

SOUTHERN *Focus*

A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm orange and red glow. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and reeds. In the middle ground, two people are standing in a small boat on the water, their figures also silhouetted against the bright sky.

Story and Photos by Joe Mac Hudspeth

Growing up in the hills of North Mississippi granted me the opportunity to be exposed to some of the most unique landscapes and wildlife in Mississippi.

Though the full-frame images of turkeys, deer, and waterfowl would come much later in my career, my Benton County deer camp was the perfect training ground for becoming a wildlife photographer.

Armed with a Kodak Extralite 10, I photographed every whitetail “hero” image I could. I photographed deer after deer, and it eventually became a camp rule that no one was permitted to process their animal before I photographed it and put it on the wall and in my scrapbook. And it was within the pages of that scrapbook that I began to form my love for photography and wildlife. But it would be years later before

I would actually take my first real wildlife image.

It’s one of those memories that sticks with you forever, and I remember that day just like it was yesterday. It was an unusual blistery winter morning. I was driving into camp with some friends when I spotted a small screech owl in a honeysuckle thicket on the side of the road. I quickly dug out my instamatic camera, eased to within 5 feet of the sleeping owl, and took my first wildlife image. At that very moment, at the ripe old age of 25, I vowed to save every nickel I could in order to buy the camera gear I needed to become a published wildlife photographer.



After what seemed like ages, I had finally put back enough money to buy a 35mm camera, equipped with an automatic mode, a 100-300mm lens, a cheap tripod, and all the accessories I thought I needed to get started. Now equipped with my new gear, I stomped around Ross Barnett, knowing that I'd have the next "Ducks Unlimited" cover in no time.

And it was in those next few years that I learned that wildlife photography wasn't going to be as easy as I had once imagined. I wasn't going to be able to just pull up in my 1976 Toyota Corolla, roll down the window, snap a shot of a mallard, and send it off to get my first paycheck. Even with a 300mm lens, I knew I had to be within a few feet of a wild animal to get a full-frame image.

Over those next few weeks, hundreds of images I'd taken came back poorly exposed and out of focus. Frustration set in to the point that I boxed up my camera equipment and threw it in the closet. I was done with photography.

Two years passed and my fiancée (now wife) had patiently listened to my repeated talk of photographing wildlife. She bought me an inexpensive 70-210mm zoom lens for a birthday gift that would allow me to focus on frogs, butterflies, and other smaller insects and animals. I also bought a book on wildlife photography and studied it, especially the chapters on exposure, shutter speed, and aperture. I studied how they affect each other and how they should work together. After all, I knew if I wanted to become a true wildlife photographer, I was going to have to work at it.

Soon after my poor man's education, I started chasing butterflies and weeds, and was very happy with the initial results. From there I added frogs, turtles, snakes, lizards, sunrises, sunsets, scenic shots and any other wildlife that couldn't outrun me to my quarry list. It was not long before I started sending my slides to magazines in hopes of being published. One day I opened the mailbox and found two magazines that had my

photos in them. One was on the cover of *Turkey Call* magazine and other one shared space with Stephen Kirkpatrick in *Mississippi Outdoors*. I just knew I'd made it big.

After the initial shock of becoming a published photographer wore off, I decided that it was time to buy some "big glass," a large telephoto lens, to start chasing deer, ducks, and turkeys. My first subject was to be the wood duck, which I regard as one of the most beautiful waterfowl in North America, and I knew exactly where to find plenty of them.

Having spent scores of hours in a particular tree stand that overlooked a beaver dam covered in wood ducks, I knew where I was going to try my hand at photographing this marvelous bird. I'd spent hours in that stand waiting on that trophy whitetail to pass, which never happened, but I spent my time well, watching wood ducks feeding, preening, and showing off.

After hunting season closed, I got permission to photograph

on that beaver dam. I knew that getting close enough to my subject would not be easy because, even with the 300mm lens. I would have to be less than 20 feet from them to “fill the frame” with a lone wood duck.

For the next year I experimented with every type material known to man trying to design a blind that the wood ducks would not be afraid of. I used lumber, conduit, PVC pipe, burlap, and every type of camouflaged material available. I finally came up with a blind made from PVC pipe as a frame and custom sewn camouflaged material that didn't seem to scare the wood ducks. I put the blind in the middle of the slough because I liked the background and there was a fallen tree that I wanted the wood ducks to get on and pose for me. The blind was placed in knee-deep

water with the rising sun to my back. I'd get in the blind 30 minutes before the wood ducks arrived and bide my time listening to the frogs and crickets. As it got light, the wood ducks would land and swim all around me, but before I had enough light to photograph them they would settle in an area some 50 yards from my blind. At 50 yards the wood ducks were mere “specs” in my cameras viewfinder!

Over the next year I took only a few photographs of wood ducks that would occasionally pass my blind. Then I had one of those “aha” moments. Just maybe they liked the area where they'd been going more than the location where I was set up. So I moved my blind.

I didn't go back to the blind for a couple of weeks so the wood ducks would get comfortable with it being in their favorite gathering

spot. The first morning I returned to the blind, the ducks arrived, as if on cue. While I waited for the sun to come up I was greeted by about 20 wood ducks, some as close as 3 feet. One actually landed on top of my blind and sat there for 30 minutes! That morning I took 10 rolls of slides, which were more images than I had taken over the past year.

That morning was truly the moment in my life when I knew I had what it takes to become a wildlife photographer. And over the past 20 years, I've taken thousands of photos that document the wonderful Mississippi that we have the privilege of calling home. ❖

For more information on the Mississippi Wildlife Federation Youth and Adult Outdoor Photography Contest, contact the Mississippi Wildlife Federation at (601) 206-5703.

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