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# FLATHEAD

## LIVING



42

### Montana in Focus

BY ANDY VIANO

Photographer Bret Bouda has spent what seems like a lifetime photographing Glacier National Park and the Flathead Valley, but before he arrived in Northwest Montana he could not have been further from home.









A photograph of a photo studio. In the foreground, several large landscape photographs are laid out on a table. One prominent photo shows a vibrant autumn scene with a path through colorful foliage. In the background, there are shelves with more framed photos, including a blue birdhouse and a landscape with a river. A large camera lens graphic is superimposed over the text.

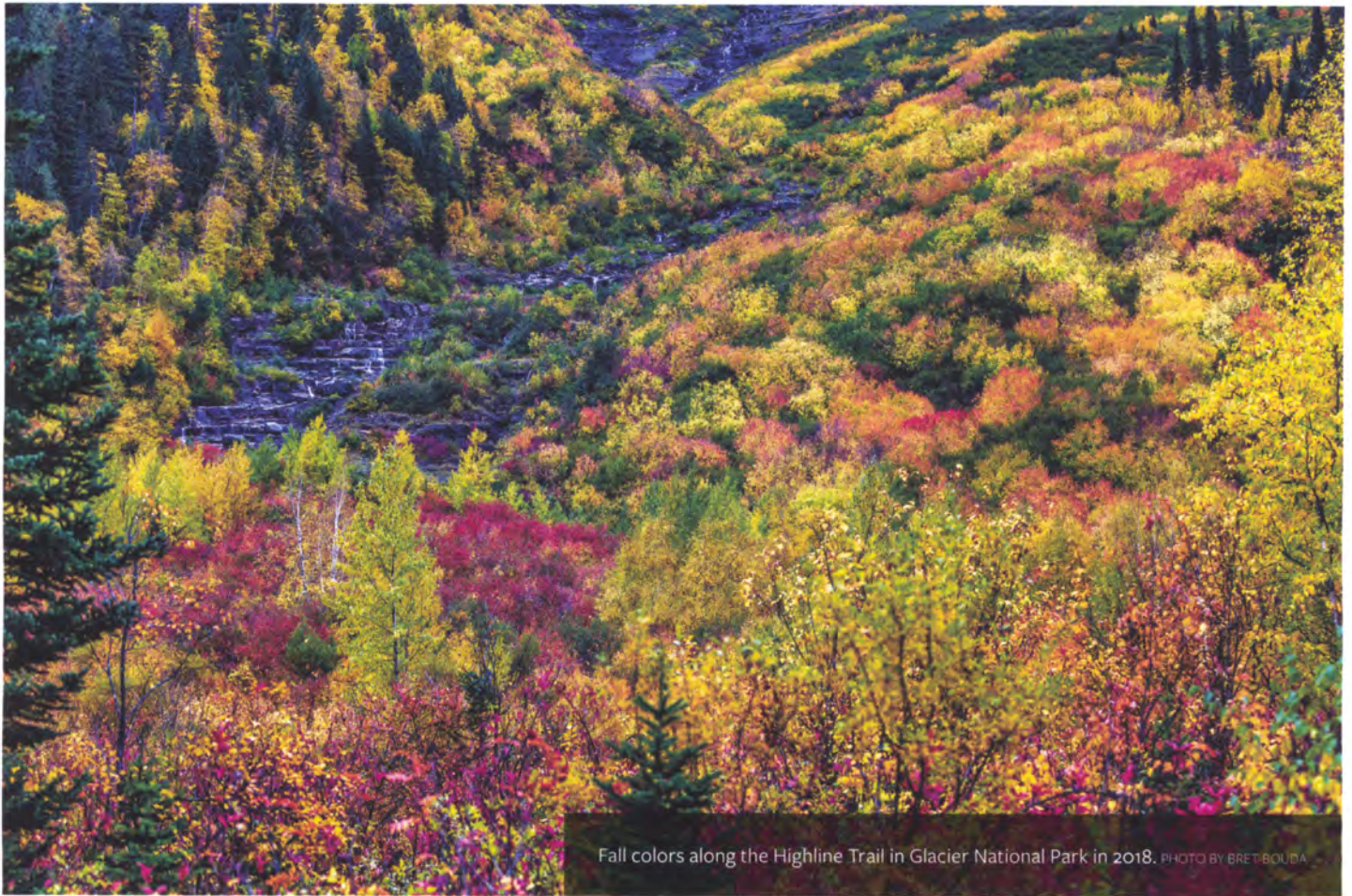
# Montana in FOCUS

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STORY BY ANDY VIANO || IMAGES BY HUNTER D'ANTUONO

Nature photographer Bret Bouda in his photo studio in Kalispell on Feb. 6, 2020.





Fall colors along the Highline Trail in Glacier National Park in 2018. PHOTO BY BRET BOUDA

**A**sk enough people how they wound up living in the Flathead Valley and you're going to hear some version of Bret Bouda's story time and time again.

Sixteen years ago, Bouda was a successful businessman, living with his wife and young family in Salt Lake City, Utah, when he embarked on an annual pilgrimage to one of the country's sprawling national parks. The destination that year was Glacier National Park, and while Salt Lake City had the mountain air, comfortable temperatures and breathtaking views that reminded him of home, it never spoke to him the way Kalispell did the very first time he drove through town.

"I remember the day; it was June 23, 2004," Bouda said. "I'm driving through Kalispell and I just say 'gosh, I wish I could live here' ... and a year later, we were here."

Bouda is one of a cascade of transplants who have packed up and moved to the Flathead Valley intentionally, and

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who describe the Rocky Mountains, pristine waters and way of life here with spiritual reverence. And as anyone who has done it knows, no matter how beautiful the mountains, it's still not an easy move to make. Well-paying jobs are hard to find, and the closest large city is at least a two-hour drive away.

But to people like Bouda, that is not an obstacle. They face the challenge and they make it work, like when the company Bouda was hired to lead in Kalispell folded up shop less than a year after he arrived in town. Undeterred, Bouda turned a hobby into a career that has allowed him to raise two sons (his youngest is a high school sophomore) and continue to fund regular trips into Glacier Park, where he has hiked miles upon miles of trail and seen things so beautiful he just had to snap

a picture. He is passionate, resourceful and respectful of the world around him, imbued with so-called Montana values that idealize a distant time like the one Bouda used to watch in the Spaghetti Westerns of his youth.

Yes, there is part of Bret Bouda's story that sounds just like everyone else's. It's just the rest of the story that is unlike any other.

**B**retislav is a mouthful for Americans to pronounce, so when he arrived here in 1995, Bouda shortened his first name to the more palatable Bret.

Bretislav was his dad's name, anyway, and the elder Bretislav and his wife, Elena, raised their three sons in the town of Cheb in what was then Czechoslovakia, under the watchful eye of the



Soviet Union. Bret is the youngest son and a true romantic, as one of his childhood friends described him, favoring the arts and feeling uneasy with the regimented government that ran as much of his life as it could. The elder Boudas were both party members but not highly ranking enough to earn the perks that came with party status, so the family blended in with most of the rest of the country, content but certainly not comfortable and seemingly destined for a future as cogs in the machine.

“One of the things you realize is, ‘OK, I don’t want to be a member of the party, so what else could I do to get a little separated above average people?’” Bouda said. “And that was, obviously, to be a kind of celebrity. Either in the movies or drama or sport, it was one of those vehicles.”

Bouda spent much of his childhood outdoors but didn’t play an organized sport until the sixth grade, when a favored math teacher asked him a simple question: Are you fast? Thus began Bouda’s track and field career, although in

his earliest races he showed himself to be not particularly fast nor a prodigy to whom the sport came naturally.

“When I started, I was always the last one (to finish),” he said. “But then (in the next race), I’d go, ‘Oh, I didn’t get last!’ It was progress all the time.”

Bouda took his first major step forward when he got to high school and began working with a renowned track coach who convinced his passionate if not terribly gifted pupil to give multidisciplinary competitions like the decathlon a try. It was the late 1970s, when Caitlyn Jenner was a worldwide megastar and Olympic champion, competing in those days as Bruce Jenner. Bouda, like millions of others, idolized Jenner and developed a strong affection for his sport that drove him to spend as many hours as he could honing his skills in every one of decathlon’s 10 events.

“I became more involved because it just called to me; it was my passion. I just loved track and field,” Bouda said. “I think it’s the challenge (of decathlon). It’s not just one event — there are 10. If

there were 20, even better. I just loved knowing the challenge.”

Before long, Bouda had climbed from the back of the pack to the front, and by the late 1970s he was one of the top decathletes in the country, ranking as high as No. 2 in Czechoslovakia as the 1980 Summer Olympics approached. After high school, he was admitted — on his second try — to one of the elite sport schools in the country, where he was to continue his training as a decathlete and educate himself in order to become a coach for the next generation once his career was over.

But before the Olympics rolled around, Bouda injured the meniscus in his right knee and never fully recovered. His Olympic dreams were dashed before he even had a chance to qualify.

“My life really changed within a few weeks,” Bouda said of the injury. “But it was actually a blessing. If I was not injured, who knows where I would be today.”

Bouda’s father passed away in 1980, and by 1981 the young, once-promising

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Photos of Bret Bouda and his family adorn the wall of Bouda's studio in Kalispell on Feb. 6, 2020.

athlete made a fateful and daring decision. He was going to leave Cheb, which is just east of the border with what was West Germany at the time, and escape the Soviet Union to buck his future as a party member. It is a decision Bouda says he would not have come to were it not for his injured knee.

"It totally shaped my future to defect, to be on my own, to be totally independent," he said. "Instead, I would have become a coach, probably, but I would still have had to subscribe to part of the regime and that's something I would never want ... I didn't have the stomach for it."

Even today, Bouda has a strong sense of fairness. He bristles at the notion that anyone should get more or less than they deserve, based on their own actions and their own merits. And growing up under Communism, Bouda says he saw rampant corruption among the ruling class while people like his parents were minimally provided for but never given an opportunity to move upward in society.

That, he decided, was not going to be his fate.

For as strongly as Bouda felt about the government, however, his defection was a more spontaneous decision than one might imagine, a decision in part motivated by the fact that he concealed the extent of his injury from his college coaches so as not to jeopardize his place at the school and the future it could have offered to him.

"I never planned to escape," he said. "I privately knew (after the injury), OK, that's the end for me, but I don't want to tell people because you realize that overnight you lose all your friends, you become a nobody or you have a mark on your head. I said, OK, I have a very short window before the Communists realize, 'We cannot take advantage of him anymore.'"

"The reason was, really, it was the constraints. I knew everything was lined up for me and I would have to subscribe to some things, but I know myself ... and I just didn't want to be part of

that," Bouda added. "We always have choices and I just want to sleep well. I don't want to look over my shoulder, and I just know, intuitively, it will haunt you. It always haunts everybody."

To pull off his escape, Bouda applied for and was granted a 30-day tourist visa that he paid for with help from his middle brother and a convoluted banking scheme that allowed him to project greater wealth than he actually possessed. His brother and the banker were the only ones who knew about his scheme, which was to pack his things, cross the border into West Germany on his tourist visa and never come back. He said goodbye to no one else.

But the now 60-year-old Bouda admits the 21-year-old version of himself was, fortunately, unbothered by and even a little unaware of the risk he was taking. When he crossed into West Germany, ostensibly for a month-long visit, he brought two giant bags, one that contained every personal document he possessed and that certainly would have



tipped off a border guard, had it been searched. The consequence of getting caught, he believes, would have been imprisonment and, potentially, forced labor in a uranium mine from which he may have never returned.

Instead, of course, Bouda crossed successfully. He bought a Coca-Cola the first chance he could and settled into a new life. When the 30 days passed, he was tried, in absentia, and sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison for his fraudulent departure. The regime even sent his mother to visit him on more than one occasion in an effort to convince him to come home.

He didn't, and after a brief adjustment period, Bouda threw himself into German life. He learned the language, got a job working construction, received his master's degree, and started his own construction company, employing as many as 19 people at the height of its operation. When the Velvet Revolution of 1989 reopened the Czech border, Bouda returned and worked briefly in Prague, and then spent a brief time in

Australia before arriving in the United States, in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1995. He lived there with his new wife, Karen, and took a job working as a conduit between American businesses and the Czech government. Then came Salt Lake City and, finally, Kalispell in 1995.

**T**he place to find Bret Bouda today, if not in his Kalispell home and attached studio, is in nature. In a meandering way, the kid that his childhood friend Ladislav Jakl called "romantic and gentle" had returned to his roots, leaving behind the cutthroat worlds of sports and business to admire and document the beauty of the world around him.

Art is in Bouda's blood. His grandfather was a painter, and a cousin, Cyril Bouda, was a renowned 20th century Czech artist. Bret's medium was always photography. Jakl remembers Bouda wearing a camera to school to photograph his friends, and when his business

opportunity dried up in Kalispell, Bouda poured himself into the craft. Where his passion for track and field had been, a new passion took over, and a new challenge emerged.

Within a few years, his career took off. He has published five books of photography, his work hangs throughout Northwest Montana — including a large exhibit at Glacier Park International Airport — and his photo of Sperry Chalet, taken just before it burned in 2017, is one of more iconic recent photographs of the park, with the historic lodge set back behind lush greenery and beargrass, and framed beneath a bright blue sky and mountain peaks (the photo was presented to Gov. Steve Bullock and now hangs in the Governor's Office in Helena). But if anything, his friends wish he would push his work out into the public more fervently. The work may now pay the bills, but he still does it primarily for himself, and he still can't bring himself to compromise in order to maximize his financial gain. He's doing

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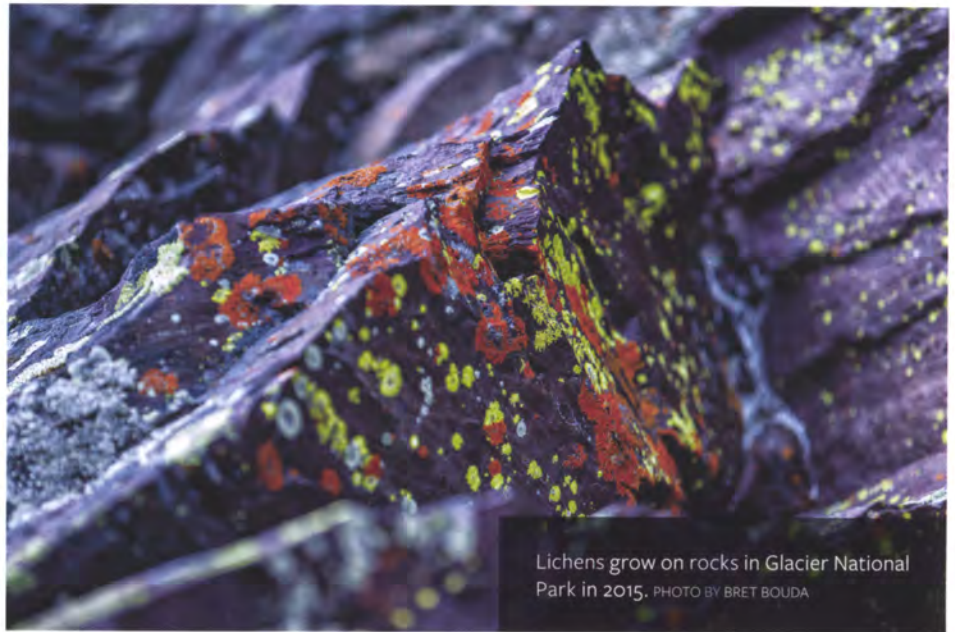


it for another type of reward.

“Anybody who likes my stuff, it makes my heart warm, because not only is my heart happy but another heart as well,” Bouda said. “That’s the beauty in it. I can share my joy with someone else. That’s the key.”

Bouda’s first love was the park, but over the years the rest of Northwest Montana has succeeded in capturing his imagination as well. His recent work includes waterfowl and other birds he can photograph without leaving Kalispell, and more artistic pieces centered on the detail of tree trunks.

More than the work, though, what brings Bouda peace these days is a sense of place. The man who fled his homeland, who bounced from country to country and later job to job, does not plan on changing much of anything in his remaining years on earth. He has found work that brings him joy and an area that brings him everything he could have imagined when he first made a fateful trip here 16 years ago.



Lichens grow on rocks in Glacier National Park in 2015. PHOTO BY BRET BOUDA

“I’ve seen a lot. I’ve been across the whole of Australia, I know the whole of Europe, and almost every major park in the U.S. anyway, as a photographer, but people have no idea. This is really unique,” Bouda said. “We have everything, from the wildlife and the

mountains to the blue skies and the lakes, we have everything.”

“I could go back to Prague at any time, but this is my home. I am truly home here for the first time in my life ... I really am a Montanan. I am from here. By heart.”