

PhotoFile

A MINI-MAGAZINE FEATURING PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARTICLES BY
John R. DeLapp

Number 6, September 2015

BEAR BOAT

*Photographs and experiences visiting
Katmai National Park and Preserve
via Alaska's coastal waters*





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Front Cover Photo:
Female coastal brown bear, Hallo Bay,
Katmai National Park, Alaska

PhotoFile #6 - Bear Boat

Alaska's coastal brown bears! Nothing is more amazing and exciting as traveling to untouched wilderness and spending time in close proximity to these enormous and beautiful animals. I've heard people ask, "And there are no fences?" That is correct, there are no fences and our guides were armed only with sound of their voices and an amazing understanding of bear behavior from decades of experience in bear country. Often times only our guide's subtle change in body language was all that was needed to keep bears from approaching too closely. Pepper spray was carried as a backup but was never needed.

This issue of PhotoFile is devoted to a trip I made with seven photography friends to a portion of Katmai National Park located on Alaska's mountainous coast across Shelikof Strait from Kodiak Island. Coastal Outfitters' boat, a 72-foot vessel named "Breezers", was already anchored at Hallo Bay when our group arrived via float planes from Kodiak in early July 2015. Breezers became our "bear boat" home for the next six days. Included here is a brief account of this wilderness adventure along with a sampling of images made during this trip.

Other Publications by John R. DeLapp

Mini-magazines (available for purchase from www.magcloud.com)

PhotoFile #1: *Chinitna Bay Bear Camp*, October, 2012.
PhotoFile #2: *Redpoll Rally*, March 2013.
PhotoFile #3: *Denali*, July 2013
PhotoFile #4: *Road Trip*, July 2014
PhotoFile #5: *Havanna!*, May 2015

Books (available for preview or purchase from: www.Blurb.com)

Rock, Rock Art, and Ruins. Black and white photographs of travels in the southwest U.S. April 2012.

Road Trip, Colorado to Alaska, May 2011. Photographs and notes from my solo road trip from Grand Junction, Colorado to Anchorage in the spring of 2011.

Norah, With Her Family in Connecticut. Photographs and commentary celebrating the birth of my granddaughter. April, 2011.

Stories from My Early Years, by Warren DeLapp and John R. DeLapp. Stories and photographs of Warren DeLapp's early years with additional biographical notes about his later achievements and life. December, 2008.

Animals, A Portfolio of Photography. A presentation of my favorite wildlife photographs. November, 2007.

People, A Retrospective of Photography: 1968-2007. October, 2007.

Others

Sam and His Earliest Moments. Photos and notes commemorating the birth of my grandson. October, 2006. (www.lulu.com)

Reaching, The Story of a Young Minnesota Girl and Her Dream to Fly, by Mary DeLapp. Published 2005 by John and Tina DeLapp (out of print).



A female coastal brown bear and cub (not shown) graze on beach sedges at Hallo Bay. Sows with cubs will often wander close to small groups of people who quietly wait with their guides for bears to approach them. The bears usually show no fear and little interest in people as they concentrate on filling their bellies with vegetation, and later, with salmon and berries when they are available. This man was with another small group who had flown in on a day-trip with a pilot/guide for a few hours of bear viewing and photography.

Bear Boat

This trip began with an Alaska Airlines flight from Anchorage to Kodiak Island and an overnight stay at the Best Western Kodiak Inn. Despite the rain, low clouds, and fog on our arrival in Kodiak, the weather the next morning was mostly sunny with good visibility, so there were no delays with our charter flight to Hallo Bay.

When we arrived at the dock for our charter flight, our party of eight was divided into two groups of four people and each group was carefully weighed along with all their baggage and hand carried items for two separate flights. Owner and pilot Roland Ruoss uses a DeHavilland Beaver on floats for most of his bush flights. It is an airplane that has been around for many years and is still a major “workhorse” throughout Alaska. It easily carried four people plus the pilot and all the personal gear in each flight. Roland provided earphones for all passengers to reduce the engine noise (which is significant in this airplane) and also so we could converse during the 45 minute flight, which took us through the Kodiak mountains and across Shelikof Strait to the boat’s location.

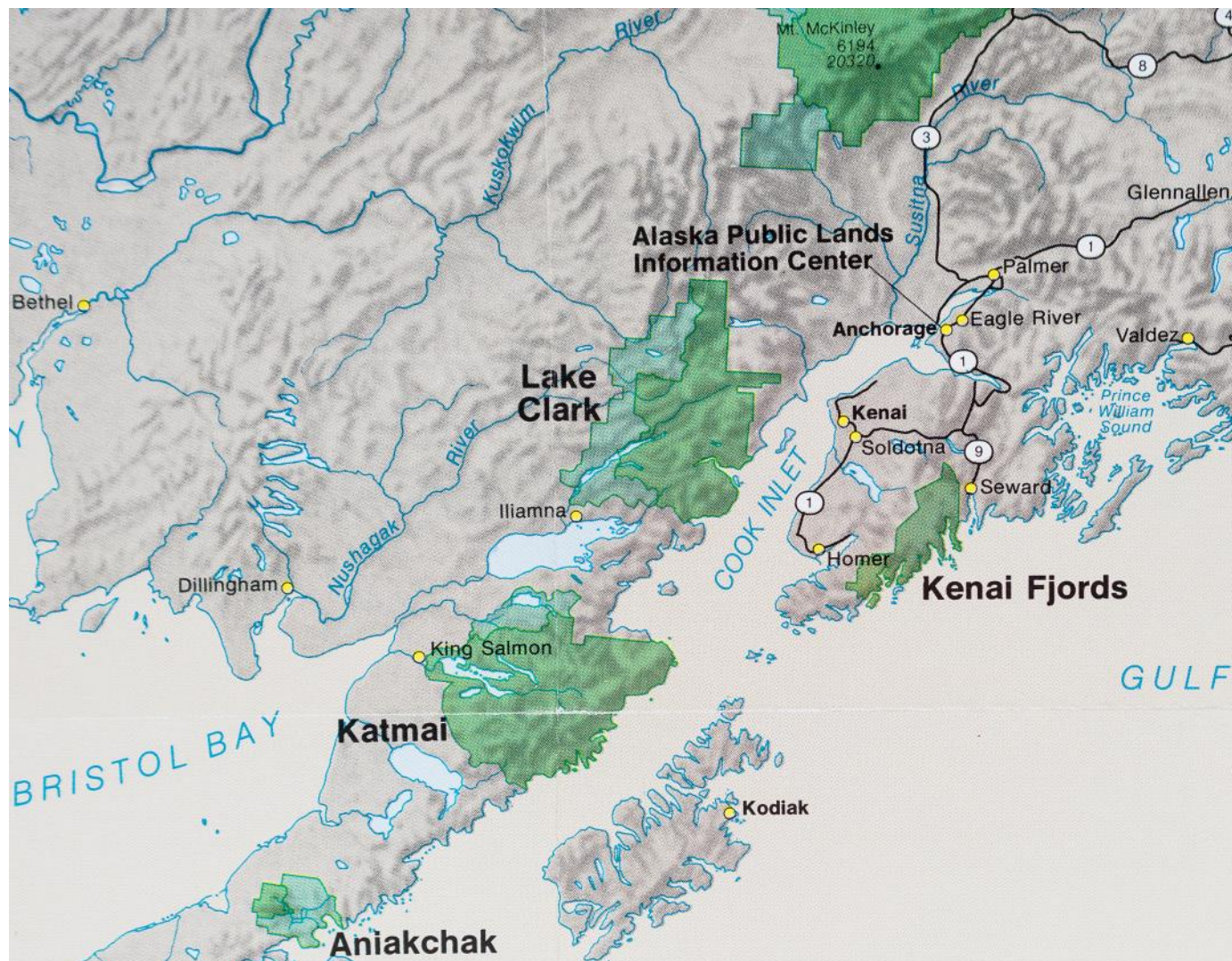
During the crossing, Roland pointed out several features along our route and we were treated to an aerial view of several fin whales. I had not seen one before and little did I know then that we would get a very close view of a dead one



Jim and Julie look on as our pilot Roland readies the DeHavilland Beaver for our trip to Hallo Bay. Roland Ruoss and Jo Murphy are the owners of Sea Hawk Air in Kodiak, Alaska.

The map below shows the Gulf of Alaska and the location of Katmai National Park in relation to Kodiak and Anchorage. For a sense of scale, the distance between Anchorage and Kodiak is approximately 250 miles. Most visitors to Katmai fly to King Salmon and then transfer to a float plane for the short flight to Brooks Camp. The camp is located on Naknek Lake and consists of a full service lodge, cabins, and a campground. Boardwalks and viewing platforms are provided for viewing bears and interaction between people and bears is highly controlled by the park personnel.

The map to the right is a detail of the area of our visit to Katmai. The red X's are the approximate locations where we anchored during our stay on the bear boat.





Aerial view of a Kodiak subdivision and Fort Abercrombie State Historical Site in the background.



Leslee and Jim step out of the plane and into a skiff which is tied up to the back of our boat, Breezers. Owner of Coastal Outfitters, and Captain, Chuck Keim keeps a watchful eye as his wife Olga and our pilot Roland assist passengers into the skiff. Olga was our primary bear guide during our stay and is also an accomplished fisherwoman, keeping us supplied with fresh fish.



This large male bear with a scarred nose glances at our group briefly as he wanders quite close while feasting on sedges. The first time one of these big guys got close, I held my breath and my heart was pounding. Usually, the big males tend to avoid people but each bear has a distinct personality. In the park, the biggest threat to bears is other bears so, for the most part, they ignore people. Thankfully!

Our daily routine was to have breakfast on the boat and then be transported with our guide to a beach location for bear viewing. This usually involved walking in hip boots since we often had to cross shallow stretches of water and creeks to get to the best locations. The skiff would return later to take us back to the boat for lunch, since having food near bears is not wise. In the afternoon we would repeat the procedure.

Hallo Bay is a fairly popular bear viewing area and it was normal for wheel planes to land on the beach during low tide bringing five or six visitors with their pilot/guide. Their time on the ground was quite limited due to the tides so our group had blocks of time where no other groups were around. We also had the advantage of moving to other locations during our stay and we did visit and anchor overnight at Kukak Bay and Kuliak Bay.



Above: This is the same bear as shown on the opposite page that is feeding close to our group.
Left: Chuck brings the skiff to pick us up at the end of a day of photography at Hallo Bay, returning us to the boat.



Our group on the beach at Hallo Bay: Me, Lynn, Karen, Harry, Olga (our guide in the hoodie), Julie, Alissa, Leslee, Jim.



A sow with a large cub approaches a group of visitors located on the opposite side of an inlet from our group at Hallo Bay. We had watched these two bears cross from our side of the water to their side. They wandered closer and the guide positioned himself in front of his clients (on his knees). The sow responded by keeping an acceptable distance from the group. A third bear is at the far right.



Small planes fitted with oversized tires and mud flaps to keep sand and rocks from damaging the wings are able to land and take off on the beach at Hallo Bay during low tides. Tides in this area are normally about fourteen feet and much of the bay is exposed during low tides.



Our group watches the sow with the cub shown in the image at the left interact with the group of people across the slough.



A friendly sow with cub (not shown) has no concerns as she rolls around on the ground near us. A joy to watch!

Alaska's Bears

All the bears that we encountered and photographed on this trip were coastal brown bears. These bears are bigger than the grizzly bears that inhabit the interior areas of Alaska and isolated mountainous areas of the Lower 48 states. It was thought at one time that brown bears and grizzlies were different subspecies but according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game taxonomists, they are both the same species, *urus arctos*. The brown bears on Kodiak Island are the biggest and considered a separate subspecies since they have been geographically separated for thousands of years. Brown bears are the largest land-based predators on earth.

The coastal bears grow larger than the interior grizzlies because of the abundance of fish and sedges in their diets and the generally milder climate near the coast. From my personal experiences over the years observing and photographing both grizzlies and brown bears, the interior grizzlies are more aggressive in defending their food and territory than the coastal bears. With the abundance of food, coastal bears have learned to tolerate other bears in close proximity and seem to settle differences over food without serious injuries although more serious fights probably occur during mating periods. This may also explain why these bears tend to accept our presence without fear or aggression.

Let me hasten to add that the strict protocol for bear viewing has been refined over many years to be predictable and non-threatening for the bears. Most importantly, we are always in tight group, quiet, and make no sudden movements that might alarm the bears.



A cub entertains us, eventually falling off his perch.



A lactating female bear lounges in the verdant grasses of Hallo Bay.

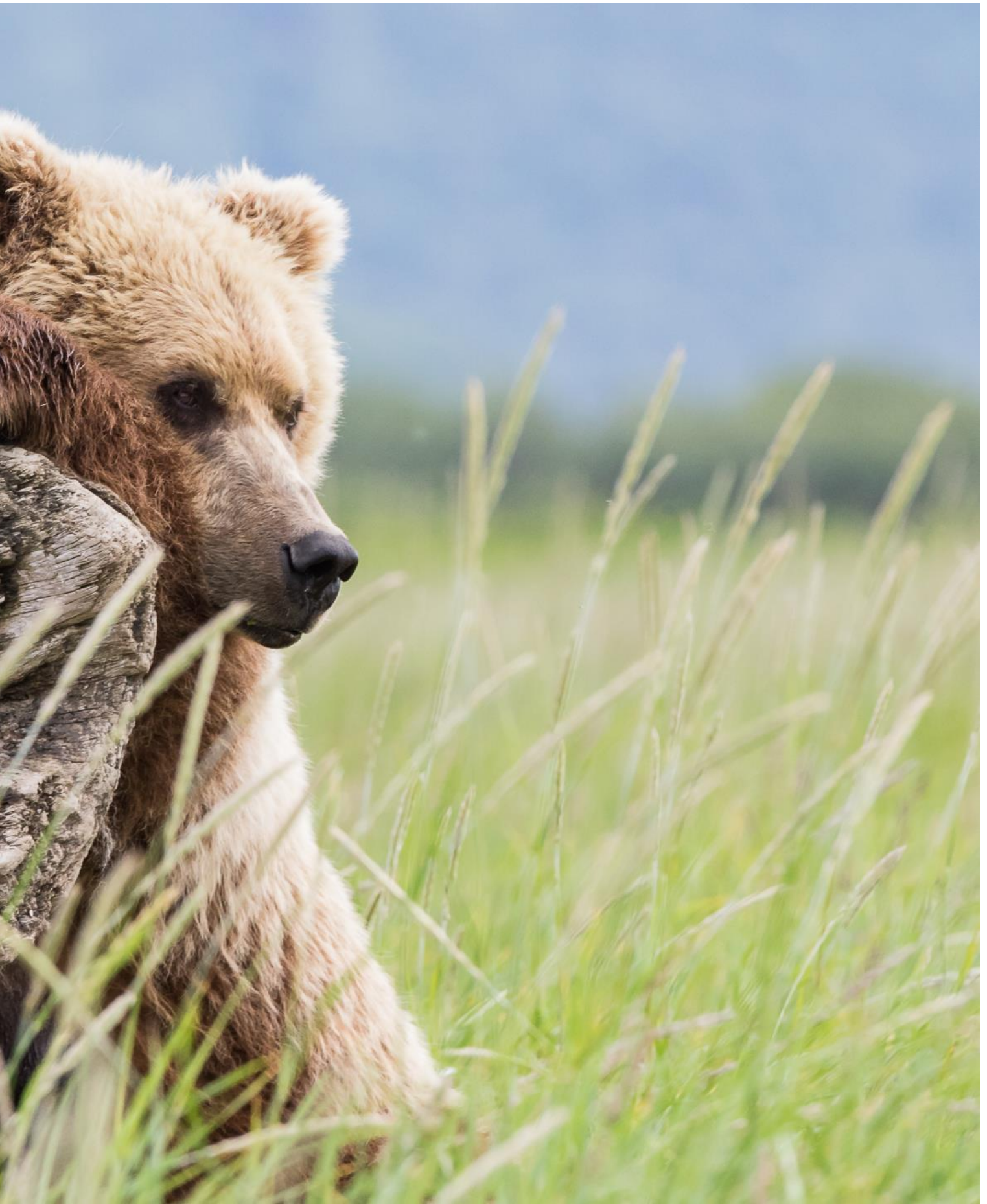


Two sows with separate cubs interact on a Hallo Bay beach at low tide. Many believe this is unusual behavior since sows are usually very protective of their cubs from other bears, including other sows with cubs.



Two cubs run toward our location as they play a chase game on the beach.





A Hallo Bay sow rests on a driftwood log while she keeps an eye on her two cubs, who are feeding nearby.

The Fin Whale

A day or so after our arrival at Hallo Bay, Captain Chuck said he had heard that a whale had washed up on a beach in another bay down the coast from us and offered to take us to see if we could find it. We all agreed that if we could find it, that it would likely be a rare opportunity to see bears feeding on a whale.

It took several hours to relocate the boat to Kuliak Bay but the whale was located not long after we arrived. Bears had already found it (no surprise since their sense of smell is superb) and had eaten part of the tail and most of the exposed flipper.

After anchoring the boat a good distance from the whale we spent the rest of that day watching and photographing bears from the skiff. The next morning we went back in the skiff to the whale location and found even more bears in the area. The seas were dead calm so the skiff floated calmly making it a fantastic moment to watch and photograph the big feast. My biggest surprise was how difficult it was for the bears to chew through the hide and rip off a chunk of blubber or meat. It was a lot of work. At times there were five or six big bears all working on various portions of the whale with only occasional disputes over who had ownership of a particular part of the giant carcass. What a special opportunity we had to watch bear activity in a totally wild and natural setting! This was a highlight of the trip for all of us.



Two bears disagree but never bite each other at the whale site. Their vocalizations, however, would stand your hair on end.



A large bear strikes a pose on the whale carcass, as if to say, "This is all mine!".



A sow with a large cub on the left is assertive enough to feed on the whale's tail while four larger bears also feed on the whale.



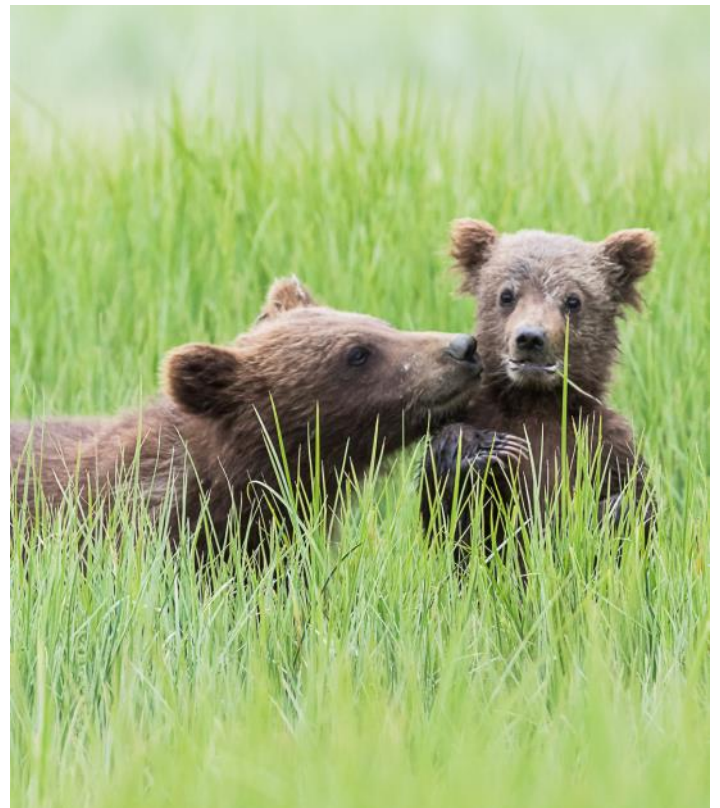
This bear looks down the beach toward the whale but was more interested in trying to catch salmon jumping near shore.



A brown bear sow with two normal spring cubs and one very small but, apparently healthy cub.



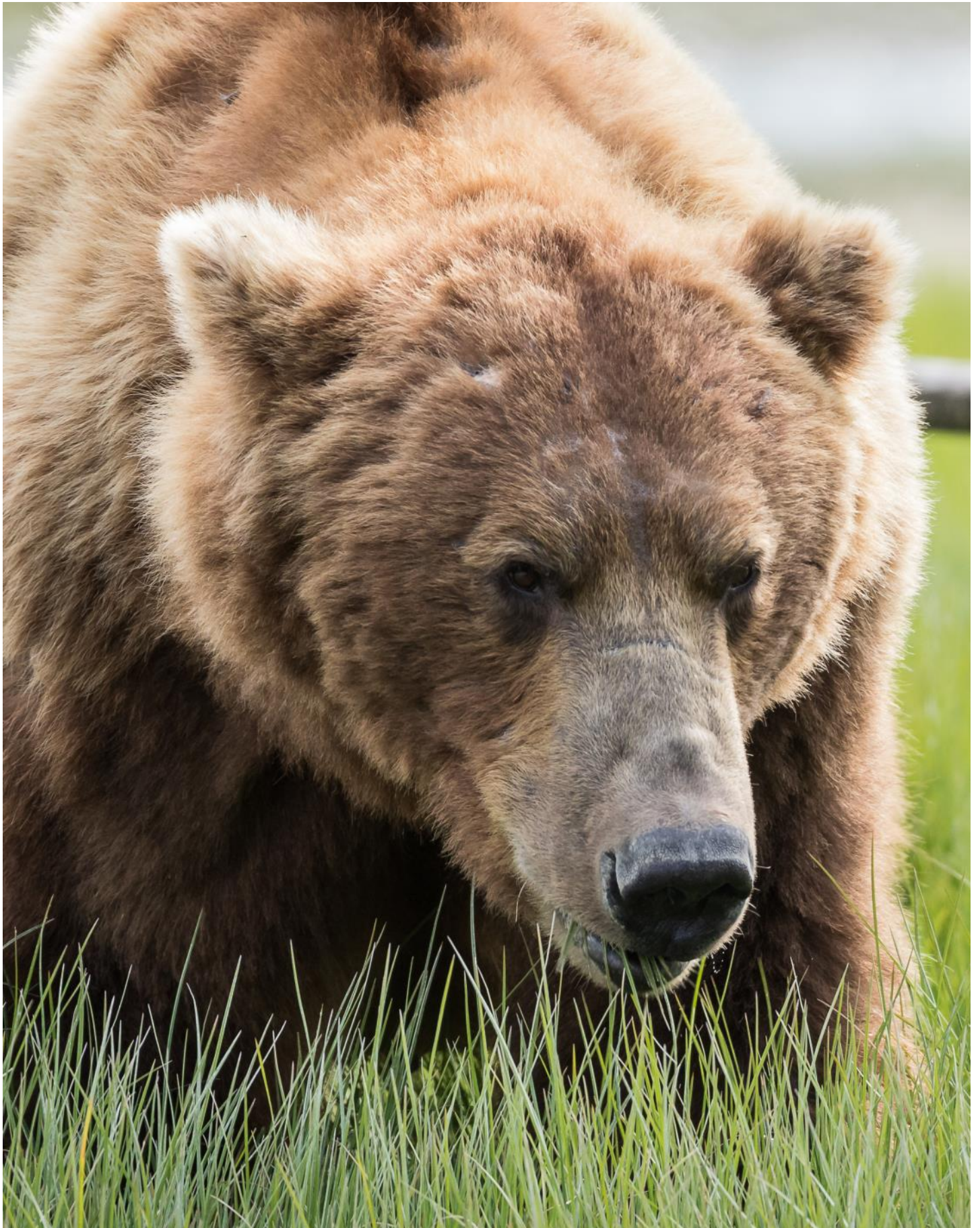
A cub stands to check out our group. He repeated this numerous times and kept us entertained.



Cubs enjoy some time in tall grass at Kukuk Bay.



This small sow found a comfortable spot on a piece of driftwood near our group. She was very tired and spent some time sleeping in that position. Some bears feel safer near a group of people when bigger bears are in the area. She had apparently lost her cub.



Another large male bear gets pretty close to our group in Kukak Bay.

It's More Than Just Bears

Being in a pristine environment in Alaska's wilds is more than just about seeing and photographing bears. For me, the whole experience of being in this remote untouched land and enjoying all that nature can provide made the trip worthwhile. The bears were the icing on the cake.

Of course having a home for six days on the bear boat with all of its comforts just added to the experience. Alaska's weather, even in mid-summer, can be challenging and having a warm, dry, and safe place to sleep at night with three delicious meals prepared everyday made the trip easy and enjoyable. Traveling with good friends and like-minded people added greatly to the experience. Trips like this are memorable and a great learning experience.

One lesson that I have learned from this and other trips, is to have an open mind, photographically speaking. By that I mean taking advantage of all the opportunities that come your way. For example, in our case, even though the primary purpose of our trip was to photograph bears, we had many unique chances to make other beautiful images of birds, seals, and the landscape.



A female oyster catcher with a small critter she found in the beach sands of Ninagiak Island. Holding it in her beak, she is feeding it to her chick.



Our boat, "Breezers", is to the right of a private yacht that was anchored in Hallo Bay for a couple of days. In the background are the 6,000 foot peaks of the Barrier Range on the Alaska Peninsula with the terminus of Hallo Glacier visible on the right behind our bear boat.



A harbor seal, who appears to be grinning, basks in the sun on a bed of barnacles in Kukak Bay.



Male (left) and female oystercatchers on a small island in Kukak Bay.



Bald Eagle, Kukak Bay



Olga, our intrepid bear guide and amazing naturalist.



Adventurers Leslee and Karen, enjoying beach time at Hallo Bay.



My good friends and fellow travelers at Kukak Bay spending time with more than a few annoying insects!



BEAR BOAT