

Issue 2 2021

The wild Lens

magazine for photographers

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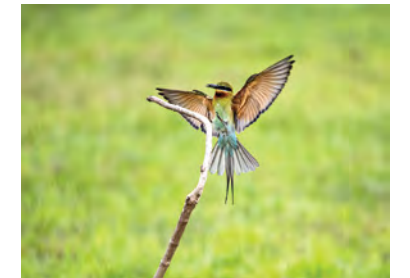
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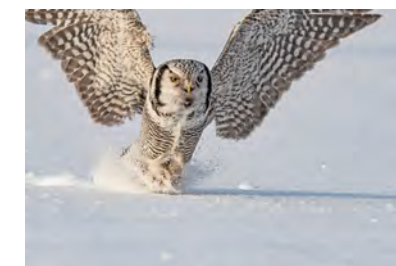
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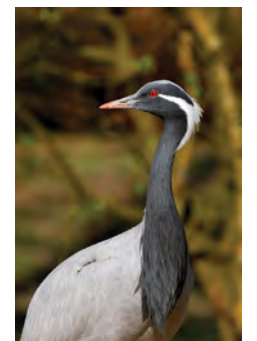
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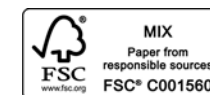
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Publisher's Note



Recently, I was making the drive from California to Nevada on Highway 152, not far from Pinnacles National Park, a known habitat for the California condor. I saw a colossal dark shape perched at the top of a tree. It was a condor! I almost drove off the road in my excitement. It was the second sighting I had in the area. The first was of four condors perched on top of a light pole. It was wonderful to see one in a natural setting and I spent some time watching the immense, graceful bird. He gave me quite a show, spreading and fanning his wings. Condors extend their wings to allow the most sunlight to reach as many of their feathers as possible. I will never forget the beauty of the bird.

In this issue we have some fantastic articles. Regular contributor, Ranjan Ramchandani, uses lockdown to take advantage of the wide diversity of species in his country of residence, Singapore. David Roberts tells his story of working with Francois Bigirimana photographing silver-back gorillas. Joseph Cooper shares his impressive black bear photos from the Smoky Mountains and A.S. & Shakti Bishnoi offer their elegant demoiselle crane images. Mohit Agha Tak regales us with his unique Mongolia birding story, while we feature some gorgeous entries from the 2020 photography contest.

We are so close to being able to travel internationally to photograph again. Hang in there and hoping you and your family are happy, healthy and able to enjoy it.

Michelle Liles
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Recovery In Rwanda

Gorilla Tourism Is Helping
A Country Heal Its Wounds

STORY
AND
PHOTOS
BY
DAVID
ROBERTS

Back in the mid-nineteen nineties, Rwanda was in turmoil. A genocide of monumental proportions had wracked the nation and separated its people. Today, however, these same people have reunited into a formidable force. Not a force of the former violence, but a force displaying sheer determination and inconceivable humanitarianism. They are rebuilding their land, and at an alarming rate. New roads, schools and hospitals have replaced the derelict landscapes. The cities are now bustling with industry and business consortiums. I pondered the situation but struggled to understand the sheer tenacity of these people, and what they had achieved in such little time.

My destination was far from the capital of Kigali. I was heading for an area that had also been transformed, but in a very different way. The Volcanoes National Park is an area of outstanding natural beauty and home to the creatures that I had come to visit, the magnificent mountain gorillas. The Rwandan people have worked together to make these volcanoes (now benign) accessible to tourism. The gorillas have inhabited this region for thousands of years but due to depletion of natural habitat and poaching, in particular, their numbers declined dramatically.

The work of many people like world-renowned primatologist Dian Fossey was instrumental in stabilising the gorilla population. These days, conservation programs are showing true positivity as the numbers, though still at a critical state, are showing good signs of improvement. There are now around 800 individuals existing in the wild world with a good proportion of these in Rwanda, Uganda and the Republic of Congo.



ABOVE: Silverback gorilla stripping bamboo in Volcanoes National Park

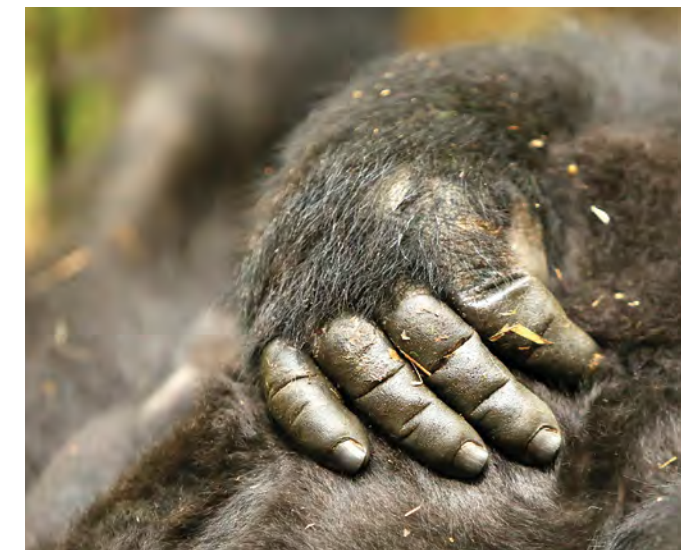
I had arranged to view and photograph gorillas with a very special man by the name of Francois Bigirimana. Francois was porter to Dian Fossey. My meeting with him was both exhilarating and totally educational. I felt his passion immediately. From his early days with Dian to the present day, his stories take the uninitiated swiftly into a sense of involvement. He said of Dian, “She was a determined and interesting lady who would not suffer fools lightly.” Francois had been instrumental in the habituation of the gorillas. He would go out into the jungle and introduce himself to the wild groups, not a job for the fainthearted.

After several meetings and altercations with the groups, the silverbacks would accept his presence. This is how members of the public today are allowed into the company of groups. His passion for the gorillas outshone everything else. His body language and physical demeanour left no doubt that his life was devoted to the mountain gorillas. He talked to the gorillas using squeaks and noises that only the gorillas seemed to understand. As he spoke with me, he stripped a bamboo branch and started to eat it, offering me a piece as if this was the normal thing to do. “Don’t eat too much” he said, it makes the gorillas want “jiggy jiggy”. When I eventually plucked up enough courage, I had to ask him what I had been thinking. “Are you part gorilla?” I said. His immediate response was to crouch down, arching his back so that his arms touched his knees. He then looked me square in the face and shouted “fifty-fifty”. Francois was the most experienced and eldest of all the guides at the time of my visit.

Francoise gave me a briefing of safety procedures dictating what to do and what not to do in case of

confrontation by one of these gargantuan animals. The hair on the back of my neck stood up involuntarily as he explained the consequences of improper conduct and I listened.

The gorillas we were to visit were the Hirwa group (meaning “lucky”). They consisted of 19 individuals. The hierarchy of a group such as this starts right at the top with the dominant male, otherwise known as the silverback. At the age of around twelve years, the hair on his back turns silver in colour, hence the name. He will take care of the entire family and sire babies until he grows too old. He will then be replaced by either the next dominant male in the group or a more powerful male from another group. Some groups consist of more than one silverback but there is little trouble, as everyone knows without any doubt who is boss.



TOP: Male silverback suggesting that it's time for us to leave

BOTTOM: Hand close up

The Hirwa group has currently one silverback named Muryinya, three small babies, and a pair of teenage twins named Gakuru and Gato. As we approached the area in which our group had been sighted, Francois took on a different demeanor; silence was critical from anyone bar him. A series of grunts and screeches emanated from his body and an immediate response followed as the dominant silverback answered his calls. These were calls of acceptance, thankfully, as the beaming smile on Francois' face confirmed.



My first sighting was of a female with a baby high in the canopy of the bamboo forest. As we walked beneath it was as if she, too, was excited by our presence, as she purposefully fell out of the tree and landed within inches of us, baby still attached. My heart raced as I fought to take control of my emotions while at the same time trying to fight with the controls on my camera. Francois smiled.

As we progressed deeper into the gorillas' domain, the picture began to unfold. Several females wandered around plucking bamboo as they walked. One sat beside me as if to welcome me, proudly grooming her tiny baby, kissing it, and sucking its hand.

Then, pandemonium erupted. I thought we had upset the "boss" who we hadn't seen yet. But, not. It was the "terrible twins" play-fighting and tickling each other. The ground bounced as they raced past, seemingly bemused at my presence. Francois called again, taking on his gorilla role. He had to show the boisterous twins that they must keep their distance for my safety. Just like human children, the twins accepted their scolding, then sulked for a while before running away, screeching as if nothing had happened.

I must say, the magical aura of this jungle spectacular lured me into making one mistake. I had become so engrossed in photographing this amazing family that I had not noticed a rather bossy female approaching dangerously close. Francois called to her but she simply brushed past me and continued on her way. It was like being hit by a small car, though no damage was done. I felt humbled by her immense power.

Suddenly, there was tension in the air. The females and babies were restless and Francois smiled again. By now I felt that I could read him a little and knew that Muryinya was close. His arrival was like a Hollywood actor walking into the room, as the bamboo trees parted and his monumental frame entered the scene. He transferred looks with Francois and all was well. The family then grouped on the floor for their morning constitutional. Grooming, touching, kissing, and feeding all took place within a couple of metres of where we stood.



My one-hour allocated time with the gorillas was over in a flash as Francois looked at his watch, indicating that it was time to go. As we left the site, the silverback gave a perfunctory grunt as if to say goodbye to Francois. He responded in kind.

This was just a small insight into the wonders that the Rwandan people have achieved in the revival of their country. I felt that even though I was in the company of some of the most dangerous animals alive, there was safety. These gorilla treks, and indeed the rest of the tourism that now abounds in Rwanda, have only been in operation since around 2005, again demonstrating the determination of the people to show the rest of the world what a wonderful place this is to visit.

My thanks to my driver Theo and the wonderful Francois for their help in conducting this once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. Also, thanks to Kigali-based Primate Safaris and the staff of Jack Hanna's Guesthouse.

FROM FAR LEFT: Baby learning how to climb with a pensive mother watching. Adult gorilla seemingly mesmerised by a swaying frond of fern. A thoughtful mother caresses her baby.



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2020 PHOTO CONTEST

Publisher's Choice

Last December's **Wild Lens Magazine Photo Contest** was flooded with extraordinary images, exhibiting every imaginable degree of difficulty and skill level. Our prudent judges had the arduous task of assessing and scoring each entry. Prizes were awarded. But photography is not just an objective pursuit. The most coveted prize is when you are able to move the viewer.

The photos collected here moved us, and are a small sampling of the remarkable images we were honored to receive from so many corners of the world.

Thanks to all who participated in the 2020 photography contest.

Look for the details of the 2021 contest on our website,
www.thewildlensmagazine.com.



JAY DICKMAN, United States | "Puffin Lunch", Vigur Island, Iceland



ANUP SHAH, United Kingdom | "Escort", Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya



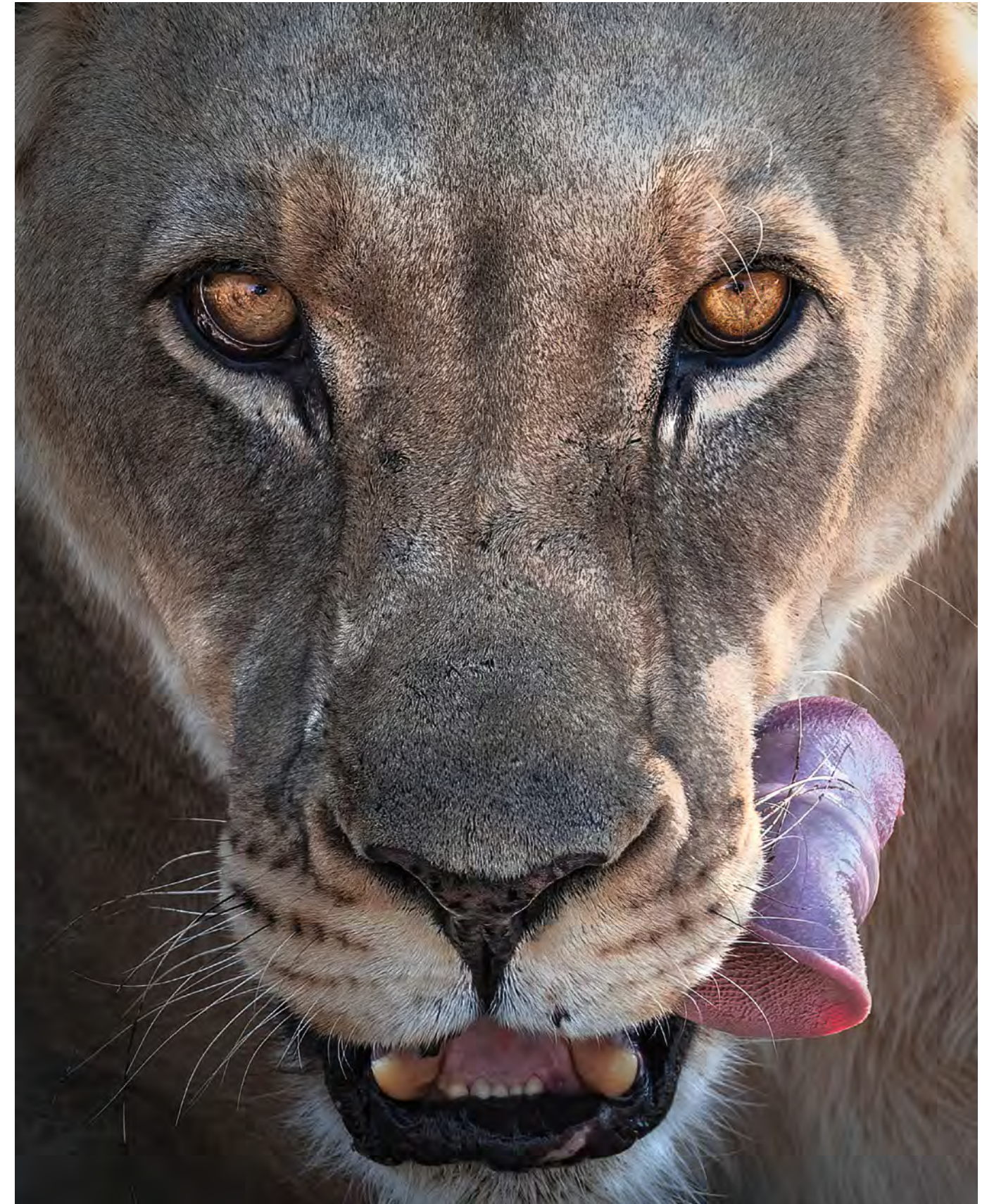
SHING YAW LEE, Malaysia | "Blowing Bubbles", Malaysia



GARY CUSINS, South Africa | "Aardvark Fairytale", North Cape, South Africa



PARAG BHATT, India | "Drama and Sunbeams", Maasai Mara, Kenya



ANDREW LIU, United States | "Insatiable Hunger", Erindi Private Game Reserve, Namibia



NILESH SHAH, India | "Spa Time", Amboseli National Park, Kenya



GRAEME GUY, Malaysia | "Romancing the Female Bowerbird", Mount Molly, Queensland, Australia



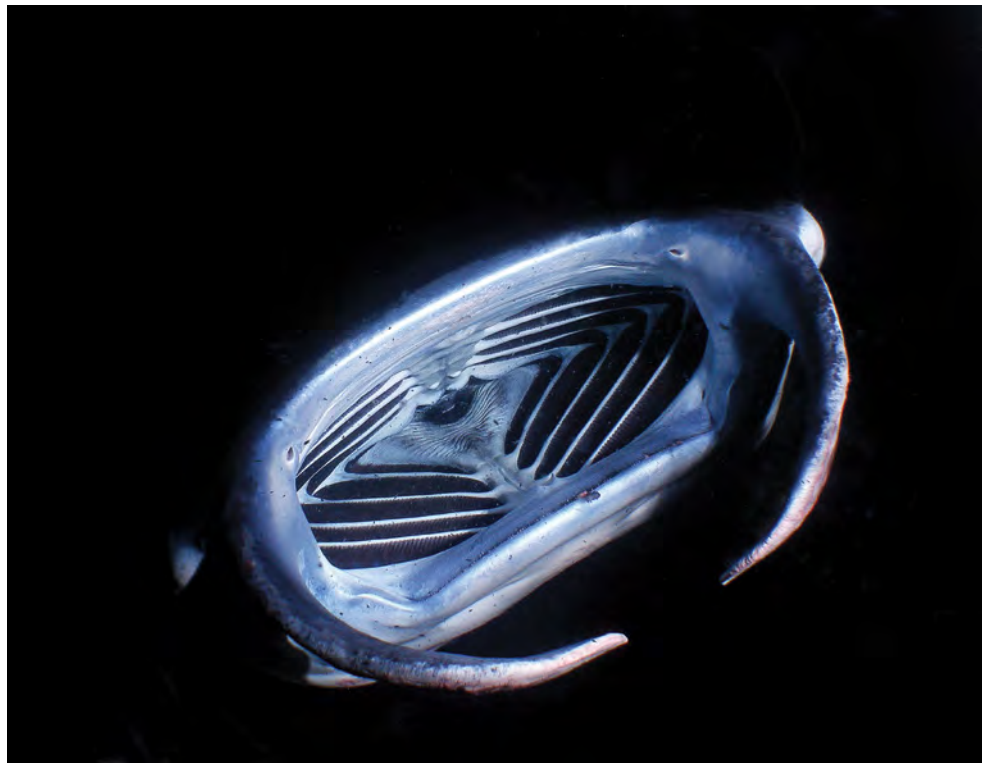
AMISH CHHAGAN, Zambia | "Samson", Maasai Mara, Kenya



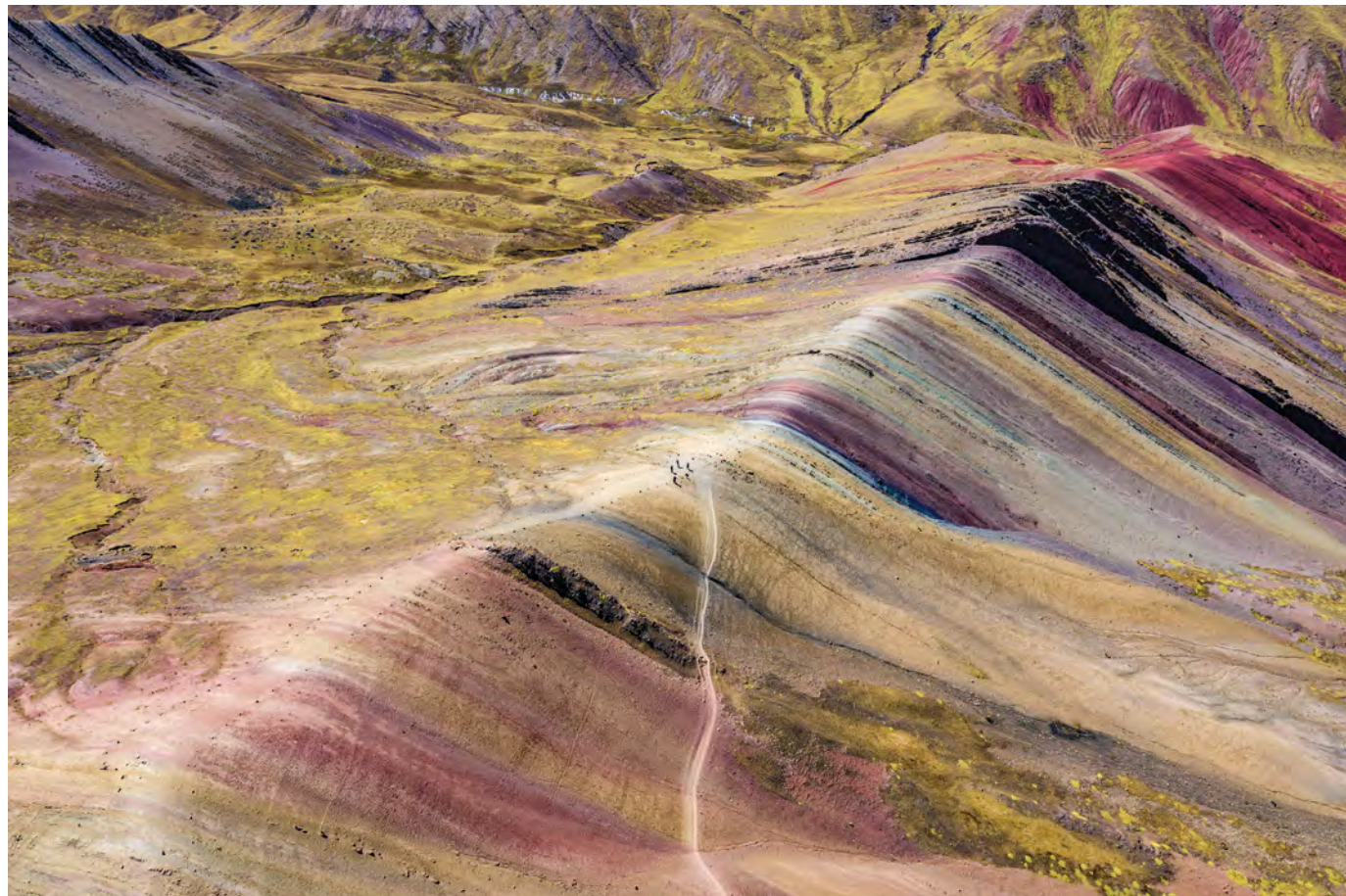
JOHAN SIGGESSON, Malta | "Dalmations On Ice", Lake Kerkini, Greece



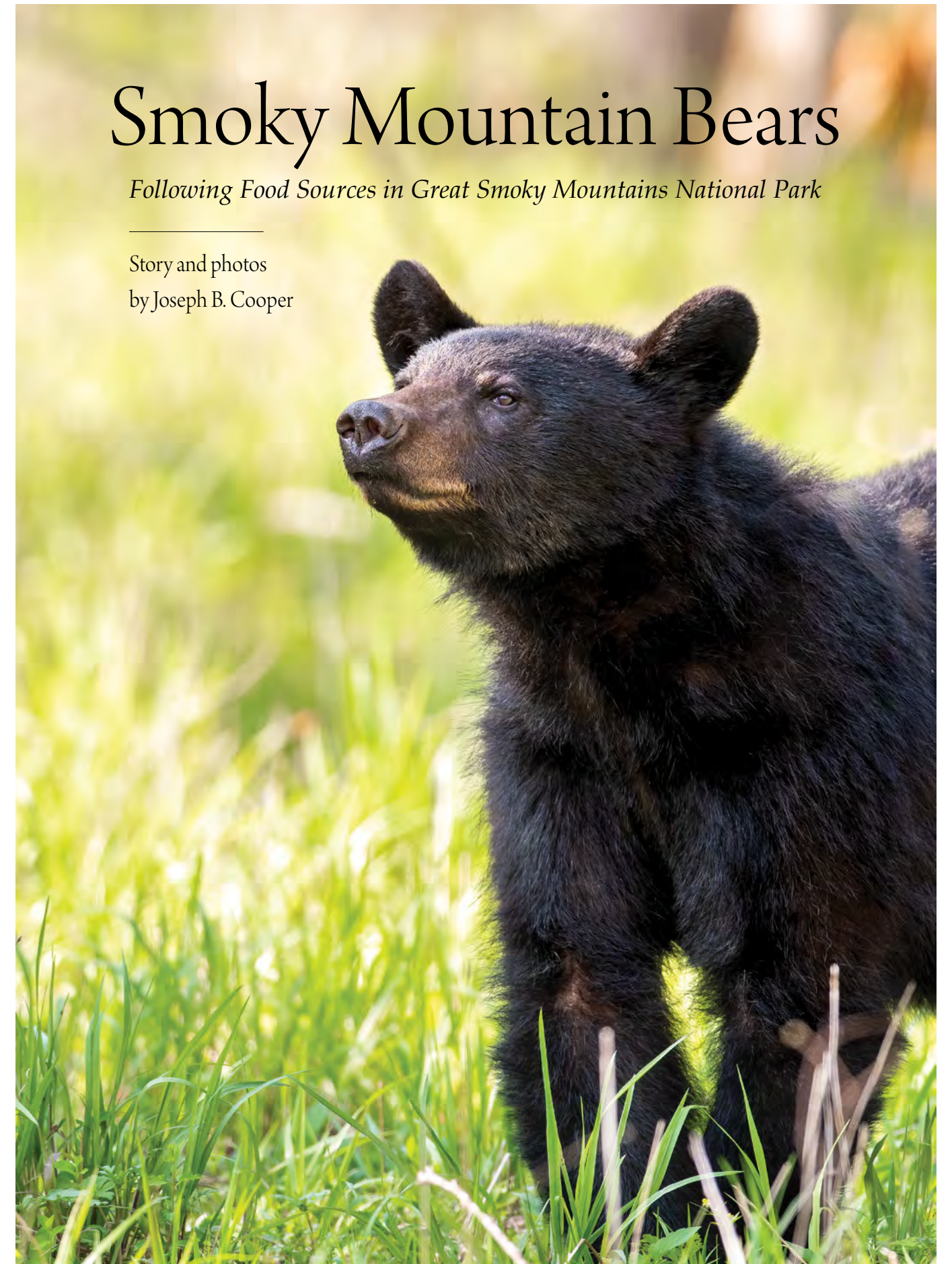
ABHIJEET KUMAR BANERJEE, India | "Rhino Mating", Assam, India



BRENT BARNES, United States | "Open Wide", Kona, Hawaii



ENRICO PESCANTINI, Italy | "Earth's Rainbow", Palcoyo, Peru



Smoky Mountain Bears

Following Food Sources in Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Story and photos
by Joseph B. Cooper



American black bear, Ursus americanus

The American black bear can be found all over North America in various habitats, one of which is Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP). The park borders North Carolina and Tennessee and has stunning bear habitat with an ever-changing forest.

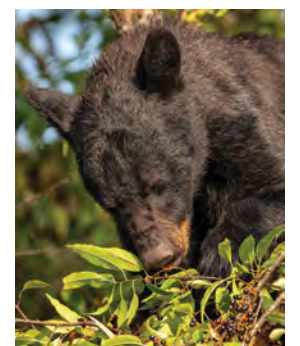
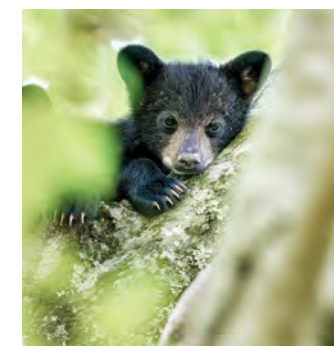
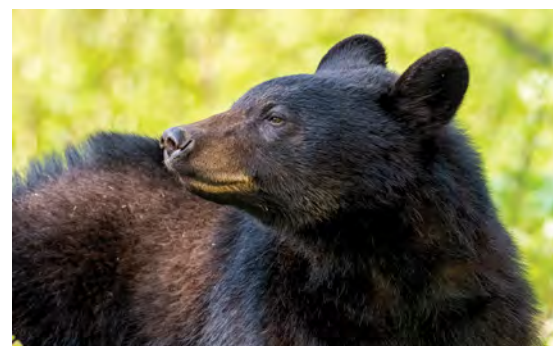
Though populations are variable, biologists estimate that roughly 1,800 bears live in the park. This equals a population density of approximately two bears per square mile. Even with the density of bears, it is still challenging to get good photographs. The forest in the Smokies is thick in places and the canopy doesn't let much light in. Also, the bears can be elusive.

Bears can eat almost anything since they are omnivorous, but there are patterns based on seasonality. Bears enjoy blackberries, which typically peak in July. They will lay in blackberry patches throughout the day picking berries. They also enjoy wild cherries

found in trees which typically bloom in late July and August. Bears will climb to the top of cherry trees to pick the berries which make for good photos. Another food source that the bears look for is white oak acorns. These acorns are typically at their peak in October and November, which brings the bears to the ground.

Black bears in the park rely on all three of these food sources to build up weight for hibernation in the winter months. Searching for these foods can help you locate the bears more easily. But, remember that these are wild animals and there's no specific pattern. Don't get discouraged if it takes a few attempts to get the perfect shot. GSMNP says not to approach closer than 50 yards for the safety of the bear and yourself. These safety rules help keep the bears "wild" and safe, as they should be.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOSEPH COOPER



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PHOTOGRAPHER FEATURE

Marcello Galleano

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amur falcon



northern hawk



steppe eagle



snowy owl

Of Eagles & Owls

Birding
Inner
Mongolia

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
MOHIT AGHA TAK



upland buzzard

It's hard to imagine a place like Inner Mongolia, a seemingly empty land, a land of vast, almost endless grasslands, where there still exists a nomadic lifestyle of yurts and wild horsemen. It is the land where Genghis Khan and his successors came from.

The bird density is low here, especially in the steppes. The first bird on my September trip to Hulunbuir in Inner Mongolia was the amur falcon, a small but fascinating migratory raptor. They breed here in northern China, as well as in Siberia and every year travel 22,000 miles.

The next birds we found were the steppe eagle, an endangered migratory eagle, and the upland buzzard, the largest buzzard in the world (based on wingspan). We also had a small family of demoiselle cranes appear, while a flock of ruddy shelduck flew overhead against the backdrop of the vast deep-blue sky. The last bird on the trip was a juvenile northern lapwing, a near-threatened species, despite its very wide geographic distribution.

I had an opportunity to go back to Inner Mongolia in late December 2018 with the specific goal of photographing the snowy owl. My base was Genhe, which is in the Alaqi Mountains (labeled as A-LA-CH'I SHAN area) and that has

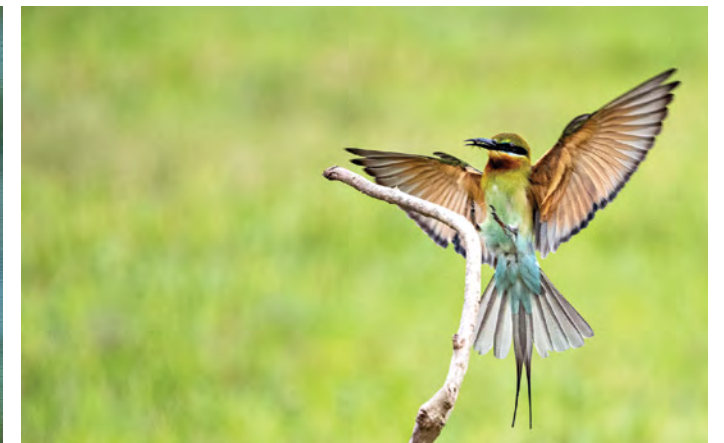
a subarctic or boreal climate, with an annual average temperature of -4°C , though the temperature in late December was well below -30°C . The first bird seen was a northern hawk owl, a resident owl in that northern latitude. Northern hawk owls are thought to detect prey primarily by sight. Along with their tendency to hunt in the daytime, their symmetrical ear openings are cited as evidence for daytime hunting. A 14-16 inch owl, with about 300g in weight, the northern hawk owl has a wingspan of almost 18 inches.

The final bird of the trip was the beautiful female snowy owl. The snowy owls are diurnal, active both day and night. Snowy owls nest in the northern arctic tundra and in the winter they wander south. An adult may eat more than 1,600 lemmings a year, or three to five every day. The owl would supplement its diet with rabbits, rodents, birds and fish. They are a vulnerable species, with an estimated global population of 28,000 individuals. The winter birding here, in the steppe region of inner Mongolia, with the grasslands covered by a thick blanket of snow resembling arctic tundra, requires staying out in temperatures dropping down below -35°C during the day time. Better pack your warm gear!



BRIAN BRUNETTI, "Shark Fin Cove" | Canon 5DSR, 16-35 2.8 Mark III lens, 10 stop ND filter, ISO 50, f:11, 75 sec.

Postcards from Singapore



Left: water hen. Top right: bee eater. Center: mangrove pit viper and crab. Bottom: Olive backed sunbird

MIGRATION OF THE



Demoiselle Crane

Story and photos by A.S. & Shakti Bishnoi

The demoiselle crane is a species found in central Eurosiberia, ranging from the Black Sea to Mongolia and northeastern China. Brown-grey birds with a black chest and throat, demoiselle cranes stand about 75cm tall and have a long neck and a short beak.

Migratory demoiselle cranes flock to the Rajasthan and Gurat regions in western India in the winter months, making for an amazing spectacle. The number of these migratory birds who arrive October through March has increased steadily every year. From less

than 100 individuals counted two decades ago, the number has grown to a staggering 15,000.

In the evenings the cranes fly back to their resting grounds. The sky darkens and the air reverberates with their trumpeting calls. A rush of air moves through curved wings as they glide into land.

It was the 18th-century queen Marie Antoinette who dubbed them “demoiselle” (young lady) for their grace, when these birds were taken to France from the Russian steppes.



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