Projects funded through Philip Hyde Conservation Grant

21

high school and college students mentored in immersive hands-on learning experiences

$20,000
awarded in grants for undergraduate and graduate study in photography

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Cover Photo
Great Kiskadee
Attracted to Wild Pyracantha Berries
© Tom Ingram
Alamo, Texas
Editor’s Note

If you had pandemic, wildfires, economic crisis, mass protests, murder hornets, and sports without spectators on your 2020 bingo card, you won! Congratulations or something.

It was one heck of a year! A year that played havoc with our travel, our businesses, and our very lives. Yet nature photographers are, by definition, a flexible and resilient lot. We adapt on the fly to rapidly shifting conditions in the field. We change our business models as the business of photography mutates in unexpected ways. We are, if not exactly thriving, at least surviving and adjusting as one thing after another disrupted our world. We may be happy to see it go but we won’t soon forget 2020.

It could have been tempting to shut yourself away in a dark room until it all blew over. But that’s not in the nature of nature photographers. In spite of all the turmoil, the angst, and the disruptions, photographers were out taking advantage of whatever opportunities they had to capture great images. As a result, the photographs in this year’s Showcase competition are truly remarkable. They remind us that the world is still full of beauty, awe-inspiring sights, and incredible moments that are waiting to be seen and captured.

As economic convulsions and mass protests rocked our world and made us reevaluate how we managed our work and our relationships with others, new technologies expanded our abilities to use imagery to tell stories. We found greater demands for creative conservation storytelling and a basket of tools that gave us greater freedom in how we practice our craft.

It’s an exciting time to be a nature photographer, as you’ll see in these pages. Enjoy!

— Frank Gallagher

Meet the Judges

Conservation Category Judges

HELEN GILKS is owner and manager of Nature Picture Library, a specialist nature photo agency based in the United Kingdom and formerly part of the BBC Natural History Unit. The collection is especially strong in animal portraits and behavior but also includes landscapes and travel, plants, tribal peoples, and images illustrating conservation and environmental issues. The Library represents the photography from the Wild Wonders of Europe and China projects, Scotland: The Big Picture and Meet Your Neighbours. Previously, Helen was manager of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition organized by BBC Wildlife magazine and the Natural History Museum, London. Helen is an affiliate of the International League of Conservation Photographers.

DOUG GIMESY is a conservation, wildlife and animal welfare photojournalist, with a focus on Australian issues. His recent work has included the Australian bushfires as well as the conservation and animal welfare issues that face the platypus, the grey-headed flying-fox and the little blue penguins of Melbourne. He is an Associate Fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers, a contributing photographer to National Geographic and also the Nature Picture Library. Doug has been a finalist in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year and the Big Picture Natural World competitions and has won both the Australian Geographic Nature Photographer of the Year “Our Impact” category, as well as the inaugural Wildscreen Panda PhotoStory Award.

Michele Westmorland has created a vast library of imagery from around the globe. She recognizes the need to tell a visual story, whether it covers exotic locations or the wonders of the natural world. Michele is especially passionate about conservation and proud to be a Senior Fellow of International League of Conservation Photographers, from which she was honored to receive the 2016 Fellow of the Year Award. Most recently, she received the Lifetime Explorer Award from the Sea of Changes Foundation. Her underwater and cultural photography has gained international recognition.

Showcase Judges

ELLEN ANON is an internationally acclaimed photographer, writer, and speaker who specializes in expressive photography. Her images, most often based on nature, are sometimes realistic and sometimes abstract but always designed to elicit emotional reactions from the viewer. Her goal is to go beyond the ordinary in ways that hopefully stimulate others to pause and appreciate some of the beauty and wonder of our earth to help balance some of the stress of everyday life. Ellen has won recognition in numerous worldwide competitions including the prestigious Wildlife Photographer of the Year competitions. She has co-authored nine books on photography and digital processing as well as numerous articles and video training materials and is currently developing a series of online photography courses based on her “See It” book. She is proud to be a member of the SanDisk Extreme Team/Western Digital Ambassador.

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One of North America’s best-known contemporary outdoor and nature photographers and a leader in the field of digital imaging, GEORGE LEPP is the author of many books and hundreds of nationally and internationally published articles about the creative, ethical, and technical aspects of nature photography. He is field editor of Outdoor Photographer magazine, where his “Tech Tips” column is widely read. His photography is extensively published and exhibited, and represented by Getty Images, Corbis, Agstock, and Photo Researchers. Lepp is one of the first members of Canon USA’s Explorers of Light program, featuring the industry’s most influential photographers. He has presented hundreds of lectures and led workshops all over the world, and often serves as a judge of international photography competitions. A founder and fellow of the North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA), Lepp has won many awards for his work, including Photo Media’s Photography Person of the Year, the Photographic Society of America’s prestigious Progress Award, and NANPA’s Lifetime Achievement Award. First trained in wildlife and wildlands management, Lepp later earned a BA and honorary MSc from Brooks Institute of Photography. George and his wife and collaborator, Kathryn Vincent Lepp, live in Bend, Oregon.
JOSH ASEL began combining his love of wildlife with photography in 2012, seeking to create dedicated conservation stories about threatened, endangered, keystone, and bellwether species. His recognition and awards include California Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 2016 and a Top 20 photo in the 2019 NANPA Showcase competition. Josh is sponsored by Nikon USA, represented by Wildscreen, and currently serves on NANPA’s Ethics Committee. Publications include National Geographic Education, Defenders of Wildlife, Alaska Airlines’ Alaska Beyond Magazine, Outdoor California, Improve Photography, and the Press Democrat newspaper, among others.

AMANDA BLOUNT is a multi-genre, award-winning photographer from Clarksville, Tennessee. She’s also a disabled, retired Army combat veteran and a department of defense retiree. She’s worked part-time as a freelance photojournalist for thirty years, and is known for donating her time and photos to many conservation groups. Amanda loves to share information with nature photography enthusiasts. She maintains a strong presence in many professional and environmental groups and raises awareness of social issues through her work. Her work has been displayed multiple times, most recently during the Steven A. Cohen veterans’ art show held at the Clarksville, Tennessee Customs House Museum.

KEVIN SCHAFER is a professional natural history photographer, whose work has appeared in all of the most respected science and nature magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has written and photographed more than ten books, including Penguin Planet, which received the 2000 National Outdoor Book Award. His groundbreaking story on Amazon River dolphins was published by National Geographic in 2009. Committed to putting his images to work for conservation, Kevin spent several years documenting threatened eco-regions around the world for the World Wildlife Fund. He is a past recipient of the Gerald Durrell award for Endangered Species photography by the BBC and was a founding Fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers. In 2007, Kevin was named the Outstanding Nature Photographer of the Year by the North American Nature Photography Association.

BOB COATES started his official pro career in March of 1995 after picking up and putting down a camera for the previous thirteen years. Based in the Caribbean for the first three years of his business, Bob concentrated on commercial photography. After working in many genres of image creation, he is back to concentrating on commercial projects, chasing nature and wildlife, and creating an art décor line of images. Bob believes in helping his local community using photographic skills. He currently lives and works from his residential studio in Sedona, Arizona, with his wife Holly. As a speaker, Coates has presented programs from Hawaii to the Caribbean.

DONALD BROWN retired and is now a resident of Charlotte, North Carolina. He was president of the Carolinas’ Nature Photographers Association (CNPA) for five years, is an active member of the North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA), and the Photographic Society of America (PSA) where he served on the board for six years and is currently the 1st Vice Chair of the Pictorial Print Division. An avid exhibitor since 2011, he regularly offers his works for juried competitions and PSA-sanctioned International Exhibitions of Photography. His works have appeared in the NANPA Showcase, Nature’s Best Photography, and LensWork’s recently published Our Magnificent Planet. Don’s primary love is the natural outdoors world: landscapes, wildlife and plant life. He frequently explores other subjects and is especially interested in mastering the craft of fine art inkjet printing. His prints are a reflection of his basic philosophy of making pictures rather than taking them. The image captured by the camera is the start of the process of crafting the final image, the final product being the result of both artistic vision and mastered craft.

Authors
When I create a composite, like Guardian of the City, I like to use individual images that have a strong potential to express a mood and use them to create a story. Sometimes I know ahead of time exactly what I want to create and other times it just happens spontaneously. It’s great when my imagination kicks in. Although many of my photographic images tend to reflect a long association with classic and traditional compositions, I have only just recently enjoyed a slight departure into the world of altered realities and artistic stylizing. I find the challenge of creating altered images while retaining original photographic detail to be unique, fun, and fascinating.

Since high school, I’ve enjoyed a long history with photography. Retired now, I’ve been a full time photographer for over 10 years and live in Northern California. Over the years, I’ve discovered that the concept of “less is more” is what I like most about my own photography. I gravitate to things like light, shadow, texture, shapes, expressions and gestures, but nature photography has always been the most exciting and challenging subject for me. Not only do I learn a great deal about the subjects I photograph, my photography has taken me to amazing places all over the world.
Palm Trees Morphed into a Nature Mandala
© Melissa Fraser
Moloka‘i, Hawai‘i

"When I look at this image, I see the palm trees but then am captivated by the repeating design and complimentary colors. The lines created by the trunks immediately draw my eye in, closer and closer to the center, where there is a beautiful star to land on. It’s impressive that this was done with a mobile app."

—Ellen Anon

“A great, dizzying pattern with repetitive colors and an instant read with the palm trees. It draws your eyes in and keeps you looking. How long you hold your viewer’s attention is important.”

—George Lepp

Morning Grasses
© Karen Gordon Schulman
Yampa River Botanic Park, Steamboat Springs, Colorado

“This beautiful image is so artistic that it’s hard to realize a multiple-exposure photograph is at its foundation. The careful application of textures and toning have yielded an image that looks like some sort of fantastic old-school printing process with gold leaf added to it.”

—Ellen Anon

“This is a soft, mood piece that would make an excellent décor image. It’s neutral in colors with earth tones and could be hung almost anywhere. Very pleasant rendition.”

—George Lepp

“To be honest, I’m not sure exactly how this was done, but happily it really doesn’t matter. The end result is delicate and lovely in a way that a more literal representation cannot capture.”

—Kevin Schafer
Top 100

Lilac-Breasted Roller Taking Flight
© Christopher Ciccone
Ndutu Conservation Area, Tanzania

Dance of the Snowy Egret
© Bob Coates Photography
Millsboro, Delaware

Great Blue Heron With Chicks Revisited
© Cheryl Medow
Venice Rookery, Venice, Florida

Just an Old Dead Tree
© Thomas Yackley

Crane Chaos
© Thomas Yackley
Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, Alabama

Circularized Photograph With Cat’s Eye and Beaded Water on Glass
© Melissa Fraser
USA

Top 100
The Hand of Man: Rescuing an Endangered Species
© Jim Shane
Lee’s Ferry, Arizona

Mushroom in the Mist
© Frank Clemmensen
Durham, North Carolina

Composite with Snowy Egret
© Cheryl Medow
Malibu Lagoon, California

Burchell’s Zebra at the Watering Hole
© Marty Purdy
Etosha National Park, Namibia

Composite of Tricolored Heron and Skimmer
© Cheryl Medow
Viera Wetlands, Florida

Pelican’s Night Out
© Ron Day
Tontkilo Reservoir, Oklahoma
Cover Crop Species Protect and Regenerate the Soil and Feed Pollinators
© Elijah Goodwin
Stone Barns Center, New York

Orb of a Coastal Wood Fern
© Judy Kramer
Monte Bello Open Space, Santa Clara County, California

Multiple Exposure of a Standing Wave at the Top of a Waterfall
© Elijah Goodwin
Bog River Falls, Tupper Lake, New York

Painterly High-Key Image of a Great Egret Displaying Breeding Colors
© Ron Day
Grand Lake, Oklahoma

Doe in Springtime Flowers
© Jan Lightfoot
Northern Nevada

Tulip Photo Layered with Image from a Swimming Pool
© Melissa Fraser
Rhode Island

Ross’s Geese Taking off after Dusk
© Rob Badger
Merced National Wildlife Refuge, California
Top 250

COVID-19. There, I said it! During 2020 the novel coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19, came like a tsunami and washed over everything, including our photography businesses. It continues to affect us as I write and probably will for the foreseeable future.

Pandemic disruptions highlight the need for business owners to plan for disaster, build flexibility into their DNA, and constantly evolve. The virus is today’s elephant in the room but it’s only the latest in a long list of challenges photographers face.

Unprecedented wildfires put portions of the U.S. West Coast off limits and smoky haze obscured landscapes hundreds of miles inland. Increasingly violent tornados, hurricanes, and other severe weather events disrupted travel.

Even before all of these natural disasters, technology had been eating away at photographers’ income for years. As each new digital improvement was introduced, more and more people were able to satisfy their photographic needs with more capable gear at lower prices. Just to stay solvent, photographers have had to change their business models (often more than once) over the last decade.

As a photographer who “wasn’t EVER going digital,” I now find myself immersed in the world of technology. And I am loving it! Image creation today is ever more dependent upon leveraging the capabilities of new camera systems and software. It still takes skill and technique to make a memorable photo, but we now have the tools to create images that we once only dreamed about.

A Little History

COVID-19 is only the latest threat to a photographer’s income. Ever since the mid-90s, when electronic imaging first came to call, professional photographers have had a love-hate relationship with it. On the one hand, digital technology gives and, with the other, takes away. Image makers asked for easier and better ways to capture and process photos. Tech was there to oblige. With each major improvement, less knowledge and skill were needed to capture a “properly” exposed photo. Processing those photos became less difficult. Camera prices dropped. Mobile phone cameras got better. Less and less specialized knowledge was needed. Each new iteration of camera or post-processing software ate into pro photographers’ profitability.

By one estimate, more photos were taken in the year 2015 than in the entire history of film photography. In poking around, I found that, by 2018, the number of images made per year exceeded one trillion. In 2020 the world was on track to shoot 1.4 trillion images! What does that mean for you and me? Much of the photo business is now a commodity.

In the stock business, economies of scale mean that large corporations make money doing volume sales at low prices while creators are forced to take pennies on the dollar.
Because of pandemic concentrate on fishing for sockeye Safaris in Alaska in July, when bears one of Dooley’s Fishing Bears Splashing Bear. This photo is from 2020 than mingling money paid for a future workshop with your of an unexpected event has always been important. Rather business, having the ability to refund client deposits in case for having solid plans in place has been a truism. When the of 2020 were particularly brutal. In any business, the need to rethink their own insurance, to make sure they are protected of doing things.

Workshop and Photo Tours
Planning for anything. While professional photographers (and many other business owners) might have thought their planning had everything covered, the coronavirus has exposed some unexpected holes. For those who make a substantial part of their living leading workshops and photo tours, the travel shutdowns and conference cancellations of 2020 were particularly brutal. In any business, the need for having solid plans in place has been a truism. When the almost unthinkable happens, like it did in 2020, we need to be even more prepared.

Financial flexibility. Most businesses set aside some funds for contingencies they can’t anticipate. In a photography business, having the ability to refund client deposits in case of an unexpected event has always been important. Rather than mingling money paid for a future workshop with your day-to-day funds, keeping those dollars in escrow accounts can make a huge difference if you need to make refunds. When I was a wedding photographer, all retainers and deposits went into a separate account and weren’t released into my general accounts until the events were completed and money officially earned. Tour and workshop leaders “are going to have to be flexible for the next year or more,” said Mary Ann McDonald. “Things are going to be canceled at the last minute. We’ve got to establish a good relationship with our outfitters and providers so that we don’t lose money and can reimburse people if necessary. We’ll have to have contingency plans in place.”

Rethinking insurance. Many photographers I spoke with used to suggest, but will now require, that their trip participants purchase travel insurance. Cindy Miller Hopkins said, “We have always required [that] ALL of our guests purchase travel insurance to join my safaris or workshops. This included cancellation and interruption coverage. Yet all travel insurance companies refused to pay any claims having to do with COVID-19.” So, you will need to do some research to make sure your clients are covered for as many contingencies as possible. Businesses will also have to rethink their own insurance, to make sure they are protected in the event of pandemics and natural disasters. It’s not all doom and gloom. “All of the tourism industry is upside down,” said Kevin Dooley. “If travelers are willing to be patient and postpone, not cancel, recovery will be possible.” Will you be ready?

Things will look different. Because of pandemic restrictions, cancellations and tour- and workshop-related losses, many people have focused on their clients, meaning less revenue for the operator. William Manning predicted, “Workshop attendance numbers are going to be smaller. I will likely be providing more one-on-one teaching, as group sessions will likely turn some people off. As to how I approach these issues, I’m still working on them.” Manning also noted, “I believe my locations need to be regional and within driving distance for most attendees.” Miller Hopkins agreed, “Some of my very fit and active senior clients are thinking twice about traveling to remote destinations and developing countries. Clients who never baited an eye about traveling on a dicey itinerary want to stay closer to home.”

Be Positive and Seize Opportunities
New business openings are out there. Online webinars and sessions on platforms like Zoom allow photographers to reach new audiences and attract potential workshop clients who could not have traveled to your location but can participate in a class from their homes. Lisa Langell found new successes and opportunities during the coronavirus pandemic. She learned that, while workshop and travel-based income streams were halted, other rewarding business opportunities were waiting to be grasped. “I would have entirely missed these openings if I didn’t slow down, change course, and refocus. More importantly, I have, via live, interactive, webinar-based events, met a tremendous number of incredible people.” She has made friends, built relationships, and had conversations she couldn’t have otherwise. Dooley also found positives. “This time in reflection and self-discovery has opened my eyes and my perception of nature in bigger ways than I ever thought possible. I will spend more time and effort not only being grateful, but sharing with others the importance of living through nature and the many ways it can improve a person’s life.”

Relationships
An overriding theme I ran into among the photographers with whom I spoke was the importance of building and maintaining good, solid relationships. This includes relationships with vendors, resorts, and travel agents just as much as with clients. Good relationships build mutual trust and a desire to work together to solve problems caused by events beyond anyone’s control. Good relationships may encourage clients to postpone, rather than cancel, a booking. Good relationships may be an incentive for vendors to cut you a little slack when the unexpected happens. Well-grounded relationships start and are maintained by clear and frequent communication. This includes detailed descriptions of how things would be handled in case of disruptions and cancellations, such as with the coronavirus crisis or in the aftermath of severe weather events or wildfires. While you can’t always know or predict all possibilities, it is important to have a clear set of expectations for your clients in case of exigent circumstances. Having clients sign off on these in advance is important, too. Consult an attorney to get the proper language.

Where once a good living could be made from stock sales, today, unless you occupy a special niche, the business of stock imagery is all but gone. Like most nature photographers, NANPA members are resilient, creative, and adaptable people. They’re not afraid of embracing change and making the best of what the world gives them. Several members recently shared how they had been affected and what they were doing to continue to make a living in their chosen field. Their answers are enlightening, and point to the need for business owners to be prepared. Having the ability to refund client deposits in case of exigent circumstances. Having clients sign off on these in advance is important, too. Consult an attorney to get the proper language.
Many photographers, including myself, used the newly found down time to learn new or brush up on existing skills. I spent a large amount of time doing deep dives into Photoshop and learning new techniques and changes that snuck into the software while I wasn’t looking. This translates directly into improving my skills as a teacher. In addition, becoming more adept has helped push my artwork by adding new depth and dimension to finished pieces.

Some education was pushed upon us, like learning how to present and leverage online learning and Zoom calls. Ultimately, that gives us more avenues to present material to more students in more places.

Jeffrey Klug said he saw a silver lining; "I find that virtual meetings with larger groups of people make it easier to teach students. With a virtual meeting, I can draw from a larger area and keep the costs lower. I find a lot of people like one- or two-hour classes instead of longer five- or six-hour sessions. " Where larger groups of students are needed to cover the travel, room, and equipment rental costs of giving in-person seminars, an online class is inexpensive to run, though there may be a cost for revising materials and lessons for virtual spaces.

Jennifer King said that internet learning should continue to generate revenue, even after things get somewhat back to normal. “However, there is no replacement for going to a photo location and having someone who knows the area well to help be your guide.” Jennifer feels that internet learning can be motivating, and teach very specific things, but the evolution of a photographer requires getting behind the camera in a location they want to capture.

Residual Income
Those photographers who have residual income (I like to call it “Mailbox Money”) had a smoother time, as their revenue did not entirely evaporate when the coronavirus started disrupting the economy last March and the bottom fell out of everything.

Let’s start with some great advice from Langell. She has always prided herself in building multiple revenue streams and was already starting to position herself to be less dependent on income from leading workshops. “I can be a ‘photographer’ and also be in the business of photography, art, sales, and more,” said Langell. “Much like a mutual fund, building numerous income streams will continue to make me more flexible, relevant, and stable. I will continue to do this during and after the pandemic.”

McDonald Wildlife Photography is another prime example. “We are looking for more residual income options. By this, I mean eBooks and YouTube promotional videos,” said McDonald. The promotional videos will help drive students to Zoom instruction, one-on-one teaching, or small group shoots at their Hoot Hollow location. The McDonalds have had many of these projects in the pipeline, but now have time to expand these into key income streams.

Dooly stated, “Normally I would not have the time to work on books, blogs, and speaking engagements. Various forms of photographic income will help secure a better future.”

Going Forward
Pivot is the new watchword these days, and pivot we must if we want to earn a living in the nature photography business.

It seems that those who embrace the changes find ways to leverage opportunities and technologies in new ways. Some nature photographers were able to leverage new technology into new forms of business. Some refocused their efforts towards filling the photographic education needs of a tidal wave of people new to photography, helping them learn that there is more to making a great image than having a “proper” exposure. Many photographers started creating educational content, adjusted their workshops, and added new products. Others took time to enhance their own education.

Photographers need to be as resilient, nimble, and flexible as ever. Recall how I originally said that I wasn’t ever going to be a digital image maker? If I had stubbornly locked on to that thought, I doubt I’d still be a professional photographer today.

Birds

The new look of a live meeting post COVID-19, captured during a presentation to the American Society of Photographers. Screen captures courtesy of Marisa Baletti-Lavoie

Mary Ann and Joe McDonald having some mask fun. Phone selfie. Mary Ann and Joe McDonald

Joe McDonald Teaching Photoshop. Photo credit: Jon d’Alessio

An image I made near the Vermillion Cliffs in Northern Arizona on a post-COVID car-camping trip. Photo credit: Bob Coates

Goin` For Ward

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First Runner-Up

Great Kiskadee Attracted to Wild Pyracantha Berries
© Tom Ingram
Alamo, Texas

Squawking Female Common Merganser Vigorously Defending Her Log
© Diana Rebman
Beaverton, Oregon

My main objective with photography is to share the wonders of nature that might not be easy for others to witness firsthand. With bird photography, I love being able to freeze nature in motion and capture details that the naked eye cannot see. I also try to pre-establish a vision of what I want to achieve on a specific trip. During this workshop, my focus was on action shots that would help the viewer appreciate the speed, dexterity and beauty of the great kiskadee. With wildlife photography, I spend a significant amount of time learning the behavior of my subjects and being able to predict this great kiskadee’s consistent flight pattern was key to achieving this shot. I loved how the action of this beautiful bird was captured.

I call Northern California home and have always had a passion for conservation. My love for wildlife drives my interest in photography. A few years back I decided to wind down my career in technology to spend more time in the outdoors focusing on my photography. Although I do sell prints, I see myself more as an advanced enthusiast. My primary focus is with birds and mammals, but I have recently started expanding into landscape, cityscapes, and astro-photography. My favorite location is anywhere outdoors. However, I do enjoy the abundance of wildlife and nature in Yellowstone, Grand Tetons, and anywhere in Alaska.

COVID-19 caused all of my 2020 photo safaris to be cancelled. It seems so apropos that this photo, taken within a few miles of home, would be the image that is recognized in Showcase! This epitomizes what I’ve tried to tell people over the years—you don’t have to travel far to take wonderful wildlife images. In fact, many times you get your best images in an area where you can return many times.

Having recently retired and relocated to Portland from the San Francisco Bay area, I have spent lots of time exploring local wetlands and wildlife refuges. Koll Center Wetlands is essentially a small wetlands bordering a business park. When I heard that a number of common mergansers were hanging out there, I went in search of them. In this photo, I love the way the dark background makes the merganser really pop and allows her personality to reveal itself!

I am now a resident of Portland, Oregon, and am an avid, amateur wildlife photographer. I got my first SLR in 2008. I love photographing all wildlife but my real passion is non-human primates. My goal in traveling to remote areas around the world is to capture special moments in the lives of animals that many people will never have the chance to experience. By sharing these images I hope to educate the viewer, instill a sense of awe, and cultivate a sense of responsibility to help with their conservation.
“Without a doubt, this is one of the most striking and graphic images of a bird carrying a fish that I’ve seen. The incredible symmetry of the image with the black skimmer coming straight at the viewer, combined with the perfect out-of-focus background, make this image unforgettable!”

—Ellen Anon

“Very unusual angle, coming directly at you. I learned something in that I didn’t know that the skimmer’s bills were that razor thin. Nice image and again, unique!”

—George Lepp

“This one stopped me in my tracks. Skimmers are always elegant and graceful, but I have never seen a picture of one so boldly composed. The eyes are perfectly focused, the background is clean and colorful, but what really got to me was the wide eye of the hapless little fish in the bird’s bill. That double eye contact elevates the head-on perspective. This would make a stunning magazine cover.”

—Kevin Schafer

Black Skimmer Carrying a Fish
© Marie Read
Long Island, New York

Burrowing Owls, One Levitating
© Anita Ross
San Bernardino County, California

“Capturing three burrowing owls in focus with a lovely out of focus background can be challenging enough. But to have one of them frozen, mid-air, in such a wonderful position, and with all three looking towards the camera is extraordinary. I could easily see this image having a caption beneath it and being used for some sort of advertising campaign.”

—George Lepp

“This immediately caught my attention and brought a smile to my face. Engaging the viewer is always a plus. Add the good composition of having three owls with the center of attention in the middle. Well done and this could be entered in the Comedy Wildlife Photography Awards competition!”

—Ellen Anon

“As judges, we see a LOT of burrowing owl shots. This should come as no surprise, since they are relatively easy animals to find and approach and have wonderfully expressive faces. This one really stands out, however, because of the striking composition, and the nearly miraculous pose of the bird in the center. Irresistible.”

—Kevin Schafer
Top 100

Female Baltimore Oriole Selects Horsehair for Nesting Material
© Sandra Rothenberg
Warren, Pennsylvania

Male Allen’s Hummingbird Stretches and Shows off
© Corey Raffel
Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, California

Indigo Bunting Marking His Territory
© Stan Bysshe
 Maryland

Least Tern Faceoff with Fish
© Michael J. Cohen
Sebastian, Florida

Male Snail Kite
© Nancy Elwood
Lake Kissimmee, Florida

A Snail Kite Rises with an Apple Snail
© William Pully
Vero Beach, Florida

Prairie Warbler Forages for Insects
© Grace Scalzo
Long Island, New York
Top 100

Catbird Playing in My Backyard Apple Tree
© Sandra Rothenberg
Warren, Pennsylvania

Wood Duck Landing on a Cold January Day
© Carol Grenier
Livingston, Montana

Northern Hawk Owl Hunkered Down
© Mary Lundeberg
Schomberg, Ontario, Canada

A Female Baltimore Oriole Strikes a Pose
© Sandra Rothenberg
Warren, Pennsylvania

Buff-Collared Nightjar
© Brian E. Small
Southeastern Arizona

Snowy Owl on a Post against a Sunset Sky
© Michael J. Cohen
Ottawa, Canada
Top 100

Royal Tern Chased by a Laughing Gull
© Michael J. Cohen
Jacksonville, Florida

Rufous Hummingbird Turf Dispute
© Jim Ramakka
Near Aztec, New Mexico

Crested Caracara Battle
© Kim Marsinger
Texas

American White Pelican Landing in the Truckee River
© Carol Grenier
Pyramid Lake, Nevada

Black Vultures Vie for Space on Pilings
© Kirsten Hines
Manatee Springs State Park, Florida

Three Willets Making Tracks
© Steven Long
Melbourne Beach, Florida

Top 100
Ferocious Sharp-Shinned Hawk Takes a Northern Bobwhite
© Brian E. Small
Upper Texas Coast

Greater Roadrunner Catching Butterflies
© Hector D. Astorga
Starr County, Texas

Anhinga Scores!
© Cissy Beasley
Southern Louisiana

Snowy Egret Thrashing Around Chasing Prey
© Peter Ismert
Lakewood, Colorado

Roseate Spoonbill in Flight with Nesting Material
© Peter Brannon
Fellsmere, Florida

Vigilant Female Harpy Eagle Protects Two-Week Old Chick
© Barbara Fleming
Roraima, Brazil

Common Loon Diving in Search of Food for Its Chicks
© Marie Read
Michigan

Open Wide
© Alice Cahill
San Luis Obispo County, California

Threatened Least Terns Captured from a Distance with 1200 mm Lens
© Mary Lundeberg
Stump Pass Beach State Park, Englewood, Florida

The One That Got Away!
© Laurie Anderson
Traverse City, Michigan
Graceful Arctic Tern © Linda Burek
Deerfield Beach, Florida

Least Tern Fledgling in Flight © Michael J. Cohen
 Deerfield Beach, Florida

Short-Eared Owl Flyby © Alice Cahill
San Luis Obispo County, California

Monogamous Tropicbird Pair’s Ritualized Courtship Flight © Kathy West
Northeast Coast, Bermuda Island

Western Bluebird Mid-Air Courting Ritual © Jodi Frediani
Bonny Doon, California

Great Gray Owl in Flight © David Armer
Montana

Majestic Bald Eagle in Search of Prey © Hans Arnold
Matheison Island, Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Sky Dance: Two Great Kiskadees in Aerial Ballet © E. Darrell Crisp
Hidalgo County, Texas

Common Gallinules in Courtship Allopreening, Bailey Tract © Teri Franzen
J. N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, Sanibel, Florida

Two Male Baltimore Orioles Squabble © Sandra Rothenberg
Warren, Pennsylvania

Graceful Arctic Tern © Linda Burek
Deerfield Beach, Florida

Least Tern Fledgling in Flight © Michael J. Cohen
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J. N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, Sanibel, Florida

Two Male Baltimore Orioles Squabble © Sandra Rothenberg
Warren, Pennsylvania
Top 250

**Western Grebes Rush across the Surface of a Lake Aglow from the Smoke of California Wildfires**
© Donald Quintana
Santa Margarita Lake, California

**An Acorn Woodpecker Greets New Arrivals**
© Kevin Lohman
Santa Cruz, California

**Blue-Footed Booby Takeoff**
© Patrick Pevey
Galapagos Islands, Ecuador

**Western Grebe Returns to Nest and Enters by Leaping**
© Carol Grenier
Pyramid Lake, Nevada

**American Bittern Crossing the Road**
© Eleanor Briccetti
Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge, California

**BlueJay and Baltimore Oriole Surprise Each Other**
© Sandra Rothenberg
Warren, Pennsylvania

**White-Fronted Woodpeckers Play King of the Hill**
© Corey Raffel
Near Sucre, Bolivia

**Pied-Billed Grebe on the Run**
© Michael J. Cohen
Palm Beach County, Florida

**Royal Tern Lands in the Mouth of Another Royal Tern!**
© Judylynn Malloch
Fort Desoto, Florida

**A Fiery-Throated and a Talamanca Hummingbird Feed on a Ericaceae Flower**
© Cindy Jones
Costa Rica

**Bluejays**

**Western Grebe Returns to Nest and Enters by Leaping**
© Carol Grenier
Pyramid Lake, Nevada

**White-Fronted Woodpeckers Play King of the Hill**
© Corey Raffel
Near Sucre, Bolivia
Congratulations to all the photographers who have their hard work and dedication recognized here!

- Steve and Nicole -

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Top 250

Black-Browed Albatross in High Key
© Amy Marques
Falkland Islands

Little Green Bee-Eater Landing on a Log
© Barbara White
Kanha National Park, Madhya Pradesh, India

American Goldfinch
Picking Thistlesdown
© Don Larkin
Renton, Washington

Sandhill Crane and Snow Geese Migration
© Adriana Greisman
Rowe Sanctuary, Gibbon, Nebraska

Greater Sage Grouse Breeding Display
© Peter Ismert
Northern Colorado
Massive wildfires scorched large areas of the American west, exacerbated by high temperatures and a long drought. Glaciers are breaking up in both polar regions. One million species are at risk of extinction, according to a recent United Nations report. Sir Robert Watson, chair of the panel that compiled the report, said, “The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health, and quality of life worldwide.”

Earth is in danger and, if we can document the threats and move people to action, conservation photographers have the potential to be among the most important storytellers in history. The burden we carry cannot be understated. We’re the ones who have to tell the hard-hitting and often emotionally upsetting stories of a global mass extinction in order to sway public opinion to save the planet. Obviously, for those of us who claim the mantle of “professional conservation photographers,” communication is key. We need to express ourselves using the right words and images. We need to employ compelling messaging strategies. And we need to use the right media. Easier said than done.

Messaging matters
“Climate change.” Are those the right words to describe the rapid degradation of the natural world due to human activity? I’ve heard people say, “The climate has always been changing. It’s normal.” Maybe you’ve heard something along those lines, too. They’re not exactly wrong, but there is a fuzziness in the phrase “climate change” that leads to misunderstanding. And, in a polarized political environment, there will be those who take every opportunity to twist words and distort meanings.

How about this instead: “climate cancer.” It definitely grabs my attention because it sounds more threatening and imminent, as it needs to be. It’s also more reflective of the symptoms the Earth is experiencing. I first heard “climate cancer” from Simon Sinek, one of the great visionary thinkers and author of the best-selling books Start With Why and Leaders Eat Last.

Slogans can be enlightening and move people to action. But slogans can also be downright confusing, especially if you hear one out of context for the very first time. I admit to being confused about a couple of very important slogans that were in the news a lot during 2020: “Black Lives Matter” and “Defund the Police.” At first, I thought don’t all lives matter and why would anyone want to take all funding away from law enforcement? In fact, I had badly misinterpreted both, and I’m not alone.
Media Choices Matter

I began researching this article thinking that social media would be a major part of a communications and messaging strategy. Most of us won’t get contracts from magazines, TV shows, or documentary filmmakers. And, after all, the way people consume news, information, and entertainment has shifted from newspapers, magazines, and TV shows to Google, Netflix, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms. Go where the audience is, right? But, after watching a Netflix documentary, the social dilemma... I’m not so sure. At the very least, we may need to reexamine how we use these platforms. The ways the companies and algorithms operate may be working against what we’re trying to do. Don’t get me wrong; I still think using social media is a great way to communicate, but it might not be the best direction to head anymore.

“Social media isn’t a tool that’s just waiting to be used. It has its own goals and it has its own means of pursuing them by using your psychology against you,” says Tristan Harris, co-founder of the Center for Human Technology. By using your psychology against you, says Tristan Harris, has its own goals and it has its own means of pursuing them using social media is a great way to communicate, but it to reexamine how we use these platforms. The ways the media platforms. Go where the audience is, right?

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All of these companies are competing for our attention. Their business models rely on keeping people engaged with their screens. Their goal is to get as much of a person’s attention as they possibly can by designing the products to be as engaging and addicting as possible. “How much of your life can we get you to give to us?” asked Tim Kendall, former executive at Facebook and former president of Pinterest, in the documentary.

So that means more attention for our conservation stories, right? Maybe not. Consider these four problems:

1. Information bubbles. What we see on our Facebook or Instagram feed is determined by algorithms which are trained to give us what we want. That creates what Eli Pariser calls a “filter bubble,” in which you get information you like and you’re less apt to encounter conflicting viewpoints. The algorithm ensures we mostly see what we want to see and what we already agree with, leaving little room for important discussion about other schools of thought. It supports the kind of tribalism we see in politics, which may help politicians, businesses, and maybe even some specific conservation efforts, but renders the true point of conservationism meaningless. The whole world needs to come together to embrace the fight against “climate cancer,” working with nature and not against it.

For conservation photographers, this means our social media posts are mostly preaching to the choir. How do we reach beyond the bubble and reach the people we need to reach?

2. Arguments over debates. Conflict grabs attention and gets people engaged and enraged. The algorithms favor shouting matches over calm discussions. It’s easier than ever to be hostile with each other over the simplest things, to say and do things we’d never do face to face. Sometimes, I’ve had people verbally ripping me apart for expressing an opinion. I have to politely remind them that, “I’m not your enemy.” And then there are the self-proclaimed “experts,” trolls, and bots waiting to tear apart science, facts, and reason, or to spread disinformation. Conflict gets eyeballs, likes, and comments. Conflict gets promoted by the algorithm. So, how can your message reach big audiences without being turned into a food fight?

3. Who is the product? In the business models of social media companies, users are the product being sold to advertisers. Everything that you do online is being tracked, measured, carefully monitored, and recorded down to the millisecond. All of this data describes what kind of person you are, whether you’re an introvert or extrovert, what your addictions are, and exactly what you’re doing first thing in the morning or late at night. The data social media companies collect about our clicks, posts, and likes are fed into automated systems that get continually better at predicting our behavior. And, if they can influence our behavior, even a little bit, through the posts and ads we see, advertisers can sell more. Says Jarom Lanier, computer scientist, writer, and pioneer of virtual reality, “It’s the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in your own behavior and perception that is the product.”

Given that the purpose of these slight changes in behavior is to get you to buy more products (and opinions) and that advertisers are paying the bills, the deck is stacked against conservation photographers. As Justin Rosenstein, who worked as an engineer at both Facebook and Google, put it: “We live in a world in which a tree is worth more, financially, dead than alive. In a world in which a whale is worth more dead than alive.” Since advertisers are the customers and are predominantly large corporations selling products, we’re not going to see a lot of posts warning about companies polluting the environment or the need to buy less and conserve more.

4. Activism or slacktivism. Social media can also be a digital pacifier. It’s much easier to like a post than to write to your congressperson, click than march, post than protest. I always knew, deep down, social media were affecting me but recently I have found myself becoming more passive in my fight for wildlife conservation which is, after all, my career. I see myself as a fighter in the war for wildlife protection who has succumbed to an acceptable level of lethargy. How can conservation photographers tap into people’s passion and encourage action?

So What Are the Solutions?

Actor and author Robert McKee once wrote that “storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today. Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, cleaner, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact.”

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the like still have an important role to play, as I learned when the Lightning Complex fires destroyed the Ventana Wildlife Society’s complex, a research site and sanctuary for the critically endangered California condors. Social media were crucial in getting word out about the loss of the facility and in raising funds to rebuild.

Two great Instagram storytellers are Melissa Groo and Joel Sartore. They draw you into their posts with quotations, poems, quirky animal behaviors, and personal thoughts that grab your attention before telling you about the species or the environmental threats the photos depict. Compelling stories make a massive difference in engagement. Are you telling great stories?

Creative Alternatives

Conservation photography isn’t just social media or National Geographic anymore. There is no shortage of creativity in the field and, if we think beyond the old stereotype of a conservation photographer, the possibilities are endless.

Popular art installations like Projecting Change by The Oceanic Preservation Society used dozens of 5K projectors to light up major structures, like the Empire State Building.
Conservation and the United Nations headquarters building, with images of visually striking wildlife, such as cheetahs, Mexican gray wolves, and blue whales. The million-dollar campaign was created to raise awareness of the world’s endangered species. When the projected images by Joel Sartore, Frans Lanting, David Doubilet, and others went up, buildings emptied out from New York to the Vatican and people flooded the streets to watch in awe and capture images on their cell phones. “[Photos] have a power to convince the unconvinced ... The hardest job in the world,” says Doubilet.

Other nature and conservation photographers may not have a million-dollar budget, but they have already explored installing galleries outside in locations like state parks and AZA-accredited zoos.

Moving beyond photography to multimedia is another avenue that is bringing conservation photographers together with storytelling experts in other areas.

As I revamp my own website into a new, multi-tiered system called Wild Expectations Media Cooperative, I am trying to put into practice what I’ve learned. My hope is to connect conservation photographers, executive producers, or private funders with trusted and time-tested environmental conservation researchers around the world. My goal is to use any and all forms of media to complete significant projects that forward protections for wildlife and wild places.

The potential sponsors or affiliates with whom I’ve met all want me to drive my social media. The more followers I have, the more they have the potential to sell their products, which is understandable. So, how do I effectively use Facebook or Instagram? I’m still figuring it out.

At Impact Media Lab, Kika Tuff and her colleagues work with scientists to provide visual storytelling expertise to help researchers make their findings compelling and understandable to a wide audience. With website design, effective imagery and video, they help translate research into captivating stories.

Another way of impacting how and what stories are told can be found in what Jaymi Heimbuch and Morgan Heim did with Her Wild Vision. Their ground-breaking initiative connects female nature and conservation photographers and filmmakers to editors, marketing directors, communication directors, and anyone else looking to hire a woman in the current male-dominated photography business. “No more excuses for not being able to find us,” they say.

I started by saying that conservation photographers have the potential to be among the most important storytellers in history. It won’t be easy. People need to be educated about becoming better stewards of natural ecosystems during a time of polarization and social divisions. Yet, I am absolutely positive we can.

Hope needs to endure. And love needs to fill our hearts, thoughts, ambitions, and creations if we are to communicate with others in a polarized and divided society. Somewhere deep within all of us is a love for the planet and for our fellow humans we must tap into. Through storytelling we can do that. Through storytelling we can save the planet.

Sea Star in Conservation Lab. Since 2013 sea star wasting syndrome has killed many of the animals along the Pacific Coast of the U.S.
I had just received notification that my home state of Colorado was considering putting stay-at-home orders in place during the early days of the pandemic. I was visiting Yellowstone National Park when I heard the news, so I scrambled to pack up and head home. As I left the hotel, I found a trailer of bison parts—heads on the bottom, legs missing hooves in the center, and these plastic-wrapped legs tied to the sides. It was so disturbing, yet I couldn’t help but ponder what I was seeing. In the winter, when bison leave the safety of the park and venture into the surrounding ranches, they can be slaughtered because they may transmit brucellosis to domesticated cows. It seems such a horrid thing to do to animals just looking for food away from the deep snows of Yellowstone. Seeing the fresh carcasses made my gut wrench in pain and sadness.

I am a full-time nature photographer, writer, and business owner based in Estes Park, Colorado. I attended Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey, for communications, where I had my first formal training in photography after many years of instruction on my own and from my mom. I also attended the University of the Arts and the Art Institute of Colorado for computer graphics and photography, respectively. After a move to Colorado in 2002, I focused my photography on nature subjects, and specifically into wildlife around 2010. Although I enjoy photographing all animals and many landscapes, I especially enjoy photographing bald eagles, elk, bighorn sheep, fox, and moose.
Black-Capped Chickadee Stuck in Burdock
© Kyle Moon
Bozeman, Montana

“This photo really caught my attention. How had this bird died? I had no idea that a plant could actually cause a bird to die, but common burdock is an invasive plant, and small American birds did not evolve alongside it. What an interesting story, perfectly illustrated by this image.”
—Helen Gilks

“An emotive capture that draws the viewer in to ask ‘what’s going on’ and, by so doing, invites the viewer to read the caption and learn something about this conservation—and animal welfare—issue.”
—Doug Gimesy

“This image resonated with me quite personally. Although we do not have the same invasive species of burdock, there are many other floras in the Pacific Northwest that impact birds and other wildlife. The sight of this dead bird caught in thorns makes a compelling story.”
—Michele Westmorland

Pelican Not “Living the High Life”
© Jeremy Burnham
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

“This photo really caught my attention. How had this bird died? I had no idea that a plant could actually cause a bird to die, but common burdock is an invasive plant, and small American birds did not evolve alongside it. What an interesting story, perfectly illustrated by this image.”
—Helen Gilks

“An impactful image with a clear story and strong message, which is really what great conservation photography is about.”
—Doug Gimesy

“Although somewhat humorous, this well-shot image of the pelican depicts the intense disregard for our environment, not only in the ocean, but also in waterways. Trash and plastic are a number-one concern and the loss of wildlife due to trash ingestion is increasing at frightening levels.”
—Michele Westmorland

“An image that works on several levels: at first glance a beautiful photo of a pelican reflected in water; then the beer can, which is shocking but also humorous; then the message—our discarded trash is a threat to wildlife. I am not surprised the image went viral.”
—Helen Gilks

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—Michele Westmorland
Threatened Western Snowy Plover settles down her eggs.
© Joshua Asel
Monterey, California

Still a Stump Field after 130 Years
© Tom Haxby
Kingston Plains near Munising, Michigan

Endangered Greater Adjutant Storks atop Boragaon Landfill
© Carla Rhodes
Guwahati, India

Girls petting a frightened newborn California Sea Lion pup as it tries to escape.
© Jennifer Warner
La Jolla, California

Condominiums loom over juvenile Manta Ray
© Bryant Turffs
Jupiter, Florida
Top 250

Victim of a Shipstrike: Blue Whale Fetus Expelled from Mother
© Jodi Frediani
Bean Hollow State Beach, Pescadero, California

Wild Pelican Unable to Eat a Pleco
© Robert Ferguson
Jurong, Singapore

A Shark Finning Camp with Hundreds of Fins Laying out to Dry
© Bill Klipp
Punta Hughes, Isla Magdalena, Mexico

Inquisitive Nestling Burrowing Owls
© Jim Shane
Mountain Home, Idaho

The Loss of Two Bushbuck
© Alison M. Jones
Maasai Mara, Kenya

There’s a Message in the Trash
© Shane Morrison
Rio Salado Audubon Center, Phoenix, Arizona

Too Young to Drink: Tule Elk with Litter
© Jane Scott Norris
Elk Meadow, Redwood National Park, California

Archenemies: The Manatee and the Motorboat
© James Beissel
Crystal River, Florida

© Jodi Frediani

© Robert Ferguson

© James Beissel

© Shane Morrison

© Jane Scott Norris

© Bill Klipp

© Alison M. Jones

© Jim Shane

© Jane Scott Norris
Top 250

Free-Roaming Domestic Cats Kill Billions of Birds and Mammals Each Year
© Nicollet Overby
Oceanside, California

Tibetan Macaque at a Poor-Quality ‘Rescue’ Facility
© Scott Trageser
China

The Last Preserve: Tiny Natural Area in the Midst of Warehouses and Industrial Development
© Thomas Simpson
London, England

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Enjoying the National Parks (While Black)

Story and Photos
By Donald E. Brown

Recently, I came to a shocking realization—in over 50 years exploring state and national parks, photographing wildlife and landscapes, I don’t remember seeing another Black person who was not traveling with me! In fact, fewer than seven percent of visitors to national parks are Black. Other people of color are similarly underrepresented.

That’s beginning to change, but we have a long way yet to go.

Not long ago, after I posted some images on Facebook, another Black amateur photographer commented: “Outstanding images, didn’t know there was a Black nature photographer in the area.” We connected and talked for three hours, exchanging experiences in the outdoors.

I have had enough of these conversations to know that others also notice the lack of people of color in our parks and public lands. But why? And why does it matter?

The answers are complex. The tortured legacy of race and racism stretches back to slavery. But there are also more contemporary reasons. My story may help illustrate the puzzle. After a 24-year career in the Air Force and a second career with Computer Sciences Corporation, I retired. I’m part of a growing number of Black middle-class professionals who have the money and time for fancy cameras, travel, photography workshops, and conservation advocacy. In a country with a growing proportion of people of color, our dollars are important for the prosperity of the companies that make our gear. Our voices are important for conserving and protecting nature. Our aesthetic perspectives are important for keeping nature photography a vibrant art form.

So, why don’t I see more people like me hauling cameras around the great outdoors?

A Legacy of Jim Crow

I grew up on the southside of Paducah, Kentucky, less than 30 miles from Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area. The area has many miles of hiking trails, boat ramps, campgrounds, lodges and cabins, and a 700-acre Elk and Bison Prairie.

I spent several days there every time I visited my hometown and made a special effort to attend the “Gathering of Eagles” festival every January, when you can see the largest number of wintering eagles in the country.

You might assume I developed my love of the outdoors and wildlife here, but you would be wrong. Visitors who looked like me were not welcomed there when I was young. I could only go to an out-of-the-way spot called Cherokee Park that had a small camping, picnic, and swimming area and served as the “Negro area.”

Near my home was an expansive depression in the land known as the “10th Street Hollow.” It was a magnet for my friends and me to roam and play. This was where I developed a love of nature and anything and everything wild.

That was during the “Jim Crow” era, a time during which laws and customs, particularly in the South, legalized racial segregation and marginalized African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold certain jobs, or get an education. It was an era when lynchings were not uncommon and unequal justice prevailed.

Everything in our town was segregated and the facilities afforded Black families were inadequate at best. Noble Park was reserved for “Whites Only” and had a huge Olympic-sized swimming pool with a diving board. Lincoln Park for Blacks had a wading pool, a couple of swing sets and a dusty baseball field. I was one of five Black students who “desegregated” my hometown high school in 1956, but still could not swim in Noble Park with my white classmates.

At movie theaters, Blacks entered through a separate door and had to sit up in the balcony. I really am a product of my environment and to this day am not a fan of theaters.

Though I traveled as a teenager to Knoxville, you would not have seen me in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In the 1930s the National Park Service decided that park units would abide by the laws and customs of the individual areas in which they were located. In the South, that meant national parks were segregated. Although the Department of Interior ordered parks to desegregate in 1945, it took many years for all of the parks to come into full compliance.

For too long, national parks simply weren’t seen as places of refuge and enjoyment for most African Americans.

Blacks who lived through the worst of that era still find themselves wary of forests and woods and lonely country roads. Having grown up in a “Separate but Equal” world, I find that all of my interactions have a “be aware of your surroundings” component, much like the “talk” about how to interact with police and authority figures.

So, why do we have a lack of Black and minority faces in our national parks and other public lands, at least for people of my age. We pass our attitudes on to our children and, if we were not taking our kids out into nature, it’s no wonder they didn’t develop a love of being in and photographing the outdoors.

Role Models

I recently browsed the shelves of a local bookstore and couldn’t find any images of Black or brown people in any of the magazines about the outdoors. I see scant evidence of attempts to interest minorities in visiting public lands or considering nature photography or conservation as viable careers.

Until recently, when I got my copies of Outdoor Photographer and other magazines, I would seldom see images of people who look like me. Instead, my early interest in nature and wildlife photography was fueled by...
the writings, teachings, and images of the famous white nature photographers featured in those publications. I have done a fair amount of research over the years and still wonder, where are the widely recognized Black nature photographers? Where is their work published?

Not seeing ourselves represented in stories, advertising, and marketing is another contributing factor to the lack of diversity in hiking, camping, nature photography, and park visitors. Minorities aren't being invited or encouraged to explore nature, photography, or outdoor recreation. After all, how can you imagine yourself camping, hiking or becoming a conservationist, or a nature photographer if nobody’s marketing to you or reaching into the places where you work and live or the media you consume?

**Camera Clubs and Comfort**

My family and I came back from England in 1997, where I had enjoyed an expatriate assignment (during which I did a lot of scenic and travel photography), and settled in Northern Virginia. In our new home, I discovered a fox den in my backyard. Documenting this fox family and its two kits consumed me for months. It was my introduction to nature photography and I was hooked!

I also discovered Huntley Meadows in Alexandria, Virginia, a wonderful park of wetlands, trails, and boardwalks.

Some of the photographers I met there became lifelong friends and introduced me to other spots for great bird photography. My Black friends admired my prints but only one expressed an interest in joining me on photography outings. George became my travel buddy as we photographed birds from the Everglades up to Cape May. We both recognized that one key to our friendship was the added safety we gave to each other in the predominately white outdoors.

I attended a ton of workshops and lectures and also visited the camera clubs in the area, but I never attended more than one or two meetings of any club. None of them were friendly and inviting. I still remember the experience of arriving early for the social hour and being the odd man out, standing around not knowing anyone.

The story was absolutely the opposite after moving to Charlotte. After settling in, I began to explore the rich natural world of the Carolinas. I quickly found myself invited to join the Charlotte Region of the Carolinas Nature Photography Association (CNPA). The members accepted and welcomed me as part of their fellowship and that gave a new boost to my passion for nature photography. Soon thereafter, my print of the back-yard fox kits won second place in the annual Members’ Choice competition. That hooked me completely and CNPA activities and outings became my life.

At first, I only remember seeing one other member who looked like me and, judging by the attendance at annual meetings, there were fewer than 10 Black members in all of CNPA. I have not seen a new (non-white) face at the annual meeting in five years. Are there really that few Black people interested in nature photography in the Carolinas?

Photography clubs and associations often have “educating others interested in nature photography” as part of their mission statements but make little, if any, outreach to other communities. Blacks and other people of color don’t see themselves represented in the organizations’ websites, boards, social media, or marketing materials. There are few programs in predominately Black schools or neighborhoods to get kids interested in and experiencing camping, hiking, or photography. There aren’t enough role models of famous Black nature photographers or conservationists and there aren’t enough people willing to mentor kids from these ignored populations. There are plenty of worthy kids out there I have mentored and sponsored students of color for the Photographic Society of America Youth Showcase each of the past three years. One of those students had multiple images accepted into the exhibition and at least one medal print each year.

**Hope for the Future**

Children born in the 1960s and later are living in a mostly desegregated but not yet completely integrated nation. They have witnessed far less overt discrimination and enjoyed much more success in breaking barriers. There has been an explosion in the number of Black Meetup and special activity groups devoted to hiking, camping, skiing, and other outdoor activities. In Charlotte, where I live today, one can join ShootoWin, Breezers Ski Club, Outdoor Afro Charlotte, Afro Explorers, Black Girl’s Trekking, Hammock Gang, and many more clubs that provide safety in numbers along with a social dimension for Blacks interested in experiencing the outdoors together.

Due to the recent public attention to race and culture, it seems that companies and organizations are finally becoming aware of the opportunities to attract people of color as consumers and dues-paying members. I’m starting to see people like me being targeted in ads for cameras and photographic equipment. Companies like Nikon and Canon now feature Black photographers representing their brands. I was both amused and pleased to see a Subaru TV ad that featured a young Black family taking a selfie with their car in front of the sign for Arches National Park. The subliminal message I saw was “You’re welcome here,” ads like this can help change the way people think about the national parks.

**The Way Forward**

The National Park Service’s Office of Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion is actively working to increase the diversity, in numbers and its own workforce. By having “relevancy” in its very name, the office is an indication that the National Park Service knows it needs to attract a more diverse workforce and visitor base to remain relevant. Thankfully, other organizations, companies, and groups are also recognizing the need to appeal to and include people of all colors and backgrounds if they want to remain vibrant, growing, and relevant.

After all, it’s not like Black people never engaged with the outdoors and its own workforce. Buffalo Soldiers patrolled and maintained Yosemite and nearby Sequoia National Park more than a century ago. Some of the roads we hike today were built by these soldiers. Several of their commanders served as park superintendents. Likewise, the rich history of African Americans in the Smoky Mountains is now being uncovered and included on the historic markers about the area and its inhabitants.

Sorry, I don’t have all (or most) of the answers and I definitely can’t speak for an entire race of people. I can only speak for myself based on my own lived experiences, insights, and biases gained over 80 years of being Black. With the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests against racism that swept the globe in 2020, large numbers of people seem to be coming to grips with the systemic racial inequities in the nation in ways far deeper than they did during the civil rights movement of the sixties. I think the question on our minds is what should we consider, as nature photographers, while we navigate this new world.

Demographic data clearly shows that the United States is becoming a much more diverse nation. This diversity can be a strength if we learn to include more voices in every aspect of our lives. But it is no longer sufficient to be non-racist. That requires no action and, in fact, encourages no more than the declaration itself. Instead, we must become anti-racist. If we are to make meaningful progress towards becoming that “more perfect union” mentioned in the Constitution, well-intentioned individuals and organizations must be actively working to end racism in society.

What does that mean for photographers? We have to listen to what diverse communities have to say, tailor outreach to those communities, bring people of color into the conversation and into leadership roles, and make everyone welcome. Each of us enjoys some level of influence to use our platform, whatever that stage might be, to show role models of Black and Latinx photographers, to reach out to people of color where they live, to recognize the barriers they face, and work together to help overcome those obstacles. If we can do that, it won’t be long before no nature photographer will wonder why they don’t see anyone who looks like them.
In macro-photography of insects, one often has to choose between science and art. Making a “bug pic” artistically appealing is a special challenge, probably because many of us simply find bugs creepy (Why doesn’t my wife want to hang this great spider photo in our bedroom?). Both the art and science are legitimate approaches, and each has its place. Macro photography of insects becomes special when we can capture the beauty without losing the functional and behavioral detail. My goal is to look at these tiny creatures in new ways from a different perspective. Often that requires moving beyond the view we typically have—the back of a running bug just before we squash them with our boot. In this pic the empty egg case and emerged caterpillar come together with the curve of the host plant in a special way that honors both the science and beauty of nature.

My home is in Lady Lake, Florida. I have only been seriously shooting nature photography for the last five years and consider myself somewhere between a part-time professional and hobbyist. We live on several acres and many of my shots come from there, but my wife and I also regularly camp in state parks, which provide plenty of opportunities to find macro subjects. People often ask where I find the insects I photograph. My answer: Just stop and look closely. They are all around us. I also love to shoot lightning, landscapes, and larger critters when the opportunity presents.

Carnivorous Northern Pitcher Plant with Captured Juvenile Spotted Salamanders
© Samantha Stephens
Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, Canada

Northern pitcher plants grow on bog mats where there is no nutrient-rich soil to feed them. As a result, they have evolved to be carnivorous, instead obtaining nutrients through a diet of insects. But researchers at the Algonquin Wildlife Research Station recently discovered that a population of these plants are also regularly capturing a vertebrate prey: juvenile spotted salamanders. Salamanders have long been recognized as important nutrient cyclers that move between aquatic and forest ecosystems, and this discovery reveals that they might be a large source of nutrients for these plants. I was working at the Algonquin Wildlife Research Station in 2019 as a photojournalist-in-residence, when I was able to make this image that visualizes this scientific discovery.

I use photography paired with compelling written narratives to communicate scientific research, especially when that research is relevant to conservation issues. Through my work, I hope to foster appreciation for the natural world and the people working to understand and protect our shared planet. I’m trained as a biologist but have been working as a full-time photographer and science communicator since I graduated from the Environmental Visual Communication program in 2016. When I’m not following researchers in the field with my camera, I’m based in Ottawa, Ontario.

Zebra Longwing Caterpillar on Passionflower Vine with Empty Egg Case
© Steven Long
Clermont, Florida

In macro-photography of insects, one often has to choose between science and art. Making a “bug pic” artistically appealing is a special challenge, probably because many of us simply find bugs creepy (Why doesn’t my wife want to hang this great spider photo in our bedroom?). Both the art and science are legitimate approaches, and each has its place. Macro photography of insects becomes special when we can capture the beauty without losing the functional and behavioral detail. My goal is to look at these tiny creatures in new ways from a different perspective. Often that requires moving beyond the view we typically have—the back of a running bug just before we squash them with our boot. In this pic the empty egg case and emerged caterpillar come together with the curve of the host plant in a special way that honors both the science and beauty of nature.
“Capturing an ant, in stunning detail, possibly drinking from a water droplet on a blade of grass with a detailed reflection of the nearby sunflowers took remarkable skill.”
—Ellen Anon

“Beautiful macro with natural light. Lack of depth of field is always a problem and this has been solved quite well. The subtly colored flowers are a bonus that adds the uniqueness factor.”
—George Lepp

“This is an extraordinary image by any measure. The crisp focus on the ant’s face and body (devilishly hard to get right at this close range) contrasts beautifully with the soft background, while it captures a rare, and fleeting, moment. The inverted image of the flowery meadow in the droplet makes the whole image sing”
—Kevin Schafer

Ant Feasting on a Nectar Bubble
© Lea Foster
Lafayette, Indiana

Lotus Blossom Seed Pod Resembles an Alien Landscape
© Mary Louise Ravese
Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, Washington, D.C.

“This image required outstanding vision. The composition is perfect, leading one’s eye around the image. Many people won’t know what it is without seeing the title, and that’s fine. The varying shapes of the seeds are engaging, as are the colors.”
—Ellen Anon

“I keep coming back to the word “uniqueness.” I didn’t know what this was, but it was so interesting that I took the moment to find out (Oh yeah, now I see it!). It had my attention. A macro subject that’s done well.”
—George Lepp

“At first glance, I wasn’t sure what I was seeing here. A microscopic view of skin texture? Strange insect larvae emerging? The caption answered the question, of course, but did not diminish the picture’s sense of discovery and wonder. What’s more, the light is perfect and the colors sublime.”
—Kevin Schafer
Top 100

Apple Snail Laying Eggs
© William Sutton
Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, Belize

Black-Speckled Palm-Pit Viper
© Cathy DesRochers
Costa Rica

Dangling Danger!
© Cissy Beasley
San Patricio County, Texas

Lion’s Mane Jellyfish Moves through a Moon Jellyfish Smack
© Jennifer Idol
Port Fridaño, Valdez, Alaska

False Clown Anemonefish and Magnificent Anemone Tentacles
© Matthew Meier
Lembeh Strait, Indonesia

Banded Crab Spider and Honey Bee Prey
© Robert Ferguson
PoLoChe, Sai Kung, Hong Kong

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Macro/Micro/All Other Wildlife • 69
Top 100

Father Calling
© Karthik Arasalai Kalyana Sundaram
Amboli, Maharashtra, India

Diamondback Water Snake Eating American Bullfrog
(Lithobates catesbeianus)
© Nick Kanakis
North Texas

Spider Shedding Exoskeleton
© Larry Litke
Cloud Forest, Chaco, Ecuador

Pink Puckered Lips
© Jim Squires
Solomon Islands

Cactus Close-Up, Sherman Gardens
© Charles Needle
Corona del Mar, California

Spectacular Waterlilies
© Adriana Greisman
Chicago Botanic Gardens, Glencoe, Illinois
Top 100

Mating Lantern Bugs Make a Push-Me-Pull-You Creature
© Robert Ferguson
TaiMoShan Mountain, Hong Kong

Red-Eyed Tree Frog
© Jim Burns
Arenal, Costa Rica

Spring Flowers
© Steve Whisnant
Snohomish, Washington

Green and Black Poison Dart Frog
© Hector D. Astorga
Sarapiqui, Costa Rica

Chevron Manta Ray
© Matthew Meier
San Benedicto Island, Mexico

Painted Lady Butterfly Feeding on Desert Blooms
© Jim Mohler
Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, California

Relaxed Land Iguana Eating Large Mouthfuls of Juicy Cactus
© Kathy West
Plaza Islas, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador

Jagged Ambush Bug Nymph on Blanketflower
© Joseph Ferraro
Ferndale, Michigan

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72 • NANPA Expressions
Colorful Clownfish or Damselfish Living in an Anemone for Protection
© Roger Johnson
Papua New Guinea

Blue Ribbon Eel
© Tony Frank
Lembeh, Indonesia

Shape-Shifting Blue-Ringed Octopus Displaying Its Pulsating Rings
© Cameron Azad
Lembeh Strait, Indonesia

A Blue Dasher Dragonfly Perches Cooperatively
© Peter Brannon
Tampa, Florida

Freshly Emerged Cicada
© Steven Long
Sapelo Island, Georgia

Hanging Flower Shot with Lensbaby Optic
© Jackie Kramer
Ormond Beach, Florida

Two Cuttlefish Mating
© Tony Frank
Lembeh, Indonesia

Goldenrod Crab Spider Shedding Skin
© Anne Grimes
Ayden, North Carolina

Halictua ligatus Female on a Blanketflower
© Joseph Ferraro
Ferndale, Michigan
How Non-Traditional Camera Technology Is Changing the Face of Nature Photography

Story and Photos By Amanda Blount

Do you remember the breathtaking wonder you felt the first time you saw a photo of the Milky Way Galaxy over Joshua Tree National Park, or how excited you were when you opened the crisp, bright pages of the latest National Geographic magazine? For many generations, nature photographers used their big, expensive cameras to share incredible photos with millions of people who may have only dreamed of visiting these faraway places. They inspired others to appreciate, visit, and protect the natural wonders depicted in their images. These photos could be so transformative that they inspired some viewers to become outdoor photographers. That was, however, a door open to only a few. Most couldn’t afford the gear and the travel, didn’t have access to publishers, and didn’t have a sense that their voice mattered. Wow, has that changed!

Breaking Down Barriers

The barriers to becoming a nature photographer used to be quite high. Cameras, film, and travel were expensive. To reach an audience and have an impact required a magazine assignment, book deal, or client with deep pockets. For a long time, the field was dominated by English-speaking, white, male explorers and adventurers. That was the way of the world. Their images were brilliant, moving, and evocative, but not all stories were being told and not all perspectives were being heard. And the cameras, however fancy, had limitations.
Fortunately, with today's technology and the increasing variety of devices with cameras, it's easier than ever to be an outdoor photographer. Increased access to cost-effective, non-traditional image technology (drones, trail cameras, webcams, dashcams, and cell phones) and web-based technology (websites, apps, and social media platforms) are giving traditional photographers new tools and new ways to tell stories. These same tools are also opening nature photography to a wide range of citizen scientists, researchers, and even previously marginalized groups. Non-traditional image technology is giving more people a voice and a stake in documenting and protecting the natural world.

With new kinds of cameras and relatively inexpensive equipment, professional and enthusiastic photographers—even people who don’t consider themselves photographers—can bring excitement, attention, and funding to issues affecting them directly. Pros can use camera traps and drones to tell a more complete conservation story or market their workshops. A park ranger in Africa can immediately upload webcam video or smartphone photos of poachers and alert authorities. Thru-hikers with action cameras can alert park supervisors or researchers to flood damage or conservation issues. A birdwatcher in a city park can alert others to a rare or endangered species. People with cameras who live in densely urban or deeply rural areas can report instances of water pollution or transcendent beauty. The possibilities are endless and the power of the internet enables these stories to gain traction in a local community or across the globe.

More diversity in nature photography also leads to a more complete story of our natural world. Breathtaking photos are no longer limited to the most popular places and subjects nor are topics confined to the interests of organizations with large budgets. Whether they become “photographers” or simply people with cameras can executive photojournalists and instantly tell stories about the issues they believe need attention. Some will use this experience as a jumping-off point for a future profession, CVV activism, conservation advocacy, or simply a great hobby.

With the growth of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, the number of organizations representing marginalized groups has exploded. Girls Who Click, HBCUs Outside, Black In Nature, and the Venture Out Project are just a few examples of how people are coming together to support one another and encourage the exploration and appreciation of nature. These groups use social media to grow, find financial and personal support, and raise awareness of issues they believe are important. For example, social media have allowed these groups to tell their stories to a broader audience of people facing similar challenges and report these immediately to the correct agencies. These individuals share a passion for the outdoors and are excited to be included in conservation conversations.

But Wait! There's More!

Webcams, cell phones, dashcams, and drones operated by professional photographers and by ordinary citizens are helping researchers see the world in new ways.

Photographers have always been good at adapting new technologies for photographic uses. In that same spirit, people are expanding research bases, protecting nature, and helping others by taking and sharing pictures and videos.

Instead of bulky and expensive cameras, mobile phones now make the perfect lightweight option for the on-the-go nature photographer. Through apps like iNaturalist, millions of photos are uploaded daily by a wide variety of regular citizens and researchers to aid in conservation, education, and enjoyment. These reports to websites like e-bird help professional and amateur nature photographers plan trips with better opportunities to capture rare or abundant wildlife.

In certain locations inside Shenandoah National Park, visitors are encouraged to take a photo, scan a QR code, and contribute their photo to a crowdsourced, time-lapse, citizen-scientific project that will help park rangers and scientists document changes over time.

Dashcams, mostly used by motorists to document accidents for insurance companies, have become a fantastic tool for seeing the patterns of wildlife and weather, and documenting natural phenomena like meteors and fireballs.

Since the invention of the very first webcam, watching a coffee pot in the main computer lab at the University of Cambridge in 1993, webcams have served as a way for people to watch something while being somewhere else. Webcams have become a valuable tool during the coronavirus pandemic for backyard birdwatchers, zoo managers, park rangers, and continued conservation research. They can serve as a second set of eyes when research budgets are limited. Most importantly, webcams provide a way to view and research an area with minimal human intrusion. Eagle cams around the country allow viewers to witness eagles raising their young without disrupting the birds. Monterey Bay Aquarium’s live webcams are popular viewing options for people (and employees) while social distancing.

From the very early years of photography, innovative photographers like Gaspar Félix Tournachon and James Wallace Black literally took photography to new heights by taking the first aerial photos from a hot air balloon in 1858 over France and over Boston in 1869. Now, licensed nature photographers and filmmakers from all backgrounds fly drones to capture aerial images for nature enthusiasts, realtors, preservationists, park managers, art collectors, and more. And, because of their knowledge of what a natural area looks like from above, drone operators are often the best people to help rescue agencies look for lost hikers or survivors of natural disasters.

The Adaptations Don't Stop There.

Once we expand our conception of nature photography, the possibilities are endless. For example, why not include overlooked partners such as hunters, anglers, and others who enjoy outdoor recreation? They track animals with hi-tech trail cameras, check weather, plant, and water conditions, and are often the first to find and report illegal activity or sight a new species deep in the woods. They can use GPS to document wildlife crimes or conservation issues and report these immediately to the correct agencies. These individuals share a passion for the outdoors and are excited to be included in conservation conversations.

Nature photography is a great way to encourage children to get excited about the great outdoors. A quick check on any social media platform shows that vast numbers of young people are taking a lot of pictures, and nature photography gets kids outside and excited about the natural world. Young people are adept with digital devices and bring fresh perspectives to any conversation about nature and conservation. This is especially true for those who live in disadvantaged areas. Photography can be an important way for them to tell the stories of their communities.

Smart phones and inexpensive digital cameras can help develop the next generation of nature photographers and conservation storytellers.
Negative Consequences and Mitigating the Impacts

With all the opportunities new types of cameras and technologies have created, it would be irresponsible to ignore some of the more negative consequences.

Inexperienced photographers, in search for a great photo, have harassed animals and destroyed sensitive public and privately-owned land. Due to location tagging, many places became popular with influencers and were overrun by Instagrammers. The damage caused by hordes of people and irresponsible behavior has resulted in access restrictions for all.

The desire for Instagram likes has driven some people to extremely dangerous actions, putting their own lives at risk. Some people have died trying to “get it for the ‘gram.”

Another downside is “Slacktivism,” “Hashtag activism,” “Gramivism,” or “Social Media warriors,” when posting or liking a photo is used as a substitute for action. Nature photography is supposed to tell a story, elicit an emotion, and, in some cases, encourage real action. “Slacktivism” doesn’t help and is sometimes counterproductive to genuine conservation efforts.

Occasionally, a story told by a photographer (even an experienced and well-meaning one) does not accurately portray the situation and can skew the understanding and actions of well-meaning activists. Consider the photos and video of an emaciated polar bear that went viral in 2018. As more people viewed and shared the imagery, the photographer lost control of the narrative and others used the emotional images to further their own agendas. Rather than documenting the starving animal that the photographer saw, others, without knowing why it was starving, made it into a symbol for climate change.

While inaccurate stories and images can be reported to social media platforms, that won’t stop the spread of misinformation or correct the inaccuracies already spread. A better approach might be to respectfully engage the posters, whether they’re a well-meaning amateur photographer or a social media influencer. Many social media photographers take amazing pictures and have the time and money to travel, so it would be beneficial for all to harness that power for good.

Experienced nature photographers and conservation researchers could also partner with social media influencers to educate the public on the importance of ethical photography, personal property rights, and responsible tagging. Maybe participating influencers could earn special access to research, labs, and protected property to obtain ethically sourced photos for their feeds.

By including a diverse selection of online influencers, the power of social media can be used to educate the public about ethical photography, help raise awareness about conservation issues, and help provide low-cost photos to under-budgeted research projects, all the while supporting and maintaining a path for everyone to enjoy and thrive in nature.

Conclusion

Nature photography in all its forms has exploded on and offline. By using modern technology and/or non-traditional image-capturing devices, nature photographers have helped protect natural habitats, brought the love of nature photography to more marginalized groups, increased career opportunities for outdoor photographers, and made researchers become better storytellers.

Maybe a camera trap, a drone, or an action camera is already helping you document and learn about a place or species. Maybe you’re finding new uses for these small, flexible and interesting tools that further your vision and goals.

Maybe these unusual perspectives in your work are already inspiring someone else. After all, you never know when the next Ansel Adams, Melissa Groo, Galen Rowell, or Christina Mittermeier might be looking at your photos and dreaming about following in your footsteps. The proliferation of new types of cameras and devices make it easier than ever for someone to document their world, tell their stories, and share their vision.

Special thanks to Nicole Solomon, Regina Mick Maloney, and Pedro Figueroa for their editing assistance and constructive input.
First Runner-Up

Startled California Sea Lion
© Alex Rose
Los Islotes, Baja California Sur, Mexico

I enjoy creating animal portraits that exist within a whole ecosystem context. Unlike land photography where we have the luxury of spending hours patiently waiting with our telephoto lenses to capture tight shots of animals hundreds of feet away, photographing mammals underwater is a different beast. It’s close up, it’s unpredictable, it’s fast paced, and you’re shooting in what amounts to a hostile human environment that requires a life-support system just to keep breathing. While challenging, these conditions also make it endlessly exciting and rewarding. The California sea lion colony of Los Islotes in the Sea of Cortez is an intensely fun place to make photos, and I was ecstatic to capture this moment in the life of one of the most charismatic marine mammals on our blue planet.

My home base is in Woodridge, Illinois, a quiet area in the western suburbs of Chicago, but I’m gone about half the year for work. I’m the science editor of Ocean Geographic Magazine, a quarterly ocean-conservation publication headquartered in Sydney, Australia, where I serve as an underwater photographer and environmental journalist. I’ve been shooting professionally for about five years, and I always say that I’ll go anywhere there’s water! That being said, Raja Ampat, Indonesia, and the high Arctic are probably my two favorite places on Earth. So far.

Best in Show

You’re All Grounded!
© Lea Lee-Inoue
Apache Junction, Arizona

This image of an emerging round-tailed ground squirrel mom and her babies was taken on Mother’s Day. She exemplifies a great mom, ever watchful to the needs of her babies and alerting them to dangers. I have seen her run around nursing them and, at other times, warning them of a snake, “whistling” loudly and furiously stomping her hind legs. Seeing her face a snake is pretty incredible. She’s a tough lady. Yet she often has a smile on her face. Really!

Arizona is my home base and I live at the base of the Superstition Mountains. The wildlife here is surprisingly abundant—not yet completely disturbed by urban life. I like to observe and photograph the local area when I’m not traveling.

Photo Credit: Michael AW

Photo Credit: J.W. Carothers
Judges’ Choice

“Photographing a mountain lion is challenging enough but capturing it mid-leap with the hind feet in the air and the snow flying is very dramatic and unusual. The position of the eyes adds to the story.”
—Ellen Anon

“Being at the right spot at that moment with this subject is quite difficult. It’s a terrific action image with good composition of an animal we seldom see in the wild.”
—George Lepp

Wild Mountain Lion Leaps down a Cliff Chasing Magpies off Her Kill
© Savannah Rose Wildlife
Jackson Hole, Wyoming

“The composition, lighting and processing of this image are truly outstanding. There are absolutely no distractions. Everything that is there serves a purpose. The result is an engaging, memorable image that grabs one’s attention.”
—Ellen Anon

“This is about lighting and composition. The single piercing eye and light on the face make the image and separate it from the busy jungle background. Be careful so that the darkening of areas doesn’t look too Photoshopped.”
—George Lepp

“Anyone lucky enough to spend time in the company of mountain gorillas will find the experience deeply moving. The intelligence in their eyes, and the familiarity of their gestures, make our kinship with them obvious. This wonderful, minimalist image suggests that connection with nothing more than a warm, patient eye in a field of black. Beautifully seen.”
—Kevin Schafer

Silverback Mountain Gorilla Portrait
© Hector D. Astorga
Bwindi National Park, Uganda

Mammals • 85
A Whale of a Meal
© Jennifer Smith
Katmai National Park, Alaska

Mother Cheetah Protecting Cubs while Drinking
© Kevin Dooley
Namibia

Surprise!
© Svetlana VanKempen
East Bethel, Minnesota

Spotted Hyena Cub Nursing
© Michael Milicia
Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya

Pika Leap
© Alice Cahill
Sierra Nevada Mountains, California

Curious Ermine
© Fi Rust
Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado
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Leap of Faith
© Vicki Jauron
Mara River, Maasai Mara, Kenya

Sea Lion Ballet
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An Illusion of Endangered Grevy’s Zebra
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Bobcat Playing with Prey
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Bull Elk in a Beam of Light
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Sunset Silhouettes
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A Leopard Stalks a Young Zebra
© Kevin Dooley
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Female Cheetah Surveying the Landscape from an Acacia Tree
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Impala Herd on the Run from a Leopard
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Drama in the Crater: Wildebeest, Newborn Calf and Golden Jackal
© James Ramakka
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Two Young Kudu Bulls at Sunset
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Jaguar Under the Roots
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Brown Bear Walking Along the Coastline
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Southwestern Alaska

A Chase at Sunset: Polar Bear Cubs Play
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Perfect Daybreak Conditions for This Juvenile Red Fox
© Ron Day
Cherokee County, Oklahoma

Young Female Bengal Tiger on the Prowl
© Christopher Ciccone
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Mammals • 93
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Mother Cheetah and Cubs Warming Themselves Atop a Termite Mound © James Heupel Serengeti, Tanzania

Alaska Coastal Brown Bear Nursing Spring Cub © Peter Hartlove Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska

Japanese Macaque: Mother: Infant Interaction © Ann Gillis Jigokudani Monkey Park, Yamanouchi, Japan

Black Bear Mother is Playing with Her Yearling Cub © Gero Heine Photography LLC Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

Baboon Family Huddles Together © Donna Eaton Lake Nakuru, Kenya

Yellow-Bellied Marmot, Wood River Wetlands © Peter Hartlove Chiloquin, Oregon

Lamb Sails over a Huge Jack Fence in Pursuit of Mom and the Bighorn Sheep Herd © Patricia Bauchman Paradise Valley, Montana

Humpback Whale Breaching © Dee Langevin Frederick Sound, Alaska

Long-Tailed Weasel Coming Right at Ya! © Sarah Killingsworth Photography Sonoma County, California

Red Fox Hunting for Voles and Mice © Melissa Anne Usrey Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

Top 250
Top 250

American Mink Mom Brings a Fish to Her Young
© Jane Scott Norris
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Young Leopard Captures a Monitor Lizard
© Patrick Pevey
Chobe River, Chobe National Park, Botswana

Coyote Intimidating a Field Rat before Devouring It
© Tim Timmis
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Red Fox Vixen Bringing Home Dinner
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San Luis Obispo, California

Subadult Brown Bear Catches a Salmon
© James Picardi
Brooks Falls, Katmai National Park, Alaska

Female Gorilla Screams at Approaching Male
© Kathleen Reeder
Rwanda

American Red Squirrel Getting a Drink in a Beaver Pond
© George Sanker
Acadia National Park, Maine

Killer Whale Bull and Cow Feeding on Herring
© David Rein
Waters off Vestmannaeyjar Islands, Iceland

Leopard Cub Looking up at His Mom up in a Tree
© Anita Ross
Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya

A Bobcat Kitten Captured by Camera Trap
© Luciane Coletti
Carmel Valley, California

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Scapes

Top 250

Southern Elephant Seal Pups Huddle against the Bulk of Their Mothers
© Vicki Santello
Salisbury Plains, South Georgia

Grizzly 399 with Four Cubs in a Snow Storm
© Tom Ingram
Pilgrim Creek, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

Bobcat Hunting along the Madison River
© Carol Grenier
Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

Humpback Whales Bubble Net Feeding in Icy Strait
© Frank Zurey
Hoonah, Alaska

A Grizzly Sow Traveling through the Snow
© Savannah Burgess
Bridger Teton National Forest, Jackson, Wyoming
Kiss on the Horizon

© Scott Reither
Maui, Hawaii

There is power in photography that is easy to see but hard to develop. I never wanted to just create pretty photos. I wanted to move people with my images. It took me many years to find the keys to evocative imagery. Peace, beauty, depth, and mood is what I seek—both in life and in my photographs. This photo contains all of these elements!

If photography has taught me one thing, it is to seize the moment. When all of the elements converged here, I was simply inspired. This photograph reminds me to pay attention—to look out for those fleeting moments when the world gives you unexpected visions.

I am a full-time, professional, fine art landscape photographer based in Maui, Hawaii.

Bio-Luminescence along the Southern California Coast

© Ian S. Frazier
La Jolla, California

I think it’s safe to say that 2020 has been a rough year for everyone, and one that made many look inward to what and who are important to us. For me, it was family and my love of nature. There is comfort knowing I can pick up a camera and escape into its beauty. This photograph of San Diego’s bioluminescent bloom was from one of my first outings after the initial panic of lock down. I had seen algae blooms before, but the intense blue glow of the crashing water felt as if I had stepped into a dream. Although microscopic, the sheer numbers of phytoplankton created an ephemeral dance of light along the darkened coast. Standing in frigid water I felt a buzz of excitement. Nature had found a new way to surprise me. In that moment, with my eye to the camera, the stress of the world disappeared.

Growing up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, I often dreamed of the soaring mountains and rugged coastlines of California. Some twenty years ago I picked up my first camera (an old Canon AE-1) and that urge to go west grew. I was pulled to California’s beauty, and finally ended up in San Diego where I do nature and portrait photography part time. San Diego offers some great opportunities for local photography, especially along its varied coastline. I also enjoy the bizarre Salton Sea, the spectacular mountains and waterfalls of the Eastern Sierras, the untamed beauty of Big Sur, and the iconic views at Yosemite.
“At first glance, this looks like some sort of unusually formed aurora, captured with a bit of beautiful reflection and a hint of light, suggesting human presence in a position in the image that perfectly balances the ribbon of gas. Learning that this is not an unusually formed aurora but a different phenomenon altogether, combined with the beautiful composition, makes this image outstanding!”

—Ellen Anon

“I really didn’t understand this phenomenon, but it was beautiful and well done. The green light pollution and foreground details added to the composition. Again, its uniqueness helped it to be chosen.”

—George Lepp

“I learn something new almost every time I judge a photo competition. As photographers, we are sometimes witness to remarkable events in nature, whether it is a revealing moment of animal behavior or, as in this case, a rarely seen and fleeting pillar of light. This image sparked a lively discussion among the judges, and a flurry of Googling, to explain what we were seeing. It is a rather simple photograph, but it superbly captures a phenomenon few of us will ever be fortunate enough to see.”

—Kevin Schafer

Strong Thermal Emission Velocity Enhancements
© Naona Wallin
Ketchikan Alaska

“Chasing the Dragon
© Scott Wilson
Barrika, Basque Country, Spain

“You often hear people comment about leading lines but rarely see an image with such striking leading lines curving gracefully toward a center of interest. This composition is outstanding, as is the exposure, which helped create the sense of motion”

—Ellen Anon

“I really liked the composition of this landscape, from the detail in the foreground to how it takes me into the distance with the light on the horizon. Also, the cold blues in the water and rocks give it mood. The “S” curves are classic, and it reminds me of some places on the California coast that I have photographed while surprising me that it was in Spain. Learned something again. Probably one of my favorite landscape images in the competition.”

—George Lepp

“In this bold composition, the layers of rock – in ravishing blue tones – lead the eyes toward a warm splash of color at the horizon. The long exposure, meanwhile, enhances this sense of motion and adds a wonderful sense of mystery. Bravo! (I will also admit that I loved seeing a corner of the world that I never knew existed before.)”

—Kevin Schafer

Chasing the Dragon
© Scott Wilson
Barrika, Basque Country, Spain

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—Kevin Schafer
**Shades of Spring**  
© Russ Bishop  
Merced River, Yosemite National Park, California

**Cloud Surge**  
© Tim Bryan  
White Sands National Park, Alamogordo, New Mexico

**Light Painting at Arch Rock**  
© Ian S. Frazier  
Joshua Tree National Park, California

**Frozen Reflection of El Capitan**  
© Michael Shane  
Yosemite National Park, California

**White Dome Geyser Erupts With Aurora and Milky Way**  
© Don Grall  
Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming

**Solar Eclipse**  
© Mark Hayward  
Red Fish Lake, Idaho

**Hidden Lake Overview Alternative View**  
© Christopher de Souza  
Glacier National Park, Montana
Top 100

Wetland Reeds
© Irene Reti
San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, California

Elowah Falls
© Don Larkin
Columbia Gorge, Oregon

The Aurora Borealis over a Glacier
© Peter Nestler
Juneau, Alaska

Reflections in Small Pools on Beach
© Ian S. Frazier
Three Sisters, New Zealand

Passing Cars Light Paint Boulders
© Ian S. Frazier
Joshua Tree National Park, California

Peak Fall Colors along the SeongJae-Gil Trail
© Geoffrey Schmid
Odaesan National Park, South Korea

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Top 250

Protecting 108 Acres through My Photography
© Kathryn Cubert
Hocking Hills Eastern Reserve, Ohio

Valley View Panorama
© Alice Cahill
Yosemite National Park, California

Summer Stream below the Blue Ridge Parkway
© Mark Hoyle
North Carolina

Sturm und Drang of King Tide Waves
© William Sutton
Cape Disappointment State Park, Washington

Clouds Reflecting on Lake Surface as Seen from a Kayak
© Debbie Tubridy
Vega State Park, Collbran, Colorado

Blue Ridge Parkway Sunset after Storm
© Susanna Euston
Glassmine Falls Turnout, North Carolina

Sunrise with Saharan Dust in the Air, Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge
© Tim Timmis
Brazoria County, Texas

Foggy Morning Sunrise at Lake Mulwala
© Garry Everett
Yarrawonga, Victoria, Australia

Backlit Sonoran Desert Majesty
© Geoffrey Schmid
Tucson Mountain Park, Arizona

Sunrise through the Old Tree
© Barbara Houston
Malvern Hill, Richmond, Virginia

108 • NANPA Expressions

Scapes • 109
Wildflowers Cover Hillsides during 2017 Super Bloom
© Rob Badger
Carizzo Plain National Monument, California

A Meteorological Phenomenon Called Virga
© Charlotte Caldwell
Clyde Park, Montana

Valley Oak Tree Silhouetted against Spring Leaves
© Judy Kramer
Rancho Canada del Oro, Santa Clara County, California

Olympic Sunrise
© Don Larkin
Olympic National Park, Washington

Morning Run on the Beach in the Fog
© Curt Tipton
Monterey, California

A 45 Image, Multi-Row Panorama of the Alaskan Coastal Mountain Range
© Peter Nestler
Juneau, Alaska

Celestial Dance above a Silent Tower in the Desert
© Peter Nestler
Utah

Long Exposure Lightning Shot
© Steven Long
Clermont, Florida

Bull Moose Stare Down
© Deena Sveinsson
Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

Night Sky Just after Sunset
© Irene Reti
Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona

Wildflowers Cover Hillsides during 2017 Super Bloom
© Rob Badger
Carizzo Plain National Monument, California

A Meteorological Phenomenon Called Virga
© Charlotte Caldwell
Clyde Park, Montana

Valley Oak Tree Silhouetted against Spring Leaves
© Judy Kramer
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Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

Night Sky Just after Sunset
© Irene Reti
Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona
Top 250

Rojo: A Dramatic Flowerscape of English Poppies
© Scott Wilson
Nottingham, England

Thor’s Well Beneath a Dramatic Red Sunset
© Scott Wilson
Yachats, Oregon

Islands in the Stream: Sunset over the Channel Islands
© Russ Bishop
Ventura State Beach, Ventura, California

Solar Eclipse on August 21, 2017
© Mark Hayward
Red Fish Lake, Idaho

Early Morning Fog Surrounding Cypress Trees
© David Hammond
Horseshoe Lake, Alexander County, Illinois

Wispy Bridalveil Fall
© Michael Shane
Yosemite National Park, California

Clearing Storm on Combers Beach
© Robert Nowak
Pacific Rim National Park, Canada

Ancient Camel Thorn “Ghost Trees” and Fog
© Wendy Kaveney
Dead Vlei, Namibia

Islands in the Stream: Sunset over the Channel Islands
© Russ Bishop
Ventura State Beach, Ventura, California

Solar Eclipse on August 21, 2017
© Mark Hayward
Red Fish Lake, Idaho

Rojo: A Dramatic Flowerscape of English Poppies
© Scott Wilson
Nottingham, England
Congratulations to Non-Traditional Capture Images in the Top 250

NANPA recognizes that today’s image capture extends beyond traditional film and digital cameras. Digital tools developed since 2000 have expanded the nature photographer’s ability to interpret the world around us. Previous Showcase Top 250 images have included unique images created with these devices that may not have been possible otherwise. This year, we’re highlighting images among the Top 250 that were created with 21st century technology.

Palm Trees Morphed into a Nature Mandala
© Melissa Fraser
Moloka‘i, Hawai‘i
SMARTPHONE

Clouds Reflecting on Lake Surface as Seen from a Kayak
© Debbie Tubridy
Vega State Park, Collbran, Colorado
SMARTPHONE

威胁西部雪原拉鲁特在她的蛋
© Joshua Asel
Monterey, California
REMOTE ACTIVATED/TRAIL CAMERA

Cactus Close-Up, Sherman Gardens
© Charles Needle
Corona del Mar, California
SMARTPHONE

Tulip Photo Layered with Image from a Swimming Pool
© Melissa Fraser
Rhode Island
SMARTPHONE

Pre-Dawn Light Highlights Artistic Ice
© Karen Vail
Steamboat Springs, Colorado
SMARTPHONE

Circularized Photograph With Cat’s Eye and Beaded Water on Glass
© Melissa Fraser
USA
SMARTPHONE

A Bobcat Kitten Captured by Camera Trap
© Luciane Coletti
Carmel Valley, California
REMOTE ACTIVATED/TRAIL CAMERA

REACHING OUT TO TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHERS & PHOTO TOUR COMPANIES TO CREATE PHOTO TOURS IN BHUTAN, INDIA, NEPAL & TIBET

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