



*By Judy Schwartz*

We'd done the "\$50 hamburger" hundreds of times. We'd flown most of the U.S., and even parts of Canada before. But flying all the way to Alaska? That was quite another challenge.

In December 1997, my husband, David, saw a write-up in an aviation magazine about Alaska Northwinds Tours. He decided that flying to Alaska in our Mooney would be the ultimate adventure! We called and spoke to Jerry McCann, the owner and operator of Alaska Northwinds. Jerry answered our questions and sent us some information. He said there's no minimum flying experience or ratings required. I was concerned about landing on gravel runways but was assured that they were all 5000 feet or more, well maintained pea gravel, and used by commercial planes all the time. David was concerned with IFR flight in the mountains. We were told that the trip would be all VFR at lower altitudes (no oxygen needed). By flying with a group, and a professional guide, we'd minimize the major hazards of flying in isolated areas. If the unthinkable should happen and we were forced down, there would be 9 other aircraft marking our position and radioing for help.

We came to learn that flying with Jerry's group was far more valuable than just for potential rescue service. He took us places that we would never have gone on our own and showed us things we didn't know existed. His knowledge of the local area was invaluable. Because of the rugged terrain, weather comes in micro-systems and could be vastly different 10 miles up the route. Flight Service, as we know it, does not exist in the remote areas. There are simply no reporting stations. Jerry could do things like call "Duffy's Tavern" and say, "Joe, look out your window and tell me if you can see such-and-such a mountain." He'd then know the ceiling and visibility in the area. At our pre-flight briefings, Jerry would give us our planned route and our escape route if the weather turned sour. When we were to fly through a pass, with the peaks obscured and the ceilings low, it was a great comfort to have Jerry out front radioing back to us that the pass was flyable. Jerry would file all flight plans, and, as the lead plane in the flight of 10, he'd do all the radio contacts with air traffic control (where it existed!).

Our trip, from home and back again, was 22 days, approximately 9,000

miles, 60.8 flying hours (tach time). We met the group in Great Falls, Montana, on June 26. We crossed Alberta, a corner of British Columbia, The Yukon Territory and Alaska. We went as far west as Hawaii and farther north than all of Iceland, all without crossing an ocean! It was a big trip, but like any cross-country flight, it was just a lot of little flights, one after the other. Jerry made all hotel reservations, took care of all breakfasts and dinners, ground transportation and entertainment. This was not a "roughing it" trip; we stayed in good hotels and ate fine food. No sleeping under the wing of the plane for us! Our only additional expenses were lunches, which we frequently ate enroute, souvenirs, fuel and oil. We spent \$1375 on fuel. We took a case of oil with us and used 11 of the 12 quarts.

Jerry sent us all the sectionals for the trip and a list of survival items required for travel in Northern Canada and Alaska: a firearm, fishing gear, camping equipment, survival food, first aid kit and on and on. It was a big list and we set about to beg, borrow and buy everything on it. When it came time to load the Mooney, we removed the back seats, weighed each item, and started to

fit everything in as efficiently as possible. When we totaled the weight, we found we'd be over gross if we went with full tanks. So we donated some fuel to a fellow Mooney pilot down our hangar row, and went with 50 galls (instead of 64). Since no flight was much over 4 hours, that turned out to be fine. I was happy each time we used a quart of oil: I could then buy a souvenir without messing up our weight and balance!

We left home (Oakland Co. International Airport in Pontiac, Michigan) on June 23, 1998. We made it to Sioux Falls, S. Dakota, where we spent the night while a major summer storm passed over us. The next day was bright and beautiful and we flew on to Gillette, Wyoming, flying over the Badlands, passing by Mount Rushmore and getting a great view of the monument. We spent a day at the Devil's Tower National Monument near Gillette. We got to Great Falls a day early and had time to explore the area.

Finally, we met the group. They ranged from a couple in their mid-seventies, flying a Maule, to a couple in their thirties-to-forties, flying a 172. There was only one other woman pilot in the group. Jerry flies a Saratoga and there was a Grumman Tiger, three 182's, a Cessna 210 and one other Mooney, flown by Bob Moravek from New Jersey. Jerry would take off first, then the slower planes, then the faster ones. We flew in slot #9, only the 210 was faster. But we flew throttled back most of the time, to try to stay in line. We still passed the Maule and the 172 every time! We all had GPS and could report our position to each other, which really helped with spacing.

For each leg of the trip, there was a detailed flight log with check points every few miles and Jeppesen airport diagrams. Jerry called it the Blue Book. We called it the Bible! These were VFR check points we could see and identify. After all, if you followed the wrong fork in the river, you'd soon be separated

from the group and lost. Our first stop as a group was Lethbridge, Alberta, to clear customs and have lunch. Then we overnighed in Grand Prairie. The next morning we headed northwest to the Fort St. John area where we picked up the beginning of the Alaska Highway. This 1422 mile road was built by the U.S. Army in 1942 and we followed it for quite a few of those miles. From this point on, there were very few VOR's and most of our navigation was by visual reference. We became very good at it as we relearned what we'd known as student pilots! After a picnic lunch at Fort Nelson, British Columbia, it was on to Whitehorse in the Yukon. We were based here for three days. We drove to Skagway, Alaska, in two big vans the next day. Jerry didn't want to risk flying it, as there is usually a lot of fog along the coast. Skagway was celebrating the centennial of the gold rush- 1898 to 1998. We spent the day sightseeing in the mountains from the Whitepass & Yukon Railway built to carry the gold miners-the stamperders of '98-and their tons of supplies over the 3,000 foot pass between Skagway and the Yukon. Back in Whitehorse, we had time to sightsee. One evening, after dinner, we attended the Frantic Follies-Jerry got us front row seats! It's a Gay 90's vaudeville revue with dancing, singing, comedy and the poetry of Robert Service. We all got into the spirit of it then. Poetry "readings" became part of our dinner-time entertainment. From "The Cremation of Sam McGee" to "The Spell of the Yukon," we enjoyed them all.

From Whitehorse, we continued to follow the Alaska Highway through the Wrangell-St. Elias Mountains, the largest area of over 14,000 foot peaks in the world. The scenery was unbelievably beautiful with mountains rising all around us. But we flatlanders were always on the lookout for possible emergency landing sites. There were a few dirt strips, some sandy river shores, and of course, the highway, but it did

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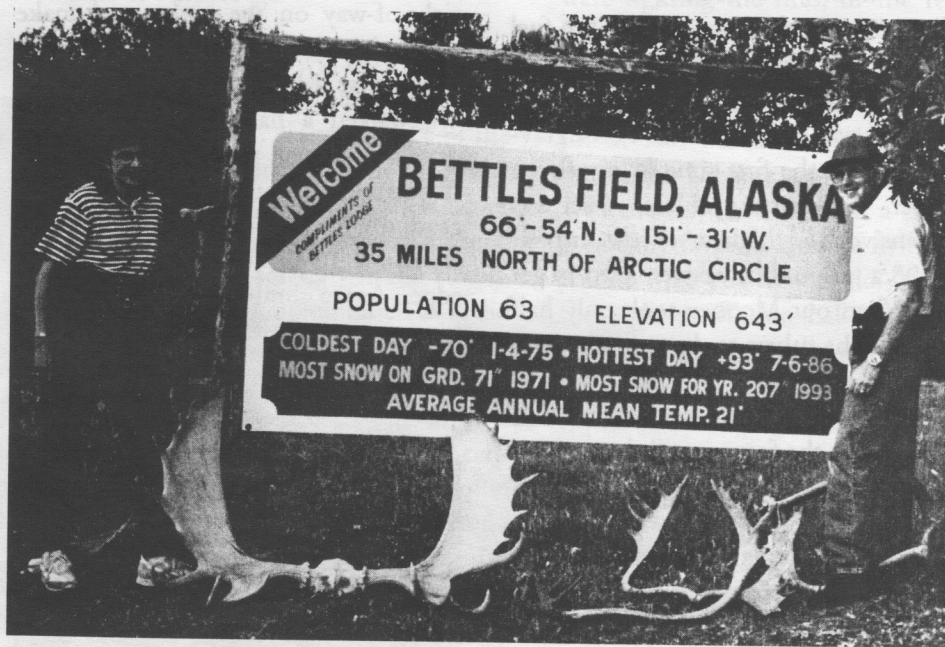
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not have any long straight sections. I wrote in my log book that this was the most beautiful flight I'd ever flown. Jerry agreed and added, "It just gets better." And it did.

Northway, Alaska, was our first landing in Alaska. A nice paved airport with a very pleasant customs agent-the town's preacher! After a quick lunch, it was off again for Fairbanks. On the way, we crossed the Buffalo MOA, which owned the airspace from 300 feet agl and up. So here we were, trying to dodge the low clouds and rolling terrain and stay at 200 feet agl. Suddenly we were back in the real world of aviation with MOA's, restricted air space near Eielson Air Force Base, Class D airspace and other airplanes! But it was a pleasure to land at Fairbanks International: 10,000 feet of beautiful

Tanana Rivers. One highlight of the trip was a Super Cub which took off, circled us, and landed again on about 500 feet of riverside! We also visited the famous Alaska Oil Pipeline. The next day, July 4th, turned out to be one of the highlights of the trip: a "bush flight" north of the Arctic Circle! We flew above the pipeline as it snaked in and out of the ground, avoiding the areas of permafrost. We all watched our GPS/lat/long readouts as we progressed northward. Crossing the Arctic Circle was an emotional experience. Bettles was our first stop north of the Circle - and our first gravel runway. David made a beautiful landing but we hit a small hole as we left the runway and dinged the corner of an inner gear door. We removed them and added them to our crowded baggage compartment for the rest of the trip! (If you go,



pavement. Our planes were based here for 3 days.

We drove to Denali National Park and each of us spent the next day on our own. On our way to go whitewater rafting, we saw a mother moose and her calf. Others took the 8 hour bus trip into Denali to see the wildlife. Back in Fairbanks, we took the sternwheeler "Discovery III" down the Chena and

leave them at home!) After lunch at the airport, we continued north to the Eskimo village of Anaktuvuk Pass, 120 miles north of the Arctic Circle. We had to cross the Brooks Range, the northernmost part of the Rocky Mountains. It's a beautiful young mountain range with steep slopes and sharp peaks but only 5,000 to 6,000 feet msl. Spectacular scenery! We flew GPS direct at 7,000 feet, looking for

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emergency landing spots and finding only a few where Wild River cuts through the mountains. The village had a nice gravel strip. Since there are no roads leading to the village, everything had to be brought in by air. Most of the natives drove small ATV's and lived in prefab type homes. Power was provided by a diesel generator with fuel flown up from Fairbanks. We visited the native museum and found it a fascinating way to spend the 4th of July.

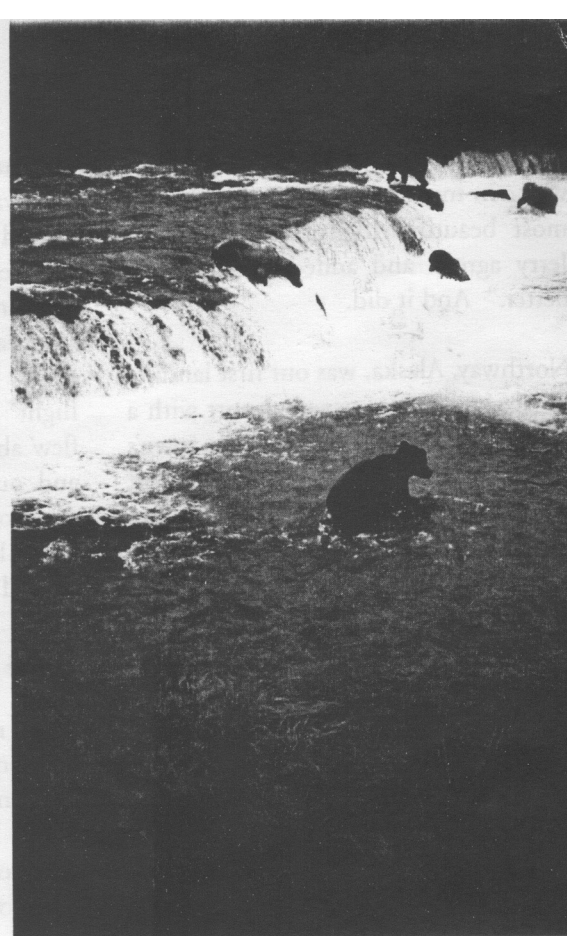
Flying from Fairbanks to Anchorage takes you past R2206, a restricted area with a warning on the sectional: Caution: Possible damage and/or interference with airborne radio due to high level radio energy. Jerry informed us that the radar screens all faced toward Russia, and as long as we passed on the east side, there was no problem. We headed south through Windy Pass. The Blue Book notation was: "Keep a sharp eye for oncoming traffic. Vertical separation on the only option, it is tight in here. And don't scrape the mountains, it's bad for the ecology." It was a beautiful flight, and not windy that day. There were glaciers in the mountains to the west with glacial runoff joining the river beneath us in the narrow valley. We kept looking for Mt. McKinley, or Denali, at 20,320 feet, the highest peak in North America - a peak we could not see because it was covered in clouds.

Merrill Field in Anchorage is a busy airport in the midst of the busiest airspace in Alaska. Even after studying the local chart, we were still confused! But at least we didn't land at Elmendorf Air Force Base by mistake! Besides Merrill, Anchorage International and Elmendorf, there are three other small airports in the area plus the world's largest floatplane base.

The next day was a flight that we'd hesitated to make. We felt the flying was more dangerous than we were comfortable with - lots of over-water flying. But it was the opportunity for some real adventure: to visit Katmai National

Park and see grizzlies up close and personal! We flew south from Anchorage, along the Cook Inlet, where the water is around 38 degrees. We saw the oil derricks rising from the water. The shoreline was spectacular with waterfalls, bays and inlets. Volcanoes, active in recent years, rose from the water and along the coastline. We were headed to the northern part of the Aleutian Chain, to the town of King Salmon. Because of high terrain and the usually low ceilings, we would cut inland at Bruin Bay, follow the shore of Lake Iliamna, the largest lake in Alaska, and then follow the river to King Salmon. A good plan, but there was fog at the foot of the lake. Since we'd already flown for 3 hours, we decided to divert to an alternate airport for fuel and to consider our options. We flew back 40 miles along the lake to Iliamna, where it was my turn to land on a gravel strip, for the first time in my flying career. It was no problem. Fuel was expensive, the highest of the trip at \$3.08 a gallon, but we were glad to get it. When our Mooney took only half the fuel the others took, we had everyone jealous of our efficient airplane! When we flew back to the southern end of the lake, the fog was still there. Jerry said he'd go through while we circled over the lake. He radioed back that it was only a couple of miles and if we stayed at 3,000 feet we'd be fine. One by one, we made it through - with hazy ground contact most of the way.

From King Salmon Airport, we were transported to the river where floatplanes were waiting to take us to park headquarters at Brooks Lake. First we had to attend the "Katmai School of Bear Etiquette," a rather light name for some serious warnings. We were told to keep 50 yards from any bear, 100 yards from a mother with cubs, give the bears



right-of-way on the paths, and make noise when in the woods so you wouldn't surprise a bear with your presence. We walked a half mile through the woods to a small platform by the river. It was only about 4 feet above the ground with a low wooden railing and set about 10-12 feet from the water edge. As we climbed up onto the platform, we were astounded by the sight before us: about a dozen grizzlies stood





in the water, some on top of the falls, some in the river below, catching salmon as they swam upstream. We'd been told to leave all food behind so the bears would not learn to associate humans with food. Since their tummies were full of salmon, we would not be in any danger. And they did ignore us. (The biggest hazard we had to face was being hit in the head by the long lenses of the cameras around us!) It was amazing to watch the different fishing techniques of the bears. Some stood atop the falls, leaned forward and grabbed the jumping fish. Others dove under water at the base of the falls. Some brought their catch on shore right below us to dine. We were enthralled by the show. When it was time to leave, we walked back through the woods, singing loudly, to the park lodge for dinner, where we were very grateful not to eat salmon! We stayed overnight at King Salmon, then headed back to Anchorage.

From Anchorage, it was back home for us - but we didn't head south. We headed northeast, along the face of the Chugach Mountains, following the Glenn Highway, above glaciers, over the pipeline, back to Northway for fuel. Then on to Dawson City in the Yukon, a charming city looking much as it did one hundred years ago in the days of the gold rush, with wooden plank sidewalks and gravel streets. The town is built on perma-frost so pavement cannot be used. Perma-frost turns liquid when it melts and pavement would crumble. The buildings had no foundations but were built on wooden platforms which could be shimmed to keep them level. We visited Bonanza Creek (sorry about that name); the exact spot where gold was first discovered in the Yukon. We visited Robert Service's cabin and Jack London's cabin. We were in Dawson City for 2 days. It wasn't enough!

On our way back toward Whitehorse, we encountered a large area of forest fires. The smoke was thick and I lost



sight of the highway we were following. I had no choice but to climb IMC into smoke and rain, hoping I'd encounter no other planes, the helicopters that were fighting the fires, or the terrain. Once I was at 7,500 feet, I knew I'd cleared the terrain. I then headed for the Lebarge NDB, got behind the smoke and was able to descend VFR over Lake Lebarge and continue into Whitehorse. IMC without a clearance is not my favorite kind of flying! But you do what you have to do. We spent the night at Watson Lake, famous for the world's largest collection of "stolen signs;" 30,000 signs from cities and towns all over the world.

From here, it was southward toward Calgary, where we were in time for the famous Calgary Stampede. The misty-eyed group shared a farewell dinner, exchanged addresses, phone numbers and email addresses. We'd participated in a wonderful adventure together, and had bonded as only those who had shared a memorable experience can. We'd all completed the trip with no major mechanical problems and, thank heavens, no need for Jerry's rescue service. On July 13, we headed for home, trying to remember to talk to controllers, and call ourselves Mooney 49U instead of "Minneapolis Approach,

Dave and Judy here."

We have such wonderful memories of our flight, our fellow travelers, and Alaska. Alaska's state motto is "North to the Future," its state flower is the Forget-Me-Not. I can tell you that we will never forget Alaska or the extraordinary adventure that took us there last summer.

Judy Schwartz

*David Schwartz has been flying since 1978, has about 1800 hours and has owned two previous planes before buying the Mooney. Judy started flying in 1992, after taking a pinch-hitter course in the Mooney. She trained in a Piper Warrior, then immediately transitioned to the Mooney. Judy has over 600 hours, 530 in the Mooney. She and David are both instrument rated. They usually alternate legs on a trip, changing seats at a stopping point. On IFR trips, they find it invaluable to have another instrument rated pilot helping with the approach frequencies and charts. Their Mooney is a 1989 J Model purchased in 1990, from the dealer with over 100 hours on it. It now has over 1500 hours.*

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