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# WHERE THE MOUNTAINS HAVE NO NAME

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As the Alaska Highway celebrates its 75th anniversary, we look at some of the most expansive landscapes in northern BC. Photographer Taylor Burk shares his photos and story from the Muskwa-Kechika, and writer Matt Simmons remembers feeling small in the Northern Rocky Mountains.

photos by Taylor Burk

words by Taylor Burk & Matt Simmons





I stand on the summit of a mountain, its name unmarked on maps, an endless panorama of mountains and valleys surrounding me. I'm alone. There's enough wind to keep the bugs at bay and I literally laugh out loud, spinning around and drinking in the view. I feel a bit tipsy almost, as if my eyes are being injected with 100-proof alcohol. This is a very big place.

Up along the Alaska Highway are some seriously crazy landscapes: Muncho Lake, Stone Mountain, Liard River. The Northern Rocky Mountains. Think of them as Banff's quirky northern cousins—without all the people. It's a rugged place, in the best sense of the word. The highway threads its way through all these landscapes, eventually leading to the Yukon and on to Alaska.

Built by the US during World War II, the idea behind the road was to connect the contiguous states in the south with its lonely northern outlier. The Americans had military motivations for construction but part of Canada's agreement was based on the idea that a road in that region would eventually be a boon to economic development, including tourism. Pretty forward thinking.

Here we are, 75 years later, and tourism along the Alaska Highway is thriving. For some who make the trek, it's the road trip of a lifetime. One more crossed off the bucket list. They come in the summer and take their memories home. There aren't a lot of people who live in the towns along the route, but a significant segment of those who do, relies on tourism dollars. The dollars, and the folks spending those dollars, keep coming but it's still pretty easy to feel alone up here. To have space. To feel small in a big, wild place.



It's even easier if you leave the road behind and get out into the landscape. The Muskwa-Kechika is a spot not many people get to visit. I've never been. I hope to someday. Lucky for you, Taylor Burk, Vancouver-based photographer and adventurer, has...

"What's the name of that mountain?" I ask Wayne Sawchuk, pointing to a prominent peak in the distance.

"It doesn't have a name. None of them do."

These mountains may have had names once, but modern maps show only their topography—tight contour lines climbing steeply out of valleys.

Approximately the size of Ireland and deemed the Serengeti of the North, the Muskwa-Kechika (M-K) is one the largest and most biodiverse areas in the entire rocky mountain range, yet only a select few have heard of it. The reason for its elusiveness lies in the rugged landscapes, harsh climate, and a unique management system allowing humans to live harmoniously with its wilderness.

Mayfield Lakes Camp is owned and operated by the legendary Wayne Sawchuk. Sawchuk is an author, photographer, conservationist, cowboy, wilderness guide, outfitter, and professional badass. He is arguably as much an integral part of the M-K as the M-K is a part of him. Like a statue, he sits atop his steed with a stoic gaze, axe in sheath, sporting an impenetrable moustache and wide-brimmed hat.

As a founding appointee and board member of both BC's Muskwa-Kechika Advisory Board and Committee of the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, Sawchuk has invested his time and energy, and his heart and soul into keeping the M-K pristine and wild.

Wayne Sawchuk  
is an author,  
photographer,  
conservationist,  
cowboy,  
wilderness guide,  
outfitter, and  
professional  
badass.

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We ride our horses up the face of another mountain, stopping to snack on the abundant wild cranberries and blueberries, staining our fingers like kids. We see bear and caribou tracks, but none of the animals that left them. My time here is short, but on longer expeditions, it's very common to see grizzly and black bears, moose, elk, caribou, lynx, wolves, and mountain goats. The dynamic between humans and wildlife is different in the M-K than most wilderness areas. There aren't many places in the world where one can travel by foot or horseback for months at a time and not see any other signs of human activity. You can here. The M-K isn't fragmented by roads, powerlines, or other forms of infrastructure. With humans so hard to come by, wildlife here tends to be more curious and frightened and has not grown accustomed to seeking out our food.

The open, wild landscape allows for a near-aerial view of how far the horses took us in just a few hours. It's that sense of scale that gives places like this their legendary status.

On our way back down the pass, a massive storm engulfs the valley and rolls towards us. All visibility disappears and we watch helplessly as we're swallowed into the storm and soaked by rain. It feels like a different time period. I'm on horseback, hunkered down under the downpour, following Sawchuk's wide-brimmed hat in the distance.

When I lie on my back and close my eyes, I can feel like I'm there again. That expansive emptiness that isn't actually empty. The rocks and lichen under my back. The wind on my face. The ladybugs clustering on the warm rocks. The sensation of an endless landscape of mountains, valleys, rivers and lakes out there, waiting.

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Weather can change quickly in the Muskwa-Kechika and moments like this one might only last for a few seconds.

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