

Bear grass along Grinnell Glacier Trail  
above Grinnell Lake, Glacier National Park.

# Rocky Mountain High

A photographer's guide to prime landscape  
locations in the Northern Rockies

Text & Photography By James Kay

**R**ising from the high deserts of northern New Mexico and continuing north for 1,900 miles to their terminus just south of the Yukon/British Columbia border, North America's Rocky Mountains score high on the list of our planet's great mountain kingdoms. From Colorado's 14,000-foot summits to the Canadian Rockies, along with all the countless sub-ranges in between, this entire mountain cordillera was created from the same general tectonic events that began approximately 100 million years ago as monumental compressional forces along the western edge of North America caused the upper portion of the earth's crust to buckle and fold.

While these mountain-building forces ended about 40 million years ago, the scenery we photograph today was formed much more recently as a result of the sculpting effect of glacial ice during the Pleistocene Epoch, which began a mere 2.5 million years ago. At that time, the mountains of interior western North America had much softer profiles than the sharply defined peaks we see today. Much of western Canada was a region of high, rolling terrain at an elevation of 10,000 to 15,000 feet. As the ice thickened to depths of thousands of feet, its prodigious weight began to gouge deep valleys and chisel jagged peaks into the underlying terrain. These glaciers advanced and retreated, bulldozing their way across the landscape on a 100,000-year cycle—right up to our most recent ice age, which ended 10,000 years ago—leaving in their wake all the precipitous peaks, thundering waterfalls, mountain lakes and wildflower-filled meadows we see today.

Many mountain ranges across the western U.S., such as Colorado's Sangre De Cristos, Wyoming's Wind River Range and Utah's Uinta Mountains, are surrounded by vast expanses of broad, dry, flat valleys. By contrast, the Canadian Rockies form an endless sea of towering peaks, tumbling glaciers, turquoise lakes and thick forests 900 miles long by 100 miles wide. Few would contest the suggestion that these Canadian mountains represent the crowning achievement of the entire Rocky Mountain chain. Don't

be fooled by the fact that, of the 100 highest peaks, only one in the Canadian Rockies, Mount Robson, at 12,972 feet, makes the list. (The other 99 are located in the mountains of Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming.) While Canada's Rockies may not achieve the 14,000-foot heights of the southern Rockies, the much-lower elevations of the valleys they rise from make them appear much larger than their Colorado cousins.

While some of us in the Western U.S. may refer to the mountains of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming as the Northern Rockies, the mountain region I'm referring to as the Northern Rockies begins just south of the Canadian border in the dramatic terrain of Montana's Glacier National Park and extends north to the Yukon border. Thanks to their shared tectonic past, this 1,000-mile-long stretch of mountains has a completely different look and feel than the mountains further south. Also, due to their more northerly climes, the summer season is cooler and wetter and provides a welcome reprieve from the heat further south, along with a dazzling array of photographic options.

**Glacier National Park, Montana**  
Glacier National Park has many unique aspects, even when compared to the grandeur of the Canadian Rockies. First off would be the enormous glacier-carved lakes that occupy every major valley, with huge mountains towering thousands of feet above them. Rise early to capture first light at Wild Goose

Island, overlooking 7-mile-long Saint Mary Lake, and don't miss sunrise at Swiftcurrent Lake in the Many Glacier region. Both lakes are often windy, so the trick is to schedule enough days to ensure that you'll get at least one morning with ideal reflections, especially at Swiftcurrent Lake.

Glacier is also one of the premier locations anywhere in the Rocky Mountains for wildflower and wildlife photography. Fasten your seat belt for the breathtaking ascent to Logan Pass on Going-to-the-Sun Road, where you'll have your best chance to photograph bighorn sheep, mountain goats and mountainsides covered with the white bulbous flower

heads of bear grass during its peak, which usually occurs in mid-July at the higher elevations of the park.

Other not-to-miss locations would be Avalanche Creek Gorge near Lake McDonald Lodge, where turquoise-hued glacial runoff swirls through a shallow maroon-colored canyon dripping with moss. On the flip side of the Continental Divide, the Many Glacier region has more stunning scenery per square mile than anywhere else in the park. Reserve a seat on the morning boat shuttle across Swiftcurrent and Josephine Lakes and then ascend the 4-mile trail to Upper Grinnell Lake, with stunning scenery, wildflowers and wildlife the entire way.

### **Banff National Park, Canada**

If the Canadian Rockies are the crown jewel of the Rocky Mountains, Banff National Park is the crown jewel of the Canadian Rockies. As Canada's first national park, with more than 2,500 square miles of mountain terrain and over 300 active glaciers, Banff is what we picture when we imagine the Canadian Rockies. While Banff is known for its many cerulean-hued lakes backed by jagged, glacier-draped peaks, the iconic scene at Lake Louise is what originally put Banff on the map back in the 1880s. With Mount Victoria's 11,365-foot icy summit reflected in its brilliant aquamarine waters, few places on earth can match



Quadra Peak and Mount Babel, Banff National Park.

the jaw-dropping scene here. Along with Moraine Lake in the adjacent valley, these two locations represent the magnificence of the Canadian Rockies at their very best. As it so happens, these lakes achieve their most photogenic, vibrant turquoise hues during the July/August tourist crush, so be prepared to jostle shoulders.

While the summer crowds can be challenging around Lake Louise, Banff National Park is a vast region of mostly empty valleys and lonely peaks. Beginning just north of Lake Louise Village, the Icefields Parkway parallels the Continental Divide and offers a much more sublime experience. Some would argue that this 140-mile-long ribbon of asphalt affords the most beautiful drive on earth. As if designed specifically for photographers, a series of stunningly beautiful turquoise lakes with their requisite glacier-studded peaks above seem to appear around every other bend in the road, with the most photogenic section between Bow Lake and Waterfowl Lake.

#### **Jasper National Park, Canada**

If you continue north on the Icefields Parkway to Sunwapta Pass, you'll enter Jasper National Park. The main difference between Banff and Jasper is that Jasper has views of the largest glaciers flowing off the Continental Divide. The most accessible of these would be Athabasca Glacier, where tourists flock to hitch rides on the ginormous glacier buses, which ply the surface of the rapidly retreating ice. As the glacier withers, it leaves behind a barren, rubble-filled valley, which doesn't make for the most beautiful photographic compositions. Far superior would be capturing first light as it illuminates the gleaming summit of Athabasca peak, just east of the glacier. Continuing north from here, it's another 60 miles to the town of Jasper along a section of parkway not quite as eye-popping as the southern portion in Banff.

Many of Jasper's most dramatic and

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First light illuminates the tips of The Ramparts above Amethyst Lake, Jasper National Park.





**Above:** The Robson River flows through the Valley of a Thousand Falls in Mount Robson Provincial Park.

**Opposite:** Mount Assiniboine viewed from The Nub.



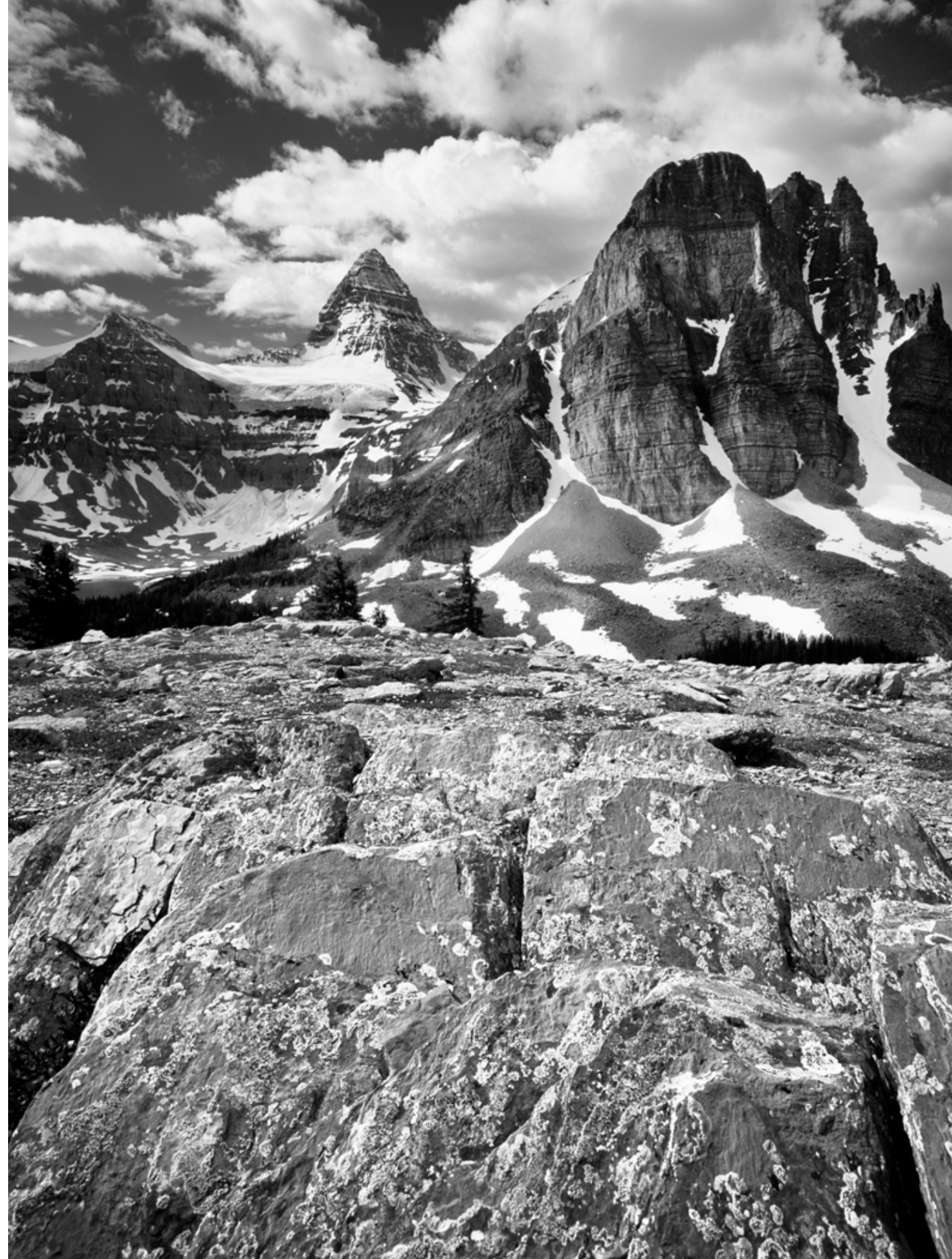
easy-to-access photography locations surround the town of Jasper. Take the Maligne Canyon Road to where the Queen Elizabeth Range reflects in the calm waters of Medicine Lake. Continuing further, you'll arrive at Maligne Lake, one of the Canadian Rockies' most beautiful bodies of water, where you can grab a seat on the scenic boat ride to Spirit Island, Jasper's most iconic photo location. Just south of town, the Mount Edith Cavell Road offers views of Angel Glacier cascading from the mountain's 11,000-foot summit. The most stunning photography location around Jasper town, however, requires an overnight trip via horseback or foot to Amethyst Lake in the Tonquin Valley, where the jagged Teton-like summits of The Ramparts rise 3,000 feet from the water's edge.

### **Mount Robson Provincial Park, Canada**

As the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies at 12,972 feet, Mount Robson attracts climbers and photographers alike with its nearly 10,000-foot rise from the valley floor. While the view from the highway of Robson's immense south face is certainly photo-worthy, the most sought-after compositions in the park require backcountry camping. The Berg Lake trail starts right off the highway and parallels the Robson River for 7 miles to Whitehorn campsite in the Valley of a Thousand Falls, where waterfalls plummet hundreds of feet over a sheer cliff face above the very turquoise waters of the Robson River. But the photographic mother lode lies another 6 miles along the trail at Berg Lake, where its namesake glacier calves glistening blocks of blue ice into its bright-green waters. Due to its massive size, the mountain creates its own weather, so Berg Lake campsite serves as an ideal base for perhaps three or four nights so you can wait out any bad weather it stirs up. If the clouds really unload, you can duck into the Berg Lake shelter for the day to stay dry. Above camp, it's a short climb to Toboggan Falls, with sweeping vistas overlooking the lake with Robson's summit rising into the clouds. If you have clear skies to the west, it's an amazing vantage point for capturing last light on the mountain. The best full-day excursion from camp would involve heading up the trail to Snowbird Pass with its tremendous views of Robson's imposing north face and glacier.

### **Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park, Canada**

It's easy to understand why Mount Assiniboine is referred to as the Matterhorn of the Canadian Rockies. Like a spear thrusting 11,844 feet into the sky, its sharp profile towers above all the surrounding mountains and dominates the skyline for miles in every direction. At its base lie some of the most luminous lakes in the Canadian Rockies, with names like Magog, Cerulean, Sunburst, Gloria and Marvel. Fortunately, this magnificent setting is hidden away in a remote corner of the Canadian Rockies, more than 16 miles from the nearest road.





Emerald Lake in Yoho National Park.

With a backcountry campground and a small, rustic lodge providing the only overnight accommodations, you'll have the place mostly to yourself once you arrive on foot, horseback or the thrice-weekly helicopter flight. The lodge or campground both serve as excellent base camps for several days of photography in the immediate area. I'd suggest a minimum of three to four nights in order to maximize your options and increase the odds of getting cooperative sky conditions. You'll need to rise well before sunrise if you want to capture first light

on Assiniboine from the Nublet, one of the most magnificent vantage points in the region. Bring your bear spray, as grizzlies tend to wander through the area, probably enjoying the views as much as we do. The small reflecting ponds along the trail from the lodge to Magog Lake are also ideal for framing the mountain at sunrise, and the easy hike to Wonder Pass will reward you with another lovely view overlooking Marvel Lake.

#### Yoho National Park, Canada

"Yoho" is a Cree Indian word that translates as "awe and wonder." The Cree discovered early on that a high proportion of the most stunning scenery in the Canadian Rockies lies within the relatively small confines of Yoho National Park.

Yoho lies on the western (British Columbia) side of the Continental Divide, where it shares a common border with Banff. Immediately over the divide from Banff's Lake Louise lies a small turquoise gem by the name of Lake O'Hara, where some of the most stupendous peaks in the Rockies rise thousands of feet in sheer vertical relief from the edge of this beautiful lake. With the numerous trails, all meticulously designed and maintained, you could spend a week here in the lodge or campground if you're lucky enough to secure an available room or campsite.

Immediately northwest of Lake O'Hara, one of the largest ice caps in the Rockies feeds one of its tallest waterfalls. Ranked as the second-highest in Canada, Takakkaw Falls plunges nearly 1,000 feet in an explosion of spray from the lip of a hanging valley along Yoho Canyon. Facing west, Takakkaw is best photographed with afternoon light or in overcast conditions.

Emerald Lake would be the third location in Yoho to round out your itinerary. As with all the other aquamarine lakes in the region, the most vibrant water color occurs during midday lighting conditions during the months of July and August. The easy 3-mile trail that encircles the lake provides a variety of worthy vantage points. **OP**

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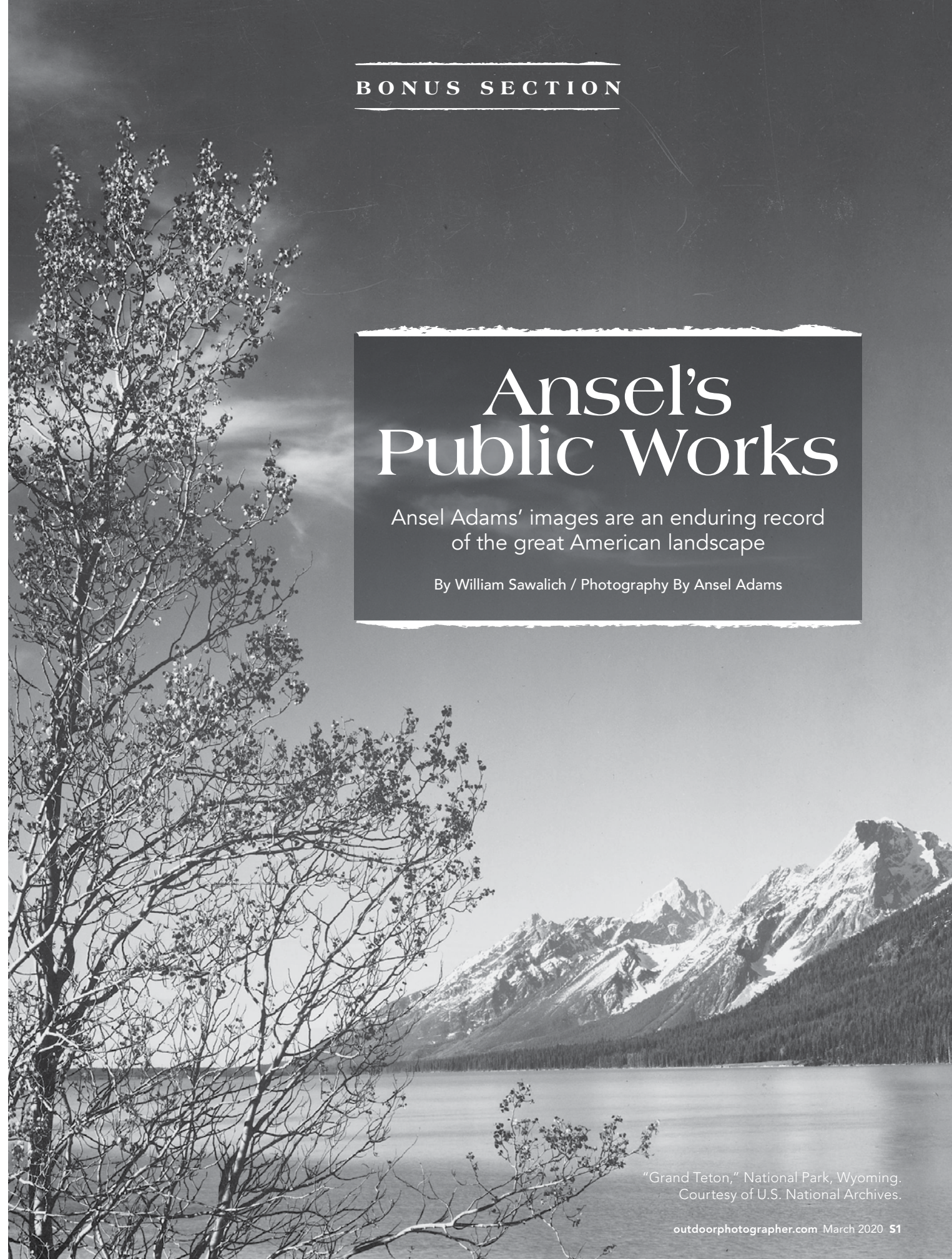
See more of James Kay's work and learn about workshop opportunities at [jameskay.com](http://jameskay.com).

## BONUS SECTION

# Ansel's Public Works

Ansel Adams' images are an enduring record of the great American landscape

By William Sawalich / Photography By Ansel Adams



"Grand Teton," National Park, Wyoming. Courtesy of U.S. National Archives.