

Photography

Arctic Appeal

Canadian Embassy Showcases Photos of 'Endangered Treasure'



Amy Gulick's "Crossing the Kongakut," left, and Thomas Mangelsen's "Dream Walker" highlight the inherent beauty and delicate ecosystems found within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

by Anna Gawel

The searing green eyes of a Canadian lynx—standing calmly, yet defiantly against a backdrop of unruly Alaskan wilderness—is one of the first striking images that greets visitors as they enter the art gallery at the Canadian Embassy. The gray and white creature—a visual hybrid of wolf and cat—is captured in stunning detail by photographer Art Wolfe and is one in a series of photographs encompassed in the exhibit, "Endangered Treasure: The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge."

The refuge, situated in the far northeastern pocket of Alaska, is home to America's largest ecological sanctuary and is birthing ground for an array of arctic animals including polar bears, foxes, caribou, wolves, migratory birds, porcupine, grizzly bears and the last remaining musk oxen.

The detail in these large-scale color photographs is impressive—as are the images themselves. Gary Braasch's "Porcupine River Caribou Herd" and Amy Gulick's "Crossing the Kongakut"—showing a group of caribou racing across a river—lend new credence to the phrase "capturing a moment in time." Every movement of every muscle and every speck of splashing water is pronounced in resounding detail, virtually leaping off the photograph.

In all, seven wildlife photographers offered their perspectives on this enormous chunk of rugged land—a land that is at once gorgeous and serene yet untamed and unpredictable. Landscapes peppered with pristine streams, brilliantly colored pastures and mountains that seem to stretch beyond the imagination also effectively convey the vast openness of the area that these photographers were dealing with.

But just as this space seems too immense, too infinite to fathom, the photographers remind us that this is also a land thriving with a menagerie of wildlife and ecosys-

tems. Take for example Kennan Ward's "The Best View From the Brooks Range, Dall Sheep," an almost surreal portrait of five tiny white sheep perched precipitously on a rocky ridge with the mountains and a picturesque rainbow bearing down behind them. For us, the image seems too fantastic to be real, but for the sheep, it's just another typical day in the Alaskan wilderness.

Or consider Tom Walker's "Autumn Palette" in which a single caribou pokes its head out of a large, lush pasture. The grass looks as if it's been painted over with the rich colors of fall—drowning the caribou in a sea of vibrant reds, oranges and yellows. In Ward's "The Wilderness of the Grey Wolf," a lone wolf seems to be taking in the broad expanse of territory before him—an odd mixture of steaming, snowy mountains and pastures as green as any in Ireland. Another of Ward's photographs, "Home in a Snow Drift," centers on two polar bear cubs that have sledged down an untouched snowy hill, carving a niche for themselves in the endless abyss of white.

Many of the photographs focus solely on the animals, providing some of the most compelling images in the collection. In one photograph, two snowy owlets crouch behind a bed of flowers and tall grass, as if two children playing a game of hide and seek. Similarly, Thomas Mangelsen's "Nursing Mother With Cubs" reveals an almost human-like expression of content on a mother polar bear as she looks down upon her cubs.

Ward's "Snowy Owl," on the other hand, provides a stark contrast to the human-like qualities displayed in "Nursing Mother," eerily depicting a snowy owl—also known as a ghost owl—that appears to have been caught between this world and the next.

But by far one of the most arresting images in the

exhibit is Mangelsen's "Dream Walker." Here, a brilliantly white Arctic fox stands on the ice, blanketed by a flurry of tiny snowflakes. The image is so powerful because of the delicate beauty inherent in each individual aspect of the photograph—the fox, the ice and the snowflakes.

However, this exhibit is about more than just pretty nature pictures. The photographers are also providing their own silent commentary on an issue that has sharply divided environmentalists and members of the Bush camp—oil drilling.

Right down the road from the Canadian Embassy, politicians are still mulling over proposals to open up the Alaskan wilderness to oil drilling, a crucial fact that has most likely not escaped the attention of exhibit organizers and photographers. Alaskan oil drilling impacts Canada as well because the animals that take up residence in the Arctic refuge also migrate to Canada each year and are critical to the way of life for many Canadian aboriginal groups.

Regardless of any political overtones, the exhibit is worth checking out on the sheer merits of its photography. Though small in scale, "Endangered Treasure" allows viewers to envision the grandeur of a land that remains one of the last areas of virgin wilderness in the United States.

"Endangered Treasure: The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge" runs through Aug. 5 at the Embassy of Canada, 501 Pennsylvania Ave., NW. For more information, please call (202) 682-7727 or visit www.canadianembassy.org/arts.

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