

Andy Rouse's Shots of the Month

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Alaska Grizzly Bears

First I would like to thank everyone for the nice comments on last month's kingfisher pictures, they have certainly created quite a stir. It's nice to know that so much hard work and frustration has led to images that seem to give so much pleasure. Hopefully the moral will come through too, nothing is beyond you and if you have the determination to try then you can achieve anything.

A couple of weeks ago I returned to visit some old friends Digger, Nemo and Grandpa. Yep it's that time again to visit the Grizzlies of Katmai as they struggle to nail unsuspecting salmon during their annual migration. My work with this one group of Grizzlies, now for over two years, has seen a real seed change in my approach to photography. In the old days I just photographed what the commercial world needed, and in a style that I knew would sell. As you know from a previous article my horizons have widened a lot and now I only photograph the projects that I am interested in. It also may sound a little sentimental, something for which I do not apologise, but I really enjoy getting to know the individual personalities of bears and how they interact with each other. It is so easy to lose track of what is the most important factor in wildlife photography, our relationship with the animals that we photograph. I also love sharing these experiences with others and want to thank Ollie, Simon, Mike and Heath who were with me on my workshop. So here are a few stories of the trip that I hope you will enjoy.

The salmon run was a pretty bad one I found out when I arrived, a combination of an odd numbered year and pounding winter storms that re-shaped the creek. The bears tried their hardest though and some, particularly the highly adept Nemo, found good success and regularly hauled salmon from the creek. On the first evening she caught a glistening salmon right in front of us and proceeded to walk directly in our direction. Gary, our erstwhile guide whispered to stay still, we all froze as Nemo passed within 10 feet of us. She stood for a second on the brow of the hill with the salmon hanging tantalisingly from her mouth. I couldn't resist it, luckily experience had taught me to track her motion with my 300 2.8; I kept it very low at knee height to avoid alarming her. Slowly I lowered my eye to the viewfinder and WOW, she looked awesome through it. I managed to take one shot before she moved off, a real cracker and a great start to the trip. My guys loved it too; it was their first bear encounter and a really special one thanks to Nemo.

But Nemo had more in store. A few days later she used us as a barrier from a large boar that was fishing in the river. She came frighteningly close to us but all the time her attention was squarely on the boar and not once did she show us any bad intent. In fact she was so close that I could only get a head shot with my 70-200; so close we could smell her fur. Sure we were a little nervous, who wouldn't be, but she was totally engrossed in the boar; the only problem would be if she became scared and ran through us. Fortunately the boar moved off and she resumed her fishing, leaving some very elated and smiling Brits on the bank! The problem of course with Grizzlies is their reputation; tales of campers being chewed up or dragged from their tents at night have been associated from them since the year dot. Sure these things do happen, but they are the exception and usually have an explanation such as the bear being suddenly startled. In general Grizzlies are cool with us, they would rather go elsewhere than have anything to do with us, and provided they know you are around and can set their own distance will tolerate our presence. In other places in Alaska, Nemo's close approach could have been her last; fortunately the guides that I work with Gary, Kevin and Simyra are all experienced at reading bear body language and avoid any potential problems.

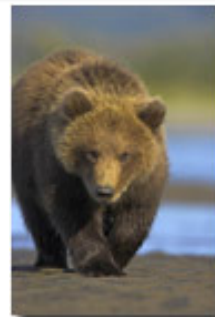


The day came for my group to leave; I waved them off as the Cessna took off from the beach and then turned to greet John McEnroe who had just arrived. He is not the real John McEnroe of course, but I know he will read this and know exactly who he is! That afternoon we struck real gold. We were sitting high up on the river bank when I noticed some movement in the brush behind us. Thinking it was a bear I turned my camera.....only to see a wolf looking back at me. Its eyes burnt into the lens and I was, and so many people before me have been, transfixed by its powerful gaze. It watched us for several minutes, before melting back into the bush as if nothing was there. The pictures, well they are just long shots, but the memory is what will stay with me for a long time. In fact Mr Wolf you have started off another project in my mind and we will meet again, hopefully!

As the salmon run really started to dry up we decided to try a river estuary that was a good couple of hours slog across the mud flats. The journey was made a lot easier by the stunning Alaskan scenery and the constant banter within the group. John McEnroe was there of course, always an easy target for my wit, and he was joined by Chris, a chap from the deep south who had shoulders that belonged to an American football star. It's always policy with my wit to avoid making fun of anyone with big shoulders and tattoos. Eventually we arrived at the mouth of the river and sat down in a likely spot; we were surrounded by bears on all sides but they were too far for the camera and engaged in post fishing recovery activities – sleeping! So we set up and waited. The only sound was the sound of the tide changing, a rushing noise that heralded the arrival of grizzly feeding time. After a few minutes the first bear awoke from its slumber and headed to one of the deep channels to sit and wait. Further out a large boar charged into the water and emerged with a shining salmon, the salmon run was starting. It was like a telegraph to the other bears, who awoke from their slumbers, stretched their muscles ready for action, and ambled out to get a piece of the action. One bear in particular made straight for our position, a mother with two spring cubs following behind. Her body language indicated that she was totally cool with us; the problem was the cubs, who could create havoc in an instant. The female passed us closeby and walked some 200 ft beyond us before turning to watch the cubs. As they walked steadily towards us I limited my shooting to only essential shots as my 1DS MKII had a small buffer and this too unique an encounter to run out at the wrong moment. In a few seconds the cubs were too close for me to photograph and now the time for photography was over, it was a tense moment. They stood 8 feet (we measured it afterwards) from us, staring at us with inquisitive eyes and wanting to come over and take a look at these strange creatures on the shore. That would have been the end of it for us as the female would have perceived it as a threat so our guide Kevin coolly talked to them and persuaded them that we were actually quite boring! Everyone froze and tried to appear as boring as possible; after what seemed like an eternity the cubs moved off and followed their mother towards the rapidly approaching sea leaving some very elated photographers behind. It was truly an awesome encounter; the bears had set their distance and had tolerated us on their terms. The memory of that cub staring down my viewfinder will be one that stays with me forever and next year I'll be back to get some more wonderful memories of the bears.

Until next time...

AR-NPN 1153



Andy Rouse is a professional wildlife photographer based in the U.K. His professional credits include hosting the Discovery Channel's Wildlife Photographer TV series, and the publication of six books, including his soon-to-be-released [The DSLR Masterclass](#). Andy's images are represented by NHPA and Getty Images and are sold worldwide. To learn more about Andy, check out his [NPN bio](#). To view more of Andy's work, visit his website at www.andyrouse.co.uk.