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Gates of the Arctic National Park: Twelve Years of Wilderness Exploration by Joe Wilkins inspires readers to experience the arctic wilderness or the wilderness next door

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DALLAS: The stories contained in Gates of the Arctic National Park: Twelve Years of Wilderness Exploration (Brown Books Publishing Group) by Joe Wilkins take readers on an incredibly exciting and intimate journey through the northernmost and second largest national park in America. Located in the heart of the Brooks Range and far north of the Arctic Circle and indisputably the “toughest of the tough,” this park is often referred to as the “Blackbelt National Park.” This is an area of magnificent natural beauty; however, it also contains substantial dangers inherent in its rugged mountains, white-water rivers, wild animals, and challenging weather conditions. Drawing on the experience he accumulated during multiple decades of exploration in the Brooks Range, Wilkins’ informative book about this remote arctic mountainous wilderness is filled with stirring narrative descriptions punctuated with spectacular photography.

After retiring from his teaching career as a professor at The University of Illinois, Wilkins focused his energy on hiking, climbing, and backpacking inside some of the most remote portions of arctic Alaska’s Brooks Range. In addition to using canoes and packrafts, he solo-backpackered throughout the region. He also served as a Volunteer Backcountry Patroller for the National Park Service.
“Spending time alone in the vastness of the arctic makes the senses tingle,” says Wilkins. “Each day is new and exciting. Opportunities for personal achievement in these places are intermingled with the hard realization of human fragility. A single misstep during any one of the tens of thousands of steps I take each time I visit the wilderness could have life-changing or life-ending consequences.”

Displaying a comprehensive understanding of the harsh realities of the landscape, this book has captured the essence of one of the most beautiful and untouched regions of North America. Readers will be mesmerized by his descriptions of the Aurora Borealis flickering across the nighttime Alaskan skies as well as by Wilkins’ portrayal of the flight of a boreal owl. They will be able to almost smell the fragrant aromas of springtime’s arrival on the tundra, savor the fresh water of mountain lakes, and taste the rich sweetness of the region’s numerous wild berries.

Wilkins takes readers deep into a delicate, dangerous and yet quite vulnerable world containing diverse wildlife. He shares his exciting encounters with Dall sheep, rough legged hawks, fighting moose, musk oxen, arctic foxes, and a mother Grizzly bear nursing her cub. He presents his photographs of two charges by Grizzly bears and reports on a “nighttime conversation” he had with a pack of wolves deep in the boreal forest. He describes the geology, wildlife, and forests of the region. His depictions enable the reader to vicariously experience the intimidating weather, mountainous terrain, wild animals, deep-water lakes, and white-water rivers of this magnificent park.

Fellow adventurer, Francesco Bruti, MD, shares the importance of Wilkins’ book as being a valuable resource guide for the adventurous and the adventurous at heart. “I am especially fond of how he urges us to take a deep breath and listen to the silence of this wild world, to smell its fragrant aromas, and to observe the rhythm of its numerous mechanisms. Fundamentally, he is teaching us to appreciate, understand, and protect the wild places.”

Wilkins says, “My intent is to help readers better understand this ultimate wilderness of North America. I want them to become more aware of the extraordinary beauty that exists throughout the arctic wilderness and specifically in and around the Gates of the Arctic National Park. This is an important part of our national heritage and one of our most precious national treasures.”

_Gates of the Arctic National Park: Twelve Years of Wilderness Exploration_ will inspire readers to travel or dream of traveling beyond their boundaries. It is Wilkins’ intent to motivate readers to get out of their comfort zone and better understand and appreciate the natural landscapes of the American frontier – whether that frontier lies in northern Alaska or in the “wilderness next door.”

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About the Author

Beginning with his training in arctic wilderness survival at Elmendorf AFB in 1966, Joe Wilkins has a fifty-year span of experience in remote regions of arctic Alaska. During the early 1970’s, he was climbing and backpacking in the area which, in 1980, was designated Gates of the Arctic National Park.

Between 2005 and 2017, Wilkins made more than fifty trips into remote regions of the Brooks Range in and around this majestic park. Some of these were solo-backpacking trips during which he also utilized canoes and packrafts to explore lakes and rivers. During other trips, he served as a Volunteer Backcountry Patroller assisting the backcountry operations of the National Park Service in Gates of the Arctic National Park. Wilkins made the decision to write Gates of the Arctic: Twelve Years of Wilderness Exploration while backpacking 675 miles on a pilgrimage through the Pyrenees Mountains along El Camino de Santiago from the Grotto at Lourdes, France to the Cathedral in Santiago, Spain.

In addition to his widespread backpacking experiences in Alaska, his climbing, hiking and backpacking explorations in North America extend throughout the entire range of the Rocky Mountains from the border of Mexico, through Alberta, British Columbia, the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories of Canada.
How did the idea for Gates of the Arctic National Park: Twelve Years of Wilderness Exploration come into being?
I consciously chose to have my retirement years include activities which were as physically strenuous and challenging as possible. One of my retirement counselors at the university voiced the observation that people often don’t “wear out” from meeting challenges but they regularly “rust out” from inactivity - both physical and mental. I concurred with the philosophy of that observation; and, following my retirement, I immediately focused my backpacking and climbing activities deep inside the most rugged and remote area of North America - the Brooks Range.

Located in the very heart of the Brooks Range of mountains, Gates of the Arctic National Park is the northernmost and second largest national park in America. It was created in 1980 and is commonly known as the “Blackbelt National Park” - meaning that when compared with all other such areas, this park is the “toughest of the tough.” Any visit to the interior regions of “Gates” is far more than just a “walk in the park.”

I had my first exposure to the rugged and remote wilderness areas of interior Alaska in 1966 when I received arctic-wilderness-survival training at Elmendorf AFB as a young military officer. During the 1970’s, I began hiking, camping and backpacking in the area that, in a few years, would become Gates of the Arctic National Park. When I retired, I intensified my explorations of the most remote and rugged portions of this area. Between 2005 and 2017, I completed more than fifty trips into this region. Some of these trips were as a Volunteer Backcountry Patroller with the National Park Service. During others, I solo-backpacked and paddled canoes and packrafts on lakes and rivers throughout the region.

As one of the most remote wilderness areas in North America, what drew you to visit Gates of the Arctic National Park for the first time?
I chose to concentrate my explorations in this area precisely because it is one of the most rugged, pristine, and remote areas of North America as well as of the entire world. The beauty and dangers of its often intimidating weather, mountainous terrain, wild animals, and white-water rivers present unparalleled challenges to anyone entering the area. I chose to experience those challenges as thoroughly and completely as possible and report on them in this book.

Is there a particular place in Alaska or elsewhere that you have become fonder of as a result of creating this book?
I have a continuing, deep and abiding love for all wilderness areas; and, I have a particular fondness for the most remote and rugged regions of the mountainous arctic wilderness. My fascination with Alaska began with a book I received on my fifth birthday and it has only increased with each passing year and every additional trip “into the bush.” I have also described the similarities of numerous locations inside the park with other wilderness areas I have explored throughout North America, Asia and Europe.
Describe one of your favorite memories while touring a National Park. Have you had any unconventional stories involving wildlife?

I am very proud of the photographs, taken on two occasions, when I was charged by large Grizzly bears. I am also pleased with the photographs of a mother Grizzly nursing her cub and I’ve included those photographs in my book. However, one of my most exciting memories comes from the night a pack of wolves began returning my calls. We “conversed” for over an hour while I was camped alone deep in the boreal forest. This “nighttime conversation” is one of the most memorable and exciting experiences of my life.

What is one story you’d like to share about someone from that region who impacted you in some way?

Rather than singling out one person, I believe the remarkable individuals who work for the National Park Service provide extraordinary services to everyone who visits our National Parks. Despite their chronological ages, I generally refer to these individuals as “young” because they seem to invariably possess a “youthful” outlook on life. They serve the public while helping safeguard and protecting the precious assets of our National Parks. The most positive aspects of America’s “frontier spirit” are alive and well in today’s Alaska and the personnel of the National Park Service personify the finest examples of that spirit. They consistently maintain a lively “sense of wonderment” at being fortunate enough to be able to spend time “working” in the arctic wilderness. These individuals are shining examples of the best public servants in America.

Is nature a catalyst for your creativity and how? Where else do you draw inspiration for your photography?

I have watched and been inspired by the aurora borealis as it flickers across the nighttime Alaskan skies. I have smelled the fragrant aromas of springtime’s arrival on the tundra and listened to the calls of boreal owls in the arctic forests. I have stalked close to the shyest wolves and even the elusive Musk Oxen and Dall sheep. I learned to call wolves and moose and they returned my calls. I have paddled canoes and packrafts down arctic whitewater rivers. I have climbed in the Arrigetch Peaks, drunk the freshest water from remote mountain lakes and tasted the sweetness of wild blueberries, cloudberries, salmon berries, and lingonberry berries. I have experienced the Brooks Range and Gates of the Arctic National Park. This book is a comprehensive report on my explorations.

What did you learn from creating this Book? How have your experiences influenced your work?

I discovered the similarities between my preparations for extended trips into the remote wilderness with those of preparing and organizing my materials for writing this book. Both efforts required time and meticulous care. The beauty and the wonder of the arctic wilderness are so tremendous that writing about it was not difficult. Sometimes it was even hard to stop writing.

What do you hope to accomplish, teach and/or inspire in readers with Gates of the Arctic National Park: Twelve Years of Wilderness Exploration?

My desire is to help readers better understand the value of this ultimate wilderness of North America. I want them to become more aware of the extraordinary beauty that exists in the arctic wilderness and specifically in Gates of the Arctic National Park. This is one of our most precious national treasures.
As we departed for multiple weeks of backpacking among the rugged and beautiful Arrigetch Peaks—the first of my numerous backcountry travels with Joe—I remember being fascinated by what little I knew of him. I had been told of his military history and the time he spent alone in the jungles of Asia, but the image of a dangerous special-operations commando seemed hard to reconcile with the kind, warmhearted, mild-mannered professor I had just met. But by the end of our mountainous trek—through thick brush, steep scree slopes, tricky river crossings, and days on end of cold rain and snow—I had gained a great appreciation for Joe’s ability to bridge these seemingly contradictory descriptions. He was all those things, and by the end of our trip, this real-life “most interesting man in the world”—in addition to being a superbly competent wilderness companion—had also become a great teacher and good friend. Joe’s book provides readers with a unique opportunity to share the experiences of exploring America’s ultimate frontier.

—Doug Jewell, Former Park Ranger
Anchorage, Alaska

This is a magnificent book about Gates of the Arctic National Park written by a wilderness authority. Joe Wilkins is intimately acquainted with this park and the surrounding portions of the Brooks Range. Few people have invested so much time and effort in exploring and getting to know this area. His descriptions of the region are accurate, current, and authentic. Joe also brings well-deserved recognition to the dedicated personnel of the National Park Service. He is indeed part of “our family.”

—Zak Richter, Park Ranger (Retired)
Gates of the Arctic National Park

Few people will have the privilege of stepping inside the borders of Gates of the Arctic National Park; for this reason, the pictures and insights shared by Joe Wilkins are truly a gift to the entire nation. The wilderness, the serene beauty of the landscape, and the majestic inhabitants of the Alaskan wilderness can yield a powerful sense of peace and harmony. Given Joe’s combat experiences as a young man in Vietnam, it is most understandable why he has returned to this area year after year. For combat veterans, the therapeutic effects of the Great Outdoors can provide a healing tranquility. It is easy to understand why Alaska is home to more military veterans than any other state.

—David E. McCourtney
Eagle River, Alaska
West Point class of 1999
Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan)
Excerpts from the book...

“Where all roads end, the real magnificence of the arctic wilderness commences and no roads reach Gates of the Arctic National Park.”

“This is a land of multiple complexities and amazing contrasts. Nowhere else in North America does it get darker, colder, or more wild.”

“Hearing the nearby growl of a grizzly bear, the howl of a wolf, the snarl of a wolverine, or the screech of a lynx during the night while sleeping in a tiny tent pitched high in the mountains, far out on the tundra, or deep in the boreal forest can evoke primal memories of ancient threats in addition to the presence of actual and current dangers lurking in the darkness.”

“A person’s view of the harsh world ‘out there’ is dominated by a marvelously big sky, unpredictable weather, rugged mountains, wild animals, challenging rivers, and frequently intimidating amounts of snow and ice.”
SUMMARY

After retiring from the teaching faculty of the University of Illinois at Springfield, Joe Wilkins focused his backpacking adventures in and around Gates of the Arctic National Park in Alaska. He was invited by the National Park Service to serve as a Volunteer Backcountry Patroller and assisted the backcountry operations of the NPS with his experience and expertise. Between 2005 and 2017, he completed more than fifty trips through some of the most remote and rugged mountainous wilderness areas of North America. Gates of the Arctic National Park: Twelve Years of Wilderness Exploration provides current, thorough and detailed information about this unrivaled park together with spectacular photography of its mountains, animals, lakes and rivers. Wilkins has created a definitive, perennial book about one of the country’s most enchanting national parks that will stand the test of time. It is no surprise that Wilkins consistently describes this park as the nation’s most magnificent national park!