

Nizina Glacier to Chitina Float

Nizina, Kennicott, and Chitina Rivers

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve



(Kennicott River variation included at end)

Access: Amphitheater airstrip at the toe of the Nizina Glacier. The least expensive flights are available through the air-taxis in McCarthy, Alaska.

Distance: Approximately 90 river miles

Time: 4-6 days

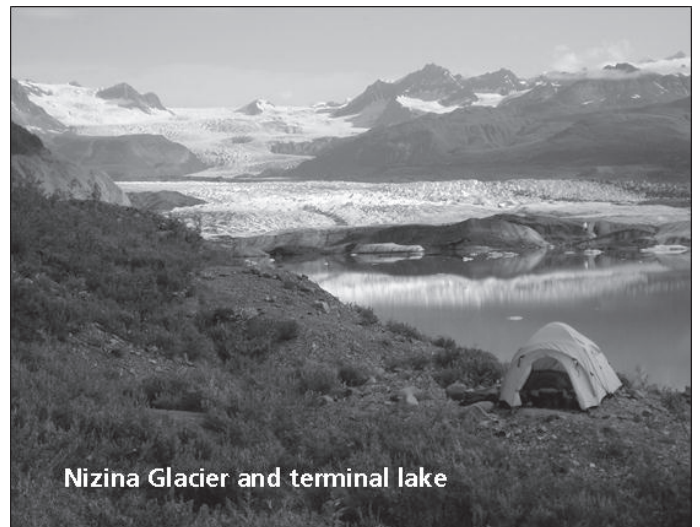
Maps: USGS 1:250,000 McCarthy, Valdez

Difficulty: Class III. Knowledge of Alaskan rivers is required, as extensive braiding in channels can be tricky to navigate. Traveling with a guide or guiding company is recommended, however, it is do-able with an independent group.

Hazards/Safety Precautions: Many bears and other wildlife are present along these rivers, and caution should be given to help avoid encounters. Choose a camp location carefully, and if there is recent sign of bears, go elsewhere to reduce possibility of contact. Keep sleeping areas separate from cooking areas, and use a bear resistant food container for storing food and other scented items.

The water in these remote glacially fed rivers is very cold. One local guide calls them “Class III with Class V consequences.” Glacial outburst lakes occur up both the Kennicott and Chitina Rivers. Due to glacial silt, the water in the Nizina and Chitina Rivers isn’t potable. It is necessary to look for clear water tributaries throughout the trip.

Always wear an approved, well-fitting personal flotation device while boating or fishing on any body of water and wear a helmet and wet or dry suit when appropriate. Dress warmly in layers of wool or synthetic materials that will keep you warm when wet. Pack your gear in waterproof bags and take at least one complete change of clothes and plenty of waterproof matches. Always tie your boat down when not in use to prevent rising water or the wind from taking it down the river without you.



Nizina Glacier and terminal lake

Route:

Put-In: Nizina Glacier Lake. The airstrip is approximately a 1/4 mile from the terminal lake at the toe of the glacier. Gear will need to be portaged to the lake for put-in. Good camping is available along the lake and at the airstrip. No potable water is available. The shores of the lake and the Nizina River offer excellent hiking and views of the Nizina Glacier and Chimney and Frederika Mountains.

Day 1: The first 10 Miles of river are a class III boulder field as the river flows through spectacular mountainous terrain. Below the confluence with the West Fork of the Nizina River the river widens and begins to braid into a classic glacial fed river, class II. Excellent camping can be found on both sides of the river, particularly in the region of the confluence with the Chitstone River. Hiking opportunities are available on river-left above the confluence with the Chitstone River.

Water may be available at a waterfall on river-left several miles down river from the put-in. Depending on water level this may be a difficult place to stop.

Day 2: The river stays wide and braided until entering Five Mile Gulch. It is a wide canyon with hydraulic activity where the river bends around rocky outcrops. Below Five Mile Gulch lies the confluence with the Kennicott River. Hidden Lake, a glacially dammed lake on the Kennicott Glacier, catastrophically washes down the Kennicott River every year in late June or early July. The Nizina Canyon, just below the confluence with the Kennicott River should not be run at flood stage. If possible, pull over above the Kennicott if it appears to be flooding. The flood usually lasts about 24 hours.

The Nizina Canyon is a class III, vertical walled, twisting canyon with large hydraulic activity. Camping is available below the Nizina Canyon, at the confluence with the Chitina River, on both sides of the Nizina River. There is also an airstrip and gravel bar on river right just below the canyon and it would be possible to end the trip here with a prearranged pickup.

Day 3: Just below the Nizina Canyon is the confluence with the Chitina River. Water levels on the Chitina vary widely with temperatures. At low water the Chitina can be a braided river. Water levels rise in prolonged warm weather as substantial glacial melt water flows down the river. Also, Iceberg Lake, a very large glacially dammed lake, periodically (not every year) washes down the Chitina River, raising the water level to both banks. While it is possible to raft the Chitina during the Iceberg Lake flood event, it is important to remember to tie up boats at all times.

Generally, there are good places to camp along the shores of the Chitina and at the Nelson Mountain landslide. Hiking opportunities are also available at the Nelson Mountain landslide. Water can sometimes be found at Steamboat Creek or Skull Creek and from the creek coming in on the downriver side of the Nelson Mountain landslide (river-left).

Day 4: Interesting scenery, cliff walls and mountains line the Chitina River. Camping can be found on both sides of the river, particularly above the Kuskulana River. Water is available at Tebay River. However, camping is not recommended at Tebay River due to bear activity.

It would be possible to make it all the way to the takeout at O'Brien Creek on this day. However, due to the propensity for high winds on the Copper River in the Chitina area in the afternoon, it may be more pleasant to take-out in the morning.

Day 5: After scenic views of the bluffs of the Chitina River you will arrive at the confluence between the Chitina and the Copper. The take-out is at O'Brien Creek, 5 miles down the Copper. It is important to row to river-right. Depending on water levels you may need to navigate through river bars to ensure you reach

the takeout. Also, be aware that the wind can blow hard up the Copper and tends to increase throughout the day. While it may be tempting to pull into the lee of the river bank to get out of the wind it can be hard to get back out around the corner if the wind is strong.

Take-Out: O'Brien Creek, 5 miles south of Chitina on the Copper River Highway.

The situation for boaters has been changing at O'Brien Creek. Obtaining updated information is essential.

Generally O'Brien Creek is the private property of Chitina Corporation and they do not currently allow put-ins or take-outs on their property. However, the State of Alaska Right-of-Way intersects the Copper River about 100' upriver of the creek bed where there is a legal take-out that does not trespass. There are often vehicles parked near the river in the right-of-way. The ease of the takeout depends on the water level in the Copper River. There is a river bench there that can be straightforward. However, there are often people fishing from this bank with dipnets and it is necessary to ask them to temporarily move.

The easiest place to take-out is the alluvial plain of O'Brien Creek. However, the land you must cross to transport your gear to your car is Chitina Corporation. Since the situation is in flux it is worth calling Chitina Corporation (907) 822-8132 to inquire about the possibility of getting a permit to cross their land.

To reach O'Brien Creek take-out by car: At Chitina, turn South on the Copper River Highway (a narrow gravel road). Travel approximately 5 miles. Once the road goes down a steep hill towards O'Brien Creek, turn left immediately (before the creek) towards the Copper River. This narrow driveway is in the state right-of-way and is where you should takeout unless you have a permit from Chitina Corporation to cross their land.

Note: There are two alternative options to taking out at O'Brien Creek:

Alternate #1: Flights can be arranged for a pickup on river-right just below the Nizina Canyon.

Alternate #2: It is possible to raft all the way to the Million Dollar Bridge at the mouth of the Copper River. This would add an additional 5 days to the trip. The Copper River portion of the trip is not covered here.

KENNICOTT RIVER VARIATION:

The Kennicott River is a Class III boulder field from the put-in to the Nizina-Kennicott confluence. At low water the final three miles are somewhat braided. The river is approximately eight river miles in length. Put-in below the Kennicott River footbridge. The bridge poses a serious wrap hazard. Putting-in above the footbridge will require the rower to execute the river's most difficult maneuver immediately after launching. There is very little time for a proper setup. There is also a second bridge (private) approximately 1/4 mile down river from the footbridge which also poses a wrap hazard. Generally, there is more time for a proper set when passing under this bridge. The Kennicott-Nizina confluence is between Five Mile Gulch and the Nizina Canyon.

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