

wild eye

2025.05

Jack Dykinga's Love Affair with the Land

Sergey Gorshkov on Russia's Endangered Cats

Alex Noriega's Search for Mystery in Photography

Ralph Pace's Relationship with Sea Otters



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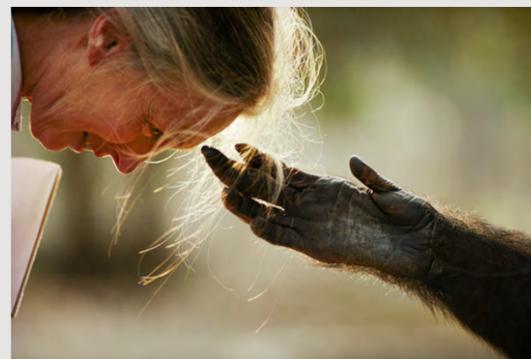
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BEHIND THE COVER

Words and Image by Jack Dykinga

Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona

Back in the days when only a handful of people knew of these candy-striped petrified sand dunes, I trekked the area, in circles, to find a magical place. When I finally found it, the wind was howling, and sand was blasting through the passes. On one such trip, my Toyo Field 4x5 camera took a wind-propelled nosedive down the sandstone cliff, landing with the 75mm Nikkor taking the hit. I made two more trips, making a few exposures, but they weren't quite right. I decided to take one last crack at the composition burned into my mind. Persistence finally paid off with an absolutely still pothole pool and a bleached root at the edge of the water in the pre-dawn stillness.

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Publisher's Message



WITH THE PASSING OF DR. JANE GOODALL, the world lost more than a scientist, activist, and conservation icon. We lost a symbol of something deeper: a generation that carried a quiet and enduring wisdom about our connection to nature.

Jane's work redefined the boundary between humans and animals. From her early *National Geographic* features to her speeches at the United Nations, she became a bridge across disciplines, cultures, and generations. She helped shift conservation from a niche concern to a global moral imperative.

At a time when science is often shadowed by culture wars, fast news, and shifting generational baselines, her passing feels symbolic. It feels like a vital thread in our connection to nature has come loose.

In honor of Jane, we've included Nick Nichols' iconic image of her in this issue. She leans in, while a chimpanzee reaches toward her head and glowing backlit hair. The image stands as a symbol of the kind of attention and respect the wild still deserves. It is not just a moment of trust. It is a reminder of what humility, patience, and empathy can achieve.

This issue of *Wild Eye* is a response to that loss, and a call to continue the work.

Nature photographers are responsible for bringing to light, the importance of the human bond with nature, and this issue carries that thread. Issue 5 of *Wild Eye* showcases landscapes and endangered species that need protecting and reminds us that we are all connected to nature and the planet, as Jane often reminded the world.

We feature an interview with Jack Dykinga, a Pulitzer Prize – winning photojournalist and one of the great living landscape photographers. Alongside him, Alex Noriega's immersive landscapes offer new ways of seeing familiar terrain. Sergey Gorshkov brings us into the shadows of Far Eastern Russia to witness Amur leopards and tigers in their stronghold, and Ralph Pace brings us face-to-face with sea otters along the California coast.

These are not just images. They are witnesses.

Wild Eye exists to awaken and inspire a new generation to cherish and defend what is left, and to remind us of the importance of the human connection to nature. That mission grows with every reader, every share, and every conversation.

JASON BRADLEY, PUBLISHER AND CONTENT DIRECTOR

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Nature's Knockout

WORDS AND IMAGE BY KEVIN ELSBY/
FLPA/MINDEN PICTURES

WORCESTERSHIRE, ENGLAND

Common kingfishers are remarkable hunters, and one of their most fascinating behaviors is how they stun their prey, typically small fish, before swallowing them.

To catch prey, the kingfisher dives from a perch or hovers briefly before plunging into the water to catch a fish using its sharp, pointed beak. The bird usually flies back to a perch to prepare its meal.

There, the kingfisher grips the fish in its beak and repeatedly beats it against the perch or another hard surface. This serves several purposes. By stunning or even killing the prey fish, the kingfisher prevents it from wriggling during swallowing. Breaking the fish's spine immobilizes it, aligning the fish properly for safe swallowing, usually head-first to avoid fins getting stuck.

Once the fish is subdued, the kingfisher tosses it into the air, catches it headfirst, and swallows it whole. This behavior is often quite dramatic and loud, especially when the perch is hard, making it a striking moment to witness or photograph.





Tracking the Invisible

The new frontier in wildlife forensics

WORDS AND IMAGES BY BRITTA JASCHINSKI

WILDLIFE CRIME has become a global operation — fast, complex, and deeply profitable. From illegal ivory and rhino horn to trafficked pangolins and tiger parts, the trade is driven by transnational criminal networks that move through supply chains connecting poachers, middlemen, corrupt officials, and end consumers.

Challenges and Solutions

Despite growing international efforts to curb it, successful prosecutions of wildlife criminals remain rare. Law enforcement faces major challenges: limited financial resources, jurisdictional barriers, and, perhaps most critically, a lack of hard evidence. Now, a new generation of forensic science is changing that.

In the fight to protect endangered species, conservationists and forensic experts are turning to investigative techniques long associated with serious human crimes — homicide, sexual assault, and organized violence. The same tools that are used to solve murders and rapes are now being used to solve wildlife crimes.

The principle is simple: Every contact leaves a trace. And it's on those traces — fingerprints, DNA, ballistic fragments, and biochemical residues — that investigators are beginning to build cases.

Wildlife CSI

Wildlife forensics focuses on collecting and analyzing evidence from animals, their body parts, and the tools used to hunt or move them. Bones, shells, fur, traps, vehicles, and weapons can all tell a story. Ivory and rhino horn become not just contraband but crime scenes. A single fingerprint on a tusk can link a poacher to a larger network. A fragment of DNA in a vial of “medicinal wine” can reveal the presence of an endangered species. But collecting this kind of evidence isn't straightforward.

Many wildlife materials have irregular surfaces — porous ivory, curved scales, fur, feathers — which makes lifting fingerprints extremely difficult. In hot or humid environments, traces degrade rapidly. Traditional forensic powders often fail to capture viable prints.

That changed with a breakthrough led by a forensic investigator at London's Metropolitan Police working with researchers at King's College London. Together, they researched known and untested forensic powders, resulting in a new magnetic fingerprint powder that can recover prints from wildlife items — including ivory — up to 28 days after contact. In some cases, even longer.

Instant Success

Over 200 fingerprinting kits based on this technology were distributed to border forces across 40 countries in Africa and Asia. The results were immediate.

In Kenya, evidence recovered using one kit led to 15 arrests, including five police officers, and the seizure of 11 elephant tusks. For the first time, ivory was not just proof of a crime; it was evidence of who committed it.

A white variant of the powder is now being used to recover prints from rhino horn, pangolin scales, and turtle shells. The powders are low-cost, field-deployable, and can be used in locations where DNA testing isn't feasible.

DNA, meanwhile, remains the gold standard for wildlife identification. In forensic labs, genetic material from animal tissue, blood, or fur can be used to identify species, determine geographic origin, assess whether the animal was wild or captive, and even match individual parts, like tusks, to a specific carcass.

It's now even possible to detect tiger DNA in traditional medicine and wine using a rapid multiplex quantitative PCR assay — a test that can identify multiple big cat species at once. This technology is crucial in prosecuting cases where wildlife products have been heavily processed or disguised.

P12-13: London, UK Using a newly developed magnetic powder, Mark Moseley, a forensic investigator at London's Metropolitan Police, dusts for and detects human fingerprints on an elephant tusk confiscated at Heathrow Airport.

↑ London, UK The surfaces of animal parts can be difficult to fingerprint. Officers from the CITES Border Force Team can now use a white magnetic powder to reveal human traces on rhino horn confiscated at Heathrow Airport.

→ London, UK Dr. Alexandra Thomas, wildlife crime and conservation training practitioner, uses a Crime Scene Investigation device to make human fingerprints visible on the scales of a confiscated pangolin, the world's most trafficked mammal.





Forensics Gone Global

Globally, there are only a dozen or so dedicated wildlife forensic labs across 10 countries, according to CITES (2022). These labs are working not only to solve individual cases but to build global databases of genetic and forensic information that can help trace trafficking routes and identify repeat offenders.

In the field, portable forensic devices are making these techniques more accessible. Multispectral imaging tools, adapted from crime scene investigation, can detect fingerprints, bodily fluids, and trace evidence on difficult surfaces like scales and shells. These handheld devices use UV, visible, and infrared light to reveal what would otherwise be invisible.

Researchers at the Zoological Society of London's wildlife forensic lab have explored tailoring devices for use in remote, resource-limited environments. But the biggest barrier isn't always the technology — it's that wildlife crimes are often not treated as crimes at all.

Law enforcement officers may not recognize a poaching site as a crime scene. They may not know how to preserve forensic evidence or call in experts. As a result, crucial evidence is lost, and cases collapse before they even begin. This is where awareness becomes as important as innovation.

Wildlife forensics isn't only about catching criminals — it's about deterrence. Criminal syndicates often see wildlife trafficking as low risk and high reward. The likelihood of being caught is minimal, but when they are, conviction rates are low, and penalties are often light. But as forensic science improves, that equation could shift.

The Big Picture

If poachers and traffickers know that a fingerprint can tie them to a seized tusk or that DNA in a bottle of wine can link them to a protected species, the perceived risk rises. Forensic evidence introduces accountability in a space that has long operated without it. And in doing so, it helps shift the status of wildlife crime from an environmental concern to a serious criminal offense.

The future of wildlife forensics isn't just in better tools or faster lab results. It's in integrating these tools into enforcement systems, training officers to recognize their value, and creating a culture where wildlife crime scenes are treated with the seriousness they deserve.

Behind every illegal tusk, scale, tooth, or claw is an animal that should still be alive. And now, the invisible traces left behind can help ensure that someone is held responsible.

See more of **Britta Jaschinski's** work, at www.brittaphotography.com.



↑ **Bonn, Germany** Millions of animals are killed annually by leg-hold traps, like the one pictured here. They might target certain animals, but they kill indiscriminately. Scientists at the laboratory for research at the Leibniz Institute for the Analysis of Biodiversity Change (LIB) are studying whether the remains of this cheetah might link back to a leg-hold trap.

← **London, UK** Researcher Louise Gibson, from the wildlife crime forensic lab at the Zoological Society of London, takes a sample from a tiger bottle full of "tiger bone wine." A rapid qPCR test can detect tiger DNA in processed products, helping to identify big cat species illegally poached.

Making a Crab Look Scary

Using unnatural lighting
to shoot an invasive species

WORDS AND IMAGES BY SHANE GROSS

W

WHEN I MOVED TO VANCOUVER ISLAND

on Canada's West Coast during Covid, I felt like a child, naïve to my new world. I started researching the conservation issues in my new backyard and found I wasn't the only new resident to British Columbia. I can only hope my actions are far less destructive than the invasive European green crab.

I began to wonder how I could photograph the small, palm-sized, unspectacular-looking crabs in a way that would convey the gravity of just how scary they are here. I watched a few movies about terrifying aliens for inspiration and found the original film "Alien," directed by Ridley Scott, to be especially helpful. That's when I realized "it's the lighting, stupid!"

P18-19: Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada A European green crab invades the waters of Canada's west coast, where their numbers have exploded and their damage is incalculable.

→ **Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada** The calm water and beautiful setting hide the damage underwater caused by the invasive European green crabs. This is habitat for salmon, herring, and countless other species. Keeping the crabs at bay allows native species, which rely on seagrass, to thrive.





Why So Scary?

Known as one of the world's most destructive invasive species, European green crabs (*Carcinus maenas*) have caused chaos along both coasts of North America and around the world outside of their native range in Europe and North Africa. European green crabs outcompete many local crab species. Worse is that they dig up shellfish in eelgrass meadows, uprooting the seagrass that's an important habitat for juvenile salmon, herring, rockfish, and many other marine animals. Seagrass is also an important carbon sink, being 35 times more efficient at storing carbon than rainforests. These crabs can quickly destroy entire meadows of seagrass.

The crabs first arrived from Europe and North Africa to North America's east coast in the 1800s, likely in the ballast of ships. Today, they're deeply entrenched on the east coast of the United States and Canada, where they wreak havoc on local ecosystems. It's thought they arrived in California in the 1980s, hitching a ride on ships travelling through the Panama Canal. Since then, they've been marching north, reaching British Columbia in 1989. Almost everywhere our ships go with suitable habitat, so to have the crabs. They're now established in Australia, South Africa, South America, and, of course, both coasts of North America.

The crabs begin life as tiny larvae, drifting in ocean currents, expanding their territory little by little to wherever is suitable, like the seemingly endless shallow inlets and estuaries of Vancouver Island. But they're not everywhere, yet. If their arrival is caught early enough, they can be kept at bay. So far, the Salish Sea between Vancouver Island and the mainland is green crab free. However, given how remote and complex these ecosystems are, more outbreaks are highly likely.

So, you can understand why I wanted to make an image that would grab people's attention and have them feel fear of these aliens.

Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada A European green crab invades a seagrass meadow. One of the reasons the crabs are so destructive is that they dig for shellfish in seagrass beds, which uproot the vital plants.

→ **Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada** A team from the Coastal Restoration Society sets traps to catch the invasive crabs. They have virtually zero bycatch, and in areas where they trap, they've seen signs of ecosystem recovery, such as seagrass taking root once again.

↓ **Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada** A team from the Coastal Restoration Society hauls up a trap full of invasive European green crabs. The team works full-time trapping the crabs, in partnership with the Ahousaht First Nation, to keep the ecosystem healthy.



The Scouting

After some digging online, I found the Coastal Restoration Society (CRS), a non-profit organization that's actively trapping green crabs to help save our eelgrass beds. They led me to a dock where they set traps to get the invasive crabs out of the water. I could also scuba dive from dock.

The first couple of dives were during the day to understand the seascape and how the crabs would react to me. There were lots of crabs, but you'd have to search for a minute or two to find one, as it's not like they're piling on top of each other. Most crabs were shy, but there were a few that would approach me. I don't know if it was curiosity or aggression, but it sure felt like the latter. They would dart at the camera, trying in vain to claw the dome port with their pincers.

The day dives were good for getting other shots I wanted that would help tell the story. I wanted to show the "before" and "after." The "before" part would be in an area where there's still some seagrass because the crabs have recently arrived. The "after" would be a barren seascape filled with empty shells and mud. I'm grateful my contacts at the CRS could easily point me in the right direction for both.

Failing

As the sun set and the world got quiet, butterflies arrived in my stomach. It's always a little creepy getting into the ocean alone as the light fades, even if it's only a few feet of depth. I was surprised that the crabs acted much the same at night as they did during the day, except I saw more of them.

I tried to plant a flashgun behind a few crabs to backlight, but they moved too quickly, and I abandoned plan A after a short time. Plan B was to find the right individual who'd let me close and hold a light behind them. The results didn't work. I didn't have enough detail on the crab for the viewer to read what was happening, so I had to turn on my front strobes and try to balance front with back light. When I did that, it also lit up my strobe arm. I wouldn't get the shot tonight.

Getting the Shot

I went home feeling defeated. I knew there was a shot there; I just needed to get the light in the right place. I started playing with strobe arms, connecting them into one long, curved pole. Maybe with the right curve, the arm would be out of the shot and still behind the crab, leaving me mobile enough to compose the right shot. A couple of weeks later, I went back to the same location and worked it. It took an entire dive to find the right individual crab personality and line everything up, but I got one frame that I like. It was worth it.

Making this image allowed me to learn about my new home on Vancouver Island and, hopefully, help make it a better place.

See more of **Shane Gross'** work at www.shanegross.com.

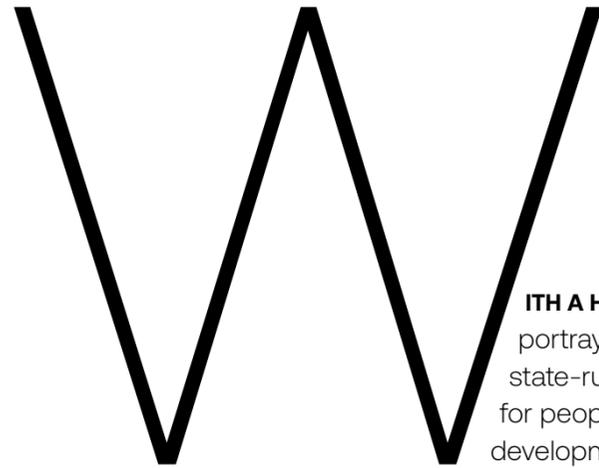




Bearing Witness

Jack Dykinga's lifelong
love affair with the land

IMAGES BY JACK DYKINGA
INTERVIEW BY MIRIAM STEIN BATTLES



WITH A HEARTRENDING
portrayal of life inside
state-run facilities
for people with
developmental disabilities,

Jack Dykinga won a Pulitzer Prize for feature photography in 1971 at just 28 years old. For most, that would be a career-defining achievement. For Dykinga, then a photographer with the *Chicago Sun-Times*, it was merely the end of the first chapter.

Not long after receiving the award, he and his wife traded the urban grit of Chicago for the open horizons of the Southwest, which would bring him peace after photographing difficult subjects for years.

Settling in Tucson, where he and his wife still live today, Dykinga turned to large-format nature photography. His landscapes — violent yet serene, meditative yet mind-bending, monumental yet delicate — radiate with stories and enlist viewers as witnesses to nature's beauty. Dykinga's work is celebrated as much for its ability to inspire and educate as it is for its artistic and technical excellence.

P26-27: Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming Grand Prismatic Spring at sunset gives way to terraces of bacteria mats and red algae ribbons.

→ **Chihuahuan Desert, Mexico** A cluster of flowering barrel cacti and yuccas set against the Sierra Madre in the background.



Wild Eye's Miriam Stein Battles spoke with Dykinga about the intersection of art and photojournalism, the movie in his mind's eye, and why photographing cranes isn't all that different from covering ice hockey.

MIRIAM STEIN BATTLES: What first drew you to photography? And when did you realize it could be your life's work?

JACK DYKINGA: You probably are all too young to remember Arthur Rothstein at *Look* magazine, but I won the high school photo contest when I was a sophomore, and he was one of the judges. That, plus being dyslexic and left-handed, I've always been a visual person. While other kids were reading, I was watching pictures.

MSB: How do you feel dyslexia affected your choice to be an artist?

JD: I hate the word "artist." I think art is something that the next generation decides. I would consider myself a recorder, a documentarian of the times. And if I do that honestly and well, then I've succeeded.

MSB: I hate to break it to you, but most of your colleagues would probably call your work art.

JD: Well, it's nice.

MSB: It's a compliment.

JD: I think that some people are born with a certain way of seeing. You see things, and your mind automatically is arranging a composition. I cannot turn off the movie. It's the way I look at the world. If I'm going for a hike, I'm seeing all these juxtapositions as I walk.

MSB: Tell me more about being a professional nature photographer versus a "fine" artist.

White Sands National Monument, New Mexico Unique white gypsum dunes dotted with yuccas, partially buried amid the dunes, colored by a crimson sunset.





↑ **Havasupai Reservation, Arizona** Havasu Falls cascades behind cottonwood trees bathed in glowing sunset light reflected off the canyon walls.

→ **Havasupai Reservation, Arizona** The waters of Havasu Falls roar down from towering red rocks into terraced pools of blue and turquoise waters below.



JD: As a working professional, every time I go out, I'm going to come back with publishable images. Maybe two would rise to that next level, to what you might call "art." Usually the ones that are the most appealing for publications and have the most impact are just too gonzo for fine art. It's often the delicate, whispering shots that are the ones I can look at the longest.

MSB: You started your career in photojournalism and even won a Pulitzer Prize. Did that background shape the way you photograph landscapes today?

JD: I still consider myself a photojournalist. It's just that the subject matter has changed. It's not anthropocentric anymore.

MSB: You were integral in founding the International League of Conservation Photographers. Is there any one photo you'd say had the most impact in terms of conservation?

JD: The photo that iLCP said was among the best nature images — that dead root in a pool of water surrounded by petrified sand dunes. This image contributed to the designation of the Grand Staircase-Escalante Canyons area as a national monument.

MSB: Your work has historically focused on the deserts and the canyons of the American Southwest. What drew you to this landscape?

JD: It's a love affair. I'm totally smitten by the way the light plays across the untrammelled landscape. Photographers love texture. And when the light can sweep horizontally from horizon to horizon, all that little irregularity is emphasized, between cool and warm light, and it's just intoxicating.

Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico Migrating snow geese taking off in blurred flight during morning liftoff over partially frozen ponds along the Rio Grande drainage basin.





Sonoran Desert, Arizona Saguaro cacti stand steady during a summer monsoon storm on Arizona State Trust land just outside of Redrock.



MSB: You've said that landscapes are never static. How do you approach a scene to reveal its living, changing qualities?

JD: It's about moving at a slower pace. It may be moving at the pace of a tree. We're running through life at rocket-propelled speeds, and the environment is putting down roots at a very slow rate. The change is always going on. It's training yourself to see it.

MSB: For example, your photo of the saguaro cacti with the lightning bolts during the storm. How did you approach that scene to reveal all of the different elements?

JD: It's a slow, deliberate process. You're watching apps with radar movements of storms. You're lining yourself up with possible roads that parallel and intersect. You're running out into the storm with the hair on your neck standing up. Sometimes you get really lucky. This storm just progressed right across the frame.

MSB: Yes — the rainbow as well.

JD: Only experience can tell you the way that the storm is tracking. You're basically setting up an image knowing that you're not going to be able to turn the camera at all.

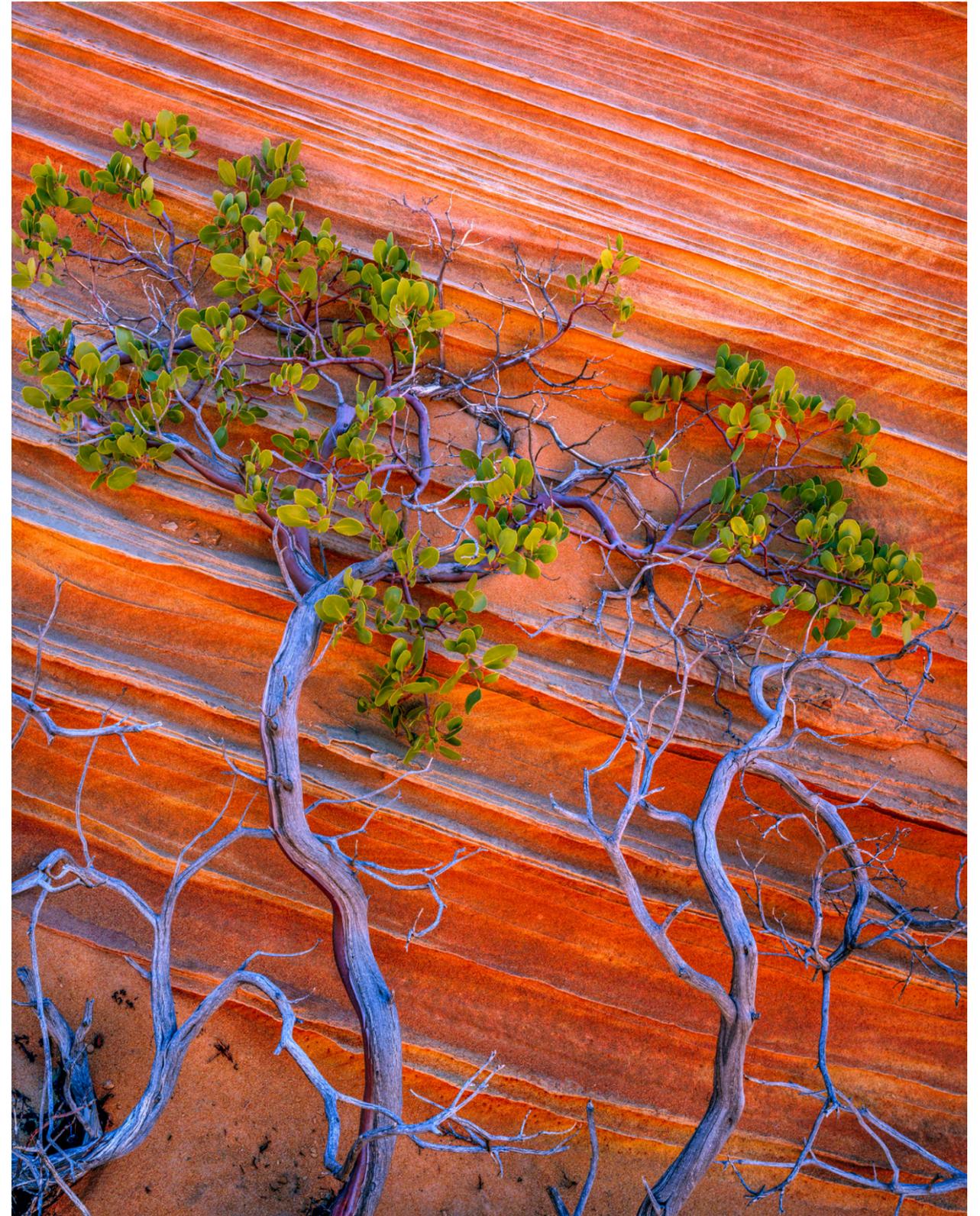
Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, near Alpine, Arizona A crosshatch landscape of patterned shadows, felled trees, and charred trunks gives way to new green growth lining the forest floor.



Torres del Paine National Park, Chile A beech tree clings to the cliffs above El Salto Grande, where the glacial waters from Nordenskjold Lake pour into Pehoe Lake.



Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah
Ponderosa pinecones and driftwood collect in a pool after swirling around the Colorado River through the canyon.



Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, Arizona Petrified sand dunes showcase red and yellow banding and climbing pointleaf manzanita, glowing from the vibrant morning light.

MSB: So, it's not just about the camera and your gear and composing a good picture?

JD: It's f/11 and be there — and stay there. Let the storm march right on through the frame.

MSB: Ok, that sounds unpredictable.

JD: But for every one of those magical shots, there are a thousand failed attempts. I think the average person thinks you just drive up and get the photograph. But every photograph that I've made — with a few exceptions — is something I really worked at. I planned and went back multiple times until I got the shot I envisioned.

MSB: Tell me a little bit more about your shift from landscape to bird photography.?

JD: All my friends, all these wildlife photographers, they're kind of surprised. But I was photographing hockey games in Chicago. You can't get much more fast action. It was not that big of a leap to go from speedy hockey players to fast-flying birds.

MSB: But what inspired you to shift from landscapes to wildlife?

JD: I always liked wildlife photography, but I didn't want to commit to a whole new set of expensive lenses. The other thing is curiosity. By going into bird photography, I was bringing in a whole new dimension of my interests in the natural world. Sometimes the birds would be incidental; sometimes it wouldn't be a bird. Sometimes it's prairie dogs, which I'm doing right now. Or burrowing owls. But with each one of these projects, you find yourself being schooled by the animal that you're photographing.

→ **Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, New Mexico** A great blue heron silently stalks prey in a lagoon in the bosque during fog inversion.

P46-47: Sonoran Desert, Arizona A solar plasma ejection reached deep into the Southwestern United States in October 2024, bringing crimson and magenta colors of the aurora borealis to the desert sky. Emblematic saguaro cacti are silhouetted against the vividly colored sky.







Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Utah Coyote Creek cascades through sculpted sandstone with Fremont cottonwoods showcasing fall colors.



Big Bend National Park, Texas Cerro Castellan, a volcanic peak surrounding volcanic tuff badlands, with lone ocotillo, glows pink under sunset-colored storm clouds.



MSB: Can you describe a moment in the field where you felt most connected to the land you were photographing?

JD: The first one was after my lung transplant in 2014, about four years after I was first diagnosed with a progressive lung disease. I returned to Boulder, Utah — and I'm going to probably cry now — I crested the hill and drove into Boulder, and I just started tearing faucets. It was just such a joy to be back. And the wildlife — I'm actually chomping at the bit to see the sandhill cranes return because it's such a festival and affirmation of life.

MSB: I do love your crane photos.

JD: These guys have been flying the same routes since the Pleistocene. In that scheme of time, we're a blip. To be there, to bear witness to these birds that remember the route without error every time — it inspires awe, respect, and love. People sometimes say, "You've been there a thousand times." But the truth of the matter is I go there to photograph, sure— but mostly I go there to celebrate life.

See more of **Jack Dykinga's** work at www.dykinga.com.

Whitewater Draw Preserve, Arizona Murmurations of swirling tight formations of yellow-headed blackbirds returning to their roost at sunset, diving and rising to confuse predators.



Cats in the Cold

Big cats in Far Eastern Russia

WORDS AND IMAGES BY SERGEY GORSHKOV



A

LTHOUGH RUSSIAN, I SPENT MANY YEARS photographing leopards in Africa. My images from the Okavango Delta were published around the world, and each trip pulled me back to

the savannas, to the golden light, to the elegance of those spotted cats. Africa felt like the center of my photographic life, and in many ways it was.

But one day, in the middle of all those journeys, a simple thought struck me: My own homeland is also home to leopards. Not the African kind, but the rare Amur leopard of the Far East. It was so obvious, and yet I had overlooked it for years. That realization landed heavily on me. How could I, a Russian, celebrate Africa's leopards while ignoring the fate of the leopards in my own country?

That moment changed the course of my life. I knew I had to turn my attention from Africa to Russia, from the savannas to the Far Eastern taiga. I committed myself to five years of work in Land of the Leopard National Park, determined to photograph the Amur leopard and the Siberian (Amur) tiger, the rarest of all the big cats.

P52-53: Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East Siberian (Amur) tigers have evolved perfect adaptations to their cold habitats. They have longer and denser fur than any other tiger subspecies. During autumn, they build a thick layer of body fat for insulation in temperatures that can drop to as low as minus 22 degrees Fahrenheit. Siberian tigers have large, broad, and heavily furred paws that allow them to walk easily and silently on thick snow. Additionally, their excellent senses help them detect prey in dense, snow-covered forests.

← **Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East** With the Amur leopard being classified as "critically endangered," the size of the Ussuri region's leopard population is of utmost importance. Recent reports estimate that about 129 adult Amur leopards are living in the protected wild of Land of the Leopard National Park. These numbers represent a significant increase over past decades. For example, in 2007, the wild population was estimated to be only about 25 to 35 individuals.



The greatest gift I could imagine was not only to see these animals myself but to show them to others: to Moscow officials who write policies, to the villagers who share their land with these predators, to Russians who may never travel to the Far East. I wanted to say that these are not distant symbols. They are our heritage, our pride, and our responsibility. Only we can decide whether the world's northernmost and rarest big cats will survive. Will we act in time so that our children and grandchildren might one day see them in the wild?

A Complicated Landscape

Today Russia, like the rest of the world, faces serious social and political problems. Many Russians live with economic uncertainty, political tension, or daily struggles that feel far removed from questions of wildlife. Some might reasonably ask me, "Sergey, do you really think there is nothing more important to do than worry about tigers and leopards?"

My answer is simple: *Yes. Exactly that. Yes, today.*

Of course, I understand the skepticism. Culturally, Russians often place human survival and national pride far above environmental issues. For decades, people have been told that prosperity, security, or political strength matter more than the natural world. In this climate, conservation can appear like a luxury — something we can postpone until times are easier.

← **Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East** Amur leopards call many habitats their domain, and like most wild big cats, they balance their time between resting, patrolling, hunting, and scouting. They're thought to spend 2 to 5 hours per day walking their territory, marking trails and trees with their unique urine, investigating scents left by other leopards, and searching for prey. It's estimated they sleep up to 20 hours per day.

P58-59: Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East In Russia, the Amur leopard lives at the limit of its distribution, and density estimates are rising, as there has been a remarkable population growth over the last 25 years. In 2000, the leopard population hit a rock bottom of 22 to 30 individuals. Now, there are an estimated 129 individuals, but they might have reached the carrying capacity of their habitat.



But in my view, postponement is fatal. By separating ourselves from the big cats, by cutting our ties with the taiga, we lose more than wildlife. We lose hope, dignity, and the very qualities that make us human. A country that cannot keep its great animals alive is a country that risks losing its soul.

Big Cats in Danger

Poaching remains the greatest direct threat to big cats. It is a tragedy not just in Russia but globally: populations of big cats have dwindled to a fraction of their historical population sizes. When you add in unreported cases of poaching, it is likely that hundreds or even thousands of big cats are killed every year.

Here in Russia, the numbers are terrifyingly small. Only about 120 Amur leopards and around 600 Siberian tigers survive in the wild. Every single individual matters. Losing even one is a blow to the species.

Poachers do not only kill the cats themselves. They target deer and wild boar for bushmeat, depriving the cats of their prey. Snares set for smaller animals often maim or kill tigers and leopards by accident. Forests are logged illegally, destroying habitat for both predator and prey alike. Each of these forces — bullets, snares, saws — erode the fragile balance of the taiga.

Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East

The Siberian tiger is considered the northernmost tiger species, living in colder environments than its cousins. These tigers begin to grow their thick winter fur in the fall. This allows them to face the first frosts well prepared. Winter fur is thicker and longer than summer fur, so it retains heat much better and prevents the tiger from freezing even in severely subzero temperatures.



Photography as a Weapon

I cannot physically stop poachers. I cannot guard every tree or chase away every hunter. But my camera is my weapon. It works slowly, quietly, invisibly. A photograph is a single real second in the life of a living tiger or leopard. Yet that second, once published, can resonate for years.

Wildlife photography carries an invisible energy. It seeps into people's consciousness. It makes us pause, reflect, and reconsider our relationship with the natural world. Every photograph is a reminder that something precious and irreplaceable still survives, and that it depends on us.

With my photographs, I try to make a small contribution to conservation, a drop in a vast sea. It may sound idealistic, but I believe images can make this world a better place — for people as well as for wildlife.

A Passion Project

The thought that first came to me in Africa — that my own country had leopards of its own — stayed with me for years. At first it was just a distant idea, something easy to push aside while I focused on the savannas and the familiar rhythm of my African projects. But the more I traveled, the harder it became to ignore. That quiet realization grew into a calling. If I truly wanted to understand the bond between people and animals, I had to turn my camera homeward.

By 2019, after years of preparation and reflection, that once-distant thought became a mission. I began the most unusual and ambitious project of my life: Russia's Big Cats: My Dream, Passion, and Obsession.

Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East

The Amur leopard is a solitary, predominantly crepuscular animal, sleeping most of the day and becoming active during the transitional periods of dawn and dusk. This activity is often an adaptation to avoid predators, utilize cooler temperatures, or capitalize on specific light conditions for hunting or foraging.





← Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East

Known for living in one of the coldest and most remote habitats of any big cat species, the Siberian tiger is well-adapted for life in its natural, chilly habitat. Dense taiga, rugged mountains, hilly terrain, and icy river valleys form the remote, frozen wilderness it calls home. "Taiga" refers to the world's largest land biome, known as the boreal forest, characterized by cold, long winters and warm summers with evergreen coniferous trees.

↑ Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East

Big cats need large territories primarily due to their ecological needs and solitary behavior. Their prey, like deer and boar, is widely dispersed, so they require large areas to find enough food. The territory size a tiger needs varies depending on sex, prey density, habitat quality, and human disturbance. A Siberian tiger's territory can range from roughly 100 to 400 square miles, not always falling within protected boundaries.



My dream carried me deep into the Ussuri taiga, which became my home. After a long journey by planes, by roads, and finally by rough tracks, I reached the Borisovskoye Plateau in the northern section of Land of the Leopard National Park. Both Amur leopards and Siberian (Amur) tigers roam this wilderness. The Chinese border is closer than the nearest human settlement. Here, distances are not measured in kilometers or miles, but in hours of travel, days of hardship, and sometimes weeks of isolation.

I arrived with everything I needed: Nikon cameras, lenses, underwater housings, mounts, and Browning trail cameras. I knew that if I forgot even one small piece, a cable or a bolt, the expedition could fail. When the car that had brought me departed, silence fell, absolute and heavy.

By the riverbank, I thought of my childhood in the Siberian taiga. Every Saturday, I would wait for the television program "In the World of Animals." I watched black-and-white footage of hunting brigades. Back then, tigers and leopards were trophies, not treasures. I could never have imagined that 50 years later I would be here, in their forest, trying to capture not their deaths but their lives.

On that cold January day, I began my odyssey. The taiga is no Africa. There are no open plains, no predictable sightings. The forests are dense, impenetrable, and endless. Tigers and leopards are shy shadows. They see you, but you do not see them.

Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East This female Siberian tiger is territorial marking by rubbing her cheek against an ancient Manchurian fir tree. These trees act like a "message board" — a kind of olfactory bulletin board where tigers check in, read who's been there, and leave their own scent. The vast majority of these trees are located not at the edge of territories but in the places where the paths of the forest animals will most likely cross. By leaving marks on trees, tigers exchange information about their species, gender, and even age.





P68-69: Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East Amur leopards reproduce extremely slowly. Females seek contact with males by visiting places where the males are most likely to be found. The females follow a maze of scent-marked trails to locate males and they themselves mark trails to let the male leopards know they're interested in mating.

← Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East Siberian tigers love to climb into caves, so much so that one could call them "cave cats." A significant number of their temporary and permanent lairs can be attributed to caves and rocky niches and shelters, where one can often find discarded bones of prey.



A New Path

In this reality, I had no choice but to rely on camera traps. At first, I thought of them as an aid — a complement to my usual work. Later I realized they were the only true way forward.

From the outside, it seems simple: set the camera, go home, wait for the shutter to trigger. But that is only the illusion. To make a photograph using a camera trap, one that is not just a record but a work of art, requires vision, planning, and enormous patience.

Trail-camera photography transforms you into more than a photographer. You become technician, director, artist, and producer all at once. Every setting, every placement, every angle must anticipate the movements of an animal you may never even glimpse.

I placed cameras near a fir tree marked with tracks. Many times I failed. Sometimes a tiger shifted the camera. Once, a curious bear destroyed a bracket. Another time, a camera misfired and left me with thousands of empty frames. Each failure stung, but I did not lose hope.

Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East One can distinguish between the presence of a “winter” and “summer” menu. In winter, ungulates are of the greatest importance. The summer menu includes ungulates but also the raccoon dog, Manchurian hare, and badger.



← **Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East** The relationship with humans is complex for Siberian tigers in Russia. People hunted them to the brink of extinction. Now, due to raised awareness and consideration, people have helped the population grow. This population growth has also raised a critical issue. The animals now need more space and food, but, once again, human activity interferes through logging, fires, poaching, and habitat encroachment.

P76-77: Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East The tiger slowly and even leisurely wanders through his domain. The snow springs softly under his huge paws. He seems absent-minded, but this is a facade—at any moment, he can turn into a formidable predator, with strength unlike that of any other big cat or terrestrial predator.





The Magic

Then came the moment I had been waiting for. As I approached one of the camera trap boxes, I saw fresh tiger paw prints pressed into the snow, leading straight to the fir tree. My heart hammered. My hands shook as I opened the case.

You never know what awaits inside. Perhaps nothing at all. Perhaps only a blurry curious face. But that day, months of frustration gave way to joy. A female Amur leopard had passed. At least three tigers had come. There were also photos of bears, foxes, squirrels and even a pine marten.

And then — the image of my dreams. A tigress hugging the fir tree, pressing her massive body against the bark, her power and tenderness revealed in a single embrace. That photograph was worth every disappointment, every frozen night, every empty frame.

Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East

Leopard mothers are very caring. For the first year and a half of their cubs' lives, they accompany and protect them, finding them shelter, bringing them prey, and teaching them how to hunt. The cubs can only learn from their mothers' experiences. The hardest part for young leopards is surviving their first year of life in the taiga, where the laws of nature prevail and only the strongest survive.





A New Responsibility

As I worked on this project, I kept asking myself the same question: What more can we do to save our big cats?

The Russian government has made progress. Laws have been passed, reserves established, funding directed toward protection. But the struggle is far from over. Protection on paper does not guarantee survival in the field.

The truth is simple: the Ussuri taiga cannot live without the tiger and leopard. They are the architects of balance, the keepers of silence. If their roars were to vanish, the forest itself would cry out in grief.

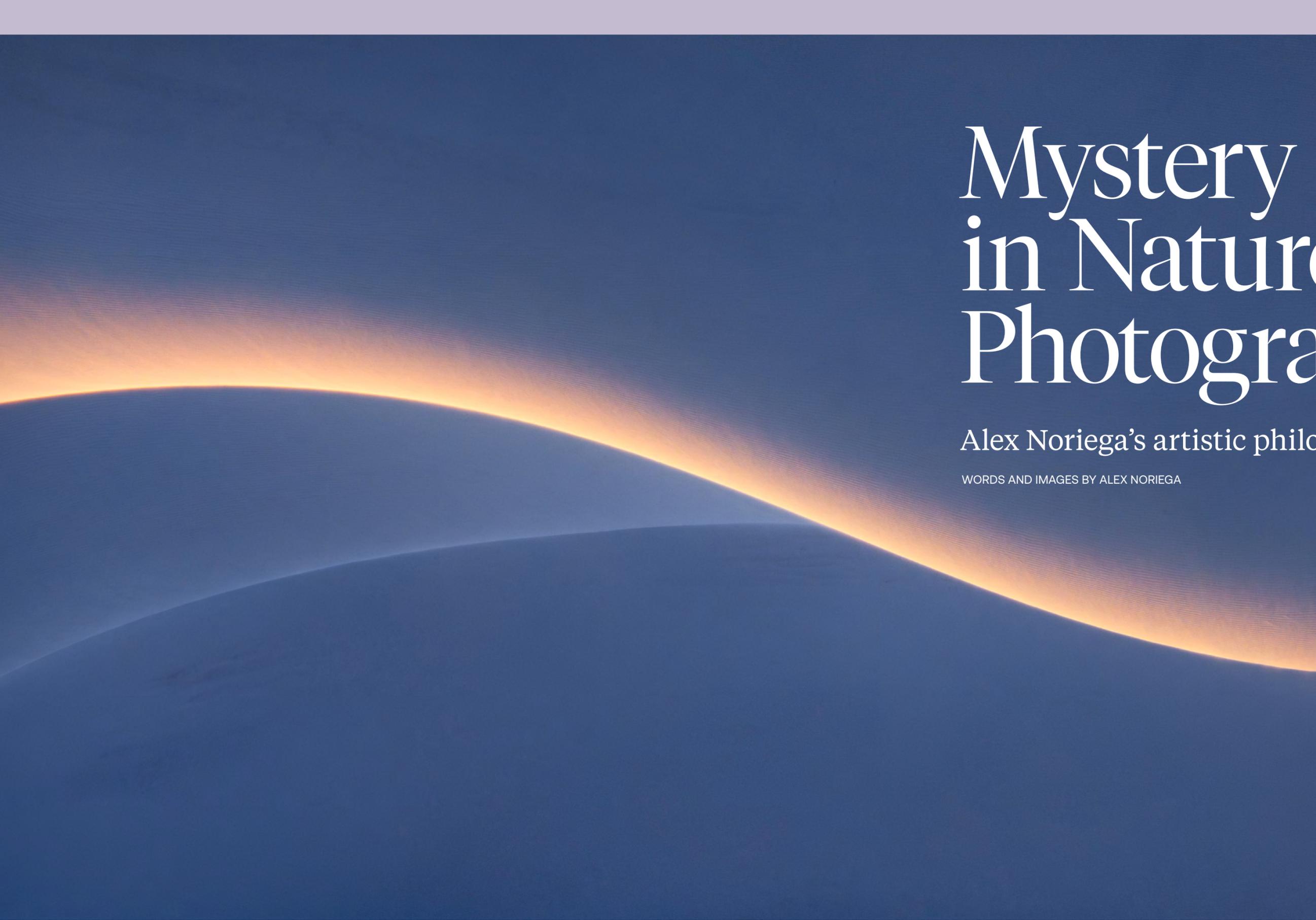
Saving them requires more than laws or even photographs. It requires a change of heart, a shift in how Russians — from politicians to villagers — see their relationship with the wild. It requires courage, cooperation, and pride in something beyond human achievement.

The story of these big cats is still being written. My hope is that when our children inherit the taiga, they will inherit it with the leopard's shadow and the tiger's roar intact. That, more than anything, will mean we have secured our future.

See more of **Sergey Gorshkov's** work at www.mindenpictures.com.

P80-81: Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East The Amur leopard can thrive in any landscape. Its permanent habitats are large mountain formations with ledges, cliffs, and outcrops, alternating with gentle and steep slopes covered with oak and cedar forests. The leopard's coat color changes with the seasons. Its summer coat is shorter and has brighter, more saturated tones than its winter coat. Some individuals exhibit a faded coat from May to June, when the winter coat is replaced by a summer coat.

← **Land of the Leopard National Park, Russian Far East** The autumn forest is full of life. Golden autumn on the Borisovskoye plateau is the brightest, most beautiful time, ablaze with the gold of oaks and the fire of maples. Nature is preparing for sleep, and winter will soon come into its own. In autumn, the leopard's coloring becomes especially effective in camouflaging him from the main color of the forest—the orange fall of oak leaves and dry yellow ferns.



Mystery in Nature Photography

Alex Noriega's artistic philosophy

WORDS AND IMAGES BY ALEX NORIEGA

BELIEVE DEEP REFLECTION

and self-evaluation are essential components of artistic growth. I often look back on my best images and ask myself what made them so effective or impactful and what I might do differently now. I find this practice especially helpful after a hiatus, as I'm diving back into photography. It reminds me of what I'm capable of and hints at what direction I might take. After some time away, I've even caught myself feeling surprised that I'm the person who created all this work. This makes some sense, as photographs are reflections of who we are at the time we create them — and I'm no longer quite the same person I was in the past.

Regardless of when my favorite images were made, as I evaluate them, I realize there are three important qualities that apply almost universally: they were unplanned, their design makes them easy to read, and they engage the imagination.

P84-85: Death Valley, California Wind and the golden light of sunset work together to emphasize the crest of a sand dune, showcasing its sinuous form with simplicity.

→ **San Juan Mountains, Colorado** An extremely shallow depth of field creates a dreamlike impression of red aspen leaves on a mountain lakeshore.





← **Yosemite Valley, California** The famous Bridalveil Fall appears to plunge into trees floating in darkness due to a rare alignment of light occurring at a specific time of day and year.

↑ **Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, California** A long exposure reveals a brilliant pink glow upon layers of badlands at twilight, following a colorful sunset.

The Unexpected

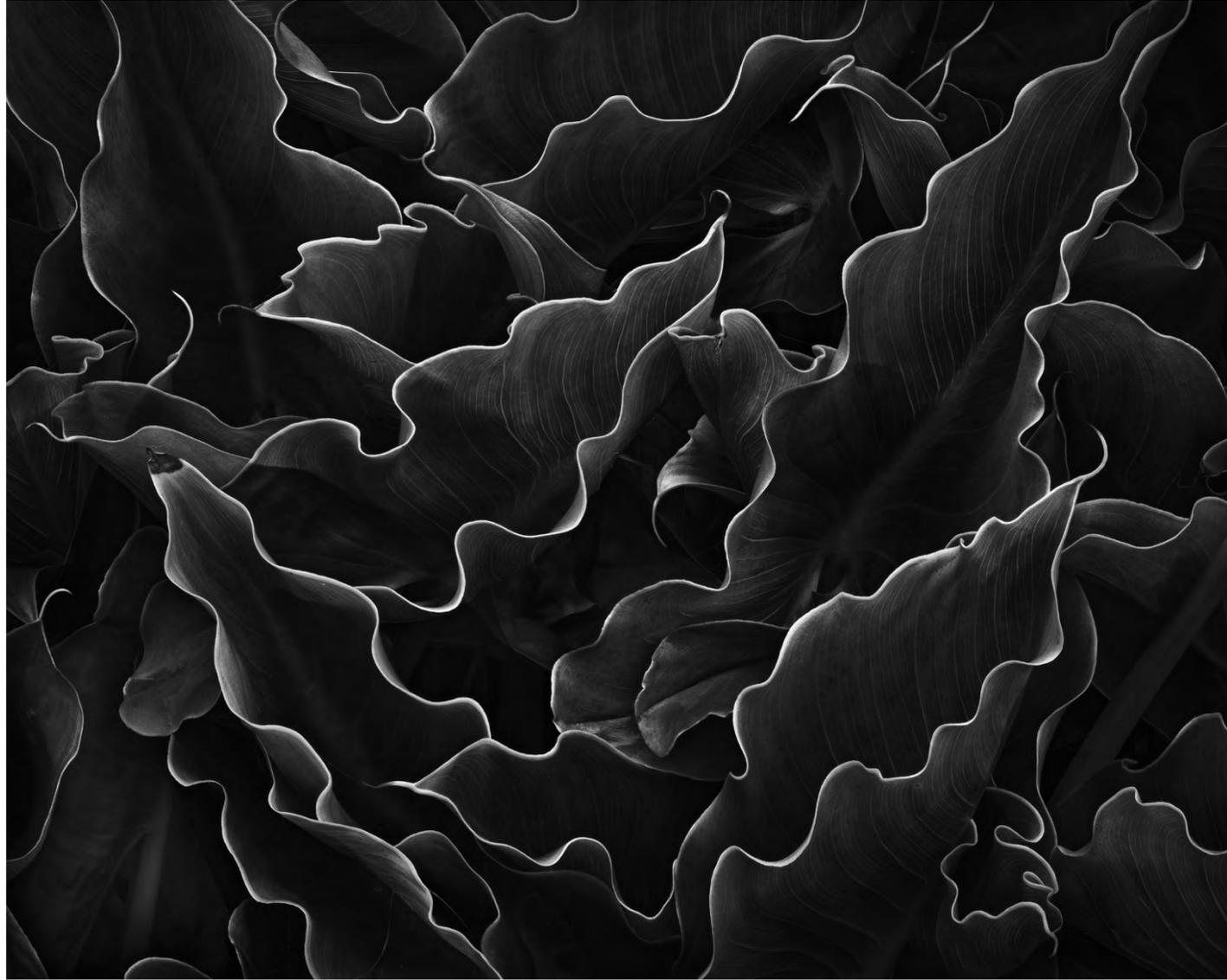
In the early stages of my journey, I was at least partially motivated by external validation, and I was basing my ideas on what I had seen done by others. I'd thus travel to known locations with particular compositions and specific conditions in mind that were conceived well in advance. These expectations were a recipe for disappointment. Furthermore, they led to predictable photographs that didn't engage the imagination. Viewers were able to understand them in an instant. Perhaps worst of all, they didn't reflect anything unique about me as an artist or a person.

Once my interest in making such images waned, my process began to change. Instead of being driven to produce a certain quantity of work or fulfill an expectation, I was motivated to find something new — something me. This required letting go of the idea that any given outing would necessarily guarantee photographs. Nature can't be controlled like a studio environment, and we're at its mercy. Why be disappointed when it doesn't conform to our expectations?

I began to go out with my camera and wander. I found that when I opened myself up to quiet observation of my surroundings, without the self-imposed pressure to fulfill a quota or to check photos off a list, magnificent curiosities revealed themselves to me. I began to see potential in smaller details or fleeting moments of light. My subjects began to reflect what I personally saw and found important in the landscape. This new approach required a change in how I designed my images.

Yosemite National Park, California A lone tree is the momentary star as a clearing storm begins to reveal the granite cliffs of El Capitan towering overhead.





↑ **Big Sur Coast, California** A monochrome abstraction emphasizes the interlocking shapes of the leaves of a calla lily plant, typically photographed instead for its flowers.

→ **Death Valley, California** The leaves of a rare desert poppy, showcasing an intricate network of trichomes and rosette shapes.





Design

Regardless of the subject, a strong design is the foundation for any good photograph. The overall framing is determined by the bounds of the subject and its surroundings. But there are mechanical aspects underpinning any compositional idea: balance, flow, spacing, shapes, and contrasts.

Though I'm inspired by specific subjects in nature, when it comes to design, I'm unconcerned with what these subjects actually are. I find it helpful to abstract and reduce every element to its essential attributes. A backlit pine tree is a bright green triangle. The crest of a sand dune is a sweeping, flowing line. The shaded side of the dune is cool and dark, and the lit side is warm and bright. Tree trunks are vertical lines, and layers of mountains are diagonal ones. Tree branches and erosion channels alike are simply dendritic patterns. How to arrange and balance these elements in the frame becomes clearer when I view them dispassionately.

I prefer to give my subjects ample breathing room, which serves the same purpose within the frame that a mat does around a print: to highlight what's contained within and separate it from its surroundings. I think of this as a sort of vignette that's formed not necessarily by darkness, but by the absence of distracting elements. Even if my subject is itself complex, I want the experience of viewing and parsing the photograph to be simple.

I'm also very particular about maintaining the theme of a given image by highlighting and complementing the essential attributes of a subject. Therefore, I aim to exclude elements that conflict with that essence. For example, if my subject is primarily curvy or flowy, I'll avoid rigid shapes that break this flow. I may exclude objects of a certain color that don't fit the intended palette. I simplify the image by thinking back to my childhood and "One of These Things Is Not Like the Others" on "Sesame Street." In short, I ask, "What doesn't belong?"

Yosemite Valley, California An alder tree along the Merced River appears to glow from within due to a rare alignment of light occurring at a specific time of day and year.



Context and Mystery

Before the mechanics of visual design come into play, composing a photograph begins with deciding on a subject. When I became dissatisfied with creating those early photographs born of expectations, I asked myself what drove me to begin photographing nature in the first place. I realized the answer was, in a word, mystery. The mystery of nature is boundless, manifesting at microscopic scales all the way up to the cosmos, and in everything between. But how can we do justice to nature's extraordinary details and convey this sense of mystery to the viewer?

The answer lies in a foundational photographic principle: exclusion. By selecting what we include in the frame, we're also deciding what we leave out of it. However, I employ exclusion to a radical degree in my work. The reason for me is simple: Context is the enemy of mystery. While photographs made for documentation may include more of the subject's surroundings, these inclusions likely distract from that subject's essence — and my goal isn't to convey objective reality.

If I'm so very fascinated by a particular subject, and I present a larger scene including the subject's surrounding context, is it reasonable to expect a viewer to intuit which part I found so remarkable? Even if they can do so, will they find the subject mysterious if they easily comprehend its place in the world? Will they be curious about it if they fully understand how the photograph was made and can even imagine me standing in the scene with my camera?

P96-97: Yosemite Valley, California A tree silhouetted by the moon setting behind a cloud's edge gives the impression of a flame burning in the night sky.

→ **Southern Utah** An aerial view of Mancos Shale badlands reveals dendritic drainage patterns and contrasting warm and cool colors.





I believe my subjects should be presented as heroes. They may well be quiet or subtle, but in the bounds of the frame, the thing that motivated me to make a photograph should be where the viewer's attention falls. I want the viewer to ask questions about the subject and marvel at its qualities. I want them to wonder how such a thing came to be, and I want myself and my camera to be invisible.

By framing out the ordinary elements that surround my subjects, I make clear to the viewer what it was that I found interesting. For example, green grass, roads, or even the sky will likely detract from the mystique by virtue of being what a person is used to seeing in everyday life. When those elements are absent, the viewer is instead free to explore the details of the subject rather than the subject merely being a detail within the greater context. This method of isolation typically requires a tighter field of view, so my telephoto lens is practically glued to my camera.

Southern California A close-up abstraction emphasizes the sweeping forms and colors of an agave plant in a desert botanic garden.

Imagination

There's another reason I aim to convey mystery in my photographs, beyond nature's inherently mysterious quality — and that's imagination. The absence of contextual information forces the viewer's imagination to be engaged as they fill in the blanks. Rather than getting everything there is to know at first glance, further examination is encouraged to complete their understanding. They may interpret the subject completely differently than I did, but that's the point! They are, in some capacity, an active participant rather than a passive observer. A photograph that causes the viewer to ask questions is more likely to have lasting intrigue.

Even though I'm fully aware of the entire process of creating each photograph of mine, I enjoy it when I'm able to fool myself and imagine another context entirely. Paraphrasing Minor White, I photograph things not just for what they are, but for what else they might be.

One of my favorite ways that imagination can be leveraged relates to scale. If the bounds of the subject aren't shown, it may imply that it's much more extensive than in reality. In the mind of the viewer, the subject may even go on forever. It might seem counterintuitive, but a smaller, tighter, more "intimate" composition can be more effective at conveying infinity than a grand scenic.

→ **Shenandoah National Park, Virginia** Clearing fog reveals a hierarchy of autumnal trees and bushes covering a mountainside.

P104-105: Mount Jefferson, Oregon Pines weathered by their high-elevation environment glow in backlight against a dark hillside, revealing their Seussian form.





Slices of Infinity

I began my journey with a checklist mentality, focused on quantity and completing a collection of the most impressive grand scenics available (as determined by others). But nature is infinite, and it's a fool's errand to attempt to capture it all. The ideas I've shared here have led me away from predictability and toward more personal and unique photographs that I never could have envisioned before they were right in front of me.

By the very nature of the process of featuring smaller details and unplanned ephemeral moments, and by intentionally excluding context, my images have become better reflections of who I am. I'm showing the viewer exactly what I found most fascinating, and that may be completely different than what someone standing right next to me did. To me, a single photograph that's uniquely mine is more valuable than a hundred that could have been made by another artist.

I'm taking small pieces of the vastness of the natural world and making them my own — simply by determining the essence of my subject and judiciously excluding all else. And as long as I remain fascinated by the wonders of nature, I'll keep gathering these slices of infinity.

See more of **Alex Noriega's** work at www.alexnoriega.com.

Southern Utah A dormant cottonwood tree in the soft glow of twilight, surrounded by colorful winter brush.



A sea otter is swimming in a kelp forest. The otter is positioned in the center of the frame, facing downwards. The water is a deep blue color, and the kelp plants are visible on either side of the otter. The lighting is soft and diffused, creating a serene atmosphere.

Not Just Cute

My Complicated
Relationship
with Sea Otters

WORDS AND IMAGES BY RALPH PACE

F YOU WALK THE FOGGY COASTLINE OF

Monterey, Calif., on a cool morning, you'll probably hear the sharp cry of a sea otter pup calling for its mother. You might spot scientists tracking the otters' every move — or an overly eager local otter enthusiast confidently guiding Monterey Bay aquarium experts.

Around here, sea otters are mythical. They're mascots, beer names, stuffed toys. Debates fill pubs with the best encounter. And, eventually, the discussion ends with, "They sure are cute though."

The first time I met a sea otter underwater was not a cute encounter. I was filming swell shark eggs when I felt a thump on my scuba tank. I turned to find a wide-eyed male sea otter humping it. In seconds, he scratched my camera dome, smashed my strobes, and yanked the regulator from my mouth before swimming off. Not cute, not majestic.

P108-109: Monterey Bay, California A juvenile southern sea otter dives to search for crabs and snails in the kelp forests. Sea otters who forage in kelp forests will generally dive down one vertical water column (stipe) and look for crabs and snails before they reach the ocean floor. There, they'll search the ocean floor for octopi, clams, crabs, sea urchins, etc. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D

Monterey Bay, California A juvenile southern sea otter dives below a 10-foot wave on its way to forage for mussels, clams, and crabs to eat. Although sea otters are generalists when it comes to feeding, meaning they can consume many types of prey, they often prefer to feed on specific foods. As conditions change and the sea begins to get rougher, otters will still forage in very shallow waters when the seas are high (20 feet). Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D



So, when I was asked to do a story on sea otters in 2021, I wasn't sure I was game. But sea otters are more than fuzzy faces. In fact, they're closer to wolverines than to teddy bears—biologically speaking. As members of the Mustelidae family, they share lineage with ferrets, martens, and badgers—not exactly soft and cuddly. I was intrigued.

Sea otters have difficult lives. They're constantly on the edge of starvation. Their famous fur, consisting of up to a million hairs per square inch, serves as their primary insulation. Without blubber like other marine mammals, they must eat constantly just to stay warm and rest as much as possible to conserve energy.

They need that rest, but I've lost count of how many times I've seen a group of kayakers paddle into a sleeping raft of otters, sending them diving in panic and forcing them to spend precious energy just to settle again.

Sea otters are remarkable, resilient, wild, perfectly adapted, and, yes, too cute. I was incredibly lucky to have access and the ability to spend time with these magnificent animals underwater.

See more of **Ralph Pace's** work at www.instagram.com/ralphpace.

Monterey Bay, California A small sea otter pup rides a larger sea otter pup while their mothers feed on a mussel bed. Mothers will sometimes get together for pup playdates. These dates allow pups to release their toddler energy while the mothers have time to hunt and intake some much-needed calories. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D





↑ **Monterey Bay, California** Sea otter pups are a bit wild when they're little—interested but confused, active but naive. In an unusual moment of confusion, two pups went to the wrong mothers, so all four otters wrestled about to ensure each mother had the correct baby. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D

→ **Monterey Bay, California** A female otter clutches her cub while keeping a watchful eye on a nearby dominant male otter who wants to mate with her. Dominant male sea otters generally patrol a territory and continuously try to mate with females and separate females from their cubs. When mothers know their cub isn't ready, they'll avoid males. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D

P116-117: Monterey Bay, California A juvenile sea otter dives for a meal on a shallow mussel bed lined with kelp. While sea otters are generalists, they prefer to consume the prey their mother taught them to eat at a young age. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D







P118-119: Monterey Bay, California For the soft and fuzzy reputation they hold, sea otters are far more capable and hardier than we give them credit for. After finding food in 3 feet of water, a southern sea otter eats mussels on its chest on a massive 14-foot wave. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D

← Monterey Bay, California A southern sea otter dives below a large wave on its way to find mussels to forage for food. As conditions change and the sea begins to get rougher, otters will still forage in very shallow waters when the seas are very high (20 feet). Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D



Monterey Bay, California During the early months of a young sea otter's life, they can't dive for food. Their neonate plumage (young fur) is designed to make them buoyant. While not able to reach the bottom, a juvenile sea otter follows its mother's trail of bubbles that are released from her fur as she searches for food on the sea floor. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D



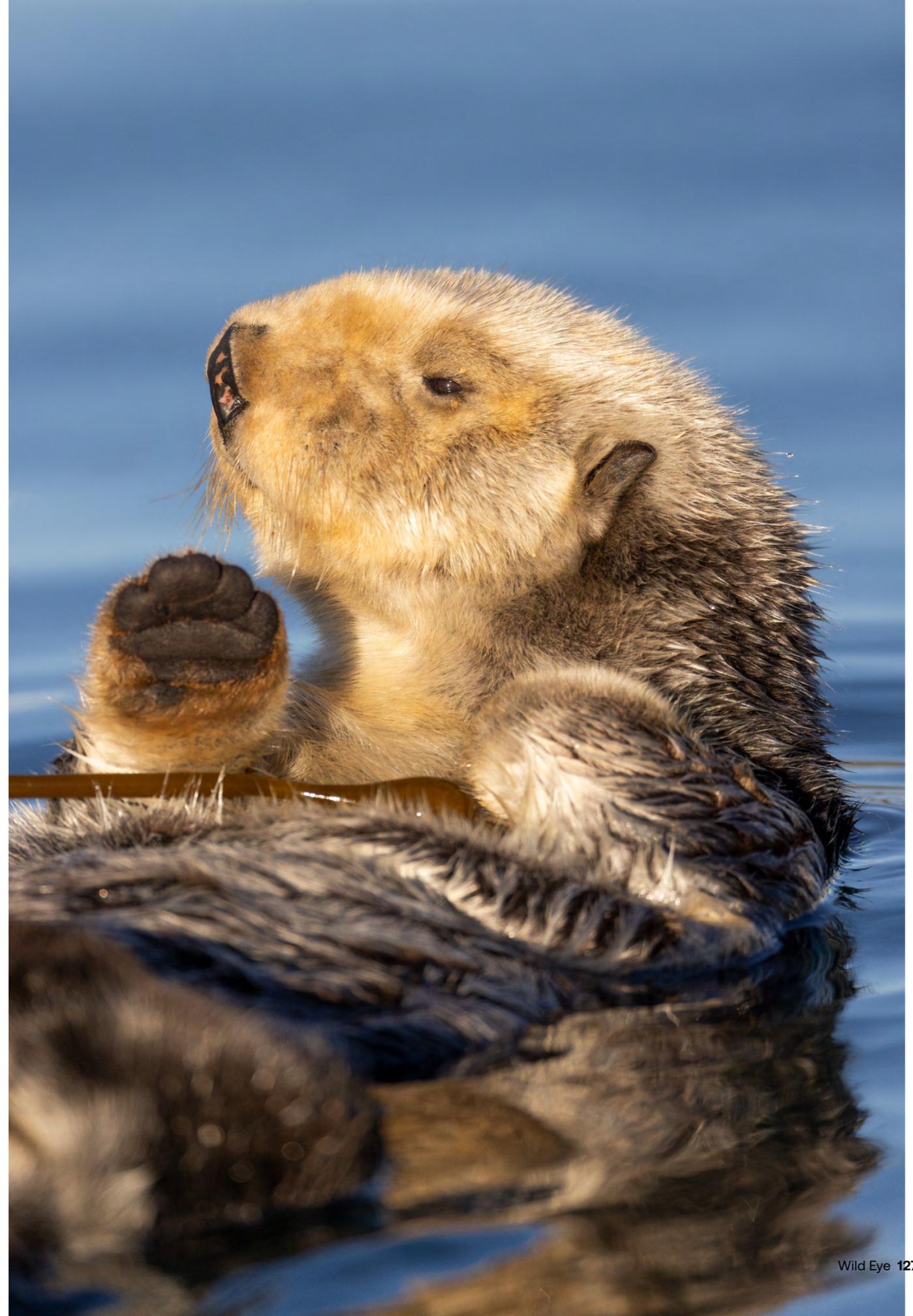
Monterey Bay, California

A mother sea otter and her pup search for food in a kelp forest. After mastering the ability to dive, a young otter may just “shadow” its mother and pick the occasional morsel of food. By 6 months or so, the young otter will be fully eating on its own and not dependent on its mother. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D



↑ **Monterey Harbor, California** A female sea otter wakes up after the gate of the harbor slams as fishermen come and go. Otters will often find refuge in the calm waters of the harbor in the evening and early morning. Some otters will continue to make a living and forage exclusively within the harbor, while other otters will exit the harbor to feed in the kelp or at mussel beds. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D

→ **Monterey Bay, California** As the world becomes more urban, otters have begun to find refuge in the safety of harbors. While they do sometimes make a living finding food in the harbor, they must eventually go back to sea to socialize and find a mate. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D





Monterey Harbor, California A female otter rests and grooms its one million hairs per inch of fur. Lacking blubber like other marine mammals, sea otters must groom to introduce bubbles that allow them to stay warm. Each time they're disturbed while resting, they must do the same thing again, wasting precious energy. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D



Monterey Bay, California A sea otter pup wrestles with its mother shortly after waking up at sunset. A sea otter mother has very little time to teach her pup the essentials of survival. Every waking moment is used to teach them how to rest, groom, find food, open food, and stay alive. Pups then become independent at about 6 months old. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D



← **Monterey Bay, California** A pup hunts for the perfect purple sea urchins amongst mussel beds. Sea otters are incredible predators that keep the sea urchin population in check. Without otters, sea urchin populations explode and destroy kelp forests. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D

P134-135: Monterey Bay, California A mother sea otter dives through the kelp forest to search for food. Unlike sea otters that specialize in urchins or mussels, the otters that search the kelp forest are generalists, taking snails, crabs, abalone, octopus, and even sand dollars on the sea floor when they're pregnant. Image taken under U.S. FWS permit # 37946D





Legacy of Hope

IMAGE BY MICHAEL NICHOLS

“Each one of us matters, has a role to play, and makes a difference. Each one of us must take responsibility for our own lives, and above all, show respect and love for living things around us, especially each other.” —JANE GOODALL



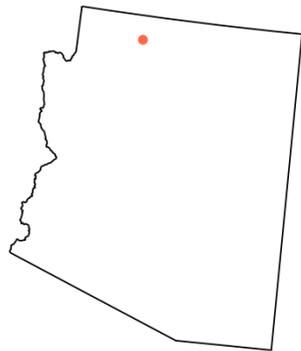
Grand Canyon National Park

Arizona, USA

WORDS AND IMAGES BY JERRY DODRILL

Grand Canyon National Park

Arizona, USA



FROM THE FIRST MOMENT I peered over the edge of the South Rim into the unfathomable abyss of the Grand Canyon, I could feel the allure of the great river over a mile below. My eyes traced the shimmering water as it went in and out of sight, cutting deep into a mysterious gorge before reappearing as a glint of sunlight far downstream. I strained in vain to hear the faint roar of a distant rapid and dreamed of unlocking the canyon's secrets. It would take years for the opportunity to materialize, but in 2015, I stepped into the chilly water at Lee's Ferry as we pushed our raft into the current. That moment began a passion for the canyon that has reshaped all my perceptions of scale and time.

Like every other first timer, my neck ached as I stared up at the towering architecture, rock patterns, and natural designs as our guides expertly navigated the rapids. With each mile, new sights and subjects were revealed. My camera clicked away as I explored with the lens, getting to know the subtle textures, tones, plants, animals, river and canyons. How do you connect the ever-changing dots to make sense of such a place as this? At first, you're just taking inventory, following intuition, and responding to what you see.

More than just a photography trip, this was a real adventure! I held on tight through huge rapids when invigorating splashes of frigid water hit my face, soaked through my clothes, and ran down my legs. We slept under the stars, ate like kings, and couldn't have been happier. As the days wore on, the magnitude of the canyon and harshness of the desert environment became ever more apparent. Soon the skin on my fingers and lips cracked, and abrasions appeared on sandaled and sun-burned feet. A growing feeling of vulnerability evolved into a sense of awe, a profound reverence for this incredible ecosystem.

After a dozen trips down the Colorado River now, my images have evolved from documentation and exploration to more intentional expressions of familiar places, emotions, and memories. Early attempts to capture the enormity of the landscape have become more nuanced as I try to capture individual moments framed by the perspective of time. If the whole is the sum of its parts, small scenes, like these ancient sandstone ledges carved by the endless erosion of sediment-laden water, or a long exposure of the twisting river reflecting evening light, seem to possess more answers than broad panoramas that reveal all but leave little to the imagination.

P138-139: The view downriver from Nankoweap's historic native American granary site is one of the iconic views of the American West.

→ Morning light rakes across Chuar Butte while looking down the Little Colorado River, a major tributary in the Grand Canyon.





These fantastical sandstone forms were carved by the Colorado River before Glen Canyon Dam began controlling water levels and filtering out the natural sediments.



Sediment-laden waters of the Colorado River act as abrasive agents that carve even the hardest of rocks, like this Tapeats Sandstone after an unusually high flow event.

Between coveted private permits and the many commercial outfitters willing to take you on a bucket list adventure, there are a lot of ways to experience the Colorado River. A few photography tour companies arrange charter trips with these outfitters and offer experiences led by professional photographers who know the canyon well. While rowing trips are incredible, motor trips are a shorter, more accessible and less physically demanding option. The large and stable rafts with quiet motors let us bring more gear, go slow in parts of the canyon where we want to spend time photographing, and then make up some miles later.

Of all the photo expeditions I lead annually, rafting the Colorado is the one I most look forward to each year. It's not just because of the incredible photo opportunities among vertiginous canyon walls, rapids so big they have their own rating system, hikes up delicate fern-lined canyons, the vivid blue waters of the Little Colorado, or the many rock layers that unfold as a storybook of Earth's history. The opportunity to unplug from society, take a small group of people, and embark on a full value wilderness adventure — 226 miles of river running over 10 days — is beyond compare.

Given the realities of a warming planet, a persistent drought in the American West, divisive water politics, and numerous environmental issues, the Colorado River is ever-changing and under new threats. I firmly believe that recreation is the gateway to conservation, and the more people who are passionate about protecting these places, the stronger our voice will be when the inevitable need for protection arises. Regardless of what method you choose, it's said that the best way to run the Colorado is any way you can, and once is never enough. Perhaps I'll see you downstream.

See more of **Jerry Dodrill's** work at www.jerrydodrill.com.

Guide Chad Tucker expertly rowing an 18-foot raft through Hermit Rapid, known for its huge and exciting "wave train."



Old Clothes

WORDS AND IMAGE BY CLAUDIO CONTRERAS KOOB/
MINDEN PICTURES

ONE OF THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE MOMENTS I had while visiting the remote archaeological site of El Mirador in northern Guatemala occurred one morning while I strolled past the workers' camp near the temples. I perceived movement at the edge of my eye and turned toward a line with old hanging clothes, only to spot a little face gazing back at me. There, between the hanging underpants and socks, was a beautiful, tiny, orphaned spider monkey delicately balancing on the clothesline.

See more of **Claudio Contreras Koob's** work at www.mindenpictures.com.





A LENS ON THE UNTAMED WORLD

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