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In Valley of the Geysers, a 'Month of Silence'

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We are now well into Kronotsky nature reserve's "month of silence." Every spring for more than 15 years, Kamchatka's famous federal nature reserve has announced a temporary restriction on visits to two of its best-known sites, the Valley of the Geysers and Uzon Kaldera, in order to encourage bear population growth. This year, the period lasts from May 23 to June 25. Thanks to this rule, tour groups to the territory are, for now, rare. In the Valley of the Geysers, one helipad has been closed for the month. Already more than thirty bears have been spotted in the tiny Valley and more are coming day by day.

It is an acknowledged fact that Kamchatka's protected territories, its reserves, parks, and sanctuaries, hold some of the Earth's most exquisite natural wonders. Comparing the peninsula with other places around the globe, one director of a local nature park said, "The rest of the world is trying to restore their wilderness. All we have to do is protect ours." Kamchatka's isolation has allowed its nature to remain mostly untouched. Kronotsky nature reserve, with a territory rivaling that of Montenegro, is occupied by less than a dozen

inspectors. The lack of human interference here has made Kronotsky home to Russia's largest population of brown bears.

With this month a lull before the storm of tourists that lasts from July to October, reserve staff members are, like the animals around them, passing their time in busy quiet. Inspectors in the Valley of the Geysers are making repairs to their base, noting weather conditions, recording the explosions of geysers, and observing the valley's wildlife. These days, the Valley stays twilit until eleven in the evening, and days stretch into night in a low hum of activity. One recent dusk found three Valley inspectors standing on the steps of their base and looking at the snow-spotted hills around them. "There she is," an inspector said, pointing out a mother bear and her two cubs, one light brown like the mother and the other dark as coffee.

Another inspector started. "I thought —" he said, grabbing the binoculars. He squinted through them, then passed them to his colleagues and pointed. On a farther hill grazed an identical bear family, with a blonde mother bear and a tumbling set of motley cubs. The inspectors began to laugh in short wonder. They passed the binoculars back and forth. Living in the valley for eight months out of the year, they know it as intimately as their own apartments. Bears here are considered close as neighbors, each with its own name, habits, and personality. The mother bear on the closer hill was called Blondie — but the bear on the farther hill was entirely new. One inspector took out his notebook and jotted down the sighting. This bear family was the latest arrival to the valley's June silence, but it would not be the last.

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