

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Lakes, Mountains and Brown Bears: Traveling with Beau

**Author's Note:** This is the tenth in a series of stories<sup>1</sup> reflecting on a 2007 trip to Alaska with my dog, Beau. During that trip I began a personal journey to an expanded understanding of One Health, the implications of which would unfold over several years.

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
November 10, 2014

While in Anchorage, Doris, Beau and I stayed in a Best Western motel beside Lake Hood, only three miles from downtown Anchorage. Lake Hood is the world's busiest seaplane base with a constant stream of lake traffic -- we were told almost 200 flights per day -- and more on the gravel runway adjacent to the water. Because many people in Alaska live in small, remote communities with no road service, air travel (often by airplanes equipped with water floats in the summer and with skis for snow travel in the winter) represents the only connections to the larger world.



*Float airplanes docked in the lagoon adjacent to Lake Hood*  
(Photo by the author)

On our second day in Anchorage and with Beau safely boarded in a veterinary clinic, Doris and I drove south from Anchorage through the Kenai Peninsula, our ultimate destination being the

ocean port of Seward.

Our 260-mile round trip was a spectacular collage of mountains and glaciers, ocean life, and modern Alaskan culture. One of the most memorable sites was the forest of naked spruce trees, still visible from the road that had been thrust into the salt water as the ground sank during the deadly 1964 earthquake and tsunami that so devastated the southern coast of Alaska.

We stopped to watch a pod of beluga whales at a place the locals call Beluga Point. There was something truly majestic about viewing these magnificent creatures so close to shore as they pursued the salmon while avoiding the Orcas that occasionally turned the hunters into the hunted.

Halfway to Seward, we stopped at a state park where an iceberg-laden lake had formed as the terminal moraine of the Portage Glacier. At one time a massive 14-mile-deep glacier filling the entire valley, the Portage group is now a series of five separate ice fields of named glaciers.

Seward is a gorgeous coastal town with stunning mountain and bay scenery. Though it has only 3,000 inhabitants—almost 20% are Native Americans—it is ranked in the top ten most lucrative fishing ports in the United States. Several buildings sported brightly-colored murals of ocean life, and restaurants featured interesting local menus of caribou, reindeer and musk oxen.



*Marina restaurant with its unique local fare*  
(Photo by the author)

Behind the town, the mountains rise through various layers of greens, from the tall dark spruce, to the lighter shrubs in the higher elevation, then the pale grass blending eventually into the

grey rock dome partially covered with snow. In front of the mountains was the Seward Small Boat Harbor with sailboats and fishing boats, some offering cruises.



*Seward Harbor with its personal and commercial boats. Distinct layers of green vegetation are seen in the distant mountain.*

(Photo by the author)

We lifted our faces to the damp salt water breeze during a boat tour of Resurrection Bay. Wildlife was abundant, from puffins and bald eagles to sea lions basking in the sun on a rocky ledge. A colorful jellyfish appeared right next to our boat.

The following day, we headed north, for an extended visit to Denali National Park and Preserve. Encompassing six million acres of lowland forest, the lower levels give way to tundra and then to mountains. America's highest mountain, McKinley, towers over 20,000 feet. Many tourists spend several days in the park and never are able to see the upper reaches of the mountain because of dense cloud cover. We were extremely fortunate, seeing the peak on three separate daylong trips into the interior.

During our visits into the park's interior, we typically traveled in park busses with other tourists, but also took the time to hike the grass-, shrub- and flower-laden tundra. Especially fascinating were the glacial-fed "braided rivers" that meandered through the valleys on their way to the Yukon River.



*Mount McKinley, North American's highest peak (20,320 ft) on a rare cloudless day*  
(Photo by the author)

We saw several brown bears, thankfully from the safety of the bus, frequently engorging on berries to prepare for late fall hibernation. An old white sow was guarding a pair of cubs, seemingly disinterested in our presence as they feasted on berries. One of the cubs, perhaps a two-year-old, showed the effects of a berry-heavy diet.



*A two-year-old cub shows the telltale red diarrhea of a heavy berry diet*  
(Photo by the author)

A solitary male had a turquoise ear tag that suggested he had previously been darted and examined by park rangers.



*A solitary male wandering among the berries*  
(Photo by the author)

We happened to be in Denali during a near-total eclipse of the moon as well as a lovely 2:00 am dancing display of the northern lights. But we were most entertained by the trio of bear bums (sow with her two older cubs) walking away from us down the mountain road after their day's fill of berries.



*A white-colored old sow ambles down the road with her two cubs*  
*after a day's pre-hibernation feast of berries*  
(Photo by the author)

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Donald F. Traveling with Beau: My 34-day Trip to a Deeper Understanding of One Health. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, Sept 9, 2014.

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#### KEYWORDS:

Human-animal bond  
One Health  
Traveling with a dog  
Alaska Highway  
Denali National Park  
Seward, Alaska  
Brown bear  
Mount McKinley

#### LEADING QUESTION:

What is the highest mountain in North America?

#### META-SUMMARY:

The author explores Alaska from Anchorage through the Kenai Peninsula and Seward to Denali National Park and Mount McKinley with his dog.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.