

Some Observations from a Summer Trip to Alaska

By Ralph Tiner

Last summer my wife and I went to Alaska for a couple of weeks. In my nearly 40 years of work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service I never had the opportunity to experience Alaska's wetlands, so I had to do it in retirement — one item on my bucket list. We started our trip in Anchorage and our first stop with the rental car was Potter Marsh which has a great boardwalk system traversing the marsh. To our surprise after walking just 100 yards, we saw a moose feeding in the shallow water...what a sight at our first stop. We then went to Seward and along the way stopped at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center and Exit Glacier. When back in Anchorage we stopped at 49th State Brewing where I had two pints of a delicious imperial stout — “Candy Bar” — brewed with peanuts, chocolate, and caramel...perfect for my sweet tooth (sorry but the beer was just so good I have to give it a shout-out). We also visited a high school classmate who was a teacher in Anchorage and spent a day in Talkeetna where we spoke with Aurora Dora, a local photographer who has captured some amazing images of the Aurora Borealis (check out images on her website: <https://auroradora.com/>). Here we also sampled some birch syrup made from White or Paper Birch (*Betula papyrifera* var. *humilis* and *B. neoalaskana*). On Day 3 we began our Princess land-sea cruise tour as

we headed north to Denali for a couple of days and then took the scenic train to Whittier (great views of Alaska's wetlands on the way, despite the rain) and then to various ports via ship. I was hoping to see some bears in Denali and other places, but the salmon were not yet running, so bears were out of sight although I did see one running across a meadow at some distance. I also saw a few along with other animals common to the state at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center where they rescue injured/orphaned wildlife. Some high points of the trip were seeing Denali in all its glory, a female moose with calf at Horseshoe Lake, wildflowers in bloom along the Savage River Trail and the Savage Alpine Trail (exhausting but great time for wildflower photography), a hike across a local bog at Hoonah (Icy Strait Point), a hike through a temperate rain forest (Tongass National Forest) to Mendenhall Glacier, and seeing Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) bubble-net feeding in Auke Bay, plus views of a few other glaciers and whales during the cruise. If you don't know what bubble-net feeding is ... check out this website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z00G0RxeSP0>. There's still more to see in Alaska, so we'll probably be heading back in late summer 2025 to travel inland.

Here's some mostly wetland-centric images from the trip.



Potter Marsh, south of Anchorage on the Seward Highway. Our first wetland stop in Alaska where we saw our first moose on this trip.



Wetland bordering Turnagain Arm near Girdwood.



Brown Bear (*Ursa arctos*) and Raven (*Corvus corax*) at Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, near Girdwood.



Wild Flag or Beachhead Iris (*Iris setosa*) from a wet meadow along the road to the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center.



Shrubby Cinquefoil (*Dasiphora fruticosa*) – common in both wetlands and nonwetlands in Alaska.



Denali on a clear day – July 13, 2023.



Cow moose and calf (*Alces alces*) at Horseshoe Lake, Denali National Park.



Old beaver dam along the edge of Horseshoe Lake, Denali National Park.



View of the Savage River and its floodplain at Denali National Park.



A large patch of Dwarf Fireweed (*Chamerion latifolium*) was observed on a gravel bar along the Savage River.



Marsh Grass of Parnassus (*Parnassia palustris*) from floodplain of Savage River, Denali NP.



Another portion of the Savage River floodplain; note cotton-grasses in foreground.



Tall Cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) from Savage River floodplain.



View of Alaska wetland (in the rain) taken from the train from Denali to Whittier.



View of coastal marsh and tidal flat south of Anchorage from the train to Whittier.



Arctic Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus parryi*) along the Savage Alpine Trail auditioning for a spot on Wild Kingdom.



Boardwalk across bog near Spasski Creek, Hoonah (Icy Strait Point). The bog turned out to be the high point of this excursion as there were no bears to be seen along the creek as the salmon had not yet returned.



Scentbottle (*Platanthera dilatata*) from bog near Spasski Creek, Hoonah.



Deercabbage (*Nephrhyllidium crista-galli*) from bog near Spasski Creek, Hoonah.



Buckbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*) from bog, near Hoonah.



Wetland along Lake Mendenhall near Mendenhall Glacier, north of Juneau.



Cloudberry (*Rubus chamaemorus*) from bog, near Hoonah.



Mendenhall Glacier emptying into Mendenhall Lake, Juneau.



Bear track along Spasski Creek, near Hoonah (Icy Strait Point). This was as close to a bear that we got in the wild.



Temperate rainforest at Tongass National Forest.