



Dan Cox's extraordinary animal photographs tell tales about their lives

By Ed Lawrence / Photography By Dan Cox

Dan Cox's approach to finding subjects for wildlife parallels the logic of Willy Sutton, who robbed banks because "that's where the money is."

Says Cox, "In order to photograph wildlife, you've got to figure out where the animals are in their greatest concentrations and go there."

Outdoor Photographer managed to cross paths with Cox at the tail end of a trip that included back-to-back photo shoots of birds in Florida, wolves in Minnesota and swans in South Dakota. The trip was followed by a visit to his favorite chiropractor in Montana.

"This time it's my neck," says Cox, who tweaked it on the last leg of his journey. His body now provides constant reminders of 18 years spent lugging backpacks containing 60 pounds of camera gear and 40 pounds of film onto floating airplanes, rafts and boats, and nights on tent mattresses. Since first experiencing discomfort during a trip to Kenya that resulted in a five-day

WILDLIFE

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stint flat on his back, a constant companion is an electronic telephone directory that includes the names of medical practitioners on every continent.

Though he sounds offhanded when describing the "going there" component of his profession, Cox strives to produce striking images of animals that also reveal his deep philosophical beliefs about wildlife and their habitats.

"I'm attempting to produce images that portray the beauty and unique qualities of animals in the wilderness. At the same time, I'd like to subtly communicate the message that if we don't maintain what little natural wilderness is left on the planet, we won't have places for these animals to live. I just hope the art will raise the viewer's level of consciousness about the environmental aspects."

Though placing himself in close proximity to large numbers of subjects is a key ingredient in Cox's success,

several other elements are vital. "You've got to know how the animals behave in the wild and be prepared to adjust to their temperament," he says, citing early work done with black bears in Minnesota.

"I was allowed to spend two weeks following a group of 25 to 30 bears that lived on a large, privately owned tract. They were always on the move and traveled in a densely canopied forest and swampland."

This presented several challenges. "First, I had to be patient until the bears became accustomed to my presence, which took several days. I knew I'd been accepted when, after following the biggest bear in the group for a couple of days, he disappeared into the underbrush, then came out and sat on a log, staring at me, almost posing, as if to say, 'Okay, who are you and what do you want?'"

"The most difficult mechanical aspect was shooting a dark subject in low light conditions. That necessitated

getting within 50 yards of the bears and using a Nikon 80-200mm *f*/2.8 zoom lens and pushing the film one stop to get the right shutter speeds."

After two weeks in the mosquito-infested area, battling 90-degree temperatures and 100-percent humidity, with cameras protected by plastic bags, Cox had the images he needed for *Black Bear*, his second book.

He faced similar challenges while photographing polar bears on his fifth trip to Churchill on Hudson Bay. "The trip a year earlier had been great. We'd had sunny weather and there were bears all over the place, dancing in the snow as we hoped they would, so we got good images."

So why five trips? How many different ways can you photograph a polar bear?

"I'm always looking for a new shot. It's not always possible, and it's time-consuming and expensive, but I've found

Dan Cox's approach to wildlife photography is focused on finding the "unique qualities of animals in the wilderness." His photographs carry a sense of each animal's "personality." You see it in the cautious poise of the white-tailed buck (opening spread); in a curious stare from an Eastern chipmunk (opposite page); and in the sprint of a mountain lion (above).

DEER: Nikon F4, Nikkor 600mm, Kodachrome 64, Gitzo tripod, Arca Swiss ballhead; CHIPMUNK: Nikon F4, Nikkor 600mm, Kodachrome 64, Gitzo tripod, Arca Swiss ballhead; MOUNTAIN LION: Nikon N90s, Nikkor 300mm, Fujichrome Provia, Gitzo tripod, Arca Swiss ballhead



Making intimate portraits of wild animals isn't easy, and requires an enormous amount of patience. It pays off though, when you capture a definitive moment like the playful ambush of one young red fox by another (above) or the pensive solitude of this black bear yearling (left). Timing is also essential to making a photograph that captures the essence of an animal's behavior. The arching leap from the sea of bottlenose dolphins occurs abruptly and ends quickly (right), so the photographer must be on his toes.

FOXES: Nikon F4, Nikkor 600mm, Fujichrome Velvia, Gitzo tripod, Arca Swiss ballhead; BEAR: Nikon F4, Nikkor 80-200mm, Kodachrome 64, Gitzo tripod, Arca Swiss ballhead; DOLPHINS: Nikon F5, Nikkor 80-200mm, Fujichrome Provia, handheld



WILDLIFE STORIES

that I've just got to keep going back because I might get something that someone else missed."

Unfortunately, nature and the bears weren't cooperating this time. "I was shooting white bears on ice under cloudy skies and overcast, so the light was flat. And most of the bears were somewhere else."

Except for a mama and two cubs.

"As with the black bears, I used an old manual Nikon 200-400 zoom, one of my favorites, and a new N90s. I typically use slide film, usually Fujichrome Provia or Sensia, which I pushed one stop because of the bad lighting and the fact that I was shooting from an unstable platform on a buggy."

Though there were few subjects, a bear family provided subject matter for 12 rolls of the most dramatic photos Cox has created.

"One of the cubs was sick, so over a period of five days I recorded the effort the mother and the other cub made to keep it alive before it finally died."

The drama that Cox recorded on film transformed what could have been a wasted five days into a two-page spread in *LIFE* magazine.

Essentially a self-taught photographer, Cox began tinkering with cameras as a 15-year-old growing up on a

farm in Minnesota. He committed to a career with camera in hand by enrolling in Photo 101 at the University of Minnesota.

"That's where I learned a lot about both the technical and commercial sides of the profession," says Cox, topics he believes receive too little attention from many shooters, especially those just setting up shop.

Four years later, Cox "was chafing at the bit. I wanted to shoot pheasants and white-tailed deer and was ready to face the challenges of getting good photographs." The 21-year-old pulled up stakes and headed for the wide open spaces of Montana.

Cox devoted a year to photographing whitetails solely and accumulated a library of photographs. Then, with stock in hand, he made his first major sales to *Field and Stream* and *Sports Afield* magazines. That project also produced the first of what he calls two lucky breaks.

"I managed to convince the Willow Creek Press to publish *Whitetail Country*. The same year, I sold a photo to a major outdoor cataloger, which was published as a limited edition. It sold out in four days." Cox's reputation was established.

Cox meticulously plans as much of each photo excursion as possible. Color is a critical ingredient in the pre-planning of a road trip.

QUICK TIP

Depth Of Field

Use your depth-of-field preview button. It's one of the most used functions on my camera. If you have trouble seeing depth through the viewfinder, keep practicing.

"My first consideration is whether a subject is interesting to me, then whether it has a strong visual appeal," says Cox. "That's why I went to photograph blue herons and roseate spoonbills, which are pink."

"If I need a head shot of a Canada goose, I can take that in a city park. But if I want a wildlife shot, I need to find that goose in the cattails on the banks of the Missouri River or in the air over wheat fields."

"Compositionally, my objective is to lead the viewer's eye to the subject by placing it outside the center of a frame. I'll use a river bank, for example, to lead the eye to a bear standing at a point of land on the edge of the image."

"Sometimes it's a matter of being lucky. One of my favorites is a whooper swan taken on a pond in Japan. I framed the shot by using a rock wall that moved tangentially to frame the right and a tree branch to cover the top, with the swan in the lower-left corner. When a large raven landed on the edge of the water, I ended up with the two birds mirroring each other."

"I also visualize the way a shot would look if the animal moves into a certain location—a herd of elk, for instance, that might move to a hilltop and add that element to a dramatic landscape. I'll move to that area and hope it works out. Sometimes it does, sometimes I lose a day."

"Local knowledge also helps," adds Cox. "I wanted to photograph herons that were supposed to be at a reserve,

but I couldn't find them. When I saw a woman with a pair of binoculars and a bird book, we struck up a conversation, and she eventually told me exactly where to find the birds at specific times of the day."

Though Cox still has one foot anchored in the world of a manual zoom lens, he's quick to acknowledge the tremendous advantages afforded wildlife photographers by the new equipment.

"We used to say that if we got one good image from a roll of film, we were lucky. Now, with a Nikon F5 and an AF lens, I expect 90 percent of still shots to be publishable, as well as 25 to 30 shots of a 36-frame film, even when I'm shooting a fast-moving object."

Cox is also very positive about using a 1.4X teleconverter. "The lens quality is so good now that the only loss is the reduction in light. I've checked transparencies with an 8X loupe and can't tell when I used the converter without looking at the frame number."

While Cox's most recent forays into the wilderness weren't as photographically successful as the polar bear shoot, he isn't discouraged. So, after the trip to the chiropractor and a short hiatus in the office, he'll be on the road again.

"I'm looking forward to it," Cox says. "This is my passion." OP



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