

**To Walk In Wilderness**  
**by**  
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Introduction:

Hi, I am Tom Barron, and this is my friend John Fielder. Together, we'd like to take all of you on a hike—a trek into the deepest heart of Colorado wilderness. Of course, as we all know, no words and pictures can possibly do a place like this justice. No matter how great John's photos, no matter how pretty my words—The Real Thing is always better.

Plus, when you go on a long hike vicariously, as opposed to physically, you miss out on some of life's greatest joys. For example: forcing your feet into frozen cold socks and boots in the morning. Or smelling fresh llama breath at the start of your day. Or trying desperately to land just one trout to counterbalance all that macaroni and cheese you've been eating for supper—even when you know you're the worst fisherman ever to tangle a line.

The goal that propelled John and me to embark on a 30-day trek in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness was to use our different art forms—John with his camera and me with my pen—to create a book that would allow anyone who might read it to go for a true walk in the wilderness. To really be there on the trail—almost. And I should add that I also had another more personal goal (in addition to trying to land that first trout): I wanted to go as deep into wilderness as I could—both physically and spiritually. I wanted to shed as much of the conveniences, rhythms, and assumptions of modern life as possible. And I wanted that experience so much that, frankly, I didn't care if anybody ever bought a copy of the book.

So we embarked on a month-long trek, John with 100 pounds of camera gear and me with five or six ounces of paper and pens. (Whenever John gave me grief about this disparity, I'd tell him it was just another form of intelligence test.) And the result of all this is our book, *To Walk In Wilderness*.

Before we begin our hike, though, let me say one thing more. These aren't just a bunch of pretty words and pictures. I hope they are that, of course—but what they really are is a reminder to us all of the specialness—the sanctity—of our wildest places. For wilderness is our inspiration, the place freshest from God's hand. It is our irreplaceable heritage. Our watershed. Our wellspring. And yes—our very womb.

This place, like all wilderness places, took all of geologic time to make—and would take less than one human lifetime to destroy. And what's more: If these places are ever lost to mining, or clearcutting, or sprawl—they are lost *forever*.

So enjoy the show. Then let's go out there and save some more wilderness!

# #1

## **From Day 8:**

Mist rises off the vale of Conundrum Creek, curling slowly skyward. We follow the creek in the rain and fog, through a Rocky Mountain rain forest. Leaves drip everywhere, rivulets bounce down the banks to join the creek, lupines collect glittering pearls of water in their palmate leaves.

About three miles from the trailhead, tan-colored cliffs rise up from both sides of the creek. They show the complex geology of this region, where rocks of every age and origin are mixed together like a great pot of stew.

Small wonder, then, that these cliffs have their own story to tell, one with a modern twist. Those granite faces hold intrusions of marble—just as in this very wilderness are intrusions of mining claims. As we approach an old marble mine, stepping over rusting scraps of metal, cable bolts and machinery, it is easy to imagine how an active mining operation would totally change this place. Yet because of loopholes in the Wilderness Act of 1964, that is a real possibility. And if that happens here, the whisper and hush of water and leaf would give way to the screech and clatter, dust and smoke, of hammer and generator.

A storm sweeps through the valley. Rain turns to snow and sleet. Wind whipping our faces, we finally reach the pass at 13,000 feet, a full 4,000 feet higher than our starting point this morning. We secure the llamas and set up our tents on the trail itself—the only flat place around—all while trying to keep our gear and ourselves from blowing off the mountain.

“You know,” John yells to me above the raging gale, “there are some people who’d call us crazy!”

I glare at him, then shout back, “We *are* crazy!”

At last, the storm subsides. The full moon, glowing like a luminous lamp, rises over a bank of pink clouds. Our world is washed in silver. Our simple supper of dried fruit and granola bars turns into a grand repast because of one addition: silence. And I realize, sitting there, that the ultimate gift of wilderness, for me, is not the glowing vistas, the marvelous creatures, nor even the crystalline air. It is that precious quality so often drowned by the cacophony of modern life, that quality called *Silence*.

To sit upon a ledge on a mountain ridge, drinking in the silence, is to become part of the stone, the water, the wide-open sky. To listen to silence, truly listen, is to hear echoes across vast distances both within oneself and without. Sometimes at such moments, I lose myself completely in the simple miracle of all that surrounds me. For it is nothing less than the continuous power of creation—a power whose essence is life, and whose engine is silent.

## #2

### From Day 17:

With raw lungs and scraped shins, we finally make it to tree line. We follow a stream that flows periodically under the rocks and surfaces again yards away. As the foliage disappears, we approach a glacier-scoured cirque, that ring of sheer cliffs and sharp summits called Pierre Lakes.

As we finally approach the lakes, John and I trade glances. Without a word, possessed by the same wild idea, we drop our packs, dash to the nearest pool, and plunge our heads straight into the frigid water. We whoop and splash, then immerse our heads again. At last, we tumble backward onto the rocks, push the dripping hair from our eyes, and gaze at the stunning vista surrounding us.

“We made it,” sighs John.

“No,” I reply. “God made it.”

In time, golden hues bathe the entire basin. But for the rare patches of tundra hugging the edges of lakes, no green is visible here. Instead, this landscape’s character comes from the constant interplay of light and shadow on snow and rock. At one moment, the needle-like towers on the ridge stand stark and bold against the sky; at another moment, streaked with mist, they seem softer than clouds. One swirling snowfield resembles a distant galaxy, connecting the newly carved Earth with newly born stars above.

What is the attraction of a place so inhospitable, so uninhabitable? This landscape is as unforgiving as any on our planet. Yet it exudes a silent music, an unheard melody that touches people from all backgrounds and beliefs. Perhaps the very starkness of this place, its very simplicity, brings us closer to things essential and pure. Or perhaps it attracts us simply for its own sake, a land of never-ending drama, of powerful contrast, of freezing wind and sizzling sun.

As the colors deepen, one lone bird sings its evening song. I recall a conversation with my five-year-old daughter, Denali, when she heard for the first time the call of a loon. She sat very still, listening to the haunting notes echo across the lake, before turning to me. “Daddy,” she asked, “Why does that song make me feel so sad? Most birds make me feel happy.” I nodded. “Maybe that call reminds us of a time, long ago, when we were...closer to other animals. When we were their friends, and they were ours.” She scanned the water. Then she whispered, “I want to be his friend again.”

## #3

### From Day 3:

Rain, relentless rain. The downpour at Little Gem Lake continues unabated all through the night and into the next day. At times fog rolls in, so thick that the ground a few feet outside our sopping tent becomes nothing more than a cloud. The rain turns to sleet, then to snow, and I watch the wide flakes settle by the thousands on the surface of the lake. The turf outside turns white, as the air grows colder. Rockslides fall every few hours, the only sound besides the swirling storm.

At last, the snowfall ceases. We force our feet into wet socks and boots, stiff and cold, and set out to explore Siberia Lake. Though it is only 400 feet higher in altitude than our camp, that constitutes the difference between emerging spring and frozen winter. Climbing upward, we can see the landscape change, as if pages of the calendar are being turned backward before our eyes. More and more snow clings to the rocks, tundra becomes scree and talus, shriveled trees grow sparser.

Trying in vain to warm my hands, I wonder: What drives otherwise sane people to seek out experiences like this? What is this mad streak in humanity, this strange desire to shiver in wet sleeping bags?

Maybe we put up with the painful sides of wilderness because its pleasurable sides are so wondrously potent or maybe all the remarkable convenience, speed and data transmission of our age still leaves us hungering for something more. Something like the basic truths and reliable rhythms of nature—so that we willingly give up comfort for the body to find comfort for the soul.

If you read John Muir's description of the Los Angeles basin, written in the 1870's, that place sounds like the closest thing you could ever find to the Garden of Eden. Crystalline waves lap at your feet; snow-capped peaks sparkle in the distance; palm trees undulate slowly at hidden coves. Muir goes on for paragraphs about the clear air, the endless vistas, the sheer beauty of it all. There was no freeway in sight; no such thing as smog.

All that has changed. So much around us has changed—and so rapidly. That, I think, is a key to the enduring attraction of wilderness: It gives us perspective. The perspective of a stone. For in wilderness, change is marked not in centuries, or even millennia, but in geologic time—where the ravages of the last ice age are not even history, but “current events.” Places where the land and our spirits feel equally wild.

So it is no accident that prophets from all cultures have plunged into wilderness for a time. Wild places, and wild storms, provoke us to clarify and simplify, to distill our abundant cleverness into a few drops...of wisdom.

## #4

### From Day 25:

From our perch on top of the pass, it is easy to follow the sun's advance over land and sky. I turn back and forth from the sweeping pastels in the east to the deepening blue Earth shadow in the west. Clouds metamorphose in color, while the mountains follow, one radiant step behind. The luminous procession continues, moving over one ridge then the next, one summit then another, until, at last, the entire world as far as we can see is bathed in new morning light. The breeze blows crisply, tousling our sleeping bags. Dawn.

Passing through a long alleyway of bluebells, we drop over East Avalanche Pass. Stark towers of stone, etched against the rich azure sky, line the ridge. Great quantities of red paintbrush, blue lupine and yellow cinquefoil make the meadow under our feet ripple with vibrant colors.

This is a day to go on forever. As we stride along the ridge, we hear the continuous rising and falling of wind in the passes, streams in the valleys, birds in the cloudless sky, and shifting rocks in the ravines, all combining in a single sonorous fugue. As this ridge stretches before me, so it seems does *life*, full of hope and opportunity and challenge. I feel ready to face *anything*. **Even as the late afternoon light deepens the hues and shadows, signaling the inevitable approach of night, I feel far more joy at having lived this day—than grief at having lost it.**

By a tarn surrounded with marsh marigolds, we make camp. Sunset comes slowly and intensely, reflected on the craggy spires around us. When I awake before dawn, my sleeping bag is coated with frost—as if stars have descended during the night and lodged there, sparkling for a while.