



Explore, enjoy and protect the planet

# Sierra Borealis *alaska report*

SIERRA CLUB ALASKA CHAPTER  
MARCH 2022



## "Our fight to stop the Ambler Road is far from over"

The fight to stop Ambler Road and protect the health of our communities and our environment along this significant swath of interior Alaska continues. In this conflict with the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, (AIDEA) we are lucky to be represented by the incredible attorneys at Trustees of Alaska -- and also on cases related to so many other important issues. (For our earlier coverage of this issue, see articles by Adam Babcock in *sierra borealis* June 2020 & Dec 2019.) The following is an update from The Trustees of Alaska on where we stand on the 2020 filing of a lawsuit to challenge the illegal approval of the proposed Ambler Road.

-- Andrea Feniger

### Biden administration recognizes some, not all, legal problems with Ambler road approvals

The Biden administration acknowledged there were legal errors with the subsistence and National Historical



photo: Zac Richer, NPS; from Trustees for Alaska

Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve.

Preservation Act processes for the Ambler Road, but failed to acknowledge the full and long list of legal problems with the Interior Department's approval process. The Biden administration also only agreed to suspend the right-of-way permits while fixing the limited number of errors it

acknowledged, but refused to revoke the permits.

This means the applicant, the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, can continue funding and working on the project with corporate mining interests.

"While Interior acknowledged the legal problems with the prior administration's analysis of impacts to subsistence and cultural resources, it is hugely troubling that it ignored a number of fundamental legal violations, and is nevertheless allowing AIDEA to keep its permits," said Suzanne Bostrom, senior staff attorney with Trustees for Alaska. "This project never should have been authorized in the first place, and the agencies can't fix their broken analysis by papering over their mistakes after the fact. This administration should prioritize the health of communities and the Arctic, not politics and profits for outside

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## Ambler Road litigation update--still fighting -- from page 1

corporations.”

Interior essentially wants to correct select deficiencies in its review after the fact, as if putting a band-aid on a deep tissue problem. It also entirely ignores the numerous other legal issues raised by plaintiff groups, such as failing to follow laws meant to protect our lands, air and water.

### Multiple lawsuits, many legal flaws

Trustees for Alaska and the Western Mining Action Project took multiple agencies to court on behalf of eleven clients in 2020, charging Interior agencies and the Corps of Engineers with violating the law when approving the Ambler project, based on an inaccurate and inadequate environmental review.

A separate lawsuit filed by five Alaska Native villages and the Tanana Chiefs Conference also challenged legal violations that occurred when agencies authorized the Ambler Road, including failing to meaningfully analyze the impacts to tribes and subsistence.

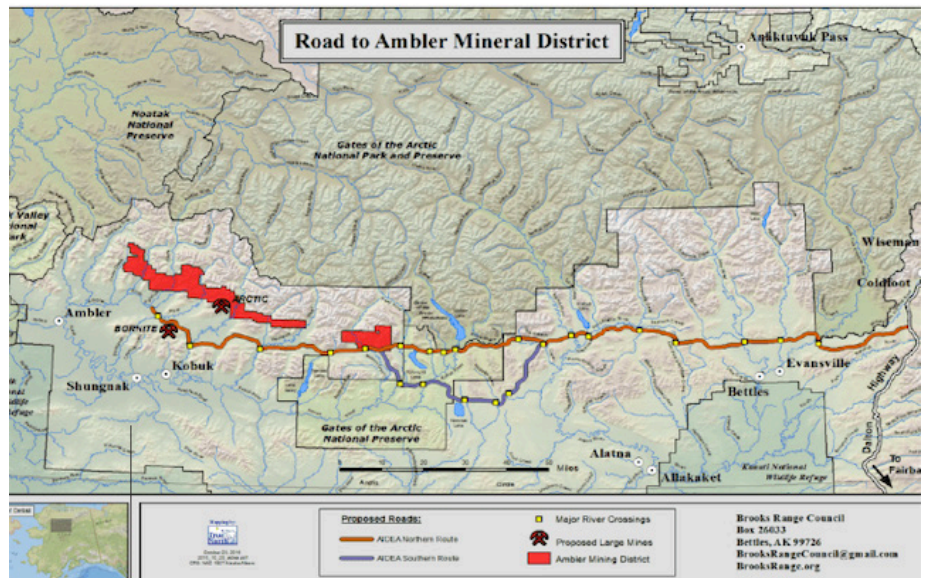
The Biden administration later requested multiple stays in the case, and now acknowledges that there were issues with its analysis of subsistence and cultural resource impacts--while nonetheless asking the court to allow the applicant, the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, to keep its permits for the project during the government’s reconsideration of some environmental impacts.

The Tanana Chiefs thanked agencies for acknowledging significant legal defects in the approval of the Ambler Road and urged the state of Alaska to drop the road proposal. “The 200+ mile Ambler road represents a fundamental threat to our people, our subsistence way of life and our cultural resources,” said Brian Ridley, TCC President. “We appreciate that the federal government recognized the flaws in the previous administration’s decisions to permit the road. We believe any objective review of the full impacts of this project ... would demonstrate that constructing this road through the heart of our traditional lands would be a terrible idea. We urge the State of Alaska to drop the road proposal altogether.”

The court has not yet ruled on Interior’s request. Our fight to stop the Ambler Road is far from over. ❖

-- From Trustees for Alaska <https://trustees.org/>

<https://trustees.org/biden-administration-recognizes-some-but-not-all-legal-problems-with-ambler-road-approvals-lets-permits-stand/>



## Origin of the Ambler Road controversy Some Legislative history:

The origin of our present battle over the Ambler road goes way back to the 1970s, to the effort that resulted in the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, (ANILCA).

During Congress's 1972-80 consideration of new and expanded national conservation system units in Alaska, one of the major issues was whether surface transportation corridors should be designated throughout Alaska, including across the conservation units. The State and resource extraction interests argued that large new national parks and preserves, wildlife refuges, and wilderness areas would mean that road, pipeline, transmission line and other projects would have to circumvent the units; that additional costs would be incurred that could make some projects uneconomic and jeopardize the feasibility of others; and that project proponents would need congressional approval of routes across the units, a difficult task given the support for these national treasures from pro-environment members of Congress and the American people.

In response to the pressure for instant corridors, House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee chairman Morris K. Udall and John F. Seiberling, chairman of the subcommittee on Alaska lands, designed a process for congressional and executive agency consideration of proposed transportation projects involving access in and across the conservation system units. A decision on a proposed route was assured at the completion of the process, unlike under existing law where opponents could try to defeat a bill that mandated a route they opposed. (The transportation process eventually became Title 11 of ANILCA.)

In December of 1978, the 1972 federal land withdrawals for study as potential

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## Origin of Ambler Road controversy

-- from page 2

new and expanded Alaska conservation system units were due to expire, exposing the now unreserved public lands to state selections, mining and mineral leasing, and private appropriation under the public land laws. As the December deadline neared, the House had passed H.R. 39, a bill supported by the Alaska Coalition, while the full Senate had not taken up the Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee's bill, a deeply flawed version opposed by the Alaska Coalition. There was not enough time left in the session for full Senate action before adjournment for the year at the end of October.

In late October, in an attempt to get a bill to the president before adjournment, Sen Henry M. Jackson, Chairman of the Senate committee, called an "ad hoc" conference of the principals to see if a compromise of the House-passed bill and his committee's bill could be reached. A compromise emerged, but then Sen. Mike Gravel, who opposed an Alaska lands bill and did not participate in the negotiations, showed up at the last minute and said he would not support the bill unless it contained several things he wanted, including seven mandated transportation corridors. Three of the corridors would reach the Ambler prospect: from Kotzebue across the Selawik and/or Kobuk Rivers; from the Seward Peninsula across the Koyukuk and Selawik national wildlife refuges; and from the pipeline haul road across the Kobuk River unit of the national preserve..

The principals rejected Gravel's demands, ending the ad hoc conference. The principals quickly proposed a one-year extension of the 1978 deadline, but Gravel blocked that with a filibuster. In response, President Jimmy Carter assured further congressional action in 1979-80 by proclaiming 56 million acres of national monuments, and Secretary Cecil Andrus used his executive authority to protect the remaining areas.

In the Energy Committee's 1979 Alaska Lands bill, the Kobuk River unit was designated a national recreation area with a mandated right-of-way across it. In the House-passed bill of 1979, the unit was a national preserve with no authorized right-of-way across it. When these differences were resolved in a 1980 conference committee, the conferees agreed to the right-of-way and to change the energy committee's 1.34 million acre national recreation area, including the Kobuk River unit, to far stronger national preserve status. Since both measures included the transportation process, it is in the 1980 Act and is applicable to any future access proposals involving national conservation units. ❖

-- Jack Hession

## Chapter election results are in

The count for our Alaska Chapter Executive Committee election has been finalized, and we are happy to announce that both candidates were accepted by our voting chapter membership and have begun their terms on the Executive Committee (ExComm). Congratulations to our returning Secretary, Deanna Nielson, and our returning Chapter Chair, Heather Jesse. In case you missed out, you can find both of their candidate bios in the December 2021 **sierra borealis**.

Deanna continues as the chapter's Secretary, following a special vote by the ExComm to fill a vacant seat in the summer of 2021. Deanna stepped in to fill an essential role within the chapter, and we are thrilled that she will be continue to be a valued member of our Executive Committee.

Heather continues on for her second two-year term as Chair after being elected in January of 2020. During the past two years, her favorite experiences have been spruce bough hunting and wreath building, leading outings, and going



on site visits. She is excited to continue volunteering and promoting the mission of Sierra Club to explore, enjoy, and protect the planet.

As we begin 2022 and our Executive Committee settles in to work for the year ahead, I'm reminded of the passion, dedication, and support of our members and volunteers. On behalf of the 2022 Executive Committee, we are honored to help all of you continue the fight to enjoy, explore, and protect our great state's vast wild places.

While we might not see many changes in the makeup of the Executive Committee this year, we will see some changes in the times and frequency of meetings throughout the year. Seeing the successful relaunch of in-person outings, we plan to bring back in-person chapter meetings. For the latest information on hikes, picnics, guest speakers, and all types of outings, check us out on Facebook or [www.sierraclub.com/alaska](http://www.sierraclub.com/alaska). ❖

-- Heather Jesse

Update

## Willow Project: a climate and biodiversity disaster

The National Petroleum Reserve holds some of the largest oil discoveries on the North Slope of Alaska, one of them being the Willow prospect, first announced by ConocoPhillips in 2017. The Willow Project could yield an approximated 750 million barrels of petroleum product. Oil production advocates are eager to support this project, while climate and environmental groups are outraged by the potential of new drilling in the Arctic, making this a political sticking point for the Biden Administration.

In recent months, environmental groups objected to the Bureau of Land Management's defense over their decision to approve fossil fuel exploration in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska. While environmental groups repeatedly expressed their concerns that oil exploration could have severe environmental impacts, the BLM argued that the project would not cause long term damage to public lands, and that they did their due diligence via thorough project reviews. In spite of a publicly-avowed climate conscious agenda, the Biden Administration continues to struggle with Arctic drilling decisions.

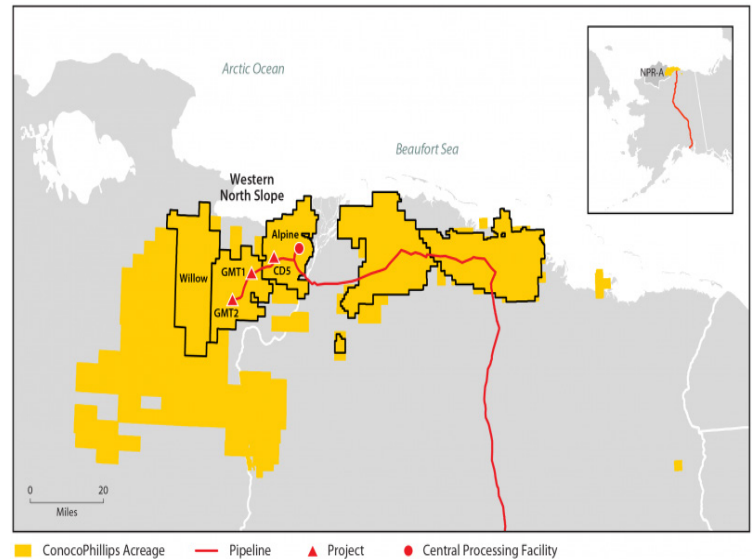
The Biden administration's public comment period on the Willow Project closed on March 9. If the administration approves the Willow Project, it will worsen the global climate crisis, cause irreversible damage to fragile ecosystems and wildlife, and will negatively impact Indigenous communities. According to an analysis by the Center for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org>:

"ConocoPhillips' Willow oil drilling project is estimated to extract more than 160,000 barrels of oil per day for the next 30 years, which would dwarf the greenhouse gas emissions avoided by fulfilling President Joe Biden's 2030 commitments on renewables on public lands and waters."

The National Petroleum Reserve is a 23-million-acre reserve in Alaska's arctic. This area is home to the Inupiaq people, and several protected and diverse species including but not limited to polar bears, bowhead whales, caribou, and migratory birds. The Willow Project is a proposed plan to install pipelines, roads, wells, and associated process equipment across the western arctic to facilitate the extraction of approximately half a billion barrels of petroleum over a 30-year lifespan.

As Alaska's climate continues to warm at an alarming rate, the Willow Project threatens to make an already considerable problem worse by adding an approximated 250 million metric tons of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere over 30 years. At a time when transitioning away from fossil fuel production and consumption is more important than ever, the development of a new fossil fuel extraction project is a massive threat to the global climate. Proceeding forward with this project would be in direct conflict with current goals outlined by the Biden Administration to tackle the global climate crisis – net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

The Arctic is one of the most diverse and rich ecosystems on the planet and is home to many endangered and protected



species. This fragile and unique area already faces severe challenges associated with a warming climate, all of which are negatively impacting plant and animal life. The Willow project will directly affect wildlife migration patterns, destroy plant and animal habitats, and contaminate wetlands and watersheds in a broad area.

The people living in the Western Arctic rely on the caribou, birds, fish, and whales as a major source of food. Should the Willow Project develop on these lands, animal habitats would be fragmented and destroyed. Disruption to animal habitats would threaten the food security for rural communities. This land is sacred and precious to the Inupiaq people, and fossil fuel development would permanently alter their lifestyles and cultural traditions.

The Willow Project was proposed and approved under the Trump Administration. In 2021, the United States District Court determined that the permits issued for this project under the Trump Administration did not accurately portray potential environmental impacts and failed to engage public opinion; that the environmental impact statement issued by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) neglected the requirements outlined by the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and failed to comply with the Endangered Species Act (ESA). (See *sierra borealis* June & Sept 2021.) This court victory was temporary. Attempting to remedy such flaws, the BLM held the very recent scoping comment period, to gauge public opinion, and to develop a supplemental environmental impact statement on the project.

Protecting the arctic region is a crucial battle in the war against climate change. The Sierra Club urged the public to provide comments asking the Biden Administration to stand against the Willow Project. It is paramount that we unite to defend the arctic ecosystems, keep fossil fuels in the ground, and lead the world to move away from petroleum production and consumption. ❖

-- Deanna Nielsen

## Beavers moving into Arctic tundra

Beavers are moving to the Arctic as the Alaska tundra heats up and the beaver population rebounds after centuries of trapping.

A study published in December shows the small, industrious mammal is accelerating climate change in the north. Beaver ponds are showing up in places they've never been documented before. As arctic tundra warms and thaws, new ponds and wetlands are created, along with incursions of shrubs and small trees, that further transform the once-frozen landscape, making new habitat for beaver.

Satellite imagery shows beavers have built upwards of 12,000 new ponds in the last half century in the Western Arctic. The beaver pond count doubled in the last 20 years. For the past five years, ecologist Ken Tape, professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, has used satellite imagery and old aerial photos to map where beavers have dammed streams and created ponds. Tape said he was shocked by the magnitude of change: "If it were a few streams, it wouldn't be a big deal. But it's a lot more than that."

That's bad news for melting permafrost. Tape and his



fellow researchers have long tracked the effects of climate change on permafrost thaw and Arctic vegetation and water, but they were really surprised by the effects of beavers, said Tape. When

beavers dam a stream, their new pond is deeper than the stream was, and it retains more heat. These ponds thaw permafrost and release carbon dioxide, providing little oases for creatures that don't usually live in the Arctic. It's a case where more biodiversity isn't healthy for the native ecology.

"The landscape is falling apart with permafrost thaw, and beavers are that trend on steroids," said Tape. "Permafrost is really rapidly impacted by changes in hydrology and surface water. And that's precisely what beavers do."

--from [Claire Stremple, KTOO - Juneau](#), Jan. 2022.

(Also see <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/beavers-are-reshaping-the-arctic-tundra-heres-why-scientists-are-concerned>. ❖ (Beaver photo: Getty Images)

### CAUTION!

Watch out for phishing scams claiming to come from our Chapter Chair, or other ExCom members. We've had a few members reach out to us reporting suspicious emails requesting that members purchase gift cards with the promise of future reimbursement. The Alaska Chapter will reach out to our members only for donations, using the proper channels- that means we'll never send you an unofficial email promising reimbursement or requesting emergency funds. If you receive such email, please notify Chapter Director Andrea at [andrea.feniger@sierraclub.org](mailto:andrea.feniger@sierraclub.org) or Chapter Chair Heather at [heather.g.jesse@gmail.com](mailto:heather.g.jesse@gmail.com).

## Support for Pribilof Marine Sanctuary

The St. Paul Island Tribal Government's nomination of a new St. George Unangan National Marine Sanctuary surrounding the Pribilof Islands (see [sierra borealis](#) Dec 2021) received new support recently as the organization Businesses for Conservation and Climate Action (BCCA) applauded this sanctuary nomination by the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island. If designated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, this Marine Sanctuary would be the first in Alaska and the first established on the basis of government-to-government co-management between the United States and a federally recognized tribe.

"The tribe's approach to sustainable business opportunities, equitable Indigenous leadership, and visionary new approaches to conservation make this nomination truly groundbreaking," said David Levine, American Sustainable Business Network (ASBN) president and co-founder. "We urge swift evaluation of this nomination, pursuant to designation under the National Marine Sanctuaries Program."

Dune Lankard, president of the Native Conservancy in Alaska, emphasized, "Indigenous people of this continent have successfully managed large seascapes and marine resource dependent economies for 10,000 years. When our communities and businesses are provided a genuine role in policy making, we can expect to see meaningful results that mirror this legacy for the good of all communities. This new approach to National Marine Sanctuaries is a major precedent for all Indigenous communities and businesses throughout our country as well as the conservation of the resources we have always depended on."

"I am thrilled that the St. Paul Tribal Government is advancing this visionary nomination in support of Alaska fishing businesses and their critical island ecosystem," said Linda Behnken, commercial fisherman and executive director of the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association. "We've known for decades that family fishing businesses need healthy ecosystems to survive. But -- to address the climate threats of tomorrow, businesses, tribes, and the government need to come together to advance grounded and groundbreaking conservation actions, as the Biden Administration has recognized in the America the Beautiful program. This sanctuary nomination truly sets the conservation bar, and I'm proud to stand in strong support of it alongside tribal fishing businesses across Alaska."

(Businesses for Conservation and Climate Action is a coalition of Indigenous-led and community-based businesses, organized to develop and deliver grounded and, therefore, durable conservation policy wins for the benefit of all.) <https://www.asbnetwork.org/>. ❖

# What about McCarthy?

## Tom Kizzia's new book, *Cold Mountain Path*

Tom Kizzia, bestselling Alaska author and former Kenai Peninsula reporter for the Anchorage Daily News, has now published a history book. But—this is not just a “history”--it is a vivid saga of America’s pioneer spirit meeting the hard realities of Alaska’s geography and climate; it is an absorbing story of lives in remote McCarthy—gateway to the vast Wrangell-St. Elias National Park.

The book’s subtitle is: *The Ghost Town Decades of McCarthy-Kennecott, Alaska 1938–1983.*

*Cold Mountain Path* is in a way a backward sequel (prequel?) to author Kizzia’s previous book, *Pilgrim’s Wilderness*. That story was about the Pilgrim family that made headlines in McCarthy not so long ago, and Tom tell us it led readers to ask him about the earlier history of the area—what happened around McCarthy *before*: what stories could he tell about (as Porphyry Press puts it) “The spirit

of Alaska in the old days — impetuous, free-wheeling, and bounty-blessed — [that] lived on in the never-quite-abandoned mining town of McCarthy...heroes and lovers, crackpots and con artists, feuding prospectors and daring bush pilots.... cagey old-timers and young back-to-the-landers, a rough wilderness community [that] salvaged... rusted relics of a profligate past.”

So here is the book that tells their stories. And “the life story of a cantankerous and idealistic homesteader, Jim Edwards, who lived in the valley longer than any of them, the ghost in Alaska’s rear-view mirror.” And tales of ‘Unaccompanied miners.’ And roles of John Denver, Rogers Morton, Ed Wayburn, Dick Cooley, John Barrett--founder of McCarthy, Sally Gilbert—they’re all here in this new book. Their stories and many others. And – the days of “Sierra Club Go To Hell.”

Tom points out for us: “I think that ANILCA history from the ground up - the two chapters that focus on that - will be of special interest to Sierra Club readers.” The chapter “Wrangell Mountain High” indeed is filled with absorbing and valuable environmental history of the conservation battle in the 1970s to achieve the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) which established our country’s largest national park--and did much more.

McCarthy and its environs played a big role in the campaign for ANILCA, attracting some well-known players: John Denver, who did a whole film on the Alaska campaign, came to McCarthy for a rainy September week

with a film crew, and hung out with bush pilots and hunting guides Oney and Harrower: the documentary that resulted from Denver’s trip—that also included the Arctic--was *Alaska, the American Child*. We read about the part played by Sierra Club’s Ed Wayburn—who had been overwhelmed by Alaska’s vast wildness and conservation opportunities on his first visit in 1968, and then, as recent past Club President, convinced the Club to make Alaska conservation a conservation priority, and in many ways led the way to ANILCA. And Secretary of Interior Rogers Morton, who had the job of figuring out which Alaska lands should be protected as parks. The Wrangell Mountains, long viewed as park potential, were high on his list; so in 1972, he showed up in McCarthy—to see for himself. And 1972 saw Ed Wayburn visit McCarthy as well. Richard Cooley, a professor at UC Santa Cruz inspired and encouraged by Sierra Club’s Ed Wayburn, started a program at his university about Alaska environmental issues; he sent students up to the McCarthy area for several summers.

After President Carter declared Wrangell-St Elias a national monument in 1978 according to the Antiquities Act, the first park rangers appeared in McCarthy—less than warmly welcomed by residents; two years later, with ANILCA, the national park became official, and McCarthy had to learn to change too—we read about the transition period, about Ben Shaine, Sally Gilbert, the Hardware Store,—the tragic tale of the “mail day murders”, and more: you’ll have to find out for yourselves.

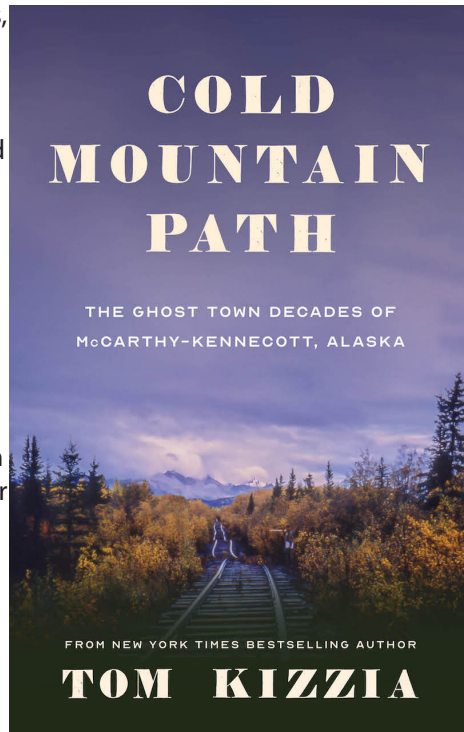
Tom Kizzia’s previous book, *Pilgrim’s Wilderness*, 2014, was named Alaska’s best True Crime book by the *New York Times*. Amazon pegged the book at Number 5 among its Top 100 Best Books of the Year. *Sierra borealis* reviewed it. And Tom’s earlier book, *In the Wake of the Unseen Object* had not one but two reviews in *sierra borealis*, after its 1991 original publication in and, a year ago, on reissuing.

Enjoy *Cold Mountain Path*’s easy conversational style, tantalizing people tidbits, historic photos and poetic section quotations. More info at

<https://porphyry.press/cold-mountain-path> or <https://www.tomkizzia.com/cold-mountain-path>.

\$21.95; Porphyry Press  
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-- reviewed by Vicky Hoover



Nature beckons!  
Get Outside

## Our Winter ventures outdoors? YES!

We had so much fun sharing coffee, cookies and chats about the environment with ice skaters at Westchester Lagoon in February. As the days get longer and warmer, we are getting excited to host regular member hikes and picnics in the summer. Shout out to everyone who has been braving this icy winter and recreating outside!

### New outing leaders sought!

Want to lead a hike, bike ride, bird watch, ski or any other outdoor activity? Become an outings leader for Sierra Club Alaska Chapter!

Find out how to do it -- Send Email to: [alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org](mailto:alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org) telling us of your interest."

**Thanks!** ❖



photo: Caleb Duplessis

*Sierra Club has a real presence at Westchester Lagoon as we celebrate the lengthening hours of daylight in February*

photo: Nicole Peltzer



Our skaters at Westchester Lagoon

### Sierra Club Alaska Chapter seeks Volunteer Changemakers

Looking for a way to get more involved in promoting conservation in our great state of Alaska? Apply to be a member of the Alaska Chapter's Executive Committee! Help to plan and create effective change in your community by applying for one of the positions listed below.

#### Outings Chair - organize to explore the outdoors

The Chapter Outings Chair provides leadership, direction, and oversight to the chapter outings leaders. The Outings Chair helps dream up innovative new outings while minimizing safety risks by maintaining CPR and other Club required certifications. The Outings Chair helps volunteers find and obtain resources for hosting their outings, often guiding them through the initial process. and tries to ensure a steady and consistent flow of outings

throughout the calendar year. You may host your own outings and may occasionally be asked to attend ExCom meetings to report on recent outings. This work makes outdoor activities an integrated, vital element of Chapter conservation efforts.

#### Compliance Officer - Fill a crucial role to educate our members

The Election Law Compliance Officer to the Chapter will be responsible for advising members of the ExComm about how to conduct political activities to ensure compliance with State of Alaska election requirements and local election laws, as well as Sierra Club policies and restrictions.

A successful Compliance Officer will explain to Club members all appropriate Sierra Club policies and Club-related restrictions as stated in the Sierra Club Political Committee Compliance Guidelines. You will also serve as a compliance resource for the Chapter's political program and serve as an integral member of the Executive Committee, maintaining good communications with volunteer leaders and Chapter staff.

The Chapter ExComm and Sierra Club national support staff will help you navigate your new responsibilities every step of the way! If you are interested in volunteering please send an email to [alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org](mailto:alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org)!

## Alaska Chapter has a new office!

"Alaska--take note: Sierra Club's Alaska Chapter has an office again! Come visit us at **308 G Street in Downtown Anchorage**. Email [alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org](mailto:alaska.chapter@sierraclub.org) if you're in the neighborhood and want to come grab some stickers or talk conservation. Please plan to wear a mask regardless of vaccination status. We are so excited to be able to interact in the community in this way again!"

-- Andrea Feniger, Chapter Director



photo: Andrea Feniger



photo: Andrea Feniger

photo: Heather Jesse

### Sierra Borealis / alaska report

is the newsletter of the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club

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Sierra Borealis: <https://www.sierraclub.org/alaska/newsletters>  
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photo: Andrea Feniger



"Wilderness is the permanent home of the human spirit."  
 -- Joseph Wood Krutch

