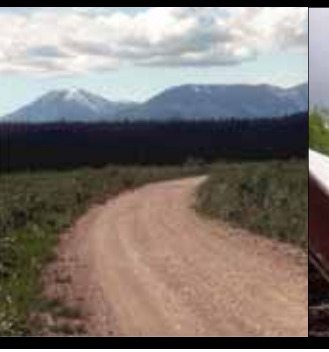
McCarthy Road

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Wrangell-St. Elias
National Park & Preserve



The 60- mile McCarthy Road winds deep into the heart of Wrangell- St. Elias National Park & Preserve. Once the gateway to tremendous fortunes, it is now your gateway to spectacular scenery and vast wilderness. For those willing to leave the pavement behind and brave the ruts and dust, this road provides access to the many natural and historic wonders of our largest National Park.

The Basics

- *60 miles, 3 hours EACH WAY*
- *NO FUEL available past Chitina.*
- *Drive slowly, carefully, and courteously.*
- *Carry a full-sized spare and an adequate jack.*
- *There are restaurants, but no supplies or groceries available.*
- *Camping is permitted, but not on private lands.*
- *Most people spend a minimum of two days exploring the area.*

Born on Rails

Today's McCarthy Road originated in 1909 as a railway constructed to support the Kennecott Copper Mines. Over 200 million dollars worth of ore was hauled from the Kennecott mill 196 miles to the port of Cordova. The railway operated successfully until abandoned in 1938 when large scale mining ended. Most of the rails were salvaged for scrap iron, and no longer maintained, the Copper River Bridge was soon destroyed by flooding.

In 1971 a new bridge was constructed over the Copper River, and the rail bed was modified into today's road surface by backfilling over the remaining wooden railroad ties with gravel.

What To Expect

Narrow and winding, the road still reflects its railway origins. In places, remnants of railroad ties may surface, along with the occasional spike, creating unexpected hazards. Please drive slowly, diligently, and courteously. Traffic and weather often result in ruts and washboarded surfaces. However, under normal summer conditions, most passenger vehicles can make the trip. Please allow faster vehicles to pass by using turnouts. Soft road shoulders have led to numerous accidents and vehicle damage.

Please be aware that private property adjoins many parts of the road and the McCarthy/Kennecott area. Please respect the privacy of landowners. Information on federal land access and private property locations is available at park visitor centers.

A Park Service Information Station is located near the end of the road. Park Rangers can assist you with trip planning and area information.

Enjoy your visit!

Chitina

Pronounced, "Chitna," this railroad town sprang to life in 1910. Quiet today, this town was once bustling as the major stopover and service point for the trains that carried ore from Kennecott to waiting ships in Cordova. Restrooms and informational panels can be found at the downtown wayside. This is the last chance to obtain fuel and supplies before you enter the Park.

Chitina, 1914

Copper River Bridge

Several small pullouts here provide great views of the confluence of the mighty Copper and Chitina Rivers. The Copper is the only waterway that cuts through the rugged coastal Chugach Mountains. At this point the Copper is about 1/2 mile wide, while the width of the Chitina is over one mile!

As you cross the bridge, you will notice that these rivers are dirty...but they are not polluted. These flowing waters begin as flowing "rivers of ice." Millions of tons of rock dust are scoured off of distant mountains by glaciers and carried downriver each year. The resulting silty waters hide salmon swimming up these rivers to spawn. Copper River "Reds," (sockeye salmon) are world renowned. In summer, look for busy Alaskan residents catching red, silver, and king salmon with dip nets and fishwheels. How well do you think these fishing methods would work in a crystal clear river?

Fishwheels on the Copper River

The large snow covered mountain visible to the north is volcanic Mount Drum (12,010'), part of the Wrangell Mountains.

The McCarthy Road begins as you cross this bridge and enter Wrangell-St. Elias.
Look for the mile marker posts to follow along with this guide.

mileage

5.0 **Chitina River Scenic Vista**

Stop here and enjoy the view. The Copper and its tributaries (including the Chitina) drain an area of approximately 24,000 square miles. Much of this drainage basin lies within Wrangell- St. Elias National Park & Preserve and almost 17% of it is covered by glaciers. Because of this glacier influence, high water in the Copper River typically occurs not during the snowmelt of spring, but during summer hot spells that cause rapid melting of ice. Low water usually occurs in late winter when everything is frozen. The Chitina River is a popular rafting trip from McCarthy. Rafting guide companies operate out of McCarthy.

10 **Strelna Lake Trail**

A small pullout on the left provides access to a 1/2 mile trail to Strelna Lake. Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game stocks this lake with rainbow trout.

14.5 **Backcountry Trailheads**

The access road on the left leads 2.5 miles to the trailheads for Nugget Creek and Dixie Pass. These primitive routes offer abundant wilderness adventure. Ask a park ranger for more information and route descriptions. Nearby Strelna was once a bustling supply stop along the railway and provided support for nearby mines.

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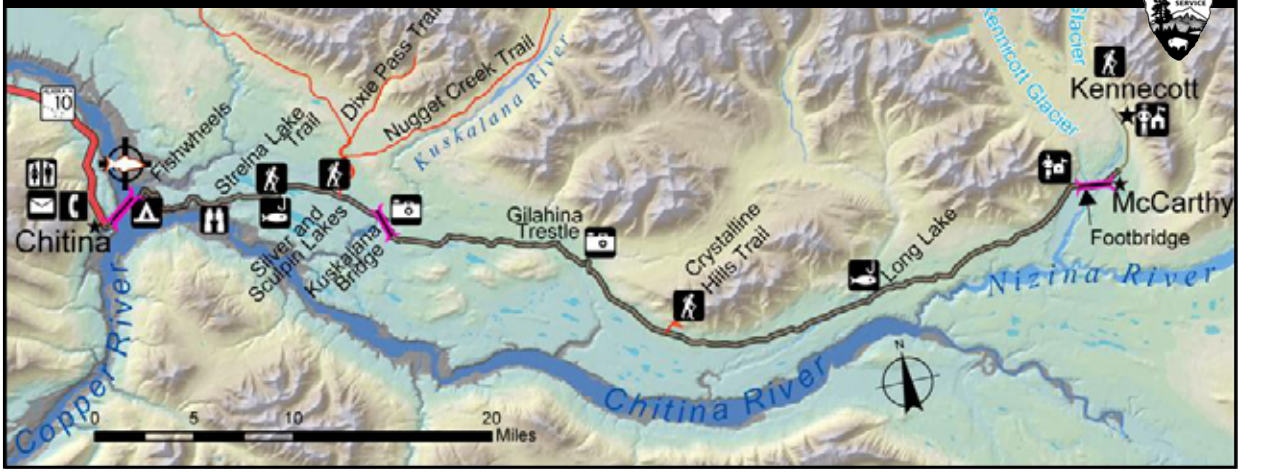


17 **Kuskulana Bridge**

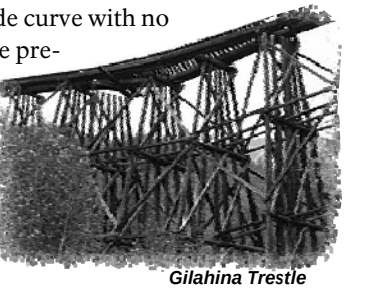
A spectacular achievement, the Kuskulana Bridge was constructed during the winter of 1910. Imagine riding high in a heavily loaded ore train across the two icy rails. Perched 238 feet above the raging Kuskulana River, this single- lane railroad bridge still remains for many, the most hair raising part of the entire drive.

18.5 **"Hug-A-Boulder" Bend**

Remember, this was once a railway! Watch out for this narrow, blind, hillside curve with no room to pass. This is no place for an accident. Please **proceed slowly** and be prepared to back up if necessary.

29 **Gilahina Trestle**

A classic reminder of a bygone era, this wooden structure was originally 890 feet long and 90 feet high, required one- half million board feet of timber, and was completed in eight days in the winter of 1911. Because of the rugged landscape, over 15% of the entire railway was built on trestles!



Gilahina Trestle

34.7 **Crystalline Hills**

A trailhead on the left marks the start of this 2.5 mile loop trail through dense spruce forest to the base of the Crystalline Hills and a nice view of the Chitina River Valley.

45.2 **Long Lake**

Each year, an average of 18,000 sockeye salmon struggle up the silty Copper and Chitina Rivers to spawn in the clear waters of this lake. This salmon run is unique as the longest duration sockeye run in North America. Salmon begin entering the lake in September and spawning continues all winter into April. A spring along the lake's far side keeps some of the lake unfrozen, and this is where carcasses of spawned salmon provide a rich food supply for hungry winter predators such as ravens, eagles, mink, foxes, lynx, wolves, and coyotes.

57.5 **McCarthy Overlook**

A pullout on the right provides the first view of the town of McCarthy and the toe of the Kennicott Glacier. The Kennicott River emerges from beneath the glacier and swiftly flows along the western side of town to join the Nizina River, which eventually runs into the Chitina.

59 National Park Service Information Station

Stop Here!

- *Restrooms*
- *Daily Parking*
- *Information*
- *Trip Planning*

The McCarthy Road Information Station is open daily during summer. Park Rangers are available to answer questions about the area and help plan your visit to McCarthy/Kennecott. Stop by to pick up a map and inquire about parking options, transportation on the other side of the river, various guides and services available in the area, as well as any current local events.

60 Kennicott River-Road's End

You've made it to the end of the road, but in many ways, your adventure is just beginning! Except for a 100' State right of way, the land at road's end is privately owned. There is a fee for parking and camping on this property. To continue onward, cross the footbridge over the Kennicott River. This bridge is open to foot and bicycle traffic only. From there, you may continue yourself, or ride one of the shuttle vans which regularly travel between the footbridge, McCarthy (½ mile), and the Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark (5 miles). Because there are several shuttle services, we recommend that you cross the footbridge, wait for the next shuttle, and pay for one way at a time. While visiting, remember that there is no landfill in McCarthy. Please take your own trash back with you. Have Fun!

McCarthy

Homesteaded in 1906, McCarthy quickly grew into a lively community with a story all its own. McCarthy served as the supply and recreation stop for the entire Kennecott mining district. Town history is well portrayed by the local museum and guide services.

Today, McCarthy retains much of its original flavor thanks to landowners who have preserved and restored historic buildings for use as businesses and private homes. Accommodations, dining, guide services, and air taxis are just some of the visitor services available here.

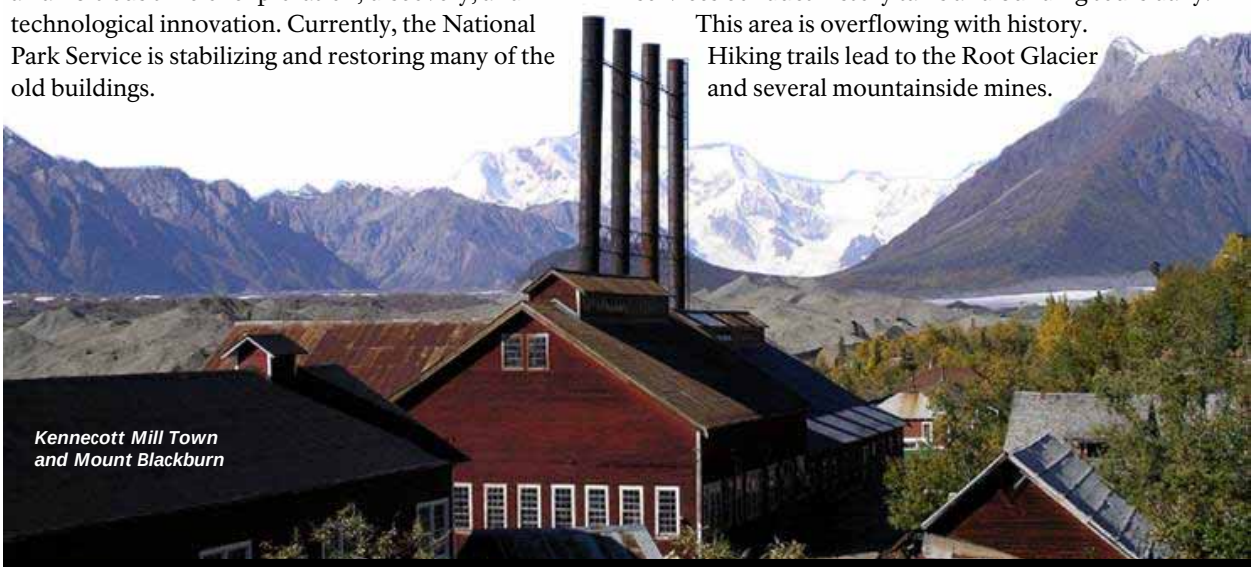
Kennecott Mines National Historical Landmark

Like a time capsule, the impressive structures and artifacts left behind when the mines were depleted represent an ambitious time of exploration, discovery, and technological innovation. Currently, the National Park Service is stabilizing and restoring many of the old buildings.

A National Park Service Visitor Center is located within the Kennecott Mill Town. Park Rangers and local guide services conduct history talks and building tours daily.

This area is overflowing with history.

Hiking trails lead to the Root Glacier and several mountainside mines.



Kennecott Mill Town and Mount Blackburn