



# Observations from the Mendenhall Glacier

Closeup view of the terminus of Mendenhall Glacier taken February 28, 2009

March 5, 2009

## Upcoming ... Fireside lectures

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.

We'll have a special booksigning on March 6, too!

Mark Kelley will autograph copies of his 2008 book **Black Bears of Alaska's Mendenhall Glacier**.  
Doors open at 5:30pm

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.

Friday, March 20 \* 6:30pm & 8pm  
**Singer in the Stream:  
American Dippers in Juneau**

Our only aquatic songbird, the American Dipper nests on streamside cliffs and forages for stream insects and small fish. Get an inside look at the lives of local dippers through photos and stories with Mary Willson and Kathy Hocker. Learn the results of a five-year study of Juneau's dippers including details about their nesting biology and survival and the factors that limit the local population.

More at [www.mendenhallglacier.org](http://www.mendenhallglacier.org)

Fireside lectures are free and occur on Friday nights in January, February and March.

## Mendenhall's Black Bears: A 2008 Update



Retired Alaska state fisheries biologist Doug Jones spends his summers as a seasonal ranger watching the black bears at Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center. He spends his winters reading about them. He spends all year with his excellent photo collection of Mendenhall's black bears.

In August 2008, Doug also spent many early mornings and late evenings setting hair snares to collect specimens from the area's black bears for DNA analysis. The aim of the study is to assess the number of male and female bears and to estimate a population total.

All of Doug's skills come together on Friday, March 6 when he and ranger Laurie Craig present a Fireside lecture on the bears.

"Our talk will be a blend of science and stories to tell what we have learned about -- and from -- the bears," said Jones.

The Fireside slideshow will be the second annual update on the individual bears that frequent Steep Creek and the area immediately surrounding the visitor center.

"Our goal is to make the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center area safe for bears to live and for people to watch them," said Craig, who works at the center year-round.

Bear watching is becoming a popular summer pastime on the elevated boardwalks of the short Steep Creek Trail.

Crowds of cruiseship visitors enjoy the view during the day. Early mornings and evenings are favorite times for Juneau residents.

The elevated trail provides a comfortable separation between humans and bears foraging on vegetation in the meadow or salmon in the stream. Although the platforms are only four years old, resident bears have learned to not fear humans standing above them. The Forest Service credits benign, predictable human behavior for the bears' apparent ease with people nearby.

"The most important factor in preserving safe bear viewing is preventing bears from becoming conditioned to humans' food," cautions ranger Craig.

The Forest Service in 2008 prohibited food and beverages from being carried or consumed in the Mendenhall Glacier visitor center area. Bearproof garbage cans have been in place for several years.

A special booksigning will occur in conjunction with the Friday night talk.



**View from the frozen west side of Mendenhall Lake showing the deglaciated bedrock peninsula with the Mendenhall Glacier in middle ground and Mendenhall Towers in the distance**



## **Naturalist's Notebook**

February is my new favorite month. This year's second month has been full of sunshine and clear skies. Outdoor activities have lured Juneauites from our dark winter dens into the daylight. Parking lots have been full of vehicles at the visitor center and on the west side of Mendenhall Lake at Skater's Cabin. Lengthening days have given us several extra minutes of daylight. Skiing has been wonderful.

Sunlight also creates shadow. That element gives animal tracks a depth and distinction unseen in the flat light of a gray day. I am amazed at the meandering trails left behind by mountain goats on Mount Bullard.

Through spotting scopes in the observatory the goats' steady wandering hoof prints reveal routes clinging to steep precipices. The lines of prints in the snow make it easier to locate off-white goats on snow-white slopes. One set of tracks shows a goat descended a steep rock face to lake level, walked along the frozen shoreline and climbed up another vertical rock face. We have seen four goats regularly: a pair of large long-haired goats foraging together and a nanny/yearling pair feeding close to each other.

Mountain goats are the one species of large mammal that we can see almost year round from the visitor center. They are on Mounts Bullard, McGinnis and the rock peninsula. For the next two months we will be able to watch goats foraging at low elevations on Bullard. When the snow melts and hillside vegetation greens up, the goats munch their way upslope. In late May goats congregate one-third of the way up the mountain. That's when the first tiny white kids can be seen standing beside their mothers. In June we'll see many frolicking youngsters as the band of female goats moves higher. By the end of summer, the goats may have moved over the top of the mountain to feed on tender emerging plants on the north side.

From the visitor center we are able to see skiers glide around the groomed ski trail on the frozen west side of Mendenhall Lake. Many pause for a closeup view of the one-horned mountain goat foraging on the rock peninsula. I can see clusters of observers gathered together. Sunday a photographer had a tripod holding a large camera and lens pointing toward the goat. Skiers raised their ski poles to point out the goat's location for others to see.

Although the sunny and wintry outdoors have been the big attractant lately, the inside of the visitor center has been busy, too. Monday organizers for a three-day conference came in to arrange tables and chairs for their participants arriving the following day. Their caterer set up cloth-covered tables, vases of silk flowers, and stacks of plates and glassware. Hot food in steam trays arrived the next morning for breakfast.

The visitor center is a fine location for winter meetings and conferences. Some groups rent the building annually for their office retreats. They say the center and its spectacular view gives them a place to generate expansive ideas, to leave behind the confines of cubicles and yet to have an economical meeting because they are at home every night. It is surprising how the building can be easily transformed into quiet niches for small breakout sessions. The center is available in winter months for meeting rentals during the days we are closed to the public (Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.)

Friday night all the chairs were back in the auditorium as the building was packed with eager Fireside lecture attendees who listened to – and laughed through – UAS professor Sherry Tamone's lecture and slideshow about octopuses. She is a gifted speaker with a sense of humor as well as great information. There were many new faces in the audience. Each Fireside topic attracts our core audience plus new listeners. Hopefully the newest attendees will become regulars.

The following day the blue auditorium chairs were stacked up again to make room for Saturday's Girl Scouts-Forest Service coordinated event called GIRLS ROCK SCIENCE.

Twenty-five volunteers staffed tables with various activities designed to encourage youngsters to explore nature through indoor and outdoor experiments. My favorite activity was The Physics of Sledding. I watched through the sunny windows as groups of girls gathered on the sledding hill with UAS professors.

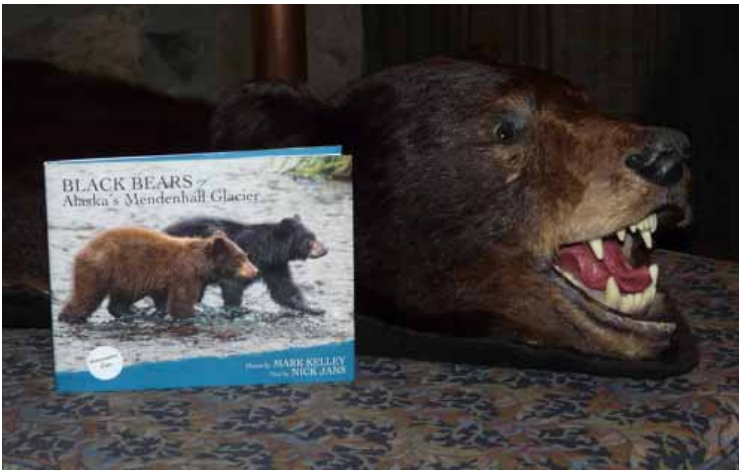
Geocaching, animal tracking, cutting paper snowflakes, making clouds in a bottle and blue ice cream in a baggy were some of the other events. The building was buzzing with excited girls learning new ways to look at their world. It was an outstanding public event.

To read more in depth about mountain goats, try the book [A Beast the Color of Winter](#), by Douglas Chadwick

For a great web cam view of the glacier <http://www.wunderground.com/webcams/eknuth/2/show.html>



**Juneau Nordic Ski Club volunteer ski trail groomer smoothes skate skiers' trail in Mendenhall Campground on February 22. The device used to cut the classic cross-country track is suspended above the snowmobile's raking implement.**



*Photographer Mark Kelley will be in the visitor center at 5:30pm Friday, March 6 to autograph his newest book **Black Bears of Alaska's Mendenhall Glacier**. The signing will be held in conjunction with the Fireside presentation by Forest Service rangers on the bears.*

## Booksigning Friday night

### Meet photographer Mark Kelley

In May, 2008, a new book arrived at the Alaska Geographic bookstore. On its cover was a photograph of the two black bear cubs that spent the previous summer trailing around Steep Creek at their mother's heels. One cub is black; the other cub is brown.

Black Bears of Alaska's Mendenhall Glacier is a small perfect book describing the wonders of watching the resident wild bears that live in the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center area.

Well-known Alaska photographer Mark Kelley and author Nick Jans combined their creative talents to tell the story of Mendenhall's bears in images and words.

The bear book hit the shelves just as the busy summer activities and the first of 398,000 visitors arrived. There was no time to schedule a special autograph party.

Friday night's Fireside lecture on black bears provides a fine opportunity to celebrate the book and the bears.

Starting at 5:30pm, Mark Kelley will be available in the center's observatory to sign and personalize his bear book. Kelley's books Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska: A Photographic Excursion, Alaska's Watchable Whales and Alaska's Tracy Arm and Sawyer Glaciers, plus calendars — are for sale at the Alaska Geographic bookstore located in the visitor center, also.



*Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center in winter*

## Mark your calendars -- for 2012

The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center is the first visitor center built in the country by the U.S. Forest Service. Constructed in 1962, the original portion is the curved-roof observatory and the present-day bookstore which was first operated as a restaurant. Extensions on each side of the building were added in 1998 as was an elevator under the bedrock.

Visitor center staff are contemplating ideas to celebrate the center's 50th anniversary in 2012 and welcome suggestions.

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*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