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Why are we still talking about Chris McCandless?

Young man who ventured into the wilds of Alaska and died there in 1992 is still making news.



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Chris McCandless in front of his 'Magic Bus' in 1992. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

In August 1992, moose hunters discovered the body of a young man in an abandoned bus deep in the wilderness near Alaska's [Denali National Park](#).

The body was eventually identified as that of Chris McCandless, a 24-year-old honors graduate from a wealthy Virginia family. Two years previously, McCandless had cut ties with his family, donated his \$24,000 in savings to charity and traveled westward.

His journey eventually brought him to Alaska, where he hiked alone into the wilderness and spent more than 100 days there, living off the land through hunting and foraging.

When his body was found weeks after his death, McCandless weighed 67 pounds, and Alaska state coroners listed starvation as his official cause of death.

Writer Jon Krakauer shared McCandless' tragic story in the January 1993 issue of Outside magazine and later in his bestselling book, "Into the Wild," which inspired an award-winning film of the same name.

To some people, McCandless' story is simply a cautionary tale, a reminder of nature's harsh reality and mankind's inability to tame it.

But those most impassioned by his journey tend to fall into one of two camps: those who view him as a heroic figure who dared to live a life free from the restraints of civilization and consumer culture, and those who criticize him for venturing unprepared into the [Alaskan](#) wilderness and inspiring countless others to do the same.

Twenty-three years after his death, McCandless still has people talking — debating his cause of death, condemning his choices and discussing how perhaps they, too, can leave everything behind and walk into the wild.



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Hiking to the bus where Chris McCandless died. (Photo: Paxson Woelber/flickr)

Pilgrimage to the 'Magic Bus'

The bus where McCandless died was transported into the woods near Denali in the 1960s, and bunks and a stove were installed to house workers building a road. The project was never completed but the bus remains, and when McCandless happened upon it about 20 miles outside Healy, he named it the "Magic Bus" and lived in it for months.

After his death, Krakauer and McCandless' parents visited the bus via helicopter, where his parents installed a plaque to memorialize their son and left an emergency kit with a note encouraging visitors to "call your parents as soon as possible."

Inside the bus, there's also a suitcase filled with notebooks, one of which contains a message from Krakauer himself: "Chris - Your memory will live on in your admirers. - Jon."

Those admirers have transformed the rusting Fairbanks 142 bus into a shrine to McCandless. The notebooks and the walls of the bus itself are filled with quotes and musings scrawled by "McCandless pilgrims," as the residents in nearby Healy call them.



Writing on the interior of the Fairbanks 142. (Photo: Paxson Woelber/flickr)

More than 100 of these pilgrims come annually, according to one local's estimate, and Diana Saverin wrote about the phenomenon in [Outside](#) magazine in 2013.

During her own trek to the "Magic Bus," Saverin encountered a group of hikers stranded across the Teklanika River, the very river that prevented McCandless from hiking back to civilization about a month before his death, and the same river where 29-year-old [Claire Ackermann](#) drowned in 2010 during her attempt to reach the bus.

Since then, both the Ackermann family and the McCandless family have pushed for the installment of a footbridge to make crossing the river safer, but locals worry that such a move would only encourage more people to venture into wilderness they're not equipped to handle.

There's been talk of [relocating the bus](#) to a park where it would be more accessible, or even simply burning it to the ground.

While the latter may seem extreme to an outsider, such a move would be a relief to some Alaskans. One trooper told Saverin that 75 percent of the rescues performed in the area happen on the trail that leads to the bus.

The draw of an old bus where a young man died is baffling to most Alaskans.

"It's some kind of internal thing within them that makes them go out to that bus," a trooper told Saverin. "I don't know what it is. I don't understand. What would possess a person to follow in the tracks of someone who died because he was unprepared?"

[Craig Medred](#), who's written numerous unsympathetic articles about McCandless in [Alaska Dispatch News](#), an online-only news site, has been just as critical of the pilgrims as he has been of McCandless himself, noting the irony of "self-involved urban Americans, people more detached from nature than any society of humans in history: worshipping the noble, suicidal ascetic, the bum, thief and neophyte Chris

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history, worshipping the noble, suicidal narcissist, the burn, thief and poacher Chris McCandless."

However, the pilgrims continue to come, and many share moving stories and revelations from their journeys on websites devoted to McCandless. But for some, the search for the bus ends only in disillusionment.

When [Chris Ingram](#) attempted to visit the site of McCandless' death in 2010, he arrived just days after Claire Ackermann's death and concluded that the bus wasn't worth his life.

"I had an ample amount of time along the trail to contemplate Chris' story, as well as my own life," he wrote. "The wild simply is just that, wild. Unchanging, unforgiving, it knows nor cares not for your own life. It exists on its own unaffected by the dreams or cares of man. It kills the unprepared and unaware."



Visitors to the 'Magic Bus' in Alaska. (Photo: [Paxson Woelber/flickr](#))

The man who made McCandless famous

Critics blame Krakauer for the steady stream of pilgrims to the bus, accusing the award-winning writer of romanticizing the tragic story.

"He's been glorified in death because he was unprepared," writes Dermot Cole, a columnist for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. "You can't come to Alaska and do that."

However, while plenty of people believe McCandless died due to his own lack of preparation and [outdoor experience](#), Krakauer maintains that starvation isn't what did the young man in, and he has now invested years of his life and thousands of dollars into researching numerous theories that have led to debates with his critics, as well as multiple book revisions.

Krakauer says one of the key pieces of evidence that supports his latest theory is a brief diary entry McCandless made in the back of a book about edible plants.

"There's one passage you just can't ignore, which is 'Extremely weak. Fault of potato seeds,'" Krakauer told [NPR](#) in May. "He didn't say much in that journal, and nothing that definitive. He had reason to believe that these seeds — and not all these other foods that he had photographed and catalogued — had killed him."

The entry refers to the seeds of the Eskimo potato plant, and Krakauer says the seeds had become a staple of McCandless' diet in his last weeks of life.





Emile Hirsch portraying Chris McCandless in 'Into the Wild.' (Photo: 'Into the Wild')

In 2013, Krakauer decided to test the seeds for a neurotoxin called beta-ODAP after reading a paper about [poisonings at Nazi concentration camps](#). He hired a company to analyze the seed samples and learned that they contained a lethal concentration of beta-ODAP. Krakauer wrote in [The New Yorker](#) that this “validates [his] conviction that McCandless wasn't as clueless and incompetent as his detractors have made him out to be.”

However, numerous scientists [disputed his theory](#) and pointed out that this wasn't the first of Krakauer's theories to be disproved.

In 1993, in his first article about McCandless, Krakauer wrote that, “In all likelihood McCandless mistakenly ate some seeds from the wild sweet pea and became gravely ill.” But in “Into the Wild,” which was published in 1996, he changed his mind, saying he suspected McCandless actually died from consuming poisonous seeds of wild potato — not wild sweet pea.

To lend validity to his theory, Krakauer collected samples of the plant growing near the Magic Bus and sent the dried seedpods to Dr. Thomas Clausen at the University of Alaska; however, no toxins were detected.

Then, in 2007, he offered this explanation: “Now I've come to believe after researching from journals of veterinary medicine that what killed him wasn't the seeds themselves, but the fact that they were damp and he stored them in these big Ziploc bags and they had grown moldy. And the mold produces this toxic alkaloid called swainsonine. My theory is essentially the same, but I've refined it somewhat.”

So in 2013, when Clausen wrote that he was “very skeptical” of Krakauer's neurotoxin cause of death, Krakauer had a lab run a more sophisticated analysis on the seeds.

He discovered that the seeds did contain a toxin, but it wasn't beta-ODAP — it was L-canavanine. He published the results in a peer-reviewed journal earlier this year.

Clausen, meanwhile, says he's waiting for an independent analysis to confirm the results.

Jonathan Southard, a biochemist at Indiana University of Pennsylvania who assisted Krakauer in the testing, has defended the research, saying that the controversy “has to do with the story, not with the science. And people in Alaska seem to have very strong viewpoints about this.”

While Krakauer has scientific evidence on his side, the debate over how McCandless died will likely go on and Krakauer will likely continue to assert that McCandless didn't die simply because he was inexperienced or unprepared.

“What he did was not easy,” he said. “He lived for 113 days off the land in a place where there's not a lot of game, and he did really well. If he hadn't been weakened by these seeds, I'm confident he would have survived.”

People have speculated that perhaps Krakauer's insistence on this matter has more to do with himself than it does with McCandless.

After all, as Krakauer states in the introduction of “Into the Wild,” he's not an impartial biographer. “McCandless' strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible,” he writes.

Indeed, throughout the book Krakauer includes his personal thoughts about McCandless and even inserts a long narrative about his own nearly fatal travels.

Anchorage teacher Ivan Hodes thinks it's Krakauer's personal investment in McCandless that makes it difficult for him to accept the young man's fate. “Krakauer needs to know what happened because he looked into the dead face of McCandless



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