My Wrangell Mountains
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“The mountains are calling and I must go.”

—John Muir
Even with the best of intentions, strength, skill, and endurance, the scale of Alaska’s greatest mountain range demands more than a lifetime to explore by foot or ski. One cannot appreciate this without trying first, yet the hindsight and humility gained by years of backcountry travel open the senses fully for exploration by air. My connections with this landscape, with Hombi, and with our close friends, the Claus family, began as I was just making this realization for myself. Though I had lived in Alaska for years, it was only after I became a pilot and experienced the inestimable freedom afforded by a small airplane, that was I truly living in Alaska. Paul Claus had already shared this truth with Hombi, as his father John had shared with Paul before, and as Paul and Donna have now shared with their three children raised in the Wrangells. All of these souls have built their appreciation and love of this landscape with years of climbing, skiing, hiking, hunting—exploring on foot and in the air. This essence is present in Hombi’s photos; the perspectives are from both modes of exploration, perspectives gained from years in the Wrangells.

Worldwide there are few landscapes to compare with Wrangell-St. Elias. From the broad, high-energy Pacific beaches fringed with dense forests on the Gulf of Alaska, unrivaled coastal relief quickly climbs to the summits of St. Elias and Logan. Inland from here, past measureless icefields, the land plummets down deeply incised chasms into a desert-like rain shadow below. This in turn lies at the feet of more mountains—now the Wrangell volcanoes proper—surrounded by canyons and gorges often filled with shifting and evil glacial-fed slurries of gravel, rock, mud, and water. The landscape is young, restless, and filled with beauty gentle and harsh. There is life here too, sparse and tough, wonderfully strong and enduring, often a surprise to encounter.
Many of Alaska’s mountain ranges are long in extent but comparatively narrow in width—upon climbing to a pass or divide you might see past the mountains to the foothills and beyond to tundra or ocean. Not so in Wrangell-St. Elias. The ranges are thick, deep in all directions, and every horizon gained promises another climb to another divide before the next horizon revealed. Nowhere else in Alaska can you become so endlessly surrounded by high mountains, glaciers, rock, and ice. Mountains are born of tectonic forces, crustal plates moving such that their edges press upon each other, deforming in the act. The Wrangell-St. Elias range lies at the end of the more than 1,000-kilometer-long Queen Charlotte–Fairweather Fault, where the leading edge of the Yakutat Block collision marks an abrupt transition from rapid strike-slip motion to crustal shortening. This Yakutat corner, formed between North America’s greatest transform boundary and Alaska, influences and drives deformation across the entirety of southern Alaska and the Yukon and western Northwest Territories. The focus and center of this corner collision runs roughly from Icy Bay to the summits of St. Elias and Logan, spreading outward from there. These peaks are themselves at the center of extensive icefields. Rising so high and so close to the Pacific Ocean, the mountains suffer prodigious precipitation. Here, the snow never completely melts, but rather each snowfall is crushed successively under its own weight into ice and then into flowing glaciers. Gravity, water, and ice conspire to bring the growing mountains down. Landslides drive down from the peaks. Glaciers grind, pluck, convey, and bulldoze rock and mud while rivers cut valleys and transport gravel and silt. These actions occur not in a theoretical, geology-lecture sense, but as you watch. The land is that young, that wild.

Hombi too is young and wild—perhaps less so now than before—but he still approaches many things as a child would. This is perhaps his most enduring quality and what keeps his senses open to beauty. Wild, as well, to have climbed, skied, and explored here as he has, sometimes risking all in the pursuit of now as the only moment that matters. But there is no need to beware of his flashing eyes and floating hair: Hombi’s tastes of paradise are happily and earnestly shared in a drive that comes from deep in his kind soul. And time spent in the moment makes for great photography.

Chris Larsen, geophysicist
Fairbanks, Alaska
February 2011
In the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, mountains are what it’s all about. Mountains are the beginning and the ending of every view. To spend time in the Wrangells is to spend time in the company of mountains.

For Swiss-born photographer Ruedi Homberger—Hombi to family and friends—what could be more natural? He was raised in the mountains around Arosa, where hiking, skiing, and climbing have been a way of life. Being the son of photographers certainly encouraged an awareness of beauty and a means to capture and record it. A camera is part of his entity, and his skill comes from his constant practice.

As mountainous and picturesque as Switzerland is, bigger and wilder places and adventures called to Ruedi.

You may wonder how a Swiss mountain climber and adventurer got to Alaska. Would you believe a chance meeting in Nepal, in 1989, with an Alaska mountain climber and adventurer?

Alaskan Paul Claus was charmed by the sight of a tall man walking the streets of Nepal with his young daughter perched on his shoulders. Paul missed his own young daughter and newborn son, and the sight struck a chord. A conversation led to an invitation that has steadily grown into a deep and lasting friendship of over twenty years.

Ruedi’s first trips to Alaska were to climb mountains and ski, pursuits not unusual in our state. The unique part was connecting with the Claus family. Their home and lodge are only accessible by airplane and lie in the heart of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. Paul and
his father, John, are remarkable bush pilots. Their flying skills took Ruedi to remote areas for climbing and extreme skiing.

At thirteen million acres, the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is the largest park in the United States. The park is, in fact, larger than Switzerland, and its mountains are taller and greater in number. These lands are so rugged and unexplored that many of the rivers and mountains are unnamed. It carries scars of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and the futile attempts by man to tame the landscape.

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, combined with Kluane National Park and Preserve in the Yukon, Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, and Tatshenshini-Alsek Provincial Park in British Columbia form one Natural World Heritage Site totaling more than twenty-four million acres. This is the largest contiguous expanse of protected land in the world.

So the rugged, pristine wilderness called and Ruedi answered. Hombi was like a kid in a candy store (and he still is). Over the past twenty years, Paul and Hombi, along with other friends, have climbed many named and unnamed peaks. They made the first ascents of Mount Miller, Mount Anderson, Mount George, and Mount Hawkins and the second ascent of University Peak. They also summited Mount Logan, King Peak, Mount St. Elias, Mount Bona, Mount Bear, and Mount Blackburn, among others.

Through these adventures, Ruedi developed a firsthand knowledge of and a personal relationship with the mountains. Soon Ruedi realized that flying was the way to see and explore more of the area. So, at sixty years old, Ruedi learned to fly a Super Cub airplane. The Super Cub is a small, sturdy airplane that people jokingly say you wear more than ride in. The plane is just big enough for the pilot and half of a passenger to sit directly behind the pilot. It is usually equipped with “Tundra Tires”: big, soft tires that permit landings on rough tundra, sandbars, and other areas without landing strips. With the addition of skis to the plane, it also has the ability to land on snow and glaciers. Flying opened a whole new world for Ruedi.
Flying over Alaska and the Wrangells is like reading a best-selling mystery novel—it’s a page-turner for sure. There is always another mountain range to cross or river valley to follow. An airplane takes you farther and faster than skies and opens new horizons. The continuity and natural flow of the topography are evident from the air. As Ruedi notes, there are no actual lines across the land marking borders and boundaries: it’s an open map.

The Wrangell-St. Elias Mountains spawn the state’s largest glaciers. From the air, you can view the textbooks of the three Gs—geography, geology, and glaciology—all spread before you. Nine mountains in the park rise above 14,000 feet, with four peaks soaring above 16,000 feet.

Canada’s Mount Logan climbs to 19,850 feet and is eclipsed only by Mount McKinley, known as Denali to Alaskans, which shoulders its way 20,320 feet into the sky.

The rugged rock walls reveal stories of the Pleistocene era. Fossils of ancient sea creatures now reside 10,000 feet above sea level, and hints of copper and gold still remain in their rock vaults.

From the air you can also learn the stories of this remote land: the triumphs and tragedies, successes and failures of life in the wilderness. Join Ruedi for the journey of a lifetime through “his Wrangells.”

Jona Van Zyle
The view across Nizina River, Mt. Blackburn (16,390 feet), and Regal Mountain (13,845 feet).
TOP  Paul Claus on a high landing spot above Hawkins Glacier with University Peak.
ABOVE  Paul’s Super Cub Alpha approaches a short landing strip near Barnard Glacier.
RIGHT  High above Nizina River.
OPPOSITE  Ross Green Lake.
ABOVE  Rock Glacier near Chimney Mountain (6,575 feet).

OPPOSITE  Ptarmigan Lake with Mt. Natazhat (13,435 feet).