



Photos by John Hyde



WILDLIFE VIEWING IN ALASKA

by Jeff Hughes

"There's a pod of orcas off the bow of the ship!" the skipper shouted in an excited voice. Immediately most of the passengers on board rushed forward with binoculars and cameras in hand, hoping to catch a glimpse of the elusive whales. Wildlife watching and photography are increasingly popular in Alaska, and as I learned during my recent tour of Resurrection Bay, near Seward, these activities are not just a tourist avocation. Passengers included 'old-timers', 'new-comers', visitors, men, women, and children! And despite the pouring rain (which shortened our trip), we were able to closely observe (in addition to orcas) sea otters, bald eagles, a peregrine falcon, and several species of seabirds, to the delight of everyone on board.

Alaska is an exceptional place to view and photograph wildlife. Many people visit our state hoping to see wildlife that remain common in Alaska but have become rare or disappeared in other parts of North America such as the bald eagle, trumpeter swan, peregrine falcon, wolf, lynx, brown bear, and wolverine.

Large concentrations of mammals, birds, and fish can usually be viewed during their annual migrations. Large herds of caribou migrate hundreds of miles each year between calving and wintering areas. Alaska's caribou populations are estimated to include just over a half million animals. Moose populations statewide number in tens of thousands, and populations of even uncommon carnivores, such as brown bears, are estimated in the thousands. Nearly two-thirds of the bird species occurring in Alaska are migratory. Each spring, thousands arrive from wintering areas in the Lower 48, Mexico, Central and South America, Polynesia, Asia, and Africa. Even some of Alaska's fish are migratory—salmon, hooligan, herring, and arctic char are just a few that return to specific spawning grounds. Spawning fish attract predators, creating impressive localized concentrations of brown bears, bald eagles, and other fish-eating wildlife.

Many wildlife species are uncommon or rare in Alaska, but some species occur in amazing numbers. More seabirds occur in Alaska's coastal waters than are known to occur in any comparable size region of the northern hemisphere—75-125 million are estimated to use Alaskan waters during summer. Many oceanic islands are used by tens or hundreds of thousands of birds, and a few individual colonies are used by millions. In all, 105 species of mammals, about 325 species of birds, over 430 species of fish, and 7 amphibians occur regularly in Alaska.

Despite the variety and abundance of wildlife in Alaska, some residents and tourists are disappointed because they see little wildlife. Such disappointment may result from unrealistic expectations but often results when people do not know how to look for wildlife. Fortunately there's a book, *A Guide to Wildlife Viewing in Alaska*, that's loaded with information for wildlife watchers and photographers. The book is arranged in such a fashion that users can check out wildlife by habitat type, by area of the state, by season of the year, or by animal species. Well-known wildlife-watching areas—including state and federal parks, refuges, sanctuaries, and recreation areas—are detailed. The authors have even included some outdoor tips and ethics for wildlife viewing which I'll pass along here.

Experienced wildlife watchers look for animals in their preferred habitats, at the right time of day and season, and take the time to stop, look and listen carefully. Anyone can locate

interesting wildlife in every part of Alaska, during every season, by using these simple techniques.

LOOK IN THE RIGHT PLACES. In order to observe a given animal, you must visit an area used by that species. Wild animals occur only where their specific requirements for food, water, cover (protection from predators and weather), and space are available in a suitable arrangement. These habitat requirements force animals to live in specific environments.

LOOK AT THE RIGHT TIME OF DAY. The greatest number and variety of mammals and birds are active, and therefore more often seen, in early morning and late evening, in most areas. Warblers, kinglets, sparrows, and other songbirds display a pronounced activity peak from about one-half hour before sunrise to 4 hours after sunrise. Most hoofed mammals (moose, deer, caribou, and bison) are active in morning and evening but may bed down and be difficult to spot during midday. Many crepuscular and nocturnal animals (owls, flying squirrels, marten, and lynx) are also active during twilight hours, especially during summer.

Thus, you should plan sunrise or sunset expeditions to view most wildlife. In central Alaska, 3:00 a.m. is the best time for wildlife viewing during June, but 9:30 a.m. is better during midwinter. At Alaska's northernmost latitudes, wildlife activity peaks occur a few hours after midnight during May and June when the sun never sets, and, during winter, wildlife may be seen throughout the twilight period of each day.

You'll see the most wildlife early or late in the day, but some wildlife (woodpeckers, red squirrels, ptarmigan, and ravens, for example) are active, and may be observed throughout the day. Also, hawks, eagles, and falcons are easiest to spot when soaring on rising hot air currents during midday.

Consider tide stages when you look for wildlife in coastal areas. Seals and sea lions are often seen hauled out at low tide stages, while whales and porpoises often feed close to shore and are more easily seen during high tides. Shorebirds often feed over wide expanses of mud at low tide, then concentrate near accessible shorelines or in adjacent wetlands (where they can be more closely observed) during incoming and high tides.

Watch for wildlife during bad weather as well as on sunny days. Rain and snow muffle sounds, enabling you to travel more quietly. Some animals are more visible during stormy weather, too. Migrating birds often travel in larger flocks during periods of onshore or tail winds and many animals are especially active before or after a heavy storm.

LOOK DURING THE RIGHT SEASON. Seasonal activities such as migration, breeding, and hibernation affect the visibility of wildlife.

Spring offers some of the best wildlife viewing opportunities in Alaska. During spring, birds migrate into Alaska from almost every direction and many are concentrated by limited habitat along their migration routes. Breeding plumage birds are colorful and easy to distinguish and many make conspicuous courtship displays. Most carnivores and rodents breed during spring and are easier to observe than during other seasons. Fresh green vegetation on lower mountain slopes attracts Dall sheep, mountain goats, and black bears into areas where they can be easily spotted. In all areas, many animals are easy to see before vegetation has leafed out. Spring is also the best season to observe walrus, seals, bowhead whales, and other animals associated with the receding ice pack along western Alaska. In addition to springtime, wildlife viewing can be exciting throughout the rest of the year. During summer (June through August) bears and other wildlife concentrate along streams where salmon spawn, young birds and mammals may be seen, and late-arriving birds nest. Many waterfowl concentrate on lakes and lagoons to molt their wing feathers, and some shorebirds flock together in preparation for southward migration. In northern and western Alaska, spectacular concentrations and migrations of waterbirds occur.

During fall (September-November) moose, goats, caribou, and muskoxen are in rut (mating). Like breeding birds in spring, animals in rut are conspicuous, frequenting open areas. Caribou, moose, and deer have grown their antlers and aggressive males spar with one another. Bears frequent berry patches and continue to visit salmon streams. Geese, cranes, shorebirds, and raptors congregate in various locations, sometimes in large numbers. The largest bald eagle concentration in the world can be observed along the Chilkat River during late fall. Smaller eagle concentrations occur along other late-run salmon streams in central and southcoastal Alaska.

Winter (December-February) also provides a variety of wildlife viewing opportunities. With less vegetation, most animals are easier to spot. Wolves, lynx, marten, mink, river otter, and fox may be easy to locate during winter, and the tracks of these shy animals can be readily found in the snow. Although most Alaskan birds migrate south for winter, some such as woodpeckers, chickadees, redpolls, jays and grosbeaks, are attracted to birdfeeders. These can be viewed without even leaving the warm indoors. Some waterbirds concentrate in bays during winter, and several species that occur in remote areas can be easily viewed near coastal towns. For example, common and Steller's eiders can be seen near Homer, and guillemots, murrelets, and murre can be seen in the boat harbors of southeastern Alaska towns. In February and March, boreal, great

horned, great gray, and northern saw-whet owls begin courtship hooting in late evenings. Other resident birds, including chickadees, jays, woodpeckers, and grosbeaks also begin forming pairs and establish nesting territories in late winter.

STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN. Even if you visit the right places at the right times, you will see animals only if you look carefully and act unobtrusively. The number and variety of animals that observers detect is closely tied to the length of time spent looking. Unless you take time to look carefully, you may travel over large areas without seeing any wildlife.

Whenever you travel through an area, move slowly and stop often. A wide variety of wildlife are easy to spot just from roadside pullouts, if you look carefully. Use binoculars or spotting scopes to scan open areas, hillsides, cliffs, lakes, and stream banks. Sit quietly for 10-15 minutes in each habitat you visit. Listen for singing birds, large animals moving through the brush, or small mammals skittering over the ground. Often a mammal or bird that hides at the sound of your approach will venture into view if you are quiet.

You'll see more wildlife if you travel quietly, but during spring, summer, and fall you'll be safer if you make noise to warn bears and moose cows with calves of your approach. These and other large animals can be dangerous if they are surprised by the sudden appearance of a person at close range.

Rather than attempting to approach or pursue animals you see, use binoculars, spotting scopes, and telephoto lenses to get a closer look. Wildlife is likely to approach you more closely if you sit quietly than if you move or sneak around to get close to them.

Alaska's abundance of fish and wildlife is well known but the numbers and variety must be considered in context. The state encompasses well over half-a-million square miles and wildlife are not spread evenly throughout this vast area—in fact animals are uncommon in some places. Yet those who learn how and where to observe wildlife find that Alaska offers extraordinary opportunities to view and photograph animals. By learning how, where, and when to look for wildlife, anyone can find a variety of these species, observe the spectacular migrations, and find the impressive concentrations for which Alaska is renowned.

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