

THE TALKEETNA TRAVERSE

A taste of hellbiking in
the Alaskan bush

You're not always riding when hellbiking, as Roman Dial, in front, and Bob Kaufman demonstrate.

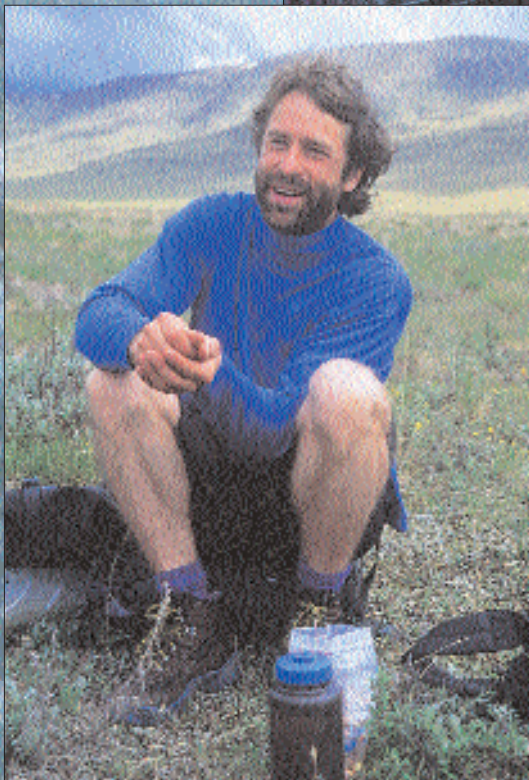
Call it “hellbiking,” a bicycle trek across untracked wilderness, using only a topo map and compass, in a place too big to fit in the Lower 48 — Alaska. Three of us — Roman Dial, the inventor of hellbiking, Bob Kaufman, Roman’s good friend and founder of the Alaska Channel, and I — were on this particular journey through the Alaskan bush, where it seemed to take only a moment for one of the most exciting trips of my life begin to look as if it would derail completely. I was being offered a brief glimpse of what happens when things get “epic” in a place like this, the Talkeetna River country.

When Bob and Roman left to search for the remote airstrip where Kevin would fly in with the boats we needed to get down the river, not to mention our food, I immediately started shivering in the 50-degree drizzle. It was summer in the Arctic, and the eternal twilight had spared us many of the hassles associated with time. Maybe spared isn’t the right word; time still affected us, but we noticed it less. We had spent the last couple of hours below treeline, pushing our bikes through wet thickets. My teeth began chattering as soon as we reached the river. Time had also been a critical factor in our rendezvous, and we were late, meaning we didn’t see Kevin’s plane set down. We were hopeful that he had already landed, but now we found ourselves standing in an immense valley, unsure of where the airstrip was.

By Drew Walker



PHOTOS BY DREW WALKER



endangering our survival. If we failed to make the rendezvous, Kevin would be fine. He would have two boats, plenty of food, no way to find us and little idea where to start looking. We, on the other hand, were 60 miles from anywhere. We had a day's worth of food, but might need a week to escape on our own. If something didn't go right, and soon, we would have our hands full just getting out alive.

Left, Roman Dial, inventor of hellbiking; above, Bob Kaufman, practitioner of hellbiking.

Roman, a theoretical biologist at Alaska Pacific University and a climber who moved to Alaska when he was 18, notched dozens of rock climbing and mountaineering first ascents, and several first descents of rivers. When Alaska began hosting wilderness races, which would later grow into today's adventure races, Roman won many of them.



The Talkeetna River country is just north of Anchorage.

Bob and Roman casually mentioned that we might have to cross the river in search of our missing companion, then went to find the airstrip. I walked to the riverbank to size up the flow. The rushing water was opaque, the gray color of freshly melted glaciers. It was about 300 yards wide and braided into several channels. Each braid looked too wide and fast and deep to cross without a boat, and the river was at least four braids wide.

I had been getting colder as I tried to imagine walking into that river. Feeling a little desperate, I gathered driftwood for a fire. All the nearby driftwood was soaked, and I had to use about a third of our remaining stove fuel to get a flame going. As I poured the gas out, I wondered if I was

Alaskan wilderness trips are high-risk ventures, and the longer one is in the bush, the more chances there are for mishaps. Roman became an expert at finding ways to quickly cross huge tracts of roadless backcountry. He discovered mountain biking in the mid-1980s, and in 1988, he and two friends tried a two-wheeled, 150-mile Alaskan bush bash.



Bob Kaufman finds his way down a slope; about two-thirds of the route was rideable.

They had a blast on that first trip, but more importantly, they made a discovery: they were just as fast as hikers when they walked, and much faster than hikers when they could pedal. It was immediately clear that riding a bicycle across the wilderness was the quickest, and thus safest, way to travel the backcountry.

For the touring cyclist, hellbiking represents the ultimate expression of bicycle power, for the hellbiker goes through true wilderness without relying on hotels, stores, paved roads, dirt roads, trails, or the chance of rescue. In short, if a person can hellbike in Alaska, he or she can bicycle across almost any landscape on the planet.

Roman made more than a dozen two-wheeled forays through the bush, culminating in a seven-week, 700-mile traverse of the Alaska Range for National Geographic. (*Editor's note: One of the members of that trip was Adventure Cycling's own Paul Adkins.*) But the adventure that most impressed me was Roman's very first. In the spring of 1989, I happened across a magazine story in Mountain Bike Action about that first bush bash, and by the time I finished the article, I wanted to be a mountain biker. I bought a fat tire bike a month later. Seven years after that, I met Roman and we started planning this ride.

Our time was limited, so our tour would only last six days. Starting 150 miles east of Anchorage, we planned to spend the first four days navigating across mountains, passes, valleys and tundra, as we pedaled across the Talkeetna Mountains. We would then meet Kevin on the banks of the Talkeetna River, and float down the Talkeetna with the rafts he would bring, a trip that included scores of Class 3 and 4 rapids, pulling out in the next town, also named Talkeetna. In a fit of wild originality, we decided to title our trek the Talkeetna Traverse.

Roman's wife, Peggy, drove us to the starting point, where a dirt track intersected the road to Valdez. Roman, a man of medium height and medium build, with medium-length brown hair, with no tattoos, body piercings, or weird facial hair, would have been tough to pick out of a crowd as an accomplished "extreme" athlete. Bob, for his part, was tall and muscular, and looked like the clean-cut high school quarterback 20 years after graduation. They both dressed like they had stock in the Patagonia clothing company — appropriate, really, as Roman had been sponsored by Patagonia for the last ten years, and had tested equipment for them for almost as long.

As we pared our gear down to the bare minimum, Roman said that meeting the boats, instead of carrying rafts on our backs, was a new luxury. But no one complained, as

flying in a couple of boats with Kevin meant that we could do the river in style. Roman also said that he liked his hellbike trips longer. He explained that we were test-riding the Talkeetna Traverse for possible use in a future adventure race, and that a two-week trek would be too long for the race. He seemed to be saying that the Talkeetna Traverse wasn't a true hellbike — more of a heckbike. We channeled our desire for a longer journey into fine-tuning our packing systems.

We each had a front-suspension mountain bike with a rear rack and compression sack (but no panniers or front rack), and a small backpack. My total baggage weighed about 18 pounds, and consisted of a few clothes, a sleeping bag, my camera, bike stuff, and food. At the last minute, Roman

handed me an extra pound of butter and an extra pound of oatmeal as emergency rations.

"In case things get epic," he said.

After his "heckbike" speech, I wasn't too worried. We were on a weenie ride, and even I, a neophyte, would shred this tiny ride like a champ.

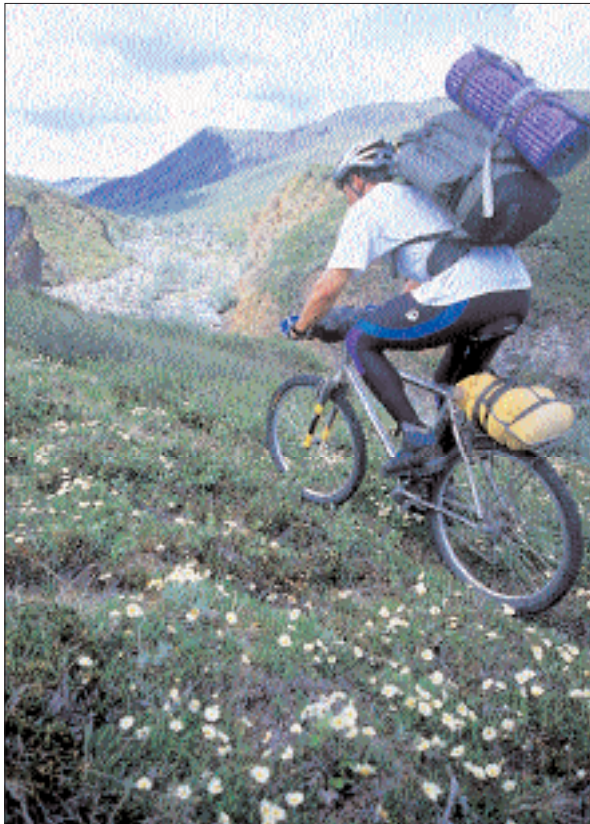
We bid Peggy goodbye, then started across grassy, rolling hills on a road made from mud. At first, we could only see green hills, but we soon caught views of the Talkeetna Mountains, which managed to look lush and scary at the same time. Treeline is around 2,000 feet at these latitudes, and the strange thing was that the lack of trees not only helped us navigate, but also made the landscape even more beautiful.

Later that day, after dropping into a pristine valley, the road faded to intermittent marks across the tundra. We began following the stream, staying to the rideable gravel banks and crossing the channel dozens of times. Following the river valleys was pretty easy, but we couldn't follow the water forever. The next day, we carried our bikes straight up a long steep hill until it started to flatten. Then, using the view and a topographic map, we began navigating the landscape.

Assuming you don't get lost, hypothermic, or eaten by a grizzly, the main challenge in hellbiking is that you have obstacles — jagged, snow-capped mountains, bogs, big rivers, alder thickets, and grass clumps the size and shape of standing watermelons — that conspire to keep you from riding. But if you have solid technical riding skills, and can read a landscape for good routes, you can cover about two-thirds of the backcountry in the saddle. The unrideable sections include river crossings, snowy passes, and impossibly steep hills.

The reasons for going ultralight were instantly clear. Almost all the terrain, even river banks and flat tundra, was technically challenging. Extra weight in these situations does more than slow you down. It also makes difficult ground impossible to negotiate. With our light bikes, we could ride across gnarly terrain for hours on end; if we carried just ten or 15 more pounds, we might have had to walk that same terrain all day long.

Even before we left the river valley, the challenges of all-terrain riding had altered my pedaling style. I had to be constantly alert to the implications of every choice of direction. The challenge of finding a passable route between 7,000-foot mountains and 2,000-foot valleys was immense, but also immensely rewarding. This kind of cycling actually brings you closer to the land than hiking, I think, because



The trio carried everything they needed with them, and they kept what they needed to a minimum.

you must read the landscape so closely in order to ride across it.

As Roman said, "Mountain bikes are the essence of minimalist wilderness travel."

At first, I watched Roman get his bearings and choose our routes. The main trick seemed to be to find your immediate destination, then utilize whatever parts of the landscape will let you ride from here to there. Soon, I was bugging Roman to let me navigate. Fortunately, the bushwhacking skills I'd picked up in the Lower 48 worked just as well in the 49th State, and I managed to keep us on course, and on our bikes.

Roman and Bob talked at length about their adventures in Alaska, where Roman is a bona fide legend. The story I thought about the most started with a conversation about crossing icecaps (if you think of a glacier as a river, think of an icecap as the lake that feeds the glacier). Roman and Bob were alone, hiking up a glacier on their way to crossing an icecap. Bob walked onto a snowed-over crevasse, and the snow held just long enough for him to reach the middle of the fissure before he plunged into the glacier. He and Roman were roped together; in another second Roman was also pulled into the abyss. But by a miracle, they both landed on a snowy ledge 50 feet below the surface, a fraction of the total depth of the crevasse. They only had two ice axes between them, but managed to climb out, and complete their traverse.

On the third day of our trip, I got my own small taste of danger. As we descended to the last river valley, we saw about 100 caribou below us as they made their annual migration. When we crossed the river and started up the next pass, we saw more and more caribou coming down. On many passes we could ride part of the climb, but not this

one. The bikes were instantly in the "carry" position, with our heads poking through the main triangles and the seat tubes resting on our shoulder blades.

We soon had to abandon the small creek we were following, and climb to our left. At one point, we came to a steeply sloping field of scree. The cinder block-sized rocks swept down at a 45-degree angle for 100 feet or so, then plunged 200 feet off a cliff to the creek below. Roman and Bob had barely shrugged as they began the traverse, and pride demanded that I follow.

While tottering on the precariously balanced rocks, I nearly fell twice. On one of those occasions, I planted my downhill foot on a rock that dislodged and tumbled down, taking several others with it. I quickly moved my foot to another rock, which also slipped away. When I desperately moved my foot to a third rock, I was practically doing a split, and had way too much downward momentum. If I pitched over, simply falling down with the bike in this position could break my neck. Even if I didn't sail off the cliffs below, our first aid kit was little more than a bandanna, we had no way to call for help, and the immediate area was too treacherous for rescue, if and when Bob and Roman did get back to civilization. Fortunately, the third rock held, and I didn't tumble. But after that, I never forgot that when you go hellbiking, you are in it all the way.

In the next two hours, we crossed the pass, braving waist-deep drifts of snow in our bike shorts, and slid down to a point where we could begin riding. The caribou had continued to trickle past in the other direction, always avoiding us. We pedaled over a small rise, then stopped and hunched down. Clustered on a sort of bluff below us were about 500 caribou.

We made a quick plan. Bob rode first, on the left. I rode second, on the right. Roman rode last and came down the middle. We didn't know what the caribou would do; probably just run away. But the bluff, while appearing mostly flat to us, was surrounded by steep hills on three sides, and we came at the caribou from their only escape route. The herd, which stayed together when Bob started toward it, splintered into dozens of confused herdlets when Roman and I approached.

For the next ten minutes, there was total chaos, as the caribou stayed on the mesa and never regrouped, but instead ran around in circles and boxed us in. Caribou ran in front of me, behind me, and directly at me. But we were never afraid, because we could tell that they were scared, and didn't plan to charge us. It almost felt like we were dancing with them. Toward the end of the encounter, I found myself

speeding downhill toward a running group of 50 caribou, when a dozen or so splintered away and ran beside me. They matched my speed and direction for an unforgettable moment, 15 seconds at the most. They were 15 of the most magical seconds of my life.

Afterward, as we sped toward the waiting river, we replayed the encounter. Thinking that such play might be commonplace, I asked Roman if he'd ever pedaled alongside caribou before.

"No," he said. "You don't know how lucky we are. What



Hellbikers navigate using only a topographic map — and the view in front of them.

happened back there has never happened to me before."

During the next day, we saw even more caribou, making, by Roman's estimate, about 4,000 that we had passed. Roman explained that all other large mammals had changed their travel patterns, and the northern caribou make the last great migration in North America.

That night, we descended to the Talkeetna River, and commenced looking for the airstrip. When Roman and Bob left me by that river, the first thing I did was to look at my map. I became convinced that our airstrip had to be down the Talkeetna from us, but Bob and Roman had gone upstream. I wandered down to the Talkeetna's next tributary, thinking the airstrip had to be near. But that next stream looked at least thigh-deep, and the crossing was right where it emptied into the Talkeetna. The three of us had crossed streams bigger than this together, but I had never done it alone. So I chickened out, went back to the fire, and waited for my companions.

Bob and Roman were gone for two hours, but I wasn't worried about that pair of Yukon Jacks. They showed up about 3 a.m. I told them my hunch about the airstrip, and they didn't even bother to warm their hands by the fire before plowing across the stream I had been afraid to ford. Talk about feeling foolish — Kevin was waiting a few hundred yards downstream. The whole time I'd been alone and panicking, Kevin and the supplies he brought had been less than a mile away.

All worries were soon forgotten when we hugged Kevin, busted open some coolers, built a fire, opened the folding chairs, threw steaks on the fire and drank beers. The fact that we were still far from civilization made the forbidden fruit of these luxuries all the sweeter.

Over the next two days, we shot rapids, capsized the



Hey the hard part is over! Now the hellbikers had only to raft the Talkeetna River — and its gut-churning rapids.

boat holding the bikes, punctured my Thermarest on the floor of an abandoned cabin, and enjoyed the giddy sensation of motion without progress. More than anything, we relaxed. We at last reached a bridge, where we unloaded the boats and walked into Talkeetna. As we mixed with the feral hippies at the local bar, the wilderness already seemed far away. But that's the thing about Alaska; it's the one place in our country where the wilderness is always near, and so powerful that you can never forget its presence. ●

Drew Walker wrote about Utah's White Rim Trail in the July 2000 Adventure Cyclist.

River crossings weren't the only occasion for carrying the bikes.

