



A brown bear fishes
for sockeye salmon
in Katmai National
Park, Alaska

WHERE THE “WILD LIVES” ARE

A conversation with globetrotting, award-winning photographer Art Wolfe

BY ROBIN BISHOP

*“The best form of philosophy
is the contemplation of the
universe of nature.” ~ Aristotle*

Sitting down with Art Wolfe is akin to delving into Aristotle’s treatises on “The History of Animals.” Aristotle classified more than 500 species during his zoological explorations, while Wolfe has chronicled as many through the lens of his camera.

After spending time with Art Wolfe detailing his career and passions, what inspires him and what drives him to inspire others, I came away with a desire to engage. Whether that is engagement in nature, life, our own dreams—I don’t think it matters to Wolfe. Just appreciating the natural world and how you fit into it, appears to be his greatest love. He happens to do so, to our great benefit, through the lens of his camera. This remarkable appreciation and specific outlook were handed down to him by his parents, who were both photographers.

“My mom and dad were both wedding photographers. My dad was a photographer who worked off an aircraft carrier in the South Pacific. When I was seven years old he gave me his old box cameras, and that started me photographing from the tops of mountains around the Northwest.” Wolfe was born in Seattle in 1951, a city he’s been proud to call home for his entire life. He was raised about a mile from his current home in West Seattle. His parents are not only attributed with giving him his first camera, but when he was very young, also encouraged him to take buses on a 10-mile journey several days a week to learn how to use those cameras. What might be considered unwise by today’s standards, was perfectly normal back then and this early exposure to self-sufficiency instilled in young Wolfe the confidence to handle the unknown and the curiosity to explore. “One of the reasons I love living in the Pacific Northwest is the mountainous terrain.”

Wolfe’s entire career has subsequently been devoted to exploration and education. Wolfe has spent the last six decades honing his specific brand of conservation photography. The more he traveled the world seeing the need for conservation across the globe, the more passionate he became about expressing this need through his body of work.



A whale shark off the Yucatán Peninsula

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After being exposed to photography at an early age, Wolfe explored other art forms and ended up attending University of Washington for fine arts, not photography, in the early 1970s. While there, he had the pleasure of studying under professors such as Jacob Lawrence, an internationally recognized painter, with works hanging in the White House and the Smithsonian. Lawrence left a lasting mark on Wolfe. “He told me to not be so pleased with the work I was doing that I didn’t leave room for growth and learning. He said that to everyone in the class, and the people that really stuck to their style or only painted one way, basically, left the class before the end of the semester. He spurred me on to keep experimenting and pushing the carrot slightly beyond my reach, so I’m always being motivated by something new and better. I’ve taken that to heart for all these years.”

Living in the Northwest exposed him to many ways of engaging with nature, which inspired his original interest in a fine art degree. “When I was at University of Washington, I started climbing. I climbed all the volcanos in the North Cascades while I was in college and by the time I graduated my allegiance

had shifted to photography. It was far easier to make original compositions through the photographic medium than sitting and conjuring up an image on a blank canvas.”

Wolfe goes on to say, “There was a perfect parallel between what I had learned in painting and photography because I applied a lot of the theory to my photography. If you asked me who my favorite artists were, the answer would lie in painters rather than photographers. Right out of college I started emulating some of the impressionist painters like Monet and Seurat, photographing in ways that emulated them, to the point that it became my style as well. Through the years I’ve gone through the different painting movements and have adopted styles from the painters but through a photographic medium and it broadened my interest and my artistic vocabulary. The broader my knowledge base the better my work became.”

His desire to keep things interesting and new is what initiated his fascination with abstract photography—even now Wolfe has a collection of abstract work—the research for which has provided the impetus for a new series of classes and will someday be another book. “Abstract



A gemsbok in Namib-Naukluft National Park, Namibia

expressionism hit its zenith right after WWII,” explains Wolfe. “The likes of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were basically non-objective painters—no recognizable subjects. However, they’d say their paintings begin where your imagination ends. I started photographing like all these painters, maybe fifteen different ones, until it became an identifiable style for me. Rather than taking a class, I just self-induced this experience and now I’m teaching it.” He goes on to share that he loves teaching and educating other photographers as well as the viewers of his work.

“I’ll take people out to old batteries or forts where there are cement walls up and down the coast. Over time cement oozes these chemicals and people come in and paint graffiti that gets worn off and others paint over it. They become these really textured walls that tell a story of their own,” Wolfe explains. “After I lecture on all these different painters, it’s up to the student then to go find subjects to fulfill the assignments. They love it!”

It sounds like he teaches from the same philosophy that has honed his craft over the decades. Wolfe details that he teaches in three different ways. He takes groups of students

of all ages out for multiple-day immersion tours across the globe where the students are exposed to incredible photographic opportunity without a lot of critique. He also provides three-to-four-day workshops with in-depth lectures that result in specific assignments for the students to explore and fulfill, and lastly, he teaches photography as art where students go find unintentional art in urban and rural settings. “I tell them that if they get asked what exactly they are photographing [others just don’t see it], they’re probably on the right path,” Wolfe grins.

Those that study Wolfe get a lesson in the value of always being open to learning new things, as well as advocacy and conservation. Wolfe’s sexagenarian photography career is a marvelous testament to the durability and demand for his images, his expertise, and his passionate advocacy for the environment and indigenous culture. Wolfe has accumulated an extensive photographic body of work journaling wildlife of more than 500 species. However, he also has produced more than 120 books in eight languages, all highlighting nature, conservancy, and life in the wild. His first book was in 1979, only four years after

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graduating from University of Washington and completion of photographic assignments for *National Geographic* magazine.

Wolfe went on to partner with the likes of ESPN, PBS, and *National Geographic* on different television programs. His debut was a high-definition series called “Art Wolfe’s Travels to the Edge” that offered unique insights on nature, culture, and digital photography. This intimate program won the “American Public Television” 2007 Programming Excellence Award in its very first season. In its second season it was recognized with five Silver Telly Awards for outstanding achievement. It’s been broadcast hundreds of times across many affiliates and global syndication and can currently be seen on Amazon Prime.

With his incredible body of work and propensity to produce new work, I had to ask if Wolfe ever experienced creative blocks. The answer was a definitive, “No.” He goes on, “That’s the biggest fear of my life. I never want to run out of ideas. When I was new to photography, I traveled around with an experienced photographer that only photographed ducks. He did it extremely well, but when he got every duck in North

America, he literally gave up, and went on to doing something else. So that’s the lesson for me. If I’m really into photography and sharing what I’m interested in with a broader audience, I never want them to get bored.” He remarks that he never wants his loyal fan base to be able to predict what’s coming next, so he works on surprising people.

Wolfe went on to share that he’s able to maintain fresh creativity and stay motivated because he’s “just that kind of person.” No whining aloud, basically, only positive vibes. “My house is filled with art and my garden is a work of art, as well. I have garden tours every ten years. There are 2,000 people walking through the garden that I created. So everywhere I look from my house, which is on a bluff, in a green belt, I’m surrounded by streams and views. I also have a stream I created with recycled water that brings all the animals in.” He affirms that he just maintains a high level of energy through his love for teaching and photographing subjects that uplift and inspire.

The idea of work/life balance also has no traction in his life. “I’ve had a couple of partners in my life, and I’ve just come to realize it’s one of those things you just don’t

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Mountain Gorillas in
Parc National des Volcans, Rwanda



A Verreaux's sifaka in Berenty Reserve, Madagascar



Brown bear sow and cubs
in Katmai National Park, Alaska

have, honestly. I tell my audiences, I don't have a wife or a husband, dog, or cat, but what I've got is a great life. You realize early on in your life what you want to pursue and it's not going to be the average life, and that's okay for me." Wolfe is enjoying living his passion and sharing with those that are passionate, too.

In his early seventies now, he's journeying more this year than ever before, which is saying something, because he travels on average nine months out of the year. His explorative zeal is still evident as he tells me, "As a matter of fact, this year I'm traveling to visit a tribe called the Wodaabe. They live in Chad and Niger, some fairly dicey areas of North Africa, but they have this amazing ceremony every September where the men dress up like peacocks and they're wearing makeup—" We get distracted with the parallels of the male of the species typically being the flashier, but that is to induce the females to select the males based on how "pretty" they are. We eventually get back around to this sub-Saharan African ceremony taking place during the fall harvest when all the migratory tribes come together and the women select their husbands based on how well they've beautified themselves and embodied the intention to impress. This story is indicative of the reason Wolfe desires to share the human and animal experience through his unique gift of photographic storytelling.



Orcas in Glacier Bay
National Park, Alaska

ART WOLFE'S FAVORITES

Time of day: Sunset

Animal to engage with: Bears OR whatever is his current subject, but mostly bears (*Reason: any animal that is so extremely fierce that has the capacity to trust you and let you into their everyday space, is special*)

Indigenous culture: Kayapo in Brazil or the Surma in Ethiopia

Photography type: None, or whichever one he's focusing on at the moment

Camera: Whichever one he's working with at the moment. If he had to pick one - Canon R5

Lens: Between Nikon and Canon probably, but again not really one specifically

Destination for photographic tours: Cultural India and Africa – avoid Brazil, Columbia, and Venezuela

Vacation spot: No such thing – at home in his garden is as much a vacation as anywhere

Thing about the Pacific Northwest: Old growth forests



Dolphin gulls in the Falkland Islands



Male and female comet moths rest on a
banana leaf in Madagascar

In his newly released book, Wolfe partnered with essayist Gregory A. Green and Earth Aware Editions to bring us a new photographic and fact-filled monography focused on wildlife and the planet's major biomes, shedding light on the creatures themselves and humanity as well. This new book becomes available in October 2023, and is called "Art Wolfe WILD LIVES"—the cover of which is gracing the cover of this issue of *Art Chowder*.

"It is in the wild places, where the edge of the Earth meets the corners of the sky, the human spirit is fed." ~ Art Wolfe

FIND OUT MORE

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You can learn more about Art Wolfe and peruse his body of work, or sign up for one of his photographic tours, seminars, workshops, or classes at www.artwolfe.com. Wolfe also has some incredible shots of animals interacting with him while he's photographing them on location. A visit to his site truly is a color-infused, image-dense lesson in staying curious and engaged with the world around you.

Scan the QR Code to find out more.



Art Wolfe

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