

PORTFOLIO

KAMCHATKA BEARS *by Michel Roggo*



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Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula is famous for its resident brown bears. In summer they feed on migrating salmon and rainbow trout in the Ozernaya River.

Michel Roggo used an underwater camera on a pole to get as close to the animals as possible. "I had to be careful not to approach the bears, but to wait for them to come to the camera," he says. "My patience was rewarded when the dominant male went fishing in front of my lens. For a wildlife photographer it was the experience of a lifetime."

MICHEL ROGGO



Specialising in freshwater subjects, Michel works mostly underwater, often with remote-controlled systems. He went to Kamchatka as part of a project that will take him to the finest freshwater locations in the world. www.roggo.ch

ABOVE When a bear sees a sick or wounded salmon, it jumps on the fish, pressing it into the gravel of the river bed with its claws. It is astonishing how fast an animal weighing more than half a tonne can move.



SALMON RUN

The Ozernaya River is located in the Kronotsky Biosphere Reserve in the far east of Russia. Every August, up to five million sockeye and some humpback salmon swim from the Sea of Okhotsk upstream into the Kurile Lake to spawn. During that period, brown bears in the surrounding area migrate to the Ozernaya.

On the outflow of Kurile Lake there is a research station in the perfect place to count passing salmon. With a high concentration of fish in this location, it is a fantastic spot for both hungry bears and wildlife photographers too. I was given a special permit to work here thanks to my experience with non-intrusive, remote-controlled systems.



NEAR MISS ◀▶

This bear has just jumped on a sockeye salmon, but missed it. This isn't unusual – while I was observing the animals, only about one in four hunting leaps was successful. The white spot on the fish's head suggests that it is already wounded; bears prefer to hunt weakened prey because it is easier to catch. This is part of the process of natural selection, and is in itself important for the long-term survival of Pacific salmon in the Ozernaya watershed.

DREADED CLAW ◀

The last sight for many salmon in this area of the river is the claws of a hungry bear. In this instance it was actually investigating my pole cam. There were three young brown bears hanging around the research station, constantly causing problems. So I had to be careful and avoid any needlessly close encounters.

RICH PICKINGS ▶

When a bear does finally catch a fish, it sits on the river bed to feed. It removes the skin first, then – if the prey is a female, as in this photo – swallows the eggs before consuming the filet. I sometimes saw bears eating dead or even decaying fish, though there were plenty of live ones swimming around. This big bear fed very close to me, avoiding eye contact but listening carefully.



DOWN THE MUZZLE

After watching the bears on the Ozernaya for some time, I realised that the dominant male always fished at a particular spot. So I got there early one morning and waited patiently. He finally came out of the forest, walking through the river just in front of me, and began to fish without looking in my direction. Hours later, I slowly slid the camera into the water on a long pole.

The bear moved away a little. When I did the same thing the next day, he stayed close, investigating the camera under and above the water line. He was clearly getting used to it. I ended up watching the bear with my camera for days, though there were occasions when he made it clear that he wasn't comfortable with my presence by moving his head from side to side.



TAKING THE PLUNGE ◀

Here the dominant male is chasing a salmon. He left the forest to catch four or five before returning to rest. During this time other bears came to this fishing spot, including younger animals and females with their cubs. But they were clearly wary of older males, and their fishing trips were never as successful.

Bears need to gain enough fat to fuel their high-energy winter hibernation. Without these reserves they will starve to death or be forced to leave their den before spring to look for food. Also, females cannot conceive until they have accumulated sufficient reserves – and the more salmon one eats, the higher her chance of having twins.

WAITING GAME ▲

Fishing requires plenty of patience. Salmon can smell a bear and may even see one in clear water, and so they stay at a distance. But the longer a bear waits, the closer the fish swim. To create these underwater images, I held the camera housing on a long pole in the water, sitting at a distance of perhaps 5–8m. But with no armed ranger by my side, I had to be very careful.

I knew the Japanese photographer Michio Hoshino, who was killed by a bear while he slept in a tent on the banks of Kurile Lake in 1996. You always have to stay on your toes around these magnificent animals.



TIME TO RELAX

I'd often watch the bears sitting in the river after they ate, seemingly just relaxing and looking around – the Ozernaya is cold, but that's not an issue when an animal weighs 600kg with a significant layer of fat as insulation. A bear's posture communicates its mood.

For example, a male sitting down, looking away and yawning to feign a lack of interest indicates that he is subordinate and doesn't want to challenge other bears for dominance, fishing spots or females. During my first encounter with the dominant male here I just sat nearby avoiding eye contact. It was only when the bear appeared comfortable that I introduced the camera.