BREATH OF THE LAND

Portraits of Bathurst Inlet

Text and photos by Brandy Wilson

Seaside Potentilla rest upon the sandy shore of Bathurst Inlet.

Top left: The author, checking out the view from Bathurst Inlet.

Top right: Quadjuk Island rock covered with delicate Rock Tripe and Map Lichen.

Bottom: Ayuk Island reveals salt loving plants like Seaside Bluebells, Dwarf Fireweed, Beach Pea and Sea-Beach Sandwort.

Top: The dramatic transformation of Mountain Aven from bloom to seed.

Bottom: Bird Island — Prickly Saxifrage, Snow Cinquefoil, Pallas' Wallflower, Mouse Ear Chickweed and sandstone rocks covered with Jewel Lichen.

In the summer of 2013, I received an NWT Arts Council grant, and on July 1 I flew North from Yellowknife to Bathurst Inlet. I booked myself into the Bathurst Inlet Lodge, one of Canada's first eco-lodges, for a weeklong quest to learn about High Arctic plants. Within minutes of stepping off the plane, I spotted the very flower that brought me so far North — the Arctic Lupin.

Daily excursions were planned around the weather, and most days we left Bathurst Inlet at 9 am on a big barge called the "Blue Loo," humorously named for the outhouse secured to its rear deck. Each trip highlighted unique characteristics of the landscape, geology, wildlife, and wildflowers. We also learned about the history of the community and read excerpts from Franklin's diary. On one occasion, Sir John Franklin described the very hillside we were able to view from the barge.

Over our week's visit, we saw caribou and grizzly bear from a distance. We investigated glacial striations and bedrock polished smooth by those same glaciers. Sunburst, Jewel and Map Lichen were examined in hand, up-close. From a distance we saw only dark green or rocky landscapes, but up close we found delicate flowers like Wooly Lousewort or Moss Campion and Capitate Lousewort. Even though this area is called the Barrenlands, I found the land was anything but barren. Because the growing season is so short and intense, flowers forego height and get to blooming for survival. I had to remind myself often to look up from the colourful flowers and enjoy the view.

I brought my studio equipment with me and was assigned a 12x12' cabin with a huge table that was perfect for my set up. In my art, I collect and arrange native flowers and foliage in various seasons in order to create a portrait of that place in a moment of time. I want to reveal the small details in nature that are easily missed in passing.

Opposite: Portrait of the lodge surroundings with Capitate Lousewort, Painted Cup, Mountain Aven, Lapland Rosebay, White Arctic Heather, Snow Cinquefoil, and Fireworks Flower.

Below: Portrait of Amethyst Point marsh with Richardson's Anemone, a small yellow flower named after John Richardson who was the Naturalist on Franklin's expedition.

I carried with me a small, insulated sample bag that held cups with water. At each place we stopped, respecting the fragile local ecology, I collected only a few flowers that would later become part of my portrait of the area. What began as a Google search for Arctic Lupin two years earlier had turned into a full-blown exploration of the Barrenlands. Here I was, crawling on all fours, collecting plant samples and eagerly listening to resident Botanist Page Burt as she introduced each flower to our small group of nine High Arctic visitors.

After dinner and an evening lecture or hike, our days were usually completed by 9 pm. From that time until the wee hours of the night, I worked in my makeshift studio. It was not hard staying up late as the midnight sun warmed my window as I worked. I knew sleep could come later and I wanted to make the most of each moment I was there.

When I think about my exploration of Bathurst Inlet, I always smile. I close my eyes and remember cruising on the Blue Loo. It was cold, windy, and wet, but I could not have been happier. Every now and then I felt a gentle, warm puff of air across my face, and when I mentioned it to Page Burt, she told me, "they call that the breath of the land."

Breath of the Land was exhibited at the Northern Life Museum and Cultural Centre in Fort Smith in 2014. The 13 oversized Giclée prints are my portraits of the landscape of Bathurst Inlet. The images for the exhibit are limited editions of three and the size is 28x28". A&B

Brandy Wilson was born and raised in Inuvik, NWT, and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Alberta College of Art + Design in Calgary, Alberta. Her work has been exhibited in many northern communities, including Fort Smith, Fort Simpson, Inuvik, and Yellowknife.

Brandy was selected to be part of the Northwest Territories 'Artist Delegation' at the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia. Most recently, her work was selected as the base design for the newly milled carpet in the Northwest Territories meeting room at Canada House in London, England, opened by Queen Elizabeth II on February 19, 2015. The Northern Arts and Cultural Centre in Yellowknife presented Brandy's work in April 2015.

Brandy currently lives in Fort Smith with her husband and their two dogs, Molly and Blue.

To see more of Brandy's work, please visit www.brandywilson.ca.