



# Delta Wildlife

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**Get Ready for Duck  
Season**

**Photography Feature**

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# A View From the Blind

by Joe Mac Hudspeth

I grew up hunting and fishing in the hills of northern Mississippi. On my trips into the woods, I always carried a Kodak 110 Instamatic to take photos of the deer my friends and I harvested. One frigid January morning as I was returning from a hunt, a slight movement in a honeysuckle thicket caught my attention. Moving in for a closer look, I discovered a screech owl sunning himself. When this little fellow allowed me to get within two feet of him, I took my very first wildlife photograph. At that time, I had never heard of shutter speeds, f-stops, or aperture and I did not know that my camera would not focus at that close range. This experience, however, stoked a fire that has burned within me ever since.

Another ten years passed before I saved enough money to buy my first 35 mm camera, an automatic with 100-300 mm zoom, 90 mm macro, and 28 mm wide-angle lens. The zoom lens, I was sure, would let me photograph wood ducks and mallards from the window of my car without getting my feet muddy. I rode around Pipe Line Road on Ross Barnett Reservoir and took photograph after photograph of waterfowl. I believed in my heart that the ducks in the final prints would be ten times larger than they were in the viewfinder. Of course, this did not happen. Discouraged, I put all my equipment into the case and stashed it in the closet.

Two years later, my fiancée surprised me on my birthday with a simple 70-210 mm macro lens. Motivated once again to photograph wildlife "up close," I decided to take a different

approach. I bought and studied books on wildlife photography. The 70-210 macro lens reduced me to stalking smaller subjects such as frogs, turtles, lizards, and butterflies, but photographing these creatures honed my skills. Next I targeted sunrises, sunsets, wild flowers, spider webs, and fall leaves.

With the purchase of a big 300 mm telephoto lens, I turned my attention to the wood duck, in my opinion, the most beautiful of all ducks. But I soon realized that even with the big lens I had to be less than twenty feet from the ducks to get the full-frame photographs that I so desperately wanted. To get close to my subjects, I designed a lightweight blind, a PVC-pipe frame set in knee-deep water near an old beaver dam. I covered the frame with Mossy Oak's camouflage material and surrounded it with tree limbs stuck in

the mud. Now, or so I thought, I was ready.

After a week of waiting, I discovered one big problem—the ducks coming in at the crack of dawn would always land in the same spot, fifty yards away from me. I knew they weren't afraid of my blind because every now and then a duck would swim by only a few feet away. They just liked it better where they were. I moved my blind closer to where the ducks congregated and stayed away for a couple of weeks so they could get comfortable with the blind.

The first morning back in the blind, I watched the beaver dam come alive at 5:50 a.m. with at least twenty ducks arriving on cue and landing mere feet away. One actually came to rest on the top of my blind. The wood ducks fed and preened for the next hour and a



half while I waited for enough sunlight to capture them on film. And capture them, I did. That morning I took ten rolls of film, quite an accomplishment since I had only taken a total of three rolls of film the whole previous year.

As my photographs improved, I began submitting them for publication. Many long months later, quite unexpectedly I received in the mail two magazines featuring my photographs, one on the back cover and the other on the front cover. It was then that I said, "I can do this."

These publications were the first of many. Patience and perseverance have had much to do with my success as a wildlife photographer, but often it's just a matter of being in the right place at the right time. One summer a few years ago, I had been out in my blind unsuccessfully trying to photograph wood ducks. On my drive home I noticed something out of place under a lotus leaf about seventy-five yards off shore. High winds hit me as I stepped out of my car to get a better look. With my binoculars I located and identified an immature least bittern grasping a leaf and riding out the gale. Least bitterns are usually very secretive and unapproachable, and I knew that the odds of getting close enough to photograph this one were against me. As I put my waders on, I noticed that the "prime time" morning sunlight had been replaced by harsh overhead light. Viewed from the shore, the lotus leaf completely shaded the bittern. My plan was to wade past the bird in the hope that the sun would light him from the other side. As I approached I started shooting. I had to time my shots between gusts of wind that blew cattails in front of my subject. In these blustery conditions the camera's light meter was very erratic in trying to determine exposure. The least bittern was shadowed by the lotus leaf while the rest of the scene was bathed in bright sunlight. As I approached to within thirty feet of the bird, I took twenty images before he finally flew away.

The photographs from that roll of film were published in magazines around the country. One that appeared in the Nature Conservancy's 1993 calendar was selected from over two thousand wildlife images to win the Award for Excellence in Calendar Photography by the Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History.

After several years of photographing the native wildlife of Mississippi and surrounding states, I took a trip to Yellowstone and there met professional photographers whose work I knew and respected. National parks have been protected habitats for years, and the creatures there are accustomed to the presence of people. For this reason these areas attract wildlife photographers. While there I photographed elk, big horn sheep, antelope, and coyotes.

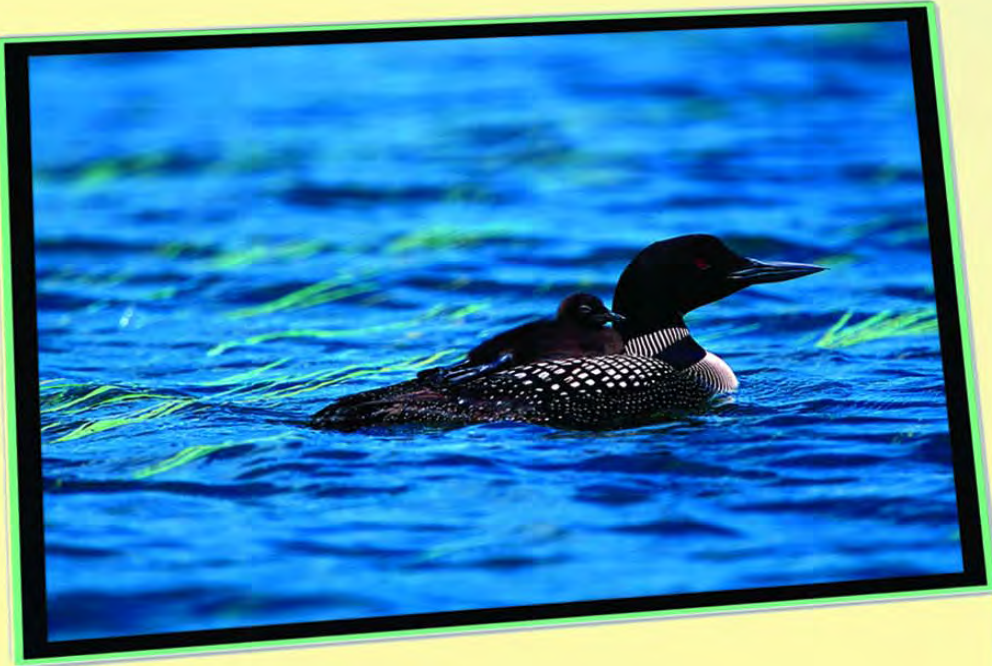
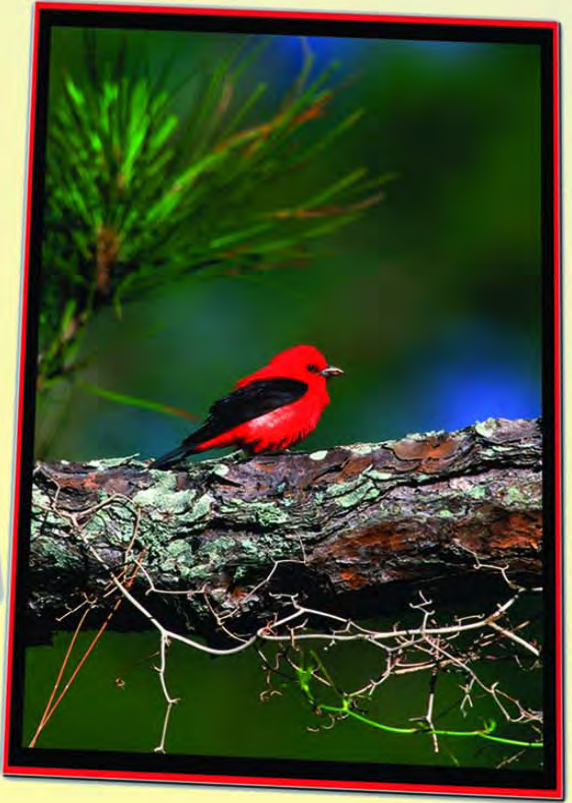
When I got home and had my slides processed, I was excited with the results. I called a photo editor who had published one of the least bittern photographs from the year before. I told him I had some amazing new material, and at first, he was eager to see it. But when he heard that I had just gotten back from Yellowstone, there was a long pause at the other end of the line. He finally said, "Well, hurry up and get them to me before all the other photographers who were out there, standing next to you, photographing the same elk you were, get their film processed." My heart sank. He was speaking the truth. I remembered an instance when I had finished lunch and was sitting around relaxing with four other photographers. All of a sudden a coyote appeared chasing a vole. The five of us started photographing the coyote as it jumped into the air and tried to catch the vole. Several minutes later I became aware of the sound of power winders going off behind me. Turning around, I saw about fifty photographers lined up—some kneeling, some standing—photographing the same scene.

While animals in the southern wild are more camera shy than those at Yellowstone, the woods and water teem with wildlife. I have spent many hours photographing blue-winged teals and alligators on Ross Barnett Reservoir outside of Jackson, wood storks and turtles at the Noxubee Refuge near Louisville, anhinga and snowy egrets at Tara Wildlife on Eagle Lake, and wood ducks and great blue herons at Springdale Refuge and Sardis Reservoir, close to my childhood home, Oxford. On certain private lands where wildlife is not hunted or harassed as much as on public land, deer and turkey have allowed me close enough to get some great photographs.

Birds of many species are everywhere you look. I knew this when I first started taking photographs in the wilds, but I was not very knowledgeable about bird identification and behavior. On my own I learned that if I set a tree limb close to my blind a certain bird would land on it and pose for me. But I had to buy a bird book before I could identify that bird as a prothonotary warbler. The beautiful wood duck, perhaps my favorite subject, is native and can be photographed year round. Around the same time that mallards, gadwalls, and other migratory ducks head north, a new group of birds begin to arrive in the southern marshes. Purple gallinules, common moorhens, least bitterns, and green herons all spend the spring and summer in central Mississippi nesting and raising their young before heading south in late summer and early fall.

In recent years as my photography has attracted some attention, I am frequently asked what expeditions I have planned for the future. While I have visited other wildlife areas around the country, my favorite photographs have been taken near the hunting grounds and fishing spots of my youth. I expect that in the future I will see what more can be found in my view from the blind. ■





These prints and others can be purchased at [www.southernfocus.com](http://www.southernfocus.com)