

“A Naturalist in Alaska”

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“Bears,” Marie whispered as she looked up from the spotting scope. Her dream became reality when I found two grizzly bears crossing an tundra meadow along arctic Alaska’s Dalton Highway. We hadn’t seen another person in three hours: just two grizzly bears, alone in the wilderness.

But Marie learned first-hand successful wildlife watching didn’t happen at random. She needed a veteran wildlife guide.

Dan L. Wetzel, NatureAlaska Tours



Guides who live where they work – the value of arctic expertise

“People will sleep in the mud for a good guide,” the travel manager for a national wildlife organization told me. She knew her business. As “chance favors the prepared mind, she did her homework and asked me to reserve the June “ Naturalist in Alaska” tour program for their members.

She knew the members wanted real, first-hand adventures in the real Alaska with real Alaskans for guides, who work where they live, to learn about life in the Far North. She knew the members cherished wild places and wanted to find wildlife in the wild, and learn about wildlife conservation. But not elbow-to-elbow from a viewing platform or through the window of a mammoth tour bus.

Arctic Alaska to Denali to Kenai Fjords - Alaska’s major ecosystems

On a sunny June day, the Alaska Airlines’ jet carrying Marie and her 14 companions, circled over endless pack ice covering the Arctic Ocean before touching down at Prudhoe Bay. Here, they would begin a 1,500-mile, north to south, overland journey. This adventure would span Alaska’s major ecosystems from arctic tundra, over the mighty Brooks Range mountains to the wide Yukon River Basin, deep into Denali Park and onto the Kenai coastal forests and glacial-bound fjords: 20 national parks and wildlife refuges.

In 1981, I lead the first group of birdwatchers along the wilderness Dalton Highway, the only road across 500 miles of arctic Alaska. For travel planners, tour operators and individuals, planning is a daunting task when dealing with Alaska’s enormous size, varied geography, complicated and expensive logistics. After 38 years as a licensed Alaskan guide, biologist and tour operator, I tie a tight knot in these tasks and save everyone the uncertainty of a safely moving people to and from remote locations by bush plane, oomiak, dog team, horseback, Ford van or afoot.

A connection with wildlife

In Alaska, wilderness without wildlife is like eating an egg without salt.

A connection with wildlife is part of the earliest human experience. Today, watching and learning about wildlife are center-stage activities for travelers. NatureAlaska Tours draws upon decades of diverse, professional experience to create the “Wildlife Search Series.™”

Alaska is the great northwestern peninsula of North America. One mountain range after another radiate in giant sweeping arcs from the Pacific Ocean in the south, to the Arctic Ocean in the north. These northern ecosystems encompass a wide range of ecologic and geologic settings, floristic zones, latitudes and climates to create taiga, tundra and marine biomes – the wildlife habitats – of Alaska.

- Muskoxen and Barren Ground caribou graze across Arctic Coastal Plain.
- Spectacled Eiders nest in tundra ponds.
- Dall Sheep scale the mountain cliffs in the Brooks Range.
- King Salmon ply the silt-laden waters of the Yukon River.
- Grizzly bears show their cubs how to dig for arctic ground squirrels in Denali Park.
- Mountain goats range high in glacial-bound Kenai coastal mountains.
- Puffins, sea otters and whales thrive in the Maritime Wildlife Refuge.
- World’s rarest tundra shorebird, Bristle-thighed Curlew, nests near the Bering Sea.
- ...and the stormy Aleutian Islands are home to the revered Whiskered Auklet.

Wilderness travel, science and conservation

“*A Naturalist in Alaska,*” is a useful, real-world forum for curious, adventurous travelers to engage in “*wilderness travel*” for authentic experiences; “*science,*” useful and easily understood; and “*conservation*” to let us know why.

“More grand than anything else in the world,” said Henry Gannett, president of National Geographic Society, upon returning from Alaska in 1899. He then cautioned young people, “...it is not well to dull one’s capacity for such enjoyment by seeing the finest first.”

At NatureAlaska Tours, we’re sure Mr. Gannett wouldn’t mind if you ignored his advice to come North to Alaska with us in 2005 and see for yourself. Thanks again for your interest. Travel safely and keep in touch.

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