

Voyageurs National Park *More than a Winter Wonderland*

by Photographer Raymond Klass



You might think I'm crazy for having driven to the "Icebox of America", International Falls, Minnesota, in the middle of February, and as the mercury dropped steady with each passing mile, I might have agreed. Despite conditions that often tested my limits, and that of my equipment, there was a warmth about Voyageurs National Park, and the dedicated people that live and work in the area that far overcame the weather. Working on self-assignments across the country, I've learned that photography is more about the experience and less about pixels and apertures.

This trip is part of a book I am working on with Voyageurs National Park and the Voyageurs National Park Association. It all started a year ago when I was accepted for an Artist-In-Residence position at the park for the autumn of 2006. I stayed for about 4 weeks in August and September, images from that trip can be found in the "expeditions" section of this website. To make a long story short, it was suggested to me that I visit the park in the winter, to highlight the drastic, but

beautiful, transformation of these lakes into a frozen paradise. With the help of Cory MacNulty of the Voyageurs Park Association, Gordon and Jennifer Gelo of The Sandy Point Lodge, and everyone from Voyageurs National Park, I was able to return for a little more than 2 weeks this winter.

For those who have never had the opportunity to travel to Voyageurs National Park, it is a truly enormous area, made up mostly of 4 large lakes. In addition, the Kabetogama peninsula and mainland sections house forested areas and inland lakes home to animals from loons to eagles, and curious beavers to moose and wolf. It is an important area not only for our natural heritage, but a critical habitat for the wildlife of northern Minnesota and migrant species throughout North America.

It is amazing how perception changes depending on the mode of transportation. While I was there in the summer, I canoed about 150 miles, and the edges of



the park seemed at times out of reach. This winter however, I was able to use a snowmobile, and it was amazing how suddenly close everything was. For this reason, I worked with park pilot Jim Hummel to get some aerial photographs and depict just how large this area of northern Minnesota is. I feel the experience was a success not only because I enjoyed the photography, but because it has given me a new perspective to interpret from.

While hiking on a snowshoe path at the Black Bay Ski Trail area, I met 2 women setting out on the cross-country ski trail. Phyllis and Roberta were more than willing subjects, and in my short conversation with them, I realized that although they were not photographing at the time, they were heading out to ski with the same awe and amazement of the area that I try to capture in my images. When I returned home, I was inspired to see that they had written and e-mailed me some of their poetry about the experience of being outdoors and skiing along the trail.



SKI HAIKU

Crusted snow carpets
Dazzling paradise of white
Ski magical scene.

Phyllis Karsnia





All too often we view areas like the National Parks as islands of concentrated wilderness disassociated with their surroundings. While we as humans have drawn borders and boundaries, the wildlife is free to roam in and out of the park. One of the most special experiences on this trip was accompanying wildlife biologist Dave Garshelis as he visited the dens of collared bears within the park. It goes without saying that although the image of me with the month-old cub is cute, all wild animals are dangerous and they should never be approached for your safety as well as theirs. This was a very special set of circumstances where I was keeping the cub warm, while his mother, who was tranquilized, was being weighed and measured by Dave and his assistants. The survey of bear dens is a cooperative effort of the park and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to track the health of bears both inside and outside the park boundaries.



Across the enormous lakes, and throughout the woodland trails there was this incredible sense of an almost timeless beauty, where the snow floated atop the soft high pines, held by shelves of soft needles. A place where you knew that just out of sight the wildlife was carrying on as though Columbus had never found America. It is humbling to be in a place so wild that I was more interested in what animal's tracks I am crossing than what animal would need to cross the interstate.

So, although the temperature often dipped below -20 degrees Fahrenheit, the people and the experiences were more than warm enough to sustain me. After visiting twice to this beautiful region of Minnesota, I am quite certain that the park is surrounded and run by dedicated people who truly understand the unique value of this area. Voyageurs National Park was about more than photography, it was an inspirational journey with experiences and friends that reach far beyond any physical borders.



Between my two trips to Voyageurs National Park, I have revisited many areas. The images from drastically different times of the year make an interesting comparison; summer images are available on the Voyageurs Expedition page, or by clicking the direct link below:

<http://www.klassphoto.com/voya1.html>