

Natural Qualities of the Copper River Highway

The Copper River Highway is surrounded by the Chugach National Forest and passes along the northern edge of the largest contiguous wetland on the Pacific Coast of North America. This wetland is in excess of 700,000 acres and is the summer home to Trumpeter Swans, mallards, widgeon, teal and many other species of ducks, dusky Canada geese, song birds and shorebirds. The Copper River delta recently was added to the international "WHSRN" (Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. Cordova celebrates an annual Shorebird Festival the first week in May, with birding enthusiasts coming from all over the world to marvel at hundreds of thousands of migrating birds. This vast delta also provides summer and winter habitat for several species of pacific salmon, trout and char. A variety of large mammals including moose, goats, brown bears, wolves and coyotes also call the Copper River Delta home.

Starting in Cordova, the Copper River Highway follows the old Copper River and Northwestern Railroad right-of-way passing along the southern shore of Eyak Lake. This lake is 12 miles long and about one mile wide, yet it only averages 8 feet in depth. It has been said that the salmon produced in this lake are worth more than \$1 million dollars each year to the commercial fishing fleet. On the other side of the road is the Heney Mountain Range which tops out at over 3000 feet high at Heney Peak. Spruce and hemlock blanket the mountain to the tree line. The occasional mountain goat may be spotted below the snow line on some of the surrounding peaks. The Eyak River, downstream of where the Copper River Highway crosses the outlet of the lake, supports a very popular and robust coho salmon sport fishery in late summer. Several thousand sport anglers ply these waters during the annual salmon migration testing their skills against 10 to 15 pound salmon.

Once across the Eyak River the vastness of the Copper River Delta becomes apparent. The steep mountains give way to flat terrain punctuated with many icy cold streams being fed by glaciers that are visible in the mountains a short distance to the north. These glacial streams meander through the delta's ever changing the landscape with sandbars and oxbows that divert water into sloughs or create and drain ponds as the stream channels move.

A short distance down the highway produces more opportunities to angle for salmon and trout in many small clear water tributaries to the larger glacial streams. The vegetation along the highway changes from tall spruce trees near Cordova to vast swatches of alder and willow with the occasional cottonwood tree. The cottonwood trees provide ideal perches for bald eagles, ravens, jays and other birds surveying their domain. In April and May, huge numbers of smelt can enter many of these glacial streams on their spawning migration. These bite size morsels attract thousands of gulls and hundreds of bald eagles which can be seen swooping down to the water to snatch a meal.

At any point along the Copper River Highway, moose can be observed browsing in the willow patches. Often times, a mother with her calf will stand and stare at a vehicle looking at the occupants who are just as intently staring back at the moose. Coastal brown bears can also materialize out of the vegetation at anytime, but most often they will be near one of the streams containing migrating salmon or smelt. The bears are a little more secretive than the browsing moose and tend to melt into the brush as a vehicle approaches.

At mile 27, the first sight of the mighty Copper River appears as the first of many brides comes into view. This river is home to the famous Copper River Salmon. Many of these salmon will begin their homeward journey in mid-May traveling 300 miles and climbing 3,000 feet in elevation. These salmon are able to find their way through the silt laden waters, fighting strong currents and dodging icebergs created from calving glaciers as it cuts through the Chugach Mountains. Even more incredible is the fact that these fish no longer feed as they make this migration. They use the energy stored in their body from fat reserves acquired during their time at sea. The mountain at the river's edge at mile 27 is known locally as Flag Point. Often times in the early summer goats can be observed with the aid of binoculars grazing in the alpine meadows.

The Copper River Highway continues along the eastern shore of the Copper River traveling up river for the next 25 miles. When crossing the bridge it is easy to see that the ecosystem around the Copper River is quite different from the previous 27 miles of road. Sand from winter winds has left its mark with large sand dunes on both sides of the road. Even the posts holding the guard rails in place have been carved into half-moon shapes. The cold winter winds barrel down the Copper River often in excess of 100 mph. This chilling effect extends the winter season in the river corridor for an extra month each spring. After crossing the mile 27 bridge the vegetation slowly starts changing from mixed willow and alder to groves of alder and tall Cottonwood trees. These trees also show the effects of the wind with the southerly lean to their trunks and limbs.

At mile 37, a long bridge crosses the Copper River. The swift, turbulent water has increased in volume in recent years under this bridge as the river meanders across the vast delta. Both brown and black bears are more common in the following miles of road as the vegetation becomes thicker and the mountains start to close in around the road. Goats are more common on the nearby mountain slopes particularly on a tall mountain to the east called Goat Mountain.

The Highway reaches another milestone at mile 52 where the Copper River is crossed by the Million Dollar Bridge. This bridge was built in 1910 to pass trains filled with copper ore from the Kennecott mine. It did so until 1938 when the mine closed and the last train passed over the bridge. Immediately downstream from the bridge is a salmon counting sonar station which is operated by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. This station uses sonar to view salmon as they pass upstream in the silt colored water. What looks like a turbulent, dangerous river that could kill anything in minutes is actually alive with Chinook and sockeye salmon hugging the shores as they move upstream. A quick visit to the sonar camp will show salmon after salmon passing through the sonar beams moving upstream. Oftentimes a harbor seal can also be seen swimming in the river feeling his way along hoping to bump into an easy meal of unaware salmon.

Crossing the Million Dollar Bridge nears the end of the road for this scenic trip. A short distance further, the gravel road abruptly ends at the bank of a stream that, in a long forgotten flood, removed any remnants of the old railroad bed. What remains are a few skeletons of the old trestles and some "hanging" iron rails but mostly it's wilderness, occupied by all the wild animals and fish that call the Copper River valley their home.