

# Play by Their Rules

by James B. Faro

**M**oose are regal, sheep majestic, squirrels cute, swans tranquil, wolves symbolic of something now lost over much of our country. As descriptions go, however, bears probably inspire the greatest variety of adjectives. Unless a special effort is made to watch bears (by going to McNeil River, Pack Creek, Anan Creek, a national park, or, unfortunately, a garbage dump), most opportunities to see a bear occur unexpectedly. The viewer responds at a gut level because few have the knowledge and experience to react otherwise. Some panic, others shoot, many take pictures, the foolish try to feed it, and there are those who irately call ADF&G to remove this infringement on civilization. Nonetheless, you should look forward to seeing a bear by choice or chance because it is as much a part of Alaska as the Northern Lights. The experience, with few exceptions, is not particularly dangerous.

Any doubts as to whether there is a demand to see bears can be dispelled by the traffic jam that develops with any bear visible close to the road. While the species and abundance of bears differ, bear watching may occur nearly anywhere in the state. Still, if bears are so widespread, why don't we see them more often? The answer is a combination of bear behavior and human behavior. Wilderness bears generally avoid people and do not encourage bear watching. Bears that must live near people become secretive and often nocturnal. In either situation, those bears that are so bold as to ignore people generally don't survive long. Also, many bear-viewing opportunities are lost because the person simply did not look or caused enough disturbance that the bear left before it could be seen.

If you are content to see only bears that cross the road ahead of you or knock the garbage can off the back porch, read no further. There are, however, ways to maximize the number of times you will actually see a bear. The trick is to think "bear," knowing what a bear has to do in the spring, summer, and fall to survive the winter months. Then, by placing yourself in the right place at the right time or by looking for bears when other activities have you in an appropriate location, you will more likely see the bears that are there.

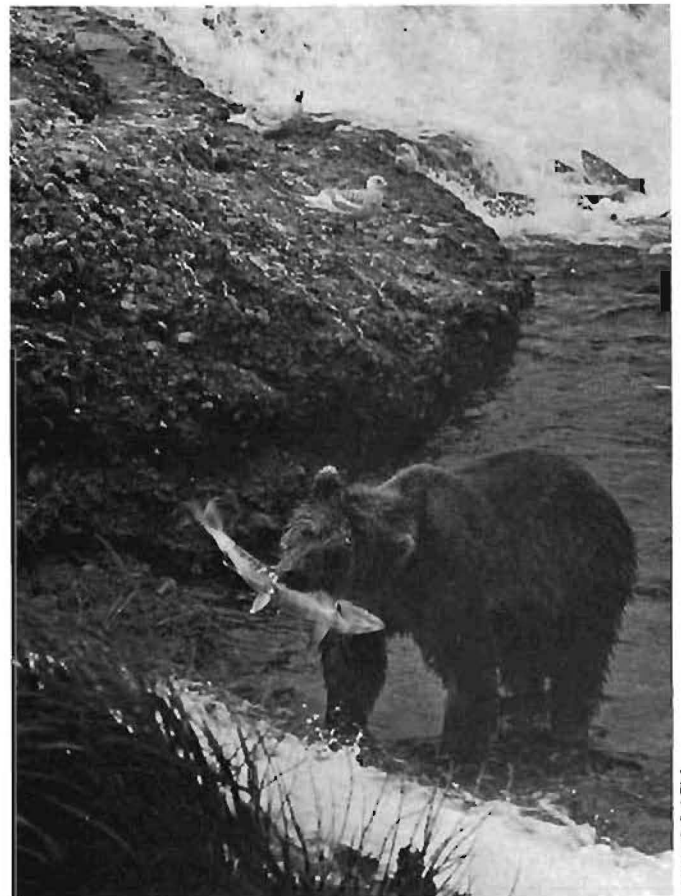
The key to finding bears is bear food. Like money in the bank, fat is the savings account that allows a bear to get through the winter hibernation period. In order to capitalize on the best available food sources, a bear must at times use areas where they can be watched. Bear foods are many but the abundance, desirability, and availability of them change with the season, the area, and the year. No single recommendation can be made to insure finding a bear every time. Still, there are generalities that can help in your search for a bear (or, conversely, to avoid

areas where there might be bears).

The common factor in identifying preferred habitat for bears is food; except to hibernate they don't long remain where they cannot eat. Because bears move seasonally to get what they need, the best viewing locations also change. In the spring, seek areas with early vegetation growth. Near saltwater, this is often on grass flats where the tide has removed the snow and the sun has warmed the soil ahead of other areas. Elsewhere, it may be south-facing slopes or near a seep or spring that promotes early growth. As summer progresses, bears may move from vegetation to salmon if spawning streams are present. The fall berry crop is a major item in all areas and will often pull bears away from other recognized foods such as salmon. Learning the season of use for each preferred habitat makes deliberate searching or casual looking more effective.

Bear behavior is an often overlooked factor once a wild bear

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ADF&G Staff

## Caribou

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### WHEN

Caribou are accessible for viewing from Alaska's road system, but there is more to know. Because caribou are gregarious animals and forage heavily on slow-growing lichens, they have developed a nomadic nature. Although caribou seem to be constantly on the move, they do pause periodically where conditions are temporarily favorable. The tabular outline on page 8 summarizes the caribou's annual cycle of behavior and movements. It also highlights the notable viewing opportunities for each time of the year. For example, August is the poorest time to see a large aggregation of caribou. A long file of caribou plodding through the tundra will most likely occur in mid-March to mid-May, and the awesome aggregations numbering tens of thousands form in late June and throughout July.

### HOW

The "where" and "when" sections have summarized much of the general "how-to" of caribou viewing, but the successful viewer will need to consider some specifics. Learning whom to contact is essential for tips on gear and techniques. The aspiring caribou viewer who reviews some reference material will be able to identify bulls, cows, and calves; will know which habitats are best to visit during a given season; and will

recognize the many peculiar behavior characteristics of caribou, such as the excitement leap, threat and attack poses, head bobbing pose, bush gazing, bush thrashing, and others.

To avoid possible disappointments, prospective caribou viewers, both resident Alaskans and visitors, should do their homework. There is no better preparation for viewing caribou than communicating with others who have first-hand knowledge of the area or the caribou herd that the viewer wants to watch. Prime contacts will include local biologists working for ADF&G, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, or U.S. Forest Service. Additional contacts might include friends and acquaintances who have been there before (or, better yet, who are "there" now). Travel consultants, and the many guides, outfitters, and tour organizers who are familiar with specific areas can be invaluable sources of information and advice. For those who can afford it, local air taxi operators often know exactly where and when to put viewers in contact with caribou.

Many viewers will find their caribou-related experiences more fulfilling if they are knowledgeable about the natural history of caribou. Fortunately, there are several informative books which should be available in local bookstores or libraries.

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## Play by Their Rules

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has been located. Don't expect the bear to know you mean it no harm; if it feels threatened, it is going to react. The aggressive reactions reported in the news media are rare. Generally, the bear just quietly leaves. In either case, the viewing opportunity is frustrated. The most common mistake is to approach the bear to get a better view. If at all possible, select a site that is safe for you and let the bear move to you. If your presence is not "threatening," the bear will generally continue its activity but not approach so close that either party will be in danger. The assumption that a nearby bear doesn't know you are there is generally false. The bear may be ignoring you but, at the first hostile sign, it will be gone. Frequently it is the need to feed that outweighs the bear's concern for your presence.

Attempts to improve the situation almost always result in failure. The window of your car, cabin, or home can be an excellent and safe place to bear watch but just opening the door and stepping out often sends the bear into nearby cover. An open hillside above a salmon stream 100 yards away may allow the bear to fish and feed while you watch. The visibility across a narrow valley or ravine is generally superior because brush or topographic features are less likely to hide the bear. If you must move, the rule is, "Closer isn't necessarily better." The order of priority is: your safety, the bear's safety, visibility.

After determining where the preferred habitats are and when they are in use, consider the visibility aspects of the habitats themselves. Black bears feeding on devil's club or salmonber-

ries in the dense coniferous forest are difficult to see under the best of conditions. The same bear feeding on alpine blueberries can often be spotted from great distance. Nocturnal bears are best seen at dawn or dusk unless the situation lends itself to artificial lights. Small brushy salmon streams are not visually as good as their larger counterparts. The time taken to scout for areas in the preferred seasonal habitat pays off.

Bears are unique big game animals because they don't seem to do things halfway to accommodate viewers: They're either too shy or they're too bold. Behavior of wild bears makes viewing opportunities few and easily lost. However, because they are opportunistic feeders, they easily become addicted to human foods and become bold and aggressive. Shortsighted actions by humans, either by feeding wild bears to accommodate viewing or accidentally providing food (garbage, improper food storage while camping, etc.) are dangerous to all parties. While they last, these bears provide risky viewing opportunities. In the end they make the news by destroying property, mauling people, and ultimately being killed themselves.

Wild bears are there to see if you want. They are busy being bear and nothing—this article included—will convince them that people should be allowed to watch them. Therefore, success means looking for bears where they want to be, conforming your actions to theirs in a non-threatening manner, and either making the opportunity happen or capitalizing on a chance nature has given you. Above all, safe and successful viewing results from playing by the bears' rules.

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