

BROWN BEARS ATTRACT VISITORS TO KODIAK ISLAND, ALASKA By Patricia Arrigoni

KODIAK ISLAND, GULF OF ALASKA - Something like 3000 Kodiak brown bears roam this archipelago when once they were almost extinct. Thanks to President Franklin D. Roosevelt who established the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge in 1941, visitors can now see the largest carnivores on earth in their natural habitat. The fishing for silver salmon and halibut is also outstanding.

I made a trip in August to Kodiak and Afognak Islands with my husband and another couple with the American Land Conservancy out of San Francisco, and we did see large brown bears and hear wild bear stories. Carl Christiansen, our boat captain, told us about an encounter that happened to him.

“Al Cratty’s girlfriend had a dream he was mauled by a bear,” Carl said. “We went fishing together at Big Creek and were on the bank when Al caught a salmon. I looked over the riverbank and saw a bear watching us. I started to yell and wave my arms to scare the bear off.

“Al dropped the fish and went for his gun. The bear sprung for Al passing me like lightening and landed on Al. I had brought heavier ammunition because of hearing about the dream, and I shot the bear three times to save Al who had some puncture holes in one arm. Al turned out to be OK.”

Still Carl, carrying a large handgun, took us hiking one evening near Old Harbor on Kodiak Island to see the bears. We hiked down trails and saw where the bears slept in straw near a stream. There was plentiful bear scat, bones of dead fish and a million bugs. Fortunately for us the bears were in some tall trees away from where we stopped and did not come over while we were there.

From a safe distance on Carl’s boat, I was able to photograph a Kodiak brown bear fishing for salmon. He saw us too and stood up on his hind legs to a height of about nine feet to give us a good look before going back to gorging himself on fresh fish.

Getting around Kodiak and Afognak Islands is done by floatplanes. Our flight up to Afognak Island for the first part of our stay was piloted by local hero, Willie Fulton, in a De Havilland Beaver DHC-2 Aircraft owned by Andrews Airways. It was small carrying only four passengers, luggage and all our fishing equipment.

As we flew over we could see that Afognak was a rugged, wild island with green carpeted cliffs, small rocky coves and inlet bays with narrow black sand beaches.

We stayed in a rustic lodge whose owner asked us not to mention their names as they only like repeat customers and their friends as guests. He added that not everyone was comfortable with their facilities which included home-made bunk beds and outhouses. The setting here was on a fjord-like bay with a background of stunning glacier-covered mountains.

On Afognak we fished with flies (catch and release) while looking nervously over our shoulders for bears. I took a crash course in fly-fishing from the more expert members of our group but caught only one silver salmon though others did much better.

An incredibly heart-stopping flight on a floatplane carried five of us plus luggage to Old Harbor back on Kodiak Island. This plane ride took us over mountains with heavy timber, lakes and bays, and then up through high peaks still white with snow.

As I looked at the mountain peaks stretching endlessly before us, I wondered how our tiny little floatplane was ever going to get there. After the longest hour of my life, we landed safely in the water off a deserted airline runway in Old Harbor.

This fishing village of 250 people is located on the Southeast side of Kodiak Island. We climbed ashore dragging the luggage up after us and were picked up in a van and driven to the Ocean View Lodge situated on a bluff overlooking Sitkalidak Strait.

The hotel was plain but quite comfortable and included a large public lobby decorated with bear hides, deer and goat mounts, blue and arctic foxes, king salmon and a variety of puffins and ducks.

Kodiak Island, also known as the “Emerald Island,” and nearby Afognak Island provided us with amazing wildlife viewing. Besides the bears we saw two sea otters frolicking just off the beach and a pair of huge ravens hovering nearby. There were bald eagles swooping around, white gulls, white mountain goats, a couple of Sitka black-tailed deer, hundreds of horned and tufted puffins with bright orange bills and a wide variety of ducks. We were also lucky to view four white orca whales and several humpback whales.

Our fishing in Three Saints Bay from Carl Christiansen’s boat, the “Amasuuq” (meaning “King Salmon”) was prolific. All four of us limited out with five silver (coho) salmon each of between ten and sixteen pounds. Others in our group on another boat caught about a dozen halibut.

Kodiak and Afognak Islands are known for splendid scenery and spectacular fishing, but they are most famous for the Kodiak brown bears, so be prepared for a memorable adventure and take along strong binoculars and cameras with telephoto lenses plus a little bug spray.

IF YOU GO:

AIR - Kodiak is served by Alaska Airlines or ERA Aviation, 12 Airport Rd., Kodiak AK 99615. (907) 487-4363; (800) 866-8394. www.flyeara.com; Email: airlineinfo@eraaviation.com. Alaska Air: (907) 487-4363; (800) 252-7522. Private charters fly to Afognak Island or Old Harbor. We flew on Andrews Air: (907) 487-2566; Email: AndrewAir1@aol.com; www.andrewairways.com. We also flew on Island Air Service: (907) 487-4596; (800) 478-6196. Email: ISLANDAIR@ALASKA.COM; www.Kodiakislandair.com.

ACCOMMODATIONS:

KODIAK - Salmon Run Guesthouse; Roy & Treena Breyfogle, 410 Hillside Dr.; (907) 486-0091; Treena@Salmonrunguesthouse.com; www.salmonrunguesthouse.com. We had a small apt. with a living room/kitchen (complimentary snacks & breakfast), bedroom with twin beds. TV and free DVD's; \$80.

KODIAK - Shelikof Lodge, 211 Thorsheim Ave.; (907) 486-4141; email: kyle@ptialaska.net; Small room on second floor (no elevator) double and single beds, no closet, free shuttle to airport; \$100.

OLD HARBOR: Ocean View Lodge, 11 Elderberry St.; (907) 286-2381.

Oceanviewlodge@starband.net; www.OceanViewLodge.com. Package deals are offered for fishing, lodging, meals, bait and saltwater tackle, fish processing, rain gear and boots. Packages for 3.5 days fishing, 4 nights meals and lodging are \$2377 per person. Prices for 6.5 days fishing, 7 nights meals and lodging are \$3486 per person. Taxes are included.

MISCELLANEOUS: Visitor Information Center and Chamber of Commerce, 100 Marine Way, Suite 300, Kodiak, AK 99615; (907) 486-5557. Email: chamber@kodiak.org; www.kodiak.org. Kodiak Island Convention & Visitors Bureau: vist@kodiak.org.

Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, 1390 Buskin River Road, Kodiak, Alaska 99615; (907) 487-2600.

American Land Conservancy, Tim Richardson, Director of Gov't Affairs; (301) 770-6496; tim@alcnet.org.