



PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE SUMMIT: A MEMOIR

By Jim Cornfield

In pre-dawn darkness west of the Snake River, our crowded SUV crunches over gravel to gas up at a lonely, fluorescent-lighted truck stop.

It's still mid-autumn in Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park, but frigid air already stings your nostrils and numbs your fingertips. There's a mini-mart. The coffee is mostly yesterday's—thick and bitter—and the lids don't quite fit the Styrofoam cups. The only convenient breakfast food is packaged, preservative-laced donuts. I guesstimate their half-life at something approaching that of plutonium. Clearly, Toto, we're not in Starbucks anymore. But it's not far away. Just a few miles behind us down the highway is the

manicured, rawhide-and-silver cowboy chic of Jackson, an über-hip mecca for sportsmen, skiers, tabloid-grade celebs, eco-tourists, and, of course, photographers.

The Bull Elk, Schwabacher's and Oxbow Bend

This morning's outing into the Jackson Hole Valley, at the foot of these great mountains, is, in fact, a photo expedition. It's a daily

***Above:** Ox Bow. A popular section of the Snake River known as Oxbow Bend.
Top right: Triangle X. Horse pasture at the foot of 13,000-foot Grand Teton Mountain.
Right: Bull Elk with harem during mating season. (All images taken with Nikon D3, 80–400mm zoom)*





Summit students spend much of their time processing and downloading images at individual workstations in the Wapiti Gallery of the Wildlife Art Museum, Summit headquarters.

ritual that will be repeated for the better part of a week by several groups just like ours, most of us ranging into the wild at daybreak, then again at dusk, to catch peak moments of the luxuriant natural light for which Grand Teton is famous.

The program that's brought us all together is the fall session of Rich Clarkson's Photography at the Summit Workshops, a series of hands-on clinics that join serious shooters—both amateur and professional—with a celebrated faculty of widely published photographers, editors and world-class techies. The mission is obviously to refine everyone's imaging skills and to nurture a few new creative impulses that might be lurking in some midbrain hideout. All this in a visual milieu so astonishingly beautiful, it's unthinkable that anyone will return from the experience without at least a couple of new portfolio pieces.

The leader of my group's first chilly foray is renowned wildlife photographer Tom Mangelsen. We're all hoping for some sun-



Instructor and celebrated wildlife photographer Tom Mangelsen helps Summit student Charlie Cobb during one of the Summit's group excursions in the field.

rise images of local elk herds against the steep wall of the valley to the east. Like a small artillery detachment, we unlimber cameras and ponderous lenses and tripods beside the road and wait, jabbering expectantly. Having Tom Mangelsen as your guide in the Tetons is something like it would have been visiting Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary. Mangelsen knows the ground. As jagged mountaintops emerge in silhouette against a hint of orange sky, he shushes us all and points into the darkness at the base of the slopes. The high-pitched keening of a bull elk's "bugle" is unmistakable in the distance. This is the autumn rut for these creatures—mating season—and the antlers of a 13-point bull soon come into relief in the hazy blue shadows. With ISO settings cranked up to the pain threshold, our DSLRs whirr in unison. The bull elk bugles again and fusses over his little harem.

Every morning similar scenarios are played out around the valley. Other workshop groups stalk moose and bald eagles near Schwabacher's Landing and Oxbow Bend; they wait for deer to splash across Cottonwood Creek and bison to lumber through the sagebrush at Elk Ranch Flats. As the light fills in, there are stunning screen-saver vistas of golden aspen and cottonwood leaves reflecting in Jackson Lake and in tranquil pools of the Snake River. There are man-made subjects here as well—spans of rustic split-rail fence; cowboys driving horse herds to their corrals at the Triangle X Ranch; the history-drenched Cunningham Cabin, built in the late 19 Century and, thanks to Rich Clarkson, arguably the

most photographed log structure in the country (not counting Abe Lincoln's boyhood home). Presiding over everything: the familiar icon of 13,000-foot Grand Teton Mountain, bracketed by its smaller sister peaks, Teewinot and Middle Teton.

Faculty Star Power

Headquarters for all activities of the Summit Workshop is the National Museum of Wildlife Art, an architectural fusion of native stone, bronze and rough woods sculpted into red sandstone cliffs that overlook the National Elk Refuge. In the museum's Wapiti gallery (meaning "elk" in the Cree language) that serves as classroom and communal workspace, the daily sign-up sheets for these field excursions lists a pedigreed roll of instructors and guides: local Mangelsen colleague Bob Smith, a seasoned shooter and digital photography pioneer; William Allard, one of *National Geographic's* most prolific contributors; former *National Geographic* editor-in-chief Bill Allen, whose photographic skill and editorial savvy spawned a major, positive transformation of this venerable magazine; photojournalist Dave Black, another leader in the digital revolution and an expert in the creative alchemy of mixing artificial and natural outdoor lighting; and *National Geographic* staffer Jodi Cobb, author and photographer of the groundbreaking book *Geisha*, widely



Jackson, WY-based photographer/instructor Bob Smith in the field with students.



Photojournalist and summit instructor Dave Black demos techniques for mixing strobe—on and off-camera—in outdoor shooting situations.



Summit attendees on a chilly morning shooting excursion, stalking wildlife beside the Snake River.

known for her daring work style and insightful picture essays. In the museum's meeting rooms and lecture hall, these instructors also conduct presentations and critique sessions—group and individual—along with colleagues like emeritus photojournalist and *LIFE* magazine vet

Bill Eppridge; audacious, award-winning shooter John Moore, who seems drawn to working in savage war zones around the world; and *Time* magazine photo director Mary Anne Golon, an articulate instructor with a reverence for honest, unadulterated image capture and a fondness for what she

calls this workshop's "documentary heart."

Despite all the faculty star power, Photography at the Summit is freeform in structure. Students manage their own agendas, sometimes shooting independently or selecting lectures and seminars that push their personal creative buttons. But everyone is urged to participate in the afternoon group critiques. In preparation for these, the Wapiti classroom is pretty well packed with attendees poring over laptops from mid-morning on. Many of the computers are furnished by Apple, along with state-of-the-art software and a couple of patient digi-techs who cruise the room dispensing aid and comfort. (Nikon is represented as well, with loaner camera bodies and optics, plus proprietary imaging software and on-site technical assistance).

The task during these hours at the computer is to select images for faculty review and upload them to a server for projection in the group crit sessions. After-capture manipulations are frowned on. "Don't enhance," goes the cautionary mantra, "just correct."

Thoughts on Mr. Summit

Few personalities in photography have anywhere near the diversity and sparkle of this workshop's founder, Rich Clarkson.

His reputation as a one-man photo conglomerate is undisputed. Denver-based Rich Clarkson and Associates, LLC employs a team of nine creative shooters and multimedia specialists who produce scores of imagery for worldwide publications, advertising agencies and corporate clients. The company's publishing arm is responsible for celebrated book projects, including *The Colorado: A River at Risk* and the acclaimed pictorial study of Arlington Cemetery, *Where Valor Rests*. His world-renowned Summit photographic workshops are now in their 25th year, making Clarkson one of the world's premier names in photographic education.

Clarkson's extraordinary media résumé began with an early interest in aviation and a tiny newsletter, *Aeroscience*, which he published at home during his grade school years in Lawrence, Kansas. When a well known visiting pilot saw a copy on his way through town, he phoned the young editor to ask why Clarkson had never interviewed him. Clarkson apologized, did the interview, and that week, the entire 40-reader circulation of *Aeroscience* read an exclusive one-on-one with Orville Wright.

Clarkson's career as a shooter got its major lift at the *Topeka Capitol-Journal*, when he was assigned to cover Kansas' infamous Clutter murders and the subsequent trial. Working beside him was the illustrious Truman Capote, who used this case as the basis for his landmark non-fiction work *In Cold Blood*.

A passion for sports eventually drove Clarkson's career more than straight news. He helped tout Wilt Chamberlain to the world with a composite for *Sports Illustrated*, showing the basketball legend dribbling the ball down court in multiple exposures on a



single frame. Later, as an *SI* regular, he fastened a camera to a backboard and made the first overhead point-of-view shots of players coming up under the hoop. Working under contract to *Sports Illustrated* for 20 years, Clarkson produced memorable spreads and some 30 covers for the magazine. But to many, his greatest successes have been in the front office.

As a manager of creative intelligence, Clarkson is without peer. His years as photo director at the award-winning *Topeka Capitol-Journal*—a nursery for the careers of dozens of eminent photojournalists—lead to his taking charge of the photo department staff at *National Geographic*. He hired many of his *Topeka* alumni and helped revamp and modernize the magazine. Many of Clarkson's *National Geographic* staffers maintain their association with him as the star mentors of his workshop program.

The style of these programs reflects an important facet of Clarkson's approach both to business and to teaching. "Creating an atmosphere for creativity," he says, pointing around at the lavish interior of the Wildlife Art Museum, "encourages imaginations. Whether it's plush, interesting office décor or the beautiful surroundings of a place like Jackson Hole, and this great setting, people are inspired. It shows in the way they think and in the work they produce."

Despite the fact that digital image capture and workflow management are now at the center of his businesses and his photographic workshops, some of Clarkson's best memories hark back to his days in Topeka—film and darkrooms, and 11 shooters with 35mm cameras. The energy, he remembers, was infectious: "At one time President Gerald Ford's daughter Susan worked for me as an intern. The guys on her Secret Service detail were so enthralled by all this, they both eventually quit to become photographers."

Seeing in the Dark

In the museum auditorium, workshop director Brett Wilhelm lowers the house-lights. Every seat is filled, just as they are for the nightly faculty presentations. The afternoon's instructors are grouped together in a center row, silhouetted against the screen, as student work is projected anonymously up front for everyone's perusal. Images shuttle from one to the next, lingering long enough for commentary.

The attendees at this workshop are serious shooters, many of them successful professionals in their respective fields, nearly all well educated. There are physicians, teachers, one full-time conservationist, a neuroscience researcher, several retirees, two veterinarians—even a lichenologist. One student is the brother of one of the more gifted faculty members, presumably curious to find out if all that talent is a family trait. Another is the wife of a former U.S. Vice President. Some are launching or furthering careers in photography. One staff shooter for a newspaper is here to experiment with fine art wildlife imagery. An East Coast specialist in commercial horse photography is doing much the same. "I was beginning to feel a little stagnant," she says, "thought it was time to open up some new horizons." This group is clearly in earnest about improving their photographs. They're not here for pats on the head, and that's good. They don't get many.

In the darkness, faceless voices from the center row offer constructive, but frank commentary. Most of the negative feedback seems to concentrate on images that lack a strong point of view, for whatever reason—feeble composition, no composition, distracting detail ("There's way too much grass in the foreground. Is this

something I need to see?" "Your eye goes right to that highlight, and it's not relevant to the shot," "Isolate what you want us to see"). Originality is another issue. "A great picture," says one of the faculty, "is often great because it looks at an extremely familiar object in a different way." In this, nature photography is a great leveler. Wildlife and weather changes are maddeningly uncontrollable, but the subjects are often so over-photographed, they've become hopeless, though frequently beautiful, clichés. One instructor makes the succinct point that a photo should "tap a person on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, look at this.'" Even a cliché can have that effect.

The effectiveness of these sessions proves itself as the week plays out. Images uploaded to the server become noticeably more interesting, better thought out and carefully executed. The lessons in the shadows of the auditorium during the daily critiques are having their effect. It all brings to mind author Aaron Sussman's poetic line, originally written about the bygone era when we used to coax images from chemicals and film: "There, in the dark, I begin to see."

A Personal Epilogue

It's my next to last day at the workshop. The season's first snow dusts the surrounding peaks. I drive north in the afternoon to spec out a camera position for a shot I've been thinking about all week while clomping around the base of these mountains. Overnight the snowfall abates, and, the following morning before daybreak, I return to my spot and set up under a cloak of frozen starlit sky. My hands can barely feel the shutter release. I wait, shivering a little. Then, there it is,

the moment I've come for—cue the shutter click—one lone image, as the day's first light meets the year's first snow on the lustrous face of Grand Teton. I stare at my LCD and wince. I know it's a cliché, but it's my cliché. I've left the engine and the heater running in my rental car. In the crisp, morning air, I barrel back down the road, past the place with the nuclear donuts, eager to get back to the Wapiti classroom and my laptop. I want to make the workshop's last show-and-tell in the auditorium and unveil my precious image. But more important, I want to hear what's wrong with it.



Jim Cornfield, a veteran commercial photographer and travel writer based in Malibu Canyon, CA, is a Rangefinder contributing editor and regular columnist.

If You Want to Make the Trip...

Rich Clarkson sponsors a series of major workshops throughout the year covering a range of photographic specialties: sports, adventure, travel, multimedia and nature/wildlife. Each is conducted by a stellar roster of photographers and other media professionals. For information on these events, see www.photographyatthesummit.com or contact Clarkson's staff at 1-800-745-3211.

This year's Fall Photography at the Summit is scheduled for **October 3–8, 2010**. For complete information, go to www.photographyatthesummit.com/fall_photography_at_the_summit.html or contact workshop director Brett Wilhelm at 1-800-745-3211 or bwilhelm@richclarkson.com.

The Fall Photography at the Summit location:

National Museum of Wildlife Art
2820 Rungius Road
Jackson Hole, WY 83001
www.wildlifeart.org

The Workshop's host hotel, highly recommended, is a European-inspired inn and spa, with gourmet breakfast buffets and a lobby wine bar:

The Alpine House
285 North Glenwood Street
PO Box 1126
Jackson, WY 83001
(307) 739-1570
www.alpinehouse.com

My cliché—Grand Teton at dawn. (Nikon D3, 80–400mm zoom with polarizing filter.)

