

Take Advantage Of

Current weather patterns yield rare opportunities for nature photographers

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES KAY

BIG Weather

Perhaps you thought last summer's weather was particularly wild, especially if you live along the Bow River in the town of Canmore, Alberta, at the gateway to Banff National Park. Last June, the largest single storm to ever hit the region was poised like a giant hammer over the headwaters of the Bow, unleashing 17 inches of rain in one day. A huge wall of water descended on the town, severing Canada's transcontinental highway, and further downstream, turning the city of Calgary into a large, murky swimming pool.

Two months before those storm clouds gathered over the peaks, I received a backcountry permit for a weeklong backpacking trip in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park, just south of Canmore. I had selected a route that promised a wealth of images along a particularly dramatic portion of the Continental Divide. Unfortunately, Peter Lougheed was the epicenter of the maelstrom, where roads, bridges and trails were erased from the map in a matter of minutes. The area was shut off from the rest of the world, and officials estimated it would take months to open it again to visitors. With permit in hand, I was left high and dry.

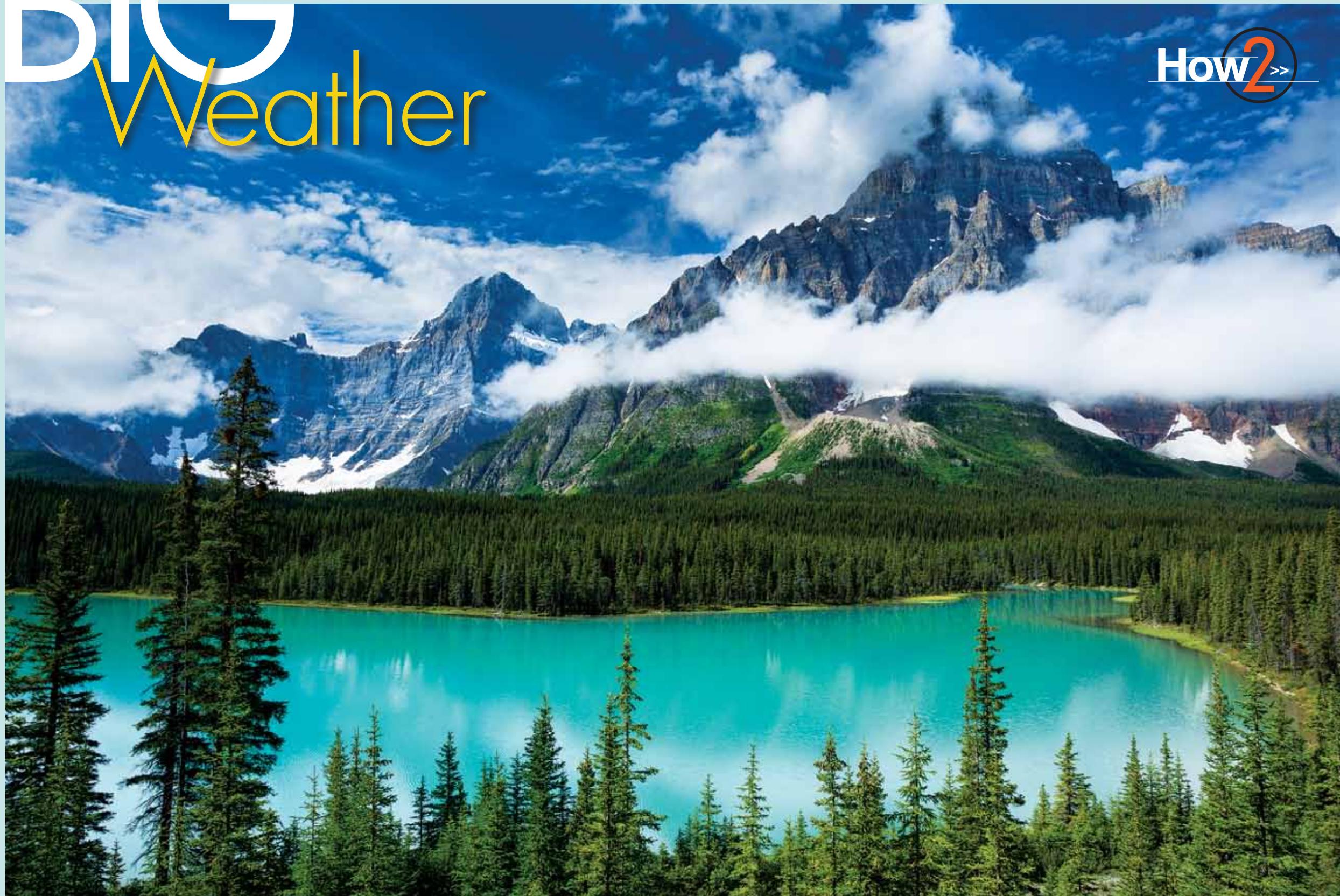
From farmers to photographers, anyone who makes a living off the land always struggles with the weather. After all, the jet stream doesn't determine where it's going to dip or dive simply for our benefit. Indeed, we all have our horror stories where our well-laid plans are shredded by the vagaries of the jet stream. While this high-altitude river of air has been the traffic-control system for the storms that have swirled around our planet since time immemorial, its recent behavior has left more than a few atmospheric scientists and photographers scratching their heads. Some

surmise that the rapidly warming Arctic is causing the speed of the air within the jet stream to slow down, which seems to produce more pronounced large loops in the jet, which then causes storms and high-pressure systems to get locked into place, thus producing larger rainstorms and more widespread droughts.

Others surmise that the average annual position of the jet has actually shifted north over the last few decades.

I've been photographing the American West for the last 30 years, and my task has become noticeably more difficult lately. With only a few average or above-average precipitation years embedded

in the last 15, the weather paradigm for the West seems to be changing. Along with the diminished snowpacks of drier winters come hotter summers and earlier and longer wildfire seasons. The smoke that now cloaks Idaho, Montana and Wyoming in a near-perpetual haze for much of August and September



each year has become the norm rather than the exception.

Are these smoky skies or that freak storm which sliced and diced my plans in Peter Lougheed Provincial Park the result of climate change? No one knows for sure. Whatever the cause may be, the reality is that I've needed to adjust my summer photography schedule in the northern Rockies for this apparent new reality, shifting my usual August/September trips forward to July before the summer fires really take hold.

If you've spent as much time as I have over the years staring at weather maps trying to decipher what the jet stream is about to do, you've probably noticed that it snakes across the center of the U.S. in winter, shifting north of the Canadian border each summer. As it moves north, it takes the storms with it, leaving behind large high-pressure sys-

tems that typically dominate the weather in the Western states during summer. As Western fires ignite, they pump smoke into these region-wide stagnant air

masses so the air becomes hazier and hazier as summer progresses. On the other hand, the Canadian Rockies, due to their more northerly location, re-

main susceptible throughout summer to more variation in weather due to the influence of the jet stream. Periodic storms equals cleaner air

equals better photo opportunities.

Back to my cancelled trip in Peter Lougheed. I wasn't about to give up on my plans to spend two weeks shooting in the Canadian Rockies after my Glacier National Park workshop in July, so I had to come up with a new itinerary. With thousands of square miles of serrated, ice-clad peaks, tumbling glaciers, waterfalls and turquoise-colored lakes to choose from, it wasn't a difficult task.

Leaving home in what turned out to be the hottest single month ever recorded in Utah, my wife, Susie, and I traveled north to Glacier in mid-July to witness Montana suffering from one of its warmest, driest summers on record and the most

nonexistent wildflower bloom I had ever seen. As we drove north into Canada after our workshop, this dry-weather regime changed dramatically, as Banff was experiencing one of its wettest summers on record. This was both good and bad news over the next couple of weeks. While I struggled to get clear horizons at sunrise and sunset, and had to dodge daily cloudbursts, the stormy weather provided spectacular, swirling cloud formations and quickly doused any local lightning-caused fires, making for crystal-clean air with 100-mile views. In the end, the images I captured were better than anything I could have imagined had the skies been a monotonous, monochromatic, hazy blue.

As I dealt with these challenging weather conditions, I lived by the photographer's rule that dictates that the farther we travel from home and the more money we spend to get there, the less likely we are to give up and roll over and go back to sleep when a cloudy, dreary scene greets us before dawn. Who knows, we might get lucky. With this rule in mind, I grabbed my gear and headed out one morning into a dismally thick layer of low stratus clouds filling the Bow Valley. I drove north along the Icefields Parkway to a distant location I had previsualized as a dramatic sunrise. Arriving at the scene with no breaks in the cloud deck, I hung around for a while on the long odds that something wonderful would happen. It didn't, so I packed up and headed back to the cabin

for breakfast. Within 15 minutes, small holes began to form in the clouds, and I realized something amazing might happen at another location I had scouted just south of here at Waterfowl Lake. I arrived just as the clouds were shredding into a perfect veil across the face of Mount Chephren. I captured the scene, and within 15 minutes, the swirling mists were gone. It turned out to be my favorite image from that trip.

This was a perfect example of why it's pointless and actually counterproductive to get angry about the weather not cooperating with our plans even though at times it may feel like a well-orchestrated conspiracy. Being able to anticipate and take advantage of changing sky conditions and rolling with the weather punches are both key elements in being able to seize the moment for the photo opportunities around us.

When I think about what attracted me to the Canadian Rockies in the first place and about what continues to motivate me in my work today, I recall one of my favorite quotes by Steve McQueen: "I'd rather wake up in the middle of nowhere than in any city on earth." My passion for exploring remote, wild places developed long before I acquired a passion for photography. Once I combined the two, I discovered how they reinforced one another. I've always been driven to find out what's over the next ridge or around the next bend in the canyon. By adding a camera to the equation, I learned that the simple act of traveling through a landscape, in search of compositions, allows me to connect with the land on a much deeper level than I would otherwise. This deliberative process causes me to slow down, look around and pay attention to those details I might have missed.

As a lone wolf by nature, landscape photography is, for me, a solitary, contemplative experience. My most vibrant experiences occur when I immerse myself in a remote location where I may not see another person for days. As I move through the landscape in search of light and texture, I begin to feel like part of the scene. The mesmerizing, Zen-like state I enter gets deeper and deeper the longer I'm out there, but comes crashing down the moment I finally do run into another person and need to communicate and say something intelligible. It's like breaking the trance.

Before traveling to a particular loca-



OPENING SPREAD:
Mount Chephren and Waterfowl Lake, Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada

ABOVE, LEFT:
Bow Lake and Crowfoot Mountain, Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada

ABOVE:
First light illuminates Mount Babel above Consolation Valley, Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada

LEFT:
Waputik Icefield viewed from Niles Peak, Yoho National Park, British Columbia, Canada



tion, I always sketch out a plan with an itinerary of times and places, often based on notes I've kept from past visits where the conditions weren't exactly right when I was there. While some of my most rewarding photography experiences have occurred watching an image I've planned and previsualized for a long time materialize before my eyes, it's often more satisfying when I stumble across a new, spectacular scene that I hadn't anticipated at all. It gets back to that sense of discovery. That's why I'm out there in the first place. In landscape photography, the most dramatic, unanticipated images are almost always delivered by unusual weather and sky conditions, so it's just a question of being in the right place at the right time and making sure you're out there enough to increase the odds.

Another major driver behind my landscape work has been the opportunity to use it as an advocacy tool to inform and, hopefully, inspire people to protect the last remaining fragments of wild land in North America. From the beginning of time, we've altered the natural world in profound ways to suit our own needs, usually without any consideration of the long-term implications or effect on other parts of the system. I often wonder what purpose it serves or if it's actually counterproductive to continue producing beautiful images depicting pristine nature, while just outside the image frame, clear-cuts fill the horizon. Land conservation groups are always looking for photographers willing to donate images of the areas they're working to protect. Having our images used in this manner can provide us with another good reason to get out there to photograph those threatened landscapes we cherish most.

Whether we're motivated by conservation issues or the art itself or simply wish to decorate our walls, in the end, each of us has our own reasons for pursuing landscape photography. The challenge is to continually devise goals and projects that will help us keep those passions alive. **OP**

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