

In profile - Tom Mangelsen: A date with nature

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Continuing our series profiling the masters of nature photography, legendary wildlife photographer, Tom Mangelsen, explains the importance of mentors, and how he fits his life around nature's great events.

My life's itinerary is set by Nature's beat. I work out the best times to photograph a subject, and organise my life around that. Birds, for example, are more colourful and active in springtime, but many mammals (such as elk and moose) look better in the fall with their new winter coats and antlers and displaying much more interesting behaviour, rutting - challenging other males and gathering their harems.

But the most important date in my calendar is the sandhill crane migration. Every year, I go back to Grand Island, in Nebraska, to the cabin of my childhood, to see some 500,000 sandhill cranes stop off in the Platte River valley on their annual journey to Arctic nesting grounds. (Some subspecies migrate 5,000 miles from Siberia to Mexico.) It's one of the most dramatic migrations in the world and every bit as impressive as the famous wildebeest migrations in Africa.

Cranes are ancient birds: bones of sandhill cranes have been found in Nebraska dating back 10 to 20 million years. For many cultures, these intelligent survivors symbolise peace, love, and longevity

They restore me like nothing else. Even when I'm not there, I can still summon up the memory of skies darkening with these magnificent birds and their graceful courtship dances and haunting cries I grew up with. I've got thousands of pictures of cranes, most aren't particularly great, but I continue to take more photos of cranes simply because they mean so much to me.



Tom's 2011 image, *Ancient Journey - Sandhill Cranes*, captures the emotional relationship the artist has with his subject

<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/resources/natureplus/wpy-blog/wpy50/TM2.jpg>

Looking back, I realise that my career has been marked by the great fortune of meeting some really special people, each of whom has, in their own way, inspired, guided or mentored me.

The first and most influential was Paul Johnsgard, a world authority on waterfowl and a totally brilliant guy. I read an article about him, got in touch, and he ended up being my advisor in graduate school where I studied ecology and animal behaviour. He was also an amateur photographer and taught me the basics of bird photography. From that moment, I was hooked. He also sketched and drew birds and this had a huge impact on me as it got me thinking about how artistic approaches might be used in photography. So while I was taking photographs, I was studying inspiring artists such as Louis Agassiz Fuertes, Andrew Wyeth, and Robert Bateman, all of whom influenced my style.

Owen Gromme was another mentor, and his approach has influenced me enormously. In his painting *Salute to the Dawn*, Owen masterfully captures the essence of a whooping crane family: the behaviour, the calls, the pair-bond, the parenting, the anticipation of an egg about to hatch, along with intricate detail of the nest and the background of the far North, the warmth of the early morning's first light and coolness of fog lifting off the marsh - all that in one painting. It is shot through with a feeling that this is a wild, secret place, shared with us through the brush strokes of an artist with imagination and knowledge.



<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/resources/natureplus/wpy-blog/wpy50/OG.jpg>

Owen Gromme's *Salute to the Dawn*:

This is what I try to do with my photography: show animals in their social, behavioural and physical environment.



Tom's aim is to show animals in their social, behavioural and physical environment. This image, taken in 2010 in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, is titled *First Light - Grizzly Bear*

<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/resources/natureplus/wpy-blog/wpy50/TM5.jpg>

My next mentor introduced me to a very different medium: video. Burt Kempers taught me the basics of cinematography and editing, and in the early 1970s I made three films, including a series Flight of the Whooping Crane for National Geographic, which was nominated for an Emmy. In 1990, I filmed and produced Cranes of the Grey Wind, about sandhill cranes, for PBS Nature and the BBC's Natural World This taught me how to tell a story through the language of film. By doing this, I also realised how hard single images have to work to tell a story in a single frame, without relying on movement, narration or sequences.



Tom won the 1994 Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition with this image, *Born of the North Wind*

<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/resources/natureplus/wpy-blog/wpy50/TM4.jpg>

I think competitions like WPY have a huge role to play in terms of ethics. For example, I loathe the game farms that keep wild animals captive for photography, film-making and art: it is cruel and inhumane and in many ways has ruined the integrity of the profession and cheapened the market. I'm delighted that the WPY continues to set the highest ethical standards in disqualifying images taken under these conditions.

I suppose it's about authenticity, and this is also why I care so deeply about fieldwork skills, something I talk about a lot in my workshops. Photographers should know how to get their image right in the field, not rely on fixing it on the computer. That makes a person lazy, which really frustrates me, because that then prevents them from engaging deeply with the subject. What I want to see and nurture is their skill and artistry in the field.

I'm very focused, determined and patient: I can sit in a hide, barely moving, and tolerate everything from extreme cold to biting mosquitoes for days on end. If I fail to get the images I want, or if I miss some natural event by a week or two, I will go back to the same place again, and again, until I succeed, drawing on the lessons learned and experiences from the last time I was there. When I look at my images, I often try to think about what is missing.



'I'm very focused, determined and patient', says Tom. This image from 1988, one of his most well known works, was the result of weeks of planning, and hours of waiting at the now-famous Brook Falls, Alaska

<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/resources/natureplus/wpy-blog/wpy50/TM6.jpg>

Home now is in Wyoming, and I try to spend about half the year there. If I'm there in spring, I can see the grizzly bears in Yellowstone National Park, along with moose and elk calves, and all sorts of other creatures. The rest of the year, I'm travelling, photographing images for my limited edition prints and attending events and book-signings at my eight Images of Nature galleries, which are now in six US states. These are the result of a decision I took early in my career, again influenced by what artists were doing. If they could sell limited edition prints of their art, I thought, why couldn't a photographer do the same? So I did!

Around 15 years ago, I met Jane Goodall. She became a great friend and is truly inspiring, so it was an honour to not only be with her for her 13th annual crane trip to my cabin in Nebraska last spring but also to celebrate her 80th birthday there. Every year we share the pleasure of watching the sandhill cranes and all the millions of migrating ducks and geese and the resident deer, turkeys, raccoons and all matter of life on the Platte River. She teases me for being addicted to cranes, and I think she is right; I don't photograph wildlife for the money, or to check species off a list, but for the sheer love of it.

Looking back on my career, I realise just how important it is, both personally and professionally, to seek out friends and mentors whom you love and respect. I would never have achieved what I did without support from these people, among many others.

Tom's tips:

1. Find someone whose work you respect and who is willing to guide you. Work with them if you can, whether it's in the form of apprenticeship or an internship or just as an informal mentor.

2. Cultivate the ethic of getting the image right in the field, rather than relying on computer shortcuts later. It forces you to think hard about what you are doing and to master the basic skills of photography. It's about working very hard before you even press the shutter; your images will be all the better for it.
3. Be exceptional. As well as field skills, you must be incredibly passionate and hard-working and diligent, and you need to learn about animals, seasons, the weather, as well as photography. You can't just throw money at equipment and expensive trips and hope that is enough, because it isn't.
4. It has become standard to expect a photographer to be able to shoot stills, but it's also important to learn video skills and how to tell a story in the language of film. It's what the market demands.

If you do all that, and if in addition you also have a natural ability, then there is a place for you in the world of wildlife and nature photography.

Tom's work is included in the book *The Masters of Nature Photography: Wildlife Photographer of the Year*, published by the Museum.

ABOUT TOM MANGELSEN

Tom won Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 1994 and judged the competition in the late 90s. He is one of the world's most celebrated nature photographers. He won the North American Nature Photographers Association 'Outstanding Nature Photographer of the Year' in 2000. In 2002, he received a Royal Photographic Society Honorary Fellowship and in 2005 he was named 'One of the 100 Most Important People in Photography' by American Photo magazine, one of only two wildlife-environmental photographers selected for the list.



<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/resources/natureplus/wpy-blog/wpy50/Tom.jpg>

He has also been recognised as one of Nikon's 'Legends Behind the Lens' and one of Jane Goodall's Heroes on the network Animal Planet. In 2014, the International League of Conservation Photographers selected his image *Polar Dance* as one of the 40 Most Important Nature Photographs of All Time.

His most recent book, *The Last Great Wild Places, 40 Years of Wildlife Photography* by Thomas D. Mangelsen will be released in September 2014 and is available through his Mangelsen - Images of Nature Galleries or www.mangelsen.com.