

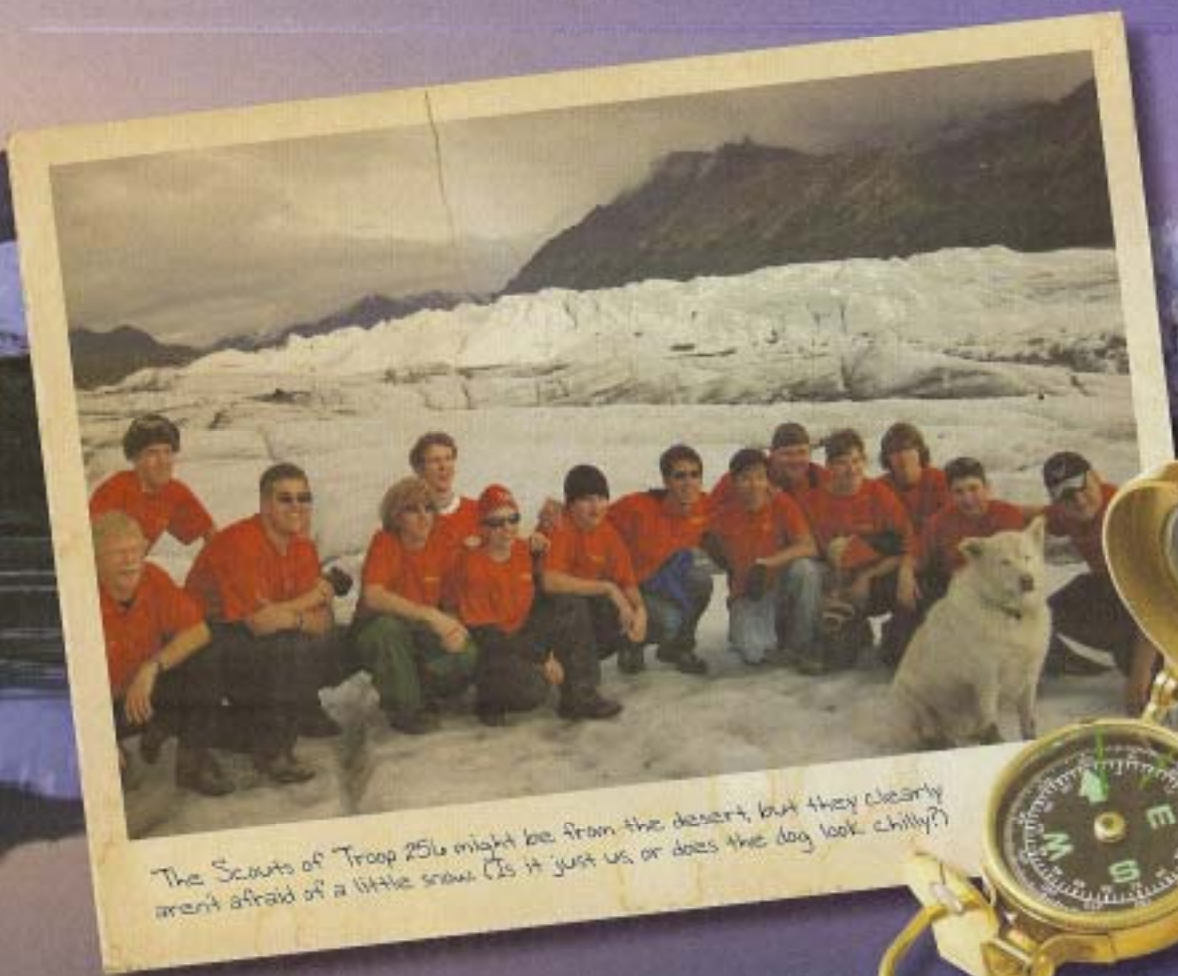


BY SEAN McCOLLUM

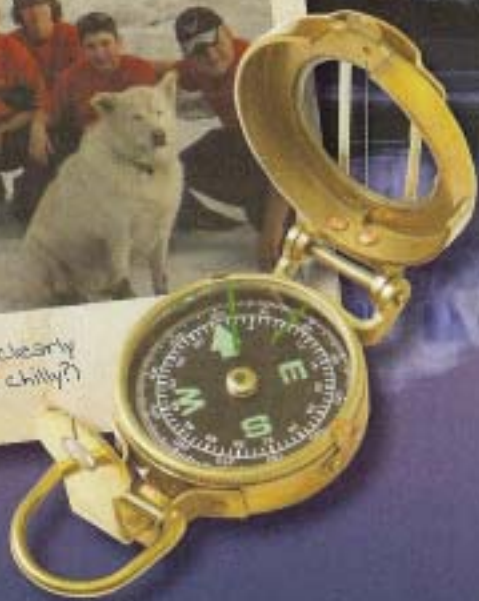
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TROOP 256

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Las Vegas Scouts trade desert heat for glacier cool as they take their team—and their team spirit—into the Alaskan wilderness.



The Scouts of Troop 256 might be from the desert, but they clearly aren't afraid of a little snow. (Is it just us or does the dog look chilly?)





With his ice axes in hand, crampons fastened and safety harness attached, Eagle Scout Mark Russell begins the ascent up the ice wall.



“Matt Mayberry! Troop 256!”

the Life Scout yells from atop the wall of ice.

Matt, 15, has just clambered up 60 feet by kicking his crampons into the side of the glacier and steadying himself with ice tools plunked into the ice above his head. His troopmates follow suit, shouting name and troop number as each completes the climb.

“I wanted to represent the Scouts,” Matt says. “I wanted to do it right the first time. I mean, how many times are we going to be in Alaska?”

Once might not be enough for Troop 256, judging from this experience. Last summer, 24 members of this pack of “desert rats” left their Las Vegas, Nev., homes for an eight-day adventure in Alaska. They went ice climbing, paddled sea kayaks, bedded down in bear country and marveled at Alaska’s immense and majestic beauty.

“The wilderness there is not like a park where you drive in,” Matt says. “It’s the entire state.”



Danny Melcher takes the first steps over the top of the ice wall. Once he makes it, he yells out "Troop 256!"



Chilly Reception

When Troop 256 took off from Las Vegas, the temperatures were pushing 110. When they landed in Anchorage, Alaska's largest city, they got a chilly reception—about 50 degrees cooler. Equally odd to these sunshine boys were the overcast skies, mist and rain.

"We were the only group wearing shorts and sandals coming off the plane," says Adam Schwerin, 17, senior patrol leader. "We were total tourists."

Fortunately, the Scouts were in the trusty hands of experienced Alaska guide Mark Reiser and his crew. Reiser supplied a detailed list of gear that Troop 256 would need for the wetter, cooler climate.

He also offered memorable advice as they drove into the territory of grizzly bears and deceptively dangerous moose: "In Alaska, if you get off the road, then you are part of the food chain."

(No one got chomped on. The troop did see moose, but regretted that they never laid eyes on a grizzly.)

The Scouts headed east toward Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, one of the most unspoiled wilderness areas in the United States. They toured old mining towns and abandoned gold mines along the way. Around and above them, sashes of clouds dressed the dark and imposing mountains of southern Alaska.

Scouts on Ice!

Then it was time for Troop 256 to gear up and pit themselves against the landscape by ice climbing on Root Glacier. An outfitter supplied rigid plastic boots, ax-like ice tools, helmets and crampons—strap-on footgear bristling with metal spikes that bite into the hardest ice.

"They had us practice different techniques for walking on the ice," Adam says. "When we were going down a slope, they had us squat super low so we wouldn't fall head first. We looked so goofy."

Top-belayed with ropes and harnesses, the Scouts chinked and chunked their way up the 60-foot ice face. That's the height of a six-story building.

"It was almost like walking on air," Matt says. "You kick your spikes into the ice and push yourself up with your legs. Your whole weight is on the spikes, then you stand as flat as possible and reach up with the ice ax."

After mastering the techniques, some Scouts took turns racing up the wall. Adam, for one, found it easier than rock climbing.

"With ice climbing, you can use any part of the wall you want," he says. "You don't have to hunt for hand- and footholds."

Leave No Trace



The Alaskan wilderness might seem boundless, but its beauty and treasures still require preservation and protection, says Mark Reiser of Alaska Outdoors, a local outfitter. Here are techniques for making a minimum impact while enjoying outdoor adventure wherever you may roam.

Pack It In, Pack It Out: Carry out all trash, litter and leftover food.

Stay on Trail: Hiking off-trail and cutting across switchbacks kills plants and accelerates erosion. This is especially true in mountains and the Alaska tundra where the growing season is very short.

Don't Freelance Camp: Camp only in designated sites, if possible. If camping in pristine areas, leave no trace that you were there.

Leave What You Love: Don't collect plants, flowers, artifacts or even rocks. Leave them for the next visitors to enjoy.

Catholes: Deposit solid human waste in catholes dug 6 to 8 inches in the ground, at least 200 feet from water sources. Pack out TP.

Quest for Fire: Don't forage for firewood. Pack it in or use a gas stove for cooking.

Strain and Drain: Strain dishwater to remove food particles so wild animals won't come sniffing for scraps. Use biodegradable soap and toss out dishwater over a wide area at least 200 feet from water sources.

For more ideas and detailed information, check out the Leave No Trace Web site at www.lnt.org.



Christopher Fuller, right, follows the lead of his guide as he carefully navigates the cracks and holes of the ice wall.

The Kennecott Copper Mine in McCarthy, Alaska, was closed in 1938, but the building still stands.

Eagle Scout Joey Laruti digs his spikies into the snow leans back into his harness and makes his way down.



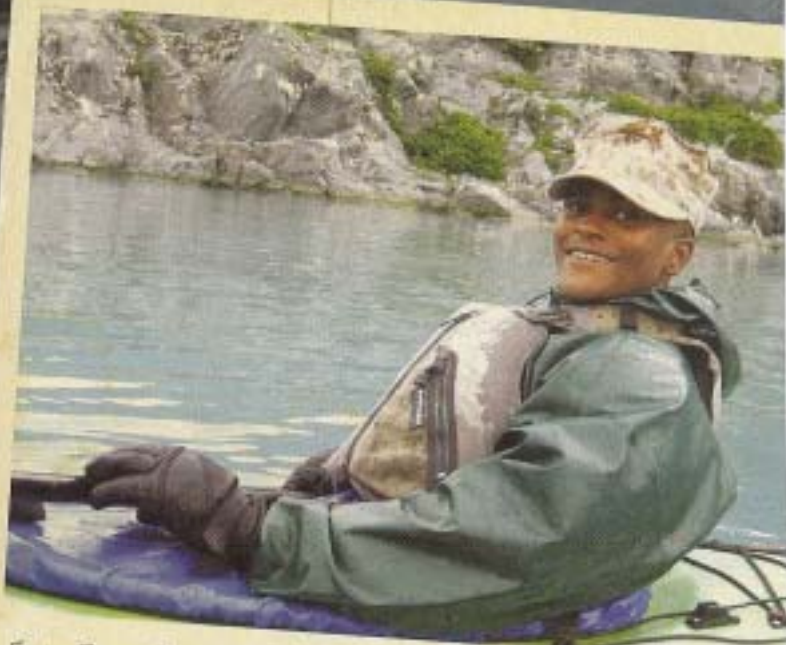
Scouts and adult leaders from Troop 256 proudly wave their paddles after a long day in their kayaks.

Alaska's Glaciers

Glaciers are massive rivers of ice created by century after century of accumulating snow, ice, dirt and rock. There are an estimated 100,000 glaciers in Alaska, covering more than 5,000 square miles of the state.

The immensity of Alaska's largest glaciers can be difficult to fathom. The Bagley Icefield in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve, for example, is 127 miles long, 4 to 15 miles wide, and up to 3,000 feet thick. Three times as thick as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France, is tall!

Glaciers are slow-footed—they usually advance or retreat only a few feet a year. Today, though, most of the world's glaciers—and most of those in Alaska—are in retreat. Some scientists blame higher average temperatures connected to global warming. They expect sea levels to rise as water that has been locked up in ice fields for centuries melts into the oceans.



Eagle Scout Phillip Stewart leans back in his sea kayak as the group explores the Shoup Glacier.



Out to Sea

The next adventure launched from the port city of Valdez. After getting instructions, the troop slipped into the water in two-person sea kayaks.

"You feel like you're one with the boat," Eagle Scout Phillip Stewart, 20, says. "You're right at the same level as the water."

The bundled-up crews paddled across Shoup Bay. As they approached Shoup Glacier, their boats entered even icier waters. Chunks of ice anywhere from cube- to car-size scraped against the plastic hulls of the kayaks. In the event the glacier calved—when a mass of ice splits off from a glacier—nearby, the Scouts were told to bring their kayaks together quickly to shield one another from the incoming waves.

As they glided along, the Scouts caught glimpses of Alaska's wealth of wildlife. They viewed bald eagles cruising for fish and the bobbing heads of curious sea lions. They also floated up close to a colony of black-legged kittiwakes, a kind of seagull.

"The scenery was awesome," 15-year-old Nolan Ramos says. "Just awesome. But I do want to go back to see a bear someday."

Big Impressions

There were other hits and misses as well.

They tried to catch wild salmon with their bare hands—not much luck.

One group joined Phillip, a reservist in the Marine Corps, on an eight-mile double-time hike—success! They even called out cadence to let any bears know that they



Laurence Jacque sets up his tent on a terminal moraine—a mass of rocks deposited in one spot by a glacier. Above left: Each climber double-checks his crampons before each ascent.

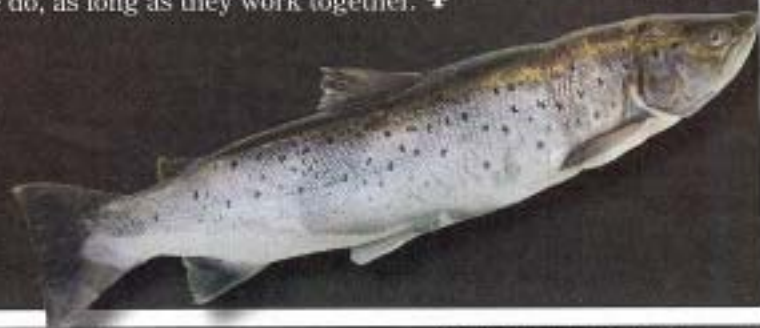
were in the neighborhood.

Traveling and camping in Alaska's wide, lonely, chilly and misty spaces left lasting impressions on Troop 256.

"When you've lived in Las Vegas all your life, in a city, Alaska is definitely a big change," Matt says. "It's nature at its best."

And the cool memories provided some relief when they returned to their desert home—temperature 108 degrees.

"I would love for other Scouts to see that there are ordinary troops like 256 that are doing amazing things," Phillip says. "And Alaska was definitely amazing. Everyone has the opportunity to do what we do, as long as they work together."✦



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