





**My Favorite Alaska Trip**

Story and photos by Donna Bush

If you've read my stories over the years with *Slidell Magazine*, then you know I love Alaska. I've visited numerous times, everything from girls' camping and kayaking trips, to hiking/biking/fishing trips. This month, I want to share with you one of my favorite visits to Alaska. It's a trip I've experienced a few times over the years, and it's hands-down the best!

How about living aboard a 65' boat in Shelikof Strait along the Alaska Peninsula for six days? This is the perfect place to unplug and recharge! To get there, I fly from New Orleans to Anchorage; then to Kodiak Island for a night. Weather permitting, the following day I board a float plane that takes me to wherever the boat is anchored. No, this is not a scavenger hunt, flying around looking for the boat. The boat captain and pilot communicate before we take off and it's a straight flight. So, other than unplugging, why is this my favorite way to see Alaska? First, the scenery is stellar! The abundant wildlife is absolutely incredible. I've photographed numerous grizzly bears, foxes, bald eagles, sea otters, sea lions and an amazing number of different birds.

Keep in mind, I haven't just taken this trip once or twice, but multiple times! My first trip was in 2002. Yep, back when my camera used film.

So, how did a girl from Louisiana end up in such a remote area of Alaska? It all started when another local photographer put together a boat trip with all Louisiana nature photographers. I was one of the lucky ones invited. There were 5 of us – two ladies and three guys.

My friend Marie and I went up early to explore other areas of Alaska. She had traveled to Alaska many times, but this was my first. We visited Valdez and



stayed in a cool hand-built log cabin in Chitina where we drove the Kennicott/McCarthy Highway and experienced a taste of what Alaska-life was like back in the mining days. We were even lucky enough to visit Denali National Park.

There's nothing quite like living onboard a boat in a remote area of Alaska, surrounded by the most amazing scenery and wildlife imaginable. I've lost count of how many times I've been asked if I was taking an Alaska cruise each time someone learned I was traveling there. Yes! I live on a boat, but this is not like any cruise trip, ever!

Let me tell you more about our home for 6 days. The boat is 65' in length, with 5 cabins and 2 heads (bathrooms); a large galley/sitting/dining area and a bridge (driving) area roomy enough for us all to hang out and glass the shores for wildlife. We stayed on the large boat to sleep, eat meals and motor to different locations. Once anchored, we climbed aboard a 22' skiff with twin 115 Yamaha engines and ventured to the shore. The skiff was unique, as it offered a winch-lowered boarding ramp at the front, making it easy to just walk off and onto the beach.

Shelikof Strait is located between the northwest side of Kodiak Island and Katmai National Park, along the beautiful Aleutian Mountain Range. There are a variety of locations where we can anchor in protected waters. I should explain that, unlike coastal Louisiana, Alaska experiences tides in feet not inches. Tides and weather greatly influence where we anchor and where we go ashore.

That first trip was eventful on so many levels. We met up with the boat in Kukak Bay on the Katmai Coast. After lunch, we motored to Hallo Bay for our first session with the bears. Hallo is a large, sandy beach located in Katmai National Park beneath the Aleutian peaks. There are three glacial-fed rivers



that drain into the bay. It is a favorite place for grizzly bears to gather and feast on rich sedge grass along the mud flats. At low tide, the bears dig along the tidal flats for razor clams. I am so glad I was able to see and experience the richness of Hallo Bay. Nowadays, it is a very popular day flight for bear viewing. Surprisingly, the bears are quite tolerant of the planes and the people.

We motored over in the skiff as far up Hallo Creek as we could, then walked the remaining way. We spot a sow with a spring cub sleeping; another sow with a 1-year old cub, and several adults, probably males. We set up and began photographing, while Chuck, our captain, returned to the beach to check on the skiff. More bears wandered into the meadow, including two that began play-fighting with each other. This can mean that they are siblings, or it could be a mating ritual. At times, they appeared to be dancing as they stood on their hind legs and wrestled together. When Chuck returned, we loaded up and headed to the main boat, where we all pitched in to help with dinner.

Alaska is unique in many ways and one of those relates to bears. It is the only state that has all three species of North American bears – brown bears and grizzly bears, black bears and polar bears. Brown bears and

grizzly bears are considered the same species and most people use the terms interchangeably. They are found almost everywhere in the state. Brown bears range from 7-9 feet in length; with males weighing 400-1500 pounds and females weighing 200-850 pounds. They range in color from dark brown to blonde. Black bears are usually smaller than both brown and polar bears; reaching 4-6 feet in length, with males weighing 150-400 pounds and females weighing 125-250 pounds. Here's the interesting thing – they can range in color from black to brown. However, brown bears have a prominent shoulder hump that black bears do not have. That hump is all muscle, allowing brown bears to exert enough force to crack open clams, tear through rotting trees in search of grubs or rodents, and dig their way out of their winter dens. A grizzly bear's claws are at least 2 inches long, but can reach more than 4 inches. Front tracks measure 6-8 inches long and 7-9 inches wide, with hind tracks measuring 12-16 inches long and 8-10 ½ inches wide. Polar bears, the largest of all, reach 8-10 feet in length and are easily identifiable with their white to cream colored fur. Males weigh 600-1200 pounds. Females weigh 400-700 pounds.

The next morning dawned with fog and low clouds. We headed back to

Hallo again. As the wind began to pick up and the temperature dropped, the bears moved inland. It's as if they knew a storm was brewing. Back at the boat, Chuck listened to the weather forecast – 30 knot winds and 20-foot seas! "We've got to head for protected waters! Hallo is too open to anchor with even 10 knot winds!" The wind and seas really picked up. After the anchor was lifted, we made our way across the churning seas in search of sanctuary. Even though the 65-foot boat was tossed around like a bobbing cork in the ocean and we could hear food crashing in the fridge, as well as dishes in the cabinets, I felt confident with Chuck at the helm. After all, he ran a fishing boat in the Bering Sea for years. Think *The Deadliest Catch*.

About 90 minutes later, we reached the calm waters of Kukak Bay, where we originally met the boat. Still with fog and low ceiling at 8pm, the rain had tapered off to a gentle shower. The next morning brought more stormy weather – not a good day for photography. Instead, we used the day to motor to Geographic Harbor, located in Amalik Bay of Katmai National Park. It received this name due to the five 1916 National Geographic-sponsored expeditions to this area after the 1912 Katmai volcano eruptions. The volcano was later named Novarupta and the area



became known as *The Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes* due to the smoking, steaming ash that covered the ground 4 years later!

Geographic Harbor is the best location for photographing bears digging for clams and eating mussels. The gold-colored kelp offered a beautiful background. The next morning, we rose early to hopefully catch bears on the clam tide. Watching the bears dig allowed us to get a real sense of the strength of their upper body. They located the clam with their keen sense of smell, quickly dug a large hole in a matter of seconds, unearthed the clam, and used their brute strength to cracked it open. I remember one trip where a sow uncovered the clam, cracked it open by pushing it into the rocks, then served it on the back of her forefoot! The coolest thing was watching her



cub emulate her! The clams provide a necessary nutrient-rich addition to their diet. An average-size sow needs to eat approximately 200 clams per day to offset the energy burned digging for them.

Katmai is home to both Steller sea lions and harbor seals; which are in the pinniped family, Latin for 'fin footed.' Brown sea lions are extremely vocal, have visible ear flaps and are able to walk on land using their large flippers. Seals are a light or dark gray with some lighter or darker blotches. With their small flippers, they wiggle on their bellies on land but are quite efficient swimmers. They lack visible

ear flaps, and are much quieter than their noisy cousins, preferring to utter soft grunts. While both species dine on seafood and can exist in or out of the water, the less-social seal is far better adapted to live in the water than on land. Sea lions are a social group, often seen together in large crowds that can reach up to 1500! They love to hang together on rocks, known as a haulout, and converse loudly.

Bald eagles are as prevalent in Alaska as pigeons in the New Orleans French Quarter. Alaska boasts the highest population in North America, with estimates of 100,000-150,000 birds. Many stay year-round, wintering in Southeast Alaska, but some leave during the colder months. During salmon spawning, huge numbers gather in the rivers to feed on spawned-out salmon. In the summertime, bald



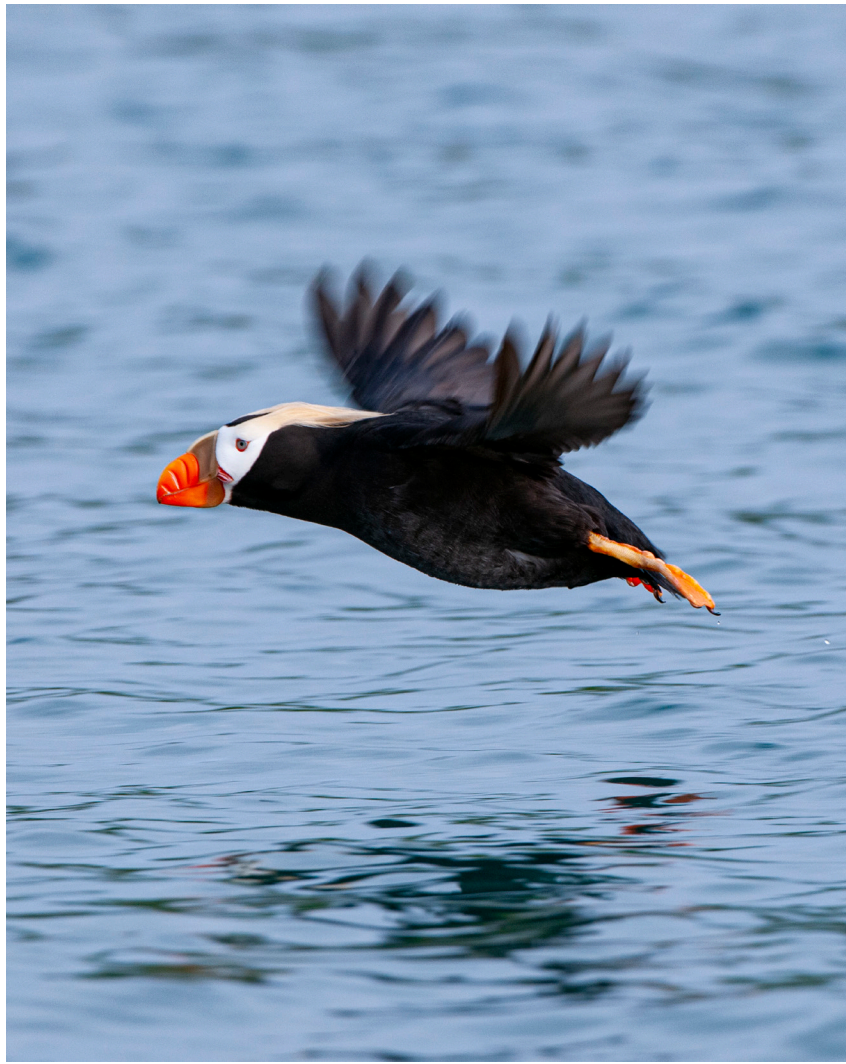
eagles are easily seen perched, hunting for food or feeding their young. Even though fish is their main diet, they are opportunistic and will prey on waterfowl, sea urchins, clams, crabs and carrion.

Typically, two eggs are laid in late April, several days apart. After incubation of about 35 days, the chicks hatch. Often, the weaker of the two doesn't make it to fledging, which occurs after approximately 75 days.

Once I switched to digital cameras, I could afford to shoot hundreds of images of flying bald eagles and other birds, especially tufted puffins. One of my favorites, they honestly don't look like they should be able to fly, but yet they do. Their small, short wings require them to put a ton of effort into taking flight; flapping their wings up to 400 beats per minute, as they use their brightly colored feet to run clumsily across the water. There's no wonder they are known as the clowns of the sea. But, look out! Once airborne, they can fly up to 40 mph! They look just as funny coming in for a landing, often belly-flopping or tumbling and rolling across the surface of the water. Of course, their intense orange beaks add to the clown appearance. These vibrantly colored bills are seasonal, appearing only during breeding season. Both male and female use their beaks and feet to excavate a burrow in a seaside cliff for their eggs that is approximately 34 inches long with an entrance 7.5 inches wide and 7 inches tall. All this for only one egg. As you might imagine, they feed on fish; diving as deep underwater as 360 feet to fill their mouths with fish to feed their young. They can carry up to 20 fish at a time. I've often seen them in large rookeries with other seabirds, such as black-legged kittiwakes, glaucous-winged gulls, common murre, and various auklet species.

Over my several trips, I've encountered many red foxes in Katmai. I've had them follow our group occasionally, seemingly more curious than cautious, and perhaps hoping for a bite of food. During my first trip, a pair of young, skinny foxes followed as we walked through the grassy fields of Hallo Bay. Chuck caught some tiny fish in the stream and fed them. Amazed and appreciative, they stayed with us until we left that day. Red foxes have striking colorations. Usually, they display a white-tipped tail and black stockings, but there are many variations. The outside of their ears may be black-tipped, with white inside. Their fur can range in color from a deep auburn to a light yellowish.

Bears mostly dine on fish, in particular, spawning salmon. But they also eat sedge grass, grubs, small rodents, ripe berries and clams. Females don't mate until they are 4-6 years old. Mating season occurs from May till early August with multiple partners.





When the female enters her den in the fall, the embryo will start to develop. She gives birth to 1-3 cubs while still in hibernation, usually in January or February. There have been occurrences where a female gave birth to four cubs. Can you imagine waking up from a long nap to find you have four children? When born, cubs are tiny and hairless, weighing less than half a pound. After a winter of sleeping and nursing, warm in the den with their mom, they emerge from their winter home weighing 4-6 pounds. The family searches for food as Mom rears her young, teaching them survival skills. They stay with her until approximately two years old. Known as sub-adults, they will fend for themselves until they reach sexual maturity.

One of the photo ops I've enjoyed the most is observing bear behavior.

I love the play fighting that they do, but there's so much more. Often, they will stand up to get a better look around. This is usually an act of curiosity as a result of a noise or smell, but can also happen when they are scared. When a bear stands up and rubs its back on a tree, most people assume they have an unreachable itch; but, actually, it is a way of marking their territory. The same is true of them clawing trees. Frequently, after a full belly, they will roll around, striking cute poses as if they were doing yoga. While Mom is busy digging for clams or eating sedge grass, her cubs will play with each other or amuse themselves playing with an empty shell, rock or their feet. I've been fortunate to watch a sow educating her cubs on proper ways to dig for clams, eat salmon, and even reprimanding them when

they demanded too much of her attention. She does not hesitate to discipline them! There was the time a sow with a spring cub we named "Whiney" was running to Mom every time a young fox came near him. Mom had enough, swatted the cub and chased off the fox. The fox continued to return to play with the cub. Finally, Mom was done. She sauntered over to the bay and swam across to another rock outcropping. Whiney followed her, reluctantly. We could hear him crying and whining the entire short distance!

On another trip, we were lucky enough to motor with Chuck back to Kodiak Island, rather than returning by float plane. It was time to refuel the boat and it sounded like a wonderful adventure... and it was! We were able to appreciate scenery we





never would have seen otherwise and an opportunity to photograph sea otters more up-close than ever before. I was able to lay on my belly on the lowered skiff ramp, which provided an eye-level perspective of the otters. They were so curious about us that they bobbed up and down directly in front of my camera, often too close for me to focus. I even thought one might climb up the ramp and join us!

As I've mentioned, weather can change at a moment's notice in Alaska. I've been lucky enough to be weathered-in on the boat when the fog would consume Kodiak Island. On the other hand, I've been unlucky enough to be weathered-in on Kodiak Island for the same reason.

And, just one more reason I love this trip - the fabulous food! Many days, we dined on spectacular snow crabs, and fresh caught halibut - caught by yours truly! It just doesn't get any fresher than fish you caught yourself.

I hope you've enjoyed this visit to Alaska and the amazing Katmai National Park. I've gotta' go now. I'm hungry for halibut!

