

Birch Creek (Ikhèenjìk River) is one of Alaska's 25 wild and scenic rivers. The Bureau of Land Management administers Birch Creek to provide high-quality but undeveloped recreational opportunities, to protect water quality and archeological sites, and to preserve the character of the river. The Birch Creek drainage encompasses nearly 1.4 million acres or about 2,187 square miles.

One hundred twenty-six miles of Birch Creek have been designated wild under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. The wild and scenic river corridor is closed to all-terrain vehicles during the summer season (May 1 – Oct. 14).

The Bureau of Land Management encourages visitors to minimize their impacts on public lands by observing "Leave No Trace" principles. You can assure the enjoyment of other visitors to Birch Creek by doing the following:

- If water levels allow, camp on gravel bars or durable upland surfaces.
- Leave campsites clean.
- Observe wildlife from a distance.
- Be considerate of other visitors.
- Bury human waste at least 200 feet from water; dispose of other waste properly. Pack it in, pack it out.

Bureau of Land Management

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Bluffs along Birch Creek are a great place to observe peregrine falcons and other raptors.

For some people, Birch Creek represents an unforgettable float experience that offers not only quiet enjoyment of nature but also convenient road access at either end. For others the river provides entry to moose habitat during hunting season. And for still others, Birch Creek's transition from a swift headwater stream to a broad, meandering river presents a special window into the "life stages" of an Interior Alaska waterway.

Safety

All visitors should carry U.S. Geological Survey 15-minute (1:63,360) topographic maps covering Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River. Be aware that the river has changed course in several locations since the last map updates. A georeferenced PDF map of the Steese National Conservation Area, including Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River, is available on the BLM website for download to tablets and smart phones. See the map for a link.

Always file a trip plan with a friend. Write down where you are going, when you plan to return, a description of your vehicle, and your license plate number.

River-water temperatures range from a high of 60 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer to near-freezing in the fall. Even on a hot day, water temperatures are still cold. Be able to recognize and treat hypothermia.

Drinking or cooking water from the river or side streams should be treated before use.

Weather conditions can change rapidly at any time of the year. Thunderstorms upriver can cause water levels to rise rapidly downriver; secure your boat at night. This river can exert tremendous force during high-water events, and sweepers are an ever-present danger.

Take survival gear and be prepared for the unexpected. In the winter, plan for high winds, deep snow, and extreme weather changes. Temperatures may be as much as 25 degrees colder than in Fairbanks. Overflow ice and open leads can create hazardous conditions. Summer temperatures can reach the 80s and occasionally the 90s, but daily variations can be extreme. Freezing temperatures have occurred in every month of the year.

Both grizzly and black bears roam the Birch Creek drainage. Floaters should always keep a clean camp and cook and store food far away from sleeping areas and other equipment.

Cover photo: Paddlers start through Shotgun Rapids, the most challenging whitewater on Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River.

Recreation

Birch Creek offers outstanding recreation opportunities for boaters experienced with raft, kayak, or canoe. It is one of very few clear water rivers in Alaska with road access at two locations on an otherwise undisturbed river segment. Float trips usually take at least 50 hours of actual water time to travel from Upper Birch Creek Wayside to Lower Birch Creek Wayside, a distance of 110 miles.

Many floaters make this trip over a 7- to 10-day period, taking leisurely days to fish, hike, hunt, and enjoy the scenery.

Maximum river flows usually occur in early May as a result of break-up or in late July or early August after summer rains. During June, water levels usually drop, resulting in shallows, exposed rocks and logs, sweepers, and rock gardens.

In Birch Creek's upper reaches, floaters often alternate between dragging their boats through fast riffles and floating across small pools. As tributaries join Birch Creek, it changes from a headwater Class I creek to a larger river with stretches of Class II or Class III whitewater as classified by the International Scale of River Difficulty. Most rapids occur between Clums Fork and Wolf Creek. The lower segment slows and widens as the river starts to meander through the Yukon Flats.

During winter Birch Creek offers experiences that can test a person's skill, provide adventure, and reveal aspects of the river not seen by summer floaters. Each February the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race follows the upper reaches of Birch Creek and also crosses the river ice and snow-covered gravel bars along the river's lower reaches between Central and Circle. Snow-machining and cross-country skiing typically become popular on lower Birch Creek in March and April, when the days get longer and temperatures start to warm. Trapping for small furbearers and wolves occurs along the upper stretches and along the Yukon Quest trail.

History

The first inhabitants of this area were probably the Gwich'in Athabascans. They traditionally occupied portions of Birch Creek to hunt for moose and waterfowl and to fish. The river's Athabaskan name, Ikhèenjìk River, was officially recognized in 2017.

Miners moved into the area in 1893. Pitka Pavaloff and Sergei Cherosky, two Russian-Koyukon miners, panned for gold at what is now known as Pitkas Bar. The next year they triggered the Birch Creek Gold Rush when 100 men followed them back to their claims and began prospecting on adjoining tributaries.

Entrepreneurs followed the gold seekers, blazing trails, freighting goods, and establishing road houses. Old miner and trapper cabins dot the landscape along the river. Remember, these structures and artifacts belong to everyone. Take only pictures, leave only footprints.



Two visitors explore the ruins of a log cabin.



Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River widens into braided, sinuous channels as it leaves the hills and enters the Yukon Flats. Inset photo: Double Barrel 2 Rapids.

Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River

Wildlife

The wildlife in this remote area see few humans. You may encounter moose, caribou, black or grizzly bear, wolf, lynx, beaver, and fox, but you are more likely to see their tracks along sandbars. Bald eagles, red-tail hawks, peregrine falcons, and owls all make their summer homes along the banks of Birch Creek. Osprey are becoming more common in the area and may be seen diving for fish along Birch Creek. Common mergansers are the most frequently seen waterfowl.

Moose are the world's largest member of the deer family. They are primarily browsers (feeding on twigs and leaves of willow, aspen, and birch), but in summer they also feed on aquatic plants in sloughs along the river and will sometimes feed on sedges, horsetail, and grasses.

Beaver, North America's largest rodents, are plentiful along the lower section of Birch Creek. You will see a few beaver lodges and dams along old oxbows or tributaries. However, most beaver live in bank dens along the river. Bank dens are holes dug into the stream bank, with an underwater entrance leading to a den above water level. You may see mud, sticks, and rocks piled above the den and a cache of sticks in the water nearby. Look closely along the banks to see beaver slides—trails smoothed by beaver hauling branches of cottonwood and willow to the water.

Raptors. In recent decades, peregrine falcons have become abundant enough along Birch Creek that sighting one of these spectacular birds is almost assured on a summer float trip. Nests are located on cliffs and steep banks. If you're close to a nest, you will likely hear the loud, rasping cries of an adult warning you to stay away. Peregrine falcons return to the

same nest site each year. When diving after prey, peregrines can reach speeds above 175 miles per hour. Also called a "duck hawk," the peregrine feeds on waterfowl, sandpipers, and other small birds.

If a bald eagle, peregrine falcon, or red-tail hawk is circling near you with cries that indicate the bird is agitated, please don't stay long in that area—choose another spot for a campsite. Prolonged human activity near nest sites can result in abandoned nests or the death of young birds.

Fish

Arctic grayling, northern pike, sheefish and salmon all make their home in Birch Creek.

For many fishermen the arctic grayling is a rare freshwater fish symbolic of the clear, cold streams of the northern wildlands. An elegant cousin of the trout, its sail-like dorsal fin dotted with large, iridescent red or purple spots makes the grayling one of the most unusual and beautiful fish of Alaska.

Geology

Birch Creek flows through the Yukon-Tanana Uplands, a region of rounded ridges and valleys located between the higher mountains of the Alaska Range and Brooks Range.

Much of the bedrock along the waterway consists of schist, a metamorphic rock. One of the oldest rocks in Alaska, the schist formed over millions of years as high temperatures and pressure compressed sediments from rivers, lakes, or oceans.

Schist comes in many different varieties, all characterized by a flakey or slablike texture.

Along Birch Creek you may see quartzite as well as garnet, biotite, muscovite, or mafic schist. Minerals hidden within the schist may include pyrite, antimony, and tourmaline.

Spectacular examples of schist are found in rock outcrops where sheer rock walls have resisted the erosive action of water. Shotgun Rapids is one such location.

Also exposed in cutbanks along Birch Creek are melting ice wedges, part of the permanently frozen soils, or permafrost, underlying much of the river valley. Forests of short, stunted black spruce, deep sedge tussocks, and thick stands of willows grow above the permafrost in the shallow layer of soil that thaws for a few months each summer.



A group of boaters camp on a gravel bar next to a riverbank where melting permafrost is exposed.

Birch Creek

(Ikhèenjìk River) Wild and Scenic River



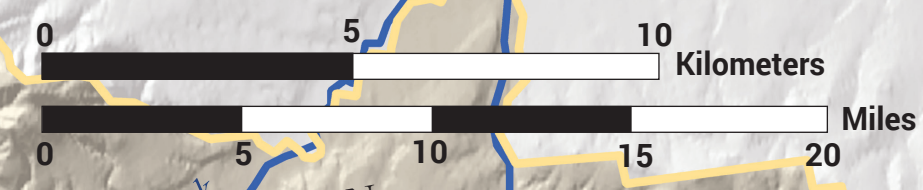
Map & Guide

Birch Creek Wild & Scenic River

(Ikhèenjik River)

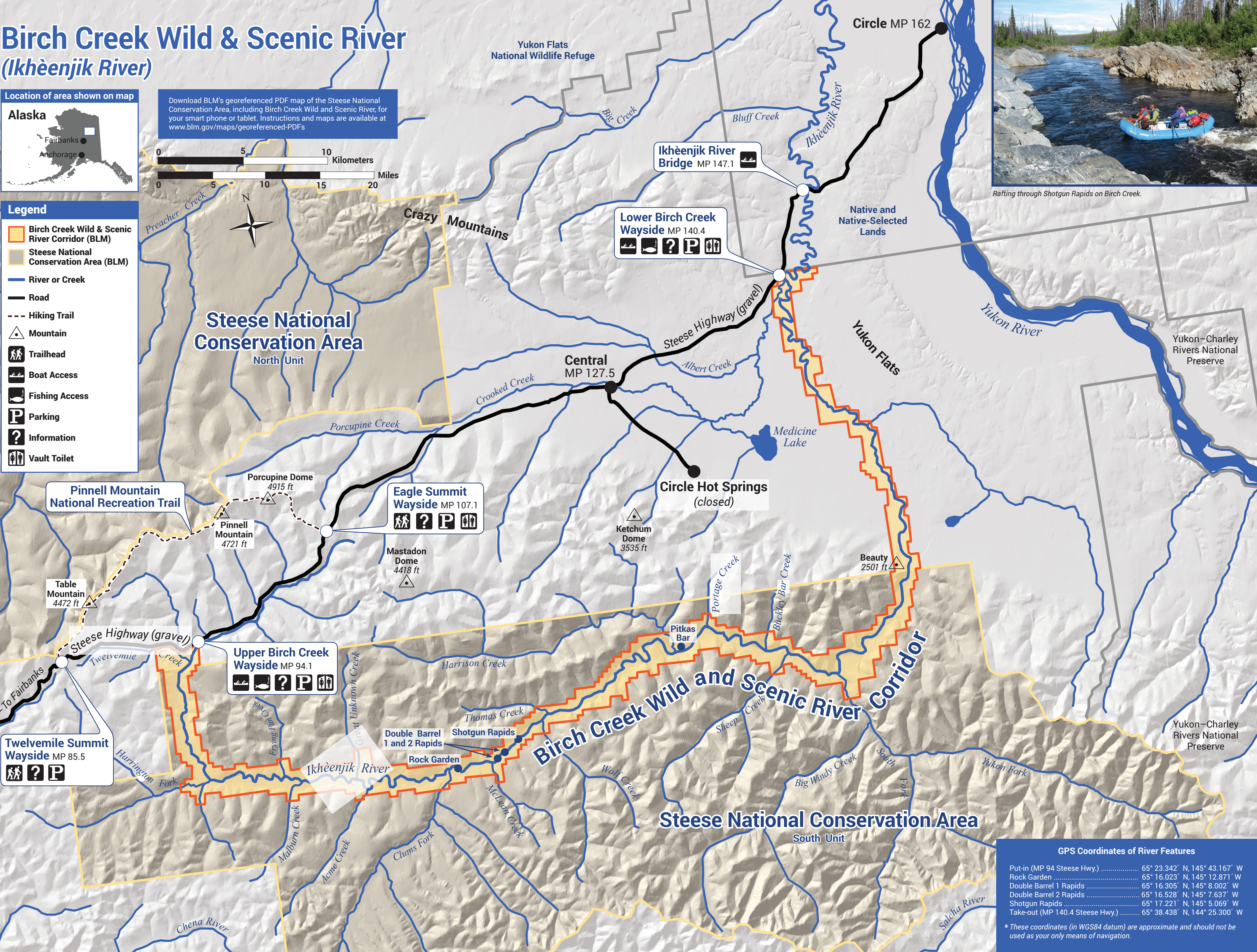


Download BLM's georeferenced PDF map of the Steese National Conservation Area, including Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River, for your smart phone or tablet. Instructions and maps are available at www.blm.gov/maps/georeferenced-PDFs



Legend

- Birch Creek Wild & Scenic River Corridor (BLM)
- Steese National Conservation Area (BLM)
- River or Creek
- Road
- Hiking Trail
- Mountain
- Trailhead
- Boat Access
- Fishing Access
- P Parking
- ? Information
- Vault Toilet



Rafting through Shotgun Rapids on Birch Creek.

Pinnell Mountain National Recreation Trail

Table Mountain
4472 ft

Twelvemile Summit Wayside MP 85.5

Upper Birch Creek Wayside MP 94.1

Eagle Summit Wayside MP 107.1

Circle Hot Springs (closed)

Ikhèenjik River Bridge MP 147.1

Lower Birch Creek Wayside MP 140.4

Central MP 127.5

Beauty 2501 ft

Chena River

Steese National Conservation Area
South Unit

GPS Coordinates of River Features

Put-in (MP 94 Steese Hwy.)	65° 23.342' N, 145° 43.167' W
Rock Garden	65° 16.023' N, 145° 12.871' W
Double Barrel 1 Rapids	65° 16.305' N, 145° 8.002' W
Double Barrel 2 Rapids	65° 16.528' N, 145° 7.637' W
Shotgun Rapids	65° 17.221' N, 145° 5.069' W
Take-out (MP 140.4 Steese Hwy.)	65° 38.438' N, 144° 25.300' W

* These coordinates (in WGS84 datum) are approximate and should not be used as your only means of navigation.