

ALASKA ADVENTURE July 2012

By Audrey J. Lambert

Mike and I have been considering Alaska as a new adventure destination for a long time. Mike found a trip he thought would allow us the best opportunity to discover the wilds of Alaska. The trip he found was called Polar Bears and Wildflowers, Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska lead by a so called professional photographer named Mark Lissick. If you were to see the photos and read the itinerary offered on his website you would forget the price and concentrate on the photo opportunities and professional guidance available on this trip.

Our group met in Fairbanks, AK, and had a brief orientation about the wonderful things we would see on Barter Island and the safety of viewing and photographing up close and personal polar bears with relative ease and safety. After a short flight, approximately one hour, to Barter Island, in a small plane that held only our group members and the weight of expensive cameras and gear brought by the group, took flight. We were all expecting to be in cold weather but having so many bears to capture on film that was the least of our concerns....the energy vibes ran on a high note by all.

Barter Island is an island located on the Arctic coast of the U. S. state of Alaska east of Arey Island in the Beaufort Sea. It is about four miles (6 km) long and about two miles (3 km) wide at its widest point. Kaktovik is located on Barter Island, 90 miles west of the Canadian border and 310 miles southeast of Barrow. The village is on the northern edge of the 20.3 million acre Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The community incorporated as a second class city in 1971.

In 1993, there were approximately 230 residents in Kaktovik and a labor force of 128. Nearly 83 percent of residents are Inupiat Eskimos. Nearly half of the residents are employed by the North Slope Borough. Other employers include the City of Kaktovik, Village Corporations, State and Federal agencies, School District and private sectors.

Like other communities in the region, subsistence hunting and fishing play a major role in the local economy. Hunting in the nearby area is for Dall sheep, moose, caribou and fox. Three times a year the natives are allowed to hunt for whales.

Our first day we were met at the airport by Mike from the Marsh Creek Inn nestled in the village of Kaktovik. This is a place where clean rooms and good food can be found whether your stay is for one night or one month. We had three meals a day cooked by Mike and his helper Dan. Without the smiles and friendly conversations with Mike and some locals our stay would have been unbearable. It did not take much time to find out that our dream of polar bears and the emergence of the tundra wildflowers was not going to happen.

Our loyal leader had not done his homework and we were too early for the polar bears and too late for the emergence of the tundra wildflowers. Here and there were some groups of wildflowers holding on at the last of their season. The weather was warm and

hiking would have been a dream...but it seemed that the locals that our leader Mike Lissick had hired were not to be found. It seemed that they had other plans than to play around with a group of photographers looking for wildlife. It seemed that the wildlife had the same ideas. After unorganized trips out on the tundra (some that Mike and I did on our own) we did manage to see Snowy Owls and a few molting Caribou. Mike was lucky to see and get a photo of an Arctic Fox that jumped out of the grass as he was trying to get a shot of a Snowy Owl nearby. We did see a few birds and ducks on the island but without a field guide we had a time identifying them. The lagoons we were suppose to take a boat ride to was cancelled due to the fact that the birds no longer nested on the island...another miss calculation by our tour guide.

We were to be on Barter Island with the opportunity of photographing polar bears from ground level in the field for four full days. As you can tell by now this was not going to happen. We tried to entertain ourselves by going for a walk through town. The town was not that big and except for the trailer type living quarters of the locals the only places to visit was the post office, a small store, a nice school for the children and a community center. We found joy in speaking to the postmaster named Dave he said he had been the postmaster for the last 15 years and was the first to operate out of the new building that he had requested the postal service to build as the old one (which was just a double trailer) was not adequate. Dave was so funny to listen to as he told us one story after another about living on Barter Island. He told us that he was kept quite busy as postmaster, clerk and everything else in his tiny office as the locals ordered tons of food and soda pop from the mainland and other supplies. Dave was a short little man with round spectacles, bushy beard and a wide smile. He wore a t-shirt with a funny verse on the front. He told us about floating around in the Beaufort Sea in his inner tube and taking a nap, his tube drifting near the shoreline....when he opened his eyes a very large male caribou was staring at him inches from his tube.... the caribou was wondering what kind of critter he might be. Dave said one time he made the mistake of seeing a mound in the tundra that looked like dirt and grass and got very near to it when the mound stood up and he realized it was a grizzly bear. He quietly backed off. Mike and I then went to peek in the school and the library which was a very nice building with lots of books and educational rooms and a gym for the children. Pictures of polar bears hanging on the wall. Our last stop was the community center where the locals had just finished having a rummage sale and cake walk. The prizes from the cake walk was donuts, cakes and cookies. It was set up just like the cake walks held down south in Tennessee that I had seen. The locals were quite nice and loved to show us their pictures of polar bears on their iPads. A local film maker told us that we were too early to view the polar bearscome back in September or October and he would show us around. He said at that time the locals hunt the whales and bring them to shore to process. I purchased one of his polar bear CD and Mike and I watched it at the lodge one afternoon.

Mike and I walked all around the shore line looking for birds and animals. We went to visit (2) local graveyards and found stray wildflowers here and there. When we got back our dazed and confused leader said that we were going out on the sea to photo icebergs and to spot polar bears. We were suppose to have (2) boats for the 9 people on board but we only had (1). Seems the other guides were not to be found or left the island. Our

groups took turns and we went for the boat ride. We were surprised to find there were no life jackets for anyone. It turned out that the next few days since the polar bears did not come to shore that we were going to take the boat out looking for them ourselves. The first boat ride was a new adventure for us and the ride was very enjoyable even though it was a bit chilly at times. We saw some loons on the water and a few seals. The best spots was viewing the ice flows and icebergs. Some of the icebergs were brilliant blue others had unusual shapes. We passed the bone yard at the back of the airport where the locals throw the bones of the whales for the polar bears that come to shore. We would visit this spot frequently in hopes that a polar bear might wander in to check for scraps of food.

Can't say we did much else but a few boats rides and a few on land rides looking for wildlife that did not appear to be around. I finished a very lengthy book called "Night Circus" and snacked on cheetos and sugar cookies waiting for the next main meal. Kaktovik is a dry village in which the sale and possession of alcoholic beverages are prohibited so a cocktail was out of the question. It never got dark so you could roam around all night if you wanted to. We had (1) Power Point photo lecture given by our leader to act like he was educating us on how to take pictures. I had a new camera with me and expected him to at least look at it and give me guidance and photo tips but he did not provide that service to me. He never even looked at the photos Mike and I were taking and downloading on our computer. Too say the least it was a lost week, with little to show for the price and time spent on this adventure. We could not wait to leave and the group was feeling the same. Our leader tried to act like nothing was the matter the whole time and disappeared for hours (scouting) he called it, leaving us to melt into the furniture in the small lounge. The day finally came when we were to leave...the locals were wondering the whole time what we were doing there and why we came in July. Two group members were going separate ways...one to go on another Alaska adventure with some friends and another to go home. One member was suppose to go home but after such disappointment of not seeing any polar bears and getting only a few shots of other wildlife or flowers wanted to join us on the brown bear extension...so she was included on the extension.

We were hoping that the extension was going to work in our favor. We flew to Fairbanks and stayed at the Wedgewood Resort where he had stayed our first night. It had been raining when we were here at last time and it was sunny now. The resort had a few hiking trails and one went to Wander Lake. We put on our hiking shoes and took the trail to the lake and saw lots of birds and ducks and was happy to see and take photos of a big beaver swimming in the lake. Our group dinner was good and everyone had a glass of wine or a beer. No big tales were told at dinner about the polar bears ...it was a mystery about what to expect on the extension. All that was said by Mark Lissick was for the remaining group to meet at the Super 8 motel in Anchorage.

Mike and I had some time before dinner so we took a taxi to downtown Anchorage and did some shopping and looking around. It was a nice sunny day and downtown was bustling with people. We ate at a restaurant called the "Rum Runner" and I had a big plate of the best clam strips, best I had ever tasted and Mike ordered a few local beers and

a good halibut sandwich. We went back to the motel to meet our group for dinner in Anchorage. A new person had joined our group and we welcomed him but when he asked about the polar bear trip he was told it did not go well and we would tell him later.

The next day the extension began and we went to an area where lots of small float planes and other small aircraft were. We had two planes waiting for us and we got into one and off we went...with images of brown bears floating in our brains. We flew over some very beautiful areas. Lots of snowcapped mountains and green forest as far as the eye could see. We wore headsets to keep the noise of the plane down. After about an hour we landed on the beach shoreline. Our destination was Silver Salmon Creek Lodge where we were staying for a few days. The lodge is located in the Lake Clark National Park and Preserve area. This is bear country paradise. I picked a pretty nice room with a view of the tundra and Cook Inlet. As soon as we got into our room a female bear wandered into the yard and walked right past our cabin. The beds were comfortable, we had a kitchen with a stove so I could heat up water for tea. We did have to share the bathroom but it worked out OK. It was sunny at times but it turned to rain quickly and could get cool on the beach so we dressed in layers and wore our rain gear. Dave was the lodge's guide that took us out for the photo shoots. We would be towed by an ATV that had two trailers with seats that we rode in to get to the bears. We went out early in the morning when the tide was out and got up close to the bears that were clam-digging. One time two bears were near each other, one clamming the other hoping for a leftover when the one bear clamming turned and challenged the other bear that was too close to him. We watched the bears clamming some better than others...some bears just didn't learn enough from their mother and never got a clam. The bears would dig in the muck all the way up to their shoulder sometimes to get the clam, push it with their big paw and slide the shell open and slurp up the meat. When the bears were not clamming at low tide they could be found in the rich grass fields, grazing like cattle. Their other sources of food are berries and fish. I did not see any berries and the bears favorite food, salmon, were not running on the river when we were there.

Our hearts were beating fast....there are bears here!!! Lots of them! Blonde bears and dark brown bears.... many of them losing their thick winter coats. Eagles were flying around in the clear blue skies....you could hear their screeches for miles. There could be as many as (8) bears grazing in the fields at one time.....others spotted heading for the beach. We would jump in the trailers and head off to find them when the bear we were photographing would take a nap. It was hot at times for the bears so they would go down to the river and flop their bodies in the shallow river and push their noses in the mud to cool down their bodies and protect their faces from the mosquitoes. Sometimes you would see the bears start to run, either they were fleeing from another bear or had a date at the donut shop. We were supposed to go on a boat ride to view colonies of horned and tufted puffins on a nearby island, but we did not go. In the morning the weather was too rough for the boat but later it was OK but our guide chose to track the mother bear and cubs we saw the day before instead.

The mother bear and her (3) cubs had just left their mountain den and descended to graze on the grass fields. It is special photo opts at this time and everyone, even the lodge staff

are excited to experience the event. Every group takes turns to view the mother bear and cubs. The park ranger is close by to watch the groups to make sure the mother and cubs are not being bothered by the groups. It is important not to disturb the bears daily lives. The bears are so use to people that they can walk past you about an arms length. Give them the right of way and know who is boss is the rule, never run from them. It was quite the experience to be so close to the bears that you could hear them breathing, crunching the grass and slurping the clams. The day we saw the mother bear and cubs the cubs were nestled so deep in the mother's long fur that you could not see them. Our group waited patiently for the mother to get up so we could see the cubs. She finally got up to relieve herself and there were the cubs. "Oh my God" I found myself saying quietly out loud and raised my camera to get a shot. It was quick and sudden and the cubs ran back to their mother and down she went again and the cubs were hidden. We had to get back to the lodge for dinner and did not want to disturb the mother bear anymore so we left. As we crossed the river our guide stopped one more time on the other side and we walked to the edge. Just in time I got one of my special pictures of the trip. One of the cubs was sitting right in front of her mother and I got them both in my photo. The next day we had more time with the mother and cubs and between Mike and I we got some great shots. The mother was busy grazing and the cubs were getting into all kinds of trouble. One was playing with a rock, turning it over and over and then the (3) cubs started playing with each other and climbing on a log and chewing the wood. Sometimes the cubs would try eating some grass and getting a drink out of a puddle. Whenever a plane flew over they would stand up on their hind legs and look up at the sky. Mom was not far off eating grass but would look around every few minutes to see what the cubs were doing. If another bear came in the area she knew it and she would call her cubs and they would leave to hide in tall grass.

I opted to stay at my cabin one afternoon after a wet cold morning hike and took a much needed nap in my nice warm bed. Mike went with the group and got to see the mother nursing her cubs. There were special times when the bears would stand on their hind legs or swim in the water when the camera shutters never stopped. One day a bear in the water found a rope that was tied to the shore and pulled and bit it for 15 minutes...he must of thought it was a net full of fish. His huge claws and teeth were glistening in the sun. His body mass was huge and powerful. You got so engrossed watching him that you forgot how close you were and then another bear would suddenly appear right behind you. As long as the group stayed tight and did what the lodge guide told you to do you felt quite safe.

The main lodge was quite nice with its pot bellied wood burning stove in the sitting room...bears wandering in the front yard. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were served family style and we enjoyed gourmet eating the entire time....we never went hungry. The lodge had a nice outdoors balcony that overlooked the fields. One sunny day Mike and I sat in two lawn chairs and enjoyed the view.

It was time to leave the lodge and fly back to Anchorage. We had a very good time viewing the brown bears.

Back at Anchorage we stayed again at the Super 8 motel... and again we got a taxi to go downtown. We went back to the Rum Runner and got more clam strips and Mike got beer. I read about the Anchorage museum and we decided to go there and have a look. It was a very nice museum that housed many native crafts and explained the different tribes' customs, dress and ways of life.

Our next adventure stop was Juneau. We arrived in the early afternoon and took a shuttle downtown to do some shopping and looking around. Big black Ravens were muttering in the trees, others in pairs flying straight up like a rocket into the sky and then to turn and death dive together back to earth. Three huge cruise ships were in the port. Cruise guests lined the sidewalks. Robert's tram could be seen in the distant taking customers up and down the mountain side. Our shuttle driver suddenly stopped by the bay and pointed out huge flocks of sea birds diving into the water. The salmon were sprawling and the birds were eating their eggs. Down the road was the Macaulay salmon hatchery, the shuttle made a stop. We all piled out. The salmon swimming in the creek were corralled into a manmade steel fish ladder with numerous gates. The salmon thought they were swimming up stream as nature intended but were now captured in this life ending factory. This factory hatches salmon eggs and then releases them so that the salmon go off to their hunting grounds for (3) years and then come back all fat and grown up just to get harvested on their way back. We watched as the salmon went though the gates to a point where some men were stationed, a song by "Cream" was blasting out the speakers. One man with a long white beard, wearing a floppy hat and full length apron grabbed the wiggling salmon and whacked it with a metal rod stunning it, another younger man grabbed the fish and plunged his knife in part of the fish. Another man grabbed a salmon and aimed at it at one of two buckets near by...one we thought was for the salmon eggs and one bucket for the salmon sperm. The man would milk the fish and a stream of eggs or sperm squirt out. Our shuttle driver told us that the salmon were harvested and used to make fish oil and the rest of the fish was used for making fertilizer.

We left downtown and got the shuttle back to our hotel. We were staying at Best Western's Grandma's Feather Bed. Mike had read it was a very nice place to stay and we needed it at the end of our trip. It turned out to be the best place I had stayed in quite a while. The rooms were decorated in white wood and flowered wallpaper, it had a great big Jacuzzi tub, baskets of towels and a nice soft feather bed. We had a fridge with Bombay Sapphire Gin chilling. We ate breakfast, and two dinners at this place and every meal was wonderful...our young waiter was so polite with a killer smile. Mike had Dungeness crab one night, he looked up on the internet how to eat Dungeness crab so he could have the knowledge to get every bite just right. I had halibut one night and a chicken dish the next...both so good. One of our adventures was with Alpine Zipline Adventures. It was a zip line in the deep of a rain forest miles from downtown. It proved to be exciting...not quite as scary as we thought but nice enough. The best part was the longest zip line and going backwards.

Our last day was our whale watching trip with Harv & Marv's. We had a really nice big boat with big windows and back and front standing viewing. The captain went out looking for a good whale spot. When the spot was not reaping enough action we went

on. He found a spot that had lots of humpback whales. Sometimes (3) humpbacks would be sprouting in a group and the water would be blowing high up in the sky. Once one breached but I missed it. When it was whale tail time I got my camera ready and got some good shots. Mike got a lot of great shots....people on the boat were giving him their e-mails to get the photos he took of the whales. Eagles flew by the boat....a group of seals were cramming for space on a buoy. We were told that Orcas are sometimes seen but not always. Today was our lucky day for the Orcas. After immensely enjoying the humpback whales...the captain left the area. Orcas were spotted ahead. We saw (4) other whale watching boats in the area...must be something going on. It was! A pod of transient Orcas were hunting a seal and they were right on top of it. The action continued... the excitement of the customers on the boat was in full frenzy. Cameras were active, voices were loud, some were saying "Oh I hope the seal gets away", others were cheering for the Orcas. Water was splashing, we would see the seal's head a few times, the Orcas surrounding him, fins showing, sometimes the body of the Orca. It was a fast kill once the seal could not escape the pod it was killed....the water turned pink we saw the Orcas swimming away, the kill was over. Everyone was excited that they saw nature in action...not all were happy about the outcome. The boats all separated and we left.

Our shuttle driver was a very nice man and he took us to the Mendenhall Glacier. We had seen the Herbert Glacier at a distance from the boat. We had 20 minutes at the Mendenhall Glacier, just enough time to hike close to it and see a beautiful glacier waterfall next to the blue ice glacier. There was a rumor that a black bear was near the visitor's center and a few people in our group went to see.... but the bear was hidden by bush so no pictures were taken. I had my fill of bears so the glacier was my designation. I was left in the dust by Mike as he rushed to the best photo area for the glacier. I was not far behind, my rain pants falling off my hips as I ran.... I quickly hiked them up and took off. Got a few shots and we raced back to the shuttle. Got back to Grandma's Feather Bed and popped into the hot tub with a tasty icy cold root beer and mini chocolate Musketeers bars I got from the lobby goodie basket.... I was in heaven.

Adventures over...good and bad....off for home...and I am glad.
Maybe someday we will return to Alaska and find...
that polar bear we had in our mind.

We hope mother bear and the cubs are fine...
and the eagles are still resting in the pines.

May the oceans stay deep and strong...
so the whales and seals have a home.

Alaska still holds some of the last frontier...
someday we hope to return and behold the polar bear.

Till that time:

Audrey & Mike Lambert's Alaska Adventure 2012