

Wildlife Photography On The BC Coast

A Comprehensive Guide

Version 4 (2024)



This guide was produced to assist you in preparing for your BC coastal photo tour with *Natural Art Images*. It is intended as a *helpful supplement* to the information you have (or will) receive in your Trip Bible and, as such, may overlap on some of the same topics. Any conditions or constraints that are completely specific (or unique to) your trip – and that could impact on your gear choice – will be covered in your Trip Bible.

This guide covers five main topics:

1. A description of the “*nature and style*” of *wildlife photography* you’ll experience on your photo tour with Natural Art Images.
2. A discussion of the *wildlife photography ethics* we will be following on your photo tour.

3. A “*Choosing Your Camera Gear*” section that includes a description of the special conditions and constraints you’ll face on virtually all coastal BC photo tours with *Natural Art Images* (and how they may impact on your gear choice).
4. A “*Camera Gear FAQ’s*” section that presents the most common questions (and my answers) that I get from many photographers prior to their first trip to the BC coast
5. A “*Tips & Tricks*” section that includes some advice that should help you significantly while on your photo tour.

Enjoy!



Black Ghost of the Rainforest. Coastal Gray Wolves (including black coloured ones!) are actually quite common on the BC Coast. However, a century of heavy persecution has left them very wary and shy, making them a very challenging – but highly rewarding – subject to photograph!



Nikon D5 with Nikkor 180-400mm f4E @ 560mm. 1/800s @ f5.6; ISO 2500.

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1. The Photography “Style” On My Photo Tours

All my coastal BC photo tours are genuine “*photography in remote wilderness*” experiences. This means we will spend the bulk of our time in isolated and remote wilderness and away from other humans (and other photographers). It also means we have to “track down” our subject matter without the help of other outfitters, spotters or real-time online apps listing recent sightings (i.e., there is no “network of sightings” for us to plug into!). Additionally we’ll usually have no “set-up” situations where we can set up in a specific location ahead of time and with the knowledge that a certain species will predictably appear and pose for us! The advantage of our “*photography in remote wilderness*” approach is that it produces a far more unique and personalized experience and it can often lead to more original and compelling photos. A possible downside is that it means

we don’t know the specifics of the shooting conditions ahead of time and thus it may put more onus on the photographer to make snap technical and creative decisions in a field setting. This means it may challenge your photographic skills more than other photo tours do! But this can be a *good thing* by pushing you to expand your photographic skills and techniques.

In some respects the best description of what we’ll be doing on your coastal photo tour is “*Run and Gun*” wildlife photography! And, on that note, you can safely assume that while we will spend some time ashore (and shooting from land), ***the majority of our shooting will take place from a boat*** (either a large sailboat/powerboat or an inflatable Zodiac).

Our Wildlife Subject Matter: All of my photo tours are “multi-species” tours where we will try to take full advantage of ANY wildlife photography opportunity presented to us. We WILL be in a “target-rich” environment

with many wildlife photography opportunities, but usually we are unable to predict (with any degree of precision) what photo ops we'll encounter on any specific outing. For example, my *Khutzymateen Grizzlies* photo tours are the closest thing I offer to a "single-species" photo tour, but even on those trips we may well shift our attention to other species (such as coastal Gray Wolves or even, in very rare circumstances, wolverines) as we encounter them. Of course, and as serious wildlife photographers ourselves, we are most interested in the "charismatic megafauna" and we are NOT going to turn away from sparring Grizzly Bears to photograph a spotted salamander! 🙄

Said in a slightly different way, while we do have key "primary" target species on each of my photo tours, we approach them all *with an attitude of finding and capturing any form of natural beauty and natural art we can find*. This may include many species of terrestrial and marine wildlife and birds, intertidal scenes, landscapes, seascapes, and more! So – and as a practical example of this approach – my *Great Bear Rainforest* photo tours include the rare white Spirit Bear as *one* our "primary" target species...but it is only *one of many species we may encounter on the tour*. And, more importantly, *we will not sacrifice all our other photo ops on the trip just to find and photograph a Spirit Bear*.

2. Our Ethical Stance – Wildlife FIRST!

Wildlife conservation is the primary reason for my involvement in wildlife photography and for running photo tours. As such, *I place the welfare and value of our subjects above the value of any photograph of them*. This philosophy is embodied in my *Wildlife FIRST!* rules of conduct that guide our collective actions during all my photo tours. These four simple ethical rules state that:

1. We engage in *PASSIVE* wildlife photography only. This means we strive to capture images of wildlife behaving as naturally as possible and without the use of "set-ups", contrivances, or any actions that could guide the subjects toward desirable settings and/or backdrops or elicit specific "poses".

Seeking Natural Art! While finding and working with several species of "charismatic megafauna" is a big part of our experience, we'll be approaching this trip with an attitude of *finding and capturing any form of natural beauty and natural art we can find*.



Nikon D2Xs with Nikkor 200mm f2.0 VR. 1/400s @ f6.3. ISO 100
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Going Down! A Humpback Whale shows its tail flukes as it dives to feed in a narrow channel in the Great Bear Rainforest. Over the past few decades Humpback Whale numbers have soared on the BC coast.



Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 180-600mm f5.6-6.3 @ 600mm. 1/2500s @ f6.3. ISO 1400. Wide-area AF with SD = Animal

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2. We do nothing intentional to alter or influence the behaviour of our subject(s) for the purposes of photography. This means we do not engage in any form of luring or baiting (or any other form of food supplementation). Additionally, we will not use any form of sound to alter the behaviour of the subject for the purpose of photography (including using predator and/or prey calls, vocal clicking, or making any other sound to encourage the subject to look at us).
3. While respecting any legal guidelines on minimum approach distances, *we always allow the wildlife subject – regardless of the species – to determine the distance it is comfortable with between itself and us.* This principle not only serves to reduce the stress on the subject, but it also allows photographers to capture the subject behaving in a more natural, and often more interesting, fashion.
4. We strive to always consider and minimize the impact that our own photographic activities – and the overall impact of all photographic

activities – have on the subject(s). This includes being aware of our total time spent with the wildlife subject(s) and, whenever possible, *the total time spent with the subject by all photographers utilizing that same subject.* In practice this means I (or we) will often break contact and withdraw from the subject and leave it in peace, especially if there is any indication that our presence is impacting on the subject's behaviour (including activities such as feeding, resting and/or sleeping, caring for its offspring, etc.). This consideration is always important – and *may become even MORE important if multiple photographers or groups of photographers are simultaneously or sequentially sharing the same subject(s).*

We will be adhering to these 4 rules during all my BC coastal photo tours.

All images in this photography guide and on the *Natural Art Images* website (www.naturalart.ca) were captured following these *Wildlife FIRST* rules of photographer conduct.

Who's Gonna Blink First? This young Sea Otter was fascinated by our presence and must have wondered what this strange floating animal was!



Nikon Z 9 with Z 400mm f2.8S + Z TC-2.0x (800mm), 1/2500s @ f8. ISO 900

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3. Choosing Your Camera Gear

British Columbia's coast is a visually stunning environment filled with dramatic wildlife. There is no single configuration of camera equipment that is *"the best"* for every possible situation you may encounter in this breathtaking setting. Moreover, every photographer comes equipped with a different visual framework, different physical skills, and different goals. As such, it's impossible to come up with a fool-proof list of camera equipment to bring on any of my photo tours. Please use the following information and tips to help guide you in choosing which gear to bring. Please also feel free to contact me if you have any questions whatsoever about the appropriate camera gear to bring on your photo tour.

Some Unique & Challenging Considerations!

Extensive Zodiac® Use! While our shooting situation (including where we are shooting from) does vary between photo tours, much of our wildlife viewing and wildlife photography will take place from within a small-ish Zodiac® inflatable boat. Zodiac® use is necessary to access the various coastal inlets and shorelines and, of course, when we're working with some marine mammals. Over the years we have found there are some key benefits to both using and shooting from a Zodiac®, including the calm acceptance of our presence from the wildlife (but only if we stay offshore in the Zodiac®). And, of course, the Zodiac® offers us a great low shooting angle. If we were forced to operate without a Zodiac® and shoot from land we would have only a small fraction of the photo ops we have when using one! Overall, using a Zodiac® is a very GOOD thing! 😊

But...it is impossible to use a tripod in the Zodiac®. This doesn't mean you will have NO support for your big lenses – in many situations it will be possible to rest your lens on the side of the Zodiac®. I have found that placing something (towel or bean bag) between the lens and Zodiac® helps dampen vibrations. I personally prefer using a small inflatable pad (or seat), such as those made by Thermarest. Here's the type I have used:

<https://www.thermarest.com/products/seats/lite-seat/lite-seat.html>

BUT...Tripod, Tripod, Tripod? During many of my instructional seminars I stress that 3 important rules for capturing a quality image are “Tripod, Tripod, Tripod”. Historically this rule was true in most situations, especially if the photographer was shooting with a large and heavy super-telephoto lens. However, recent reductions in lens' weights and the continual improvement of image stabilization systems (either in-lens or in-body) have greatly reduced the need for the stability of a tripod when using super-telephotos to photograph wildlife.

So...should YOU bring a tripod on your photo tour? Here's a general guideline that may help you decide:

- ***Khutzeymateen Photo Tours:*** Virtually ALL of our grizzly photography will take place from within the Zodiac. Consequently you should leave your tripod at home – it will simply take up valuable space in your pack and add to your “weight budget” and it will NOT get used.
- ***Great Bear Rainforest Photo Tours:*** Photography will take place from the deck of the sailboat, from within a Zodiac®, and from land-based locations (the proportion of shooting from each location will vary between trips and between years). Those who like to shoot from tripods should feel free to bring them on these trips.
- ***Marine Mammal Photo Tours:*** Photography will take place from the deck of the sailboat, from within a Zodiac®, and possibly from land-based locations. Consequently those who like to shoot from tripods should consider bringing them on these trips.



Morning Dip – Steller's Sea Lion. Sea Lions can be seen throughout the Great Bear Rainforest and can be great photographic subjects.

Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8S. 1/2500s @ f4.5. ISO 500. Wide-area AF with SD = Animal

© Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca

Eye-to-Eye. The low shooting angle of the Zodiac® made this eye-level shot of a fishing grizzly possible. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca



Nikon D3s with Nikkor 400mm f2.8 prime lens. 1/250s @ f2.8; ISO 2500.

Mandatory Life Jacket Use: When in the Zodiac® you will be required to wear a life jacket. This has an important repercussion – *it means you can not WEAR a camera backpack while in the Zodiac®* (the life jacket must be worn as your outermost layer). Keep this in mind when considering how you'll be carrying and handling your gear in the Zodiac® (more on camera-carrying systems – and what might work best for you – is below).

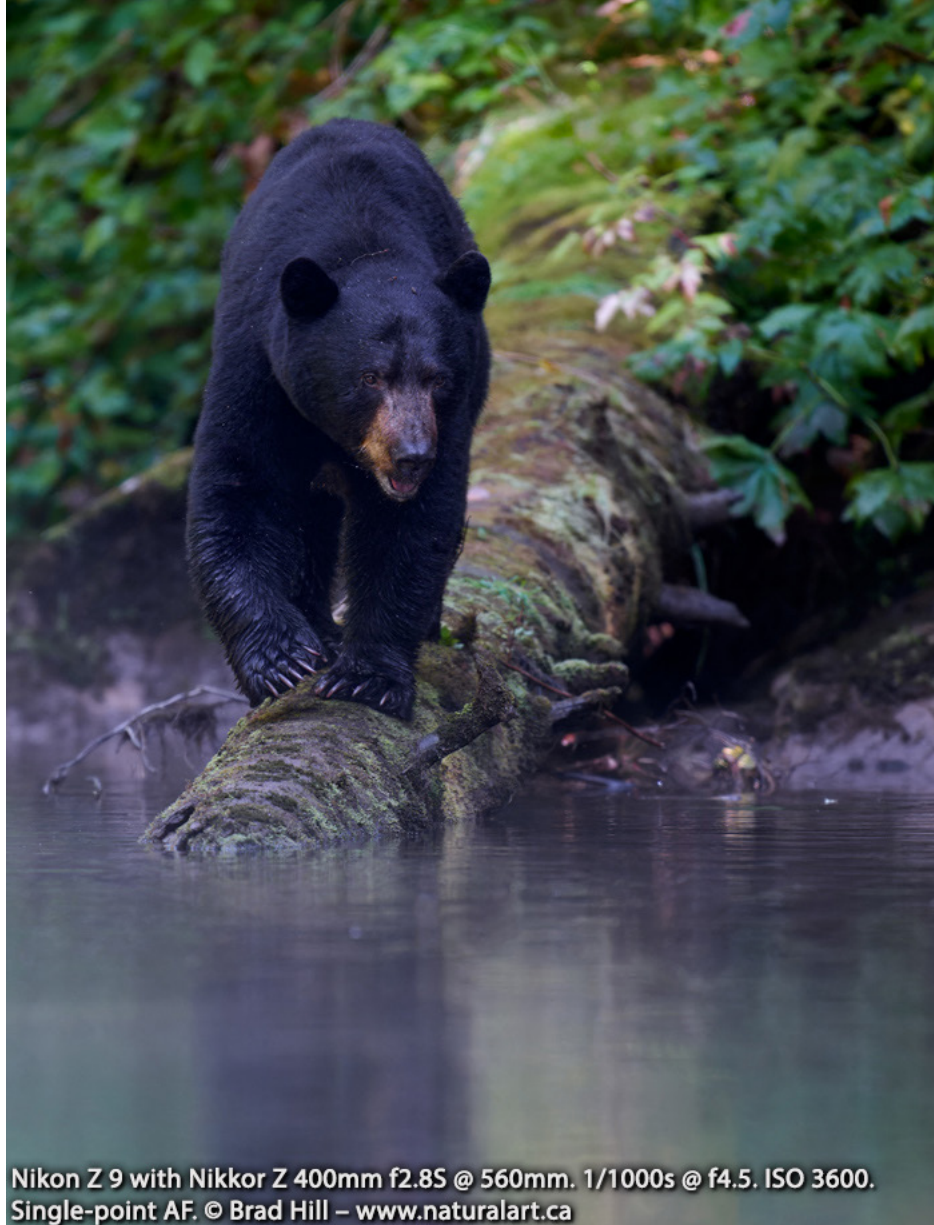
Dealing with Possible Rain? It DOES rain on BC's coast! There is NO requirement for you to use your camera in any rain we might have, but if you choose to, here's a few things to keep in mind:

1. Professional (and in some cases semi-professional) camera bodies are almost always “*environmentally sealed*” and are quite water resistant. While definitely NOT waterproof, they do tend to hold up better if they get moisture on them than do “consumer level” cameras. Please note that many mirrorless cameras are less well sealed than DSLR's and thus a little more susceptible to moisture damage.
2. Many manufacturers offer rain covers for cameras and/or lenses. While they vary in quality (and price), most work better than no cover at all. I have even seen creative photographers adapt a plastic green garbage bag for use as a rain cover (and it “sort of” worked, but not nearly as well as either of the two brands of rain covers discussed below). *If you choose to shoot in the rain, I would strongly suggest that you bring a high quality rain cover for your camera.* I have personal experience with two of the higher-end brands of rain covers – AquaTech Sport Shields and Think Tank Photo's Hydrophobia rain covers – and I can recommend either brand. Unfortunately, it appears that in the last year or so AquaTech has ceased producing and selling rain covers, so they may be increasingly hard to come by.

Camera Carrying Systems (for within the Zodiac). So what works best for carrying your gear in the Zodiac®? Generally, after the first day (when everyone figures out that their big camera pack is more of a hassle in the Zodiac® than anything else) here's what people end up doing:

- *Primary Camera* (favourite body with super-telephoto or telephoto

Walking the Plank. Black Bears thrive on the BC coast and are found throughout the Great Bear Rainforest. I photographed this one during my 2023 "Summer in the Southern Great Bear Exploratory Photo Adventure".



Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8S @ 560mm. 1/1000s @ f4.5. ISO 3600.
Single-point AF. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca

zoom). Enclosed in a quality rain cover and either in the user's hands or at their feet in the bottom of the Zodiac®.

- *Secondary Camera* (usually with a shorter lens mounted). Usually under a rain cover and either in user's hands or at their feet.
- *Everything else* (wider angle lenses, teleconverters, lens cloths, extra batteries, etc.). In any pocket or small bag the user can find!

And, of course, this *isn't the optimal solution!*

So...here's some ideas to help you find a system that will work for YOU in the Zodiac®...

1. Camera Bags/Packs. I would encourage all participants to bring a water-resistant camera bag or pack. Many of you probably already own one or more camera packs. In selecting a bag for this trip, I would suggest you pay particular attention to the following parameters:

a) Size – you want a mid-sized bag (at the absolute largest) that you can easily carry and load into the Zodiac® and that does not take up too much room on the floor. As suggested above, while in the Zodiac® you probably don't need a bag large enough to carry your largest telephoto lens (it will likely be in your hands or at your feet). Additionally, you should be able to easily access your gear while in the boat (without undo effort or noise).

b) Water-resistance. Look for a pack that is water-resistant or waterproof or that has a rain cover with it. One word of caution – some *fully* waterproof bags (such as Lowepro's Dryzone series) can be REALLY hard to get into...and it's almost impossible to get something out of them fast. A water-resistant bag with a slip-on rain cover can be better than a FULLY waterproof bag if the latter is tough to get into.

There are several good manufacturers of camera packs. These include Shimoda (www.shimodadesigns.com), F-Stop (www.fstopgear.com) Lowepro (www.lowepro.com) and the BackLight series from Think Tank Photo (www.thinktankphoto.com).

As an alternate, you might want to consider bringing a camera pack

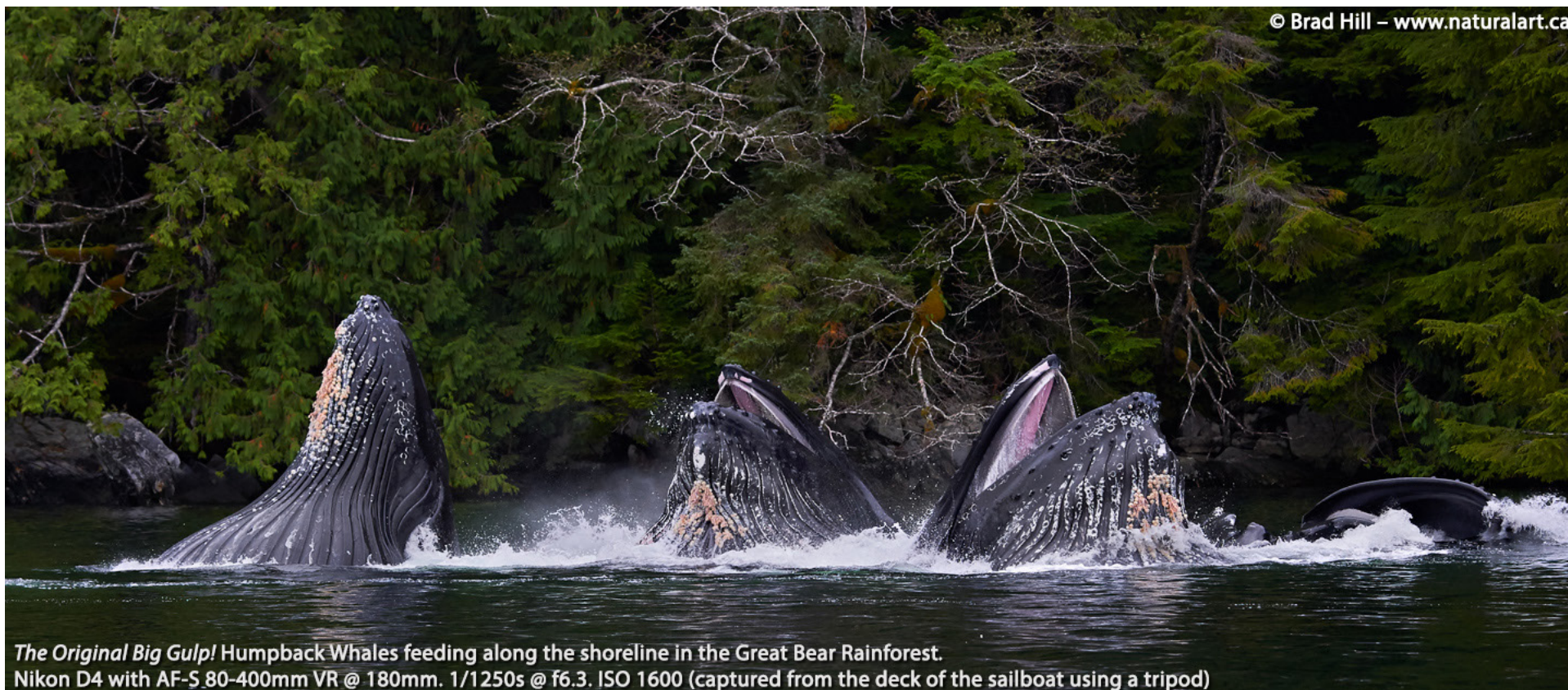
simply to transport your camera gear to your trip's start point and use a much smaller water-resistant daypack or dry bag (like those used by kayakers) to carry a few of your essentials in the Zodiac®.

2. Belt-and-Holster systems. I use a belt-and-holster system to carry some of my gear while in the Zodiac®. The system I use (from Think Tank Photo – www.thinktankphoto.com) consists of a wide waist belt attached to shoulder straps. There are a variety of camera holsters and lens cases available that fit onto the belt and the larger ones can accommodate a pro body with a medium length telephoto zoom attached. This system has allowed me to work in the Zodiac® with one pro body and “long” telephoto (covered by a rain cover) in my hands but have a second body with a zoom lens on my waist and always ready to go (and

easily accessible). And, the system *can be worn with a life jacket on*.

This system allows me to take only a very small (or no) pack into the Zodiac®. And, much more importantly, *it ensures my gear is quickly and easily accessible*. This has allowed me to capture many good images that I may have otherwise missed. I originally experimented with this system because I had noticed that within the confines of the Zodiac® it was often difficult or slow to access gear sitting in a larger backpack (and I was reluctant to open the pack if it was raining out). After almost a decade of use I can say I am still very happy with how the belt-and-holster system works for me.

As an alternate, some choose to bring photography vests and place a lot



The Original Big Gulp! Humpback Whales feeding along the shoreline in the Great Bear Rainforest.
Nikon D4 with AF-S 80-400mm VR @ 180mm. 1/1250s @ f6.3. ISO 1600 (captured from the deck of the sailboat using a tripod)

RHINOS! Rhinoceros Auklets – as well as many other seabird species – are found on many of our BC coastal photo tours. This flock of 7 was photographed from the deck of our chartered sailboat as the blew by!



Nikon D3s with Nikkor 600mm f4G (tripod-mounted). 1/3200s @ f5; ISO 320.

© Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca

of their gear in the pockets. If you are considering this, please remember that you will be wearing a life jacket whenever in the Zodiac and the life jacket may make it hard to access pockets on your vest.

Camera Bodies?

Pro photographers almost always bring two (or more) camera bodies on an expedition. They do this primarily to have a “spare” in case their main body fails or because they want a body with a different lens “ready to go” without having to change lenses. While this is a good idea, do not think that bringing multiple camera bodies is a must! In the past many clients have chosen to rent a second camera body “just in case” their own camera fails.

Many BC coastal photo tours may be “lower light” environments than some photographers normally shoot in, and you will likely find that

hand-holding your lenses in the Zodiac® requires you to shoot at higher shutter speeds than “normal”. Consequently, you may end up shooting at higher ISO’s than you typically do. You will probably go home with more good shots if the camera body you bring can produce results *pleasing to you* at ISO 3200 or higher.

Lenses?

Please consider the following when selecting the lenses to bring.

- 1. Can you hand-hold it?** If you have a lens that absolutely *must* be mounted on a tripod to be used effectively (e.g., many “full-sized” 500mm or longer prime lenses), then it’s a bad idea to bring it on your trip. Fast lenses with large apertures and cameras/lenses with good image-stabilization systems can *really prove their worth* on BC coastal trips – *but you still have to be able to hand-hold them!*

2. Cover the Focal Range! If possible, it's always good to bring a combination of lenses that cover from wide angle through to about 400 to 500mm (in full-frame terms). Bear in mind that on some photo tours we may be working quite close to the wildlife and even a 300 mm lens may bring you too close! As one frame of reference, if you tally up the focal lengths of all the images shown in this photography guide *the average focal length used was 481mm.*

3. A Brief Trip-By-Trip Focal Length Guide. Here's a general guide to the key focal lengths (in full-frame terms) you'll need on my three primary categories of photo tours. Note that this list considers your "long" lenses only, and many will want some shorter focal length lenses with them as well. Since transitioning to Nikon's mirrorless Z system I have found the Z 24-120mm f4S zoom to be an extremely versatile and valuable lens to have with me on ALL my coastal photo tours.

- **Khutzeymateen Photo Tours:** In the Khutzeymateen we tend to be quite close to our subjects (on average the closest of all my photo tours). You rarely need a focal length of greater than 400mm in the Khutzeymateen. However, small, lightweight 500mm lenses (like the Nikkor 500mm f5.6E PF) that are easily hand-held are popular

among Khutzeymateen photographers and many have used them with great success. Medium focal length zooms (e.g., 100-400mm or 200-500mm) are *highly valuable* in the Khutzeymateen.

Should you bring your shiny new (and easily hand-holdable) Z 800mm f6.3 VR S to the Khutzeymateen? Well...it's up to you and, of course, there may be times when it will give you exactly what you want. But much more commonly it will *simply be too long* – and you'll find yourself only able to shoot tight portraits with it (think "eyeball" shots).

- **Great Bear Rainforest Photo Tours:** On most Great Bear trips we have a highly variable distance to our subjects. In some cases (e.g., coastal Grey Wolves) you may want as long a focal length as possible. In other cases we may be "Khutzeymateen-close" to our subjects, and you'll be shooting full-frame shots with focal lengths of around 100mm. And, at times a Humpback Whale may go from very far away to very close very quickly. So...overall...the most important lens to bring on Great Bear photo tours are those medium-to-long focal length zooms (e.g., 100-400mm, 180-600mm).



Sea Otter in iconic pose. This image was captured while in a Zodiac® during our *Marine Mammals* photo tour in August of 2014. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca
Nikon D4 with Nikkor 80-400mm f4.5-5.6. 1/800s @ f7.1; ISO 320.

What about that new-ish hand-holdable 800mm super-telephoto from Nikon? I'd say that lens is considerably more valuable on a Great Bear trip than a Khutzeymateen trip, but still less valuable than the medium focal length zooms.

- **Marine Mammal Photo Tours:** On average my marine mammals photo tours require the longest focal lengths of ALL my coastal photo tours. Because whales are invariably key subjects on these trips – and because they often move from very far away to very close – those medium focal length zooms are still key lenses on these trips.

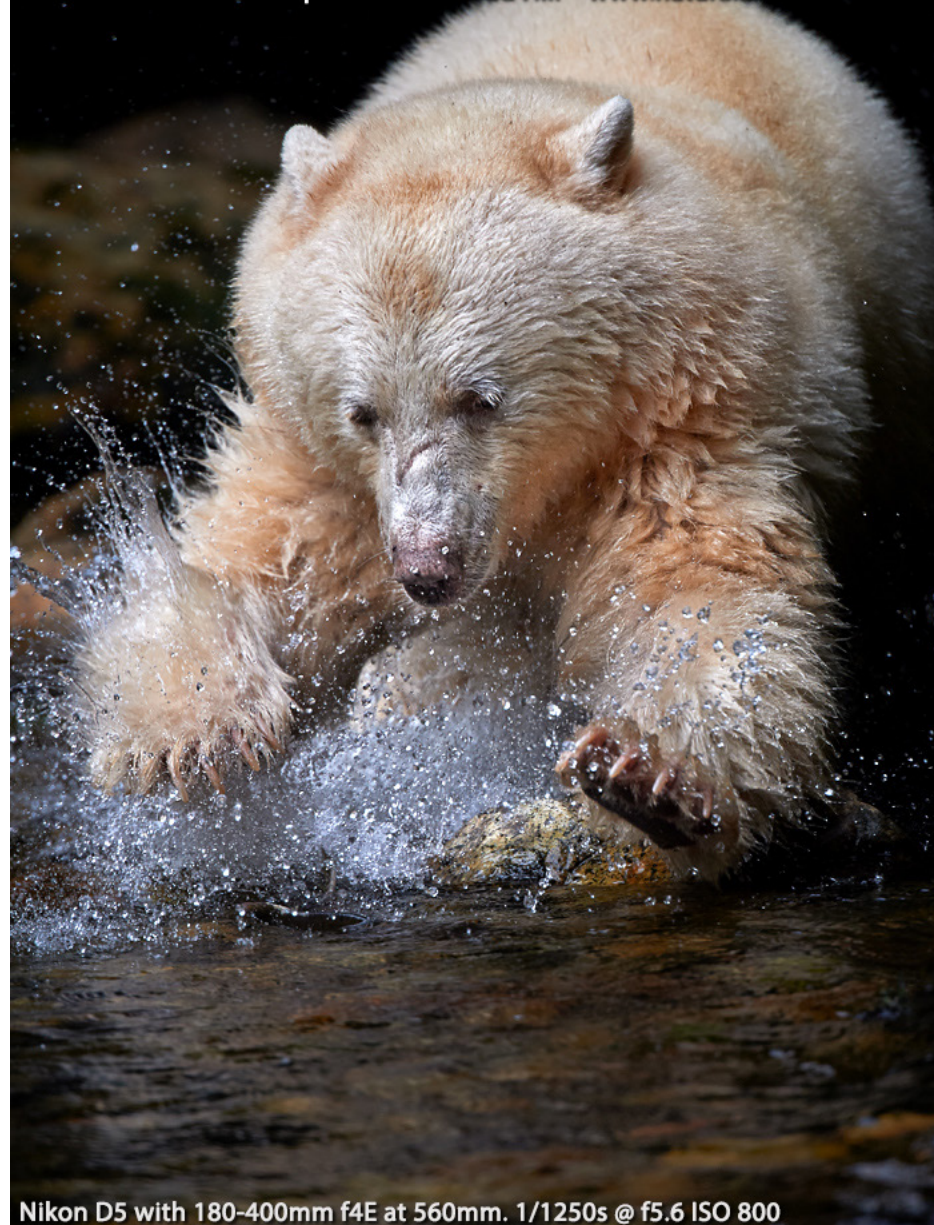
What about that hand-holdable 800mm? Yep, if you've got it, I'd bring it on my marine mammals trips! 😊

Note that the Trip Bible for each of my photo tours will contain a list of lenses I am bringing on that tour.

4. **Teleconverters/Tele-extendors?** Many photographers have great success with teleconverters, especially with some of the most recently released models of them. And, they can definitely cut down on the number of lenses you end up carrying.
5. **Polarizing Filters?** Because we will be shooting in a potentially “highly reflective” environment (on the water!) and because you may be doing landscape and seascape shooting, some may find polarizing filters helpful on this trip. I always bring them.

And, a FINAL piece of advice: I *highly recommend* that you try out *EACH* piece of gear you will be bringing with you *before* you come to the BC coast. This includes everything from your clothing through to your cameras and lenses and even packs and/or belt-and-holster systems (it's never good to discover that your rain cover needs a specific eyepiece once you're in the wilderness!).

The Pounce – Fishing Spirit Bear! All Black Bears on the central coast are of the *Kermodei* subspecies but only those with two recessive genes for the white coat become all-white Spirit Bears. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca



Nikon D5 with 180-400mm f4E at 560mm. 1/1250s @ f5.6 ISO 800

About to Alight – Gull @ Sunrise

© Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca



Nikon Z 6II with Nikkor 500mm f5.6 PF with 1.4x TC. 1/1000s @ f8; ISO 1600.

4. Camera Gear FAQ's

Here's a sampling of the most common gear-related questions (and my answers) I get from photographers coming to shoot on the BC coast for the first time:

Okay...what is the absolutely MOST critical lens focal length range for me to cover for a coastal BC photography excursion?

In my opinion – and for the wildlife – it's the **300-600mm range**. Of course, if you're into shooting animalscapes or landscapes you'll want to bring one or more lenses of shorter focal lengths with you. And here's a good frame of reference for you – if you tally up the ALL the focal lengths used for the images in this photography guide, they average out to 481mm.

Several of the new “ultra-zoom” lenses seem to be of much better optical quality than in the past. Do you recommend them for BC coastal photography excursions?

Yes, I agree that some of the new ultra-zooms from Nikon, Canon, Sony and Tamron are really strong optically. And in that group I include lenses such as the Nikkor Z 100-400mm f4.5-5.6S, the Nikkor Z 180-600mm f5.6-6.3, the Canon RF 100-500mm f4.5-7.1L IS USM, the Canon RF 200-800mm f6.3-9 IS USM, the Sony FE 200-600mm f5.6-6.3 G OSS and the Tamron Tamron 150-500mm f5-6.7 Di III VC VXD (available in both Nikon Z and Sony E mounts).

But do I recommend them? This is a far tougher question to answer. Of course the wide focal length range these lenses cover make them very convenient and they can replace several other lenses in your kit (making them appealing to the travelling wildlife photographer). But...all of them are quite slow (i.e., have a relatively small maximum aperture). And this can make using them in a low-light environment challenging (and often result in photographers using far higher ISO's than they'd prefer to). And, most importantly, the BC coast is often overcast and with fog/rain – which means *it is often a low or very low light*

The Welcoming Committee. Steller Sea Lions can be seen throughout the channels and inlets of the BC coast, but large groups like this are more commonly encountered on the outside and more exposed islands and coastlines. This shot was only possible because we were low to the water in a Zodiac®.



Nikon D800 with Nikkor 70-200mm f2.8 @ 200mm. 1/1000s @ f8. ISO 400

© Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca

environment. So if you bring an ultra-zoom lens on the trip as your primary wildlife lens you MAY end up shooting at sky-high ISO's (like ISO 10,00 or higher).

If you happen to do a BC coastal photo trip that does NOT have a lot of heavy overcast or rain then an ultra-zoom lens may work out really well. But if your trip is a low-light one an ultra-zoom may not work well at all. Bottom line: There's an element of pure chance involved.

What do you consider your absolutely most important lens to have on your BC coastal photo tours?

This one is easy – as a Nikon shooter I can say that without question it is the Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8 TC VR S. This lens is remarkably good optically and offers a very fast f2.8 aperture for low-light shooting. It is also a fast f4 560mm when it's built-in teleconverter is engaged. And, it performs very well with the Z TC-2.0x teleconverter, making it a

professional level f5.6 800mm lens. So it's extremely versatile over some very important focal lengths.

Is bringing a rain cover for my camera/lens really necessary?

Well...if you want to shoot in the rain then the answer is YES. And on most of my coastal photo tours there will be at least some daily photography sessions where we will be shooting in the rain.

Note that while I do recommend bringing a high-quality rain cover (such as one from Think Tank photo or AquaTech), the reality is that almost any rain cover is better than none at all. High-end rain covers really show their worth if we happen to end up in a situation where we're shooting in heavy rain for an extended period.

My last point on the rain covers: I have run trips where folks have shown up without rain covers because “...*their cameras and lenses are*



professional level so they're weather-sealed". In almost cases when these photographers have shot in the rain they have ended up having serious gear malfunctions (often later in the trip).

I've just purchased a new Nikkor Z 800mm f6.3 VR S super-telephoto lens. Should I bring it on my BC coastal photo tour?

Well...it depends on the photo tour and what style of images you like (e.g., more of an "animalscape" vs. tightly framed shots and/or animal portraits). Keep in mind that *some* of my photo tours have strict weight limits and, even if they don't, you'll face some size and weight restrictions on one or more legs of your trip to get to the the photo tour start point. So picking your overall gear "kit" ends up being a game of

optimization and compromise. Anyway...here's some recommendations for each of my three coastal photo tour categories:

- ***Khutzeymateen Photo Tours:*** In the Khutzeymateen we tend to be quite close to our subjects (on average the closest of all my photo tours). There may be times when an 800mm lens will give you exactly what you want, especially if you like tight portraits and/or eyeball shots of grizzlies. But much more commonly it will *simply be too long of a focal length*. So, for most folks I'd say they'd be well-advised to leave their 800mm lens at home on Khutzeymateen photo tours.
- ***Great Bear Rainforest Photo Tours:*** On most Great Bear trips we have a highly variable distance to our subjects. In some cases and with some subjects (e.g., coastal Grey Wolves) you may want as long

a focal length as possible. In other cases we may be “Khutzeymateen-close” to our subjects, and you’ll be shooting full-frame shots with focal lengths of around 100mm. Overall? I’d say that your 800mm lens will be more valuable on a Great Bear trip than a Khutzeymateen trip.

- **Marine Mammal Photo Tours:** On average my marine mammals photo tours require the longest focal lengths of ALL my coastal photo tours. So if you have one I’d simply say “Yep, bring your 800mm lens along on my marine mammals trips!” 😊

What about lenses like a 70-200mm f2.8 zoom?

These lenses have been a “staple” lens for wildlife photographers for ages, and they can be put to very good use a LOT on my BC coastal photo tours. So...yes...if you have one I’d bring it.

What about short focal length lenses like a 24-70mm f2.8 zoom?

Yep, if you’re into shooting “wider” wildlife shots or landscapes and seascapes I’d definitely bring them!

I just transitioned to mirrorless and still have a lot of lenses that need “adapting” to work with my new mirrorless body. Are there any concerns unique to your coastal photo tours that I should be aware of?

Actually...yes. And please note that currently this answer applies ONLY to Nikon shooters when they use F-mount lenses with their FTZ adaptors (both the model I and II FTZ adapters) as we haven’t had enough Canon and Sony users of adapted lenses on my photo tours to see any solid trends. While it’s well-known that adapted F-mount lenses perform just fine on Z-mount (mirrorless) camera bodies



Eagles in the Mist. There is no better place to capture images of eagles and other wildlife with stunning backdrops than on the coast of British Columbia.
Nikon D4 with 70-200mm f4 VR @ 150mm. 1/160s @ f8. ISO 720. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca



(e.g., no negative impact on autofocus performance or optical performance) we have seen a highly predictable problem (i.e., 100% occurrence!) when F-mount lenses are used with FTZ adapters on very wet and/or humid trips. The problem? On every single very wet trip lenses used with FTZ adapters have had the external surface of their rear elements fog up. This is external fogging and can be easily wiped off (and it clears quickly if you take the lens off the camera and allow it to breathe), but it can be quite inconvenient when it happens. The most likely reason for this problem is that the FTZ adapters simply are not weather-sealed as well as lenses are and moisture leaks through the interface between the back of the lens and the front of the FTZ adapter. Note that this has occurred whether or not the camera/lens combination was used with a rain cover.

5. Tips & Tricks – Some Photographic Advice

I. Some Technical Comments and Suggestions:

1. Hand-holding Your Lenses. The unique constraints of photographing wildlife on BC's coast (e.g., shooting from a Zodiac®) puts us in a situation where we're forced to hand-hold telephoto lenses quite commonly (and more often than we might like to!). I highly recommend that each of you spend some time practising hand-holding (while standing and while crouched) each of the lenses you plan to bring on your trip. You may also want to experiment with supporting your telephotos on semi-stable surfaces (mimicking supporting a lens on a pontoon). You'll be at a big advantage if you know the slowest shutter speed at which you can effectively hand-hold each of your lenses *before* the trip starts!

2. Your Camera's ISO Capabilities. Related to the above point is knowing your camera's ISO capabilities. While I have seen blue skies many, many times on BC's coast (including one stretch of 6 cloudless days in early June in 2008), it is commonly overcast and we can easily have rain. This means we often have to deal with low-light conditions.

Rust On Rust – Great Blue Heron in Flight. Although the sub-species of Great Blue Heron found on BC's coast is considered to be endangered, they are quite commonly seen on almost all of my BC coastal photo tours.



Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8S @ 560mm. 1/2000s @ f4. ISO 1400. Wide Area AF with SD = Animal

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Knowing how high you can push the ISO on *your* camera to and *still* get results that please you before you come on your photo tour will be another big advantage to you (and help ensure you start capturing quality images early in the trip).

3. Rain & Rain Covers. If you choose to bring rain covers for your camera(s) and lenses (*which I highly recommend*) I suggest you practice putting them on and taking them off a number of times *prior* to coming on the trip. Some of them can be a little tricky and you don't want to be learning how to do put them on when we're sitting near a grizzly and it begins to start raining! ***One final point on rain covers:*** I have seen numerous instances where participants purchase thousands of dollars of camera equipment prior to their photo tour and then

choose to go very low budget on rain covers (including either buying very cheap ones or bringing green garbage bags they hope to “make do” with). Invariably I see these people cursing themselves the minute the rain starts (or a few minutes later when their gear is wet).

4. Shoot in Short Bursts. When hand-holding a telephoto lens it's often best to shoot bursts of two or three images at a time (i.e., through keeping your shutter release continuously depressed by constant index finger pressure). You'll often find that the second or third image is sharper than the first image.

II. Some Comments on Creative Decisions. It's impossible to deal with all the creative aspects of wildlife photography here. But here's a few general principles to keep in mind for this trip...

1. Preconceptions vs. Reacting to Available Opportunities. There is nothing at all wrong with coming on your trip with a “hit list” of images you want to capture. However, if your mental “hit list” is so rigid that it produces “tunnel vision” you may miss many fantastic photo ops simply because you’re not truly *seeing* what you’re being presented with. It’s my experience that those photographers that do the best on my photo tours are those that can maintain an open mind and quickly react to what photo ops the wildlife subjects DO give us. The process of “*always watching, always evaluating*” CAN be exhausting, but it can also lead to some fantastic and unique photos!

2. Documentary Photography vs. Wildlife Art. To be honest, it is fairly easy to get a nice, sharp, and relatively close-up picture of a bear in the *Khutzeymateen* or a Humpback Whale on a *Marine Mammals* trip! It’s exceptionally difficult to define where documentary photography ends and wildlife art begins, but one of the unique things about wildlife photography on BC’s coast is that the subjects (be they bears in the Great Bear or Sea Otters on a *Marine Mammals* trip) will go about their everyday lives (exhibiting virtually all their normal behaviours) right in front of us. Because they will often allow us to spend long sessions “among” them, we commonly have the time to truly work with them almost like models (albeit ones that don’t take instruction well!) and this can mean we may have the chance to capture images of the bears and whales (and more!) that go beyond simply being pictures “of a” bear (or “of a” whale, etc.). This can mean anything from fantastic portraits through to wonderful animalscapes or capturing motion blurs of running bears (or those shaking water off their heads directly in front of us). One approach that works well for me is that when we first encounter a dramatic subject is to snap off a few quick documentary shots to “record the event” – and then stop and actively tell myself “OK – now it’s time to get down to real work and get something unique and different” and proceed a whole lot slower!

3. Filling Your Frame/Viewfinder? This issue – *just how large should the subject be within the frame?* – is one where there is no single



correct answer. However, over the years I have found that those situations where the subject is *just about* filling the frame leaves the photographer with very few compositional options (often they're struggling just to ensure all body parts are within the frame). On most of my photo tours you can capture fantastic animalscape shots (think landscape shot where the subject fills just a small portion of the frame) AND fantastic close-ups (such as full-frame portraits). But the most important thing can often be to make an *active decision* about the relative size of the subject in the frame and avoid ending up with thousands of "almost filling frame" shots (and little else) at the end of the trip. Those wishing to read more about the whole subject of "Subject Dominance" should check out this section of my website:

http://www.naturalart.ca/artist/techniques.html#anchor_justhowbig

4. Shooting Style – Machine Gunning vs. Selective Shooting. With the advent of very fast digital cameras and relatively low-priced high-capacity memory cards it has become very tempting to simply keep

your index finger pushing the shutter release and "capture everything." The philosophy and/or motivation behind this approach tends to be either "...well, at least some of those shots should be sharp" or "...I must have captured something interesting in that batch." My experience is that this approach produces, at best, a few relatively sharp shots of something that's usually not too visually interesting. There ARE times where "letting it rip" is a good strategy (often with action shots, such as when bears are sparring), but more often than not I feel that a more selective shooting style and waiting for the "decisive moment" is more likely to produce memorable images.

5. The Mantra – Simplify and Isolate. A painter starts with a blank canvas and adds just enough paint and visual interest to make (hopefully) their creation "work". As photographers, we face the opposite challenge – we normally face a scene where what's visually appealing is only a small subset of the total visual stimuli hitting our eye (or image sensor). To make an image work, we commonly have to simplify the scene (i.e., find a way to remove distracting visual elements) and/or isolate the subject from its surroundings.



It's a Family Affair – Coastal Gray Wolves. This wolf family was photographed during the 2023 "Summer in the Southern Great Bear Exploratory Adventure"

Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8S plus Z TC-2.0x (800mm). 1/400s @ f6.3. ISO 3600. 3D-tracking AF with SD = Animal

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There are many ways to do this, such as careful framing of the subject to remove distracting elements; using selective focus and/or a shallow depth of field; “zooming in” on only a small portion of the scene. Overall, though, the biggest single thing to remember is that our cameras always record MORE than we tend to see, and that we have to be continually reminding ourselves to “simplify & isolate” whenever we’re in the field shooting!

III. And Some Area-specific suggestions. And some final specific comments about our coming experience:

1. Our Behaviour and the Wildlife. For many of you this will be a very unique experience. It can be a little difficult to remain calm the first time you’re close to a large wild grizzly or Killer Whale or Sea Otter (perhaps a slight understatement?), but it’s always best to try to remain as calm as possible. The animals do pick up on our moods and temperaments – if we’re calm they will be calm (and, conversely, if we’re nervous and edgy, they tend to get a little edgy too). Of course, when we’re working close to our subjects you should always remain quiet and move only very slowly (even within the Zodiac®) - think “slow motion” and you’ll get an idea of how to move around them.

2. Shooting from the Zodiac®. Much of our photography will take place from within the Zodiac®. The approach here is simple: *be courteous to your fellow photographers*. Everyone’s images are of equal value. Our guide is very experienced in working with serious photographers and knows to move (slowly rotate) the Zodiac® so that everyone gets a good view (and shooting angles). It is also important to remember to keep still (don’t “rock the boat” – literally!) and quiet when you’re done shooting as others may still be shooting.

3. SUBJECT SIDE DOWN! This is the cardinal rule when shooting from the Zodiac®. We will commonly be in a situation where the bear(s) or other subject we’re working with will be on one of the sides of the Zodiac®. During these times, it is critical that the photographers on the side closest to the subject crouch and/or sit down as low as possible (while still being able to shoot) so that those behind (on the opposite side of the Zodiac®) can also see and shoot. Simple concept, but easy to forget in the excitement of the moment!





4. Wet Wildlife and Blown Highlights. One of the most common mistakes photographers make when first photographing wildlife on BC's coast is blowing out highlights (over-exposing) on critical regions of the subjects, especially when they are wet. Even under overcast skies, it's common that the portions of bears, sea lions or even whales that are facing skywards (their backs, and particularly the bridge of their snouts/noses) reflect a surprising amount of light. If we're close enough to capture portraits of our subjects, blowing out highlights on the bridge of the nose can completely ruin a photo!

5. Shutter Speeds - Freezing the Action. How fast a shutter speed you need to completely freeze subject movement and/or action varies with a number of factors, including how fast the subject is moving, how much of the frame the subject is filling, and the resolution of the camera you are using (all of which translate into, in real terms, "*how many pixels is the moving part of the subject going to cross per unit time?*"). Because of

this, there is no single shutter speed I can recommend to freeze all movement. However, here's a few rules of thumb: If you want to freeze movement of a walking bear or a cruising whale, you need a shutter speed of 1/250s or faster (and the faster the better). For faster moving land mammals (trotting or running), you'll want to use a shutter speed of 1/500s or faster if your goal is to freeze the action. If we're lucky enough to see and photograph sparring bears or a breaching whale, you'll need a shutter speed in the range of 1/1000s (or faster) to freeze the action.

In closing – good luck in preparing for your photography adventure on the BC coast! Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the tour that aren't answered in this photography guide.

Cheers...

Brad

The New Kid on the Block! I photographed this all-white Black Bear (or Spirit Bear) on an island in the Great Bear Rainforest that – for reasons that are not fully understood – has an atypically high proportion of Spirit Bears. 2023 was the first year in which this particular bear made its presence known on the island.



Diving Deep! When you have GREAT backdrops you don't have to fill the frame with your subject to create compelling photos!



A Romp of River Otters. This particular group is a family consisting of a bold mom and 3 rather curious pups. Photographed in the Great Bear Rainforest



The Spin Cycle! This Spirit Bear loved eating salmon eggs it repeatedly scooped out of a shallow pond, giving me loads of chances to capture the "just right" head-shaking shot!



Unnamed Falls. Go off the beaten path in the Great Bear and you can find stunning scenes that few have ever witnessed.



Scanning the Shoreline. Although secretive and not too commonly seen, the coastal Gray Wolves found along the BC Coast have a major positive impact on the ecosystem. This wolf – along with 4 of its family members – was photographed during the 2023 *"Summer in the Southern Great Bear Exploratory Adventure"*.

