Photo by McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

own bear fishes for silver salmon along an Alaskan creek

Searching for grizzlies? Follow the fish

By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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?

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 disanpointed 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

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 so 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 n 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 every-

thing 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 land-scape 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-tobear 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, tront, trees, flowers and the rest.

Here's the solution. Spend a couple of days at a wilderness or fishing lodge

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.

that offers bear-watching outings a part of their daily activities. Or book day trip with an outfitter. Most likel you'll go by float plane, landing on distant lake or river. Is it worth th expense (\$200 apiece and up) just t watch bears eat? Oh, my, yes. Th plane flight alone is half the thrill.

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the kids (and your friends) to the Alask Wildlife Conservation Center, in Portag Valley near Girdwood, close t Anchorage. The center, a rescue an rehabilitation center, takes in all kinds of orphaned and threatened wild anima including brown bears - and raise them in multi-aere outdoor pens espe cially designed for visitor viewing.

You can tour the Center by car or c foot, and will be rewarded with plent of close-ups. Whenever possible healthy animals are reintroduced int the wild; others remain there, includin bears, moose, musk oxen, a Woo Bison herd (reintroduced from Canada), coyotes, elk, eagles and owl Every year brings another crop of cut (and cuddly) babies — presentl including three teeny, furry musk o calves and two spindly-legged moss calves. I wouldn't miss it, and yo shouldn't either.

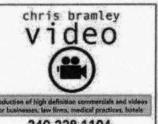


Fun By The Numbers

ike puzzles? Then you'll love sudoku. This mind-bending puzzle will have you hooked from the moment you square off, so sharpen your pencil and put your sudoku savvy to the test!

Here's How It Works:

Sudoku puzzles are formatted as a 9x9 grid, broken down into nine 3x3 boxes. To solve a sudoku, the numbers 1 through 9 must fill each row, column and box. Each number can appear only once in each row, column and box. You can figure out the order in which the numbers will appear by using the numeric clues already provided in the boxes. The more numbers you name, the easier it gets to solve the puzzle!



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