



Photographing Whales, Bears and Glaciers in Southeast Alaska

By Barbara Jordan

I have made several trips to Southeast Alaska the past ten years. Each trip has been just as wonderful as the last and has provided me with many new photo opportunities. Alaska is a wildlife photographer's dream. I always travel on a lovely 50' trawler named *Delphinus*. The skipper of *Delphinus*, Ronn Patterson, is a wonderful naturalist and photographer. His knowledge of both the area and the wildlife allows him to locate the best photo opportunities.

My favorite trip is from Ketchikan to Juneau. Ketchikan is a town with lots of character. Creek Street, built of pilings above Ketchikan Creek, is filled with galleries and shops but is still very photogenic. Another great photo spot is the Totem Heritage Center outside of Ketchikan. Take some time to learn about the native heritage while photographing the totems. There is also a large bald eagle population in the area. Eagle nests are pretty easily spotted just outside of town.

After leaving Ketchikan, a stop at Anan Bay is next on the itinerary. When the salmon are running, usually in July and August, Anan Creek is a great spot to photograph bears and eagles. As is the case anywhere in Alaska, where there are salmon there are bears and eagles. The blind at the bear observatory make shooting safe and easy.

My favorite part of the trip is photographing the great whales. Most of the whales I have photographed have been in Frederick Sound and Stephens Passage. The area is the feeding grounds for humpback whales that travel every year from Hawaii. It is quite common to have a chance to photograph breaching, fluking and lunge feeding humpbacks every day of the trip.



I usually set up a tripod and shoot with my 300mm f2.8 lens or my 500mm f4 lens, using a 2x extender if necessary. The image stabilizer in the 500 lens is great for shooting off the boat. However, I have not had much trouble using a lens without image stabilization. Whales often breach near the boat, so a good portion of my work has been with a hand held 70 to 200 lens. Exposures are difficult, though, because of the water and the fact that the whales move in and

out of shadow areas. Shooting in RAW mode allows me a little more flexibility with exposures.

I am now shooting with a Canon 1Ds which is not as fast as my Canon EOS3. What that means when photographing whales is that I get 3 frames of the breach instead of 5 frames, so I really have to be ready. Catching a breaching whale requires a bit of luck and great understanding of the behavior of the whale. Once a whale breaches it is likely the whale will breach again, possibly even a couple more times. Knowing that offers a chance to get set for the subsequent breach. On rare occasions I have had the opportunity to photograph a young humpback whale breaching over and over again for nearly 45 minutes.



Another great humpback behavior to photograph is lunge feeding. A pod of humpbacks will blow bubbles under the surface of the water, which herds herring and other small fish into a kind of bubble net. The whales then lunge up through the bubbles, mouths wide open, taking in great amounts of food and water. The pod then sinks back under the surface and the whole process begins again. This can go on for hours at a time.

Also present in Stephens Passage are pods of Orcas (otherwise known as killer whales). I have often photographed transient pods in Stephens Passage but there are frequently resident pods in the area, as well. The transient pods love to feed on seals and sea lions. I once photographed a pod of five Orcas during the kill of a Steller sea lion bull. Over and over again the Orcas circled, dove and then breached – landing on top of the sea lion. It provided many opportunities for some great orca breaching shots in the process.

Another place I always try to visit is Pack Creek on Admiralty Island. The island has the largest concentration of Grizzly bears in Southeast Alaska. There is a sand spit for observing the bears, as well as a raised tower that is just a short hike from the beach. The hike is through a

wonderful old growth rain forest.

The Brothers Islands has another great old growth rain forest. I can spend hours photographing there, including the lovely sunset views. Not far from The Brothers is a haul out for the endangered Steller sea lions. Stellers are fun to watch as they bully for territory on the rocks. As awkward as they look out of the water they are extremely fast, sleek swimmers.

Of course, everywhere along the way there is a good chance of photographing bald eagles. There have been days when it seems as though the water starts to boil with the feeding frenzy of herring eating krill, whales eating herring, and eagles swooping down to catch the herring. The action certainly leads up to a photographer's frenzy!

Before ending in Juneau, we usually take a trip up Tracy Arm to the face of the Sawyer Glacier. Tracy Arm is a beautiful 25 mile long fjord with granite walls. The trip to the glacier includes encounters with blue icebergs frequently covered with baby harbor seals. On every trip I've made to the Sawyer Glacier I've had the opportunity to witness it calf a huge iceberg. Large numbers of Kit-tiwakes are usually present against the blue ice of the glacier face.

The days during the summer in Alaska are very long, the wildlife is abundant and the landscape is absolutely spectacular.

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Visit Barbara's portfolio site at <http://www.barbarajordan.com/>

Dr. Digital Tip...Compact Flash Cards & other Memory Cards

Not all memory cards are made equal!

The CF/SD performance database at Galbraith Digital Photography Insights is a must for you to review before purchasing new cards. It introduces you to the technology and shares the test results of all industry-wide cards from fastest to slowest (based on JPEG write speed). Select your particular camera body at the upper right-hand corner of page 2 to access the right information for you.

NOTE: Nikon pro digital bodies are optimized for the WRITE ACCELERATION (Wa) technology available from the Lexar Pro Series of CF cards. Check your Nikon literature for information about your particular digital body.

A note about the size of CF cards: until the recent evolution of 8-12+ megapixel digital bodies, I always recommended CF cards no larger than 1 gig. I still think that is an optimal size if you think about how many images you will be happy to loose if the card is lost or becomes glitched. If you are shooting for clients, loosing images this way can be a crisis of major proportions.

To give you an example, the new Nikon D200 eats up CF card space like no other camera body I have had. Shooting in RAW format, for me, now means that a 1 gig card can now hold fewer than 50 images - even fewer than that if I shoot both RAW & JPG simultaneously! (which I don't).

The industry is increasingly forcing us to sacrifice common sense judgement for hefty CF card space! So now is the time, more than ever before, to make judicious in-camera deletes as we are shooting.

http://www.robgalbraith.com/bins/multi_page.asp?cid=6007