



# Images in the Wilderness

David Shaw

An abstract image of the sun reflected nearly perfectly in the calm water of a pond along the Noatak River in Gates of the Arctic National Park, Alaska. August 2012.

### The Wild Landscape

*The river, far below, looked like a thin silver ribbon as it wound in bends out of sight to the west. At nearly midnight the shadow of the mountains was finally encroaching on the wet tundra of the valley floor. But from my perch high above, the sun would remain for another hour at least.*

*When I raised my camera to compose an image of some strange monolithic rocks, it occurred to me that I was quite possibly the first person to ever photograph those stones. When I clicked the shutter the mechanical sound and glow of the digital screen seemed incongruous in the arctic silence.*

*Wild places offer rare opportunities for photographers willing to explore. There are chances to make unique images, not just new perspectives or interpretations of already well-photographed landscapes. The challenges, however, are as unique and abundant as the opportunities. Access, weather, equipment, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to open yourself mentally to the moment, are challenges difficult to overcome.*

### Types of Trips

*Backpacking* offers unrivaled freedom for exploration. A peak you want to climb? A ridge, canyon or distant

lake you want to explore? Simply turn your boots and go. Distances covered and areas explored are only limited by physical capabilities. Photography however can be impeded by the limited amount of equipment that can be carried. Every lens, body and accessory packed must be carried on your back, mile after long mile. When I load my pack, my kit is pared down to the minimum: a wide to mid-range zoom (in my case a Canon 24-105L), a single body, an ultralight tripod, a polarizing filter and a handful of batteries and memory cards.

*Basecamp trips* are a common type of wilderness trip for photographers, and allow an intimacy with the landscape not often available on other types of trip. I use them regularly when I lead expeditions in Alaska's remote arctic. On such trips we'll fly in a small bush-plane to a lovely spot, land on the tundra or a riverside gravel bar and set up camp within yards of where we stepped from the plane. A few years ago I led a photography trip to the coastal plain of Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We set up along the Canning River midway between the mountains and the Arctic Ocean. During our time, we got to know our surroundings in detail. We knew where the best



A forest pond reflects the mountains in Wrangell St. Elias National Park, Alaska. July 2006.





A small glacial pond or tarn, glitters in the wild Baird Mountains of Alaska's western Brooks Range, as seen from the window of a small bush plane. July 2012.



view of the tumbling stream could be found. We could find the male Rock Ptarmigan on his territory above our camp whenever we wished. Nests of Golden Plovers, fields of tussocks, caribou trails, bear tracks and perspectives on the mountains were all known, explored and photographed. But there were drawbacks. Several times during our stay we peered up at the mountains and wondered aloud what opportunities lay there. We lived in a three or four mile radius of our camp, the landscape and wildlife further abroad were untouchable.

Equipment can be more flexible on base-camps as long as you stay within the carrying capacity of the airplane. I've guided trips where I've carried every piece of gear I could possibly need including a 500mm f/4 lens, two camera bodies, 70-200 f/2.8, wide angles and macros. Other trips, due to flight restrictions, have been more limited.

*River trips* and photography go hand in hand. Boats offer mobility and the ability to carry reasonable loads of equipment. A year ago, I spent three weeks paddling the Grand Canyon. The large rafts could carry an extraordinary amount of gear. Not just photography equipment of course, but big tents, gourmet food and coolers full of beer. That kind of luxury is rare on wilderness trips. My photography kit on river trips includes wide angle and telephoto lenses (though rarely the big 500mm), a couple of bodies, tripod and very importantly, dry bags and watertight Pelican cases.

### **You Have No Idea What You Are in For**

For two years in a row I've guided canoe trips down the same stretch of river during mid-August. The first year, the weather was immaculate. For 10 days we had glorious blue skies, rarely tarnished by even a passing cloud. In those 10 days we put on rain gear once. Once! That, to my knowledge, is a standing record for Alaska's Brooks Range. It was warm, almost hot. We swam in the clear blue water of the river and basked on the dry tundra. It was amazing, it was beautiful, it was perfect for everyone...except me.

## Guided vs. Independent Travel: Pros & Cons

### *Independent*

#### Pros

- Your own itinerary
- Generally less expensive
- Food choice
- Pick your companions
- Flexibility in the field—shoot when and where you want

#### Cons

- Must own or rent necessary equipment (can add to cost)
- Requires experience
- No local expertise
- Camp chores
- Logistics and planning

### *Guided*

#### Pros

- Supplied group equipment
- Local expertise
- Safety
- Professional wilderness skills
- Less cooking and camp chores
- More time for photography

#### Cons

- Costly
- Lost flexibility
- Unknown companions

### **(Almost) The Best of Both Worlds: Custom Trips**

Most high quality outfitters offer custom trips that can be catered to your needs. (Some even offer photography specific trips.) You collaborate with the company to choose the best itinerary, locations, and type of trip, but you still get to choose your companions and rely on the expertise and labor of the guides. The drawback? Customized trips can be expensive.



A group of hikers explores the lower reaches of side canyon in Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona. March 2012.

The fact is the weather was just too damn good for photography. Sure the light was amazing, but the perfectly blue skies had no texture, no interest, nothing to catch the evening color, just blue. After the trip, a friend (who had also been photographing in the Brooks) and I got together to talk about our trips. We reminisced about the incredible weather we'd both

experienced, the endless sun, and how we needed our sunscreen and lip balm far more than our rain gear. Then there was a pause, and he said without irony, "Yeah, it could have been better."

The same trip a year later started with such potential. We had a beautiful first couple of days. High clouds



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Two Brown Bears fight over a fishing spot near Brooks Falls in Katmai National Park, AK, USA. July 2009.

caught the sun; lovely late-night light lingered on the tundra. Then on the afternoon of the third day, the weather arrived bringing high winds and blowing rain. For a day or two it was an interesting change. The skies were shifting constantly. Lenticular clouds rolled passed like an invading fleet of UFOs and the wind tore great gashes of blue into the overcast sky. These provided a compelling backdrop to the dark mountains. But it didn't change, not for the rest of the 17-day trip. Sure the skies had texture, but that didn't make up for the fact that I'd seen enough lenticular clouds to last a life time, and I was sick and tired of battling the wind and flooded river as we paddled, setting up and taking down wet tents and listening to the gusts tear through the willows at night.

Understanding and then coming to terms with the fact that you have no control over the weather allows you to discard your hopes and expectations and simply begin to see. For most photographers, long wilderness trips are life vacations. They cost a lot of money, time and energy. When things don't go as planned like when the rain falls, the wind blows, or textureless gray and flat

light seem endless, disappointment and frustration rise quickly to the surface.

But every condition, no matter how rotten, is good for some kind of image. Think it through. Tell the story. Feeling down because of the rain? Take that emotion and mix it with the place. What kind of image would show that best? Even in the worst of conditions, there are unique images to be made.

Experiment. Play. Dammit, go outside. Journeys into the wild are stories to be told. Tell yours.



*David Shaw is a professional photographer, writer, guide and wildlife biologist living in Fairbanks, Alaska. He spends an irresponsible amount of time watching birds. Dave leads trips into Alaska's wilderness each year for Arctic Wild ([arcticwild.com](http://arcticwild.com)) where he always looks forward to working with photographers. Check out his website, read his blog, download his ebook on wilderness photography and follow him on Facebook and Twitter at [wildimagephoto.com](http://wildimagephoto.com)*