

# Autumn in the Queen Charlotte Strait

## Exploratory Photo Adventure 2023



**T**he Autumn in the Queen Charlotte Strait Exploratory Photo Adventure 2023 features 7 days of wildlife photography and adventure in an absolutely stunning environment. You will be provided with the opportunity, logistic support, and assistance needed to photograph some of the most dramatic marine mammals the Pacific Ocean can provide, including Humpback Whales, Orcas (Killer Whales), Steller Sea Lions, Sea Otters and Harbour Seals. On previous trips in this region we have also encountered and photographed Pacific White-sided Dolphins, both Dall's and Harbour Porpoises, Gray Whales, Minke Whales, Northern Fur Seals, plus a plethora of resident and migratory bird species. And, of course, this photo adventure offers absolutely fantastic scenery – both as a backdrop and as stunning subject

matter itself. You'll do all this while traveling through and around the northern tip of Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Strait, BC region aboard a comfortable and spacious 70-foot schooner, the *Passing Cloud*.

**The Region – And Our Expedition – At A Glance.** The northern tip of Vancouver Island is incredibly rich in wildlife. During the summer months it is home to a wide variety of marine mammals as the Pacific Ocean delivers nutrients to the numerous channels and inlets of the region. Orcas, dolphins, porpoises and sea lions assemble to feed on the Pacific salmon that are returning to their natal rivers. Humpback Whales and coastal seabirds feed on the nutrients stirred up by the strong tidal currents.



**The Blow – Killer Whale on Calm Seas.** The Queen Charlotte Strait region is home to two distinct populations of Killer Whales – fish-eating Northern Residents Killer Whales and mammal-eating Transients (or Biggs) Killer Whales

*While common on all sides of Vancouver Island, Harbour Seals are exceptional photographic subjects!*



Nikon D500 with Nikkor 500mm f5.6E PF lens. 1/800s @ f5.6; ISO 900

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**This is a Tour of Exploration!** The *Autumn in the Queen Charlotte Strait Exploratory Photo Adventure 2023* is a true tour of photographic exploration. We'll explore the islands, islets, channels and inlets of the northern tip of Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Strait area, all while searching for the unique mix of subject matter that only this area can provide – Humpback Whales, Killer Whales, Steller Sea Lions, Sea Otters, many bird species, landscapes, and more.

This is a multi-faceted trip, focusing not only on whales, but on *all* the inhabitants of the rich waters of the northern Vancouver Island region – and the entire marine ecosystem in which they thrive. While the various whale species 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 wildlife and birds, intertidal scenes, landscapes, seascapes, and more (see the final page of this document for a regional map of the area this photo tour will explore).

**About the Photography “Style” On This Photo Tour.** On this trip – as on my 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 largely 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 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 very 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):

- Killer Whales
- Humpback Whales
- Steller Sea Lions
- Sea Otters
- Harbour Seals
- Bald Eagles
- Gray Whales
- Rhinoceros Auklets
- Herring Gulls
- Common Loons
- Harlequin Ducks
- American Mink
- Dall’s Porpoises
- Asst’d seabirds
- Asst’d shorebirds

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

- Minke Whales
- River Otters
- Harbour Porpoises
- Black Bears
- Coastal Gray Wolves
- Elephant Seals
- Fur Seals
- Pacific White-sided Dolphins

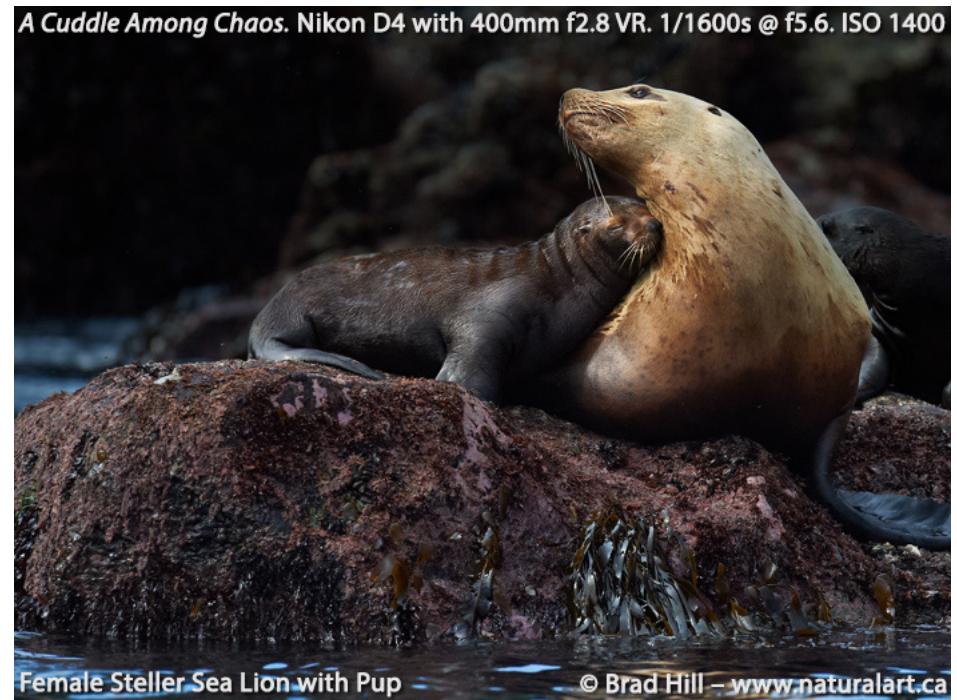
**2023 Trip Start and End Points:** The photo tour starts and ends in Port McNeill, BC.

**2023 Dates:** October 12-19, 2023, including arrival and departure days. October 13-19 aboard the *Passing Cloud*.

**2023 Price:** \$5,799 CAD plus 5% GST.

**What's Included?**

- All meals and accommodation in Port McNeill beginning on the evening of Day 1 (see Itinerary)
- All food and accommodation while aboard the *Passing Cloud*
- A highly-experienced skipper and aquatic-mammals guide and a professional photography guide
- A great chef and crew
- Use of Zodiac® and all associated safety gear (life jackets, etc.)
- Jaw-dropping scenery, great marine mammals, and amazing photo ops!



Female Steller Sea Lion with Pup

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**What's NOT Included?**

- Your transportation and accommodation expenses associated with getting to the tour's start point (Port McNeill, BC)
- Gratuities for skipper and crew of the *Passing Cloud* (not mandatory but always appreciated!)
- Personal belongings and equipment you bring on this tour
- Any extra personal expenses incurred because of weather, logistical delays, or missed flights.



*I'm Currently Tied Up!* This male Sea Otter has wrapped itself in kelp to help anchor it in place while it rests. Sea Otters have recently re-colonized the region after a nearly century-long absence.

Nikon D5 with Nikkor 400mm f2.8E plus TC=20EIII (2x) teleconverter. 1/1250s @ f10. ISO 1250. © Brad Hill – [www.naturalart.ca](http://www.naturalart.ca)

## What To Expect?

- Cool and pleasant temperatures averaging about 15°C (with daytime highs of up to about 18°C); rain showers are likely but often short-lived (and sunny skies are NOT uncommon at this time of year)
- Calm to moderately rolling seas – those susceptible to seasickness should bring appropriate medications/remedies
- Unsurpassed aquatic mammal photography opportunities (and excellent landscape photography opportunities as well)
- Hearty, healthy and delicious food
- Always warm, always dry floating basecamp!

**Photo Tour Leader:** Brad Hill

**Accommodation:** While in Port McNeill we'll be staying at the Black Bear Resort. Unless otherwise requested, you will have single occupancy accommodation (i.e., a room for yourself) in Port McNeill.



This trip is being offered in association with *Outer Shores Expeditions*. While on the water we will be staying on their beautiful *Passing Cloud* sailboat, a classic 70-foot wooden schooner.

Please be aware that it is likely you will be asked to share a berth on the *Passing Cloud*. This will be dependent on the make-up of the group (e.g., the number of couples attending, gender mix of the participants, etc.).

## The Headline Acts...

While it is impossible to absolutely guarantee finding any naturally-occurring non-captive species of wildlife during a one-week trip (whales have tails, seals have flippers, and they can all move!), based on past experience it is *almost* inconceivable that we will not have success in finding five species of marine mammals: Humpback Whales, Orcas (Killer Whales), Steller Sea Lions, Sea Otters, and Harbour Seals. Of these we will consider Humpbacks, Orcas, Sea Lions and Sea Otters of equal rank in determining how we allocate our efforts. Because our ability to find and focus on any one of these species can be impacted by such things as prey abundance and/or weather conditions (which can change quickly and unpredictably) we will choose our target species each day based on highest probability of yielding quality photo ops. So, one day it may be Humpbacks and another day it may be Sea Lions. And, of course, there is a strong supporting cast of characters (notably Gray Whales and Pacific White-sided Dolphins) that we will "pursue" as opportunities present themselves.

**Humpback Whales:** Once hunted almost to extinction, Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) are now strongly rebounding in numbers. In recent years their population size along the BC coast has skyrocketed. Humpbacks grow up to 14m (46 feet) in length and weigh up to 40 tonnes (88,160 lb or 44 tons). Despite their large size, Humpbacks are filter-feeders that prey on tiny, minnow-sized fish and krill. The confluence of several tidal currents plus nutrient upwelling (caused by the currents and changes in ocean bottom depth) means that the waters

Diving in Paradise. Humpback fluking in the Queen Charlotte Strait

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Nikon D500 with Nikkor 70-200mm f2.8E @ 90mm, 1/1250s @ f6.3, ISO 400

surrounding the northern tip of Vancouver Island are rich in Humpback food – and hence are rich in Humpbacks!

From a photographic perspective, Humpbacks are absolutely extraordinary subjects. They are active and often amazingly acrobatic – they will leap completely clear of the water (a behaviour known as “breaching”). The exact function of breaching is poorly understood – some argue it is done by Humpbacks to rid themselves of external parasites. Others believe it serves a communicative function (either to other Humpbacks or as a warning to boats). But regardless of its function – breaching can make for spectacular photos!

Humpbacks commonly feed on the surface using dramatic lunges. And, they will – either alone or in a group – feed using a fascinating behaviour known as bubble-netting. When doing this one or more whales swim

under a school of herring or other small fish and swim in a circle while exhaling bubbles out of their blowholes. As the bubbles rise they form a net which trap the fish. The whales then swim upward through the fish with their mouth agape, trapping them in their massive, pleated lower jaw and throat. Finally the whales strain the water through their fine baleen plates, which allows water to pass through but traps the fish.

To learn more about Humpback Whales, check out:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humpback\\_Whale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humpback_Whale)

***The Orcas of Queen Charlotte Strait.*** The waters of the Queen Charlotte Strait are considered the best place in the world to observe and photograph the Orca (*Orcinus orca*). In the early years Orcas were thought to be merciless killers and were hunted. Since the 1970's scientific research

and intensive study has shown the Orca to be a highly intelligent animal capable of complex vocal communication and advanced social behaviours.

Within Queen Charlotte Strait and the waters surrounding northern Vancouver Island there are two distinct populations of Orcas – residents and transients. The resident Orcas primarily eat fish and, at times, squid. They are very vocal and tend to visit the same areas consistently (hence the name “resident”). Transient Killer Whales range over much greater distances and primarily eat marine mammals such as Harbour Seals and Steller Sea Lions. Compared to residents, transients are more “stealthy” and vocalize less.

With their large dorsal fins, striking black and white coloration, and their propensity to travel in groups (pods), Orcas make great photographic subjects. Behaviours we may observe (and photograph) include hunting, breaching, spy-hopping (where an Orca will raise its head out of the water and remain motionless while it surveys the scene) and more. The mountainous topography of the surrounding islands and mainland BC

that's unique to this region provides us with stunning natural backdrops to work with. There's simply no better place to photograph Orcas!

For more information about Orcas, visit:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orca>

**Steller Sea Lions.** While endangered and declining in the most northern part of its range, the highly social Steller Sea Lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*) is experiencing a strong rebound in numbers in the waters of British Columbia, and especially in the waters surrounding northern Vancouver Island. Steller Sea Lions are the largest of the “eared” seals (seals with visible outer ear flaps). Males can be up to 3.5 meters (11 feet) in length and weigh up to 1,120 kg (2,500 lb).

Steller Sea Lions are most commonly found aggregated on small, isolated and exposed islands and rocks known as haul-outs. Breeding colonies (also known as rookeries) are located in similar isolated (and generally hard-to-access) locations.

I consider Steller Sea Lions one of the most under-rated (and historically ignored) photographic subjects available in North America. In fact, they have quickly become one of my favourite subjects. There are a number of reasons for this. First, because they are normally found in “tight” social groups, there are continuous – and often highly dramatic – social interactions between them. These include territorial disputes for limited space on intertidal rocks, a huge range of diverse interactions between females and their pups, and more. Sea lions have a polygamous (harem-based) breeding system where dominant males control valuable “turf” (normally the tops of rocks) where large numbers of females will visit to breed with the males. Not surprisingly, male Sea Lions will compete very aggressively to gain control of the “best” rocks, including fighting for them.

Second, the rocks where sea lions aggregate are often exposed and awash in breaking surf. This can lead to striking, dramatic scenes of sea lions enduring conditions which seem almost unimaginable as a “home” to humans!



*The Welcoming Committee.* Nikon D800 with 400mm f2.8 VR. 1/1000s @ f8. ISO 400

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**Curious sub-adult Steller Sea Lions checking out the photographers!**

Learn more about the Steller Sea Lion here:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steller\\_Sea\\_Lion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steller_Sea_Lion)

Please note that because of the isolated and exposed nature of the haul-out rocks and rookeries inhabited by sea lions, our access to them is limited to relatively calm conditions. Thus on any single trip we may not be able to visit all potential sites to photograph Sea Lions.

**Sea Otters.** By early in the 20th century Sea Otters (*Enhydra lutris*) had been completely extirpated through over-hunting on the entire BC coast. In 1969 and 1970 a small number of Sea Otters were reintroduced to a few locations on the west coast of Vancouver Island. The reintroduction was successful and the otters have now spread over the northern tip of Vancouver Island. Sea Otters are unique in being the only fully aquatic mammal which has no fatty layer of blubber to insulate itself. Instead,

they rely upon an amazingly dense and luxuriant coat to provide warmth from the cold waters they inhabit. In fact, with up to 150,000 strands of hair per sq. cm (almost 1,000,000 strands per sq. inch), they possess the densest fur of any animal. This dense fur – and man's desire for it – is what led to the demise of the Sea Otter. The Sea Otter's unique method of insulating itself has lead to at least one more hazard to its health – if the otter's fur becomes fouled by oil (such as after an oil spill from a tanker) it quickly loses its insulating properties and the otter dies of hypothermia.

It's challenging to think of a wildlife subject with a higher "cute factor" than a Sea Otter, especially when you encounter a female with a kit. Sea Otters feed almost exclusively on shellfish, and it is not uncommon to encounter them floating on their backs with a sea urchin or two resting on a makeshift table formed by their chest and belly.

**A Massive Meal!** Sea Otters have an extremely high metabolic rate...and appetite, consuming up to 33% of their body weight per day! This Sea Otter has dug up a hard-to-catch Geoduck and is enjoying the fruits of his labours! Orange reflections courtesy of British Columbia's wildfires and smoky skies of 2018!



Nikon D5 with 180-400mm f4 @ 560mm. 1/1250s @ f6.3. ISO 1600.

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We will opportunistically photograph Sea Otters as we encounter them. They do tend to be quite wary, so successful photography of them often requires the use of super-telephoto lenses (such as 500 or 600mm lenses).

Learn more about Sea Otters here:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea\\_Otter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_Otter)

## The Supporting Cast...

The supporting cast of characters we can reasonably expect to encounter on this trip is strong and deep! In past years some of them have come close to stealing the show! Here's a little more about some of the other species we may encounter on this trip.

**Pacific White-sided Dolphins.** Nicknamed the “Lag”, Pacific White-sided Dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*) are known for their extreme exuberance and energy. They’re one of the liveliest dolphins found in the Pacific and they commonly leap clear of the water, perform flips and somersaults, and will also often approach and ride the bow waves of ships. White-sides are commonly found in groups of 30 or so, but on occasion they will form super-pods consisting of up to 1,000 or more individuals. Within the Queen Charlotte Strait region we have seen super-pods of more than 200 Lags on many occasions.

Besides the obvious photographic appeal presented by their leaping and frolicking, Pacific White-sided Dolphins’ interactions with other species can present unforgettable photographic opportunities. When they encounter schools of salmon they will quite literally pursue them right out of the water! And, we have observed strong interactions (probably more



Pacific White-sided Dolphins competing for a meal of salmon

accurately described as “mobbing”) between pods of dolphins and sea lions, Humpbacks, and even Orcas.

For more info about the Pacific White-sided Dolphin, go here:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific\\_white-sided\\_dolphin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_white-sided_dolphin)

**Coastal Gray Wolves.** Gray Wolves (*Canis lupus*) are common on Vancouver Island and on many of the surrounding small islands. Like wolves found in the interior of BC, coastal Gray Wolves are social animals that live in family groups called packs. Coastal Gray Wolves tend to be about 20% smaller than their inland counterparts and often have more red or rusty colours in their coat. And, like so many other coastal species, they key in on salmon during their annual spawns and have been seen fishing in streams.

Because of ongoing persecution coastal Gray Wolves tend to be extremely shy and are seldom seen. But over the years we have both seen and heard wolves on this trip – and it’s always a special treat!

## Sample Itinerary

**NOTE:** The itinerary of this tour 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 will likely look! This is only a *sample* itinerary and how we actually spend our days may differ from this proposed route and schedule.

### Day 1 - October 12, 2023.

Participants must arrive in Port McNeill, BC. Overnight in Port McNeill at the Black Bear Resort. A group dinner at approximately 6:30 PM will be our first official activity.

### Day 2 - October 13, 2023.

We depart from Port McNeill! We'll board the *Passing Cloud* at about 9:00 AM and, following an orientation and delicious snack, we'll head towards Johnstone Strait and the Robson Bight Ecological Reserve. This area is regarded as one of the best places in the world to observe Killer Whales and many species of Marine Mammals in their natural habitat.



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On Sunrises & Seabirds. Nikon D4s with AF-S 80-400mm f4.5-5.6 VR @ 230mm. 1/2000s @ f71. ISO 720



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## Days 3 to 6 – October 15-18, 2023.

We'll spend our days seeking and photographing Marine Mammals throughout the Queen Charlotte strait, including up to the northern tip of Vancouver Island. Our exact route and daily itinerary will be determined by weather, the distribution and abundance of our target species, and the wishes of our group.

During the evenings we will anchor among the numerous islands and bays of the Queen Charlotte Strait. Here we may see a Black Bear foraging through the rich intertidal or Great Blue Herons fishing atop the abundant kelp beds.

## Day 7 – October 19, 2023.

After a leisurely breakfast we'll head to the trip end point in Port McNeill. There our journey together will end in and you'll depart with memories and photographs of a spectacular area abundant with the wonders of nature.

## My Ethical Stance – **Wildlife FIRST!**

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

1. Ethical wildlife photographers should engage in *passive* wildlife photography only. This means striving to capture images of wildlife behaving as naturally as possible and without the photographer taking any actions to guide the subject(s) toward desirable settings and/or backdrops or elicit specific “poses”.
2. Ethical wildlife photographers should do nothing *intentional* to alter or influence the behaviour of their subjects for the purpose of photography. This includes not intentionally influencing their distribution

*Dancing in Dawn's First Light.* Opportunities to photograph birds (and birds in flight) in great light abound on this photo tour.



Scram – This Rock is Mine! Steller Sea Lions competing for a haul-out rock



Nikon D4 with 400mm f2.8G VR. 1/1600s @ f5.6. ISO 200

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in space or their behaviour. This translates into not engaging in any form of luring or baiting (or any other form of food supplementation). Additionally, it extends to not using any sound to alter the behaviour of the subject for the purpose of photography, including using predator and/or prey calls, song or vocalization playbacks, vocal clicking, or making any other sound to cause the subject to alter its ongoing behaviour and look at the photographer.

3. While conforming to and working within any legal guidelines determining minimum allowable approach distances, ethical wildlife photographers should allow the wildlife subject – regardless of the species – to determine the subject-to-photographer distance it is comfortable with. This principle serves to reduce stress on the sub-

ject and also allows the capture of photographs of the subject behaving in a more natural, and often more interesting, fashion.

4. Ethical wildlife photographers always consider both their *individual and the overall collective effects* photographic activities can have on the subject(s). This includes being aware of *your total time spent with the wildlife subject(s)* and, whenever possible, *the total time spent with the subject by all photographers utilizing the subject*. In practice this means the photographer may have to withdraw from the subject and cease photographic efforts of it, especially if there is any indication that his or her presence is impacting on the subject's behavioural routine (including activities such as feeding, resting and/or sleeping,

Solitude. Nikon D3s with 600mm f4 VR. 1/1250s @ f5.6. ISO 720

Solitary Orca in Blackfish Sound



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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).

All photographers participating in my photo tours are expected to conform to these ethical rules.

All images in this trip compendium and the Natural Art Images website

([www.naturalart.ca](http://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](mailto:seminars@naturalart.ca)

Orcas with mainland BC in the distant background



Nikon D700 with 400mm f2.8 VR. 1/1600s @ f5. ISO 200

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*Resting in Peace.* A male Sea Otter strikes an iconic pose while resting. Sea Otters have recently re-colonized the region after a nearly century-long absence

Nikon D4 with Nikkor 80-400mm f4.5-5.6 VR @ 400mm. 1/800s @ f7.1. ISO 320

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Landscape Photography Nirvana! The many islands and islets – and dramatic skies – often lead to great land- and seascape photographic opportunities on this trip!





# Region of the Autumn in the Queen Charlotte Strait Photo Tour

