

The Goat Trail

Lower Skolai Lake-Chitistone Pass-Glacier Creek

Wrangell-St.Elias National Park and Preserve

National Park Service
US Department of the Interior



Alpine Panorama in Chitistone Pass

Access: From Gulkana, Chitina, or McCarthy via local air-taxi service to Lower Skolai Lake Airstrip or Glacier Creek Airstrip.

Distance: Approximately 30 miles

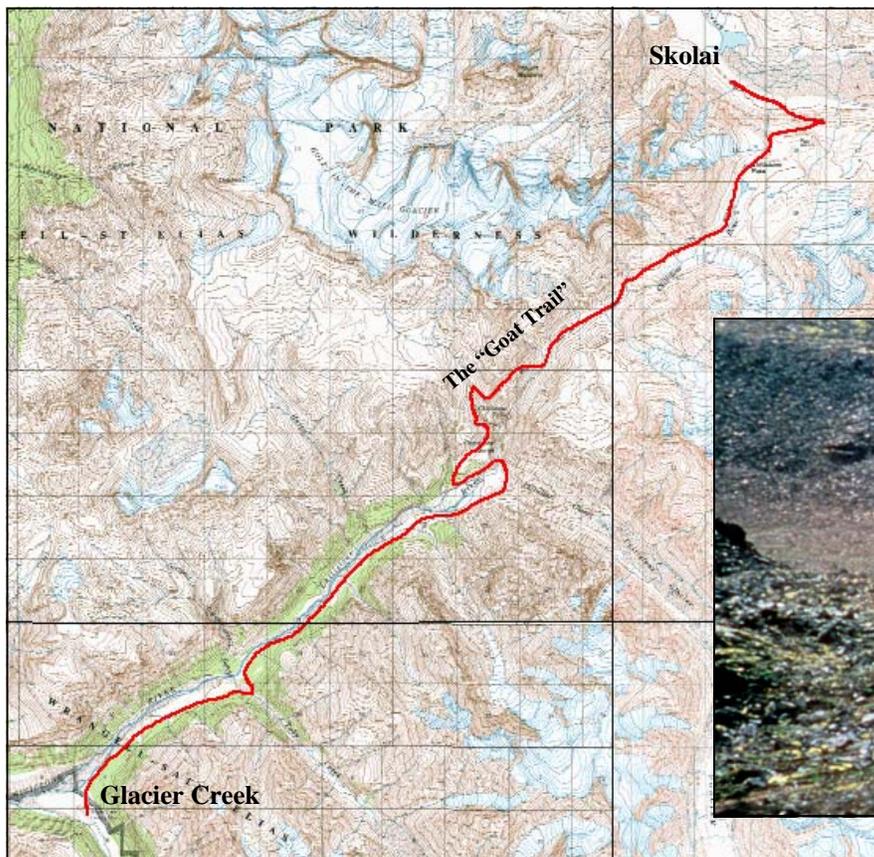
Time: 5-8 days

Difficulty: *Difficult* (route finding, steep terrain, multiple river crossings).

Maps: USGS-McCarthy (B-4), (C-4), (C-3) 1:62,360;

Elevations: From 4,500 ft. at Lower Skolai Lake to 5,800 Ft at Chitistone Pass to 2,340 ft. at Glacier Creek.

Highlights: Spectacular vistas, wildlife, wilderness, glaciers, waterfalls, alpine flowers



Note:

- *Proper food storage is required!* Bear Resistant Food Containers are available from all park visitor centers.
- This is a route with a visible historic trail in places. The trail is NOT maintained.



Dall Sheep in Chitistone Pass

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Skolai airstrip



Up above Skolai



Alpine Lake in Chitistone Pass

Route:

To lessen the chance of weather problems, this hike is best completed from high elevation Skolai to low elevation Glacier Creek. Note: The airstrip shown on the USGS maps near Upper Skolai Lake no longer exists. The current strip is along the western shore of Lower Skolai Lake. The tiny airstrip is surrounded by beautiful mountains, waterfalls, and great hiking opportunities. If time permits, it would be great to spend a day or more exploring this high-elevation paradise. This is also a great location for a base camp.

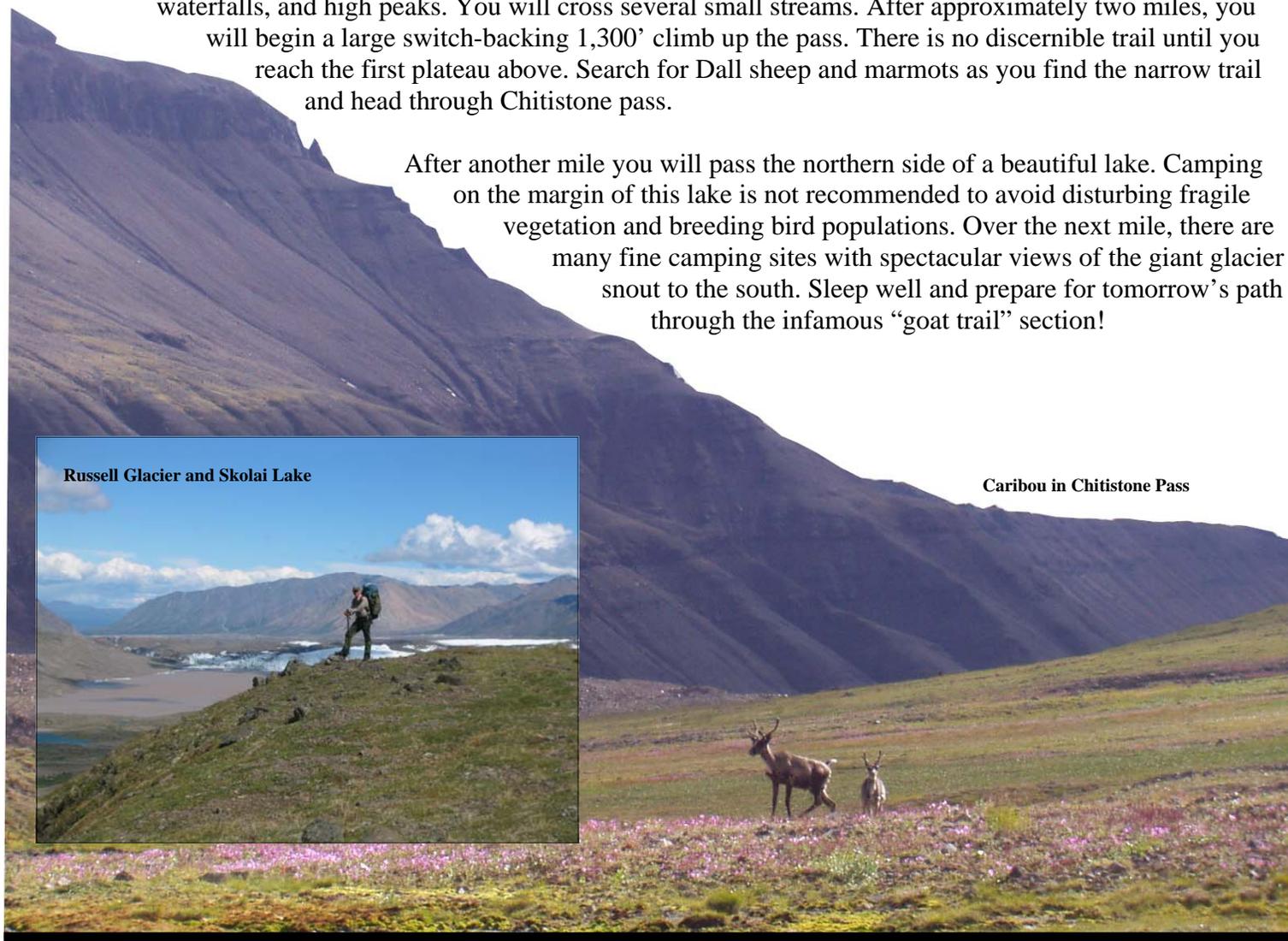
From the airstrip, head southeast along the base of the long ridge. Enjoy the views of the Russell Glacier, waterfalls, and high peaks. You will cross several small streams. After approximately two miles, you will begin a large switch-backing 1,300' climb up the pass. There is no discernible trail until you reach the first plateau above. Search for Dall sheep and marmots as you find the narrow trail and head through Chitistone pass.

After another mile you will pass the northern side of a beautiful lake. Camping on the margin of this lake is not recommended to avoid disturbing fragile vegetation and breeding bird populations. Over the next mile, there are many fine camping sites with spectacular views of the giant glacier snout to the south. Sleep well and prepare for tomorrow's path through the infamous "goat trail" section!



Russell Glacier and Skolai Lake

Caribou in Chitistone Pass



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An early start is recommended to allow for plenty of time to negotiate some very steep terrain ahead. The trail begins to descend through a lateral moraine and along the beginnings of the Chitistone River. The route generally follows the river. There is no discernible trail through much of this canyon. Continue hiking southwest with the river on your left. You will have to negotiate several glacial streams. The canyon begins to narrow and become steeper. After approximately three miles, the river enters the Chitistone Gorge. You will find a trail again. It crosses a clear stream and then heads steeply upwards. You are now entering the actual "goat trail." After a climb of 1000 feet, the "trail" begins to cross steep but very colorful scree slopes.

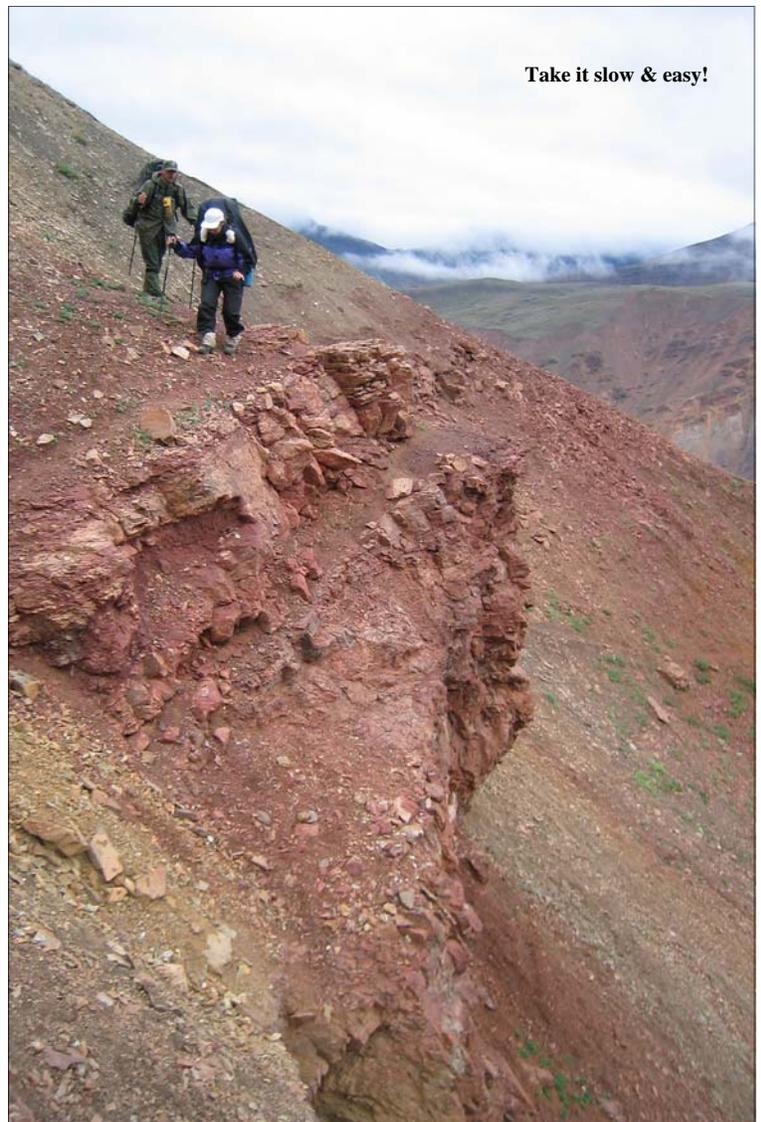


Heading towards the gorge

It is imperative that you continue your climb upwards until you reach the base of the most prominent cliff band in the light yellow colored rock (limestone) above the dark colored rock (greenstone). Do NOT traverse into the greenstone. The safer, high path depicted on the photos here may be covered by rockfall debris and not very obvious. The well-worn trails leading down into the dark greenstone are made by Dall sheep and lead to impassable cliffs and dropoffs! Many hikers are traversing too low and are walking into very treacherous areas.



Take the high route...stay in the limestone



Don't follow sheep trails into the treacherous bluffs

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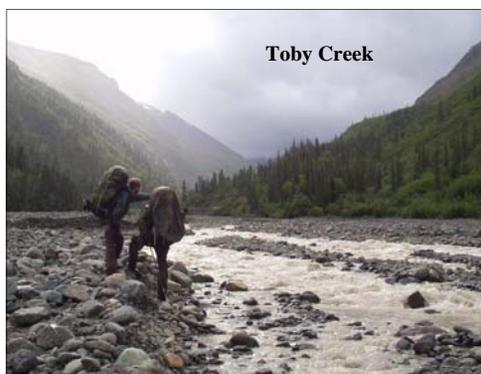
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After one mile of steep scree slope crossings, you will round a ridgeline and be rewarded with a tremendous view of the Chitistone Canyon and river far below. From this vantage point, you can see the trail as it descends around a steep side canyon and down to the large green bench visible far below you. Make your way down to the bench and enjoy the awesome view of the river exiting the gorge into Chitistone Falls.

The route stays along the right side of this bench near the hillside. When you reach the southwest end of the bench, a trail heads steeply down through the alders. Be careful not to lose the trail in this thick vegetation! The trail will end at a gravel outwash plain from a small stream. Head to the banks of the Chitistone River.

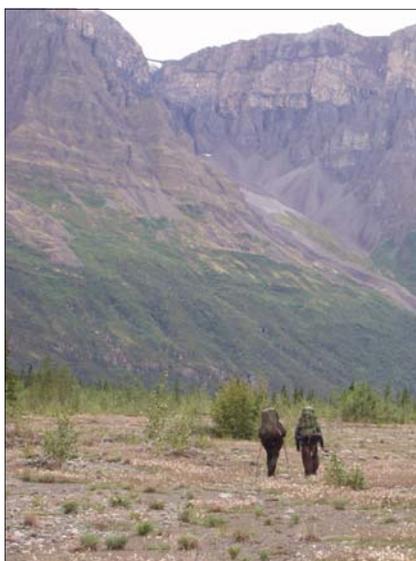


Do NOT try to cross the main Chitistone River! This could be fatal. Instead, walk upriver to the confluence between the Chitistone River and the Chitistone Glacier tributary. Cross each tributary separately. People have died in the Chitistone River trying to cross below the confluence. These crossings may be time consuming. Take your time to find the best crossing place and time. Early morning hours are best. You may have to hike upstream to find a safe crossing. Do NOT attempt to cross after heavy rain.

Once you've negotiated both channels of the Chitistone, the route (no trail) follows the southern shoreline of the river. Walk down river on the southern shoreline. The hiking is fairly easy along gravel river benches and through open woodlands. Be observant and watch for bears as you travel through the riverside vegetation.

There are still three significant river crossings to negotiate. Be prepared to cross the two un-named rivers, and the largest, Toby Creek, which is narrow, but deep and very swift. Just before Toby Creek, you must leave the river edge and make your way along a very thickly vegetated hillside. A trail is evident, but disappears frequently. Once through this alder thicket, Toby Creek is only 1 mile away. If the water in Toby Creek is high, continue upriver to locate a suitable crossing. Be aware that the lowest flow is usually during the very early morning hours. You may need to stop and wait for lower flow.

Once you've crossed Toby Creek, the route is an easy, level 3.5 mile hike to the Glacier Creek airstrip. A public use cabin is located along a short trail from the northeastern end of the strip. Be aware that there are no freshwater streams between Toby and Glacier Creek and that there is no water at the airstrip or cabin. The closest fresh water is almost two miles up Glacier Creek canyon.



Easy hiking on gravel bars



Cabin at Glacier Creek