



Giant Pacific Octopus: Studying the Elusive Cephalopod

February 26, 2009

Upcoming ... Fireside lectures

Friday, February 27 * 6:30pm & 8pm
**Giant Pacific Octopus:
The Elusive Cephalopod**

See more information to right.

Friday, March 6 * 6:30pm & 8pm
**Mendenhall's Black
Bears**

Join visitor center rangers Doug Jones and Laurie Craig for a 2008 update of the glacier area's wild black bears. Get acquainted with this year's 13 bears through stories and photos.

**** We'll have a special booksigning, on March 6, too!** Mark Kelley and Nick Jans will autograph copies of their 2008 book **Black Bears of Alaska's Mendenhall Glacier**.

Friday, March 13 * 6:30pm & 8pm
**On Your Knees Cave and
the Shuka Kaa Honor
Ceremony**

Explore one of Alaska's most fascinating archaeological discoveries with Terry Fifield, Forest Service archaeologist. Forest Service staff, researchers, and Tribes have worked together in the study and ultimate reburial of 10,300 year-old human remains. Terry has been with the project since its beginnings in 1994. He will explore the project's history and discuss its many scientific, social, and political outcomes.

More at www.mendenhallglacier.org

Fireside lectures are free and occur on Friday nights in January, February and March. Visitor center doors open at 5:45pm with the first lecture at 6:30pm and repeat at 8pm.

Did you ever secretly desire cuddling up with an octopus?

Sherry Tamone has snuggled up to her study subjects and the evidence is below.

Learn how she did it on Friday, February 27 at the evening Fireside talk presented at 6:30pm with a repeat at 8pm.

Dr. Tamone and her colleagues at the University of Alaska have marked and recaptured giant Pacific octopus in Kachemak Bay, Alaska.

Sherry will share some preliminary data about the population of these marine charismatic cephalopods and their movements in the Cook Inlet area.

Sherry will also include some basic information about this group of mollusks that you may not be aware of including their relationship to other molluscan animals and some of their outstanding abilities to change color.

The talk will emphasize the challenging logistics of studying creatures that spend their entire life underwater from funding to carrying out such a project.

Unfortunately she will not be bringing her cephalopod companion along for the talk.



University of Alaska Southeast's Dr. Sherry Tamone with an octopus

Closeup of caution sign near lakeshore



Safety Tips

Stay far away from the glacier's face.

The glacier can calve at any time, dropping slabs of ice the size of bathtubs or nine-story buildings. The collapsing glacial ice breaks the lake ice where it falls. Generally any calving episode causes waves that undulate the frozen lake surface as the waves roll beneath. The waves can break shorefast ice and toss king-size mattress shaped lake ice onto the beach, leaving open water that might prevent safe return to land. I have witnessed a calving that shattered the entire eastern quarter of the frozen lake ice instantly, leaving nothing but slushy shards the size of Sno-cone ice.

Avoid all icebergs.

Summer icebergs freeze in place when the lake freezes in winter. They continue to melt under the water. Despite the frozen lake surface icebergs can roll over if they become top-heavy. On warmer days the icebergs are usually ringed in pools of water.

Avoid Nugget Falls.

Lake ice is thinnest there. The waterfall flows year round but the lake water melts then refreezes near flowing creeks and moving water. Snowfall can hide thin, new lake ice. Snow insulates water from freezing solid.

Know how to use red rescue ladders.

Red wooden emergency ice ladders are located at the falls, at the pavilion, and on the west side of Mendenhall Lake. To use the ice ladder lay it flat on the ice and push it toward the victim who grabs onto a rung or cross piece. Then the rescuer at the safe end of the ladder can pull the ladder and the clinging victim from the freezing water without risking harm to himself.

Lie down on the ice if it begins to break up.

Spread out your body weight by lying down instead of putting all your weight on your feet. Crawl to safety.

Wear proper outdoor clothing.

Use at your own risk.

Naturalist's Notebook

The man comes into the visitor center Saturday afternoon and walks directly to the counter. His eyes are locked onto mine from the moment he opens the front door.

"You need to put up some signs warning people about the ice," he says in a quiet fierce tone. "My sister fell through at the glacier."

I ask if she is okay. Yes, she is safe, he acknowledges. He is still visibly shaken from his sister's ordeal even after the long, cold, wet one-mile walk back to the parking lot where she waits in his warming automobile. The woman had been standing at the face of the glacier when the frozen lake gave way beneath her, plunging her into frigid water up to her knees. I ask if she needs to come inside the center to get warm. He shakes his head no.

I tell the man I am sorry this has happened to his family member. Then

I walk him to the front window and point down to the lakeshore to show him the bright yellow caution sign his sister must have walked past to get onto the lake. I take no pleasure in doing so.

Sunday afternoon the scene repeats. A woman comes into the visitor center looking intently as if she is searching for something or someone. When we inquire, she says she needs a way to dry her wet cold feet. She had fallen through the lake ice above her ankles and is having painful difficulty walking due to the cold. I offer my hair dryer, the bathtub for soaking her feet, a seat by the observatory window heaters or the new hand dryers in the restroom. She is more chagrined than injured. She opts for the hand dryers.

A few minutes later, with her socks warmed and dried, the woman tells us she had walked across the frozen lake to photograph the glacier's spectacular blue ice. The sunny day and beautiful scenery lulled her into thinking she was safe. There were so many other people doing the same thing, she said. She just kept walking closer until suddenly she broke through within spitting distance of the glacier. She knew it was risky, she tells us, but just kept going closer.

These real life events form the basis of our concern as we watch people walk across the frozen lake to the glacier. There is real fear on the faces of those with the scary first-hand experience of breaking lake ice. On sunny days the glacier appears so accessible and benign. Today we count about 80 people per hour on the lake. Not all of them are at the glacier's face, but many are. Some are deep inside blue crevasses with blocks of glacier towering over their heads. The humans appear as tiny dots through the spotting scopes.

From the visitor center we would not be able to see a person fall into the lake because we are too far away (more than a mile from the glacier's face). We might be able to see a calving but we would not be able to hear it inside the building. We would not be able to rescue anyone. Our only option is to call 9-1-1 and wait for help to arrive.

While the frozen lake can never be deemed safe, using the west side for recreation is a better choice. From Skater's Cabin or West Glacier

Trail parking lot, skiers, snowshoers, hikers, and motorized vehicle users can access the lake. Snowmobiles and off-road vehicles are permitted to use the frozen lake as long as they remain on the west side of the two hazardous zone markers (orange 4-foot by 8-foot signs on the south shore of the lake and on the rock peninsula).

Courteous non-skiers avoid destroying the groomed ski trails and tracks by using other areas. Thoughtful dog owners remove feces from trails.

This week lake skiing has been perfect. Volunteers from the Juneau Nordic Ski Club pack, rake, and groom skate-ski and classic cross-country ski tracks in the campground and on the west side of the lake when conditions warrant.

At this time a well-groomed 20-foot wide loop guides skiers around the lake, bringing them near the bedrock peninsula where mountain goats have been seen, including one goat with a single horn. Unlike antlers, horns are permanent.

***The black wolf stands on frozen
Mendenhall Lake in front of the
imaginative white wolf on the
flank of Thunder Mountain***

Photo courtesy of John Kern



Forest Explorers and goats

Saturday's 11am to noon conservation education program for 4-6 year-olds focused on the topic of camouflage. Elayne explained to her young Forest Explorers how animals can hide in plain sight by blending their natural coloring with their surroundings and by not moving. The children played a game to cement the lesson.

Meanwhile on Mount Bullard three mountain goats provided the perfect example of camouflage. Their off-white coats showed minimal contrast against the snowy background. Goats live year round on the steep rugged slopes on both Bullard and Mount McGinnis. In May when hillsides begin to green up, the 200-pound animals are easy to locate. We can zoom in on them easily using spotting scopes.

During winter, however, when the goats move to lower elevations to forage on vegetation they can be challenging to find. Lake skiers have also seen mountain goats and their wandering tracks on the bedrock peninsula to the left of the glacier. One goat in that area sports a single black horn. At this time it is unknown if the horn was broken off or did not grow initially.

I mentioned this odd goat to Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist Kevin White who researches mountain goats.

"One horned goats are fairly rare. Of the 120 goats we handled in the Lynn Canal area, we had 3 that were 'unicorns'; 2 nannies and 1 billy. Two of the three were particularly old goats. I am not certain why they lose their horns but it may be related to older animals having brittle horns and subsequently taking a fall or inadvertently bumping horns against rocky substrate," he said.

The white wolf

There is another camouflaged animal on the mountainside that I learn about this week as I stand with John Kern on the ski track on the far west side of frozen Mendenhall Lake.

"Have you seen the white wolf on Thunder Mountain?" John asked. I am confused until he explains that he and his children discovered an imaginative interpretation of the steep snowy avalanche chutes that give the mountain its name. The "thunder" is caused by springtime's rumbling avalanches.

"Look to the far left and see the wolf's short full tail pointing north," John said. "Then follow the ridgeline to the right to see its back and torso. The wolf's long legs are created by the steep avalanche chutes.

At the far right see how the wide open area indicates the wolf's down-turned head."

I follow John's directions. Before my eyes the shape of a white wolf appears on the vast slope of Thunder Mountain. Until that moment the wolf had been hidden in plain sight. Now I see its image each time I glance across the valley at the mountain that dominates the eastern terrain.

Kids say the darnedest things

Earlier this month the visitor center hosted every third grade class in Juneau for day-long field trips called Backyard Glacier. The Forest Service's Conservation Education Specialist Karen Maher organizes school events such as this regular offering. Students explore outdoors, practice drawing, write poems, learn how a glacier is made, and study nature's food web.

During a break in the class, one youngster was explaining the marks on the frozen lake to a classmate. Straight lines in the snow made by hikers connected Photo Point to a nearby iceberg. To young eyes there was another interpretation of the streaks across the snow.

"Look," he said, "you can see where the iceberg crawled across the lake!"

A new way to incinerate garbage

Saturday's brief power outage at the visitor center and other valley locations was caused by an eagle flying in the Lemon Creek area from the landfill with a load of trash in its talons. The garbage shorted out the area's electricity when it touched transmission wires.

*Observations from Mendenhall Glacier
February 26, 2009 page 3*

***Observations from Mendenhall Glacier
and Naturalist's Notebook***

are written by US Forest Service naturalist
Laurie Craig in Juneau, Alaska.

Contact lcraig@fs.fed.us

Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center
US Forest Service
8510 Mendenhall Loop Road
Juneau, AK 99801 907.789.0097

Winter Hours Thursday-Sunday
10am to 4pm
Free in winter