



# EVERYMAN'S ALASKA

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSH MILLER

**H**ave you ever wanted to photograph Alaska, but didn't have the time or money to make it happen? Have you ever wanted a chance to photograph glaciers, wildlife and meadows in the same day? If so, Glacier National Park in Montana may need to be your next photo adventure. Glacier offers photographers the opportunity to photograph big game and dramatic landscapes without the need for an expensive multi-week trip to Alaska. The park's unique mix of alpine topography, wildlife and great hiking is as close to a true Alaskan experience as a photog-

## Exploring the alpine meadows and dramatic vistas of Montana's Glacier National Park

rapher can have in the lower 48 states. Like many of the larger national parks, Glacier offers a lifetime supply of scenes and subjects. Many photographers find that the park is actually easier and more productive to photograph than Alaska because of its greater road access and comparatively predictable weather. While non-photographers

may grumble at the thought of stormy sunrises and afternoon thunderstorms, photographers know that "bad" weather is the key ingredient to great nature photography. Unlike Alaska, where it's common to get days or even weeks of nothing but rain, the summer storms in Glacier are generally short and almost always provide amazing light.

### Best Times

All seasons in Glacier offer something different, but, by far, the most popular time to visit the park is late summer. The exact timing is difficult because it depends on the remaining

winter snowpack, but usually the middle of July to early August is ideal. The key is to time your visit shortly after the Going-to-the-Sun Road opens for the season. Driving this 50-mile steep and winding road can be an adventure in its own right and offers photographers easy access into the heart of the park (while scaring some passengers half to death). In fact, many park visitors say this road is the most spectacular road they have ever driven in their lives.

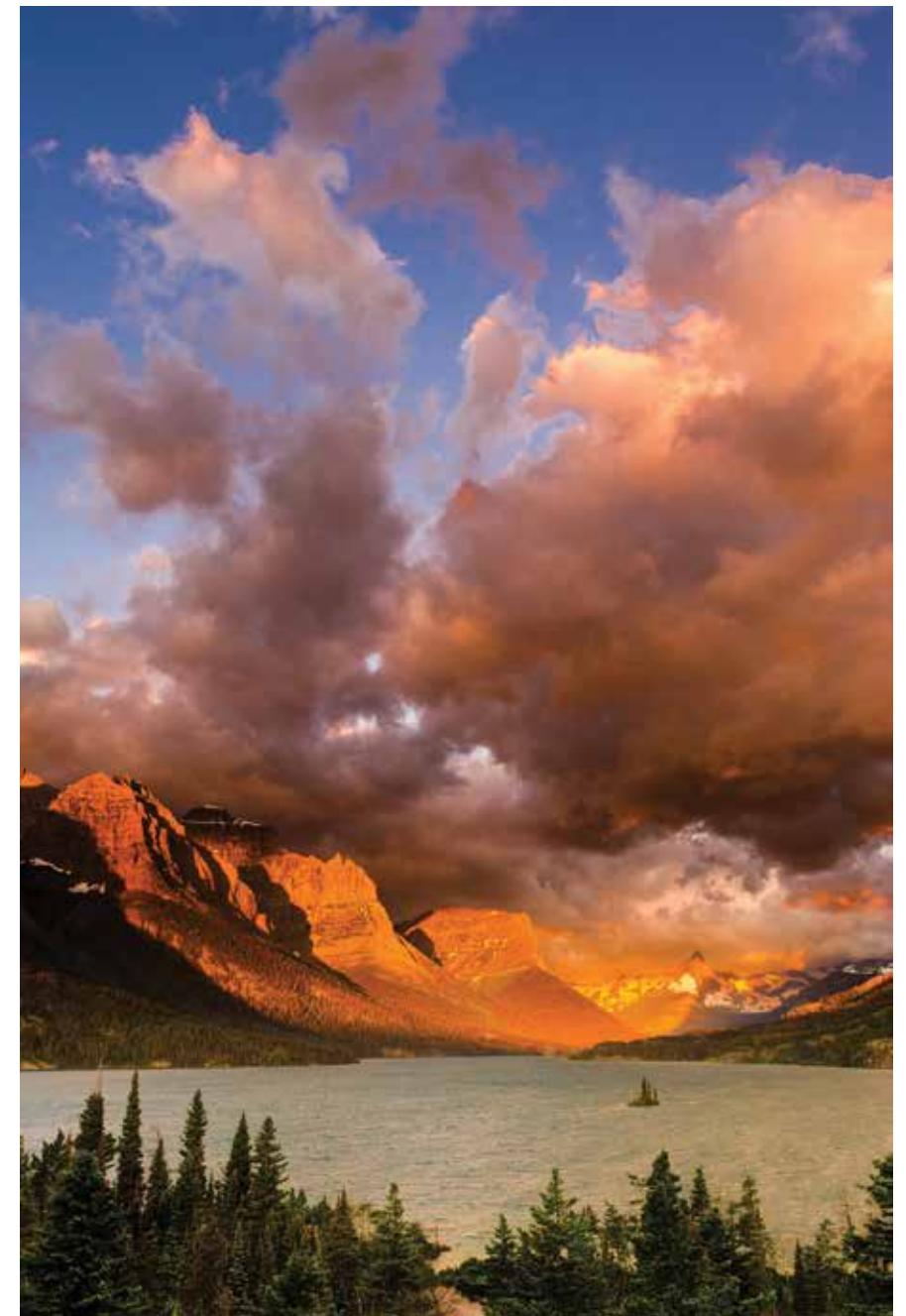
If you're a skier, you may want to plan your trip right when the road opens for some end-of-season turns on the pass, but otherwise wait a week or

*Considered one of the best trails in North America, Highline Trail along the top of Logan Pass is not to be missed. While you can sample the views with a short out-and-back hike, to experience the entire trail and see the Granite Park Chalet, you need to be ready to spend the entire day hiking nearly 12 miles.*

two to allow time for wildflowers to replace dirty melting snow in the meadows around Logan Pass. If your trip dates are flexible, call the ranger station in late June to get an update on when the meadows around Logan Pass will be melted out and filled with flowers to plan your trip accordingly. If you must plan your trip months in advance, there still may be flowers and active wildlife to be found if you vary your elevation on the pass and thus change the timing of the spring bloom.

### Where to Go

Once the road opens for the summer, it's best to base yourself on the eastern side of the park to allow easier access for shooting early-morning light. This area is also more alpine and less forested, making it easier to spot wildlife. While all three access roads on the eastern side of the park offer great photographic potential, if time is limited, I prefer to base myself in St. Mary along the eastern end of the Going-to-the-Sun Road because it allows prime access



*St. Mary Lake is one of the classic views of Glacier National Park. While good for sunset, if the sky lights up, it's more of a sunrise location. Be here early and hope for a clearing storm at sunrise.*



you may end up losing track of time and spending all day exploring.

#### Recommended Photo Opportunities

**Sunrise and Sunset.** While there are many great locations to photograph sunrise and sunset in Glacier, there are a few classic locations that should be a must on every photographer's list. For sunrise, the shores of St. Mary Lake offer some of the most classic views. When driving east down from the summit of Logan Pass along St. Mary Lake, the first spot is Sun Point, which has a clearly marked parking area. Walk a few hundred yards to a grand vista overlooking the lake. For the more motivated, there's a trail that leaves Sun Point and heads west along the shore of St. Mary Lake, which offers less-photographed views of the mountains reflected in the lake.

Perhaps the most classic Glacier sunrise shot is from a little farther east along the lake. To reach it, continue east beyond the Sun Point parking area. After the road bends to the right around the lake, Wild Goose Island will be clearly visible on your right through the trees. Watch for a break in the trees and an obvious pullout that gives you a great view of the lake, as well as the peaks in the background. Depending on

to different elevations and ecosystems along Logan Pass (depending on what the weather is doing). There are several hotels in St. Mary, and for those willing to rough it, there are two campgrounds along St. Mary Lake that make great base camps.

If time allows after exploring the St. Mary Lake and Logan Pass areas, Many Glacier offers great photographic potential, as well. It has fields of wildflowers, several waterfalls, wonderful hikes and the famous Swiss chalet-style Many Glacier Lodge, which is worth a visit in itself.

While in Many Glacier, drive the main road in the early mornings for likely sightings of bears, bighorn sheep and possibly moose near the park entrance. After breakfast, hike the nearly 10-mile Iceberg Lake Trail, or catch the boat across Swiftcurrent Lake and Lake Josephine. The boat tours are a great way to escape your car and photograph the deeper wilds of the park. Either way, make sure you pack a lunch, because



**TOP:** On the western side of the park, Avalanche Creek has easy access to a dramatic slot canyon-style cascade. Shooting early in the morning or late in the day when the area is in complete shade allows for longer shutter speeds and softer, less harsh light. **ABOVE:** While all the mountains on the eastern side of the park get great sunrise light, the Many Glacier area is a favorite among photographers because of mountain reflections in Swiftcurrent Lake.

your composition, you can also include Wild Goose Island in the foreground.

While sunset can be amazing in Glacier, it's less of a guarantee than sunrise. For sunset, I prefer to focus my energies on the top of Logan Pass, with commanding views in many directions, which helps take advantage of any weather that may be brewing. The hike from the visitor's center to Hidden Lake frequently offers close encounters with wildlife, and while waiting for the sunset, there are many opportunities to photograph wildflowers or the bighorn sheep that seem to gather close to the parking lot at the end of the day.

**Waterfalls.** While everyone comes to Glacier National Park to see glaciers, there are also several dramatic waterfalls close to the road, and even more for those willing to walk a couple of miles. Perhaps the most classic waterfall view in the park is Avalanche Creek. With its easy approach and dramatic cascade cutting through mist-soaked rocks, it should be on every photographer's hit list during their visit. As with most waterfalls, it's best photographed in the early morning or late afternoon when in complete shade.

Two other unique waterfalls that are close to the road are Sunrift Gorge and Baring Falls. Both are accessed from the same parking area along the shores of St. Mary Lake and are a short walk from the car. While Sunrift Gorge is more of a slot canyon, Baring Falls is a classic waterfall with dramatic cascades and colorful river rocks that make great foregrounds.

My favorite waterfalls are those that take a bit of hiking to reach. St. Mary and Virginia Falls together make a great day hike and offer endless cascades and compositions. If you start your hike early in the morning, you can avoid the harsh shadows that make photographing the falls difficult later in the day, but be on the lookout for interesting shafts of light hitting the blowing mist during other parts of the day.

**Hiking and Backcountry Wildlife.** While Glacier National Park is popular among photographers, it's known even more as a hiker's park. Yes, there's amazing road access for less active photographers, but if you hike a mile or two from the road, the photographic potential explodes. For hikers, there are alpine lakes, waterfalls, meadows filled with flowers and abundant wildlife that avoids getting close to the

#### Getting There

No matter when you plan your visit, the simple logistics of Glacier National Park make it great for a trip of any length. In addition to being within a day's drive from many major West Coast cities, flying is also easy, with Glacier Park International Airport in Kalispell, Montana, less than an hour's drive from the park's west entrance. If you have more time, you might pair a visit to Glacier with a few days in Canada's Banff and Jasper National Parks. If you're considering hitting both locations, Glacier is a large park, so don't spread yourself too thin. Unlike that big trip to Alaska, you don't have to hit every spot on your first trip—Glacier is closer and cheaper than Alaska, so you can return many times and focus on a new area. Not only will this allow you to really get to know the park, you'll develop a much deeper portfolio of what many photographers consider their favorite national park. Go to [nps.gov/glac](http://nps.gov/glac) for more information.

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crowds and the noise of the busy roads.

Remember, you're in grizzly bear country, so make sure you stay safe by making lots of noise, hiking with a friend and carrying bear spray. If you're a hiker, but the potential of bear encounters intimidates you, stick to the more popular trails along Iceberg Lake, Avalanche Lake and St. Mary Falls, all of which offer a wide variety of photo ops while never being far from other hikers.

For the motivated hiking photographer, Highline Trail is often considered one of the best day hikes in the entire country. This 11.5-mile trail leads photographers through alpine meadows with grand vistas of distant peaks and offers some of the best wildlife viewing in the park. Just remember to carry your telephoto lens on the outside of your pack so you're ready for any wildlife you may come across.

**OP**

**Josh Miller's** images have been featured in *Outdoor Photographer* and in publications throughout the world. To see more of his work and for information on his workshops, visit his website at [joshmillerphotography.com](http://joshmillerphotography.com).

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