

# Bear necessities at Brooks Falls



PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

**A convergence of wildlife**

Top, left: An immature bald eagle comes in for a landing to scavenge salmon carcasses. Right: Young cubs climbing a tree for safety while their mother fishes. Bottom, left: A brown bear as seen from the elevated boardwalk that crosses the Brooks River.

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Brooks Falls in Katmai National Park & Preserve is one of the finest locations in the world to view bears in the wild. Established in 1918, approximately 2200 brown bears reside within its boundaries. Every year beginning in July, scores of the ursine gather there at Brooks River to feast on spawning sockeye salmon.

Once you've made your way to Anchorage, a 45-minute flight on Alaska Airlines will take you to King Salmon in the northern section of the Alaska Peninsula where you'll begin your bear viewing adventure. Short of winning a spot through the Brooks Lodge lottery for accommodations at a rate of \$1,250 per night for a small rustic cabin with two bunk beds, or securing a hard-to-attain camping permit, King Salmon Lodge is your best bet to be your base of operations.

The rooms and cabins are clean and comfortable at a cost of \$450 for a single and \$600 for a double. The food at King Salmon Lodge is the best in town and the staff can schedule roundtrip transportation to Brooks Camp via water taxi or floatplane for \$450 per person. No one ever said that premier bear viewing comes cheaply.

It is best to reserve two nights for every day of planned bear viewing,

since inclement weather sometimes scrubs flights and cancels taxis. To kill time if that happens, wetting a line in the Naknek River is a worthwhile alternative.

On my first morning the lodge hooked me up with a group who would be boating across Naknek Lake to Brooks Camp for some river fishing. They stayed clumped together and slowly headed to the shoreline every time a bear got too close. Much of their excursion was spent dodging bears.


Upon arrival at Brooks Camp, first-timers are required to complete "bear school" at the visitor center, which consists of a short film and briefing on proper bear viewing etiquette. After storing any food you might have, it is an easy 1.5-mile hike to the main viewing platforms.

The elevated boardwalk spanning the Brooks River is secured at both ends with a heavy metal door to keep the bears out. While crossing it, I spotted a red-breasted merganser hen and her fifteen ducklings resting on a partially submerged log. I'd watched them grow up over the last two weeks on the webcam at [www.explore.org](http://www.explore.org). They were now nearly as big as their mother.

In a prelude of what was to come, a brown bear sow and her two yearlings stood on an island in the distance.

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**Fattening up for winter**

Left: This bear at The Riffles consumed over a half dozen fish per hour. Right: A bear looks on as another is about to snag a sockeye salmon from atop Brooks Falls.

# Bears

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Another bear swam in search of salmon.

Hiking the greenery-lined trail, we spotted a rather large bear headed in our direction. Right of way never an issue, we stepped 50 feet to the side and let him pass. Not much farther along, another bear approached, so we repeated what we'd done before – only this time, the bear angled off the trail straight towards us. Trying not to panic, we moved again and the big boar ambled by.

Another door and boardwalk led to where you sign up for a half-hour session on the Falls Platform. Only 40 people are allowed there at a time. On busy days during July, you might have to wait up to two hours for your turn. In the meantime, situated just downriver of the falls is the Riffles Platform where you wait until your name is called.

The action at the Riffles Platform was often better than at the falls. One female bear was particularly adept at catching fish in the salmon-packed river and would consume around seven an hour. With such an abundance of food available the bears didn't bother eating the entire fish, instead, pinning the salmon's head to a convenient surface, stripping the fatty skin off with its teeth, downing the tail and nearly boneless back half of the fish, and

letting the rest drift downstream for the bald eagles and seagulls.

A beautiful blonde sow and her two dark brown cubs born during the winter showed up by the platform all three days that I was there. They would mill about until she'd lead them to a nearby tree for the cubs to climb while she was fishing. After getting her fill, she'd bring them back a few scraps.

The bears mostly respected each other's space according to dominance, but occasionally between evenly matched bears a fight would erupt to settle their differences. The skirmishes could be fierce yet short lived, establishing new limits.

The same bears claimed the same choice spots every day at the falls. Well known to some of the visitors, they had names like 747, 32 Chunk, and 164 Bucky. Growing fatter by the hour, they'd sometimes sit chest-deep in the river grasping a salmon in their front paws while downing their catch. The Park Service estimates that between 200,000 and 400,000 sockeyes make it past the gauntlet of brown bears and over the six-foot high waterfall to their Brooks Lake spawning grounds each year. The river is backed up with fish as they repeatedly attempt to clear the obstacle.

As different waves of fish come in, there can be a dozen salmon per second launching themselves for hours at the waterfall, or just a few. On my second day my water taxi was the first to arrive and since I'd already graduated "bear school," I proceeded directly to the lower Falls Platform with no waiting time. Two bears were perched atop the falls where most of the sockeye pass. There were long lulls between salmon within the bears' reach. Not fond of sharing a confined area rich in protein, they barely tolerated each other, growling and trading harmless swipes back and forth, not giving an inch.

Thomas D. Mendelson's iconic photograph titled "Catch of the Day" of a sockeye salmon about to enter a

bear's mouth is the picture most people associate with Brooks Falls. It is the shot many photographers, including me, try to emulate. With that in mind, I set my camera at its highest speed possible with a reasonable ISO, shallow depth of field, and good exposure. I would also need luck.

Patiently focused on the bears and the falls at the same time, whenever a salmon appeared in the bottom right corner of my viewfinder I began firing at six frames per second. I attained some nice images that way but no great ones when everything suddenly aligned perfectly. While reviewing my pictures on the LCD screen I noticed an airborne fish frozen in time near the gaping jaws of a hungry bear that would make a meal of it. While no two action shots will ever be the same, the picture was similar to Mendelson's photo and satisfying to have captured.

The days of bear viewing had come to an end with too many encounters to describe or remember in detail: over 30 bears were observed on every visit. Bidding farewell to Brooks Camp, I boarded my floatplane as a mother bear and her cubs raced along the beach behind us.

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