

Yellowstone Illuminated

A Night of Photography Under the Aurora

Jennifer Renwick

Yellowstone Illuminated

by Jennifer Renwick

jennifer@jenniferrenwick.com

www.jenniferrenwick.com

All Content Copyright © 2024 Jennifer Renwick

All rights reserved. No portion of this ebook may be reproduced by any mechanical, photographic, or electronic process; nor may it be stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or otherwise be copied for public or private use, other than for "fair use" as brief quotations in articles and reviews, without prior written permission of the publisher.

You may purchase fine art prints of any of the photographs in this ebook on my website.



*The northern cheek of the heavens,
By a sudden glory kissed,
Blushed to the tint of roses,
And hid in an amber mist,
And through the northern pathway,
Trailing her robe of flame,
The queenly Borealis
In her dazzling beauty came!*

— May Riley Smith

Preface

On May 10th, 2024, the strongest geomagnetic storm in two decades hit Earth, creating dazzling auroras visible worldwide, even as far south as Florida in the United States. David and I were home in Golden, Colorado, taking a break between teaching workshops. On the afternoon of May 9th, David asked if I'd seen the aurora forecast. I hadn't, and he informed me that a significant storm was predicted — the strongest in decades. We quickly realized this would happen the next day, leaving us little time to plan. With late spring cloud cover in Denver, we knew we had to head out of state to see it.

We considered three locations: Devil's Tower in Wyoming, Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota, and Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. We decided to make the final call the following day. After packing food, clothes, and camera gear, we set out early and drove to Douglas, Wyoming, to pause and check the cloud cover forecast. Theodore Roosevelt was ruled out due to thick clouds, and we passed on Devil's Tower for its lack of varied scenes. We chose Yellowstone, though it was a risk, with only a 50/50 chance of the clouds clearing. We've spent years exploring and photographing Yellowstone, so it's a familiar location, and we knew we could move quickly and maximize photography opportunities.

As we made the 11-hour drive from Golden, our phones kept alerting us that the storm was intensifying. We arrived at Yellowstone's east entrance around 7 p.m., greeted by two grizzlies as we drove through the park's snowy, thawing landscape.

By the time we reached Grand Prismatic Spring, the clouds were beginning to clear, and the Kp index was climbing toward 9 — the highest we'd ever seen. Reports of auroras overhead in the Midwest confirmed that this would be an unforgettable night.

We met up with a friend, grabbed a quick bite, and prepared for a long night of photography. While we had experienced small bursts of auroras on previous trips, I had never witnessed a full display. David, who had seen auroras in Iceland, gave me valuable advice: don't get so caught up in capturing the shot that you forget to experience the moment.

This book chronicles that magical night and the photos I captured during our eight-hour journey through Yellowstone. We visited multiple locations, hiked, and soaked in the awe of it all. These images may not be award-winning, but that night wasn't about creating perfect images. It was about witnessing and appreciating something larger than ourselves and realizing how fortunate we are to experience the natural world's beauty.

Thank you for joining me on this journey. I hope you enjoy reading about my experience and viewing the images from one of my favorite places when the night skies and the landscapes of Yellowstone were illuminated.



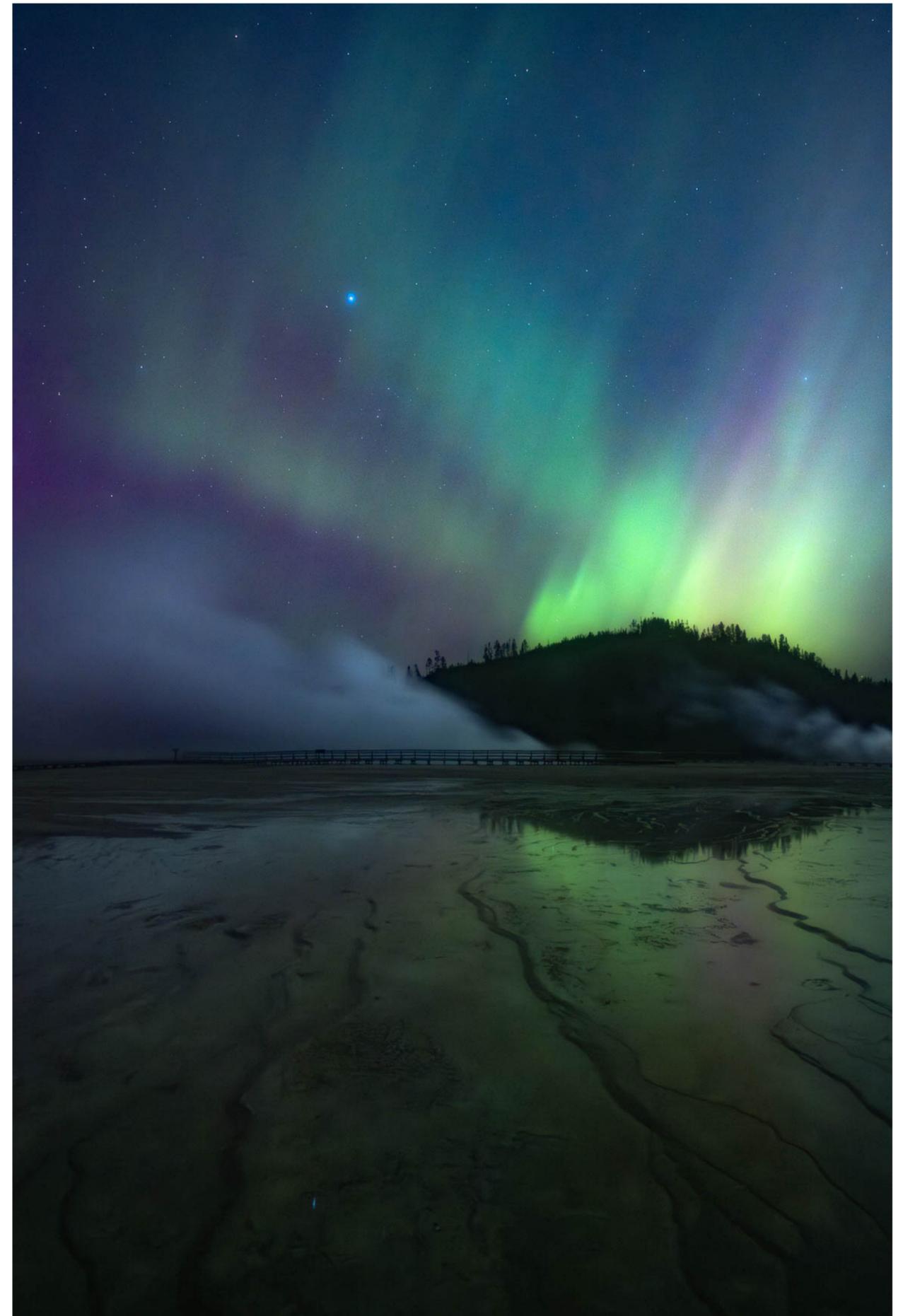
Midway Geyser Basin

As the last light of sunset faded, we began organizing our gear and prepared for the hike up to Grand Prismatic Spring. That evening, a partial moon was setting in the western sky, which we knew might wash out the aurora a bit, but only for the first few hours. Being early May in Yellowstone, the evening air was chilly, and steam greeted us as we crossed the bridge and walked up the boardwalk.

We took some test shots, and though the aurora was faint due to the moonlight and the recent sunset, we could still make out distinct shapes in the sky. To our surprise, the aurora wasn't just visible to the north — it surrounded us in every direction. As night fully descended, we were ecstatic to see the aurora dancing in the northern and eastern skies, as well as in the south and west. Green was the first predominant color to appear, followed by pillars of purple and pink, creating a colorful symphony across the sky.

One of my best memories from that night was witnessing the excitement of other park visitors and photographers as they, too, experienced the aurora.

I had a delightful conversation with a park employee who was capturing the aurora with her camera for the first time. As we continued to photograph and watch, it became clear that this was just the beginning of an unforgettable night.



Bacterial mats and Excelsior Geyser



Opal Pool



Firehole River

Firehole River

After our experience at Grand Prismatic, the intensity of the aurora grew, and we could make out the pillars of pink with our own eyes. To the west, an eruption of pink and pillars appeared in the sky, and we pulled our car over on the shoulder in a pullout near the Firehole River. We couldn't believe what we were witnessing as the aurora's intensity blew up around us — to the west and north, pillars danced across the sky in ribbons.

At this point, I realized I was witnessing an intense aurora that I would have expected to see in Iceland or Alaska. This aurora was much stronger than the few little solar storms we had witnessed before. I had dreamed of this moment for a lifetime and realized that this was happening in a place that meant so much to me. I was excited and grateful that my first experience with an aurora this strong was happening here, which is quite rare to witness. I almost knocked over my tripod because the light flashed and danced in every direction.

As I watched a pillar of light stretch above me, I looked straight up and watched as the light flashed and danced. I realized I could see the flashes, like muted lightning sparkling above. It was dynamic, and each breath of light changed quickly, filtering through the sky above me. I yelled out to David and our friend to look straight up to see what I was witnessing.



Firehole River



Firehole River with Biscuit Basin in the background



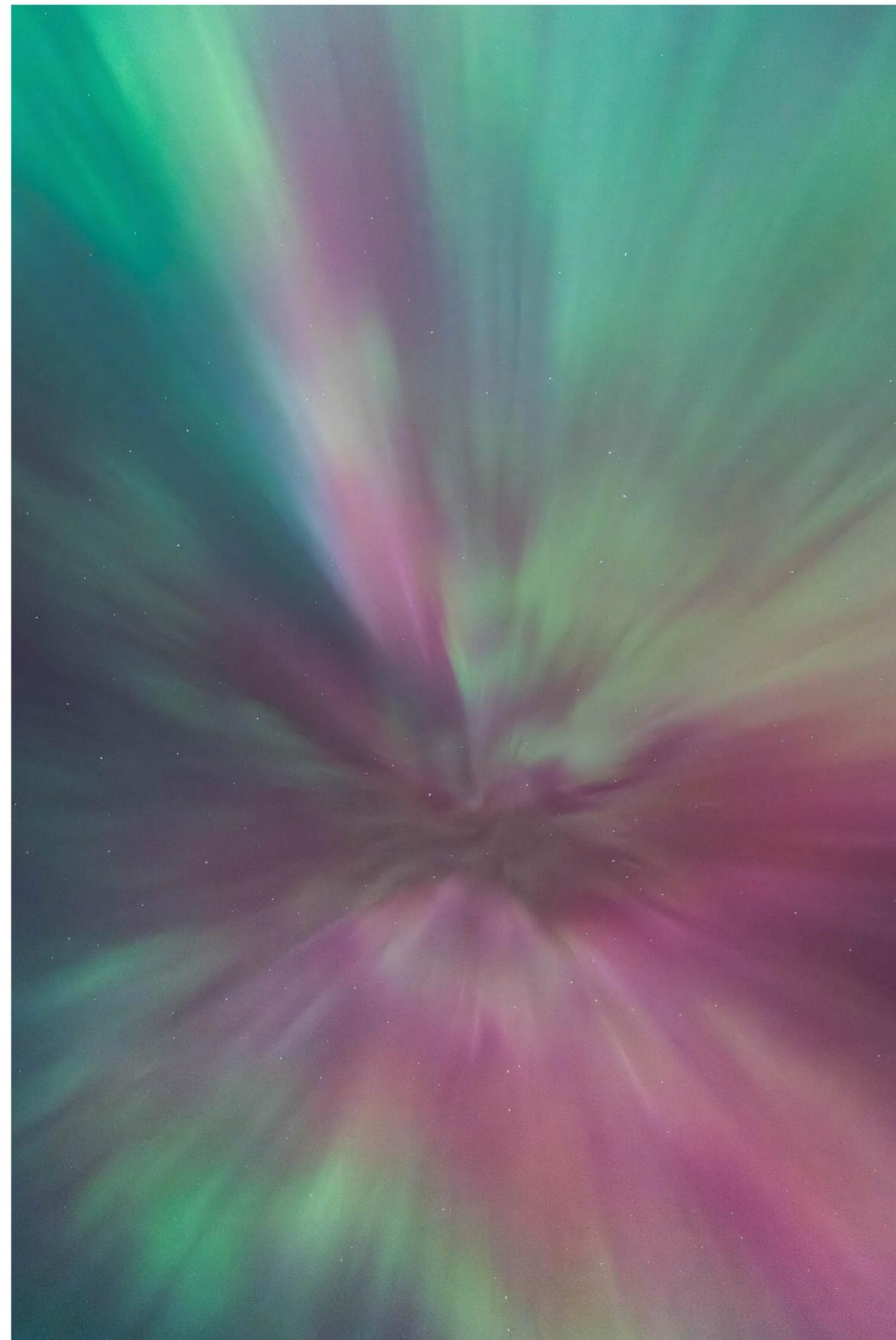
Firehole River

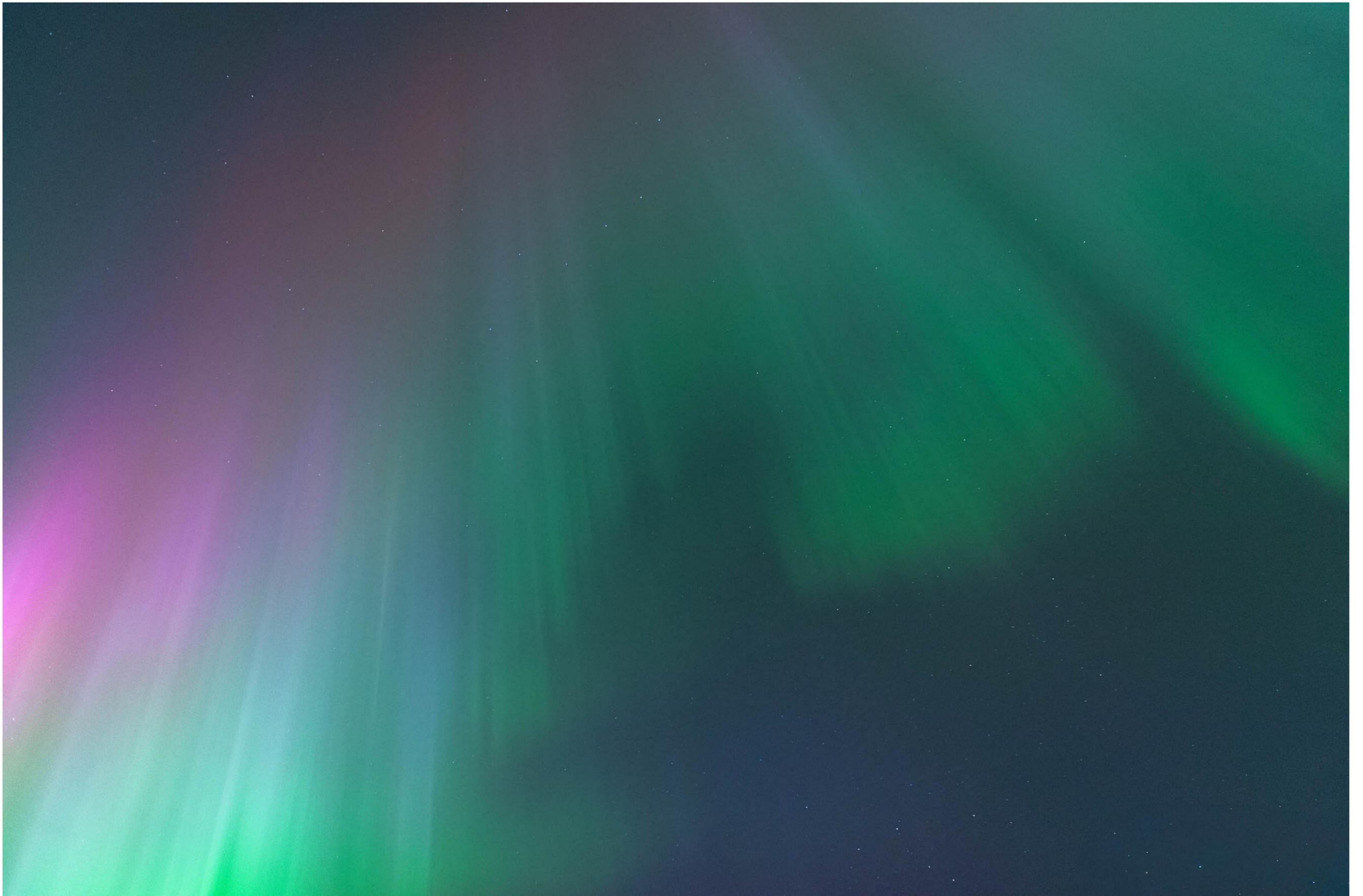
Auroral Corona

As we paused along the Firehole River, our eyes were drawn upward to a breathtaking sight. The aurora was now flashing and dancing above us. Witnessing the shimmering lights in their frenzied dance was mesmerizing. I aimed my camera at the glittering light and captured a few images of the auroral corona.

This was my first encounter with an auroral corona. This phenomenon occurs when the aurora is at its strongest activity peak and very bright. It forms directly overhead, presenting in a radiant, crown-like light pattern. Bright rays converge towards a central point as if radiating from the sky's zenith, giving the impression that the light is cascading down towards Earth in all directions. The experience was incredibly immersive, and I looked up at this celestial explosion of light as happy tears gathered in my eyes. It was an electrifying experience that hit me right in the soul.

The corona flashed constantly, and each frame I captured revealed a new, unpredictable light pattern. The pinks and greens intertwined, creating fresh opportunities with every moment. After a few frames, David's earlier words, "Make sure you take the time to stop photographing so you can watch, feel and experience," filtered into my brain, and for the next half hour, I stopped photographing and just watched in awe at the light show above me.













Great Fountain Geyser

Firehole Lake Drive

As the aurora continued to dance above, we quickly checked our app: it was still a Kp 9, and the oval remained strong. Ever since witnessing our first smaller solar storm, we had dreamed of photographing one particular place in the park during an aurora: Great Fountain Geyser.

The road leading to it had been closed for some time due to geothermal damage. The mile-long hike in bear country (especially after spotting two grizzlies) earlier was a bit unnerving. Still, with the three of us determined to capture our dream shot, our excitement overcame our fear, and we drove to the road closure and began our trek.

When we arrived, the scene before me was one I had only ever dreamed of. The aurora began as a vibrant green before shifting to bright pinks and reds and then back to softer pastel greens. Each change created a new, dynamic scene, enhanced by the occasional call of a Sandhill Crane or Wilson's Snipe breaking the night's silence. The aurora danced in the reflections on the terraces and it felt like a dream.

After capturing Great Fountain Geyser, I headed to another favorite down the road, White Dome Geyser. By chance, I arrived just in time for an eruption, and the water and sinter bathed in the aurora's green glow was indeed a unique sight.



Great Fountain Geyser



Great Fountain Geyser



Great Fountain Geyser



White Dome Geyser



Shield Spring

Upper Geyser Basin

The weight of the 11-hour drive, the hike, the adrenaline and being awake for 20 hours was starting to take its toll. We were exhausted, but the aurora was still dancing, so we decided to press on and head to the Upper Geyser Basin. The morning was fast approaching, with the first light expected in about an hour and a half. We parked and made our way toward Castle Geyser, where the aurora began to shift, taking on a more blue and purple hue.

As we hiked and photographed around Castle Geyser, the aurora started to fade in and out, and the Kp index that had been so strong began to decline along with our energy levels. We continued to Grand Geyser, another favorite spot, and captured the Firehole River. In the background, Old Faithful erupted, and the occasional eye shine of bison resting in the grass reflected in our headlamps.

At Grand Geyser, I sat and watched the sky, wondering if I'd ever experience another night like this. The night had been a dream come true, and I felt a deep sense of gratitude for having had this experience.

As fatigue set in, we took a few more photos and returned to the car. With the dawn's blue hour fast approaching, we decided to start the drive back and return to West Yellowstone to find a hotel.



Castle Geyser



Crested Pool



Firehole River



Firehole River



Firehole River and Sawmill Geyser Group



Grand Geyser



Grand Geysers and West Triplet Geysers Pool



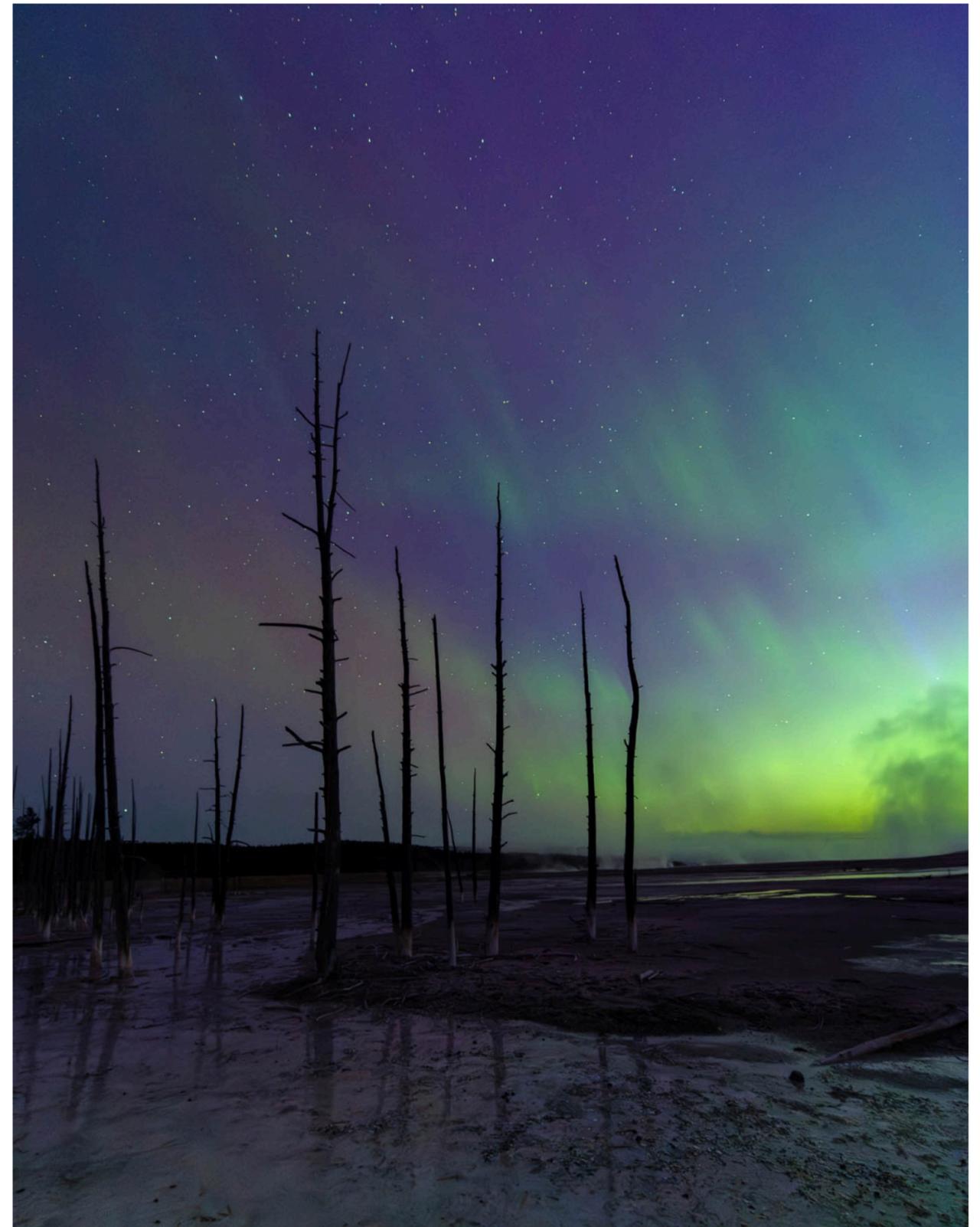
Firehole River

Fountain Paint Pot Trail

On our drive back to West Yellowstone, we made a final stop at the Fountain Paint Pot trail. There, I have a favorite grove of Bobby Socks trees that stand alone in a thermal area. Bobby Socks trees are named for the white mineral deposits at the base of their trunks that resemble socks.

This unusual appearance is caused by the mineral-laden water from hot springs and geysers in the park. When these trees grow in geothermal areas, their roots absorb the silica-rich water. As the trees die and dry out, the silica is left behind, creating a bleached, white effect around the bottom of their trunks, much like a pair of white bobby socks. As we arrived, the aurora was still faintly visible as a soft green glow on the horizon with occasional ribbons of light dancing across the sky.

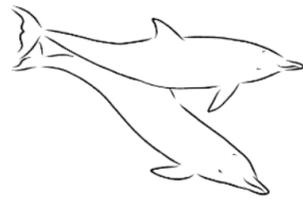
We took a few final photos, capturing the return of morning as the eastern horizon gradually brightened. As the aurora faded, we were overwhelmed with a mix of gratitude and numbness, trying to process the extraordinary spectacle we had just witnessed. This experience of an illuminated night in Yellowstone will remain etched in my memory as one of the most special sights I've ever encountered.



Bobby Socks trees



Bobby Socks trees



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.



Where to find Jennifer

www.jenniferrenwick.com

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

Donate

Did you appreciate this ebook? Show your support by [making a donation](#) to help Jennifer continue producing content.