

JOURNEY

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By Judy Jennings

Photographs by Linda Griffith, MSW, DCSW

North to Alaska

Suburban dogs share an epic road trip into the wild.



WHY would a 57-year-old professional photographer set out on a road trip from Maine to the Arctic Ocean with only her two dogs for company? Was she on a hunt for the perfect image? Or, in packing up her suburban dogs and driving off into the Alaskan wilderness, was she just impossibly naïve?

Linda Griffith's journey to the north in 2008 with Hugger and Comfort might most accurately be called a spiritual migration, one that began long before the trip actually started and never really came to an end. After returning home in 2009, it took her five years to narrow down the 20,000 photographs she took to the 75 she would include in a book and exhibit she called *The Secret Life of Light*.

(Left): Comfort navigating. (Top): Dog is my copilot.



Parked for the night at the top of the world.
Keno Hill, Yukon Territory, Canada



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Hugger and Comfort on grizzly watch.

Even then, Griffith's journey was not complete; she would come to find it unbearable to have her work viewed only as beautiful photos. Her passionate assertion that Arctic light itself is endowed with conscious awareness, caught through the lens of her camera, is as intriguing as her photographs.

But none of that was in play when Griffith was struck with the idea for the trip in 2003 following the unexpected deaths of her grandmother, mother and a long-time mentor. Though Griffith grieved, she had a focus, a way to deal with her sorrow.

Sixteen years earlier, she had occasion to meet a Lenni Lenape Clan Mother at an Allentown, Pa., museum when she took a bag full of oddly shaped stones that she thought might be Native American artifacts to be evaluated. The Clan Mother, respectfully titled "Grandmother," took Griffith under her wing, teaching her the Lenni Lenape worldview in the same way she would teach a granddaughter.

"It wasn't that I didn't like my culture and wanted to try on somebody else's," Griffith said candidly. "It was that I picked up these rocks and they led me to this place, through a path that was uniquely mine."

By the time the three matriarchs in Griffith's life passed in 2003, she had developed a different sensitivity.

"I had an awareness of how directions [affect] my life," she explained. In the medicine wheel, West is the place of dying and transformation, while North represents wisdom and clarity. "It just naturally occurred to me that I should be going North to integrate the loss of these people, and to understand where I am in my life now."

Preparation

Griffith spent four years getting ready for the trip. First, she purchased a used bus and hired a mechanic, who spent a year reconditioning and converting it to four-wheel drive. Over the next three years, she removed seats, laid carpet and installed insulation. She also coated its exterior with a special paint



developed by NASA to help protect spacecraft from intense heat and cold. (As it turned out, during her August stay in Deadhorse, Alaska, the temperature was 15 degrees; the extra insulation turned out to be time and energy well spent.)

Then, there was the matter of communication. "The concern was, what do I do if I get in trouble? It's not like you can walk back to town," Griffith pointed out. She came up with an ingenious solution: a few days before departure, she had the bus outfitted with a military-grade satellite dish, theoretically providing access to the Internet. Upon seeing pictures of the bus before departure, friends dubbed it "Jaw-droppin' Babe Lucille."

"With the dish up, it looked like Border Patrol. Nobody ever messed with it," Griffith said.

Griffith also had some soul-searching to do about her dogs. What would quality of life be like for them inside the bus, where living space had been whittled down to 7 by 14 feet? It would mean that they wouldn't be able to run loose for a year. "I am not a believer in putting them at risk that way," she stated emphatically.

Ironically, putting the dogs at risk by taking them with her into the wilderness was a prospect Griffith was more willing to entertain. In the end, her decision to take Hugger and Comfort was influenced by several factors. Not only were both deeply attached to her, Hugger—who at four had already had two cruciate repair surgeries—required regular medication for a kidney issue,

and five-year-old Comfort had separation anxiety. Griffith knew she'd refuse to eat if left behind.

Griffith's own separation anxiety also played a part. "The dogs travel everywhere with me," she declared. "I decide where I can go and when I can go based on whether or not I can take them. If I can't take them, I don't go."

Unlike Lucille, the dogs needed very little special equipment for the trip. Hugger, a Husky mix, thrived on cold weather, and Comfort, a Terrier mix, wore a thermal shirt for most of the trip (she basked in sunbeams whenever she found them). Other than that, a couple of sleeping bags, an abundant supply of Hugger's prescriptions and 200 pounds of kibble were all the gear the dogs required. ("We carried way more food than was reasonable in case we got stuck somewhere," Griffith explained.) And harnesses, of course; for their safety, the dogs wore them full-time so Griffith could quickly leash them up as needed.

On the Road

As it turned out, the satellite dish never worked very well. The first one had to be replaced even before setting out, delaying her start by a week and unintentionally pushing Griffith's departure date to her late grandmother's June 6 birthday. The second dish worked great at first, as Griffith made her way from northern Maine into Canada, and continued to work as she traveled back into the U.S. and across the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, heading steadily westward.

By the time she reached Montana,



Glaciers cover roughly 3 percent of the state of Alaska.

however, the software had failed again, requiring a 200-mile detour to the last place that could repair it before she headed into the wilderness. The dish was plagued with technical difficulties for the rest of the trip, and whenever it was cloudy—which most days are in Alaska—it wouldn't pick up the satellite at all.

In addition, Lucille needed constant attention. "The bus broke down the whole way there and the whole way back. I could tell you about every Ford service station between Fairbanks and Maine," Griffith said. "But there was no giving up!"

Oblivious to all of that, the dogs settled easily into bus living. In fact, they thrived. Comfort remained alert while they were driving, stationing herself next to Griffith and taking in the scenery. Hugger slept in the back most of the time they were on the move, but developed a passion on walks that surprised Griffith.

"Nothing made her happier than

sniffing flowers! I didn't know this about her," Griffith said fondly. As they continued north toward Skagway, stopping at fields of flowers along the way, their bond grew stronger than ever.

"I felt as if the three of us were living on a level that people rarely get to experience because culture is so invasive," Griffith remembered. "I feel that we're very equal. My job is to keep them safe, not to oppress them."

Despite Griffith's watchful eye, the dogs did get occasionally get into trouble. Take, for example, their stop-off in Haines, Alaska, to photograph the grizzlies. The salmon were running and the bears were feeding. For the most part, birds and bears have a reciprocal arrangement in Alaska: the bears leave salmon remains wherever they happen to be and the birds pick them clean.

That day, however, the dogs beat the birds to a salmon under a bush, and before Griffith realized what was happening, they'd eaten enough rank fish to get sick. It was the kind of thing that

could have happened anywhere, but they weren't just anywhere, they were 130 miles from the nearest veterinarian. By evening, both dogs were vomiting blood.

"I'm used to being able to take my dogs wherever they need to go for whatever care they need. But it didn't matter what I was willing to do, because there was nobody there to help us. That was the worst night of the trip," recalled Griffith. There was nothing to do but head up the highway to Whitehorse (Yukon Territory, Canada).

Griffith drove north into the Yukon through the lengthening night, stopping every few minutes to take the dogs out into the thick of grizzly country to be sick. The next morning, having arrived intact at the vet's office, she got the medication they needed, and they were fine within a couple of days.

Griffith stayed in Whitehorse for two more days just to be sure, then drove back to Haines, always in pursuit of that perfect photo.

“To feel so loved by the earth and in such a deep bond with the girls: the gift of a lifetime.”



Keno Hill, Yukon Territory, Canada

Still, Hugger and Comfort earned their keep, alerting Griffith to the presence of bears. Their message was clear, and it wasn't only conveyed by barking; at times, they'd get out of the bus and stop dead. Other times, they'd start backing up. Whenever this happened, Griffith did the same, retreating into the bus and heading on down the road.

"Living with bears present, I was aware that there were things out there that needed to eat me if they could," said Griffith. "That put me in my place right quick. We had stepped out of this culture that we live in, and were living much closer to the terms of the earth. Yeah, sure, I had a generator, and the bus, and food, so how at risk were we, really? But when we stepped out of the bus, especially at night, we *were* at risk. That felt very primordial, because I don't think that human beings were always superior and had power over every other living thing. We used to have a place in the food chain."

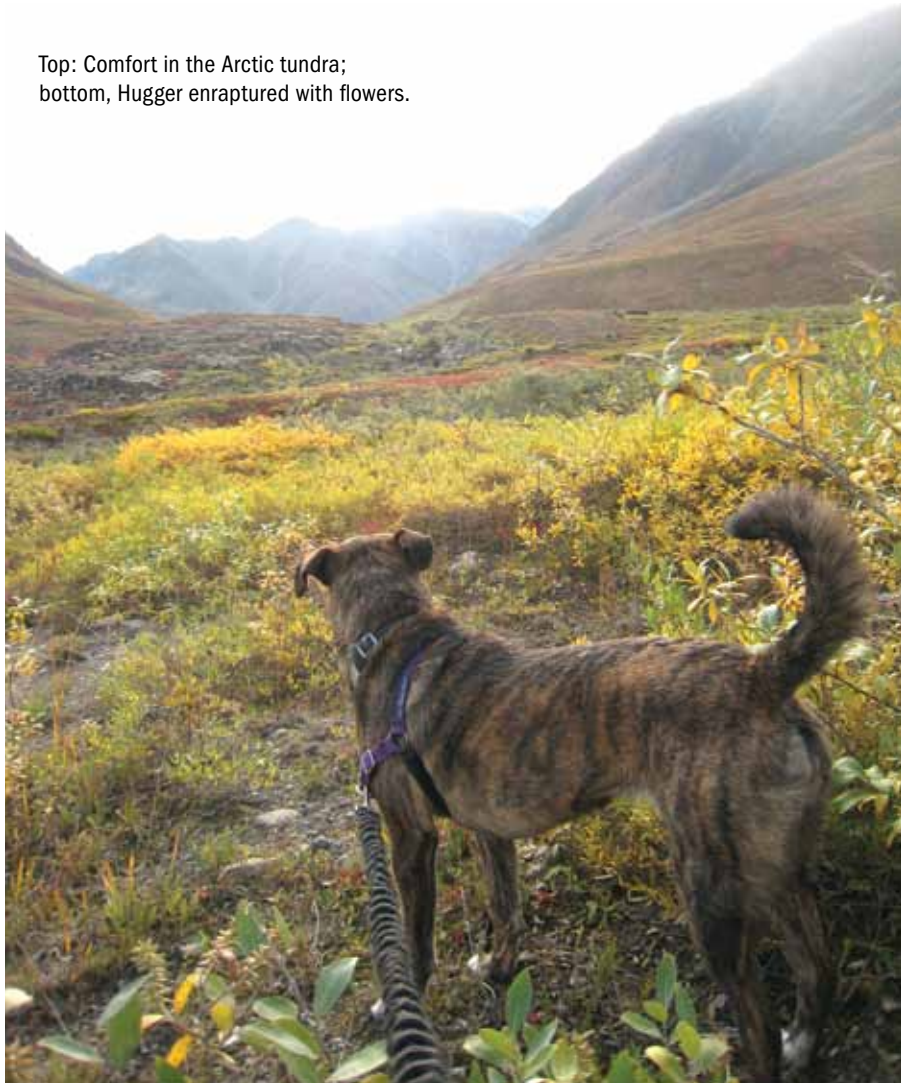
While Griffith was conscientious about the safety of the dogs, when it came to herself, she was absolutely fearless in her hunt for photographs. That drive led her to some remote locations where, had the bus broken down, it was unlikely that help would have arrived before winter set in.

"I was only going to do this once, so I was to see it and photograph it," Griffith said emphatically. "What I do for my dogs is done for me, I'm just passing it on. I'm part of the instrument for their care and well being. I feel well cared for on this planet; it doesn't matter where I go. I feel like I belong here, like the planet is designed to support my life, up to a point; past that time, I should just graciously go. I was never frightened of being in the wild, as it were. That wasn't scary to me, ever."

Arrival

They'd been on the road a little over two months when Lucille finally made her way through Fairbanks and rolled across the 66th parallel, leaving behind pretty much every vestige of civilization and putting Griffith within 500 miles

Top: Comfort in the Arctic tundra; bottom, Hugger enraptured with flowers.



of her goal: the Arctic Ocean. Covering that distance on the pot-holed washboard of the Dalton Highway took five days, during which Griffith began to notice a change in Hugger and Comfort's behavior.

They'd been animated for most of the trip, but as they began crossing the tundra, where signs of wildlife were limited to the sighting of a single crow and one musk ox, the dogs were initially glued to the windows, then settled into a state of tranquility.

"I think an awareness of how barren this place was registered on the dogs, probably on the level of *What the hell are we going to eat if this bus breaks down?* Or maybe I'm projecting," Griffith said.

"This is really what I think was going on," she continued. "The light, and the mist, and the earth itself have a responsiveness that I've not experienced anywhere else. It's as if the earth is aware that you're there. I think at one point, probably most of the globe was like that and because of all the changes we've made, we've lost it."

"I had a sense of being someplace sacred—that this was not just about me looking at the land, but that the land and the light were looking at me, too. Dogs are very sensitive to light. I'd be surprised if they didn't feel that, as well. They certainly grew very peaceful."

Griffith's own sense of tranquility merged with the dogs' as they became immersed in what she would refer to later as "the secret life of light." Even so, as they neared the Arctic Ocean, she was overcome by a wave of emotion.

"If I had to give a name to it, it was that in that place, I felt very loved," Griffith said quietly. Her desire to understand where she was in her life and to integrate the loss of her loved ones had been fulfilled.

"Everything in its own way contributes to sustaining life. Even though it may not appear that way at the time, invariably, the turn things take is life-affirming. Even dying is life-affirming," she continued.

She was grateful to the dogs, not only for their company and protection but

My gratitude for them is greater than it ever could have been without the trip.

also, because she was aware how much her own sense of well being played off them.

"My gratitude for them is greater than it ever could have been without the trip. There were times when it was incredibly lonely and they were such emotional support, so beautifully present and attentive." Knowing that dogs have an ability to key in on illness in people, Griffith observed how they reacted to her from day to day. Their responses became an important part of what she called their "feedback circle," sometimes on a barely conscious level.

"We're not always aware of it, but our dogs are constantly checking on us, watching and being mindful of us. In the bus, that was so obvious," said Griffith.

There was another animal Griffith appreciated having along for most of the trip. "I swear the only reason I got there and back alive was because of the crows. They would cue me when to stop and where to park for the night. I would just pay attention and hear in the way you hear when you have a dialogue with a dog. As a result, every time we broke down, it was near as somebody who could fix [the problem]. Every single time."

After much anticipation and five days on the tundra, Lucille delivered the trio to Deadhorse. To Griffith's intense disappointment, that was as far as the dogs (and Lucille) were allowed to go. A bus owned by the oil company took her to the beach at Prudhoe Bay, where she was permitted to spend only 10 minutes.

"I was pretty surprised to discover that the only way I was going to be able to actually see and touch my destination was by the grace of the oil company. Of course, they limit what you see for a very good reason: what they're doing there. The amount of destruction of the environment is significant. And

there's nothing worse than a woman with a camera, you know," said Griffith.

Despite her restricted access, Griffith rejoined Hugger and Comfort feeling electrified by the ocean. She was also honest enough to recognize the part she had played in the incongruity of that day.

"There was an irony in having to confront my own contribution to irresponsible living," she reflected. After all, she'd driven there in a diesel-fueled bus that got roughly nine miles per gallon, and the final stretch of highway only existed to support the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which was built to carry oil from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez.

"What was I doing to help the environment?" she asked rhetorically. "I was in this place that's so important to preserve, and yet I was a contributor to its demise. I had to face that truth. It was very troubling."

Home Again

It was another nine months before Lucille delivered the pack of three safely back to Maine by way of Tucson, Arizona. They arrived on June 6, 2009, exactly one year after they'd set out. By the time Griffith finalized *The Secret Life of Light* project in 2014, she realized that the sense of serenity she'd felt above the 66th parallel had stayed with her.

"The opportunity to experience that place was a gift. It came at a time in my life when the questions of death and dying were so primary. I feel as if that experience has paved the way for me to go into the last stage of my life. I'm ready to go, whenever," Griffith said easily.

"There was a moment when we were very far back," she remembered. "We were about 150 miles from anybody. It was, you know, *If this bus doesn't start tomorrow morning and if the dish doesn't work, we could just die here.* I did go through the process of okay, what would I do? Night came down as I thought that through, but then the sun came up, the bus started and we went on." ³

For more examples of Griffith's work, go to fineartphotographyoflindagriffith.com.