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Searching for grizzlies ? Follow the salmon

TOGIAK, Alaska — Do you want to see grizzly bears in the wild? Of course you do. This summer's Alaskan adventure wouldn't be complete without photos to post on Facebook and to send to friends. What's the Last Frontier all about without hard evidence, usually in the form of photos?



MCT PHOTO

This brown bear is fishing for silver salmon along Rainbow Creek in Alaska.

But don't count on getting picture-perfect close-ups of Smokey's larger cousins. Of the millions of travelers expected to tour Alaska this year, only a few will be lucky enough to see a grizzly (they call them brown bears here). And if they do, it's likely to be at long range. I know. I've been disappointed more than once.

"See that brown shape moving near the trees," the Denali Park bus driver says, and you look and look, and everyone around you peers and points, and finally you see the bear, a blotchy brown spot that might as well be a cow.

But if you really want to see a grizzly doing its wild thing, IN the wild, nothing could be easier. How? You have to know where the bears gather to eat, and go there yourself.

And where do they go, and have gone every summer for the last millennium? To the rivers, brooks and creeks where salmon, their primary diet, swim upstream to the pools and eddies where they were hatched and where they will spawn and die.

When Alaskan salmon get the signal to spawn _ no one's quite sure how _ they return from the ocean

in the tens of thousands, gathering near the mouth of familiar rivers. Then they head upstream, swimming so close together that their backs, when you see them from above, resemble gridlocked traffic on a mid-city freeway. The bears, meanwhile, linger along the stream banks, watching and waiting for the feast. When the fish arrive _ a moving banquet that lasts for days _ the bears hustle into the water, clutching and snatching at every fish that passes by. Busy putting on fat calories, they're generally oblivious to everything else, even nearby people.

Once a bear has a fish in its jaws, it climbs onto the bank or a gravel bar and rips the fish apart, devouring the richest parts and tossing the rest away. These bits of carcass feed the trout, and in turn the birds, small mammals, insects and eventually microorganisms. The rest dissolves in the stream as nutrients, fertilizer for the trees and bushes along the banks. Everything in this riverine landscape depends on the salmon .

That could be you, standing there with your camera, perched close in but out of the way. But remember to take care. Never get between a brown bear and its dinner, or a mother and her cubs, or between two males vying for top- bear fishing rights. That's why the best way to see and photograph bears is to go with a guide, someone who knows the salmon streams, where the bears will be and how to stay safe.

If you do see bears in the wild, treasure the moment. And remember: You're now a witness to the salmon -to-bear food chain and, I hope, an advocate for protecting Alaska's rivers. Man-made pollutants dumped into streams _ especially from mining _ that destroy the annual salmon runs will be remembered as tragedy worse than the near-extinction of the plains bison (the buffalo). Without salmon , Alaska's brown bears, its most magnificent predators, will disappear, along with the rest of the river-dependent creatures, from river otters and wolves to foxes, wolverines, rodents, trout, trees, flowers and the rest.

Here's the solution. Spend a couple of days at a wilderness or fishing lodge that offers bear-watching outings as part of their daily activities. Or book a day trip with an outfitter. Most likely you'll go by float plane, landing on a distant lake or river. Is it worth the expense (\$200 apiece and up) just to watch bears eat? Oh, my, yes. The plane flight alone is half the thrill.

Flying low over the land, I've seen not just bears but moose, herds of caribou, occasional wolves and swans on their nests. When our flight route crossed ocean inlets I spied pods of white beluga whales cruising at the surface. Flying over Katmai National Park — a favorite bear destination — look for the crater and devastated area around Novarupta Volcano, which exploded in 1912, darkening the sky for months. Yessir, flightseeing is every bit as momentous (in its way) as bear watching.

And for guaranteed closeups? Take the kids (and your friends) to the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, in Portage Valley near Girdwood, close to Anchorage. The center, a rescue and rehabilitation center, takes in all kinds of orphaned and threatened wild animals _ including brown bears _ and raises them in multi-acre outdoor pens especially designed for visitor viewing.

You can tour the Center by car or on foot, and will be rewarded with plenty of close-ups. Whenever possible, healthy animals are reintroduced into the wild; others remain there, including bears, moose, musk oxen, a Wood Bison herd (reintroduced from Canada), coyotes, elk, eagles and owls. Every year brings another crop of cute (and cuddly) babies _ presently including three teeny, furry musk ox calves and two spindlylegged moose calves. I wouldn't miss it, and you shouldn't either.

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