

Kuskulana & Gilahina

General Description

Management unit number 27 is defined by the area around the road crossing of the Kuskulana River to the west and the Gilahina River to the east. Both of these places are of major significance with respect to scenic resources along the McCarthy Road. The Kuskulana crossing, developed for railroad use, is a one lane bridge over a spectacular 300 foot river gorge. This single lane steel span bridge is an important visual remnant of the old Copper River and Northwestern Railroad days and is a particularly memorable and unique driving experience. The Gilahina River area is equally significant because it contains the last major remnants of the old railroad trestles which were used to maintain grade over the numerous rivers and creeks along the route. This structure is visually impressive and, from an engineering perspective is extremely interesting in that it



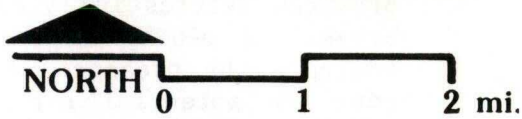
The Gilahina trestle, viewed from the small parking area near the road crossing of the Gilahina River. This is an important visual and historical landmark which needs restorative work.

is a super-curved, all wood structure reportedly constructed in six weeks. Between these two places there are a number of other sites of particular visual significance - most importantly Chakitna Slough and Chokosna Lake.

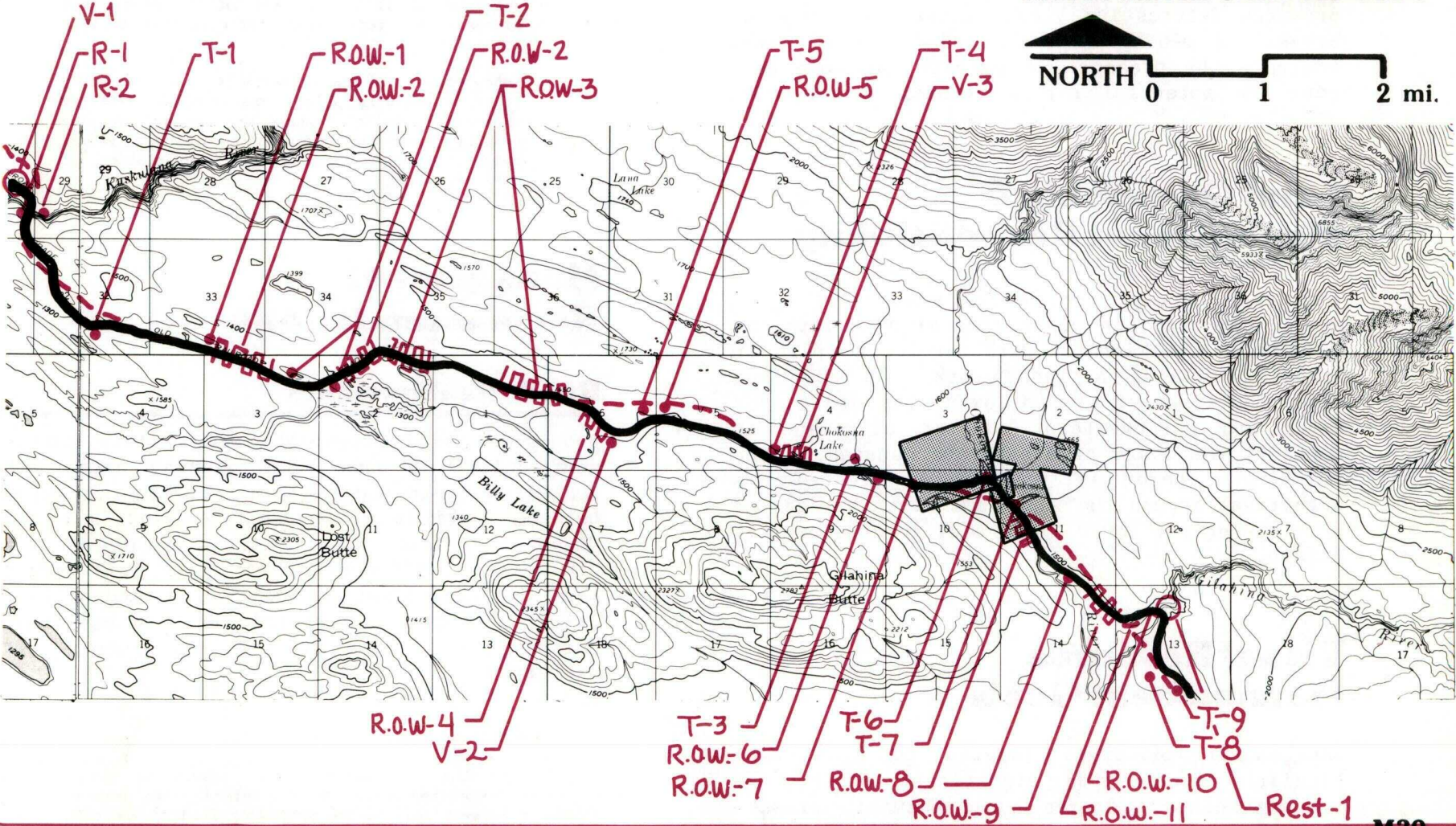
Scenic resource values for this management unit are very high. Views across the numerous sloughs, picturesque lakes and some man-made openings provide interesting panoramas of the Chugach Mountains to the south and west, the Wrangell mountains, including Mt. Blackburn, to the north, and the broad Copper River lowlands to the northwest. Coupled with this is the fact

27 Kuskulana & Gilahina

Assessment Units M9-M14



- R- Reclamation
- V- View Management
- Rest- Rest Area
- ROW- Right of Way Mgt.
- T- Turnout
- D.O.T.P.F. Realignment Proposals (1973)
- Federal Land
- Private Land



that most of the road alignment winds pleasingly through the level to gently rolling topography, offering an ever changing point-of-view to the traveler.

Current Land development is only visible around the area known as Chokosna. Here one homestead provides interesting views across open, cleared areas. A nearby airstrip and for sale signs indicate the presence of private land and suggest the potential for additional development.

Land Ownership & Management Responsibility

This area, except for approximately 700 acres around Chokosna, is under federal ownership and managed by the National Park Service as part of Wrangell-St.Elias National Park. A 200 foot wide road right-of way following the old Copper River and Northwestern Railroad alignment is owned by the State of Alaska and managed by the DOTPF. There is, also, a right-of-way withdrawal around the Kuskulana River bridge and a hydroelectric power withdrawal just below this bridge.

Visual Resource Management Goals

Management objectives related to this particularly scenic and significant stretch of roadway relate to three broad themes: preservation, restoration, and enhancement.

Preservation: To preserve those elements which make this portion of the McCarthy Road a distinctive and memorable recreational driving experience.

Restoration: To reclaim those areas which have been severely disturbed due to road construction and maintenance and to restore those features or structures which have significantly deteriorated yet play an important role in the scenic and historic resource values characteristic to this landscape.

Enhancement: To employ suitable landscape modification measures which reinforce the existing experiences while opening up new and complementary ones that provide a stronger visual awareness, understanding and appreciation of this landscape.

Management Recommendations

Road Realignments

Proposed road realignments within this management unit fall into four general areas: the Kuskulana River crossing, elimination of curves between Chakitna Slough and Chokosna Lake, the Chokosna by-pass, and the crossing of the Gilahina River. After study of these 1973 Department of Transportation realignment proposals it is clear that from a scenic resource management perspective the existing alignments are preferred.

● Kuskulana River

Here the realignment would result in long, straight approaches to the bridge. The present alignment follows the slopes, providing a series of changing views of the bridge itself which

create a dramatic sense of anticipation for crossing the river. Within this alignment a nice series of small turnouts are possible to take advantage of these views. The proposed realignment would completely eliminate this experience. In addition, it is recommended that as long as recreation remains as the primary use of this area that the one lane bridge not be upgraded to a two lane bridge through the addition of a concrete deck.

● **Chakitna Slough to Chokosna Lake**

This proposed realignment would eliminate a series of short radius curves along the road and replace them with large radius curves and long, straight tangents. The existing alignment provides an interesting and continually changing visual experience which would become somewhat monotonous following the proposed alignments.

● **Chokosna By-pass**

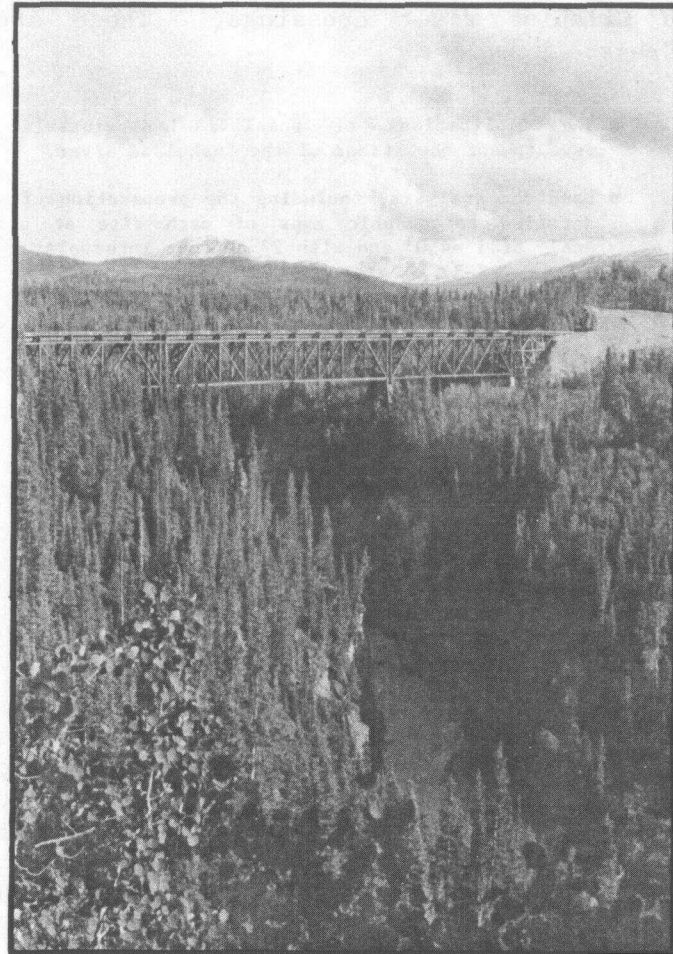
This realignment would bypass the existing bridge and the limited development around Chokosna. The primary reason stated for this realignment was to move the road away from the airstrip west of Chokosna. This airstrip clearing opens up the view and adds visual interest. Its proximity to the road is a real opportunity rather than a problem. Additionally, the potential land development around the Chokosna River crossing could significantly add to the visual interest of the area if set back properly from the road.

The proposed realignment continues east for some distance north of the Chokosna River and the present road. The very pleasing views out across the small Chokosna River valley would be lost if the new alignment were followed.

● **Gilahina Crossing**

This realignment proposal would replace the existing road which winds down to the Gilahina River with a straight alignment running directly across the valley. Such a route would require considerable cutting and filling and would be a visually dominant feature on the landscape. It would also eliminate the striking views of the Gilahina River railroad trestle and would

make this area nothing more than a separate turnout rather than an integral and significant part of the driving experience.



The Kuskulana bridge as viewed from the approach from the west. This existing approach offers dramatic views of the steel span structure and instills a strong sense of anticipation on the part of the traveler.

Additional Study Areas

More detailed site specific study and analysis needs to be conducted around both the Kuskulana and Gilahina river crossings. These should address:

- The implications of possible hydroelectric development downstream of the Kuskulana River.
- Landform analysis, including the preparation of detailed topographic maps of each site at a scale of 1"=400' and with 2' contour intervals.
- Historic information, with photographs, regarding the construction and maintenance of the bridges, trestles and the operation of the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad through this area.
- Material site locations, conditions and plans for future use.
- Soil stability conditions.
- Water quality and availability for human use, particularly at the Gilahina River area.
- Microclimatic variations.
- Natural history of the area.

These two places are presently, and should continue to be, focuses for travelers on this road. The information requirements outlined above are essential in order to plan for the use, appreciation and preservation of these resources.

Gilahina Railroad Trestle Restoration

The Gilahina trestle is, at the moment, the only highly visible feature recalling the former use

of the road alignment by the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad. Few other railroad buildings, partial trestles, grades and embankments can still be seen by the careful observer. Additionally, it is a highly sculptural structure and visually striking as it is viewed from numerous distances and vantage points. It would indeed be a significant loss if it were no longer there. Therefore it is recommended that the restoration of this trestle be given immediate and highest priority. Today it is deteriorating rapidly and it will not be long before it might be completely lost.

Restoration may include dismantling and replacing rotted components or preserving old and new wood. Its future use and character, either as a purely visual element or as a structure to be used by pedestrians, also needs to be determined. Since this structure is already on the National Historic Register, special funding may be available to initiate this task. As already mentioned, ownership and management responsibility of the trestle needs clarification.

Greenbelts

Since all but a small portion of this management unit is under federal ownership and National Park Service management no greenbelt designations are necessary except for the area around Chokosna. Here it is recommended that a 25' greenbelt beyond the road right-of-way be adopted by local landowners to help buffer them from the road and to retain the natural character. Within this area, no land clearing or structures should be allowed. Some clearing could be done if it conforms with visual

resource management goals such as opening up distant views across meadows, airstrips and other clearings.

Land Use & Development

Because of ownership patterns, land development would only occur in the Chokosna area where private land presently exists. Development there, if set back from the road, could add visual diversity to the driving experience. Some limited commercial services would be welcomed by many visitors and travelers as the Park receives more use. However, special considerations need to be given to signs, setbacks, amount of land clearing, access roads and right-of-way management. It could be in the interest of the National Park Service and the State of Alaska to provide development tax breaks or financial incentives so that professional designers (architects, landscape architects etc.) are consulted by people interested in developing existing private land holdings, particularly for commercial or residential developments.

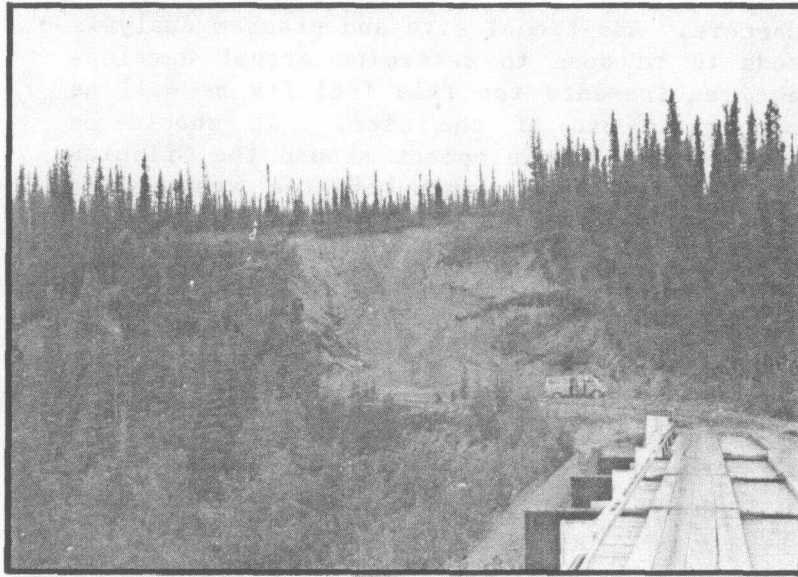
Other development may be initiated by the National Park Service, with a focus on the Kuskulana and Gilahina rivers. Minimum facilities development is recommended at the Kuskulana Bridge site, day-use facilities around the bridge and some overnight camping facilities at some of the material sites is all that is recommended. At the Gilahina, a rest area-interpretive center should be developed as a major use focus between Chitina and McCarthy. This could be the site of the park head-

quarters. Additional site and program analysis needs to be done to determine actual development requirements for this facility as well as appropriate use of the site. It should be noted that any development around the Gilahina River is contingent upon trestle restoration and stabilization. Without the trestle the site loses its scenic and recreational interest and would need to be re-evaluated as to its role and significance on the McCarthy road.

View Management (V)

The following recommendations outline ways that existing views and experiences might be preserved and some potential views opened up. Refer to the management unit map for the general location of each recommended action.

- V - 1 Retain the experience of brief and changing views of the Kuskulana River bridge while traveling east. This can best be accomplished by slight alterations of existing landforms and vegetation management to open, close and frame views. As mentioned below under turnouts, viewpoints should be developed where space permits.
- V - 2 The opportunity exists to open up brief but significant views of the Chugach Mountains while traveling east. This would require right-of-way clearing and some selective clearing beyond.
- V - 3 Retain this view sequence. While traveling west, brief glimpses of Chokosna Lake are possible which increase in duration until finally the entire lake is visible. Right-of-way management should preserve this experience through carefully controlling roadside vegetation along this stretch of roadway.



The Kuskulana bridge, shown here in the foreground, is one of the most notable features along the McCarthy Road. The areas at both ends of the bridge have been subject to extensive landscape disturbance, requiring reclamation measures.

Reclamation (R)

Landscape reclamation efforts within this management unit should focus on the following two sites around the Kuskuklana River crossing:

R - 1 Large roadcuts and unstable embankments at the north end of the Kuskulana River crossing need to be regraded and erosion control planting established. This area is highly visible. The landscape modifications are out of scale and result in significant contrasts of color and texture with the surrounding landforms and vegetation. This work should be considered a high priority since the crossing is an important focus. The site should be reclaimed as a

turnout permitting people to park and experience the area on foot.

R - 2 Roadcuts and gravel extraction sites at the south end of the Kuskulana River Bridge are also highly visible, requiring grading and revegetation to stabilize slopes and reduce visual impacts. This area should also be reclaimed as a day use turnout. Some landform modification and grading could open up better views of the bridge and river gorge. Interpretive signage could be included at both of these bridge crossing reclamation sites. It is recommended that actual work be begun only after a complete analysis of this area has been done and a long range master plan has been prepared and adopted.

Turnouts

Numerous small turnouts are necessary along the McCarthy Wild and Historic Road because of its narrow width and the few places to get out of moving traffic. The following recommended turnouts help to meet this need and are generally places with opportunities for pleasing views:

T - 1 Potential for turnout development on the south side of the road. There is a view over a long, narrow lake which could be opened up through foreground vegetation management. A small 1-2 car) turnout is suggested.

T - 2 Interpretive turnout at Chakitna Slough. Two small pull out areas for 2-3 cars to stop are recommended within the forested areas at each end of the slough. For travelers heading east, the turnout should be on the south side of the road at the east end of the slough. This allows people to drive through the entire slough area first, experience its beauty and then stop and return on foot for a closer look if desired. The existing road should not be widened. At the moment it is wide enough for two cars to pass and it is visually subordinate to the landscape. The existing width encourages people to drive slowly and discourages vehicular

parking within the open slough area itself. Invading willow and poplar vegetation along the road edge should be removed so as to make the slough area appear to come up to the edge of the road. Some interpretive signage may be developed at the two turnout sites beyond the slough.

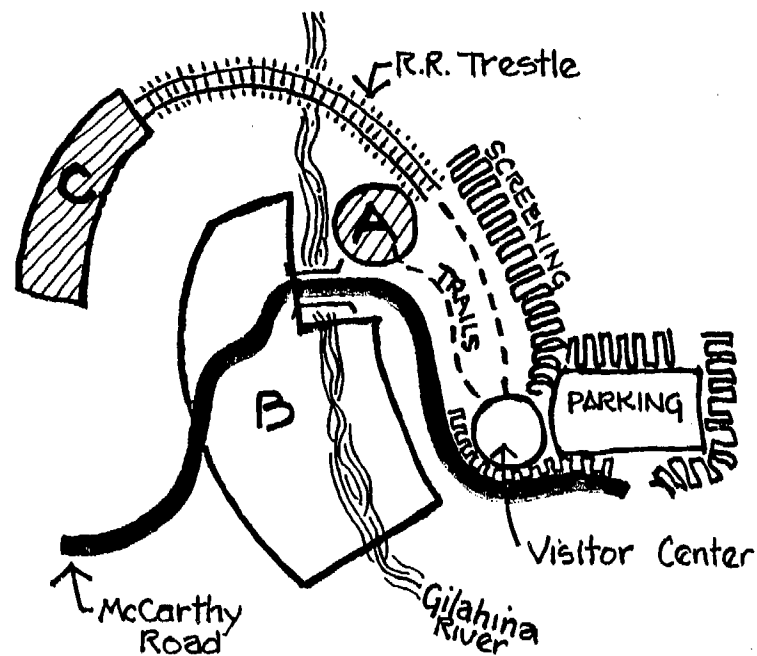
- T - 3 A small turnout (1-2 cars) is recommended on the south side of the road to permit stopping and viewing of waterfowl and the surrounding mountains. Development would require gravel fill over boggy soils.
- T - 4 Potential exists for a scenic turnout-day use area. This site provides excellent views across the lake towards the higher Wrangell Mountains (Mt. Blackburn). Entry and exit visibility is good and there appears to be enough higher ground to provide limited day use of the site (eg. picnicking, wildlife observation).
- T - 5 Turnout at existing materials site. This site is flat without significant views and amenities. However, it could be reclaimed, revegetated and used for periodic overnight use, as well as a turnaround. Trails to higher view-points are possible. Entry and exit visibility is not good since the site occurs on a hill and a curve.
- T - 6 Existing turnouts at Chokosna River bridge. No turnout development is recommended here. The river edges should be encouraged to revegetate and vehicular use of the banks should be discouraged since this site is very close to private land and much better sites exist nearby.
- T - 7 This site provides good views over the Chokosna River and includes the opportunity for a short trail along the former railroad grade to an overlook of a small creek and remnants of a small railroad trestle. Trails down to the Chokosna River itself could also be developed. Selective clearing and careful right-of-way vegetation management could open up views. Private land ownership adjacent to the site may limit turnout development here.
- T - 8 This small knoll covered by a nice aspen grove could be developed into a sunny, day use (picnic) site with views across the Chitina River valley. Some selective clearing is needed to

open up views. This site could be used in conjunction with the recommended rest area - visitor center at the Gilahina River.

- T - 9 This small existing turnout without good views, is recommended to be used for stopping and turning around only.

Rest Area (Rest)

A rest area-visitors center is recommended for the Gilahina River area (Rest-1). As already mentioned, this site need additional field study and definition of its functions with respect to



A schematic diagram of possible rest area development at the Gilahina River crossing. (See text on following page)

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park (eg. a headquarters site) and the status of the Gilahina River Railroad trestle. The following observations relate to some of the potentials of this site for redevelopment into a rest area-visitors center as well as an intensive use area on the McCarthy Wild and Historic Road.

- Area A: Day use with interpretive information. Facilities would include picnic tables, rest-rooms, information signage; trash receptacles and parking for up to ten vehicles. These facilities and uses are best accommodated at the existing intensively used area by the river.
- Overnight vehicle use could be accommodated along the river lowlands (Area B) and walk-in tent camping along the old railroad grade to the northwest (Area C).
- Park headquarters and visitor information center would best be located amongst the trees on a high point near the railroad grade. From this point trails to the day use area, trestle overlook and other viewpoints could be developed. Parking and access could be via the former railroad alignment where it meets the existing road alignment.

Right-of-Way Management (ROW)

Within the road right-of-way the following actions are recommended to help retain the wild and historic character of the road and maintain views and desired driving experiences:

- ROW-1 Opportunity to open views north to the Wrangell Mountains with selective removal of willows along the right-of-way.
- ROW-2 The dramatic visual impact of the Chakitna Slough, a large open area, is highly dependent upon the generally enclosed nature of the

approaches to it. Retain this enclosed "tunnel" feeling by allowing shrubs and trees to grow as close to the road as possible while still allowing for adequate visibility and safe vehicle passage.

- ROW-3 Clearing invading brush (willows and poplars) along the roadside could open up good lateral views and create a more "natural" appearing relationship of the road to the adjacent landscape.
- ROW-4 Open up filtered lateral views through selective right-of-way clearing.
- ROW-5 Large bare roadcuts need revegetation to soften visual impacts and stabilize slopes.
- L.W.-6 Selective clearing in this area could open up better views towards a small lake.
- ROW-7 Clear out invading willow and alder vegetation along roadside gravel edge.
- ROW-8 Selectively clear poplars along the side of the road next to a creek. This will open up nice lateral views towards the small Chokosna River valley.
- ROW-9 Lateral views in both directions could be opened up through selective clearing and thinning of right-of-way and more distant vegetation.
- ROW-10 Retain all roadside vegetation to frame views of the railroad trestle as travelers descend the hill.
- ROW-11 Careful selective clearing within the right-of-way could open up dramatic views across the Gilahina River valley for eastbound travelers and lateral views for travelers going west.

