

# Among the Trees

by

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## **Background**

The work in this project has created an opportunity to combine two very different disciplines and make it into something that is not often discussed in the scientific or art communities. Wildlife photography combines the natural world with the world of fine art and allows for exposure to both art and ecosystems simultaneously. While looking at images may not expand knowledge it can provoke curiosity and initiate a relationship with the subject. Wildlife photography is often overlooked in both fine art and the science communities but will not be ignored any longer. Making images of wildlife in which their natural habitat is featured as a critical element creates a more complete sense of identity wherein the ecosystems in which they exist are described as being both reflective of and essential to their lives.

During my time at SUNY Purchase I have majored in both Visual Arts as well as Environmental Studies. In their own way, each area of interest has engaged and inspired but I wanted to finally allow my love for science and art to come together and combine into a single vision, a unique body of work. The perfect blend of my work was wildlife photography, it allows the audience to experience a different perspective and get detailed documentation of animals that may not be approachable in reality. Most animals in the natural world would not allow us this intimate gaze which makes these selected moments infatuating. Wildlife photography provides a different experience. Patience and study were indispensable aspects of the process - observing animals as they went about their lives, searching for food while always aware of that harsh dynamic between prey and predator.

## An Introduction to Wildlife Photography

Years before embarking on my own journey in wildlife photography, I fell in love with the images of wildlife and nature. The portal to the natural world from these images always seemed incredibly enchanting. I have always been inspired by images that show the passion and drive of conservation like Ami Vitale documenting Northern white rhinoceros in the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya (Vitale 2019), or Joel Sartore trying to preserve the life of endangered species through his extensive photo ark (Sartore 2023); these artists are simply unforgettable to me. Most of the work I have grown to love has been experienced through National Geographic Magazine. Yet would not be possible without George Shiras III. His images were some of the first displayed in National Geographic Magazine and altered the Magazine indefinitely to have a desire for imagery (Classen 2021). Upon the publishing of Shiras' work two National Geographic Society Board members resigned in protest of turning the magazine into a "photo book" but the magazine has never had regrets (Classen 2021). Shiras began his passion for the natural world when traveling and hunting as a child. He later swapped out shooting with a rifle to shooting with a landscape camera (Wender 2015). Without him both National Geographic and wildlife photography would not be where it is today.

Joel Sartore's Photo Ark has documented over 15,000 species around the world to create an archive of biodiversity on a global scale. He both sells his prints and displays his imagery in exhibitions to promote conservation efforts as well as educate. When Joel discusses his work he discusses his desire to create connection which is exactly what my work hopes to accomplish. One of the quotes that wrapped me into his work was, "*I want people to care, to fall in love, and to take action.*" It describes perfectly how wildlife photography can be a perfect tie to

conservation. Caring about these species is always the first step and to get there a connection to the animals is key.

### The Fact of the Forest

The unfortunate truth is that the hardwood forest, critical to the life and sustenance of these animals, is being erased. That timeless sense of home and belonging which is sparked to life whenever we enter the deep woods is running out of time and what we've long taken for granted is at risk of disappearing. It is my hope that these wildlife images will serve as a reminder of a precious resource which should be recognized as being as important and vital as our own lives. These images may not be a cry for help from our forest but they serve a purpose of preservation of the current state of our natural world. It also allows the perspective of true habitat. Hardwood forests as well as being a place of intrinsic value is home to many.

New York State is 61% forest. Our forests cover 18.6 million acres of our 30.2 million total acres. (NYSDEC 2024) These forests are crucial to species across New York State. The forests are responsible for 80% of our terrestrial biodiversity (NYSDEC 2024). Deforestation and fragmentation are major threats to biodiversity. Both deforestation and fragmentation can create a loss of habitat for many species (Zipperer 2020). Forest areas, in addition to being habitat, are hubs for carbon sequestration. Forests store over 1 trillion tons of carbon (NYSDEC 2024). Forests are useful in multitudes of ways but the focus in this project is the forest as habitat.

## **Methods**

### **The shooting process**

To get near enough to photograph the animals demanded stealth and silence. The decision to use a Canon EOS R mirrorless DSLR camera proved to be essential. Being mirrorless it was silent and its fast autofocus technology provided the means to make multiple images within fractions of a second. The lens, a 100-400 zoom was critical, as it provided greater access to subjects both near and far. At times I could barely see the subject and it was the enhanced facility of that zoom lens which provided the visual clarity and detail needed to make the picture

When shooting I always tried to utilize a shallow depth of field to create a less distracting image. This shallow depth of field is also achievable in post processing but I preferred to see this effect in the moment. I decided to use as low an ISO as possible to limit 'noise' and enhance resolution. Excessive grain would be distracting and undermine my wish to capture that natural sense of light, place and space I sought to describe. My desire for this work was to describe these creatures in a natural light so I didn't want to distract from that. When in the field I always tried to use a high shutter speed to provide clarity even when the animal was in motion. Through trial and error I learned that using small point autofocus when shooting was crucial. It allowed for a much faster focusing adjustment as compared to a manual focus. Its small point of focus was crucial to shoot through tree branches and create a clear focal point on the subject.

The compositional rule of thirds was applied in much of the work. This rule splits the image in nine equal parts creating a grid of three lines on each axis. The important part of the grid is the intersections of those lines. Those points are often the best placement for a subject. Another compositional rule that I utilize often is the rule of symmetry. Symmetry can help make

an image very pleasing to the eye and allows the viewer to see the point of focus “front and center”.

Gaining access to my subjects required that I proceed with caution and become, as they were, a part of the landscape and while this helped me connect to the environment with a greater sense of intimacy and respect there were still occasions that for all the care and caution applied, my stumbling efforts caused the animals to scatter forcing me to start the hunt anew.

### Image Selection

In this process, image selection has been crucial. When returning from the field I can come back with 1000+ images of one particular kind of bird yet find that only a handful manage to provide the clarity and content I desired. Part of the challenge of this type of imagery is the difficulty of revealing the animals’ strength, grace and beauty while they are in motion and I am bound to a specific position which greatly limits choice and preference. As the photographer, you get to create the frame for the wildlife you're documenting and often you can change your location and angle of the subject to alter the image and achieve your goal. The intention with all of my work is to describe the animals in their own space within the environment. The overall aim for this project has been to describe the animals in a natural and unaffected state, showing them at ease and at one within the environment they call home. My interest as a photographer is often in flux, responding to the potential of the subject and situation. The element of chance has to be addressed as a benefactor through patience, a heightened quality of attention and that sharpened sense of awareness which follows in the wake of any respectful period of love and interest

exercise of love and interest all play a critical part in the work produced. Even so, not all images translate with the depth, vision and clarity hoped for.

Image selection is a difficult task for me. It demands a discerning, objective eye and invariably demands time and patience. Because the differences in each image can be extremely subtle, the process is tedious and exhausting. The sheer number of photographs made in a day, let alone the many months of shooting the project only added to the demand. In the effort to pull together a strong, cohesive body of work which would inspire the viewer to see beyond the literal and make that leap to the fact that we all connected was a challenge and often had me editing out favorite images so as to better support the intention of the presented work. It won't come as a surprise that the many hours of tracking and observing these subjects brought with it a deep respect and enhanced sense of intimacy for the animals. I truly fell in love with some of them. Some of which didn't make the cut for my final image library. As with any photographic project, the process of selection, editing and sequencing is critical to the cohesiveness and success of the presentation. The goal was to show the beauty and power of those among the trees so the images that don't share that message don't get displayed.

## Editing

I always aimed to leave focus on the animals in the image and often the background was a distraction. When editing I wanted to ensure that the focal point on the animals, so I would heighten the colors properly to allow for the birds to be more pronounced than the background. In images where the colors of the bird matched the background too closely I was able to select the bird and brighten them while toning back the background or even placing it out of focus. The variation in size of my pieces is also something I would like to discuss in this process. When printing images it is hard to keep the clarity of some shots after post processing. A lot of these

images are printed on the largest scale the quality would allow. With images like the eagle cropping was necessary as the extensive distance between the camera and the subject compromised resolution and limited the overall scale in which the subject could be presented.

## Printing

After the selection and shooting process I began the most exciting portion of this project, the printing process. Printing is when this work really came to life. On a computer screen images seem so malleable, and so incomplete, but once the images hit the paper in the proper way there is no unfinished business. The images become alive when in their final printed form. The printed work becomes an object on the wall, complete and concrete, far more satisfying than the ephemeral image of the computer screen.

Prior to getting the images into their perfect final state there were many decisions to be made. The most pressing for this stage was of course scale. There were so many things to consider. How big should this image be? Do smaller images make them more intimate? Do I have the paper for this to be large? Should the images all be the same size? Do the small prints seem less engaging if I alter sizes? It was important that these decisions supported the intention of the project and each image came with its own unique requirements. The choices could not be thoughtless or arbitrary but instead had to be carefully studied and considered. In this time of uncertainty, I found comfort in beauty and printed images on a small and familiar scale. I made many images the size of a letter sheet of paper and even cut it down to make half letter sized images. These smaller images served as perfect tests for me to see the image. When test printing, It was obvious that the small scale would not. This made clear in the image of the mother eagle in her nest especially. At the smaller scale she was lost in the trees. Similarly the image of the flying mallard was consumed by the landscape when printed smaller. Printed larger the image



seemed like a landscape painting with its soft edges in the background and use of shallow depth of field the duck stood on its own. The sharp details and coloration soared through the trees just as he was in person that day. The mallard emerged from the trees with the same distinct character and presence of the day I'd witnessed the flight. For other images the small test prints became a hushed intimate moment. The robin among the berry covered bush was just elegant. I knew that this image would be on a smaller scale. There is a fine line and balance when addressing scale and content. Smaller does not always mean less. The image of the cooper's hawk, the smallest image in the show, still shone through with power and presence, its screeching call as piercing and demanding as the moment it was let loose.

For some images test prints were not determining size but addressed color balance problems. In the image of the hermit thrush especially the colors would not print to the desired vision. The piece presented me with issues for not just hours but days. I was so frustrated that I couldn't resolve it. I actually forced myself to go home for the day and come back with a fresh start tomorrow. The picture kept printing with an obscene amount of magenta that overpowered the entire piece. The bird was losing all of its natural color. For issues like this one I went back in and edited the image file in photoshop repeatedly after making more and more test prints. The prints always provided me with a great deal of information on how to adjust the image but it unfortunately did take a great deal of trial and error to get this piece to translate properly.

### Installing the Work

In order to best organize and design the layout and sequencing of the display I drew out the layout of the room I displayed in. Resembling a blueprint, the sketch had each wall drawn and sized. This small sketch proved to be a crucial piece of the process. It allowed me to move pieces around and try different layouts of imagery by just writing them onto the walls. If I didn't

like my organization there were no extra holes in the wall from hanging them prior but instead I could just erase the placement and rework the layout. Even though I played around with the image placement for what felt like an eternity. The final layout on the walls was not even one that I drew but instead was based on instinct. I had most images planned in their proper places and laid them out on the floor in front of their soon to be homes. After laying everything out, regardless of all my planning and sketching, something just didn't feel right when all laid out across the floors. The images were not having the conversation I would've hoped they would. They were not cohesive with the spaces I placed them in. So of course, I moved the images again, and again, and again. Finally, the images were making music together, and beautiful harmony was achieved. After hanging the work the room seemed to form its own ecosystem. The small birds in branches had created a perfect trio in the small wall sections, the doe had its spotlight on its own perfectly sized wall, the eagles, both male and female, appeared to take charge of the room and demanded attention. All the animals and landscapes seemed to have finally found their place and marked their territory.

After hanging all the images I still had a desire for something more. The room was simply too much of a room. It needed natural elements. Back to the drawing board. After a lot of deliberation. I decided the trees needed to not just be imagery but also enter the room itself. Dr. Taylor took me on a journey to the dendrochronology lab. He gave me creative freedom and t allowed me to hide some of the power outlets in the room that were creating a very human made interior and replaced it with small cross sections of trees as well as some tree stumps and even little logs. Nature was no longer implied but now in the room with us in multiple aspects. It was a small element that truly transformed the space.

## **Conclusion**

At the science symposium I was honored to display my work and receive overwhelming praise. My work was described as a scientific unicorn. I was enchanted by the results of my display and the engagement I received from the audiences of strangers, friends, and family alike. After a large amount of positive feedback I think I would still change a few things about this installation. A lot of the issues I had were based on the room itself but one thing that I wish I altered was the lighting. I would add more light in multiple locations and even manipulate the light to have a softer tone. Some images felt as if they were hiding in the shadows which was not intentional. I also have the desire to incorporate more natural elements such as wood chips or more tree stumps to invite the outdoors in and create a more immersive experience. I would even consider putting live plants in the location if there was a natural light source. The work was complemented well by these features but I think it was not enough in this installation. The last location based change I would hope to make would be transforming the pole in the room into something less distracting or even presenting my work in a location without that. It was obstructing the view of other imagery and made some images less engaging because of the physical barrier it formed.

In terms of the imagery itself I wish I had more variety to the species I captured. A lot of my imagery was birds but I am curious as to the impact that amphibians or insects could incorporate into the work. I also wonder if incorporating more mammals would've promoted more of a connection with the audience. Overall I think my images were very strong and displayed my technical abilities very well. The work showed the power of the forest and those who call it home and created connections with the viewers. The process of this project has made

me appreciate those among the trees more than I knew possible and I hope it sparked the same appreciation in those who experienced it.

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