

# **Nature Photography**

**On the Road  
in  
Montana  
and  
South Dakota**

**Alan and Elaine Wilson**





## Preface

South Dakota is situated in the north-central United States and is considered part of the Great Plains region. It is bordered to the west by Montana and Wyoming and houses six national parks that blend prairie grasslands, pine clad mountains and prehistoric rock formations with eye-popping canyons, buttes, pinnacles and spines. The state is bisected by the Missouri River, dividing South Dakota into two geographically distinct halves. Our travels were confined to the western portion where the landscape becomes more arid and rugged, consisting of rolling hills, plains, ravines, and steep flat-topped buttes. Much of South Dakota is dominated by a temperate grasslands biome. Precambrian formations form the central core of the Black Hills which feature rocks such as limestone that were deposited when the area formed the shoreline of an ancient inland sea. Here Plains Bison, Pronghorn, Black-Tailed Prairie Dog and Sharp-Tailed Grouse are protected in the confines of Custer State Park and Wind Cave National Park. The area, of course, is best known for the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. To the east, Badlands National Park features an eroded, brightly colored landscape surrounded by semi-arid grasslands.

Montana is mostly prairie, part of the northern Great Plains. The Rocky Mountain Front, however, is a significant feature in the state's north-central portion and best known for Glacier National Park. Our primary interest here, despite enjoying the scenic mountain topography, was largely restricted to the Pryor Mountains where we were determined to photograph wild "mustangs" in their natural habitat. We were also targeting the National Bison Range, a small reserve but one of the oldest National Wildlife Refuges in the United States. By coincidence, on a winter trip to Yellowstone National Park, we were invited to a private ranch near Kalispell that catered to wildlife photographers seeking the opportunity to acquire images of hard-to-get species such as Mountain Lion, Pine Martin and Lynx. Photographing "captives" in realistic settings is great fun and certainly filled our bucket list with images that would normally be difficult to acquire in the wild.

Montana and South Dakota house incredible photography destinations. The images in this book attempt to document the many enjoyable hours we've spent in search of interesting and compliant subjects. It is by no means a compendium of every known species that can be found in these areas. It is simply a selection of birds, wildlife and natural landscapes we were lucky to encounter and photograph in their natural habitat at locations we feel are some of the best in Montana and South Dakota.

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## South Dakota Birds and Wildlife

We had such an awesome time photographing Greater Sage-Grouse in Wyoming that we couldn't resist the urge to repeat the experience with Sharp-Tailed Grouse in South Dakota. The centerpiece of this area is the sprawling grasslands of the Black Hills that house Custer State Park and the adjacent Wind Cave National Park. We arrived in the middle of April, targeting not only Sharp-Tailed Grouse (early April to the middle of May is the only time of year the leks are active), but also Wild Turkey and hopefully a new born Plains Bison. It was a bit early for Pronghorn fawns and Wild Turkey poults, which typically arrive in early June and late July respectively. We were also aware that the Bison are beginning to shed their winter coats and, with the inevitable jumble of grass and dirt, don't make for very compelling images unless you are able to isolate a clean animal. Many photographers looking for more action-oriented photography time their visit for the annual Bison roundup in September. The Custer Wildlife Loop and adjacent Wind Cave is also the best place we have found to photograph Pronghorn as they are prevalent and accustomed to human traffic.

We began before sunrise at a Sharp-Tailed Grouse lek in Custer State Park near Lane Johnny Road. This experience was much different from what we encountered in Wyoming when photographing breeding Greater Sage-Grouse. The Sharp-Tailed Grouse prefer leks on the top of hills where the males begin the mating ritual by posturing and fighting from a bended, spread wing position. We arrived at our blind an hour before sun up and found the lek already crowded and the males displaying vigorously. This lasts roughly ninety minutes when the ritual ends abruptly and the birds disappear into the grasslands habitat.

We found Plains Bison and Pronghorn to be prevalent and easy to approach with one proviso. Female Bison with young are very protective and will not tolerate human presence. If other females are present, whether with young or not, they will also exhibit warnings and more than likely become aggressive. It's always hazardous photographing new born and best done from a distance using a long lens and teleconverter with a well-planned exit strategy.

### PRONGHORN

Custer State Park, South Dakota

Early in our trip to Montana, we made a stop at the Greycliff Prairie Dog Town State Park near Big Timbers. We have passed many prairie dog “towns” in our travels and have never really found any to be easy to photograph. They are devils to pin down as they tend to sit submerged in a burrow opening, peering around and constantly whistling warnings of impending danger. At Wind Cave, however, we found they didn’t pay much attention to us if we used our truck as a blind. Although Wild Turkeys were also prevalent, capturing an image was also extremely difficult. They are wary and generally won’t tolerate human presence. The hens are relatively drab and don’t make great fare but a strutting Jake or Tom in full fan is something to behold. It’s an image that still eludes us.

As you will read a little later, we had a tough time trying to find and photograph feral horses at the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range in Montana. It was an experience we were really looking forward to. We decided to try again on the way home through North Dakota at Theodore Roosevelt National Park which is a well-known location for not only the “mustangs” we were seeking but Plains Bison. Here again we struck out on both accounts as the weather treated us to dark and cloudy skies with buckets of rain. We did find both animals in several small herds and enjoyed the Scenic Loop Drive that encompasses most of the park’s best landscape.



**BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOGS**  
Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota



**SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**  
Male Courtship Display,  
Custer State Park, South Dakota

**SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**  
Custer State Park, South Dakota



**MULE DEER**

Cedar Pass,  
South Dakota



**WILD TURKEY**  
Lame Johnny Road,  
Custer State Park,  
South Dakota





**WILD TURKEY**

Lame Johnny Road,  
Custer State Park,  
South Dakota



**BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG**

Wind Cave National Park,  
South Dakota

**FERAL BURRO**  
Custer State Park, South Dakota





**PRONGHORN**

Custer State Park, South Dakota



**FEMALE PLAINS BISON AND CALF**  
Custer State Park, South Dakota



**PLAINS BISON CALF**  
Custer State Park, South Dakota





**SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**  
Male Territory Dispute,  
Custer State Park, South Dakota

**FEMALE PLAINS BISON**

Wind Cave National Park,  
South Dakota



**FERAL BURROS**

Jenny and Colt,  
Custer State Park,  
South Dakota





**BIGHORN SHEEP**  
Cedar Pass, South Dakota



**SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**

Male Territory Dispute,  
Custer State Park,  
South Dakota

**SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**

Male Courtship Display,  
Custer State Park,  
South Dakota



**SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**

Male Territory Dispute,  
Custer State Park,  
South Dakota



**SHARP-TAILED GROUSE**

Male Courtship Display,  
Custer State Park,  
South Dakota

## South Dakota Landscapes

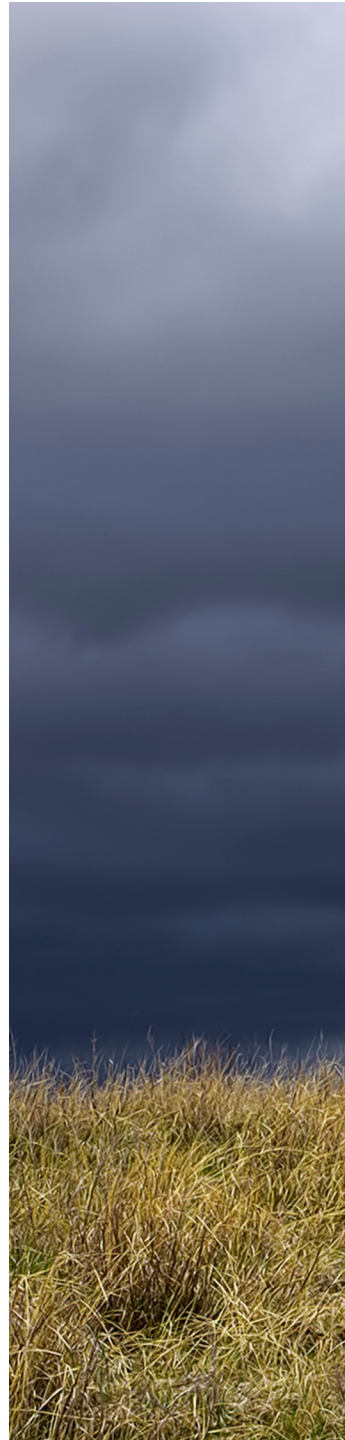
Roughly eighty miles east of Custer is truly another world. Here the dramatic landscape of Badlands National Park spans striated rock formations, steep canyons and towering spires. We decided that the best locations to concentrate our efforts were along the Red Shirt Table east of Hermosa and the north unit of Badlands.

Traveling west from Cedar Pass we discovered a picturesque and bizarre mixture of spines, pinnacles, massive buttes and deep gorges where the erosion reveals a collage of color from purple/yellow (shale) to tan/grey (sand and gravel), red/orange (iron oxide) and white (volcanic ash). We found all the overlooks spectacular but Norbec Pass, Bigfoot Pass, Panorama Point, Yellow Mounds and Pinnacles were our favourites. We encountered Bighorn Sheep roadside at the latter location as they are part of a restoration program underway in the Sage Creek Wilderness Area. Here they make great images if it's possible to isolate a lone ram or ewe on a hill top with a badlands backdrop. Black-Footed Ferret and Swift Fox are also being reintroduced to the area.

We also took the scenic loop through the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve which encompasses the Mount Rushmore National Memorial, the Iron Mountain rock tunnels, Needles spires and Sylvan Lake. This latter location provides trail access to both Mount Harney and the Cathedral Spires, walks well worth taking as the landscape provides awesome photography opportunities.

We were totally overwhelmed by our visit to this area and felt the potential for year-round photography, especially spring and winter, was awesome. With the notable exception of geysers and active volcanic terrain, we feel this area easily matches the photographic magic of Yellowstone National Park and is high on our list for a second visit. We felt nothing short of envy for the locals who live and enjoy this area daily.

**LONE PRAIRIE TREE**  
Custer State Park, South Dakota







**MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL**  
South Dakota



**BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK**  
South Dakota

**BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK**  
South Dakota





**BUTTE** near Scenic, South Dakota



**RED SHIRT TABLE** near Hermosa, South Dakota

**STOCKADE LAKE**  
Custer State Park, South Dakota





**PRAIRIE GRASSLANDS**  
Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota



**PRAIRIE GRASSLANDS**  
Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota

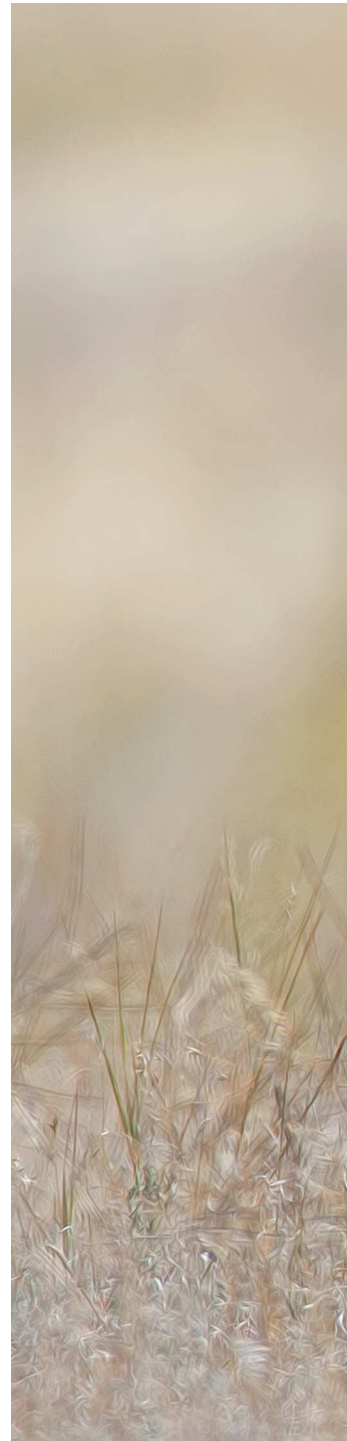
## Montana Wildlife

We were excited by the idea of four wheeling through the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range. Here our intention was to tour the mountainside and water holes looking for the elusive bands of "mustangs" that winter on the lower slopes. We weren't expecting any great action as we were led to understand that the best photography is really after the fawns are dropped in May when the stallions gather mares and fight to protect their brood line throughout the coming breeding cycle. Notwithstanding, we felt it was an opportunity to become familiar with the territory and gain a better understanding of their behaviour. Our prime objective was simply to capture some documentary images showing them in their natural setting and hopefully illustrating some typical behaviour. What we encountered were small and a fairly somnambulant herds that were not in the least inhibited by our presence. They were difficult to photograph as many were covered with burrs and were obviously waiting out the worst heat of the day.

We also found the mountain tracks to be extremely rugged, demanding a high clearance vehicle with tough sidewall tires. The Wild Horse Range that encompasses most of the south slope of East Pryor Mountain provides a stunning vista of the Bighorn Basin. Over one hundred feral horses range from the high meadows to the flats of Crooked Creek Valley, traversing what can best be described as juniper infested foothills and desert badlands. We encountered many dead ends as the upper roads have countless branches that are unmarked. We found several small herds near the range entrance and just past Devil's Canyon Outlook. This latter location is a great natural landscape and a good bet to find Bighorn Sheep. They were also in mangy condition and tough subjects as their coats were dirty and covered with brambles. Overall, this was not an exciting visit even for documentary photography. One surprising location was the roadside just north of Horseshoe Bend. It is a haven for Ring-Necked Pheasant in the early morning and late evening.

### PRONGHORN

Red Sleep Mountain Drive,  
National Bison Range, Montana





**MALE FERAL HORSE**

Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range,  
Montana



**FEMALE FERAL HORSE**

Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range,  
Montana





**MALE AND FEMALE FERAL HORSES**  
Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, Montana



**BIGHORN EWE**  
Devil's Canyon Overlook, Bighorn  
Canyon National Recreation Area,  
Montana

**BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG**  
Graycliff Prairie Dog Town State Park,  
Big Timber,  
Montana



**BIGHORN LAMB**

Devil's Canyon Overlook, Bighorn  
Canyon National Recreation Area,  
Montana



**ELK COW**

Mission Creek,  
National Bison Range,  
Montana

## Captives

Every now and then, serendipity intervenes in your photography experience. On a winter trip to Yellowstone National Park, we met two experienced photographers from the eastern seaboard of the United States who talked us into joining them in Montana to experience photographing “captives” at a ranch that catered to wildlife photographers looking for hard-to-acquire images of species like Mountain Lion, Lynx or Wolves. The Triple “D” Game Farm near Kalispell uses animal trainers to manage selected species in professionally designed settings that recreate the animal’s natural habitat, including high elevation mountain backdrops, rocky outcrops, aspen groves and ponds for reflection images. We never considered photographing animals outside their natural habitat but were so taken with the enthusiasm of our cohorts that we decided to give it a try. Although they were looking for Bengal Tiger and Snow Leopard in mountain settings, we were more interested in North American species that constantly eluded us. It was a fun weekend and our images have been published on the cover of several prominent magazines.

This was our only foray into the world of “captive” photography and an experience we will treasure forever. For the record, images must be marked with a (C) to denote wildlife captured in controlled settings. We have conformed to this protocol, so the viewers of our photography know the conditions under which we approached and photographed certain wildlife.

### **MOUNTAIN LION (C)**

Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana







**CANADIAN LYNX (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana

**ARCTIC FOX (C)**

Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana





**PINE MARTIN (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana



**BOBCAT (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch,  
Kalispell, Montana

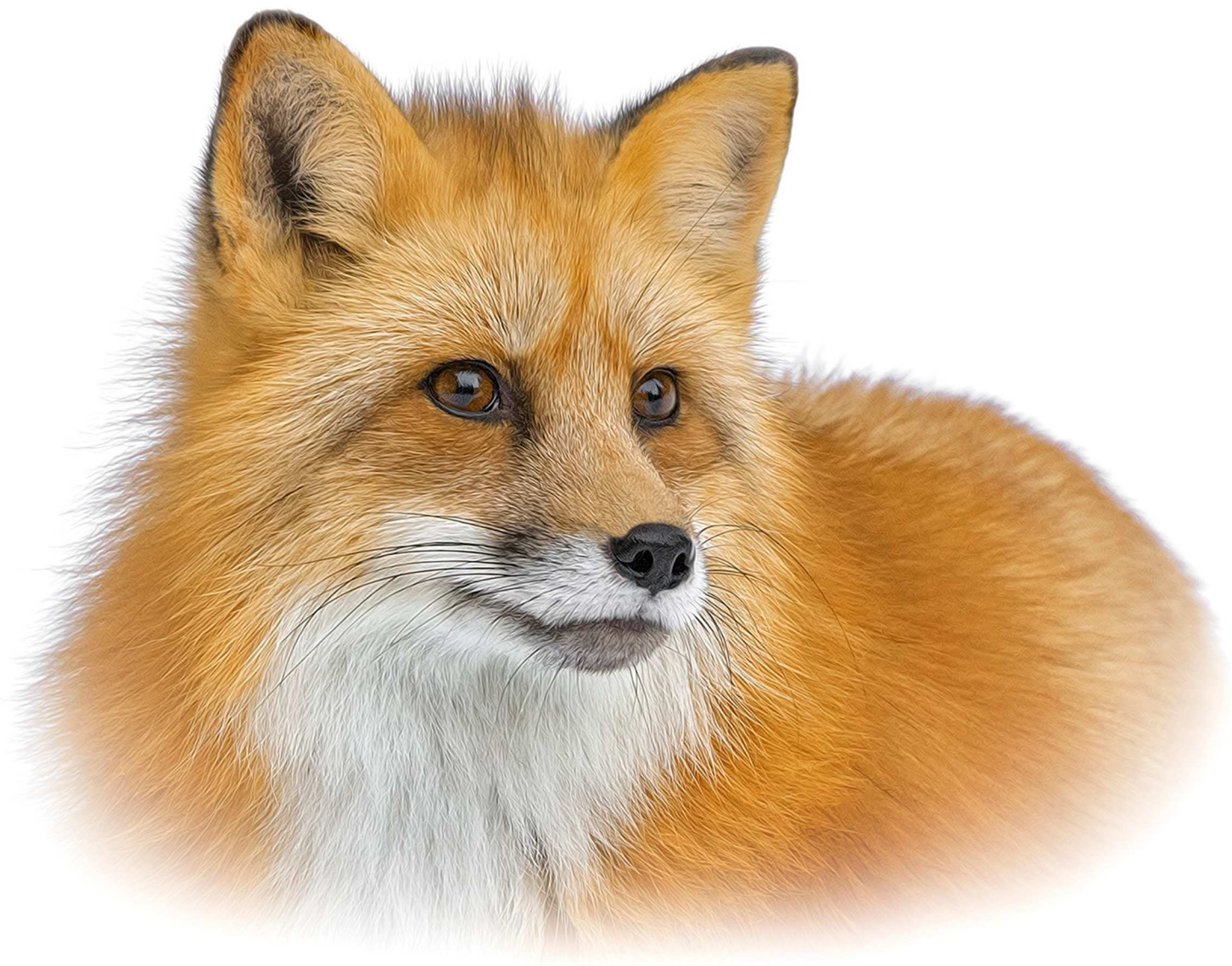




**BLACK WOLF (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch,  
Kalispell, Montana



**MOUNTAIN LION (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch,  
Kalispell, Montana





**RED FOX (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch,  
Kalispell, Montana





**BLACK WOLF (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana

**BLACK WOLF (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana







**MOUNTAIN LION (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch,  
Kalispell, Montana

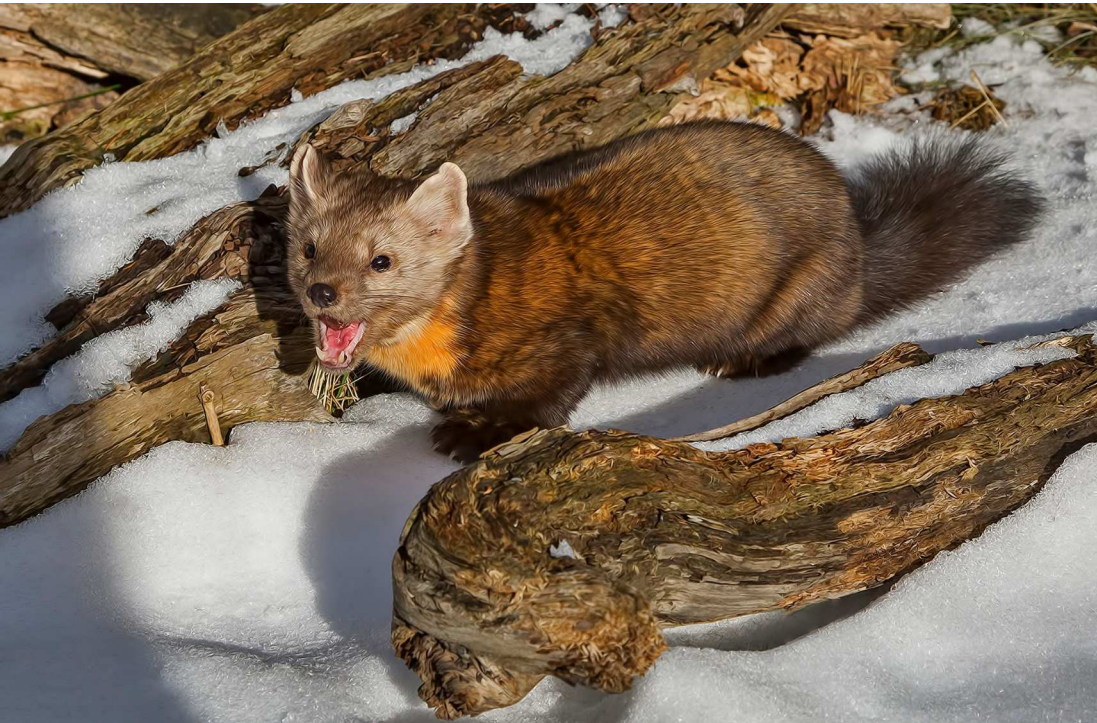




**COYOTE (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana

**CANADIAN LYNX (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch,  
Kalispell, Montana





**PINE MARTIN (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch,  
Kalispell, Montana



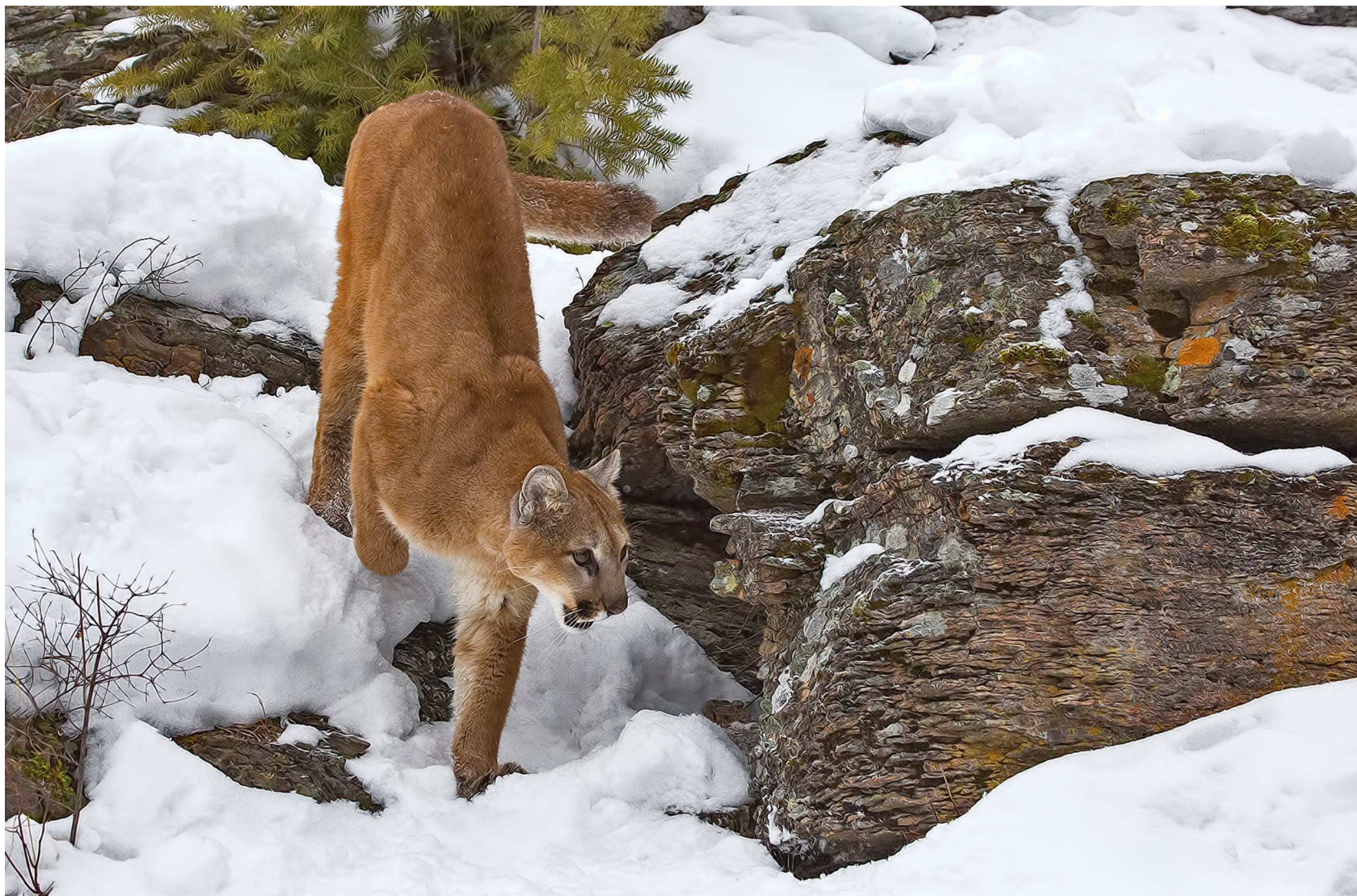
**COYOTE (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana





**COYOTE (C)**

Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana



**MOUNTAIN LION (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana



**MOUNTAIN LION (C)**  
Triple 'D' Ranch, Kalispell, Montana



**PIXEL BENDER OIL PAINTING  
FERAL HORSE “LONESOME STALLION”**

## **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 Montana and South Dakota travels.





# Montana and South Dakota

## 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 Montana and South Dakota.

