



Filming brown bears in the remote Alaskan wilderness with Erin Ranney

Wildlife cinematographer **Erin Ranney** talks about her experiences filming brown bears in the remote wilderness of Alaska and shares her thoughts about animal behaviour

By Erin Ranney

Bears have been there my entire life. Thinking back, I never realised how unique that was. I grew up going to my family's remote fishing camp in Alaska. Most of the time, you could scare the bears off, usually banging pots together, to keep them away from camp.

They tended to pull equipment apart or break into cabins, no matter how much you cleaned the smell of food out of it at the end of the season. Keeping them away seemed to be the best option. We even had to burn one of our cabins down after a bear decided to knock down the wall and hibernate in it all winter (as well as letting in many other animals in the process).

I appreciated that my family never wanted to shoot the bears, they respected the fact that we were ultimately in their home and had to deal with the consequences of that and find other solutions. You quickly start to learn what a smart and adaptive animal they are, which in turn ended up being the reasons I was so drawn to filming them.

I started working the summers at Orca Adventure Lodge in Cordova, Alaska, as well as continuing to commercial fish in Bristol Bay, to make some extra money to pursue film studies after finding a degree in Wildlife Ecology.

I'd go out in the mornings before work and then in the evenings after work to find bears and other wildlife to photograph and film. My family quickly accepted that this was what I wanted to do, and my dad and uncle encouraged me and taught me everything they knew from growing up in remote Alaska and co-existing with bears.

Sometimes, if I got lucky, my uncle would drop me off in his bush plane at one of the family's remote camps and retrieve me a



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few days later. I'd spend the days figuring out how to follow bears and how to read their behaviour. Since they are hunted and/or not adapted by people in these areas, they become a much different bear than the kind you find in Katmai National Park or that you might find in Lake Clarke National Park. These bears tend to be more skittish and avoid you all together or far more aggressive and quicker to bluff charge.

Every moment with those bears captivated me even more. One defining moment for me occurred after two weeks of waiting every day on a riverbank, getting soaked by the rain. That afternoon the rain finally cleared, and a sow immediately came out from the thick brush and fished the river right in front of me. Her hair glistened in the sun as it was still wet from the rain. I was so focused on her that I did not realize until she left that I had two bears sitting right behind me watching as I filmed her. They can be surprisingly quiet animals for how big they are.

This ended up being the best way to start for me, as when I received my first camera assisting job based in Katmai National Park, not only was I shocked at how much easier it was to get footage of the bears but reading behaviour was much more simple. I was fortunate to have my first camera mentor as Mark Emery, who had spent every summer in Alaska filming bears and other wildlife for over forty years. I soaked up all his knowledge from these areas.

In 2019, I had decided to follow my family's stories around coastal, remote Alaska and explore the same places that my

grandma, uncle and dad had throughout the last fifty years. My grandma was an exceptional bush pilot in Alaska, flying in remote regions of Alaska during her career.

My uncle followed in her footsteps, becoming a bush pilot and then a boat captain as well, and my dad focused on boats and became a brilliant boat captain and outdoorsman. They are all quite humble people though, and I had to work hard to get them to start sharing but when the stories started flowing, you were transported to these beautiful places and the wildlife there, sometimes even behaviours that had never been filmed.

I spent almost six months in some of their favourite places with very little budget, good friends and the RED Epic-W I had purchased with my guiding and fishing money early in my career. I planned everything for the camps, the food, the equipment (both camera and camping), the solar panels and windmills for charging batteries, bush and helicopter flights and weights. I often think the key to my progress throughout my career has been throwing myself into situations that might be slightly over my head. My family remained great at double checking lists for me but encouraged me to figure most of the logistics out myself. My dad and uncle have been two of the most influential and supportive people in my career despite not having any film background.

Here is an excerpt from my journal from August 13th, 2019: "The cabin was surrounded by a dense forest of alders, the only hint of it was the roof from the air



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when [the pilot] turned the otter for me to see. Thankful for the chainsaw or we might not have been able to make a path to it. The vegetation is so different from the old photos my grandma and uncle showed me, as is the water level of the river.

We listened to his engine fade in the distance. I think this is becoming one of my favourite parts, hearing that silence and knowing you're finally alone and here. The outside world can fade away.

We used an old tote attached to the quad to pull gear in. We untied the door from the tree and removed the boards from

the windows, letting light stream in the dark little space. The inside was dusty and mouldy, it's in great condition.

We caught dillies from the river for dinner and cooked over a little fire. And after all the dusty cleaning and organizing gear in the cabin, we swam. The water is icy cold, but it feels good. And there, in that moment we relaxed. The chaos of setting up camp was over. We could enjoy it, the views, the smells, the sounds. This place is a sensory overload. We watched as the towering mountains were illuminated by the setting sun. I'm not sure I've been somewhere quite as beautiful

as this. As we swam, a bear wandered down from the trees and began to fish next to us. There is a surreal feeling of being content. I expected to keep being nervous about messing up some silly logistics or whatever throughout the whole project, but it's completely gone away. This feels like home.

I left this project with an even greater appreciation of the areas I film in and the wildlife that we observe. The experience forced me to learn different aspects of the filming process. I became more intimately knowledgeable with bears that were not used to humans and had to push myself to keep the crews (my friends) safe, many who had no previous experience with bears. You become very aware of every facial change, you listen carefully to every 'chuff' or 'snort' they make, and you are constantly keeping an eye on the social dynamics between the bears. And immediately after, I was back in Katmai filming for other commercial wildlife documentary projects.

Filming bears in coastal Alaska National Parks can be addictive and it can give you a false sense of security. In Katmai, you immediately feel like you have a connection with the bears, and it becomes so easy to anthropomorphise them. They walk alongside you. You are often about as interesting to them as the gulls waiting for scraps of fish they catch, so you end up having them closely approach or walk past you. We believe the mother bears may bring the cubs up to you to 'babysit' while they feed, perhaps knowing that the large



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males that could kill the cubs tend to avoid humans. These bears are used to tourists and guides coming in. It makes you feel like an expert even after just one season. It's so easy to become complacent and forget to respect the fact that these animals can easily kill you.

I always recommend having a guide to production companies or at least someone watching who is used to bears and knows what to do if the situation turns south. It is easy to think that it will not, but it would only take a second and one bear who has had enough. I carry bear spray and flares with me and expect that my guide or assistant does as well.

For filming, you are often dealing with very rainy and wet days with cameras that were not built with these environments in mind, I really should be sponsored by desiccant! Equipment-wise, I have mostly been shooting with different REDs, including my first camera- the Epic-W, then the Gemini and now the Raptor- the frame rate choices have been ideal for different sequences including bears fighting and fishing. I lean towards using an O'Connor 2560 or a similar tripod for most of my work there.

You learn tricks and tips from every cinematographer you work with, everyone has their own way of dealing with the weather, preferences of types of equipment and working with the wildlife. Since I started filming, I have tried to listen to each cinematographer's favourites so that I can develop my own that work for me. An example would be my camera bag- I now have a custom, waterproof camera bag made by Ivo in Germany. Not only can it fit the RED raptor with the CN20 lens, but it is also the first camera bag I have had that fits my waist properly and allows me to carry the weight on my hips during the long hikes that bear shoots often require.

Though I will likely return to Katmai again, I continue to be drawn to the temptations of the quieter, more challenging places in Alaska for brown bears. They still feel like home.

Article by Erin Ranney, wildlife cinematographer. She is a member of the International Association of Wildlife Filmmakers (IAWF).

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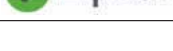
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