

Robert Glenn Ketchum Releases Book: Wood-Tikchik Alaska's Largest State Park

Digital Prints by West Coast Imaging Showcase His Newest Work

by [Susan Seiling](#)

In this vastly populated world, unexplored wilderness still remains. If you need a concrete example, study Robert Glenn Ketchum's newly released book *Wood-Tikchik, Alaska's Largest State Park*, which showcases the beauty of a vastly diverse landscape that can only be accessed by foot, plane or boat.

West Coast Imaging had the chance to view many of Robert Glenn Ketchum's original transparencies on our light tables several months before Aperture released the book. The sights shining through the Fuji Velvia provoked wonder and wanderlust.

Ketchum's photographs capture rivers snaking through boreal forests; deep blue skies contrasting dramatically with the white iciness of glaciers; and intimate photographs of the tundra flora in autumn colors.

We scanned dozens of images and sent the scans to his designer, Dawn Rogala. Rogala and Ketchum collaborated, using the scans to plan the picture sequencing of the book, and to create a full-size comp, which they took to Aperture. Then Aperture took the reigns, expertly reproducing Ketchum's images into an exceptional book that documents the relatively untouched landscape of Wood-Tikchik.

In Southwest Alaska, Wood-Tikchik contains 1.6 million acres and is home to 140 animal species. A vast and varied wilderness, it is home to one of the largest species of rainbow trout in the world, and provides a critical breeding habitat for sockeye salmon. Ketchum's photographs, coupled with an essay by Bill Sherwonit, create a book with a powerful plea to protect this treasure, which is threatened by commercial development.

Using his photography to protect and preserve the environment is nothing new to Ketchum. His accomplishments and dedication to his craft led him to be named Outstanding Photographer of the Year by the North American Nature Photographer Association (NANPA) in 2001.

And it was NANPA that led Robert to try digital printing with West Coast Imaging. In 2001, Ketchum was printing on Cibachrome materials, and Fuji decided to sponsor Ketchum's exhibition at the NANPA Summit in Las Vegas. They paid to ship and display a full set of Cibachrome prints at the summit, despite the fact that their Fuji Crystal Archive paper was quickly replacing Cibachrome as the standard for fine art color printing.

"Having Fuji do that so generously at NANPA struck me," Ketchum said. "At the same time, I'd been going to various trade shows and I watched Rich (owner of West Coast Imaging) do several presentations. I knew his work. I knew that he worked with other landscape photographers in particular, and had some sense of it. Fuji was pushing on the other side saying—'Try this new material; you don't have to leave Cibachrome...Just check it out.' I said, 'I like Rich and we'd work well together.' So, Bert Parks from Fuji said, 'Let's do it!'"

Fuji offered to sponsor an exhibition of fine art prints on Fuji Crystal Archive paper of images from Ketchum's *Wood-Tikchik* book, as well as his book, *Rivers of Life*.

Ketchum has printed his photographs using a wide variety of processes, and has been printing in Cibachrome almost exclusively for the past 30 years. Pursuing digital printing on Fuji Crystal Archive paper meant he would be working with a medium he had no hands-on experience with.

"In the course of working with Michael Wilder (his Cibachrome printer), I've learned enough of the give and take of the language to work well with anybody, as long as I can grasp the totality of the process. I like the darkroom process. But I like perfection of control Adobe Photoshop gives me even more."

Ketchum decided to start out by testing the digital process with his most challenging images. He wanted side-by-side comparisons of the images he knew were difficult to print in the traditional darkroom. He strove to test the limits of the materials, the digital darkroom, and the new technology.

"I went back and forth a lot, sampling what would work and what didn't work, and where I was going with the whole idea," Ketchum said. "I took a long time doing it. I feel I got all of my answers and that the prints are a better product. I am making more beautiful, more controlled, more exactly-the-way-I-want-it prints than ever before."

West Coast Imaging Master Printer Terrance Reimer guided him through the transition from the traditional darkroom to the digital darkroom.

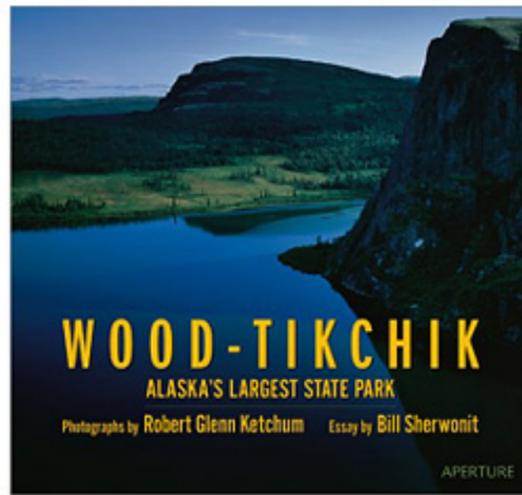
"The biggest challenge was trying to get into Robert's head and to translate his words into final prints that resonate with his vision," Reimer said.

Ketchum had a very distinct idea of how his images should look as final prints. His goal was not to match the transparency, but to match the emotive qualities of the landscape he experienced when he snapped the shutter.

"The translation has to hit a certain note, and the challenge is understanding what Robert wants that print to say. A lot of his corrections were more esoteric and emotional than imperical. That pushed me to translate his verbiage into something technical and tangible."

Ketchum's explorations allow everyday people to witness landscapes they will probably never experience in person. Thus, his Fuji Crystal Archive prints became much more than photographic prints—they are vehicles for communicating the value and power of this pristine wilderness.

"I'm kind of the middle man," Reimer said. "I'm his vehicle to reach that final captivating moment that



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compelled him to click the shutter, and capture the essence that was before him when he was reacting to his landscape."

Ketchum said a definitive moment in deciding how digital printing compared to traditional printing was when he printed a very large photograph of one of his images on Fuji Crystal Archive. On Cibachrome, Ketchum rarely printed his images larger than 30x40.

"Going larger than 30x40 is where critical information started to break down. I would print them larger, and they repelled me," Ketchum said. "They didn't hold and have their acuity. They lost the extravagance of biodiversity."

As a test, West Coast Imaging enlarged one of his images to 48x72.

"Everyone stopped working when we unrolled the print on our print finishing table. The whole staff gathered around to marvel over the detail and clarity. It was truly a sight to behold," said Seiling.

"The big prints are extremely powerful," Ketchum agreed. "The ability of the digital enlargement to remain sharp and detail-rich at this extended paper size is nothing short of amazing, as far as I'm concerned."

"(Ketchum) could see that this process allowed him a lot more control with subtleties of tone and density of color that he never had access to before," Reimer said. "This allowed him to make prints that were as expressive as possible."

The quality of printing has led Ketchum to change his approach to print making. He recently decided that all new images and new editions will be printed on Fuji Crystal Archive paper. Ketchum expects to have his full exhibition completed by the end of 2003, and the prints will travel to various venues throughout the US.

"We have about 15 different venues that have shown interest out of the first draft of phone calls. I will try to travel it everywhere. All of the states will find it interesting-- it is part of Alaska most people don't know about, and it's such a different looking landscape."

An exhibition featuring some of his Alaska work can be seen at the Benham Gallery in Seattle from April 15 to May 30. If you can't make it to the Seattle show, experience his photographs by purchasing a copy of his book.

As his book cover so eloquently states, "His photographs shimmer with the extraordinary seasonal color and reveal the remarkable and diverse textures of the landscape within the park—a grandeur that would be hard to believe were it not before our eyes."

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