

**Nature
Photography
On the Road in Alaska**



Alan and Elaine Wilson

Preface

Alaska's high latitude, vast coastline and complex inland topography supports an incredible variety of bird and animal wildlife. It is a harsh environment that experiences wide seasonal variations in temperature and light. Although best known for large resident populations of Moose, Brown Bear, Bald Eagle and Caribou, the spring bird migration also brings immense flocks returning to their traditional northern nesting grounds. It's a nature photography showcase and unbelievably accessible.

We've spent many enjoyable hours traversing the Alaskan outdoors in search of interesting and compliant subjects. There is no end of exciting venues. This book contains images from seven locations – Nome, Barrow, Anchorage, Brooks River, Homer, St. Paul Island in the Pribilof archipelago and Barter Island in the Beaufort Sea. It is by no means a compendium of every known species that can be found in these areas. Nor does it begin to exhaust the incredible number of tremendous locations that Alaska has to offer. It is simply a selection of birds and wildlife we were lucky to encounter and photograph in their natural habitat at seven locations we feel are some of the best in Alaska.

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Vernon, British Columbia

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Nome

Nome in June hosts spectacular birding as migrants return to the Seward Peninsula to nest in habitat that encompasses ocean, wetlands and high alpine tundra strewn with dense willow thickets. Here you can expect to find warblers in boreal forest, shorebirds in spongy tundra as well as ducks, loons and grebes in ponds that dot the landscape. Although the prize species for this area is a singing Bluethroat on territory, there is ample opportunity to find others that are equally as hard to encounter elsewhere including Northern Wheatear, Lapland Longspur, Red-Throated Loon, Long-Tailed Jaeger and Bar-Tailed Godwit. It's also one of the easiest places to photograph Musk Ox as a large herd inhabits the outskirts of the town.

Photography at Nome requires endless driving along the three roads that service the area. It was not uncommon for us to travel a couple of hundred miles a day searching for the target species on our bucket list. It's a tough slog where many encounters end early as the birds can be skittish or simply not in the mood to cooperate. Most action is roadside which requires little walking. However, many hours are spent in soggy tundra or marsh water clogged with mud, always accompanied by the ubiquitous and haunting sound of Wilson's Snipe.

The weather in June can be foggy and cold in the morning, often windy with a rapid temperature rise as the day progresses. However, as Nome is slightly below the Arctic Circle, we were treated to a minimum of twenty hours of light each day. Given the tremendous bird population that is present at this time of year, it makes for great photography and is an area well worth experiencing.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT

Teller Road near Milepost 31, Nome, Alaska



WILSON'S SNIPE
Teller Road near Cripple River, Nome, Alaska

WESTERN SANDPIPER

Tundra near Bering Air, Nome, Alaska



AMERICAN GOLDEN PLOVER
Kougarok Road near Salmon Lake,
Alaska



AMERICAN PIPIT
Teller Road near Cripple River,
Alaska





PACIFIC GOLDEN PLOVER
Glacier Creek Road near Nome,
Alaska



BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER
Lagoon Road near Cape Woolley,
Alaska

BLUETHROAT
Kougarok Road near Milepost 35, Alaska



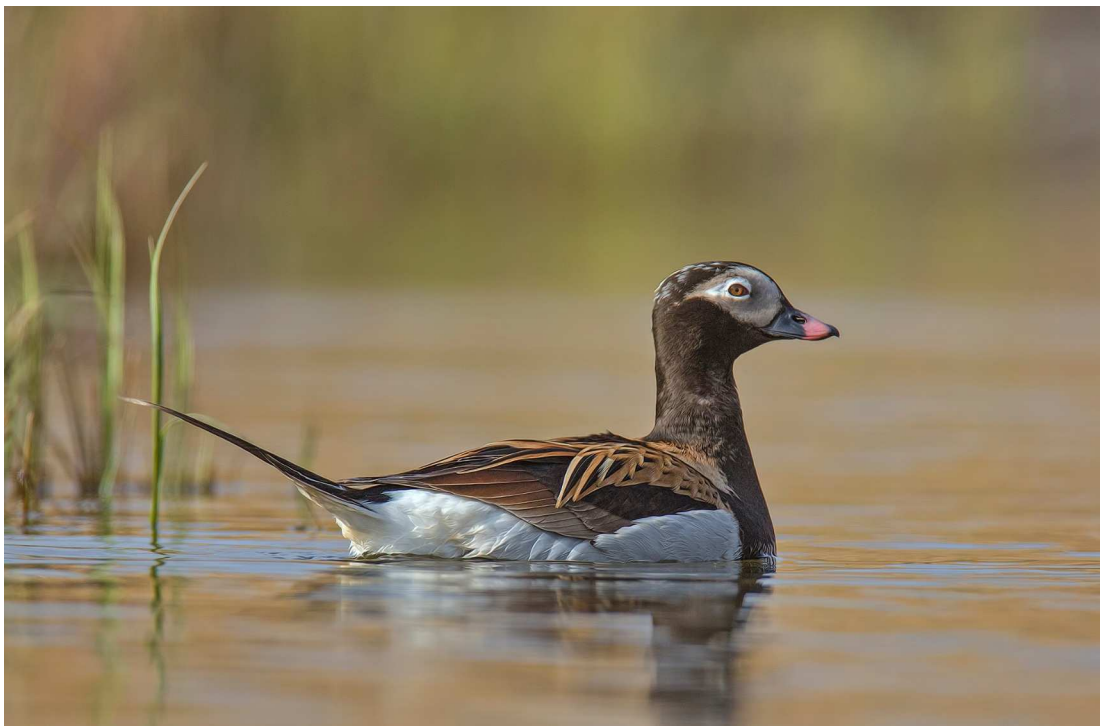


ARCTIC WARBLER

Kougarok Road near Salmon Lake, Alaska

LONG-TAILED DUCK

Pond at East End Park,
Nome, Alaska



RED-NECKED PHALAROPE

Pond at East End Park,
Nome, Alaska





RED-NECKED GREBES
Pond at Swanberg Dredge, Nome, Alaska





MUSK OX
Pond at East End Park, Nome, Alaska



MUSK OX

Dexter Pass near Nome, Alaska



MUSK OX

Bering Street, Nome, Alaska

MUSK OX
Dexter Pass near Nome, Alaska



MUSK OX
Bering Street, Nome, Alaska

MUSK OX CALF
Dexter Bypass near Nome, Alaska



MUSK OX COW AND CALF
Dexter Bypass near Nome, Alaska





MUSK OX COW AND CALF
Dexter Bypass near Nome, Alaska



RED FOX

Lagoon Road near Cape Woolley, Alaska



LONG-TAILED JAEGER
Teller Road near Milepost 33, Alaska



WILLOW PTARMIGAN
Lagoon Road near Cape Woolley, Alaska



GYRFALCON (DARK MORPH)
Teller Road near Livingston Creek,
Alaska



PEREGRINE FALCON
Council Highway near Solomon,
Alaska

NORTHERN WHEATEAR
Skookum Pass near Milepost 53,
Alaska



WILLOW PTARMIGAN
Dexter Bypass near Nome,
Alaska





ARCTIC TERN
Tundra near Bering Air, Alaska

COMMON REDPOLL
Shovel Creek near Solomon,
Alaska



ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER
Teller Road near Cripple River,
Alaska





GRAY-CHEEKED WARBLER

Teller Road near Livingston Creek,
Alaska



LAPLAND LONGSPUR

Teller Road near Livingston Creek,
Alaska



LONG-TAILED DUCK
Pond at East End Park, Nome, Alaska



RED-THROATED LOON
Pond at East End Park, Nome, Alaska

Brooks River

Brooks River is in the heart of Katmai National Park and Preserve roughly two hundred and fifty miles southwest of Anchorage in Alaska's Bristol Bay area. It's a tremendous venue and can only be reached by floatplane. Here large numbers of Brown Bear congregate in the fall to feast on Sockeye Salmon as they strive to complete their epic migration from the Bering Sea through inland lakes and streams to reach the spawning beds at Brooks Lake where they will end their instinctual drive to reproduce.

Photographers are attracted to the area in the hopes of capturing action images as the salmon run the gauntlet of hungry bears. The river is only a mile and a half long, ending at a small water fall. To ensure safety, the National Park Service patrols the area and visitors must attend a "bear conduct" seminar prior to entry. At the time of our visit, the viewing platforms at both the upper falls and the lower estuary easily accommodated large groups and were designed for a great photography experience.

Brooks River is at the top of our list as a premier location to view and photograph Brown Bear as they feed and fatten on salmon prior to denning up for a long winter hibernation.

BROWN BEAR SOW AND CUB

Brooks River, Katmai National Park and Preserve, Alaska







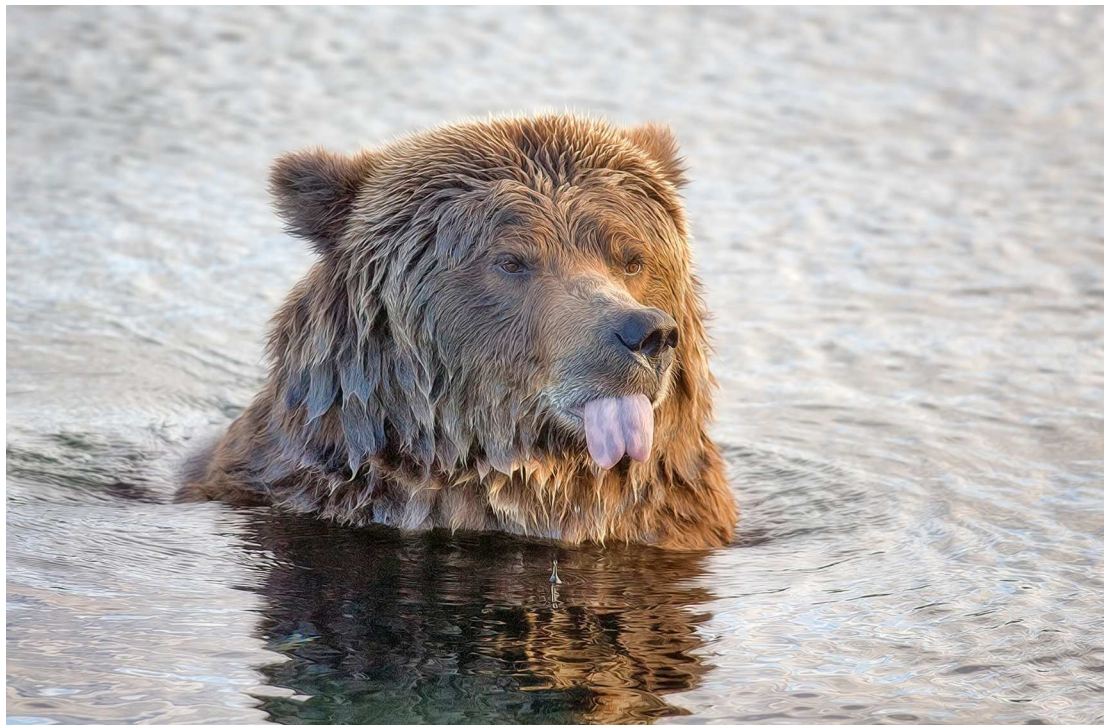
BROWN BEAR

Brooks River, Katmai National Park and Preserve, Alaska



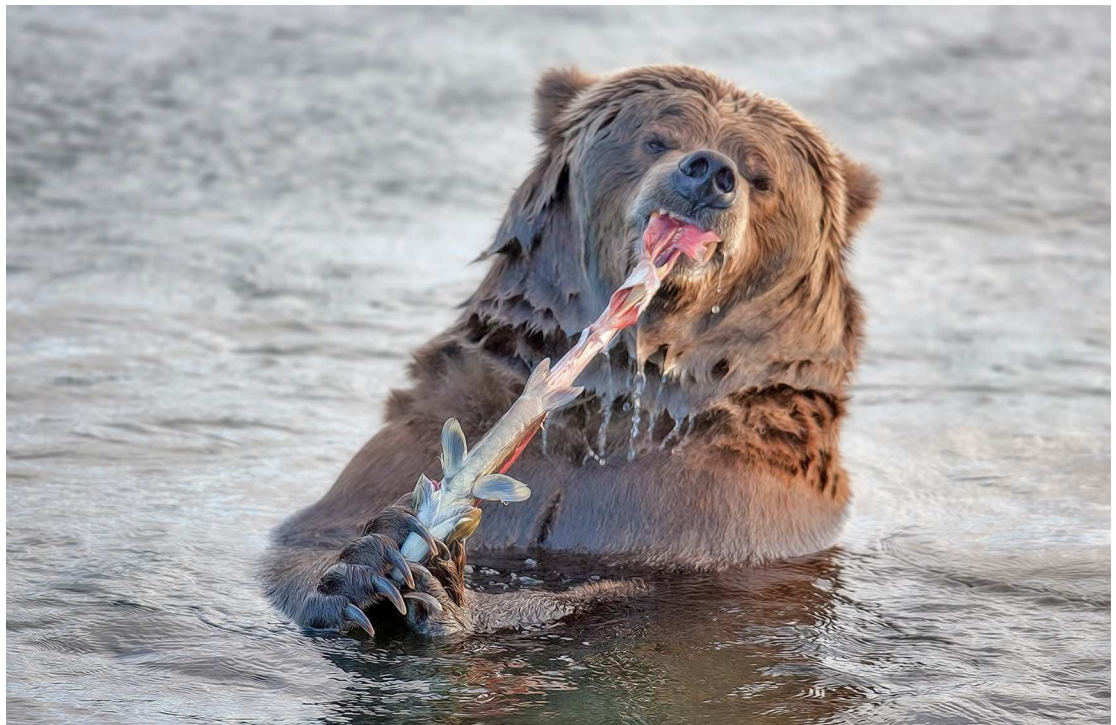
BROWN BEAR

Brooks River, Katmai National Park and Preserve, Alaska



BROWN BEARS
Brooks River,
Katmai National Park and Preserve,
Alaska



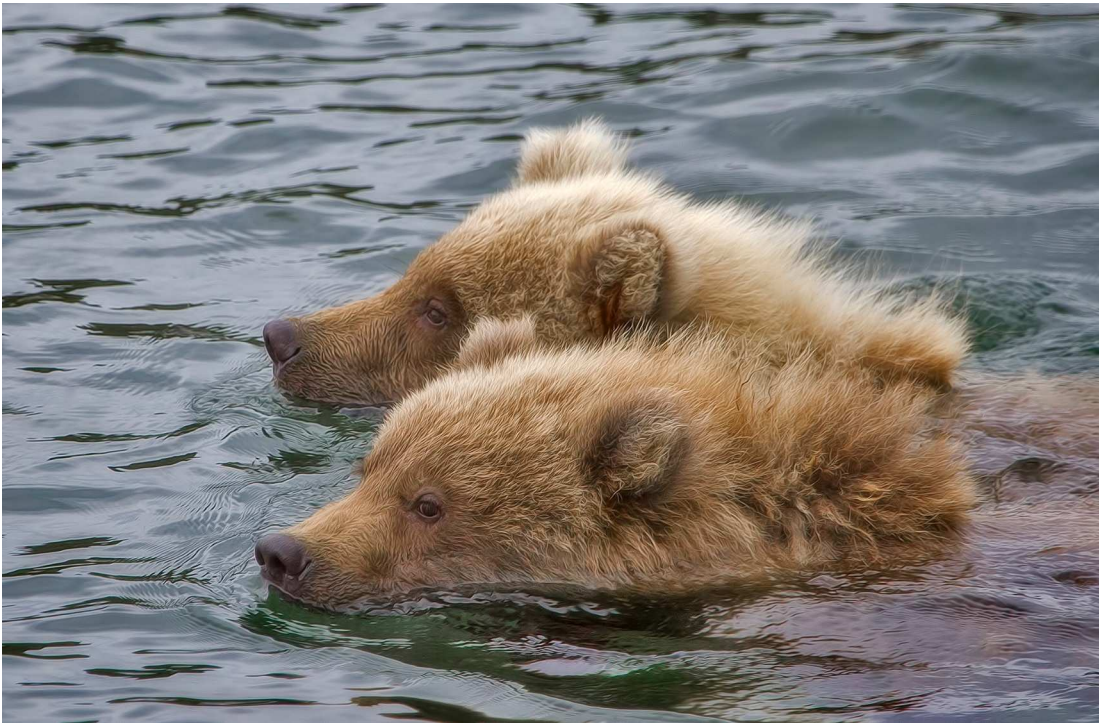


BROWN BEARS
Brooks River,
Katmai National Park and Preserve,
Alaska



BROWN BEAR

Brooks River, Katmai National Park and Preserve, Alaska



BROWN BEAR CUBS
Brooks River,
Katmai National Park and Preserve,
Alaska



BROWN BEAR
Brooks River,
Katmai National Park and Preserve,
Alaska

BROWN BEAR
Brooks River,
Katmai National Park and Preserve,
Alaska





BROWN BEAR

Brooks River, Katmai National Park and Preserve, Alaska





St. Paul Island

This small island located in the southeastern Bering Sea is roughly two hundred and fifty miles north of the Aleutian Chain. It's part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and hosts a prolific avian population. The sheer volcanic cliffs are home in early August to almost forty species of nesting seabirds, most notably Horned and Tufted Puffins, Common and Thick-Billed Murres, Red-Faced Cormorants as well as Least, Crested and Parakeet Auklets. The rugged shoreline is dotted with several sandy beaches that supports several large Northern Fur Seal rookeries.

Although the persistent summer fog, high winds and cloudiness create a raw chilliness that often shrouds the island and inhibits any chance of productive photography, it's an exciting location from the perspective that as the weather clears the birds are active and easy to approach. We used a jitney service from the only hotel to reach the prime locations. Although walking is only moderately strenuous, the cliffs can be hazardous and require caution when positioning for light and background. It's a great venue and a location where close encounters with Arctic Blue Fox and Reindeer that roam the island interior make for an even more exciting photography experience.

TUFTED PUFFIN

Zapadni Cliffs, Saint Paul Island, Alaska



NORTHERN FUR SEAL
Big Zapadni Rookery, Saint Paul Island, Alaska

ARCTIC "BLUE" FOX

Reef Rookery, Saint Paul Island, Alaska





LEAST AUKLETS
Zapadni Breakwater,
Saint Paul Island,
Alaska

GRAY-CROWNED ROSY-FINCH
Near King Edward Hotel,
Saint Paul Island,
Alaska



HORNED PUFFIN
Zapadni Cliffs,
Saint Paul Island,
Alaska



ROCK SANDPIPER
Southwest Point Tundra,
Saint Paul Island,
Alaska



PARAKEET AUKLET

Ridge Wall, Saint Paul Island, Alaska



CRESTED AUKLET

Zapadni Cliffs, Saint Paul Island, Alaska

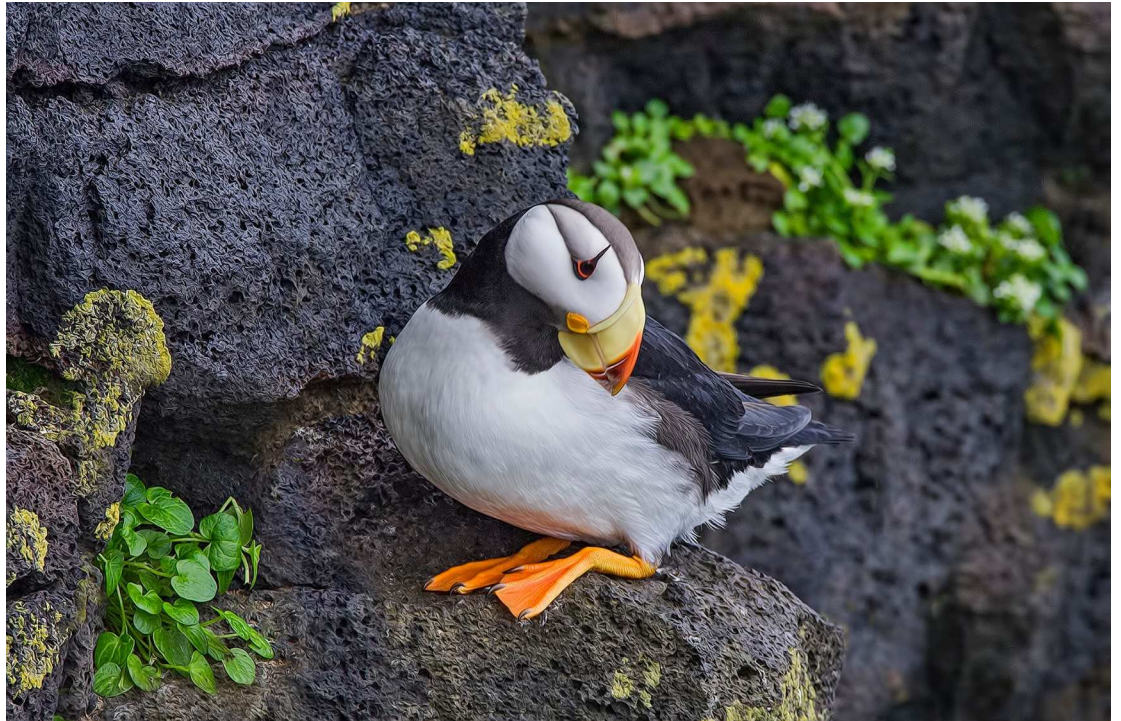
THICK-BILLED MURRE

Zapadni Cliffs,
Saint Paul Island,
Alaska



HORNED PUFFIN

Ridge Wall,
Saint Paul Island,
Alaska





TUFTED PUFFIN

Zapadni Cliffs, Saint Paul Island, Alaska





Homer

A personal bird archive is simply not complete without images of the Bald Eagle. Although it's easy to find locations in North America where the birds congregate, often habitat conflicts create severe composition challenges when attempting to position for an image, especially of a roosting bird. Besides, we were looking for action flight photography and felt there was no better place than coastal Alaska.

We considered two prime locations. The State of Alaska created the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve near Haines where large numbers congregate in early fall and winter on the river "flats" to feast on the late run of Chum Salmon. Homer, on the other hand, is situated on Kachemak Bay, a forty-one-mile arm of Cooke Inlet where similar concentrations reside but are more an early spring event. We chose the latter option in March as the birds in this area are known to be habituated to humans and predisposed to be compelling photography subjects.

Although Bald Eagles can be photographed on the beach along the Homer Spit, action images can only be captured on the water using herring as bait. This requires knowledge of bird locations and critical nautical conditions such as tides, shallows and good anchor points to optimize boat positioning. Weather can also be unbelievably transient along coastal Alaska, often changing hourly from sunshine and calm water to rain or drizzle with gusts that make photography almost impossible. As this was a venue that we obviously couldn't undertake on our own, we decided a local guide would be our best option. We enjoyed five days of unrelenting excitement as our water craft was surrounded by Bald Eagles and Glaucous-Winged Gulls that performed incredible aerial acrobatics and competed vigorously on the water surface for herring scraps. It was certainly a lot of fun and perhaps the best photography venue we've ever attended.

BALD EAGLE

Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska

BOREAL CHICKADEE
Anchor Point near Homer,
Alaska



RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH
Anchor Point near Homer,
Alaska





BALD EAGLE
Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska



BALD EAGLES
Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska





GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL
Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska



GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL
Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska



BALD EAGLE

Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska



BALD EAGLE
Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska

LONG-TAILED DUCK
Marina at Homer, Alaska



GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL
Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska





BALD EAGLE

Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska



BALD EAGLE
Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska



BALD EAGLE
Kachemak Bay near Homer, Alaska

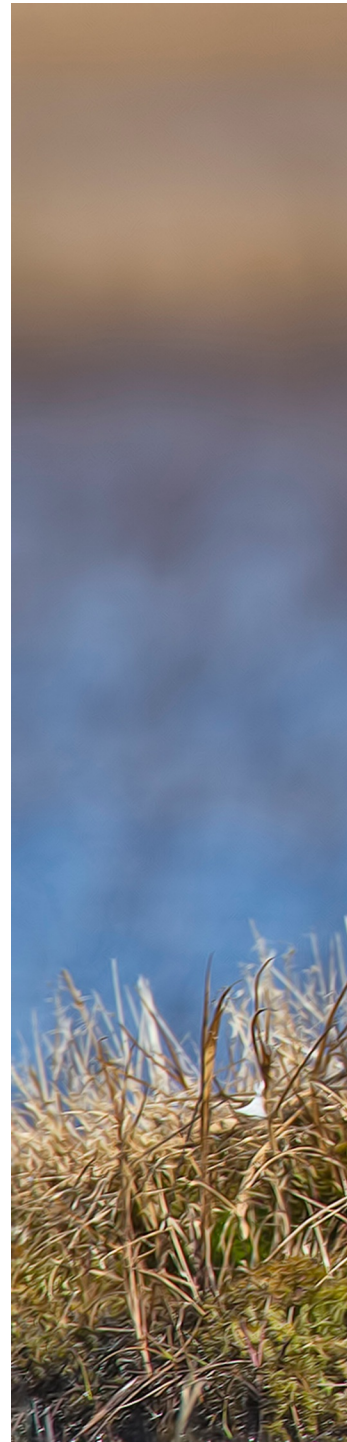
Barrow

Barrow is roughly three hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle and is surrounded on three sides by the Arctic Ocean. It's only accessible by commercial airline. Although the cold and dry polar climate sees little rainfall, it is almost always shrouded in clouds. The flat, wet tundra is supported by a deep layer of permafrost that forced us to physically live in waders. It is much colder than Nome, often with a biting wind chill and dense fog. However, little driving is required and although walking is moderately strenuous the shallow ponds have icy bottoms that require a fair amount of dexterity to ford while carrying a tripod and long lens.

In June, the “polar night” turns photography into a twenty-four-hour experience. It is also traditional Inupiat land and a photography permit is needed for entry. Although stalking requires patience, the rewards can be outstanding as this is the prime breeding area for King, Spectacled and Steller's Eiders. The tundra ponds are also frequented by Pacific Loons, Sabine's Gulls and Long-Tailed Ducks. The spongy green surface hosts nesting Pectoral Sandpipers and Pomarine Jaegers. Snow Buntings and Baird's Sandpipers are common but breed closer to town. It's a prolific location and a must experience for both birders and photographers alike.

KING EIDER (MALE)

Tundra near Imaqsaun Road, Barrow, Alaska







KING EIDER (MALE)
Tundra near Imaqsaun Road,
Barrow, Alaska



KING EIDER (FEMALE)
Tundra near Imaqsaun Road,
Barrow, Alaska



PACIFIC LOON

Pond at High School, Barrow, Alaska





POMARINE JAEGER
Cakeater Road, Barrow, Alaska



LAPLAND LONGSPUR
Cakeater Road, Barrow, Alaska



SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER
High School Playground, Barrow, Alaska

BAIRD'S SANDPIPER
High School Playground,
Barrow, Alaska



**GREATER
WHITE-FRONTED
GOOSE**
Pond near Stevenson Street,
Barrow, Alaska





PECTORAL SANDPIPER
Cakeater Road, Barrow, Alaska

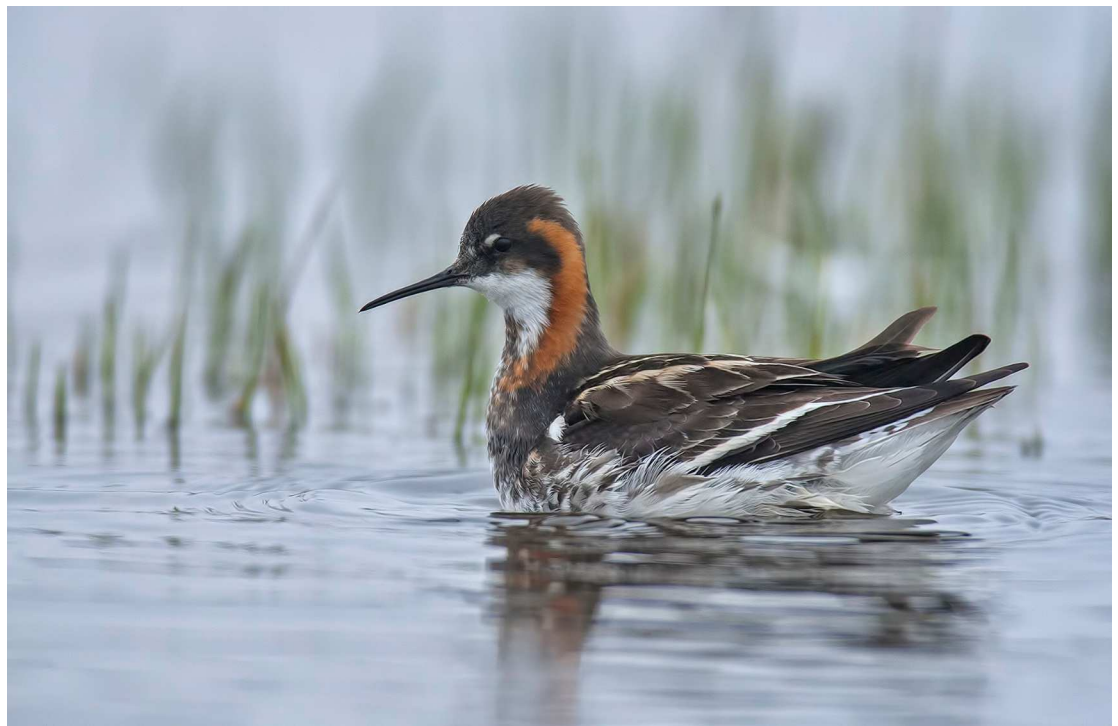


SNOW BUNTING (FLEDGLING)

Agvik Street, Barrow, Alaska

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE

Stevenson Street,
Barrow, Alaska



PACIFIC LOON

Imaqsaun Road,
Barrow, Alaska





SPECTACLED EIDER (MALE)
Pond on Cakeater Road, Barrow, Alaska

SPECTACLED EIDER (MALE)

Pond on Imaqsaun Road, Barrow, Alaska



LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER

Tundra near Imaqsaun Road,
Barrow, Alaska



LONG-TAILED DUCK

Tundra near Imaqsaun Road,
Barrow, Alaska





KING EIDER (MALE)

Tundra near Imaqsaun Road, Barrow, Alaska



POMARINE JAEGER (DARK MORPH)

Imaqaun Road, Barrow, Alaska



DUNLIN

Freshwater Lake Road,
Barrow, Alaska



SNOW BUNTING

High School Playground,
Barrow, Alaska



KING EIDER (MALE)

Tundra near Imaqsaun Road, Barrow, Alaska



AMERICAN GOLDEN PLOVER

Cakeater Road,
Barrow, Alaska



RED PHALAROPE

Freshwater Lake Road,
Barrow, Alaska





Anchorage

We encountered Moose at almost every turn in Alaska. However, in late September the bogs and swamps in Chugach State Park on the outskirts of Anchorage is a great location to experience and photograph the fall rut. With binoculars, Moose can be spotted from the valley overlook. Descending to the valley floor, the well used trails are easy to traverse and the landscape open and flush with low wet scrub and small willow.

The Williwaw Lakes Trail traverses the uplands and descends slowly through the swamps and thickets where the Moose congregate and the males fight for supremacy and ultimately breed. Leaving the trail and approaching Moose in natural habitat requires patience and caution while positioning for light and a pleasing background. It is a great natural setting and one of the best locations for intimate Moose photography in Alaska.

BULL MOOSE

Glen Alps Williwaw Lakes Trail,
Chugach State Park, Anchorage, Alaska



COW MOOSE
Glen Alps Williwaw Lakes Trail,
Chugach State Park,
Anchorage, Alaska



BULL MOOSE
Glen Alps Williwaw Lakes Trail,
Chugach State Park,
Anchorage, Alaska

CALF MOOSE
Glen Alps Williwaw Lakes Trail,
Chugach State Park,
Anchorage, Alaska



BULL MOOSE
Glen Alps Williwaw Lakes Trail,
Chugach State Park,
Anchorage, Alaska

BULL MOOSE
Glen Alps Williwaw Lakes Trail,
Chugach State Park,
Anchorage, Alaska





BULL MOOSE

Glen Alps Williwaw Lakes Trail, Chugach State Park, Anchorage, Alaska





Barter Island

It goes without saying that a Polar Bear is a proficient predator and extremely dangerous if encountered in an unprotected environment. It was patently obvious that photography at our level had to be restricted to some form of vehicular approach to ensure safety. Having accepted the obvious, we also felt a crowded and elevated tundra buggy that caters to tourists would hardly be conducive to capturing images that are best composed at eye level.

We discovered the Inupiat village of Kaktovik on Barter Island located on the northern tip of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge solved both our approach and composition issues. From roughly early September to late October, Polar Bears begin to congregate along the edge of the Beaufort Sea awaiting freeze-up as they progress to their winter grounds. The village of Kaktovik is a prime staging area as the remains of the annual village whale kill provide an interim though scant food source. It's a fantastic location for capturing intimate, eye-level images with the proviso that wind and snow can create extremely cold and low light conditions. However, as the bears are naturally curious, there is no better place in Alaska to find large concentrations that make for an intimate photography experience.

Although our prime focus was Polar Bear, it is also a great venue for Walrus that can be photographed from a boat as they rest on small ice flows just offshore. It's an experience we've added to our bucket-list for a future visit to this area.

POLAR BEAR SOW

Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska



POLAR BEAR SOW AND CUB
Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska



POLAR BEAR CUB
Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska



POLAR BEAR
Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska



POLAR BEAR BOAR
Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska

POLAR BEAR
Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska



POLAR BEAR SOW
Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska



POLAR BEAR
Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska

POLAR BEAR

Kaktovik, Barter Island, Alaska





**PIXEL BENDER OIL PAINTING
MUSK OX “LEARNING TO JOUST”**

Our Photography Journey...

The adventure began during the latter part of our careers when we started to ponder the question of what to do during our retirement. We had no objective in mind but finally settled on the combination of travel and nature photography as something that might be an interesting pastime. After months of agonizing research, we became early adopters of Canon's transition from film to digital camera bodies. What started as an overwhelming introduction to an emerging and complex technology soon mushroomed into somewhat of an obsession, especially as we progressed from wandering around local habitat searching for compliant subjects to attracting birds to sets we designed and photographed from a blind in our back yard. As we became more proficient behind the camera, we decided to focus our attention on travelling to locations in western North America, targeting sites known for outstanding bird, wildlife and natural landscape photography. Although our approach to stalking subjects "in the wild" produced some compelling images, we soon learned that most eye-catching exposures are the result of set-piece creations where subject behavior and ambient light are manipulated in a controlled setting. This is most readily achieved when photographing birds. The concept of "Birds as Art" was first introduced by Arthur Morris and subsequently taken to unprecedented heights as an artform by Alan Murphy. Both photographers raised the bar for what eventually became a photographic standard and one we passionately pursued as an adjunct to the traditional approach of simply searching for subjects in their natural habitat.

Not surprisingly, we were soon overcome with the urge to display and share our images. We began by producing web graphics and hosting an educational blog online for beginner photographers. As the sophistication of the digital darkroom evolved, a host of programs began to appear that elevated post-processing techniques to a new and exciting level. This led us to not only improve our web graphics but also to experiment in-house with the production of large prints on specialty media, including textured watercolor paper and canvas. During this time, we became overwhelmed by the emerging world of digital art, a niche genre designed to create stunning special effects from photographs. At the time of publication, our favorites were Pixel Bender, a Photoshop plug-in with an Oil Paint filter and LucisArt, a standalone program that creates incredible watercolor renditions. Both programs became mainstays in our Photoshop workflow.

This book is our self-published attempt to showcase, in print, a selection of photographs from our Alaska travels.

Alaska

Nature Photography

Bird, wildlife and natural landscape photography is an enjoyable and absorbing pastime. It's also an immense amount of fun! The advent of the digital camera and image enhancement software has had a significant impact on what was once the domain of professionals and serious amateurs. Today, it's an accessible and affordable hobby, no matter what your level of entry.

Like most photographers, we were soon overcome with the urge to display and share our images. We began with web graphics of photographs captured at outstanding locations throughout western North America, including: Alaska, Alberta, Arizona, British Columbia, California, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Nunavut, Oregon, Saskatchewan, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, the Yukon and several sites we visited in eastern Canada.

This book contains selected images from our travels throughout Alaska.

