- shovel
- matches in waterproof container
- throwbags or throw cushions
- insect repellent and/or headnet
- bailing device
- fire extinguisher (for motorized craft)
- air pump (for inflatable rafts)
- portable toilet system
- USGS inch-to-the-mile scale maps

### Know Your Limits

The Gulkana River is not a place for a novice boater. Solo travel is not recommended. Always travel with at least two craft in your group.

Accidents can happen in seconds and emergency assistance can take many hours to reach you. If you lack experience, proper equipment or knowledge of the river, you should engage a licensed guide or outfitter to assist you.

### Share the River

When encountering a motorized boat, non-motorized craft should row to one side to allow the motor boat to maneuver through the deeper channel. Give them as much room as possible.

Motorized boats should be courteous of non-motorized boats in narrow river sections, in rapids, and reduce speed when passing close. The wake of a motorized boat can easily swamp a canoe.

### Additional Restrictions

Power boats are not suitable beyond the outlet of Paxson Lake or at a point one river mile upstream of the West Fork confluence on the main branch.

All boaters must abide by the Coast Guard Inland Water Regulations (☎1-800-368-5647).

Aircraft are not permitted on the river surface within the wild river corridor.

Off-road vehicles are restricted to designated trails and must be parked out of sight of river users.

## Plants

Spruce-hardwood forest is the major vegetation type along the Gulkana River. You may see white and black spruce, birch, aspen and poplar forests. The understory includes willow, alder, rose, dwarf birch, cranberry, blueberry, Labrador tea, dwarf dogwood, lichens and mosses.

## Fish and Fishing

The Gulkana River's abundant fish makes it one of the most popular sportfishing rivers in Alaska. The Gulkana's tributaries contain rainbow trout/steelhead, arctic grayling, king salmon (chinook), red salmon (sockeye), whitefish, longnose suckers, and lamprey. The surrounding lakes have good populations of lake trout, burbot and whitefish.

You can purchase an Alaska fishing license and view sportfishing regulations online at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Web site at [www.adfg.state.ak.us](http://www.adfg.state.ak.us), or buy in person from license agents throughout the state, including stores in Glennallen, Delta Junction and Tok. Fishing is particularly heavy on weekends in June and July when the kings are running.

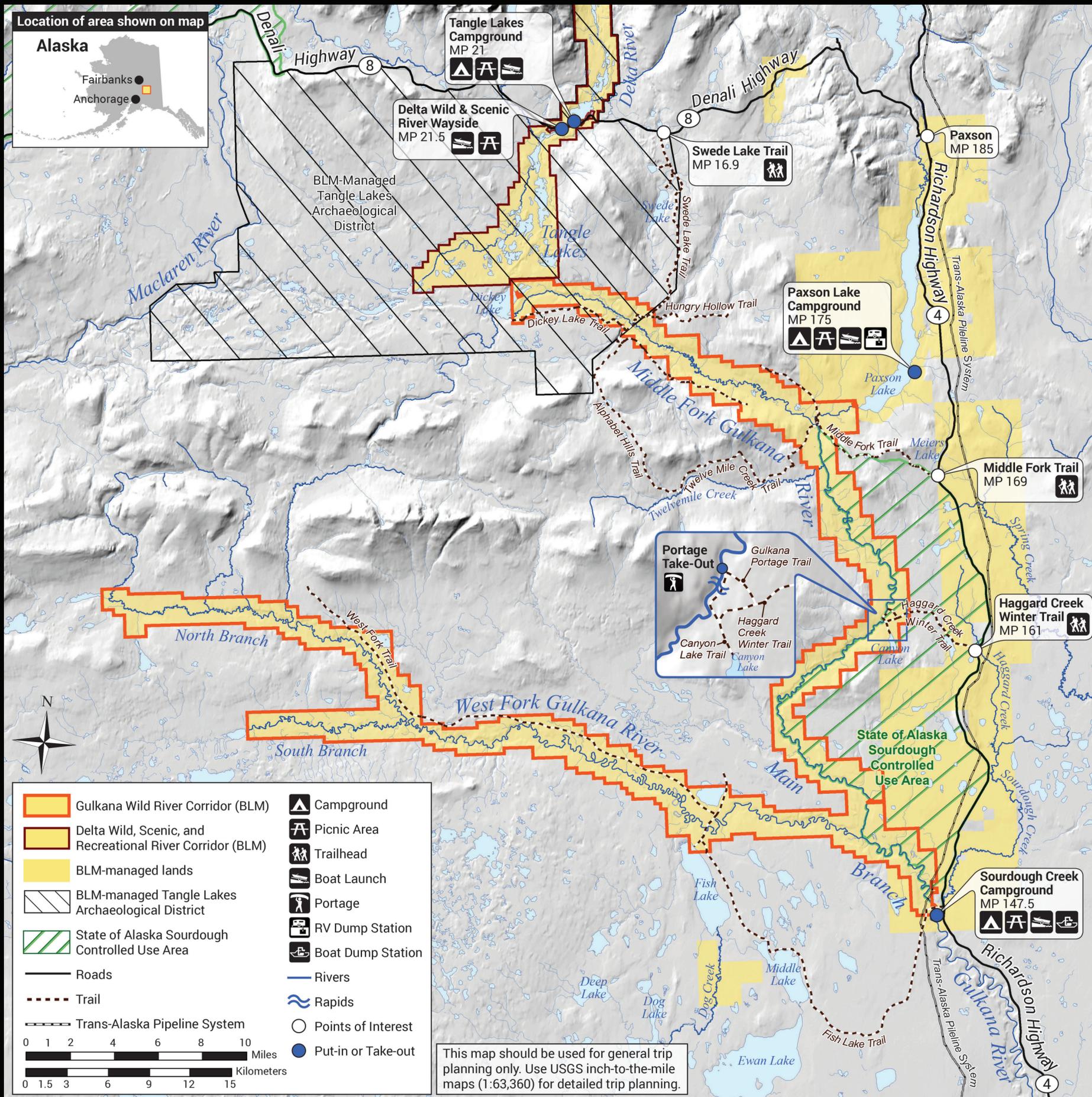


Flyfishing on the Gulkana Wild and Scenic River.

## Low Impact Guidelines

The Gulkana River is a wilderness adventure known for its subdued but wild scenery, challenging rapids and excellent fishing. Those who travel here are responsible for maintaining its primitive character for all who follow:

- Use existing campsites.
- Use firepans or existing firepits.
- Bring your own firewood, charcoal or cook stove. Never cut green wood.
- If you use soap, be sure it is biodegradable. Dispose of gray water at least 200 feet away from rivers and lakes.
- Pack out human waste in portable toilet containers. There is a boater dump station at Sourdough Creek Campground.
- Pick up any litter that you find and carry out all garbage. If you pack it in, you can pack it out.
- Leave plants, soil, minerals, wildlife and other natural features undisturbed for others to enjoy.



**Location of area shown on map**

**Alaska**

Fairbanks ●  
Anchorage ●

Gulkana Wild River Corridor (BLM)	Campground
Delta Wild, Scenic, and Recreational River Corridor (BLM)	Picnic Area
BLM-managed lands	Trailhead
BLM-managed Tangle Lakes Archaeological District	Boat Launch
State of Alaska Sourdough Controlled Use Area	Portage
Roads	RV Dump Station
Trail	Boat Dump Station
Trans-Alaska Pipeline System	Rivers
	Rapids
	Points of Interest
	Put-in or Take-out

This map should be used for general trip planning only. Use USGS inch-to-the-mile maps (1:63,360) for detailed trip planning.