

# McNeil River Bear Study

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SOME OF THE GIANT brown bears at McNeil River on the Alaska Peninsula will be slightly less conspicuous in the future, now that the Department of Fish and Game research program there is ending.

Department personnel, who have marked and tagged the bears in the past years as a means of identifying them, were back on the river last summer armed with dart guns and tranquilizing drugs.

The bears were once again immobilized as they came to the falls to fish for salmon, but instead of marking them, the bright collars attached in previous years were removed.

Last year marked the end of data collection for the department research program which has been conducted at McNeil River since 1963.

The marking of bears for future identification has been an integral part of the program and various collars, ear tags, streamers and flags have been utilized for that purpose.

However, the department has not been alone in the use of McNeil River, and, in recent years, the public use of the area has increased greatly. Some persons seeking to observe or photograph brown bears in their natural habitat have objected to the harlequin aspects of a tagged and/or collared bear. Thus, in this final year of work, a conscientious effort was made to remove the collars placed on bears in previous years. Fifteen bears were immobilized last summer and seven collars removed.

Other things besides the fact that bears were being unmarked made this past summer unique. Most notable, and directly contributing to all other unusual factors, was the late spring. Late into July, there were still deep snow banks in sun-protected areas next to the tide flats and abundant snow cover was found at higher elevations. The melting snow coupled with a "wet" summer kept the water level in the river far higher than normal and hampered the efforts of the biologist to work in the area. A hip-boot river crossing at shoulder depths with floating ice chunks in the frigid water is enough to dampen the enthusiasm of even the most dedicated biologist.

Because of the late snow cover, much of the vegetation was two to three weeks behind in growth. As a result, Mikfik Creek-McNeil River tidal flats did not have the usual early concentrations of bears feeding on vegetation prior to the return of the salmon. Then, when the fish did arrive, the bears did not capitalize on them but continued to feed upon grasses. The entire Mikfik Creek red salmon run--the best in recent years--reached its spawning grounds nearly untouched by bears. At the McNeil River falls, dog salmon



## PROGRAM ENDS ON A COLLAR-LESS NOTE

were present for two weeks before the first bear arrived. In a normal year, the bears arrive at the falls on about July 7 and depart for other areas in early August. This summer, the bears did not arrive until July 26 and remained until the end of August. However, by the time the bears left, 79 individual bears had been identified in the area, so there were no fewer bears than in other recent years.

The McNeil River has been a valuable study area for the department. It was originally set aside as a photographic and research sanctuary for the brown bears and is still fulfilling both functions. Utah State University will continue to use the area for graduate studies on brown bear behavior.

Although the present department program is coming to a close, the area may be called upon for future research needs. Already it has supplied information on the reproductive potential of bears and has been an important testing area for new drugs and marking techniques. Because of much that has been learned at McNeil, in 1968 department biologists were able to successfully instigate a tagging program using a helicopter in the Chignik-Black Lake area of the Alaska Peninsula.

In 1970, and again in 1971, more than 100 brown bears were successfully immobilized and marked. With a sample size--in either year--of nearly ten times that gained during an average year at McNeil, the biologist will be able to more rapidly gather the knowledge necessary to formulate sound management programs for the brown bear. The present McNeil study may be over but its contribution to knowledge of the Alaska brown bear has made it money and time well-spent. ■

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