



BY SEAN CRANE

THE FRIED CHICKEN INCIDENT

A TALE OF COURAGE IN THE FACE OF FEAR

DISCOVERY IN A FAR OFF LAND

AND GREASE IN A BUCKET OF WINGS

The fried chicken incident seems amusing to me now, but at the time I was furious. I had been on the road for two months and I was finally at my only true destination. The one must see. The reason — if I had to come up with one — for packing up the car and setting out across America. In a summer of aimless wondering, Denali National Park in Alaska was the closest thing I had to an agenda.

From all that I had read, I was expecting an Eden of verdant mountains, gushing waterfalls, azure glaciers and, most importantly, abundant wildlife: Bears, wolves, moose, wolverine, fox, golden and bald eagles, caribou, you name it, a virtual who's who of North American wildlife. Day one in the park I realized that only three fourths of my expectations would be met. The mountains, waterfalls and glaciers were certainly there, the wildlife was not.

I had read somewhere that Denali is the Serengeti of the Americas. Well, I've been to the Serengeti and that's like saying John Stamos is the Marlon Brando of television. Now, don't get me wrong, all the aforementioned animals do exist within the park, but seeing what appears to be a beige rock a mile off and being told it's a grizzly just isn't the same as being told to pull your hands inside the van before the lion bites them off. A rare animal in the Serengeti is a leopard. There might be only four sightings in a day. A rare animal in Denali is a wolverine. There might be only four sightings in a decade. The plus side is that in Denali when you do see

an animal up close (and when I say up close I mean you can see the glint in its eyeball) it's all the more exciting.

I remember the end of my seven-day Tanzanian safari when the driver let me know about a group of lionesses up on the left about to ambush an antelope. I barely looked up and wanted to know if he could back

up so that I could get a better look at the finch I saw in the bushes. Lions, elephants and giraffes were a dime a dozen, this particular bird I hadn't seen before. It's kind of like seeing a half naked woman (or man, if you prefer) on the beach and thinking, "oh, that's nice, another half naked woman on the beach," but see that same half naked woman in the frozen foods section of your local grocery store, now there's something to get excited about. In the Serengeti, a lion is the woman on the beach. In Denali, a grizzly is the woman stuffing a package of Van de Kamp's frozen fish fillets into her hand basket. This, I was not willing to pass up. I didn't exactly conquer my fear of hiking in grizzly country, but I was able to temporarily cast it aside, and decided that I needed to get out into the backwoods of Denali to see one of these beasts.

A little background on Denali is necessary to understand the importance of hiking in the park and why a roadside spotting wasn't going to do it for me. The

park itself is a massive 6.1 million acres, but only one road penetrates its borders. The road is 89 miles long and unpaved for all but the first 15. The 15-mile mark is not only the end of the pavement, but also the turnaround point for all passenger vehicles. To go further into the park, you must reserve a seat on one of the park service's shuttles. The shuttles themselves are nothing more than converted school buses, painted a fresh coat of green and white and equipped with metal rafters above the seats to stash your belongings while in transit. The no-car policy is the park service's way of keeping Denali from turning into another Yellowstone/Yosemite wildlife theme park. On the one hand, I think it's a great policy as it insulates the park from the destructive force of the human virus. On the other hand, however, I'm part of that virus. I drove to Alaska to view and photograph animals. Doing so from the window seat of a crowded school bus wasn't exactly what I had in mind. For one thing, the mass of fellow passengers reduces the ex-

perience to a zoo-like atmosphere. Furthermore, the movement in the bus and lack of an area to put a tripod makes it all but impossible to use a longer focal length lens (chances of a bear being on the side of the road, ten feet from the bus, weren't likely).

If park regulations didn't prohibit the driver from letting passengers off the bus within several miles of a bear, I'd have been satisfied to hop off for five minutes with my 600 mm lens, teleconverter and tripod, take a few shots and then hop back on. It's not like I wanted to shake hands with *ursus horribilis*, I just wanted to be close enough so that 840mm of high quality optics would make it look like I did.

On the up side of park policy, as long as there's no bear in sight, you can get off the bus wherever you want. When you're done hiking, just flag down the next available bus. Apparently, less than 5% of all park visitors actually get off the bus for anything more than a trip to the shockingly clean restrooms stationed every hour along the road. I was determined to buck the trend. I didn't drive 5000 miles to see a beige rock. If the only way to see the glint in the eye was to set out on foot, then that's what I was going to do. Well, maybe I didn't need to see the glint, but I certainly wanted to get close enough so that I could see that the rock had fur.

I had done all my homework. I knew the bears were most likely to be somewhere between the Tolklut River and the Eilson Visitor's Center. I knew that at this time of year they were most likely halfway up the mountainsides in open grassland. This being the case, I also knew that they could

be anywhere at anytime in the park and that the most important thing was to not sneak up on them. It's not a hungry bear you should fear, it's a startled bear. The proper procedure here was fairly logical — make lots of noise while hiking to alert them of your presence. I knew that if I did happen to encounter a bear, I should wave my hands in the air to let it know I was a weak defenseless human. (Apparently, they shy away from weak, defenseless humans, preferring the ferocity of, say, a moose.) I knew that eye contact was bad and running was worse. I knew to stand my ground should the bear charge. This one I wasn't quite sure about. They say that most charges are bluffs and the bear stops just short, but what if the bear happens to have a depth perception problem? Hey, could happen, and you're just supposed to stand there? Not that it really mattered either way as I would probably freeze up like that guy in Saving Private Ryan who was paralyzed by fear as he cowered in the stairwell. Eventually he found his nerve, but then again we are talking about Spielberg. If I lost my nerve, finding it again wouldn't be so easy. I guess you never really know how you'd react until the situation arises. The point is, I was well informed.

Of course, there's being well informed and then there's being too well informed. After reading about the bear that took fourteen gunshots to the chest before decapitating the shooter, I realized that I was drifting into the camp of the latter. Enough was enough. Way back in Cary, North Carolina I had purchased a canister of bear spray from REI. It was advertised as "grizzly tough." I had been carrying it with me ever since, going so far as to smuggle it across the Canadian border (they don't allow a certain kind to be



OPENING SPREAD: A brown bear surfaces after fishing for Salmon.

ABOVE: A porcupine forages in Denali National Park.

BELOW LEFT: A trail-less wilderness, in Denali, you're free to hike wherever your heart desires.

BEAR: Nikon F100, Nikon 600 f/5.6, Fuji Provia Film.

PORCUPINE: Nikon F100, Nikkor 80-200 f/2.8, Fuji Provia Film.

LANDSCAPE: Nikon F100, Nikkor 17-35 f/2.8, Fuji Provia Film.

brought into the country — apparently the kind that's "grizzly tough"). I had naively thought that as long as I had the spray I was safe. Then I find out that you can't kill these things with an AK-47 and I think I can kick its ass with mace. Mace couldn't even take down Johnny Knoxville in that episode of Jackass. Like I said I was getting dangerously close to informing myself out of even setting foot on Alaskan soil.

For every horror story, however, there's the opposite in the form of positive reinforcement. I had also read, for instance, that no human has ever been killed by a grizzly in Denali. Compare that figure to ten in Glacier National Park in Montana where there are a lot less bears, and things start looking downright rosy. The Denali bears seem to be some sort of docile strain.

I wouldn't go so far as to call them congenial — there have been encounters, even attacks, but no deaths. The reported attacks all seem to occur when the human doesn't follow the proper protocol by either running (which is basically saying to the bear, "hey there, here I am, dinner, and I taste really good, my thighs being especially succulent tonight,") or by sneaking up and surprising the bear, especially a sow with cubs. I knew better. I surely wasn't going to be the first fatality. I conveniently decided to ignore the "we don't recommend hiking alone" warning on all the park's literature.

"Up ahead is the Tolklut River," announced the driver slash tour guide. My time had come. I reached into my pocket and felt for the "grizzly tough" spray. Still there. I got up to grab



my backpack and tripod from the metal rafters when all of a sudden someone shouted “Stop. Bear” and pointed out his left side window. Immediately the entire right side of the bus lurched over to the left, invading the already too-small seating area of the lefties. If we were a ship we would have capsized due to improper weight distribution. “Where, where?” the rest of the bus frantically exclaimed. “See it thar, like a blonde rock? I think it’s a bhar.” After the rock shifted slightly, the driver confirmed that it was, in fact, a living creature.

With tourists pressing in on me from all sides I wanted off with a vengeance. The cameras began snapping — those disposable instamatics no less. I’m thinking what in the name of god are you taking pictures of, a beige dot amidst a green field. It’ll look like dust was on the lens. To make matters even more ridiculous, these people were using flash. The bear’s a good half a mile out and they think a flash with a ten foot range is going to bring out the highlights in its complexion. The guy behind me, the one who spotted the bear, turns to his wife and says, “Boy, that thar is a beautiful creature. I’d love to pump a few bullets into her turso.” I sat quietly, deciding to tough it out until the Eilson

Visitor’s Center, get off there and hike back toward the Tolklat. Eilson was the turn around point for the bus that I was on and slightly more than the standard rest stop. It was at Eilson that most people had their picnic lunch before re-boarding. I figured I’d eat my lunch and lighten my pack a bit before setting out. More importantly, this would give me the opportunity to eliminate any bear attracting odors.

We were about three miles from Eilson when it happened—the fried chicken incident.

The bear killer and his wife had packed about ten pieces of fried chicken into a flimsy plastic bag, which they conveniently stashed just over my head. Sixty miles of bumpy dirt road later the bag finally had had enough and the Colonel’s best began pelting me about the head and shoulders. A particularly large breast even crashed into the camera I was loading, leaving an equally large grease spot in its wake. I was in disbelief as the wife scrambled to retrieve the five or so pieces of chicken that had ended up, among other places, in my lap. There were no apologies. Nothing. She actually seemed genuinely pissed off at me for getting lint on her lunch. What did she care that she had just covered me in a savory marinade.

As we pulled into the parking area, visions of my own decapitation ran through my head — and that’s when the futile paradox of my mission finally set in. I was about to walk through the wilderness in search of bears, while at the same time, doing everything possible so as not to see them. If I succeeded I failed. If I failed I succeeded.

The bus was now empty. Alone, I opened my lunch, attached the 600 mm lens to my camera, and scanned the horizon for the close approach of a bear. Who knew, after all, I wasn’t just throwing out random analogies, I did actually once see a half naked woman shopping in the frozen foods section of a supermarket.

(I did eventually hike that day in Denali, and each of the next four days. Other than the white spots, which were sheep high up on the mountains, the only wildlife I saw while hiking was a porcupine and a marmot. Four days later I bit the bullet and laid out \$500 to take a float plane to Katmai National Park where the salmon run was on. There I viewed and photographed grizzlies that were as close as ten feet in front of me [from the safety, of course, of a viewing platform]. As they gorged on the spawning salmon, I could see more than just the glint in their eyes, I could see the reflections on the glint. I was happy.)

For more of Sean Crane’s wildlife photography, go to www.seancrane.com

LEFT: An inquisitive marmot wondering why this strange man is hiking alone in grizzly bear territory. RIGHT: At Katmai National Park, photographing bears is easy from the safety of a raised platform.

MARMOT: Nikon F100, Nikon 600 f/5.6, Fuji Provia Film.
BEAR: Nikon F100, Nikon 600 f/5.6, Fuji Provia Film.

