

LAST TRUE WILDERNESS

Experiencing the ecological and cultural richness of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Story and photos by Steve Hossack





There is much I'll remember. The cooing of sandhill cranes from across the tundra. A polar bear sauntering down the beach, like a minivan on four legs. Paddling for days on the lagoons without seeing a single mosquito, then listening to them hatch all at once while walking across the muskeg. A young caribou running at me from over 250 metres and stopping only a few metres away. Seals swimming around our canoe as we paddled through the azure waters of an ice floe. Scores of ducks overhead making a whopping sound like little fighter jets without any engines. Filming on the beach well after midnight and still feeling a sunburn setting in.

However, more than any other memory from my trip to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, I'll always remember sitting against a piece of driftwood with my eyes closed and fingers in the sand, feeling the ice calving and thundering into the ocean from more than a kilometre away.

A RACE AGAINST TIME

There is an 8-million-hectare parcel of land on Alaska's North Slope known as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). It's been a protected wildlife refuge in some form since 1960, and because of the language used in the bill that created it, the potential to extract fossil fuels has been left ambiguous and to be determined. Today, ANWR is facing a threat unlike any it has experienced in the last 40 years.

A portion known as the "1002 area" refers to a 600,000-hectare section of the coastal plain considered an important wildlife habitat and rich in oil and gas. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the *Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act*, which left the area open to potential drilling. The U.S. Geological Survey assessment suggests it may hold between four and 11 billion barrels of oil.

The act also designated approximately 3.2 million hectares of ANWR as protected wilderness, roughly 40 percent of the region. This area seems relatively safe from development—at least for now. In December 2017, a tax bill passed by U.S. Congress put exploration and potential drilling back on the table in the 1002 area.

ANWR is home to hundreds of animal species, including polar and grizzly bears, fish, seals, whales, foxes, and muskox.

It also serves as a safe haven for seasonal migrators like caribou and waterfowl.

Many people associate the region with barren ground caribou, a member of the deer family that undertakes the longest migration of any land mammal on Earth to calve on the coastal plains of Alaska. But what is often overlooked is that millions of birds, from six continents, also make their way north to rear offspring in the long hours of Arctic summer light.

The region is pocked by crystal-clear freshwater ponds and blanketed under an elaborate mosaic of flora. Grass, fescue, moss, lichen, willow, and wildflowers colour the sweeping landscapes. At any moment, one can hear or see dozens of different species, giving proof of its reputation as America's Serengeti.

During the summer, the southern Beaufort Sea teems with seals and fish; on a clear day one can see down fathoms into the blue water. To the south, the mountains in the Brooks Range stand as indomitable figures, exacerbated by an otherwise flat expanse. The summer sun doesn't come close to touching the horizon; what photographers refer to as the "golden hour" often lasts all night.

While there is only one community inside ANWR (the village of Kaktovik on the shores of the Arctic Ocean), the refuge plays a vital role in the culture and health of the Inupiat that call the region home, as well as the Gwich'in populations in north-eastern Alaska, the Northwest Territories, and the Yukon. The calving grounds are a sacred place for these groups, and the impacts of oil and gas will undoubtedly have a transboundary effect.

Although serious development may still be years off, the potential looms like a dark cloud on the horizon of Alaska's North Slope. It has become a race against time for Indigenous and conservation groups to lobby government bodies in one final stand, pleading and demanding for the sacred lands to be protected.

BEYOND THE ICE

This summer, I travelled north to experience ANWR myself. Our trip was part of a larger effort to raise awareness about the threat to the region's pristine wilderness.

Weather made the journey tough. It rained frequently. When it wasn't raining,

it was often surprisingly hot, and with no trees or structures on the tundra, escaping the high Arctic sun was impossible at times. However, the once-in-a-lifetime moments more than made up for it.

I stood a few metres away from a wild muskox. I walked under the skull of a bowhead whale and around the largest bone pile I've ever seen. We were chased off a barrier island by a polar bear that emerged from the mist like a character from a George R.R. Martin novel. We watched large flocks of ducks weave through the ice floe, and had small herds of caribou run through our camp on more than one occasion. I spent a day searching for snowy owl nests to no avail, and subsequently spent three hours walking back to camp along a gully while being harassed by Arctic foxes that felt it impolite to drop by their dens without invitation.

It was as though I could see the Earth peeling back like the skin of an orange as erosion exposed a thick layer of melting permafrost, leaving gaping holes in the ground. We often spent long, sunlit nights filming in a golden dream world, washed in intense hues of orange, red, and pink.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Spearheading this mission was Yukon-based photographer Peter Mather. He has spent several years in Gwich'in communities and been telling stories from within ANWR for more than a decade. More recently, he started a campaign to raise awareness about the harm oil exploration will have on wildlife and Indigenous people. Mather hopes to protect the region with an onslaught of stories and media coverage, with the goal being to force U.S. Congress to reverse its decision.

"You have 200,000 caribou that come here every year, and this is the most important habitat within their range. That's incredible that you have something like that in North America," Mather explains. "I think that wildlife is important on our planet. I think that they have a lot of value, and I think that about wilderness too. But this area that's going to be open to oil and gas development is a biological hotspot. It's full of birds and caribou—and they need this area to survive and thrive."



Kaktovik resident Robert Thompson.





Yukon-based photographer Peter Mather.



As Mather describes his outlook on the current political landscape, I begin to understand what he's trying to accomplish and how he plans on doing it. He is humble to his core, but has a strong grasp on the fact that when you connect thousands of people to a cause you develop a strong and unified voice—one capable of making real change.

"I can't describe it, and that's why we have filmmakers and photographers around. It's something that has a soul," he says of the region. "So that's why we're here, to show people versus to describe it. There's no other place like this in the world. It's special, it's unique, it's critical to wildlife, and it's critical to the subsistence of Aboriginal culture."

It's evident that ANWR has brought purpose to Mather's life. The area has shaped his career, and he hopes it will shape and mould the lives of others.

"This is one of those places that should be set aside. It's as simple as that. We don't need to set aside a lot of land in the world, but this is one of those small pieces that needs to be."

KAKTOVIK, ALASKA

Our trip was bookended with special visits to Robert Thompson, a resident of Kaktovik. While not originally from Alaska's North Slope, he has lived there for the last 30-plus years.

Thompson has a clear stance on the issue and wants the land protected for future generations to enjoy, but his reasons are pragmatic. His culture is based on hunting practices, and any exploration or drilling work will have a tangible effect on those traditions.

"IF THEY TURN IT [THE LAND] OVER TO THE OIL INDUSTRY, WE WOULD BE TRESPASSING ON AREAS THAT WE'VE BEEN USING FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS."

"If they turn it [the land] over to the oil industry, we would be trespassing on areas that we've been using for thousands of years," Thompson tells me as we walk through the narrow streets of Kaktovik.

He says the quantity of oil in Alaska is not running out any time soon, but that's not the issue. To him, and many others in the region, it's about the impact future development will have on the health of their people and their land. By his math, Thompson says there's enough oil in Alaska for 200 years of extraction.

"We're already having climate-change issues on a very large scale here in Alaska's North Slope, so what is that going to do? What is it going to do to the world if we keep pumping oil for that length of time?" After a moment, he finds the words to continue. "We've got to stop at some point and get to clean energy or it could be the end of the world."

Thompson wants to have the land reassessed with a new baseline study that includes an environmental-impact statement and information on health risks, which he claims hasn't been done since the 1980s. "Industrial activity just should not affect human health," he adds.

FUTURE OF THE REFUGE

For now, it seems that what might save ANWR is the availability of oil in the Lower 48 that is cheaper to access and more efficiently extracted due to improvements to hydraulic-fracturing methods.

The world has been waiting to see how large oil companies would react to the opening of ANWR to drilling for the first time in 40 years. Although there haven't been any major power plays yet, that could change in the next few months. And as part of the act that opened the 1002 area to potential exploration and drilling, the U.S. government now must hold at least two lease sales in the next few years.

We will have to wait and see whether or not ANWR will remain intact for the sake of the wildlife, wilderness, and people connected to the land. The fight is far from over.

"I just keep hoping that people are going to rise up and we're going to do something," Thompson says. "Here and there, there's progress being made, but not enough." **Y**

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