

JOHN E. MARRIOTT

TALL TALES, LONG LENSES: MY ADVENTURES IN PHOTOGRAPHY

PRESENTATION TO IACC, DECEMBER 14, 2017

John Marriott was five years old when he first photographed the Canadian Rockies while on his family's annual vacation from his home in the interior of British Columbia (BC). His camera at the time, a \$20 Kodak Instamatic camera, resulted in images he'd prefer to keep to himself! Since that beginning, the camera equipment in his hands has changed dramatically -- and so have his skills as a natural history photographer.

On December 14, 2017, John's presentation to the Images Alberta Camera Club had nothing to do with cameras, lenses or techniques for photographing wildlife; it was, however, about the release of his new book, *Tall Tales, Long Lenses: My Adventures in Photography*, covering the past 20 years as a natural history photographer (ever since he made his first photographic sale to *Canadian Geographic* magazine in 1997).

John received his BSc from UBC in 1991 and the following year he came across the incredulous opportunity to work for Parks Canada in Banff National Park to take roll after roll of film of photos of people, wildlife, and scenic in the mountain environment. It was from that opportunity his career as an outdoor photographer was born. After that position finished at the end of September, it was followed by a 50-day cross-Canada trip visiting all the national parks, but upon his return, John was somewhat disappointed with his results.

In May 1993, back with Parks Canada he held a variety of positions. In 1994, needing to update his camera gear, he sold his Honda Civic and bought a VW van. The following year, he sold the van and bought what he called, "a clunker," spending the rest his money on a 500mm f/4.5 telephoto lens. In January 1995, back with Parks Canada, a colleague was ecstatic about a wolf pack that was feeding on a dead elk carcass beyond the end of the Vermilion Lakes Road, just outside the Banff townsite along the CPR tracks. A lifelong lesson was quickly learned here about not being prepared and hence missing the shot!

By the end of 1995, John left his stint with Parks Canada and moved down the highway from Banff to Canmore. During this time, he earned a living working as a hiking guide with an adventure company while supplementing his income with computer-related jobs. In the fall of 1996, he sold his first wildlife image, a wolf photograph, to *Canadian Geographic* magazine for \$150. In 1997, he made less than \$1,000 selling his images.

In 2002, his business leapt forward with the investment in a line of 24 different wildlife and scenic greeting cards, his *Wilderness Moments* notecard line. Throughout the years, John added more and more cards (the cards continue to be the best-selling greeting cards in the Canadian Rockies, with the sale of more than 150,000 cards).

First Coffee Table Book: *Banff & Lake Louise: Images of Banff National Park*, released in 2007, was self-published and is now a Canadian and International Bestseller. By the end of 2007, almost all 5,000 copies of the first run sold out. So far, more than 17,000 copies of that publication have sold world-wide.

Second Coffee Table Book: Following the success of his first book, in June 2008, John released *Wildlife of the Canadian Rockies: A Glimpse at Life on the Wild Side*. This book is now also a Canadian bestseller, with more than 8,500 copies sold. In 2009, two more coffee table books were released, both titled *The Canadian Rockies: Banff, Jasper & Beyond*, a large and a small version.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, John photographed extensively both in the front and back country of the parks in the Canadian Rockies of Alberta and British Columbia. He also spent several months over those years photographing grizzly bears and other wildlife along British Columbia's West Coast, working out of Knight Inlet Lodge, 500 kilometers north of Vancouver.

Over the past decade he has been to other exotic locations, from the Yellowstone back country to the highlands of Scotland and Ireland; he has sailed the BC Coast from the Queen Charlottes through the Great Bear Rainforest to the Inside Passage, he has climbed aboard fishing trawlers in the Atlantic seaboard in search of whales and puffins, and he has crossed the frozen tundra and ice of the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. However, the majority of his work has been done in Western Canada, where he has carved out his niche as a photographer specializing in Canadian wildlife and nature photography.

While much of his skill as a photographer was learned through trial-and-error, having not been formally trained as a photographer, John has been lucky enough to have met and forged relationships with some incredibly talented photographers such as Al Williams, Jeff Waugh (his old supervisor with Parks-Canada), Alec Pytlowany (also of Banff, offering business advice), Darwin Wiggett, Tom Murphy, and Terry Berezan (offering photographic advice). Unfortunately, he never did get to meet his most desired photographer — Japanese wildlife photographer Michio Hoshino, who died in Kamchatka, Russia in 1997.

His photography business started 20 years ago, and it is now firmly entrenched in Canmore, Alberta. John sells his images as stock photography; they have been published in many publications, including *National Geographic Adventure*, *Backpacker*, *Canadian Geographic*, *Reader's Digest*, *Outdoor Photography Canada*, *Photolife*, *Ranger Rick* and *OWL*. His photography has also been used for a wide range of commercial applications, including highway billboards, decorating transit buses, travel brochures, websites, product packaging, and catalogs. In 2010, John was named a contributing editor for *Outdoor Photography Canada* magazine as the wildlife photography columnist.

In 2010, John launched a wildlife photography tour company called Canadian Wildlife Photography Tours, which has also been extremely successful, leading tours and photography workshops to places like the Queen Charlotte Islands, the Great Bear Rainforest in search of Kermode (Spirit Bears) and the edges of Hudson Bay in Nunavut. In 2016, his book, *The Pipestone Wolves: The Rise and Fall of a Wolf Family*, was released, with author and wolf researcher Gunther Bloch.

Now, in the fall of 2017, John just released *Tall Tales, Long Lenses: My Adventures in Photography*, which is a culmination of his 20-year career as a photographer and includes many of his favourite stories and photographs. The following are some of the tales that John shared with our Club members.

Tale #1

In Spring 1992, John found himself living in Banff, Alberta, and while looking at job postings in the immediate area while at the Banff Visitor Centre, he spotted a poster of a Bear Warning Notice; a grizzly bear was frequenting the area around Johnston Canyon and Castle Mountain along the Bow Valley Parkway. Grabbing a few of his companions he drove up and down the Bow Valley Parkway to seek out this grizzly. After initially proving to be an unsuccessful wildlife drive, he spotted a group of tourists at the Storm Mountain Lookout, just north of Castle Mountain Junction. Here they spotted a blonde grizzly! Then, once most of the tourists had lost interest and departed, a big male grizzly came out of the forest edge. Here they witnessed the male first fighting with the blonde grizzly, then mating with her ... all within striking distance of Castle Mountain. This blonde grizzly however, was notorious for campground scavenging. She was soon trapped and sent up to the Swan Hills area of Alberta. Within three months of John's first encounter with the bear, she was shot and killed by Alberta Fish and Wildlife Officers, having maintained her aggressive ways in west-central Alberta.

Tale #2

One Day Love Affair: After an extremely unsuccessful photography trip up to Jasper one April, he was headed home and was driving along the Bow Valley Parkway back in Banff National Park. Not to go home empty-handed, he had positioned himself to photograph a ground squirrel, he then noticed some movement in the shrubbery. This turned out to be an incredible six-hour session alone with a pine marten.

Tale #3

Delinda: In June 2007, John first observed Delinda, the alpha female member of the Bow Valley Wolf Pack. In August 2008, she was killed on the Trans-Canada Highway near Redearth Creek, having dug her way underneath the wildlife fencing paralleling the highway. Less than one week later, another member of her pack was also killed on the same stretch of highway. Slowly, other members of this pack also died at the hands of man – either along the railway or along the highway.

Tale #4

Frank the Tank: In Spring 2012, John made his first trip into the Khutzeymateen area of northern British Columbia, Canada's first and only grizzly bear sanctuary. Because the bears in the sanctuary have never been shot at or hunted they have not developed any fear of humans – quite unlike most other area of BC and Alberta. About 40 to 50 grizzly bears inhabit this region in addition to black bears, mink, wolves and other coastal wildlife. Only 400 people per year can enter this sanctuary. Brutus was the most dominant male bear in the area for years but when John returned in the spring of 2015, an even more-dominant boar emerged. This one was built like a tank – big, gnarly, and rogue, along with battle scars to prove it. The massive bruin was 750 pounds in the Spring and 900 pounds in the Fall. John dubbed him "Frank the Tank" and the name seems to have stuck over the years.

Tale #5

Early in January 2016, construction crews working on the paved walkway at Johnston Canyon left garbage in open construction bins attracting the wolves and possibly conditioning them to people. On January 21, 2016, members of this pack, the Banff Wolf Pack, were photographed at Johnston Canyon. January 27, the same pack approached and followed visitors. No option was left but to destroy two of them — Kootenay (the alpha female) and Scout (one her offspring). Four others were killed on the nearby CPR tracks and two others simply disappeared. Only a \$1,000 fine was levied to the company, but the death of the alpha female began the decline of this wolf pack.

John's photographic advice to all aspiring natural history photographers:

- Photograph all things "weekend warriors" don't (e.g., porcupines, marmots) and try to stay away from always visiting the wildlife hot spots so your images appear different.
- Don't follow the lead of others.
- Make sure your gear is ready; it is difficult to photograph fleeting wildlife moments if your gear is locked up in the back of your vehicle.
- Turn on your gear, with lenses mounted to camera bodies and all settings maximized.
- Convey a mood, tell a story or inspire a story.
- Watch for the same behavior, which will often be repeated in a static location.
- Use manual exposure at times when the situation calls for it.
- Use landscape photography techniques to create near/far relationships.
- Take a near subject that can lead your eye through a composition.
- Don't be discouraged by missed opportunities.

Ask yourself:

- How low of a shutter speed can you successfully hand-hold your telephoto lens/camera body configuration?
- How low of a shutter speed can get away with on a tripod before your wildlife subject may start to blur?
- What ISO can your camera body get away with?
- Where may your lens be sharpest?

Upon completion of John's presentation, it made me want to ditch my wide-angle zoom lens, attach my 300mm f/2.8 lens to camera body and head out into the bush!