

Spring in the Southern Great Bear

Instructional Photo Tour 2026



The *Spring in the Southern Great Bear Instructional Photo Tour 2026* combines pre-trip professional photography instruction with seven full days of photography in a very special and very wild pristine wilderness. You will be provided with the opportunity, the conceptual and creative tools, and the techniques needed to capture striking images of spectacular scenery and a diverse array of wildlife. Our “targeted” high-priority subjects will include Grizzly Bears, Black Bears, coastal Gray Wolves, Sea Otters, Humpback and Killer Whales, land- and seascapes, and more. And, we’ll do all this while traveling into the depths of the Great Bear Rainforest aboard a spacious 70-foot ketch, the *Ocean Wayfinder*.

Photography Instruction. The instructional component on this photo tour will take place in the weeks before the trip. Starting in 2022 I’ve taken the pre-trip photography instruction online, allowing you to take in the sessions in the comfort of your home. And, by going online and offering the instruction in the weeks before the trip you’ll have time to

reflect upon and digest the material long before you are face-to-face with the subjects. The two online sessions will be of benefit to all levels of photographers – from enthusiastic novices through to seasoned professionals. We will discuss both the technical and creative aspects of wildlife photography as well as the specifics and logistics of photographing wildlife and scenery within the Great Bear Rainforest. While the instructional material will be agnostic with respect to camera brand and camera style (e.g., mirrorless vs. DSLR) it will be assumed that most participants will be bringing either digital SLR’s or mirrorless cameras.

Photography instruction will also take place during our time on the *Ocean Wayfinder*. This instruction will be less formal and on a “time-permitting” basis. The topics will vary, depending on both the specific interests of, and requests made by, those on the trip. It could include sessions on digital workflow topics, including raw image processing through to discussions on field-techniques and camera gear.



Common Loon, Uncommon Beauty. I photographed this loon during the 2022 *Spring in the Great Bear Rainforest* photo tour.

Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor Z 400mm f2.8S @ 560mm. 1/4000s @ f4. ISO 1600. Wide-area AF with SD = Animal

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Kissed by the Light. Coastal Gray Wolves are common in the Great Bear Rainforest, but their secretive nature makes them a challenge to see, and an even bigger challenge to photograph.



The Region – And Our Expedition At A Glance. The portion of the British Columbia mainland coast that stretches from Rivers Inlet in the south to the Skeena River in the north is often referred to as “The Great Bear Rainforest”. At over 64,000 square kilometers (25,000 sq. mi.) it is the largest tract of temperate coastal rainforest left on planet Earth. Here the coastal mountains meet the Pacific Ocean – the area is cut by hundreds of steep-sided inlets/fjords and there are countless islands. This true wilderness is rarely visited by humans and is stunningly beautiful in itself. And, it is literally teeming with wildlife, including Grizzly Bears, Black (and Spirit) Bears, coastal Gray Wolves, Wolverines, Sea Otters, American Martens, Bald Eagles, Humpback Whales, Killer Whales, Sea Otters, Harbour Seals, Steller Sea Lions, many species of waterfowl and seabirds, and more! The photographic opportunities on this tour are always absolutely amazing.

Spring is a wonderfully exciting time to be in the Great Bear. Coastal plants and wildflowers are in full bloom, whales are returning to nearshore

waters, and the entire ecosystem is literally coming to life! Spring is also the best season of the year to watch and photograph Brown (Grizzly) Bears in the Great Bear Rainforest. In spring the bears congregate in the large river estuaries to feed and breed. During this time behavioural interactions between the bears are at their maximum, and it is not uncommon to see sparring bouts, chases, active courting, mating, nursing, and more!

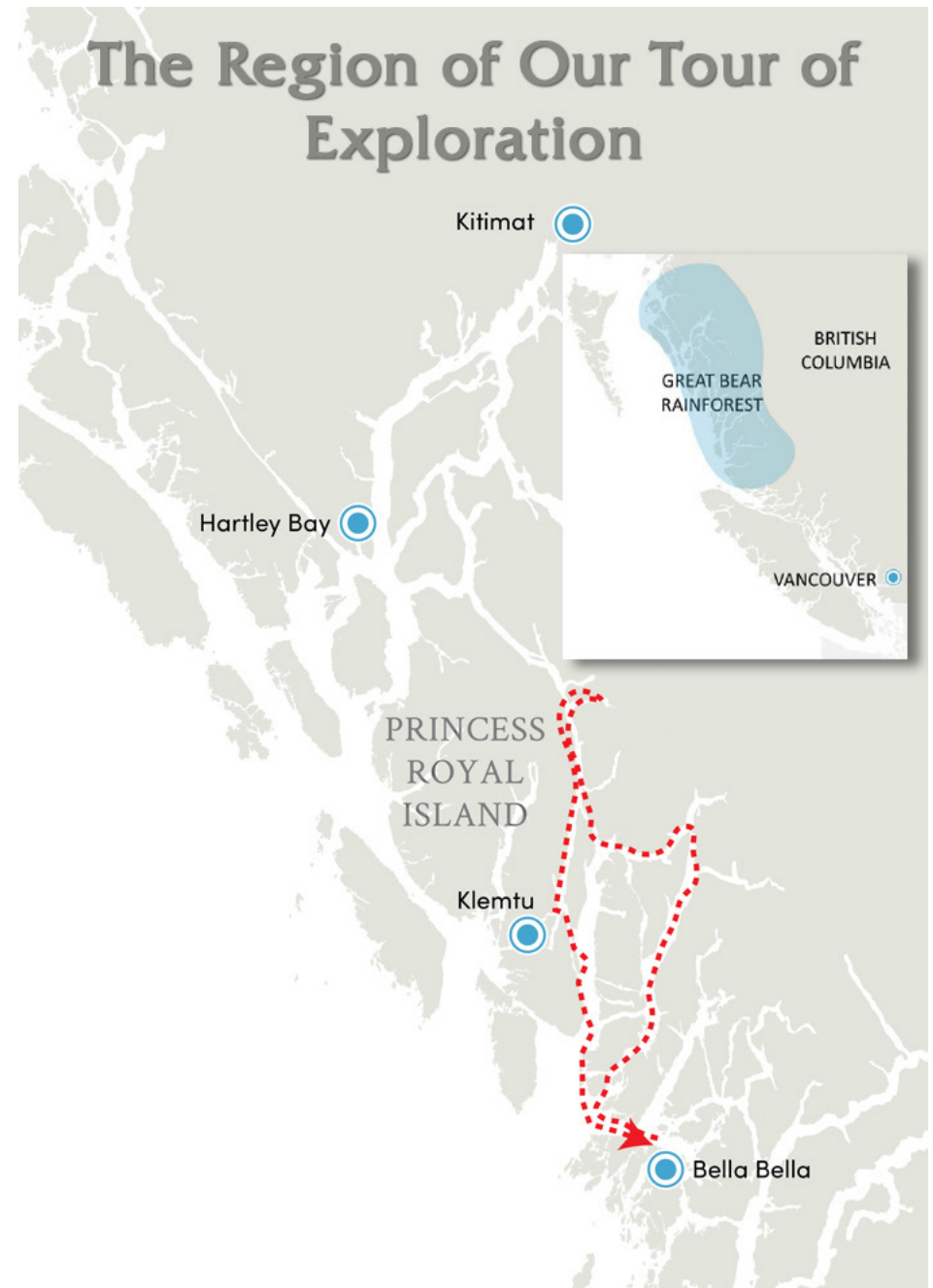
The *southern portion* of the Great Bear Rainforest has generally the same assemblage of wildlife species as the more northern regions. However our intended route provides us with the option (if weather conditions and the sea state permits) to explore more exposed “outer” islands. This gives us a greater chance of seeing and photographing several more species of wildlife, including coastal Gray Wolves, Sea Otters, Steller Sea Lions and Fin Whales than on a typical *northern* Great Bear trip. But please note that on this trip our chances of encountering a Spirit Bear are lower than in the northern Great Bear trips we run in the late summer and early autumn.

This is a Tour of Exploration! The *Spring in the Southern Great Bear Instructional Photo Tour 2026* is a true tour of photographic exploration. We'll explore the inlets, bays and old-growth forest of the spectacular mid-coast of British Columbia. We'll walk trails, explore creeks, and search for the unique mix of subject matter that only the Great Bear Rainforest can provide – Grizzly Bears, Black Bears, coastal Gray Wolves, Sea Otters, Humpback Whales, many bird species, landscapes, and more.

This is a multi-faceted trip, focusing not only on the bears, but on *all* the inhabitants of the Great Bear Rainforest – and the entire ecosystem in which they thrive. While the bears are an integral part of this trip, we will be approaching this trip *with an attitude of finding and capturing any form of natural beauty and natural art that we can*. This may include many species of wildlife and birds, intertidal scenes, landscapes, sea-scapes, and more! *If your sole goal is to photograph bears (to the exclusion of other subject matter you will be presented with), this may not be the trip for you.*

About the Photography “Style” On This Photo Tour. On this trip – as on my other photo tours – this is a “*photography in true wilderness*” experience. This means we will spend most of our time in isolated and remote wilderness and away from other humans. We'll have to “track down” our subject matter without the help of other outfitters, spotters or real-time online apps listing recent sightings. Additionally we'll have no “set-up” situations where we can set up in a specific location ahead of time and with the knowledge that a certain species will predictably appear and pose for us! The advantage of our approach is that it produces a more unique and personalized experience and it can often lead to more original and compelling photos. A possible downside is that it means we don't know the specifics of the shooting conditions ahead of time, thus may put more onus on the photographer to make snap technical and creative decisions in a field setting. This means it may challenge – and encourage you to expand – your photographic skills more than other photo tours do!

Our Wildlife Subject Matter: While this is a *photography-in-true-wilderness* trip, we are definitely headed into a target-rich environment!





Seeking Natural Art! While finding and photographing charismatic megafauna is a big part of our experience, we'll be approaching this photo tour with an attitude of *finding and capturing any form of natural beauty and natural art that we can!*

Here's a quick run down of both our “*most likely*” wildlife subjects and our “*less likely but possible*” wildlife subjects:

A. Most Likely Subjects (50% or greater probability of encounter):

- Black Bears
- Grizzly Bears
- Harbour Seals
- Steller Sea Lions
- Humpback Whales
- Bald Eagles
- Herring Gulls
- Dall's Porpoises
- Surf Scoters
- Harlequin Ducks
- Common Loons
- Sea Otters
- River Otters
- American Mink
- Asst'd songbirds
- Asst'd seabirds
- Asst'd shorebirds

B. Less Likely But Possible Subjects (<50% probability of encounter):

- Killer Whales
- Coastal Gray Wolves
- Spirit Bears
- Minke Whales
- Fin Whales
- American Marten
- Elephant Seals
- Pacific White-sided Dolphins

2026 Trip Start and End Points: The photo tour starts and ends in Bella Bella, BC.

2026 Date: May 28 - June 5, 2026, including arrival and departure days. In the Great Bear Rainforest aboard the *Ocean Wayfinder* from May 29 - June 5, 2026.

2026 Price: \$8999 CAD plus 5% GST.

What's Included?

- All meals and accommodation in Bella Bella beginning on the evening of Day 1 (see Sample Itinerary)
- Pre-trip online professional photography instruction and multiple informal instructional sessions and good old-fashioned “*photography chats*” during the course of the trip
- All food and accommodation while aboard the *Ocean Wayfinder*

- A highly-experienced crew, wildlife guides, chef and a professional photography guide
- All First Nation, Conservation, and Stewardship fees
- Use of onboard gear and resources, including rubber boots!
- Use of Zodiac® and all associated safety gear (life jackets, etc.)

What's Not Included?

- Transportation between your home and Bella Bella, BC at the beginning and end of the trip
- Personal belongings and equipment
- Meals and accommodation in Bella Bella prior to Day 1 of the photo tour
- Any extra personal expenses incurred because of weather, logistical delays, or missed flights
- Any gratuities for the crew of the *Ocean Wayfinder*

What To Expect?

- Cool and rapidly “changeable” weather (daytime highs of about 12-17°C) with some light and moderate rain
- Mostly calm seas, but with some short-duration bouts of rolling water
- Hearty, healthy and delicious food
- Always warm, always dry floating basecamp!
- Great wildlife, landscape and seascape photo ops
- A truly unique and once-in-a-lifetime experience!

Photo Tour Leader: Brad Hill

Accommodation: While in Bella Bella we'll be staying at the Shearwater Resort & Marina.

This trip is being offered in association with *Outer Shores Expeditions*. While in the Great Bear Rainforest we will be staying on their classic 70-foot ketch – the *Ocean Wayfinder*.



Check out my super-sensitive front paws! Sea Otters have amazingly sensitive front paws that can distinguish between barnacle-encrusted rocks and barnacle-encrusted bivalves (food!) even when the water is so murky that there is zero visibility. Sea Otters have recently re-colonized the region after a nearly century-long absence and are now spreading to more and more locations in the Great Bear Rainforest. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca

Nikon Z 9 with Nikkor 400mm f2.8S @ 560mm (built-in TC engaged). 1/400s @ f4.5. ISO 800

Sample Itinerary

NOTE: The itinerary of the *Spring in the Southern Great Bear Instructional Photo Tour* is designed for flexibility. This allows us to react to the ever-changing distribution and abundance of wildlife and fluctuating weather conditions. Our primary observational and photographic “target” species will be Grizzly Bears, Black Bears, coastal Gray Wolves, Sea Otters, Humpback and Killer Whales and we’ll be visiting areas where each of these species have been found in the past. We will observe and photograph other species and landscapes as opportunities present themselves. Here’s just *one example* of how our time together may look! The route we have chosen provides us with opportunities to explore both “*inside-passage-style*” channels, inlets, and estuaries (the “*Inner Great Bear*”) and – weather permitting – the “*saltier-and-sandier*” and more exposed outer coast islands and islets (The “*Outer Great Bear*”). *This is only a sample itinerary and how we actually spend our days may differ from this proposed route and schedule.*

Day 1 – May 28, 2026

Arrive in Bella Bella, BC. Make your way to the Shearwater Resort and Marina. You may check-in any time from 4 PM on. If you arrive early in the day feel free to go for a walk or check out the facilities. Our first official activity will be meeting in the restaurant for dinner at 6:30 PM.

Day 2 – May 29, 2026

Early breakfast, followed by boarding the *Ocean Wayfinder* at the marina in Shearwater. Following meeting the crew and guides of the *Ocean Wayfinder*, allocating cabins, and a brief orientation we’ll begin our journey into the Great Bear Rainforest. Our voyage will immediately take us north into glacier-carved fjords of the “*Inner Great Bear*” where



Beauty in the Beast: Humpback Whale numbers have been on the rise in recent years in the channels and inlets of the Great Bear Rainforest. The whales are commonly seen during our photo tours – but capturing a breach shot is a special and rare treat!

Nikon D5 with Sigma Sport 150-600mm @ 550mm. 1/1250s @ f7.1. ISO 4000. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca



Fueling the Great Bear. The annual late summer and autumn spawning runs of 5 species of salmon provides the energy and nutrients that drives the entire ecosystem we know as the Great Bear Rainforest.

Nikon D600 with 24-70mm f2.8 @ 35mm. 1.0s @ f16. ISO 200

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photographic opportunities can abound! The narrow channels we'll travel through are home to Humpback and Killer Whales, Sea Otters, Elephant Seals and countless seabirds. End of day will see us anchoring in a small coastal estuary. We'll be able to watch for wildlife from the deck of the *Ocean Wayfinder*.

Days 3-7 – May 30 - June 3, 2026

We'll slowly make our way through steep-walled fjords of the inner Great Bear. Along the way we'll take Zodiac excursions into narrow inlets and estuary systems in search of Grizzlies, Black Bears, coastal Gray Wolves, and more! We'll also head ashore and explore on foot when opportunities present themselves. Weather permitting we'll spend some of our time on the more exposed outer islands of the Great Bear (the "*Outer Great Bear*") where we may encounter Steller Sea Lions, Sea Otters, Humpback and Fin Whales, and breathtaking land- and seascapes.

Day 8 – June 4, 2026

Today is about exploring forests, rivers, and estuaries in search of Grizzly and Black Bears, and coastal Gray Wolves! By evening we'll have time to relax and reflect on the fantastic sights and experiences of the day and the past week!

Day 9 – June 5, 2026

We'll travel the short distance to Bella Bella and then say farewell to our shipmates. You'll be left with a flight to Vancouver and beyond and, of course, great memories and photographs!

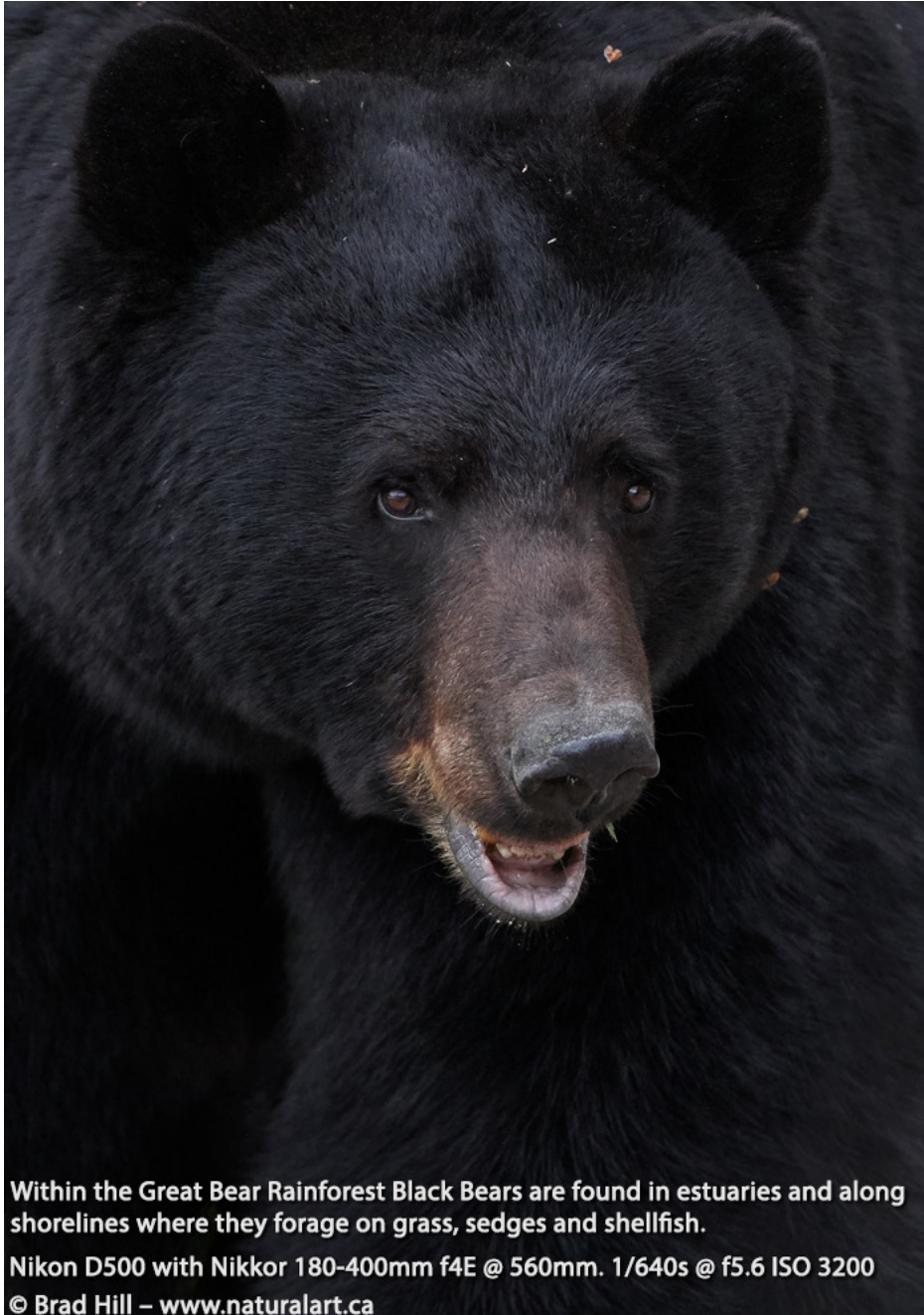
My Ethical Stance – Wildlife FIRST!

Wildlife conservation is the primary reason for my involvement in wildlife photography and for running photo tours. As such, *I place the welfare and value of our subjects above the value of any photograph of them.* This philosophy is embodied in my *Wildlife FIRST!* rules of conduct that guide our collective actions during all my photo tours. These four simple ethical rules state that:



Intrepid wildlife photographers scan the shoreline during an on-shore excursion in the Southern Great Bear Rainforest

1. Wildlife photographers who place wildlife welfare *FIRST* should engage in *passive* wildlife photography only. This means striving to capture images of wildlife behaving as naturally as possible and without the photographer taking any actions to guide the subject(s) toward desirable settings and/or backdrops or elicit specific “poses”.
2. Wildlife photographers who place wildlife welfare *FIRST* should do nothing *intentional* to alter or influence the behaviour of their subjects for the purpose of photography. This includes NOT intentionally influencing their distribution in space and time or influencing their behaviour. This translates into NOT engaging in any form of luring or baiting (or any other form of food supplementation). Additionally, it extends to not using any sound to alter the behaviour of the subject for the purpose of photography, including using predator and/or prey calls, song or vocalization playbacks, vocal clicking, or making any other sound to cause the subject to alter its ongoing behaviour and look at the photographer.
3. While conforming to and working within any legal guidelines determining minimum allowable approach distances, **wildlife photographers who place wildlife welfare *FIRST* should allow the wildlife subject – regardless of the species – to determine the subject-to-photographer distance it is comfortable with.** This principle serves to reduce stress on the subject – and also allows the capture of photographs of the subject behaving in a more natural, and often more interesting, fashion.
4. Wildlife photographers who place wildlife welfare *FIRST* always consider both their *individual and the overall collective effects* photographic activities can have on the subject(s). This includes being aware of *your total time spent with the wildlife subject(s)* and,



whenever possible, *the total time spent with the subject by all photographers utilizing the subject*. In practice this means the photographer may have to withdraw from the subject and cease photographic efforts of it, especially if there is any indication that his or her presence is impacting on the subject's behavioural routine (including activities such as feeding, resting and/or sleeping, caring for its offspring, etc.). This consideration is always important and may become even MORE important if multiple photographers or groups of photographers are simultaneously or sequentially sharing the same subject(s).

We **will** be adhering to these 4 rules during this photo tour.

All images in this trip compendium and on the *Natural Art Images* website (www.naturalart.ca) were captured following these *Wildlife FIRST* rules of photographer conduct.

For more information about this amazing trip contact Brad Hill at:

seminars@naturalart.ca

The Sea Wolf. Coastal Gray Wolf pauses along an inlet in the Great Bear Rainforest in spring of 2017
Nikon D500 with Sigma 120-300mm f2.8 Sport zoom @ 300mm. 1/1000s @ f4. ISO 640
© Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca





The Blow! This female Killer Whale and her calf are part of a small pod of 5 transient Killer Whales hunting for their primary prey – marine mammals. Transient Killer Whales can be seen in both the inside and outside coastal waters of the Great Bear Rainforest.

Nikon D4 with 400mm f2.8 VR. 1/1000s @ f5.6. ISO 2000. © Brad Hill – www.naturalart.ca

The "Inner" Great Bear. Our photo tour begins in the glacier-carved channels, inlets, bays, and estuaries on the mainland side (or "inner" side) of the central BC coast. Here towering mountains fall steeply to the Pacific Ocean, with forest often meeting the water line! Humpbacks, Killer Whales, Harbour Seals and the occasional Steller Sea Lion are found in these waters. Brown and Black Bears, coastal Gray Wolves, and many other species reside in the thick forests.



The "Inner" Great Bear – River Meets Ocean @ Sunrise! Coastal estuaries occur where rivers drain into the ocean – and are where bears, wolves, and many other wildlife species are commonly found in the spring and summer. We'll visit several estuaries during our *Great Bear Rainforest* photo tour!



The "Inner" Great Bear – Mystical Light, Mystical Moods! If you enjoy photographing moody scenes with enchanting light, there's no place better than the Great Bear Rainforest!



Super Highway – Great Bear Rainforest Style. As the tide rises streams that were mere trickles just a few hours ago become navigable. With the use of Zodiac® inflatable boats we can use these temporary “Rainforest Highways” to move deep into the forest in search of wildlife.



The "Outer" Great Bear – Where Rock Meets Sand! Many of the western-most islands and shorelines on the BC coast offer a beautiful mix of beach, forest, and rock! In this region we find greater numbers of Sea Otters, Steller Sea Lions, and Coastal Gray Wolves



Home of the Spirit Bear. During our “*Spring in the Southern Great Bear*” photo tours we travel through the heart of Spirit Bear country! In springtime Black Bears (including Spirit Bears) are widely dispersed through the area and not focused on salmon streams. If we are able to see and photograph a Spirit Bear it will be a very special treat!

