



Tent shelters on Qikiqtaruk-Herschel Island



Mountain avens (*Dryas integrifolia*) ready to disperse feathered seeds across the tundra

**‘IT FEELS LIKE  
AN ALTERNATIVE  
UNIVERSE’**

Winning the TPA/RPS  
Environmental Bursary  
has allowed Sandra  
Angers-Blondin to fuse  
photography and science  
on an Arctic journey

WORDS: GAVIN BELL



A curious ringed seal emerging from the Beaufort Sea



A red fox hunting for tundra voles and lemmings

**T**HERE IS AN ISLAND of ethereal beauty at the top of the world where polar bears and grizzlies roam free with caribou in the golden light of a summer sun that never sets. It is a high Arctic refuge, remote and barely touched by humanity.

But the pristine wilderness is crumbling into the sea through coastal erosion accelerated by the climate change that is also carving massive, ugly scars on rapidly thawing landscapes.

These stark contrasts emerge in compelling images by ecologist and photographer Sandra Angers-Blondin – originally from Québec, Canada, and

now based in Scotland – who spent a summer month during 2018 on Qikiqtaruk island in northern Yukon.

She had been to the island before, studying the effects of global warming on tundra ecosystems with a team of researchers from the University of Edinburgh, but this time was different. She had been awarded the 2018 Environmental Awareness Bursary (under-30s) by the RPS in partnership with the Photographic Angle. Previously she had considered herself an ecologist with a camera; latterly she was a photographer engaged in scientific research. And she made the most of it.

A slight, elfin figure, Angers-Blondin is speaking in a tearoom in Edinburgh where she is now resident after

completing a PhD in environmental science. On Qikiqtaruk she slept alone in a tent, with a shotgun by her side in case polar bears came calling. And it was while waiting for a flight to Canada from Glasgow Airport that she received the email announcing she had been awarded the bursary. 'I was jumping in my seat, I was so excited,' recalls Angers-Blondin, who is 30.

Qikiqtaruk, named Herschel Island by Sir John Franklin on a mapping expedition in 1826, is hard to reach. Light aircraft from the Yukon mainland are the only practical ways of getting to the remnants of a 19th-century whaling station that provides basic accommodation in the short summer for a handful of

researchers, occasional tourists and a couple of national park rangers.

The high Arctic is a realm of aching solitude and profound silence that grips the soul. But it is teeming with wildlife, and Angers-Blondin evidently feels at home in its icy embrace.

'It's strange,' she says. 'I feel really peaceful and in my element on the island, but also it feels like an alternative universe. There's a sense of pioneering in being in a place where few people have been before.'

The island of 40 square miles is a living laboratory for scientists researching dramatic coastal erosion and the effects of melting permafrost that have placed it on the most endangered sites list of the World Monuments Fund.

**'There's a sense of pioneering in being in a place where few people have been before'**

Angers-Blondin found that one of her field sites from three years before had been lost 30m out to sea.

It would have been easy for her to focus on coasts crumbling into the Beaufort Sea, and ugly 'thaw slumps' looming from a once frozen soil. But she preferred to portray the intact beauty and vibrant wildlife of the island. 'I was trying to make people aware of an environment that they don't really know and don't get to see. Most of my images are quite bright, with pastel tones. I wanted to celebrate beauty that is getting lost, to record how beautiful and fragile these places are and that it's worth taking action to preserve them. That's what keeps me fighting and not despairing.'





View of camp across Pauline Cove



'Thaw slumps' in a once frozen soil

● Her favourite image is of a narrow spit of sand with a driftwood shelter barely rising above freezing mist on a glass-like sea, framed by the huge, dark mountains of Yukon in the far distance. It could be an illustration from the Philip Pullman fantasy *His Dark Materials*.

'This was taken on a quiet afternoon, shortly before a storm, and for a few minutes everything was very still. There was mist rising from the sea and I was very excited.'

Barely visible in the shelter is the tent where Angers-Blondin slept. 'It's at sea level and it gets quite flooded when there are storms, but mostly there's a lovely quiet feeling going to bed in that tent. You hear the ice creaking, the seagulls

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crying, and sometimes you can even hear the whales breathing. It's just fantastic.'

On previous expeditions to Qikiqtaruk she had been a 'hobbyist photographer', lagging behind other researchers to take snaps whenever she could. This time she was still part of a research team but the bursary encouraged her to be more creative in using her compact mirrorless Fujifilm X Series.

'With no real sunset you get a lovely golden light, usually between 8pm and midnight. It's amazing. After dinner people would do their data entries and I would go for a walk and take photographs. One night it was beautifully calm, and the sea was a mirror, and sea ice was floating in the soft light. It was about three in the morning and I stayed

up until about five because it was so beautiful, I was so excited, and there were seagulls and whales. It was magical.'

There are disturbing images in her portfolio, of thin layers of soil draining into the sea, and bare bones of the earth emerging like tombstones from melting permafrost, as if the island was a wounded animal. But far from the usual Arctic illustrations of frozen wilderness, Angers-Blondin captured panoramas of tundra bursting into life during the short summer and blooming with grasses, shrubs and wildflowers.

'People tend to think of the Arctic as completely white, and images of ice and polar bears are pretty much all you get in the media. But the truth is much of it is green and getting greener, and there

are processes at work releasing carbon from the permafrost and producing bigger plants that are significant for the carbon balance of the planet.

'There's lots of feedback we don't understand yet, but when I hear climate sceptics on the news it makes me angry, because it's no longer a matter of whether change is happening or not, it's what can we do about it and how quickly can we do it.'

The world is changing but life on the frontiers of survival goes on, for now at least, and Angers-Blondin's portraits celebrate Qikiqtaruk's wildlife. A ringed seal pokes its head from still water bathed in rosy light, a snowy owl glides low over the tundra. A fox is captured leaping into the air to pounce on

unsuspecting prey, and a plover chick takes its first hesitant steps through sun-drenched grass.

Asked how the bursary has affected her work, Angers-Blondin says: 'It was a turning point. It's given me a lot of confidence, because I always saw myself as a scientist with a camera, but now I have the credentials and confidence to approach people and market myself as a photographer for exhibitions and magazine articles. On the island it gave me the freedom to roam in one of my favourite places, and be more thoughtful and creative in taking pictures. It was the perfect summer.'

See more of Sandra Angers-Blondin's work at [vanishingislandphoto.com](http://vanishingislandphoto.com)