

Glacier National Park

Big Sky And Great Views

Mountain and sky reflections at sunset on Lake McDonald.

Glacier National Park, named for its glacially-carved terrain and remnants of past glaciers, is located in the northwest corner of Montana. Recognized as a World Heritage Site, it sports over a million acres of vast wilderness and is home to more than 70 species of mammals, including black and grizzly bear, gray wolf, lynx, wolverine, mountain lion, and elk. The park also hosts well over 260 species of birds and thousands of different plants. Add soaring mountain peaks, plentiful wildlife, diverse flora, and crystal-clear mountain lakes, and it's easy to see why Glacier National Park is a photographer's paradise.

A few thoughts on photo gear might be worthwhile before you begin your journey. Wide-angle lenses are definitely appropriate for scenic expanses. Telephoto lenses work to isolate specific landscape features or distant wildlife. A sturdy tripod is an absolute necessity. A graduated neutral density filter (2-3 stop) can help deal with variations in dynamic range and a polarizing filter will saturate colors, eliminate reflections, and add impact to skies.



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Exploring the tranquil waters of Lake McDonald on an early evening at the beginning of June.

Lake McDonald

You might want to begin your tour in West Glacier and head toward Logan Pass via Going-to-the-Sun Road—one of America's most scenic highways. First stop is Apgar Village, located on the southern shore of Lake McDonald. The

Visitors Center there is a good source for information to help get the most out of your trip and where you get a first glimpse of the magnificent Rocky Mountain panorama. Dawn and dusk are the best times to capture Lake McDonald and the mountains. The sun rises and

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A raw capture of Avalanche Creek Gorge converted to black and white in Photoshop.

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sets from right to left. Departing Apgar, there are many photo opportunities along Going-to-the-Sun Road. The first part of the trip runs along Lake McDonald's eastern shore—there are numerous pull-offs for photos. Also, check out Lake McDonald Lodge for more photo possibilities.

Beyond the lake, the road parallels Upper McDonald Creek where several sets of rapids and small cascades are worth photographing. Stop at Trail of the Cedars—an ancient grove of giant cedars. Mushrooms and moss here provide great close-up subjects. Avalanche Creek Gorge is an ideal spot for milky shots of flowing water—a shutter speed of less than 1 second works best for this effect, along with an aperture of f/16 for great depth of field. Continue on to Avalanche Lake (4.6 miles round trip), which is a classic cirque lake fed by several waterfalls cascading hundreds of feet from the surrounding mountain peaks. Photography here is best in the early evening.

Logan Pass

Beyond Avalanche, Going-to-the-Sun Road rises dramatically, hugging the cliffs of Glacier's famed Garden Wall. The scenery here is most stunning, so take advantage of the few pull-offs (or construction delays) to capture the moment. At the Pass postcard-type

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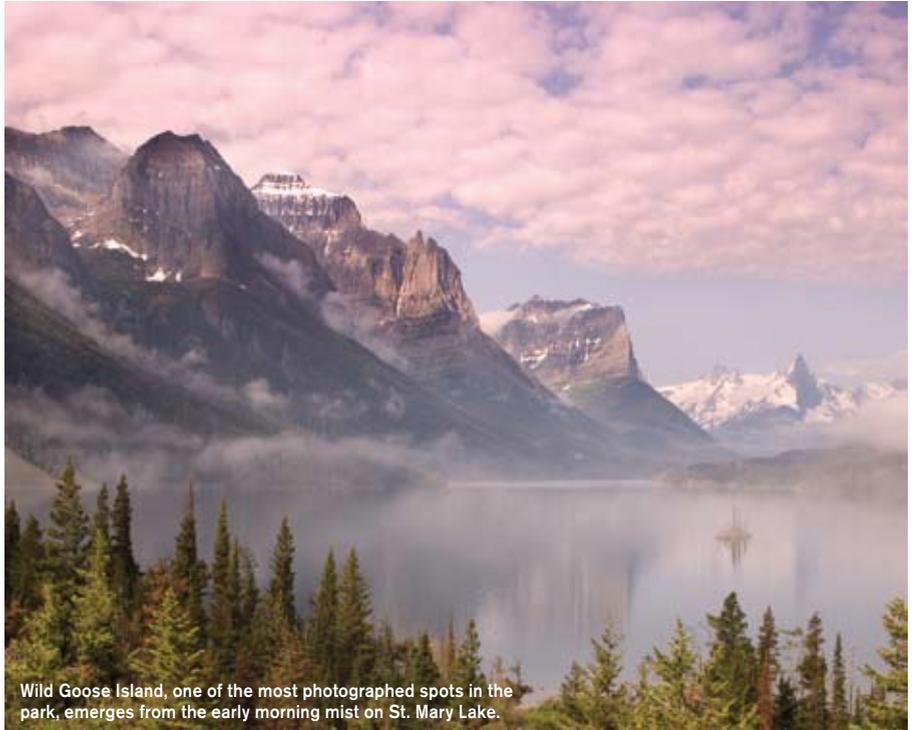
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Beargrass, Glacier's signature wildflower, dominates a high mountain meadow along the Highline Trail.



Wild Goose Island, one of the most photographed spots in the park, emerges from the early morning mist on St. Mary Lake.



Sinopah Mountain emerges from early morning cloud cover.

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scenes abound in every direction. The Pass is a favored haunt for mountain goats and bighorn sheep. Sheep like to congregate in the parking lot of the

Visitors Center, especially on hot summer afternoons—a 200mm lens will be sufficient for close-ups.

There are nice hiking trails that

start at the Pass, the Highline Trail being one of my very favorites. It's an easy hike and offers some of the best landscape, wildlife, and wildflower photo



Sunrise alpenglow over Swiftcurrent Lake.

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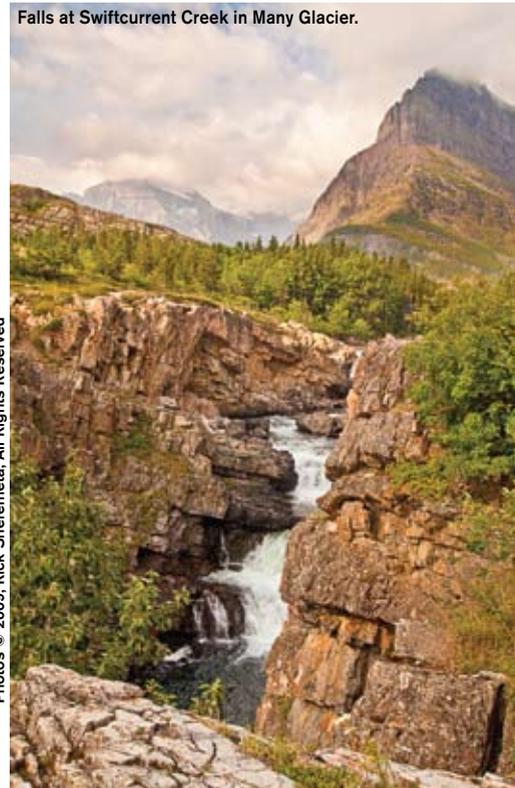
opportunities in the park. Goats, sheep, and marmots are frequently encountered, and occasionally grizzlies. Lighting here can be somewhat tricky because of the mountain range's north/south orientation. Late afternoon and evening affords the best lighting.

Another popular trail is Hidden Lake (6 miles round trip). This trail rises several hundred feet, from the Visitors Center, over open tundra, arriving at an overlook 700 ft above Hidden Lake. Mountain goats frequent the trail and wildflowers abound. Because it sits in a deep bowl, Hidden Lake is cast in shadow early and late in the day. It's spectacular though even in midday light. It's situations like this where a D-SLR and/or post-processing software shine. I can now shoot all day, regardless of lighting conditions, by thinking black and white—which renders best under harsh, contrasty midday lighting conditions.

St. Mary Lake

Continuing toward St. Mary, a notable stop is Sunrift Gorge. Take the trail to Baring, Virginia, and St. Mary Falls—well worth the effort. Sun Point is another awe-inspiring location—the promontory overlooks St. Mary Lake framed by peaks of the Continental Divide. Sun Point faces west so photography is generally best first thing in the morning. One of

Falls at Swiftcurrent Creek in Many Glacier.



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Summer sunset reflected in the serene waters of Bowman Lake.

the most popular photo spots is Wild Goose Island. This is a prime location and can be crowded at times. Morning light is best, but may be challenging due to mountain-cast shadows at first light. Going-to-the-Sun Road ends not too far beyond Wild Goose Island, but not so far for our photographic journey. Reaching

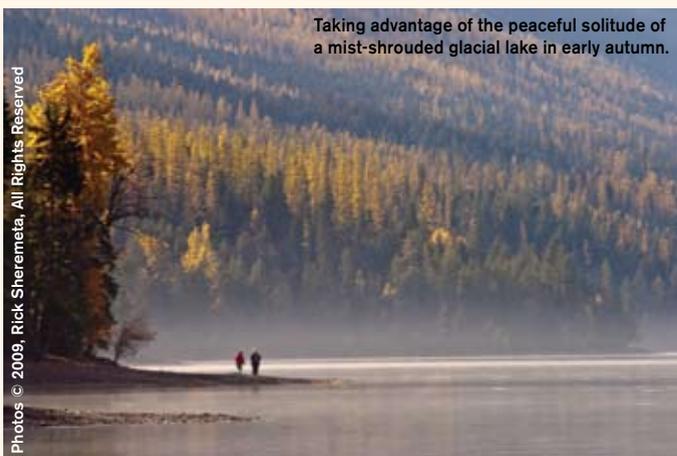
US Route 89, at St. Mary, it's decision time: north brings you to the Many Glacier area; south goes to Two Medicine. Don't pass up either area—each is unique with lots of photo ops.

Many Glacier

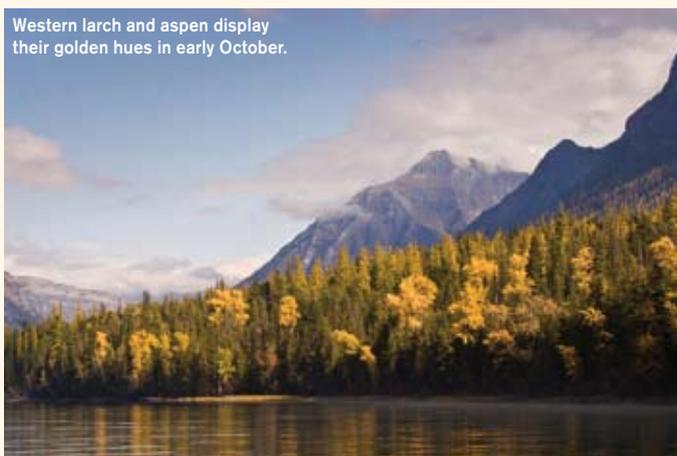
Many Glacier is home to the historic

Many Glacier Hotel. Nature is unspoiled here and there are innumerable photographic opportunities. For the long lens enthusiast, this is the place to be—wildlife is plentiful and encounters with deer, moose, bighorn sheep, and grizzlies are common. Sunrise and sunset are prime times, but this is definitely a

Glacier At A Glance



Taking advantage of the peaceful solitude of a mist-shrouded glacial lake in early autumn.



Western larch and aspen display their golden hues in early October.

Glacier National Park is slow paced, serene, and less crowded than other national parks, and is a photographer's delight. Glacier could easily take several lifetimes to fully explore and enjoy. The road network accesses only a small portion of the park, and while there are over 700 miles of hiking and horse trails, the majority of Glacier remains untouched. Accommodations and visitor amenities are limited, and Glacier's season is relatively short. The high country and Logan Pass rarely open until late in June because of lingering snows. Wildflowers bloom shortly after snows have melted, which can be mid-July to early August in the mountains and late May/early June at lower elevations. Late September and early October are best for scenic color and foggy mornings. The National Park Service's website (www.nps.gov/glac) offers a wealth of information on accommodations, services, road and trail closures, activities, natural history, etc.



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place where you can find lots of things to photograph all day.

Two Medicine

Two Medicine is at the southern end of the park. Here, Sinopah Mountain is the dominant feature in the landscape. The Two Medicine Valley's orientation allows great dawn and dusk lighting. There are fewer hiking trails here and they tend to be more difficult, and visitor amenities are limited. A good photo stop is Running Eagle Falls. This cascade is unique in that water flows through the cliff face rather than over it. Running Eagle Falls is best shot during early morning because of prevailing light direction.

East Glacier

Should you opt not to retrace your route returning to West Glacier, a worthwhile detour is Glacier Park Lodge in East Glacier. Its entry garden sports a large variety of indigenous wildflowers that are ideal for close-ups. Another worthwhile stop, along Route 2, is Goat Lick Overlook. This natural salt formation is a favorite hangout for mountain goats and bighorn sheep. The overlook will be in shade for a good part of the early day. Here, a long lens will be needed to get in tight.

Polebridge

Polebridge is the gateway to the park's northwestern entrance, and to Bowman and Kintla Lakes. These lakes are spectacular, especially in early autumn when Western larches display their golden needles. Sunrise and sunset lighting is great at both locations.

At Polebridge you'll catch a glimpse of Montana's past, much unchanged since the early 1900s. Take the North Fork Road, or Inside North Fork, to get there. This northern region of the park is one of the few areas that is home to elk and several packs of gray wolf. 🐾

Rick Sheremeta conducts workshops in the Northern Rockies and is a Photographic Instructor for the Glacier Institute. To learn more, visit www.alpenglowproductions.com.