

Recapping the 2020 season

From David & Joanne

April 2020. While the nation was reeling from the spiraling uptick of covid-19 cases, Alaskan seasonal lodges were rapidly having to decide on options for the coming summer. Our 2020 calendar was full, we were looking forward to a robust season, but the health risks of opening at full capacity certainly gave us pause. Some lodges pulled out early, led by Camp Denali, and others took a more cavalier approach, weighing the risk/benefits and deciding to steam-roll ahead. We took a cautious compromise, after considering all medical protocols that Joanne researched. We decided to operate at a 50% level, instituting carefully planned measures to minimize the risk of viral infection, including mask-coverings for employees indoors, options for delivering meals to cabins and rooms, (in disposable yet durable heavy duty paper plates and soup bowls), and having readily at hand a 5 gallon bucket of sanitizer with dispenser. It turned out that through cancellations and general attrition, our guest load averaged about 50%, so we didn't have to institute any cancellations ourselves. So we had a high guest to guide ratio, and a silver lining was a rather more relaxed and personalized experience, to the point where Joanne and I broke away for 3 separate trips to Kantishna in Denali, McCarthy/Kennicott, and even Brooks Falls in September where only 10 people were at the upper platform! We were able to bring our entire crew back and as a dramatic back-drop, we had the best crop of bears in 14 years. By season's end, we experienced no health issues related to covid-19 and while gross revenues were substantially less, we were pleased with how everything unfolded. 2020 was the first season in the 37 year history of lodge operation when the Shelter Creek Tent Camp did not operate, plagued by too much uncertainty with scheduled guests and cancellations. Certainly in moving forward, pandemic related issues still exist and will affect travel and people's decisions and comfort level in making plans. With our overseas reservations being in question, there is strong demand among Americans, so we expect again a full calendar but with the added experience of last season, will be better prepared to render a service with the limitations that the pandemic presents. We heard from many of you who had to make agonizing decisions regarding health issues and risk of exposure, and we extend our heartfelt wishes that you are navigating safely all the obstacles that these trying times challenge us with. Solace gained through experiences in the natural world may be the best elixir in warding off the ill-effects of covid impositions.



STAFF 2020

In mid March we had no idea if a viable season awaited us, and in limbo were our wonderful employees/colleagues who are pivotal to our operation's success. By April, we took a gamble and invited everyone to return. So, Andrew Maxwell and Justin Mucaria returned as our creative head chefs with Rugger Reimen supporting the kitchen and keeping the premises clean, all quite a challenge in a covid year. Our experienced guide team was headed by Dave Rasmus along with Mark Giordano (also an excellent carpenter), Eric Fisher (when he is not working in finance) and Rob Zimmer (talking his way through Canada despite closed borders). Rick Collins (his 12th year) joined us for our spring start-up routine and joined the culinary team in September and subsequent closing, along with Karolyn Brown. Oliver Coray, among his endless responsibilities, headed up halibut charters, coastal tours, maintenance and flew to town for supplies in his newly acquired Maule M-6 airplane. In town, (Soldotna) was Steve Toth, our intrepid expeditor who tirelessly gathered vital supplies for our continued operation. While revenues were down and covid challenges high, the fun factor was peaking, with weather, superb showing of bears, and a good salmon run, resulting in a relaxed and enjoyable season. We're thrilled to announce that most of the crew is on schedule to return for 2021.



ALASKANS SEEING ALASKA

2020 was the year for Alaskans to see Alaska, with the covid pandemic having thwarted so many plans for national and international travel. As guests, we had visitors from Kodiak (to see bears!), Anchorage, Soldotna, Sterling, Big Lake, Juneau, Fairbanks, and Homer. Joanne and I took advantage of the lighter guest load to see parts of Alaska we'd never seen, and with the vastness and limited means of travel, one could spend a life-time exploring Alaska.



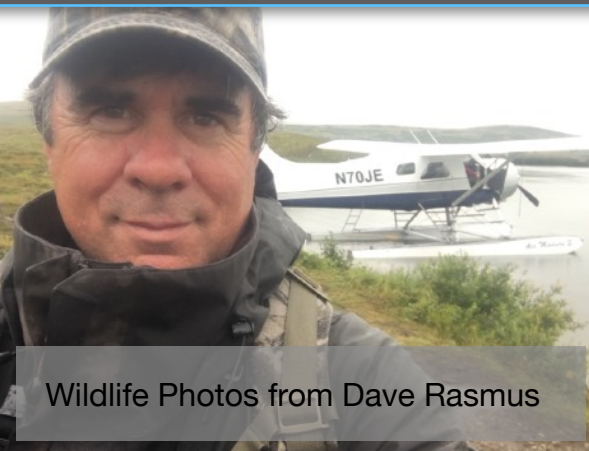
Dining Room Expansion

Long on our "lodge to-do" list was the expansion of our dining room and elimination of the two upstairs bedrooms. 2020 was the year, since most of our June was cancelled due to Covid. Heading the project was our friend and accomplished carpenter, Cody Hesse, and with Oliver's help did a superb job in adding 12 feet to our dining facility and creating a new entry to it from the lower floor. Without adding to our total capacity, we can now spread guests out a little more, timely for the new era of "social distancing."

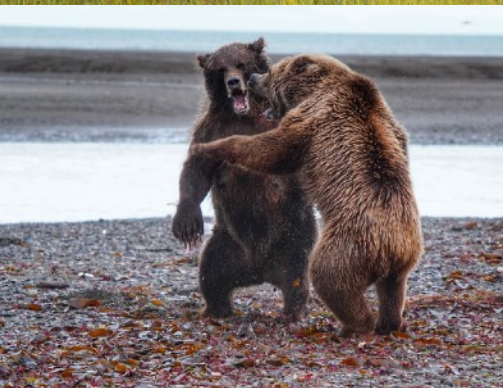


Bears of 2020

Indifferent to any looming pandemic gathering on the horizon, the bears of 2020 were nothing short of spectacular, the best we have seen since 2006. We had over a dozen spring cubs surface last summer, and with virtually no fly-in traffic and a smaller guest load, the viewing and photo opportunities were unequaled. The Lake Clark park survey team counted well over 250 brown bears in their overflight in late spring, the second highest total ever. This comprises the entire coastline of the park, stretching from Tuxedni Bay to the north, taking in Silver Salmon Creek meadows in the middle, and ending south at Chinitna Bay. Conditions such as high winter survival rate, abundance of nutrient rich vegetation and a strong salmon run all dovetailed to produce an extraordinary crop of bears. On two separate occasions, a particularly assertive male bear killed (and consumed) a spring cub directly in view of a group of SSCL photographers. While difficult to witness, it is the unfolding of a natural cycle of population control from an apex predator, possibly enhanced by the theory of elimination of offspring bringing the mother sooner back in to estrus. Our landmark wooden bear statue took a hit from bears as they gnawed and raked the decomposing structure, accelerating its diminishing life-span. We're hopeful for a forthcoming year of similar activity, welcoming our first guests in late May/early June when the courting season for the bears begins.



Wildlife Photos from Dave Rasmus



Eric Fisher with a nice coho



Randi Hall with a 65# halibut



Creek tent camp did not operate in 2020 so we had little data on salmon runs there, but we have a robust camp operation lined up this coming summer.



Lindsay family with a days catch

Coho Notes, 2020

Oblivious to the covid climate affecting the anglers pursuing them, the silvers made their usual foray into Silver Salmon Creek beginning late July. The numbers were decent, not a record-breaking year but healthy in showing sustainable levels. Anecdotally, we have seen over the years a slight diminishing in the average weight of the Coho, with few fish now in the 15 lb range, which was quite common in the 80's and 90's. Nevertheless, the hard-fighting nature of the fish hasn't changed, and while they required more man-hours to secure a responsive "bite" in 2020, the escapement was strong, paving the way for strong future stocks. A favorite (and necessary) past-time at the lodge is tying our own fly patterns and we creatively have discovered unique color and material combinations that have proved very effective on our local streams. With our bear numbers in record-breaking territory last summer, the salmon had to manage a gauntlet of predator interest as they floundered upstream from the tidal flats. The silvers are the last of the Pacific salmon species to make their way to their natal stream, and we saw trickling schools urgently fighting their way to spawning beds, well into Sept. Our Shelter

Horned Puffin life-cycle

An enormously popular service offered at SSCL is the 40 minute boat ride to a nearby island for puffin photography. The island is home to thousands of nesting pelagic Auk and Gull species, with the biggest attraction being the Horned Puffin. Nesting/courting takes place in May and June, with photo opportunities being mostly water and flight shots. By mid July, they are often perching and later into August we see them with their collection of sand lance and capelin in their beaks, striking a regal pose as if bragging of their catch. The island in summertime promotes a discordant mixture of sounds, the cacophony underscored by the raucous chainsaw-like guttural bellowing of the horned puffin. Both males and females appear alike (monomorphic) and the females lay a single egg, with both partners helping during incubation period. Sexual maturity is reached between 5-7 years. Puffins can dive well over 100 feet and use their wings

as oars, to "fly" underwater in search of food. They spend half their lives on water, not truly migratory, with much time spent far out to sea in the North Pacific. With an Alaskan population of over 250,000, the horned puffin is not threatened at this time, and are affected by rising temperatures in the oceans, with an actual increase in reproduction rate.





A successful day of fishing



Dave Rasmus, Rick Collins, and Oliver taking a trip to see the bears of Katmai.



A disappearing sun behind Mt Iliamna



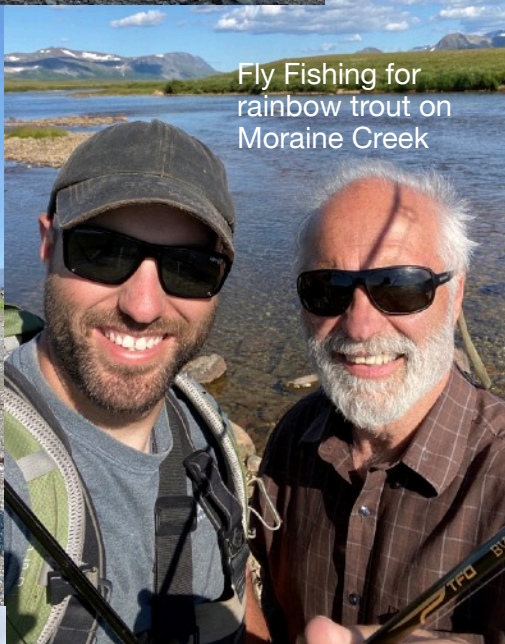
A romantic stroll at fossil point



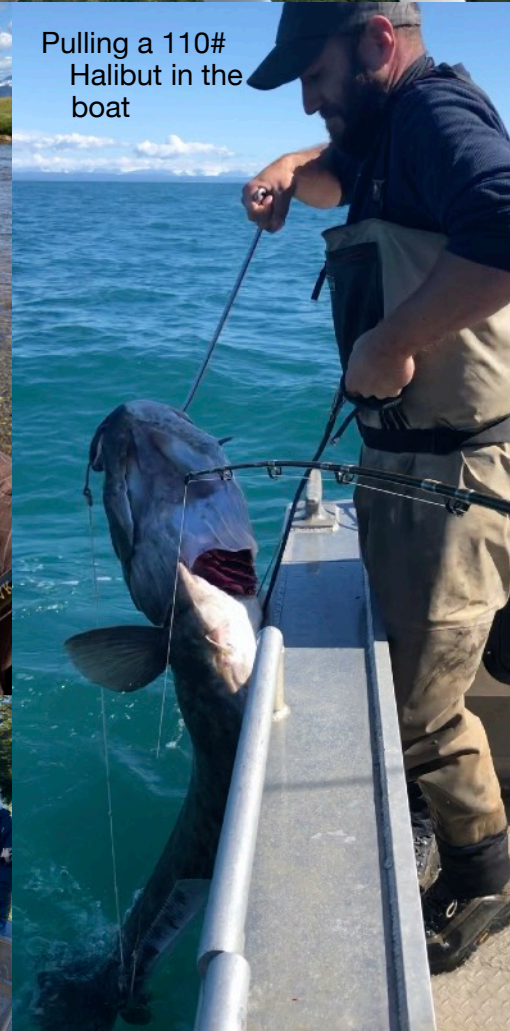
Flying over the rugged shores of Katmai National Park.



Exploring the beaches around Hallo bay in Southwestern Alaska



Fly Fishing for rainbow trout on Moraine Creek



Pulling a 110# Halibut in the boat



Exploring the tidal estuaries around Silver Salmon Creek



David's high school friends visit: Patti, Sue & Elaine

MINING THREAT TO SILVER SALMON BEARS AND ECOSYSTEM

In 1975, prior to the formation of Lake Clark National Park, geologists found promising samples of ore in the headwaters of Johnson River which resulted in Cook Inlet Region, Inc (Ciri) selecting a full section of land as part of their native allotment entitlements under ANILCA. Early exploration and test drilling in the 1980's confirmed the potential for marketable quantities of gold, copper and molybdenum but the efforts fizzled in the mid 1990's and the area sat untouched until just recently. High Gold, a Canadian mining company, has entered into a contractual arrangement with Ciri to explore, develop and pursue efforts to create a viable mine, with guaranteed access to tide-water, mandating a road-corridor for ore extraction.

The two choices for a road would be 1) north from their mine site, through a short range of mountains, into Tuxedni Bay where a deep water port in protected waters would be built and 2) construct a road (to support massive ore trucks) directly alongside the Johnson River and build an extended pier and port (because of shallow water) over ½ mile into Cook Inlet to support ships for receiving the ore.

The mouth of the Johnson River is only 3 miles from SSCL and a port facility and road there would irreversibly damage and severely diminish the natural beauty of the Lake Clark Park coastline and impact both bear and salmon populations. Noise and air pollution would be rampant. Residents of Silver Salmon Creek have adopted a zero tolerance for a Johnson River option, although we are currently linking efforts with Tuxedni Bay residents to halt or stall the project altogether. The agreement in 1975 states that "a mutually agreed upon corridor will be decided between Ciri and the National Park Service" and falls outside of the usual protocols where the public can weigh in, so at this time, input from concerned citizens have no portal whereby to register their views on the project. We are working to change that and are also working with Cook Inlet Keeper and NPCA to strategize ways to help protect this extremely sensitive area from irreparable harm. We may be asking our guests and visitors to add comments in the future. Below is a link to the mining company's website on the Johnson Tract project. <https://www.highgoldmining.com/projects/johnson-tract-project/> If you would like to be kept abreast of updates, contact Joanne at joedney@icloud.com

On a brighter note, the more visible and larger Pebble Mine project received a denial in November from the Army Corps of Engineers for a key federal permit for mine construction near Lake Iliamna, home to millions of sock-eye salmon that return there annually. Conservation minded Americans were dancing in the streets that day, a result of grass-roots efforts, although a permanent land designation is still needed. We encourage our readers to keep a close watch on developments with Johnson Tract and Pebble and how they can help in preserving these areas of bountiful salmon and bear populations.

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