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PHOTOGRAPH BY SAPNA REDDY

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MARK DENNEY

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Canon EOS R1 Mirrorless Camera

Speed, precision, and reliability, the Canon EOS R1 is built for photojournalists, sports photographers, wildlife shooters, and other image-makers who can't afford to miss the shot. The flagship of the EOS R line, this mirrorless camera sports a full-frame 24MP BSI stacked sensor, DIGIC Accelerator processing, next-gen Dual Pixel Intelligent AF, and the robust design expected from a professional workhorse.

CAER1 | $6,799.00

Panasonic Lumix S1 II Mirrorless Camera
PADCS1M2 | $3,197.99

Nikon Z6 III Mirrorless Camera with 24-70mm f/4 S Lens
NIZ632470 | $3,096.95

Sony a7R V Mirrorless Digital Camera
SOA7R5 | $4,198.00

OM SYSTEM OM-5 Mark II Mirrorless Camera (Sand Beige)
OMOM5M2SB | $1,199.99

Leica Q3 Digital Camera
LEQ3 | $6,735.00

FUJIFILM X half Digital Camera (Charcoal Silver)
FUXHCS | $849.00

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Nikon 8x30 Monarch M7+ Binoculars (B&H Exclusive)
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Sigma 70-200mm f/2.8 DG DN OS Sports Lens (Sony E)
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Canon imagePROGRAF PRO-1100 Professional 17" Wireless Inkjet Photo Printer
CAIPP1100 | $1,403.99

Manfrotto ONE Hybrid Aluminum Tripod with 500X Fluid Head
MAMKONEA500X | $679.99

Pelican 1535AirTP Wheeled Carry-On Hard Case
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COVER SHOT

PHOTOGRAPHER
Sapna Reddy

LOCATION
Skogafoss Waterfall, Iceland

EQUIPMENT
Sony A7R IV, Sony FE 16-35mm f/2.8 GM at 27mm

EXPOSURE
10 sec., f/2.8, ISO 1000

SITUATION
During a workshop in Iceland, the aurora forecast looked promising. We were about three hours away from Skogafoss waterfall but decided to drive toward it in hopes of capturing the northern lights over this popular location. I anticipated that the full moon would provide nice light on the waterfall, but the moonbow was an unexpected bonus.

Standing in the middle of a freezing river in the depths of an Icelandic winter, witnessing this scene, all we could feel was pure exhilaration. To see the aurora dance over Skogafoss just as a rainbow formed in the moonlight was a true delight. This is a single shot.

– Sapna Reddy

Outdoor Photographer

outdoorphotographer.com

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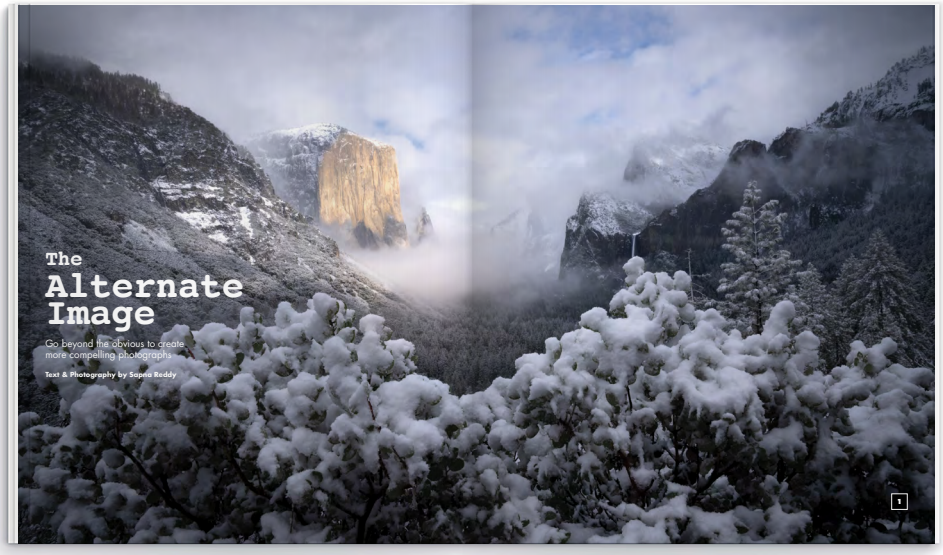

The issue of *Outdoor Photographer* you're holding is not just a labor of love – it's a testament to perseverance and a call to action.

As many of you know, *Outdoor Photographer* went through a difficult period a few years ago that nearly brought an end to this iconic and beloved publication. In fact, OP – as a print magazine – went on extended hiatus, which came close to becoming permanent. But thanks to new ownership, *Outdoor Photographer* is back, and I'm proud and excited to return as editor in chief.

We couldn't have made it back without our devoted readers – many of whom were just as upset (if not more so) about the magazine's unexpected pause as we were. We know it will take time to fully earn back your trust, but we think the first step is this issue you're reading now. Some things will feel familiar, while others will look refreshed – and, we hope, even better than before.

Here's what's new: OP is now a quarterly print magazine and website, with more pages, a refined design, and a thicker, higher-quality paper stock. What hasn't changed is our deep commitment to outstanding outdoor photography and storytelling.

You may also notice we've introduced a new tagline: **Explore. Capture. Inspire.** It embodies the spirit we hope to rekindle with our relaunch. We don't want the magazine to be a passive experience – we want it to motivate you to explore the outdoors, capture the natural world with your camera, and inspire others through your images.

That's our mission, and we're thrilled to have you on this journey – whether you're a longtime supporter or a first-time reader who believes in the power of outdoor photography.

Thanks for joining us.

–Dan Havlik, Editor in Chief

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THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

ANNUAL PHOTO CONTEST

Outdoor Photographer is back!
And we're kicking things off with a celebration of nature's splendor.

The American Landscape 2025 Photo Contest

This marks *Outdoor Photographer*'s first official photo contest since our exciting relaunch earlier this year — and we're making it one to remember. The American Landscape is our premier annual showcase honoring the breathtaking beauty of the wild places across the United States.

We're inviting photographers of all levels to submit their most stunning landscape images for a chance to earn national recognition, incredible prizes, and publication in an upcoming issue of *Outdoor Photographer*.

Show us your view. Share your vision. Be part of the new era of *Outdoor Photographer*.

Outdoor Photographer is committed to ethical practices in wildlife photography.
Please review our contest FAQ section and official rules online regarding restrictions on eligibility of certain types of images.

Submit your best photos now – final deadline to submit is September 22, 2025

PRIZES

1st PRIZE

$1,000 cash prize

- One (1) K&F CONCEPT Carbon Fiber Tripod
- One (1) Bay Photo 20×30 MetalPrint of your winning image
- One (1) Anthropics, Landscape Pro software
- One (1) One-year *Outdoor Photographer* VIP Membership
- Publication in the *Outdoor Photographer* Volume 2 2025
- Publication in the *Outdoor Photographer* online Winners' gallery

2nd PRIZE

$250 cash prize

- One (1) Bay Photo 20×30 MetalPrint of your winning image
- One (1) Anthropics, Landscape Pro software
- One (1) One-year *Outdoor Photographer* VIP Membership
- Publication in the *Outdoor Photographer* Volume 2 2025
- Publication in the *Outdoor Photographer* online Winners' gallery

3rd PRIZE

$250 cash prize

- One (1) Bay Photo 20×30 MetalPrint of your winning image
- One (1) Anthropics, Landscape Pro software
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Outdoor Photographer

Sony 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS Review

Huge reach at a reasonable price — with some tradeoffs

Text & Test Photos by David Schloss

Sony's 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS is an impressive lens, albeit with a handful of small drawbacks – many stemming from the compromises required to deliver such a long reach at a price of around $3300.

Externally, the lens is nearly identical to the Sony 200-600mm f/5.6-6.3 G OSS, aside from a longer barrel extension at the lens mount end. Internally, it features several upgrades over the older 200-600mm, allowing it to match that lens's speed while significantly extending the focal range.

The most notable limitation is the aperture range. At 800mm, the maximum aperture drops to f/8, which demands ample light – something that's not always available, especially in wildlife photography. The combination of in-lens image stabilization and in-body systems allows for slower shutter speeds, but fast shutter speeds are often critical when shooting fast-moving animals.

I tested the Sony 400-800mm G OSS in both wildlife and sports environments and

Opposite: Sony A9 III, Sony 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS at 402mm. Exposure: 1/500 sec., f/6.3, ISO 5000.

Above: The Sony 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS includes a full complement of barrel-mounted controls, including one rarely found on a telephoto zoom: full-time Dynamic Manual Focus (DMF). With DMF, the lens uses autofocus to acquire the subject, but turning the focus ring overrides AF for manual adjustments. The lens also includes standard controls for Optical SteadyShot and focus range limiting, along with three customizable focus hold buttons positioned around the barrel.

came away impressed. On previous photo safari trips, I carried the Sony 100-400mm GM along with 1.4x and 2.0x teleconverters, but from now on, this will be my go-to lens for wildlife travel.

My first test was at the Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge in New York. Though the bird activity was lighter than expected, a few harriers and red-tailed hawks circled above the grasses in search of a meal. As harriers hovered and dove near a distant stand of trees, several photographers nearby carried massive Sony 600mm f/4 GM OSS lenses. The 400-800mm looked modest by comparison – but offered reach that even those 600mm primes couldn't match.

Performance

While the 600mm primes offered advantages in autofocus and image quality, their owners didn't bother photographing birds on the far edge of the field. Thanks to the 400-800mm's 200mm reach advantage, I was able to capture photos as a harrier

Left: Sony A9 III, Sony 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS at 800mm. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/8, ISO 400.

Opposite: Sony A9 III, Sony 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS at 800mm. Exposure: 1/500 sec., f/8, ISO 2000.

twisted in the wind, searching for prey.

That said, my images from this shoot weren't exceptional. A light haze diminished image quality at extreme distances, and the main culprit was the expected tradeoffs of designing an "affordable" hyper-telephoto lens.

Handholding at 800mm even with Sony's excellent Optical SteadyShot image stabilization requires very fast shutter speeds — often 1/4000 sec. or faster — to avoid motion blur, especially when photographing birds in flight. Despite a clear, sunny day, many of my shots were noisy due to the high ISO settings required to compensate for the f/8 aperture, which lets in four times less light than a 600mm f/4 lens.

Still, I captured images that others missed. A slightly noisy bird photo is better than no photo at all.

A Captive Audience

Using a tripod with a head designed for wildlife photography would have allowed me to shoot at slower shutter speeds and lower ISOs, producing cleaner images. With a heavy prime super-telephoto lens, support gear is essential. But because the 400-800mm is relatively light, it invites handheld use — even when a little stabilization could improve results.

From the moment I unboxed the FE 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS, I knew it would be ideal for safari. I've taken photo safaris in Africa and Brazil, always with lenses maxing out at 600mm. Each time, I wished I had a longer option.

Animals on safari often approach vehicles closely, habituated to humans. In Botswana, for example, several curious hyenas came right up to our truck and did a playful dance — though the same animals later tore into a baby elephant with horrifying precision. (Pro tip: don't play with hyenas.)

But not all sightings are so close. On the same trip, two lionesses stalked antelope from hundreds of meters away. A male lion ruined their cover, and they made a dramatic sprint. With a 600mm lens, I captured the action, but the lionesses were small in the frame. An 800mm would have delivered much more detail.

To simulate those conditions, I brought the lens to Central Park Zoo on a sunny spring day. Tripods aren't used in safari vehicles, so I practiced handholding and bracing the lens on surfaces. Leaning the lens against a stone wall, I photographed snow monkeys grooming one another. At the sea lion tank, I stood back as if photographing distant wildlife. Indoors, the lens didn't fog up despite the humid tropical bird pavilion — proof of modern coating technology.

That's more like it.

Why This Lens?

For wildlife, sports, and aviation shooters, there's no such thing as a lens that's "too long." As an airshow photographer, I've stood in photo pits surrounded by hundreds of thousands of dollars in glass. Enthusiasts often rely on 100-400mm zooms; pros bring 600mm or 800mm primes.

That price and performance gap — often more than $10,000 wide — makes the 400-800mm G OSS uniquely compelling. Retailing for around $3300, this lens offers massive reach at a cost that's attainable for serious enthusiasts. It could also serve as a versatile backup for photographers who own longer primes.

At 800mm, you can frame a bird across a field or tightly capture a subject right in front of you. It's a magic focal length.

Optical Design

While Sony hasn't disclosed all internal details, the 400-800mm's design appears to build on the 200-600mm, with a longer rear section likely accommodating a built-in teleconverter. This cost-effective strategy helps keep the price down while extending performance.

The lens is compatible with Sony's 1.4x and 2.0x teleconverters. With the 1.4x, the

lens becomes a 560-1120mm f/9-f/11. With the 2.0x, it reaches 800-1600mm at f/13-f/16 — extreme, but potentially useful in bright conditions for photographing distant wildlife.

Image Quality

Today's lenses are generally excellent, and flaws are increasingly rare. Evaluations now focus more on how good a lens is rather than whether it's "good enough."

The Sony 400-800mm performs very well for its price. Given the strong performance of the 200-600mm, this lens's image quality is no surprise. Edge-to-edge sharpness is good, chromatic aberrations are minimal, and detail is crisp.

At high shutter speeds, noise can become a concern — especially when tracking fast subjects — but for slower wildlife, the results shine. And since Sony doesn't offer an 800mm GM lens, this is, by default, the best native 800mm option available.

Autofocus

Autofocus performance on the FE 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS is excellent. When paired with Sony's AI-driven autofocus systems, the lens tracks small subjects reliably — even across complex scenes.

Shooting at 60 fps and higher, I captured hundreds of sharp images of birds in motion. While autofocus precision ultimately depends on the camera body, this lens's internal motors are fast enough to keep up with Sony's high-performance systems.

Minimum focus distance varies across the zoom range. I missed a few shots at 800mm when the subject was too close for the AF system to lock on. That's typical of long zooms and a good reason to carry a second lens — like a 70-200mm — for closer subjects on safari or at sporting events.

Should You Buy It?

If you're a Sony shooter looking for the longest native focal length, this lens isn't just a good option — it's the only one. Sony has no 800mm prime in its lineup.

Other options include:

- Sony 600mm f/4 GM OSS + 1.4x or 2.0x teleconverter – Superior performance, but roughly $10,000 more.
- Sigma 60-600mm f/4.5-6.3 DG DN OS Sports – More affordable, but heavier.
- Sony 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 GM OSS + 2x teleconverter – Lacks the reach and has aperture limitations.
- Sony 200-600mm f/5.6-6.3 G OSS + 1.4x teleconverter – Excellent value and comparable reach.

Conclusion

The Sony 400-800mm f/6.3-8 G OSS is a remarkable tool for wildlife, sports, and aviation photographers seeking extreme reach without breaking the bank. While it has limitations — chiefly the narrow aperture at the long end — it delivers strong performance in a lightweight, versatile package.

This lens opens new creative possibilities for enthusiasts and pros alike. For many, it will be a gateway into ultra-telephoto photography. For others, it's the lightweight backup they've been waiting for.

Either way, it's a powerful addition to Sony's growing ecosystem — and one that fills a long-overdue gap in the lineup. **OP**

The 5 Best Cameras for Outdoor Photography

Our top picks for landscapes, wildlife, night skies and more

By Henry Anderson

When it comes to camera gear, outdoor photography demands versatility, durability and exceptional image quality. Whether you're shooting sweeping landscapes at sunrise, tracking fast-moving wildlife through the forest, capturing the Milky Way on a moonless night, or simply hiking with a lightweight setup, the camera you carry needs to match your specific needs and environment.

In 2025, there are plenty of options on the market, but not all cameras are created equal when it comes to excelling outdoors. Some are built to endure extreme conditions, some prioritize resolution and color science for detailed landscape work, and others are engineered for speed and low-light sensitivity.

We narrowed our list to five standout cameras, each offering the best balance of value and performance in its category. Not all are brand-new models – in fact, some have been out for a few years – which means you'll likely find them at more affordable prices.

Here are our top picks for the best outdoor photography cameras, broken down by specific use case:

- **Best Overall: Nikon Z8**
- **Best for Landscapes: Sony Alpha 7R V**
- **Best for Wildlife: Canon EOS R3**
- **Best for Astrophotography: Nikon Z6 II**
- **Best Value: Fujifilm X-S20**

BEST OVERALL

NIKON Z8

PROS

- Flagship-level performance in a compact body
- Excellent autofocus with subject recognition
- Beautiful, detailed 45.7MP images
- Strong build quality and ergonomics

CONS

- Battery life could be better
- Can be overwhelming for beginners

PRICE: $3,999

Nikon's Z8 hits a sweet spot for just about any outdoor photography scenario. Essentially a more compact and affordable version of the flagship Z9, the Z8 offers top-tier image quality, fast autofocus, rugged weather sealing, and excellent ergonomics.

At the core of the Z8 is a 45.7MP stacked CMOS sensor, which provides stunning detail and impressive dynamic range. The sensor is paired with Nikon's EXPEED 7 image processor, enabling 20 fps Raw or 30 fps JPEG shooting, and pre-release capture for action moments you almost missed.

The Z8's subject detection and tracking system is smart and reliable, locking onto birds, animals, people, and vehicles with ease. This makes it ideal not only for landscapes but also for wildlife and action photography.

The camera body feels solid and is designed for field use, featuring dual card slots, weather sealing, and a deep, comfortable grip. The tilting 4-axis touchscreen LCD is a nice bonus for composing shots from awkward angles. Video shooters will appreciate the 8K/60p and 4K/120p options with internal RAW capture.

BEST FOR LANDSCAPES

SONY ALPHA 7R V

PROS

- Extremely high resolution
- Outstanding dynamic range
- AI-enhanced autofocus
- Great for large prints and cropping

CONS

- Large files require fast storage and editing power
- Slower burst rate than sports-focused models

PRICE: $3,899

For landscape photographers who crave the finest detail and tonal depth, the Sony Alpha 7R V is hard to beat. It boasts an ultra-high-resolution 61MP full-frame sensor with class-leading dynamic range, making it perfect for capturing expansive scenes in crisp clarity.

The A7R V builds on its predecessor with a new AI-based autofocus system that enhances tracking accuracy for both humans and animals. While not tailored specifically for fast action, the AF is snappy enough for occasional wildlife shots.

The camera features a new 4-axis articulating LCD, helping you frame shots from high or low angles – a key advantage for creative landscape compositions. The 8-stop IBIS system allows for sharp handheld shots even in low light.

Color rendition is rich and accurate, with plenty of detail retained in highlights and shadows. For those who shoot both stills and video, the A7R V offers oversampled 4K video from the full 61MP sensor.

BEST FOR WILDLIFE

CANON EOS R3

PROS

- 30 fps burst with tracking
- Outstanding subject detection and AF tracking
- Comfortable handling for long shoots
- Extremely durable

CONS

- Expensive
- Lower resolution than some rivals

PRICE: $5,399

When it comes to photographing fast-moving wildlife, speed and autofocus are everything. The Canon EOS R3 delivers both in spades. Built around a 24.1MP stacked CMOS sensor and Canon's DIGIC X processor, the R3 offers blistering performance with a blackout-free 30 fps continuous shooting rate.

The R3's deep-learning autofocus system is especially adept at tracking animals and birds, even in complex environments. Eye Control AF – a unique feature – lets you select your focus point simply by looking at it in the viewfinder.

It's also built like a tank. The weather-sealed body is ready for harsh environments, and the large, ergonomic grip makes it comfortable to use with long telephoto lenses. While the resolution may not match some landscape-focused cameras, the 24MP sensor strikes a balance between file size and detail, and it performs exceptionally well in low light.

BEST FOR ASTROPHOTOGRAPHY

NIKON Z6 II

PROS

- Excellent high-ISO image quality
- Compact and travel-friendly
- Dual card slots and robust build
- Great lens options for astro

CONS

- No built-in astrophotography-specific features
- Autofocus not as advanced as newer models

PRICE: $1,599

Night sky photography demands excellent low-light performance, and the Nikon Z6 II delivers that with a 24.5MP full-frame sensor known for clean high-ISO output and strong dynamic range.

The Z6 II keeps noise levels impressively low even at ISO 6400 and beyond, making it a popular choice for Milky Way and star trail photography. It also features a wide native ISO range and dual EXPEED 6 processors for fast performance.

Its compact body makes it easy to travel with and paired with fast prime lenses like the NIKKOR Z 20mm f/1.8 S, it becomes a powerful astro combo. The camera also features in-camera interval shooting and a time-lapse mode, both valuable tools for night photographers.

While it lacks some of the AI autofocus features of newer models, the Z6 II's performance in low light is tried and tested.

BEST VALUE

FUJIFILM X-S20

PROS

- Great price-to-performance ratio
- Compact and lightweight
- IBIS and subject-detection AF
- Beautiful JPEG color output

CONS

- APS-C sensor limits depth of field control
- Smaller grip may not suit large lenses

PRICE: $1,299

For photographers who want capable outdoor performance without spending several thousand dollars, the Fujifilm X-S20 is a standout choice. It features a 26.1MP APS-C X-Trans sensor and shares many features with more expensive Fujifilm bodies.

Despite its compact size, the X-S20 includes in-body image stabilization (up to 7 stops), subject-detection autofocus, and excellent battery life thanks to the larger NP-W235 battery. It can shoot up to 20 fps with the electronic shutter, making it fast enough for action.

The color science is classic Fujifilm, and the Film Simulation modes offer unique looks straight out of camera. This makes the X-S20 great for travel, hiking, or spontaneous outdoor adventures where you don't want to haul heavy gear.

It also boasts strong video capabilities, including 6.2K video and external Raw recording. The interface is beginner-friendly, but deep enough for enthusiasts.

Final Thoughts

Choosing the best camera for outdoor photography in 2025 depends on your priorities. If you want a camera that does it all, the Nikon Z8 is a powerful and versatile option. For those focused on maximum detail and image quality for landscapes, the Sony Alpha 7R V leads the way. Wildlife photographers will benefit most from the Canon EOS R3's speed and autofocus. If you're chasing the stars, the Nikon Z6 II offers excellent low-light performance. And for those seeking great performance on a budget, the Fujifilm X-S20 delivers fantastic results in a small package.

Each of these cameras offers something special to outdoor photographers. Paired with the right lens, any one of them can be a great companion for your next adventure. **OP**

Lose the Legs

How ditching the tripod has never been easier for landscape photographers

Text & Photography by Josh Miller

In starting this column, I hope to bring readers along on some of my photographic adventures around the world and share a few insights into my creative process and the photographic lessons I've learned along the way. The column's title "Chasing Light" comes from my desire to move as fast and unencumbered as possible throughout the landscape while in search of the best photographic light.

I'll be sharing more of these ideas as the column takes shape in the coming issues. In that spirit, I'd like to start by sharing my experiences shooting landscapes without a tripod.

The Glory Days?

Thinking back to the glory days of black-and-white landscape photography and photographers hiding under black cloths with their huge view cameras, tripods have always been a mainstay of the genre. When I first started out, there was a joke that you could tell how serious – or "professional" – a photographer was by the size of their tripod. Bigger was better and bigger meant sharper photos at slower shutter speeds.

Fast forward to today's mirrorless camera bodies, and that's no longer the case. Years ago, I traded in my 6-pound carbon-fiber tripod and heavy ball head for a much lighter 4-pound tripod/head combo that was easier to pack and carry in the field. But these days, aside from sunrise and sunset photography or long exposures, I rarely even use that tripod. Not only has this lightened my pack, but it's made photography more fun and more dynamic. I can compose more quickly and move through the landscape less encumbered, helping me find more unique compositions.

The real eye-opener came several years ago while I was photographing brown bears in Alaska. After spending two weeks in a wildlife photography mindset – fast shutter speeds and action shooting – I was suddenly presented with a dramatic sunset landscape that exceeded the dynamic range of my camera sensor (time for an HDR), but it also included two bears wrestling.

I know I was a bit late to the party on this, but I realized that by keeping my ISO high, I could use a fast enough shutter speed to freeze the bears in all three bracketed frames. And if I employed the fastest frame rate of my newest mirrorless camera, there would be nearly no movement between frames – even though I was handholding the camera. At that moment, I entered the world of action HDR, and I began to reevaluate all my techniques and preconceived ideas about when a tripod was truly necessary.

Handholding

Fast forward a few more years, and with the amazing image stabilization and improved high ISO performance in today's cameras, I now routinely handhold landscape images I wouldn't have even attempted just a few years ago. I handhold multiple-frame panoramas (pro tip: use the in-viewfinder level to help keep your horizon lined up between frames), and I regularly handhold bracketed exposures for future HDR images (just make sure your slowest shutter speed is still fast enough to handhold).

Yes, there's a small loss of dynamic range and some increased noise when shooting at higher ISOs, but I find the trade-off worth it to lighten my pack. And don't forget – with today's AI-powered noise reduction tools, high ISOs are more usable than ever.

One Big Drawback

The biggest drawback, for me, of leaving the tripod at home isn't the loss of image quality – it's the loss of compositional refinement. While ditching the tripod lets you explore a scene more quickly, that often comes at the expense of a carefully refined composition. As Ansel Adams once said, "There

is nothing worse than a sharp photo of a fuzzy concept."

By their nature, tripods force a slow, methodical approach to composition. Handheld shooters often don't take the time to fully refine their framing before moving on to the next shot. While I don't think that's a dealbreaker, it's something to be aware of. As you explore your composition, take the time to recheck your frame: Is there balance? Are there lines that lead out of the image? Are there distracting elements like branches or blades of grass that don't belong?

As we often hear, there's never been a better time to be a photographer. We've come a long way from the days of tripod-mounted view cameras and black cloths over our heads. As our tools continue to evolve, the real challenge is evolving with them – and embracing the new creative possibilities they bring. By ditching our tripods and lightening our loads, we allow ourselves to explore the landscape more freely and fully. The only question is: Can our creativity keep up? **OP**

See more of Josh Miller's work at joshmillerphotography.com.

>>> *Nikon Z9, NIKKOR Z 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6 VR S at 100mm, handheld. Exposure: Three shots bracketed: 1/4000 sec., 1/1000 sec., 1/250 sec., f/5.6, ISO 3200.*

Staying True to Nature in the Age of AI

Where to draw the line between creativity and credibility in photography

Text & Photography by Kristi Odom

Recently, while judging the nature category of an international photo competition, I saw a lot of images that just didn't feel right. They were technically strong, but something was missing. It felt like nature had been edited out. The wildlife didn't seem to belong in the scene anymore. In a world growing more disconnected from the wild, how can we, as photographers, help people connect when even the animals don't look like they're part of the photo?

At a recent conference, someone asked my opinion on using blur in post to soften backgrounds. My answer was immediate. It scares me. Not because it's wrong, but because of what it can replace. Creating a strong image in camera takes time, patience, planning and, most importantly, connection with your subject.

Time Invested Matters

I have spent years photographing pikas in the Colorado Rockies. I return to the same rock piles across seasons throughout years. I know the individuals. I know who steals flowers from the one-eyed elder pika when he turns his back. I know when the first light touches their alpine homes. I know the angles that reduce distractions and highlight their character during their flower runs. I have watched their personalities emerge, seen their resilience in harsh terrain, and through that time, I fell in love with a tiny flower-carrying mammal. That time matters. It matters to my storytelling, my photography and also to me.

One of the reasons people use post-production blur is to mimic the effect of a wide-aperture lens. These lenses help separate the subject from the background in camera, creating a beautiful softness that helps isolate your subject from distracting backgrounds. But they're costly, and I completely understand that not everyone, especially early-career photographers, has access to them.

When someone is passionate about wildlife photography but can't yet invest in high-end gear, or when moving closer to an animal might disturb it, I understand why tools like background blur become tempting. And I'll never judge someone for using what's available, especially if it's used thoughtfully and transparently.

Now with AI, things can go further. I will admit, the first time I saw a bridal party running from a T. rex, I laughed out loud. It was creative and fun. That kind of playful AI has a place. The issue is when AI creates something that is mistaken for truth. When context is missing, it misleads. In nature photography, this is dangerous.

AI Does Have a Place

AI has a place and is becoming more and more integrated into our workflows, often without us even realizing it. Our cameras use it to recognize animals and track their movements. I am crazy excited with how easy it is to autofocus, even a tiny bee in flight.

AI allows me to take photos I never thought were possible. Noise reduction is better than ever. But I still ask: Where is the line? When does nature itself get replaced? When are we unintentionally widening the gap between people and wildlife?

I have worked in music, sports and wedding photography before focusing on wildlife. I spent years shooting weddings, where removing a zit from a bride's face or digitally zipping up the father of the bride's pants was just part of the job. When I started in wildlife, I brought some of those habits with me. When I shifted toward conservation photojournalism, my approach changed. Now, as a guide, I try to only make edits that reflect what was possible in a traditional darkroom with a single image. The only thing I remove is backscatter in underwater work, and I am transparent about it.

Tools of the Trade?

I ran both black-and-white and color darkrooms for years. I learned how to dodge and burn, enhance shadows, and even upscale a 35mm print by rephotographing it with a medium-format camera. Yes, I once used nose grease to soften a scratch. Today, AI tools can do this in seconds. The technology is incredible. But again, where is the line?

I once worked with a student on techniques to bring out detail in the sky using exposure and filters. She said, "Why does it matter when I can just replace the sky?" I hear that more and more, and it feels like a gut punch. It makes me wonder if the patience and skill behind the image still matter.

With less time outdoors, something is lost. I have lived in cities with very different skies, different color sunsets and vastly different cloud patterns, and I have seen edits that add skies that don't belong. It feels as jarring as a movie that uses the wrong bird call behind an eagle. These

things may seem small, but they break the illusion and weaken the bond we are trying to create with nature.

The Power of Honest Storytelling

As an associate fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers, I believe in the power of honest storytelling. Our job is not just to make beautiful images. It is to help people feel something real. It is to tell the stories of wildlife, encourage people to go outside and inspire them to care about this planet.

In a world increasingly shaped by AI, we need to protect trust in nature photography. Let's honor our subjects. Let's help people connect to what is real. When someone visits a place that looks nothing like the photo that inspired them, it breaks trust. It weakens the awe. And that scares me. Because when people stop believing in what they see, we lose photography's power to connect.

To anyone reading this, no matter where you are in your photography journey, support each other. We all come from different places, with different tools and experiences. Most of us use AI in some way, even without realizing it.

What matters most is honesty. Be transparent about your edits, even if your ethics change through the years. Respect the values of the organizations you work with. And most of all, stay true to your subjects. Stay true to nature. When we create with integrity, we do more than make beautiful images. We build trust. We build connections. And we help people fall in love with the wild. **OP**

Kristi Odom is a Nikon Ambassador. See more of her work at kristiodomfineart.com.

>>> *Nikon Z9, NIKKOR Z 800mm f/6.3 VR S. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/6.3, ISO 3200.*

Delicate Arch

Arches National Park, Moab, Utah

Text & Photography by Darren White

Location

Delicate Arch, located in the northeastern part of the park, is roughly a 1.6-mile hike up sandstone, with trail markers along the way. The first part of the trail, starting at Wolfe Ranch, consists of switchbacks on a well-maintained, wide path with a gentle to moderate incline.

About 0.8 miles into the hike, you'll reach the sandstone incline, often considered the most challenging section. So many people have hiked this trail that the slickrock sandstone is visibly worn from foot traffic.

Roughly 1.5 miles in, near the end of the hike, you'll come to a small window looking out over Delicate Arch. This opening is officially named Twisted Doughnut Arch. From there, it's only a short walk to the end to see Delicate Arch in full view.

Weather

Moab is generally quite dry. I've spent more than 10 summers in the area, and while the skies are usually clear, summer afternoon storms can be intense. From heavy rains that cause flash flooding to powerful electrical storms, it's important to stay weather-aware and plan your outings accordingly.

In winter, the air is cold and dry. Hiking in Arches can be a wonderful experience if you're bundled up, and with fewer visitors, the park is much less crowded. In the summertime, temperatures can soar well over 100 degrees during the day, and there is little to no shade on the trails. I remember one September afternoon leaving the Delicate Arch trailhead when it was still 96 degrees at 6 p.m.

Know your limits – sunscreen and water will be your two best friends on this hike.

Photo Experience

Having made this hike roughly 45 to 50 times over the past 13 years, I feel confident navigating the trail in both daylight and darkness. I recommend downloading the trail map to your phone using an app like AllTrails, so you can access it offline – even if you're hiking during the day.

I generally tell first-timers to bring only the camera gear they really need. In my experience, a camera and two lenses are enough: a 14-24mm and a 24-105mm should cover it.

On this particular evening, I had my Sigma 20mm f/1.4 Art lens with me, which I used for this shot. My favorite spot at Delicate Arch is right where this photo was taken. If you're planning to go down into the bowl, be sure to keep your camera bag on your left side. Keep all lens caps, memory cards, batteries – anything small – secure in your bag while shooting. I've seen everything from lens caps and lenses to water bottles and even tripods fall to the bottom of the bowl. At night, this becomes even more of a hazard.

Find your spot, get set up, and enjoy the view and the experience.

Best Times

Delicate Arch is stunning year-round. Depending on the kind of photo you're after, here are the best times to visit.

November – March: Cold and clear, with the potential for snow. If you can capture the red rocks with a fresh dusting of snow, the results can be spectacular.

April – June: A great shoulder season with slightly warmer weather and a higher chance of clouds. The Milky Way is visible

in the early morning hours after midnight.

July – September: Hot, with summer storms and clear skies. This is prime Milky Way viewing season. As of 2024, Moab is officially designated a Dark Sky Community, making it even better for astrophotography. The Milky Way is visible shortly after sunset.

October: Pleasant temperatures, typically ranging from 42 to 74 degrees. The Milky Way can still be seen low in the western sky after sunset, and the crowds tend to be smaller. **OP**

See more of Darren White's work at darrenwhitephotography.com.

Contact

Arches National Park
www.nps.gov/arch/index.htm

>>> *Nikon D810, Sigma 20mm f/1.4 DG HSM Art. Exposure: 15 sec., f/2, ISO 6400*

Kelp Wanted: Saving Underwater Forests

Justin Myers documents a delicate marine ecosystem in crisis

Photography by Justin Myers
Interview by Bill Sawalich

Since 2020, Portland photographer Justin Myers has worked with the Oregon Kelp Alliance (ORKA) to document the distressing disappearance of kelp forests along the coasts of Northern California and Southern Oregon. Normally focused on adventure photography for brands such as Adidas and Intel, Myers jumped at the chance to help when the team at ORKA reached out with the assignment.

A lifelong surfer and free diver, Myers cares deeply about the ocean. Warming waters have led to a catastrophic imbalance in the coastal ecosystem. With sunflower sea stars disappearing, the purple urchin population has exploded, consuming nearly every bit of bull kelp in sight. A once-diverse underwater ecosystem is now a barren desert, devoid of the fish, crabs and marine mammals that once called the area home.

OUTDOOR PHOTOGRAPHER: As a commercial photographer, is personal work a sort of counterbalance to advertising?

JUSTIN MEYERS: It's less because I'm selling someone else's widgets and more that I've had a lot of very kind people help me through life and I look at it as giving back. Paying it forward. I had a lot of opportunities in junior high and high school, a lot of people looking out for me, supporting me, encouraging me. Because of that I've always tried to give back and do what I can.

I left school as commercially minded as possible. Even with this, I was hired to take photos initially. Tom Calvanese, the director of ORKA, brought me onto this because he saw the value of cameras. I was there working on whatever budget they had, and I did as much as I possibly could. I'm here to work with your budget, just maximize what I can do. With something like Nike or Adidas I would charge usage, but with nonprofits I'm like, here, it's all yours. I do what I can to give back. It's also very much a personal project because I love the ocean. I'm still working with them right now, in fact. They've needed some communications and media help. You know, getting the word out.

OP: Is it as simple as raising awareness, hoping your pictures inform one more person about the issue?

JM: It is. You're also kind of hoping you raise the awareness of someone that has a lot of influence, whether it be monetarily or socially. Finding that person who can help can really make some change. It's like dropping one stone in a pond versus 10. The more stones you drop, the bigger waves you're going to create.

It's brought me to some weird places. I went to legislative days at the state capitol last year with the foundation to tell the story about kelp. And I've never worn a suit in my life. Or a tie. I had to go buy all that stuff. It was super uncomfortable, but you've got to do it.

OP: How much of the coastline is affected?

Lone bull kelp floating in Nellies Cove, Port Orford, OR. "While I found it beautiful, it was a stark reminder of what we've lost in the area," Myers says. "A place that used to be rich in kelp forests had been reduced to this." Exposure: 1/1600 sec., f/4, ISO 400.

JM: It's all over the world. The Kelp Forest Alliance (kelpforestalliance.com) is a great resource for more information, but I believe there's 20 different sites across the world this is happening to. The interesting thing is there are similar outcomes where the kelp forest dies off, similar scenarios where it's a predator imbalance, but the animals are different.

OP: If all goes well, what would you like to see in five years?

JM: Oregon kelp is making a lot of forward progress on mariculture and reestablishing kelp beds. So, I'm hoping in five years I can go back down to Nellies Cove and dive back in and on those rare clear Oregon days go photograph actual kelp forest. That's kind of been the kicker this whole time, finding a kelp forest to film or photograph is becoming harder and harder. So, I can't wait to make a return image – here's what this should look like.

OP: How is a personal project different from a commercial assignment?

JM: I do enjoy both. I love collaborating with a ton of people, but with this there's a raw unpredictability. And especially with free diving with a camera, you're like, well, I'm not quite sure what's going to happen today. It's not that expectations are lower, it's just that you have to work with what you have and be okay with that. It's a different mindset.

OP: Any advice for photographers considering their own passion project?

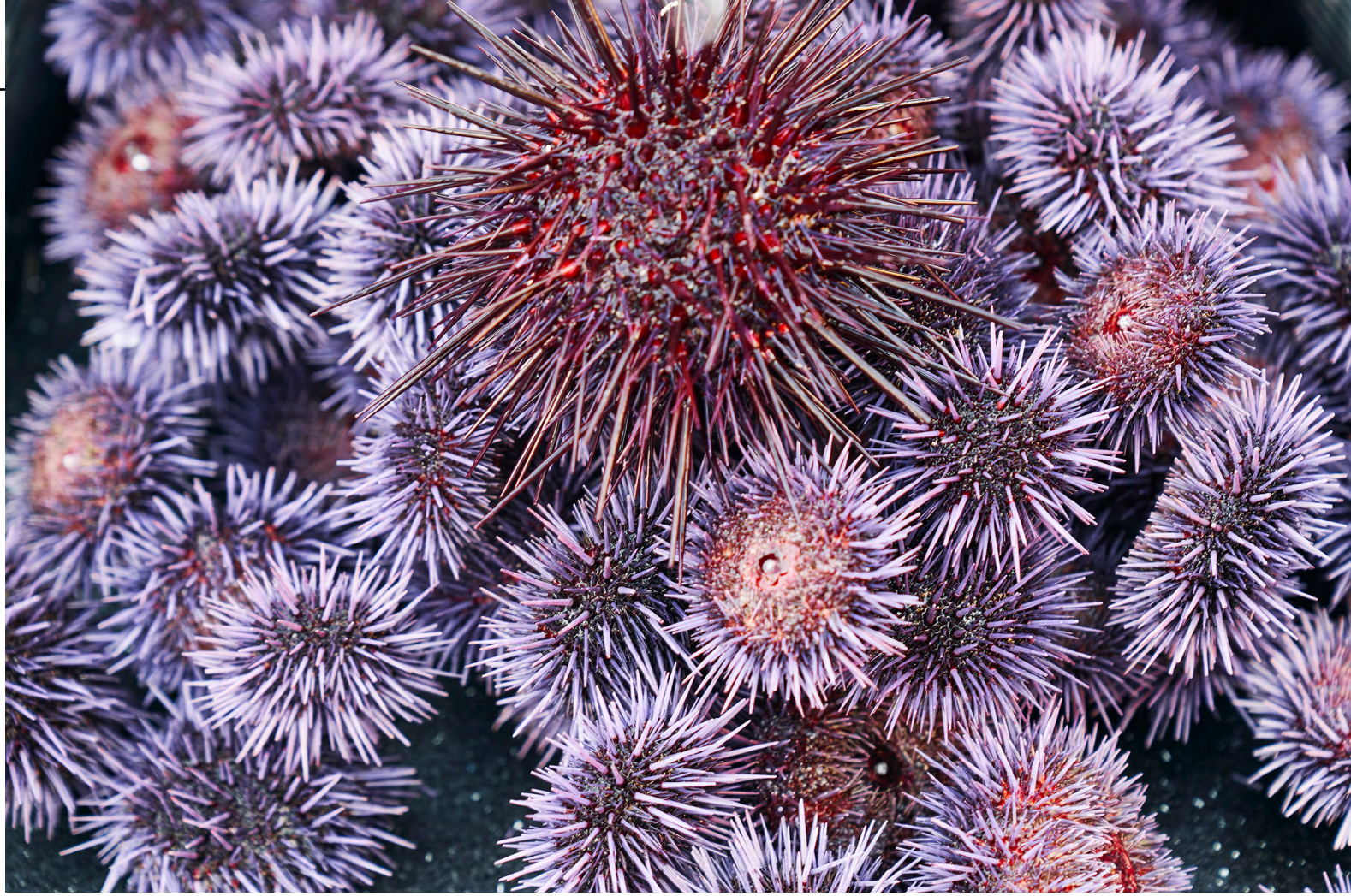
JM: If there's something that you want to document, there's likely an organization or a group of people you can find. Just start doing research and going to meetings and showing up. Or if it's the ocean, for example, there's SOLVE (solveoregon.org), you can go to beach cleanups and start photographing there. It all helps. Getting fresh content and feeding that social media machine, even that would help. If there's a Boys & Girls Club (bgca.org) or whatever it is you're passionate about, they need so much to keep up, to stay visually on top of things. **OP**

See more of Justin Myers work at myersphoto.com.

Above: Tom Calvanese, ORKA director, remains optimistic the problem can be solved. Exposure: 1/320 sec., f/5.6, ISO 3200.

Opposite top: The results of a 10-minute dive in Nellies Cove; purple urchins now blanket the area. Exposure: 1/800 sec., f/3.5, ISO 800.

Opposite bottom: Tom is holding a red urchin, the larger more profitable cousin of the purple urchin. For some reason the purple urchins have taken over vs. the red. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/4, ISO 1000.



The Alternate Image

Go beyond the obvious to create more compelling photographs

Text & Photography by Sapna Reddy

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One of the most rewarding aspects of landscape photography is finding magic in what others may dismiss as mundane or might overlook completely. Drawing the viewer's eye to an image that few envision creating involves deeper thinking, analysis, introspection and a unique perspective.

The ability of an artist to go beyond conventional thinking, establish deeper connections, recognize subtle nuances in light and discover patterns that are not readily apparent is important for progressing from emulation to innovation in the creative journey.

In an era where we are inundated with images generated by nearly everyone on a daily basis, being original and innovative is fundamental to creating photographs that stand apart. If we liken postcard-type shots to visual stories, then these "alternate images," as I like to call them, are visual poetry. They offer a deeper meaning that compels the viewer to immerse themselves in unraveling the story behind the photo while savoring the original approach. And for the artist, alternate images can be deeply satisfying as they are a true expression of self-discovery and unique individual creativity.

In my experience, such images often present themselves in different ways – and frequently, unexpectedly. Let me share a few examples to illustrate my point.

Respond to What Unfolds

During the learning phase, we often aspire to emulate those who inspire us. The image we hope to create is preconceived, and therefore the location, composition and image rendition are all influenced by that original image.

Letting go of preconceived images and instead reacting to whatever presents itself in the field opens the door to novel imagery.

The two approaches are not mutually exclusive and can be pursued concurrently. One can pursue a preconceived image and also create an alternate image – one never planned or envisioned – simply by observing and responding to what unfolds.

Image 1
Tunnel View at Yosemite is a favorite among landscape photographers for obvious reasons — especially the winter scene with snowcapped mountains, fresh snow in the valley and frost-covered foliage. Getting to Yosemite right after a winter storm, I had preconceived this image and was delighted by the frosty foliage in the foreground.

Image 2
As I was walking back to my car, I noticed a beautiful raven posing on a mound of freshly shoveled snow. It was fortuitous that the pile of snow and the bird aligned with the perfect backdrop to render this second image.

This shot was taken from a low angle that hid everything behind the snow — including the road. There is nothing wrong with chasing preconceived images. However, situational awareness and spontaneity can result in alternate images that are even better than what was originally planned.

Image 3
Another image from winter in Yosemite showcasing a conventional composition of an iconic location.

Image 4
This image is from the popular destination of Tumpak Sewu in central Java, Indonesia. Here, a C-shaped valley is inundated with hundreds of waterfalls. Going slightly beyond the obvious viewing points revealed a hidden waterfall with the perfect rainbow dancing over it.

Deliberately seeking out new areas of interest — even in heavily photographed locations — can result in compelling images. While the physical exertion many photographers undertake to capture an image is admirable, it's just as commendable to create a powerful photograph through quiet observation and mindfulness, particularly when working with a subject that has been extensively photographed.

Image 5
Having visited the desert dunes of Death Valley dozens of times, I would often hike off the beaten path in search of opportunities

to create something different from what I had shot before. As luck would have it, a severe sandstorm prevented me from going too far into the dunes on this particular day. I decided to stay in the parking lot and shoot using a long lens.

As the wind whipped up the sand around me, it reshaped the dunes and erased all footprints. When the sand cloud lifted, I could see the beautiful pattern of layers, and using the long lens, I was able to create images that to me represented the essence of the desert.

Image 6

While scouting this location, I was using my iPhone to evaluate potential compositions. For an unusual perspective, I decided to flip the image, creating the illusion of an ice cave – when in reality, what is at the top of the image is the frozen bank of the Merced River.

This image won the Shot on iPhone competition and went viral when shared by Apple on its platforms. I had never expected a phone shot while scouting would end up paying not only for that particular trip to Yosemite, but for a few others.

Offering a fresh perspective is what fueled interest in this image. Unique experiences and unusual terrain can result in unique images.

Image 7

This picture was taken in the extensive Son Doong cave system in central Vietnam. The subterranean landscape was in total darkness and required special lighting, except in those areas where the light entered through a doline.

Image 8

Letting our eyes wander and observe the nuances of light while staying still helps us to be more mindful, focused and deliberate in image creation.

I am a strong believer that the image we create is as much a reflection of what is before us as what is inside us. This is why photographers at the same location generate images that are different from one another. Our mood and personality have a strong influence on the images we create.

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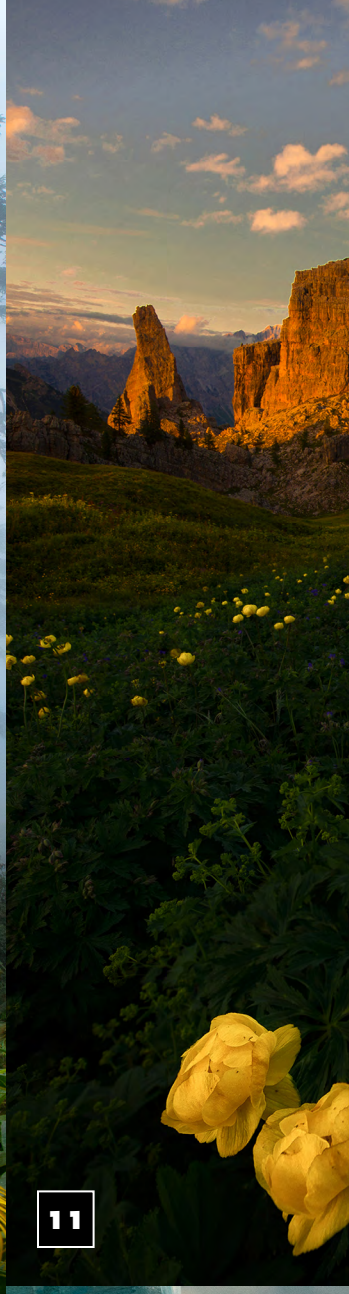

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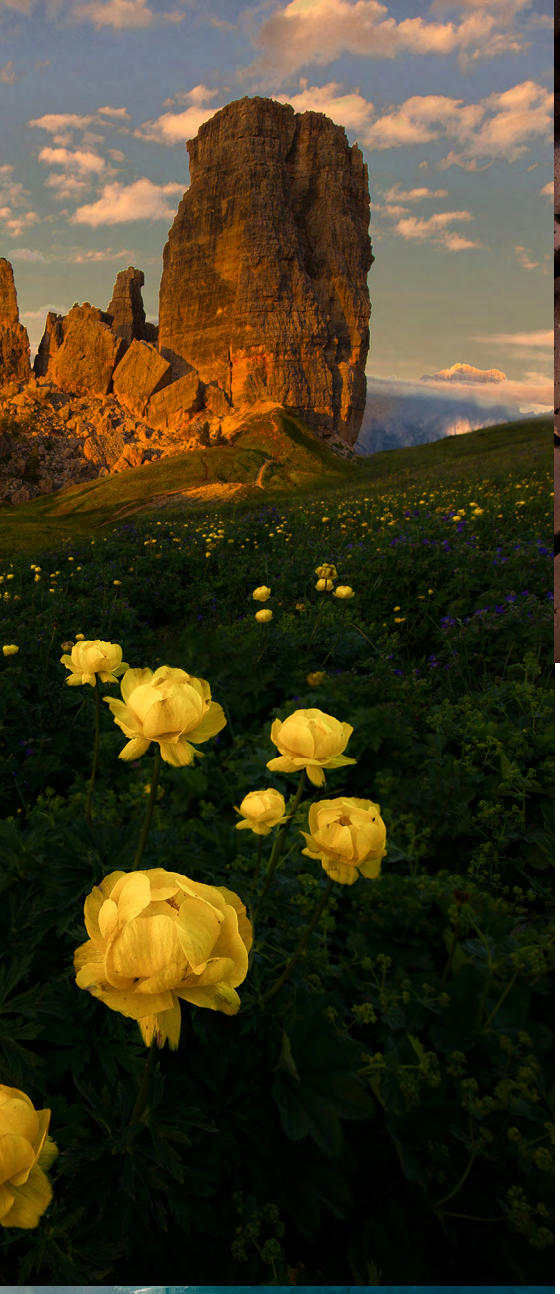

Image 9

This picture from Redwood National and State Parks in Northern California is one of my most popular images. It's perceived not just as a portrait of two trees, but rather as a representation of the feeling of hope as sunbeams pierce through the dark forest.

An image truly resonates and becomes more impactful when it goes beyond the surface, prompting the viewer to contemplate its deeper meaning. Experimenting with shooting techniques and creative edits – such as intentional camera movement, time blends and perspective blends – can result in interesting images.

Image 10

This image is a blend of two exposures. For the first exposure, the camera was angled downward toward the flowers to show the details of the foreground. The second exposure for the midground and background was shot at a normal angle to maintain the overall perspective. The final image is a perspective blend of the two exposures.

Image 11

To create a visual summary of all of the interesting light that transpired over a couple of hours around sunset, this time-blend photo was created by keeping the composition constant through multiple exposures as the light moved through the scene. The resulting image showcases the optimal light for each component of the composition.

Exploring diverse shooting techniques can unlock a wider range of creative possibilities.

As photographers, we realize the importance of the decisive moment – that exact time we choose to click the shutter. Setting ourselves up for an unusual moment makes it that much more rewarding.

Image 12

This is a portrait of an iceberg taken through the opening of another iceberg in front of it, while navigating among the icebergs in a boat. The curved lines simulating a frozen wave add mystery to the image.

When an image has an element of mystery, the viewer becomes emotionally invested in unraveling it. Also, creating such images is extremely satisfying for the photographer.

Image 13

There are often many subjects in the scene before us that are worthy of their own visual story. Bringing attention to inconspicuous details conveys hidden stories.

Image 14

Photographing a solar eclipse is always interesting but capturing it in a dramatic landscape enhances the surreal nature of the phenomenon – as in this shot from Sun Valley, Idaho.

Careful planning, especially for celestial

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events, can yield interesting and sometimes truly unusual results.

Going beyond the obvious requires paying attention to details – noticing what may not immediately demand our attention. It is these small scenes that, when portrayed, draw attention to what would be missed by most people: the way light glows along the edge of mud cracks, the flowers on the forest floor or a beautifully sculpted tree embraced in mist.

Image 15

In the era of doom scrolling, arresting a viewer's attention often requires more than a

pretty picture. When something is enigmatic, the mystery draws the viewer to stop and analyze the image. The mystery of the image is what deepens its emotional impact.

Image 16

I went to Utah's Badlands in the hope of capturing beautiful images of fall foliage. However, being in a sad state of mind after recently losing my father, what appealed to me was a solitary tree – devoid of foliage or color – yet more beautiful than any of the vibrant foliage around it. For me, it conveyed a deeper meaning of beauty and grace in suffering and death.

Image 17

Taken in the infamous historic German settlement of Kolmanskop, Namibia, this picture portrays how the desert is reclaiming what was once land exploited by greed.

Practice Quiet Observation

My creative fulfillment stems from embracing what nature presents. It's about shedding preconceived notions and allowing the scene to unfold before me – rather than imposing my will upon it. This openness, combined with a willingness to experiment with different techniques and perspectives, has been transformative.

But perhaps most crucial has been the practice of quiet observation. Taking the time to truly see – to notice the subtle shifts in light, the intricate details, or the fleeting moments – unlocks depths that hurried shooting simply can't.

Underpinning it all is the sheer enjoyment of the process itself. When the focus shifts from just the end result to the journey of discovery, creation and connection with the natural world, that's where immense joy and creative satisfaction truly lie. **OP**

See more of Sapna Reddy's work at sapnareddy.com.

Out of the Office, *Into the Wild*

Mark Denney turns a layoff into a landscape photography career

Photography by Mark Denney
Interview by Bill Sawalich

Eight years ago, after 17 years in a corporate office, Mark Denney was laid off. Instead of moping, he seized the opportunity to pursue his dream of becoming a full-time photographer — and it paid off.

Since then, Denney has built a thriving business centered on international photography workshops and grown an audience of more than 350,000 across his newsletter and popular YouTube channel. He's a textbook example of how to make it as a full-time landscape photographer in 2025, leveraging the marketing know-how from his previous career to fuel his success.

We recently caught up with Denney to learn how he made the leap from corporate life to becoming a sought-after photography educator and influencer — while consistently capturing stunning landscape images with a simple, striking style.

OUTDOOR PHOTOGRAPHER: What prompted you to pivot from business to art?

MARK DENNEY: It's so funny how life works because looking back on it, being laid off was probably one of the best things that's ever happened to me. I know that sounds so cliché, but it legitimately was. It took my life and put it on a completely different trajectory.

I made a roll of the dice and said, "You know what, I've been in the corporate world pretty much my adult life. Let's spend 12 months and see if I can make photography work." The first quarter I made $300 or $400, the first year I made something like $12,000. Thankfully that 12-month experiment has now turned into eight years and everything keeps humming along. It's been quite the wild run, that's for sure.

OP: Why did you choose to focus on landscape photography?

MD: When I was first laid off, I was doing what I felt most working photographers do: you do portraits, maybe you do a wedding, maybe you offer event photography, real estate photography. I literally offered everything. And I got a lot of jobs! I just didn't enjoy any of it.

I wasn't excited about it. I remember taking portraits and just becoming so anxious and nervous, and I didn't feel comfortable telling people how to pose. I knew that my job was to make the model be at ease, but I remember thinking how am I supposed to make them at ease when I am an absolute nervous wreck? It was so hard. I remember so vividly the day it happened. I was like, Mark, why don't you just photograph what you like to do?

You don't have to tell a mountain to point their chin in the sky or roll their shoulders back. I found that landscapes were just so relaxing. The problem was, where do you make money with landscape photography? That was the hard part, which was the teaching side of it all.

OP: It sounds like a dream job, but maybe one that's becoming more difficult?

MD: I've spent eight years figuring it out. Most working landscape photographers are also amazing teachers. It doesn't have to be YouTube. Actually, most of the time it's not YouTube. But it's almost always workshops, conventions, speaking engagements, podcasts, writing articles. But it's all predicated around education and inspiration, just getting people outside to photograph beautiful earth.

OP: How much of your time is spent doing YouTube versus being outdoors?

MD: The last few years I've been running a maximum of 10 workshops, and all are a minimum of seven to 10 days. So, right there, is 70 plus days in the field. I usually arrive a few days early just to see the locations we are taking the groups to, and then I'll always stay a few days afterwards as long

Previous page: When seasons collide in the Italian Dolomites. Fujifilm GFX 100S, Fujifilm GF 32-64mm f/4 R LM WR. Exposure: 1/60 sec., f/16, ISO 100.

The cathedral of trees in the Great Smoky Mountains. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 14-24mm f/2.8 S. Exposure: 1/4 sec., f/11, ISO 200.

Fire in the sky at Schwabacher Landing, Grand Teton National Park. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 14-24mm f/2.8 S. Exposure: 1/250 sec., f/11, ISO 100.

Titanic sea stack glowing in Olympic National Park. Fujifilm GFX 100S, Fujifilm GF 20-35mm f/4 R WR. Exposure: 1/15 sec., f/16, ISO 100.

as the schedule affords it. There's probably not as much personal time in the field as I would like, but maybe an additional 30 to 40 days just for me. So, roughly 100 days of the year. Then the rest of it, unfortunately, is behind a desk. That's YouTube and the email newsletter side of the business, which has exploded over the last two years.

OP: You share a lot of wonderful photography tips on those channels. I'm curious about some that have helped you personally.

MD: I see photographers all the time on workshops; we get to this absolutely gorgeous scene and we're all standing there, and a lot of people don't have any idea how to photograph it. Everything they see is absolutely gorgeous, so being able to know where to put your camera, how do you compose a composition? It can be really, really difficult when you see so much amazingness.

Something that has really helped me – and I didn't coin this term – photography is an exclusionary art. What you exclude in an image is just as important as what you include. I really took that to heart and I'm always thinking about that. What are the things that are going to make it in the frame and what are the things that are going to be relegated to the sidelines? Ultimately

Meandering through a golden grove of aspens in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. Fujifilm GFX 100S, Fujifilm GF 20-35mm f/4 R WR. Exposure: 1/60 sec., f/16, ISO 200.

Reflecting on the beauty of the Dolomites. Fujifilm GFX 100S, Fujifilm GF 20-35mm f/4 R WR. Exposure: 1/15 sec., f/16, ISO 100.

that's helped me to just simplify, simplify, simplify. Keep it easy on the eyes.

I have plenty of photos that are a big explosive sunrise or a very chaotic foreground or something like that. And I personally don't think that those images are very comfortable to look at. They create visual tension – which I also think is good – but I really enjoy trying to create a very attractive photograph that's easy for people to see. And I think simplifying things is a very beautiful way to do it. Just keep it simple. But in landscapes it's kind of hard because there's so much going on. That's something I'm always thinking about: what are you going to exclude?

The stuff that works on social media is the big explosive sunrises and sunsets. Those things garner a lot of attention, but most people usually don't want that in their home. And to me those usually aren't the most relaxing photographs to look at.

I actually just posted a brand new photo from the Smokies, which is just this beautiful overarching tree with some nice spring green and a blanket of fog behind it. And no, it's not going to garner a ton of social media love, but for me it is an absolutely gorgeous, quiet, simple, easy-on-the-eyes photograph that my wife already wants to print and hang on the wall. Because it's just such a peaceful photograph. That's what I really, really like.

OP: Does simplicity translate to your equipment choices too?

MD: I was using Fujifilm for six years. A few of the photos here were captured with the GFX 100S, which is absolutely gorgeous. But I switched to Nikon about a year and a half ago, the Z8. There were a lot of depth of field challenges with medium format and I felt that a full frame camera would alleviate some of those, and it definitely did. I was having to focus back so many things with the medium format camera and I didn't really enjoy doing that. I felt like the technology was kind of getting in my way because I was having to think about that all the time. But with full frame I really never think about that anymore. I'm always trying to get the equipment out of my way. I want to focus on the artistic side of it all. The less you think about equipment, the better.

I've used NiSi filters since day one. It feels really good to become an ambassador for a brand you really enjoy. The only filter that I consistently use is a polarizer. If you look through my photos, I don't have many photographs that have five-second exposures or even one-second exposures.

When I photograph water, I'm usually trying to show that the water is moving but also retain as much detail as possible. And the only way to really achieve that, you're going to be at like a 15th or a 25th of a second. And usually, you can drag the shutter that long just by applying certain camera settings. You don't really need a filter to do that. So, I really don't use neutral density filters much, but a polarizer I use a lot. On almost all of the seascapes it's pretty standard operating procedure.

Dancing Sumba trees off the coast of Sumba in Indonesia. Fujifilm GFX 100S, Fujifilm GF 20-35mm f/4 R WR. Exposure: 1/5 sec., f/8 ISO 400.

An otherworldly stroll through the Highlands of Iceland. Nikon Z8, Nikon Z 24-120mm f/4 S. Exposure: 1/60 sec., f/11, ISO 640.

OP: Do you have a favorite lens?

MD: Lately it's been the Nikon 24-120mm. I think that's such a versatile lens because it's on the longer edge of a mid-range lens. I love telephoto photography. I love the simplicity of it because the farther you go out, your area to work with is drastically reduced. I find it very relaxing to shoot long-lens photography because you don't have so many things to account for in your frame. It's a beautiful way to keep things very simple, which I really enjoy. The image of the tree in the Smokies, that was with that 24-120 maxed all the way out at 120mm. I think it's great. It's such a simple image.

OP: Is your post-processing simple too?

MD: People ask me all the time, "Is that a photograph or is that a painting?" And that's like the ultimate compliment because, although I've never shot film, I grew up with film and I do like the way film looks better than digital because to me, the blacks in digital are so deep. Digital is so sharp. It is such high resolution. It's so refined to where the photos almost feel kind of crunchy, almost lifeless a little bit.

So, I actually edit my photos more toward a filmic style. Instead of sharpening everything, I actually take clarity out of almost all of my photos. I'm purposely trying to soften them. And then I also lift the blacks a little bit, so I actually don't have a true black point in any of my photos. The shadows are always kind of faded and a little bit softer. To me it just makes the photo feel a little more ethereal, a little more whimsical and a little more like film.

When I started to do that, somebody sent me an email and said, "Every time I see one of your photos, I know it's yours before I even see your name." And I was like, oh, that's the greatest compliment! It changes and evolves over time, of course, but every year that goes by, I just love that look more and more.

OP: Where are some of your favorite places to photograph?

MD: One of my favorite places I've been in the last few years is Bali. Really, all over Indonesia. Bali and the Indonesian coast are mesmerizing, just absolutely gorgeous. I do a workshop in the Lofoten Islands in Norway to kind of chase the northern lights in January, which is always a ton of fun. And I live in North Carolina, so I've been able to go to the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Smoky Mountains probably more than any location. I just got back from two workshops in the Smokies over the last couple of weeks. That's where I cut my teeth for landscape photography, chasing waterfalls and photographing trees. That's where I really fell in love with that stuff.

OP: Is there a destination you're most looking forward to photographing?

ND: I am putting together a trip to go to New Zealand in December of 2026, which I'm very excited about. Also, Namibia next year, which I've never been to. And in January of 2027 I'm going to Hokkaido, Japan, which I'm very excited about. Those are all probably the top of the list for me. I'm very excited about all of those. **OP**

See more of Mark Denney's work at markdenneyphotography.com.

UNDER OPEN SKIES

Five years on the road with landscape photographer Emilie Hofferber

Photography by Emilie Hofferber
Text by Terry Sullivan

EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE through art is a cornerstone of American tradition. In the late 19th century, many artists turned their attention to the American West. One notable pair was photographer William Henry Jackson and painter Thomas Moran, who joined forces to capture the grandeur of Yellowstone. In the 20th century, photographers like Ansel Adams followed, documenting their vision of the vast, wild terrain.

The idea of being on the road — and making that nomadic experience part of the artistic journey — also began to appear in other art forms. One of the most iconic was Jack Kerouac's novel "On the Road." In it, he wrote: "There was nowhere to go but everywhere, so just keep on rolling under the stars."

Kerouac's words seem an apt description of photographer Emilie Hofferber's lifestyle. For the past several years, she has continually explored wilderness areas throughout North America and beyond. In one Instagram post, she put it plainly:

"Hi, I'm Emilie. I'm 29 years old and haven't paid rent in five years. This is what I've been doing instead... I've been living on the road since January 2021. I moved into a van in 2022."

Since then, Hofferber has been traveling, capturing and posting her photographs and experiences online while building a professional portfolio. In that same post, she explained what she's drawn to: "I found myself really drawing to certain themes in nature: rainbows, flowers, the moon, pastel skies — basically anything that made me feel really peaceful."

Changing Gears

But how did Hofferber, who was born and raised in southwest Florida, decide to take that leap — to pack up her camera, her Chihuahua Margaret, and her ambition to be a photographer into a Subaru Outback and live life on the road?

Before 2021, her life was very different.

"I worked retail for about a decade," she says. "And if you know anything about working retail — especially in retail management — you know that it's really hard to get consecutive days off. You're lucky if you get a weekend off!"

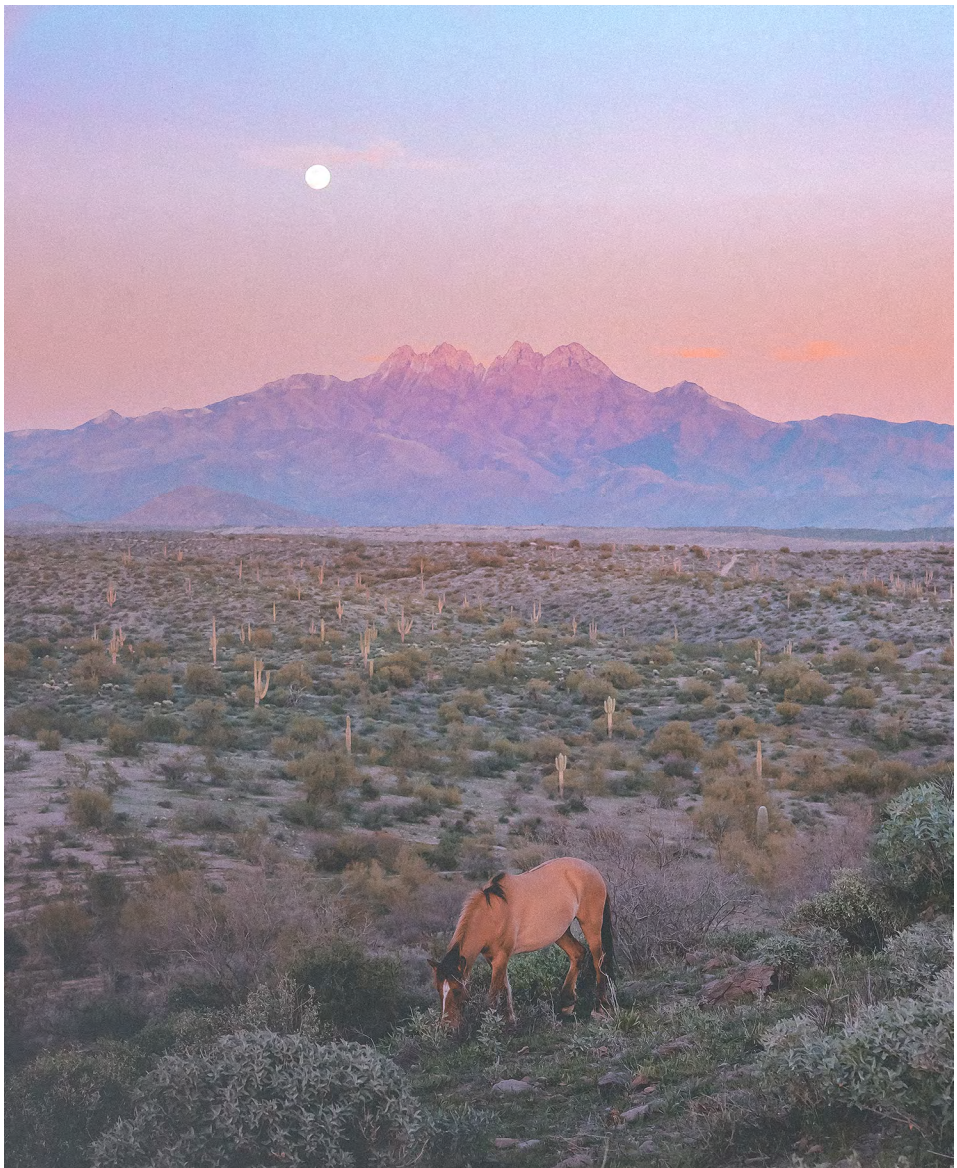
Still, her passion for photography continued to grow.

"I always wanted to play with photography, but I didn't know how to make it real. And working retail made it nearly impossible to get enough time off to pursue anything else seriously."

A fateful camping trip in Utah with friends several years ago would change everything for her.

"I hadn't actually gone camping until I was 22," she recalls. "But that year, we went on a Mighty Five road trip and I got to see all of Utah's national parks — Arches, Canyonlands, Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef, and Zion — for the first time."

They camped in the back of her SUV, and that experience helped her realize just how



Previous page: Sunset hues paint the sky over the Athabasca River in Jasper National Park in Alberta Canada. Canon EOS R6, Canon RF 24-70mm f/2.8 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/250 sec., f/3.5, ISO 800.

Opposite: Fields of fireweed line the trails in Mt. Assiniboine Provincial Park in British Columbia, Canada during a mid-August sunrise. Canon EOS R6, Canon RF 15-35mm f/2.8 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/250 sec., f/2.8, ISO 400.

Right: Wild horses roam a saguaro forest under the full moon, Tonto National Forest near Mesa, Arizona. Canon EOS R6, Canon RF 24-70mm f/2.8 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/200 sec., f/4, ISO 800.

inspiring the outdoors could be – and how much she wanted to photograph it.

That trip, along with her desire to make photography a full-time pursuit, brought her to a crossroads: return to the life and job she had known for a decade or leave it all behind and hit the road. She made a realistic plan to give herself a chance at success.

She framed the change as "a six-month experiment," allowing her the freedom to build a portfolio without the pressure of immediate results.

"It was a trial run," she says. It also allowed her "to make up for lost time without rushing the process." The test worked – and gave her the confidence that she could make a new career as a nomadic photographer.

Color and Composition

Hofferber's images stand out for their dreamy, pastel palette – a signature look that earned her the nickname "Pastel Papi" from friends. These glowing hues are balanced with minimalist compositions that give the images a sense of clarity and calm.

"I try to stick to three or four elements. Five max," she explains. "I'll have my mountains, then sometimes I'll have the flowers. And then I'll have the sunset. Those will be my three different elements."

Sometimes she'll add the moon or a tiny figure in the distance. By limiting visual elements, she creates poetic, pastel visions of the landscape. "They all link together to form a composition, which is how I view minimalism."

Finding those scenes in the wild can be difficult. The weather and light often don't cooperate, requiring patience and flexibility.

"You either learn to deal with it, or it deals with you," she says. "You really can't control it. You just have to roll with the punches."

Fortunately, her mobile lifestyle gives her that freedom. "I live in my van, which is fully paid off," she says. "So if I go somewhere and I don't get the conditions I like, I can stay indefinitely until I get what I want."

Her Gear and Approach to Post-Processing

When it comes to gear, Hofferber is refreshingly down-to-earth. She doesn't emphasize any particular brand or model.

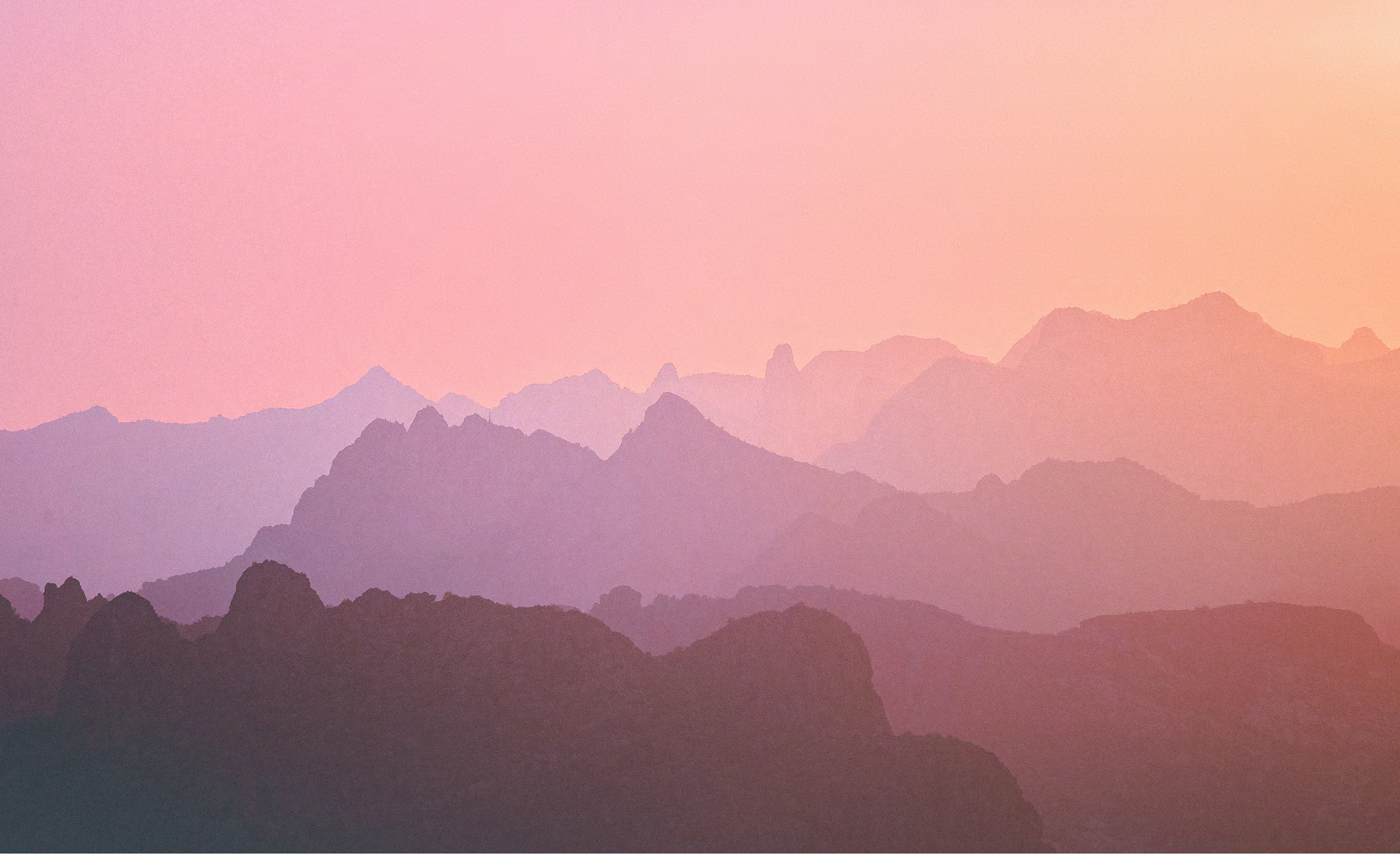
"I started my career using a $13 film camera from a thrift store," she says. She's

Previous left: California poppies carpet the hills in Southern California during a "superbloom." Canon EOS R6, Canon RF 24-70mm f/2.8 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/160 sec., f/4, ISO 400.

Previous right: Lightning strikes the nearby mountains in Wendover, NV just west of the Bonneville Salt Flats during a late night storm. Canon EOS 5D Mark III, Canon EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM. Exposure: 13 sec., f/4, ISO 200.

Opposite: Two horses and riders trot off in the distant gypsum dunes of White Sands National Park, New Mexico at sunset. Canon EOS R6, Sigma 100-400mm f/5-6.3 DG OS HSM. Exposure: 1/2500 sec., f/6.3, ISO 640.

Right: Pinks and purples color the cloudy skies over a lupine dotted hillside in the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon. Canon EOS R6, Canon RF 24-70mm f/2.8 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/80 sec., f/3.2, ISO 400.



Above: Last light reveals jagged layers of the Superstition Mountains, east of Phoenix Arizona. Canon EOS R6, Canon RF 100-400mm f/5.6-8 IS USM. Exposure: 1/400 sec., f/8, ISO 3200.

Opposite: Sunrise glow and wildflowers paint Mt. Crested Butte into a colorful summer morning scene. Crested Butte, Colorado. Canon EOS R6, Canon RF 24-70mm f/2.8 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/500 sec., f/4, ISO 400.

also made strong work with her iPhone. "One of the prints I have in my print store was actually taken on an iPhone. I've often asked people to guess which one, and they can't tell."

Today, she primarily shoots with a 20.1-megapixel Canon EOS R6 full-frame mirrorless camera paired with two lenses: the RF 15-35mm f/2.8 L IS USM and the RF 100-500mm f/4.5-7.1 L IS USM. She particularly enjoys the 100-500mm for the compression it offers — visually pulling background elements closer to the subject.

"In minimal landscapes like sand dunes or white sands, using a big zoom lens can reveal things your eyes can't make out," she says. "I've shot tiny people from so far away I couldn't see them with my eyes, but the lens captured them beautifully."

In post-processing, she takes a conservative approach. "I'm very picky when it comes to choosing my Raw files," she says. While she occasionally uses composites, she prioritizes authenticity.

"I won't add something that's not naturally occurring," she says. "If I saw a bird three frames earlier, maybe I'll bring it in." But she won't add a moon that couldn't have appeared in that location.

Over time, her editing preferences have evolved, especially in her use of color temperature. "I used to be terrified of warm tones. I thought the only way to create pastels was with cool tones. Now I regularly set my white balance warmer."

That shift, she says, has opened new creative doors. "Some scenes still call for cool tones," she says. "But I'm not afraid to experiment anymore."

Hofferber's journey is a testament to the power of intentional change, creative vision, and the freedom to follow your own path. Under open skies and ever-changing light, she continues to chase the beauty that first inspired her to pick up a camera. **OP**

See more of Hofferber's work at emiliehofferberphoto.com.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Break free from the crowds with these tips for photographing remote wilderness locations

Text & Photography by Liam Doran

IT'S 7:30 P.M., AND THE SUN IS SETTING on a high mountain lake deep in the Colorado backcountry. At this point, my biggest challenge is the vast number of rising trout breaking up an otherwise perfect reflection of snowy peaks – a rarely photographed scene. Why is such a spectacular location so lightly visited? Simple. It's not easy to get here.

Earlier in the day, I hiked nearly 4,000 vertical feet over six miles – much of it off-trail – to arrive in time for sunset. But the rewards far exceeded the effort. I was the only person here, and for that matter, there was no real sign of people at all. No obvious campsites, no fire rings, no beaten-down path around the lake, and most importantly, zero trash anywhere. Just me, my camera and a vision.

This is outdoor photography as it was meant to be.

Why Go Backcountry?

Today's favorite landscape photography destinations stand in stark contrast to the scene I just described. Think Schwabacher Landing in Grand Teton National Park, Kebler Pass in Colorado during fall, Tunnel View in Yosemite. While beautiful and often worth photographing, popular locations like these come with numerous pitfalls.

Crowding tops the list. I remember my first trip to Oxbow Bend in the Tetons in early October – the sheer number of people, mostly photographers, lined along the bank of the Snake River was mind-bending. Next is environmental impact. A group of 100 people, no matter how well-intentioned, will inevitably leave a mark on the land, wildlife and the experience of others.

The third downside is the lack of originality. Everyone ends up with essentially the

Previous: Dropping into canyon country on a solo trip can be both exciting and intimidating. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Sigma 24-105mm f/4 DG OS HSM Art for Canon EF.

Above: Remote, stunning landscapes few will ever see — this is true backcountry photography. Eagles Nest Wilderness, Colorado. Sony A1, Sigma 24-70mm f/2.8 DG DN II Art. Exposure: 1/3 sec., f/16, ISO 100.

Opposite: A short section of 4X4 driving and a moderate hike can lead you to some incredible finds. San Juan National Forest, Colorado. Sony A7 III, Sigma 24-70mm f/2.8 DG DN Art. Exposure: 13 sec., f/11, ISO 100.

same photo that's been posted on social media thousands of times. Don't get me wrong – I enjoy meeting fellow photographers and capturing my own version of an iconic scene. But sometimes we need more. Or maybe we need less.

Enter the backcountry. When it's time to break from the crowds and pursue a unique creative vision, the wildlands beckon. National forests, national parks, public lands and designated wilderness areas all offer millions of acres to explore with your camera.

Getting Out There

There are many exciting ways to experience these target-rich environments – day hiking, river trips and overlanding in a 4x4 vehicle. One of the most popular methods is multi-day backpacking. The slow pace of walking through wilderness immerses you in the sights, sounds and smells of pristine nature. With your senses heightened, you're tuned into your surroundings and ready to create some of your most original and compelling images – rich in depth and mystery.

Two of the most important things a photographer needs to venture into the backcountry are skills and gear. The right backcountry skills will keep you safe, comfortable and productive. What skills do you need? For starters: navigation, staying warm and dry in bad weather, packing a backpack, cooking, and basic wilderness first aid.

I learned these essentials at the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) back in college. It was an incredible experience, though long and expensive. Fortunately, there are plenty of great alternatives to NOLS and Outward Bound. You can learn quite a bit on YouTube, but nothing beats time in the field. Check with your local community college – many offer backcountry-focused courses. Local

I don't often shoot astrophotography but when a scene like this is out your tent door, you don't pass it up. Eagles Nest Wilderness, Colorado. Sony A1, Sigma 24-70mm f/2.8 DG DN II Art. Exposure: 30 sec. f/3.2 ISO 8000.

When the locals show up in camp. Eagles Nest Wilderness, Colorado. Sony A1, Sigma 24-70mm f/2.8 DG DN II Art. Exposure: 1/1250 sec., f/6.3, ISO 200.

hiking groups such as Colorado Mountain School, retailers like REI and private guides like Andrew Skurka are other excellent resources. Find the one that fits your needs and go for it.

Hiking Gear

If you already have the skills but haven't been out in the backcountry in a while, here's my advice on gear: modern backpacking equipment – especially over the past eight years – has improved dramatically.

From tents to sleep kits, and footwear to backpacks, there's been a revolution in weight and comfort. In 1997, my Dana Design backpack weighed 7 pounds – empty. My next pack in 2012 weighed 5 pounds. My current backpack, the Granite Gear Blaze 60, weighs in at just 3 pounds and is extremely comfortable.

You can go lighter, of course, but photographers need a pack that can handle more than 20 pounds of gear. The same weight savings apply to sleep kits (mine dropped from 7 pounds to 3) and tents (from 6 pounds to under 2).

The days of heavy leather hiking boots – and the blisters and sore feet that came with them – are largely behind us. While there's still a place for full-grain leather and Gore-Tex boots, a maintained trail usually isn't one of them. Today's lightweight hiking boots and trail shoes strike a great balance between agility and support – helping your feet stay happy after long days on the trail.

Photo Gear

When it comes to photography equipment, there are many ways to lighten your load. Of course, the gear you already own is probably fine – but consider bringing only what you need and leaving the rest behind.

For me, that means my Sony A1 full-frame mirrorless camera and a single lens. My go-to is the Sigma 24-70mm f/2.8 DG DN Art lens. If I want to go lighter, I'll bring the Sigma 28-70mm f/2.8 DG DN Contemporary instead. Need a wider field of view but don't want to pack an ultra-wide lens? I simply shoot vertically and stitch together a panorama.

If wildlife is on the shot list, I'll bring the Sigma 100-400mm f/5-6.3 DG DN OS Contemporary lens, which offers an unbeatable weight-to-reach ratio. I also pack a polarizing filter, an extra battery, a spare

memory card, a lens cloth — and yes, a tripod. But not the heavy-duty version. I bring a lighter carbon fiber tripod that's still stable enough to capture tack-sharp images at shutter speeds of one second or longer.

Three More Tips

If you're thinking about putting together a backcountry trip like this, here are three more quick tips to keep in mind:

1. Start small: This might be the best advice I can offer to beginners — or anyone who hasn't done a trip like this in a while. That alpine lake 10 miles from the trailhead might sound doable, but even for seasoned pros, 10 miles with camera gear can be a slog. Start with something in the 4-to-6-mile range. If you arrive at

Previous: Multi-day backpacking trips are fun and challenging, but there are no guarantees that your hard work will pay off photographically. Weminuche Wilderness, Colorado. Canon EOS 7D Mark II, Sigma 10-20mm f/3.5 EX DC HSM for Canon EF.

Right: It's nice to camp out even close to home as you will be perfectly positioned for sunrise and sunset shooting. Breckenridge, Colorado. Canon EOS-1D X, Sigma 150-600mm f/5-6.3 DG OS HSM Sports Lens for Canon EF. Exposure: 1/2000 sec., f/7.1 ISO 400.

camp exhausted, your photography will suffer.

2. Bring a paper map: Smartphones are great navigation tools, and today's apps make route-finding easy. But electronics fail – whether it's a dead battery or accidentally recording five hours of your pocket. (Guilty.) Always carry a paper map and know how to use it.

3. Practice safe hygiene: Learn how to go to the bathroom properly and sanitarily in the woods. It's not hard – and it's critical for your health and the experience of those who come after you. Better yet, learn and follow all "Leave No Trace" principles to help preserve the backcountry for future visitors.

Conclusion

When you've already photographed the classics and are wondering what's next, it might be time to seek out fresh perspectives. With a bit of planning, some sharpened skills and the right gear, you could be ready for a photographic adventure in the backcountry.

The solitude, challenge and raw beauty of remote landscapes offer rewards that far outweigh the effort. Step off the beaten path – and your best work might be just beyond the trail's end. **OP**

See more of Liam Doran's work at liamdoranphoto.com.

7 GREAT NATIONAL PARKS FOR WILDLIFE

Discover the best spots for photographing animals up close and in action

Text & Photography by Dawn Wilson

From the largest mammals in North America to the smallest invertebrates, the U.S. national parks provide undisturbed, protected ecosystems for thousands of species of birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals.

Every national park has resident wildlife. Although some have more than others, with places like the National Park of American Samoa having a diversity of 1,168 species yet only three mammals (all are bats), no park is without the opportunity to see a variety of animal life.

The following seven national parks provide an abundance of photo opportunities – if you know where and when to look – of everything from the prehistoric-looking American alligator to massive brown bears, one of the largest mammals in the United States.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

The busiest national park in the U.S. – more than 12 million people visited in 2024 – attracts its visitors from the nearby urban corridor. But this park of critical wildlife habitat, which sits in the southern Appalachian Mountains and straddles North Carolina and Tennessee, also attracts a rich variety of animals.

Ideal for fall photography, when the deciduous trees that cover the rolling ridges throughout the park create a kaleidoscope of reds, oranges, golds and yellows in October, the scene makes a wonderful backdrop for photographs of the native animals. Some of these include white-tailed deer, elk and black bears, with approximately 1,900 bears in the park.

In particular, the action of the elk rut in September and October against the colorful landscape produces environmental scenes complete with vibrant hues, fog and animal activity. Look for this reintroduced species in Cataloochee Valley in the southeastern portion of the park on the North Carolina side.

The park is also one of the best places in the U.S. to see salamanders, giving it the nickname "Salamander Capital of the World."

Everglades National Park

A vast and unique ecosystem of wetlands, marshes, swamps, mangrove forests, pinelands and estuaries, the highest elevation in this Florida national park is only eight feet.

Protected for this unique mix of lowland habitats, including the largest contiguous stand of protected mangrove forest in the western hemisphere, the variety also attracts a diverse array of wildlife. Photographers will find extensive biodiversity with more than 360 species of birds, 40 mammals, 50 reptiles, 17 amphibians and 300 fish, putting this national park near the top of the list for biodiversity.

In the Everglades, seasons are determined not so much by the changing of the leaves or temperature but by the amount of rainfall – either wet or dry. Although wildlife abounds throughout the year, nesting season coincides with the dry season, which happens from about December through April.

Visit Everglades National Park in the dry season for the best opportunities for nesting bird photos. Some of the most popular species for photography include the 16 species of wading birds, such as the white ibis, roseate spoonbill, wood stork and great egret.

Within the park, walk the Anhinga Trail, where photographable nests abound during the dry season. Photographers can also capture images of the sunning alligators common on the grassy banks along this trail.

Previous page: A bull elk enjoys the cool, foggy morning in a meadow of Cataloochee Valley in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, North Carolina. Nikon D3S, AF-S NIKKOR 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6G ED. Exposure: 1/320 sec., f/11, ISO 2000.

Right: A Gila woodpecker sits on a blooming saguaro cactus in Saguaro National Park, Arizona. Nikon Z8, NIKKOR Z 180-600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR. Exposure: 1/2500 sec., f/8, ISO 1000.

Above: The shy Island fox is endemic to only a few islands in the archipelago of Channel Islands National Park, California. Nikon D4S, AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/4G ED VR. Exposure: 1/40 sec., f/7.1, ISO 2000.

Opposite: A white ibis poses for a portrait during nesting season in Everglades National Park, Florida. Nikon D800, AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/4G ED VR. Exposure: 1/1600 sec., f/5.6, ISO 800.

Saguaro National Park

Located in Tucson, Arizona, Saguaro is small in comparison to many national parks, ranking 41st out of 63 national parks. What it lacks in acreage, however, it makes up for in what it protects – the largest cactus in the U.S. The saguaro, which reaches an average height of 45 feet, only grows in limited areas of the Sonoran Desert.

This mighty cactus provides fruit, flowers, shelter and pollen for more than 100 different species of birds, animals and insects. Plan a visit to Saguaro National Park in April and May for the best photo opportunities of the animals living their symbiotic relationship with these massive cacti.

Gila woodpeckers and gilded flickers create cavity nests in the pulpy flesh of the cactus. Great horned owls, greater roadrunners and Harris's hawks create nests in the confluence of the trunk and arms. Abandoned cavity nests may be used by whiskered screech owls and elf owls.

Costa's hummingbirds, cactus wren and bats spread the pollen from the large, white flowers that also bloom this time of year.

Rocky Mountain National Park

Set along the Continental Divide in northern Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park has one of the largest variations in elevation and has more tundra habitat than any other national park in the Lower 48 states. Ranging from tundra and rocky talus slopes on the park's highest mountain – 14,259-foot Longs Peak – to the meadows and ponderosa forests in the lowest elevation range of about 8,500 feet, three biomes sit in the landscape in between these two elevations.

The tundra region of Rocky, which encompasses about one-third of the park, is home to Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep,

American pika, white-tailed ptarmigan, weasels and yellow-bellied marmots.

Moose, the largest member of the deer family, have become abundant in the meadows and willow bottoms at lower elevations of the park during summer. The meadows and forests are also home to mule deer, coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions and black bears. Consider yourself quite lucky, however, to have a sighting of the last two species as there are only estimated to be 12 and 20, respectively, of these animals throughout the park.

An estimated 3,400 elk roam through Rocky. Highly migratory, elk venture to the foothills in winter east of the park but return to the park's meadows in May to feed on the fresh forbs and grasses. Calves are born at the peak of meadow vegetation in late May and early June.

The journey of the elk continues to the tundra in late June, where they will spend the summer months in the cool alpine air. As the first frost arrives above tree line in late August, the rut season begins. The elk return to the parks (the term used to describe an alpine meadow), with Moraine, Beaver and Horseshoe being their favorites, in early September.

The rut season is the highlight of the year in Rocky, when bull elk fill the valleys with the piercing call of their bugle and spar – sometimes to the death – for the right to mate with cows.

By late October, the meadows once again grow quiet as the elk continue their annual migration back to the foothills for the winter.

Yellowstone National Park

No list of the best national parks to see wildlife can be complete without including Yellowstone National Park.

Created as the first national park in 1872

Two bull elk cross the tundra at sunrise as the morning light hits Longs Peak, the tallest mountain in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Nikon D800, AF-S NIKKOR DX 16-85mm f/3.5-5.6G ED VR. Exposure: 0.5 sec., f/22, ISO 200.

for its abundance of geothermal features, it is also part of the last remaining large intact ecosystem in North America. That unique heat on a cold landscape and the vast, unbroken habitat provides the elements needed for 67 mammals, nearly 300 birds, 16 fish, five amphibians and six reptile species to thrive.

Even with that diverse lineup of animals, Yellowstone is known for its megafauna.

Wolves were reintroduced to the park in 1995 and have flourished despite challenges over the years. Today, more than 100 gray wolves call the region home, dispersed among nine packs and a few wandering individuals. They can be found throughout the park with Lamar and Hayden valleys providing the best potential for witnessing this elusive predator.

December through February can be the best months to see wolves. This is their courting and mating season, a time when some wolves will be exploring more of the region – now covered in snow, making it easier to spot the gray or black animals – in search of new mates. The northern road between Gardiner and Cook City/Silver Gate, Montana, which passes through Lamar Valley, is open to vehicles yearround. To access the remainder of the park in winter requires hiring a snow coach operator or going on a guided group tour. Most snow coach tours leave out of West Yellowstone, Montana but Xanterra also offers tours out of Gardiner.

In addition to wolves, photographers will have opportunities to photograph black bears, grizzly bears, bison, pronghorn antelope, elk, moose, red fox, coyotes and badgers.

Any time is a good time to visit Yellowstone but the access changes throughout the year and the crowds are at their worst in late June through mid-August. The best times for wildlife, however, are May and June when the crowds are a little more tolerable and the wildlife babies are bounding around throughout the park. Lamar Valley, which is referred to as the Serengeti of North America, is the destination the venture to for pronghorn fawns, badger and coyote dens, and to see the red dogs, the babies of America's national mammal, the bison.

Channel Islands National Park

Located in southern California off the coast of Oxnard, this archipelago of five islands and the surrounding waters of Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary may not be the first national park that comes to mind when thinking about wildlife photography but there are reasons to make this destination a priority for unique images.

Channel Islands National Park is home to 23 endemic species found no place else in the world, including the Channel Island fox, island deer mouse and island scrub jay.

Accessible only by boat and limited to life on a single island, wildlife on the islands have evolved into subspecies on different islands. For example, two native mammals – the island fox and the island deer mouse – have evolved into eight distinctive subspecies found only on the Channel Islands.

In total, Channel Islands only have four native land mammals, four lizards, one salamander, one frog, and two non-venomous snakes. No island supports all seven species, and many are only found on these five islands.

Birds, which have unlimited ability to travel by air, are more numerous on the islands. Even the feathered animals, however, have evolved into unique subspecies, with 11 endemic land birds unique to Channel Islands.

In contrast, the marine mammals are much more diverse in the waters of the archipelago. Visitors frequently report seeing seals, sea lions, whales, dolphins and otters.

For an opportunity to photograph the endemic species, plan a boat ride to the islands and then camp at one of the five primitive campgrounds – one on each island. Only Sant Cruz and Santa Rosa

Two brown bears play in the water of Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska. Nikon D4S, AF-S NIKKOR 500mm f/4G ED VR. Exposure: 1/2500 sec., f/6.3, ISO 1600.

Above: The growing wolf pups of a large wolf pack gather along the banks of the Firehole River on a winter day in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. Nikon Z7 II, AF-S NIKKOR 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6G ED. Exposure: 1/500 sec., f/6.3, ISO 6400.

Opposite: A bull elk goes to great lengths to impress the cow elk by donning a stunning headdress, during the fall rut in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Nikon D850, AF-S NIKKOR 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6G ED. Exposure: 1/500 sec., f/6.3, ISO 2000.

islands have potable water. Island fox are found on three of the islands – Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel – making the first two the best options for photographing the fox and other endemic species.

Lake Clark National Park & Preserve

One of the most remote national parks in the U.S., Lake Clark National Park and Preserve on the Alaska Peninsula southwest of Anchorage welcomes less than 19,000 visitors each year. In this remote area within the Bristol Bay watershed, however, exists some of the largest concentrations of brown bears and sockeye salmon in the world.

Accessible only by plane or boat, Lake Clark encompasses more than 4 million acres of pristine wilderness. For photographers, however, most fly into a few of the remote lodges along Cook Inlet, Crescent Lake, Lake Iliamna, Lake Clark or Port Alsworth, the only community within the park.

Wildlife photographers will want to travel to Lake Clark from June to early September to photograph brown bears. The salmon runs, which attract the bears to various areas of the park, vary on timing. Along Cook Inlet, where several comfortable lodges accommodate anglers and photographers, the salmon run peaks in August. The peak runs can happen in July in more interior portions of the park.

Along Cook Inlet, other times of the summer also offer ample photo opportunities for brown bears, with June being the season for the little cubs of the year at their most adorable stage, the chance for bears walking through fireweed and lupines in July, and bears clamming and playing in the sedge meadows throughout the summer. **OP**

See more of Dawn Wilson's work at dawnwilsonphotography.com.

Environmental Impact

Why capturing wildlife in its natural surroundings is the key to a powerful portrait

Text & Photography by Richard Bernabe

During a typical wildlife encounter, the initial impulse of most beginning photographers is to grab the longest lens in the bag and capture a full-frame reproduction of the subject, revealing the finest details in every feather or fiber of fur. The assumption is simple: the closer, the better. The tighter the frame, the richer the details – giving viewers the feeling of an intimate encounter with a bear, lion or any other potentially dangerous predator they could never safely experience in person.

While this approach has some aesthetic and documentary value, it tends to be overly simplistic and compositionally one-dimensional. Tight, conventional wildlife portraits offer little in the way of context or environment, delivering as much drama or storytelling as a snapshot from the city zoo.

Environmental wildlife portraits, however, present the animal in its natural habitat and surroundings – such as the frozen sea ice under Arctic skies, the steamy rainforest or the wide-open savanna grasslands – helping tell the story of the animal's life, habits and behaviors. They provide rich context and can lead to more dynamic and complex compositions. The light on the landscape in the early morning and the moody skies of an impending storm can inject a variety of emotions into the image while giving the viewer the sensation of being there.

Let's look at some helpful approaches to environmental wildlife portraits.

Compose Like a Landscape

When you approach a sweeping landscape, particularly from a wide-angle perspective,

Previous page: Giraffe silhouettes reflected in waterhole with the last glow of sunset light, Etosha National Park, Namibia. Canon EOS 7D Mark II, Canon EF 24-70mm f/4L IS USM. Exposure: 1/800 sec., f/4, ISO 2500.

Right: Sunrise glow and penguins at Cuverville Island Antarctica. Canon EOS R5, Canon RF 100-500mm f/4.5-7.1 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/5.6, ISO 400.

Above: Elephants in the shadows with multi-hued ridges of the crater in the distance. Ngorongoro Conservation Area, Tanzania. Canon EOS 5D Mark IV, Canon EF 200-400mm f/4L IS USM Extender 1.4x. Exposure: 1/1250 sec., f/6.3, ISO 250.

Opposite: Oryx at rest in the sands of the Namib Desert, Namibia. Canon EOS 5D Mark IV, Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II USM. Exposure: 1/1250 sec., f/5, ISO 1000.

you are often looking for balance, visual movement, depth and layers – a foreground, subject and an epic backdrop so viewers can take in the entire visual experience. You can view a wildlife image in the same way.

In an environmental wildlife portrait, your subject does not necessarily need to be the primary visual element of the image, any more than a single tree or mountain needs to be the primary subject of a landscape photo. A lone wildlife figure nested in a mountain landscape will always be the focal point for the viewer, but it is just one of many visual elements that come together to make a unified photograph.

By widening the frame, you bring more compositional working materials into play: potential leading lines that move the viewer's eye through the frame, a counterbalance to your wildlife subject, and layers that add depth and multidimensionality. All of this leads to compositional complexity. Aesthetically, it is true that simplicity often speaks with a clearer voice – but it can also be incomplete and ordinary. Yes, sometimes less is more. Yet sometimes less is merely less, and more is more.

The following are some compositional concepts to consider.

1. Balance

By juxtaposing the primary wildlife subject with one or more strong visual elements – such as trees, the sun or secondary animals – you can create asymmetrical balance by positioning them on a diagonal in the frame. As the eye moves from one subject to another, it creates virtual lines, movement and visual tension.

Working near water can reveal reflections of your subject, which is a good time to

zoom out and create a compelling wildlife image with symmetrical balance. A rhino taking a drink from a waterhole at sunset with a perfect mirror reflection is much more compelling than just the rhino itself. When balance is employed, in either form, the viewer can engage the photo with an instinctive feeling of stability and harmony.

2. Movement

Movement refers to how the viewer's eye travels through the image frame. Including literal or implied lines – such as S-curves, rivers, streams or trails – helps move the viewer's eye through the frame and adds dynamism.

Tighter portraits or headshots are usually static; you are drawn to the animal's eye, but there is nowhere else to go. Yes, an animal's eyes create a strong focal point for the viewer to gravitate toward, but without movement, the image is static and dull. Movement is particularly powerful when it leads the viewer's eye toward the primary wildlife subject.

3. Layers and Depth

Layers also create movement, usually from the image's bottom foreground to the top background, and they add depth. Depth is not just about distance; it's also about story. Foreground elements in a scene invite curiosity, the middle layers provide context and the background creates a sense of place. The animal, inserted into this landscape, then becomes the photo's primary focal point.

4. Scale

The photo (on page 84) of a waddle of penguins dwarfed by the snow-capped mountains behind them gives viewers a visceral grasp of size, altitude and geographic isolation. These are emotions a tightly cropped portrait simply cannot convey.

Polar bear on fast ice, Svalbard, Norway. Canon EOS R5, Canon RF 100-500mm f/4.5-7.1 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/1250 sec., f/11, ISO 1000.

Storytelling

Storytelling is the oldest of all art forms and one of the most powerful. Stories resonate because they connect the "what," "where" and "why." A conventional full-frame portrait or headshot nails the "what," much like a guidebook photo that helps identify a species. What's missing in these images is the "where" and the "why."

You've certainly heard the phrase that a photograph is worth a thousand words. That's absolutely true – if you give it a chance. Widening the frame can reveal stories that hint at a species' ecological pressures, migratory journeys or symbiotic relationships with other animals or the environment. A polar bear navigating the edge of an ice sheet in the Arctic can articulate the perils of climate change better than a thousand – or even ten thousand – words.

By giving the "where" and the "why" equal billing with the "what," you remind viewers of the interconnectedness among all three. Using the example of the polar bear image (on page 88), a photo can feature the bear in its environment and the environment in the bear – showing why both are worth saving, all without stepping onto a soapbox. The photo itself explains why this place matters and why the beautiful, wild creature you see is dependent upon it.

Drama of Weather and Light

Light is often called the lifeblood of photography, and in wildlife photography that's mostly true regarding how the light illuminates the subject – whether front light, back light or diffused light. Because a telephoto lens has a narrow angle of view, the light on the landscape, clouds and sky is often ignored.

Elephants walking in a single file, Amboseli National Park, Kenya. Canon EOS R5, Canon RF 24-105mm f/4 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/1250 sec., f/10, ISO 800.

Above: Young lioness in tree, Serengeti National Park, Tanzania. Canon EOS 5D Mark IV, Canon EF 200-400mm f/4L IS USM Extender 1.4x. Exposure: 1/1600 sec., f/4, ISO 800.

Right: Gray langur monkeys, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka. Canon EOS 5D Mark IV, Canon EF 100-400mm f/4.5-5.6L IS II USM. Exposure: 1/1600 sec., f/6.3, ISO 2500.

Opposite: Black Rhino coming to drink in late evening light, Okaukuejo Camp, Etosha National Park, Namibia. Canon EOS R5, Canon RF 100-500mm f/4.5-7.1 L IS USM. Exposure: 1/1000 sec., f/8, ISO 1600.

Weather of every kind can inject emotional content into an image. From soft pink pastels in the predawn sky to ominous storm clouds on the horizon, the drama and feeling that weather and light create in a wildlife image can be captured only by expanding the frame and including those elements.

Gear

I will never leave for a wildlife photography trip without at least one telephoto lens, and that will never change. It's absolutely essential for many reasons, including the tight portrait when it's the only real option. But I also keep a midrange zoom mounted on one of my cameras — such as the Canon RF 24-105mm — for the inevitable moment when the surrounding environment is every bit as important as the primary wildlife subject.

I also find that telephoto zoom lenses such as the 100-400mm, 100-500mm or 200-600mm offer far more compositional versatility, allowing me to zoom out quickly to include striking foreground elements, mountains in the background or a perfectly placed tree that counterbalances the subject — without having to switch lenses or camera bodies.

Conclusion

As mentioned, most wildlife photographers reach for the longest lens first. If you've spent $10,000 on a super-telephoto, you might feel pressure to get the greatest return by using it whenever possible.

My initial impulse, however, is to look at the scene in its entirety and attempt to tell a story. The environmental wildlife photo is always my first look. If the surrounding environment does not tell much of a story, distracts or fails to provide compositional complexity that yields movement or balance, then I will zoom in for the tighter shot.

I'm not suggesting that you do exactly the same. You should create the images that inspire you as a photographer. All I ask is that you give the environmental portrait a chance.

When your eye is locked onto your subject through the barrel of your big 600mm lens, lift your head from the camera and take in the wider view for just a moment. Study the surrounding environment. Search for layers. Scan the sky for drama and atmosphere. Expand your wildlife photography portfolio with environmental perspectives that tell stories and fully engage your viewers. **OP**

See more of Richard Bernabe's work at richardbernabe.com.

Aurora Exploding Over the Black Church

Budir, Iceland

Text & Photography by Navaneeth Unnikrishnan

The Scene

It was late winter, and we were staying near Snaefellsjokull National Park in Iceland. After sunset, the sky began to clear just enough to reveal a faint aurora dancing overhead. Light pillars shimmered on the horizon — a promising sign.

We monitored vedur.is, Iceland's weather forecast site, watching for breaks in the cloud cover. When a clear patch appeared near the Black Church at Budir, we didn't hesitate. We quickly geared up and set out.

When we arrived, the aurora was already visible, though still faint. Then, almost as if on cue, it began to intensify — building slowly and deliberately. As we moved around the church, the corona shifted directly overhead and erupted into brilliant arcs of green and red. It was a breathtaking sight, almost overwhelming in its beauty.

The Gear

I used my Sony A1 paired with the Sony 14mm f/1.8 lens, one of my favorite combos for nightscapes and astro work. This lens is a go-to for both astrophotography and landscapes; its wide aperture is crucial for gathering as much light as possible.

A sturdy tripod was essential. I used a Gitzo GT3541 carbon fiber tripod, paired with a Gitzo center Ball Head, Series 4. Iceland's winds are no joke, and this setup provided the stability needed for long exposures.

No filters were used for this shot — I wanted to maximize light intake. To minimize camera shake from the shutter press, I also used a 2-second self-timer.

The Approach

My goal was to capture the grandeur of the aurora corona arching over the Black Church like an ethereal umbrella. The 14mm lens, while ultra-wide, made it challenging to fit both the church and the overhead display into a single frame. To solve this, I opted for a three-tile panorama, ensuring at least a 40% overlap between frames for seamless stitching.

Focusing was surprisingly straightforward. The Sony 14mm has a handy feature: when the camera powers on, the lens automatically focuses to infinity. I double-checked to confirm everything was sharp, but with the church more than two meters away, depth of field wasn't a major concern.

My camera settings were: 2 seconds at f/1.8, ISO 6400, with auto white balance. I shot in Raw format. I chose the relatively short shutter speed to preserve the aurora's detail and structure — longer exposures can blur its dynamic, shifting forms.

The main challenges were the cold and the relentless wind. The church was lit by a floodlight, which I temporarily blocked with my jacket to avoid overexposure. Light pollution from other photographers at this popular spot was harder to control. Once again, my sturdy Gitzo tripod proved essential for stabilizing long exposures in the gusty conditions.

The Final Image

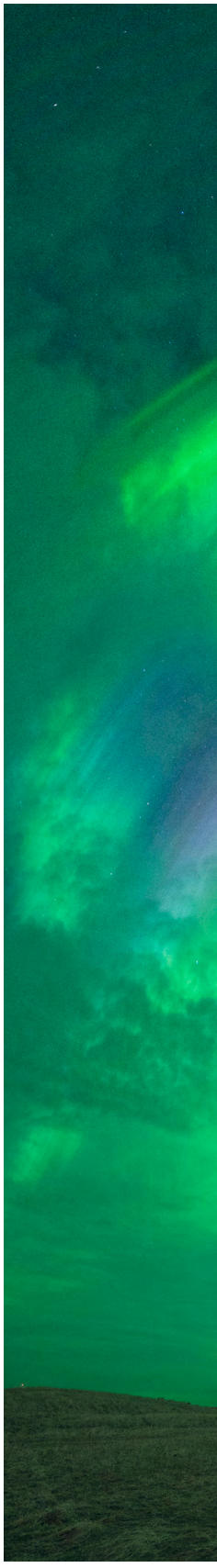
I'm very pleased with the final image. It captures the "aurora umbrella" effect I envisioned, with vibrant greens and hints of red contrasting beautifully against the dark silhouette of the Black Church. The shape and color of the aurora are what make the image truly stand out for me.

Looking back, the biggest lesson was that it's nearly impossible to both fully experience and perfectly capture such a dynamic event. There's always a tension between being present in the moment and focusing on the shot.

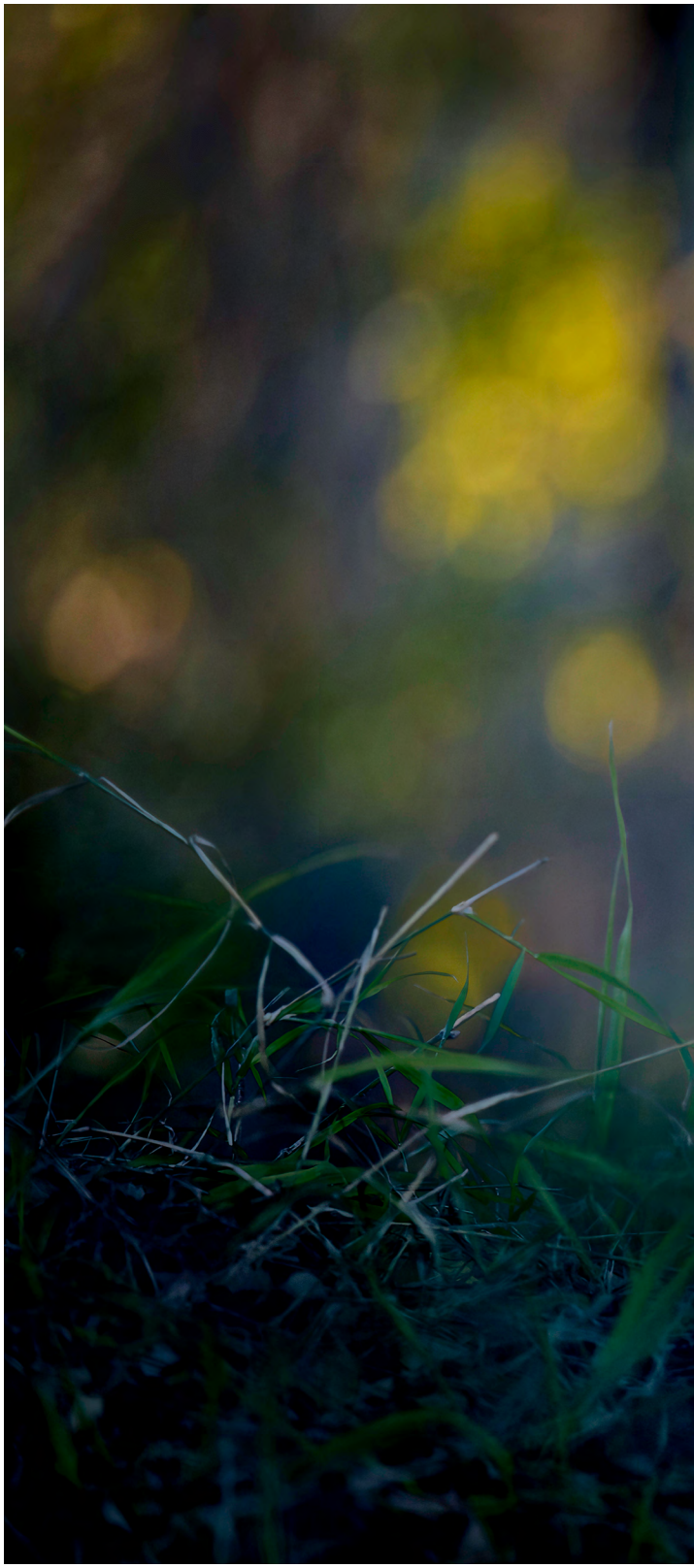
If I could change one thing, it would be having more control over the light pollution from nearby vehicles. Shooting in complete darkness would have been ideal.

My advice to anyone photographing the aurora in Iceland — or anywhere similar — is to invest in a sturdy tripod and a fast lens. Be prepared for the weather; it can be harsh depending on where you are. And be ready to improvise. Sometimes you have to make quick decisions to get the shot, just like I did with the panorama. **OP**

See more of Navaneeth Unnikrishnan's work at navaneethuk.com.



>>> Sony A1, Sony FE 14mm f/1.8 GM. Exposure: 2 sec., f/1.8, ISO 6400.



SLY FOX

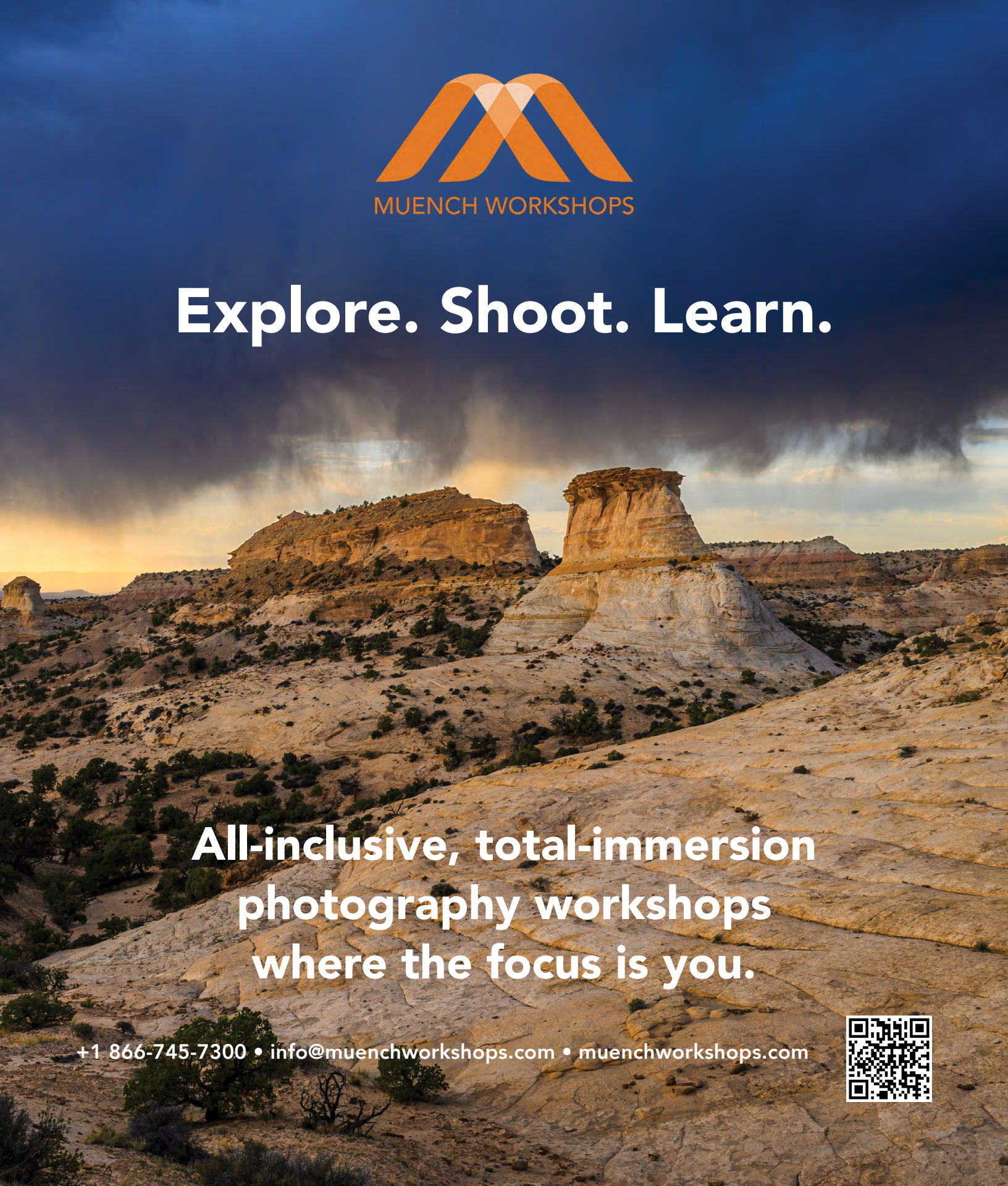
Kevin Lohman is a California-based photographer whose charming image of a "winking" fox was a finalist in the 2022 Comedy Wildlife Photography Awards. The story behind the shot is a reminder that the early bird really does catch the worm — or in this case, the fox — and that you should always be ready for that perfect, unexpected moment.

"I was out early one morning, hoping to spot one of the red foxes known to roam this area," explains Lohman.

"As I scanned the path ahead, I saw one slowly strolling to the edge of the tree line. It sat down, glanced side to side, then turned to look behind. That's when it caught my eye...and gave me a wink. I couldn't help but smile. A moment later, it rose and slipped silently into the forest, leaving behind nothing but that quiet, magical moment." **OP**

See more of Kevin Lohman's work at kevinlohman.com.

>>> *Nikon Z9, NIKKOR AF-S 180-400mm f/4E TC1.4 FL ED VR at 290mm, handheld. Exposure: 1/320 sec., f/4, ISO 5000.*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