

Alaska Bears: Four Prime Viewing Locations
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ANAN CREEK WILDLIFE OBSERVATORY

Brown bears (grizzlies) and black bears rarely use the same feeding areas. However, the largest pink salmon run in southeast Alaska, sometimes over 100,000 fish, lures both species to Anan Creek. Brown bears fish upstream in early morning and late evening hours; black bears snag salmon mid-day on the lower river. Dense forest allows this tenuous truce - black bears can climb trees, brown bears cannot.

Even though it is rare to see more than a half-dozen black bears at a time, as many as 40 individual black bears fish here. Many people consider this to be one of the best places in North America to watch free-ranging black bears close-up.

The covered viewing pavilion located about one-half mile from the Anan trailhead overlooks the stream where it tumbles through a narrow, boulder-lined gorge. Natural vegetation screens activity on the observatory. A viewing blind was fashioned at the fish pass from two pre-fabricated hunting blinds purchased from Cabela's. To decrease the impact of visitor movement to the bears, USFS screened the walkway with hanging camouflage netting. Only females and cubs, or juvenile females frequent the viewing area . . . about 20-30 total. Large male black bears or brown bears rarely, if ever, use the lower river in mid-season. These animals use the rest of the river which is closed to viewers. The Anan Bay public-use cabin, about a mile from the lagoon, is the only overnight accommodation. (Reservations are accepted up to 180 days in advance, with a maximum stay of seven days.) Air and boat charter services in Wrangell and Ketchikan offer full-day and half-day trips.

Management authority: two agencies with some overlap of jurisdiction - USFS/ADF&G – provide team management. A seasonal coordinator supervises interpreters.

Visitor limits: Maximum group size 10. Visitor numbers unlimited.

General regulations' purpose: to make all human behaviors predictable to the bears and consistent. Regulations are strictly designed to prevent **food conditioning**.

Regulations are enforced from June 15 to September 15 by two on-site natural history interpreters who do not accompany visitors but explain rules, biology and natural history. Visitors may **not** leave the trail and approach bears. Visitors are limited to the trailhead, trails, viewing platform, outhouse and the public recreation cabin. A Forest Closure Order prohibits dogs, food, and camping. The upper falls are closed to provide space for "non-viewer tolerant" bears. Both species use the upper falls for fishing. At the lower falls, bears have almost 9 daylight hours per day to fish that are not in the core viewing time (10:00 AM to 5:00 PM). Managers concluded that the current viewing situation is not likely to adversely affect Anan's bear population.

How to Get There:

Location - 35 miles southeast of Wrangell, Alaska. Aircraft or boat access. USDA Forest Service, Wrangell Ranger District, P.O. Box 51, Wrangell, AK 99929, 907/874-2323.
www.fs.fed.us/r10/tongass/recreation/wildlife_viewing/ananoobservatory.shtml

BROOKS CAMP, KATMAI NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

Once at Brooks River, on the shore of Naknek Lake near the mouth of Brooks River and the 4,093,229-acre park's main destination, all visitors stop at the Brooks Camp Visitor Center, which operates from June to mid-September. All visitors are required to attend the "Brooks Camp School of Bear Etiquette," a 15- to-20 minute safety and bear orientation program.

To overnight at Brooks River, visitors must stay in either the campground, located about one mile from Brooks Falls, or in the nearby lodge. The rustic campground has a limit of 60 persons per day. Advance reservations and both day use fees and campground fees must be paid prior to arriving at Brooks Camp.

Despite an array of wildlife, wilderness, geologic wonders and an important historic location, Katmai has become best known

for its bear-viewing. During the peak of the sockeye salmon run each July, and during return of the "spawned out" salmon in September, forty to sixty bears congregate along the Brooks River. Bear watchers - campers, lodge guests, fly-in day users - jam Brooks Camp in July.

Raised platforms along the river enable viewing. Crowding may result in waiting lists to access viewing platforms. At peak times, a 2-3 hour wait is often necessary to access the falls platform. High demand may limit visits to the falls platform to as little as 20 minutes. A new boardwalk and platform reduced this unpopular congestion and waiting period. On occasion in the past, especially in July, a few visitors were unable to get to the falls platform due to time constraints or flight schedules.

During peak season, visitors first must check in at the lower bear viewing platform, or trailhead, before continuing to the Brooks Falls platform. The lower bear viewing platform is large and often over-crowded, yet the location of this platform does not deter bears from wandering by. Juvenile bears, and some females and cubs, tend to hang out here, the favored fishing spots up river controlled by more dominant bears. Larger individual bears, and family groups, dominate fishing sites at the falls. This is the site for Katmai's icon photo of a salmon leaping into a bear's open maw. Large males and other bears intolerant of people begin showing up at Brooks River in mid-September when few visitors are present.

The outer Katmai Coast facing Shelikof Strait has become a popular summer alternative to Brooks Camp bear viewing. The coast is remote and access limited to boats and aircraft, thus trips are expensive. For lodging contact Hallo Bay Bear Lodge: www.hallobay.com For boat trips: Chuck Keim, Katmai Coastal Explorer: coastalexplorer@hotmail.com

Management authority: National Park Service. No hunting within this wilderness park.

General regulations: Except when on the bear viewing platforms, visitors may not intentionally approach or remain within 50 yards of a single bear, or 100 yards of a female with cubs, and follow all procedures detailed in the "Brooks Camp School of Bear Etiquette." With the exception of the campground, camping is prohibited within five miles of Brooks River. Visitors may not carry food of any kind on the trails and paths. Clean camping techniques are strictly enforced. All food must be stored in bear-proof lockers and meals prepared in designated shelters. Strict food and garbage controls are enforced.

How to Get There:

Location - Alaska Peninsula, about 290 air miles southwest of Anchorage; 30 air miles from King Salmon. Air access. Contact: www.nps.gov/katm/pphtml/planyourvisit.html

McNEIL RIVER STATE GAME SANCTUARY

Excessive, uncontrolled public use in the early 1970's endangered this unique 246,700 acre area. People sometimes outnumbered bears at the falls. Bears abandoned the river or fished at night. Since preservation of the unique **concentration** is the sanctuary's primary goal, managers instituted a permit system. Regulations prohibit solo inland jaunts. Visitors travel in groups lead by a sanctuary employee. These stringent rules work. By being consistent, and going to the same predictable locations, bears view humans as non-threatening.

Other than a communal cook shack and pit toilets, the only campground is undeveloped. There are no concessions of any kind. The campground is a two-mile walk from the McNeil Falls. Visitors are lead to one of two viewing sites, one at McNeil Falls, and one on Mikfik Creek. In spring, bears graze the sedge flats and fish for red salmon in Mikfik; in mid-summer they fish for dog salmon in McNeil River. The McNeil Falls impede salmon migration and provide bears with a unique fishing opportunity. The record number in sight at one time within the quarter-mile area at the falls is **67**. Now, as many as 144 individual bears use the sanctuary each summer. The congregations of bears at the falls are one of Alaska's most famous icons. However, due to low salmon returns the last decade, numbers of bears have declined at the falls, now dominated by large males.

McNeil Sanctuary is viewed as one of the world's great wildlife attractions and serves as the world's ideal for bear-viewing and habituation. Here visitors experience bears close-up and with minimal risk. Because visitor numbers are tightly limited, and all human behavior conforms to predictable patterns, bears have learned to neither fear nor seek out people. The "McNeil Experiment" demonstrates that people and bears can co-exist peacefully. McNeil's worldwide fame and publicity, but limited public access, has spawned additional bear-viewing opportunities and benefited regional businesses, such as that offered by Emerald Air in Homer.

The majority of human-tolerant bears at McNeil are females with cubs, juveniles, and rarely, a large male.

Management authority: Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Visitor limits: No more than 10 total per day.

General regulations: Camping in campground only. Visitors may not approach bears and may not access the viewing sites

unless in a staff-escorted group. Viewing is confined to specific sites, or uncommonly, transient positions enroute. Groups do not approach bears but allow bears to continue their normal behaviors that often bring them within feet of viewers. Typical days at the falls involve 6-8 hours confinement to a small viewing pad so children not recommended. No pets. All visitors must sign a liability waiver.

Permit system: Each year from 1500-2000 people apply for standard four-day permits, which are awarded by a random lottery; March 1 application deadline. Lottery application fee: \$25. Non-resident fees: \$350; resident fees: \$150. Standby permits: non-residents, \$175; residents, \$75. Standby access is **not** guaranteed.

How to get there:

Location - 250 air miles southwest of Anchorage, 100 air miles west of Homer. Aircraft access. June-August. Contact: McNeil River Sanctuary Manager, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 333 Raspberry Road, Anchorage, Alaska 99518-1599, 907/267-2182. www.wildlife.alaska.gov/mcneil/index.cfm)

STAN PRICE STATE GAME SANCTUARY

During July and August brown bears move along the shores and down from the steep slopes of Admiralty Island to the intertidal wetlands at the mouth of Pack Creek to feed on spawning pink and chum salmon and on the sedges found there. The bears tolerate a certain amount of human presence, and visitors may often view and photograph bears fishing for salmon and interacting. Visitors access two different designated viewing sites, a sand spit at the mouth of the creek and a viewing tower located a mile upstream and accessed by a groomed trail through old-growth forest.

Most of the bears seen at Pack Creek are females and female/cub groups. Large males infrequently are seen near the upriver viewing tower. Almost all visitors (more than 95%) are successful in seeing at least one bear. During peak viewing periods from mid-July to mid-August, fortunate visitors may enjoy close-up views of five or more bears during the day. Researchers say there are about 30 to 35 bears that use Pack Creek part of the summer. It is either known to see several bears at one time or watch for hours without seeing a single bear.

Stan “the Bear Man” Price, spent 39 years on Pack Creek and became a local legend for his ability to live peacefully with the bears. Sailing a boat he’d built in Seattle, Price arrived in Southeast in 1927, and worked as a miner, fisherman, mechanic, and logger before settling at Pack Creek. Price took in several orphaned cubs and raised them. Armed only with a walking stick, with which he sometimes used to “bop” the rare troublesome bear, Price wandered freely through the area. His continued presence habituated the bears to humans. The 90-year-old “Bear Man” once said “if you’re friends with the bears, they will be friends with you.”

Management authority: Joint USFS and ADF&G. Hunting not allowed.

Visitor limits: 24 permits per day, peak season; unlimited shoulder season.

General regulations: To ensure safety and preserve the bear viewing opportunities, access to 60,000-acre Pack Creek is restricted and limited by permit from June 1 to September 10, with a maximum stay of three days. Permits are especially hard to acquire during the peak viewing season of July 10-to-August 20. No facilities or lodging of any kind exist, and campers are restricted to nearby Windfall and Swan Islands. A canoe or kayak is needed to reach shore. No food is allowed beyond the trailhead. Safe storage areas for gear and food are located at the beach-landing site. Advance reservations required for peak season, July 10-August 25. Viewing restricted to two sites; visitors may not approach bears.

How to get there:

Located at the mouth of **Pack Creek** on the eastern shore of Admiralty Island about 30 miles south of Juneau. Aircraft, boat, or kayak access. Contact: US Forest Service Information Center, Centennial Hall, 101 Egan Drive, Juneau, Alaska 99801, 907/586-8751; www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=refuge.pack_ck; Admiralty Island National Monument, 907/586-8790.



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