

CROSSINGS: WHEN NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY BECOMES A FORM OF RESISTANCE

A desire to record the elusive and unpredictable quality of nature, rather than seeking out a more idealised view, has led Niall Benvie to create a new body of work, Crossings. He describes the ideas that underpin the project, and reflects on the authenticity of imperfection

Skyline in the Berserkjahraun, Iceland.



Red deer, Jura, Scotland.

I love the idea that, with camera in hand, I can make something beautiful that didn't exist before. It's a privilege afforded to all photographers, whether or not it is exercised. Most images I record don't merit a second glance. A few please me. Fewer still please others and, in the process, set up a connection between viewer and subject. As a tour leader, I have seen the intense pleasure people get from the act of taking photographs. Some, like me, especially enjoy having taken pictures where there is a lot of hardship involved. And yet, even at those times, I relish the moments – or minutes – of transcendence experienced when enchanted by the image in the viewfinder. For that time, its frame becomes the limits of our world and we lose awareness of everything else. In our everyday lives little else fosters such a degree of concentration, is so certain to get us 'in the zone', as anticipating the moment to release the shutter.

It's only natural that we want to repeat these moments, to feed an internal reward mechanism. That's certainly how it feels. But here is where the beautiful simplicity of encounters, those moments where our life and the subject's cross, then cross again in a moment of transcendence, starts to look vulnerable. It's the resulting urge to make things repeatable, predictable and conforming that kicks away the stool of wildness and replaces it with something that may look the same but originates in our mind rather than in wild nature: something that lacks authenticity.

It was this way of working that kept me in business for years, making pictures that met expectations of how the natural

world was (or should be) rather than, necessarily, how it was. Productivity trumped reality. On one level, there is nothing wrong with introducing perches, creating drinking pools or any one of dozens of other ruses wildlife photographers use to shorten the odds in their favour. But with a growing collective weariness with perfection (why else would we flick past photographs of a diving kingfisher?) I began to recognise that

Buzzard in flight, Scotland.



it is a quality of elusiveness and unpredictability that marks out the work that endures. It is Jim Brandenburg's spontaneous photograph of a wild wolf peeking round the side of a tree that has become iconic, not all the cover versions it has spawned.

Working with wolves in the Apennines, Italian wildlife photographer, Bruno D'Amicis recalls in his book, *Time for Wolves*, 'I tried to increase the frequency of my encounters, making sure that the wolf would show itself where and when I wanted it, but that did not work out. Thus, I changed my strategy... [and] dedicate[d] much more time to my quest.' Bruno ending up spending six years working on the project, reflecting that, '...compared to the hundreds of trips in the field, I only managed to meet wolves on a few, unforgettable occasions.' Here, then, we are talking about photographs being given rather than taken. Many of the pictures in Bruno's book have been recorded under less than perfect lighting conditions; sometimes parts of the animal are obscured, or the composition seems less than perfect. There are traits that, rather than diminishing the body of work, enhance it. This is the authenticity of imperfection – reflecting how nature

actually is. We saw this quality too in Tom Mangelsen's *Spirit of the Rockies*, about a family of wild mountain lions that took up residence above Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in the winter of 1999, and, for me, most strikingly in Hannu Hautala's photograph of a wolverine in a foggy forest at dusk that appears in *Winter on the Finnish Taiga*. In this image, shot on high ISO slide film, the animal, though indistinct and small in the frame, is an electrifying presence, all the more compelling because we can tell what it is and what it means without a detailed description. It shares some of the mystery – and excitement – we associate more with photographs of Bigfoot or Mokele Mbembe. Once again, the sense of encounter is to the fore.

You could ask, with some justification, why it matters how you get your photographs if you, the photographer, are happy with the end result. I believe it matters because how we represent the natural world reflects our relationship with it. If we put our images into the public domain, by extension it reflects how we would like others to think about it too. I need to lay my cards on the table.

Waves at Malarrif, Iceland.



Cumulus clouds over Burgundy, France.

I value life, wildness and diversity more than money. I expect you feel the same too, but in reality we are all part of a culture that is founded on an opposite premise, one in which violence against the natural world, against indigenous people and local culture, even against our atmosphere are, ultimately, legitimised in the name of economic growth. Of course it's easy to believe, as you ransack the storehouse of natural capital, that your life is getting better – just ask the 500 million people lifted out of poverty in China by its industrial boom. But in out-running Mother Earth, we have been looking over our shoulder to gloat too much, not noticing the swamp we are heading into. Now it looks like She is getting ready to repay us for our impertinence.

You and I are artists and, as such, it is not in our gift to change the mindsets of those who continue, with almost universal collusion, to propel us along this path of hatred for life. But in our work, at least, we can stage small acts of resistance by making images that reflect a different reality, far removed from the 'real world' conjured by economists and their soulless consorts. This need be no more complicated than taking pictures that reflect transcendence, showing the natural world as it is, rather than a commodified, cajoled or entrapped meme of it. That's not to say that there isn't scope for interpretation; many of the pictures from *Crossings* show my interest in high energy subjects and environments; from raging seas and billowing clouds to birds in flight and the sun itself. Others have a more sinister feel to them, reflecting the prospects for the subjects in decades to come.

The mining and pollution that goes into making the very equipment I use to show 'wild nature', not to mention the travel involved, is plainly at odds with these noble intentions. But there are worse things to be than an idealist and to want to leave a record of how wild nature looked, unmediated by man. There are worse weapons to wield than a camera, however futile it may ultimately be.

Redshank, Iceland.

