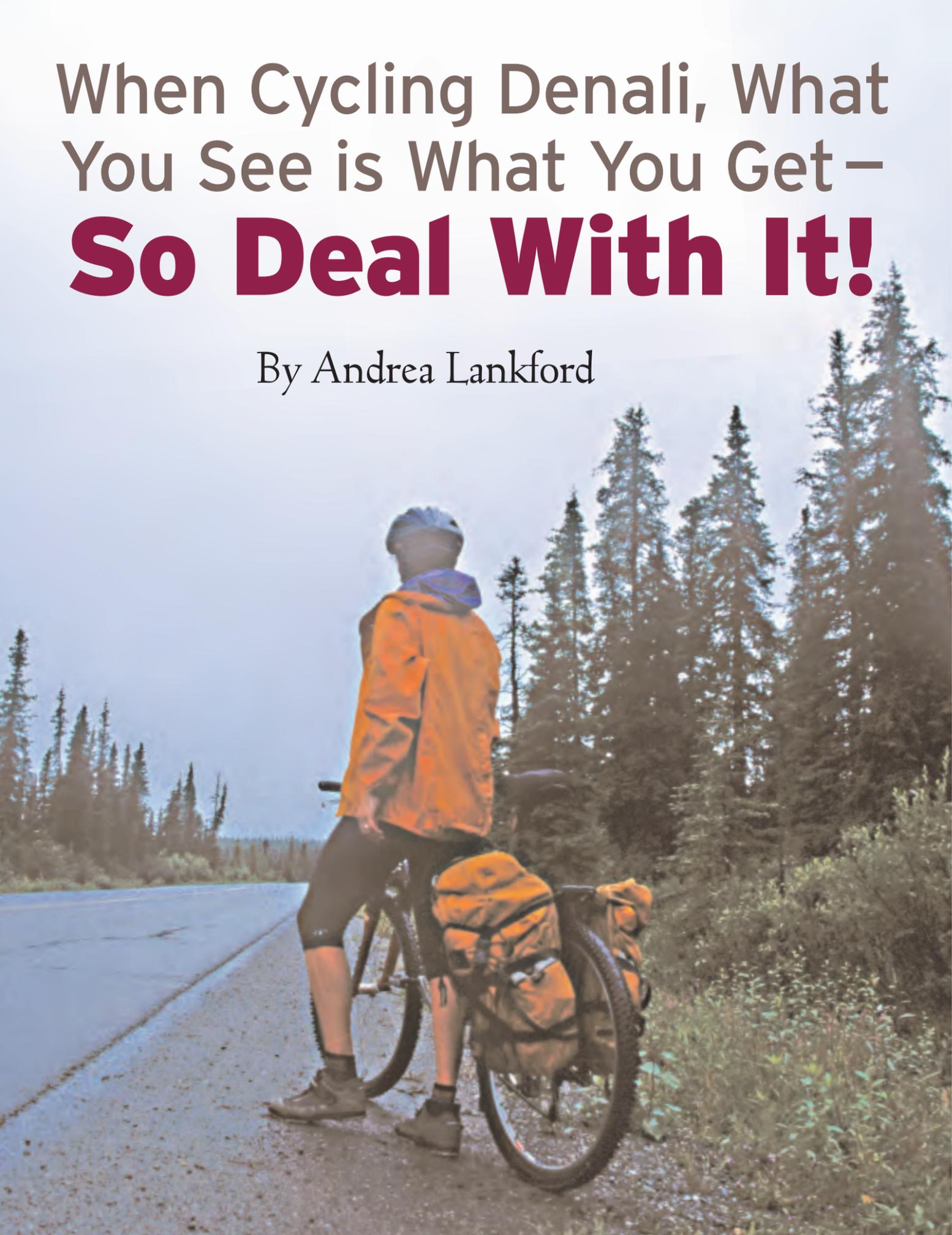


When Cycling Denali, What You See is What You Get — So Deal With It!

By Andrea Lankford



I've developed a love-hate relationship with nature. It's not environmentally correct to admit that. I'm supposed to be a tundra-kissing wilderness lover, which I am — most of the time. But after twelve years working as a search-and-rescue ranger in places like the Grand Canyon and Yosemite, after removing too many bodies from too many scenic spots, after spending an early retirement traveling over 5,000 miles by foot, kayak, and bike, you could say I'm burned out on enduring the



best and the worst nature has to offer. Then why, after all the tragedies I've witnessed, after all the self-induced suffering I've put myself through — why do I keep going back for more?

"I just love Alaska," I say, my voice sharp with sarcasm, to the two men hiding from the rain and the bugs inside the flimsy three-sided shelter the National Park Service calls a bus stop. The men stare at me with eyes wide from surprise. Cozy and dry in their expensive fleece jackets, they look like accountants — no, engineers. On this oppressive and dreary day, at the lonely end of this rugged ninety-mile dirt road, the last thing they expected to see is a woman skidding up on a bicycle. To make things more surreal, I'm a woman with corded calves and muscled arms, a woman

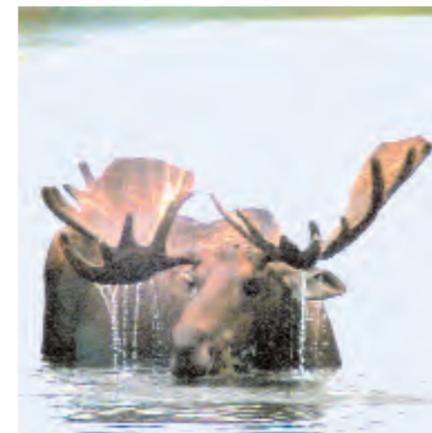
WILDLIFE PHOTOS BY CALE SCHAFFER

who doesn't slap at the mosquito on her cheek. Wearing a helmet over a face splattered with mud, I seem to have appeared from nowhere. Perhaps I materialized from the silty bottom of Wonderlake like a soldier emerging from a jungled swamp.

Truth is, I'm not so tough. In fact, I've had it. I'm giving up. I take off my helmet, shake the rain out of my hair, and sit down next to the engineers to wait for the bus. No view of the mountain, lots of rain, more mosquitoes — welcome to Denali National Park.

My travel partner, KJ Glover, and I intended to bike from Kantishna to the Eielson Visitor Center. We've been mountain-bike touring in the Alaskan bush for over two weeks. We saved Denali Park, the best, for last. But the soaking downpour, the late start, and the depressing overcast sky darken our spirits. We decide to call it a day. Besides, we can't see the mountain, so what's the point?

I've been to Denali twice and have never seen what the Athabaskan's refer to as "the high one," unless you count pictures. Denali is a postcard photographer's dream — on the good days. But the highest mountain on North America is also the mountain on which my friend Cale Shaffer died.



Shaffer loved nature. He loved it so much that, like me, he decided to become a park ranger. It was a job that killed him when, on the way to the climbing camp on Kahiltna glacier, his plane crashed into the blueberry bushes at the base of a cliff. In Talkeetna, where all the ambitious moun-



taineers begin their attempt to conquer nature, Cale's sacrifice is honored by a plaque on the ranger station wall. He knew the risks. Although he was only twenty-five when he died, Cale had been a park ranger long enough to realize that nature isn't always nice. But he still loved that damned mountain.

"Shame on you," I shake my finger at the sobering mass of dark clouds behind which Denali hides. The moody mountain makes its own weather. During the wet days of summer, you have less than a twenty percent chance of getting the picture postcard view. At the Eielson Visitor Center, the rangers keep a calendar that illustrates under each date what the view was like on that day. The space under July 5th is colored in completely with charcoal. On a date in June, someone wrote, "What you see is what you get." Deal with it.

Oh, well, it's not like there isn't plenty of other stuff to look at — like the twisted

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Smelling the flowers. Lupines and other wildflowers abound during the Alaskan summer.

braids of water flowing out onto graveled riverbeds below mountains that rival the opening scene in *The Sound of Music*. Or the hyperactive growth of purple fireweed along the roadside, the herd of caribou silhouetted on top of tundra slopes, or the monstrous male moose lifting his massive head out of the willow before trotting off to put some distance between himself and the road. They didn't make Denali a park for nothing.

"Stop!" I yell to the bus driver. "A bear." It's a wonder we don't tip over when everybody moves to my side of the bus. In the riverbed below us, a blond grizzly paws for something in the dirt. We watch from the safety of the camper bus that transports people, bikes, and camping gear back to what passes for civilization in Alaska. "That's too cool," KJ whispers. After biking over 400 miles, it's about

time we saw a bear. A terrifying animal, the grizzly is the creature we so badly want to see — and so badly don't want to see.

Less than a quarter of a mile away, the bear minds her own business, which is searching for something to eat. She seems unaffected by the soaking and frigid rain, although we quickly shut the bus windows to keep out the cold.

After another drenching night in our tent, KJ and I are in no mood to fight the weather. We decide to go to the park service dog-sled demonstration instead. At the kennels, bright-eyed huskies stand on top of their houses and wag their tails. Government employees that work for a mere two cups of dog food a day, these canines are eager and willing to perform their summer duty — entertaining and educating park visitors — even though

they'd rather mush through snow on wilderness patrols. After the mushing demo, the group walks over to tour the ranger station. Nailed to the walls are boards engraved with the names of dogs long since retired or dead. Tok, Mather, Neanna, Harry. The dogs are named after rivers and rangers. How many winters did these dogs haul heavy sleds over icy landscapes before their names earned a space on this wall?

It's my last day at Denali and, by God, I'm going bicycling. Neoprene booties — check, Gortex rain jacket — check, waterproof gloves — check, helmet — I prepare for battle. The rain comes down harder. I ignore the weather and crank up the fifteen percent grade at the start of my ride. While going uphill, I'm slower, which gives me a better look at the wildflowers. Because there is no awe-inspiring view to distract me, I see the detailed and complex beauty of the taiga — a ground patterned with greens, grays, burnt oranges, and brown needles under a forest of tiny Christmas trees. Stopping for a water break, I hear the pleasant white noise of a hidden creek. I spot a moose track in the mud. Then I gaze up to where Denali, I think, is supposed to be. The mountain refuses to reveal itself to me.

My seat aches from putting in so many miles over the last three weeks. Pedaling through the pain, I receive one of those revelations you get during long rides. Now, suddenly, I know something. I know that loving a fairy-tale view of nature is like loving a man only when he is rich, successful, and has a head full of hair. Or, if it makes the comparison easier, like loving the image of an airbrushed woman with fake boobs in a magazine. To love nature, you've got to find a way to accept her bad sides. She's not always beautiful. She's not always smiling.

To truly love wilderness, you have to love all of it, even if it hurts.

And I do. And it does. 📷

This article is dedicated to the memory of Cale Shaffer, 1974 - 2000, park ranger, cyclist, mountain climber, and nature lover.