

CANADA'S REMOTE NUNAVIK TUNDRA

ADVENTURE IN THE FAR NORTH

Searching for elusive wildlife among
stunning autumn landscapes in the barren,
hostile environment of Canada's northern
sub-arctic autonomous region



A lonely, desolate landscape abruptly exploding in a riot of warm autumn colors

With the coming of winter the barren landscapes of the Arctic tundra of Nunavik briefly explode in a rainbow of colors, as endless extensions of Dwarf birch *Betula nana*, White spruce *Picea glauca*, Dwarf willow *Salix herbacea*, blueberry *Vaccinium* sp., Caribou moss *Cladonia rangiferina* and various other plants and lichens face rapidly plummeting temperatures.

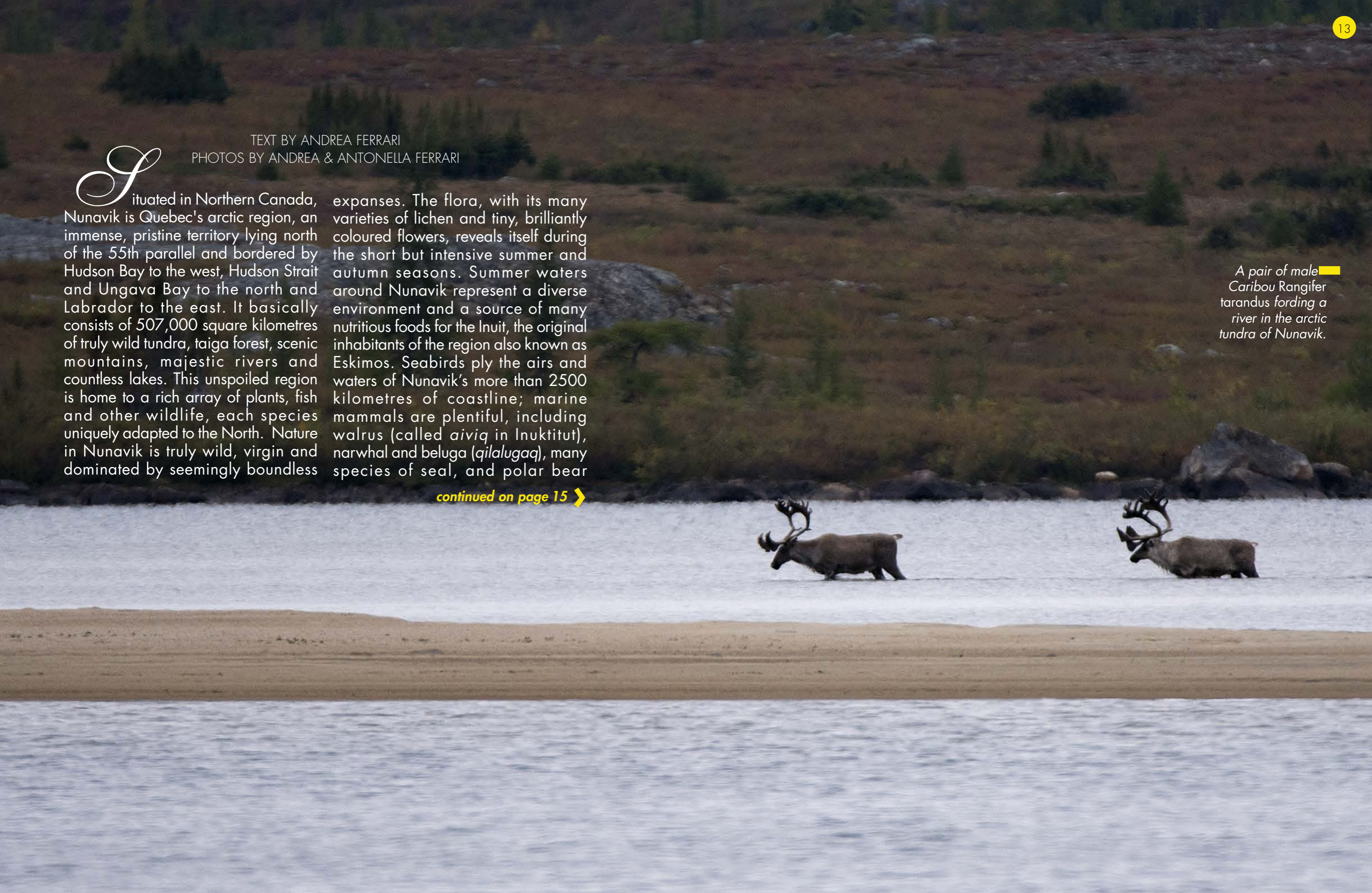
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PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

*S*ituated in Northern Canada, Nunavik is Quebec's arctic region, an immense, pristine territory lying north of the 55th parallel and bordered by Hudson Bay to the west, Hudson Strait and Ungava Bay to the north and Labrador to the east. It basically consists of 507,000 square kilometres of truly wild tundra, taiga forest, scenic mountains, majestic rivers and countless lakes. This unspoiled region is home to a rich array of plants, fish and other wildlife, each species uniquely adapted to the North. Nature in Nunavik is truly wild, virgin and dominated by seemingly boundless

expanses. The flora, with its many varieties of lichen and tiny, brilliantly coloured flowers, reveals itself during the short but intensive summer and autumn seasons. Summer waters around Nunavik represent a diverse environment and a source of many nutritious foods for the Inuit, the original inhabitants of the region also known as Eskimos. Seabirds ply the airs and waters of Nunavik's more than 2500 kilometres of coastline; marine mammals are plentiful, including walrus (called *aiviq* in Inuktitut), narwhal and beluga (*qilalugaq*), many species of seal, and polar bear

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A pair of male Caribou Rangifer tarandus fording a river in the arctic tundra of Nunavik.





■ A flock of Canada geese *Branta canadensis* against the spectacular autumnal background of the Nunavik tundra near Ungava Bay.

■ A typical Nunavik tundra esker landscape brightened by an unexpected rainbow - in full sunlight.

*Endless vistas
unchanged since
the Pleistocene*

(*nanuk*). Sightings of any of these species is an unforgettable but sadly rather uncommon experience for the visitor. Terrestrial wildlife in the region is just as diverse. The world's largest caribou herds, totalling almost one million head, roam freely in Nunavik and can be occasionally observed up-close - if lucky - in summer. The introduced Musk-ox (*umimmaq*) is a

more impressive species, and these can be approached more easily in summer and autumn, although in smaller numbers. Since time untold, marine mammals have been essential to Inuit life. Not only are they an important source of food - the pelts, bones, ivory and blubber of these animals were also traditionally used for tools, clothing, heating oil, shelters and boats. The most important species of marine mammals to the Inuit are ringed seal (*natsiq*), bearded seal (*ujjuk*), walrus (*aiviq*) and beluga (*qilalugaq*). The near-legendary polar bear (*nanuk*) is an important symbol of the Arctic that is also classified by Inuit as a

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■ A Short-tailed Weasel or Stoat *Mustela erminea*, one of the few mammals we encountered in the arctic tundra of Nunavik.

marine mammal. Except for Inuit hunters and killer whales, polar bears have very few enemies. Traditionally, the tracking and hunting of a first polar bear marked a young Inuk passage to adulthood. Inuit have many uses for the wildlife they harvest. For example, seal fat continues to be aged and eaten as a condiment (*misiraaq*). In days gone by, it was transformed into heating oil, an essential source of heat and light during long, cold winter nights. Sealskins are also still a prized material for making warm and water-repellent boots, mittens and other garments. Traditionally, sealskins were also used to make *avataq* (buoys used for the hunting of marine mammals) and *puurtaa* (sacs for the storage of meat and oil). As for walrus, their skins were once used for building boats, shelters and many types of accessories. Inuit artists use the animal's ivory tusks for carving, especially jewellery. Finally, like seals and walrus, belugas are primarily a source of food for Inuit. Not only is the meat eaten dried (*nikku*), frozen-raw

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Snowshoe Hare
Lepus americanus
 photographed in the
 outskirts of Kuujjuaq
 village at twilight.



Left, Antonella photographs a Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus muta* in fall plumage during a snowfall; top right, Black scoter or American scoter *Melanitta americana* females; bottom right, Herring gull *Larus argentatus* juvenile, in Ungava Bay.



A typical esker landscape of the
arctic tundra of Nunavik province,
Ungava, Northern Quebec,
Canada.





and cooked, but the thick skin (*mattaq*) is a delicacy, which happens to be rich in vitamin C. Beluga meat and fat is still used today to make *igunaq* and *misiraq*. Beluga skin was traditionally used for footwear, boat covers and dog whips. The history of Nunavik's musk-ox , on the contrary, dates back to August 1967. At that time, 15 youngs of these bovines, captured around Eureka on Ellesmere Island, were transported to an experimental farm located at Old Chimo (Kuujuuatuqaaq), a few kilometres downstream from present-day Kuujuuaq. It was hoped that captive musk-ox could be domesticated to boost socio-economic development.

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Canada geese *Branta canadensis* can be sighted migrating in huge flocks around October.



■ Left, a huge Musk-ox *Ovibos moschatus* bull;. right, Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus muta* still in fall plumage despite the recent and abundant snowfalls. In a few days it will turn completely white.



The billowing glory of the Aurora borealis lighting up the midnight sky

■ A spectacular show of the Northern Lights, also known as Polar Lights or Aurora borealis, lights up the midnight sky above our wooden cabins at Wolf Camp, Wolf Lake, in the arctic tundra of Nunavik.



With the coming of winter the barren landscapes of the Arctic tundra of Nunavik briefly explode in a rainbow of colors, as endless extensions of Dwarf birch *Betula nana*, White spruce *Picea glauca*, Dwarf willow *Salix herbacea*, blueberry *Vaccinium sp.*, Caribou moss *Cladonia rangiferina* and various other plants and lichens face rapidly plummeting temperatures.

Inuit would use the soft, fine *qiviu* (musk-ox wool) to make warm clothing for the harsh, cold winters and they would be able to incorporate meat from the animals into their diets during periods when caribou was not plentiful. Though the outcome of this socio-economic experiment did not produce the desired results, the introduction of musk-ox to the tundra of Nunavik has been a great success. In Nunavik, the first animals to be released were three calves in 1973 near Tasiujaq. By the time the experimental farm at Old Chimo terminated operations in August 1983, a total of 52 head had been released at a few sites in the region. The new environment of these musk-ox suited them very well, and they began to reproduce successfully in the wild. Today, the Nunavik population is estimated at more than 2000 head. Since their situation is still precarious however, hunting is restricted by a quota system. In Inuktitut, musk-ox are called *umimmaq* (the bearded ones). Musk-ox are one of the oldest species of mammals still living today. About one million years ago, the ancestors of these bovines roamed the steppes of Northern Asia, along with the mammoth. More than 90,000 years ago, this animal crossed the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska to populate North America. Fossils have been found in several sites in Canada and the United States, notably in Saskatchewan, Ontario and New

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Muskrat
Ondatra zibethicus.



■ Rock Ptarmigan
Lagopus muta
in fall plumage.

The spectacular colors of autumnal vegetation in the Nunavik tundra.



■ A large Musk-ox *Ovibos moschatus* bull in an icy drizzle, one of the few we could actually approach in the arctic tundra of Nunavik.



■ Herring gull
Larus argentatus.



England. Hundreds of thousands of caribou roam the wilds of Nunavik. For centuries, the lives of many Nunavik Inuit have been closely tied to caribou and their migrations for subsistence and other purposes. For example, before the arrival of the modern world in the North in the 20th century, the hides of these animals were used to make clothing, such as the *qulittaq* (a parka held in great esteem because of caribou fur's exceptional insulating effect). Thread for sewing came instead from dried tendons.

**SHORT SUMMERS
LONG WINTERS**

Nunavik is an immense region where spring may last for more than three months. The land, its forests and water bodies begin their annual reawakening near the end of March in the southern reaches of the region in communities such as Kuujjuarapik. However spring only arrives near the beginning of June in the north, in communities such as Ivujivik, Salluit, Kangiqsujaq and Quaqtaq. Spring marks the return of Nunavik's migratory birds, large and small. Canada geese (*nirliq*) and eider duck (*mitiq*) to name but two species of waterfowl arrive among the first, to build their nests on offshore islands and await the hatching of their young. According to the Québec Breeding Birds Atlas, at the height of summer over 125 species of birds may be found in the southern forests of Nunavik and

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■ An abundance of frozen brooks and iced patterns heralds the coming of a long winter in the tundra.



Arctic hare
Lepus arcticus
in autumnal livery.



up to 50 species nest on the Ungava Peninsula above the tree line. Nunavik also nurtures populations of several birds of prey, well-known emblems of the North. These include the peregrine falcon (*kiggavik*) and the gyrfalcon (*kiggaviarjuk*), as well as the rough-legged hawk (*qinnuajuaq*), to name a few. Among the handful of bird species that reside year round in the region, it is worth mentioning the nocturnal snowy owl (*ukpik*) and one of its prey of choice, the ptarmigan (*aqiggig*). These species have adapted to the Arctic climate and may have feathered legs or be able to change their colouring according to the season.

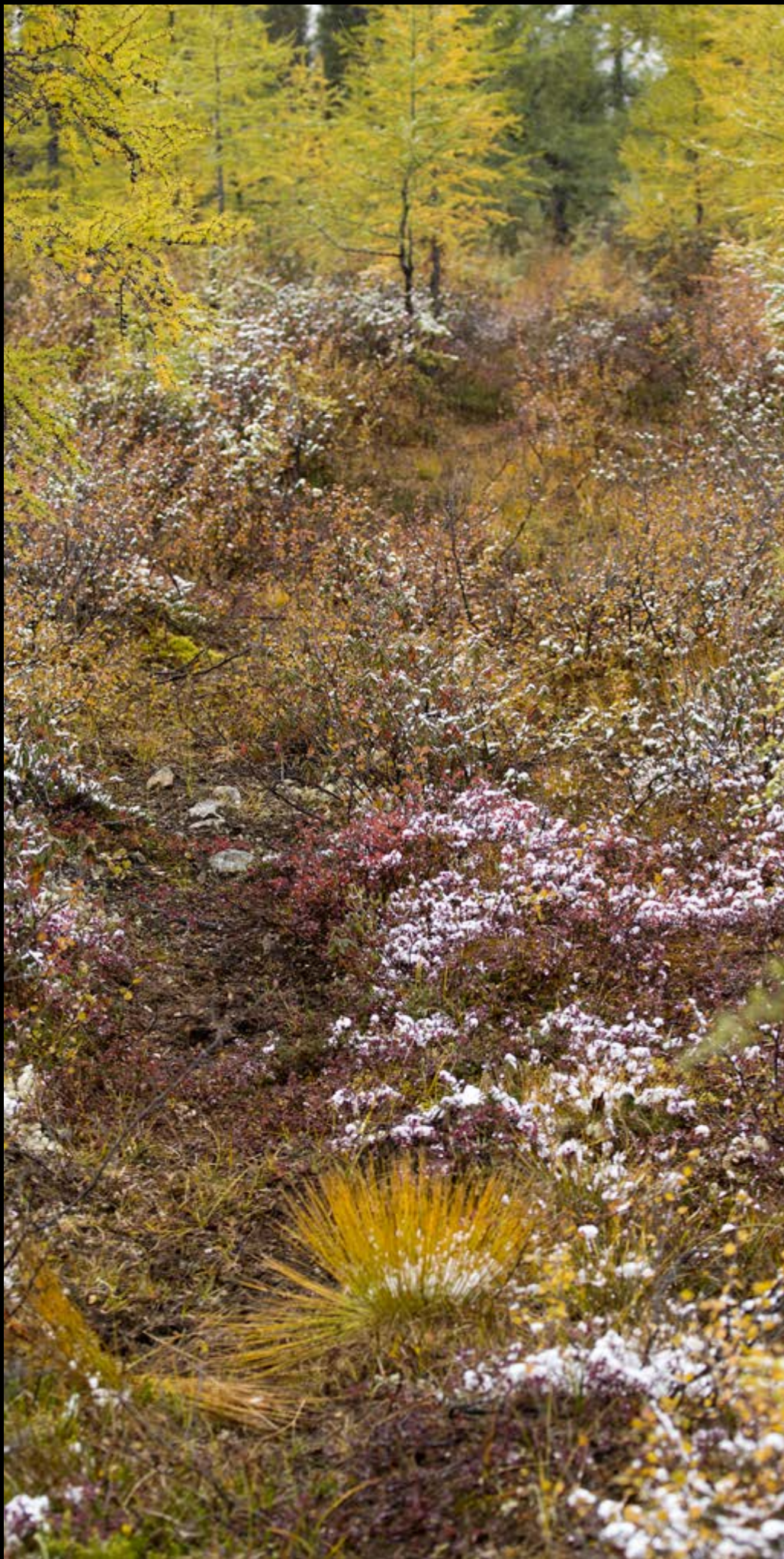
EXPLORING THE TUNDRA ENVIRONMENT

Exploring the Nunavik region is very costly and occasionally quite difficult, and wildlife photography there can prove exceedingly frustrating. Before committing to what could prove to be a very frustrating and uncomfortable trip, one should realize these are real expeditions to totally unspoilt, unpopulated, undeveloped areas where the great outdoors spread for thousands of miles in every direction. Accomodation is sparse and very basic, consisting mostly of run-down, unoccupied plywood cabins occasionally utilized by local and North American hunters, which still represent the majority of the very few

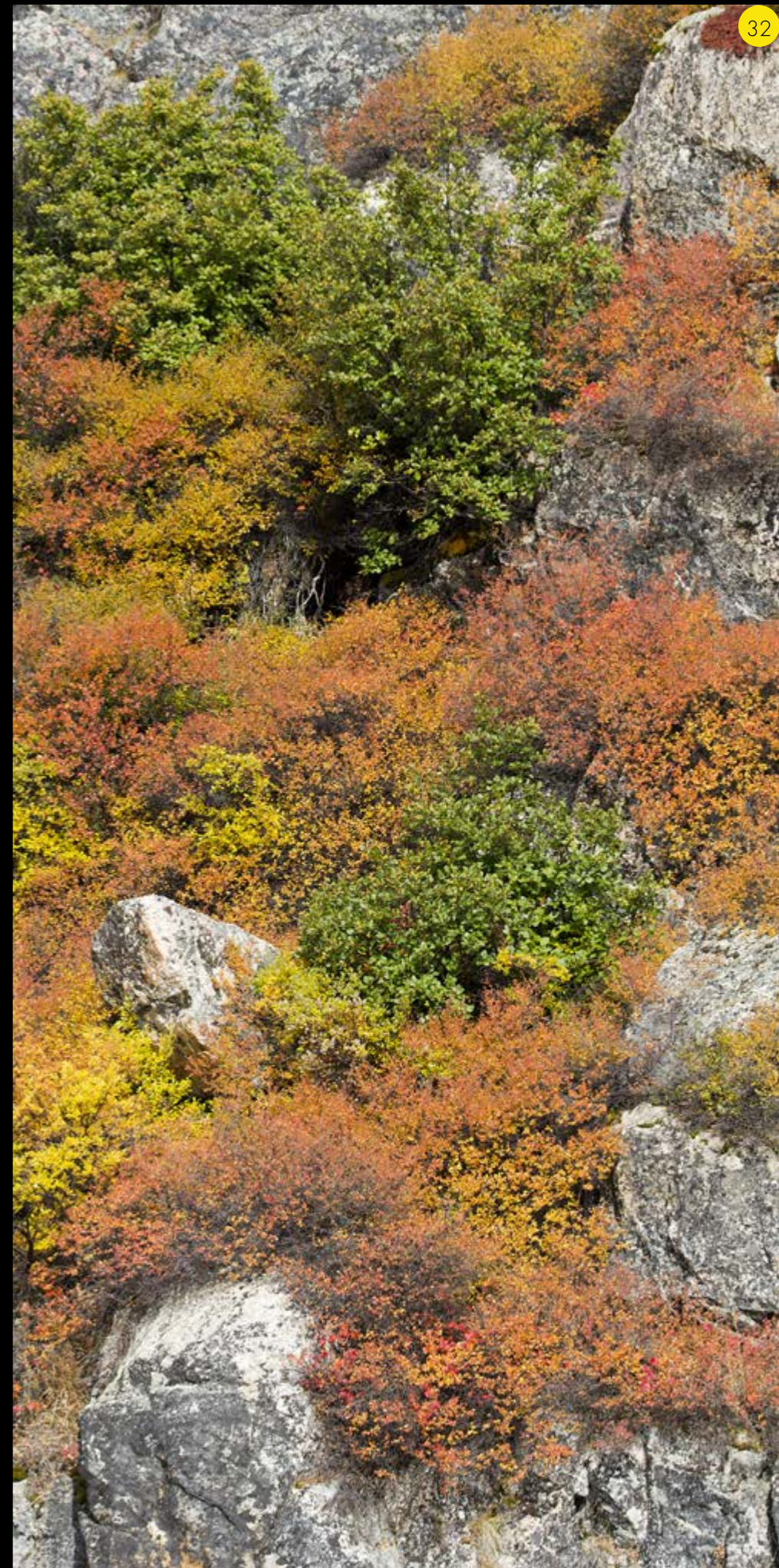
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A flock of Canada geese *Branta canadensis* flies over the technicolored autumn landscape of the arctic tundra of Nunavik near Ungava Bay.



■ Autumn colors
and migrating
Canada geese
Branta canadensis.





■ A flight of female Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* shoots across the icy waters of Ungava Bay.



The steep granite cliffs overlooking Wolf Lake (left) are occasionally visited by lone Musk-oxen *Ovibos moschatus* (right).



■ The first winter snow falls on the Nunavik tundra.




travellers to this beautiful but harsh, forlorn land. Visitors sleep in barrack bunks and have to utilize outdoor latrines in sub-zero temperatures, resorting to river water for drinking and washing as running water is unavailable. Everything - including oil barrels, utilized for heating stoves and cooking, and food provisions (mostly frozen meat as no fresh fruit or vegetables are available, obviously) has to be flown in to the camps by Twin Otters or small floatplanes, which are able to land and take-off on the countless bodies of water dotting the landscape but whose movements are however highly dependant on the weather situation. Good Inuit guides to locate and track the sparse wildlife are seldom available to wildlife and nature photographers as they - quite understandably - prefer to work for the hunting business, where the money is. Furthermore, the wide open nature of the landscape creates great difficulties to photographers wishing to approach their subjects - the only way to move around here is on foot, and cross-country walks lasting several hours are needed every day to cover relatively small areas. Groups of hunters, on the other hand, usually have trackers, spotter planes and radioes at their disposal to locate caribou or musk-ox herds from the air and quickly communicate their position.

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A trip to the Nunavik tundra in October offers stunningly colorful vegetation..



*The first snow blizzards
announce the arrival
of the Arctic winter*

The cliffs above  our camp at Wolf Lake are hit by the first winter blizzards.



The Northern Lights at night and autumnal vegetation during the day offer a riot of colors in the Nunavik tundra during the months of September and October.





The rapid drop in temperatures creates spectacular ice patterns in the ponds and brooks of the Nunavik tundra.

Heavily clothed
against the cold
and the icy wind,
Andrea photographs
an Arctic hare
Lepus arcticus;
right, a formation
flight of migrating
Snow geese
Anser caerulescens.



A PRISTINE LAND OF GREAT EXTREMES

The best chances to see and approach the herds of caribou and musk-ox occur during the brief, stifling summer period - usually in August - when however the much-feared swarms of black flies and mosquitoes make life miserable for all, animals and visitors alike. Mosquito nets and full cover for hands and face are an absolute must for all - there have been documented cases of caribou actually having been driven insane by these implacable blood-sucking pests, which inflict countless, extremely painful, itchy bites. In summer the tundra is also lush and green - a strange sight. On the other hand, the best time for landscape photography and the spectacular, magical show of the Northern Lights or Aurora borealis is during September-October, when the tundra vegetation explodes in a veritable rainbow of reds and yellows before the onset of the long Arctic winter. Animals in October are less numerous and less easily approached (we only saw two caribou and never saw a bear in three weeks; only heard wolves once, at night), and weather can be absolutely unpredictable - we often experienced bright warm sunlight, rain, drizzle, hail, thick fogs and snow blizzards in the course of a single day - but the stunning, endless tundra landscapes are at their absolute best, and there are no black flies or mosquitoes around. ●

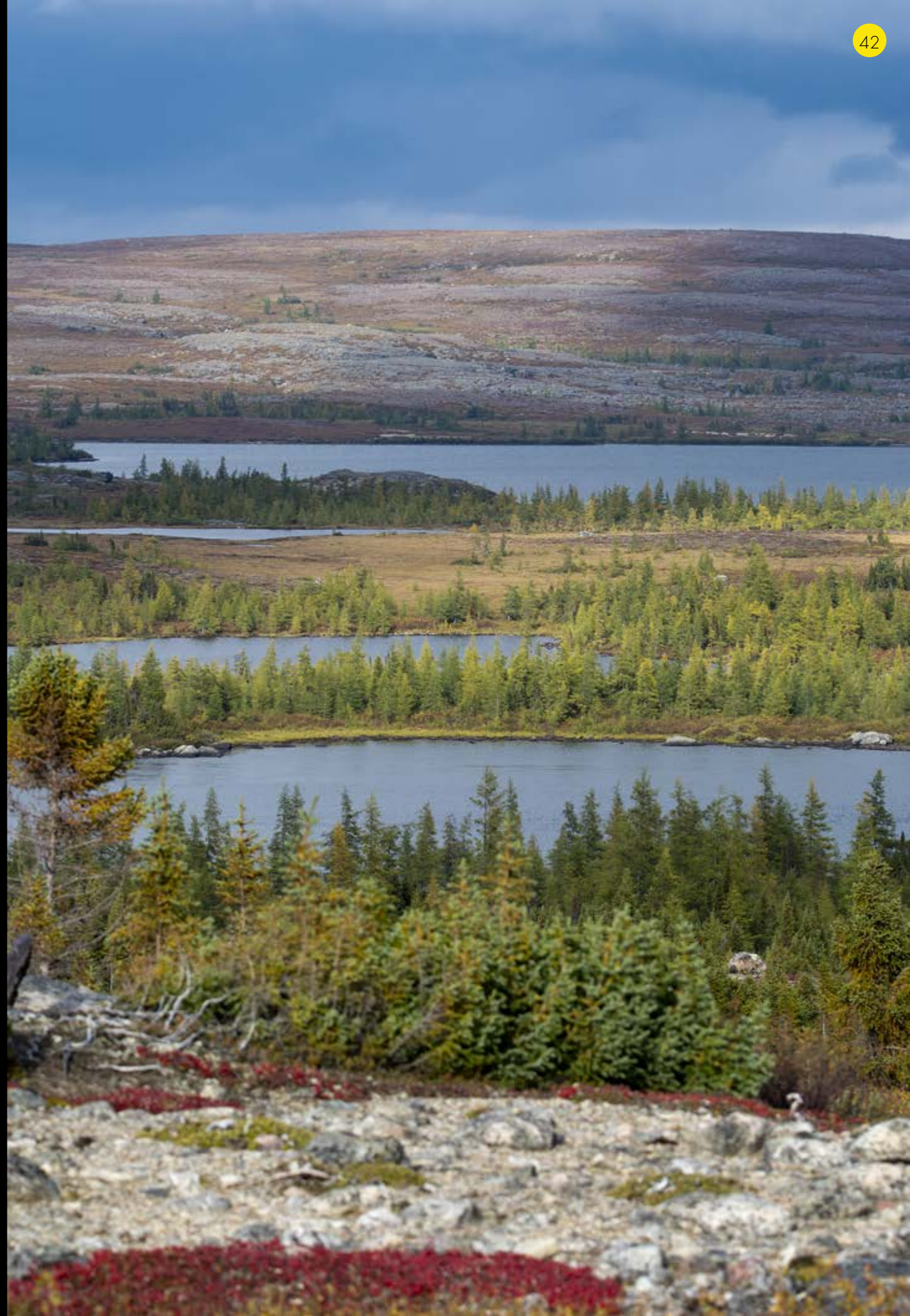


A large Musk-ox (Ovibos moschatus) is shown in profile, facing right. It has thick, shaggy brown fur and a white patch on its back. The animal is standing on a rocky, uneven ground covered with low-lying, colorful tundra vegetation in shades of yellow, orange, and red. The background consists of rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky, suggesting a high-altitude or Arctic environment.

■ A big Musk-ox
Ovibos moschatus
bull faces the icy
wind of the tundra
- the harbinger of
the harsh Arctic
winter which is
coming fast.



■ Left, Snowshoe Hare *Lepus americanus*; right, esker landscape.





Two aerial shots taken from our Single Otter hydroplane as we fly towards our first camp - the partly waterlogged and partly rocky/sandy nature of the tundra is evident.



Scattered bones left over by wolf packs bear mute witness to the great Caribou migration



All too often the only evidence of Caribou was this - a few scattered bones. August is apparently the right time to see them in numbers.



■ *Photographing Aurora borealis in the tundra is more difficult than in Norway or in other developed locations as the landscape is completely devoid of artificial lights - one has to work in total darkness and at very low temperatures, often in strong wind.*

*This is how we saw most of the Musk-oxen *Ovibos moschatus* we encountered - it takes a lot of stealth to get close to them, at least at this time of the year.*





A beautiful
Peregrine Falcon Falco peregrinus perches on a lake shore. This photo was taken from our little boat.




Rock Ptarmigan
Lagopus muta
were quite
numerous.

Left, rainbow over the esker landscape; center, ice patterns on low bushes; right, American Tree sparrow *Spizella arborea*.





Canada geese 
Branta canadensis.



Two relatively common sights of the Nunavik tundra in October. Left, Arctic hare *Lepus arcticus*; right, Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus muta*.



■ Colors and patterns of the Nunavik tundra in October, just before the onset of the Arctic winter.

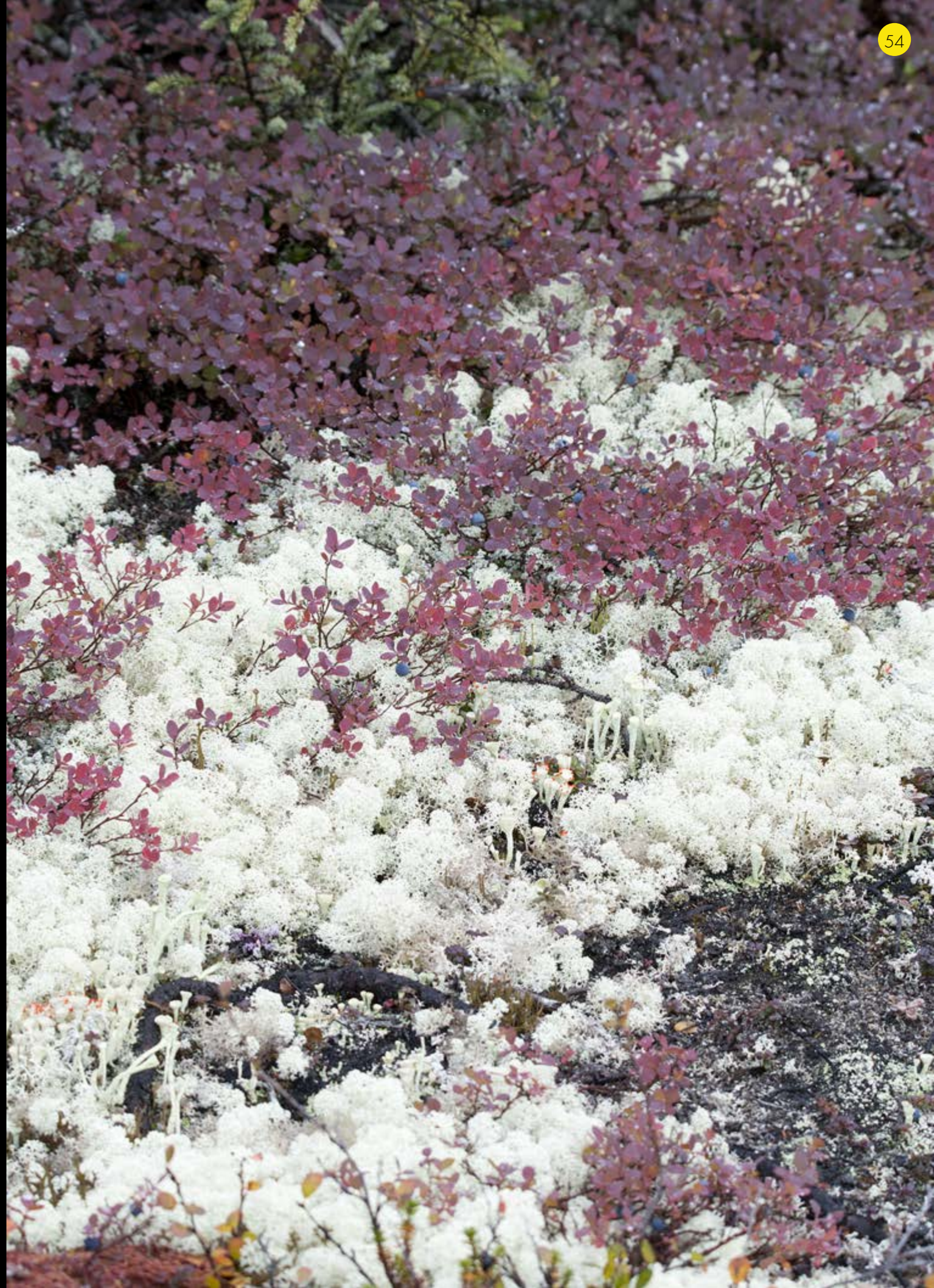




Muskrat Ondatra zibethicus can be easily confused with beavers at a distance, but the latter are not present in the tundra of Nunavik.



■ *The miniaturized and highly specialized plant life of the Nunavik tundra offers wonderful photographic possibilities to the discerning photographer.*



■ Musk-ox *Ovibos moschatus* on a ridge. One has to creep stealthily and carefully among the low bushes to get relatively close to these large, fast and aggressive bulls, which are known to charge if disturbed.





Goosander
or Common Merganser
Mergus merganser females.



■ Beautiful, ice-cold, clear-water ponds and lakes dot the tundra landscape. Center, a pair of female Black scoter or American scoter *Melanitta americana*.

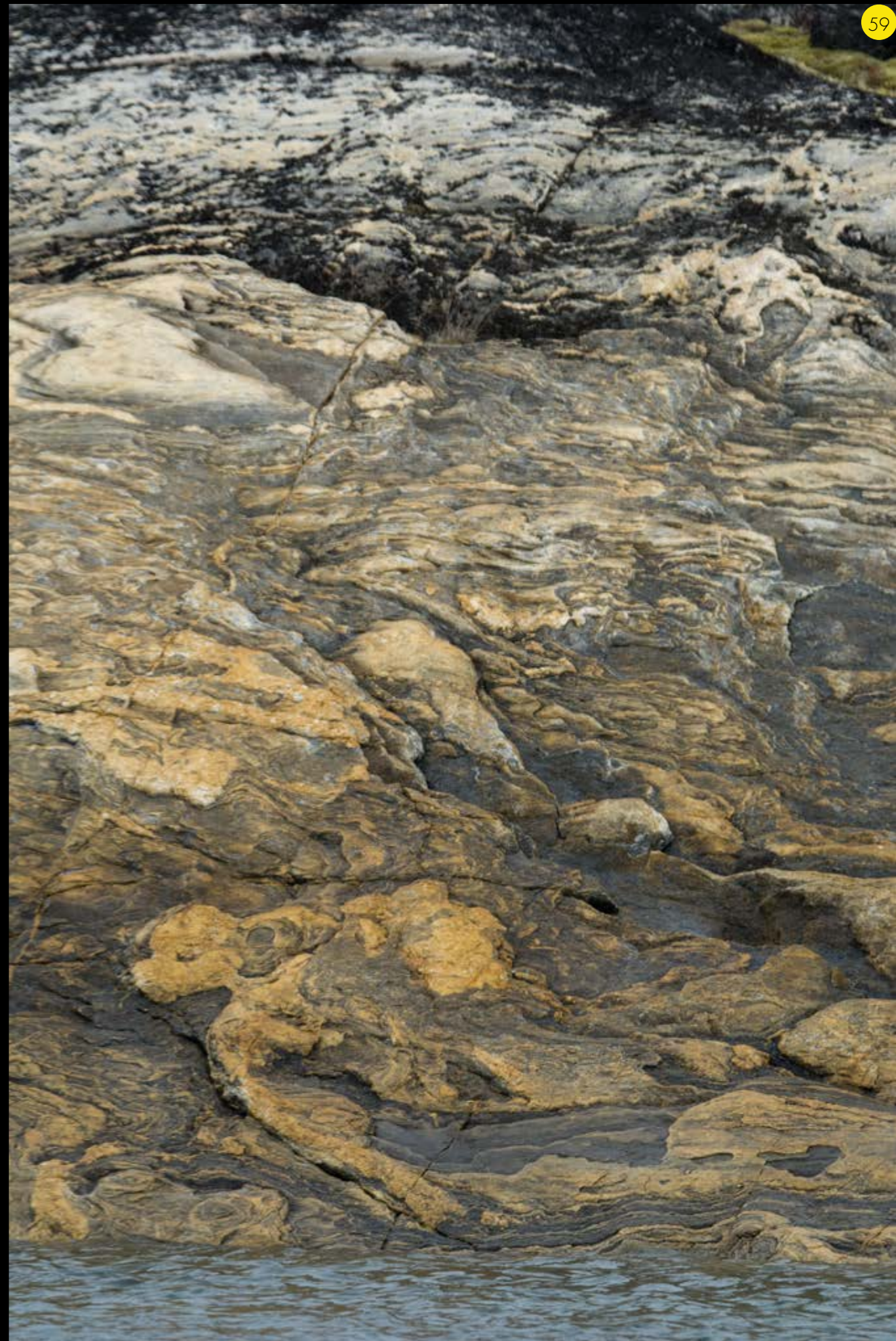


*Sun, rain, fog, hail and snow
in the course of a few hours*

Quick, unexpected weather changes offer great light conditions and camera opportunities in October.



■ The barren, occasionally bush-covered rocky shores of the Ungava river offer wonderfully abstract and occasionally very colorful patterns.



■ The typical esker landscape of the Nunavik tundra in autumn, when colors are at their brightest.



■ *Arctic hares*
Lepus arcticus can be
approached quite closely
if one moves slowly
and carefully.

