

PAT GAULT

Edible Plants of Alaska

FIND DENALI ON A MAP. Trace your finger from the summit southwest for an inch until your fingernail scrapes the white of the widest glacier on the western side of the massif. The Kahiltna Glacier flows mostly south and slightly west for forty-four miles until its terminus, also known as its toe. This story begins thirty miles down the Kahiltna, where the three-mile wide river of ice bends south and a much smaller glacier named the Pika cascades into the Kahiltna's eastern edge.

Brock and I skied and climbed with our ten-man Air Force Pararescue team for four days on the Pika, then walked off the glacier at 4 a.m. on the fifth day with packrafts deflated and stuffed inside our backpacks. Every one of those days in the middle of May was progressively warmer and more dangerous. Snow bridges and avalanche-prone slopes, hard and stable in the morning cold, grew soft and unpredictable under the afternoon sun.

We hoped to hike what we needed and float what we could from the Pika all the way back to Talkeetna, the hub for Denali and Alaska Range climbers. The rest of our team planned to fly out on ski planes like wimps. They knew our plans and for Brock and I to back out would have invited ridicule.

When my watch alarm sounded at 3 a.m. on day five, I was on top of my sleeping bag and sweating from the heat.

Brock was up at the same time and the rest of the team slept as we made coffee, ate breakfast, and packed. I rolled my packraft, an inflatable one-man raft/kayak hybrid, and pushed it into the center of my pack, placed a disassembled kayaking paddle toward the front, then placed a warm jacket, poncho, stove, food, neoprene socks, water shoes, and a water bottle in the empty space. I attached my personal flotation device (PFD) –a lifejacket– to the outside of the pack. No drysuits needed, the river was an easy class two for nearly 65 miles—the real fear for the float was the boredom. Two years prior, I accomplished the same walk/float out of the range with another friend. We spent seventeen hours floating on rivers so slow that we fell asleep in our rafts.

Brock and I wore crampons strapped to our mountaineering boots, wool underwear under polyester pants, harnesses with an ice screw and carabiners, ice axe, ski pole, and gloves. We needed the proper equipment for both glacier travel and alpine climbing, first to descend the fifteen hundred foot gully to access the Granite Glacier below and to the north of the Pika, and then to travel over the Granite to its toe.

I was in no state to chat after breakfast as we roped up to prepare for the descent. I said nothing as we tied in, perhaps because I somehow knew the bad decisions we were making. But Brock and I understood each other that quiet morning as we have for years. We both began our careers together a decade ago. We deployed together, he as a young lieutenant in charge of men much more experienced than he, and I as a senior airman, perpetuating a consistent internal lie of my own immortality and importance. And now all these years later we were back on the same PJ team in Alaska, rescuing bush pilots, sick homesteaders, and lost tourists in between deployments. Both divorced and weathered by multiple combat tours, we were older and wiser through tragedy—but still too young to be wise.

We walked to the top of the gully in snow usually described by skiers as “mashed potatoes”—wet and heavy, thick and unfrozen. The top of gully was called Grizzly Pass because years ago in almost unbelievable circumstances, a grizzly smelled the food of the climbers on the Pika and accomplished a climb that most seasoned alpine climbers would consider impressive, leaving his tracks as evidence of the feat.

I went first, extending the rope between us, kicking one crampon with toes pointing down and the other perpendicular to the fall line, slowly so as not to trip, ice axe shaft impaled into the slope with each step, and fifteen hundred feet of ice luge below. If the gully grew any steeper, it would be necessary to square my chest to the hard snow, kick both feet toes-first into the slope, and sink the ice axe blade in order to safely downclimb.

We planned to place fall protection—an ice screw or picket driven into the snow or ice and clipped by carabiner into the rope—one piece of gear in between us as we descended. If either, or both, of us fell, that singular point of protection would theoretically suspend both of us and avert death. But two rope lengths down the gully, the slope steepened. I turned toward it to down climb as the sun came out of its Alaskan summer twilight and baked the gully above us. Snow sluffed off the top of the gully like sand through an hourglass and ran in larger amounts between our legs—a warning of impending wet avalanches. The gully offered no escape. Our best option was to get out before it avalanched.

Brock yelled down and asked if we should place a piece of protection. I thought for a second and offered the idea that we skip the protection for the option of moving faster.

“In fact,” I told him, “I think we should unrope.”

He looked down at me and said, “Alright,” knowing full well the implications of such a decision. I untied. He let the rope dangle from his harness.

We down-climbed the ice luge, which grew more dangerous by the minute.

We said nothing and for an hour the only sound in the glacial valley below was the heavy breathing and grunting of two fearful men. Near the bottom of the gully I stepped onto fresh avalanche debris from the day prior—soft chunks that ran down for at least seventy-five yards—enough snow to bury, crush, and suffocate a man.

“Hey man, we gotta hurry!” I yelled up at Brock.

“Yep!” he said.

My right foot collapsed through the snow and dangled in a void directly below me. I was standing on a bergschrund, the bottomless crevasse where the Granite Glacier met the mountains above. I climbed a few feet above the hole like a cat climbing out of a pool and grabbed the rope as quickly as I could, tied in, and jumped over the ‘schrund.

Brock did the same and we descended the debris field and onto the glacier and even softer snow. My blood was acid as I anticipated a soft snow bridge collapsing beneath me. It was like walking in a minefield or flying into a known hot LZ in the Helmand.

But we escaped onto the moraine, the pile of rocks at the glacial toe, after another couple hours of white-knuckle anticipation. We hugged and ate candy bars.

We hopped the moraine boulders and post-holed through snowfields. We saw grizzly tracks the size of a baseball mitt in the snow. And a few hours later, we stepped onto the sandy banks of the turquoise Granite Creek, the color of glacial melt. We dropped our packs and rested for a few minutes.

After our time at our first PJ squadron in Georgia, Brock and I chased girls, future ex-wives, and went very separate ways. I floundered through a young marriage and my untrue resolve to build an American life that seemed comfortable. I tried school, I tried out for the PJ team that fought alongside SEAL Team 6 and Delta Force, and I tried being a conventional husband. In the end, I failed at them all.

Brock went to a civilian wilderness survival school in Washington and learned to make loincloths. He also learned how to enter the wilderness with nothing and not only to survive,

but how to produce tools and how to feel comfortable and a part of the nature that surrounded him. His divorce came a couple years after mine, via email while we both sat in Afghanistan again and washed the blood off our boots.

I was not surprised when Brock walked over to me on the bank of Granite Creek with the leaves of a plant.

“It’s River Beauty,” he said, “It’s edible.”

I ate the dark green leaves with maroon outlines and tasted broccoli with alpine soul. I walked to the plant and ate more.

We strapped our glacier travel equipment to our packs and for the next two hours fought our way through alders to reach the bottom of a ridgeline. Halfway up the ridge, Brock rested from the steep hike and sat down next to a small, delicate plant with bluebell flowers barely bloomed.

“These are bluebell,” he said, “The flowers and the leaves are edible.”

They tasted like fresh mixed greens.

We continued up. Three hours after leaving Granite Creek, we finally entered a tundra valley with clear streams and snow covered slopes. At the far end of the valley was Wildhorse Pass. We needed to climb up and over the pass to access the valley on the other side that descended all the way to the Tokositna River—our put-in for the packrafts. At that point, seventy miles in the rafts would be all that separated us from Talkeetna’s cheeseburgers and beer..

But we needed to wait until the earliest hours of the morning when the air was coldest and the snow at its firmest before we exposed ourselves to Wildhorse Pass’s steep slope, perfect for a large avalanche if our judgment of the conditions was wrong. My prior time completing the route, my partner and I waited until 2 a.m. and ascended the slope with perfectly hardened conditions. So Brock and I decided to take a nap and wake up at 1:30.

We cooked ramen and Brock reached over to a tiny, stand-alone plant and broke it low on the stock.

“This is fireweed,” he said.

“And it’s edible,” I said. It tasted on the edge of bitter and crunchy but still organic and good, like celery.

“Not sure what I’m going to do about Lauren,” Brock said as he chewed on another fireweed and looked at the alpenglow on the glaciated peaks across the Granite Valley. “We just haven’t really been happy lately.”

“It would be your second divorce,” I said and cringed at the obviousness of the statement.

“How’s it going with Molly?” he asked.

I picked a fireweed to my left and chewed on it, “Who knows. It’s like there’s a glass wall between her and I.”

Brock nodded, laced his fingers behind his head, and lay back onto the soft tundra to stare at the soft twilight above, “Yeah. I can definitely understand that.”

We napped for a few hours under the sound of the stream below and the occasional call of ptarmigan somewhere along the tundra. I dreamed that the bear that climbed the pass to the Pika came into our camp to sit and breathe heavy while he watched us sleep, wondering perhaps why we came there before he walked off toward his own sense of purpose.

My watch had been beeping for a while before I woke. We packed our bags and started toward the pass, first along tundra, then onto a snow covered hill. I felt the softness of the snow—it should have been cold and hard at this hour—and a pit opened from my brain to my stomach. But I did not say anything. We ascended the pass until we came to a fifty-foot wide strip of scoured ground that ran straight into a ravine below. And at the top of the strip was an eight-foot tall wall of snow. It was the destructive evidence of an avalanche caused by warm, wet snow. It was big enough to destroy a house.

Brock and I stopped in the middle of the avalanche path and looked at the gutted ground where the slide had pulled body-size rocks from the dirt. The pass was ahead and the route to get there was below another half mile of slopes like the one we were on, not yet shed of their winter snowpack.

“What do you think?” Brock asked.

I thought for a moment and said, “I don’t want to climb up a slope that’s identical to this one right now. Nothing is frozen. It’s all getting ready to go.”

“What’s our other option?” He turned to look at me.

I shook my head. I didn’t know. There was no other option to access the tributaries on the other side of the pass because Wildhorse was the safest of all the passes to access them by.

We turned around. Back at the stream, we dropped our packs, stood around with our hands on our hips, and thought about the only option left. The landscape itself was the answer—we had to go downhill and all the water around us did just that, down into the Granite Valley, into Granite Creek, and southeast toward the Kahiltna River and the tributaries that emptied into the Susitna far below Talkeetna and any roads that crossed it and into the Cook Inlet and the Pacific. Our best option was to float Granite Creek all the way to the Kahiltna River and hope to find a sandbar where we could use the satellite phone to call for a bush plane to pick us up. It had to be a sand bar long enough for a plane to land. Civilian helicopters were not allowed to land in the national park.

Our other option, should it come to be a necessity, was to call for a rescue. But Brock and I and our teammates *were* the rescue in Alaska. And the greatest fear either of us had, greater than horrible injury, was to see the grinning faces of our friends on a helicopter come to extract us from our misadventure. We had to be drained of all hope before calling in a rescue.

We opted to descend to Granite Creek. It was our best option. On our way back down the ridge that had taken so many hours to ascend, we stopped for a water break and Brock reached down to harvest the curled tip of a fern.

“This is a fiddlehead,” he said.

It tasted like fresh brussel sprouts.

We reached the sandy shores of Granite Creek and napped again for a few hours. We woke dehydrated, hungry, and exhausted. We spoke about how much food we had left between us.

The creek was flooded with snowmelt under unseasonably warm temperatures. Rafting early on the creek, before the terrain flattened, was too high a risk. Packrafts are durable enough to run class five rapids but they have one large drawback: when burdened with gear, they are less nimble and flip easier. If the paddler lacks confidence in larger rapids, it is best to walk around rather than risk losing all his gear down the river.

Brock and I are both fairly confident paddlers—he more than I. But we decided to walk down the creek until we found a more mellow section of water. From the shore, we saw rapids that were larger than usual due to the high water levels. A quarter mile from where we started, a boulder the size of a cargo van spanned the width of the creek and swallowed the

entire flow of water beneath it, spitting it out the other side—certain death had we started our float upstream.

About a mile down, we found mellow water and unpacked our rafts. Brock unrolled his raft and found a rubber fist sex toy, hidden by a team member on the Pika. Hiding an item or a picture to shock one's masculinity into momentary embarrassment is a time-honored tradition amongst PJs. I snapped a picture of Brock holding the life-sized pleasure device above his head with the glaciated peaks in the background. We ate lunch and strapped our backpacks and glacier equipment to our rafts. I wore my wool underwear without pants in case I got wet in order to remain warm, a t-shirt, water shoes, and my PFD. Brock wore similar clothing.

We put our rafts into the water and climbed in, pushed off from the shore and floated the mellow but swift water along rocky banks. The mountains got smaller with the miles as the water escaped the range toward the flats of the Susitna Valley.

We relaxed a little, but we both felt uneasy about our imaginary destination and how long it might take and how much it might cost to call in a bush plane.

The creek passed through a winding ravine, then turned to parallel the Dutch Hills. We stopped on a sandy bank and saw another set of lone grizzly tracks and ate a handful of snacks, now mindful that we had a limited amount of food to fuel the unknown days ahead. Brock walked over to a spruce tree, perhaps one of the first we'd seen. He pulled the bright green tip of a pine-covered branch off. The needles were much brighter than the rest of the tree and softer—new growth in a new spring.

“This is a spruce tip,” Brock said.

It tasted like Christmas.

As we prepared to continue our float, I spotted some boulders beyond the sandy bank. They were ten feet tall, dark gray and covered in moss—the type of rocks that usually make up the moraine of a very large glacier. I climbed to the top of one in order to view the creek ahead of us. Once on top, the ten-mile wide moraine of the Kahiltna glacier revealed itself—a land of no life, only boulders piled into hills hundreds of feet tall. We sat on the northeastern edge of it.

I looked down the creek and saw rapids. But they were not big and beyond them the creek disappeared around a bend. Brock climbed up and had a look and we decided to float on, confident that the creek would continue on its course toward mellower times.

We smiled as the rapids splashed our faces and continued around the bend, where the creek straightened and revealed a maze of boulders and narrow rapids ahead. I yelled at Brock to paddle to the nearest eddy so we could look again. But the flooding creek ran over the rocky shores and into the alders beyond them—like the mangroves of the Caribbean with the turquoise water of Granite Creek flowing at their roots.

I found a tiny eddy as did Brock and climbed through the alders on the shore and up a small hill where more boulders allowed us to view down the creek. More rapids, slightly larger. We agreed to float again, feeling confident from the rapids before and hopeless and desperate to find the imaginary sandbar nearby.

I went first and found myself paddling a technical rapid that wound around three boulders. Then there was a drop of about two feet and another drop. I paddled hard perpendicular to the current to avoid another boulder that looked like it swallowed water like the creek-wide boulder earlier that day. I passed the boulder on its right side and froze as the bow of my raft went over an L-shaped waterfall about four feet tall. My packraft found its way into the pocket of the L, my drenched, fifty-pound backpack gained momentum, and I was underwater.

I held on to my paddle and saw my raft, which I grabbed with my other hand. I screamed Brock's name, gurgling water. Downstream were more boulders, bigger than the last ones and swallowing even more water beneath them. I slammed into one and let go of both my paddle and my raft. Brock paddled next to me then beyond me, wanting to save me but aware that if he flipped as well, there was no chance for either of us. I saw him look at me and then look downstream and maneuver successively for what felt like twenty minutes. I saw my raft near me and grabbed it. Ahead, Brock paddled to the right side of the river and grabbed onto an alder branch. I began trying to drag my raft toward that side of the creek while disappearing under more rapids. As I passed Brock I understood that the upside down raft with all the weight of my backpack and glacier equipment submerged was not coming with me. So I let go and swam to the alders.

For a moment, I think I smiled, happy to be alive. Then I looked down and saw that I only had one shoe, I was wearing nothing but underwear, a t-shirt, and a PFD in Middle-of-Nowhere, Alaska. I looked at Brock who was only ten feet from me and still in his boat.

“We have to get my pack,” I said.

“Where's the sat phone?” he asked.

I nodded at him.

“Ok,” he said, “I’m going to go down river to look.”

“Wait,” I said, “How do I know how far down you went? Where do we meet up?” I pointed at my shoeless foot.

“I’ll go one hundred yards downstream and stop,” he reached into his raft toward his foot and handed me his shoe. Then he pushed off into the raging rapids, focused, and determined.

Meanwhile, I fought my way through the alders along the creek and grumbled about my stupidity. I walked about seventy-five yards through the alders, a task that took nearly thirty minutes, and heard Brock calling my name. I answered and heard him yell that he had found my raft. It was lodged between two boulders and with an amazing amount of luck it was reachable from shore.

I recovered my mountaineering boots and my pants from the backpack, deflated and stuffed my packraft back inside, and threw the soaked and twice-as-heavy pack over my shoulders. Brock and I walked into the alders and at a tiny clearing set our backpacks down. Our only map ended only a mile south of where we stood. The alders, which extended to the glacier moraine, were the thickest we’d seen and pinned us against the raging creek.

Brock mentioned the Dutch Hills across the creek and the fact that the map showed the park boundary ending a couple miles into those hills. I was appalled by the idea of challenging the creek again, even if only to cross it.

“Well what’s our other option?” Brock asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, frustrated. “We walk.”

And we did. Hours upon hours of walking through the endless day of the Alaskan summer. The sun beat us red and though time went by, the alders remained the same, forcing us to lift our soaked packs over and under thick tangles of branches, a nonstop obstacle course sprinkled with hopelessness. We walked south with the creek to our left. Every hour we stopped to drink water or walk hopefully up hills or rock piles that might offer vantage points. But each time we climbed to the top of one, our views were either obstructed by thick alders or they amplified the hopelessness with clear views of the huge moraine.

We followed bear and moose trails, gained energy each time we found a clear path used by hordes of huge animals, and felt crushed when they faded into indistinguishable trails that disappeared back into the alders.

We stopped at one pile of boulders grown over and I went up to look but came back and said, “Nothing.”

I picked my pack up as Brock sat in a tangle of branches and began to move again but he grabbed my leg.

“Hold on,” he said, “Let’s just sit here for a while.”

For a few minutes we sat in silence, both weighing the seriousness of our situation, both understanding now how so many of the people lose their way in Alaska before PJs like us pluck them from their distress. And of course, we had the same option for a rescue, but it came at the cost of pride and most truthfully at the cost of discovering our own potential to be overcome.

“I have to tell you something,” Brock said, “I just have to get it off my chest right now.” To my surprise, he began to tear up, “I’ve been depressed for the past two years. I don’t understand why. I don’t know how to get any help for it. I don’t know how to fix it. And I just want to feel happy again.”

I thought for a few moments and nodded slowly, “Yeah,” I said, “I’ve been feeling the same way.”

“It’s just . . . It’s so fucking hard to . . .” “And he trailed off with a half laugh half cry but I understood perfectly and my own eyes welled into tears and though I was dehydrated my cheeks soaked through.

Now we both sobbed like lost children in that beautiful place left for only the lost to find.

“I don’t feel like I’m a good PJ anymore,” I said.

Brock cried and nodded.

We had spent our entire adult lives away from home, preparing for and going to war, dreaming of our own potential for strength and courage.

Our cheeks dried and we both looked at the ten feet we could see into the alders that lie ahead. Brock stood, then I did, and we walked and fought the alders with more ferocity than before. We barely covered a mile in three more hours and then decided to go back to the creek where we could gather water for dinner. It was late into the night but still twilight—as dark as it would get. We found a patch of ground in a clearing where a bear or a moose slept during one of the recent nights and set up our lightweight, narrow tent and tried to keep the door shut against the hordes of mosquitos outside.

I opened my food bag and found one packet of ramen, a granola bar, and a handful of peanuts with M&M's. Brock's food situation was no better. We walked to the creek to cook our dinner, our bodies mad for calories, and when we viewed the creek, Brock said, "We can cross here."

It was flooding and in no way crossable by wading. But Brock offered the idea of tying the rope to his raft so that he could ferry it across the creek and tie it to a tree. Then I would tie the other end to my raft and, caught by the current, would pendulum across. With no other option available, we decided to eat, sleep, and try when we woke up.

I tried to light the stove but it was broken and would not light at all. Brock built a tiny cooking fire and placed two stones on each side to balance the pot. We ate and retreated back to the tent where we had to sleep so close to each other that it was difficult not to spoon. But somehow we slept soundly for eight hours.

In the morning, we packed with new motivation and crossed the river as we had planned. Then we began the climb into the Dutch Hills and toward the park boundary. The alders were the thickest we'd seen but we charged through them knowing that clear, unrestricted travel lie ahead and above in the tundra. And we had a plan—to call a friend on the satellite phone and to have him find us a civilian helicopter available to pick us up.

But we still had no idea how long it might take or if there was a civilian helicopter available. So we saved our food and ate as many bluebells and fireweed and fiddleheads and spruce tips as we could find. The fiddleheads got bigger the higher we climbed and some were baked in the sun and tasted like cooked brussel sprouts. We took our time, unknowingly, walked slower and took more breaks, wandered along clearings, and felt the leaves of intermittent alders. We came upon an unaware black bear that retreated into the bushes and watched us with curiosity through the branches. And once high enough, we viewed the expanse of the Kahiltna Glacier as it dwarfed the now far off mountains of the Alaska Range with sheer volume and appeared as something so immense that in no conceivable way could it ever disappear through those streams of water.

We took our fill of the edible plants of Alaska and never thought of our leftover food. Eventually we found a clearing on top of a hill large enough for a helicopter. The clearing offered a clear view of the entire Kahiltna and all the western part of the range, Denali and Foraker floating in the background like clouds. We called our friend and gave him our coordinates.

On the edge of the clearing, we found a single large alder bush and crawled inside among the roots and fell asleep like two animals burrowed away from the fears and anticipations and anxieties of the outside world—we slept and dreamed in complete comfort and in complete confidence that there in the dirt is where we both belonged. Birds called with long whistles that trailed off with deeper notes that seemed to meditate on the silence of a place still not conquered. When we heard the sound of rotors bouncing off the hills above, neither of us moved with any sense of purpose.

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