

Magic of Alaska

By Ilona Linnoila

This is a short essay of a photography camp by Lisa Langell, called 'Magic of Alaska'. It took place at the end of this May on Kenai Peninsula, Alaska from Sunday to Friday. We were six photographers and two instructors plus support staff. We lived in cabins by Kenai River around Sterling and had private rooms with all comforts of home. Delicious and nutritious meals were provided family-style by a superb cook Mary. Days were action packed. We had breakfast at 4.30, 5.30 or 6.30 am depending on the day, and dinner around 7 or 8 pm. It was light throughout the night.

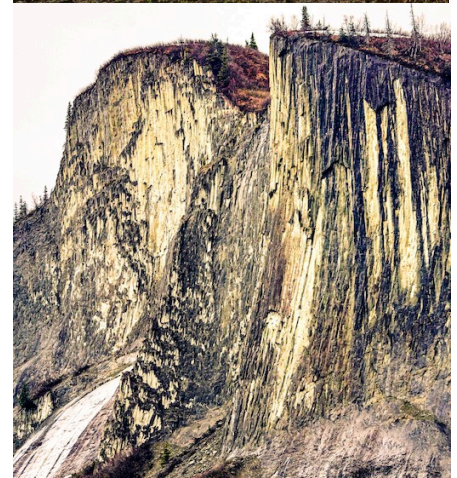
On land, we traveled in a big comfortable van driven by Lisa. I was amazed by many bogs growing tall but very narrow fir trees (Picture 1). We frequently encountered moose peacefully munching vegetation by the roadside. We gave them names (Picture 2) and were told that this time of year even the males didn't have antlers (sigh!). On Eagle Beach,



large numbers of bald eagles gathered to mingle and eat fish remains from professional fishermen. We frequented the place almost daily, spending there

hours at a time (Picture 3). Lisa was always present answering questions, solving problems and challenging us.

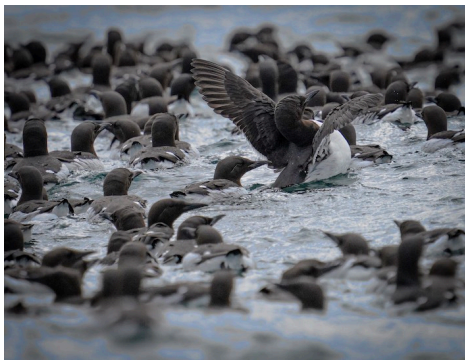
In order to see Alaskan brown bears, we flew to a remote wilderness area in typical five-seater small bush planes (Picture 4). We hiked a few miles next to a salt marsh to a narrow ridge where we spent a quiet and wet eight hours in cold rain waiting. We did see bear tracks but no bears. At times, when the fog parted I was staring at this big rock formation, to pass the time (Picture 5), and thinking of Ansel Adams and his work. We were given a short guided hike on a marsh which was truly sticky and thus very scary, sucking in our boots and feet. On return, our pilot felt sorry for us and flew very low over another marsh while tilting the plane to better show at least seven large bears. Well, that was scary, too, I thought.





We had two boat trips at sea. The first was a small fishing boat that left from Homer to see birds around nearby rocks and islands. It was raining off and on. We saw kittiwakes (Picture 6) , common murrens (Picture 7), a few puffins among other birds, black bears and big starfish. Another boat

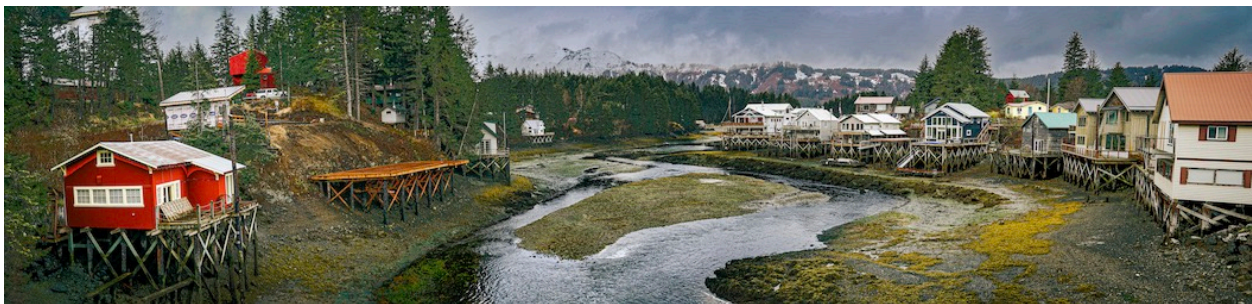
adventure left from Seward which is on the east side of Kenai Peninsula. This boat had a slightly larger cabin where we could place our gear away from the elements. The route was very scenic with coves, glaciers and islands. We encountered twice a big group of orcas and met Dall's porpoises that came to play with our boat (Picture 8). iPhone video turned out spectacular. We witnessed a sea lion giving birth on a big rock. One of the highlights was a double breach of two humpback whales although I only captured one (Picture 9) because I



was TOO CLOSE. Our third boat trip was on Skilak Lake photographing ospreys, loons and waterfowl (Picture 10).



Cultural highlights were an old Russian Orthodox Church (Picture 11) and Cemetery in Ninilchick established in the beginning of 1900s. We also traveled by a ferry to Seldovia, population 250, which dates back to 1700s as a Russian fur trade post. Houses were built on high stilts (Picture 12, low tide) to withstand some 28 feet high tides every 10 hours that



Alaska's Cook Inlet is known for. Characteristically every home had wooden statues on their front lawn (Picture 13) that Alaska's Cook Inlet is known for.



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I had two mirrorless cameras with me: Sony α 6300 and α 7RIV full frame. I used wide-angle Sony FE 1.4/24 GM and Sony FE 5.6-6.3/200-600 G OSS lenses. A monopod was invaluable, as was my camera backpack Lowepro Flipside 300. Trying to focus on a flying bird while supporting my 600mm zoom lens in a small boat going up and down on swells was a HUGE challenge. I had a chance to try a Tamron 50-400 mm lens which I liked a lot. The golden-

crowned sparrow was captured with it (Picture 14). The best new investment was raincoats by LensCoat for my lenses and camera; they were outstanding although they cost as much as my own rain jacket. I also used a waterproof iPhone cover. After all, it was raining five out of six days of the trip! I display my images in [Flickr.com/people/RIL21](https://www.flickr.com/people/RIL21/). Interestingly, the image with the most views has been 'Mother and Daughter Dancing' (Picture 15).

In summary, this was a fun albeit demanding trip where I learned a lot. Lisa Langell is an excellent photographer, coach, sharp birder and superb organizer.

