

## Aniakchak River Trip

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The following observations were made during a private trip down the Aniakchak river. I've included comments regarding what worked well and what might have worked better.

### Trip Logistics

1. Flight information - we contracted with 2 separate companies for the trip. PenAir would not pick us up at the Aniakchak River, but wanted us to paddle 8 miles down (south) the coastline to a better landing spot. We did not have the time, much less the inclination, to paddle down the coast and did not have good information as to paddling conditions so we chose to contract with Windy's Mag Air Service out of Naknek for the return flight.

Our outgoing flight from King Salmon was with PenAir, in their Widgeon. This aircraft comfortably handled raft, all gear and four people. Orin flew us into the Caldera and we landed on Surprise Lake. We had to wait two and a half days for suitable weather but PenAir's information about the area seemed reliable and they would not take off unless they were sure to get us into the Caldera. We flew through very marginal conditions and low clouds but we got into the Caldera as promised, despite the crack in the Widgeon's windshield and the torrential rain (in the cockpit).

Our return flight with Windy was scheduled for two 185's on wheels to pick us up on the beach in front of the Alaska Packers Cabin in Aniakchak Bay. These aircraft also worked well for all gear and people concerned. They had to land at low tide and this left a very small window for the weather and the tides to both be acceptable for flying and landing conditions. They had a 2 hour margin around the mean low tide to land; incredibly, they arrived only 2 hours and 40 minutes after mean low tide and were able to pick us up as scheduled.

Because of the lack of hangar space in King Salmon, the 185's usually land in Naknek. We talked them into landing in King Salmon because we could unload at the Park Service/Fish and Wildlife hangar. Our pilots from Mag Air were Windy and JC Hooter.

2. Rafting Gear: We used a 12 foot, self-bailing Sotar raft

with a crew of four paddlers. This worked extremely well, a larger raft would have been too big for the river. The self-bailing feature was great, but not necessary. We had a total of six paddles, which gave us two extra. The river did manage to grab one so the extra spare was good insurance.

A similar sized raft with a rowing frame could also do the trip, as well as kayaks, with raft support.

Because we were a single raft, we were especially concerned with the reports of razor sharp rocks and bears puncturing holes so we took a lot of repair material. It remained unused.

Because of the remoteness of the area we also had a large first aid kit. This also remained unused. One of the trip members was an emergency room doctor.

We took two bear resistant food containers to secure our food. This did not accommodate all our food for the trip but did give us an emergency supply. Although we did not have any problems with bears, I'd recommend trying to secure all food to avoid problems and being caught in short supply.

We also had the usual assortment of throw bags, carabiners and rescue ropes and class III life vests were worn, all standard river gear.

Clothing was a critical item for this trip. The weather lived up to all reports and provided 4 days of wind, rain and low temperatures. Crew members varied in dress from dry suits to Helly Hansens and the dry suits definitely seemed to be the clothing of choice. Constant wind and rain was the rule and hypothermia was a factor; we calculated a wind chill of 19 degrees F one afternoon. Wool hats, gloves, sweaters and socks were also necessary. Standard backcountry precautions such as warm fluids and high energy food also helped.

No weapons were carried for protection against bears. We did have a canister of Counter Assault but it was unnecessary. Bears were plentiful but easily deterred when encountered. Most hiking was in tundra and noise combined with long sight distances avoided all problems.

3. Scheduling: We scheduled the trip as a 4 day float with whatever time we had left, due to weather delays, for hiking. Reports vary as to the actual length of the river, from 27 to 42 miles. USGS maps, we found, were fairly inaccurate, especially on the lower reaches of the river. Our schedule ended up as the following:

day 1 - fly King Salmon to Caldera at 1400  
arrive Caldera approximately 1500  
set up camp, explore rest of day  
day 2 - hike in Caldera

day 3 - hike in Caldera until 1500  
           launch on lake and paddle to river 1530  
           run 5 miles of river 1930  
           find a place and make camp, eat and explore rest of day  
 day 4 - hike side valley until 1530  
           run 5 miles of river until 1930  
           camp  
 day 5 - run river about 8 hours (stopped to fish once)  
 day 6 - fish  
           paddle river about 6 to 8 hours to reach cabin  
           de-rig gear and explore  
 day 7 - fly from Aniakchak Bay to King Salmon 0940

Four days were pretty reasonable for the length of river and the amount of water that we had. I would (in a perfect world) schedule at least 3 or 4 days for exploring the Caldera and another 3 or 4 for Aniakchak Bay.

Camping spots were a little scarce along the river corridor, especially in the upper stretches because of dense vegetation. Our first two camping spots were recommended by local pilots who had seen river parties camping in these areas before. The lower stretches contained sandbars and flat benches that were more amenable for camping.

### River Conditions

Although earlier reports of running the river were daunting, we had very little problems with the technical aspect of the trip.

Earlier rafters reported razor sharp rocks. We found some rocks that it was wise to avoid, but most rocks in the river were rounded and moss covered.

Earlier reports indicate rapids as difficult as Class V, we found nothing above a Class III. This may have been due to water level which we estimated at 600 to 900 cfs. The hardest rapids which were in the first two miles were of a technical nature, a lot of rock dodging as opposed to big water. The rest of the rapids were very straight forward runs, with some drops of 6 feet or so.

USGS maps were inaccurate, as stated earlier, and actual trip length is unknown. The last five miles of the river that lead to the coast appear rather straight on the map and we found the river to contain many considerable meanders, which added at least five miles to the trip. I would estimate the river length to be closer to 42 miles than 27.

My estimated river log is as follows:

mile 0-2 - continuous rapids, Class III, technical, large boulders, this is the run through 'the Gates' and it is recommended to scout although it is pretty apparent

- where you have to go. We scouted briefly. This is where we took on the most water and lost a paddle while fending off a rock, total run time was about 8 minutes.
- mile 2-7 - continuous chop, a stretch of constricted river with some pretty large side laterals, more chop, then a run of 2 or 3 large drops (about 6 feet or more) but very straight forward runs, Class IIIs.
- mile 7 - good benches on river left for camping
- mile 9 - Hidden Creek. Last set of large rapids. People had trouble here in the past. We stopped to fish. Doesn't hurt to scout here, trail above river on river right.
- mile 18 - end of the chop and into the flat water. Last 10 miles are slow meander and could be a real grunt if windy. River widens out, a lot of walking and pulling in the last 2 miles.

The roughest part of the whole trip was making the turn out of the river into Aniakchak Bay and then traversing the bay over to the cabin. We arrived at the mouth of the river on an out-going tide, which helped pull us down the last mile or so of river, but then wanted to keep pulling us out into the bay. The out-going tide was compounded by a fierce storm with large breaking waves that made traversing the bay extremely difficult.

## Hiking

Hiking during the trip was highly variable depending on location. Hiking ranged from superb in the Caldera to nightmare alder bashing along drainages.

We spent the better part of two days hiking in the Caldera and it was time well spent. Hiking was relatively easy and a good portion of the Caldera could be traversed. I went to four different sites in the Caldera and could have spent even more time exploring there.

I climbed the Vent Cone, one of the major landmarks in the Caldera. The cone rises 2,000 feet from the Caldera floor and ends in a precipitous knife edge ridge encircling its own crater. Climbing was moderately tough because of the loose, crumbly rock near the top. The crater was still filled with snow. Views of the entire Caldera could be obtained, and my trip companions also saw the Pacific and the Bering Sea as the clouds lifted when they summited later in the afternoon.

The 1931 eruption site (T38S, R56W, sec. 8 and 9) is an easy 4 mile stroll across flat, barren ash fields from Surprise Lake. We climbed down into the site and found a stark contrast in vegetation from outside the rim. Inside, thick moss and lichen grow over the jumbled rocks. Outside, the ash fields remain harshly barren.

I also hiked to Birthday Pass on the southwest side of the Caldera. This low pass, roughly opposite 'the gates', is the only other way into the Caldera, without going right over the rim. This pass also afforded views out to the west and southwest. The pass seemed to be a gateway for wildlife passing into or through the Caldera as evidenced by a myriad of tracks (bear, wolf, caribou) running through it.

Finally, I hiked up the east rim and looked down the other side. Not all areas of the rim were accessible but many parts were easily attained. Evidence of bear was just about everywhere.

Once we left the Caldera we only hiked one valley along the river. This was Lava Creek and after some initial alder bashing to get away from the river, we found fine tundra hiking through a large u-shaped valley. The valley is a watershed draining away from the Aniakchak River to the north. Bear trails were found through out the river corridor but Lava Creek had an especially interesting network that criss-crossed the valley, radiating out from a central rock promontory.

Once we got to the coast, our explorations remained by the shore although the surrounding hills looked quite interesting. Lack of time curtailed some exploration here also, but the beaches were great.

### Impacts

Little evidence of human use was found throughout the trip. All people encountered were in the Caldera (two park service employees and a private trip of three). Only one piece of trash was found on the river (a full beer can). Some human tracks were found on a few sandbars but no major campsites had developed from what we found. We were advised by locals around King Salmon of good camping spots and stayed at two but did not see any noticeable impacts.

The largest impact was from the USGS/NPS camp in the Caldera where significant vegetation trampling had occurred in Cove 3 on the west side of Surprise Lake.

Aircraft tracks were found around the Caldera and down by the coast. Helicopter tracks were found at several sites in the Caldera (1931 eruption site, Birthday Pass). Wheeled airplane tracks were evident on sandbars at the mouth of the Aniakchak River and in front of the Alaska Packers Cabin. More garbage was found near the wheel tracks but it is unclear if it was left by the plane's occupants or if it washed ashore. One Pepsi can had bear canine puncture holes in it. I observed a wheeled plane land on an ash field in the Caldera (T38S, R55W, sec. 7) near the outlet of Surprise Lake.

The private party of three had hiked in from the coast and were

retracing Father Hubbard's footsteps from his accounts of his explorations. The party of three were from Germany (one currently living in Oregon) and planned to canoe (in an inflatable) back down the Aniakchak River.

## Resource Observations

1. Cultural artifacts - Two small pieces of questionable archeological value were found in the Caldera itself. Cove One on Surprise Lake had remnants of weathered lumber from an earlier camp, possibly from a tent frame setup. A small piece of copper, approximately 3x3mm, was found in the 1931 eruption site. The copper was highly corroded.

The Alaska Packers Association Cabin on Aniakchak Bay provided shelter for our rafting party for one night. The cabin appeared in good shape since Biotechs Hasselbach and Trapp had been there. The party of Germans that we met in the Caldera had stayed there and were planning to return. The cabin was greatly appreciated by all members of our rafting party as it was a great place to stay after several days of wind whipped rain, exacerbated by a fierce storm that blew in the night we got to the cabin. I'd highly recommend keeping the cabin open as a public use cabin.

2. Wildlife - Wildlife and birds were observed in three different geographical areas.

### a. Caldera:

- Ursus arctos (brown bear) track
- Vulpes vulpes (red fox)
- Rangifer tarandus (caribou)
- Spermophilus parryii (arctic ground squirrel)
- Canis lupis (gray wolf) track
- Canis latrans (coyote) ??

- Corvus corax (common raven)
- Charadrius semipalmatus (semipalmated plover)
- Leucosticte arctoa (rosy finch)
- Plectrophenax nivalis (snow bunting)

### b. River Corridor:

- Ursus arctos (brown bear)
- Rangifer tarandus (caribou)

- Histrionicus histrionicus (harlequin ducks)
- Mergus merganser (common merganser)
- Haliaeetus leucocephalus (bald eagle)
- Tringa melanoleuca (greater yellowlegs)

- Oncorhynchus gorbuscha (pink salmon)
- Oncorhynchus nerka (sockeye salmon)
- Oncorhynchus keta (chum salmon)

c. Coast:

Ursus arctos (brown bear)  
Phoca vitulina (harbor seal)

Larus glaucescens (glaucous-winged gull)

Oncorhynchus gorbuscha (pink salmon)

A Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) nest with one apparently unfledged young was observed in the river canyon (see map). Two adults were flying around the nest while the young bird sat on the edge of the nest which was located on a rock promontory.

Harlequin ducks (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) were sighted in several places along the river. Four females, two females with broods and a male were seen. Please see the enclosed map for location specifics. The two broods were in choppy whitewater sections of river. They were easily disturbed by our raft. Disturbance consisted of the female and brood flushing from grass overhangs near the bank and traveling downstream. The female would fly, following the river corridor and the chicks would swim furiously after her. Disturbance was avoided by pulling the raft to the far bank and quickly floating past the family group.

#### Recommendations

The Aniakchak River is a unique recreational opportunity because of its geographical qualities (it isn't often you can float a river from a volcano to the sea) and because of its isolation and remoteness.

I do not recommend advertising this river in any way. It is not for the novice backcountry user. Whitewater, extreme weather and a remote location all add the ingredients of disaster to the unexperienced.

In 1988 Surprise Lake was part of a water quality monitoring project. I would recommend the Surprise Lake/Aniakchak River watershed be included in any additional water quality monitoring work that Katmai National Park does as it is a unique and valuable resource.

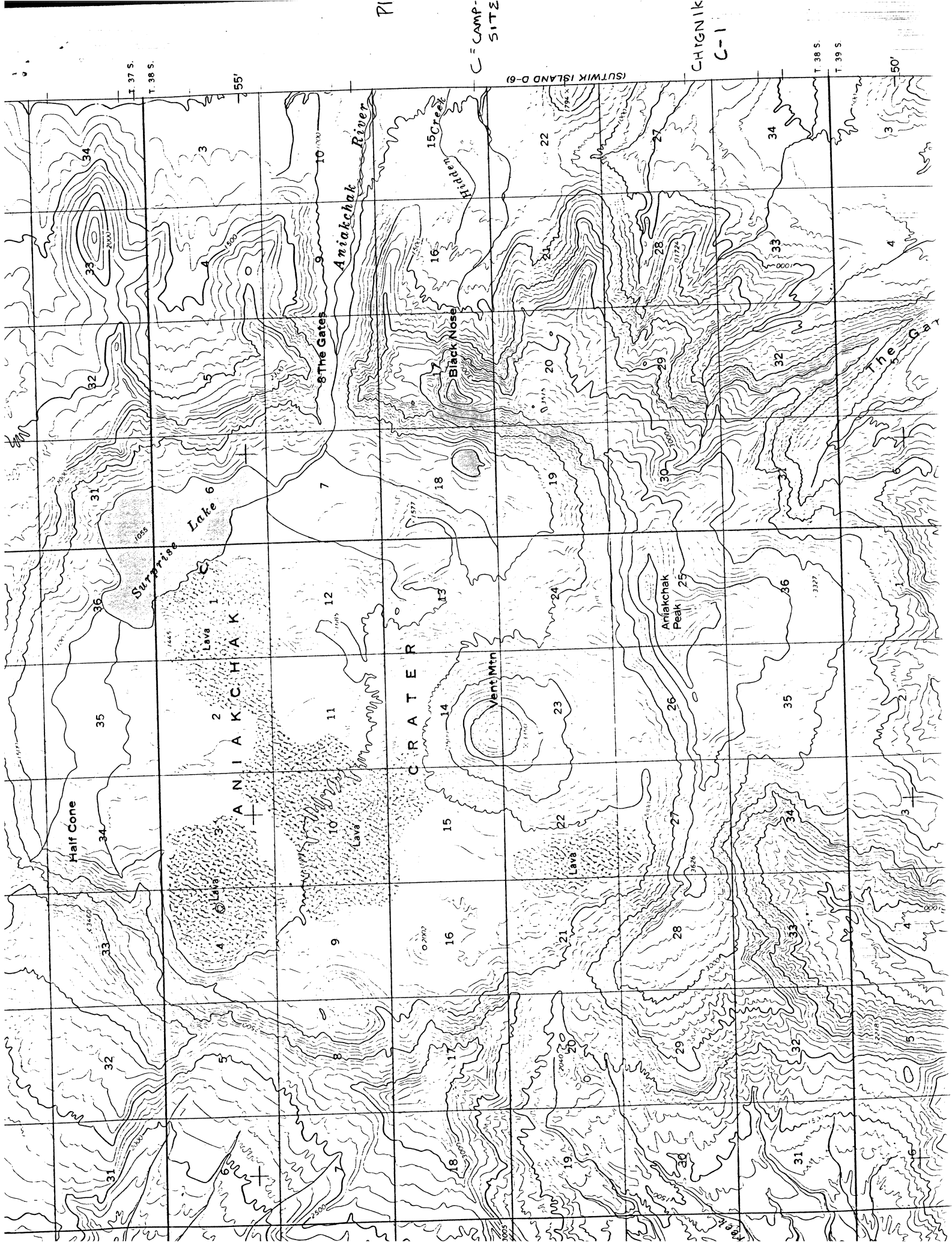
Average stream flow rates should be taken as often as possible so that park staff has information to give potential rafters. River conditions and water levels are the most important information a rafter can have. Fluctuations in water levels and (if possible to obtain) their subsequent effects on the river would be extremely valuable information.

Aerial and river patrols by law enforcement staff would provide protection to the resource and additional knowledge of river conditions and visitor use.

Monitoring of the resource should also be done by resource management staff. Assessment of campsite impacts and visitor use of the area should be begun. Censuses of sensitive species, such as Harlequin ducks should be kept to track human impacts.

Finally, I would encourage the accumulation of as much information as possible about this region, as it would only further its protection. But I advise caution in its dissemination. Part of the mystery and allure of the Aniakchak River is the appeal of the unknown.





P1

C = CAMP-SITE

CHIGNIK  
C-1

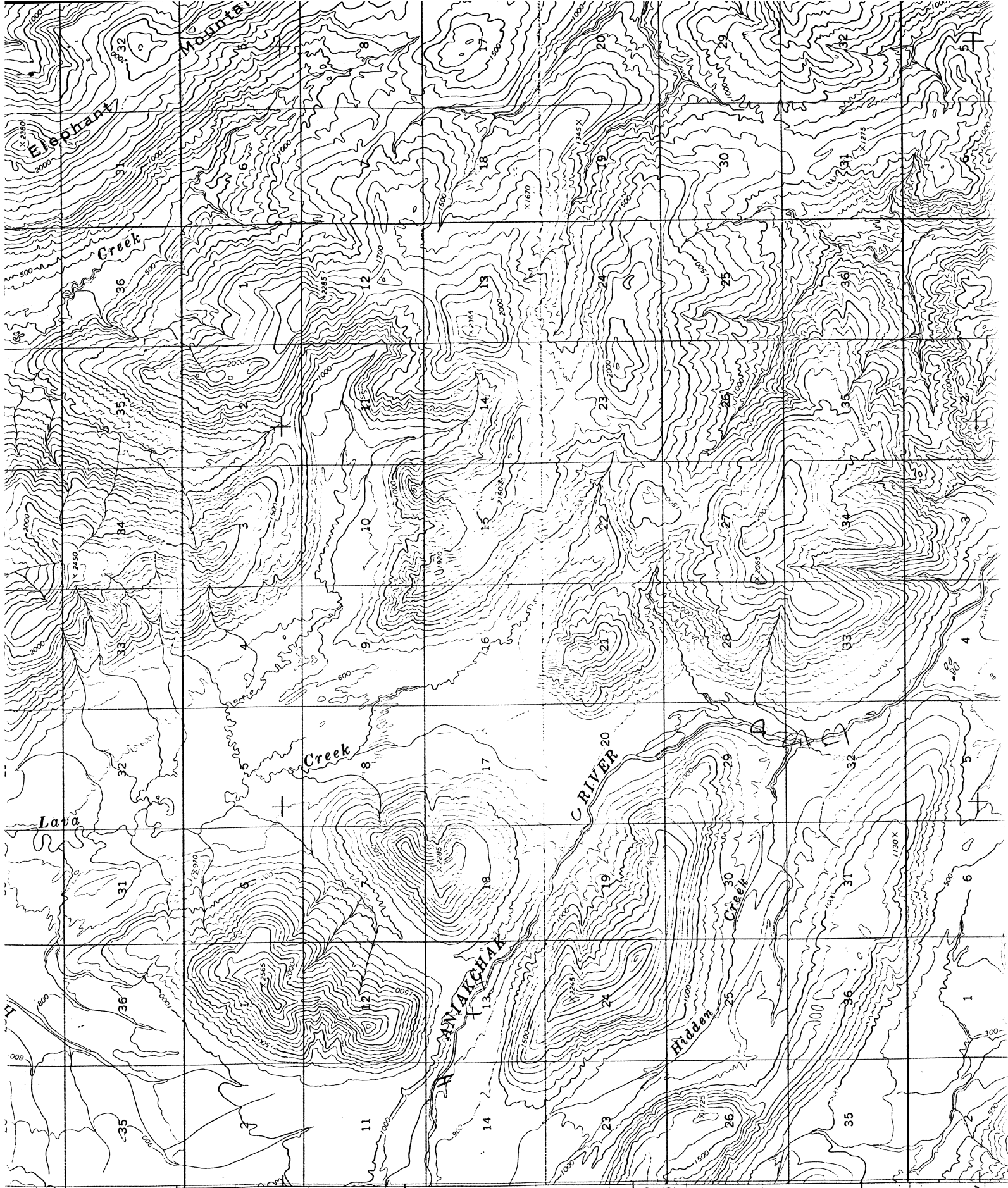
ISUTWIK ISLAND D-6

T 37 S

T 38 S

T 39 S

50'



T. 37 S.

T. 38 S.

55°

= CHOM SALMON

= HARLEQUIN DUCK w/ BROOD

= ♀ HARLEQUIN

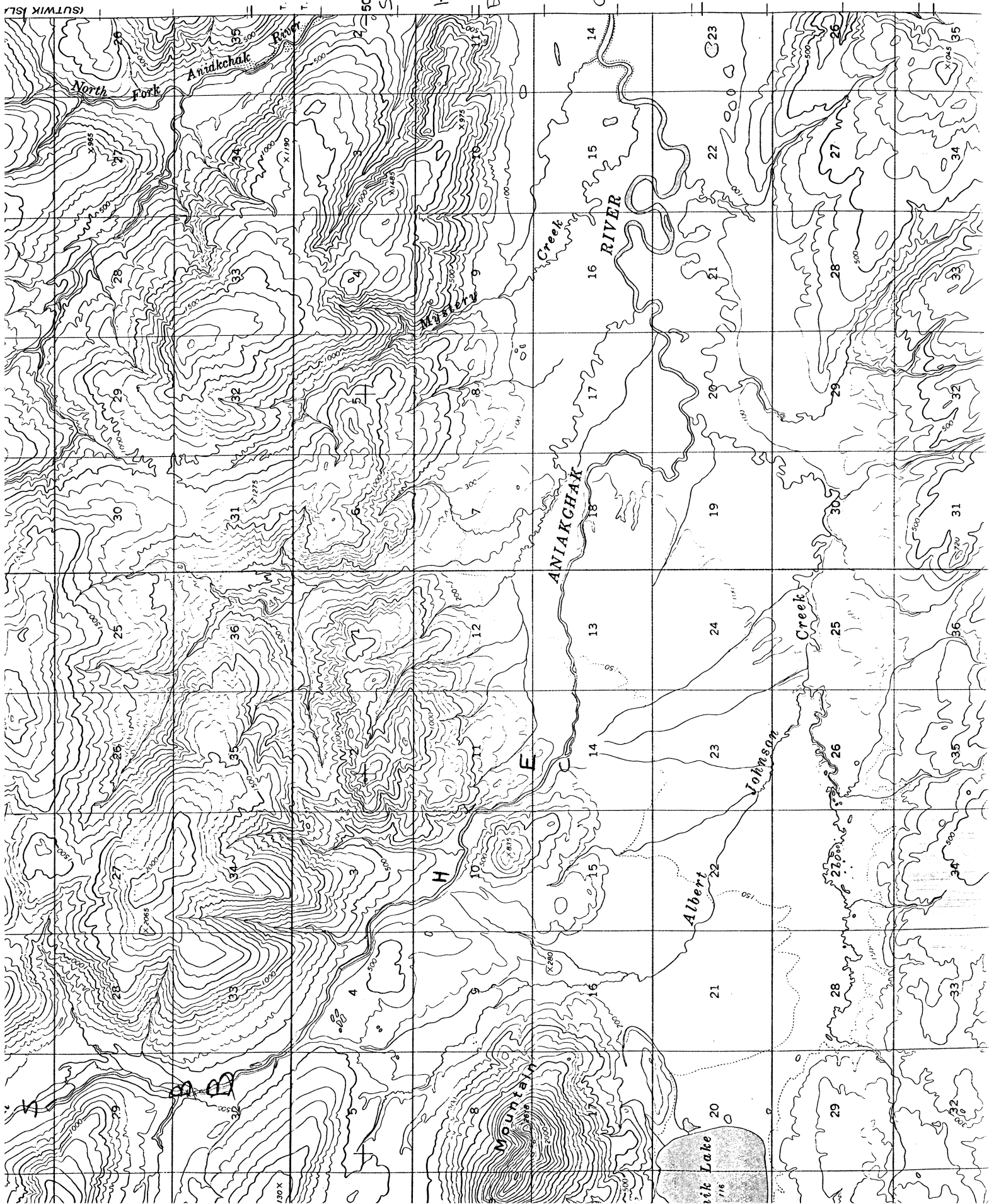
= CAMPSITE

SUTWICK ISLAND  
D-6

T. 38 S.

T. 39 S.

50°



SUTWIK ISL

T. 38 S.  
T. 39 S.

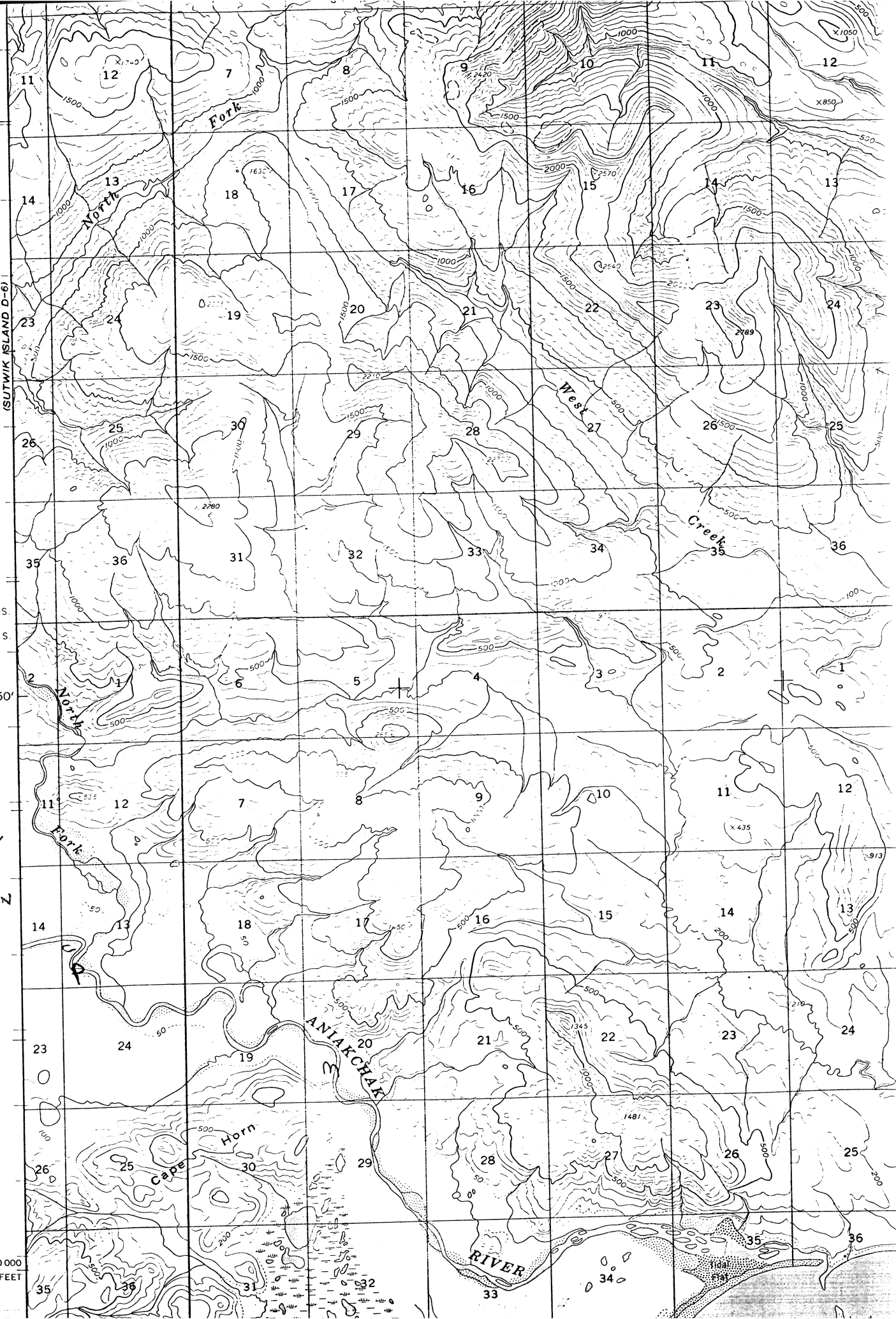
S = SOCKEYE  
SALMON

H = ♀ HALLIB-  
QUIN

E = BALD.  
EAGLE  
NEST W/  
UNFLEDGED  
YOUNG

C = CAMPSITE

SUTWICK  
ISLAND  
D-6



(SUTWICK ISLAND D-6)

T. 38 S.  
T. 39 S.

50'

P = PINK SALMON  
C = CAMPSITE  
M = MALE HARLEQUIN

SUTWICK ISLAND  
D-5

1010000  
FEET