

Beneath a Dancing Sky

A Night Under the Aurora in Glacier National Park

Jennifer Renwick

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by Jennifer Renwick

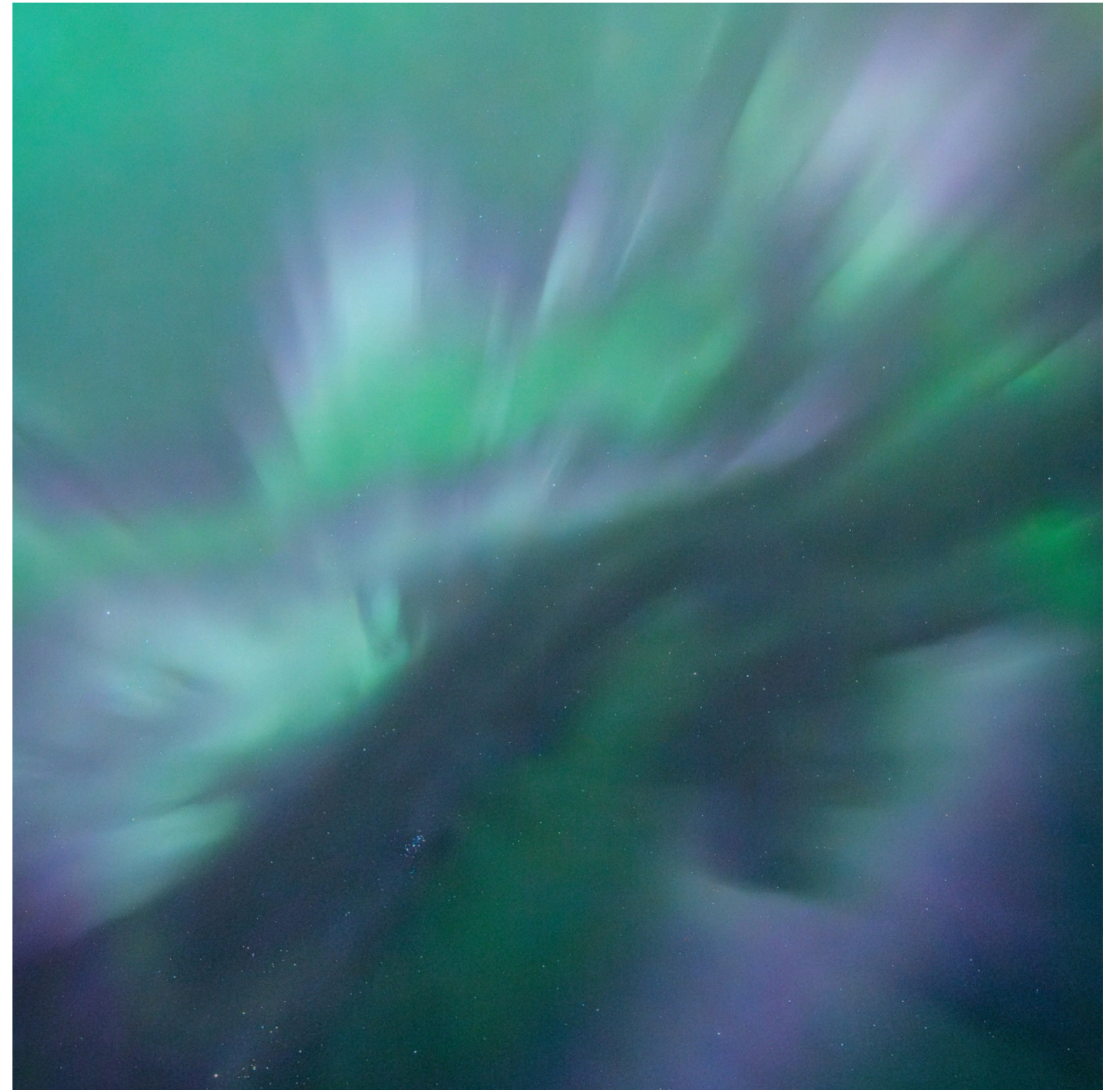
jennifer@jenniferrenwick.com


www.jenniferrenwick.com

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*Dancing in the dark,
Green ribbons kiss the still peaks,
Night's breath hums with light.*

Preface

On October 10, 2024, a predicted G4 severe geomagnetic storm reached Earth after the sun unleashed a massive CME (Coronal Mass Ejection) the day before. We were in Yellowstone National Park when the alert came through on our phones. After much deliberation, we boldly decided to drive north to Glacier National Park to witness and photograph the event.

The story truly begins on September 29, when we left Yellowstone after a month of teaching photography workshops. Our next stop was the Oregon Coast for another workshop, but we decided to break up the trip with a visit to Mount Rainier National Park. We spent two days driving there and enjoyed four wonderful days exploring the area. On the third day, news broke of a solar flare that could create a significant geomagnetic storm. However, forecasts across the Pacific Northwest, including Rainier, were cloudy. The only clear skies were back in Yellowstone.

We debated whether it was worth returning to Yellowstone after leaving, but the possibility of capturing the aurora again there convinced us to take the chance. After a two-day drive, we arrived only to find the storm had fizzled out. While disappointed, we laughed at the risk, knowing we'd have regretted not trying. We made the most of our time by revisiting our favorite park and having the chance to photograph it for a few extra days.

A few nights later, we were rewarded with a small but beautiful aurora display, which we photographed with friends [Michael Frye](#), Claudia, and Kristal Leonard. Back at the trailer that night (the night before we were supposed to leave to head to the coast), we received a G4 storm watch for a new, fast-moving, Earth-directed CME. The forecast for Yellowstone and the Pacific Northwest was grim as overcast skies loomed everywhere but Glacier National Park. Though Glacier was a six-hour drive north and would add time to travel back to the Oregon Coast, Michael and Claudia helped convince us to go. We hit the road the following day, arriving just in time to park and head out to photograph along Going-to-the-Sun Road.

I have fond memories of Glacier, from trips with David and earlier adventures with my father during our dad-daughter outings to the West. Kristal had also decided to join all of us, making the night even more special, and it was shaping up to be a memorable evening with friends and the aurora.

Preface (cont.)

That night was one of the most magical of my life. Despite the fatigue the following days as we raced to the Oregon Coast, the experience was worth every effort. While the May storm in Yellowstone had been extraordinary, this surpassed it. Being further north, directly under the auroral oval, gave us the most active and vibrant aurora display we had ever witnessed. I'm so grateful we took the risk to head to Glacier, and it wouldn't have been possible without the earlier chance we'd taken in Yellowstone, which positioned us closer.

Nature photography is about taking chances. While we cherish whatever conditions we're given, sometimes we must actively seek the best scenarios. It doesn't always work, but the rewards are profound when it does, and the photography is unforgettable.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have experienced this twice in one year. I never imagined having the chance again, alone in another park with such personal significance. The fact that we could experience it with good friends made it even more special.

This ebook chronicles that extraordinary night, with narratives from each location as we chased the aurora through Glacier National Park. Every image comes from that evening and reflects my wonder and emotion. I hope you enjoy reading this journey as much as I enjoyed experiencing a magical night under the northern lights in Glacier National Park.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Renwick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and a long, horizontal flourish at the end.

The Evening Begins

Time was of the essence as we began our evening adventure, hastily parking our travel trailer at a campground in West Glacier. It was around 5:30 PM, leaving us precious little time to prepare. I whipped up an iced huckleberry latte—a fitting tribute to being in huckleberry country—and we called in an order for pizza from a local spot down the road, planning to grab it on our way into Glacier National Park. I thought caffeine and pizza were a perfect pairing for a night of aurora chasing! We rushed off to pick up our dinner and entered the park through the West Entrance.

It was an exhilarating return to a place we hadn't visited in over eight years. We slowly remembered locations as we paused at a few spots along the way, scouting locations and making mental notes of pullouts with unobstructed views to the north. We planned to follow the iconic Going-to-the-Sun Road, which winds through some of the park's most stunning landscapes. We arrived at Oberlin Bend, where we met with Michael and Claudia. Twilight had descended, and after exchanging our scouting notes, we decided to start the night's aurora chase at Lake McDonald.

As we drove down to the lake, the sky was still a dusky blue and not yet dark. Glancing upward, I noticed something unusual. I slid open the moonroof and gasped. Above us, the auroral corona was already shimmering and dancing across the sky. David pulled over, and we spilled out of our cars, gazing skyward in awe. The emotion hit me, and tears welled up in my eyes out of happiness and gratitude. The fact that the aurora was visible even before the night had fully descended was an incredible omen of what lay ahead for the evening.



An early evening auroral corona made an appearance right after the sun set



Early evening auroral corona overhead

Lake McDonald

Our first destination was Lake McDonald, which has always held a special place in my heart. When David asked me where I wanted to begin the evening most, Lake McDonald was my immediate answer. It felt like the perfect way to start our journey along the Going-to-the-Sun Road.

The four of us parked behind the lodge and headed down to the shoreline, where we had scouted some promising spots earlier. The auroral corona that had been dancing so vividly earlier had calmed, now replaced by tall, elegant pillars of pink and purple light rising above the northern mountains. The lake lay still, its surface a mirror to the soft hues glowing in the sky. The evening hushed as a peaceful silence wrapped itself around us.

We stood in awe, soaking in the beauty as the aurora danced gracefully across the night sky. Occasionally, the calm was broken by the faint whispers of other aurora watchers nearby, but even their voices seemed to honor the stillness.

The gentle lapping of the lake against the rocky beach and the vibrant colors painting the night created a moment of pure serenity. It was a perfect beginning to our night of wonder.





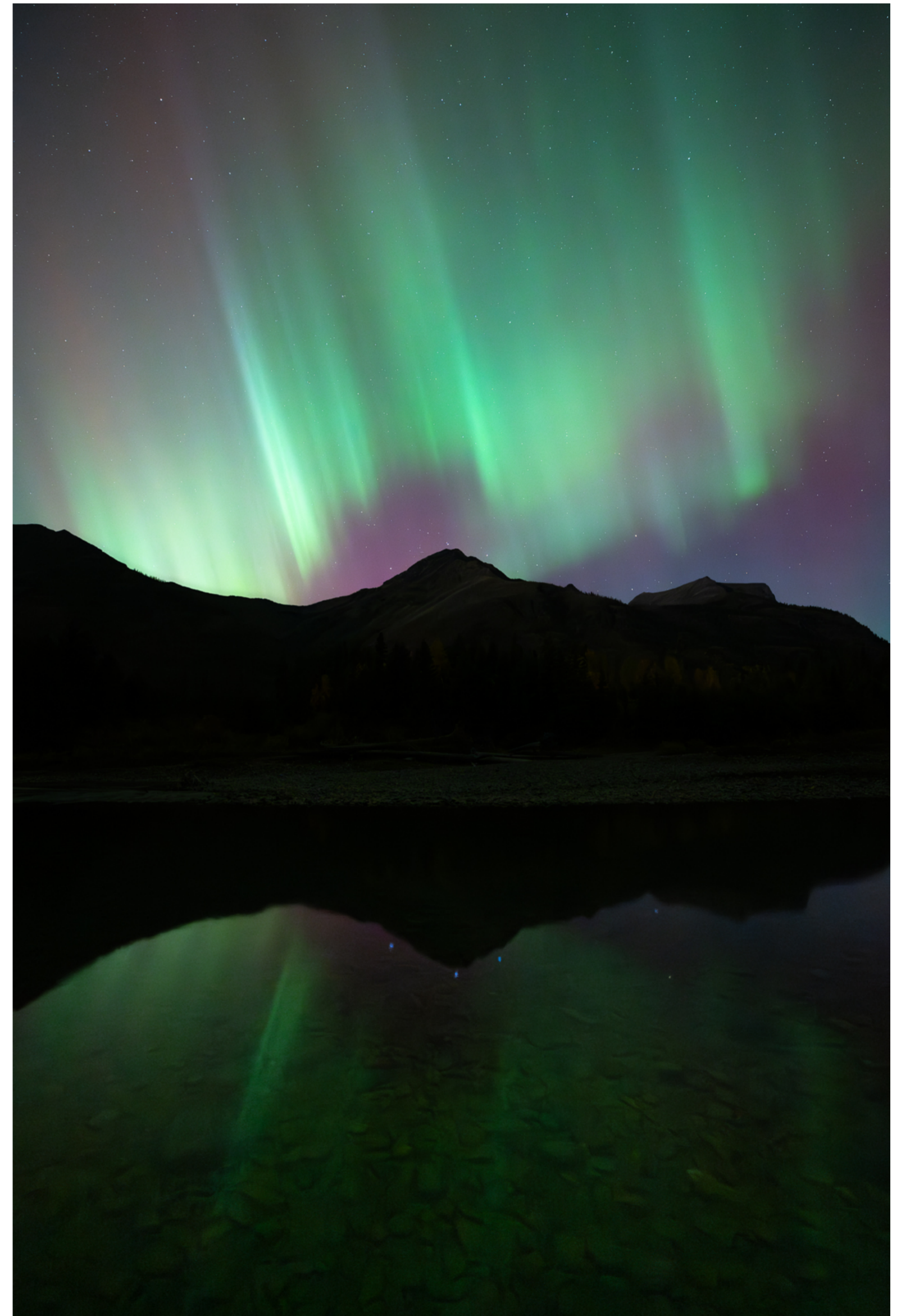
Lake McDonald

McDonald Creek

After leaving Lake McDonald, we continued our journey up Going-to-the-Sun Road, stopping at other locations we had scouted earlier. One of these locations was along McDonald Creek, where the aurora's glow mirrored in a still and quiet creek area. We set up on a rocky shoreline, capturing the reflections as the aurora shifted from pink and purple pillars to vibrant green ribbons and then back to a mix of pinks and greens. The most enchanting aspect of this display was its constant transformation of an ever-changing palette of light and color. One moment, the sky was dominated by bold greens, and the next, soft pinks and reds would gracefully return, weaving a dynamic story above. While we were watching from this location, our friend Kristal arrived to join us for the evening.

As I marveled at the beauty, I reminded myself to pause and absorb the experience, not just through the lens of my camera but with my own eyes and heart. At one point, I looked up, and to my astonishment, the auroral corona reappeared, more vivid and active than before. Reds and greens surged and swirled, creating intricate, mesmerizing shapes that seemed alive. We all turned our focus upward, captivated by the brilliance of the display.

Eventually, the intensity faded, and the aurora settled back into serene green ribbons drifting over the mountains. We took a few final moments to appreciate the tranquil beauty of the creek and its reflections before deciding to pack up and move farther along the road, eager to see what other wonders the night had in store.



McDonald Creek



McDonald Creek



McDonald Creek



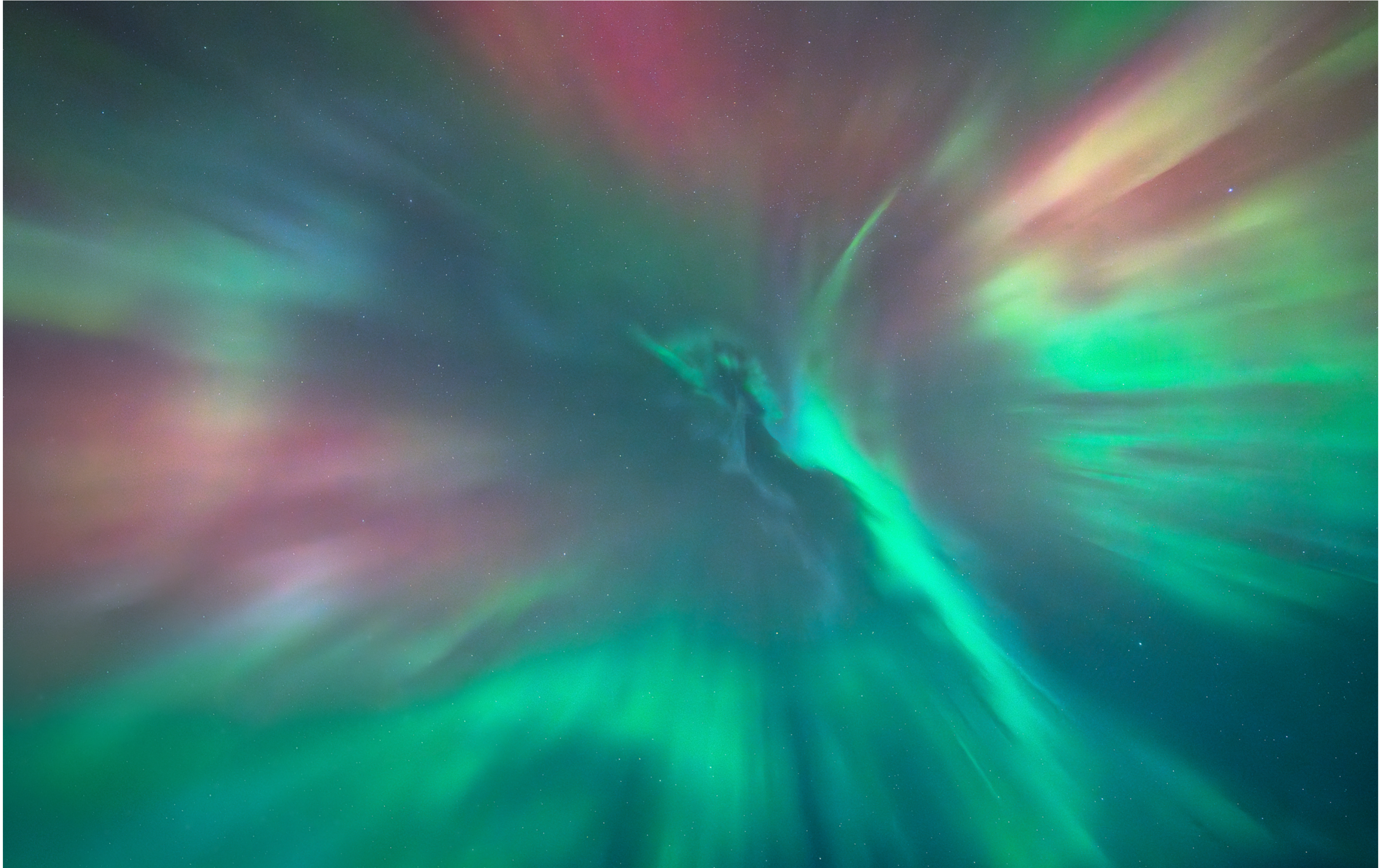
McDonald Creek



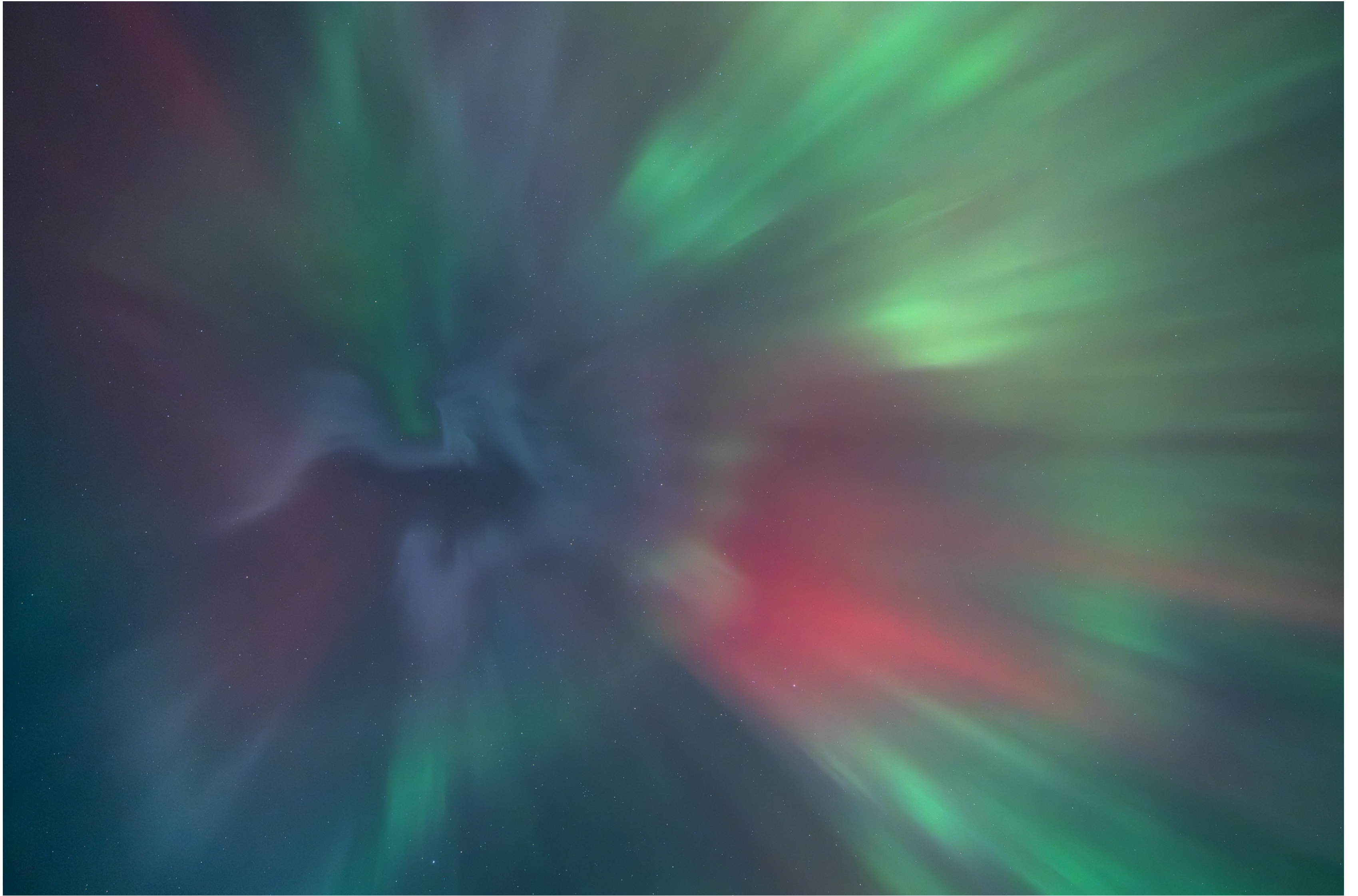
McDonald Creek

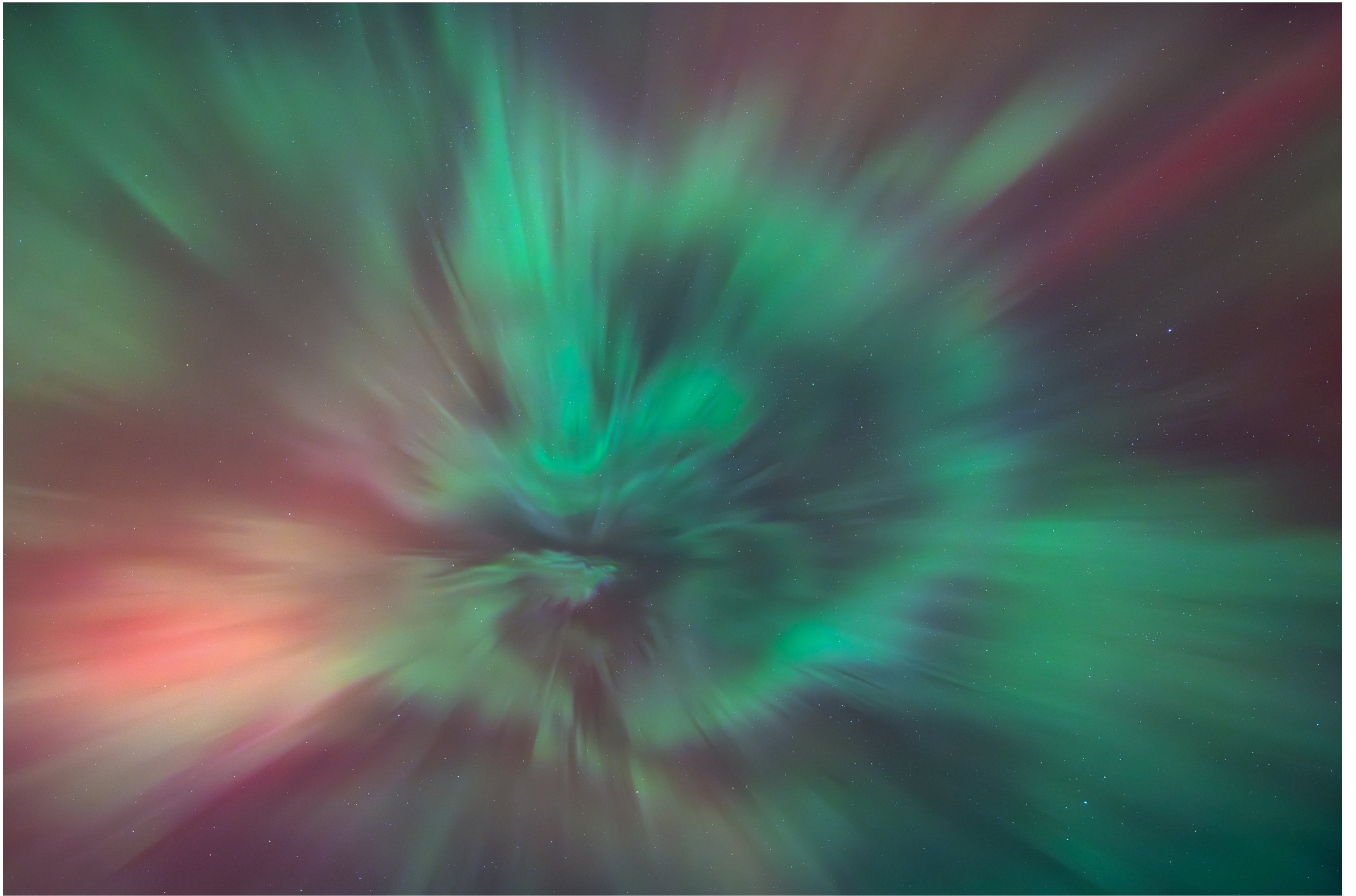


The auroral corona reappears and dances above McDonald Creek











After the auroral corona burst quieted down, green pillars took over the sky over McDonald Creek

Oberlin Bend and Logan Pass



Green auroral ribbons viewed from Oberlin Bend

As we continued up the road, the aurora softened, and the entire sky took on a glowing green hue as we arrived at the parking lot at Oberlin Bend. We exchanged friendly greetings with other aurora photographers and watchers, joining them in pointing our cameras toward the luminous sky. The aurora now appeared in elegant green ribbons and lines, stretching and weaving across the expanse above. Green dominated the scene, and the dynamic, shifting forms were mesmerizing.

After photographing and observing from the viewing platform, we moved a short distance to Logan Pass. Though the display had calmed, we checked the aurora forecast and noted that the oval remained strong, with the index still holding at an impressive Kp 8.

Logan Pass, typically a bustling hub during peak season, now felt hauntingly serene in the stillness of the early morning hours. The contrast was striking and beautiful. It was around 1 am, and the energy in the park had begun to wane, with many onlookers starting to retreat for the night. Fueled by a caffeine boost, my adrenaline kept me wide awake and eager for what was next. We savored the light show while sharing our now-cold but satisfying pizza. Nights like this have a way of making you forget hunger as excitement and awe take over.

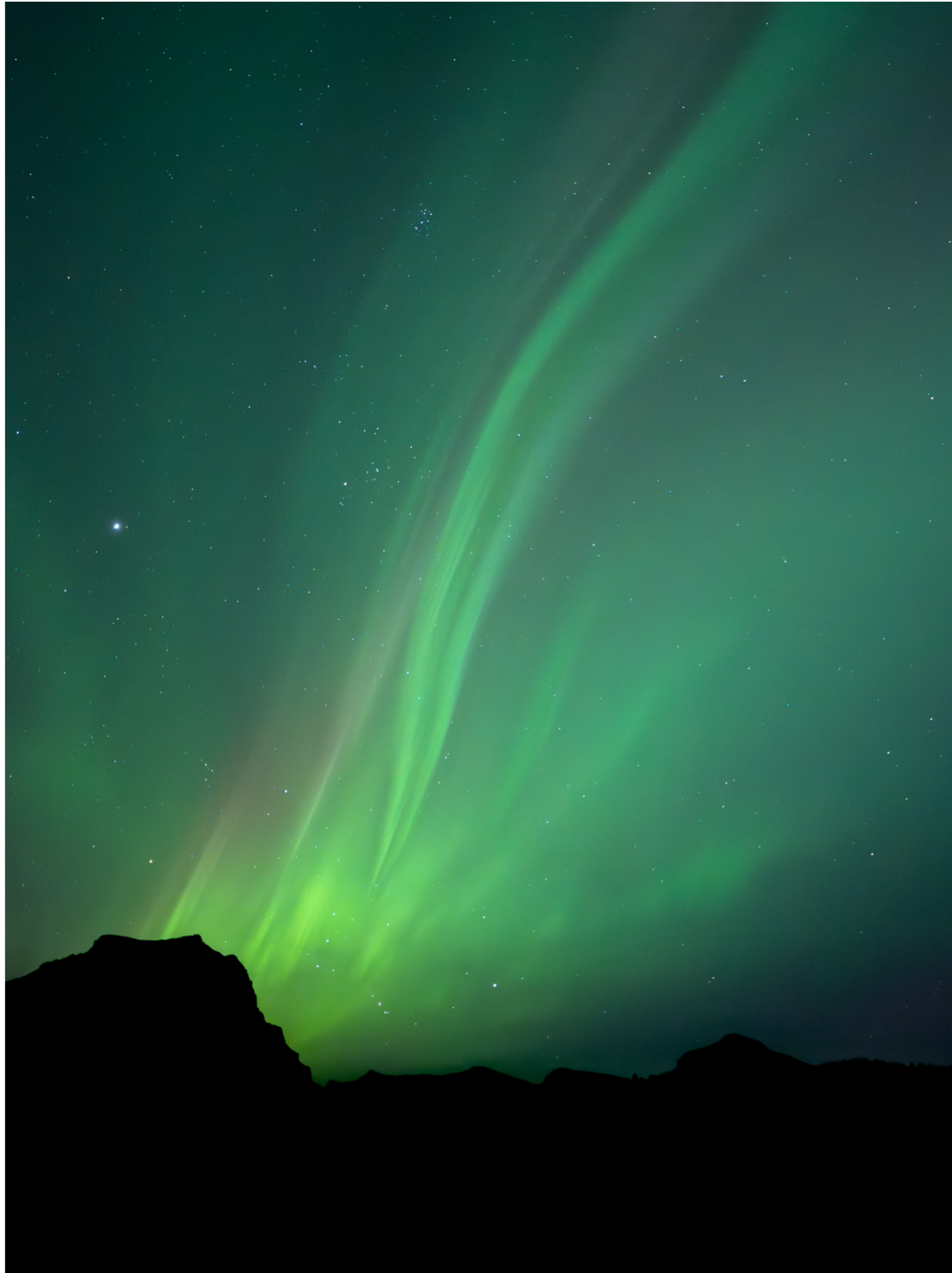
David and I checked in with each other, acknowledging the long day we'd already had, but neither of us was ready to stop chasing the aurora. With renewed determination, we packed up and started the drive down the pass.



Green auroral pillars and ribbons looking out from Oberlin Bend



Interesting auroral lines above Oberlin Bend



Green ribbons and streaks over Logan Pass.



Saint Mary Lake and Wild Goose Island

Saint Mary Lake

We arrived at Wild Goose Island Lookout in time to witness the aurora come alive again. In moments, the once-quiet sky erupted into a frenzied dance of coronas and ribbons. After capturing a few photographs of the colorful display reflected in the lake, I paused to take in the compelling scenes unfolding in every direction.

The lake mirrored the sky's dominant colors, casting Wild Goose Island in a soft glow against the darkened landscape. The green light bathed the surroundings, and while I had primarily focused on silhouettes throughout the night, I experimented with a few longer exposures to capture the beauty of the surrounding landscape. This lookout had always been one of my favorite spots. I never imagined I'd return to witness such a stunning aurora from the same vantage point years later.

As the aurora continued its vibrant display, we returned to another familiar lookout from past visits. When we arrived, the activity had quieted again, leaving the sky awash in green and pink with occasional corona bursts. The flashing in the sky was visible at intervals even to the naked eye. It was nearing 3 am, and our adrenaline was beginning to fade. Though tempted to explore further north on the park's east side, we reluctantly decided it was time to head back to camp. The morning was fast approaching.

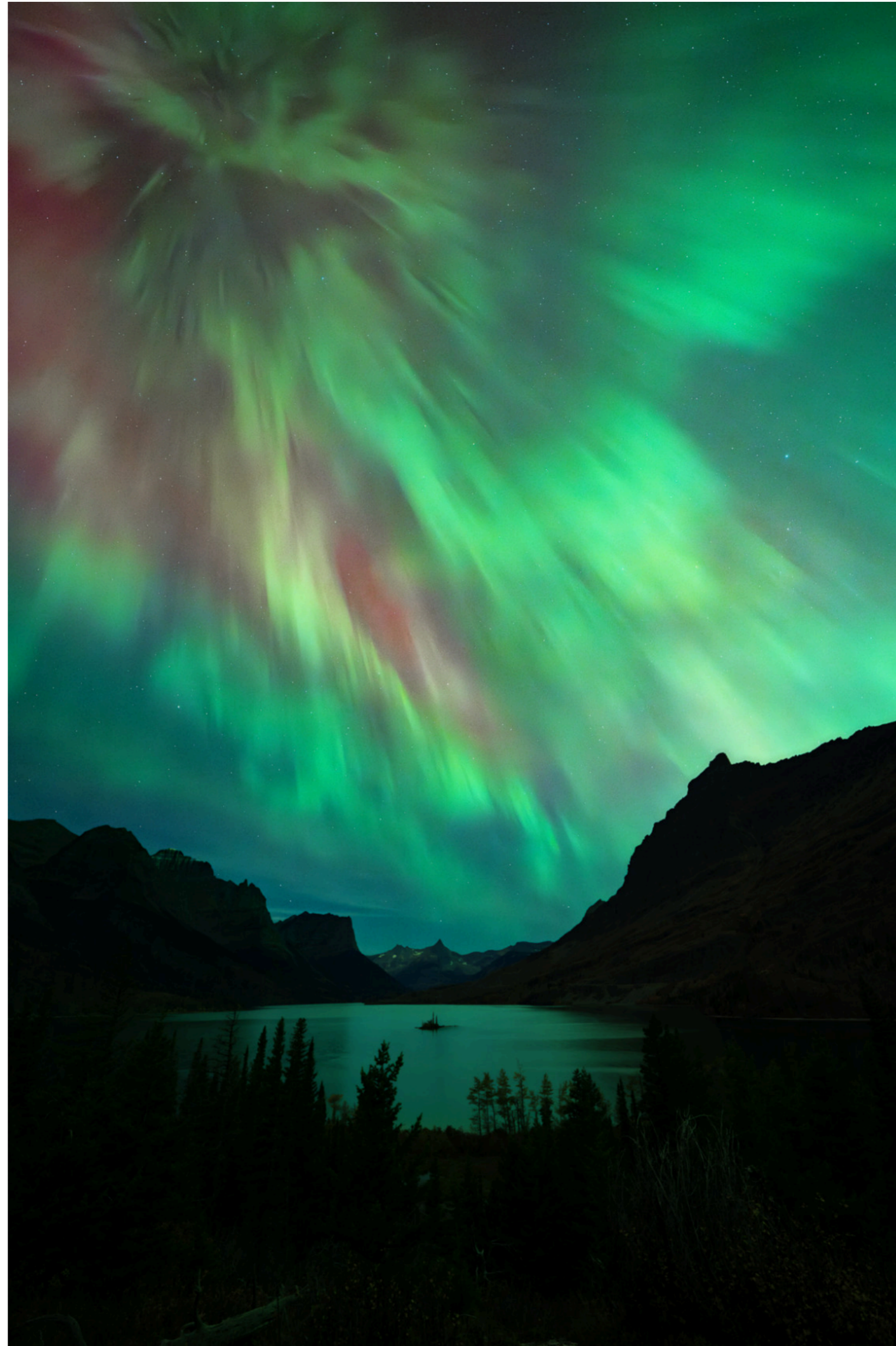
We said our goodbyes to the group and began the drive back. The aurora continued dancing as we drove through the park, and before we neared the campground, I suggested making one last stop to savor the night's magic.



Saint Mary Lake and Wild Goose Island



The auroral corona dances over the trees near Saint Mary Lake



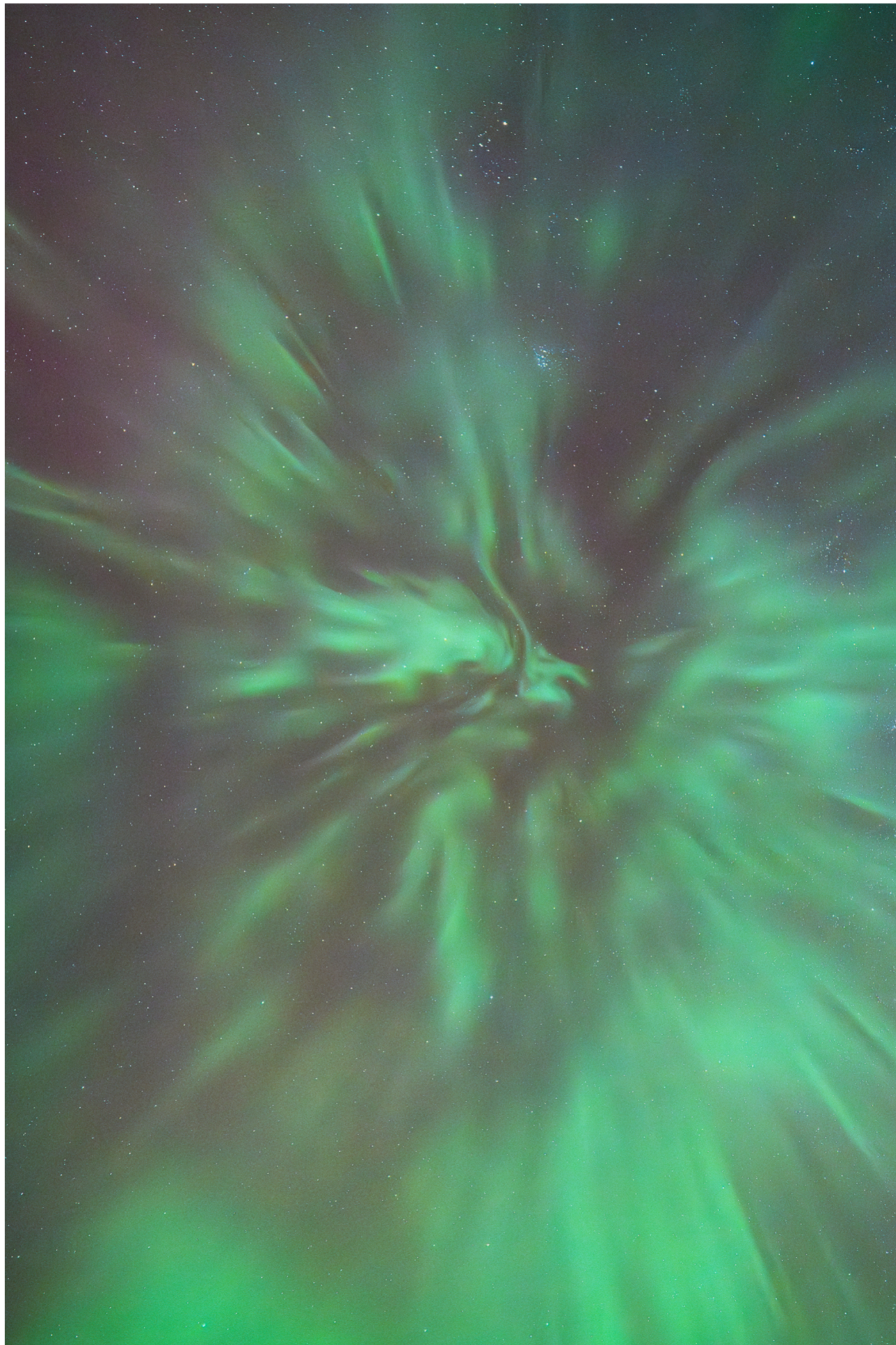
*A sudden burst of auroral corona activity dances above
Wild Goose Island and Saint Mary Lake*



Looking back at Wild Goose Island and Saint Mary Lake as the auroral pillars and ribbons travel across the sky

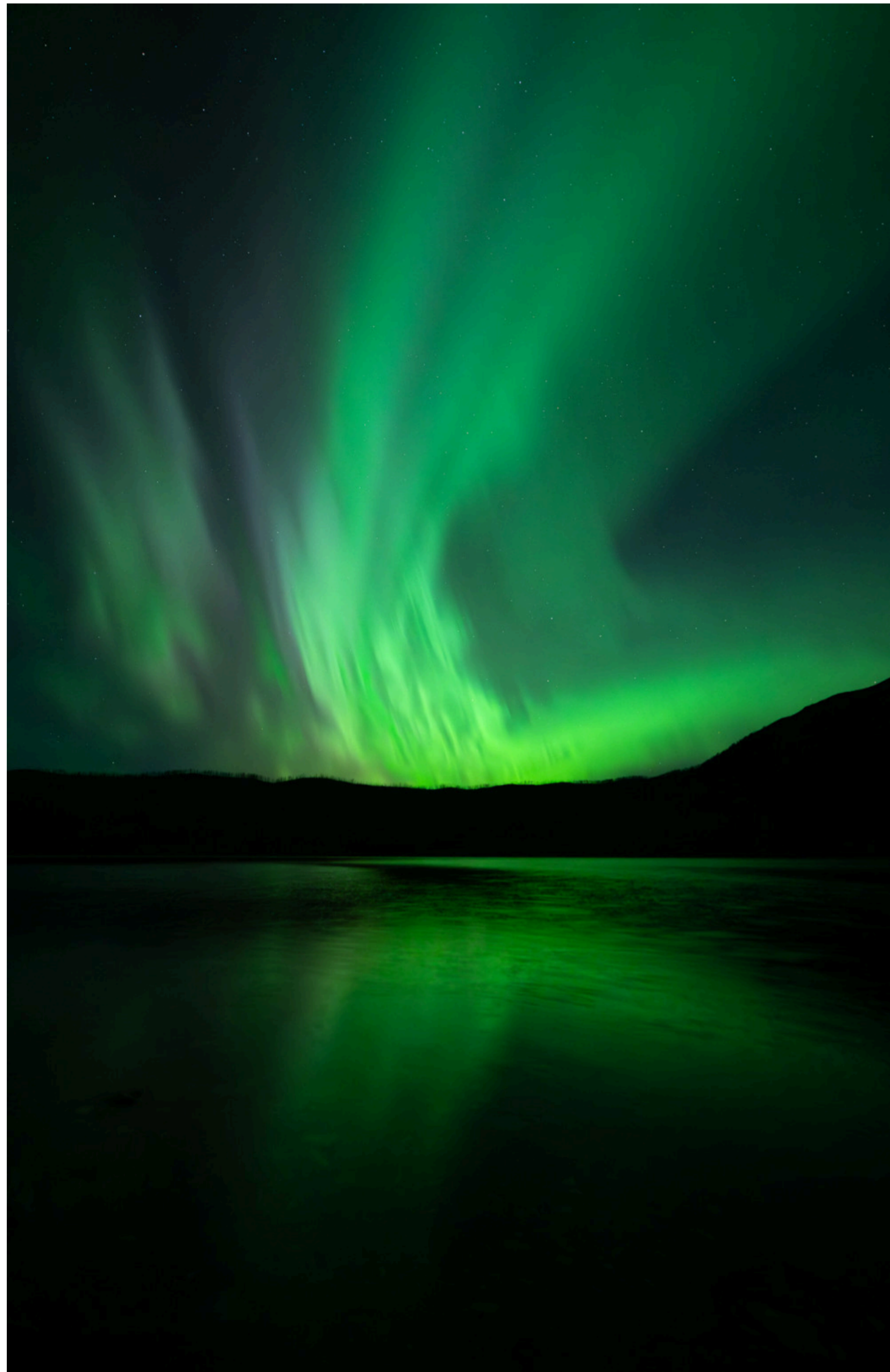


A burst of auroral activity dances above the mountains surrounding Saint Mary Lake



Auroral corona shapes and forms

Return to Lake McDonald



Green aurora ribbons above Lake McDonald

I suggested to David that we make one last stop before calling it a night. I couldn't resist the pull for one final glimpse. We returned to Lake McDonald and wandered back down to the shoreline. As if the aurora knew this was our final stop, the sky exploded into massive ribbons of green, and the lake, perfectly still in places, became a mirror to the light shown above. The drowsiness that had begun to settle in vanished, replaced by awe.

It was as though the aurora was putting on a grand finale. The sky erupted with a frantic corona of purple, white, and green, unlike anything I had ever witnessed, even more vivid than our previous experience in Yellowstone. The flashes were so intense they were like lightning, briefly illuminating the landscape with each burst. The corona moved so quickly that even a one-second interval between timelapse shots couldn't capture its fluid motion. At one point, I turned off the camera and watched in wonder, wholly absorbed in the spectacle.

The shapes and forms of the corona morphed rapidly. We sat on the beach, taking in the final show. As I reflected on the night, I thought about the decisions that had led us here and how taking a chance had rewarded us with an experience. I felt incredibly grateful, especially after witnessing the storm in Yellowstone a few months earlier. Every aurora now feels like a gift, and I always wonder when and if I'll see it again.

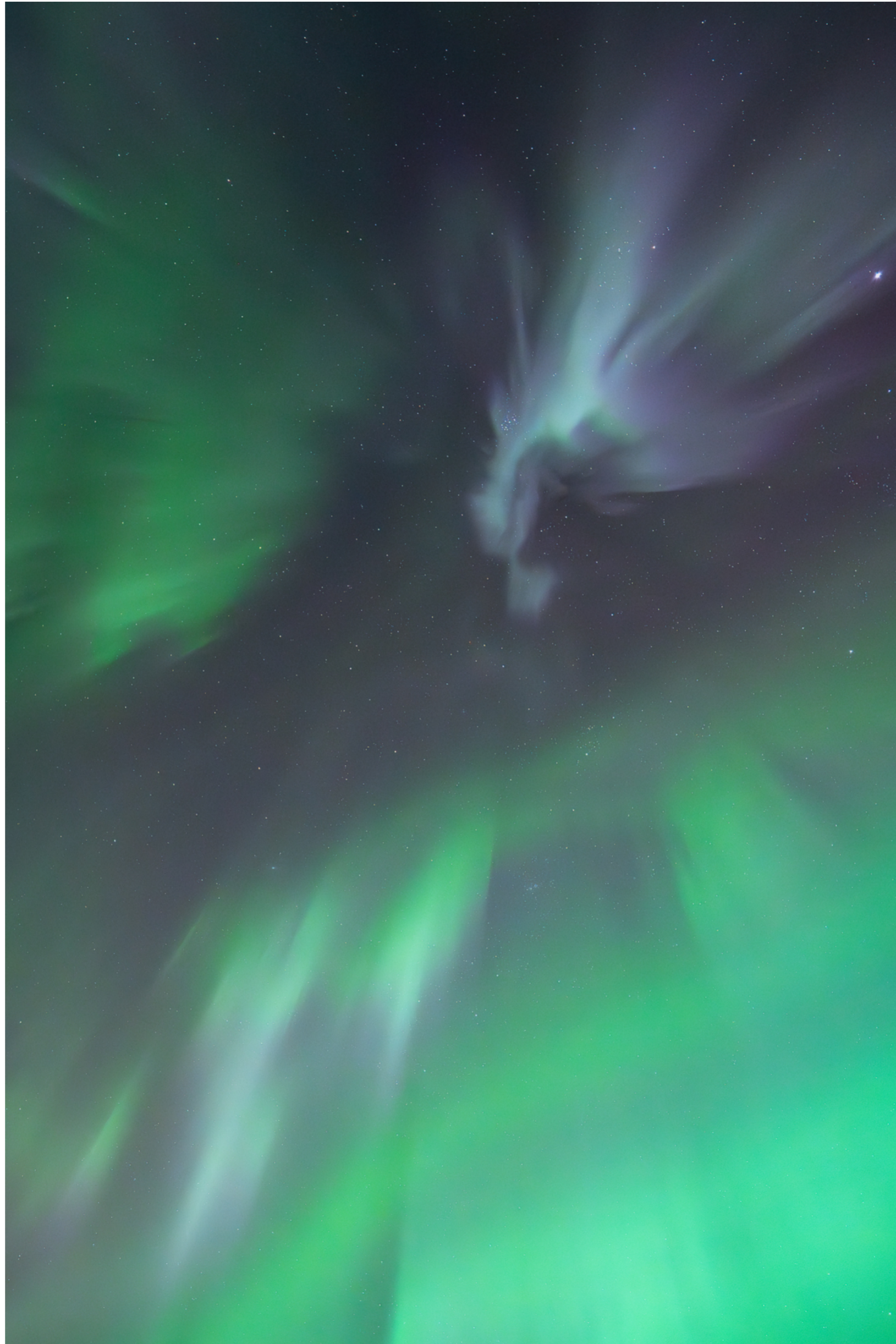
The dawn was beginning to brighten the horizon, and as we took one last look, we expressed our thanks to the aurora and Glacier National Park. We returned to camp with full hearts and memory cards, knowing this night would live on as one of the most unforgettable of our lives.



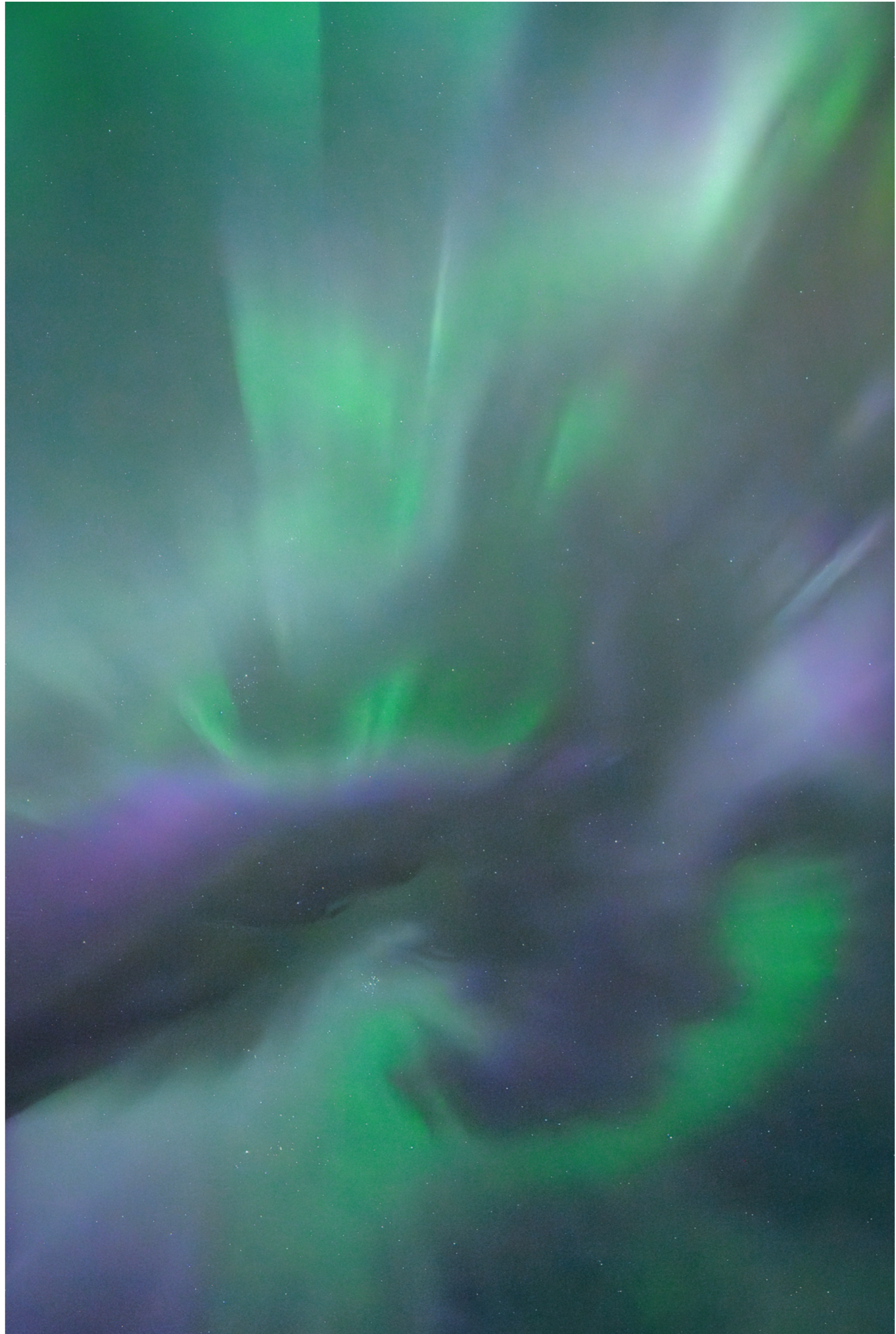
Green aurora ribbons above Lake McDonald

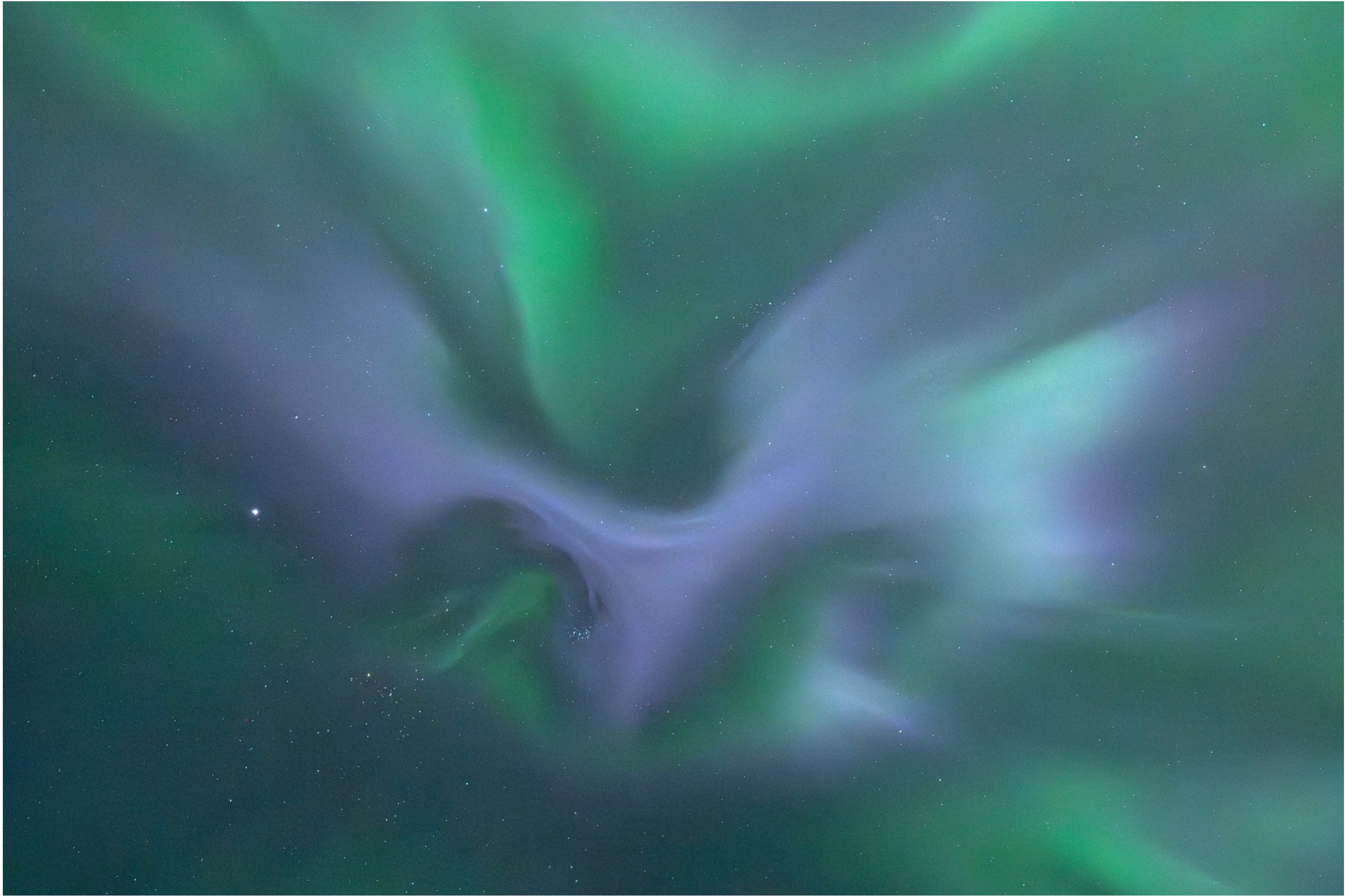


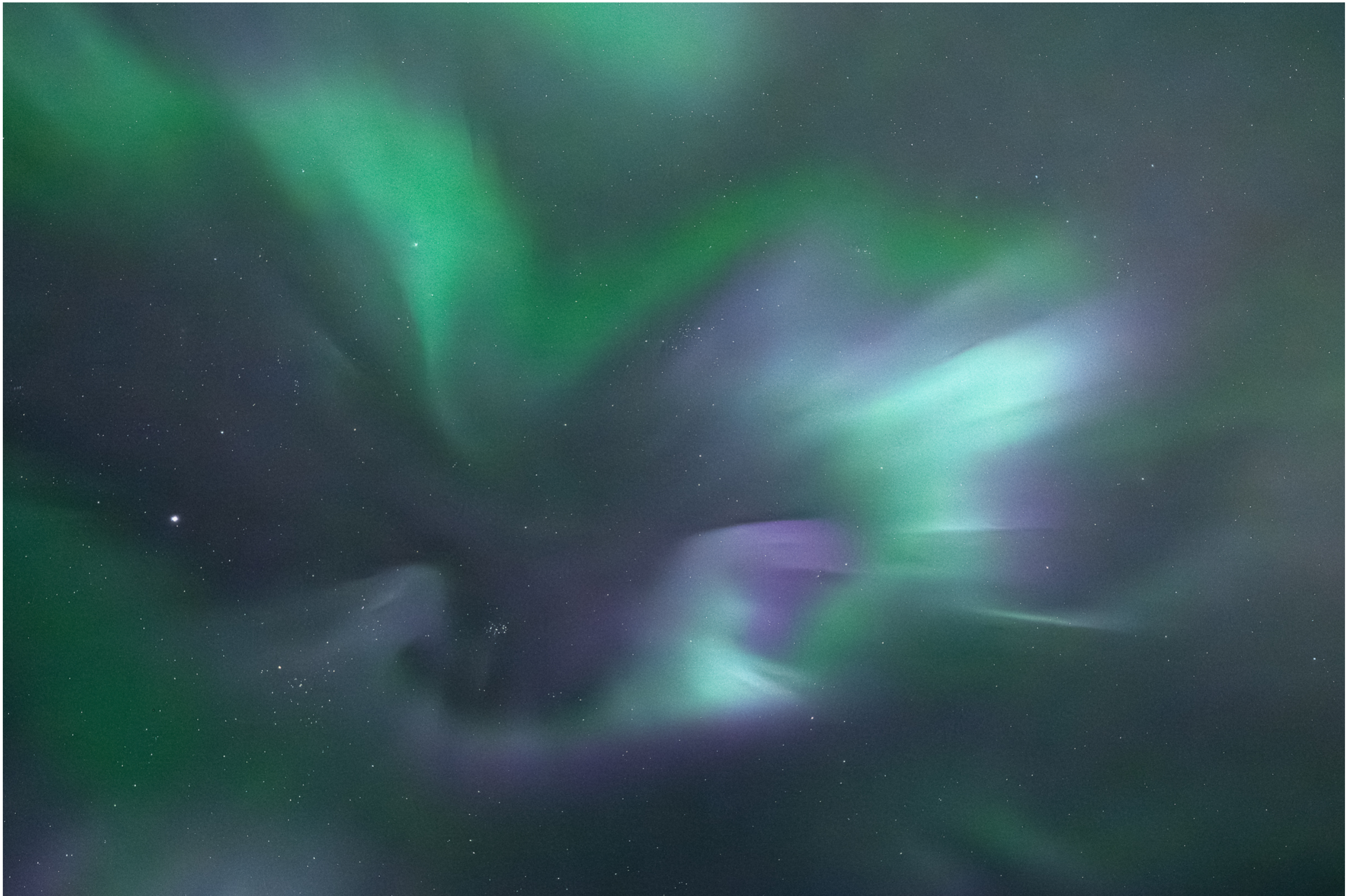
An opening appears in the aurora above the mountains surrounding Lake McDonald









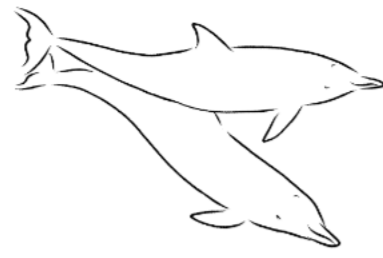




Green and purple aurora viewed from the shoreline of Lake MacDonald



Burst of purple and green pillars above Lake McDonald



Exploring

Jennifer Renwick

Connecting



Creating

About Jennifer

My journey into photography began with a deep fascination for nature, leading to studies in Geology and a 14-year career in Veterinary Medicine. Eight years ago, I transitioned to full-time photography, drawn by my love for the American West and its rugged landscapes.

Now based in Colorado, I live a nomadic lifestyle, traveling nearly full-time in a travel trailer with my partner David Kingham. Together, we explore the diverse landscapes of the American West, teaching photography workshops and capturing the beauty we encounter.

My photographic style focuses on intimate landscape details, often overlooked in grand vistas. I practice slow photography, emphasizing visual storytelling and emotional expression. Whether I'm photographing wildlife in the ocean or natural abstracts in the desert, my goal remains constant: to create compelling images that evoke emotions and raise awareness about our fragile natural world.

If you enjoyed this ebook, you can download my other ebook about experiencing the aurora in Yellowstone National Park, ["Yellowstone Illuminated."](#)



Where to find Jennifer

www.jenniferrenwick.com

[instagram.com/jennifer.renwick.photography](https://www.instagram.com/jennifer.renwick.photography)

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