

# PhotoFile

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A MINI-MAGAZINE FEATURING PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARTICLES BY JOHN R. DELAPP

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## Chinitna Bay Bear Camp





Publisher/Editor

**John R. DeLapp**  
**13101 Elmore Rd.**  
**Anchorage, AK 99516**

jrdelapp@gci.net  
www.delappphotography.com

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Cover photo: Grizzly bear spring cubs on the beach of a salmon stream in Lake Clark National Park, Alaska.

### ***First Issue of PhotoFile***

*I think as photographers we are always looking for new ways to display and share our images with friends, family, photographers, and promote our work. In the past, I have produced a number of self-published photo books using online publishers, utilizing mainly Blurb.com, to document some of my trips, display my photographs, and provide viewers with a tangible product (a book!) of my work. My books, by the way, can be seen and reviewed by going to Blurb's website and searching under my name. They can also be purchased directly from Blurb.com.*

*I may continue working on additional book projects in the future, but I wanted to try my hand at a shorter type of publication that could be used to document and share my photo trips/ projects and occasional thoughts on photography. This mini-magazine format may accomplish this in a quick, and reasonably easy way. My intent is to provide this publication in both print form and as a PDF file that can be downloaded for viewing in the virtual world which is so popular and compelling today. Time will tell how well I accomplished these goals. In any case, I am happy to have you along for the ride in this new venture.*

### **Chinitna Bay Bear Camp**

On the weekend of August 3, I accompanied a group of photographers who were mostly members of the Alaska Society of Outdoor & Nature Photographers ([www.asonp.org](http://www.asonp.org)) for a three day, two night stay at Great Alaska's Bear Camp. After driving to Great Alaska's lodge in Sterling, Alaska, we met with a staff person for a brief orientation of our trip before transferring to their vans for the short ride to the Soldotna airport. At the airport, we and our gear were carefully weighed, divided into two equal groups, and loaded into two single engine planes for the 40 minute flight to the camp, which is located within Lake Clark National Park on the west side of Cook Inlet.

There is no airstrip at the camp so the planes land on the beach front of camp when the tide is low. This was an interesting experience since the beach is neither straight nor level, but the pilots got us in and out without a hitch. Virtually all supplies for the camp arrive by air, including jugs of drinking water. In the future there may be a well developed at the site to eliminate the need to fly in water.

The camp facilities were neat and clean, but rustic, consisting of Weatherport tents erected on a wooden platforms and decks. Each tent was set up for two people, with simple wooden bed frames, mattresses, and bedding. Separate tents served as dining





Aerial view of Chinitna Bay Bear Camp.

hall, kitchen, and “homes” for the four camp staff. Since there was no running water, bathrooms consisted of separate men’s and women’s pit toilets. To discourage bears from entering the camp, an electrified fence surrounded the perimeter of the camp. Power for the fence came from a car battery which was continuously charged by a solar panel.

Behind the camp was a tidal marsh bisected by a small salmon stream. There was an established bear viewing platform next to the stream which was our primary location for observing and photographing bears, although bears were likely to be seen anywhere at various times. Bear activity was largely governed by the tides and presence of fish. While we were there, the chum salmon run was just beginning so the bears were keying on the stream, hungry for fish. Lacking fish, the bears rely mainly on sedges from the meadows.

Our camp manager, Caprice, was in her seventh summer as a bear guide so was very familiar with the habits of the bears and did a great job of getting us in good positions for photography. We saw lots of bears and were fortunate to watch and photograph spring cubs, one-year olds, and two-year old cubs in addition to various adults. The best time to



Caprice, camp manager and primary guide.

visit the camp is in early August because the salmon do not arrive in this stream until then. Until that time, the bears spend most of their time in the meadows eating vegetation. Once the fish arrive, there is much more to





Caprice, (right) gives photographers some last minute instructions before heading out to the viewing platform.

watch than when they are mainly eating vegetation. When fish arrive, there is more action as the bears are concentrated on the stream chasing fish and vying for fishing spots. Some bears opted not to catch their own fish, instead waiting for another to make the catch and then try to steal the fish. I watched one amazing long distance chase across the tidal flats that expended a huge amount of energy—all for one fish.

As soon as most bears caught a fish, they would immediately head for an isolated spot away from the river to avoid the risk of losing their prize to a larger bear. Our guides were always very careful leading us to our viewing locations to avoid bears that might be hidden from view in the tall grass, brush, and trees near the stream.



This large male bear staked out his spot in the middle of the stream at low tide and watched for salmon.



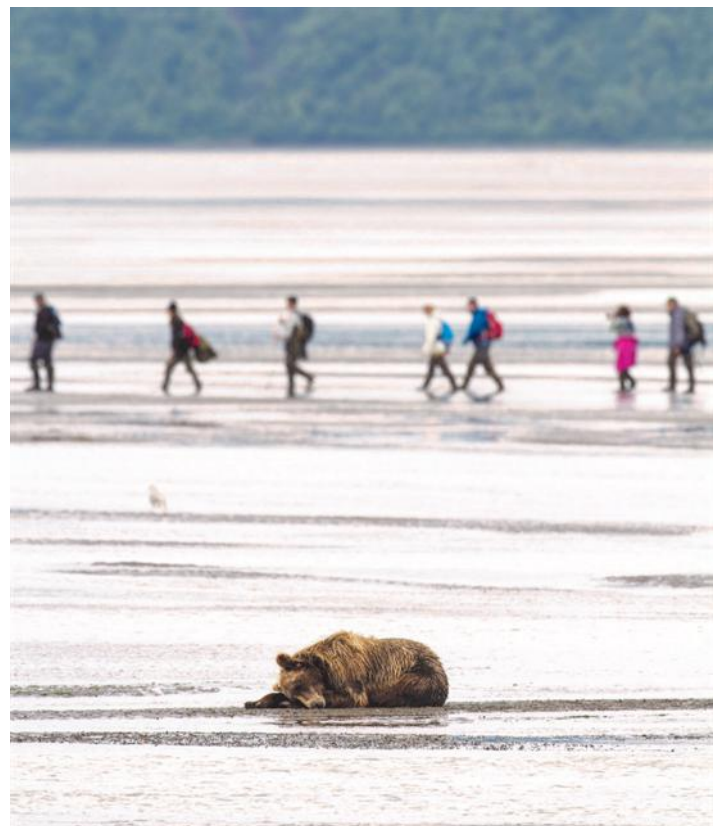


The ASONP photo group, ready for action, on the beach near the mouth of the stream at low tide. Our two guides are on the left.

At low tide the bears moved out to the mouth of the stream or nearby tidal flats and waited for the rising tide to bring more fish into the stream. A few also looked for clams. Some bears just rested and kept an eye out for a ripple or splash from a fish navigating the shallow water. During these times, we walked as a group up the beach a half-mile or so from camp to good viewing locations. This offered a completely different background for photos but did not allow the close encounters that the viewing platform at the stream provided.

The beach at low tide is public land and is, therefore, available for use by any aircraft. So, when bears were visible in the area from the air, planes would land with “day-trippers”. Their pilot/guide would lead them to various viewing locations on the beach or tidal flats. The bears seemed to be used to this activity and paid no attention to these small groups of people as they walked about on the flats, usually keeping a discrete and safe distance from the bears.

There were various times during each day when the bears seemed to disappear, probably





napping or wandering in the brush or nearby forests. During these periods, we hung out in camp, had coffee and snacks, and dried our gear from the cold, intermittent rain that had descended during our stay. Our guides did a great job watching for bear activity near camp, and when bears were in view, they were always ready and available to take groups out for more photos.

Despite the challenges from the wet weather, the experience at Bear Camp was outstanding. Being so close to bears in their natural environment, hearing them breathe, vocalize, and interact was awe inspiring. I left with fond memories and many great bear pictures, some of which are included here. Oh yeah, I should not forget to mention the food; every meal was delicious, well prepared, abundant, and served by friendly staff.

More information about Great Alaska and their other adventure tours can be found at [www.greatalaska.com](http://www.greatalaska.com).

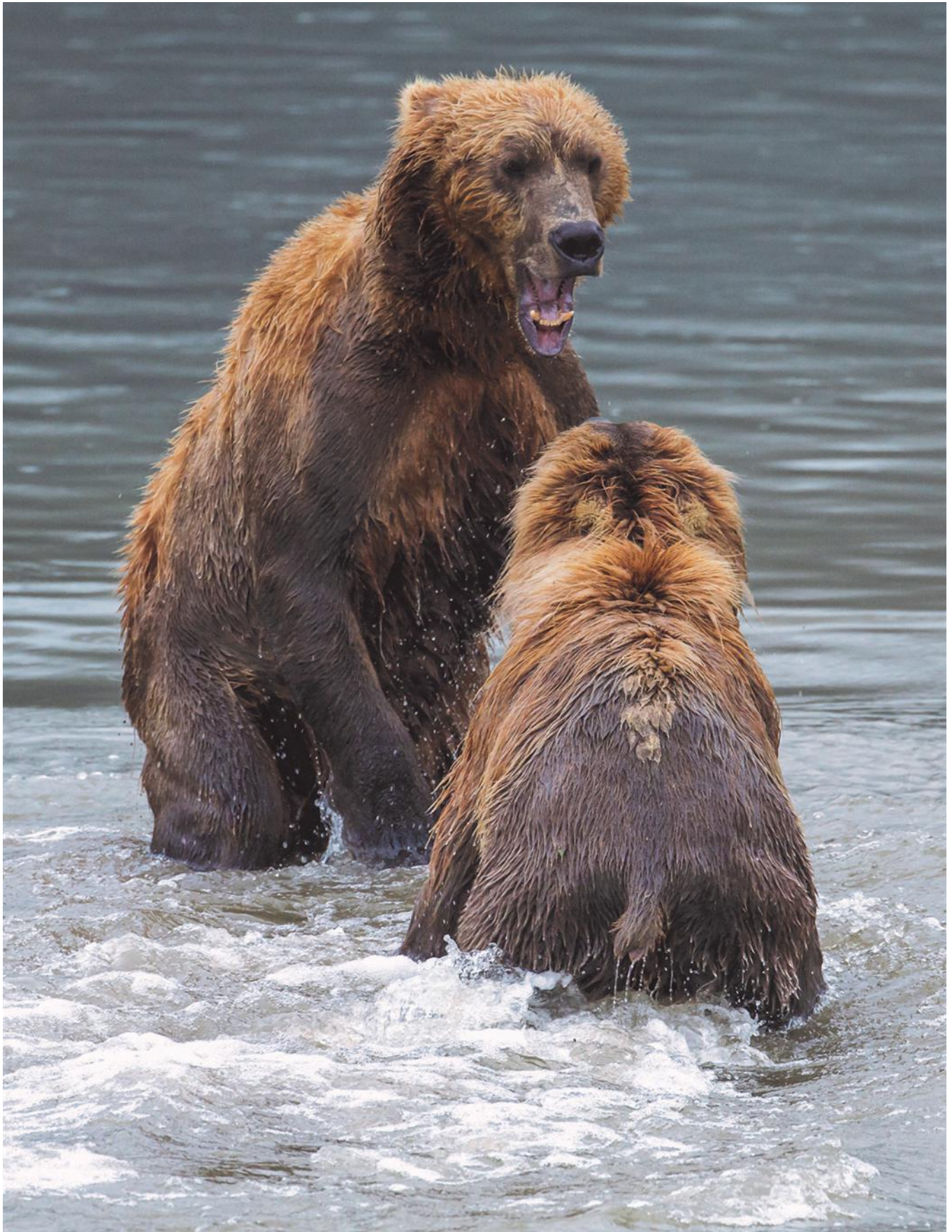


Our camp cook.



This female bear was running straight toward the camera in pursuit of a salmon she had just seen.





A large male bear was being challenged for a fishing spot by the smaller bear. It was a serious confrontation but no contact was made and the smaller bear decided not to risk injury and backed down. Impressive display, none-the-less!





A sow carries a fresh chum salmon away from the river into tall grass and brush to share it with her cub.



A sow with two cubs approach the stream while another bear stands on the far bank.





Bob Glassmaker enjoys the view from the platform while his wife Deb watches with binoculars.



Sub-adult siblings look for fish in the stream.



A sow and her two sub-adult cubs wait in the grass for a larger bear to leave the area.





A view of the tidal flats at Chinitna Bay with mountains of the Alaska Range in the background.





Two small private structures, in-holdings within Lake Clark National Park, can be seen in the background.





Grizzly Bear Family at Chinitna Bay  
Lake Clark National Park, Alaska

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