



A Nature Photography Carol

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Bah!” said Scrooge, “*Humbug!*” —Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol (1843)

Chapter One: Erhardt’s Ghost

“You will be haunted,” said the Ghost, “by Three Spirits.” Scrooge’s countenance fell. “I—I think I’d rather not,” said Scrooge. “Without their visits,” said the Ghost, “you cannot hope to shun the path I tread.”

On the eve of the tenth year anniversary of NPN, the spirit of Jim Erhardt, NPN’s founder, visited me and asked that I write an article reflecting on what’s happened to nature photography in the past ten years, to consider the state of the art today, and to offer some thoughts about where it might be going in the next ten. He also vigorously insisted (in a rather unconvincing manner) that he is in fact not quite dead yet, and therefore not a ghost but rather an out-of-body astral projection. He warned me that I would be visited by three ghosts, who would show me nature photography in the past, present, and future. When I suggested that the plot seemed a bit cliché, he just waved his arms and breathlessly said “booooo” a lot—further proof that he is lying about not being dead.

I woke up the next morning convinced that this was the week I needed to lay off the “special” mushrooms, when lo and behold, a spirit appeared! A puckish and impertinent youth, he whisked me away to days long past, to the year 2000—to a year before digital photography! I now recount my tale, not as it happened to me, but as if you, the reader, were on the journey at my side, seeing what I saw, hearing what I heard, and learning the same terrible lessons.

Chapter Two: Nature Photography Past

“Are you the Spirit, sir, whose coming was foretold to me?” asked Scrooge. “I am.” The voice was soft and gentle. Singularly low, as if instead of being so close beside him, it were at a distance. “Who, and what are you?” Scrooge demanded. “I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.” “Long Past?” inquired Scrooge: observant of its dwarfish stature. “No. Your past.”

We are now traveling back in time to the year 2000! Emerging from a fuzzy cloud of time travel goo, we see a scene before us, materializing from the mist. A man sits at his desk, hunched over his home computer. He is logging onto the internet, and is suddenly jarred by a screeching sound, reacting the way most people do when fingernails scratch along a chalkboard. His first page loads slowly—not because of the dreaded Y2K bug, which after years of media hype turns out to be disappointingly non-lethal—but because he, like many people using the internet, is still using a dial-up phone connection. Bill Clinton is president, and times are prosperous and sexy—but hair styles and fashion haven’t been interesting since the 80s, so despite the prosperous and sexy times, the man has a rather conservative hair cut and is wearing a casual button-down shirt and jeans. For a moment, Britney Spears’ video “Oops!... I Did it Again” appears on the TV, before the man realizes and immediately changes the channel. But he can’t seem to get that horrible song out of his head. He tries watching “Cast Away” on DVD but can’t understand why they keep giving Tom Hanks all those Academy Awards—he is a good actor, but not that good. The man decides to watch an Arnold Schwarzenegger action flick instead, and flirts briefly with the idea that Arnold would make a great politician. Too bad no one can understand a word the guy says.

By now the man’s internet connection has been established, so he goes back to his computer to get some work done. He is a professional nature photographer, a rare and dedicated breed of outdoor artist.

The man looks over his equipment. He shoots both wildlife and landscape, and has a different camera system for each. For wildlife photography, he shoots with a 35mm SLR (which is what people used to call cameras, before the “D” part gets added a few years later). For his landscape work, he tends to favor a large format camera system, to ensure maximum quality and detail.

One common item in his equipment pile is his color slide film. Although he uses it in many different sizes and speeds, it is all essentially the same. Color slide film has pumped up colors and contrast, so it doesn't always render a given scene exactly as the eye sees it, but it provides a (more or less) consistent and standard baseline among photographers.

Since the slide itself is the final product marketed to stock, editorial, and publishing clients, there is no way that the man can fix any mistakes that he makes when photographing a scene. If his exposure is off, or if he doesn't like the colors, there is not much he can do about it. He has to rely solely on his skills as a photographer to get the image right. As a result, the man spends a lot of time in the field, and he has learned to master his technique. He spends as much time as possible "chasing the light," trying to find magical moments when composition, mood, and light all came together.

Accordingly, nature photography is both difficult and expensive—which is why not many people are professional nature photographers. The man makes most of his living from editorial clients and stock photography sales. Every week, he sends out dozens of submissions in the hopes of making some sales.

While sorting through some color slides on his lightbox in preparation for a submission, the man comes upon one of his favorite images. It features a stunning landscape and a beautiful sunset sky. Photographers spend weeks, months, even years in the field in the hopes that they will capture an image like this. Anyone who has done so can vouch that such perfect moments are rare indeed. Only through patience, skill, and dedication can a photographer hope to capture an image such as this. And when the moment happens, the photographer had better get everything right—from composition, to focus, to exposure—because even one little mistake can ruin the magical moment.



A landscape from a time when men were men, and the sheep were scared.

The man scans the image, and then considers posting it on a new website he has discovered, called "Nature Photographers Network." It seems an interesting and novel idea, a place where nature photography pros and enthusiasts around the world can share photographs and ideas. He decides to give it a try. The scene fades as we are whisked from the past.

Chapter Three: Nature Photography Present

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Present," said the Spirit. "Look upon me!" "Spirit," said Scrooge submissively, "conduct me where you will. I went forth last night on compulsion, and I learnt a lesson which is working now. To-night, if you have aught to teach me, let me profit by it."

The second spirit, a flamboyant and chatty woman, arrives to take us to our next destination. We emerge through the mists of time and arrive at . . . 2010? The present? Perhaps this whole "mist of time" nonsense is just a bunch of hocus pocus and dry ice. Never mind, a scene materializes before us! The man we visited ten years past looks much the same, perhaps with a little less hair, but at least he has replaced his casual button-down shirt with a t-shirt that he considers ironic (it says something about how he hasn't seen "Avatar" yet and doesn't plan on doing so). Times are perhaps a little less sexy, and while the United States has decided to take a break from electing old white men as presidents, Arnold Schwarzenegger somehow managed to get elected governor of California a few years back (which on further reflection doesn't really seem all that odd).

The man is still at his computer, but something has changed. In fact, two things have changed, two quite revolutionary things, just a few years prior. One, inexpensive, high-quality digital cameras became available for the first time. Two, high-speed internet became readily available to millions of people worldwide. As a result of these two events, there has been an explosion in the popularity of nature photography.

So now, the man is using blazing-fast high speed internet, surfing a number of photo sharing sites, including NPN, at the same time. He just got back from a week of photography, and is downloading a number of "raw files" for "raw conversion" and "post processing"—a bunch of new phrases. He is thinking of posting some images on the various photo sharing sites he frequents in order to fill some empty spaces on an upcoming workshop.

The man no longer makes most of his money from editorial or stock photography sales. The overwhelming amount of nature photographs that are readily available on the internet has reduced his stock photography income to a negligible amount, and the wide availability of internet content is driving print magazines and newspapers out of business. It seems these days, everyone is a nature photographer, and even amateur enthusiasts are offering their images for sale. In fact, everyone also seems to be a "pro" these days, even though they have day jobs as doctors and accountants. Although this all adds up to mean reduced sales from his traditional markets, it also means there is a growing demand for photography instruction—hence, the man now makes his living primarily from workshops.

Because everyone is now a pro photographer and everyone is struggling to make their name on the internet, competition is fierce. The man is looking at an image he took on his recent trip to Zion National Park. It is a nice image of some cottonwood trees glowing in the twilight, with the famous Watchman peak in the background. A nice image, but not a great one, as the sky is blank and featureless. Too bad, the man thinks, because he really needs something stunning to help sell the empty spaces on his upcoming workshop.

Then he got an idea! An awful idea! THE MAN GOT A WONDERFUL, AWFUL IDEA!

Why not take a sunset from another image and blend it into the picture of the cottonwoods? What would be wrong with that? No one would ever find out, right? With this minor ethical qualm settled, he begins to construct his image, taking sunsets from two other photographs and blending them into the first. He flips the sunset upside down and blends it lightly into the stream, to make the reflections in the water seem more realistic. After about fifteen minutes of blending and some heavy saturation tweaking, he ends up with an image that he decided to call "Zion Dreams" (the man, while perhaps lacking integrity, at least has a sense of irony). It was surprisingly easy to do—both in terms of the technical process, and side-stepping any thorny moral issues.



Is it real? Computer enhanced? Does anyone care?

He posts his image on a number of nature photography sites, and gets rave reviews. Everyone compliments him on the wonderful sunset that he has captured, and his control over what is truly magical light. His empty workshops fill up, and all is well. Of course, the man never tells anyone how the “photograph” was actually created on the computer.

Then, one day, the man has a falling out with his friend who was there the night he photographed the Watchman in Zion, and his friend starts telling everyone on the internet that the image is a fake. A small furor erupts, as several people accuse the man of being a cheat and a fraud. He defends himself, claiming the photograph is real, but to no avail.

And then, something wonderful happens. Several people on the internet speak in his defense, saying: who cares if it is fake or not? They make the argument that “reality” is purely subjective, photography is art, and that artistic expression can’t be right or wrong and shouldn’t be bound by the dictates of technology or the constraining moral views of an ignorant, up-tight minority. Suddenly, the man’s critics begin to sound shrill and reactionary, and the furor goes away. He’s back to receiving nothing but accolades.

So, no one takes much notice when someone later posts a comment about the image. The commenter says that the debates over “reality” and “art” are missing the point. He claims that photography is unique among artistic media because unlike other types of art, such as painting, it is not a *creation* media, but rather a *capture* media. Photography captures a moment of the world around us, whereas a painting is entirely the creation of the artist. Photographers—nature photographers in particular—have historically been dependent on the light, color, mood, and compositions formed by the convergence of elements in the real world. We respect the photographer who can recognize that convergence, the “decisive moment” as Henri Cartier-Bresson put it, and react by triggering the shutter. That’s how a photograph is created. It is no less art than creation media such as painting or sculpting, but the craft of photography is fundamentally different from either. The problem with significant digital processing, as he sees it, is that as photography becomes increasingly

mixed with computer art (a creation media), it begins to lose what makes it special and unique.

The commenter goes on to note that there is also a “have your cake and eat it too” problem: most photographers who use computer processing to significantly alter their photographs don’t fess up about it. More often than not, people present what are essentially mixed media creations as photographs, with little or no disclosure of the fact that significant computer alteration was involved. If people are so eager to call themselves “artists” and to use the computer as a significant part of the artistic process, he asks, why are they so reluctant to admit what they have done?

The man laughs when he reads this comment. Just another crazy reactionary, he thinks, destined to be swept aside by the brush of history. Poor fool.

Chapter Four: Nature Photography Future

“Ghost of the Future!” Scrooge exclaimed, “I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me?” It gave him no reply. The hand was pointed straight before them. “Lead on!” said Scrooge. “Lead on! The night is waning fast, and it is precious time to me, I know. Lead on, Spirit!”

The third spirit arrives, a dreadful apparition, faceless and voiceless. We travel through the mists of time, a scene materializes before us, blah blah blah—you know the drill. We have arrived in the year 2020! The man now has a full head of hair and looks vigorous and young, thanks to a revolutionary new product that mixes Viagra, Rogaine, and botox injections into one tiny pill (“Viagrainox”). Schwarzenegger, after a stint as president of the United Nations, decided to go back to acting and has become the spokesperson for Viagrainox. The United States has finally seen fit to elect a woman as president; unfortunately, she is not human, but rather one of many genetically modified hyper-intelligent super monkeys that escaped from a lab a few years ago and who now pretty much run Earth and a few of the neighboring planets. Actually, it’s not a bad deal, as the hyper-intelligent transgenic super monkeys do a much better job of running things than the human did. They were the marketing wizards who came up with Viagrainox; they also managed to pull off Microsoft’s acquisition of Apple, finally ending those really annoying PC vs. Mac commercials.

The man blinks his eyes to activate his I-Brain, and starts listening to The Monkees, which are—you guessed it—a band of genetically modified hyper-intelligent super monkey musicians. Their remake of the classic “Oops!... I Did it Again” is considered almost as annoyingly catchy as the original. The I-Brain is a small sub-cranial device that plays music, does both personal and enormously complex multi-planetary corporate computing, uploads movies right into your eyes, opens and closes your garage door, generates interesting pick-up lines, and takes 300 trillion megapixel photographs.

After a dreadful style drought of more than 30 years, haircuts and fashion finally get interesting again: the man’s newly fulsome hair looks like a pack of hyenas that crashed into a plaid sofa. As for clothing fashion, the man is wearing nothing but a pair of tattered underwear, which is unfortunate, because he has put on some weight. The truth is, he doesn’t get outside for nature photography all that much these days, so pants are now considered optional. And it’s not because the national parks are now owned by corporations, with fancy corporate logos emblazoned on beautiful places like Yosemite’s Half Dome (now called “Skittles Dome,” it features a rainbow of colors). Frankly, he doesn’t need to leave the house anymore. He is a professional nature photographer, which these days means he uses sophisticated 3D rendering programs to create realistic nature photographs on his I-Brain—without ever leaving the comfortable human-shaped indentation in his couch.

He’s creating a nature photograph now, as a matter of fact, getting it ready to post on NPN. He’s no longer making any money from editorial or stock photography sales, or for that matter, from photography workshops. All of his former workshop students are now leading their own workshops, and their students are doing the same, and so forth, creating too much competition. Now, the man makes a living offering virtual “How to Teach Photo Workshops” workshops, and from in-photo corporate advertising. Online photo sharing sites, such as NPN, have become absolutely vital to his commercial success—he gets paid by his corporate clients on a per-comment basis.

The photograph he is working on shows the Martian landscape at sunset. He’s never been to Mars, but that doesn’t matter. He is, after all, an artist, so he makes Mars look the way he thinks it should look, and creates a perfectly composed photograph of the Red Planet, featuring giant natural rock arches spraying three-hundred foot waterfalls, glowing in brilliant blue light from a nearby exploding supernova. He posts the image online, and everyone immediately raves about the wonderful magical moment he has captured in his photograph. He gets more than 30,000 comments, which is not as many as he hoped; his image was doing well until someone put up a photo of a Venusian razor-bear fighting with a baby space

dragon under a rainbow. The man shakes his head—there really is no accounting for taste.

Some nut makes a few comments to the effect that Mars isn't near any exploding supernovae, and that razor-bears (Venusian or otherwise) and space dragons don't actually exist, but he is quickly dismissed by others as an anti-photography lunatic. His obvious prejudice is further revealed when he protests that he is not anti-photographer, as the images he is commenting on are not in fact photographs. Stark raving mad, this one.

The man wonders whether his next Martian landscape should include a Venusian razor-bear. No, a razor-bear won't do—razor-bears are already old news. Perhaps a vicious man-eating Venusian electric tyranno-platypus? After some quick Photoshop work (his I-Brain largely automates both the artistic and corporate branding process), he pauses to admire his creation. The man smiles—he knows a great photograph when he sees one.



A vicious man-eating Venusian electric tyranno-platypus stalks the Martian landscape.

Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own, to make amends in! "I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future!" Scrooge repeated, as he scrambled out of bed. "The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me."

This story, of course, is fiction—except for the parts that aren't. While you puzzle that one out, let's pause to ask: Can this really be the future of nature photography? Is the future now? Does any of this matter? Or, in the end, will the tyranno-platypi defeat the benevolent transgenic hyper-intelligent super monkeys and consume us all?

To me, two positive points about digital photography arise. First, digital techniques have freed us from the fetters of the limiting technology of analog (film) capture. Second, digital techniques allow us to explore our artistic expression in new and exciting ways.

But, as with many things in life, nothing exists in a vacuum. From these positive points, two counterpoints emerge, which I believe are worth considering.

One: We chose photography, not painting or sculpting or performance art—or for that matter, computer art. Maybe that should mean something.

Two: We chose nature photography, because we love nature. We love witnessing magical natural events, which reveal themselves only to the patient, dedicated, and observant. Are we doing those magical moments a disservice when we enhance or alter their reality on the computer?

So, the next time you pull up an image on your computer, think carefully before you begin editing. What kind of artist do you want to be? How much do you want the natural experience to shape your art? How much of your computer processing will you reveal to the public? Will you label "computer-enhanced" creations as photographs, or as digital photo art? How forthcoming will you be?

How you answer each question is up to you. But choose carefully, as your decisions will shape the future of nature photography for the next ten years. As for me, maybe it's time to put "Zion Dreams" in the trash file. "Electric Tyranno-Platypus," on the other hand, is going on the cover of my next book.

"Bah, humbug"—whatever it means—seems to sum up my thoughts on this issue quite nicely.

Comments on NPN nature photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#). NPN members may also log in and leave their comments below.

NPN Contributing Editor **Ian Plant** is a full-time professional nature photographer, writer, and instructor. His images and instructional articles have appeared in a number of books, calendars, and magazines including *Outdoor Photographer*, *Popular Photography*, *National Parks*, *Blue Ridge Country*, *Adirondack Life*, *Wonderful West Virginia*, and *Chesapeake Life*, among others. Ian is the author/photographer of eight books, including the critically acclaimed *Chesapeake: Bay of Light*. Most recently, Ian was one of the lead authors and executive editors for *The Ultimate Guide to Digital Nature Photography*, and co-author of *50 Amazing Things You Must See and Do in the Greater D.C. Area*. Ian is co-owner of *Mountain Trail Press* and *Mountain Trail Photo*, and he leads several photography workshops every year.

To see more of Ian's work, visit [Ian Plant Photography](#) and [Mountain Trail Photo](#). The Mountain Trail Photo Team consists of some of the top nature photographers in the country, whose mission is to educate and inspire others in the art of nature photography. There you will find team member images; articles on photo techniques and destinations; and information on workshops in some of America's most beautiful places. Also visit the [Team's Blog](#) for a more eclectic mix of images and musings.
