

KAMCHATKA

Russian land of bears and fire

►► A land of spectacular wild beauty, with dozens of smoking volcanoes – Rivers, creeks and lakes crowded with salmon. Forests of birch and conifer and in another part of the territory the Siberian tundra. This is where huge brown bears live, this is Kamchatka. ►

Photos and text by Marco Urso, Wildlife Photographer

► Every year at the end July a vast number of salmon congregate in the lake attracting a large number of brown bears



Kamchatka is a volcanic territory with many active volcanos

The Ring of Fire

Cold, remote and scarcely populated, Kamchatka is a long peninsula southeast of Siberia. For a long time it was forbidden to people from the west and only in the latest decades it opened up to visitors. Its name sounds like far and difficult places to live, though lays at a similar latitude to Great Britain. Siberian arctic winds combined with the cold Oyashio sea current that comes directly from the Polar Pack through the Bering Sea result in a much colder and longer winter.

“The peninsula is comparable in size to Japan.”

Though on one hand coldness dominates the land, on the other fire is the real master as Kamchatka is a section of the Pacific Ring of Fire, a chain of active volcanoes and geysers that starts from Equator ending to Alaska.

The peninsula is comparable in size to Japan or one and half times Italy, but is inhabited by only 500.000 people.

Only approachable by helicopter

I land at Petropavlovsk, the capital, after a nine hour flight from Moscow. The town does not inspire an immediate enthusiasm. Everything looks grey and against the horizon two volcano peaks face each other.

But as soon as the helicopter, which is the only way of travelling to natural paradises

like the Kuril Lake, takes off, Kamchatka shows all its natural beauty. The journey to the lake lasts one hour and twenty minutes. Kuril Lake is situated in the heart of South Kamchatka Sanctuary and was formed 8500 years ago in a caldera following a powerful volcanic explosion and massive collapse of its cone. Today the surface covers 77 squared kilometers and its maximum depth is 316 meters making it Kamchatka’s deepest fresh-water lake.

In 1981 a volcanic eruption dumped thousands of tons of nutrient-rich ash into the lake. Since then a peak of six millions adult salmon returned from the sea and attempted to spawn in an area with space for only 1,5 million. ▶





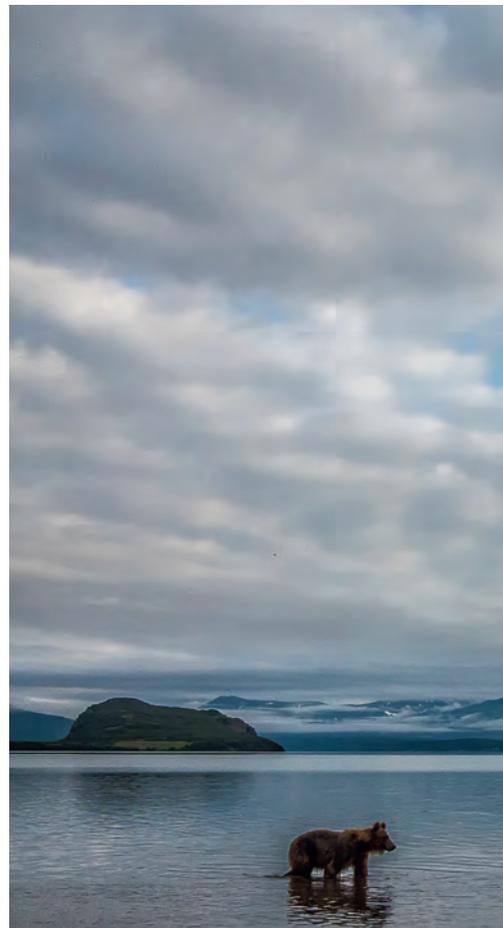
The only convenient way to reach the lake is by helicopter

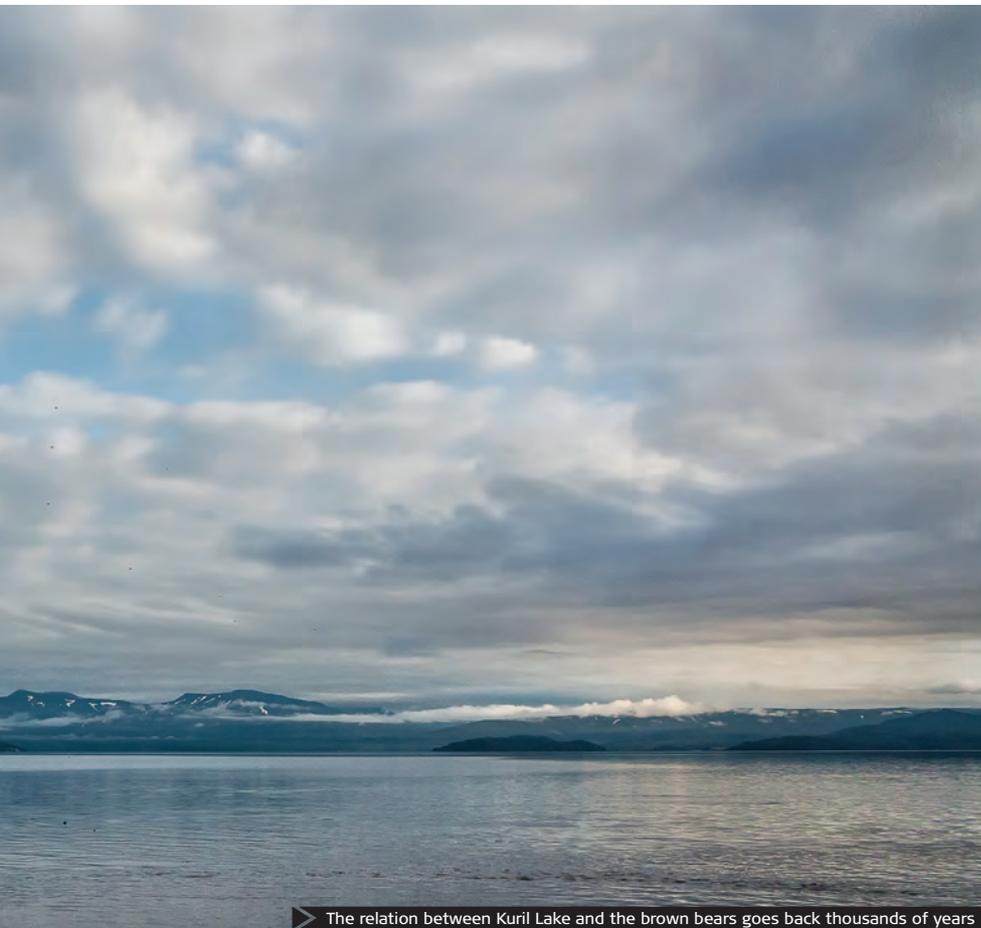


Even the clouds are impressive here



Sometimes bears appear almost like playing <





▶ The relation between Kuril Lake and the brown bears goes back thousands of years

A 2,5 meter tall predator

The abundance of salmon, especially the red sockeye, attracts plenty of brown bears that after the long and cold winter had to survive for some weeks only on roots and dead fish. In July and August the salmon bonanza enables them to build up the reserve of calories necessary for surviving the following winter.

The Kamchatka brown bear (*Ursos Arctos*), also known as grizzly bear in other parts of the world, can reach the height of 2.5 meters when standing up and can weight up to 600 kilograms. Though there is no scientific count, it is believed that the brown bear population in Kamchatka reaches 15.000, most of which concentrated in the south part of the peninsula. Kuril lake is one of the most populated areas.

“The Kamchatka bear is a shy animal”



▶ Each bear seems to present his own style of fishing



Bears are approachable although always with caution



The local brown bears, due to their diet based mainly on fish, appear more mild mannered than their Siberian and Alaskan cousins, but the memorial at the ranger station of the Japanese photographer Michio Hoshino, who was killed by a bear, is there to remind us that these wild predators should always be respected and kept at a secure distance.

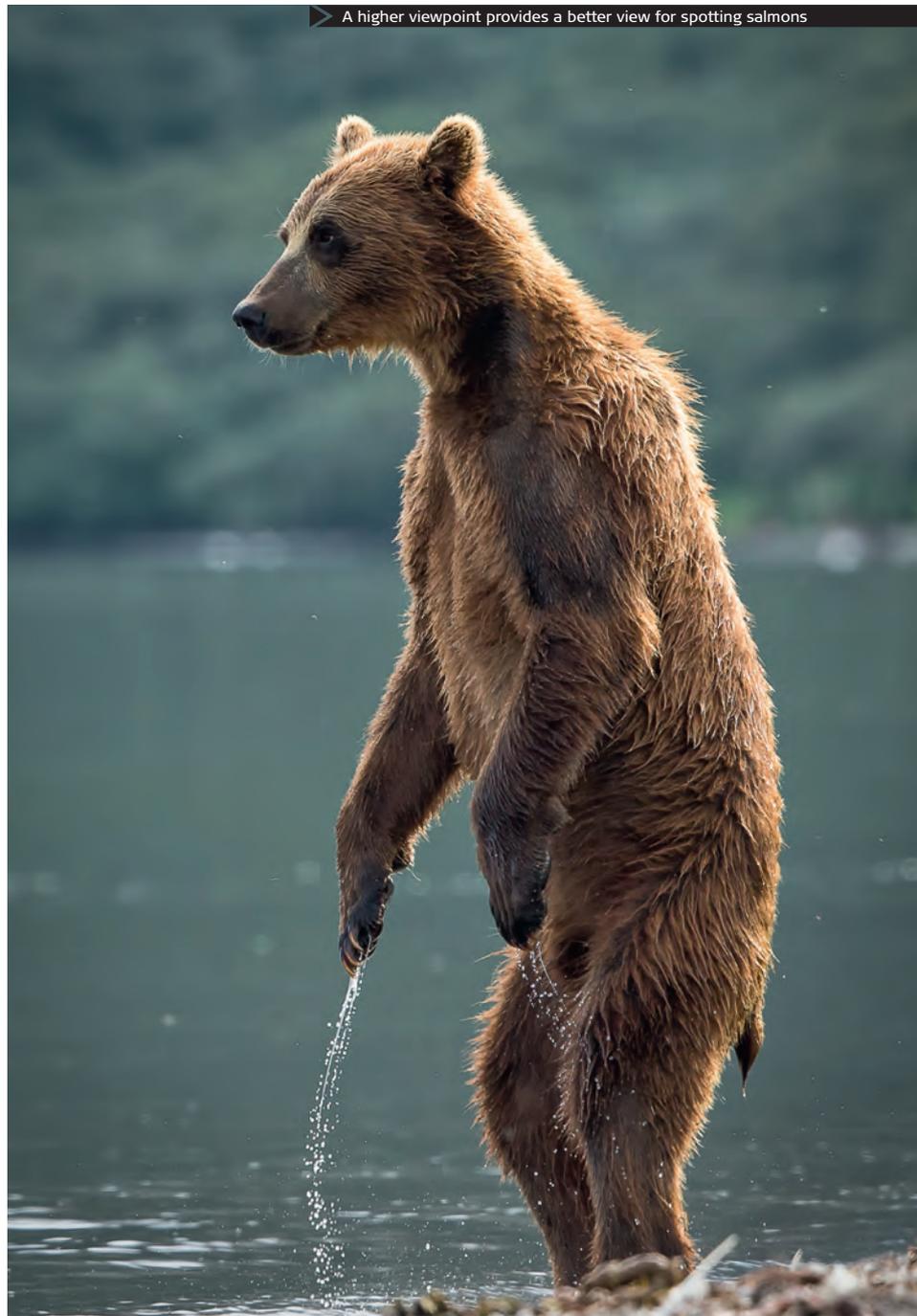
Mutual respect and an electrical fence

The Kamchatka bear is a shy animal and keeps this attitude even during the peak of the salmon's season when dozens of bears crowd the same location, gorging themselves on salmon along the lakeshores and the rivers. Each individual tries to find his own territory, just a few meter away from the other, a sort of a personal fishing reserve. When a bear interferes with the territory of another a gesture or a moaning sound is enough to warn the competitor who change direction. This attitude so far has also been working towards human beings , who are not considered preys but rivals to respect and to be respected by.

“Each bear has his own technique and personality”

I pitch my tent close by the rangers cabin. The bears are so at home in this area that I see them wandering around the shores of the lake below our camp and even behind it. An electrified wiring system is all around the place to prevent bears from entering ▶

▶ A higher viewpoint provides a better view for spotting salmon



▶ My tent, my recover and photo blind



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> You can also see interactions among mothers and cubs

the area. Once outside I am always escorted by a warden with a shotgun and am warned never to venture out of the wired perimeter at night.

Bears With Attitude

It is the end of July and days are mild, even warm, but the difference of temperature between day and night is remarkable and a proper sleeping bag is required. For eight days my life follows the wildlife photographer pace, waking up at 5 am, a quick breakfast and then patrolling the shores by boat to find the best spot where bears concentrate. Tripod, long lens and a good number of CF cards. This place is Heaven for bears and a Mecca for wildlife photographers.

“This place is heaven for bears and a Mecca for wildlife photographers.”

Kuril lake is not only a great location for taking amazing shots of bears fishing, but also for freezing their everyday life with mothers nursing, cubs playing and running . Each bear has his own technique and personality and after a while I start to forecast their behaviour. It is a clever and curious species, they take an interest in our life vests, stealing them several times.



> Bears are highly intelligent and extremely curious...



Marco Urso, the author of the text and photos of this article, is a professional wildlife photographer <

I keep on taking pictures till sunset, and after a frugal dinner I go back to my tent where I look at the pictures of the day before falling asleep. The days quickly go by and the helicopter comes to bring me back to Petropavlovsk. I greet the lake and the bears from above and promise to come back. ■