

THE PRO-FILES:

Daniel J. Cox's Natural Exposures

by Jenna Caplette
Photography by Daniel J. Cox

Montana's dramatic landscape and diverse wildlife inspire superb nature photography. It's no wonder several world-class photographers call the Big Sky Country home. Their images grace the cover of national and international publications. They win national and international photography awards. They mentor upcoming photographers. Their images express nature's inherent beauty.

Every fall for the past 17 years, Daniel Cox has packed his gear, bundled up, and headed north to the arctic cold of Churchill, Manitoba. He photographs the polar bears that congregate there, waiting for the bay to freeze, so they can go out on the ice to hunt seals.

Cox volunteers his time, and his international reputation as a skilled and ethical wildlife photographer, to communicate the work of the conservation organization, Polar Bears International. He works with a team from PBI's Buggy One to stream high definition video to National Geographic for a live web cam available in season on their website. "The idea," he says, "is to bring the world to Churchill. It's amazing technology. Polar Bears are an incredible species, endangered because of the climate change." In fact, "Polar Bears are the poster child for that issue."

*Alaska Brown Bears crossing river in Katmai National Park, Alaska.
(When photographing bear, Cox recommends working with a powerful
telephoto lens to assure the bears' and the photographer's safety).*



*Trio of adult Bald Eagles in Alaska.
(Daniel works to capture the image he wants in the field).*

Bears of all types are one of the most prominent subjects in Cox's photographic collection. "I think because where you find bear, you find wilderness, places without a lot of people. Bears remind us of ourselves."

Cox describes his work with conservation groups as one of the most personally satisfying aspects of his twenty-five year career. "Photography," he says, "is a field that seems predicated on taking. It's built right in to photographer's vocabulary. We've all heard it. May I take your picture? Only with us it's working with animals. Wildlife photographers have been taking, taking, taking. It's time to give back."

An award-winning photographer, Cox has an impressive resume of successes. His work has been featured in hundreds of publications, in galleries like the Natural History Museum of London, and in dozens of books. He produced two cover stories for National Geographic, in 2002 and 2005, both on owls. Though Cox's passion for the outdoors has taken him around the world to photograph nature and wildlife on every continent, many of the owl images were shot closer to his home in Bozeman, Montana. For both the owl stories, Cox teamed up with Charlo, Montana owl biologist Denver Holt. "With Denver's knowledge of owls, we accomplished big goals."

Inherently curious, and willing to be nimble with the changes that technology brings, Cox is intrigued by digital videography. He also considers it a professional imperative to learn more about it, predicting that before long producers will take still images from video. "As I look toward the future, I see dramatic changes in the industry."



*Glacier National Park, Mount Clements in morning alpenglow.
(Gorgeous light and a compelling subject create a striking image).*



“Bear remind us of ourselves.” – Daniel Cox



Mother and cub walk along the shores of Hudson Bay, while waiting for the ice to freeze.



*Snowy owl in flight in the high Arctic of Alaska.
(This image creates the feeling of 3 dimensions by using dramatic light).*

Traditional photography may still be useful as an art. But I think that in general if the BBC is out on a shoot, they will pull the stills they want from the high definition video they shoot.”

Technology has changed and continues to change the world of photography more quickly than anyone anticipated. Though Cox considers himself “an early adapter” of digital, it’s just five years since he started shooting with what he describes as “the first digital single lens reflex camera that gave quality files,” the Nikon D100. These days he shoots with a Nikon D2Xs and a D200.

With digital, “You understand if you’re getting the kind of pictures you hope to get. From a business perspective, there’s an immediacy to getting images to the clients.” The vision he sees in the field can be transmitted in minutes, to his clients and to his

own Natural Exposures website. Sometimes images are posted to his website within hours of being shot. With film, he says, “I might be gone six months and have all of that sitting on a desk waiting to be looked at and images selected.”

Now when especially grueling weather on a shoot keeps him indoors, he edits images. For Cox, editing is a process of sorting images, and making slight color and exposure adjustments. If an image needs to be cropped, he does that in the camera, in the field. He says, “A lot of photographers want to know how to make it work in Photoshop. When I teach, I tell my students that I’m here to show you how to do it with the real thing, to get the best images on location, in the field.”

While producing his work, Cox minimizes the impact he has on his photographic subjects. “In Churchill, I work



*Adult Killer Whale leaping out of the water, while hunting Dall Porpoise in Alaska.
(A still photographer works to capture that one unique moment that flies by).*

from inside a vehicle called a Tundra Buggy. It acts like a blind. When you work with a telephoto, you keep yourself and the bear safe. When there are human-bear conflicts, the bear always loses. All bear photography should be done with powerful telephoto lenses and always with the animals best interest in mind.”

When photographing wildlife, “It’s more intriguing to be a fly on the wall and watch what life is like for these incredible animals, enjoying them at a distance, and getting a chance to learn how they make a living. It’s difficult for them. The habitat is tough, the weather is tough, other animals are tough. Then, humanity is constantly encroaching on their habitat.”

“What’s wonderful about still photography is the excitement of working to capture that one unique moment that you can’t capture with your own eye. You can’t really capture it with video, either.”

Is still photography an art or a craft? Both? Cox says, “Photography can be learned, however some of the great photographers are blessed with having that special vision built right in to them. They have something extra that’s hard to describe.” For the most part, though, the public doesn’t see those differences. “Many gifted photographers struggle to make a living, and some craftspeople who are able marketers thrive.”

Cox credits his father with mentoring him in the business aspect of photography: his mother with his gift of seeing. Along with his National Geographic covers, and his work with conservation organizations, Daniel Cox’s ability to make a living in nature photography, and his willingness to employ technological innovations in his work, distinguish him as a professional. So does his willingness to hold a larger vision for what responsibilities come with being a natural history photographer. “I want to inspire people to appreciate the great outdoors, with their own eyes, and with a camera. To convince them that what we have here is so unique and enjoyable it’s worth preserving.” ■

Daniel J. Cox’s Tips for Natural Exposures



*Daniel Cox photographing Polar Bear
in Churchill, Manitoba.*

~ Strive for that one particular image that truly is striking and tells a story.

~ Practice non-invasive photography. Work from a blind and with a long lens, with the intent of keeping both you and the animal safe. Keep from adding further stress to already stressed wildlife.

~ Spend a lot of time with one subject at a distance, over a sequence of days, seasons, even years, to get to know it well, and to create a compelling photographic story.

~ Create the feeling of 3 dimensions by using dramatic light.

~ When you have good light, look for the other elements that will make a gorgeous image. Practice this even when you don’t have your camera.

~ Produce the image you want in the field. Don’t rely on Photoshop to “make your image” when you get home in your computer.

~ Experiment with a software program like Apple’s Aperture. It expedites sorting and basic editing of digital images.

~ Stay nimble. Pay attention to the changes in technology; be willing to learn from videographers and cinematographers.

~ To work professionally, learn the business end of photography, especially marketing.

~ Do more than take. Commit to giving back to the natural world by mentoring a young person to appreciate the beauty, and our need for wild places.

For more tips from Daniel, check the postings
on the Corkboard at www.naturalexposures.com