



**WILDLIFE
VIEWING**

VALLEY OF THE GRIZZLY



A HUSH COMES OVER THE CROWD and I join the stream of people who flow through the doors and onto the outer deck of the *Inside Passage*. The 72-foot catamaran, painted buttercup yellow, is a leviathan compared to the jet boat I had been travelling on for the past four days. Evidently, we're not trying to blend in to our surroundings here in Khutzeymateen Provincial Park, better known as the K'tzim-a-deen Grizzly Sanctuary.

The Skeena River ends its 580-kilometre journey just south of Prince Rupert, where it spills into the Pacific Ocean at Chatham Sound. The griz sanctuary is situated in the sound's fish-filled estuary some 45 km northeast of Prince Rupert in the traditional territories of the Coast Tsimshian First Nations.

Owned and operated by Prince Rupert Adventure Tours, the boat is surprisingly stealthy. Plus there's a strict protocol for grizzly-bear viewing. Larger vessels, like ours, have to keep at least 75 metres away from the beautiful bruins. When on deck, words must be whispered and food is entirely forbidden.

The Khutzeymateen is famed for having one of North America's highest concentrations of grizzlies. Think of it as Manhattan for *Ursus arctos*. The best times to visit are mid-May to July. Since it's late June, we've had lots of luck, already spotting several solitary bears munching on protein-rich sedge. Males grizzlies can reach 300 kg, double the weight of a black bear or a female grizzly. Despite having their characteristic humps, the bears we see don't look like imposing beasts. They're almost lanky, with eyes ringed in dark fir like their long winter naps have been endlessly interrupted by Goldilocks.

Then I see them: three little bears. Fuzzy, chocolate-brown scamps chasing one another in the seaweed and playing hide-and-peek in the sedge. Then the mama bear comes and chases her cubs out of the sedge, closer to the shore—and us. She seems to be staring directly at the boat, undaunted, and cajoling her fur babies to put on a show. And they do, dancing behind her in single file near the shore as we wildly snap away, long lenses fully extended.

Finally, I put down my camera and immortalize this moment in my mind's eye. The scene is surreal and it bites deep. Perhaps because it is so real yet so rare. Grizzlies playing in this pristine place, as Mother Nature intended. — *Janet Gyenes*

For more on the grizzly-bear-viewing tour in Prince Rupert: princerupertadventuretours.ca.