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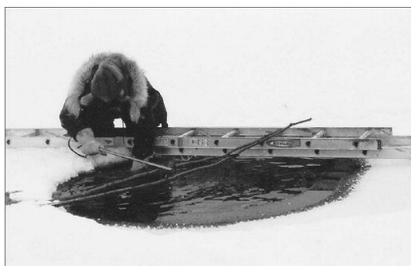
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 SUBMIT

Lake Minchumina residents lend a hand in scientific studies

by Julie Collins / In the Bush

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Julie Collins photo Miki Collins perches on an aluminum ladder straddling an open methane hole to collect swamp gas for a UAF study in November 2010.

collect liver and spleen samples from furbearers for a tularemia study. I have only the vaguest recollection of doing this, even though it involved quantities of guts and test tubes. (We never heard the results of that study.)

In the 1970s, Chuck and Dianne Gudgel-Holmes flew to Minchumina for weeks at a time over several summers to study the prehistory of the area. (It was "Gudgel and Holmes" for the first years, and Gudgel-Holmes during the final year or so.) My mother, also a scientist, had a great interest in their work and while I was only peripherally involved (i.e., went to their picnics) our encounters began a lifelong friendship.

By 1979, Miki and I had two years of college behind us when we managed to finagle jobs with University of Alaska scientists studying Minchumina to determine the effects of a large lake on the local climate.

They wanted upper-level students, but chose us because we lived here and could point out areas best suited for their instruments, or fetch their boat when it blew away.

The older UAF crowd may remember Jim Anderson, our immediate boss and the quintessential gentleman-wilderness-eccentric-scientist with his tweeds, pipe, beard and wire-framed glasses.

He worked with several other team members, but we answered primarily to him, trekking through the woods with him to set up pollen traps, take tree cores, measure leaves and count flowers.

Then he left us to measure the emerging leaves of alder and birch (100 of each at three sites, every other day) and count cranberry blossoms (from a one-meter loop tossed randomly over several berry patches at each site). I don't know much about the study results, except that after measuring 600 leaves every other day for weeks, I never worked for hourly wages again, and I never felt quite the same about green-up.

Today you could simply examine consecutive satellite photos shot during the spring and fall to

LAKE MINCHUMINA, Alaska - Back in the 1960s, a guy named Edward Hosley came sniffing around the area looking for native artifacts.

Being pretty itty bitty at the time, I was not involved with his efforts. Since then, however, I have been the subject of, involved in, or half-drowned by so many studies that I can't even remember them all.

I recently came across a 2004 letter from a UAF scientist asking my sister Miki and me to

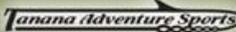
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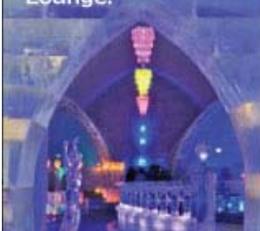
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see how green-up and fall colors are delayed or advanced by the vicinity of the lake.

This study was probably flawed because the more distant meteorological measurements came from permafrost flats, while measurements from the lake's vicinity came from east or south-facing birch slopes.

When most of the area south of us became engulfed in the new Denali Park and Preserve, we jumped on the chance to participate in the cauldron of studies that bubbled constantly around the park. In 1993 and 1994 we participated in a major cabin study that documented subsistence use of cabins in the park additions. This study showed how vital cabins are and helped park management justify issuing permits to qualified local subsistence users to replace old cabins that became unusable.

In February 1994, cabin researcher Jim Rudd accompanied Miki on a week-long trapline run. He towed behind her dogsled with a little sled of his own, meticulously recording everything from the measurements of each cabin to the songs she sang to her dogs. He slept in cabins and tents, and fell through thin ice into Whisper Creek. As Miki reported in her News-Miner story, he may not have learned much about the cabins, but he sure learned a lot about Whisper Creek!

Once Andrea Blakesly of Denali Park asked us to collect moose samples for part of a study on airborne contaminants. We left generous hunks of frozen moose liver in a cooler in our pickup for her to fetch in Fairbanks, and later found the chocolate she'd left in its place. (OK, who's been telling people about our chocolate dependency?) Andrea asked us to estimate the weight of the moose. Instead, we took delight in actually weighing every hunk, including the head, hide and several buckets of blood and guts that we saved for dog food and trapline bait. (It totaled 1,343 pounds.)

For years afterward, we harassed poor Andrea about the study results, and when the labs finally finished their analyses she did pass them on to us in a book almost as massive and even more glossy than the 377 page cabin-study book.

In 2002, Chelsie Venechuk interviewed all the locals on their subsistence harvests for a Department of Fish & Game study. Miki and I were mortified that our harvest was so low that year; we'd had a sad berry crop and had caught two bears instead of the more typical moose.

A couple of years ago, a fisheries specialist asked us to collect fish samples to test for various contaminants.

We did this in winter when we could easily freeze the samples and had a cleaner area to work on (that is, the snowdrifts instead of the beach). The work involved cutting off the front third of several dozen fish and bagging them using semisterile techniques. We changed latex gloves after each fish, but for some reason the instructions said nothing about cleaning the ulu that we used for cutting.

With a light wind on a 10-below day, cutting fish became bitterly cold and Miki and I were shrieking nastily at each other by the time we finished. (We usually handle fish with felt-lined rubber gloves but the gloves were too dirty for this job.) Two years later we got the results in a single page letter with nothing extraordinary to report.

One year Knut Kielland asked us to collect a bunch of tiny muscle samples from the fur-bearers we caught. The Fairbanks biologist had a fascinating way of analyzing isotopes to determine whether a carnivore had been eating voles, hares or squirrels.

We must have overwhelmed him with dozens of tiny Ziploc bags carefully labeled to track the date, sex and location of each sample.

Maybe someday the results will come in. This year the big thing is methane. We have been helping UAF scientist Katey Anthony collect swamp gas from local lakes to study its origins by determining the age of the material emitting the gas. During freeze-up the bubbles collect under the ice and show up nicely until the first snow. With long memories of lighting methane trapped in ice, we knew just where to look.

Capturing the bubbles proved just as cold as cutting fish and we were snarling again by the time we finished, but we still had fun.



One big bubble in the middle of the lake ice kept an open hole beside our sled trail for weeks after freeze-up. With the bubble centered in the eight-foot-wide hole, we hauled out an aluminum ladder by slinging it alongside our biggest dogsled, using it to straddle the hole to reach the gas. (Katey told us later we could have tied the umbrella-shaped collector onto a stick to center the thing, which would have been a lot easier.) Next up: a study on local observations and concerns about climate change, spear-headed by Corrine Knapp of UAF.

We'll probably participate in this one, too. It's always gratifying when these studies emphasize local expertise and anyway, we can't seem to resist a study, perhaps because of deep curiosity or perhaps from our desire to help outsiders understand bush life. While we rarely get paid for our efforts, helping in the work gives great satisfaction, and once in a while we even get some answers.

Julie Collins is a trapper and freelance writer who lives near Lake Minchumina.

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