

Into the Great Bear Rainforest

Exploratory Photo Adventure 2024



The *Into the Great Bear Rainforest Exploratory Photo Adventure 2024* offers 9 days of exploring and photographing one of the last great wildernesses on earth – the incomparable Great Bear Rainforest. This trip is about both exploration AND about photography – and having a great time! We’ll travel by boat, Zodiac®, and by foot into the heart of the Great Bear, always keeping an eye out for great photo ops of our “targeted” species, including Grizzly Bears, Black Bears, the rare white Spirit Bear, coastal Gray Wolves, Humpback Whales, landscapes, and more. And, we’ll do it all from our very comfortable and spacious mobile base camp – a 60-foot Gulf Commander power boat – the *Afterglow*.

The Region – And Our Expedition At a Glance

The portion of the British Columbia mainland coast that stretches from Rivers Inlet in the south to the Skeena River in the north is often referred to as “The Great Bear Rainforest”. At over 64,000 square kilometers (25,000 sq. mi.) it is the largest tract of temperate coastal rainforest left on planet Earth. Here the coastal mountains meet the Pacific Ocean – the area is cut by hundreds of steep-sided inlets/fjords and there are countless islands. The more inland portions of the Great Bear Rainforest (AKA the “*Inner Great Bear*”) are characterized by thick forests cut by steep-sided inlets – here forest literally meets salt water! Another characteristic feature is the presence of wide, fertile estuaries where inland rivers and streams drain into the inlets and fjords. These estuaries are wildlife viewing and wildlife photography hotspots!



Photo-bombed by a Humpback! The Great Bear Rainforest is a very target-rich environment – pure nirvana to a wildlife photographer!

Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8S. 1/1000s @ f8; ISO 720

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Inspecting the Intertidal Zone @ Low Tide! Coastal Gray Wolves are quite common in the Great Bear Rainforest. However, a century of heavy persecution has left them very wary and shy, making them a very challenging subject to photograph!



Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8S with 2x TC (800mm). 1/200s @ f6.3; ISO 5600

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The portions of the Great Bear Rainforest more directly facing the Pacific Ocean (AKA the “*Outer Great Bear*”) are more wind- and “sea-swept” and include many islands and islets with more stunted tree growth and are generally more open than the forest of the Inner Great Bear. Many portions of the shoreline even have long, sandy beaches!

Both faces of the Great Bear – *the Inner and Outer* – are true wilderness and stunningly beautiful! They are rarely visited by humans. And both faces share many fascinating wildlife species, including Grizzly Bears, Black (and Spirit) Bears, coastal Gray Wolves, Wolverines, American Martens, Bald Eagles, Humpback Whales, Killer Whales, and Harbour Seals.

The Outer Great Bear adds even more species to this strong list – here Steller Sea Lions, Sea Otters, additional whale species (such as Fin Whales), and many species of waterfowl and seabirds are more commonly seen, adding even more faunal diversity to our adventure! Because we’ve added

and extra day and night to the 2024 version of this trip we’ll have more route options available to us and a greater ability to visit hotspots in both the *Inner and Outer Great Bear!*

About The Spirit Bear. The almost mythical Spirit Bear is a rare, white-phased form of the American Black Bear. The subspecies of Black Bear found within the Great Bear Rainforest is *Ursus americanus kermodei* – the Kermode Bear. All the black bears in the Great Bear Rainforest (of any coat colour) are Kermode Bears. But not all Kermodes are white – only the rare Spirit Bear possesses the “signature” white coat.

Spirit Bears are not albinos. The white coat colour is caused by a recessive gene and only those bears with two copies of the gene (one inherited from the mother and one inherited from the father) have white coats. Bears that possess one copy of the recessive white coat gene and one copy of the gene for a “normal” coat have typical black coats and are carriers of the trait.

The white coat colour of Spirit Bears can theoretically be found in Black Bears anywhere, but they are exceptionally rare in all parts of the Black Bears' range. The one exception is on a small portion of the British Columbia coast where, for reasons that are only poorly understood, between 10 and 20 percent of the bears are white!

A Tour of Exploration! The *Into the Great Bear Rainforest Exploratory Photo Tour 2024* is a true tour of photographic exploration. We'll explore the inlets, bays and old-growth forest of the spectacular mid-coast of British Columbia. We'll walk trails and beaches, explore creeks, and search for the unique mix of subject matter that only the Great Bear Rainforest can provide! The photographic opportunities on this tour are always absolutely amazing. Due to potentially extreme weather conditions and rough terrain, and to increase our chances of seeing a Spirit Bear, we may utilize native-built viewing platforms in certain situations.

This is a multi-faceted trip, focusing not only on the bears, but on *all* the inhabitants of the Great Bear Rainforest – and the entire ecosystem in which they thrive. While the bears are an integral part of this trip, we will be approaching this trip *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! *If your sole goal is to photograph bears (to the exclusion of other subject matter you will be presented with), this may not be the trip for you.*

About the Photography "Style" On This Photo Tour. On this trip – as on our other photo tours – this is a *"photography in true wilderness"* experience. This means we will spend the bulk of our time in isolated and remote wilderness and away from other humans (and other photographers). We'll 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 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 true*

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
© Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca

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 may put more onus on the photographer to make snap technical and creative decisions in a field setting. This means it may challenge – and encourage you to expand – your photographic skills more than other photo tours do!

Our Wildlife Subject Matter: While this is a *photography-in-true-wilderness* trip, we are definitely headed into a target-rich environment! Here’s a quick run down of both our “*most likely*” wildlife subjects and our “*less likely but possible*” wildlife subjects:

A. Most Likely Subjects (50% or greater probability of encounter):

- Black Bears
- Harbour Seals
- Bald Eagles
- Surf Scoters
- River Otters
- Asst’d songbirds
- Grizzly Bears
- Humpback Whales
- Herring Gulls
- Harlequin Ducks
- American Mink
- Asst’d seabirds
- Spirit Bears
- Steller Sea Lions
- Dall’s Porpoises
- Common Loons
- Great Blue Herons
- Asst’d shorebirds

B. Less Likely But Possible Subjects (<50% probability of encounter):

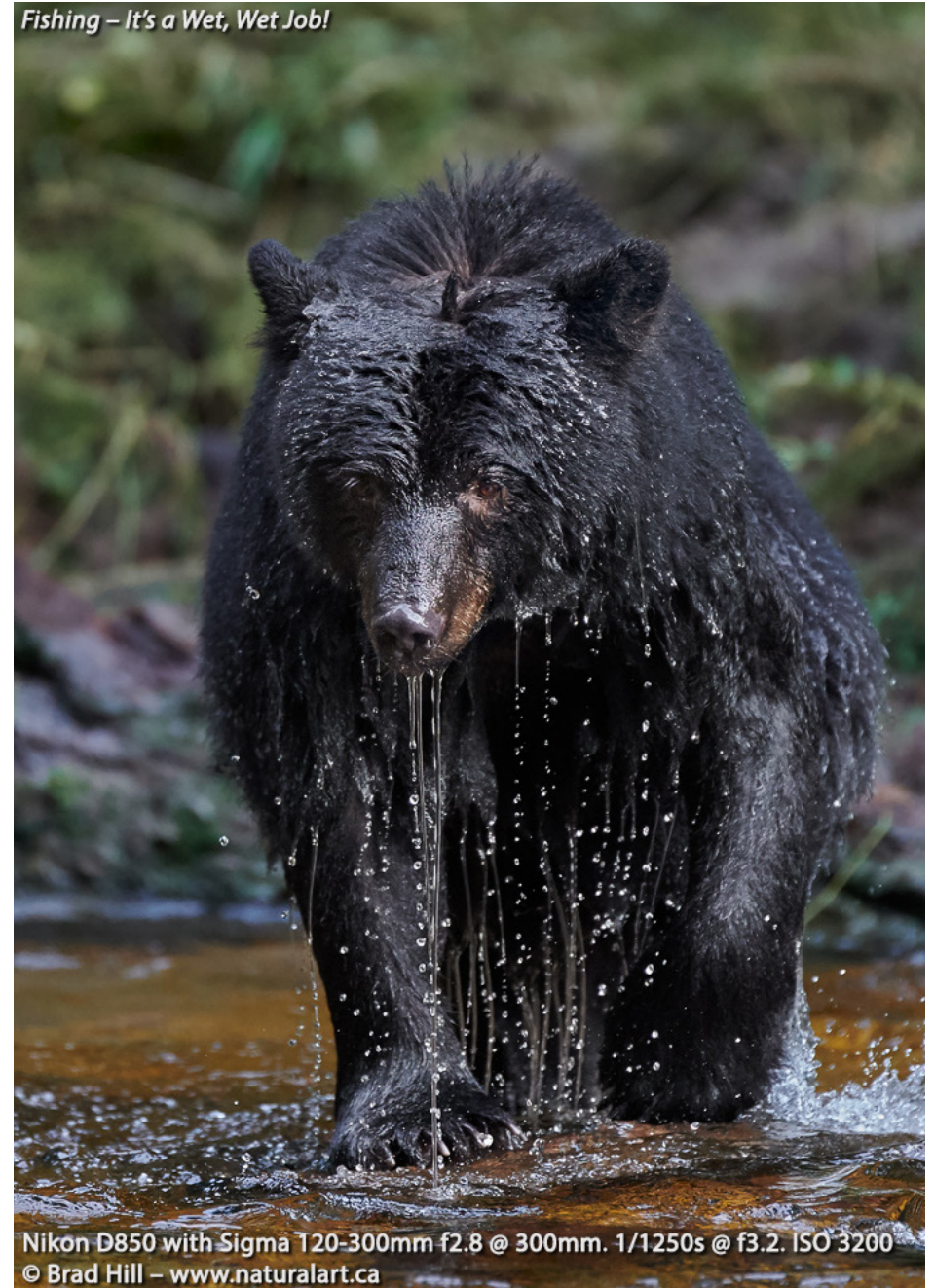
- Killer Whales
- Minke Whales
- Elephant Seals
- Sandhill Cranes
- Coastal Gray Wolves
- Fin Whales
- Wolverine
- Pacific White-sided Dolphins
- Sea Otters
- American Marten
- Marbled Murrelets

2024 Trip Start and End Points: The photo tour begins in Prince Rupert, BC. It ends in Terrace, BC.

2024 Date: September 18-27, 2024, including arrival and departure days. Aboard the *Afterglow* from September 19-27, 2024.

2024 Price: \$10,599 CAD plus 5% GST.

Fishing – It’s a Wet, Wet Job!



Nikon D850 with Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 @ 300mm. 1/1250s @ f3.2. ISO 3200
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What's Included?

- All meals and accommodation in Prince Rupert, BC beginning on the evening of Day 1 (see Itinerary)
- All food and accommodation while aboard the *Afterglow*
- A highly-experienced bear guide and professional photography guide
- A great cook and crew
- Use of Zodiac® and all associated safety gear (life jackets, etc.)

What's Not Included?

- Transportation between your home and Prince Rupert, BC at the beginning of the trip and from Terrace, BC to your home at the end of the trip
- Personal belongings and equipment
- Any meals and accommodation in Prince Rupert prior to Day 1
- Any extra personal expenses incurred because of weather, logistical delays, or missed flights



What To Expect?

- Cool weather (daytime highs of about 12-17° C or 54-63° F); rain showers, with the possibility of heavy rain
- Mostly calm seas, but with some short-duration bouts of rolling water
- Hearty, healthy and delicious food
- Always warm, always dry floating basecamp!
- A truly unique and once-in-a-lifetime experience!

Photo Tour Leader: Brad Hill

Accommodation: While in Prince Rupert you will be staying at the Highliner Hotel and Conference Centre. This hotel is conveniently located in downtown Prince Rupert and right around the corner from where the airport shuttle drops you off.

While in the Great Bear Rainforest we will be staying on the *Afterglow* boat, a 60-foot Gulf Commander power boat. Please be aware that it is likely you will be asked to share a berth on the *Afterglow*.



A Sea Lion's Worst Nightmare! Although Killer Whales can be found throughout all the inlets and channels of the Great Bear Rainforest, they are more common on the outer islands closer to the open Pacific. During the 2023 edition of the *"Into the Great Bear Rainforest"* photo tour we were lucky enough to witness and photograph a pond of Transient Killer Whales attacking sea lions at a haul-out rock. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca

Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor 120-300mm f2.8E @ 240mm. 1/2500s @ f5. ISO 1250



Fueling the Great Bear. The annual late summer and autumn spawning runs of 5 species of salmon provides the energy and nutrients that drives the entire ecosystem we know as the Great Bear Rainforest.

Nikon D600 with 24-70mm f2.8 @ 35mm. 1.0s @ f16. ISO 200

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Sample Itinerary

The itinerary of the *Into the Great Bear Rainforest Exploratory Photo Adventure* is designed for flexibility. This allows us to react to the ever-changing distribution and abundance of wildlife and fluctuating weather conditions. Here's *one example* of how our time together may look!

Note that we have several route options available to us and the actual route we'll follow will be determined by weather conditions, any recent information on wildlife distribution and abundance, and a desire to minimize travel time (and maximize time in the field). The *intended* route we have chosen provides us with opportunities to explore both faces of the Great Bear – *the Inner* and the *Outer Great Bear*. Please keep in mind this is only *a sample itinerary* and how we actually spend our days may differ.

Day 1 – September 18, 2024

Arrive in Prince Rupert. Make your way to the Highliner Hotel & Conference Centre to check in and stow your gear. Official check-in time is 3 PM, but if your room is ready before that they will let you check in earlier. You can stow your luggage with them while waiting to check-in. If you arrive early in the day feel free to sightsee or check the town out. Plan on assembling in the lobby of the Highliner at 6:30 PM for an informal “meet & greet”. Shortly following you'll head out for dinner together.

Day 2 – September 19, 2024

Early breakfast, followed by transport to the *Afterglow* by water taxi. Once we board the boat we'll meet the crew and guides of the *Afterglow*, allocate cabins, have a brief orientation, and then we'll begin our journey into the Great Bear Rainforest. Our intended route will immediately take us into the “*Inner Great Bear*” where photographic opportunities can abound! The narrow channels we'll travel through are home to Humpback and Killer Whales, Elephant Seals and countless seabirds. End of day should see us stopping in a secluded anchorage where we'll be able to watch for wildlife from the deck of the *Afterglow*.

Days 3 through 9 – September 20-26, 2024

Expect each day to be full and very different from the previous one! We'll mix marine mammal viewing from the *Afterglow* and from the Zodiac® with visiting coastal streams and estuaries in search of carnivores that will visit them to feed on salmon. While we'll opportunistically work with any subject matter we find, we will place emphasis on finding Grizzly and Black Bears (including Spirit Bears), Humpback and Killer Whales, Steller Sea Lions, and Bald Eagles. The subject matter we may "opportunistically" work with (as we encounter them) could include Harbour Seals, Fin Whales, Dall's Porpoises, coastal Gray Wolves, Great Blue Herons, Sea Otters, Northern River Otters and more. Plus, of course, great sea- and landscapes!

During these days we will spend time shooting from the *Afterglow*, the Zodiac®, and land-based locations we will be hiking to. And *we'll be constantly adjusting our schedule* –and possibly our route – based on weather conditions, tides, and the ever-changing distribution of our "prey". Remember – *whales have tails, bears have feet, and eagles have wings – and they can all MOVE! ;-)*

Day 9 – September 27, 2024

Breakfast on the *Afterglow* near Kitimat, BC. Shortly thereafter our time together in the fabulous Great Bear Rainforest will draw to an end, but you'll be left with many fabulous memories and photographs!

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”.

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*

First Warning. Grizzly Bears are found in many of the inlets and estuaries of the Great Bear Rainforest. Here mom is clearly communicating that she's aware of our presence and that there's no need to get any closer to her cub.

Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8S @ 560mm (TC engaged). 1/1000s @ f5; ISO 3200. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca



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 ethical rules during this photo tour.

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

For more information about this amazing trip contact Brad Hill at:

seminars@naturalart.ca



The Humpback Ballet. Humpback Whale numbers have been on the rise in recent years in the channels and inlets of the Great Bear Rainforest. The whales are commonly seen during my photo tours – but capturing a breach shot is a special and rare treat!

Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor 120-300mm f2.8E @ 300mm. 1/2500s @ f3.2. ISO 640. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca



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

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



Black-on-Black – Emerging from Shadows.



Up and Over the Falls! One of our main goals of our *Exploratory Photo Adventures* in the Great Bear Rainforest is to find Spirit Bears in new locations and settings...with the goal of producing unique images and memories. In 2019 we were successful and found Spirit Bears in two new locations!



Autumn Sunrise in the Great Bear. While most photographers travel to the Great Bear Rainforest to see and photograph the wildlife, the scenery and the landscape photography can be spectacular.



The "Outer" Great Bear – Big Beaches, Big Skies. The open spaces of the outer coast (and "Outer" Great Bear) is in almost stark contrast to the "tighter" and darker "Inner" Great Bear Rainforest. By including both faces of the Great Bear we increase the diversity of wildlife we can encounter and the types of landscapes and seascapes to see and photograph.

