

The Bears of McNeil River

By Chris Smith

THE NATURAL WONDERS of Alaska are often described by superlatives and considered unique in character. Among the features most deserving of such treatment is the annual gathering of brown bears in McNeil River State Game Sanctuary during the summer months. Although this species is widely distributed, and its members concentrate along thousands of salmon streams every year, there is no place else in the world comparable to McNeil. Here, barriers to fish migrations, open habitat and limited intrusion by humans combine to bring about the highest density of bears under natural conditions that can be readily observed by wildlife enthusiasts anywhere. Up to 100 bears may feed along the river in the summer and visitors often see more than 20 at once during the peak of the salmon run. A single photograph may capture over a dozen bears feeding simultaneously.

The bears come to McNeil River to feed on migrating salmon. Although all five species of Pacific salmon are present in the sanctuary, it is the calico-colored chum or dog salmon that attracts and holds the bears. About one mile (1.5 kilometers) upstream from the river mouth, a series of rocks, boulders and fast water forms the McNeil River falls. The falls are an obstacle to the upstream migration of the salmon and since there are no other comparable fishing areas on the stream, the bears concentrate here in numbers that have brought the area worldwide fame.

The McNeil River area was established as a State Game Sanctuary in 1960 to protect this vital habitat for the bears. Beginning in 1963 the Game Division began studying the bears to learn about their movements, life history, reproduction



Russ Dixon photo

and survival. In the late '60s Department biologists were joined by researchers from Utah State University who came to study the social behavior of the big bruins. The data gathered from these research projects have been published in numerous scientific and popular journals and have greatly enhanced our understanding of these fascinating animals. We learned, for example, that these bears range up to 60 miles away from the falls during other parts of the year. We also found that a complex social system exists, with each bear holding a particular "rank." The bears near the top of the "pecking order" choose the best fishing spots while the others must try less productive waters or wait on shore for an open spot. Additionally, we have been able to monitor the success of sows rearing cubs. Several bears are now

accompanied by their third litter since being tagged, and one old girl of 22 was followed by three yearlings in 1978. All this information helps the Department do a better job of managing bear populations throughout Alaska.

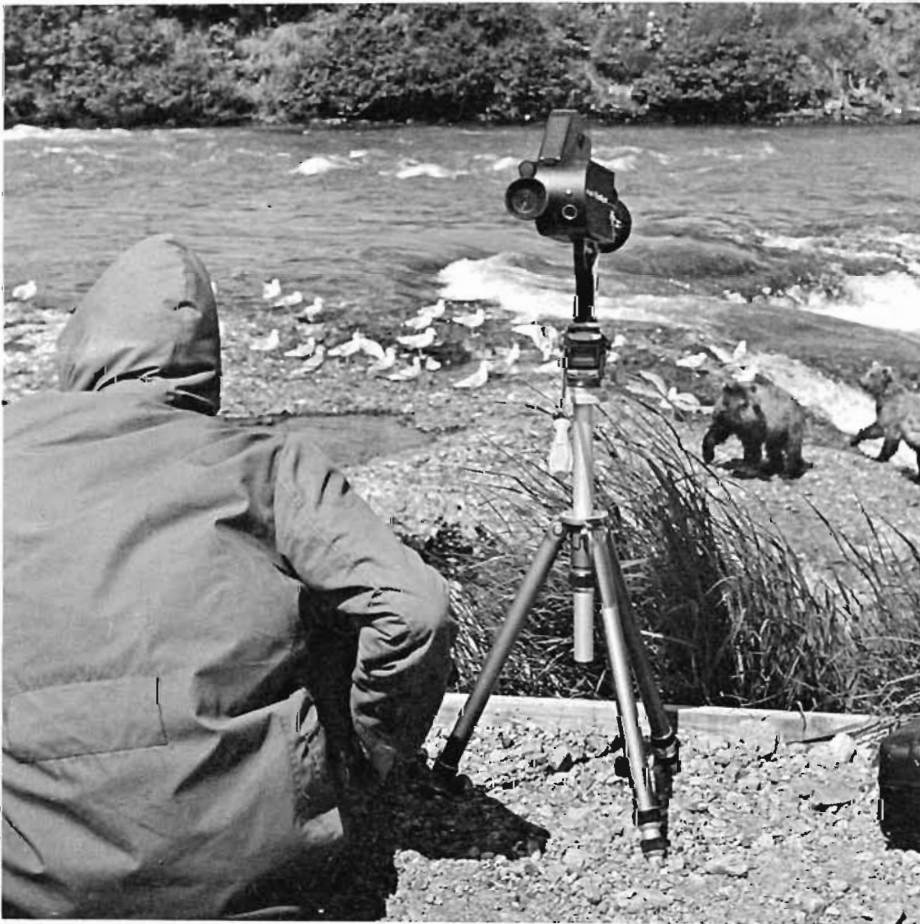
As interest in, and awareness of the bears' activities grew in the early 1970s, it became apparent that people were beginning to disrupt the bears' behavior. In addition, a few overly-bold and foolish photographers were endangering both themselves and the bears by approaching individual bears too closely. As a result, the Department and the Board of Game instituted a permit system in 1973 to control the numbers and actions of visitors at McNeil River. This approach stems from the policy that the Sanctuary exists primarily for the bears and that any human use is of

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MANY McNEIL BEARS tolerate man's presence while feeding at the falls; others feed only in the evening after the visitors have departed. Viewers are restricted to a small area at one side of the falls.

secondary importance. Food storage, cooking, camping and travel in the Sanctuary are all closely regulated to prevent problems *before* they develop.

Under current regulations, only ten people per day may visit the McNeil River falls from July 1 to August 25. The permits to visit the falls are assigned during a lottery held in King Salmon in May of each year. The Department has personnel stationed at the Sanctuary in the summer to insure that the people and the bears coexist with minimum conflict.

The strict approach to regulating human activity and the cooperative attitude of most visitors have combined to prevent serious problems at McNeil. In the past six years no bear-caused injuries have occurred and not a single bear has been killed in self-defense. That's a record we hope to extend indefinitely.

One serious problem currently facing the program at McNeil River, though, has little to do with bears. The money to manage the Sanctuary comes solely from hunting license and tag fees and a tax on guns and ammunition. These sources have not kept up with inflation or with the increasing demand for nonhunting programs. If we are to continue to protect the bears at McNeil River and provide an opportunity for people to come and experience the excitement of sharing a day on the river with the bears, additional sources of funding will have to be found.

For further details and an application to visit McNeil River write: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Box 37, King Salmon, Alaska 99613.



Chris Smith received a double Bachelor's degree in Wildlife Management and Fisheries Biology from the University of Alaska in 1973. He went on to obtain his Master's from the University of British Columbia in 1976. In addition to managing the McNeil River Bear Sanctuary, he manages the Round Island State Walrus Sanctuary.

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