Nature Photography

On the Road in Quebec and Nunavut

Alan and Elaine Wilson

Preface

This book is dedicated to the locations we visited in eastern Canada and the north where our research and planning resulted in a variety of outcomes. The sites we describe are examples of how trip preparation and the vagaries of nature often collide, producing either moments of serendipity or events that are simply ill-fated. It's almost axiomatic, visiting locations where target species are known to congregate will usually increase the probability of capturing the images that were envisioned as part of the trip planning process. Although the locations we visited in Quebec, Nunavut and the quick side trip we made to northern Minnesota were enjoyable, the experience certainly left us with insights into just how difficult bird and wildlife photography can be at times.

Most of Quebec is covered by the Canadian Shield, a rocky but generally level landscape of plains and plateaus covered by large areas of coniferous forests, all crisscrossed by hundreds of rivers and countless lakes. It's a large area and many regions are sparsely populated. Although our photography was usually confined to locations in western North America, three areas piqued our interest in the eastern Canadian province of Quebec – the Northern Gannet colony on Bonaventure Island on the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula, the Musk Ox and Boreal Woodland Caribou that populate the tundra and treeline near Kuujjuaq at the base of Ungava Bay and the winter migration of Snowy Owls that travel south annually to forage in the Montreal area.

Planning a visit to Bonaventure Island was easy as the location is readily accessible and demands only a moderate hike to reach the gannet colony. What we were not prepared for was the immense size of the nesting area. Moreover, the nests were so closely compact for such large birds that isolating a subject became a challenging process. We were certainly faced with the old photographers' adage of having to "work with what we were given."

Locating Snowy Owls in the outskirts of Montreal was also a breeze as the locations are well known and it is a simple matter of driving around looking for photographers. What was unexpected was the extent of the crowds and the undisciplined approach used to attract the birds and position for decent compositions. It was something akin to controlled chaos. We tended to stay on the periphery as the many arguments that erupted were a sad testimonial to the extent that bird photography has degenerated with the rapid growth in new market entrants created since the advent of digital technology.

Kuujjuaq, was another matter. We knew conditions in the north would be harsh, but it was an experience we didn't want to miss. We finally found an outfitter that had camps in locations that looked promising but required extensive hiking,

especially to locate Musk Ox which were on open tundra and required a stealthy approach as they are extremely wary of predators. The camp conditions, however, proved less than stellar, as did the weather. In fact, we were able to track and photograph Musk Ox but saw few Caribou, and only at a distance.

As Kuujjuaq was a bust for Boreal Woodland Caribou, we decided to try our luck at locating Barren-Ground Caribou that populate Nunavut across the Hudson's Bay from northern Quebec. Although there are many places in the Canadian arctic to witness their migration, we chose Ennadai Lake in the Kivalliq Region of present-day Nunavut, approximately 700 kilometers northeast of Yellowknife. It's remote but boasted a full-service lodge and boat access to the migration routes. Unfortunately, we once again saw few animals during the many hours we spent scoping the shoreline, all at distances that made photography impossible. Not to be deterred, several guests hired a helicopter to take them inland where the herds were more prevalent. We managed to book a day and were dropped into a great location where we finally experienced, up close, several small groups as they progressed along the well-worn migration paths that have been used for centuries. It was an incredible experience due solely to the fortuitous access to a helicopter!

Lastly, we have never had much luck photographing Black Bears in the wild as they are difficult to locate, usually unpredictable and invariably aggressive if young are present. We decided to visit a known sanctuary managed by the American Bear Association near Orr, Minnesota. Although bears that congregate in this area are wild, our research indicated the viewing stands and supervised trails were designed to make observation and photography relatively safe. We timed our visit when cubs would be present and hoped to capture some intimate and playful moments. Although we were not disappointed, it was still unnerving to encounter Black Bears in the wild, especially in what turned out to be such close quarters!

Our experience in each of the above locations was certainly unforgettable and shrouded in varying degrees of success. Each section of this book contains a narrative that details the conditions we encountered and is a testament, at least in the case of Boreal Woodland Caribou, to the unpredictable nature of bird and wildlife photography, even after thorough planning. If this sounds negative, we are never disappointed with trip outcomes. Each location was an experience we thoroughly enjoyed and helped immeasurably with our approach to planning future trips.

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CONTENTS

Bonaventure Island	6
Kuujjuaq	25
Nunavut	38
Montreal	56
Northern Minnesota	75
Our Photography Journey	93

Bonaventure Island

Bonaventure Island is in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, located 3.5 kilometres off the southern coast of Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula, roughly 5 kilometers southeast of the village of Percé. It is a small, circular shaped island comprising almost 5 square kilometres. Two hundred and eighteen different species of birds have been recorded as visiting, migrating to, or living on Bonaventure Island. The most common bird found on the island is the Northern Gannet and is home to one of the largest colonies in the world, hosting roughly sixty thousand nesting pairs annually.

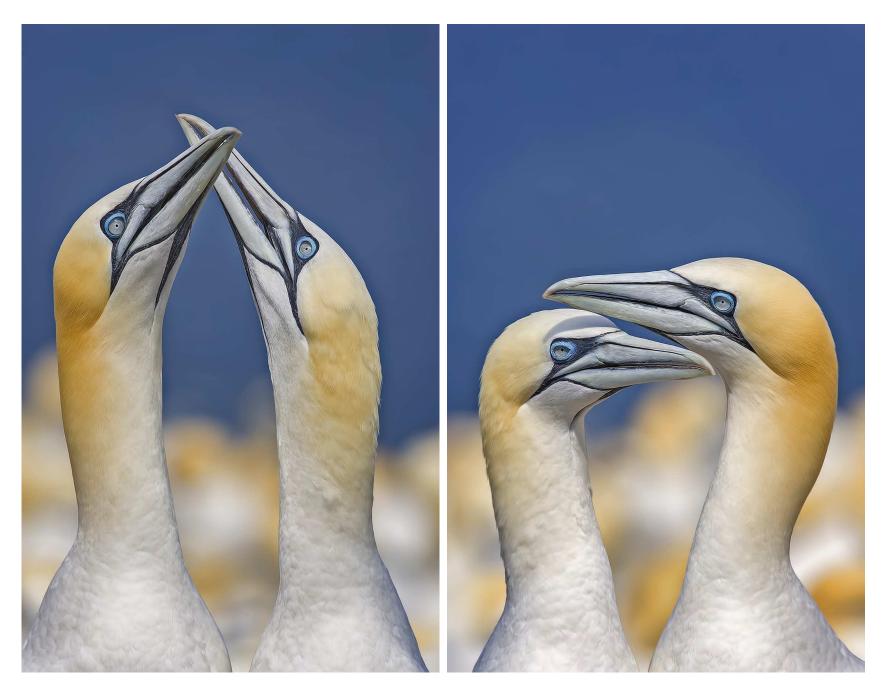
The best time to visit is late July and early August when the colony is alive with nest building, mating and feeding routines. Access is by ferry from Percé and requires an easy walk of approximately forty-five minutes across the center of the island to reach the nesting site.

Park attendants are on site to answer questions and ensure the viewing rules are enforced. As this is a cliff nesting site, the opportunities for flight and behavior photography abound, all with superb backdrops. The classic image is a composition that captures a nesting pair as they point skyward, signaling to their mate that they are about to take off and feed. The colony is noisy and very active as the birds are constantly on the move. The pace is simply frenetic with limitless opportunities to capture not only flight images but also intimate portraits of adults and young as they feed and preen. Due to the immense size and concentration of the colony, it's a location that must be "worked" and requires several days to create compositions that range from intimate portraits to birds in flight. Northern Gannet's can be very photogenic, but it requires patience to isolate a subject that will produce a compelling image, especially one with a decent backdrop. In our opinion, it's a must location and one we wouldn't miss.











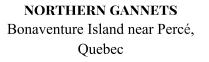










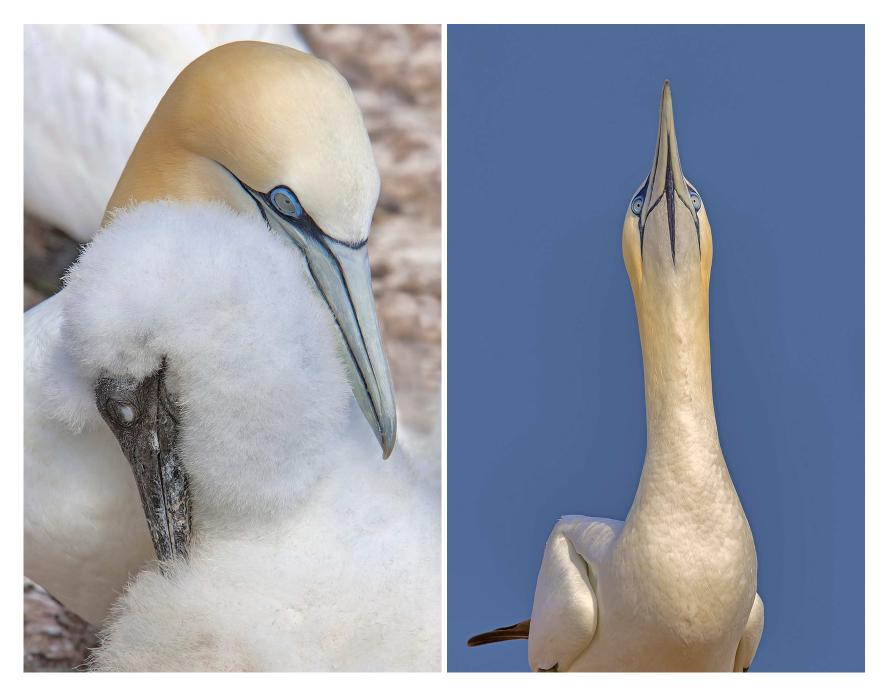




















NESTING NORTHERN GANNET

Bonaventure Island near Percé, Quebec









Kuujjuaq

Hiking in northern Quebec is quite an experience as there is a remarkable difference in terrain between the sub-arctic tundra on the northern shoreline of Ungava Bay and the fringe of the boreal forest slightly to the south. The northern terrain is a moderately undulating, frost-shattered bedrock composed of gray and pink granite outcrops covered with black tripe and colorful star-burst lichens. There are many soggy or poorly drained areas containing tussocks of sedge and various marsh grasses. For the most part, however, it is dry, unlike the ubiquitous spongy wetness characteristic of the Alaskan tundra. It's best described as a tightly woven mat of lichens and mosses on a thin layer of soil that supports an assortment of dwarf plants such as birch and willow trees, crow berries, blue berries, cranberries and mushrooms. Labrador tea and caribou lichen are present but sparse. Cotton grass often dots the wet areas and makes for an excellent backdrop as Musk Ox can often be found grazing in the shallows. Inland, however, the landscape is riddled with small "kettle" lakes set amongst the many tributaries that feed the Leaf and Larch Rivers. Caribou lichen is much more prominent and lusher, creating a soft carpet of vegetation that sustains the caribou herds throughout their winter migration to the southern boreal forests or taiga. The dwarf birch and willow are much larger than that found on the coast and is interspersed amongst very stunted strands of black spruce and larch. Pods of White Spruce or "Crumholtz" complete what is a sparsely forested atmosphere. Cranberries abound and Sweet Gale can be found that makes an excellent tea.

Walking is relatively easy in both areas although we were overwhelmed by a vast stillness that gripped our first few days. Hordes of black flies often accompanied our every movement and would abate only with a moderate to brisk wind. An upper body bug net is essential as bites can be a significant irritation. It is a harsh and unforgiving environment that leaves you in awe of the fauna and flora that have adapted to survive there. It is one of the few truly untrammeled locations in North America.

We targeted the region surrounding Kuujjuaq where we utilized two base camps, one along the coastline of Ungava Bay for Musk Ox at a fishing camp on a small island near the mouth of the Koksoak River in Dry Bay and another inland south of Tasiujaq on the Potier River for Boreal Woodland Caribou at an old hunting camp near Finger Lake which was a prime location for migration of the Leaf River herd. Both locations had the potential for displays of northern lights in late August and early September.

Musk Ox must be stalked quietly downwind as they see few humans and are constantly on the lookout for wolves. The herd we were tracking moved daily, requiring hours to locate and subsequently position for light and wind. It's not uncommon to trek up to ten miles each day in search of a herd. Caribou, on the other hand, follow well-worn migration trails over the granite outcrops, through the wet areas and along "eskers" or gravel ridge lines that were formed from glacially derived deposits. The Caribou herds tend to walk into the wind to ward off bugs. Predicting their movement and location over what is thousands of square kilometres of terrain is difficult. It's very much a waiting game. Being in the right place requires a fair amount of serendipity and getting a compelling image needs time and patience. The conditions we experienced were less than stellar, especially inland where high winds and rain left us sitting in camp most days trying to remain dry and warm. When the weather did abate, we saw few Caribou and only at a distance. Unfortunately, we were also too early for the fall crimson and gold colors which are striking and make for colorful photography back drops. Walking to find the herds or awaiting a river crossing often yielded other wildlife opportunities such as Arctic Fox, Short-Tailed Weasel, and both Rock and Willow Ptarmigan.

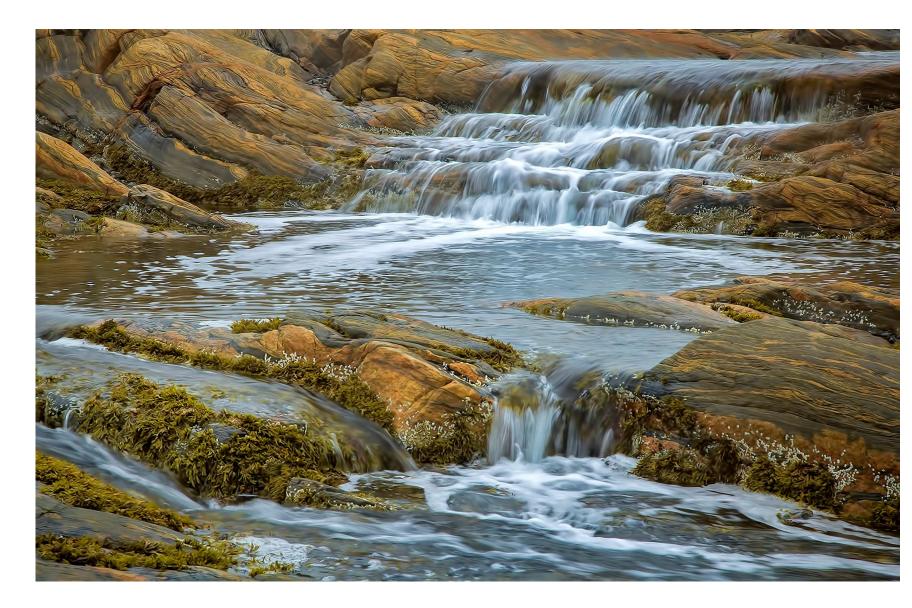
For the nights that the weather cooperated, we witnessed slow moving aurora formations that displayed varying degrees of light intensity. On one evening, we used a campfire to light the cliffs next to the location we had chosen as a camp and used the opportunity to photograph the northern lights with a well-lit foreground object. It was great fun and the first time we had experienced the aurora in such pristine surroundings.



WILLOW PTARMIGAN Dry Bay Tundra near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec



UNGAVA BAY COASTLINE Dry Bay near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec

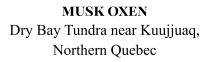


WATERFALL Dry Bay near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec



MUSK OX Dry Bay Tundra near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec











AURORA BOREALIS Dry Bay near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec





AURORA BOREALIS Dry Bay near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec



MUSK OX SKULL Dry Bay Tundra near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec



MUSK OX Dry Bay Tundra near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec



COTTON GRASS Dry Bay Tundra near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec

SHORT-TAILED WEASEL Potier River south of Tasiujaq, Northern Quebec





ARCTIC FOX Dry Bay Tundra near Kuujjuaq, Northern Quebec

Nunavut

The territory of Nunavut was created in 1999 out of the eastern portion of the Northwest Territories and encompasses the traditional lands of the Inuit, the indigenous peoples of Arctic Canada. It is also the home of Barren-Ground Caribou, a subspecies of Reindeer comprising nine herds that travel throughout specific areas of the north. Located on the fringe of the tree line, sparse black spruce and tamarack abound, stunted by harsh winds and dry summers. Our location at Ennadai Lake is the departure and terminus of the annual migration of the Qamanirjuaq herd whose numbers are estimated to exceed 300,000. This area is also central to the auroral zone that produces the northern lights.

The consensus is that the migration is best viewed in March or early April as the caribou travel in large numbers east to the coast of Hudson's Bay, then north to their calving grounds. Alternatively, late summer and early fall can also be good, but the Caribou return in smaller groups to their winter range in the tree line. As mentioned above, spring herds are more concentrated and the late winter conditions make great backdrops. The area is flat and easy to traverse but requires boat travel in the fall to spot migrating groups. We decided on an early September visit, staying at the Arctic Haven Wilderness Lodge. We hoped this would afford us the opportunity to not only photograph Caribou in dramatic fall colors but also the aurora borealis on clear evenings.

We knew there would be little bird life in the area at this time of year. However, we did discover a Harris's Sparrow near the lodge, a rare species and one we hadn't encountered before. We were also surprised to see a Red Squirrel that we felt shouldn't have been this far north. They are apparently abundant but at the limit of their North American range. The dominant fall colors of crimson red (bear berries), vibrant yellow and orange (dwarf birch and larch), emerald green (crow berries) and light gray ground cover (caribou lichen) didn't disappoint us. Black "witches' hair" dangled from the spruce trees, adding further character to what is a harsh landscape.

BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU North Arm of Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut



The fall return is widespread and much less concentrated than in the spring making it difficult to locate animals. Moreover, photographing from a boat even on a calm day is a tough business as positioning for light and background is often not an option. As you can appreciate, the tundra is thousands of square kilometers dotted at this time of year with small to large water bodies where land passage spans rocky to spongy wet terrain or shallows where the animals can ford. Finding Caribou in the fall is like locating the proverbial needle in a haystack. The migration is also weather dependent and if warm can occur much later than expected. Nonetheless, we enjoyed hiking the various terrains, especially the eskers and ridges that coughed up spectacular tundra panoramas. In addition, the aurora was nothing less than phenomenal and could be easily captured using the lake or surrounding lodge structures as foreground.

As mentioned in the preface to this book, we certainly had an exciting and enjoyable trip. However, it was the fortuitous one-day outing in a helicopter that allowed us to witness and capture images of the fall migration. Otherwise, we would once again have left empty handed.



BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU North Arm of Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut



BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU North Arm, Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut



BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU North Arm, Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut







BEAR BERRIES Ennadai Lake, Nunavut



ARCTIC MUSHROOM Ennadai Lake, Nunavut



BIRCH BAY TREE LINE Ennadai Lake, Nunavut



BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU North Arm of Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut

BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU

North Arm of Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut





SUNRISE Ennadai Lake, Nunavut

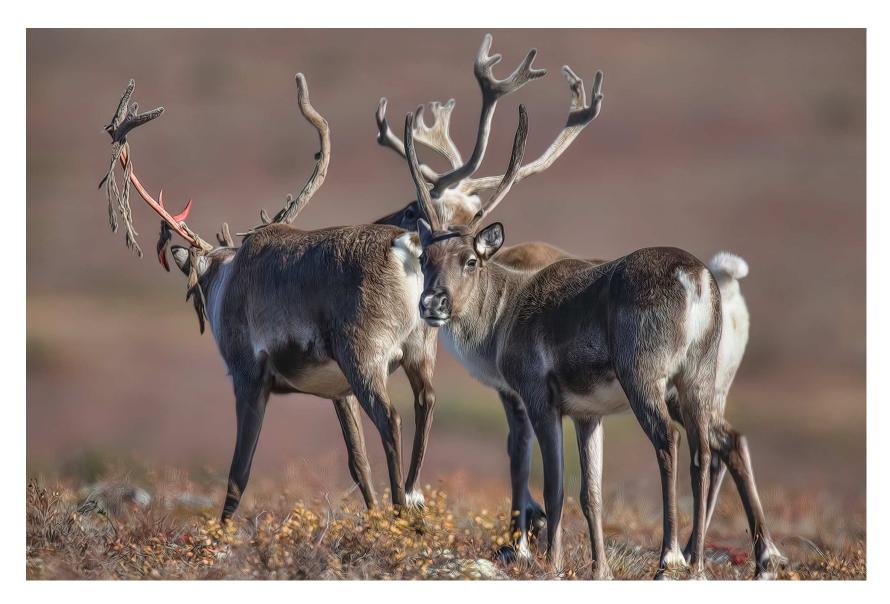


AURORA BOREALIS Solar Panels, Arctic Haven Wilderness Lodge, Ennadai Lake, Nunavut

BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU



North Arm of Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut



BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU North Arm of Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut



HARRIS'S SPARROW Ennadai Lake, Nunavut



AMERICAN RED SQUIRREL Ennadai Lake, Nunavut



BARREN-GROUND CARIBOU North Arm of Ennadai Lake near Kazan River, Nunavut



RAINBOW Ennadai Lake, Nunavut

Montreal

The Snowy Owl prefers the cold climate of Canada's northern tundra where it resides and feeds almost exclusively on lemmings during most of the year. Some will move south as the winter becomes harsh and food becomes harder to find. The outskirts of Ottawa and Montreal are a favorite destination as the fields of corn stubble are ideal for hunting voles. However, winters here are not always kind, and many birds die each year from malnutrition. Over the years, photographers have found that some birds can be approached and are receptive to feeding on live mice. This is an attraction technique known as "baiting" and can be a great venue for flight photography but should be undertaken by an individual well versed in how to safely conduct a session.

The best time is late January to early February if the birds are present in numbers. There are usually other species in the area, notably the Great Gray Owl and Norther Hawk Owl. The latter is an opportunist as it hunts constantly, "stashing" its prey in various hiding places for later consumption. Both species, including the Snowy Owl, are receptive to feeding on "bait," usually live mice that have been placed on the snow in front of a group of photographers. Unfortunately, the practice of baiting is widespread and not always carried out with either respect for the subject or private property. We encountered unstructured groups of as many as forty photographers, not surprisingly from all over the world, concentrating on one bird and rarely agreeing on how best to cooperate. We were not only surprised but distressed by the frequent arguments and were informed that this was typical behavior now that digital technology had opened the genre to a plethora of new entrants. We'd often found locations where trash was thoughtlessly left. It's best to photograph with an experienced guide who knows the area, understands the bird's behavior and has permission to conduct sessions on private property. The ethics of baiting can be endlessly debated but we feel it is an acceptable practice if executed in a safe and well-structured manner.







NORTHERN HAWK OWL Pincourt near Montreal, Quebec

SNOWY OWLS



Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec



NORTHERN HAWK OWL Pincourt near Montreal, Quebec





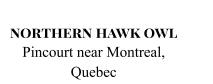
SNOWY OWL Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec



SNOWY OWL Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec

NORTHERN HAWK OWL Pincourt near Montreal, Quebec









SNOWY OWL Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec



SNOWY OWL AT DUSK Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec





SNOWY OWLS AT DUSK Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec



NORTHERN HAWK OWLS

Pincourt near Montreal, Quebec



NORTHERN HAWK OWLS Pincourt near Montreal, Quebec







SNOWY OWLS Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec





SNOWY OWL Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec



SNOWY OWL Saint Barthelemy near Montreal, Quebec



Pincourt near Montreal, Quebec









Northern Minnesota

The Vince Shute Wildlife Sanctuary in northern Minnesota is a 360-acre haven of forested land and a safe home to the many Black Bears that frequent the area. Unlike Brown Bears that gorge on spawning salmon, are easily found and usually display predictable behavior, Black Bears can be aggressive, are usually reclusive and must be approached with a fair amount of caution. The American Bear Association operate the sanctuary which is dedicated to creating a better understanding of Black Bears through education, observation and experience. Although the bears that congregate in this area are wild, the well-placed viewing stands and supervised trails make observation and photography a relatively safe endeavor.

We were given a short introduction to bear etiquette, the prime rule being no kneeling down for photography at eye level as this is interpreted as an aggression stance and may invoke an unwanted response. We were amazed at the number of bears present, especially those with cubs. It was a bit unnerving walking the trails but the bears we encountered seemed habituated to human contact and for the most part simply went about their business. When young were present, we usually retreated to the safety of the viewing stands and were treated to treed cubs at eye level that would be impossible to photograph elsewhere. While on the ground, our tact was to use a long lens and keep our distance. We did see other less inhibited photographers experience the odd growl as they approached for a closeup with a short lens and can never understand why individuals take risks when a long lens produces just as compelling images.

We visited the sanctuary twice and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. While driving the local backroads, we did find a location frequented by American White Pelicans on the Rapid River near Baudette. It was an interesting photography experience as the birds would congregate in small groups in rapids that produced a white "bubbled" surf that created an ethereal look to the images we captured. We also came across Bald Eagles, Turkey Vultures, White-Tailed Jack Rabbits, Red Pine Squirrels and Broad-Winged Hawks roadside while driving that were unusually compliant and great fun to photograph.

BLACK BEAR Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, Minnesota



BLACK BEAR CUBS Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, Minnesota



BLACK BEAR CUB Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, Minnesota

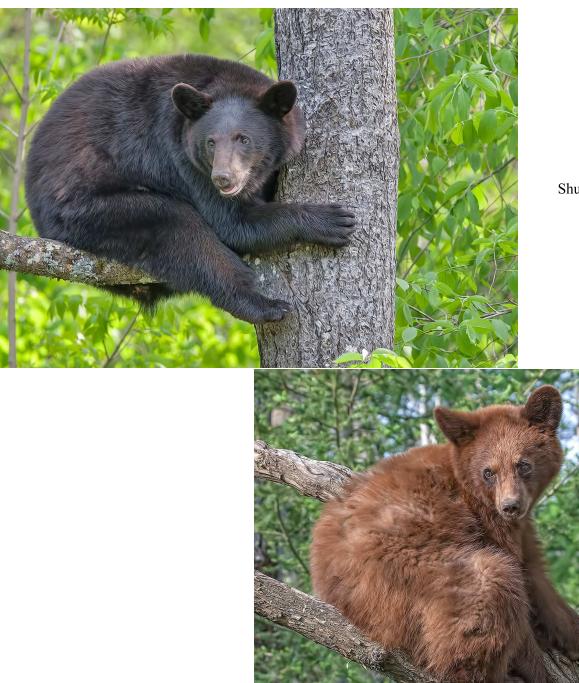


AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN Rapid River near Baudette, Minnesota AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS Rapid River near Baudette, Minnesota





AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN Rapid River near Baudette, Minnesota



BLACK BEARS Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, Minnesota





BLACK BEAR Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, Minnesota





BLACK BEAR CUBS Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, Minnesota



BALD EAGLE Highway 53 near Cold Springs, Minnesota

WHITE-TAILED JACK RABBIT Highway 23 near Buyck,

Minnesota





TURKEY VULTURE

Lett Lake Road near Orr, Minnesota



AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN Rapid River near Baudette, Minnesota



AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS





AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS Rapid River near Baudette, Minnesota



BLACK BEARS Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, Minnesota





BLACK BEAR CUB Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, Minnesota



PIXEL BENDER OIL PAINTING BLACK BEAR "ON THE PROWL"

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 Quebec and Nunavut travels including an excursion to an awesome location in northern Minnesota.

Quebec

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 Quebec and Nunavut, including an excursion to an awesome location in northern Minnesota.







