

WILDLIFE

Bears rule in Alaska's Katmai National Park

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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"Two bears are coming down the path toward us," warned the park ranger. "We had better move back and wait on this rise until they pass by."

As we stood on the small knoll right beside the path, two well-fed brown bears (larger cousins of the grizzly) ambled by, seemingly ignoring us.

Just when we thought it was safe to continue on, another ranger radioed to say that more bears were hanging around the foot bridge across the river where we were headed. We wait because bears always have the right of way.

Bears are why we've come to Alaska's Katmai National Park. Mid-July is the height of the sockeye salmon run when massive numbers swim up the Brooks River to spawn. Their progress slows when they struggle up Brooks Falls, where bears wait in ambush and gorge themselves on the bountiful buffet.

We stayed in the park campground, surrounded by an electric fence, and twice a day took the mile and a half hike to the falls, across the bridge at the river mouth, then along a narrow path through thick bush.

Bears could be anywhere, but the most frequent "bear jams" were at the bridge. Park rangers were stationed on either side, and if bears came too close (which often happened), they would close the bridge until the bears wandered off.

A raised viewing platform looks over the falls, where it felt like we were in the midst of a wildlife documentary. One evening, we counted 21 bears from one spot. Each has different fishing strategies.

Some stood motionless and stared into the water, then suddenly pounced on a fish. Some stood high on their hind legs to get a better view over the water, while others "snorkelled" with their heads just under the water.

The stars of the show stood on top of the falls and waited for the fish to jump. If a bear timed it just right, it could simply open its mouth while the salmon unknowingly jumped right in.

Bears don't like being close to each other, but here the pickings are so good that they tolerate the crowded conditions or at least they try.

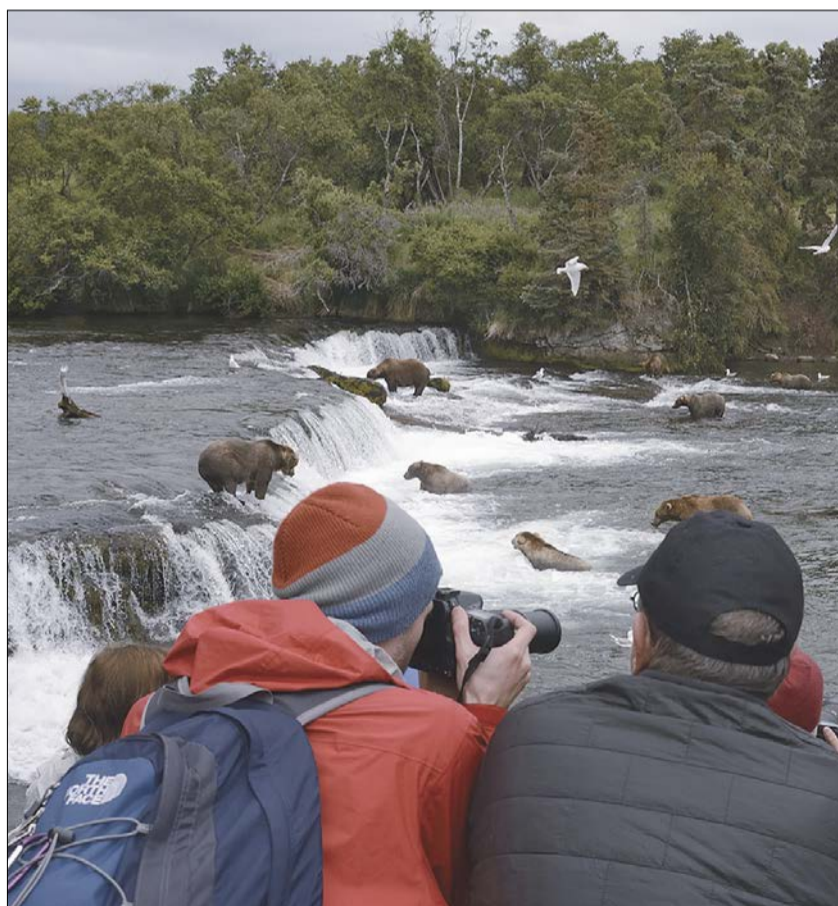
Though the fish are plentiful, squabbles over prime fishing spots are frequent. Often it's simply a growling match until one bear backs down, but sometimes it gets serious. A mother felt threatened by a large male getting too close to her two cubs, so she attacked with such ferocity that the male almost twice her size retreated.

While Katmai today is most famous for bears, the park was originally formed to protect the



ABOVE, BELOW, RIGHT: Brown bears have the right of way in Katmai National Park. Animals congregate at the falls where their hungry cubs and tourists watch as sockeye salmon leap into waiting jaws of adult bears. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

BOTTOM RIGHT: Compacted ash from the Novarupta volcano is eroded into tower-like formations along the Ukak River.



unique geology. The 1912 eruption of Novarupta volcano was the world's largest in the 20th century.

Ten times as powerful as Mount St. Helens, the explosion dramatically transformed the land, leaving ash deposits more than 200 metres deep.

The first expedition into the remote area after the blast dubbed it the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes

because of the many fumaroles still belching steam.

We took a trip into the valley along the park's only road, traveling in a converted school bus fitted with huge tires to cross the shallow streams.

While the smokes are gone, the valley still looks like something from another planet, with reddish ash devoid of vegetation stretching

as far as we could see.

A park ranger led us on a hike into the eerie, other-worldly setting where compacted ash was cut into a deep gorge by the Ukak River. Banks are solid enough to be carved into steep vertical cliffs, but fragile enough to collapse or be sculpted into tower-like formations. A strong wind can still stir up the 100-year-old ash and pumice to

the extent that distant airports are closed.

We had come for the bears, which certainly didn't disappoint, but the bizarre landscape turned out to be an equally compelling part of the trip.

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