

INTERVIEW



Fall at Oxbow Bend

BOB JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHER PAR EXCELLENCE



Meet Bob Johnson – an award-winning photographer and writer with nearly two decades of experience photographing the natural world. His work covers the scenic beauty from the Pacific

Northwest and beyond. His weekly photography tips and other writings have helped countless people better understand the craft of nature photography and the digital darkroom. He is the winner of the Best of Wildlife category in the 2002 Northwest Exhibition of Environmental Photography. A longtime member of the North American Nature Photography Association and a regular contributor to Nikonians.org, Bob teaches photography and leads workshops for the Mountaineers, a large outdoor organization based in Washington State.

His photographs are held in numerous private collections and are available both as stock and as fine-art prints. His work can be seen online at www.earthboundlight.com as well as several other online galleries.

INTERVIEW

Potts Basin



Please tell us about your photography background – have you had any formal training in the field or are you self-taught?

Self-taught, really. I've attended a number of seminars and a few workshops over the years, but the basis of what I know came from self-study and my own experience. Having worked in a bookstore and continuing to have a love of books, I've read a great many works on photography and nature photography specifically. I now teach photography through the Seattle Mountaineers outdoors organization (www.mountaineers.org) and is actively pursuing other teaching opportunities as well. So I'm now increasing my involvement in formal training but from the front of the room rather than in the audience.

Your images portray a strong sense of color. How do you manage that? Are your images digitally enhanced?

I have to admit that as a film shooter I was fond of films such as Fuji Velvia and Kodak E100 VS that have a more saturated color palette and continue with that now that I'm shooting digital. Mostly though, the color comes from being there at the "magic hours" near dawn and dusk when the color truly looks that way. For a long time, I had plenty of shots taken at sunset, but



Nooksack Falls

very few shots at sunrise, since it meant getting up too early. Once I finally forced myself to do it though, I was hooked. I live only a short distance from Mt. Rainier National Park. When I'm down there photographing, I start my day early, well before sunrise so I can get what I am after. Some people come in late and only see the mountains in full sunlight. A snow-capped peak in full sun will only ever be one color – white – never pink or orange or anything else. When people see my Mt. Rainier images I occasionally get asked what I did to get that color. First and foremost you have to be there when that color happens.

We feel that higher-end digital cameras are superior to



Jumping Off Point



film cameras for a variety of reasons. Would you agree?

Yes, I do, and the digital advantage will only increase as time goes by. That's technology for you.

As a learning tool, digital is wonderful. I find I have less hesitation to try something new since I'm not "wasting" film, and the ability to see your results right away cannot be underestimated. With film, you have to wait to get your slides processed and then have to try to remember what you did. If an image came out great (or if it didn't) you may not know why. Beginners repeat the same mistakes time and time again before they realize why they keep happening. Digital does

Arches-postcard



away with all that. As soon as each picture has been taken, you can see the results, make any needed changes and often shoot again before the moment has passed. Other differences such as the ability to change ISO on every shot force you to start rethinking how you work in the field.

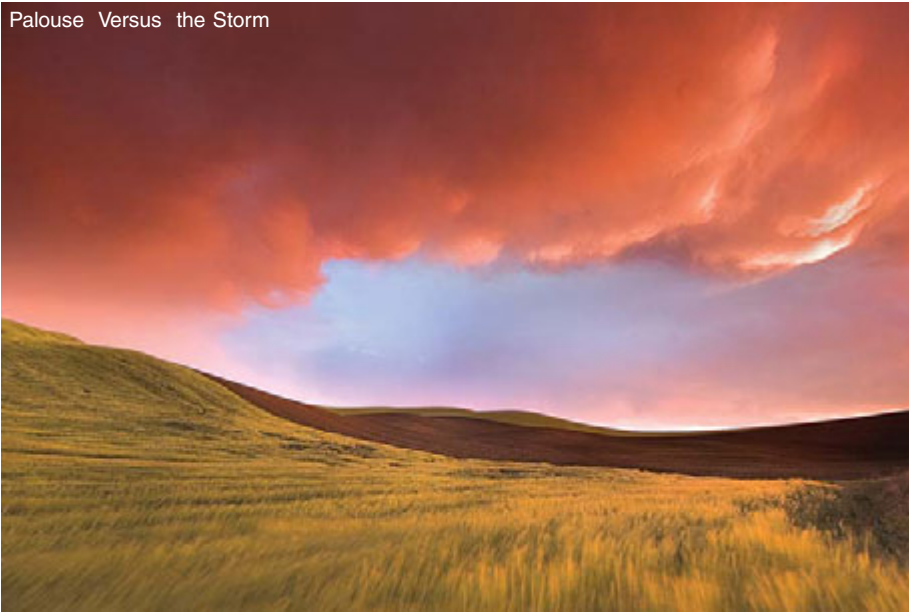
Since you specialize in nature and landscape photography, could you enlighten us as to how you capture 'those magical

moments'?

I could say that step one is to be in the right place at the right time, but in fact step one is to research where that is

INTERVIEW

Palouse Versus the Storm



and when that is. In order to maximize my chances of getting what I'm after I usually research locations online extensively before going somewhere. If you want tide pool shots for example, you have to be there at low tide. And not just any low tide, you want a really low one, the kind that only happens a few times a year. If your timing is off by an hour, the shot is gone, back under water.

When I'm on location, I will have already figured out where I will be for sunrise and sunset, the two most important times of the day. I try to also have a backup plan in case the weather doesn't cooperate. When the light gets flat, I try to scout out other locations to come back to. Once I get to what is supposed to be the right place at the right time though, all that planning has to be left behind and the only thing I'm thinking about or paying attention to is what is happening in front of me.

Could you be the judge and jury to one of your own images? Our readers would like to know why you have shot the image, what are the points you considered, what elements of composition has helped you and any other detail you would like to give.

Wow, good question. Consider the "Yosemite Valley Morn-

Yosemite Valley Morning



ing" which was a planned image. Shot from the Tunnel View overlook made famous by Ansel Adams, I knew exactly what the view would be like from there even though I had never been there before. Yosemite is one of the easiest places to find information on but on the Internet and in books.

I went there over Christmas in the hopes of seeing it in ways that aren't seen as often but nearly got snowed out. The afternoon I arrived it was snowing heavily. On a drive around the valley loop I couldn't even see El Capitan or any of the other famous landmarks, even as I drove directly beneath them. Overnight, the snow stopped though, although it was still somewhat fogged in as I headed into the park around dawn on Christmas Eve morning. Driving up to Tunnel View in the hopes of seeing over the fog proved to be a winner. In this

X-marks-the-Spot





case, I set the tripod up as high as I could to see over the trees in the foreground. I wanted to balance out the weight of El Capitan on the left with that of Half Dome and Cathedral Rocks on the right. Two stacked graduated neutral density filters were needed to cut the brightness of the sky enough to get useful detail in the valley floor.

This was a shot I had already in my mind long before I left Seattle and I'm pleased that I was able to execute it as well as I did. The entire trip was a truly magical experience. The day after I left, it snowed again so my timing was perfect.

Who is your 'guru'? Who are the nature and landscape

Palouse Potala Palace



photographers you look forward to?

Galen Rowell obviously, as I've already mentioned.

His images were what made me first realize that photography could be more than mere record keeping. Galen's images truly convey a sense of magic and wonder at the natural world that most people are never fortunate enough to see.

I was truly saddened at the loss of Galen and his wife Barbara. On the morning their plane went down, I was down at Mt. Rainier shooting with Galen Rowell graduated neutral density filters. I have learned a lot from John

INTERVIEW

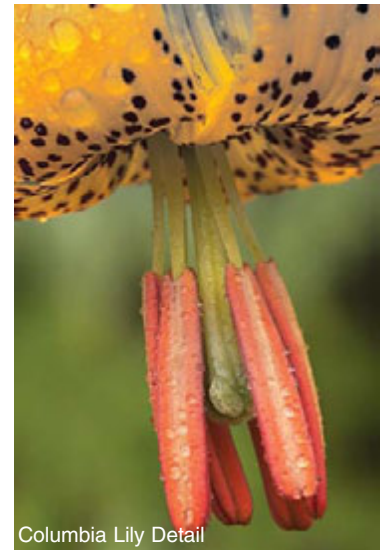
Vine-maple-Collage



Young Canada Lynx



Redmond Watershed Mushrooms



Columbia Lily Detail

Shaw. His were some of the first (and still some of the best) instructional books for aspiring nature photographers. And his images have a cleanliness and simplicity to them that is instantly attractive.

He grew up in a part of the US that doesn't have a lot of National Parks and such, so he had to look for subject matter in more everyday scenes, sometimes even in his own backyard. Lacking majestic landscapes is also why he became interested in macro. He was proof that no matter where you lived

there were plenty of wonderful pictures to be had.

Other photographers I admire greatly include Art Wolfe, David Muench, Jack Dykinga, and Tom Till.

I know I should say Ansel Adams, and I certainly have taken the opportunity when it presents itself to shoot from the same spots he did, but for the most part I think his work is simply too well known and too often imitated. I look for artists that keep showing me new ways of looking at nature. ■