

DAWN WILSON

Wildlife Photographer

Whether you spend life on the road for pleasure or work, it's nice to have the comforts of home as you travel the highways and byways.

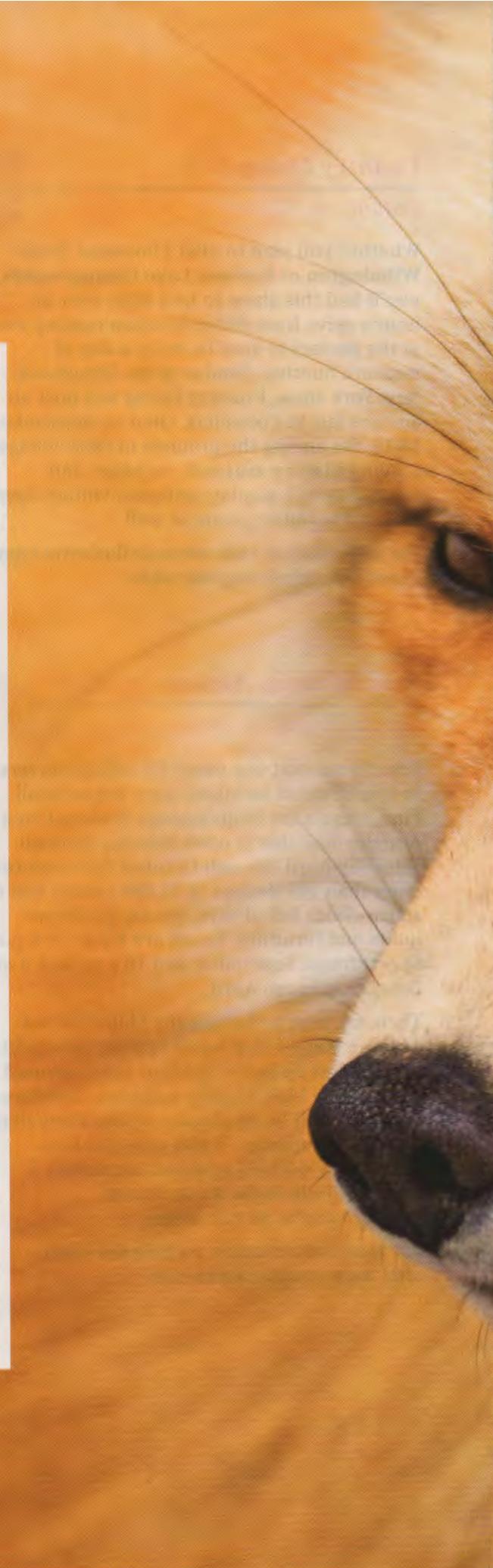
TRAILBLAZER checks in with folks who spend a fair amount of time on the road to see just what makes their home away from home.

This month, we chatted with professional wildlife photographer, **Dawn Wilson**.

With a communications degree and an MBA in hand, Dawn Wilson left her corporate marketing career to pursue her hobby – and dream job – of full-time wildlife photographer and travel writer in 2013. And she hasn't looked back...other than in the rear-view mirror of her RV as she embarked on a solo excursion around the United States in her 24' Thor Chateau in the fall of 2015 – accompanied only by her two dogs and two cats.

by Lynn & Cele Seldon

All photos courtesy of Dawn Wilson







▲ Bison in front of Denver skyline at Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge

After growing up and going to school in the Northeast, Dawn found herself in Colorado working the rat race in corporate marketing and account management. And although she was putting her education to work, she wasn't satisfied. After a difficult couple of years of family illnesses and the death of her boyfriend and her father, she realized that life was short and she wanted to make the most of it. So she started focusing more on her passions of photography and writing to help center herself. They became her outlets to understanding the world around her. Within a few months, Dawn gave her notice and decided to pursue her passions full-time.

She took a year to focus completely on travel and building a photo inventory, including two trips to the Arctic, plus exploring much of Colorado and the Rocky Mountains region. She also started finding success selling her photos and stories. But she still had a house and a menagerie of pets that kept bringing her back home. So in early 2014, Dawn came up with a list of all the places that she wanted to go and developed a plan for her "year in an RV." Even though she had never set foot in one, Dawn put her house on the market and made the leap to living in an RV.





When we spoke with her, Dawn had been living in her RV full-time for more than six months, while specializing in wildlife photography of the high latitudes of Alaska and the high altitudes of the Rocky Mountains. She has published a compilation photo book and an e-guidebook and has been published in numerous magazines, books, and calendars. Her award-winning work is also regularly exhibited in galleries and collections throughout North America.

What prompted you to take to the road in an RV?

The biggest thing is that I wanted to be mobile. I want to be able to say, "I want to go there. And then I want to go to this place. And then that place." Without having to go there and then go home and then that place and go home. Being in an RV allows me to get to a place and really be there. My pets are with me and I have everything I need. And I don't have to worry about getting home to mow the lawn. It's so much more accessible for what I want to do and the places I want to access to photograph and write about. The more that I looked at the various options of RVs and conversion vans and 5th wheels, the more I felt like an RV was the right way to get around. I found a used 2012 24' Thor Chateau with 8,500 miles on it. I put the house on the market the following week. I've been downsizing and I've been on the road since September 2015.

Did you every go camping or RVing as a family vacation?

No. My family wasn't into the outdoors at all. It was always one of the things that attracted me to my boyfriend. He grew up camping and hiking so he exposed me to backpacking and car camping. We had never rented an RV, but had talked about it.

What's your favorite thing about staying in your RV versus a hotel room?

That I don't have to move everything around. It's so nice to just pull in some place and your food is right there, you can take a nap, your bathroom is right there. And being a single woman traveling alone, it actually feels safer that way.





Where have you been and what's on your bucket list?

I've been to quite a few places in Colorado and Wyoming due to the familiarity. I went up to Rocky Mountain National Park and Mount Evans, which is one of my favorite places in Colorado. I went up to Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area, Grand Teton National Park, and Devils Tower National Monument. Then I went out to California. I went to Escondido down by San Diego, the Salton Sea to photograph birds, Malibu to photograph sea lions, Port Reyes National Seashore to photograph Tule elk, Pinnacles National Park, and Yosemite, and then to Utah to photograph Zion National Park.

I have plans to do some bird photography in Florida and Texas in the spring. I'm actually trying to figure out how to get to all the places I want to see. Glacier National Park would be wonderful. Yellowstone – a lot of wildlife photographers go there in May and June because of all the babies that are running around. And then I'm headed up to Alaska in June where I will be teaching a bear photo workshop. If I can swing it, I'd like to spend the summer in Alaska.

What are your three favorite things onboard?

I haven't had a gas stove in years and I really like that in the RV. And I like that it's such a tiny space and it's convenient. I like the fact that I have a window at the head of the bed and the side of the bed. A lot of times when I'm lying in the bed – which is really comfortable – I'll pull the shades open and I can actually watch the sun rise or see what kind of critters are running around outside. The third thing would definitely be storage. Because I'm working out of there, I use half the space in the mother's attic over the cab for my cats and half for my gear. And I like the space underneath for my snowshoes, cross-country skis, and for my photo blind. That was one of the things that I was most worried about. How am I going to have the space for all the things that I need to have with me because I'm working? I have a printer, and maps, and all kinds of guidebooks.

Other than photography, what else do you do when you are on road?

I don't watch TV. I do have a TV but I don't have satellite. I don't miss it. I like watching nature episodes on my iPad. Otherwise everything is purely about work. I will edit photos, I will write, I will do research. I do a lot of reading about where I'm going to go. I'll go out and hike.

You travel with two dogs and two cats. What do they like about life in the RV?

The older dog likes to sit on the bed or the sofa and watch out the windows. The other dog sits on the front seat and does the same thing. The cats really seem to enjoy it. They like to play with their toys. I like to think that they like being around me all the time.

Do you take the highways or the scenic routes?

My preference is the scenic route if I can afford the time.

What's the most unusual thing that has happened to you in a campground since you've been on the road?

In California, tarantulas walk across the road all the time and you have to dodge them. Which is hard in a big RV with a tow car. I've been charged by an elk, bison, and a moose. But for the most part, I'm very respectful of my distance and not being obtrusive. Once in Yosemite, I saw a coyote in the road and I stopped to photograph him. He was just sauntering down the road and, all of a sudden, he just stopped. His ears perked up, he was looking past me, and he kind of freaked out. So I wondered what he saw in the trees behind me that totally changed his behavior. He came back towards me and walked right past me. After he passed me, I looked up to see what was in the trees. And there was a bobcat hunting rabbits. I actually saw the cat catch a rabbit. You don't get to see bobcats too often. So, that was pretty interesting.

To follow Dawn's travels and learn more about her photography, visit DawnWilsonPhotography.com.

