



---

**St. Elias Alpine Guides, LLC**  
**Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, Alaska**  
**(888) 933-5427 ♦ (907) 345-9048**  
**[www.steliasguides.com](http://www.steliasguides.com)**

---

## **Chitistone Goat Trail Trek - Backpacking in Alaska's Chitistone Canyon**

If you're looking for a shorter trek, but still want to experience some of the best backpacking terrain in the Wrangell St. Elias National Park; the Upper Chitistone Canyon Trek is for you. Located in the heart of the Wrangell St. Elias National Park, the Chitistone Canyon offers some of the most spectacular backpacking in Alaska, if not the world. This superlative hike follows the "Goat Trail", so named by miners making their way to the gold fields of the Interior. This "trail" explores the only pass that bisects the magnificent Wrangell and St. Elias Mountain ranges. Flying by bush plane, you and your guide are dropped off on a remote plateau in the Hole-in-the-Wall region where this adventure begins. Hiking into the canyon, you and your guide join the route of our 11-day Chitistone Canyon Expedition. The end of the adventure is spent in silent awe as you cross pristine Chitistone Pass and finish by scrambling out amid glaciers onto the tundra of Skolai Valley. The Upper Chitistone Canyon Trek is a moderately difficult trip designed for experienced backpackers who want to go beyond the trail and see some of the best the Wrangell St. Elias National Park has to offer.



### **Trip Highlights:**

- Breathtaking views of the Wrangell *and* St. Elias Mountains from Chitistone Pass
- Test your Alaska backpacking skills on the "Goat Trail"
- Exploring the glaciers and high alpine tundra of the Upper Chitistone Canyon
- Shorter version of our spectacular Chitistone Canyon Expedition

## Upper Chitistone Canyon Trek: Detailed Itinerary

**DAY 1** - Backpacking in Alaska requires careful preparation and your adventure starts at our headquarters in the historic Motherlode Powerhouse in McCarthy. Our professional mountain guides have been busily making preparations for your trip and are excited at the adventure to come. You are in good hands as they review your itinerary, go over the menu, and make sure that you are properly outfitted for the trip. After the final checks are complete, you head for the airstrip and the short flight, by bush plane, into a high plateau southwest of the Hole-in-the-Wall Glacier. The flight from McCarthy will take off south, cross McCarthy Creek, and then turn east ascending the Nizina River. You skirt Sourdough Peak with its huge rock glacier. Looking down at the Nizina River, you see a couple of



sections of the old bridge that once spanned this river for a road that connected May Creek with McCarthy. Just beyond this, the Nizina bends almost 90 degrees north. To the east is Dan Creek, the site of an old placer gold mine. The peaks just behind it are Mt. Andrus and Pyramid Peak (first ascended by St. Elias Alpine Guides in 1988). Directly ahead lies the Nizina Glacier. This huge ice flow is a natural pass between the Chitina River valley and the northern

lowlands of the Tanana River. It was used as a route to get to the gold fields of Chisana from McCarthy during the rush of 1915. After Dan Creek, the next large river and canyon leading east is the Chitistone. "Sierra Club Go to Hell" is written by a large bulldozer in the river gravel below, and though partially washed away, it is still discernable. This was done during the controversial days of the D2 lands act when this region was set aside as a National Park.

Your Upper Chitistone Canyon Trek starts just up this canyon, where our bush plane lands on a high alpine ridge overlooking the Chitistone River. You and your guide explore the alpine ridges surrounding this airstrip that offer breath taking views of the glacier clad Twa Harpies Peaks, and the Chitistone River almost a thousand feet below. This is a plateau hunted by bear and wolf; home to sheep, arctic ground squirrels, bald eagle and mountain goat. The mesa-like shapes and ruddy hues are reminiscent of the Southwestern US. We'll take our time skirting the base of the mountains, combing the lower slopes in search of the fossils commonly found in this area. Camp is set up on a high and airy perch overlooking the Hasen Creek drainage, and on a cloudless day, the views of the University Range and St. Elias mountains are incredible.

**DAY 2** - Morning dawns, and you may have to pinch yourself to make sure that the view outside your tent flap is real. However, as you rub the sleep from your eyes there's no doubt that you are in an unparalleled wilderness kingdom and the excitement of the day rousts you from your warm cocoon. Today you descend into the Hasen Creek drainage, scrambling across scree fields, tundra covered steppes, and small exquisite waterfalls. Sheer rock cliffs border the northern side, with immense hanging glaciers straddling their tops. This is the dreamy world of the Hole-in-the-Wall glacier; a primal region of glaciers and rock formations. On a cloudless day, the tallest peak in the Wrangells, 16,390 ft (4,995 m) Mt. Blackburn, will be seen in the distance to the west. Turning east, 16,421 ft (5,005 m) Mt. Bona, the tallest of the St. Elias Mountains rises up from the surrounding peaks. You are indeed between the ranges. We'll set up camp early, drop our packs and explore. The rolling tundra allows solitary wanderings, and a great opportunity to get a feel for the amazing Alaska wilderness.

**DAY 3** – The day begins with a short hike to the saddle, which is the entrance to the Chitistone Goat Trail; a narrow path formed and maintained by Dall sheep traversing scree slopes. These slopes plunge down into the Chitistone Falls River below. You slowly pick your way across the first bowl, the multi-colored rocks reminiscent of hiking the Grand Canyon of Arizona. Footing is generally solid, with patches of hard earth that take



concentration. Your guide discusses the hiking methods that will enable you to hike along this trail safely and points out areas of caution. After crossing the "goat trail", we'll encounter a series of scree-slopes separated by tundra. After an exhilarating morning of hiking, you are glad to break for lunch along the roiling Chitistone Falls River. Continuing, your boulder strewn course takes you past rushing tributaries, bursting from basins high above, and lined with hanging glaciers, free falling waterfalls, and hob-goblin rock formations. At another narrow impasse, you begin to climb again and follow a barely-perceptible trail through a wonderland of tundra covered mounds, below a massive rock tower soaring into the clouds. You circuit the enormous tower, climbing gently through Chitistone Pass and on to our next camp. From the top of the pass, you can stop and ponder the view of your ascent route along the Upper Chitistone Canyon.

**DAY 4** - We could easily spend the day in this radiant cleft between two enormous mountain ranges. This is truly one of the most beautiful places on

earth. Caribou can be found high along one side, usually laying down on snow banks, keeping cool till evening. Hoary marmots and Dall sheep roam the hillside on the west, stopping motionless for an instant to monitor your intentions. The pass is a rather large expanse; U-shaped from glacial action. To the east are brilliant glacier covered peaks, the now familiar red rock, cleaving through the ice at summits. To the north, a view into Canada, and the tumbled surface of the Russell Glacier. To the west is Frederika Mountain, and in the opposite direction Mt. Sulzer. We may scramble onto the surface of the Chitistone Falls Glacier. This picture perfect ice flow is a beautiful example of glacial morphology, and as you walk along its surface, your guide may discuss its formation, its growth cycles and its intricate formations of crevasses and ice falls.



You drop off the northern rim of the pass, and eat lunch out of the wind, then break down camp. Cascading glaciers tumble off the hillside to your left, seemingly close enough to reach out and touch. After eating, you can walk to an overlook of Skolai Valley. A meandering stream curves gracefully away from the jumbled Russell Glacier and forms a large lake at one end of the valley. Opposite, mountains climb back into the sky, corner-stoned by Castle Peak, a mountain so true to its name, it is still unconquered. Shouldering your packs once again, you drop straight down 1500 feet (457 m) to the valley floor, where you re-enter willow thickets and enjoy the smell of cranberry and cottonwood. The final four miles to the small airstrip, near the lake, is accompanied by views of vaporous waterfalls, misting off towering rock walls, to

disappear in gusts of wind, only to reappear in spray at the bottom. Today is the last day of your backpacking trip. By this time the routines and rhythms of backcountry life come easily and you and your guide share in the camaraderie of shared experience. The thought of returning home is a bittersweet mix but you're thankful for the amazing experience you've had. As the plane takes off, you depart this gracious land, leaving it the way you found it, silent, exquisite powerful.

The flight back to McCarthy gives amazing views of the massive Nizina Glacier, and the famous folds in the rock cliffs along this glacier's river. Upon returning, you and your guide can enjoy a warm meal in McCarthy and then scrub off the dirt in our rustic, wood-fired sauna. The therapeutic steam and heat will help ease your "re-entry into civilization".

## What's Included?

As with all of our Alaska backpacking adventures, the Upper Chitistone Canyon Trek includes professional, experienced backpacking guides with extensive local knowledge and medical training. We provide all food for the backcountry portions of your trip, including hot and delicious meals morning and evening and plenty of snacks and lunch food for mid-day nourishment. St. Elias Alpine Guides also provides shared group gear, including stoves, pots, and tents, as well as any technical gear, such as crampons. All you need to bring is your personal gear, (clothing, rain gear, boots, sleeping bag and pad) You can find a detailed list of the backpacking gear that we recommend you bring on our [backpacking equipment list](#).

If you would like us to arrange your transportation to McCarthy/Kennecott and/or lodging while in the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, we offer this as a free service to our multi-day clients. Please email or give us a call to discuss the details.

