

# Bergs 'n Bears

Once again, Ann and Curt escape from the office and live to tell about it.

“Predatory grizzly and black bears rarely kill their victims before consuming them. After dragging them away from camp usually less than a few hundred feet, they concentrate their efforts towards soft tissue or visceral consumption and the victims frequently remain alive for an hour or more.”

– *Backcountry Bear Basics*, page 80, The Mountaineers, 1997.

*Photos for this trip can be seen in the photo gallery at [www.curtis.mobley.name](http://www.curtis.mobley.name)*

Glacier Bay, Alaska is one of the world’s last true wildernesses. It is not only a jewel of the US National Park system, but it is also a United Nations World Heritage Site and a UN World Biosphere Reserve. Only two hundred years ago, this entire area was covered by glaciers up to 4,000 feet thick. These glaciers have since melted back by 60 linear miles to create today’s Glacier Bay. This area is consequently one of only three places on earth (along with Mt. St. Helens in Washington and the island of Surtsey near Iceland) where ecologists can study first hand how a new and completely bare landscape is populated over time by plants and animals. Not until 1960, for example, were moose able to make it over a mountain pass to the north and begin populating the ice-free lowlands at the south end of Glacier Bay. Obviously, such a place needs to be checked out.

Glacier Bay still hosts several tidewater glaciers, which drop house-sized ice bergs into its upper reaches. Sea kayaks are the preferred way to get as close as stupidly possible to these 200 foot high faces of unstable ice, there perhaps to be dunked into the 33 deg water or crushed between moving bergs. A trip here would also offer the opportunity to camp among the legendary Alaskan brown bears.

Your basic black bear in the lower 48 grows to about 400 pounds for an adult male. The grizzly bears in Yellowstone can reach twice that weight. In coastal Alaska, grizzly bears are usually called brown bears to distinguish them from their puny relatives to the south. Even though brown bears are technically the same species as the grizzlies in the lower 48, that’s like saying that I’m the same species as Michael Jordan; it sort of misses an important size distinction. Owing to their high-calorie diet of salmon and sea kayakers, brown bears routinely weigh 1000 pounds and top out at 1,500 pounds. Needless to say, we spent a lot of time reading up on these critters since there is a very good chance that you’re going to bump into one of them on your trip. I put together Figure 1 to help get psyched up for the trip.

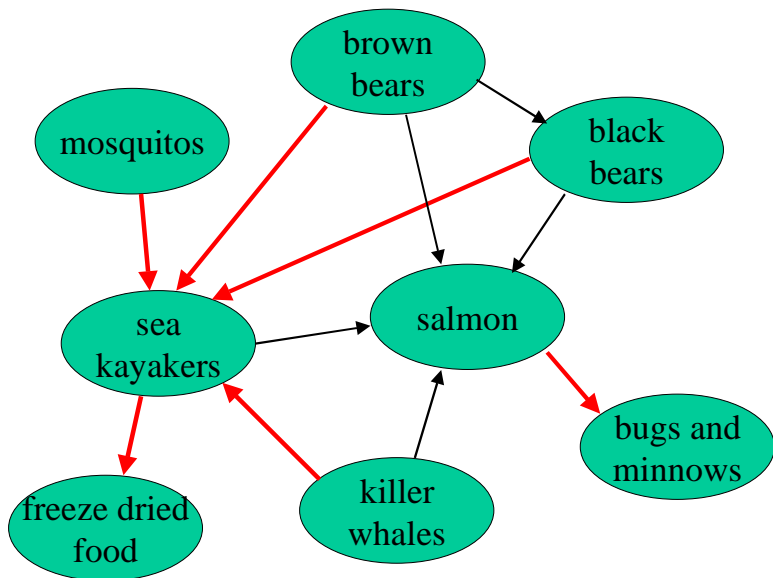


Fig. 1. The basic food web of the Glacier Bay ecosystem. The direction of the arrow shows what eats what. Red arrows indicate the primary food source; black arrows show secondary food sources.

**First two days:** Flew Seattle to Juneau to Gustavus. Rented kayaks. Got backcountry permit and bear resistant food canisters (BRFCs) from the National Park Service. Repacked food in BRFCs. BRFCs are cannisters about 8 inches in diameter and 18 inches long with screw-on caps that bears can't open because, lacking opposing thumbs, they can't hold screwdrivers.

**Paddle Day 1:** Took daily tourist boat to the kayakers' dropoff point on Sebree Island. This saved us 30 miles of paddling before you get to the really good stuff. The tourist boat dropped us off on the beach at 9:30 AM, near high tide.

**Tides.** This is where you will learn the value of a tide chart! During our trip (which included a full moon) the low-to-high tide range was as great as 22 feet. This makes for strong currents and either very hard or very easy paddling, depending on whether you're going against or with the tidal flow. Unfortunately, we were starting out paddling against the ebb tide (rather than sitting on the beach for 6 hours until the tide changed in our favor), so it took us almost 6 hours to cover 10 miles. After we had had enough, we went ashore on a promising beach (near Point McLeod) and checked for bear sign. Saw no bear tracks, scat, or trails, so set up camp. Too tired to worry about being eaten, so fell asleep without difficulty.

**Day 2:** The day was crystal clear—a rarity in this part of the world—but windy. We wanted to cross Muir Arm, a distance of about 2 miles, but the water was too rough. So we hugged the shore for a few miles until the wind died a bit and we could cross. We soon encountered our first ice bergs, which had floated down from McBride Glacier a few miles to the north. We stopped at a clear stream and filled our water jugs. After a few more miles we reached the mouth of McBride Lagoon, which collects the bergs calved by the McBride Glacier. McBride Glacier, half a mile away, thundered every few minutes as another ice berg was born. We arrived at the peak of the ebb tide flow, and the narrow mouth of the lagoon was literally a river of ice bergs. The current was perhaps 15 mph and the water was covered by tumbling and crashing ice bergs, some the size of a small room. It was like rapids in a river, but with floating ice instead of rocks. Perhaps this is what it is

like when the ice goes out on the Yukon River in spring—a sight I have yet to see.

We came ashore at low tide and carried our gear and boats 100 yards to the only accessible spot that would escape the next high tide. Here there were bear tracks, which looked to me as big as a bathtub, within 30 feet of our tent site. The area was also covered with wolf tracks. However, there was no place better to camp, so we made ourselves at home and prepared to meet our first furry friends. Neither of us would say it, but we were each thinking, “No problem: all I have to do is keep my spouse between me and the bear.” We inspected the ice bergs that had been stranded on the beach by the previous high tide, and then went to bed at 5:30 PM and slept for 12 hours straight.

**Camp Life:** Kayak camping in Glacier Bay is a bit different than car camping in your local state park. First you go ashore and announce your arrival with loud “hey bears” to see if anything comes out of the bushes. There is usually a narrow strip of land between the high tide line and an impenetrable wall of alders and willows. You camp on this strip of land, which is also the sidewalk used by the bears for their evening walks. The beaches are gently sloping, which means that if you land at low tide you may have to carry all of your gear and the kayaks 100 yards to get above the next high tide. The beaches are also rocky, which makes for difficult walking. You do all of your cooking (and other business) in the intertidal zone so that the next high tide will wash away the smells. You cook at least 100 yards from your tent (a quarter mile is recommended), and you store the BRFC’s at least 100 yards from your camp in the other direction. This all makes for a lot of walking, so it can take two hours or more just to break camp and get everything onto the boats.

**Day 3:** The next day we awoke to discover that we still had not been eaten. We soon heard a whale spouting and went to the mouth of the lagoon to discover a large (40 feet long?) humpback whale swimming back and forth at the mouth of McBride Lagoon, having a breakfast of the plankton that were stirred up by the strong current from the lagoon. At times he was so close you could see individual barnacles on his head, and we almost could have jumped onto his back.

We left camp in place and headed for Riggs Glacier, a few miles further north. Here we met the only other people we saw on the trip (after leaving the dropoff site)—two photographers on assignment from National Geographic magazine. They were camped on the other side of McBride lagoon from us, and we had seen their tent. They said that they had gotten up at midnight to check on their boats at the high tide and had seen a wolf in our camp (it never gets very dark in summer this far north). Indeed, we found fresh wolf tracks near our tent when we checked that evening. After inspecting Riggs Glacier, we paddled a few miles further up Muir Arm, into an area that was still covered by ice in 1960. The further up Muir Arm you go, the more recently the ice has melted out, and the more barren the mountain sides. Here there were no trees yet, just grass and a few bushes. We saw moose, mountain goats on the cliffs, and many bald eagles. At our turnaround point in upper Muir Arm we were over 50 miles of paddling from the nearest house or road. That’s Alaskan wilderness!

**Day 4:** It rained all night and into the morning. We broke camp and headed back south for Adams Inlet, an area known for its bird life. The tide was now with us, and we did 16 miles without much effort. We found a perfect camp at the mouth of Adams Inlet (at Point George) and set up shop.

**Day 5:** We spent the day riding the flood tide into Adams Inlet, watching a pod of orca whales eat lunch while we ate lunch, and then riding the ebb tide back to camp. At times the current was so

strong that we were in class 1 white water in the narrow channel. That is definitely the way to sea kayak!

**Day 6:** We planned to continue on south and camp at Tlingit Point, near the pickup point on Sebree Island. The Backcountry Ranger had told us that some campers had had problems with “aggressive wolves” at Tlingit Point. However, we reasoned that if our tent was surrounded by a pack of vicious, hungry, snarling, howling, drooling, bloodthirsty wolves, the wolves would likely fight off any bears who wanted to eat us. Perhaps we could escape to the kayaks in the confusion as the wolves and bears fought over who would have us for dinner.

As it turned out, the water was glassy calm and the tide was with us, so we reached the Sebree Island pickup point before the morning tour boat arrived. After Sebree Island, the daily tour boat continues up the spectacular West Arm of Glacier Bay, where big cruise ships give their thousands of passengers a tame glimpse into a world these people will never know. (One of the reasons we went to Muir Arm is that the cruise ships don't go there.) It was another perfect day, so we decided just to wait for the pickup boat and catch the scenery while the weather was good. This would end the kayaking a day earlier than planned, but we had seen what we came to see in Muir Arm, and we would also get to sleep in a bear- and wolf-free bed that night.

---

The bear business in Glacier Bay is definitely serious stuff, but if you're knowledgeable about bear behavior and scrupulously careful about food handling, you probably won't have any problems. Bears are not territorial and are willing to give you your space on the beach. The bears in Glacier Bay are somewhat used to sharing their beaches with kayakers and, because people have been extremely careful with food storage and cooking, the bears there have not learned to associate people with food. Many kayakers come home with stories about getting up the morning to find foot-long tracks all around their tent, left by a bear checking them out during the night but doing no harm since they didn't smell like food. The main danger is surprising one, so you spend a lot of time announcing your presence with loud “hey bears” whenever you're on land. Indeed, I suspect that bears think that “hey bears” is the sound that people make, just like birds chirp. To put the risk into perspective, between 1900 and 1985, bears killed 20 people in Alaska, but dogs killed 19 between 1975 and 1985. In one sense, you're much safer in the backcountry than you are taking a walk in Anchorage, where you may get ripped to pieces by your neighbor's pit bull. In the unlikely event that you are indeed eaten, bear attack survivors report that the bears' salmon-flavored breath is so rancid that it knocks you out a few seconds before those four-inch claws open you up like a can of beans. Moose, which are very territorial and of which there are plenty in Glacier Bay, are actually far more dangerous than the bears. If you bump into a moose, and we kayaked past several, it may charge and then do a little dance on your face. Actually, the thing I feared most was that a bear or moose would rip open our tent and let the mosquitos in. The stories you hear about Alaskan mosquitos carrying away cats and sucking dogs dry are mostly true. The real reason we wore wetsuits was for mosquito protection; protection against 35 degree water was simply a secondary benefit. Anyway, if you're not ready for an adventure, you should go to New Jersey or Paris for your vacation.