

Do Alaska On Your Own - It is Easy!



by Sharon Work
GMCWS Coos Bay, OR, Fall 2016

- We think of Alaska as way up there where it is cold and snowy.
- True, but for a few short months it is sunshine, flowers, water and beauty you don't want to miss!
- I'm not about to do a travelogue, but I do want to share what we learned and maybe you too will want to drive to this wonderland.
- And, yes, you can easily do it alone or with some friends. No caravan service needed or desired.





***And, you never know
who or what you will
meet along the way!***

***This Swiss couple had
shipped their mid-70's
Peugeot camper to the east coast.***

***Now they were on their way to
Alaska and from there planned
to drive to the tip of
South America.***

***So who says you can't do long
distance travel just
because your rig is 40 years old?***





***Ft. Steel, BC, just like
frontier towns all over
the west.***

- This trip is the opportunity to revisit the lifestyle of your grandparents.
- It was a harsh, difficult frontier life in the west and still is today as you go further north.

An important realization
before we start busting
a few myths.....

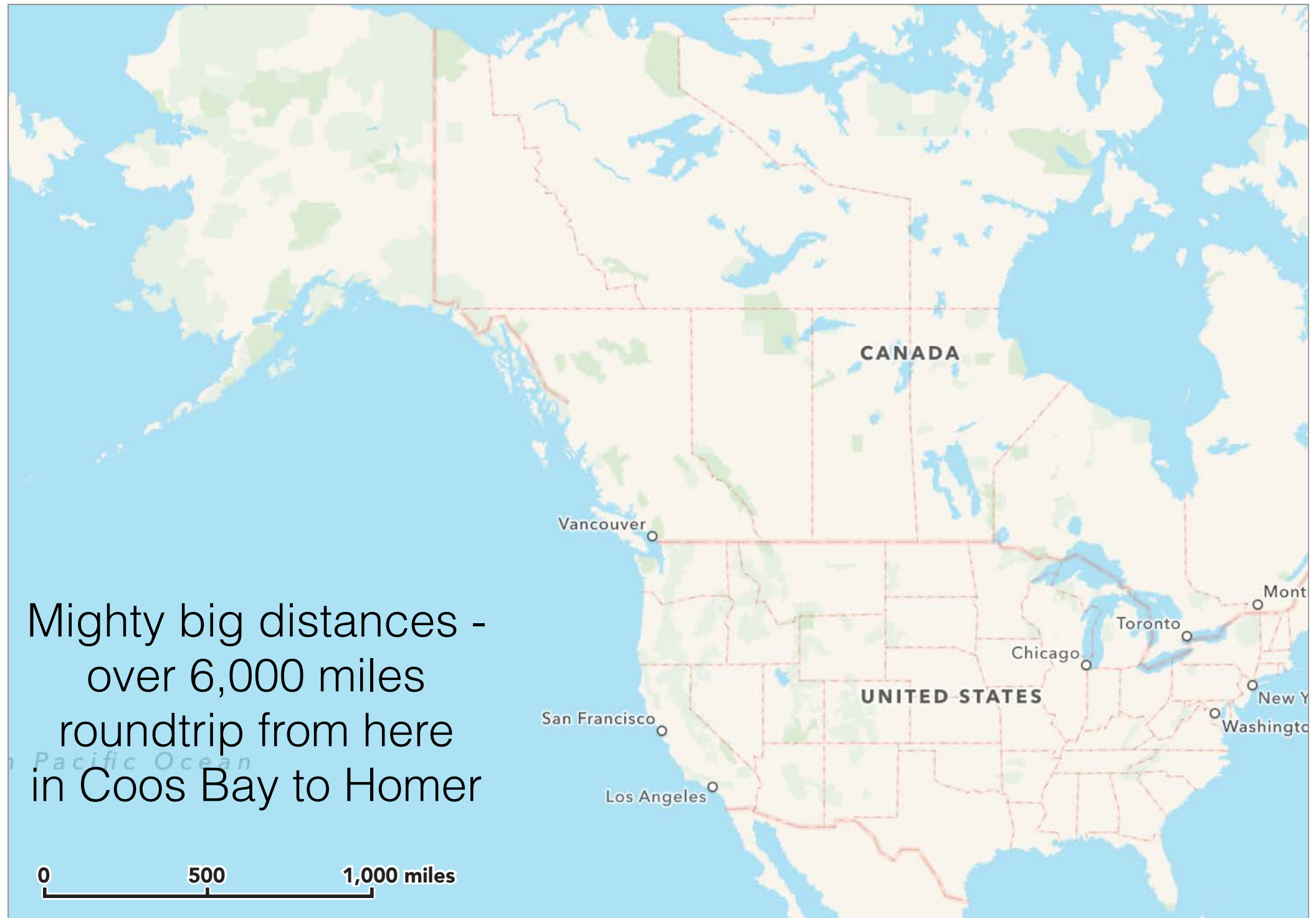
Getting there is far different from being there

- We went everywhere we could go on paved roads - a total of 8651 miles roundtrip from our southern Oregon home in Kerby.
- There are just two ways to get there and only a few major roads once in Alaska so you can't get lost going, while there, or coming back.



Mighty big distances -
over 6,000 miles
roundtrip from here
in Coos Bay to Homer

0 500 1,000 miles



Myths....

- **The roads are terrible** Nope, not a lot different from two lane roads anywhere in our northern US states. Permafrost roads, yes, especially approaching the Yukon Territory/Alaska border.
- **There is construction everywhere** Well, they only have four months in which to repair the winter road damage so you do see construction, especially on the permafrost roads, but it is not much different from road repair season anywhere along the US/Canadian border.
- **You have to cross numerous high mountain passes** Nope, the roads are mainly from sea level to 1500 feet. The highest pass on the Alaska Highway is in BC at 4250 ft., lower than Siskiyou Pass, the highest point on the US I-5 (on the California/Oregon border) at 4311 ft.
- **You need to carry two mounted spare tires** No again. The only tire issue we had was a freak blowout in Spokane, WA, on a 2011 BFG tire that we found out later was in a series of load range E tires (but not our size) that had been recalled.
- **If you break down you are on your own** There are auto parts stores and mechanics nearly everywhere in Alaska and many are old enough to remember how to fix our GMCs! In northern BC and Yukon Territory there are some long stretches between towns but there are periodic roadhouses and enough traffic that you never feel alone. Everyone is helpful.





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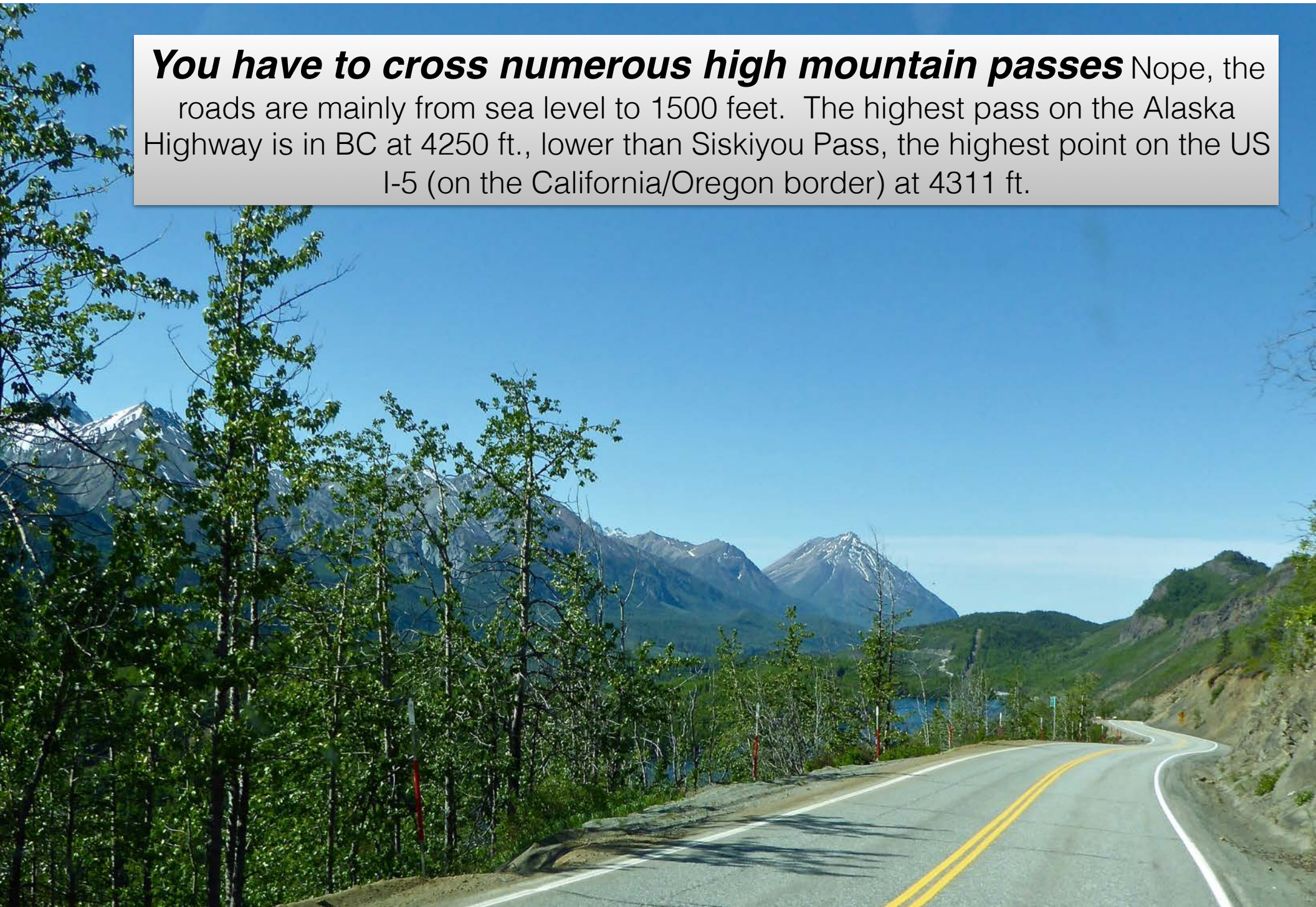






Another myth

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Even though you are in the mountains, the roads never get very high.



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***A GMC mechanic
just waiting and
ready to help
if you need it!***

More myths.....

- **It's not safe to be on your own** The people you meet only have 4 months to capitalize on the tourist trade so everyone is friendly. They want you to enjoy your trip - and to tell all your friends.
- **Not safe to travel without a tow car** I will talk more about the tow or not decision in a moment, but we did it without a tow car and had no issues, although a tow car is handy for excursions.
- **It rains through the summer.** Actually, if you go in May, as we did, you likely will encounter the best weather of the whole year. We were in bright sunshine most days.
- **Dangerous wildlife is everywhere** The animals along the roads generally ignore you and are mainly interested in eating after a long winter. We were never threatened. A chance encounter with a Grizzly while hiking might be a different story, but as long as you do not offer food or move between mom and cubs, you are unlikely to be bothered.
- **Forest fires and smoke are everywhere** Not on our trip. We saw the remnants of old fires but it is a vast land and forest fires can and do break out periodically. It is the nature of the land.



This couple own a beautiful roadhouse and, yes, they too go south in the winter!



Living Museums
Visitors Centers
Take the Time
Make all the Stops





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Mother Nature at work,
doing her thing



Still more myths.....

- **Mosquitos are bad and will make life miserable** That might be true some times of the year, but in May and June we found they were few except in the deep woods.
- **You are isolated and without telecommunications** Wrong again! Just be sure your phone plan includes Canada or you are in for a surprise big phone bill when you get home.
- **Prices are high for everything** Well, most everything has to be brought in 1000's of miles either by ship, plane, or truck, so prices will be higher than you encounter at home, especially for food and at restaurants. Gasoline was lower in cost than we thought it would be and you are never more than 100 miles from a gas facility either in a town or at the self-serve facilities along the more remote stretches of highways.
- **You will get to enjoy the Northern Lights** Nope, that comes later in the year, in the dark, and around full or new moon. It will be light for 22 or 23 hours at solstice. You are not likely to see the Northern Lights during the 4 months of the tourist season.
- **Campgrounds are few, full and require reservations in advance** That was not our experience. In May and June. Most have plenty of space to just drive in. There are also lots of purpose built overnight areas along the roads and in some of the towns.



Jolly Jerry at the Self Serve



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Another nearly empty campground



***Enough myth busting,
now let's get ready to go!***

Analysis Paralysis.... not necessary.

Remember: It's Easy!....even the preparation...

...though not quite as simple as brother Ray's advice:
“you only need two things to navigate in a motorhome
- a thermometer and a compass”

To order ahead of time.....

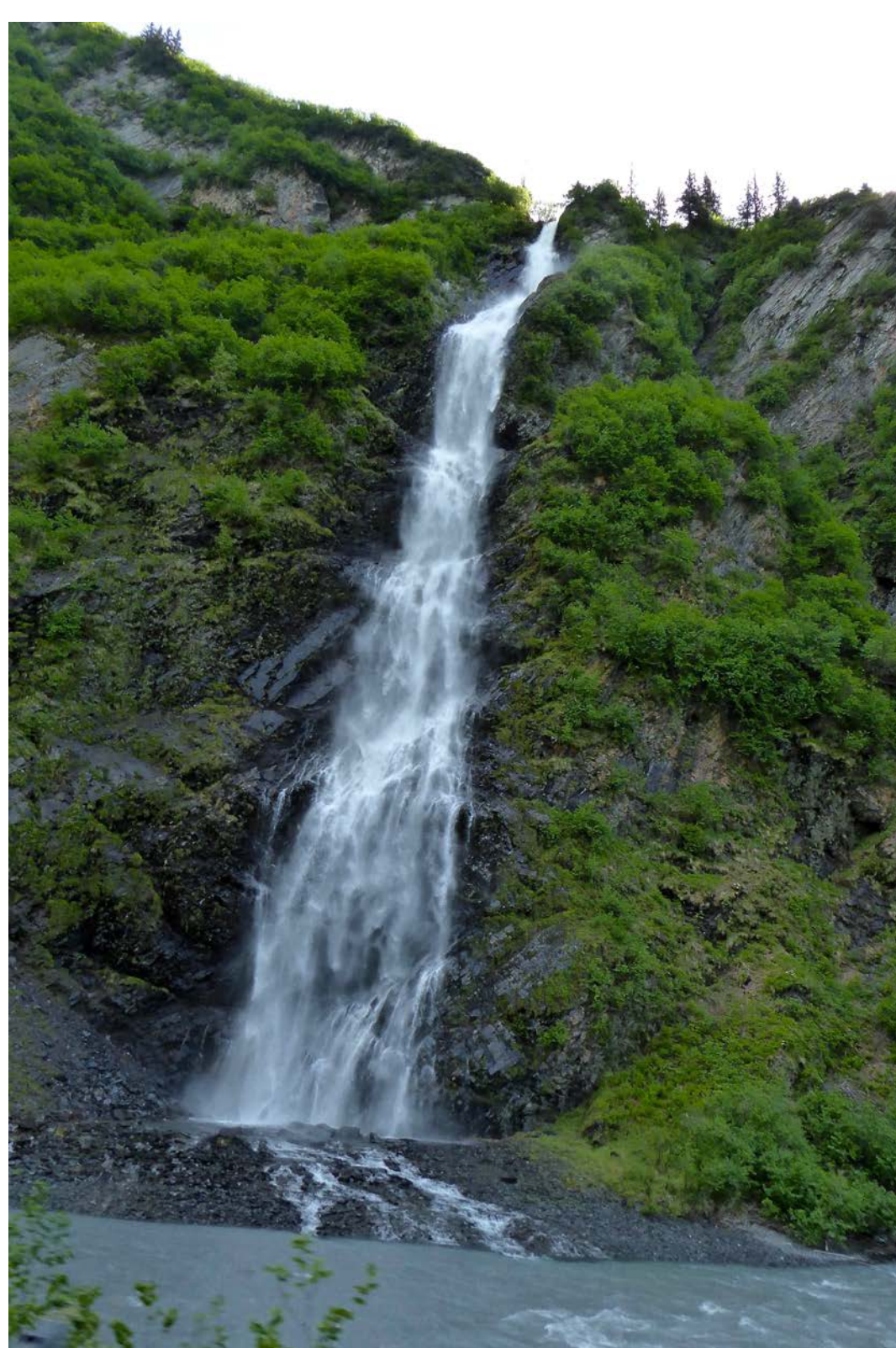
Three resource books we
found important:

“The Milepost 2017 edition”

Mike & Terri Church

“Traveler’s Guide to Alaskan
Camping”

Ron Jones, “RVing to Alaska
on Your Own” (download)



So, what do you need to do to get ready for such a trip?

First, do a shake-down trip close to home checking tires, batteries, cables, all your appliances and make sure your generator and air system are top notch.

You want to be prepared for dry camping and you will need to level frequently.

Don't overdo it carrying spare parts as they are available everywhere you will go.





The At Home “To Do” List:

- change oil***
- check tire dates***
- buy 2 collapsable buckets & auto wash soap***
- have 3 rags - wash, rinse & dry***
- have a good quality molded rubber squeegee***
- black-out the bedroom***

Picture taken at our campsite about 10PM in late May



Welcome to Eielson

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska



Wednesday, June 15th Mile 66 3,733 Ft
1,138 m

WEATHER



Today: Mostly Sunny
High 60°F 16°C Low 48°F 9°C



Tomorrow: Mostly Sunny
High 68°F 20°C Low 46°F 8°C

WEATHER on Denali

Partly Cloudy

High 5F

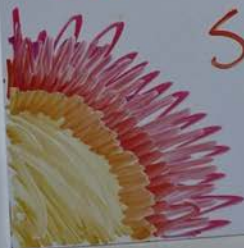
Low 0F



Sunrise @ 3:45 am

Sunset @ 12:22 am

Day Length = 20h 36m



Welcome to Pioneer Park Fairbanks, Alaska

June 16, 2016

Temperature: ☺
High: 79° Low: 56°

Sunrise: 2:59 a.m.

Sunset: 12:45 a.m.

Length of Day:

21 hours + 44 minutes

Don't forget:

- **binoculars**
- **a bird book**
- **minimal clothing**
- **2 weeks underwear**
- **your laundry soap**
- **prepared for hot, cold and wet**
- **bedding for cool and hot nights**
- **sunblock**
- **bug spray and anti-itch**
- **a clock you can set**



For sure.....

Take a camera for each person. Long travel zoom cameras work really well and are small enough to carry with you all the time. Your cell phone camera really won't cut it for this trip! We carried a Panasonic ZS100 and a ZS50.



Getting electronically ready.....

- Make sure one of your cell phones has a Canada plan add-er (about \$2 per day of use). You will want that both for calling and for doing internet searches while in Canada.
- Tether your other devices to that one phone for internet access. Access will be spotty in northern or rural parts of BC and Yukon Territory but generally quite good elsewhere and in towns of any size in Alaska. Since Alaska is part of the US, your existing plan will cover you there.
- If you use a cloud service for storing photos, be sure you know how and when to activate it. You will take a gazillion photos and they can eat up your data plan quickly.
- The TV satellites will be too low on the horizon to see once you are 100 or so miles into Canada. Some campgrounds have cable TV.

One last “getting ready” thing.....

Be sure you carry both a MC and a Visa card. Costco in Canada only takes MC and Costco in Alaska only takes Visa.



An unexpected benefit if you happen to be an Elk

There are several nicely situated Elks Clubs with overnight parking. Not only are they a fun place to stay, they put you in touch with locals who can suggest things to do or see you might otherwise miss.



Do you want to tow or not?

- That is actually a more difficult question than it seems.
- Towing a vehicle can lead to difficulties over the worst of the frost heaved roads...
-but is a blessing to have when you want to go on gravel or dirt road excursions. For example, we did not take our coach on the 100+ mile washboard gravel road to Dawson City but would have done so separately in a tow car.
- You really don't need a tow car for in town excursions - we used our folding bikes - but you would like it for longer jaunts like up to the Independence Mine out of Wasilla, AK. We only got to go to that interesting place thanks to some big-rig RVers we met while parked at the Elks Club there.
- If you do want to tow, be sure to protect your tow car from flying rocks in the construction zones or if you do take your GMC on gravel roads.



The Independence Mine
as it is today.



When is the right time for you to go?



- If you fish, go later
- Otherwise, by leaving in early May you will chase spring all the way north....or is it chasing you?
-and it is uncrowded, the wildlife is still at lower elevations within sight, and the only tour busses will be at major attractions like Lake Louise in AB or accommodating the cruise ship crowds in AK.
- All in all, May and June in Alaska just can't be beat most years.

Wildlife is active and it's birthing season - so babies





Our campsite
moose

They aren't called Stone Sheep by accident!



Following lilacs in bloom - Kerby to Anchorage





Feathery Aspen
are a unique treat



The streams are their fullest



Waterfalls are everywhere



By going to Alaska in the spring you will have your best chance to actually see Denali. Spectacular!

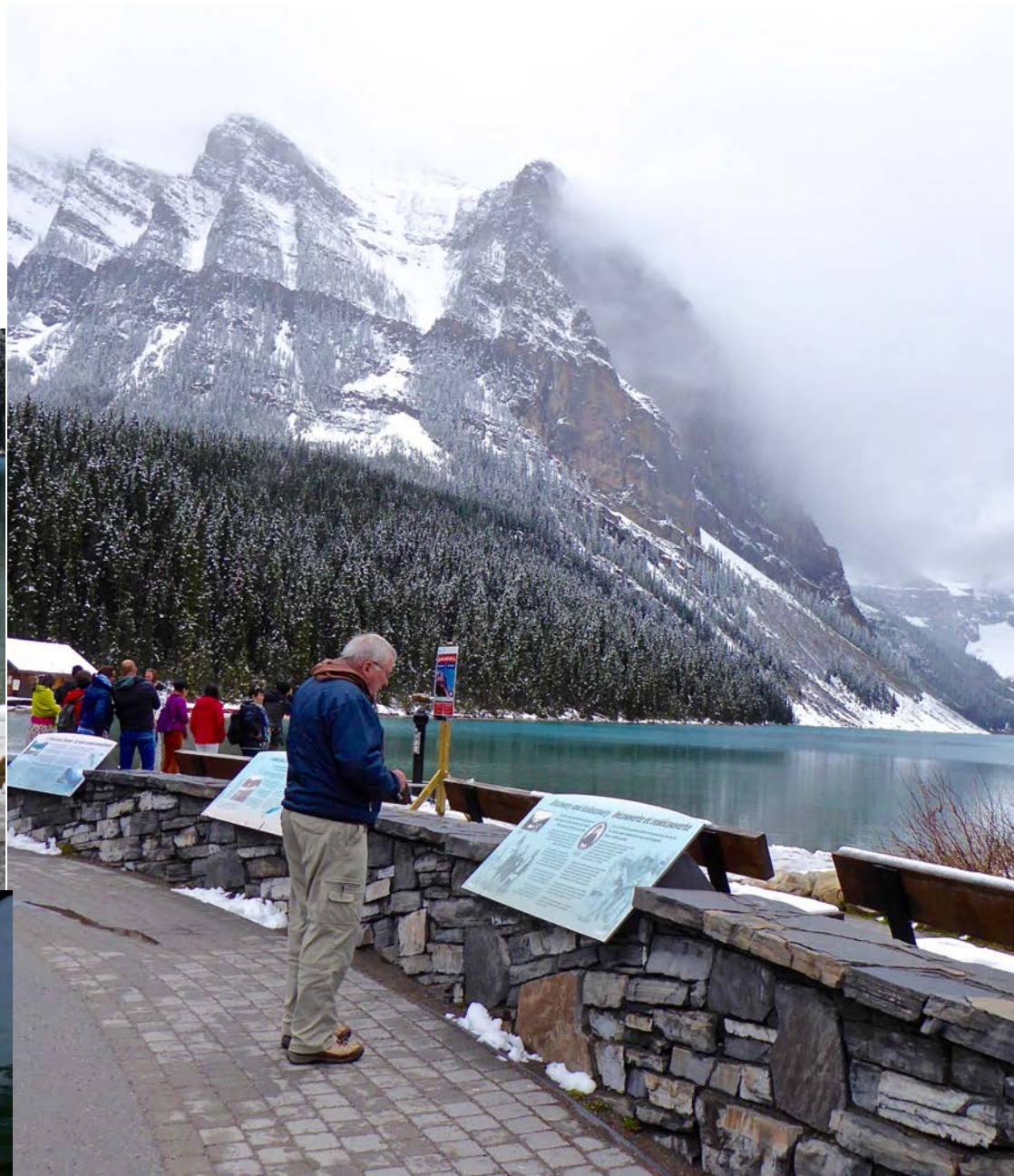




From Eielson Visitor Center

Accessible only by
an eight hour round trip
ride on park shuttle buses

There are far fewer tourists to contend with in the spring



By mid-summer this parking lot will be full of tour busses!



Later in the summer at Lake Louise, AB, you would have a hard time getting to this viewpoint. In early May, it was easy, but a bit cold in the Canadian Rockies.

***Alaska in all it's glory CAN be on your "must do" list
- and You Can Do IT on your own***



Now let's open it up for questions
and comments from the floor