

Black Bears and Blue Ice

By Laurie Craig, Interpreter, Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center

Mendenhall Glacier is rapidly becoming one of Southeast Alaska's best black bear viewing areas. The glacier is only 13 miles from downtown Juneau and the cruise ship docks. Last year, 435,000 visitors toured the glacier grounds and visitor center. Due to the glacier complex's easy road access and close proximity to Mendenhall Valley neighborhoods, the glacier is a popular bear viewing

site for residents as well as Lower 48 and international visitors.

Several factors contribute to the new wildlife watching opportunity that provides safe bear viewing for thousands of visitors each summer. The key element is Steep Creek's sockeye and coho salmon runs. This prime food source attracts bears when the sockeye enter the creek to spawn in late July. Next, the recently deglaciated landscape has finally grown a forest capable of providing two more components: thick vegetative cover for the bears and tall sturdy cottonwood trees for bears to climb and escape from other bears. Finally, the human contributions offer a new elevated boardwalk, cedar and mesh fencing, and careful bear and people management by Forest Service interpreters.

Approximately a dozen black-coated or cinnamon-colored black bears feed along the banks of one-mile-long, lower Steep Creek. Since the platforms were erected in 2005, the resident bears have adapted to



The elevated boardwalk at Steep Creek allow visitors to safely watch bears in the wild. Photo by Laurie Craig.

catching fish, napping in trees, and playing with cohorts while being observed at close range by hundreds of visitors standing above them. During summer, seasonal interpreters are stationed at two key spots on the platforms to provide interpretive talks about fish, bears, birds and plant life. Solar-powered public address systems allow interpreters to reach as many as 200 visitors simultaneously. The interpreter shares life histories about bears in general and about specific bears if they are known.

One particular female black bear has been the favorite of visitors, locals and staff. She has nurtured four sets of cubs at the glacier over the past six years. Black bears have cubs every other year. Her acceptance of human observers has allowed people to watch and listen as she suckles her cubs, teaches them how to fish and where to escape for safety, and leads them on walks around the grounds. Many of the bears do not confine their wander-

ings to the creekside platforms so Mendenhall staff are trained in bear hazing techniques to encourage bears to avoid areas designated only for people. The management goal is to enhance viewing opportunities while keeping visitors and wildlife safe. Crowd control becomes a more challenging effort than bear control.

Perhaps the most important step for public safety has been the no-food policy institut-

ed in 2008. All visitors are asked to have no food or beverages outdoors anywhere at the glacier. This step reduces the potential for bears to become food-conditioned.

Bears use the grounds at times other than when the salmon are available. In May, bears climb high into the leafless branches of male cottonwood trees to feed on the catkins. In June, the bears climb to the tops of the female cottonwood trees to feed on the seed pods. In July and August, bears carry salmon to the base of the cottonwood trees so they can eat while being close to an easy-to-climb escape route. Decaying salmon carcasses fertilize the trees and forest.

Bears are frequently visitors' most sought after wildlife. A close-up view of a bear is the prize of a trip to Alaska.

Explaining the complex relationship between habitat and bear viewing is one of the best topics for Mendenhall Glacier staff to discuss with visitors. Interpreters



often dispel the notion that the bears are tame, artificially fed or kept in pens for release when visitors arrive. The gratifying aspect of their work is the look of sheer delight on a visitor's face after he or she has watched a bear move silently through the forest or catch a bright red sockeye salmon from Steep Creek.

As one visitor was heard to say, "Those people with the Forest Service are sure smart. Their glacier retreats and they bring in the bears!" There's much more to the story than that and glacier staff are on site to offer the details.

Black bear cubs are great tree climbers.
