

Issue 4 2021

The Wild Lens

magazine for photographers

Alaskan
Bears

Isla
Espiritu
Santo

Iberian
Lynx



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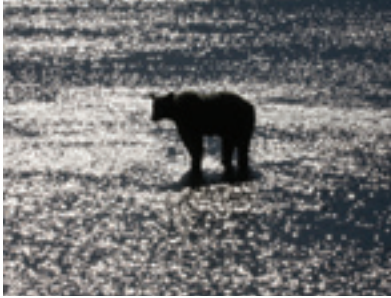
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Publisher's Note



Cathy Hart, Alissa Crandall, Kathy Doty and Michelle Liles head to Bear Camp

"A true conservationist is a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers, but borrowed from his children."

—John James Audubon

As my family continues to grow with nieces, nephews and cousins, who I adore, I often think about our planet's future. I hope these young people will see what we have witnessed in nature: open spaces and wildlife in their natural environments. I challenge you to take your younger family members to see birds, marine life, forest animals, and even safari. Let's educate them about natural history while it's still possible.

Cook Inlet, Alaska, offers a magnificent, mountainous backdrop to showcase epic, apex grizzlies. It's truly one of the premier spots in the world to view brown bears in their natural habitat. Read an article about one group of photographers' journey there via Great Alaska Adventures and a remote camp accessible only by boat or plane.

See a portfolio of the greatly endangered but slowly recovering species, Iberian lynx, through photographs from Andalusia, Spain. Enjoy rare images captured by Sebastian Kennerknecht, Daniel J. Risueño Sánchez and Karin and Robert Saucedo.

Underwater photography from Isla Espiritu Santo dazzles. It is a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site since 2005, and a National Park since 2007. A rugged, untouched area in the Sea of Cortez that will take your breath away (whale sharks, *oh ya*).

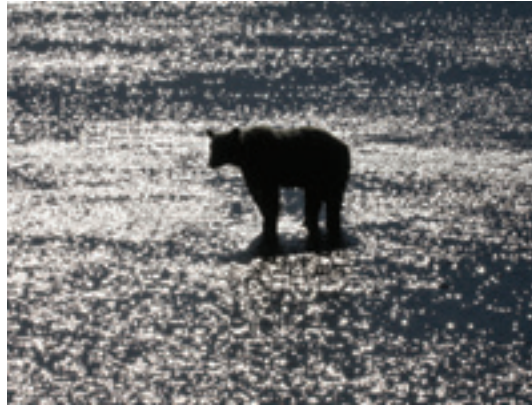
Hoping that you all are back out experiencing nature!

Michelle Liles

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Adventure



CALLING

STORY: MICHELLE LILES | PHOTOS: ALISSA CRANDALL, KATHY DOTY, CATHY HART AND MICHELLE LILES

Flying into the Cook Inlet to Great Alaska Adventures Bear Camp in Lake Clark National Park, you wonder if you are dreaming: rugged, snow-capped mountains surround sparkling, azure-blue water. There is untouched terrain as far as the eye can see. As we landed, we could already see Alaskan brown bears searching the flats at low tide for clams. Fresh out of hibernation, the bears were hungry and had to spend much of their days foraging for precious nutrients, which would be fascinating to watch and to photograph.

Finding habitats that are austere and untouched is a photographer's dream that has become increasingly rare. There are certainly areas where you can view beautiful species but they can also be overrun with tourists and photographers. This has been my experience in Katmai, Alaska. Although it is a great area to see and photograph bears, you find yourself losing the connection with the bears as you are navigating all of the people.

At Great Alaska Adventures Bear Camp, you can completely immerse yourself in the bears and their habitat. The epic sweeping backdrops of snow-covered mountains create artistic and beautiful moments and photos. You make your home in a private, permanent camp that allows both bear lovers and photographers to capture perfect images while reducing the impact on the bears. The camp is sustainable, with solar panels, showers and leading-edge compost toilets. Great Alaska Adventures Bear Camp works with National Park Service to best protect the bears.

As we sat viewing monumental bear moments on a private, camouflaged platform that provided peace and inspiration, I relished the tranquility of Bear Camp. We watched a boar pursuing a sow in the soft grass in front of us and happily clicked our shutters. We had many, many moments like this during our trip. I managed to take 10,000 images of boars, sows, cubs, moose, foxes and landscapes—iconic Alaskan photography.



ALISSA CRANDALL

For me, the photographic opportunities would have been enough. I would have slept on a log with a granola bar. However, the reality of GAA Bear Camp is so much more. The camp is beautifully appointed with gorgeous tents with comfortable beds (and trust me, after all of the photography you are ready for that), plenty of space for your gear and heaters to keep you nice and warm. Once you have warmed up, you need only saunter to a meal in the lovely dining tent. Rugs, chandeliers and a library flank the tables where you are treated to a healthy gourmet meal. And, as with most wildlife trips, you are famished and ready! The fare includes fresh greens, meats, fish, desserts and adult beverages. I was astounded by what they could accomplish in the middle of nowhere.

Speaking of nowhere, you must enter the camp by boat or plane. Named “North America’s Best Bush Camp” by *Outside Magazine* and one of “America’s Best Adventures” by *National Geographic Traveler*, Alaska Bear Camp is a step back in time. Bear Camp is located on Chinitna Bay, on the homestead of Wayne Byers. Byers formerly made a modest cash living fishing on sockeye (red) salmon. Beyond that, he lived off the land. When the National Park was founded, his property was grandfathered into the arrangement as a subsistence homestead. Luckily, Great Alaska Adventures understood the essence of Byers’ undertaking and has preserved the area for Alaskans and non-Alaskans to enjoy. I felt privileged to be included with a group of such passionate folks. Their approach to life made my heart soar.



MICHELLE LILES



KATHY DOTY



CATHY HART

Because the season is short, Alaskans spend many summer days hiking, fishing and floating down rivers. They also spend time preparing for their long, cold winters, whether homesteading or operating a tour company.

Kent John and his team at Great Alaska Adventures in Soldotna are welcoming and gracious from the moment you enter their comfortable, upscale lodge, as well as being completely down-to-earth. A family heritage business that includes Kent's father, Laurence, it is not just about bears. It's about Alaskan fishing, safaris, bucket-list trips, National Parks, Kenai exploration, family adventures, whales and weekends. Just about anything you could imagine, Great Alaska Adventures will accommodate.

Travel in Alaska has a unique flow, often shaped by weather patterns. The team can handle it all, and manages to keep guests comfortable, regardless of the conditions.

Having personally experienced the professionalism and high level of expertise of Great Alaskan Adventures, I encourage you to give them a go on your next wildlife photography expedition. Look for them at www.greatalaska.com, on Instagram [@great_alaska_adventures](https://www.instagram.com/great_alaska_adventures). The partnership that has developed between *The Wild Lens Magazine* and GAA is one that we look forward to sharing for many years to come.



ALISSA CRANDALL



MICHELLE LILES



KATHY DOTY



ALISSA CRANDALL



CATHY HART



“Great photography is about depth of feeling, not depth of field.”

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PRO TECT — AN D — SER VE

On a sunny Alaskan afternoon, we boarded two small prop planes for a trip across Cook Inlet. Our destination, without hyperbole, is unlike anywhere else on earth. Situated at the base of the Aleutian Range, within sight of Iliamna volcano and the Iniskin Peninsula, the setting is remarkable for both the wealth of resources and the breathtaking natural beauty. The sweeping mountain range settles along the coastline, giving way to meadows of sedge grass threaded with salmon streams. But this vast and wild habitat alone is not the reason for our visit. The Bear Coast, which extends from Redoubt Bay State Critical Habitat Area in the north, through Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, and Katmai National Park and Preserve to the south, is home to

one of the world's largest concentrations of brown bears.

Through the Veterans Program at the National Parks Conservation Association, I was accompanied by five other veterans from multiple eras of military service. A few were professional photographers, looking forward to three days of unparalleled access to photograph brown bears in their natural habitat. Others, like me, were simply outdoor lovers who had been offered a once-in-a-lifetime trip to experience this remarkable place.

Nestled in the middle of this extraordinary swath of wilderness is Great Alaska's Bear Camp, one of only two permanent camps in the region. On a grandfathered homestead site, the camp is surrounded by Lake Clark National Park and has unparalleled access to the local bear population.

Service
veterans
visit
Alaska's
Bear Camp
with a new
mission

story by
VALERIE STEMAC

photos by
CATHY HART

The camp itself is a well-established compound with all-weather tents on raised wooden platforms, propane heat, comfortable beds, shower houses, and a dining tent. And most importantly, it is staffed with a knowledgeable crew of guides who live at the camp throughout the viewing season.

Flying along the coast from Soldotna to Chinitna Bay, where we would land on the beach bordering Lake Clark National Park, we crossed over the exploration camp and airstrip for the potential Johnson Tract gold mine. Currently in the exploration phase of development, the mine would result in the need for infrastructure projects cutting through the National Park and the surrounding bear habitat.

There are other challenges on the horizon. Pebble Mine, in Bristol Bay, is a massive mine project that would require not only a road bisecting bear habitat but also a deep-water port and a subsea natural gas pipeline, which would further disrupt the pristine landscape that makes it possible for bears to survive in such remarkable numbers in the region. While climate change is a looming danger for all our national lands, Alaska is particularly vulnerable, as it is warming at twice the rate of the planet's baseline. Additionally, the tourism draw of the bears is itself a mixed bag when it comes to conservation efforts. While hunting and ecotourism can be a vehicle for bringing attention to the other threats facing the Bear Coast, there must be thought given to the proper management of these industries to prevent a negative impact on this precious place and its animal inhabitants.

What we need now are strong, credible voices to advocate for protecting this exceptional place. Although this trip was free of charge for the veteran participants, it was not a simple "thank you for your service" but an opportunity to continue our service to the country through learning about and becoming advocates for our national lands.

One of the most striking things about the veterans that I met on this trip was the unanimous experience of being brought to Alaska through their military service and choosing to stay because of how spe-



cial and singular of a place they found there. And honestly, after just a few days I think I understand. Something is stunning and awe-inspiring about being surrounded by so much untouched land; in a way, it is the opposite of the regimented, technologically-advanced, uniformed world of my military service. But also, for many veterans, it represents the pinnacle of what they joined the military to protect.

Alaska boasts 60 percent of all national parkland by acreage. This is a tremendous opportunity for national park advocates and particularly for veteran voices. The Bear Coast alone faces threats from development, climate change, sport hunting and the impacts of unregulated eco-tourism. One of the challenging factors in protecting this region is the lack of landscape connectivity. Although much of the region is state or national land, there are gaps where land is privately owned or unprotected. This leaves those areas open to development which could disrupt the interconnected ecosystem of the area.

Part of the answer to this is simply to build an identity for the region and work with all the landowners and stakeholders—from the state of Alaska to Alaska Native corporations, to bear guides—to understand and address threats together. It is a formidable task and an opportunity for those of us who have stood up for our nation to stand up again in her protection.

During our time at camp, we counted over 50 bears in view at one time. After three days of incredible viewing, the small plane bumped along the beach, taking off and taking me away from my time as a guest in the bears' home. I felt a twinge in my chest, something not quite jealous but still deeply protective. I had the chance to touch something so real and so rare. Now I get to work to help protect it and that

feels like just as much of a privilege. For more information about NPCA's campaign to protect the Bear Coast, contact Alaska Senior Regional Director, Jim Adams at jadams@npca.org.

Valerie Stamac, second from left, is a United States Air Force veteran, writer and nature enthusiast.



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CATHY HART | Nikon D500, 150mm, ISO: 6400, f: 5, 1/200 sec.





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SEBASTIAN KENNERKNECHT



IBERIAN
LYNX

BACK
FROM
THE
BRINK

The Iberian lynx, native to Southwestern Europe's Iberian Peninsula, has been reclassified as "endangered" from "critically endangered" on the IUCN Red List. There are now an estimated 1,000 individuals on the southern Spanish peninsula, with another 154 in Portugal's Guadiana Valley.

PHOTOS BY

SEBASTIAN KENNERKNECHT

DANIEL J. RISUEÑO SÁNCHEZ

ROBERT AND KARIN SAUCEDO



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