

WILD IMAGINATION PHOTOGRAPHY

5 Day Aurora Photo Tour

31 MARCH - 4 APRIL 2014





Trip Details

Length: 5 Days, 4 Nights

Dates: 31 March-3 April

Destination: Wiseman Alaska and the Brooks Range

Transportation Provided: Round-trip in a vehicle from Fairbanks to Wiseman

Lodging: Rustic but comfortable cabin

Food: All meals provided except breakfast on the 31st and dinner on the 4th.

Requirements: Must be physically able to walk over slick and uneven ground for short distances, and have a flexible and positive attitude.

Activities: Photography, hiking, natural history, aurora viewing

Hazards: Walking/Hiking in cold and dark over snowy and icy trails.

Guide Services: Photography instruction, natural history information, driving, cooking and meal preparation.



Expectations

Our chances of viewing and photographing the aurora borealis should be good during this excursion, but are not guaranteed. The northern lights require clear skies to be visible, and the right solar activity to occur. March and April offer the best odds of success because these two months are known for very low precipitation and peak solar activity. But, like any natural phenomenon, the aurora is difficult to predict. That's why I ask you to be flexible in your schedule and expectations. Below is a sample itinerary and is very much subject to change. Weather will dictate our daily activities. If clouds prevail at night we'll spend our days searching out other photo subjects. On clear nights, you can expect to be out from 10pm to 4am. And don't worry, there will always be a warm cabin or vehicle nearby if you need to warm up or take a break.

Itinerary

March 31

At around 9am we'll turn our wheels north and drive out the Elliott Highway. We will quickly leave Fairbanks behind as we head into the snow-covered White Mountains. About 70 miles from town we'll pass the small community of Livengood where we'll hang a right onto the famous Dalton Highway, or Haul Road. This narrow, mostly gravel, highway parallels the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and connects the oil fields on the north slope with the rest of the state.

Heading due north we'll pass more rolling forested hills before descending down a steep hill to the frozen Yukon River. There, we'll take a break to stretch our legs and check out the jumbled ice of the Yukon, and views over the Yukon Flats to the east. Not too far past the Yukon River, we'll pass the Arctic Circle at $66^{\circ} 33' 44''$ N where we'll officially cross into true arctic Alaska.

Our next stop will be at Finger Mountain, a treeless ridge occupied by numerous rocky tors. If it's clear, we'll get our first look at the mountains of the Brooks Range to the north. The Brooks Range lies entirely north of the Arctic Circle and stretches for 700 miles across the northern part of the state. The mountains are pierced by only a single road for its entire length.

We'll carry on for another hour or more, slowly gaining elevation as we climb to the foothills and into the mountains themselves. At the truck stop and visitor center in the small community of Coldfoot we'll take our last break of the drive. If it's open, we'll spend a few minutes at the visitors'

center where we can see displays and read about the human and natural history of the Brooks Range. Coldfoot is only a short distance as the crow flies from Gates of the Arctic National Park to the west and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the east. Though neither of these two protected areas are road accessible, the boundaries are just a few miles from the road.

It's just another 12 miles to the historic log-cabin community of Wiseman where we'll be staying for the next four nights. We'll find our way to our rented cabin at Arctic Getaway where we'll be greeted by our hosts Bernie and Uta Hicker, who live year-round in Brooks Range.

In our warm cabin, we'll kick back and relax for a few hours, before we head back out for our first aurora hunt of the trip.

Total Drive Time: 6-8 hours

April 1

After a late night, we'll sleep well into the morning. Breakfast will be provided by our hosts, and we'll have a chance to wander around the historic buildings of Wiseman and explore the nearby winter trails with our cameras.

In the afternoon, when the light grows sweet, we'll head out to look for some nice compositions of the dramatic mountains of the surrounding Brooks Range.

We'll return for dinner at our cabin and maybe a nap before heading outside to scan the skies for the northern lights.

April 2

Continuing with the previous day's schedule, we'll have a good lie-in to recover from our inevitably late night before venturing out to explore. Weather and road conditions permitting, we'll drive up to Atigun Pass, the high point of the Dalton Highway on the crest of the Brooks Range. There, we'll be right in the mountains, and Dall Sheep may be present on the slopes close to the road. If road conditions and time allows we'll descend toward the Atigun River and as far as the foothills where we will hopefully get a look out over the sweeping arctic coastal plain.

We will tie this excursion into an aurora hunt, taking our time to watch the sunset over the mountains and hopefully find the northern lights as we work our way slowly back to our warm cabin in Wiseman.

April 3

Our last full day in the Brooks Range, we'll return to some of our most productive landscape and wildlife spots of the past few days to hone our images, or see the views under different light. The evening will be filled with our final aurora hunt of the trip, where, with luck, we'll find the lights dancing over the frozen ice of the river and the mountains beyond.

April 4

We'll aim to leave Wiseman by mid-morning for the long drive back down the Haul Road toward Fairbanks. We'll stop for gas at Coldfoot before returning the way we'd come a few days before. There will be fewer stops on the way south, but if we spot wildlife, or great landscape scenes, we'll hit the brakes and make some images.

If all goes as planned, we'll be back in Fairbanks in time for dinner and some much-needed rest.



Recommended Clothing

March and April are called “spring” in Alaska, but despite the label, it will still be very cold, particularly at night. We will likely see temperatures below zero Fahrenheit, and possibly well below zero. Here are a few things that should be in your duffel or suitcase when you head north:

- Thick Down Jacket (800 fill), preferably with a hood
- Warm hat that completely covers the ears
- Neck gaiter or balaclava
- Fleece sweater
- Long underwear tops and bottoms
- Insulated pants- down or thinsulate (recommended) OR
- Fleece pants/shell combo instead of down pants
- Warm socks
- Super-insulated boots (Sorels, bunny boots, mukluks or similar)
- Thin gloves for operating a cold camera
- Fleece gloves
- Mittens
- Headlamp

Recommended Camera Equipment

- Tripod (if aluminum, wrap upper leg section in foam insulation)
- DSLR or Mirrorless
- Wide angle lens (Preferably f2.8 or faster)
- Midrange Telephoto (70-200, 100-400 or similar)
- Ultra telephoto or zoom (optional for wildlife)
- Polarizer
- Remote shutter release (wired or wireless)
- Comfortable camera bag
- Several gallon-size or larger ziplock bags (to protect equipment from condensation)



About Your Guide

David Shaw has photographed and lived in Alaska for more than 15 years. He has both an undergraduate and masters degree in wildlife biology. By blending science, natural history, and adventure into his images and words, he has created engaging stories for dozens of publications. His articles on the art of photography have been featured in magazines like Sierra, Shutterbug, Photographic, Photo Technique, Professional Photographer, and Amateur Photographer. Additionally, his knowledge of the natural world, and birds in particular have led to many publications in natural history magazines like Sierra, Birds and Blooms, Birdwatching, Birdwatcher's Digest, Alaska, and The Ecologist. Dave has travelled across the planet from Alaska to Antarctica and leaves bits of his heart in the wild places he visits. He has a particular passion for Alaska's wilderness. The Brooks Range, in Dave's opinion, is the most beautiful range of mountains in the world.

Questions?

If you have any questions or would like more details about what to expect, please don't hesitate to call or email.

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