

HOW I GOT INTO NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY

June 27, 2011

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Many of you have asked how I came to photograph nature so here is that story in brief for those interested. I will perhaps be writing about the upcoming solar eclipse tomorrow if time permits.

What motivates me in nature photography is probably a little unusual and I will sketch it out so that you know where I am coming from. I was a naturalist from the time I was six-years old until I discovered how beautiful women are at the age of say sixteen. I kind of segued out of nature study when I was around seventeen. We can perhaps all agree that nature is serene and beautiful but I am not as sure that all of us are aware that nature is also fierce and a very harsh mistress.

As a youngster I lived and breathed nature but as I got older I found it hard to look nature in the eye. And I usually blink first, because nature never blinks. There is some tough love there. And while I loved nature, as I grew older, I gradually shied away from looking directly at the harder parts. I find the same problem with Billie Holliday recordings, my favorite woman singer. Even though I love her singing, I am not always willing to put myself through the emotions she brings out in her voice. I can't go there without paying the price of my full attention and all that entails.

It is the same thing with nature. Nature is so absolutely direct and not all of her story is tranquil. There is an enormous amount of suffering to be witnessed in nature, creatures living in fear their entire lives of being eaten and at the same time struggling to find something or some other creature to eat, and so on. Nature tells a touching story and I did not always want to be touched. I was not willing at times to go there and over the years I kind of opted out of that kind of directness. I was out of shape in that department and like exercise I found it hard to get back into the rhythm of it.

Then some years ago I had a very tough personal time, one of those times that kind of popped me out of whatever groove or bubble I was in and I found myself kind of waking up in the middle of this personal crisis. Some part of me was back from wherever it had gone to years before. At that time I was somewhat inconsolable and soon wandered outside of whatever box I normally was happy in.

One of the places I went was out into nature once again. Whatever pain I didn't want to face in nature all those years was nothing compared to how I was feeling at that time and before I knew it I was out in the fields and meadows watching the sun come up every morning. Unless it rained or something, I believe I saw the sun come up every morning from late May until it was too cold to go out that early, sometime in October. And here is what is interesting.

When I went back out into nature, this time I took a camera. I just happened to. Perhaps it was

an excuse to go out. I had been photographing since the middle 1950s, but not as intensely as I was about to. Perhaps the camera was my reason to just get out there, a better reason than the truth which was that I was desperate at some level. And I took pictures. Looking at nature real close up was a good antidote for what I was suffering from. Perhaps it was the pristine mini worlds that I could see into through a macro lens, worlds untouched by all in the world that had recently touched me so painfully; I can't say.

Anyway, the fact of the matter is that here I was out in nature with my eye glued to a lens peering at Nature's truths and lessons after many years of not being able to really look. Somehow my mind was calmed by what I was seeing and before long I found myself searching for and learning to use better and better macro lenses. Yes, it was therapy.

The story is actually a bit more complex than I have described it here and I wrote it all out in two free e-books for those inquiring minds who 'really' want to know more. The books are "The Lama of Appearances: Learning Dharma through Nature" and "Experiences with Mahamudra: The Dharma of Meditation." They can be found at MacroStop.com. I don't need to go into those details here. They were also connected to my dharma and meditation practice.

I retell this story here to explain to readers why the resulting nature photographs from my photography were never the reason I did photography. Some photographers find this hard to understand, so I present it here.

It was not the resulting photos that interested me, but rather the process, the mental therapy I got out of being out there in the meadows and peering through my lenses at whatever was there. It was not what I was seeing through the lenses that was important, but rather the act of "seeing" itself. It was all about the "seeing." It was about getting my mind right and about ever-so-carefully setting up and taking these close-up photographs, holding so still for so long until the wind died down or the critter stopped moving, and then taking one, two, or ten photos without anything moving whatsoever. This elaborate and slow process did something to my mind, something clarifying and bright.

So over quite some period of time I healed myself not with pills and potions but with the ritual of taking precise photographs and the mental clarity that came out of that process. It was the "process" not the product that was important and it has remained so to this day. For the longest time I hardly (sometimes never) looked at the resulting photos or, if so, just long enough to get some bearings on how I might perfect the process. Again, it was the process and the "seeing" that was satisfying.

Over the years the resulting photos also happened to get better but it is only recently that I have even begun or bothered finishing these photos so that I might show them to others. After all, there are probably more than 200,000 of them at this point.

I did become a better photographer through the process and the patience required in macro photography but most of all I became a much clearer person in the mind. And all of this time I

was more and more aware of what nature is all about. And as the Buddhists say, the laws of nature accurately reflect the dharma, the path to clarity and awareness set out by the Buddha. So, I was learning dharma during all this time as well. This is a synopsis of my story and what macro photography for me is all about.

