

Go Now: Alaska's Secret Season

Fall is the unsung best season to visit America's wildest state. Here, writer Karen Catchpole explains why. Photograph by Eric Mohl



Clear views of Mount McKinley in the fall, Alaska's secret season.

Once the cruise ships, RVs, and mosquitoes of summer have disappeared, fall brings new reasons to explore Alaska's epic scenery, wildlife, and waters. Here's a special dispatch from writer Karen Catchpole on how to make the most of it.

Do Denali

Fifty percent of the land in America's National Parks System is located in Alaska, including the six million stunning acres (two million hectares) of **Denali National Park & Preserve** (www.nps.gov/dena). Denali's campgrounds are often booked solid all summer, but come fall, you stand a good chance of getting a site, even in the coveted Wonder Lake Campground.

Fall is also moose rutting season and sightings of amorous groups are common. Thanks to groves of Aspens and rolling carpets of tundra and blueberry bushes, the park also puts on an unforgettable display of fall colors.

As the blueberries peak, the park's grizzly bears gorge themselves silly on their final pre-hibernation harvest. During a hike in early September, I came across two bears vacuuming up blueberries on a sloping hillside, just off the dirt road that runs through Denali National Park. For more than an hour, I watched a female with a cub, which was so roly-poly that it literally jiggled when it walked, at a distance of between 75 and 200 feet (23 and 61 meters). The bears didn't seem too interested in me, but I can assure you that those blueberries didn't stand a chance.

The Alaskan sky is also more likely to be clear in autumn than at other times of the year, rewarding fall travelers with the occasional unobstructed top-to-bottom view of Mount McKinley. One glorious day last fall, the entire mountain was visible from as far away as Anchorage.

By far the most luxe base camp for your **Denali National Park** adventures is **Camp Denali and North Face Lodge** (www.campdenali.com), one of only three privately owned lodges allowed to operate inside the park. After a seven-hour bus journey from one side of the park to the other (the time flies thanks to a gourmet picnic lunch and endless wildlife sightings along the way), you can check into a lodge room with all the modern conveniences or one of 17 hand-crafted cabins, which feature a wood-burning stove, handmade quilt, and gas lamps. While there may be no electricity and no bathroom, each cabin has its own four-star outhouse with a perfectly positioned, heart-shaped window cut into the door giving guests a million dollar view of Mount McKinley from their throne.

As I settled into my cabin early last September, a staff member knocked on the door to tell me that a bull moose was strolling through the property. Two days later, a mother bear and her cub silently followed another guest right up the dirt road that leads to the main lodge, where delicious meals are served.

Denali National Park & Preserve is technically open all year, but once the snow begins to fall, usually by mid-September, the park stops maintaining the road. Bus service through the park is suspended and some campgrounds close. In early September Camp Denali and North Face Lodge also closes for the winter.

Amazing Aurora Gazing

Northern lights viewing in and around Fairbanks is at its most dramatic between September and October, thanks to a combination of high aurora borealis activity, clear skies, a lack of light pollution, and moderate weather—in early October 2006, daytime temperatures in Fairbanks were in the 60s (16 degrees Celsius).

One of the best places to watch the spectacle in the sky is at the **Silver Gulch Brewing and Bottling Co.** (www.ptialaska.net/~gbrady/pages/main.html) in Fox, a dozen miles (19 kilometers) outside of Fairbanks. Every October the brewery opens its doors for an Oktoberfest celebration that combines their handcrafted beer with aurora-watching. Snag a spot near the huge, wood-burning stove (made out of a vertically-installed cement truck mixing cylinder) in the brewery's backyard, and you'll stay toasty no matter how long the show (or the beer) lasts.

Drive the Dalton

The Dalton Highway, aka the Haul Road, is 500 dusty, muddy, bumpy miles (805 kilometers) of vehicle-munching infamy stretching straight north from Fairbanks to the Arctic Circle and over the 4,739-foot (1,444-meter) Atigun Pass to the other side of the Brooks Range. The Dalton then goes down to the North Slope and on to Deadhorse, shadowing the Trans-Alaska Pipeline as it carries crude from the oil fields of Prudhoe Bay through exquisitely remote, wildlife-filled tundra.

In early fall thousands of caribou (mostly from the Central Arctic Herd) migrate through the area—sometimes holding up Dalton Highway traffic for hours as they hoof it across the road. By October resident arctic foxes and snowy owls have put on their white winter coats, but with snow accumulation still weeks away their "camouflage" makes them ridiculously easy to spot against the red, gold, and yellow fall colors of the tundra.

About 50 miles (80 kilometers) shy of Deadhorse, I watched four pure white arctic foxes hunt for lemmings in the tundra as a pair of big white owls dive-bombed them from above. I was so mesmerized—and the animals so unfazed by people—that I pulled my truck over and got out to watch the show.

As I was standing next to the truck, the owls ditched the foxes and started hovering over me. Hanging magically in the air, they swiveled their round heads and stared at me with intense black eyes.

Fall also brings the native Kaktovikmiut tribe's annual whale hunt in the Arctic village of Kaktovik. From Deadhorse you can charter a plane for the short flight to Kaktovik, about 100 miles (161 kilometers), to watch polar bears scavenge from the "bone pile" that villagers leave on the beach after they've cleaned their kills.

The Insiders' Inside Passage

The Alaska Marine Highway (AMH) ferry system navigates 3,400 miles (5,472 kilometers) of waterways through Alaska's Inside Passage, connecting more than 30 ports on dozens of islands dotting Alaska's southern coastline. AMH ferries carry more than 400,000 passengers and 100,000 cars each year. The service is such a unique and important form of Alaskan transportation that the AMH was named an All-American Road by the Federal Highway Administration in 2005.

The ferry services a wide range of destinations (including Juneau, as well as ports like Petersburg and Skagway), but you shouldn't miss a trip past Sitka, where migrating humpbacks congregate between mid-September and mid-January. Or get off the ferry and celebrate the annual **Sitka Whale Fest** (www.sitkawhalefest.org), which is held in early November.

Another secret-season must is a layover for at least a few days in the town of Wrangell on Wrangell Island, where fall brings thousands of migrating snow geese, ducks, and sandhill cranes. Be in the right place when they all take off and it's like standing in a living snow globe.

In addition to the exquisite bird watching, fall brings other outdoor temptations to this adventure-packed island. Barbara and John, the enthusiastic and knowledgeable couple who own and operate **Alaska Charters & Adventures** (www.alaskaupclose.com), prefer custom-fit adventures to what they call "cookie cutter" trips. In the fall, they take small groups out for a little (or a lot) of fishing and they can ease their boats closer to the LeConte glacier than at any other time of year. That's because the cooler autumn weather slows down calving activity on the LeConte which can even calve from below, sending huge, fast-moving chunks of ice, called shooters, up from underneath the water where the glacier juts out into a fjord.

It was a crystal clear fall day when I stopped by **Sunrise Aviation** (www.sunriseflights.com) for a sky-high tour over the Stikine Ice Field which includes the LeConte Glacier, Shakes Glacier, and an eerie formation called the Witch's Caldron that really did look like it was boiling and bubbling as clouds swirled over its surface. My attention was suddenly diverted by a sheer wall of rock in front of the plane's windshield which turned out to be Devils Thumb, a 9,000-foot (2,743-meter) spire that is featured in Jon Krakauer's book *Eiger Dreams*.

My pilot, Tyler, playfully dipped a wing, and we skirted safely past the rock at about a 45-degree bank before we swooped down over the face of the LeConte Glacier and buzzed low over Chief Shakes Hot Springs, which has one open-air tub and one with only marginally effective bug screens around it. In the fall, however, you can soak in peace since the voracious bugs of summer have disappeared.

Back in my truck, I explored more of Wrangell Island, part of the 17-million-acre (6.9-million-hectare) **Tongass National Forest**, which wraps its arms around scores of islands in Southern Alaska. About 15 miles (24 kilometers) south of town, up an old logging road, I came to a group of U.S. Forestry Service campgrounds called the Nemo Campsites. Three Sisters View Point Campsite offered stunning views of three peaks across the sparkingly clear Zimovia Strait and had just a single, ultra-private tent site. Next came Anita Bay Overlook with two campsites followed by Highline Campsite, which was also limited to just two tent sites. Amazingly, all of these campgrounds were completely empty this time of year.

Time your visit to Wrangell to coincide with Halloween and your fondness in this "holiday" might be restored. Just follow the crowds to the Totem Bar for some serious Alaskan drinking and some of the most creative costumes you're likely to ever see. Last year's revelers included a pair of sisters, one dressed as a keg and the other dressed as a foaming cup of freshly poured beer—Alaskan Amber, of course.

Stick with the waterborne theme by spending your nights in the **Rain Haven** (www.rainwalkerexpeditions.com/rainhaven.html), a beautiful one-bedroom houseboat with a fully equipped galley, modern bathroom, and sleeping accommodations for four, which can be docked in near the heart of Wrangell or moored in a remote harbor along the island's gorgeous coastline.

As every local knows, fall is also fire sale season on the AMH, which historically slashes fares after the summer tourist season ends. Check the AMH website for the latest.

Make Stephen Colbert Proud. Or Not.

Haines holds its annual **Alaska Bald Eagle Festival** (baldeaglefestival.org) in late November, when thousands of the regal birds converge to feast on the last of the salmon run, which is accessible in Haines until early winter.

But you don't have to wait for the festival to officially begin in order to hang out with hordes of Stephen Colbert's favorite freedom flyers. The early birds, literally, start arriving in Haines in October when hundreds of bald eagles can be seen perched in trees and fishing on the Chilkat River flats.

Not a member of the Colbert Nation? Show it by hanging out with his nemesis. Throughout the fall, Chilkoot Lake State Recreation Site, 10 miles (16 kilometers) northeast of Haines, is the place to be for fee-free, crowd-free, and very up-close grizzly bear viewing.

Every evening at dusk bears can be seen scooping up the late-running salmon in the Chilkoot River and all you have to do is stand on the riverbank and stare. When I arrived around 6:30 p.m., there didn't seem to be any bears—just a handful of cars and about 30 other people gathered to watch.

Then I spotted one chest deep in the water, eyes locked on the current and ready to pounce. The grizzly seemed completely unfazed by the audience of humans gathering less than 50 feet (15 meters) away. There were so many salmon in the water that the bears had the luxury of only eating their favorite part of each fish (the head) before tossing the rest of the carcass into the current for the bald eagles to swoop down and enjoy.

When in Haines, settle into the **Chilkat Eagle B&B** (www.eagle-bb.com) as much for the comfortable and affordable rooms (with a separate kitchen for guests to use) as for the charming and worldly owner, Dave, who is a former fisherman and a wealth of information about the area. Do not leave until you have tried Dave's delicious Tutti-Fruitti pancakes made with fruit from his own garden.

Writer Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl spent last fall exploring Alaska by road on just one leg of their Trans-Americas Journey, a 3-year, 100,000-plus-mile (160,934-plus-kilometer) road trip through North, Central, and South America. Learn more about their Trans-Americas Journey at www.trans-americas.com.