



Food-hunting eagles often perch atop the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

A World Beyond Imagination

Ten days in the Arctic wilderness casts a new light on life's petty squabbles.

STORY BY DAVID SHAW, FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

FAR BELOW, THE RIVER meanders across the treeless valley. Our tents and canoes, laid out in the shrubby willows along the shore, look like colored specks, while all around me the mountains of the Brooks Range rise steep and wild into the Arctic sky.

It's moments like these that make me so grateful that I can earn a living doing what I do. My work as a wildlife biologist, photographer and guide has carried me across the state, and often—though never often enough—into the remote valleys of the Brooks Range.

Birds fascinate me, and for the past dozen years my research efforts have centered on them. Here, on this wild ridge, I can hear a northern wheatear calling from a rock outcrop behind me. Probably early in its fall migration, the small gray-and-black bird will soon wing off to the west,



over the Bering Strait, across Siberia, China, western Asia and the dunes of the Sahara to its wintering grounds in the grasslands of east Africa.

To the north, beyond the last mountains of the Brooks, migrating birds from six continents gather each year on the coastal tundra. Caribou roam in vast herds of up to 120,000 animals. And in faraway courtrooms, industrialists and conservationists face off over the region's uncertain future. But that's something I choose not to think about as I begin the long walk back down to our riverside camp.

The day before, a bush plane dropped off the group I was guiding on a gravel bar beside the river. We unloaded gear, canoes and 10 days' worth of food before the plane roared

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID SHAW

ALASKA



TAKAHULA LAKE (above) nestles at the foot of Takahula Mountain in the Gates of the Arctic National Park. Continuing clockwise: The rock ptarmigan changes its camouflage color from brown in the summer to winter white; the golden plover spends its summers in the Arctic, then flies nonstop to winter feeding grounds on the grasslands of South America; a hiker enjoys a somewhat shorter journey in Gates of the Arctic National Park.



out of sight beyond a bend in the river. Then we pushed off from shore, severing our last ties to the outside world.

For a while, at least, we are free. We share the valley with a pack of wolves howling from atop a rocky outcrop above the river, their cries echoing across the emptiness. We watch a grizzly bear and her four yearling cubs chase chum salmon through the clear water of a tributary.

One day, hundreds of caribou pass by our camp, swim single file across the swift river and shake the water from their fur like showers of shattered glass. My fellow travelers stand in awe, eyes wide, and cameras forgotten at their sides.

When the plane returns 10 days later and 75 miles down-petty politics and quibbles, the electronics and noise suddenly seem so unnecessary.

I live in Alaska, so solitude, wildness and intact landscapes are part of my daily life. It's a land unlike any other, and it has created a community unlike anywhere else I've lived. Many people move to the state for the land—some, like me, for what the land is, others for what it can be made into. And though we have wildly differing worldviews, we are neighbors first, and we look out for one another.

This is true in a figurative and a literal sense. My neighbor, with whom I share part of my driveway, is a pistol-packing, old-time Alaskan, not to be told what to do by anyone. And though we don't talk politics, I'd not trade him for another. Despite our differing opinions, he looks out for me. He plows my driveway without being asked, and graciously pulled me out of the snow when my truck slid into the ditch. Neighbors come first. Politics can come later—much, much later.

Alaska is a world to itself, imperfect, in constant flux, full of conflicts and change. Just like anywhere, I guess, except that there is so much potential here—so much potential for change, so much potential to leave things alone. And maybe in these vast open spaces, there is room for a bit of both. 🐾

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