

Fall Around Denali: A Personal Perspective
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September 2006: The Bronco bucks and fails to break a rib, facts which feed my courage and inform me I am on the right track.

Even at 5 mph and with 158,000 miles and a rebuilt engine, this is a sturdy mare that does not falter. She shows no signs of weakness, only an occasional craving for oil, which I gingerly indulge. I am no mechanic but trusting in lots of luck. She has carried me and my gear a thousand miles in the Interior of Alaska and within the last 36 hours, nearly a hundred miles on the Denali Highway, a grueling, corroded, pot-holed path connecting the Parks and Richardson Highways. A few hours south on the Parks and one is in Anchorage. A few miles north and it's Denali National Park.

I could not be happier. Every few miles, a braided river plain or view towards the snow-packed mid-Alaska Range reveals a new and different vista. Alder, birch, willow, spruce, heather, sedges and blueberries by the millions is my guess for this subarctic palette. In the microcosm there are hundreds of individual plant species. Now in the fall, they appear as fantastic paints: mauve and pink, amber, ochre, cinnamon, pumpkin and rust. Renoir, Monet and Degas surely would love this.

I have come here to mark my retirement from teaching, to shake off the incessant paperwork, to connect with kin and friends, to begin to think through landscape photography and for cool air and lower humidity, all of which make me feel as if I am thirty again. When I do the math, I recall I am twice that. I need all the help I can get.

Being here is the cure. My good cousins, rural Alaskans to the core, are relocating their dog kennels and lives away from town. I housesit for them, pick a few eggs and talk to their curious cat about why she should not be stealing my flashcards or knocking the external harddrive onto the floor. In between times, I drive, hike and hunt, always watching for moose, bears, grouse, Lesser Sandhill Cranes, hares and foxes. There is nearly always a surprise or two.

Early one day in Denali National Park, with the Bronco as a blind and a medium zoom lens, I photograph Gray Jays gorging themselves on Snowshoe Hare. Unfazed by a magpie, the jays urgently crowd each other, stuffing their craws. Within a few seconds two ravens call, circle and bank low, about to flap down when suddenly they lift again and are gone. Out of the corner of my right eye, I sense movement, turn, and see the gray wolf. She walks within a foot of the Bronco. A pause, then pads straight to the hare where she calmly claims the remains.

All competition has vanished. The wolf noses the pile of fur and takes her sweet time. A few bites. A dangle of tendon and bone. Another sniff. She quickly looks up not at me, but past me to the road, then vaporizes into yellow willow brush with her prize in her teeth. A bus slows, then roars by. They have not seen the perfectly camouflaged wolf.

Suddenly my wobbly fingers rip the lens cover off the 500 and wedge it into the window. The angle is a struggle. I wait without moving, barely able to breathe. Within 45 minutes the wolf returns, I think to inhale. She noses again, then picks up a piece of fur gently like a baby, bites it, wolfs it down, sniffs, squats, and urinates on the spot. What a gal.

Within 24 hours, no sign of the hare can be seen. An impression of a wide wolf paw remains in the fine gravel and mud. A late fall warbler works the willows. A hawk owl cocks its head, then plunges near vertically from the top of a skinny Black Spruce to nab some small mammal, a vole or shrew, perhaps.

At the distances one sees these animals, I am grateful for the Impressionists' palette. When the animals are gone, I concentrate on photographing color and shapes, but secretly, I hope for the wolf.



*Around Denali, there is nearly always a surprise or two.
A gray wolf on roadkill watches for competitors.
EOS 1D MK II N, 500 + 1.4 tele-extender, f/9, 1/320 sec, ISO 400*

The school year has started. I think of the kids a few thousand miles away at home and wonder who among them will see this wilderness or any wilderness in the next 15 years. I have hope for more than the wolf.

In the Bronco I write a few sketchy notes with a pen on a scrap of paper. So much for today's paperwork. Yes, I think I am on the right track.



Recently retired from 38 years in rural special education services, Juli Wilcox is a writer-photographer-editor and project consultant for other nature photographers. She is working on her first book, proceeds of which will benefit The Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund.

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