make it work
The Business of Nature Photography
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Jack Graham’s 2015 blog post, “Making a Living as a Nature Photographer,” is consistently one of the most visited pages on NANPA’s website, nanpa.org—every month for several years.

Why? Because it’s the top entry on a page of search results when you ask Siri (or Google, or Bing, or Yahoo), “Can I make a living as a nature photographer?” It’s a question asked by tens of thousands of photographers—and their life partners, parents, and others.

The answer is a definitive yes, though it may not look as you imagine. And it certainly takes a lot of work—often physical, intellectual, and emotional work.

Five highly accomplished nature photographers explain more in this handbook, with the hard facts, tips, and inspiration to support you, should you choose to follow them into the mountains.
Making a Living as a Nature Photographer

by Jack Graham

I am often asked if it's possible to make a living as a nature photographer. No matter whether you attempt to do it as a full-time professional or a part-timer to supplement income from an existing job, there are many things to consider.

Nature photography is a tough way to make a living. But if you do it right, you can make it work.

Both full-time and part-time photographers need to remember and understand these concepts:

• You need to get really (and I mean really) good as a photographer. This takes many years of working hard. As the late, great Henri Cartier-Bresson famously observed, "Your first 10,000 photographs are your worst."

• Be prepared to spend as much or more time in your office as in the field.

• You must deal with rejection.

Full-time photographers can add these to the list:

• If no one buys your work or attends your workshops, you don't eat.

• You have to know your market and change when necessary.

• Develop business savvy.

• Be able to justify expenditures such as travel, equipment and extensive marketing (website, social etc.).

• Become known.

Part-Time Photographer

Being a part-time nature photographer can subsidize an existing income or make it possible to afford new gear, travel, etc. Any income from photography that comes along is often extra cash, over and above income from a regular job or other source.

In other words, if you make no money in your photography, your lifestyle will not significantly change. You can shoot when you like, quit when you like, and not worry who likes your work and who doesn't. The income of most part-time nature photographers comes from print sales or stock.

Full-Time Photographer

The only way to make any meaningful income in nature photography, however, is to do it full-time.

Being a full-time professional nature photographer sounds romantic. We travel to exotic places, spend hours outdoors in the wilderness, meet fascinating people and more.

Folks say I have a dream job. In many ways they are correct, but they don't understand that this job involves being in the office and on the computer or phone at least as much as I am in the field.

The reality is that making a living at nature photography is hard work, both physically and mentally.
As a full-time photographer, there are three ways to make a meaningful income.

**Print Sales**
Few nature photographers sell enough prints to make a meaningful income from print sales. However, those who sell enough prints between $300 and $1,000 can make somewhat of a living. You might have to adapt your style to suit a specific market as the iconic images don’t always work as art prints. More expressive and large-sized works sell better these days. Think outside the box.

**Stock**
Stock agencies are not paying what they used to. Microstock and subscription stock has changed everything. Today there are so many photographers selling their work for next to nothing that the overall business is very different than it was years ago. Can you make some income as a part-time stock photographer? Sure, but only a few can make enough income from stock to rely on it solely. The only reason to sell images to magazines is to get the exposure; most don’t pay anything near what your work may be worth.

The stock industry has changed with the advent of digital. A huge inventory of digital images has driven down the payment to photographers. Some microstock agencies operate on a quantity basis and are an inexpensive source of images for businesses of all kinds. A lower payment to the agency means the payout to the photographer is smaller as well. It’s a numbers game. One way to try making money in stock is to shoot large quantities of images. They should be of subjects that are in demand and different from the norm or subjects not often photographed.

**Workshop Leader**
To my mind, this is the only way to make a living in nature photography today, but it is not as easy as you might think. It takes many years to build a photography business. You have to be prepared to:

- Travel like crazy and be willing to be away from your home and family for weeks at a time.
- Shoot less and become a competent teacher and communicator.
- Develop some business savvy. When you determine your fees, be sure they will cover all your expenses and still show a profit.
- Learn how to market and promote yourself. Do you know how to make yourself marketable enough to get folks to want to take your workshops? You have to get your name out there.
- Know your client base and be able to relate to it. Can you deal with people and their idiosyncrasies and not let them affect you?

Know your competition. Can you compete with successful photographers who have been doing this for many years?

Eat, sleep and drink photography, and know your place in the market.

Being a full-time professional photographer isn’t easy, but it is rewarding. It takes time, knowledge and dedication.
How to get published

So…you’ve been an avid nature photographer for several years. Your shots always win compliments from family and friends and ribbons at local camera club competitions. Now you want to move up to the next level and start selling your work. How do you do this?

Getting Started

**Be realistic.** Don’t even think about quitting your day job—at least for a while. The romantic allure of traveling the globe—camera in hand—is very enticing. But unless you’re living off a trust fund, just hit the lottery, or have one-in-a-million shots of mutant pygmy crocodiles in Borneo, it’s not going to happen. You simply aren’t going to suddenly start making a living from nature photography.

**Consider the facts.** The competition in the world of nature photography is incredibly fierce. How can you compete with the likes of George Lepp, Art Wolfe, Frans Lanting, and other pros who travel the world with $100,000 worth of camera gear and a paid entourage? The answer: you’re not going to—at least not immediately.

So what do you do? While the following suggestions may not make you rich, they will help you gear up for the world of photo marketing. If all goes well each year, you’ll be able to pay for equipment upgrades, travel to some exotic locations, earn a little extra sending money, and move your career along to future self-sufficiency.

**Work your way up.** In many ways, the publishing world is a Catch-22. Editors like to see previous publication credits as verification of the quality of your work. But if you haven’t been published, how do you break in?

**Start small.** Chances are your first sales won’t be to *National Geographic*, *National Wildlife*, *Audubon*, or *Outdoor Photographer*. But think about all the publications right there in your hometown or local area.

Town and city newspapers, conservation and corporate newsletters, city, regional, or state magazines—most of these publications depend on freelance submissions. They are always interested in well-crafted photo essays targeted to their audiences. After you’ve got a few of these under your belt, then move up to the larger regional and national markets.

**Originality works.** Photo editors typically review thousands of digital files each month. How do you make your work stand out
from the rest? First you have to build what I call a “foot-in-the-door portfolio” of eye-catching shots. Then lead every submission with some of your showcase images. In addition to getting an editor’s attention, the photos might wind up in places like Outdoor Photographer’s “Showcase,” Outside Magazine’s “Exposure,” or—who knows—even on a National Wildlife cover.

Remember, the one thing Lepp, Wolfe, and Lanting don’t have is your individual creative eye. And the development of your creative vision doesn’t require trips to exotic locations or telephoto lenses that cost as much as compact cars. It just requires a willingness to break the mold and try a few things that will set your work apart. If you’re true to your own heart and personal vision, you will eventually be successful. How can someone else market what only you can see?

**Finding Ideas**

**Determine your marketing targets.** Whether you’re trying to publish a 1,000-word photo essay or a 400-page book, you first need to decide who is most likely to be interested in your ideas. This means undertaking a comprehensive review of the magazine or book publishers who specialize in your preferred subject matter. I’ve found this is best accomplished by buying the most recent annual editions of both Photographer’s Market and Writer’s Market. If you’re an aspiring author or photographer, these two publications are literally worth their weight in gold. They provide you with the latest and most up-to-date information on each publisher’s contacts, preferred subject matter, what they are currently seeking, and how to format your submission. Both of these books are published by Writer’s Digest Books in Blue Ash, Ohio and can be ordered online directly from Amazon.

**Photo essays sell.** A picture may be worth a thousand words but words certainly help if you’re trying to sell the picture. Editors love photographers who provide the complete package. It makes their jobs a whole lot easier. Learn to write crisply and engagingly. Draw the reader in with fact-filled text presented in a rapidly flowing, readable style.

**Travel.** Nothing spurs the creative process like travel. Anytime you go anywhere, think about unusual angles and perspectives that would make a good photo essay. Spectacular scenery, colorful characters, rare wildlife, local lore—anything is potential photo essay material if it’s presented with the right twist. If you capture the essence of your trip in well-crafted photos and words, you’ll definitely have some sales when you return home.

This approach worked well for me during my early photographic years living in Colorado. Every time I returned from a weekend trip, I fired off several ideas to local magazines. In less than a year, I was a contributing editor to both the Sunday Denver Post and Colorado Homes and Lifestyles Magazines.

**Making Submissions**

**To query or not to query.** The professional approach is to pitch your ideas to editors in brief—one page is best—“query letters.” A query letter outlines your idea, tells why it would be of special interest to the publication’s readers, and describes your credentials for preparing the piece. But when you’re first starting out, it’s difficult to get editors to bite on query letters. Since they are “buying into” a piece when they give you the go-ahead, they like to know what they’re getting. If you haven’t published anything, it’s difficult to give them this comfort level—the old Catch 22 strikes again!

So here’s a twist. I recommend to bypass the Catch 22 when you first start out. If you think you have
a truly marketable photo essay, go ahead and bite the bullet. Prepare the complete text and accompanying photos—and then try to sell the whole package (instead of just writing query letters). In fact, pull together several solid photo-with-text packages and start sending them to your list of target publications (as developed from Photographer’s Market and Writer’s Market). This way editors get to see exactly what they’re buying—with no guesswork on either side.

Once you’ve sold a few pieces, especially to the same publication, then you have your foot in the door. Now you can start working on a query letter basis—pitching ideas first and getting editors to bite before you invest the time in pulling the pieces together.

**Follow the publisher’s guidelines for submissions.** Before you submit anything to one of the publications you have targeted, ask for their submission guidelines. You must make sure that you follow their specifications to the letter. Such things as digital styles and file sizes for your sample photos are critical to know. Approximate numbers of words and document formats are also critical to follow. Finally, you need to know exactly how to submit your packages including email addresses of receiving editors (if provided). If your packages don’t follow specified submission protocols, chances are they may never even reach an editor’s desk.

**Don’t take it personally.** When a submission gets rejected—and believe me, many will—just immediately turn around and email it to the next publication or editor on your list. One thing the world of publishing will do is help you develop a very thick skin. If you don’t handle rejection well, you might want to think twice about even trying to get published.

But if you’re braced for rejection, the thrill of that first acceptance—which will inevitably come if you’re persistent—is well worth all the disappointment that preceded it.

Few things in life can compete with the satisfaction of seeing your own photos and words in print!
Do you look at photo books and think *I have pictures as good as these*?

You might be right, but how do you get your images from the computer into that book?

I’ve been on both sides of this question—from photographer and as photo editor—and I have the answer.

It’s all about submitting them. You won’t know if your images are good enough until you try submitting them, and you must be willing to put a little time into selecting and preparing your images for submission.

Professional photographers have a few advantages. They recognize their most competitive images and are willing to put effort into getting those photos in front of an editor. Pros also have an advantage because they know how to prepare effective submissions.

But here’s your advantage: I know what I’m looking for as a photo editor, and I’m going to give you five easy tips that help photographers get my attention. I know my editorial colleagues will agree.

**If you see a call for submissions and think you have material to fit the topic, request submission guidelines and study them thoroughly.**

For a recent Pacific Flyway book that I edited, the general need was migrating bird species, their behaviors, and locations from the Arctic to the tip of South America. I detailed further specifics in a want list that I made available upon request. I anticipated the need for more than 200 images from plenty of photographers.

Another photo-driven book I managed was *The Salish Sea: Jewel of the Pacific Northwest*, which won the Gold Nautilus award as a best seller. I received more than 6,000 images from this region and selected 233 from 55 photographers. Looking at *Salish Sea* will give you an understanding for the quality and originality I seek.

Look at other award-winning photo books—from the same publisher or photo editor you wish to submit to, if you can.

**Understand what I’m looking for. Study the photo request and only send images that fit the requirements.**

Be objective. How are your photos different? Sometimes our experience taking the photo makes it meaningful to us in a way an impersonal viewer will not see. Maybe you shared the day with a special person or found some particularly delicious wild blueberries. I won’t know nor do I need to know that. I only see the image.

I’m looking for original capture, relevant content, and technical quality. If I’ve seen a dozen versions of a sandpiper feeding in the mud, I’ll select the strongest...
should be email. If a call is warranted, the editor will say so.

Like many people who work with photos over time, I've developed an excellent image sense. I may forget where I put my car keys, but I can tell you whose image is on page 88 of *The Salish Sea*, where it was taken and the name of the photographer's cat. I remember the images I've seen and when I come across ones that grab me with a fresh look, I move them forward.

Put yourself in my shoes to understand what I'm looking for and prepare an ideal submission with complete metadata, refreshingly relevant subjects, and technically well-captured images.

A few final bonus tips:

**Show common subjects in a unique way.**

**Ask yourself:** What do my photos say?

**Don’t overprocess images. Don’t overcrop.**

Book publishing is very different from internet postings, including Facebook and Instagram. Images reproduced in books must be higher resolution and larger in overall size.

one. Maybe your image has golden lighting to set it apart or was taken at an unusual angle that brings out something special in the image. Keep these things in mind when deciding if your image is worth submitting.

You should feel great about the weakest image you submit. Don’t be tempted to include images outside the parameters of the photo request. Be selective. Don’t send multiple versions of a subject expecting the editor to choose from them. Choose the best version of each subject. I will ask for variations if I want to see more.

**Make your submission worth my time.**

I’d rather see 10 well-selected images than 100 that I have to pick through to find ones meeting my specifications. Quality is *always* preferable to quantity. You may have two stunning images of excellent technical quality that perfectly fit a requested subject. Don’t pad a submission with average images. Also, first impressions are important. I’m hooked if the first images I see from a photographer are engaging, technically excellent and original. Give me a reason to take more time studying your submission. We’re a team: you want me to select your images and I want to find them. Getting published is a process. Follow the guidelines meticulously.

**Tell me the story.**

Metadata is your friend and mine. Include all the pertinent information: keywords, names, locations, species, behaviors, titles and captions. If an image is compelling enough for a second look, I want to know more about it. When I look through a large number of submissions, it helps to search with keywords. Photo editors have their systems. Mine is to create a Lightroom catalog and create a collection for each photographer. If I want to look at feeding shots from a dozen photographers I’ll search for “feeding.” If I want rafts of grebes at the Salton Sea, I’ll search for that. You want me to see your images, so help me do it.

**Be smart when you submit.**

Deliver images using the requested method. Don’t expect an editor to go through time-consuming searches on your website. While that might be easier for you, it is unwelcome to me. Expect to take time preparing and sending a submission.

**Meet or exceed the deadline.**

Earlier is better, because the editor isn’t under as much pressure as she might be at crunch time. Most submissions arrive close to deadlines so stand out by being early. When contacting the photo editor with questions, use the stated method. The first approach
How I did it: A photo tour leader in Ireland

by Ron Rosenstock

Being a successful photo tour leader requires far more than being a very good photographer.

It requires knowing how to develop a following and market your tour. You must be familiar with the photo destinations, know the options on a daily basis. You must know how to relate to people with different expectations in a positive way. The successful leader is a problem solver and must be highly committed to each participant’s needs.

I believe I may have been the first photo teacher to bring a group of people overseas for the express purpose of photographing. After studying photography with Minor White in the 1960s, I was fortunate to get a job teaching photography at the Worcester Center for Crafts in Massachusetts in 1969. About that time, I met Paul Caponigro, who had recently returned from photographing ancient stones in the U.K. and Ireland. His images stirred something in me and changed the course of my life.

The following year I offered my students an opportunity to join me photographing in England. That excursion was the first of many international workshops to follow.

In 1971 I organized a workshop in Ireland. Enamored with the experience, my wife Cathy and I started a new business together called The Irish Photo Workshop. Fifteen years later I had the opportunity to join a much larger tour company, Voyagers International, which later became Strabo Tours.

In 1982 I purchased a seven-bedroom house in western Ireland for the workshop. Hillcrest House is a charming traditional house with access to country towns, rural and mountain landscapes, and the sea.

Initially Hillcrest was used only for my photographic groups, but around 1990 other photo tour leaders working for Strabo Tours began using the house and my support staff. This arrangement allowed me to lead photo tours to many other destinations.

Hillcrest House fit our needs—complete with a wet dark room—until recent years, when customers’ requirements and house maintenance necessitated a new strategy. Since 2018 Strabo Tours and I have been using a local four-star hotel with modern amenities and easy access to walking trails, great views, and small conference rooms.

Ireland continues to draw photographers from around the world. West Ireland is a center for visual artists and musicians, and is rich in historical landmarks. With its breathtaking land and seascapes, and ancient ruins, Ireland is a place of tremendous beauty and inspiration. It is also a modern and energetic place.

I’ve been privileged to be a photographer and international tour leader for over 50 years and continue to take enthusiastic travelers on photo trips. Periodically I teach trip leadership to small groups of photographers who have a similar ambition, inviting them to join me for a tour of the magical light of Ireland as well as dinner conversations about being a photo tour leader. They have opportunities to photograph and build tour leadership skills.

Most of my life has been spent image-making and helping others. Now, I give a big push to anyone who dreams of the same life.

The work is hard, but the rewards are many.
Diversify your revenue to thrive

by Jeff Parker

If you insist on pursuing this dream, let’s look at how it can be made reality.

You will need to be persistent in the face of rejection and failure. You will need to up your marketing game, diversify your revenue stream, and engage more on social media.

First, realize that technology has made managing a business easier than ever. Websites are relatively inexpensive to get and maintain. Software packages handle routine chores like accounting and invoicing. Email services manage marketing and mail lists. It’s a lot easier than pencil-and-paper days.

Next, honestly compare your work to really good photography. Just because your mom thinks you are the best doesn’t mean you should start leading workshops or opening a gallery. Enter contests such as the NANPA Showcase, Nature’s Best Photography, and the Wildlife Photographer of the Year. Placing in one of these contests certainly validates your work, and making it to the semi-finals is worthy of celebration.

Once your photography is at a professional level, start trying to get published. You probably can’t make a living solely off of editorial work, in part because rates for both photography and writing have been flat for 20 years, but it can be one of your revenue streams. Start small. Many states have a magazine published by the fish and game department or department of natural resources. These publications are a great way to get your foot in the door, and many publications rely heavily these days on freelancers. Being able to write and provide a package with both an article plus photos will increase your chances for success. Once published, you gain a certain credibility that can help smooth your path forward.

Now that you’re published or have some prize-winning images, you might want to try your hand at leading tours or workshops. This is definitely not for everyone but can be a viable way to make some money, especially if you gain energy being around others. You will need to be good with people and realize that your own photography must take a back seat when you are with clients. You will need to know how to teach, how to organize the logistics of a group trip, how to attend to...
the needs of your clients. You will need insurance and, for many locations, a license as a guide or a permit for your photography tour. There are significant up-front costs in time, effort, and dollars. And beware: there is a lot of competition in this arena! You will need to know and be able to articulate what makes your workshops different from a dozen others. The ultimate keys to your success in workshops will lie in your ability to market and promote yourself and to provide your clients with such a high-quality experience that they will want to come again and again.

Marketing and self-promotion mean you have to be on social media—a lot! Building a social media audience takes time, and you have to offer interesting, useful information in an entertaining way. A large and growing audience can attract both advertisers and customers for your prints, workshops, training videos, and other products. If you’re good on camera or behind a microphone, there is money to be made. But being visible also makes it easy to steal your work. Add metadata with your name, copyright, and contact information to every photo. Better yet, register with the U.S. Copyright Office any photos that you don’t want used without permission. Some photographers use services that constantly do reverse image searches across the internet, looking for unauthorized use of their photos.

Working with conservation organizations or applying for grants to fund your own projects can provide another income stream. There are a lot of conservation projects and nonprofits out there with vitally important work to be done, documented, and displayed. While they don’t often think of or plan for photography when budgeting, if you can show that images are valuable in telling their story and communicating with donors and supporters, they can be convinced to build you into their next budget. If you can also create videos, all the better.

Stock photography still exists, but it’s impossible to earn a living selling stock alone these days. One photographer that I know started selling stock in the late 1960s. He still sells about the same number of images per year, but his royalty checks are a tenth of what they were in the late 1990s. The market is flooded with images that too many photographers are willing to sell for a pittance, simply for the thrill of seeing their work published. It IS a thrill. I get it. But these practices, where photographers practically give away their work, have changed the landscape of stock, so consider it just one component of your business.

What about print sales, you ask? That’s all about volume. If you’re going to sell prints in a gallery or art show, you have to get prints made or print them yourself. There is also matting and framing and, for an art show, booth rental, display material, and travel expenses. You need to sell a certain volume of pieces just to break even. Depending on your location, subjects, and how good you are at making a sale, you could make some money at this.

In short, these days, a diverse array of revenue streams is key.

The same technology that lowered the cost of entry for nature photographers has presented new challenges, but I’m still optimistic about the future of nature photography.

Our society is visual. There is an ever-growing demand for good images, powerful images, images that tell compelling stories, move people, and drive them to take action.

There are significant issues in the natural world that must be understood and addressed—where the power of great images can’t be overstated.

And in an increasingly frenzied world, there is still a place for a moment of calm serenity, found in a beautiful moment in nature, captured by a camera, printed on paper, canvas or metal, and hung on a wall.
About the Authors

Jack Graham
Jack Graham is a professional photographer living in the Pacific Northwest. He has an extensive schedule of small group and one-on-one photography workshops throughout the United States and beyond.

Jack’s work has been published in many well-known magazines as well as for stock and fine art print sales and e-books.

He was named an “X” Photographer by the Fuji Corporation, and his images have been used extensively by Fuji for commercial and promotional purposes.

See more of his work at jackgrahamphoto.com.

Jeff Parker
Jeff Parker is the owner of Explore in Focus, offering photography tours and workshops for the naturally curious.

A wildlife and nature photographer, he was captivated by nature’s big screen long before he developed a passion for capturing it with the camera.

Jeff credits photography with bringing a deeper awareness to issues of conservation. He especially appreciates how the lens highlights nature’s needs throughout the Americas. His work has been featured in many magazines as well as the book Explore Texas.

Visit Jeff at exploreinfocus.com.

Ron Rosenstock
Ron Rosenstock is a professional photographer who has been creating images of the world and its people since the 1950s. He has had over 150 exhibits in museums and galleries worldwide, has published six books that feature his photographs, and has written articles for photography magazines in the U.S. and beyond.

Ron retired from Clark University after teaching photography there for 30 years. He has been leading photo tours and teaching photographic vision and photography as a spiritual practice since 1969.

Learn more about Ron at ronrosenstock.com.
About the Authors

Wendy Shattil

Wendy Shattil has been photographing wildlife for 30 years, driven by her desire to produce thoughtful images that can influence people to care for the world we live in.

She was the first woman awarded Grand Prize in the prestigious BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. She has produced 17 books and numerous magazine articles, and has led nature photography trips worldwide—many with her long-time partner, the late Bob Rozinski.

Learn more about Wendy at dancingpelican.com.

Budd Titlow

A professional wetland scientist and wildlife biologist, Budd Titlow is author of four books: Protecting the Planet, Bird Brains, Seashells and Rocky Mountain National Park. He has published more than 300 photo essays and 5,000 photographs, including works in BBC Wildlife Magazine, Outdoor Photographer, National Wildlife, Audubon, Outside, Nature’s Best, Travel Holiday, Time Life publications, Sierra, Popular Photography, and Petersen’s Photographic.

He lives in La Jolla, California and continues to teach photography and birding workshops. He uses Canon cameras.

See Budd’s website at buddtitlow.com.

More resources

Make It Work: The Business of Nature Photography is just one in a series of free handbooks available to you through NANPA. Check out others, including:

Conservation Photography
Written by conservation photographers for others interested in the field, this handbook explains important concepts and offers insider tips.
NANPA members share a passion for nature photography and a desire to shine light on what’s beautiful, threatened, and/or unique in the natural world. They believe in the power of storytelling to effect change.

Whether you’re a professional nature photographer, hobbyist, vendor, publisher, conservationist, or other nature photography enthusiast, you’ll find inspiration, resources, and opportunities at www.nanpa.org.