



ROBERT BERDAN'S CANADIAN WILDLIFE EXPERIENCE

BY JUDY COLE

Robert Berdan is an award-winning, Calgary-based photographer who delights in photographing living creatures, from micro-organisms to Canadian wildlife.

When Berdan was a child, everything in nature fascinated him. He became obsessed with the microscope, and later wanted to take pictures of what he saw. At the age of 13, Berdan began experimenting with a cheap Kodak Instamatic Camera. Images from this first camera were unclear and he felt that with a better camera, he might be able to take better pictures, particularly of micro-organisms viewed through his microscope. Berdan purchased a Polaroid camera for about \$70 to attach to his microscope, and it worked as advertised, but Polaroid film was expensive, and the prints were small and not particularly clear. After reading about single lens reflex (SLR) cameras with interchangeable lenses, he decided on an Olympus OM-1 for \$300. With \$100 that he saved, and help from his parents, he acquired the camera. His first pictures turned out better than

expected and Berdan managed to get a couple of good shots from every roll of film.

Berdan soon began to photograph everything around him, such as landscapes, plants, insects, and mammals, including his friends. For the first few years he owned only one lens, the basic 50mm f/1.8 standard lens that is good for low light and documentary-type images but not for wildlife. He attached the camera body with an adapter to his microscope and was able to capture images of mosquito larvae, rotifers, crystals, and other single-celled animals living in pond water. Some of these images he is still selling. Today, Berdan uses both Nikon and Canon digital cameras with lenses ranging from 8–1500mm.

Together, the camera and the microscope directed him towards a career in cell biology and neuroscience research. Berdan earned a Ph.D. studying electrical synapses, also called gap junctions, an esoteric topic. He especially liked taking pictures



with electron microscopes, fascinated with how living organisms function and grow.

Later he acquired bigger lenses and photographed larger animals, from insects to grizzly bears, moose, and caribou. After three years of research at the University of Calgary and five years at the University of Alberta, Berdan felt a need to get out of the laboratory. He began to explore education, multimedia, and nature photography full time. He worked for a few years at the Calgary Science Centre before he started a business called Science & Art Multimedia. According to Berdan, both science and art have things in common, though they are different approaches to studying and seeing the world. In his opinion, photography is a tool that uses a combination of sciences, including optics and electronics, but the application of the camera and composition is an art created by photographers trying to see and capture images that inform, evoke emotions, and make people think. Therefore, photography is a fascinating duality of science and art. Berdan's new business allows him to focus on technological developments taking place on the Internet, and to teach and pursue nature photography.

Photography is also the best excuse Berdan has to spend more time outdoors surrounded by nature. He loves to travel and explore Canada, where there are places that are still rarely visited or photographed.



experience with the grizzly he met on the trail, that is: Berdan didn't get any pictures of him, for obvious reasons.

According to Berdan, a lot of people living in cities have lost a connection with nature. How many people today have seen the stars on a clear night, the Andromeda Galaxy, or the Milky Way? How many people have seen a grizzly bear, fox, wild wolf, or killer whale up close? Berdan tries to pursue these rare and special encounters in order to photograph and share them with others, in part to remind them that there are still places in this country where people can see them. These moments give Berdan a high but also a sense of humility and feelings of respect and wonder.

Most of Berdan's photography learning and inspiration came from reading and looking at photography books by Eliot Porter, Thomas Mangelsen, John Shaw, Freeman Patterson, Courtney Milne, Ansel Adams, Jim Brandenburg, and Richard Brown. Budd Watson, a photographer and shop owner in Midland, Ontario, was Berdan's first mentor. Two inspirational Calgary photographers are Keith Logan, who taught Berdan how to operate a 4 × 5 camera and how to use masks in the darkroom, and friend and mentor Dr. Wayne Lynch.

Berdan is also grateful that his parents bought him a microscope and a camera. Years later, his father developed an interest in photography and father and son try to travel and photograph together whenever they can.

Recently, Berdan has developed a website called The Canadian Nature Photographer whose mission is to promote nature photography, show the beauty of Canada, and inspire others to take up nature photography. The website features the work of new and established photographers and has a major educational goal with free downloadable slides for teaching, online courses, galleries, movies, tutorials, and e-books on photography. Future projects will be to publish several books dealing with topics such as the aurora borealis, Canadian wildlife, Canadian landscapes, and the role of science and art in photography.

Nature photography has helped Berdan appreciate his own life better and develop a greater respect for other living things. The camera is his excuse to get out and look, but the experience is often more meaningful than the picture — the picture is simply evidence that the photographer was there and can share the experience with others.

Berdan's favourite places to photograph in Canada so far are Alberta's Rocky Mountains; the Badlands, including Red Rock Coulee and Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park; Waterton Lakes and Jasper National Parks; and the Carmanah Valley, with its giant ancient trees and the Great Bear Rainforest. Going north to Yellowknife, he loves to photograph the aurora borealis; even further north, on the tundra, he loves to chase migrating caribou in autumn. However, of all the things Berdan has photographed, the most exciting has been the aurora borealis as its multicoloured rays of light dance across the sky.

Berdan has had memorable wildlife encounters. For example, he photographed a sow and a cub grizzly bear fishing for salmon on the Atnarko River in Bella Coola, British Columbia, while sitting only 15 metres away on the other side of the river. Another time, he encountered a grizzly bear while hiking on a trail in the Rockies. Fortunately, he made it back to his car without mishap. When Berdan called a park ranger so a warning sign could be posted, the ranger simply replied, "Oh, that grizzly bear ... he won't hurt anyone."

Other special encounters include seeing a pod of orcas swim under the *Mothership III*, a boat where Berdan served as a photo guide, and watching a mountain lion next to the road in Waterton Lakes National Park. The cougar turned around and sat down for a minute to look at Berdan while Berdan took his picture from behind his jeep, and then lumbered away.

Berdan can relive these amazing wildlife encounters anytime he wants by looking at the images he captured—except for the