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Photography by

Mark J.
Harlow

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"Focus" ©markjharlow.com

Wildlife Photography at its best

I have often wondered if a person can write objectively when they are emotionally entranced by the subject of their writing. I mean when you really love something, how do you think critically? I believe that the answer lies in the fact that until you became acquainted with it, you didn't love it.

I have yet to talk to a person, and I have the good fortune of talking to many, who has not loved Mark Harlow's work. In fact, I can say that even with all of the great wildlife images I've been able to see in my life (I read numerous outdoor publications and have gone to many art shows where wildlife photography is displayed), never have I seen so many iconic images captured by one man. I must confess I Love Mark Harlow's work. And what may be even more impressive than the images is the man who shoots them. You see, Mark Harlow is a true traditionalist. In a world full of shortcuts he is unwilling to take them. All of his photography is imposition free,

meaning no images are stitched together, nor does he place one image inside of the other. He does not use the "continuous shoot" mode on his camera so his images are shot one at a time. He is determined to capture nature's true unaltered, unadulterated beauty. He does not bait or stage. His images are captured through hours of patient waiting in climates and conditions that send other people packing for home. His Toyota Tundra's odometer is well passed the 400,000 mile mark, his eyes are dilated from lack of sleep and too much starrng at a computer screen, and sometimes he lies awake at night thinking back on the road that took him here. It's been a long one, filled with many twists and turns, heartaches and triumphs, but most importantly a single promise to a very important person.

Back in high school Mark took an interest in photography. He took detailed notes about each picture; shutter speed, exposure, lighting, etc. Yet it wasn't something he took seriously for the purpose of a career.

In fact, after graduating from high school Mark didn't seem to know what to take seriously. As a partying atheist he drifted through various construction jobs. Mark was working for the union doing sheet metal work when he punched the clock for the last time saying to himself, "I can't do this anymore." That night there was a Ducks Unlimited banquet and Mark met Les Kouba, the famous wildlife artist. Being naturally curious, Mark asked Kouba about the process of moving his paintings to marketable prints. After the conversation Mark knew he wanted to get into the graphics business and do color separation.

There were only five schools in the nation that offered schooling in color separation. One happened to be in Brooklyn Park, MN. Even though he had vowed that he would never live in the Twin Cities area (too many people and too much traffic) his dream eventually took him there, but first he needed to get a degree in Graphic Communications, which he got from Mankato Technical Institute. In 1985 while he was finishing up his schooling at North Hennepin Tech, he was also working full time for a color separation company. It was during this period of time that he went from being a full time student and employee, pursuing his goal at a hundred miles an hour and sleeping very little, to what Mark describes as the lowest point in his life.

Mark was driving his Datsun wagon down I35W to deliver some proofs to a client when the brake lights of the truck in front of him came on. As the truck

swerved Mark saw a stalled vehicle directly in front of him. He stopped in time but one of the vehicles behind him did not. He was ejected from the vehicle. Lying in the freeway with vehicles speeding all around him and his Datsun on top of him, Mark entered into a surreal world experienced by a select few. "I'm unconscious but I can feel this heat. I can hear the sirens and I remember hearing this lady



paramedic say, 'someone get a fire extinguisher!' It's pitch-black and I'm kind of in pain but I'm not. I'm fading in and out and not really hearing details but I remember this peripheral blue light and a tremendous feeling like a morphine experience. It was at this point that a really calming, peaceful, unbelievable feeling came over me with this blue light." He had escaped with severe burns and lacerations, a broken collar bone, multiple fractures, seven messed up discs in his back and neck, and his life. Mark was taken from the accident scene in an ambulance and went through extreme physical pain in the following months, some of which still haunts his spine today, yet it was nothing compared to the mental anguish that was yet to come. Fortunately for Mark the accident caused him to revisit his faith. In the past he had always argued with his Christian brother, but not anymore.

Even today Mark is quick to humbly point out that he takes no credit for the natural beauty of his work, instead he gives those accolades to The Creator.

Once Mark was out of the hospital Mark tried working part time, but the company didn't really want him. So with over \$50,000 in medical bills, no job, constant physical suffering and a settlement tied up in the court system, Mark reached his low point.

Mark recalled this period in his life, "The moment I realized how bad it was occurred when I went to the cash machine to get ten dollars. The machine told me the money wasn't there. I was so broke, I couldn't even buy you a cup of coffee." That was when he finally had to swallow his pride and

apply for government assistance. "I'll never forget standing in line with the others and applying for food stamps. It was the most humbling experience of my life. I was in a period of extreme reflection and severe depression."

Yet, Mark was never one to idle for too long. He eventually saw an ad for a print sales position. Mark went to the interview in boots and blue jeans, but oddly enough they hired him. Since he didn't own a suit he went to Mankato where his friend sold clothes. He purchased three suits on credit. His friend signed a personal guarantee and taught Mark how to tie a tie.

From 1986 to 1993 Mark worked at three different companies. Although he did well, corporate life didn't suit him. Mark's next venture was founding his own company, White Pine Graphics Inc. He moved the company to Walker in 2005 and kept the business running until April of 2008.



"His Majesty" ©markjharlow.com

On a trip to Walker in April 2004, Mark picked up his camera and shot a photo of a pair of swans on Shingobee Bay of Leech Lake. It was during this time in 2004 that his mother's health began to fail. It was his Mom's favorite photo. On subsequent trips, when he came to see her, she would be staring at it. In June of 2004 shortly before she lost her battle with cancer, she looked into Mark's eyes and said, "Mark, Promise me you will do something with your photography this time. You've always had the gift and it is not fair to not share your gift with others" Mark wanted to say yes but he hesitated. It would be a completely new venture for him, he would have to give up the other business he built, and he wondered if he really had "the gift" or if his Mom was just being nice. Mom pressed her son again, and finally he relented. With the peace of knowing her son would pursue his God-given gift she passed away only three days later.

Although he eased into his promise initially, he found himself closing his business in April of 2008 and diving into photography more than full time. "Capturing the images is something I love to do. It is not really work, I consider it therapy. The work part is keeping up all my websites, planning for books, and running the studio, now that's a different story," chides Mark.

-Neil Johnson

Mark has captured many amazing images that you can see on his websites: markjharlow.com, wildmustangsite.com, natureinblackandwhite.com, and eaglelovers.com

But the best way to see the beauty of his work is to stop by his studio in Walker, MN. There you can see images like *The Guardian*, *His Majesty*, and *Focus* on large canvases. I encourage you to do so.

It will be an amazing experience that you will not forget.