



Mark W. Moffett

UNITED STATES

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From my desk calendar, a tiger peers at me behind leaf sprays. I flip through the months. A whale fin splashes; a butterfly sips nectar; moonlit elephants bathe and trumpet. Each situation has been the subject of countless photographs. Still, these particular images are unbeatable as artistic statements, technically and aesthetically up-to-date.

In the case of magazine articles, however, I believe most images should dig deeper into new photographic territory. I look at nature photographers as natural historians with film, journalists transcending color and design to document the drama of a species' existence.



MOUSE EATING ACORN

Portraits contribute a scene-setting look at an animal, or familiarize us with the appearance of unusual species. An article can then proceed with more complicated action.

My portrait of a browsing mouse comprised part of a larger article in *National Geographic* on acorns. Mice turn out to be heroes of the story, since only acorns buried by mice, squirrels, or similar vertebrates, and subsequently forgotten, have any chance of germination. Otherwise, all the acorns are hollowed out by such insects as acorn moths and acorn weevils, which were the article's main focus. These species bore through the acorn shell and move in.

The plant (oak) side of the acorn story also fascinates me, but plants, being relatively passive, rarely sell as magazine stories without a strong animal component. Choice of topic is crucial even in animal stories. Some species—among them calendar favorites—lead basically tedious lives. Good for them, but not necessarily for wildlife photojournalists, who, if they choose such a subject, will have to struggle all the more to photograph rare or unforgettable moments.

I couldn't cover the mouse's full story in my acorn article, and so it represents one of many unexplored options for "backyard" photographers.

Canon AE-1 camera, 100mm macro lens, Kodachrome 64 film.



MOUSE EATING ACORN

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An article's interconnected images tell a story; each one, like a well wrought paragraph, instructs and enthralls. As in ordinary journalism, the goal is to record not simply everyday routine and environment, but decisive moments—actions or events that may occur once in a subject's lifetime, such as a marriage or bereavement might for a human.

For any publication, then, I look at the proportions of three overlapping types of images. For this book, I've selected one photograph of each kind: decisive moments (typically dramatic action); landscapes; and portraits. In the portrait category, I include rudimentary or commonplace behavior images such as a bird brooding her young, snakes threatening the camera, a leopard in a blurry dash. While satisfying when executed well, I think portraits weaken a story when they are too numerous, because they draw little from life's most poignant dynamics. Also, a story feels incomplete if a sweep of the subject's environment—a landscape—isn't introduced.

Usually an article with few dramatic action pictures also suffers, no matter how elegant the presentation or sumptuous the plumage. If the topic were human affairs, viewers might conclude that the photographer had weak emotional and intellectual



TREE-CLIMBING RESEARCHER

Landscapes tend to be statements of ecology: in stories on animals, they place the subject in its habitat, often a vista. Alternatively, the landscape itself may be the subject: this story in *National Geographic* concerned an ecosystem or a place rather than a species. Such stories are hard to do well, particularly in the case of this rainforest canopy effort.

The usual photographer's cop-out: pick the most crowd-pleasing subjects present when the light's good. I try instead to reveal how a community is put together, emphasizing the actions of resident species with key ecological roles (so-called "keystone species"), plus any other unique aspects of that environment. This Costa Rican landscape, for example, portrays the dangers of trees on extreme slopes. Because the trees tilt to reach light, they often topple, setting off landslides (as has occurred in the background). Scientist Pierre Berner—here measuring tree growth—is truly in a precarious position.

Canon T-90 camera, 100-300mm zoom lens, Fujichrome 100 film.



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connections to his own species. In this respect, our field of wildlife photography lags behind other forms of journalism.

The fault lies as much with editors as photographers. In any case, the scarcity of action photographs suggests opportunities for growth. Rather than improving graphic presentation of familiar events, we should look for new behaviors, new insights to surprise the reader.



JUMPING SPIDER

Reminiscent of dueling gladiators, these Sri Lankan jumping spiders spar with swordlike fangs. In this frame, the spider at right backs off and is about to flee with an apparent look of panic. The other rears up like a triumphant Rocky in the ring. Successful macro photography makes us forget size: these guys are 1/5 inch long. (I consider this an advantage. After all, hippos can only be smaller than life on the printed page!)

The best photographers strive for technical excellence without artifice (though action pictures commonly have the gritty realism of the finest human war images). "Bugs" can be quite expressive. Because of this, knowledgeable observers recognize contrived situations by subtleties of posture and action—as in vertebrates (for which, unfortunately, cage setups are equally common). Especially lamentable for insects are carefully staged photographs of refrigerated specimens. Indeed, to capture action in tiny subjects, composition cannot even be constrained by a tripod. I handhold cameras in nature at magnifications to x20. Depth of field may be the length of a paramecium (I have a steady hand). No modern gadget circumvents this. In fact, I choose camera models that existed long before I learned macro photography 10 years ago.

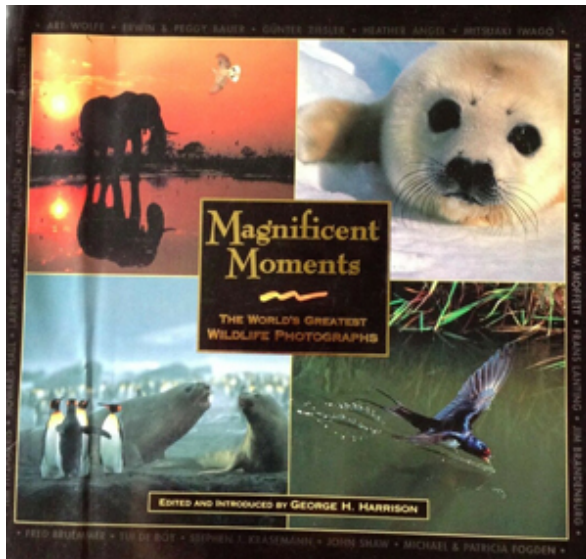
Olympus OM-2 camera, extension tubes and 38mm macro lens, Fujichrome Velvia film.



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Excerpt from...

Magnificent Moments: The World's Greatest Wildlife Photographs
G.H. Harrison, ed. (1995). Willow Creek Press.



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Usually an article with few dramatic action pictures especially suffers, no matter how elegant the presentation or sumptuous the plumage. If the topic were human affairs, viewers might conclude that the photographer had weak emotional or intellectual connections with his own species. In this respect, wildlife photography lags behind other forms of journalism.

The fault lies as much with editors as photographers. In any case, the scarcity of (non-trivial) action photographs suggests opportunities for growth. Rather than improving graphic presentation of familiar events, we should look for new behaviors, new insights to surprise the reader.