

AP Exclusive: Webcams make Alaska bears accessible

MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) -- A new video initiative is bringing the famed brown bears of Alaska's Katmai National Park directly to your computer or smartphone.

Without having to go there, you'll be able to watch mature bears compete for salmon at Brook Falls and other sites and cubs tumbling over each other as they play. Starting Tuesday, a live Web stream (<http://is.gd/bfPAs8> [1]) will allow the public to log on and see the brown bears in their natural habitat.

"I think it's an unparalleled opportunity for people to get that front row seat of the lives of the bears at Brooks Camp," said Roy Wood, chief of interpretation for Katmai National Park and Preserve.

The project is a partnership with explore.org, which set up four high-definition cameras in Katmai, spokesman Jason Damata told The Associated Press. Three of them are at existing viewing stands where bear fans come to watch the animals.

The cameras provide access to a national park that is difficult to reach and expensive for most tourists. It is about 275 miles southwest of Anchorage, but no roads lead to Katmai. A trip there involves multiple airplanes and a lot of advanced planning: it's hard to get a lodge reservation at Brooks Camp before 2014. Camping is allowed, but on a reservation system that goes online Jan. 5.

"It takes a lot of time, a lot of effort and a lot of money, and the webcams will make it accessible to anyone with access to a computer, a smartphone, a tablet device," Wood said.

The park draws just under 10,000 visitors a year, but about 2,200 bears live in Katmai National Park. About 100 of them are in the Brooks Camp area.

One camera is at Brooks Falls, where the bigger male bears compete for salmon, some while the fish are trying to jump the falls. The bears eat mostly the brains and eggs of these fish and let the carcasses flow downstream. This is the prime viewing area now.

The second camera is about 150 yards away, where females and cubs eat the fish scraps floating downstream. The third is at the lower falls, where bears will congregate later this summer when dead salmon float downstream after spawning. "Any bear can catch them when they're dead," Wood said.

The fourth is on Dumpling Mountain and provides an aerial view of the entire ecosystem, including Brooks Lake, Naknek Lake, Brooks River and falls, and in the

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distance the Valley of 10,000 Smokes, Damata said.

"The placement of the cams is fantastic," Wood said. "I mean, they'll be close enough, many of the bears you'll be able to identify and follow the individual bears as they use the salmon at Brooks Falls and raise their young here."

The cameras are powered by solar and wind energy. Microwave signals are sent to the Dumpling Mountain camera, which are then sent to King Salmon, Alaska, where a T1 connection allows for the high-definition cameras to be broadcast to the Internet. The best action of the four cameras will be broadcast.

They are the latest addition to a list of live-streaming webcams in the Pearls of the Planet initiative for explore.org, underwritten by the Annenberg Foundation.

The subjects of other webcams include osprey off the coast of Maine, and polar bears in the Arctic and Scandinavia; locations such as the California redwood trees and in institutions like the Vancouver Aquarium, where cameras are directed on belugas and jelly fish. A camera in Brookeville, Md., is focused on a golden retriever and her new litter. The pups will be raised and trained to be service dogs for military members suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"The mission is simple. We simply want people to fall in love with the world again," said Charles Annenberg, creator of explore.org and vice president of the Annenberg Foundation.

A previous attempt to set up live bear cams from Katmai with a museum in Homer, Alaska, failed due to lack of funding.

"It's very expensive to run streaming video, more expensive than we could handle with our partnership with the Pratt Museum because both of us don't have a good revenue stream," Wood said.

He said it was a "great, fortunate day for us that explore.org called and said they were interested."

Annenberg, who also goes by the name Charles Annenberg Weingarten, said the intent of the bear cam and others provided by the organization is to make adults fall in love with the world again.

"I think when you watch these brown bears, and the salmon going upstream and you see the beauty of this nature, I think it's going to put a smile on your face and a sense of bewilderment and awe you felt a long time ago when we were all kids," he said.

He said when people view the live stream, he hopes they realize what they are seeing is pure - there's no ulterior motive other than an experience to reconnect with nature.

The cost of the project wasn't disclosed, but explore.org will absorb the full costs.

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Bear cam:

<http://explore.org/#!/live-cams/player/brown-bear-salmon-cam-brooks-falls> [2]

Explore: <http://www.explore.org> [3]

Katmai National Park and Preserve: <http://www.nps.gov/katm/index.htm> [4]

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[1] <http://is.gd/bfPAs8>

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