



## Andy Rouse's Shots of the Month

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*Editor's Note* - Thumbnails are links to larger images, presented in slide show format.

I always love working with bears and the Grizzly has a special place in my heart. I've worked in close proximity to them many times now, and always in the most remote wilderness locations. I've been fortunate to work with some great guides too, which has greatly expanded my knowledge of this most misunderstood of mammals. It's been a couple of years since I last worked with Grizzly Bears (on Admiralty Island) and that's far too long for me. Of the 4 book projects I have on the go at the moment, two will involve bears, so I decided that I needed to freshen up my collection and look for some different behaviour. I specifically wanted to photograph Grizzlies at this time of the year, as they are busy feeding in the meadows and digging for clams on the tidal flats. Hopefully I'd see some mating too as this was the prime time, but I wouldn't see any salmon fishing; to be honest I was quite glad as I'd witnessed it many times before. It was also the time to refresh my relationship with Alaska, one of the last great wilderness areas on the planet, and one that I'd lost touch with due to my ongoing African projects. And so, in late June 2004, I found myself in a remote camp on the Alaskan Peninsula, face to face with the awesome Grizzly Bear and loving every minute of it. As a change for NPN this month, I thought that I'd put in my diary entries for a few days of the trip, so that you can see the highs and lows of a typical few Rouse days in the field. I've only arrived back today from Alaska so it's been a real rush to get some pictures processed for you and now my jet lag is really catching up with me! Here we go:

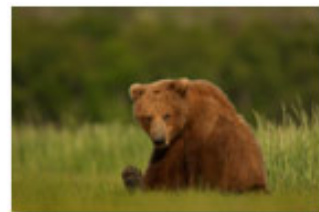
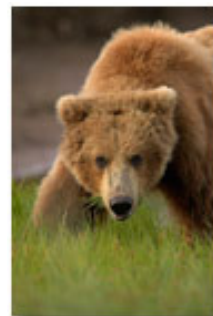
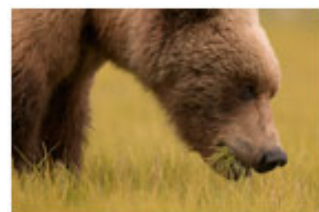
### June 20th

The morning dawns bright and clear and I can see for miles from my room in Homer. I can hardly contain my excitement at the prospect of seeing bears again and put the finishing touches to my packing. I always try to travel as light as possible on all of my trips and this time I'm being extra careful to take only what I need. From experience I know that there will likely be a lot of hiking involved, so only take what I can comfortably carry for a 5-mile hike in my Lowepro Pro Trekker. The gear list reads as follows:

- DSLRs - Canon EOS 1D Mark 2 + 1Ds
- Lenses – Canon 500mm f4L IS, 70-200 IS f2.8L and 1.4 extender
- Tripod – Gitzo 1548, Kirk Ball Head with Wimberley Sidekick
- Digital stuff – three Just Rams I-Pro 2GB CF cards, antiquated laptop, Flashtrax 40GB downloader + spare battery, Iomega 40GB portable hard drive
- Miscellaneous – off camera release, chargers, waterproof covers for camera and lens, anglefinder for low angle shots, Quantum Compact long life battery

This was the first trip that I'd taken the 1D MK2 and intended to shoot it as my primary camera. My initial tests with it, after a few teething troubles, had proved satisfactory enough for me to give it a serious test in the field. The 1Ds would act as a backup camera in case of damage / failure, and also allow me to shoot with two different camera / lens combinations at the same time. I always like to have the option of shooting both portraits (with the 500mm) and "animal in habitat" (with the 70-200) shots, without the need to constantly switch cameras and lenses. A few of you may be wondering why I took both a Flashtrax downloader and an Iomega drive. The answer is simply that I like to have a double backup in the field if I have the option of taking my laptop along. When any of my I-Pro CF cards fill up, I download them to the FlashTrax straight away (much quicker than using the PCMCIA adaptor in my laptop). When I'm back at camp I copy them to the Iomega hard drive, and this stays at camp the whole time. In this way I ensure that I'm not taking all my precious (or rubbish) images into the field every time, which is just inviting an accident to happen. Luckily on this trip I had solar power for my laptop so the double backup approach was feasible. So that's all the gear packed and I'm ready to leave.

The bush plane departed on time and treated me to a spectacular flight over the Shelikof Strait. We flew over snow capped volcanoes, glistening river deltas and meadows full of wild flowers and lush green grass. Eventually Zak, the pilot, lands the plane on a deserted beach where three figures are waiting to greet us. Brad, John and Jay quickly introduce themselves as my guides and



we haul my baggage upto the camp that is situated just above the beach. My room is a weatherport with a cot and comfortable sleeping bag, a cosy home from home. I quickly unpack and connect my laptop and hard drive, plus two chargers, to the solar panel. Then it's on with the waterproofs, sling the rucksack on my back (at 40lbs it's a bit more than a sling) and off we trot along the beach.

After several minutes we branch off along a bear trail through a forest, my ears instantly prick up for any tell tale sounds and I feel my heart quicken a beat. To be honest there is no real need as the bears can hear us a long way off and will get out of the way but it takes me time to get used to working with Grizzlies each time. After a few minutes wading through mud we arrive at a beautiful green meadow, overlooked on one side by a spectacular mountain range. There, sat down in the middle of the meadow, is a big Grizzly happily munching away on the fresh growth. Slowly we edge along the side of the meadow; he checks us out once and immediately accepts our presence. Finding a good spot amongst some logs we sit down to wait. I'm not one of these photographers that try to force the issues with bears – I always prefer to let them do their own thing in their own time. If they come close, great, it's because they want to. If not then I won't push them. Yes it can be frustrating when you're locked onto a feeding bear in beautiful light, and it simply will not look up to give me a shot. Rather than resorting to the detestable behaviour of making deliberate noise to make them look up, I just keep my mind focussed and always prepared for the shot. In this way I tend to get quite natural looks from animals such as bears, rather than the forced looks that using a less than scrupulous method might achieve.

I managed a few shots before the bear moved slowly off; we waited until sunset but little else happened. Bears are unpredictable in their nature, which makes working with them always exciting, and I knew that today was only the beginning. Tomorrow would be another day.

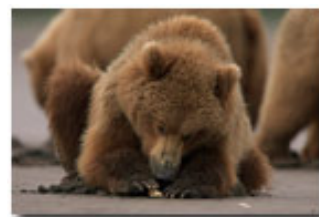
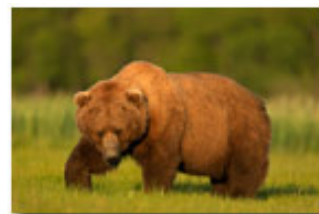
### June 21st

Bright sunshine again and worryingly hot, I wonder if this is really Alaska that I'm in. We trek out to the meadow but already it's too hot and there's only a young male called Skinny Guy hanging out. After an hour we move out of the meadow and check the tidal flats. Several bears were feeding way out, too far for us to walk, so I took a few group shots through the haze. They're not commercial at all, but will do nicely for my Grizzly book and what's more I like them. By now it's noon, hot and time to head back to camp.

At 7:00 PM we return to the meadow again, sitting quietly in our favourite spot from last night and waiting for any action to occur. Before long the meadow starts filling up, with Skinny Guy and Eddie putting in an appearance, albeit at a distance. They give us brief glances but then get down to the serious business of feeding. Gradually Eddie moves across the meadow and after a couple of hours she is within range of my 500mm. The light is really beautiful on her and luckily for me she hasn't begun her seasonal rubbing yet; hence her coat is in perfect condition. On cue she sits down and starts cleaning herself, I track her head with the autofocus all the time and keep the focussing point right on her eye. An easier option would of course be to just let the camera do the work and select all the focussing points, but you can never be sure where the camera will decide to focus. At such a low depth of field (I was set to f4 to maintain shutter speed) I have no margin for error, as my agents are hot on getting the eye in focus. Put another way there are a lot of great bear pictures out there from a lot of great photographers so to stand a chance of selling my pictures would have to be top notch. After preening for a few minutes Eddie suddenly looks into the forest and then nervously moves away. A cracking branch from the trees heralds a new arrival and a big boar called Elbows walks purposefully into the meadow. I quickly find out why he was so named, within a minute he was lying down on his elbows feeding. For an hour he presented me with the perfect butt shot, eventually I relented and took it for posterity. As the sun slowly set we carefully made our way from the meadow, a final glance over my shoulder showed me that Elbows was still hard at work, butt sticking right up into the air.

### June 22nd

By 8:00 AM it's really, really hot again and we know that it's pointless trudging out to the meadow for the morning light. So I spend the morning editing the previous day's work. When I'm in the field I can't really do a serious edit as I don't have a decent screen, but I can certainly remove the trash. Anything that looks slightly out of focus, has its eyes shut or head down gets consigned to the



recycle bin. I would remove more but the only software I have, the all-new Canon Digital Photo Professional, is rubbish and provides no workflow for any serious editing. I take the chance to top up the charge on the batteries that I've been using, especially the new Quantum Compact. I've only recently acquired this battery; it's a bit more bulky than the NP-E3 batteries supplied with the cameras, but lasts much longer. The 1D MK2 seems to have a much improved battery life over the 1Ds, which is a great bonus when out in the field for an extended time.



By mid afternoon the earlier heat subsides due to increasing cloud cover and again I prepare my gear for the trek out to the tidal flats. A call on the radio saves me the trouble; Ursula & family had decided to clam right in front of the camp. We watch them for 20 minutes or so, working out the direction that they are heading so that we can get ahead of their path. This is a much better approach than simply walking up to the bears, as this might well displace them from their feeding, which is unacceptable in anyone's book. As we walk slowly along the beach my guides constantly check the bears for signs of stress or displeasure, but they seem to accept our presence totally and carry on with their feeding. Finally we reach our spot and I set the tripod on its lowest level to get an intimate angle for the shot. I really want to try not only to get a shot of them digging for clams but one that shows how delicately they open it. One of the cubs, Emma, approaches us slowly, stops and starts digging. Knowing that I have just a few seconds I whip on my 1.4x teleconverter so that I can get right in tight with my 500mm (now a whopping 910mm with the converter and 1.3 crop of the 1D MK2). Lying on wet sand is no fun at all so I attach an angle finder and switched it to the 1.25x setting. One hot tip when you do use one of these handy attachments, remember to adjust the eye dioptre setting at the side of the viewfinder – without doing this the image will look slightly blurred.



Emma abruptly reaches her clam and flips it up onto the sand. With amazing dexterity she holds the clam down with one claw whilst inserting the other claw into the shell and ever so gently prizing it open. Through the viewfinder I notice that the other bears behind here were confusing the image so I swiveled the camera to portrait format to reduce this as much as I can. I select an autofocus point right on the clam as that will be the focus of the picture and set an aperture of f8 to ensure that Emma's nose will be in sharp focus too. Then the clam was just an empty shell and a satisfied Emma moves off to find more food. Eventually, after 2 hours of frantic digging, they'd had enough clams for today and head off towards the beach. This was the signal for the two cubs to play, and Digger wasted no time in chasing Emma all the way to the beach. Not having time to do much I just track them until they rear up, then let the motordrive go at full blast. Usually I like to pick and choose my shots but in situations like these it's sometimes best to just let rip. A few minutes later it is all over as they disappear into the brush; I filled up all three 2GB I-Pro cards so I hope that I've got something useful.

Back at camp there is just time to download the shots before heading out again. The sky looks ominously dark and sure enough by the time we reach the meadow there is a hint of rain in the air. The sight of a big boar paying close attention to a really beautiful sow though takes our attention away from the gloomy skies. Slowly the sow walks ahead and then waits for the boar to catch up, a sure sign that she is interested in his attentions. Not wanting to disturb anything we just sit still and sure enough he mounts her and starts to do the business. I knew this was a rare shot but also knew that there was no rush as Grizzly mating can take up to 45 minutes – good stamina dude. The light was appalling; at ISO 100 it was 1/60th at f5.6, which could lead to some camera shake. So I bumped the ISO of the 1D MK2 up to 400, as I knew that I could process some of the inherent noise from the image at a later date. That's the beauty of shooting RAW, the ability to correct situations in the field that you can do nothing about at a later stage, without the image degradation of a JPEG. After setting the ISO I looked up and the boar was taking a well-earned break, although the sow looked less than happy with all his weight on top of her. The final decision I had to make concerned composition and the subject and the weather conditions made that for me. With sunny skies and nice light I would have more options, but in this dismal light I had to eliminate as much of the sky and landscape as possible. So I just opted for a record shot, with a 1.4x teleconverter to bring them in as close as possible. All this time the bears carried on regardless, so I set about recording their actions for my book. The best shot of the sequence came towards the end, when the sow wanted him to stop and he clearly had other ideas. Without warning he grabbed her neck, baring his teeth and growling menacingly, I carefully made a couple of shots. Had I blasted with the motordrive then I'd probably have missed the moment as a repetitive motordrive sequence shakes the camera enough to cause blur in low light (by now it was below 1/60th at ISO 400). Finally the sow managed to pull away, a few minutes after they were well apart and grazing as if nothing happened. So ended a great day, even though the elements did their best to ruin it, which perhaps I'll have written on my tombstone as it describes my daily life exactly.

## June 23rd

The fog rolls in over night and by morning we're completely socked in. Still at least it's really cool so we head out early to the meadow. We hang out for several hours but nothing much happens, so we turn our attention again to the tidal flats. The fog has got thicker and the spectacular scene which usually greets us is hidden, although we do spot the courting couple from the previous evening as dull shapes in the mist. We strike out in a direct line for them, but the mist thickens and we soon lose all visual contact.



We decide to strike on regardless but after 15 minutes give up as we can't see a thing. My idea of following our footprints back to the meadow falls flat on its face as we discover the sand is too hard to show any prints. Damn. Not having any point of reference it's easy to get disorientated, which is not a good idea with the kind of swift tide that washes into the bay. In the distance I can hear the sea pounding against the rocks and I know that the headland is right at that point, so we head out towards it. After what seems an age we get to the sea and sure enough the headland looms to our right out of the mist. We reach it, climb up the bank and strike out on a bear trail back to camp. Suddenly my guide motions me to stop – "hey bear" he calls gently. Ahead on the trail I see three bears, not 30 foot away, watching us through the brush. Both of us recognise them as Ursula and her cubs, but we take no chances and back well off the trail, talking to her all the time. She passes slowly by, with Digger watching us out of the corner of his eye. Emma's inquisitive nature gets the better of her and she stops and watched us with a quizzical expression on her face. She leans against a tree and I regret having all cameras packed away in the rucksack as it's a great shot; the one thing that you don't do in such a situation is anything *interesting*! Realising that the others have forged ahead she ambles off to join them, after a few minutes we start to follow. We reach the beach as they are already disappearing out into the fog, fortunately in the direction of the sea. We strike out along the beach, hoping that when they reach the clam flats we'll get lucky and they'll come our way. It's a 50-50 chance and lady luck smiles on us. The mist is thick though, which rules out any close-ups or behaviour. So I use my 70-200mm with the 1.4 teleconverter to try some art. The bears have a very recognisable shape and therefore are perfect candidates for a silhouette. As always the trick with silhouettes is to shoot them underexposed; the arty nature of the shot dictates that I make them small in the frame too.

After an interesting 20 minutes or so they head back out to sea and we decide to leave them to their business and return to camp. By evening the fog has completely burnt off so it was off to the meadow again to sit in our usual spot by 7:00 PM. Over the course of the next 5 hours we were treated to some wonderful behaviour as first Skinny Guy, then Eddie, then Ursula & Cubs came to graze in our meadow. Ursula in particular was of real interest to me as she had a habit of standing upright to keep track of all the boars in the meadow; I have never managed to get any wild shots of this so was keen to break my duck. I had to be quick though with the autofocus point selection, as it needed to be right on her eye as she was at maximum height. Of course she always did it when I was focussed on someone else, but my knack of keeping both eyes open in such situations allowed me to get a decent percentage of the shots in the can. A beautiful rusty coloured boar then strode into the meadow and all sows immediately left. He was a pretty bulky guy with not much stomach clearance from the ground but he was so impressive. By now the light was starting to really turn red and I could see his coat glowing through the long grass. Using the LCD histogram I check my light readings several times to make sure there were no mess ups, just as I finish he strides out onto the grass in front of us. It's the closest that I've ever been to such a big boar and the stare that he gave me right down my lens is something that I'll never forget. It is just so awesome to be so close to such an animal and feel it's power. A fine end to the day.

## June 24th

Can this place get any hotter? By 8:00 AM we're already sweating so give up all ideas of going out as the bears will likely be in thick brush. Low tide is listed as 3:34 PM, which means I might get some decent light to work with instead of the midday sun. At 3 we head out and quickly find Eddie clamming by herself. I notice an area of surface water with a great reflection of the mountains and set up right there; I'm banking on Eddie's personable nature that she'll follow us. Sure enough she did and gave me the best shots of the trip. For once my low angle didn't work so I was forced to raise the tripod up to maximum height to get the reflection. I dispensed with the 500mm as portraits were not the order of the day; the picture was much wider than that. With my 70-200 I started shooting various compositions, usually with the bear small in the frame. This showed the bear dwarfed by the stunning mountain habitat, which I think worked really well. Exposure wise I chose an aperture of f16, which gave me a good balance between an isolated bear and one merged into the background. Of course it would have been much better if the surface water was a pure mirror, but this is a wild shot and not a studio creation so I can only take what I see.

The evening was no less exciting; Fat Boy, Elbows, Ursula & Cubs and Eddie all gave me really great opportunities and a newly formed street gang of three sub-adults romped around the meadow. My final shot of the night was of Digger, silhouetted by the setting sun and looking every inch the magnificent boar he would become.

Well I hope that you've enjoyed the diary and looking at the shots, I have to say that this has been one of my favourite trips for some. Bears have a special fascination for all of us and I can't wait to go back there this September. As I write this I'm packing for Finland where I'll be spending several nights in a hide trying to photograph the European Brown Bear. I'll let you know how I get on next month, that's all for now, happy shooting!

*Author's note* – next year I'll be running several tours that are geared towards photography and at least one will be to this Grizzly camp. If you are interested in hearing more then simply send a blank email with the subject "MAILING LIST" to [mailing@andyrouse.co.uk](mailto:mailing@andyrouse.co.uk). You'll then receive our monthly(ish) newsletter which will announce our tours as and when they are scheduled.

Andy Rouse is a professional wildlife photographer based in the U.K. His professional credits include hosting the Discovery Channel's Wildlife Photographer TV series, and the publication of six books, including his soon-to-be-released [The DSLR Masterclass](#). Andy's images are represented by NHPA and Getty Images and are sold worldwide. To learn more about Andy, check out his [NPN bio](#). To view more of Andy's work, visit his website at [www.andyrouse.co.uk](http://www.andyrouse.co.uk).

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