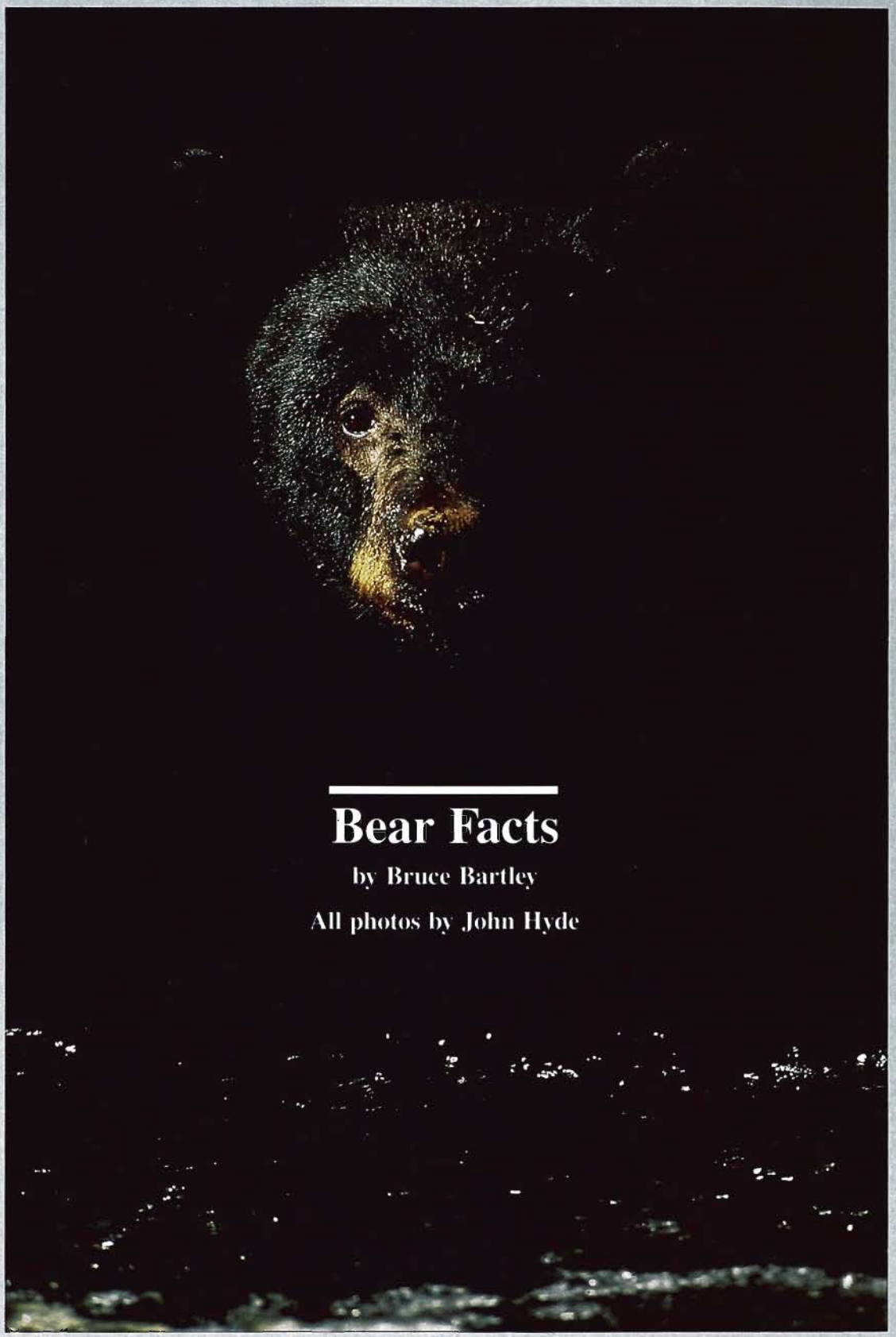


Bear Facts

by Bruce Bartley

All photos by John Hyde

The fact that bear attacks are infrequent and that instances of bears eating people are even more rare doesn't make it any less terrifying when such tragedies occur. When two fatal bear attacks occur in three days, the imprint on the public's consciousness is profound. In an attempt to help people understand the seemingly unfathomable events, here are some of the facts gleaned from investigations into the fatalities.

The first death occurred July 7, 1992. A woman, who had lived in Alaska off and on for a number of years, and her husband were staying in a cabin on a lake off the Glenn Highway near Glennallen. The woman previously had lived alone in the cabin for several years. The couple heard a bear moving around outside the relatively large cabin. They began banging pots and pans and making noise, but the bear persisted in its efforts to gain entry into the cabin. The couple had been at the cabin only about 24 hours, and there were no obvious food attractants. The bear eventually broke out a window at the rear of the structure. The couple fled out the front door and onto the roof. Warning shots were fired from a .22-caliber pistol, but again the bear was undeterred.

Seemingly safe on the roof, the husband and wife conferred about what to do next. It was decided the husband would get off the roof when the opportunity presented itself, run to the edge of the lake, and take a motorboat across the lake for help.

At this point, they thought they were being pursued by a brown bear. With their bulky body structure and long, relatively straight claws designed for digging, brown bears are not as adept at climbing trees as are black bears. Thus it seemed a reasonable assumption that this "brown" bear would be unable to climb up on the roof. In fact, it was a cinnamon-colored black bear. The mistaken identity was critical because of what happened next.

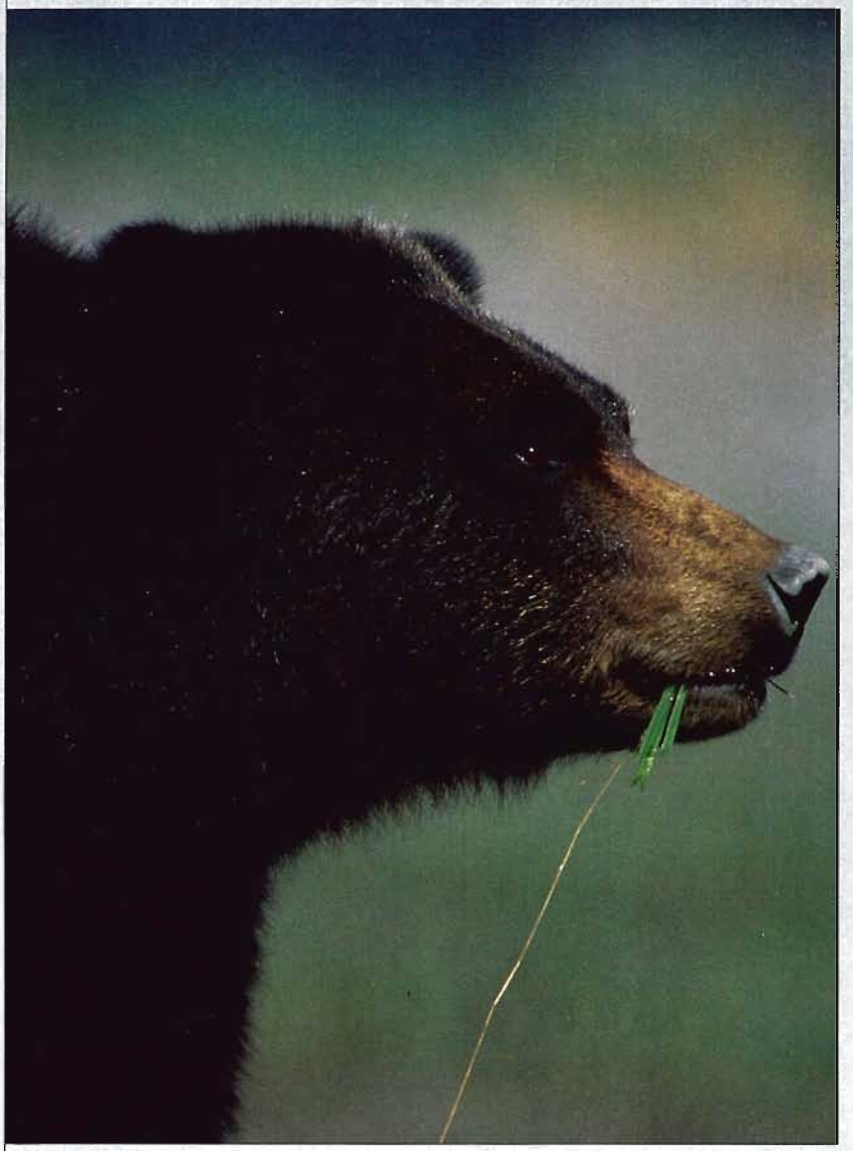
The husband fled to the boat as planned and went for help. While he was gone, the bear climbed a very small black spruce next to the cabin and jumped on the roof. It is unclear whether the bear attacked the woman there or whether she jumped from the roof. When the husband and a neighbor returned, they found the bear next to the cabin and shot and killed it, only to find it had already killed the woman and consumed a substantial portion of her body. Defensive wounds on her body indicated the woman had tried vigorously to defend herself.

Examination of the 150- to 175-pound male bear, estimated at 11 years old, turned up no physical injuries or impairments that might predispose the bear to attack a human. Nor was there any indication it was a *garbage* bear or a *nuisance* bear which had made a habit of breaking into cabins. Nearby residents were unaware of the bear's presence, and no cabin break-ins were reported.

Ever since two fatal attacks on women in Montana several decades ago, it has been difficult to dispel fear that bears are attracted to menstrual odors. Several research projects since then have shown no attraction. The woman in this attack was not menstruating.

The seemingly unexplainable attack is not without precedent either in Alaska or elsewhere, although there have been fewer than half a dozen such attacks documented in Alaska. Stephen Herrero, a professor at the University of Calgary, is generally acknowledged as the world's leading expert on bear-human interactions. In a 1985 book entitled *Bear Attacks,* Herrero documented 26 people being killed by black bears in North America between 1900 and 1983. He concluded that in the majority of the cases, these black

bears deliberately preyed on human beings. The bear that killed the woman near Glennallen fits Herrero's profile of a *predaceous* black bear in many respects: it had no physical ailments; it did not have a history of nuisance behavior; and it appeared to be a truly wild bear with little or no prior contact with humans. The attack occurred during the day, outside of the denning season, and involved a male: all characteristics of the majority of the fatal black bear attacks studied by Herrero.



With a conservative estimate of 100,000-plus black bears in Alaska, it is only natural that people are concerned by this fatal attack. But when you consider the tens of thousands of people engaged in all sorts of activities every day in Alaska's back country, the magnitude of the risk diminishes considerably. The statistical probabilty of a predaceous black bear attack is put into clearer perspective by Herrero's work. Of the millions of people exposed to bears during the first 83 years of this century on the North American continent, only 26 black bear-human encounters were fatal to the humans. Look at it yet another way: in Algonquin National Park in Canada there was a similar predaceous attack last fall in which two people were killed by a black bear. The last attack before that was in 1978. In between, 8 million visitors passed through the park without a bear-related fatality.

Even rarer is a predaceous attack by a brown bear. Although Herrero was unable to find as accurate statistics for brown bear attacks as black bear attacks, he estimates about twice as many people were killed by brown bears as black bears during the corresponding period. But he was unable to document a significant number of predaceous brown bear attacks.

Most brown bear attacks are defensive in nature. The brown bear perceives people as a threat and responds aggressively. In a few cases, the mere sight of something running away is known to trigger a *chase response* among bears. It is the same instinctive response that prompts dogs to chase bicyclists, joggers, and cars while ignoring people walking by.

On July 9, 1992, a young brown bear killed and partially consumed a 6-year-old boy in the Alaska Peninsula village of King Cove. Although initial reports indicated that half the corpse had been consumed, the subsequent autopsy and an examination of the bear suggested a far smaller percentage. It is unclear whether this really was a predaceous attack or one more in keeping with normal brown bear behavior. The child's mother told investigators that when she first saw the bear, it was some distance behind and traveling the same direction down the road on which she was walking, carrying her infant daughter and

All photos ©John Hyde

holding her son's hand. Upon seeing the bear, the family jumped a guard rail and fled downhill through thick brush. Bears, black and brown, can run much faster than people think they can. Their top speed has been estimated at around 35 miles per hour. By comparison, world record sprinter Carl Lewis runs about 28 miles per hour. Bears can and do run down fleeing prey.

The fleeing family may have triggered a chase response. The boy became separated from his mother and was caught and killed by the bear. The mother and daughter escaped to a nearby house. Having pursued and caught its quarry, the bear may have instinctively begun feeding upon its prey. Neighbors responded to the scene and killed the bear next to the boy's body.

Like the black bear near Glennallen, there were no obvious physical problems with the brown bear. Unlike the black bear, this brown bear, a 3-year-old male weighing an estimated 400 pounds, had a stomach full of garbage. He was one of more than half a dozen brown bears regularly visiting the dump in King Cove.

Based on numerous observations of bear-human interactions by researchers in very different locations, experts recommend that people stand their ground when approached by a bear. Running obviously is futile and may trigger a chase response. Given the facts surrounding the King Cove case, it is possible that if the three family members had stood their ground, the bear would have avoided them. That hindsight is of little comfort to a grieving family and friends, but it may help other Alaskans in dealing with brown bears. With a population estimated at 35,000 to 40,000, brown bears are much less numerous than black bears; but because they often live in unforested areas and travel great distances, brown bears are often more visible than black bears.

Brown bears have accounted for perhaps twice as many deaths as black bears, probably because of their size and ferocity, but their frequency of predaceous attacks is much lower.

Brown bears are found throughout most of Alaska, even in an area as populated as Anchorage. But given the amount of outdoor activity and the infrequency of attacks, the statistical risk of being killed or even injured by a brown bear remains very remote. Nevertheless, it is sure to take some time for the awful memories of the summer of '92 to fade away.

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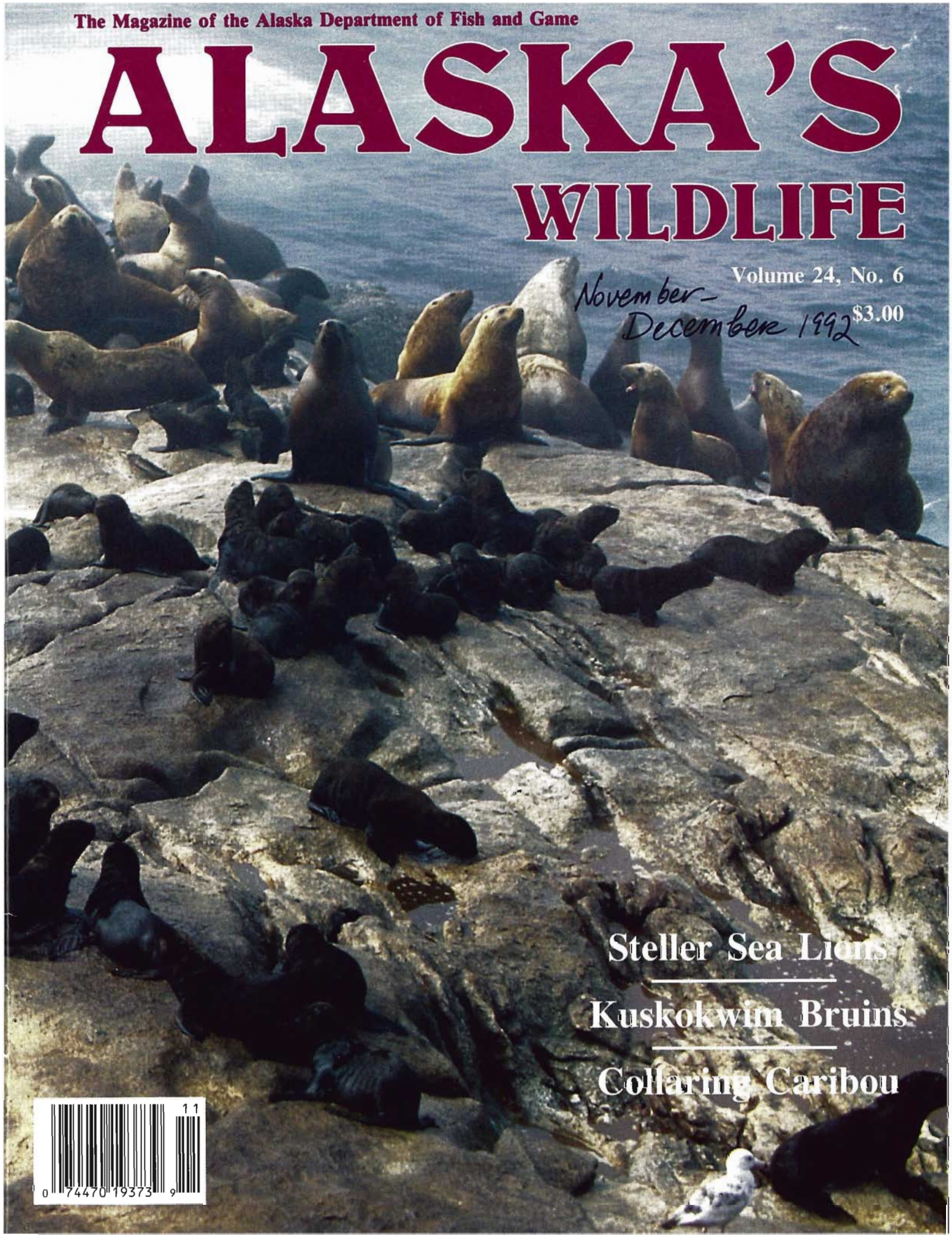
The Magazine of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game

ALASKA'S WILDLIFE

Volume 24, No. 6

November–December 1992

$3.00



Steller Sea Lions

Kuskokwim Bruins

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