

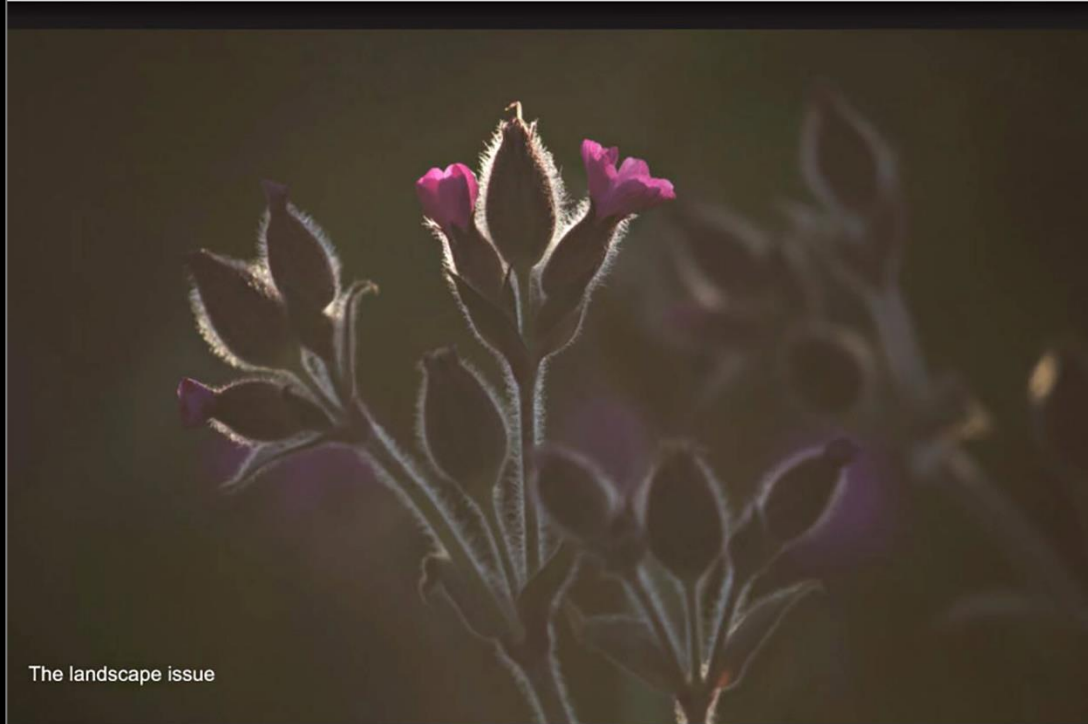
USING ART TO INSPIRE THE PROTECTION OF NATURE

A THURMANOVICH Publication

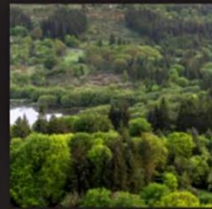
On Your Doorstep

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The landscape issue



IN SEARCH OF WINTER

By the end of February I was sick of waiting. Winter, which I remember in my childhood used to begin as early as November, now seems to delay its arrival until late January, and this year was refusing to appear at all. So on March 2nd I threw my camera, my cat and a few provisions into my car and headed north to find it.

First, some geographical context for my story: I live in the province of Nova Scotia on Canada's Atlantic coast. I spent my childhood in its capital city, Halifax, and recently settled on the south shore near the picturesque town of Lunenburg. Having done much traipsing about during the intervening forty years, I am now content to stick closer to home – no hardship, as there is plenty of inspiration in the wild coastal scenery and moody weather right on my doorstep. Here I make my (very modest) living as a photographic artist.

So, when I packed my car and headed north in March, it was just for a shortish drive to Cape Breton to explore the dramatic coastal and highland landscape between Inverness and Ingonish. Cape Breton, connected by causeway to mainland Nova Scotia, sticks out into the North Atlantic and is battered by weather systems that converge on it from every direction. The Highlands at its northern tip are especially notorious for "bad" winters, so I was guaranteed some snow. Or so I thought.

As it turned out, when I arrived in Cheticamp (where a rustic rental cottage was miraculously open in the off-season), I found the same dreary brown I had just left at home. But snow was promised in the forecast, so I settled in, anticipating fine photographic conditions for my four-day visit.

Those four days stretched into nine. Clouds gathered, the wind intensified, and the area was pummelled by one savage storm after another. No snow fell at first, or, more accurately, snow fell, but the wind snatched it away before it ever reached the ground. However eventually it stuck, and during my holiday several feet of it accumulated over the Highlands. Meanwhile the Ingonish coast heaved with sea ice, while over on the Cheticamp coast, wind speeds were clocked one afternoon at 152 kilometres per hour – hurricane force! – and there I was, hiking along a cliff-top trail, having the time of my life.



This page

Hurricane Force:
Wind whips up a frenzy of waves in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, viewed here from a cliff-top look-off about 10 km north of Cheticamp

Left page

A Breath of Fresh Air: Cheerful sunshine on fresh snow at Scotch Cove, Aspy Bay



26 On Top of the World: Streaks of evening light fall across Aspby Bay, framed by Sugarloaf and the North Mountain Range

I have often wondered why it is that some (most?) people yearn for the gentle warm breezes, long days and verdant fields of summer, while others (or am I the only one?) prefer winter's icy bleakness. After mulling it over for many years I have concluded that the difference between Summer People and Winter People is both physiological and psychological, and for those of us who are photographic artists, our preference is expressed in our visual style and choice of subject matter.

Physiologically the difference lies simply in our physical tolerance for heat or cold. I do not know how much of this tolerance is innate and how much develops in response to where we live (Alaska or Malaysia) or how our culture represents its local climate (celebrating or vilifying one season over another). However I do know that the thermostat in my house is set at 12 degrees Celsius and my bedroom window is cracked open on all but the bitterest of nights. Moreover, I become absurdly grumpy with meteorologists who predict "beautiful" hot days and apologize for snow in their weather forecasts.

The psychological difference between Summer People and Winter People is more nuanced. I hasten to add that my

analysis is unencumbered by any professional expertise, and based only on personal observations in my local environment.

Here in Nova Scotia the Summer People emerge about the same time as swarms of biting insects in the latter half of May. On sunny days, Summer People tend their lush lawns and colourful flower gardens, or flock to beaches and hiking trails for some quality time outdoors. They vanish quickly again in October with the first nip of frost.

In Cape Breton the Summer People will linger an extra week or two to marvel at the blazing autumn foliage for which the highland valleys are famous (just google "Cape Breton fall colours" to see thousands of examples). But by November the Summer People, like the leaves, are gone, their cottages closed, the campgrounds empty, and the roads are quiet again.

Then the Winter People come to life.

Winter is a season for loners and introverts. Winter People walk briskly in woolly socks, their pockets stuffed with Kleenex and their rucksacks with thermoses of hot tea. They press their noses excitedly to windows during dark and

stormy nights, bewitched by the clatter of wind and glint of ice, knowing their familiar world will look magically unfamiliar next morning under a fresh blanket of snow.

The photographers amongst them will ready their cameras. As the sun staggers briefly above the horizon, they will relish the mystery, the drama, or the feast of monochromatic minimalism that unfolds with each winter's day.

Winter light is angled low. On sunny days the photographic "golden hour" stretches almost from dawn till dusk as sunlight diffuses through the atmosphere on its oblique

route to the Earth. Rich blue skies are reflected in the snow; tiny colourful objects "pop" against it. Shadows punch sharply across the whiteness, creating powerful shapes and exaggerated textures.

On cloudy days, winter light creates a soft, muted, shadowless palette. Gone are the claustrophobic greens of summer and the saturated bling of autumn. Snow and ice combine to hide distractions and obscure background clutter. Leafless trees stand stark against grey skies. The world is sparse. The view is simple. Black, white and negative space prevail.



Into The Blue: As if chasing the passing cloud, a channel cuts through the sea ice around White Point at the mouth of Aspy Bay



Above:
The Geometry of Ice
(Meat Cove)



Right:
Sea Slurry (New Haven
Cove)

Sea ice is battered into large chunks ("pans") and a slurry of smaller fragments by the relentless pounding of North Atlantic storm waves



Top: Highland Profile; Bottom: Bare Bones

In October these deciduous hills are ablaze with colour – beautiful, yes, but I prefer the monochromatic starkness of winter (French Mountain, Cape Breton Highlands National Park)

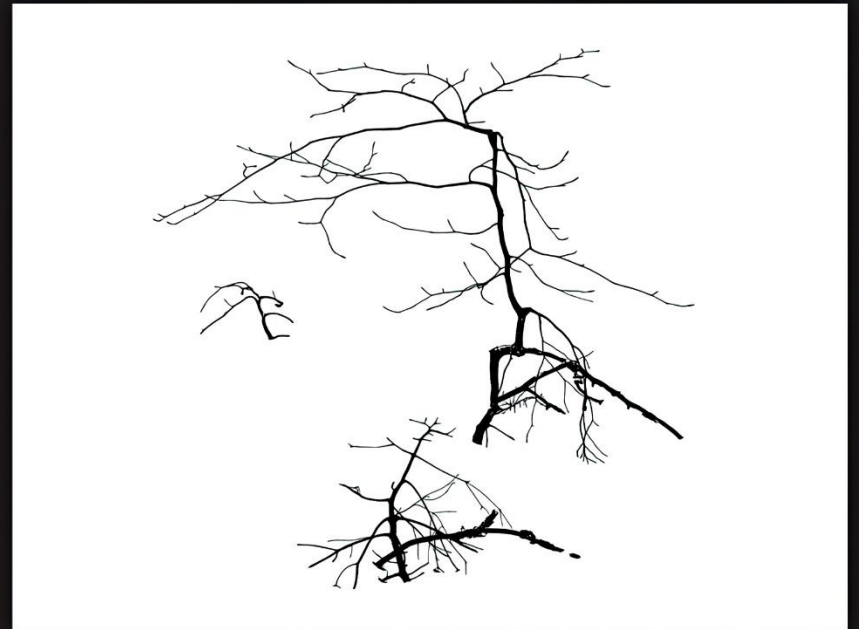


I immersed myself in this landscape for nine exhilarating days. Photographically it was a bonanza; I came away with almost 1,500 images. Admittedly many were of the "Yay, I Found Winter!" holiday snap variety, but others are more enduring. My favourites are those that evoke winter's wide-ranging moods and sense of infinite space.

Anyone who has visited Cape Breton during the Celtic Colours Festival in October will know that its scenic hairpin highways can resemble a geriatric conga line. So it may be hard to imagine that in March I was able to stop my car anywhere along the road – often in the middle of the road – to set up my camera. I hiked for a whole day on the popular

Skyline Trail without seeing another soul. I sat at empty look-offs for hours, soaking up the winter vistas. And pondering their future. I couldn't help wondering, given the ominous trajectory of global warming, whether I will be able to find winter here in March a decade from now? And if not, will anyone else mourn its loss?

My nine days passed all too quickly. The time came to gather up my camera, cat and bags and return to the brown world back at home. As I closed the cottage door and set off down the highway, I smiled at the happy irony as huge soft snowflakes began to fall.



Twig Ballet: Magic on a forest trail in Cape Breton Highlands National Park



North Mountain Mist: This birch tree overlooks a steep, misty valley cutting into the flank of North Mountain, Cape Breton Highlands National Park

Yay, I Found Winter! Kas celebrates on the Middle Head hiking trail overlooking Ingonish Bay and Cape Smokey



Kas Stone turned her love of exploring and photographing wild landscapes into a career more than a decade ago. Her portfolio now includes an extensive list of publications, exhibitions and awards, and she has clients in the tourism, environmental, corporate and retail sectors. Kas and her cat Harris travel extensively, especially in autumn and winter, yet never straying very far from their beautiful home on Nova Scotia's south shore

