Camp Island: A Place for Pioneering Research

Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge

It All Starts with Salmon

The 1889 harvest of Karluk sockeye salmon set records: eight new canneries caught more than 3 million fish, or about half of Alaska's annual salmon harvest. A commercial success in the young territory, salmon remained a biological mystery – scientists had not yet established basic facts such as their return to natal streams or their inevitable death after spawning.

Yet the enormous harvests triggered concern for future sustainability, and that same year the 50th Congress approved US National Museum ichthyologist Tarleton Bean to conduct a biological investigation of salmon in Alaska. Bean focused exclusively on the Karluk, and made the first scientific observations of the Karluk Lake sockeye spawning grounds. While traveling around the lake, he took shelter in an Alutiiq barabara (sod house) on Camp Island, initiating a long tradition of the island as a research base camp.

Karluk barabara 1989, Tarleton Bean. NOAA National Archives

A Remote Laboratory

Salmon research at Karluk Lake developed rapidly in the 1920s under the direction of Stanford professor Charles Gilbert, the head Pacific fisheries scientist for the US Bureau of Fisheries. His protégé, Willis Rich, conducted intensive and pioneering field surveys, and their data led to major discoveries about sockeye salmon biology. Accessing the lake study site was not easy and included transport by steamer to Larsen Bay, overland hiking to the river, traveling by skiff and foot to the lake, and a slow journey by skiff across the length of the lake to the base of operations at Camp Island.

At first, Rich set up tents on wooden platforms for his camp and laboratory; by 1927, he built the island's first cabin. From 1926 to 1941, Rich and his successors, Barnaby and DeLacy, launched the long-term collection of data on Karluk sockeye salmon and their incredibly complex ecosystem that continues to this day.

U.S. Bureau of Fisheries Camp Island cabin and boathouse, Karluk Lake, 1930s. (from L. Gabriel, Herndon, VA)

At the Heart of the Refuge

Camp Island also served as a camp for bear hunters. Bear hunting guides like Charles Madsen and his son, Alf, used Camp Island from the 1930s to the 1950s as a base camp for guided bear hunts, first from tents and then from a cabin (located at the site of the current Pilot's cabin; the original structure burned in 1976).

In 1941, Camp Island and Karluk Lake became part of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, partly due to the advocacy efforts of guides like the Madsens. The Refuge added to the research presence with a small cabin near the Madsen cabin, and later acquired a second cabin from a bear guide across the lake.

Kodiak NWR Headquarters on Camp Island, Karluk Lake c. 1950s

Bear Wrangler

1957 at Camp Island brought a new kind of pioneering research: live trapping Kodiak brown bears. Like salmon several decades before, scientists were just developing their knowledge of brown bear life history; bears had never before been live-trapped in Alaska.

When the new Refuge manager and bear biologist, Will Troyer, arrived on the island in 1955, he set out to spend his next 8 summers learning more about Kodiak's bears. He developed techniques to capture and tag bears in the Karluk Lake area

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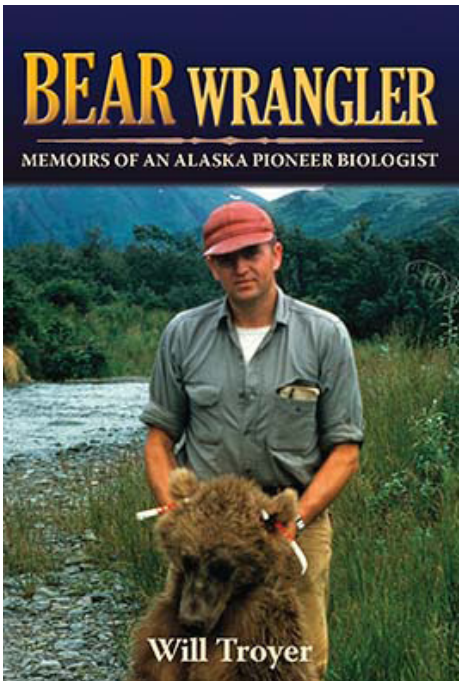
area so he could study their biology and behavior. His memoir also gleefully recalls a friendly rivalry with the fisheries research camp on the other side of the island, including elaborate pranks.



Cover for Will Troyer's 2008 memoir.

Time of Transition

The current main cabin, bunkhouse and boathouse at Camp Island tell a story of transition among agencies. The fisheries research station continued intensive research on Karluk salmon into the 1960s under the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries (previously part of the Biological Survey and then Fish and Wildlife Service). They renovated their facilities in 1959-1962, bringing pre-fabricated materials for a laboratory and Pan Abode living quarters in by helicopter.

The new State of Alaska assumed management of Karluk's Sockeye salmon in 1960 and gradually took over the role of the BFC during the next decade, including temporary use of the Camp Island research facilities.

U.S. Bureau of Commercial Fisheries research facilities, Camp Island, Karluk Lake, 1977. Transferred to Kodiak NWR in 1978.

During the late 1960s, the newly improved compound also played host to some unusual celebrities: the King and Queen of Nepal hunted bear from the camp in 1967, and Jacques Cousteau briefly stayed there in 1969 while filming an award winning movie about Karluk sockeye.

In 1978, the newly created Karluk Native Corporation (later merged with Koniag, Inc.) assumed ownership of the northern half of Karluk Lake, including part of Camp Island. That same year, the National Marine Fisheries Service (formerly BCF) transferred their research facilities to Kodiak Refuge.

Legacy

Today, the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge continues Camp Island's legacy of research and partnership with agencies and academic institutions. Current research includes a Brown Bear and Salmon Ecology graduate research project that uses innovative technology to track how bears and salmon move across the landscape.

Technicians maintain a remote camera system for counting salmon on a tributary of Karluk Lake. 2015.

Resources:

Gard, Richard, and Richard Lee Bottorff. 2014. A History of Sockeye Salmon Research, Karluk River System, Alaska, 1880–2010. U.S. Dept. of Commer. NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-F/SPO-125, 413 p.

Troyer, Will. 2008. Bear Wrangler. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press.