

BROWN BEARS PROMINENT ON KODIAK & AFOGNAK ISLANDS, ALASKA

By Patricia Arrigoni

KODIAK ISLAND, GULF OF ALASKA – The brown bear raised up on his hind legs and stared at us. He had been busy fishing for salmon at the mouth of a spawning stream when he saw our boat slowly approaching. We watched him with binoculars and telephoto cameras in awe of his great height for he was a Kodiak brown bear whose species are the largest carnivores on earth.

Our boat captain, Carl Christiansen, guessed him to be around 9' tall. Some grew even bigger he informed us.

It was late August in Three Saints Bay and we had spent the morning fishing for salmon in a place called Silver Bay near Old Harbor. Our group on this boat, the “Amasuq” (meaning “King Salmon”), were part of a group of nine who were touring the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska on a trip sponsored by the American Land Conservancy.

We watched the bear for almost an hour as he fished and gorged himself until he could hardly move. We learned that the Kodiak bear population, hunted almost to extinction by the late 1930's, were now plentiful and healthy with around 3000 animals living in the Kodiak Island archipelago. They were saved by the creation of the Kodiak

National Wildlife Refuge established in 1941 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Kodiak Island, also known as the “Emerald Island,” and nearby Afognak Island are located 250 miles southwest of Anchorage in the Gulf of Alaska. Both islands provide a paradise for hunters, fishermen, wildlife photographers and just plain nature lovers. While we watched the bear dance around the stream, two sea otters frolicked just off the beach and a couple of huge ravens hovered nearby waiting for a chance to snatch the bear’s leavings. A bald eagle swooped around checking out the action and white gulls stood patiently waiting for their turn.

From the boat we also saw three 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 or five black and white orca whales and several humpback whales.

Our fishing had been prolific with four of us limiting out with five silver (coho) salmon each of between ten and sixteen pounds. We were not so lucky fishing for halibut though the rest of our group on another boat caught about a dozen.

Getting around Kodiak and Afognak Islands is done by plane as there are no super highways here. 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 float plane owned by Andrew

Airways. It carried four passengers, luggage and all our fish 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. Unfortunately, the Sitka spruce trees which covered the mountains had been heavily logged and crisscrossed with dirt roads.

On Afognak we fished with flies (catch & 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 and caught one silver salmon though others did much better.

An incredibly heart-stopping flight on a float plane 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 float plane was ever going to make it. Fortunately the weather was sunny and the winds fairly light and we landed safely (after the longest hour of my life), 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. After we climbed ashore dragging the luggage up after us, we were picked up in a van and driven to the Ocean View Lodge.

This hotel was 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. Two large decks overlooked Sitkalidak Strait

We spent a day upon our arrival in Alaska in the town of Kodiak, the largest metropolis on the island with a population of about 5000. There were two excellent museums including the Baranov, and the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository. We learned that eight Native corporations formed the Alutiiq Heritage Foundation in 1995. They built, support and govern the museum.

Sven Haakanson, director of Alutiiq Museum, gave us a tour which included roughly 7,000 years of history of the Alutiiq people. He told us how they were conquered and slaughtered by the Russians in 1784, what happened after the American purchase of Alaska in 1867 and about the 1964 tsunamis which had such a devastating effect on the island.

The Exxon Valdez Oil Spill in 1989 changed the lives of the islanders as it brought subsidized housing and welfare. The billion dollar settlement with the Exxon Oil Company also enabled large sections of the islands to be purchased from the natives for conservation purposes by groups such as the American Land Conservancy and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. One-half million acres have been added to the Kodiak Wildlife Refuge, Afognak Island State Park and Shuyak Island State Park.

But most of all, Kodiak is known for its famous bears so if you come to enjoy the island's magnificent scenery and spectacular fishing,

be prepared for some wild animal stories. Ask Carl Christiansen and he will tell you about the time the bear mauled his partner, Al Cratty, when they were salmon fishing and...

IF YOU GO:

AIR - Kodiak is served by Alaska Airlines or ERA Aviation, 12 Airport Rd., Kodiak AK 99615. (907) 266-8394; (800) 866-8394.

www.FlyEra.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: info@andrewairways.com; www.andrewairways.com. We also flew on Island Air Service: (907) 487-4596; (800) 478-6196. Email:

ISLANDAIR@ALASKA.COM; www.Kodiakislandair.com., 1420 Airport Way, Kodiak, AK 99615.

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; \$120 - \$180.

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; \$80 - \$110, (10/1 - 3/14 - \$70 - \$80)

OLD HARBOR: Ocean View Lodge, 11 Elderberry St.; (907) 286-2381. Oceanviewlodge@starband.net; or Oceanviewlodge@aol.com.; www.OceanViewLodge.com. Package deals are offered for fishing, lodging, meals, bait and saltwater tackle, fish processing, rain gear and boots.

RESTAURANTS:

Henry's Great Alaskan Restaurant, 512 Marine Way, Kodiak, 907-486-8844. We ate here twice and enjoyed a menu with a great selection. Crowded, but good service and fun.

Old Powerhouse Restaurant, 516 E. Marine Way, Kodiak, 907-481-1088. Features "fantastic" Japanese food and dining plus a terrific view of the water with fishing and charter boats sailing by.

MISCELLANEOUS: Kodiak Island Convention & Visitors Bureau, 100 Marine Way, Suite 300, Kodiak, AK 99615; (907) 486-4782 or 800-789-4782. Email: visit@kodiak.org.

Kodiak Chamber of Commerce; Same address, (907) 486-5557; Email: chamber@kodiak.org.; www.kodiak.org.

Kodiak Adventures for bear viewing tours. 907-486-8766; Email: Kodiakreservations@Alaska.net.

Kodiak National Wildlife Visitors Center, 402 Center Street, Kodiak, Alaska 99615; (907) 487-2626.

1-888-592-6940; www.kodiakwildliferefuge.org.

American Land Conservancy, Tim Richardson, Director of Government Affairs; (301) 770-6496; tim@alcnet.org. www.alcnet.org.