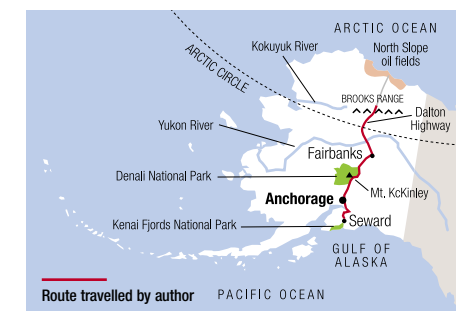


The Little Boy & the Moose

Text by **Morten Strange** Photos by **Ng Bee Choo**

Morten Strange retraces his steps back to northern Alaska, and this time he brings his 5-year-old son.

Sometimes life is funny. Impromptu events might affect your destiny. In 1974 I was hitch-hiking on the Alaska Highway running from Dawson Creek in Canada to Fairbanks in Alaska, USA; it was February and 24 degrees below zero. A man stopped his pick-up truck in the snow. He didn't really have room for me, the truck was full of supplies, but he made space and ended up taking me along to his gold mine in the Brooks Range. I was 21 then, and after a year in Canada and Alaska I never went back to my university economics studies, and my life would never be quite 'normal' after that.



34 years later I wanted to see Alaska again, and catch up with the man who changed my life, I think, for the better. I also wanted my wife Bee Choo and my son Mark to see the land and meet Bill. I wasn't sure if it was right to take Mark to the remote mountains in northern Alaska, but as it turned out that was the best thing I have done for years.

The international port of entry in the state of Alaska is the town of Anchorage in the south. From Singapore you can reach Anchorage on a direct flight via Taipei or by going down across San Francisco in California. The statistics of the state are staggering. The area is 1,477,277 km², i.e. almost three times the size of Thailand. In this vast wilderness less than 700,000 people live, half of those around Anchorage. America bought Alaska from the Russians in 1867; the price was 7.2 million US dollars. At the time some

Left: Mark finds his first Moose on a hillside in Denali National Park.

Above: Flowers along the Koyukuk River.

Right: And here it is, the State Mammal of Alaska and the largest deer in the world, *Alces alces*.

American senators thought that was a bit steep!

To get to Bill's camp we had to hire a car in Anchorage and drive up via Fairbanks on the Dalton Highway, an infamous stretch of mainly dirt road that services the oil fields on the North Slope, some 670 km north of Fairbanks.

Between Anchorage and Fairbanks we stopped at Denali National Park and spent a couple of nights to acclimatize and look at the wildlife. The park is enormous, 24,585 km², i.e. some 3 ½ times Singapore's size and it includes the highest mountain in North America, Mount McKinley at 6,194 meters.

However, as is often the case with large reserves like this, most of the visitor activity takes place around a relatively small section, a well-developed entry area, Park HQ and a few open access roads. Only a small number of fit

and energetic hikers track into the back country or climb the higher hills.

So, we did the tourist trip on the park bus; but it was worth it. As always when you are in the States everything was well organized with pleasant and professional drivers and guides. We managed to see all the local Big Four on that trip alone. I.e. Dall Sheep, Caribou, Moose ... and yes, Grizzly Bear. We saw three bears, two in a river valley and another one running along the river, swimming across through it and later crossing the road.

Next to the salmon-fishing brown bears along the coast in southern Alaska, maybe, Denali must be the best place in the world to spot grizzlies. With great habitat and no hunting pressure, the mammals at Denali are plentiful and fairly approachable.

Mark loved the place, it was

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Mark's crossing of the Koyukuk River went smoothly.

him who spotted the Caribou which he didn't fail to remind us of. But his favorite was the Moose, Alaska's state mammal. We saw a few every day we were there and often with good views. Near the roads, smaller mammals like the Snowshoe Hare and the Arctic Ground Squirrel would emerge, easy for a child to enjoy. Mark even saw a glimpse of the Coyote that crossed in front of our car once. When we saw the Red Fox close by, he was napping, but you can't win them all.

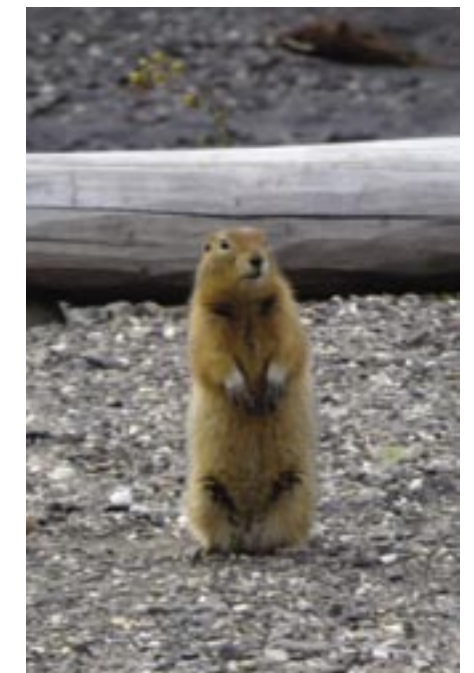
We found a Beaver dam and sat up the scope, some beavers were out in the water. Whenever we stopped and mounted the scope, a small traffic jam of other vehicles would develop, and we would share our discovery and meet other travelers. People who are not familiar with telescopes would be amazed at the difference good optics make to a wildlife experience.

The 300 km drive from Fairbanks up into the Brooks Range was long and slow and fairly eventless, the spruce forest being generally in bad shape after widespread fires and attack from parasite. Last time I did this drive, we crossed the giant Yukon River on the ice, now there was a fancy new steel bridge across. Mark was pretty patient but occasionally he would ask from the back: "When will we get to the Koyukuk River?" He has seen a story on television about two men who capsized on the Koyukuk and spent five days starving in the bush before they were airlifted out. Now he was a bit concerned, but also excited, that we would soon cross the same river.

But our crossing went smoothly, Bill was there to help us across, and the water level is barely a meter in autumn. This surely must be one of the most beautiful spots on earth, especially in



I bet all travelers take this snapshot when they drive north along the Dalton Highway and cross the Arctic Circle north of the Yukon River, this imaginary line marks the southern limit for 24 hour sunlight in summer.



One of the smallest of the mammals in Denali, the Arctic Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus parryii*.



Mark does his chores, stacking firewood for our cabin in Bill's camp.

the fall when the leaves on the hills turn red and yellow.

We didn't see many animals in this area, but they were there. There were tracks and marks among the willows along the river where the Grizzly Bears come down to dig for roots. Bill insisted that I carried his Winchester .356 rifle whenever we were out of camp. And since Bee Choo doesn't know how to shoot, she and Mark were encouraged to stay around camp while I helped Bill in the mine, a mile or so up the creek.

We did manage to birdwatch a bit and found some Boreal Tits and a flock of White-winged Crossbill in the trees, and a Rough-legged Buzzard soaring overhead, and of course the ever-present Gray Jay, Camp Robbers to the locals. In Denali the Gray Jays would steal food from the café tables, like White-vented Mynas do here in Singapore, but not in Bill's camp. Bill used to feed the jays and the Ravens, he even had a Timber Wolf coming into camp for leftovers some years back. But when the bears started giving him trouble he had to stop, now he was meticulously cleaning up any trace of food from around the area.

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The Koyukuk country.

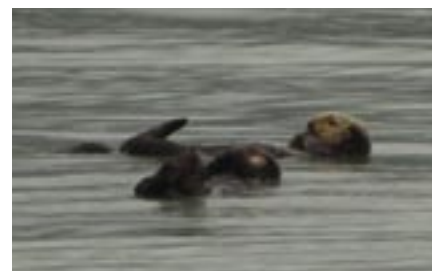


The Koyukuk country must be one of the most beautiful places on earth.

But Mark got the better of us. I was with him in camp when he said: "An animal just ran by". It wasn't a Red Squirrel, he assured me, they are numerous all over Alaska. "It was either a Caribou or a female Moose", he said. I went to check, and there were the fresh Moose tracks in the dirt. It must have run by while I looked elsewhere. To this day Mark will still occasionally ask, "Who has seen a Moose all by himself in Uncle Bill's camp, raise up their hands".

Maybe the greatest nature experience at the Koyukuk for Bee Choo was not the wildlife. I think it was the night I got her out of her bunk in the cabin. It was close to freezing outside, but I wanted her to see it: The Northern Lights, the aurora coming up over the mountains in the east, spreading across the sky and slowly changing colour and shape. It is a magical moment in the arctic.

I didn't feel the little old SUV I had was suitable for the long drive north all the way to the Arctic Ocean. I cancelled that plan, and instead on the way back I took Bee Choo and Mark on a one-day cruise out of Seward, that was on our last day before flying back out of nearby Anchorage.



One of the great marine mammals visible off Seward, the Sea Otter *Enhydra lutris*.

Mark happens to love marine mammals, he knows our copy of *Sea Mammals of the World* inside out, and he was delighted to see Humpback Whales, Harbor Seals, Steller Sea Lions and maybe best of all, Sea Otters from the ship.

He cried in desperation when some Dall's Porpoises emerged while he was on the wrong side of the vessel; luckily they came back and he got to see them playing in the surface on his side. But maybe best of all was when he was resting from the cold wind behind on the ship while we were approaching the largest of the glaciers in the Kenai Fjords.

I carried him across when we were close, and having never seen snow or ice before he couldn't believe his eyes when

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confronted with a 100+ meter wall of ice. "That is amazing!!!" he exclaimed, and ran across to one of the stewards on the ship and asked in bewilderment: "Where does all that ice come from???"

My stay in the Koyukuk country in 1974 advanced my life. I went back to see the country again in 2008, and to get re-acquainted with the toughest and the kindest man I have ever known, the best gold miner in Alaska. I think that by taking him along, I advanced Mark's life a little bit as well. 🌲

Morten Strange is a long-time member of NSS, as well as a host of other nature conservation organizations. He is currently Editor-in-chief of Nature Watch.