

REPTILES in Alaska

Alaska, the Land of the Midnight Sun, offers many wonders, but not many herps.

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This cool horned lizard sculpture can be found at McCarran Airport in Las Vegas.

These dried and splayed tokay geckos are used to brew a "gecko tea."

The only frogs I saw in Alaska were on totem poles such as this one. Freshly returned from my Alaska vacation, I have to say that even though I was gone two weeks, I feel like I've been gone for two months. There's a lot to do in Alaska. That, coupled with the extended daylight period, can lead to a bit of weariness that takes a few days to wear off. I've been back for a couple of days and am now getting back into the groove. Of course, no sooner will I get settled back into my usual rut when I'll be heading to Toronto, where I'll be attending the first Canadian Reptile Breeders Expo.

Although Alaska is certainly not teeming with herps, they did figure into my vacation in small instances. First off, on the very first day, my friend Reed, with whom I was traveling, and I happened upon a really cool horned lizard sculpture at the airport in Las Vegas, which was where I was making a connecting flight to Vancouver. So there was a cool photo op right off the bat.

In Vancouver – the first week of the trip was comprised of an Alaskan cruise up the Inland Passage, and I was to catch the ship in Vancouver – I had another herp encounter, but of the more disturbing kind. I've written about the Chinese penchant for using turtles for food, and the time I happened upon red-eared slider on the menu of a restaurant in Beijing at which I was dining. This time we were poking around in Chinatown in Vancouver, and in a drugstore we came upon dozens of tokay geckos that had been dried, gutted and splayed out on little wooden crosses. They looked like little kites made out of gecko skin and heads.

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The salmon were a'spawning. This batch was on view in Ketchikan.

This black bear was a resident at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center in Portage Glacier. There you could see black bears, grizzlies, moose, caribou, bald eagles and other animals, many of which were taken in by the Center when they were injured or orphaned.

This is Margerie Glacier in Glacier Bay National Park. It was the most actively calving glacier we saw. It was here that I made a bonehead maneuver, when I filmed a big calving only to find afterward that my camera wasn't actually on.

These are some of the "spirit boxes" that can be found at the cemetery in Eklutna.

I got to play with some of the working sled dogs at Denali National Park.

Here is just one of the spectacular views at Denali National Park. Mount McKinley, the tallest mountain in North America, is there, but 90 percent of the time it is obscured by clouds. I saw parts of it, including both peaks at one time, but never had a clear, unobstructed view.

Dall sheep were the most commonly seen animal in Denali. I saw six brown bears there, but never got this close to any of them. That's probably a good thing. According to the signs that accompanied the gecko corpses, the lizards were a recommended ingredient in a tea that could be brewed to alleviate asthma. To quote the sign directly: "How to Use Gecko? Mix with other herb, boil together to make tea to drink. We don't eat the GECKO. LOL." Both king-sized (pictured here) and smaller geckos were for sale. To be truthful I thought about buying one for an office decoration, but decided not to endorse the lizards being killed for such purposes.

Then it was on to Alaska. There, all we saw were frogs – the wooden kind, which could be seen on totem poles, adorning native Alaskan masks and sculptures.

As for flesh-and-blood herps, Alaska doesn't have many, but there are some. The species you would be most likely to encounter in Alaska would be the wood frog (*Rana sylvatica*), which has the widest Alaskan distribution. I spoke with a couple of Alaskans who mentioned that they had frogs in their ponds during the spring; I suspect these would be wood frogs.

The Columbia spotted frog (*R. luteiventris*) is also indigenous, as is the western toad (*Bufo boreas*), rough-skinned newt (*Taricha granulose*), long-toed salamander (*Ambystoma macrodactylum*) and northwestern salamander (*A. gracile*) but

these are not as widely distributed as the wood frog. According to alaskaherps.info, there have been reports of introduced populations of red-legged frogs (*R. aurora*) and Pacific chorus frogs (*Pseudacris regilla*) in Alaska, as well.

In addition, sea turtles that turn up in Alaskan waters include the loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), green (*Chelonia mydas*) and leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*). Besides from these turtles, the only reptile that is suspected to pop up in Alaska occasionally is the garter snake (*Thamnophis* spp.), although this is suspected and not verified, as there are no documented sightings.

To read more about these Alaskan herps, check out www.alaskaherps.info.

We were staying with Reed's mom and stepdad, and one day John, the stepdad, said to me that he was visiting a friend of his named Ray who pulled out a copy of REPTILES magazine, pointed at my picture in the editorial, and said, "Do you know this guy?" Apparently Jenasy, Reed's mom, had told Ray that I was a friend of the family. John acknowledged this, and Ray had a message for John to pass on to me: If I would publish more articles about reptile natural history, as opposed to articles about pet reptiles he'd subscribe rather than pick up the occasional copy.

Eventually Ray and his wife, Gina, joined us for dinner. Dinner that night included moose meat, a first for me (I also had reindeer sausage on this trip, another first). Moose to me tasted like a cross between beef liver and pot roast. I liked it. It's interesting how the locals attain their moose meat. They either hunt it, or they receive a phone call from a state trooper to tell them that a moose has been hit on the highway at mile marker so-and-so, and do they want to come get it? Road-killed moose provides a lot of meat to those who are willing to go get it. And I can say it makes for one tasty, authentic Alaskan meal.

Anyway, we spent a pleasant evening that included plenty of discussion about reptiles. Ray and Gina travel to Florida and Arizona, and they are reptile-knowledgeable people. They encounter various species, including rattlesnakes, during their travels. In addressing Ray's comment about natural history articles I discussed how the magazine tries to keep a good mix of articles to appeal to all readers, so articles such as that will always have a place alongside more pet-oriented articles. Ray mentioned how he enjoys taking photos of reptiles, but after he and Gina left it occurred to Jenasy that he never got around to showing me any of his photos. Maybe next time I'll get a chance to look at Ray's photos.

The rest of my vacation was occupied not by thoughts of reptiles, but by such activities as kayaking among glaciers and icebergs; spying on grizzlies, caribou, Dall sheep and other wildlife in Denali National Park; trying to get a clear view of Mount McKinley (never did; it was always obscured by clouds with only parts showing); gorging on cruise food (I gained 5 pounds on the trip, which was actually less than I expected); purchasing native Alaskan and Canadian artifacts, such as totem poles and masks, and more. As regular readers know, I try to visit cemeteries during my travels, too, and this trip afforded some unusual ones, including a Gold Rush cemetery in Skagway, where a number of stampedeers are buried, and a Russian/Athabascan cemetery in a small town called Eklutna, where "spirit boxes" are constructed over the graves. These brightly colored boxes are meant to house the spirit of the deceased, which is believed to hover around for awhile before departing. The colors of the boxes are representative of the families for whom they are constructed, and they contain items that the deceased enjoyed during life. It was quite interesting, even though there were a lot of mosquitoes there.

Alaska was most definitely a fascinating place to visit – even if the resident herp population isn't anything to write home about. Don't hold that against this beautiful state.

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