Into The Wild (excerpt)
by Jon Krakauer

On April 25, 1992, ten days after leaving South Dakota, McCandless rode his thumb into Fairbanks. After perusing the classifieds ads, he bought a used Remington Nylon 66 – a semiautomatic .22-caliber rifle with a 4x20 scope and a plastic stock that was favored by Alaskan trappers for its light weight and reliability.

When James Gallien dropped McCandless off at the head of the Stampede Trail on April 28 the temperature was in the low thirties – it would drop into the low teens at night – and a foot of crusty spring snow covered the ground. As he trudged expectantly down the trail in a fake-fur parka, the heaviest item in McCandless’s half-full backpack was the library: nine or ten paperbacks ranging from Michael Crichton’s The Terminal Man to Thoreau’s Walden and Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Illyich. One of these volumes, Tanaina Plantlore, by Priscilla Russel Kari, was a scholarly, exhaustively researched field guide to edible plants in the region; it was in the back of this book that McCandless began keeping an abbreviated record of his journey.

From his journal we know that on April 29 McCandless fell through the ice – perhaps crossing the frozen surface of the Teklanika River, perhaps in the maze of broad, shallow beaver ponds that lie just beyond its western bank – although there is no indication that he suffered any injury. A day later he got his first glimpse of Denali’s gleaming white ramparts, and a day after that, about 20 miles down the trail from where he started, he stumbled upon the bus and decided to make it his base camp.

He was elated to be there. Inside the bus, on a sheet of weathered plywood spanning a broken window, McCandless scrawled an exultant declaration of independence:

Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, ’cause “the West is the best”. And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climatic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.

Alexander Supertramp
May 1992

But reality quickly intruded. McCandless had difficulty killing game, and the daily journal entries during his first week at the bus include "weakness", "snowed in", and "disaster". He
saw but did not shoot a grizzly on May 2, shot at but missed some ducks on May 4, and finally killed and ate a spruce grouse on May 5. But he didn’t kill any more game until May 9, when he bagged a single small squirrel, by which point he’d written “4th day famine” in the journal.

Soon thereafter McCandless’s fortunes took a sharp turn for the better. By mid-May the snow-pack was melting down to bare ground, exposing the previous season’s rose hips and lingonberries, preserved beneath the frost, which he gathered and ate. He also became much more successful at hunting and for the next six days feasted regularly on squirrel, spruce grouse, duck, goose, and porcupine. On May 22 he lost a crown from a tooth, but it didn’t seem to dampen his spirits much, because the following day he scrambled up the nameless 3,000-foot butte that rose directly north of the bus, giving him a view of the whole icy sweep of the Alaska Range and mile after mile of stunning, completely uninhabited country. His journal entry for the day is characteristically terse but unmistakably joyous: ”CLIMB MOUNTAIN!”

Although McCandless was enough of a realist to know that hunting was an unavoidable component of living off the land, he had always been ambivalent about killing animals. That ambivalence turned to regret on June 9, when he shot and killed a large caribou, which he mistakenly identified as a moose in his journal. For six days he toiled to preserve the meat, believing that it was morally indefensible to waste any part of an animal that has been killed for food. He butchered the carcass under a thick cloud of flies and mosquitoes, boiled the internal organs into a stew, and then laboriously dug a cave in the rocky earth in which he tried to preserve, by smoking, the huge amount of meat the he was unable to eat immediately. Despite his efforts, on June 14 his journal records, ”Maggots already! Smoking appears ineffective. Don’t know, looks like disaster. I now wish I had never shot the moose. One of the greatest tragedies of my life.”

Although he recriminated himself severely for this waste of a life he had taken, a day later McCandless appeared to regain some perspective – his journal notes, ”henceforth will learn to accept my errors, however great they be” – and the periods of contentment that began in mid-May resumed and continued until early July. Then, in the midst of this idyll, came the first of two pivotal setbacks.

Satisfied, apparently, with what he had accomplished during his two months of solitary existence, McCandless decided to return to civilization. It was time to bring his “final and greatest adventure” to a close and get himself back to the world of men and women, where he could chug a beer, discuss philosophy, enthrall strangers with tales of what he’d done. He seemed to have turned the corner on his need to assert his autonomy from his parents. He seemed ready, perhaps, to go home. On a parchmentlike strip of birch bark he drew up a list of tasks to do before he departed: “patch jeans, shave!, organize pack.” Then, on July 3—the day after a journal entry that reads, “Family happiness”—he shouldered his backpack, departed the bus, and began the 30-mile walk to the highway.

Two days later, halfway to the road, he arrived in heavy rain on the west bank of the Teklanika River, a major stream spawned by distant glaciers on the crest of the Alaska Range. Sixty-seven
days earlier it had been frozen over, and he had simply strolled across it. Now, however, swollen with rain and melting snow, the Teklanika was running big, cold, and fast. If he could reach the far shore, the rest of the hike to the highway would be trivial, but to get there he would have to negotiate a 75-foot channel of chest-deep water that churned with the power of a freight train. In his journal McCandless wrote, “Rained in. River look impossible. Lonely, scared.” Concluding that he would drown if he attempted to cross, he turned around and walked back toward the bus, back into the fickle heart of the bush.

McCandless got back to the bus on July 8. It’s impossible to know what was going through his mind at that point, believing that his escape had been cut off, for his journal betrays nothing. Actually, he wasn’t cut off at all: A quarter-mile downstream from where he had tried to cross, the Teklanika rushes through a narrow gorge spanned by a hand-operated tram—a metal basket suspended from pulleys on a steel cable. If he had known about it, crossing the Teklanika to safety would have been little more than a casual task. Also, six miles due south of the bus, an easy day’s walk up the main fork of the Sushana, the National Park Service maintains a cabin stocked with food, bedding, and first-aid supplies for the use of backcountry rangers on their winter patrols. This cabin is plainly marked on most topographic maps of the area, but McCandless, lacking such a map, had no way of knowing about it. His friends point out, of course, that had he carried a map and known the cabin was so close, his muleheaded obsession with self-reliance would have kept him from staying anywhere near the bus; rather, he would have headed even deeper into the bush.

So he went back to the bus, which was a sensible course of action: It was the height of summer, the country was fecund with plant and animal life, and his food supply was still adequate. He probably surmised that if he could just bide his time until August, the Teklanika would subside enough to be forded.

For the rest of July McCandless fell back into his routine of hunting and gathering. His snapshots and journal entries indicate that over those three weeks he killed 35 squirrels, four spruce grouse, five jays and woodpeckers, and two frogs, which he supplemented with wild potatoes, wild rhubarb, various berries, and mushrooms. Despite this apparent munificence, the meat he’d been killing was very lean, and he was consuming fewer calories than he was burning. After three months on a marginal diet, McCandless had run up a sizable caloric deficit. He was balanced on a precarious, razor-thin edge. And then, on July 30, he made the mistake that pulled him down.

His journal entry for that date reads, “Extremely weak. Fault of pot[ato] seed. Much trouble just to stand up. Starving. Great Jeopardy.” McCandless had been digging and eating the root of the wild potato—Hedysarum alpinum, a common area wildflower also known as Eskimo potato, which Kari’s book told him was widely eaten by native Alaskans—for more than a month with out ill effect. On July 14 he apparently started eating the pealike seedpods of the plant as well, again without ill effect. There is, however, a closely related plant—wild sweet pea, Hedysarum mackenzii—that is very difficult to distinguish from wild potato, grows beside it, and is poisonous. In all likelihood McCandless mistakenly ate some seeds from the wild sweet pea and became gravely ill.
Laid low by the poisonous seeds, he was too weak to hunt effectively and thus slid toward starvation. Things began to spin out of control with terrible speed. “DAY 100! MADE IT!” he noted jubilantly on August 5, proud of achieving such a significant milestone, “but in weakest condition of life. Death looms as serious threat. Too weak to walk out.”

Over the next week or so the only game he bagged was five squirrels and a spruce grouse. Many Alaskans have wondered why, at this point, he didn’t start a forest fire as a distress signal; small planes fly over the area every few days, they say, and the Park Service would surely have dispatched a crew to control the conflagration. “Chris would never intentionally burn down a forest, not even to save his life,” answers Carine McCandless. “Anybody who would suggest otherwise doesn’t understand the first thing about my brother.”

Starvation is not a pleasant way to die. In advanced stages, as the body begins to consume itself, the victim suffers muscle pain, heart disturbances, loss of hair, shortness of breath. Convulsions and hallucinations are not uncommon. Some who have been brought back from the far edge of starvation, though, report that near the end their suffering was replaced by a sublime euphoria, a sense of calm accompanied by transcendent mental clarity. Perhaps, it would be nice to think, McCandless enjoyed a similar rapture.

From August 13 through 18 his journal records nothing beyond a tally of the days. At some point during this week, he tore the final page from Louis L’Amour’s memoir, Education of a Wandering Man. On one side were some lines that L’Amour had quoted from Robinson Jeffers’s poem “Wise Men in Their Bad Hours”:

Death’s a fierce meadowlark: but to die having made
Something more equal to the centuries
Than muscle and bone, is mostly to shed weakness.

On the other side of the page, which was blank, McCandless penned a brief adios: “I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!”

Then he crawled into the sleeping bag his mother had made for him and slipped into unconsciousness. He probably died on August 18, 113 days after he’d walked into the wild, 19 days before six hunters and hikers would happen across the bus and discover his body inside.

One of his last acts was to take a photograph of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaskan sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. He is smiling in the photo, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God.