

The Photography of William Albert Allard

# MONTANA

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**WINTER**  
IN THE HEART OF  
**YELLOWSTONE**

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'I never forget that I am a guest in the home of these creatures. If I come in that posture of respect, animals will tolerate me. Then I see some amazing things. If I barge in just looking for that 'paycheck' picture, forget it.'

*Tom Murphy*

Standing and lying on the relatively warm geothermally heated ground, these bison cope with one of Yellowstone's typical February mornings.

Photographer finds profound moments during the winter months in the nation's oldest park

## KEEPING AN EYE ON YELLOWSTONE

STORY BY ALAN KESSELHEIM | PHOTOS BY TOM MURPHY



Mid-January. Nearly dark. Already 20 below zero.

He is alone in the heart of Yellowstone National Park. All he has for shelter is a small blue tarp. The snow is four feet deep. The nearest human being is a dozen miles away, which might as well be in Pakistan. The twilight air is still and clear. By morning temperatures will drop another fifteen degrees.

A thin slice of moon hovers above the ridge. He stoops to dig his sleeping trench deeper. When he stands up he hears a faint wolf howl across the snow-muffled valley, one wailing call, a sound both stirring and haunting. An involuntary chill runs through him.

At this moment, Tom Murphy would be nowhere else on earth.

"I remember the first time I heard my own heartbeat," Murphy says. "I was skiing near Harebell Cabin in the southern part of the park. I was alone and I'd stopped to eat lunch. I heard this Thump! Thump! Thump! I kept looking around for an animal. Nothing there. Then it dawned on me that it was my heart.

"I kept hearing it at quiet moments throughout that trip. I was out for two weeks, skied all the way across

the park, listening to my heart. That kind of quiet is almost totally unavailable anymore. Having my heartbeat for company is one of the reasons I like being alone."

Murphy is a straightforward man with a profound and clear sense of purpose. "I like being outside," he says, simply. That basic affinity has defined his life.

He grew up on a cattle ranch near the Black Hills of South Dakota, 60 miles from the nearest grocery store. While he never took to ranching life as a vocation, the years he spent on the land doing ranch work, in every conceivable type of weather, certainly taught him how to be outside. Everything else followed from that.

Above: Murphy captured this little tree as the sun came up over the ridge and lit it up for less than a minute.



Top: Trumpeter swans take flight. Below: Murphy has skied across the park several times in order to capture the beauty of Yellowstone in the winter. | Photo by Cindy Goeddel



Murphy came to Montana 33 years ago, after a stint at college in Rapid City. "I was basically a bum for quite a while," he admits. "I'd get a job, any job, work for a few months to put some money aside, then I'd quit and go hiking."

"I'd see such beautiful things," he adds. "I wanted to somehow get that down. When I was 22, I bought my first camera and started shooting pictures. I had no formal training. I'd never taken a photo before. I like to say I went to Trash Can University of Photography. Over the years I got better, started getting assignments. Now I've been in *National Geographic* and other national magazines, gotten pictures into museums, published books, but I always shoot for myself. I shoot what's interesting to me."

That sensibility has made Murphy's career. It has taken him to ▶



Elk prefer to travel through deep snow in single file. These four cows were traveling down the south side of the Lamar River to join a larger herd. Murphy carefully timed this shot so all four are visible between the silhouetted cottonwood trees.

'I read a quote once about places that feel right to you.  
When you're there, you're home. That's what the Lamar is for me.  
When I'm there, I'm home.'

Antarctica several times. It has allowed him to spend time in the company of mountain gorillas in Africa, which Murphy counts among the most profound interactions he's ever had with animals. But the meat of his career, the heart of his work, has focused on Yellowstone and the surrounding ecosystem.

"You get a quarter-mile off the road and it's your park," Murphy says. "In the winter, you get 100 yards off the road and you're completely alone. I've heard it said that 90 percent of the park is out of view from roads. It's one of the few places left where you can get some inkling of country that is the same as it was 500 years ago, and what an intact, functioning ecosystem feels like."

Murphy has been going to Yellowstone for decades. He may know it as intimately as anyone alive. He makes a point of entering that space with deep respect, coupled with his commitment to close observation. The eloquence of his photography blooms from that approach.

"I never forget that I am a guest in the home of these creatures," Murphy says. "If I come in that posture of respect, animals will tolerate me. Then I see some amazing things. If I barge in just looking for that 'paycheck' picture, forget it. Too often people charge off after that bugling elk shot, and miss everything else. I can be guilty of it too. I have to remind myself that a crab spider is as incredible and beautiful as a grizzly."

"My favorite photographic technique is serendipity," he continues. "Things come to me, then it's my job to get it right. It's gotten to the point now that I feel it is almost my obligation. My job is to try to communicate the essence of that place, that scene, that animal, and to elevate people's awareness through my photograph."

By the same token, Murphy doesn't buy a lot of the New Age mysticism about having the right aura in wild places.

"There are a lot of things that can kill you

if you aren't paying attention," he stresses. "Even so, I can honestly say that I haven't ever had a bad day in Yellowstone. And that includes being charged by grizzly three times, getting caught in two avalanches, being chased by cow elk. I've skied across the entire park twice, and most of the way a third time. It's cold, the snow's deep, blizzards catch you by surprise, but I rarely feel in danger."

"You need to know and understand an ecosystem in order to survive in it, not to mention to get good pictures out of it. I spend a lot of time just sitting still and watching. You do that long enough and you start to really understand animals, what they're going to do next, why they're where they are, whether they're comfortable or nervous. It's not something you can explain to people or teach in a class. It comes from being there, paying close attention. Then, when a bison turns a certain way and you see the muscles of his shoulder bunch up, you know what's coming."

Murphy has photographed Yellowstone in every season. Fall is his favorite time, when everything is full of potential, at the peak of health and energy. Everything is at its best in the fall, he says. The smells, the colors, the richness of the season is intense.

"But winter is the best for photos," Murphy asserts. "Everything is taken to its most elemental level. Things are absolutely clean. The hardship of the



This page: In the winter, mice usually live in tunnels and pathways along the surface of the ground where it is relatively warm. When elk and bison feed, they push or paw away the snow to expose grass and other food, and they inadvertently expose the mice pathways to predators. This coyote was checking the disturbed snow for mice as the elk moved away. Facing page: Early morning fog and steam from Old Faithful geyser drifts across the Upper Geyser Basin.

season provides the bottom line, the pivot point of the year. It is also incredibly beautiful."

If Murphy had to pick a favorite section of Yellowstone, he'd settle on two, the Lamar Valley and the Thorofare region south of Yellowstone Lake. "I read a quote once about places that feel right to you," he says. "When you're there, you're home. That's what the Lamar is for me. When I'm there, I'm home."

Murphy's recently published book, *The Spirit of Winter*, completes his four-volume set tied to each season in the park area. In it, Yellowstone's winter moods lift off of the pages—a whiteout blizzard against aspens, a pouncing fox, an iridescent close-up of a hot pot—and Murphy's philosophy resonates in the written passages.

In the book's introduction, he recalls a meeting with chickadees.

"It was as if they were the spirit of life, so powerful that I felt I was in the presence of a smile or a laugh from the heart of the universe. We met each other in amazement, and all I could do was try not to move..."

"Every photo," Murphy says, "evokes the entire scene again for me. Everything comes back into focus. The smells, the weather, the emotions, the meaning."

He talks about the cover shot for the book, a winter

close-up of a bison herd.

"It was outside of Old Faithful Lodge," he says. "38 below zero. Clear. I got up before dawn, the best hour of the day for light. I knew where they would be sleeping. It had to be one of three places."

"I checked the first, but they weren't there. I went on to the second, and I found them, just like you see them in the picture, lying on some warm ground in the bitter air. I stood there looking at them. The overwhelming impression I had was one of endurance. They were just there, enduring, like they always have. Losing calories, waiting for the sun, waiting patiently. The only sound was the squeaking snow when an animal shifted."

"It was a profound moment to be with them. After an hour or so I looked like them, too, all covered with frost, the cold seeping through my clothes. I stayed there for a long time, even after the light stopped being good. What I hope the image gets across is that whole package I participated in. The sense of deep cold, the absolute quiet, and the heroic, mundane endurance of these animals." ■

Frequent contributor Alan Kesselheim lives in Bozeman and is the author of nine books and hundreds of magazine stories.