

To Take a Photograph

by Patrick Costello

We stopped at McDonald's, the one just before the bridge into Assateague. I knew from my own visits here that it's a good idea to go in with a full belly and camera gear ready.

She was restless, talking excitedly about the things she wanted to see. The bench seat of the car was littered with photography equipment and field guides.

Assateague National Seashore is a beautiful place. The road to the beach takes you through forest and salt marsh. Wild ponies wander among a veritable sea of waterfowl.

It was our second date. She wanted me to take her someplace where she could take pictures of wildlife. I cautioned her that animals are not on anybody's clock. We may not see anything.

She was confident.

The park was crowded, even on this cold January afternoon. We did not see much other than tourists all the way to the shoreline. The blistering wind kept even the seagulls from the beach. We spotted sandpipers and plovers dodging the waves, but that was it.

Even so, we happily walked along the sand. The wind overpowered my hearing aid, making it hard to talk. Yet, we were comfortable together walking quietly.

Suddenly, she squeezed my hand. I turned to read her lips as she pointed off into the horizon. "What's that?"

I couldn't make anything out. I zoomed in with my camera. A pair of black eyes seemed to be looking directly into the lens.



As I stood there snapping pictures on reflex, a harbor seal swam towards us.

We started walking along the beach a bit, to give the creature space to swim ashore. The seal seemed to have other things in mind. With its eyes locked on her, the seal followed us, coming closer.



Out of the water.



As the seal waddled up to her feet, Amy remained completely unsurprised. She chatted happily to it as it waddled up to her feet.



This is where the photographs stop for a bit. I tripped in the sand. By the time I got to my feet, the seal was turning to swim away.



Then it was gone.



She turned to me; cheeks flushed with excitement. She asked me if I saw what had just happened. I assured her I had pictures. She tackled me and wrestled the camera out of my hands to get a glimpse of my photographic efforts.

As we got back into the car for the ride home, she started wondering what would happen on our next National Park visit together. Maybe something even more exciting than this.

I tried to assure her that a visit from a seal was hard to top. She said we were only getting started.

So, I was more than a bit nervous a few weeks later when we pulled into Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. The winter cold had only intensified since our trip to the beach. Large sections of the Chesapeake were frozen over. I was sure that the extreme conditions would have the critters laying low.

She remained confident.

We drove through the wildlife loop, not seeing much of anything beyond beautiful landscapes. After a couple of turns in the road, we came out of the wooded area. Now, the great frozen salt marsh lay before us. The ice shone in the sunlight like an ocean of diamonds. Curiously, some of the ice in the distance seemed to be moving.

That morning, I had packed a little pocket audio recorder with my camera gear. As I watched the ice waddle back and forth in the distance, I instinctively grabbed the recorder. I told Amy to get out of the car. The park was about to grant another of her wishes. I started the recorder as we got our cameras ready. Something was about to happen.

Before we could close the car doors the ice seemed to come alive. Countless snow geese rose as one into the air. The great gaggle filled the sky. As we stood there trembling with awe, they wheeled in our direction, flying directly overhead before circling back a few times. With each pass we could feel the air moving from wingbeats. Every breath seemed heavy with the scent of feathers and waterfowl. The sound of their cries shook the ground.

You can hear the audio here:

<https://tangiersound.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/snow-geese.mp3>



It was the largest concentration of snow geese anybody in the area could remember. Some old-timers we talked to afterwards called our experience once-in-a-lifetime.



Amy asked me what would happen during our next park date. I told her to keep her expectations down a notch. There was no way anything could be more amazing than what we had just seen.

She was right. Of course.

We were married that October. We had eight years together, most of them good. We screwed it up near the end, making the kind of foolish mistakes only lovers can.

Over the years, people have asked me how to take a good photograph. I tell them to go out into the world with someone they love. See the world through their eyes. You will never capture everything. You will, if you are lucky, find a way to frame the moments where sunshine and shadow reveal the truth.

That truth has nothing to do with light meters or ISO. The brand or type of camera is unimportant. No, I think that truth is the moment you realize how blessed you are to have that person by your side. To hone your skills only to grab the occasional image that makes her smile.

It was easy for me. Everywhere we went it seemed as if nature itself loved her as much as I did. As I do. All I had to do was point the lens and snap the shutter.

