

# Wildlife Essentials





BY ERIC LUCAS



**IT'S THE MOST CHARMING WILDLIFE SCENE YOU**

**COULD IMAGINE:** a mother brown bear and her cub, snoozing along the beach near

Pack Creek, on Southeast Alaska's Admiralty Island south of Juneau. Mom and cub are splayed out on warm, gray sand like snow angels, cub snuggled up close to mom—probably as comfy a nap site as any bear cub in North America might enjoy. Spruce spires behind them reach up into a light mist; intermittent specks of rain clearly trouble the pair not a bit.

For us, though, these two wild bears pose a distinct dilemma. Our prescribed path leads right past them—just a few yards from their snoozing venue.

Under most circumstances, wilderness trekkers in Alaska would steer a very wide path around a mother bear and her cub, but we six day-trippers at Pack Creek Wildlife Viewing Area are in exceptional circumstances in this Edenic spot on a late-summer day. The ground rules here are that bears have the right of way; humans are confined to precisely defined areas leading to the salmon-stuffed creek and the viewing area. Visitors land at a gravel bar a half-mile from the creek; receive instruction from wildlife management officials about stringent protocols (no food in day packs, not even tooth-paste); and then walk to the viewing area along the shore, near the high-tide line. Arriving at the creek, humans post themselves on a 20-foot-long gravel rise bounded by drift logs, about 10 yards from the creek. And there watchers stay put—period. No chairs, no railings, no wandering, no separation other than a longstanding and most intriguing interspecies custom. Bears fish and play and quarrel and nap; people stand still and watch.

While Pack Creek is clearly one of the most memorable wildlife-viewing venues on Earth,





around major Alaska cities. Thousands of sand-hill cranes alight in the middle of Fairbanks each summer. Eagles are on view every day in Juneau. Peregrine falcons patrol the air just outside Barrow. Sensational experiences featuring what biologists call “charismatic megafauna”—such as coastal brown bears feeding on salmon—are just the most conspicuous parts of a vast tapestry of Alaska wildlife.

“Many visitors arrive with expectations formed by a steady diet of TV programs featuring up-close-and-personal images of bears snatching salmon from roaring waterfalls, humpback whales trying to fly, and bull moose posing in front of snow-clad mountains. While these scenes do play out often, 25 years of guiding in Alaska has convinced me that anyone who wants to see the real magic ought to concentrate instead on the small things taking place on the wings of the stage,” advises Lynn Schooler, a Juneau-based outdoor guide and author of the famous memoir *The Blue Bear*, which recounts a photographer friend’s lifelong search for an extremely rare Alaska creature.

“Watch the ravens,” Schooler continues. “Maybe they’re circling over a wolverine slinking through the brush. That shadow that’s a little darker than the other shadows along the tree line could be a coyote or an otter, dodging from cover to cover.

Or a slight movement in the grass at the edge of the creek might be a mink emerging from the water.”

It is precisely that philosophy that I have happily practiced in midwinter in the Alaska Interior, taking as much delight in watching black-capped chickadees peck among snow grains in the deep-slanted light of February as I might in watching a humpback feeding in the sparkling water of Frederick Sound in June. Set against the polished ivory trunks of winter birch and the shimmering surface of the snow, these energetic songbirds gleam with color and movement. The chickadees of Fairbanks represent tiny miracles that make little sense to humans clad in multiple layers of down to fend off the

Clockwise from upper left: Humpback whales in Kenai Fjords National Park; caribou in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; a polar bear on the Arctic Ocean coast; and a black bear sow and her cub near the Harding Icefield Trail in Kenai Fjords.



## Bear With Us

Alaska is home to three of the world’s eight bear species, though there are various subspecies within those three.

■ **Brown bear:** Grizzly bears, coastal brown bears and Kodiak bears are all in this species. Salmon is the key to the coastal brown’s larger size, which on Kodiak Island reaches 1,400 pounds and 10 feet standing fully upright.

■ **Black bear:** The ubiquitous bear of North America is found from Mexico to Alaska’s Brooks Range. Smaller than browns, black bears are agile climbers.

■ **Polar bear:** Confined to Arctic coasts in Alaska, polar bears are master predators surviving on seals and other marine mammals. They reach past 1,500 pounds, and 11 feet when standing. The global population is around 20,000. —E.L.



Sea otters swim among floating ice in Prince William Sound, and a bull moose browses in Denali National Park & Preserve.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: PATRICK J. ENDRES / ALASKAPHOTOGRAPHICS.COM; ROBIN BRANDT / ACCENT ALASKA

cold at Creamer’s Field, a vast midcity field-and-forest preserve. It’s sunny, but far from balmy. How can half-ounce marvels that would fit in the palm of my hand survive year-round here?

“They find more food than you think is there—seeds, even tiny frozen bugs. And they have amazing shelter strategies at night,” reports ornithologist Dan Gibson, a retired University of Alaska Museum of the North staff member. “They sometimes huddle up together, 20 of them, say, in a hole or hollow in a tree, conserving warmth. Most likely, on our coldest nights, they’re probably barely surviving. But they do.

“The amazing thing is, if you see them emerge at first light, they all look like they just fell out of bed, feathers askew—like little kids with bed head—and in fact that’s exactly the case.”

I’ve only seen them in the comparatively warm light of midday, looking as perky as kids at play in the snow. But it is still a wonder to witness their cheery presence in the sub-Arctic woods. And all I’ve done is go for a walk with a friend in a Fairbanks park.

The fact that you need only open your eyes to see wildlife in Alaska does not diminish the experience at Pack Creek, or lessen all the other possible wildlife experiences in the state. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game oversees about 30 “special areas” devoted to wildlife habitat conservation, and maintains a wildlife-viewing website featuring Alaska animals. A research survey sponsored by the state a few years back found that the opportunity to see wild animals is a key ingredient in quality of life for two-thirds of Alaskans—a number far higher than in other states,

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Migrating sandhill cranes stop in Fairbanks each summer.

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## Wildlife Celebrations

- **Alaska Bearfest:** Workshops, presentations, films and performances all centered on bears; Wrangell, July 23–27; [alaskabearfest.org](http://alaskabearfest.org).
- **Tanana Valley Sandhill Crane Festival:** A celebration of migratory birds, focused on the sandhill cranes that stop over in the Interior each summer; Fairbanks, August 22–24; [creamersfield.org](http://creamersfield.org).
- **Sitka Whalefest:** Research presentations, films, banquets and more; Sitka, November 6–9; [sitkawhalefest.org](http://sitkawhalefest.org).
- **Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival:** Millions of waterfowl pass through the Kenai Peninsula on their way north each spring; Homer, early May; [homer.alaska.org](http://homer.alaska.org). —E.L.



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including Florida and Arizona where similar surveys have been taken. Among those two-thirds, 98 percent are happy they get to see wild animals in their daily lives. And the most popular Alaska animal for viewing, for both residents and visitors, is the moose.

“We were surprised by that. We expected bears, or whales, maybe,” admits Anne Sutton, wildlife-viewing program coordinator at ADFG. “Why moose? We’re not sure.”



Tiny black-capped chickadees are year-round residents.

Maybe it's because moose are such an everyday presence that Alaskans have developed a measurable affection for them. Maybe it's because seeing such impressive animals reminds human viewers that wilderness vitality still thrives here. Visitors can taste subtle samples of this experience whenever they, too, see moose browsing in a marsh, or eagles flying by, or whales cruising near a beach.

Alaska wildlife advocates urge visitors to expand their perspectives far beyond the big three—bears, whales, moose—and marvel at the innumerable wildlife wonders on view throughout the state. In tundra habitats such as in Denali National Park & Preserve, for instance, many flowers have globe shapes that face toward the sun to capture warmth. Insects gather in the warmed bowls of these Arctic roses, figworts and other flowers. And birds flock to the flowers to gather the insects that provide all-important protein for chick-rearing during the lush sub-Arctic summer. Observing this synergy is a great way to take in the marvel of life at the foot of Denali.

“We try to teach people to take note of the whole ecosystem,” says Rebecca Talbott, Anchorage-based regional chief of interpretation for the National Park Service. “Alaska has so much wildlife, especially in the open tundra, that if you're just looking for a moose or a bear, you'll miss a lot.”

Bears remain undeniably popular, though—they came in a close second behind moose in the state wildlife survey. Each year, during the Bear Festival

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in Wrangell, Alaska, dozens of schoolchildren gather at the local library for a “bear checkup,” hauling in stuffed bears (and the occasional moose) for stethoscope inspections by Forest Service naturalists and local nurses. “Are his ears dirty? Does he need a bath?” One young girl looks earnestly at her bear’s nurse. “No, I don’t think a bath would be good,” the girl is advised about her clearly hand-me-down toy. “Maybe just a couple hours out in the sun. That’s good for everyone, you know.”

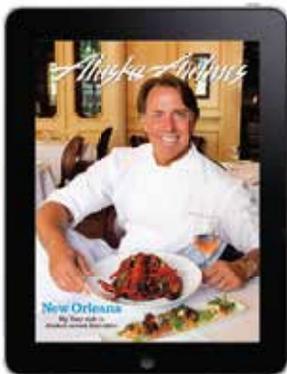
All this makes excellent sense to bear advocate Chris Morgan, a Bellingham-based documentary filmmaker and ecologist. “Bears remind us of ourselves,” he says. “They’re intelligent, adaptable, versatile. They care deeply for their young.

“And yet bears keep us humble, especially when we see them in a wilderness setting, such as Katmai National Park,” Morgan continues. “It recalibrates my mind, reminding me I’m not always at the very top of the food chain. This experience used to be commonplace for humans.”

That in many places it is not so anymore is clearly one of the great draws of Alaska—among the state’s 1.8 million visitors a year, 52 percent place wildlife viewing among their key objectives, and most guides and tour operators place bears at the top of the list.

And on a late-summer day at Pack Creek, when our path is blocked by a snoozing mother bear and cub, a bit of invention affords a feasible response for all involved. After consulting with on-site supervisors, our party makes a wide detour around the bears, utilizing the handily exposed tidal flats, and we clamber up to the viewing “hill” (it’s about 6 feet tall) and just watch for two hours. We see bears catch and consume salmon as casually as if they were downing sliders at a sports bar. We watch a massive male—coastal browns can reach 1,400 pounds—run a mother and her cub off into the woods.

“Happens a lot, but there is so much salmon here that in the end everybody



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gets more than enough,” explains one of our guides. At one point a mother bear ambles right by the people platform, with her cub no more than 15 feet away; they both stop a minute to inspect us, incuriously, while our escorts straighten up on extra alert. A few moments later, there are 12 bears in sight along the 300 yards of stream visible from the viewing spot. Mostly, the bears act as if there are no people within a hundred miles.

That’s how it has been done for 80 years at Pack Creek, and wildlife managers believe the bears grasp the implicit bargain: People behave in an exact, predictable fashion, and bears go on about their lives. There has never been a bear-human incident here that brought harm to either party. Some biologists suspect that mother bears, such as the ones we saw, pass on to their offspring knowledge of the bipartisan treaty.

Only 1,200 visitors or so experience Pack Creek each summer; it’s costly to get here, and preserve managers limit the number of people in order to maintain the wilderness character and to refrain from disturbing the bears. By comparison, more than 400,000 people a year visit the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center just outside Juneau. So at Mendenhall, because a small salmon run takes place in a creek near the center, perhaps millions of people over the years have seen bears at the stream, from a boardwalk the U.S. Forest Service built to provide a viewing platform. People are required to stick to the platform; bears catch fish in the creek 20 yards away.

“If the bears aren’t on the creek, occasionally we’ll have someone ask: ‘When are you going to let the bears out of their cage?’ We tell them: ‘It’s you who are in the cage here,’” says visitor center manager John Neary, who before coming to Mendenhall spent decades as a manager on Admiralty Island, overseeing the Pack Creek viewing area. He thus has a unique perspective on wildlife watching in Alaska.

Neary believes both kinds of experience have intrinsic *continued on page 205*

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from page 59 value, though one is infinitely more accessible than the other—a trek to Pack Creek is a roughly \$700 day trip from Juneau by floatplane.

Mendenhall, by comparison, is just minutes from downtown Juneau, and all those thousands of visitors constitute the largest bear audience in the United States. “We serve more people by far than all other bear-viewing locales put together,” Neary reports.

“Either way, at Pack Creek or Mendenhall, the current popularity of bears illustrates a sea change in public perception of wild animals,” Neary says. “When I first entered this profession, bears were widely considered either great dangers or obnoxious pests. Now millions of people consider them creatures of wonder.”

#### IN MY MANY JOURNEYS TO ALASKA

I have seen “whales trying to fly,” as Lynn Schooler puts it; bears catching salmon; bull caribou browsing on tundra scrub at Denali; a peregrine falcon soaring over the Arctic marsh at Barrow; thousands of



Wolves are elusive sights in Alaska. This one was photographed in Denali National Park.

COURTESY: DENALI NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE

salmon struggling up a coastal cascade; eagles fetching herring from quiet coves; and hundreds of other memorable sights. One spring I saw a raft of 80 sea otters in Sitka Sound, a mass of marine beauties all clinging together in the indigo water. Did you know that sea otters live in matriarchal societies, and when you see such a raft of otters, it is usually one large extended family?

Still, the experiences that have lodged in my memory most are the bears at Pack Creek—and the midwinter chickadees in Fairbanks.

It's easy to understand the majestic

impression coastal brown bears make, seen up close, with easy-to-grasp lives as they thrive on bountiful salmon. But I often reflect on the delight those chickadees brought me. Why? The best I can say is that these tiny birds are, as Lynn Schooler puts it, the real magic show. Their distant ancestors were the dinosaurs that “ruled the earth,” to use an entirely human phrase. Now they are adapted to a rugged but fruitful existence in a harsh and beautiful environment, collaborating as a community to survive winter nights and working hard each day as individuals. Graceful, dainty, finely shaped and vigorous, they are a wonderful reflection of the bustling spirit of life on our planet, there for anyone to see and love as I have. ▲

*Eric Lucas is a contributing editor at Alaska Airlines Magazine.*

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