Wild Globe Travel Consultancy
Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.
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ALASKA, UNITED STATES

Date - July 2016

Duration - 47 Days

Destinations
Anchorage - Knik River Valley - Hatcher Pass - Talkeetna - Denali State Park - Denali National Park - Paxson - Fairbanks - Creamer's Field State Migratory Waterfowl Refuge - Dalton Highway - Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve - Arctic National Wildlife Refuge - Chugach State Park - Kenai Peninsula - Soldotna - Kenai - Lake Iliamna - Katmai National Park - King Salmon - Brooks Falls - Homer - Wynn Nature Center - Lake Clark National Park and Preserve - Cooper Landing - Kenai National Wildlife Refuge - Seward Peninsula - Nome - Teller - Girdwood - Prince William Sound - Seward - Exit Glacier - Kenai Fjords National Park - Resurrection Bay - Pedersen Lagoon Wildlife Sanctuary

Trip Overview

Although each trip brings its own excitement and each subsequent year produces its own unique anticipation, it must be said that I had been particularly looking forward to 2016, as not only would I be visiting Australia for the very first time, but I had also planned a first comprehensive expedition to Alaska. In addition to my other tours throughout a momentous year, I would basically be spending almost fourteen weeks in Australia and Alaska amid some of the most remarkable landscapes on earth, a feat that I could not have dreamed of as a child growing up in the hustle and bustle of London life. Unlike Australia, which has for some time resembled almost a final frontier for me, I had visited Alaska previously, but only a few easily accessible areas and for just a week or two at a time. Whilst I could still not hope to explore all of America's largest and least densely populated state on just one tour, on this occasion I would at least reach most of the more renowned areas, including some of the finest brown bear territory in North America, as only certain parts of Canada can rival Alaska in terms of truly wild and unrestricted grizzly bear viewing. In many places you have the

thrilling opportunity to observe immense bears on foot at extremely close quarters in a variety of largely pristine environments. This is without vehicles or barriers of any kind or even guides, just you, the bears and a few thousand spawning salmon keeping everything nice and equitable. The majority of my trip would be devoted to evaluating the most natural bear experiences against a succession of spectacular backdrops and some of the most breathtaking wilderness I have had the privilege to gaze upon. In addition, I was hoping to discover a reliable and accessible walrus site for future guests, as most good locations for these magnificent pinnipeds are fairly difficult and subsequently expensive to reach, as well as an area in Nome where muskox sightings could be pretty much guaranteed. There were other targets of course, but these were my main aims and in many respects this would not be a general wildlife tour, at least not in the sense that I intended to split my time evenly between each and every possible species. Bears were my absolute priority and although the tour was an unqualified success and produced several highlights that will remain with me forever, one of which was as exhilarating as I have ever known, we missed a number of mammals that I had at least tentatively hoped to encounter. Grey wolf, coyote, Arctic fox, American mink, least weasel, raccoon, muskrat, American bison, killer whale and harbour porpoise all eluded us and whilst not all of these animals are by any means routinely observed in Alaska, they do all occur in areas that we visited and I was greatly surprised that we did not see a few of them. Given the time that we spent either sailing on or flying over water, I was especially disappointed not to see any killer whales, but even their absence paled into insignificance when you consider the fact that in seven weeks, having investigated literally hundreds of ponds, lakes, rivers and other water courses, we did not encounter a single muskrat. I would have said that this was bordering on impossible before we travelled, but it just confirms that absolutely nothing can be taken entirely for granted when dealing with wild animals and the reality of this particular tour was that we observed more Canada lynx than muskrats. Whilst this total absence of a generally widespread rodent was a somewhat extreme example, such vagaries are actually not uncommon in genuinely wild areas, where the vast majority of animals are not habituated to people and many may go their entire lives without seeing a single human being. As wonderful as that thought undoubtedly is, in other regions the opposite is sadly true and animals are difficult to encounter due to the intense pressure they face from hunters. That is certainly the case in parts of Alaska and the combination of largely unrestricted hunting and essentially inaccessible wilderness, can make wildlife viewing far more challenging than elsewhere in the United States. That said, Alaska can be far more rewarding as well and I would definitely not swap any of the numerous memorable moments from this trip, just to be able to say that I saw another species or two. Often it is not just what you see, but how you see it and some of our sightings would be nigh impossible to improve upon, particularly in terms of feasting, foraging and downright fabulous bears. As will be the case until he disappears off to university next year, James was at my side once again, but on this occasion I had very little use for his remarkable spotlighting talents. At this time of year it remains light until very late in the northern hemisphere and in some areas it barely grows dark at all. Spotlighting was therefore largely unnecessary

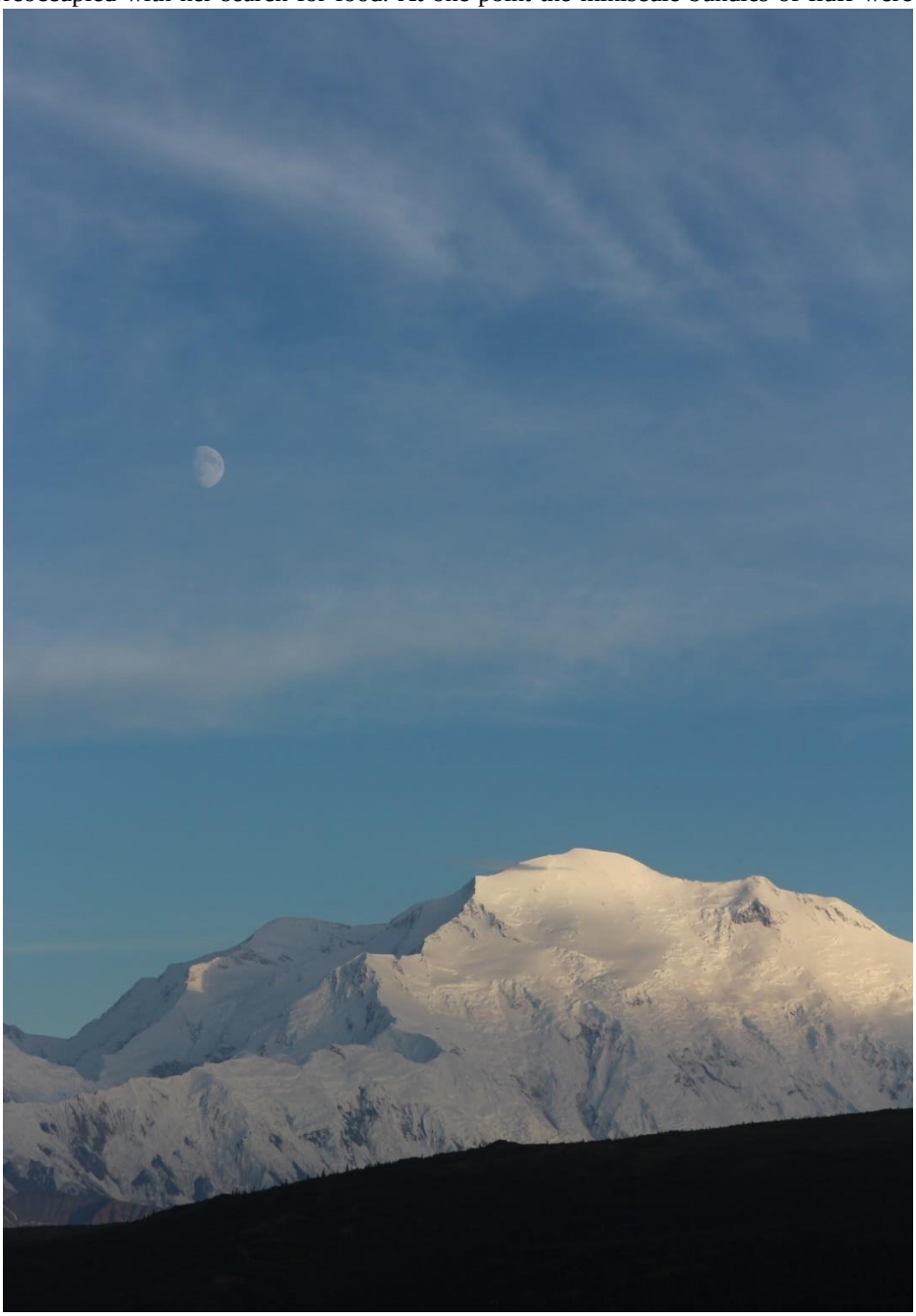
and instead we were able to drive and hike in good visibility throughout most of the night, which is always a real treat given the amount of time we generally spend searching for animals in complete darkness. James was consequently able to devote more time to filming wildlife than normal and his hard work throughout the entire tour was greatly appreciated, as we spend long hours in the field and these often extreme research tours are now very much a team effort. That was particularly the case on this trip, as the volatile Alaskan weather was very much against us and we endured more hours than I ever want to remember, either hiking for animals in the rain or staked out trying to photograph bears that were almost as soggy as we constantly were. You always expect some rain in Alaska, but at one stage it had rained on 22 out of 23 days and I think that in all we experienced only five entirely dry days out of 47. Despite the incredible settings and equally resplendent wildlife, it was difficult not to become slightly disheartened at times and the often horrendous conditions certainly contributed to a lack of success with some species. Ultimately we began to hope for days with even a degree of sunshine between downpours and attempting to protect cameras became almost a full time occupation. Certainly we missed a great deal of natural behaviour whilst the rain was too torrential to consider using cameras and on more than one occasion we simply left our equipment behind and huddled to enjoy the hugely entertaining spectacle of bears doing their thing. Precipitation, however heavy, does not have a profound effect on bears ploughing through the shallows for waning salmon and their second major activity, sleeping soundly between banquets, was similarly impervious to the inclement weather. As it was, Anchorage was bathed in a deceptively glorious sunlight as we arrived and within a couple of hours and a first picturesque drive, we were watching half a dozen moose grazing among the willows in the shadow of the stirring Chugach Mountains. The bright weather held for the next day as well and having briefly disturbed a shuffling porcupine at the crack of dawn, which promptly headed for the nearest tree before peering down rather pathetically at us, we drove further north to Hatcher Pass in search of a trio of smaller mammals that, if not exactly routinely observed, are fairly common in the area. Traditionally Arctic ground squirrels are the easiest of the three to find and that proved to be the case, as we quickly encountered the first of the hundreds of ground squirrels we would observe throughout the trip. Hoary marmots are generally reasonably easy to spot as well, but on this occasion we were still waiting for our first glimpse of one of these rather charming and particularly rotund rodents after more than three hours. Eventually I decided that it made sense to switch habitats for a while and to investigate a few rocky hillsides to look for collared pika, one of only three lagomorphs native to Alaska. Just as we trekked up the first slope, James caught sight of something peering up at us from the opposite side of the road at the bottom of the hill and we were quickly able to identify it as a marmot. Although it was the only one that we would find at Hatcher Pass, it was not overly worried by our presence and we were able to follow it at fairly close range for several minutes. Almost immediately we found the pikas to complete our furry triumvirate and shortly after I was briefly convinced that I had pulled off one of my finest spots of all time, when I just caught some movement on a mountainside at extreme distance and scanned what my binoculars confirmed could only be a pack of running wolves. There appeared to be six in all, but they were still so far away that they were difficult to see properly even with optics and it took a few minutes to notice that these sleek shadows were being chased by something appreciably smaller. At first I wondered if it was a young wolf or perhaps even a coyote trying to follow the pack to a carcass, but it was a curiously inelegant creature and although it was somehow oddly familiar, it did not instantly remind me of any specific wild animal, certainly not at that still considerable range. Fortunately, the wolves were running in our direction, although still at great height, and

as they approached it did not take much longer to determine that these wolves were sadly huskies and that the awkward lump chasing them was actually a big fat labrador, trying desperately to keep up with its considerably fitter cousins. I was not really sure whether to laugh or cry, but the labrador was so deliriously happy when it finally caught the resting sled dogs, that it was impossible not to smile despite the initial disappointment of realising that we had not, after all the initial excitement, encountered a pack of wild wolves on the first full day of our trip. We both still expected to see wolves at one stage or another and any slight tinge of regret was forgotten that afternoon as we moved on to the small town of Talkeetna for what was likely to be one of the highlights of the tour, a fixed-wing flight around Denali with a spectacular landing on one of the vast glaciers carved through the Alaska Range. Although we would be spending several days in and around Denali National Park, this was as close as we would get to the famous mountain that was known as Mount McKinley until it was renamed prior to the official visit of President Barack Obama in August 2015. Originally named after the Republican Senator William McKinley in 1896, just a few months before he became the 25th President of the United States and five years before he became the third to be assassinated, Denali translates as the tall or high one in some of the local dialects. The moniker is a fitting one, as Denali is one of the tallest mountains on the planet in terms of its actual elevation from base to summit, as it rises to a total height of 6,190 metres, but from a starting point of only around 600 metres above sea level. Everest in contrast may, at 8,848 metres high, reach a great deal further into the atmosphere than Denali, but its starting position is much higher, as Everest emerges from a base approaching 4,000 metres above sea level. Of course such simple equations and meaningless comparisons do neither colossus justice, as they are both awe-inspiring masterpieces and our circumnavigation of Denali was an unforgettable experience, particularly as the weather continued to hold and our flight took place in almost perfect visibility. Denali was shimmering majestically in the golden evening sunlight and our two-hour adventure also featured dazzling views of the next two tallest mountains in the Alaska Range, Mount Foraker and Mount Hunter, as well as superb aerial views of a host of immense glaciers, the longest of which stretched more than forty miles. The glacier landing was as much fun as we both expected and an almost perfect day was completed when we reached Denali National Park late at night and managed to

order a meal a few minutes before the last restaurant closed. Things would improve even further the next day, when we took a scheduled bus tour through a large section of the national park, for although I generally try to avoid activities with other people at all costs, as large numbers of babbling tourists are not usually conducive to successful wildlife viewing, at Denali you do not have a great deal of choice. Private vehicles are not allowed beyond Savage River during the summer months, which is just fifteen miles along the main park road, and at other times of the year you can drive the 30 miles to Teklanika River, weather and road conditions permitting. So the only way to really explore Denali is to use one or both of the main bus services, the first of which is a shuttle that provides visitors with the freedom to get on and off the numerous buses at any point throughout the park. The second option is an organised tour that stops at major points of interest and for any significant wildlife. This package also includes a reasonably impressive commentary from the drivers, who certainly know a great deal about the history of the park and resident wildlife. In addition, you can stay at one of the lodges within the national park, which basically involves fixed transfers in and out on a lodge vehicle and various daily activities aimed at all levels of fitness in some truly glorious settings. Over the next few days we would experience all three options, largely to assess every possibility for future guests, and I had also included sufficient time to explore some excellent wildlife areas beyond the park, including the generally productive Denali Highway, which runs through 120 miles of sumptuous landscapes from Cantwell to Paxson and features superb views of the Alaska Range. Our first sortie beyond Savage River would be on the Tundra Wilderness Tour, which traverses 62 miles of the 90-mile national park road, before turning for home at the Stony Hill Overlook. As we took our seats, along with at least forty other visitors, I joked to James that I saw my first ever Canada lynx within about thirty minutes of boarding a Denali tour bus many years ago and that it would be pretty special for both of us to see a lynx on our first day within what I consider to be one of the finest national parks in the United States. Twenty minutes later someone shouted lynx on the opposite side of the bus and James and I rose in unison to be greeted by the unmistakable and rather wondrous sight of a Canada lynx. We glanced at each other with an almost equal measure of joy and disbelief and we were incredibly fortunate in more ways than one, as the person sitting on that side of the bus was more than happy for us to take their open window whilst they watched the rarest of North American cats through the glass. It was fairly close and obviously hunting, but photography was extremely tricky, as you are shooting out of a relatively small window

on these vehicles and, unless the bus is empty, it is impossible to move from window to window as the animal moves. You are therefore restricted to one position and although we had an excellent view for most of the sighting, and I was able to take a few reasonable reference shots, I was not able to capture the true elegance or spirit of this exceptionally beautiful creature. Eventually it skulked beyond our vision and when I spoke to the driver later, he informed us that we had been extraordinarily lucky, as he had spent five or six days a week in the park for the first ten weeks of the season and had not seen a single lynx. I was certainly not going to argue with his assessment and over the years I have become used to being told how lucky I am. It has become a regular refrain in fact and I accept that fortune, in whatever guise, has played an integral role in every trip that I have been involved with. That said, we make our own luck in life to some degree and I like to think that I encounter so many species and experience such exceptional sightings, not because I am twice as lucky as anyone else, but because I spend at least twice as long looking. I am routinely prepared to devote eighteen hours or more a day to the cause in all conditions and not for two or three weeks at a time, but for six or seven. Whilst many contributing factors will ultimately determine the success or otherwise of a tour, including several that are usually beyond your control, there is no real substitute for time in the field and as the South African golfer Gary Player used to say when he was accused of being lucky 'you know what, it's true, I am lucky…and the harder I practice, the luckier I get'. There was certainly an element of good fortune on this drive, as we observed almost all of the megafauna that Denali is famous for, including dall's sheep, or thin horn sheep as they are now rather incongruously known, moose, caribou and a female grizzly bear with two cubs born in hibernation in January or February and nursed until they left the den with their protective mother in spring. Despite the fact that we were on a crowded tour bus, this was actually a magnificent sighting, as the mother and cubs approached to within a few metres of our vehicle and we were

able to savour the cub's mischievous antics for the best part of twenty minutes. The pattern was always the same, as they would spend several minutes frantically attempting to savage each other, before suddenly charging off when they eventually realised they had allowed the safety of their mother to wander too far. For her part, despite the occasional glance to check that her offspring were still following, their mother was almost entirely preoccupied with her search for food. At one point the miniscule bundles of fluff were engrossed in a macabre but amusing game of tug of war with the skin of a flattened ground squirrel and it was an absolute pleasure to hear the gasps of excitement from tourists who had clearly never seen a grizzly before and did not expect such a remarkable encounter. Whereas the significance of the lynx sighting had been lost on most of my fellow passengers, listening to the positive comments and animated exclamations, the bears clearly resonated with many of them and I was delighted that they were going to return home with such positive memories of this habitually misunderstood and persecuted animal. Most of them at least, as one teenager, unfortunately sitting directly behind me, complained bitterly and at great length that his parents were unbelievably selfish for taking him on a two-week vacation to Alaska and that he really hoped the return journey would not be delayed by any more boring bears. Having listened to him whine for more than seven hours, I was certainly hoping that he might see at least one more hungry grizzly, but most of the animals spotted on the way back, including another half a dozen bears, were at distance and the return journey was consequently less eventful. I cannot say that I would like to make a habit of viewing wildlife in this way, as it is not what I love to do and it is obviously impossible to provide guests with profound, intimate encounters whilst sharing a bus with 40 or 50 people and relying on a driver who has to maintain a specific schedule. However, considering that you cannot take your own vehicle deep into Denali, these tours represent an ideal and affordable introduction to the national park and it is difficult to criticise an activity capable of producing the outstanding sightings that we were so privileged to experience. The spellbinding landscapes alone are worth the drive and Denali looked glorious, both the mountain and the park, for the majority of our stay. The weather was starting to turn, but at this stage the rain was arriving in the evening and during the day the famous old mountain was an absolute picture, bathed in sunshine against largely clear blue skies. For the next few days we divided our time between the park and surrounding area, but were not able to drive quite as far as Savage River due to a group of extraordinarily stupid hikers who were surprised by an inquisitive young male grizzly and thought that it was a good idea to throw their backpacks at him, which were full of food and soft drinks. The bear, who had only recently separated from his mother and was trying to find his way in the wild without her reassuring presence, gleefully accepted the free meal and then of course began approaching other hikers for food. Although the imbeciles originally involved were entirely the problem in this case, this is what park officials call a 'problem bear' and when efforts to scare him away from populated areas failed, the Savage River Campground was closed to the public whilst rangers searched for the ill-fated bear in order to kill him. They did not find him during our stay and although I had hoped that he might have realised just how much trouble people are, when I returned home I read that he had been trapped and euthanized. The park staff did attempt to recondition the bear by shooting him with high powered beanbags, but when this failed he paid the ultimate price for the inexcusable behaviour of a group of people who evidently should not have been hiking around wild animals and who would face absolutely no consequences for their actions. Not only did they condemn this innocent creature to an unnecessary death, but they also endangered the lives of other visitors and yet were not even banned from the national park system, where clearly they have no place. By the time that we were due to begin our four-night stay within the park, the last section of road to Savage River had been reopened and our final independent drive on that illustrious fifteen-mile stretch was rewarded with a fabulous view of a stoat bouncing across the road with a huge dead vole clenched in its jaws. The mustelid was only the third carnivore observed at Denali and although a certain lack of diversity is to be expected in terms of mammal species in Alaska, in general animal densities were also considerably lower than anticipated. We did see moose and caribou, but surprisingly few, and the only really common animals within the actual park were snowshoe hares, red squirrels and arctic ground squirrels. Beavers were more widespread beyond the national park, as were European



rabbits, and we had our first close view of a bald eagle on the Denali Highway. There are four lodges to choose from within the park and all of these are situated in the Wonder Lake area more or less at the end of the 90-mile road that the green shuttle buses traverse throughout the day. As the name suggests, Wonder Lake is absolutely stunning and the spectacle of a snowcapped Denali across the shimmering blue water and set against equally vivid azure skies, is as breathtaking as it is serene. The area itself, however, is not actually the best in terms of wildlife sightings and the lodges are not at all set up for serious wildlife viewing. They offer a wide range of highly enjoyable activities, including hiking, canoeing and cycling, but they are very soft adventures and there are no dedicated or expert wildlife guides. We turned down most of the prearranged activities, which are organised on a group basis depending to some extent on your interests, but more on your capabilities in terms of hiking. None started early enough in terms of mammal activity and we would generally use the lodge vehicle to go out with the other guests before heading off independently and eventually making our

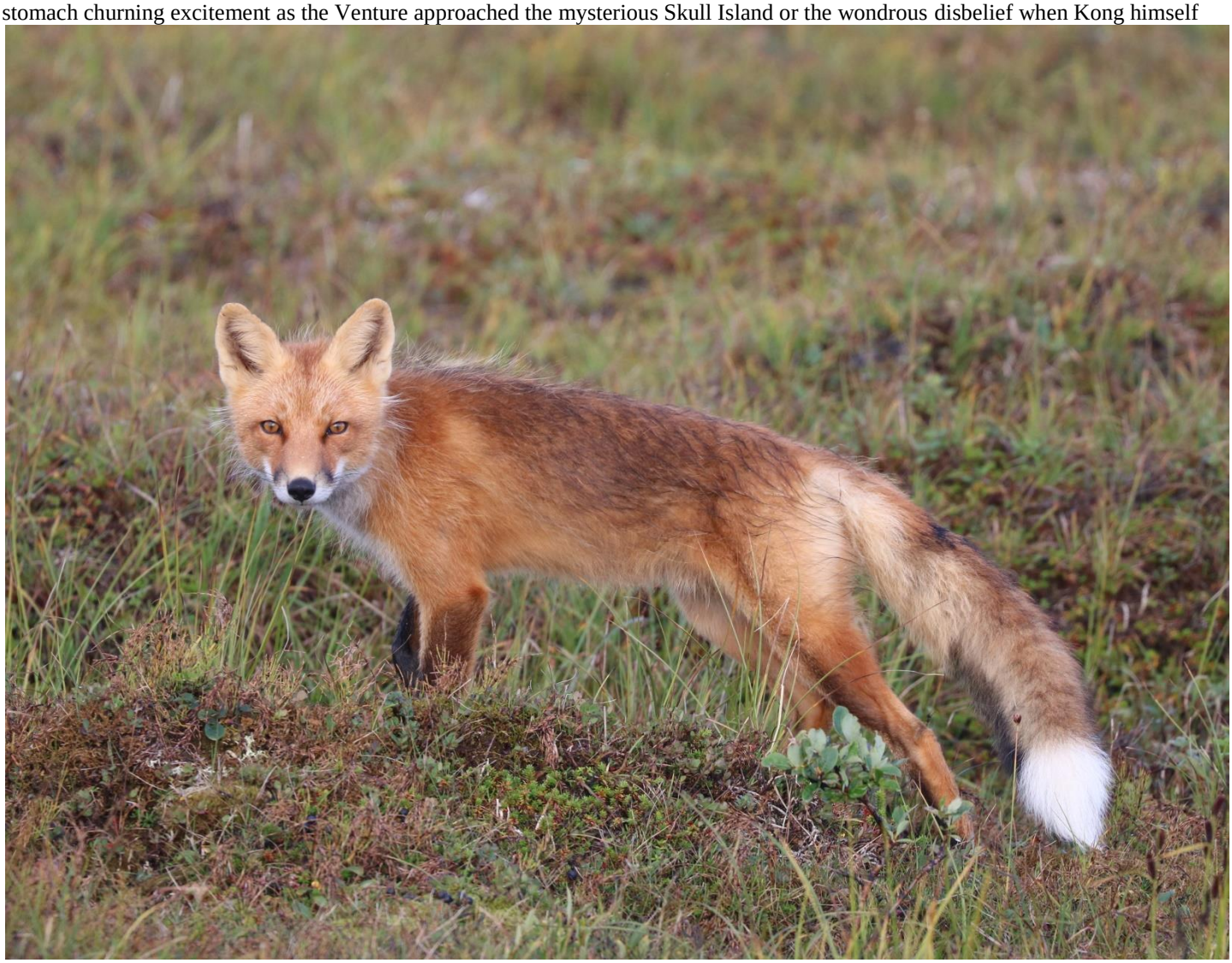
own way back. This worked reasonably well, certainly given that the organised groups encountered very few animals, and we were able to get extremely close to three huge male moose, that we spent the best part of a thoroughly enjoyable day watching. We also managed to find several caribou, a small herd of distant dall's sheep, numerous pika at the top of one of the steeper climbs and a tundra vole that had, for now at least, managed to escape the attention of any stoats. We were more likely to see a black bear than a grizzly in the wooded area around the lake, but we saw neither and had to be satisfied with some chattering red squirrels. Our luck was just about holding with the weather, as it was still glorious during the day and we were able to watch some dramatic storms across the mountains at night from the porch of our lovely little wooden cabin. We knew, however, that the elements were closing in, as the clouds started to gather earlier each day and we got soaked a couple of times hiking back to the lodge in the evening. Indeed, it rained as we left Denali for the final time and it would now continue to do so on a daily basis for the remainder of the tour. We had been fortunate in terms of both the weather and wildlife, as the lynx had been a thrilling bonus and we had seen most of the species that you would generally expect to encounter at this particular national park. The one glaring omission was a wolf, as Denali has always been one of the best places to watch wolves anywhere in the United States and as recently as 2010 it was estimated that almost half of all visitors would have the real privilege of observing this iconic predator. That very same year, the Alaska Board of Game removed the buffer zone that protected wolves on state land east of the national park and sealed the fate of most of the wolf packs in that region. It had been proposed by several independent sources that the buffer actually needed to be expanded, as scientific data clearly demonstrates that many of the park wolves were travelling beyond the original buffer zone where they could be trapped and shot by hunters. However, not only was that advice shamefully ignored, but the representatives of the Alaska Board of Game, all of whom were appointed by the then Republican Governor Sarah Palin, decided that wolves should no longer be protected at all beyond the park boundaries, which has of course resulted in a catastrophic reduction in the wolf population. There are currently believed to be

less than fifty surviving wolves in the entire six million acre Denali National Park and Preserve, which attracts over half a million visitors every year, more than 50,000 from within the state. Less than 4% of these visitors are now likely to encounter these apex predators and some of the guides and bus drivers, who you have to remember are working in the park on a daily basis for several months at a time, had not seen wolves for between three and five years. One national park employee told me exactly what everyone else knew but would not admit 'when they killed the buffer, they killed the wolves, simple as that'. You would think that it was this obvious to everyone, but the National Park Service has for years denied that the absence of a buffer zone is even a contributory factor regarding the reduction in wolf numbers and they only recently admitted that killing Denali wolves reduces the chance of visitors seeing one, which sounds so stupid that it must be fabricated, but is appallingly true. As the organisation responsible for Denali National Park and its visitors, you could probably be forgiven for presuming that the National Park Service would have a vested interest in protecting these denizens of the wild and ensuring that as many tourists see them as possible. Unfortunately, and although thousands of their employees are decent citizens doing a job that they genuinely believe in, at times certain sections of the NPS can be entirely disingenuous in their attempts to support the political agenda of the far right and the pro hunting and pro gun lobbyists. On far too many occasions they have denied the substantial damage that hunting causes to the environments they are charged to protect and in 2016 they embarrassingly claimed that the decline in wolf numbers was as a result of low snowfall. Even when they ultimately had to accept that there has never been any correlation between levels of snowfall and wolf numbers, they went on to insist that the killing of wolves along the boundary of the park has 'minimal impact on the size of protected wolf populations'. This is not only unambiguously wrong, it is insulting and not a little dishonest, as two of the most established wolf packs in the area were all but wiped out as a result of single breeding females being killed just beyond the protection of the national park. The Grant Creek pack did not den at all when their only pregnant female was killed by a trapper in 2012 and in 2015 the same appalling situation occurred when the one pregnant female of the East Fork pack was shot at a bear baiting station. Within months, healthy family groups of seventeen and fifteen had been reduced to an unsustainable three and two respectively and in May 2016 one of the two remaining adult members of the East Fork pack, a male wearing a radio collar, was killed by a trophy hunter, again just beyond the park boundary. His mate, with two young cubs and no pack to protect her or provide food, disappeared from her den within weeks of his death and has not been seen since. Even by the woeful standards of casual cruelty and selfish disdain displayed by so called sports hunters, this is a sorry tale, as the almost certain death of this isolated and desperate mother marks the end of a beloved pack that had been studied continuously since 1939 and that multitudes of visitors have taken great delight in over more than seven decades. Only Jane Goodall's renowned study of the chimpanzees of Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania can even begin to approach the wolf research undertaken at Denali, which is certainly the longest ever survey regarding the ancestry of a major mammal group. The biologist and author Adolph Murie was the first scientist to study wolves in the wild and his pioneering fieldwork and meticulous observation of the East Fork pack, particularly in terms of their relationship with dall's sheep and other prey species, formed the basis of his ground-breaking publication The Wolves of Mount McKinley. Biologist Gordon Haber took up the mantle in 1966, studying the same family of wolves for 43 years until he was killed in 2009, when the Cessna 185 that he was using to track another pack, crashed within the park. Haber

was highly critical of the government's ruthless persecution of wolves and of the dishonest way in which Alaskan officials attempted to justify the widespread slaughter. He repeatedly called for a ban on the use of planes and helicopters to systematically exterminate predators and for an end to hunting in and around Denali, as even now some hunting, supposedly for subsistence purposes, is permitted within the actual national park. To give you a better idea of exactly what we are dealing with in Alaska, the trapper who killed the Grant Creek female in 2012 did so by shooting a horse in the former buffer zone and setting multiple traps around the carcass. The dead horse was used to lure wolves into an area where they had previously been protected and this particular female was one of at least two wolves killed at this trap. She was left to die in a barbaric neck snare for ten days and the trapper did not even return in time to save the pelt, which was damaged beyond use by a scavenging wolverine. He had no interest in the pelt, the wolf, the horse, or even future visitors who perhaps would have liked the opportunity to see the beautiful living creature that he took it upon himself to torture and kill, simply because he wanted to. What people like this either do not understand or do not care about, is that wolves are a keynote species and that by eradicating them, they are effectively destroying the very land they purport to cherish, not only for themselves, but for their children and all future generations. Wolves are essential to the environmental health of the ecosystems in which they roam, forging ecological harmony and maintaining a natural balance that we cannot even begin to comprehend. In February 2017 the members of the Alaska Board of Game, who had watched wolf populations crash to almost unsustainable levels since the buffer zone was removed in 2010, had the opportunity to take all of these factors into account, when they met to discuss the possibility of restoring the buffer. They decided instead that the few remaining wolves did not deserve our protection and that almost 600,000 visitors to Denali each year, who contribute about $500 million to Alaska's economy annually, equally did not deserve the chance to see one of the very special animals that the park had built its outstanding reputation upon. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the board rejected any link between wolves being killed in the former buffer zone and the indisputable reduction in wolf numbers and went on to add that an almost total absence of wolves in the preceding years had not adversely affected the number of tourists visiting the park. Although this may be the case, it really only accentuates the board's collective spite for a single persecuted species, as well as their utter contempt for the people who spend a great deal of money travelling from all over the world to hopefully experience a pristine and intact ecosystem, an ecosystem that they, as Alaskans, should be doing everything within their power to preserve. For the record, the seven board members who voted unanimously to betray both the wolves and ultimately their own species were: Ted Spraker, Nate Turner, Stosh Hoffman, Teresa Sager Albaugh, David Brown, Larry Van Daele and Karen Linnell. All seven are committed hunters, some are trappers as well, and they all benefit either commercially or recreationally from hunting and or trapping. As such, they would all appear to have a vested interest in maintaining Alaska's harsh hunting and trapping laws and not necessarily in doing the right thing on behalf of the environment or the people they were supposedly appointed to represent. All of the people that is, as opposed to just the hunting and trapping fraternity, most of whom

support either the total eradication of major predators or at least a shamefully brutal control of their numbers. It is difficult to understand how such a blatantly obvious conflict of interest was allowed to go unchallenged, as clearly all of the board members benefit economically from hunting in some form and were never likely to vote for a proposal that challenges either their finances or their beliefs, no matter how unethical they are. After the decision was announced, Nate Turner, who runs his own hunting and trapping business, was quoted as saying, apparently with a straight face, that he listens to the 'best science available', whilst clearly ignoring the best science available and the Denali Citizens Council, which includes a large number of people living in or around the Denali area who supported the reintroduction of the buffer zone, were all summarily dismissed by the board as being 'misinformed and emotional'. Larry Van Daele, who perhaps highlighted exactly why his qualifications are in wildlife management and not wildlife conservation, insisted that the killing of a pregnant alpha female and the consequential and substantiated destruction of an entire wolf pack, was 'purely an emotional issue' and 'not a biological issue'. Teresa Sager Albaugh, who enjoys joining her husband to kill animals with snares whenever she can, had previously outlined her suitability for a role on the board by emphasising her many 'wonderful opportunities' to shoot bears and 'avid hunter and trapper' Ted Spraker is also a member of Safari Club International, which basically means that he enjoys killing animals abroad as well as in the United States. Good old Ted apparently dedicates much of his spare time to 'youth firearm safety', which I am reliably informed is definitely not an oxymoron. Sadly for the wolves, the park itself and anyone who cares about conservation, the board members certainly are and the issue of a buffer zone at Denali will not be revisited for at least another three years, at which time a further seven brave hunters will, no doubt magnanimously and entirely without prejudice, decide that less than fifty wolves is more than enough in a wilderness of six million acres, if of course there are any remaining by that stage. Whether we would see wolves on our trip was of no great importance, but Denali had always been the place in Alaska where you were likely to and as we moved on to Fairbanks, we knew that our chances were now very much in the lap of the gods, all of whom appear to carry automatic weapons in America. Our first stop was at Creamer's Field State Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, where I had been reliably informed we were certain to encounter a woodchuck, the second of three marmot species that we were attempting to photograph over the course of the tour. Woodchucks, or groundhogs as they are also known, are more commonly observed in parts of Canada and the eastern United States and were immortalised in the 1993 Bill Murray film Groundhog Day, which featured the annual ceremony in the town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, where a groundhog, known as Punxsutawney Phil, is used to determine whether spring will arrive early or winter will continue for another six weeks. The movie was actually shot in Woodstock, Illinois, but Groundhog Day is a real event in Punxsutawney and has been performed there every February since German immigrants introduced the celebration in 1887. Directed by fellow 'Ghostbuster' Harold Ramis, the film has taken on more philosophical resonance with time and in 2006 was chosen for the National Film Registry as being 'culturally, historically or aesthetically significant', essentially in relation to the United States. Administered by the Library of Congress, the registry has to date selected and preserved 700 films, including short films, documentaries and in some cases rudimentary clips, that are considered to be important to the nation. As a concept, the registry has tremendous potential and it is fascinating to browse the diverse and largely impressive works selected. However, as a comprehensive archive, it appears to be at least partially flawed, as only 25 new works are added each year and it will therefore take another 28 years to even double the number of films that have been protected for future generations. When you look at the great number of hugely significant works that have been omitted, you quickly realise that the

powers that be should probably be adding far more films on an annual basis. Of course any list of this kind is always going to be deeply subjective, but it is difficult to justify the inclusion of Ferris Bueller's Day Off, The Lion King and The Princess Bride, having excluded Moby Dick, Once Upon a Time in America, Spartacus, The Shining and the enormously atmospheric 1941 version of The Wolf Man. You have to question how you can possibly omit an American classic like Moby Dick, which was directed by one of the greatest US film directors John Huston and based upon a literary masterpiece by Herman Melville, particularly as it portrays such an extraordinary event in the nation's history, the intentional attack and sinking of a whaling ship by a whale. The whaler in question was the Essex, out of Nantucket, which on the 20th of November 1820 lowered three small boats in pursuit of a pod of sperm whales in the South Pacific. One of the boats harpooned a whale almost immediately, but was damaged in the process and had to cut the line and return to the Essex for repairs. It was at this point that a massive sperm whale was spotted in the distance, a whale that survivors would later estimate at about 26 metres in length, a full ten metres larger than the average size of this species, that was swimming directly towards the murderous harpoon points and not away from them. Perhaps this one colossal whale had witnessed just too much bloodshed and had watched too many of its mates and young harpooned and butchered, but whatever the reason, what followed was simply unparalleled, as the avenging leviathan rammed the Essex at great speed on not one but two occasions, ultimately punching a hole in her bow before disappearing, never to be seen again. The breach would be sufficient to sink the whaler and so began a harrowing ordeal for the crew of twenty, as only eight would ultimately survive more than three months lost at sea and most only did so by consuming their own shipmates. On one horrific occasion, when there were no more bodies to gnaw at, four of the sailors in one of the whaleboats had to draw lots, firstly to see which one of them would be killed and then to determine who would have to pull the trigger. One man was chosen and duly shot and the remaining three ate him in a desperate attempt to endure until they were rescued, which two of them eventually were. A somewhat sanitised version of this disturbing true story, as opposed to the mythical allegory that inspires Melville's largely fictional Moby Dick, was released in 2015 as In the Heart of the Sea. It was directed by Ron Howard, who also made Apollo 13 and A Beautiful Mind, neither of which currently appear in the registry. I imagine that they probably both will at some stage and so should another of his movies, Frost/Nixon, a remarkable film that portrays the series of interviews that the disgraced former President Richard Nixon gave to David Frost in 1977, three years after resigning the presidency following the Watergate scandal. Frank Langella has never been better as 'Tricky Dicky' and the terrific British actor Michael Sheen does not put a foot wrong as Frost. Frost/Nixon is not eligible for selection at this stage, as it was released in 2008 and a film must be at least ten years old before it can be considered for the registry. At least this criteria is reasonably clear, as some of the other guidelines are a little more ambiguous, including what actually classifies as an American movie. A few that are recorded as joint productions are certainly far more British in terms of the creative input and talent involved, including two of the greatest films on the entire list, The Bridge on the River Kwai and Lawrence of Arabia, both of which were directed by the English cinematic legend David Lean. For me the beauty of cinema, and of art in general in fact, is that it is entirely possible to admire contrasting works and genres, so whilst I was exposed to great British and European films from an early age, I grew up with an appreciation of American movies as well and one in particular had an enormous effect on me when I first saw it as an eight-year-old. The film was King Kong and I will never forget the stomach churning excitement as the Venture approached the mysterious Skull Island or the wondrous disbelief when Kong himself



appeared, followed by a succession of mind blowing monsters, including a ferocious Tyrannosaurus Rex that the mighty Kong defeated in a titanic, petrifying battle. I had never seen anything like it and from that moment on I was completely hooked on creature and monster films, which would later develop, when I was old enough to be allowed to watch them, into horror films in general. That said, I could never understand why the animals always had to die and was inconsolable the first time I watched Kong topple from the Empire State Building. I could not comprehend how such an immense creature could be killed so easily, but it did not take me long to learn growing up, that this was also the case in real life and that even the most powerful animals were no match for the devastating weapons available to man. I did not know at the time, but Willis O'Brien was responsible for the special effects that so enthralled me and when I started to learn more about him, another strange name kept appearing, as Ray Harryhausen had clearly loved Kong as much as myself, as well as the ground breaking stop-motion animation that O'Brien had employed so realistically to bring him to life. I was seven before my family owned a television and in a seemingly antiquated era before the internet, personal computers, DVD players and even basic videocassette recorders, which arrived in the UK when I was about ten, it was only possible to see films at the

cinema or when they occasionally appeared on television. Consequently, or perhaps not as even today I still generally prefer reading to watching, I was a voracious reader who had already developed a love of the Classics, the study of the Greek and Roman world or Graeco-Roman in the correct parlance, which ideally combined two of my great passions, history and mythology. I would lose myself for hours in the epic tales of Hercules, Achilles, Odysseus and a host of enthralling heroes, gods and monsters immortalised in Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey, as well as the seminal Greek Myths by the poet Robert Graves, who, apart from being horrendously wounded at the Battle of the Somme in the First World War, also wrote I, Claudius and Claudius the God, two of the finest novels of the 20th Century. Norse mythology was similarly devoured, with exhilarating and unrepentantly violent accounts of Thor, Odin, Fenrir and the treacherous Loki and closer to home I marvelled at the heroic stories of Beowulf, the loyal and tragic Gelert, King Arthur, Camelot and the Holy Grail. At my primary school Miss Blackburn, an elderly lady with a hypnotic voice, but not an actual teacher, would read the Classics to us once a week and I would sit mesmerised by the spellbinding tales that she would spin and weave to life. I cannot remember looking forward to anything more than her weekly visits until my parents mentioned that Jason and the Argonauts was going to be shown on television one Christmas. I had learned a great deal about Ray Harryhausen by this stage and was aware that he was responsible for the memorable special effects that the film was famous for, but I had never seen it and spent most of the holiday desperately wishing the days away until I could finally watch my immortal namesake battle an actual hydra and, if it was even possible, an army of skeletons. I soon realised that it was all possible and so much more, as Harryhausen had vastly improved upon the techniques established by his mentor Willis O'Brien and I sat transfixed as my enthusiasm for mythology, monsters and movies all merged into one magical love affair that has never waned. It would be years before my great passions would collide in this way again, when I realised that exotic and previously unimagined travel could combine majestic wildlife, remote wilderness and more or less complete solitude, which would ultimately be replaced by the treasured company of my son James. Instead of simply building on existing technology, Harryhausen pioneered an entirely new process of split-screen animation that produced a previously implausible level of realism between his immaculately crafted and painstakingly choreographed models and the live elements of each film, including the actors. Dynamation was born and Harryhausen spent the rest of his career developing and refining the technique of seamlessly combining animated objects with challenging live action sequences. Although his immeasurable contribution to the film industry was somewhat undervalued by the major studios during his own lifetime, indeed he found it impossible to raise funds for a number of projects that he had hoped to bring to the screen, Harryhausen is now acknowledged as one of the most influential film makers in cinematic history and his timeless work has inspired generations of film makers, from Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, to John Landis, Joe Dante, James Cameron, Tim Burton, Peter Jackson and Nick Park. Of the sixteen feature films that Ray Harryhausen was involved with, my personal favourites are his three Sinbad films, The 7th Voyage of Sinbad,

The Golden Voyage of Sinbad and Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger, as well as Jason and the Argonauts and the original 1981 version of Clash of the Titans, which may not have had the astronomical budget of the 2010 remake, but was certainly twice the film. Whilst it is almost an impossible task, if I had to choose just three scenes to illustrate the genius of Ray Harryhausen, the first would be Talos turning his head in Jason and the Argonauts, which made my blood run cold. From the same film, the rise of the 'Children of the Hydra' skeleton army is simply staggering and the terrifying sound of the centaur clip clopping through the subterranean caverns in the Golden Voyage reverberates to this day. Other honourable mentions go to the dragon and the cyclops battle to the death in the 7th Voyage, the six-armed statue of Kali fighting Sinbad's crew with a sword in each hand from the Golden Voyage, Minoton

despatching Zabid in Eye of the Tiger and the entire Medusa sequence from Clash of the Titans. Memories flood back even now and when Ray Harryhausen died on my birthday in 2013, at the splendid age of 92, it felt as if a part of my childhood had died with him. Happily, his work endures and the National Film Registry already includes the 7th Voyage of Sinbad, which features a fight between Sinbad and a single skeleton as a forerunner to the seven that Jason and his Argonauts would face five years later to great acclaim. If you would like this important and prestigious archive to feature more of Ray Harryhausen's films, or indeed any films that mean a great deal to you, then there is something that you can do about it, as members of the public are allowed to propose up to 50 films for inclusion each year and the Library of Congress website includes details of how to nominate, as well as a list of several thousand possible films to choose from. On a personal note, in March 2017 the eight-year-old came full circle, when James and I went to the cinema to see Kong: Skull Island. On this occasion, instead of having to suffer Kong dying yet again in my own Groundhog Day nightmare, we were instead treated to a powerful rampaging ape, protecting his island and throwing a collection of hostile helicopters out of the sky. Whilst the film itself is not high art and the script is not something you are ever going to need to study in depth, the cinematography is superb and a few of the single shots are as impressive as I have seen. Some of the stills are probably amazing and just as Jurassic Park took special effects to another level almost a quarter of a century ago now, despite also suffering from a weak script and largely one

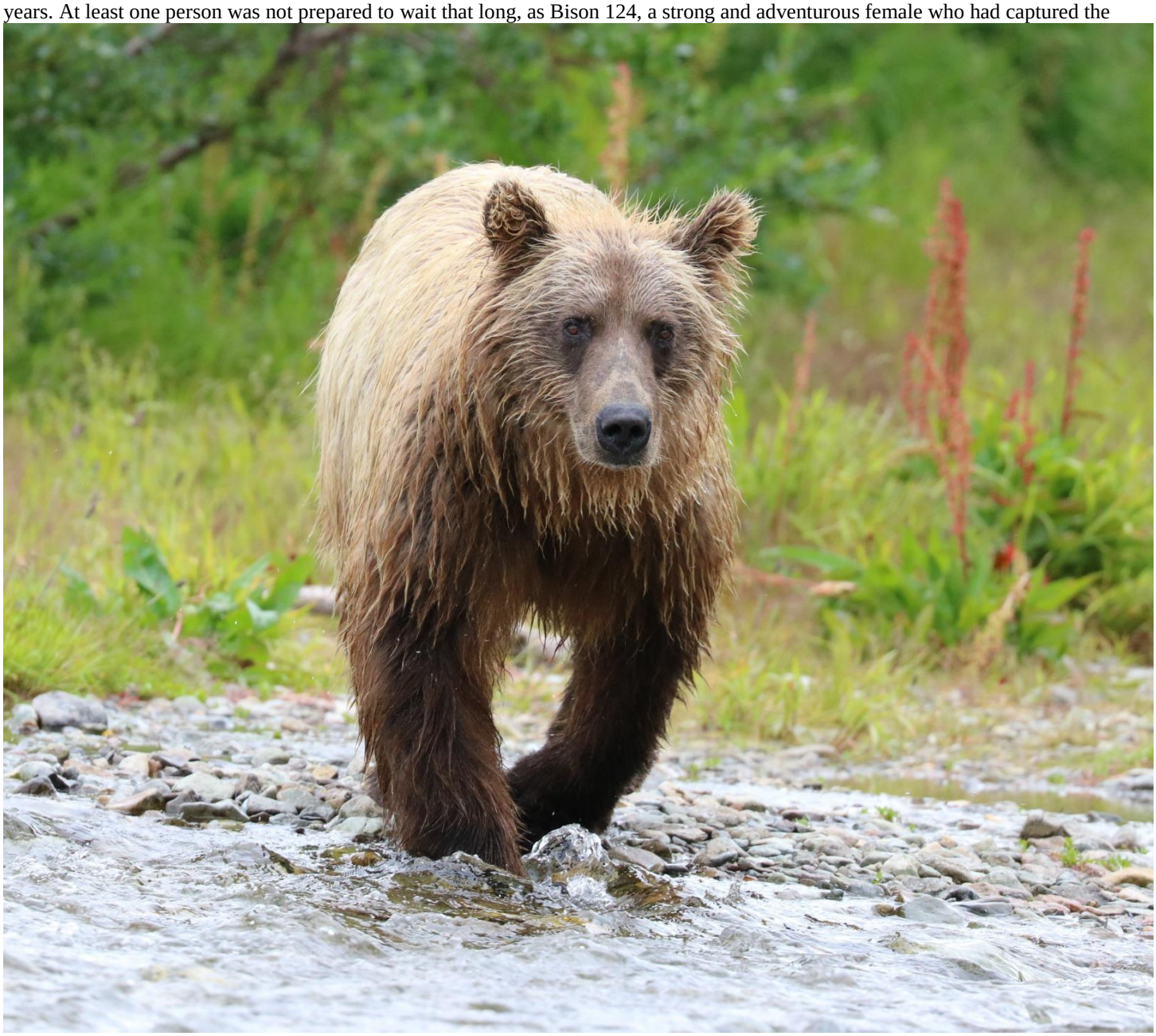
dimensional characters, so Skull Island raises the bar yet further. The climactic battle between Kong and the dominant Skullcrawler is one of the most faultless and 'believable' monster battles that I have seen and Skull Island is visually the most impressive film since The Revenant fully tested just how much Leonardo DiCaprio was prepared to go through in order to finally win an Academy Award. Back at Creamer's Field the story had unfortunately changed somewhat, as we were now informed that the woodchucks were not being seen as regularly or in their usual burrows, which had clearly been deserted when we checked them. It was therefore a case of searching the entire reserve, which we did for several hours in heavy rain without any initial success. Eventually we decided to split up to improve our chances and within a few minutes I had seen a woodchuck running across a clearing in a private section of the refuge, which contained old farm machinery and was surrounded by a tall wire fence. The woodchuck disappeared into long grass and it made perfect sense that these defenceless creatures had made their home in a protected area, as the former dairy was very busy with school groups and dog walkers, several of whom did not comply with the fairly basic and reasonable rules of a wildlife reserve and keep their dogs on a lead. Although, in our own private and inadvertent tribute to Groundhog Day, we returned on four occasions, all at different times to improve our chances and all in appalling weather, none of our soggy vigils met with any success and James was not to see a woodchuck on this tour. We did try a few other sites that had been recommended to us, including the Birch Hill Cemetery,

as the Fairbanks area is the most northerly extreme of the woodchuck's extensive range and we wanted to make every effort in order to establish a reliable site for future guests. Regrettably, and despite our very best efforts, the rain did not relent and it was simply not to be on this occasion. Providence, however, is a fickle mistress and we were more successful with our third marmot species of the trip, albeit following considerable effort on our part. Only found in Northern Alaska, and perhaps in a small corresponding area across the border in Canada, the Alaska marmot makes its home on the Arctic tundra and it is necessary to travel a long way north of Fairbanks in order to find one. The easiest way of doing so is on the Dalton Highway, the infamous largely gravel road that runs 414 miles from the Elliott Highway near the former gold rush settlement of Livengood to the town of Deadhorse and the oilfields of

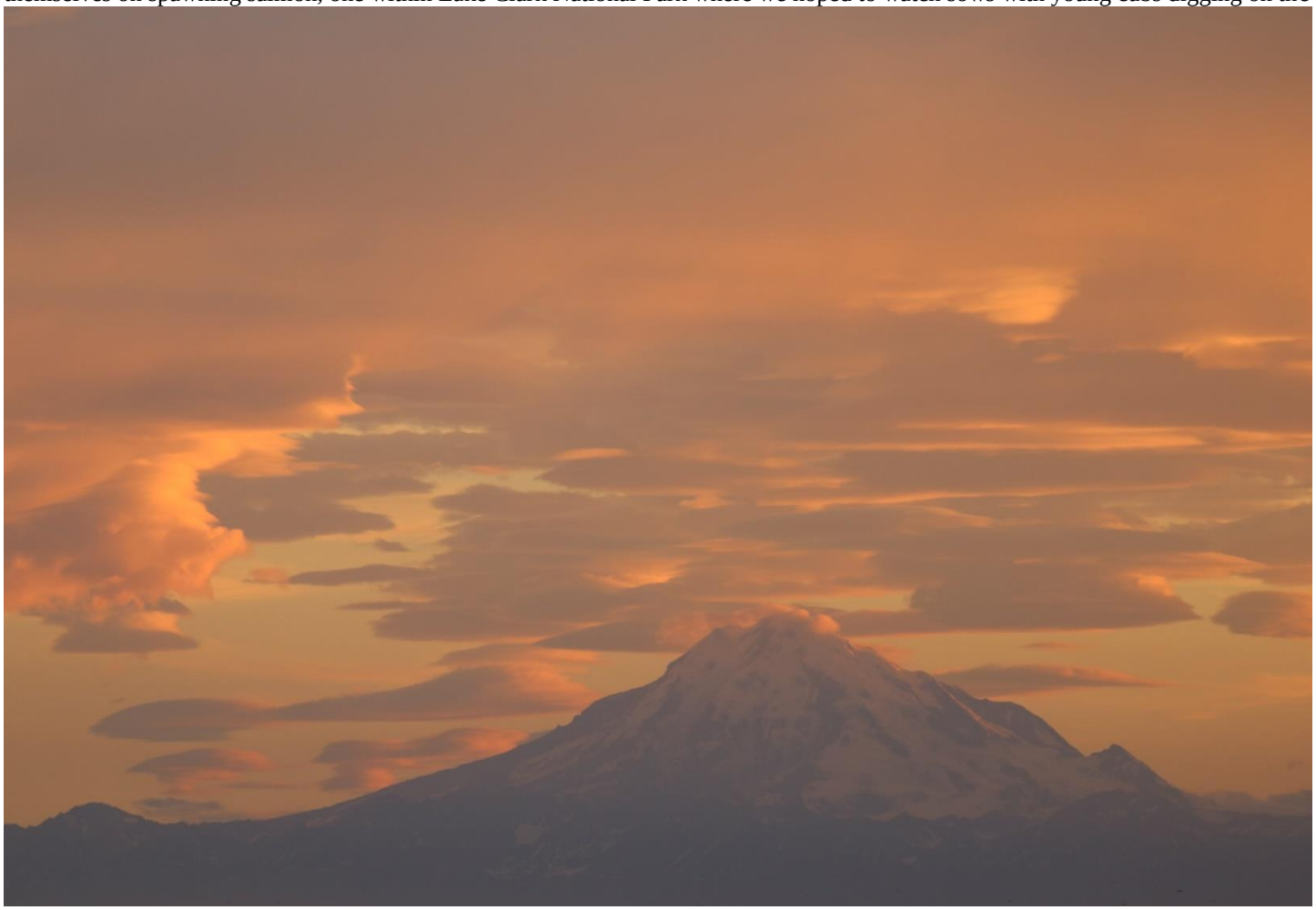
Prudhoe Bay in the Arctic Ocean. Built to supply and service the Alaska Pipeline, or the Alyeska Pipeline depending on your preference, the Dalton Highway earned its fearsome reputation on the reality television series Ice Road Truckers, which followed a group of truckers transporting equipment on massive eighteen-wheeler rigs in the most appalling conditions imaginable. I have only seen clips in order to research driving conditions and the truth is that when you remove the heavy snow and thick ice that those capable truckers had to contend with in the middle of winter, the road itself and the risks associated with it, are both grossly exaggerated. Apart from the fact that the road consists of mainly loose gravel for lengthy sections, only just over 100 miles are paved and not in one single stretch, and that you are consequently more likely to sustain a puncture, the main issue is that there are only three places to refuel on the entire route and the final two are some 239 miles apart. You therefore need to keep a careful eye on your fuel and perhaps take some spare gas, but the rest is just common sense, as you do not want to drive too fast on the uneven and in places jagged surface, just to avoid putting a great deal of pressure on your tyres. Out of interest, and because of all the hype surrounding this deadly route, I requested a quote before I travelled from an outfit in Fairbanks who recommend 'gravel road-ready automobiles' for use on the Dalton Highway. The quote worked out at about $800 for a single 24-hour period from one morning to the next, thanks largely to a ridiculous $0.35 per mile fuel charge beyond 250 miles per day. In addition to a second spare tyre and a CB radio, your $800 basically buys you a conventional two-wheel drive vehicle, which was almost identical to the standard hire car that I used with absolutely no problems. The drive itself passes through literally hours of outstanding natural beauty, but large sections are blighted by the unsightly Alaska Pipeline, which extends 800 miles from the Prudhoe Bay oilfields, the largest and most productive in North America, south to Valdez on the shores of Prince William Sound. If the name Valdez is familiar, it certainly should be, as the oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef a few miles from Valdez in March 1989, rupturing its hull and spilling almost eleven million gallons of crude oil into a pristine and biologically significant marine environment. The subsequent ecological catastrophe claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of marine creatures, including up to 250,000 seabirds and around 3,000 sea otters, and even today thousands of gallons of oil remain on

the beaches of Prince William Sound and hundreds of miles beyond. As difficult as it is to believe, there is an Alaska Pipeline visitor centre just outside of Fairbanks, which is apparently a popular tourist attraction. Not surprisingly, at least not if you know me, we gave it a miss, but it is impossible to do the same regarding the actual pipeline, as 420 miles of it was constructed above ground to avoid building into the unstable permafrost, which, as the name suggests, is permanently frozen ground. There are hundreds of animal crossings to supposedly limit the impact on the environment, but it is of course difficult to assess what the true ecological impact has been since the pipeline was completed in 1977 and certainly thousands of barrels of oil have spewed into the tundra as a result of various leaks and spills, some of which have been caused intentionally. The pipeline aside, the highway itself is a stirring journey through the Alaskan wilderness and at one stage, roughly on the section between Coldfoot at mile marker 175 and Galbraith Lake, which is exactly 100 miles further north, you are driving directly between Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, both of which we took short hikes in. I have long wanted to spend an extended period hiking and camping in Gates of the Arctic and had also looked at a tempting kayaking trip down the Alatna River for this particular tour. Ultimately, time did not permit, but it is a few years since I ventured out into the real back country and this brief foray certainly fuelled the fire for a prompt return. A remarkable combination of desolate beauty and imposing grandeur, the landscapes are as haunting as they are captivating and at Atigun Pass you cross the Continental Divide and drive up and through the commanding sentinels of the Brooks Range, which dominate much of this magnificent odyssey. We did not intend to drive all the way to Deadhorse this time, as access to Prudhoe Bay is restricted by the oil companies and you have to book a guarded shuttle bus through the oilfields for just a brief glimpse of the Arctic Ocean, which did not appeal by any means. Instead the loose plan was to look for the marmots just past Toolik Lake and to either begin the return journey as soon as we had seen them or, if we were initially unsuccessful, to grab a few hours sleep in the car before trying again. There was also the option of driving further north to the Happy Valley area to look for a small herd of muskox, but as we would be visiting Nome later in the tour, where muskox sightings are more or less guaranteed, we decided that this did not make sense unless we were definitely going to spend a second day on the highway. As it was, although they were easily spooked and subsequently challenging to photograph well, particularly with the hideous pipeline in the background, the marmots were not difficult to find and we spent an hour watching one small colony before beginning the long drive back. Including the return journey from Fairbanks, which was all on tarmac, I drove 738 miles within a single 23-hour period, as we left at 5am and arrived back at our accommodation around four the next morning. About sixteen hours were spent in the actual car and our not inconsiderable effort was rewarded with a number of excellent sightings. In addition to the marmots and ubiquitous ground squirrels, we had really good views of several grizzly bears, a family of beavers and a lone porcupine, as well as dall's sheep and caribou at distance and two stunning snowy owls, one of which flew directly over our car. At times our excursion through the austere splendour of the Arctic tundra felt like an actual safari and although we did not encounter any moose, or the wolves or lynx that I was continually hoping for, we more than made up for their absence on the utterly scenic 57-mile drive to Chena Hot Springs, during which we stopped to watch several moose browsing, apparently obliviously as usual, at the side of the road. Fairbanks itself is not an overly attractive city, few are to be fair, but it is surrounded by vast areas of exceptional beauty and is also one of the best and most accessible spots to witness the astonishing natural phenomenon of the Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights as it is perhaps more commonly known. Indeed, Fairbanks styles itself as the Aurora Borealis capital of the world and, given its position within the auroral zone, it is undoubtedly a great location to observe this spectacular and always unique light show. We were a few weeks too early, as it needs to be dark of course and although the peak viewing times are in the darkest nights of mid-winter, you can start seeing this amazing spectacle from late August. Dedicated Aurora Borealis tours operate on a daily basis out of Fairbanks, one of which flies to Coldfoot on the Dalton Highway and includes a stop at the Arctic Circle Wayside, basically a wooden sign indicating the beginning of the Arctic Circle. Our last major stop in at least the vicinity of Fairbanks would be Delta Junction, a small town reached by driving almost 100 miles south, more or less along the Tanana River. As far as I am aware, and notwithstanding the fact that it is surrounded by three towering mountain ranges, Delta Junction is famous predominantly for being the last town on the Alaska Highway, which was built to connect Alaska to the contiguous United States and runs 1,387 miles through Canada to Dawson Creek. Obviously we were not visiting to commemorate that remarkable but fundamentally dull feat of engineering, as Delta Junction is also home to a small population of American bison and I always make a point of attempting to locate wild bison whenever I am in areas that these wonderful animals occur. The history of bison in Alaska is a rather confused and typically sorry affair involving varying degrees of stupidity, cruelty, intolerance and the type of inane mismanagement that you come to associate with most of the federal and state organisations responsible for conserving the magnificent species that Americans should be privileged to share their exceptional homeland with.

Bison have certainly suffered more than most and of the two distinct bison subspecies, plains bison (Bison bison bison) and the larger wood bison (Bison bison athabascae), only the wood bison is native to Alaska. Sadly, but certainly not uncharacteristically, unregulated hunting wiped out tens of thousands of wood bison and by the turn of the twentieth century this northern subspecies was thought to be on the verge of extinction, which proved to be the case in Alaska at least. Small populations did still survive in Canada and in 1957 an isolated and disease free herd of around 200 was discovered in Alberta, a few of which were eventually moved to Elk Island National Park in order to create a healthy and genetically pure population. Since then Canadian conservation initiatives have seen wood bison numbers increase to at least sustainable levels and there are estimated to be around 11,000 surviving today within eleven protected areas. Meanwhile, in the absence of any remaining native wood bison, in 1928 a few residents of Fairbanks arranged for 23 plains bison to be relocated from Montana to the Delta Junction region, primarily as a hunting resource. That number has since grown to around 900 in four small herds at various locations and if that figure appears to be surprisingly low for a healthy breeding population after almost 90 years, you need look no further than the Alaska Department of Fish and Game for an entirely reasonable explanation. According to their website, hunting is used to manage the size of the four herds, because at 665,000 square miles, which is more than seven times the size of the United Kingdom with a populace of 65 million, Alaska simply cannot afford a bison population of more than 900. Over 70 bison are consequently killed at Delta Junction alone each year and the most depressing fact of all is that 15,000 Alaskans apply for permits to shoot these hugely symbolic animals. Turning full circle, the news is apparently much better once again for the wood bison, as 130 were reintroduced to Alaska in 2015, all of which were bred from the healthy Elk Island population. Released near Shageluk on the Innoko River, the bison are largely thriving and within a few months wood bison calves were born in the wild in Alaska for the first time in over a century. While this would seem to be a wonderful success story and a great cause for celebration, the devil is always in the detail and the following chilling statement currently appears on the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website: *'Efforts are underway to re-introduce the plains bison's larger cousin, the wood bison, to Alaska. A successful reintroduction may eventually provide opportunities for hunting this bison subspecies'*. So they are reintroducing an animal that was wiped out as a result of hunting more than a hundred years ago, basically so that they can start wiping them out all over again. Sometimes you get the idea that the lunatics have taken over the asylum in terms of US wildlife management and that allowing individuals so predisposed to the habitual killing of animals to determine policy for any species is a bit like asking a suicide bomber to fly the plane. The general consensus among the Shageluk residents was that they also cannot wait to start hunting bison again and Tom Seaton, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist who has supervised the reintroduction, delivered the cheery news that the herd would be strong enough to be hunted when the population reached 250, which he estimated would take another five to ten years. At least one person was not prepared to wait that long, as Bison 124, a strong and adventurous female who had captured the



hearts of many Alaskans by wandering hundreds of miles from her original release site, was illegally killed in early 2017. Having become something of a celebrity, she was photographed and filmed by numerous locals, it was hoped that she may eventually form part of a secondary herd, that is until one selfish hunter took it upon himself to go out and shoot her. Now neither I or anyone else will have the opportunity to even search for the free spirit known as Bison 124 and the world will surely be a slightly greyer and sadder place for at least the individuals who liked looking out for her each day. I could have possibly seen her on this trip, but I made the decision not to even look for the main herd at this early stage and will follow their progress with interest and no doubt some trepidation. I instead focused our efforts on the Delta Junction plains bison herd and, such is my affinity for this iconic animal, the fact that we did not manage to see them, despite scanning for hours in the pouring rain, was one of my biggest disappointments of the tour. I would have ideally squeezed in another chance, but Delta Junction is a 200-mile round trip from Fairbanks and it was now time to move on to the main section of the trip and get up close and personal with around 800lbs of pulsating grizzly. We would be visiting three main brown bear locations, one on the banks of Lake Iliamna within brief float plane flights of principally male bears gorging themselves on spawning salmon, one within Lake Clark National Park where we hoped to watch sows with young cubs digging on the



beach for clams and a final stop at Katmai National Park, where we would watch bears of both sexes catching salmon at the most iconic grizzly bear viewing location in the entire northern hemisphere. To reach Lake Iliamna we would be flying out of Kenai, which meant traversing another of Alaska's outstanding drives, the spectacular Seward Highway stretching from Anchorage down to the Kenai Peninsula. To be completely fair, barely any of the drives in Alaska could be called ordinary, but this one is truly exceptional, with the green forested slopes of Chugach State Park diverting your attention to the right and the iridescent cobalt blue waters of Turnagain Arm distracting you to the left. You can often watch beluga whales along this section, including at the appropriately named Beluga Point where they pass within a few metres of the shore, and the area around Windy Point is one of the best places that I know for photographing dall's sheep, which are usually perched on the rocks overlooking the road. Sadly, that was not the case on this occasion, as Chugach State Park was ablaze and the whales and sheep were replaced by fire-fighting helicopters filling their Bambi Buckets in Turnagain Arm before flying back over the park and emptying them above the flames. We reached the Sterling Highway turnoff at Tern Lake later than expected as a result of the fire, but were soon savouring yet another fabulous route that takes you all the way down to Homer in Kachemak Bay. We were only taking it as far as Kenai this time and we spent the evening exploring Soldotna, where James spotted the only American Marten of the trip, and just sitting gazing in awe at the almost mythical panorama from the Kenai River Viewing Platform. In addition to watching our first harbour seals and a preening osprey, several active volcanoes are visible over the estuary and across Cook Inlet and the most dominant, Mount Redoubt, was illuminated in such an enchanting radiant light, it was somehow impossible not to conjure evocative images of the Lonely Mountain from J.R.R.Tolkien's classics The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings. We would return to the splendid Kenai Peninsula on several occasions throughout the tour, but our next stop was a lodge at Lake Iliamna, which we would use as a base to fly into various areas within Katmai and Lake Clark national parks. That at least was the plan, but unfortunately the lodge owners had some fairly severe issues with their aircrafts during our stay, two of which crashed within a few days of each other, which caused a great deal of inconvenience for all concerned and meant that we were not able to reach some of the destinations that I had hoped to see, including the sensational Crescent Lake in Lake Clark. A lot of time was wasted because there were not enough planes to transfer all of the guests to each location at the same time and groups subsequently had to take it in turns to sit around waiting for the next ride out. Photographic parties were split, to much consternation in some cases, and the main issue, as far as I was concerned at least, was that we all had to go to Katmai more or less every day, as it was not possible for the only remaining floatplane to adequately cover several destinations. As it was, one group was

left to sleep overnight in the sparse willows of the high tundra, as they were the last party due to be shuttled out and the weather closed in before the plane could return for them. The situation was certainly not ideal, particularly as I had arranged in advance for James and I to explore further afield, but the saving grace was the bears, as Katmai was teeming with a wonderful assortment of bears, including a few eye-catching blondes and some massive boars. Whilst an average male brown bear weighs around 550 to 600 pounds, the coastal bears of Alaska are the largest of all grizzly bears and routinely weigh in at 850lbs. Some have reached a staggering 1,700lbs and whilst we did not encounter any of that size, they all look fairly large when you are walking among them. That is the real beauty of Katmai, you are genuinely free to do exactly what you want and that includes sharing a landscape with animals that could rip you to shreds in a heartbeat if they were so inclined. This is true wilderness, you fly in, you fly out, there are no roads or facilities of any kind, just tundra, creeks, salmon and bears, lots of bears. If the weather moves in, you do not move out and there are no rangers or guides telling you where to go, what to do or when to do it. Your pilot would normally hang around with you, but he can only stay with one group at a time and in our case he was frantically disappearing within minutes to collect his next passengers. The photography groups would spend most of each day staked out on the edge of a creek, pointing their cameras at the waning salmon and

waiting for the bears to arrive, which they duly did on a regular basis and in healthy numbers. Although we hiked more than the photographers, we also spent several hours a day utterly absorbed by the fishing bears and the different strategies that each had developed over time. In general the old masters would watch the salmon carefully before pouncing and were successful more often than not, while many of the younger bears would charge at anything that moved and consequently expended more time and energy plunging through the water than actually feeding. There were significant variations in between of course and it was fascinating to observe the divergent behaviour and the interaction between bears, many of which were obviously comfortable together, whilst others clearly just about tolerated each other's presence. Unless a female with cubs is involved, there is so much food available that serious fights are relatively infrequent, but vociferous squabbles are commonplace and much of the behaviour on display involves a great deal of posturing. Regardless of how many times you have observed it, the entire experience remains a magical one and I will personally never tire of watching basically solitary creatures all having to share the same banqueting hall. My favourite days involved James and I being dropped off at one of the higher lakes and hiking down to the collection point in the evening, as the bears do not all congregate

in one area and instead follow the spawning salmon along the myriad creeks and channels that flow into Katmai's numerous lakes. We would spend the days encountering grizzlies more or less at will and unless we came across fishermen or yet more photographers, we would do so completely alone. There were eager bears ambling across the tundra, exhausted bears sleeping it off among the willows and of course monstrously fat bears marauding through the shallows at every conceivable opportunity. As we followed the creeks, we would discover a different collection of bears at almost every bend and in one two-hour walk we counted over 40 grizzlies, all doing their own thing and generally giving us a wide berth. As preoccupied as these bears undoubtedly are when they fish, and as

endearing and harmless as they may look, you have to remember that even the smallest of these animals are powerful predators and that you need to respect their space. You never approach them directly and if you can see that they are disturbed or agitated by your presence, then you back away slowly, always resisting any temptation to turn and run. There is no doubt that during the annual salmon run, people and bears get closer than they should and ever would in any other circumstance. The abundance of food allows the bears to tolerate each other and us as well, but it is very much a temporary alliance and even in these perfect conditions you need to keep in mind that you are sharing, or more accurately encroaching upon, the territory of a wild animal, an animal that would definitely prefer to be on its own. Whatever the occasion, and however benign a situation may appear, you never entirely know how an individual creature, of any species really, will react to either your presence or to a multitude of different factors that may influence or dictate their behaviour, many of which you will not even be aware of. We had our own personal reminder of this at Katmai, when we were in the middle of a wide stream watching a group of five grizzly bears, some of which were fishing, while a couple were taking a nap between salmon. We had been enjoying and photographing the spectacle for over an hour and everything was completely normal when a bear spotted another languishing fish and gave chase. The salmon was initially swimming parallel to us from right to left, but as the bear closed in, it frantically turned and swam directly towards us, with the determined and rather large grizzly charging directly behind. It all happened in a split second and we had no time to react or even think, as the bear pounced and killed the salmon no more than two metres from our feet, soaking us in the process. It would be interesting to know which party looked the more shocked, as the bear peered up at us blankly, with the salmon still wriggling between its jaws, as if to say what exactly are you doing here? James and I looked at the bear and then at each other, grinning stupidly as the grizzly decided that we had no designs on his fish and trooped off contentedly with its prize. I have no idea what would have happened if that salmon had been just that bit stronger or just slightly faster and its pursuer had not been able to catch it more or less at our feet. Would the bear have continued and simply bundled us over as if we did not exist, or would it have sensed that something was not right and turned away at the very last moment, as I have experienced with a few species on other occasions? Whatever the answer, and although I would not recommend that anyone tries to replicate the episode, having maybe 800lbs of untethered bear rushing directly at you certainly gets the adrenalin flowing and it was one of the most exhilarating moments of this or any other trip. The option of exploring so many remote locations aside, which regrettably did not really materialise, the main purpose of using this lodge was to establish an alternative walrus viewing site in Alaska, as the current option, Round Island within the Walrus Islands State Game Sanctuary, is difficult and time consuming to reach. The lodge owners were aware of a closer colony, but at one stage, given the absence of airworthy planes, it did not look as if even reaching there was going to be achievable. Fortunately, they also had access to a Super Cub and it was agreed that James and I could squeeze into the back of this tiny single engine monoplane for

the ninety-minute journey. Although, strictly speaking, they are only designed to carry two people, cubs are superb wilderness planes that can land on almost any surface, including the beach that we arrived on after an outstanding journey flying amazingly low across the boreal forest and open tundra. In addition to clear aerial views of moose, caribou, brown bears, a red fox and even a swimming beaver, I thought that I had possibly glimpsed a wolf in the distance, but it was so far away that I could not be certain of the size and it may have been a coyote. That was not an issue we had with the walrus, as the real beauty of this colony is how close you can get to these imposing animals without disturbing them. The secret is the low cliff that runs along the beach, as the walrus automatically

move if you try to approach them directly on the sand, but if you climb the bluff before they are able to see you, you can crawl directly above the colony without them even registering your presence. We watched for several hours in this way and at the lowest point of the cliff you are only a few metres above probably 1,000 or so walrus. They are all males of course, as the females and young migrate north in late spring, following the receding ice through the Bering Strait to the Chukchi Sea. They begin their southerly return journey in the autumn and both sexes winter together on the thick pack ice of the Bering Sea, where breeding takes place between January and March. Historically there were thought to be three walrus subspecies, but the current thinking is that there are in fact only two, the Atlantic walrus (Odobenus rosmarus rosmarus) and the Pacific walrus (Odobenus rosmarus divergens). The Atlantic population, which currently numbers around 25,000 in comparison to approximately 200,000 Pacific walrus, was hunted almost to the point of extinction and although commercial hunting is now prohibited, Inuit, Inupiat and other indigenous North Americans are allowed to kill large numbers of walrus each year, supposedly for subsistence purposes. Whilst I have always supported the right of indigenous people to maintain a traditional lifestyle, and have long advocated that local communities should benefit from conservation initiatives and wildlife tourism, the fact is that too many native people abuse the special rights they have been granted in order to

maintain the authentic way of life that they so vehemently insist upon, but, in far too many cases, no longer practice. Automatic weapons, exploding harpoons, snowmobiles and motorboats are all widely permitted for subsistence hunting and although guided sports hunts, for polar bears at least, have to use conventional dog sleds, the local guides abuse even this custom by using snowmobiles for the majority of the pursuit before transferring to sleds just before the defenceless bear is about to be shot. In Canada, First Nations people are allowed to sell their hunting permits to the highest bidder, polar bear tags have been known to change hands for in excess of $50,000, and most native communities are granted special dispensation to kill basically anything that moves for subsistence purposes, which includes for financial gain and not solely for food. The myth of noble natives living in spiritual harmony with the animals they depend upon to survive is just that, a myth, as many indigenous societies are no better or worse than the rest of humanity and as such they take what they want and as much as they can get, regardless of the consequences for future generations, even in terms of their own offspring. If it ever even existed, the deep respect that tribal people were once meant to feel for the creatures that sustained them has been replaced by a callous indifference and instead of using every single part of a carcass as the legend purports, animals are now butchered for the most profitable parts and the meat is often abandoned to fester and rot. Worse still, the same principled citizens demanding to be left alone to pursue a traditional existence are now also killing animals for sport and in some cases, simply out of malice. In 2007 the Canadian biologist Paul Nicklen produced an article for National Geographic outlining some of his personal experiences on Baffin Island, specifically with regards to the hunting of narwhals. He described one particular hunt that he attended where 109 rifle shots were fired and only nine narwhals were landed, which, given that these were capable hunters who would not miss often, meant that a large number of whales were either killed and allowed to sink beyond hastily thrown grappling hooks or were wounded and swam away to probably die later. One hunter confirmed that he had killed seven whales, but that they had all sunk and another that he had shot two without killing either. These were not isolated incidents, as another hunter, who Nicklen described as skilful, admitted that on a previous hunt he had individually, and almost inconceivably, killed fourteen whales and had only managed to land one. Although the sickening waste is deeply

shocking, the absence of remorse for slaughtering such beautiful creatures unnecessarily is unforgivable, as is the total lack of empathy for an animal that the people of Baffin Island have been granted special permission to profit from and are meant to share an intrinsic and timeless union with. If this sounds unjust or perhaps not entirely corroborated, remember that in Canada only the Inuit are allowed to hunt these distinctive whales and that their splendid single tusks, which are basically all they are killed for now, regularly sell for more than $20,000 and in some cases as much as $30,000. However, instead of revering this animal as you might expect, or even protecting it as a commodity to ensure the financial prosperity of their children, the Inuit communities appear to disregard the narwhal almost as a pest. No efforts have been made to reduce the waste, or, almost as importantly, to report the true number of whales being killed each year, and the last passages of Nicklen's article were particularly abhorrent, as he described a thirteen-year-old boy spending a day shooting narwhals for target practice, as a child might with an air rifle or BB gun and a stack of tin cans in his back garden. No one made any attempt to kill the whales that he was wounding and the entire episode took place in full

view of several village elders, all of whom said precisely nothing. Nicklen later explained that his piece was very difficult to write, as he grew up on the island and still had many close friends living there. In some ways this was as significant as the article itself, as anyone who dares to criticise Inuit hunting practices is either dismissed as a racist or as an ignorant outsider with no understanding of the harsh lives that indigenous people have to endure. As a local boy, Nicklen's observations could not be disregarded as easily, but the fact remains that no one wants to address such a politically sensitive issue and that it is currently almost impossible to criticise aboriginal lifestyles, irrespective of any harm they are causing the rest of the planet. As per humankind in general, indigenous populations are expanding, not shrinking and if their hunting quotas increase accordingly, or they continue to abuse their current rights, nothing will be left for them to base a traditional way of life upon. A friend of mine visited Baffin Island to see the narwhals recently and when she commented how beautiful they were, her local Inuit guide responded with 'my trigger finger is itching'. Whales were killed all around her group and she saw several dead animals being dragged out of the water, as the same individuals who shoot whales and polar bears, are also now earning money from ecotourism. However, instead of looking to develop this harmless and potentially lucrative industry further, the locals that she spoke to were really only interested in guiding hunts and a few mentioned that they were hoping to open a camp specifically to encourage tourists to visit Baffin Island in order to kill polar bears, which they had about as much compassion for as the whales. It is extremely difficult to change such a deep-rooted and negative philosophy, particularly in groups who perceive almost anything involving conservation as a direct attack on their culture, and, back at the walrus colony, we found plenty of first hand evidence of the atrocities committed by indigenous people. Several huge walrus were decaying on the beach and only their heads had been removed for the valuable ivory tusks. A full 'mask', which is the skull with the tusks still attached, can be sold for several thousand dollars. According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 'killing walrus only for the ivory is considered wasteful and is therefore illegal'. They also state that only 'Alaska Natives' have the right to hunt walrus and that this includes all people who are at least one-fourth, so basically with at least one native grandparent, Indian, Aleut or Eskimo, which is not an offensive label as some people appear to now believe, but a generic term that incorporates the most northerly inhabitants of Alaska, Canada, Siberia and Greenland. As we walked along the beach inspecting rotting cadavers with their heads hacked off, it was difficult to comprehend how these regulations, which were designed exclusively to enable native communities to maintain a traditional lifestyle, could have been more blatantly and contemptuously abused. Despite our gruesome discovery, the overall encounter remained an exceptional one and was actually one of the most memorable wildlife sightings that I have experienced in Alaska. We were able to get much closer to these tremendously impressive mammals than at Round Island and I have to reiterate that we did so without stressing or disturbing them in any way, which is very important, as walrus are often killed if they are frightened and forced to stampede, particularly if a colony includes young calves. Whilst not on quite the same scale of magnificence,

Lake Iliamna, which is the largest freshwater lake in Alaska and the second largest found entirely in the United States, is home to a small population of harbour seals and I wanted to take a closer look at a group of marine mammals that have been recorded in this inland lake for at least 200 years. Seals permanently inhabiting freshwater bodies are exceptionally rare and these unusual pinnipeds should not be confused with the Baikal seals that are endemic to Lake Baikal in the Siberia region of Russia and are the only species that exist entirely in freshwater, as opposed to other species that have both freshwater and marine populations. The seals spend most of the day basking on small islands and sandbanks and although they are also hunted, and are consequently exceedingly nervous, we were able to enjoy some nice views of about twenty on land and in the water. On another occasion we flew to the world renowned Brooks Falls for the evening and spent a few hours photographing a female grizzly and her three young cubs in the most resplendent light imaginable. Another group had actually requested this excursion, as I had already arranged to stay at Books Falls later in the tour and we would get to know this exceptional mother and her adorable cubs very well. Meanwhile, we bumped into another sow with three cubs whilst taking an evening stroll around Iliamna and when it was raining too hard to relish the prospect of another walk, we all played pool and swapped tall tales. I managed to shock a couple of the overconfident Americans with an eight-ball clearance and as far as tales are concerned, I have absorbed an almost inexhaustible supply over the years. One of my favourites actually occurs in

Alaska, at a remote fishing camp that a biologist was staying at to study the spawning salmon. On one occasion he wanted to collect data from a distant creek and a fisherman told him to take the camp dog along, as there were a lot of bears in the area and he was advised that the dog would scare away any that came too close. Although I cannot remember her breed, the dog's name was Roarer and she liked cookies, which the fisherman told this researcher to take along for her. He duly did and he tossed her the odd biscuit as they walked along happily enough together for a couple of miles or more. I remember him stating how amazed he was that she was such a well trained animal, as she never ventured more than a few feet from his side and never attempted to run off or chase even a single squirrel. At one point, when she had not received a cookie for quite some time, she suddenly stopped walking and sat down. The biologist guessed that she was probably after another cookie and laughed at her saying 'they're all gone, no more until we get back now'…at which point Roarer promptly turned around and walked straight back to the fishing camp, leaving a flabbergasted researcher at the mercy of the grizzly bears. When he eventually returned several hours later the biologist asked the fishermen, who were all drinking and playing cards by this stage, whether Roarer had returned. When he was informed that she had, he asked them if they were not at all worried when they saw that the dog had come back without him. One guy half turned, barely taking his eyes of his cards and replied 'nope, we just knew you'd run out of cookies'. Another story, that I thought was probably apocryphal when I first heard it, but that actually turned out to be completely genuine, involves a highly responsible Chinese tourist who attempted to protect his wife and children before they went for a walk in bear country in one of the national parks. Just as he had been advised, the visitor purchased a can of bear spray before they set off and, taking no chances, he lined his family up in a row in the visitor centre and sprayed them all

liberally with what is basically a type of pepper spray, in exactly the same way that you would use insect repellent to avoid mosquitos. People can be so stupid around animals that nothing really surprises me anymore and I will never forget the lady who phoned the North Dakota radio show to complain that deer crossing signs were being placed in areas of heavy traffic. Whilst her heart was obviously in the right place, I have no idea where her brain was and at one stage she asked 'Why are we encouraging deer to cross on the interstate? I don't get it. That's a high traffic area'. The radio presenter had to point out that the signs were actually for motorists as the deer probably could not read them, but she never got it and insisted that if they moved the signs to quieter areas with far less traffic, the deer would cross there instead and less would be killed. Although our stay at this first dedicated bear lodge had not evolved entirely as intended, we still experienced a host of tremendous grizzly encounters, as well as a walrus sighting that would be difficult to improve on, and drove down to Homer looking forward to a change of perspective and our first marine expeditions…if only it would stop raining for more than an hour at a time. Homer sits in a superb location overlooking Kachemak Bay on the Kenai Peninsula and it is probably superfluous to mention at this stage that the drive of almost 80 miles from Soldotna along Cook Inlet is simply ravishing. At this time of year the vibrant almost incandescent fireweed is in full bloom and entire meadows and fields burn in all its glory, particularly when the sun shines and the sky and ocean combine in that deep Alaskan blue, a blue that the more you see, the more you yearn for, especially when the weather has been so depressingly grey. We had three days to explore the wildlife habitats surrounding a pretty and in some respects quirky town that is marketed, somewhat bizarrely given its unparalleled location and natural splendour, as the Halibut Fishing Capital of the World. The area along the famous Homer Spit is less impressive, except for the insane view that is, but pretty much every view in and around Homer is insane in one way or another and the spit in comparison is tired and not a little run down. Having said that, it is one of the best settings for observing sea otters, as the cutest creatures in North America can be spotted swimming on their backs in traditional manner all along the spit and even amid the myriad boats in the bustling harbour. Unlike most aquatic mammals, sea otters

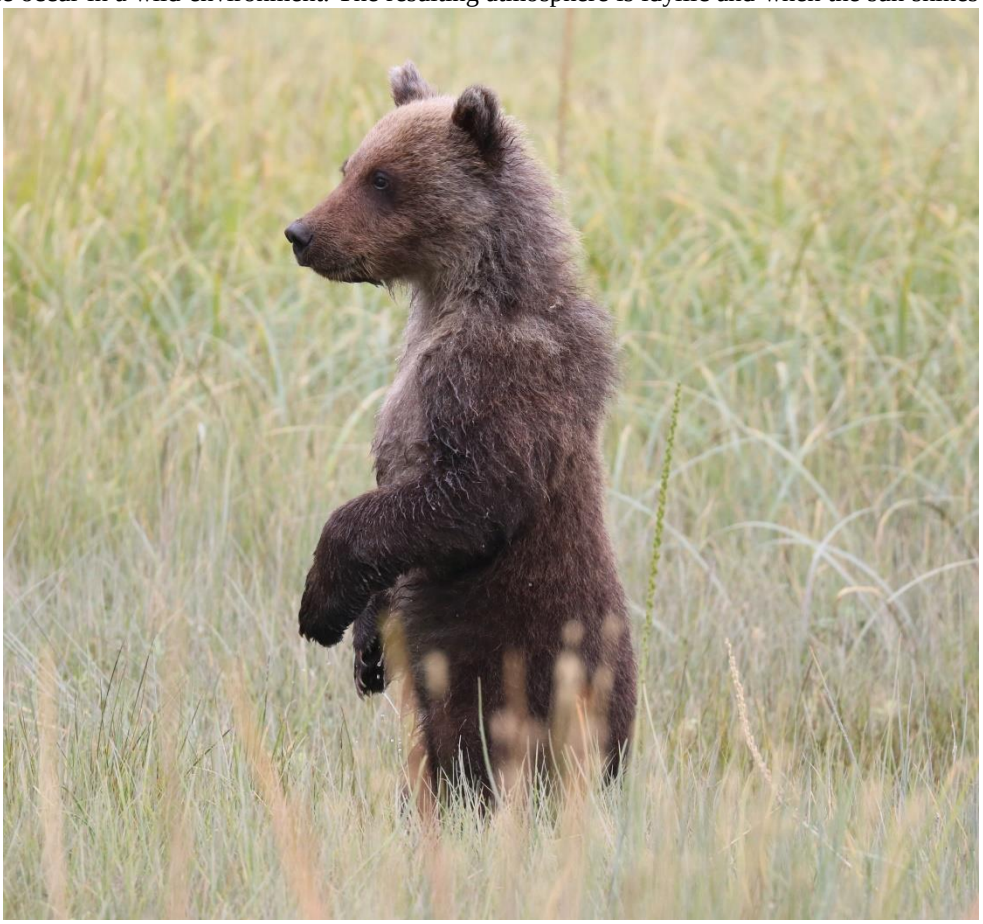
have no insulating fat and instead rely entirely on their thick coats to keep warm. These are divided into two layers, the long guard hairs, which are waterproof when clean, and the short under fur, which traps a layer of air that provides four times the insulation of blubber. With around a million hairs per square inch, sea otters have the densest fur of the animal kingdom, but the guard hairs have to be spotlessly clean in order to remain waterproof, which is why sea otters spend so much time grooming meticulously. More often than not sea otters will be observed holding their forepaws up out of the water, as well as tucking their hind feet into their stomach, and although this is purely to conserve heat, it really only accentuates their ridiculously adorable appearance. They are actually fascinating creatures in a number of ways, as they are the only otters to give birth in the water, even marine otters use sheltered dens,

and, again unlike many marine mammals, their relatively large kidneys allow them to routinely drink seawater. They are highly social, often floating together in same sex groups called rafts, where they sometimes hold each other's paws, and are also considered to be particularly devoted mothers, as they carry their young on their stomachs for up to a year and are incredibly protective towards them. Although it is common knowledge that sea otters habitually entangle themselves in kelp to avoid floating out to sea whilst sleeping, it is probably less well known that you can often identify the sex of a sea otter by its nose. If it is badly scarred then you are looking at a little girl otter, as mating is a rough affair and males will often hold and bite the female's nose. We saw more than a few disfigured snouts throughout our stay and during the first of two marine cruises out of Homer, we were fortunate enough to witness a sea otter leaving the water, which is fairly rare. We were not as successful with most of the other species that inhabit the rich coastal waters of Kachemak Bay and at times the inclement weather greatly reduced our visibility at sea. We did glimpse a couple of humpback whales at distance, as well as the customary harbour seals and first puffins of the tour, tufted and horned, but no killer whales, porpoises, of either variety, or pacific white-sided dolphins. Whilst disappointed, we were not that concerned at this stage, as we had longer and more comprehensive marine expeditions to come later in the trip at Kenai Fjords National Park. The rest of our time at Homer was spent exploring inland, principally hiking in or around the Wynn Nature Center up on Skyline Drive where we were hoping to see a black bear, as this is one of the few regions in Alaska where you are more likely to see a smaller black bear than its brown counterpart. That said, we did not see a black bear either and had to content ourselves with red squirrels and northern red-backed voles. Moose were common as well, including a mother with a young calf at Beluga Lake, and the entire area was teaming with birds, from sandhill cranes and willow ptarmigan to jays, chickadees and of

course bald eagles, although surprisingly few on the spit where Jean Keene used to spend several hours feeding between 200 and 300 eagles every day until her death in 2009. It would have been nice to spend a little bit longer at Homer and in better weather, but at least we did have the opportunity to visit the harbour where one rather inexperienced mariner did not realise that the difference between high and low tide is around six metres and secured his small dingy to a permanent post instead of to the floating dock. When he returned a few hours later after a pleasant evening and a fine meal, his boat was hanging several feet above his head. We would be flying out of Soldotna to reach our next bear lodge, which was situated on the western shore of Cook Inlet within Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, another untouched wilderness that can only be accessed by the air or sea and can only be described as breathtaking.

Located in a sublime setting on a small creek overlooking golden meadows and the rugged coastline, this second bear destination is mainly home to an assortment of mothers with cubs, as well as juvenile bears either foraging alone or with siblings that are also having to fend for themselves. Mature males generally only make an appearance during the breeding season, which runs from May to early July and peaks in mid-June, and at the time of our visit in August, the entire area feels a lot like a sanctuary as a result. You do have to have a guide on the main excursions here, but they are reasonably relaxed and there are no artificial viewing platforms, fences

or barriers between you and the bears. You are also just as likely to encounter bears whilst walking on your own and on three separate occasions we had to stop to let a mother cross the lawn in front of the lodge, each time with three cubs chasing furiously behind. The real beauty of this location is that there are no large males to threaten the cubs and the sows clearly know and trust the staff, many of whom they have grown up with. Consequently they are remarkably relaxed around their young, which of course is not always the case where highly protective mothers and people occur in a wild environment. The resulting atmosphere is idyllic and when the sun shines and the bears wander, this tiny little part of the world is as close to paradise as someone who grew up in a chaotic metropolis could ever imagine. At one stage, as their mother grazed serenely nearby, two cubs wandered to inspect a trampoline and I half expected them to climb on and start bouncing. It was probably too much to ask, but the lodge is so magical that not only did it not seem impossible, it actually felt likely. Although they do experience a salmon run here, and there is a satellite camp for those who want to take advantage of the brief spawning season between late July and early September, the bears are not dependent on the coho, or silver salmon as they are also locally known, and are characteristically observed digging for razor clams on the beach or feeding on sedges in the luxuriant meadows. The fact that some of the females without cubs will have mated already, does not necessarily mean that they are pregnant, as bears are one of the mammals that can utilise ‘delayed implantation’, a biological process that enables them to delay embryo implantation until they are due to hibernate. If a bear is healthy and has consumed sufficient calories to give birth and raise young through hibernation, the embryo will implant in the uterus and gestation will begin. However, if a female has not gained sufficient fat throughout the summer and autumn, the pregnancy will not take place and the embryo will be reabsorbed into her body. The amount a female bear eats is therefore not only intrinsically linked to her own survival, it is essential in terms of her ability to reproduce. Most of the bears that we were watching were eating for three or four, as they all had two or three cubs and would spend part of the day nursing, occasionally sitting up, but more often than not flat on their backs with demanding cubs feeding greedily on



their mother's fat-rich and highly calorific milk. There are few scenes in nature as delightful as bear cubs suckling and it was a joy to watch the amazingly patient sows interacting with their exuberant infants, which were really only completely still when they had their mouths clamped tightly around one of their mother's nipples. You could watch their heads nodding and eyes closing as they gulped ravenously at the soothing milk and most fell asleep for at least a brief period as soon as they had fed. When the sows were not nourishing their young, they were feeding themselves and more often than not this involved digging for clams on the beach during low tide. Apart from the inexperienced young, that would fumble around in the sand in a pale imitation of their skilled mothers, all of

the bears that we observed were proficient clammers and within a few seconds of smelling a clam had dug down and uncovered it. Contrary to popular belief, brown bears have good eyesight, at least comparable with our own, but they rely more on their sense of smell, which is extraordinary, even in comparison with other mammals. It is said that a bloodhound's sense of smell is about 300 times more acute than our own and yet apparently a grizzly bear has a sense of smell seven times greater than a bloodhound. For several days we were able to observe just how sensitive their noses were, as every hole that the adult bears dug produced a clam, more or less without fail, and their dexterous claws were too fast to allow the molluscs to retreat deeper into the sand. Whilst the cubs spent most of their time playing with the discarded shells, we did notice that some of the juveniles had remembered what their mothers had painstakingly taught them and were also successfully catching clams. As expected, the cubs spent most of their day frolicking and fighting between themselves and also with their often indulgent mothers, who joined in far more regularly than you would probably assume and seemed to take a great pleasure in playing and bonding with their young. I have actually witnessed these affectionate and profoundly moving displays on many occasions and what always surprises me more is how playful the younger juveniles still appear, as some of these bears only found themselves on their own for the first time this summer and yet they still want to spend hours rolling and tumbling together. We watched one magnificently exuberant specimen sprinting in all directions at almost full speed and tossing a solid clod of earth high above his head, only to catch it again in his mouth and repeat the process in another area after a mad 30-metre dash. At one stage he was rolling on his back and kicking the clump into the air with his hind feet and if anyone tries to tell you that animals do not have personalities and do not feel joy, just mention this exultant adolescent bear, who was clearly just happy to be alive in the warm sunshine. The salmon were just beginning to arrive during our stay, which was good news for the bears and, probably not coincidently, also for our first North American otter of the tour, a freshwater otter that was no doubt attracted to our little stretch of creek by the promise of an easy meal. The bald eagles, there were several nesting pairs within a brief walk of our cabin, were also clearly interested in the doomed fish and on one of several very pleasant hikes, we spotted a couple of moose in the distance and disturbed a porcupine going about its day in the long grass. Aware of our presence, the porcupine immediately went into defensive mode and called on all of the techniques crucially developed over millions of years of evolution. So basically it froze and hoped that we would not see it. Although it was extremely tough to leave the bears, we did tear ourselves away for a few hours to take a boat ride along the coast of Cook Inlet to a puffin rookery, where we watched several hundred largely horned puffins diving to collect mouthfuls of fish in their uniquely serrated beaks. There were a few tufted puffins as well and a solitary sea otter that looked fairly perplexed, to be honest, they always look at least a little perplexed, as puffins dived into the water all around it at speeds of up to 55 miles per hour. Dominating the horizon, as they had for several days, or eons to be strictly accurate, were the glaciated slopes of Mount Iliamna, a 3,000-metre volcano in the Chigmit Mountains section of the principally volcanic Aleutian Range that extends as far south as Unimak Island and includes Mount Redoubt. Mount Iliamna actually rises in Lake Clark National Park just a few miles from our lodge and its dramatic white peaks provided a stunning backdrop to our entire memorable stay. The only cloud on the horizon,

both figuratively and literally more often than not, was the weather, which you could describe as mixed, but only if you were an imbecile or a duck. One glorious day aside, when the sun shone and everyone took as many photographs as possible to pretend that Armageddon had not actually descended, it rained throughout our stay and at one stage I was certain that I saw Noah with a hammer in his hand looking for some nails. If that sounds like an exaggeration, I can assure you that it is only partially so and on several occasions I gave up trying to keep my camera dry and abandoned it back at our cabin. Conditions eventually deteriorated so severely that planes could not fly in or out, as you could not even see Cook Inlet from the lodge, let alone fly over it. This resulted in a few lucky guests remaining for an extra night, while others were not so fortunate and missed a significant part of their visit. James and I were delayed for a full day as well, but the lodge owner needed to get back to the Kenai Peninsula that evening and offered to take us out on his boat, which we accepted just to stay on schedule. We did not actually miss any time with the bears, and there are certainly worse places in the world to be rained on, but it was still a shame that we were not able to fully appreciate such an enchanting setting in better conditions, particularly as we would be repeating that sentiment regarding almost every destination for the rest of the tour. It was still raining heavily when we arrived at Cooper Landing the next day in time for a float along the Kenai River to Skilak Lake, which was attractive despite the grey leaden skies. As you can probably guess by now, the entire drift was scenic, but seven hours on the water and a short hike out at the end, produced only a few bald eagle sightings and a fleeting glimpse of a North American otter. In comparison, during the twenty-minute drive back to Cooper Landing we spotted a grizzly with two cubs and on the return journey to Anchorage along Turnagain Arm, we were thrilled to see a small pod of beluga whales chasing fish into Cook Inlet on the ebbing tide. Unfortunately the dall's sheep had not returned after the fire in Chugach State Park and we were not to see them again on the tour. We were going back to Anchorage in order to fly to our third and final bear destination, Brooks Falls in Katmai

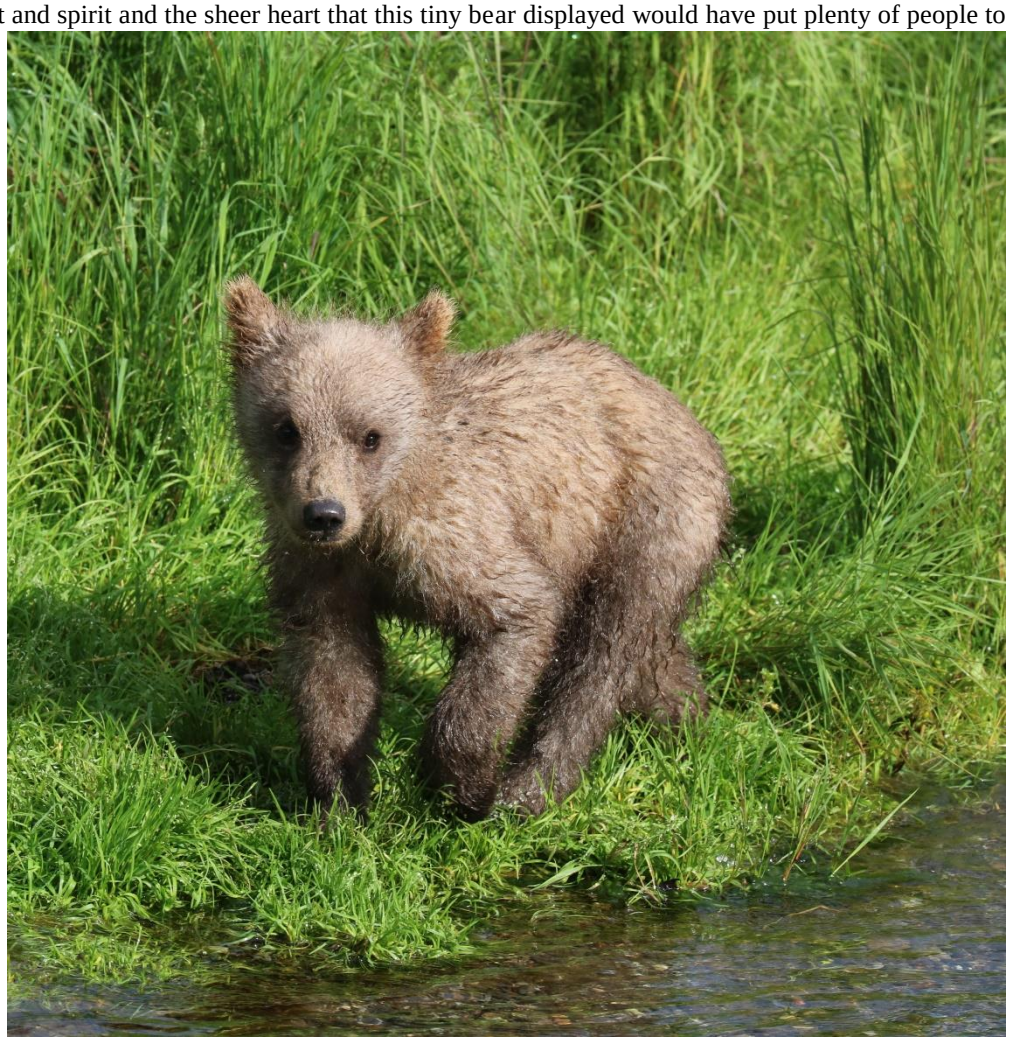
National Park, which is probably the most famous bear viewing site in the world. For those not already aware, Brooks Falls is a small waterfall on the Brooks River and is one of literally thousands of rivers and creeks that host probably the greatest migration on the planet, the annual salmon run, when hundreds of millions of salmon migrate thousands of miles to spawn on the same tiny stretch of water that they hatched on years before. Five different species of Pacific salmon migrate to Alaska and they all die within a few days of spawning. The fish that you see at Brooks Falls are sockeye salmon, which will have journeyed to the North Pacific and Bristol Bay before swimming up the Naknek River into Naknek Lake and ultimately Brooks River. For the fortunate ones their epic journey is over and the female will lay her eggs in the nests or redds that she will build with her tail on the gravel riverbed. The male will fertilise these eggs, known as roe, and the female will cover them with loose gravel before moving to build another redd until her eggs are exhausted and her life is run. For the salmon spawned further upstream life is a little more complicated, as Brooks Falls stands between them and their sole purpose in life, procreation. Although the falls are only a few feet high and are not a huge obstacle to the agile salmon, which have been known to leap twelve feet, it must be said that dozens of famished grizzly bears are an added complication that they could no doubt do without. The bears, that have been fishing here for centuries and return to the same peak spots each year, simply wait at either the top or bottom of the falls and attempt to pluck the salmon out of the air as they make their fateful jumps. In truth, far more are killed in the water than the air, but tourists flock from all over the world hoping to observe, and in most cases photograph, the iconic spectacle of a bear standing at the top of the falls, plucking a leaping salmon out of the air. Most visitors do not look much beyond this and do not consider the implications of the momentous life and death struggle that is playing out before them, as the salmon are compelled forward by an irresistible urge that has driven them thousands of miles to reproduce and will ultimately kill them all. For their part, the bears are desperately attempting to gain the weight that will ensure they survive hibernation and, in terms of the females, produce their own young. A few years ago the BBC filmed the wildlife documentary series Nature's Great Events, which was narrated, at least in the UK, by the doyen of natural history broadcasting Sir David Attenborough. One of the six episodes was entitled The Great Salmon Run and much of the action was filmed at Brooks Falls for good reason, as there can be few better locations to so perfectly illustrate the relationship between predator and prey and how that relationship impacts the entire ecosystem. Having said that, the regimented setup around the falls is not for everyone and there is much about the destination that I dislike. The park rangers are certainly intrusive at times, but they are dealing with people who have no idea how to act around animals, particularly big scratchy animals that could eat them. They therefore have to adopt a one rule fits all policy that

does noticeably limit your personal freedom, as do the boardwalks and viewing platforms that you are forced to use and the mandatory operating hours that you are equally obliged to abide by. Unless you are fishing, which does allow far greater freedom, you are only permitted to watch bears at three designated locations and these are consequently often busy and noisy. To be fair, the park rangers do their best to minimise the noise, but too many tourists are allowed on the viewing platforms at any given time and rangers are not always present to supervise their behaviour. If you care about these things, the cabins are old and tired, the food is mass produced and of poor quality and the camp itself more resembles a Second World War prisoner of war camp, than a premier wildlife destination. There are lots of reasons why you might not visit Brooks Falls and just as many issues that you could complain about

while you are there, but the bottom line is that this is simply the best view in the house of one of the greatest shows on earth. Whilst I would never swap this destination for the totally wild experiences that I described previously at Katmai, I understand that the stringent regulations are necessary at this particular site and that they were introduced largely to protect the bears, as the falls area is relatively small and there are far too many visitors to allow uncontrolled access. It is also possible to avoid the crowds to some degree by visiting either just before or between the busiest months of July and September, when the salmon runs peak and there are consequently far more bears feasting on them, and by arriving early and staying late at the viewing platforms. I planned our visit for the second week of August and there were always bears at the falls, eleven was the most in view at one time, and some of our best sightings were on our own at night, as we were consistently the last to leave and spent several enthralling hours with just the bears for company. Unlike the previous two dedicated bear destinations, this one had a mix of adult males and females with young cubs and as such we were able to observe the uneasy alliance that exists between the two at this type of shared feeding ground. The always guarded behaviour of the females in these circumstances can vary enormously and it is remarkable how quickly a merely anxious situation can deteriorate into a sudden and ferocious exchange. This was certainly the case concerning the sow that we had seen on our previous visit, who was extremely protective of her three cubs and consequently highly aggressive. She would attack even large boars with no apparent provocation and with almost no discernible change in behaviour from

any of the males, all of whom appeared to be far more interested in the salmon. Perhaps this female had lost young before, as it is well known that male bears will kill cubs, occasionally over territory, but far more commonly as an instinctive reproductive strategy. By killing the cubs, the male automatically brings the female into oestrus, which will enable him to breed with her and ultimately pass on his genes. This is known as 'sexually selected infanticide' and only occurs with offspring that the male has not fathered. A study involving brown bear populations in Sweden has discovered that around a third of cubs are killed during the mating season and that almost all of these deaths are caused by unrelated males, which has far wider implications than was previously known, particularly concerning hunting. In most countries where brown bears occur, hunters are not permitted to kill females with cubs and will instead shoot a male bear, often a dominant boar that will have fathered many of the cubs within its territory. The male that will inevitably replace it will have no genetic link to the cubs in that area and is likely to kill them in order to mate with their mothers. So by shooting one male bear, hunters are effectively condemning many more to death and scientists have argued that this fact should now be taken into account when hunting quotas are calculated. Females do not give up their cubs lightly and have been killed attempting to protect their defenceless young, but the mother that we were so absorbed with adopted an altogether more proactive approach and basically charged at anything that moved towards her…or might be going to move towards her…or might be going to move at all. This particular sow was completely terrifying and at one stage, when she was fishing midstream at the top of the falls, four of the largest male grizzlies I have ever seen were all huddled meekly in one tiny area towards the far bank, desperately trying to avoid making eye contact with her. One of the four, a bear almost twice her size, got mauled simply for attempting to leave the water and instead of fighting back or even defending himself, he sheepishly traipsed about fifty metres further downstream to get out beyond her wrath. In all seriousness, she was an astounding and devoted mother and her uncompromising attitude was clearly designed to give her cubs every chance of surviving to adulthood. It also demonstrated the palpable difference between bears playing and bears actually fighting, as the play took place almost in slow motion, despite the apparent brutality, but the fighting just exploded in a rage of furious teeth and claws. There were a couple of young adult bears, almost certainly siblings, that would fight for extended periods whenever they met and although the fights were robust and looked fairly violent, you could tell that the bears had genuine affection for each other. This was certainly not the case when the female attacked the larger males and the first picture on the following page shows the siblings sparring, whilst the second illustrates one of the sow's sudden and apparently unprovoked lunges. The female is the much smaller animal on the left and this formidable mother was also by far the most proficient predator of the many bears that we watched, at least in terms of standing above the falls and grabbing salmon in mid-air. At one session, in between checking on her young cubs and bullying the skulking boars, she caught twelve salmon with remarkable ease and she was the only bear routinely able to catch fish in this way. Most of the other bears would kill the desperate salmon in the water beneath the falls, either just before or, more

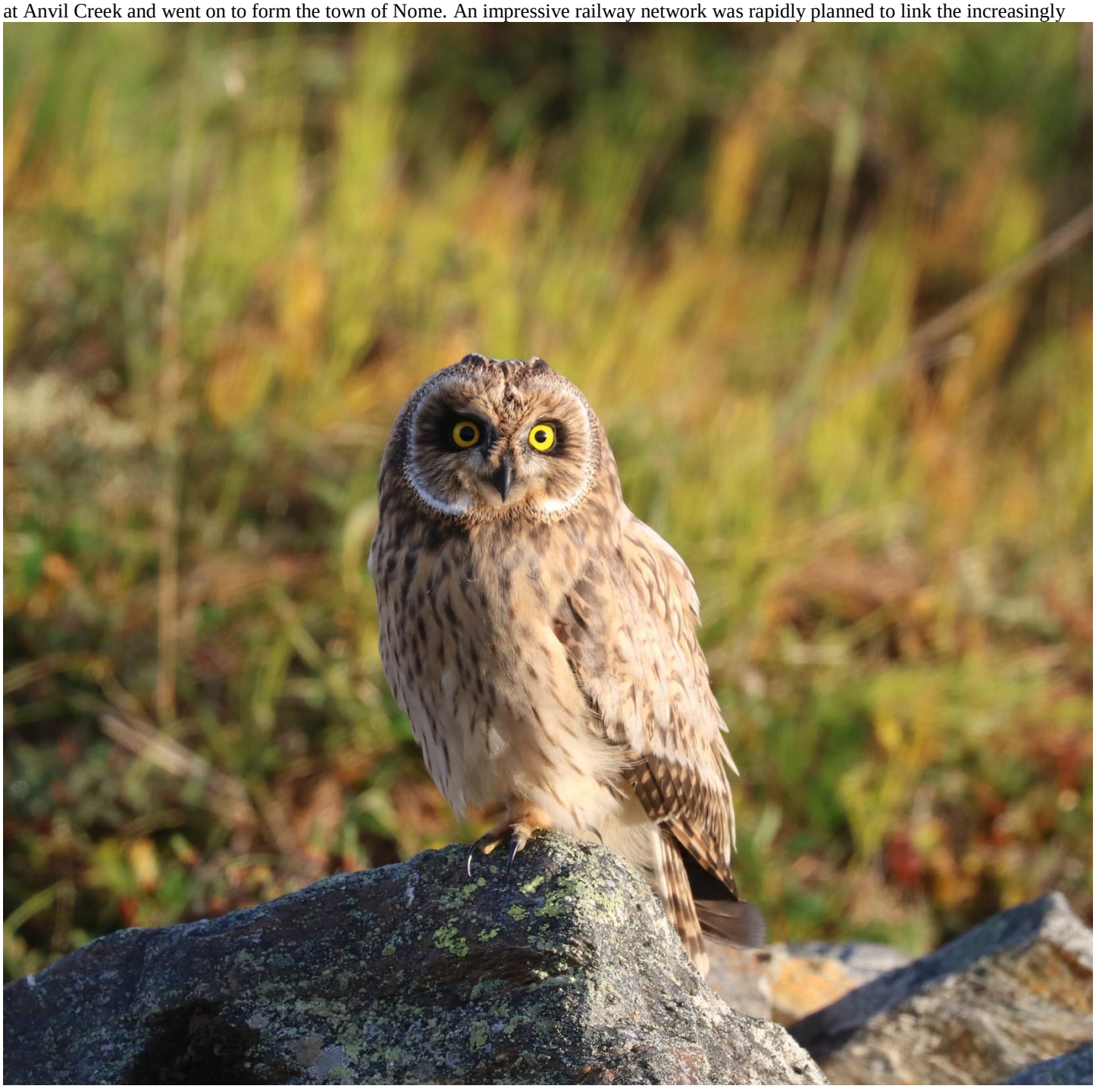
customarily, just after they had gambled everything and failed, never to get a second chance. With three young cubs to raise our extraordinary mother certainly needed the calories and one of her offspring was just as exceptional in its own way. All three of her cubs were different sizes, but this little one was half the size of the biggest and would have been described as the runt of the litter, except that I do not like that term and it does not describe what I watched over the course of our stay. What I saw had nothing to do with size and everything to do with fight and spirit and the sheer heart that this tiny bear displayed would have put plenty of people to shame. At one stage the largest sibling savaged him over a piece of salmon skin that their mother had discarded, but between the pathetic squeals of pain, he still attempted to fight back and would not back down. Twice all three cubs were swept over the falls by the strong current and on both occasions it looked as if he was gone and could not possibly keep up with his siblings and make it to the safety of the riverbank. As they followed behind their mother, he was swept further downstream, but somehow he found the strength to keep going and instead of trying to swim or even walk, he threw himself forward, one desperate lunge at a time, until he collapsed exhausted on the shore. Each day you almost expected him to be missing, but each day he refused to yield and the pictures on this page will tell you something about his size, if not his enormous heart. Our last evening was spent watching him with his family and I have deliberately not checked to see if he made it through hibernation, for although I know that it is unlikely, if any bear could beat the odds, then this one could and I prefer to think of him finding his own way and returning one day to fish where his mother once ruled. Nature can be very tough and watching it in the raw can be as painful as it is rewarding. An enjoyable trip to The Valley of 10,000 Smokes aside, which included a stimulating hike through a really interesting landscape, Brooks Falls is all about the bears and we spent most of our time engrossed by their distinct personalities and often comical antics. The destination does not lend itself to general wildlife,



principally because you have no freedom to explore beyond the viewing platforms, and although we did encounter a couple of moose and a few bedraggled red squirrels, no, the weather had not improved, we were more than happy to concentrate our efforts on the bears. This was the case at all three of the specialised grizzly locations that I selected and although I would not choose Brooks Falls if I could only visit one main bear destination in Alaska, I would equally recommend that anyone interested in wildlife travels here at least once in their life. Whilst it does not have quite the same reputation, much the same can be said about the penultimate destination of our epic tour, as we had more success in terms of the actual number of mammal species viewed in Nome than anywhere else and this tiny former gold rush town is also home to one of the most impressive animals on the planet, the muskox. No two sources appear to agree exactly when it occurred, but the muskox was hunted to extinction in Alaska before 31 animals were reintroduced to the state

on Nunivak Island in 1935, primarily to produce, in that perpetual cycle of human ignorance and lamentable mismanagement, a population that could again be hunted. The small number of muskox, all of which were captured in Greenland, thrived on Nunivak and the five current Alaskan populations are all descendants of those original 31 hardy animals. There are estimated to be more than 5,000 muskox in Alaska today and the largest number, around 3,400, can be found on the Seward Peninsula, which stretches approximately 200 miles into the Bering Sea on the extreme western coast of Alaska. Nome sits on the southern shore of the peninsula overlooking Norton Sound and the surrounding area can be explored via three significant gravel roads, all of which pass through a wealth of diverse habitats. The 73-mile Teller Road winds its way northwest through stark tundra, river valleys and rising hills to the small Inupiat village of Teller, which occupies the southern tip of the spit between Port Clarence Bay and Grantley Harbor. The Woolley Lagoon side road takes you down towards Cape Woolley and the type of spectacular coastal light and sunsets that you really need to experience to fully appreciate. Roughly four miles before you reach the turnoff is the old airstrip near Feather River, where the

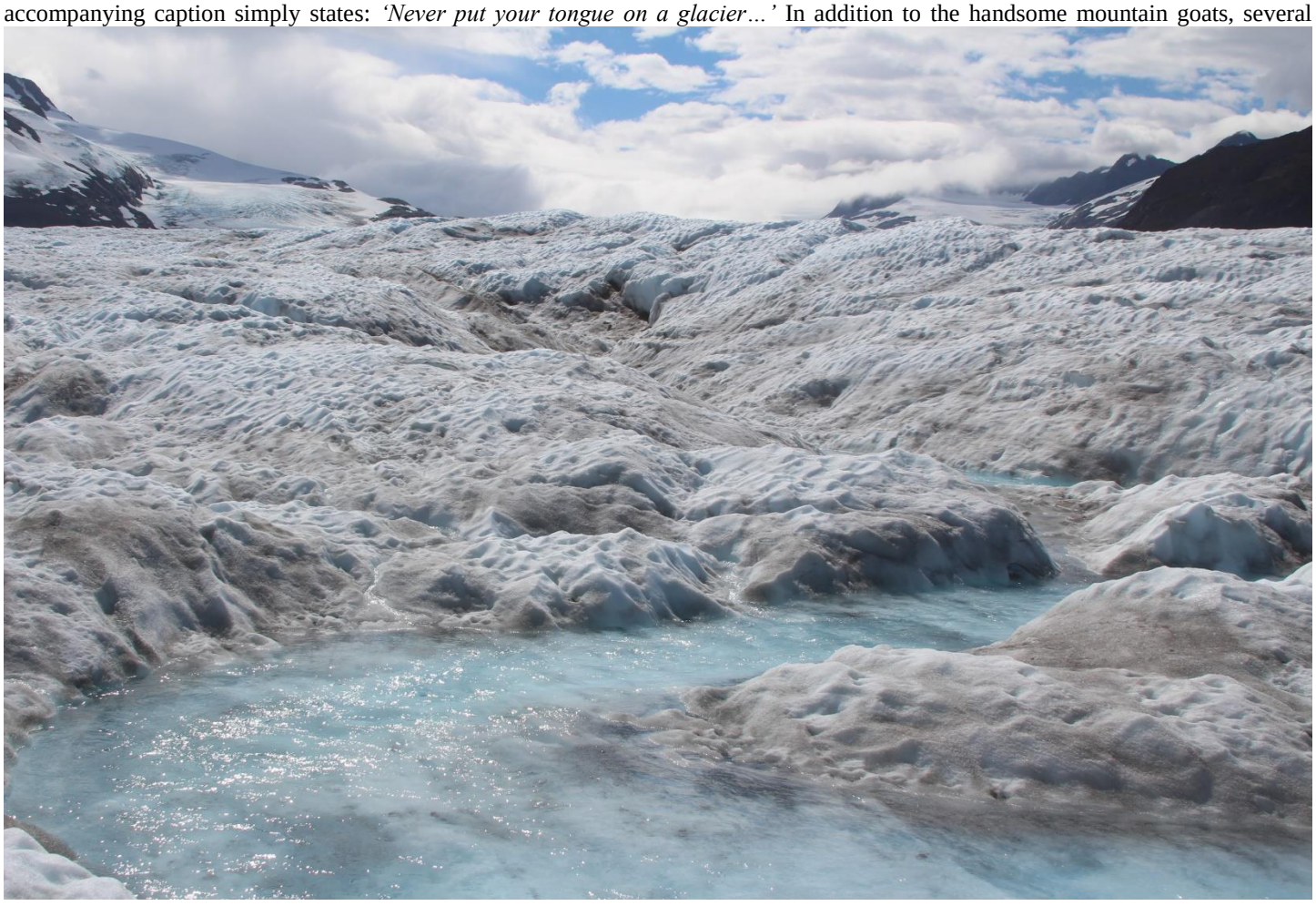
first of two herds of muskox from Nunivak Island were landed and released in 1970. Although there are now a small number of muskox living around Nome itself, they are more naturally observed grazing on the verdant slopes that separate the wetter lower meadows and the higher rocky outcrops. Despite some local nonsense to the contrary, muskox are not aggressive animals and are remarkably tolerant of people, although less so of dogs. A few unfortunate dogs have been killed when irresponsible owners have allowed them to harass herds with young and the muskox have responded in the age old fashion, just as they would if attacked by a pack of wolves, their only natural predators. We spent much of our time sitting among these docile, but hugely impressive animals and I would go as far as to say that being able to study these singular beasts at close quarters and in such a natural setting, was one of the real highlights of the tour for me. At 86 miles, Kougarok Road is the longest of the three roads and takes you through the striking Kigluaik Mountains and past Pilgrim Hot Springs to the Kougarok River Bridge, which rests about 25 miles shy of the small settlement of Taylor and is the end of the road unless you are using a robust four-wheel drive vehicle. There are splendid views of Mount Osborn, the tallest peak in the range, from the campgrounds of Salmon Lake and the sockeye that have returned to the appropriately named lake after decades of overfishing are one of five species of Pacific salmon that spawn in the myriad water courses of the peninsula. The first 32 or so miles of the 72-mile Council Road follow the coast east along Norton Sound before cutting north up through the alpine tundra of Skookum Pass to the edge of the boreal forest and the long since abandoned gold rush town of Council, which is now mainly used as a summer fishing camp by the residents of Nome and the tiny nearby town of White Mountain. At the right time of year, beluga whales can be seen along the reasonably extensive stretch of accessible shoreline, as can four seal species, bearded, ringed, ribbon and spotted, which is also known as the larga seal. Polar bears have even been encountered on the beaches in the Nome area, but given that the indigenous people are allowed to kill them, you suspect not often and certainly not for long. The seals are also hunted extensively and of the four types that we could have theoretically observed, we were only lucky with a couple of spotted seals, despite our best efforts scanning for the exquisitely distinctive but far more elusive ribbon seal. Just beyond the point where the Council Road leaves the sea lies ‘The Last Train to Nowhere’ a rusting collection of abandoned steam locomotives and old railway stock and a suitable memorial to the incredibly lucrative but short-lived gold rush of 1899, when ‘Three Lucky Swedes’ one of whom was actually a Norwegian whilst the other two were American citizens born in Sweden, discovered gold at Anvil Creek and went on to form the town of Nome. An impressive railway network was rapidly planned to link the increasingly



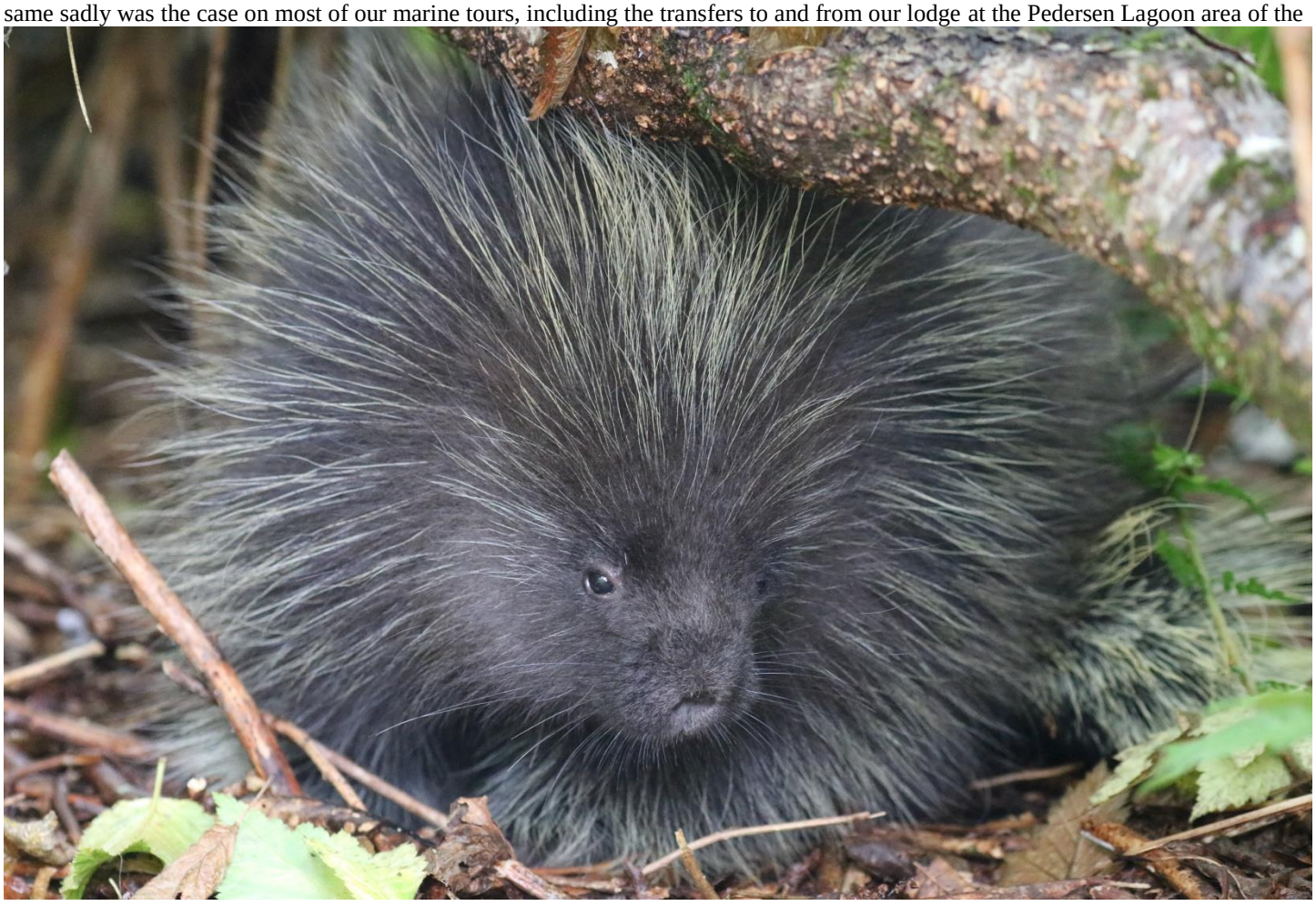
prosperous mining communities on the peninsula, but by 1909 the gold rush was over and only 35 miles of track was ever laid. In addition to the outstanding photographic opportunities that the corroding but somehow defiant engines provide, particularly against the vibrant green and golden hues of the lush coastal wetlands, they are also home to a colony of singing voles and we enjoyed some wonderful views of several of these furtive but sadly, from their perspective at least, equally conspicuous creatures. With 230 miles to explore, plus more hiking possibilities than you could ever hope to fulfil, Nome is a wildlife enthusiasts dream in many ways and we relished every minute of our five-night stay on the Seward Peninsula, even during the inevitable rain. The only real disappointment was the Aurora Borealis or rather our failure to enjoy one of nature's great spectacles, as there had apparently been an impressive show the night before we arrived, but our chances on each subsequent night were ruined by the bad weather and accompanying cloud cover. No matter, as the sunsets were simply breathtaking in comparison and the scenery was enough to make you forget about the weather…and more or less anything else. I am only pleased that I do not have to choose or recommend one landscape or a single vista to future guests, as the task would be an impossible one in Alaska and I make no apology for the numerous superlatives that I have had no choice but to overuse. Anyone who has visited this inspirational region will understand and forgive me. The wildlife is equally stirring, although of course far more difficult to observe, and we were amazed to spot just one wild caribou, a large male, during our entire stay. We only encountered one hare as well, but given that it was the only Alaskan hare of the tour, our perspective was entirely different and on this occasion we were delighted with just a single and relatively brief sighting. Such are the whimsies of wildlife viewing and whilst I have always tried to stop and appreciate all of the animals that I have been fortunate enough to encounter, it is impossible not to become slightly blasé about the more common ones and to consequently devote more time and effort to the species that are rarer and more difficult to find. One of which in Nome was an Arctic fox, as we found several beautiful red foxes that I spent time photographing, but I was really hoping to see an Arctic fox, which is generally scarcer where the two animals coexist. In an odd way we succeeded, but not as I had anticipated and certainly not with any real sense of satisfaction, as we came across two clear examples of hybridisation between the species. Whilst these hybrids are relatively uncommon and were fascinating to study, albeit briefly, both the males and females will be infertile and I would have preferred to find a pure Arctic fox, which was not to be on this occasion. We did, however, have an opportunity to compare and contrast two similarly charismatic owl species, the short-eared owl and the great horned owl, as well as several beaver lodges, one of which was immense and must have taken an extremely ambitious family of beavers years to construct. We watched four of the latest dynasty working tirelessly on their country estate and when we returned three days later the new wing was almost complete. Several moose with young calves aside, the remaining highlight of our time at Nome was our encounter with an immature male grizzly bear, as our final destination would be in black bear territory on the Seward side of the Kenai Peninsula and this inquisitive young fellow would be the very last grizzly bear that we were destined to see on a trip that had been transformed into something exceptional almost entirely as a result of their majestic presence. Having flown back to Anchorage, the drive south to Seward was interrupted by a rather special stop at the picturesque and superbly situated town of Girdwood, where we took an aerial tram to the top of Mount Alyeska and a scenic helicopter flight over Prince William Sound, which included our second glacier landing of the tour. Famous as a winter skiing resort, Girdwood is dominated by the grandiose chateau-

styled Hotel Alyeska, which is where the tram departs, and the views across the Chugach Mountains and Turnagain Arm were almost as arresting on the invigorating hike down the mountain, as they were from the cable car on the way up. As you will probably not be surprised to read by this stage, the ensuing helicopter flight surpassed both and then some, as we hovered like a speck against infinity above vast seas of blue ice and the radiant waters of Prince William Sound. It can be good at times to truly understand your own

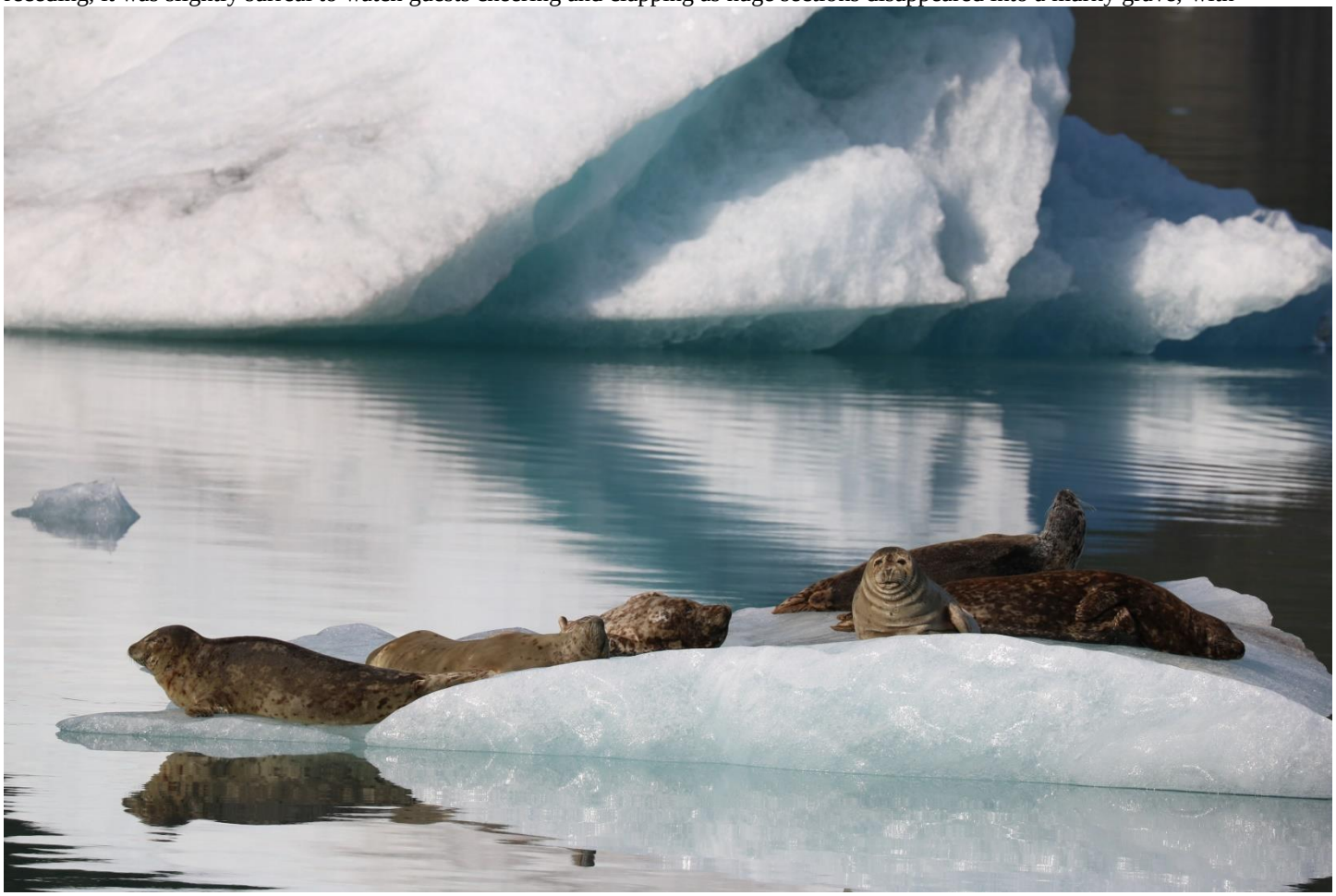
insignificance and as we glided past a landscape billions of years in the making, I abandoned my camera and sat mesmerised as titanic mountains and colossal fjords drifted dreamily by. My reverie was only disturbed by our pilot, who I had specifically asked to look out for mountain goats, which are common at higher elevations in this region and can often be seen from the boat cruises out of Seward. He was more than happy to oblige and was eventually able to find a couple of herds numbering about twenty animals in all. The photograph on this page illustrates our rather unique bird's eye view of one of my favourite mammals and although I do not normally use pictures of such poor quality, the situation and the resulting image reminded me of one of my favourite Gary Larson 'The Far Side' cartoons, when the pilot of a large passenger aircraft peers through a gap in the clouds and asks his co-pilot: '*Say…what's a mountain goat doing way up here in a cloud bank?'* Irreverent, anarchic and almost always exceptionally funny, Larson has been a favourite of mine since his impeccably well-observed reflections on life, death and more or less everything in between and even beyond, were first published in the UK in the early 1980s. I particularly love his hungry beaver surveying an open fridge to choose between different cuts of wood and sticks and James and I are convinced that there is a far side cartoon to match almost any unlikely occasion or awkward situation. Shortly after our amazing landing on the glacier, as I bent down to take a drink from the glacial meltwater, James reminded me of Gary Larson's Eskimo hunter with his tongue stuck to the ice and a relieved polar bear in the background. More a visual witticism, the accompanying caption simply states: *'Never put your tongue on a glacier…'* In addition to the handsome mountain goats, several



moose, hundreds of harbour seals and even a few tiny sea otters were all clearly visible from the helicopter and, despite the fact that it is another of Alaska's great drives, our flight had been such an overwhelming and uplifting experience, that it was somewhat difficult to concentrate on the scenery during the journey down to Seward. When we did eventually arrive, it was probably a mistake to visit Exit Glacier immediately, as this is one of the most accessible glaciers in the world and is used to record and illustrate the accelerated rate at which the ice is receding. President Obama's visit in August 2015 was organised principally to highlight the potentially devastating effects of climate change and having flown over such a seemingly eternal landscape a few hours before, it was difficult to comprehend just how much damage we had been able to cause as an almost renegade species in such a comparatively short period of time. In an ecological sense we are an aberration and as I returned to Exit Glacier after an absence of more than a decade, I stood on rock where ice used to be, with signs indicating in which year the ice in that spot finally disappeared. Our final few days in Alaska would be divided between Seward on the Kenai Peninsula at the head of Resurrection Bay and at the only lodge within Kenai Fjords National Park, where I had arranged a three-night stay. From Seward we intended to hike the Harding Icefield Trail and to take a full day marine tour within the national park, but the rain was an almost constant factor now and it was beginning to finally take its toll. The Harding Icefield is very steep in places and is already a reasonably strenuous hike without the driving rain that I must admit at times threatened to undermine our assault. We eventually made it, but traipsing uphill in thick mud and unrelenting rain was far more challenging than we had anticipated and, despite a succession of remarkable views all along the trail, the entire exercise more turned into a battle of wills between man and the elements than the planned idyllic day among nature. Our efforts were at least rewarded with a couple of hoary marmot sightings and our first beautiful black bears of the trip, a mother with two cubs at distance, but having lugged all of my equipment around on my back for the entire day as if in penance, it was too wet to attempt more than a couple of reference shots and my camera barely left my rucksack. The same sadly was the case on most of our marine tours, including the transfers to and from our lodge at the Pedersen Lagoon area of the



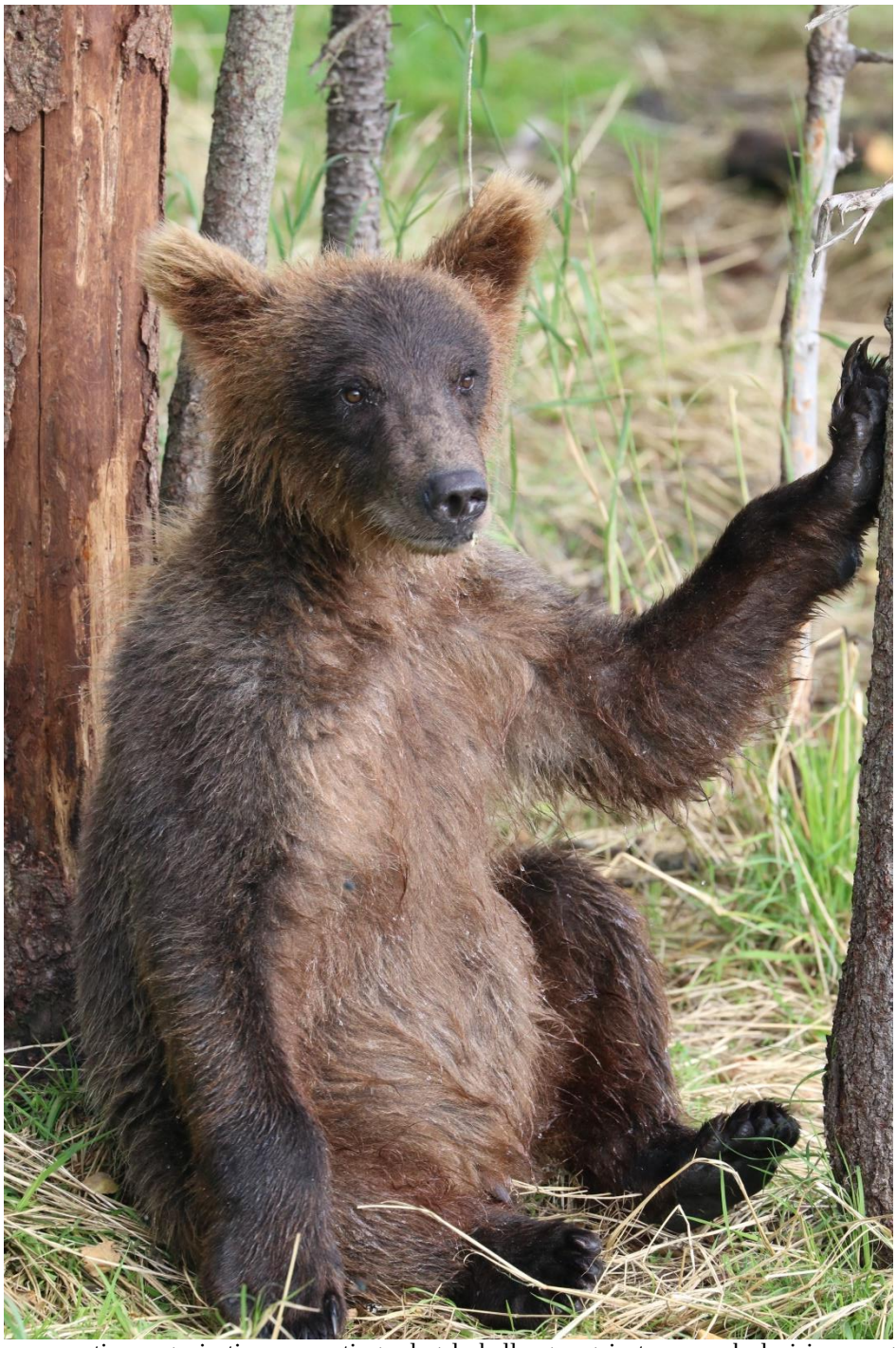
national park. Our longest cruise, which incorporated three calving tidewater glaciers in Northwestern Fjord, as well as numerous alpine glaciers and waterfalls, lasted approximately ten hours and we spent all but about one of those attempting to protect our cameras from the incessant downpours. It was a great shame, as the waters around the Kenai Peninsula are incredibly fertile and although we were not destined to see killer whales on this trip, we did encounter another two humpback whales, to add to the two spotted in similar conditions at Homer, as well as our first steller sea lions and only dall's porpoises of the tour. Notwithstanding the gloomy fact that everything just looked and felt grey, to such an extent that you did not really feel the urge to commit entire stretches of dramatic coastline to film, the worst aspect of the poor weather was the greatly diminished visibility and I am certain that we would have seen a lot more in better weather. As it was, I was delighted to spot a few mountain goats littered among the rocky outcrops and good numbers of harbour seals, sea otters and bald eagles. Our actual lodge was exquisitely situated on Pedersen Lagoon with an exceptional view of Pedersen Glacier, for now at least, as this is another glacier that is disappearing fast and it will not be long before guests are staring at grey rock, as opposed to shimmering sheets of ice. Given the extraordinary rate at which the Pedersen Glacier is receding, it was slightly surreal to watch guests cheering and clapping as huge sections disappeared into a murky grave, with



apparently no idea that whilst ice calving is an entirely natural process, the pace at which this glacier is vanishing is anything but. As is so often the case these days, the lodge provided a number of soft adventures for general tourists and the guides, although helpful and friendly, had little knowledge or experience of wildlife. There was certainly no urgency in terms of looking for animals, the morning activities did not usually begin before 9am for example, and James and I spent most of our time hiking and kayaking together, usually in the rain. We still had a wonderful time and were actually fairly successful given the climatic conditions and the lack of local expertise that we would usually rely upon. The ubiquitous harbour seals and sea otters were no great challenge, but we also found several black bears, an inquisitive stoat and at least a dozen red squirrels. Our last new mammal was a northern bog lemming, which, just for the record, was our 35th species of the tour, excluding bats and some rodents that I had not seen well enough to identify. We also came reasonably close to a wolverine, as one was glimpsed on the edge of the lagoon by a young guide taking his visiting family for a walk along the coast. We tried the same area of course, but lightning did not strike twice and, for me at least, our best moments at this last destination both involved young porcupines, which took almost no notice of our presence and allowed us to observe each of them silently for over an hour. The second of these sightings was on our final evening and as we drove back to Anchorage the next day to catch our flight home, a pod of beluga whales glided past us on Turnagain Arm. It was an enchanting way to finish an almost entirely spectacular tour and although I would ideally prefer to end on the many positive aspects of both the trip and Alaska itself, I am very late in completing this report and international events have rather surpassed me. To say that I knew that Donald Trump would be elected President of the United States would be an exaggeration, but having discussed the pending presidential election with so many people over seven weeks, and having personally witnessed a groundswell of support for him wherever we travelled, I was certainly aware that he could win. Even taking into account the fact that Alaska has never been the most representative state within the Union, it was still somewhat surprising to hear the level of genuine hatred expressed towards President Barack Obama and many of the locals were even more vitriolic and abusive in their condemnation of Hillary Clinton. One of the lodge owners openly stated in front of his local and international guests, that he was going to rename his female dog Hillary 'because she is the biggest bitch I know' and this was by no means the worst or most malicious comment that I heard regarding the Democratic candidate. I try to avoid employing the expression redneck, partly because I understand that it is offensive to some people and also due to its harmless origins, as the term can be traced back to hardworking rural and itinerant workers, whose necks were burnt from toiling in the fields all day beneath a baking sun. However, at least a few of the locals that we encountered sounded as if they thought

that the film Deliverance was a tourist marketing campaign by the state of Georgia and on several occasions I expected banjos to start appearing. It was easy to laugh and dismiss some of the nonsense being espoused at the time, but on the 8th of November 2016 events took a far more sinister turn when almost 63 million Americans, around 20% of the population, voted for a man who believes that climate change is a 'hoax' and who openly announced that he would remove the United States from the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement to reduce global warming, which he duly did a few months after his inauguration. Considering that the citizens of the United States are collectively the worst polluters in world history, Trump's isolationist position is not surprising and his jingoistic rhetoric plays out well to the staunch Republican right and the Second Amendment fanatics who are more interested in their right to bear arms, than they are in protecting the future of the planet or even their own country. Trump's Vice President Mike Pence has dismissed global warming as a 'myth', and has even suggested that climate change is just an issue for the left in America and around the world, and his two sons Eric Trump and Donald Trump Jr. have been proudly photographed with the elephants and leopards they have butchered on hunting trips in Africa. Whilst most normal people are shocked and repulsed by these horrific images, they actually increased Trump's popularity with hard core Republicans, who were reassured that he was one of them and that he would protect an

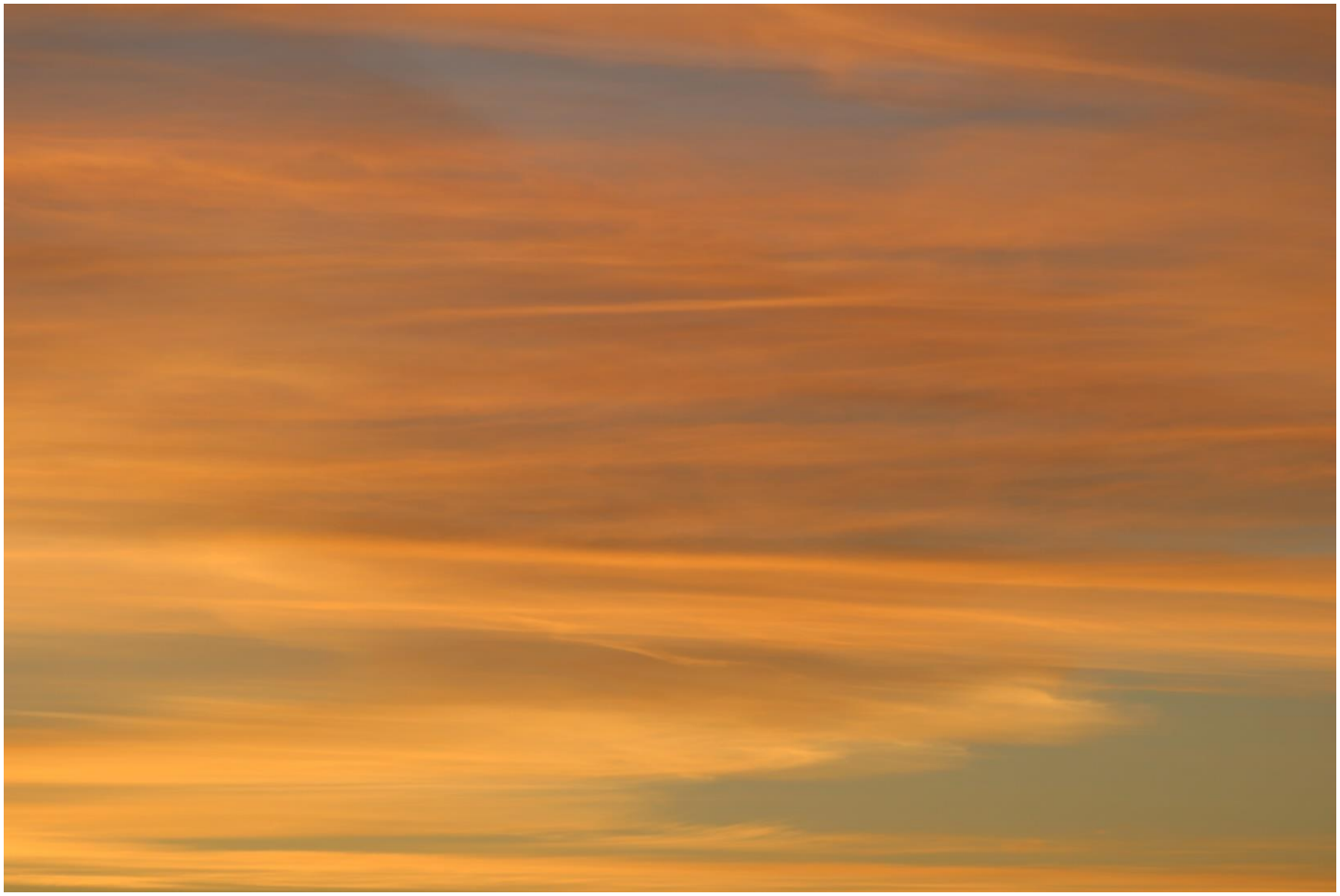
increasingly obsolete way of life based on greed, ignorance, hatred and an almost complete absence of social responsibility. Trump's failure to honour the agreement that almost every nation on earth has signed and that the United States had already ratified is, by his own admission, just the beginning in terms of the conservation initiatives that he plans to dismantle and we have already seen him issue Executive Orders to commence oil and gas exploration in the Arctic and to remove federal protection on a large number of national monuments, many of which support an abundance of wildlife. Sensing their moment, or perhaps having been informed from inside the White House that their moment had arrived, a group of senators, those wise and democratic bastions of the Union, have introduced a bill to remove grey wolves from the Endangered Species List in the states of Wyoming, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan. Known as the 'War on Wolves Act', the legislation, which has already been passed in Wyoming, will strip wolves of federal protection in all four states and will permit the indiscriminate slaughter of these eternally persecuted creatures without regulation or control, including for trophy hunting and with both dogs and snares. Wolves have already been eradicated across much of the country and even with the partial protection that they have received in recent years, they still inhabit less than 10% of their former range within the contiguous United States. The Endangered Species Act is itself under attack, as Senator John Barrasso, a highly vocal critic of the Paris Climate Agreement and another Republican who refuses to acknowledge a harmful link between human activity and climate change, plans to introduce a bill that will 'modernise' the ESA. The fact that Senator Barrasso has been paid over half a million dollars in the past few years by the oil and gas industry has absolutely nothing to do with his views concerning climate change or the fact that he personally urged President Trump to withdraw from the ground breaking international agreement forged in Paris. I am not aware of many things that Richard Nixon said of great beauty, but in 1973, after passing the Endangered Species Act he stated: *'Nothing is more priceless and more worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed'* For a man not known entirely for his honesty, President Nixon had never uttered a truer word and for over 40 years the ESA has protected some of the most vulnerable and most important species in the land. Concerned that the act of saving wildlife from extinction is *'unfair to landowners and stymies efforts by mining companies to extract resources and create jobs.*' Barrasso plans an overhaul that will see a large number of species lose their protected status and will prohibit conservation organisations mounting a legal challenge against any such decisions, regardless of their significance. It has even been suggested that there will be a limit regarding the number of species that can be protected at any one time, so basically you will not be able to attempt to rescue one endangered animal from extinction, until another has already succumbed. If it sounds as if these proposals have been conceived by imbeciles, the opposite is actually the case, as vast resources are utilised to challenge and undermine almost every environmental law and to ensure that ecological issues, however important, are rarely permitted to stand in the way of profit. All too often greed and self interest dictate the political agenda, as well as a malevolent desire to assert dominion over creatures that have no way to protect themselves or even hide. In April 2017 hikers discovered an injured white female wolf in Yellowstone National Park. Her condition was so bad and her wounds so severe, that park officials had no choice but to put her out of her misery. It transpired that she was the famous alpha female of Canyon Pack, a twelve-year-old wolf who had given birth to twenty cubs, most of which had survived to adulthood. She had been shot illegally within a national park and it is likely that she was killed by one of the many hunters who hate the wolves in and around Yellowstone, simply because they prey upon the same elk that the hunters believe only they have a right to kill. Similarly, in 2016 the bipedal black bear Pedals was killed in New Jersey. Pedals was basically a disabled bear who was missing his right paw and had a damaged left paw, which meant that he found it far easier to walk on two legs rather than struggle on four. He was incredibly popular around the Oak Ridge area of New Jersey and 312,000 people had signed a petition asking for Pedals to be moved to the protection of a wildlife sanctuary. $22,000 had even been raised towards his relocation, but the local Fish and Wildlife division failed to act and a single hunter, who apparently later bragged that he had been trying to kill

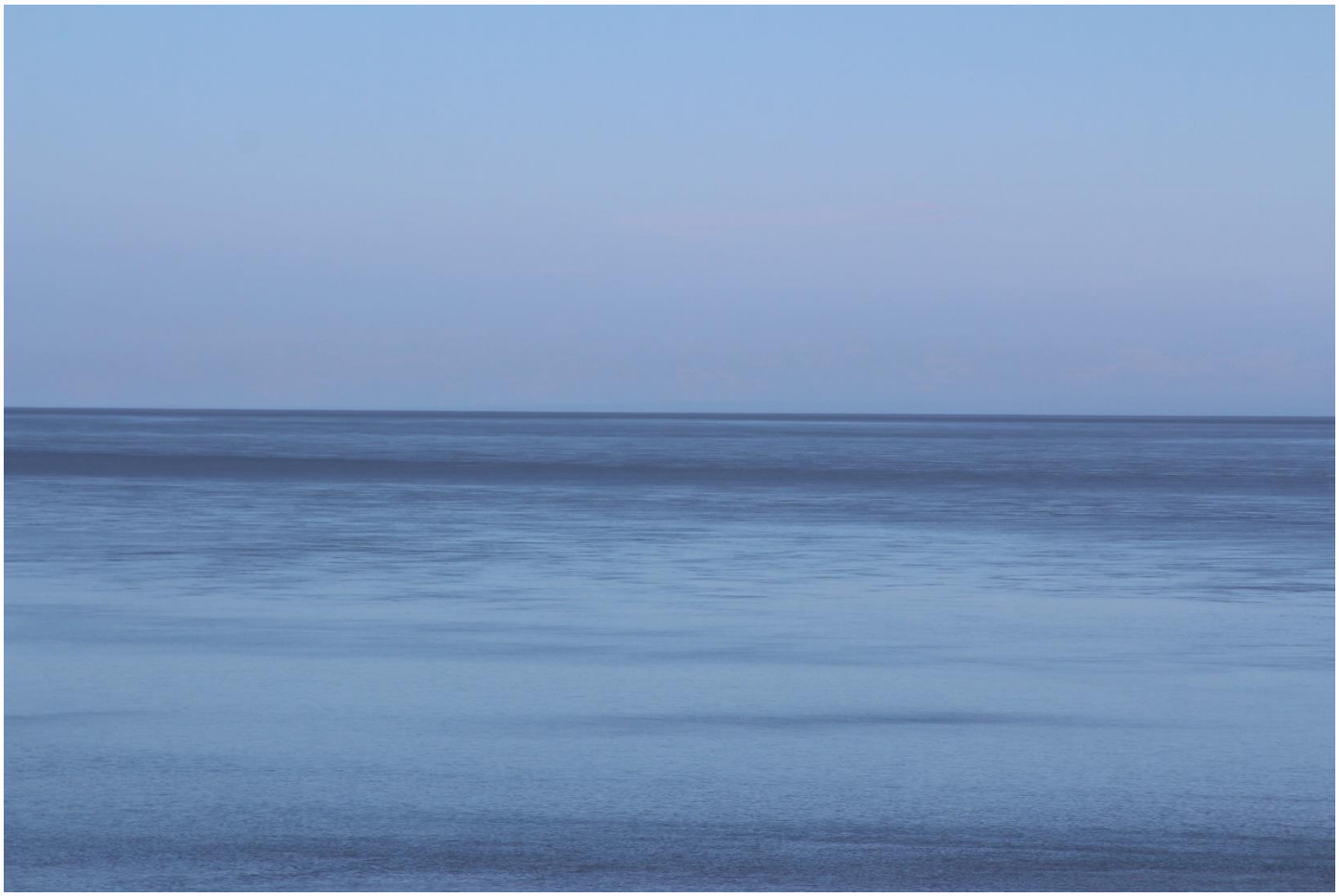


Pedals for three years, decided that his two-second thrill was more important than the life of such a brave animal and the happiness of thousands of people. Although these are two high profile examples, millions of animals are butchered in America each year with barely a murmur and the greatest democracy on earth and a watching world, both stand at an environmental crossroads from which there is unlikely to be any satisfactory return. Whilst I should be ending this piece by writing that this was one of the most inspiring trips that I have ever been involved with and that Alaska is almost unparalleled in terms of her ravishing natural splendour, both of which are undoubtedly the case, the uncomfortable truth is that a great number of Americans simply do not deserve the phenomenal wildlife or breathtakingly beautiful country they have been so blessed with. They look everywhere but within for their enemies and if Richard Nixon is not the man to inspire them these days, perhaps another former president can do the job…and you have to ask yourself whether anyone will be quoting Donald Trump in two hundred years?

'America will never be destroyed from the outside.
If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.'

- Abraham Lincoln





No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Canada Lynx	Lynx canadensis	Individual hunting at Denali National Park.
2	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	One at the walrus colony and several around Nome.
3	American Black Bear	Ursus americanus	Mother and two cubs on the Harding Icefield Trail and several sightings at our lodge at Kenai Fjords National Park.
4	Brown Bear	Ursus arctos	Encountered at every major park and reserve except Kenai Fjords National Park.
5	American Marten	Martes americana	James enjoyed a brief view of one running across the road at distance at Soldotna.
6	Stoat	Mustela erminea	One crossing the road with a dead vole at Denali and another at our lodge at Kenai Fjords National Park.
7	North American Otter	Lontra canadensis	Nice sighting at Lake Clark National Park and a quick glimpse on a rafting trip on the Kenai River.
8	Sea Otter	Enhydra lutris	Routinely observed at Homer and at our lodge at Kenai Fjords National Park, plus a solitary animal at Lake Clark.
9	Muskox	Ovibos moschatus	Several herds of various sizes in and around Nome.
10	Mountain Goat	Oreamnos americanus	Small herds observed on the helicopter flight to Prince William Sound and the marine tour to Northwestern Fjord.
11	Dall's Sheep	Ovis dalli	Small herds at Denali and on the Dalton Highway.
12	Caribou	Rangifer tarandus	Low numbers in Denali and on the Dalton Highway and just one wild individual at Nome.
13	Moose	Alces americanus	Encountered at most destinations and on several drives.
14	Snowshoe Hare	Lepus americanus	Several sightings at Denali, but none after.
15	Alaskan Hare	Lepus othus	One spotted and photographed at Nome.
16	European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus	Common at several locations.
17	Collared Pika	Ochotona collaris	Three members of a colony at Hatcher Pass.
18	North American Porcupine	Erethizon dorsatum	One each at Knik River Valley, the Dalton Highway and Lake Clark and two at Kenai Fjords National Park.
19	American Beaver	Castor canadensis	Several sightings, including a first on the Denali Highway to Paxson and a family at a massive lodge in Nome.
20	Arctic Ground Squirrel	Spermophilus parryii	First observed at Hatcher Pass and viewed at several destinations.
21	Red Squirrel	Tamiasciurus hudsonicus	First seen at Denali and observed at several locations.

22	Alaska Marmot	Marmota broweri	Small colony near Toolik Lake on the Dalton Highway.
23	Hoary Marmot	Marmota caligata	One for an extended period at Hatcher Pass and two at distance on the Harding Icefield Trail hike.
24	Woodchuck	Marmota monax	Brief sighting of one running across a clearing at Creamer's Field State Migratory Waterfowl Refuge.
25	Northern Bog Lemming	Synaptomys borealis	At least one at our lodge at Kenai Fjords National Park.
26	Singing Vole	Microtus miurus	Colony on the Council Road at Nome.
27	Tundra Vole	Microtus oeconomus	Brief view of one at Denali.
28	Northern Red-backed Vole	Myodes rutilus	Several on the Kenai Peninsula.
29	Walrus	Odobenus rosmarus	Large colony on a flight from Lake Iliamna.
30	Steller Sea Lion	Eumetopias jubatus	Several sightings at Kenai Fjords National Park.
31	Spotted Seal	Phoca largha	Two individuals from a coastal bridge at Nome.
32	Harbour Seal	Phoca vitulina	Common at various coastal locations and inshore at Lake Iliamna.
33	Humpback Whale	Megaptera novaeangliae	Two each on marine tours at Homer and Kenai Fjords National Park.
34	Beluga Whale	Delphinapterus leucas	Small pods observed on two occasions at Turnagain Arm.
35	Dall's Porpoise	Phocoenoides dalli	Several beside our boat on a marine tour in Kenai Fjords National Park.

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