

2011 Alaska Cruise Journal # 5

Homer and Beyond After a break for a week in Seattle, we returned to South Central Alaska for another four weeks of exploring. Bill Faia, our Maui neighbor; as well as Jim and Judy Heber from Seattle joined us for the first two weeks. The group flew to Anchorage where we had reserved a SUV for our return to Homer. After a stop at the Anchorage Costco for fresh supplies, we made the five and one-half hour drive to Homer where the *Inside Passage* had been moored during our absence. Homer is known as “the end of the road” on the Kenai Peninsula



Augustine Volcano Rather than explore the town, our new crew chose to shove off at our first opportunity. Always seeking new anchorages and areas to explore, we took advantage of favorable weather conditions to head the 60 miles across Cook Inlet to the picturesque island created by the Augustine Volcano ([59 21.673 N, 153 25.803 W](#)). Our journals normally only include photos taken by either our guests or ourselves, but the aerial (**above**) gives such a good perspective of this unusual island that we included it.

A landmark in the region, this symmetrical mountain island has a continuous plume of steam emitting from vents in its crater. Augustine, which is the largest island in the lower half of Cook Inlet, was named by Captain James Cook in 1778.

Uninhabited, the island has been the subject of continuing scientific research because of its frequent activity. The latest series of multiple eruptions consisted of four phases continuing from December 2005 to March of 2006.



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We went ashore both that evening and the next morning to explore and took our group photo (**preceding page**). Using the GPS on Jim's iPhone with an "app" displaying the local USGS topo map, we searched for trails that were once part of the terrain.

Above the beaches on the island's flanks, the vegetation was a dense jungle of tall grass, lupine, and cow parsnips, some almost five feet high. We slogged through hoping to locate the ghost of a hiking trail, but found no evidence of past human visitors as nature has likely

reclaimed whatever trails may have existed in the past. Nevertheless, exploring a 4,134 foot high active volcanic island in the Aleutian Arc was an exciting experience.

Cape Douglas Thirty miles southwest of Augustine is Cape Douglas, the eastern edge of the Alaskan Peninsula, and the start of the Katmai National Park & Preserve. This 4-million acre park encompasses 15 active volcanoes; many glaciers, and a large population of coastal brown bears. Our anchorage had us tucked behind Cape Douglas and visibility was down to almost zero as we settled in for the night (58 50.332 N, 153 20.169 W).

We awoke in the morning to the view of Mt. Douglas, which at 7,063 feet dominates the western shore of Kamishak Bay. Several of its glaciers snaked down the mountains towards us (**photo above**).

As we scanned the wide beach searching for bears, we spotted a small plane circling the bay. It landed on the sand and gravel beach and taxied to one end. Under a sunny sky and on flat water, we kayaked to the beach to take a walk and check out the plane. When we were about half-way to the plane, Judy called out that in the distance she saw a couple of bears run off into the vegetation. This was our first bear viewing of the summer.



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Bill the Bush Pilot We convinced Judy that it was safe at this distance to proceed and as we did, we saw a man walking towards us along the beach. We knew that he had to be off the plane and we were anxious to “chat him up”.

Bill Syms, the plane’s pilot, owns and operates a fishing lodge on Iliamna Lake. He had flown some of his guests that morning to fish for halibut off the cape after they had grown tired of catching rainbow trout in the rivers near his lodge. Later when we passed their skiff, we

learned they had caught a 100 pound halibut. Bill had been coming to this area for almost 50 years and shared some his local knowledge about it. Describing the bears in the area as “nice” and not a danger, he escorted us into the nearby vegetation to see a four year old bear grazing alone (**photo on preceding page**).

Grizzly Man Bill told us that he knew Timothy Treadwell, the tragic subject of the feature length documentary film *Grizzly Man* produced by Werner Herzog. Bill was one of the pilots who used to bring Treadwell supplies and flew him into the area to live with the bears for many summers. The skiff that his guests were using to fish originally belonged to Treadwell. Bill had warned Timothy that his eccentric behavior among the bears would ultimately lead to his demise and informed him that he would claim his photographic equipment when it happened. Instead, Bill ultimately wound up with Treadwell’s skiff.

Yet Another Dead Whale Bill’s most interesting information was that he had flown over a beached dead humpback whale that morning and saw ten to twelve bears feasting on the remains. Bill bent down and drew a map in the sand of the location for us (**photo above**). Although it required back tracking the route of the previous day, we could not resist the opportunity to view this unusual event. Two hours later, after setting our anchor well off-shore because of shallow inshore conditions, we took the jet shore-boat to where we



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could observe and photograph the giant brownies around the carcass. We anchored our shore-boat about 35 feet away, and along the wide beach had as many as 12 bears in sight at one time (58 59.111 N, 154 16.005 W). It was fascinating to watch the social interactions involved with each bear displaying a separate personality and observing its place in the social hierarchy.

The largest and most aggressive bears had first claim while the others, either sated from previous meals or waiting their turns, sat or reclined nearby. Confrontations were short, vocal and clear as to which bears got precedence in the feeding process. The senior bear, which we named “shaggy butt”, was at the top of the dominance chain (**photo on preceding page**). This matriarch was able to intimidate the others and demand priority access until she was finished.

Repeat Visit After our Friday night dinner, we returned around 8 p.m. for another viewing opportunity. The tide was now higher and the whale carcass was partially in the water. With the perfect weather conditions and the large collection of brown grizzly bears we knew this was likely a once in a lifetime experience. In one photo



(**above**) we captured the nine bears that were currently taking their turns feeding. The bears had a challenge breaking through the tough hide of the whale and were only making progress at the head and tail ends.

Two hours later, we returned to download the well over 1,000 photos taken by the group that day knowing that we would ultimately delete the vast majority of them. This special day was concluded sitting on the front deck drinking port and hot chocolate as we watched a beautiful sunset around 11 p.m. (**photo**).