

Photo Essay: Wildlife of the Canadian Rockies

In 1999, I moved to the beautiful city of Calgary, Alberta from Toronto, Ontario. With the Canadian Rockies only one hour away, there are many places to explore the diverse wildlife of this region.

I became the Alberta Environmental Writer for Digital Journal in 2011 and I have enjoyed this role ever since. Living in Alberta has given me an appreciation of nature and wildlife that I didn't experience in Toronto. The preservation of our water, land, and certain species soon to be at risk, are worth fighting for. Residing in a closer proximity to nature has given me an awareness I didn't have before moving here. There are so many places to explore for a glimpse of wildlife and it's a photographer's paradise in Alberta.



One of the places I have visited all year round is the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary in the City of Calgary. This is a place where birds of all types can be seen including Canada geese, eagles, hawks, and chickadees especially during the winter. Different birds appear during each season. Deer even frequent the area but I have not seen a bear yet probably because of the close proximity to the city. The mighty Bow River runs through the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary, making it more scenic. Many people visit the Sanctuary past and present because it allows them to be in natural surroundings for a day within city limits.

I have met many photographers who visit the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary. One day during the summer of 2011, about 5 photographers were huddled in one area. I asked what they were taking a picture of and they informed me there was a big hawk sitting on a tree branch. Since I didn't have a zoom lens for my Nikon D7000 at the time, I decided to get closer to the hawk by climbing half way up a tree to take a photograph. I was at a weird angle so I didn't quite get the desired close up photo I wanted, and in the process I almost fell out of the tree! My Toronto

friends would have laughed hysterically at the sight of me half way up a tree since they have always known me as a city gal at heart. Living in cowboy country sure has taught me a few things.



During the winter, I go to the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary as well because the birds have been entertaining. The chickadees were out in full force during the winter months that I visited and they were always so friendly. Although people were told not to feed the birds, they still fed them. The first time I went to the Bird Sanctuary during the winter, a chickadee landed on my shoulder and pecked me as I was adjusting my camera. Then there was the infamous argument between two Canada Geese on the frozen Bow River. I watched these two birds for half an hour going at it walking up and down the frozen river. Finally, whatever disagreement they were having was resolved as seen in the second photograph. One of the birds finally succumbed to submission.

Though I have lived in Calgary for a while now, I had never been to the Calgary Zoo, a very popular place year round for people of all ages. Numerous photographers have visited the zoo throughout the years but the summer months are especially busy. Many birds gather at the Calgary Zoo too. When I visited in summer 2012, they were playful, very quick and they were everywhere. The Canadian Wilds exhibit was popular because of the wide range of animals, including the variety of birds. The Bald Eagles especially garnered a lot of attention. The Eurasia and Africa exhibits where the tigers and lions lived were a big attraction as well.

In the summer of 2012, I also travelled with a friend along the popular Highway 40 route in Kananaskis Country where wildlife lingered and grazed by the roadside. It's best to travel on Highway 40 during the summer and fall because part of the highway is closed during the winter.



We saw a mountain sheep lingering by the roadside on our way to Kananaskis Village. I stopped the car, got out and took some pictures.

As I clicked away, the animal kept staring at me and within 5 minutes I heard this shuffling noise. It started to move its legs back and forth like a bull in a Spanish bullfight. I was so engrossed in taking its picture, that I had no idea it could have attacked me. After cooler

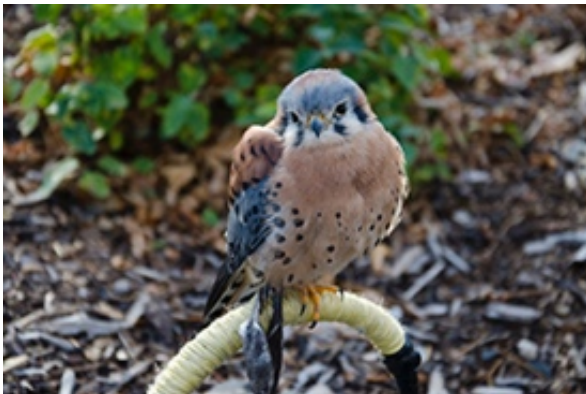
heads prevailed and we got used to staring at each other, the animal calmed down. Then it walked towards the road and posed for me with the Kananaskis road sign in the background! What a photo-op for Alberta Tourism. He was definitely Mr. Personality and he was teasing me all along – or so I thought. When I returned to the car laughing, my friend sternly said, “I almost got out of the car to haul you away from that animal because I thought it was going to attack you!”

Since I have been taking photos of wildlife, I noticed that all animals are highly intuitive and they sense us before we sense them. Did I say they have personalities too? Some birds and animals are not afraid to interact once trust is established. However, an encounter with a bear is another story. I remember doing some research on bear safety for work and after seeing some violent bear encounters on video, I wanted to hightail it back to Toronto. Before exploring the backcountry of Alberta, it’s best to do your research and always be prepared for emergencies like a bear or a cougar attack. Every situation is different in the wild and Parks Canada has a wealth of information on their website about what to do if an unexpected encounter occurs.

After the mountain sheep photo op experience, we continued on our way to Kananaskis Village, once the athletes’ village for the 1988 Olympics. Kananaskis Village is just off of Highway 40 and there were some spectacular views of the Canadian Rockies from the outlook area. There were some hiking trails just off to the side of the outlook points but we didn’t have time to check them out that day. Bears frequent this area as well so we were warned to be cautious. Deer roamed freely on these grounds too. I followed a squirrel as it moved within a treed area looking for food. Always one step ahead of me, it was quick and very aware of every move I made. Whenever I visited Kananaskis Village, it was always an enjoyable experience.

In October 2011, I went to the popular Festival of Eagles, a big community celebration in Canmore, Alberta. Bird spotting scopes were available to view the numerous eagles flying in the sky. Bird walks and other activities were also part of the community celebrations. I stopped at the live Birds of Prey exhibit that allowed me to take photos close up of the birds brought from the Alberta Birds of Prey Centre in Coaldale, Alberta. I took photos of an eagle called Spirit, a couple of owls, and a Peregrine Falcon.

The woman taking care of the Peregrine Falcon told me “Don’t let that tiny beak fool you. It will rip you to shreds if the bird considers you a threat.” Swell. Then I thought about my ancestors



on my mother’s side who were a noble Spanish family that bred Peregrine Falcons and other birds for the King of Spain. The breeding was done for hunting purposes. No wonder the falcon was staring at me with its beady little eyes. The owls at the live Birds of Prey exhibit were cool too, especially the Great Horned Owl that finally stopped turning its head 360 degrees long enough so I could take a picture.

Living in Alberta has certainly changed my life. This beautiful province has been a great place to explore nature and wildlife since I left Toronto many years ago. I consider my car and Nikon D7000 camera my “freedom mobiles”

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because they bring me closer to nature. I will continue to do photography in the future because it not only gets me away from indoor technology, but also brings me peace of mind. I have discovered too, that wildlife can be entertaining even though one must be cautious. If you were born and raised in a city like I was and have not spent a lot of time in the Alberta backcountry, it's important to do your research to stay safe during adventures.