

Gallagher power fence bars bears, saves fish in Kodiak, Alaska



From the center of the lower 48, Kodiak, Alaska is a day trip. A very long, all day trip. It's a serious jaunt that requires several changes of planes and ends with a last leg flown by a bush pilot. If you would like to drive there from Wyoming, Mapquest says it's a 66 hour, 45 minute trip covering 3,271 miles. Coming from Kansas City? Add another 600 miles and 10 hours. The Mapquest folks decline to show you either route, though. I'm sure it contains hundreds of miles of unpaved roads with potholes big enough to swallow a moose – antlers and all - and a few ferry boat rides.

Just getting to Kodiak requires lots of advance planning. Staying there for any length of time requires dedication and a close, working relationship with your local FedEx office for advance shipping of just about everything you'll need.

Robin Ekler, an experienced outdoorsman, leaves his Caspar, Wyoming sporting goods store every summer and spends a month camping out on Kodiak with his wife and daughter. The trip usually starts in July, but he'll start gathering supplies at least two months ahead of time and shipping them to the island. "Dehydrated food, any potentially dangerous materials that airlines won't carry like fuel, lots of gear – we pack it up in sewer tubes, cap either end and send it ahead," he said.

After arriving at the camp site, there are problems with mosquitoes and black flies and, worst of all, dense clouds of 'no see-ums,' tiny little flying pests that can drive even larger herds of caribou to distraction. The warm season is short but nature makes up for it by hurling way too much at you all at once.

Part of the 'way too much' is bears. Kodiak Island has more bears per square mile than most states have people per square mile. They're always hungry, constantly curious and potentially dangerous. Because Ekler's time on the island is spent on photography and salmon fishing – and salmon are probably a bear's favorite food – he's always got a battle on his hands.

"You don't want to let a bear know you might be the source of his next meal so if one or two are watching you fish, you've got to do catch-and-release," said Ekler. "I'll clean fish on the river bank and leave the guts for the bears but I won't let them see me with a fish on shore."

Keeping his catch afterwards was always a problem. "You want to sleep with one eye open, just in case a bear decides to investigate your camp or get into your tent," he said. In fact, he tries to keep at least one person awake and on guard at night, usually in a 4 hour shift.

Before he left for his annual Alaskan adventure last year, Ekler spent some time talking about his bear problems with Gallagher Fence expert TM Morgan Renner.

Renner recommended starting with a Gallagher B80 Energizer. It can power up to 50 acres of multi-wire permanent fence and battery life on a full charge can be up to four and a half weeks, an important time frame for Ekler's critical application. It's a portable, lightweight unit than can be packed into wilderness areas easily, too.

Renner said, "Robin needed to solarize it so he wasn't packing multiple 12-volt batteries. He needed to ground it well to insure the bear got the most energy from the energizer possible. His need for portability led me to recommend our E-net, which is a 165 feet of long woven polywire netting with the posts built in. Anything that a bear can get into - which is everything, they have been known to chew up and eat plastic chainsaw gas containers with the gas mix in it - can be put inside the netting and protected."

Ekler put his entire camp, including his family and his food supply, inside the netting. He was literally betting his life on the fence. After a few anxious nights, he learned to trust the fence. Sleep came easily to everyone in camp when they saw dozens of bears keeping a safe and respectful distance from the camp, even though the hungry animals knew there was food inside the E-net.

'They were patrolling the area, I've got the photos to prove it,' said Ekler, 'but they were staying at least 15 or 20 feet away from the fence.'

Returning from that first trip with the E-net, happy camper Ekler sent this note to Gallagher:

"Just wanted to say thanks for probably saving our lives last year on Kodiak Island. You spent time and effort supplying us with e-net (40X40) solar charged. We counted in the neighborhood of 30 bear that visited our camp and no Kodiak bear came within 5' of our fence (and had fish inside).

We have wonderful pictures of this but do not know what happened when we were asleep. Will be recommending your products to all clients in bear country forever. This year we will be smoking fish inside fence due to the confidence in your fence. We will be in Kodiak backcountry for 1 month and will shoot around 20,000 pictures. I will e-mail you a picture or two.

Thank You, Robin Ekler-CASPER ARMS"

A hungry bear can be dangerously aggressive and, even though Ekler didn't actually see one testing the fence, you can bet that a few tried it out during the night. Gallagher's power fences are designed to discourage intruders, not harm them. They've been battle-tested in lots of back country applications, protecting valuable property from marauding wolves, coyotes, and other scavengers. The lightweight fences have even stood up to big game like elk and bears in the lower 48. Ekler and his family probably put a Gallagher fence to one of the most extreme tests, though, and came back to tell the story.