Lake Clark
Qizhjeh Vena

National Park Service
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Lake Clark National Park & Preserve
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Wildlife

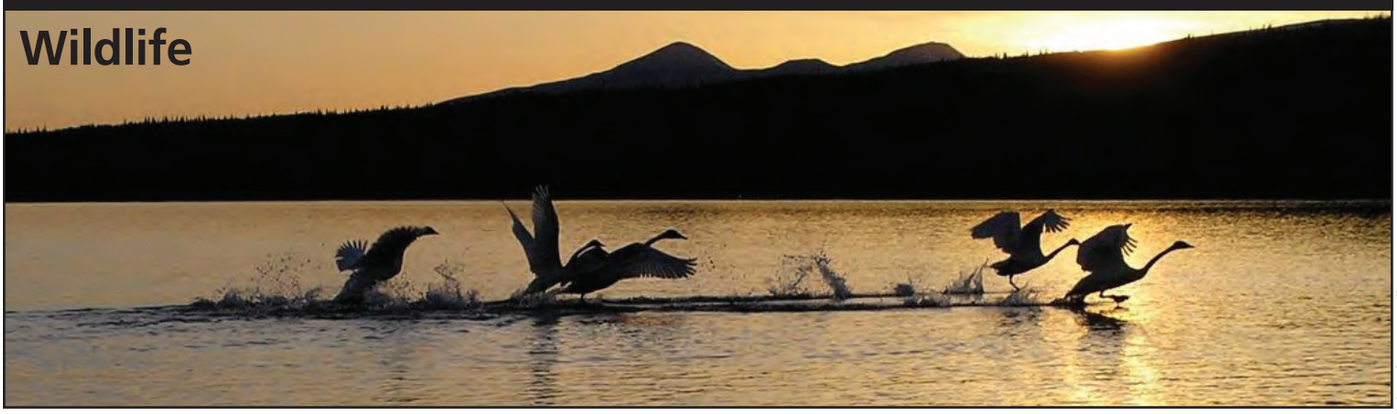

Photo by NPS/ J. Mills

Tundra swans glide elegantly across a boggy pond. A brown bear splashes into a stream and emerges with a spawning salmon. A sharp-shinned hawk dives on a redback vole. A porcupine curls up and shows his quills to a curious hiker. Wolves howl into the winter night. Lake Clark teems with wildlife.

Brown Bears

Many brown bears call Lake Clark home. Their behavior and diet vary depending on the habitat in which they live. Just like living in the city is different from living in the country for people, living near the ocean is different from living inland for bears.

Estuaries, where rivers meet the sea along the park's Cook Inlet coast, are the urban centers of the bear world. Food is plentiful here from early spring until the bears return to their dens in the fall. Sedges that are high in protein and other edible plants grow in salt marshes. Tidal flats brimming with clams lay just a few yards away. Flowing through it all are rivers filled with salmon who return each summer to spawn and die further upstream. Whales and other marine carcasses occasionally wash ashore. Berries grow on the nearby hillsides. Everything a bear needs to eat is in one place.

Bears gather in these estuaries in large numbers to eat and mate. Park biologists have counted as many as 219 brown bears within a 54 square mile area on the coast in recent years. There are few other places in the world where you can find as many bears living in such a small area. This is possible because they are more tolerant of the presence of each-other, of other wildlife, and often of people than they are in places where there is less food.

The habitats west of the Aleutian and Alaskan mountain ranges differ from those on the coast. If estuaries are a bear's big city, boreal forests and open tundra are the country. There is less food inland and it is spread out over a larger area. Salmon spawn in the streams and lakes in the summer and fall, but bears usually have to travel much further to find them. Brown bears here eat more roots, insects, berries, and ground squirrels.

Because there are fewer sources of protein-rich food inland, there are also fewer bears. They do not gather in large numbers here, thus they interact with fewer individuals in their lifetime than a coastal bear. These solitary bears are less tolerant of the presence of the other bears, wildlife, and people they do encounter.

Photo by NPS/ Jim Pfeiffenberger

Wolves

The lonely howl of the wolf is an icon of the Alaskan wilderness. Yet, there are fewer wolves in Lake Clark than you might imagine.

Wildlife experts would expect to find eight to twelve packs with around seven members each living in a park this size. Yet park biologists have identified only four to six packs with about five members each.

These packs' territories average just over 1,000 square miles. This is a larger amount of land than most other Alaskan wolf packs use. Larger territory sizes means there are fewer packs. Territory size varies depending on what the wolves hunt. The packs that eat more salmon need a smaller range because they don't have to roam as far to find food.

Many young wolves leave their original pack to find a mate and territory. They often travel outside the park to find a place of their own. A few have ventured as far away as Bethel, 230 miles to the west of Lake Clark's boundary!

Photo by NPS/ Mike Jones

Dall's Sheep

Wild sheep love their mountains. They ramble along rocky ridges and sleep on steep slopes. The pure white Dall's sheep live further north than any other North American wild sheep species. In Alaska, Lake Clark is the furthest southwest extent of their range.

Though there are many mountains in the park, Dall's sheep live on few of them. If the peaks are too high, vegetation is too scarce. Too close to the coast and long winters can bury food beneath a heavy blanket of snow. Lake Clark's population is only 1,000. Look for them tiptoeing on Tanalian Mountain or prancing along the peaks near Twin Lakes.

Photo by NPS

Bald Eagles

To many Americans bald eagles are the embodiment of freedom. Around fifty pairs nest each year in Lake Clark. They prefer tall trees within view of the ocean, a lake, or river where they can hunt for salmon, seabirds, and other prey.

As top predators, their nesting successes and failures hint at changes to the populations of their prey. Their continued freedom to soar the skies is a sign of the freedom and health of the entire ecosystem.

Photo by NPS

Sockeye Salmon

Salmon play an important role in Lake Clark's ecosystems. They are eaten by mammals, birds, insects, other fish, and people. Fungi and bacteria decompose their bodies when they die. This adds nutrients to the water and soil, which plants use to grow.

Sockeye are anadromous fish, meaning they hatch in freshwater, but migrate to the ocean during their first or second summer. After spending two years at sea, they return to their birthplace to lay their eggs and die.

About half of the world's sockeye salmon spawn and rear in the Bristol Bay watershed. The park is located at the headwaters of Bristol Bay's Kvichak River. Each year between 150 thousand and 3.1 million sockeye return to Lake Clark.

Photo donated by Thomas Quinn

Species List: Terrestrial Mammals Listed by Order

Even-toed Ungulates
- Caribou
- Dall's sheep
- Moose

Hares, Rabbits, and Pika
- Collared pika
- Snowshoe hare

Rodents
- American beaver
- Arctic ground squirrel
- Brown lemming
- Hoary marmot
- Meadow jumping mouse
- Meadow vole
- Muskrat
- Northern bog lemming
- Northern collared lemming
- Northern red-backed vole
- Porcupine
- Red squirrel
- Singing/Alaska vole
- Tundra vole

Shrews
- Masked shrew
- Montane/dusky shrew
- Pygmy shrew
- Tiny shrew
- Tundra shrew

Bats
- Little brown bat

Carnivores
- Coyote
- Gray wolf
- Red fox
- Canada lynx
- Wolverine
- Northern river otter
- American marten
- Ermine/short-tailed weasel
- Least weasel
- Mink
- American black bear
- Brown bear