

Chris McCandless from an Alaska Park Ranger's Perspective
by Peter Christian

Both Chris McCandless and I arrived in Alaska in 1992. We both came to Alaska from the area around Washington, D.C. We were both about the same age and had a similar idea in mind; to live a free life in the Alaska wild. Fourteen years later Chris McCandless is dead and I am living the dream I set out to win for myself. What made the difference in these two outcomes?

There was nothing heroic or even mysterious about what Chris McCandless did in April 1992. Like many Alaskans, I read Jon Krakauer's book "Into the Wild" when it first came out and finished it thinking, "why does this guy rate an entire book?" The fact that Krakauer is a great outdoor writer and philosopher is the bright spot and it makes a great read, but McCandless was not something special.

As a park ranger both at Denali National Park, very near where McCandless died, and now at Gates of the Arctic National Park, even more remote and wild than Denali, I am exposed continually to what I will call the "McCandless Phenomenon." People, nearly always young men, come to Alaska to challenge themselves against an unforgiving wilderness landscape where convenience of access and possibility of rescue are practically nonexistent. I know the personality type because I was one of those young men.

In fact, Alaska is populated with people who are either running away from something or seeking themselves in America's last frontier. It is a place very much like the frontier of the Old West where you can come to and reinvent yourself. In reality, most people who make it as far as Alaska never get past the cities of Fairbanks and Anchorage because access is so difficult and expensive (usually by airplane), travel is so hard, the terrain is challenging, the bears are real, and so on.

A very few competent and skillful people make a successful go at living a free life in the wild, build a home in the mountains, raise their children there and eventually come back with good stories and happy endings. A greater number give it a try, realize it is neither easy nor romantic, just damn hard work, and quickly give up and return to town with their tails between their legs, but alive and the wiser for it.

Some like McCandless, show up in Alaska, unprepared, unskilled and unwilling to take the time to learn the skills they need to be successful. These quickly get in trouble and either die by bears, by drowning, by freezing or they are rescued by park rangers or other rescue personnel—but often, not before risking their lives and/or spending a lot of government money on helicopters and overtime.

When you consider McCandless from my perspective, you quickly see that what he did wasn't even particularly daring, just stupid, tragic and inconsiderate. First off, he spent very little time learning how to actually live in the wild. He arrived at the Stampede Trail without even a map of the area. If he had a good map he could have walked out of his

predicament using one of several routes that could have been successful. Consider where he died. An abandoned bus. How did it get there? On a trail. If the bus could get into the place where it died, why couldn't McCandless get out of the place where he died? The fact that he had to live in an old bus in the first place tells you a lot. Why didn't he have an adequate shelter from the beginning? What would he have done if he hadn't found the bus? A bag of rice and a sleeping bag do not constitute adequate gear and provisions for a long stay in the wilderness.

No experienced backcountry person would travel during the month of April. It is a time of transition from winter's frozen rivers and hard packed snow with good traveling conditions into spring's quagmire of mud and raging waters where even small creeks become impassible. Hungry bears come out of their dens with just one thing in mind—eating.

Furthermore, Chris McCandless poached a moose and then wasted it. He killed a magnificent animal superbly conditioned to survive the rigors of the Alaskan wild then, inexperienced in how to preserve meat without refrigeration (the Eskimos and Indians do it to this day), he watched 1500 pounds of meat rot away in front of him. He's lucky the stench didn't bring a grizzly bear to end his suffering earlier. And in the end, the moose died for nothing.

So what made the difference between McCandless and I fourteen years ago? Why am I alive and he is dead? Essentially, Chris McCandless committed suicide while I apprenticed myself to a career and a life that I wanted more badly than I can possibly describe in so short an essay. In the end I believe that the difference between us was that I wanted to live and Chris McCandless wanted to die (whether he realized it or not). The fact that he died in a compelling way doesn't change that outcome. He might have made it work if he had respected the wilderness he was purported to have loved. But it is my belief that surviving in the wilderness is not what he had in mind.

I did not start this essay to trash poor Chris McCandless. Not intentionally. It is sad that the boy had to die. The tragedy is that McCandless more than likely was suffering from mental illness and didn't have to end his life the way he did. The fact that he chose Alaska's wildlands to do it in speaks more to the fact that it makes a good story than to the fact that McCandless was heroic or somehow extraordinary. In the end, he was sadly ordinary in his disrespect for the land, the animals, the history, and the self-sufficiency ethos of Alaska, the Last Frontier.