

Travel and Adventure: Fishing and bears prominent on Kodiak Island

by Patricia Arrigoni

KODIAK ISLAND, Alaska - The brown bear rose 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.

ISLAND NAMESAKE - The Kodiak brown bear, some known to exceed 9 feet standing on hind legs, is the largest carnivore on Earth. CNS Photo courtesy of American Land Conservancy, San Francisco.
CATCH OF THE DAY - A boat ride along Three Saints Bay can be rewarding, just ask Ron Marcoux of Montana, pictured proudly displaying a silver salmon. Humpback whales are also commonly spotted along with other animals on the Alaskan shore. CNS Photo by Pete Arrigoni. **FOUR CAN FLY** - Getting around Kodiak and Afognak Islands is done by plane. Willie Fulton, a local hero, can ferry four passengers and their gear in this floatplane. CNS Photo by Pat Arrigoni Our boat captain, Carl Christiansen, guessed him to be around 9 feet tall. Some grow 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. The anglers on this boat, the Amasuq (meaning King Salmon), was 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 1930s, is now plentiful and healthy with around 3,000 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 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 between 10 and 16 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 superhighways 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 floatplane owned by Andrew Airways. It carried 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. Unfortunately, the Sitka spruce trees that covered the mountains had been heavily logged and crisscrossed with dirt roads.

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 and caught one silver salmon, though others did much better.

A heart-stopping flight on a floatplane carried five of us plus luggage to Old Harbor back on Kodiak Island. The 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 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 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 5,000. 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 that 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 that 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 Exxon 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-and-a-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

GETTING THERE

ERA Aviation - 12 Airport Rd., Kodiak AL 99615. Phone 907-487-4363 or 800-866-8394, Web site

www.flyera.com; e-mail airlineinfo@eraaviation.com.

Alaska Air - Phone 907-487-4363 or 800-252-7522, Web site www.alaskair.com. Private charters fly to Afognak Island or Old Harbor.

We flew on Andrews Air, phone 907-487-2566, Web site www.andrewairways.com, e-mail AndrewAir1@aol.com. We also flew on Island Air Service, phone 907-487-4596 or 800-478-6196, Web site www.Kodiakislandair.com, e-mail Islandair@alaska.com.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Kodiak

Salmon Run Guesthouse, Roy and Treena Breyfogle, 410 Hillside Dr., phone 907-486-0091, e-mail Treena@salmonrunguesthouse.com, Web site www.salmonrunguesthouse.com. We had a small apartment with a living room, kitchen, complimentary snacks and breakfast, bedroom with twin beds, TV and free DVDs: \$80.

Shelikof Lodge, 211 Thorsheim Ave., phone 907-486-4141, e-mail 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., phone 907-286-2381, e-mail Oceanviewlodge@starband.net, Web site www.OceanViewLodge.com. Package deals are offered for fishing, lodging, meals, bait and saltwater tackle, fish processing, rain gear and boots. Packages for three and a half days fishing, four nights of meals and lodging are \$2,377 per person. Prices for six and a half days fishing, seven nights of meals and lodging are \$3,486 per person. Taxes are included.

MISCELLANEOUS

Visitor Information Center and Chamber of Commerce, 100 Marine Way, Suite 300, Kodiak, AL 99615, phone 907-486-5557, e-mail chamber@kodiak.org, Web site www.kodiak.org.

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

American Land Conservancy, Tim Richardson, director of Government Affairs, phone 301-770-6496, tim@alcnet.org.

Patricia Arrigoni is a freelance travel writer. © Copley News Service

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