



Photo Itinerary - Elk Island National Park

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The tires hummed monotonously on the asphalt, as the silhouettes of a prairie landscape at dawn swept past the windows of our car. My wife Amy and I were on our way to Elk Island National Park, 45 kilometers (28 miles) east of Edmonton, Alberta, on Highway 16, to do some early morning photography, and enjoy the beauty of nature around us.

We normally concentrate our visits to the photogenic Astotin Lake area of Elk Island Park. However, we have also ventured out on the numerous trails in the Park where the chance of encountering wildlife increases tremendously. The trails meander through woods of aspen and poplar, skirt past wetlands, often busy with beavers, and wander over rolling grasslands, where we frequently cross paths with bison.

As we approached Elk Island, I was keenly interested in the clouds on the eastern horizon. Dark and two dimensional, they formed dramatic shapes against the brightening sky. My concern was whether the clouds would remain long enough to retain their "photogenicity."

The sun had not yet begun to paint the clouds with the traditional palette of warm colors, which assured me that we were still in time for the sunrise as we entered the Park. We travelled the Park road for 14 kilometers (8.5 miles) through rolling hills of aspen, marsh, and grasslands. As usual, the bison were present along the road and we passed several still slumbering in their wallows before we arrived at Astotin Lake.

As I parked the car, I hoped all the elements, a clear reflection, interesting cloud formations, and dazzling colors would come together to form the dramatic sunrise I anticipated.

We hastened to my chosen location, an extension of the floating boardwalk on a sheltered part of Astotin Lake. Once on the boardwalk, which bobbed up and down with every step I took, I went to work setting up the tripod. The water remained calm despite the chilled breeze that ruffled through the trees and grasses. The cool wind had begun to thin the clouds and pull them apart; however, I was not discouraged. Already the sun began to tinge the clouds with mauve and paint a pinkish hue on the horizon. All the elements of the sunrise were in place, and I quickly composed a sunrise shot that emphasized the dramatic clouds in the sky.

The clouds reflected in the water and formed a symmetrical pattern. Several mallards floated beneath the symmetry; their shapes duplicated beneath them. A small dark head of a muskrat glided past the mallards, disturbed their reflection with its wake, and then disappeared beneath the boardwalk. An American Bittern perched uncharacteristically on the railing of the boardwalk, which caused me to fumble for my 70-300mm lens. It flew off the moment the lens emerged from the bag. Amy, with her binoculars, found the bittern on the southern shore. To the south a noisy, ragged "V" of geese stitched the sky. Their honking reverberated over the lake as they flew over. They were heralding the beginning of autumn and I looked at the colors that were emerging into the dawn. Some of the aspen had already donned a crown of gold and stood out regally from the others yet in their summer greens.

We left the boardwalk and began to explore the windswept shoreline of the lake. I gazed out over the choppy water. Waterfowl bobbed here and there in the troughs of waves, and terns flashed the whites of their wings as they flew against the dark grey clouds. The leading edge of the clouds was smudged with mauve and I found a dramatic composition in the somber light.



I knelt among the vegetation that grew in the sandy soil, ignoring the dampness of the morning dew, and adjusted the tripod for the composition, when Amy drew my attention to a small flock of lesser yellowlegs which were probing the edge of the lake. They darted about, poking and stirring with their long, slender beaks. Occasionally, one would preen at its long twig like yellow legs. Gradually, they began to come closer, and I kept low not wishing to startle them away.

My thoughts turned again to my 70-300mm lens. This time I managed to attach the lens to the camera. Immediately, the nearest bird that was within range of my lens, obscuring itself in the sedge grass along the shore and defied my attempt to photograph it. It kept probing, poking, and stirring, until I moved slowly from my crouched position for a better view. It flew off, along with the rest of the flock, to a distant part of the shore.

I reattached my 28-80mm lens and resumed my landscape photography.

After I brushed off the wet sand from my knees, we wandered further up the undulating path that followed the shore of the lake. We had not gone far when suddenly the sun broke free of the clouds' shadowy embrace and illuminated the landscape in beautiful light rich in warm colors.

I looked back towards where I made my last composition, and realized how different it looked in the new light. I hastened back to recompose it as best as my memory would allow and chastised myself for lacking the patience to wait for the change in the light. I would cultivate that patience in the future.

Eventually, we returned to the car. I felt satisfied with having a good photographic outing and looked forward to coming to Elk Island National Park again soon. Autumn, and then winter, would provide new and wonderful images for me to find, and we would share in the enjoyment of nature.

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