

# North to Alaska

by Francine West and Jo Gilbreath

Alaska, the 49th state in the union, is 1/5 the size of the entire United States and 2-1/2 times larger than the state of Texas.

It was purchased from Russia in 1867 for \$7.2 million by Secretary of State William H. Seward, which breaks down to about 2¢ per acre.

17 of the 20 highest mountains in North America, with Mt. McKinley being the tallest at 20,320 ft., are located in Alaska.

Glaciers of every size and shape, bald eagles, salmon, whales, Stellar sea lions, sea otters, moose, grizzly bears, black bears, and birds are just a very few of the magnificent sights you will find in Alaska.

Leaving Anchorage following Seward Highway south the buildings quickly fade away to

After staying at Turnagain Arm for a while taking pictures we head on to the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Preserve, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving Alaska's wildlife through conservation, education and quality animal care. It is located half-way between Anchorage and Seward at mile 79. There are caribou, moose, black bears, bison, coyotes, elk, deer, muskoxen and Hue, the grizzly bear. Hue was rescued from the wild when she was very young. AWCC found her with all four paws completely filled with porcupine needles, she was dehydrated and weak from lack of food. Couldn't tell it now! She is BIG!

Off to the gift shop to purchase souvenirs, hoodies and gloves. Finally, we are freezing!

The small coastal town of



by Jo Gilbreath



Moose at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Preserve. by Francine West

majestic mountains, glaciers, waterfalls and wildlife.

Traveling in Alaska is different than anywhere else. Laws are in place to protect the "working" people. It is against the law to allow five or more vehicles to be delayed behind you because you are going too slow. You must pull over and allow traffic to continue on.

June 17: First stop is the Turnagain Arm pullout.

Grab the camera's and out of the vehicle we go. Wow, it's COLD! (remember it is the middle of June; it is supposed to be warm.) Mountains, waterfalls, birds and ocean shoreline greet us. The sounds and

Seward is known for its scenic views, and as the gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park. Seward is located about 125 miles south of Anchorage, about 3 hours by road.

We arrive at the Seward Windsong Lodge which is located on the edge of town in a secluded setting. There are 180 guest rooms, Resurrection Roadhouse restaurant, lounge and meeting facilities all connected together by paved trails that wind their way through wildflowers, ferns and spruce trees, the natural beauty of a temperate rain forest.

Resurrection Roadhouse restaurant features Alaskan

A wonderful temperature drop as we get closer to the glacier.

BEAR! BEAR! Bear on the trail! Okay now we are talking, maybe this hike was worth it after all, we get a bonus! AWESOME! Yes, sir, it was thrilling to be that close to a huge black bear in a little tree.

June 18: Up and dressed in layers, ready to go! The first

any seasick medicine now before we leave the dock. Weatherman is calling for 4' to 5' swells. Oh Boy!

First animal sighting of the day, a sea otter, an endangered species in western Alaska. It is the smallest marine mammal and the largest member of the weasel family. They have up to a million hairs per square

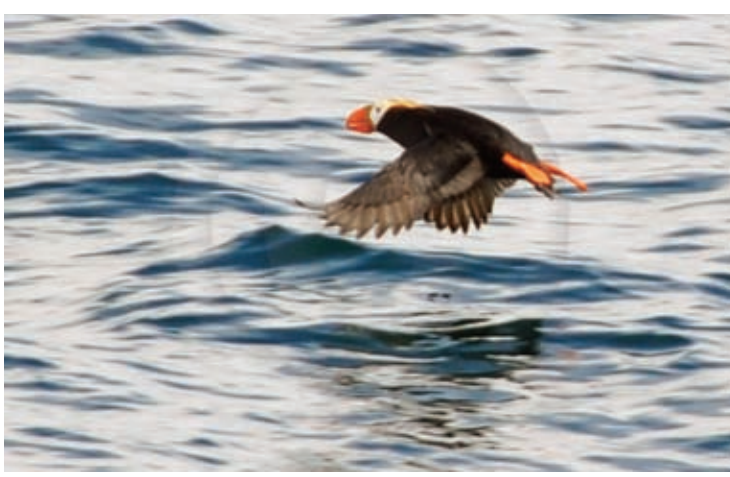
course the wonderful bald eagle, the symbol of our country, are just a few of the birds we saw.

Steller sea lions, an endangered species, hunt nocturnally and haul out to rest during the day, sunning on rocks and cliffs.

Amongst all the wonderful wildlife came Aialik glacier, the largest tidewater glacier in the national park.

The most stunning color of blue you will ever behold, and the echo of the huge pieces of ice calving into the water is a sound of wonder. The temperature drops at least 10 degrees as you draw closer to the glaciers.

Leaving the glaciers and heading to Fox Island, only accessible by water, we had the unexpected pleasure to see the rare fin whale; magnificent



Puffin in flight. by Jo Gilbreath

sight of the day, clouds, and rain!

To the lobby by 7:00 to take the complimentary shuttle to catch the scenic wildlife and glacier cruise with Kenai Fjords Tours.

Captain informs us to take

inch! The Sea Otter lives its entire life in the ocean.

Next we see, humpback whales that are approximately 56 ft. long and weigh 90,000 pounds, playing in the ocean, the young often like to perform with headstands and tail flips, called "the fluke" for the tourists.

Looking toward the cliffs you see black-legged kittiwakes, nesting and breeding in large colonies on the sheerest of south-facing vertical cliffs which protect the eggs and young from predators.

Sharing the same cliffs are colorful tufted and horned puffins, they propel themselves through the water with their wings and use their feet as rudders. The puffins only come to land to nest. Both the tufted and horned puffins dive depths have been estimated at 250'.

Black oyster catchers (by the way, that is a bird), common murre, cormorants and of



Black bear on the Exit Glacier trail. by Francine West



Sea Otter by Jo Gilbreath

crisp air make you feel alive and vibrant.

Chugach State Park's 3000-foot mountains jut up on your left. On the right, the sprawling, sometimes four-mile-wide flats of Turnagain Arm seem to stretch like a plain to the opposite shores of Cook Inlet, where mammoth sloping mountains abruptly stop their flat expanse. Each turn reveals another scenic wonder.

specialties fresh seafood, hamburgers, pizza, and more. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are served, all with a spectacular view of the Resurrection River valley.

Next, off to a guided tour of Exit Glacier, the only glacier in Kenai Fjords National Park accessible by road, we hike 1.5 miles round trip to see the glacier. (they really meant 1.5 miles, up hill, both ways!)



Harbor seals by Francine West



Seward Windsong Lodge guest rooms. by Jo Gilbreath



# The last frontier



Nesting black-legged kittiwakes. *by Jo Gilbreath*

fish swimming below the boat. Salmon fishing boats are abundant in this part of the ocean, laying out their nets and just waiting to make the haul of the day.

Cruising through narrow Esther Passage is a waterway only small ships can navigate. Playful sea otters live here, often floating placidly on their backs in a bed of kelp, dining on shellfish.

Glaciers, glaciers and more glaciers. They are everywhere. We are traveling through Harriman Fjord and Barry Arm heading for the majestic Surprise Glacier.

**WOW!**

The most popular is undoubtedly the Surprise glacier, just for the rumbling, eery noises that emanate from it. Bits of ice break off and drop spectacularly into the sea in front of you. The floes that result can exist as ice for days



Baby humpback whale doing a headstand. *by Jo Gilbreath*

animal. Arriving at Fox Island, an all-you-can-eat dinner buffet was ready, included salmon, prime rib and Alaska king

and longest combined rail and highway tunnel in North America.

It is the first U.S. tunnel with jet turbine and portal fan



Sea lion going in for a swim. *by Jo Gilbreath*

row is another day.

June 20: Time to head to Denali State Park to see the highest mountain in North America, Mt. McKinley.

it's trying to rain. OK, so off to the gift shops to look around. Sure wish we would have chartered a plane, instead.

Leaving Denali State Park,

spend the night.

Set on a ridge above the small community of Talkeetna on the south side of Mt. McKinley, the lodge offers unforgettable views of Mt. McKinley and the Alaska Range. The lodge is constructed from natural woods and spruce timbers, has a 46-foot river rock fireplace in the grand lobby and the most spectacular views of Mt. McKinley.

We arrive late, about 10 p.m. but the sun is still up so we can grab our cameras and take a few shots before dark. The clouds are still hanging low so you still can't see Mt. McKinley's peak.

So we go back to the room and grab a cup of coffee, and decide to try again, back to the viewing deck. Clouds are breaking! It has been only a few minutes ago that you couldn't even see the peak, now slowly but surely as the sun begins to set, the very tip of the peak begins to show. Pictures, pictures and more pictures. I am beginning to get a little tired. But the sun is still up, so it can't be late. WRONG! It is 3:00 a.m. and we are still outside taking pictures of the sunset behind Mt. McKinley. Guess that is what they call "summer solstice".

June 21: Return to Anchorage to begin packing for the return trip home. The trip was exciting and adventurous, and we will go back soon! We didn't have time to see all the wonderful things Alaska has to offer.



Flying bald eagle. *by Jo Gilbreath*

After talking to the locals, they assure us it is only a hop, skip and a jump to Denali.

Are we there yet? Six hours later we arrive at Denali State Park. Finally!

Clouds hang low and you can't see Mt. McKinley. Now

you will never guess what was in the road, the first moose in the wild we have seen since being in Alaska. (We drove around Anchorage for 2 hours trying to find one.)

On to Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge were we are going to



*by Francine West*

ventilation and computerized regulation of both rail and highway traffic. The tunnel is designed for -40°F and 150 mph winds and the portal buildings are designed to withstand avalanches.

Arriving early, at 8:40 a.m. we pulled up to the toll booth, paid the fee and followed the signs to get in line, but there was NO line and the light was green. So ready or not, here we go! No time to prepare, no time to take pictures.

Arriving in Whittier we find Pier 1. We look up and see a bald eagle just sitting on a railing. Hurry grab the cameras; can't miss this shot.

Today we are taking the Wilderness Explorer Glacier Cruise out of Whittier-Prince William Sound.

After loading on the boat, the first magnificent sight we see is waterfalls, some just a

at a time. Surprise Glacier is one mile wide and 275 feet high. These waters are the northernmost salt water in North America, yet surprisingly, they never freeze.

Laying upon the ice blocks that have calved from the glaciers are harbor seals!

Harbor seals are approximately 6.1 ft. in length and weigh 360 pounds. They live in Alaskan waters all year long.

Time to head back to Anchorage for tomorrow



Mt. McKinley from Talkeetna Lodge viewing deck. *by Francine West*



Fox Island, Alaska *by Jo Gilbreath*

opening. The Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel (often referred to simply as the Whittier Tunnel) is a tunnel through Maynard Mountain. It links the Seward Highway south of Anchorage with the relatively isolated community of Whittier, a port for the Alaska Marine Highway. It is part of the Portage Glacier Highway and at 13,300 feet (4,050 m), is the second longest highway tunnel

few feet tall, others over 300 feet tall. Everywhere you look, more spectacular waterfalls appear, all being glacier fed.

Prince William Sound has the densest concentration of tidewater glaciers in the world, some flowing a dozen miles from ice-capped peaks to terminate in cliffs of ice towering hundreds of feet above the water.

The water is so clear that you can actually see the jelly



Calving glacier *by Francine West*