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Anne Z. Cooke: Searching for Grizzly Bears? Follow the Salmon

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Images by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

TOGIAK, Alaska- Do you want to see grizzly bears in the wild? Of course you do. This summer's trip to Alaska wouldn't be complete without photos to post on the internet and send to your Facebook friends. What's the Last Frontier all about without hard evidence to prove it? But don't hold your breath. Of the tens of thousands of travelers that tour Alaska every year, only a few ever see a grizzly close up (they call them brown bears here). And when they do spot one, it's usually at long range. I know. I've been there.



"See that brown shape moving near the trees," the Denali Park bus driver will say, and you'll look and look, and everyone around you will be peering and pointing, and finally you'll see the bear, a brown lump that might as well be a cow. Even fewer visitors will be lucky enough to see a bear at close range, within 20 yards. And they're the ones likely to be touring the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, near Girdwood (outside Anchorage), where rescued orphans live in outdoor, multi-acre pens. I recommend stopping here as it's a sure way to get

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an unhurried look not just at brown bears, but at moose, musk oxen, reintroduced Wood Bison (larger than Plains Bison), coyotes, elk, eagles and assorted kin. The year's annual crop of very cute babies fulfills the "cute" quotient, now including three teeny musk oxen and two moose calves. It's great thing, it's not a zoon, and it's not just for kids.




That said, if you really want to see a grizzly doing its wild thing, *in the wild*, you can. Trust me, nothing could be easier. The trick is to find out where the bears go to eat, and follow them. And where do they go every summer and have for centuries? To the rivers, brooks and creeks where their primary diet, the salmon, are swimming upstream, heading to the pools where they were born and where they will spawn and die.



When Alaska salmon get the signal — no one's quite sure how — they gather near the mouths of rivers in the tens of thousands. Then they head upstream, swimming so close to each other the tops of their backs, seen from above, look like gridlocked traffic on a mid-city freeway. The bears, waiting for the feast, know when to expect them and linger along the banks, watching. When the fish arrive — a process that can last days — the bears hustle into the water, snatching up fish until they can't eat another bite. Busy putting on calories, they're generally oblivious to everything else, even people standing nearby.

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Once a bear grabs a salmon it climbs onto the bank or a gravel bar and rips it apart, devouring the richest parts and tossing the rest away. These bits of carcasses feed the trout, and in turn the birds, small mammals, insects and eventually microorganisms. The rest is dissolved in the stream as nutrients, essential fertilizer for trees and bushes along the banks. Everything in the riparian landscape, literally, depends on the salmon. The adventurer standing there in a safe place, armed with a camera and binoculars, could be you. But watch yourself. Never get between a brown bear and its dinner, or a mother and her cubs, or between two males jostling for a prime fishing spot. That's why the best way to see the bears is with an adventure or fishing guide, someone who knows the salmon streams, where the best viewing will be and how to come back alive.

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What are your options? Alaska is alive with wilderness lodges that organize salmon fishing and bear-watching adventures as part of their daily activities. Crystal Creek Lodge, near King Salmon, and Winter Lake Lodge, west of Cook Inlet, are two of many such destinations. If you go that route, take advantage of every opportunity they offer. If you're not heading for a bush lodge but are staying in or near towns like Anchorage, Seward, Homer, Talkeetna or Fairbanks, book a day trip with an outfitter.

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Some rivers, like the Kenai, are accessible from the road. But most likely you'll go by float plane, landing on a distant lake or river near a salmon stream. Is it worth the expense, (\$200 apiece and up) just to watch the bears eat? Get outta here. The plane flight alone is half the thrill. Flying with Pilot Lori Michels, of Sky Trekking Alaska, I've seen moose, herds of caribou, wolves and swans on their nests. When our route crossed salt water I spied pods of white beluga whales cruising near the surface. Flying in the vicinity of Katmai National Park, we circled over the crater of Novarupta Volcano, which exploded in 1912, darkening the sky for weeks. Trust me — been there, done it myself — flightseeing is every bit as momentous (in its way), as bear watching.



If you do get close to bears, count it a day of wonder. Just as important, you'll be a witness to the salmon-to-bear food chain, and, I hope, an advocate for protecting Alaska's rivers. Anything that pollutes these streams — mines, industry, chemical dumping — killing the fish and destroying the annual salmon runs, will be a tragedy worse than the near-extinction of the buffalo. Where the salmon go, there go the brown bear. And the rest of the riparian denizens, from black bears and birds to river otters, foxes, wolverines, rodents, trees and all the rest. I do love grilled salmon. But even I didn't, I couldn't imagine Alaska without the brown bears. Can you?



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