



This serene scene shows  
the wilderness of Nabesna  
Road in Alaska.

Rain came down in torrents,  
making the tropical rain forest nearly invisible.  
Huge logs bobbed in the swollen, churning river.  
Sitting in the bow of a 20-foot dugout canoe, I was  
drenched, clutching my plastic-wrapped camera  
bag and listening to the outboard motor cough and  
backfire. I figured our chances of capsizing and  
ending up in the seething river were excellent.

Both through my work as a wilderness guide  
and my sheer love of nature, I find myself in this  
sort of scenario a lot. Yet, despite the terrifying  
canoe rides (they've all ended safely so far), the  
days spent shivering in a rain-lashed tent on the  
tundra and the pain of blisters that rise on my  
feet after too many rocky miles of trail, I return  
to these wild places again and again.

# the call of the *wild*

The middle of nowhere is the perfect place  
to see birds. Story and photos by David Shaw

## Slowing the Clock

A journey into the wilderness is a bit like time travel. You go from the noisy, busy domain of people and their machines to a world that moves at a different pace. There is change in the wild—seasons shift, birds migrate, trees grow and die—but it all happens gradually. Immersing yourself in this slow-motion world is one of the joys of travel to remote places.

Each summer I guide wilderness backpacking and river trips into Alaska's Brooks Range. It is staggeringly beautiful country, with sweeping valleys, rugged peaks and rivers clear as glass. There are few trees, and the views seem endless. Birds migrate unimpeded up and down the valleys and over the mountains to the vast expanse of wet tundra on Alaska's North Slope.

## Into the Wild

When you go birding in the Brooks Range, or anywhere in the wilderness, there are no scope-bearing hordes, no cellphones ringing to obscure the birds' songs, nothing to interrupt as you watch a falcon play the wind. The birds you find are yours alone.

This is a different kind of birding experience than many are used to. You're not chasing a rarity or luring it

to your feeder. You're watching birds in their own world.

Perhaps because true wilderness is difficult to reach, you appreciate every bird you see or hear. During the summer around my home in Fairbanks, Alaska, I hear many species singing: yellow-rumped warblers, ruby-crowned kinglets, dark-eyed juncos, white-crowned sparrows, boreal and black-capped chickadees, varied thrushes and more. I hear these so often that the sounds can wash right over me, barely registering. But if I listen to those same songs in the wild, they sound entirely new. I'm tuned in, aware.

## Capture the Moment

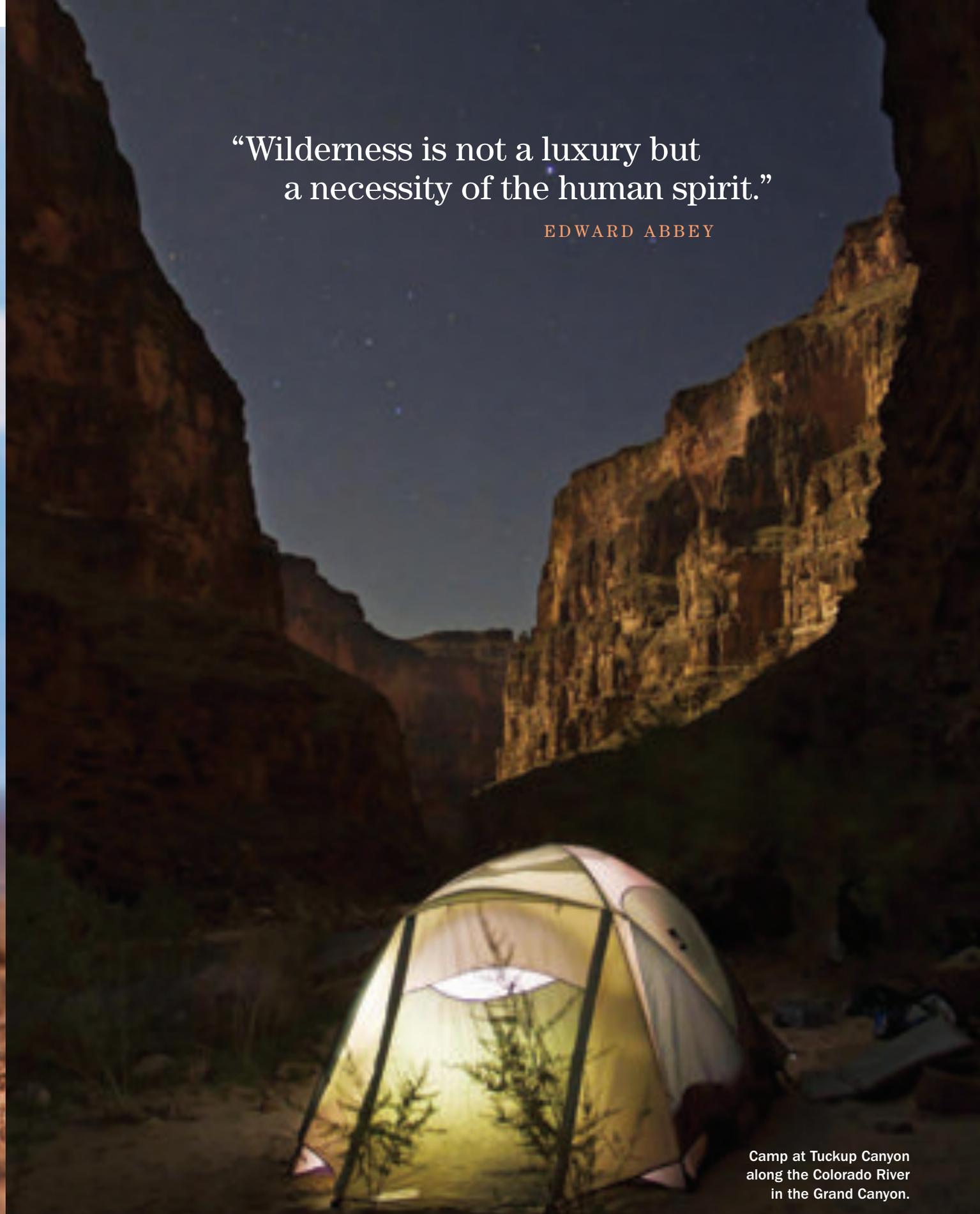
Photography, too, is different in wild places. Time and distance require you to be a minimalist. You can't carry every lens and gadget you do when shooting from your car or at home.

Some photographers I've talked to or guided find this limiting, but I think they're looking at it wrong. The challenge in photography has always been to compose

**A pair of tundra swans on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.**

“Wilderness is not a luxury but  
a necessity of the human spirit.”

EDWARD ABBEY



Camp at Tuckup Canyon  
along the Colorado River  
in the Grand Canyon.



Boreal chickadees call the boreal forest of Canada home and are rarely spotted in the U.S.

only what is necessary. Cluttered images without focus or depth are rarely successful, and the ability to compose an image has little to do with equipment. These parameters can force you to consider the landscape and its inhabitants in a new way.

Sit down with the stones, tundra or river and wait. Observe the wildlife. Where do they linger? What do they avoid? Slowly, you can start making images. The first few usually aren't great, but eventually your photos will improve. And when you look back on the pictures, you'll remember the exquisite moments.

## The Journey Home

When I get home—for a while, at least—the lessons of the wilderness stay with me. I hear the birds in my yard with renewed appreciation. I watch them flit in and out of my feeder and admire the sleek tuxedo of the black-capped chickadees. I catch the first subtle notes of a ruby-crowned kinglet's song.

But it goes beyond that. I remember that there are aspects of the wild everywhere. Migrating birds land in parks and backyards across the country. Flowers poke through cracks in the pavement; peregrine falcons nest atop skyscrapers. Wilderness remains, and it's worth exploring. 🐦



*David Shaw guides for Arctic Wild, a company in Fairbanks, Alaska. Check out [arcticwild.com](http://arcticwild.com) to find out how to take a trip with him.*

## The Wild Picks

David recommends these top five places to visit for wilderness birding.

**1. THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE.** This vast, wild, beautiful Alaskan refuge should top anyone's list for both wilderness exploring and unsurpassed birding. Explore the coastal plain in June for nesting shorebirds and waterfowl, or the mountains of the Brooks Range for such rarities as northern wheatear and Smith's longspur.

**2. THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS.** The Rockies extend through many states, each with its own hot spots. White-tailed ptarmigan, Lewis's woodpeckers and black rosy-finches are among the many birding highlights.

**3. BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK.** The mountainous deserts of West Texas—and in particular the wild areas of Big Bend—make for an incredible birding destination. The Colima warbler and several other species are found in the U.S. only in the mountains of Big Bend, and the greater roadrunner, black-chinned sparrow and blue-throated hummingbird are not to be missed.

**4. THE CHIRICAHUA NATIONAL MONUMENT.** Southern Arizona is a mecca for birders. The most prized species are the elegant trogon and the magnificent hummingbird, but there are countless others to see. Miles of hiking trails are a big draw, too.

**5. EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK.** Well known as a birding paradise for its many species of waders, the Everglades is also a wonderful place to find a bit of wilderness. Miles of canoe routes provide access to backcountry camping near the park's bird-filled mangrove forests.

“Generally speaking,  
a howling wilderness does not howl:  
it is the imagination of the traveler  
that does the howling.”

HENRY DAVID THOREAU



A scrubby pine in Colorado's Front Range just outside of Denver.



Grab your binoculars and head outdoors in search of bald eagles. Discover the best areas at [birdsandblooms.com/mag](http://birdsandblooms.com/mag).