Kahiltna Travels

JULIE-ANN CLYMA

(*Plates* 67, 90–93)

In 1988 the Payne 'family' – myself, husband Roger and a clutch of ice-tools – found that its plans to visit the Himalaya had gone awry. However, a favourable exchange rate against the dollar, a special offer on North American air fares, the lack of bureaucracy in gaining access to climbing areas – and the novelty of climbing in a country where we spoke the same language as the locals – made Alaska our choice of venue for our annual 'Greater Ranges' foray. Roger had already visited Alaska in 1983 and related dire tales of strong winds, temperatures of −45°C, man-eating crevasses and terrible snow conditions. It seemed a ridiculous place to have chosen – from these accounts we would surely perish! – but I had seen pictures of the Denali National Park, and the isolation and beauty of the area were undeniable. Some more reading and the timely arrival of the 1987 *AAJ* provided us with an objective in the shape of Mt Foraker (5300m) and, after considering possible routes, we selected an unclimbed line on the S buttress of the SE ridge for our attempt. Mt Foraker is a comparatively little- climbed mountain upon which only 29 expeditions have been successful, as compared with more than 5000 individuals who have summited on nearby McKinley. A common reaction on hearing our intentions of climbing this mountain was cautionary; H Adams Carter wrote of the huge avalanches which pour off the mountain.

As we flew over Greenland, we reflected that it was taking us less time to get from London to Anchorage than it often took to get from London to Fort William! Having left at 1pm on Wednesday 18 May, we arrived in Anchorage at 1.30pm the same day (the 9hr time difference having been lost somewhere between time zones). While this made us feel very efficient, it also caused us to feel extremely tired. We almost literally stepped off the plane and into the supermarkets (open 24 hours a day) to buy provisions, and did the round of the climbing shops for miscellaneous equipment. By the time we stopped to eat dinner (10pm local time), we had been up for 24 hours. We collapsed that night at the home of a local woman, Jean, who had been working on the information counter at the airport when we arrived. When we explained to her that we needed some help to find a motel, supermarkets, equipment shops and transport to Talkeetna, she proceeded to arrange our transport to Talkeetna the next day, and then offered herself as chauffeuse and her home as our temporary place of residence. Alaskans are hospitable and friendly people.

The following morning we were on the road to Talkeetna, the jumping-off point for flights into the Denali National Park. A 2½-hour journey saw us arriving at midday in showery weather. We called in to K2 Aviation to meet Jim and Julie Okonek; organized the loan of sleds, bought wands and fuel, and



67. *Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma on the summit of Mt McKinley. Mt Hunter L, Mt Foraker R.* (p 201)



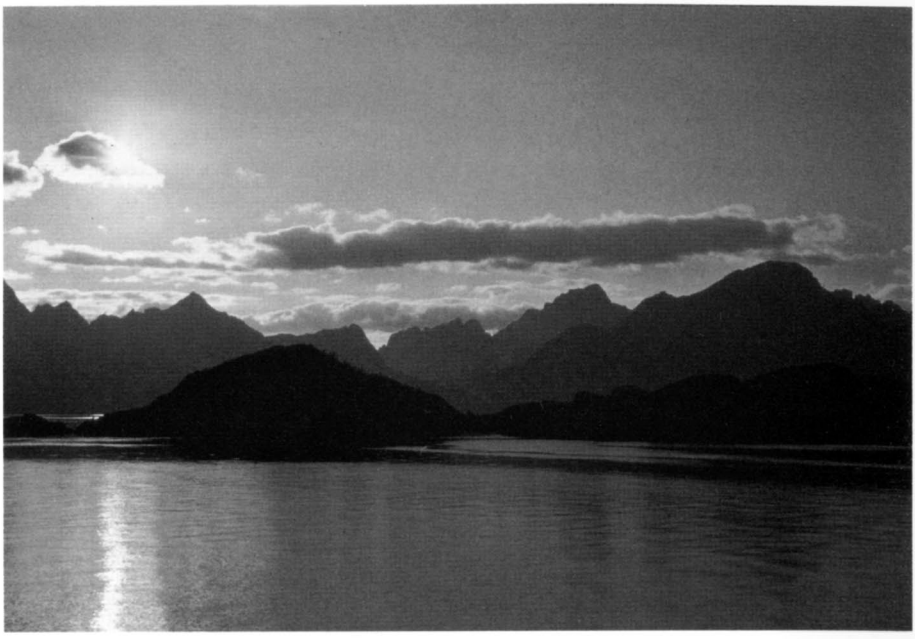
68. *Lofoten: Ostpollen Fiord from Geitgaljartind.* (p 197)

arranged to fly on to the glacier as soon as the weather cleared sufficiently. Then it was over to the Ranger Station to register and undergo a briefing. After another repacking of all our gear and an excellent dinner at the 'Latitude 62', our second hectic day finished at the K2 Bunkhouse. The following morning dawned (a relative term with 24 hours of daylight) beautifully clear and sunny, and Jim started at 6am to fly parties on to the glacier. We were scheduled for 10am. Nothing can quite prepare you for the disorientation of standing at one moment in the balmy spring air at Talkeetna airport, and an hour later being dumped alone in the wilderness of the Denali National Park.

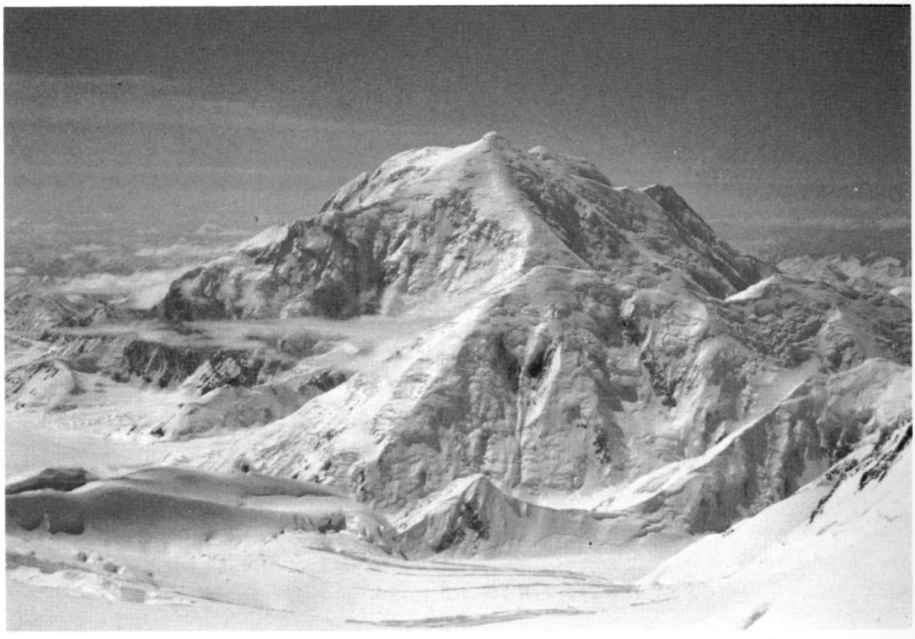
We had elected to land in the W fork of the Kahiltna glacier, immediately beneath our objective, Mt Foraker. Two possible reasons for the low success-rate on this mountain soon became apparent. First, the least technical routes on Foraker are extremely long and, second, all the routes we examined had high objective danger from serac fall and avalanche. During the six days we spent beneath the mountain, we examined it from a number of angles. On 21 May, using our touring skis, we skinned up to a pass SW of our camp to get a better look at our proposed route. What had not been clear in our photographs of the route was an ice-cliff separating the rock buttress from the summit snow-slopes above. Somehow the route lost its immediate appeal, and we began looking for alternatives. From the col we could see down into the Lacuna glacier and towards the SW ridge and Infinite Spur routes. We already knew from earlier parties in the area that season that the approach and lower reaches of the Infinite Spur were in poor condition, and the SW ridge is extremely long, so we discounted these. The only other route to be considered was the French ridge (SSE ridge) but, as the first (and only) ascensionists had placed 7300m of fixed rope, we discounted this also!

Back at our camp, on another afternoon, we saw four simultaneous serac avalanches on the SE face; for us this marked the end of making any attempt from the W fork of the Kahiltna glacier. On 22 May, by ski and sled, we moved camp to a bay between Mt Foraker's E face and Mt Crosson (3900m), and on the 25th we climbed a small peak behind our camp to examine the E face and NE ridge routes. The two existing routes on the E face looked difficult and, we observed, were both threatened by huge active seracs. The NE ridge route, which initially climbs over Mt Crosson, began to look like the most likely option – but, again, it was very long. We decided as a warm-up to climb the S ridge on Mt Crosson to assess snow conditions and the feasibility of continuing on to Mt Foraker. The weather during this time had been mixed, with some days of clear blue skies and others of snowfall. We set off to climb Mt Crosson at 3am on 26 May; it seemed a long walk to the foot of the route, and the initial couloir we had picked to gain access to the upper ridge turned out to be most unpleasant. What had looked like one pitch of straightforward climbing turned into a hour-long struggle through bottomless sugar-snow beneath tumbled seracs. By the time we reached the top of the couloir we were thoroughly demoralized. Cold, tired and not impressed with either snow conditions or weather prospects, we turned round and headed back for camp.

Having spent a week looking at options on Mt Foraker, we felt we had to make a decision. In view of the high objective danger, neither of us could raise



89. *The Lofoten Islands from the sea.* (p 197)



90. *Mt Foraker seen from the NE. Mt Crosson and the Kahiltna glacier in the foreground.* (p 201)

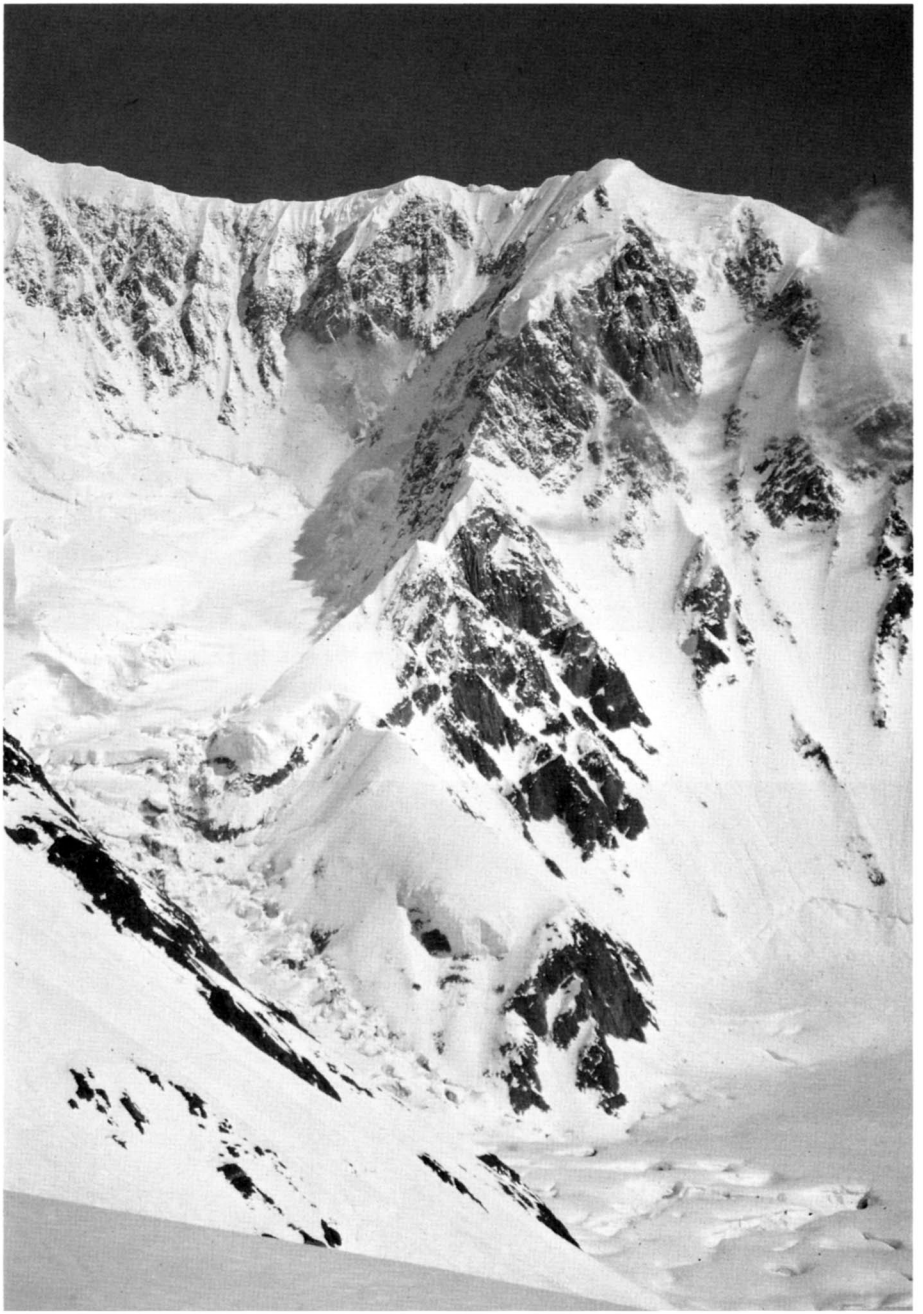
much enthusiasm for any of the routes we had seen. So we finally decided to turn our backs on Foraker and move towards Mt McKinley.

Armed with photocopied extracts from various journals and magazines, we searched through them and settled with interest on an account of the ascent of the NW ridge of McKinley. It has only been climbed twice and has not had a British or NZ ascent – it seemed ideal. Our approach lay over the Kahiltna Pass (3145m) at the head of the Kahiltna glacier, and then dropped down into the Peters Basin to reach the foot of the route at about 2400m. On 27 May we moved camp to a new base at around 2200m near the entrance to the E fork of the Kahiltna glacier. The following day we packed up eight days' food and ski'd towards the Kahiltna Pass, following the usual Mt McKinley W buttress trail. After 6½km and six hours on the glacier we had to stop beneath the pass, overcome by the intense heat. We were dismayed to discover when we stepped off the trail that the snow was over our knees. It was a struggle to set up camp for the night, and just as we crawled inside the tent it began to snow again. The following morning (29 May) hardly a word needed to be spoken before we agreed to abandon crossing the pass (now an avalanche hazard), and to opt instead for the only other route close to hand – the W buttress of Mt McKinley.

We discovered that many of the guided parties on this, the standard route, take about three weeks to make a summit attempt. They adopt a siege approach to maximize the chances of success, but land themselves with days of load-carrying between camps. We now had seven days' food and, trusting to luck as to weather and our acclimatization, we set off from 3000m towards the camp at 4300m. The weather was cloudy and cool: ideal travelling conditions. We used skis and sleds up to the 3400m camp and from there continued on foot. Stopping two or three times for longish breaks and a brew, we reached 4300m at about 8pm. The weather was deteriorating as we put up our tent.

Despite our tiredness, we spent a restless night listening to the rising wind. The 30th brought a calm day but whiteout conditions. We both had mild headaches and settled in for a well-earned rest day. Lots of parties were dropping down from higher camps reporting very strong winds of 80–130km/hour. The 31st brought improving weather, but we were both still feeling the altitude and opted for another rest day. The camp at 4300m is unique in having a manned medical station from which Dr Peter Hackett and colleagues collect data on high-altitude sickness from the great pool of afflicted mountaineers passing their door. They even offer a 'haemoglobin-oxygen-saturation reading' service which gives some indication as to whether one is wise to continue gaining altitude. We could not resist submitting ourselves to this test, and were delighted to find that we were above the recommended level.

We woke at 4am on 1 June to find the day clear and cold. We set off at 6.30am up the steeper slopes towards the 4900m camp on the ridge above. Although the ground was not excessively steep, a fixed rope was in place, presumably to make load-carrying safer and easier and to protect guided parties. We arrived at 4900m at 9am and stopped to have a drink and to warm our cold hands and feet. The wind was gusting more strongly, and parties were still dropping down from higher camps. Within 30 minutes the cold drove us to set up camp there in order to see what the day would bring. It took a long time to

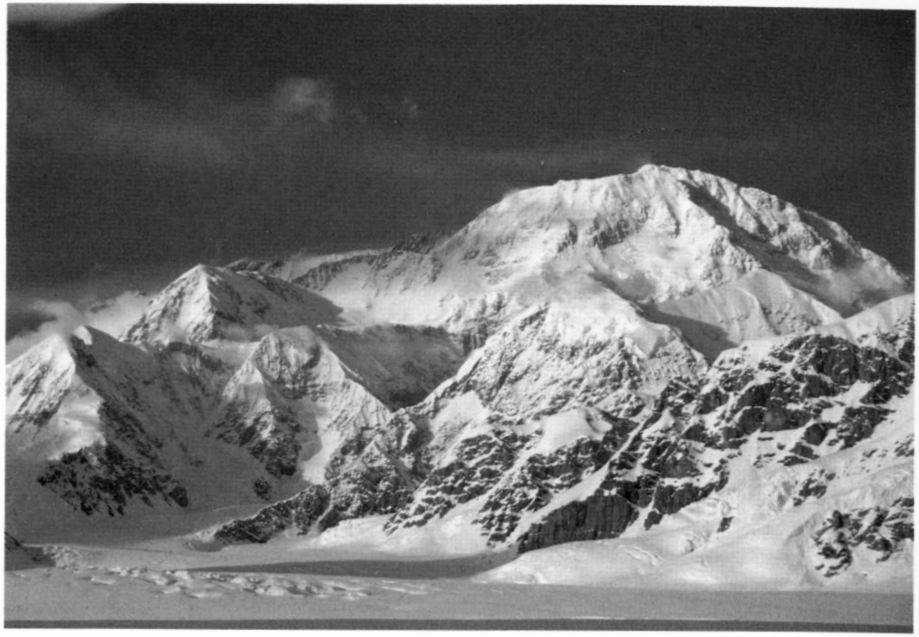


91. Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne's proposed route on Mt Foraker: S buttress of the SE ridge. (p 201)

dig out a platform and to erect the tent; and even longer to get warm again. However, the day improved and by 3pm it was sunny, calm and warm. We decided to continue our ascent to the camp at 5200m. It was perhaps the most memorable day's climbing for sheer enjoyment; winding our way on hard névé between beautiful granite blocks, enjoying the views of peaks and tundra dropping away on both sides. We arrived at 5200m at 8pm and, feeling extremely tired, we put up our tent and collapsed into our sleeping-bags. Again the weather deteriorated and the night brought very strong winds and more snow.

2 June was cold, windy and miserable, but the weather was supposed to improve, so we sat and rested and hoped. On the morning of the 3rd we woke late at 9am to find calm weather and sunny skies. We had a leisurely breakfast, and then there suddenly seemed nothing else for it but to set off for the summit. It was very cold on the traverse of the shaded slopes up to Denali Pass at 5500m, and we feared that our summit attempt had ended when I had to stop to rewarm seriously cold feet. However, after some brisk rubbing and a change of socks we were able to continue. Progress was steady over moderate slopes until we reached about 5800m, but from then onwards the altitude began to feel like a physical barrier. Our footsteps were weighted and slow, and soon our range of vision had narrowed to just the few feet in front of us. The last few hundred feet up a suddenly steeper slope and along the summit ridge felt like being on a treadmill – the summit was in view, but never seemed to get any closer. Finally, at about 7pm, we reached the top. The last 300m of climbing had been extremely trying, and the arrival on the summit was an emotional moment. We hugged each other and stood together for a while, feeling a great weight being lifted from our limbs as we rested. Except for one other person just ahead of us, we were alone; the weather was calm and clear; and, incredibly, we felt properly warm for the first time that day. Soon we had recovered enough to become fully aware of our surroundings, and we were infused with an enormous sense of well-being and contentment. Beyond us in all directions stretched row after row of mountains, tinted blue and pink; beyond them again lay the tundra, a deep brown, with small lakes glistening silver in the reflected light; and above it all stretched a sky of palest blue and green. We stayed on the summit for nearly an hour, and it was with the greatest reluctance that we turned to make the descent. We paused often to sit and talk and to take in the changing view, and we made good time back to camp at 5200m.

The following day we descended to 4300m in the morning. Again it was one of those exceptional days, and the spell of the previous day seemed stronger than ever. We lingered on the ridge between 5200 and 4900m taking photographs, stopped at viewpoints at 4300m and did not continue on to our dump at 3400m until the afternoon. We had heard stories from parties passing us on their way up about a big avalanche at the 3400m camp in which many people had lost equipment. However, nothing had quite prepared us for the sight of a deep fracture-line which extended along more than 1km of ridge above the camp. Had it not been for the very large bergschrund at the bottom of the slope, the whole camp and all its occupants would have been engulfed. Freshly fallen snow had buried our skis to within a foot of their tips, and a long



92. *Mt McKinley seen from the SW.* (p 201)



93. *Looking down the Kahiltna glacier from Mt McKinley. Mt Hunter L, Mt Foraker R.* (p 201)

session of digging was required before we could reload our sleds and ski off down to a safer haven. Tiredness and frustration from falling over under our heavy loads finally led us to stop at 2700m for the night. A final morning's effort saw us reach our cache at 2200m on 5 June. We were both starving and spent the next four days luxuriating in good food and lots of sleep and rest.

It was not long, though, before we felt that we were squandering our time and began to cast about for another peak to climb. A small 'peaklet' (Pt 2800m, a satellite of Kahiltna Dome) across the glacier from our camp seemed to offer just what we were looking for: 400m of nice-looking technical climbing on a 50°+ ice and mixed face. We called it *Kahiltna Gnome*. We set off at about midnight on 8 June and skinned across to the foot of the route on crisp snow. We made good progress, moving together on the face up to two pitches beneath the summit. Here the snow was deep 55° windslab, deposited beneath the cornice. We tiptoed across to a firmer rib of snow which led through the cornice, unable to relax even as we moved on to the rounded summit, as the snow settled and creaked beneath our feet. We decided that it was an unhealthy place in which to linger and made for the mixed SE ridge for our descent. This was straightforward and gave wonderful views of the peaks further down the glacier, turning pink and blue in the morning sun. At 6am we were back in our sleeping-bags, happy with a good night's work.

After a further night's rest we decided on another attempt on McKinley by the NW ridge. We left camp at 10.30pm on 10 June and skinned up to beneath Kahiltna Pass. Leaving our skis at 3000m, we continued on foot. The snow was more consolidated, but now we had to contend with a breakable crust. It was a struggle to get to the top of the pass, with sacks containing eight days' food and with every other step collapsing beneath us. The view into the Peters Basin and on to the snow-laden NW ridge was extremely disappointing. The weather was deteriorating again, and we could only see the upper 150m of the slopes descending to the glacier below. The visible ground was littered with serac debris and loaded with windslab. Again a tactical retreat was agreed and we slogged back to camp in a whiteout, arriving at 8.30am. We later learnt that a party of Italians was avalanched, luckily without serious injury, descending near this point.

By this stage we were getting fairly tired of carrying heavy loads up and down the glacier to little effect, but with time running short we decided to make one last attempt on McKinley. Two days later, on 13 June, we set off at 10.30pm, this time up the NE fork of the Kahiltna glacier towards the Cassin ridge. The NE fork has a somewhat fearsome reputation for danger and, although there was no debris on the trail, the size of the seracs which line this narrow passage is such that, if something big were to come down, one would not want to be there to see it! We skinned, and later walked, on up to the head of the glacier without incident, hoping that the worst was over, but in fact the most appalling line of seracs was sitting above the final part of the trail which we needed to follow to reach a safe camp-site. It was already 6.30am and the sun was beginning to touch the upper slopes, so it was with heart in mouth that we practically ran to the safety of a point under a rock-wall near Kahiltna Notch (3650m). By 8am a great spectacle had begun: enormous avalanches exploded

across the glacier from the serac-band above. We spent the day resting in our tent, trying to find relief from the oppressive heat. The next day (15 June) the altimeter showed a large drop in pressure and the weather was deteriorating, with light snow falling. Suddenly it seemed a good time to be going home and, happy to be leaving that oppressive place, we raced back down to our base at 2200m to pack up our equipment.

The weather continued to deteriorate and we continued in heavy snowfall on to the landing strip in the E fork of the Kahiltna glacier to wait for a flight out. A mass exodus seemed to be under way, with a party of 14 Spaniards in front of us, and four or five parties in front of them. It was a rude shock to be suddenly surrounded by so many very vocal people, and we ruefully recalled the solitude of the Kahiltna glacier. Our trip was over and, although we had not achieved our initial objective, we had enjoyed a successful and immensely satisfying time. For us the two days above 5200m on Mt McKinley had had all the essential elements which make mountaineering worthwhile.

Conditions seemed to preclude any chance of flying out for a couple of days but, incredibly, late the next morning small aircraft were appearing beneath the cloud-base to land with a roar outside our tent. With the long queue of people in front of us, it was not until 5pm that we lifted off from the glacier. The flight out was spectacular – spring had taken hold and the landscape was clothed in a forest of fresh green, with great areas of golden marshland holding small lakes coloured deep blue.

Talkeetna was bathed in sunshine and our heavy mountain clothing was shed without delay – it was such delight to walk barefoot on the grass.