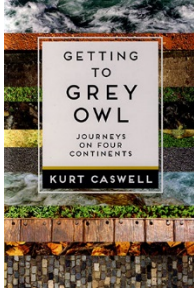


## From *Getting to Grey Owl: Journeys on Four Continents*

By: Kurt Caswell

Reprinted courtesy of Trinity University Press



To get to Grey Owl's cabin, I drove to Prince Albert National Park, Saskatchewan, from my house in west Texas. It's about 1,725 miles from Lubbock to Waskesiu, but I didn't drive in a straight line. I made a number of detours over several weeks, camping along the way: the Medicine Bow National Forest near Cheyenne, Wyoming, where great mushrooms of smoke from the High Park Fire savaged the sky; Deadwood, North Dakota, because of that HBO series; Devil's Tower, Wyoming, because N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) writes that "it has to be seen to be believed," and I believed him; Lake Sakakawea on the wide Missouri River, North Dakota, where Lewis and Clark once camped; then on up over the US/Canada border to Crooked Lake, Saskatchewan, where I watched a terrible wind come in over the quiet waters; then out to Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba, where Grey Owl also lived for a short time; and finally, to Prince Albert National Park where he lived out his days and now is buried. So, to get to Prince Albert National Park, I drove 2,450 miles. Inside the park, I drove another 100 miles over a period of four days. So now I was at 2,550 miles of driving to get to Grey Owl's cabin. Of course, I would also have to eventually drive home.

I drive a 2002 Ford F250 4-by-4 supercab, with a 7.3-liter V8 Power Stroke diesel engine (yeah, the last of the good ones). The paint is peeling and the truck has 200,000 miles on it, but it's still going strong. I'm running Firestone Destination A/T tires at LT285/75R16, which is a little bigger than the factory tire, so that reduces my fuel economy just a bit. Then I have an eight-foot cabover Alaskan Camper on the back, which weighs 1,750 pounds, dry. The thing about the custom-made Alaskan is that it's the only hard-shell popup camper made in North America. The top raises for camping and lowers for driving on a hydraulic system, which dramatically reduces drag and thus helps maintain reasonable mileage. I've got a canoe on top of that and a whole lot of gear stowed in the cab because I'll be making a long canoe trip out of Stanley Mission, Saskatchewan, after I visit Grey Owl's cabin, plus books, clothes, pots and pans, food, assorted tools and other miscellaneous gear, 35 gallons of fresh water, 20 pounds of propane, and at least, *at least*, a case and a half of beer.

On a good day, my truck can pull down 18 miles to the gallon. I use a diesel fuel conditioner, because the EPA changed the diesel fuel standards to remove most of the sulfur, thereby reducing emissions of oxides of nitrogen and particulate matter. That's good news for all living things that respire, and those that don't too, and a good step toward curbing climate change, but the process reduces the potential energy of the fuel, decreasing the work it can do, which lowers fuel economy, which means burning more. This new ultralow-sulfur diesel fuel (ULSD) is rated at 15 parts per million (ppm) of sulfur and isn't so good for diesel engines built before 2007 because they are designed to burn low-sulfur diesel (LSD), rated at 500 ppm. One of the problems is lubrication, so the fuel conditioner lubricates older diesel engines, like mine, and can also increase fuel economy. Instead of buying this, you have to buy that. Now, this ULSD fuel is good news for European diesel engine manufacturers because they build engines designed to burn ULSD fuel, so now Europe can compete with North America in the marketplace. But I suppose this is not so good for North American diesel engine manufacturers, who until now had less competition at home, which is probably why the diesel fuel was made that way for so long to begin with.

This is a more complex issue, though—it includes a world campaign to lower sulfur content in diesel fuels for the sake of the entire planet, and I have no business reducing it to market exclusion. The point here is that with all this weight on and in my truck, and with this fuel and my engine, I probably average 15 miles per gallon. That's not too bad for an outfit that weighs upward of 15,000 pounds, but I'd do much better with a Toyota Prius. At any rate, to get to Grey Owl's cabin, I burned 170 gallons of diesel. According to my source, 1 gallon of diesel produces 10 kilograms of carbon emissions. So to arrive at the parking lot where I will unload my canoe to paddle up to Grey Owl's cabin, my truck alone has produced 1,700 kilograms of carbon.

\*\*\*\*\*

According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, the average American produces about 19.18 metric tons of carbon per year. By comparison, the average Canadian produces 17.27 metric tons of carbon; the average German, 10.06; the average Chinese, 4.91; and the average Brazilian, 2.18. The average Afghan produces almost no carbon at all. One metric ton is equal to 1,000 kilograms. To get to Grey Owl's cabin, I produced nearly 2 metric tons of carbon-burning diesel and propane fuels alone. But there is more, of course.

The truck I'm driving has a carbon footprint too. The footprint of building the truck is fixed (it is only built once), but each time I have the truck repaired, change the oil, or buy new tires and the like, the footprint grows. For now let's stick to the fixed carbon cost of manufacturing. Energy is required for every step in the process: the extraction of ore from the earth, the manufacture of the engine and components, the various plastics and such that make up the interior and exterior, the shipping of parts from all over the world, the energy required to run the plants where parts are made and the truck was assembled, and then the workers while at work. Even the workers' clothes and what they had for lunch have a carbon footprint. And after that is the footprint of the sales people and their facilities. It's staggering, really. It's hardly possible to calculate a precise carbon footprint for my truck, but it is possible to make an educated guess. Two journalists at the *Guardian* report that the carbon footprint of an average-sized car is about 17 metric tons. At the high end (the report cites the Land Rover Discovery as an example), the footprint is 35 metric tons. To build a truck like mine, surely the cost must be at the high end. The truck is ten years old, and I traveled in my truck for two months getting to Grey Owl's cabin and back again. A simple calculation puts my truck at 292 kilograms of carbon per month over its lifetime, which means adding another 584 kilograms. My total now is 2,311 kilograms.

And there is more still. My truck is carrying the camper and the canoe and all the gear and clothing and other supplies. All of this has a carbon footprint. The food I buy to stock the camper has a carbon footprint. Doing my laundry has a carbon footprint, as do the books I've brought with me, my laptop, even the beer. My source estimates 900 grams of carbon for a single bottle of good beer with a fairly extensive transport history. And this is what I have, good beer from Wyoming and Colorado. Let's estimate two beers a day for two months, and so add another 108 kilograms of carbon in beer alone.

So far my calculations have been fairly precise, and I've accounted for the big ones. The calculation of the carbon cost of getting to Grey Owl's cabin breaks down from here into a dizzying complexity "too flattering-sweet to be substantial," as Shakespeare said. I don't really want to try to come up with an accurate number for every little plastic gizmo in my kit, and as with the calculation for the manufacture and upkeep of my truck, I'd then have to calculate the carbon cost of that plastic gizmo only for the duration of time that I use it to get to Grey Owl's cabin. You would be bored to death, and I would never finish this essay. So to account for the rest that is nearly incalculable, I'll double the total I have now and

call it good. Let's say that 2,311 kilograms doubled is at the very least the carbon footprint of getting to Grey Owl's cabin: 4,622 kilograms of carbon. And then, double it again to get home, and add the beer. To get to Grey Owl's cabin it cost me—no, it cost the world—9,352 kilograms of carbon, or 9.35 metric tons, plus or minus a kilogram or two. That sum is nearly half of the yearly carbon footprint of the average American, and nearly double the average Chinese. If I want to remain near the average for my country, there's no room for travel for the rest of the year, and no room even to drink good beer. I can stay home well enough, but giving up beer is hardly American. It's hardly even civilized.

\*\*\*\*\*

Paddling, I begin to think of all the journeys I have made and how many of them likely had a much greater carbon footprint than this one. All you have to do is step onto an airplane. A round-trip flight from Houston to London, for example, comes in at about 1,700 kilograms of carbon for each person on the plane. The plane itself produces that sum multiplied by some four hundred seats: 680 cubic tons of carbon. But this is merely the plane's emissions; it does not include all the other carbon sources that I so tediously considered for my truck. Air travel produces more carbon than any other sort of travel. And, to boot, air travel is fast, which means you can produce more carbon in far less time. My truck racked up a good carbon sum, but it did so over a period of two months. Let's say you were to fly 1 million miles, as several of my friends have, as Hillary Clinton did in four years as secretary of state. If you never get off the plane, you can fly that million in 2,000 hours, the equivalent of just over 83 days. In my truck it would take 15,385 hours to make the same distance, an equivalent of 641 days. And of course, if you are doing the driving, you have to stop now and again to rest and drink beer, so it would take much, much longer. Not so with air travel; air travel allows you to drink beer and produce carbon at the same time.

So, what about the great travelers who roam the world? What about the immense journeys of the environmental writers and conservationists of our time, the women and men whose work has been my steady diet since I was a boy? What is the carbon footprint, for example, of a writer who travels to all the cold places in the world to bring back a story about melting glaciers or the decline of the polar bears, writing that may help change public policy in order to curb the environmental pressures that are causing the melting and the decline to begin with? What is the carbon footprint of a writer who flies off to the site of some terrible disaster—Banda Aceh, Sendai, or the path of Hurricane Sandy? Or a writer who travels to a dozen landscapes in as many countries to consider the fate of humanity in relation to water? What is the carbon footprint of a UN conference on the environment? And how does the work of these writers and their carbon footprints compare to the work of writers who stay home, who inhabit one place, one landscape, for the whole of their life and so come to know it intimately and write from that intimacy? What are the impacts of those two bodies of work? The John Muirs of the world, who roam, and the John Burroughses of the world, who stay home?

The question I have to ask myself is this: is researching and writing a story on climate change worth its weight in carbon? Or are writers who travel extensively really just documenting the failure of our



*Grey Owl's Cabin*

species, even as the process of documenting it hastens that failure? Perhaps you've asked these questions before. Eventually it becomes personal. I want to know how to justify my own journeys, those I've made and those I wish to make. How do I justify the carbon cost of my journey to Grey Owl's cabin? Surely my seeing Grey Owl's cabin will not help save the world. Of course it won't.

This appeared in the book *Getting to Grey Owl*, \$18.95 published by Trinity University Press. For more information, please visit [www.tupress.org](http://www.tupress.org).

Image of Grey Owl's Cabin by en:User:Fremte - en:File:Greyowls cabin ajawaan lake.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8762353>