



*Naturalist's Notebook*

July 4, 2009

## ***Bears and cottonwoods***

The little cinnamon juvenile bear is barely visible as it moves through the tall lush grass of the meadow. A crowd of visitors has walked away after watching for awhile. With only an hour to spend at the Mendenhall Glacier, they hustle toward the visitor center for a look at blue ice and spectacular icebergs. I wait for the next bus to drop off visitors and watch the bear.

This 2-1/2 year old bear is one we know well. It grew up along the creek, traveling with its black sibling as the two cubs trailed their mother. The cubs were born in January or February of 2007. A year ago they split from their mother when she came into estrus and chased the cubs away so she could breed again.

We have not seen their mother yet this year. We hope the reason for her absence is that she has another pair of cubs high on the hillside. Cubs-of-the-year are still quite small now. I don't expect we'll see the new family until sockeye return in late July. Because the mother bear has successfully raised three previous sets of cubs in the visitor center vicinity, we believe she is probably protecting and teaching the newest generation in areas safer and farther away from crowds of humans.

An identifying designation has been given to the two juvenile bears: C-7 is the cinnamon bear that we have seen so frequently this year;

B-7 is its black sibling. The letter signifies their fur color and 7 indicates the year 2007 when they were born.

The Forest Service frowns on staff naming wild bears lest visitors perceive the animals as pets. For those of us watching the bears and monitoring their movements, a method of differentiation is needed.

C-7 will probably be recognized during its lifetime based utilizing an identification system used for other wild animals: scars. Like its mother with her left ear notch or nick, C-7 now has a scar across its nose. The cut appeared about three weeks ago. We don't know how the bloody slice occurred, but it has healed well. The bear did not seem to be bothered by the cut. They are tough animals. I hope that is true for its newest injury.

***“Bear C-7 is the cinnamon black bear and B-7 is its black twin.***

***The letter signifies their fur color and 7 indicates the year 2007 when they were born. “***



***C-7 forages beneath the Steep Creek Trail***



**Bear C-7's leg wound in July**

As I watch the bear in the silent green meadow C-7 eats its way closer to the platform I stand on. On the well-worn bear trail that edges Steep Creek's bank, the little cinnamon-colored black bear sits on its haunches like a dog and extends its left rear leg.

I am perfectly positioned to see a nasty open wound as the bear leans forward to lick it.

The patch of open skin has peeled back to reveal white interior flesh with red blood vessels swinging like strands of curly yarn. I see no flowing blood. With its tongue the bear strokes the fleshy cut while strings of horsetail cling to its lips from the bear's eating foray in the meadow. That's what this bear has been eating for the past three weeks.

The bear cares for its injury while I fumble with my small camera. I take a photo before the bear rises and moves beneath the platform to continue its walk along the creek.

I fret over the raw wound on the young bear's leg, but the bear does not limp. I see the bear the next day. Again, no apparent disabling effect. The cut is still white and open. Skin flaps around it.

The following day C-7 scrambles up a scrawny alder in front of an audience of awed visitors. We all gasp as the bear climbs up the shrubby tree and bends it downward.

The bear is at eye level and close. Cameras buzz and whir. It's an unbelievably great "photo op." I'm watching intently for the bear's choice of direction after dismounting from the alder. I am too focused on the close proximity of bear-to-crowd to investigate the status of the cut on the bear's left rear leg.

This bear has had four painful incidents. When just a small cub, it bawled in pain with a single porcupine quill stuck in its front paw. It limped and whimpered for a couple of days. Its mother was nearby and in charge of cub care.

Last year — after family breakup — the yearling cinnamon bear arrived on the creek one day with a four-inch long slash

*"I am perfectly positioned to see a nasty open wound as the bear leans forward to lick it."*

on its left hip. I wondered if it had been a result of the cub's reluctance to split away from its mom. I had watched the mother chase the cub one night after the little bear had snuck through the woods to be closer to her. It was a heart-wrenching moment for me. It's difficult to separate the universal emotion of mother love from one species to the next. I was happy to talk to my own healthy and strong mother the day after watching the sow chase the cub. Because all these previous wounds healed, I assume the same will occur now. But I'll continue to observe.

Rarely do state or federal wildlife agents intervene with a wild animal's health. I informed Fish and Game staff, however. Given the recent injuries perhaps C-7 finds it safer to be around several hundred humans than other bears. We can only speculate about the cause of the injury.

A few days before the cinnamon bear appeared with the fresh cut, we were surprised to find it still in close proximity to its black sibling. Last week both sub-adult bears foraged adjacent to Photo Point Trail. C-7 followed a familiar route along the beach while B-7 ambled away from the crowd of bear-watchers and climbed the hill toward the Trail of Time.

Despite the knowledge we gain from books and scientific papers we still delight in watching the bears and learning from them. The resident bears teach us new things all the time.

A recent lesson for me came from C-7. The bear walked along a path then poked its nose into the dirt at the base of a spruce tree. With its front paw it began digging. Within a minute there was an eight-inch deep hole near the roots. I was quite close but could not see the source of bruin curiosity. The bear took a couple of steps away and dug another hole. Within a short time I watched four fat bumblebees emerge slowly from the hole! Had the bear discovered a wild hive? A little Googling told me wild bees do create hives in trees and rock crevices. The bumble bees were not aggressive, merely flying slowly. I continue to look at the tree's roots to see what else is occurring there.

We have heard of a few sightings of new cubs. A black sow with a new tiny black cub crossed the road toward the dense brush of Dredge Lakes. One day one of our rangers scoped the upper reaches of Bullard Mountain searching for mountain goats to show to visitors. Jane was pleased to locate two mother bears with twin cubs foraging in open areas as she scanned the peak.



**Bear C-7 gnaws off the top of a female cottonwood tree in June**



**Ranger Doug Jones GPSs a female cottonwood's location**

We are embarking on a study of this interesting bear/cottonwood tree activity. Step one is to identify the female cottonwoods now while we can recognize their gender by their seed pods and soon-to-be fuzzy cotton seedlings.

As we locate the female trees, we are applying a numbered aluminum tree tag. It's about the size of a silver dollar. We are noting the tree's GPS coordinates, measuring the girth, assessing the amount of foraging damage (by bear or porcupine), and mapping the tree's location. We have tagged many trees (discreetly so the tags are not visible) in the visitor center area from Photo Point to the bus parking lot. Our final weekly tagging session was Wednesday morning July 1. We discovered a remarkable number of chewed trees behind the visitor center in the woods along the Trail of Time. Next May we will tag the male trees when we can be certain of their gender.

We are also looking for other places where bears eat cottonwoods to assess whether or not the visitor center bears have a unique behavior. Apparently a bear was up in a Mendenhall Valley neighborhood cottonwood tree last week for almost a day; it was eating and breaking branches. We'd appreciate your help if you know of this activity.

This tree identification exercise has been enlightening. It has forced us to look up in places we normally only look forward. In one wooded place we found five sizable bear scat piles in a 4-foot by 4-foot square area.

The cottonwood/bear study will begin this year and continue to be something we can follow for years to come. Our goal is to learn more about Mendenhall Glacier's wild black bears and to build more information to provide in our interpretive talks.

In many cases, we have notes from past years describing when bears were in certain trees, for how long and which bears they were. We'll add that to the story.



**Cottonwood seed pods dangle from a female tree's branches**

## **Bear/cottonwood study**

We have become intrigued with the bears' feeding behaviors in cottonwood trees. In May they feed on the catkins of the male trees. In June the bears scramble up the female cottonwoods and gorge on the grape-like bunches of seed pods that dangle from the tips and crown of the tree. In both instances the bears climb high into the trees and break off branches to get to the delicacy at the tips. This foraging technique makes for great bear viewing and photography. It provides a safe distance between bears and people and fine opportunities for our naturalists to discuss the complex aspects of a black bear's life. In some cases we can identify the individual bear and share its personal life history.



**Male cottonwood catkin in May**



**Female cottonwood seed pod (June)**



**Seed pod too fuzzy to eat in July**



***Mendenhall Glacier in the evening light on July 3. Warm temperatures have caused more calving than usual resulting in higher lake levels. More water lifts icebergs that had been grounded so they move around the lake.***

Another project we are working on this summer is mapping bear movements for each day we see the animals. We know anecdotally that the bears walk in regular patterns around the grounds. By mapping we will create a knowledge base that can be passed on to others in the future. I add a few notes and the map is done in about 2 minutes. I use colored pens on a simple hand-drawn map. This may provide an additional management tool in the future to ensure visitors continue to observe watchable wildlife safely.

On Sunday June 21, the *Juneau Empire* assisted us with managing a vital aspect of bear viewing safety: "Don't Feed the Bears!" was the front page headline. Two photos showed cinnamon juvenile bear C-7. The story reinforced the message to leave food and beverages, especially coffee with chocolate and whipped cream, at home.

Here's a link to Kate Golden's fine article with David Sheakley's photos:

[http://juneauempire.com/stories/062109/loc\\_453022554.shtml](http://juneauempire.com/stories/062109/loc_453022554.shtml)



***A beaver swims in a pond adjacent to the road***

fledglings attract lots of attention from visitors; the noisy birds provide our naturalists with a perfect opportunity to talk about the amazing raven. The resident pair of adults has hatched four juveniles this year. Juveniles are distinguished by their pink mouths. It's not easy to see but when they open their beaks, look inside for the pink interior.

Barn swallow babies have hatched. Their tiny mouths gape open in unison when their parents fly under roofs to serve insects to the chicks. The swallows present certain challenges to us every year. Their nests are built in places where droppings can impact people. Despite repeated creative efforts to discourage nest-building in the pavilion and other people-places, we have finally surrendered to the birds. In previous years we cleaned off the concrete floor beneath the nests to remove the unsightly droppings, but then innocent people stood in the line of fire. Nothing warns folks better than looking down — and keeping their mouths closed when they look up for the source.

Plants are also surging with vigor at this point in summer. Groundcones are emerging from the soil. They are an important bear food later in the summer. (C-7 is eating lots of horsetail now. The scat looks like horse manure because of it.) Delicate wildflowers are blooming while the hardy Nootka lupine are fading. Willows are casting their cottony seeds into the wind, covering ponds and ground with white snow-like fuzz.

Beavers are dependably viewable in the evenings. Almost every night we see a pair of beavers in the roadside pond on the east side of the Spur Road. These beavers gnaw branches and trees. They are fun and easy to observe.

***-- Laurie Craig  
US Forest Service Naturalist***