

Preface

Our family homesteaded a plot of ground near what is now the Eagle River Nature Center. A literal homestead, patented through the federal Homestead Act, its uphill sides abut land that became Chugach State Park. We are fortunate, privileged. We never tire of the view of rock and snow on the 6300-foot face of Eagle Peak, all jagged and imposing with a gentle rounded cap of white at the summit. Hiking the steep ridge behind the homestead is an annual rite; the view just gets bigger and broader with elevation, the forest and tall grass fall below, and you end up feeling on top of the world. This is a Southcentral Alaska mountain experience, with spruce, birch, and a wandering river laid out below, soft tundra underfoot for napping in the sun, and always more mountains above. This book helps us share these kinds of experiences with others.

Helen Nienhueser, the matriarch of our Alaska family who wrote the first version of this guide, moved to Southcentral Alaska in 1959 because of the mountains. The original *55 Ways* published in 1972 was the result of her explorations with the Mountaineering Club of Alaska, a group largely composed of other recent arrivals. We two authors, Helen's son and granddaughter, were born here and grew up admiring and sometimes living a "frontier" lifestyle—hiking, mountaineering, ski touring, paddling, picking berries, building backcountry cabins, and splitting wood to keep ourselves warm. Through these escapades, we have amassed three generations of collective memory about this land that we delight in, and we want to pass that on to you. We hope you will love this land as well, and work to protect it.

THE LAND

Southcentral Alaska is a big place. Bounded roughly by the arc of the Alaska Range and Wrangell

Mountains, the region measures almost 300 miles north to south and 350 miles east to west. Southcentral Alaska encompasses the vast drainages of the Susitna, Matanuska, and Copper Rivers. It is a land that rises up from the Pacific coast and culminates at the highest point in North America. The Chugach and Talkeetna Mountains push up almost as tall, filling out the Southcentral high ground. Between the sea and the summits lies a rich set of coastal and boreal forests, estuaries and freshwater wetlands, powerful rivers, quiet little creeks, and tundra uplands that support everything from mosquitoes and salmon to ravens and brown bears in the complex, interdependent web of life. And, not incidentally, this land supports 63 percent of the population of the state. Like the majority of Southcentral residents, our family's years here are a drop in the pond. Indigenous people have lived in Southcentral Alaska since time immemorial. With the new edition of the book, amid a rising movement toward

OPPOSITE: *Drifted snow in March creates patterns in the Placer River Valley, Trip 21.*

decolonization and equity in the outdoors, we recognize that to write a book about land necessitates acknowledging that land's first people.

INDIGENOUS LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The lands we celebrate in this book are Dena'ina, Sugpiaq (Alutiiq), and Ahtna homelands. The Dena'ina are part of a Dene (Athabaskan) language group of mostly Interior peoples in Alaska and Canada (but also including Diné, sometimes referred to as Navajo, and Apache on the plains and dry mountains near the southern end of the Rockies); in parts of Southcentral Alaska, the Dena'ina are unusual among Athabascans in being a coastal people who hunt whales and fish on the ocean. The Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) people have a deep coastal tradition, living along Southcentral Alaska's shores, at the outer end of Kachemak Bay, on the southern coast of the Kenai Peninsula, and in Prince William Sound. The Ahtna are an Athabaskan people centered in the Copper River watershed, whose inland territory spreads between the Alaska Range and Wrangell and Chugach Mountains and extends west at the Matanuska Valley and upper Susitna River. We acknowledge that these are the original human inhabitants of the lands in this book. These peoples reside here still, with vibrant cultures that appreciate and are deeply connected with the land of Southcentral Alaska. We are grateful for the literal and figurative trails they laid on the land. In the age of climate change, it would be wise for all of us to look to Indigenous peoples' land stewardship ethic for guidance.

Thanks to the movement for Indigenous land acknowledgment, we thought more than ever before,

while hiking for this book, about the people whose lands we walk on. We are proud of our family's legacy, yet we recognize that the "frontier" ethos is one of colonialism and that this land was and still is the territory of the original people. Settlers from elsewhere intent on furs, gold, fish, timber, oil, and tourism have run rampant over the land, and the collective actions of everybody from Russian fur traders to recent homesteaders like ourselves have gravely harmed individual Alaska Natives and collective cultures.

We are finding land acknowledgment to be powerful. No matter your own cultural background, we invite you to learn more too. In this book, at the beginning of each trip entry, we provide an indication of Indigenous land: a brief acknowledgment of the people whose lands that specific trip traverses. We encourage you to check out Alaska Native Entities in the Resources section, particularly if you are not Alaska Native yourself, to learn more before you head out. Perhaps you will find out about a tribal language school you will pass to reach the trailhead or learn more about the cultural inspiration of that artist you've been following on social media.

FULL CIRCLE

The protection of biodiversity and the effort to keep in check the outrageously fast change in climate are entirely dependent on the goodwill of the people. It is important that persons of all cultures, in their own ways, have the chance to experience the beauty and peace of the natural world and not just the disasters—floods, fires, droughts, and storms—nature can unleash. To experience firsthand the

connections between plants and animals, water and soil, sun and air is to learn to love the earth. In the way that it “takes a village” to raise a child, it takes all persons and all peoples to care for the planet. We hope that this book, in its own small way, will help people of all walks of life find a way to the woods. It is time for the dominant culture that has enjoyed the Alaska concepts of “the last frontier” and “north to the future” to yield the trail to those who have been

historically excluded or discouraged because of age, ability, race, size, or income and to actively support everyone’s effort to enjoy the outdoors. The more that people share enjoyment and understanding of the natural world, the better chance we have of sustaining the natural network that supports us all.

—John Wolfe Jr.
and Rebecca Wolfe