

PeakPIXELS

TIPS FROM OUR PHOTO EDITOR

story by JOSHUA HARDIN

photograph by VERDON TOMAJKO

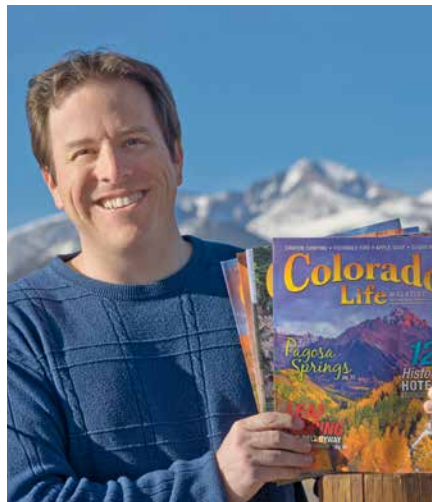
FROM THE SUMMIT of 14,265-foot Mount Evans, you'd think it would be easy to stand above the crowd. But that's the thing about photographing Colorado – capturing an image that no one has seen before is a mountain of a challenge, even while standing on the highest paved road in North America.

This year *Colorado Life Magazine* sponsored the Audubon Society of Greater Denver's Share the View International Nature Photography Contest. At a gala celebrating the top 250 contest photos, we confirmed something we've found in more than three years of publishing the magazine: Our state has an incredibly talented community of photographers. Colorado residents took many of the images honored that night.

Awed by grand landscapes of elk under the peaks of Rocky Mountain National Park, comical shots of ducks admiring their own reflections and macro portraits of iridescent insects and more incredible images, we had the task of choosing one to give our inaugural Editor's Choice Award. In the end, the decisive moment captured in "Panic on the Titanic" by Verdon Tomajko, a Slovak mountain climber and artist now living in Superior, earned our nod.

Tomajko described the experience of photographing a herd of mountain goats on Mount Evans during a July afternoon. He and his wife dodged a passing thunderstorm as they drove to the mountain top, allowing him to spend two hours taking pictures of baby goats frolicking and playing while the adults grazed. The little goats had impressive agility at just a few months old.

Things got interesting, however, when another storm quickly rolled in from across the valley. Then the lightning flashed.



"The baby goats started to get very anxious, running and jumping over the rocks and over each other with nervous energy from the incoming storm," Tomajko said. "Despite the potentially hazardous conditions, I wanted to keep shooting, trying to get this perfect shot with the goats pausing on a rock and a lightning strike in the background. You can see the hair on the goats standing up from the electricity in the air."

Tomajko kept shooting until his hair was standing on end and the sky was nearly dark.

Most photographers would have been content with a collection of whimsical images of goat kids cavorting in the bright sun, but Tomajko had stayed.

"I have found that many times I get the best shots after other photographers have had enough and have gone away," he said.

My own experience has proven this to be true. On the cover of our September/October 2014 issue is an image I took of Mount Sneffels from a popular vista along Ouray County Road 7. As the sun was setting that day, photographers lined

up to witness the predictable red alpenglow that would illuminate the summit of the peak above a calico green-and-gold patchwork of aspen forests in fall foliage. What we didn't predict was that a cloud-bank cloaked the western skies as sunset approached leaving the mountain dark and flatly lit.

Then a squall started battering the roadside with frigid raindrops. Nearly all of the photographers packed up their gear and drove away. I stayed, put jackets over my head and equipment and endured the pelting precipitation.

The storm suddenly dissipated with minutes remaining before the sun dropped below the horizon for good. A window appeared in the clouds, and a solitary beam of light began to kiss the top of the mountain with a scarlet, lipstick like hue. It was beautiful.

Many of the photographers who fled from the rain frantically sped back to the overlook, darted out of their vehicles and attempted to unfold their tripods in vain to get the shot. The moment was fleeting, lasting for maybe a minute or two, and I was the only one prepared to take full advantage of it.

While perusing the Audubon Society of Denver's Share the View contest entries, I was proud to see there are others who choose to shoot through the storm. Persistence pays off, and sometimes it's the only way to stand above the crowd. 🌩️

PANIC ON THE TITANIC

These baby mountain goats had been playing without a care on top of Mount Evans, but their frolics stopped when lightning started flashing. Verdon Tomajko braved the storm to photograph them.





PEAK PIXELS

TIPS FROM OUR PHOTO EDITOR

Photos and s'mores aplenty in Loveland

story and photograph by JOSHUA HARDIN

SOMETIMES PHOTOGRAPHERS' fear of working with large groups are justified. Photo shoots rarely end up being as easy as you expect, and for all your careful planning, your success often hinges on your ability to adapt and improvise. That was the case when the staff of *Colorado Life Magazine* partnered with Colorado's Sweetheart City to help produce the 2015 *Loveland Visitors Guide*.

Loveland's Visitor Service Coordinator Cindy Mackin proposed we do a photo shoot at Sylvan Dale Guest Ranch for the guide's cover. Many photographers would be skittish about having to direct a large group of models that included children wearing cowboy hats shading their faces on a sunny afternoon while riding horseback over winding mountainous trails.

Sylvan Dale, which I knew well from growing up in Loveland, is a nearly 70-year-old landmark that we almost lost in the September 2013 floods. Owners and staff have had the monumental task of rebuilding the grounds and business. All I needed to do was show up and take some pretty pictures with a post-shoot payoff of campfire hot dogs and s'mores. "No problem," I thought – sounded like fun.

After persuading family and friends to be our models, we scheduled the shoot for a mid-week evening. In true Colorado fashion, the weather intervened with a mix of rain and snow showers. We scrambled to reschedule another time when all of our models could attend while still meeting our deadline.

The next Sunday, I arrived at the ranch ahead of the models to meet Cindy, graphic designer John Metcalf and Susan Jessup, who co-owns Sylvan Dale with her brother, David, to survey the perfect locations for the photographs. We chose spots with curving gravel roads and wooden fences stretching



Lindsey Bradbury

toward a horizon of rolling sandstone buttes.

Precious daylight was burning as our models arrived, and we excitedly saddled them up in a carefully coordinated arrangement of ages, attire and horse colors. By the time we hit the trail, the sun had moved behind a cloud, and we discovered our pre-selected spots had distracting sagebrush we hadn't noticed previously. The horses grew stubborn when taken in a direction they weren't used to plodding. The riders had uncomfortable expressions because they were still getting used to their mounts. The photos I took just weren't right. It was time to throw our plan out the window again.

Susan, who knows the terrain better than anyone, offered to lead the group back toward the barn over a narrow trail along a mountain ridge. The catch was that I would need to hoof it ahead of the group with only minutes to visualize my shots before the riders appeared.

John volunteered to run alongside to look for clearings where we could set up and alert me when the models approached. Just then, the sun emerged from behind the clouds, casting golden light on the background rock walls. The horses perked their ears as they traveled familiar trails. The riders were having fun

and smiled from ear to ear. At the opposite side of the ridge, Cindy cracked up with laughter at the sight of John and me running to stay ahead of the horse string. Our cover photo resulted from this flurry of impromptu activity.

Photographers want to be in control. In our camera bags we pack flashes to manipulate lighting conditions, lenses to give us a range of possible compositions and all sorts of other technological tools that are supposed to help get us out of any jam we find ourselves in. When working with natural light that is at the mercy of the weather, animals that have minds of their own and wide open spaces where it's difficult to shout directions to models, you realize quickly that no matter how hard you hold the reins you're still just along for the ride. You might as well embrace unpredictability.

That's how the people at Sylvan Dale have survived a natural disaster that would have disheartened less hardy folk. I'd like to think this is just one example of the resiliency of Coloradans, and Lovelanders in particular.

If you ride into Loveland during your summer travels, be sure to stop at the Visitors Center at 5400 Stone Creek Circle. Pick up your copy of the guide and extra copies of *Colorado Life Magazine* to share with the friendly residents you're guaranteed to meet in my hometown.

You never know, you just might be invited for campfire s'mores at a ranch cookout. 🍪

EMBRACING UNPREDICTABILITY

When weather and unforeseen snags dashed his original plans for the photo shoot, photographer Joshua Hardin improvised to capture this image of horses and riders on a trail at Sylvan Dale Guest Ranch.





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Sage advice from ‘Sage Spirit’

by JOSHUA HARDIN

ON A MORNING in June 2004, photographer Dave Showalter and his wife, Marla, drove west on I-70 into the mountains from their Arvada home when, near Idaho Springs, they saw a wolf slumped along a guardrail. A vehicle had struck and killed the wolf, whose head was turned toward them, eyes wide open. They drove in stunned silence before turning to ask each other if they truly had seen that wild creature thought to be extinct in Colorado. News reports confirmed it was indeed a wolf, No. 293F, tracked more than 500 miles from the Yellowstone region of Montana to Colorado.

“We wondered, ‘How had it gotten there? What was its story?’” Showalter told me during a lunch we shared to preview his new book, *Sage Spirit-The American West at a Crossroads*. “She had to travel through the sage country that stretches from Greater Yellowstone to Telluride. I got to thinking, ‘If she could connect this landscape, why couldn’t we?’”

This curiosity led him to start a nearly seven-year project to chronicle the environment of the “Sagebrush Sea,” which includes portions of Colorado’s Western Slope. The release of the book, published by Braided River in partnership with Audubon Rockies, the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club, coincides with a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision expected this September on whether to place the greater sage grouse on the endangered species list.

Sage Spirit’s rarest photos are of a related species, the Gunnison sage grouse, which only lives in isolated spots of Colorado and Utah. The bird is a symbol for this region. In the project’s first year, Showalter was allowed two days to photograph the threatened birds on a nesting ground called a lek. The first morning, he hid in a camouflaged hunting blind. His heart pounded when he finally saw the outlines of the strutting birds on the pre-dawn horizon. As he slowly pointed his



lens to make the first photograph, the birds exploded from the lek to escape an eagle gliding overhead seeking an easy meal. His day was over before he got a single photo. The same thing happened the next day.

The Gunnison sage grouse became Showalter’s “grail bird.” He made repeated pilgrimages to leks, until after more than six years he finally made the photos he had seen in his mind’s eye. I wondered how he kept his spirits up when shoots didn’t work out. “This sagebrush study has taught me to just be, in one place, a speck in a giant landscape waiting for a defining moment,” he said.

The scale of that landscape awed Showalter while taking aerial photos on flights provided by LightHawk, an organization that allows pilots to donate their services to conservation projects. He saw a jigsaw puzzle divided by roads, power lines and energy development. There wasn’t a lot of unbroken land, even in remote sage country.

“As I looked from above, I asked, ‘How do these pieces fit together? How do humans fit in?’” Showalter said, noting that animals don’t recognize human boundaries. “A bird doesn’t care that he’s within the borders of a national park. He only cares that he’s in good habitat to live, mate and raise his young and has somewhere to fly to for the winter.”

We all want clean air, water and open space to cleanse our spirits, he said. “I

realized it’s not about a chicken-sized bird that lives in sage. It’s really about all of us and our personal connection to the West.”

Human connection to an environment is hard to show in photos. Contrary to the stereotype of a nature photographer working as a lone wolf, the job of conservation photographer requires collaboration. It takes going out with biologists to learn science and getting permission from state agencies to set up cameras. It takes meeting with county commissioners, adventure outfitters, ranchers and American Indian tribes. Portraits of people, including a descendant of Chief Ouray, accompany the images of a complex, interconnected ecosystem of sage grouse, Sandhill cranes and mule deer.

For Showalter, the book’s profiles of people with different views who work together to figure out what’s best for the sage country is the most important expression of the project’s spirit. He hopes people who care about the West will continue cooperative conservation agreements already in place, whether or not the grouse gets endangered status.

I’m equally encouraged by conservation photographers who persevere for purity of purpose rather than fame and fortune. Curiosity about a traveling wolf led Showalter to smell the spicy aroma of sagebrush, hear the fluttering sound of landing grouse and see the ephemeral light of some of the West’s least-understood landscapes. That is what allows us to temper a tendency to be impatient and rush through our photo shoots.

“I developed a mantra of ‘stay until you learn something,’” he said. “If you have a sense of wonder, you ought to be a photographer.” 🐾

THE RARE GUNNISON sage grouse become Dave Showalter’s “grail bird” during the seven years he spent photographing Colorado’s sagebrush country.

