BEYOND THE WONDER

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AN ECOLOGIST'S VIEW OF WILD ALASKA

THOMAS BANCROFT

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frontispiece |

The sockeye dashes through the shallows of Funnel Creek, trying desperately to outmaneuver the pursuing brown bear.

The Washington State University Pullman campus is located on the homelands of the Niimíipuu (Nez Perce) Tribe and the Palus people. We acknowledge their presence here since time immemorial and recognize their continuing connection to the land, to the water, and to their ancestors. WSU Press is committed to publishing works that foster a deeper understanding of the Pacific Northwest and the contributions of its Native peoples.

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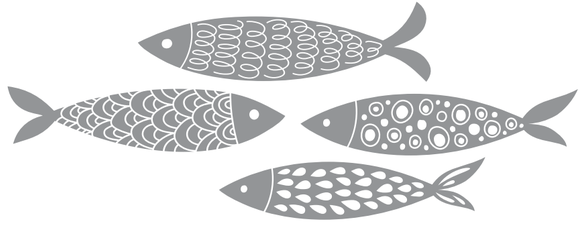
DEDICATION

To
Ann, Kelsie, Connor, and Elara Jane—
my family.
May nature always bring you joy and solace.



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PREFACE

The Alaska brown bear *Ursus arctos* is an apex predator more popularly known as the grizzly. The image of this mammal often stimulates a strong feeling of awe and creates a sense of fear in humans. This bear symbolizes wildness at its loftiest—a place where the natural world can function unconstrained by humans. My professional career focused on understanding wild places and how to restore and protect them so native species could continue to survive and flourish. Seeing this bear was a dream.

Before I wrote this book, I had seen grizzlies a few times. The first, in 2003, was from the main road in Denali National Park. A large, probably male, grizzly was sleeping in the tundra a few hundred yards out. At the sight of this impressive bruin, I leapt toward that side of the bus for a better look, but it didn't twitch a muscle in the five minutes I watched it. In 2005, my wife Ann, daughter Kelsie, and I saw a female grizzly with two cubs running down the Kenai River. The bear family was way off, though, and we had only glimpses of them. A third time, in 2008, I was in a caravan of cars in Grand Teton National Park that stopped to watch a young grizzly run through the forest and disappear over a ridge. But I had never seen grizzlies just living their lives, being bears undisturbed by humans.

In 2018, my friend Bob Harvey posted photos on the Nature Photography Adventures website from a photography trip to the Katmai Peninsula in Alaska. His photographs were breathtaking. They showed bears fishing, wrestling, grazing, and just being themselves. Sockeyes ran the rivers, and the landscape was wild. I returned to his website many times over the next several months before finally contacting him about going on the next Katmai trip. It would be my chance to observe these magnificent creatures up close and experience their wildness.

When I arrived at the Katmai Peninsula in August 2019, I thought the trip was all about photography, but I soon discovered that the landscape and its creatures opened a floodgate of introspection. I had spent the first part of my professional career as a research scientist trying to understand birds and their habitats and what was needed to restore and protect them. Then, I moved into the science–policy interface, trying to translate science into forms that could influence laws, regulations, and management regimes. By the time of this trip, my salaried career had ended and I had begun to think about who I had been and who I was now.

We all have ups and downs, and I had just passed through a challenging decade during which Ann, my wife of thirty years, died of cancer, I also was diagnosed with cancer, I lost my job, and then I had to close a struggling organization, which forced me to sack its entire wonderful staff.

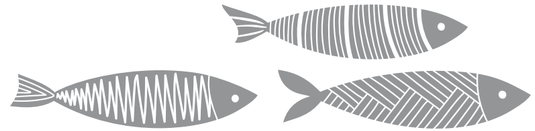
facing page |

A bear family comes to Moraine Creek to begin fishing. Sockeyes are an essential food for these bears, and they must put on a lot of fat for their hibernation.

On top of all that, my daughter—my only child—moved to another continent. Though I was still in the "healing phase," I realized that this week in Alaska might help me see the world beyond my grief and loss. Who had I become? Who might I become?

The bears, the landscape, and the wilds were mesmerizing, intricate, and complex. The trip consumed my mind and ignited my sense of wonder and possibility. I decided I would write a book as a lens into the experience, the place, and what it meant to me. The natural world provides many benefits, and being out in it has been a source of solace for me. I hope that the resulting combination of text and photographs will engender strong feelings in you, the reader—foremost, a sense of awe as you accompany me on this journey.

As our human population grows, a new and more comprehensive conservation strategy is needed. Critical to that effort will be having more people who care about wild places, whether or not they ever get to visit them. This book attempts to make sense of what I saw, thought, and—most importantly—felt in the midst of nature. I hope it will transport you to the same magical place and engender the same sense of wonder and possibility in you that I experienced, and leave you with much to ponder.



CHAPTER 1 | Port Alsworth Bay, Alaska

The sun was still half an hour from rising, and a heavy blue cast hung over the bay. In three hours, we were scheduled to head out by floatplane to look for brown bears, but I awoke early and couldn't get back to sleep. Clenching my arms tightly to my chest, I stared east along the mountains bordering Lake Clark, puzzled by my unsettled mood.

Katmai was powerfully wild country, home to all the creatures that had thrived here since long before Europeans came to North America. A few hundred people lived in tiny Port Alsworth, but the land was nearly free of humans for a hundred miles in all directions. A few Native villages south on Alaska's Katmai Peninsula had been here for millennia, but this vast country seemed entirely unaltered by contemporary humans.

Though I grew up on a Pennsylvania farm, I had lived and worked in cities my whole adult life and dedicated myself to protecting the wildest remaining parts of the natural world. Now, I had come to Alaska to truly immerse myself in that wildness in its most primeval form. With luck, I would get to see the untamed inhabitants of this untamed wilderness. Yet, here, on the brink of my adventure, sleep eluded me.

Clouds drifted across the rugged mountains at dawn. Pine siskins began to chatter in the conifers behind me, and the bawl of an unknown animal—a bear, a bird—sounded from across the water. Intense energy seemed to emanate from all directions. My eyes darted one way and then another, but I stood still, transfixed. This land was vibrant, alive, and untrammeled. Slowly, I could feel my mind and body connect with the quiet, deep rhythms of the true wild. In front of me was the thing I had searched for and strived to protect all my life. I was filled with reverence.

The rising sun began to peek through the clouds. I was ready.

facing page and detail right |

The sun is half an hour from rising, and a heavy blue cast hangs over the bay. I clench my arms tightly to my chest and stare east along the mountains bordering Lake Clark.

CHAPTER 2 | The Glance of the Grizzly

His eyes glared and his muscles tensed as he stood in two feet of churning water. I shifted my tripod to the right for a clearer view. He bolted forward, instantly at full speed, and headed downstream toward me. My finger pressed the shutter button; images came as fast as the camera's shutter could click. He pushed a wall of water in front of him, and splashes went up over his head, drenching his brownish-blond hair. The guy kept coming, less than a hundred yards away, running full tilt, his lips parted, teeth showing. My right hand held the camera pressed tight onto my eye. My left hand rested on the top of the lens, steadied by the gimbal head of my tripod. I tried to keep this brown bear in the center of the camera's frame as he kept coming, filling more and more of the viewfinder while the shutter snapped.

Other cameras clicked around me. Eight of us were bunched together on the edge of Funnel Creek in Katmai National Park. It was late afternoon, and we still had more than a mile-long hike across the tundra to where our two floatplanes sat tied to the shore of Mirror Lake. This brown bear had stopped us. We first saw him sound asleep beside the trail, but now he was charging toward us. I was torn. This was scary and I felt my body tensing, but I wanted to capture this blitz. Perhaps, though, we should become defensive? The bear must have weighed at least five hundred pounds, and his eyes seemed glued to me. Had Glen Alsworth Jr. and Leo Fowler, our two pilot guides, pulled out their .45s?

Nicole's comment from twenty years ago popped briefly into my mind. Her safety guidance on brown bears had given me the heebie-jeebies. As the new vice president of The Wilderness Society's Research Department, one of my responsibilities was to help bring a science component to our work in this state. I had flown to Alaska from Washington, DC, to spend several days with the regional staff of The Wilderness Society. After a few days in Anchorage, Allen Smith, Nicole Whittington-Evans, Darrell Knuffke, and I had left for a weekend canoe trip into the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. This trip was a chance for us to discuss issues in one of the places we were working to protect.

Our canoes were ready to launch when Nicole tapped my arm. "We need to chat about bears," she said. "Stay together on portages, always talk out loud, even if you're alone, and don't run if you come across a grizzly; they will usually back down." Each of us had to make three trips across a mile-long portage, and we became separated while concentrating on the task. I stopped dead in my tracks in the middle of a dense spruce forest when I realized I was by myself. I had not been talking to the forest, but I did from then on.

Two decades later, here I stood in grizzly territory, with a prime specimen rushing right toward me, his eyes glaring. A bright red sockeye suddenly shot up in front of him, splashing water as its tail whipped back and forth. The bear couldn't resist it.

facing page |

The brown bear bolts forward, instantly at full speed, coming directly toward us. His glare cuts right through my telephoto lens, causing me to blink.

The salmon darted to our right, with the bear in full pursuit, and then headed away from us upstream.

I stepped back from my tripod. All eight of us were still there. Glen Jr. stood eight feet to my right and slightly closer to the bear. As the owner-manager of Farm Lodge in Port Alsworth, he was there to guide and protect us. His muscles were relaxed, his face calm with no visible sweat. My arms were still tense.

Glen's shoulders were broad and his stance confident. His reddish beard glistened in the afternoon light. Katmai was his country. His grandfather, Babe Alsworth, had homesteaded the area along Lake Clark, which is now named after him. His father, Glen Sr., who runs Lake Clark Air, had flown us from Anchorage to Port Alsworth the previous day.

The red sockeye bolts right in a desperate attempt to outmaneuver the brown bear, but this young male is as quick as a cutting horse and makes the turn to follow.

facing page |

A salmon darts in front of the charging bear. The flick of the sockeye's caudal fin creates a massive splash. The bear can't resist and pivots to follow.

Glen announced, "He's a young male, four or five years old, not fully mature," as if that explained everything. Glen chatted with all of us as if we were in a coffee shop in Anchorage and not out in wild Alaska where a brown bear had just run full speed right toward us. I shivered, each hand tightly gripping the bicep on the other arm as I wondered how Glen could be so calm. These bears are major predators, easily capable of taking down a moose or a caribou. A swipe from one of those forepaws would tear me to shreds. I shifted my feet around as another shiver ran through my body, and then I looked out at the creek. That charge had been thrilling. Though it scared me, somehow I didn't freeze or bolt but stayed focused on picture-taking. Right then, I was more awake than seemed possible. Watching this massive predator come charging at us made me wonder what had driven me to go on this trip. I had thought it was to photograph bears, but my mood this morning had made me begin to ponder—and now this.

The young male brown bear pauses after lunging and missing a sockeye, looking right across Funnel Creek to where we stand. Perhaps he is considering an alternative meal.

The bear stood where the river tumbled over small rapids, looking back and forth in one direction and the next. Salmon were clearly in his sight, but he shook his thick coat and scowled in our direction. He seemed unsure about whether to eat salmon or us. Water dripped from his muzzle and muscular flanks. The Alaska Peninsula brown bear is a subspecies of *Ursus arctos*. Most people recognize it as the grizzly bear—the inland version—but such bears don't grow as big as these salmon-eating giants. Even more massive are the brown bears that live on Kodiak Island, where the incredible riches of the ocean help them grow to gigantic proportions.

Before flying out in search of bears earlier that day, we had huddled around the two floatplanes. Mark Kolka, Dan Davis, and I were assigned to Glen's plane, and the others—Joanne Rowan, Jay Robins, and Bob Harvey—were assigned to Leo's. A relay formed, and we handed our bags and tripods from person to person to be packed in the back of the planes. When Mark took my bright yellow dry bag, the weight caused it to sag a foot. "Yikes! You're going to carry all these?" he asked. "They seem to weigh forty pounds!" That bag didn't include my two tripods. Bob had said that the hike to Moraine Creek was not far, so I had brought everything.

Dan climbed nimbly into the front seat and slid across to the right side. I climbed in next, shuffling along the pontoon. A crossbar formed a giant first step, leaving a second step of equal distance into the cockpit. My waders clung tightly to my legs, but my feet slipped around inside the boots. Once in the plane, I leaned over and used my weight to move awkwardly into the back, where I slid over to the far side, feeling that Grace and Elegance had deserted me that morning. Mark climbed in beside me with ease, his camera in tow.

Glen stood on the top step and leaned over his seat. "Fasten your seatbelts. No smoking. There's an emergency beacon in the tail, and you can activate it with that red button." He pointed to the dash and a toggle switch. "There's a GPS locator signal on the yellow device on the top, and there's a fire extinguisher on the floor by the

copilot's seat. The orange bag behind you," he said as he pointed at Dan and me, "has two headsets for you." With that, he climbed in, buckled up, and moved confidently about his tasks. I guessed he was in his forties. He'd probably flown customers like us thousands of times.

I cinched up my seatbelt. It was my first time on a floatplane. I had spent several hundred hours in Cessna 172s and 182s when I worked in Florida, always fighting seasickness. My stomach was already queasy. "Keep your head vertical, and watch the horizon," I told myself in my mind, remembering the advice of John Ogden—my boss in Florida—when I was studying wading birds there. I wanted to photograph this country and see it the way a bird might. How could I have forgotten my Dramamine?

Glen cranked the engine and taxied out into the bay. The other Cessna began to plow water in huge waves off the fronts of both pontoons, and a giant wake formed behind it. The plane initially leaned up at a steep angle as it accelerated. It then rose onto the surface, lifted off the water and climbed rapidly, banking left out over Lake Clark.

Now it was our turn. Glen began to rev the propeller, and the plane lurched forward. The water's resistance held it back as the engine strained to speed us along. It took maybe a thousand feet before the back end suddenly lifted and the strain lessened noticeably. We bounced over small ripples on the bay for another thousand feet. Waves flew out from the pontoons, and then we lifted, gaining altitude, following Leo southwest. Camera in hand, I continued taking pictures throughout the takeoff, zooming the lens in and out for different perspectives.

The plane climbed, turning south, away from the lake. My forehead was pressed tight against the window. Spruce forests extended across the rolling hills. There were clumps of brown, dead trees interspersed among the living ones. Spruce beetles had reached the Katmai Peninsula. I used my finger to trace a small stream meandering through the forest, stopping on a beaver pond and the dam the rodents had built. Shortly, the spruce gave way to tundra, and I leaned back, staring forward, holding my head still and letting my stomach calm down.

As Glen weaved our plane through a narrow valley, my camera banged on my face and the window with each bounce of turbulence. Partway up the slope, the tundra disappeared, and the hillside became bare dirt spotted with dark, lichen-looking patches. Possibly caribou food? The hilltop wasn't visible because of the wing and fog.

"What's this pass called?" I asked Glen.

"It doesn't really have a name, he said. "We just call it High Notch."

The words "High Notch" went back and forth through my mind. We were passing over wild country, and its extent was hard to comprehend. Shortly, we would leave Lake Clark National Park,

facing page |

Spruce forests line the streams, and tundra covers the rolling hills south of Lake Clark. Spruce budworms have arrived in this region, killing many spruce trees. Warming temperatures have allowed the beetle to gain a foothold in Alaska and are changing its forest dynamics.

an area of four million acres, and fly across vast stretches of state and Alaska Native corporation lands that were equally wild and large, and then into Katmai National Park and Preserve, which was bigger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. Helping The Wilderness Society build its program in Alaska had been especially rewarding because all the ecosystems' pieces were still there. Aldo Leopold, a great naturalist and writer and one of the founders of The Wilderness Society, said that it was essential to keep all the parts of the wheel if you wanted it to work. In Alaska, we could.

Forty minutes later, we began to descend toward two lakes in the center of a broad valley. Twice more, I had to stop looking down and taking pictures to instead watch the horizon until my stomach settled. I had seen trails meandering through the tundra (maybe made by caribou), lines in the lake vegetation (maybe from a moose), beaver dams, trumpeter swans, and numerous rivers running wild, unimpeded by human devices. Western culture is all about control, exploitation, conquering the wilderness, but this land hadn't suffered from these assaults.

Glen got my attention when he called Leo over the radio and said that he would make a loop from Mirror Lake down along Funnel Creek to see what was there. He cruised about four hundred feet above the ground. The creek was visible from his side of the plane. I craned my neck to look out the opposite window. I could make out at least two large brown figures standing in the water. My muscles tightened. I couldn't wait to get out of the plane and walk into their world.

Throughout my life, the wilds have been a source of awe for me. I've often stood and marveled at what I saw, contemplating the existence, evolution, or geologic reason for what was there. One of my earliest memories as a child was of my sister Barbie asking if I wanted to "go to the wilderness" on our family's farm. She took me below the barn, where we crawled through a long tunnel formed by overhanging hog wire and brambles, coming out into a meadow among the walnut trees. It was simultaneously thrilling and scary. Only four years old at the time, I would have promised my seven-year-old sister anything to ensure that she would get me back home safely.

When my life fell apart six years ago, I sought solace in Washington's wilderness areas. The downhill spiral started in 2004 when Ann was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at age fifty-two; her prognosis was never good. For thirty months, she fought the disease, taking chemotherapy in one form or another virtually the entire time. She desperately hoped to see Kelsie graduate from college, marry, and have a child; and she never wanted to talk about her illness or pending death. While caring for her and grappling with the pressures of my work—leading a department at The Wilderness Society—I never fully faced that reality either.

Ann slipped into a coma one day in December 2006 and died a week later. It was Kelsie's senior year in college. In September 2007, I foolishly changed jobs, probably to escape my grief. The position of chief scientist at National Audubon seemed like a great opportunity to get back to studying birds. A month later, though, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and slipped into depression.

As I endeavored to climb out of my gloom, a new organizational leader at Audubon decided to fire most of the existing senior staff, including me. I made the mistake of taking the first job offer I received, despite having to move clear across the country, even though I had a feeling something wasn't right about it. Off I went to Seattle to lead a small nonprofit that focused on Puget Sound conservation.

The distance strained my relationship with my daughter. To make matters worse, I discovered that my new Seattle employer was experiencing severe financial problems. These had not been revealed to me during my interview, and yet they were now my responsibility to solve. After spending two years trying to save the organization, the board and I decided to close its doors. The ordeal exhausted me, mind and body. During the year that followed, I solo-backpacked into more than twenty of Washington's designated wilderness areas, often in places so remote that I saw few people for days on end, which suited me entirely.

Glen banked the plane around, snapping my thoughts back from the past. "This looks good to me. I saw four or five bears. Let's stop here." Both

planes flew upstream to the far end of Mirror Lake, landing and taxiing to the north shore, a good half mile from the lake's end and the creek where Glen had spotted the bears. He cut the engine and adjusted the rudders so we turned to face the wind and drifted back toward shore.

"Stay here," Glen told Mark, Dan, and me as he jumped onto the pontoon and into the lake, the water almost coming to his knees. After dragging the plane until both floats were sitting against the shore, he came back for us. We unloaded the camera equipment with a relay team and prepared it for the day. I had come equipped with two cameras, a pair of binoculars around my neck, a heavy backpack, two tripods, and my chest waders pulled high—fifty-plus pounds in all.

I shifted the weight around my body while slipping in the loose gravel. When I caught my balance, I noticed Bob Harvey staring at me. "You want another tripod?" he asked with a chuckle, but I could see the concern on his face. He was a little younger than me, with silver hair. He carried his camera gear easily, not visibly strained by its substantial weight. Everyone had brought big lenses. Bob had organized this trip, and it was through his company, Nature Photography Adventures, that I'd signed up. Moraine Creek, where I thought we were headed, was a short walk, but Funnel Creek would require a few miles' journey to our photography locations.

The loose gravel on the berm proved challenging to traverse. Not only did my boots slip, but my feet inside my waders slid back and forth. A trail in the tundra made for a more comfortable walk. However, it wasn't long before we stepped over small piles of black scat filled with partially digested blueberries and dogwood berries. I suddenly realized that we were walking on a bear trail. It made me hesitate and look a second time at some scat. I was really here, on the tundra of Alaska, where giant brown bears roamed freely, and we were walking toward the place where they would be feeding. I quickened my steps, but it wasn't long before I started to lag behind the others. The weight of my gear was taking its toll.

The group dropped down a small berm to stand beside the outlet of Mirror Lake and the start of Funnel Creek. Everyone waded immediately across the flow except Bob, who stood with his right hand on his hip, and his head cocked slightly toward me. "You okay?" I nodded, but he looked concerned. The crystal-clear water flowed rapidly over a rocky bottom. Each stone was distinct through knee-deep water, and the current pushed hard against my calves. I leaned upstream, taking mini steps to keep my balance. Bob moved beside me, looking nonchalant, but he kept glancing my way every three or four feet. Glen waited on the far shore.

"Need a hand?" Glen asked as he reached out, extending his body over the bank's edge.

facing page |

After landing on Mirror Lake, we begin the hike to Funnel Creek. Winter winds have pushed ice drifts up onto the shoreline, forming the wide rocky beaches.

I grabbed his wrist, and he pulled me and all my gear up the bank. "Thanks," I said as we shuffled to follow the others. Glen tipped his head, averting his eyes while hurrying along. I relaxed, having successfully crossed seventy-five feet of rushing water. It scared me more than I expected. I had used my big tripod to steady myself while balancing the weight of all the camera equipment on my back. A slip with chest waders would have been disastrous, to put it mildly, especially if my waders filled with water and my cameras got soaked.

The creek ran for a third of a mile before opening into a small pond. About halfway along that stretch, someone pointed north. A little brown blob plodded across the tundra, probably a half mile away. Even through my ten-power telephoto lens, it looked small, but it was my first wild brown bear, and I stood on the tundra in its domain. The blond-backed guy passed in front of a large patch of pink fireweed. He was heading up into the hills, and I thought, "Oh, no," worried that this would be our only sighting. As the others continued toward the edge of the next pond, I stood photographing him. When I put down my camera, I saw that I was several hundred feet behind everyone else. Leo had stopped to wait for me, but I hurried to catch up, remembering a conversation from the previous night as well as my friend Nicole's long-ago warning about staying together in bear country.

On the preceding day, we had arrived late in the afternoon, settled into our cabins, and then headed to the lodge for dinner. The six of us had just finished eating and were chatting when Dan said, "I'm still really nervous about this trip." He looked away from everyone, paused, and added, "Those bears scare me." Dan was a tall man and didn't look his age. I suspected he was in his seventies or close to it. Yet, he walked with an appearance of youth and vigor. The way he talked made me wonder if he'd been a university professor.

The level of tension around the table skyrocketed. I felt my muscles tighten. Dan hesitated for a few seconds and then stared at Bob, saying, "I read about Timothy Treadwell and everything I could find on others who were killed by bears." Treadwell and his girlfriend had been killed and eaten by a brown bear on the Katmai Peninsula. Dan's hands gripped the table's edge as if he were about to bolt for the exit, and his face was taut. Everyone's face was frozen and expressionless, and we were all looking at Bob.

"Timothy was asking for it," said Bob as he sipped his lemonade. He glanced at each of us and then fixed his eyes on Dan as he set his glass back on the table. "Timothy and his girlfriend tried to live with the bears, camping along bear trails and the shore, even walking right among them as they fished for salmon." Bob straightened and became taller as he emphasized the mistakes

Treadwell had made. I marveled at his calmness and appreciated his effort to get us to relax.

An old male, not in good shape, had killed the two of them. I remember it making headlines because the deaths were captured in Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man*. I had intentionally not reviewed anything on bears killing humans before this trip and definitely had not watched Herzog's movie. Bob continued, "We will stay together and away from the bears. Our guides carry guns and really know the local bears. They haven't had any issues."

The tension around the dinner table remained high, but then someone, I think Mark, joked, "You need to learn how to use your tripod to trip one of us, just not me," and everyone laughed, releasing the tension. "Or just not be the slowest," I thought.