

# the SCREE

## Mountaineering Club of Alaska

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There is not a sprig of grass that shoots uninteresting to me.  
~Thomas Jefferson

Monthly Meeting  
Wed. June 17 @ 6:30 PM  
Program: MCA Huts,  
Gateways to Outdoor Adventure

Mount Angayukaqsrq  
Ptarmigan Peak  
POM, Fang Mountain



# Mount Angayukaqsaq, Kobuk Valley National Park Remote Exploration Still Exists

by John Mitchler



John Mitchler and Anga  
Photo by Greg Griffith

Mighty Anga hides unnoticed among a sea of peaks in the Baird Mountains, about 140 miles northeast of Kotzebue and 110 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Unrecognized and unappreciated at 4,760', Anga can still claim fame as the range highpoint and highest point within Kobuk Valley National Park, and thus is a worthy objective, especially for someone chasing the highpoints of all 58 national parks. After I completed the 50 state highpoints on Denali in 2003, I pursued 'Park Pointing' as a follow-up goal, and I've visited 51 through August 2008.

In 2006 Greg Griffith asked me if I would go with him to this remote region and I quickly said 'Yes,' being eager to appreciate wilderness, in Greg Griffith's minimalist style. Greg had made two attempts to reach Anga (via kayak on the Noatak River) and had thoroughly researched this peak, which had no known ascent. Greg is a 50-state completer, the only person to do all 46 national park points in the Lower 48, and was part of the successful ascent of Mount Igikpak on August 23, 2004. Together, we reached Anga's summit on August 13, 2006, during an eight-day expedition, excluding travel to/from Kotzebue.

## The Peak

First, let's figure out how to pronounce this awkward name. The easy way is to just say "Anga," but being explorers, we like to understand the root reason for a name. I turned to Dick Ellsworth, librarian and teacher in Kotzebue. After consulting the Native experts in town (Willie Goodwin, Ray Ferguson, Nanyaq, etc.), he concluded we should say "anga-you-cuk-suk," which means "a younger old man" – not an elder, but old enough to care for the family. The rangers at the National Park Service office in Kotzebue were appreciative of this research, and for the details of our expedition to the rarely visited mountains in the park.

The Baird Mountains form one of the western ranges of the Brooks Range, and are comprised of rounded

summits heavily dissected by shallow streams. Anga rises as an abrupt bump along the ridgeline, but is well-hidden by neighbors of similar height. The rocky summit knob is surrounded by Class 2 scree slopes that, in most directions, lead down to cliff faces or very rugged terrain. Fortunately, the north ridge provides an even walk to the top, and our fear of an impassible ridge-line tower was not realized.

## The Park

The NPS describes Kobuk Valley as follows: "Located north of the Arctic Circle, this is probably America's most mysterious national park. The Baird and Waring Mountains encircle this park, which provides protection for the central portion of the Kobuk River, the 25-square-mile Great Kobuk Sand Dunes, and the smaller Little Kobuk and Hunt River dunes. Half a million caribou migrate through the park, and for 9,000 years people came to Onion Portage to harvest caribou as they swam the Kobuk River."

Rare is the visitor who explores the mountainous northern half of this park, and in fact, rare is the visitor to this park at all. Official statistics indicate this is the least visited national park, after our park in American Samoa, with fewer than 5,000 annual visits. Most go to see the sand dunes in the park's south half. Access is by bush pilot, and it was our pilot's opinion that many visitors go just to say they've been to the park (often combining their visit with a second gravel bar landing inside Gates of the Arctic NP to claim two park visits during one flight). Outfitters guide rafters and kayakers along the Noatak River, which flows east to west, north of the park.

The park visitor center is in Kotzebue (907) 442-3890 & 3760. This 1.7 million-acre park has no roads, gift shops, trails, or fees, and was converted from a national monument to a national park in 1980. Licensed air taxis are listed on-line at:

[www.nps.gov/kova/planyourvisit/airtaxi.htm](http://www.nps.gov/kova/planyourvisit/airtaxi.htm)

### The Approach

To reach our subject peak, a person must fly to a remote lake 140 miles north of the Arctic Circle, and then backpack four days and 25 miles over flat, but tedious, grass tussocks and easier but mildly undulating tundra to the base of the peak, from which a one-day ascent is possible. Total gain to the peak will exceed 5,000 feet. There are no signs of humans along the route.

Our research did not reveal much about this peak, let alone information about possible routes. We did not know if the route would go, if bears would block our way, or if the peak was technical. To travel light, we did not carry rope. Should we come from the south or the north? Based on Greg's previous experience, he chose an approach from the north, landing on Lake Kangilipak in Noatak National Preserve deep within the Northwest Arctic Borough, and hiking cross-country to the south-southwest (204 degree straight-line bearing) toward the ridgeline of the Baird Mountains.

Coming from the Lower 48, I first flew to Anchorage and then to Kotzebue. From there, we employed a bush pilot (Arctic) for a 2-hour, 160-mile flight northeast to Lake Kangilipak. Note: Be sure your pilot is equipped for water landing. A gravel bar landing can be made along the Noatak River, but this adds a grueling day to and from the peak.

### The Hike

After our landing on the lake (975 feet), we struck out across the grassy tussock landscape that rose gently to the south. This experience is like walking across a field of tires. It required attention and was annoying. The minor drainages featured dense willows, which hid bears, so we chatted constantly and loudly. After a brutal seven hours and seven miles, we camped on a bare knob with long sight-lines (aka Perfecto Camp in Section 18, Township 29 North, Range 2 West.)

The next day we enjoyed firmer ground beneath our feet as we hiked south over a well-defined ridge and into a steep-sided gully. Then our route took us southwest and over a broad, brushy ridge, and again, more descent; into a deep drainage (Sec.14, T28N, R3W.) Due to weather concerns, we elected to stay off the significant north-south ridge, and instead hiked its easy, narrow, eastern bench, passing three hills. This we called Mammary Lane (Secs. 24, 26, and 35, T28N, R3W). We camped at the south exit of this convenient bench after eight hours of hiking, setting the bear fence just as the rain arrived.

Now we enjoyed a three-hour day, which was needed to dry out clothing and negotiate bear-dangerous, head-high vegetation along the east boundary of the national park. We crossed south over a broad saddle (Sec. 34, T28N, R3W) and contoured the east side of a rounded hill we called Jiffy Pop (3410 feet, Sec. 9, T27N, R3W) before finding camp on a hill with sight lines (Sec. 15,

T27N, R3W.) Conversation centered on which approach to take up Anga; the more direct route to the south through cirques, or the broader north ridge which would require an extra day to reach. We chose the latter.

The next morning was spent viewing wildlife (fox, bear, caribou) while the fog lifted. We struck out due west, over the 2435 foot saddle and for the first time entered the park. We descended 200 feet, tiptoed across the shallow Salmon River, and ascended two minor ridges before descending 150 feet to a creek that required wading. We were now at the toe of Anga's north ridge, and we set camp (2200 feet, Sec. 13, T27N, R4W.)

**Greg at a River Crossing**



We began summit day a bit anxious about our prospects. Would we meet with a technical impediment on our chosen ridge? Would the summit be a spire, as found elsewhere in this region? We progressed without incident, following the broad, gentle grade, south, then east, then south, to the steep, but easy, Class 2 scree that led to the rocky outcrop of Anga. We noticed a small spring at the base of the scree on Anga's north ridge.

The summit's rock blocks were a welcome relief from the scree slopes. We relaxed in relatively warm, still air, and marveled at the extended view of peaks and valleys that surrounded us, taking note of the easier ridges to the north and east, and the steeper terrain to the northeast and south.

Our descent was uneventful, and we needed next morning's full sun to dry out. Having taken four days to approach, we took three days to exit. We varied our return by ascending the top of Jiffy Pop where a caribou herd had gathered to escape insects and bears. We descended northeast, crossed the saddle and set camp. The next day we skipped Mammary Lane and instead hiked high on the ridge to 2906 feet (Sec. 23, T28N, R3W.) For the first time, we had clear views of Anga to the south, and we walked among the caribou on the ridge. It was a long day back to Perfecto Camp where we set tents in a cold rain (I use a Eureka Zeus 1LE). The next day, our eighth, we reached our lake. Not needing our two weather days, we called the pilot with our sat phone and were picked up the next morning.



Waiting for the plane, the mosquitoes were thick, but did not bite through our long sleeves and net hoods.

Overall, it was a pleasant outing, with a measured pace that accommodated weather, bears, and route-finding. The scale of this place is immense and is not captured well on the 1:63,360 map scale. We averaged 1 mile per hour, which included route finding. Our entry gained 5,964 feet and our exit required 4,325 feet, for a total gain of 10,289 feet over 53.9 miles. Our straight-line route was 48.3 miles, so we held true to that at 89.5 percent.

There was no cairn or register on Anga's summit, and we did not leave any evidence of our visit. There is a small national park communications repeater on a sub-ridge to the west of Anga, although we could not find information about its placement, presumably by helicopter. Apparently during the survey of ANWR, spot elevations were shot from the slopes near Anga, but the surveyors did not reach the summit.

### Concerns

The best time to visit is the mild summer weeks. Although this is arid country, the first 6 miles of our trek



was soggy grassland, and we encountered 50-degree rain with one evening dipping down to 36; however, the daily sunshine dried our clothes. Weather is a threat secondary to the presence of grizzly bears. We viewed a solitary male and a mama bear with cubs, as well as numerous signs of their immediate presence along our route. You do not need rock climbing gear nor experience with glacier travel; however, you do need bear experience; knowing where they're likely to be encountered, how to look for their presence, how to sustain a noisy presence (startling a bear is bad news), tricks for setting a camp (view lines), and protective camp behavior (odor management). Rangers carry firearms in the bush, so we brought a Ruger Redhawk Alaskan .454 Casull, and protected our two solo tents with an electric bear fence (4 pounds.) Caribou were abundant; the youngsters were curious as to what we were and the older males showed aggressive protective behavior.

### Details

Mt. Angayukaqsraq at 4,760' can be found on the Baird (C-1) map. Look in Section 30, T27N, R3W at latitude 67° 42' 21" North, longitude -159° 25' 45 West"

Our landing site was Lake Kangilipak at 975' on the Baird (D-1) map. We began our hike in Section 15, T30N, R2W at latitude 67° 59' 39" North, longitude -159° 5' West"

View an on-line map at:

<http://mapper.acme.com/?ll=67.7088,-159.4022&z=13&t=T>

DeLorme Atlas & Gazetteer page 133 gives a poor overview of the area, so look for park & commercial maps. I have annotated topo maps showing the route.

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