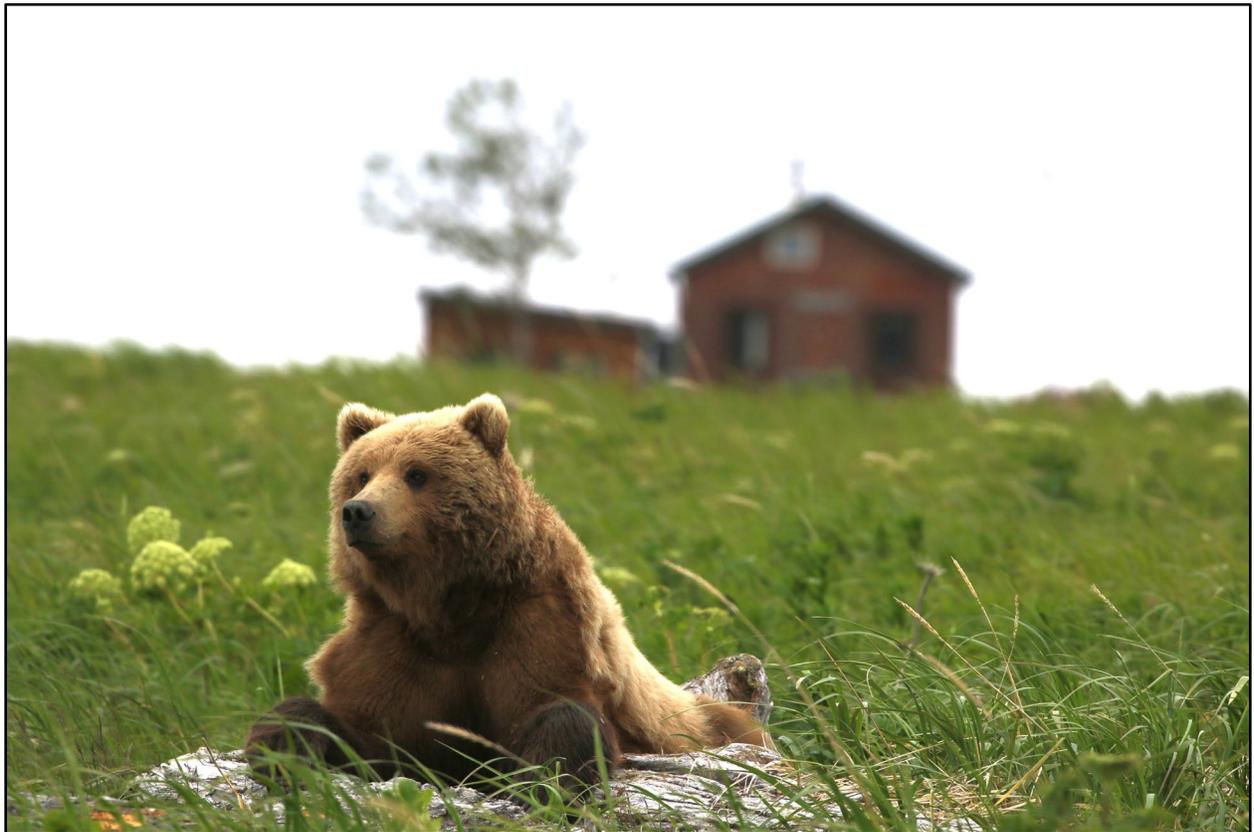


McNeil River State Game Sanctuary Annual Management Report 2025

Thomas M. Griffin

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Cover Photo: A subadult brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) in front of camp at McNeil River State Game Sanctuary. ©2025 ADF&G. Photo by Nick Deuel.

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Introduction

McNeil River is located in southwestern Alaska (Fig. 1) and supports the world's largest congregation of brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) that gather in the vicinity to feed on migrating salmon. The McNeil River State Game Sanctuary (sanctuary) and McNeil River State Game Refuge (refuge) encompass approximately 388 mi². The sanctuary was established by the Alaska State Legislature in 1967 and expanded in 1991 when the adjoining refuge was created (Schempf and Meehan, 2008). However, this 1991 legislation was not enacted until 1993, when the commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G or department) certified that the newly constructed Paint River fish ladder was operational. ADF&G operates a world-renowned bear-viewing program in the sanctuary at McNeil River and nearby Mikfik Creek.

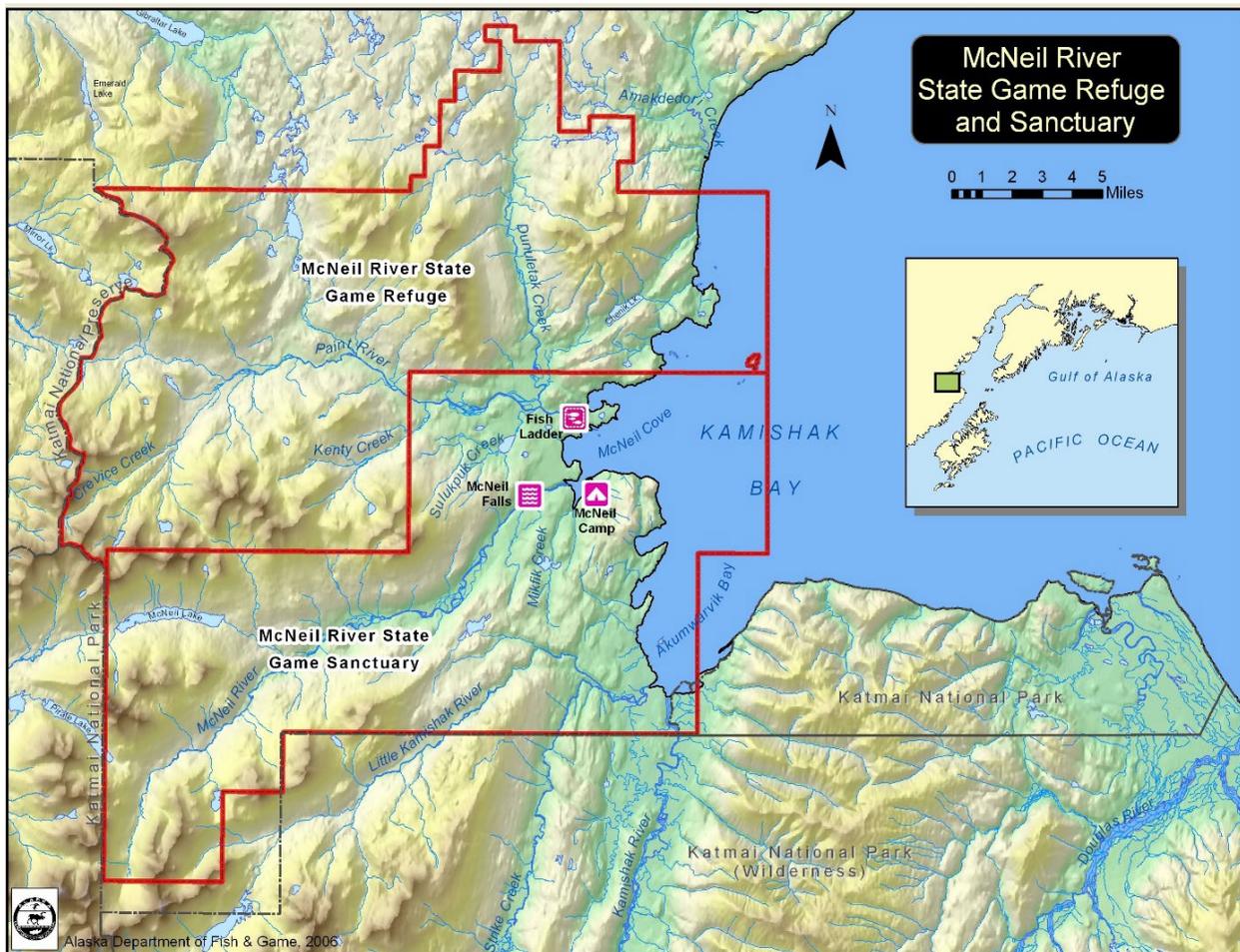


Figure 1. Map of the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary and McNeil River State Game Refuge, southwestern Alaska, 2025.

Pursuant to Alaska Statute (AS) 16.20.162(a), the sanctuary was established to

1. provide permanent protection for brown bear and other fish and wildlife populations and their habitats, so that these resources may be preserved for scientific, aesthetic, and educational purposes;
2. manage human use and activities in a way that is compatible with (1) of this subsection and to maintain and enhance the unique bear-viewing opportunities within the sanctuary; and
3. provide opportunities that are compatible with (1) of this subsection for wildlife viewing, fisheries enhancement, fishing, temporary safe anchorage, and other activities.

Hunting, trapping, and mineral entry are prohibited in the sanctuary. The refuge was created for purposes similar to those of the sanctuary; however, in the refuge, hunting and trapping are allowed if adopted by the Alaska Board of Game (AS 16.20.041), and mineral entry is permitted. Furthermore, human use within the refuge is managed to maintain and enhance the sanctuary's unique bear-viewing opportunities.

This report summarizes the status of brown bears and other fish and wildlife resources within the sanctuary and refuge, as well as the effects of fishing and fishery enhancement activities on these resources. It also covers the bear-viewing program, known public use, and issues with land status and management. This report is submitted annually to the Alaska State Legislature by the commissioner of ADF&G, as required by the sanctuary and refuge enabling legislation (AS 16.20.041(f) and AS 16.20.162(f)).

Wildlife Research and Monitoring

BROWN BEAR MONITORING PROGRAM

The department conducts bear surveys and summarizes bear-use data for the bear-viewing program centered at McNeil River Falls, lower McNeil River, and Mikfik Creek. Monitoring and reporting statistics, along with subsequent management decisions, are based on data gathered from the McNeil River bear-viewing program.

The number of bears at McNeil River fluctuates daily and annually. It may be influenced by several factors, including food availability, the size and timing of salmon runs, changes in the regional bear population and distribution, and harvest of bears outside the sanctuary and refuge. The number of bears observed in the sanctuary does not appear to be strongly influenced by the sanctuary viewing program, fisheries management actions, or land use activities in the region.

Monitoring Indices

Managers of the sanctuary and refuge use 3 different indices to monitor annual fluctuations in bear abundance at McNeil River. These indices are based on 1) high hourly counts of bears observed at McNeil River Falls (hourly count index), 2) numbers of individually identifiable bears seen across the season in the sanctuary (individual count index), and 3) summed days that

individually identifiable bears are observed in the sanctuary (bear-use index). Full descriptions of the methods used to measure these indices are provided by Griffin and Weiss (2021).

The 3 indices in 2025 indicated that the number of individually identifiable bears that used the sanctuary's bear-viewing program area was similar to that in past years, but bears did not consistently stay in the area. Additionally, hourly counts of bears were the lowest recorded since 1976. It appears that bears did not persist in the area in part because of extremely low numbers of returning chum salmon (*Oncorhynchus keta*) in 2025 (see Fisheries section).

Hourly Count Index

Each day that staff visit the McNeil River Falls, they conduct hourly counts of all bears in view. The hourly count index is calculated from the hourly observations by 1) extracting the highest count each day and 2) averaging the 7 largest daily high counts of the year. The hourly count index, therefore, measures peak bear abundance at the falls and is comparable across years.

The maximum hourly count for 2025 was 16 bears on 13 July. The hourly count index in 2025 was 13 bears, the lowest on record, and the first time it has fallen below 20 bears. The 2025 index was markedly lower than the long-term (1993–2024) average of 39 bears and the previous 5-year average of 30 bears (Fig. 2).

Individual Count Index

The individual count index tallies the total number of individually identifiable bears (including cubs) observed by sanctuary staff in all viewing areas each day and throughout the season from 7 June to 25 August (Fig. 3, Table 1). Only individual bears that are known or recorded a minimum of 3 times are included in this index. Historical data spans from 1976 to the present. Since 2007, bear identification has been assisted by an ongoing photo-identification project. While the individual count index does not provide an annual estimate of the absolute number of bears present in the sanctuary, it does provide an additional annual index of bear abundance for sanctuary managers and visitors planning trips to the sanctuary.

In 2025, 85 individual bears were identified in the sanctuary (Table 1). This is 10% lower than the long-term (1976–2024) average of 94 bears. The lowest count was 58 bears in 1976, and the highest count was 144 bears in 1997. Of the 85 individually identifiable bears observed, 66% were males, 24% were females, 1% were of unidentified sex, and 9% were cubs.

Bear-Use Days Index

Bear-use days index the number of days per season that individual bears use the sanctuary (Fig. 3). For example, 1 bear seen during 1 day is counted as 1 bear-use day. In 2025, bear-use days totaled 1,473, much lower than the long-term (1993–2024) average of 2,095 (Fig. 3). Monthly percentages of total bear-use days in 2025 were 34% in June, 45% in July, and 21% in August.

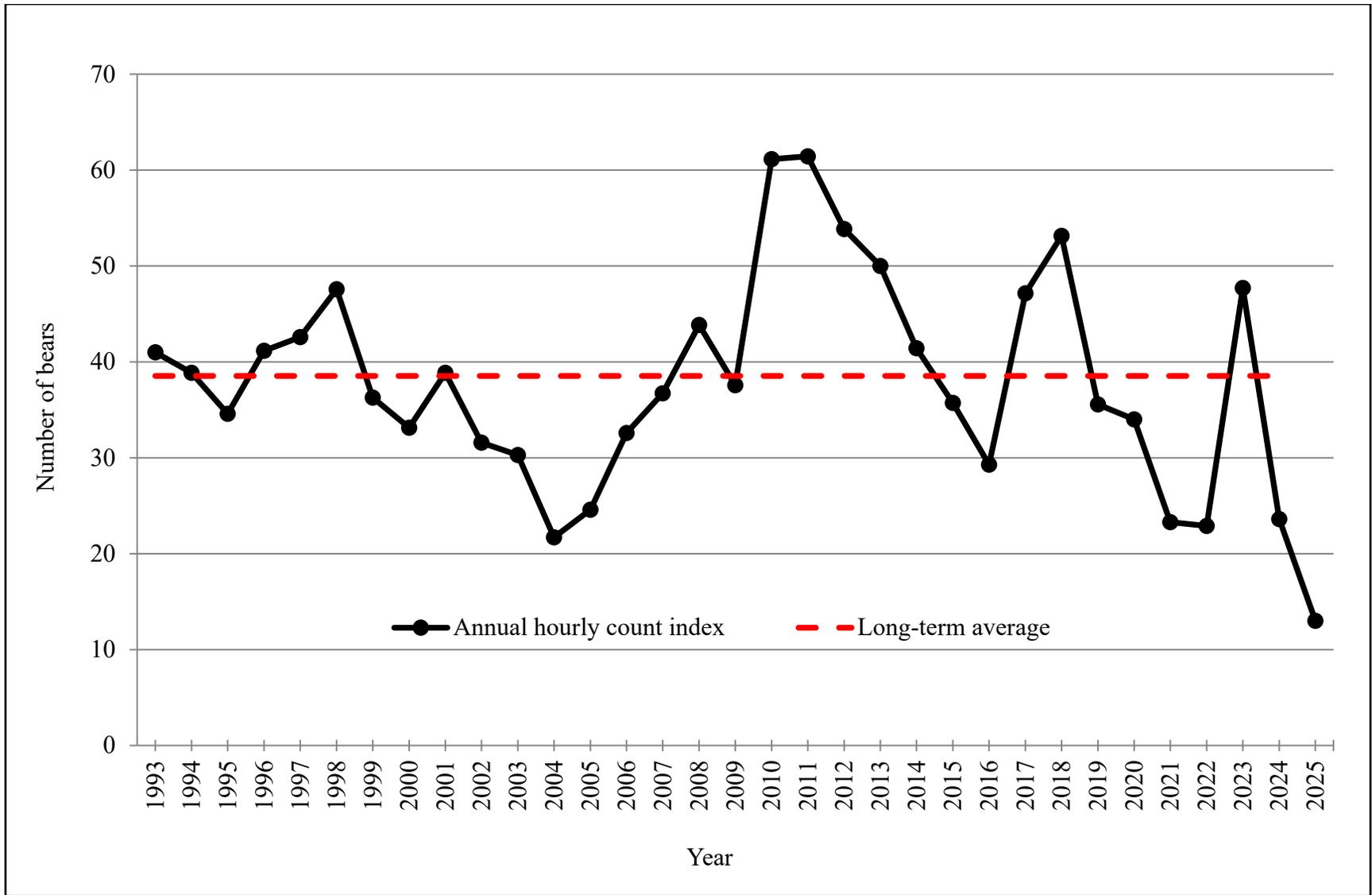


Figure 2. Annual hourly count index (annual mean of 7 highest daily counts) of brown bears at McNeil River Falls, McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, southwestern Alaska, 1993–2025.

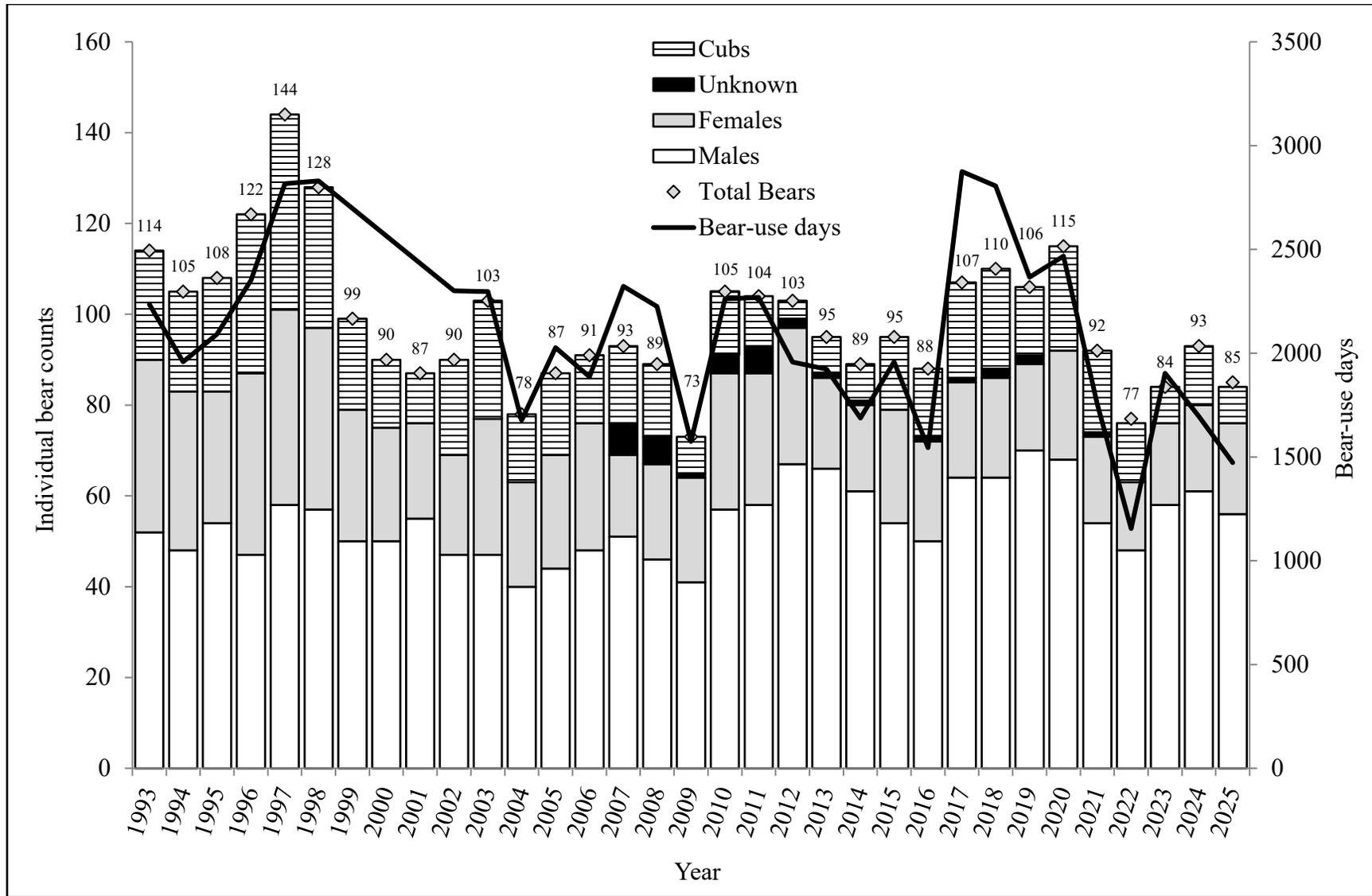


Figure 3. Annual number of individual brown bears observed, bear-use days, and bear composition, McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, southwestern Alaska, 1993–2025.

Table 1. Annual tallies of brown bears by age and sex observed at McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, southwestern Alaska, 2005–2025.

Year	Adults					Subadults ^a				Total adults and subadults ^b	Total cubs	Total bears
	Females with cubs	Single females	Single males	Unknown sex	Total	Females	Males	Unknown sex	Total			
2005	10	13	41	0	64	2	3	0	5	69	18	87
2006	8	14	40	0	62	6	8	0	14	76	15	91
2007	9	7	46	0	62	2	5	7	14	76	17	93
2008	10	9	45	0	64	2	1	6	9	73	16	89
2009	5	16	40	0	61	2	1	1	4	65	8	73
2010	7	20	56	0	83	3	1	4	8	91	14	105
2011	5	22	56	0	83	2	2	6	10	93	11	104
2012	2	24	65	0	91	4	2	2	8	99	4	103
2013	4	16	66	0	86	0	0	1	1	87	8	95
2014	4	15	61	0	80	0	0	1	1	81	8	89
2025	10	14	53	0	77	1	1	0	2	79	16	95
2016	7	15	46	0	68	0	4	1	5	73	15	88
2017	10	9	59	0	78	2	5	1	8	86	21	107
2018	10	9	61	0	80	3	3	2	8	88	22	110
2019	7	8	59	0	74	4	11	2	17	91	15	106
2020	12	7	62	0	81	5	6	0	11	92	23	115
2021	10	7	51	0	68	2	3	1	6	74	18	92
2022	7	6	47	0	60	2	1	1	4	64	13	77
2023	6	6	48	0	60	6	10	0	16	76	8	84
2024	8	8	58	0	74	3	3	0	6	80	13	93
2025	6	10	55	0	71	4	1	1	6	77	8	85

^a Defined as bears 5.5 years old and younger.

^b These figures represent the minimum number of bears present at the sanctuary. Only bears that are recognizable as individuals (known bears) and have been seen on more than 3 days are included. Bears seen less than 3 times, unrecognizable as known bears, or both, are excluded.

Bear Photo-Identification Project

A long-term photo-identification project was initiated in 2007 to assist sanctuary staff with daily and seasonal bear identifications, predict individual behavior, and track the history and movements of individual bears. In 2025, sanctuary staff continued to photo-document identifiable bears observed during the bear-viewing program, capturing digital images of individual bears and their defining characteristics.

OTHER MONITORING

The department currently does not conduct bear surveys in the refuge or sanctuary outside of the bear viewing program area. However, bears are recorded in other areas within the sanctuary and refuge through opportunistic surveys, fisheries escapement videos, anecdotal information, and commercial guide reports.

Mikfik Lake

ADF&G Division of Commercial Fisheries (DCF) staff recorded 1,417 hours of video footage of sockeye salmon (*O. nerka*) escapement into Mikfik Lake from 4 June to 4 August 2025 (Hollowell et al. *in prep*). In addition to escapement data, reviewers documented wildlife transiting the camera's field of view, including moose (*Alces alces*), beavers (*Castor canadensis*), river otters (*Lontra canadensis*), bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), and various waterfowl species. Brown bears transited the camera's field of view in 52 instances, averaging 0.84 bears per day of video operation ($n = 62$ days). Peak daily bear counts (4 bears) occurred on 18 June, 25 and 27 July, and 2 August.

Kamishak River Drainage

Commercial guides operate in the lower reaches of the Kamishak River, the Little Kamishak River, and Strike Creek within the sanctuary. Per regulations, these commercial guides submit a report, including information on bear observations, to the Lands and Refuges Program at the end of each season (5 AAC 92.065(c)).¹ Commercial guides report that brown bears are typically observed daily from late May to mid-September in these areas. The 7 guide services operating in 2025 reported observing an average of 4 bears per day in these areas from 8 July to 17 September.

Chenik Creek

One commercial bear-viewing guide reported observing an average of 10 bears per day at the mouth of Chenik Creek from 25 June to 12 August.

¹ AAC refers to the Alaska Administrative Code.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS OF OTHER WILDLIFE

In 2025, sanctuary staff opportunistically recorded general wildlife observations, including birds, terrestrial mammals, and marine mammals.

Many bird species were sighted throughout the 2025 season. Notable observations included trumpeter swan (*Cygnus buccinator*), harlequin duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*), black oystercatcher (*Haematopus bachmani*), wandering tattler (*Tringa incana*), pigeon guillemot (*Cepphus columba*), red-throated loon (*Gavia stellata*), fork-tailed storm-petrel (*Hydrobates furcatus*), short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*), belted kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*), merlin (*Falco columbarius*), peregrine falcon (*F. peregrinus*), northern shrike (*Lanius borealis*), American dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*), and gray-crowned rosy finch (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*).

Marine mammal sightings during 2025 included harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*), which were generally observed at high tide in McNeil River Lagoon, McNeil Cove, and the lower tidal areas of McNeil River.

This season, observations of terrestrial wildlife included the first recorded lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) in the sanctuary, which was hunting ducks along lower Mikfik Creek. Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*) were observed in the lagoon and tidal flats, and wolf tracks were observed on the spit. A wolverine (*Gulo gulo*) was seen crossing the tidal flats. Red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) and a few Arctic ground squirrels (*Spermophilus parryii*) were observed in and around camp. Meadow jumping mice (*Zapus hudsonius*), beaver, and moose were observed in several locations. As usual, wood frogs (*Rana sylvatica*) were observed along McNeil River Trail.

HUNTING AND TRAPPING

Game Management Unit 9 encompasses the Alaska Peninsula, with the sanctuary and refuge overlapping or adjacent to Units 9A, 9B, and 9C. The sanctuary is closed to all hunting and trapping (AS 16.20.162(b)). In October 1995, the Alaska Board of Game closed the refuge to brown bear hunting, but it remains open for hunting and trapping other species. Harvest reports and sealing records indicate that, apart from moose, hunting and trapping are extremely limited within the refuge. Detailed harvest data for large game and select furbearers within Unit 9 are available in the department's species management reports and plans.

The sanctuary and refuge are within a larger 5,585 mi² area that protects brown bear from hunting and includes Katmai National Park and the State-owned Kamishak Special Use Area. Hunting of brown bear is allowed on about 2,100 mi² of game management units west, north, and south of the sanctuary and refuge (Units 9A, 9B, and 9C; Fig. 4). Some bears using McNeil River range into areas open to hunting west and north of the sanctuary and refuge, but it is not known how many bears that use McNeil River occur in this harvest.

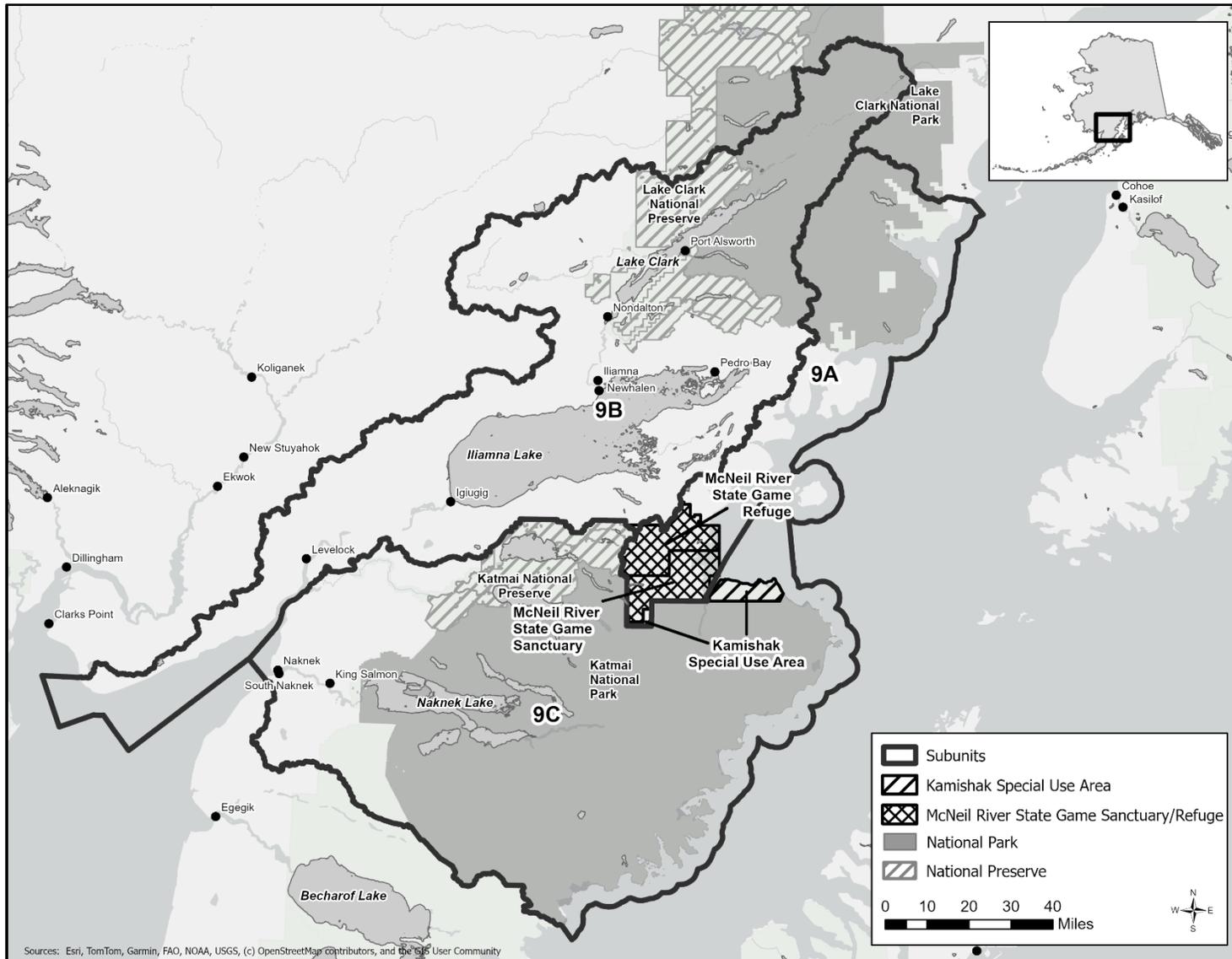


Figure 4. Map of Game Management Units 9A, 9B, and 9C in relation to McNeil River State Game Sanctuary and Refuge, southwestern Alaska, 2025.

In Units 9A, 9B, and 9C, bear harvest occurs every other regulatory year (RY)² with fall hunts in odd-numbered years (RB368, RB369) and spring hunts in even-numbered years (RB370), except near some communities (RB502 and RB525). Harvest data for RY24–RY25 are not yet available. In RY22–RY23, 134 bears were reported harvested in Units 9A, 9B, and 9C combined (Fig. 5). The RY22–RY23 harvest is comparable to the average harvest of 136 bears per 2-year regulatory period since RY14–RY15. In this annual report, Figure 5 depicts the harvest reported for 2-year regulatory periods from across Units 9A, 9B, and 9C combined. This is a larger harvest area than what was included in previous annual reports.

Fisheries

The sanctuary and refuge contain several rivers and streams that support both anadromous and resident fish populations. Kamishak River drainages support Dolly Varden (*Salvelinus malma*) and all five species of Pacific salmon: Chinook, chum, coho, pink, and sockeye. McNeil River drainage contains Dolly Varden, chum salmon, coho salmon (*O. kisutch*), pink salmon (*O. gorbuscha*), and small numbers of Chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*). The Mikfik Creek–Lake drainage contains sockeye salmon, Dolly Varden, and rainbow trout (*O. mykiss*). The Chenik Creek–Lake system supports sockeye salmon, some coho salmon, lake trout (*S. namaycush*), and Dolly Varden. The Paint River system contains rainbow trout, Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*), lake trout, and, more recently, through access from a fish ladder, coho salmon, and some pink and chum salmon. In addition to providing an important food resource for the area’s bears, these fish resources contribute to annual sport fishing and commercial fishing harvests in the lower Kamishak District.

COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

McNeil River Drainage

ADF&G DCF conducts periodic aerial surveys to index escapement of chum salmon into McNeil River, with an estimated 8,252 fish in 2025 (Hollowell et al. *in prep*; Fig. 6; Table 2). This value is below the sustainable escapement goal (SEG) of 24,000–48,000 chum salmon. Few salmon were seen above McNeil River Falls during 4 aerial surveys conducted between 8 July and 4 August 2025. On 4 August, there was a peak daily streamwide estimate of 4,510 chum salmon and a peak count of 890 chum salmon upstream of the falls.

McNeil River Chum Salmon Stock Status

In response to guidelines established in the Policy for Management of Sustainable Fisheries under 5 AAC 39.222, ADF&G and the Alaska Board of Fisheries recognized McNeil River chum salmon as a “stock of management concern” in 2016. Further details on the status of McNeil River chum salmon, including a review of past research and management actions, are available in Otis et al. (2016) and Peirce et al. (2011, 2013).

² A regulatory year (RY) begins July 1 and ends June 30 of the following year. For example, RY24 is from 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025.

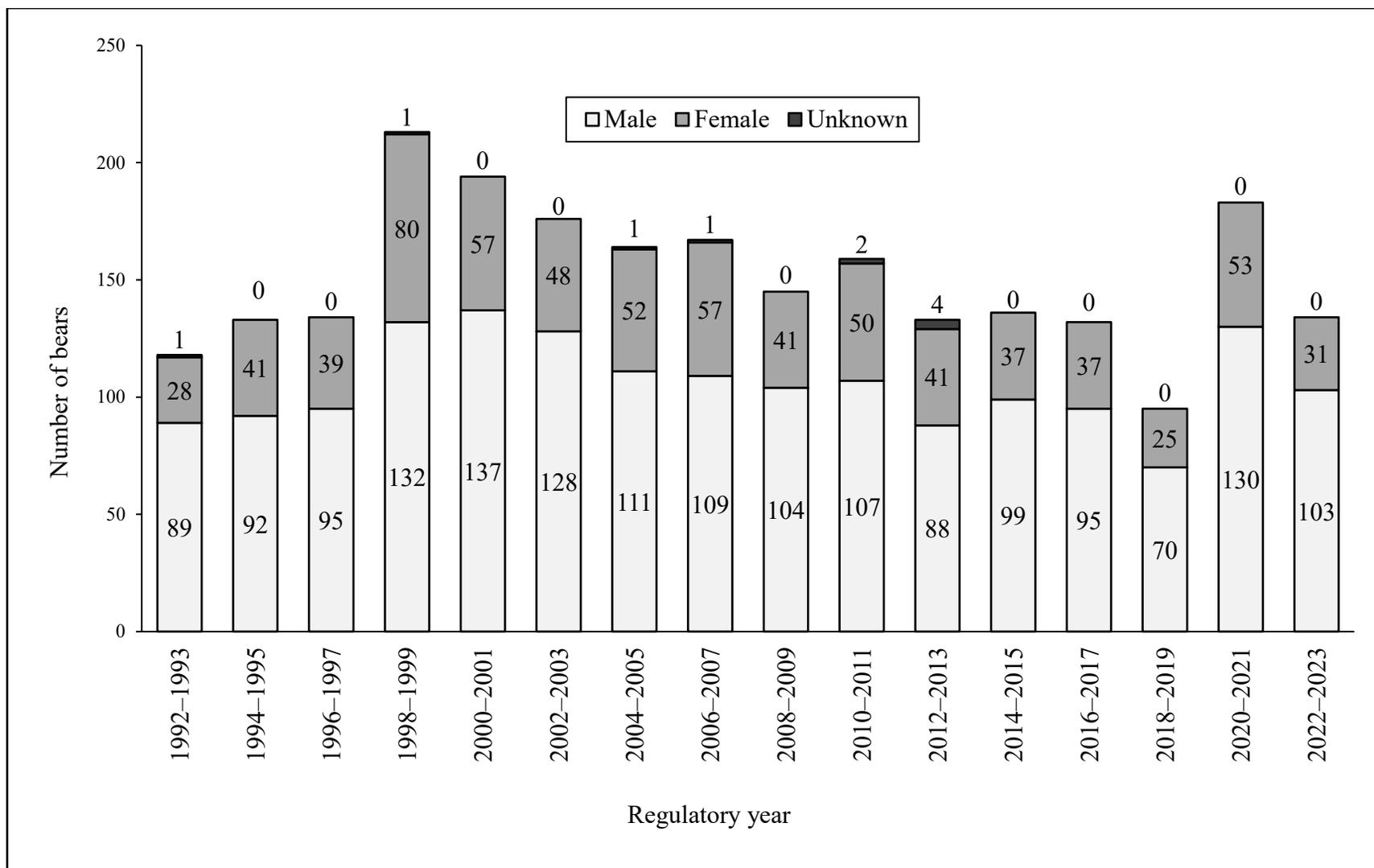
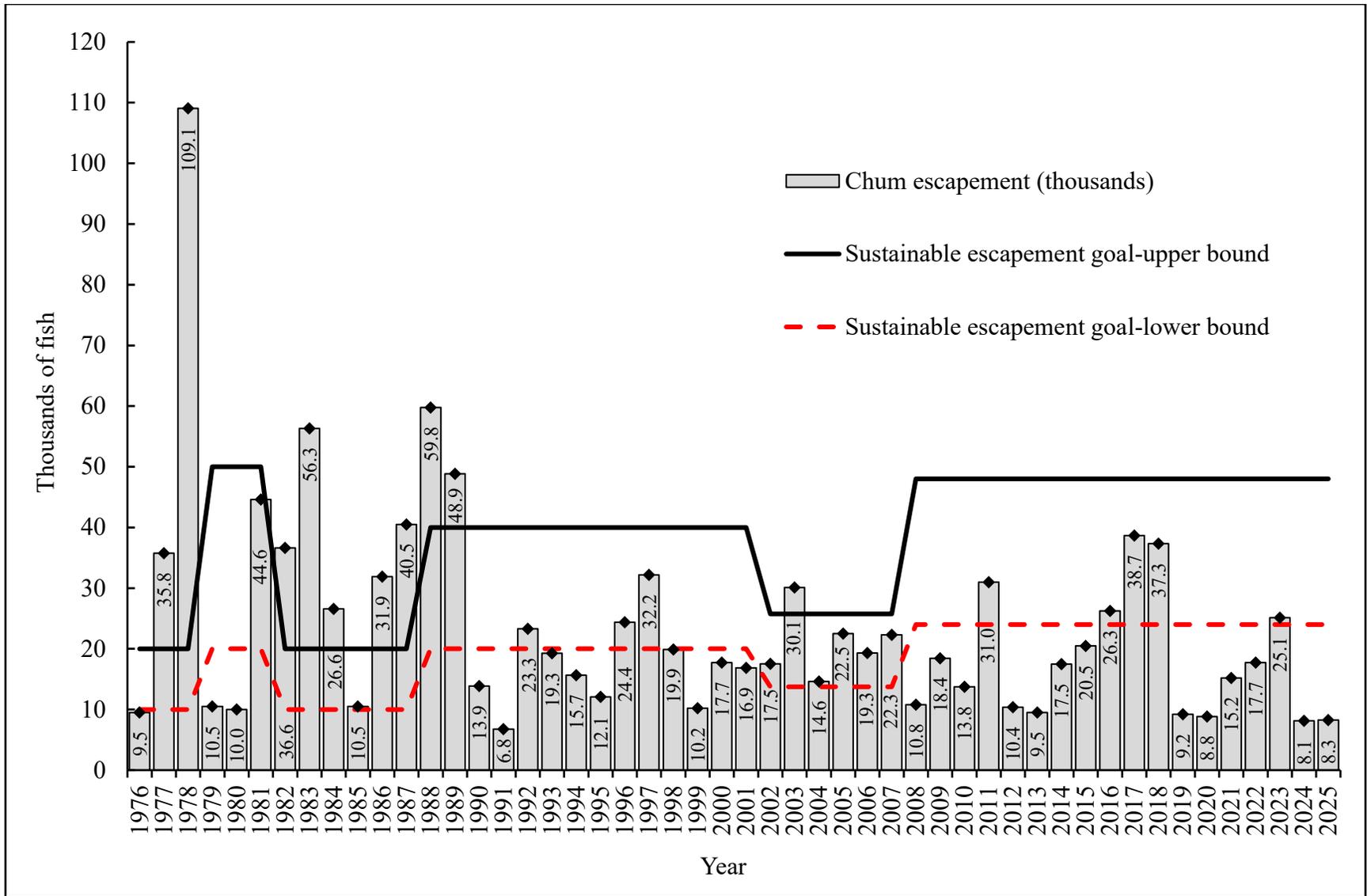


Figure 5. Brown bear harvest by 2-year regulatory periods from Units 9A, 9B, and 9C, adjacent to McNeil River State Game Sanctuary and McNeil River State Game Refuge, southwestern Alaska, regulatory years 1992–2023. Even and odd regulatory years are combined. Harvest for regulatory years 2024–2025 will be included in subsequent reports.



Source: Hollowell et al. *in prep.*

Figure 6. McNeil River chum salmon escapement, McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, southwestern Alaska, 1976–2025.

Table 2. Escapement estimates of salmon into Mikfik Lake and McNeil River, McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, southwestern Alaska, 2025.

2025 date	Mikfik sockeye salmon cumulative total ^a	McNeil chum salmon (daily) ^b
1 Jun	0	–
8 Jun	78	–
15 Jun	2,659	–
22 Jun	2,858	–
28 Jun	–	0
29 Jun	2,895	–
6 Jul	2,902	–
8 Jul	–	1,063
13 Jul	2,902	–
15 Jul	–	2,570
20 Jul	3,744	–
26 Jul	–	920
27 Jul	3,746	–
29 Jul	–	4,020
3 Aug	3,746	–
4 Aug	–	4,510
Escapement index	3,746 ^c	8,252 ^d

Source: Hollowell et al. *in prep.*

Note: En dashes indicate no data available.

^a The cumulative total by each date.

^b Daily estimate, considered to be conservative, from individual aerial surveys. The McNeil aerial survey on 26 July was conducted under poor conditions.

^c The escapement index for Mikfik sockeye salmon is the cumulative total “day count” from the remote video system at Mikfik Lake and does not include additional passage observed at night with the aid of an underwater light.

^d The escapement index for McNeil chum salmon is derived by dividing the area under the escapement curve by a 13.8-day stream-life factor and then applying a run-timing expansion factor to account for fish entering the system after aerial surveys were terminated.

Mikfik Creek and Lake System

A digital video camera was used to document sockeye salmon escapement into Mikfik Lake and recorded a cumulative total of 3,746 fish escaping into the lake during daylight hours in 2025 (Hollowell et al. *in prep.*; Table 2). This escapement is within the SEG range of 3,400–11,000 sockeye salmon (day count only; Otis et al. 2023). With the aid of an underwater light, an additional 919 sockeye salmon were observed escaping into the lake at night, bringing the total census count to 4,665 fish. Postseason evaluation indicated that the run timing of sockeye salmon into Mikfik Lake was early and compressed, with nearly 70% of the run entering the lake on 10–13 June. A second large pulse of 822 fish passed on 16–17 July.

On 1 June, the McNeil and Paint river subdistricts were closed to commercial fishing to protect Mikfik Lake sockeye salmon, which have experienced low runs in recent years. Consequently, no sockeye salmon were harvested in the McNeil or Paint river subdistricts in 2025.

Mikfik Lake Salmon Stock Status

Mikfik Lake sockeye salmon are designated as a “stock of management concern” (5 AAC 39.222; Hollowell and Otis 2024). Natural conditions unique to Mikfik Creek, presumed to contribute to this status, include the physical obstacles of Upper and Lower Mikfik falls, which impede upstream migration. These obstacles make fish more vulnerable to predation by the high density of brown bears that aggregate along the creek to feed on sockeye salmon migrating to spawning grounds at Mikfik Lake. Further details on the status of Mikfik Lake sockeye salmon, including a review of past and current research and management actions, are available in Hollowell and Otis (2024).

Chenik Creek and Lake System

Chenik Lake, located approximately 5.5 mi north of McNeil Lagoon, is the site of another sockeye salmon stock. Chenik Creek drains the lake and has a tidewater cascade at the stream mouth that hinders fish passage. The established SEG range for Chenik Lake (2,900–13,700 sockeye salmon; day count only) has been met or exceeded each year since 2003. The 2025 cumulative daytime escapement estimate, as documented by remote video, was 14,315 sockeye salmon. An additional 2,808 sockeye salmon were observed escaping into Chenik Lake at night, but were not counted toward the SEG range calibrated to day counts. The 2025 commercial harvest of sockeye salmon from the Chenik subdistrict is confidential because fewer than 3 permit holders made deliveries.

SPORT FISHING

Kamishak River

The only area in the sanctuary that attracts significant sport fishing is the Lower Kamishak River, including the Little Kamishak River and its tributary, Strike Creek. Target species are coho, chum, and pink salmon, as well as Dolly Varden. The primary target species is coho salmon. Between 8 July and 17 September, 7 permitted operators reported making 87 trips and spending 374 angler-use days and 170 guide-use days in the area (Table 3). Anglers reported catching 3,102 fish: 6% Dolly Varden, 47% coho salmon, 16% pink salmon, and 32% chum salmon. Of all fish caught, 81% were released. Approximately 41% of the coho salmon caught were kept. This compares with the prior 5-year average of 2,397 fish caught: 29% Dolly Varden, 44% coho salmon, 5% pink salmon, and 21% chum salmon. Of these fish, 85% were released, and 33% of the coho salmon caught were kept.

McNeil Lagoon

In 2025, sport fishing efforts in McNeil Lagoon (from the end of the spit) by visitors and staff at the camp were low. One silver salmon was caught and kept, and one pink salmon was caught and released. In addition to low interest, bear activity in the lagoon limited sport fishing by visitors and staff for safety reasons.

Table 3. Visitor use and sport fish harvest reported from Kamishak River drainages, including 2025 and the previous 5-year average (2020–2024), McNeil River State Game Sanctuary, southwestern Alaska.

Year	No. of days				Coho salmon		Chum salmon		Pink salmon		Dolly Varden		Avg. bears per day
	Days in sanctuary	Guide-use days	Angler-use days	Nonangler-use days	Kept	Released	Kept	Released	Kept	Released	Kept	Released	
2025	87	170	374	0	592	854	6	979	3	483	0	185	4
5-year avg.	70	116	234	19	351	709	2	511	1	126	2	695	5

FISHERIES ENHANCEMENT

Paint River Fish Ladder

Paint River is located approximately 2 mi north of McNeil River and is blocked to upstream fish migration by a steep waterfall at tidewater. Paint River lakes were first stocked with sockeye salmon fry in 1986 to test the feasibility of developing a new sockeye salmon run in this salmon-barren drainage. The Paint River fish ladder has operated since 1993, and previous reports outline its design, history, and goals (Quimby and Dudiak 1987, Griffin and Weiss 2021). From 1986 to 1996 (excluding 1987 and 1994) and in 2002, between 0.5 and 2.2 million juvenile sockeye salmon were stocked annually in the Paint River lakes.

In 2025, Cook Inlet Aquaculture Association (CIAA) staff conducted periodic visits to the Paint River to manage a video-camera-monitoring system. The Paint River fish ladder was open from 12 June to 22 September, and video cameras monitored escapement from 12 June to 6 August. A total of 7 chum salmon, 5 sockeye salmon, and 52 coho salmon were documented transiting the ladder into the Paint River. CIAA staff reported 3 bear sightings on 2 different dates, with no adverse interactions (Tanis 2025).

FISH AND WILDLIFE RESEARCH

McNeil River Brown Bear and Chum Salmon Research

From 2011 to 2024, ADF&G DCF staff, in collaboration with Alaska Pacific University, conducted a video-monitoring project to estimate the number of pre-spawning chum salmon killed by bears at McNeil River Falls each year. The project was first implemented during a graduate research project in 2009 and 2010 (Gill and Helfield 2012). This project was discontinued in 2025.

Public Use and Land Management

To protect the bears, their habitat, and the sanctuary's unique visitor experience, an access permit issued by ADF&G is required for entry. The department's Division of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) permits visitation to the sanctuary by issuing Viewing Permits, Special Access Permits, Nonviewing Permits, Transporter Permits, and Commercial Guide Permits (5 AAC 92.065 and 93.030).

The refuge is open to most public uses, provided the activity does not damage refuge resources, disturb wildlife, or disrupt existing public uses. Allowed activities generally include legal hunting (the refuge is closed to brown bear hunting), trapping, fishing, wildlife watching, hiking, boating, snowmachining, and camping. In both the sanctuary and refuge, certain activities and land uses are managed through an ADF&G Special Area Permit issued by the department's Habitat Section (5 AAC 95.420 and 5 AAC 95.542), a land use permit from the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (11 AAC 96.010), or both.

MCNEIL RIVER STATE GAME SANCTUARY BEAR VIEWING PROGRAM

Since 1973, bear viewing at McNeil River and nearby Mikfik Creek has been limited to 10 people per day from 7 June to 25 August. For each of the established 4-day permit periods, 10 regular and 3 standby permits are issued. A total of 185 regular permits (Guided Viewing Access Permits) and 57 standby permits (Camp-Standby Access Permits) are issued through the lottery. An additional 15 Guided Viewing Access Permits are issued as Special Access Permits at the commissioner's discretion to individuals whose work will benefit the McNeil River Sanctuary, the general efforts to conserve bears, or both. Under the existing permit program, the maximum number of people who may visit the sanctuary each season is 257. Application and permit fees are established under 5 AAC 93.030 and listed on the McNeil River webpage.³

By the 1 March 2025 deadline, ADF&G received 655 applications for 2025 McNeil River guided and standby permits, 44 % below the long-term application average (1984–2024) of 1,171 applicants. Applicants were residents of 14 different countries; 35% were Alaska residents, and 65% were nonresidents.

In 2025, 190 permits were issued, including 145 Guided Viewing Access Permits, 33 Camp-Standby Permits, and 12 Special Access Permits. Of the permits distributed, 56% were issued to Alaska residents. Of the 190 permit holders, 134 visited the sanctuary, 34% below the long-term visitation average (1984–2024) of 202 people (Table 4). The average number of permits used daily by permittees to view bears at the sanctuary in 2025 was 7 (out of a maximum of 10). Of the 134 bear-viewing visitors to McNeil River, 51% were Alaska residents and 49% were nonresidents. The sanctuary permit program generated \$76,656 in 2025, which was added to the state's Fish and Game Fund. Both the number of applications received, and the number of permits used were the lowest since 1984 (Table 4).

In 2025, visitor-use days of the McNeil River bear-viewing program totaled 913 days, including all permitted bear-viewing visitors and administrative visitors (Table 4). Permitted bear-viewing visitors spent a total of 839 visitor-use days within the sanctuary during the viewing season. Twelve Special Access Permits were issued to Katmai National Park staff, bear biologists, a children's book author, the ADF&G Communications Director, raffle winners, and a National Geographic film crew. Nine Commercial Transporter Permits were issued to commercial operators to transport clients to the ADF&G McNeil River camp for bear viewing.

In 2024, the department allowed limited wheeled plane landings on a trial basis to transport visitors when tides prevented float-plane access. Landing wheeled planes increased visitor access, but sometimes disturbed and displaced bears. On occasion, planes were unable to land because bears were present on the beach landing area. Only float planes landed at the viewing program site in 2025, and the department is considering using wheeled planes to increase public access in the future.

³ ADF&G Home | Habitat | Conservation Areas | McNeil River | Permits:
<https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=mcneilriver.permits>.

Table 4. Visitor use at McNeil River State Game Sanctuary and McNeil River State Game Refuge, southwestern Alaska, 1984–2025.

Year	Annual no. of applicants	Annual no. of bear viewing visitors	Mean no. of bear viewing visitors per day	Visitor-use days bear viewing program ^a	Minimum visitor-use days in other areas ^b	Total visitor-use days
1984	992	159	–	574	–	–
1985	832	216	–	816	–	–
1986	806	255	–	967	–	–
1987	1,757	252	–	1,054	–	–
1988	1,094	304	–	1,328	–	–
1989	1,306	264	–	1,183	–	–
1990	1,481	299	–	1,435	–	–
1991	1,818	249	–	1,415	–	–
1992	1,672	245	–	1,210	–	–
1993	2,150	225	14.1	1,128	–	–
1994	1,766	228	13.6	1,086	–	–
1995	1,486	212	13.4	1,074	–	–
1996	1,502	219	14.5	1,158	–	–
1997	1,474	228	15.0	1,197	–	–
1998	1,159	219	13.7	1,096	–	–
1999	1,223	208	14.0	1,122	–	–
2000	1,322	198	13.1	1,051	–	–
2001	1,329	186	12.7	1,012	–	–
2002	1,434	175	11.6	930	–	–
2003	1,314	188	12.3	995	–	–
2004	860	201	12.9	1,034	–	–
2005	960	195	12.3	983	–	–
2006	783	183	11.6	970	–	–
2007	1,156	157	9.8	832	–	–
2008	932	167	10.9	913	–	–
2009	725	181	11.9	1,266	635	1,901
2010	714	176	11.7	1,100	350	1,450
2011	751	195	12.7	1,089	507	1,596
2012	719	180	12.0	1,041	572	1,613
2013	934	156	10.6	910	488	1,398
2014	1,075	171	11.0	923	639	1,562
2015	983	178	11.5	946	862	1,808
2016	819	175	11.2	929	461	1,390
2017	972	199	13.5	1,092	513	1,605
2018	862	187	12.9	1,044	388	1,432
2019	1,097	200	13.7	1,215	545	1,760
2020	1,211	153	11.4	919	254	1,173
2021	1,144	180	12.1	1,069	692	1,761
2022	1,146	175	11.6	941	296	1,237
2023	1,373	168	11.5	929	711	1,640
2024	887	167	12.4	1,035	410	1,445
2025	655	134	10.5	913	720	1,633

Note: En dashes indicate no data available.

^a Visitor-use days for the bear viewing program include permitted bear viewers and administrative visitors.

^b Visitor-use days from other areas include reported commercial activities in the Kamishak River area of the sanctuary and Chenik Creek area of the refuge.

In December 2025, the department launched an online survey to gather public input on operational challenges related to public access. The survey asked questions about wheeled plane landings and permit practices, including whether permit winners may change their time blocks after receiving a permit and whether time blocks may be adjusted to better align with accessible tides. The department will consider public input from the stakeholder survey as it balances the sanctuary's primary statutory purposes of protecting wildlife resources while providing adequate access for compatible public uses (AS 16.20.162). Survey results will be available in 2026. A department determination regarding wheeled plane landings at McNeil will follow analysis of results.

KAMISHAK RIVER

Lodges and air charter services conduct sport fishing and wildlife-viewing trips in the Kamishak River drainage within the sanctuary and adjacent to Katmai National Park. The Kamishak Special Use Area, managed by the Department of Natural Resources, overlaps with the southeast portion of the sanctuary that includes the Kamishak River drainage. Businesses store riverboats on the lower reaches of the river, and one of these businesses is authorized to maintain a temporary guide camp on the lower Kamishak River. These activities require an ADF&G Special Area Permit, an ADF&G McNeil River State Game Sanctuary Commercial Access Permit, and a Department of Natural Resources Land Use Permit. In addition, these activities require reporting the number of guides, clients, fish harvested or released, and bears observed to ADF&G (5 AAC 92.065(c)).

In 2025, 8 commercial operators had permits to operate within the Kamishak River area of the sanctuary. Of these commercial operators, 7 reported making guided-use trips to the area. These guide services spent a total of 544 visitor-use days in the sanctuary, including 374 angler-use days, 170 guide-use days, and 0 nonangler-use days (bear viewing; Table 3).

CHENIK LAKE–CREEK AREA

The mouth of Chenik Creek is another area within the refuge where bear viewing has historically been low. One commercial operator reported guiding day-use bear viewing in this area. Currently, this activity does not require a Special Area Permit or associated reporting.

BEAR-HUMAN CONFLICTS

Staff document adverse bear-human interactions associated with ADF&G's bear-viewing program. Commercial guides and other entities self-report any adverse interactions to the department. A total of 1,633 user days were reported in 2025 from the department's bear-viewing program, self-reporting from commercial guides, and operations at the Paint River fish ladder. There was 1 report from the Chenik Creek area of the refuge from a commercial guide who hazed a subadult bear. There were no other reported adverse interactions between bears and people in the sanctuary or refuge.

LAND USE PERMITTING

In 2025, 10 ADF&G Special Area Permits and 20 ADF&G Access Permits were issued to companies involved in commercial transportation, sport fishing, and wildlife viewing in the McNeil River and Kamishak River areas; fisheries enhancement at the Paint River; and department fish surveys at McNeil River Falls, Mikfik Lake, and Chenik Lake.

No mineral resource or development activities were applied for, permitted, or reported to the department within the sanctuary or refuge during 2025.

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