

BEAR VERSUS FISH

A photographer shows that it's not so easy being a top predator.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHEL ROGGO

It's summer in Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula. My goal here at the Ozernaya River is to photograph brown bears as they catch fish. It's a challenge since I need to maintain a safe distance from the bears. But as I discovered, it's also a challenge for the bears to catch their fish. As this female bear (right) finds out, a huge lunge doesn't always result in a fish snack. But with a little patience, both the bears and I got what we wanted.

1 WAITING GAME

During the first few days in Kamchatka, I was mainly looking for and observing different bears to see which ones were most likely to be approachable. I usually saw about 10 to 15 bears at any time, but as many as 600 come to this river when the salmon are swimming upstream to lay their eggs. When photographing brown bears, it is crucial to understand their behavior. So for these underwater shots, I found a good fishing spot, positioned my underwater camera on a 30-foot-long pole with a remote shutter release, and waited for bears to approach.

I never moved toward them—I let them choose whether to come closer. Over time, the bears became accustomed to my presence. But if a bear started moving its head from side to side, I knew it was time for me to move away.



2 I SEE YOU

This dominant male was very calm. He didn't seem afraid or stressed by my presence. He approached the camera, peering at it underwater. After this close-up look, he decided it wasn't very interesting. So he left to look for the most interesting thing in the river: salmon.

4 FISH FEAST

After several tries, the hungry bear manages to catch a fish, and he sits down right in the river to eat his meal. Brown bears often eat only the parts of the fish with the highest fat content, such as the eggs, skin, and brain. They eat dozens of fish as they try to gain enough fat to fuel their long winter hibernation.

This bear ignores my camera dangling above him on the pole as he devours his salmon. Once the banquet is over, he stays in the water to relax. I relax a bit too, knowing I've gotten some fantastic images of these impressive animals.



3 THE CHASE IS ON

It's no easy task for a 1,300-pound bear to catch a fish. The bear is clumsy underwater and the salmon are alert and fast. Injured or sick fish make the easiest prey, and the bears are smart enough to single them out.

Soon I spotted a bear doing just that. As I stood onshore with one camera, I photographed him stalking a lone fish. Using the long pole, I then positioned my underwater camera and was able to capture the picture of the bear making its final lunge toward the fish.

