

From the National Geographic Sea Lion in Alaska



A Mountain Goat Kid with Mom

Glacier Bay National Park

Bright sunshine made our day sing. The surrounding mountains stood high and crisp against a blue sky. We picked up our National Park Ranger, Marylou Blakeslee at six in the morning. As we headed north, we passed occasional sea otters and watched several northern sea lions ripping fish apart. This is no easy task if your teeth are used mostly for gripping. These pinnipeds must grasp a fish firmly and then thrash their heads back and forth violently until pieces fly off. Gulls take advantage of this flinging food by grabbing the pieces as soon as they hit the water.

After an early breakfast we arrived at Marble Island, a sea lion haulout. There are often 300 to 400 animals resting here after fishing in the area. This species has lost more than 80% of its population in western Alaska and is now considered endangered, but here in Southeast Alaska they are doing well. This rocky island is also a bird rookery. Tufted puffins, pigeon guillemots, black-legged kittiwakes, glaucous-winged gulls and black oystercatchers all breed here. This remote location is an ideal site for colonial seabirds, because it is close to abundant food and has steep, exposed cliffs and other habitats for nest sites. The puffins were the favorites. Their endearing quality is probably because of their comically oversized bill.

Mountain goats were scattered over the higher hillsides at Gloomy Knob. It didn't live up to its grey and drizzly reputation today. The dolomite was brightly lit by the sun. Most of the goats that live here were high up on the rocks except for one nanny and her kid. They were close to eye level and quite approachable. This youngster was probably a week or less old. They are only about 12 inches long and 6 to 7 pounds at birth after a 180-day gestation period. They can keep up with their mothers after they are only a few hours old.

The flat area in today's photo is surrounded by very steep cliffs. Nannies pick nearly inaccessible locations like this to have their young. It's often interesting to try to pick a route they will take out of such a tricky place, no easy task for such a little kid. Falls are one of the leading causes of mortality for the young. If a kid lives past the first few months, it will stay with mom for about a year or longer. Yearlings like to spend the next couple of years with a nanny even if it is not its own. If you wanted to be an old goat, you'd have to live about 13 years or longer.

The day went far too fast. We watched black bears in Geike Inlet after an afternoon of looking at stunning glacial scenery. Two different bears scraped the rocks with their claws and lapped their barnacle soup as we quietly watched.

Soon we were at our own dinner. Hikes and exploration of Bartlett Cove ended our very full day in Glacier Bay National Park.

Robert "Pete" Pederson, Natural History Staff

